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*Eve's Beauty in Paradise Lost:
Aesthetic Form, Moral Choice, and Agency*

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Table of Contents

Introduction	Page 5
 1. Milton and <i>Paradise Lost</i>: Context and Theoretical Framework	 8
1.1. Contextualising Milton: The Theological and Cultural Foundations of Eve's Representation	8
1.2. Renaissance Aesthetics, Love Poetry and Milton's Adaptation	14
1.3. Milton's Eve: Beauty, Grace, and Obedience	20
 2. Eve in <i>Paradise Lost</i>: From Creation to Redemption	 26
2.1. Eve's s Creation and First Appearances	26
2.2. Eve's Dream	31
2.3. Eve's Relationship with Adam	34
2.4. Eve's Temptation	38
2.5. Adam's Fall	40
2.6. Reconciliation After the Fall	44
 3. The Linguistic Construction of Eve's Beauty	 46
3.1. Lexical Fields of Beauty: Softness, Nature, and Ornament	46
3.2. Verbs and Agency: Action, Movement, and Choice	53
3.3. Vision and Self-Representation: The Language of Sight	57
3.4. The Rhetoric of Temptation: Seduction, Eloquence, and Ambiguity	62
3.5. Postlapsarian Language: Fragmentation, Accusation, and Salvation	67
 4. Artificial Intelligence in Literary Studies: ChatGPT and the Interpretation of Eve's Beauty in <i>Paradise Lost</i>	 72
4.1. Artificial Intelligence in Literary Studies: Potentials, Risks, and Methodological Implications	72
4.2. Structure of the Research	78
4.3. First Phase: Zero-Shot Analysis	80

4.4.	Second Phase: Co-Intelligence Approach Without Direct Textual Access	84
4.5.	Third Phase: Co-Intelligence with Direct Access to the Text	89
4.6.	Comparative Analysis of the Three Phases	93
	Conclusion	97
	Summary	100
	Riassunto	103
	Bibliography	106

Introduction

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is one of the most influential and critically debated works of English literature. Since its publication, the poem has generated an extensive body of scholarship addressing its theological and philosophical implications, political dimensions, epic structure, and linguistic complexity. Among its many figures, Eve occupies a particularly central and controversial position. Throughout the centuries, her representation has often been interpreted through contrasting perspectives: as an embodiment of beauty and harmony, as a symbol of temptation and disobedience, or as a figure marked by increasing intellectual autonomy and rhetorical agency. Therefore, her role has been examined from theological, political, philosophical, and gendered perspectives.

Particularly in recent decades, critical attention has increasingly focused on the complexity of Eve's characterisation and on the tension between her aesthetic representation, intellectual agency, and moral responsibility within the Fall narrative. She has been reconsidered not merely as a passive symbol of temptation or disobedience, but as a rhetorically sophisticated and psychologically layered character whose language and representation evolve significantly.

This thesis thus investigates the thematic, stylistic, and rhetorical construction of Eve in *Paradise Lost* through the analysis of selected passages from the poem. Particular attention is dedicated to the relationship between beauty, nature, visibility, cognition and persuasion. The research examines the ways in which Milton employs imagery, syntax, lexical patterns, and rhetorical structures to shape Eve's beauty and overall characterisation across the different books of the poem. The main focus of the analysis is the relationship between beauty, nature, cognition, and persuasion. More specifically, a key aspect of the analysis concerns how Eve's representation progressively shifts from predominantly aesthetic and Edenic harmony toward the increasingly argumentative and self-reflective discourse that emerges during the temptation sequence in Book IX.

The dissertation is structured into four chapters. The first one briefly introduces the literary and critical context of *Paradise Lost*, outlining the scholarly debate surrounding Eve's representation and role. The second chapter is centred on the examination of the most impactful passages of the poem, whereas the third one expands

the analysis toward the stylistic and rhetorical analysis of such episodes. Therefore, it explores recurring lexical patterns, imagery, and rhetorical strategies that emerge throughout the poem. Together, the first three chapters aim to demonstrate that Eve's characterisation cannot be reduced to a single symbolic or moral function. Rather, her identity develops through a highly complex interaction between poetic form and thematic meaning.

Alongside this literary analysis, the fourth chapter concludes my dissertation by presenting the experimental AI-assisted component of the research, evaluating the interpretative behaviour of ChatGPT across different methodological and contextual conditions. This serves to examine the application of artificial intelligence within literary studies, since the growing diffusion of generative AI systems has opened new possibilities for textual analysis and interpretative assistance within the humanities. At the same time, these technologies raise important methodological questions regarding reliability, interpretative accuracy, agreement bias, and the risk of reducing literary meaning to computational regularities.

In order to investigate these issues, the thesis incorporates an experimental section dedicated to AI-assisted literary analysis. The experiment was organised into three progressive phases: a zero-shot analysis, a co-intelligence approach without direct textual access, and a final co-intelligence phase in which ChatGPT was provided with the text of *Paradise Lost*. Through this methodology, the research evaluates both the potential usefulness and the limitations of AI-generated literary interpretation. Particular attention is dedicated to the relationship between human critical supervision and computational analysis. Moreover, the extent to which collaborative interaction can enhance interpretative originality is also considered as an essential element.

While the primary objective remains the analysis of Eve's beauty and overall characterisation throughout the epic, this experiment also aims to contribute to contemporary discussions concerning the role of AI within humanities scholarship and the evolving dynamics of co-intelligence between human researchers and computational systems. Hence, the purpose of this experimental chapter is not to present artificial intelligence as a replacement for human critical work, but to examine how collaborative interaction between the researcher and ChatGPT may influence literary interpretation. Therefore, the research observes the model's tendency toward interpretative agreement,

its difficulty in producing genuinely oppositional readings and new examples, and the extent to which direct textual access can enhance both stylistic and rhetorical analysis. In this sense, this thesis is situated at the intersection of literary criticism, stylistic analysis, and digital humanities, thus participating to broader contemporary discussions pertaining to the future role of AI within humanities research.

Chapter 1

Milton and *Paradise Lost*: Context and Theoretical Framework

The first chapter of this dissertation provides a brief theoretical overview of the cultural, theological, and aesthetic framework. This is necessary in order to approach Milton's portrayal of Eve, her beauty, and her role in *Paradise Lost* (1667), which represents the main focus of this academic work. Therefore, the present chapter examines how the author reworked Renaissance and Puritan ideas of beauty, harmony, and obedience to construct a complex female figure who seemingly embodies both divine order and human frailty. Each section progressively narrows the focus of this investigation: from the author's context to the influence of Renaissance aesthetics and to the moral and theological implications of beauty and grace.

