Serpentine Eve: Milton and the Seventeenth-Century Debate Over Women

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While debates about Milton’s representation of women have assumed a significant place within Milton criticism in the last two decades, it is remarkable that there has been such slight attention to the influence of the “anti-feminist” pamphlet debate on Milton’s representation of Eve, the Fall, and his ideas about gendered culpability in *Paradise Lost*.1 Mary Nyquist has suggested that “Milton could not but have known that questions of priority figure prominently in the Renaissance debate over ‘woman’” (107), while Kari McBride and John Ulreich suggest that Milton be read “in the light of early modern treatises on the nature of women and the entire history of the *querelle des femmes*” (109). Yet little critical consensus exists on Milton’s likely or probable exposure to the texts within this tradition, a debate very active in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries if less popular by the time *Paradise Lost* is published.2 Nor have either Nyquist or McBride and Ulreich suggested that Milton was an active interlocutor of this tradition. And yet, Milton’s poem appears deeply steeped in the terms of this debate, especially questions of women’s secondariness, Eve’s motivations for the Fall, and of course the character of women.3

Given the critical caution about whether this body of texts was drawn into a conversation with *Paradise Lost*, this essay’s central claim may appear bold: the seventeenth-century “anti-feminist” debates, particularly the exchange between Joseph Swetnam and three women pamphleteers who respond (Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda) produce arguments for and against the culpability of women that Milton dramatizes within *Paradise Lost*. Such an assertion lacks the smoking gun that would clinch such a claim: a copy of Rachel Speght’s *Mouzell for Melastomus* in Milton’s library, for example. Yet we have every reason to conclude that Milton would have been among a community of readers of these or similar tracts: himself an author engaged in the Smectymnuus debate in the early 1640s, Milton was an avid reader of a huge range of texts, as well as a participant within print-mediated debates of the period. Milton also was fully located within what Robert Darnton has called the communication circuit of the “anti-feminist” tracts. Marching about amid the booksellers’s stalls in the 1630s, Milton details in a letter to Alexander Gill, Jr., that Gill is to “look for me (God willing) in London on Monday, among the booksellers” (Milton, *Familiar* 12-13). The shop owned by Matthew Simmons, which Sabrina Baron claims Milton would have known well, was located in Aldersgate; it was on the other side of Christ’s Church from the very “Saracen’s Head” where copies of Joseph Swetnam’s “Arraignment” were reprinted in both 1634 and 1637.4 A revolution of printing and of reprinting framed Milton’s world, and Milton was fully a member of this world, both as a reader and as a participant.5
Milton, then, had every opportunity to engage and access the world of pamphlet production in the early and mid-century, a world that continued to generate texts imbued with shifting gender ideologies. The representations of women and the use of the narrative of the Garden of Eden and the Fall within this tradition are very popular early in the century; these strategies of representation will become redirected during the Civil War and Interregnum years, thus remaining available to readers and producers of pamphlets at mid-century. This redeployment of the earlier debate thus carries within it traces of the gender debates from the 1610s and 1620s. Milton would not have had to pick up copies of Speght’s or Sowernam’s responses to Swetnam in order to engage aspects of this tradition. And yet, the unique innovations introduced into the “anti-feminist” debate in the early seventeenth century do appear to shape Milton’s choices in *Paradise Lost*. A consideration of Milton’s possible access to, in conjunction with the history of, this pamphlet tradition can broaden the cultural context through which we evaluate his representations of women and of gender in his epic.

This essay will first illustrate the unique turn that this earlier seventeenth-century pamphlet debate took, one employed by all of the female-pseudonamed responders to Joseph Swetnam: these writers, two who certainly were women and all identifying themselves as women, reconfigure aspects of the “anti-feminist” debate through their retellings of the story of the Fall. Next, it will contextualize aspects of *Paradise Lost* amidst these early seventeenth-century “anti-feminist” defenses that reenacted the story of Eve and the Fall. Because of the centrality of the Genesis tale to defenses of women, these writings share much with a Genesis epic like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Yet these specific tracts, which continue the querelle des femmes tradition, introduce rhetorical and narrative innovations to the story of Genesis. Specific characteristics of the writings of Rachel Speght and Esther Sowernam, especially their association of Eve with the female defender herself, become central elements in Milton’s portrait of Eve. But Milton is not simply dramatizing the qualities that are attributed to Adam and to Eve within these debates: he actually enacts these disagreements within conversations between Adam and Eve and Adam and Raphael.

Plotted along many of the same lines as the “anti-feminist” debate, *Paradise Lost* chooses to employ this genre in a dramatized form. This debate over the role and identity of Eve figures centrally in the arguments between Adam and Eve in Books 9 and 10. While Eve will turn at the end of Book 9 to many of the arguments and language embedded into the “anti-feminist” tracts, in Book 10 the poem will offer a seeming reconciliation to this swirling debate from the early seventeenth century. The larger context of the “anti-feminist” debate of the early seventeenth century thus provides us a way to interpret Adam’s diatribe against Eve, often seen as a moment of character failing in him. Milton turns to this genre—and to the tradition of ideas about women contained within it—in order to transform the contested nature of the debate forum into a singular vision of the relationship between the sexes.

And yet, the appearance of a stock, “anti-feminist” discourse in Book 10 of *Paradise Lost* also highlights the socially created identity—if also the effectiveness—of this form. Dramatically presented as a necessity for Eve to concede to this discourse in Book 10, the poem records the effectiveness of “anti-feminist” rhetoric while exposing its constructedness. The social and political implications of these tracts thus provide a framework for examining the language.
of “anti-feminist” attacks and defenses and Milton’s use of this “debate” in his poem. One significant implication of *Paradise Lost*’s seeming use of the “anti-feminist” scene is the silencing of the female interlocutor who had emerged onto the scene of the “anti-feminist” debate in the early seventeenth century. But, while Milton may represent the convention of silencing Eve, at least within male-authored texts in the “anti-feminist” tradition, he embeds into his poem the very defenses for women promulgated by male- and female-authored tracts alike.

While the direction of this argument appears to agree with the large number of feminist critics arguing for the misogyny implicit within Milton’s poem, the very debate form Milton adapts to *Paradise Lost* challenges such readings: earlier modes of defending women remain in traces within the poem. As a result, Milton’s attempt to stabilize these discourses cannot fully dampen the conflicting positions represented within the earlier debate forum. The result is the very doubledness of the poem, a characteristic that has allowed critics to argue contradictory positions about the representation of women in *Paradise Lost*. The poem’s polyvocal nature is due in part to its engaging the gender debate recorded in the querelle des femmes, a debate transformed in the early seventeenth century by women’s entrance into the fray.

The phrase “anti-feminist debate” has been employed so far in this essay to describe the English tradition of texts arguing for and against the qualities of women. And yet this phrase contains a certain historical inaccuracy. As Linda Woodbridge has suggested, the mid- to late-sixteenth century querelle des femmes in England was actually not structured along the lines of a debate. Defenses were their own form and were not prompted by attacks on women. Further, the conventional arguments for and against women were often employed by the same writer: *The Scholehouse of Women* and its response *Mulierum Paean*, the first an attack, the second a defense, were both penned by Edward Gosynhill. Instead of any genuine debate, then, many attacks and defenses were staging a debate since they were written by the same author.

In the seventeenth century, the structure of an actual publishing debate finally emerges. The publication of Joseph Swetnam’s very popular *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*, prompted five responses—all defenses. Three of these were published by women or under a female name. The reactive nature of the texts produced by, especially, Rachel Speght and Ester Sowernam thus gives the name “debate” validity. This structure, in which respondents specifically generate a defense to Swetnam’s published attack, had not been a driving force for publication previous to 1617 (Woodbridge 104).

As these shifts in the publishing tradition suggest, when women—as Speght definitely was and Sowernam could possibly have been—enter into the fray, their responses, although partaking of many conventions from earlier tracts, become quite serious—in contradistinction to the playful tone of earlier defenses. Whether produced by “material” women, such as Speght, or by men taking on the pseudonym of a woman, this assumption of a female identity in print shifts the character of these discourses. In some cases, an overt level of sincerity emerges within a tract: Rachel Speght means to offer a defense to the “filthie froth” “foamed” onto “Eves sex” within Swetnam’s attack (*Poemis* 243).

