Eve Transcending “Demeaned”: The Construct of Female Gender in *Paradise Lost*

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* presents Adam and Eve as the first man and the first woman to live on the Earth. Essentially, Adam and Eve are Milton’s archetypes of the male and female genders. A closer inspection of Eve’s womanhood within *Paradise Lost* reveals contradiction of the female gender. Book eight of *Paradise Lost* presents this contradiction most directly to the reader. Adam explains his newfound joy at the fact that he has been given a helpmate, but demeans Eve in the process:

> For well I understand in the prime end
> Of nature her th’inferior, in the mind
> And inward faculties, which most excel,
> In outward also her resembling less
> His image who made both, and less expressing
> The character of that dominion giv’n (8.540–545)

Here Adam relates the inferior nature of Eve in both mind and body. Not only does she not resemble God as much as Adam does, but Adam alludes to the idea that Eve does not have the equal capacity to perform that he possesses. Yet, the contradiction lies in the lines that immediately follow as Adam esteems Eve above others:

> Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
> And in herself complete, so well to know
> Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
> Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her
Looses discount’nanced, and like folly shows; (8.547–553)

The contradiction throughout *Paradise Lost* of Eve being simultaneously demeaned and esteemed creates a space in which Milton plays with the constructs of gender, and more specifically the female gender. Throughout the poem, there is a call for equality, yet a pervading theme of patriarchy.

Critical analysis of *Paradise Lost* from a feminist perspective has been quite thoroughly explored and examined. Most critics tend to argue for the character of Eve as being a representation of the oppression of patriarchy among other feminist theories. One feminist critic, Elspeth Graham, explains that because of Milton’s political background and “As prime defender of an all-powerful God-the-Father he [Milton] becomes the ultimate spokesman for a misogynistic western culture” (134). Graham also states the notion that today “Milton is currently either reaffirmed as the archetypal misogynist, or, at the other extreme, presented as some sort of proto-feminist” (134). Although somewhat siding with Eve as being an oppressed woman, Graham ceases to focus on Eve in her analysis and does not forcefully commit to either side of the critical spectrum. This seems to be a common occurrence in recent criticism of gender in *Paradise Lost*. Patrick J. McGrath, like Graham, is another critic whose article was published this year. McGrath also does not explicitly take a side on the matter, instead he examines the differences of the language and prosody between the speeches of Adam and Eve to gain more clarity as to whether Eve is being oppressed by a form of patriarchy or not. Yet, McGrath seems to reach a point in which he concludes that Eve is not as demeaned as some feminist critics may
make her out to be, but McGrath still remains somewhat undetermined in his stance toward the
treatment of gender in *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike the recent critical analysis of Milton’s poem, I wish to explore the contradiction
that arises throughout the poem of the nature of Eve’s gender through the language of the
narration of the poem, and not entirely through the speeches made between Adam and Eve as
McGrath has presented. Gender is not simply male or female in *Paradise Lost*, as is related near
the beginning of the poem, “For spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both”
(1.423–424). And spirits and human beings are not the only things that take on a gender. Among
other living things that assume a gender are the Earth and the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve
reside in. In this paper I argue that the construct of gender and the subsequent contradictions that
arise in the actions of gendered characters, transcend Milton’s Eve from what some feminist
critics define as “a mouthpiece for patriarchy” (McGrath 73), instead raising her up as a beacon
of the powerful feminine gender that moves and creates throughout the poem. Through exploring
the ways that the female gender is both characterized and contradicted, I wish to understand how
the contradictions actually foster a space in which Eve transcends popular feminist theory.

