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Eve Transcending Demeaned

The Construct of Female Gender in *Paradise Lost*

Jillie Orth Reimer

Milton's *Paradise Lost* presents Adam and Eve as the first man and 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 a contradiction in the poem's depiction of the female gender—Eve, and her gender, are portrayed as characters simultaneously esteemed and demeaned. 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 degrades 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. First, Eve does not resemble God as much as Adam does, and second, she does not have

the equal capacity to perform that Adam 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 issue of Eve being simultaneously demeaned and esteemed throughout *Paradise Lost* creates a space in which Milton plays with the constructs of gender—more specifically, the female gender. Throughout the poem, there is an underlying call for equality between Adam and Eve yet a pervading theme of patriarchy.

Paradise Lost has been quite thoroughly explored and examined from a feminist perspective. Most critics tend to argue that the character of Eve is an example of the oppression that women experience in light of living within a patriarchal system. 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 further 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 Graham, at times, sides with the idea that Eve is an oppressed woman, she 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 who does not explicitly take a side on the matter; instead, he examines the differences in 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. 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 he still remains somewhat undetermined in his stance toward the treatment of gender in *Paradise Lost*.

Unlike the more recent critical analysis of Milton's poem, I wish to explore the construct of Eve's gender through the language in the narration of the poem,

not entirely through the speeches made between Adam and Eve, as McGrath has done. 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. In this paper, I argue that the personification of female-gendered characters, such as Paradise, Reason, Earth, and Sin, serve as vital constituents that construct the female gender in the poem and transcend Milton’s Eve from “a mouthpiece for patriarchy” to a beacon of the powerful feminine gender that moves and creates throughout the poem (McGrath 73). By exploring the ways that the female gender is first personified and then edified by Eve’s own actions, the poem can then foster a space in which Eve transcends popular feminist theory.

The construct of gender in *Paradise Lost* cannot merely be understood by examining Adam and Eve as the quintessential male and female beings. Instead, the poem presents 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 individuals that establish 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). 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). These descriptions of female Paradise present a beautiful place of nurturing, creating, and feeding. Paradise is a holy site, representing the foundation of creationism. Milton’s gendering of Paradise as female places Eve, and her sex, in a space of creative power as the bearers of new life.

However, the title of the work, *Paradise Lost*, could seem to contradict this idea if we apply the construct of gender to the title. “Losing” the female Paradise could support the notion that the feminine is being lost from Milton’s poem or that Eve’s womanhood is playing a less-than-vital role. But what I believe is truly being “lost” in Milton’s poem is the recurring notion of femininity as a negative attribute. In the world today, the character of Eve has been negatively associated with the Fall, and yet Milton’s poem does not represent the Fall as a negative occurrence. Thus, Paradise “Lost” may more closely be aligned with the notion of the negative view of femininity being replaced by a 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 called 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 deciding whether to eat of the fruit, she hears the words of the serpent, and is "impregn'd / With reason...and with truth," (9.737–738). Eve's fall is a rational one, wherein she reasons with her own thoughts once both the serpent and God converse with her. Her choice to eat of the fruit is not merely a simple reaction to the serpent's speech, but rather a mindful decision after all she has encountered. Despite the foreshadowing in this passage that Eve will eat the forbidden fruit and thus bring about the Fall, it is vital to recognize that, because Reason is gendered as feminine, we are able to see that Eve's choice to eat of the fruit was an act of awareness and understanding and actually advocates femininity as a positive attribute. Milton gendering Reason as female places Eve in a space outside of the patriarchy. In this space, Eve reasons on her own without first consulting man, and independently acts on the agency that God has given to both her and Adam.

The Earth and nature are the final feminine entities in the poem that dignify the female gender and place it in the same realm as 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 assigning the Earth a female gender, 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 Christine Froula, Milton

succeeds in his poem at the “silencing and voiding of female creativity” (338). However, I argue that the Earth and nature are proof of the feminine creative ability that Milton portrays throughout *Paradise Lost*. Although, conventionally, the male and female act together in the creation experience, the mother alone nurtures and tends to her children while they are in the womb. Through these gendered entities, the highest power—creation—is associated with the feminine, enabling Eve to break from the confines of patriarchy. She has partaken of the fruit and transitions from an innocent state in which she is unable to create to a state in which she can co-create, both with God and with Adam.

Sin is arguably the most oppressed female character in the poem, yet Sin’s necessary act of creation aligns her with God and establishes motherhood as an important aspect of the female gender. In book two, Sin is produced out of Satan’s head, and then, through incest, gives birth to Death (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. Sin’s existence as a feminine body capable of motherhood results in the creation of Death. 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’s creation becomes so vital in Milton’s poem that Death is referred to as “the gate of life” (12.571). Thus, the character of Sin and her motherhood over Death form a link with God. Without the creation of Death by Sin there exists no vital connection between Adam and Eve’s mortal life and the immortal life they can attain through Death.

Aside from the non-human feminine characters, analysis of the male and female genders through the lens of Milton’s Adam and Eve is evidence that Eve transcends the oppressed 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 the male and female gender in an equal position because both embody 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—Adam and Eve did not “seem” equal because, outwardly, Adam exhibited valor while Eve showed grace. 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 component of the passage above that complicates meaning 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. Most likely, though, this phrase could allude to the critical idea that Adam only has to obey God, but Eve must obey both Adam and God. Kent R. Lehnof 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.” Lehnof’s point, in conjunction with the 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 genders. Eve does not serve God and Adam because she is an inferior sex, for she is not; she serves them both because it is simply what God requires of her.

Some critics, such as Shari A. Zimmerman, argue that the contrast 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 like Adam does. However, looking more closely into these two scenes actually reveals how similar Adam and Eve’s experiences are, and how Eve transcends this 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 speaks directly to Eve and informs her of her importance as first woman and first mother in his plan, while Adam receives simply a dream.

The loss of “Paradise” or a false concept of femininity is visible when Milton intertwines the relations of Eve and Mary. Raphael, a heavenly messenger, introduces 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. Many religions worship Mary as the virgin 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 feminine status.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* provides much space for the discussion of Eve’s status in Paradise, and by closely analyzing the portrayal of the female gender we are able to understand how Eve goes beyond her stereotype and becomes a representation of the power and importance of womanhood 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 identify 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).

Conversely, 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). This short passage identifies Eve as 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." Adam and Eve 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). Truly, the female gender in *Paradise Lost* transcends critical evaluation through the analysis of female-gendered entities, and through the reanalysis of Eve's representation. Ultimately, Milton's 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.

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