‘An Eve to Please Me’: Mary Wollstonecraft and the ‘Public Woman’

‘An Eve to please me’

In a letter to William Roscoe dated 3 January 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft notes that she is finalising her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and that the painter Henry Fuseli has begun to work on illustrations for an edition of John Milton’s works:

Our friend Fuseli is going on with more than usual spirit – like Milton he seems quite at home in hell – his Devil will be the hero of the poetic series; for, *entre nous*, I rather doubt whether he will produce an Eve to please me in any of the situations, which he has selected, unless it be after the fall. When I am in a better humour I will give you an account of those already sketched – but had you not better come and see them? – We have all an individual way of feeling grandeur and sublimity. (*MWL* 206)

As a member of the rather exclusive circle of radical poets, painters and politicians who met at the publisher Joseph Johnson’s house, Wollstonecraft had been involved from its inception in the never-completed edition of John Milton’s works commissioned by Johnson, to be edited by William Cowper and illustrated by Fuseli. Her letters to other parties, and in particular to Roscoe, a Liverpool poet, historian and painter, suggest that she tried to obtain subscriptions for it. She was inspired and influenced by the discussions on the aesthetic, political and philosophical issues of the work. As this citation suggests, although clearly interested in both readings of the founding story and theories of aesthetic representation and reception, Wollstonecraft does not always agree with the way they are laid out, especially where
women are concerned. Although she recognises why Milton’s satanic tempter may be qualified as heroic and sublime, she nevertheless wants to reformulate the account so that these virtuous sentiments can be located in the efforts of postlapsarian humanity and specifically Eve.

Wollstonecraft also comments on the unlikelihood of her being ‘please[d]’ by Fuseli’s Eves and in so doing offers a stinging criticism of the painter’s avowed intentions. Some months later in May 1792, Fuseli wrote to the same Roscoe, ‘Eve [Starting from her reflected Image in the Water] is, I flatter myself, as likely to please as I hope the other [Satan Sin and Death] will Surprise.’¹ He contrasts the two sketches by referring to the very different responses they will elicit in the spectator: the very gentle or amiable sentiments and the more awful and respectful ones. In this distinction, Fuseli articulates what Edmund Burke analyses in his more famous reflections on the difference between the beautiful and the sublime (vide A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful [1757]), and he maintains Burke’s inherent gender categories.² The beautiful, female Eve can produce only tender and pleasurable sensations.³ By noting that this Eve does not ‘please’ her, Wollstonecraft challenges the dichotomy.

In her letter to Roscoe, Wollstonecraft does not explicitly express this specific meaning of ‘please’. She signals instead her disapproval and dissatisfaction with the way in which the artist has decided to represent Eve, referring to both the Eve he produces and the situations in which she is portrayed, to both the roles she is given and the way in which she plays her role. Clearly, with the exception of postlapsarian Eve, the staging and casting of the Miltonic epic deny the ‘first mother’ the possibility of becoming a sublime subject, one who invites the astonishment, admiration and respect of her spectators.

If Wollstonecraft takes to heart these limitations in Fuseli’s Eve as she finalises her own Vindication of the Rights of Woman, it is because she recognises how crucial representations of women are in making them. As in her comments to Roscoe, she knows that both tales and their telling produce women as they now are. Centuries of women were denied a decent life on earth as well as the promise of future redemption because of Eve’s purported role in paradise. Or so Wollstonecraft believes is the case with ‘Moses’s poetical story’, the Book of Genesis, which has given rise to the ‘prevailing opinion that woman was created for man’ (95). Calling attention here to the use of figures in the Old Testament book, Wollstonecraft nevertheless notes that few accept that ‘Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam’s ribs’. Instead of arriving at the same ‘prevailing opinion’, she proceeds to