

Paradise Aborted

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Even before the publication of *Paradise Lost*, the 17th century was already entertaining spirited and significant debates over the nature of human generation. Vernacular literature, or texts intended for lay audiences, exploded into wide popularity between the late 16th and early 17th century. The most popular texts were often concerned with reproduction, fertility, and midwifing (Fissell 434), corollary to Louis Schwartz's argument that "Milton's and his immediate audience's perceptions of reproduction were filtered through a pervasive anxiety" he links to the "conditions of trial and punishment" in God's exhortation to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Schwartz 11). Simultaneously, as critic Mary McQueen argues, "*Paradise Lost* was written on the cusp of the new Enlightenment ideas about human generation," namely preformationism (that organisms develop from smaller but complete forms of themselves) and its opponent, epigenesis (that organisms gradually develop their form) (McQueen 440). The tension engendered by "Be Fruitful and multiply," whether in obstetric or ontological anxiety in the 17th century, is inscribed by Milton in the figure of Eve. Her engagement with her reproductive anxieties via challenging discourses of Edenic generation ultimately motivates the abortive moment of the Fall, which Milton deploys to reconcile the different modes of reproduction.

For Schwartz, Milton's cosmos is "a great womb--in fact...a series of concentric wombs," from the "empyrean realm" to the realm of Chaos, to the created universe protected by cosmic shell, to Earth to Eden to Eve (Schwartz 249). Schwartz's further argument of the dyadic relation between "the great, fertile womb of creation" and the "paradoxically 'abor-tive' womb, the gulf

from which the other emerged, and the grave...it might someday return” must then be altered: their concentric formation suggests synecdoche as well as symmetry (Schwartz 248). The lines to which he refers, Chaos described as “the womb of Nature and perhaps her grave” predicts, in the conditionality of “perhaps,” Eve’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge (Milton 2.910). Even as Eve falls, the Earth sympathetically “felt the wound” and “Nature from her seat/Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,/That all was lost,” echoing Nature’s turn to Chaos (9.782-783). Eve’s actions have ramifications for Eden, itself a womblike site of fertility (“whatever Earth all-bearing Mother yields”) that becomes subsumed by the Earth even as Earth and the created universe are suggested as listing back into Chaos’ abortive womb (5.338). This relation puts increased emphasis on Eve, on her womb as a central site for understanding the synecdochal reproductive implications of the Fall, but also freights it with the problem of Eve’s own reproduction. Despite God’s blessing to “be fruitful and multiply,” she is unable to conceive a child in Eden.

The synecdochal relationship of Eden and Eve appears problematized by Eden’s multiplication and Eve’s lack thereof, but reading the two in light of 17th century interpretative offshoots of God’s blessing, “be fruitful and multiply,” reveals a concerted network of images around gestation rather than active reproduction. In early modern England, the female body was already viewed as synecdochal with Eden: as Charlotte Sussman notes in *Peopling the World*, “women could understand their value in terms of their conjugal fidelity and their fecundity; men through their labor power, and through their capacity to protect (enclose) the “natural” resource of women’s reproductive capacity.” The 17th century female body and its reproductive capability to give birth to the redemptive seed is identified with the natural land, the object of male agricultural labor, thereby presenting the possibility of “reclaiming” Eden. Schwartz reinforces

this point, that the act of childbirth, naturalized in this time period as synecdochal, “constituted...a chance for a woman...to redeem some small part of the world...in fulfillment of God’s command to mankind to be fruitful and multiply.” It should be unsurprising that agricultural metaphors were extremely popular in discussing reproduction. Of particular note are the multitude of “analogies to fruit trees, comparing gestation to fruiting” (Fissell 436). 17th century physician Doctor John Maubray wrote that “the *Fruit* of her *WOMB*; especially in the *First Months*, ... may be justly compar’d to the tender BLOSSOMS of *Trees*” [sic] (436). Jakob Horst, author of the popular 16th century text *Wonderful Secrets of Nature*, wrote that the child left the womb when it was ready “as a ripe apple” falls from the tree (436). Similarly, the anonymous author of the immensely popular *Aristotle’s Mysteries* wrote “When the fruit of the apple is ripe, it drops off readily. The baby also does the same thing when it is proper time” (Crowther 917).

