The Female Is Nothing But The Body: Chaucer’s The Merchant’s Tale And Milton’s Paradise Lost

In the context in which these two texts were written, from the medieval universe of Chaucer to the Restoration Period in which Paradise Lost[footnoteRef:1] was written, it’s fascinating to examine the image of women in the eyes of people during these differing eras. Before exploring such perceptions we must understand the implication of the statement- ‘the female is nothing but the body’ which can be interpreted in various ways: First being the idea of women as a sexual object used to please their husbands; a domestic body or the religious perception (written by St Paul) that the man is the chief in a marriage just as the head is to the body. The overall argument of this essay is that Chaucer’s portrayal of women in The Merchant’s Tale[footnoteRef:2] is very much focused on their mere body, yet the humorous undertone through the use of irony and intertextuality may suggest his undermining of such sexualizing perceptions. In comparison, in Paradise Lost the idea of equality between the two sexes is asserted nonetheless seems to be undermined by Milton who tends to be biased towards these prejudices as a result of Biblical views towards women in the 17th century. [1: All references are from Fowler A ed., 1984, Paradise Lost, USA, Longman] [2: All references are from Hussey M ed., 1975, The Merchant’s Prologue and Tale, Cambridge, CUP]

Both Paradise lost and The Merchant’s Tale delve into the idea of women being moulded by their male partners. Januarie sees May as an object which he can mould to satisfy both his domestic needs and his sexual desires. ‘Right as men may warm wex with handes plye’(MT 218). The Merchant’s Tale builds up the protagonist, Januarie, for ironic observation: ‘This fresshe May, that I spak of so yoore/In warm wex hath emprented the clyket/ that Januarie bar of the smale wyket.’ (MT 904-906) Chaucer’s repetition of ‘wax’ emphasises the irony later on when we witness May opposing her objectification. Ironically, she does in fact have the power to mould and control Januarie for her own sexual gratification, this being evident in her manipulation of Januarie in the garden before and after her intimacy with Damyan. (Chaucer makes this point with references to other tales: Wife of Bath: also has a twist where the man forces himself on women but is eventually mastered by a woman.) Furthermore, in the beginning of the tale Januarie refers to names of Biblical women ‘By good conseil of his mooder Rebekke[...] Judith[...] Abigayl[...]Ester’(MT 151-159). Here Chaucer invites the educated reader to enter ‘intertextual’ understanding of The Merchant’s Tale by remembering the stories of these biblical women. Once the reader has brought these stories to mind, they will perceive the irony of Chaucer’s examples which show honest women supporting their men- but they all turn out to be clever and shrewd women who manipulate men, sometimes using their sexuality, foreshadowing the story of Januarie being deceived and manipulated by May. Chaucer’s intention with portraying such irony may be to criticise the men in his era, particularly those resembling ‘old’ Januarie who had lived their lives as their heart desired- ‘folwed ay his bodily delyt on wommen ther as was his appetyt’ (MT 37-38) and expected young ‘freshe’ girls to be ‘so ententyf’ and the ‘fruit of their tresor’. This criticism would’ve been seen as quite an unconventional standpoint especially from a male in the 15th century when medieval philosophers such as Peter Abelard claimed that woman had ‘a deficiency of spirit’[footnoteRef:3]. Nonetheless, this just makes Chaucer’s work all the more admirable being one of few storytellers to write of such delicate and sensitive matters. [3: Keith Tankard, The Medieval View of Women, 2009

http://www.worldhistory.knowledge4africa.com/women/women-02.jsp]

