

# Eve Reimagined: Milton's Undoing of Misogynistic Traditions

Annalyse Granowski<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>West Texas A&M University

## ABSTRACT

How might John Milton's depiction of Eve unintentionally reveal the uniquely feminine struggle for equality in a patriarchal power structure? In the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), Milton "justifies the ways of God to men" by emphasizing the importance of obedience. However, Eve disregards Adam's suggestion that they work together in Eden, and this separation results in her falling into temptation. Eve chooses to work independently because of her own desire, but is this decision a form of disobedience? Even though *Paradise Lost* establishes Eden to be a patriarchal structure, I believe that Eve's decision might plausibly be interpreted as an attempt to gain equality. In this paper, I wish to claim that Milton attempted to minimize the assumption that Eve's act was merely a selfish or impulsive one. Instead, he depicts his only female figure as a being who can equally make decisions just like the male figures in the Garden, and her independence allows her to attempt to escape a gendered hierarchy. Instead, the misogynistic environment of Eden may play a larger role than originally thought. While traditionally the interrogation of Eve in Judeo-Christian discourse has revolved around her act of disobedience against God, Milton shifts the narrative to focus on Eve's interactions with Adam; with this modification, Milton creates the possibility for disrupting misogynistic traditions of interpreting Genesis.

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In the story of Genesis, historically, Eve has been interpreted through a misogynistic lens, where she often faces harsh criticism and blame for choosing to eat the forbidden fruit and causing the Fall of humanity. However, the seventeenth-century poet John Milton expands the narrative of the Garden of Eden from previous medieval depictions. Ironically, Milton retells the story to emphasize the importance of obedience, but he shifts the narrative to focus on Eve's interactions with Adam; with this modification, Milton creates the possibility of disrupting misogynistic interpretations of Genesis. Milton's depiction of Eve also places her within the patriarchal structure of Eden, but she regularly engages with Adam through dialogue and freely chooses to express her opinions and perform certain actions in the Garden. It is through her dialogue that Milton's representation of Eve becomes ambivalent since her ability to verbally admit her sin and be forthright in her confession allows him to ease some of the blame that she faced from the Fall, even if she had acted immorally.

In Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667), the depiction of Eve often leaves scholars conflicted, since she can be interpreted in a feminist light; or, she can be viewed as an oppressed figure who is inferior to Adam. Scholars are conflicted about Milton's representation of Eve since she is initially constrained by the gender hierarchy that is rooted within Eden; yet, she starts to develop a sense of agency as the narrative evolves. It is through Adam and Eve's interactions, the circumstances that influence Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit, and her confession after the Fall that Milton reimagines Eve in ways that depart from previous narratives. Milton's deviation from previous narratives in his retelling of Eden opens up the following interpretive question: How does Milton's expansion of the narrative of Eden ease some of the blame that Eve received for causing the Fall? This textual analysis will examine how Milton's representation of Eve shifts away from previous medieval narratives of Eden, such as that of the Junius manuscript from the tenth century, with his conflicting depiction of her. Ultimately, I believe that Milton is elevating

Eve through her ambivalent representation and departing from traditional Judeo-Christian interpretations of Genesis, and his modification of the narrative eases some of the blame and criticism that Eve faced for causing the Fall.

Milton's depiction of Adam and Eve's marriage in *Paradise Lost* was largely shaped by his own views of what made a compatible marriage and what constituted grounds for divorce. In early modern England, marriage was primarily understood within a legal context, where there were constant tensions between the compatibility of two partners and the law of the Church, which legally determined who was allowed to marry. An English historian, named Lawrence Stone, writes about how the English Church passed regulations to tightly enforce rules over the institution of marriage. During the sixteenth century, a common practice was a contractual marriage, which only required a verbal statement to legally bind two individuals. Stone states that:

In these [contractual] cases enormous pressure was often brought by his [the husband's] parents and kin to persuade the man to repudiate the contract. While he hesitated and procrastinated, it often happened that the woman became pregnant. The pressure from his parents and kin then intensified, and the man often reluctantly, or cynically, went back on his alleged promise to marry. (19)

