



STUDIES *in*
THEOLOGY
and the ARTS

RESISTING THE **MARRIAGE PLOT**

FAITH AND
FEMALE AGENCY IN
AUSTEN, BRONTË,
GASKELL, AND
WOLLSTONECRAFT

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Introduction

“Doing God’s Work”

Female Heroines in Response to Milton’s Eve

There seems nothing improbable in the thought, that this supremacy of woman over the novel is one which will go [on] widening and deepening, and that only through her shall we learn what resources there are in it for doing God’s work.

JOHN MALCOLM LUDLOW

The above statement, made in an unsigned review of *Ruth* in the *North British Review* (May 1853), delighted English novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. By the time this was written, women were, indeed, working to prove their supremacy over the novel. As is well known, female novelists had long taken up their pens—oftentimes donning male pseudonyms to obtain publication but rarely supporting themselves financially by writing. But Ludlow’s reference above points not to quantitative supremacy, but rather to what he saw as the qualitative supremacy of the female novelist. The novel genre, still relatively new in 1853, gave women a voice, and many women were using it well.¹

Furthermore, the novel was already being used widely “for doing God’s work,” and female authors were exploiting the novel both to embrace and to challenge Christianity’s transformative potential by constructing heroines who leveraged their faith in order to challenge marriage as the preferred narrative resolution. Instead, these heroines employed differing types of resistant agency to assert their spiritual equality with men, thereby challenging the

Epigraph from Angus Easson, ed., “Ruth,” in *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1991), 285.

¹See Inga-Stina Ewbank, “The Feminine Novelist and the Will to Write,” *Their Proper Sphere: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

doctrine of coverture, a particularly harmful interpretation of one-flesh doctrine (Eph 5:31) whereby wives were subsumed under the lordship of their husbands and therefore legal nonpersons. Though modern feminism has often exploited and overexaggerated Christianity's long—and sometimes well-deserved—reputation of oppressing women, orthodox Christianity liberates, rather than subjugates, women and men alike. Modern feminist scholarship² has only recently begun to recognize the ways in which early female novelists understood the liberative effects of Christian agency. Recognized this way, Christianity and feminism need not be wholly at odds. In fact, at the time in which these novels were written, Christianity drove feminist thought.³ This book examines specific novels written by Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Each author creates a heroine who leverages some sort of Christian practice. I begin by examining profeminist Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Christian Rational Dissent* has been relatively ignored by literary critics until recently. She died while writing, but before finishing, the novel *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798)⁴ as a sequel to her influential treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).⁵ Readers must understand, therefore, that *Wrongs of Woman* is the fictional counterpart of *Vindication*, and reading one text without reference to the other leads to a failed interpretation of both.⁶ In *Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft

²Foundational feminist texts such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, exp. ed. (Princeton, MA: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Inga-Stina Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) recognize the feminist struggle against patriarchal authority. Imagining Christianity as a feminist ideal to combat this ideology is largely absent.

³The term *feminist* would have been foreign to the women who wrote the texts examined here. The word *feminism* is nevertheless utilized with qualifications in this book to describe the concerns of women—females just before the turn of the nineteenth century and through the Victorian Era—who recognized and confronted female subjugation. It is used throughout the text to denote female empowerment, intelligence, drive, and ultimately, female agency and its legitimacy.

⁴Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin. *Wrongs of Woman*. In *Posthumous Works*, ed. William Godwin, 2 vols. (London: J. Johnson, 1798).

⁵Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1792). Subsequently referenced as *Vindication*.

