

“The Wombe’s Burden”: The Undermining of Female Agency within *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene*

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Abstract

Through their depictions of Eve and Britomart, Milton and Spenser undermine the agency of their female characters and perpetuate and preserve patriarchal values and hierarchy. Britomart, at once a strong martial knight, is undermined by Spenser’s tying of her ultimate purpose and goal to her ability to birth a noble lineage into existence. Milton’s Eve, while being a more positive depiction than her predecessors, is intended to be subservient to Adam and her purpose lies in copulation and procreation. Ultimately, while both texts do give their characters some agency beyond procreation, it is imperative to recognize the historical degradation of women to wombs, and how this still affects women to the modern-day.

Keywords: Renaissance, Milton, Spenser, Paradise Lost, Faerie Queene

In *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, Spenser and Milton paradoxically both perpetuate and challenge the sexist preconceptions of the Renaissance era. While both authors do seem to portray female characters with slightly more agency than their contemporaries, there is still much to be desired. This is particularly true when analyzing Spenser’s female hero, Britomart, and Milton’s highly debated Eve. While Britomart does twist the common “male-knight-

saves-the-princess” archetype through her search for her love, her overarching purpose is to procreate. In addition, after finding Artegall, she kills another powerful woman, Radigund, in order to reinstate male authority and hierarchy. As Sheila Cavanaugh states in her book, “throughout most of the epic, [Britomart] dresses like man, interacts with women as though she were male, and only rarely acknowledges her sex and gender--most notably when she

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acquiesces to patriarchal prerogatives by deposing Radigund and then relinquishing her own power as soon as possible" (139). A similar undermining of female agency is found within Eve's portrayal in *Paradise Lost*. As noted by James Turner in "The Aesthetics of Divorce," *Paradise Lost* portrays an "unresolvable clash of two ideologies of gender—the ecstatic-egalitarian and the patriarchal-masculinist" (51). This is evident in the paradoxical portrayal of Eve. Some critics, such as Kristin Pruitt, Deidre McChrystal, and Diane McColley, claim that Adam and Eve are equal through their mutuality and reciprocity. However, this supposed equality in hierarchy comes at the expense of Eve's agency; when she does attempt to assert her own agency, she is punished and told once again to obey her husband. Ultimately, Spenser and Milton undermine the agency of their female characters, Britomart and Eve, through the preservation and perpetuation of patriarchal values and hierarchy.

While Britomart exhibits female power through her superior strength, this strength is only made possible through her disguised femininity and outward "maleness." Britomart enters book three with a denotation of power. Before we are even told her name, Britomart's power is asserted when she knocks down Sir Guyon: "They bene ymet, and both their points arrived, / But Guyon drove so furious and fell" (iii.i.6.1-2). However, this strength is quickly undermined through the depiction of Britomart's spear: "that spear enchanted was, which layd thee on the greene" (iii.i.7.9). Mary Villeponteux notes that at this point we are told that "Britomart is literally invincible because she wields a potent magic spear—a powerful phallic symbol that at the same time connotes her woman's chastity" (54). Through this, Britomart's power stems from a male source, undermining her own independent feminine strength and excusing her victory over Sir Guyon. In addition, Britomart dons male-coded armor: "and on his arme addresse his goodlt shield / that bore a Lion passant in a golden field" (iii.i.4.8-9). As noted by Judith Anderson, the armor belonged to Queen Angela, but "is coded male in Spenser's culture, as is evident whenever Britomart encounters a knight with her visor down and in the Castle of Malecasta even with her visor up" (76). Britomart's fashioning herself with male-coded armor and spear could be a way in which she is able to first equate herself to the level of the men and monsters she will be fighting. Anderson notes that she "has to start somewhere" (78) on her quest, so this adoption of male-garb and weapon may in fact be a way the Britomart asserts her dominance over male authority. While this can be read as a tool of empowerment for Britomart, the speed at which Britomart's success is reined in by the notion that she defeated Guyon with an invincible magic spear, not her own physical power, seems to indicate otherwise. Thus, while Spenser does attribute strength to Britomart's character, he is also careful to temper her strength by affixing it to male-coded iconography. It is through this that Spenser undercuts Britomart's true agency as an independent female character;

it is not necessarily through her own strength that she is able to succeed, but through the male artifacts she implements.

The lives of both Eve and Britomart are piloted by male guides, showing their lack of agency over their situations. For instance, while Britomart does assert her agency by searching for her love, her quest itself was initiated by a male figure. After Glauce is unable to cure Britomart's lovesickness with medicine, the two decide to seek help from a male adviser. Cavanaugh notes that this "illustrates the futility of 'female' solutions to Britomart's injuries" and "suggest[s] that help could only emanate from the male realm" (149). It is from Merlin that Britomart receives her quest to find and marry Artegall: "The streight course of heavenly destiny, / Led with eternall providence, that has / Guided thy glauce, to bring his will to pas: / Ne is thy fate, ne is thy fortune ill, / to love the prowest knight, that ever was" (iii.iii.24.3-5). The fact that Britomart's guidance comes from a man, rather than her own searching, illustrates the overarching power and control of men. Furthermore, Villeponteux notes that "[Merlin] follows with the exhortation, 'Therefore submit thy wayes unto his will'—coupling the charge to fulfill her destiny with a charge to submit" (63). Through this, it is evident that Britomart's own power to fulfill her destiny comes with the caveat of submission to a man. Overall, it is through male instruction and submission that Britomart will fulfill her quest, which undermines her own independence and agency.

