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An Artful Eve

There are many depictions of Adam and Eve at the moment of the Fall throughout history. By looking at a few of these portrayals that were created prior to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, we will see the contrast between the general, popular view of the Fall and Milton's version of it. It is important to keep an historical perspective in mind, as most of the pieces we will look at are from the 1500 and 1600's. This means that these artistic works had been around for many years before Milton even wrote *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, the portrayals of Eve that we see here had been accepted and concreted in society. As Roland Frye points out in his book *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts*, "Because the story of the Fall was universally known, the artists were able (once they became seriously interested in doing so) to postulate psychological reactions for the characters involved, and to do so by purely visual means" (*Imagery* 291). These paintings and engravings of the Fall were not just empty representations of biblical characters, but in-depth examinations of the first man and woman and the repercussions of their actions in the Garden of Eden. As I focus on the depiction of Eve in these representations, I want to look at how Milton contradicts the ideas that these visual images assert. In contrast to the negative and guilty portrayal of Eve in several visual depictions of the Fall, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton constructs a radical defense of the first woman.

First, before looking at specific representations of Adam and Eve depicted at the moment of the Fall, it is important to establish Milton's relationship to the visual arts.

Not only would Milton have been aware of the artwork of the Fall, but his highly descriptive writing lends itself to visual inclinations. As we read *Paradise Lost*, we're inclined to almost see the characters and scenes that he so vividly describes. For example, we can see this stunning ability to paint pictures with words in his descriptions of Adam and Eve. First, Adam:

> His fair large front and eye sublime declared
> Absolute rule; and hyacinthine locks
> Round from his parted forelock manly hung
> Clust'ring, but not beneath his shoulders broad: (Milton 4:300-03)

Milton's words are lush with descriptive imagery as he explains the exact way in which Adam's hair hangs, his eyes look and his face is carved, as well as what these descriptions imply. The same is also true of his description of Eve:

> She as a veil down to the slender waist
> Her unadorned golden tresses wore
> Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets waved
> As the vine curls tendrils, which implied
> Subjection… (Milton 4:304-08)

Here he describes Eve to such an extent that we can immediately visualize the shape and sway of her hair as it swings down to her slim waist. His words create such images in our minds that it is difficult to read without imagining visual representations of these characters. Again, Frye supports this argument of Milton's great talent of depicting detailed images through his writing. "[W]e shall find that Milton's descriptive words have been so chosen as to select, and exclude, and alter, and evoke impressions of great visual power" ("Visual" 244). Not only would his poem be placed strategically within an historical context of visual representations of the story, but his use of description in his work lends itself to be perceived in a visual and artistic manner.

As mentioned, it is also valuable to keep in mind Milton's place in history at this point. The paintings that we will look at had been established in the public sphere for years, and Milton would have potentially been aware of them. As Frye points out in his article "Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Visual Arts," "Milton's epic story coincided with a visual tradition which was to be seen throughout Europe: hundreds of examples of it were to be found even in the relative isolation of England, and it was preeminently to be encountered in Italy" ("Visual" 233). The story of Adam and Eve was obviously one that was well known and often the subject of artwork throughout Europe. Frye also states that, "The central characters, places, and events of his great epic had occupied the foreground of visual art in the western world for a millennium and a half before he was born" ("Visual" 233). We can assume that Milton would have been exposed to many of these works of art prior to his writing of *Paradise Lost*. Considering this, it is even more impressive that Milton took the accepted image of Eve and altered it greatly in his text.