Contractual marriages often resulted in a woman being abandoned and many children being born out of wedlock. Marriage involves more than the two individuals entering into the partnership, and pressures from family members also interfered with subjective feelings and the compatibility present between the couple. In Milton's lifetime, after the civil war in 1642, even tighter control was placed on marriage by the Church. Now, instead of a matrimonial ceremony involving two individuals and their relatives, marriage involves even more social pressures than before since a legally binding marriage only occurred if it was witnessed by a court official. Stone states:

The legislation ordered each parish to elect a 'register,' whose job it was to keep a record of all marriages. Prospective marrying couples were instructed to declare their intentions to the register; to have banns read three times in Church; to produce a certificate from the register that there had been no objections; and if under 21 to provide proof of parental consent. Armed with these documents, the couple were to present themselves to a JP, who would perform a simple secular ceremony in a private house. All other forms of marriage were declared illegal. (20)

Legal marriages now had to be approved by a court official before they could be legitimate. In Milton's time, the Church maintained tight control over the practice of marriage. And the Church's rules for marriage had wide implications that dominated the notion of compatibility within a marriage. However, the political beliefs of certain individuals, such as Milton, often came in conflict with this governmental ideology of marriage.

Milton opposes the Church's ban on divorce and supports separation in the case of incompatibility, which establishes the cultural tension between the law and subjective feeling. In the seventeenth century, divorce was only allowed in the case of incest or non-consummation, but Milton argues in his essay *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643) that uncleanness of the body is similar to the unfitness of the mind, which is why separation due to incompatibility is justified. He states that:

The cause of divorce mentioned in the law is translated [as] 'some uncleanness' which by all the learned interpreters refers to the mind as well as to the body. And what greater nakedness or unfitness of the mind than that which hinders ever the solace and peaceful society of the married couple, and what hinders that more than the unfitness and defectiveness of an unconjugal mind? (870)

For Milton, forcing two mentally incompatible partners to remain married results in a defective marriage. In fact, he prioritizes mental compatibility over physical compatibility in marriage. He claims that “indeed it is a greater blessing from God, more worthy so excellent a creature as man is, and a higher end to honor and sanctify the league of marriage, whenas the solace and satisfaction of the mind is regarded and provided for before the sensitive pleasing of the body” (871). Milton prioritizes mental compatibility in a marriage as the most important factor for a true partnership of happiness. For him, subjective feeling and compatibility take precedence over Church law that forces two incompatible partners together.

Milton emphasizes that compatibility results in a state of happiness, as was intended by the biblical sense of marriage, which opens up interpretive possibilities about his depiction of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* since he shifts the narrative to focus on their interactions. Ironically, Milton uses the story of Genesis to support his argument on mental compatibility in his doctrine. He discusses how Eve was created to be Adam’s companion and states that “God’s intention [for] a meet and happy conversation is the chiefest and the noblest end of marriage, for we find here no expression so necessarily implying carnal knowledge as this prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man” (871). For Milton, a compatible marriage results in a state of peace and happiness and allows individuals to escape from the state of loneliness. However, by forcing two mentally incompatible individuals together the English law has only deepened the sense of loneliness. According to Milton, by forcing a marriage rooted in unhappiness to continue, the English Church is disregarding the religious ideal for the meaning of marriage. Milton concludes that the true sense of marriage does not involve any kind of forced partnership with one another. He claims that “marriage is a covenant, the very being whereof consists not in a forced cohabitation and counterfeit performance of duties, but in unfeigned love and peace” (877). For Milton, marriage involves a partnership that cannot be forced in any way. His notion that marriage is more of a mental state than a legal one connects to his depiction of Adam and Eve in his poem *Paradise Lost*. His portrayal of their marriage involves a strong sense of compatibility since they are always interacting and openly communicating with one another, which may be why Eve has a stronger sense of freedom than in previous narratives. Additionally, Milton’s belief that the partnership rooted within a true marriage cannot be compelled has subtle feminist implications for his depiction of Eve, since she is never forced to bend her own will to accommodate Adam’s way of thinking. Milton represents Eve as a being with agency, who consistently makes her own choices about the different actions she will perform in the Garden.

