ESLJ
THE EDINBURGH STUDENT LITERARY JOURNAL

Subtle Resistance and Public Hysterics: Female Agency in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

Sanika Prakash

August 2025

'Imput'st thou that to my default' (Milton 1145)

Even in Paradise there is inequality. Through the lens of female agency, *Paradise Lost: Book IX* by John Milton and *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope can be understood as political by the ways in which women exercise their ability to take actions led by an awareness of social rules and gender roles. For the purposes of this essay, female agency is conceptualised as the resistance, as well as the 'interactions in which women accommodated, negotiated or manipulated' male-centred societal norms (Montenach and Simonton 5). This essay proposes that Eve and Belinda, from Milton and Pope's poems respectively, are lucid agents that respond to the social roles that they are positioned in to achieve their goal: the distribution of blame.

Eve, who functions as a complementary character to Adam's in *Paradise Lost*, ties her sense of personhood to him and thus cements her identity as his subordinate wife. Her corpus was formed from Adam's 'liveless Rib', giving him a parental sense of superiority for having provided the material from which she was conceived (Milton IX.1154). Created by God to be Adam's companion, her existence is thus dependent upon her relationship to him. Moreover, Adam further recognises their seclusion by labelling her his 'Associate sole' (IX.227). While Adam is a singular unit whose existence predates her, 'Eve is born into an already established male society and masculine discourse' whereby she is inextricably tied to him (McChrystal 495). Creating a tripartite hierarchy where Eve is placed at the bottom, her femininity is viewed as 'infantile and dependent' upon the masculine figures in her life (Zimmerman 247).

The character of Eve and the idea of woman are used interchangeably, as Eve is the very embodiment of female. The duties that Adam attributes to women are all in subservience to him as he is the head of the aforementioned household, and Eve is intended to 'promote' Adam's actions, ignoring any will for independent actions of her own (IX.234). Even Adam's effort in explaining her purpose removes her ability to determine that for herself, or if the role he has assigned her is what she desires. All of Adam's innocuous dialogues therefore demean

Eve's status to an inferior counterpart or a mere supporter, rather than a whole person in her own right. Her intended submission further reiterated throughout the poem as her femininity is seen as something to be protected, '[s]afest and seemliest' (IX.268). Here, Adam's use of diction once again emphasises Eve's ostensible weakness. Pervading rigid beliefs of subordinate female roles within the context of Milton's epic are present, which is evident when Adam tells Eve of her designated role:

> for nothing lovelier can be found
> In Woman, then to studie houshold good,
> And good workes in her Husband to promote.
> (Milton IX.232-4)

While Adam endeavours to elucidate a woman's 'role' within their society, Eve nevertheless manipulates social and gender roles to curate her own sense of individuality. Even prelapsarian, Eve is seen exerting her sense-of-self and identity apart from Adam. She initiates a discussion of her own volition for the first time, rather than being a willing mirror for Adam's own discourse. Eve suggests '[l]et us divide our labours', with an intention to have some time alone (Pope IX.214). Her desire to form an identity independent from Adam is evident, and incongruous with Adam's own desire to labour less and spend more time together. She refuses to abide by Adam's commands, and seeks to regain 'physical and therefore psychological autonomy' upon separating, walking away despite his calls for her (Zimmerman 259). Eve's role as a subordinate is re-established throughout the epic, her intellectual and hierarchical inferiority grows to be something that she believes herself, prompted by Adam. Her belief is identified when tempted by Satan with the forbidden fruit, where the most persuasive factor to eat the fruit is the pursuit of knowledge—to ameliorate her lacking. Discontent with the dissemination of knowledge from God through Adam, Eve seeks to form her own conclusions about the world rather than blindly following him/them as she had been since her nativity, saying:

> What fear I then, rather what know to feare
> Under this ignorance of good and Evil,
> Of God or Death, of Law or Penaltie?
> (Milton IX.773-5)

After the Fall, she is conscious of this glaring subjection, and even muses on the power she has now gained over Adam with her knowledge. A desire to 'render [herself] more equal', Milton suggests that her current supposed status as Adam's equal is not true, and she is dissatisfied with the status quo (IX.823). This frustration stems early on, from a 'seemingly genuine sense of [...] inferiority [...] feelings genuinely experienced, if suppressed' (Interdonato 95). She has no lofty ideas of usurping Adam and her aim is still to draw his love and improve where she is lacking, but her longing for independence still prevails, and she wishes to be 'somtime / Superior: for inferior who is free?' (Milton IX.824-5). Exercising agency to Eve prelapsarian was purely the accommodating and acquiescing to Adam and God, in the domestic labour of the familial structure, and an object to agree with Adam when he displays his own ability to possess subjectivity and reflect upon his experiences. Her complex feelings towards having been created as a complementary and lesser, as well as a lack of power in her relationship and intelligence, all culminate into her yearning to be 'more equal' (IX.823).

