

Exonerating Eve: The Brontës' Reversal of the Masculinist Metanarrative

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Abstract

For millennia, women have been demonized and denigrated through the metanarrative of Eve's collaboration with Satan in Paradise as proof of women's inherent moral inferiority as the progenitors of the "Original Sin." Grandstanding poets such as Milton with their grandiose epics such as *Paradise Lost* have perpetuated and propelled the myth of the "second sex." Thus, one half of humanity has been condemned and confined to their "place" indoors and reduced to the service of the "superior sex" – until the revolutionary age of the Romantics attacked all grand narratives. The two Brontë sisters, Charlotte and Emily, for instance, tried to upend the narrative of subjugation by championing the egalitarian struggle of Eve and Lucifer over the hierarchical order of Adam and God. The subversive strategy of delegitimizing the metanarrative of the Original Sin frequents in *Shirley* and haunts the gothic landscapes of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, where the female central characters, Jane and Cathy respectively, undercut and undermine their feminine performativity by bending the will of their male counterparts. Deconstructing the abovementioned novels, this paper aims to demonstrate how the Brontë sisters actually attempted to unravel the metanarrative of the Fall from within – to hail Eve as the genuine "hero" – and prove how the feminine intellect is at par, if not superior, to that of the masculine.

Keywords: Gender Archetypes, Metanarrative, Deconstruction, Counterpoint

For millennia, women have been demonized and denigrated for being the instrument of Satan and condemned as the progenitor of the Original Sin. Using the metanarrative of mankind's journey from innocence to experience brought about by Eve's collaboration with the serpent in the Garden of Eden as proof of women's inherent moral inferiority, one half of humanity has been confined to their "place" indoors and were expected to live as slaves in all but name, reducing their entire existence to the service of their male counterparts. Unable to unshackle themselves of such pseudo-spiritual and time-honored tales, women kept rotting away in the dark corners of households and each attempt to revolt or gain intellectual recognition was ruthlessly quashed and slandered as sorcery or witchcraft, symbolized by the *malleus maleficarum* of the middle ages. Grand poets such as Milton with their grandiose epics such as *Paradise Lost* have perpetuated the grandstanding myth of the subordinate sex until the age of enlightenment when all grand narratives came under



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attack. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* have shown, two Brontë sisters, Charlotte and Emily, tried to absorb these Miltonic and patriarchal narratives of subjugation by championing the egalitarian struggle of Eve and Lucifer over the hierarchical order of Adam and God. In *Shirley*, the eponymous heroine brings the issue to the forefront by asserting that Milton miserably failed to comprehend the depths of Eve's intentions but merely gave into the archetypal oversimplification of feminine character. In reality, a woman is simultaneously compliant and assertive – a complex mosaic of reason as well as passion – fluidly shuffling between personas in keeping with necessity and ability. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* demonstrate this fact where the heroines, Jane and Catherine, never quite conform to the etiquettes and elegance expected of them. Ultimately, they emerge victorious as they bend the will of their male counterparts, living or dead. Analyzing the three above mentioned novels, this essay aims to explore how the Brontë sisters actually attempted to reverse the metanarrative of the fall from Paradise – to exonerate Eve and hail her as the genuine “hero” – to prove how the feminine intellect and will is far superior to that of the masculine because, despite all the injustices toward them, women are not vengeful to their male counterparts, because if they were, humankind would have long gone extinct.

In her incorporation of the cubist style in poetry, Gertrude Stein seems to wonder about “Patriarchal poetry their origin their history” (Nelson 263) which is inextricably linked with *The Bible* and its masculinist readings espoused by the agents of Western literary tradition such as Milton whose literal and metaphorical blindness toward one half of the human race crippled the women's imagination and asphyxiated their creativity for centuries. Thoroughly deserving of the epithet “covering Cherub ... the great inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles” bestowed on him by Harold Bloom, the paradigm that Milton's bogey successfully established had slammed the door shut on women who endeavored to explore new territories – artistically, economically, and even psycho-sexually (191). What is ironic is that the seemingly heaven-inspired poetry not only convinces men, who are all too willing to accept anything, sublime or sedentary, that hails them as superior and enslaves the opposite sex, but that Milton's verse hypnotizes its female readers and convinces them of their inherent decadence and inferiority through the authority of the grandstanding father/author – the bastion of intellectual patriarchy – as manifested in Virginia Woolf's recorded impressions on *Paradise Lost* in 1918. Despite being aware of the masculinist propaganda perpetuated in epic-proportions, the paragon of feminism is mesmerized by the “wonderful, beautiful, and masterly descriptions of angels' bodies, battles, flights, dwelling places” which makes the androgynous Shakespeare, the greatest poet of all time “troubled, personal, hot and imperfect” (5-6). The sheer grandiosity of Milton's poetry leaves Woolf feeling “puzzled, excluded, inferior, and even a little guilty,” albeit, indeed because of, the epic's cosmological condemnation of womankind and confinement to their mediocre and meager roles and places under the scarlet stone of subjugation (5-6).

