

Annemarie Lisko

EN 335: Milton and Women

Dr. David Ainsworth

3 May 2017

### Humanity's First Artist:

#### Milton's Creative Relationship to Eve in *Paradise Lost*

Creativity is a complicated matter in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. God's creativity brought humanity and the world into existence, but, in turn, Eve's own creativity played a central role in her temptation and fall—a sequence of events which seems to warn that creativity is too dangerous for humans to even attempt, and should instead be left to God. However, this assessment falls apart upon considering that *Paradise Lost* itself, the very work which supposedly delivers this warning, is nothing less than a massive creative endeavor on Milton's own part, as he explicitly acknowledges in his invocations of the muse Urania. Indeed, *Paradise Lost* constitutes not Milton's condemnation of human creativity, but rather his exploration of the incredible power of this human faculty. By intertwining his focus on Eve's deeply creative nature (and its resulting strengths and weaknesses) with his own identity as poet-narrator of *Paradise Lost*, Milton illustrates the struggles faced by any human artist in a world where free will and innate creative agency constitute a precarious balance which can lead to either resounding success or complete disaster. Apart from God himself, Eve alone in *Paradise Lost* embraces creativity, but this tendency ultimately leads to disaster, because those around her lack her artistic insight and instead respond with condemnations which ultimately lead to the Fall. Milton, understanding and appreciating both Eve's creative tendency and her resulting tragic

fate, styles his own creative identity as a refiguration of Eve, humanity's first artist, and in doing so offers a testament to creativity as the most profound human trait imaginable.

While Milton's God certainly does not oppose "creativity" as a concept, and neither does he restrict the actions (thus including the creativity) of humanity, the framework of his universe does require humans to acknowledge and accept the repercussions of their actions. Bill Caudell, in his 2012 essay "Humanity as Art," demonstrates God's intense appreciation and respect for the creative faculty (Caudell 1-2) and illustrates how he endows humanity with the same creative agency that he himself possesses. Yet this agency, as Caudell astutely notes, does not come without responsibility. As "Authors" (*Paradise Lost* 3:122) of their own experiences and destinies, humans are free to make creative choices in their lives; however, they also "have to realize that even though God has given them free will, their actions still have consequences" (Caudell 2, 5). In his essay from the same year, "The Freedom of God and Man," Clay Greene offers further explanation of the nature of these responsibilities and consequences: to enjoy the free will offered by God, one must also accept the divine justice which, as Greene illustrates, is inextricably tied to free will for Milton's God and his universe: "Without free will, justice would be tyrannical and cruel. Lacking justice, freedom would create a world of unresolved particulates floating in an unconstructed void" (Greene 7). God clearly allows his creations free will, including creative freedom, but he equally clearly expects them to understand that these actions will be subject to his justice, because, as Greene has demonstrated, free will and justice are inextricably connected.

It is into this world of artistic free will cautioned by divine justice that Eve, an amazingly creative human, arrives. Every action she partakes of in Eden demonstrates her remarkable creativity—in fact, the very first deed we see her engage in in Book IV is the telling of a story.

While our first encounter with Adam finds him reiterating the rules God has established for the Garden, Eve, on the other hand, narrates an account of the day she came into existence. The contrast between Adam's repetition of words previously given him by someone else and Eve's imaginative action of storytelling immediately foregrounds creativity's centrality in her identity. Moreover, as she acknowledges, she "oft remember[s]" this day (4: 449)—such imaginative reflection is not an anomalous occurrence, but rather a frequent part of her life.

This key difference between Adam and Eve becomes even clearer upon considering the content of Eve's story, especially in comparison with Adam's account of his own awakening. Describing her first moments of existence, she reveals that she has employed her mind creatively from the beginning: "I first awak't...much wond'ring where/ And what I was, whence thither brought, and how" (9: 450-452). While Adam's response to first awakening focuses on his lack of information—"who I was, or where, or from what cause,/ [I] Knew not" (8: 270-271)—Eve's "wond'ring" reveals her innate tendency to fill her mind with imaginative thoughts. Despite knowing no more concrete facts than Adam did at this point, she immediately creates material for contemplation via her own "wond'ring." Similarly, while Adam immediately turns his attention to exterior elements such as the "Hill," "Woods," "Streams" and animals around him (8: 261-266), Eve needs no such external stimulations to craft a pleasing and informative experience for herself. Glimpsing her own reflection in a pond, she finds fulfillment in the image's "answering looks/ Of sympathy and love" (4: 464-465). Indeed, this self-created experience fulfills her so well that, had not God introduced her to Adam, she would have "fixt/ Mine eyes [there] till now" (4: 465-466). Even when alone, Eve's imaginative skills enable her to transform a simple image into an experience of companionship and happiness so complete that she does not need company.

