



INTERSECTION OF DIFFERENT DISCOURSES IN THE REPRESENTATION OF EVE IN BOOK IX OF PARADISE LOST

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Abstract

This paper situates Eve at the intersection of different discourses in Paradise Lost – philosophical, political, theological. The paper looks at the historicity of the moment and Eve’s narrative of resistance which is questioning authority in all forms.

Keywords: *Idea of labor, narratorial interjections, theological context, narrative of resistance*



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Introduction

Commentators have written extensively about the central female character in *Paradise Lost* (Book IX). Analysis of the character of Eve in Shari A. Zimmerman’s “Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: Eve’s struggle for Identity” focusses on a psychoanalytical reading of the text - how Eve’s identity and search for a stable self are at the heart of the narrative. Some writers also see how the redefinition of heroism as embedded in the character of Eve in *Paradise Lost* replaces the heroism of some of the central male characters:

It is a redefinition that not only substitutes a feminine posture of supplication for masculine stance of heroic defiance, it is one that removes the moment of heroism from the field of battle and lodges it in that most intimate (and humdrum) of domestic dialogues, a husband and wife making up after a quarrel. (Quilligan, 171)

My paper rather than focusing on questions of identity or redefinition of heroism will try to see Eve’s portrayal at the intersection of different discourses in the text – philosophical, political, theological.

I will be primarily focusing on Book IX to support the argument cited in the introduction.

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The Idea of Labor

We are first introduced to the pair (in Book IX) when we see them busy in their morning rituals; this is followed by a discussion on how best to divide their labors so as to manage and organize the garden they are supposed to tend. The commentary on dividing labor has been discussed by Maureen Quilligan in context of gender/economic roles in seventeenth century England:

In Adam and Eve's conversation on gardening in Book IX, we see the economic issues of the reorganization of labor which was being effected in the second half of the seventeenth century debated directly on the surface of the text. (Quilligan, 163).

Two different economic organisations find expression here – a feudal arrangement, in which God is lord, and protocapitalistic one, in which the laborer hires out his physical exertion and is paid in terms of how much he has achieved. (Quilligan, 163).

For Eve, Quilligan feels, it is important to take labor seriously. It is something outside the domestic, so, the need for greater efficiency and effort is needed.

There is also a different interpretation of the idea of labor especially in context of Puritan theological debates in seventeenth century England. Diane Elizabeth Dreher in Milton's warning to Puritans in "Paradise Lost": Another Look at the Separation Scene" comments on the need for balance and order in our attitude to work (a position taken by moderate puritan theologians):

Eve would receive Gouge's censure for such ignorant zeal, a compulsiveness too often found in conscientious people beneath the good intentions is a subtle admixture of pride, the urge to prove oneself through excessive work instead of patiently co-operating with the divine plan. Warnings about this error abound in Puritan theological tracts. Baxter admonished his readers to beware of good works carried to such extremes. "Good works opposed to Christ or his satisfaction, merit, righteousness, mercy or free-grace in the matter of justification or salvation, are not good works, but proud self-confidence and sin." (Dreher, 36)

I agree with this position partly as the need for temperance in work is significant in the context of some of the theological debates of seventeenth century England.

Adam argues against this division of labor stating the need for 'love' and 'refreshment' (Milton, 22) as central to the labor they are supposed to accomplish. He also warns Eve of the enemy, jealous of our spoils and desiring to ruin this union decreed by God. Eve upset by these comments retorts:

But that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt

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To God or thee, because we have a foe
May tempt it, I expected not to hear
His violence thou fear'st not, being such,
As we, not capable of death or pain,
Can either not receive, or can repel.
His fraud is then thy fear, which plain infers
Thy equal fear that my firm faith and love
Can by his fraud be shaken or seduced.
(Milton, 23-24)

I do partially agree with Zimmerman's position that Eve oscillates between a desire to separate from Adam to assert her own identity and the fear of this separation, an anxiety that underlies some of her arguments.

