

Proposal for Senior Honors Thesis

HONS 497 Senior Honors Thesis Credits 2 (2 minimum required)

Directions: Please return signed proposal to the Honors Office **at least one week prior to your scheduled meeting with the Honors Council (or by Oct. 1 if you are a senior)**. This proposal must be accepted by Honors Council the semester before presentation. (2-3 pages)

Student's Name: Katharine Van Arsdale

Primary Advisor: Dr. L. Monique Pittman

Secondary Advisor:

Thesis Title: "Eve in the Image of Man: Feminist Concerns in Paradise Lost"

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Expected date of Graduation: May 2009

- I. Goals and brief description of your project or research.
- II. Outline your methodology. **Please be specific.** How does this achieve your goals and how reliable is it?
- III. In what sense is your project original, unique, or beyond normal senior expectations? How does it relate to current knowledge in the discipline?
- IV. Include a **substantive annotated bibliography** of similar or related work
- V. A statement of progress to date.

This student's performance in his/her major field is acceptable and I understand the plans to graduate with honors.

Dept Chair (signature) _____

I have read and support this proposal: Primary Advisor (signature)

I have read and support this proposal: Secondary Advisers (signature)

I. Goals and Description

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem following in the footsteps of such great writers as Homer, Ovid, and Virgil. The epic genre is known by certain conventions such as invocation of the muse and *in medias res*, or beginning the story in the middle of the action. Epics also feature clear heroes, protagonists on whom the fate of the nation rests, and the epic follows their adventures. Written during the Renaissance and first published in 1667, Milton's epic poem follows the story of creation, the transformation of Lucifer to Satan, and the eventual fall of man.

In *Paradise Lost* there is a definite gender hierarchy at work. This hierarchy is constructed by certain binaries that separate the world of the male from that of the female. Examples of these binaries are rampant throughout the text; men use reason, women do not. Men are strong and women are weak. Men have a closer connection to God—generally face-to-face—while women access God through an intermediary.

From the moment Adam and Eve are first introduced, Milton establishes male superiority. "Thir sex not equal seem'd," Satan notes, as he views the pair for the first time (IV.296). However, Milton does not cling consistently to this sharply diametric opposition. Throughout the poem, Milton presents conflicting evidence about Eve's character and the place of women. The text offers ambiguity, refusing to completely demonize or vindicate the woman. This ambiguity is evident first through Eve's use of reason, which questions her position as subordinate; second, the text subtly offers non-traditional readings of the Fall which share the blame for sin with men, rather than placing all responsibility on the woman; and third, the narrative ends with man and wife comforting one another as equals in the fallen world.

In my study of *Paradise Lost* and the conflicting view of woman it presents, I intend to explore the way Milton's text conforms to and yet challenges the typical Renaissance gender hierarchy as outlined in the binaries above. Scholars in the past have typically fallen into one of two camps; either Milton's Eve is the stereotype of temptress and fallen woman or she is misunderstood and oppressed by men, including her misogynist author. My work with the poem tries to carve out a middle way supported by the subtleties of the text, and shored up by careful reading of many scholarly articles on the subject. My study will also reach out to other primary texts of the time period—specifically those that discuss the interplay of religion and gender identity—to help craft a fuller understanding of the typical Renaissance construction of woman, to better highlight the atypical nature of *Paradise Lost's* Eve.

I. Methodology

In this project I will use close textual analysis to study *Paradise Lost*, specifically focusing on the role the woman plays in the overarching story. Close textual analysis entails careful reading of relevant passages, scrutinizing aspects such as alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, allusions, images, patterns, and other elements of the text. This way of approaching literature has been used by many prominent critics such as Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and T.S. Eliot. My close reading of passages treating Eve will demonstrate the ambiguities in the way she is constructed.

I will also be using aspects of gender criticism in my reading of the time period. Looking at the Renaissance through the filter of gender criticism assists me in focusing on the role women played in the literature of the time period, as well as determining what this means

for Eve in *Paradise Lost*. I will specifically be taking on the role of a “resistant reader.” This tactic encourages rejecting traditional understandings in favor of crafting a fresh interpretation based on feminist interaction with the text. This method of reading has been popularized by important feminist scholars such as Judith Fetterley, Leslie Cahoon, Amy Richlin, and Genevieve Liveley.

