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"Like Consort to Thyself Canst no Where Find: Gender Politics and the Rhetoric of Negation in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*"

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Abstract: The social value of women during the Renaissance limited their intellectual interests to marriage and obedience to their partner. When a woman did not follow this pattern, she was considered a spinster. Women who showed intellectual inclinations in any way usually remained unmarried and part of a social group considered threatening to society. In many cases they were accused of witchcraft and of being demon worshipers. This article deals with the Biblical figure of Eve, a woman created perfect, in similarity to the creator, but who does not follow the social norm, thus being the cause of what is known as the human Fall from divine Grace. In particular, I look at John Milton's *Paradise Lost* where Eve stands as an allegorical figure that represents all women.

Keywords: Gender Politics, Renaissance, Milton, *Paradise Lost* y Rhetoric of Negation

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Like Consort to Thyself Canst no Where Find: Gender and the Rhetoric of Negation in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

O. Introduction

After the reign of King James' I, the religious context, albeit being extraordinarily grounded, was at the same time perhaps one of the most prolific on diverging theories. Almost after a hundred years after the Reformation, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* contributed to reinforce Puritan radical ideas on salvation, damnation and, interestingly, on gender issues. Several critics have acknowledged the importance of *Paradise Lost* on such matters, but their assertions, in my opinion, do not go far enough. While some of them deal with gender politics (Pruitt 2003) suggesting that the text deals with the power of men over women, there is darker element that Milton is describing in dealing with Eve that is missing from these analyses. Thus, this article explores gender politics through the rhetoric of negation present in the imaginary of the text. In so doing, it will deal with the re-conceptualization of women during the 1670s.

The paper focuses only on Book IV because within its pages the best examples can be found. Other books, such as book IX, also offer interesting ground for study, but such analysis simply cannot be undertaken within a single paper. My approach develops as follows: first I deal with a theoretical background for my analysis, then this is applied to the text, and finally I offer some conclusions that shed some light on the role of the woman in *Paradise Lost*.

1. Theoretical Background

Contrary to what might be expected, women were much present in the society of the 17th-century. However, their position was not good. After the Reformation, for instance, nuns disappeared from the social spectrum, and it was conventional to expect every woman to be a wife, a mother and, eventually a potential widow. After Queen Elizabeth's reign, women's status was even lower. An indication of this were the queen's speeches, intentionally masculine, as it was the image she projected. Amanda Dolack states that arguments such as intellectual inferiority derived from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, in which he asserts that women are weaker than men. Classic Catholic text beliefs on the lowly nature of women are argued in works such as *Summa Theologica*, where Thomas Aquinas states that "The male sex is more noble than the female, and for this reason he [Jesus] took human nature in the male sex" (III:31:4 ad 1). However, it was also true that the same argument derived from the general degree of education of women compared to men. A well-educated intelligent woman was therefore often assumed to have a masculine intelligence and was considered an exception to the rule. Elizabeth's successor, King James I seems to have compared his daughter's education to the instruction of a fox (Thomas 2003).

Spinsters were the actual, cultural retail of nuns, in so far as they were (generally) old women – that is, twenty seven years or older – that were not able, for some specific reason, to marry. Such group was regarded with suspicion by society; particularly for their tendency to turn their interests into intellectual matters, being good candidates for teaching and educating provided they were separated from the group. It is in the 17th-century when the word 'spinster' begins to gain the connotations of what would be known as an 'Old Maid' (Worsley 2012). However, it is not on its etymology where we are going to stop, for spinsters carried with themselves a subversive component that will remain patent for society up until the 19th-century.

It is not unthinkable, thus, that popular belief associated spinsters with the more dangerous, able to perform supernatural feats, witches. During the Renaissance "Witches indeed were suspected everywhere" (Shumaker 1972: 61) due to an almost-ferish concern towards such supernatural issues. Because of the gender politics carried out throughout the 17th-century, the popular mind associated this group of women with witchcraft and demonic Sabbaths.

Paradoxically, witchcraft also acted as a device to empower women. Despite being notably despised by society, and considered a superstition by mid17th-century (Thomas 2003), it still sustained

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an important role in popular culture. Names such as Circe, Perimede, Agamede, or Deino, Enyo, and Pemphredo, along with those from Anglian and Celtic myths, such as Guinevere, Morrigan or Cartimandua, the queen of the Brigantes, whom Tacitus defined as a queen full of lust and wildness (*Histories* 3.45), appeared again in intellectual life, thus affecting popular culture too. Thus, women maintained the Aristotelian role of wild animal: "woman ... is more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory" (Aristotle IX.1).

