

# 'THEIR SEX NOT EQUAL SEEMED': EQUALITY AND HIERARCHY IN JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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.....but wide remote  
From this Assyrian garden, where the Fiend                   285  
Saw undelighted all delight, all kind  
Of living creatures new to sight and strange:  
Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,  
Godlike erect, with native honour clad  
In naked majesty seemed lords of all,                   290  
And worthy seemed, for in their looks divine  
The image of their glorious maker shone,  
Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,  
Severe but in true filial freedom placed;  
Whence true authority in men; though both                   295  
Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;  
For contemplation he and valour formed,  
For softness she and sweet attractive grace,  
He for God only, she for God in him:  
His fair large front and eye sublime declared                   300  
Absolute rule; and hyacinthine locks  
Round from his parted forelock manly hung  
Clustering, but not beneath his shoulders broad:  
She as a veil down to the slender waist  
Her unadorned golden tresses wore                   305  
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved  
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied  
Subjection, but required with gentle sway,  
And by her yielded, by him best received,  
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,                   310  
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.



David Aers and Bob Hodge have noted the 'seemed's but concluded 'these doubts or equivocations are not dominant, and the passage basically supports a male supremacist reading.'<sup>3</sup> Julia M. Walker, examining Milton's use of 'seemed' in relation to free will and predestination in *Paradise Lost* suggests 'Throughout the poem, Milton uses "seems" in three different ways: first and most simply, "seems" is used to mean a false appearance, a seeming not an actual reality; second, and more ambiguous, "seems" is used as "appears" but without a clear judgment about reality... finally and most confusingly, "seems" is actually equated with some form of the verb "to be".' And she attributes 'their sex not equal seemed' to this hypothetical 'some form of the verb to be.'<sup>4</sup> It is an unconvincing redefinition and it has been challenged<sup>5</sup>. It is hard to see that any of Milton's usages of seems and seemed are free of the sense of 'false appearance'. And the sense of false appearance in this passage is reinforced by Milton's use of 'seeming' in the clearly unambiguous sense of deceit only twenty lines further on: 'With shows instead, mere shows of seeming pure.' (IV 315)

'Seemed' is a significant word in Milton's vocabulary. A glance at Ingram and Swaim's *Concordance to Milton's English Poetry* will indicate readily enough the uncertainty, ambiguity and pretence regularly embedded in seem, seems and seemed in Milton's usage. At the elevation of Christ in book V of *Paradise Lost*, the event that triggers Satan's resentment and rebellion, we are told

All seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all.  
(V 616-7)

When Satan first approaches the Son to tempt him in *Paradise Regained*, 'seemed' is used as one of the signals of ambiguity and deception:

But now an aged man in rural weeds  
Following, as seemed, the quest of some stray ewe,  
Or withered stick to gather... (I 314-6)

What seemed the case here was illusion, charade, deception. The passage in book IV of *Paradise Lost* that we are looking at is permeated

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3 David Aers and Bob Hodge, "'Rational Burning": Milton on Sex and Marriage', *Milton Studies*, 13 (1979) 23.

4 Julia M. Walker, "'For each seem'd either": Free Will and Predestination in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly*, 20 (1986) 14.

5 See Stephen M. Fallon, 'The Uses of "Seems" and the Spectre of Predestination', *Milton Quarterly*, 21 (1987) 99-101, and Julia M. Walker, 'Free Will, Predestination, and Ghost-Busting', *Milton Quarterly*, 21 (1987) 101-2.

with ambiguity, not only in relation to the word seemed but in many further aspects. Stevie Davies has remarked on some of the contradictions:

though Milton's Eve is declared to be naked, she is also seen clothed (with her hair)...though she is supposed to be freely erotic, she practices the art of 'sweet reluctant amorous delay'.

Diane Kelsey McColley remarks on other ambiguities about this passage:

At this point the narrator produces one of those ambiguities which invite the reader to choose a meaning and thereby make him aware of his own opinions. 'Though both Not equal, as thir sex not equal seemd': is the 'as' a conjunction of similitude or of explanation? Are Adam and Eve 'not equal' in all ways or only in regard to sex? Does inequality imply disparity of merit, or only distinction of qualities? Do their bodily forms limit Adam to contemplation and valor and Eve to softness and grace, or are these talents to be shared? If he is for God only, is he not for God in her? These questions can be answered only by watching Adam and Eve unfold in response to experience and to each other.

