"Flowers of the Field": The Sexual and Reproductive Imagery of Eve and Eden in Milton

"Milton's Eden is no allegorical or emblematic landscape but a garden of earthly delights, a real, physical garden with an abundance of flowers and fruit trees, and, at its centre, is Eve."

- *Mandy Green*

Introduction

The theme of creation in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is resounding in a number of different directions in the epic—God's creation of the heavens and of the earth, the creation of the angels, and, most notably, the creation of humans in the Garden of Eden. It can be determined that the ability to create, in a Biblical sense and an epic sense, is inherently godly, and perhaps the figure in *Paradise Lost* that holds the second-most significant power of creation is Eve, Mother of All Living. The purpose of this essay is to explore Eve's involvement in creation, and, more specifically, her ability as the first human to be able to grow life, both in the sense of flora and in the sense of her own offspring. It will examine the entirety of human's ability to create: conception, pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, and how Eve represents each stage in Milton's work.

Moreover, I argue that the reproductive imagery surrounding Eve in *Paradise Lost* highlights unspoken themes of feminine sexuality and female anatomy in Renaissance England, and by exploring these themes in Milton's work, the conversations surrounding women's reproduction in the early modern period can be better understood. I will delve into the context surrounding sexuality and reproduction in the seventeenth century to better understand the background that Milton was familiar with when writing *Paradise Lost*. Over the whole of the essay, I will first discuss the sexuality of Eve that is portrayed in the epic, and then I will analyze

the maternity of her character and the reproductive phases that occur in both pre-Fall and post-Fall Eden.

The Sexual Imagery of Eve and Satan in *Paradise Lost*

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Adam and Eve, as husband and wife, experienced sexual relations with each other in order to produce their sons Cain and Able. While this is an interesting topic that wholly contributes to Eve's sexual and reproductive history, I argue that an even more approachable idea from a Miltonian standpoint is that of the potential sexual relationship between Eve and Satan. There are several scholars who claim Satan to be the true "hero" or "protagonist" of *Paradise Lost* rather than Adam or Raphael, yet the relationship between Satan and Eve has yet to be thoroughly examined through a sexual lens in Miltonian scholarship. I believe that a large part of Eve's sexual nature in *Paradise Lost* is owed to Satan, and for the first part of this essay, I will provide an in-depth analysis over the relationship between the two characters.

Supernatural Sexual Relations in the Renaissance

Before we discuss the sexual relationship between Eve and Satan, I believe that it is first important to provide context to the way that supernatural sexual relations were seen during the time that Milton was writing *Paradise Lost*. The concept of seductive devils—known commonly as *incubi* and *succubi*—originated in the Middle Ages, but still carried strong roots during the British Renaissance. In *Elizabethan Demonology*, author Thomas A. Spalding writes that from "the very earliest period of the Christian era the affection of one sex for the other was considered to be under the special control of the devil" (Spalding 118). It is inherently established in this viewpoint that any kind of sexual attraction, even between husband and wife, was already rooted in evil, and that while celibacy was the closest way that one could get to absolute purity, sexual

intercourse was still tolerated in the sanctity of the marriage bed. The urge of temptation, Spalding implies, is already implanted in human nature, and because it is evil in origin, it is natural that other evil forces would spur this sin to corrupt Christian men and women. The matter of sexual intercourse between a supernatural being and a human made in God's image was "of so gross and revolting a nature" in the Renaissance that "it should willingly be passed over in silence, were it not for the fact that the belief in it was, as Scot says, 'so stronglie and universallie received' in the times of Elizabeth and James" (Spalding 118). It can be assumed from this that the idea of being seduced by a demon was a widely known phenomenon during the Renaissance, and it is my conclusion that Milton was aware of these occurrences and subtly hinted at the supernatural relationship between Satan and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. While it was initially assumed that all demons aimed to sexually corrupt Christians, the assumption eventually evolved into the theory that it was a specific class of demon that was particularly adamant about sexual corruption. According to Spalding, this belief "sprang up, and spread from its original source into the outer world, in a class of devils called *incubi* and *succubi*, who roamed the earth with no other object than to tempt people to abandon their purity of life" (119). *Incubi* were demons that took the form of a male human in order to seduce and corrupt Christian women, while *succubi* were demons that took the form of a female human in order to seduce and corrupt Christian men. It was also believed that a single demon could take the form of both an *incubus* and a *succubus*, as demons held no corporeal form in their native state and could transform as they pleased depending on the subject of their wiles.

