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Milton's anticipation and view on women's autonomy through Eve in Paradise Lost

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Abstract:

John Milton belonged to the Puritan Age, where women did not have many rights. Unlike the popular mood in the present twenty-first century, the Puritans around the seventeenth century viewed women as inferior to men. Although Milton's Paradise Lost contains many hints of male superiority, the poem revolutionarily depicts an ambitious woman in Eve. Through her decision to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, Eve opposes thearchy, the rule of God. She further gives the fruit to Adam and makes him take a subservient position to her instead of God and attains a status of total autonomy, but it yields her negative consequences. Using the adverse effects of her autonomous decisions, Milton points out that freedom also demands moral responsibility. As the first woman ever existed in the world, Eve represents the entire womankind. Therefore, Milton anticipates through her character that the repressed freedom of women will not remain contained for long as womankind has a natural inclination towards autonomy. Eve's accountability of her actions and her desire to rectify the consequences in the end

attribute to Milton's timely message: the proper use of freedom is to improve humanity.

Keywords: Autonomy, Freedom, Thearchy, Sin, Moral

Introduction

John Milton retold the biblical narrative of the Fall of Man as an epic poem in Paradise Lost, first published in 1667, followed by a second edition in 1679. In the poem based on the biblical book of Genesis, Milton chiefly focuses on humanity's descent from an ideal condition to a woeful state due to the original sin of Adam and Eve, the first man and woman. As the causative object of sin, the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge plays a crucial role in the poem. God kept the couple, Adam and Eve, from eating the fruit while Satan tempted them to eat it. Between the two contrasting choices, the couple chooses to follow Satan's temptation and eat the fruit. Unfortunately, their preference brings them

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an undesirable consequence. Milton emphasizes the ramification of their action when he says,

“Earth felt the wound, and nature
from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave
signs of woe,
That all was lost.”(Milton 9.782-
784)

The cause for such a consequence is not attributable to anything inherently wrong with the fruit, but their disobedient spirit, which made the meat it. Milton says in the opening line that the poem concerns “man’s first disobedience.” (Milton 1.1). Therefore, disobedience against God’s authority stands to be the central premise of the poem. Although Milton uses the word “man” to collectively denote the couple as the subject of “first disobedience,” the sequence of events reveals that the first disobedience proceeds from a woman. As the Fruit was “Fair to the eye” and “inviting to the taste” (Milton 9.777), Eve chose to pluck and eat it. After eating the fruit, she gives it to Adam, who eats it because of being “fondly overcome with female charm.” (Milton 9.999) Considering Eve’s act of eating the fruit as disobedience against God’s authority brings into the discussion the concept of women’s autonomy. According to the poem, Eve represents the entire womankind as the first woman to exist in human history. Through

the character of Eve and her decision to eat the Fruit, Milton anticipates womankind’s desire for autonomy and their resistance against subjugation. Therefore, Milton’s treatment of Eve’s character throughout the poem would reveal his stance on a woman inclined towards her autonomy.

Eve’s bent for autonomy in a world of thearchy

A research article defines women’s autonomy as “the ability of women to make strategic life choices, organize them to increase independence, and control resources to help them eliminate their subordination.” (Ristiana and Handayani 10013). With Eve’s inclination towards autonomy as a woman and God’s right to rule over his creations, including humankind, Milton pulls some major strings in the poem, putting both ideologically at loggerheads. Over the ages, patriarchy as a system has been an infamous antagonist for women striving to achieve self-sufficiency. In *Paradise Lost*, however, thearchy seems to be an antagonist for Eve’s bent towards her autonomy. She posts a resistance against it by eating the forbidden fruit. Collins Dictionary defines thearchy as the “rule or government by God.” When Milton says that Satan opposed the “throne and monarchy of God” (Milton 1.42), he is attesting that thearchy is the system of governance in the fictional universe of *Paradise Lost*.

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The precursor for Eve's rebellion

Eve's rebellion has, as a precursor, Satan's rebellion against God's rule. Satan, whose name means adversary, was formerly a powerful archangel of God. His original name Lucifer denotes his then radiant qualities as Milton describes him as "brighter once amidst the host / Of angels." (Milton 7.132-133) Overcome with jealousy over God's rulership, this dynamic archangel convinces a third of Heaven's angels for a rebellion against God, and a Civil War breaks out. However, he and his followers face defeat and get thrown into Hell. Even a punishment in Hell does not bring Satan any repentance as he proudly considers it "Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven." (Milton 1.263) Instead of spiraling down deep discouragement after facing an extreme defeat, Satan displays enormous psychological resilience when he identifies a new purpose to pervert everything God does.