And Stanley Fish has also noted some of the verbal complexity of the prelapsarian and postlapsarian possible divergent interpretations of crucial words in the passage.<sup>6</sup>

If 'their sex not equal seemed' and if 'seeming' is false, does that mean that their sex *was* equal? The uncertainties of 'seemed' spread elsewhere. To find Adam and Eve described as 'seemed lords of all' makes us wonder, were they really lords of all, and ask what weight does 'lords' carry from a revolutionary who had supported the abolition of the House of Lords. Is 'lords of all' the same as 'lords of the world' in I 32, or is it a more excessive version? Even stranger is the terse proclamation of 'Absolute rule' (V 301) from an intransigent opponent of absolutism.

This first description of Adam and Eve is problematical, of course, because, as commentators have recurrently pointed out, it is presented through Satan's perceptions:<sup>7</sup>

                  this Assyrian garden, where the fiend  
Saw undelighted all delight, all kind  
Of living creatures new to sight and strange:  
Two of far nobler shape... (IV 284-8)

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6 Stevie Davies, *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: The Feminine Reclaimed* (Brighton, 1986), pp. 210-1; Diane Kelsey McColley, *Milton's Eve* (Urbana, 1983) p. 41; Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (London, 1967).

7 Diane Kelsey McColley, *Milton's Eve*, p. 40; Helen Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 81; *et al.*

Marcia Landy's reading is hence questionable when she writes 'we are told by the narrator, lest we misunderstand, that Adam and Eve are "not equal, as thir sex not equal seem'd." '8 This is not something told us by the narrator, but something perceived by and mediated through Satan's prejudiced vision. His sight is darkened, 'undelighted' and distortive; it 'seemed' that way to Satan. It would make sense that Adam and Eve 'seemed lords of all' to Satan with his preoccupations about authority, that he should see their relationship as political and inegalitarian, that he should see Adam as absolutist, and that he should offer a political interpretation of the way Eve's hair

in wanton ringlets waved  
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied  
Subjection. (IV 306-8)

Again there is ambiguity: the image 'implies', but does not clearly state. This is apt since the image of the vine and elm traditionally represents mutuality, reciprocity and fertility, but not subjection, as Peter Demetz and Todd H. Sammons have scrupulously demonstrated.<sup>9</sup> If subjection is an implication it is a false one - one taken by Satan or the careless fallen reader. It is a suspect political-authoritarian interpretation analogous to the way Adam's 'fair large front and eye sublime declared / Absolute rule.'

The use of 'declared' here carries an ambiguity. Are these lines to be read as if they were the interpretation of an emblem - Adam's 'fair large front and eye sublime' represent absolutism? Or is the 'declared' to be interpreted, rather, as Adam 'expresses' absolutism - this is what he says, or seems to say, or what his expression of body language 'declares': but not necessarily what is the truth of the matter. As Aers and Hodge put it

one might wonder whether "declared" (IV, 300) undercuts the whole speech on male rule since these signs may only "declare" absolute rule to the fallen Satan, who does not know what Raphael told Adam, "that great / Or bright infers not excellence" (VIII 90-91).<sup>10</sup>

If we take the description of Adam and Eve as recording Satan's interpretative vision, then we can suggest that Satan is projecting a

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8 Marcia Landy, 'A Free and Open Encounter': Milton and the Modern Reader', *Milton Studies*, 9 (1976) 17.

9 Peter Demetz, 'The Elm and the Vine: Notes Toward the History of a Marriage Topos', *PMLA*, 73 (1958) 521-32; Todd H. Sammons, ' "As the Vine Curls Her Tendrils": Marriage Topos and Erotic Countertopos in *Paradise Lost*', *Milton Quarterly* 20 (1986) 117-27.

