Jennifer K. Staehle

EGL 503/ Spring ‘14

Professor Pfeiffer

May 1, 2014

Eve and *Areopagitica*

Thus far in our readings of *Paradise Lost* the character who has stood out the most to me is Eve. I find her to be a very complex and relatable character and the more I read this poem, the more I have sympathy for her, the more I understand her, and the more I am frustrated by her. This made me believe that she was truly a Miltonic character because she embodies conflicting ideologies, such as passion and reason, and whenever we think she is leading us to a conclusion, we only end up with more questions. What I have found in my research is that there are generally three traditions of thought when it comes to Eve: the first is that Eve carries the entire blame of the Fall because she, as a woman, is only good for. The second is that even though Eve fell to temptation, it was a “Fortunate Fall” because she ensured our freedom to choose and granted us knowledge to know how to choose. The third justifies Eve’s sin and argues that Eve never should have been punished because she was right to sin and that Eve is the unsung hero of *Paradise Lost.* I think that in his characterization of Eve, Milton incorporated all of the traditions even though they conflict with one another. I can see how some would view Eve’s sin as heroic, as fortunate, and as a critique of the female’s place. This made me believe that she was a character that needed further investigation because, as we’ve discussed in class, Milton makes choices in plot and characterization for thematic and conceptual purposes. So, there must be a point in creating Eve in such a way - it’s up to us as the readers to figure out what those points and purposes are for ourselves.

Today I’d like to explore Eve pre-fall and specifically focus on Eve’s reason for wanting to work separately from Adam and her argument. Before I do that, there are a few points I want to make. Last week we discussed the circular text structure of the poem and this caused me to look back at Book 4 to see if there were any important connections or facts that I overlooked that may inform my reading of Book 9- as it turns out, there were two. The first point I’d like to make is that Satan, by listening to Adam and Eve talking in the garden in Book 4, not only finds his way into paradise unnoticed, but also sees his opportunity to corrupt the couple: 4.512 “Yet let me not forget what I have gained/ From their own mouths; all is not theirs it seems:/ One fatal tree there stands of knowledge called,/ Forbidden them to taste: knowledge forbidden?/ Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord/ Envy them that? Can it be sin to know,/ Can it be death? And do they only stand/ By ignorance, is that their happy state.” Satan finds the weakness in mankind’s happiness, and that is that their happiness is based on ignorance for knowledge is forbidden from them. Knowledge and ignorance is a topic we have discussed before and that Milton purposely brings to our attention again and again. Three lines later Satan reveals his plan to us: “Hence I will excite their minds/ With more desire to know, and to reject/ Envious commands, invented with design/ to keep them low whom knowledge might exalt/ equal with gods.” How will he accomplish this? Though Eve- because as he is spying on the couple, he sees that Eve’s character is similar to his own- she is vain, prone to passion, wants higher standing in Eden, and suspicious. At least, she becomes suspicious in Book 9.

This leads me to my second point- before Satan can tempt Eve into action, he has to plant the seed in her mind. This has huge implications on Eden because the temptation of Eve in the garden by the serpent is not the first time Eve is tempted in the poem. The first time Eve is penetrated by Satan is mentally, in her sleep, defenseless, in Book 4. Moreover, no one does anything about it or increases defenses on Eve after she is corrupted by Satan which leaves us with the uncomfortable reality that Milton’s Paradise was not strong enough to keep Satan out twice. We also see that Milton’s Eve is left defenseless, vulnerable, and prone to sin and temptation. Eden has failed Eve and so has God by allowing this to occur and we have to question why Milton does this in the poem-Why is Paradise flawed? Why is Eve left defenseless against temptation? These are questions I hope to answer later, but they are important questions to begin with so that we can understand where Eve is coming from in her argument in Book 9.

Moving forward to Book 9 we must pay attention to Eve’s argument and reason for wanting to work away from Adam. What begins as a civil discussion turns into accusation quickly and I believe that we are invited to read Eve’s argument as the better one. Adam wishes for them to stay together to avoid temptation. Eve, perhaps inferring too much into Adam’s point, takes this as an attack on her virtue. This, as we know, is not the first time Eve has felt her virtue to be considered inferior or weak, but this is the first time she is speaking out against it. To appease her, Adam claims: “Not diffident of thee do I dissuade/ Thy absence from my sight, but to avoid/ Th' attempt itself, intended by our Foe” (9.295)” Adam’s desires are clear: he would just rather avoid temptation altogether and he explains that his desire to stay together has nothing to do with Eve’s faith, or lack of faith. In Eve’s response, we see that her reason for desiring separation is to prove her virtue and declare her freedom. Eve is now verbally questioning her purpose and, more importantly, her happiness and inviting Adam, and us, to respond.

