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“Though both not equal, as their sex not equal seemed”: The Role of Gender in Epic Teleology in the Iliad and Paradise Lost

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“Though both not equal, as their sex not equal seemed”: The Role of Gender in Epic Teleology in the Iliad and Paradise Lost
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By Lauren Kaufmann

For contemplation he and valour formed,
For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
He for God only, she for God in him

Paradise Lost IV. 297-9

...But you,
The gods have replaced your heart
With flint and malice, because of one girl,
One single girl...

Iliad IX. 657-60

Reading a Homeric epic is not an exercise in narrative suspense and revelation. Rather, the plot ineluctably pushes toward an unavoidable end—a finality that must be. Episodes of misdirection or meandering, from the perspective of the epic genre, exist to be overcome and subsumed by the broader narrative, thus demonstrating ever more strongly the teleological form.\footnote{David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993: 46.} In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Adam and Eve is an exemplary case of the epic with its fixed, inevitable telos: Eve must eat the forbidden fruit and humanity must fall. However, the idea of strict causality in
Eden from pre- to postlapsaria is complicated by David Quint’s *Epic and Empire*. He articulates a distinction between two types of epic: those of the imperial victors, modeled by Virgil and characterized by its linear teleology, and those of the defeated, associated with Lucan and containing the meandering tendencies of romance.\(^{12}\) He argues that, while Milton’s epic illustrates the teleological movement supporting its overarching political-theological narrative, *Paradise Lost* nonetheless bestows upon Adam and Eve psychological freedom, demonstrating the potential for individual choice to derail a romance-epic altogether, thereby suggesting that “individual choices of conscience… can have far-reaching, indeed world-historical consequences.”\(^{13}\)

With this genre framework in mind, I seek to investigate the nature of gender in epic. I engage Miltonic literary criticism due to its profound focus on the psychology of gender in Eden to formulate my own conclusions. Then I gaze retrospectively at the *Iliad*. I seek to glean an understanding of the notion of epic telos in the grandfather of Milton’s epic poem, Homer’s *Iliad*, and will conclude with a reflection upon the heroic natures of Adam and Hector.

I. Milton and *Paradise Lost*: Gender, Dynamism, and the Fall

When Milton composed *Paradise Lost*, he was a blind man in his fifties, utterly disappointed by the failure of the so-called “English Revolution” and restoration of the monarchy in 1660.\(^{14}\) He aimed to write a new kind of epic poem focusing on sacred truths in order to “assert Eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men” (I. 25-6).

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\(^{12}\) Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 8-9.

\(^{13}\) Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 283.

He incorporates features of Homeric epic—beginning in *medias res*, invoking the muse, emphasizing aristocratic and martial themes, employing so-called epic similes, and more—but he also revises and challenges these conventions. Indeed, the character in *Paradise Lost* who most embodies the Greek martial virtues is Satan “in his unwavering pursuit of personal glory and imperial ambitions.”\(^{15}\) Satan’s obsession with external honor and rejection of subservience aligns him with the heroes Achilles and Hector who sacrifice their lives for ephemeral social status and the hope for eternal glory demonstrating how “fully their sense of self is bound up with these external marks of honor.”\(^{16}\) Milton also employs features of the romance genre, characterized by dynamism, wandering, and the possibility—but not promise—of learning. On the divine level, these features of romance highlight “the aimlessness of the eternally fallen Satan”\(^{17}\).

Satan always ventures higher than his divinely-granted, creaturely lot and engages in an eternal repetition of trial and failure. But Milton presents these same narrative characteristics in a positive light for his human protagonists. In Eden, Adam and Eve find a dynamic space of discovery that works to advance Milton’s own theological project: God-given free will. Read within his corpus of political and religious writings, Milton’s portrayal of the gendered dynamics between Adam and Eve serves both his ideological and political ends and also contributes to the telos of the epic narrative.

