Luke McClinton

Dr. David Ainsworth

EN335

4 May 2024

Paradise Lost's Revolution of Misogyny

Abstract: *Among all of Milton's fan-fic elaborations, Raphael's warning of Satan's coming is the most consequential. In particular, it makes Eve much more liable to criticism; she becomes essentially the active agent in the circumstances that led to the fall. This paper argues that Milton writes into* Paradise Lost *a revolution of misogyny, turning Eve from an incidental victim of temptation to an overconfident spiritual inferior. Eve's shortcomings are so pronounced and consequential that they are inherent in a variety of* PL *interpretations and enable readers to derive more misogyny from the story of the fall than they ever could from the original Genesis account.*

Paradise Lost, in being a 10,500-line epic adaptation of three chapters and seventy verses, is predicated upon elaboration. This manifests in narrative insertions existing on a spectrum of conjecture, ranging from extrapolation of biblical ideas to essentially baseless fan-fiction. There is also a wide range of consequentiality to John Milton's additions, some harmless and innocuous and others revolutionary not only for the story of the poem but for the Genesis account it is based upon. Most weighty among these biblical conjectures is the extensive conversation between Raphael and Adam, which adds to the source material a foreknowledge on the part of Adam and Eve of Satan's coming temptation and a heightened emphasis on Eve's spiritual weakness and inferiority. Beyond the obvious aim of rendering mankind's fall inexcusable in order to justify God, this addition irrevocably alters audience perception of Eve's deservingness of blame and lowliness in status. By making her knowledgeable of the coming temptation, having her

confidently dismiss the warning only to then immediately succumb to deception, and depicting her forgiveness as earned only through extreme self-humbling, Milton makes Eve liable to condescension and indictment beyond anything that could be gleaned from the source material. Moreover, he makes her deficiency so pronounced that it is inherent in potential counterarguments or alternative readings, whether based on supposed misanthropy or Adam's kind but misguided rejection of God's intended gender roles. It is all around a slippery slope of condemnation, a revolution of misogyny; since Eve is the origin point and therefore supposed model of character for women descending across history, this culpability and inferiority are hazardous enablers for prejudiced interpretation.

This slope of revolutionary interpretation begins with a simple bit of biblical conjecture, not much unlike what Milton does throughout the poem. He takes the Genesis story in all its lack of granularity and inserts an interaction — and a motive behind it — that changes the scope of how Adam and Eve's time in Eden and their eventual fall can be interpreted. In the original biblical account, there is neither dedicated foreshadowing nor preface to the original sin; chapter two of Genesis ends with, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" (*New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*, Genesis 2.25) and chapter three opens with, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal. . ." (Gen. 3.1). As the text portrays it, the temptation of Eve and the subsequent fall was an event without a grand amount of context.

Such vagueness leaves room for interpretation as well as inquiry: Was Eve by herself when approached by the serpent? If so, where was Adam, and how had the two who were meant to cling together as one flesh (Gen. 2.24) become separated?

Milton's way of addressing these potentially game-changing theological questions is multifaceted. He writes into the Bible's sequence of events a sweeping, multi-book conversation

between Adam and Raphael the angel in which the latter, among many other things, warns the former of the enemy's temptation. Raphael also doubles down on the spiritual inferiority of Eve, emphasizing that she is of a lesser nature and farther from God than Adam despite her alluring outer beauty.

At surface value, what this narrative insertion does is clear. By making Adam and Eve aware of the imminent temptation before it comes, Milton is justifying God by removing the intentionality of the original sin from God; he renders mankind inexcusable, "Lest wilfully transgressing he pretend / Surprisal, unadmonished, unforewarned" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 244-245). The warning itself, however, is not what makes this Milton's most revolutionary piece of biblical conjecture. Rather, it is its pervasive lowering of Eve — Milton's addition takes the innocent, unknowing motherhead of Genesis and turns her into an inferior yet overconfident rebel who, aware of coming danger, ignores the warning and plunges herself headlong into deception.

