

A Defense for Milton

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Is it possible that Milton actually had a sympathetic opinion of Eve from the Genesis story? Paradise Lost is a retelling of Adam and Eve' s passage toward the Fall. Milton elaborated the 39 verse Genesis story into a four hundred page epic. The epic includes Satan' s Fall and his journey to paradise, Adam and Eve' s birth, and the Fall of man. The plot of Milton' s epic never deviates from that of the original story; he only embellishes the events and characters to provide an interpretation of it. By delving into the relationship between the characters of Paradise Lost, Milton enables the reader to view Eve as perfect and innocent, instead of corruptible and sinful. Unfortunately, many readers of Paradise Lost are biased to the views of Eve; having knowledge of the Biblical story, the opinion of Eve as the temptress is difficult to forget. While reading Milton' s epic, the reader already knows the outcome of the story, therefore may never wish to defend Eve' s actions. Thousands of criticisms have been

written against Eve, showing her as a vain, unholy temptress. The following pages are dedicated to these negative criticisms and will later be refuted. These discussions include Eve's narcissism, un-god-like appearance, rebelliousness, and sinning against God.

Regrettably, Eve's vanity is possibly the most often written about trait of Eve. According to countless criticisms, because of her desire to look at herself in the lake, Eve is considered narcissistic. The following lines reappear in critical works to show Eve's vanity,

As I bent down to look, just opposite, A shape within
the wat'ry gleam appeared Bending to look on me, I
started back, It started back, but pleased I soon
return. Pleased it returned as soon with answering
looks Of sympathy and love: there I had fixt Mine eyes
till now, and pin'd with vain desire, (Milton, 4.460-
6)

She looks at her reflection and does not want to look away; so full of curiosity that she ignores everything else. She also pines with vain desire, which makes her appear to be lovesick with herself. In Beverly McCabe's article, she speculates how Eve's vanity directly causes the Fall, since Satan is watching Eve. She writes, "Not only does Eve's narcissism reveal her vanity to the reader but to Satan as well "Satan

perceives her vanity as a weakness and immediately plots a plan for expediting the Fall" (83). McCabe names Eve the vessel who brings mankind towards the Fall. Satan exploits Eve's narcissism to his own advantage by tempting her while flattering her. Even though Eve's main purpose is providing Adam his request for a beautiful mate, she also gives Satan an opportunity to cause man to sin.

Another critic employs the same passage from Paradise Lost to further degrade Eve. Roberta Martin explains in "How Came I Thus" that since Eve looks into a pool of water at her reflection, "this is a clear importation of the imagery of the Ovidian Narcissus myth into Paradise Lost" (67). Martin supposes Milton wanted Eve to appear like Narcissus; a character who is so proud of his appearance, denies everyone and anyone's love. He too looks into a pool of water and sees his own beauty. Immediately he believes no other soul could match his attractiveness. He falls in love with himself which such intensity he beats himself to death. Martin simply rationalizes the event of looking into a pool of water as a comparison to Eve, without providing more explanations. Juxtaposing Eve with Narcissus exaggerates her as an arrogant being that cares for nothing.

Eve's appearance, though beautiful, attracts not praise but scrutiny. Because Eve is made in the image of Adam's body, she is essentially a "copy of a copy" (Watkins, 137). Her image, unlike God, places her second to him, which also means she is further away from holiness than Adam, naming him the superior being. Eve's noticeable differences cause her to appear corrupt. McCabe states, "Eve by her very secondness in creation presents some very interesting difficulties. These arguments imply that Eve is the reason or the cause of the Fall, " and therefore, "is the villain who provides Milton with a motive for its occurrence" (McCabe, 74). She explains how many scholars believe they are "rationalizing" Eve's appearance as a means for Milton to foreshadow Eve's crime (74). She is considered the reason for the Fall, because she is a blemish in the paradisaal world.

David Mikics, another critic interested in Eve's form, does not actually condemn her, but included into his document a comment that defaced her. By incorporating phrases from Paradise Lost with his own, he enhances Eve's lowliness, "Adam says he knows Eve to be

'inferior, in the mind/And inward faculties, ' and 'less expressing' than he himself does 'the character of that dominion given' by God

over nature" (35). Within his article, Mikics concentrates on the relationship between Adam and Eve. This quote uses fragments of Adam's speech to Raphael, showing Eve's inferiority in her image and in her intelligence. Mikics believes Adam sees Eve as an odd entity in Eden, because she lacks the purity of Adam's image. Adam cannot help himself to feel superior. Though consequently, without including more of Adam's speech, the quote lacks Adam's full opinion of her, which is not as degrading.