Most critics who discuss gender, hierarchy, and power in Eden consider Milton’s cultural moment and his political

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17 Quint, *Epic and Empire*, p. 303.
and religious tracts including *Areopagitica, Tetrachordon*, and *De Doctrina Christiana*\(^\text{18}\) to aid the reader in situating *Paradise Lost* within the broader scope of his intellectual project. As the quotation I use to open this paper exemplifies, Milton constructs Adam and Eve as essentially different but ineluctably related via a hierarchy atop which man reigns. While in scripture female subordination is a purely postlapsarian condition,\(^\text{19}\) Milton’s portrayal of women is that of presupposition—and thus inborn diminished status—due to their inherent distance from God’s image.\(^\text{20}\) Reading Eve’s creation, then, with an understanding of Milton’s theology yields an interpretation of her role solely as Adam’s companion. In *Paradise Lost*, God creates Eve as the “embodiment of Adam’s wise longing”\(^\text{21}\): “Thy wish, exactly to thy heart’s desire” (VIII. 451). Eve, in both mind and body, is formed in Adam’s image to “permit unity with him.”\(^\text{22}\) She is meant to exist alongside—not share—his preeminence. Thus, while Milton grants Eve an autonomy rarely seen in the works of other seventeenth-century male writers who tend to “under-develop...their [female characters’] moral and

\(^{18}\) *Areopagitica* today remains an enduring defense of the right to freedom of speech and rejection of state censorship; *Tetrachordon* is a scriptural rationalization of legalized divorce; and *De Doctrina Christiana* is a collection of Milton’s theological beliefs and arguments.

\(^{19}\) “Prior to the Fall, there is no mention in the *Bible* of woman’s subordination to man; female subordination is a postlapsarian condition imposed on woman by God in Genesis 3.16 for her role in the Fall.” Desma Polydorou, “Gender And Spiritual Equality In Marriage: A Dialogic Reading Of Rachel Speght And John Milton,” *Milton Quarterly* 35.1 (2001): 23.

\(^{20}\) Polydorou, “Gender And Spiritual Equality In Marriage”, p. 22.


intellectual faculties,” a fundamental theological belief nonetheless operates in the text: “The Pauline notion that male is to female as head is to body or as spirit is to flesh.” In *Tetrachordon*, Milton emphasizes the pronoun “him” in the phrase “in the image of God created he him” from Genesis 1:27, arguing along with 1 Corinthians 11 that “woman is not primarily and immediately the image of God, but in reference to the man.” Mutual-egalitarian interpretations of the Adam-Eve relationship indeed existed in Milton’s time, such as in the writing of Rachel Speght, but Milton’s distinctly masculinist readings of *Genesis* and Paul’s epistles serve his own political and theological ends and emerge in his poetics. He portrays Eve’s nature as inherently subordinate to Adam’s. However, it is precisely this hierarchy that Milton complicates in *Paradise Lost*: it is both protagonists’ misunderstandings of this hierarchy that will lead to the Fall and thus fuel the narrative teleology.

“O yet happiest if ye seek / No happier state, and know to know no more” advises Raphael to the blissfully sleeping Adam and Eve in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, revealing the danger imminent when venturing higher than the cognitive state granted by God (IV. 774-5). Despite this warning Eve aims upward toward equality with Adam—“for inferior who is free?” she asks—demonstrating her misinterpretation of the nexus of power in which she has been placed (IX. 825). She does not possess inborn knowledge of her relation to Adam as his rightfully subordinate partner, a lack of understanding demonstrated explicitly by Milton in her creation scene. When she first sees Adam, she finds his appearance “Less winningly soft, less amiably mild,/Than that smooth wat’ry image” of her own reflection (IV. 479-80). It is not until

