18th Century Women Writers and the Reclamation of Milton's Eve

Since its first publication in 1667, Milton's *Paradise Lost* has continued to exert its influence over literature, having particular resonance with the romantics, Wordsworth citing it as among 'the grand store-houses of enthusiastic and meditative Imagination'. Milton took what Genesis had put forward in a few brief lines and crafted an enthralling, skillful epic, using the creation story to justify the ways of God to men. Using the Bible as inspiration and basis for the poem awarded Milton's text an authority, and thus his detailed portraits of Adam and Eve became particularly influential in discussions about the nature of men and women generally, having sprung from these two 'parents'. Milton's Eve gives credit to the attitude commonplace in his era, that women, though creations of God, are inferior to men: 'both not equal, as their sex not equal seemed'.[Book IV] It is through Eve's weakness of pride and vanity that mankind comes to fall in the Bible and the poem. However, for women writers living in the late seventeenth, and through the eighteenth century, political climate opened up a physical and imaginative space in which they had an opportunity to challenge these gender perceptions Milton's influential work propagates. As Margaret Doody explains, 'in England just after 1660 (and through the Revolution of 1688-89), the ontologies of both gender and politics were radically fragmented', and around this time 'for the first time it was really possible for a woman to enter [the] public realm of the kingdom' through writing. Radical political change happened fast, creating a feeling that public opinion could be swung and changed with more ease than in previous years, and indeed, Doody goes on to comment that 'aggressiveness is a dominant tone or manner of the Restoration, and aggressive questioning one of its norms'. Milton's Eve was a figure for whom all other women were believed, quite literally, to be modelled from, and for women writers who had not existed in the 'public realm' for long, his work provided a popular base from which to work. For these writers to pave their way in the literary world, it was necessary to find a way in which to dispel the inferiority and weakness generally perceived in women. Returning back to the origins of women and original sin and filling out the external forces working on Eve meant tending to the problem at its source. Whether particularly consciously or not, these women, without directly taking issue with his content, attempted to re-model women in the public sphere by filling in gaps that Milton left open, reframing his poem in different ways. Much like Milton drew from the Bible for textual authority, women writers like Margaret Astell and Aphra Behn drew from Milton's ideas for this same purpose, paying homage to the work, of which Virginia Woolf once claimed 'all other poetry is the dilution'. Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* in particular works structurally to dispel female tropes before then suggesting a fresh start for women in a retreat, 'which will be the introducing you into such a *Paradise* as your mother Eve forefeited'. [19]

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Diane Mccolley makes a case for the ‘radical’ treatment of Eve by Milton, claiming that ‘Milton was radical in making Eve an ardent caretaker of the natural world, a passionate, sensuous, and pure erotic partner, a spontaneous composer of exquisite lyric and narrative poetry, a participant in numerous kinds of conversation including political debate’. Whilst perhaps ‘radical’ for his time, Milton informs us repeatedly in clear terms that in spite of all these faculties, Eve remains inferior to Adam: ‘Yielded with coy submission, modest pride’. [Book IV] In relation to this inferiority, Mccolley’s point that Eve is a ‘participant’ in conversation and debate is interesting, and something that Mary Astell, in her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* also identifies. Many critics have noted that after Eve has tasted from the tree of knowledge, her oratory skills become much improved in their persuasiveness, much akin to Satan’s ability. However, it is also true that in her state of innocence, Eve is still able to reason and be persuasive, as exemplified in book IX where she reasons to Adam that they should divide their work between them separately:

‘Let us divide our labours, thou where choice /Leads thee, or where most needs, whether to wind /The woodbine round this arbour, or direct/The clasping ivy where to climb, while I/In yonder spring of roses intermixed/With myrtle, find what to redress till noon:/For while so near each other thus all day/Our task we choose, what wonder if so near/Looks intervene and smiles, or object new /Casual discourse draw on, which intermits/Our day's work brought to little, though begun/Early, and th' hour of supper comes unearned’. [book IX]