Historically, the number of cases of supernatural sexual seduction were far more prevalent in women than in men. Although there certainly were cases told of men being visited by *succubi* during the night, it was far more common for a woman to confess to her priest that an

evil nocturnal visitor had corrupted her while she slept. In Dyan Elliott's *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, Elliot writes that even the most pious women "could potentially be subverted by seduction, since it was in the imagination that carnal and spiritual impulses met and frequently merged" (Elliott 54). He argues that women by nature are much more imaginative than men, and as a result, they were more susceptible to being seduced by supernatural forces. It is also Elliott's belief that during the early modern period, "woman's susceptibility to incubi was often tacitly understood as opposed to explicitly stated", and that it was only through "multiple anecdotes that turned on this form of female weakness" that the belief in supernatural seduction was as widely known as it was—and as truthful as it was assumed to be. It was also thought during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that women were more impressionable than men, and because of this, they were more susceptible to being tempted by supernatural beings. Elliott writes that in the thirteenth century, it was a common belief that "woman's receptivity to every kind of supernatural visitation, including the incubus" was due to "the greater impression ability of her soul" (53). While this quote includes the possibility that women are also more likely to be visited by angels or otherwise inherently "good" supernatural beings, it seemed from several Renaissance accounts that demons were more likely to make an appearance than those beings that would have otherwise been favored. Considering the conversation surrounding sexual relationships with supernatural beings during the Middle Ages and the early modern period, it can be assumed that Milton was influenced by these happenings and alluded to such a relationship between Eve and Satan in the Garden of Eden.

Sexuality Between Eve and Satan

Upon Satan's arrival in Eden, his wishes to find Eve alone are granted, but before he begins to attempt to persuade her to partake of the Fruit of Knowledge, he first analyzes Eve from a distance. This is a powerful scene for many reasons, but in context, the scene carries the weight of two facts: Eve is the first human that Satan sees of God's creation, and because of it, he realizes that humans are now more beautiful than angels and is momentarily tempted by Eve's beauty. Previously, it was Satan that was considered the most beautiful creature in creation, but with the making of Eve, Satan both scripturally and epically lost that title. There is, then, both a power and a sexuality to Satan's encounter with Eve, and the power and sexuality are not limited to a single party—rather, both parties radiate those qualities. In the article "On Authorship, Sexuality, and the Psychology of Privation in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, author Katherine O. Acheson writes that the "temptation of Eve by Satan is both sexual and authorial, but the marking of similarities and differences between good and bad sexuality, and good and bad authorship, which have been so assiduously rehearsed prior to this point, is urgently threatened in the temptation scene by the possibility of the collapse of the difference between good and evil. The potential for this collapse is figured in the erotic nature of the temptation, through which Eve becomes the 'strange woman' of Proverbs and Satan is, momentarily, made 'stupidly good,' which 'excites' him to greater evil" (Acheson 906). Eve's sexuality is thus powerful enough to briefly turn Satan, the embodiment of evil, into someone who is "'stupidly good'", which makes quite a statement as to the capability of Eve's beauty. The moment is lost, though, as Satan realizes that causing the downfall of something so beautiful and powerful will be much more advantageous than he originally thought.

