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Paradise Lost: The Indeterminate Eve

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In this examination of Milton's introduction of his character Eve, I look closely at the poet's word choice and syntax. I use his choices to argue that Milton, with every word placement and every use of contradiction or double meaning, makes it clear that Eve was not predestined to fall. Part Explication de Texte, part research paper, this exploration uses both past scholarship and my own observations to demonstrate Milton's purpose in introducing Eve in such a seemingly confusing way.

*Shee as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
Subjection, but requir'd with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best reciev'd,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (4.304-311)*

John Milton's introduction of his character Eve presents readers with an unusual opportunity: they have a chance to glimpse a character fully adult, yet fully new to the world. Though Eve's destiny is unformed, this introductory passage highlights the potential for two disparate future selves. On one hand, Eve might help lead to the further glory of Adam. On the other hand, through her rebellion, she might cause the entirety of mankind to be separated from God. Every stylistic choice Milton makes in lines 304-311 in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost*, from his selection of contradictory words to his employment of the run-on sentence, points to Eve's ability to develop in more than one way. And, in making it clear that Eve could have grown into something other than what she became, Milton eliminates any suspicion that humanity was predestined to fall.

Such conclusions do not come easily; however, at a cursory glance, this passage introducing Eve makes clear only that *nothing* is clear. Contradictions abound. Eve, a paragon of newborn innocence, has hair described as "wanton" (Milton 4.306). The hair is unruly, yet it signifies her submission. Milton further convolutes this submission by calling it "coy," and he declares her proclaimed pride "modest" (4.310-11). A reader might easily be tempted to

see this inconsistent description as reason to doubt Milton's poetic skill, and that reader would not be the first to do so. In *Milton's Grand Style*, Christopher Ricks outlines the criticism of past scholars. At the heart of many critics' problems with *Paradise Lost* often lies the same initial complaint: he is inconsistent. Yet Ricks argues that one who "notices the contradictions...but fails to see how they are part of Milton's purpose" has only scratched the surface of the poem (15). Stanley Fish believes that *Paradise Lost* is a "dialectical experience" (*Surprised by Sin* 49), implying that the reader can only grasp Milton's meaning if he or she better understands the relationships the contradictions have with one another. Returning, then, to the subject of Eve's introduction in Book 4, perhaps the best way to unpack Milton's meaning is to assume he places his contradictions deliberately.

The majority of the selected passage discusses a particular physical feature of Eve: her hair. Critic Catherine Belsey believes that a woman's hair, to Milton, serves as "both a glory and a snare" (66), and the quoted lines from *Paradise Lost's* Book 4 reflect these conflicting attributes. Milton claims that Eve's wild, untamed, "wanton," curls imply, strangely, "subjection" and "submission" (4.306, 308, 310). Considered alone, the message about Eve's hair seems confusing. How can Eve's uncontrollable hair demonstrate her ability to be controlled? Furthermore, why does a passage describing a virginal figure use words so reminiscent of, as Fish writes, "the scarlet woman of so many sermons and moral harangues" (*Surprised by Sin* 92)? Fish concludes, as one rightly must, that Milton uses contradiction in this description to display a broader point, and the critic believes that point is to make the reader confront his or her own confusion (*Surprised by Sin* 102). However, another argument for these contradictions is that Eve has multiple potential selves, and later passages indicate which self she has chosen.

Eve's hair, according to this introductory passage, resembles curling foliage. Considering *Paradise Lost's* setting, this simile begs to be analyzed. Precedent for this comparison has been set by William Shullenberger, as well as by Fish. Shullenberger notes that the Bible compares the body to a garden (67), which Milton may want to emulate in order to further *Paradise Lost's* connection with the holy text. Fish draws much of his insight for the end of his book *How Milton Works* from a comparison between man and the Garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (530, 535-559). With the value of this comparison established through precedent, then, the reader is free to consider the lines in which Milton connects body and garden: "As the Vine curls her tendrils" (307-08). Just as the Garden of Eden's foliage would soon grow out of control without Adam and Eve to prune it, Eve is prone to wildness. She must choose domestication and "subjection" lest she become uncontrollable (4.308). Mirroring his description of Eve's hair, Milton later calls the Garden of Eden's growth as "wanton" (4.629, 9.211). The word "wanton," according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), can mean "undisciplined" or "ungoverned" ("wanton" def. 1.a). This definition dates back to 1362, and the OED cites two examples of "wanton" being used this way in the seventeenth century—Milton's time ("wanton" def. 1.a). The couple's God-given duty is

