



# Milton's Pro-Feminist Presentation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*

Abdullah F. Al-Badarneh

Department of English, Jerash University

P.O. box 26150, Jerash, Jordan

E-mail: albadarneh\_abdullah@yahoo.com

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## Abstract

This paper absolves John Milton from any critical and feminist accusation of being anti-feminist in *Paradise Lost*. Such defense of Milton is based on the close reading and analysis of the passages that focus on Adam and Eve in the text. This study highlights Milton's modern view of women as independent, free, and responsible. It also presents his iconoclasm in representing women as leaders and initiative takers when decision is to be taken. This study shows Milton reversing traditional gender roles through the relationship of Adam and Eve. In addition, one can find a modern emphasis on the principles of equality, democracy, dialogue, freedom, and free will available in the poem and designed in a way that serves Eve's rights in comparison with Adam's. Therefore, my voice in defending Milton joins the cohort of critics who believe of Milton's wide perspective of pro-feminism and not a person of misogyny.

**Keywords:** feminism, hierarchy, equality, partnership, misogyny, binary opposition

## 1. An Introduction

A lot of critics, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, as shown in Catherine Martin's article, "Dalila, Misogyny, and Milton's Christian Liberty of Divorce" (2004), have reached a "conclusion that his [Milton's] works are staunchly antifeminist" (p. 2) or "consistently masculinist" (p. 4). Thus, the readers' responses all over the centuries got a kind of oscillation or ambivalence whether Milton's representation of women, and, particularly Eve, as long as she is the main concern of this paper, is negative or positive, but "by the time 'second wave' feminists came along in the 1970s, these suspicions had turned into active disdain" (Martin, p. 4). Therefore, this paper purports to expose Milton as a pro-feminist rather than an anti-feminist as some critics think of him. For this purpose, my study will closely examine *Paradise Lost* giving a special concentration on the situations in which Eve is concerned in order to scrutinize the ways she is described and represented by Milton. It also examines her relationship to Adam and Adam's treatment of Eve in the poem. In order to foreground Milton's high and modern view of Eve, I would like to highlight Eve's liberty, independence, and Adam's need for her. In the course of the epic, Eve comes to achieve her equality to Adam through establishing her own freedom, self-will, and self-judgment.

## 2. Gender and Binary Opposition

Susanne Woods's argument, presented in Julia Walker's article, "The idea of Milton and the Idea of Woman" (1988), that "hierarchy of creation is no hierarchy of value or freedom in Milton's vision" (p. 9) appears sustainable. This logical argument shall explain Milton's lines that could be taken to mean woman's inferiority and her subjection to man if read superficially. Though the binary opposition between the two sexes is internally one of creation—not of gender as a lot of feminists thought of it—Milton, as I believe, has been misunderstood in this respect. In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, he says:

Though both  
Not equal, as thir sex not equal seem'd;  
For contemplation hee and valor form'd,  
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace, (IV. 296- 307)

Such difference, as it appears in these lines, is one that concerns physicality not intellectuality or equality. Milton emphasizes that it is sex that is "not equal," and—as it has become a commonsense knowledge, the word *sex* has to do with biology, not with gender. In his book entitled, *Milton and Sex*, Edward Comte (1978) comments on this passage, pointing out that the two sexes are "not equal" in terms of creation. He goes on saying that "the usage [of the word "equal"] is nearer to our usage of *identical*" (p. 90). Obviously, it is a matter of fact that man's creation is different from that of woman. Both sexes are different in this concern. Ascribing the qualities of contemplation and valor to Adam and those of softness and grace to Eve doesn't necessarily mean to inferiorize women. Rather, difference here suggests a state of wholeness and interdependence.

Moreover, Milton places Eve as Adam's center of concern and attention. She is depicted to be more commanding and leading. Upon her creation, Eve was directed into the Garden of Eden by the voice of God. There, she sees Adam for the first time and turns away from him because, as she tells him, he was "less fair," "less winning soft," and "less

amiably mild” (IV. 478-79). Thus, Milton situates Eve as the center into which Adam is drawn. He was the one who follows her, not the opposite, and, here, I highlight these poetic lines in which the word “follow” in line 481 is so significant. Eve addresses Adam and describes his state as he sees her in the Garden:

thou following cri’d’st aloud, Return fair Eve,  
Whom fli’st thou? Whom thou fli’st, of him thou art,  
His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent  
Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart  
Substantial Life, to have thee by my side (IV. 481- 85).

