The Mother of All Living: Eve's Redemptive Role in John Milton's *Paradise Lost**

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ABSTRACT

In this essay I argue that in *Paradise Lost*, Milton reframes traditionally misogynistic narratives of Eve. Milton does this by portraying Eve as a growing, dynamic woman seeking to "find herself" after her secondary creation from and for Adam. In *hubris*, Milton's Eve desires wisdom and the autonomy it would afford. She does not want to be attached to Adam forever and longs to work, at least for a time, in solitude, not because she does not love her husband but because she wants to develop her own selfhood to contribute to her marriage and to the Garden's labor. But following Satan's temptation to eat the "forbidden fruit," Milton's Eve is repulsed at the separation between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds, which has disrupted her marital union, and in despondence and desperation, she shares the fruit with Adam to bring about inclusion. Adam's readiness to share in her sin and die with Eve brings attention to the identity Eve has already had—as woman, wife, mother of nature—and gives her the strength and wisdom to save Adam from suicide and lead them both to repentance and redemption. Although she eats the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge and shares it with her husband Adam, Milton's Eve experiences the stages of "growing up" attributed to her innate humanity in God's Paradisal Eden.

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"Its name in English is Murder."
—C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost

As the first woman in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, shared it with her husband Adam, and condemned the world to sin and death (Gen. 3:1-7). According to tradition, she has since been regarded as "the devil's gateway," in Tertullian of Carthage's coinage (Benckhuysen 15), and the "[o]rigin […] of all ills." Eve is an "impious wife," "Satan's vessel," a wicked heretic who, "filled with madness," sought Adam's ruin (Arbel 35; Benckhuysen 20). Her disgrace and infamy have made her a representative of the archetypal roles and behaviors of the female sex, providing a divine sanction to deny women leadership and autonomy. Eve has been a weapon for the patriarchal notion of feminine inferiority, an excuse for the "need" to supervise women to prevent their "natural" inclinations towards sin, anarchy, and desolation. Eve's tradition has been defined by both exoneration and denigration (Levison 251-75 qtd. in Arbel 3). In his portrayal of Eve in *Paradise Lost* (especially in Book IX, which depicts the central tragedy of the work), Milton develops the biblical character of Eve positively to emphasize less her subordination and more her eventual role as a spiritual leader in concert with Adam. Milton gives her a voice in shared lordship of the Garden and refashions the misogynistic tradition to make an argument for her worthiness and free will. Milton never seeks to pardon Eve or suggest Adam's ultimate culpability, but rather seeks to portray her humanity in "growing up" as a woman into a wife and mother. Despite the consequences of the Fall, Milton's Eve assumes the identity of "The Mother of All Living," not because of her sin but because of her role in redemption (Gen. 3:20). This provides insight into her sense of that identity, both in her emotional responses to Adam and her rationale for eating the fruit. Unlike her husband, whose personal identity was established prior to her creation, Eve has been fashioned from Adam and cannot be separated from him without forfeiting her fundamental selfhood.

In the Pentateuch, Eve's entire narrative—creation(s), temptation, fall, expulsion—can be found within Genesis 2-3 in less than fifty words; the only exception is the conception and birth of her sons in the following chapter. She is created and immediately brought before and married to Adam, who names her without asking for her name or opinion (Shemesh 109). Eve has no voice and is entirely subject to her husband's will; in fact, the only time she is given an opportunity to speak is to incriminate herself in the cardinal scene with the serpent (Gen. 3:2-3, 13). The narrative relies on four assumptions: first, that Eve was sufficiently prepared with an established identity; second, that Adam

perfectly communicated God's instructions to her; third, that she alone twisted and questioned God's will upon her temptation; and fourth, that her sin was rooted in *hubris* and lust. Eve's emotions and rationale are strictly absent from the narrative.