Milton enables Eve to perform actions with a sense of agency, and this freedom is what creates ambivalence in her representation since Eve’s freely made decisions also result in the Fall. Eve’s conflicting depiction alludes to the cultural tensions that were present between free choice and immorality. Milton stresses the importance of free choice, which is displayed through his political writings. In response to legislation passed on censorship, such as licensing laws that required any text to be approved by the government before it could be printed for the public, Milton wrote a political speech entitled *Areopagitica* (1644), where he advocated for personal liberties. In this piece, Milton attempts to persuade Parliament about the importance of freedom of choice by connecting it to the state of one’s virtuousness. He claims that true liberty is not the absence of publicly expressed wrongs; instead, it is the ability to express those grievances. Milton states that:

For this is not the liberty which we can cope, that no grievance ever should arise in the commonwealth – that let no man in this world expect. But when complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for. (928)

For Milton, an individual’s ability to freely express their opinions, even if those opinions contradict common societal beliefs, is what truly creates a free population. Additionally, Milton emphasizes the importance of free choice by connecting one’s ability to choose to their virtue. He questions how virtuousness can even be acquired if no one has the opportunity to choose goodness amongst evil. He claims that “all kinds of knowledge whether of good or evil; the knowledge cannot defile, nor consequencely the books, if the will and conscience be not defiled” (937). Milton stresses

that texts themselves do not corrupt individuals, instead individuals are what corrupt texts to represent immoral values. For him, freedom of choice and virtue/righteousness connect to one another, and that tension presides over the governmental value of censorship. The importance of free choice and its connection to someone's ability to choose righteousness is heavily reflected in Milton's representation of Eve. Although Eve does choose to eat the forbidden fruit and causes the Fall, she also freely chooses to confess her sin in a direct manner. Therefore, Milton's prioritization of free choice becomes vital in his depiction of Eve, since she freely made choices that cause both her downfall and later her redemption.

Milton highlights the importance of free choice and opens up the interpretive possibilities with his depiction of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, since both the circumstances that surround the Fall and the decision to confess their wrongdoing are freely made choices. Despite the tragedy of the Fall from Eden, Milton does acknowledge that it did create the benefit of free choice. It is the story of Genesis that shapes Milton's claims about free choice. He states that:

Good and evil we know in the field of this world grow up together almost inseparately; and the knowledge of good is so involved and interwoven with the knowledge of evil...It was from out the rind of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the world. And perhaps that is the doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evil, that is to say, of knowing good by evil. (939)

For Milton, someone cannot only be exposed to goodness; instead, they become a virtuous being when they choose moral principles over immoral/sinful options. Milton also stresses that God intended for individuals to make free choices. He connects his argument again to the story of Genesis. He claims that:

When God gave him [Adam] reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing; he had been else a mere artificial Adam such an Adam as he is in the motions. We ourselves esteem not of that obedience, or love, or gift, which is of force. God therefore left him free, set before him a provoking object, ever almost in his eyes; herein consisted his merit, herein the right of his reward, the praise of his abstinence. (944)

According to Milton, a true sense of free choice does not involve any form of force or influence, since this would hinder one's true state of virtue. After all, God created Adam and Eve to be free beings with their own sense of agency, and this freedom is how Milton reshapes the narrative to focus on the slightly different ways that Adam and Eve confess their sin. It is through Eve's forthright confession that Milton can reshift the narrative and ease some of the blame that she endured for causing the Fall. Milton reshifts the narrative by allowing Eve to take on a more authoritative role during their confessions than she previously did in the narrative, and she accepts responsibility for her sinful action. Eve's forthrightness in her confession allows Milton to display her in a positive light, since she becomes an example of a proper response to sin, and reconnects herself to her faith.

In more recent scholarship, there has been a discussion about the gender hierarchy that is rooted within the patriarchal structure of Eden, including Milton's depiction of the Garden. In her article, Allison Bare discusses the different ways that Eve is implied to be an inferior figure in comparison to Adam. She claims that:

It is my contention that Milton conveys a fundamental asymmetry between the female and male sexes that manifest at various levels within the text as a power imbalance favoring the male... Eve is largely portrayed as yielding to, submitting to, or compliant with Adam's direction of energy, and Adam is largely portrayed as initiating energy. It is a picture of imbalance. (96)

