

“Hee for God only, shee for God in him”: The Sexual Contract of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*

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English

Rebecca Sachs

Senior

rsachs2@washcoll.edu

I. Introduction

In contemporary studies of gender dynamics, discussions often focus on the extensive history of inequalities faced by women, the notable improvements that feminist movements have helped to achieve, and the difficulties modern women around the world still face on a daily basis. However, one detail that such dialogues typically fail to acknowledge is the far-reaching history of feminist philosophical thought. While the beginnings of the present-day feminism are often thought to date back to the women's movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the roots of Anglo-American feminism actually date back to the French *querelle des femmes* of Christine de Pisan and her contemporaries in the fourteenth century¹. While the term "feminism" was not yet coined, the thinkers of the *querelle* sparked intellectual and literary debates that would span centuries until women's social movements echoed the revolutionary ideas expressed in such philosophy.

The thinkers of the *querelle des femmes* created a legacy of feminist thought that still persists in modern discussions and philosophy, such as Carole Pateman's 1988 *The Sexual Contract*. Pateman's feminist reimagining of social contract theory was written in the midst of second-wave feminism, an influence that can be found in her goal of advocating for the liberation of women from their social and economic dependence upon men. She accomplishes this by arguing that the modern patriarchy finds its basis in the slave-like contract that has existed between men and women throughout history, most notably in the form of marriage, as well as other imbalanced contracts within society, like employment and prostitution. By demonstrating that social contract theory as explored by John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau is misleading because of the inherent subjugation of women within such

¹ Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400-1789," *Signs* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 4, MLA International Bibliography.

relationships, Pateman effectively establishes a philosophical and historical basis for even modern patriarchal structures and contends that women cannot gain true social equality until they successfully escape the confines of the sexual contract.

While Pateman's theory does explore the historical rationale for contemporary gender issues, her writing is still largely focused on the sexual contract's applications for the modern feminist movement. Therefore, in order to establish a comprehensive analysis of the sexual contract's extensive role throughout history, it becomes necessary to consult other sources, particularly those that can offer a historical perspective of societal gender dynamics. One such text is John Milton's 1667 poem *Paradise Lost*, which uses a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve as an allegory to provide commentary on post-Civil War England, especially as it pertains to the country's volatile political situation. However, when read in comparison to the anti-feminist pamphlet debate that occurred throughout the decades prior to the poem's publication, it becomes apparent that *Paradise Lost* provides an accurate depiction of the gender dynamics persistent in seventeenth-century England, it moves from a document of literary significance to one of historical relevance.

Still, the comparison of Milton to Pateman raises the question of why *Paradise Lost* is a rational choice for the historical understanding of the sexual contract. When read as a response to these seventeenth-century pamphleteers, Adam and Eve's imbalanced relationship becomes the focal point of the poem, as Adam comes to represent the anti-feminists, while Eve voices the position of the anti-misogynists. These ideas are even further echoed in John Locke's discussion of Adam and Eve in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, in which he insists that, "Eve's subjection was nothing more 'but that Subjection [wives] should ordinarily be in to their

Husbands.’”² Thus, the poem becomes less about the plot and more about the complexities of the relationship between Adam and Eve. However, the true significance of Milton’s response to the pamphlet debate comes from the fact that it is unclear whether Milton’s loyalties lay with the anti-feminists or the anti-misogynists. Milton instead raises questions about the nature of the dynamic between men and women by presenting two equally flawed characters and allowing the reader to draw conclusions about who is at fault for the fall. Therefore, Milton’s literary work becomes one of philosophical importance as well.

Throughout the rest of this thesis, I will analyze the significance of Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* for the contemporary feminist movement, using the misogynistic content of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to exemplify the historical prevalence of the gender imbalance between Adam and Eve, and consequently society in its entirety. In doing this, my thesis will answer three primary questions: What is the sexual contract and what is its role in feminist political philosophy? How does the sexual contract manifest itself in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, particularly in his representation of Eve? How is the sexual contract, both in Pateman’s original form and in Milton’s poem, useful to understanding gender relations in modern society? In my evaluation of Milton’s poem, I will focus my attention on his representation of Eve and how her relationships with Adam and God contribute to her subjugation, as historical anti-feminists use Eve’s role in the fall as rationale for the continued subjugation of women while Milton actually raises the question of whether Eve had the knowledge and opportunity necessary to be truly “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.”³ Ultimately, I will use this literary, philosophical, and political analysis to argue that the relationship between Adam and Eve in

² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 52.