1.1. Contextualising Milton: The Theological and Cultural Foundations of Eve's Representation

The first section of this chapter explores the theological and cultural background that probably shaped Milton's imagination and, more specifically, his conception of beauty, freedom, and obedience. In doing so, this subchapter outlines how 17th century tensions between Renaissance and Puritan reform might have influenced Milton's vision of beauty, creation, and sin. This establishes the foundation for understanding how Eve's beauty seemingly functions not only as an aesthetic quality, but also as a possible site of moral testing within the poet's universe.

Understanding Eve's portrayal in *Paradise Lost* requires situating Milton's conception of beauty and virtue within the cultural and theological climate of 17th century England. The epic does not exist in isolation, but it emerges from a world deeply divided between Renaissance humanism and Puritan reform, between the exaltation of visible perfection and the fear of moral corruption. Ferry (1988: 113) states that "when we question Milton's ways of treating the material of *Paradise Lost*, we therefore have to take into account [...] the fixed points of interpretation that he was unavoidably compelled to work with or to work around". Such points concern the fact that Milton's

magnum opus reflects an age marked by religious upheaval, moral introspection, and aesthetic transformation. Milton's England was a world in which humanist ideals of harmony and virtue appear to meet the more austere demands of Puritan theology. These opposing forces seem to be crystallized in Milton's Eve, whose beauty becomes both the sign of divine harmony and the field of moral testing. As Lewalski (2000: 16) observes, Milton's writings continually attempt to reconcile "his insistence on free will as the ground of human dignity" with "his delight in natural beauty".

This tension lies at the very heart of *Paradise Lost*, and Eve's creation and her subsequent fall arguably embody this anxiety most vividly. She is the first woman, crafted in divine perfection, yet her role is destined to reveal the fragility of obedience. Hence, her loveliness appears to contain the potential for pride and deception. She stands at the meeting point of freedom and obedience, beauty and transgression, reason and passion: in Milton's imaginative world, beauty is not merely an aesthetic quality, but a moral and theological problem. This is supported by Marjara (1984: 51), who claims that "the idea of the moral perfection of man has its counterpart in the physical perfection imparted to man by transcendence of nature by the heavenly quality of grace". In this sense, Eve's perfection could be intended as a visible reflection of God's order that may, if misunderstood, become the vehicle of sin. However, Ferry (1988: 127) suggests that the author, "like Milton's God, seems to take Adam's sin more seriously here, because man was created the guide and head of woman". Thus, Eve's disobedience exposes a complex interplay between autonomy and dependence, intellect and submission.

Furthermore, Eve "complicates the reading of her story as a simple submission to patriarchy" (Lewalski, 2000: 483). This perspective may indicate that Milton's treatment of gender was neither wholly traditional nor radically emancipatory: it could rather reveal a poet struggling to articulate moral agency in a hierarchical universe. Nonetheless, Eve's initiative, though flawed, could signify a form of experiential knowledge that even Adam must eventually recognize. As pointed out by Astorino (2020: 1), this is probably why "he trusts her and follows in her footsteps". One could even declare that Eve (negatively) led by example, since she partially shaped and/or influenced Adam's choice and fate. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 102) even observes that "a fallen woman's influence on the men in her domestic sphere can rot and warp all the male virtues since she robs them of the basic underlying virtue".

Therefore, Milton's Eve might not simply be a passive character, but an active and independent one, though not necessarily in a positive way. Cannell (2024: 1) notices that "this freedom also opens the door to the possibility of disobedience and fallibility": the Fall is not inevitable. Consequently, "Adam and Eve's disobedience is framed as a wilful act rather than a predestined event" (Cannell, 2024: 2). Milton heavily insists on the dignity of rational choice, even when that choice leads to failure.

While these tensions reveal the author's nuanced approach to moral agency, they also seem to unfold against a cultural backdrop that profoundly shaped his conception of gender. Early modern England tended to view women through a framework of subordination. Al-Badarneh (2014: 108) highlights that women were traditionally seen "as passive, objectified entities whose role in the family as well as in society is to listen to the patriarchal figure and to execute his orders". This indicates that women were often considered intellectually secondary, morally fragile, and yet symbolically charged with notions of both purity and temptation. Moreover, in early modern England "being a woman [meant] performing obedience, which in turn is necessarily part of being considered a woman" (Murphy, 2012: 262). Hence, Milton's Eve is the product of a world in which obedience is the measure of virtue.

Yet, Milton's *Paradise Lost* appears to complicate this norm even more. Eve does not seem to be a mere symbol of submission, but a figure of dialogue, reasoning, and emotional intelligence. In this regard, Woods (1988: 15) notes that "far from being a misogynist, Milton was ahead of his time in granting to women a dignity and responsibility rarely conceded in the seventeenth century. His Eve has majesty". As a consequence, "the depiction of Eve often leaves scholars conflicted, since she can be interpreted in a feminist light; or, she can be viewed as an oppressed figure who is inferior to Adam" (Granowski, 2023: 1). This tension is due to the fact that the author's treatment of Eve does not appear to be simply misogynistic nor wholly redemptive. Milton's Eve becomes a sort of poetic site where those inherited assumptions are tested and, at times, maybe even subverted or subtly redefined. This is also noted by Al-Badarneh (2014: 108), who states that Milton's representation of Eve "with such strong personality subverts the patriarchal discourse of hierarchy and places Eve on the same level as Adam's". Thus, her fall simultaneously exposes and complicates 17th century anxieties about hierarchy, virtue, and knowledge.

Another crucial aspect to examine is how the intellectual climate of Milton's England was still steeped in humanist ideals, which celebrated the dignity of man and the capacity of reason to approach divine truth. From this tradition the author inherited the notion of beauty as a manifestation of cosmic harmony, where aesthetic order would reflect moral and divine order, as will be expanded in the next chapter. Eco (1986: 25) thus observes that "beauty exists in a thing as the splendour of its form, the form which orders the matters according to canons of proportion, and which in shining forth reveals the ordering activity". Also, from classical antiquity Milton may have absorbed ideals of symmetry and proportion: "the underlying belief was that locating the centre of symmetry meant locating the way, the truth, and the light" (Eco, 1986: 40).

Nonetheless, Milton reworks this heritage also through the lens of Protestant theology, which insists on the instability of visible forms and the need for inward grace. Tanimoto (2005: 85) highlights how "subordination, like obedience, is the ideal human attitude toward the God". It is possible to suggest that Milton inherits the Renaissance language of beauty but subjects it to a rigorous theology of obedience. Hence, beauty in *Paradise Lost* seems morally unstable only when untethered from faith and submission to divine will. Milton assimilated from Protestant theology the belief that grace is the ultimate reflection of divine truth. This concept is central to the poem's vision: Eve's beauty reflects divine order, yet it becomes morally unstable when detached from faith. In this regard, Fish (1967: 160) states that "the tree is always there and eating of it is always a possibility and not eating of it is always virtue". For this reason, Milton's theology is one of perpetual testing: every created good, including beauty, seems to potentially contain within it the possibility of corruption.

