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Introduction: Milton's gendered subjects

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Milton's treatment of women, marriage, and divorce in his life and works has been subject to criticism almost as long as his major works themselves. Ever since Samuel Johnson's famous *Life* of the poet, the charge that the great advocate of mutuality in marriage bore a "Turkish contempt" for women has survived, and, in the twentieth century, actually thrived. Yet this claim would no doubt have astonished both the poet himself and his contemporaries, the most critical of whom regarded his views on women and marriage as libertine, not retrograde. As Ruth Mohl points out, the poet's early *Commonplace Book* also disproves "Milton's proverbial disesteem for women." Its many laudatory remarks upon the "weaker sex" include tributes to such admirable women as Queen Elizabeth, Tasso's heroine Sophronia, Lady Scroope, the wife of Edward I, Queen Martia, and the Countesse of Arundel. Even more significantly, these tributes characteristically counterbalance the "less complimentary . . . contentions of those writers who would discredit women altogether" (*CPW* 1:357). Yet then as now, these attitudes have proved far less controversial than his defense of divorce "at pleasure." His contemporaries considered this thesis no less scandalous than his defense of regicide: at worst, he was the spokesman of the radical new sect of divorcers; at best, his new notion of marriage as a spiritual rather than a physical bond seemed ludicrously utopian. Yet ironically, now that most moderns agree with Milton's once radical belief that the marriage is not a sacramental "seal" but a negotiable contract, his views on this and related gendered subjects are generally regarded as ultra-traditionalist, patriarchal, or masculinist rather than prophetic or progressive.

This volume aims to reconsider this and related charges in the light of the most recent developments in feminist theory. In the process, it will also reconsider why Johnson's high Tory insinuations about the innate hypocrisy of this notorious libertarian have been taken over by liberal feminists whose political agenda actually seems closer to Milton's own.¹ As several of this

book's contributors suggest, one reason may be that, with very few exceptions, his most hostile feminist critics have specialized in later literary epochs when the "woman question" was posed in quite different terms than it was in Milton's day. Nevertheless, the strongly argued positions of scholars like Christine Froula, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar have clearly left their mark upon mainline Milton criticism, which remains deeply divided over their conclusion that his works are staunchly antifeminist. Yet again, a great number of his works superficially seem to refute this critique: ten sonnets and an epitaph eloquently testify to his high esteem for female friends, acquaintances, and performers, including a beloved and deeply lamented late wife.² His first major poem idealistically incarnates feminine virtue in a youthful heroine and a water nymph who single-handedly fend off depraved masculine vice during the course of their atypical courtly masque. His later epic tributes to the mother of mankind and her true "daughter" Mary similarly laud the high intelligence and virtue of womankind, although his portrait of Eve is necessarily complicated by her role in initiating "man's first disobedience." Yet unlike John Donne, Milton does *not* present Adam's marriage to Eve as "our funeral," nor does he believe that her daughters follow her example in killing "us all . . . one by one" (*The First Anniversarie*, 106–7). On the contrary, Milton upholds the self-sufficient and the *almost* untarnished honor of womankind's "original" in much the same spirit that he cultivated cordial friendships with her daughters. Besides the subjects of his sonnets, these daughters include contemporaries like Lady Ranelagh – the brilliant sister of Robert Boyle, the mother of his pupil, Edward Jones, and quite probably a life-saving defender during the dark days of the early Restoration; his sister Anne Phillips and her two children, who similarly defended him during these years and long before; and at least two of his three wives.

Yet the negative side of the balance cannot be gainsaid: Milton's first marriage to Mary Powell was both a private and (in the wake of his divorce tracts) a public disaster, which, after an apparently uneasy reconciliation, finally left him a widower unable to cope with at least two of their three daughters. While the youngest of the three still harbored fond memories of her father when Johnson's contemporaries sought to reward her "national service" in assisting his literary endeavors, both the questionable nature of this less-than-voluntary service and the unquestionable resentment of the elder daughters continue to lend credence to Johnson's claims. Yet neither this failed "family romance" nor the high Tory critic himself ever cast so dark a shadow on Milton's idealistic literary portraits of women as his own divorce tracts. Written in the heat of emotion surrounding Mary's unexpected desertion after a month of marriage, these pamphlets betray