10 Aers and Hodge, *op. cit.* p. 22. Nonetheless Aers and Hodge see 'these doubts or equivocations' as 'not dominant.'

political, hierarchical Hell onto an Eden that is something other. At the beginning of book V we were told

horror and doubt distract  
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir  
The hell within him, for within him hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from hell  
One step no more than from himself can fly  
By change of place. (IV 18-23)

At the end of his encounter with Adam and Eve, Satan's soliloquy suggests just such a habit of projection, demonstrated in the opening words in which he literally projects Hell onto Eden:

O hell! What do mine eyes with grief behold. (IV 358)

And he goes on to relate to Adam and Eve in a political, hierarchical way, offering them 'league' and a reception in Hell of 'all her kings.' The soliloquy is phrased in emphatically political terms:

league with you I seek  
And mutual amity so strait, so close,  
That I with you must dwell, or you with me  
Henceforth.... (IV 375-8)

And he continues

hell shall unfold,  
To entertain you two, her widest gates,  
And send forth all her kings.... (IV 381-3)

The political organization of Hell with its kings, and the political thinking and language of Satan with the 'league' he requires, lead on to his political justification for his action:

And should I at your harmless innocence  
Melt, as I do, yet public reason just,  
Honour and empire with revenge enlarged,  
By conquering this new world, compels me now  
To do what else though damned I should abhor.  
So spake the fiend, and with necessity,  
The tyrant's plea, excused his devilish deeds. (IV 388-94)

Milton spells out explicitly in a voice unambiguously narratorial that Satan's thinking is absolutist, tyrannical. Alastair Fowler sees him 'here

cast in the role of a contemporary Machiavellian politician, excusing the evil means he resorts to by appeals to such values as "the common weal," "the good of the state", "policy" and "necessity".<sup>11</sup> Whenever Milton writes of 'necessity', 'public reason', 'public good' or suchlike phrases, it is with the resonance of political manipulation and tyrannical corruption.

Satan's attack on Adam and Eve, then, has its political dimension. Planned politically in the parliament of hell, it is continued in this way by Satan's political language. What we are to note is the huge discrepancy between the political planning, organization and theory of Satan's attack, and the political innocence of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are simply two people, the only two people, living in domestic harmony. With only the two of them no political organization is needed. That is only introduced after the Fall, as Milton makes clear in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*. There is no coercion or oppression. They exist in a state of simplicity and innocence and this is intruded upon by a political force. The couplet 'When Adam delved and Eve span / Who was then the gentleman?' dates from the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381. It is the text behind Milton's great epic.<sup>12</sup> The vision of an inegalitarian, hierarchical and absolutist Paradise, then, we can interpret as a Satanic vision.<sup>13</sup> This is what Satan imports from Hell, and this is what he turns Paradise into. The perceived unequal relationships are not ideal but proleptic of the postlapsarian human condition. The seeming inequality, the seeming lordship, the declared absolutism, the implied subjection - these are all from Hell and all to come on earth. But the true paradise is to be deduced from the opposite of Satan's vision, the Paradise to come from the negation of the negation.<sup>14</sup>

This reading can be supported both by significant absences and by explicit evidence elsewhere in the poem.

The absences first, a couple already remarked by previous commentators. Aers and Hodge ask, "Absolute rule" for instance: does Adam really have that? To the horror of the orthodox he does not claim it

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11. Fowler, *op.cit.* p.636n.

12. Michael Wilding, *Dragon's Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1987), p. 227-8.

13. Dennis Burden's model of 'the Satanic poem' contained within *Paradise Lost* is a useful model here. See Dennis H. Burden, *The Logical Epic: A Study of the Argument of Paradise Lost* (London, 1967), p. 57ff.

14. 'Milton's stridently masculinist "Hee for God only, shee for God in him," ' as Mary Nyquist has categorized it, can perhaps now be resituated as *Satan's* stridently masculinist sentiment. It has worried readers as far back as Richard Bentley, who proposed emending it to "Hee for God only, shee for God *and* him.' See Mary Nyquist, 'The genesis of gendered subjectivity in the divorce tracts and in *Paradise Lost*', Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson, (eds.), *Re-membering Milton* (New York and London, 1987), p. 107; Dr. Bentley's *Emendations on the Twelve Books of Milton's Paradise Lost* (London, 1732), p. 15.

in the crucial exchange with Eve before the Fall.<sup>15</sup> And Marcia Landy remarks of Milton's treatment of Adam and Eve's postlapsarian quarrels, 'in spite of his psychological insight into the ways in which mental conflict is acted out, he does not see their struggle as arising from the stringent boundaries of hierarchy, with male dominance and female subordination, which make conflict inevitable.'<sup>16</sup> Significantly, then, absolutism and hierarchy are not features of the dramatised dynamic of Adam and Eve's relationship.

