



Compare the Representation of Femininity in *Paradise Lost* by John Milton and *V for Vendetta* by Alan Moore and David Lloyd

Victoria Lorriman

Femininity is a social construct. Hélène Cixous supports this view by arguing that in any form of representation of social relationships, the masculine/feminine dualism is equivalent to a 'Superior/Inferior' metaphor.¹ The socially-constructed idea of the female as the subordinate is intertwined with patriarchal ideology. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* present patriarchal societies. Within their socio-political systems, Eve and Evey are rendered feminine by their representation in language and images as the 'Inferior', the subordinate, in relation to masculine figures of emotional, physical and social supremacy. Both characters ensure the maintenance of patriarchal values, even when they seem powerful. However, Moore and Lloyd deconstruct Evey's femininity by demolishing the idealistic image of feminine appearance set up by Milton through Eve: one of innocence and beauty. Therefore, Evey moves away from being equated with Milton's Eve figure of patriarchal conservatism towards one of social reform, but the transfiguration is undermined by derogatory language directed towards Evey that reaffirms the connection between femininity and the subordinate.

Mary Nyquist argues that differences that in *Paradise Lost* are ordered hierarchically, such as gender, are 'neutralised by a critical discourse interested in [...] harmonious pairing'.² However, initially, Eve is not positioned in a pair with Adam, but is represented, somewhat radically, as his equal. Formed from Adam's rib, she and Adam are, figuratively, one body, regardless of their genders. God extracts Adam's rib 'with *cordial* spirits warm'³ (emphasis mine), literally withdrawing and fashioning Eve from Adam's heart. Upon seeing Eve for the first time, Adam perceives 'myself / Before me' (*PL* p.201,8,495-496) and desires to join with Eve in marriage as 'one flesh, one heart, one soul' (*PL* p.201,8,499). Milton succinctly encapsulates the extended metaphor of Adam and Eve as one human being by placing 'flesh', 'heart' and 'soul' at the latter, stressed half of their iambic feet, mimicking the pulsation of a human heart. However, unlike Nyquist asserts, hierarchical difference comes to be *emphasised* by the disintegration of gender equality through bodily union. After representing Eve as equal to Adam, Milton reverts to using language that relates to a subdivision of Cixous' 'Superior/Inferior' metaphor to separate and subordinate Eve: 'Activity/Passivity'.⁴ The radical impact of fusing Adam and Eve into one body is reduced by Milton's representation of marriage as a transaction, during which Eve is subordinated through passivity that is equated with femininity. She is submissively 'Led by her heavenly maker' (*PL* p.200,8,485) and passed from God to Adam with 'obsequious majesty' (*PL* p.201,8,509), suggesting a dutiful compliancy with the marriage that is conducted by patriarchal force. Cixous argues that to sustain itself, the patriarchal social structure 'passe[s] itself off as eternal-natural'.⁵ Indeed, Adam gains insurmountable authority over Eve in actively deciding upon their marriage because he understands Eve as 'in the prime end/Of nature her the inferior' (*PL* p.202,8,540-541). Moreover, Eve's position in Biblical doctrine renders her eternally passive to mankind. Written in a Hebrew context, the Bible reflects Hebrew patriarchal culture in which wives are subordinate to their husbands.⁶ The Bible represents an eternal hierarchy within which Eve is incapable of completely overcoming the inferior, feminine role of subordination that patriarchal domination over religious doctrine reinforces.

¹ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 1996), p.63.

² Mary Nyquist, 'The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity in the Divorce Tracts and in *Paradise Lost*', *John Milton*, ed. Harold Bloom (USA: Chelsea House, 2004), 171-202 (pp.171-172).

³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.200, book 8, line 466. Further references are given as 'PL' followed by the page, book and line number.

⁴ Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.65.

⁶ John T. Shawcross, *John Milton: The Self and the World* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p.9.

While Milton presents Eve as subordinate to Adam through figurative language that associates her with acceptance of a passive, feminine role, Lloyd depicts Evey's face as one laden with garish make-up⁷ that establishes her as an icon not only of femininity, but of gendered childhood. Hence, in comparison to Eve, Evey begins in a position of heightened vulnerability within a male-dominated context, but the femininity of both characters ensures the upholding of a patriarchal value system. It is precisely this socio-political conservatism that Milton sets up through the figure of Eve that Moore and Lloyd seek to destabilise; the maintenance of patriarchy is not conducive to social reform. Indeed, Jordana Greenblatt argues that the figure of the feminine child is raised 'only so that it can be explicitly undermined'.⁸ Lloyd pictorially undermines the representation of the child by exposing its vulnerability, contrasting Evey's slight frame and rose pink cheeks with a physically taller and wider, deeply shadowed Fingerman (VV p.10,7). A brick wall divides the characters and the Fingerman looks down upon Evey (VV p.10,7), visually establishing Cixous' 'Superior/Inferior' opposition to further disempower the symbol of the child while reinforcing the supremacy of masculinity over femininity. When the Fingermen turn on Evey after establishing that she is prostituting herself, their physical as well as social superiority is represented in Lloyd's manipulation of gutter space. Scott McCloud posits that 'in the limbo of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea'.⁹ This concept of closure enhances the ease and speed with which the Fingermen presumably move from encircling Evey to holding her up against a wall (VV p.11,6-7), undermining the physicality of the feminine child.

