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Cavendish and Milton on Gender Parity as the Foundation for Utopia

Explorations into the concept of utopian society tend to prioritize observation over explanation. Generally speaking, a Utopia features “no heaven... no hell... no countries... no religion... no possessions... no need for greed or hunger... a brotherhood of man,” and a world that “will live as one” (Lennon). This emphasis on the elimination of manmade societal dividers persists in modern utopian works, but mankind’s inherent dividers are seldom challenged within the genre. One such divider is the distinction between the male and female sexes, and the predetermination of roles and expectations borne from it. With *The Blazing World* and *Paradise Lost*, oft-contrasted writers Margaret Cavendish and John Milton both illustrate how gender parity, rather than political or economic erasure, provides the strongest possible foundation for a utopia.

Historical readings of *The Blazing World* generally concur that Cavendish wrote it to satirize the Royal Society—and European academia in general—for their baseless insistence on gender-exclusivity. Her employment of a female protagonist who immediately rises to power in an alien civilization upon being introduced to it, coupled with her emphasis on the inquisition of traditional beliefs, gives the text an initially feminist appearance. This appearance is at first established in the following passage, when the Lady arrives before the Emperor:

No sooner was the Lady brought before the Emperor, but he conceived her to be some Goddess, and offered to worship her; which she refused, telling him, (for by that time she had pretty well learned their Language) that although she came out of another world, yet was she but a mortal. At which the Emperor rejoicing, made her his Wife, and gave her an absolute power to rule and govern all that World as she pleased. But her subjects, who could hardly be perswaded to believe her mortal, tender'd her all the Veneration and Worship due to a Deity. (Cavendish 13)

At face value, this scene depicts an idolization of the Lady by the *Blazing World*'s people, initiated by her exoticism but promptly justified as her competence as a ruler of an intellectually superior society is displayed and acknowledged. The new-world inhabitants' reactions to the Lady, however, must not overshadow the intent with which the Lady speaks and acts. When the Emperor declares that she holds a divine status, she immediately corrects him by asserting that while she may be foreign, she is still mortal. Had Cavendish chosen for the Lady to capitalize on the Emperor's misperception, all balance between the Lady's power and that held by the *Blazing World*'s people would have been lost; if this were the case, the Lady's capitalistic course of action would undermine every remaining utopian detail, leaving a narrative that would parallel *The Female American*. Thus, the Lady's correction of the Emperor is effectively a request to be regarded as, if nothing else, standing on equal ground with those around her. Northeastern University English professor Dr. Marina Leslie, in her analysis of *The Blazing World*, argues "that Cavendish exploits both the novelty and tremendous range of utopian narratives to authorize a revisionary project whereby a number of more intractable generic models for representing female nature and authority are subsumed and transformed" (Leslie 7-8). Leslie's

statement is observable here, as the Lady deviates from the utopian female norm to strengthen the utopian concept through authoritative mutuality that disregards gender difference.

The observable representations of gender parity in *Paradise Lost* are concentrated most heavily in Book 9, where Adam and Eve discuss whether they should remain safely together to tend to the garden or, in an effort to cover more ground, work separately despite God's warnings of a dangerous, lurking enemy. In the following excerpt from their dialogue, Eve's reply bears significance:

To whom with healing words Adam replyd.

Daughter of God and Man, immortal Eve,

For such thou art, from sin and blame entire:

Not diffident of thee do I dissuade

Thy absence from my sight, but to avoid

Th' attempt itself, intended by our Foe.

For hee who tempts, though in vain, at least asperses

The tempted with dishonour foul, suppos'd

Not incorruptible of Faith, not prooff

Against temptation: thou thy self with scorne

And anger wouldst resent the offer'd wrong,

Though ineffectual found: misdeem not then,

If such affront I labour to avert

From thee alone, which on us both at once

The Enemie, though bold, will hardly dare,
Or daring, first on mee th' assault shall light.

...

So spake domestick *Adam* in his care
And Matrimonial Love; but *Eve*, who thought
Less attributed to her Faith sincere,
Thus her reply with accent sweet renewd.

If this be our condition, thus to dwell
In narrow circuit strait'nd by a Foe,
Suttle or violent, we not endu'd
Single with like defence, wherever met,
How are we happie, still in fear of harm?
But harm precedes not sin: onely our Foe
Tempting affronts us with his foul esteem
Of our integrtie: his foul esteeme
Sticks no dishonor on our Front, but turns
Foul on himself; then wherefore shund or feard
By us? who rather double honour gaine
From his surmise prov'd false, find peace within,
Favour from Heav'n, our witness from th' event.
And what is Faith, Love, Vertue unassaid
Alone, without exterior help sustaint?

Let us not then suspect our happie State
 Left so imperfet by the Maker wise,
 As not secure to single or combin'd.
 Fraile is our happiness, if this be so,
 And Eden were no Eden thus expos'd. (Milton IX.290-341)

Eve's rebuttal to Adam's cautiousness comes in the form of multiple inquisitions, challenging the authenticity of their happiness, the legitimacy of the threat their unnamed enemy poses, and the very word of God that Eden is safe at all. Not long after this exchange, Eve succeeds in convincing Adam to let her go about her day apart from him, on the condition that she be "returnd by Noon amid the Bowre" (Milton IX.401). Trinity International University chair of English Joshua R. Held, in his analysis of gender in *Paradise Lost*, states the following:

By emphasizing that the human couple need not "fear" outward "violence" (9.282), per Raphael's account of Satan's coming temptation, Eve downplays the possibility that they might need to "repel" an encounter with temptation. Eve's important word "fear" perhaps also recalls Raphael's (6.912), though this term comes to suggest many additional components as well: fear of the Lord and fear of Satan's "fraud," fear for oneself and fear on behalf of another. The growing disagreement between Adam and Eve to some degree centers on this ambiguity. Eve suggests that Adam may fear for himself, but takes umbrage at the "infer[ence]" that he fears "equal[ly]" her own "firm[ness]" of "Faith and Love." Her final two lines make especially clear that she is offended at his doubtful "Thoughts" of her, which, she puns, are merely "misthought." Eve and Adam thus reveal their different priorities in hearing and responding to divine commands, even as they

foreshadow different ways that they will fall, and more broadly suggest different pitfalls for the transfer of epic messages. (Held 58)

Held observes Eve's argumentative approach as being derived from an interpretation of the angel Raphael's warning that contrasts Adam's interpretation. Eve's perspective is thus proven to develop separately from Adam's, granting her independence from her male counterpart that ultimately leads them to pursue knowledge together and leave God's confines. Eve's ability to present and support opinions that conflict Adam's provides her—and, by association, women—with equal representation in the progress of Man, which could only begin with their departure from Eden.

While the construction of a utopian world can appear to be idealist to a fault, often laden with foundational oversights concealed under contemporary topical applicability, Cavendish and Milton successfully avoid the genre's pitfall by addressing humankind's most basic, universal separator, sex and gender. By depicting instances of true gender parity, *The Blazing World* and *Paradise Lost* successfully utilize utopian fiction to challenge gender-based divisions and suggest the potential for progress in breaking down these barriers.

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