

A question of gender in paradise lost

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John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem written in blank verse in sixteen sixty-seven. The poem which is based upon the biblical tale of Genesis, tackles the creation, temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. In the edition's preface Milton declared that the aim of the poem 'is to justify the ways of God to men'. The poem takes the settings of: Heaven, Hell and The Garden of Eden. The poem focuses on God's creations of Adam and Eve, the poem follows the pair through the temptations presented to them by rebellious angel Satan. Although, both fall to the appeal of temptation it is Eve who falls first and commits a sin against God and his spiritual hierarchy. This essay will contrast the importance of gender hierarchy in Milton's epic and the importance of Eve specifically using her final speech. To support this contrast, Patrick J. McGrath's article, *Formal Resistance: Gender Hierarchy and Eve's Final Speech in Paradise Lost*. Gender hierarchy is an obvious aspect of *Paradise Lost* and something that the character of Eve is assessed against by both the characters and the readers. Joseph Wittreich believes 'Eve takes the lead in assuring their redemption and recovery'. Others argue that Milton ignores the typical male dominated world of literature with 'the epic's pervasive dismantling sex-gender binaries and hierarchies in favour of polymorphous array of fleeting gender identifications'. Overall, this comparison will argue the presentation and validity of gender hierarchy in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Gender Hierarchy is a dominant motif in *Paradise Lost*, the argument of gender is contested and there are several arguments to tackle in terms of gender and its importance to the poem. Mandy Green's argument is that the gender dynamics of the human couple and their relationship is 'too subtle to

admit only one line of interpretation'. These lines of interpretation open's the assignment of faults when events turn to the worst. As the 'weaker sex', blame seems to be the natural route for women characters of literature. The temptation of Eve, is based on the possession of knowledge and power, which are male dominated characteristics with the women usually taking the weaker position of the two sexes. Ignorant to the malicious intent; she becomes the victim of temptation. With an aspect of 'graceful innocence, her every air of gesture or least action overawed'. Eve is a contradiction of innocence and aspiration; with an understanding that her actions could have dire consequences she neglects her conscience to gain something that prior to the serpent's arrival wouldn't have seemed reachable. With obvious prosodic talents that are not usually identified with the female gender, as McGrath identifies 'Eve's prosody and lexical choice also demonstrate this verbal facility and her revisionary allusiveness'. The speech Milton uses to identify Eve in the text is intriguing, as a male writer the stereotypical stance to take is male orientated with the female character taking a supporting role in the stories arc. Although, some critics such as McGrath have suggested that 'this collapse does not, it should be noted, suggest a feminist Milton'. Eve is duped into the act and in she does not quite understand the ramifications of her actions. It is here her innocence that is quintessentially associated with the female becomes apparent, with realisation occurring with Adam's intervention influencing an assessment of hierarchy on the reader's behalf throughout the scenes of Eve's temptation and the conclusion of this. Vindication is clear within the final speech, after the events of the Fall with resolution and understanding that Eve is no less

because of her mistakes simply an individual that is recognisable. McGrath provides the argument that her 'role in conveying such critical redemptive information undermines gender hierarchy'. As a male author like many before and after him, there is a general expectation that Milton, would have followed the train of thought. The negative association with Eve, can be expected with Milton writing from a post-fall point of view. It is difficult to imagine Milton treating Eve in a predominantly feminist tone because of the stories basic chauvinistic nature.

McGrath's essay does not only focus on the narrative of Eden's inhabitants but Milton's use of syntax to establish them separately in the text. Eve is a product of patriarchy; however, she does not conform to expectancies of subordination which is obvious in her methods ways of speaking instead provoking Adam into assessment. 'O Woman, best are all things as the will of God ordain'd them'. Adam, is God's creation and feels there is no element of God or his power that should be ignored, however it is not until after Adam has sinned alongside Eve that this opinion is clear. Elements of guilt are evident in Adam; however, he pushes this guilt onto Eve whom he believes has coaxed him with reflections of Satan's temptation of Eve. There is hierarchical element to the argument between the two, there is a spiritual ignorance on Eve's behalf that Adam cannot see. 'Adam takes issue with Eve's assumption that there must be something imperfect in God's creation if they cannot resist temptation'. The article argues that there is a certain level of ignorance on Adam's behalf as he has committed the same sin as Eve however over time emphasis is placed upon Eve. There are valiant aspects to Adam's character at the beginning of the epic, however over the

progression of the poem this is hard to acknowledge as he knowingly commits the sin and only with spiritual reflection and punishment.

Punishment upon the pair and their eviction from Eden, is not literal but metaphorical they serve as a learning curve on behalf of their own mistakes.

McGrath's essay, summarises the importance of Eve's final speech. The speech is a powerful reminder of female ability, Eve is given power by Milton to deliver the final spoken message of a character. Despite her errors, she is portrayed with innocence, making mistakes with an air of childish naivety after she is duped so easily by Satan. However, the final words are a speech of: confession, forgiveness and love. The overall tone of realisation, gives Eve the qualities she so greatly desired. Milton gives Eve a voice and the voice is that of a realistic character whom makes the mistakes they learn from and become greater as an individual. The idea of a Felix Culpa emerges after The Fall, everything has changed in some way there is a general tone of understanding for Eve as an individual character with McGrath 'viewing Eve as a mouthpiece for patriarchy'. Eve has become a voice of women in a world of male domination something that Milton would have understood. Felix Culpa or the 'Fortunate Fall' happens because of The Fall, and despite its original catastrophic state, the emergence of Christ is a later occurrence. Despite the events of Temptation and The Fall, the Felix Culpa has forced Eve to evaluate and after their eviction from Paradise she has found that she 'Is to go hence unwilling, thou to me art all things under heav'n all places thou'. Adam is 'all places' to her and their marriage is paradise to her, she can locate happiness within their marriage. There is a suggestion in the

speech that Eve is reaffirmed in her nature as a wife and partner to Adam, however this time she is an equal partner.

In Paradise Lost, gender hierarchy is an obvious factor of the text. From beginning to end there is a sense that Eve is presented differently to the male characters in the text, although expected to be subordinate she ventures into intrigue ignoring Satan's claims for vanity. The temptation is based upon Eve's want to become her husband's intellectual equal. To most she is presented with shame, to Patrick McGrath and Leah Marcus she is an individual testing the obvious restrictions. Gender hierarchy puts Eve in a place, and she is villainized for attempts to break away from this hierarchy. It could be argued that Milton, aspired to justify Eve of her aspirations or to reinforce the subservient nature of a wife to her husband. Overall, from inquiries into the text itself and Patrick McGrath's article the conclusion that I have garnered is that, Eve was a woman aspiring for something the world around her could not accept.. Even though, Eve is presented in a harsh light before The Fall the ending speech redeems her and Milton writes a speech that provides Eve with the power she aspired to have justifying the idea of Felix Culpa for Adam and Eve.