In a complementary fashion, the tropes or forms of argumentation employed by these writers shift as a result of self-identifying as female defenders. While the name Ester Sowernam is almost certainly a pseudonym, the specifics within “her”
tract become distinct because of the assertion of a female identity. While there has been some debate about Sowerenam’s biological identity, this essay considers her a woman and argues that the female author position effects similar problems for a writer regardless of biological sexual identity. Thus, such an adoption of an identity in print, either because it accords with one’s sex or not, results in the reconfiguration of certain familiar conventions of the genre. As with tracts before 1617, the responses by Speght, Sowerenam, and Munda invoke the Genesis account of the Fall, as well as an extensive range of biblical narratives. Yet the proportion of their tracts that turns to the story of Adam and Eve becomes significantly higher than either Joseph Swetnam’s attack on women (which includes four references to Eve), or other male-authored defenses of women. In both Speght and Sowerenam’s tracts, the result becomes the narrative of the Fall operating as the first line of defense in protecting women from the attacks of Swetnam and others.

While most scholarship on these defenses by women has focused on the arguments of writers like Speght or Sowerenam, or on their play with conventional rhetoric, no critic has highlighted the two-fold use of the Fall story these writers deploy as a defense. The defenses spend a much higher percentage of time on the narrative of the Fall, utilizing an expanded account of “our first disobedience” to restage aspects of the Fall. These writers understand the structural challenge embedded within a female-authored defense. Women are described as seducers within the tracts attacking women. Thus, in defenses where women are arguing for themselves (or appear to be doing so), they could be viewed as taking on the identity of a seducing Eve. Eve’s arguments had, of course, seduced Adam to fall; consequently, women defenders could be aligned with Eve. Instead, these writers turn this liability to an advantage, appropriating the potential association with the first mother.

Speght and Sowerenam use, even embrace, the identity of Eve in their texts. Their reasons for adopting this role may in fact have been to address the association directly: they could be, disparagingly, viewed as disputing Eves, women attempting to gain forgiveness for their own sins in order to prompt male acceptance of their acts: the consequence would be to generate sin once again. Yet, by aligning themselves with the figure of the postlapsarian Eve—and not a Mary figure—writers like Speght and Sowerenam defend women’s characters as well as justifying their own entrance into print. Barbara Lewalski has suggested that Speght “interprets [the querelle des femmes texts] in such a way as to deny any real basis for gender hierarchy in female nature itself” (165). Both Speght and Sowerenam accomplish this through their portrait of Eve: by entering back into a (prelapsarian) garden space, their Eve-like figure can operate outside of the gender hierarchy uttered after the Fall. Consequently, their version of the defense audibly challenges the social and political implications of gender hierarchy, a subject that Milton responds to in Paradise Lost.

The tropes within Speght’s and Sowerenam’s defenses of Eve will rehabilitate her by effectively undermining Swetnam’s attack: he will be placed amid the story of the Fall itself. The counter-narrative they construct slowly builds toward a much larger rejection of the premises of the “anti-feminist” debate. Speght and Sowerenam begin very generally, suggesting that Swetnam’s attack violates God’s plan. Ultimately, they will position him as a tempter, thus shifting the traditional identity of seducer away from Eve and all women. Their initial response is to attack Swetnam’s
religious piety—in fact to insist on his absence of piety. Their claim that Swetnam's arguments against women are “irreligious” graces the cover of Speght’s defense and occurs within Sowernam’s first chapter (Mouzell title page; Sowernam, 2 [B1v]). In essence accusing Swetnam of heresy, both of their arguments become testimonies to the glories of God’s creation. Sowernam “undertooke this enterprise [. . .] to set out the glory of Almighty God, in so blessed a worke of his Creation” (A3v); more than just defending women, “I am more violently vrged to defend divine Maiestie, in the worke of his Creation” (B1v; my emphasis). Defending Eve is thus accomplished through the larger project of justifying God’s creation of man and woman.

Once they have established the blasphemy that characterizes Swetnam’s argument, female defenders can deploy their more specific strategy for defending and redeeming Eve: distancing her from the popular and longstanding tradition of aligning her with the serpent. In the hands of Speght and Sowernam, the snake is reconfigured into the male pamphleteer, the very seducing force that must be resisted. By redirecting this identity of the snake onto either men or Swetnam himself, the Eve-like figure of the female defender can initiate a reenactment of the narrative of the Fall. Yet this time the story will end differently: she will now reject the arguments of the snake. These tracts consequently combine individual defenses of women with a narrative reworking of the story of the Fall, one that replots the anti-feminist conventions upon which these tracts are built. In Speght, when the serpent is identified as the male detractor of women, Eve is distanced from the epitaph of “earthly Serpent” (Swetnam, E2v). The result? Sowernam and Speght narrate a return to the Garden, offering a vision of a postlapsarian Eve who restages an account of the Fall.

Speght begins to link the misogynistic pamphlet writer to the devil himself by employing the very motifs of the snake against Swetnam. Although the dominant animal image in A Mouzell for Melastomus is Swetnam as a biting dog, the imagery clusters also establish multiple links between him and a snake. In the opening letter, Swetnam is implicitly linked to a snake and a viper by the first reference. In fact, Speght employs this conceit to justify publishing her defense: “as Historiographers report the viper to doe, who in the Winter time doth vomit forth her poyson, and in the spring time sucketh the same up againe” (3), so too will Swetnam: he has threatened to publish another attack, and “a more deadly poyson” from this “viper” must be countered with this “Antidote” (3, 4). As she closes the first letter, Swetnam becomes a “fierie and furious Dragon” (5). Thus Speght establishes a constellation of images—of serpent, viper, and the worm-like image of the dragon—upon which she will draw extensively in the second letter (5). In her prefatory poem to Swetnam, who is described as “venime fowle” (6), the serpent imagery multiplies: “From standing water, which soon putrifies, can no good fish be expected; for it produceth no other creatures but those that are venemous or noisome, as snakes, adders, and such like” (7). Images of filth and disease plague the swamp’s description, now inaugurated as Swetnam’s imaginatively generative space. Speght then proceeds to more explicit images, transforming him into a serpent: “then had you not seemed so like the Serpent Porphirus, as now you doe [. . .] full of deadly poyson” (8). Apparently, it is from Swetnam himself, not just his writings, that readers will need an “Antidote” (4).

This link in Speght’s defense between Swetnam and “snakes, adders, and such like” invokes the narrative of the Fall, a narrative which recalls for the reader Swetnam’s heretical act against God (Mouzell 7). Like Satan, he is offering to all
mankind a temptation to accept his “blasphemous” argument about women’s foulness (8). Once the language of the snake has been established, the connection of Swetnam to the devil can be made explicit: Swetnam becomes an associate of Satan. “Your corrupt Heart and railing Tongue, hath made you a fit scribe for the Divell” (7; my emphasis). Speght continues to paint Swetnam as a mouthpiece for the devil as his remarks are characterized as “this doctrine of Divells” (9). And routinely, Speght equates Swetnam with the devil by recalling the Genesis image of Satan’s entrance into the snake: “Was Sathan crept into thy filthie Pen” (6). Swetnam, whose identity as author is metonymically indicated by “thy filthie Pen,” actually becomes the snake that Satan enters. Possessed by Satan, then, Swetnam takes on the role of the serpent in the story of the Fall. Yet he simultaneously serves as a figure for the devil himself; as a “Seducer of the vulgar sort of men” through his use of this conventional “anti-feminist” language, Swetnam evolves from just a snake, to a figure animated by this devilish power, into the great “Seducer” himself (6). Once he is exposed as a mouthpiece for Satan, Swetnam’s attacks on Eve and all women become radically undercut. Thus, before Speght even offers any defense of women, they have been absolved of the epitaph “earthly Serpents” (Swetnam, E2’), this phrase is now reassigned to the seducing Swetnam.

This sustained association of Swetnam and the serpent effects a reversal of the very convention that Swetnam and others had employed against women. When Swetnam refers to women as “you earthly Serpents,” he invokes a tradition allowing Eve (and women) to be blamed for the Fall because of an elided distinction between Satan and Eve (E2’): when Eve becomes the seductress, she is an “entic-[ing],” “entangl[ing]” figure who is not tricked by the reptilian-shaped Satan, but instead instigates the Fall (D2’; C4’). This projection of the identity of the serpent, and thus of Satan, onto Swetnam protects Eve and all women from this association while the pamphleteer is drawn into the Fall story himself.