Creativity characterizes all of Eve's major acts in the garden. When she cooks, she crafts inventive meals, contemplating "What choice to choose for delicacy best" and "What order, so contriv'd as not to mix/ Tastes, not well join'd, inelegant, but bring/ Taste after taste upheld with kindest charge" (5: 333-336). She artistically analyzes the fruits' tastes to create new and delicious combinations. And her cultivation of the garden's plants, which she regards as almost human-like, further emphasizes her imaginative perception of the world. For Eve, flowers are not merely objects, but vibrant, living figures. And the plants respond dynamically to Eve's attitude: "they at her coming sprung/ And toucht by her fair tendance gladlier grew" (8: 46-47). Her creative success here becomes even more obvious when contrasted to Adam's treatment of the garden's animals, which emphasizes only his domination and control: he names them, and the animals "pay [him] fealty/ With low subjection (8: 344-345). The animals' "low subjection" before Adam contrasts starkly with the flowers which "sprung" and "gladlier grew" at Eve's approach, again revealing the creative power innate in Eve and her actions.

Unfortunately for her, however, Eve's intense creativity baffles her peers—or more accurately, her one human peer, Adam, who, assisted by the questionably-judging angel Raphael, shuns creative agency altogether. Throughout the epic, Adam and Raphael repeatedly condemn the "Fancy"—the "creative or productive imagination, which frames images of objects, events, or conditions that have not occurred in actual experience" (*OED*)—and characterize it as female, recognizing its centrality to Eve's identity and then seeking to suppress it. In one particularly clear statement of their attitude, Raphael suggests to Adam to "Think only what concerns thee and thy being;/ Dream not of other Worlds" (8: 174-175), and Adam completely agrees, criticizing the "Mind or Fancy" which "rove[s]/ Uncheckt" (8: 188-189) and asserting that anything other than "That which before us lies in daily life" is "fume,/ Or emptiness, or fond

impertinence (8: 193-195). He then continues, lamenting of the “Mind or Fancy” that “of her roving is no end” until “she learn” to concentrate on everyday reality instead of imaginative creations (8: 188-190). His words indicate his perceived need to beware of, and, ideally, to subjugate, this imaginative faculty. He has already expressed these same ideas to Eve herself, defining “Fancy” as one of the “lesser Faculties that serve/ Reason as chief” (5: 101-103) and following this subordination with further warnings. As he cautions Eve, “mimic Fancy” causes dreams by “imitat[ing]” Reason, producing “Wild work” by “misjoining shapes” (5: 110-112). Adam and Raphael stingingly criticize this feminine-identified human “Fancy,” and, by extension, Eve who embodies it so thoroughly.

Yet Adam and Raphael miss the point. As Caudell and Greene have already convincingly demonstrated, God both appreciates creativity (and not only his own, but humanity’s as well) and endows humans with free will. Thus, to declare, as Adam and Raphael do, that God advocates subjugation of human creativity, makes no sense whatsoever. On the most obvious level, when God sent Raphael to speak with Adam in Eden, he did not direct Raphael to criticize imagination. On the contrary, he intended Raphael to warn Adam against the impending threat of Satan, the “enemy/ Late fall’n...from Heaven” (5: 239-240) who plans to trick Adam and Eve “by deceit and lies” (5: 243)—a task which Raphael’s warning to “Dream not of other Worlds” (8: 175) hardly seems to accomplish. (Truly comprehending the threat of Satan—a being who has fallen from Heaven and now arisen from Hell—would likely involve precisely the dreaming of other worlds which Raphael tries to forbid.) And Adam’s agreement that elements “which before us lie...in daily life” (8: 193) supersede products of the imagination demonstrates a similar misunderstanding. Is not God himself, resident of the “other World” of Heaven, a central element of Adam’s “daily life” in Eden? Similarly, an impending invasion of Eden by Satan and

the forces of Hell (another world) should be considered a serious concern of Adam's "daily life." Imagination of that which lies beyond the immediately visible is not completely separate from concerns of "daily life." The two are intimately connected, but Adam and Raphael fail to realize this fact.

Raphael and Adam's fundamental misunderstanding of the necessity of creative imagination renders them unable to approach either the faculty itself, or Eve who embodies it so thoroughly, in an informed manner. Their inability to comprehend the idea of human creativity, as opposed to Eve who understands it so thoroughly, can be explained, at least in part, by a consideration of Eve's unique identity as the first human woman. Adam, a man, possesses Reason but obviously cannot reproduce biologically, and the female animals in the garden, while capable of reproduction, lack Reason, as Raphael makes clear (8: 586-594). (Raphael himself, as an angel, stands outside of the human sphere altogether.) On the other hand, Eve, a female figure created as Adam's "likeness" and "other self" (8: 450) possesses both Adam's Reason and the female ability for biological reproduction. She is the only entity in the garden to embody both concepts, and together they render her particularly attuned to creativity at large: her Reason allows her to explore alternate manifestations of the biological creativity she already innately holds, as her numerous creative acts throughout the story illustrate.

