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Eve Disordered: The Relationship of Feminine Happiness and Hierarchy in *Paradise Lost*

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## Introduction

More or less since the publication of *Paradise Lost*, many of Milton's readers have detected in his illustration of the prelapsarian couple, particularly of Eve, either feminist or anti-feminist sentiments. Samuel Johnson, for one, wrote that Milton's work portrays a "woman made only for obedience" ("Life of Milton"). More recently, critics have turned this debate on Milton himself, raising the question of whether the poet could be characterized as a misogynist or feminist. In the former camp, there are those who believe, like William Riggs, that Milton's Eve is solely "[c]reated in response to Adam's erotic need" (368). In the latter camp, there are others like Anne Ferry who insist that we must keep in mind "the givens" of the Genesis story Milton had to work with and that he reveals himself to be "[Eve's] defender from her first introduction" (113, 129). However, the trap that many of these readers fall into is that of oversimplifying the beliefs of a poet synthesizing the elements of a literary, theological, and cultural vision. Given the complexity of Milton's work, it seems unwise to label him as either one extreme or another. Diane McColley writes, "The 'woman question' in Milton will never be *decided*; good poems never end" ("Milton and the Sexes" 189).

We cannot deny that Milton utilizes certain ideas about men, women, and their respective roles in the scheme of creation in his epic. During his lifetime, these roles were a hotly debated topic, and Milton adopts some of his contemporaries' ideas, dismisses others, and develops his own in his retelling of the Fall. Yet, the theme of gender roles throughout the poem serves primarily as a lens through which we can view a larger issue. Specifically, Milton is concerned with the ordering of the universe under God, the natural hierarchy of creation, of which gender is certainly a part but not the ultimate focus. When we choose to analyze Eve's actions, then, we are looking at one particular manifestation of what Milton sees as God's intention and

providence for his creation, and though her sin has its reference point in the narrow realm of sex, it points to a much more far-reaching significance. That is, Eve's fall-inducing pride stems from her gradual conviction that she can achieve happiness outside, or in a reordering of, the hierarchy in which she and all of creation exist. She seals her fate when she decides to take on the roles of both her divine and human superiors, and it is our awareness that she *has* such superiors in Milton's universe that informs our assessment of her guilt.

Before the analysis proper of Eve's fall, it is important to establish the nature of her sin. Fredson Bowers points out, "One way alone exists in which man can fall [in *Paradise Lost*]: through disobedience" (264). Eve's disobedience in eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil can be classified as an act of pride, defined by early modern preacher William Ames as "[a]n inordinate love of ourselves [and the] cause of covetousness" (2.225.15). St. Augustine provides further explication: the proud soul "despises the more just dominion of a higher authority" (*City of God* 12.8). In disobeying God's commandment, especially in the wake of Satan's argument that she, too, can have god-like wisdom, Eve puts her desires, sprung from insecurity and a distrust of God's providence, ahead of her duty within the created order. Milton captures the essence of this duty when he exclaims upon first introducing the prelapsarian couple, "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" ("Paradise Lost" 4.299). Eve is aware of this duty, too; she echoes Milton's sentiments when she declares her lot to Adam: "God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more / Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise" (4.637-638). Eve, as a creature and as a wife, is subject to God via Adam, and she knows it. This is a far cry from her musing just before her fall, in which her address to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil reveals how her personal curiosity gains precedence over her obedience to God: "Thy praise hee also who forbids thy use, / Conceals not from us, naming thee the Tree / Of Knowledge,

knowledge both of good and evil; / Forbids us then to taste, but his forbidding / Commends thee more” (9.750-754) That she longs for wisdom, which (we will later see) typifies Adam’s masculinity, is also significant in that she tries to adopt that which makes him superior, in effect desecrating his authority and her own unique dignity as a woman. The psychological distance between Eve in Book Four and Eve in Book Nine is vast; she has gone from willingly serving those above her to indulging her wish to act according to her own desires, though she knows said desires violate divine mandate.

From this definition of her sin, we begin to deduce an idea of the importance of social and spiritual order in the poem. The notion of hierarchy is a hinge on which Milton’s epic swings open to his audience, and many critics are eager to acknowledge this in their analyses. C.S. Lewis writes of Milton’s fascination with hierarchy, “The Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work, it foams or burgeons out of it at every moment” (79). Certainly, all the creatures of Milton’s universe are connected by the hierarchy. Riggs, examining how creatures of varying positions of power can still live in unity, asserts, “Higher levels of being...comprehend (‘contain’) everything that lies below them within a greater inclusiveness which itself constitutes their distinctiveness” (373). McColley, focusing on this rendition of Adam and Eve, says, “Their context is a purposeful hierarchical order of creation culminating in the kingship of the Son, and an account of Satan’s violation of that order...and his determination to seduce the newly created participants in it from their rightful place” (“Free Will” 108). And, Dorothy Durkee Miller narrows the scope still more to the order of gender and encourages her readers, “Let us grant Milton’s formulation of woman’s secondary rank in the hierarchical world as he conceived it” (547). Given this understanding of the centrality of hierarchy, then, we recognize that Eve’s sin goes beyond the

disobedience of God's command and is also a sin against her very nature. We shall delve deeper into Milton's illustration of Eve in the hierarchy of *Paradise Lost* later, but for now, it suffices to say that this concept plays a key role in informing the poem's characters and the significance of their actions.

In the meantime, we turn to Milton himself. His life was saturated with a belief in a natural hierarchy of the universe under God, and by examining the norms which sprung from this belief and which structured his own society, it is possible to get a glimpse of the ideas behind the ordering of society in his poem. While the cultural manifestations of hierarchy in the early modern period varied by class, occupation, education, and so forth, for our purposes, we shall concentrate on how it pertained to gender. And specifically, because Adam and Eve were believed to be the first married couple, we must look at the structure of marriage, which was based on the perceived roles of men and women as God created them.

### **“[T]he weaker vessel”: Dominant Perceptions of Gender Relations**

Depictions of these roles fell primarily into two camps: writers who chose to highlight the disparity of the sexes, and writers who preferred to focus on their complementarity. Either way, we can capture the essence of the male-female relationship as envisioned by both parties by borrowing a line from Constance Jordan: “Men-in-themselves have a generic authority over women-in-themselves” (3). The reasons for this are most frequently discovered in the insistence on women's physical and psychological weaknesses, the latter of which was to lead to moral quandary. Of course, these were not new ideas; Aristotle's *Generations of Animals* from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC asserts that “a female was by nature a defective male...[even in procreation] the male contributed motion and form to the embryo, and the female only matter” (30). Later on in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, Augustine considers the Eve of Genesis as a female prototype and declares

her function in creation as merely “for the procreation of children” (*Literal Commentary* 9.3.5). He flatly dismisses the idea that she could have been a true intellectual and emotional companion for Adam, musing, “How much more agreeably could two male friends, rather than a man and a woman, enjoy companionship and conversation in a life shared together” (9.5.9). Certainly, it is difficult to overstate the influence of both Aristotle and Augustine on 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century thought, and indeed, this mentality pervades much of the work by Milton and his contemporaries.

Some of these contemporaries align themselves with Aristotle, starting with women’s bodily “defects” as a foundation for a broader theory of gender inequality. According to this school of thought, women demonstrate not only a relative physical weakness, but also a damning lack of control over their own bodies: they cannot conceive on their own, they are sexually vulnerable, they menstruate, they lactate, etc. Jordan sums up this viewpoint succinctly, saying, “Misogynists tend to perceive her inability to control the effects of her sexuality...as an indication of her moral debility” (29). The general suspicion of women’s bodies, and especially of their sexuality, is revisited in Galenic medicine. Of particular note is the notion that women’s sex organs are actually inverted male genitals, which, if overheated, will experience a reversal (135-136). This hypothetically afflicted woman would be seen as a monstrosity, and we are left with the image of women as merely defective men or, potentially, much worse.

Other writers follow Augustine’s line of thought by expanding on the Biblical depiction of Eve. Drawing from the events of Genesis, they focus on the facts that Eve is created second (and from Adam’s side, no less), and that she is not able to avoid the Fall. Based on these criteria, they reason, she is beneath Adam in the natural hierarchy. From here, they signify the inferiority of women by cataloguing the seemingly subsequent manifestations of the nature of Eve’s

creation, i.e., women's psychological, and particularly their intellectual, inferiority. For example, Juan Luis Vives, writing in the early to mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, asserts, "For Adam was the first made, and after, Eve, and Adam was not betrayed; the woman was betrayed into the breach of the commandment. Therefore...a woman is a frail thing and of a weak discretion, and that may lightly be deceived" ("Christian Woman" 102). He builds on this in his instructions to new husbands, providing his students with a list of female flaws. Among her other traits, she is "feeble...needful of many things...full of suspicion, complaints, envies, and troubled with many diverse thoughts" ("Office and Duty" 124-125). In the same vein, the 16<sup>th</sup> century homily on the institution of marriage insists of women: "[They are] the sooner disquieted, and they be more prone to all weak affections and dispositions of mind, more then men bee, and lighter they bee, and more vaine in their fantasies and opinions" ("An Homilie" 241). Illustrating the real-world implications of these stereotypes, Ludovico Dominichi's *La Donna di Corte* suggests that there is little reason to educate women, even those in court society, saying, "A male who is a child is not always a child but becomes a man with time: but the lady is a child all her life" (qtd. in Jordan 150). And, an anonymously published piece called "The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights," ostensibly written to help women understand what they were permitted to claim in the name of the law, frankly states,

Eve because she had helped to seduced her husband hath inflicted on her an especial bane. *In sorrow shalt thou bring forth thy children, thy desires shall be subject to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.* See here the reason of that which I touched before, that women have no voice in parliament. They make no laws, they consent to none, they abrogate none. All of them are understood either married or to be married and their desires are subject to their husband. ("Law's Resolutions" 32)



As a consequence of Eve's flaws, women have no say in the statutes that govern them, are legally considered only in relation to their marital status (i.e., their legal bond to a man), and are to be submissive to their male superiors. That is, positive law is designed to reflect the belief in the natural inferiority of women to men.

This treatise on women's rights introduces to us the idea of marriage as a contract between a man and a woman, and one more or less based on both managing and maintaining the woman's secondary status. A great number of early modern writers emphasize the obligation of husbands to rule over their wives, and of wives to submit to their husbands. After all, the logic goes, women are not intellectually strong enough to adhere to reason and morality as they should; thus, they need always follow the guidance of their stronger, wiser husbands, and these husbands are bound to provide adequate care and direction. And, once again, we find the basis for this logic in Genesis. For instance, the rite of marriage as written in the 1552 *Booke of Common Prayer* tells us that marriage is "an honorable estate, instituted of God in Paradise...signifying unto us the mysticall unio[n], that is betwixt Christ and his Church" ("The fourme" 113). It then goes on to spell out the terms of the contract between man and wife: it elicits a vow from the husband to "love her, comforte her, honoure and kepe her, in sicknesse and in health" (114). Next, the wife is called upon to do the same, but even before swearing her love, she must promise to "obeye and serve" her husband (114). The contract is finalized when the husband speaks yet another vow while putting the ring on his wife's finger: "With this ring, I thee wedde: with my body I thee worship: [and] with all my worldly goodes I thee endowe" (114v). Interestingly, the wife does not return this sentiment. Of course, part of this is due to the fact that the only "worldly goodes" she can potentially offer her husband are most likely her father's. Nevertheless, it is striking to observe that, while the husband is encouraged to love his wife "even as Christ loved the

Church”, the wife is repeatedly told to obey him. In fact, only once do the words of the rite instruct her to love him. For a sacrament designed to cement the bond between two people, there is surprisingly little talk of companionate love. And, the little that *does* touch on love is presented in either the earthly terms of body and property, or else in the abstract terms of Christ’s relationship to the Church. Clearly, this is an attempt to echo the words of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, but it does not seem to allow for much of an emotional component in love. Instead, it is a duty. For the husband, it is manifested by guiding and providing for his wife, his dependent, and for the wife, it is manifested by obeying her husband, her guardian. Marriage, then, is a legally binding contract between a superior and an inferior, and the instruction offered throughout the course of the rite reflects this.