In looking specifically at Eve's portrayal in these visual representations, we can see an Eve that differs greatly from Milton's depiction of her. In Diane McColley's chapter, "Native Innocence," she points out the most common depiction of Eve in art at this time. "[T]he mother of mankind in art and verse is weak, vain, useless, mindless, trifling, grasping, vacillating, wanton, obstinate, presumptuous, and (nonetheless) fatally seductive" (McColley 1-2). As we look at several examples of visuals representations of the Fall from the 16th and 17th centuries, we will see that McColley's words ring true. Milton gives us a complicated, complex Eve who struggles with reason and moral decisions, while her manifestation in art transforms her into a two-dimensional figure, either useless or highly sexual and capable of deceitful manipulation. McColley narrows

these representations down to the following: "At her most appealing, she embodies passion subjugating reason; at her worst she is the apt and willing instrument of evil" (McColley 2). In stark contrast to Milton's complex, logical and mindful Eve, her portrayal in art at that time was defined by her most base qualities. McColley also defends Milton's portrayal of her, saying, "Within this tradition one finds a rich variety of Eves, ranging in predominant attributes from wanton frailty to superb and tragic dignity, but none that emphasizes, as Milton's does, her present and potential virtues" (McColley 7). Despite the fact that there are several varying representations of Eve in the visual arts, none give her the credit and complexity that Milton affords her in *Paradise Lost*. In order to demonstrate these differences between the visually represented Eve and Milton's Eve, I am going to look at several pieces of artwork created prior to the writing of *Paradise Lost*. These works are: Cecchino Salviati's The *Fall*, Michelangelo Buonarroti's fresco *The Fall and Expulsion*, Jacopo Tintoretto's *The Fall*, and Peter Paul Rubens' *The Fall*. In each of these pieces, we will see how these artists' portrayals of Eve differ greatly from Milton's more generous depiction of her.

In Cecchino Salviati's (1510-63) painting of the Fall, Eve is shown as the active participant of the scene, as she is taking fruit from the serpent, while simultaneously handing it to Adam. She is shown on one knee, with the other stretched out in front of her, so that it looks as though she is about to get up and move. In contrast, Adam is sitting, leaning on a rock, with one leg bent up near his body. Here, Eve is the center of the picture, as she appears to be active and ready to move. Also, both the serpent and Adam are looking at her, so one's eyes are drawn to her, as she seems to be the center of everyone's attention. Because she is the one perpetrating this activity (the plucking and

eating of the fruit), the viewer sees her as the one to fault for this digression. Meanwhile, Adam appears innocent, as he sits idly by, staring at Eve's body. Also, as Frye points out, there are some partially crushed roses at Adam's feet (Frye 287-88). Their presence is interesting since this painting was created prior to Milton having written *Paradise Lost*. The roses at Adam's feet seem to be those from the garland that Milton mentions in his poem:

> […]Adam the while
> Waiting desirous her return, had wove
> Of choicest flow'rs a garland to adorn
> Her tresses, and her rural labors crown,
> As reapers oft are wont their harvest queen.
> Great joy he promised to his thought, and new
> Solace in her return, so long delayed; (Milton 9:838-44)

The fact that these are included in the painting supports the argument that Adam is sweet and innocent, waiting for his love's return, which is in stark opposition to Eve's intentional evilness.

Also of interest in this particular painting, is the depiction the serpent and his interactions with Eve. In this rendition, the bottom part of his body is a serpent, and the top is the body of a man. He is quite attractive, with curls and muscular arms and torso. Eve is reaching up to take the fruit from him, and he is handing it to her with one hand, while embracing her arm with his other hand. As has been noted in some of the other depictions of Adam and Eve, they are usually rarely ever touching. Yet, here, we have the serpent very solidly holding on to her arm, almost in the form of a caress. In Milton's version of this moment, the reader is told that Eve is not enchanted by Satan's beauty as a serpent.

> Crested aloft, and carbuncle his eyes;
> With burnished neck of verdant gold, erect

> Amidst his circling spires, that on the grass
> Floated redundant: pleasing was his shape,
> And lovely, never since of serpent kind
> Lovelier (Milton 9:500-5)

He has tried to make himself dazzling to catch her attention and convince her, but she ignores his physical advances. "To lure her eye; she busied heard the sound / Of rustling leaves, but minded not" (Milton 9:518-19). Instead of being lured by this physical attractiveness, she finally submits to his requests because of his logical argument. In Salviati's painting, the serpent is portrayed as a beautiful man, and Eve is staring into his eyes as he caresses her arm. This composition portrays Eve as being smitten by the serpent's physical beauty.