However, while this set of observations frees Eve's creativity from the charges of foolishness and opposition to God leveled by Adam and Raphael, it also points toward the fall she will eventually suffer. Eve is incredibly alone in her identity as a creative being. Adam and Raphael, her only associates, fail to understand God's acceptance of human creativity, let alone the faculty's (tremendous) potential benefits, rendering Eve the sole creative figure apart from God in the universe at this point. God himself, while granting Eve the freedom to act creatively,

also remains distant from her throughout the epic. As a result, she has no companionship in her creativity and must navigate this unique identity alone, meanwhile suffering scorn and abuse from the misunderstanding Raphael and Adam—a difficult situation that renders her all too susceptible to Satan’s temptation.

Close analysis of Eve’s behavior reveals that she undoubtedly perceives the other characters’ criticism of and attempts to suppress her creativity. Her experience after her dream in Book 5 provides one such example. While she outwardly professes herself unsettled by this dream (induced by Satan’s whispers into her ear) of eating the forbidden fruit and receiving expanded perceptive powers, her language simultaneously reveals her enthusiasm for the vividly imaginative experience of the dream. Breaking the limits of everyday reality, she “[flew]...up to the Clouds,” perceiving the Earth from above as she never had before, and her reaction—her “wond’ring at my flight and change”—finds her again filling her mind with new possibilities (5: 86-90). However, Adam’s harsh dismissal of the creative process behind dreams forecloses any possibility for Eve to continue “wond’ring” about the sensation. This denial, combined with the vague description of her tears upon hearing Adam’s words, suggest Eve’s sense of repression. Adam views these tears “as the gracious signs of sweet remorse/...that fear’d to have offended” (5: 134-135). However, not only does this perception (the tears seemed “as,” but not necessarily “were”) fail to clarify that Eve indeed cries from remorse (as opposed, perhaps, to sadness at the loss of the sensation or frustration at Adam’s dismissal of her experience), but, moreover, the implicit suggestion that Eve’s imaginative experience is an “offense” meriting “remorse” underscores Adam’s hostile attitude toward creativity. Eve did not here commit a forbidden deed—she merely imagined doing so—yet Adam reacts almost as vehemently to the imagination of the deed as to the deed itself.

Thus, by the time Satan arrives at the garden, Eve's creative identity has been battered and demeaned to the point that, once Satan seizes upon this pressure point, he can capture her attention and tempt her to fall. While he employs several strategies in his temptation, his climactic—and successful—argument appeals to the denial of her own creativity under which Eve has suffered. Flagrantly asserting the suppression of Eve's creativity in a manner that evokes Raphael's and Adam's characterization of creativity as beyond human reach—"The Gods are first, and that advantage use/ On our belief, that all from them proceeds"—Satan then interrogates this monopoly on creativity: "I question it, for this fair Earth I see,/ Warm'd by the Sun, producing every kind,/ Them nothing" (9: 719-722). His choice of the generally feminine-characterized "Earth" to evidence creative entities outside of God's supposed monopoly particularly appeals to both Eve's own female creativity and her (correct) understanding that God is indeed not the universe's only creative power.

The argument impacts her profoundly. Even after Satan finishes speaking, his words "Yet rung...impregn'd/ With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth" (9: 736-738). Significantly, this argument seems reasonable and truthful not just in general, but specifically "to [Eve]." It does so because Satan openly speaks the "Truth" about her creative oppression. While her earlier actions—such as her vague response to Adam's admonition after her dream—have suggested her sense of oppression, this oppression has never been openly challenged until Satan speaks it aloud. The effect of doing so is tremendous: by first bringing Eve's creative subjugation viscerally into the open for the first time and then portraying the eating of the fruit as a defiantly liberating action (his final words are an encouragement to "freely taste" [9: 732]), Satan capitalizes upon Eve's sense of creative subjugation as the weak point from which he can, and does, lure her into the Fall.



In this moment, Eve's suppressed and injured creativity overwhelms her consideration of the repercussions that her action—like every action—must have. Succumbing to Satan's sympathetic appeal to her battered identity, she eats the fruit. And because, as Greene has noted, free will and divine justice are intimately connected, Eve's choice to eat the fruit leads to man's exile from Eden. However, the lasting impression of Eve conveyed by *Paradise Lost* is not Milton's condemnation of her action as wrong, but rather his nuanced consideration of the reasons behind that action: Eve falls because she is creative and alone.