We might have expected the alleged hierarchical relationship of Adam and Eve to be spelled out in the authoritative account of creation given by Raphael, but again it is most significantly absent:

Let us make now man in our image, man  
In our similitude, and let them rule  
Over the fish and fowl of sea and air,  
Beast of the field, and over all the earth,  
And every creeping thing that creeps the ground.  
This said, he formed thee, Adam, thee O man  
Dust of the ground, and in thy nostrils breathed  
The breath of life; in his own image he  
Created thee, in the image of God  
Express, and thou became a living soul.  
Male he created thee, but thy consort  
Female for race; then blessed mankind, and said,  
Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth,  
Subdue it, and throughout dominion hold  
Over fish of the sea, and fowl of the air,  
And every living thing that moves on the earth.

(VII 519-34)

Authority over fish, fowl and beasts is spelled out here; but there is no mention of 'lords of all' and no mention of 'rule' or 'dominion' by mankind over mankind, or by one sex over another. Mary Nyquist remarks that the reference to Eve here is 'meagre',<sup>17</sup> as indeed it is. But it is importantly non-discriminatory, unlike the Satanic observations of book IV, and the meagreness, the very absence of comment is in itself significant. As the Diggers declared in *The True Levellers Standard* (1649)

man had domination given to him, over the beasts, birds and fishes;  
but not one word was spoken in the beginning, that one branch of

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<sup>15</sup> Aers and Hodge, *op. cit.* 22.

<sup>16</sup> Landy, *op. cit.* 23.

<sup>17</sup> Nyquist, *op. cit.* 117.

mankind should rule over another. And the reason is this. Every single man, male and female, is a perfect creature of himself<sup>18</sup>

Domination is explicitly limited to 'beasts, birds and fishes' here on the basis of absence in *Genesis*. Milton perpetuates that significant absence in Raphael's *Genesis*-based account, and reasserts the interpretation in Adam's comments on Nimrod:

O execrable son so to aspire  
Above his brethren, to himself assuming  
Authority usurped, from God not given:  
He gave us only over beast, fish, fowl  
Dominion absolute; that right we hold  
By his donation; but man over men  
He made not lord; such title to himself  
Reserving, human left from human free. (XII 64-71)

The model for human society is 'fair equality, fraternal state' (XII 26) which Nimrod has rejected for 'dominion undeserved / Over his brethren.' (XII 27-8) How then could Adam's 'fair large front' legitimately declare 'Absolute rule'? Of course, when we turn back to book IV, 'Absolute rule' is not explicitly applied to man ruling over woman: the context seems to imply it, but the expression is ambiguous and evasive. It is an appropriate Satanic suggestion, inexplicit, insinuating. It can always be plausibly denied and interpreted as applying only to 'beast, fish, fowl' - though male supremacism is the prime Satanic implication.

Marcia Landy acknowledged that Adam's assessment of Nimrod 'might seem to argue for egalitarianism. It certainly argues against externally imposed dominion by king or overlord. Yet the equality of fraternity is qualified throughout *Paradise Lost* by the idea of merit.'<sup>19</sup> Certainly there is a hierarchy of merit in *Paradise Lost*, but this is something very different from a fixed hierarchy of birth, rank, caste or class, and in no way conflicts with egalitarianism. The confusion of these different sorts of hierarchy has caused considerable problems in interpreting *Paradise Lost*, especially in those readings that have all too readily accepted the Satanic rigid hierarchy.<sup>20</sup>

18 Christopher Hill, (ed.), *Winstanley: The Law of Freedom and other Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 77.

19 Landy, *op. cit.* 9.

20 Landy, *op. cit.* William Shullenberger, 'Wrestling with the Angel: *Paradise Lost* and Feminist Criticism', *Milton Quarterly* 20 (1986), 74 - 'The doctrine of woman's subordination is explicit in the text'; Virginia R. Mollenkott, 'Milton and Women's Liberation', *Milton Quarterly* 7 (1973), 101 - 'Milton treated the subject of female subordination in the most objective fashion possible, not with egotistical gratification but because his view of a hierarchical universe would allow no other concept'; Ricki Heller, 'Opposites of Wifehood: Eve and Dalila', *Milton Studies* 24 (1988) 190. The hierarchical, gender discriminatory model is, of course, endemic in non-feminist readings - e.g.

The hierarchy of birth, caste, rank or class which rigidly fixes its components and allows little or no change, which is predetermined, is one that institutionalizes privilege, power and inequality. Admiringly defined by C. S. Lewis,<sup>21</sup> it is a system represented by Satan, a model for postlapsarian earthly dynasties, for monarchical, feudal, imperial and class structures.