II. How is my project original/unique/beyond normal senior expectations

My *Paradise Lost* project reaches beyond usual senior expectations in that it includes work and study done over the course of two seminar classes dealing with epic poetry and the Renaissance. This combination of classes has allowed me to do a great deal of background work that enriches my paper by giving me a thorough grounding in texts similar to Milton’s. My paper will also be much longer than a typical seminar class essay is expected to be; upon completion my paper will be of professional article length (20-25 pages). This sort of capstone work is not required by my discipline.

My work is also important to my field because it touches on the important area of Gender Criticism, which is a significant topic in literary studies right now. Twentieth and Twenty-first century Literature scholars are anxious to reexamine and reevaluate key texts of periods like the Renaissance to expose and correct gender-biased interpretations of the past. My paper will be contributing to this current discussion.

III. Progress to Date

At this point I have completed a twelve-page seminar paper. I am currently involved in a Renaissance class that is adding to my research and understanding of the era and its

construction of the female. I am also modifying and polishing the paper I already have. I have added a third prong to my thesis—that Adam and Eve find equality and mutual comfort in their marriage—and will soon begin writing this section of my argument. I also intend to add a section about religion and women in Renaissance literature, specifically how the church viewed Eve’s role in the fall and how John Milton supports and/or challenges this construct. To further this end I am reading primary texts from the era as well as scholarly articles and monographs such as A. Bartlett Giamatti’s The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic.

IV. Annotated Bibliography

Corum, Richard. “In White Ink: *Paradise Lost* and Milton’s Ideas of Women.” Milton and the Idea of Woman. Ed. Julia M. Walker. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 120-147.

In his paper, Corum uncovers God’s idea of woman, as portrayed by Milton, and what she should be. He establishes that Milton’s epic poem is meant to idealize this godly woman; however, Corum sees ways in which Milton strays from his own preset ideal, making this a “fallen poem.” Corum reads beyond the stated intentions of the text to the places where the text contradicts itself, offering a conflicting reading of women. This essay is useful to me because it follows the same principle of reading against the grain that I am using in my paper.

Giamatti, A. Bartlett. “The Forms of Epic.” Play of Double Senses: Spenser’s Faerie Queene. New York: WW. Norton & Co. 17-27.

In this chapter from his book about *The Faerie Queen*, Giamatti describes traditional aspects of epic poetry. He determines that epics constitute a never-ending journey home and all the chaos such a massive journey brings. Giamatti also places the woman at the center of the “home” the hero searches for, giving her a place at the center of the entire epic. This equation meshes perfectly with my understanding of the end of *Paradise Lost* where the woman’s role as wife is a comfort to her husband, and their marriage is an equal partnership.

Giamatti, A. Bartlett. The Earthly Paradise and the Renaissance Epic. New York: WW. Norton & Co., 1966.

This monograph by Giamatti describes in depth the traditional Renaissance depiction of a natural paradise. Giamatti explains the classical roots of the literary “earthly paradise,” and how it was used in Renaissance epics, specifically the Christian epics. He ends with a very useful chapter detailing Milton’s gardens in *Paradise Lost*. One key element I draw from his explanation of Milton’s garden is the great importance of the hierarchy established there—God above man, man above woman—and how this was necessary for the garden to be a “paradise.”

Halley, Janet E. “Female Autonomy in Milton’s Sexual Poetics.” Milton and the Idea of Woman. Ed. Julia M. Walker. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 230-254.

Halley’s essay offers yet another traditional feminist reading of *Paradise Lost* that sees Eve as entirely subordinate. Reading these traditional essays helps my argument by letting me see in depth how important critics and scholars have read Eve. Halley’s work in particular is important because she anticipates ways in which Eve could be read more

sympathetically, yet denies them in favor of a misogynist reading. I take some of the questions Halley poses and develop them more fully in my essay.

Lewalski, Barbara. “‘Higher Argument’: Completing and Publishing *Paradise Lost* 1665-69.” The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography. New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 442-488.