strongly conflicted beliefs about the rights and responsibilities of women caught in failed marriages. All too often, their lofty sentiments about the “gladsome conversation” that sustains well-matched unions are undermined by bitter complaints about the “grinding” emotional and sexual stress suffered by ill-matched marriage mates – victims usually gendered male (*CPW* 2:258). Couched as they are in once widely shared biblical assumptions about the “natural” priority of the male in marriage, the divorce tracts strongly jar with modern sensibilities on that subject as well. The modern reader’s perception of Milton’s bias is further compounded by the biting sarcasm and obviously injured pride that repeatedly erupt in these treatises, although a good deal of this rhetoric originally seems to have been aimed at uncovering the unselfconscious hypocrisy of his male audience. Given their commonly held principle of Christian liberty, Milton attempts to startle these male contemporaries into realizing how inconsistent and unjust it is to subordinate God’s “primary” creation (man) to his secondary creation (woman) by demanding that he endure a permanent state of marital discord and mental bondage. For as most readers would now agree, such purely physical unions can foster neither the emotional, the spiritual, nor (ironically) even the physical well-being of either party. Although this conclusion is hardly alien to modern feminists, most have found his argument not only unattractive but insincere. Like their many male sympathizers, they contend that Milton’s passionate defensiveness shows that his “real” purpose was to convict either his first wife, women in general, or even heterosexuality in general of selfishly promoting male thralldom.

Yet, once again, the case cannot be considered closed. Not only did Milton’s argument strongly appeal to contemporary feminists, who appreciated his subtle deployment of the logic of Pauline headship against itself, but they immediately put it to work in releasing themselves from domestic bondage.³ Male readers, too, soon realized the power of this argument – and feared it, since it clearly threatened their traditional authority over their wives. In fact, even some of Milton’s harshest modern critics readily concede that he was indeed trying to formulate an early version of “no fault” divorce. Yet since most of these critics remain convinced that these prophetic efforts were undermined by a potent combination of Pauline doctrine and Milton’s own “masculinist” pride, his attempt to absolve divorce from all taint of sin is generally seen as a failure and the poet remains guilty as charged.⁴

Given the current state of the argument, the contributors to this volume are fully aware of the immense difficulty involved in decoding Milton’s “real” views on gender. The task is obviously complicated not just by the density

of his texts themselves but also by our vast distance from his social and intellectual milieu. This distance is proportionately increased in the wake of the strong influence that “second wave” or post-1970s feminism has generally exerted on literary studies, especially where women, marriage, and divorce are concerned. Writing in 1970, John Halkett could still safely conclude that both the divorce tracts and *Paradise Lost* presented consistently progressive views on the subject. Not very long afterward, most critics were ready to agree with the position presented in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979): that Milton’s views on women were at best inconsistent, and at worst, consistently masculinist. Since then, Diane McColley in *Milton’s Eve* (1983) and Joseph Wittreich in *Feminist Milton* (1987) have forcefully challenged this consensus by deepening our critical awareness of the latent anachronisms lurking in the Gilbert/Gubar position, which fails to account for the long *durée* of literary history.⁵ Reconsidering the long history of literary iconography surrounding Eve, McColley showed that Milton’s portrait of our “grand mother” effectively reversed a thoroughly misogynistic tradition. Reconsidering the “reader responses” of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, Wittreich showed that they continued to regard Milton’s female portraits as positive role models. However, as he also showed, from the mid nineteenth century onward, “first wave” feminists became increasingly suspicious of the “angel of the hearth” roles associated with Milton’s Eve, and by the time “second wave” feminists came along in the 1970s, these suspicions had turned into active disdain.

Yet by now what we might call a “third wave” of feminist critics has become increasingly sensitized to the historical/particular conditions of marriage, divorce, and patriarchal domination in western culture, conditions which create a vast gulf between the social, legal, and political condition of seventeenth-century women and those of their Victorian daughters. Seventeenth-century women not only participated in the most radical phase of Reformation and early revolutionary culture in ways that Victorian women did not, but they also helped to initiate the wholesale rethinking of marriage and the family in which Milton actively participated. Since these gains were not lost until the neo-traditionalist reaction set in after the Restoration and especially after the eighteenth century, a less linear model of gender history would now seem to be in order. This volume not only seeks to take this more accurate historiography into account but also to explore alternatives to the heavily Freudian and implicitly anti-feminine accounts of gender dominance employed by critics like Gilbert, Gubar, and their “mentor” Harold Bloom. These alternatives range from Lacan’s

rewriting of Freud (Shullenberger in this volume) to Heidegger's ontological mediations (Grossman in this volume).⁶ Other contributors use other new theoretical tools to various ends, but all respond to a perceived need to reassess Milton's treatment of gendered subjects and subjectivity. In general, these newer accounts are directly or indirectly indebted to the productive rethinking of the organic, shifting, and interdependent economy of human selfhood, embodiment, and desire begun by French feminists and vigorously pursued by their American followers. By refusing to view femininity and masculinity as essentialist binary oppositions, theorists like Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray seminally foregrounded the linguistic processes that construct and mediate them over time.

