

Kaitlin Seeger

Professor David Ainsworth

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The Union of Gender in Angels: Oneness as Divinity

Abstract: If everything derives from God, including gender, then why does the Father present as only one gender, male, and how does this answer alter our understanding of the angels' gender presentations? This paper argues that, as divine metaphysical beings, the angels possess both genders and are a union of the roles assigned to them, presenting these masculine and feminine aspects as either dominant or secondary, external or internal.

Paradise Lost is a uniquely creative endeavor in that, despite revolving around the fall of humanity, the unprecedented portrayal of its inhuman characters completely redefined how they were viewed thereafter. These otherwise distant and unearthly figures from the source material are presented up-close and personal, revealing new facets to their characters, one of which being the focus of this essay: the relationship between the angels, as enigmatic and fluid beings, and gender, a concept integral to the plot of *Paradise Lost* as objective, unchanging roles to be abided by. Initially, these two notions may seem incompatible, but the angels are, in actuality, the perfect representation of an ideal union between the two genders.

To understand the definitive roles of male and female and how the two are made distinct within *Paradise Lost*, we must first examine their concrete physical representations in Adam and Eve as the initial humans of their assigned genders. While taking into consideration that they are free-willed people, each with their own individual personalities and tendencies outside of their respective genders, as well as the unreliability of the narrator as a possibly biased perspective,

their defined gender roles are repeatedly established as having the same base rules and characteristics throughout the books by a cast of characters including, and most significantly impressed upon by, God himself.

After Eve's creation and introduction, book three of *Paradise Lost* provides this description of the two humans as seen by Satan: "The image of thir glorious Maker shon, / Truth, wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure, / Severe but in true filial freedom plac't" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 292-294). Both of them were made in God's image and represent that despite their clear physical differences, implying either a unifying key trait between the two that is shared with God, or that their appearances are each inherent to God. These differences are referenced in the following lines: "Whence true authority in men; though both / Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 295-296). The significance of the usage of "not equal" here can imply more than merely an inequality of power, instead referring to their differences in appearance and countenance. This becomes even more apparent as the lines continue, "For contemplation hee and valour formd, / For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 297-298). While these qualities are considered to be opposite of each other, they are also in that same way complementary; their inherent difference in purpose allows them to each be the best at their designation without competition, whereas a single shared role would instead emphasize the comparison of their abilities to perform said role.

If Adam, as a male, was made for God's express purpose and divine plan, then Eve's role as a female was to further that plan through him: "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (*Paradise Lost* 4: 299). For all that he was intended to be a perfect creation, Adam was incomplete; he requested an equal for a companion and so Eve was made, not as an equal in terms of position, for she was to submit to him and Adam to lead her, but as a completing

balance. His strengths were her weaknesses, and his weaknesses were her strengths: where Adam was a man of action, with intelligence, reasoning, strength, and the ability to communicate directly with God, Eve was receptive, graceful, submitting both to Adam and God through him. For all that they are separate people, they were made to be a union—a union of minds, bodies, and genders.

In the same way, angels were designed to be, as individuals, a union of the gender roles similar to how God embodies everything, including both male and female. As metaphysical beings comprised of the fifth element, the celestial aether, they are fundamentally fluid and not confined to a permanent shape. They have the ability to alter their forms and choose to present as either sex or both: “For Spirits when they please / Can either Sex assume, or both” (*Paradise Lost* 1: 423-424). Whether or not this choice is a conscious and deliberate one, however, remains to be seen—all the angels who change long-term in appearance (and not temporarily, for convenience) are receiving these changes indirectly from decisions they make, resulting in them being consequences rather than intentions. However, gender is not confined to merely its physical presentation; rather, it is innately tied up in its inner manifestation as an identity, or as *Paradise Lost* decrees, an assigned role.

A majority of, if not all of the introduced angels, present outwardly as male. They are referred to by masculine pronouns—it is, however, also important to consider the narration in this case; both in that as a human narrator and audience, the angels may only be being perceived under human conceptions of gender for the time and culture during which *Paradise Lost* was written. Nevertheless, their masculine attributes are the primary external presentation: with their overwhelming strength and battle prowess, capable of not only lifting mountains and launching them but also surviving being crushed beneath such a feat of physical power, the angels (and

devils, as former angels) demonstrate these male-aligned traits most emphatically. One key difference in the exercising of these skills between the angels and devils, though, is that where the angels are untouched by the pain of the injuries they receive from battling, the devils are subject to suffering the consequences of their actions: “And uncouth paine fled bellowing” (*Paradise Lost* 6: 362). Despite having the same healing factor, the devils do not have the same “saving grace” as the angels, whose capability to maintain a soft grace to counterbalance their valor is a distinctly feminine quality of the body and not the mind (as is how manly grace is often referenced).