In *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance*, a translation of the sixteenth-century text *De praestigiis daemonum*, early modern doctor Johann Weyer writers that while Satan met Eve in the Garden, he "deluded her with a most seductive ruse under which no deception seemed to lurk, and they disposed of her belief in the threat of certain death" (Weyer 9). It is worth noting, in my opinion, that Weyer chose to use the phrase "most seductive" rather than an alternative phrase with the same meaning, such as "tempting" or "attractive". The fact that the doctor chose specifically to describe the temptation of Eve as "most seductive" is indicative of the way that readers in the Renaissance might have also seen the relationship between Satan and Eve—something that Milton would have also recognized if he was familiar with the text, which was published a century before *Paradise Lost*. Weyer also writes that Satan "was perfectly aware of the cause of his fall", and that it was his primary goal to "attract Eve to the same ambitious hope" by "enticing her". The descriptive use of "enticing" is operating the same way as "most seductive" in the previous paragraph of the text, and it was deliberately placed in order to establish a sexual tone towards the event. Additionally, Elliott mentions that some religious authorities in the Renaissance "also allege that Eve was first seduced by the serpent, which corrupted her with its tail, and subsequently gave birth to the demonic race of Cain" (Elliott 143). Although this is not Biblical nor explicitly mentioned in Milton's work, it is a significant factor in the early modern conversation surrounding the temptation of Eve, and it contributes towards the argument that there was indeed a sexual relationship between Eve and Satan in the Garden.

Moreover, when reading between the lines in *Paradise Lost*, a reader might conclude that during Satan's convincing of partaking of the fruit, Eve is in fact sexually attracted to Satan. Acheson provides insight on this possibility as well, stating that "Eve's attraction to his words is similarly cast as sexual appetite, or desire: 'Meanwhile the hour of noon drew on, and waked /

An eager appetite, raised by the smell / So savory of that fruit, which with desire, / Inclinable now grown to touch or taste, / Solicited her longing eye (PL, 9.739-43)'" (Acheson 911). Historically, fruit in general has been a representation of lust and sexuality, and such a representation stems from both the reproductive nature of fruit and also from this moment in scripture—the temptation of Eve. As Acheson points out, similar words linked to sexual behavior, such as "appetite", "savory", "desire", and "longing", were perhaps put there by Milton purposefully in order to enhance the sexual nature of Eve's temptation. This moment is vastly regarded as the moment where Eve loses the innocence that she bared before the Fall. Thus, the infidelity was not only potentially a physical act, but a spiritual one as well, and it served as a mark against both Adam as her husband and against God as her creator.

There is also the notion that this sexual attraction between Eve and Satan was the event that robbed Eve of her innocence or purity rather than the act of eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge itself, which is where some if not most Biblical scholars mark Eve's fall from grace. Acheson agrees with this alternative mark of Eve's defiling and mentions that Satan's "temptation, in which Eve mistakes a false author for a true one, is (as is widely recognized) profoundly sexualized, an 'event perverse!' (PL, 9.405) in which Eve is '[d]espoiled of innocence' (Acheson 911). This indicates that the ignorant bliss of humanity was already over by the time that Eve had flirted with the decision of partaking of the fruit in her mind rather than acting out the offense itself—a reference, perhaps, that Milton was making to the scripture of Mark 7:23: "All these [sinful] things come from within, and defile the man."

Lastly, it is important to consider that Satan's brief inner conflict upon seeing Eve draws the relevant theme of free will into examination. Satan's desire to do "stupidly good", as was previously discussed, can be seen as a window of opportunity that Satan had to reverse his plans

to destroy humanity and prevent the Fall. However, as it is clear from the remainder of the epic, Satan made the choice to continue his evil deeds besides the opportunity of good being presented to him. In a final note, Acheson writes on this choice as well and includes its relevance to the poem by saying that "Eve's production in Satan of both good and evil through her attractiveness as sexual object threatens the ironic logic of the poem, which collapses into the chiasmus of sexual desire in the temptation scene" (Acheson 913). It was not God, then, that offered this opportunity of free will to Satan, as he had done in Satan's escape from his chains in the Lake of Fire and his ease of entering Eden, but Eve, just in her attractiveness alone.

The Fertility and Motherhood of Eve

Perhaps the most important title that Eve bears, both Biblically and in Miltonic works, is the Mother of All Mankind. Before Cain and Abel, however, Eve also served as a mother in Eden—specifically, to the flowers and plants that grew in the Garden. As McColley writes, in "classical and scriptural imagery, flowers are metaphors of regeneration", and this proves to be true in the case of *Paradise Lost* as well. While Adam was tasked with naming the beasts of the land and of the sea, Eve was to care for the flora of Paradise, and the imagery of fertility and purity of flowers ties into viewing Eve as a pure, fertile being herself—something that Milton portrayed intentionally, as well as to portray Eve's femininity and beauty.

