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Abstract:

In this essay, I consider the problem of free will in Milton's Paradise Lost by positing that Eve, though ultimately in control of her actions, makes a logical decision in her eating of the fruit, and causing the fall of mankind. I argue that the circumstances of her creation, conducted on God's word, lead her to possess desires which are gratified directly by her partaking of the fruit, rendering her decision rational, despite their disobedience.

Faulty Machinery: An Examination of Eve's Fate as it Relates to Her Creation

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the story of the fall of mankind. It is familiar to most: tempted by Satan to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the first woman, Eve, commits the original sin, and damns mankind to eternal death. God, omniscient, watches from above, perfectly aware that mankind will fall. This presents us with a quandary: if God knows of mankind's fall, does Eve act on free will when she takes the first bite, or are her actions dictated by God's foreknowledge, and influenced by his divine power? Free will, being mankind's ability to make decisions without the necessity of a force such as fate acting upon their choices, seems to exist in Eve. God does not intervene during the temptation, and no force stays her hand. However, at the outset, it seems that her creation, her God-given characteristics, have rendered her susceptible to fall. She is the more naïve, the lesser informed, and the more vain of the two humans, all of which can be seen at her creation. Eve's very humanity, her

defining traits, endowed by her creator, lead directly to her choice to disobey, and although she may have free will, she ultimately makes a rational choice in choosing to eat the fruit.

Eve, the principal actor in the fall, describes the moment of her creation as a time of profound confusion. In Book IV, she recalls that she awoke “Under a shade on flow’rs, much wond’ring where/ and what I was, whence thither brought, and how” (*Paradise Lost* 4:451-2). Thus, from the moment of Eve’s very creation, we see how God has meant for her to be: uninformed, obscured in shadows, and utterly bemused. She is, at her very inception, the more distant of God’s humans, left to learn the world by her surroundings, rather than God himself. She is highly susceptible to circumstance, and, without the direct guidance that Adam receives from God, prone to make mistakes.

And, indeed, she does make mistakes. She spends the majority of her first moments of creation staring upon her own face, “pin[ing] with vain desire” at her own beauty (*Paradise Lost* 4:466). Thus, in the first minutes of her existence, we see that she is flawed: a woman easily distracted by beauty, by the worldly, by what she sees. Here, Eve retroactively describes her actions as vain. Now, in the full knowledge of her love for Adam, she is able to name the fault of her first encounter with the sight of mankind. However, does this not indicate that Eve had knowledge of her very particular flaw, perhaps even of something sinful in her nature? In this scene, she is warned by a voice, presumably God, that informs her that she will become mother of the human race through Adam. Eve ponders “what could I do,/ But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” (*Paradise Lost* 4:475-6). As Eve’s first moments reveal, she is captivated by the visual, and it is unsurprising that, since God failed to present himself to Eve while advising her to seek Adam, she chooses to turn back and look for the fair creature in the water, defying God’s suggestions.

Satan, however, is perfectly cognizant of this innate susceptibility, and uses it to his advantage. His first, unsuccessful attempt at temptation sees him as a frog, “assaying by his Devilish art to reach/ The Organs of her Fancy, and with them forge/ Illusions as he list” (*Paradise Lost* 4:801-3) by speaking in her ear. Like God, he has attempted to speak to Eve without presenting his physical form. Unlike God, he plays at Eve’s fancy for image, attempting to create illusions in her mind, painting pictures of his desire for her. Where God attempts to inspire Eve through an unfamiliar concept, motherhood, Satan appeals to Eve’s true, innate wishes, inspiring “vain hopes, vain aims,/ Blown up with high conceits ingend’ring pride” (*Paradise Lost* 4:808-9). While Satan may be courting Eve’s vanity, he did not, by whispering in her ear, create it; the conception of a vain Eve was God’s own.

One must also consider Eve’s docility, her creation as a being that would follow Adam’s guidance, as a factor in her fall as well. Eve herself acknowledges that Adam is the person, “for whom/ And from whom [she] was form’d” (*Paradise Lost* 4:440-1). She knows that she is meant to be the inferior of the two, the obedient. She follows Adam’s word because she believes that it is what she was created for: to be his graceful, sweet companion. As Elisabeth Liebert notes in her article “Rendering More Equal: Eve’s Changing Discourse in *Paradise Lost*”, “knowledge is not an issue in Eve’s creation as it is in Adam’s: God does not instruct her “to know” but rather to “follow me” (156). Eve has developed an amazing capacity for obedience to what is before her, which is, namely, Adam. It is no wonder then, that the serpent appearing before her has an easy time of tempting her. Eve even asks the serpent to lead her after he has told her of the fruit--“Lead, then, said Eve,” (*Paradise Lost* 9:631)--actually requesting that the beast give her guidance. Eve is ready to follow, as following has comprised the majority of her experience.

It is important to note that the final, successful temptation sees Satan take a corporeal, visual form before Eve, playing into her preference for definite images. To gain her attention, he takes the form of a serpent, and it is not until he flashes a “gentle dumb expression” at Eve that she stops to take notice of him (*Paradise Lost* 9:527). Eve, devoid of contact with the miraculous, except for perhaps the face of the angels, only takes notice of the anthropomorphic snake when he presents himself to her. When the serpent speaks to her, her marvel at his ability might also be derived from her ignorance to miracles, her endowed lack of contact with God. Her amazement stemming from this God-given naiveté predisposes her to trust the serpent, and thus predisposes her to fall.

