"Which way shall I fly/Infinite wrath and infinite despair?": Double-Talk and Double-Meaning in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is widely considered one of the greatest pieces of classical literature in existence, which is just short of surprising given its density and ambiguous language. In fact, Milton's use of double negatives, stretches in logic, and conjunctions bring to Milton's verse a level of equivocation matched only, perhaps, by John Donne's. Of course, *Paradise Lost* is set thousands of years before Milton's lifetime, but facets of seventeenth century English sociopolitical, religious, and even economic structures can be seen represented in Milton's Eden. Most prominent, perhaps, are the gendered representations of divinity, which at first appear to be in line with the male-dominated social structures of the 17th century, but fall apart under closer inspection of the equivocal language. At the same time, both Adam and Eve engage with astronomical debates, which are representative of certain prominent 17th century narratives concerning Baconian philosophy. Whether Milton supports this Baconian concept of dominating nature for the sake of improving humanity's stature in the universe is a mystery though, largely because of the clearly contradictory logic that Milton employs. The tortured logic and ambiguous constructions are so widely and uniformly used throughout *Paradise Lost* that to attribute them to mere happenstance or historical uncertainty is to miss their point entirely. Milton obviously refrains from offering up clear views on the subjects represented in *Paradise Lost*, but he often does not present dichotomies either, contrary to how the conjunction constructions may at first appear; Milton presents possibilities, but does not preclude alternate interpretations. Milton does not present *Paradise Lost* as a subversive text masquerading as a masterful dramatization of the Genesis story, glorifying and justifying 17th century European philosophies in a biblical context.

Rather, *Paradise Lost* acts as an interrogative text, never claiming to have the answer, yet certainly destabilizing the dominant discourses of Milton's time.

Paradise Lost is, of course, Milton's retelling of the Genesis narrative, but the ambiguous language that he uses to present the age-old story leaves a great deal up to reader interpretation, especially in relation to Eve's status in the divine hierarchy. Milton's use of logical (or, perhaps, illogical) constructions like double negatives and equivocating conjunctions engenders a sense of mystery and hinders any attempt to parse out a true meaning. Most telling is the use of what Dr. Peter C. Herman calls the Miltonic "Or," in instances like the dialogue on astronomy during which Eve leaves Adam and the archangel Raphael to their discussion in favor of working in the Garden because she "not with such discourse/Delighted or not capable her ear/Of what was high" (Milton VIII.48-50). The importance of the Miltonic "Or" goes beyond flippant presentation of two possibilities due to the fact that it "in and of itself complicates or deconstructs the notion of stable binary opposition because the word can mean *both* similarity as well as difference" (Herman 184). The aforementioned passage from *Paradise Lost* includes no textual evidence to help determine whether Eve is simply bored or is incapable of understanding Adam and Raphael's discussion, and nothing precludes both assumptions from being true. In fact, there are any number of possibilities, not least of which assumes that the two "not"s of the passage act as a double negative, suggesting that Eve's ear is not not capable of understanding their discussion. Herman engages with this quandary in part by recognizing that "[i]f Milton uses 'or' to conflate difference, then he also uses 'or' to provide a choice between different items but without indicating a preference between them," but even this application of the Miltonic "Or" assumes that one of the options must be correct, even if the narrator or the reader cannot know it (Herman 185). To go a step further than Herman's assessment of the Miltonic "Or," though, if the use of

"or" does not specify a preferred option, then it also cannot preclude either option from being wrong, and not only could the use of "or" mean "and," but also "neither." In this case, even if "[h]er husband the relater she preferred," it does not necessarily mean that Eve is somehow less willing to or capable of understanding the astronomical discourse than Adam (Milton VIII.52); the only conclusion that can be solidly drawn is what is given explicitly in the text: Eve would rather hear the discussion from Adam with his "[g]rateful digressions and solv[ing] high dispute/With conjugal caresses" (VIII.55-56). While it may seem like a small logical jump to assume that Eve's preference of Adam's caresses over heady, heavy conversation is an indication of inferiority, it is a logical jump nonetheless. By filling the verses of *Paradise Lost* with similar constructions, Milton creates a labyrinth of seemingly innocuous religious and political discourse, but when these constructions are not excused as a mere lack of certainty in the faux-historical account of the Genesis narrative, the subversive nature of the text can be recognized and analyzed.