Bare holistically examines and analyzes Eden and connects the structure of the environment to Adam and Eve's behaviors. In the article, Bare's main claim resides in her analysis of the nature in Eden, where Adam names animals while Eve is only allowed to name plants, the lower-ranked living species; this difference in their connection to the environment of Eden implies the gender hierarchy at the most subtle level. For Bare, she interprets Milton's depiction of Eve as an inferior figure compared to Adam and joins the scholarly conversation about the oppression that restrains Eve in the Garden. However, Bare only analyzes the environment of Eden rather than focusing on the characterization of Eve. She concludes that Milton's "Paradise [is] founded on sexual inequality and widespread objectification of one sex by the other... [a comprehensive approach] exposes deficiencies within Eve's environment, rather than deficiencies within Eve per se" (110). Bare concludes that the structure of Eden is rooted in inequality and there is a gender hierarchy present, where the male gender is superior to the female. Bare's article focuses on the ramifications that the gender hierarchy has on Eve, and her interpretation focuses on Eve's behavior in response to her environment rather than Eve's engagement with Adam through their interactions and dialogue.

Similar to a holistic approach, a close analysis also reveals how other scholars can also perceive Eve as the weaker sex. In her article, Deirdre Keenan McChrystal analyzes the different cultural lenses that forced the idea that Eve was the inferior being. Through this analytical approach, McChrystal is potentially in conversation with Bare's claims that Eve's inferiority was due to her oppression; however, McChrystal departs from the notion that Milton's Eve is subordinate to Adam and insists it is remarkable that Eve has a voice to express her ideas and beliefs. Similar to Bare, McChrystal recognizes the gender hierarchy rooted within Eden, but McChrystal does not attribute this inequality to Milton's depiction and instead recognizes its origin in the Bible. McChrystal discusses how deeply the gender hierarchy created in the Bible penetrates societal understandings of gender differences, especially in the seventeenth century when Milton retold the narrative of Genesis. She states that:

As a symbol, Eve bears diverse meaning, representing the first woman, the source of life, beauty, grace, innocence, love, sin, pride, deceit, and death. Even more essentially, at least within the Judeo-Christian tradition, Eve symbolizes subordination as the "offspring" of both God the Father and Adam, and moral inferiority as the cause of the Fall. (490-91)

McChrystal acknowledges the sense of inferiority that is attributed to Eve, and the criticism she faced for the Original Sin. However, McChrystal does not join the scholarly conversation that Milton's portrayal of Eden is what resulted in Eve's oppression. Instead, she focuses on the misogynistic lens that shapes the narrative. She states that:

Milton emphasizes, by foregrounding within the text, their [Adam and Eve's] mutual capacities – for truth, wisdom, sanctitude, and freedom – subordinates all other distinctions. These primal and fundamentally important qualities are not gender specific. Certainly, there are troubling gender issues in Milton's construction of Eve and Adam, for he cannot absolutely transcend his own historical context and dismantle the social, cultural, religious, and linguistic patriarchal structure. (492-93)

McChrystal implies that the characterization of Adam and Eve reveals them as closer to being equal to one another, instead of having a hierarchical unequal relationship. Her focus on the social and cultural interpretations that shaped the narrative of Eden allows McChrystal to portray Milton's retelling of the narrative in a positive light, and she is subtly hinting at Adam and Eve's interactions rather than their environment.

Another close analysis of Milton's depiction of Eve reveals the changing nature of her discourse. Similar to McChrystal's argument that it is remarkable for Eve to have her own voice to express her ideas and beliefs, another

scholar named Elisabeth Liebert joins this conversation and observes how Eve's discourse both indicates her subordinate and her privileged position in Eden. Liebert compares the differences between Adam and Eve's discourse and analyzes how Eve's language changes throughout Milton's narrative to break away from the patriarchal structure of Eden. First, Liebert discusses Eve's initial inferior position in comparison to Adam, which is seen through her creation. Liebert argues that initially, Adam's rhetoric after his creation indicates a strong desire for knowledge, while Eve's language does not imply such desire. Liebert states that:

Her [Eve's] actions and discourse are perceived to be different from his [Adam's] own, the result of a different conceptual process and expressive of a different volition, not based upon 'higher knowledge' or 'Wisdom,' attributes which, exposed her otherness... Nor is her discourse based upon authority. Unlike his approach to the created world, hers is essentially unreasoned and lacks his consciousness of authority and concomitant responsibility. (154)