In the book *Milton's Ovidian* Eve, author Mandy Green speaks to this parallel that Eve shares as mother to the flowers of Eden. She writes that Milton "highlights Eve's present position as happy young bride with tutelage of flowers", and that "the constant and loving attention she devotes to the young charges that as yet fill 'Her Nurserie' (VIII.46) gives ample evidence of her fitness as the designated mother of mankind and prompts the reader to bear in mind this important dimension to her future role". In the same vein, Green also comments that

"'Eve's promised empowerment as 'mother of human race' is deferred beyond the bounds of the poem, but Eve's mothering of the flowers doubles both to suggest and to anticipate her importance as the 'Mother of all Mankind, / Mother of all things living' (XI.160-161) by stressing the virtuality of her motherhood" (Green 82). The type of foreshadowing that Milton offers with Eve as mother to her flowers gives the reader a chance to remember this pre-Fall Eve when considering the aftermath of the Fall—that is, when seeing Eve as a "true" mother, a mother to humans, Milton is stressing the fact that the post-Fall mother of the sinful Cain and Able is still the same Eve that served as the pure, "happy young bride" to Adam and tended to the flora of Paradise before Satan's temptation. Eve, then, had not lost her mothering nature despite her fall from grace—rather, it was possibly the only positive thing that was enhanced once Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden.

It is not only the reader, however, that deduces this parallel, but Raphael also makes note of Eve's successful garden—the epic mentions Raphael "surveying the fruits Eve had piled high on the 'ample Square' (V.393) of the table", which, also according to Green, "makes explicit the unmistakable correlation between her destined fruitfulness and that of the garden in his prophetic utterance", and as "Raphael's exclamation reveals, Eve's fruitfulness is implicit in the luxuriant abundance of the garden. She is virtually pregnant with the teeming life of the world" (Green 85). While Raphael's praise was indeed an encouraging thing to be said of Eve's successfully thriving flowers, it does not carry any sort of foreboding of the price that Eve would inevitably have to pay in order to provide the mentioned "fruitfulness" as a punishment for the Fall. Whether this was intentional of Milton to keep from the pre-Fall dialogue or not, it leads to a misleading idea that providing the children of the world will be nothing short of a pleasant experience for Eve—as pleasant as it was to raise her flowers.

Upon banishment, however, the consequences of Adam and Eve's actions became apparent, and when "the sentence of exile has been pronounced by Michael, Eve cannot contain her grief, which breaks out in a lament for the flowers she must leave behind in Eden, which "sounded to many a reader like a mother's passionate grief for her lost children" (Green 83). Eve was also told that her human children would be "Harshly pluckt" (XI.537) and "torn from her in the pangs of labour". Even when hearing this, though, Adam is "happily ignorant of the full anguish of childbirth, rather blithely reassuring Eve that her 'Pains…in Child-bearing' will soon be 'recompenc't with joy, / Fruit of thy Womb' (XI.1052-3) [despite] Sin's horrific account of her own terrifying and agonizing experiences of labour serves to anticipate the very real physical and emotional traumas that will attend delivery in the fallen world" (Green 90) to both Eve and to the rest of womankind.

The gradual change from Catholicism to Protestantism in early modern England produced an increasingly interesting attention to Eve as the symbol of childbirth and the consequences that her actions gave to women for the remainder of time. While the change was enacted due to the Virgin Mary being strongly associated with Catholic prayer and worship, it is actually somewhat appropriate for Eve to be considered as the focus of fertility and childbirth due to the major role that she played in the execution of the act—she was, to be sure, the first woman to have the experience, after all. However, due to both the general misogyny that stood in the early modern period and to the fact that women's anatomy—particularly their reproductive anatomy—was still not very accurately understood during the seventeenth century, the connection to Eve and childbirth was not always a female-positive experience despite the successful delivery of a child being considered a triumph. Mary E. Fissell addresses this issue in her book *Vernacular Bodies* and speaks to this change in childbirth representation by saying that