The creation of Eve is often a point of contention for those concerned with gender equality, mostly because there are multiple interpretations of the event's implications. One of the more popular, misogynistic interpretations of Eve's creation is that because she was "of Man/Extracted," and therefore derivative of Adam, she is a step further from God in the hierarchy of creation than he is (Milton VIII.496-7). If Eve is simply a cheap imitation of man, molded solely from a rib, though, then it suggests that Adam's parts are not as perfect as their sum, or even that God's power of creation is not ineffable after all. Another camp focuses on the fact that Eve must have be equal to Adam due to the fact that she was created in direct response to Adam's request to have a partner of comparable intellect created because "Among unequals what society/Can sort, what harmony or true delight" (VIII.383-384). In true Miltonian fashion,

both, one of, or neither of these assumptions could be correct, but they are not the only plausible conclusions which could be drawn from these passages. The text resists the reader and routinely reaches what Neil D. Graves calls states of “exegetical aporias,” or areas where analysis becomes impossible due to the text’s contradictory constructions, by utilizing widely understood symbols in unconventional ways, and drawing “associations [that] are merely faint echoes, discernible but subtle" (Graves 174; 178). While not so subtle, the associations between Adam and Eve’s power dynamic, and the 17th century microcosmic familial power dynamic are certainly discernible. This aporia is arrived at because the conclusion that the text is misogynistic and reflective of the dominant gender discourse of the period that “both/Not equal as their sex not equal seemed” is only as valid as any other reading, even one that concludes that, in fact, the gender hierarchy is merely a social construction, because “Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,/Godlike erect with native honor clad/In naked majesty, seemed lords of all” (Milton IV.295-6; 287-290). This aporia does not allow for either of these conclusions, or any other that one might attempt to reach, to be irrefutable, but this does not mean that the text lacks meaning. Rather, the inability to conclusively analyze the text acts as its own form of subversion, denying the infallibility of the concrete, dogmatic social dynamics of the era.

Similar to Milton’s use of ambiguous language to avoid condemning Eve to inferiority as the prevalent religious dogma of the period demanded, he also contends with Adam’s supposed ineffability. Coinciding with Eve’s departure to perform labor in the Garden, Adam attempts to engage Raphael in conversation about the nature of the cosmos, much like people were engaging in debates on Baconian philosophy during the time of the poem’s writing. Adam responds to Raphael’s instructions to simply admire the cosmos rather than question their inner workings by saying that “God hath bid dwell far off all anxious cares/And not molest us, unless we

ourselves/Seek them with wand'ring thoughts and notions vain" (Milton VIII.185-187). Adam's response suggests that he agrees with Raphael's assessment that it is not humanity's or angel-kind's place to seek higher knowledge and engage in discourse about it, but rather to blindly accept and appreciate these complex workings of the nature of the universe. Adam's initial line of interrogation toward Raphael holds parallels with the Baconian philosophy that was so prominent during the period. Carolyn Merchant makes the claim in her book, *The Death of Nature*, that Baconian philosophy regards nature as though its "womb harbor[s] secrets that through technology could be wrested from her grasp for use in the improvement of the human condition," ("Dominion Over Nature" 169). Of course, Adam lives in the pre-Fall world, which might beg the question as to why Adam would need to improve his condition, but this does not take into consideration the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being places Adam (Man) below angels, who are themselves below God. This hierarchy allows for two tiers of potential betterment in Adam's condition through the technological subjugation of nature which can only be achieved through scientific inquiry. Adam obviously questions Raphael in order to gain new knowledge not bestowed upon him by God, but whether or not Adam truly accepts that pursuits like this are actually vain notions is, and remains, a mystery. The lines that follow do not reveal the veracity of Adam's claims, but rather pose another, that "apt the mind or fancy is to rove/Unchecked and of her roving is no end/Till warned or by experience taught she learn" (Milton VIII.188-190). However, upon closer inspection, this construction is not a claim so much as it is a paradox, given the use of the Miltonic "Or." The mind cannot be capable of fanciful wonderings, or the imaginative conceptualization of an idea, without being capable of their comprehension, and the use of the conjunction "or" suggests also that if the human mind is capable of comprehending these vain notions then it is also naturally inclined to inquire about

them. It follows, then, that if this knowledge has been divinely decreed to be forbidden, or at least outside of Man's provided domain, yet man was given a mind capable of and naturally given to seek this knowledge, then God created a flawed being predisposed to seeking sin in the form of forbidden knowledge. As such, not only is Man's flawless nature called into question, but God's as well not necessarily by condemning the Creation narrative, but simply by allowing for alternate interpretations.