Unlike Adam, whose understanding of Eden is based on his desire for knowledge, Eve's sense of understanding is based on curiosity. She initially appears to be less of an authoritative figure than Adam, which is why she assumes the inferior position. However, Eve's self-concept changes throughout the narrative and she develops more of a sense of agency than her original, newly created state; this change is reflected through her language. Liebert primarily focuses on Adam and Eve's disagreement before the Fall to illustrate this change, where Eve makes a rational and logical claim that separating allows them to get more work done than if they remain together, which is why her argument is successful. With this example, Liebert states that "Eve nudges their relationship towards a horizontal interrelation of equals, away from the hierarchy where received knowledge is authorized and handed down from above" (158). Eve's disagreement with Adam indicates her ability to depart from the hierarchy that is rooted in Eden, where she was previously assumed to be the inferior being. According to Liebert, Adam and Eve's interactions and disagreement also imply Eve's development as a more autonomous being than before. Liebert states that:

She [Eve] attempted to step out of the role of inferior, of acolyte, and into the role of equal by adopting elements of a more masculine discourse – formulation rather than receptivity of ideas, and dissemination rather than seeking of advice – and by appropriating those qualities characteristic of Adam's means of knowing: authority and reason. (159)

Eve's evolution of discourse throughout the narrative represents her transition from a subordinate being to one that is equal to Adam. Liebert's focus on Adam and Eve's interactions allows her to argue that Eve evolves from an inferior being to one that departs from the hierarchy that constrains her, so she can become equal to Adam.

Similar to the scholarly conversation on Eve's departure from the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of Eden, there has also been a close analysis that shifts the focus away from the prelapsarian narrative to the postlapsarian one, and the implications this has for Eve. A scholar named Anne Ferry argues that Milton's portrayal of Eve after the Fall is truly what allows her to escape the gender hierarchy of Eden, even if her actions were immoral. Ferry focuses on the differences between Adam and Eve's confessions of their sin. For Adam, most of his confession is spent explaining his actions, and mounting a defense; he does admit that he ate the fruit but only because Eve gave it to him. Adam slightly deflects responsibility and blame onto Eve. Meanwhile, Eve's confession is shorter and more direct than Adam's, and she merely states that she ate the fruit because the serpent gave it to her. Ferry's main thesis between the differences in these two confessions is that "Milton's view [of their confessions] is not so balanced. He exaggerates Adam's devious excuses to the point of ridiculing him, while he elevates Eve's accusation of the serpent to a form of truly penitent" (127). Through his ambivalent representation of Eve, Milton elevates her, since Eve's confession is more direct and upfront than Adam's. With this interpretation, Eve has also escaped the gender hierarchy that constrains her through her authoritative discourse. Ferry concludes that:



In order to elevate Eve as a worthy partner in marital conversation, Milton has been in a sense her defender from her first introduction, making repeated efforts to rescue her from the place assigned to woman's nature on inescapable biblical authority. It may be that the pressure of Milton's sympathetic attitude grew strongest at the point in the story most encouraging to [the] severe judgment of Eve, after she had successfully seduced the husband from whom she was formed, for whom she was made. (129)

Milton's portrayal of Eve slowly elevates her throughout the narrative before he momentarily places her above Adam because of her direct confession and upfront ability to accept responsibility for her action. Ironically, Milton not only elevates Eve in a way that departs from Judeo-Christian tradition, but also in a way that eases some of the harsh blame and criticism she faced for causing the Fall. Even though Milton's depiction of Eden was grounded in the tenets of obedience, he contradicts the misogynistic tradition and exerts more blame on Adam for his, somewhat, ineffective confession.

This analysis will build on Ferry's argument that Milton elevates Eve due to her direct confession after the Fall, and it will examine the tensions that emerge within the text between the properness of Adam and Eve's confessions. Additionally, this analysis will examine the cultural tensions between previous misogynistic interpretations of Genesis and Milton's reimagining of Eden, which creates the possibility of disrupting Judeo-Christian exegesis. To examine these tensions, *Paradise Lost* will be compared to the Junius manuscript, to determine the different ways that Milton expands on the narrative, and how these expansions create the possibility of minimizing the blame that Eve received for the Fall.

