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Milton's Gift of Autonomy

Abstract: This essay delves into why Milton chose to tell Eve's side of the story of The Fall in Paradise Lost in order to relieve some of the blame she has been shouldering for centuries. The essay looks at the influence of the male characters' masculinity and control of Eve, Milton's gift of narration to Eve, and Eve's characterization in regard to her decision to eat the fruit and cause The Fall. Together, the analysis provides insight as to how and why Eve made her decision to eat the fruit.

Within John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the majority of characters present as male. As one of the few females depicted within the poem, Eve stands out due to her storyline. Many know Eve from the iconic duo of Adam and Eve that originated from the Bible's Genesis creation narrative as well as the story of how Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs, which Milton relays through lines 495-497 in Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*, "Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self / Before me; Woman is her Name, of Man / Extracted." Yet, readers also associate Eve with that one time she ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in Eden and doomed all of mankind to pain and death for the remainder of time itself. The original story of The Fall in Genesis in the Bible is told from an outside perspective that does not have access to the thoughts of Eve, but within Milton's *Paradise Lost*, readers are able to see Eve's thoughts as well as her rationale and reactions to the consequences of the fall in much more detail than that of the original telling in Genesis. The narrational authorship that Milton grants Eve allows the readers to access her

thought process and motivations as well as comprehend the outside influences she was subject to in regard to eating the fruit that the original text does not convey. Therefore, Milton provides Eve's side of the story in order to assuage some of the blame that she has received for dooming mankind through showing how she was a victim of deception, not a malicious perpetrator.

Eve's knowledge of her beauty prevails as a main reason for the downfall of humanity. In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, Eve describes to Adam the first time she noticed her beauty when she caught her reflection in the river, ". . . there I had fixt / Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire, / Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest, / What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself," (465-468). With this knowledge of her beauty in not only her mind but also Satan's mind, Eve falls prey to Satan's compliments of her beauty in Book IX. From there, Satan in his serpent form waxes poetic about how eating the fruit has done nothing bad to him, a beast, so nothing bad could possibly happen to her, a human of God's creation, "Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe, / Why but to keep ye low and ignorant, / His worshippers;" (*Paradise Lost* IX: 703-705). This is where the issue of the male characters' masculinity comes into play.

At various points in the poem, the male characters use their masculinity and male-ness to rule over Eve. God acts as the father of Adam and Eve while Adam acts as the protector and husband of Eve. Knowing how these male characters have control over Eve, Satan uses his masculinity to also assert a certain amount of control over Eve in order to coerce her to eat the fruit. This sentiment is echoed in Anna Michaels' essay "How a Damaging Inferiority Complex Led to Eve's Fall" when Michaels writes, "Satan's objectification of Eve represents the opinions other male characters have about her" (2). Michaels explores the complications of Eve's inferiority complex as a reasoning for why "she looks to Satan for guidance. This desire to be led is so ingrained in Eve that it influences her to commit acts against God" (4). Eve has always been

led and guided, never granted an opportunity to use her free will, so why would she not trust Satan's words about the intentions that God, a father figure to Eve as well as a male character with control over Eve, has for her?

Eve acts obediently throughout the majority of the poem and dutifully listens to those with knowledge, specifically male characters, so it is no surprise that she listens to this serpent with supposed knowledge about God's intentions for her. As Maggie Espino puts it in her essay "Eve: 'Defective by Design' or Disobedient by Decision?" on the topic of Eve's valuing of Satan's deceptive words, "Because she has never heard someone distort God's 'right reason,' the words of Satan seem truthful and logical, trusting this creature that seems to display higher cognitive powers than other animals" (6). Espino also adds to this point, "Throughout her time in Eden, Eve has lived without anxiety and has no reason to fear any creature in the garden" (5). Espino raises a very solid point: who could resist an animal that can speak, especially one who claims he received the gift of speaking from God himself. Satan's claims about God's intentions for her point to the idea that not eating the fruit is a rule that God actually wants Eve to break in order for her to show her independence from God and utilize her free will. Eve interprets this as fact because Adam also gave her independence from him, which is how Eve has wound up with Satan at the Tree of Knowledge, contemplating eating the fruit. Eve cannot take her eyes off the fruit, and with these thoughts of showing God that she is more than just a wife to Adam, she conjures, "Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then / To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind?" (*Paradise Lost* IX: 778-779). Thus, to prove to God she is worthy and with "only 'unexperienced thought' to guide her," she bites down on the fruit (Espino 2).

Then, the world encloses on itself, "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" (*Paradise Lost* IX: 782-

784). Eve's first post-fall thought is to find Adam and to have him eat the fruit as well. Eve realizes she does not want Adam to remain in Eden and fall in love with someone else, so she must get Adam to eat the fruit and become equal to her in her doom. This act signals a change in the characterization of Eve. Before the fall, she was submissive to Adam and eager to please, and now Eve asserts herself by coercing Adam to join her in eating the fruit. She knows she can accomplish this because of Adam's adoration and undying love for her. She is aware that his love for her outweighs his love for God. In some respects, she adopts the manipulative nature of Satan by wanting Adam to suffer alongside her.