While Speght links Swetnam to serpent imagery and then to the devil himself, Sowerman distributes the title of serpents to men more generally. While “The Serpent at first tempted woman, he dare assault her no more in that shape, now he imploiyth men to supply his part” (E1’). Instead, “men” have “turn’d to Serpents” since “The Serpent with men in their workes may agree” (H1’). The “contagion of Masculine serpents” stands in for a figure like Swetnam, although Sowerman does not connect him as explicitly to the serpent as did Speght (Sowerman G4’). Sowerman ends her text with the christening of all men as snakes, although we hear the implications for Swetnam. In her conclusion, she addresses him, asserting that “You haue exceeded in your furie against Wid- dowes,” and she directs him to “recollect your wits, write out of deliberation, not out of furie; write out of aduice, not out of idlenesse: forbear to charge women with faults which come from the contagion of Masculine serpents.” That “con- tagion,” she has shown us, is in fact a disease derived from pamphleteers like Swetnam (G4’).

While both texts defend women through narratives in which Swetnam, or all men, become serpents, they also develop the figure of the defender of women who is positioned analogously to Eve. Sowerman pursues this identification most aggressively. While she defends women, Eve, and God’s actions throughout, Sower- nam’s narrative actually links herself to the figure of Eve. Sowernam claims that she has “entred into the Garden of Paradise, and there have gathered the choyest flowers which that Garden may affoord, and those I offer to you” (A4’). She thus
returns to the story of Eve and Adam in Eden by literally returning to that site. Her goal is to offer an alternate defense through an alternative narrative of the Garden. Sowernam, in positioning herself as a postlapsarian Eve, is able to enter this space in order to make her argument. This fusion of herself with Eve also stands as an inversion of the normal use of Eve, particularly in misogynistic tracts. In the tradition of these tracts, and of misogyny in general, Eve in her act of disobedience, vanity, and pride becomes all women. That link between Eve and women is what Sowernam seizes on: because all women are like Eve, she can assume a position like the first of women. Once that association with Eve allows her access to the Garden, she can then reconfigure women’s identity through her journey back into the Garden.

Sowernam’s rehabilitation of Eve has occurred in large part through her extended identification with the first mother. Sowernam actually reenters the Garden in order to author her defense: “I have entred into the Garden of Paradice, and there haue gathered the choysest flowers which that Garden may afford, and those I offer to you” (A4r). In doing so, she paints herself as a pre-fallen Eve linked with the beauty, even the flowers of the Garden which Milton will have her name in Paradise Lost. Instead of shying away from an identification with Eve, Sowernam embraces this link as she develops the “esse” of all women (B3v); they all become the “choyst flowers.” By embracing an identity with Eve, both for all women but explicitly here for herself, Sowernam restages the narrative of the Garden as a defense of women. Impersonating a postlapsarian Eve, Sowernam’s narrative entrance into this space actually makes her argument.

Sowernam accomplishes this in part by aligning Eve to the Garden through the oft-debated issue of Adam and Eve’s birthplace. Sowernam identifies Eve as “a Paraditian Creature” (A4r) because she was formed in the Garden. Adam, conversely, was made outside of it, and thus—in one tradition of defenses—is less pure. Sowernam expands upon this issue of the birthplace of Eve, an idea then distributed to all women. As we will see, Sowernam transforms the walled boundaries of the Garden into a permeable membrane. In the process, Sowernam makes fluid the boundaries between womankind and this “Paraditian Creature,” Eve. This permeable boundary—both of the Garden’s wall and the association of Eve and all women—allows for this “Paraditian” identity to be transported out of the Garden. Because this “Paraditian” trait was within Eve, the women who follow from her carry this trace of the Garden’s perfection within them. Further, they bring this essence of perfection into all marriages: “there is no delight more exceeding then to be ioyned in marriage with a Paraditian Creature. Who AS SHEE COMMETH OUT OF THE GARDEN, so shall you finde her a flower of delight, answerable to the Countrey from whence she commeth” (A4r, my emphasis). Eden is located in Eve, and thus within all women. The postlapsarian status of women, then, is not one separated from the positive elements of the prelapsarian Garden of Eden. Further, the departure from the Garden, originally an image of expulsion resulting from Eve’s sin, now evokes Eve’s original perfection. What Sowernam will call the “esse” or essence of Paradise thus exists within all (postlapsarian) women.

The site of Eve’s creation consequently becomes one of Sowernam’s central arguments against Swetnam, allowing her to rewrite the Fall itself: “So that woman neither can or may degenerate in her disposition from that naturall inclination of the place, in which she was first framed, she is a Paradician, that is, a delightfull creature, borne in so delightfull a country” (B3v). While Sowernam will
acknowledge the Fall, the character of Eve is defined—and elevated above Adam—by the Garden: “euery element hath his creatures, euery creature doth corresponde the temper and the inclination of that element wherein it hath and take his first and principll esse or being” (B3v). Eve becomes defined here by this “esse” of Paradise rather than by the act that results in her and Adam’s expulsion from Eden. Instead of a portrait of the Fall as loss, Sowernam’s defense playfully reconfigures the notion of women’s innate identity to offer a redeemed Eve in this space as well as outside of it in postlapsarian marriage.

The centrality of the story of the Fall, then, not only offers to these women an effective defense, it also becomes a method within their tracts: they turn to the narrative of the Garden because they can produce an alternative one for their purposes. The imagery patterns within Speght’s prefatory material recast—literally—the players in the Fall: Eve is not the seducing serpent; the male misogynist pamphleteer is. We will have to wait until 1621 to see Speght restage Eve’s actions in her second publication, a volume of poems that operates in concert with her earlier tract. Her 1621 publication of A Dreame, a poem described on the volume’s title page as “imaginarie in manner” but “reall in matter,” returns to this same constellation of motifs which invokes the narrative of the Garden and the Fall. Like Sowernam, Speght will cast herself as a figure for Eve when she identifies herself as the writer of defenses for women. Here, her method—as in Sowernam’s earlier text—includes locating Speght within a reconfigured version of the Fall and thus aligning her with a portrait of a redeemed Eve. She accomplishes this through a decisively gendered narrative of the acquisition of knowledge.

While the Mouzell has received a fair amount of attention because of recent scholarly interest in the “anti-feminist” debate and the resulting entrance of women into print, the entire publication in which A Dreame appears, Mortalities Memorandum, has generated less interest. And yet, in A Dreame we see Speght return in significant and complex ways to the issue of female culpability: the prefatory material to the text even announces a thematic and intertextual connection between her earlier 1617 and this 1621 publication. Explicitly invoking the earlier text that Speght had published, this poem also sustains her strategies in the Mouzell. Here, her method—as in Sowernam’s earlier text—includes aligning herself with a reconfigured version of the Fall and thus with a portrait of a redeemed Eve, now introduced to us within a narrative about acquiring knowledge.13

The prefatory material to Mortalities Memorandum makes explicit the connection between this publication and Speght’s Mouzell. These are purposely intertextual works as Speght uses this opportunity to invoke her earlier publication: because of “my mouzeling Melastomus, I am now, as by a strong motive induced (for my rights sake) to produce and divulge this off-spring of my indevour, to prove them further futurely who have formerly deprived me of my due, imposing my abortive upon the father of me, but not of it” (45). Even her insistence on authorship is infused with the defense of women to which that earlier tract was committed. Speght continues to assert her authorship in the resulting dream vision. She allegorically stages her textual exchange with Swetnam’s Arraignment here:

But by the way I saw a full fed Beast,
Which roared like some monster, or a Devill,
And on Eves sex he foamed filthie froth,
As if that he had had the falling evill;
To whom I went to free them from mishaps,
And with a Mouzel sought to binde his chaps.

(241-46)

*A Dreame*, a metatextual meditation on the act of writing and publishing by a woman, is equally a defense of “Eves sex” against the “Devill” that is Swetnam.

The conventions that mark defenses consequently grace the body of *A Dreame*, complementing both the form and purpose of her earlier publication. *A Dreame* contains a list of well-educated women, one meant to illustrate the good traits of women.

*Cleobulina*, and *Demaphila*,
with *Telesilla*, as Historians tell,
(Whose fame doth live, though they have long bin dead)
Did all of them in Poetrie excell.
A Roman matron that *Cornelia* hight,
An eloquent and learned style did write.