⁶As Diane Long Hoeveler has explained in "Reading the Wound: Wollstonecraft's 'Wrongs of Woman, Or Maria' and Trauma Theory." *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 4 (1999): 387-408, at 392, www.jstor.org/stable/29533355, "Maria does clearly attempt to work out in a fictional manner the issues and concerns that were developed in the *Vindication*. Reading at times like a barely-disguised sociological text, *Maria* was less conceived as a fiction in its own right than a fictional presentation of ideologies already presented in prose."

demonstrated that the union of spiritually equal agents in marriage was a prerequisite for the educational and legal reform she envisioned for the women of England. Individual agency, an emerging ideology situated in the individualism of the revolutionary 1790s, was particularly important to Wollstonecraft, and the same concern is evident, although in slightly different forms, in the writing of other female authors: Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814),⁷ Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848),⁸ and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853).⁹ These authors used the novel to confront the contemporary paradox of religion that was sometimes manipulated to confine women while contradictorily insisting on feminine redemptive influence within marriage. Their work responds, in part, to a literary and cultural phenomenon somewhat set in motion by John Milton's Eve of *Paradise Lost* (1667)¹⁰ that placed women in a double bind: a lose-lose scenario of fallen perfectionism. Even before the fall, Milton's mythic Eve embodied transgressive femininity, and thus, along with all other females, deserved her subjugation. Milton's widely read fabrication and fictionalization was profoundly beautiful, but nonetheless, it was a grotesque exaggeration of Scripture often perceived as gospel truth, at least in the cultural consciousness.

The four novels around which this book is primarily structured were written by women who not only leveraged Christian narrative, but more precisely, claimed Christianity for themselves.¹¹ Given the era in which the novels were written, this designation seems unexceptional. The choice of widely read and much-discussed novels for this book is not a recapitulation of other scholars' previous arguments; rather, I expand upon previous readings of these texts. In particular, I assert that the Christian bias of the authors, along with the characteristic Christianity of the Romantic and Victorian eras of the novels' origins, have often caused the resistant agency present in these texts to go largely unnoticed by scholarship of the late twentieth century. Further, the chosen

⁷Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park: A Novel*, 3 vols. (London: T. Egerton, 1814).

⁸Anne Brontë [Acton Bell], *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, 3 vols. (London: T. C. Newby, 1848).

⁹Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth, A Novel*, 3 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1853).

¹⁰John Milton, *Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*, ed. Christopher B. Ricks (1667; repr., New York: Signet Classics, 1982).

¹¹In no way do I claim in this text that the authors were biblically orthodox. Mary Wollstonecraft was progressively liberal at best and antinomian at worst; Elizabeth Gaskell was heretical in her rejection of the Trinity. Still, these authors claimed Christianity and appropriated, rather than rejected, Christian narrative.

texts cross retrospectively constructed divisions of literary history, spanning from 1798 to 1853. This timeline demonstrates the ongoing concern with gender relations throughout this period, enabling me to identify broader trends that a study bound by narrower period divisions would obscure.

TO EMBOLDEN AND TO RESIST

Recently, historically minded scholars have situated these texts more fully within their original contexts. The study contained in this book builds on recent scholarship to look at how spiritual agency,¹² a term I subsequently detail, sat in concert with the secular culture of individualism and its evangelical twin that negotiated “transformation of the heart.”¹³ Each heroine is shown to focus on the individual paradoxically to manipulate the very Christian narrative that threatens to confine her—narrative that modern readers would understand as cultural Christianity. But Christianity was not wholly oppressive as some scholarship suggests—neither is it shown to be embraced without question by the heroines discussed here. The paradoxical nature of spiritual agency this book examines not only works to demonstrate the ways that cultural and political practice, at times, inappropriately manipulated Christianity, but also demonstrates that heroines are shown to expose, resist, and confront this contradiction by living out their faith in unexpected and empowering ways. So the novelists that form the subject of this book, and the particular texts examined, are shown to leverage Christianity in paradoxical and peculiar ways, and when studied together, demonstrate how Christianity could (and still can) confront oppression.

In the first place, each novelist represents a different subset of Christian practice: Wollstonecraft’s Rational Dissent, Austen’s Anglicanism, Brontë’s evangelicalism,¹⁴ and Gaskell’s Unitarianism are apparent as each of their

¹²See Julie Melnyk, ed., *Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹³Transformation of the heart as Reformation ideology was promoted, in part, by William Wilberforce’s *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians, in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, [. . .]* (London, 1797).