Milton scholar Diane K. McColley brings a more humanistic and feministic perspective to the understanding of Eve. Though Adam and Eve have been used to represent traditional gender roles and to control women, Milton rectifies the disparity, bringing them closer to a marriage of equals. As McColley notes in "Milton and the Sexes," women could not be lawyers, physicians, or clergymen because the positions followed the edicts of the Fall (186). Amanda W. Benckhuysen observes that women could not petition for more autonomy even into the twentieth century, as the Bible provided patriarchal defense to the sin of Eve (205). Because Eve had come to represent all women, as the "universal Dame," all women were held responsible for her sin to a degree beyond that of even Judas Iscariot and Pontius Pilate in their responsibility for Jesus's execution (7, 42-43; Lewis 151). Shari A. Zimmerman observes that Eve's initial lack of identity positions her as the human paradox: the desire to be independent and the desire to be with someone (247). By the end of Milton's Christian epic, Eve displays her own redemptive identity and endeavors to achieve autonomy within the prelapsarian to postlapsarian evolution of Book IX. Satan corrupts Eve's innocence, shifting her naïve "growing up" within the Garden to a desperate struggle for redemption in the postlapsarian world. From her sin's consequence of absolute separation from Adam, Eve begins to recognize her individual selfhood, her contribution to her relationship with Adam, and her role as the mother of humankind. She is forced to "grow up" swiftly, exchanging her *hubris* for the self-sacrifice shown by the Son. Remaining as faithful as possible to the biblical account, Milton devotes time to developing Eve's perspective, and by doing so frees her from the constraints of a tradition that condemns her for the Fall of Man.

The Hebrew Tradition of Eve

In the Hebrew scriptures, the story of Eve is more complicated than many realize because there are two creation narratives. In the first, God breathes life into man, both male and female:

So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (*Gen*. 1:27-28)

The co-creation of mankind by God suggests equality, but this version of the story is usually overshadowed by the second one and the tradition that arose from it. In the second narrative, God first creates Adam from *adamah* (clay or dirt) outside the Garden

and names him *adam* (the Hebrew word for "humankind"), distinguishing him as the dominant creature over the living world. But he is alone; Adam lacks companionship with one of like-species. As God has named him, "Adam [gives] names to all cattle […] but for Adam there was not found an helpmeet for him" (*Gen*. 2:20; Norris 10, 19). God recognizes his loneliness and creates for him a "helpmeet," a translation of the Hebrew phrase *ēzer kenegdô* meaning "a companion corresponding to"—of the same status, or rather, one in equality (Norris 19). God's solution to Adam's problem is the creation of Eve:

> And the LORD God said, *It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. […] And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. (*Gen*. 2:18, 21-22)

In this account, Eve is fashioned from Adam's rib in the Garden, a narrative that has been historically interpreted to suggest Eve's secondary status to Adam. According to Panela Norris, however, the intimacy of her creation—that is, having been taken from the closest flesh to Adam's heart—can symbolize the intended loving relationship between a man and a woman (19). For Adam, loving Eve is the same as loving himself, as illustrated in his reaction to her creation: "And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh: She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man" (Benckhuysen 29, Gen. 2:23). Having been created within the Garden, Eve shares his dignity. Her name symbolizes her unique worth: while Adam is named by God after the Hebrew term for "man," she is named twice by her husband—first as the term for being taken "out of Man," and second "the Mother of All Living," or "Eve" (Benckhuysen 19; Gen. 3:20; Norris 10). The name "Eve" precedes the Fall and suggests Adam's complete and ultimately unbroken adoration for his companion. Following Adam, Eve becomes God's new crown of creation.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton revisits Eve as depicted in the two accounts from *Genesis*, updating the tradition that had largely depicted her as almost solely responsible for Adam's Fall and the Fall of Man. Although Eve is beguiled by the serpent and shares the fruit with Adam, she ultimately helps save Adam from suicide after his Fall—thus providing a future for mankind. Her actions serve to restore balance to their relationship and permit their prayerful repentance to God. By developing on an often-ignored perspective of Eve's role, Milton correlates the love of Adam and Eve to their shared Fall and portrays Eve as a redemptive spiritual leader.

Eve's Identity and Hubris in Temptation

Milton's Satan exploits Eve's innocent and unformed identity. He deliberately targets Eve, hoping to tempt her in Adam's absence to eat the forbidden fruit through a pre-temptation in a dream that precedes the actual temptation. For a moment, though, in their initial encounter, the most beautiful maiden, with looks of "sympathy and love" (*PL* 4.460-465.289), divine beauty and wisdom, momentarily disarms Satan and is positioned as a goddess (*PL* 9.459-464.388; McColley 29; Moore 6). Satan, however, exploits her godlike qualities in his flattery and appeals to Eve's innocent narcissism, turning it into *hubris*.

The Genesis account capitalizes on the ambiguity of the Fall by not depicting Eve's emotional response to eating the fruit: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat" (Gen. 3:6). Milton imagines that Eve's purpose for eating the fruit is to fulfill an unmet desire for wisdom. The utter exclusiveness in the words "without copartner" (*PL* 9.822.397) shatters her initial identity of innocence. She is consumed by the endeavor for autonomy, but its *hubris* swiftly repulses her, since she loves Adam and understands this *hubris* to be in opposition to divine will (Zimmerman 264). She is excluded from Adam, and her pursuit for her own identity only alienates her from him (and God) more. Satan, who is more advanced in his rhetoric and development, manipulates Eve beyond what she is prepared to resist.

