EVE'S SEARCH FOR REASON

An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

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"Round the Tree/ All other beasts that saw, with like desire/
Longing and envying stood, but could not reach" (IX, 591-93). All other beasts desired the forbidden fruit, but they could not reach it. All other beasts watched Eve approach the Tree and wonder whether she should try the fruit. The beasts hadn't any reason not to eat the fruit while Eve hadn't any logic not to do the same. None of them actually knew for a fact what would happen if they ate of the Tree.
The beasts could simply not reach the fruit; Eve had been relayed the word of God by a well-meaning, but unconvincing Adam not to eat of the Tree. Perhaps, had the beasts thought it within reach, they, too, would have been so bold and adventurous as Eve. Or perhaps those beasts had been so adventurous as to try to get to the fruit but had found it was not within their reach. Either way, Eve, without a logical reason not to go to the Tree, was no more a sinner than the innocent beasts who had probably tried before Eve arrived. Eve, however, was adventurous and made an error in judgement. This error resulted in her sinning. Hence, the fall of humankind. Her mistake has been discussed and criticized for centuries in reference to John Milton's version of the story in his epic poem, Paradise Lost. It seems as though no one will ever agree as to why Eve made the mistake she did, but after reading some of the reasons put forth by several critics, I believe I can defend my own ideas. Looking at the reasoning of others, I find it rather easy to say why they are wrong. I, however, often find that, after critiquing their ideas, I have
painted my own reasoning into a corner. When one denies one small step in another's analysis, he may also have denied himself that same step needed for a different outcome.

Therefore, I believe some points need to be made before I begin my arguments. Admittedly, Eve was a very complex person. Throughout the last several centuries, Eve has been thought to be weak, inferior, and stupid. This idea has been extended primarily by the teachings of organized religion and its views of Eve derived solely from the Bible. Continuing this line of reason, one might even be able to say that all women, with few exceptions, have been characterized as Eve, primarily because the Bible states that women are in all ways subordinate to men.

With this reasoning in mind, one can quite easily see how Milton's Eve might inadvertently end up being described by the above characteristics, even though this depiction is wrong and unfair. I believe that this unfairness is derived by peoples' not being able to distinguish between two entirely different characters: Biblical Eve and Milton's Eve. Whereas the Biblical Eve says very little to express her own personal thoughts, Milton's Eve is a bright, introspective, reasoning character. In this respect, the two characters function very differently, and, here, Milton's Eve proves her traditional critics very wrong.

Hence, I believe that even if John Milton was such an extreme anti-feminist as he appears to have been, he did not displace those feelings into Eve's character. Had that been his intent, Milton could have most certainly made her nature and actions completely insipid or
stupid. But he did not. If a modern-day reader still feels that Eve is, in fact, senseless or inferior, than he or she is misreading Eve's character all together and is placing the wrong stereotypes on Milton's version of Eve.

Consequently, in order to correctly read the character of Milton's Eve, one must recognize her true characteristics. Throughout the first eight books of Paradise Lost, Eve appears to be quite intelligent and motivated almost purely by the desire to learn and search for reason. In her trying to learn, we find her listening in on the angel Raphael's speech and later, questioning Adam's untested faith in something he's never seen. In this questioning, Eve is never spiteful or mean, only curious. In her final request to separate from Adam for her daily work, Eve is being honest when she tells Adam that they could get more done that way. However, she also apparently begins thinking that she may be able to find something to satisfy her desire for reason and logic. So, when Eve is alone and without help and extra teaching, Eve's logic is unreliable. This state presents a problem when she finally encounters Satan who speaks and confuses her in his rapid, circular logic.

