

# An act of akrasia: marriage and the fall of man in milton's paradise lost

[Life](#), [Relationships](#)



The Scripture of Genesis laid down the framework for seventeenth century moral guidelines. Of these morals, the focus on the Creation story and the relationship between Adam and Eve gave authority to the definition of marriage, thus establishing a hierarchy within the union between husband and wife. Theologians such as John Dod and William Gouge discussed the meaning of marriage and the conduct of women within marriage, consequently establishing marital norms as a way to keep order within society. This ideology was referenced in conduct books for women as well as in church sermons, which focused on male dominance and female subordination within the household. Any reference to abusive relationships at the hand of the husband was met with advice of perseverance and to entrust any suffering to God. ' Even so think you, if thou canst suffer an extreme husband, thou shalt have a great reward therefore...But I exhort the women that they would patiently beare the sharpness of their husbands'.

The scripture of Genesis categorises this to be a just punishment that women were prescribed after Eve chose to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. However, John Milton's Paradise Lost redefines traditional norms surrounding the concept of marriage by the focus on mutual love and honest colloquy within the union between Adam and Eve while revealing the pitfalls of denying one's partner mutuality and a sense of individualism. By doing so, the poet is able to nuance the idea of Miltonic marriage from biblical ideas of gender roles to a marriage where the focus lies on the need for companionship between two individuals instead of a prepositioned idea of man and wife. In this essay, I will argue that Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve's miscommunication and dependence on each other delegates blame for

the Fall of Man in such a manner that their actions could be deemed akratic. Akrasia is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'The state of mind in which someone acts against their better judgement through weakness of will', and was used by Greek philosophers to define a paradoxical inability to act in one's best interest. Throughout the epic poem, Eve's dynamic character goes from being inherently curious and rational to becoming continuously more desperate to be considered Adam's equal. Upon creation, Milton's Eve is moulded out of Adam's rib to be united with him as '...one flesh, one heart, one soul' (8. 499) This suggests that Eve is not inferior to Adam when she is created, but equal in both intelligence and status. This idea matches the equality of genders posed in Genesis, where Eve only becomes Adam's inferior as God's punishment for breaking the Prohibition. In *Paradise Lost*, this inferiority becomes gradually more apparent even before the Fall, which suggests that the social hierarchy is a social construct that has gradually developed into law rather than being the natural order of gender. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.

This statement reinforces that the institution of patriarchal hierarchy present in *Paradise Lost* forces Eve in to assume Adam's inferior, thus Eve is 'becoming woman' as defined by the hierarchy, rather than becoming herself. However, at the time of her creation, Eve did not have any prescribed notions of her inferiority and rank on the social hierarchy, which implies that anything less than equality comes unnatural to the innocent mind and women assume a state of submission due to the social construct of gender

expectations. Thus, Eve is denied a sense of individualism and forced to internalise a prescribed view on womanhood. Although *Paradise Lost* focuses on the reinvention of marriage, the poem is governed by a gendered hierarchical institution, similar to that present in Milton's contemporary society. Modern philosopher Amelie Rorty expounds in her essay 'The Social and Political Sources of Akrasia' the idea that akratic behaviour can be affected by political or social institutions: 'Laws, economic institutions, civic associations, moral and religious ideals and public culture express and model the formation of social habits. Conflicts among them provide some of the major sources of akrasia' In *Paradise Lost*, the institution present is the patriarchal hierarchy which establishes Adam as Eve's superior. This creates tension between the pair, which contradict the ostensible portrayal of their marriage in *Genesis*, which suggests that they were created as equals and the role of submissive wife was established as a punishment pertaining the Fall. However, it is apparent that Adam and Eve are not created as equals as Adam consider Eve below himself before their infraction.