See also Elisabeth Jay’s *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

¹⁴Throughout this book, the lowercase use of *evangelical* indicates a broad religious movement, whereas the uppercase use of *Evangelical* indicates specific reference to the evangelical sect of the Anglican Church. This is keeping in line with the Oxford Handbook definition of *Evangelical*; Mark A. Noll, “What Is ‘Evangelical?’” *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

novels explores the contemporary intersection of secular individualism with evangelical introspection. Even with these distinctions, the religious beliefs of each of these women were nuanced and complex, ultimately failing to map unambiguously onto a particular religious affiliation. During the time period in which these authors lived and wrote, evangelicalism, a widespread and diverse movement within the Anglican Church and within contemporary English society, challenged traditional lines of church authority in favor of a belief in individual responsibility, made possible by “transformation of the heart.” Evangelicalism influenced the way these novelists characterized their heroines and developed their narratives; all of the authors saw ways to appropriate Christianity in order to embolden women. Ultimately, the study contained in this book follows a sequential publication timeline and intentionally crosses literary periods to demonstrate that spiritual agency, situated within Christian practice, was shown to be liberating for heroines who resisted the traditional marriage plot. In every case, resistance is central to agency, and this resistance is as far from acquiescent normative womanhood as could be expected.

Second, then, the novels examined here focus on resistance to unwanted marriage—in each case, the heroine embraces the same religious strictures that threaten to confine her and employs her faith to influence the resolution or dissolution of marriage within the novel. For each of the heroines, the resolution of the plotted narrative is situated in a rejection, not simply a completion, of the commonplace marriage plot. Maria fiercely asserts her right to divorce the husband who seeks to prostitute her; Fanny refuses to marry the profligate Henry Crawford; Helen illegally extracts herself from her abusive, adulterous marriage; and Ruth refuses to resolve her seduction by marrying her perpetrator. Each resolution within these novels, then, is a resolution of resistance. What is striking is that the heroines’ courage to take such action is found in the very Christian faith that modern secular feminism often claims is oppressive.

Finally, I reiterate in this study that from the revolutionary 1790s to the reforming 1850s, the general role of women in society at large, and their specific role in the family, was a subject of constant discussion and debate. The novelists in this study challenged contemporary gender ideology by way of the novel, all the while living out the oftentimes conflicting Miltonic

expectations of womanhood. Without exception, the authors in this study somehow managed to fulfill their culturally mandated roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and devoted sisters. Even Mary Wollstonecraft, who maintained an unusual level of independence throughout her lifetime, nevertheless maintained dual roles as writer and domestic manager.¹⁵

The historical parameters of this book begin with the publication of *Vindication* in 1792 and end with Parliament's Divorce Act of 1857. This law gave greater custodial access by mothers to their children in the event of a hard-won divorce.¹⁶ The heroines who form the focus of this book—heroines who either resist marriage altogether or who struggle to free themselves from an abusive union—anticipate such civil reform. Deprived of the ability to legally divorce when biblical divorce was allowable, they instead leverage their Christian faith, thereby paradoxically wielding the same ideology that misguided cultural practice exploited to subjugate them.

The heroines examined here reject marriage as the narrative solution. Of course, Fanny does marry Edmund in *Mansfield Park* and Helen's marriage to Gilbert marks the conclusion of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; however, both of these marriages are thin conclusions to novels that are dominated by a more important concern: the resistance of the heroines to forming undesired unions to Henry Crawford and Arthur Huntingdon, respectively. In this regard, it is the dominant theme of ultimate and conclusive resistance to the Byronic heroes George Venables, Henry Crawford, Arthur Huntingdon, and Henry Bellingham that will be examined here.¹⁷

¹⁵Mary Wollstonecraft, in *The Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 374, provides an example. Even though she and Godwin were wary of the institution of marriage and kept separate lodgings, she nevertheless somewhat stepped into the role of domestic manager even while simultaneously writing. A letter to Godwin (November 10, 1796) reveals her dissonance: "I send you your household linen—I am not sure that I did not feel a sensation of pleasure at thus acting the part of a wife, though you have so little respect for the character."

