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Milton's Sexist Strategy And The Relevance Of Paradise Lost As A 21st Century

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Abstract

The following study aims to place in juxtaposition and critically review three scholarships on Milton's Paradise Lost, namely, Milton and Modernity by Matthew Jordan, Regina Schwartz's "Rethinking Voyeurism and Patriarchy: The Case of Paradise Lost," and ultimately, Deirdre Keenan's "Redeeming Eve." The three aforementioned texts, with their carefully curated arguments on gender identity, bring out Milton's chauvinistic prejudices, thereby rendering Paradise Lost as an obsolete text in today's times. Patriarchy prevails abundantly in Paradise Lost – starting from God begetting a 'son' to him creating Eve as a carnal commodity – and therefore needs to be critiqued afresh by 21st century readers.

Keywords: Milton, gender, marriage, sexuality, subjection, commodity, Christianity.

Introduction

In *Milton and Modernity*, to be a modern subject is to feel alienated or individuated, to believe we're autonomous, and yet to fear that we're losing out on an immediacy of meaning in language, or a unity with nature or God. Jordan argues, for Milton – "conformity to the lawof male supremacy is a sign of the possession of reason" (p. 114). Nowhere else does it become more obvious that the necessary obverse of reason is obedience. Matthew pays careful heed to the language of Paradise Lost, as chapters unfold. For Milton, marriage was a repository for the sacred on earth – spiritualised almost, on the grounds of which, throughout 20th century, critiques and counter-critiques of his gender representation have increased manifold. Milton could be pro or anti-feminist: a confusion that surfaces when we question his perception of women's marital status as a source of companionship, but interchangeably, also as a source of 'intimate danger.' He argues for divorce to be a wholly private affair, left to the whims of the male. We do witness Milton's utterly regressive worldview, especially as sexuality and marriage are continually placed at opposite ends of the spectrum, with an essential distinction between the human and the bestial that needs to be policed due to obvious social implications. Responding to St. Paul, who says, "it is better to marry than to burn," Milton denigrates 'burning' as the 'venom of lust' – actively resonating with Freud's train of thought where Freud marks a point of transition between animal and human society,

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the moment genital satisfaction no longer makes its appearance, hoping to be entertained plentifully. However, it is important for us to note that the 'physical' can after all be an expression of the spiritual. Augustine argues – had companionship, rather than procreation, been the prime concern, God could've created another man for Adam.

Milton refutes this, saying, it is only a 'woman' – who's capable of being a defence against life's sorrows. Eve for Milton is an instrument of wish fulfilment, but for us readers, she's much nuanced. It is significant how Eve turns away from what seems to be initially the "less fair" form of Adam, not only because of the inherent racism involved, but because she has a 'choice.' Marriage is the sole propriety in Paradise, and the female has to be subjected to ownership, in order to guarantee such propriety. Female characters, Sin and Eve, are not simply incarnated fantasiesof their begetters, Satan and Adam, but also disavowed scapegoats for God's own narcissism.Like Freud who sets the psychological against sensual, Milton's hostility towards the sensuous body produces a subject characterised by male familial relations and an end goal of procreation. Even then, the licit sexual act is one with no intention of pleasure, performed to procreate or prevent adultery. When Adam discloses how strongly he's transported by Eve – Raphael's response aims to put Eve 'in her rightful place in Adam's mind.' He says, "Weigh with her thy self; then value" (PL 8.570). He says this, scared, that Adam might involuntarily take Eve's place of subjection, a place meant for 'woman': man's second self. Denied of a mother substitute, Adam's dependency upon Eve is acute and despite her substantial being, the woman he sees is a fantastical construct. Even when Adam calls Eve "wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best" (PL 8.550) – all superlatives – her merits impinge on the man's subjectivity,all part of strategic sexism. The woman is either fit to be idealized, meant for the man's surrender; or she's despised: such are the polarities of masculine dependency. Idealising Eve is both a function of Adam's autonomy and immensely threatening to the same – it is this idealization that leads to the birth of the woman's image as an indomitable vixen. Adam's ambivalent relationship with the object, Eve, reminds us of Freud's remark: hate could be derived from "ego's struggle to preserve itself." Many have called Adam's love narcissistic: his ego along with an imaginary sense of mastery is maintained through a denigration of Eve.Milton claiming that the 'wife' is no longer an 'accidental companion of propagation' only tosay that she's intended to 'remedy man's loneliness' is extremely problematic, because in both cases, the wife is expected to align herself with masculine needs. It is said, "in the economy of Milton's Eden, Eve is to be for Adam, but she becomes excessive when she is forherself" (p. 106). Even after Fall, the stronger response is directed at the female vice: Eve is called hollow, an 'outside' for supposedly threatening Adam's supremacy. It is as though the language of lust is more fitting as a description of the object, rather than a male subject. Adam blames God for his fall, lamenting how it is singularly the 'fair defect of nature' He created that is responsible for such mischief, unwilling to take accountability for his own actions. Attachment, unless it is to someone fully controllable, is a threat to masculinity – andit is this threat that produces such an innate hatred towards women: once again a male supremacist point of view. Milton preaches female compliance: Adam's never condemned forintemperance, Eve is. He's condemned only for leaving his assigned place above her, for considering her voice. Succumbing to Eve's will is ridiculously equated with resignation of manhood. They're "not equal, as their sex not equal seemed" (PL 4.296). Matthew suggests, Milton was undoubtedly referring to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and the mandate against eating it enforces 'the exclusion zone of Enlightenment.' Matthew exposes how Adam's portrayal reeks of chauvinism on Milton's part – how establishing the 'first human' to be an archetype of patriarchal prejudice seems to hint at an underlying apprehension of his authoritative supremacy being challenged, due to which he relegates the female to a role of the insignificant 'other.' In a book that's supposed to read Milton's texts as revolutionary, thechapter is a curious cog in the giant wheel that Matthew apparently aspires to spin in favour of establishing the 'modernity' of Milton.