(139-44)

The list continues, as now she turns to female practitioners of “Astronomie,” “Rheth’ricke,” and other sciences (145, 146). This list reconfigures the conventions of a defense into a tribute to women who have successfully acquired knowledge. The defense of women’s acquisition of knowledge allows the narrator—explicitly linked to Speght through the numerous biographical references—to offer a defense of Eve; Eve, of course, had previously pursued a “plant” of knowledge. As a female defender of women, Speght runs the risk of becoming identified as an Eve figure. Her poem thus makes the identification explicit as she offers a defense of women tailored to their pursuit of knowledge.

“A Dreame” thus offers an elaborate allegorical vision that reimagines the terms of the Fall itself. The poem will work to differentiate distinct forms of knowledge, with the search for one kind of knowledge cast as laudable. Experience, the opposite of Innocence, guides her, instructing Speght that

The onely medicine for your maladie,
By which, and nothing else your helpe is wrought,
Is Knowledge, of the which there is two sorts,
The one is good, the other bad and nought;
The former sort by labour is attain’d,
The latter may without much toyle be gain’d.

(91-96)

A distinction is made here, one which may partially offset the problematic resonances to Eve’s prelapsarian act to acquire knowledge. Yet the detailed account of her activities in the Garden, including the account of Speght’s desire to acquire the plant of knowledge, inflects her search with echoes of Eve’s attempt to acquire knowledge.
Such desire to acquire knowledge is experienced within an equally pleasurable Garden, one that recalls the original Garden of Genesis. The Garden is repeatedly linked to pleasure, while the acquisition of knowledge is cast in desirable terms as well:

If thou didst know the pleasure of the place,
Where Knowledge growes, and where thou mayst it gaine;
Or rather knew the vertue of the plant,
Thou would’st not grudge at any cost, or paine,
Thou canst bestow, to purchase for thy cure
This plant, by which of helpe thou shalt be sure.

(169-74)

The pleasurable pursuit of knowledge, the taking of this “vertue”-filled plant, establishes a link to the motivations of Eve at the moment of her fall: in fact, in Paradise Lost, Eve will detail “The virtue of that Fruit” (9.616). That “pleasure” motivates her acquisition of knowledge is signaled by Desire’s role in this search: “Desire, / Who did incite me to increase my store, / And told me ’twas a lawfull avarice, / To covet Knowledge daily more and more” (229-32). Speght is again employing extensive conventions about Eve’s character and reasons for taking the fruit—Eve is often described as covetous and filled with desire as she eats the forbidden fruit.

Nor is the act of tasting, so resonant with the consumption of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, avoided by Speght in the account. A sustained motif linking “taste” and “knowledge” becomes the inducement to acquire this “plant” of knowledge. Such language begins early in the poem. In the narrator’s first attempt to distinguish herself from the animals in the Garden, we are told that “Their seeming science is but customs fruit” (Dreame 46). As the poem continues, the narrator’s goal is to acquire real, not “seeming,” science, and thus a different fruit: one from the “plant” of “knowledge” (171, 170). It is for this that she is “hungry,” a sensual drive that predicts the tasting to come: “And taste of science appetite did [her] move” (53, 191). Speght thus creates a powerful constellation of images of hunger, appetite, and tasting to invoke the narrative of Eve’s eating of the apple. Further, the knowledge of “higher” things, a motivation of Eve’s seen so clearly in Milton, is both the goal of, and the method of, augment’ing the narrator’s “Theorie of things above” (191-92). And while the “plant,” which is described as having “vertue” as in Milton, is not cast as a fruit, the language of appetite and taste draw us back to the earlier description of the animals’ “customes fruit.” The resonances to the first Fall are thick, from the aspiration to knowledge desired by this female narrator to the knowledge she imagines distinguishing her from lower beings.

Because of the narrator’s search for knowledge’s “plant” in A Dreame, Speght is in a position to defend women against the “monster, or Devill” Swetnam who bursts into the poem (242). “[O]n Eves sex he foamed filthie froth, / As if that he had had the falling evill; / To whom I went to free them from mishaps, / And with a Mouzel sought to binde his chaps” (243-46). The effect of Speght’s knowledge, then, is shown to be the containment—and silencing—of this “Devill” (242). This outcome, which is presented positively—obviously—by the Mouzel’s own author, offers a reconfigured narrative of the garden and of knowledge. Now, the rhetoric of this “Devill” will not delude her. Instead, her knowledge will defeat him. In a
reimagination of the context of knowledge and the attack by Satan that results in
the Fall, Speght has constructed a postlapsarian narrative of acquiring knowledge to
which women can return. As in Sowernam, then, the garden becomes accessible,
able to illustrate women’s positive traits. Instead of the story of Eve and the Garden
proving women’s evilness, these narratives offer a detailed reimagination of
women’s character and actions through an alignment with Eve.

The effect of the parallels established during Speght’s search for knowledge, as
in Sowernam’s text, is to cast these defenders as Eve-like, now in a position to
defend women against attacks. This reading of Sowernam’s and Speght’s defenses
of women suggests that female authors defending women significantly shifted the
earlier conventions of the “anti-feminist” debate. Their greater reliance upon the
narrative of the Fall is transformed into a counternarrative meant to present their
actions, now aligned with Eve’s, in a positive light. It is the centrality of the Garden
narrative in these defenses, in addition to the terms of their defenses, that suggests
a productive intertextuality between these female-authored defenses and Milton’s
use of both a narrative account of the Fall and the use of the “anti-feminist”
tradition in *Paradise Lost*. The insight of these female writers—that in taking up a
defense of women, they actually operate in the position of Eve—is one to which
Milton appears to respond in his epic.

The trajectory of this “anti-feminist” debate also underscores the innovation of
these writers during the 1610s and 1620s. As the “anti-feminist” tradition moves
forward into the mid-seventeenth century, that “disputing Eve”—so strong in these
earlier texts—becomes reconfigured. There are, through the 1630s and 1640s,
occasional tracts in this genre: the *Juniper Lecture* by John Taylor and the *Woman’s
Sharpe Revenge* revitalize the conventions of the debate most closely. And there is
still the occasional text produced into the 1660s that follows the conventions of
that earlier “anti-feminist” tradition. But into the mid-century, these texts become
much more limited in number. The energy of the earlier pamphlet debate appears
overshadowed by, or redirected into, other forms of writing. As the English revo-
lution approached, the voices of women—as Mihoko Suzuki and Katherine
Romack have shown—become directed toward a political sphere, often in acts of
petitioning the pre- and then post-revolution government.14 The disputing Eve
elaborated by Speght and Sowernam now turns her back on a prelapsarian Garden
space; she reorients her female voice toward a much more contemporary political
site.15 And if there is a Restoration “anti-feminist” tradition modeled on the
energetic debate of the 1610s, it emerges, as Katherine Romack argues, in the
Mistress Parliament tracts that now condemn women for their explicitly political
dvoice during the Civil War and Interregnum periods.

Swetnam’s own tract, on the other hand, did remain available into the 1660s.
Wandering among the booksellers in 1634, 1637, or 1645, Milton could well have
seen the reprinted editions of the *Arraignment*. Years later he could have heard of the
1660 or 1667 reprinted editions. Any of these editions could have acquainted him
with the characteristic language of female attack within this tradition. Meanwhile,
this unique figure of the disputing Eve, who defends herself in terms of the Fall while
simultaneously being assaulted by Swetnam-style language, goes underground at
mid-century. But she will resurface in *Paradise Lost*. This text, as had Speght and
Sowernam’s earlier, grapples with modes of representing the story of the Garden, the
Fall, and its relationship to gender. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve undertakes her own defense
after the Fall. Milton thus appears to show an awareness of the development within
the “anti-feminist” genre; by casting Eve in the role of a defender, *Paradise Lost* draws on this particular characterization of Eve in the earlier part of the century. Milton also embeds this tradition into a scene where the very conventions of the “anti-feminist” tract are created in the course of Adam’s response to Eve’s fall. While Eve briefly will become a defender of her actions—the consequence of which is to defend all women—Adam momentarily takes on the linguistic characteristics of a misogynistic pamphleeter like Joseph Swetnam. A pattern emerges: these traces of earlier defenses in the poem threaten the inversion of gender hierarchy. Such traces will then be righted, clarified, even codified by an authorizing voice in the epic. And yet Milton will highlight this very process: while calling attention to an older style debate about gender and resulting hierarchy that he is resurrecting, Milton’s poem also has the effect of silencing this debate’s resonant echoes.

