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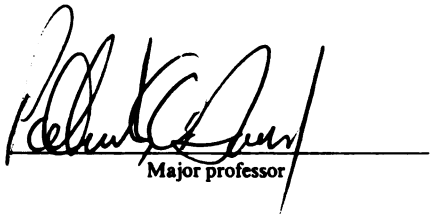

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'SHE FOR GOD IN HIM': A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF *PARADISE LOST* AND MILTON'S APPROACH TO WOMAN

By

Richard Eugene Ziegelmann

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ABSTRACT

'SHE FOR GOD IN HIM': A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF *PARADISE LOST* AND MILTON'S APPROACH TO WOMAN

By

Richard Eugene Ziegelmann

Milton is renowned widely by many for being one of the first proponents of "companionate marriage", a marriage in which the man and woman are equal partners. Many recent critics have denounced these evaluations as the product of the patriarchal society in which Milton wrote and in which his works have been criticized over the centuries. Using various critical sources in addition to the works of Milton himself, we are able to construct a more complete idea of Milton's contributions to his age as well as the critical canon as a whole. Attempting to reconcile the two notions of Milton as either misogynist or early woman's right advocate, this work creates a conception of Milton somewhere between these two polarities. Many critics overlook the inherent complexity and contradictions in Milton's life and works and create an incomplete picture of Milton, when the contradictions themselves are most indicative of a man attempting to challenge societal conceptions of marriage and womanhood, and, in turn force the reader to confront his/her own beliefs. This work is an attempt to briefly canvas Milton's historical and critical evaluations in the context of the present day reader and introduce new conclusions based on this research.

Dedicated to my family

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Introduction

> Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.
> Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere
> Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
> Where only what they needs must do , appear'd
> Not what they would? What praise could they receive?
> What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
> When Will and Reason (Reason also in choice)
> Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil'd
> Made passive both, had serv'd necessity,
> Not mee.
>
> --*Paradise Lost* (III 102-111)

> It is ironical that the popular image of Milton to-day is of an austere Puritan who advocated the subordination of women. For his contemporaries it was chiefly Milton's sexual libertinism which made them link him with the radicals . . . Both are caricatures, and I do not wish to replace the later caricature by the earlier one. Somewhere between the two we must set the bold if unlucky thinker . . .
>
> --Christopher Hill (*Milton* 117)

Milton struggled within *Paradise Lost* to construct an idea of God and man that would both absolve God of any responsibility for man's failures and justify to man the reason behind God's actions. Milton takes great pains to express how Adam and Eve were both consciously able to make a decision of their own volition, yet they failed to utilize their capacity for reason. Milton imposes the idea that ,if God had not given them the choice to make their own decisions based on reason and obedience, he could not have collected any praise as a result of their allegiance. In *Paradise Lost* God speaks:

> So will fall,
> Hee and his faithless Progenie: whose fault?
> Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee
> All he could have; I made him just and right,
> Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall. (III 95-99)

In Book IV, Milton reiterates, "While time was, our first-Parents had bin warnd / The coming of thir secret foe" (6-7). And later, ample warning is demonstrated when Raphael says, ". . . take heed lest passion sway / Thy Judgement to do aught, which else free Will / Would not admit . . ." (VIII 635-637). Indeed, Adam and Eve should have been amply prepared for the temptation that was to come. And yet, they fell. However fortunate their fall may have been, as it leads to the "one greater Man" who is able to "Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat" (I 4-5), Milton insists they nonetheless must take responsibility for bringing death into the world.

Milton's works have always been the subject of controversy, but late criticism has caused a re-evaluation of Milton and the place his prose and poetry, particularly *Paradise Lost,* have occupied in the history of Western literature. While no one claims that Milton's works are not of historic importance, much debate has centered on the idea that many critics have overemphasized Milton as an early advocate of women's rights and equality in marriage. Milton's understanding of women is as debatable as his definition of marriage. An early advocate of divorce, Milton arduously plots out a specific idea of the marriage that God intended. Loudly debased as a libertine, many contemporaries of Milton claimed he mystified God's definition of the "holy union" to serve his own needs as the husband in at least one apparent mismatch in matrimony. Milton's first marriage, in particular, was so unsuccessful as to cause the man to test his own faith and examine more closely biblical text and canonical law. Milton's *On*

the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce is most useful (for obvious reasons) in criticizing his search to excuse divorce.

Milton's claim, above all, was that God did not intend man to adhere blindly to marriage vows when spiritual or intellectual incompatibility left both parties miserable. His view was that the canonical law in this case more often lead to lascivious and lewd behavior. Because a man was bound to his wife despite their differences, he could find no legitimate release for his passions, be they sexual, emotional or intellectual. This fact could only lead to affairs, causing adultery and illegitimate children. Milton believed that God was practical in many ways, and would have allowed for divorce and remarriage if it was best for both parties and not simply a whimsical act of anger or lust. The intractable canonical marriage laws severely impeded the freedom that Milton supposes God must have intended. Milton says, "They will know better when they shall hence learn that honest liberty is the greatest foe to dishonest license" (*Divorce* 698). God would rather allow a man to divorce his wife openly and honestly than allow for repeated "debaucheries" while hidden inside the institution of marriage. But Milton's definition of marriage goes beyond the simple wishes or desires of men. Instead, he claims, ". . . God in the first ordaining of marriage taught us to what end he did it, in words expressly implying the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman . . . " (*Divorce* 703). It is here where we can see the notions of Milton's companionate marriage taking shape. He does not claim man had complete rule over women, but that marriage consisted of a mutual union. Later, Milton elaborates, "God's intention a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest

and the noblest end of marriage" (*Divorce* 707). Again, Milton iterates that marriage is a mutual engagement meant to enforce the benefits of a blessed union, far from the lifetime curse that the tradition of church fathers imposed. While Milton nevertheless gives favor to man over woman in the case of marriage and divorce, he nonetheless extends his definition to the mutual benefit of both man and woman in matrimony. Marriage is not something in Milton's mind only to be enjoyed by men, but, rather, both parties must take part in this happy "conversation". Milton continues, "Marriage is a covenant the very being wherof consists not in forced cohabitation and counterfeit performance of duties, but in unfeigned love and peace" and ". . . love in marriage cannot live nor subsist unless it be mutual" (*Divorce* 711).

Nonetheless, those who proclaim Milton as the first proponent of companionate marriage overlook Milton's biases towards men, and explicit equality is not something he intended to include in his definition, but Milton nevertheless understands that at least equality in love and happiness must exist. In other words, unless both sexes are happy in the marriage, then either the man or the wife had the right to dissolve the union. In this way, Milton certainly goes much further than traditional Biblical canonical law, and so far as to be ridiculed by other Christian scholars of his era. Milton's thoughts on marriage and woman's role within it are expanded in *The Christian Doctrine*. In it, he says, "Marriage, therefore, is a most intimate connection of man *with* woman, ordained by God . . . (994 italics mine). Milton elaborates that "With regard to marriage, it is clear that it . . . consisted in the mutual love, society, help, and comfort of the

husband and wife, though with a reservation of superior rights to the husband" (*Christian* 994). While Milton's emphasis on patriarchal rights based on Biblical text may be debated, it is clear he was working within the constraints of a Biblical text that (he believed) privileged the rights of man over woman, though not exclusively, for he later amends that ". . . there can be no love or good will, and consequently no marriage, without mutual consent" (*Christian* 1000). And later, he continues that the Bible ". . . allows the wife to leave her husband on the most reasonable of grounds, that of inhumanity and unkindness" (*Christian* 1002). Milton's definition of marriage is one in which equality and mutuality exist on at least a basic level. Woman may not enjoy a completely equal partnership, but God's truest and holiest understanding of marriage is one in which love, happiness, and solace exist for both man and woman. It is not one based solely in sensual pleasures, but one in which man and woman must enjoy the benefits of a marriage that God has ordained.

Paradise Lost is rich and complex on many other levels, and Milton's argument is not simply one based on theology. He is also constructing a social and political argument. There is little question that Milton's text is response to present-day events that swept the nation. Christopher Hill asserts, "I believe that Milton's ideas were more directly influenced than is usually recognized by the vents of the English Revolution in which he was an active participant: and that the influences brought to bear on him were much more radical than has been accepted" (*Milton* 4). The execution of Charles II and the subsequent Restoration certainly played no small part in the construction of his great epic.

Hill asserts that poem likely was conceived in two parts, one before and one after the Restoration. He writes:

> The political allusions in *Paradise Lost,* veiled though they had to be, are not indecipherable. The poem was no doubt planned as a whole before the Restoration of May 1660. Nonetheless there must have been a break in 1660, when Milton was in danger of life and forced to go into hiding; and further interruption when he was in prison" (Hill, *Paradise Lost*, 15).

Hill even asserts that the last six books of *Paradise Lost* demonstrate Milton's acceptance of God's will in restoring Charles and cause Milton to evaluate his own rebellious tendencies (Hill, *Paradise Lost* 18).

While present day scholars have done much to evaluate Milton on many fronts, they often construct Milton in a polarity of positions. Whether asserting Milton's misogyny or proclaiming his forwardness in thinking about women, these views are strongly supported by Milton's own words, whether in poetry or prose. What we should draw from this is not that Milton is difficult to evaluate as a Seventeenth Century thinker, but that the world in which he lived was complicated in many ways, and Milton himself was conflicted about his own attitudes towards women. Indeed, Milton was, and is, a man deeply imbedded in his own age. While a revolutionary in a social and political sense, he is also still closely tied to the chauvinist thinking that pervaded his age. Stanley Fish asserts that Milton is intentionally trying to trouble the reader, in so much as he may call the reader to doubt his own interpretive abilities. Fish says, ". . . Milton consciously wants to worry his reader, to force him to doubt the correctness of his responses, and to bring him to the realization that his inability to read the poem with any confidence in his own perceptions is its focus" (*Surprised* 4). In

the Fish analysis, Milton, troubled by his own feelings of inadequacy in explaining his understanding of God's position, chooses to compel the reader to this same troubling realization. In not understanding the will of the Creator, man may better understand himself and, paradoxically, his role in God's plans. In this interpretation, Milton is not seeking reduce the intentions of God into a simple formula, but, rather, much as Raphael explains to Adam, illustrate how the fundamental complexity of God is far too intricate for man to comprehend. Likewise, we may further conclude, that Milton's relations with the figurative, domestic, political, and Biblical figures cannot be reduced to any number of components. Thus, to place Milton too far at either end of an ideological spectrum is to negate any relevance he had inside or outside of his age.