Again, as in many other depictions of Eve, she is shown in the shadows. Most of her face, as well as half her body is shadowed and turned toward the tree and Satan. This idea of Eve being shadowed is something connected only with visual representations of her, as Milton does not indicate a darkness in association with her. In fact, as Eve presents Adam with the fruit in *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes her countenance as, "in her cheek distemper flushing glowed" (Milton 9:887). While he does describe there being a "distemper" in her looks, there is no indication of a shadow in relation to her appearance. By portraying Eve as being encased in shadows, Salviati makes Eve appear to be the bearer of evil things to come. Also, it's important to note that Adam is completely in the light, so again we see the contrast between Eve's dark sinfulness and Adam's bright innocence.

FIG. 21. Cecchino Salviati (Francesco de' Rossi) (1510–1563, *The Fall,* Colonna Gallery, Rome.

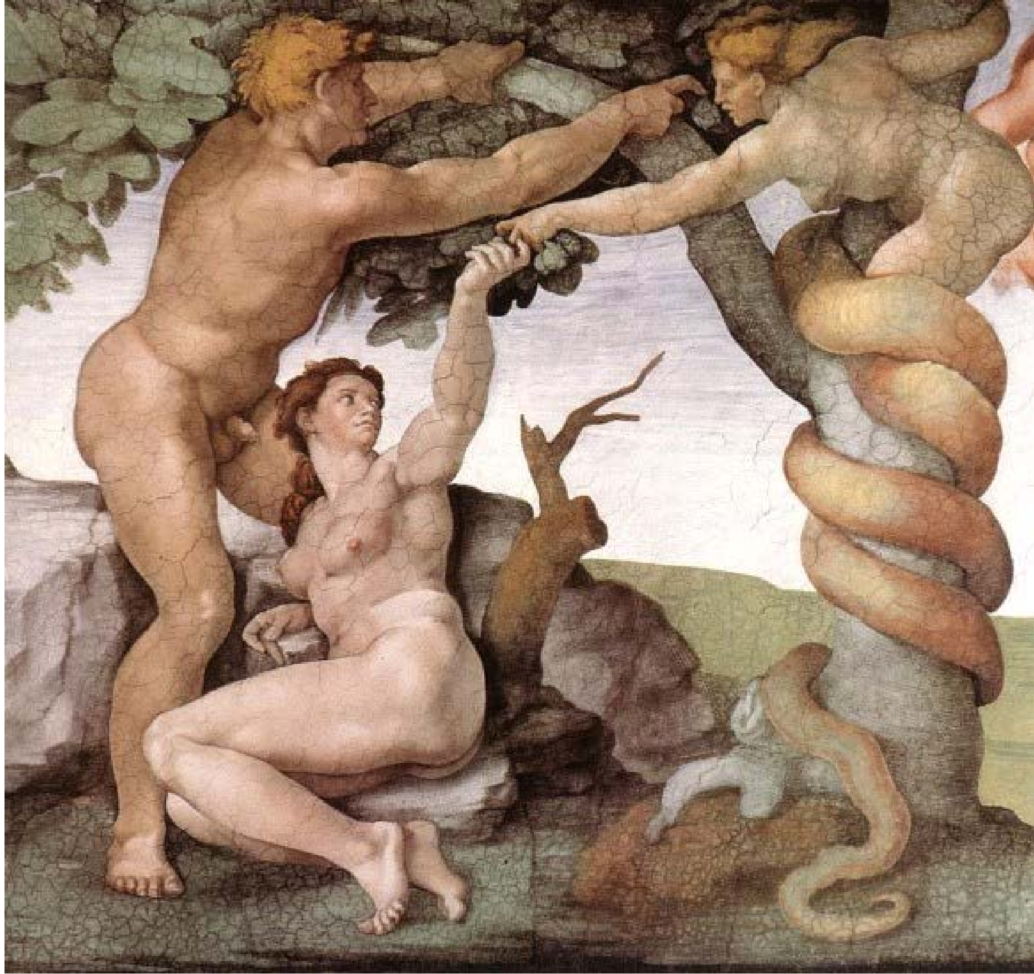
(Roland Frye's *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts*)