Thus, without a reliable logic with which to reason, Eve falls when she actually eats the fruit—not before, when she thinks about it or even after, when she seduces Adam. As a result, my theory about Eve is that she needed to test virtue while experiencing the world in order to fulfill an innate need for reason that was not being satisfied by Adam's answers of unquestioned faith.
First, and most obvious in proving that Eve fell when she ate of the fruit (and not when she just thought about the act) is the fact that Eve herself implies that untested virtue is not really virtue at all. "And what is Faith, Love, Virtue unassay'd/ Alone, without exterior help sustained?" (IX, 335-36), Eve asks Adam after he has told her that he does not believe she should venture into the garden alone. Eve has only suggested that they divide their labors, and she could go gathering fruits for them by herself. This proposal does not immediately seem to be one that should put Adam on the defensive or make him suspicious of Eve's motives, yet it most certainly does. Perhaps this reaction initially makes Eve suspicious of Adam's reasoning. Adam answers in the manner that suggests to Eve that she cannot be trusted in the garden alone because evil could exist there and she would not know how to deal with it. Not only does Adam suggest that Eve would be too weak and unintelligent to handle evil, he also implies that she is inferior to him simply because she is female. Eve, on the other hand, has no reason to believe that any harm could come of her searching the garden. Furthermore, he does not actually have a good answer for Eve's statement about untested virtue. "But God left free the Will, for what obeys/ Reason is free, and Reason he made right" (IX, 351-52), Adam replies, contradicting what he really wants Eve to believe. He appears to be saying that reason is good and right but that he does not think it is right for her to go by herself. He thinks that Eve should obey him anyway. Eve is not trying to be sly or spiteful as she speaks about virtue because she truly does not understand why Adam is answering her in the contradictory manner that he is.
Another viable view of Adam's reply to stated by John Ulreich. When Eve suggests separating, "Adam begins badly, reasoning abstractly from Eve's false premise rather than concretely from his own feelings. Had he said simply: 'Efficiency is beside the point, for we belong together; you are "flesh of my flesh" (VIII, 495), and I can't get on without you,' the matter might have ended there. But by the time that reply occurs to him--'leave not the faithful side / That gave thee being' (IX, 265-6)--it is too late, for Eve has had a taste of spurious independence and considers his solicitude a slur on her integrity. She simply ignores his plea that he is strengthened by her presence..." (39). Perhaps it is true that if Adam had told Eve his honest feelings out loud, she would have been more passionately convinced to stay behind. At that point, Adam, in a calmer atmosphere, may have been able to explain his ideas for Eve in a more relaxed and reasonable manner.

On the other hand, some readers see only Eve's attitude at the end of this conversation. They believe that Eve had become spiteful or even enraged at Adam's telling her not to go for any reason. Marjorie Nicolson goes so far as to say that Eve is like a rebellious teen-age daughter at this point and that she should be treated as such. "(Adam's) is an experience only too familiar to every parent and teacher. Eve is experiencing 'growing pains.' Like most young people, she resents the suggestion that she needs protection, that she is not capable of standing on her own feet, of doing what she should.... It is the persistent cry of adolescence: 'How can I ever grow up if you won't let me?' Adam is entirely wrong is yielding to
her insistence..." (283). This attitude, however, is wrong in evaluating this point of the story.

Eve is not being rebellious simply to make her authority angry or to see how far she can push him before she is punished or chided. Rather, she is honestly asking these questions and questioning the authority of Adam because she does not grasp his line of thought or understand why he is so adamant about it. Furthermore, her lack of understanding does not come from her lacking intelligence. Eve has not had the lecturing of Raphael to rely on. She has not been taught the same way Adam has. In fact, she has not been taught at all. Even though she has listened in on Raphael's speech, she has not heard the whole discourse, and, furthermore, it was not directed to her so it was not entirely beneficial in that respect either. Consequently, even though Eve listened to part of the speech, it was not helpful in her learning more about life in the garden.

Another reason, albeit less well-thought-out, as to why Eve does not benefit from what she hears of Raphael's speech is stated by Fredson Bowers. "Adam by his intellectual powers arrives immediately at the truth of who he is and of his relations with God" (266). This does not mean that Adam is any wiser than Eve, but that his mind just works differently from Eve's. Still, if Bowers' theory is true, it could provide an explanation as to why Eve could not learn much from what she has overheard. Therefore, it is easy to see that Eve is not less intelligent, only less informed. Eve is not rebelling; she is just trying to have a conversation with an unwilling recipient.
Equally important in reference to Eve's question of virtue is her idea that in order to know virtue, one must know evil, and in order to know evil, one must know virtue. "...Deter'd not from achieving what might lead/ To happier life, knowledge of Good and Evil;/ Of good, how just? of evil, if what is evil/ Be real, why not known, since easier shunn'd?" Eve asks later when standing at the Tree (IX, 696-699). She has not yet sinned because it is not wrong to think about the consequences of an action. In fact, I would venture to say that most people, before acting, do consider the outcomes of what they might do.