Significantly, it is Adam who follows Eve, as if Milton is alluding to a modern theme of a transposition of the sexes. As we investigate the idea of the woman in *Paradise Lost*, we should keep in mind that Milton is writing in the mid-seventeenth century and, here, in the above lines, we find him masterfully reversing the traditional gender roles. Adam appears as a subordinate to Eve and not the opposite. What is also dazzling here in these lines is Eve’s creation from Adam’s side and nearest to his heart, as he tells her. Interestingly, Eve is neither created from his head, so she might transcend him, nor from his foot, so there will be a possibility that he may step over her, but out of his side. This emphasis on the side implies her equality to him and her nearness to his heart, so they will take care of each other and protect the one another.

However, the nature of the love relationship between Adam and Eve transcends all opposite binaries in the sense of a superior-inferior hierarchy. Eve’s submissive words that are taken by some feminists to be against Milton and to describe him as a misogynist can be interpreted as courtesy words that add to the intimacy of the relationship among the couple. Such nice words of Adam and Eve have a deep psychological level, and the subjection or the submission of Eve referred to in the poem was sexual in the sense that she surrenders herself to him upon each intimate relationship. Thus, it is not a gender-based submission. What we to expect of Eve’s answer to be when Adam gently speaks to her in an intimate manner: “sole partner and sole part of all these joys, \ dearer thyself than all” (IV. 411-12). Responding to him, Eve, out of love, describes him as her “guide” (IV. 442) and “head” (IV. 443). In response, Adam addresses her as “daughter of God and Man, accomplisht Eve” (IV. 660). Furthermore, Adam’s treatment of Eve suggests love, equality, and justice rather than hierarchy or misogyny. In the morning, Adam wakes Eve up to share doing the garden labor. The way he is described awakening her proves the gentle manner in which Eve is treated. In this context, Milton says:

Then with voice  
Mild, as when Zephyrus on Flora breathes,  
Her hand soft touching, whisper’d thus. Awake  
My fairest, my espous’d, my latest found,  
Heaven’s last best gift, my ever new delight (V. 15- 23).

Therefore, such love relationship among the couple abolishes any sort of hierarchy and presents Eve as an active part of the love equation rather than presenting her as a sexual object.

### 3. Iconoclasm of Milton

The idea that Milton is a pro-feminist and an iconoclast who undermines traditional gender roles is further exemplified in his transposition of the sex roles. This takes place in book nine of the poem. In this book, Milton appears as an iconoclast in his presentation of the scene where Adam is “waiting desirous her return” (IX. 839) and making her a garland while Eve is away working in the garden. By having this master scene, Milton deconstructs the traditional gender role that dictates that man goes out of the house for work and woman stays at home taking care of children and of her domestic chores. In this scene, Milton reverses gender roles by having Eve working and reaching a space farther than that of Adam’s. Moreover, this time it is the man who waits the return of the woman and not the opposite. Dan Vogel (2012), in his article, describes Eve’s initiating role as her feminism. He indicates that her proposition to divide labors with Adam can be seen as “the first indication of the beginning of Eve’s self-revaluation” (p. 21).

Actually, Milton’s accusers of anti-feminism are oblivious to the fact that Adam—all the time before the Fall—sees Eve as his equal, if not a creature that excels him since Eve is so beautiful, sexy, and rational. In addition, Adam sees Eve as an intelligent being, as it appears when in many lines he tells Raphael about her: “And in herself complete, so well to know \ Her own, that what she wills to do or say, \ Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best” (VIII. 548-50), till he gets into describing her great intellect, saying: “Greatness of mind and nobleness thir seat \ Build in her loveliest, and create an awe \ About her” (VIII. 557-59). So, Milton does not present Eve in the poem as a sexual object as some critics assume. If it is true, as some critics claim, that Adam is the embodiment of reason and wisdom, and Eve is that of passion and grace, I still see them presented by Milton to be on equal grounds since one has what the other lacks. In this way, they complete each other. Nonetheless, Milton has gone farther when he presents Eve “in herself complete” (line 548). That means she has the two parts of the human soul, the mind and the body, and this shall place Eve in a position higher than that of Adam. In this sense, I see Fredson Bowers’ (1969) point that equates “Eve, the female and so the inferior element of the union, [as he describes her] to passion (or emotion), the lower element of the soul, subject to the governance of her superior, Adam” (p. 265) refutable.