Since this subjugation is facilitated by a masculinist myth which slanders the foremother Eve as the progenitor of Sin and Death, the myth itself demands deconstruction. Why does Eve let herself be beguiled by Satan in the guise of a serpent? More importantly, why does she eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge which precipitates the fall of mankind on earth and, by co-damnation, to the anguish of gestation and maternity? Eve's is a quasi-parallel story to that of Prometheus who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity which ensured the mastery of mankind over hostile animals and prosperous propagation of the species. Similarly, without the knowledge brought about by Eve's "Sin," *Homo sapiens* would still have been lagging in the dire animalistic crudity. However, unlike Prometheus, Eve is not proclaimed as a hero in the patriarchal metanarrative but an archetypal villain of disobedience on a par with the Prince of Darkness himself, and the only conceivable reason behind it seems to be her femininity. In spite of the condemnation of God(s)¹, if Eve were masculine like Prometheus, her cosmological conviction would have been overturned long ago. Thus, as Simone de Beauvoir described her experience of the four women imprisoned in a dark subterranean cave in Tunisia, mastered by one man, shackled by their subordinate roles of cooking, needling, knotting, and rearing children, the women have been enshrouded by their anatomy – the womb, the shrine of procreation – had become the tomb where women were interred in immanence without any hope of transcendence (77–78). What are women to do to reclaim the minimal footing and sense of belonging in society in order to survive? The answer appears to lie in the effort to refute, and if possible, reverse Milton's bogey and the associated patriarchal assumptions. As the Danish author Isak Dinesen declares:

Adam had a time whether, long or short, when he could wander about on a fresh and peaceful earth ... But poor Eve found him there, with all his claims upon her, the moment she looked into the world. That is a grudge that woman has always had against the Creator: she feels that she is entitled to have that epoch of paradise back for herself ... Thus these young witches got everything they wanted as in a catoptric image [and understood] that no woman should allow herself to be possessed by any male but the devil ... So there you find, not only the old witches of Macbeth ... but even young ladies with faces smooth as flowers ... All this they got from reading – in the orthodox witches' manner – the book of Genesis backwards (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 187).

Many women have (and still are) attempted to reverse the metanarrative, trying to withstand the slings and arrows of patriarchal backlash, suppression, and demonization. For example, Charlotte Brontë created *Shirley*, a novel still shamefully underrated by the critical male intelligentsia because of its blatant accusation of Milton's cosmology's depthlessness which is required to understand a complex female character such as Eve. The woman-bashing scholarly society had hitherto seen women not with a mind and a soul but in terms of their flesh and ability

to shed sweat and blood only in the service of their pen-pecking molesters (or, male-masters). Satirically reverential of the jaw-dropping poetry he has produced, Shirley, the central character of Brontë's novel, asks some crucial questions: "Milton was great; but was he good? His brain was right; how was his heart?" (270). She understands that in order to empathize with or properly understand someone, one has to have a heart, an inclination to put oneself in another's shoes, which Milton was devoid of along with the eyes to see through the façade created as a pretext to denounce everywoman for a crime she has not committed. In her slightly comic acrimony, Shirley illustrates this in breathtaking detail:

Milton tried to see the first woman; but, Cary, he saw her not It was his cook that he saw; or it was Mrs. Gill, as I have seen her, making custards, in the heat of summer, in the cool dairy... preparing a cold collation for the rectors – preserves and "dulcet creams;" puzzled "what choice to choose for delicacy best; what order so contrived as not to mix tastes, not well-joined, inelegant, but bring taste after taste, upheld with kindest change. (270)

Mocking Book V of *Paradise Lost* where Eve "entertains" Adam and his cohort of "Angel guests ... / ... on hospitable thoughts intent" a dainty feast consisting of delicacies as "dulcet creams," Shirley reveals how shockingly apathetic Milton was to Eve's status as a fellow Edenic creature. It is as if Eve's sole purpose is to serve Adam as the Angels' sole purpose is to serve God (*PL* 5.328–332, 347). In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë presents an alternative myth to that of Milton and the book of Genesis. Her prototype of Eve is not the docile submissive "half doll, half angel" (296), but a spirit similar to that of Lucifer whose revolutionary fervor for breaking the bondage of subordination is capable of blinding, or at least deceiving, the Omnipotent even if it lasts a short while. Shirley's Eve is the mother of the immortal Titans whose audacity is in no way less daring than Prometheus:

I would beg to remind [Milton] that the first men of the earth were Titans, and that Eve was their mother; from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus ... The first woman's breast that heaved with life on this world yielded the daring which could contend with Omnipotence, the strength which could bear a thousand years of bondage, the vitality which could feed that vulture death through uncounted ages, the unexhausted life and uncorrupted excellence, sisters to immortality, which, after millenniums of crimes, struggles, and woes, could conceive and bring forth a Messiah. The first woman was heaven-born. Vast was the heart whence gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations, and grand the undegenerate head where rested the consort-crown of creation. I saw – I now see – a woman-Titan (270)

It is not difficult to decode that here Shirley speaks of Eve not as a person but as the feminine spirit. Milton the great bard cannot find it in his heart to forgive either Eve or his daughter. But the vastness of Eve's heart forgives him as well as all his sons –

the patriarchal slavers – who have bound the wings of Eve in fetters. In all honesty, if Eve had not forgiven Milton and “*man-kind*” in general, she would never have borne him in her womb in dire agony, nurtured him with nourishing breast-milk, “borne him in her arms and in her heart. But for her the race of the world would have trampled him under foot [like] a squashed boneless snail” (Joyce 28). If he had a little morsel of profundity of soul, he would have been conscious of the fact that the Messiah was conceived immaculately. Even the Son of God needed a mother to bring him into the world as Sojourner Truth had pointed out: “How came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him.” The embittered former African American slave added the challenging question for everyman to ponder, “Man, where was your part?” (Marable 68).