Barbara Lewalski states a similar opinion about the ways in which their minds function. "...Primal man's nature is shown to be complex and constantly developing, not simple and stable. Each new situation in Milton's Eden is an opportunity to grow in wisdom, virtue, and perfection and normally Adam and Eve must take the initiative in interpreting what happens to them and in seeking new knowledge and experience" (Kranidas 99-100). By perceiving their minds in this light, we can clearly see that they are not sinning through reasoning; they are being rational human beings. Being reasonable and rational is certainly what Eve is doing here. Therefore, before realizing reason, Eve has made some decisions and has not found them especially troublesome. Diane McColley implies that Adam and Eve are in a growing process wherein they are learning to make responsible choices. "It is because they are growing, responding individuals that Adam and Eve reveal weaknesses and are faced with difficulties" (Free 106-7). Therefore, upon finding an outsider's reason, Eve has to make a judgement, and this is one of her weaknesses.
Critic C. S. Lewis implies that Eve is directly sinning at this point because she has obviously discarded the word of God completely. He says that because she has listened to Satan while questioning untested virtue, she has replaced all of God's teachings with Satan's (125). I do not think that this point is entirely true. She still knows what Adam has told her of God's teachings and is most likely just adding to what she has already learned. Seeing the world from different viewpoints is no sin. Eve's actual sinning takes place when she takes the advice of a stranger without first talking to someone whom she should already trust about it. This takes place when she finally gives in and eats the apple, making this judgement for herself rather than discussing it with Adam when she next sees him. Bowers implies that the reason for her eating is that Eve has weaker reason and more powerful passion. Therefore, when she encounters Satan, he uses strong passion that overwhelms her weak reason, and "under this influence, she makes a decision that seals the fate of them both" (265). Bowers has most definitely presented a possible answer to Eve's poor judgement making: Eve may have sharper logic than Adam appears to, but hers cannot withstand the passion involved in Satan's type of logic.

Contrary to what several critics say, we can see from this entire first part of Book IX that Eve was never malicious and never intended to try to overrun God or Adam. Ulreich even goes so far as to say that "she remains innocent until her will consent to enact the choice of her clouded reason" (39). To show my idea, I first use Nicolson's argument that Eve plans their initial separation as a time when she
can find a way to be superior to Adam. Nicolson says that Eve comes right out and admits her "slyness...arrogance and self-assuredness" (282-83) when she acknowledges that she has overheard the end of Raphael's conversation with Adam by eavesdropping. Yet, this may be wrong. Eve as a human might actually be innately good; thus she would never do anything she thought was wrong on purpose without an external influence. Eve does not tell Adam she has heard what Raphael said to be spiteful or sly. Instead she tells him because she is honest, having no reason not to tell him the truth. Eve does not become such a sly person until after she has eaten the fruit.

On the other hand, Helen Gardner says that Eve sinned, in most men's eyes, by being bold and adventurous (90). This argument is faulty because that would mean that any bold or confident act is a sin. I have always believed that courageous persons were admired, not looked down upon or seen as sinners. Perhaps Gardner should have instead said that Eve receives this bad reputation simply because she is a woman; some people seem to believe that women are not to exhibit the same character traits as admirable men. I think that perhaps if Adam had eaten of the fruit first, he may have been congratulated on taking such bold initiative.