**Page 531**

If this be our condition, thus to dwell [322]  
In narrow circuit [strait'nd](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_9/notes.shtml#line323) by a Foe,  
Suttle or violent, we not endu'd  
Single with like defence, wherever met, [ 325 ]  
How are we happie, still in fear of harm?  
But harm precedes not sin: onely our Foe  
Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem  
Of our integritie: his foul esteeme  
Sticks no dishonor on our [Front](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_9/notes.shtml#line330), but turns [ 330 ]  
Foul on himself; then wherefore shund or feard  
By us? who rather double honour gaine  
From his surmise prov'd false, find peace within,  
Favour from Heav'n, our witness from th' event.  
And what is Faith, Love, [Vertue unassaid](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/book_9/notes.shtml#unassaid) [ 335 ]  
Alone, without exterior help sustaind?  
Let us not then suspect our happie State  
Left so imperfet by the Maker wise,  
As not secure to single or combin'd.  
Fraile is our happiness, if this be so, [ 340 ]  
And Eden were no Eden thus expos'd

I’d like to draw your attention to a few lines of this passage that should sound familiar to you because they bring up issues of freedom and choice, a topic we can’t seem to get away from. Eve asks the all- important question on line 326: How then are we happy, still in fear of harm? Eve seems to understand that her happiness is a part of a Miltonic equation. Happiness comes from freedom, freedom comes from the ability to choose, and choice can only be made if one has knowledge. Eve is missing parts of this equation- so is she happy? We have to answer “no,” because that is the only way we can justify her desire to look for what will make her happy- testing her virtue and proving her faith.

The next line we need to look at is 335: And what is faith, love, virtue unassaid? What is faith love, virtue untested- it’s in *Areopagitica.* “He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d virtue unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.” What are we to make of this? It’s clear that there is a connection between the treatise and Book 9- this is just one example of it but we are forced to ask ourselves: Is Milton condoning Eve’s desire to test her faith?

Again, we are conflicted, because we can come to many different conclusions: some of us may say yes, Eve is right to test her faith and I think that Milton would agree with you. Others of us may say, no, Eve has no right to test her faith because she is going against her purpose, and again I think that Milton would agree with you as well. I think that this is what it means to be Miltonic- that one work, one character, could embody two opposing thoughts that could both be proven true simultaneously. Whatever you believe, I think that Eve is at the point where she has to take action because she has called into question her freedom in Paradise. For Eve, Eden is not a Paradise and we have to wonder if it ever was. In the passage we have been focusing on, Eve makes the claim that Eden may not be a paradise if she is not free to control her own actions and make her own decisions and choices. Eve’s desire is simple and is put into perfect words in *Areopagitica*: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties” (268). Eve wants the freedom to make her own choices and the knowledge to be able to make good choices and prove she is not an inferior creation. In light of Book 4, what we know from *Areopagitica,* and the fact that Eden is not perfectly protected, can we blame her?

As I work to bring closure to this labyrinth I have created for myself, I want to take one last look at Eve’s narrative and make one last connection between Eve and *Areopagitica*  because I really feel that Milton is purposely tying the two together to say something about freedom, choice, and knowledge. Eve asks a very important question in Book 9: if Eden is supposed to be a paradise, why does she need to be censored from temptation? And if she needs to be censored, how can she truly be happy and choose to love God? This question is an important one in Milton’s treatise and Milton makes sure to bring up the Fall in *Areopagitica: “*It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the [knowledge](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica/notes.shtml#knowledge) of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbeare without the knowledge of evill?” In essence, Eve is struggling with the idea of free-will, but she never comes to a true conclusion, nor does she receive an answer to these two questions. In fact, when Satan tempts Eve he does not tempt her with answers, but by re-stating these questions and reiterating Eve’s insecurities about Paradise from Book 4. He even uses points from the portion of *Areopagitica* that I just read out loud to tempt Eve when he asks her (9.696) “knowledge of Good and Evil;/Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil/ Be real, why not known, since easier shunnd?” Milton continues to write about the need for good and evil in order to truly have knowledge and freedom, and I think that Milton saw the connection between Eve and the treatise. After reading the last portion of *Areopagitica,* I conclude that Eve had no way of knowing good or evil because she had nothing to compare it to- she had no experience, Adam was no help as her guide, so she had no way to make educated choices. Milton makes it clear that a man or a woman is good only if they have chosen good over evil- he or she must know that he is choosing between the two, and must be able to weigh them against each other. How can Eve make a good choice if she does not have the wisdom to choose nor the freedom to seek wisdom? For Eve, Eden has one fatal flaw: freedom. If Eve is not allowed to resist temptation alone and make decisions on her own, away from Adam, then she is not free. If she is not free, she is not happy, and if she not happy she is not in paradise. So, she bites.

Questions for further discussion:

1. Why does Adam allow Eve to separate herself from him if he has specifically been warned about Satan in the garden? Is this similar to the way God allows Satan to separate himself from God?
2. To what extent does Milton want us, the readers, to participate as unofficial characters in the fall? What the effect of this? Is this what makes the poem complicated?
3. In Book 9 it’s clear that Eve and Satan are very similar as Eve’s flaws are also Satan’s. If we agree that there are inherent similarities between Eve and Satan, why does Eve have the opportunity for eventual redemption through the Son and not Satan?