Lacking an individual self, Eve's identity is dependent on her marriage to Adam and cannot survive the permanent separation between the prelapsarian and postlapsarian worlds. In Book IX, Eve expresses her postlapsarian fears in language reminiscent of Satan's guileful rhetoric, as she humors his *hubris* in her desire to rule alone over Adam:

> But keep the odds of Knowledge in my power
> Without Copartner? so to add what wants
> In female sex, the more to draw his Love,
> And render me more equal, and perhaps,
> A thing not undesirable, sometime
> Superior: for inferior who is free?
> This may be well: but what if God have seen,
> And Death ensue? then I shall be no more,
> And Adam wedded to another Eve,
> Shall live with her enjoying, I extinct,
> A death to think. (9.820-830.397)

Satan's skillful temptation encourages Eve's search for autonomy. In the juxtaposition of her dual identities, the human paradox of desiring to be with her husband and to be superior to him, Eve perceives herself to be inferior (*PL* 9.824.397; Zimmerman 247-249). Uncomfortable with Adam as her "head," she comes to believe her sole lordship will bring balance to her internal conflict. Although she loves Adam in their marital companionship, as evidenced in devotion of their prelapsarian lovemaking, she desires what she imagines to be equality and the power it could afford her.

Because Adam is created for dominion, and Eve is created for Adam, he receives a fulfilled identity in her presence and perceives her as being "undivided" from him. This is seen in their first argument and ultimate separation when, in anxiety for her wellbeing, he petitions for their combined labor despite Eden's "wanton growth" and increasing need for tending (*PL* 9.11.383). Adam believes that because Eve was "form'd and 'fashion'd" (*PL* 8.460.373) from his rib, he owns her. Upon their first meeting, titillated by anticipation for the "Nuptial Bow'r" (*PL* 8.510.374), he professes, "Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self / Before me" (*PL* 8.495-96.374). He does not recognize her as a distinct individual, but as an extension of himself "of Man / Extracted" (*PL* 8.496-97.374), an oversight punctuated by their marriage as "one Flesh, one Heart, one Soul" (*PL* 8.499.374). By failing to acknowledge her sufficiency and autonomy, Adam does not give Eve the space to experience the independent stages of "growing up" and becoming comfortable in her identity and in her contribution as the first woman. From creation to instantaneous marriage, Eve is Adam's "hope" (*PL* 9.424.388), and he is never alone prior to their quintessential separation in Book IX: she sleeps, eats, works, and worships every day with him without reprieve. Most notably, she is not given time to contemplate her love for Adam until after her Fall. Adam is the cause of Eve's existential crisis; he is the reason for her seeking lordship "without copartner" (*PL* 9.821.397) as well as the catalyst of her solidified identity and redemptive role.

Absolute Separation Arising from Eve's Sin

Through peer pressure, or the fear of missing out, Eve eats the forbidden fruit. The sin condemns her to death and, potentially, to eternal separation from Adam. Considering the future of their marriage and the prospect of death, Eve is left with questions:

> And Death ensue? then I shall be no more,
> And Adam wedded to another Eve,
> Shall live with her enjoying, I extinct,
> A death to think. (*PL* 9.826-830.397)

Despite her dissatisfaction, she is the only woman to exist, and thereby the only suitable companion for Adam. She wants to be recognized as an autonomous individual who has "grown up" in her knowledge, wisdom, and desires, for "full happiness" (*PL* 9.819.397), for love and equality, shedding Adam's treatment of her as an inferior (*PL* 9.822-23.397). Eve is surrounded by a perfect Garden, wears the crown of its creation as a nurturing mother tending to its "wanton growth" (*PL* 9.11.383) and acknowledges that her death would permanently separate her from Adam. While he is marrying "another *Eve*" (*PL* 8.828.397), Eve would be condemned to her separation and silence in a vegetative state, where her unformed identity would serve as a mark of what she most desired but was never able to achieve. Eve would be eternally excluded. Because she would lose this innate acceptance in leaving Adam to the prelapsarian world, Eve's decision to eat of the fruit can thus be seen as her desire for inclusion.