Milton was certainly familiar with the figure of the fruiting tree as a mother gestating with child, as Schwartz notes that he deploys it in a 1645 poem, *An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester*, to refer to both the titular figure who dies, and the stillborn child that an incompetent physician “crop[s]” and in doing so kills the mother (Schwartz 125). But this relation is complicated by Eden. While Raphael directly compares “the various fruits [of] the trees of God” with “thy sons” that “shall fill the world more numerous,” aligning with the figure, the abundance of Eden only emphasizes Eve’s comparative unproductivity, with Eve’s children being still a promised absence in the face of Eden’s fruiting trees (5.388-389). But reading into Eden’s trees, we quickly find something strange. When creating the Earth, God induces fruit trees to yield fruit of “her” own kind “whose seed is in herself upon the earth” in order to create forests (7.310-311). This epigenetic reproduction, unique among the preformed arrival of

animals, has halted in Eden. Instead, as Eve explains in her dialogue with Satan, the fruits of Eden “hang incorruptible” until “men rise up to thir provision” (9.622-9.623). In discussion with Adam to provide food for Raphael, she notes that there is no need to store fruit, as “small store will serve, where store,/All seasons, ripe for use hangs on the stalk” (5.322-323). More explicitly, she uses the term “immortal fruit” in Book 11. Rather than Eden’s fruit being hyperproductive, it appears paused, constantly gestating, never crucially “falling” to fulfill the child leaving the womb in the fruiting tree analogies. Even when the fruit does multiply, it does so only when Adam and Eve participate in its “disburd’ning,” requiring an external actor to affect even epigenetic reproduction (5.319).

In line with Eden’s synecdochal reproduction, we can similarly characterize Adam and Eve’s perpetual gestation as also needing an external actor. In Book 5, the narrator overlays Adam and Eve having sex, reproductive labor, with their actual agricultural labor: “where any row/ of Fruit-trees overwoodie...needed hands to check/Fruitless embraces” as Eve “spous’d about him twines/Her marriageable arms.” While again we see the collapsing of different forms of labor into a naturalized resource of reproductivity, more important is the acknowledgement of “hands” needed to check “Fruitless embraces,” procreations that are not “fruitful” and thus do not lead to multiplication (5.215-217).

Let us return to the fruit-tree analogy that has so far colored Edenic birth. Critic Horace Hodges notes that the fruit trees in Eden also present a problem that critics Kurt Lehnhof and David Glimp view as an unresolved antimony (Hodges 1): in an address to God, Eve says “where thy abundance wants/Partakers, and uncropt falls to the ground/But thou hast promis’d from us two a Race,” blatantly contradicting the gestating synecdoche of perpetually hanging fruits (4.731-733). Though Glimp and Lehnhof read this as a literal assertion, it seems more likely

that Eve is deploying this antimony to emphasize her own problem of reproduction. Fruits falling “uncropt” to the ground figure a disruption of Edenic hierarchy and reproduction: rather than Adam and Eve picking fruits, and causing the trees to multiply through their “disburd’ning,” the trees are independently “yielding Fruit after her kind/Whose Seed is in her self upon the Earth,” reproducing in the manner induced by God without God. We can read this as Eve’s articulation of unease with the reproductive conditions in Eden, cleverly displacing her questioning of God by indicting the “wants” of “thy abundance” and reminding God of his promise of children.

This figuring of unease via the fruit tree becomes of cosmological significance as Eve begins to be tempted by Satan, who draws her to the Tree of Knowledge, thereby contending with God’s hierarchy in Eden. Interesting is that in Satan’s tempting of Eve in Book 5, where he appears to her in a dream, he attempts to persuade her by lamenting “Deigns none to ease thy load?” (5.59). Recalling Eve’s previous address to God, wherein the fruits fall by themselves, we can also read the trees as constantly multiplying but laden with increasing burden of gestation, as if the sheer weight of the fruits perpetually on the tree mirror Eve’s anxiety, freighted with children that inexplicably remain in the womb. After she eats the apple, Eve even pledges to the Tree of Knowledge that she will constantly tend it to ease “thy fertil burden,” reciprocally identifying her anxieties with the maternal fruiting figure (9.801).

Both Satan and Eve are burdened by their relation to God: immediately before she is accosted by the former, Eve tells Adam that she must work away from him, as they often lapse into sex rather than labor (recalling the “fruitless imbraces” of Book 5). She does so in the belief that her labor will allow her to not sleep feeling “unearn’d,” as she does otherwise, even though she acknowledges that procreative sex rather than labor is the only solution to outpacing Edenic growth (9.220-222). This sentiment mirrors Satan’s monologue of his “debt immense of endless

gratitude” of creation by God (4.50). Where Eve feels she fails in her labors, both productive and reproductive, indebted to God, Satan tempts her via the same discourse that allows him to skirt God’s authorship: by claiming self-creation, violating the preformationist logic of Eden with wholly epigenetic process.