¹⁶See Mary Lyndon Shanley's, *Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England, 1850-1895* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 138. Shanley explains, "The provisions of the Divorce Act and its amendments helped only women whose husbands were guilty of adultery in combination with incest, bigamy, or extreme physical cruelty. Nonetheless, the broad discretion granted to the Divorce Court contrasted sharply with the limited powers Parliament had given to Chancery eighteen years earlier."

¹⁷Though Venables and Crawford technically predate the Byronic hero, the reformed rake that made its rebellious construction possible at the turn of the nineteenth century is evident nonetheless.

MANIPULATING MILTON

Milton's ubiquitous Eve myth begged a response by Christian female novelists who would follow. Their work marks a critique of and response to Milton: a deliberately nonmythic resistance to Milton's mythic Eve. In order fully to understand Milton's influence during this period and the narrative responses that would follow, this section briefly examines John Milton as a father of English literature and the reality that, alongside the rise of the novel and the influence of women on the form, *Paradise Lost* evoked strong negative responses from female writers.¹⁸ Thus, this section next explores the specific ways in which Milton's Eve was a perversion of the biblical Eve. Finally, in response to this perversion, this section demonstrates the ways in which many women during the Romantic and Victorian eras rejected Milton's picture of Eve as well as the double bind she represented, going so far as to blind their literary heroes. Simultaneously and contradictorily, Milton's Eve was represented by him as the idealized picture of womanhood as well as the cause of original sin. As a literary figure, therefore, she was sharply rejected in favor of more resistant, less naive, heroines.

Though John Milton was a literary icon, he was also a biblical mythologizer. *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, a mere century before a wave of revolutions would rock Western civilization, uses epic conventions to grotesquely expand the brief biblical account of the fall of Satan and his legions, and the eventual banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. After an invocation to the muse, Milton begins in medias res, with Satan and his army awaking in hell after their fall. Satan begins by rebelliously proclaiming, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a hell of Heav'n."¹⁹ With this resolution in mind, Satan plots to free himself from the chains of hell, travel across the great chasm to earth, and tempt Adam and Eve and thus all humanity to their "first disobedience." His temptations are successful when he convinces Eve to eat the fruit that will allow her to see and discern evil.²⁰ His achievement establishes Satan as the obstinately rebellious antihero of *Paradise Lost*. The narrative also established Eve as overly ambitious and thus

¹⁸Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* have perhaps written the most comprehensive material exploring Milton's relationship with Victorian female authors in part three titled "How Are We Fal'n?: Milton's Daughters."

¹⁹Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1:254-55.

²⁰Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:663-794.

our necessarily dependent “first mother” whose personal agency single-handedly led to the fall of humanity. Early female novelists rejected this construction of womanhood.

Milton’s interpretation of the Genesis narrative reflected his contemporary moment, echoing the Protestant Reformation. In his work *The Puritan Revolution*, Don Wolf elucidates Milton’s influence in moving the masses away from the prescriptive practices of Calvinism and toward the interpretive practices of Puritanism. He claims that Milton embraced a “rebellious individualism,” claiming that “individualistic Gospel searching was the central impetus of Milton’s radicalism, both religious and political so it also, in varying degrees, lighted and sustained reforming fires in almost all the radicals of the time.”²¹ Though often remembered as a Puritan, Milton was an individualist who embraced the humanistic pursuit of knowledge, picking and choosing which church doctrine he would embrace.

Milton’s relationships with women also reflected his radical individualism and willingness to deviate from culturally accepted ideology. Milton was thirty-four years old in 1643 when he married his first wife, Mary Powell, a beautiful seventeen-year-old, but she deserted him one short month after their marriage.²² It was during his separation from Powell that Milton wrote a treatise in defense of divorce, which argued for lawful divorce on the basis of incompatibility, breaking with both the Anglican Church and Puritan Reformers. To be more specific, Milton bemoaned the inequity of being yoked to an inferior being. Key to this discussion is the reality that at the time, it was men, not women, who could file for and obtain a divorce. It seems that Milton felt shackled to an inferior coy virgin, stating, “The soberest and best governed men are least practiced in these affairs; and who knows not that the bashful muteness of a virgin may oftentimes hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for conversation?”²³ Milton later explained his abhorrence to domestic bondage, saying, “It is to little purpose for him [a man] to make a noise about liberty in the legislative assemblies, and in the courts of justice, who is in bondage to an inferior at home—a species of bondage of

²¹Don M. Wolfe, *Milton in the Puritan Revolution* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 39.