Being the sole claimant of Eve’s body and soul, Adam, it seems to Eve, is the absolute master/God/author of her existence which is self-evident in her speech of surrender: “My Author and Disposer, what thou bidd’st / Unargu’d I obey; so God ordains, / God is thy Law, thou mine:” (Milton 4.635-637). Being thus overshadowed by the pantheon of patriarchy, Eve dreams of dismantling the shackles of the garden of Eden and flying to escape her subjection:

Up to the Clouds ... I flew, and underneath beheld
The Earth outstretch immense, a prospect wide
And various: wondering at my flight and change
To this high exaltation;” (5.86-90).

Plagued this plight, any human being would do what Eve does – make a pact with the devil’s egalitarianism in hopes of overthrowing God’s hierarchical order. Satan appears to be the champion of the downtrodden, refusing to surrender to the “tyranny of heaven,” according to Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* (3.1.57). Likewise in the play *Cain*, Byron’s Lucifer rejects the autocratic politics of Paradise and offers autonomy and knowledge for all – the precondition of power. In *Paradise Lost* itself, Satan rises up in revolt against the divine decree of Primogeniture which accords the “Son of God” preferential treatment, elevating him above the highest of archangels. In protest of God’s injustice, he delivers a daring speech which can become a part of any liberal politician’s rhetoric:

Who can reason then and right assume
Monarchy over such as live by right
His equals if, power and splendor less,
In freedom equal?
 Much less for this to be our lord
And look for adoration to th’ abuse
Of those imperial titles which assert
Our being ordained to govern, not to serve? (*PL* 5.794–802)

Eve sides with Lucifer not because she is seduced by him, as many critics claim; she agrees that no single creature of God should be given mastery over the other.

Eve's joining of forces with Satan is neither carnal nor covetous but ideological. Disinherited by her God/father/author through cosmic constriction of primogeniture and coverture, subsumption of a woman's properties by her husband upon marriage, education to be the slaves of the "superior sex," Eve and Satan are united in their grievance. In her poem "Doubt," Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, niece of the legendary S T Coleridge (but not less able), confesses being struck by epiphanies when she saw "no friend in God – in Satan's host no foes" (40). In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Mary Wollstonecraft divulges her impression of the "lovely pair" tucked in their snug state of innocence as "an emotion similar to what we feel when children are playing or animals sporting," and unable to bear the lack of knowledge in the state of pure bliss, Wollstonecraft inadvertently thanks Eve for liberating humanity from the lobotomy of God's tyranny. She concludes, "I have, with conscious dignity or Satanic pride, turned to hell for sublime subjects" (25). Combined with the thirst for sublimity, Wollstonecraft's dignity and pride cements the position of female authors with Shirley's Titanic Prometheus Eve. In fact, the anti-Miltonic Eve created by Charlotte Brontë in the shadow of her recently deceased sister, Emily, who herself had penned the feminist *Jane Eyre* which was denounced by Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, and many female defectors to patriarchy for having "the tone of mind and thought which has authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*" (173). In *Shirley*, the heroines Caroline and Shirley herself find expression of their pent-up rage in the revolutionary fervor of the similarly exploited starving workers, smashing the machines of domination, resembling the Prometheanism espoused by Satan and Eve.

Now, an obvious question remains unanswered. Was it worth the trouble for Eve to go out of her way to dare disobey God's patriarchal order to gain emancipation which resulted in her ultimate failure? Would she not be better off accepting her fate, remaining docile and passive to Adam's hegemony? The answer is no, because as Brontë had vehemently asserted in *Shirley*, "All men, taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies, they are intensely so" (142), coupled with Shirley's declaration that "[men] misapprehend [women], both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend" (296), demonstrates how women are defined and treated by men. If women are servile, they are labeled as "good," and when they rise up in revolt, the women become evil, which is exactly what happens to Eve and all her daughters² living amongst us today.

In addition, *Shirley* illustrates what happens to women who surrender to their fate of servitude in the form of Caroline's long-dead aunt, the wife of the rector Mr. Helstone, unsurprisingly named *Mary Cave*, a spirit manifested in the aforementioned cave-dwelling Tunisian women. Mary Cave had died of neglect because belonging to "an inferior order of existence" (376) she was not allowed to challenge the secondary roles assigned to women in society and engage in a profession

which would relieve the deep-seated angst which racks women psychologically and economically. Disillusioned, dispossessed of all the expectations endowed by her caged imagination, she “gradually, took her leave of him and of life, and there was only a still, beautiful-featured mould of clay left, cold and white, in the conjugal couch, he felt his bereavement” (46). It shows how the institution of marriage hinges upon the basic principle of female subjugation, and also how women starve psychologically for a lack of purpose.