In addition to social and political statements, Milton is seeking to construct a poem in English that would equal the efforts of Classical poets like Homer. At the same time, *Paradise Lost* is a lesson in biblical history melded with classical mythology. He masterfully weaves pagan imagery with Christian doctrine to create "Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime" (Milton *Paradise Lost* I 16). Yet, the centerpiece of this work is his dedication to the idea of free will and God's willingness to leave to man his own destiny. In Book IX, Adam asserts, ". . . force upon free Will hath here no place" (1174). This is the basic principal which rules Satan, Adam, Eve, and the Son yet to come. Rejecting assertions of predetermination, Milton makes plain both the responsibility of man for his fate, and the choice each man and woman still has in eternity. Free will is both the controversy and proclamation of the epic.

Some would exclude Eve as an equal participant in the fall of man; they wish to either assert her blame for Eden's catastrophe, or her unwitting betrayal of the promise between God and man. But Eve's role is far more complicated than either of these two. She, like Adam, had been warned not to partake of the forbidden tree. She, too, ultimately refused to obey God and his commandment. Adam follows her into temptation, rather than demanding that she submit to her punishment. Many would argue that Eve's eagerness to both part from Adam in the garden and her unwillingness to listen to reason when Adam tries to warn her is indicative of Milton's warning for women to obey their husbands. But this ignores the fact that Adam, too, did not allow reason to govern his actions. If anything, this indicates that both man and woman must be held intellectually responsible for the decisions they make, and, sometimes, women and men must be allowed the freedom to make the wrong decision.

Milton's complex use of the role of women is but another essential component of the story. Examined without taking in to account the larger constraints of Milton's struggle, both traditional and feminist evaluations of the work can undermine that elaborate relationship each component of the poem had with each other.

Milton's concept of woman has traditionally rested on the idea that Milton, himself, injected much of his own misogyny into his works. While seemingly encouraging the idea of a companionate marriage within *Paradise Lost*, he also embues the great Christian epic with notion of Eve's frailty, vanity, and stupidity.

Mary Nyquist finds fault with recent criticism that attempts to use *Paradise Lost* as a defense of Milton's misogyny. She says,

> Because much academic criticism on *Paradise Lost*, especially that produced in North America, has been written within a liberal-humanist tradition that wants Milton to be, among other things, the patron saint of companionate marriage, it has frequently made use of a notion of equality that is both mystified and mystifying" (99).

The crux of Nyquist's argument rests on the idea that too much weight has been given to Milton as a man ahead of his time when it comes to the role of women. While many praise Milton's compromise of the two creation stories, the first which states God created man and woman at the same time, the second which elaborates on if not contradicts the first, saying that man was created first and then woman was created out of man. Nyquist asserts that many female critics have proposed alternative compromises that offer a far less patriarchal view of the Genesis creation myth. These authors displace a literary tradition which privileges one creation myth over the other, giving rise to the masculinist assumptions of female subjugation. Nyquist articulates that this tradition allows for the flourishing of "an entire network of of misogynistic or idealizing stereotypes, relating, indifferently, to Genesis and to this institutionally privileged text by Milton, English literature's paradigmatic patriarch" (101). Nyquist follows with an elaborate analysis of Milton's exegetical practices within the context of his own literary age. Nyquist goes on to assert that modern critics have manipulated Milton's texts while ignoring certain obvious contradictions with this view. In her evaluation, the blame falls as much on the masculine traditions with English literature as with Milton himself. This represents a type of criticism that

seeks to reiterate those ideas of Miltonic interpretation that have been glossed over by proto-feminist critiques. If one accepts these interpretations as more or less accurate, then it is little wonder why contemporary feminist critics find Milton a source for the fodder of their criticism. Ironically, while naming Milton as a premium example of the "dead white male" that pervades literary history, he also is the fuel that enables feminist critics to produce a resonance within their criticism. Thus, Milton is an important cog in the machinery of both traditional and contemporary literary criticism. While not presuming to discredit their notions of Milton and his possible misogynous tendencies, I would assert that Milton can be read and interpreted in a variety of ways that do not necessarily suppose a notion of him as chauvinist and misrepresent many of the opinions within his works, particularly *Paradise Lost*.

It is little wonder, then, that Milton is the center of the debate which largely concerns a masculinist interpretation of the canon. Milton, more so than Shakespeare, most completely represents an age in which the new "modern" man was seeking to identify ways in which genders were to function in a new English society. *Paradise Lost* most explicitly portrays the complications of a man and his age. Because the patriarchal tradition absorbed Milton and used him as the essential author (and *Paradise Lost* as the essential text), it is Milton who most often appears as either a saint to protectors of the canon, and the most avid sinner to those who attack the canon as the backbone of a culture and tradition that subordinated women. The complexities we see in Milton are perhaps more debatable today than they have ever been, for the debate over the

canon is as heated now as it has ever been. We should note, however, that Miltonic conclusions are less a product of Milton himself than those who have criticized him over the centuries. With a closer evaluation of the role of women within Milton's age we might more fully understand the gender problems and complexities which Milton faced in *Paradise Lost*.

