The “Nature” of Sovereignty and the Female Intellectual in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

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Bio:

Megan Trotter graduated from the University of North Texas in summer 2010 with the Bachelor of Arts Degree in English with a minor in Philosophy. She was a Distinguished Honors Scholar in the Honors College and graduated summa cum laude. Trotter was named Outstanding Undergraduate Student in English in 2010. She was featured in UNT Research magazine in 2009, and was on the President’s List and Dean’s List throughout her time at UNT. She received the Mary Patchell Scholarship for English in the 2009-10, and the Burlage Family Scholarship for English in 2008-09. She has held Research Fellowships in 2008-09 and 2009-10. Prior to coming to UNT, Megan was on the Dean’s List in 2005-06 at the University of Southern Mississippi where she held an academic scholarship. She presented at University Scholars Day 2010 and at the UNT English Department Scholarship Ceremony in 2009. After graduation, Megan plans to teach English as a second language in Korea, and later attend graduate school in Literature. Her career goal is to become an English professor.
Abstract:
This paper examines the effect of Queen Elizabeth I’s sovereignty as a monarch on English literature in the 17th century England, especially the work of John Milton, *Paradise Lost*. The meaning of *sovereignty* is explored and as well as the consequences of an expanding book trade on the concept of women’s status in Milton’s time. The results of a close reading of *Paradise Lost*, from an ecofeminist perspective, demonstrates that *Paradise Lost* is not a protofeminist work, but rather a continuation of an anti-feminist movement initiated by Renaissance pamphleteers.
Introduction

The presence of Elizabeth I on the English throne made the larger question of a women’s right to govern an urgent topic of debate. Discourse fueled by Elizabeth’s accession was interested not merely in issues directly related to the monarch, but in the concept of female sovereignty more generally, a term which I want to understand in Georges Bataille’s sense, as that which is “opposed to the servile and subordinate” (Bataille 197). Evidence of this concept’s omnipresence in public discourse can be found in John Milton’s Paradise Lost. As a seventeenth-century author and poet, Milton had little reason to be concerned with the former Elizabethan regime. Yet Paradise Lost raises several questions about a woman’s role in society, one of the most prevalent being how, and if, she may contribute intellectually. Milton’s re-imagining of the Genesis story posits that the unnatural intellectual overreaching of Eve in the Garden of Eden would be no less unnatural and socially, no less catastrophic, in the real world of seventeenth-century England. In what follows, I shall begin by elaborating upon the meaning of sovereignty as it ought to be understood for the purposes of this paper. Next, I will examine the consequences of an expanding book trade for women in Milton’s time before I move on to a close reading of Paradise Lost, which will draw heavily on ecofeminist criticism. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that Paradise Lost is not, as several scholars contend, a protofeminist work, but rather a continuation of an anti-feminist movement initiated by Renaissance pamphleteers.

Sovereignty

One scholar who reads Paradise Lost as a protofeminist work, Kristin A. Pruitt, argues that Milton uses the themes of reciprocity, or the sharing of male and female gifts, and gender hierarchy to create an Eden where male and female are equal (Pruitt 57-59). She contends that the archangel, Raphael, not Milton, gives Paradise Lost its masculinist undertones and that, if the Fall
had not altered Paradise, Adam and Eve would have become like angels, and gender differences
would have dissolved (Pruitt 57-59). Bataille’s understanding of sovereignty serves as a useful
corrective to this insofar as it helps to illuminate the gender hierarchy within which Adam and Eve
operate in Milton’s Eden—a hierarchy whose uppermost position belongs to Adam. According to
Batailles, it is servile to employ the present time for the sake of the future—what he deems
work—and sovereign to enjoy the present time with nothing else in view (Bataille 198-99). He also
contends that the quest for knowledge is a servile operation, one which requires the seeker to
always work, never attaining the object desired (202). Finally, he argues that the sovereign
moment is that moment in which anticipation meets disappointment, that is to say, when the object
of desire is accepted as one that may not be attained, although it remains conceived of as an object
which possibly exists (234).

If we are to accept the conditions established by Bataille—those which must be met in
order for one to be deemed sovereign—then we must also acknowledge that according to these
conditions, Adam is sovereign while Eve is servile or subordinate. Whereas Adam labors for no
other end than to glorify God, Eve remains concerned with productivity, through which she hopes
she may prove herself to be as competent as her husband. Eve also remains desirous of knowledge,
a pursuit that Bataille considers a servile operation, and for Eve, one that eventually leads to
original sin. Finally, Eve never accepts her object of desire—knowledge—as one that may be
conceptualized but never obtained. Therefore, in Bataille’s terms, she never experiences a moment
of sovereignty. I will revisit these points when I offer close readings of passages from Paradise
Lost, but first, let us turn to the historical context and consider how the book trade initially
impacted men and women and, more specifically, how it may have influenced Milton’s writing.