Milton's contention with Baconian philosophy does not only concern Adam's place in the universe, but extends to the gender dynamics of the era. According to Merchant, the investigation of nature is not only an effort to reveal its secrets, but an inquisition of womanhood because "[l]ike wild chaotic nature, women needed to be subdued and kept in their place" ("Nature as Disorder" 132). However, the task of tending the Garden is considered wholesome and good, and is given to both Adam and Eve even though it is often Eve who ends up going off to actually nurture the Garden. Eve is even the one to suggest that they should split their tasks because for all of their work nature "One night or two with wanton growth derides/Tending to wild," and when working together "Looks intervene and smiles or object new/Casual discourse draw on which intermits/[their] day's work brought to little" (Milton X.211-212; 222-4). Eve's own Baconian impulse to tend the Garden and control nature appears to engage with the idea that nature tends toward chaos, and that this chaos should be tamed, which is what Stanley Sultan may call the "traditional assumption." Considering the prevalence of Baconian philosophy in the era it is likely that presenting the expected Baconian rhetoric so blatantly "distracts the readers because it is a conceptual grid that imposes itself on a reader's hermeneutic capability" (Sultan 400). Rather than engender ambiguity through equivocation, Milton's constructions often explicitly reflect the dominant discourse of the era, making the common reader complacent with

the traditional assumptions and skip over the subversive elements of which contradictory constructions like the Miltonic “Or” are usually indicative. The traditional assumption that “the bodily corruption of the male was attributed directly to lust and temptation by the female” is reflected in Eve’s reasoning, but this is quickly deconstructed as the argument progresses (“Nature as Disorder” 133). Eve goes on to ask “How are we happy, still in fear of harm?” and asserts that “harm precedes not sin,” subverting the assumption that if nature or woman are left unchecked then it will lead to sinfulness (Milton IX.326; 327). This construction can be evaluated in multiple ways: doing harm to another is not inherently sinful, being harmed does not necessitate sinful retribution, harm is only a result of sin, and more. The blatant presentation of the traditional assumption straight from Eve’s mouth only obscures the text’s underlying subversion of the idea that it is Man’s place to make sure Woman’s chaos does not consume them both.

Milton goes even further, moving beyond the religious and gender arenas into sociopolitical spheres as he attempts to reconcile Baconian philosophy and its relations to American colonization with pre-Fall, edenic philosophy. Adam’s claim that impulses to further one’s understanding of nature are natural seems to support Baconian philosophy, which was highly concerned with colonialism and the enclosure of public land for private gain, but even this ideology is subtly subverted. Adam readily concedes that his discussion with Raphael is more ideal than performing the labor delegated to him by God, “[f]or while [he] sit[s] with [Raphael] [he] seem in Heav’n,” while the archangel’s words “satiate and soon fill [him]” (Milton VIII.209; 214). If Adam feels as though he is able to transcend Eden and reach a Heaven-like state by hearing the angel’s advice (for as perfect as Eden may be, the kingdom of God is inherently more divine), then it would appear that the Baconian argument is abandoned, and the