The construct of gender in *Paradise Lost* is not as simple as describing Adam and Eve as
the quintessential male and female beings, but presents instead a complex treatment of gender in
which entities apart from humans are ascribed as being either male or female. Aside from Eve,
there are other entities that make up the female gender in the poem. The Garden of Eden, also
called Paradise, is gendered as female, “A Heav’n on Earth, for blissful Paradise / Of God the
Garden was, by him in the east / Of Eden planted; Eden stretched her line” (emphasis added,
4.208–210). The descriptions hereafter of the gendered Paradise present a beautiful place of
nurturing, creating, and feeding. In Paradise there is “a fresh fountain, and with many a rill /
Watered the Garden” (4.229–230), and the trees therein “Ran nectar, visiting each plant, and fed / Flow’rs worthy of Paradise” (4.240–241). Milton’s gendering of Paradise as female places Eve, the first female, in a place of authority. Paradise is a holy site and represents the foundation of creationism. By gendering Paradise as female, Eve’s sex is raised up to a space in which the feminine falls in line with power and the bringing of new existence. However, the title of the work, *Paradise Lost*, could seem to contradict this idea if we place the construct of gender in the title. Paradise, being gendered as the feminine, could also give the notion that the “feminine” is being lost from Milton’s poem. But I believe that what is actually being lost is the worldview of femininity as a negative attribute. In the world today, the character of Eve has been negatively associated with the Fall. However, Milton’s poem does not represent the Fall as a negative happening. Thus Paradise “Lost” may more closely be aligned with the notion of the negative view of femininity being replaced by a more positive one. Ultimately, both Adam and Eve are tilling and protecting a feminine entity in Paradise—one in which God places extreme importance, as it is the place where reason can be reached for mankind.

The concept of reason is also gendered as female throughout the poem, creating a space where the female gender is the source of cause and purpose rather than blind choice:

But God left free the will, for what obeys
Reason, is free, and reason he made right,
But bid her well beware, and still erect,
Least by some fair appearing good surprised
*She* dictate false, and misinform the will
To do what God expressly hath forbid. (emphasis added, 9.351–356)
To further explain this concept we must remember that throughout *Paradise Lost* the role of agency is viewed as paramount to God’s plan for his children. When Eve is beguiled by the serpent, she is “impregned / With reason…and with truth;” (9.737–738). Thus, Eve’s fall was a rational one, wherein she evoked reason and purpose to her choice. By acting out of reason, Eve helps enact God’s plan. Despite the foreshadowing in this passage of Eve going to eat the forbidden fruit and thus bringing about the Fall, it is vital to recognize that by reason being gendered as feminine we are able to see that Eve’s choice to eat of the fruit was a righteous act and actually advocates femininity as a positive attribute. Because Milton genders reason as female, he shows the nature of woman in a new space, unlike the space that women have been placed in before. This placement situates Eve outside of a patriarchy because she has reason without first consulting man, independently acting on the agency that God has given to both her and Adam.

The Earth and nature are the final positively reinforcing entities that are gendered as female in the poem, and consequently serve as the examples that place the female gender in the same realm as that of the Creator. During the creation scene in the poem, it is explained, “the earth obeyed, and straight / Op’ning her fertile womb teemed at a birth / Innumerable living creatures, perfect forms” (emphasis added, 7.453–455). The Earth serves as the vessel of creation in Milton’s poem. By gendering the Earth as female, Eve’s gender is thus tied to the position of creator with God. Furthermore, nature is gendered as female in the poem, “The womb of Nature and perhaps her grave,” (emphasis added, 2.911). Together with the Earth, nature acts as another participant in the creative experience. According to feminist critic Froula, Milton has success in his poem of the “silencing and voiding of female creativity” (338). However, I argue that the Earth and other gendered entities like nature are proof of the feminine creative ability that Milton
portrays throughout *Paradise Lost*. Although the male and female act together in the creation experience, the mother nurtures and tends to her children while they are growing inside of her. Through these gendered entities, the highest power—creation—is associated with the feminine, enabling Eve, the first woman, to claim a space outside of the patriarchy because she has enabled herself to change from an innocent state in which she is unable to create, into a state in which she can fulfill the measure of her creation and become a co-creator, both with God and with Adam.