Naturally, critics against Eve like to discuss her desire to leave Adam's protection and her sin of eating the fruit. Since she insists on working separate from Adam, she appears hasty and rebellious. Even though she reasons with Adam stating that more work can be done, she still appears treacherous. Mikics claims, "Eve is more dangerously open to experience" (22). Even after hearing Adam's warnings, she still wishes to leave him, unafraid to be alone in the forest. Mikics continues by stating that Eve has a "dangerous nature" for Adam (23). Without Eve, the idea of eating from the forbidden tree would never cross Adam's mind. Sinning against God is not in Adam's nature, yet because of Eve, he feels he has no choice. She is the reason why Adam sins.

Furthermore, because of the belief that Adam would not have sinned without Eve' s creation, some wonder if Eve is fallen before the Fall. In "Eve and Flora" , Maggie Kilgour questions, "when does the Fall actually take place: in Book 4 with Eve' s creation? with the dream? with Eve' s Fall, or with Adam' s" (6). Kilgour points out Eve' s unchanging identity—her fallen self is similar to her unfallen self. The reader cannot determine when the change takes place, therefore should believe she was always fallen.

The previous arguments against Eve suggest Milton viewed Eve as the sole reason for the Fall, but this is a mistake. Though she commits the crime, she did not act alone. She was led there. Her un-god-like appearance or her desire to look into the water are not reasons why she becomes fallen. Crucial factors about how she came to eat the fruit need to be considered before making judgments about her. Milton, in fact, provides the reader a chance to see how innocent and perfect Eve is before the Fall. He even demonstrates her maturity in admitting her guilt for the sin. A defense for Milton is therefore required. His interpretation of the Bible required him to present Eve as the first to sin, but since the Bible does not supply the reader with a character trait of Eve, Milton has the ability to represent her

as he pleases. He also has the ability to show how Eve came to sin. Essentially, Milton gives the reader a motive to forgive her—Milton is sympathetic to Eve and possibly favors her to Adam.

Taking the blame from Eve is not the goal, she does commit sin; however, disputing the negative criticisms presented may prove Eve as the innocent being she was meant to be, as well as showing how unfortunately her gullibility acted against her. Narcissistic, inferior, and fallen are three main traits applied to Eve, thus must be disputed to show her true identity.

First of all, Eve is not as vain as Narcissus. Eve looks into the lake and sees her reflection, which is similar to the Ovidian character, but this is the only similarity to him. Milton places Eve in the shade and next to the noisy water. Her first intention is to discover the noise. Milton writes, "I thither went,/With unexperienc'd thought---to look into the clear/Smooth lake, that to me seem'd another sky" (Milton, 4.456-9). Eve simply believed she was looking at the heavens, or at least something "Pure as th' expanse of heaven" or perhaps just at "another sky" (Milton, 4.459). When she sees her reflection, she first imagines she is looking at a heavenly creature; beauty could easily be confused for something divine. She is

amazed and automatically loves the person staring back at her, so she wishes to continue looking. She did not realize until later that she was looking at her own reflection. John Tanner claims "it is no sin to admire beauty or to be curious about one' s beauty" (136). She is surprised the reflection is herself. Eve may have looked into the water with admiration like Narcissus, but by no means does Eve have this extreme sense of vanity. Eve never denies love, like Narcissus, or chooses herself over everyone else. Vanity describes a person who is so enthralled with themselves they act heinously against others or cares less about them. Therefore, Eve' s ability to love Adam and God denies this accusation. She simply wishes to understand the image staring at her. Elisabeth Liebert writes, "[Eve] does not wake and postulate from her own existence of a Creator but discovers instead the existence of an image, an other, and realizes that this other is necessary to complete her own existence, her sense of self" (155). Milton is pointing out how identity is an important characteristic which God wishes for in his new beings.