24 Polydorou, “Gender And Spiritual Equality In Marriage”, p. 22.
Adam seizes her hand that Eve recognizes his “manly grace/And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (IV. 490-1). Here, Eve verbally acknowledges her inferiority but fails to understand that her subordination means her individual teleological success: serving as Adam’s wife via adherence to her assigned, essentialist gender role. Already, Milton depicts Eden as a world in which his characters are able to explore and grow.\textsuperscript{25} Thus, the depiction of Eve and Adam is not merely one of static characters existing in rigid hierarchy; the two grow in prelapsarian Eden by learning from one another and developing as individuals. An interpretation of their marriage as inclusive of trial and error of this sort is also in keeping with Milton’s theological and political ideals. For him, true liberty which “must be contingent in order to be free”\textsuperscript{26} essentially includes the potential for failure—whether embodied through Christian free will allowing sin or through civic liberty that can cause the acceptance of a king such as Charles II.\textsuperscript{27}

The plot of \textit{Paradise Lost}, of course, depends upon

\textsuperscript{25} The extent to which the prelapsarian Adam-Eve relationship includes individual and personal dynamism is a topic of continued scholarly debate. Influencing many critical responses to this question is an understanding of Milton’s own theory of marriage revealed most pointedly through his philosophy of divorce in \textit{Tetrachordon}. I position myself with scholars such as Edwards, Belsey, and Pruitt who argue that Milton’s marriage ideal—embodied by Adam and Eve—includes a reciprocity requiring both types (personal and interpersonal) of dynamism. Further, this dynamism corresponds to the Miltonic notion of free will: as McColley says, “If Adam and Eve are not sufficient as well as free, God will in effect have inclined the scale toward disobedience. Their responsibility for their conduct derives from their capacity to obey.” Diane McColley, “Free Will and Obedience in the Separation Scene of \textit{Paradise Lost},” \textit{Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 12} (Winter 1972): 103-20.

\textsuperscript{26} Quint, \textit{Epic and Empire}, p. 300.

Eve’s rejection of Raphael’s advice to remain content in her subservience, upon the failure of learning her rightful relation to Adam, and on the “self-assertion and independence”\textsuperscript{28} of “adventurous Eve” (IX. 921). Eve’s prelapsarian failure to learn fully the nature of her marriage to Adam—destined not for full equality but for harmonious, hierarchical coexistence—thus culminates in her sin. This portrait of Eve’s cognitive state as innately limited is in keeping with seventeenth-century gender norms and also adheres to Milton’s theological belief in female presubordination. Duped by Satan’s wiles, she eats the apple in order to make herself more appealing to her husband and “add what wants/In female sex, the more to draw his love” (IX. 821-2). As Quint argues, “Eve’s seeking of independence thus grows out of her relationship with Adam as much as from diabolic suggestion.”\textsuperscript{29} She fails to understand her individual ontology and falls prey to demonic deception. However, Adam’s subsequent indulgence in the forbidden fruit is an event of a fundamentally different sort.

Milton’s God creates both Adam and Eve “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (III.99). The double alliteration in this line, separated by the comma caesura, creates a symmetry separated by the pivotal \textit{though}, which concedes the choice. The whole of humankind is not fallen until Adam joins Eve in the postlapsarian state. This fall is the result of free choice and active rejection of reason. Adam articulates his mental and physical superiority: “I understand in the prime end/Of nature her the inferior, the mind/And inward faculties, which most excel,/In outward also her resembling less/His image who made both” thereby recognizing his duty to lead Eve with his “inward faculties,” his rationality and wit (VIII.540-4). Adam actively rejects his

\textsuperscript{28} Belsey, \textit{John Milton}, p. 60.

\textsuperscript{29} Quint, \textit{Epic and Empire}, p. 292.
divinely granted role as leader of humanity when he fails to fulfill husbandly duty and mistakes the fallen Eve for the righteous wife God initially creates for him. The “effeminate slackness” (XI. 633) of which the angel Michael accuses Adam manifests when he stoops “to join [Eve] in sin rather than trusting divine providence and using his own unfallen virtue to free her from it.”