Milton understands that Eve's fall is the result of a particular, complex set of issues which she as the world's first (and at the time, only) creative human faces. The recently-created world, at this point, has no human precedent for creativity, and Eve's only companions both lack her keen attunement to the reality of human imaginative potential and, furthermore, because of this lack of understanding, mistakenly consign creative agency to God alone. Thus Eve, bereft of companions in her creative identity, is all too ready to listen to Satan when he arrives and offers, for the first time, approval of that identity.

Milton indicates his understanding of Eve's predicament by the lengths to which he styles his own poetic identity as the narrator of *Paradise Lost* after Eve's own imaginative experiences within the story. Milton knows (and Eve knows too, as her subsequent admission of full responsibility for the consequences of her choice shows [10: 935-936]) that actions have consequences, and thus, when he ventures to follow in Eve's creative footsteps, he also institutes some extra precautions, clearly drawn from his understanding of the reasons behind her fall. Primarily, he recognizes that the isolated existence she suffered as a result of her creative identity—not the actual creativity itself—was what precipitated her into the Fall. Eve did not fall because she was creative (as Caudell and Greene make clear, Milton's God would not condemn

someone for creativity), but rather because Adam's and Raphael's repeated criticisms of her creativity left her subject to a sense of isolation which made Satan's work all too easy. Eve is not only the world's first artist, but also the first person to experience the struggles, exclusions, and misunderstandings that creative minds (including Milton himself) have faced ever since.

Recognizing this root cause of the Fall, Milton constantly calls upon the companionship and guidance of his muse, Urania, to remain by his side. His repeated requests to Urania to "Instruct" (1: 19), "support" (1: 23), and "guide" (7: 15) him in his creative endeavor to "pursue.../Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhyme" (1: 15-16) ensures that as he employs his creative faculties, he will not be as alone, and subject to pain and temptation, as Eve was. Similarly, he asks for Urania's aid in using his imagination to craft images of Heaven, lest he "fall/ Erroneous there to wander and forlorn" (7: 19-20). The language in this invocation directly indicates his attempts to avoid the situation in which Eve found herself. He recognizes that creativity is risky, and that the embrace of one's creative faculties can lead to a "fall" (this word's significance is clear); thus he seeks to avoid the fate of Eve, who after her own creativity-related Fall finds herself "wand'ring" her "solitary way" out of Eden (12: 648-649).

Milton understands that Eve's isolation as a creative being was key to that creativity's role in her temptation and downfall, and he thus summons Urania to accompany him and save him from the creative isolation that overthrew Eve. Despite being "fall'n on evil days,/...and evil tongues;/ In darkness, and with dangers compast round,/ And solitude," he is "yet not alone" because of the company of Urania, and, thus, he remains "unchang'd" and able to continue safely practicing creativity in the writing of his epic (7: 24-31). The image of a solitary and suffering creative soul evoked here clearly echoes his characterization of Eve throughout *Paradise Lost*,

with the key difference that Milton is saved by his decision to invoke the spiritual company of Urania.

And, in fact, this invocation constitutes Milton's most dramatic vindication of the creative imagination, and, by extension, of Eve herself. Milton deliberately frames his own creative process as incredibly similar to that which led to Eve's Fall. When Satan first approaches Eve to offer the false sense of imaginative companionship that will ultimately lead to the Fall, he does so by whispering in her ear: he stands "close at the ear of *Eve*; Assaying by his Devilish art to reach/ The Organs of her Fancy" (4: 800-802)—in short, making a direct appeal to her creative imagination. Just like Eve, the creative Milton receives inspiration in his sleep: "thou [*Urania*]/ Visit'st my slumbers Nightly" (7: 28-29). That Milton should parallel his own creative inspiration to Satan's temptation of Eve at first seems startling and appears to place creativity in a negative light. Yet such is not the case. Through these parallel images, Milton demonstrates that human creativity is neither innately good nor innately evil, but rather the greatest double-edged sword known to mankind. He and Eve receive the inspiration that leads to their particular outcomes in the exact same way: a figure comes to them in dreams, appealing to their identities as creative souls. The creative identity that leads Eve to listen to Satan, thus causing the Fall, is the exact same creative identity that leads Milton to listen to Urania, thus creating a beautiful work of epic poetry. The creativity is the constant in these seemingly radically different equations; only the particular situations are different. Eve, entangled in an unsympathetic world, suffers the perversion of her creativity into the leverage by which Satan enacted the Fall, the worst event in the history of mankind. Milton, deeply understanding and appreciating both Eve's creative identity and her resulting tragic fate, seeks to follow in her footsteps while protecting himself from the forces that led to her painful fate—and, in doing so,

he creates a work of epic poetry which testifies to the equally powerful positive realizations of the artistic capacity inherent in both himself and Eve.