Finally, I have been quite elated that I could find a critic who, although he had several differing views, agreed with me about my basic idea. This thought is that Eve does take the initiative to get involved with evil, but that she does it purely by accident. Furthermore, if she had known all the reasons that Adam had been taught, she could have made a better judgement, too. Critic William
Grace says that Eve moved voluntarily into danger. But, even further, he says "Eve responds to the temptation at least in part because of her ignorance of experience" (83). Eve does, in fact, move voluntarily into something, but she does not foresee it as danger; Eve just moves throughout the Garden. Eve, however, does not have any experience dealing with outside forces, such as Satan (or God, really) because Adam has received all of the attention and advice himself. Most important here, though, is that Adam never strives to tell Eve everything and all the reasons Raphael has shared. He instead tells Eve to believe faithfully without any examples or evidence to back up his advice. In other words, Arthur E. Barker states that "Human reason, rightly guided, is the image of God in us remaining." [Diane McColley goes on to say] it will also be the image of God in Adam and Eve as yet untarnished" (McColley, Milton's 166). Using this idea, we can further the argument for Eve's search for reason. If McColley's idea is true, then Eve is completely in the right, using her God-given free will. McColley also observes Milton's belief that "man was made in the image of God, and had the whole law of nature so implanted and innate in him, that he needed no precept to enforce its observance" (Free 105). Hence, Eve is right in using her reason to guide herself in any manner throughout the garden. Adam, on the other hand, appears to be denying the image of God in himself and is, therefore, wrong in his unquestioning faith. If Adam would use the reason he is allowed, then he might be able to stop Eve's fall. Reason should tell him that he needs to explain his answers, to satisfy Eve's search for reason. He, instead, ignores his reason and inadequately cautions Eve.
Therefore, I believe that Eve is treated unfairly in this point of the story by readers because she is inexperienced and because she will go so far as to innocently question ideas for which she has not been given any reasons. Perhaps she does become suspicious when Adam becomes so defensive at her mentioning their separation, but her reaction is only a normal human response to having someone overreact to an innocent suggestion. Also, Eve's problems with Adam further when his answers are not only suspicious but contradictory. Eve has not fallen by talking about the separation or thinking of eating the fruit. Eve does not fall until she makes a poor judgement in eating of the fruit of the Tree before she has discussed her findings with her companion.

Even more important than all of the thoughts about Eve's virtue or lack of experience is the reason why she could be tempted at all. If Eve fell when she actually ate of the Tree, then what provoked her at that point to go ahead and eat? If Adam could not give her good enough reasons not to separate from him, then how could Eve ever be convinced one way or another about eating this particular fruit? This answer becomes obvious when noting Eve's ceaseless questioning as to why Adam believes as he does. No matter how many times Adam tells Eve that she must obey the word of God, Eve still wants solid answers as to why she must, and what will happen if she does not, and how they will ever know if their virtue is true if it is not tested. These are questions Adam would never ask because he has been told not to, and that command is good enough reason for Adam. Evidently, Eve is asking these questions out of line, in some readers' eyes. McColley states
that Eve is supposed to relate to Adam as he has to Raphael, as the Son to the Father (Free 108, 110). But Eve is never so easily swayed.

When asking her questions, Eve has a greater need, and I believe that need is reason. If her need had not been reason, I cannot think of any other excuse why she, an innately good person, would badger Adam the way she does. She does not do it simply to be annoying, but instead to understand his answers and rationale. Throughout her conversation with Adam at the beginning of Book IX, Eve appears to be a very logical person in search of another rational being with whom she may question and think. I make this assertion because of her constant questioning. Her actions are those of someone who is looking for a conversation or at least someone who will agree with her opinions. Adam, however, is neither of these. He does not agree with Eve, nor does he explain why he opposes her actions. But because he does not give her adequate reasons not to go, Eve decides to go on into the garden alone. Perhaps she even hopes to find someone or something with which she can talk and share her reason. Perchance it is even possible that Eve finally does fall because someone's reason finally wins her over; thus, she sins when she is influenced enough to eat of the Tree.

Eve then begins what may be a search for reason as she wanders the Garden during her self-imposed separation from Adam. Eve probably does not expect to find an answer to her questions that Adam has denied, but she possibly does expect to show Adam that there is no reason for him to become so irrational about her journeying into the Garden alone. Therefore, when she comes in contact with this
marvelous talking serpent, she is most likely shocked and overjoyed to have someone with whom she may be able to have a rational conversation. I believe that Eve must be overjoyed to find the serpent because she has now found someone with whom she can have that conversation and use her reason. Most definitely, Satan has no problem in gaining Eve's undivided attention since Eve is shocked—she has not been aware that any other beings in the Garden can talk. Hence, Satan does not have any problem telling Eve about what exists in the Garden, especially a Tree of Knowledge (which Eve may be highly interested in knowing about after her illogical discussions with Adam).