²²Ellyn Sanna, “Biography of John Milton,” in *Bloom’s Bio Critiques, John Milton*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 7-34, at 15.

²³John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1644; repr., London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1820), 30-31.

all others the most degrading to a man.”²⁴ It appears that the degradation Milton feared most, then, was not that of an unhappy marriage, but bondage to “an inferior.”²⁵

It seems logical, then, that Milton’s perverse depiction of Eve and her subsequent inequality and subjection reflects his view of women. From the moment we meet Adam and Eve in the garden, Milton depicts mother Eve intellectually bound to Adam, a picture of inequality and subjection:

Whence true authority in men; though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seem’d;
For contemplation hee and valour form’d,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
Hee for God only, shee for God in him.²⁶

Milton envisions womankind, from the beginning of time, not just in complementary roles, as many orthodox Christians still claim as accurate, but unequal. Milton suggests here that Eve is separated from God, only to look for God through Adam’s agency.

Milton’s epic, then, depicts Eve’s desire to be her own agent as precisely the problem. The King James Version of the Bible, the text used by Puritans, indicates that Adam was “with” Eve when she partook of the fruit,²⁷ suggesting dual blame for the fall. In Milton’s version, the female is perfectly beautiful and wonderfully domestic, but when she obtains a measure of freedom—freedom gained by transgressive independence—her judgment fails her entirely. Even

²⁴John Milton, “Extract from *The Second Defense* (1654),” in *John Milton: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Thomas Shawcross, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1999), 62-66, at 63.

²⁵Sanna, in “Biography of John Milton,” explains that Milton’s relationships with women were plagued with heartache and loss. Milton and his young bride, Mary Powell, eventually reconciled to a marriage of relative amiability, but in 1658, only a year after Milton had fallen completely blind, Mary died. Their third daughter was only a month old. Soon, Milton married a second time, to Katherine Woodhouse. They were married for only fifteen months before she died, and their infant daughter died immediately afterward (9). Milton’s strained relationship with his daughters became clear during his third marriage, to Elizabeth Minshell. It is said that Milton’s daughters found out about his marriage through a servant, and his middle daughter said that it “was no news to hear of his wedding but if she could hear of his death that was something” (27). Nevertheless, Milton is said to have been satisfied with his third wife who cooked for him, sang to him, and read to him (28). She seems to have fulfilled the traditional domestic duties of the “angel in the house.” Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House” (1862) would eventually immortalize this growing fantasy.

²⁶Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4:295-99.

²⁷“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat,” (Genesis 3:6).

when describing Eve's beauty prior to the eating of the fruit, Milton's poetry is an invective against her judgment:

Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell'd, but in wanton ringlets wav'd
As the Vine curls her tendrils, which impli'd
Subjection, but required gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best receiv'd,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.²⁸

The subtle characterization of Eve's hair as wanton reflects her unruly nature. There is beauty in this woman, but she must be controlled and tamed, as a vine needs the tender care of a gardener. Milton requires Eve to be submissive. Even in areas of sexual expression, she must not be the aggressor, but she must be shy and reluctant but also pliable and submissive. It is clear that Eve must submit to Adam in every area: from her relationship with God to her sexuality to her very personhood. Milton leaves no room for Eve to express or search for autonomy.

Milton's depiction of Eve's naive lack of judgment when she steps away from Adam's watchful eye is disturbing. Her ambition to be independent appears transgressive. Instead of working together with Adam, Eve suggests that they divide the labor, taking her away from Adam's watchful eyes.²⁹ Adam reluctantly allows Eve to work alone, but with a warning on his lips:

The Wife, where danger or dishonour lurks,
Safest and seemliest by her Husband stays,
Who guards her, or with her the worst endures.³⁰

Away from his supervision, she is surely at risk of falling into questionable circumstances.

