

Paradise lost

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Paradise Lost begins and ends with Man, but this is not Man as we know him in daily life, nor indeed as he is usually depicted in literature, but a perfect, pre-lapsarian Man. The primary concern of this epic poem appears to be "man's first disobedience" 2 and the results of that action. However, although Milton uses the word "man", it is universally understood that it was not a man, but a woman who disobeyed God and brought about the downfall of the human race. This woman is Eve.

Diane Kelsey McColley in her book *Milton's Eve* asserts that the "story of our first parents shows woman as flesh, passions, nature, and sexuality seducing man as soul, reason, spiritual virtue and contemplation from his proper relation to God". 3 The portrayal of Eve as primordial temptress is a long-standing one and can be found not only discursively in literary history but also pictorially in art history, and these traditions are perhaps accountable for the reductive opinion of Eve today.

Before *Paradise Lost*, literary accounts of the Fall interpreted the story as male virtue undone by female concupiscence and masculine reason undermined by feminine passion. This blame for Eve as Adam's inferior perhaps originates from the source of the story, the book of Genesis. When God discovered that the apple had been eaten, He inquired of Adam whether he had eaten from the tree of knowledge. Unquestionably accepting his answer that the blame should be heaped on Eve, for it was she who had given it to him, He then proceeded to accuse her for the disobedience:

"And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done?"
(Genesis 3: 13) 4

This accusation is directed only at Eve, as God assumes Adam's view that she is the one to blame. When the Lord comes to dealing with punishment for their actions, it would appear that Adam's wrongdoing was primarily in the fact that he listened to and obeyed his wife, as this action is the one God stresses firstly and unnecessarily; with the eating of the apple - and thus the contravening of His law - coming as a secondary citation for punishment:

" And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten from the tree..." (Genesis 3: 17) 5

It may be surprising that even after the easing of patristic restrictions on women's liberty resulting from the Reformation, Puritan and moderate Anglican writers still continued to echo the reductive view of Eve and therefore women in general. Such a case is John Donne, who draws on the established authority of the Bible and shares such opinions as:

"... ye wives, be in subjection to your husbands;..." (I Peter 3: 1)

"... ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel..." (I Peter 3: 7)6

The idea that women are "weaker", secondary beings who lack in some way the virtues and the higher intellect of men, is reinforced as an established idea by Aristotle's statement that the female is "a deformity... of nature... perhaps rather bad than good", and Plato's that men are reborn as women if they have been "cowards or led unrighteous lives". 7

It is perhaps a result of these ingrained ideas, that painters and poets have rarely captured what Milton dwells on in his epic, the innocent pre-lapsarian lives of Adam and Eve, and instead have focused on the temptation and downfall of the first man and woman and its symbols - Adam, Eve, the serpent and the tree. Within these portraits, there can be found many depictions of Eve. She is predominantly wanton in one, and yet frailly dignified in another; but in all can be found an emphasis on her fantastic beauty, which is presented as a glorious attribute and yet a cunning snare - ultimately the source of the loss of the paradisaal garden she embodies.

McColley discusses some examples of this iconographic tradition in her book, including Raphael's ceiling fresco, Stanza della Segnatura. ⁸ The tree of knowledge stands between Adam and Eve, literally and symbolically the object that divides them. Encircling this instrument of division is the catalyst of the Fall, the serpent, half-hidden in the shade of the tree. Adam, half-sitting, gazes at the tree with his palm outstretched, mirroring Eve's gesture. However, she is standing upright in the dominant position, openly gazing at him with a knowing look full of concupiscence and temptation.