Michelangelo's fresco, *The Fall and the Expulsion*, in the Sistine Chapel, also depicts a Fall that is entirely Eve's fault. Here, we have an interesting composition of the figures of Adam and Eve, both in relation to each other, and also in relation to the tree and the serpent. Eve is sitting down, with her back towards the tree, while Adam is standing over her, leaning towards the tree. This arrangement puts Eve in a somewhat compromising position and thoroughly reiterates Adam's dominance over her. As Adam reaches over her head, it appears that he is trying to stop the serpent from enticing Eve with the forbidden fruit. One arm is grasping a branch of the tree, while the other is reaching towards the serpent with a hooked finger in front of its face. It is as though Adam is trying to stop the Fall from happening, by physically stopping the serpent from

getting to Eve. In contrast to Salviati's depiction of an innocent, naïve Adam, Michelangelo illustrates Adam as actively trying to save humankind from sin.

The serpent, meanwhile, is portrayed in the form of a woman. The bottom half is a serpent, but the top is a female human. This also insinuates that evil comes in the form of a woman as well. Not only is the Fall caused by a woman (Eve) it is also brought about by a female serpent. This is at odds with Milton's version of the how Eve is tempted. He takes Satan and makes him completely change form into that of a snake, "So spake the enemy of mankind, enclosed / In serpent" (Milton 9:494-95). It is telling that instead of being influenced by versions that came before, he created his own rendering of the serpent. This choice to not use the form of a woman as the serpent also supports the argument that Milton is defending woman in *Paradise Lost*.

Another interesting part of this composition is the interaction between this female serpent form and Eve. As Adam leans over Eve, trying to halt the serpent from tempting her, Eve is reaching up from under Adam to touch the serpent's outstretched arm. Eve is turned and looking at the serpent, completely ignoring Adam's struggle above her. It is difficult to see in the reproduction of the fresco, but the viewer is unable to see any fruit in the hand of the serpent, so it appears as though Eve and the serpent are actually just reaching out to hold hands. As in other depictions of the Fall, there is often a physical, almost sensual connection between Eve and the serpent. This idea of a sexual relation between the serpent and Eve is left out of Milton's rendering of this moment. This visual reproduction paints Eve as being enamored with the serpent as she tempts her. Again, the viewer is shown Eve as being culpable and, in this depiction, almost sly, as she reaches for the forbidden fruit under Adam's arm.



Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564), *The Fall and Expulsion*, Sistine Chapel, Vatican (http://www.artbible.info/art/large/68.html)

Jacopo Tintoretto's *The Fall* gives yet another version of the Fall depicted in art. In this painting, the serpent is completely missing from the composition. Instead of the usual three characters that are normally represented during this moment, we're only shown Adam and Eve. In this depiction, Adam and Eve are both sitting down. Adam's back is towards the viewer, so that we are completely unable to see his face. Eve is facing the viewer, as well as Adam. She is leaning forward, with a piece of fruit in her outstretched hand. Adam is leaning back, as if leaning away from Eve's reach. Her action and Adam's reaction create a sense that she is not so much offering him the fruit, but

forcing it unwillingly on him. This composition makes Eve appear completely at fault for the Fall, not only in that she fell to temptation, but that she is now forcing sin on Adam, while he tries to resist.