Even without the matrimony, women suffer from marginalization and alienation which is depicted through the “old maids” Miss *Mann* (the name symbolizes how women in the patriarchal society are desexed and re-sexed for implicit insubordination) and Miss Ainely whom Caroline visits to learn the formula of remaining un-commodified in the matrimonial market. However, what she experiences horrifies her. Miss Mann remains a spinster to whom “a crumb is not thrown once a year,” and like the exploited workers of mercantile capitalism, she has to exist “ahungered and athirst to [feminine] famine” (154). Miss Ainely, on the other hand, is more optimistic; nevertheless, her optimism emerges from an illusion of a sense of belonging through religious devotion and self-denial. In order to lay claim to a place in the dark dank corners of male-hegemonic community, women have to basically deny their sheer identity and rights as equals of men.

Abhorred and petrified of the state of these women, Caroline sees no other option but to offer herself up as a sacrificial lamb or a good in the bizarre bazaar of brides. Even so, she cannot be willingly enslaved by the man she loves, her distant cousin Robert Moore the mill owner, because “‘forward’ was the device stamped upon his soul; bit poverty curbed him,” and he could not afford to marry a portionless girl as Caroline (26). Rejected by Robert, Caroline is not enraged but fatally grief-stricken due to her unsuitability to make a niche in this inhospitable world. In dire despair she questions, “Where is my place in the world?” (149). The third-person narrator, incensed by Caroline’s desperation, seems to insert herself as the condemning voice rebuking Caroline’s feminine nature which causes her to love without being asked to:

A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation, a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts, and would vindictively repay it afterwards by the thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret ... You expected bread, and you have got a stone: break your teeth on it, and don’t shriek because the nerves are martyred; do not doubt that your mental stomach – if you have such a thing – is strong as an ostrich’s; the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind; in time, after your hand and arm have

swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. For the whole remnant of your life, if you survive the test—some, it is said, die under it—you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive. This you are not aware of, perhaps, at the time, and so cannot borrow courage of that hope. (89–90)

This embittered description of the apathetic *maledom* seems to foreshadow the Nietzschean maxim “Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger” (99). The passage shows how the woman’s voice has been silenced over the ages, asking them to sink into the solipsism of self-loathing, assuring them of the survival of the sufferer. This gradual crucifixion of everywoman mocks the Christian consecration or transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus – the Messiah Milton so adored – brought into the world by Eve (or at least, one of her daughters) whom Milton so abhorred. In *Shirley*, the transformation is reversed into stone and scorpion that offer women poisoned death instead of salvation and eternal life.

For a while, Caroline seems to obey the commands of this voice which rudely awakens her to the reality of her existence. Unable to mentally stomach the stone of subjection, she starves herself and physically dwindles toward death. This reminds us of the “mad scene” in *Wuthering Heights* where Catherine commits to a hunger strike in opposition to Linton’s misbehavior with Heathcliff. Starvation is a form of protest waged by disenfranchised peoples universally, regardless of time and space. Many psychologists opine that the development of anorexia nervosa in young girls is an unconscious self-abnegating protest against growing up a girl – akin to Freudian “penis envy” in response to menstruation which is labeled as a “curse” and a gradual disempowerment in comparison to the boys’ mastery. Ironically, self-starvation is sanctioned by patriarchy in reaction to female appetite which is partially blamed as the reason for the Original Fall. Caroline’s starvation is carefully juxtaposed with the voracious appetite of the curates whose omnivorous palates are not condemned by the society which is famished due to the war-time depressed mercantile British economy in 1811-12 when the novel is set. Furthermore, Caroline’s contrition is associated with the despairing dramatization of Eve’s admission of guilt to Adam in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Drama of Exile”: “I adjure thee, put me straight away, / Together with my name! / Sweet, punish me! / ... I also, after tempting, writhe on the ground, / And I would feed on ashes from thy hand,” exposing the depth with which the denigration of the “second sex” is complete (C. Brontë 185). To return to whether Eve could simply yield to male mastery, one must state that from the discussion above, it is safe to assume that the oppression of women is inevitable. It is certainly preferable to go down fighting rather than waning into nothingness from paralysis which is the case with Caroline. Therefore, on this account, Eve is exonerated from all false charges laid on her.

However, yet another question remains unanswered; was Eve’s fall conceived

by fatalism or free will, in relation to the Calvinistic ideal of determinism and Puritanical concept of self-determination? If the Calvinistic ideal of determinism is taken to be the truth, it is God who is the culprit in the myth of origin because it was His intention all along that Eve would take the fall for His sadistic design. This deliberate dispossession and defilement of feminine nature by making her the devil's sojourn was brilliantly scrutinized by Robert Graves in his *The White Goddess*. Defiant of the monotheistic myth that Milton champions, Graves argues:

The new God claimed to be dominant as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, pure Holiness, pure Good, pure Logic, able to exist without the aid of woman; but it was natural ... to allay the woman and the rival permanently against him. The outcome was philosophical dualism with all the tragicomic woes attendant on spiritual dichotomy. If the true God, the God of the Logos, was pure thought, pure good, whence came evil and error? (456).