In a similar way, Eve's life and actions are steered by Adam. During their time in Eden, Adam is not depicted as enforcing Eve's obedience towards him. In fact, he is the one who allows his love for Eve to drive him to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. McChrystal notes that "[w]hile the hierarchy presented in Book 4 distinguishes difference between female and male...the difference is not based on power or oppression" (505). She further states that even though Eve "yields to Adam as a guide" he "does not exercise power over her" (505). However, Eve's subservience to Adam is still reiterated numerous times throughout the text. For instance, while Adam worships "God only," Eve is to worship "God in [Adam]" (4.299) which shows that Eve's connection with God himself is ruled by her relationship with Adam. Thus, Eve must rely on her relationship with Adam to reach God. As Turner notes, "[Milton] wants to persuade us that the image shone in them both, but not to the same extent" (47). This imbalance is especially prevalent after the Fall. The Son says to Adam, "Thou didst resign thy manhood and the place / Wherein God set thee 'bove her, made of thee / And for thee, whose perfection far excelled / Hers in all real dignity?" (10.148-151). Here, Milton suggests that, in allowing Eve's freedom, Adam has gone against God's plan and that God intended for Adam to rule over Eve and govern her actions. Furthermore, when telling Eve of her fate after the Fall, The Son further emphasizes her status beneath Adam: "to thy husband's will / Thine shall submit: he over thee shall rule" (10.195-196). Here, it is further evident that

Eve is meant to be below Adam, regardless of Adam's feelings of equality and mutuality towards her. Thus, although Eve is granted some freedom and not forced into submission by Adam, Eve is intended to maintain a subservient position to Adam's male dominance.

Though Eve and Britomart portray intelligence and virtue in other ways, in the end, their importance is reduced to their sexual fertility and ability to procreate. The true purpose of Britomart's quest is to procreate with Artegall and begin the historical lineage that leads to Queen Elizabeth. When she meets Merlin, he tells her of this fate: "From thy wombe a famous Progenie Shall spring, out of the auncient Trojan blood" (Spenser iii.iii.22.5-6). Villeponteaux notes that "Britomart is destined to marry, and in history her importance will lie not so much in her martial prowess as in her 'wombe's burden'" (54). As such, Britomart inevitably fulfills her destiny through submitting to a man, which seemingly contrasts her dominant pursuit of Artegall in Book III. Through tying Britomart's overall importance to her ability to reproduce, Spenser undermines his own powerful female character. While Britomart may have the power to pursue Artegall herself and realize her destiny, this destiny is bound to her fertility. Tying a woman's agency and power to their fertility is a harmful notion that equates female worthiness to their ability to procreate. Furthermore, as Harvey notes, "Spenser's representations of sexualized or virginal bodies reflect the larger cultural problematic of female power" (102). *The Faerie Queene* encapsulates the importance of familial lineage and genealogical purity during the Renaissance Era wherein female sexuality was heavily policed and scrutinized. Thus, what is shown to be truly important about Britomart is whether or not she relinquishes her power to a male when needed, to take up her "proper" place as a wife and mother.

Similarly, Eve's true purpose for existence is to have sex with, and procreate with, Adam. When Adam asks God to make him a companion, he asks for someone "mutual in proportion" (8.385) so that he might "hold converse" with (8.407). However, after Eve's creation, it is revealed that Adam's true initial intent was to find someone to copulate with. The first thing Adam does when Eve wakes is not to simply converse with her, as he had claimed the wanted, but rather, he convinces her to copulate with him, solidifying the intention of Eve's creation:

I followed her: she what was Honor knew
 And with obsequious Majesty approved
 My pleaded reason. To the nuptial bow'r
 I led her blushing like the Morn. (8.508-511)

Furthermore, it is evident that this was Eve's intended purpose through her depiction as a "gift." Pruitt claims, in support of Milton's characterization of Eve, that "[Eve] is Adam's 'likeness,' his 'other self,' but she is also 'heaven's last best gift' and the benevolence is all God's, the surprise and

benefit all Adam's" (33). Though Pruitt's intent is to argue Eve's significance within the epic, this actually thoroughly portrays the undermining of her agency. Describing Eve as a "gift" given to Adam for his "benefit" is to suggest that she is an object created for Adam's use. While she does seemingly develop beyond this, it does not take away from the fact that Milton portrays her as an object created for Adam's pleasure. According to Turner, Adam "is to go out into the real world, to study furiously, to fight for religion's sake; but it is hard for him to be 'intense' all of the time, so he needs to slip home once in a while for a little sensous relaxation—'slackening his cords' as Milton puts it" (49). This shows how Milton's Adam reveals a harmful expectation of women: that they are to be used as a sexual release for the man in the relationship. Finally, although Eve is given the final lines of the epic, these lines further reduce her purpose to procreation. Pruitt claims that these lines are Milton's way of giving Eve importance: "Eve leaves the garden and the text as regenerate woman and ennobled character. After all, to her belonged the last God-inspired dream and the final spoken words of *Paradise Lost*" (ix). However, these final words are "be mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore" (12.623), showing that it is not Eve herself that will restore all, but her reproductive organs. Thus, these last lines do quite the opposite of what Pruitt claims. Rather than ennobling Eve as a character, these lines reiterate her true purpose pre- and post-Fall, to copulate with Adam and produce offspring.