Not only is Eve leaning forward with the fruit in her hand, she also has her other arm wrapped around the tree. In many other visual representations of the Fall, the serpent is often shown entwined around the trunk of the tree. Here, we see Eve taking the place of the serpent. By taking the serpent completely out of the picture and replacing his usual position with Eve, the viewer doesn't even see the original temptation that occurred, but instead only Eve's culpability on forcing the fruit on Adam. One could argue that this is the moment after the serpent has seduced Eve, and she finds Adam to offer him the fruit. Many artistic portrayals of the Fall conflate time, so that Adam, Eve and the serpent are all present at the tree, and several moments are combined so that the fall happens simultaneously. It seems that Tintoretto chose not to compress several moments of the story together, yet in the background of the painting, the viewer can see Adam and Eve in the far distance being stricken from the Garden. If Tintoretto decided not to conflate time in order to show the serpent seducing Eve and Adam taking the fruit from her, then why does he choose to conflate it to show the eventual outcome of their choices? His decision to show the result of Eve's indiscretions seems to place even more blame on Eve. We see an immediate result of her choice and of her actions to force the fruit on Adam.

If we do accept the fact that this may be the moment that Eve offers Adam the fruit, regardless of what scenes Tintoretto chose to use in his conflation of time, it still depicts a rather troubling moment of coercion on Eve's part as she tries to convince a begrudging Adam. Milton does mention the moment of horror that Adam experiences

when Eve first tells him what she has done, but then this is tempered by Adam's long assertion that he cannot live without Eve, so he will join her. Then we see the actual moment of Eve offering Adam the fruit, which is far less forceful than Tintoretto's version.

> In recompense (for such compliance bad
> Such recompense best merits) from the bough
> She gave him of that fair enticing fruit
> With liberal hand: he scrupled not to eat
> Against his better knowledge, not deceived,
> But fondly overcome with female charm. (Milton 9:994-99)

While Milton does admit that Adam is foolishly overcome by Eve's womanly charm, the reader is already told that he has made the decision to join her, as he cannot bear to be apart from her. Milton's portrayal of this moment is much kinder on Eve than the visual representation we're given here.

Jacopo Tintoretto (1518-94) *The Fall*, Accademia, Venice
(http://www.wga.hu/art/t/tintoret/6/03adamev.jpg)

In Rubens *The Fall*, we see yet another incarnation of the serpent seducing Eve. Here, the serpent is half human, half snake. The upper part looks like a small child, or a cherub-like creature. Eve is reaching up to take the fruit from his hand and is looking up, lovingly, at the creature. She looks as though she has been easily swayed to accept this fruit, because of the physical appearance of the serpent. The image insinuates that she has been easily duped by this cherub-serpent's innocent looks. Milton's version gives Eve much more logical reasoning and depth than as portrayed here. Rather than being persuaded by a logical argument, here she is convinced by a cute face.

Similar to Michelangelo's depiction, we see an active Adam trying to block Eve from taking the fruit offered to her. While he is sitting down, he has one hand up, pushing Eve's shoulder away. She is standing above him, reaching for the fruit and leaning forward. Adam is an active participant in this rendition, attempting to stop Eve from falling to temptation. Again, like the Michelangelo piece, this makes Adam look like the savior in trying to save Eve from herself. He is the force of good, while she embodies sin and needs to be stopped. In Milton's version of both Eve's taking the fruit and later offering it to Adam, he never gives Adam the volition to stop Eve's actions. It is interesting that Rubens gives Adam the determination to try to change the course of what is to happen. And, again, we see Adam attempting to have control and dominance over Eve. She is portrayed here as a mischievous child about to do something bad, while Adam tries to prevent her from doing so.