to hold back the Garden's tendency toward wanton (keep) wildness. Likewise, Adam's calling is to be master of Eve. As of this early moment in the couple's lives, Eve's curls can imply wantonness *or* they can imply compliance to her role as Adam's subject, depending on whether or not she chooses to accept the role God assigns her. Later in his poem, Milton does not hesitate to use his description of Eve's hair to help readers know when she has become more wild than tame. After hearing Satan whisper in her ear, her hair is "discompose'd" (Milton 5.10), and, in her fallen state before she humbles herself before Adam, the "tresses" are "all disorder'd" (10.911). When Eve finally chooses wantonness over subjection, her hair reflects that choice.

The vine comparison has further implication because a decorative, climbing plant evokes contradictory imagery. A gardener may praise foliage like grapevine or ivy for its natural tendency to cling to what is nearby and add to that host's beauty. The host functions as the vine's means of reaching its full potential, and the curling plant may have difficulty reaching sunlight if it lacks something on which to cling. Likewise, Adam is the means by which Eve accesses God, and her beauty enhances his life by giving him great joy (Milton 8.490-94). Eve can choose to cling to Adam, allowing her to remain connected to God. This choice would also help Eve avoid the potential troubles of wandering off by herself and trying to survive without his support. Yet, if left unchecked, a vine can become parasitic. It can suffocate its host, starving it of sunlight and overpowering it. Comparatively, Adam claims that Eve's beauty smothers his ability to reason (Milton 8.532-36), and Eve eventually alienates Adam from God by convincing her mate to fall with her. When not properly restrained, Eve overpowers Adam. Her tendrils entangle Adam in sin and pull him down.

The word "vine" provokes further associations, and, in keeping with Milton's use of contradiction, some associations are positive and some are negative. In John 15.5, Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches" (New International Version). Certainly, Milton would consider an association with Jesus as a positive correlation, so this comparison of Eve's hair to a vine points toward her potential to be a guiding, Christ-like figure for Adam. But the vine may also carry associations with wine, which can cause a man to become base and ridiculous. Indeed, Adam seems almost intoxicated by Eve's beauty, leading to his poor decisions. As mentioned before, his reason is hampered by the passion Eve's beauty inspires (Milton 8.532-36). Additionally, the fruit they devour makes them "As with new Wine intoxicated," tying Eve's vine-like qualities to sin itself (Milton 9.1008).

The OED also states that a vine can refer to clothing ("vine" def. 2.d), and Milton compares Eve's hair to a "veil" (4.304). Eve's hair, as well as being symbolic of her wildness, can point to her need for covering. This, momentarily, may seem strange. After all, Eve was made perfectly. She is still simple; her curls are "unadorned" (Milton 4.305), and Fish considers this one of the primary signs of her innocent perfection-- Milton pays her "the compliment of needing no compliment" (*How Milton Works* 62). Yet, these "golden" tresses are a form of adornment in themselves (Milton 4.305), and, apparently, Milton does

think she needs the veil of hair, implying her potential for shame. Milton describes Eve's hair as a covering to draw attention to her ambiguous, unformed state of self underneath. Her hair implies submission, Milton says, but which future Eve lies beneath that veil is yet to be determined.

To further explore Eve's hair as veil, a veil's functions should be considered. In a bridal context, the veil's symbolism is rooted in property transfer, as pointed out in Catherine Belsey's *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (65). While much can be said about the purpose of Eve's creation for the enjoyment of Adam, it is perhaps more apropos to this argument to examine the veil as a symbol of chastity or humility. Nuns take what is called "the veil" and coverings, in general, signify modesty. However, a veil can also distort what might plainly be seen without a cover. It hides the truth. Eve's hair as veil, then, can be a sign of her virtuous modesty or a sign of her deceptiveness, depending on how she develops. Continued reading of *Paradise Lost* shows which of these traits become part of her developing personality. First, she shows contrition over a sin-filled dream by shedding a few giant tears (Milton 5.130-31). Certainly, this meek act might be construed as a sign of modesty. Some critics—William Empson, for example—see no reason to suspect Eve of guile at this point in the poem (147-48). Because she shows no sign of weepiness until Adam expresses his disapproval, the text seems to support the theory that, by Book 5, Eve is learning how to deceive. Later in the poem, she becomes an outright liar; though Eve claims she means Adam no harm in giving him the fruit (Milton 9.979-80), she knows that the fruit could indeed be fatal (9.830-31). The veil which once might have been a display of modesty takes a turn for evil when Eve decides to become deceitful.