Impact of the Book Trade
The shifting topography of the book culture in Milton’s time presented the male population with no shortage of reasons to be concerned about the prospect of female participation in the male-dominated intellectual community. For example, the rise in consumer activity in early modern Europe triggered a rise in female readership (Lamb 15-17). Throughout the seventeenth century, commodities of all kinds, especially books, became significant symbols of social status. The mere ownership of expensive books functioned as proof of one’s wealth. However, early modern associations of female idleness with social superiority granted women an additional opportunity to validate this proof. By discussing the books she owned, a woman demonstrated that she spent much of her time in idleness, reading for leisure.

Paralleling a rise in seventeenth-century female readership was a rise in politicized female authorship. For example, several women published defensive tracts in response to the gynophobic attacks of pamphleteer Joseph Swetnam (Miller 44-48). These women often alluded to the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, identifying with Eve and projecting the identity of the serpent onto the male pamphleteer. This analogy gendered seduction and deceit as masculine, reversing conventional attacks on women as the source of original sin. *Paradise Lost* is best understood as belonging to this Genesis-inspired tradition of gender debate. Without making any specific argument or recommendation, Milton does draw attention to this debate, and he does challenge the protofeminist positions offered by female pamphleteers.

**Gender Heirarchy in *Paradise Lost***

An ecofeminist analysis of passages from *Paradise Lost* helps to expose the gender hierarchy in Milton’s Eden, a hierarchy that suggests that Adam is superior, or sovereign, by virtue of his natural reason and understanding. The school of ecofeminist literary criticism combines environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism to explore the relationships among nature,
gender, race, class, and sexuality in literature (Legler 227-28). The central tenet of ecofeminism is that masculine domination of women parallels the cultural domination of nature. Ecofeminist critics thus argue that in literature, a female character’s association with nature often indicates her status as dominated.

In *Paradise Lost*, Eve frequently emphasizes the natural beauty of Eden, whereas Adam emphasizes the value of labor; that is, transforming and managing natural beauty as an offering of praise. The earliest revelation of this dichotomy occurs in Book IV, when Adam and Eve are preparing for sleep. Adam encourages his wife to rest, claiming that “Man hath his daily work of body or mind / Appointed, which declares his dignity, / And the regard of heaven on all his ways” (*PL* 4.618-20). Before the couple falls asleep, Eve eulogizes Eden’s natural landscape in an elaborate speech:

> Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
> With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
> When first on this delightful land he spreads
> His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower. (641-44)

Eve’s infatuation with nature in this scene serves to distinguish her from her labor-minded husband. Although Adam also shows sensitivity toward nature throughout *Paradise Lost*, the significance of his relationship to the landscape differs greatly from that of Eve’s. The couple’s differing experiences of nature highlight the hierarchical structure of Milton’s Eden. Let me explain in detail how this works.

While describing to Raphael his first memories of Paradise, Adam recollects being overcome with admiration for the nature that surrounded him. He begins with a rather sensual account of the world in which he awakened, recalling that a “flowery herb”
cushioned him while the sun “fed” upon the sweat on his body (8.253-56). After gazing a while at the sky, he inspected the earth, fascinated by both the sentient and non-sentient beings he first observed, which filled his heart “with fragrance and with joy” (65-66). From his observations, Adam concluded that a divine maker must have created him. He then fell asleep “On a green shady bank profuse of flowers” (286), and in a dream, God revealed to him the truth about his origin and inheritance.

Eve’s first memories of Eden are similar to Adam’s in that they are filled with pictures of Eden’s natural landscape. She recalls first awakening “Under a shade of flowers” (4.451), curious about who and where she was. She then apprehensively rose to her feet and walked to a grassy bank, where she sat and observed her reflection in a lake. Immediately, God told her that what she perceived in the water was her own image and then beckoned her to follow him, claiming that he would lead her “where no shadow stays” (470). Eve obeyed, and God brought her to Adam.

