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God’s Failure as the Ultimate Patriarch in *Paradise Lost*

Abstract: *This paper presents evidence for the argument that Milton’s presentation of God as a failed patriarch serves as a critique to the patriarchal system. The argument focuses on Adam and Eve’s ignorance, the information they were presented with along with their interpretations of said information, and God’s role as a patriarch and judge of the law.*

In *Paradise Lost,* Milton criticizes the idea of patriarchy by presenting God as a failed patriarch who did not protect Adam and Eve from Satan’s influence. In Book 9, Eve suggests to Adam that they split up to complete their work in order to get more done, however, Adam is nervous of the danger. During their conversation, it becomes clear that neither Adam or Eve was properly prepared to face Satan, and since God is the patriarch of the household, he is responsible for the subsequent fall of humanity. Milton criticizes the idea of patriarchy by presenting God as the ultimate patriarch who failed to warn Adam and Eve of their own vulnerability and Satan’s deception.

After Adam argues against splitting apart for chores, stating that the wife’s place belongs beside her husband and they will both be safer together, Eve questions his argument. In doing so, she reveals her unwilful ignorance, stating, “[Satan’s] violence thou fear’st not, being such, / As wee, not capable of death or pain” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 282-283). Eve’s statement is peculiar because she does not appear to understand her own vulnerability. She falsely believes that she and Adam cannot die or experience pain, and proves to have a limited understanding of what pain and death mean. Adam and Eve have yet to experience pain, and with no example to go off of, are left vulnerable to their own false assumptions. Eve’s lack of understanding of death also makes her unaware to the severity of the consequence of the fall. She continues, stating, “His fraud is then thy fear, which plain infers / Thy equal fear that my firm Faith and Love / Can by his fraud by shak’n or seduct’d” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 285-287). Eve believes that her faith and love will protect her from their foe’s charms, and she does not think it possible for him to trick her so easily, even if she is alone. Here, she shows less ignorance towards her own vulnerability, and more towards Satan’s power. It is clear that God has not properly warned them of what Satan is capable of, having sent Raphael down from Heaven in charge of warning Adam and Eve instead of warning the couple himself. Eve continues, “Thoughts, which now found thy harbor in thy breast, / *Adam*, misthought of her to thee so dear?” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 288-289). Eve’s offense to Adam’s response further proves that she has enough confidence in her own strength (and subsequently, believing their Foe to have a lesser strength) for Adam’s words to prove offensive to her character. She appears more concerned about Adam’s opinion of her than the danger presented. Eve’s false assumptions and confusion serve as evidence of God’s neglect towards her, as he is responsible for preparing both she and Adam for the temptation as the head of household.

In his rebuttal, Adam, sensing Eve’s distress, attempts to alleviate her concerns of his judgement towards her character. He says to Eve, “Daughter of God and Man, immortal Eve, / For such thou art, from sin and blame entire” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 291-292). This address lacks an understanding of the danger at large, as Adam has more priority to comfort Eve than to warn her, as he, too, is lacking information. He also calls Eve “immortal”, again, reiterating that the pair seem to think they are not capable of death. Adam also does not correct Eve on her statement that they are not capable of pain or death, showing that he, too, likely has a similar understanding. He consoles Eve first by his compliment to her creation, and then by explaining that he did not mean to imply that Eve would sin. Adam’s response is more purposed to comfort Eve than tell her the truth, therefore, the intention unveils Adam’s misguided trust in both he and Eve’s ability to not be deceived. The conclusion could be drawn, then, that despite his concerns, deep down Adam does not believe Eve can be deceived by Satan. Adam explains further, stating, “For hee who tempts, though in vain, at least asperses / The tempted with dishonor foul” (*Paradise Lost* 9: lines 296-297). Adam makes the claim that Satan’s attempt on Eve would be in vain, again dismissive of the Satan’s ability and continues, “thou thyself with scorn and anger would resent the offer’d wrong.” Adam believes that this encounter with Eve would only offend her and tells her as much, proving that he is not fully aware of the danger. However, Adam still argues in favor of the pair sticking together, stating, “…on us both at once / The Enemy, though bold, will hardly dare, / Or daring, first on mee th’ assault shall light.” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 303-305). Adam believes that Satan is not bold enough to attack he and Eve while they are together. His assumption in this is not entirely untrue, as Satan does choose to target Eve once she is alone. However, his statement also implies a sense of protection that is not guaranteed. He believes that he could somehow protect Eve, but he does not even know the nature of Satan’s attack. For instance, he nor Eve know of Satan’s ability to possess other living creatures, such as a snake. God sent Raphael to warn Adam and Eve, but it is evident based on the pair’s discussion that they were not given enough information. This, in turn, makes the fall of humanity the inevitable result of God’s neglect as the patriarch.

