

Nick Summers

Dr. Ainsworth

EN 335—Milton and Women

3 May 2017

Mysterious Ways: Eve and the Problem of Evil

*Abstract: Tracing the causes of the Fall, Eve's Temptation, and some of the more troubling events that God allows to unfold in Eden, this paper argues that the Fall is fortunate; that Eve's decision to eat the fruit, while mistaken, is free from moral blame; and consequently that Eve, rather than being the source of our woe, is instead a paragon of humanity.*

On the surface, *Paradise Lost* perpetuates patriarchal and misogynistic views of Eve, following a long tradition of blaming her for mankind's fall. But Milton advocates for readers to reach their own conclusions through careful thought; indeed, *Paradise Lost* itself warns against taking things at their first appearances:

...consider first, that Great

Or Bright infers not Excellence: the Earth

Though, in comparison of Heav'n, so small,

Nor glistering, may of solid good contain

More plenty than the sun that barren shines (*Paradise Lost* 8: 90-94).

In fact, the poem is crammed with examples of false appearances: Satan's monologues in the early books appear rationally sound and dramatically relatable, but Milton's narrator frequently points out the error in being swayed by Satan's charisma; Satan's lies and disguises confound nearly every character, including numerous angels; Raphael's depictions of the War in Heaven are, as he admits, inherently inaccurate in their attempt at "measuring things in Heav'n by things

on Earth” (*PL* 6: 893). Early in the poem when Milton writes “Whence true authority in men; though both / Not equal, as thir sex not equal seem’d” (*PL* 4: 295-296) readers have serious cause for suspicion. In fact, careful analysis of Eve’s temptation reveals that she falls not because she is flawed, but because she is supposed to fall.

Milton writes when Eve is introduced that her hair “impli’d / Subjection” (*PL* 4: 306-307). God, the angels, and Adam believe that Eve is (and ought to be) naturally subservient to Adam. Yet Eve wields more agency in *Paradise Lost* than Adam does. Indeed, she acts independently more than any other character, with the exception of God and Satan themselves. On the other hand, Adam exercises very little meaningful agency throughout the poem. As demonstrated by Arwen Hutchinson in “To Stand or Fall,” Adam acts with blind subservience to God (Hutchison 3). Instead, Eve’s choices propel the narrative. It is by her seed that humanity is saved, and it is by her hand that humanity falls. Although speeches such as Michael’s seem to relegate Eve to little more than the biological role of reproduction (*PL* 12: 594-605), she is the character on whose actions the whole poem depends; Adam is the one relegated to a biological function by the plot of the poem itself. His only truly autonomous, significant action is requesting a mate from God; otherwise, he is chiefly important for being the first man created and for being the father of Eve’s children.

It’s strange, then, that God and his angels interact directly with Adam, but not Eve; when she is present, the angels’ attentions are typically directed at Adam. Eve, when she is addressed, is spoken to through Adam. For example, God instructs Raphael to “Converse with Adam” (*PL* 5: 230) to warn him about Satan, failing to mention Eve. Raphael (following God’s instructions) speaks with Adam while ignoring Eve, simply instructing Adam to “warn / Thy weaker” (*PL* 6: 908-909). That is, the “chain of command” from Heaven is constructed in this way: God/His

agents lecture Adam; Adam listens; Adam relays instructions (or his interpretations thereof) to Eve.

Satan's temptation of Eve reverses this dynamic. Whereas agents of Heaven usually seek counsel with Adam alone, Satan finds "Eve separate... / to his wish, / Beyond his hope" (*PL* 9: 422-424). The "chain of command" (or perhaps "temptation") from Hell is symmetrical to that of Heaven: Satan tempts Eve; Eve listens; Eve brings the same temptation (with her spin on it) to Adam. Aside from her initial awakening, God never speaks to Eve, and Satan never speaks to Adam. Just as Adam, after consulting with angels, makes decisions that affect both him and Eve, Eve decides after eating the fruit that "Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe" (*PL* 9: 831). Just as Eve usually passively assents to Adam's decisions, Adam resigns himself, "[s]ubmitting to what seem'd remediless" (*PL* 9: 919) to falling with Eve with little reluctance or resistance. Whether the Fall is good or bad, Eve's choices bring it about, creating profound repercussions in *Paradise Lost*.

However, considering the perfect symmetry of these structures of influence—especially in the context of the numerous other symmetries in God's Creation, and especially given the numerous descriptions of God creating light from darkness and good from evil—and considering that God's treats Satan more like a rebellious horse or dog, rather than an equally matched adversary (which I'll elaborate on later), Eve's temptation seems less like an unintended consequence of God's actions and more like an orchestrated, or even engineered, event.