The hierarchy of moral and spiritual development that Milton has Raphael describe in book V is entirely different. A 'curiously fluid conception of hierarchy', as Barbara Lewalski characterizes it,<sup>22</sup> it is a dynamic model of alchemical circulation and continual refinement.<sup>23</sup> There is no fixed inequality. It is open to everything to ascend spiritually. This is the divine hierarchy, one of process and ascent, not rule and repression.

To whom the winged hierarch replied.  
O Adam, one almighty is, from whom  
All things proceed, and up to him return,  
If not depraved from good, created all  
Such to perfection, one first matter all,  
Indued with various forms, various degrees  
Of substance, and in things that live, of life;  
But more refined, more spiritous and pure,  
As nearer to him placed or nearer tending  
Each in their several active spheres assigned,  
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds  
Proportioned to each kind. So from the root  
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves  
More airy, last the bright consummate flower  
Spirits odorous breathes: flowers and their fruit  
Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed  
To vital spirits aspire, to animal,  
To intellectual, give both life and sense,  
Fancy and understanding, whence the soul  
Reason receives, and reason is her being,  
Discursive, or intuitive; discourse  
Is oftest yours, the latter most is ours,  
Differing but in degree, of kind the same.

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Joseph H. Summers, *The Muse's Method: An Introduction to Paradise Lost* (London, 1962) p. 95 - 'The inequality of man and woman is imaged as clearly as is their perfection. It is not only modern ideas of the equality of the sexes which may make this passage difficult for us; the democratic assumption that ideally every individual *should* be self-sufficient and our tendency to define "perfection" as eternal self-sufficiency complicate our difficulties further.'

21 C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London, 1942), 72-80.

22 Barbara K. Lewalski, 'Milton on Women - Yet Once More' *Milton Studies* 6 (1974), 6.

23 On the alchemical, see Alastair Fowler in Fowler and Carey, (eds), *Poems of John Milton*, p.704n; Michael Lieb, *The Dialectics of Creation: Patterns of Birth and Regeneration in Paradise Lost* (Massachusetts, 1970) pp. 229-44.

Wonder not then, what God for you saw good  
If I refuse not, but convert, as you,  
To proper substance; time may come when men  
With angels may participate, and find  
No inconvenient diet, nor too light fare:  
And from these corporal nutriments perhaps  
Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,  
Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend  
Ethereal, as we, or may at choice  
Here or in heavenly paradises dwell. (V 468-500)

As Raphael makes clear, this is a dynamic, evolutionary process. It is a flowing scale of ascent, not fixed hierarchy. It utterly subverts any fixed political or social or gender roles.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the unequivocal inapplicability of fixed gender roles is clear when we relate this passage to what we were told in book I about spirits:

For spirits when they please  
Can either sex assume, or both. (I 423-4)

Since Adam and Eve may 'at last turn all to spirit' and since 'spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both', any assertion of gender hierarchy is ultimately unsustainable.

The concepts of sexual inequality and absolute rule are introduced so brusquely and indeed brutally into the portrayal of Paradise that the reader might expect they would be active concepts in the presented relationship of Adam and Eve in the events leading up to the fall. Strikingly this is not so. Nor is equality an issue in Satan's temptation. His strategy is to flatter Eve, to suggest her unique superiority - 'who shouldst be seen / A goddess among gods, adored and served / By angels numberless' (IX 546-8), 'no fair to thine / Equivalent or second' (IX 608-9). Only after Eve has eaten the apple does she raise the issue of equality, considering whether to share her knowledge with Adam

and give him to partake  
Full happiness with me, or rather not,  
But keep the odds of knowledge in my power  
Without copartner? So to add what wants  
In female sex, the more to draw his love,  
And render me more equal, and perhaps,

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24 Cf. Marilyn R. Farwell, 'Eve, the Separation Scene, and the Renaissance Idea of Androgyny,' *Milton Studies* 16 (1982) 13 - 'Thus, anyone who at one point represents the natural and material world is not bound to remain at that level. Theoretically then, Eve has the potential to grow into more wisdom and spirituality.'