By allowing Satan to enter the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve were prepared for temptation, God fails in his role as the ultimate patriarch. Milton’s choice in presenting the situation in this way to his audience is significant because it serves as proof for an argument that a patriarchal household, even with God as the ultimate patriarch, is not successful. It could be countered that Adam did have more knowledge and warning than Eve, and therefore had enough to protection, as he states, “Nor thou his malice and false guile contemn; / Subtle he needs must be, who could seduce / Angels” (*Paradise Lost* 9: 306-308). So, Adam knows that Satan has enough level of intelligence to somehow “seduce Angels”, but his previous discussion with Eve undermines support for his comprehension of Satan’s fall from Heaven. If he was given a full understanding of the situation, he would not have chosen to comfort Eve more than warn her, and he would not have agreed to let her go out alone.

In Margaret Shaklee’s article, “Grammatical Agency and the Argument for Responsibility in *Paradise Lost*”, she explains how the specifics of moral agency and law support an argument for God’s neglect as a patriarch. She begins by defining moral viability as “the capacity to perceive oneself as agent of one’s actions and thus to assume responsibility for that action” (Shaklee 518). Furthermore, she explains that “allied to [moral viability] is the ability to perceive in other responsibility for their action, what amounts a moral orientation to one’s universe” (Shaklee 518). The purpose of these definitions is their application to the poem’s characters—specifically God, Adam, and Eve. But before an application of these definitions can be made, it is important to understand the role of each character. Shaklee argues that “God as Judge is responsible for the articulation of the law and the extension of the law toward mercy” (Shaklee 522). In this case, the “law” would be the set of rules Adam and Eve are bound by, and therefore, the rules in which God is responsible (as both Judge and the ultimate patriarch) for defining and explaining. However, Shaklee points out that “when [God] speaks of the fall of man or of Satan, the nominalizations and passives run high; when the subject is the exaltation of Christ and the redemption of man, there are almost no abstractions and agency is clear” (Shaklee 519). Since God is both the ultimate patriarch and Judge, it is incredibly important that his articulation of the law be as far from abstract as possible. Otherwise, God leaves Adam and Eve at an unfair and confused disadvantage, as they are forced to make out their own interpretations as best as they can. For example, Shaklee mentions two instances that she argues prove Eve’s lack of moral viability. In Book IV, during Eve’s poolside episode, she says, “a voice thus warn’d me” (*Paradise Lost* 4*:* 467) and in Book V, during her dream, she says, “one call’d me forth to walk” (*Paradise Lost* 5*:* 36). In neither instance did Eve ask for identification. Shaklee argues that “in one sense, she is perfectly obedient; in another, she is disastrously ignorant of agency” (Shaklee 524), and “in light of Eve's overwhelming gullibility in the face of unknown agents, Satan's boast that he did it is puny triumph indeed” (Shaklee 524). But where does Eve’s gullibility come from? Part of it simple comes from a lack of answers, as Eve’s knowledge mainly consists of what Adam explains to her, and Adam, not being the Judge, is also confused on certain aspects of the warning and is therefore not a truly reliable source. Shaklee argues that, in Book 9, Adam’s “rising frequency of abstractions signals confusion” and “what finally allows him to countenance Eve's proposed action is his understanding of reason” (Shaklee 527). Here, the ‘proposed action’ is Eve’s suggestion to split up to complete their chores. Shaklee continues, stating that “Adam personifies reason in trying to explain to Eve what leads to sin (IX, 351-56); somehow reason will discern "fair appearing good" and relay this perception to the will. Reason will meet the Foe and fall if "not keeping strictest watch" (363)” (Shaklee 527). His lack of understanding and knowledge leaves him unable to properly assess the situation and respond to Eve’s suggestion. Adam’s personification of reason in his explanation reveals flaws in his own understanding and comprehension of the threat at hand. Following Shaklee’s argument, the question of whether or not Adam and Eve’s own interpretation of God’s warning puts them at fault becomes almost entirely irrelevant. If God is the Judge, he is responsible for the law and its articulation. God’s role as the patriarch, then, serves as a critique to the to patriarchy as a whole. Neither Adam nor Eve had the proper moral agency or explanation of the law to prepare themselves for the temptation, and God’s role as the Judge and patriarch makes him responsible.

During their discussion, both Adam and Eve show a level of misunderstanding towards the temptation that they will face sufficient enough to result in their inevitable failure. Though, as previously argued, the fall was not their fault because it was God’s responsibility, as the ultimate patriarch and head of household, to ensure that they were properly prepared. Adam and Eve believe that they are incapable of death and pain, despite having little understanding of the concepts. Eve does not believe that Satan is able to trick her, and Adam spends more time trying to assuage her worries than to warn her, as he was not given sufficient information that would have allowed him a better approach. In her article, Shaklee proves how Adam and Eve were also lacking in understanding of the law, which God is responsible for articulating as he is the final Judge. In conclusion, Milton criticizes the idea of patriarchy by presenting God as the ultimate patriarch who failed to warn Adam and Eve of their own vulnerability and Satan’s deception.

Works Cited

Margaret E. Shaklee. “Grammatical Agency and the Argument for Responsibility in *Paradise Lost*”. *ECH*, Volume 42, No. 4 Winter 1975, pgs. 518-530.