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Reinventing Eve: The Subversive Ego of Female Identity in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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In the 17th century women were not only viewed as inferior, but often as a burden. While Milton's epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, does not portray a hatred towards women, it does show that Milton believed their role to be submissive to men. In addition, from the very first-time the serpent views Eve, it is her beauty and not her intellect or worth as a human he comments on. He tempts her by saying, "**A Goddess among Gods, adored and served by Angels numberless, thy daily train**" (9.36), which raises her view of her own stature. Being seen as beneath Adam and created from Adam, this empowered her to see herself as a master of her own life for the first time. The ease with which the serpent can flatter and tempt Eve can be read as a nod to Milton's belief that women are the weaker sex, unable to overcome seduction of any type or have their own independent thoughts. This idea feeds the notion that women are better off serving men and under their control. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* portrays the character of Eve as an objectified creature in a classical patriarchal society, but when one applies the feminist literary lens,

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the implications of this choice serve as a warning to readers about the subjectification of female characters. A psychoanalytic literary lens portrays the character of Eve as a person who, from the very beginning of her existence, is denied her own self-identity. Because she is chastised when looking upon her own reflection, she is never able to experience the Lacanian mirror stage, which halts her own development. “In the mirror stage, Lacan compressed the two phases into

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one. At the very moment when the ego is formed by the image of the other, narcissism and aggressivity are *correlatives*. Narcissism, in which the image of one’s own body is sustained by the image of the other, in fact introduces a *tension*: the other in his image both attracts and rejects” (Whitfield 34). This attraction and rejection, which is a natural human response, is never experienced by Eve which greatly fractures her own self-worth and identity. “By looking directly at her actions and comments, and beyond the poem’s many imposed visions of her character, we find a woman who is striving to secure a sense of self in accordance with an innate human paradox; the desire to be both separate from and united with another person without losing oneself in either isolation or fusion” (Zimmerman 2). In addition to this need to have her own identity, from her first moments of creation, her speech is preoccupied with images of her appearance, even though she does not even contain the knowledge yet to understand she is staring at her own reflection.

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As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A shape within the wat'ry gleam appear'd
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleas'd I soon return'd
Pleas'd it return' as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love (IV, 460-465)

In this way, Milton immediately gives Eve an identity that consists only of what her physical image is and what it offers. This stands in stark contrast to the way that Adam's world is seen

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from the beginning, giving him an objective reality. Adam's first act is to look towards the heavens, a direct line to God and giving God authority over him, but his next act upon standing is to begin naming all the things he sees, which gives Adam a role and an authority figure in the dominion he now lives in. A psychoanalytic literary lens enables readers to see that Milton writes the character of Eve as having no choice but to be consumed with a sense of narcissism from the very beginnings of her creation and the reality of her world revolves around this. When a voice interrupts Eve to tell her what she views is her own image and that she is meant to find another (Adam) she

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“relinquishes the original pathos she feels for the image, and, to some extent, internalizes and alien judgement that sees her mirroring her experience as vain” (Zimmerman 4). In this way, the voice directs Eve to other pursuits, so from her first moments she has only an identity built by an image that she was chastised for looking at. A psychoanalytic read would lead readers to interpret that Milton is essentially asking Eve to give up her own image for Adam’s. The message here seems to be that Eve is beautiful, which is important, but her priority is to be beautiful and go to Adam.

Upon their meeting, Adam tells Eve that she is the other half of his whole. He had asked for a companion because he did not believe that he could be fulfilled without one. “The specifications regarding the intended use of a new human design (Eve) have been explicitly stated by the intended recipient of that design. The specifications of Eve’s purpose—dictated by one man (Adam) and ratified by another (God)—express clearly that her end is not in herself. Her end is in Adam” (Bare 27). The problem here, is not that Adam asked God for a companion so much is that he understood what his own identity needed, without considering what Eve needed or in what ways dictating her role would objectify her. Adam says,

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Return fair Eve,

Whom fli’st thou? Whom thou fli’st, of him thou art,

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His flesh, his bone, to give thee being I lent out of my side

to thee, nearest my heart.