A thing not undesirable, sometime  
Superior; for inferior who is free? (IX 818-25)

'She is feeling inferior for the first time,' Dorothy Miller remarks of these lines.<sup>25</sup> Eve only expresses this sense of any inequality when she is fallen. This suggests that inequality is a part of the fallen world, projected by the fallen Satan onto his vision of Paradise, experienced by Eve when she herself has fallen.<sup>26</sup>

And now in the fallen world, confusions abound. Marcia Landy remarks, 'The speech portrays the idea of equality as confused in Eve's mind with dominance. She errs, like Satan, in confusing hierarchy and equality of affection.'<sup>27</sup> But Landy too readily accepts a pejorative account of Eve.

By violating boundaries and moving to adopt more power through Satan's offers of equality, power, and authority, Eve identified herself as a deviant. In other words, her resistance to subordination is invalidated and stigmatized through its association with the archetypal subverter, Satan. Are we to consider Eve's rebellion and the rebellion of all women against subordination as evil?<sup>28</sup>

The issue is more tangled than that. Firstly, Eve undoubtedly errs in eating the apple. Secondly, equality is not an issue in her temptation: it is an explanation, a rationalization, that enters afterwards. Indeed, it can only enter later if, as I have suggested, inequality was not the reality of the Paradisal relationship but rather something that 'seemed' the case in Satan's distorted and evil perception.

So although Eve in falling is stigmatized through her association with Satan, this in no way stigmatizes the egalitarian impulse. Once in the fallen, Satanic world the question 'for inferior who is free?' is a valid one.

The complicating factor, of course, is that though Satan uses the rhetoric of egalitarianism in rousing supporters for his rebellion, his own motives are unequalitarian. As Joseph Wittreich puts it, 'Satan's strategy is to employ a rhetoric of equality through which he would bring all creation

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25 Dorothy Durkee Miller, 'Eve', *JEGP* 61 (1962) 546.

26 Oddly, Diane K. McColley puts it the other way: 'Equality in any case is a fallen concept - the legal recourse of a race not much given to rejoicing in the goodness, much less the superiority, of others - needed to rectify injustices that no one in a state of sinless blessedness would consider committing.' Diane K. McColley, 'Milton and the Sexes' in Dennis Danielson, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge, 1989) p. 159.

27 Landy, *op. cit.* 21.

28 Landy, *op. cit.* 19. The parallels between Eve and Satan are stressed in Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's *Bogey*', *PMLA* 93 (1978) 368-82, and King-Kok Cheung, 'Beauty and the Beast: A Sinuous Reflection of Milton's Eve', *Milton Studies* 23 (1987) 197-214.

under his subjection.<sup>29</sup> Satan's handling of the issue of egalitarianism shows all his political and oratorical shiftiness:

Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend  
The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust  
To know ye right, or if ye know your selves  
Natives and sons of heaven possessed before  
By none, and if not equal all, yet free,  
Equally free; for orders and degrees  
Jar not with liberty, but well consist.  
Who can in reason then or right assume  
Monarchy over such as live by right  
His equals, if in power and splendour less,  
In freedom equal? (V 787-97)

Equality is a part - and only a part - of Satan's rhetoric, but never of his social practice. His rhetoric is a serpentine display of confusion and contradiction. Orders and degrees certainly do jar with liberty.<sup>30</sup> That is why those observations of 'their sex not equal seemed', 'Absolute rule' and 'implied subjection' conflict with a true vision of Paradise and alert us that there is a Satanic rhetoric intruding. Satan plays hypocritically with a rhetoric of egalitarianism but acts as an absolutist monarch and sets up a patriarchal dynasty with Sin and Death. About this there are no ambiguities. The narratorial voice denotes him firmly as 'monarch' (II 467) and 'tyrant' (IV 394). It is essential to stress, however, that Satan's use of the language of equality in no way discredits the concept of equality. Indeed, his lack of egalitarian practice serves to confirm egalitarianism as a good: 'fair equality' (XII 26). To reply at last to Marcia Landy, No, we do not have to consider the rebellion of all women against subordination as evil. But Satan is a bad model. Satan's 'rebellion' was an attempt to establish tyranny, authoritarian rule. Human rebellion for the good is a rebellion against the Satanic authoritarian, an attempt to 'restore us, and regain the blisful seat' (I 5)<sup>31</sup> by following the way of Christ: a model, indeed that Eve does follow, her 'On me, me only' (X 832) echoing

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29 Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton* (Ithaca, 1987) pp. 90-1. And see 'Satan and the Argument from Equality' in John M. Steadman, *Milton's Epic Characters: Image and Idol* (Chapel Hill, n.d.) 160-73.