None of this evidence suggests that Eve has made up her mind to deceive Adam when she leaves him during the separation scene, as implied by critic J. M. Evans (McColley, Milton's, 184). Rather, it suggests that, upon leaving Adam, Eve has a very bewildered, but open mind towards other viewpoints. Therefore, once Eve meets Satan, who begins discussing God's deceiving story of the Tree of Knowledge and its death for humans, Satan can use generally any form of reason, and Eve will listen. Reason is what Eve apparently hungers for, and Satan, with his gift for talking in circles, certainly makes a point for himself. Satan can apparently answer Eve's 'why's' and questions of virtue. (Satan himself even is a good argument for testing virtue: he appears quite happy, yet he has questioned the word of God.) Furthermore, Satan does not even realize the greatest argument he makes in support of himself, notes Grace: If Eve loses her innocence, she will acquire a special kind of knowledge (82). This fact, added
to the condition that the only reason available to Eve is that of Satan, leads the audience to realize that Eve could easily be seduced into his temptation. Eve is uncertain, but since Adam would not argue about his beliefs, Satan is quite believable because he seems very certain of his own ideas. Thus, Eve is led to her fall.

Critic Northrop Frye says of this point in the story that "Eve searches her own mind to see what her state of mind is. What she finds there, of course, is Satan's speech, which has got into her mind without her noticing it..." (77-78). I believe that hearing any reason, by this time, is enough evidence for Eve to follow someone's advice. Her actually following the advice is obviously the wrong act to do: she should have discussed Satan's reasoning with Adam before acting upon it. But because Satan talks so quickly, she is already eating the fruit and believing without thinking. Hence, the fall comes as she finally eats the fruit, and not before when she is listening to Satan's conversation about knowledge and life. Eve never fully gives in to Satan's talk until she finally eats the fruit. The two actions, believing and eating, are simultaneous. E. L. Marilla implies this idea also, as he says that Eve's sin is her yielding to Satan's talking and, thus, eating the fruit. He says that, here, Eve is "defying God's initial plan for the future of man" (34).

What Eve does after this point is really not of any considerable import. She is no longer the rational, intelligent person we saw struggling so hard to find truth and solid evidence in a world of acceptance and obedience without question. Eve no longer needs logic or reason. All the reason she needs is enveloped in her
newly-acquired jealousy and rage toward Adam and the fact that he could most likely go on without her if the Tree, in fact, really is deadly. Eve, in her new state of mind, possibly does not even care to see that now, after the fact, Adam is more than willing to argue with her about her actions and thoughts, whereas before, he only told her--without much conviction--to accept his word as God's own.

Through Eve's need for a good definition of virtue, for experience, and for reason, the reader gains a knowledge of not only when Eve sinned and commenced the fall of man, but also why she did it to begin with. Had Eve not been down-played intellectually by followers of traditional religion, perhaps critics would never have felt the need to criticize Milton's character and her person the way they have throughout several centuries. This Eve is not dull or stupid. On the contrary, I believe that Eve appears the brighter and more realistic of the two, on the whole, because of her extremely human needs and desires. Jane Petty expresses a similar view in saying that "while Eve has been called susceptible and vulnerable, her very sensitivity and perception reveal her as more receptive and creative than Adam" (45). Eve is only an innocent, honest person out to experience the world. When she separates from Adam, she has absolutely no intentions of sinning or doing any wrong at all. She is just curious, as any human might be. Even the fact that Adam was the one that Raphael spoke with does not convince me that Adam, at some unknown point in time, would not have done exactly the same thing that Eve did in giving in to temptation. I often wonder if perhaps Adam would have stood less of a chance and would have fallen more quickly
because his mind appears to be so much less sharp. Whereas Eve questions and wonders, Adam accepts and has no way to support his beliefs other than by saying that everything is the way God wants it. Obviously, Adam has come in contact with a skeptical mind—the one person for whom he should have been willing to state his true feelings, thus saving her from hurt—and we have seen how little he was inclined to say to convince her.

Hence, Eve ventured out into danger alone because Adam would not admit that in order for faith to be of use, one must question and test his beliefs. Due to Adam's actions, Eve leaves Adam with no real basis for arguing or testing her own reason. Thus, Eve fell when she finally went ahead and ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, but she did so innocently and without the spite or foolishness that countless critics have tried to displace upon her for so many centuries.
Works Consulted


McColey, Diane K. "Free Will and Disobedience in the Separation Scene of Paradise Lost." Studies in English Literature. 12 (1972): 103-120.


