



12-8-2016

Eve's Feminist Wave

Heather Randall

Brigham Young University, heathrandall23@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Randall, Heather (2016) "Eve's Feminist Wave," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol9/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Eve's Feminist Wave

Heather Randall

Paradise Lost has been studied critically since the seventeenth century, and yet there is still something that scholars and readers cannot agree on: what is up with Eve? Students of Milton argue about the role she plays in this epic that describes the greatest heroism in history. Could Eve possibly be part of that great heroism? I propose that viewing Eve's role in *Paradise Lost* through the lens of third-wave feminism can help us better understand her heroic role in the story. By comparing Eve to third-wave feminists, the breadth and depth of her heroic character becomes evident; however, her true heroism is unveiled by examining how she differs from third-wave feminists in selflessness and restraint. This repression of her own desires for the good of those around her leads her to become, if not the epic's hero,¹ then at least Adam's hero, and certainly the hero of humanity.

Seeing Eve in this modern feminist view helps the reader understand the decisions Eve makes throughout the work. One aspect of her character can be framed in an important part of third-wave feminism: the “reclamation of femininity” that occurs as today's women embrace feminine traits that previous feminist movements fought against (Reger 111). For example, the second wave of feminism in the United States rejected stereotypically female ideas, fighting to change the stereotype that a woman's place was the home. Sewing, knitting, cooking, cleaning—any activity that women were typically thought to participate in was de-emphasized as much as possible in order to undercut the “symbols of patriarchal control” (111) in society. Third-wave feminists, however,

have subverted this idea, emphasizing those same typically feminine activities as “tools for women’s empowerment” instead of symbols for patriarchy (110). For third-wavers, empowerment does not come from the activity itself; instead “the ability to choose one’s appearance or activities is what matters” (109). In third-wave feminism, the choice itself gives power to the woman.

Eve finds her tool of feminine empowerment in the Garden of Eden as she nurtures the nature around her. Carrying out the command of God to “prune these growing plants, and tend these flowers” (Milton 4.438), Eve chooses to give the garden her vitality and quickly excels as gardener of the heavenly surroundings. Eve is found “oft stooping to support / Each flower of slender stalk, whose head . . . Hung drooping unsustained; them she upstays / Gently” (9.426–32). Eve is literally able to give power to the flowers around her as she works with them. With this powerful choice of activity, the Garden of Eden becomes subject to Eve’s rule, flourishing now under her hand instead of under God’s, even though God originally gave it life. Of most importance for the third-wave feminist is the direct effect of this tool of Eve’s empowerment on Eve as a woman. Julie Kim suggests that the work Eve accomplishes in the garden gives her a sense of self-worth and identity (22), and I agree. In this work that Eve performs independently, she does exactly what feminists today venerate, empowering not only herself but also the things around her.

Another key to understanding third-wave feminism and Eve’s character is understanding the extent to which this wave of feminism “is all about contradictions” (Orr 35). When discussing what groups one feminist identifies with, she explains, “I suffer from an acute case of multiplicity” (Gilmore 218). Some feminists report that contradictions surface specifically because of the definitions of feminism that the second wave provided for the current generation. Angela Davis explains that feminists today “lay claim to feminist consciousness even as they engage in rituals, careers, sexual practices, and cultural politics that they take to be decidedly ‘unfeminist’ according to standards of second-wave feminism” (Walker 281). Third-wave feminism deals with a contradiction that is never fully reconciled: on one side, there are expectations to live up to, while on the other side exists a new, unique “feminist consciousness.” Eve suffers this same predicament in *Paradise Lost*.

Eve’s situation is very familiar to the third-wave feminist. What she desires to do contradicts what God’s expectations of womanhood demand of her. From the time she first gains consciousness, her first desire is to continue looking at her reflection. When she meets Adam, however, she finds him “less fair . . . than that

smooth wat'ry image" and back she turns to continue admiring her own reflection (Milton 4.478–80). God gave Adam to Eve in order to make Eve happy, but Eve has a much different idea of what will bring her that happiness. Although both God and Eve desire the same goal—happiness and success in the Garden of Eden—each side wants to accomplish that goal in different ways. Later, Eve tells Adam she would rather work by herself in the garden, despite Adam's protests that they will be more likely to resist evil together. Again, Eve's wishes disagree—not from the desire to resist evil, but in how to accomplish it. Eve argues they can only be truly strong if their virtues are tested, and so she ventures off into the garden without Adam, willing to stand for the things she claims to believe in and hoping to become stronger by so doing (9.378–83). Eve desires success and happiness within the Garden, but she is entangled in this contradiction as she struggles between her ways and God's ways. As Eve must grapple with the same complexities that third-wave feminists must, her independence will give us insight into her depth of character.