Similarly in Paradise Lost, Eve is moulded and controlled by the male figure; she is created from Adam's rib. Although Eve is said to be, with Adam, 'Godlike' as she was made in the image of the divine and majestic (IV.288-293), Milton emphasizes that she is under the control of man. 'Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed he for God only, she for God in him (IV.296,299) Any sense of equality is diminished by the hierarchy between Adam and Eve, with the repetition of the phrase 'not equal'. In Book VIII 547 Adam describes Eve in an almost superior manner- "Her loveliness, so absolute she seems" Eve was solely made to remedy Adam's original solitude, she doesn't have that "single defect" and thus appears more complete than Adam. 'All higher knowledge in her presence falls…' (551): they will indeed fall because Adam forgets 'higher knowledge' and due to Eve's independent use of intellect, leading her to seek knowledge from the forbidden tree. According to R Mitchell's notes on Paradise Lost, Raphael isn't entirely pleased to hear Adam's extravagant praise of his wife. Adam, he says, don't be unwise in overvaluing what your better judgment tells you is 'less excellent'. Implying that Eve is to be loved, but she mustn't rule. Milton seems to affirm such a view by demonstrating how reliant Eve is on Adam. When Raphael is talking to Adam of spiritual matters, Eve doesn't stay to hear the angel teaching: 'went she not, not with such discourse delighted, or not capable her ear of what was such high pleasure she reserved, Adam relating' (VIII 48-51). Bob Linn comments on this explaining how Eve will enjoy the explanation and understand it better if her husband explains it to her. This also establishes the role of Eve and women as helpmates who belong at home, whilst their husband's role is in the world. This essentially resembles the view of society during Milton's time and the lack of implicated criticism from Milton suggests he wasn't against such a hierarchy and women's low position within it. Despite such a close-minded perception towards gender inequality, it's important to recognize that for a Puritan his other views such as sexual intimacy between a couple, would've been considered very liberal during Cromwell's regime.

Furthermore, in both texts, there is a specific focus on women's bodies. Women seem to be 'nothing but the sexual body' in The Merchant's Tale where Chaucer highlights, that serving the needs of the husband includes submitting to his sexual desires; whereas in Paradise Lost Milton overtly describes the mutuality of sexual desire. 'Allas! I moot trespace To yow, my spouse, and yow greetly offende, Er tyme come that i wil doun descende.' (MT 616-18). Due to his lust, Januarie does offend and trespass on what should be love-making; this is shown in effective use of harsh sounds of 'k' and 'br'; 'he kisseth hire ful ofte; With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,/ Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere' (MT 611-13). May appears to be only a body, resembling a sex doll, passively brought to the bed, 'brought abedde as stille as stoon' (MT 606). Evidently, this is an upleasent labor of lust[footnoteRef:4], where the harshness of the night coincides with the coarseness of Januarie with May 'Night with his mantel' is 'derk and rude' (MT 586)[footnoteRef:5]. However, sooner or late May seems to not only be a sexual victim but also a sexual predator manipulating her blind husband to satisfy her sexual desires with Damyan in the garden of love. Additionally, the context of Chaucer's storytelling is the debasing of the idea of courtly love- dignified admiration of a knight for his lady; a prime example of this debasing being when May thrusts Damyan's love letter down the 'pryvee' (MT 742)[footnoteRef:6]. [4: 'Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawe.' MT 630] [5: Contrast the epithalamium or marriage song in PL VIII: 510-520: 'fresh gales and gentle airs/ Whispered it to the woods, and from their wings/ Flung rose' with its wonderful alliteration and clever play on word 'airs' in the sense of wind and the sense of music] [6: Chaucer will make his comment on this ignoble sexual triangle of May, Januarie, Damyan by an implicit

contrast to the honourable Franklin's Tale and the characters Dorigen, Arveragus and Aurelius]

In contrast to this in Paradise Lost Milton portrays sexuality and eroticism (pre-fall of course) in a more positive light; making it evident that Adam and Eve's lovemaking is 'not...loveless, joyless, unendeared,/ Casual fruition, nor in court amours…' (PL IV 746-7). Here Milton essentially challenges the close-minded teaching of the Church which attempted to suppress female. Instead Milton affirms that Adam and Eve took pleasure in a fulfilling and possibly fruitful sexual relationship prior to the fall[footnoteRef:7]. 'Then was not guilty shame, dishonest shame/Of nature's works, honour dishonourable' (PL IV 312-4). The oxymoron 'honour/dishonourable' is suggestive of Milton's criticism of the Church's views towards eroticism. Even so, Milton undermines this notion when describing Eve's hair: 'Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved/ As the vine curls her tendrils' PL IV 306-7. The adjective 'wanton' possibly denoting 'wild' (or the modern meaning; double meanings are a unique artifice of Milton). Descriptions of Eve seem to imply that she is seductive by nature, this being suggestive of Milton's complex view of relationships. On the one hand, he didn't see sex as inherently sinful (the fact that Adam and Eve had sex prior to the fall would have shocked his readers) yet throughout Paradise Lost he hints at the uncontrollable nature of women which needs to be tamed by their husband. [7: RJ Beck in Paradise Lost Books IV and IX York notes 1980]