Though Fredson Bowers and some other critics argue that Eve's representation lacks good intellectual powers and they, consequently, accuse Milton of being a misogynist. They claim that Eve's act of withdrawal from the conversation held by Raphael and Adam is due to her lack of intellectual powers and her inability to comprehend what the heavenly creature proposes. However, the truth of the matter is different. In book VIII of *Paradise Lost*, Eve leaves that conversation to look into her fruits and flowers. Milton, here, makes it a point for Eve as if he is asking his readers not to misunderstand and mistake Eve as intellectually inferior. Eve "preferred" to have the story related out of Adam's mouth because he is her husband who can mix love with storytelling. In this context, Milton says:

Her husband the Relater she preferr'd  
 Before the Angel, and of him to ask  
 Chose rather: hee, she knew, would intermix  
 Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute  
 With conjugal caresses, from his Lip  
 Not Words alone pleas'd her (VIII. 53-8).

Thus, her preference necessarily reflects her independence and free will. Michael Cody (2000) argues in the same direction, solidifying my argument as he says: "When in the middle books of the epic Raphael discusses with Adam the history of creation and the war in heaven, Eve wanders away. But she neither is sent away nor leaves because the conversation is above her understanding" (p.52). Therefore, it is obvious that her withdrawal is a matter of preference that has nothing to do with lack of intellectual powers. Such accurate choice of the word "preferred" solved a big problem and saved Milton the accusations of some critics who are doing the great bard injustice.

Moreover, Adam's voice in the poem can be said to be the same as Milton's especially when the former speaks of Eve. In an obvious statement upon Eve's creation, Adam, whose voice is Milton's, declares a sense of equality and identification between the two sexes as he says:

I now see  
 Bone of my Bone, Flesh of my Flesh, my Self  
 Before me; Woman is her Name, of Man  
 Extracted; for this cause he shall forgo  
 Father and Mother, and to his Wife adhere;  
 And they shall be one Flesh, one heart, one Soul (VIII. 494-99).

In his book, *Milton and Modernity*, Matthew Jordan (2001) joins those critics who defend Milton's idea of woman as he says: "Eve is in significant respect an equal, a companion for Adam with considerable powers of reasoning and, while a beautiful, sexual being, is by no means the hollow temptress whose presence in earlier accounts of the Fall renders them so inconsistent" (p. 88). Such inconsistency in Eve's powers of passion and mind result, as I think, from her vanity and extreme beauty. However, such consideration of herself fosters her independence and free will, not the opposite. Thus, her self-conceit is a point that strengthens her equal status to that of Adam and enables her to make a decision without any reference to Adam even she makes her decision ahead of Adam.

#### **4. Partnership, Equality, and Individuality**

The theme of partnership, as presented by Milton in the poem, leads to no place but to Eve's equality to Adam, bearing in mind that it is Adam who prays to God to create a female being for him, somebody that is equal to his intelligence and human status. Adam appears in book eight speaking to God as if lamenting his solitude and wishes to establish a kind of utopian society whose establishment seems impossible without a woman. Thus, he insistently and humbly urges for another human being and particularly a female to complete his existence. Adam's request of a "fellowship" (VIII. 389) proves his inability to live alone. He tells God that each of the beasts lives with its own kind: a "lion with Lioness" (VIII. 893); thus, he is asking God for a female fellowship in particular. God's response to Adam's request is a clarification of the picture in which Milton's Eve is to be placed: "What next I bring shall please thee, be assur'd\ Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self,\ Thy wish, exactly to thy heart's desire" (VIII. 449-51). Upon her creation, Adam is overwhelmingly joyful. He describes his relationship to Eve as a "union of Mind, or in us both one Soul;\ Harmony to behold in wedded pair" (VIII. 604- 05). In her article entitled, "How Free Are Milton's Women?" Susanne Woods (1988) argues that "far from being a misogynist, Milton was ahead of his time in granting to women a dignity and responsibility rarely conceded in the seventeenth century. His Eve has majesty" (p. 15). In my point of view, it is unlikely for a misogynist to present a main female character in such "majesty" as Milton has done in his presentation of Eve. Raphael's praise of Eve as a goddess stands as a real substantiation of Eve's majesty in the poem. In this context, Milton describes what Raphael says about Eve as "undeckt, save with herself more lovely fair\ than Wood-Nymph, or the fairest Goddess feign'd\ of three that in Mount Ida naked strove" (V. 380-83). Thus, we know, as a matter of fact, that Raphael is God's good angel who speaks the heavenly truth that no one can question or argue. One might raise the question that if this is true, why, then, Raphael warns Adam not to be subjected to Eve and to show more self-esteem. Again, the answer to this question places Eve in a good position as Adam's central being. Moreover, one might take this argument further to say that Adam was blinded by his love to Eve. What happens is that Raphael, through Adam's dazzling speech of Eve, was able to sense Adam's excessive love for her and his