³ "Paradise Lost," 1667, in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, by John Milton, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1957), [Book III, line 99].

Paradise Lost is exemplary of the sexual contract because of the poem's strict hierarchy that asserts female physical and mental inferiority.

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V. Milton and the Sexual Contract

Regardless of Milton's position in the anti-feminist/anti-misogynist debate, his portrayal of Adam and Eve is perfectly demonstrative of Carole Pateman's sexual contract theory. If the purpose of the sexual contract is to "establis[h] men's political right over women—and...establish orderly access by men to women's bodies"⁴ as Pateman suggests, then God's act of physically creating Eve to fulfill Adam's desire is precisely that: an instance of male possession of the female body. Eve describes her own creation, saying, "O thou for whom/ And from who I was form'd flesh of thy flesh, / And without whom am to no end."⁵ From the very moment of her creation, Eve is aware that she owes her existence to Adam: not only did Adam prompt her creation by asking God for a companion, but he also provided the flesh that would become the basis of her body. Because Eve could not exist without him, Adam therefore feels a sense of entitlement toward Eve, a sentiment that is later reiterated in his account of Eve's creation. This detail illuminates several key aspects of Eve's role in Paradise. First, her creation was secondary. While Adam was made during God's initial week of creation, he did not feel that Eve's existence was necessary until Adam requested her; therefore, she was built to please Adam rather than God, unlike everything else in Paradise. God's words also underscore the inherent hierarchy present in Paradise. He says that Eve is Adam's likeness, while Adam was "Created in [God's] Image, there to dwell / And worship him, and in reward to rule / Over his Works, on

⁴ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 2.

⁵ "Paradise Lost," in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, [Book IV, lines 440-442].

Earth, in Sea, or Air.”⁶ The fact that Eve was formed in Adam’s image illustrates the distance between her and God; while Adam has a direct link to God, Eve’s only relationship to her creator is through Adam.

Throughout the poem, the possessive language Adam consistently uses to refer to Eve demonstrates the sexual contract between the two. At one point, Adam addresses her, “My fairest, my espous’d, my latest found, / Heav’n’s last best gift, my ever new delight.”⁷ While these are lovely, seemingly inoffensive comments, the problematic nature of Adam’s language is found in the minute details of his dialogue. Here, as well as throughout the rest of *Paradise Lost*, Adam refers to Eve using the possessive pronoun “my,” indicating that he views her as his property rather than as a true companion or partner. His word choice elsewhere in these lines compounds the intent behind his language, particularly his use of the word “gift.” This demonstrates Adam’s ownership of Eve, as he clearly believes that she exists for the sole purpose of pleasing and “delighting” him—and given the nature of Eve’s creation, he is not necessarily wrong.

Adam’s political power over Eve also stems from the hierarchical structure within Paradise. Upon first witnessing Adam and Eve, Satan is cognizant of the differences between the two. He easily perceives the imbalance in their relationship, commenting, “Hee for God only, shee for God in him.”⁸ While Adam has a direct line of communication with God, Eve does not. Because she is cut off from the knowledge and opportunities that accompany Adam’s relationship with God, she is forced to rely on Adam in just about every respect. This dynamic is reminiscent of the economic dependence women experience in *The Sexual Contract*. Both Carole Pateman and those who offered commentary on her philosophy recognize economic dependence

⁶ Ibid., Book VII, lines 627-629.

⁷ Ibid., Book V, lines 18-19.

⁸ Ibid., Book IV, lines 299.

as a primary reason for the persistence of the sexual contract. Even as other social and political rights of women have improved, women, especially single mothers, remain at an economic disadvantage compared to their male counterparts because of the wage gap, their expected role in the home, and of the straightforward fact that much of the work often considered to be the responsibility of a woman is devalued. Though the political and economic life of *Paradise Lost* is unconventional in that it lacks government, money, and jobs, it still maintains the same gender inequality seen in contemporary society because Eve is forced to rely on Adam for her existence and any information from God.