Adam and Eve’s initial experiences of Eden differ first in that Adam awakens in the sun, whereas Eve awakens in the shade. Second, after opening their eyes, they gaze in opposite directions. Adam first gazes at the sky, whereas Eve peers down at the water. Lastly, God confirms and builds upon the conclusions Adam draws about his origin and endows Adam with knowledge of each species’ name and nature. However, instead of satisfying Eve’s initial curiosity about her origin and environment, God leads her to Adam, who is to act as God’s intermediary, responding to all of Eve’s questions. The sunny, amicable environment that welcomes Adam into Paradise, as opposed to the overcast, hostile environment that welcomes Eve, signals that Adam is the knowledgeable, or enlightened, half of the couple. This implication becomes more apparent as Adam initially
turns his gaze to the heavens, which symbolizes his confidence and understanding. Eve, however, looks down at the water, signaling her uncertainty and suggesting that her understanding is dependent upon the reflection of another’s knowledge, that is, Adam’s relaying of information to her. Finally, that God reveals much to Adam but speaks very little to Eve confirms that Adam’s role in Eden is that of the knowing sovereign; Eve’s, the intellectual dependent.

In addition to Adam and Eve’s relationships to nature, Raphael’s gendered descriptions of nature and celestial bodies help to establish the subordinate status of women in *Paradise Lost*. In Book V, Raphael discusses the hierarchy of human faculties with Adam, explaining that the lower faculties, those of the senses, sustain the pure faculty of reason. According to the archangel, God gave the earthly and ethereal elements a parallel hierarchical structure (5.404-33). He explains that the grosser elements, earth and sea, feed the air and that the air feeds the ethereal elements. Of the ethereal elements, he continues, the moon is the lowest, and it provides nourishment for the sun. Raphael introduces the earthly elements with the gender neutral article, *the*, or the gender neutral pronoun, *it*; however, when referring to the moon and sun, he uses the gendered pronouns *he or his* and *she or her*, respectively. Given that the hierarchy of elements and the hierarchy of human faculties are analogous, the gendering of the lower ethereal element as feminine and the higher element as masculine implies that the lower human faculties belong to Eve while the higher ones belong to Adam.

With his work ethic and logic-mindedness, Adam demonstrates that he, not Eve, embodies what Raphael considers the high human faculties. However, toward the end of *Paradise Lost*, Eve’s atypical behavior suggests that she also possesses these faculties. In
Book IX, Eve proposes that she and Adam work separately in order to prevent their affection for one another from interfering with their labor. Until this point, Eve has considered her work not only a praise offering to God, but also a God-given privilege. For the first time, she acts as though she must work in order to win God’s approval, declaring that when she and Adam become distracted, “the hour of supper comes unearned” (9.225). Though overlooked by Adam, Eve’s sudden change in character raises suspicion in readers who, familiar with the story of Genesis, know what is soon to occur. Succeeding events strongly suggest that Eve feigns her work ethic in book IX in the hopes that she will attain the level of autonomy observed in her husband. It is at this point that Eve begins to employ the present moment for the sake of the future, an act which Bataille would consider one of servility.

If we attend closely to those of Satan’s strategies which are successful in tempting Eve, we gain a heightened understanding of the deeply rooted desire for equality which motivated her to feign a change in character. For example, in response to Eve’s initial resistance, Satan argues, “So ye shall die perhaps, by putting off / Human, to put on gods, death to be wished, / Though threatened, which no worse than this can bring” (9.713-15). It is by defining death as the transformation into a state of higher being that Satan breaks through Eve’s defenses. Assuming that by gaining knowledge she will attain the equality she desires, Eve forfeits her agreement with God and eats the forbidden fruit. After eating the fruit, she considers not telling Adam about her transformation, reasoning that in keeping knowledge to herself, she will “add what wants / In female sex, the more to draw his love, / And render [herself] more equal, and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior; for inferior who is free?” (9.821-25). Eve’s reflections after her fall
from grace clearly demonstrate that she was never Adam’s equal, and for this reason, we can understand why Eve would cloak herself in Adam’s identity and disobey God’s single command. Only an environment of gender inequality could have fostered desperation in Eve strong enough to disregard God’s warnings about the loss of Paradise.

Conclusion

This paper has enlisted Georges Bataille’s concept of *sovereignty* along with some fundamental tools offered by ecofeminist theory in order to argue against a critical orthodoxy within Milton studies: that *Paradise Lost* imagines a protofeminist space of gender equality. Instead, Milton’s re-imagining of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve ought to be understood as a challenge to the arguments found in tracts published by protofeminist pamphleteers who contributed to an ongoing Genesis-inspired gender debate. *Paradise Lost* functions ultimately as a warning to seventeenth-century readers: that a woman’s participation in intellectual discourse through her ambitions to think critically and to establish herself as both a reader and a published author would yield socially catastrophic consequences in proportion to those which ensued after Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit which led to the Fall of humankind.
Works Cited