Discovering herself is Eve' s initial instinct, so should not be viewed negatively. Through these discoveries, Adam and Eve learn about their environment, each other, and themselves, an essential task of

living as higher beings. While staring into the pool of water, Eve ignores her surroundings, not because she is purposefully ignoring Adam, but because she needs to know who she is. Adam, who is born with knowledge, knows who he is, therefore Eve, who does not possess such knowledge, must first discover herself. Additionally, she only looks into the water because she is curious. One cannot blame Eve for her curiosity, unless one blames Adam for his, who is born with as much curiosity as Eve. His first words are, "O by what name, for thou above all these,/Above mankind, or ought then mankind higher [•••] In solitude/What happiness, who can enjoy alone/Or all enjoying, what contentment find?" (Milton, 8.357-66). Under the brilliant light, he can only think of what to call it, or what it may be, and since the light is God he appears more devout. But Adam would not have asked about God, if he wasn't born under the light. Eve is not less devout just because she did not ask about her maker; she is born in the shade. Both Adam and Eve are merely curious about their immediate surroundings. Curiosity, thus, should not be considered a downfall for either, since it helps them obtain awareness.

McCabe also stated that Satan uses Eve's vanity to bring "mankind towards the Fall" , but this is only partly true (83). Satan

learns about Eve' s awakening and how she looks into the lake, but learning of the tree is what made Satan plot his revenge. He is pleased to know, "all is not theirs it seems:/One fatal tree there stands of knowledge call' d/Forbidden them to taste" then claims he will, "excite their minds/With more desire to know" (Milton, 4.513-23). The knowledge of the forbidden tree is the foundation for Satan' s plan, and then he decides to use wisdom to tempt them.

So a defense for Eve has been made in the area of narcissism, but what about inferiority? Not only do critics call Eve vain, but also claim she is inferior to Adam. This is completely unfair, since it was God who created Eve as she was. God tells Adam he will make him a companion, a "fit help" (Milton, 8.449). God does not explain to Adam that since Eve is made from his rib, he is superior, or that she is farther from God than Adam. When Eve is born, God no longer converses directly with Adam, because now Adam has Eve for company, meaning Eve replaces God as a companion. She is not equal with God, of course, but should not be considered inferior to Adam, even if she lacks the intelligence or strength of him.

Since Eve is made to give Adam a companion, she is essentially made to relieve him of loneliness. God wanted to make a relationship

where each person provides for the other. Adam needs Eve as much as she needs him. Because she is compared to vine, "'-golden tresses wore/Dishevll' d, but in wanton ringlets wav' d/As the vine curls her tendrils---" (Milton, 4.305-7), the reader understands that she needs Adam for support. A vine cannot thrive without a sturdy foundation; Adam provides support for Eve, however, this does not make him superior over her. She may lack the sturdiness that Adam has, but since he needs her as well, she is equal with him.

Milton may have presented Eve with some flaws, but mostly he shows her as a beautiful and innocent creature. The quote from Mikics only skims the surface of Adam' s first impression of Eve, making it sound as though he only feels she is inferior. When in actuality, Adam is describing her with affection. Adam claims,

In outward also her resembling less
His image who made both, and less expressing
The character of that dominion given
O' er other creature, yet when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems,
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;

(Milton, 8.543-50)

At first Adam sees how she lacks a godly appearance, but then realizes how wonderful she is. He tells Raphael that she seems best, in other words better than him. The word "seems" is described in the Old English Dictionary as "to be suitable to, befit, beseem, often with well, best, or fair" (OED). Adam is simply stating what he notices of her at his first glance: Eve's appearance is unlike God, but she is not lacking in godliness. Adam also admits that Eve is "more than enough", or more beautiful than he could image (Milton, 8.537). Adam continues to say that Eve renders him unintelligent, "All higher knowledge in her presence falls/Degraded" (Milton, 8.551). Adam adores her to the point that he cannot think correctly. Eve is not inferior to him, she is made for him, and he loves her.