The first aspect of Eve's maltreatment is the most obvious: the repeated emphasizing of her unworthiness. This idea of male superiority is not unbiblical — God, when doling out punishments, tells Eve that "your desire shall be for your husband, / and he shall rule over you" (Gen 3.16) — but Milton is extrapolating a dynamic that only became manifest post-fall unto all of life pre-fall. It is reiterated to a point where readers are likely characterize Eve most prominently by her lesser character, associating her with being "Of nature. . .th'inferior" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 541) more than her beauty or the "thousand decencies that daily flow / From all her words and actions" (*Paradise Lost* 8: 601-602). Such association becomes the readers' instinct.

This instinct comes into play in the next component of the anti-Eve revolution: her aforementioned self-overestimation and walking directly into danger. By the time *Paradise Lost* begins leading up to its climax by having Adam and Eve split up, Milton has repeatedly used

biblical narrative additions to ensure our doubt of Eve's merit. The debate between Adam and Eve on whether they should separate therefore has a built-in tint; all Eve says has the subtext of her being inferior, no matter the substance. Not helping is the fact that her argument is centered around denying what readers know is inevitable. It would be one thing if the two agreed to depart from each other's presence with the simple premise of dividing the workload; it is an entirely more agonizing thing, however, to watch Eve attempt to mollify Adam's concerns about the imminent tempter with assurances we know will be proven wrong. She claims that this tempter will fail and only heap ignominy back on himself (*Paradise Lost* 9: 327-334), stating that "harm precedes not sin" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 327). When Adam warns that "reason not impossibly may meet / Some spacious object by the foe suborned, / And fall into deception unaware" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 360-362) but reluctantly lets her go, she even repeats her confidence in not falling prey to temptation. The scene leaves no ambiguity: as Milton tells it, Eve, the inferior and weaker of character, is the active agent in creating her solitary and therefore vulnerable position.

This idea of Eve's active autonomy is touched on by Tucker Godek in his exploration of the fall titled, "Milton's Satan and Eve's Temptation." At the root of Godek's argument is a positive view of Adam compared with Satan based on, among other things, his allowing for Eve's independence: contrasted to Satan's deception, "Adam acknowledges Eve's need for personal autonomy when he unknowingly sees her off to the fall" (Godek 4). While the essay heavily features Satan's character, more important here is its emphasis on Adam's goodness in allowing Eve's agency, a generous allowance that renders her failure even worse. Not only does Milton show Eve to force her way into the circumstances of the fall, but he depicts her doing so against the kind lenience of her husband.

When the inevitable outcome finally arrives, it is an indicting confirmation of the character dynamics the poem has hammered home from the start. Tyde Lacher, analyzing in his essay "Domestic Adam" Milton's emphasis of these roles throughout the poem, characterizes Adam's position as "both the muscle and decision-maker" and Eve's as "the more caring and nurturing"; the former is attributed terms like "contemplation" and "valor," while the latter is described with "softness" and "grace" (1). Because of these concrete role separations, Eve's succumbing to Satan's deception is given an aura of unsurprised letdown — it is the tonal equivalent of sighing and saying, "No surprise, the weak one was weak." This is perhaps where Milton's fan-fiction has the most negative effect on audience perception, as the foreknowledge of the temptation renders Eve's fall that much more frustrating.

The final element of tarnishing Eve is her plea for forgiveness. This is multi-parted; it stems directly from Milton's conjecture and the resulting vexation with Eve, but it also brings in its own revolutionary piece of fan-fiction. Nothing that takes place in *Paradise Lost* between the fall and the exiling of Adam and Eve from the garden comes from the Bible. Genesis does not account for the fallen's prostration before God or the Son's being the deliverer of punishment, and for our purposes it does not account for Eve's pronounced self-lowering before Adam. These entreatments, which involved falling reverently before Adam, embracing his feet, and offering to take on all of his burdens (*Paradise Lost* 10: 911-913, 933-936), are the finishing touch on Eve's condemnable role in the fall. She oversteps the inferiority we've been told of, demonstrates that weakness by caving to temptation, and has to seek forgiveness via extreme and degrading methods.