early modern women "were to connect their suffering in childbirth, not with the Virgin Mary, but rather with Eve. In this prayer, the speaker tells the Lord that she acknowledges that He has 'justly' increased the pain and sorrow with which women bring forth children because of Eve's 'original transgression'", and that it was typical for people to "subtly [shift] away from a depiction of the womb as powerful and wonderous, the source of new people" (Fissell 54) and instead that it was more of a mixture of a blessing and a curse—a punishment for all women.

Fortunately, though, there were still some lighter, more positive aspects of Eve's association with childbirth, and most of these aspects had to do with the sense of empowerment that early modern women gained after becoming mothers. In the article "Women's Bodies and the Making of Sex in Seventeenth-Century England", author Laura Gowing comments that if the question of "when women feel themselves to be, unequivocally and recognizably, women, and when the category of women effectively bridges other divides, maternity would seem to be a strong contender" (Gowing 818). This is, perhaps, because one of the few things that biologically differentiates men from women is a woman's ability to grow and produce a child. In society's view in early modern England, a woman's crowning achievement was motherhood, and the bearing of children was seen quite positively, especially if the child was a son to carry on the family name. As successful childbirth was likely the most celebrated accomplishments that were only reserved for women, it is perhaps only natural that women would want to be empowered in this sense by motherhood. Miller and Yavneh also speak to this sense of empowerment in the book *Maternal Measures* and, more specifically, to the "doubleness" that early modern women face in their womanhood and in motherhood, stating that maternity in seventeenth-century England "was associated with a doubleness of identity that only partially coincides with the doubleness commonly associated with femininity at the time. Whereas women in general might

be directed to be chaste, silent, and obedient in order to counteract the perceived power of their sexuality, mothers in particular emerged as figures who combined the sexuality required for procreation and reproduction with considerable authority over their offspring, male as well as female" (Miller and Yavneh 6-7). This was essentially the only way that a woman of common social standing could hold power over a man—if he were her own child, the title of "mother" usurps the social barring that prevents women from holding power over men. Additionally, when it came to matters of their children, typically the person whose opinion and authority mattered the most was the mother.

As the Mother of All Mankind, Eve's portrayal of motherhood and of fertility both in *Paradise Lost* and in scripture addressed real-life issues of early modern childbirth and the religious and social stigmas that came with the task. When examining Eve's mothering nature in the Garden of Eden, Milton's readers can analyze how her nurturing served not only as an example to women in Renaissance England but also as a method of empowerment that may not have been previously experienced.

Metaphorical Reproductive Imagery in the Garden of Eden

When considering the reproductive imagery surrounding Eve, it is important to take into account the idea that the fertility of Eve was portrayed in parallel by the Garden of Eden itself. It is commonly noted among religious scholars that Eden stands as the birthplace of humanity, as it was where Adam and Eve were created, and while I certainly agree with this, I would like to take it a step further and emphasize that Eden is not only the *birthplace* of humanity, but the *womb* of humanity—where humanity was conceived, grown, and eventually expelled.

In the article "'before midnight she had miscarried': Women, Men, and Miscarriage in Early Modern England", authors Jennifer Evans and Sara Read write that in the medieval and