As the gender that is primarily perceived, the masculinity of the angels is overt, essentially asserting itself as the dominant gender; whereas their feminine aspects, while subtle, are no less present, if far more internally expressed than externally. In their appearances, the angels are regarded as ethereally beautiful, a trait undeniably feminine in presentation. Their elegance and grace are both physically present as a result of their deference to God, much like how Eve’s beauty is because of her submission to Adam (*Paradise Lost* 4: 498); the act of subservience within the divine hierarchy is innately feminine in its role, similar to how superiority is considered masculine. Their hierarchy directly corresponds with their level of mindful obedience—the angels under Satan’s purview in Heaven were quick to follow, some out of agreement and others out of unquestioning subservience, whereas higher ranked angels were capable of taking the risk to question a superior if that meant being able to better follow God’s intentions. The very act of cooperating with or submitting to, obeying or disobeying God directly aligns with the roles of gender in *Paradise Lost*—specifically the divine and fallen versions.

If the angels are the image of a union of the gender roles, then the devils are a representation of disunion. Sin, one of the few female-presenting inhuman characters, is born

from Satan's head through "miserable pain" (*Paradise Lost* 2: 752) and an eruption of flames. The similarities between Eve and Sin's creations exaggerate where they differ, shedding light on the exact nature of their origins: where Eve came from a source of love as a rib close to Adam's heart, Sin spawned from Satan's mental split, warring with himself and his very nature. By denying his role to serve God and desiring to rule himself, Satan is essentially denying his femininity and letting his masculinity consume him. The pain he experiences reveals this is where he first truly fell from God.

Both Satan and Sin exemplify the fallen traits of their respective genders: Satan desires absolute control of others but lacks that same control for himself, leading to violence, treason, secrecy, lust, and self-obsession; Sin, either in a form of narcissism or subconscious longing to return to being one with Satan, utilizes her beauty to win over everyone she can to fulfill her goals, forgoing the holy nature of submission and distorting it into seduction and manipulation. Similarly, both Adam and Eve denied their gender roles which led to them eating the forbidden fruit: Adam in that he let himself submit to Eve, and Eve in that she desired more than she was allowed. Even their punishments mirror those of Satan and Sin—that men will know pain and labor, just as Satan first felt agony and was damned to struggle and failure for the rest of eternity, and that women will submit to men and endure painful childbirth, much like how Sin futilely strives for Satan's attention so much so that she was disfigured and tortured by the birth of their son.

It is not merely the union of man and woman, male and female, that is divine in of itself; rather, it is the third unseen factor of a holy union which neither the devils nor the fallen Adam and Eve have: God, or to be more exact, the connection with and obedience to God. In comparison to Adam and Eve's intended purposes made apparent in this quote prior, "Hee for

God only, shee for God in him” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 299) we see the fallen Satan described in an eerily similar manner: “The Hell within him, for within him Hell” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 20). The replacement of God with Hell only reiterates the fact that Satan has renounced his connection to God. God himself is the ultimate symbol of the union of male and female as both were made in his image. The reoccurring theme of the Trinity throughout all of the characters’ relationships emphasizes the significance of this balanced union.

The Holy Trinity is comprised of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and if we were to continue abiding by this concept of the unity of gender with *Paradise Lost*, with God as the unifying factor and the original source of the two genders, then the Son would represent the masculine half of the balance and the Holy Spirit would be the feminine. The Son, as the perfect image of the Father, is the most divine form of the male gender and therefore holds the highest rank. The Holy Spirit, as the divine feminine, does not appear within the ranking, rather playing a more subtle but no less important role; as Ethan Hurst demonstrates in “The Urania Connection: The Christian Muse Excised from the Classics” the Holy Spirit can be argued as being represented by the goddess Urania of the heavens, called upon not only as the muse of this poem, but also to receive guidance and grace.

The concluding line of *Paradise Lost* at last reveals itself in a new light: that Adam and Eve cannot be in union with one another again no matter their physical closeness, for they have betrayed God; despite having each other, the fallen Adam and Eve “Through Eden took thir solitarie way” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 649). *Paradise Lost* itself, as a literary work, is a union of ideas: it is essential to understand the way gender incorporates itself as a theme into all of the characters’ lives in order to fully see a single portion, just as the genders, the creations and the creator, are never fully separate.

The angels meld the genders as one on a metaphysical level; just as we cannot comprehend how the angels appear to come together spiritually, neither are we able to perceive as humans how the angels blend the two forces of male and female made clearly distinct to us in our physical forms. Unlike humans, who God created with the intention of union through marriage, the angels are in of themselves a union of the genders.