Nevertheless, Eve assures Adam that she knows of the dangers lurking about Paradise, scolding him for doubting her ability to resist temptation. Despite the warnings, Eve does begin to work alone, and Adam's fears become

²⁸Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4:304-11.

²⁹Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:214-25.

³⁰Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:267-69.

reality. Eve is “impregnated” by Satan’s falsehood.³¹ The language suggests that she has been mentally raped due to lack of protection. Eve eats the fruit. She contemplates her deed, considering keeping this knowledge-producing fruit a secret. In her sinfulness, she yearns for equality:

to add what wants
In Female Sex, the more to draw his Love,
And render me more equal, and perhaps,
A thing not undesirable, sometime
Superior; for inferior who is free?³²

Eve eventually decides to share the fruit with Adam. She plucks a bough from the tree and returns to his side. She shares her transgression with Adam. He listens, horrified. Milton creates a scenario where Adam can choose to remain blameless before God; he can avoid death by not eating the fruit. But Eve, jealous for his love, is pleased when he decides to eat, damning himself along with her:

she embrac’d him, and for joy
Tenderly wept, much won that he his Love
Had so ennobl’d, as of choice to incur
Divine displeasure for her sake, or Death.³³

Adam eats. They become intoxicated with desire. She has persuaded Adam to fall, and he relishes her for it. Lasciviously, Adam and Eve fall to “carnal desire.”³⁴ Eve, beautiful, domestic, but ultimately ignorant, brings the superior male into her fallen world. Ironically, this man seems to have little choice. He cannot help but be attracted to this wanton creature.

Unfortunately, Milton’s elaboration of and addition to the biblical account influenced generations after him. *Paradise Lost*, widely read by the educated populace, was a defining narrative of the eighteenth century and thus begged confrontation by the female novelists of the period that followed him—the period of the early novel. Many rejected Milton’s Eve; this rejection is evident in the heroines who lined the pages of early novels penned by women, and it demonstrates the working out of femininity that was an arduous task for

³¹Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:738.

³²Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:821-25.

³³Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:990-93.

³⁴Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 9:1013.

several generations of women who were only beginning to find their place alongside their male counterparts in the public sphere.³⁵ Early female novelists aided in this cultural shift by producing heroines who altered the model of womanhood from an Eve figure with her physical beauty and spiritual weakness, to autonomous heroines with moral fortitude and spiritual agency. Thus, their novels produced heroines markedly different from Eve, heroines who demonstrated truly virtuous, even Christian, womanhood.

Wollstonecraft, whose novel *Wrongs of Woman* forms the subject of the second chapter, was a well-known outspoken opponent of Milton, but through the emerging novel, other writers like George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Gaskell, to name a few, also directly confronted the Miltonic Eve by creating fiercely independent, spiritually conscientious heroines. The result was sharp censure of patriarchal narrative, the type that spurred along early feminism. Through the novel, female authors were freeing women from the cognitive dissonance of Miltonic womanhood—a simultaneous idealization and villainization of women that plagued the eighteenth century and bled into the nineteenth century.

Women who lived directly in Milton's shadow—women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—were caught in a double bind: on one hand, trapped by the oppressive growing ideal of “the angel in the house” but on the other hand, like Pandora and Eve before, villainized as the cause of all hardship and immorality. So while women were expected to exemplify submissive perfection, they were also continually punished for the sins of humanity. This emotional and spiritual abuse was fueled by previous narratives. In Milton's myth, the flawless Eve operates as a domestic goddess, but as soon as she steps outside of her “proper sphere,” chaos ensues.³⁶ Early female novelists sought to abolish this contradictory picture of Eve, and thus womanhood, using literary fiction to fight societal fiction.

³⁵Virginia Woolf asserts in *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2005), 82, that a huge shift with the Victorian female novelists was the realization that females have goals “besides the perennial interests of domesticity.” Woolf often satirically alludes to Milton's authority. After inheriting a small legacy from her aunt, she explains: “Indeed my aunt's legacy unveiled the sky to me, and substituted for the large and imposing figure of a gentleman, which Milton recommended for my perpetual adoration, a view of the open sky,” (39).

