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How a Damaging Inferiority Complex Led to Eve's Fall

Abstract: This essay explores the factors that convince Eve to surrender to Satan's temptations.

The masculine characters that surround Eve in Eden perceive her to be weak, but Milton characterizes Eve as highly intellectual and ambitious. These figures control and manipulate Eve to betray her natural inclinations in order to fit into their idea of how she should behave.

Dismissed as inferior to Adam, Eve falls because of the stifling restrictions put upon her due to preconceived notions about the limitations of her femininity.

Under the coaxing of a disguised Satan, Eve eats the fruit of the forbidden tree. In the 17th century, John Milton wrote his celebrated epic *Paradise Lost*, depicting the banishment of Satan from heaven, the creation of the earth and mankind, and the fall of Adam and Eve into sin and death. Milton's epic addresses higher religious and social issues within the greater complexity of human frailty that contribute to the fall of Adam and Eve. While they are both guilty of disobeying God, Eve shoulders most of the blame because she partakes of the fruit first. Eve's sense of inferiority to Adam, based chiefly in the presumed deficiencies of her sex, contributes to her fall. The masculine characters in the epic, such as God, Raphael, and Satan, treat Eve as weak and seek to control her. Throughout the story, Eve fluctuates between a desire for both independence and complicity. These masculine figures manipulate her inclination to trust in order to limit her actions and relegate her to an inferior position. Eve eats the fruit because of her

unequal treatment to Adam, and she understands that falling gives her a chance to join the ranks of her superiors. While gender is not responsible for Eve's fall, her reaction toward God's masculine bias pushes her to listen to Satan. Eve's frustration with the hierarchical system that seeks to control her leads to her fall from grace.

The masculine figures in *Paradise Lost*, such as God, Raphael, and Satan, perceive the difference in gender between Adam and Eve and use this to constrain Eve. Upon Adam and Eve's introduction, Milton directly informs readers about the inequality between them, determined by their difference in gender. In heaven, all of the occupants are male, by choice. Eve's appearance as a female introduces a new dynamic to creation in human form. In Book 4, Satan observes Adam and Eve and determines, "Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd," (*Paradise Lost* 4: 296). Upon his first glance at the couple, Satan notices an inequality between God's creations. Milton's introduction of the pair explicitly distinguishes a hierarchy between male and female that other masculine characters also discern. While Satan describes Adam as having "valor" and the power of "contemplation," he reduces Eve to an objectified creature, any agency diminished to the superficial level of attractiveness (*Paradise Lost* 4: 297). Satan continues to characterize Eve, using distinctly promiscuous and submissive language to define her, noting that her hair "impli'd/subjection" and calling it "wanton" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 306-308). Satan's objectification of Eve represents the opinions other male characters have about her. These characters continue to discriminate against Eve, and enforce limitations upon her because of these perceived differences. Similarly, Milton emphasizes the inequity between Adam and Eve by describing Adam as "Hee for God only, Shee for God in him," (*Paradise Lost* 4: 299). Here, Milton deprives Eve of a direct link to God, who intended for Eve to be secondary both in the order of her creation and her relation to Adam; thus, God reveals his intention to create Eve

as inferior, and the other characters acknowledge God's decision. Additionally, the masculine figures in *Paradise Lost* treat Eve as weak and incapable. For example Raphael relates the creation of the earth and the fall of Satan to Adam, but he neglects to inform Eve of this important information. He instead advises Adam to "warne/ [his] weaker," counterpart (*Paradise Lost* 6: 908-909). He trusts that Adam will caution Eve about Satan's presence, not finding it necessary to personally inform Eve of the evil that could lead to the downfall of mankind. These masculine figures observe the subordinate situation of Eve and decide to create limitations for her based on their perceptions of her feminine weakness. Eve is swayed to the expectations of these external forces that pressure her into a more subdued form of behavior.

While Eve is not the only female character in *Paradise Lost*, she encounters in Eden only masculine figures, who assert their dominance over her and instruct her to follow their demands. God leads Eve to develop dependency on his and Adam's guidance and manipulates her curiosity in a way that fosters a susceptibility to Satan's future deceit. After her creation, Eve follows an incorporeal voice, obeying its orders, despite not knowing the owner: "what could I doe,/But follow strait, invisibly thus led," (*Paradise Lost* 4: 475-476). Here, Milton displays Eve's inclination to trust, revealing her naivete to Satan and other characters. Eve's sensitivities have little to do with her gender, but the manipulations by masculine characters upon her femininity make it a gendered issue. The voice, revealed to be God, explains to Eve her purpose on earth as the mother of humanity and companion to Adam, and she acquiesces to God's demands, entranced by the authority demonstrated. God then presents Eve to Adam, and while she is initially unimpressed, she concedes herself to Adam because he tells Eve that her purpose is to be his "solace" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 486). Milton uses submissive language throughout Eve's story of her creation to establish the necessity of her compliant nature, dictated by God. Furthermore,

Eve continues to submit to external forces in Book 5, when she awakens from a dream and tells Adam, "...methought/ Close to mine ear one call'd me forth to walk/With gentle voice, I thought it thine," (*Paradise Lost* 5: 35-37). In her dream, Eve submits to another foreign voice, who leads her to the forbidden tree; however, this situation directly resembles the instruction given to her from God when he led her to Adam. Satan tempts Eve from within her own psyche, and she listens. These masculine figures play with Eve's mind and exploit her to achieve their own desires. They limit Eve by making her subservient and dependent upon their demands.