In stark contrast to this, the heroine of *The Rape of the Lock* is a young noblewoman who maintains a privileged and pampered life, though this does not absolve her from being constrained in a male-centred society. Belinda is characterised as a self-admiring socialite who, along with her spirit and human handmaids, makes great efforts to dress herself up for the day. She is described as a 'gentle *Belle*' as early as Canto I, and her beauty becomes representative of her personhood through the emphasis (Pope I.8). The name Belinda was 'fashionable [at] the time' of writing, and even the first syllable of her name, 'belle', means beautiful, reiterating the importance of her attractiveness (Tillotson 25). Beauty in

eighteenth-century British high society was important, as it was ‘tied into perceptions of health and cleanliness’, as well as one’s status and wealth (Markiewicz 618). Performing beauty then became symbolic of power and privilege, especially so for women as it concerned their livelihoods and marriage prospects. This overall emphasis placed on Belinda’s beauty by society leads to other aspects of her being disregarded, as seen when Pope writes ‘If to her share some female errors fall, / Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all.’ (Pope II.17-9). Reduced to her looks, Belinda accepts what she is told her worth lies in, and wholeheartedly attends to her looks. This idea is further complicated when Pope subtly mocks her vanity when he equates her dressing for the day to ‘the arming of the epic hero’, drawing on and parodying influences from Ovid, Virgil and Homer (Tillotson 35). Thus, whilst society conditions Belinda to place her value on her looks, this earnestness is then derided by others.

Furthermore, another aspect of Belinda’s femininity and/as resistance is displayed when exercises her own sense of agency through her dramatic resistance and condemnation of the Baron after the rape, but also in her quiet refusal of male constructs. Social privilege affords Belinda more power, yet also greater risk; her reputation is at risk as well as her own principles. Her noble status affords her the power to denounce the Baron and her emotions are allowed to be expressed as public ‘rage, resentment, and despair’ (Pope IV.9). Although Pope makes generous use of hyperbole, Belinda’s feelings at the moment of the assault are quite real. Hair played an important role in English fashions in the eighteenth century, and it was ‘central to the display of social status, youth and beauty’, as well as the shock that is felt in the moment (Markiewicz 617). Her reaction, considering her vanity, is quite unsurprising, although exaggerated by Pope who likens it to other tragedies commonly found in the epic genre:

Not youthful kings in battle seiz'd alive,

Not scornful virgins who their charms survive,
Not ardent lovers robb'd of all their bliss,
Not ancient ladies when refus'd a kiss,
Not tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,
(Pope IV.3-7)

The use of the epic is an acknowledgement of Belinda's eminence, and a way to soothe the temper of the actual figure she was based on, Mrs Arabella Fermor (Pope 1). Sociocultural conventions at the time placed an importance on beauty and hair, and Belinda's anger at the rape can be viewed as her own status being undermined, and her lack of agency. Pope's choice to chronicle Belinda's tragedy though the mock-epic is revealing of her social status, whereby as a noble lady, her physical appearances must adhere to the standards of her class.

Moreover, Belinda is—almost excessively—feminine, and she guards her womanhood so greatly that she '[r]ejects mankind' to preserve her own purity (I.67). This rejection also extends to the concept of virginity, since she does not adhere to the value system of maidenhood being 'an unmarried woman's supreme possession', instead forming her own principles (Singh 477). Belinda's sense of self and her formation of her own 'female space' is contingent on her lock, 'a unique expression of her otherness' and a value system of her own making (Showalter 201; Singh 477). The creation of a female space, as Showalter argues, centres Belinda's beliefs wholly, having no male equivalent. Thus, her values regarding virginity differ from the common societal understandings of chastity and femininity, whereby she places more emphasis on her lock of hair as holding greater importance. While other women in *The Rape of the Lock* are shown to pay careful attention to their looks in pursuit of a husband, Belinda is othered as she does not seek 'the admiration of males'. The symbolism of her hair is then particular only to her character and her rejection of the ideal of virginity (Singh 477). This understated form of resistance is no less vehement

than the public hysterics Belinda expresses once her hair is cut, and it also justifies the outburst. By cutting off her hair, the Baron hurts her in a way that having literally raped her would not have done; both are acts of violence but one is inflicted on where she places all her value in.