Beyond the marriage rite, there are several other writers with advice for those bound by the legal and spiritual contract of marriage, and they likewise do not seem especially concerned with the notion of friendship between a husband and a wife. In fact, some seem doubtful that such a friendship can exist. One homily recalls St. Peter’s admonition of abusive husbands, saying, “[The wife] must be spared and borne with, the rather for that she is the weaker vessell, of a fraile heart, inconstant, and with a word soone stirred to wrath” (“An Homilie” 241). Next, it turns to wives themselves:

[T]hem must they obey, and cease from commanding, and perform subjection...she will apply her selfe to his will, when shee endeavoureth her selfe to seeke his contention, and to doe him pleasure, when she will eschewe all things that might offend him...But peradventure thou wilt object, that the woman provoketh [the husband] to this point. But consider thou againe that the woman is a fraile vessel. (242, 246)

The homily goes on to encourage wives to be the first to apologize after fights, since “the more be they ready to offend”, and even if their husbands are physically abusive, wives should make an effort to remain faithful, both to their husbands and to God: “[I]f thou lovest him only because he is gentle and courteous, what reward will God give thee therefore?” (242, 244). That is, the wife must acknowledge the fact that the consequences of her inferiority are likely the cause of any marital discord and behave accordingly, and should she suspect her husband is reacting too strongly (i.e., with physical or sexual violence) to her weakness, she is yet obligated to remain obedient. In doing so, she serves both her husband (her legal guardian) and God.

Poet and preacher John Donne’s marriage sermons expand on this concern with the contractual obligation of the wife to submit to her husband. In one wedding homily, he tells the new wife,

*[S]he will be content to learn in silence with all subjection...[and she is] but a Help: and no body values his staffe, as he does his legges...Since [Eve] was taken out of [Adam’s] side, let her not depart from his side, but shew her self so much as she was made for, *Adjutorium*, a Helper. (qtd. in Ferry 118)*

We can see the implication of his words: wives are not to act without the guidance of their husbands, and though this may be a nuisance to the husbands themselves, they are, of course, contractually bound. Moreover, the idea of wives as “helpers” indicates a belief that they do not have a purpose in themselves; their purpose is ancillary to that of men. Indeed, throughout this period, we see frequent examples of writers encouraging wives to reflect their husbands’ desires and their moods. Dudley Fenner, for example, sums up the wife’s role in marriage by saying she is “to bee an image of the authority and wisdom of her husband, in her whole administration... in al her behaviour of words, deeds, apparel, countenance, gesture, etc.” (qtd. in Jordan 218).

Similarly, Westminster Abbey's 1657 *Annotations Upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament* explains that Eve is made in God's image, but only via Adam, "as if one measure be made according to the standard, an hundred made according to that, agree with the standard as well as it" (*Annotations* A3). We may detect the intention to affirm woman's creation in the image of God, but Mary Nyquist observes that, in any production, the original is always valued more than the duplicate. To say that a duplicate is equal to an original flies in the face of the Platonic logic (176-177). The marriage contract, then, with its emphasis on wifely submission and support, seeks to provide for the weaknesses it sees inherent in women by obligating them to obey their husbands.

#### **“[M]utual help, necessity, and comfort”: Rising Perceptions of Gender Relations**

Not everyone in the early modern period agreed universally on this reductive view of women in marriage. During this time, we can detect a humanistic shift in the general conception of marriage so that, increasingly, it is not merely contractual, but also companionate. Nyquist notes that English Protestants, in particular, encourage a greater respect for women: "That woman was created solely or even primarily for the purposes of procreation is the low-minded or 'crabbed' (Milton's adjective) opinion [that] the Protestant doctrine of marriage sees itself called to overturn" (169). Many of this line of thought seek to improve their audience's view of women by insisting on their strengths as Christians and as friends to their husbands. Moreover, those noted disparities between the sexes are reinterpreted as complementary traits. While not advocating the notion of women's equality to men, nor in abandoning the contractual aspect of marriage, these writers contributed to a change in the popular conception of wives as more than mere instruments for procreation.

Part of this involves amending the claims of women's inherent weaknesses. While no one goes so far to say that women are equal to men in physical and psychological strength, there are writers who contest the notion that women are wholly incapable of achieving intelligence and moral rectitude on their own. They tend to do this by adopting a Platonic conception of virtue. In the *Meno*, Plato writes that virtue is without gender, and in *The Republic*, he states, "men and women alike possess the qualities which make a guardian" (qtd. in Jordan 33). At the core of this argument is the emphasis on that which the sexes have in common, and interestingly, we find much of the early modern discussion of this topic in treatises defending the rule of Mary, Queen of Scots. Bishop John Leslie, in his *Defence of the Honour of Marie, Quene of Scotland* in 1569, writes, "Every man and woman was also and *primarily* a human being" (qtd. in Jordan 246). Likewise, Cornelius Agrippa speaks on Mary's intellectual and spiritual behalf in his 1542 *Of the Nobilitie and Excellencie of Womankynde*: "The woman hathe that same mynd that a man hath, that same reason and speech, she gothe to the same ende of blyshfulnes, where shall be noo exception of kynde" (qtd. in Jordan 122). He goes on to make the distinction between biology and psychology, suggesting that, for the most part, men and women are only different in terms of their physical parts. It is culture, then, not inherent intellectual weakness, which renders women (seemingly) inferior to men (Jordan 122). He does not suggest any reformation of societal marriage laws to reflect this near-equality, but his sentiment is still radical for its time.

Agrippa is not alone in this assertion. He is joined by notable female writers who, though they likewise do not seek to overturn the established gender hierarchy, shed light on how women's "weaknesses" are largely the work of social custom. Rachel Speght's *A Mouzell for Melastomus, the Cynicall bayter of, and foule mouthed Barker against Evahs Sex* departs from the common use of Scripture to highlight historically weak and sinful women, and it instead

highlights women in the Bible who are honored by God. She even tries to redeem Eve, arguing, “[T]he first promise that was made in Paradise, God makes to the woman, that by her seede should the serpens head be broken...so should woman bring foorth the Saviour from sinne” (Speght C3v). Essentially, she reappropriates the use of Biblical evidence to insist that men and women are at least spiritually on par with each other; women, too, can be the enactors of God’s will. Similarly, Christine de Pisan, in her *Livre de la cité des dames* (translated into English in 1521 as *The Boke of the Cyte of Ladyes*), notes that women in history have been written either by men, or else in languages governed by men. Society’s view of women, therefore, is inextricably bound to a masculinist bias (Jordan 105). Once again, neither Speght nor di Pisan indicates a need, or even a desire to reorder the gender hierarchy. Yet, their work suggests a closer relation of men and women than their more socially conservative counterparts might allow.

Another part of this changed perception of the roles of the sexes involves a reinterpretation of marriage in Genesis. This is a potentially difficult task, given how few verses are dedicated to developing Adam and Eve’s relationship. Some, like Alexander Niccholes, respond by downplaying those parts of the Bible where Eve’s inferiority might be exploited. In *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving*, he says that marriage in Eden is instituted first and foremost to alleviate Adam’s loneliness, and “he maintains his emphasis on mutuality by erasing any explicit or evaluative commentary on [Eve’s] having been made *after* him” (Nyquist 175). Instead, he depicts what he supposes must be Adam’s relief in having finally found someone with whom to talk: “Adam took no little joy in his single companion, being thereby freed from that solitude and silence which by his lonnesse would else have been subject unto” (Niccholes B).

Other writers prefer to focus on the friendship of the first couple. In the 1530 publication of *A Ryght Frutefull Epystle...in laude and prayse of matrimony*, Erasmus writes:

For at the begynnyng when [God] had made man of [the] slyme of the erth he thought that his lyfe shulde be utterly miserable and unpleasaunt, if he ioined nat Eve a co[m]panion unto hym. Wherefore he brought forthe the wife nat of the erth, as he did the ma[n], but out of the ribbes of Ada[m], wherby it is to be underst[oo]d that nothyng ought, to be more deere to us then the wyfe, nothyng more conioined, nothyng more faste glued unto us.

(5v)

Adam, Erasmus argues, would have been lonely and sad had not God created Eve. The notion of Eve's being formed both after Adam and from his rib no longer casts her in such a negative light, but rather, a positive one: it is a symbol of her necessity to Adam's happiness (even in Eden), and of their closeness. According to Erasmus, Christian husbands should mirror Adam's love for Eve and never *want* to be separated from their wives. He emphasizes this point when he muses about the joys of living with a wife with whom one can connect both intellectually and physically: “[I]t is an especyall swetnes to have one whom ye may communycate the secrete affectyons of your mynde, with whome ye may speake even as if it were with your owne selfe, whome ye may sa[f]ely truste” (22). This is a significant departure from the idea that women should never part from their husbands, lest they commit some logical error and fall into sin. And, even though their union is still essentially a divinely-instituted contract, it simultaneously serves the couple's happiness to be together.

Indeed, the fact that God is the one to join the prelapsarian couple is a sign of his providence for the emotional well-being of his creation. Puritan preacher William Perkins praises marriage when he writes of Adam and Eve's union, “[T]he manner of this conjunction was excellent, for God joined our first parents, Adam and Eve, together immediately” (2.158). And, in this union sanctioned by God, both man and woman are bound to “that duty whereby

they do mutually and willingly communicate both their persons and goods to each other for their mutuall help, necessity, and comfort” (10.169). In this light, marriage is again predominantly a contract – the husband and wife have *duties* to each other - yet, it is a contract which emphasizes the *mutual* giving and receiving of both parties. The man is not merely acting as the woman’s guardian, and the woman is not merely her husband’s servant. Moreover, the specific duties of the couple have a more positive nuance: the faithful wife, though she is again told to submit to her husband in all things, will also “enjoyeth the privileges of her husband, and is graced by his honor and estimation among men” (12.172). The husband, in turn, is enjoined to love her as himself and to honor her as his companion (12.172). Thus, there is a clear sense that both the wife and the husband benefit from their relationship.