Satan immediately stages the Tree of Knowledge as a solution to the problem of human generation by identifying it as “mother of science,” in reference to the real world scientific discourse of preformation and epigenesis as well as the maternal fruit tree figure (9.680). He says that the tree gives the power to “discerne/Things in thir causes,” and “trace the wayes/of Highest agents”(9.678-680); he uses this false knowledge to assert that “The Gods are first, and that advantage use/On our belief, that all from them proceeds/ I question it, for this fair Earth I see/...producing every kind” (9.718-720). Satan stages the Tree of Knowledge as a solution to Eve’s reproductive anxiety, under the synecdochal implication that epigenetic processes offer a means for her to reproduce hidden by divine insistence on preformation. Milton here cleverly incorporates and offers a solution to the debates of genesis: by framing in prelapsarian Eden preformation as divine and epigenesis as rebellious, he shows orthodox obedience, but in recognizing that human reproduction is obviously epigenetic and not preformed, uses the Fall to narratively enable that mode of reproduction.

Milton’s commitment to preformation explains the constant gestation of the child, who cannot be birthed in normal epigenetic process, without God. This would also undermine divine authorship and place it with Adam and Eve. Simultaneously, if God preformed the child, it would assume a status similar to Adam and Eve, in obedience to God, rather than being their promised offspring. Thus Adam and Eve’s children only become narratively tenable after the Fall, but this in turn raises the question of the gestating potentiality of the child that has lain unborn, hanging

perpetually on the tree. Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge then acts as an abortive moment, ending the uneasy tension in her womb between preformation and epigenesis, as well as synecdochally enabling the conditions for obedient reproduction on Earth.

Eve's very act of touching the apple ("her rash hand...she pluck'd" [9.780-781]) echoes Raphael's description of death by old age as a fruit on the tree "Gatherd, not harshly pluckt, for death mature" (11.537). Eve's action is deathlike by its touch, and becomes abortive when considering that she is plucking the gestating fruit from the maternal tree. Satan's temptation to Eve to eat the apple, describing it as "sweet of thyself, but much more sweet thus cropt" takes on new light in reference to Milton's *An Epitaph*, wherein the physician's failed removal of the stillborn child from the mother's womb is referred to as an attempt to "crop" (5.68). Furthermore, Milton informs us that Eve "knows not eating death," (did not know she was eating death) as if the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge itself is an abortifacient which she consumes (9.792).

The synecdochal ramifications of this abortive moment are immediate. As Eve eats, we are told that "Earth felt a wound"; upon Adam's later eating of the apple, Earth feels "pangs," pains in "entrails," mimicking the rupture of Sin's womb in Book 2 (9.1000-1001). In thinking of Earth's womb, then, part of Schwartz's dyad and the concentric wombs, we might think of the wound as aborting the preformed shapes that rose to the surface in Book 7, as epigenetic forms of production become favored. Simultaneously, we are told that "Nature...Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe/That all was lost," echoing Chaos' "abortive gulf," (2.441) the "womb" and "grave" which it seems Nature will begin to list towards. This is supported by the narrator's description of Lucifer's flight through chaos near creation, wherein he encounters "All th' unaccomplisht works of Natures hand,/Abortive," recalling the Fall as interrupting Nature,

forcing her to abort her gestating “works” out of Creation’s womb towards Chaos, eliminating the opportunity of preformed life on Earth (3.455-3.456). The final appearance of abortive language in the text is Adam’s scrying of the future via Raphael, who shows him the flood, to which Adam describes the knowledge as “abortive,” echoing the Tree of Knowledge’s abortive consumption (11.768).

It is important to note that this is an abortive moment rather than an abortion. In line with Milton’s deployment of heterodox negotiations of controversial subjects, we can view this moment as an instance of theodicy. Satan’s ultimate goal, to force God to “abolish his works,” is a cosmological abortion, but in actuality, Eve’s consumption paves the way for new modes of life (2.370). The Son notes that “Fruits of more pleasing savour from thy seed/Sow’n with contrition in his heart, then those...all the Trees Of Paradise could have produc’t” acknowledges the benefits of epigenesis in the doubling of fruit as apple or child, and playfully prefers it to God’s preformed creation, an argument that would read as blasphemous in Satan’s mouth, or Eve’s (11.25-26). The subject of reference in God’s blessing to “Be fruitful and multiply” is shifted even as it becomes possible, from comparison to Edenic tree to epigenetic production. Simultaneously, however, Milton also qualifies epigenesis (and its potential dangers) through the same figure of the Son. The narrative deployment of the Fall also necessitates the birth of the Son through Adam’s seed, a figure whose existence already has form. This preformist birth redeems the human epigenetic process even as it provides for Sewartz’s anxious mothers to act “as an imitation of Christ,” a theodicy that neatly addresses the conjunctive anxieties around generation in the 17th century.

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