Reactionary attitudes to female agency and women not abiding by the status quo are to be expected in eighteenth-century English society, and Eve and Belinda are no exception. In *Paradise Lost,* knowledge and power are tied together/to one another, and Eve's deficiencies lie less in her womanhood than in her lack of knowledge. After the Fall, Eve gains ultimate knowledge of the world and consciousness of her inferiority. She even considers hoarding this knowledge for herself to gain the upper hand in her and Adam's relationship before deciding against it. Moreover, Milton also describes Eve urging Adam to fall alongside her '[a]gainst his better knowledge', which reiterates their intellectual differences (Milton IX.998). However, her lack of awareness andknowledge is not solely her own fault, seeing as Adam was tasked with teaching her the ways of the world. Despite his superior levels of knowledge, he fails to recognise that all God's and the angels' warnings against the forbidden tree were given to him directly, not to Eve. In fact, she herself argues this point postlapsarian when they begin fighting, telling him:

> Being as I am, why didst not thou the Head
> Command me absolutely not to go,
> Going into such danger as thou saidst?
>
> (IX.1156-8)

Through her emphasis on 'Being as I am', Eve's use of language addresses her inferiority and shoulders the blame onto Adam too. She does this by acknowledging him as 'the Head' of the family who is therefore responsible for her actions as his subordinate and wife (IX.1158). Adam then denounces his trust in all women and derides her attempt at

distributing the blame of the Fall of Man onto him as well. Instead, he blames his love for her as 'Shee first his weak indulgence will accuse', for not being able to control her free will (IX.1186). On the other hand, Belinda resists and rejects mankind by solely blaming her anger on the Baron and his actions. As was the case with Eve, she is also met with criticism for doing so. For instance, her friend Thalestris 'with Reproach assails' the Baron for his injustices and is likened to a female warrior, a 'virago', as she calls people to arms in support of Belinda (Pope V.3; V.37). Belinda is also lectured by a fellow noblewoman called Clarissa on her vanity and the triviality of the lock, and told that the best attribute that a woman can have is 'good Sense' (V.16). Ironically, Clarissa is the one who armed the Baron with the scissors, rendering her sanctimonious attitude slightly contradictory.

Milton's 'rejections of traditions of authority' and Pope's subtle parodying of female dramatics create highly conscious textual agents that exist in male-centred societies, are conscious of that fact, and do not resign themselves to the roles that they have been given (McChrystal 494). This essay has mapped out how Eve's shocking actions go against everything she has been taught, but her circumstances nevertheless relieve her of sole responsibility for the Fall of Man—a fact she is cognisant of when distributing the blame back to Adam. Similarly, Belinda's rejection and refusal of men, as well as her construction of an individual set of values contingent on her appearance, shows her own manoeuvring of female agency within a society that dictates what she should prioritise. Consequently, Belinda does not withdraw her decision to hold the Baron accountable and, like Eve had done with Adam, also distributes the blame amongst male characters in the text. Understanding *Paradise Lost* and *The Rape of the Lock* as political texts is therefore not as challenging as it may seem; the positioning of female characters within society and reactions to how they resist male domination make this undoubtedly clear from a feminist lens.

Works Cited

Cohen, Ralph. “The Reversal of Gender in ‘the Rape of the Lock.’” *South Atlantic Bulletin*, vol. 37, no. 4, Nov. 1972, p. 54, https://doi.org/10.2307/3197366.

Crehan, A. S. “The Rape of the Lock and the Economy of ‘Trivial Things.’” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1997, pp. 45–68, https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.1997.0051.

Interdonato, Deborah A. “‘Render Me More Equal’: Gender Inequality and the Fall in Paradise Lost, 9.” *Milton Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, Dec. 1995, pp. 95–106, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1094-348x.1995.tb00587.x.

Liebert, Elisabeth. “Rendering ‘More Equal’: Eve’s Changing Discourse in Paradise Lost.” *Milton Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 3, Oct. 2003, pp. 152–65, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1094-348x.2003.00056.x.

Markiewicz, Emma. “Performing Health and Beauty in Eighteenth Century England: The Significance of Hair in the Creation of Appearances.” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 22, no. 6, Routledge, 2018, pp. 617–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2018.1533340.

McChrystal, Deirdre Keenan. “Redeeming Eve.” *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 23, no. 3, Sept. 1993, pp. 490–508, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1993.tb01071.x. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.

Milton, John. “Paradise Lost: Book 9.” *Milton.host.dartmouth.edu*, 1667, milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/pl/book_9/text.shtml.

Montenach, Anne, and Deborah Simonton. *Female Agency in the Urban Economy: Gender in European Towns, 1640-1830*. Routledge, 2013.

Pope, Alexander, and Geoffrey Tillotson. *The Rape of the Lock*. Routledge, 2016.

Revard, Stella P. “Eve and the Doctrine of Responsibility in Paradise Lost.” *PMLA*, vol. 88, no. 1, Jan. 1973, p. 69, https://doi.org/10.2307/461327.

Rogers, Pat. *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Showalter, Elaine. "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 2, Dec. 1981, pp. 179–205, https://doi.org/10.1086/448150.

Singh, Brijraj. "Pope's Belinda: A Feminist Rereading." *CLA Journal*, vol. 34, no. 4, College Language Association, 1991, pp. 467–85, www.jstor.org/stable/44322421. JSTOR. Accessed 4 Dec. 2024.

Zimmerman, Shari A. "Milton's 'Paradise Lost': Eve's Struggle for Identity." *American Imago*, vol. 38, no. 3, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981, pp. 247–67, www.jstor.org/stable/26303763. JSTOR. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.