Part I

If *Paradise Lost* is examined closely within the larger context of all of Milton's works, both prose and poetry, religious and political, one will find that many contradictions exist within the oversimplified idea of Milton as misogynist. Certainly gender representations played a large part in the world and society in which Milton wrote. The role of women was largely limited to the domestic sphere in the Seventeenth Century. Milton often had to espouse his own radical political, religious and philosophical ideas with a prudish and constraining British society. Christopher Hill asserts, "So to criticize Milton because he stated a theory of male superiority is like criticizing him because he did not advocate votes or equal pay for women" (*Milton* 118). Milton carefully placed his own radical ideas within a dense and structured framework (most obviously represented in *Paradise Lost*). Milton "shocked his contemporaries by being prepared to contemplate a situation in which the wife may 'exceed her husband in prudence and dexterity, and he contentedly yield'" (Hill *Milton* 119). Only the discerning and knowledgeable Seventeenth Century reader would have been able to identify the all contradictions within *Paradise Lost*, and only the most unbiased Twenty-first Century reader is able to read past their own societal

biases and understand Milton as a man both ahead of his time and desperately tied within it.

David Boocker connects the idea of various interpretations as one that challenges that any single view can be in itself accurate. They are far too dependent on the time and place of the critic, and how he or she chose to use Milton's text. Boocker absolves Milton of any blame by declaring, ". . . it is unclear whether it was Milton's poetry or the commentator on woman's role in society who used Milton's poetry who was most responsible for the inferior position suggested [of Eve]. . ." (55). Rather than accepting one notion over the other, it is perhaps the contradictions within *Paradise Lost* which most accurately convey Milton's view of women. Perhaps Milton's representation of Eve is one that understands both the potential for conflict within a society where notions of womanhood were drastically changing. At the same time, Milton reiterates both socially and biblically constructed roles of woman as inferior. Hill states:

> Posterity has remembered 'He for God only, she for God in him.' On the basis of this line, taken out of context, the poet has been blamed for failing to rise above his age in this one respect . . . Posterity has forgotten too that this line is only a poetical version of St. Paul's 'wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord'; 'the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church.' Given Milton's assumptions, it is difficult to see how he could have rejected St. Paul's clear and explicit statements. What Milton says about the subordination of women is strictly Biblical . . ." (*Milton* 117).

Milton's idea of woman is one that chooses neither to proclaim her equality nor inferiority. She is a subject in a society where most of the men are also subjects. Megan Matchinske says, ". . . processes of state formation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries . . . affect men, determining acceptable forms of behavior

for them as well as for women" (17). A firm grasp of the subjugation and development of both genders in English society is essential to understanding the world in which Milton lived. In illuminating the role of woman from several angles in this biblical text, Milton constructs a history of women that is complete in its treatment. The point is not to radically alter the position of the female subject, but to organize a text in which a more accurate view of woman (as seen through Eve) is available to the reader. What the reader does with the information is up to the individual, but Milton lays a map in which the frailties of gender roles are exposed. What we encounter here deals largely with Milton's notions of women within *Paradise Lost*, but also briefly examines a few of his prose works to expose the connection between Milton's radical prose statements and their dramatization in *Paradise Lost*. I do not mean to be reductive in the sense that only the views and ideas represented within are accurate, rather, I seek to identify and reiterate Milton's works as magnificently complex, illustrating the contradictions and struggles within the mind of one of English Literature's most pervasive and prolific writers.

Following the path of Milton criticism from the Nineteenth Century up to present day, several clear shifts in focus occur. While early Milton critics were largely male, later female critics have also examined Milton in useful ways. The results of an examination of Milton criticism reveal that, more often than not, critics tend to confuse their own ideological motivations with their critical responsibilities. Much as proto-feminist critics may claim that Milton's misogyny comes not from Milton but from a largely male critical body that appropriates

Milton into their own misogyny, feminist critics have often misrepresented Milton's intentions by focusing on this appropriation rather than the text itself. Joseph Wittreich says:

> Recent feminist criticism is also likely to be rebuked for confusing its critical obligations with its ideological commitments, which involve the raising up of certain texts and the relinquishing of others—and in the case of Milton, the relinquishing of the one text that is itself a promoter of ideological and ideologically rigorous criticism and that is therefore a potent ally in the feminist cause. It is as important for feminist criticism to reinterpret the canon as it is for it to redress the canon" (138).

Wittreich astutely points out that feminists can be guilty of the same critical oversight and prejudice that many traditional male critics have committed. As we discover from textual examinations, Milton's works, *Paradise Lost* in particular are far more rife with contradictions than any masculinist or feminist scholar would like to admit. It is these contradictions, in and of themselves, which are our most important clue as to the mind and intent of Milton. Richard Corum asserts that a reevaluation is necessary both on the part of female and male scholars. He says:

> For men readers the choice is either to stand with those who have worked to extend a patriarchal idea of woman throughout an infinite male universe as unalterable, orthodox truth, or to ally oneself with those who have struggled to reduce this patriarchal structure of imperial signification to a concept in the minds, and in the practice, of one's predecessors, however brilliant or influential (140).

The following examination of criticism serves to expose not only feminist misreadings, but also the masculinist assumptions that predicated their similar fall from germane critical evaluations.

A look at even one passage from *Paradise Lost* reveals the crux of the problem: "Hee for God only, shee for God in him" (IV 298). Traditional

patriarchal interpretations tend to support their own hierarchy of gender relations. To them, this passage alludes that while man (Adam) may speak directly with God, woman (Eve) must receive her divine instruction through her husband. This conclusion is simply and readily discernable from this passage. And yet, as others have noted, this line is strictly drawn from St. Paul's ideas on the views of women. Yet further examination into the passage indicates that it is not quite as simple as this interpretation implies. Milton's suppositions support the position that one could easily conclude that woman's allegiance to man would end if man were not honest or open to the true message of God. Eve's submission to Adam remains only so long as man himself is obedient to God's will. This notion could extend far beyond the realm of Eden to Seventeenth Century England. A woman should remain subservient only so long as she understands her husband to be obeying the will of God. Milton asserts that in this case, "a superior and more natural law comes in, that the wiser should govern the less wise" (*Milton* 119-120). Either interpretation is possible, and I do not mean to suppose one over the other. The important conclusion here is that Milton perhaps intended to admit this contradiction without necessarily providing the answer to the dilemma. How is woman to know the will of God if she is only meant to receive it through man? How then could she determine when and if she is to be obedient to her husband without some degree of thought and communication with her Father on her own? One could conclude that these contradictions exist precisely because that is what the English woman was faced with in this era of political and social instability.