30 'Satan's argument is hampered by the fact that he particularly wants to avoid equality among his own faction, and therefore has to turn aside for a moment to explain (789 et seq) that "Orders and Degrees Jarr not with liberty." He is not very explicit on the subject, *et pour cause*. The passage is one of those where (rightly and inevitably) an element of grim comedy is permitted.' C.S. Lewis, *op. cit.* p. 76. Virginia R. Mollenkott, however, writes 'It is, for instance, generally true that "Orders and Degrees jar not with liberty.' *op. cit.* 101.

31 Wilding, *op. cit.* p. 226; Fredric Jameson, 'Religion and Ideology' in Francis Barker *et. al.* (eds), *Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century* (Colchester, 1981), p. 329.

Christ's speech (III 236).<sup>32</sup> Social subordination is a Satanic practice introduced by the fall. But it was not present before the fall, nor does Milton present Eve as rebelling against it, for it is not shown as present.

The issues of equality and masculine rule are raised again in the judgement and punishment episode in book X. Again, the passages are fraught with ambiguity. And it is this ambiguity I want to continue to stress. There is certainly a male supremacist, authoritarian, inegalitarian reading prominent in the poem, as numerous critical accounts testify; but at the same time the ambiguities and contradictions and cross-references serve to undermine and deconstruct this reading. They do not do so to the extent of utterly cancelling it; but they certainly qualify and challenge it, demonstrating that there was a tension and a debate, which the poem embodies and expresses.

In the judgment there is a wavering between whether Adam treated Eve as his 'superior, or but equal.' Do we read these as alternatives, or as equally unacceptable parallels in God's view?

To whom the sovereign presence thus replied.  
Was she thy God, that her thou didst obey  
Before his voice, or was she made thy guide,  
Superior, or but equal, that to her  
Thou didst resign thy manhood, and the place  
Wherein God set thee above her made of thee,  
And for thee, whose perfection far excelled  
Hers in all real dignity: adorned  
She was indeed, and lovely to attract  
Thy love, not thy subjection, and her gifts  
Were such as under government well seemed,  
Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part  
And person, hadst thou known thy self aright. (X 144-56)

The floating possibility is that seeing Eve as superior was wrong, as opposed to seeing her as 'but equal.' If Adam had seen her as 'but equal' then his own inner rationality should have allowed him to make a better judgement of what she proposed. Again there is the 'seemed', complicated further by a play on 'unseemly': 'her gifts / Were such as under government well seemed, / Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part.'

And what might seem a firm resolution of the ambiguity here, that Eve was 'Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part' dissolves again when we come to Eve's punishment:

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32 Michael Wilding, *Milton's Paradise Lost*, (Sydney, 1969), pp. 106-7.

to thy husband's will  
Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule. (X 195-6)

How is this a punishment, if it was already the case before the fall? Nowhere does Milton say the husband's rule over the woman was reiterated.<sup>33</sup> It is not presented as a reassertion, but as a punishment in parallel with 'children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth' (X 194-5). And if submission to the husband's will is a punishment for eating the apple, then before the fall such a submission of a man to woman was not the case. In the Paradisal state, we deduce, man and woman lived in equality.

But this is an interpretation we have to deduce from a text that often seems to be saying the opposite. The sheer blatancy of the inegalitarian and absolutist ideas expressed in the vision of Adam and Eve in Book IV are what have immediately struck most readers, and inevitably shocked them. But this very blatancy may well be interpreted as Milton's strategy for shocking the reader into recognition. Stanley Fish's model for reading *Paradise Lost* could be applied here. He writes in *Surprised by Sin*

Milton consciously wants to worry his reader, to force him to doubt the correctness of his responses and to bring him to the realization that his inability to read the poem with any confidence in his own perception is its focus.<sup>34</sup>

As Marcia Landy puts it, 'Reading Milton is thus not a passive act, but rather a contentious one.'<sup>35</sup>

Dennis Burden's model of the 'Satanic poem' ever present in *Paradise Lost* is similarly useful as a procedure for understanding what is going on here. He writes in *The Logical Epic*:

Any particular subject can be made into many different sorts of poem. So if a poem has a thesis it can also have a controversy. This opens up an interesting field to the logically minded poet who, as Milton did, likes a quarrel. A tactic of differentiation was made possible, and the adoption of this in *Paradise Lost* is crucial to the nature of the poem. It quite consciously rejects the wrong sort of system, and this rejected system, with its own ideology and literary theory, plays a radical part in the development of the argument. It is quite explicitly and deliberately written into the poem and belongs to the world of Hell.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Maureen Quilligan, *Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* (Ithaca, 1983) p. 237 formulates it 'her punishment is not merely to bear children in pain, but to (re)submit to her husband's will.'