It is precisely within this moral and aesthetic tension that Eve's character takes shape. She is presented as the most beautiful of all created beings, as "fairest of creation, last and best / Of all God's works" (IX. 896-97). However, her beauty becomes a sign of divine perfection as well as a site of temptation. Eve's beauty appears to be inseparable from the moral testing that ultimately defines her. Her loveliness is the narrative medium through which Milton explores the fragility of free will and the danger of misplaced perception: "without her, God's plan couldn't work; free will wouldn't have been exercised" (Whitfield, 2007: 61). Therefore, her beauty also functions as a theological test, it is not a static and passive attribute.

Additionally, the conventional Renaissance belief that outward, physical beauty would reflect her inner virtue coexists uneasily with the Puritan suspicion that beauty might foster pride and deception. “Gender is a center of perplexity in the epic, and the depiction of Eve in particular works as a site for the coincidence of opposites” (Rumrich 1996: 138). Nonetheless, as Doerksen (1997: 125) suggests, after the Fall “Eve’s action helps initiate not just the end of the strife, but the restoration of wholesome relationships between humans and with God”. This is the reason why postlapsarian Eve can be considered “a heroic peacemaker” (Doerksen, 1997: 125). Milton transforms this specific anxiety into narrative drama, with Eve simultaneously signifying divine origin as well as potential for transgression.

Milton’s rewriting of the classical epic genre only contributes to intensify the paradox surrounding beauty and obedience. In rejecting the martial heroism of Homer and Virgil, he relocates the site of conflict from a battlefield to the garden of Eden, that is, from the realm of political conquest to that of inward temptation and moral endurance. *Paradise Lost* asserts that “patience and obedience are more truly heroic” (Teskey, 2006: 151). Moreover, Fish (1967: 162) remarks that “epic heroism, of which Satan is a noteworthy instance, is the antithesis of Christian heroism”. This reconfigures the ancient paradigm of the warrior hero into that of the Christian subject guided by conscience and obedience. As indicated by Fish (1967: 196): “one part of heroism [...] is an acceptance of the conditions of its exercise”. Consequently, for Milton true heroism does not seem to lie in valour or in the pursuit of worldly glory; rather, in perpetual obedience, humility, and submission to divine law. In this perspective, Adam and Eve embody a new form of moral epic, one in which the act of disobedience becomes the central drama of human freedom.

The couple’s fall dramatizes not a tragic flaw in Aristotelian terms, but the fragile exercise of free will. Thus, their fall is, first of all, a moral one. Within this new moral epic, it is quite clear that Eve’s beauty and eventual disobedience embody the drama of inward temptation. Fallon (1991: 240) reinforces this by stating that “physical strength alone is weakness”. In addition, “the seal of freedom and integrity is to know and to affirm one’s proper place, to acknowledge one’s responsibility to superior beings through respect and obedience and one’s responsibility to inferior beings through protective stewardship” (Shullenberg, 1986: 74). This suggests that Milton transforms the epic action from martial

conquest to the inward battle of obedience, turning the Fall into the central moment of moral testing rather than of physical strength and a redefinition of classical aesthetics.

Paradise Lost is not solely a Puritan meditation on sin, but also, a poem that appears to negotiate the legacy of Renaissance aesthetics as well as classical conventions and decorum. This potentially stems from the specific cultural and historical context of the time, which is a blend of Puritan theology, Reformation debates, classical epic tradition, and Renaissance humanism. Milton writes from within a culture still reverberating with the ideals of proportion and harmony, yet increasingly anxious about their theological implications. Therefore, this blending of classical form with Protestant morality creates a unique poetic tension that frames the representation of the first couple in *Paradise Lost*. Within this framework, Adam and Eve's representation becomes even more crucial: they are not merely biblical figures but vehicles through which the author explores fundamental human questions regarding freedom, obedience, beauty, and grace.

In particular, as will be explored in greater detail, this is seemingly reflected in Eve's portrayal. In a time when women were typically excluded from intellectual authority, Milton complicates conventional hierarchies. By presenting Eve as an active agency who uses reason and is an articulate interlocutor in her unfallen state, she also displays autonomy of thought and emotional intelligence. Hence, Eve's fall is not the result of sheer ignorance but of misplaced trust. For Fish (1967: 212), her "sin is not in ignorance but in misreading the evidence of sense as the evidence of grace". Eve's transgression is presumably epistemological before it is moral, since it marks the collapse of correspondence between beauty and goodness.

However, Milton's Eve also embodies a humanist optimism. Prelapsarian Eve presents herself as rational and capable of growth. Despite her misreading and transgression, maybe even more importantly, she becomes the agent of reconciliation. As noted by Lewalski (2000: 482), Adam "blames both Eve and the God who gave her to him. Eve responds first to 'prevenient grace', and so first breaks out of the seemingly endless cycle of accusations and recriminations, becoming the human means to lead Adam back from the paralysis of despair to love, repentance, and reconciliation, first with his wife and the with God". In fact, it is Eve's humility, not Adam's reasoning, that initiates reconciliation. Milton "foreshadows the first gracious human action after the Fall, when Eve breaks the grip of self-hatred and mutual accusation by subordinating

herself, by pleading for Adam's forgiveness, and by offering her own life as a sacrifice out of her love for Adam" (Shullenberg, 1986: 76).

These elements indicate that Eve potentially stands at the crossroads of Milton's ethics and aesthetics because her beauty signifies the glory of creation, her fall reveals its peril, and her repentance is oriented toward redemption. Eve can thus be seen as embodying the full cycle of Miltonic theology, which consists in creation, fall, and redemption, within her own moral development.

Ultimately, the theological, political, and aesthetic currents of Milton's time do not merely frame Eve: they constitute her. She embodies the contradictions of an age that sought to reconcile divine order with human freedom, as well as moral virtue with sensual admiration. This nuanced representation implies that Milton, while rooted in his era's assumptions, may have also been grappling with deeper questions about knowledge, authority, and the female virtue and role in salvation history.

Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* is not to be intended merely as a static ornament. Eve's beauty, while radiant and pure, is potentially morally unstable. Her susceptibility to appearances, such as her own reflection in the pool and the serpent's rhetoric, suggests that beauty without inward faith risks devolving into vanity and illusion. Miltonic Eve becomes both subject and symbol, the locus where the poem's central oppositions seemingly converge: beauty and grace, reason and desire, obedience and autonomy. These paradoxes, which define her characterisation, are crucial to this dissertation and will be examined in greater detail in the following sections.