Milton's justifies the ways of God to man while subtly introducing the problems of the ways of Seventeenth Century man.

An equally debatable passage is used at the end of Book XII. Eves says:

> Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence.
> This further consolation yet secure
> I carry hence; though all by mee is lost,
> Such favour I unworthie am voutsaft,
> By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore. (618-623)

Eve here refers to her original sin that prompted the fall of mankind. She accepts full responsibility for the act, leaving none to her male counterpart. Many feminist critics would argue that Milton here and always allows Eve to represent all of guilt in the fall. Yet we know, and any reader would also conclude, that Eve is not alone responsible for the fall. Eve did not compel Adam to partake of the fruit, it was his own weakness which predicated his fall. Milton seems to acknowledge the debate by having Eve herself hyperbolize both her guilt and her absolution. In Book IX she states:

> Was I to have never parted from thy side?
> As good have grown there still a liveless Rib.
> Being as I am, why didst not thou the Head
> Command me absolutely not to go, (1153-1156)

And later, in Book XI, she states, ". . . to mee reproach / Rather belongs, distrust and all dispraise" (165-166). Milton allows Eve herself the first antifeminist and feminist responses to her action. But here Adam and Eve must share responsibility for their choices. Milton provides many examples of this mutual responsibility and tests the reader to understand the most appropriate interpretations.

Yet another passage indicates a common problem in Miltonic interpretation, that which put too much emphasis on mutuality and companionate idea of marriage, making Milton the patron saint of equality in marriage. In Book IV, Milton writes:

> So hand in hand they passd, the lovliest pair
> That ever since in loves imbraces met,
> Adam the goodliest man of men since borne
> His Sons, the fairest of her Daughters Eve. (320-324)

Many modern scholars and students who wish to absolve Milton of his misogyny most often misuse passages like this to explain that Milton is laying the plans for a marriage of equality. It would be easy to collect these passages (it happens again at the end of the epic) to overlook the many contradictions within the text that dismiss this idea of social, emotional or intellectual equality. Hill says, "Milton is not so reductive as to limit his work to one interpretation; instead he lays the groundwork for the reader to be left to his own devices (and prejudices)" (*Paradise* 14)

David Boocker provides a useful examination of the ways in which the Sarah Grimke, the prominent Nineteenth Century woman's rights advocate, used Milton, or rather, masculine appropriations of Milton to explain the position of antebellum women. Boocker's piece, entitled "Women Are Indebted to Milton" supposes that traditional critical evaluations of Milton allowed women such as Grimke to expose the patriarchal system of female subjugation for what it was. Using Milton as a map, Grimke goes back further to the masculinist assumptions about Biblical treatments of women, particularly Eve. Boocker writes:

> Thus, for woman's rights activists, Milton was for their patriarchal society a spokesman whose word was good "holy writ," and attacking him was necessary not just to establish a feminist reading of a great literary work, but because attaining equal status in an extreme patriarchal society depended on it (62).

Traditional interpretations of women compared "the condition of woman in the mid-nineteenth century to that of the slave who was kept ignorant because knowledge was either the source of unhappiness or liberty" (Boocker 55). It is not then surprising that the early suffragists reacted violently to these Miltonic assertions, as he represented the most often reviewed literary figure. In fact, Boocker writes, "This point cannot be emphasized enough; Americans framed Milton's picture of marital bliss, and writers of the period used the picture to teach women proper 'manners and morals'" (58). Boocker's conclusion is that women are indebted to Milton for allowing them to expose the hegemony of a patriarchal society through one of its most prolific writers. The important asterisk on these assertions is that it is the way Milton is conveyed to a generation of female readers rather than Milton himself who is guilty of the misogyny. What other way could women react, but with scorn, to a man who's work were passed on with as much reverence as the Bible, and with an equal disdain for divergent interpretations? Boocker summarizes, "For these women, Milton was as guilty as Paul of providing generations of antifeminists with the fodder they need to develop elaborate arguments against equal rights for women" (Boocker 52). While these women are not to blame for their outraged reactions, their remarks need to be qualified and directed against the body of the patriarchy most responsible—not Milton himself.