It is difficult to observe from the print in the book, but McColley states that not only is the serpent " half woman; it is a shadowed Eve: the same half-turned face, straight nose, bowed mouth, and rounded breasts, the same hair... waved back over the left shoulder and hanging loose on the right, each grasping a limb of the tree, their heads nearly touching, and each bending on Adam the same provocative gaze." ⁹

This image of Eve as the beautiful and debilitating seductress, akin with the serpent, represents the dark and dangerous side of the Fall and of Eve herself. This representation suggests to the viewer, by linking beauty and sexuality with the Fall, that Eve's qualities were inherently corruptive. If this is the case - and I do not necessarily believe this to be true - then the God who created her and gave her to Adam to be "fit help"(VIII: 450), 10 would be, as the fallen Adam claims, baiting a trap. To see Milton's Fall as the central action of the poem in this way, with pre-conceived ideas of sin and blame falling on Eve's head, would be to see and stress the darkest and most sinister side of each image and allusion that Milton makes. However, if we regard creation and the regeneration of life after the Fall as just, if not more, important, then we shall see patterns of positive and redeeming features in Eve's behaviour and be able to foresee possible redemption and regeneration.

The main areas of contention which surround and shape the ideas both of how Eve is perceived, and her role in the Fall, are her relationship to and separation from Adam, her behaviour during the temptation, and whether she was in a sense 'fallen' before the event itself.

Eve, made from a rib of Adam, is traditionally seen as his inferior, "not equal, as their sex not equal seemed" (IV: 296)¹¹ and her servitude justified on the basis that Adam is "for God only, she for God in him" (IV: 299)¹². However, although this is echoed in the Bible's "bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh", ¹³ it could be said that the direct distinction in these quotations between Adam's hierarchical position and that of Eve's is only described by

the narrator's voice depicting what Satan saw. To analyse the statement in this way then, is to question the validity of Satan's observations and whether his definition of Adam and Eve is to be trusted as correct, and to question whether the narrator is in part responsible for reflecting the expectations of his audience. 14

In pre-lapsarian scenes, Milton shows that Eve has a growing sense of responsibility as her understanding of the opportunities of her calling becomes greater. This is evident in her conversational language which combines questioning, reflection, wit and gaiety:

"... we in our appointed work employed

Have finished happy in our mutual help

And mutual love, the crown of all our bliss

... and this delicious place

For us too large...

But thou hast promised from us two a race

To fill the earth, who shall with us extol

Thy goodness infinite..." (IV: 726-734) 15

Even her choice of love for Adam over the narcissistic self-love she revelled in when first in the Garden, and her faithful toil for the God who created her

reveals her virtues as a strong, determined, generous and selfless person, so why not, therefore, worthy of being Adam's equal?

Although there appears to be an insistence - despite some evidence to the contrary - on the essential masculine authority of Adam, the reader should not be blinded to the fact that Eve is as necessary to Adam's fulfilment as he is to hers. They naturally complement each other and without the other neither would be complete:

" For contemplation he and valour formed,

For softness she and sweet attractive grace" (IV: 297-8)¹⁶

This complementary nature could even be seen to stretch to a mutual need and dependency:

"... I....

... enjoying thee

Pre-eminent by so much odds, while thou

Like consort to thyself canst nowhere find." (IV: 445-48)¹⁷

However, this argument is perhaps most reinforced by the narrator's first description of the pair, when Eve is included in all the valued qualities usually solely attributed to Adam:

" Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,

Godlike erect, with native honour clad

In naked majesty seemed lords of all,

And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine

The image of their glorious Maker shone,

Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure..." (IV: 288-293)¹⁸

This sharing of attributes and the responsibilities inherent to God's first man and woman are also illustrated by the clear parallel of Adam having the power to name the animals (VIII: 350-354) and Eve possessing an equal power to name the flowers (XI: 277).