She gently coaxes him with the collective address, ‘let us’, and her pleasingly sonorous alliterative speech, ‘where’, ‘whether’, ‘wind, ‘woodbine’ compels Adam to comment, ‘Well hast thou motioned, well thy thoughts employed’. [book IX] Adam’s praise seems clear indication that her reasoning skills are good, and further than this, they manage to sway him, suggesting that her capacity for reasoning is as good, if not better than Adam’s. Astell saliently expresses this sentiment, writing, ‘GOD has given women as well as men intelligent souls’,[22] using the established logic to justify that without the capacity to reason, hierarchically, women would be no better than animals. Eve’s productive conversation in this part of the poem is undermined by the fact that fundamentally, her success in ‘winning’ the argument put her in a position of vulnerability leading to the Fall, implying that persuasive power in women is a dangerous thing. In her own writing, Astell does not try to express the sentiment that women are infallible, but in disagreement with the implications Eve’s reasoning power has, she reaches to other biblical figures to level her textual support: ‘The Holy Ghost having left it on record, that *Priscilla,* as well as her Husband, catechiz’d the eloquent *Apollos* and the great Apostle found no fault with her’.[24] To call on Priscilla here diverts readerly attention away from Eve to a successful story of a woman utilising power and responsibility, placing Eve, perhaps the most infamous woman in the Bible, into a context of being one amongst many other more godly women, showing her to be an anomaly: ‘she must be as bad as *Lucifer* himself who after such enjoyments can forsake her Heaven. ‘Tis to unreasonable to imagine such an Apostacy, the

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supposition is monstrous, and therefore we may conclude will never, or very rarely happen'.

However, as the supposed first woman and mother of all women after, Eve remained, and remains a figure representative of women and womanhood, and both the Bible and *Paradise Lost* clearly lay out Eve's vulnerabilities and the severe consequences these had. From the very outset of Milton's poem, it is hinted from Eve's recollection of her creation that her susceptibility to vanity and pride, both sins which Lucifer has committed:

'As I bent down to look, just opposite,/A shape within the wat'ry gleam appeared/Bending to look on me I started back,/It started back, but pleased as I soon returned,/Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks/Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed/Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,/Had not a voice warned me, What thou seest,/What there thou seest fair creature is thyself' [Book IV]

Eve's admiration of what is her own reflection draws immediate parallels to the classical myth surrounding Narcissus, who met his end through very similar vanity, and indeed, the line 'pined with vain desire', leads one to imagine that had 'a voice' not warned Eve of what she was doing, she may similarly have carried on looking vainly at herself forever. Her beauty is the defining feature marking the difference between her and Adam, and the characteristic constantly enforced, as we see even in these lines when being told to refrain from admiring herself, she is addressed, somewhat paradoxically as a 'fair creature'. Astell does not oppose this vanity trope, but instead picks up on the inescapability of the paradox women face:

'*she who has nothing else to value her self upon, will be proud of her Beauty, or Money, and what that can purchase ; and think her self mightily oblig'd to him, who tells her she has those Perfections which she naturally longs for. Her inbred self-esteem and desire of good, which are degenerated into Pride and mistaken self-love, will easily open her ears to whatever goes about to nourish and delight them'*[12]

Like Eve, Astell's vision of a woman agrees that women have in them the capacity for vanity and pride. However, what she makes apparent that Milton does not is that these sins are nourished, naming 'pride and mistaken self-love' a 'degeneration', suggesting a state descended to, and brought about not just by the woman herself but by 'him', the man who encourages her only in pursuit of beauty, perpetuating her degeneration into sin. This considered, Satan's seduction of Eve begins to make more sense, as he doesn't use flattery entirely different from the way she has been spoken to and about throughout the poem. The 'voice' speaking to Eve upon her creation calls her a 'fair creature', whilst Satan describes her as the 'Fairest resemblance of thy maker', also noting her 'celestial beauty' where she has previously been described as 'angelic'. By pointing out the cycle of vanity fuelled by those around them, Astell provides a new frame for looking at women's vanity, and we re-perceive

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the incident, seeing Satan's words as ventriloquism of those used by Adam, and even God himself to speak to Eve. Astell laments with 'resentment' that women should 'enshrine no better than Egyptian Deities', a descriptive with a sense of hollowness, criticising the view of women as aesthetic objects and nothing more.