³⁶Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, outlines the transgressive act of female novelists moving from the domestic sphere as wives and mothers into the public sphere as published authors. See also Inga-Stina Ewbank, *Their Proper Sphere*.

Milton's prefallen Eve could not be perfect and imperfect: she is caught in an oppressive dilemma, a lose-lose situation. Individuals trapped in such a double bind can become disoriented and even "mad," as there is a sense of entrapment in their very existence. Milton's Eve was caught in a double bind because she was depicted as both beautiful and dangerous: On one hand, she is a stereotypical fantasy. She is domestic, with a "slender waist" and "unadorned golden tresses."³⁷ She yields to Adam, is submissive and without guilt. The double bind occurs because while this type of "perfection" created by Milton is appealing to stereotypical male fantasy, Milton also gave Eve dangerous characteristics that predisposed her to fall. Eve's tresses are described as wanton, and this simple foreshadowing indicates that Eve must be controlled; when she seeks to work alone, this desire for independence places her outside of Adam's sphere of influence. Without Adam by her side, she falls. She is perfect and imperfect simultaneously. Her perfection, according to Milton, seems only to hold so long as she gives up her identity and yields to Adam's authority. Eve's double bind, as depicted by Milton, was an unwelcome inheritance for several generations of women. Milton's *Paradise Lost* transcended the boundaries of fiction to do precisely what fiction does best: it became a cultural artifact that both reflected contemporary ideology and shifted the perspectives of its readership. *Paradise Lost*, then, loomed large. In their work, early female novelists worked to emancipate the Miltonic Eve. Tangentially, society's view of women was undergoing a similar shift. Women were beginning to reject a depiction of women as dependent and ignorant. Instead, women were embracing spiritual agency, and this is evident in the early novel.

Two notable authors chose to nudge contemporary society toward a new vision of womanhood in a curious way, by creating heroes that experienced a loss of sight, a narrative move that seemingly alludes to Milton's own physical blindness. By blinding their heroes, the authors challenged Milton and gave their heroes something he did not have: the ability to see the heroines clearly. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) use almost identical imagery. Before allowing marriage, Brontë blinds her hero, Rochester, just as Barrett Browning blinds hers, Romney, by

³⁷Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4:304-5.

placing the hero in hellish fires. But both men emerge from damning refining fires physically blind but with new spiritual vision. Importantly, their spiritual vision includes the ability to welcome their lovers into a position of spiritual equality. While Rochester and Romney stand as the most striking examples of blindness, George Eliot creates an infirm man with degenerating eyesight when she creates the Miltonic character, Edward Casaubon, in *Middlemarch* (1871-1872).³⁸ Eliot's Miltonic allusions are acute as well. Through these blind and ailing men, the female authors seem to be fulfilling an internal wish: to be seen clearly.

A seemingly obvious, but excluded, choice of text for this book is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). After all, Jane is generally celebrated as an early feminist heroine.³⁹ And as noted above, Charlotte Brontë sharply chastises Rochester for his profligacy. But ultimately, *Jane Eyre* is a narrative that succumbs to earlier constructs of sentimental fiction by its heroine's marriage to the reformed rake—the Byronic hero Edward Rochester. In spite of her initial resistance to Rochester, her subsequent marriage to him propagates, rather than confronts, the fallacy of redemptive womanhood and subsequently promotes a commonplace marriage plot. That is to say, Jane's pious, conscience-driven decision to resist a bigamous union with Rochester situates her as the idyllic Christian heroine—the angel whose goodness ultimately and supernaturally transforms the narrative as she rejects the “Christian” hero St. John Rivers. This is just the type of solution that Anne Brontë rejected in the construction of Helen Huntingdon, a heroine who unsuccessfully transforms her husband. In this way, Anne's realism proved shocking to many contemporary critics and may account, in a small part, for Charlotte's suppression of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* after Anne's death.⁴⁰ Arthur's “transformation of the heart” is not brought about by Helen's goodness; but seemingly,

³⁸George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, rev. ed. (New York: Signet Classic, 1981).