In fact, Adam loves Eve enough to let her leave him while they work. Understanding her position as a gardener, Eve wishes to expand their work by separating, and since Eve is a separate self, she is not bound to Adam. She owns the freedom to work alone. She asks Adam if they could separate their work, in fact, she "persisted" (Milton, 8.377). She has never truly experienced solitude, and so does not view it as unpleasantly as Adam. Mary Beth Long states that, "For Adam, solitude is this purely negative, involuntary state." (104). Again,

Eve was born to relieve Adam's loneliness; he does not want to suffer solitude again. Yet, in book four "Adam finally realizes that God does not experience solitude as lack" (Long,102). When he asks God for a companion, God hesitates then speaks, "What think' st thou then of me, and this my state?" (Milton, 8.403). God tells him that happiness could be found in solitude. So when Eve wants to leave, Adam does not want to let her go, yet wants to show that he too could experience solitude as pleasurable, even though he does not. Eve, on the other hand, considers solitude as a privilege. She also wants to prove her ability to work like Adam. She wants to practice her free will alone without help from him, but regretfully the time away from Adam leads to the downfall of man, so inevitably Eve becomes shunned by mankind. Eve, so innocent, never imaged the possibility that she could have been deceived; lies are not something she understands. God made her innocent, so consequently, it is God who does not provide the protection for Eve.

And finally, the question, is Eve fallen before the Fall, needs refuting. Jeanie Grant Moore employs the same expression as Kilgour's, but states the unfairness of it. Moore opens her paper with this statement, "[Eve] was infected with evil even before the Fall—a

temptress, a wanton seductress, a serpent herself. Since Christian antiquity, the image of Eve had been distorted, and by Milton' s time the negative view of Eve had extended to all women" (1). This statement explains that most readers of Paradise Lost who see Eve as the temptress, already believed her to be before reading. This image of Milton' s Eve is distorted and, unfortunately, hard for most people to accept as false. As a result, Eve is viewed subjectively throughout the reading of the epic. Milton had to present her as the one who sins first, but only because this was the belief, to write differently would be contradicting to the Bible, so in essence, blasphemy. So unfortunately Milton makes Eve as the first to sin, but makes up for it by constantly describing her virtue, righteousness, and beauty.

Thus far a defense has been made for Eve and how she is not as corrupt as most think, but what if Milton believes Eve was meant to be tempted? Three details from Paradise Lost show how this is possible. One, the tree of knowledge was placed in the garden, easy to reach, bearing beautiful fruit. Two, Satan was able to reach Paradise without too much trouble. And last, God gave Adam and Eve free will, knowing what events will happen. If God knows past, present, and future, then he planned for the Fall.

First of all, since the tree of knowledge was set in the middle of the garden, asking to not touch it, only makes it more desirable. Mikics claims that the fruit proves God' s lack of order, "a threat to the creation' s goodness" (26). Joel Slotkin will argue that God only meant to tempt Adam and Eve so that he could punish them, "'the evil of punishment seems to be God⁷ s primary response within the main action of the epic" (108). If he wishes to place the tree in the middle of the garden then he also wishes for Eve or Adam to partake of it. God wanted them to Fall.

God also let Satan reach Eden. The gates and barriers were not strong enough for the fiend. Since it was God who created Hell, then it was God who made it escapable. God knew Satan' s intention was to destroy Adam and Eve, but does nothing to prevent it. God even knows Satan the moment Satan journeyed to Paradise, "he wings his way/Not far off heaven, in the precincts of light,/Directly towards the new created world" (Milton, 3.86-89). And since He is determined to bestow to Adam and Eve free will, essentially, God sets them up for failure. According to Slotkin, "[Milton* s] God truly possesses the ability to compose evil" , because Hell is a product of God (108). Once Satan betrays God, he is banished from Heaven and sent to Hell.

This punishment "does not destroy Satan, but rather gives him a chance to demonstrate his fortitude" (Slotkin, 111). God essentially made Satan stronger. The lack of protection causes Eve to fall victim of the empowered Satan, who tricks her into eating from the Tree. Eve was tempted by the worst kind of creature. Milton created a serpent, which appears beautiful, yet is so positively evil and deceiving that readers feel pity for Eve. She could not help herself under the power of such a deceiving creature. This creature's only desire is to destroy what God loves. Satan, disguised as a wolf, sees Adam and Eve for the first time and is tormented. He becomes jealous of their beauty. His desire to seek revenge intensifies. Milton emphasizes the temptation laid upon Eve.