Generally speaking, the authors whose work takes up the first two sections of this book pursue a wide range of variations on this basic linguistic approach – philosophical, spiritual, medical, and political – while those in the third section are more interested in documenting the responses of real historical women to Milton's life and art. Both groups thus produce a long overdue reexamination of the inaccurate assumptions, and, in some cases, even the historical-contextual “facts” implicit in second-wave feminism's view of the poet. The chapters in the first two sections generally accomplish this by considering how, when, and why gendered language interacts with and partially constructs its historical milieu, while those in the third and final section consider how and why Milton was “good for women” over the long *durée*. Although Julia Walker's 1988 volume on *Milton and the Idea of Woman* presented a considerable range of opinion on the latter topic, the strong influence of Gilbert and Gubar and/or of second-wave feminism on most of its writers left readers with the “traditional” misogynistic portrait of the poet largely intact. Since some of the current volume's contributors defend this portrait and others dispute it, this collection provides a broader ideological as well as textual spectrum of opinion on both Milton's poetry and his prose. A broader textual spectrum is supplied by devoting its first section to his prose works (with some attention to poetry), its second section to the major poems (with some attention to prose), and its final section to the historical responses of women readers from the early nineteenth century through Virginia Woolf. While no new consensus emerges here, the volume's pluralistic approach has the great advantage of allowing readers to make up their own minds about all of Milton's gendered subjects.

However, before briefly summarizing the various approaches taken by the volume's contributors, it will be useful to survey some of the twentieth-century scholarship on seventeenth-century women to which the present

collection generally responds. In the earlier half of the century, before the onset of second-wave feminism and after the “first wave” of the suffragette era, Milton’s civil war and gender politics had been largely rehabilitated from the Johnsonian critiques of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis by a resurgence of Puritan scholarship. Relying especially on William and Malleville Hallers’ work, historians began to link Milton’s “proto-modern” view of marriage to the libertarian or radical wing of the Puritan movement. Michael Walzer’s classic 1965 study of *The Revolution of the Saints* was typical in claiming that while Puritans officially upheld the traditional secondary status of women, their attitudes toward women and marriage were inherently progressive:

Puritan writers insisted upon the inferiority of the female, but nevertheless recognized in her the potential saint: “Souls have no sexes,” wrote Robert Bolton. “In the better part they are both men.” Marriage between two saints would be a “spiritual union” and not, in Milton’s terms, “the prescribed satisfaction of an irrational heat.” The new Puritan view of women, then, entailed a new view of marriage. Founded on a voluntary contract, it was directed in some fashion toward “healthful pleasures and profitable commodities.” This was to make the choice of a partner far more important than it had ever been before – and a bad choice, as Milton was to learn, far more disastrous.

Yet Walzer is hedging here, since he knew that few if any Puritans followed Milton’s sudden leap to the radical conclusion that “spiritual unions” implied: that marriage partners should be free to divorce whenever such unions were broken or never properly forged. Nor were they ready to follow him in grounding the marital partnership in mental and emotional conversation, but instead located the “new” feminine role in the wife’s stronger but still traditional involvement in rearing and educating her children. Further, since the spiritual education of the child was still in the charge of fathers, Walzer far too facetiously assumed that this new role would allow the “woman who thus directed her son . . . also [to] direct her husband,” and that all women would be happy to become honorary male “souls.”⁷ Because he also forgot that, ironically *unlike* the Puritans, Milton was relatively uninterested in the wife’s role as nurturer and deeply interested in her role as a true soul-mate, he led feminist critics to believe that the poet endorsed the obviously secondary, angel-of-the-hearth role commonly upheld by most of the godly.