The in-text and cultural tensions between genders and their hierarchy in the Junius MS impact Eve's representation. The Junius narrative also depicts the story of Eden; however, this version directly states her inferiority and implies that her weakness resulted in the Fall. Although the circumstances that surround the Fall are slightly different in the Junius MS, Eve is still harshly blamed for falling into temptation. As the serpent's fiend begins to tempt her, the narrative directly states that "the creator had designed a weaker mind for her – so that she began to surrender her mind to those instructions; therefore, contrary to God's word she accepted the painful fruit of the tree of death from the hateful one" (12. 590-594). In this medieval version, Eve is directly called the sex of the weaker mind, and it is her weakness that makes her extremely vulnerable to temptation. The explicit gender hierarchy that is present creates the possibility for Eve to receive more blame for the Fall than Adam since she was the sole figure who failed the initial temptation. In the Junius MS, Eve's freedom to choose to eat the fruit was slightly limited. Previously in the narrative, Adam had been tempted with the fruit too, but he was successful in avoiding the temptation and he tells the fiend of the serpent to leave. However, his actions do have serious consequences for Eve. The fiend then tells Eve that if she eats the fruit and tempts Adam into eating the fruit then the fiend "will not punish him [Adam], for the calumnies, though he is not worthy of pardon; he said a lot that was hurtful to me." (12. 619-622). Eve decides to eat the fruit partly because of Adam's previous actions, even if she is also promised knowledge. In the Junius MS, Eve's freedom of choice was somewhat limited due to Adam's actions, and her decision to eat the fruit is not entirely freely made by her own desires. Therefore, this creates the possibility for misogynistic interpretations of the narrative to attribute most of the blame onto Eve and harshly criticize her, since Adam was successful in avoiding the initial temptation, while Eve is the weaker sex, who causes both her and Adam's destruction.

The tension between an emotion-based response of sympathy and the reprimanding of Adam and Eve's immoral actions is also present within the text. In the Junius MS, both Adam and Eve express their regret and sorrow for eating the fruit when they are confessing their sin, but Adam emphasizes the sorrow that he feels while Eve primarily focuses on the evilness of the serpent. In his confession, Adam states that "the bride, the elegant lady, gave it into my hand, my noble Lord, which I consumed as an offense against you. Now I carry the clear sign of it on myself. Because of that I know sorrow the more" (15. 879-882). Adam confesses his sin but he also focuses on the pain and his own feelings that result from choosing the immoral action, which allows for the possibility of sympathy to form. Similar to Adam, Eve also confesses her sin. She states that "The snake deceived me and desperately encouraged me to that

destruction and greediness, the gaudy serpent by fair words, until I shamefully carried out that hasty betrayal, committed the crime, and then plundered the tree in the grove and ate the fruit, which was not right” (15. 894-899). Eve focuses on the characterization of the serpent and only briefly mentions the shame that she feels from the immoral action. Both Adam and Eve deflect some responsibility onto another person in their confessions: Adam blames Eve, while Eve blames the serpent. In Eve’s confession, it is more difficult for sympathy to be created than in Adam’s confession, since Eve does not focus on herself; rather, she emphasizes the evilness of the serpent. Since Eve’s confession does not create many possibilities for building sympathy for her, harsher blame and criticism can be attributed to Eve’s actions and character flaws than to Adam. Through the medieval narrative of the Junius MS the cultural tensions between immoral actions and righteousness are alluded to, and Eve’s restriction of free choice and the explicit inequality present with Eden allows for traditional Judeo-Christian interpretations to view Eve in a more negative light than Adam.