The apparent tension also supplies sufficient evidence for Eve's desire to rebel in her quest to achieve egalitarian status. In book 9, Eve suggests that they should split up in order to boost efficiency. 'Thou therefore now advise Or hear what to my minde first thoughts present, Let us divide our labours' , to which Adam answers that they would be better off fulfilling the work together, assuming the union works better when they fully adhere to God's definition of gender roles within the frames of marriage. Eve thus acts like the voice of reason as she proposes a healthy balance of togetherness and

individuality within marriage, and thus can be seen as critiquing the unrealistic standards of marriage presented in Genesis, where Adam and Eve subscribes to the gendered hierarchy presented within their respective roles. However, literary critic Joseph Wittreich argues in his work *Feminist Milton*, that the character of Eve acts as a guide for the portion of balance and mutuality that is seen as ideal within modern marriage, and the tension between the different meanings of marriage, represented by Adam and Eve, is ultimately pushing Eve further towards behaving akratically.

The problem with this is that Milton's aim with the portrayal of Adam and Eve leading up to the Fall is unknown. In his book *Milton and the Idea of Matrimony*, critic John Halkett argues that: 'Woman was made for marriage, whereas marriage was made for man. Man is not limited by the same purpose as woman, the institution was created to serve his needs, whereas woman is the means by which his needs are served' This interpretation argues that Milton did not believe that Adam and Eve was created as equal beings and thus, the reason for the Fall was due to Eve's act of defiance towards the natural hierarchical order instead of an act of reasonable indignation. In *Comus: A Masque at Ludlow Castle*, Milton presents a similar problem to the one Eve is faced with leading up to the Fall. The Lady is tasked with resisting Comus' allurements in order to maintain her integrity and virtue through chastity and intellectual reasoning. Only when she overcomes the temptation is she awarded the portrayal as autonomous and intelligent. The Lady managed to achieve the recognition of her ingenuity, which is what Eve strives for. The yearning for equality and recognition is

ultimately the reason for her succumbing to the serpent's temptation. She is promised to be considered an equal and appeals to her inherent curiosity, which ultimately is clouding her better judgement. It is only when Eve's emotions and yearn for independence and equality was clouding her reason and intellectual judgement that 'into her heart too easy entrance won'.

The Lady's perseverance is to Eve's foil, yet it is unknown if Eve would be celebrated and awarded recognition for her intellectual individualism like the Lady was, had she been able to resist the serpent's temptation. Rorty explains this in her other essay "Where does the Akratic Break Take Place", and argues that there are several types of akratic breaks, in which Eve's break is defined as a break of interpretation. This type of akratic break expounds the akrasia of the emotions, and is described to occur 'when a person comes to see or interpret his situation and condition in a light that does not conform to his commitment to general ends or principles' Thus, the serpent's temptation and promise of a better life clouds Eve's moral commitment to adhere to God's commands. In that moment, Eve's emotions and indignation overrules logic and reason, and thus, Eve truly believes that her actions are just. Rorty expands on this by stating that 'emotional reactions can fail to accord with his judgements about what is appropriate to a particular situation...emotions are rarely under direct voluntary control.'

Adam, which throughout Paradise Lost, have assumed great responsibility for Eve's actions, completely renounces this responsibility during the Separation scene, but in theory, his assertion over Eve should completely free her of blame for the Fall, since it is Adam who fails to guide her both morally and

intellectually. Yet Adam failed to guide her, and instead he suppressed her intellect and curiosity. This can be seen in Book 4, when Eve questions Adam about heaven, ' But wherefore all night long shine these? For whom / This glorious sight when sleep hath shut all eyes?'