Nor is Perkins alone in his emphasis on God’s benevolent role in marriage. Vives, too, in his consideration of the first couple, concedes that they are brought together not only for procreation but also for “the society and fellowship of life” (“Office and Duty” 123). And, William Gouge, in his 1622 treatise, *Of Domesticall Duties*, echoes the idea that marriage is inherently good because it is a covenant of God’s institution: “The *Author* and first Institutor of marriage was the Lord God. Could there have beene a greater, or anyway more excellent Author?” (2.08v). He further emphasizes the specialness of marriage by highlighting the fact that it is the first human relationship God established. He insists that “[t]he bond of marriage is more ancient, more firme, more neere [than any other relationship]. There was husband and wife before there was parent and child” (1.I). The connection of husband and wife, then, is stronger and more significant than even familial ties, and in saying so, Gouge acknowledges a powerful emotional component in marriage. He goes on to encourage husbands and wives to nurture this emotional component in his discussion of due benevolence:



One of the best remedies that can be prescribed to married persons...is, that husband and wife mutually delight in each other, and maintain a pure and fervent love betwixt themselves which is warranted & sanctified by Gods word for this particular end...[Due benevolence] must be performed with good will and delight, willingly, readily, and cheerefully. (2.P7-P7v)

In other words, the happy couple fosters its mutual love in sex, and Gouge insists that marital sex – that which makes the married couple’s relationship unique from other social bonds - is sanctified by God. Moreover, while it is a duty, it is a *shared* duty, and one meant to enrich the couple’s emotional and spiritual friendship; it is not to be used as a means for one person to wield power over the other. Consequently, even the sexual aspect of marriage is not merely a series of contractual duties, but also a contributing feature in a genuine friendship; indeed, the word “must” suggests that this kind of friendship – intellectual, emotional, *and* physical - is requisite to a proper marriage.

Gouge’s allowance for wives’ sexual fulfillment (as well as husbands’) is an indicator of that which makes this conception of companionate marriage so noteworthy: its provision for women’s self-interest. Of course, the gender hierarchy is still in place; we cannot overlook the fact that no one suggests any significant changes to marriage as a contract. Yet, by emphasizing the spiritual equality of men and women, as well as their complementarity where they differ and the mutual benefit both parties derive from their situation, these writers allow for a greater appreciation for women’s personal happiness in marriage. Husbands, though they are their wives’ masters, are to be *benevolent* masters. Perkins, for example, notes the necessity of the “free and full consent of the parties” to be married, and he says that a woman threatened by her husband’s violence is fully in the right to leave and dissolve the marriage (14.169). Vives looks

to Adam as the prototype for this behavior: “Adam did not ravish Eve but received her, delivered unto him by God, the Father, he gave her not unto him perforce, but that they should mutually love one another” (“Office and Duty” 124). And Gouge takes this further, saying of the responsibility of superiors in general, “[O]ne in his place is ready to doe what good he can to another...in which respect even the highest governour on earth is called a *minister*, for the good of such as are under him” (B3). Perhaps most significantly, however, is Gouge’s explanation of why no one indicates a need to enact a role reversal in marriage. This hierarchy is a good thing because, quite simply, God made it as such: “The reason why all are bound to submit themselves one to another is, because every one is set in his place by God, not so much for himself, as for the good of others” (B3v). The natural hierarchy – including its translation into marriage – is a good thing because it was created by God, who is all goodness. In assigning everyone a hierarchical position, God sets up a system whereby everyone benefits from the service of someone else. Whether writers are focusing on the disparities of the sexes or on their complementarity, all can agree on this: the hierarchy as it stands is a fact of life, and a positive one at that.

### **“[A] meet and happy conversation”: Milton and Marriage**

With that, we turn to Milton specifically, and we are prompted to pose the question: where on the spectrum does he fall? Does he zero in on disparity or similitude? Based not only on his position in *Paradise Lost*, but also on that which he takes in his writings preceding it, it seems that he leans toward the latter approach: he tends to promote the emphasis on the inherent goodness of marriage as a contractual yet companionate bond, a union of the complementary attributes of two friends, one male (and superior) and one female (and inferior). And, like many of his contemporaries, he begins by basing his opinion on evidence from the Book of Genesis.

In *The Christian Doctrine*, his overview of the essentials of Christianity, he defines marriage as such: “[I]t is clear that it was instituted, if not commanded, at the creation, and that it consisted in the mutual love, society, help, and comfort of the husband and wife, though with a reservation for the superior rights to the husband” (“Christian Doctrine” 1.10). From this statement, we may recognize several significant factors about Milton’s view of marriage. First, he states that marriage is inherently good (as it was created and sanctified by God, who is all goodness). Moreover, it is worth noting that, in stating the fact of marriage’s divine institution first, he gives predominance to the contractual aspect of marriage. Indeed, he says that God “commanded” it at creation; that is, it is the couple’s duty, and notably, it is first and foremost a duty to God, not necessarily to each other.

Second, he emphasizes the companionate aspect of marriage, and he seems especially inclined to comment on the emotional benefits the couple shares. Unlike the marriage rite from *The Boken of Common Prayer*, Milton avoids characterizing love with physical, monetary, or spiritually abstract analogies, but rather addresses the psychological and emotional needs that arise in human relationships. To be sure, his depiction of the married state (in its ideal form), with its stress on “mutual love, society, help, and comfort”, seems a standard definition of any close friendship. And, that he places the mutuality of marriage before the fact that the husband is superior to the wife is even more significant; it is somewhat of a departure even from other early modern writers who emphasize the companionate marriage. While he defers to the contract, he does so primarily in the sense that it is a contract binding the couple to God. In serving each other as good friends, the husband and wife thus serve God according to the contract. *How* they serve each other (and thus God) is determined by their positions in the hierarchy; thus, the practical terms of the contract are indicated by their sex. Consequently, we get a sense of how

Milton prioritizes the relationships represented in marriage: people are bound first to God, then to each other, and finally, to their role in the hierarchy.

Milton expounds on this vision of companionate marriage in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, a treatise first published in 1643 defending the legalization of divorce in the Anglican Church. At the core of his argument is the idea that a married couple unable to connect intellectually or emotionally is no couple at all, and their marriage was never really valid (“*Doctrine and Discipline*” 1.2). Divorce, then, is a means of protecting the sanctity of marriage, keeping it free of the taint of weak relationships which do not, in his mind, constitute true and holy unions. And, throughout his discussion, we find more evidence of Milton’s priorities. For instance, he reminds his readers of a couple’s duty to God and to each other in marriage by pointing out that people forced to remain in an unhappy state are more likely to fall into sin. The discontented husband “will begin even against law to cast around where he may find his satisfaction more complete . . . though he be almost the strongest Christian, he will be ready to despair in virtue, and mutiny against divine providence” (1.3). Milton is concerned that unhappy marriages lead people to commit adultery, but perhaps even more important is his concern that these same people will come to doubt God’s ability or willingness to provide for his highest creation. Hence, both violations are actually of two types, according to Milton: first, they upset the order of priorities by placing companionship – and an illicit companionship, at that – ahead of contractual obligation. Second, they breach one’s duty to God and to spouse (and in that order).

However, what is especially striking about Milton’s defense is his illustration of marriage between two fit partners, those for whom the institution of marriage must be preserved. Certainly, he is careful to stress the obligations of marriage, and thus its contractual aspect, but he also dedicates a great deal of energy to praising the salubrious friendship of a well-matched

couple. He suggests, for instance, that their union answers a natural desire to alleviate loneliness and the need to produce offspring; it is a yearning ““stronger than death”” (1.4). He then goes on to list the qualities of a good wife: she is “an intimate and speaking help, a ready and reviving associate in marriage”, and she provides “apt and cheerful conversation...to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation till afterwards, as being but a secondary end in dignity” (1.4, Preface). Such a sentiment contrasts directly to the idea that a wife must be “spared and borne with”; on the contrary, Milton’s ideal wife is an escape from the world and its troubles, and for him, this is a greater asset than even her reproductive capabilities. The way he makes this statement, moreover, is revealing: that *she* provides this kind of respite for *him* indicates that the wife, though she is yet supposed to serve her husband and answer his moods, takes on the role of her husband’s emotional guardian. In this way, though Milton still holds to the established gender hierarchy, he also calls for a high degree of give-and-take in marriage for both parties. He insists, “[L]ove in marriage cannot live nor subsist unless it be mutual” (1.5).

His strongest evidence for the companionate marriage is in his allusions to Genesis. He reasons that any institution benefitting the prelapsarian couple must be even more beneficial to a postlapsarian one, as the trials and tribulations of life in a sinful world more urgently require the support of a sanctified friendship (1.4). He drives the point home in his exegesis of Eve’s creation:

And what chief end was of creating woman to be joined with man, [God’s] own instituting words declare, and are infallible to inform us what is marriage and what is no marriage, unless we can think them set there to no purpose: “It is not good,” saith he, “that man should be alone. I will make him a helpmeet for him.” From which words so

plain, less cannot be concluded, nor is by any learned interpreter than that in God's intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage.

(1.2)

We gain several significant points of insight from this analysis. Not only is marriage a good and holy institution created by God at the dawn of humanity, but also – and more importantly - it was begun when Eve was made *for* Adam, and for the primary purpose of assuaging his loneliness, not merely with her body, but with her *conversation*. So, Eve has an ancillary purpose to that of Adam; likewise, he infers, women in general have an ancillary purpose to that of men in general. But, this contingent purpose is not of an animal nature. It is, rather, psychological, and it is of such great importance that God, not Adam, or any other human with some degree of corporeal desire, is the one to insist upon it. And, so goes Milton's logic, why would God say it if it was not important? Thus, Milton reveals his priorities to us once again: the hierarchy implicit in the contract of marriage is not to be ignored, yet he insists upon the mutuality of genuine wedded love to the point where the contract cannot exist without proper companionship.

### **Prelapsarian Marriage in *Paradise Lost***

It is this view of marriage that Milton develops throughout *Paradise Lost* in the relationship of Adam and Eve. From the first moment we meet them in Book Four, we can already glean the emphasis on duty to God above all else, the mutual love and duty Adam and Eve feel for and expect from each other, and the manifestations of their inherent inequality by means of complementary attributes. Moreover, because the ways which Adam and Eve fulfill their duty to God and to each other are determined by their positions within the grand scheme of creation, Milton is careful to indicate just where, exactly, they stand. As they emerge into the readers' view for the first time, he tells us:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,  
 Godlike erect, with native Honor clad  
 In naked Majesty seem'd Lords of all,  
 And worthy seem'd, for in thir looks Divine  
 The image of thir glorious Maker shone,  
 Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure,  
 Severe, but in true filial freedom plac't;  
 Whence true authority in men[.] ("Paradise Lost" 4.288-295)

Before we get any information about Adam and Eve as a couple or as individuals, we are told where they, as a species, stand in the hierarchy under God. They represent the apex of earthly design: they possess so many of God's own attributes in "thir looks Divine" that they seem to be his son and daughter. It is important for us as interpreters of the text to note this because it lays the foundation for their behavior for the rest of the poem. Adam and Eve are not merely talkative bipeds; they have a spark of the divine, and this sets them above everything else on Earth. Even the animals show them respect and try to entertain them like jesters: "Bears, Tigers, Ounces, Pards / Gamboll'd before them", and "th'unwieldy Elephant / To make them mirth...wreath'd / His Lithe Proboscis" (4.342-345). Moreover, that Milton explicates their special position in reference to their creator before anything else about them suggests that their relationship to God is more important than any other they experience throughout the epic.