God is trapped by his own fallacious logic; if He is pure good, He can neither create nor conceive evil which would, in effect, mean that He has lost control of His own creation and cannot foster total obedience.

Even if God had embodied and created the dialectics of virtue and vice, and if Adam and Eve lived in an idyllic state of ignorance, surely, they could not be expected to abide by God's commandments word for word. If a half-trained dog fails to fetch the bone once, certainly the dog's owner would not damn him for eternity. Indeed, the dog's owner would try to prevent the dog from doing something which would hurt him, and the same responsibility falls on God. When Eve was approaching the forbidden fruit, assuming that she did it of her own accord, it was imperative for God to step in and protect her from Satan's influence. Why does He not do so? This leads us to the question: "Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not Omnipotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is He neither able nor willing? Then why call Him God?" (in Thrasher 434). On both counts, God has some questions to answer, and shamefully condemning Eve for all the Eve-ill has been equally satanic on the part of patriarchy.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Brontë analyzes the feminine fall from two perspectives. Firstly, the divinely ordained fall of Catherine Earnshaw from Hell into Heaven. Secondly, a willing fall of Isabella from Heaven or Thrushcross Grange to Hell or Wuthering Heights.

With its heap of dead cats, aggressive bitch with her squealing puppies, and extremely inhospitable, hostile inhabitants, the "vast oak dresser [extending] to the very roof ... laden with oatcakes, clusters of legs of beef, mutton, and ham ... sundry villainous old guns, and a couple of horse-pistols, ... three gaudily-painted canisters ... and immense pewter dishes," Wuthering Heights may appear to "civilized" men

like Lockwood as the den of a one-eyed Polyphemus from whence there is no return – “a perfect misanthropist’s Heaven,” where God’s order has been dismantled only to be replaced by hellish anarchy (E. Brontë 5–6). In the beginning of the novel, although the residents of the abode, Heathcliff, Hareton, and Catherine Jr., are partially related, the rage, resentment, and ruthlessness among them, devoid of the heavenly hierarchical structure, radiates the demonic thirst for equality. The devilish dynamics are developed even further by Emily Brontë in the hopes of creating a reverse origin myth, when Lockwood, along with his diabolical hosts, is engulfed with snowfall resembling a “billowy white ocean” which recalls the “deep snow and ice” of Milton’s abyss,

A gulf profound as that *Serbonian* bog

...

Where Armies whole have sunk: the parching Air
Burns froze, and cold performs th’ effect of Fire
Thither by harpy-footed Furies hail’d,
At certain revolutions all the damn’d
Are brought:

...

to starve in Ice. (2.592-600)

The third hellish element discovered by Lockwood is the revolution espoused by the icy-fingered incarnation of the storm, out of the swinging branches and swirling snow, the ghost of Catherine Earnshaw/Heathcliff/Linton who has been “a waif for twenty years,” protesting against the patriarchal sermon of “Jabes Branderheim” (E. Brontë 32).

In her lifetime, for Catherine Earnshaw, raised as she is as in the fashion of a wild untamed nature goddess, along with her brother/lover Heathcliff, the Heights looks like a perfect miscreants’ heaven. In fact, in conversation with Nelly Dean, Catherine seems to have blurred the distinction between the two: “What is heaven? Where is hell?” She elaborates:

If I were in heaven, Nelly, I should be extremely miserable ... I dreamt once that I was there ... that heaven did not seem to be my home, and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights where I woke sobbing for joy. (102)

This is why the witch-child Catherine’s ghost breaks the conventions and expectations of a myth and haunts not her place of death, the Grange, but the Heights. But what causes her to flee from her heavenly niche and take refuge in the Grange by marrying Edgar Linton? The death of Old Mr. Earnshaw upon which event, the helm of the household is inherited by Hindley as the new *pater familias* through Primogeniture – God’s hierarchical law on which Satan wages war in Milton’s metanarrative. In

addition, Hindley brings home his bride, Frances – the paragon of patriarchal ladies – an “angel of the house” who could not be better conceived than Coventry Patmore himself. Her dread of following the model set by Frances starts gnawing away at Catherine’s free soul. Since Catherine is Eve’s descendant and Mephistophelian Heathcliff’s sojourn, she falls from hell into the heaven of Thrushcross Grange. Here, they experience what could be described as the embodiment of Milton’s paradise: “a splendid place carpeted with crimson ... a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the centre, and shimmering with little soft tapers ... we should have thought ourselves in heaven!” (60). The Grange is everything the Heights is not, and it certainly makes an impression on Catherine. She is ushered into this heaven with a bite of the bulldog Skulker – a totemic animal which rightly recognizes a hellish invader in heaven. “Look ... how her foot bleeds,” Edgar Linton ejaculates. “She may be lamed for life,” Mrs. Linton cries out (63). The description of profuse bleeding bears connotations of menstruation in a pubescent girl, which is also tied in with marriage, child-bearing, and ultimately death, as foreshadowed by Frances’ death alongside Hareton’s birth. Therefore, by trespassing upon the Grange, Catherine has crossed the threshold in her journey from innocence to experience, as Eve had done before her by eating the forbidden fruit of knowledge.