Yet, this manipulative nature that she appears to reenact does not signal her to have become a so-called terrible person; Eve appears to recreate the masculinity that is constantly around her by exhibiting this manipulative nature toward Adam in convincing him to eat the fruit. Eve has been shown throughout the poem to be under the control of male characters such as God, Adam, or Satan at some point. She has not been allowed the free will that the male characters exhibit through their actions. In fact, in Espino's essay explores Eve's adoption of her "God-given free will [which] she exercises poorly leading to the Fall" (1). She must learn how to use this free will, but the first chance she has to exercise it goes horribly wrong and she dooms humanity. Eve must be granted some leeway in this case because "without any type of instruction from God her creator or another human, how can she be expected to know what is expected of her behavior, or even to look for another being in the garden?" (Espino 2). She does not commit the act of eating the fruit out of disobedience to God nor is the act committed because she has a malicious intent; Eve eats the fruit out of her loyal, unwavering obedience to God because she truly believes that that is what God wanted her to do. She wanted to pass the test that God had presented her, and she uses the gift of free will to make this decision.

Once Adam ingests the fruit, the feelings of love between Adam and Eve change to something more animalistic and less delicate, “Carnal desire inflaming, hee on *Eve* / Began to case lascivious Eyes, she him / As wantonly repaid: in Lust they burn:” (*Paradise Lost* IX: 1013-1015). Adam grabs her hand and hauls her off to the nearest shady bank where they consummate the fall of mankind. Yet, when they wake up from their nap, they feel the overwhelming emotion of shame from their nakedness. They have recognized their sinful transgression and the ramifications of the act; they have lost paradise. Then, they begin to blame each other for the fall. “Would though hadst heark’n’d to my words, and stay’d / With me, as I besought thee,” Adam blames Eve for wandering off and being coerced by the serpent (*Paradise Lost* IX 1134-1135). Adam reasons that had she not exercised her free will they would still be living in paradise, indicating a loss of the peace and unity these two once practiced. Eve responds to his accusation by saying, “Or here th’ attempt, thou couldst not have discern’d / Fraud in the Serpent, speaking as he spake” (*Paradise Lost* IX 1149-1150). Eve pleads her case and tries to convince Adam that had he been alone with the serpent at the Tree of Knowledge that he would have chosen to eat the fruit as well. Their back and forth continues as Book IX ends, bringing an end to the story of The Fall.

Milton’s *Paradise Lost* contains much more detail and dialogue than the Bible’s Genesis. The detail of the events leading up to and directly following The Fall can be accredited to the narration of Eve. She eats the fruit in the first place, so Milton took this fact of her eating the fruit and expanded upon the tale with his perspective of what happened at the Tree of Knowledge by adding the dialogue between Eve and Satan. Milton’s gift of narrational ownership that he gives to Eve, specifically in Book IX, allows readers to witness the events firsthand. Readers are able to understand her motivation of wanting to prove to God that she is worthy of the free will

that she has been gifted as well as readers also being able to understand how her judgement was skewed due to Satan's influence over her.

In addition to giving Eve a voice, Milton's granting of narrational ownership also reveals other aspects of her character that readers otherwise would not know based off of the Bible's Genesis alone. By allowing her account of the events of The Fall to come through within the poem, readers are able to see her as more than just one of Adam's ribs. Eve possesses knowledge, and she is not the dim-witted woman like many believe her to be due to her decision to eat the fruit, and Espino reiterates this fact by saying, "Her analysis and logic demonstrate that she is not ignorant" (Espino 7). For example, it is because of her knowledge that she understands her place in the social hierarchy of Eden when she steps away from Adam and Raphael's conversation in Book VIII. She steps away from the conversation so Adam can take pride in informing her of the conversation later. Eve understands the concept of masculinity of the male characters that she is subject to, and thus, she sought out this same masculinity through her decision to eat the fruit, "Eve believes that eating the forbidden fruit truly will make her Adam's equal and help her live up to his expectations of her perfection" (Michaels 6). Once Eve practiced free will once and realized she enjoyed it, she sought to be equal to the men who she had seen practice free will for so long. Readers would not know of Eve's knowledge had Milton not given her the agency to tell her own story in *Paradise Lost*.

Eve's personal agency ultimately dooms humankind, but it is through Milton's *Paradise Lost* that readers are able to comprehend the events that led up to the act itself. Satan's coercion and her thirst to prove her worth to God stand as two main reasons why she chose to eat the fruit, and it is important to reiterate that she did not commit the act out of malicious intent. Milton giving her a voice within *Paradise Lost* points to the fact that her naivety to what God wanted for

her and the deception of Satan who was telling her what God wanted were what caused her to be duped, and this information would be lost had Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with the inclusion of the original content in Genesis. Without his addition of Eve's authorship, readers would have most likely arrived at a different conclusion like maybe that Eve could not function without Adam's guidance and that is why she ate the fruit or that she had a vendetta against God for creating her as a playmate for Adam. This narrational addition is an example of how fanfiction can enhance the original text and give characters a chance to redeem themselves in the eyes of the reader. In this case with Milton at the helm, fanfiction was able to grant Eve a voice of her own to be able to prove her innocence.

Works Cited

Espino, Maggie. "Eve: 'Defective by Design' or Disobedient by Decision?" 2010.

Michaels Anna. "How a Damaging Inferiority Complex Led to Eve's Fall." 2017.