Later women authors referred to this dilemma (Virgina Woolf would later allude to it as "Milton's Bogey"). The phantom of male appropriation of Milton left them feeling dismissed and subjugated again and again by the same system of patriarchy. Sandra Gilbert provides a useful analysis of Woolf's concept of "Milton's Bogey". She writes, ". . .it may refer to another fictitious spectre, one more bogey created by Milton: his inferior and Satanically inspired Eve, who has also intimidated women and blocked their view of possibilities both real and literary" (Gilbert 58-59). Gilbert's view of Woolf is that, while Milton may not have intended his work to be used as exclusively as it has been by the hierarchy of male critics and scholars, Woolf indicates that "Milton's bogey" is something that women readers and writers must contend with anyway. She writes, "Milton's bogey, whatever else it may be is ultimately his cosmology, his vision of 'what *men* thought' and his powerful rendering of the culture myth that Woolf, like most other literary women, sensed at the heart of Western literary patriarchy" (Gilbert 61). Milton's bogey is quite real to generations of women who had to contend with his oppressive interpretations. In fact, Gilbert asserts, interpretations of Milton are as much responsible for latter day subjugation of women as they are indicative of women as the Seventeenth-Century subject. Far from absolving Milton, Gilbert implies that is not so much Milton's intent as it is the intent of the exclusively male keepers of the canon who force this view of Eve down women's throats. These men, Gilbert claims, "teach us that Milton's most repressive attitudes towards women are so basic to 'the seventeenth-century mind' as to be beyond criticism. We must accept them, we are told, with an earnest appeal to

our historical sense, if we are ever to appreciate the Great Work in the context of its age" (67). It is these misinterpretations that provide an inaccurate sense of Milton's portrayal as the exclusive representation of Seventeenth-Century woman.

Janet Halley attacks this exclusiveness explicitly in her work. It is those who see Milton's representations as somehow indicative of a homogenized view of women that continuously restore and reiterate the falsities of women's roles in the Seventeenth-Century. Much like today, the Seventeenth-Century woman cannot be simply and concretely reduced to one role, positive or negative. Halley says:

> Milton's antifeminist and liberal feminist readers repeatedly charge that it is a-historical to approach his work with reading assumptions invented after the seventeenth century – Webber even asserts that the modern reader of Milton should study his representation not of woman but of humanity, because seventeenth-century women did not see their interests as distinct from men's" (233).

Here again, a critic points to the tendency for critical analysis to tend to be reduce and exclude rather than augment and include. Any reader should realize that no work can be so inclusive as to cover the gamut of possible interpretations. Much as Milton constructs his view of the fall, a hundred other authors would have constructed in a different way, lending themselves to a hundred different interpretations. Modern criticism would sometimes like to limit itself to a few rather than many and numerous interpretations of a text or era. Certainly, the Seventeenth-Century notion of women acted upon Milton as his representation of Eve, but this in no way requires that the reverse is true; one

cannot work backwards from *Paradise Lost* to create a homogeneous idea of woman.

The notion of the contradictions within Milton's text are effectively discussed by David Aers and Bob Hodge. Numerous critics erroneously "have presented a homogenized Milton and a homogenized seventeenth century, resolving all tensions, blind to all contradictions and dissidence in Milton or his society. They are certainly not inspired by any disinterested regard for the truth or historical fact, so sadly and reluctantly we must suspect them of ideological motivation" (Aers and Hodge 68). Here Aers and Hodge assert that any critic who blindly reduces Milton to any one ideological interpretation are too subject to their own biases, rather than relying on the text itself for a possible understandings of the work. Their impetus rests in the prejudices they bring with them to their "scholarly" approach. Neither the masculinist or feminist critic is absolved in this analysis. If either suggest that Milton is able to be approached exclusively from one angle or another, they exhibit a reckless regard for the truth which Milton himself so tirelessly struggled to find. Instead, "His attitudes to women and sex entailed contradictions which he never fully resolved" (Aers and Hodge 68). The point that must be constantly reinforced is that Milton himself was highly conscious of the paradoxes within his text and within British society. His epic efforts were not to reduce them to one view or another, but to point the reader to the contradictions that exist, and, in doing so, leave the reader with ability to decipher their implications on his/her own. It is in this way that Milton is able to at once make " new demands on the marriage relationship and weakened

the repressive forms of the basic ideology in this area, he did not bring himself to renounce an exploitationary relationship which he as a male benefited from in seventeenth-century society (as his descendants of male gender in the twentieth century continue to benefit). ..." (Aers and Hodge 72), While at the same time he "carefully denies that Eve is unintelligent or uninterested, yet (as so many of our women students have pointed out to us) still gives the impression that she is both" (Aers and Hodge 72).

As this brief review of Milton criticism has indicated, the critics themselves have often highlighted the crux of the Miltonic problem; Milton is neither misogynist or feminist, monster or savior, he, like any great literary mind, is able to construct the issue in such a way that it can readily be absorbed and debated by a great many people, religious or secular, male or female. If one finds his argument lacking in any regard, this lack is often accentuated by the reader's own biases and opinions.

Part II

The first, and perhaps most obvious, of Milton's assertions is the idea of free will. While we all recall the struggles between doctrines of Calvinistic predestination and Puritanical free will, we should be quick to point out how these struggles are not linked to Adam, or men alone. If we may begin with a basic and overt idea, even the most ardent critic would concede that Milton's portrayal of Eve is not so severe as to make her appear to have no intellectual capacity, or at least the capacity to make a decision of her own volition.

She, like Adam, was given amply warning not to partake of the forbidden tree of knowledge. Eve gives a lengthy argument in Book IX as to why she should be allowed to find her own way in the garden and wonders aloud why Adam should doubt her. She says, "But that thou shouldst my firmness therfore doubt / To God or thee, because we have a foe / May tempt it, I expected not to hear" (279-281). She later condemns God's and Adam's instruction, claiming that they could not be destined to hide from Satan and temptation forever. She says, "If this be our condition, thus to dwell / In narrow circuit strait'nd by a Foe"(322-323). Adam fears her weakness will leave her unable to resist temptation by invoking passion rather than reason. Adam retorts:

> Firm we subsist, yet possible to swerve,
> Since Reason not impossibly may meet [360]
> Some specious object by the Foe subornd,
> And fall into deception unaware (359-362).