This misperception was ably corrected by Halkett, but in the short run, his dissent from the Hallers seems not to have improved the situation. Arguing that Milton’s position actually represented a considerable advance

on the standard Puritan *and* Anglican view of marriage as mainly for the purposes of procreation and the avoidance of vice, Halkett unintentionally gave Milton's position an even stronger traditionalist cast. For in bypassing the religious manuals of the radical Puritans, Halkett's Milton instead relied upon the elite courtesy tradition of courtship and marriage associated with the Spanish humanist Ludovicus Vives and his royalist followers in England.⁸ Although Halkett may have rightly considered these sources more enlightened than the religious manuals, he was not likely to convince a post-1970s feminist that male-authored and/or male-oriented how-to books on ideally "fitting" one's spouse for hearth and home represented a higher ideal. Nor would they be impressed by what Halkett considered Milton's most signal innovation in this tradition: his rejection of the traditional Augustinian view that "Solitariness" was "not a state of mind demanding remedy but a physical handicap" which could be removed by marriage.⁹ According to the traditional view, if the marital remedy failed – if a spouse still found himself in a state of "inconsolable" loneliness – the situation was a simple fact of fallen humanity traceable to Eve's tragic inheritance; for ever since the fall, women have always proved more disobedient and less reliable than the male friends whom the disappointed husband should instead seek out.

Milton attempts to overturn this antifeminine tradition by redefining "solitude" as a spiritual rather than a physical condition. He can then argue that whenever a husband discovers that the mate to "whom he lookt to be the copartner of a sweet and gladsome society" has become an "image of melancholy despair," his spiritual impairment *demands* the previously unheard of remedy of divorce. For without it, his "unmeet" or conversationally inaccessible spouse will eventually become a physical curse rather than a blessing. Instead of helping him avoid sexual sin, she will become an "uncomplying discord of nature, or, as it oft happens, . . . an image of earth and phlegm" (*CPW* 2:254) that actually drives him into his neighbor's bed. Of course for moderns, neither this insulting description of unhappy wives nor Milton's "happier" alternative of complete compliance in marital harmony unsettle, but actually reinforce, his stereotypical misogynistic image despite the real improvements he made upon the older tradition. Yet as "sexist" as his rhetoric now seems to modern readers, Milton used precisely the same terms to describe conversationally inaccessible males like the interlocutor addressed in *Colasterion*. Calling his enemy a "fleamy clodd" indelibly fixated on physical "burning" as the only rationale for marriage, the poet sarcastically declares that not even this raging sexual fire will ever "expel the frigidity of his brain" (*CPW* 2:740).

Even so, Milton himself was so fixated on spiritual compatibility that many post-1970s feminists believed that he came dangerously close to demanding a perfect Stepford-type wife. As a result, even when insisting that his doctrine would free women as well as men, and even when reserving his sharpest sarcasm for male contemporaries who clung to the traditional view that women possessed neither the mental nor the spiritual ability to become true “mates,” his divorce tracts remained under a deeper cloud than ever. In once again taking up these points in Milton’s favor, however, recent scholarship on his sources has not only confirmed Halkett’s earlier conclusions but questioned the Stepford-wife image as anachronistic. Although Milton did ground his views of companionate marriage primarily on the secular courtesy books, Gregory Chaplin shows that the erotic Platonic sources enthusiastically praised by the young Milton (Plato’s *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and their Neoplatonic Italian and Spanish commentators) indeed helped to overturn a long antifeminine tradition of male bonding that continued as late as Montaigne’s “On Friendship” and Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* (1646).¹⁰ Moreover, in a period where silence was still the most “winning” word for women, Elaine Hobby shows that the emphasis on close heterosexual relationships was necessarily left to male courtesy book writers. Obeying traditional constrictions on their social roles, seventeenth-century women wrote about broader issues by alluding to practical matters rather than by joining in candid intellectual debate. The most outspoken of these women tended to be foreigners, aristocrats, or tutors to royalty such as Bathsua Makin, who, even when they did argue for active participation in the political world (usually under male pseudonyms), did not argue for suffrage. Thus as Hobby notes, so long as “Women were constrained by the requirement that they maintain a modest reputation[,] rallying forth with arguments about female excellences, or even female potential, was dangerous and perhaps for most women, unthinkable.” In this social context, identifying with the causes of aristocratic women thus signaled a male author’s approval of the most progressive female roles available to women during this period.¹¹

Yet, as usual, several complex crosscurrents in Milton’s writing about gender partially undermine Chaplin’s or Hobby’s positive reevaluations. In contrast to other liberal Protestants of his age and type, Milton does not anticipate the climate of the coming centuries by attempting to vindicate the feminine gender per se. In response to the *querelle des femmes* begun in 1615 by Joseph Swetnam’s *Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Inconstant Women*, he produced no ringing defenses of women like those

contributed by Rachel Speght (1617, 1622), Esther Sowernam (1617), or Constantia Munda (1617).¹² He also falls considerably short of the male defense of feminine virtue contributed by his political hero, Robert Greville, Lord Brooke, who clearly saw gender equality as a counterpart to religious toleration:

Of the Chorus of Saints, the greatest number will bee found amongst the feminine sexe, because these are most naturally of affection, and so most apt to make knowledge reall. It is true, I confesse, these affections misguided, led them first into transgression; but these same affections after, carried them first to the grave, then to the sight of a Saviour, gave them the enwombing of Christ, who (in some sense) might have entertained our nature in another way (if he had so pleased;) and these affections will one day raise many of them into the sweet embraces of everlasting joy.¹³

A similar strain of apologetic appears in John Heydon's contemporary *Advice to a Daughter*, which agrees that women are generally superior to men in charity if also more "frail" in their tendencies toward "misguided affection."¹⁴

Yet Milton's great epics actually reinforce these defenses in several important respects. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve's worship is equally acceptable to a God who does not grant Adam any priority in offering him hymns of praise, and, as for Brooke, her role in the fall is counterbalanced by Mary's "enwombing" of Christ. Also as in Brooke, Eve's postlapsarian frailty is not so much "crooked" as overly affectionate, as we see from her overeager but "noble" desire to sacrifice herself for Adam, their posterity, or both. In *Paradise Regained*, the portrait of Mary is naturally even more positive and also less traditional insofar as she, not Joseph, serves as her Son's role model. Yet because *Paradise Lost* refuses the falling Eve the excuse of emotional frailty that both Greville and Heydon grant to the "feminine sexe" as a whole, Milton's position on women remains residually ambiguous. This ambiguity chiefly stems from his refusal to mollify either Eve's fall or Dalila's lapse by providing the sentimental justifications characteristic of more conservative contemporaries like John Dryden. Yet in rewriting Milton's Eve in *The State of Innocence* and in rewriting the femme fatale or Dalila role in *All for Love*, Dryden clearly illustrates how sentimentality often serves as a cloak for antifeminism. Because women are both emotionally and intellectually inferior to men, for Dryden a "Learned Wife" like Milton's Eve or Dalila is a notorious plague, not an authentic temptation. His most erotically tempting and excusable femme fatale thus turns out to be a silly,

overly emotional, “harmless, household dove” like the Cleopatra of his *All for Love*.¹⁵ This retraditionalizing of female roles stands in sharp contrast not only to Milton’s strong literary women but also to the earlier efforts of female writers to defend themselves against Swetnam’s outright misogyny.

Like Rachel Speght, later female contributors to the mid-century *querelle des femmes* like Bathsua Makin and Margaret Fell strongly espouse the spiritual, educational, and ecclesiological worth of women, even though none are willing to reject the Pauline doctrine of headship similarly accepted by the poet of *Paradise Lost*. They thus do *not* demand any broader rights for themselves than those given to Milton’s unfallen Eve and (through a dream strangely reminiscent of Speght’s) retained by her after the fall. The difference – if there is one – is that Speght’s understanding of Eve’s fall is actually less generous than Milton’s. In her view, “Satan first assailed the woman, because where the hedge is lowest, most easy it is to get over, and she being the weaker vessel was with more facility to be seduced: like as a crystal glass sooner receives a crack than a strong stone pot.”¹⁶ Thus while she wittily elevates Eve’s “clearer” and finer vessel over Adam’s stony “pot,” like Brooke, Speght at the same time concedes that the mother of mankind was far more frail than Milton ever made her.¹⁷ In fact, since Milton puts the traditional idea that Eve was the weaker vessel into Satan’s mouth (*PL* 9:480–85), it is not clear that he ever endorsed it. The unfallen Adam himself retracts his opinion of Eve’s greater vulnerability in the wake of her Areopagitan claim to be “sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,” a claim earlier maintained by none other than the Almighty himself (*PL* 3.99). After Adam’s prediction proves false and Eve does succumb and “seduces” Adam into joining her, Milton’s first husband is still unable to deny Eve’s defensive plea that he might have fallen first had he found himself alone with the great Deceiver (*PL* 9.1145–53).

The only equally vigorous contemporary defense of womankind’s equal capacity to handle “what was high” (*PL* 8.50) appears in Bathsua Makin’s *Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen, in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues* (1673), a work that seems partly inspired by Milton himself. Although we know little about Makin’s life or literary influences, her *Essay* follows the lead of Milton’s divorce tracts in describing Custom as a quasi-satanic deceiver which blocks both men and especially women from perfecting their intellectual abilities to “glorify God, and answer the end of [their] . . . creation, to be meet helps to [their] . . . husbands.” Although strong disparagements of “mere” Custom had become fairly routine throughout the civil wars and especially in the wake of Thomas Sprat’s *History of the Royal Society* (1667), Makin’s definition of the essence of “meet