³⁹As Emily Griesinger points out, however, “While much has been written about Brontë's treatment of women's issues and concerns in the novel, including women's education, the plight of the governess, and equality in marriage, what has been missing until recently is a feminist approach that takes seriously the religious dimensions of Brontë's life and makes this background central to understanding women's religious experience in the novel.” “Charlotte Brontë's Religion: Faith, Feminism, and *Jane Eyre*.” *Christianity and Literature* 58, no. 1 (2008): 29-30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44313877>. The same absence of feminist criticism regarding Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* similarly informs the reading of the novels in this text.

⁴⁰Juliet Barker in *The Brontës: Wild Genius on the Moors, The Story of a Literary Family* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2013), 772, notes the ways that Charlotte suppressed the publication of Anne's novel: “Charlotte, it appears, was prepared to consign her sister's novel to oblivion because she considered its subject at odds

Rochester does transform due to Jane's Christian influence, as he says at the conclusion of the narrative, "Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance; the wish for reconciliation to my Maker. I began to pray: very brief prayers they were, but very sincere."⁴¹ Of course, these prayers were to God. But it is not God who audibly answers Rochester. It is Jane. Rochester explains, "I pleaded; and the alpha and omega of my heart's wishes broke involuntarily from my lips in the words—'Jane! Jane! Jane!' . . . a voice—I cannot tell whence the voice came, but I know whose voice it was—replied, 'I am coming: wait for me;' and a moment after, went whispering on the wind, the words—'Where are you?'"⁴² Jane, Rochester's "alpha and omega" replaces the Alpha and Omega. She is Rochester's redeemer. Jane's agency does not seem conclusively to strengthen her resistance; instead, it leads to a predictable marriage resolution reminiscent of the very type of sentimental novel Wollstonecraft decried.

Jane's resistance, instead, is marked by her rejection of St. John Rivers, the cold hero who offers Jane a loveless marriage, but one centered on Christian devotion. Jane desires no such union. Jane does demonstrate in this rejection, of course, that in spite of St. John's evangelical appeal, the complete lack of passion between the pair made a potential marriage unfathomable, even downright sinful. In her own way, then, Jane resists capitulating to social convention and oppressive applications of cultural Christianity as it stood at the time, marking her as an early feminist heroine. Explaining her rejection of St. John, she says, "He has told me I am formed for labour—not love: which is true, no doubt. But, in my opinion, if I am not formed for love, it follows that I am not formed for marriage. Would it not be strange, . . . to be chained for life to a man who regarded one but as a useful tool?"⁴³ This provocative narrative choice—a choice that privileges female, even Christian, passion—was revolutionary for Charlotte Brontë's contemporary readers. Yet the Protestant insistence on individual conscience in concert with the culture of individualism that dominated the early nineteenth century makes Jane's decision somewhat predictable.

with her own perception of what Anne's character was and ought to have been." Furthermore, Charlotte made substantial, invasive editorial changes to Anne's poetry after her death.

⁴¹Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), 455.

⁴²Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 456.

⁴³Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 423.

Even so, Jane's Christianity prompts her paradoxically to reject the Christian hero. Ultimately however, Jane's choice and transformation of the Byronic Rochester succumbs to the very narrative resolution that the other authors who are the primary subjects of this research reject.

Paradise Lost is a grandiose and ostentatious demonstration of "Christian" literature. Indeed, many consider its depth and breadth unparalleled, its influence and beauty obvious. Milton's narrative became a cultural narrative, but the rise of the novel gave women voice, and Christian female authors responded to Milton's Eve myth in unexpected and curious ways—by creating heroines who did not blindly succumb to cultural expectations or temptations. Instead, the heroines demonstrated agency, and they situated this agency in Christian practice, subtly "doing God's work" by demonstrating active resistance to unfair cultural practices. In this way, female authors demonstrated the liberative results of knowing and walking with God.

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