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Carmen Thorley

Feminist and Non-Feminist Views on Milton's Interpretations of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*: Comparing The Female Characters, Eve and Dalila

After the Bible, the most popular source for the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden would have to be Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The popularity of this classic epic has brought forth countless interpretations of the story as it was freshly illustrated with the fictional freedom that Milton took. It is likely—and widely believed—that Milton's own views on marriage and women have found their way into his writing, not only with *Paradise Lost* but with the tragedy *Samson Agonistes* as well. This paper will point out the effect this lens had on Milton's interpretation of his the two female characters, Eve and Dalila, and compare and contrast the feminist and non-feminist (and sometimes anti-feminist and misogynist) interpretations that can be taken from the two works.

Milton's divorce tracts can be seen as an emanation of his own opinion towards the institution of marriage, and this view was greatly affected by his new wife, Marie Powell, leaving him. England law did not allow divorce, so with his treatises like *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* and *Tetrachordon*, published in 1643 and 1645, respectively, he attempted to convince the state to make divorce lawful: "Nothing now adayes is more degenerately fortgott'n, then the true dignity of man, almost in every respect, but especially in this prime institution of Matrimony." (*Tetrachordon* 4.47) Milton's arguments for divorce seem to be made mostly for the needs of the husband, and his religious beliefs give some understanding to the reasons for that. Puritanistic views are often associated with Milton because, as stated in Landy's essay *Kinship and the Role of Women in Paradise Lost*, "Milton was a representative seventeenth-century Protestant poet who was committed to the centrality of marriage, to the designated roles of man as creator and provider and of woman as procreator, submissive to her husband's natural authority." The wife is part of a harmonious relationship with certain delegated responsibilities, while the husband has his own, but there was no doubt that the wife was submissive to her husband. Though divorce was not legalized as a direct result of Milton's writings, he stood by his principles, as he believed an unhappy or uncommitted marriage was actually more of a disgrace to the institution than divorce itself. Keeping Milton's opinion and experience with marriage in mind is important to analyzing Adam's and Eve's marital relationship in *Paradise Lost* as they do not seem to meet the standards that Milton stated are required for a healthy and successful marriage—Eve neglects the Puritanistic ideals of wifely duties by not supporting and following her husband Adam throughout their experience in the Garden of Eden.

Exposing Eve as a temptress and the cause of the fall of man is one way of viewing her character in Milton's epic, and a very popular one at that. A negative light is cast on her when she first sees her reflection in the water; she stares at it in awe for an extended period of time, coming off as vain and narcissistic. But with an anti-feminist lens, this is the character that readers will find if they are already looking for these kinds of traits within her. Also, When Raphael tells Adam the story of The Creation, Eve doesn't seem to care to listen, and ends up walking away and

busying herself in the garden until she can later ask Adam to relate the story to her in words that will apparently be more easy for her to understand. One of the most obvious and serious flaws in Eve's character, not only in *Paradise Lost*, but in the Bible as well, is that she is traditionally seen as the tempter of Adam, having been tempted by Satan to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The conclusion drawn from the non-feminist view, and even what can be considered a misogynist view, is that she was a "weak woman" unable to stay out of trouble when she is out of Adam's sight. In fact, when trying to defend herself to Adam about the fall, she herself says, "Being as I am, why didst not thou the Head, Command me absolutely not to go, / Going into such danger as thou said'st?" (IX. 1155-1157) Adam will hardly take the blame and complains to God that she was "crooked by Nature" (X.885), created with flaws, and designed to tempt him. He doesn't seem to chastise her for directly disobeying God as he much as he does for leaving his side in the first place (because apparently she cannot act responsibly when she is away from his direction.) Both do seem to agree on one thing though: Eve's weakness is the defining factor that led to their fall. After the fall, Eve is more submissive to her husband because as they are both being punished, she feels the need to make it up to Adam: "Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply / By thy conception; children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth, and to they husband's will / Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule." (X.195-196) This ideal submission Eve eventually portrays, and the kind of submission that is implied she *should* have been practicing all along, coincides with Puritanistic and Milton's views of the wife's right place in marriage. This widely accepted interpretation of Eve's responsibility for the fall has been a factor in many of the gender equality issues for centuries, as woman is still obligated to "make it up to man. Much of this argument can be summarized in a description of Adam and Eve's general purposes when they are first discovering their existence in relation to each other: "Not equal, as their sex not equal seemd; / ...Hee for God only, shee for God and Him" (IV.96-99)

But the aforementioned equality seems to solely be referring to their differences in terms of physical appearances. Can it be believed that Eve was really designed to be a flawed creation and bring about the fall all along? This question leads to answers that support a feminist standpoint of *Paradise Lost*. In her essay, *Milton's Eve*, McColley states, "These interpretations obscure both the symptoms of original sin revealed in Adam's invective and the nature of original righteousness represented in the marriage of Adam and Eve." Original sin was created after the fall, and Eve couldn't have had the imperfection that had supposedly caused the fall before she actually "sinned." Such documents as *Eve's Apology in Defense of Women* by Amelia Lanyer go on to question why Eve received and is still receiving so much grief for being understandably beguiled by Satan, the most persuasive speaker to exist, while it seemed easy enough to convince Adam to follow suit by the words of Eve, as he was "fondly overcome with female charm." (XI.999) Rather than seeing Eve's submission to Satan's temptation as indicative of her vulnerability and lack of judgment, or even as a clear motive disobey God and be strong-willed against his commandments, feminist readings see her as simply being inquisitive and curious about knowledge, made more intriguing when Satan tells her that God wants to keep them from gaining a higher knowledge for some reason. And though Adam calls it a

“strange desire of wandering” (IV.1135-1136), Eve is rather seen as woman who is loving to her husband as she is supposed to be, while, at the same, independent and intelligent enough to desire to go off on her own to nurture and preserve the garden according to God’s commandments. As for the smaller events, feminist ideals see Eve’s draw to her reflection in the pool as a simple interest in seeing her face for the first time, understandable enough considering she is one of the first creations. Also, what can be seen as an inability to participate in an intellectual conversation, Eve’s lack of participation in Raphael’s explanation of The Creation is seen as her waiting for Adam to tell her as he would like her to hear, fulfilling part of her role as a wife.