The authoritarian state, Norsefire, depends on passive acceptance of established roles to sustain itself; the initial representation of Evey as a physically inferior female constitutes one of these roles. Indeed, Jennifer Macfarlane posits that *V for Vendetta* 'presents patriarchy as an evil that goes hand in hand with authoritative power structures'.¹⁰ Thus, to maintain its role as the omnipotent repressor, Norsefire systematically oppresses the effeminate through marginalisation. A comparative analysis of the syntax of Evey and the Fingerman's speech reveals Evey as representative of the oppressed, subordinate female. Evey's pleas, 'Oh please don't oh Jesus no please' (VV p.11,9) are spoken in one unbroken breath, creating the sense that she is deeply petrified by the advancements of the Fingermen. Contrastingly, the Fingerman's threat, 'we get to decide what happens to you. That's our prerogative' (VV p.11,7) is constructed in logical phrases that convey a slower pace of speech and greater self-control. Evey's intensely experienced emotion as opposed to the Fingerman's composure encompasses Cixous' notion that feminine emotions are subordinate to masculine logic; the 'Intelligible/Palpable'¹¹ opposition. Therefore, Moore's syntactical dichotomy sustains the representation of Evey as inferior to both the Fingermen and the state that they represent. Evey's socio-political influence only conserves Norsefire's authoritative, patriarchal power structure. Hence, both Evey and Eve begin as figures of socio-political conservatism because they are rendered subordinate to patriarchal dominance by the writer's or artist's representation of them as the 'Inferior' and oppressed, thus feminine, part of Cixous' metaphor.

However, Milton's representation of Eve's femininity is partly constituted of seductive power over both Satan and Adam, affording her some superiority over masculinity. Shannon Miller argues that Milton's portrait of Eve briefly defends women's position by "'snar[ing]" men through beauty'.¹² Indeed, Adam goes as far as to accuse Eve of using her 'heavenly form' (PL p.266,10,872) for evil means. He calls her a 'serpent' (PL p.265,10,867), evoking a link with Satan that establishes the feminine body as a site for male temptation. Furthermore, Milton's use of sibilance conveys the likening of Eve to Satan in his serpentine form; Adam believes 'nothing wants, but that thy shape, / Like his' (PL p.265,10,869-870), suggesting that Eve is as evil as Satan and only her external, beautiful body differs from Satan's mind of vice. The feminine body is equated with the ability to gain power by signifying abstract concepts outside of its physical boundaries, a capacity that Lloyd and Moore will be shown to use within the

⁷ Alan Moore and David Lloyd, *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), p.10, panel 4. Further references are given as 'VV' followed by the page and panel number. Panels are numbered sequentially from left to right.

⁸ Jordana Greenblatt, 'I for Integrity: (Inter)Subjectivities and Sidekicks in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*', *ImageText*, 4:3(2009) <http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v4_3/greenblatt/> [Accessed 10 May 2016], p.8.

⁹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), p.66.

¹⁰ Jennifer Macfarlane, 'Anarcha-Feminism in Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*', *The Albatross* 4:1(2014), 35-45 (p.35).

¹¹ Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.63.

¹² Shannon Miller, 'Serpentine Eve: Milton and the Seventeenth-Century Debate over Women', *Milton Quarterly* 42:1(2008), 44-68 (p.57).

representation of Evey's femininity. Eve's body becomes capable of signifying Satan's evil, alluring abilities alongside its own sexually tempting capacities.

Nevertheless, John Shawcross affirms that 'Milton repeatedly indicates that he accepted the theory of female weakness, and this [...] leads him to have Satan pursue Eve'.¹³ The key word here is 'pursue'. For Satan, Eve is not initially the hunter, but the hunted, the weak female. Milton's use of an end-stop creates the sense that Satan is enclosing in on Eve, 'his purposed prey.' (PL p.218,9,416), while the application of the continuous present tense and a comparative adverb evokes a dynamic and involving pursuit respectively: 'Eve separate he spies' (PL p.218,9,424), so 'Nearer he drew' (PL p.218,9,434). Milton describes Eve as 'mindless the while' (PL p.218,9,431), both unaware and inattentive to her surroundings, demonstrating mental weakness. However, Eve's 'heavenly form' (PL p.219,9,457) is called upon again to afford her superiority over Satan's evil intentions. Milton equates the feminine body with such idealistic, overpowering beauty and innocence that Satan is stunned and momentarily forgets his plans to deceive Eve. The 'feminine' form is 'Angelic' (PL p.219,9,458), 'soft' (PL p.219,9,458) and bestows Eve with such 'graceful innocence' (PL p.219,9,459) that Satan's malice is 'overawed' (PL p.219,9,460). Nonetheless, Satan's obsession over Eve's feminine form serves to transform her into an object of desire. Satan 'spies' (PL p.218,9,424) on Eve and sees her genitalia as an image of beauty: 'so thick the roses bushing round/About her glowed (PL p.218,9,426-427). Therefore, Milton ultimately represents Eve's feminine body as an object of desire for both Adam and Satan and in doing so, femininity is equated with objectification and inferiority when subject to the male gaze.