Having been doted on and “cured” by the genteel society, Catherine learns to adopt their mannerisms and maintain a ladylike persona. Later on, she accepts Linton’s proposal of marriage because Heathcliff’s inadmissibility into the refined culture due to his frightful appearance so widens the gulf with Catherine that he is now “beneath” her. Despite being depicted as “soft,” “weak,” slender, fair-haired, effeminate looking, Edgar manages to vanquish the “tall, athletic” robust masculine figure of Heathcliff, and cage the wild free soul of Catherine (E. Brontë 122), for Edgar’s power, as that of God in Genesis, originates with “the word” (John 1:1). Edgar does not need a masculine physique, because his lordship is guaranteed by titles, documents, books, leases, wills, testaments, and all the paraphernalia by which God’s hierarchy is passed on over millennia. As “the soft thing [Edgar] ... possessed the power to depart from [Catherine] as much as a cat possesses the power to leave a mouse half killed or a bird half eaten,” he proceeds to totally devour her with the full thrust of the patriarchal machine (91). When, surrendering to the Miltonic God’s and Adam’s victory, Eve concedes that feminine “beauty is excelled by manly grace / And wisdom” (4. 490–91), this capitulation and subsequent repression of desire, in the Freudian sense, foreshadows Catherine’s neurosis.

Like Caroline in *Shirley*, Catherine develops anorexia nervosa, but the latter’s is in response to her pregnancy – to starve the alien invader of her body – giving birth to whom would be Catherine’s doom. In a rare moment of compassion, Milton honors Eve by calling her “the mother of human race,” although her motherhood has resulted from her Sin (4.475). However, motherhood is the ultimate fragmentation of one’s own identity, and since her identity has been splintered many times before

resulting in her obsessively inscribing her own name “CATHERINE EARNSHAW ... CATHERINE HEATHCLIFF ... CATHERINE LINTON” (E. Brontë 24-25), she dwindles through starvation, renounces her will to live, and as Frances Earnshaw before her, dies.

In contrast to Catherine who really has no other option but to fall, Isabella's fall resulting from her elopement is completely self-determined – as she chooses to ignore the warning of Catherine and Edgar – a conventional fall according to the Miltonic Puritanical perspective from the paradise of Thrushcross Grange to the inferno of Wuthering Heights. Isabella has been victimized by her devotion to romantic tales, mistaking appearance for reality, dark and well-built Heathcliff for “an honorable soul” instead of a “fierce, pitiless, wolfish man,” she makes her getaway from the prison of her polished household in search of another but what follows could never have been imagined by her (131). Her puzzled questioning “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not is he a devil?” (174) summarizes her predicaments precisely, but Nelly's remark “that conscience had turned [Heathcliff's] heart to an earthly hell” (411), echoing *Paradise Lost*, illustrates the magnitude of Miltonic malice a woman has to bear for taking an earthbound flight with the devil. When she escapes Wuthering Heights with a child in her belly, she giggles like Bertha Mason, the madwoman in Rochester's attic, and is so effectively banished by her brother and Brontë, the author, that she is practically dead to the readers of this novel. So, no matter which direction a woman takes, the double bind of patriarchal tradition does not let her get away without tearing off her legs. As Emily Dickinson beautifully portrays, ...looking oppositely / For the site of the Kingdom of Heaven” (#959, lines 15–16), the fallen Eves in our society are forced to be “Born – Bridalled – Shrouded / In a day” (#57, lines 10–11).

Now as we realize that for women living in patriarchal societies the fall is inevitable, it is time to turn to the last question this essay would attempt to answer: Is there any cracks through the commanding columns of patriarchy through which a woman can slip through and still survive? The answer is, yes, but there is no shortcut to the path to freedom, as shown in *Jane Eyre*. Women have to persist, clench their teeth and fists, persevere through the ordeals of the female Odyssey, to be as shrewd as Penelope who outsmarts all her suitors, display the masculine masquerade of passivity, but never let go of their passion, their repressed aggression, and ultimately, capitalize on their will to freedom, as Jane Eyre never lets go of her ire, never gives into the patriarchal heirs, and transforms herself into the air of sublimity – air which women can breathe in deep and taste the sweetness of freedom. This is what makes *Jane Eyre* a potentially subversive text; it was an audacious attempt which critics, patriarchal agents of both sexes, tried to burn under the fume of criticism and controversy – to no avail – because Eve's spirit, the self-evident right of women's equality, liberty, and pursuit of happiness is indomitable. This is exactly what Jane represents. Despite being tempted to “fade away into the forest dim” from the imprisonment of existence, Jane withstands all the patriarchal pitfalls of submission

and prevails (Keats, line 10). She overcomes a series of ordeals and finally finds an equal footing with the man she loves, and through the miraculous rejuvenation of Rochester's amputated body, Jane cures him of his false sense of superiority.