However, their being considered wild animals made men aware of their imagined dangers. Female vipers, for instance, that "bite off [her mating partner's] head" (Anonymous, ca. 1450:Viper), were used in the early 13th-century to state that women should let their husbands "be harsh, deceitful, uncouth, unreliable, drunken" for "The man puts up with your mischief and your feminine tendency towards triviality ... Adam was deceived by Eve, not Eve by Adam." (*The Aberdeen Bestiary*, ca. 1300: Folio 67r). But it is that same association that creates an element of subversion. Since they are not men, they do not behave in the same way, and thus, like the viper, women were to be considered dangerous, less intellectual, less educated, but more cunning and freer. Moreover, when transcending the line of the supernatural, women were more dangerous than ever, being, as they were imagined, able to pact with demons and go "against" God's Plan. Of course, this was partially untrue, since God, in His (by no means her) omnisapience, allowed demons, and thus witches, to act seemingly outside of His path, as the *Malleus Maleficarum* testifies – "But against these arguments: it is submitted that God permits evil to be done, though He does not wish it; and this is for the perfecting of the universe" (Question XII).

Nevertheless, those who have discerned the disruption found also a solution to diminish it. From Aristotle to Martin Luther, women had always been seen as inferior, and yet, theologians around Europe conceded them the power to overcome men's limitations, as books such as *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) or King James's I *Daemonologie* (1597) testify (Hughes 2006:118). However, these treaties find a solution to patch such disruption, and that is to consider witches as serving male demons. Indeed, the popular image of devils such as Lucifer or Satan portrays masculine figures, even when the bible leaves some room to angel's genderless nature. According to Bragg, "They neither marry nor are given in marriage. Matthew 22:30, Luke 20:36 and Mark 12:25. This portion clearly teaches that there are no sexual distinctions among angels, or marriage relationships. The angels are a company, not a race." (n.d.:6)

2. Analysis of Paradise Lost Book IV

In trying to convey all that has been stated above, John Milton's work uses what might be called a 'Rhetoric of negation'. In line 236, the poet expresses his frustration at narrating life: "if Art could tell". Art produced in an already 'Fallen' world that speaks in misunderstandings and Babelian tongues,

And Country whereof here needs no account,
 But rather to tell how, if Art could tell,
 How from that Saphire Fount the crisped Brooks,
 Rowling on Orient Pearl and sands of Gold,
 With mazie error under pendant shades
 Ran Nectar, visiting each plant, and fed
 Flours worthy of Paradise which not nice Art
 In Beds and curious Knots, but Nature boon
 Powrd forth profuse on Hill and Dale and Plaine,
 Both where the morning Sun first warmly smote
 The open field, and where the unpierc't shade
 Imbound the noontide Bowrs: Thus was this place,
 A happy rural seat of various view;

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Since English is a language that appears after Adam and Eve's exile, the poem is unable to grasp the beauty of Paradise and, thus, the poet need to employ an indirect (negative) way of telling. He goes on considering the "Hesperian Fables" as a plausible object for a simile, and questioning their validity: "If true, here only" (251).

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native Honour clad
In naked Majestie seemd Lords of all,
And worthie seemd ...

Adhering to the first myth of the creation of humankind (in which both Adam and Eve were created at the same time), the text (288ff) presents two beings, a man and a woman that seem perfectly equal, both "seemd Lords of all". However, after these lines, in the next five we find:

... for in thir looks Divine
Severe but in true filial freedom plac't;
Whence true authority in men; though both
Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd;
For contemplation hee and valour formd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace, (Milton 1674:290-295)

Here the text starts dissociating men and women, the latter being a subject of the former:

Hee for God only, shee for God *in him*:
His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd
Absolute rule; and Hyacinthin Locks
Round from his parted forelock manly hung
Clustering, but not beneath his shoulders broad:
Shee as a vail down to the slender waste
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Disheveld, 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 receivd,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay. (Milton 1674:296-308; emphasis added)

The passage describes with almost clinical precision the conception of women upon which the text relies. In their perfection, women must submit to men, and thus men must rule over them, and accept her sexual impulses. Then again, the text pursues such ideal paradise in terms of rhetorical negations, for his language in the last two lines of the passage are full of oxymoronic connotations, such as "coy submission", "modest pride", and "sweet reluctant". In other words, English, being as it is, a corrupted language, is unable to grasp such "ideal" significances, and thus, the text has to depend upon paradoxes, negations and oxymorons.