readiness to obey her word and follow her command. So, Raphael's warning can be seen as a precaution to both of them.

Therefore, one can obviously see that Eve's individuality and independence are differently treated from the seventeenth-century traditional view of women as passive, objectified entities whose role in the family as well as in society is to listen to the patriarchal figure and to execute his orders. Though Eve, while conversing with Adam, describes him as her "guide" and her "head" (IV. 442), the reality of the matter is that she never listens to his instructions, specifically, when she asks him to go apart in order to do the garden's work. On the contrary, she seems to be the one who convinces him of her rhetoric. Thus, her power of speech is presented stronger by Milton in order to substantiate her individuality and freedom. Though she makes the wrong decision and eats of the Forbidden Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Eve was totally free to make her decision. This kind of presenting Eve with such strong personality subverts the patriarchal discourse of hierarchy and places Eve on the same level as Adam's. In her article, Woods (1988) points out that "Milton was never comfortable with human hierarchy. The republican [Milton] who abhorred an aristocratic system that gave authority by happenstance of birth to kings and princes could not be perfectly at ease with a gender hierarchy also dependent on birth" (p. 19).

Moreover, the collective pronouns, used by Milton and referring to the couple, substantiate the idea of equality between them. One can come across a lot of examples in this matter as "two of far nobler shape" (IV. 288), "for in thir looks Divine, \ the image of thir glorious Maker shone" (IV. 291-92), and "In them Divine resemblance, and such grace \ The hand that form'd them on thir shape hath pour'd" (IV. 364-65). The use of the collective pronoun in addressing the couple implies a sort of shared responsibility and equality. Therefore, this discursive address to the couple gives answers to those critics who blame Eve as the sole agent responsible for the Fall. Interestingly, in more than a spot in *Paradise Lost*, we have the word reference "Man" that refers to humanity, constituting both male and female as "Of Man's First Disobedience" (I. 1), and "For Man will heark'n to his [Satan's] glozing lies" (III. 93). Significantly, it is Eve who first eats of the Fruits of the Tree of Knowledge, but the word used here is "Man" that describes the pair, thus, involving both of them in the responsibility of the Fall, and clearing Eve of the charges held against her as the sole person responsible for the Fall. In her article entitled, "Eve and the Doctrine of Responsibility in *Paradise Lost*," Stella Revard (1973) supports such an argument by saying: "God speaks of Adam and Eve collectively as founding parents of the race, and He assigns the guilt in terms of both as first "Man" initiating Original Sin" (p. 96).

Though Eve commits a big sin through eating of the Fruits of the Tree of Knowledge, it seems a real decisive moment for her to be both intellectual and free to choose. She pauses a lot before making a second decision whether to let Adam share the fruits of her doing or to manipulate it for herself. One of the thoughts that crossed her mind is that she wanted to be "more equal" (IX. 823) or even "superior" (IX. 825) to Adam. Then, she connects inferiority with the lack of freedom pointing out: "for inferior who is free?" (IX. 825). Such connection implies her free will, her equality to Adam, and, also, her aspiration to surpass him. However, Eve, the intellectual, proves to be more empirical and practical than Adam, the ideal. In this concern, Eve makes her second decision when she let Adam eat of the Fruit of the Tree just to face the same fate of her and not to have him "wedded to another *Eve*" (IX. 828).