This chapter is drawn from a biography of Milton, and it recreates the political and cultural atmosphere of the years when *Paradise Lost* was published. Among other important issues, this chapter deals with reasons why Milton chose to write a religious epic, how *Paradise Lost* fits or departs from the definition of epic, and how one can define the heroes and anti-heroes of his work. It is a very expansive chapter. My focus is mainly on Lewalski’s interaction with the text. She offers evidence that is crucial to my arguments that Eve uses reason on par with Adam, and that marriage can be read as a positive role for woman, rather than one of subjugation.

Liveley, Genevieve. “Reading Resistance in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.” Ovidian Transformations: Essays on the *Metamorphoses* and its Reception. Eds. Philip Hardie et al. Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1999. 197-213.

This essay deals primarily with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, not *Paradise Lost*. However, the essay discusses the history of feminist readings of canonical texts. Liveley proves the pedigree of reading against traditional interpretations of literature; she describes the “resistant reader” (usually a marginalized reader). I am borrowing her “resistant reading” technique in my essay to find evidence that is generally overlooked in order to construct a feminist interpretation of the text that departs from tradition.

McColley, Diane K. "Milton and the Sexes." Cambridge Companion to Milton. Ed.

Dennis Danielson. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. 147-164.

In this essay, McColley gives a more sympathetic reading of the relationship between man and woman in Milton's texts, primarily *Paradise Lost*. She discusses ways in which Milton values the female in his writings. Her argument concerning the importance of marriage, and how highly Milton valued that institution, contributes inestimably to the section of my paper where I claim that Adam and Eve find comfort as husband and wife—equals—in the fallen world.

Milton, John. Paradise Lost. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 2003.

This is the text of the epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. I have read the poem in its entirety and now I am returning to passages that deal specifically with Eve and her place in the garden. I use close-textual analysis to determine the portrait of woman these passages construct.

Nyquist, Mary. "The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity in the Divorce Tracts and in *Paradise Lost*." Re-Membering Milton: Essays on the Texts and Traditions. Eds.

Margaret Ferguson and Mary Nyquist. New York: Methuen, Inc., 1988. 99-127.

This essay begins by discussing traditional versus feminist readings of the creation story. After establishing a history of critics' responses to the first chapters of Genesis, Nyquist describes how Milton appropriates the story in his divorce tracts as well as *Paradise Lost*. Nyquist then studies Milton's version of creation with a feminist eye. I use this essay to strengthen my observations about Eve's role in Milton's Eden, specifically using the

questions Nyquist raises—is it all or nothing? Is there any hope for Eve?—as a springboard for my own arguments.

Quilligan, Maureen. “Freedom, Service, and the Trade in Slaves: the Problem of Labor in *Paradise Lost*.” Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture. Eds. Margreta de Grazia et al. New York: Cambridge UP, 1996. 213-234.

Quilligan’s essay places *Paradise Lost* in its historical context, giving background on the slave trade during the Renaissance and how this affected notions of labor in the era. She then draws connections between Renaissance ideals and Milton’s portrayal of work in *Paradise Lost*. I have closely studied Quilligan’s observations concerning the “specifically gendered boundary” between Adam’s and Eve’s respective jobs in Eden. Quilligan determines that Eve is not expected to use reason or intelligence in her tasks because she is a more physical being, because she gives birth; this argument is important to my discussion of Eve’s successful use of reason and how this disrupts traditional understandings of her role.

Shawcross, John T. “Learning from the Past 1: Gender and the Early Reading of Milton, Especially by Women.” Rethinking Milton Studies: Time Present and Time Past. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. 33-47.

This chapter from Shawcross’s book is useful to my paper because it gives a detailed history of feminist readings of Milton. Shawcross also defines Milton’s tone in the poem as “masculinist” rather than one of “misogyny.” This clarification legitimizes my reading of Eve as neither condemned nor vindicated by the text.

Woods, Susanne. “How Free are Milton’s Women?” Milton and the Idea of Woman. Ed. Julia M. Walker. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 15-31.

This essay deals directly with the way Milton defines “the basic elements of human freedom: reason, knowledge, and choice.” I use this essay to give my own discussion of Eve’s freedom a definition. It is especially useful in the section of my paper where I deal with Eve’s use of reason.