The first parents, as an equal couple, " perfectly incarnate the proper relations and actions of the two sexes" ¹⁹. The idea that pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve had a sexual relationship causes much debate amongst critics. Whether such intimate relations were appropriate for the innocent and perfect pair is debatable, but I believe that pure love such as theirs cannot possibly be inappropriate, and that a lack of sexual love would indicate a flaw in their relationship. God created them to be the mother and father of mankind, to ensure continued renewal of life on earth, and so it is with His 'permission' that they make love:

" Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth..." ¹ (VII: 531) ²⁰

Fertility in Hell is a curse rather than a blessing; it produces tormenting monsters that feed on their mothers' womb, but conversely, fertility is everywhere in Heaven. The reader can " apprehend it in the light, the fountains, the rivers, the flowers, the dances, and the songs". ²¹ Raphael

tells Adam that the angels, the intermediaries between Man and God, contain within them " every lower faculty" (V: 410)²² which enables them to enjoy sexual relations themselves:

" Let it suffice thee that thou know'st

Us happy, and without love no happiness.

... we enjoy

... and obstacle find none

Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars:

Easier than air with air, if Spirits embrace,

Total they mix, union of pure with pure

Desiring..." (VIII: 620-628) ²³

This is an example of a purer and loftier union than that of Man, but represents the transcendence of human love between a man and woman, thus rendering it 'appropriate', natural and credible. When placed in the context of Milton's beliefs and the politics of the times, his conviction that there could be no paradise for man without sexual love seems personal and original. But in doing so, he attacks not only the " conventional idea that sexual intercourse was a result, (if not a cause) of the Fall, but also prostitution, the Catholic tradition of clerical celibacy, the fashionable tradition of playing with love, and the entire literary tradition of the lyric poet as abject suitor to his disdainful mistress" ²⁴. He may be making a political

point, but I believe such an idea is fitting and vitally symbolic. They enjoy fertility as ripe as that of the lush Garden which provides them with sustenance, and were created to continue the cycle of Life on Earth, as they themselves help to maintain the cycle of Life in Eden.

God's instructions to Adam and Eve to tend the garden are used by Milton to explain Eve's temptation when they are separated. This unquestionably gives her a sense of responsibility for the events which take place, but to what extent is a vital source of debate. Adam can be seen to treat Eve as a free being, dissuading her with lucid arguments, rational warnings, and loving tenderness, but he does not constrain her against her will:

" Well hast thou motioned....

Yet not so strictly hath our Lord imposed

Labour...

... but if much converse perhaps

Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield....

But other doubt possesses me, lest harm

Befall thee severed from me;...

... leave not the faithful side

That gave thee being...

Who guards her, or with her the worst endures." (IX: 229-269) 25

A skilled rhetorician, Adam tries to the best of his ability to dissuade her from her decision to divide their labours, but to no avail. Eve, with a determined, "the willinger I go" 26, withdraws from him and continues alone. Perhaps Adam's failure to restrain her forcibly is the root cause of the Fall? Ultimately no one can say, but nevertheless I believe this question to be a valid one, if only owing to the last line of the above quotation. The words are filled with poignancy and foreshadowings of the tragedy to come for the knowing reader, and such a line from Milton is surely expected to reflect the ironic seriousness of Adam's unknowing promise. Therefore, this clearly should cast doubt into the reader's mind as to whether it was Adam as the too-trusting husband who is to blame for not enforcing Eve's expected subjugation to his will, and allowing the possibility of the temptation to actually occur.

Eve's behaviour during the temptation and the question of whether she was already 'fallen' before the event are often inter-linked and become symptoms of each other. The occurrence of her dream and her reaction to it is also an integral part of this issue.

E. M. W. Tillyard in the essay 'The Crisis of Paradise Lost' asserts that Eve has already 'fallen' before the Fall, by referring to her dream, saying:

".. into the mind of angel or man evil may enter, and, if it is repudiated, fail to incriminate. In the abstract the doctrine may be tenable, but it cannot work in concrete literary presentation. No human being can conceive or represent evil entering a mind quite alien to it... the mere fact of entrance implies some pre-existing sympathy... Eve... does by her symptoms imply that it has touched her..." 27

One could argue that Tillyard's assertion of human being's behaviour is not applicable to Eve as both she and Adam are, as I have already stated, not humans as we know them - but there is also another line of argument to counter this. It could be said that Milton has built into his poem a sustained distinction between pre- and post-lapsarian nomenclature, and it is this device which aids the reader in distinguishing certain features of Adam and Eve's character to illustrate how they have changed from pre-lapsarian innocence into the post-lapsarian, fallen creatures they will become. This also creates an obvious echo between parallel yet contrasting events before and after the Fall.

