
Eve's Culpability And The Question Of Free Will In Paradise Lost

At the heart of *Paradise Lost* lies Milton's attempt to wrestle between two key ideals of the poem: the all-powerful Eternal Father and the notion of Free Will. In setting out to 'justify the ways of God to men' (l. 26) whilst maintaining his own anti-deterministic beliefs, Milton must ensure neither is compromised throughout his epic poem. Whilst the form of anti-Calvinism Milton chooses to extol appears to exonerate God from responsibility for the fall, there are still issues surrounding this interpretation. God has, after all, created man 'sufficient to have stood, though free to fall' (III. 99) and seems to succeed in this; his creations able to exercise their own free will to obey or rebel. Christ and, at least initially, Adam are able to prove themselves as devoted and obedient followers of Faith, however Eve's journey is markedly different, her decisions leading her down a path leading to her great transgression and the ultimate expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. However, whilst Eve is condemned as the root of man's suffering and her conscious decision to eat the apple is lamented, God's creation of Eve is markedly flawed, setting her out as a vulnerable from the poem's offset. Couple this with her treatment within the Garden of Eden and the tale's success is brought into question. Rather than demonstrating the power of Free Will in ascertaining Faith, Eve appears placed in a position near impossible for her to succeed. This difficulty arguably stems from the irreconcilable fact that Eve is a subject of the period in which she was written, both biblically and to Milton the guilt Eve carries is a response towards feelings of inferiority subjugation towards women.

It often appears God's omniscience can cast him in a cruel and indifferent light, not raising a hand to prevent the Fall, however, this is resultant in a misunderstanding of Milton's theodicy, a system through which mankind, and indeed other beings must find themselves worthy through 'degrees of merit rais'd' (VII. 157). There are numerous points throughout *Paradise Lost* critics have pointed out as troubling when judging the responsibility of God in the fall of man. An early example is seen when God observes Satan winging his way to the new world. He describes Satan's journey through chaos and his plans to usurp the new creation. The crucial moment takes place in the shift as God talks of Satan's desire from 'if...he can destroy, or worse' (III. 91) to 'shall pervert; for man will hearken to his glozing lies' (III. 93). The tense change to the indicative future, strengthened with the caesura seems to convey absolute certainty. God has no doubt of man's future and there seems to be no flexibility. Man's fall is apparently already guaranteed, seemingly removing him of the Free Will so desired by Milton's God. Nevertheless, it appears as if Milton is faced with a contradictory task. If God's knowledge is not absolute, then there must be a deficiency in his nature. Any such deficiency in his nature means he cannot be God, for God's very essence requires the perfection of all attributes. The Scripture informs us that God is omniscient, with Job 37:16; Psalm 139:2-4, 147:5; and 1 John 3:19-20 leaving no doubt that God's knowledge is infinite, knowing everything of the past, present and future. The superlatives used throughout these verses: 'perfect in knowledge', 'his understanding has no limit' and 'he knows everything' illuminate very clearly God's knowledge is not only greater than our own but infinite in its totality. It is undeniable God knows Adam and Eve are going to sin in much the same way he knows Satan will rebel against him. This must be simultaneously synthesised with the Calvinist theories of Predestination Milton seeks to refute, Adam and Eve having absolute ownership over their own actions and complete Free Will. The Almighty states as much in the infamous quote declaring Adam and Eve

'decreed / their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault, / which no less proves certain unforeknown'. (III. 116-119) Existing outside of time, God in *Paradise Lost* knows everything about what Adam and Eve experience but he cannot dictate what his creations will choose. Nonetheless, this can be synthesised when understanding God's desire to test all his creations obedience, a theory predicated on the existence of Free Will.

The quote that appears to embody the crux of God's belief in Free Will and explains his decision not to intervene in man's Fall is found in Book III during the Council of Heaven where God states 'Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / of true allegiance, constant faith or love' (III. 103-104). God argues Virtue is only displayed when faced with a test. His creation's must have Free Will as, for him, obedience through servitude is no cause for exultation and Milton's own *Aeropagitica* itself suggests, in the words of Eve, 'Virtue unassay'd' (IX. 335) is meaningless. It is of note to mention Eve's words to Adam echo that of God himself, she understands she must be strong enough to stand alone and be tested to prove her worth to God. The best example of this testing can be seen in regards to the son of God and his test of faith dependent on his own Free Will. The son is created as a separate entity from God, begotten in time not from eternity (III. 384) and, therefore, does not share his Father's omniscience. The relationship between the two is not static, rather dialectic, especially in the Heavenly Council. He boldly exercises freedom going as far as to suggest, should Satan be successful, God's goodness may be 'question'd and blasphem'd without defense' (III. 166). Christ is exercising his own Free Will and, through this, his obedience under the tenants of his Father's wishes. Through this debate, the son emerges unwavering in his belief in the Eternal Father and, upon volunteering to die for man's sins, proves he is 'By Merit more than Birthright Son of God' (III. 309). As a separate being, the Son is granted the same Free Will the angels and man are granted and proves a central theme of the tale, that freely chosen obedience is a sign of strength made perfect in weakness. Therefore, it is important that man, like Christ and the angels, is tested.