Eve's modesty directly relates to her pride. One of Milton's most seemingly-contradictory lines in this examined passage claims that Eve possesses "modest pride" (4.310). This can be best understood in the context of Eve's hair as veil. Her beauty makes her dangerous. Though her appearance delights, it can also distract men, angel, and devil alike (Milton 8.62-63). If Eve chose modesty, embracing the more holy "veil" symbolism, she might have been more resistant to one of Satan's techniques of persuasion in Book 9. Satan's tactic is flattery, telling Eve she needs no veil and calling her that which "shouldst be seen," uncovered (Milton 9.539-42, 546). When Eve shuns her need for modesty, preferring the idea that all beings should see her and be charmed, she trades modest pride for sinful pride.

The word "pride," similar to many words in Book 4's lines 304-311, can mean more than one thing. Like Eve, pride is neither good nor bad until it begins to develop. Nascent pride can blossom into a healthy awareness of one's place in the world, or it can develop into sinful arrogance and presumption. In order to determine whether Eve grows into having modest pride or arrogant pride, Eve's place in the world must first become clear. Milton uses twice a form of the word "yield" in the passage introducing Eve to emphasize her purpose—a repetition not to be ignored. Eve was made for submission, not contemplation. By Book 9 she assumes herself to be wiser than both Adam and God, arguing with the former and reasoning she knows better than the latter

(Milton 279-81, 753-59). Satan can too quickly convince Eve that she resembles a deity (Milton 9.547), making her guilty of one of the more presumptuous ideas by which a human mind can be possessed. And, finally, instead of accepting her role as inferior to Adam, Eve shows her arrogant pride by announcing her desire to be “render[ed] more equal” to Adam (Milton 9.823).

Like “modest pride,” Book 4’s phrase “coy submission” deserves attention (Milton 310). The word “coy,” like the word “pride” and like Eve, herself, can develop in multiple ways. The usual function of the word “coy” in modern times is to hint at a female’s flirty, falsely reluctant manner. However, in footnote to Book 4’s line 310 in the Signet Classics 2001 edition of *Paradise Lost*, editor Ricks claims that “coy,” in Eve’s case, means “truly shy” (page 88). The duplicity of the word is significant, despite what Ricks has determined to be Milton’s “true” meaning. It is much more likely, considering that the word appears in a passage full of apparent contradictions, that the author purposely employs a word that can be used in either circumstance, depending on the context. It is yet another technique that Milton uses to reveal the ways Eve can develop: she can become deceptive and artful, or she can retain her modesty and understand her God-given duty to be submissive.

The difference between the two meanings of “coy” is a distinction vital to the understanding of these two potential Eves. One interpretation of the word “coy” implies virtually no sexual awareness. The other interpretation hints at Eve’s potential, as a woman, to manipulate. The possible double meaning of this word helps showcase the other identically divergent words in the same passage. When Milton refers to Eve’s hair as a vine, he implies its growth is “wanton” (4.306). Though one OED definition of wantonness is “ungoverned,” the word has a second meaning. The OED’s next definition of “wanton” has a more sexual context: specifically, it describes “wanton” as being, “lascivious, unchaste, lewd” (“wanton” def. 2.a). Milton also uses the word “amorous” in this descriptive passage, which can point either to Eve’s sexuality or her loving nature. Again, in Book 9, Eve seems to mature into a woman who embodies the negative connotations of the words used to describe her in Book 4 instead of the positive contexts. Satan says that all who see Eve look on her “With ravishment” (Milton 9.541), a term that comes loaded with implications of sexual power. Eve’s womanly beauty, which, according to Milton, rightly exists to further the glory of Adam, instead functions as a tool of power in Book 9. Adam becomes “overcome with Female charm” and chooses to sin rather than disobey Eve’s request (Milton 9.999). In this way, Eve’s sexuality equates to an abandonment of her proper position. She uses her beauty to empower herself, which, as Milton establishes with his emphasis on the forms of the word “yield” in this examined passage, is not her proper place.