The centrality of the Genesis story within these early seventeenth-century tracts aligns them to Milton’s own account of the Garden and the Fall. Further, Milton’s engagement with elements from earlier defenses of women informs the middle books of *Paradise Lost*. For example, Milton places into Adam’s mouth the argument for women as the last, and thus best, creation, a position first expressed by Agrippa and argued by many female defenders such as Sowernam: “Women were the last worke, and therefore the best, / For what was the end, excelleth the rest” (H1v). Milton engages this possible consequence of Eve’s creation by having Adam describe her as “Heaven’s last best gift” in Book 5, an initially objectifying account of Eve that develops, directly before the Fall, into Adam’s claim that she is the “fairest of Creation, last and best / Of all God’s Works” (9.896–97). Obviously, this identification takes on an entirely different tone at the Fall, framed in large part by Raphael’s upbraiding of Adam in Book 8. According to Kari Boyd McBride and John C. Ulreich, Adam’s error, articulated by Raphael as “attribúting overmuch to things / Less excellent” (8.565–66), is a response to the Agrippan argument found within the querelle. More significant, though, appears to be Milton’s method throughout the poem: he draws upon the defenses of women to initially open up possible links between these texts over the question of the “esse” of Eve only to return to a more orthodox reading of her character and description of expected behavior after the Fall. Although Adam is rebuked by Raphael in Book 8 for describing “Her loveliness [as] so absolute” (547), up until this point in the poem Adam speaks as if he has been reading defenses of women, particularly those authored by women. This will change dramatically after the Fall. Now, Milton will place the language and the arguments articulated by Swetnam, rather than Sowernam, into Adam’s mouth. In Book 10, then, Adam will transform Eve into a “fair defect,” whose being created second makes her not better, but instead derogatorily “last”: Eve was “create[d] at last / This novelty on Earth, this fair defect / Of Nature” (10.890–92).

The issue of priority, which is positioned so centrally in Sowernam, was often interwoven with and buttressed by arguments about the material out of which Eve was made. The “material cause” of Eve, as Rachel Speght will explain the concept, was a “refined mould,” because “man was created of the dust of the earth, but woman was made of a part of man, after that he was a living soule” (*Mouzell* 18). For Speght, this fact leads to an argument for “their authority equall” (18) because Eve was made “from his side, neare his heart, to be his equall” (18). This argument occurs earlier in Jane Anger’s “Her Protection for Women,” and Sowernam underscores the importance of this argument by repeating it in her own tract: “as the Maide, in *her Mouzell* for *Melastomus* hath obserued [. . .] [God] created her out of
a subject refined, as out of a Quintessence: For the ribbe is in Substance more solid, in place as most neare, so in estimate most deare, to mans heart” (B3v). The language of the rib, of course, is repeatedly invoked within the “anti-feminist” debate as in any Genesis retelling. At the Fall, we hear this language explicitly: women “were made of the ribbe of a man, and that their froward nature sheweth; for a ribbe is a crooked thing, good for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature” (Swetnam [B1v]). But Milton specifies Adam’s response to Eve to suggest a connection between the language and concepts in these defenses by women. Now Adam does not just gesture to the language of Swetnam: he responds in a manner that explicitly counters Sowernam: “And [I] understood not all was but a show / Rather than solid virtue, all but a Rib / Crooked by nature, bent, as now appears/ More to the part sinister from me drawn” (10.883-86; my emphasis). Eve is neither “solid” nor substance: she is “show.”

Adam learns here what Eve has already learned in Book 4: her appearance of superiority is false, and it is “manly grace / And wisdom, which alone is truly fair” (4.490-91). This interjection engages the tradition of the “anti-feminist” debate. But more significantly, it locates Adam’s response as in a possible dialogue with Sowernam.

While the argument of Eve’s composition derives from the issue of priority in creation, the larger question is the essential composition of Eve. Speght may engage this issue more materially, while Sowernam stresses the metaphysical nature of women’s being: there is a “temper” and “inclination” that defines the “first and principall esse, or being” of women’s character (B3v). According to Sowernam, that “naturall inclination” of women is toward the Paradisical (B3v). Milton’s poem, more so than any other analogue or source for the story of the Fall, explores what this “principall esse” is in Eve by delineating her “inclinations.” The protracted experience that Adam and Eve have in the Garden—rather than the almost immediate Fall conventionally represented within analogues—allowed Milton time to explore Eve’s character.

The link that Speght and Sowernam establish between Eve and the “anti-feminist” debate becomes the largest influence on Milton’s use of “anti-feminist” conventions within his text. His portrait of Eve will take on—briefly—the role of a defender of women’s position. Departing from analogues for—and possible influences on—Paradise Lost, Milton has Eve engage not only in a pre-Fall argument about the reasons to fall, but a post-Fall defense of her actions. Consequently, Milton creates an Eve who justifies her fault by recalling both the terms of, and the strategies of, early seventeenth-century defenses of women. Subsequently in Book 10, Milton’s engagement with the “anti-feminist” tradition becomes clearest in the rant against Eve’s actions and then women in general. While this passage aligns very closely to the language of and conventions in seventeenth-century attacks on women, criticism of Milton has paid much less attention to this sequence. When it is discussed, the imagery is linked to much older traditions—classical, biblical, Hebraic—even though the texts in the “anti-feminist” tradition are much more contemporary for Milton as well as closer in tone and language.

The scene, which follows God’s condemnation of Adam and Eve for their sin, begins when Adam, who has “lamented loud / Through the still Night,” is prompted out of this soliloquy by Eve; she “approaching nigh, / Soft words to his fierce passion she assay’d” (10.845-46, 864-65). What follows is a fifty-line diatribe that links Eve, and all women, to the stock conventions contained within contemporary “anti-feminist” attacks. This speech by Adam is framed by conventions from

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the anti-feminist tradition, such specifics effectively telescoped by Swetnam in his *Arraignement*. Adam’s opening line, “Out of my sight, thou Serpent,” introduces the association of women with the tempting serpent women that resonates through Swetnam’s tract. Swetnam characterizes women as “these venomous Adders, Serpents, and Snakes” (A4r), while this dramatic moment in *Paradise Lost* identifies women through this imagery. Adam recursively attacks Eve’s internal “shape” as having the same “color Serpentine” as the tempter snake (870) while Swetnam highlights how a woman will “turne to a Serpent” (B1v) whenever she does not get what she wants. The danger that women cause, Adam shouts, is that their external, and beautiful, “heav’nly form” “snares” men, hiding women’s internal perversity (10.872-73). This language of “snar[ing]” men through beauty comes directly from the anti-feminist tradition, which Swetnam’s language highlights explicitly: women are “subtill and dangerous for [. . .] their faces are lures, their beauties are baytes, their looks are netts” (B2v). Milton will repeat women’s capacity to “snare” men at line 897 when their “Female snares” are expanded to describe all of womankind. This attack on all of women, begun in Milton with his attack on Eve and extended to all women in the course of the speech, is characteristic of this tradition and particularly of Swetnam’s popular tract. Other conventions hem this speech by Adam. While both his diatribe and Swetnam’s text will attack women’s vanity, a general accusation against Eve, they also deploy the very image of the crooked rib. While in Swetnam, women are “crooked by nature” because the rib from which she has been fashioned is “a crooked thing good for nothing else (B1v),” Adam’s language appears as if directly from this account. Women are “a Rib / Crooked by nature” (884-85), a phrase which directly echoes Swetnam’s epitaph, while the implications of the “bent” nature of the rib are extended to women’s nature in both texts (885).

Most significantly, though, is the effect that both Adam’s speech and Swetnam’s tract wish to achieve. From the beginning of the Swetnam’s *Arraignement*, his goal is to silence women, to keep them from responding to his attack: “I wish you to conceal it with silence, lest in starting up to find fault, you proue yourselves guilty of these monstrous accusations” (A2v), he asserts. This will achieve the very silence Swetnam hoped to accomplish: Eve’s silence in the face of his diatribe as she kneels “at [Adam’s] feet,” where she “Fell humble, and imbrac’d them” (10.911-12). Eve thus enacts the very desire expressed within Swetnam’s tract: “downe, downe vpon your knees, you earthly Serpents” (E2v). Thus, not only is the very language in Adam’s *Paradise Lost* diatribe parallel to Swetnam’s *Arraignement*, but the stated goals of this anti-feminist language and tradition echo in Adam’s speech.