Of course, it seems easy to blame Eve for the Fall, as most of the characters do. But Eve's motivations reveal little to blame. Although the fruit's attractive and fragrant nature aren't insignificant, Milton makes it clear that sensuous desire alone does not motivate Eve:

...his words replete with guile

Into her heart too easy entrance won:  
 Fixt on the Fruit she gaz'd, which *to behold*  
*Might tempt alone*, and in her ears the sound  
 Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregn'd  
 With Reason, to her seeming, and with Truth;  
 Meanwhile the hour of Noon drew on, and wak'd  
 an eager appetite...(PL 9: 733-740; emphasis mine)

Yet Eve still hesitates; the sensory temptation of the fruit *might* tempt her, but does not. Rather, the serpent's full story, coming from a creature who appears to bring "with joy / The good befall'n him, Author unsuspect, / Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile," (PL 9: 770-772) sways Eve. Though his story and argument are fabricated and fallacious, Eve has little cause for suspicion; from what he tells her, she builds an honest, rational decision to eat in order to increase her knowledge and wisdom:

...so to add what wants  
 In Female Sex, the more to draw his Love,  
 And render me more equal, and perhaps,  
 A thing not undesirable, sometime  
 Superior: for inferior who is free? (PL 9: 821-825)

Eve's desire for self-improvement is admirable and rational in light of her frequent subjugation to and dismissal by Adam and the angels. Eve's mistake, then, was in trusting the serpent's words, but she has never before dealt with deception, and has been conditioned to blindly follow orders from Adam, angels, and God. It's no wonder that she has an overly-trusting disposition—typically considered irreproachable, especially in such a supposedly "perfect" world as Eden.

More detailed arguments on this point are provided by both Sarah Harden in her paper “Eve’s Lack of Mentor” and in Jacob Boyd’s “Faulty Machinery.” Even Uriel, the angel “held / The sharpest-sighted Spirit of all in Heav’n” falls for Satan’s cherub disguise, as “goodness thinks no ill / Where no ill seems” (*PL* 3: 688-691).

It’s ridiculous to blame Eve for a mistake that even Uriel himself makes. Eve cannot be held accountable, so culpability might seem to fall on Satan for deceiving her, but God idly watches as Satan enters Paradise (*PL* 3: 69-78). It is contradictory that an omnipotent, infinitely benevolent god would allow evil to occur. If God wanted to stop Satan, it should be trivially easy. Many readers, such as Mariah Lawrence in her paper “Falling Pawns,” understandably react to this inaction by blaming God for unfairly “forcing” mankind to fall. Whereas I concur with Lawrence in identifying God as the primary agent behind the fall, I strongly oppose two facets of her argument: first, that Eve and Satan lack free will—God frequently explains his desire for his creation to have free will, and though he occasionally forbids or prevents particular choices, he avoids obstructing free will; second, I oppose Lawrence’s reading of God as selfish and sadistic. While I do find it difficult to argue that God exhibits deep compassion or care for individual human beings in *Paradise Lost*, I attribute his general apathy and troubling bouts of wrathful violence to an extreme detachment/dissociation from human experience, rather than voluntary mistreatment. Furthermore, reading God as malicious contradicts Milton’s aim to “justify the ways of God to men” (*PL* 1: 26). Instead, a shift in perspective to view the Fall as a positive event resolves apparent inconsistencies without creating new ones. It’s a large claim that rests on the simple logic that if a good, omniscient, omnipotent god caused (or chose not to prevent) the Fall, then that Fall must be “good”—though perhaps not in the way we conventionally conceive of good.

In accordance with Bill Caudell's essay "Humanity as Art", this reading endorses the view that Creation was made as a sort of cosmic, interactive work of art for God's appreciation. Just as any story needs conflict and any picture needs contrast, so too might God's creation need a mixture of Good and Evil. Indeed, a description of the Mount of God in Book 6 describes:

...a Cave

Within the Mount of God, fast by his Throne,  
 Where light and darkness in perpetual round  
 Lodge and dislodge by turns, which makes through Heav'n  
 Grateful vicissitude, like Day and Night (*PL* 6: 4-8);

That same passage describes the darkness in the cave as both "obsequious" (*PL* 6: 10) and female, two qualities frequently ascribed to Eve. Eve, Evil, and the Fall, then, should not be viewed as defects, but facets of God's Creation to be accepted. Raphael supports this when he states "God made thee perfect, not immutable" (*PL* 5: 524) suggesting that Adam and Eve's very ability to fall is itself an element of their perfect creation.