This does not necessarily mean that Adam will recount everything he knows to Eve, however. After Raphael describes to Adam the war in Heaven and the dangers that Satan poses the humans in Paradise, he tells Adam, “list’n not to his Temptations, warn / Thy weaker; let it profit thee to have heard / By terrible Example the reward / Of disobedience; firm they might have stood, / Yet fell; remember, and fear to transgress.”⁹ The purpose of Raphael visiting Paradise from Heaven was to warn Adam and Eve of Satan’s sinful nature and nefarious intentions, yet it would be difficult for Eve to be aware that she should remain cautious when she was not privy to this conversation. Although Raphael instructs Adam to “warn [his] weaker,” Adam does not comply. This is yet another way that Adam maintains control over Eve: by influencing and even manipulating her abilities and knowledge.

This element illuminates the importance of Eve’s absence both here and throughout the poem. In the books during which Raphael is having a serious conversation with Adam, Eve is relegated to the background to prepare a meal for her husband and the angel. Raphael was only on Earth for a few moments before Eve hastens away to gather food:

⁹ Ibid., Book VII, lines 908-912.

But I will haste and from each bough and brake,
 Each Plant and juiciest Gourd will pluck such a choice
 To entertain our Angel guest, as hee
 Beholding shall confess that here on Earth
 God hath dispenst his bounties as in Heav'n¹⁰.

This passage is significant because it serves to explain where Eve is throughout the duration of the next several books: while Raphael is bestowing pertinent information upon Adam, Eve is fetching food from around the garden. However, for a task that seems so menial, Eve is certainly putting forth considerable effort and thought. In fact, this is the first time in the poem that Eve seems to contemplate anything with such depth and concern, and it is not even anything of serious consequence.

The juxtaposition of Adam and Eve's activities during Raphael's visit perfectly exemplify the disparity between the public and the private spheres in *The Sexual Contract*. In Pateman's theory, she explores the idea of "civil society," which has two spheres: the public sphere, which is the traditional interpretation of society that is associated with masculinity and the patriarchy, and the private sphere of the home, which has been designated the "womanly" sphere¹¹. The public sphere is the only realm that is deemed relevant in terms of politics, while the private sphere is said to be more closely associated with the natural world and therefore "lesser" than the public, civic life that men have the opportunity to lead. In *Paradise Lost*, the public sphere takes the form of the ability to communicate with God, either directly or through his angels. Adam's conversation with Raphael is therefore part of the public sphere, as they discuss important issues that are, quite literally, matters of life and death. The fact that Adam is the only one who has access to this information and the decision-making process is reminiscent of politics throughout much of history in that women were not allowed to participate in or

¹⁰ Ibid., Book V, lines 326-336.

¹¹ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, 11.

influence the outcomes of the lawmaking process. While Eve's absence from this process for any reason would be enough to accurately compare it to the private sphere, this effect is amplified because Eve is sent to prepare meals, which is the epitome of the private sphere in *The Sexual Contract*. In Pateman's model, the natural, private sphere refers to both the home and jobs traditionally performed by women, such as domestic work and childcare. That is precisely what Eve is doing in these scenes, and because she is in the natural world of the garden, the connection between *Paradise Lost* and *The Sexual Contract* is even clearer.

After the fall, Adam and Eve are faced with the reality of their expulsion from paradise, prompting them to blame each other for their sins. While Eve's argument with Adam was ultimately fruitless, she still had one more opportunity to defend herself: to God himself. After finding Adam and Eve in the garden with their bodies covered, God asks the pair what happened. Adam shifts the blame to Eve, who admits simply, "The Serpent me beguil'd and I did eat."¹² Though Eve does not attempt to hide her sins, the fact that she speaks up for herself at all—to both Adam and God—is significant. While Eve is absent and silent throughout the vast majority of *Paradise Lost*, she finally has the opportunity to use her voice to defend herself against Adam's attacks in Book X in her role that critics call "the disputing Eve."

This is Eve's unique brand of feminism: though aspects of her argument in Book IX may prove problematic to contemporary feminists, such as when she belittles herself by calling Adam the "Head" in their relationship¹³, the fact that she speaks up at all is important because, once fallen, she is finally able to break free from Adam's control. Joseph Wittreich identifies Eve's voice as the source of her agency. Though he does not necessarily believe that Milton's poem is an inherently feminist text, Wittreich contends that his portrayal of Eve is closer to the anti-

¹² "Paradise Lost," in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, [Book X, line 162].