Sin is the being in the poem that is gendered as being female, but could be viewed as having a negative effect on the advocacy of femininity. Truly, Sin is an oppressed character. In book two she is born out of Satan’s head, and then through incest gives birth to Death, who, in return, rapes her (2.752–798). Again, we could argue here against Froula’s stance that Milton silences female creativity. Sin, the character who is oppressed by the oppressed (Satan), can actually be compared to Milton’s God in the function of creativity. After all, God is the father of Satan, yet Satan disobeys God and goes against his will. This is equally true of Sin’s experience with Death. Sin is the co-creator of Death, yet Death acts out against Sin’s will. Despite her oppression, Sin still succeeds in the act of creation, which affirms the idea that the feminine is closely associated with God as Creator. Sin is also associated with Christ because Milton refers to her offspring, Death, as being “the gate of life” (12.571). Without Milton’s creation of Sin and Death, Christ’s Atonement would have no meaning on Earth; however, it does have meaning because of the creative powers that Milton instills in the character of Sin.

Aside from the female-gendered entities, the genders of the male and the female through the lens of Adam and Eve’s characters creates further argument that Eve transcends the oppressive role that feminist critics place upon her. The first description of Adam and Eve relates:
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine
The image of their glorious Maker shone,
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
Severe but in true filial freedom placed;
Whence true authority in men; though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
For contemplation he and valor formed,
For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
He for God only, she for God in him: (4.291–299).

The first half of this description places both the male and female gender in an equal position because they are both referred to as having the image of their Maker. However, the second half of this passage seems to convey the notion that Adam and Eve are not equal because of their genders. The word “seemed” here is important because it implies that Adam and Eve did not “seem” equal because of their outward characteristics—valor for Adam, and grace for Eve. Yet, throughout the text we are constantly bombarded with the equality of the sexes. Eve is referred to as the “dearer half” (5.95), “thy consort” (7.529), meaning partner or companion (Oxford English Dictionary), “thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self” (8.450), and together Adam and Eve form “one flesh, one heart, one soul” (8.499). The other area of the passage above that could be problematic is that it refers to Adam being created for God only, but Eve for “God in him.” Literally, this could refer to the creative powers at work in Adam’s body, “God in him,” so that together the two beings can successfully procreate. However, the phrase “God in him” could also refer to the fact that Eve was created “in him,” or from Adam’s rib. Additionally, this phrase could also allude to the critical idea that Adam has to only obey God, but that Eve must obey
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both Adam and God. Lehnhof explains the idea that “Eve is required to obey Adam not because he is ontologically superior but because God has arbitrarily ordained that this be so.” Inserting Lehnhof’s idea to extract meaning from this passage shows that it is not gender that is “not equal” in the eyes of God, rather it is simply that God has prepared different tasks for the male and the female gender. Eve does not serve God and Adam because she is the inferior sex, for she is not, but she serves them both because it is simply what God requires of her.

The idea of “Paradise” or a false concept of femininity being lost is visible when Milton intertwines the relations of Eve and Mary. Raphael, a heavenly messenger, explains this concept when he visits Adam and Eve in Paradise and states, “Mary, second Eve” (5.387). This connection between Eve and Mary is important because it shows just how holy and divine Eve is as the first woman and first mother on the Earth. The character of Mary is worshipped by many religions because of her virgin status as the mother of Christ. In the world today, Eve tends to represent sin, while Mary represents virtue. Yet, the fact that Milton refers to Mary as a “second Eve” completely shifts this paradigm. Mary is the mother of Christ, but Eve is the “Mother of all things living.” and through her genealogical line came Mary and Jesus, among every other person who has lived on the Earth. (11.160) By connecting Eve and Mary, Milton strays from the traditional demonization of Eve, instead placing her in a holier space and acknowledging her divine status as first female and mother.