But her response is also determined by her inability to accept the inferior role assigned to her. The questioning of her integrity angers her and later also we will see how there is a reversal of gender roles where she uses reason to decide how she would appear before Adam after the initial impulse of gorging on the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Eve also raises certain important philosophical questions:

How are we happy, still in fear of harm?
But harm precedes not sin: only our foe
Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem
Of our integrity: his foul esteem
Sticks no dishonor on our front, but turns
Foul on himself; then wherefore shunned or feared
By us? who rather doubled honor gain
From his surmise proved false, find peace within,
Favor from Heav'n, our witness from th' event.
And what is faith, love, virtue unassayed
Alone, without exterior help sustained?

Rather than praising cloistered virtue it is 'abstinence' (Areopagitica, 84) which God will praise. The philosophy of self-abnegation and self-control will win us the favour of heaven.
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Sometimes, Eve, in comparison to Adam, appears more rational and her intelligence superior to his. Some of these arguments around abstinence and not getting provoked by temptation; are also discussed by Milton in some of his prose works.

Iconographic Context

Eve leaves Adam reluctantly, happy for the independence gained but also fearful of what might take place in this separation from her partner.

(I initially stated how we need to foreground the ambivalence central to the representation of Eve in Book IX) The narrator describes Eve through a cluster of images after her unfortunate separation from Adam. Following this separation, the text gives a range of classical allusions, comparing her to Roman goddesses – some of those images anticipating the Fall:

To Pales, or Pomona, thus adorned

Likest she seemed, Pomona when she fled

Vertumnus, or to Ceres in her prime,

Yet virgin of Proserpina from Jove. (Milton, 27-28)

These images are suggestive of the sensual nature of the Fall. The narratorial interventions see Eve's sexuality as threatening. But the images also point towards Eve's frailty. Eve, busy in her labor, minding the flowers is unaware of how she 'Herself though fairest unsupported flower', (Milton, 29) can now find no solace and support in her journey to selfhood. The narrator is critical of Eve's decision; these passages biblical in nature point towards Eve being deluded, away from the light of reason, separate from her partner – her loss defined in terms of a sin against not just Adam but also against God and divine principles.

Eve's Political & Philosophical Ruminations

Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, in its representations of heroism and divine laws places a great deal of emphasis on balance and order. Stella P. Revard in "The Heroic Context of Book IX of "Paradise Lost", highlights how Adam and Eve's transgression arises out of selfish motives. She sees them as moving away from a certain kind of divine equilibrium and order. Their motives are different from the sacrifice of the Son of God – sinning though pure so that man is made right with God:

Michael's words to Adam concerning the Son's martyrdom directly define the difference between Adam's and the Son's sacrificial acts. Michael tells Adam that the Son will fulfill
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“that which thou didst want/Obedience to the law of God, impos’d/On penalty of death.” Guiltless of crime rather than joining in crime, he will suffer death for another (for Adam and all mankind); he will pay the penalty for transgression and not merely share in that transgression. (Revard, 340)

This is one possible interpretation of *Paradise Lost* – the emphasis on divine balance and moral efficacy of the sacrifice of the Son of God and the later supplication of Eve and Adam crucial to the theological context of the poem. But, as I set out to prove, the paper is looking at the intersectionality of some of the debates crucial to seventeenth century England and the import of these debates in terms of larger humanist and philosophical ideas.

It is interesting that some of these political debates and philosophical ruminations are highlighted through the voice of Eve – asking the reader to think about these existential questions. To prove this I will be focussing on the long dialogue in Book IX between Satan and Eve. It is true that Satan has overpowered Eve and is cleverly forcing her to agree with his perspective. But, at the same time, in this dialogue Eve also uses her agency to posit important questions around free will, freedom and divine will.