"If then his Providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth
good,
Our labour must be to pervert that
end" (Milton 1.162-164)

Intentional to pervert every good thing that derives from God, Satan's eyes catch God's latest creation, the humans. Milton says that when Satan first saw humans, he noticed "The image of their

glorious maker" (Milton 4.292) in them. Such a sight intensifies Satan's motivation to pervert them. Seeing through the couple Adam and Eve, Satan spots a hierarchal order where Adam is subservient "for God only" while Eve is "for God in him." (Milton 4.299) He further overhears a conversation between the couple in which Eve speaks about her first memories. Initially, Eve considers Adam to be "less fair" (Milton 4.478) than her reflection on a pool, but his "manly grace" (Milton 4.490) eclipses the love for her identity and makes her subdue it. The presence of hierarchy between the couple and Eve's subdued self-love opens room for Satan to approach them.

Satan's temptation of Eve as a stimulant for her ambitious side

Shortly before the temptation by Satan, Eve suggests to Adam that they work separately, indicating her desire for some independence in her work. However, Adam shows reluctance for her idea as he considers that she will be more susceptible to "danger or dishonor" (Milton 9.267) without his protection. Dissenting against the dissuasions of Adam, Eve finally convinces him. After Eve wins some time to be on her own, Satan disguises himself as a snake and tries to convince Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Calling her with expressions like a "goddess among gods" (Milton 9.547) and "Queen of this universe" (Milton 9.684), Satan tries to

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aggrandize her subdued self. With a series of arguments fashioned to tempt Eve, he provokes her to do the act forbidden by God. One important thing to note about Satan's claims is that they make Eve think that eating the fruit will elevate her status.

By claiming that he attained a "life more perfect" (Milton 9.689) because of eating the fruit himself, Satan stimulates the ambitious side of Eve. Before giving in to the temptation to eat the Fruit, Eve thinks that she needs it as a cure for her ignorance of "good and evil" (Milton 9.774) and her inability to comprehend concepts like "God or death" and "law or penalty." (Milton 9.775) She seeks the fruit as it seems to have the virtue of making her wise. Through her desire "to feed at once both body and mind" (Milton 9.779), Eve takes an ambitious step into the unknown, explicitly displaying her disinterestedness to be under a blind subjugation to God. In a sense, Eve eating the fruit stems from her aspiration to understand the unfamiliar. Through disobedience, she feels that she will realize an aspect of existence that would otherwise remain mysterious. In the original biblical narrative of this story, the serpent tells Eve that she "...will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5 NIV) The ambition-driven desire to go beyond innocence and possess firsthand knowledge makes Eve eat the Forbidden Fruit.

Determining Adam's future to reframe hierarchy

After eating the Fruit, Eve ponders about the possibility of God separating her from Adam and giving him another woman. "And Adam wedded to another Eve, / shall live with her enjoying, I extinct" (Milton 9.828-829), She thinks. Therefore, Eve takes a further ambitious step to make Adam eat the fruit and eliminate the possibility of her extinction. Although being subservient to Adam by order of creation, Eve tries to determine his future instead of leaving it to the will of God, showing her disinclination to operate under the hierarchy set by God. While convincing Adam to trespass against God, Eve says that she is "growing up to godhead" (Milton 9.877) as she ate the fruit and wants him to join her. Therefore, in addition to determining Adam's future, Eve also challenges thearchy. According to Eve, making Adam commit trespass is sharing her newly acquired godhead with him, thereby reaching a status equal to God as humans and reframing hierarchy.

Through Eve's sin, a subversion happens in her relationship with Adam where Adam, supposedly her "Guide and Head" (Milton 4.442-443), wants to follow her regardless of "bliss or woe." (Milton 9.916). Knowing from Eve that she had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam thinks that an enemy has deceived her. By telling Eve, "Some cursed fraud / Of enemy hath beguiled thee," (Milton 9.904-905),

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Adam paints her as a gullible one, but he also admits her act to be something bold and calls her “adventurous Eve.” (Milton 9.921) Eve’s disobedience, in a sense, makes Adam, her husband take a subservient position to her. Before deciding to eat the forbidden fruit, Adam looks at Eve and wonders, “How can I live without thee” (Milton 9.908) and reveals a perceived dependence on her. Adam eating the forbidden fruit stems from his passion for Eve, superseding his loyalty to God, contrary to Eve’s sin rising from her quest for autonomy. Later in the poem, The Son acknowledges Adam’s decision to follow Eve against God’s will when he asks him, “Was she thy God, that her thou didst obey.” (Milton 10.145) Thus, Eve’s sin gives her room to explore autonomy and positions her to reframe hierarchy by making her husband obey her instead of God in a life-altering decision. However, through the ramifications of her actions, Milton makes Eve reexamine her perception of autonomy.