Adam himself describes Eve as "crooked by Nature" (X: 885) 28, implying that Eve was in fact 'fallen' before the eating of the fruit, but this is in the post-lapsarian phase of the poem, and his language has deteriorated from the perfect, pure communication he possessed before the Fall into a dualistic, anti-feminine diatribe. This fact could be seen to reduce the credibility of his words, as he no longer holds the power that is associated with his previous 'Adamic' language. One could agree with the fallen Adam's assessment of Eve, by citing the many comparisons Milton makes between her and infamous temptresses from classical myth. However, not only do the aforementioned goddesses have innocent aspects as patronesses of natural fertility, (just like Eve in Eden), this reductive portrayal by Milton would commit a terrible blasphemy, contradicting his faith, by blaming God for her sin because he created her innately flawed.

What the reader witnesses throughout the temptation is a contest (unconscious on her part) between Eve and Satan for "the authority to interpret pre-lapsarian language" 29. The serpent first stakes a claim upon Eve's language through the seeming miracle of being capable of speech:

"... he glad

Of her attention gained, with serpent tongue

Organic, or impulse of vocal air,

His fraudulent temptation thus began." (IX: 528-5531) 30

The reference to his communication as organic would infer to the reader that it is natural, and the language of pre-lapsarian Eden. However, although Eve is seduced by this into believing it to be true, the reader alone - owing to the description of it as an "impulse of vocal air" - knows it to be false. The reason this is so is because Satan already has the knowledge of good and evil, and is therefore incapable of the untainted speech of Eve. In this way, therefore, I do not believe that Eve can be seen as already 'fallen', for without a previous acquisition of 'knowledge' Eve could not realise that the words of the serpent were that of an evilly corrupted version of her own.

Eve's wonder at this apparent 'miracle' creates a dangerous moment for Satan, one in which he must exercise special vigilance. However, it is an opportunity she misses, and he turns it into his advantage by attributing his power to the forbidden fruit. In the world of Eden, where Adam's birthright of the power to name the animals with a pure and natural speech conveys

enormous power, language is knowledge and this is how Satan gains his power.

Temptation was not a new idea for Milton. He wrote a Puritan masque, originally entitled *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634*, but popularly known as *Comus*. The theme of the masque is "the death of false pagan values when they are opposed by Christian virtues" 31, and, like *Paradise Lost*, is concerned with the process of temptation and the power of evil to corrupt innocence. The vital difference between the two, however, is that the central female character, *The Lady*, does not succumb to the machinations of her would-be tempter:

" COMUS: This will restore all soon...

LADY: ...'Twill not restore the truth and honesty

That thou hast banished from thy tongue with lies." (lms 689-692) 32

It could be said that the reason for Eve to Fall when *The Lady* does not is that she was innately flawed, a bait for Adam designed by God, or merely an inferior and weak female. I believe however, that the reason for Eve's Fall is to signify redemption and regeneration. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, having been written in a period of great social unrest. The government believed to be God's government by Milton and his fellow Puritans had collapsed in 1660 with the Restoration of Charles II. This raised moral questions which I believe in part to be responsible for Milton's questioning about the "ways of God" (l: 26)33, and which resulted in the exploration in this poem of a God who does not intervene to stifle evil.

The brief image of the labourer returning home after a day's work in the fields at the end of Book XII of Paradise Lost is " especially effective, a moving evocation of the life and toil and poverty and weariness and also of homely satisfactions - all the common experience of humanity which Adam and Eve must now face". 34 Eve, though fallen, is in the process of regeneration, and, just like the political climate of Milton's era, can resume development of her pre-lapsarian virtues, though now through pain and " woe" (l: 3). 35