1.2. Renaissance Aesthetics, Love Poetry and Milton's Adaptation

The second part of this chapter examines Milton's engagement with the Renaissance and Neoplatonic traditions, particularly in relation to the concepts of beauty and love. It investigates the influence of humanist aesthetics, Petrarchan love poetry, and classical ideals of proportion and harmony on *Paradise Lost*. The present section also shows how Milton reinterprets these motifs through a Puritan lens and provides the possible conceptual background for understanding why Eve's beauty is both celebrated and distrusted in the epic.

As mentioned in the first section, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is not only a theological epic, but also a work profoundly shaped by the aesthetic and philosophical currents of the Renaissance. The poem presents itself as saturated with ideals of proportion, harmony, and eloquence that defined early modern humanism. Hanford (1926: VII) describes Milton as "the great figure in whom the intellectual and aesthetic enthusiasm of the Renaissance" can be admired. Yet, the epic questions the moral implications of such ideals within a fallen, postlapsarian world. Milton inherits the entire symbolic system of Renaissance beauty only to turn it against itself, transforming its radiance into the site of temptation and moral trial.

The Renaissance conception of beauty was largely shaped by Neoplatonic philosophy. Neoplatonism viewed beauty as the visible reflection of divine order and perfection. Typically, this could be manifested in visible harmony, proportion, and symmetry. Moreover, according to Neoplatonists, beauty could elevate the soul from the sensible to the intelligible, serving as a sort of ladder to divine contemplation. Eco (1986: 5) noted that the Medieval age conceived a "beauty that was purely intelligible, the beauty of moral harmony and of metaphysical splendour", a mirror of divine harmony inscribed in the physical world. Similarly, Mikosz and Lousa (2022: 88) report that, according to Neoplatonic thinking, "physical beauty can be a reflection of heavenly beauty and its contemplation is an anticipation of future spiritual destiny". The notion of reflection, inherited from Plato, was crucial to Renaissance poetics and art theory: contemplating beauty ideally coincided with glimpsing the divine. Beauty was not to be intended only as a physical attribute or quality, but as a sign of inner virtue as well. In other words, it was conceived as the outward manifestation of moral truth and inward value.

Milton seemingly complicates this ideal. The author reconfigures this Neoplatonic belief within a Christian framework that renders beauty both sacred and perilous: Eve's beauty is central to her characterisation, but beauty in *Paradise Lost* also appears to be unstable. On one hand, her beauty is portrayed as radiant and harmonious, thus echoing the Neoplatonic notion of visible order. In this respect, Demetrakopoulos (1975: 103) even suggests that Adam "confuses her with the Garden itself". On the other hand, as noted by McColley (1972: 103-04), "it is upon the liberty which provides men the dignity of individual responsibility that Milton's drama of disobedience and restoration depends". McColley (1972: 104) similarly underlines that Adam and Eve's "responsibility for their

conduct derives from their capacity to obey, which is the source of the dignity and freedom from which they fell”. Man’s disobedience, then, was not the revelation of his nature but the violation of it. Therefore, the author recasts Neoplatonic ascent as an ethical discipline rather than a purely contemplative act. Consequently, it appears to be a voluntary resignation and choice.

Hence, for Milton, the appreciation of beauty demands moral vigilance, since aesthetic delight without spiritual orientation can easily become idolatry or self-love. This is probably why Startzman (1987: 32) comments that at some point “beauty becomes a real temptation to wisdom”. Eve’s fascination with her own reflection in Book IV, as will be explored in the following chapters, exemplifies this instability. Thus, her innocent wonder foreshadows the moral dangers of self-absorption. However, Eve “is not vain, but simply intellectually curious about her own existence and sense of self” (Russo, 2012: 2).

A similar ambivalence was already present in Renaissance love poetry, especially within the Petrarchan tradition, where beauty played a paradoxical role. Mikosz and Lousa (2022: 74) observe that, as regards Petrarch’s love for Laura, “he was disturbed by a contradiction: loving her elevated him, but also debased him”. As Spiller (1992: 62) also notices, “Petrarch’s *lexis* signifies a natural world that is also the internal world of desire – particularly the desire of beauty and the pain and fear of losing it.” Beauty was thus celebrated as both a source of desire and the cause of torment. Therefore, on one hand, beauty was often seen as the root of delight, elevation, and inspiration, since Petrarchan poetry heavily focuses on the beloved’s beauty, which was idealised as angelic. On the other hand, beauty also appeared to be a tormenting and endangering factor for the lover, entrapping them in desire. In addition, “the pure Petrarchan perception of ideal beauty and of the suffering of the lover is liable to be disturbed, in the Elizabethan sonnet, by an excursion into the wastes of time” (Spiller, 1992: 129).

Thus, Renaissance sonneteers oscillated between adoration and suspicion, between the divine and the demonic aspects of the beloved’s beauty. Bernard (1979: 79) highlights that “poetry, when it is not mere courtly flattery, part of the game of love, becomes a vehicle for celebrating not the lady herself (if there is one), or even the ideal reality that her beauty implies, but the metamorphosing powers of the imagination”. Beauty was simultaneously praised and feared as a potential source of danger, vanity, and destructive passion. Bernard (1979: 79) also observes that “self-flattery, often thinly

disguised as praise of another, is the keynote of the Renaissance love sonnet". The lover is attached to an unresolvable tension between adoration and suffering. In this perspective, the beloved's beauty should be capable of either elevating the lover toward a higher contemplation or revelation, or capable of plunging him into destructive desire, deception, or seduction.

Furthermore, this paradox regarding beauty used to be so frequent that it pervaded the cultural and poetic imagination of the 16th and 17th centuries; it permeated Renaissance love poetry. This can be observed in other masterpieces of that period. In a similar way, Dubrow (1995: 80) explains that Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) "terminates darkly because loss is the predictable outcome of a relationship grounded in adulation, unconsumed desire, and bitterness, the kind of relationship which the Petrarchan sonnet so often represents". Also, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1590) tends to associate female beauty with both virtue and temptation. Analogously, Shakespearean sonnets often oscillate between the praise of beauty and lament over its transience or corruptive potential. Milton inherits this ambivalence and its tensions. Yet, the poet also transforms this paradox in theological terms. Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* evokes at once divine harmony and human vulnerability. This makes her the object of admiration and the catalyst of temptation. Her beauty no longer guarantees moral truth: it becomes a testing ground for free will.