Milton’s retelling of the narration reveals tensions between the previous misogynistic interpretation of Eve and his representation of her, and these tensions are largely created from Eve’s opportunity to freely choose her actions and develop agency. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve openly disagrees with Adam on the working conditions in the Garden: Adam wishes to remain together to avoid falling into temptation, while Eve wants to work separately to get more work done. Eve states to Adam that:

Our pleasant task enjoined [commanded], but til more hands  
 Aid us, the work under our labor grows...  
 Thou, therefore, now advise  
 Or hear what to my mind first thoughts present:  
 Let us divide our labors, thou where choice  
 Leads thee or where most needs. (09.207-215)

Eve argues that they should work apart from each other so they can get more done, while Adam opposes this stance. His opposition shows that although there is nothing sinful about disagreements, there is tension between Adam’s cautious approach to avoiding temptation and Eve’s insistence on living freely and not being suppressed by fear. It is also Eve who emphasizes the importance of free choice since this will prove her virtue. Ultimately, Eve wins the argument against Adam by insisting that they can’t live in fear of falling into temptation. Eve states:

If this be our condition, thus to dwell  
 In narrow circuit straitened [confined] by a foe  
 Subtle or violent, we not endured  
 Single with like [equivalence] defense wherever met,  
 How are we happy, still [always] in fear of harm?  
 But harm proceeds not sin; only our foe  
 Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem [estimation]  
 Of our integrity (09.322-329)

Eve emphasizes that to truly test her virtue she cannot live in fear of falling into temptation, instead, she has to freely make the right and virtuous choice whenever she is tested. Milton’s characterization of Eve as a free being who is capable of making her own choices, even if that leads her to temptation, reveals the cultural tension between free choice and censorship, and righteousness and immorality, since a freely made choice is better than exposing someone to only goodness and forcing the righteous decision to always be made.

The cultural tension between free choice and immorality peaks after the Fall, when Adam and Eve both confess their sin of eating the forbidden fruit, and Milton unexpectedly elevates Eve through her direct and upfront confession. Milton creates a conflicting representation of Eve since she was the first to sin and chooses to fall into



temptation and yet through her chosen method for confession, Milton represents her more positively than in previous narratives. The elevation of Eve is revealed through a subtle difference between Adam's confession and hers. For Adam, he states "That from her hand I could suspect no ill,/ And what she did, whatever in itself,/ Her doing seemed to justify the deed –/ She gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (10. 140-143). For the majority of his confession, Adam spends his time emphasizing that he ate the fruit because Eve gave it to him, and he deflects his responsibility in the Fall onto her. Similar to previous narratives such as the Junius MS, Adam does freely choose to admit his sin; however, Milton somewhat exaggerates his deflection of responsibility since the Son of Christ intervenes and corrects Adam by stating that he was not subjected to Eve, and his sin was a result of his own freely made decision. Milton notes the flaws within Adam's confession because his confession should not neglect to acknowledge his own responsibility for his immoral action. Unlike Adam, Eve's confession is more proper than his. It is direct and simple, she merely states that "The serpent me beguiled and I did eat" (10.162). Instead of mounting a rigorous defense, Eve merely admits her wrongdoing. Eve's confessions reveal a tension between her approach and Adam's since they both freely admit their sin; however, Eve's confession (according to Milton's characterization) is more proper than Adam's since she readily accepts responsibility for her action. Unlike previous Judeo-Christian narratives, such as the Junius MS, where Eve was interpreted through a misogynistic lens, Milton's narrative creates a tension between the blame that was attributed to Eve and her virtue. Milton emphasizes Eve's free choice to forthrightly admit her sin, and he eases some of the blame that she receives from the Fall since she readily accepts the consequences for her freely chosen actions and this response is proper.

Milton's ambivalent representation of Eve allows her character to fully transform on a personal level. She transitions from freely choosing to fall into temptation to choosing to accept full responsibility and the consequences for her actions: free choice results in Eve's downfall and her redemption. The cultural tensions between free choice and censorship, and righteousness and immorality results in Milton's ambivalent representation of Eve. She freely chooses to perform the immoral action with the forbidden fruit and yet she freely chooses the righteous path of directly confessing her sin. The cultural tensions both within this text and the 17th century society reveals that free choices allow someone to commit both sinful and virtuous actions, and someone's true state of goodness results from whatever path they choose. For Milton to truly emphasize the importance of obedience, Eve must represent a diverse meaning of both a sinful and virtuous being since everyone is both capable of good and evil. And perhaps, for Milton to truly "justify the ways of God to men" (01. 26) Eve merely represents a free being, who, like everyone else, is free to choose, but not free to choose the consequences of their actions, for that is only ever determined by the laws of God.

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