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To Stand or To Fall:

Responses to Temptation and Subservience in *Paradise Lost*

Parallelism can work to develop and emphasize the significance of similar and opposing viewpoints within a work. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton creates parallels between character contentions and dialogue to present variations of reason and logic. Interestingly, while most characters in the work approach their environments from differing perspectives, Satan, Adam and Eve's logic—though ostensibly different—brings each to a fallen state, as opposed to the angel Abdiel, who applies logic to remain steadfast. Comparing these seemingly diverse stances exposes themes and intents that would not be evident if the parallel did not exist. This suggests that a being is not defined by self-possessed characteristics or self-professed reason, but by his or her correlation to surroundings that are in conditional proximity. When considered in this light, it is Eve who gives incisive definition to each character's argument, specifically pertaining to the logic employed during the temptation scenes. By contrasting Adam and Satan's distinctive reasoning strategies to Eve's, the reader is no longer presented with flat, one-dimensional characters, but with a complete view of each being's motivations that are not obvious upon individual analysis. With each temptation scenario, Milton demonstrates varying ideas of subservience. Satan rebels against submission and knowingly falls from grace, then resigns himself to his fallen position. Adam initially practices subservience from instruction and constant angelic prodding then knowingly falls because he has never felt true conviction to do

otherwise. Eve feels that subservience can not exist unless her ability to choose is tested and confirmed. Ironically, Eve finds her idea of submission on Raphael's depiction of Abdiel, the only figure in *Paradise Lost* who faces and overcomes temptation. Considered singularly, each character presents a variation on a theme. However, upon examining the fall of Adam and Satan within the context of Eve's endeavors, one can see the weakness in Adam's resolve and the futility in Satan's redemption.

When considering submission and the ability to stand or to fall, it is imperative that one examine God's professed desire to be worshipped sincerely, not through mandatory submission. From the outset, God announces and repeatedly reiterates that both man and angels alike are given free will and are placed within a realm that encourages exercise of this will. He contends:

I made him just and right,
 Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.
 Such I created all th' Ethereal Powers
 And Spirits, both them who stood them who faild;
 Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
 Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere
 Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
 [...] What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
 When Will and Reason
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoild,
 Made passive both, had serv'd necessitie,
 Not mee. (Milton 3.98-111)

Here, God defends His methodology: all beings are instilled with the gift of choice and reside in

an environment where they are free to exercise this God-given right. As Callan Buck contends, “God gives commands and then leaves it up to the individual to decide whether or not to obey and does not directly intervene to influence one’s choices, as that would form a restraint on one’s free will” (2). Those who stand choose to do so through diligence. Those who fall do so by their own design, and often, like Eve, fall in their attempts to prove self-restraint beyond their own abilities. Regardless of the outcome of each character’s temptation, the import of these scenarios is that the opportunity for choice is present, as choice is an imperative precursor to submission.

When compared to Eve, in light of God’s aforementioned commandment, Adam’s blind ambition to serve without question paints him as the inferior of the pair—even though he was created as superior. After Adam bombards Raphael with a barrage of questions, Raphael charges him: “Sollicit not thy thoughts with matters hid, / Leave them to God above, him serve and fear” (8.167-168). Adam’s single-minded nature is evident in his satisfied demeanor and response to Raphael: “How fully hast thou satisfi’d mee” (Milton 8.180). Even though Adam’s questions go unanswered, he chooses to stop asking because he has been instructed to do so, *not* because he is fully satisfied. This approach to servitude without question opposes Eve’s philosophy. Eve explains the necessity of choice in relation to subservience and free will when she asks, “Can hearts, not free, be tri’d whether they serve / Willing or no, who will but what they must / By Destiny and can no other choose?” (5.532-34) Her words echo the pronouncement of the Creator. While Adam is “superior” in being, his logic is inferior. Adam worries that Eve will not be victorious over the tempter and implores her, “leave not the faithful side / that gave thee being, still shades and protects” (9.265-266). As loving as Adam’s desire to protect Eve may be, his request for her to remain by his side removes her from a position to do the very thing God has instructed—to prove subservience through personal freedom. Eve’s response to Adam asserts

some of the strongest logic used in *Paradise Lost* and, once again, mirrors the Deity:

And what is Faith, Love, Vertue unassaid
 Alone, without exterior help sustained
 [...] Frail is our happiness, if this be so,
 And *Eden* were no *Eden* thus expose'd. (9.335-341)

Yes, Eve does bring about the fall of man by venturing off against Adam's wishes and yes, Adam's dialogue does suggest he would have ignorantly maintained his loyalty to God for eternity had it not been for Eve's transgression. Even so, when juxtaposing the logic, or lack thereof, employed by each to stand, one sees that Eve, not Adam, is more in line with God's professed desire for His creation.

While Adam serves God without reservation, Satan, to his detriment, struggles with God's pronouncement. Uncomfortable with the thought of losing stature after the Son's creation, Satan denounces subservience of any kind, stating, it is "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (1.263). Whilst Satan draws an explicit parallel between hell and heaven, there is a further comparison at work in the parallels between Satan and Adam. It is through Satan's comparison to Adam that the reader sees opposing ends of the same spectrum and understands how both character's extreme stances inhibit their ability to prevent their fall. Satan and Adam's mind-set lack equilibrium. Their arguments neutralize each other when placed in balance, one negating the other's rationalization. Remove Satan's desire to disprove God's strength and one is left with indentured servitude. Remove Adam's ability to serve with innate acceptance and one is left with benign refusal to exalt one's maker. Interestingly, Eve's beliefs are a culmination of Satan and Adam's. She brings purpose to Satan's necessity for proof and Adam's ability to serve blindly. The logic Eve uses against Adam places her in opposition to him. Conversely, her