Captivated in the masculine mansion of her late surrogate father, Uncle Reed, Jane hides behind the scarlet curtains and gazes at Bewick's *History of British Birds*, which shows that her imagination is analogous to Eve's desire to fly and escape the constraints of society. However, her evil cousin John Reed flings the heavy volume at her in a shocking reminder of Eve's earthbound flight which engulfs her in raging fire – the fire of rebellion she inherited from Eve – and she lets it loose “like any other rebel slave . . . resolved to go all lengths” (C. Brontë 14). Like a doting mother, Mrs. Reed takes the side of her son soon to take up the helm of mastery, and like a true Miltonic daughter imprisons Jane in the red-room – a patriarchal death chamber – haunted by the ghost of the late master Reed where her “endurance broke down” (22). Alone and isolated, Jane confronts her inner soul on the “great looking glass” reflecting her Eve-like revolutionary selfhood which reveals the extent of injustice against her: “my heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I dreamed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed and suffocated” (24). The entirety of her pent up frustration explodes on Mrs. Reed when “an invisible bond had burst” as she “struggled out into un hoped-for liberty” (53). In a vindictive assertion of her true spirit, Jane denounces Mrs. Reed due to the latter's association with the “black pillar[s]” and “carved mask[s]” of patriarchy such as Mr. Brocklehurst who runs an institution, aptly named *Lowood*, where women like saintly Mrs. Temple and ascetic Helen Burns are starved and murdered both physically and psychologically.

When Jane wriggles out of Brocklehurst's dungeon of death, she has a minor scratch as she wears the mask of docility, but her ulterior motive of gaining equality is unscathed. Compared to *Shirley's* Caroline, despite all the disadvantages of femininity and orphanhood, Jane is fortunate that she at least has the mobility that Caroline so desperately yearns for. Jane moves from Lowood to Thornfield with optimism for a new beginning. However, as the name *Thornfield* suggests, here she would be biblically crowned with thorns. Whether she can bear this crown and still maintain a sane head would define the outcome of Jane's march to freedom.

At first glance, it seems as though Thornfield is the place where Jane would acquire fulfillment. In their first Romanticized encounter, Brontë reverses Milton's myth of Eve's fall preceding Adam's; here, Rochester falls first, both literally and figuratively, injures himself and is compelled to lean on Jane's shoulder which symbolizes men's inability to rise without women's help. In fact, Rochester acknowledges Jane's unfettered intellect, “the resolute, wild free thing” which is manifested in her drawings. “Those eyes in Evening Star you must have seen in a dream,” says Rochester in utter amazement, “And what meaning is that in their solemn depth? And who taught you to paint the wind?” (C. Brontë 193). He realizes that Jane's spirit is as

airy as her name suggests – the wind which cannot be mastered. In reciprocation, Jane sees through his façade of a gypsy soothsayer and declares, “With the ladies you must have managed well, but you did not act the character of a gypsy with me” (308). Their mutual understanding reaches the climax in the first betrothal scene when, in a moment of utter despair and ire, Jane un.masks herself of the temporary visage of gentility and divulges in an unforgettable assertion of integrity:

“Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! – I have just as much soul as you, – and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty, and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now hard for me to leave you. I am not talking to you through the medium of custom, conventionalities, or even of mortal flesh: – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet equal, – as we are!” (386).

Analogous to Mary Wollstonecraft’s declaration of women as intellectual equals of men, Jane here vehemently debunks the Miltonic myth that God has made men spiritually superior. Men and women are equals which Rochester admits, “My bride is here, because my *equal* is here, and my *likeness*” (387, *Italics mine*).

As astonishingly as this egalitarian claim is, Rochester suffers from a sense of guilt because he knows that his claim is not honest. He retains superiority not for being the lord of Thornfield but for his knowledge about sexual congress, as signified by Adèle Varens, his daughter begotten with Céline, as well as the hitherto undiscovered double of Jane’s, Bertha Mason. It becomes obvious immediately after the betrothal scene as Rochester treats Jane as a virginal possession soon to be overpowered by defloration. “It is your time now, little tyrant,” he announces shamelessly, “but it will be mine presently: and when once I have fairly seized you ... I’ll just – figuratively speaking – attach you to a chain like this” (412). When Rochester threatens Jane with domestication via lustful domination, she feels boxed in, because marriage is still a despotic institution based on the premise of inequality. Her anxiety fractures Jane’s psyche and alienates her from herself. When she looks into the mirror after wearing the wedding gown, she does not see herself but “a robed and veiled figure, so unlike [her] usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger” (C. Brontë 437).