Moreover, there is another fundamental distinction that needs to be made concerning the Renaissance concept and understanding of beauty. "Milton's rhetorical style very frequently relies on the use of paired concepts that stand in logical opposition to each other, such as 'force or subtlety', 'Reason' and 'Passion', 'Doing or Suffering', 'Rule or Art'" (Marjara, 1984: 50). Another paired concept that appears to be linked in this epic is the opposition between beauty and grace. As highlighted by Marjara (1984: 50), in *Paradise Lost* "Milton contrasts Eve's 'beauty' with Adam's 'manly grace' (IV. 490)". "The opposition between beauty and grace is recurrent in *Paradise Lost*, testifying to the fact that Milton saw them as logical contraries" (Marjara, 1984: 51).

Supposedly, this echoes the typical Renaissance debate between grace (*gratia*) and beauty (*venustas*). The former is more likely to be intended as a divine, spiritual gift that pertains to a moral, metaphysical dimension, whereas the latter risks vanity and can be seen as a natural, sensuous attraction. Consequently, this suggests that grace implies an

orientation toward God and moral strength that transcends outward form and is spiritual, inward, and enduring. Marjara (1984: 51) states that “in the Garden of Eden, Eve is said to possess ‘beauty’, but her beauty is excelled by the ‘manly grace’ of Adam”. Marjara (1984: 51) also stresses that “even if Milton had not used the notion of ‘excelled’, the reader would have been in no doubt that to Milton’s mind, grace is a superior trait to beauty”. Grace “cannot be learnt, it is a gift from heaven, and it comes from having good judgement” (Blunt, 1940: 97). Hence, according to Milton, grace signifies not mere elegance or beauty, but divine favour, the power to act in accordance with heavenly will. Grace, in Milton’s poetic lexicon, denotes divine favour and moral strength, while beauty signifies external harmony and sensuous appeal.

Nonetheless, beauty, while innocent in origin, remains tied to external harmony and is potentially unstable and susceptible to vanity, seduction, and deception. This traditional Renaissance aesthetic distinction may be extremely relevant to Milton’s representation of Eve: she embodies natural beauty and harmony, but her beauty is also the field where temptation becomes possible and takes root.

The implications of the distinction between beauty and grace are profound. Eve embodies natural beauty, yet her virtue ostensibly depends upon the alignment of that beauty with obedience and grace. “Milton’s attribution of beauty to the woman as opposed to grace to the man certainly reflects the Renaissance belief in the superiority of the male” (Marjara, 1984: 51). However, Tanimoto (2005: 83) suggests that prelapsarian Adam and Eve “appear unequal to Satan because they have different virtues”. At the same time, Shullenberg (1986: 76) argues that “not equal” might simply refer to “Eve’s significant difference from Adam [rather than] her inherent inferiority to him”. It could be a distinction in terms of physical appearance, not of different values. Thus, it may indicate a distinction that simply has to do with biology instead of gender. This is supported by Al-Badarneh (2014: 105), who states that this difference “concerns physicality not intellectuality or equality”. Al-Badarneh (2014: 106) also finds that the couple is “on equal grounds since one has what the other lacks. In this way, they complete each other”. According to Allen (2005: 25), “their differences are meant to complement each other, and they are happy together, complimenting and complementing one another in the prelapsarian bliss of Eden”.

Ferry (1988: 130) asserts that Eve “is also described by the poet in less declarative terms, in more figurative, pictorial, musical language than Adam, qualities which also characterize her own mellifluous, descriptive speeches, by contrast with Adam’s typically more abstract arguments”. These patterns indicate that prelapsarian Eve might be more “associated with those powers of the soul that belong especially to poetry, with imagination, sensation, and feeling” (Ferry, 1988: 130).

Yet, as anticipated in the previous section, many experts have argued that Eve’s beauty is not exactly evil in itself: it becomes perilous only when untethered from grace and obedience. This detail can be observed in the episode of Eve’s encounter with her own reflection in the pool for the very first time. Eve “looks at her form in the pool and is pleased by what she sees, curious about the new being that is staring back at her. But the charged words of the narrative foreshadows Eve’s predisposition to loving an image above that which created it” (Whitfield, 2007: 58). Also, this particular episode, which, among others, will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters, offers an example of how Milton adapts and references familiar Renaissance motifs and classics. This scene clearly recalls the myth of Narcissus, a frequent topos in Renaissance love poetry, which dramatizes the danger of self-contemplation if divorced from divine mediation. In relation to this episode, Fish (1967: 217) notices that “‘childlike’ (or, better still, infantlike) seems perfectly true to the reaction Eve displays to her newly discovered image”, and he even labels it as an “innocent fascination”.

Thus, what begins as innocent wonder and harmless self-discovery presumably contains the seeds of vanity, since beauty turned inward risks becoming self-absorption. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 99) goes further by stating that “Milton’s Eve is perhaps the earliest full embodiment in literature of what Mario Praz terms the Fatal Woman in *The Romantic Agony*”. The so-called “Fatal Woman” is a conventional literary figure typically characterised by a distinctive beauty that is diabolically tender as well as potentially destructive. Furthermore, as reported by Demetrakopoulos (1975: 99), Praz insists on this by tracing the genealogy of this archetype across centuries of literature, and yet, “Milton’s Eve is certainly prototypic of this version of the feminine principle”. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 106) continues: “Our first mother thus dilates, in Milton’s hands, into perhaps the first complete and certainly the most imposing literary embodiment of The Fatal Woman”.

In this sense, Eve could be considered a precursor to later *femme fatale* figures, since her fair looks simultaneously embody divine harmony and perilous charm, too.

Therefore, Milton appears to dramatize a quintessential Renaissance anxiety: is beauty a divine gift that elevates, or a dangerous allure that seduces, deceives, and brings destruction? Once again, both possibilities seem to converge in Milton's Eve. Her beauty is a sign of cosmic harmony, as well as the locus of her vulnerability and future temptation. There emerges a precarious balance between sensual admiration and spiritual ascent. Beauty, if separated from obedience, becomes the fragile threshold between paradise and loss.

1.3. Milton's Eve: Beauty, Grace, and Obedience

The third section of this chapter is more centred on Milton's representation of Eve, investigating the intricate relationship between beauty, grace, and obedience in her portrayal. It explores how Eve's aesthetic and moral vulnerability coexist, thus creating one of the main tensions that defines her role in *Paradise Lost*. Therefore, this part of the dissertation highlights how Milton appears to use Eve's beauty as both divine reflection and as a potential source of error. This also anticipates her dual role in the Fall as well as in reconciliation.