If we remember, earlier also, Eve was the one who had emphasized the futility of cloistered virtue. She talked about the primacy of experience, the need to reason and experience things, and see them as they are. After eating the fruit of the tree, unlike Adam who emotionally reacts to the Fall, she reasons and calculates (in this her actions are determined by the fear of separation and loss as Zimmerman points out) and weighs her options before revealing the truth to 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? (Milton, 44)

Eve’s actions are driven by this desire for freedom. Just like Milton, who in his own times argued for freedom and spoke against censorship, Eve too argues for artistic freedom, freedom within marriage and illustrates the larger debate in theology on the primacy of free will. She
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also critiques political structures of power; authoritarianism expressed through the narrative of the unequal relation between God and Man. But, soon, Eve's fears and insecurities get the better of her. If death be the consequence of this act she fears self-annihilation. She calculates on how she will approach Adam not revealing everything but strategising her moves. Rather than denigrating this act of reason, I think it is worth applauding her superior intelligence and insight into things.

Both Adam and Eve fear self-annihilation, Adam's resolve to support Eve in her Fall is driven by similar impulses:

Certain to undergo like doom; if death
Consort with thee, death is to me as life;
So forcible within my heart I feel
The bond of nature draw me to my own,
My own in thee, for what thou art is mine;
Our state cannot be severed, we are one,
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself. (Milton, 48)

Both creatures are driven by this impulse at self-preservation. As Zimmerman points out self-preservation is central to human conduct, human nature is 'plagued by an ambivalence that surrounds the constitution of all human identity. (Zimmerman, 247)

Eve, is the more adventurous of the two, and in her you see a desire to separate from Adam; her struggle for independence is combined with a fear of separation. These contrary feelings Eve exhibits help the reader understand the uncertainty of all human relationships. Eve articulates an existential condition; a crisis the reader can identify and empathise with. Eve's characterization is interesting for these reasons and also because through her enunciation she ponders over certain pertinent political questions. She gives a critique of totalitarianism and power play by exposing the cunning of absolute divine power:

Knowledge both of good and evil;
Forbids us then to taste, but his forbidding
Commends thee more, while it infers the good

By thee communicated, and our want;
For good unknown, sure is not had, or had
And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise? (Milton, 41)

By questioning God, Eve implicitly questions authority, her narrative of resistance foregrounds the cunning of power; absolute power functioning not just through force but also through subtle ways of winning our consent by keeping us low and ignorant.

Also, as I pointed out earlier, her philosophical arguments illustrate her fortitude in the face of adversity; her resilience and desire to meet challenges head on. There are two instances where we see her superior intelligence and insight. The scene already discussed, where Eve talks about the need to test virtue and prove our excellence. The second instance, where she uses logic and reason and rationalizes before disclosing the truth of the transgressive act to Adam. Her fortitude and her circumspect rationality is pitted against the tragic inevitability of the Fall in *Paradise Lost*. The inescapability of the Fall and Eve's counter-narrative of struggle against this necessity is an illustration of this tragic human predicament. Milton, in *Christian Doctrine* illustrates this conflict:

From the concept of freedom, then, all idea of necessity must be removed. No place must be given even to that shadowy and peripheral idea of necessity based on God's immutability and foreknowledge. If any idea of necessity remains, as I have said before, it either restricts free agents to a single course, or compels them against their will, or assists them when they are willing, or does nothing at all. If it restricts free agents to a single course, this makes man the natural cause of all his actions and therefore of his sins, just as if he were created with an inherent propensity towards committing sins. If it compels free agent against their will, this means that man is subject to the force of another's decree, and is thus the cause of sins only *per accidens*, God being the cause of the sin *per se*. If it assists free agents when they are willing, this makes God either the principal or the joint cause of sins. Lastly, if it does nothing at all, no necessity exists. (Milton, 91)

Milton, in this treatise explores the different mutations of the relationship between free will and necessity. Eve's testimony explores this conflict, her agency in choosing to fall conflicting

with her trying to understand God as the origin of all experiences significant to the human condition.

Conclusion

This paper focusses on the representation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*. As I set out to prove, Eve's characterization cannot be limited to certain one-dimensional readings. It is also not possible to speak with absolute certainty about what her character signifies. We need to situate this character at the intersection of various discourses in the text – philosophical, political, intellectual and theological. For this purpose, I have focused on the narratorial interjections in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, trying to see how they are undermined by the counter-narrative of Eve. The contradictions in the representation of the dominant female character are determined by the fissures of the historical moment and the universality of the tragic human condition.

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