The consequences of sin and the way out

Instead of portraying a radical Eve who leaves no stone unturned in her quest for autonomy, Milton shows her as a penitent woman who takes responsibility for the damage she has done for herself and her generation. As a bible-believing puritan, Milton focuses on the vulnerability of human beings and the transcendence of God after the original sin. Milton presents

the adverse effects of sin in Adam and Eve using guilt, shame, “high passions, anger, hate, / Mistrust, suspicion, discord” (Milton 9.1123-1124), and unwelcome feelings which were non-existent before. When Adam tells Eve that they gained the knowledge of “good lost, and evil got” (Milton 9.1072) after eating the fruit, he claims that they gained nothing profitable and instead lost something good due to their sin. The couple feels ashamed of themselves to the point where they cover their nakedness with fig leaves. Milton considers their guilt and shame to be “unlike / To that first naked glory.” (Milton 9.1114-1115) Eventually, the couple loses their home, the Garden of Eden.

Milton posits a paradoxical idea of freedom in the poem based on his biblical understanding of sin and redemption. God sends the Son (The Pre incarnate Christ), “Man’s friend, his mediator” (Milton 10.60), to solve their predicament by being a “ransom and redeemer” (Milton 10.61) for them. Milton places their redemption from the consequences of sin on how Eve uses her autonomy and responds to God’s plan of redemption. In a posthumously discovered theological treatise called *On Christian Doctrine*, Milton says, “Christ our liberator frees us from the slavery of sin.” (p.537) The biblical idea of freedom is paradoxical as it strictly maintains an either/or position towards it. According to biblical doctrine, people are either slaves to

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sin or are under “the control of righteousness” (Romans6:20 NIV). Therefore, as a well-versed Christian, Milton presents only two alternatives where Eve could exercise her autonomy: to sin or accept redemption. Besides revealing Milton’s expectations of ideal womanhood, Eve’s choice will also show her motive behind choosing autonomy in the first place.

Eve’s choice of redemption

Being the moral ruler of the universe, God pronounces punishment on Adam and Eve because of their disobedience. Unlike Satan, the couple accepts their punishment but not without any sorrow. Also, the couple’s disobedience brings Sin and Death into the world. Filled with intense pessimism, Eve suggests to Adam that they must kill themselves to avoid passing the consequences of the original sin to their offspring. However, Adam reminds her about another way for redemption promised by the Son that their “seed shall bruise / The serpent’s head.” (Milton 10.1031-1032) Hearing Adam’s suggestion, Eve either had the freedom to follow her idea of suicide or bear him an offspring expecting humanity’s redemption through the promised seed. By choosing to bring the promised seed into the world, Eve shows that her inclination towards autonomy was for the greater good of humanity rather than satisfying her selfish desires. The realization that God had

forbidden something evil from her while also giving her the free will to choose between good and evil makes Eve quit her rebellion against thearchy. Instead, she yields herself to God’s redemptive work and opposes Satan, who deceived humanity through her.

Through the characterization of Eve, Milton provides a glimpse of what he expects from an ideal woman. Indeed, the poet respects a woman’s choice to be autonomous; otherwise, he would have recreated an Eve who blindly submits to God without venturing to do the forbidden act. However, the poet’s concept of freedom emanates from his Christian and moral values. Milton attaches a moral responsibility to freedom where accountability embraces the exerciser of that freedom. In Luke 12:48, Jesus said that “much will be demanded” from those who have received much. Former First Lady of the United States, Eleanor Roosevelt, echoes the same sentiment when she says, “With freedom comes responsibility.”(p.1961) Therefore, although Milton acknowledges a woman’s desire to have freedom and equality, he holds a traditional viewpoint that she should also exercise a moral responsibility to carry the freedom in the right way. Milton reminds his readers through Eve that a woman’s freedom can either destroy or build an entire generation depending on her perception of moral responsibility.

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Conclusion

Due to her minor dissatisfaction with God's rule, Eve decides to eat from the forbidden tree, thereby becoming a self-defining entity. However, she later understands the moral implications involved in using freedom. Eve's autonomous decisions taken for self-satisfaction, leaving aside the heavenly point of reference ensured chaos and led her to contemplate killing herself. But when she used her free-thinking capability to acknowledge Providence humbly and decide for the greater good of humanity, her status got an actual ascent. She plays a pivotal role in God's redemption plan and brings forth the Son of God into the world, becoming his forerunner. God himself subverts the hierarchy in the right way and elevates Eve's status by sending his Son in her lineage. Thus, Milton's characterization of Eve anticipates womankind's bent towards autonomy and highlights the value of morally responsible choices that should accompany their liberty.

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