From here, Milton narrows his focus and distinguishes Adam and Eve as individuals:

...though both  
 Not equal, as thir sex not equal seem'd;  
 For contemplation hee and valor form'd,

For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,

Hee for God only, shee for God in him[.] (4.295-299)

Even before delving into Milton's language, we gain three points from the ordering of his ideas. First, because he has turned our attention from the couple's relationship to God to their relationship to each other, we realize we have moved one step lower in the scheme of the priorities previously established. We are now in the realm of human relationships, specifically in marriage (though we never stray far from the notion of one's duty to God). Second, because we witness Adam and Eve *first* as a pair and *then* as individuals, we can infer the importance of mutuality in their relationship. Stella Revard notes, "Eve is female by subclassification: her primary classification is human. Milton himself has emphasized first how Eve and Adam share the same basic qualities of humanity, before he has detailed the differences between them as female and male" (74). This transition from their relationship as a species to God to their relationship to each other signifies the inherently prominent companionship in their marriage.

Here, we also recognize the simultaneous revelation of the third priority in marriage – that is, the duty to the natural hierarchy which determines *how* Adam and Eve are to fulfill their roles. To be sure, we never lose sight of the mutuality in their marriage, and Milton's illustration of the couple as such is a departure from many of his contemporaries. Ferry notes that, in saying that Eve is made in God's image via Adam, Milton carefully amends the words of St. Paul: "[His] rewording brings Eve closer to her divine creator than St. Paul's formula that man 'is the image and glorie of God: but the woman is the glorie of the man'" (117). However, we cannot help but notice that when Milton looks at the pair individually, he is careful to discuss Adam first. And, just as the placement of God before his creations in the epic indicates his rule over



them, so does Adam's position before Eve demonstrate "his superior dignity" (116). From this, we gather that Adam is meant to govern his wife, and Eve is meant to serve her husband.

When we examine Milton's language in this passage, we see that he simultaneously begins to enunciate those gendered and hierarchical aspects of Adam and Eve which the order of their appearance suggests. He first supports his understanding of their different roles by assuming a link between their physical attributes and their social and spiritual identities as intended by God and as carried out by the yet unfallen couple. Adam, he notes, is larger in his physique and in his eyes, and he has shorter, tamer hair ("Paradise Lost" 4.300-303). Milton suggests that this identifies Adam as God's viceroy on Earth, the possessor of an "Absolute rule" of this particular kingdom (4.301). Eve, for her part, is smaller and slimmer than her husband, and she has long, curly, "wanton" tresses which Milton claims "impl[y] / Subjection" (4.304-308). Everything about her body, even her hair, indicates relative weakness and an inherent need for control, and thus we are brought to the understanding that Adam is her master.

Adam and Eve's body language further indicates their respective positions: Eve's "[s]ubjection" to Adam is

requir'd with gentle sway

And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd

Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,

And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (4.309-311)

Here, we get the sense that Eve needs little prompting by Adam to concede to his desires, and any display of resistance on her part has the effect of endearing her still more to him. And, since Milton has yet to record any words passing between the two, it seems that these particulars of their relationship are implied by their physical interaction. This is especially interesting because

there is something inherently sexed in their behavior. We do not know what, exactly, Adam is “swaying” her to do, and it does not necessarily follow that it is any sort of sexual act. Yet, Eve responds in terms of coyness and modesty, though Milton immediately follows these lines with a reminder to his readers that “those mysterious parts were [not] then conceal’d; / Then was not guilty shame” (4.312-313). The scene may not be even vaguely erotic, but Milton still classifies their wordless exchange in terms of sexual ethics, particularly as they apply to Eve. She automatically behaves in accordance to a yet unspoken law of chastity which, notably, does not seem to apply to Adam. Thus, even the slightest actions, such as walking through Eden, are necessarily influenced by gender. The restrained sexuality in Eve’s everyday physical actions suggests her inherent need to be controlled and, subsequently, her inherent lack of that faculty which would allow her to behave without a conscious effort for propriety. On the contrary, the overt power in Adam’s everyday physical actions, especially as he applies said power to Eve’s sexuality, suggests his inherent control over her and thus his possession of that faculty which allows him to regulate Eve’s sexual behavior while not having to knowingly worry about his own. Consequently, Adam’s physical manifestations of his gender automatically place him and his desires above Eve and hers, especially those relating to her sexuality, and Eve’s physical behavior suggests that she accepts this control.

The reliance on physical attributes and interaction to determine his characters’ positions in the scheme of the universe suggests that Milton is taking his cue from Aristotle; after all, Eve’s very appearance and physical stance, even as she and Adam walk “hand in hand”, is evidence enough of her subservience to her male counterpart (4.321). Yet, the fact that they *do* walk with joint hands indicates that, rather than an awkward mixing of opposites, they represent a harmonious union of complementary attributes. This is merely a starting point for Milton, for

when his characters finally speak verbally, their words serve to reinforce the themes that structure their relationships with the expressed joy they feel in living by them. Adam is the first to speak for the couple in an address to Eve:

Sole partner and sole part of all these joys,  
 Dearer to myself than all; needs must the Power  
 That made us, and for us this ample World  
 Be infinitely good[.] (4.411-414)

Again, Adam exemplifies the hierarchy of commitments in prelapsarian marriage, though this time, he presents them in their inverse order. He, the superior, speaks first, asserting the prominence of his gender. Yet, his first object in speaking is to affirm the great degree to which he loves Eve and, what is more, that he loves her as a gift from God in his infinite providence; his discussion gradually takes us upward. Eve is Adam's "sole partner", a phrase which can be taken in two ways, both telling of the perfect mutuality in a sinless marriage. First, she is singular in her suitability as Adam's companion, and for this rarity, she has greater value. Second, if we allow for the possibility of a play on words, we can read "sole" as "soul", and in doing so, we see the marriage of Adam and Eve as a profoundly spiritual union. This particular reading also serves to bolster the subsequent lines in which Adam expresses his thanks to God for his wife and for the world in which they live, a theme he expands on for another 25 lines. Hence, the highest purpose of the joy of marriage, as Adam expresses it, is to praise God, and in doing so, to fulfill his obligation to his creator. In this way, then, Adam's language likewise reveals the guiding principles of his life as a husband and a spiritual subject.

When Eve replies, she follows her husband's example and structures her first speech so as to build up the guiding principles of her life in relationship to others:

O thou for whom  
 And from whom I was form'd flesh of thy flesh,  
 And without whom am to no end, my Guide  
 And Head...wee to [God] indeed all praises owe[.] (4.440-444).

Once again, we start with the gender hierarchy: notably, Eve speaks second, and her first words are to affirm her position in relation to Adam. She knows where she stands. Moreover, while Adam's speech indicates their spiritual connection, Eve's rather indicates their physical union by noting their shared "flesh". Once again, sexuality is designated to the feminine sphere, and revealingly so: her attention to the earthly manifestations of their relationship, plus her admitted dependence on Adam as her intellectual and moral "Guide", signify her lower position relative to her husband. Yet, while her focus is perhaps not as lofty as Adam's, it indicates that Eve herself sees her creation from Adam's rib as a positive sign of their union. She considers her origin and her position as reasons to praise God. She even goes on to say that she herself has "So far the happier Lot" because she has such a one as Adam to lead her, whereas he "Like consort to [himself] canst nowhere find" (4.446, 448). Consequently, she not only affirms the love in the hierarchical structure of her marriage, but in joyfully acknowledging her position as her husband's inferior, she adds further praise of God, the architect of the arrangement, and embraces her responsibility to her creator.

### **Creation by and for the Hierarchy: Adam's Creation Narrative**

Eve's opening words introduce the subject of their creation, a topic which both she and Adam develop in narratives about their respective first days of life. These narratives are significant because they accentuate the instrumentality of hierarchy in their very existence and, likewise, in the institution of marriage (since Eve is created primarily for the purpose of being

Adam's wife). In these accounts, we come to see that the structured roles of the prelapsarian couple first evident in their introduction in Book Four do not only imply a resultant compliance to a divinely prescribed social order. Rather, we come to understand that these roles are also, in fact, a catalyst for the perpetuation of said social order; they are both cause and effect.

Let us first examine Adam's testimony in Book Eight. Though it appears later in the epic than his wife's, Adam's story is more comprehensive in that it explains all that leads to Eve's creation and their marriage. At this point in the poem, Milton has already told us that Adam has "Absolute rule" over the earth and that he is to govern on the strength of his wisdom. We are to bear in mind Milton's initial description of him: "for contemplation hee and valor form'd". So, when Adam provides us with the details of his birth, he reiterates that which we have already been told. For example, upon waking up for the first time, Adam looks up at the sky and quickly deduces the existence of a benevolent god: "[H]ow came I thus, how here? / Not of myself; by some great Maker then, / In goodness and in power preeminent" (8.277-279). This revelation is followed by a dream in which God appears to him, and Adam, immediately inferring that this is a divine presence, prostrates himself to praise his maker – a duty he is never told he must fulfill, but which he inherently understands (8.315). And, when God explains the penalty for eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – "inevitably thou shalt die; / From that day mortal, and this happy State / Shalt lose" – Adam, despite his dearth of life experience, seems to comprehend the seriousness of this result (8.331-333). Based on these anecdotes, we reach the following conclusions: first, Adam's ability to make sense of the universe and where he stands within it testifies to the power of his intellect, his signature strength and the primary instrument of his authority as a man on earth. Second, it reveals his immediate acceptance of his position in the structured universe, an acceptance so apparently automatic as to suggest that it is in his

nature to do so. His hierarchical position is an elemental part of his construction and of his subsequent world view, and we may hypothesize that the rest of creation is similarly constructed.

We get some confirmation of this when his narrative turns its focus to the creation of Eve; here, we witness the concurrent causal and resultant manifestations of hierarchy in the act of creation. First, the causal: for Adam, Eve's birth represents a conscious fulfillment of his position and the wisdom that characterizes it. Milton expresses this fulfillment in terms of the ideal companionate marriage he references in the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*: for example, Adam desires Eve's creation because, taking stock of his earthly subjects, he realizes that his reign is incomplete without a mate. Notably, he comprehends his lack by experiencing loneliness. He appeals to God with an argument for happiness, reasoning, "In solitude / What happiness, who can enjoy alone, / Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (8.364-366). In saying so, Adam identifies a longing for a particular kind of friendship that makes humans unique from other creatures. He thereby locates his position in the universe: in essence, "[he is] like and unlike the animals, like and unlike God" (Riggs 373). Like an animal, he desires a mate, but unlike an animal, he longs for a friend, someone with whom he can feel a connection, and he strives to attain this friend by reaching upward to his creator and provider. His loneliness, then, is an emotional response which strengthens Milton's argument for a marriage founded on genuine, mutual love – for a particular caste within the universe.