But Eve insists that she must have the choice on her own, reiterating the Miltonic idea that virtue untested is no virtue at all. She says, "that our trial, when least sought, / May finde us both perhaps farr less prepar'd" (380-381). Faith untested wanes and atrophies. Stella Revard takes it a bit further by intimating that Eve's questioning of Adam forces him to fully realize the implications of his views. Revard says "Yet the point is that Eve's passionate defense of the liberty of the individual finally provokes Adam to a fully comprehensive to the answers she has raised" (277). In other words, Adam spouts advice to Eve without fully comprehending himself exactly what is meant by the statements. It is not a question of who has the weaker intellect, but who is more willing to encounter the full implications of both thoughts and actions. Eve is finally allowed to walk on

her own, but only after Adam has exhausted all of his arguments. Yet, disregarding her instincts, she gives into Satan's temptation based on a twisted but sound logic. Adam, on the other hand, given an equal amount of preparation, gives in to temptation based not on his intellectual capacity, but his capacity for lust. And this lust goes beyond a crude form of adultery, but a step further in what Milton would call infidelity to the ultimate bridegroom, the one to whom loyalty was owed more than a wife. This kind of lust bordered on idolatry, what Milton saw as the greatest danger to the Christian man. Milton is contrasting mere physical adultery with the graver offence of spiritual adultery.

Part III

This idea of woman as sexual object is masterfully reviewed by David Hawkes in his book *Idols of the Marketplace*. Hawkes asserts that Milton's epic was a way in which he could confound the Seventeenth Century notion of the woman as subject. It is a representation of woman that does not allow man and woman to fully realize the extent of their marriage. When woman becomes a simple object, she is separated from God, and, when man makes her into a false representation—a sexual object, if you will--he makes himself a subject. Woman was reduced to an idol and, as Hawkes says, ". . . Milton was impelled to construct a theory of idolatry as false consciousness, which he later imported, substantially unchanged, into his opinions on politics and religion" (170). Hawkes's assertion is that Milton was aware of a problem within Seventeenth Century society, and wished to challenge this convention in *Paradise Lost.* What naturally follows from this argument is that lust takes the places of love. While

Eve and Adam may enjoy nuptial bliss unashamed initially, Adam's view of Eve as an idol reduces her to an object of lust. Unchecked lust for woman is a repeated theme in Milton's works (*Samson Agonistes*, for example), it does not detract from the idea that Eve at least had to be intellectually persuaded to disobey God's commandment. While one could still lay blame on Milton for Eve's diminished capacity, this does not mean he intended to reduce her portrayal to one of simple pawn in a game between God and Satan.

Part IV

The notion of the "fortunate fall" is one of the key positions of *Paradise Lost*. Adam rejoices when he hears the news, "High in the love of Heav'n, yet from my Loynes / Thou shalt proceed, and from thy Womb the Son / Of God most High; So God with man unites" (XII 380-382). While this is centrally located in the idea of man's fall allowing Jesus to come into the world--and ultimately to redeem all mankind, this idea can extend far beyond this Christian notion. The fortunate fall also allows man to exist in state of total free will, allowing her/him to know the evils of the world, but, at the same time, knowing the ultimate good achievable on earth. The fall to which Milton alludes allows for man and woman to come to a state whereby they may fully enjoy the freedom which God intended. In one sense, the fall allows a savior to come into the world, but, in another sense, in puts man and woman on equal footing before the lord, as equals in their act of disobedience. While Milton may have placed more blame on Eve, the sin that they committed in Eden also allows the two to realize their dependence on each other for their destination in eternity. Man and woman both

have failed on their own, but, perhaps out of their failure may come the realization that they may "hand in hand" find a place in heaven. While Adam and Eve exist in a state of total happiness and joy in Eden, this paradisiacal state is tempered by the strange aloofness in which Adam and Eve enjoy Eden. While they exist in nuptial bliss, their ultimate happiness is one that is limited by their lack of complete understanding. It is a sort of semi-angelic existence, in which Adam and Eve obviously have choice, but this choice is limited to one object; the Tree of Knowledge. They know no suffering of pain and therefore cannot truly appreciate the happiness that they feel.

The choices of Adam and Eve, which Milton takes great pains to indicate are a matter of free will, are nonetheless only a limited part of the existence that Milton would call crucial to human volition. The fall is predicated by God's (and the reader's) pre-knowledge of the event. Both God and the reader know that Adam and Eve will sin, but neither put it in man's nature to do so. The post-fall situation is immediately one of shame and misery, but this nonetheless enables Adam and Eve to imagine human existence in its entirety. This notion is exemplified by God's prediction that man and woman will know misery on this earth, but, at the same time, they will ultimately prevail over Satan.

While Adam and Eve may have existed forever in Paradise, their fall allows for all of men to enjoy the extremes of the human condition. The knowledge of good and evil in the world allows for each man and woman to make their own choice with complete awareness of the results of their actions. Eve may know the pain of childbirth, and Adam may know the pains of hard labor, but

they will each ultimately achieve greater pleasure from the nuptial union. Though death and sin enter the world, they eventually allow Adam and Eve to have the ability to live for eternity in heaven with God, rather than two individuals existing in a state of semi-separation from God. Satan's hate and anger may haunt man for thousands of years, bit, ultimately, they are able to enjoy the fruits of love with God forever. In the end, man exists in a state of total responsibility for his actions, an idea Milton mentions continuously and is the foundation for most of his prose works.