narrative endorses the claim that nature should be left untainted by human intervention and domination. However, Adam turns right around and blatantly contradicts his own claims to acceptance of Raphael's anti-Baconian ideology. The angel's "words with grace divine/Imbued bring to their sweetness no satiety" (Milton VIII.214-216). This quick, contradictory reversal paints the edenic philosophy as another flight of fancy, one that may be theoretically sound, but practically infeasible or even impossible given human nature. In Merchant's other work, *Reinventing Eden*, she notes that during the colonization of the Americas dominant discourse equated the new land with Eden, but this framework was problematized by the fact that the Americas were already inhabited by indigenous peoples. The competing discourses set the stage for conflict between "the New World Eden [being] a bountiful land to be entered and enjoyed," and a land with "the potential to become a new paradise, but requir[ing] 'improvement'" ("Adam as Hero" 96). If the two discourses are reconciled, and the land is already edenic, then wiping out the indigenous people would improve the Americas, elevating the "New World" to a state superior to Eden itself, a task similar to Adam's as he seeks to gain intellectual dominion over the Garden. The problem remains, though, of how Raphael's words can both satiate *and* not satiate; this contradiction does not necessarily beg an answer, but rather suggests a duality in nature, much like the duality implied by the Miltonic "Or." Milton is able to subvert the dominant Baconian rhetoric by admitting it is further from natural divinity than a commons-based edenic philosophy, but equivocates by also stating that it is impractical to live in that edenic way while it is only in human nature to act on Baconian impulses.

However, Adam is not the only character in *Paradise Lost* to express the idea that one's state is improvable through the collection of knowledge and domination of nature. The Baconian rhetoric expressed by Adam when questioning Raphael is echoed by Satan in Book X, when he

laments, “O Earth! how like to Heav’n if not preferred/More justly” (Milton X.99-100). Satan situates Earth as being *more* ideal than Heaven, accusing God himself of engaging with Baconian philosophy, utilizing his mastery of what he learned during the creation of Heaven to create a “seat worthier of gods as built/With second thoughts reforming what was old./For what god after better worse would build?” (X.100-1). The traditional assumption of why Satan’s indictment is contradictory to Adam’s earlier line of questioning may be that Satan’s logic, juxtaposed with Adam’s, is twisted and tortured, but the only difference between the two is which plane is being touted as more divine, and in fact even more clearly reflects the New World Eden philosophy. Satan approves of the Baconian methods that Adam fantasizes about and God has utilized, almost appearing envious that the task has already been undertaken by God before he could twist it to his own desires. This small disagreement between the two arguments is pedantic at best because they share the same means to different ends. According to Graves, it is typical of Milton to equate Satan with good characters, forcing the reader to distinguish between the possibilities that the comparisons are emphatically ironic, or that the comparisons are severely limited. However, Graves also notes that these “interpretations are contradictory, and the reader must choose between them, which suggests that neither mode is fully satisfactory” (180). This, of course, leads to an exegetical aporia, but only insofar as one assumes trickery or stylistic subterfuge on Milton’s part. It is entirely possible that Milton’s comparisons “are not restricted or ironic in nature, but are in fact fully intended comparisons” rather than hermeneutically strangling the reader by defending the traditional, orthodox assumption (Graves 190). By attributing Baconian impulses to Adam, Satan, *and* God, Milton decimates the binary construction of good and evil, Fallen and not. Adam placates God by saying that “Thou in Thyself art perfect and in thee/Is no deficience found,” yet he immediately asserts that “Not so is

Man/But in degree, the cause of his desire…No need that Thou/Shouldst propagate" (VIII.415-419). In this case, God cannot be the ineffable, omniscient, and omnipotent Creator of Man and have created Man with a desire unknown to or unintended by Him. No matter what avenue of analysis is accepted, it is impossible to assert with any degree of certainty that Adam's desire to act in a Baconian fashion to twist Earth into a better state is any more divine than Satan's desire to do the same.

Paradise Lost is a text that refuses to be limited by the traditional assumptions which are so clearly reflected in the text. The Genesis story arc remains intact, but the language used to present these supposedly historical events subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the sociopolitical structures that stem from this biblical narrative. Clearly contradictory constructions are too often glossed over during analysis as mere indicators of inadequacies in the biblical account, but the use of elements like the Miltonic "Or" suggests intentional resistance of any single textual interpretation. However, rather than present a binary alternative, the text to tends toward exegetical aporias, not allowing for any sort of definitive analysis, but certainly allowing for alternate interpretations to the traditional. These disputations of prevalent Baconian philosophy and allowance for an egalitarian gender dynamic are masterfully buried under the complex contradictory constructions of the poem. The tightly controlled dogma of the era makes the equivocation and subversion all the more necessary, especially when questioning the ineffability of both God and Man. Rather than focus on Satan as the evil tempter of Mankind, or God as their perfect Creator, Milton contends with the blasphemous notion that, perhaps, Man is just Man.

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