Tellingly, God approves this inborn need to pursue such a relationship, admitting that he has known all along that "it [is] not good for Man to be alone" and praising Adam for his self-awareness ("Paradise Lost" 8.445). This praise tells us that "Adam has the right idea of marriage" – and therefore the right idea of the creature to be his wife (Ferry 119). Thus prompted by God's commendation, Adam describes the relationship he rightly desires by listing the criteria

for his ideal companion, and in doing so, he continues to use his awareness of the hierarchy as a reference point. And, not only does his constant eye on the natural order suggest his conformation to it, but it also allows him to exercise the power of his status within it by helping God shape the woman who will be his wife – who, significantly, he imagines will be his inferior. To be sure, he tells God he wants a wife with a degree of equality to himself, reasoning that there can be no true connection between creatures of widely disparate positions: “Among unequals what society / Can sort, what harmony of true delight?” (“Paradise Lost” 8.383-385). Yet, he comes to this conclusion after just having seen various animals paired off: “[T]hey rejoice / Each with thir kind, Lion with Lioness; / So fitly them in pairs hast thou combin’d” (8.392-394). Adam’s reference to the animals as his guide to human relations thus allows him to subtly qualify his request: he wants an equal to himself in the sense that a lioness is equal to a lion. They are of the same species, yet one, the male, is dominant. Adam, as the male, already understands that he is to be the dominant being and his yet-to-be mate will be submissive.

The rest of the traits Adam suggests for Eve are likewise given within the context of his and her respective statuses. He refers to the natural hierarchy when he requests a companion with whom he can have intelligent conversation, “fellowship...fit to participate / All rational delight” (8.389, 390-391). Once more highlighting his unique placement in the world, he reasons that man cannot carry on a conversation with an animal, each of which already has a mate with which to communicate in its own way (Riggs 372). Turning to God as a point of contrast, he says that although he can talk to God, God is sufficient in himself and therefore has no need for human conversation or comfort (“Paradise Lost” 8.391-392, 415-419). Next, he petitions for someone with whom he can have children, reminding God that man must “beget / Like of his like...which requires / Collateral love, and dearest amity” (8.423-424, 425-426). Like an animal, he is

compelled to procreate, but unlike an animal, he is compelled to procreate with a beloved wife. As for God's need to reproduce, Adam points out, "No need that thou / Shouldst propagate, already infinite" (8.419-420).

In all of these supplications, then, Adam acknowledges his role, but likewise acknowledges the role he wishes Eve to fulfill. Nowhere does he indicate that he wants an exact equal in terms of intellectual or sexual capacity, and the fact that he repeatedly describes what he wants in terms of contrast to himself suggests that he expects a level of difference between himself and his bride. Indeed, since Adam is the apex of earthly creation – a fact of which God has made him aware – , any form of "otherness" in his proper mate, whether he vocalizes it or not, will necessarily insinuate an automatic inferiority. Consequently, Adam's constant referral to the order of creation as he describes his future bride reveals itself to be an active show of his relative power: he seeks to demonstrate where God has placed him within the universal hierarchy, and he uses his understanding of this hierarchy as a creative influence in his request for Eve. And as a result, Eve is both a product of and a participant in the hierarchy of the universe (including that microcosmic universe of marriage): she is inferior because Adam – rightly, according to Milton's God – requests an inferior being.

With that, Milton turns our attention to hierarchy as an effect. God puts Adam into a deep sleep and sets to work on the creation of Eve, and we see how Adam is rewarded for his show of loyalty to God's design of the world. Adam, though asleep, is able to watch the creation by means of "Fancy" (8.461), and even his sleeping reaction to God's handiwork indicates the satisfaction of his requests. The new-formed Eve is:

so lovely fair,

That what seem'd fair in all the World, seem'd now



Mean, or in her summ'd up, in her contain'd  
 And in her looks, which from that time infus'd  
 Sweetness into [Adam's] heart, unfelt before,  
 And into all things from her Air inspir'd  
 The spirit of love and amorous delight. (8.471-477).

Here, we get a sense of the qualities that characterize Milton's Eve and her role in the prelapsarian marriage. Whereas Adam's birth is marked by his pondering the existence of God and himself – in essence, all that befits the masculine ruler of the earth, Eve's is marked by her possession of beauty, a beauty so compelling that Adam, in all his rationality, sets her above the rest of creation and is immediately moved to love her. Significantly, he never says that he *decides* to love her; rather, her beauty has a power over his emotions and the way he sees the universe. Not only do we see again that her beauty and sweetness are meant to complement Adam's strength and wisdom, but we also see that her traits are a real source of power for her. We are later reminded of this power when Satan sees her up close for the first time and is, despite his insatiable hatred, for a moment rendered “Stupidly good, of enmity disarm'd, / Of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge” (9.465-466). Despite the secondary status Adam and God have assigned to her, Eve is endowed with her own powerful faculty, one which Lewis says ought to remind us “that we are dealing with a great lady” (120). Without even opening her mouth, then, Milton's Eve proves uniquely empowered.

In addition to her beauty, part of Eve's power stems from Milton's insistence on her integral role in God's plan for humanity, specifically as she relates to Adam. After all, she is not simply a part of the scenery; she is to be Adam's emotional, spiritual and sexual counterpart in life, the answer to his lonely prayer. Speaking to Adam's initial loneliness, Revard reminds us:

“When Adam [speaks] of incompleteness...he [is] referring to his own incompleteness without Eve” (74). Adam’s “incompleteness” is not simply a want for happiness that can be satisfied by any creature, or even any woman. Rather, it is a want for happiness that *only* Eve can fulfill, and a happiness that *must* be fulfilled in order for him to fully assume the position God has assigned him in the natural order. Eve’s creation, in other words, is the final step in Adam’s creation; Miller here observes, “God’s intention is fully realized only after the creation of Eve...She is, in a sense, an addition, but a necessary one” (545). In this we hear echoes of Augustine’s idea of the beauty of “lesser” things: “These creatures received, at their Creator’s will, an existence fitting them...which in its own place is a requisite part of this world” (*Literal Translation* 12.4). In a sense, then, Eve and her beauty achieve yet greater power by her very necessity.

Still, we must be careful as we read Adam’s testimony. Impressed as he is with his wife, we never forget that Eve is his inferior, and that her status as such, natural and laudable as Milton insists it is, carries with it a degree of humiliation. The power she wields without speaking is tempered by that same speechlessness: her lack of words indicates a perfect obedience and subjection, such as were recommended by so many marriage manuals written by Milton’s contemporaries. Meanwhile Adam, watching her approach, professes his immediate love for her, but he directs his speech to God: “[T]hou hast fulfill’d / Thy words, Creator...fairest this / Of all thy gifts” (“Paradise Lost” 8.491-492, 493-494). With these words, he reminds us of the contractual aspect of this marriage – God has acted in response to Adam’s properly-given request - as well as the fact that it is a contract between Adam and *God*, not between Adam and Eve. Eve herself does not have much of a say in the decision to join Adam. Though she momentarily turns away from Adam when she first sees him (an event we shall discuss in more detail as it occurs in Eve’s creation narrative), Adam attributes her hesitation not to the possibility that Eve

might question the situation to which she is called, but rather to “Her virtue and the conscience of her worth / That would be woo’d” (8.502-503). He cannot even conceive of the fact that Eve might not be instantly, utterly obedient to what he and God have prescribed.

Furthermore, that which we know about Adam’s position inevitably colors our understanding of Eve’s position. Again, because Adam has “Absolute rule”, it necessarily follows that he and his defining characteristic – his wisdom – is superior to Eve and hers – her beauty. Our introduction to the couple’s life in Book Four has already told us that they are happy with their complementary strengths, and we once more sense the influence of Augustine and his belief in the first couple’s contentment with “such being as they have received” (*City of God* 12.5). But, by Milton’s definition of such a relationship, one must be stronger where the other is weaker. Indeed, Eve not only possesses a less valuable power than her husband; she distinctly lacks that which characterizes him. Instead of asking and answering questions like Adam, Eve is born with “Innocence and Virgin Modesty” (“Paradise Lost” 8.501). She is marked by *not knowing*, and she does not appear to desire expanding her knowledge. Rather, she desires to be led by those with knowledge, first by God to Adam, and then by Adam to “the Nuptial Bow’r” (8.485, 510-511). According to Adam’s account, then, her propensity for obedience is inversely proportional to her lack of intellectualism.

### **Created by and for the Hierarchy: Eve’s Creation Narrative**

When we turn back to Eve’s creation narrative in Book Four, we find that she corroborates much of what Adam says, especially regarding their definitive traits and the hierarchical positions they suggest. Because she is the created and not the creator in this situation, her focus is much more oriented toward the effects of her hierarchical construction. However, even though she does not directly speak of Adam’s criteria for her, we glean the notion

of their successful implementation in her design from the way she tells her story. For example, we notice right away that the form of Eve's account is much shorter and simpler than Adam's. Her entire creation story is contained in fewer than 50 lines of poetry, whereas her husband's goes on for over 250, and hers is comprised of relatively few events and characters. Whereas Adam speaks at length about the animals, plants, and geography he encounters in his first days, Eve incorporates only a little description of her surroundings and speaks solely of her interactions with herself, with God, and with Adam. If she saw any animals or interesting plants, we are never told. In her brevity, then, we may immediately gather both Eve's less complex intellect and her lack of authority over her circumstances. Already, this stands in stark contrast to Adam's intelligence and influence on Eve's existence, but this, we know, is a fitting contrast in God's eyes.

The implications of her narrative structure are confirmed by its contents as Eve begins to recollect her earliest days. In contrast to her husband's upright and philosophical beginning, Eve spends her first waking moments lying on the bank of a pool in Eden, posing a set of questions she never tries to answer. While she recalls that she "much [wondered] where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how" (4.451-452), she does not hazard any guesses, and she certainly does not deduce the existence or influence of God. Conversely, whereas Adam seeks his life's meaning (and succeeds in doing so), Eve is content to simply delight in being alive. The few details she *does* include in her account are largely sensory: she hears the "murmuring sound / Of waters issu'd from a Cave" (4.453-454); she lies "On the green bank, to look into the clear / Smooth Lake, that...seem'd another Sky" (4.458-459); she sees her reflection as "A Shape within the wat'ry gleam" (4.461). Once more, we note that she dwells on what she sees and hears on Earth, rather than on the cosmic order of which she and everything around her is a part, and

this suggests that Eve's thirst for truth has a more visceral and more subjective – and thus lower – bent than her husband's. From the beginning, she is primarily concerned with what she directly experiences, not necessarily what her personal experiences might signify in regard to the God's grand scheme of creation. Riggs expands on this, arguing that this concern with self, especially as demonstrated in Eve's watching her mirror image in the pond, implies that she “harmoniz[es] her world by the perception of likeness, [and] gravitates toward self-contemplation and self-love” (371). That is, she seeks elements of herself in the world so as to make sense of it and, what is more, to love it.