The ultimate explanation for Eve's sin is an innate completion of the human paradox. She wants to know who she is as a person, to have someone to love and to be loved in return, but the result is the opposite. The act of sin creates a chasm of extended separation beyond the physiological to the physical. While Adam is still living in the prelapsarian world, Eve has transitioned to the postlapsarian world. She is wholly separated from him for the first time and has to make her own decisions: first, in the excitement of experiencing free will and potential superiority, and second, in her recognized love for Adam. Eve finds her identity in Adam's absence. Prelapsarian Eve embraced their union until it threatened her ebbing autonomy, while postlapsarian Eve misses the marital union and seeks a reunion with her husband, since reuniting with him will make them equals in the same world (*PL* 9.830-833.397). Her *hubris* abandoned, in desperation, Eve reaches for Adam and finds her identity—what is most important and what she cannot afford to lose—in his absence.

Eve's Redemptive Role

C. S. Lewis characterized Eve's decision to share the fruit with Adam as "Murder" (158), arguing that Eve was not "virginal in the sense of being immature" but in "[m]aidenly innocence" until the sexual transgression of the forbidden fruit (150). For Milton, unlike in Genesis, Eve's actual moment of decision does not occur in the explicit shift from innocence to the embrace of evil, but rather in the illusion of truth, in which she alone could rule the Garden. She is in a dreamlike state analogous to her nighttime rendezvous with Satan in Book V and recognizes her separation only after remembering "that the fruit may, after all, be deadly" (158). In the heat of killing her prelapsarian innocence, filled with an intent for murder, Eve makes the deliberate decision to share the

fruit with Adam because, as Lewis professes, "it is intolerable that he should be happy, and happy (who knows?) with another woman when she is gone,"— but the perspective becomes invalid in Eve's inability to tempt him (158). When he discovers Eve has sinned and is bound to die, Adam considers the creation of a second Eve, as feared in the climatic heat of her temptation, but resolves to die with his wife from a vehemence of love (Rudat 124). This "love above all else" urges Adam to eat the fruit, as he proclaims: "One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself" (*PL* 9.957-959.400). He is insatiably drawn to her, and would continue to be drawn to her, even with the creation of a second Eve.

Through the separation brought on by Eve's sin, Adam's absolute love is tested and reflected in his parallel desire to be united with Eve. In beginning to see her as an autonomous individual who has made decisions—good or bad—without him and has embarked into the postlapsarian world alone, he now wants what she wants. This is reflected in the final speech of Book XII, when the narrative tone of subjected exclusion becomes a resolve to stay together (McGrath 74). Eve is no longer jealous of Adam's sense of selfhood, nor is she excluded: it is rather Adam, who envies her even in her sin. In arguing for Eve's equality and shared culpability with Adam, Milton gives attention to her wisdom as Adam's temporary salvation, leading him towards God's perfect redemption. She is not the sole cause of the Fall, but rather an expression of humanity's curiosity, ambition, and adaptation. Eve adapts to the responsibility of her sin: she gave the fruit to Adam, so it is up to her to rescue him from suicide. If she had remained silent, Adam would have died. Adam chose to condemn himself, and by extension, humanity, for his love of Eve (*PL* 9.911-914.399). No longer caught in the human paradox, Eve is able to focus on her individual contributions to the relationship and to wholly loving Adam.

Conclusion

The predominant biblical interpretations of Eve have unfairly emphasized female inferiority. Although certain women of the Bible—Sarah, Rahab, Esther, and Mary Magdalene—have illustrated courage, faith, and spiritual leadership, most traditions punctuate the controversial perspectives of women, such as Eve and Dinah, whose narratives reinforce patriarchal control. Although both Adam and Eve sin and are cursed with eventual death, women since Eve have been denied a voice, have been condemned and subordinated to men. In *Paradise Lost*, however, Milton allows Eve to find her own identity. Her internal conflict with the human paradox reflects the human condition, the desire to find oneself, to love someone and to be loved in return.

Eve falls due to the temptation of Satan, but she eats the fruit aspiring more to find herself than to achieve superiority and control. Satan capitalizes on the weakness of the individual, which poses the question: If Adam had been tempted through his weaknesses—his desire for leadership and his unbridled love for Eve—would he not have eaten of the fruit? In Milton's account, Eve's Fall is noble in its innate humanity: the desire to grow up and to affirm her autonomy and free will. Eve is redeemed by saving Adam's life. Without her, he would have committed suicide in his despair. She comforts and restores him by urging his repentance. Although she ate the fruit of the Garden and introduced sin, Eve ensured the perseverance of humankind through her spiritual leadership. The children of Adam exist because of Eve.

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