Another aspect of third-wave feminism that relates to Eve's role in *Paradise Lost* is the idea of "embodied politics." This is the method of "resisting cultural norms through dress and appearance" (Reger 117), the idea of using the body in a stereotypical way to make a statement against that stereotype. For example, third-wave feminists may wear sexually suggestive clothing in order to protest cultural standards about rape. Embodied politics works against stereotypes to empower women.

Eve may not consciously utilize embodied politics, but her physicality still has a powerful effect over Adam. In Eve's case, the angels of heaven provide the negative stereotype of Eve's physicality that she subverts. The angel Raphael shares with Adam that Eve "in outward also [resembles] less / His image who made both, and less [expresses] / The character of that dominion giv'n" (Milton 8.543–5). However, Eve's physical presence has been working on Adam to overthrow this stereotype, however angelic, of Raphael's. Adam tells him, "Yet when I approach / Her loveliness, so absolute she seems / And in herself complete" (8.546–8). While never denying Raphael's statement, Adam testifies that whenever he sees Eve she seems already complete, lacking nothing of what Raphael previously suggests. Eve's embodied politics fight against even celestial stereotypes, a complexity that makes Eve more than just a female presence within the epic.

Thus Eve's role in *Paradise Lost* gains a deeper essence in connection with third-wave feminism; as a reader, using this contemporary lens helps Eve

become femininely complex and independent with a purpose. However, only as the differences between Eve and third-wave feminists are examined can Eve be understood as a hero of the story. She may not be quite the third-wave feminist that this comparison has so far made her seem. Her heroism is only possible because she makes decisions of selflessness that third-wave feminists would not consider. Eve does not take part in a fight against the patriarchy, which is a prevalent current in today's feminism, because of her love for Adam. And lastly, third-wave feminism focuses on enjoying the female body and all its sexual desires, things which Eve abstains from in favor of her future posterity.

The concept of fighting against a patriarchal society that oppresses women is a foundational building block of third-wave feminism. One woman explains how this battle against patriarchy guides her actions; she gets involved in third-wave feminist activities like lesbianism because they help her be a participant in the "rejection of patriarchal power" (Reger 116). Milton describes Adam and Eve's relationship by giving a taste of this patriarchy; the sexes are not equal, and Eve perpetually seems a degree away from God and a degree below Adam. Textual evidence suggests that Eve is aware of this disparity and, after eating the fruit of the tree, even contemplates becoming superior to her husband with her new knowledge.

. . . Shall I to him make known
 As yet my change, and give him to partake
 Full happiness with me, or rather not,
 But keep the odds of knowledge in power
 Without copartner? so to add what wants
 In female sex, the more to draw his love,
 And render me more equal . . . sometime
 Superior; for inferior who is free? (9.820-5)

Though Eve could have made the decision to have the upper hand in their relationship, she chooses unity with her husband instead. Her love for him overpowers her desire to fight against any type of inferiority she senses. In fact, the love she has for him and her desire to see him happy motivate her to choose the almost unthinkable—instead of fighting against Adam, she offers to spiritually give up her life for him. In repentant humility, Eve tells her husband, “[I] to the

place of judgment will return . . . blame from thy head removed may light / On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe, / Me me only just object of [God's] ire" (10.932–6). With those words, Eve becomes a Christ figure, willing to sacrifice her own happiness for Adam's. This love-inspired act towards the man in her life, something third-wave feminists may not even consider, makes Eve a hero in *Paradise Lost*.

The final aspect of third-wave feminism from which Eve differs is in the pursuit of sexual pleasures. Feminists today believe that a woman, empowered and independent, has the right to follow her desires, especially her sexual desires. Stephanie Gilmore describes how third-wavers today ask if they "should . . . ignore the fact that they might enjoy pornography . . . or like to be a man," or want to engage in one-night stands? (217). The third-wavers answer, "Don't ignore it!" Women, they believe, have the right and privilege to pursue those desires. Interestingly, *Paradise Lost* is not devoid of sexual issues, and those issues revolve around Adam and Eve's relationship.