Adam chooses not to live—in his case, an everlasting condition—without the fallen Eve and instead follows her into sin by eating the forbidden fruit. In turning away from the virtuous Eve given to him by God and committing a theological adultery against the bond that originally unites him to her, Adam makes his contribution to the teleology of Milton’s poetic project. Both Adam and Eve must sin for the Christian faith to develop, but in striving toward this telos—the apocalyptic ending of all endings—Milton depicts divergent reasons for the fall of the two genders. The grandfather of humanity exercises free will and chooses to fall—despite knowledge that tells him to do the contrary. Milton adheres to the Bible’s statement in 1 Tim. 2:4 that “Eve was deceived—and that Adam was not.”

Despite the difficulties of power and perceived hierarchy that inform the Fall, Milton emphasizes the ever-present counterfactual: Adam could have chosen otherwise. Indeed, it is the fact of human free will that enables him to exonerate God from responsibility for the inevitable sin. This seeming paradox illuminates divergent systems of logic and necessity within and beyond the epic plotline: in Eden, Adam and Eve are free to choose while in the global scheme of teleology they must fall. Milton presents Eve as a catalyst

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31 Edwards, “Gender, Sex, And Marriage In Paradise”, p. 155.
whose beauty is so striking that, when she turns away from Adam at her birth, her apparent ability to exist apart “seems to have inflicted upon him a psychic wound”33 that informs his irrational choice to join her in sin. It is from the female sex then that challenges to textual rationality arise in Paradise Lost. A similar argument can be made for the Iliad.

II. Homer’s Iliad & Heroic Men

As in Milton’s Eden, Homer’s Troy contains gender dynamics that both allow and problematize the narrative’s teleology. It is the adultery of Helen, “running off with a glamorous Oriental, which triggered the disasters of the Trojan War”34 and the expropriation of Briseis that impels Achilles to refuse to fight, prolonging the bloody battle. The interactions between men and women in the Iliad show female characters as demonstrating the “dangers, temptations, and deceptions that are involved with that problematic sex”35 and thus serve as barriers that must be overcome or vanquished in order to maintain both community and narrative cohesion. When Achilles rejects Agamemnon’s ambassadors and their offer of reconciliation, he sacrifices his broader community—drastically prolonging the war until his dramatic reentry—due to the social offense committed when Agamemnon takes Briseis. Phoenix, Achilles’ mentor, recounts the Meleager story to encourage him to accept the offered retribution, linking the possession of gifts with social honor. Though these offerings constitute a critical mark of social status, Achilles rejects the advice and declares, “I don’t need that kind of honor, Phoenix” (IX. 624). Achilles’ anger at the theft of his booty, an earned trophy from battles well

33 Quint, Epic and Empire, p. 290.
35 Griffin, “Greek epic”, p. 19.
fought, demonstrates the extent to which his sense of pride and honor are anchored in external markings. Thus, while his denial of the gifts seems to demonstrate the rejection of community standards, his conception of shame and honor inform this choice and work to position him as maintaining cultural cohesion and reinscribing himself within a culturally normative system of logic. This exchange of the female body as social capital exemplifies the rigid importance of status to the Homeric hero and allows Achilles to enact his adherence to society’s values.

As this example illustrates, women in the *Iliad* function as catalysts for male action and either adherence to or deviation from their heroic scripts. Females present potential crises to the collectivity in *Paradise Lost* and the *Iliad* and, in this way, drive the teleological movement of the epics; their desires must be rejected and vanquished. The final exchange between Hector and his wife Andromache is a poignant example of this collision of gendered ideals. Unlike Adam, whose *failure* to lead rationally defines his contribution to epic teleology, Hector’s staunch *adherence* to his heroic ideals—a feature characterized in Milton as superhuman via the single-minded Satan and Abdiel—in this domestic scene constitutes the fulfillments of his ontological goal as Homeric hero and of the narrative teleology.