early modern periods, scholars believe that "the female reproductive body was shrouded in secrecy" (Evans and Read 5). Although I believe that Milton had the idea of a womb in mind when he was describing Eden and Adam and Eve's experiences in the Garden, I do not believe that he was necessarily thinking in accurate medical contexts; however, I also do not believe that it was necessary for Milton to reference Eden as a womb in the medical sense. On the contrary, the idea that the womb was the source of life and a place where humans are grown suffices for the metaphor that Milton was trying to portray in *Paradise Lost*, and his execution of it was quite accurate indeed. Scholar Louis Schwartz agrees with both the idea of Eden as a womb and the theory that Milton was trying to portray it as such—in describing Eden as a womb, Schwartz illustrates that Eden is "itself both fetus and womb, and the figure extends in Chinese box fashion down to all the wombs that are later born from the womb of the earth, including those of the animals, and most importantly those of Eve and her daughters, especially, in the eventual event, that of Mary" (Schwartz 251). Schwartz also mentions that Milton "was influenced directly in the creation of his elaborate figure by contemporary medical descriptions of the womb, and of the disposition within it of a developing fetus", and to "recognize that, especially in its prelapsarian state, the figure of creation as a womb does abstract certain characteristics of the human womb, idealizing them rather than faithfully reflecting them" (Schwartz 252). By presenting God's paramount creation of Eden as a womb, Milton is glorifying the female body—and, in extension, glorifying Eve, since she was created with the first female body—by emphasizing the womb's capabilities rather than keeping it a shameful or hidden concept.

Milton's readers during the Renaissance would have likely also agreed with the concept of the Garden serving as a womb to humanity. According to Mary E. Fissell, early modern citizens generally believed that "the womb becomes a kind of container, the site within which

God works the wonders of fetal development", and that upon conception, "the fetus was imagined as a sort of guest within the mother's body, and it was her job to provide appropriate hospitality to it, just as she would in her own home" (Fissell 54, 58). The "womb" of Eden, then, was a container not only for Adam and Eve, but also for all of the flora and fauna that spawned under the initial creation week of God. The multitude of fruit trees, edible plants, and prey animals that were conceived in Eden served as "appropriate hospitality" to Adam and Eve, and the fertile land that Adam particularly labored over to provide for his wife and for God's glory is also reminiscent of both the fertility of Eve and, in the bigger picture, the fertility of Eden.

The final analogy of Eden as a womb that I would like to examine is the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden. There are, perhaps, some readers of Milton that would view Adam and Eve's banishment as a birth from the womb of Eden, but I argue that it was the corruption of Satan and the introduction of sin that makes it a miscarriage instead of a birth. Similar to the way that an illness or infection inside the body of a pregnant woman might cause one to miscarry, the choice to partake of the Fruit of Knowledge caused a premature, infected expulsion of humankind. In this analogy of miscarriage, Satan's first arrival in Eden would stand as the contamination point, while Eve's betrayal in eating the fruit as well as offering it to Adam would stand as the fetus being exposed to the results of the illness or infection. Lastly, the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden stands as the point of expulsion of the fetus from the womb and out of the body. If there was not the "infection" of Satan in the Garden of Eden, perhaps Eden would have had a successful birth of humankind in a pure, uncorrupted form—but, as Milton so heavily emphasized throughout the epic, there would not be the God-given concept of free will either.

Conclusion

The sexual and reproductive imagery surrounding Eve and Eden in Milton's *Paradise Lost* stands as a vivid image of the way that the reproductive cycle was viewed in the Renaissance, and it is especially important to regard all possibilities of sexual relationships in the texts written during this time period because it offers a unique perspective into the way that early modern citizens viewed the persuasion of the supernatural. Additionally, Eve's role in motherhood in the Garden of Eden before and after the Fall implicates the divinity in human creation and supports the Biblical suggestion of being made in God's own image—by passing on the power of creation to his most treasured creation.

This leaves the reader to consider: is Eve's pre-Fall maternal relationship with her flowers also indicative of her virginity and her innocence? If so, does her birth of a human child post-Fall imply that humankind has been created with the inherent urge to sin, since humanity was thus conceived after sin had entered the world? Alternatively, in Renaissance contexts, can beauty be equated to purity, since Eve's beauty is what made Satan himself stop and consider repenting his evil nature?

While the religious and social contexts surrounding women's reproduction that Milton was writing in during the seventeenth century was inaccurate best and misogynistic at worse, I conclude that Milton wrote Eve in a feministic light in *Paradise Lost*, and by emphasizing the role in her creations and the importance that she played in the Garden of Eden and even after the Fall, he is empowering her rather than condemning her. While the power of Eve's choice to be tempted by Satan ultimately led to humanity's downfall, her decisions also allowed humanity the luxury of free will from God, and as a result, humans obtained the choice to reproduce as they pleased.

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