When it comes to wanting sexual pleasures, Eve comfortably fits this mold—she has sexual desires too. Milton often focuses on Adam and Eve's sexual relationship, calling it a "perpetual fountain of domestic sweets" (4.742). In one scene, the desire for those "domestic sweets" is strong: "Carnal desire inflaming, [Adam] on Eve / Began to cast lascivious eyes, she him / As wantonly repaid; in lust they burn" (9.1013–5). Especially after the fruit is eaten and the fall has begun, Eve desires sexual pleasures just like third-wavers today and does not stop herself from going after them. After her attitude becomes repentant, however, Eve makes the deliberate choice not to seek after her sexual desires, no matter how much she may want to, in order to save her posterity from the sorrows of living in a fallen world. She tells Adam that she is willing to avoid their domestic sweets "so Death . . . with us two / Be forced to satisfy his rav'nous maw" (10.990–1), thus sparing her children from a life that promises death. Eve is fully aware of the sexual desire she will have to deny herself, admitting it will be "hard and difficult, / Conversing, looking, loving, to abstain / From love's due rites . . ." (10.992–8). However, no matter how difficult, she chooses to restrain herself from her pleasures in favor of her posterity. Though Adam and Eve ultimately become reconciled to God and a plan is put in place for their salvation and the salvation of their posterity, Eve's willingness to sacrifice for her future generations makes her a hero to their cause.

This contemporary look at Milton's seventeenth-century Eve may seem strange at the onset, but a third-wave feminist view of Eve is a refreshing fit for

this female character who has many decisions to make throughout the work and who often receives too much criticism for making one wrong one. However, Milton's Eve is made up of a surprising strength in complexity and feminine power that makes her an independent woman in her own way, with sincere intent to do good for God in her state of creation. After a good look at Eve through a third-wave lens, she can be viewed not as the almost-hero of *Paradise Lost* who commits a tragic mistake, but instead as the one woman in *Paradise Lost* who becomes a hero to her husband and her posterity because of the selfless decisions she makes.

Endnotes

- ¹ As we consider a female character's heroic place in her story, it might be surprising to find her labeled hero instead of heroine. Although the decision to call Eve a hero in this essay is perhaps surprising, I made the decision deliberately, bearing in mind the connotations of both hero and heroine. Whether heroes are found in comic books, military uniforms, or even behind the scenes in ordinary life, when we read the word hero we think of bravery, selflessness, and overall goodness. In our society today, women are becoming more and more included in this term. This is what makes the use of heroine unnecessary. The word calls attention to the gender of the one acting bravely or selflessly; before we know it, we have switched our focus away from the exceptional actions that allow us to label the woman heroic in the first place. Whether assigned to man or woman, heroic acts are subverted in their greatness if they must first be qualified by gender. Society's politics aside, the word heroine is too limiting for the heroic caliber of a woman. Thus, as we discuss the heroic actions Milton assigns to Eve, let us not limit those actions by gender. Let us forthrightly label her as the hero she is.

Works Cited

- Gilmore, Stephanie. "Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Third Wave Feminism in the United States." *Journal of Women's History* 12.4 (Winter 2001): 215-21. EBSCO. Web. 1 December 2015.
- Kim, Julie H. "Gender and Generation: Individual and Family in Milton's Poetry." Diss. U of Michigan, 1995. Proquest Digital Dissertations. Web. 10 Dec 2015.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century / The Early Seventeenth Century*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. 1945-2175. Print.
- Orr, Catherine. "Charting the currents of the third wave." *Hypatia* 12.3 (Summer 1991): 29-46. EBSCO. 1 December 2015.
- Reger, Jo. *Everywhere & Nowhere: Contemporary Feminism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2012. Print.
- Walker, Rebecca. *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Anchor Books, 1995. Web. 30 November 2015.
- Young, Bruce. "Excerpt from *Shakespeare and Renaissance Family Life* (Chapter One)." English 385, Learning Suite. 14 Dec. 2015. PDF file.
- Young, Bruce W. *Family Life in the Age of Shakespeare*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009.