Like Eve, Dalila (also spelled ‘Delilah’) of *Samson Agonistes* is seen as the temptress of her husband, Samson, seducing him into telling her the secret of his supernatural strength so that she can turn him in to her people in exchange for gold, resulting in his fall. Though the stories differ and the disposition of the couples’ marriages aren’t exactly the same, the similarities that still exist between the two relationships, and especially the two women, are interesting to consider under the assumption that Milton wrote these female characters with much of his own opinions to influence him. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, Milton states, “Yet marriage, the ordinance of our solace and contentment, the remedy of our loneliness, will not admit now either of charity or mercy to come in and mediate or pacify the fierceness of this gentle ordinance, the unremedied loneliness of this remedy.” This quote is reminiscent of Samson’s dire situation as Dalila turns him in and leaves him to die at the hands of the Philistines. The betrayal he must have felt, especially by the woman who he had believed to love him most, only deepened his feelings of loneliness. Similarly, when Eve decides to tell Adam of her gained knowledge through the act of sin, Adam knows better than to follow her example, but rationalizes, “Our state cannot be severed, we are one, / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself.” (IX.957-959) He, too, fears the loneliness that Milton states can be amplified by the sudden absence of a partner that one is joined to through marriage. Notably, both these female women have shaped the way that all other women have been viewed for centuries; Eve is held responsible for the fall, for death itself, and has caused women to have to make it up to man or prove their abilities even today, while Dalila is essentially seen as a warning example for the evil temptresses that a woman can be to a man.

Another significant similarity is when both of Milton’s female characters not only rationalize their mistakes with their own, innate weakness but also lay some blame on their husbands, expecting them to be more responsible even though they gave the women too much freedom despite their flighty tendencies. Eve explaining to Adam that she is only a weak woman who didn’t know any better (mentioned earlier) is akin to the when Dalila visits her imprisoned husband and attempts to defend herself, saying, “Curiosity, inquisitive, importune / Of secrets, then with like infirmity/ To publish them, bit common female faults: / Was it not weakness also to make known.” (776-779) Samson responds bitterly with, “Weakness is thy excuse,/ And I believe it, weakness to resist / Philistian gold (830-831). This coincides with the anti-feminist interpretation of Milton’s version of Samson and Dalila. The original story in the Bible and Milton’s retelling of it are more or less the same (in terms of key elements and plot points) but Milton’s interpretation of it seems to hint

at a more malicious intent within Dalila, even though she, like Eve, had a tempter with an alluring proposition as well; her people, Samson's enemies, offer her gold and fortune in exchange for the secret to Samson's power. Dalila takes the deal and ultimately follows through with it. As well as seeing Dalila as an evil temptress to Samson, other critics, in what can be considered an equally misogynistic standpoint, do not consider Dalila an important character in the tragedy at all. Dalila's true motives are purposely made unclear by Milton either to promote her insignificance to the overall story (she is merely there to facilitate Samson's actions) or to encourage the reader to take her actions at face value. These and other like interpretations of an evil Dalila are easier to come across, as her motives seem to be more difficult to rationalize as good and just. The popular conclusion is that Dalila uses her marriage to Samson as a means of satisfying her lust.

But where that is one side of the spectrum, it can also be argued that Samson uses his marriage to Dalila to overthrow her nation. Feminist readings of *Samson Agonistes* are harder to come by, but they do exist. The common versions of the tragedy that most people find themselves reading are those from the points of view of Samson and The Chorus, the latter's main function in the play being to sympathize with the Samson, and even exaggerate his situation. Milton's version of this story is unique because the format provides, maybe unintentionally, the other point of view that the reader can read from: that of Dalila's. Unsurprisingly, this is the feminist interpretation, and instead of casting Dalila as the unforgivable seductress, *Multiple Perspectives in Samson Agonistes* points out one of the questions asked by this standpoint: "Did [Dalila] intentionally set out to rob him of his manhood (his "self"), or was his loss of manhood merely precipitated by her betrayal?" This is not referring to his more literal loss of manhood, when she cut his hair, but the shameful way he reacts when she visits him in prison, which they claim should "predispose us in her favor." His lashing out is just a direct result of his wounded ego. While critics don't support or defend her in her betrayal of her husband, some try to show that from her side of the story, Dalila has reason and sense to act that way that she did, as her motives were understandable and even admirable; her allegiance is with her people and she is finding a way to sustain herself, even if that way is at the cost of her husband. This interpretation, especially that last example, is likely less popular than most others, and clashes heavily with Milton's ideals of marriage and the woman's place in the relationship.

There are several similarities between the famous female characters Eve and Dalila, but one of the most traditional is that they have been seen as the primary cause of the fall of man, especially as they are portrayed in John Milton's famous works, *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. As made evident in his documents on divorce, Milton himself was a strong advocate of the Puritanist ideals of marriage that essentially say a wife is to be submissive to her husband, as is natural, and his opinions can clearly be noted in the famous epic and tragedy. Interpretations exist on the other end of the spectrum as well, though; feminist points of view set out to read these works in a less traditional sense, and only provide more color and depth to the already accomplished works of John Milton.

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