Milton's Eve as the Hallmark Wife

John Milton conforms much to the popular misogyny of his time - the belief that women are inferior to men, and wives subservient to their husbands. However, his epic *Paradise Lost* explores the positive and important role women in that society could offer in marriage. He argues that the purpose of matrimony is not necessarily procreation, as was the norm in the 1600s, but instead to bring a man and a woman in completion. Eve's role in *Paradise Lost* is Milton's commentary on this very matter. She represents a typical woman and (with Adam) a typical union of Milton's time before the fall from grace, and what Milton theorized women could be after. Eve's wifely role is an important one, as husband and wife help one another to become better and more complete individuals. Ultimately, Eve is Milton's representation of a progression for women, at least in their role in marriage.

Any extensive study of history will bring forth the notion that women were, and in some cases still are, denied rights and basic freedoms. This concept becomes obvious when traditional marriage roles are examined. To elaborate, wives were predetermined to carry out two functions during matrimony: taking care of the family and procreation. Moreover the woman is groomed from a young age to provide the aforementioned roles and is essentially forced into the marriage. Milton mirrors this belief through the Eve character. She is not just forced to be Adam’s mate; she is specifically created for this purpose. However, the relationship between
the two characters in regards to any social structure such as marriage is purely figurative. But if this position is taken, then the metaphor could be extended even further to include the idea that the Garden of Eden itself acts like a church. All this information lends itself to Milton’s proposition that Adam and Eve’s fall from grace was fortunate because it allows for the female counterpart to evolve in position from someone who is treated like a tool into a companion who is loved and cherished.

In order to show this transformation Eve needs to start out in a lowly place and right from the point of her inception this is true. Her role in the early parts of the epic is to be the vain and oblivious housewife. While recounting the story of her origin to Adam, she mentions that the first sight that caught her eye was a lake (90). More precisely it was “A shape within the wat’ry gleam appeared Bending to look on me” (90). In a scene inspired by the Narcissus story, which we discussed in class on many occasions, Eve stares at her own reflection. The same idea can be derived from both stories: vanity overcomes rational reasoning. It is not until she hears the voice of god that Eve turns away from the water. In contrast, as soon as Adam wakes up he questions who he is and where he is actively by yelling it towards the great expanse of paradise (184). Milton further underscores the disparity between the two humans during the meeting between Adam and Raphael. The angel directly criticizes Eve and suggests that she is weaker then her husband. Ultimately, in the first half of the text the bard describes the mother of man as being too involved with her looks and therefore not suited to matters outside of her designated role. This all contributes to the general notion in 17th century Europe that women were subservient to their marital counterparts.
John Milton continues to foster the idea Eve is under Adam on the chain of command by making her absent during the latter’s conversations with Raphael. To elaborate, because she is not present during the angel’s visit it implies her incapability to actively seek knowledge and understanding. Vanity plays an important role in this situation, as it is the impetus for her disappearance during these meetings. The text states that she would rather that Adam relay the information because “he would intermix Grateful digressions and solve high dispute With conjugal caresses” (178-179). This can imply that she chooses Adam because he acknowledges her looks and that plays into her self-importance. Similarly, she ignores Raphael on the premise that he disregards those looks given the fact that he is an angel and by nature a pragmatist. Truly, pre-lapsarian heaven is against the idea of women straying outside of their given roles as mothers. Some critics, including Stephen Hacklett, argue the point that “for Milton, ‘Raphael tends to be the spokesman of the view that the wife was created expressly to bear children’”(Boehrer, 24). However, there could be a silver lining in Eve’s choice. One can entertain the possibility that the reason for her actions is that she prefers to listen and devote her time to her husband rather than a stranger, especially given the fact that during a dream she was tempted to evil by someone with a similar appearance. After all, Eve is designed to exist solely for Adam and to live under him because it is all she knows. Her ignorance does not have to be explained by gender but rather by social constructs. This first half of *Paradise Lost* is nearly doctrine for the behavior of a traditional married couple.