Eve often occupies a complex position at the intersection of theology, aesthetics, and gender discourse. Her Miltonic representation is no exception. As introduced in the preceding subchapter, in *Paradise Lost* she is at once innocent, fair, beautiful, and gifted with reason, yet vulnerable to temptation and persuasion. Critics and scholars have long debated whether she should be seen primarily as a victim, a temptress, or a complex and paradoxical figure embodying both extremes. McColley (1983: 2) remarks that "at her most appealing, she embodies passion subjugating reason; at her worst she is the apt and willing instrument of evil". Her presence in *Paradise Lost* exposes the tension between hierarchical order and mutual dependence. In fact, Milton's Eden is not static harmony, but dynamic moral testing. Rumrich (1996: 33) observes that "submission to external interpretative authority undermines true virtue", symbolising the human condition suspended between divine command and self-determination.

Several experts have precisely underscored this paradoxical dynamic by emphasizing that Eve is not predestined to fall. This is due to the fact that she is free and has free will. Al-Badarneh (2014: 108) argues that “though Eve commits a big sin through eating of the Fruits of the Tree of Knowledge, it seems a real decisive moment for her to be both intellectual and free to choose”. In addition, Milton “preferred hard liberty to easy servitude, believed that the perfect state of human nature is freedom, which means (in Aristotelian terms) the vigorous exercise of one’s powers to the fullest” (Teskey, 2006: 153). This implies the presence of responsibility and accountability, which lies in the exercise of free will or lack thereof. Eve appears to embody Milton’s dialectic of freedom and obedience, in which moral agency requires the capacity to err. Her fall is not inevitable, but contingent on her exercise of judgement. As a consequence, her freedom also becomes a measure of her moral agency.

Moreover, Eve’s prelapsarian beauty is repeatedly described as being fair, radiant, harmonious, and reflecting the divine creation. Yet, her susceptibility to appearances, first to her own reflection and then to the serpent’s speech, suggests that her beauty is not to be trusted completely or blindly. As previously discussed, beauty in Milton’s theological imagination is not neutral, since it appears as a site of moral testing. Beauty at times can also be dangerous: it may turn into self-absorption, deception, and illusion. “Hypnotically sexual, Eve is endowed with a mysterious, magical, and highly powerful eroticism” (Demetrakopoulos, 1975: 99). Her beauty, though fair and harmonious, potentially carries an inherent potential for self-absorption.

Sometimes beauty can be weaponised to seduce and manipulate others: “Eve’s beauty [...] is transformed by Milton into a weapon” (Whitfield, 2007: 59). This might be one of the reasons why “the reader in general is constantly made aware of Eve being naked” (Whitfield, 2007: 59). Also, Ferry (1988: 129) highlights Eve’s successful seduction of “the husband from whom she was formed, for whom she was made”. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 100) notes that “Eve like the garden is luxuriously adorned” and proposes that her “beauty enslaves Adam’s mind, just as it captivates and enthrals her own fanciful ego”. In addition, Bare (2018: 108) proposes that “Eve is the most prized piece of property in Paradise”. Such remarks foreground how beauty and possession intertwine in Milton’s gendered imagination.

Yet, Eve's attention and inclination to appearances expose beauty's fragility only when detached from grace, faith, and obedience. Unlike Adam, she seems to be rarely associated with grace in the spiritual sense. Her beauty is external, sensuous, and potentially vulnerable and unstable; whereas grace, which pertains to the moral, metaphysical dimension, belongs exclusively to Adam as a sign of divine strength and empowerment, not as something natural. Hence, Eve's beauty, unless subordinated to obedience, lacks this stabilizing element. Startzman (1987: 31) observes that "all, however, is not without danger in Eden, for while Beauty itself acknowledges the right relationship to Reason, Reason runs the danger itself in the face of Beauty". Startzman (1987: 31) also notes that "Adam affirms that Beauty is Goodness (the external reflects the internal) and pronounces the unity of Beauty and Wisdom: 'both one soul'. But the danger exists. Disorder is possible. Division is possible. Beauty may seem and not be. Wisdom may foolishly deny its nature and prefer the reflection rather than the source". Beauty may be an obstacle or a temptation to obedience and reason. Eve's beauty, if severed from obedience, stands for a dangerous autonomy and is vulnerable to corruption. "Beauty apart from God, who is the source of true Beauty and true Wisdom, is simply illusion" (Startzman, 1987: 34). Therefore, Eve's susceptibility to appearances may be an instance of beauty's instability without grace. In the epic, beauty signifies natural order, while grace connotes divine favour and moral stability. Hence, Eve's beauty also emerges as incomplete, unless directed and guided by obedience and grace. This distinction highlights the Renaissance concern that beauty without spiritual grounding risks turning into vanity and deception.

Furthermore, the prohibition of the Tree of Knowledge illustrates the relationship between obedience and reason. The command implies that obedience is a pure act of faith rather than a matter of rationality. As Eve marvels at the serpent's speech and rhetoric, she begins to rely on empiricism and reason, thus replacing divine command. In doing so, she fundamentally shifts from faith to self-trust. Consequently, this could be the reason why Eve's failure and fall are not primarily intellectual, but rather volitional: she chooses to privilege the evidence of the senses over faith and the command of God. These aspects suggest that Eve's failure is not exactly linked to her intellectual incapacity. This should be attributed to her misplaced trust in appearances and in the senses instead of God's word. "Milton's deep investment in this argument is founded in its implications for human

freedom and moral responsibility” (Lewalski, 2000: 423). In this perspective, the moral, inward fall precedes the physical act. This could also resonate with Milton’s theological insistence that sin stems not from sheer ignorance but from the wilful choice of self over God.

Eve’s role is not merely confined to failure. Not only does Milton portray Eve as the one who falls first, but also as the one who initiates healing in the postlapsarian era. He “develops the biblical character of Eve positively to emphasize less her subordination and more her eventual role as a spiritual leader in concert with Adam” (Benninghoff, 2025: 193). “Milton never seeks to pardon Eve or suggest Adam’s ultimate culpability, but rather seeks to portray her humanity in ‘growing up’ as a woman into a wife and mother” (Benninghoff, 2025: 193). Furthermore, Benninghoff (2025: 194) highlights that “Milton devotes time to developing Eve’s perspective, and by doing so frees her from the constraints of a tradition that condemns her for the Fall of Man”. Therefore, the poet’s narrative also grants her a redemptive function.