The passage also continues to align itself with the conventions of anti-feminist tracts in Adam’s ensuing lament about men’s unhappiness in love, all a result of the female character and actions. The sequence is marked, then, by another convention of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century “anti-feminist” tracts: men who publish attacks on women are often dismissed or upbraided as writing because they surfeit or overly experience emotion, when in love. Thus, their own romantic failures produce their decision to blame all women. Constantia Munda accuses Swetnam of this in her tract, *The Worming of a Mad Dog*: “you, hauing peraduenture had some curst wife that hath giuen you as good as you brought [. . .] you run a madding vp and downe to make a scrole of female frailties” (C1v). Adam could be so accused. He laments in the poem that man will always be frustrated in love: man “never shall find out fit Mate, but such / As some misfortune brings him, or
mistake” (10.899-900). Unhappiness in love, then, becomes the closing argument for man’s unlucky state: the “innumerable / Disturbances on Earth” that have “befall’n” men “through Female snares” (10. 895-97). Adam’s emphasis on men’s suffering in love as a result of the Fall again aligns his rant with conventions that dominated “anti-feminist” tracts.

Yet Milton’s deployment of these conventions does not clarify the status that Adam’s remarks are supposed to have in the poem. To locate how this sequence is operating in the poem, let us return to the previous instance in which Eve’s actions—and the resulting Fall—are described as producing the future character of women and man’s resulting unhappiness. In Book 9, Adam first states that all women’s future behavior is determined by the Fall. During a “fruitless” “mutual accusation” that ensues after their sequential eating of the apple, Adam states

[. . .] Thus it shall befall
Him who to worth in Woman overtrusting
Lets her Will rule; restraint she will not brook,
And left to herself, if evil thence ensue,
Shee first his weak indulgence will accuse.

(1182-86)

Adam abstracts from this event, consequently passing judgment on how women will be: Eve’s sin will pattern all future women’s behavior.

The overarching convention of “anti-feminist” attacks, that women can be classified as a group inherently “crooked,” is explicit in Adam’s statement, but is further reinforced by the tradition of editing this passage. While the 1667 and 1674 editions of the poem read “Him who to worth in Women overtrusting,” authoritative modern editors like Merritt Hughes have transformed the word to its singular form “Woman.”20 As one of only three uses of “women” within the poem,21 Adam employs here a more contemporary description of women as a category, distinct from his and the poem’s usual use of “woman” to describe womankind. Editors seem to be motivated by consistency: the category of “women” is infrequently used in the poem, and so they maintain the biblical style of the poem by changing this word. And yet, the unusual deployment of “women” rather than “woman” here to describe a (gendered) category of persons is the point. As Adam abstracts from his experience with Eve in Book 9, he imagines the many future times that “women” will lead men astray. As a result, he similarly deploys the (future) negative classification of all “women” featured in Swetnam’s title: “Lewd, idle, froward, and vnconstant women” (title page; my emphasis). Some modern editions consequently erase, by correcting: this line, Milton’s alignment to “anti-feminist” conventions that judge all “Women” as a result of the Fall.

More significant, though, is the exchange between Adam and Eve that prompts Adam’s summary in Book 9 of the dangers women pose. Milton’s Eve differs significantly from the female protagonists of other Fall narratives because she offers a defense of herself, an explicit response to Adam’s attack in Book 9. “[M]ov’d with touch of blame,” Eve offers a fifteen-line defense in which she accuses Adam of susceptibility to “Fraud in the Serpent” (1143, 1150) and blames him for having allowed her to wander off alone.

Eve’s arguments are hardly satisfying, relying as they do on redirected blame and contradictory logic: she had wanted to separate from Adam, which allowed

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Satan access to her alone, and now she blames Adam for letting her go. Yet the true significance of this passage lies not in the terms of her defense, but in the fact that she defends herself at all. Like Speght and Sowernan, who take on a reconstructed identity of Eve in their defenses, Eve argues against the conventional language of attack within the “anti-feminist” debate, and she does so by employing its very language. She even anticipates how the metonymy of her as a “crooked rib” will be employed, transforming the image in her defense: “Was I to have never parted from thy side? / As good have grown there still a lifeless Rib” (9.1153-54). While the “crooked rib” may have erred, her “lifeless Rib” image asserts that women must have some independent status or they would have no existence at all.

In explicitly invoking the language of the debate over women in her defense, Eve is offering the “Apology” for her actions that has been alluded to earlier in Book 9. Just after she has taken the apple and decided to share her good fortune with Adam, her approach to him is described in language evocative of the actual “anti-feminist” debate: “To him she hasted, in her face excuse / Came Prologue, and Apology to prompt, / Which with bland words at will she thus addrest” (9.853-55). By labeling her address to Adam as an “Apology,” she explicitly positions her resulting speech in the tradition of defenses of women. “Apology” was a popular title for these texts; three different defenses entitled Apology for Womankind appeared in 1605, 1609, and then again in 1620. The phrase is used as well by female defenders of women: the defense of Eve in Aemilia Lanyer’s 1611 Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum is glossed in the margin as “Eves Apologie” (84). Most significantly, here we observe Milton represent Eve as the first defender of women.

What the early seventeenth-century debate revealed was a series of portraits of Eve as an active defender of herself. As in Speght, Sowernam, even Lanyer—all texts produced within the 1610s and the 1620s—women’s reentry into an alternative or prelapsarian Garden space testifies to a redemptive portrait of women. This portrait of Eve as “disputing” as well as entering the Garden becomes refracted into Eve’s choice to defend herself in Paradise Lost. Or, perhaps more accurately, the texts by Speght and Sowernam offer a counter analogue for Milton’s portrait of Eve—one in which she too will produce an “Apology.” Book 9 thus ends with a debate between Adam and Eve, one that recalls the exchange between tracts such as Swetnam’s and Speght’s. Adam begins the critique, Eve responds, and Adam counters. This “vain contést,” as Milton describes it in the final line of Book 9, underscores its identity as a debate. In fact, his inflection of “contést” (with the emphasis on the second syllable) opens the word up to a doubled meaning: the “contest” of skill that had marked the body of sixteenth-century “anti-feminist” tracts as well as the contéstation or fight in which Adam and Eve engage at this moment.

The events in Book 9 thus provide us a frame for reading the tirade in Book 10 produced by Adam. It will end this “contést”: Eve becomes silenced by the eruption—in fact the creation of—“anti-feminist” language. Eve, who countered Adam’s critique in Book 9, will now become a tableau of utter repentance. Immediately following his speech and his “turn” from her,

Eve,
Not so repulst, with Tears that ceas’d not flowing,
And tresses all disorder’d, at his feet

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Fell humble, and imbracing them, besought
His peace
(10.909-13)

The “contést” characterizing the close of Book 9 is ended by Adam’s generation—not just repetition—of the “anti-feminist” tradition: following his summary of what will become the tradition of attacks on women, Eve announces herself “thy suppliant / I beg, and clasp thy knees” (917-18). She absorbs the fault for the Fall, requesting of Heaven “that all / The sentence from thy head remov’d may light / On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe” (933-35).

Further, in the course of taking responsibility for the Fall, Eve repositions herself within the gender hierarchy that had been disrupted by her sinning and then Adam’s choice to follow her: by falling, Adam has valued Eve over God, reversing a clear statement of the spiritual hierarchy declared in Book 4. There, in our first vision of Adam and Eve, the gender and spiritual hierarchy of Paradise Lost is explicitly plotted by this line: “Hee for God only, shee for God in him” (4.299). What Eve will do directly following Adam’s rebuke is return to that line, articulating the profundity of her sin as she echoes the hierarchical language she had rejected through her actions. She declares that they “both have sinn’d, but thou / Against God only, I against God and thee” (10.930-31). The second line echoes powerfully that from Book 4, though now it is spoken not by the narrator but by Eve herself. As Eve accedes to a doubled violation against both her husband and God, “I against God and thee,” her acknowledgement of sin actually mouths the very gendered and spiritual hierarchy the poem had previously asserted. The parallels exist relationally and metrically. By disobeying, Eve has not only sinned against God; she has also sinned against her other master, Adam. The hierarchical position of God, then Adam, then Eve expressed within Book 4 is now repeated through an almost parallel arrangement of the elements in this phrase. “God” and “only” occupy the same metric position in the line. By compressing “against” into a single syllable, we keep the line to ten syllables; the effect of this compression is that the pronouns in both the Book 4 and Book 10 passage align perfectly. “Shee” and “I” (both referring to Eve) occupy the fifth syllable of the line, “God” is positioned in the same place in both lines, and the line ends with “him” and “thee”—both referring to Adam—in the final syllable of the line. These pronoun alignments highlight that the parallel line, as the same hierarchical relationship between God, Adam and Eve, is now articulated by her. Eve’s scripted recasting of the earlier line means that now she will speak the language of proper gender hierarchy. Most significantly, though, her rehearsal of this line directly follows Adam’s “anti-feminist” tirade. His speech has the effect of training Eve to articulate the appropriate spiritually subordinate position for women.