Relating to the idea of mischief, a unique aspect of this particular painting is the presence of animals at the moment of the Fall. In the other pieces we've looked at here, the serpent has been the only animal present at this moment. In Ruben's painting, there is

a fox lying at Eve's feet. A fox signifies mischief and trickery, so its placement near Eve creates a relationship between the two. The viewer sees Eve as slyly maneuvering away from Adam's grasp in order to steal the forbidden fruit. This association makes Eve seem wily and deceitful. On Adam's side of the painting, a parrot sits in a tree behind Adam's head. The parrot is not only beautiful, it can also by considered one of the smarter animals in the kingdom, as it can be taught to talk and respond. Both Adam and the parrot are looking worriedly at Eve as she reaches for the fruit. Both bird and man seem to have an unblinking eye trained on Eve as she carries out her sinful act. Adam seems to be associated with the bird, as both are keeping a watch out for danger, and both are given a better perspective than Eve. The bird is in the tree above their heads, while the fox is lying on the ground in the brush. We can say the same for the viewpoints of Adam and Eve as well. Adam has a better perspective, because he can foresee the evil that is to come, and Eve is portrayed as having no prescience. By contrasting these two viewpoints and animal associations, the viewer sees that Adam is portrayed as watchful and intelligent, while Eve is mischievous and shortsighted.

Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), *The Fall*, Prado, Madrid
(http://hoocher.com/Peter_Paul_Rubens/Fall_of_Man_Madrid.jpg)

All these visual representations are at odds with Milton's more complex and intricate portrayal of Eve. Despite the many misogynistic readings of *Paradise Lost*, Milton gives much more credit to the first woman than many of the artists that came before him. We have looked at how several artists depicted Eve, but now we can look at

how Milton's depictions of her differ, and, in a way, how he defends her. First, we have the various incarnations of the serpent in the artwork. Instead of using a cherub, an attractive man or a female body, Milton chose to have Satan merge completely into the form of a serpent. " For now, and since first break of dawn the fiend, / Mere serpent in appearance" (Milton 9:412-13). His choice to not make the serpent anything other than a serpent gives Eve credit, as she is not swayed by mere physical appearance. In fact, in the poem, the serpent tries to lure her with his charms and beauty, but Eve does not notice this. She is not convinced to eat the fruit by a tangible or sensual temptation, but by the logical argument of Satan. After Satan's first attempts at convincing her to eat, she refuses, and he realizes that he will have to work harder at convincing her to do so.

> She scarce had said, though brief, when now more bold
> The tempter, but with show of zeal and love
> To man, and indignation at his wrong,
> New parts put on, and as to passion moved,
> Fluctuates disturbed, yet comely and in act
> Raised, as of some great matter to begin.
> As when of old some orator renowned
> In Athens or free Rome, where eloquence
> Flourished since mute, to some great cause addressed,
> Stood in himself collected, while each part,
> Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue,
> Sometimes in highth began, as no delay
> Of preface brooking through his zeal of right. (Milton 9:664-76)

By comparing the serpent to an ancient orator or philosopher attempting to convince his audience, Milton gives Eve more intelligence and strength than any of the visual representations attribute to her. Because Satan has to work hard at persuading her and because he has to construct a cogent and logical argument, we see that Eve cannot be so easily swayed. In contrast, in the artwork, we see an Eve that is effortlessly convinced to eat the fruit, either by being seduced by something beautiful (the cherub or beautiful

man) or by her own self-love (the woman, or Eve's own reflection in the serpent). Also, in regards to this serpent form, it is a telling choice that Milton did not use the form of a woman in his version. While we only looked at one painting that depicted the serpent in such a way, it was actually a rather common choice to use this form in artwork of the Fall. McColley also points this out, stating, "Self-love and concupiscence are all allegorically associated with Eve and hence with womankind, and are often symbolized by making the Serpent's head Eve's mirror image" (McColley 7). Milton's decision for the form of the serpent is just one way that he defends Eve in a way that she had not previously been defended.