34 Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*, p. 4.

35 Landy, *op. cit.* 4.

36 Dennis H. Burden, *The Logical Epic*, pp. 57-8.

This is particularly appropriate if we see the crucial passage of book IV as mediated through Satan's observations, and not narratorial.

And Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic model is also applicable. We have here 'the image of another's language and outlook on the world . . . simultaneously represented and representing' in the way Satan's world view is expressed in Satanic language - the seeming inequality, the seeming lordship, the declared absolutism, the implied subjection. Bakhtin's analysis of the way Pushkin 'represents Onegin's "language" (a period-bound language associated with a particular world view) as an image that speaks' is relevant to Milton's practice with Satan's language here:

the author is far from neutral in his relationship to this image: to a certain extent he even polemicalizes with this language, argues with it, agrees with it (although with conditions), interrogates it, eavesdrops on it, but also ridicules it, parodically exaggerates it, and so forth - in other words, the author is in a dialogical relationship with Onegin's language; the author is actually *conversing* with Onegin. . .<sup>37</sup>

But why is it all so ambiguous? In a legalistic episode of judgement and punishment, we might have expected clarity and scrupulous unambiguity. Yet ambiguity permeates the episode, as it does the whole expression of sexual equality.

The assertion of women's equality was contentious in the seventeenth century as it is today. The moves towards freedom and equality for women had scandalized the ruling classes: Clarendon expresses his horror at women and the lower orders preaching in church<sup>38</sup> But Milton is not only writing about gender equality. He is writing about something that was much more revolutionary and subversive: equality, human equality. This was a truly subversive doctrine, and its developing expression in the late 1640s had provoked the full repression of the bourgeois revolutionary state. The Levellers, the Diggers and such like were extirpated with a fervor never applied to extirpating royalists.

As Christopher Hill continues to remind us, 'Milton wrote under censorship, and was himself a marked man, lucky not to have been hanged, drawn and quartered in 1660. Two of his books were burnt. So he had to be very careful how he said things he wanted to say.'<sup>39</sup> Assertions

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<sup>37</sup> 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse' in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (ed.), Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981), pp. 45, 46. Bakhtin's model would place *Paradise Lost* as an example of novelistic, rather than epic, discourse.

<sup>38</sup> Edward, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England*, volume 3 (Oxford, 1704) p. 32.

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Hill, 'Samson Agonistes Again', *Literature and History* (2nd series) 1 (1990) 24. For a full discussion of the topic see 'Censorship and English Literature' in *The Collected Essays of*

*The Epic in History*

of egalitarianism could only be made carefully and obliquely. Like the assertion that Paradise was communist, that there was no private ownership, also in book IV, it can only be inserted glancingly, in passing, amidst other issues:

Hail wedded love, mysterious law, true source  
Of human offspring, sole propriety  
In Paradise of all things common else. (IV 751-2)

The issue of common ownership emerges in a discussion of human sexuality. Similarly, the issues of sexual equality and 'declared Absolute rule' and 'implied / Subjection' rapidly lead on to 'sweet reluctant amorous delay' and 'those mysterious parts' (IV 311-2). Within one contentious issue, human sexuality, Milton involves another contentious issue, egalitarianism and common ownership.

This is not to undercut the issue of gender equality at all. It is not undercut in the poem. But it is firmly attached to that more inclusive and revolutionary aim of achieving total human equality, of restoring us to that still unregained blissful seat, of liberty without orders and degrees, without discrimination, with all things common.<sup>40</sup>

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Christopher Hill, volume 1, *Writing and Revolution in Seventeenth Century England* (Brighton, 1985), pp. 32-71.

<sup>40</sup> A shorter version of this paper was delivered at the Fourth International Milton Symposium, University of British Columbia, 1991, and published in P.G. Stanwood, (ed.), *Of Poetry and Politics: New Essays on Milton and His World* (MRTS, Binghamton, N.Y., 1994). Grateful acknowledgment is given to the editor and publisher for this reprint.