The speech’s effectiveness takes us to the heart of the interpretive problem posed by the passage. Adam’s speech may work, but it is highly unsatisfying in dramatic and poetic terms. The character of Adam that emerges here is one likely to be rejected by the reader: Merritt Hughes describes Adam in his attack on Eve as “behav[ing] rather badly” and “in danger of losing his laurels as a human being to her” (Milton, Complete 177): much of this is attributable to Adam’s refusal to assume some responsibility for the Fall. He then transforms this unwillingness into a discourse of misogyny; we watch as Adam takes on the role of the tract-publishing misogynist at this moment, fueled by his anger and stubbornness. Yet the tone
within “anti-feminist” tracts such as Swetnam’s was jocular—at the expense of women, of course. The pleasure that most readers of the “anti-feminist” debate would probably have enjoyed seems absent here. The placing of this language in Adam’s mouth at this moment produces instead an acutely serious situation filled with emotional intensity: “Eve [. . .] with Tears that ceas’d not flowing, / And tresses al disorder’d, at his feet/ Fell humble, and imbracing them, besought / His peace, and thus proceeded in her plaint” (10.909-13). The power of Adam’s tirade produces a pathos-filled, if compliant, Eve.

Moreover, the style of the passage continues to link Milton’s verse with the published tradition of attacks on women, a parallel that might explain many readers’ dissatisfaction with the language, as well as the dramatic experience, of the passage. For, if Adam is at his ugliest as a character here, the verse appears to be some of the ugliest within the poem. As if attempting to match the run-on rambling style of the “anti-feminist” tracts, Milton’s constant enjambment in these lines—the carrying over of the grammatical structure from one line to the next—produces a reading experience like that of an unstoppable diatribe, a list of woman’s ills that moves from one to the next to the next with no complexity derived from modifying or qualifying statements. The normal flow of Milton’s verse works by placing phrases within and between lines, thus shifting the cadence while complicating the meaning of such phrases: we can observe this practice in an earlier speech by Adam:

Bold deed thou hast presum’d, advent’rous Eve,
And peril great provok’t, who thus hath dar’d
Had it been only coveting to Eve
That sacred Fruit, sacred to abstinence,
Much more to taste it under ban to touch.

(9. 921-25)

Both in sound and in meaning, the interjected phrases, “sacred to abstinence,” “Much more to taste it under ban to touch,” unveil layers of meaning that add richness to the “Bold deed” and the consequent “peril” she now faces. If that creates an accumulation of meaning, Adam’s diatribe becomes a perversion of Milton’s usual “or”:

for either
He never shall find out fit Mate, but such
As some misfortune brings him, or mistake,
Or whom he wishes most shall seldom gain
Through her perverseness, but shall see her gain’d
By a far worse, or if she love, withheld
By Parents, or his happiest choice too late
Shall meet, already linkt and Wedlock-bound
To a fell Adversary, his hate or shame. (10.897-906)

The “or” here allows for the piling on of the effects of “woeman,” each example of man’s pain equally shallow and undeveloped; as a result, it comprises an unmediated list. Milton’s usual pattern of generating for the reader an elaborated idea is dispensed with. Instead, through his verse an unnuanced rhetorical force carries, even hurries, the reader to the end of the passage. The structure of the
“anti-feminist” diatribe thus replaces Milton’s more subtle unwrapping of meaning: in this speech, then, the reader is carried through to the end of Adam’s speech, allowed no rest from the accusations hurled at us and Eve.

Efficacy and style then are purposely set into conflict in this passage. The speech does work: it effects a particular kind of repentance on Eve’s part, and the terms of her repentance resonate with the text’s earlier account of Adam and Eve. She is now scripted to mouth the text’s earlier spiritual location of women. Milton’s text, then, exposes the cultural efficacy of the “anti-feminist” tradition in silencing women as it makes Adam the father of “anti-feminist” discourse. Adam’s construction of this tradition within the narrative becomes the manner in which Eve can be reauthored into acknowledging the very hierarchy she had rejected at the moment of the Fall, when she imagined the fruit as “render[ing] me more equal” (9.823). The overt conventionality and recognizable anti-feminist tropes within this passage in Book 10 thus prove to be an effective cultural phenomenon. While Milton could have cast this language of misogyny as authoritative by expressing it through the narrator’s voice or have found an external narrative to naturalize this judgment of Eve, he instead locates this articulation of Swetnam–esque language into the mouth of Adam, incorporating the highly artificial language of the “anti-feminist” tradition into this single, narratively prominent, moment.

Consequently, the very stylistic dissatisfactions of the passage are intended to jar us into noticing the speech’s status as convention—in fact the birth of the conventional tropes of misogynistic argument. As a result, Milton’s presentation of Adam’s speech illustrates the cultural power of “anti-feminist” language. Milton does highlight how gender hierarchy can be enacted. But in doing so, he illustrates how that hierarchy is accomplished through a cultural rehearsal of tropes.

At this moment, though, we have to ask what has been so disruptive within Eve’s attempted defense in Book 9 that Milton needs to restage this “anti-feminist” exchange. The particular danger to which Adam must respond is Eve’s assertion of the need for some female self-determination; she has argued that without this, woman would be a “lifeless Rib.” When female self-determination is asserted, though, the status of male authority is challenged; whom do men now have authority over? That is the danger that has been offered by Eve’s defense, as it had been offered by the seventeenth-century defenses offered by the Eve-like Speght and Sowernam. Book 10 must work to stabilize this disruption by generating a figure of Eve who can be instructed, literally, to talk the talk of hierarchical gender authority. Adam’s tirade will expose its conventional status, but the terms of Eve’s defense have made this culturally necessary. Adam’s scripting of Eve will restore order between the pair, though in the process, this very mechanism has been laid bare.

This dialogue that exists between Milton’s enactment of the “anti-feminist” tradition in Paradise Lost and earlier defenses by women is also part of the larger social conversation in which these pamphlets were engaged. The seventeenth-century pamphlet wars, while reflecting a long tradition of misogyny, are obviously inflected by a political ideology of gender hierarchy that was beginning to experience cultural challenges. A powerful analogy between the state and the family that characterized English political thought through much of the seventeenth century meant that order in the household—and of the relationship between men and women within it—modeled political order. As the work of historians including
Anthony Fletcher, Susan Amussen, and Margaret Ezell has illustrated, “Relations between husband and wife are part of the larger questions in the seventeenth century on the nature of political theory and individual liberty” (Ezell 60). The family/state analogy that dominates until the end of the seventeenth century necessitates order within the family because this vision of order supports governmental organization; the analogy, according to Amussen, “helped define order and hierarchy in early modern England” (204).

As the seventeenth century moves on, this analogy became a central tenet of royalist thought to which republican thinkers, such as Milton, would need to respond. While the tradition of classical republican thought framed Milton’s thinking, the debate over the theoretical grounding of the state necessarily fused these older classical and English traditions of liberty to the political issues of the familial metaphor. We can observe just one of Milton’s intersections of these two discourses within his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*. When he says it is “unprofitable and dangerous to the Commonwealth, when the household estate, out of which must flourish forth the vigor and the spirit of all public enterprises, is so ill contented and procur’d at home, and cannot be supported” (247), we hear attempts to describe and support the republican state plotted through the workings of family itself. Disruption in the “household estate” will destabilize the state. Consequently, notions of political obedience were based on the obedience of a wife to her husband. When Milton engages the narrative of the Garden and these earlier disrupting narratives of Eve defending herself within that Garden, he is engaging the core issue of state organization and the republican possibilities embedded within this.