Sandra Gilbert, writing on patriarchal poetry, suggests that Milton draws deliberate parallels between Eve and Satan, suggesting that 'Milton's Eve falls for exactly the same reason that Satan does: because she wants to be 'as Gods' and because, like him, she is secretly dissatisfied with her place'. Whilst these parallels are evident and entrench further the demonization of Eve and womankind, the most marked difference between Eve and Satan lies in their education, a point laboured over by women writers like Astell in their attempts to revise the role and perceptions of women. Satan, or 'Lucifer' before his own fall from grace, was an angel very close to God in a similar way to Adam. Eve, however, whilst still a creation of God, is shut out from certain things Adam has access to. Lucifer's fall was considered with full knowledge of God's workings, whereas it is indicated that when Raphael is instructed to warn Adam and Eve about the dangers of transgressing like Lucifer, Eve is not present, and instead the information is relayed in part to her through Adam, having been standing apart from the pair in a 'shady nook'.[Book IX] It is this point, of a lack in education or failed communication which women writers identify as the primary cause for vanity and weakness in women as well as their inferiority. Aphra Behn, writing in the 1680s for instance bestows complete gratitude on 'the unknown Daphnis' for allowing her access to *Lucretius* through a translation, in her poem *To the unknown Daphnis on his Excellent Translation of Lucretius:*

'Till now I curst my Sex and Education,/And more the scanted Customs of the Nation,/Permitting not the Female Sex to tread/The mighty Paths of Learned Heroes Dead,/The Godlike Virgil and Great Homers Muse/Like Divine Mysteries are conceal'd from us'

Here the lines present a kind of chronological realisation, with the poet first cursing her own sex, then the 'customs of the nation', attributing her inferiority not to her birth but to external conditions preventing her from being equal. The mention of the 'paths' of 'heroes' like Virgil and Homer also implies that the poet herself, enabled in education, is able to tread their paths in a literary sense, insinuating that armed with knowledge, it is possible for a woman to equal a man's literary achievements. Astell similarly points out the injustice in women being denied education, alluding all the while to the genesis tale, with mention of 'temptation' and 'poyson', alluding to snakes:

'*to introduce poor Children into the World, and neglect to fence them against the temptations of it, and so leave them expos'd to temporal and eternal Miseries, is a wickedness, for which I want a Name[.]'* [11]

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Again, in her allusions to Milton’s poem, Astell reframes the focal point of Eve’s temptation and Fall, pointing out a ‘neglect’ in not providing Eve with all the same knowledge as Adam, instead nourishing her sense of beauty and vanity. The mention of ‘wanting a Name’ for this practice signals that Astell has introduced an external catalyst for Eve, and women’s, misdemeanours, shifting the blame, claiming that ‘many persons who had *begun* well might have one to the Grave in peace and innocence, had it not been their misfortune to be violently tempted’.[40] Were Eve really afforded all the education and knowledge Adam was allowed, women writers imply that she may have been better fenced against the forces of temptation.

It was in the direct interest of women like Aphra Behn, Mary Astell, and Margaret Cavendish, to re-fashion the model of women, or as Gilbert phrases it, device ‘their own revisionary myths and metaphors’ in place of ‘Milton’s myth of origins’, for their own work to be taken seriously. For a society in which, as John Spurr describes, ‘Every town and every city, almost every parish, was divided’, these women seemed to find wriggling room to take Milton’s Eve as a representative of all women, and fill her character out, not denying a work which was considered genius, but exposing the driving forces behind her behavior as truly in the hands of the society and men who conditioned her.

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