Another episode that will be explored more in-depth later is the one in which, after the Fall, Eve approaches Adam with humility and kneels in front of him: “Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness Heav’n / What love sincere, and reverence in my heart / I bear thee” (X. 914-16). Fish (1967: 275) observes that this speech, though desperate, is effective and sincere precisely because it is born of “a love sincere...blindly, haltingly and finally, as God would have it, effectively”. Her repentance initiates the poem’s redemptive arc, positioning her as both the cause of the Fall and the catalyst for renewal. In addition, postlapsarian Eve “helps save Adam from suicide after his Fall – thus providing a future for mankind” (Benninghoff, 2025: 195). In such moments, Eve paradoxically becomes the agent of healing, having a pivotal role in reconciliation. This is probably why “her actions serve to restore the balance to their relationship and permit their prayerful repentance to God. By developing on an often-ignored perspective of Eve’s role, Milton correlates the love of Adam and Eve to their shared Fall and portrays Eve as a redemptive leader” (Benninghoff, 2025: 195). Eve’s gesture might be redemptive, not destructive, mediating between sin and forgiveness. In a similar way, Lewalski (2000: 482) claims that Eve after the Fall “opens the way to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation”. Also, Lewalski (2000: 483) adds that “Eve, however, complicates the reading of her story

as a simple submission to patriarchy". Eve's beauty here yields to humility and love, anticipating the divine plan of redemption.

In addition, Eve is established in a position of relative power: she is the one capable of solving problems in this episode. This is corroborated by Astorino (2020: 1), who observes that this "contradicted gender norms that dictated that men, and by default Adam, should be those to solve life's problems". At this point, Eve paradoxically appears to become a figure of reconciliation and renewed hope. "Milton portrays her as one who makes a mistake but who is not solely responsible for humankind's downfall" (Astorino, 2020: 1). Also, Benninghoff (2025: 199) does not read Eve as "the sole cause of the Fall, but rather an expression of humanity's curiosity, ambiguity, and adaptation". For Allen (2005: 36) "the fact that Eve was deceived will mitigate her sentence later".

All these elements suggest that her role in reconciliation is even more valuable. Benninghoff (2025: 199) argues that "Eve adapts to the responsibility of her sin: she gave the fruit to Adam, so it is up to her to rescue him". In her attempt at reconciliation, Eve "humbles herself to Adam as he should properly have been humbling himself to God" (Allen, 2005: 41). By extension, "Eve ensured the perseverance of humankind through her spiritual leadership" (Benninghoff, 2025: 200). Doerksen (1997: 128-29) remarks that "while Eve, according to a story detail that Milton could not change, was the first to sin, the poet created a fully human Eve who was nevertheless heroic like Christ in taking a self-humbling, redemptive initiative that brought about reconciliation and peace, and helped pave the way for salvation". Allen (2005: 45) agrees with this: "it is Eve's ability, post-sinfulness, to recognize her error, and ability to take responsibility for this error, that lead her and Adam toward reconciliation". This would make Eve the first agent of recovery, allowing the first couple to be prepared for redemption. Eve thus embodies both peril and promise, since she is the one through whom harmony is lost but reconciliation begins to be restored.

Eve's beauty, grace, and obedience encapsulate Milton's moral theology. Her beauty signifies divine harmony but requires grace to remain stable; her grace depends upon obedience; and her obedience, when restored, becomes the condition of redemption. "Eve is not just reflected light. She has light of her own; she questions and sometimes leads; she gives Adam ideas and perplexities; she receives, at the end of the poem, when she is supposed to be more subjected than before, direct light from God" (McColley,

1993: 212-13). Eve's story is the story of Milton's universe itself: beauty imperilled, obedience lost, and grace rediscovered.

This thesis will focus on Eve's centrality to Milton's vision of humanity. The way in which the author constructs her character in *Paradise Lost* is far from a simplistic temptress. By situating Eve at the intersection of Puritan theology, Renaissance aesthetics, and epic tradition, Milton dramatizes the deepest anxieties and aspirations of his age. She embodies the Renaissance ideal of beauty as harmony, yet her vulnerability also lies in detaching beauty from grace. In this sense, Eve's beauty is innocent yet dangerous, her reason capable yet unstable, her will free yet fragile. Eve's "fair" (IV. 481) appearance contrasts with Adam's "manly grace" (IV. 490), underscoring the hierarchy of spiritual orientation over sensuous appeal. However, she is the figure through which Milton dramatizes the Fall of humankind, as well as the first steps toward reconciliation. Consequently, Eve is the focal point of the epic's many aesthetic and theological paradoxes: beauty as both divine gift and dangerous allure, obedience as either a possibility or a failure, and grace as the horizon of redemption after the Fall. Such paradoxes make Miltonic Eve, and by extension, the whole poem, extremely interesting and complex.

While the first chapter of the present study is relevant because it serves as an introduction of the aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural tendencies that contributed to shape the most relevant point and concerns surrounding Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The tensions visible in the author's context and masterpiece, especially regarding Eve, will now guide my closer analysis on her, thus exploring more thoroughly what has been introduced in this chapter. The second chapter will examine Eve's role reflecting on her creation, on some of her most important episodes in Eden, as well as on the hierarchical relationship between her and Adam.

Chapter 2

Eve in *Paradise Lost*: From Creation to Redemption

After having examined Milton's contest mainly in terms of aesthetic categories and religious influence, this chapter turns its attention to the figure of Eve within *Paradise Lost*. She is one of the most vividly drawn female characters in 17th century English poetry, and her presence occupies a central position in the narrative of creation, temptation, the Fall of humankind, and redemption. Eve is not marginal or incidental, since Milton places her at the heart of the dramatization of the Fall. Her trajectory is, in many ways, the poem's emotional, theological, and aesthetic centre.

By analysing some key passages of the epic, such as Eve's creation, her first moments of consciousness, her dream, her dialogue with Satan, the act of disobedience, and the companionship and possible hierarchical relationship with Adam, this chapter seeks to trace the complexity of Milton's Eve. More specifically, the main focus is the way in which Milton represents her beauty: a beauty admired by Adam, envied by Satan, yet also feared, scrutinised, and variously interpreted within a framework that renders her physical, moral, and imaginative beauty as a locus of paradox. Eve's beauty, indeed, is not merely decorative; rather, it is the site through which *Paradise Lost* explores questions of obedience, desire, self-knowledge, moral agency, and hierarchy.

2.1. Eve's Creation and First Appearances

The present section examines Eve's first appearances in *Paradise Lost*, focusing on the scenes that introduce her consciousness, beauty, and position within the created order. By analysing some of the most essential episodes of the epic, this part of the dissertation explores how Milton establishes the foundational paradoxes of Eve's character: innocence and self-awareness, autonomy and subordination, beauty and hierarchy. Moreover, particular attention is given to the symbolic and theological implications of the mirror scene, which arguably frames Eve's beauty as both a reflection of divine order and a potential site of vulnerability.

Milton introduces Eve not at the actual moment of her creation, but in retrospect. In Book IV she recalls awakening with wonder and self-aware curiosity by a shaded lake and encountering her own reflection. This specific episode is striking because, as mentioned in the first chapter, it foregrounds self-consciousness and beauty even before her meeting with Adam:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked, and found myself reposed
Under a shade on flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence thither brought, and how.