Part V

Before we can fully conclude our examination Milton's notions of women in the Seventeenth Century, we must also discuss how Seventeenth Century ideas of woman existed in England. While an analysis of this kind certainly does not absolve Milton's alleged misogynous tendencies, it provides a more complete analysis of how society constrained, to a certain extent, what Milton could portray. Much as society constrains how women may live and function in the Twenty-first Century, Milton's portrayal of Eve was most certainly affected by societal expectations.

While some women had challenged assumptions (most notably Elizabeth I), for the most part, women were still expected to behave in certain socially constructed ways. These notions were certainly changing within England during this time (as they were around the world), but, largely due to the pressures of a burgeoning capitalist society, women were still largely wives and caretakers. They were expected to make little, if any, intellectual contributions to society or

the marriage. Indeed, because a capitalist society demanded a constantly growing labor force, the pressures of a woman to bear children were, if anything, heightened in Milton's day. A woman's refusal to participate in the marriage system was tantamount to subverting the nation state. Because "pressures" existed on men to govern society and forge a new England (especially as the role of the monarchy was challenged), any progressive notions of womanhood were placed as secondary to this revolutionary change in British society.

Indeed, much has been made of the fact that Milton was radical in so many other respects, but notably silent when it came to progressing the rights of women in society. Critics speculate the exact nature of such refusal of an otherwise seemingly enlightened mind to except and assert progressive notions of womanhood. While one could assume this refusal rests on Milton's own sex bias, one could also easily maintain that Milton was simply acting within a system that repressed women. This may offer little solace to present day feminist critics, but, as Christopher Hill points out, "Subjection of wives to husbands was conventionally accepted in the seventeenth century . . ." (*Milton* 126). While societal ideas may have been progressive enough to allow the removal of sitting monarch or even divorce, they were not progressive enough to allow one man, no matter how influential, to radically redefine notions of womanhood. Milton did his best, acting within societal boundaries, to put forth a new idea of womanhood and marriage.

In addition to societal constraints, Milton also had to deal with structuring an idea of woman in accordance with Biblical interpretations. While there is room

for Milton's individual interpretation, Milton also had to construct an idea of woman that would not compromise the greater mission of his work, to justify the ways of God to man. Biblical mythology clearly places Eve as secondary to Adam, made for his benefit as a help-meet. Thus, the Bible thoroughly constrained Milton's possibilities for interpretation. How could he assert woman's equality without confounding the Judeo-Christian idea in the Bible?

Milton, much as he did in his divorce tracts, took a great deal of risk in a drastically altering a traditional biblical story in the book of Genesis. While present day critics may take issue with his interpretation, they nonetheless should give Milton a little credit for at least attempting a reasonable alternative to Biblical traditions. Milton gives Eve a far greater voice in *Paradise Lost* than she had in the Bible. Unlike Genesis, in which Eve is given barely a footnote in the creation myth, *Paradise Lost* allows for a fuller more complete understanding of Eve and for Eve to generate a voice for herself. Most notably, Eve responds with her willingness to put her faith to the test. While Adam is hesitant to allow her to go, he nonetheless bends to her arguments. Eve says:

> If this be our condition, thus to dwell
> In narrow circuit strait'n'd by a Foe
> Subtle or violent, we not endu'd
> Single with like defense, wherever met.
> How are we happy, still in fear of harm? (IX 322-326)

Eve is fully aware, however arrogantly, of the possibility of temptation apart from Adam. She persists in her belief that God had not intended them to wander together for eternity. Free choice is an essential part of the matter. No "narrow circuit" in which they build a wall around themselves could allow them the full

privilege of Eden. Neither should they allow Satan to keep them pinned to only a small part of Paradise. No true happiness can exist when they are confined in a prison built by the "Foe" around them. If they exist in a state of perpetual fear, then they cannot truly be happy. Eve refuses to believe this is what God intended for them. Finally Adam relents, and Eve continues to the foreseen, but not pre-destined temptation of Satan.

Conclusion

Milton is neither the first advocate of companionate marriage nor the first of the white orthodoxy to assert woman's submissive role. While a bit of each is included in his intricately constructed Epic *Paradise Lost*, a review of the entire body of his works indicates a career rife with this contradiction. Milton promoted divorce on the basis of intellectual or spiritual incompatibility. He condemned adultery to one's God over one's wife. He allowed for women, albeit in rare cases, to understand the will of God better than their husbands. The potential for Milton to be absorbed by the masculinist tradition is no greater than any other writer, including Shakespeare. It is a patriarchal tradition that appropriated Milton for its use and, in turn, put a level of oppression on women and women writers during and after the Seventeenth Century. The fact that Milton is continuously attacked as a misogynist and defended as an early promoter of women's rights is more of a judgment of our own biases than it can be a condemnation of Milton and his work. Milton exposes the problems inherent in the life of the early modern woman while mapping the system of patriarchal control that is still in place to this day. The fact that little has changed in this regard is evidence that

Milton was far ahead of his time in the understanding of sex and gender roles. It should be the mission of the modern critic neither to build his works up nor to tear them down, but to look for ways in which an examination of Milton can lead to a greater understanding of our own, as well as Milton's, age.

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