Infinite and omniscient, Milton's God perceives Creation on a larger scale than we humans can. It is often that violent events, such as the apoptosis of a single cell in a body or the death of an individual organism in an ecosystem, are in fact necessary and harmonious when viewed at a larger scale. Viewing the Fall as a tragedy reflects, then, an egotistical, anthropocentric worldview. Eve's sin broke humanity free of the restrictive environment of the Garden, but the violence wrought by mankind on itself is entirely our own fault. God's sometimes slightly genocidal wrath, on the other hand, certainly appears troubling. One logically sound, though ethically unsatisfying, justification for God's violence is this: just as humans don't consider the destruction of an anthill a tragedy, so too might God consider the genocidal scale of

destruction shown in Books 11 and 12 relatively insignificant; after all, what difference does a few lost decades of life on Earth make in comparison to eternity in Heaven (or, for that matter, Hell)? Since God is infinitely vast compared to humans, our deaths may seem inconsequential, or at least not evil, to God.

God may find a universe with some level of rebelliousness or autonomy (and therefore, evil) more perfect, and perhaps more entertaining, than a universe without evil. In that case, God creates Earth to play out (literally and figuratively) the marriage of heaven and hell. Adam and Eve's "naked Majesty" (*PL* 4: 290) and prelapsarian sex (*PL* 4: 738-743) indicate that Eden was never meant to be free of things considered "sinful" or "evil," only that Adam and Eve were considered innocent by ignorance before the Fall.

If the Fall improves creation, then searching for flaws in Eve's actions is a fruitless endeavor. God even states that he uses Satan and the demons to achieve his own goals:

See with what heat these Dogs of Hell advance  
 To waste and havoc yonder World...  
 And know not that I call'd and drew them thither  
 My Hell-hounds, to lick up the draff and filth (*PL* 10: 616-630)

This isn't the only time God plays his cards close to his chest in *Paradise Lost*. When Adam is first created, God tests him by requiring a reasoned argument as to why he should have a companion (*PL* 8: 444-448). Adam is also admonished by Raphael for his curiosity regarding the stars: "Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid, / Leave them to God above, him serve and fear" (*PL* 8: 167-168). Although we rarely, perhaps never, see God directly lie, we do see him withhold or omit important information quite often. It's not impossible, then, that God wanted Satan to tempt Eve.

In the light of this *felix culpa* reading, several apparent problems within *Paradise Lost* are solved. Although Adam requests, and God claims to provide, an equal companion, other characters consider Eve inferior to Adam in many respects. Adam and Eve are equals; they are not identical. Eve is more closely attuned to Nature than Adam is; her hair is “Dishevell’d, but in wanton ringlets wav’d / As the Vine curls her tendrils” (*PL* 4: 306-307). “Wanton” is frequently used to describe plants and Nature in the poem, and indeed Nature is one of the few feminine entities in the poem, along with Night and Sin. Women are conspicuously absent from Heaven, though present in other realms of Creation. Although Eve and the other female entities are problematically pigeonholed into overly restrictive 17th-century gender roles, Eve is still equal to (if not greater than) Adam in terms of influence and importance, although she may be aligned with less traditionally pious attributes.

Given that God appears to be largely responsible for the Fall, and assuming that we wish not to contradict Milton’s Christian definition of God, it seems impossible to define the Fall as tragic in any objective way. If, then, the Fall is fortunate, and considering that Eve seems to be free of blame for her role in causing it, my conclusion is that Eve is positioned in *Paradise Lost* as an inversion of the archetypal “lone prophets” described by Michael to Adam: Enoch, Noah, and even Jesus. Whereas such figures are described in scripture from a sympathetic point of view, Milton shows Eve from the external perspective of the characters who doubt her. Although the characters around her dismiss and subjugate her, she brings about great, and ostensibly positive, change. Unlike the prophets described in books 11 and 12, however, Eve is a “prophet” of Natural values, a fusion of the pious values of obedience and reason with the Satanic values of sensuous pleasure, independence, and passion. Although the virtues Eve promotes are not be



traditionally pious, she fulfills her destined role as a denizen of Earth and member of humanity in accordance with God's wishes.

## Works Cited

- Milton, John. *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press, 1957. Print.
- Caudell, Bill. "Humanity as Art" *Edifice Project*. 28 Mar. 2012. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.
- Hutchison, Arwen. "To Stand or To Fall: Responses to Temptation and Subservience in Paradise Lost." *Edifice Project*. 29 Apr. 2015. Web. 27 Mar. 2017.
- Harden, Sarah. "Eve's Lack of Mentor: An Analysis of Eve's Character and the Effects of Divine Intervention." *Edifice Project*. 29 Apr. 2015. Web. 3 May 2017.
- Boyd, Jacob. "Faulty Machinery: An Examination of Eve's Fate as it Relates to Her Creation." *Edifice Project*. 20 Mar. 2013. Web. 3 May 2017.
- Lawrence, Mariah. "Falling Pawns: An Argument Against God and His Conniving Ways as Evidenced by Satan and Eve." *Edifice Project*. 30 Apr. 2014. Web. 3 May 2017.