So far, this exploration has focused on word choice and contradictory phrases. To advance to a fuller understanding of Eve’s potential, Milton’s poetic and sentence structure must be acknowledged as well. Understanding who does what in lines 304-311 in Book 4 can prove difficult, and looking at Milton’s sentence structure will explain why that difficulty exists. The poet crafts sentences with unusual subject/verb relationships. For instance, in the first two

lines of this passage introducing the reader to Eve, “Eve” and “wore” are the subject and the verb, respectively. Yet, a total of twelve words span the vast space between the actor and the acted in the sentence. Again, in line 307, complication in syntax leads to confusion in meaning: Milton says, “As the Vine curls her tendrils,” when he could have made the meaning much clearer by saying, “her tendrils curl like the Vine.” But before criticizing Milton for poor word arrangement, suppose the reader searches for signs of intent imbedded in the confusing sentence structure. In his chapter “Syntax and Sense,” Ricks takes this course of action when he examines the first passage of *Paradise Lost*. He concludes that introducing the verb late in the sentence served Milton’s rhetorical purpose (Ricks 29). Likewise, Milton’s purposeful separations of subject from verb in the passage introducing Eve show his intentions. The syntactical choice of distanced subject and verb symbolizes how far removed Eve is from any action at this early point in the poem. She as yet has made few choices and exists at a kind of crossroads. The passage that describes her choice to sin is framed in dramatic contrast, in terms of sentence structure. Not only does all confusion regarding what subject owns what action disappear, sentences are limited to the subject and verb: Milton says, simply, “she pluck’d, she ate” (9.781). This contrast illustrates how removed Eve is from action in the examined passage from Book 4 and how established her decision-making skills have become by Book 9.

The fact that the simple “she pluck’d, she ate” from Book 9 even appears in the same poem as the long-winded description of Eve in Book 4 deserves attention; it hardly seems that these two passages can claim the same author. In Book 4, the phrase “sweet reluctant amorous delay” contains three unrelated adjectives in a row with no commas, and, in relation to Eve, the words flow so naturally that a reader may not bother to agonize over Milton’s meaning or his syntactical choice. In fact, the quoted lines alone from this passage describing the newly-created Eve would comprise a long-winded sentence, but lines 304-311 of Book 4 are not the beginning of the actual sentence in *Paradise Lost*. There is a period after “delay” in line 311; the closest preceding period is an astounding forty-three lines away. Milton employs enjambment, or the separation of a syntactic whole through line separation, to make this long sentence feel even more blended, verbose, and never-ending. Each line flows into the next one with little pause. The words and concepts of the passage fly by so quickly that nothing has time to fully develop in a reader’s mind—it simply leaves a number of vague impressions. The flow of this run-on sentence, in which Milton bombards the reader with disjointed words and strings phrase after phrase together, serves as a reminder of Eve’s state in Book 4. She is a cluster of ideas that Milton has not activated. The fluidity of possibly discordant elements shows Eve to be in the same undeveloped stage as his purposefully syntactically-jumbled sentence. Contradictory words live harmoniously together, flowing into each other, giving impressions, but are too much in flux to be able to take root. Eve is also in flux, swimming in a sea of the potential Eves into which she might grow. Her undeveloped potential is the reason the examined passage may not appear contradictory in an initial read-

ing. It is a perfect reflection of Eve at this point in her development.

Fish, speaking of an argument between Adam and Eve before the Fall, claims, “nothing follows from it in one direction or the other; the Fall is neither assured, nor rendered less likely; the matter is still poised, as it always has been, between the sufficiency to stand and the freedom...to fall” (*How Milton Works* 550). Though the topic here is Eve’s initial description and her consequential development, the conclusion is the same. After looking at the ways Milton describes Eve in lines 304-311 in *Paradise Lost*’s Book 4, it is hard to make an argument for the predetermination of her fall. Eve could have matured into something other than what she did. One path would have led her toward tendencies to obey, submit, and act modestly—character traits which certainly would have prevented her from eating from the tree. Instead, she develops into a person who deceives, manipulates, and is presumptuous, and those traits make her easy prey for Satan. Milton’s skill, as demonstrated by this passage, goes beyond demonstrating the flexibility of Eve’s character. With these eight lines, he shows that the fall of man was not inevitable.

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