It is also important to note that pre-fall Eve and pre-betrayal Satan share several prominent characteristics; both have high opinions of themselves, aspirations for self-improvement, and a tendency towards irrational or misinformed thought. Before the fall, Eve rejects Adam’s idea to work together, arguing for her independence by refusing “to dwell/ in narrow circuit strait’n’d by a Foe” (*Paradise Lost* 9:322-3). This fear of constriction, this cavalier attitude, is oddly reminiscent of Satan’s discourse in Pandemonium. Recall Satan’s “hurling defiance toward the Vault of Heav’n” (*Paradise Lost* 1:669), the rebellion that he seeks simply as a means of independence. Satan believes, quite famously, that it is “better to reign in Hell than serve in heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 1:263). Both of these creatures are given a reigning force over their actions. For Satan, this is God, and it is no small wonder that his defiance renders him the enemy of all mankind. Eve, however, seeks to defy only Adam. She knows that she is to be obedient to her husband, but on whose authority is she to take this? She has not heard from God that she is to be obedient, because she has not had direct contact with him. Eve’s defiance against Adam, then, is far more permissible. The fault in Eve, then, would seem

to be in God's creation, and it is quite an inexcusable fault, considering that God has created a flawed being in the same manner twice.

Eve's flaws are apparent when she is contrasted to Adam, whose rational thought and thirst for knowledge far surpass her own. Raphael makes the inequality between the two quite apparent when Adam frets over his rapacious sexual appetite for Eve. Raphael admonishes Adam, warning him against "attributing overmuch to things/ less excellent, as thou thyself" (*Paradise Lost* 8:565-6). Eve is less wise, less rational, and shows a vanity that is entirely absent from Adam, which begs the question: why? That Eve is to be tempted first, that she is to fall first, is somewhat constrained by the Biblical source material, but in attempting to provide motive to the fall where the Bible does not, Milton draws in to question the wisdom of God's choices in creation. Certainly God could have maintained free will, maintained Eve's autonomy and created her as Adam's equal in judgment.

The circumstances of Adam's creation seem to render the imperfect execution of Eve's formation all the more inexcusable. Adam awakes fully illumined, his body dried by "his Beams of the Sun" (*Paradise Lost* 8:255), born straight into the presence of God. As Elisabeth Liebert notes, "he uses the verb 'to know' without exception as a means to express negative understanding, either as a simple expression of the absence of knowledge or as a desire to remedy the absence of knowledge"(153). This stands in stark contrast with Eve, who contemplates the world around her "with much wond'ring", "unexperienced thought", and who "pin'd with vain desire" (*Paradise Lost* 4:451, 457, 466). Thus, Adam is aware of his absence of knowledge upon his creation, while Eve simply wonders at the creation around her. That Adam's lack of knowledge is answered immediately after his creation is even more at God's fault. Eve must *learn* that she does not know, and even in this she is inferior to her husband.

Perhaps, had Eve been born with this innate awareness of a lack of knowledge, she would not have been led to conclude, during her temptation, that “good unknown, sure is not had, or had/ and yet unknown, is as not had at all” (*Paradise Lost* 9:756-7). Here her inability for negative awareness leads her to believe that her lack of knowledge of good makes it quite possible that good will not exist until she is aware of it. Adam, however, can see the possibility of existence without knowing of it.

Eve’s inequality with Adam, her inevitable inferiority resulting from her creation, is what serves as the primary inducement to sin. In eating from the tree, Satan offers her everything that she has been denied since her creation. He claims that Eve, recipient of cryptic dreams and secondhand knowledge from her husband, will “discern things in their causes... trace the ways/ of highest agents” (*Paradise Lost* 9:681-3) and that her “Eyes that seem so clear,/ Yet are but dim shall perfectly be then/ op’n’d and clear’d” (*Paradise Lost* 9:706-8). The snake calls Eve low and ignorant, underscoring her inequality. The obscurity, the confusion that has taken Eve’s mind since the beginning of her birth, can be cured by the simple eating of this fruit. Milton takes great care to also mention the biological, that “the hour of Noon drew on, and wak’d an eager appetite, rais’d by the smell so savory of that fruit” (*Paradise Lost* 9:739-40). Eve is hungry, both literally and figuratively, and when rational beings are hungry, they eat. Why would God create hunger if he knew it would ultimately contribute to his creation’s downfall?

If Eve is a rational being, she will make a decision based on the information she has received, weighing the options and, ultimately, choosing what seems to offer her the most positive consequences and the least negative consequences. She has two options: she may abstain from eating the fruit and avoid God’s punishment, or she may eat the fruit and receive the blessings that the Serpent has described to her *and* receive a filling meal. Eve does not know

what constitutes God's punishment until the Son establishes it, and even if it were described to her, she is, before the fall, "not capable of death or pain" as neither concept exists in Paradise (*Paradise Lost* 9:283). Thus, she may choose between an incomprehensible and therefore ineffective threat, and two rewards. The rational choice is to eat the fruit.

God has given Eve free will to the extent that she is free to choose not to eat the fruit. However, nearly every circumstance of her creation would make it irrational for her to do so. The fault in mankind's fall, then, seems to lie between both Eve and God. Mankind's fall could have been prevented had Eve heeded the unexplained conditions of her creator. Mankind's fall could also have been prevented had God done a better job in creating his second human. The fault does not entirely lie with Eve, because she behaves as any innately naïve and inferior being would. She is confused and is offered enlightenment. She does not see the face of God, but sees a miracle performed by a devil; she is hungry, and, of course, she eats.

Works Cited

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Liebert, Elisabeth. "Rendering "More Equal": Eve's Changing Discourse in *Paradise Lost*." *Milton Quarterly* 37.3 (2003): 152-65. Print.