very position in the hierarchy puts her in correlation with Satan. Like Satan, Eve is placed beneath a superior who beseeches servitude. Even though God requests her allegiance to be given freely, the fact that she maintains an inferior position creates a desire to prove equality. Adam asserts, more than once, that he knows Eve's place as his subordinate: "For well I understand in the prime end / Of Nature her th' inferior" (8.540-541). Eve's desire to prove her "firmness"—a characteristic Adam so openly doubts—creates empathy for Satan's plight (9.279). Satan, like Eve, is reminded of his inferiority. After the Son's creation, God mandates that all worship His Son, stating: "your Head I him appoint; / And by my Self have sworn to him shall bow / All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord" (5.606). God's desire to be worshipped freely seems to have lapsed here. In fact, the actions that result from God's pronouncement of Satan, and all others, as inferior to the Son are catastrophic for one-third of the heavenly host as well as all of mankind. The creation of the Son and God's directed subservience generates a rebellious spirit in Satan that did not exist previously. Subsequently, Satan is driven to prove his equality by building a rival kingdom and to avenge the pride he feels he lost when the Son pushes Satan and his rebellious forces into Chaos. Here, one can see the connection between Satan and Eve's positions. As such, Eve's logic legitimizes Satan's stance.

While Satan and Eve align in position and often in argument, they diverge in motivation. Consequently, Eve finds redemption while Satan finds his "evil soon / Driv'n back rebounded" (7.56-57). Satan's motivation arises from within and becomes tainted with pride and an overwhelming need to vindicate himself against a perceived wrong. Eve also derives her aspirations from internal fortitude; yet, her desire to stand does not arise from a wish to "rival" Adam, only to prove her equality and to reveal herself as a worthy companion. She has no desire to "reign," (1.263) only a desire to prove her "firmness" (9.279). Like Abdiel before her, Eve

wishes to assert the fact that a lesser can prevail for the sake of goodness and justice. Adam injures Eve's spirit when he suggests that she can not overcome their foe on her own. As Jessica Lauren Stephenson asserts of Eve: "She feels that Adam is questioning her trustworthiness and moral strength. Adam's words, although gentle, only serve to heighten her resolve" (2). Eve confides in Adam:

His fraud is then thy fear, which plan infers
 Thy equal fear that my firm Faith and Love
 Can by his fraud be shak'n or seduc't;
 Thoughts, which how found they harbor in they brest,
Adam, misthought of her to thee so dear? (Milton 9.285-289)

Here, Eve feels she must face temptation to demonstrate proof of her subservience, just as Abdiel previously stood against his foe. Like Satan, Abdiel correlates with Eve on multiple levels. He is an angel of lesser rank than God, just as Eve is a being in lower standing than Adam. Abdiel fervently affirms that one's place in God's hierarchy is not a measure of the capacity for "Faith and Love" (9.285), but an appointed position that should be celebrated and affirmed through willful submission. Eve desires to prove that, although she may be lower in stature, she is not necessarily more vulnerable to temptation. Eve's inference is a logical one; however, she errs in the assumption that confidence in her abilities to stand necessarily ensures success. Her downfall is due to a miscalculation in her own aptitude and a misplaced desire to raise herself from inferior to equal. Abdiel faces temptation in an attempt to thwart evil, not to raise his stature. His is a selfless act. Even though Abdiel is aware that his "Empyrean substance cannot fail" (2.117), he still places himself at risk by traversing unexplored waters. Abdiel subjects himself to intense derision when he attends Satan's meeting, but not to prove *his* virtue. Eve

chooses to face temptation to assert herself and to prove that *her* “firm Faith and Love” cannot “by [Satan’s] fraud be shak’n” (9.285-286). Whereas Abdiel’s confrontation with temptation is a statement of his acceptance of his position, Eve’s confrontation is a quest to assert herself as Adam’s equal, even though it is probable she does not consciously understand the vanity of her desire. This fact reveals Eve as an amalgamation of angelic and satanic aspiration. Despite her arguably justified desire to stand fast against her foe and prove her worth, her actions *do* bring about the corruption of Eden. What makes Eve different from Satan and Adam, however, is that she learns from her mistake. By epic’s end, she realizes that while perfection has been lost with her misstep, so can redemption and restoration occur through repentance. Eve has the honor of verbalizing the last spoken words of the epic, “Such favor I unworthy am voutsaft, / By mee the Promis’d Seed shall all restore” (12.623-624). Whereas Satan seeks to avenge after his fall and Adam seeks to blame, Eve seeks to understand and grow. Through her contrition, mankind finds redeemed.

When one interprets *Paradise Lost* within the context of a parallel, the epic gains depth and magnitude. The parallel sets up an opposition between varying logical stances and works to define the subject matter in terms of its comparison. The epic serves to instruct man on the importance and absolute necessity of subservience to God. To justify his theory, Milton presents several scenarios depicting acceptance and rejection of subjection and the resulting consequences and/or benefits. Adam, Satan, Eve and Abdiel are given an opportunity to exhibit free will. Abdiel epitomizes perfection in loyalty and humility and is the model for angelic behavior, as well as an exemplar for human emulation. Adam and Satan’s encounters depict failed approaches to subservience, yet each of their arguments have merit that become clear when juxtaposed with Eve, whose convictions call to mind those of Abdiel. Examined as separate

scenes, the reader is presented with a single-sided argument. Explore the temptation scenes in unison, however, and the reader gains a complete understanding of why subservience without question cannot be genuine and why ardent refusal to serve will eventually lead to demise.

Ultimately, the reader comes to understand that although the idea of facing temptation for the greater good is Milton's overriding belief, in order to be successful, one's aspiration to stand against temptation must also coincide with a desire to glorify the Deity through sincere devotion, not through forced submission.

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