As Jacob Boyd explains in "Faulty Machinery: An Examination of Eve's Fate as it Relates to Her Creation," Eve's fascination with external forces, like voices, expose her to manipulation throughout the epic. Both her construed "docility" and "susceptibility" to deceit make Eve vulnerable to attack, and the characters use these traits to bend Eve to their will (Boyd 3). God informs Eve that she is derivative of this other creature, Adam, and tells her to submit to his guidance. Eve obeys and later says to Adam, "And without whom [I] am to no end, my Guide/And Head, what thou hast said is just and right," (*Paradise Lost* 4: 443). By this time, Eve has fully accepted her deference to Adam, and instead of merely yielding to him, she looks to him for guidance. This dependence, encouraged by masculine figures, constrains Eve, restricting her individuality and ability to think for herself. After the serpent tempts her, Eve instructs it "lead" her to the forbidden fruit (*Paradise Lost* 9: 631). 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. The control exerted by these characters consumes Eve, and the confusion between her sense of identity and willingness to comply ultimately leads to her fall.

Despite the dependence these masculine characters try to create in Eve, she demonstrates a strong sense of individuality and thoughtfulness upon her conception. From Milton's

introduction of Eve, she exhibits an inquisitive nature, and she observes, “I first awak’t, and found myself repos’d/...much wond’ring where/And what I was, whence thither brought, and how,” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 450-452). Eve’s curiosity resounds throughout the epic, asserting her intrinsic ability to question her place in the world. While Eve trusts easily, she is also inquisitive, and once she meets Adam, she does not take immediate interest in him. She hesitates. Led by the voice of God to Adam, Eve initially rejects him because he is “less faire” than herself (*Paradise Lost* 4: 478). Eve dismisses Adam because she perceives that he is inferior to her. Her choice to not submit to this masculine figure demonstrates her independent nature and reveals a deeper sense within Eve to question whether she must be subservient to someone that she observes as unequal. When Adam eventually convinces Eve that she was made for him, she “yield[s]”, which is a decidedly unromantic action, but begins Eve’s transition into submitting to the wills of others (*Paradise Lost* 4: 489). However, in Book 9, Eve once again asserts her independent nature and says to Adam, “Or hear what to my minde first thoughts present,/Let us divide our labours, thou where choice/Leads thee, or where most needs,” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 213-215). Eve suggests that she and Adam split up to do their work, despite Adam’s warnings that it would be safer for them to stick together. Milton continues to demonstrate Eve’s inherent individuality, but he also displays how she is manipulated by the other characters to depend upon them for guidance. Because this dependence is against Eve’s nature, she is constrained by their influence. Eve learns to trust these figures, but they betray her by using their power over her to make her feel inferior and limited.

While Adam never intentionally limits Eve because she is a woman, his influence over her constrains her. In Eve, Adam believes he has found an equal and a soul mate. In Book 8, Adam explains to Raphael his conversation with God about the creation of Eve. Adam argues, “Among

unequals what societie/Can sort, what harmonie or true delight?" (*Paradise Lost*: 8: 383-384), asserting that in Eden he finds no companionship because he has no equal. He cannot commune with God because Adam was created to be "his substitute," and the animals are inferior to Adam (*Paradise Lost* 8: 381). Adam's intention for Eve has always been for her to be his equal, but he takes his perceptions farther by putting Eve on a pedestal. Adam adores Eve, and many times throughout the epic, he praises her existence, calling her: "My Glorie, my Perfection," (*Paradise Lost* 5: 29). He also remarks to Eve, "For such thou art, from sin and blame entire," believing her to be without flaw (*Paradise Lost* 9: 292). While Eve similarly adores Adam, his idolization works just as effectively to limit her. Now, she must deal with two extreme opinions of her character: God created her to be weak and inferior to Adam, and Adam views her as his perfect "fit help" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 450). 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.

The idea of free will seems limited when applied to Eve. Despite God's intention to present the human race with free will, Eve is not offered many choices as to her purpose. Eve acknowledges the control and superiority that restrains her after her fall, and inquires, "for inferior who is free?" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 825). God gives Eve to Adam and informs her that she will be the mother of all mankind. Accordingly, when Satan decides to target Eve in his temptations, he chooses to indulge her already fragile sense of agency and self. Sensing her weakness, Satan switches tactics from praising her beauty to hinting at her potential for divine glory: "Empress of this fair World, resplendent *Eve*,/Easie to mee it is to tell thee all/What thou commandst and right thou shouldst be obeyd," (*Paradise Lost* 9: 568-570). Satan knows of Eve's susceptibility and supports her quest for individuality because he knows it will capitalize upon her doubt toward the masculine influences that dominate her. His temptations offer Eve the

chance to supersede the limitations put upon her by God: “Why but to keep ye low and ignorant,/His worshippers; he knows that in the day/Ye Eate thereof.../ ye shall be as Gods” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 704-706). When tempted by Satan and given the chance at agency and autonomy, Eve chooses to disobey God and eat the fruit--an action that creates the opportunity for Eve to transcend the constraints of her fate, even though it leads inevitably to her demise.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton demonstrates a woman who betrays God to escape limitations put upon her by other characters. The masculine characters in the epic, such as God, Adam, Raphael, and Satan, are biased toward Eve. They hold her to the standards of their own gendered assumptions, discrediting or disregarding her natural proclivities and desires. Thus, eating from the forbidden tree gives Eve an avenue to change her position in life and escape restraint. Her inherent sense of independence is shackled by the constraints put upon her by the anticipated weaknesses of her gender and a masculine desire to control and mold her. These weaknesses are not factual, and they are detrimental, affecting her choices and behaviors. Both Adam and Eve are created to begin the human race, in this they are equal; however, Adam, directly created by God, has an authority that supersedes Eve. She takes actions that allow her to embrace her desire for freedom from manipulation and control; however, Eve does not realize that eating from the forbidden tree represents a continuation of her susceptibility to influence.