Essay Question #5

In Joost van den Vondel's controversial play *Lucifer*, Rebellious Angels revolt against God and his alleged tyranny. A primary catalyst for this rebellion is Gabriel's message about Man. Not only is Man to be "Preferred to Angels" and eventually "shown / A path to splendour equalling God's own" (Vondel 16), but he is also given a special gift: Eve. As a woman, Eve evokes jealousness in the Rebellious Angels and desire in Adam; she is subjugated to be an inferior object *until* she boldly eats the forbidden fruit. In this essay, I examine Eve's pre- and postlapsarian levels of autonomy. By using a feminist lens as my framework, I read against negative interpretations that position Eve as a fallen temptress and show how she successfully revolts against her lack of freedom.

Before Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit, Eve is portrayed subserviently as the "missing piece" of the superior Adam. In Act One, Apollion exclaims, "They're a perfect pair, from head to toe! / If Adam wears the crown, its rightly so […] / And Eve is shaped all his desires to meet" (Vondel 15). As "wearer of the crown" and "god-like [ruler of earth]" (Vondel 14), Adam is distinguishable based upon his own abilities. On the other hand, Eve is visible only in her relation to Adam and male desire in general. This is particularly emphasized in Apollion's description of Eve: she is

> Tender of limb, soft hair, expression sweet,
> Fair skin and eyes, alluring and profound.
> Her lovely lips breath forth a charming sound;
> Her breasts, twin towers of ivory! (Vondel 15)

A similar level of physical objectification can be seen in Adam's first sexual interaction with Eve. Right before the two have sex, "Adam made a pause, [and] / Gazed upon Eve – which study seemed to cause / A sacred fire to kindle in his breast" (Vondel 14). In essence, she is

the first object of the male gaze and seemingly exists to satisfy sexual urges Adam cannot fulfill on his own.

Since Eve is to help Adam achieve that which he cannot do on his own, she must also carry *his* children (not *their* children). Of this, Apollion says, "The whole wide world with Men will soon be creeping, / Rich crops of souls from human seedlets reaping: / And that's the reason God gave Man a Wife!" (Vondel 14). As a depersonalized vessel, Eve's value is again evaluated only in her relation to Adam; she is to carry his children and, notably, assist in *male* proliferation. In Apollion's statement, Adam and Eve's future daughters are conspicuously left out. The envisioned future – by God, Adam, and the Angels – is clearly *male*, and females will continue to be implicitly valued according to how well they help "fulfill" male desires.

Ironically, the Rebellious Angels do not see any similarity between their situation with God and Eve's situation with Adam. Just as Eve is described subserviently to Adam, so are the Rebellious Angels described to God. Nevertheless, some see Eve as a covetous object. In his jealousy of Adam, Apollion laments,

> We're poorly off, alone and celibate –
> Denied the joys of sex, the married state;
> Deprived of consort, starved of loving tryst:
> Some heaven, this – where women don't exist!" (Vondel 14)

Rather than perceive Eve as an autonomous individual, Apollion sees her according to *his* sexual yearning (and the lack of its fulfillment).

However, a key turning point for Eve is in the garden with Belial. This is the first moment in the play where someone actually speaks directly to her. Adam and Apollion have gazed at her, objectified her, and stolen her autonomy; God is said to have created her *for* man's desires; and none of them – including God – have actually spoken with her. While

Belial clearly wants her to eat the forbidden fruit, he provides her with some honest insight about it: eating it will not kill her ("No venom lurks in this immortal Tree"); she will exist in the world differently after eating it ("you'll see / That all things differ - nature, type and form"); and God will probably be angry if she eats it ("He may resent it") (Vondel 67). Interestingly, Belial – and all other Rebellious Angels – never explicitly admit that they want to see *her* demise via the forbidden fruit. As Lucifer says, "my aim is – Adam and his offspring to destroy!" (Vondel 66).

By eating the fruit, Eve develops a stronger sense of autonomy. She is not commanded by Adam to eat it and instead follows her own growing desires. Additionally, Eve is said to eat the fruit *with* Adam, suggesting that he is standing there by her during the conversation with Belial. There is no indication that she forces him to eat it, but nevertheless, he does. As "fallen," Eve thus demonstrates a developing sense of dominance over Adam; in a reversal of roles, she is taking initiative and he is following *her* desires.

Though there is an initial sense of anxiety following their new state of enlightenment (such as feelings of shame, guilt, and fear), Eve is still able to demonstrate independence when confronted by God. As Adam tries to blame her (and God still refuses to directly address her), she defends herself by shifting the blame to Belial. In shifting the blame, this is also the first time we hear Eve's voice; another development in her new sense of self-autonomy. Of course, the Angels seem quite distraught by all that is happening – quite possibly because of how it has disrupted the power relations between man and woman. In an effort to diminish Eve's new position, she is blamed and disciplined with two punishments: birth-pangs and subjection to man. But the latter of the two is nothing new –

Eve's prelapsarian existence was one of submission to Adam; at least now she has a developing sense of autonomy and self-identity outside of him.

Alongside this, the children of Adam and Eve are no longer identified only as Adam's. After eating the Apple, Adam and Eve's future children are referred to as *their* offspring. At the end of the play, the Chorus even sings of "Eve's Children" (Vondel 69), a label that she did not explicitly have before the Fall. Eve has gained a sense of selfhood for herself and her future daughters in eating the forbidden fruit.

The idea of rebellion plays a major theme throughout *Lucifer*. By using a feminist framework to approach this play, I have attempted to show Eve's heroic-like revolt against the patriarchal tyranny of God and Man. Before eating the fruit, Eve is depicted as an inferior object that can only find identity in Adam. After the Fall, when she eats the forbidden fruit out of her own desire, she experiences a new sense of empowerment and agency. By focusing on revolt as it relates to Eve and her journey to selfhood, I believe this play allows for a reading in which she is praised rather than shamed as a temptress.

Works Cited

Vondel, Joost van Den. *Lucifer*. Translated by Noel Clark, Oberon Books, 2012.