Yet, it is in this display of her subjectivity that Eve becomes acquainted with some of the objective realities of Milton's universe. As she lies on the verdant bank, she is soon taken in by her reflection in the water:

[I]t return'd...with answering looks

Of sympathy and love; there I had fixt

Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desires

Had not a voice thus warn'd me, What thou seest,

What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself[.] (“Paradise Lost” 4.464-468)

Though she does not immediately recognize that she is staring at her own image, Eve nevertheless comprehends the strength of what she sees. Indeed, it is not until God – presumably; she never cares to identify the speaker – informs her of her mistake and calls her away from her mesmerizing beauty that she is able to overcome it herself. In this warning, then, she is made aware of her definitive power, that which Milton's introduction of the couple has already told us: “For softness she and Sweet attractive Grace”. Moreover, that she must be so “warn'd” also speaks to her inherent need to be guided by others who possess the wisdom that

she lacks. Though her subjectivity allows her to enjoy the beauty of Eden, it leads her to a “vain” end detached from the service of God for which she was created. Eve’s quip that she might have never left the pond without the warning suggests that she has come to accept this fact, having intuited from being told of her mistake that she lacks the capacity which would allow her to fully rule herself. As we see just a few lines later, her acquiescence to the voice’s assessment of reality – the objective reality - indicates the effectiveness of Adam and God’s employment of hierarchy in Eve’s construction: she realizes her place and the greater strength of wisdom in those who are to guide her, as planned. In merely acknowledging that she *has* a place, she must admit a cosmos much grander than her own experience. Her brush with beauty, then, introduces Eve to the nature of her creation, both her strengths and her weaknesses.

The voice follows his correction of Eve’s misdirected notice with instructions for her to join Adam:

I will bring thee where no shadow stays  
 Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, hee  
 Whose image thou art in, him thou shalt enjoy  
 Insperably thine, to him shalt bear  
 Multitudes like thyself, and thence be call’d  
 Mother of human Race. (4.470-475)

Here, Eve is told more explicitly that she is part of a larger chain of being and of her role within it. She is to accept Adam as her mate and as her superior, as indicated by the references to her being made in his image – thus making her his derivative - and to her duty to provide him with offspring – thus making her the vehicle for him to propagate himself. However, it is important to note that the voice is not only commanding; it praises Eve - “fair Creature” - for her yet eminent

status in creation, and it offers this status the reward of what we identify as Milton's companionate marriage. Eve is promised a happy life with Adam characterized by the light of love: that Adam is to be "inseparably [hers]" foreshadows their closeness and, significantly, Eve's influence over Adam despite her lower status. In addition to the psychological satisfaction it will afford, she is likewise allowed sexual pleasure with Adam ("him thou shalt enjoy"), and while this again insinuates that sexuality is particular to the feminine sphere, that this union will bestow on her the title of "Mother of the human Race" imbues her sexuality with dignity. Just as Adam and God have intended, then, Eve's position, though inferior to her husband's, is one of majesty on Earth.

With that, Eve is willingly led away from the pool, admitting, "[W]hat could I do, / But follow straight, invisibly thus led?" (4.475-476). She soon discovers Adam, awaiting her arrival, but she is disappointed by what she sees: he is "fair indeed and tall...yet me thought less fair, / Less winning soft, less amiably mild / Than that smooth wat'ry image" (4.477, 478-480). This is a critical moment for Eve: she is still absorbed by her own beautiful reflection, still affected by its power and the subjectivity it represents, and she turns away from Adam to return to the pond (4.480). Many critics regard her hesitation as evidence of the danger of her intellectual weakness, specifically, its self-absorption that makes her fall unavoidable. They suggest that Milton here holds to the beliefs of his contemporaries who equate women's intellectual weakness to inherent moral weakness. Riggs, for one, uses this moment to further explicate Eve's fascination with objects of likeness to herself, and it is here in his assessment of her way of thinking that he indicates his belief that her construction as such dooms her from the beginning. In a world of such variety as exists even in the confines of Eden – and more importantly, one in which she must be morally guided by a creature whose traits are complementary to hers, rather

than identical – a penchant for subjectivity is a decided disadvantage. For example, Riggs notes, “To emphasize causality is to acknowledge disjunction, causes being distinct from effects” (369). In other words, Eve’s attraction to similitude makes it difficult, if not impossible, for her to appropriately acknowledge the necessarily distinct being who created her. If she has any chance at successfully serving God, she must adapt to what we see as a more masculinist way of thinking (as it is proper to Adam). To survive within the hierarchy by and for which she has been created, she must resign her penchant for “self-love”, as Riggs calls it, to others’ insistence on disparity, however unnatural this way of thinking may be for her.

Riggs’ interpretation of Eve’s intellectual state, as well as others like it, has merit but runs the risk oversimplifying the matter by divorcing Eve’s creation account from its context. On one hand, as we have discussed already, Eve’s attraction to her immediate surroundings and to her reflection *are* telling of her simplicity, and consequently, of her natural preference for a subjective take on reality, and our inevitable recollection of Narcissus as she stares into her own eyes hints poetically at the fall to come. However, as we have also discussed, it is equally telling of the sheer power of her beauty. Moreover, it is crucial to remember the laws of Milton’s universe. Revard reminds us that, in a conclusion which claims Eve’s flawed construction, “we may also be forced to indict the entire providential system for its failure toward the human couple” (72). Milton indicates that his God, to the contrary, is perfect in his providence, so he would not deny an individual within his most “Godlike” species – indeed, “the Mother of the human Race” – the necessary instruments of a faithful life. At this point in the epic, we have just completed Book Three, in which God himself proclaims that humans are created “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (“Paradise Lost” 3.99). And, more immediately preceding Eve’s narrative, we note that she is telling her story precisely because she wants to affirm Adam’s



acclamation of their creator's generosity. The prologue she offers to her account declares, "For wee to him indeed all praises owe, / And daily thanks, I chiefly who enjoy / So far the happier Lot" (4.444-446). If Eve is dissatisfied by her situation, or uncomfortable submitting to the thought processes of her earthly and heavenly lords, she is hiding it well.

We must also bear in mind the context of Eve's creation itself. As we already have seen through Adam's narrative in Book Eight, Eve is both a fulfillment and a perpetuation of the hierarchy, and the hierarchy is a positive implement of God's loving direction for his creation. She *is* inferior to Adam, but in her birth such as she is, she represents the natural exercise of Adam's position in the universe. Eve, in her need for direction, "is to strengthen the godlike elements in Adam" (Ferry 545); likewise, "Adam's preeminence supports Eve's development of her own special gifts of openness and amiable mildness" ("Free Will" 111). Adam's specifications in his request for her – her position relative to his own, her ability to join him in "meet and happy conversation", and her capacity to have children with him – all signify his faithfulness to God's designs for him, including the use of his defining wisdom to arrive at this conclusion. Eve is the product of that faithfulness, so the traits with which she is endowed are to be viewed as a reward, a blessing – an appropriately faithful response by God to Adam's prayer.

What is more, Eve is to have her own unique position in the natural order. Specifically, as Adam's wife, and in light of Milton's emphasis on the companionate marriage, Eve is constructed to complement her husband. That she sees the world more subjectively than Adam is thus a fitting and divinely-ordained contrast to her husband's objectively-oriented reason. Indeed, when God first draws Eve to Adam, he appeals to her attraction to similitude in telling her that she is made in Adam's image. Such is a reminder that Eve, though made in God's image via Adam, is still made in God's image, subjectivity and all. And, when we recall the structure

of priorities in Milton's companionate marriage, we must acknowledge that those aspects which distinguish Eve from Adam are crucial indicators of how she is to serve God, either directly or through her marriage (responsibilities of service to which, it bears repeating, Adam is also bound). To review: the first duty in marriage is of the couple to God, the second duty is of the individuals in the couple to each other, and the third duty is of the individual to his or her position in the hierarchy. As we have discussed, it is this third duty, though of tertiary rank, that guides the fulfillment of the first two, and in that light, Eve's unique subjectivity and appreciation for beauty – even her own powerful beauty – are not flaws in her design, but qualities intended by God to direct her life to its most fulfilling state.

Finally, we have to take into account the clues Milton gives us within Eve's creation narrative itself, for they point to greater fluidity between subjectivity and objectivity in Eve's intellect than Riggs' hypothesis will allow. Milton's Eve is not so one-dimensional: self-interested as she is, her interpretation of the world is not strictly bound by her subjectivity. For instance, in claiming that Eve avoids confronting the disparity that would arise in her acknowledgment of a creator, Riggs ignores her earliest thoughts. Eve, we recall, wonders how she has come to be, and no matter how directionless her musings are, she implicitly allows for some degree of otherness in the fact of her creation. Though she does not presume the existence of a separate god, she likewise does not presume that she has created herself. When she first encounters her reflection, too, she believes that it is a separate entity. To be sure, she marvels at its ability to mirror her actions and its display of "answering looks / Of sympathy and love" ("Paradise Lost" 4.464-465), and we cannot overlook the fact that her assessment of her new friend is objectively incorrect. However, wrong as she is, her confusion marks her desire for contact with another being. She, like Adam (though perhaps to a lesser degree), is lonely. Indeed,

the reason she is made aware of the nature of her reflection, as well as of Adam's existence, is because she is called away from the pond by a voice which is certainly not her own. She is not only attracted to something other than herself, then; she also is content to be directed by it.

Therefore, though Eve's hesitation to go to Adam is a worrisome point in the text for modern readers, it may be read positively in Milton's work. God has endorsed her as she is, and as a yet unfallen being, she is perfect in her creation despite her potential flaws. If she did not have a weaker intellect, Adam's dominion over her would be unjust, and because they would not complement each other, neither would benefit from the kind of marriage Milton specifies. And speaking of the prelapsarian couple's interdependence of strengths and weaknesses, as much as Eve's self-absorption points to her eventual sin of pride, we must remember that she does not fall alone. Our familiarity with the Book of Genesis tells us, even before reading Milton's epic, that Adam, too, will sin. Though Adam's fall is a topic for another essay, suffice it to say that his own account of Eve's hesitation hints at his insecurity as her husband and her head, perhaps precisely in the awareness of her initial refusal. We recall that he attributes her momentary turn from him to her need to be "woo'd", despite the fact that he has already heard Eve explain that it is really owing to his less pleasing appearance (Poole 173). In the deletion of this detail from his narrative and the state of mind that such an omission implies, then, we see that both Eve and Adam have areas of weaknesses bestowed upon them as God, in making them "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall", has deemed fit. As unpleasant as it may be to 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities, Eve's self-interestedness, potentially worrisome as it is, is in compliance to the rules of the universe Milton has created within his epic.

Happily, Eve's hesitation lasts only a moment. Adam, determined not to lose the answer to his prayer, calls after her:

Return fair *Eve*,  
 Whom fli'st thou? whom thou fli'st, of him thou art,  
 His flesh, his bone...  
 Part of my Soul I seek thee, and thee claim  
 My other half[.] ("Paradise Lost" 4.481-484, 487-488)

Here, like God in his initial words to Eve on Adam's behalf, Adam appeals to Eve's penchant for similitude and insists on what they have in common: their physical matter, their spiritual connection, and their duties to each other within the hierarchy. This tactic in winning her is strengthened by our recollection of Milton's placement of the couple's commonalities before their differences in their initial introduction, and in doing so he once again affirms the priorities of the companionate marriage. Moreover, Adam's declaration of desire echoes Eve's longing for "answering looks / Of sympathy and love": he specifies he has donated the rib "nearest my heart...to have thee by my side / Henceforth and individual solace dear" (4.484, 485-486). This confession is telling of two things: first, as Ferry suggests, it marks an explicit departure of Milton from the traditional conception of marriage. "Here Eve's origin from the side nearest Adam's heart makes her part of his soul, not as Donne says, an expendable staff to which any man would prefer his own legs" (Ferry 119). Second, it calls to mind Adam's loneliness and the perfect degree to which Eve answers to it. Adam, the reasonable thinker whose earliest conjectures about his existence convey his awareness of the objective truth of God's created hierarchy, experiences the same desire that Eve feels in viewing her reflection, and God approves it. Eve's wish for communion with another being, misdirected as it initially is, is thus not a flaw, but a part of her makeup that speaks to her significance within the created order.