Schwartz's 'Rethinking Voyeurism and Patriarchy: The Case of *Paradise Lost*' critiques the act of 'seeing' that dominates Milton's epic. Schwartz's essay charts the course of the reader'sjourney across

Paradise Lost as one that trails the continuous authorial promptings to follow 'someone else's line of sight' (p. 85). Calling *Paradise Lost* 'a poem preoccupied with voyeurism' (p. 86), Schwartz postulates a tantalising take on the range and character of the subtext of voyeurism that runs through the epic, with an array of textual references that make us aware of viewing things from the eyes of the various personages invested in the poem: Satan,Eve, God, the poet, or even our own, as the reader. Every instance of looking in Milton's masterpiece, be it Galileo's mesmerised glance at the moon, Satan's 'predatory gaze' (p. 93) at Eden, or Eve's complacent eyeing of her own beauty, is, according to Schwartz, the instanceof the 'lustful eye' (p. 89) stealing a gaze at objects of forbidden pleasure. Schwartz stretches the thread of her argument to the Freudian binary of the onlooker-onlooked, which, in the Miltonian ecosystem, stands for Satan or Eve as the target / victim / object of gaze whose every move and mood is monitored by the gazer / voyeur, represented alternately by God, the narrator, the reader. With the Freudian interface, Schwartz invests a sadistic or masochistic connotation in her analysis, which locates 'the primacy of narcissism' (p. 90) in Milton's narrative. Sadism or masochism are components of voyeurism which, combined with the critic's reference to Laura Mulvey's gender-based classification (in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'), is a predominantly masculine prerogative rather 'perversion' (p. 91). Schwartz reaches the conclusion that though *Paradise Lost* is driven by seeing, it is beyond theconstraints of the voyeur-viewed binary. What Milton actually focuses on is delving into the dark of the inner mind, driven by the desperate urge to 'irradiate' the same with the 'CelestialLight' which would enable the poet-narrator to see and speak of '…things invisible to mortal sight' (p. 100). Schwartz's essay 'sees' the interpretation of the elements of 'seeing' in *Paradise Lost* with a new and informed eye. Though dealing with a rather obtuse idea, she successfully engages readers' attention in her analysis which she makes eminently readable and illuminating with her exhaustive knowledge in the topic.