Eve's test, however, is far more troubling when fitting within the system of merit based virtue and accolade, her incomplete creation at the hands of God marring her potential to ever succeed at all and leading to question God or indeed Milton's intentions in regards to women. Adam exercises his Free Will when requesting a companion from God and is tested when the bright light before him pretends he will not create a companion, however, ultimately he is able to pass the test set out, with God claiming the 'trial' (VIII. 447) over. Adam requests from God a harmonious fellowship with someone who is not 'unequals' (VIII. 382) and God's answer to provide him with 'fit help' (VIII. 450) appears as if he is entirely obliging. Yet the Eve he is presented with, although undoubtedly beautiful, kind and caring, is not an equal of Adam. Even from her inception she is made 'crooked by nature' (X. 885), taken from Adam's 'sinister' (X. 886) side. God has absolute power in his creation so the question remains why he would choose to take not only a crooked object in the form of the rib but to take said object from Adam's left side, both allusions to sin. Not only is Eve corporeally flawed but she also spiritually disabled from creation. Milton states how Adam lives 'for God only' whilst Eve lives 'for God in him' (IV. 299), immediately establishing a strong hierarchical order. The use of Adam as a conduit from Eve to God denies her the personal relationship every other higher power can enjoy. The angels and Adam are able to communicate directly whilst Eve is reduced to an impersonal conveyance. The inequity between the two is obvious, despite Adam's belief their union is one of 'one flesh, one heart, one soul'. (VIII. 40) Whilst they may be comprised of the same being, their character is anything but. The misbalance between the two is evident to

Satan too who, upon discovering Eve wandering through Paradise, is delighted to find her alone as an 'unsupported flow'r / From her best prop so far'. (IX. 423-3) The implication here is immediately obvious with Eve's appearance, although beautiful, masking a worrying lack of independence. Her reliance on Adam to stand erect in the face of sin not only removing her ability to commit herself wholly to God but leaving her all the more venerable when separated, as she must be, for her strength of faith. If Eve was created not strong enough to stand alone it is not fair to subject her to a test of faith that requires her to be alone and thus God has failed to distribute justice equally.

The greatest flaw with Eve is, however, a product of her environment rather than her creation, Adam and the Angels' treatment of Eve. Adam's test at the hands of Raphael saw his insatiable 'thirst' (VIII. 8) for knowledge silenced when Raphael refuses to answer questions concerning celestial motion and warns him of the limits in place on human knowledge. The reader is told multiple times of man's curiosity and desire for knowledge when discovering new plants or naming new animals. However, at crucial moments when man is educated on the working of the universe and its place within the cosmos, Eve is not present. She is dependent on Adam's retelling of events and, as such, is unable to explore the own realms of her curiosity. More importantly, Adam is informed what limits are placed by God on knowledge, warned by Raphael 'Solicit not thy thoughts with matters hid, / Leave them to God above, him serve and fear' (VIII. 167-168). With no awareness of the limits put in place, Eve's insatiable but untested desire for knowledge has the potential to run rampant. Yet far more damning is the scene in which Michael's physical suppression of Eve by placing her asleep in Book XI renders her once again incapable of exercising the Free Will both Adam and Christ in discovering faith for themselves. The passage in which Michael asks Adam to 'ascend this hill' (XI. 366-367) with him whilst Eve is left with her eyes 'drenched' sees Adam raised up alongside the angel with Eve below the two of them. Adam is aware of the significance of his journey, as they both ascend 'in the visions of God' to a vantage point from which he can view 'all earth's kingdoms and their glory' (IX. 377-384) the passage saturated with Biblical and Historical reference designed to elevate the glory of this moment. This is not a moment in which he considers the knowledge of Eve, after all, Eve can only live for 'God in him' (IV. 299). It is no wonder she is unable to support herself alone, not given the equal opportunities as other tested characters to learn and grow as an individual. It is this refusal that leads to the success of the Serpent winning its way into her heart, Satan using a direct appeal to this insatiable curiosity of man through the fictional autobiography of the Serpent. As Satan speaks of his 'alteration' he claims he began to engage in 'Speculations high or deep' (IX. 602). These 'speculations' are something Eve has not been provided with answers to until now and, lacking a complete understanding of the world around her, her curiosity is piqued into delving further into the Serpent's tale.

Clearly Milton highly values freedom and the notion of voluntary choice, making them central to his greatest power but he cannot relinquish the idea of God's absolute power creating a tension that lingers within Paradise Lost. Ultimately, Eve's failure to succeed and prove her faith is a result of her flawed creation and the constrictions her environment has placed her under. In Book IX lines 387- 395, as the Book begins to reach its climax with Eve nearing the Tree of Knowledge, Eve appears to adopt the blame for a multitude of tragic woman throughout classical history, her comparisons ranging from Persephone and Pomona to Delia and the Dryads who perish with their trees. Eve carries not just the guilt of a single woman in history but the mother of all female guilt forever more. Adam, when learning of the sin of Eve, cries out to the heavens in horror asking why God created women rather than filling the world 'with men as

angels without feminine' (X. 893). The Biblical story of Adam and Eve relies on the failings of Eve and, through doing so, requires Eve to use her Free Will to choose against God. However, is it truly Free Will if Eve is not provided with the necessary agencies to make her decision? The increasing direction of blame towards not only Eve but the feminine form as a whole seems rooted in an establishment well versed in the subordination and disenfranchisement of women and the tale of Eve, no matter how Milton tries to reconcile this, is a product of this time.

edubirdie.com