Despite their perceived individualism, both Eve and Britomart are used to reassert patriarchal power and control. Though Spenser highlights the powerful women of ancient times in the proem of book two, he subverts this in book five through Britomart's killing of Radigund. Spenser claims in the proem that there once were many powerful women that were taken down by men who envied their power:

By records of antique times I find,
 That women wont in warres to eare most
 sway,
 And to all great exploits them selves inclind:
 Of which they still the gurlond bore away,
 Till envious Men fearing their rules decay
 Gan coyne streight lawes to curb their
 liberty. (iii.ii.2.1-6)

However, despite claiming this in support of powerful women, Spenser does exactly as the "envious Men" do by using Britomart to kill Radigund. As Cavanaugh points out, by killing Radigund, a strong Amazonian female leader, "Britomart ensures that female rule will not continue in that kingdom" (169). In addition, it is after she "reaffirms male hierarchy" in this moment that "Britomart disappears from the poem" (170), showcasing how her purpose within the text—ending female leadership—has now been fulfilled. Harvey also supports this reading, noting that Spenser is using Britomart to "[reaffirm] the lessons of patriarchy"

(107). Thus, it is through the creation and subsequent dismantling of the authority of his strong female characters that Spenser suggests that powerful women must not be too powerful to pose a threat to male dominance.

Like Britomart's reassertion of male-rule, Eve's accepted subjection to Adam and male-authority reasserts patriarchal societal rules. Though Milton's Eve does have more agency than her previous depictions, it is no coincidence that Satan manipulates her by targeting her inferiority to Adam. Eve is not satisfied by her inferior position, nor should she be. Milton, however, reinforces the fact that Eve should be satisfied with her position through the entirety of the epic. Acceptance of what one is given in a recurring theme throughout *Paradise Lost*, as shown repeated through Raphael's teachings to Adam. Thus, it is clear that Eve's acceptance of her place within the heavenly hierarchy is intended. This is furthered in book ten when Eve falls to Adam's feet: "now at his feet submissive in distress, / Creature so fair his reconciliation seeking" (10.942-943). Pruitt notes that, "her act is the antithesis of his rejection, her submission posture the opposite of his superior, faithless stance" (69). Pruitt further claims that through this action Eve "quite literally shows Adam a pattern of submission, self-sacrifice, and love, and in doing so, she fulfills her role as his "other self" (69). While Pruitt uses this example to show Eve's humbleness and virtue in submission, I argue that it is problematic that her singular role is to be submissive and self-sacrificing for Adam. While Adam is shown to have done wrong by sacrificing himself to remain with Eve, this is simply Eve's role that she is supposed to fulfil. Rather than being a figure of agency, enacting her own power, she only becomes the way she is intended when she falls into a submissive state towards Adam and takes all of the guilt upon herself. Though it may be virtuous to humbly admit her wrong-doings, the fact that it must be Eve who lowers herself to a state of submission in order to fulfill her intended role in the hierarchy, is demeaning of women. Furthermore, in the latter two books, Eve does finally accept her place within the hierarchy, shown through her acknowledging her role as the bearer of "Promis'd Seed" (Milton 12.623). It is through this notion that Eve is only doing right when submitting herself to Adam and her role as a child-bearer, that Milton re-establishes Eve's submissive role and reinstates the patriarchal hierarchy of heaven.

Dismissing the cases of injustice towards female characters in these works would be ignoring the work that both authors do put into attempting to give their female characters any agency at all. While Milton and Spenser may have been attempting to combat some of the injustices faced by women during their times, they still perpetuate many of the stereotypes that plague women even to this day. Whether it be through the male-guidance that the women of these texts must rely on, or the overarching notion that female worthiness and accomplishment is tied to their fertility, both Spenser and Milton undermine any agency

they set out to give Britomart and Eve. It is through these representations of these female characters that issues still prevalent today are revealed. This idea is illustrated by Nigerian feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man" (13:00-13:14). This is what the characterizations of Britomart and Eve amount to: providing women with some agency, but not enough to threaten the authority of the men around them. It is "because we are female" that we are "expected to aspire to marriage" (Adichie 14:07-14:11). Like Britomart, we are supposed to seek out marriage, to find a man to settle down with and begin a family. Like Eve, we are supposed to be intelligent enough for men like Adam to converse with, but also eager to submit to his demands. We can praise Spenser for dressing a female knight in male armor, but we forget that she is ironically left without any defense against the patriarchal systems that oppress her autonomy. We can commend Milton for the mutuality in Adam and Eve's relationship but forget that to her "husband's will" she "shall submit" (10.195-196).

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