Another difference between the established artwork and Milton's new depiction of the Fall is that in *Paradise Lost*, Adam does not physically try to stop Eve from eating the fruit. While it is true that in many of the visual depictions of the scene, the artist has conflated time so that both Adam and Eve are together with the serpent at the tree, it is still an interesting addition that more than one artist chose to have Adam actively attempting to stop Eve from eating. By presenting the moment of the Fall in this way, the artists are placing more blame on Eve and painting Adam in the light of a savior. Because of his active motions to physically prevent her from sinning, the viewer sees Adam as the archetype of goodness, and Eve as evil personified. This contrast between the two creates a dichotomy between right (Adam) and wrong (Eve). Also, the physicality of Adam pushing against Eve represents a dominance over her. While there are times in *Paradise Lost* that insinuate that Eve is provided in order to serve Adam and be subservient to him, never does Milton present us with a scene where Adam is physically forceful with Eve.

Continuing on this theme of force, we also never see an Eve that forces the forbidden fruit on Adam. Unlike Tintoretto's depiction, where we see Eve coercing Adam to eat against his will, Milton explains that Adam accepts the fruit because of his love of Eve. And, if we look at how Milton portrays Eve's offering of the fruit to Adam, we will see that it is not done in a forceful way. Her explanation of why she wants him to eat with her is based on her wish to share her new knowledge with him. The offering is not done in a harmful or duplicitous manner.

> […] have also found
> Th'effects to correspond, opener mine eyes,
> Dim erst, dilated spirits, ampler heart,
> And growing up to Godhead; which for thee
> Chiefly I sought, without thee can despise.
> For bliss, as thou hast part, to me is bliss,
> Tedious, unshared with thee, and odious soon.
> Thou therefore also taste, that equal lot
> May join us, equal joy, as equal love; (Milton 9:874-82)

Not only does Eve want to share her new awareness with him, for the sake of having greater knowledge, but she also wants to share it with him out of love. Her eyes have been opened, and she wants to share that experience with Adam, but she also wants them to take this journey together, so that their love can grow equally together. Milton's description paints Eve as generous and kind in her wish to share her knowledge with Adam, as opposed to the visual depictions, which show Eve as either forcing the fruit on him or tricking him into eating it (as in Salviati's painting).

Another note of interest in regards to the comparison of Milton's depiction of the Fall and that shown in artwork is simply to point out the enormous amount of art dedicated to this subject. The moment of the Fall has been the focus of centuries worth of art, and McColley points out the implication of this focus. "Worse, by lavishing its

greatest imaginative power on the moment of disobedience it suggests that all really interesting human activity began with the Fall" (McColley 6). Perhaps artists did see this moment as the most interesting in human history so far, or perhaps it is the one that afforded the most drama. However, regardless of whether it is so popular with artists because of its interest or not, the fact remains that it is still one of the most highly depicted moments in history. The high volume of art it has inspired has placed a great deal of attention on Eve's moment of disobedience. At complete odds with this vast amount of artwork, Milton, in a rare moment of brevity, spends one line on this moment of the Fall. In an epic poem where he spends hundreds of lines describing one character or event, it is telling that he glosses over what many believe to be the most important moment of the whole story. One can argue that this is also part of his defense of Eve, in that he is more interested in spending time detailing her argument with the serpent, her use of logical reasoning, and the eventual fortunate outcome of her decision than on the moment when the Fall occurs. Instead of dwelling on the Fall itself, as the artists that came before him did, Milton concentrates on Eve's virtues.

Now, having contrasted the common, accepted portrayal of Eve in visual representations against Milton's version of the first woman, we can see that Milton undertook a defense of Eve that would be considered radical when viewed in an historical context. The story of Adam and Eve was prevalent in the world of art, as well as in popular society, and Milton would have been well aware of Eve's portrayal. "Throughout the centuries of Christian art, representations of the first three chapters of Genesis have focused on the tropes of temptation: Adam, Eve, Serpent, and Tree" (McColley 6). Eve's place in this composition and her position of blame would have been deeply absorbed

into popular belief at this point in time, and Milton's adaptation of the story would have been at odds with the average viewpoint. He goes against centuries of depictions of Eve in order to craft his own image of her, which casts her in a better light than previously portrayed.

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