Substantial Life, to have thee by my side

Henceforth an individual solace dear;

Part of my soul I seek thee and thee claim

My other half (IV, 481-488)

In this way Adam has created a role for Eve without her consent or without considering that she, like he did, may want her own individual life. If she completes him, then who or what completes her? Eve is often read as a character who puts her own emotions ahead of reason or logic, but the very first passages she is alive she has had her entire self-worth ripped from her as the creation that belongs to someone else in a way that causes her to become an unequal in her world.

The ways in which Milton composes God and Adam's roles in bringing about Eve cannot help but lend themselves to creating a patriarchal society. Because God created Adam and through Adam created Eve, she cannot help but owe her life to them. Scholar Kent R. Lenhoff writes, "The role of paternal creation creates and reinforces the perpetual denial of Eve's autonomy, which stems directly from her constitution: no self-sufficiency away from Adam; no self-direction away from Adam—all conditions that are commonly associated with ownership in an object." This leads Eve from the start

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of her life to view herself as a thing and not a person, which contributes to the ways in which she lacks an identity and instead becomes an object for

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others, first for Adam in her role as his companion and later as a means of manipulation for the serpent.

When the serpent enters the garden he remarks “The more I see / pleasures about me so much more I feel / torment within meFor only in destroying I find ease to my relentless thoughts” (9.119-121, 129-130). Therefore, readers are aware that he has two primary reasons for trespassing upon the garden and Eve, the first is loneliness and the second is jealousy for all Adam was given that he can never have. When Satan sees Adam and Eve together as a couple, he becomes further enraged with jealousy saying he is “unfulfilled with longing pains” (4.11). Satan then fixates his jealousy on Eve, determined to assert his will over hers. “Through this comparison, we can see better why Milton would establish a relationship of sexual desire between Satan (objectifier) and Eve (objectified) through his adoption of the more sexually inclined” (Bare 44). This jealousy combined with the envy Satan feels is what motivates him to bring about the destruction of mankind through the fall. Some scholars believe that Milton uses intentional language to further objectify Eve by suggesting her fall was not only a literal one, but that “knowledge” given to her by the serpent as not about eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but by having carnal relations with him. While the book

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of Genesis does not at any point suggest sexual relations were had between the serpent and Eve, there are suggestions that Milton may have drawn on context present in the book of Enoch and other early Jewish texts. Wolfgang Rudat explains the language thusly,

“Satan calls on similar sexual metaphors in his more direct approach to Eve....He describes to Eve the location of the Tree of Knowledge—'beyond a row of myrtles [breasts] on a flat

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[stomach] / fast by a fountain [genitals], one small thicket [pubic hair] past / of blowing myrrh and balm [vaporous effusions from the moist thicket” (9.627-9). He also points out that Satan, “not only offers himself as chaperone to conduct Eve to the place of the forbidden fruit, he also proposes to engage in an escort’s tour of the contours of Eve’s body. The fact that he manages to get close enough to possibly taste those ‘fair apples’ (breasts) of Eve, indicates his potential to affect a significant mishandling of the ‘best of fruits” (9.585, 745).

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In the ways in which Satan “conducts” Eve in this scene, he not only manipulates, but readers can understand that her identity has passed ownerships from God, to Adam, to the serpent. At no point is Eve her own person, only a means to an end for every male character in the poem. In addition, it is solely Eve who is reprimanded by the arch angel Michael when she eats of the forbidden fruit. Adam calls her a “fair defect of nature” (10.874) and he also blames God for putting him in the garden with such an evil and tempting creature:

This woman, whom thou mad'st to be my help

And gav'st me as they perfect gift,

So good.

So fit, so acceptable, so divine.

That from her hand I could suspect no ill.