Adam dismisses her question and answers in a cursory manner, and in Book 8, he asks Raphael the very same question; allowing himself to broaden his intellect. By doing so, he denies Eve intellectual expansion, and his ignorance towards Eve's intellectual capabilities curbs her sense of independence. If Adam had allowed her to broaden her knowledge and curiosity on the same level he allowed himself, perhaps Eve would have been able to withstand the temptation that lead to the Fall through sufficient and satisfactory intellectual advancement. Instead, the continuous suppression of Eve's individualism along with the Adam and Eve's heated argument prior to the temptation scene clouded her judgement in such a manner that rendered her unable to apply appropriate judgement in her encounter with the serpent. Thus, her actions can be seen as involuntary and subjection to exterior forces in which she had no control over. Adam's akratic break when choosing to follow Eve and succumb to eating the fruit is that of a disregard of morals. Rorty explains this type of akratic break to ' appear between a person's general beliefs about what is good, divinely commanded, morally desirable - his general principles and ends - and his commitment to guide his actions by those evaluations.' Thus, Adam's akratic break occurred as a conflict between his desire to obey the word of God and his fear of losing Eve. When presented with the opportunity, Adam require very little

convincing or form of temptation before he takes a bite despite the fact that he is well aware of the consequences when doing so. Sara Silverstein and Thomas Luxon argues in their essay that ' the Adam of Genesis sins against God after Eve gives him the apple; the Adam of Paradise Lost sins against God not because of what Eve gives him, but because of what he needs of her'. This idea clearly states that Adam had a choice in whether or not to Fall with Eve but chose to follow his heart over his head. Furthermore, in his akratic break, Adam believes himself to have no choice over violating the Prohibition, however, he fails to acknowledge that he does. Adam could choose not to transgress and instead seek forgiveness for Eve's actions. In doing so, Adam would fulfil his role as Eve's protector and moral guide while still positioning her as his submissive.

However, by choosing to disobey the word of God, he effectively renounces his position in the hierarchy and becomes Eve's equal. Thus, it is not directly the actions of Eve that allows her to become intellectually on par with Adam, but rather Adam admitting to himself that he is unable to live without her. It is established that both Adam and Eve act akratically in the events leading up to the fall, however, there is evidence to suggest that Eve was unaware of the consequences that would follow her transgression. ' Greedily she engorged without restraint, And knew not eating death' , whereas Adam profoundly and repeatedly stated the importance of obeying the Prohibition prior to the Fall, leaving no room to question his awareness of the conditions of their stay in Eden. (Augustine 216-18). Eve did not sin due to the fact that she was unaware of the consequences of her actions, the very consequences



which Adam failed to tell her. Thus, along with her akratic break, it can be argued that Eve was not acting out of her own free will, whereas Adam did. In conclusion, with the portrayal of failed colloquy within the union, Milton subverts the biblical overtones of original sin and re-examines Eve's blame in the Fall of Man, thus suggesting that the hierarchy of man-over-woman and the lack of equality in Eden was the very reason for the Fall.

This poses a question of whether or not the fall could have been prevented. Milton opens up for interpretation by the implicit theory that if Eve had been treated as equal to Adam, and her intellectual prowess recognised as Adam's equal, the Fall of Man could have been avoided. Thus, the blame for the Fall is redistributed and it could be argued that Eve's culpability pertaining the Fall is false, and that Adam's superiority is what drove Eve to rebel. Furthermore, Milton explores the possibility that Eve is falsely accused and that the culpability can easily be shifted over to Adam's akratic actions, thus suggesting that Genesis fails in its representation of Eve as the scapegoat. However, it is equivocal whether or not the portrayal of Adam and Eve's relationship was designed as a justification for Eve's akratic break or as a reinforcement of the importance of man-over-wife hierarchy in order to avoid chaos. Nevertheless, the portrayal of Adam and Eve establishes an indisputable contradiction to the authority of Genesis 3, suggesting that the origin of Christian patriarchy and the role of subservient wife was established on an intransigent punishment, a punishment for a crime that Eve perhaps was not fully responsible for. Thus, perhaps Milton argues that the akrasia of traditional gender roles man's reluctance to take responsibility for their own

mistakes, thus unjustly blaming the innocent, allowing woman to become a scapegoat who can most believably be held accountable.