¹³ *Ibid.*, Book IX, line 1155.

misogynist tradition because “if ‘woman’s silence and absence is the norm,’ in Milton’s representation of Eve, normal expectations of women, culturally established, are observed only to be broken.”¹⁴ Wittreich acknowledges that though Eve is absent during many of the major events of the poem, she defies traditional cultural representations of seventeenth-century women because when she is present, she defends herself in a manner that is wholly unexpected of a woman during the era. If the goal of the sexual contract is the male possession of the female body, Eve’s use of her voice to defend herself provides an opportunity for her to control her own body.

VI. Conclusion: “Nevertheless, She Persisted”

If *Paradise Lost* leaves its reader with any message, it should be that the issues Eve faced within the poem’s pages are far from solved. Because the inequality Eve experienced in Paradise is so perfectly exemplary of Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract*, it becomes clear that this is not merely an issue within the seventeenth century alone or even with Milton’s literary representations of women. It is instead applicable to contemporary feminism because of the misogyny Eve faces—from Satan, from Raphael, from Adam, and even from God. While the treatment of women has assuredly improved since the seventeenth century, there are still issues that persist to this day, such as violence against women, the wage gap, and the unfair portrayal of women in positions of power, such as those running for political office.

Moreover, the blatant misogyny in recent American politics perhaps explains the ever-growing popularity of the women’s movement and feminism, as exemplified by the Women’s March in January that quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. While social awareness of feminist interests has grown over the past several decades, empirical evidence suggests that

¹⁴ Joseph Wittreich, “An Alternative Perspective on Milton and Women,” in *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 102.

cultural attitudes are still at the root of modern political issues. According to a 2012 study by Pew Research Center, only 12 percent of Americans believe that the ideal situation for women with young children is working full-time, as opposed to 33 percent state that the ideal situation is for a woman with young children to have no job at all. At the same time, 70 percent of respondents believe that the best situation for men with young children is to have a full-time job, compared to only 4 percent who believe men with young children should not work at all¹⁵. In addition to these more traditional attitudes about the respective roles of mothers and fathers, family and child care responsibilities often continue to fall on women as opposed to men, thus interrupting the ability for working mothers to experience the same financial gains and career success as their male counterparts. Although such statistics do not point directly to misogyny, it still indicates the persistence of Pateman's dichotomy between the public and private spheres, this time demonstrating the real consequences women face because of this continued role.

However, the question remains of *why* such misogyny and gender inequality have persisted since Milton's lifetime (and even before, as made evident by the fifteenth century roots of the *querelle des femmes*). According to Pateman, this is because of the inherently imbalanced gender dynamic perpetuated by the sexual contract. Because the sexual contract emphasizes the power of men over women, it creates a culture in which traditionally masculine traits are regarded as superior those that are viewed as being feminine. This, in turn, devalues women themselves, as well as the fields in which they are traditionally employed, making it difficult for women to break into fields typically dominated by men. Ultimately, this leads to a society in which women are socially, politically, and economically dependent upon men.

¹⁵ Kim Parker, "Women More than Men Adjust Their Careers for Family Life," Pew Research Center, last modified October 1, 2015, accessed February 28, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/01/women-more-than-men-adjust-their-careers-for-family-life/>.

From a literary and philosophical perspective, however, part of the issue is precisely the characters depicted in the writing of Milton and the seventeenth-century pamphleteers: Adam and Eve. Because these two are considered to be the first man and woman in religious—and often, literary—tradition, it follows that society would mimic the structure of the relationship between the two. This is precisely where the anti-feminists like Joseph Swetnam found their authorial legitimacy, as they were able to degrade and subjugate women as a group by insinuating that all women were inferior by the very nature of their creation. Though Speght and Sovernam tried to shake the restraints placed upon them by Swetnam and his contemporaries by reversing this technique to instead incriminate men, this literary tradition was already so pervasive, even appearing in John Locke's popular and influential philosophy. Thus, the issue of women's inferiority in society has become a cyclical phenomenon, as the continued endurance of misogyny and inequality prove.

Even in a world in which women have more political and social rights, any perceived equality remains a façade because of the rampant societal misogyny that still persists. Though it is undeniable that contemporary culture has made significant strides since the era of Milton, there are still issues that have yet to be solved. The assumed immutability of certain rights, like access to reproductive healthcare and the ability to take successful legal action against perpetrators of sexual violence, continue to be called into question. In a time when women increasingly feel as if their rights are in jeopardy, however, feminists can take a lesson from Eve: no matter the power you are facing, use your voice.

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