And what she did, whatever in itself,

Her doing seem'd to justify the deed;

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She gave me of the tree and I did eat (10.137-144).

Analyzing this, readers can see that not only did he blame God, but even in this moment of desperation he goes back to objectifying Eve, referring to her not as a person, or his equal, but a “gift.” Furthermore, Adam’s involvement is glossed over, while Eve takes the brunt of the consequences. Her punishment is not only pain in childbirth, but to be

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ruled over by her husband from there on out, a fate that she seems to already have been dealt from the very beginning. This is especially hypocritical when considering Adam was ecstatic when they first ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, gazing upon Eve with sexual desire and even referring to the tree as “virtuous.”

But come, so well refresh'd, now let us play,
As meet is after such delicious fare:
For never did thy beauty, since the day I saw thee first,
and wedded thee, adorn'd
With all perfections, so inflame my sense
With ardour to enjoy thee, fairer now
Than ever, bounty of this virtuous tree. (9, 1027–1033)

For Adam to be so pleased with Eve’s contribution to their choices that led to the eating of the fruit and then completely change and grow so disgusted with her when he realized they were going to be expelled from the Garden is just yet another example of the inequality between the two. It is further illustrative of the ways in which Eve is seen only as an object to be praised or scolded as Adam sees fit.

Feminist literary scholar Erika Carr believes that Eve cannot be held accountable for wanting to transcend an environment that would objectify her and hold hostage from creating her

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own identity. She writes, “The most common attributes of a typical sexually objectifying environment is as follows: existence of traditional gender roles, a high probability of male contact exists in a male dominated environment, women hold less power than men in that environment, there is high degree of attention drawn to sexual and physical attributes to women’s bodies, and there is an approval and acknowledge of the male gaze” (Carr 55). All five of these exist within *Paradise Lost* and frame Eve’s world. This feminist literary reading would lead readers to wonder what the benefits would be for half of the population as women to gain anything by re-entering Paradise as it seems to be built for a patriarchal and objectifying society.

This interpretation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, using first a psychoanalytic lens to understand a deeper meaning behind Eve and the ways in which she viewed and was not allowed to view herself through both introspective and physical machinations and then a feminist literary lens to understand the dangers of these constrictions, leads readers to understand the problems of an institutionalized and patriarchal society. In fact, Dr. Jonathan Whitfield summarizes Eve’s plight in *Paradise Lost* by writing, “Milton’s Eve has been created from a man, subjected to his rule, and punished for her alleged inferiority. She has been placed in a world that is not her own, her intellectual powers limited, her ability to define herself and her world prevented. Hers is an existence defined by men” (Whitfield 57). This is Eve’s journey that causes her to

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become a Biblical foil and antihero, the woman who brought sin into the world so that another (Mary) would have to take it out through giving birth to Christ. To a male reader, this story is one of authoritative necessity, attempting to answer questions such as: Where do I come from? To whom do I answer? Whitfield argues that under a feminist literary lens; however, it is Eve who

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is actually the first hero, the first to question authority and the first to seek at knowledge, despite what it may cost her.

“Eve shows the readers that she is the first human to have wisdom as a virtue, the first to truly want to know, even in spite of Milton’s attempts to taint her language, writing about her ‘rash hands in evil hour’ (9:780), hands that reached for the forbidden fruit; despite her thoughts not being far from God-head; and despite her “ignoring without restraint” (9:791) the fruit of temptation.” (Whitfield 58).

Here readers can see how Eve, through her questioning and seeking of knowledge, does not only become the first seeker for more intelligence, but also the one who actually is able to exhibit her own free will. If God created humans to have their own free will, then it was Eve and not Adam who display this first. Dr. Whitfield writes, “Without

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her, God's plan couldn't work; free will wouldn't have been exercised. True, she is given the role "Mother of the Human Race" and mother of the seed that will bruise the head of the serpent; however, the scale is tipped to emphasize her wrongdoing, her wanting to know, to be equal or surpass." It was the patriarchal society that painted in Eve in such a light and who punished her while forgiving Adam. This is yet another way in which Eve is objectified, not only in Milton's version of the fall of man, but seemingly every story of the plot that exists today.