Thus, it offers a depiction of womanhood that the poet acknowledges as untrue, or rather, inconceivable. And yet, it seems that contemporary academics thought that to be the adequate manners of women. The question arises whether the text is an apologetic of such considerations or, rather, a concession of its non-viability. Whatever the answer to that question is, the text clearly shows the intellectual concerns on women that tradition carried on up to the day of its composition. We go on to lines 797-809 where we first find the spiritual 'weakness' of women:

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So saying, on he led his radiant Files,
 Daz'ling the Moon; these to the Bower direct
 In search of whom they sought: him there they found
 Squat like a Toad, close at the eare of Eve;
 Assaying by his Devilish art to reach
 The Organs of her Fancie, and with them forge
 Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams,
 Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
 Th' animal spirits that from pure blood arise
 Like gentle breaths from Rivers pure, thence raise
 At least distemperd, discontented thoughts,
 Vaine hopes, vaine aimes, inordinate desires
 Blown up with high conceits ingendring pride.

Here is where the biggest problem with women lies; the reason why Adam and Eve were eventually expelled from Paradise. Their affinity with Satan (or, rather, Satan's affinity towards her) is what would make her fall. In twelve lines, the text manages to make a threefold statement: First, that women were the vessel by which Evil was spread to mankind; second, that the Devil sympathizes more with women; and third, that because of that relationship, witchcraft and demonology are primarily women's practices.

The first statement is present in the text. Satan does not turn and speak in dreams to Adam, but to Eve. There might be sexual concerns behind this preference. It is stated that Satan is a masculine being. Seeing his intentions (802), the implicit sexuality of such act leads him in that direction, so that the biblical serpent acts as a kind of phallic symbol. The affinity Satan and women share is perhaps due to their inferiority as prey. In line 856, a note of confirmation: "wicked, and thence weak", which echoes *Samson Agonistes* 834-35: "All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore / With God or Man will gain thee no remission", by the same author (Milton *Samson Agonistes* 1671).

However, it is Eve's relation with Satan what ultimately makes mankind fall, and in that, the text cleverly depicts two layers of gender politics. In the first, the text acknowledges a certain weakness of women over men, and thus, their wickedness, whereas men and God are good, and hence, strong. On the second layer, however, the impact of Eve is completely eradicated: if we are to take the first interpretation literally, Eve's fault is none, for Satan, although wicked and weak, is still a masculine figure, able to rein like a "proud Steed" (858), hence able to overpower Eve. Note, nevertheless, how this 'rhetoric of negation' makes the image of a perfect woman impossible even as a myth, because she remains a potential threat for Creation.

3. Conclusions

The text works as a device full of paradoxes and oxymorons intended to offer intellectual meditations not only on religion, but also on gender politics. To do so, Milton first introduces the subversive element, in this case, Eve, describing her in terms that are evasive and obscure to the already-fallen human mind. Furthermore, her description as a woman stands out from the social norm, in the same way as spinsters did -not established in the social rite of marriage, she turns towards intellectual fulfillment. Right at that moment, Milton introduces Satan, who approximates her with the purpose of achieving his revenge from the Almighty, corrupting His creations on the process.

However, through this course of events, the figure of Eve remains as obscure as she was when first appearing. The only remarkable issue is her desire to know. Despite the layers of sexism that pervade the poem, it is ultimately the connection with Satan what provokes the fall. Thus, *Paradise Lost*, thanks to its 'rhetoric of negation' might present to us a double, ambivalent interpretation of women. The first one, points to Eve as guilty for Adam's Fall and her own, and thus being weak and prone to interact with Satan. The second

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interpretation, in which Satan overpowers Eve, leaves her guiltless. The intermediate route might be valid as well, in which case both Eve and Satan are to blame for Adam's curse, and perhaps this last one is the most advanced in terms of gender equality, for it allows the woman to act freely.

The text also leaves us with several unanswered questions, and thus it cannot be thought as a proper essay on gender politics, nor even a text that seeks to discern the truth of such myth. As the poet states, his art is unable to grasp the veracity or not of what it tells.

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