Not only does Satan tempt her in the garden, but also while she sleeps, "Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve" (Milton, 4.800). Eve is the one who has the troubling dream about eating the fruit. She is Satan's primal victim. Satan wishes to, "...reach/The organs of her fancy-" (Milton, 4.801-2). Eve cannot be completely responsible for her actions. Satan tempted her with thoughts of goodness. He knows what she desires and uses it against her. Slotkin explains, "when evil appeals on a normative level, it deceives or

distracts its target with something beautiful or admirable" ; and it is knowledge which Satan makes admirable. (105).

Satan questions about knowledge. He ponders,

•••Knowledge forbidden?

Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord
Envy them that? Can it be sin to know? Can it
be death? And do they only stand By ignorance?
Is that their happy state The proof of their
obedience and their faith?

(Milton, 4.515-20)

Satan may be rehearsing for his speech to Eve, yet he is still raising an intriguing thought. He questions God for denying them of knowledge. Why should the couple live in ignorance? Satan believes having knowledge is a privilege. Knowledge allows for independence. Satan mentions in book three that he could never bow down to God, so he cannot understand how Adam and Eve could be happy in obedience. They will never be truly independent if they must be obedient, especially if they are ignorant.

Later, in book nine, Satan tells Eve that in order to be good, one must know the difference between good and evil. It is understandable that God wanted Adam and Eve to have free will. It is also understandable that there must be a temptation. But making

knowledge sinful is not understandable. Why is knowledge forbidden? It is not sinful to know evil, only to do evil. Therefore, readers should not hold Eve responsible for eating the fruit. She only wants to know good and evil, to be a better person. God is so adamant about receiving obedience and love from his new creation, so he gives them free will. Without free will, "what proof could they have given sincere/Of true allegiance, constant faith, or love" (Milton, 3.103-4). God wants his creations to prove their obedience. But Kilgour explains how, "Separation from God allows his creatures to become creative in their own right, which means, for Milton, to make independent choices and exercise free will. " (307). Since Adam and Eve are separate from God, God must know that they will do as they please.

The reason for eating the fruit is different for both Adam and Eve. Eve was deceived into believing the tree would make her wise, and hence more devout. She only wanted to be able to understand what evil is, and improve herself. She is at first afraid of death, but sees the serpent, who claims he had eaten the fruit, still alive, so she willingly eats. Adam, on the other hand, knows it is a grave sin to eat the fruit, but does so regardless, knowing he will die. He didn' t

want to be left in the dark while Eve has the light of knowledge. So Adam, hence, is more sinful than Eve. He could have let Eve die and then ask for another companion. His love for her is admirable, yet he knowingly betrayed God. He is fully aware of the consequences, but he could not bear to lose Eve.

Milton is carefully letting the reader see how God wants the Fall to happen. In book three, God and the Son converse about the Fall and what will happen. Both knowing the outcome, they allow it to take place. This is a setup for the offering of the son for the sins of mankind, which in turn will redeem those who will sin after the Fall. God will then have the power to judge man according to their obedience to him. Those who pass will live with God, "So man, as is most just,/Shall satisfy for man, be judg' d, and die,/And dying rise, and rising with him raise/His brethren, ransom' d with his own dear life" (Milton, 3.294-7). God wishes to give man a choice: obey him and live in heaven, or disobey and not. God wanted Adam and Eve to Fall. As they leave paradise, the Archangel Michael, "promises that the result of the Fall will be something better for man in a future time" (Sorkin, 886). Eve is merely the vessel for God' s plan for something

better. Milton understands that she is not the temptress as many have claimed her to be, she is just a player in God' s ultimate plan.

Paradise Lost is a timeless work of art, where every line, eloquently written, is bursting with meaning. Milton' s epic will always cause scholarly discussions. Although, those who believed Milton should be blamed for the Eve' s sin should remember, the idea of a woman causing the Fall of mankind came from the Bible; Milton' s epic is not the one to blame. Even though Eve sins first, causing the Fall, she is not the wicked, vile, temptress many people believe her to be. Milton rewrote the epic, staying true to the story, but with specifics that may in fact show his sympathy for Eve. Perhaps one day the negative opinion of Eve will subside and society as a whole will view her as the person who opened our eyes to knowledge. She brought us from the world of innocence to a world of awareness.

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