When Hector reenters the walls of Troy in Book VI of the *Iliad*, he encounters three women—his mother Hecuba, his sister-in-law Helen, and his wife Andromache. His exchanges with each of them demonstrate how fully he, a military man, is “cut off from the community he is risking his life to protect.”36 During their final conversation as husband and wife, Andromache presents to Hector an argument at odds with the heroic rationality of the Iliadic world: claims to the

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individual family superseding the larger community. She says, “Possessed is what you are, Hector. Your courage/ Is going to kill you, and you have no feeling left/ For your little boy or for me, the luckless woman/ Who will soon be your widow. It won’t be long/ Before the whole Greek army swarms and kills you” (VI. 427-31). Like Adam, Hector is here presented with a choice: he can heed Andromache’s entreaty and fight defensively instead of in the front lines and thereby preserve her seemingly valid claims to family, or he can sacrifice his own life and the happiness of his family by maintaining his heroic modus operandi and fall by the blade of a sword. Andromache, like Eve, is described as remarkably beautiful and virtuous: “blameless,” “gracious,” and “white-armed.” A captivating female figure, Andromache expresses a challenge to the internal logic of the text in a moment at which Hector could deviate from the all-important community principles that define heroism. Unlike Adam, though, Hector rejects her request by appealing to his prevailing martial code: “Yes, Andromache, I worry about all this myself,/ But my shame before the Trojans and their wives,/ With their long robes trailing, would be too terrible/ If I hung back from battle like a coward./ And my heart won’t let me” (VI. 463-7). Hector’s words show that he is unwilling, due to his unwavering adherence to the distinctly Homeric conceptions of shame and cowardice, to respond favorably to his wife’s desperate plea.

This is, as it is for Adam, a matter of life and death. Hector chooses premature mortality, reflecting the “blindness and self-destructiveness that are bound up with heroic glory.” It is through the rejection of the desires of his lovely wife Andromache that Homer here enacts what Milton would have recognized as akin to his own model of free will in his

own recasting of epic as theological history. Hector maintains his status as hero—despite the highest of costs—by adhering to his rigidly defined ontology and sacrificing his own life and his wife’s compelling claims to family. In adhering to his heroic script—by standing when he could fall to Andromache’s appeal—Hector thereby fulfills both his personal ontology as Homeric hero and the teleology of the epic narrative: he must die, and Troy must burn.

III. Gendered Relationships in Eden and Troy

Milton’s strict adherence to God-granted free will creates a space of narrative romance in which Eve and then Adam fail to learn and grow in such a way that would preclude the fall of humanity. Conversely, Homer depicts a hero with a logical system utterly incompatible with the meanderings and deviations that Adam undergoes; as such, Hector is able to maintain his own heroic ontology.

Why is Hector able to reach his personal teleology while Adam and Eve fail so dreadfully? Though both tales are mythohistories, it is critical that no one has ever actually lived in a heroic age. It is a perspective “reserved for posterity, looking back with admiration, or with envy, at the truly great and memorable actions of the past.”38 We can covet Hector’s single-minded adherence to his martial, heroic duty precisely because we cannot identify with him. Milton, on the other hand, writes his epic from the viewpoint of a fallen Christian—hyperconsciousness of the mutability and imperfection of his creaturely nature. Adam’s adherence to emotion over rationality and Eve’s misunderstanding of her subordination to her husband involve psychological complexities and misinformed assumptions that are characteristic of the difficulties of human existence.

38 Griffin, “Greek epic”, p. 16.
Milton presents his reader with an alternative to the hierarchical gender constructs that characterize Eden. In the heaven of *Paradise Lost*, there exists no gender differential at all; the angels are free to change form at will and share a union of equality unattainable by humans: “Easier than air with air, if spirits embrace / Total they mix, union of pure with pure / Desiring” (VIII. 626-8). Without a gendered hierarchy there can exist no gender stereotypes, no divergent ontologies, no privilege and inferiority—characteristics that, in Milton’s Christian worldview, have no place in humanity. The unity of his angels harkens not to the mutable and irrational failings of the human mind but, rather, to the singular mindset of Homeric heroes. Unity, conformity, and singularity are the traits Hector possesses and Adam lacks. Perhaps Milton would have preferred that God had given humanity Hector instead of Adam. In the poet’s world, it could have made all the difference.

References


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