Eve concludes her narrative by recounting the success of what is, in effect, Adam's marriage proposal:

[W]ith that thy gentle hand  
 Seiz'd mine, I yielded, and from that time see  
 How beauty is excell'd by manly grace  
 And wisdom, which alone is truly fair." ("Paradise Lost" 4.488-491)

This is another point in Eve's narrative where many modern critics balk. That Adam "seiz'd" her hand is, for some, effectively an endorsement of the violent subjection of women. Riggs, still arguing Eve's inevitable fall, says that this scene is marked by an element of "coercion" and the sense that "Eve's reluctance seem[s] less than 'sweet'" (370). That is, Eve is forced to accept her husband and the worldview he represents, different as it is from her own. Other critics, however, focus on Adam's "gentle hand", the fact that Eve "yielded", and her happy arrival at the conclusion of Adam's genuine superiority. On this, McColley points out, "This generous perception is Eve's own... Her pleasure and spontaneous gratitude are heard in her avowal to his that, while both owe thanks to God, her debt is greater" ("Free Will" 111). Revard takes a similar position, noting, "She is advised in her decision by God and Adam, but hers alone is the choice and she alone is allowed to choose. (She is not compelled.)" (75).

While both of these arguments respond to parts of the text, they do not respond to the passage as a whole. We must acknowledge that Milton places elements of both masculine dominance and mutual affection side by side. Therefore, the answer to the question raised by Adam's proposal is not that the couple is characterized by one aspect without the other. Rather, in keeping with the companionate marriage model Milton insists upon throughout the epic, it is defined by *both* the participants' disparate positions in the hierarchy *and* their mutual love – that

is, their duties first to God and then to each other. And, because their shared acceptance of this arrangement is in keeping with God's instrumental hierarchy, it fulfills their inherent needs and desires, becoming its own reward. After all, it is only in agreeing to said arrangement that both Adam and Eve find the companionship they originally seek, whether in prayer or in mirrors (respectively). Consequently, Eve's need and willingness to "yield" to Adam's loving authority is not unnatural, nor is it violent, nor is it a warning of her impending fall. It is, conversely, a sign of her compliance to the sacred hierarchy, and in following these rules, she is all the more to be admired according to the standards of Milton's epic.

### **"Yet Innocent"**

Regarding Eve's eventual rejection of her own reflection, Revard concludes, "[S]he does not return to pine for it forever; she listens to Adam's voice, she chooses his manly beauty above her own...Eve's intellect, while limited, is not perverse. She can and does learn" (75). That is, once she has agreed to her rightful position, Eve thrives both in happiness and in holiness. So how, then, does she fall?

Perhaps a better question to begin this discussion is, "*When* does Eve fall?", though even this question is not as straightforward as it seems, and there is a bevy of critical debate on the subject to indicate as much. In addition to those who believe that she is flawed, or at least doomed, from the moment of her birth, some critics suggest that Eve becomes prey to her pride just after recounting her creation to Adam. While she asleep that evening, Satan, in the form of a toad, crouches at Eve's ear in the attempt to poison her dreams and "thence raise / At least distemper'd, discontented thoughts, / Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires" ("Paradise Lost" 4.806-808). He seems to partially succeed, too, for when Eve awakes in Book Five, she recounts a nightmare in which an angel with Adam's voice leads her to the Tree of Knowledge of Good

and Evil and questions the wisdom in its prohibition. He asks, “[I]s Knowledge so dispis’d?” (5.60), and then, eating the fruit, declares its sanctifying properties: “[I]t seems, as only fit / For Gods, yet able to make Gods of Men...Partake thou also; happy though thou art, / Happier thou may’st be, worthier canst not be” (5.69-70, 75-76). Eve then dreams of pressing the fruit to her mouth (though she does not record taking a bite), and suddenly finds herself flying to Heaven until Adam wakes her.

Bowers, among others, identifies this as the point at which Eve is given over the power of evil, albeit while sleeping. Referencing medieval and Renaissance beliefs of witchcraft and spirit possession, Bowers argues that Milton’s Satan not only whispers in Eve’s ear to influence her dreams, but also literally poisons her thoughts: “[H]e hopes to insert venom into her bloodstream, specifically her so-called animal, or vital, spirits which, carried through the blood, were supposed to link the heart with the brain, the source of emotion with the source of thinking” (267). Consequently, even though Eve is justifiably terrified by her dream – she expresses her “damp horror” at the image of the angel eating the fruit, and she sheds a tear upon recounting it (“Paradise Lost” 5.65, 130) – she is significantly compromised. Bowers emphasizes, too, that the influence of the poison is only eventually effective. To be sure, Adam explains to his wife that “Evil into the mind of God or Man / May come and go, so unapprov’d, and leave / No spot of blame behind” (5.117-119), and Milton’s narrator insists that she is “yet sinless” well into Book Nine (9.659). However, even though Eve does not immediately seek to bring to life the events of her dream, Bowers’s hypothesis clearly implies that it is only a matter of time before she falls. William Hunter, Jr. vocalizes the implication: “[T]he devil once having achieved a hold upon a man, that man is doomed” (264).

Yet, while Eve's dream foreshadows the events that lead to her sin, and while it does represent the first time it has ever occurred to her (consciously or unconsciously) to question the justice of God's providence (especially with regard to human intellect), the suggestion that it makes her fall inevitable proves problematic because it reduces her culpability. Diana Benet writes of Eve's spiritual possession by Satan, "What [is] at stake [is] nothing less than the freedom of the will" ("Milton's Toad"). That is, if Eve has been so corrupted, she has lost the capacity to exercise her free will, and if she is not acting on her free will at the critical moment in Book Nine, then she cannot be held morally accountable for what she does and should not be punished. Of course, this is not the case, as we find upon reading Book Ten when God gives her sentence: "Children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth, and to thy Husband's will / Thine shall submit, hee over thee shall rule" ("Paradise Lost" 10.194-196). That which we know about the hierarchy in Milton's universe only strengthens the notion that she is to be held accountable for her actions. Ferry, for instance, makes the argument that Eve holds a high enough position in the natural order of creation that, to not be held accountable for her actions would be a slight against her dignity: "Eve's stature before she eats the fruit makes her fall important in itself, not only as it occasions Adam's" (124-125). Indeed, as soon as Eve eats the fruit in Book Nine, we are told that "Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe, / That all was lost" ("Paradise Lost" 9.782-784). Thus, though the dream certainly has a strong effect on Eve, it cannot doom her at the risk of nullifying her free will.

There is a similar argument that Eve's fate is sealed in the beginning of Book Nine before she meets Satan in the form of the serpent. The morning after being warned by Raphael of Satan's presence in the garden, Eve suggests to Adam that they split up to do their work, and this leads to a lengthy debate in which Adam, though correct in his instinct to keep Eve by his side,



acquiesces to her request. He says to her, “Go; for thy stay, not free, absents thee more; / Go in thy native innocence, rely / On what thou hast of virtue” (9.372-374). Bowers sees Eve’s desire to work alone as the first open manifestation of Satan’s poisonous hold on Eve, but also indicates his belief that Adam is primarily to blame for the separation and is therefore partially responsible for her fall: “Adam is more guilty than Eve because he fails in his divinely appointed task as her protector, head, and guide” (273). Joan Bennett takes a similar route, claiming that Eve does not leave to meet Satan merely on a whim but first seeks Adam’s advice, and despite his several lines of argument against her, he only provides her with one definitive command. “What, we must remember to ask, is Eve to obey in this particular dramatic encounter? The only word Adam utters that sounds like a command...is ‘Go,’ which Eve does” (401). As a result, Eve’s temptation and sin rest on Adam’s shoulders; she would not have fallen if Adam had not let her go.

However, these claims again raise the issue of Eve’s culpability. Milton’s God, in his infinite justice, punishes her, so even though Adam is to be Eve’s moral guide, Eve must be predominantly responsible for her own actions. Moreover, this interpretation implies that, in order for Eve to be properly protected, she may never leave Adam’s side because she is insufficient to stand on her own. Revard questions this logic, pointing out, “If Eve faces peril from within whenever she is separated from her husband, if she requires his presence in order to stand firm against evil, then Raphael should have specifically warned Adam” (72). Not only does the transfer of blame from Eve to Adam again reduce her dignity, then, but it likewise reduces Raphael’s dignity as God’s messenger. And speaking of Raphael’s warning, this reading of the poem overlooks the fact that we have already seen the couple separate in Book Eight. Eve, after having listened to Adam and Raphael converse for a while, leaves to tend to her

garden, “Her Husband the Relater she preferr’d / Before the Angel, and of him to ask / Chose rather” (“Paradise Lost” 8.53-55). Both Adam and Raphael witness this and say nothing against it; therefore, we may presume there is nothing inherently evil in Eve’s being on her own.

Perhaps Adam should have followed his instinct and kept Eve by his side, but in letting his wife set off on her own at the risk of encountering Satan, it does not follow that he is the source of her downfall.

### **Eve’s Fall: Playing God, Playing Man**

To understand when and how Eve falls, it is helpful to consider Augustine’s ideas on the progression of sin, and particularly of pride. According to him, a prideful fall occurs in two stages: first, in the fall of the will, and second, in the resulting action (or lack thereof):

God...made man upright, and consequently with a good will...But the first evil will, which preceded all man’s evil acts, was rather a kind of falling away from the work of God to its own works than any positive work. And therefore, the acts resulting were evil, not having God, but the will itself for their end. (*City of God* 14.11)

Augustine’s analysis of the process of sin can thus direct our attempt to locate the moment – or, more accurately, the moments – of Eve’s fall. Clearly, the second stage of her sin comes when she eats the fruit, but what of the first stage? William Poole points out that, by Augustinian logic, Eve’s will must succumb to Satan’s temptation *before* she eats the fruit from the tree (27). As we have seen, she is still innocent when she first meets the devil disguised as the serpent, in spite of her dream and her disagreement with Adam. And again, Milton’s narrator insists that Eve is “yet sinless” well into her conversation with the serpent. So, our question becomes: what happens after this line that marks Eve’s will’s departure from its natural state of innocence?

Let us examine what happens up to this point. Upon leaving Adam, Eve wanders to her roses to tend to them, and we are told that Satan, waiting among the flowers in his disguise, “sought them both, but wish’d his hap might find / *Eve* separate” (“Paradise Lost” 9.421-422). Evidently, he has identified her as the easier target, but he seems to initially assume it is because she is so beautiful and therefore likely to be vain. In first speaking to her, he tries to flatter her by complimenting her beauty:

Fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair,  
Thee all things living gaze on, . . . who should’st be seen  
A Goddess among Gods, ador’d and serv’d  
By Angels numberless, thy daily Train. (9.538-539, 546-548)

It is clear here that he is trying to stimulate her vanity. His allusion to her as a “Goddess” served by “Angels numberless” is a bold move to give her a false sense of her own self worth.