A potential counter to the pointed misogyny in *Paradise Lost* is that the poem is primarily misanthropic, not scrutinizing one gender more heavily than the other. This idea that Adam is shown equally at fault is one of the chief theses of Lacher's essay: Adam "understands he has a

duty to be the decision-maker. . .despite showing occasional instances of being unpleased, it is Adam, not Eve, who rejects God's intended patriarchy" (2). This is a nuanced idea — the poem is indeed literally misanthropic, but it is in the same way that the Bible is misanthropic, with mankind as a whole falling as a result of the original sin. Within the holistic fall, there still exists the potential for blame-pinning, and this is where Milton situates his negative portrayal of Eve. As Milton demonstrates with Eve's agency in putting herself in the situation to be tempted, the rejection of intended patriarchy came at her urging. If one wants to, as Lacher does, assign blame to Adam for allowing this rejection, one still must accept the highly-problematic notion that Eve was inherently weak and misguided and that she turned that misguidedness into a potent, eventually-accepted argument.

This extends all the way to Adam's eating of the fruit. One could make the claim that Adam is to blame for taking part in the forbidden fruit's consumption, that he chose, especially in with how Milton depicts it, to do it despite his best judgment. This claim would have merit, and Adam is certainly accountable for the choice he made. Inherent in such a charge, however, is the destruction of Eve's character; Adam's choice, though ultimately erroneous, is made out of an unconditional love for Eve, who by contrast appears foolish and intellectually feeble. Any reprimand of Adam in this regard must be predicated upon a deprecatory, misogynistic reading of Eve as an airheaded temptress.

Embedding this deprecation into such a wide range of *Paradise Lost* readings is perhaps the most subtle yet robust aspect of Milton's anti-Eve revolution; it allows for any number of readers from any time and any setting to condemn her as a character and as the original matriarch. These larger interpretational applications are what make the insertion of Raphael's warning so consequential for the women for whom Eve is the origin point of character. Misogyny, whether

today or in its much fiercer form at the time of the poem's publication, is at its ugliest when it goes beyond condescension of supposed female inferiority and festers into active anger against that inferiority overstepping its bounds. Many already did and still do derive a patronizing philosophy from the Bible's assertion that a man is meant to be the head of a woman; Milton takes the fairly minimalistic claims of scripture and, in giving them extreme elaboration, provides more fuel for the fire of patronization, such that it becomes a far more consuming billow of misogyny. Eve, as the model for how women are created, is a dangerous character to modify or worsen the characteristics of, and as such the addition of Adam and Eve's foreknowledge spills over in revolutionary manner into real life.

The effects of Raphael's conversation with Adam are like a stream, with the portents of knowing Satan is coming continually arising down the line. By giving the two original humans a warning of coming temptation, Milton not only allows God to render them indefensible but also makes their fall infinitely more damnable. Eve gets the worst of this, as, being the first to fall and the one to spread it to her kind and eternally-devoted husband, she represents a crux of ignorance and unheeding that readers are sure to scathe. Making it worse is the repeated emphasis of her weakness of character; because she is Adam's inferior, her convincing him to separate, confidence that she will not be taken by deception, and ultimate fall in spite of that confidence are all the more aggrieving. This downstream flow of Raphael's warning and Eve's failure combined with her maximum self-humbling turns the condescension often gleaned from the Bible into an aggressive distaste. Eve and, by the origin-point nature of Genesis, women across history are made liable not only to a view of weakness, but of rebellion, abusing any well-meaning allowance of agency and spurning what's best for them. It is a revolution of misogyny that starts small and moves out; such pervasive progression might prove it the most dangerous kind.

Works Cited

Godek, Tucker. “Milton’s Satan and Eve’s Temptation.” The University of Alabama Edifice Project, 2014. https://edificeproject.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Godek_MiltonFinalPaperRevision.pdf

Lacher, Tyde. “Domestic Adam: How a Reversal of Gender Roles in *Paradise Lost* Caused the Fall.” The University of Alabama Edifice Project, 2022. https://edificeproject.ua.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/LacherDomestic-Adam.pdf

Milton, John. “Paradise Lost.” *The Norton Anthology of English Literature.* Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 9th edition, W. W. Norton and Company, 2012, pp. 1945-2175.

The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition, National Council of Churches, 2021. *Biblegateway.com*. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205&version=NRSVUE