Predictably, the story of Adam and Eve served as the grounding narrative of familial structure and hierarchy, and it operated as an account of both gendered and political relationships. The foundations of government and social order were thus derived in the seventeenth century from the gendered implications of the story in Eden and of the Fall. Social and political stability depended upon the maintenance of gender identities, yet the wide-ranging “anti-feminist” debate—particularly some of the modifications it undergoes in the seventeenth century that stress the events in the Garden—suggests how much pressure these categories were under during the period. The stakes are not, simply, order or “peace” achieved between men and women, or here, between Adam and Eve: “peace” in marriage—and between Adam and Eve as the model for all future marriages—is a powerfully political issue as it models stability for, or disruption to, the state. All of these texts—the defenses by Sowernam and Speght, and the negotiation of the disputing Eve figure by Milton—are thus engaging a central political issue within the seventeenth century as they map alternate images of male and female relations. If with different political goals than other writers employing aspects of the family/state analogy, Milton engages such issues directly, aware of the distinct reformulations of the Garden story in the writings of Rachel Speght and Esther Sowernam.

A mappable gender hierarchy serves as the underpinning for governmental structure in the seventeenth century, yet that map will become, if not entirely replotted in the course of the period, redrawn: the theory of patriarchal power was being placed under increasing pressure. Anthony Fletcher states “there is good reason to think that many Englishmen felt some unease about the security of their hold upon the gender order” (162). As we have seen, the figure of the disputing Eve threatens but also exposes the foundation upon which the state was perilously
balanced. Milton turns to this language of the “anti-feminist” debate—and particularly the more challenging representations offered by the women pamphleteers in the early seventeenth century—in order to try to stabilize the debate about gender. Yet, the manner in which he tries to accomplish this, by which he attempts to maintain the old lines of the map, continues to expose how fully the structure of government was dependent upon these very pillars of gendered authority. He attempts to shore the artifice but, like the disputing Eves before him, exposes its construction at the same time.

Milton’s attempt to turn to these debates offers a historically contingent stabilization of a vision of gendered responsibility for the Fall that simultaneously contains traces of an alternative vision of women’s interlocutory engagement with issues of enormous social and political significance. Milton’s Adam overwrites, if you will, Eve’s own authorship of a “defence” or apology. Yet Adam, like the text of Paradise Lost, cannot erase the language of the debate that helped to produce the portrait of Eve. Even though Eve’s defense is overridden, and overwritten, in the course of the poem, the traces of that debate resonate through the text. Adam, now cast as the author of the “anti-feminist” debate, can no more silence his disputing Eve than could Swetnam end debate. Just as Speght and Sowerman’s adoption of the identity of Eve prompts a reconfiguration of the strategies in their defenses, so too does Eve’s connection to these disputing writers remain. Invoking an authority due to Eve as a result of these authorial innovations, numerous writers in the later seventeenth century, such as Lucy Hutchinson, Aphra Behn, and even Mary Astell, will continue to explore this very connection between Eve and the figure of the woman author. They may thus have these early generic innovations by Rachel Spegh and Esther Sowernam to thank.

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Notes

1 For the purposes of underscoring the role of this tradition and the conventions which shape it, the phrase “anti-feminist” will be used throughout the essay to distinguish it from a more general misogynistic tradition.

2 Katherine Romack describes “a curious cessation of Englishwomen’s involvement” in the formal controversy over women between 1640 and 1660 (210), arguing that pamphleteers reconfigure the terms of their attacks on women during this period.

3 Joseph Wittreich notes that the poem is “mapped by—and a mapping of—debates between the sexes in the seventeenth century” (“Inspired” 136).

4 The 1634 edition reads: “Printed at London by T.C. and are to be sold by F. Grove, at his Shop, at upper-end of Snow-hill, neere the Sarazens head without New = gate 1634,” the very same inscription as in 1637. On the Web site maintained by Janelle Jenstad at mapoflondon.uvic.ca, one can find on a map of Early Modern England a “Snowhill” adjacent to the “Saracen’s Head.”

5 See Dobranski, especially chapter 3, on Milton’s involvement with booksellers and printers.

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The question of the gender of Sowernam and Munda continues to be debated. See Jones and Shepherd on the sex of Munda. See Purkiss on the rhetorical implications of a female pseudonym. I will maintain that Sowernam, as Speght, is a woman on the basis of Sowernam’s specific moves that accord so closely with those of Speght.

Diane McColley describes this sequence as blatantly misogynistic (30), while Kristin Pruitt describes his attack as “brutal” (68).

The “woman question” within Milton criticism has been a prominent critical issue since the mid-seventies. Of the many critics arguing that Milton’s representation of women is “masculinist,” see especially Froula, Nyquist, and Gilbert and Gubar. Defenses of Milton have been offered by, among others, McColley, Turner, Wilding, and Wittreich, Feminist. For a recent reconsideration of this debate, see Martin.

Peter Herman also sees Paradise Lost as producing its own critical reading of misogyny.

Alternately, many defenses previous to Speght’s and Sowernam’s would attack women while claiming to defend them, as in Nicholas Breton’s The Praise of Virtuous Ladies and Gentlemen (1597). For the dispute over Gosynhill’s authorship, see Henderson and McManus 137n4.

In the sixteenth century, scattered references to the Fall in the majority of attacks on women are countered by defenses of which 10% to 25% are engaging the narrative of the Fall. In the seventeenth century, this percentage rises: the proportion of Eve-based attack in Swetnam’s text to the Eve-based defense in Speght is about 1 to 20.

For critics who have highlighted the strategies that these women use to justify their entrance into print, see Jones, who discusses their “strategic adherence to traditional requirements for modesty in women’s language” (60).

See Phillippy’s discussion of Mortalities Memorandum, which considers Eve as a figure of both life and of death in the ars moriendi tradition.


Recent studies by Nevitt and Gillespie explore how mid-century tracts by women prophets, such as Elizabeth Poole and Anna Trapnel, enter into print and work to redefine the cultural status of women.

Critics view the terms of Agrippa’s defense of women in somewhat different ways. McBride and Ulreich view it as a “playful [. . .]trope” (105), while Turner considers Agrippa’s arguments a rhetorical game. Woodbridge considers Agrippa’s overall argument as a “rhetorical paradox,” and concludes that “Agrippa’s hyperbolic praise of women is not an ironic vehicle for laying bare the sex’s unworthiness but a graphic demonstration of the absurdities one must resort to if one claims superiority for either sex” (42). All agree, though, that these female defenders take up Agrippa’s defenses in serious ways.

Adam thus articulates the lesson of Raphael from Book 8: “of that skill the more thou know’st, / The more she will acknowledge thee her Head, / And to realities yield all her shows” (573-75).

See McColley’s argument that Milton “assigns more dignity to Eve than was usual” in the analogues (35).

For two studies that consider a wide range of classical and biblical traditions deployed within Milton’s representation of the Garden, Adam, and Eve, see Turner and McColley.

In this, Hughes follows Richard Bentley’s suggested emendation in his 1732 edition, which Hughes characterizes as “inevitable” (Book 9, n1183). In other modern editions, such as the Norton (edited
by Scott Elledge) and the Longman (edited by Alastair Fowler), these editions make the “W” in “women” lower case. Only Flannagan’s edition replicates the upper case “W” in “Women”; used in the 1667 and 1674 edition, this original capitalization by Milton stresses the category of all women.

21 The other two are in Book 4.408-09 and Book 11.582.

22 Froula’s formative essay, which argues that Eve is successfully contained within patriarchal discourse following the account in Book 4 of her creation, has been very influential on my reading of Eve.

23 Critics such as Turner and Wilding argue that this line does not reflect the narrator’s perspective while Forsyth concludes that we see here through Satan’s perspectival view.

24 For an overview of the family/state analogy at the heart of seventeenth-century patriarchal theory, see Schochet.

25 See Norbrook’s study of the tradition of republicanism in the seventeenth century. On the marriage and political contract, see Shanley and Kahn.

26 Milton’s engagement with the family/state analogy may seem odd given his rejection of the monarchical claims supported by patriarchalist theorists such as Sir Robert Filmer.

27 Milton scholars and political theorists alike have struggled with whether republican thought was more or less inviting for women. See Norbrook on gendered hierarchy and republican thought (483).

Works Cited


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