However, Eve is already intimately acquainted with the fact that she is beautiful; after all, this is her defining quality, her source of power in the world. Moreover, she has by now learned to recognize “How beauty is excell’d by manly grace / And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (4.490-491). Satan’s attempt to flatter her thus leaves her unimpressed. What does impress her, however, is that a serpent has learned to speak. Her wonder at the spectacle momentarily overcomes the consideration she might have for the fact that a beast has just over-praised her with the notion that angels, beings even more highly positioned in the hierarchy than Adam, might serve her. She exclaims, “What may this mean? Language of Man pronounc’t / By Tongue of Brute, and human sense express’t?” (9.553-554).

Unknowingly, Eve has confessed her weakness to Satan. It is not the potential for vanity resulting from her beauty, but the potential for jealousy resulting from her weaker intellect and

subsequently lower position than her husband. Satan, “the guileful Tempter”, understands her tacit confession as such and immediately alters his course (9.567). While continuing to flatter her with appeals to her beauty and the notion that she is a powerful being to be obeyed by all, he tells her that he used to be “of abject thoughts and low...[and] apprehended nothing high” until he ate the fruit of a particular tree, and “Thenceforth to Speculations high or deep / I turn’d my thoughts” (9.572, 574, 602-603). He concludes by declaring that the first decision he makes with his supposedly new-found wisdom is to “worship [Eve] of right declar’d / Sovran of Creatures, universal Dame” (9.611-612). Eve, however, is not yet convinced, despite Satan’s new approach. In a demonstration that she is, in fact, “sufficient to have stood”, she finally expresses disapproval of the serpent’s excessive praise, and when he leads her to what turns out to be the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, she frankly tells him that the trip has been a waste of time because of God’s decree: “[The tree is] Fruitless to mee, though Fruit be here to excess” (9.648).

This is the point at which Milton’s narrator insists that Eve is “yet innocent”; therefore, we are to understand that the events that follow comprise the turning of her will away from its natural alignment towards God. And, what follows is an oratorical onslaught. Satan, taking on the role of “some old Orator renown’d...where Eloquence / Flourish’d” (9.670, 672-673), spends a significant number of lines speaking. Right away, we may gather that the purpose of this is to subvert Eve’s sense of dignity. She has already made the connection between the serpent’s power of speech and his wisdom, so for him – ostensibly a beast - to speak for so long while she remains silent is to subtly cast into doubt her belief in her intellectual sufficiency. Again, the form of the passage parallels her own state. The absence of her speech, as it likewise factors into her and Adam’s creation narratives, marks a form of her inferiority. The only difference now is

that it is a false sense of inferiority, one impressed on her inappropriately by Satan and, as we shall see, one which she feels, for the first time, as a negative trait to be remedied.

Satan's monologue begins with praise for the wisdom-giving tree for supposedly providing him with the ability to understand the ways of God in a way that Eve, despite the amount of praise he heaps upon her, apparently cannot grasp. He tells her, "Queen of the Universe, do not believe / Those rigid threats of Death", and he follows the claim with a series of questions – for all of which he provides answers- intending to confuse Eve's natural willingness to accept God's rule (9.684-685). That he supplies answers is significant; we have already seen that Eve tends not to answer even her own questions, so Satan is quite clearly putting ideas into her head that she most likely would not have otherwise imagined. He picks apart God's commandment by first by disproving its consequence, then by raising doubts as to its justice, and finally by concluding the malignancy of its creator. Throughout the argument, he seeks to enshrine the notion of knowledge – of both good *and* evil – and to reduce the validity of God's authority. He claims that that which the tree imparts "might lead / To happier life" and is more likely to protect Eve in the face of evil: "[I]f what is evil / Be real, why not known, since the easier shunn'd?" (9.696-697, 698-699). As for the being who has prevented Eve and her husband from such saving wisdom, he says, "God...cannot hurt thee, and be just; / Not just, not God; not fear'd then, nor obey'd" (9.700-701). He later echoes this sentiment when he conjectures that God (if God he is) must be afraid that his creatures will surpass him in wisdom, yet "can envy dwell / In heavenly breasts?" (9.729-730). In essence, he indicates that the "real" God – if there is one – has ulterior motives in bestowing the providence on which Eve and Adam have come to rely. In trying to unseat the creator of that which structures every aspect of their lives, Satan tries

to undermine Eve's experience of the benign hierarchy and, consequently, of her life's source and its purpose.

Satan reinforces his attack on the hierarchy by continuing to toy with Eve's sense of place within it. More specifically, Riggs notes, "Eve suffers a sense of deprivation deepened by its contradiction of what she knows to be her place in the world" (385). Though Eve is made aware of her secondary status from her first day of life, she never indicates a longing for more than what she has been given. Again, we need only read her expressed joy in Book Four to recall that she feels she has been privileged even beyond Adam with her position, and in a prelapsarian world, it would seem that there should be no disconnect between her words and her true feelings. Even when she argues with Adam at the beginning of Book Nine, we do not sense that she is dissatisfied with having to obey him, only that she disagrees with him. After all, she does not go off on her own until she has her husband's blessing. Now, however, she is confronted by Satan and his destructive questions, and he recasts the position for which Eve is created as an insult to her self-worth. Pondering the possible reason for God's commandment, for example, he says, "Why but to awe, / Why but to keep ye low and ignorant...your Eyes that seem so clear, / Yet but are dim" ("Paradise Lost" 9.703-704, 706-707). He continually impresses on her mind the possibility of becoming greater than she is, not only in referencing his own supposed elevation by the work of the tree, but in emphasizing the idea that she may become godlike herself. That God, in his argument, feels threatened by her potential for divine wisdom is not to be a deterrent to her: "So ye shall die perhaps, by putting off / Human, to put on Gods, death to be wisht" (9.712-714). Again, Satan's coercion towards eating the fruit is not simply a matter of disobedience. Rather, it is an attempt to upset the natural order, to have Eve place herself on the same level, if not ahead of God, and Satan pushes towards this goal by

indicating that God and his natural order have been a sham the whole time. Thus coupled with the idea that her experience of God and the hierarchy is not what it has seemed, the excessive praise that Eve had previously ignored begins to take hold. Miller concludes, “[Eve] is feeling inferior for the first time” (546).

Here, Satan ends his speech, and his conclusion marks the critical moment for Eve’s will. Satan’s words have had a strong impact on Eve; we are told that “[H]is words replete with guile / Into her heart too easy entrance won” (“Paradise Lost” 9.733-734). Eve, not knowing what to believe anymore, thinks that his argument is “impregn’d / With Reason...and with Truth” (9.737-738), and her desire to follow the advice of the serpent is heightened by her sensory awareness: just seeing the fruit “Might tempt alone”, and she feels “An eager appetite, so rais’d by the smell / Of that savory Fruit” (9.736, 740-741). Again, though, Milton’s narrator implies that she is still able to resist the temptation, for she pauses to think about her options. Though Satan’s words are in her heart, her will has not quite yet been converted. Tragically, it is when she turns away from the visceral and towards what she believes to be objectively reasonable that she falls.

Peering into her internal dialogue with the fruit, we observe that Eve weighs what she thinks she has seen of its salubrious power against God’s commandment. The way she goes about her consideration is telling, for she tries to adopt serpent’s seeming reason and his rendition of objective reality as opposed to relying on the strength of her own experience – that is, her subjective awareness of the objective reality, her natural intellectual bent. Revard here observes, “[H]er intellect falters when it would have been upheld had her faith and love for God not first failed” (77). In foregrounding what she takes to be reason, then, Eve indicates what she suddenly feels she lacks. She muses, for example, “[G]ood unknown sure is not had, or had /

And yet unknown, is as not had at all”, and from there she presumes that the prohibition of such knowledge is unjust and thus, significantly, “bind[s] not” (“Paradise Lost” 9.756-757, 760).

Here is a red flag for us: she has put her own logic, weak as she currently feels it is, ahead of God’s. In this assertion, her will succumbs to pride; she assumes she can better provide for herself than her creator can. The lines that follow, a medley of justifications for what she has more or less already decided to do, merely strengthen her conviction of self-importance and of God’s inadequacy and malignancy. She harps on the fact that the serpent has not died from eating the fruit, that he has rather been improved, that all this has passed with “Author unsuspect” (9.771), and she concludes her internal debate with her resolution:

What fear I then, rather what know to fear  
 Under this ignorance of Good and Evil,  
 Of God or Death, of Law or Penalty?  
 Here grows the Cure of all...Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then  
 To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind? (9.773-776, 778-779)

We can sense her bitterness in the first two lines especially; she is angry that she does not even know what she is supposed to fear. She feels she must take it upon herself to “Cure” her weak mind, no longer an appropriate contrast to her husband, for (and partially by) whom she was made, but now a sickness.

Thus, the fall of Eve’s will preceding the fall of her behavior is an act of pride in which she plays God by assuming his role as provider for humans. However, that she falls by ineffectively using reason because she desires a more advanced intellect, the trait which defines Adam and which is to be complementary to her signature beauty, indicates a second kind of pride. At Eve’s birth, Adam is charged with being her head and guide and Eve is charged to



obey him, yet she certainly does not defer to his judgment in this situation. She does not first go to him and see what he thinks, as she had done before walking alone in the garden. Rather, she takes matters into her own hands and becomes her own guide. In doing so, she plays man: she attempts to acquire a masculine power of reasoning, and subsequently, masculine power in general. Her reaction immediately after eating the fruit highlights this; she wonders whether or not she should share the fruit with Adam, realizing the advantage her new-found wisdom might “render me more equal, and perhaps / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior, for inferior who is free?” (9.823-825). Of course, if she is “sometime / Superior”, that would make Adam her “sometime” inferior and therefore not free, but she does not seem bothered by this prospect. What does bother her is the idea that God might replace her with “another Eve” (9.828), and so she resolves to share the fruit and simultaneously betrays her yet living consciousness of God’s ultimate power. Her fall, then, both in will and in action, bespeaks a pride that occurs not only with reference to the vast structure of all creation, but even within the domestic sphere of marital happiness.

### **Conclusion**

The structure of the universe that Milton has provided for his text is thus a crucial component in interpreting his characters and their actions, and the course Eve follows in the epic is especially telling of the importance of hierarchy. “The woman question” in Milton’s work can be challenging for a modern audience, and critical debate over the years has suggested as much. Yet, the attempt to label Milton as either a misogynist or a feminist must be tempered by the fact that the scope of either category has drastically altered since Milton’s time and, what is more, varies even among individual readers. Within *Paradise Lost* itself, the rules of the world can seem so foreign to what we experience in real life that the application of our sensibilities to

prelapsarian Adam and Eve proves troublesome. Let us close, then, with the advice of C.S.

Lewis: “[Readers] must try by an effort of historical imagination to evoke that whole hierarchical conception of the universe to which Milton’s poem belongs, and to exercise themselves in feeling as if they believed it” (72).

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