The perception of women being superior in their sensual physicality yet inferior in their minds is demonstrated in Milton's Paradise Lost and again consequently reinforces the hierarchy between males and females: husbands are contemplating upon 'higher' matters whilst the mind of a woman has been hardwired for domestic affairs. The descriptions of Adam are very specific to his mentality: 'For contemplation, he' (IV.297) and 'His fair large front and eye sublime declared absolute rule' (IV.300-1). These lines seem to describe Adam as a contemplator with a large brain indicated by the noun 'contemplation' (297) and 'front' forehead (300) as well as being spiritual (religious imagery- 'eye sublime' 300 meaning he is looking heavenward). In contrast to this portrayal of Adam, Eve is described focussing on her sensuous body, 'She as a veil down to the slender waist her unadorned golden tresses wore' 304-5. Her long 'tresses' waving down to her waist gives a sense of the speaker scanning her body, observing her voluptuousness. In Book IV 15-40 Adam seems to show a strong interest in perplexing and profound subjects when speaking to Archangel Raphael such as the creation of the world; whilst on the other hand, Eve tends to partake in conversations not as abstract, including touching and feeling (VIII 52-57)[footnoteRef:8]. Therefore, although Milton depicts Adam and Eve in majestic terms[footnoteRef:9], Adam is seen as closer to God than Eve as he is spiritual whilst she resides in the realm of the senses. In order to understand the reasons for which Milton shouldn't deviate from this idea of Adam-Eve as resembling head-body, we must acknowledge that he belonged to the Puritan faith which was not permitted to challenge biblical teachings. For instance, the teaching in 1 Corinthians 11:3 where St. Paul states, 'But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.' Therefore, in a time such as Milton's, such lack of intellect in women wouldn't be considered sexist as such but rather part of their nature. This could explain the lack of autonomy in the lives of women as they would only be complete if they were guided by their husbands who possessed all that was required to survive in the world and without whom they would be uncontrollable (just as Eve was when not in the presence of Adam). [8: Luxon, Thomas H.,ed. The Milton Reading Room, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton] [9: 'We must constantly remind ourselves of the greatness of both personnages.' She is 'the Queen of the earth' CS Lewis: A Preface to Paradise Lost chp. XVI reprint OUP. Note VIII 59-61 on Eve: 'With goddess-like demeanour forth she went; not unattended, for on her as queen, A pomp of

winning graces waited still']

Furthermore, in The Merchant's Tale the concentration on the woman's body leads to the perception that the wife is the domestic servant with all her concerns to be for the husband's wellbeing. Januarie's attitude towards women is developed from seeing them as sexual objects to seeing them as virtual servants to wait on him in his dotage. He becomes fixated with the idea of a wife who will look after him in "syk and hool" and "loe and serve" him always. In lines 45-48 there is an echo of the marriage vows, and this shows that Januarie see his marriage as a righteous institution but also justifies his view of women through biblical references. In Januarie's mind the ideal wife will be akin to 'seinte Marie'- virtuous, chaste and ready to tend to his every need. Ironically, the wife he does choose will be quite the opposite. Januarie dreams of a wife who is 'buxom' or subservient- she will be a servant to him. He doesn't recognise May as possesive of humanity, however this belief somewhat changes when he acknowledges the positive human qualities of a wife- "buxom", "trewe", "ententif" (ironic statements as May is none of these things)-but still shows his patriarchal mindset, as these qualities are to make "his herte in joy and blisse habounde". Further on, in lines 94-95 Januarie gets carried away: he makes the ignorant observation- "how might a man hav any adversitee/ that have a wyf?" This statement reflects the further ignorance in his obsession with "blisse", which he says it to be "betwixte them", implying enjoyment for both; however he then contrasts this progressive idea with ideas of subservience: "she helpeth him", "she kepeth his good", showing that in fact Januarie is only considering himself, not his wife. Whilst it's clear to the reader that Januarie has made a progression, he is still deluded in his ideas of marriage as he believes in a "blisse" that will be "betwiste" him and his wife- the reader knows this will not be the case.