Some critics, such as Zimmerman, argue that the contradiction between the new birth scenes of Adam and Eve could portray Eve as a lesser being simply because she is unable to distinguish her own self as Adam is able to, however, looking closer into these two scenes actually reveals how closely Adam and Eve’s situations are tied, and how Eve transcends the contradiction through her first earthly interaction with God. In book four when Eve awakens her
first thoughts are, “much wond’ring where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how” (4.451–452). Most critics seem to miss the point that both Adam and Eve are unsure of who or what they are when they awaken. Adam explains, “But who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not” (8.270–271). Eve then looks into the pool of water and is unable to understand that the person looking back at her is herself, whereas Adam states, “Myself I then perused” (8.267). Zimmerman explains at this point, “Although Eve’s self-involvement is rather beautiful and inviting, it all too quickly is given a negative valence by a divine voice” (249). While Eve is examining the figure in the water, God speaks to her and tells her who she is. On the other hand, Adam does not have direct speech with God, but instead “answer none returned” and he is given a vision (8.285). McGrath is able to aid us in this discussion when he explains, “As a means of revealing prophecy, though, dreams have been found to be at the bottom of the prophetic hierarchy” (79). Instead of viewing Eve’s experience speaking with God as a submission to patriarchy, her experience could actually be viewed as a prominent example of her divine nature. God directly speaks to Eve and informs her of her importance as first woman and first mother in his plan and creation of her.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* provides contradiction for the female gender and Eve’s status in Paradise, but by closely analyzing the contradiction of gender we are able to understand how Eve transcends her stereotype and becomes a representation of the power and importance of the female gender in Milton’s poem and in Christian theology. In book ten, Adam laments the Fall and the choice that Eve made to partake of the fruit:

O why did God,

Creator wise, that peopled highest Heav’n

With spirits masculine, create at last
This novelty on Earth, this fair defect
Of nature, and not fill the world at once
With men as angels without feminine,
Or find some other way to generate
Mankind? (10.888-895)

This is a passage that many feminist critics refer to as conveying the oppression of the female
gender in Milton’s poem. Froula even goes so far as to state in her argument, “Eve is not a self, a
subject, at all; she is rather a substanceless image, a mere “shadow” without object” (328).
However, Adam relates to Eve “O woman, best are all things as the will / Of God ordained them,
his creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left” (9.343–345). Eve is God’s creation. She
is a subject as Adam refers to her as “woman.” She has a self because she is able to have
independent reason apart from her co-partner and co-creator, Adam. She has substance because
Adam states that God does not create the “imperfect” or the “deficient.” Eve is not a simple
shadow that follows behind Adam. They stand together. They work together in the Garden of
Eden and when it is time to leave, they go “hand in hand” (12.648–649). Yes, Eve is a flawed
character, but Adam is as well. Through instilling flaws in the first male and the first female,
Milton humanizes his Adam and Eve. They are not only archetypes of their gender, but from
their flaws they become models of righteous reason and action. Book seven refers to Genesis as
it states, “Let us make now man in our image, man / In our similitude, and let them rule”
(emphasis added, 7.519–520). The pronoun “them” refers to both Adam and Eve equally. In the
Hebrew language, the title “Elohim” means both male and female. In Christian theology this
means that God cannot exist without both the male and female gender. Although Milton does not
formally introduce a female God into Paradise Lost, Adam’s character states, “how glad would
lay me down / As in my mother’s lap! There I should rest / And sleep secure” (10.777–779). The “mother” in this phrase would suggest mother Earth, yet one can still view the expression that Adam relates of the importance of the female gender and the mother figure. Truly, the female gender in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* transcends the negative evaluation that usually criticizes it through the analysis of female-gendered entities, and by re-analyzing passages that have popularly been torn asunder by feminist critics. Ultimately, Eve is not a shadow; she is a divine woman who remains closely linked to God through the gift of creation. Eve’s equality with Adam is inherent, yet she is still able to reason on her own, and make choices as an individual and as a female.
Works Cited