Similarly, Evey is objectified during her imprisonment. However, rather than equate the feminine body with desirability, the process of objectification strips Evey of femininity. As Evey's hair is cut off, Lloyd accentuates her femininity to underline its loss. Evey's garment is noticeably low-cut, revealing a heavily shadowed cleavage (VV p.153,2). The gaze of the reader is drawn to this area, objectifying Evey in a manner similar to that of the obsessive male gaze of Satan upon Eve. However, Evey does not retain an idealistic image of feminine beauty, but succinctly loses it, as her breasts become shaded in and thus invisible in the following panel (VV p.153,3). Furthermore, unlike Eve, Evey is reduced to an object of disgust rather than of desire. While Eve's genitals are likened to beautiful 'roses' (PL p.218,9,426), Moore's clinical language soils Evey's sexual organs. The innocence that Milton equates with the desirable female is corrupted; Evey is given an 'examination' (VV p.153,6), a noun that connotes harsh physical penetration. Cixous argues that a woman without femininity does not exist: 'What is left of her is unthinkable, unthought'.¹⁴ This idea is reflected in the culmination of Evey's loss of femininity. Evey feels 'no better' than a rat (VV p.154,2), suggesting that she no longer views herself as human, let alone female.

However, Moore and Lloyd present the loss of femininity through the corruption and dehumanisation of the body as advantageous to Evey – a representation that is, ultimately, undermined. Cixous affirms that if a woman does not exist in thought, then 'she does not enter into the oppositions'.¹⁵ Hence, a loss of femininity affords Evey potentiality to exist outside of patriarchal binary thought that would otherwise oppress her as one of the 'Inferior' against the omnipotent state. Evey moves away from being equated with Milton's Eve figure of patriarchal conservatism towards one of social reform. Nevertheless, to enable her to transcend conservative socio-political structures, Moore and Lloyd represent Evey as a 'transfigured' (VV p.172,9) form in a manner that is ideological and unrealistic. Like the moment when Eve's body becomes capable of signifying Satan's evil, alluring abilities alongside its own sexually tempting capacities, Evey's body gains power by signifying concepts outside of its physical boundaries. Evey chooses 'the death of [her] body' over 'the death of [her] principles' (VV p.171,1), supporting the notion that she exists only as immaterial ideas, and is later described as an 'angel' (VV p.171,4), bestowing her with implausible, superhuman resistance against patriarchal and state oppression. Rather than exist as one of the subordinate effeminate, Evey becomes less than human and more of a revolutionary symbol of anarchistic ideas that renders her, ideologically, omnipotent. Maggie Gray complements this view, arguing that a character who embodies 'the symbolic and semiotic delineation of an idea rather than a human character' is 'ideological'.¹⁶ The representation of Evey as an immaterial symbol of socio-political renewal is undermined by its ideological nature and language that demeans Evey. During the transformation, V belittles Evey, stating, 'Woman, this is the most important moment of your life. Don't run from it' (VV, p.170,6). The 'Superior/Inferior' patriarchal

¹³ Shawcross, *John Milton: The Self and the World*, p.203.

¹⁴ Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, p.64.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Maggie Gray, 'A fistful of dead roses...'. Comics as cultural resistance: Alan Moore and David Lloyd's *V for Vendetta*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 1:1(2010), 31-49 (p.43).

dichotomy is re-established by V's use of a derogatory term of address and presumption that Evey is weak and afraid of transfiguration. Furthermore, V directs Evey through the transformation, commanding her to 'Seize it. Encircle it within your arms. Bury it in your heart' (VV p.172,8). Therefore, despite the pre-established loss of femininity through bodily corruption that allows Evey to become less than human and more of an ideological symbol, V's dominance over Evey works to reaffirm the representation of femininity as subordinate to masculinity.

In conclusion, the representation of femininity as subordinate to masculinity abounds *Paradise Lost* and *V for Vendetta*. Application of Cixous' 'Superior/Inferior' metaphor as an analytical framework reveals Eve as passive towards her marriage and Evey as physically and emotionally weaker than men. Even though Eve's femininity is partly constituted of seductive power over men, Satan's obsessive gaze objectifies her, hence rendering her inferior. Similarly, while Evey undergoes a supposed loss of femininity that enables her to transcend patriarchal binaries, V uses derogatory language towards her that reaffirms the representation of femininity as subordinate to masculinity. Therefore, Evey's movement away from being equated with Milton's Eve figure of patriarchal conservatism towards one of social reform is undermined, ultimately emphasising the dominance of the oppressive patriarchal system within both texts.

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