While Chaucer is exalted by May's independence, in Paradise Lost Milton demonstrates how Eve's autonomy of mind leads to catastrophe. Eve exhibits her refusal to abide by Adam's command, 'Eve/ Persisted' (PL IX 376-7), 'from her husband's her hand/ Soft she withdrew' (385) (the repetition of 'her', a personal pronoun, emphasizing her independence) and (322-326) 'If this be our condition, thus to dwell/In narrow circuit...How are we happy…?' despite the fact she is speaking about Satan, one may sense that she is subconsciously referring to her constrainment to Adam. Such independence consequently results in her being enticed by Satan and in turn leads to the couple's banishment from Eden. Adam then goes on to condemn his wife: 'O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear/ To that false worm…' (IX. 1067f) Implying that she is responsible for the catastrophic fall.

Moreover, in Paradise Lost, despite the fact that Adam and Eve appear to be working the garden equally, Milton still cannot help but to implicitly refer to the idea that Eve was created out of Adam's rib to be a helper. 'My author and disposer, what thou bi'st/ Unargued I obey' (PL IV 635-636). S Erickson argues that Paradise Lost shows 'but Milton's putative aversion to women'[footnoteRef:10]. In his essay, Doctrine & Discipline of Divorce, Milton states that the purpose of marriage is mainly for 'the apt and cheerful conversation of man with a woman.'[footnoteRef:11] Suggesting he had an enlightened view of marriage. However, although the relationship of Adam and Eve appears to be more equal and mutual than that of the 'old khnyght' Januarie's and May, it seems that Milton cannot let go of his Puritan teaching- women are to be servants of their husbands. This is evident due to his continuous allusions to biblical passages in Book IV that identify the man as the master of woman.[footnoteRef:12] [10: 'Although elements in this extract touch our modern sensitivity about issues of gender discrimination, we need to try to treat the passage on Milton's terms.

The point Milton stresses here is not the inequality of Adam and Eve, but they're matching each other.' Mike Edwards: John Milton: Paradise Lost (Analysing texts) Palgrave Macmillan (2013).] [11: Book I; accessed through Luxon, Thomas H., ed. The Milton Reading Room, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton.] [12: "He is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man… Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (I Corinthians 11:7, 9)]

'The female is nothing but the body'. It is evident that on a surface level The Merchant's Tale has the men depicting women as solely bodies under their command, nonetheless, there are several indicators of Chaucer's disapproval of this perception: his use of irony (sometimes humorous) and other provocative language techniques such as religious imagery. In Milton's Paradise Lost, Eve first appears to be ennobled yet her true purpose and nature unfold as she is said to be the body ruled by Adam (as head). Milton's focus on Eve's body and her sometimes deviant behavior indicate how he shared the prejudices of his time which weren't supportive of female sexuality and instead cautioned men to concentrate on spirituality in order to have the intellect and strength to control women's bodies. Whilst to a modern reader Milton's views may be considered conservative and Chaucer's arguably more progressive; we must consider the context of these two writers. During the medieval era, people weren't as progressive and Chaucer's mockery of chauvinism would've been considered possibly inappropriate especially since he has such close ties with nobles. This scrutiny would've been endured by Milton as well, writing Paradise Lost during a time of extreme political and religious changes. Therefore, we must appreciate both writer's attempts at tackling such matters whilst making their texts enjoyable to read and experience.

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