Deirdre Keenan, in 'Redeeming Eve,' talks of gender identity and difference, of rendering authority to the feminine "other" – historically subordinate to the male. Eve, the first woman, symbolises 'subordination' having been created by God out of Adam's ribs, and most evidently, due to her moral and ontological inferiority. Keenan posits questions – if it's possible at all to redeem Eve, whether her author would rescue her from the force of an authoritarian system and turn her into a speaking subject, rather than an object at the receiving end, muted forever. Keenan urges us to notice how Milton's construction of Eve and Adam fails to transcend his own socio-cultural context, but in a way, foregrounds their mutual capacities for wisdom and freedom. It's argued, though Eve's naming of the flowers seems unimportant in comparison to Adam naming the higher species, it is still an exclusive act of great privilege, conferred by Milton alone. But if one carefully considers, Adam's act seems to be proof of superior knowledge, because the names assigned are thought to be exact,corresponding to the species' essence. For Milton, as John Phillips asserts, it is Eve's essential femininity that incites sinfulness in a righteous man and Milton would see tragic heroism, on Adam's part, to risk it all for love. Phillips indicates with subtlety how Milton associates Fall with Female. In Eden, Eve's self-identity emerges out of relationships with things outside of herself, thus doesn't have much to do with the self. But despite her mediatedrelationship with God, she receives prophetic visions, and opposes Adam over matters of personal integrity in the face of assault and temptation – subverting hierarchical traditions of masculine linguistic privilege. However, in the process of redeeming Eve, we see how virtuesbecome vices, her receptiveness becomes "feminine snares" – even her willingness to yield, part of her created nature, is assumed to be subservience, while her need for independence is reckless felony. Eve finds no escape. Milton uses words like 'loose' and 'wanton' to indicate linguistically the movement from innocence to experience and sin, in "Her unadorned golden tresses wore/… but in wanton ringlets wav'd" (PL 4.305-6). We cannot help but read into these words – moral implications that are not relevant until the fall occurs: Milton warns us ofwhat is to come. Eve's 'golden tresses' is a romance epic cliché while 'dishevelled' and 'wanton' seem to signify a sense of being 'unrestrained.'

Keenan does not make the mistake of considering Milton a modern feminist. However, Eve's evolving discourse is brought to our notice. Her first-person pronouns do indicate the gradual shift from object-hood, the ability to construct meaning for herself. But right after fall, her pronouns reflect how an ashamed Eve struggles with an internal journey from self-objectification towards an attempt at redemption. Eve's initial construction of selfhood might even be associated with Narcissus – she says, "What there thou seest fair Creature is thy self" (PL 4.468). Not only does Eve exhibit narcissism predicted by Freud, but Adam manifests "marked sexual overvaluation" ofhis partner: it should not be surprising that she suffers from penis envy, her desire for the "phallus" explained by her position of social inferiority. Reflecting on Alastair Fowler's comment on how the cause of Fall for Eve might have been her act of seeking an ideal self, many think that Eve is characterised by vanity. But Eve's voice here provides her with the first frame of reference. As Adam falls, saying, "to lose thee were to lose myself" (PL 9.959) and Eve falls, with the words "without him live no life" (PL 9.833) – they sound equally self-serving in turning away from God, and it is at this point, Keenan draws a parallel between thetwo. Adam and Eve are just as fated to disobey God as Oedipus is to fulfil the curse imposed on him. The fallen Eve's feeling of inadequacy doesn't come from gender difference, but from lack of self-esteem, further deepened by Adam's self-defensive diatribe on womankind.Her psyche is marked by self-hate, and marred by Adam's hatred of women. Eve desperately denying the sinful 'I' is sometimes read as an impulse for complete self-destruction: suicide. However, Keenan contributes, there is "the seed of rebirth in Eve's self-effacement" (p. 507).In her gesture of self-sacrifice in order to save Adam, we find 'self-affirmation' – for you need to have a sense of self to be able to sacrifice it. She will give her 'self' to save another. Even in her fallen state, Eve reconstructs her identity. In fact, she merges subject and object,through her statement: "I carry hence; though all by mee is lost..." (PL 12.621-23). Though language confuses and restricts Eve from attaining subjecthood on multiple occasions, it also helps her in redemption and self-restoration. The essay is preoccupied with linguistic analysis. Keenan delineates the various interpretations of Eve down the years, seamlessly segueing into a linguistic approach that centres on Eve's usage of pronouns. She involves psychoanalysis, while effacing the 'binary' opposition between masculine and feminine discourse, and proving them 'mutually empowering' instead.

Milton's chauvinistic prejudice, brought out through aforementioned texts, makes Paradise Lost relevant to critical probing even after centuries. Milton's text strongly resonates with a world that treats the woman as a commodity of desire, shoving her back to where she belongs: the hearth. God "begetting" a son marks patriarchy's inception in Paradise Lost. Thereader's guilt then continually surfaces, due to the distinction one is asked to make between Adam and Eve. Paradise Lost is one primal text containing the germ of age-old chauvinism, hence needs to be critiqued anew in connection with 21st century version of sexism and majoritarian excesses.

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