But she remains uncharacteristically subdued and unable to break out of this prison and passion. Just when she needs her the most, the incarnation of Jane’s recalcitrant *élan*, her dark double, Bertha Mason, comes to her rescue. The mad bad Bertha’s incendiary tendencies echo Jane’s own rancor at Gateshead where she unleashed her fury on the supercilious Reeds like “rat,” “mad cat,” “bad animal” (9). Laughing the “low, slow, ha! ha!” Bertha reminds us of Eve’s sojourn, the devil’s sarcastic laughter at God’s failure to hold onto his preordained order; she tears off Jane’s bridal gown and attempts to burn Rochester in his sleep. Finally, she provides Jane

the justification for escape and self-preservation on principle devoid of passion to *Marsh End*, again, suggestive of the end to Jane's long march to freedom.

Under the protective wings of her newly-discovered relatives Diana, Mary, and St. John Rivers, the latter finding Jane employment at a girls' school, it appears as though she has really found the autonomy and fulfillment she, along with her foremother Eve, was looking for, when she wonders, "Is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool's paradise ... or to be a schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?" (548). Certainly, it is a rhetorical question which sounds dangerously similar to Satan's assertion in *Paradise Lost*, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (1.263). It all comes crashing down, of course, when St John proposes marriage. Pressed by her cousin to come to a decision, as she deliberates with herself, Jane understands that the work ethic of "you are formed for labor, not for love," that John follows will wring her wings of passion and leave her with nothing but servitude of reason (C. Brontë 613). "I must disown half my nature ... force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation," she reflects, and remain "as a wife... always restrained... the sole helpmate that [he] can influence efficiently, and retain absolutely till death" (619). Marrying John, therefore, would mean to replace the crown of thorns with a path of thorns, to reject the Dionysian master for an Apollonian one, to substitute the Devil with Adam. As it is foreshadowed by the tales of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Catherine and Isabella in *Wuthering Heights*, the choices of principle and passion taken in isolation embody the slippery slope of enslavement unless the woman gains the upper-hand and bends her counterparts to her will, which is exactly what Jane does.

As she telepathically hears the call of "time to assume ascendancy" and rushes to Thornfield, two events precipitate in actualizing Jane's equality with Rochester (C. Brontë 640). First, her stumbling upon a huge fortune from her uncle in Madeira making her economically emancipated; and second, Rochester's disfiguration, which is, as Richard Chase had termed, "a symbolic castration" (468). Since Rochester has gouged out his "full falcon eye" which shows him the mirage of superiority, as predicted by Jane, he can in effect *see* the profundity in Jane's character, as well as those of all of Eve's daughters. Nonetheless, now, as Jane tells him, Rochester is "green and vigorous. Plants will grow about [his] roots whether [he] asks them or not" (C. Brontë 678). After the marriage, Rochester is miraculously healed of all his injuries which is a scathing satire on Milton's blindness, his incapacity for empathy, and thus, his inability to overcome his own disabilities. In this equality, we can also realize Jane's superiority, and in essence, the superiority of all the daughters of Eve. For, despite being wronged by men throughout the history of *mankind*, women still love their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Even if the opportunity is provided, women do not take revenge upon their masculine sojourns, as portrayed in the characters of Caroline, Shirley, Catherine, Isabella, and Jane Eyre. In their mercy, women gain magnanimity and reverse the misogynist Milton's myth. Here then,

we have the fulfillment of Eve's vision – the revision of the myth of Origins to help women unreel Adam's Pythonic constriction. At long last, women can be convinced that they had “fall'n by mistaken [patriarchal] rules,” unearth their own *graves* of immanence and ascent to the ever-radiant light of transcendence (Finch, line 52).

So, would Milton's death give life to women, as Sir Leslie Stephen's death gave Virginia Woolf a career? Absolutely, said the Brontë sisters, and *Jane Eyre* is a living testament to this. Since women in patriarchal society are fallen creatures with their destiny set in stone, symbolized by Mary Cave, Miss Mann, and Miss Ainely in *Shirley*, and Catherine and Isabelle in *Wuthering Heights*, they must stand up and fight for their right, as Eve had done, rather than resigning to fate. If a woman can find the strength to withstand all the lashes and backlashes of masculine misogyny, as *Jane Eyre* does, they would bring about a revolution to overthrow the patriarchal status quo, as Margaret Oliphant reluctantly admits in her scathing review: “Ten years ago ... the only true love worth having was that ... chivalrous true love which consecrated all womankind ... when suddenly, without warning, *Jane Eyre* stole upon the scene, and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 337). Any revolution, as Marx certainly knew, would claim its own quota of souls. The first soul feminist revolution must desecrate is that of Milton's, and *Jane Eyre* being, according to Elizabeth Rigby, “preeminently an anti-Christian composition ... The tone of mind and thought which has fostered Chartism and rebellion” (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 337), does exactly that, along with all the women associated with producing *The Women's Bible* and the magazine called *Lucifer the Light-bearer* in the 19th century. Eve is redeemed, resurrected, and redefined as a Promethean Titan for all she has done for women's independence and the survival of humankind.

Notes

1. God(s) assumes that in patriarchal societies, other men play the role of surrogate God.
2. Eve's daughters mentioned in this essay are not her literal daughters, but all women “descending” from Eve, and thus, automatically labeled as moral inferiors by patriarchy.

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