A good example of Eve's strong personality and individuality, as presented in the poem, is her ability to give suggestions. Her suggestion to divide the garden labor in Paradise privileges her as an active agent in the social communicative process. Whether this suggestion sounds unwise or wrong, its importance has to do with the person who takes the initiative first. It is Eve who first asks Adam: "let us divide our labors" (IX. 214). As she decides to do her gardening labor, separate from Adam, Eve manages to persuade him of her viewpoint when she asks him not to doubt her firmness (IX. 279). Thus, Milton becomes iconoclastic in introducing a female character winning the argument over a male figure. Having taken that initiative, Eve is presented to be the leader-figure of the relationship between the two sexes. Again, Milton is reversing the typical gender roles dominant in his age. Eve proves to be a revolutionary figure that connects and colligates happiness and freedom together when she says: "How are we happy, still in fear of harm?" (IX. 326) Furthermore, she goes on to suggest that such life in a "narrow circuit" (IX. 323) limits her freedom. Therefore, I can say that such Miltonic presentation of Eve is so liberating and modern, and one can see Eve as the first human ever who breaks through the chains of narrowness and into freedom against all sorts of imprisonment. In her article, Catherine Martin in her article, "Dalila, Misogyny, and Milton's Christian Liberty of Divorce," defends Milton as a liberal humanist in his work, *Samson Agonistes*. Nevertheless, she alludes to Eve's individuality pointing out that "Eve is literally Adam's flesh and bone, she too was never meant to be a "lifeless rib" with no independent volition" (p. 59). Such an idea goes hand in hand with Eve's free will and independent identity in terms of subjectivity and choice.

However, Milton envisions an ideal model of the relationship between the two sexes that mainly depend on interdependence. Adam and Eve prove weaker when separated from each other. For example, Eve's proposal of doing their work separately in the garden alarms Adam that any of them might be seduced by Satan "who could seduce Angels" (IX. 307). In this respect and to give it a highlight, let us meditate what Adam says when proposing his need for Eve in order to stay balanced and firm: "I from the influence of thy look receive \ Access in every Virtue, in thy sight \ More wise, more watchful, stronger" (IX. 309-11). Thus, one can argue that Adam, as a male figure, lacks self-sufficiency in the poem. The truth of the matter is that neither of the couple is solely self-sufficient because to be self-sufficient means to be perfect, an attribute possessed only by God. In fact, Adam and Eve complete each other. Such an argument leads us to contemplate the situation in case Satan chooses Adam for his seduction plan instead of Eve.

Once alone, Adam is not as wise as when he is along with Eve. Thus, he will be vulnerable and subject to fall too. Therefore, we can say that each of the couple shares the responsibility of the Fall equally. It is not only Eve who first suggested the separation nor Adam who consents to let her go alone, but both of them. In her article, Revard (1973) points out that Milton “intends us to see Adam involved in Eve’s fall, not merely agreeing to it afterwards; thus it must be through Adam’s knowledge and consent that Eve is alone” (p. 69). This proves that Adam shares the responsibility of the fall with Eve.

Upon considering Adam’s immediate reaction to Eve’s act of disobedience, one makes sure that Eve’s existence in Adam’s life is central to his being. Though he blames her for the Fall, and she feels humble, he chooses to fall along with her. Vogel (2012) explains such humility: “Milton, I think, is not suggesting as part of Eve’s feminist legacy to her infinite daughters that women should always use a strategy of humility. Rather, his midrash illustrates the necessity of strategies in marriage. However, Adam follows Eve but this time to his Fall. He does so deliberately, deciding to disobey God in order to remain with Eve. Such presentation of this theme leaves no doubt to those who still believe in Milton’s unfairness to Eve. Adam is presented as a subservient to Eve by following her steps and eating of the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge. His immediate reaction was one of praising Eve’s majesty and showing an austere determination not to get separated from her as he says: “However I with thee have fixt my Lot \ Certain to undergo like doom; if Death \ Consort with thee, Death is to mee as Life” (IX. 952- 55) till he tells her that both of them “are one” (985). At the end of it, the couple is reconciled as they leave Paradise hand in hand.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say that Milton has got a lot of grains disseminated in the text of his poem that present the female character in modern terms. Indeed, Milton is a figure of modernity who has worked hard to achieve a kind of equality between the two sexes. In the course of his poem, Milton is successful to show Eve’s active agency, individuality, and free will in a way that fits our modern liberal definition of gender roles and women rights’ movements. Therefore, as I think, it is time that all critics realize Milton’s goodness to women and to the feminist movement not only in England or America but all over the world since Eve is the first woman on Earth and the mother of all human beings. She is done all justice and fairness by the great bard.

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