

Avi Silva

Professor Scrofano

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Adam and Eve as Tragic Heroes

In terms of tragedies, it's hard to get more archetypal than man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Its theme of the first men dooming themselves to destruction is not out of place among classical tales of doom- Pandora's box, Prometheus's theft of fire, and Oedipus or Ulysses's needlessly destructive attempts at heroism. However, *Paradise Lost*'s particular depiction of Eve's choice to doom her descendants shares a significantly different framing to even his contemporaries' tragedies. John Milton's depiction of Adam fits the tragic hero archetype much more strongly than his depiction of Eve, and the framing and presumption of Eve as one reflects on the common views of women in his time.

When comparing Adam and Eve to the tragic hero archetype, comparing the literal content of their story should come second to comparison of the overall mechanics of their arc. A tragedy, to both the Greeks and later English, wasn't simply a checklist of tropes, but used to evoke a specific kind of response in the audience. The failure of a tragic hero is meant to "[move] us to pity, because... his misfortune is greater than he deserves, but [move] us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilities of error in our own lesser and fallible selves" (Abrams 322). He is meant, first and foremost, to be empathized with and related to, his dramatic fall being an exaggerated reflection of our own failures. This effect is often greater when the hero is "better than we are", or is seen as exceptional to the audience. If even the greatest men can be blinded by weakness, the audience is even less "safe". Through this lens, Milton's Adam is set

up far more tragically. When the serpent plots the couple's demise, he states his reluctance to target Adam due to his "higher intellect... strength.. and courage" (Milton 8.483-484). His supposed infallibility suits this dimension of tragic heroism; if even the explicit admission of Satan himself that he won't easily turn to sin doesn't keep him from dooming himself, there can't be much keeping the audience. Eve is explicitly targeted due to her physical weakness and vulnerability; in the snake's eyes, she is less likely to resist physically or mentally. While the emphasis of a tragic hero's arc is on their faulty decisions leading to disproportionate consequences, Eve, who is at this point only characterized with the purity and naivety of the garden, is not set up for her judgements to be examined and empathized with.

Another primary characteristic of a tragic hero is their fall from grace being caused by a "mistaken choice of an action to which he is led by his hamartia- .. his tragic flaw" (Abrams 322). If Eve were a tragic hero, eating the apple would be caused by a lapse in judgment brought on by her own hamartia, but Milton's detailing of her thought process does not stick to a specific emotional blind spot affecting her decisions. Her reasonings are disconnected and inconsistent as she muses of God's tyranny in denying them knowledge and speculates on his reasoning. According to her perception, the serpent has eaten the fruit and prospered, so there is no reason to believe it could be harmful. She does not "know what to fear/ under this ignorance of good and evil,/ Of God or death, of law or penalty" (Milton 8.773-775). Eve's explicitly stated lack of judgment contradicts the purpose of a tragic hero- to show the follies of human judgment that she pointedly predates. Eve's reasoning here is, from her perspective, completely accurate. She has no concept of sin, no proof the serpent is a liar, and no reason to distrust his words given, lying as a concept has not been introduced to her. The only flaw that could be assigned to her is naivety, which is by the narration, attributed to the state of their existence rather than her nature,

or a greed for knowledge or power, which she only barely displays after her seduction by the serpent. An audience cannot connect their own lusts for power with Eve's, or see it as an exaggeration or dark reflection of their own desires, contradicting the main objective of a tragic narrative. Adam, however, upon hearing of Eve's deed, the serpent and all her newfound knowledge, instantly grasps the scope and severity of their situation. Understanding the wrath they've incited upon them and their new reality of death, his lapse in judgment is due to his own care for Eve. He believes he cannot "live without [Eve]... forgo/ [her] sweet converse and love", and therefore, cannot let her eventually die without him (Milton 8.908-909). He, supposedly before any knowledge of sin, chastises her, showing that he completely understands what she has brought upon them. He ultimately decides, knowingly and consciously, to doom herself along with her, clearly laying out his damnation as a mistaken choice caused by his tragic flaw of desire for Eve.

As a counterpoint, neither Adam nor Eve fit every main criteria of a tragic hero. Tragedies aim, as a whole, to evoke the "tragic pity and fear" of the consequences of the character's actions, which, surprisingly, doesn't fit this adaptation. After Adam and Eve succumb to sin and give in to their carnal desires, the presence of God appears through their home, enlightening them of the earthly struggles that they will be subjected to punishment for their sin. As this passage details the pains of childbirth, labor, and eventually the opening of the gates of hell, the imagery of the "Son" (referring to Jesus) is repeatedly evoked, portraying their downfall as something ultimately necessary to pave the way for Jesus's birth and resurrection. The archangel Micheal eventually informs them of "the Woman's Seed... now amplier known thy savior and thy lord", referring to the birth of Christ, and details the eventual Last Judgment (Milton 12.543-544). Though, in the actual content of the story, humanity is doomed, any

contemporary Christian would be familiar with the rest of the Bible, and therefore not view this as a true tragic ending. In this very scene, Micheal goes on to tell the couple that, now that they have such extensive knowledge, they have the capability to achieve happiness through building their godly character, encouraging them to “add faith, patience, temperance... then will thou not be loath to leave this paradise/ ... posses[ing]/ a paradise within... happier far” (583-587). Not only does this demonstrate that the couple’s new state isn’t only that of punishment, it essentially lays the ideological framework for all of humanity- the ideology by which the Christian audience would strive to live up to. This refutes the idea that either character is meant to be viewed as the protagonist of a tragedy. Christian audiences would not view every aspect of Biblical canon as simply exaggerated consequences of Eve’s choices.

However, the distinction of Adam as more closely embodying the tragic hero rather than Eve is important for more than semantics. The tragic hero is an archetype which, as previously stated, implies a great deal of agency, more so than the average person: they doom themselves out of misjudgment, and that misjudgement is meant to reflect back on the audience. However, Eve’s lack of agency turns her assumed inclusion into this archetype into an assumption of purposeful, calculated maliciousness- an interpretation of Eve not only used commonly to portray women misogynistically, but during Milton’s time period, to blame actual women as a group for the downfall of humanity. It reflects strongly on Milton that a character literally established as having no concept of sin is be assigned “seduction” or manipulation while still being treated with all the condescension of her supposed lack of any knowledge; you couldn’t ask for a clearer example of women of the time being seen as either incapable of reason or active manipulators depending on which is more convenient to a male-centric narrative. Meanwhile, Adam is rewarded all the glory of being the first, strongest, and most capable man, until he

commits a sin, and he is suddenly devoid of all agency and has no culpability for his own actions. It's additionally notable how Adam's fatal flaw is his trust in Eve and willingness to obey his heart over his intellect- while this is a trait used not only to characterize Eve as weak, but a common trait used to paint women either negatively or condescendingly. For the sex so often viewed as less sentimental, Milton certainly excuses dooming mankind because of Adam's noble sentimentality towards Eve. With many feminist texts commenting on Eve's fall and connecting their own struggles to supposed spite against this original sin, the specific vision of this story these authors would be familiar with is a vital resource.

Works Cited

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