Despite Milton's attempts to establish a hierarchy of power in *Paradise Lost*, where God is at the top of the hierarchy and Adam and Eve are two parts of a whole underneath Him, it is apparent that Eve, like most women throughout history, is inferior to her masculine counterpart.

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Milton does all he can to portray Eve as the weaker sex. Her image is the first thing every other character notice about her, she is, from her life's beginning, fixated on that image, other characters sexualize her, and he writes her as being easy to manipulate the second she is offered any flattery. Scholar Roberta Martin writes, "Milton himself was so fixated on spiritual compatibility that many feminists believed that he came dangerously close to demanding a perfect Stepford-type wife in the character of Eve. As a result, even when insisting that his doctrine would free women as well as men, and even when reserving his sharpest sarcasm for male contemporaries who clung to the

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traditional view that women possessed neither the mental nor the spiritual ability to become true ‘mates,’ his tracts remained under a deeper cloud than ever.” Eve was never going to be able to fulfill the role Milton intended for her because like so many roles invented by the patriarchy, it was impossible to fill.

Reading this impossible role from a psychoanalytic literary lens allows readers to see the ways in which Eve suffered from narcissism and depreciating sense of self. “Eve skipped typical Freudian development stages because she was created as an adult, but from the first moments of her life she was chastised for trying to understand her own reflected image” (Pecheux 35). Even in her decision to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, readers can see the roots of her narcissism and fragmented reality she viewed herself from. She calls Adam her “author and disposer” and had no true idea who she was. The basis of her final decision had roots in the way Adam would view her because she had been objectified her entire life. She believed he would either realize she was more intelligent than him and become in awe of her or that this knowledge may cause her to

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become superior to him for the first time in her life. She illustrates when she questions Adam by saying:

But to Adam in what sort Shall I appear?

Shall I to him make known

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As yet my change, and give him to partake
Full happiness with me, or rather not,
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? (9, 816–825)

Finally, readers observe an Eve who is aware that she is dissatisfied with her role as Adam's wife and helpmate. Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has allowed Eve to understand that she is inferior to Adam, and she now knows that to truly be free she must be at least his equal, inferior is never free.

When understanding that Eve has failed to become her own person and does not have a social self or a looking glass self, one also sees how Eve is objectified. The feminist theory then shows readers how the objectified Eve is put at fault for the downfall of all of mankind despite, "The

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story representing an eternal hierarchy within which Eve is incapable of completely overcoming the inferior, feminine role of subordination that patriarchal domination over religious doctrine reinforces” (Rudnytsky 45). In other words, Eve never had a chance to succeed. Scholar Allison Bare says:

Readers see that from the first day of Eve’s entry into Paradise she is never encouraged to see herself as someone whose end is in herself. So it follows, once this foundational condition of her existence is established, other denials predictably flow from that first denial of autonomy. To summarize this flow: Eve’s *raison d’être* is first as the property and instrument of God, and second as the property and instrument of Adam, making it perfectly predictable to see God’s chief detractor and humankind’s first enemy, Satan, treating Eve to serve similar ends for his own designs. To tell it plainly involves retelling the story of the trajectory of a woman passing through the hands of three men that reveals a disturbing triptych of male possession. Indeed, the objectification of Eve that

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can be detected in her instrumentality, violability, ownership and denial of autonomy should serve as a warning against this type of patriarchal society. (Bare 87).

Indeed, reading *Paradise Lost* in this manner depicts an Eve with a broken identity who is ruled and commanded by the male characters surrounding her. In this way, readers understand with

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more depth the consequences of such a society, that set Eve up from failure from the beginning and left her with all the culpability in the demise of mankind.

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