These attributes that are credited to Eve are not as much negative as they are misinterpreted. By virtue of her absence during the conversation she is not as strong of a
thinker as her husband, who was created as the perfect rationalizer. While some may see this as detriment there are others who see it as opportunity. Because she is not fully aware of the consequences of her exploits she acts with reckless abandon. Barbara Lewalski notes that “Milton also accords Eve important areas of initiative and autonomy” adding “Eve often proposes issues for discussion, initiates action, and leads in some new direction” (Lewalski, 469). This is the author’s way of distinguishing the female protagonists from the norm. This depiction of woman is similar to another anomaly: Miranda, whom we’ve discussed thoroughly in class, from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In the play, the character, also a sole female, is portrayed as having a groundbreaking level of agency. She can be seen as a precursor to our Eve because of how she behaves in the situation of marriage: according to our class discussions she initiates conversation and ultimately proposes marriage. These characters are startlingly similar as they both have a lack of knowledge about the outside world and yet manage to act while their male counterparts are isolated in deep thought. However, what separates these two women is that Miranda’s pursuits are destined to succeed per her father’s actions. On the other hand, we are told throughout *Paradise Lost* that Eve’s future is nothing short of grim. What makes the latter especially significant is that she knows her fate yet she marches on, showing an unprecedented level of autonomy. The actions of Eve are refreshing to see, especially in a character that is so intertwined in religious piety, even though those actions give way to a catastrophic event, at least in context.

The first half of the text constitutes the familiar picture of a classic marriage, however, after the fall what occurs between Adam and Eve can only be defined as
revolutionary. Similar to the aforementioned Miranda, the wife proposes marriage by offering the apple to her husband. What is truly surprising is the latter’s reaction:

How can I live without thee, how forgo Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined to live again in these wild woods forlorn? Should God create another Eve and I Another rib afford, yet loss of thee Would never from my heart. No! No! I feel The link of nature draw me, flesh of flesh, Bone of my bone thou art and from thy state Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (222)

For the first time in the epic Eve is depicted and referred to as an equal. Knowing that she has fallen, Adam decides that he would rather be fallen with her than remain pure and lose her. This event cannot be underscored enough. Both husband and wife grow into a unit, and former begins to acknowledge the latter’s new position.

Even the instance where the two have intercourse, overcome by lust rather than their primary mission, says something positive about Eve. Here she breaks free of her designated role as mother as sexual contact becomes about love and sensual urges rather than a necessity of procreation (Leinwand, 247). Reproduction was a very sacred thing in Milton’s time, as royalty would take on many consorts in order to breed the perfect child. Put simply, proliferation was the foundation of marriage as well as the basis for divorce in Christian Europe (Leinwand, 249). The only grounds for a lawful divorce in Milton’s time were usually sexual incompatibility due to unlawful relations with other parties (Laurence 5). But Milton expresses his belief that any sort of incompatibility—sexual, mental, or otherwise—is justified grounds for a divorce. Put simply, procreation is not everything in marriage, there needs to be compatibility,
conversation, mental companionship for a marriage to survive and to be meaningful and that is what Adam and Eve's marriage gains after the fall from grace. The role of the woman is completely turned on its head in this segment as Eve takes further initiative and elects to take the brunt of the punishment “There with my cries importune Heav’n that all The sentence from thy head removed may light On me” (255). Barbara Lewalski adds, “she does become the first human to reach toward the new standard of epic heroism” (Lewalski, 474). Furthermore, it is Eve who rallies Adam to repent for their sins, once again complementing his biggest weakness: the inability to act due to constantly rationalizing and reasoning. Their unison in the practice of praying, even after they are judged, is a testament to how powerful their feelings are for one another. Unlike in the first part of the text, their eyes are opened completely and their decision to remain married is through free choice rather than design and practicality. The resolution of *Paradise Lost* is a resounding statement about marriage made by Milton, which, according to Joan Weber, is “[Marriage] ‘is the basic, central figure of the way the world is, and of the way it could be-sometimes in a pattern of higher and lower status, sometimes in a balance of equals, sometimes stressing the separateness of the partners and sometimes their unity’” (Anderson, 141). Ultimately, Milton presents an amazing depiction of a truly unified marriage because Adam and Eve after the fall is a vivid example of his belief that two people can complement each other, smooth out one another’s faults and enhance each others’ strengths.

Milton promotes religious values, enlightens readers, and helps people to become better Christians. Also, he explores and shows the role women play in his society and the role they could play. Through this social commentary, Milton shows women can be better
partners in marriage, and Eve is a sign that women can progress in society, at least in their roles as wives.
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