(IV. 449-52)

This scene might initially appear as purely descriptive, but it simultaneously emphasises Eve's innocence and purity, as well as her attraction to her own image. This marks the emergence of self-awareness on Eve's part. In fact, her immediate reaction is to gaze into a pool: her first act is not disobedience, nor speech, nor even recognition of Adam, but the contemplation of her own image. The act of looking into the lake and seeing her reflection transforms her beauty into a site of both delight and potential danger, revelation and temptation. Moreover, the emphasis on "wondering" (IV. 451) underscored a pivotal dimension of Milton's Eve: since she emerges as a reflective consciousness seeking to understand her new origins, not simply as a passive entity. The pursuit of self-knowledge becomes even more pronounced in the mirror scene, when Eve contemplates her reflected image:

As I bent down to look, just opposite
A shape within the watery gleam appeared
Bending to look on me: I started back,
It started back; but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire

(IV. 460-66)

As anticipated in the previous chapter, this moment has understandably prompted comparisons with the myth of Narcissus. Yet the parallel is complex: critics have debated whether Milton intended this as a sign or instance of dangerous vanity or as a genuine, innocent moment of self-discovery and self-recognition. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 99) notes that “Eve from the moment of her birth seeks a mirror of herself. In fact, she turns away from Adam, preferring her image to the reality of his more austere self”. Unlike Adam, Eve does not move immediately; “rather [she] wanders to the first mirror she can find and reclines next to it” (Demetrakopoulos, 1975: 99). On the other hand, McColley (1983: 67) argues that “as long as she remains unfallen, Eve redeems the beauty, the richness of sensory experience, and the erotic delight”. Eve’s response may be understood as an awakening of consciousness rather than of pride.

This episode thus reflects the doubleness of beauty: Eve’s first act is self-admiration, an emblem of both divine reflection and dangerous vanity. Consequently, one can dispute if Eve is innocently or culpably narcissistic. In particular, the verse “pined with vain desire” (IV. 466) raises questions about whether the author is blaming Eve. Nonetheless, the mirror scene should not be read as a moral indictment, but as a poetic dramatization of untested innocence, in which desire is not misdirected, but simply unformed. At this point, Eve’s beauty is still aligned with prelapsarian delight in created goodness, not with sinfulness.

Moreover, the narrative of Eve’s creation is also revisited in Book VIII, when Adam recounts her creation from his own rib. His recollection adds a complementary perspective: the emphasis appears to focus on unity, but also on difference and hierarchy. He recalls first seeing her: “Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair” (VIII. 471). The juxtaposition of likeness and difference indicates an ontological tension that persists throughout the whole poem and their relationship. Adam’s words depict a creature closer to man than to animals, yet they also stress a difference. Nonetheless, as reported in the first chapter, this may simply imply a biological, physical difference rather than suggesting the existence of an inferior, subordinated sex. Adam might be highlighting complementarity, but also an imbalance in terms of hierarchy. Ruuskanen (2016: 17) debates “whether such hierarchy should be taken as the natural order of things, resulting directly from creation”. The account of Eve’s creation does not necessarily mean to

diminish her but to instruct the reader in the logic of obedience. By contrast, Bare (2018: 102) argues that “the specifications regarding the intended use of a new human design (Eve) have been explicitly stated [...] her end is not in herself. Her end is in Adam”. This aspect raises questions, since Eve’s primary function “is already decided without her contribution or assent” (Bare, 2018: 102). The latter interpretation thus underlines the contrast between autonomy and subordination.

Furthermore, pertaining to the moment Eve was brought to Adam, he recalls: “Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye / In every gesture dignity and love” (VIII. 488-89). These lines do not merely depict physical beauty, but also coyness, obedience, and prelapsarian harmony. This suggests expectations about feminine behaviour, which are connected to grace, gentleness, dignity, and love. Adam’s assessment indicates that Eve’s beauty is naturally linked to grace, allure, and nurturing. Her radiant presence is highlighted as a form of divine reflection. Hence, her prelapsarian beauty is also a spiritual and moral type of beauty, not just a physical one.

Another relevant aspect is that her beauty is so immense that she makes all the other elements in Eden, which are also known to be absolutely perfect, seem not as perfect as she is. Milton’s Eve is inseparable from the natural world; her beauty is Edenic, both innocent and erotic. This duality reflects the author’s broader interest in the paradoxes of prelapsarian embodiment. Milton integrates Eve’s beauty into the natural world, thus deepening the symbolic association between her and Edenic nature, especially through the description of her hair:

She as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best received,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.

(IV. 304-11)

By linking Eve's appearance to the natural world and the garden of Eden, Milton renders her beauty simultaneously innocent, sensual, and intimately connected to the cosmos. The intertwining of natural and bodily beauty makes Eve a mediating figure between creation and human experience. Also, since the couple's main activity is tending the garden and interacting with nature, Eve's beauty becomes performative in the sense that it is entwined with cultivation, order, and care. Yet, in the early Renaissance loosened hair was associated with vulnerability or sensuality; it typically stood for danger. The way Eve wears her hair may subtly foreshadow her later disobedience and eventual fall. At the same time, it could also suggest an Edenic freedom untainted by shame.

Moreover, another instance of how Eve's beauty is inserted in the absolute beauty of the Garden is offered by the following lines:

*Her loveliness, so absolute she seems,
And in herself complete so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her.*

(VIII. 547-52)

Here Milton's imagery indicates plentitude and perfection. Again, the author is stating that Eve's beauty is so perfect and complete that she makes all other things look less perfect. In addition, the fact that she appears "in herself complete" (VIII. 548) could signal her integrity: "one can obviously see that Eve's individuality and independence are differently treated from the seventeenth-century traditional view of women" (Al-Badarneh: 2014, 108). Such completeness, however, might provoke Adam's subtle anxiety concerning her (relative) autonomy. Thus, Milton's portrayal contains a paradox: at least according to Adam's interpretation, Eve is both subordinate and self-sufficient, even standing out among the beauty of Eden. If her beauty goes beyond her physical appearance and allure, it is crucial to highlight her magnanimity, too: "Greatness of mind and nobleness their seat / Build in her loveliest, and create an awe / About her, as a guard angelic placed" (VIII. 557-59).

Hence, Eve's introduction and some of her first moments already emphasise her beauty. This is done in a way that renders her beauty not a static or merely decorative attribute, but a dynamic and potentially disruptive force, which is intertwined with questions of hierarchy, identity, and desire.

2.2. Eve's Dream

The second section of this chapter is dedicated to Eve's dream in Book V. This episode introduces Satan's intrusion into her imagination, thereby complicating her prelapsarian innocence and anticipating the later temptation. By examining the rhetoric of the dream and Eve's reaction upon her awakening, this part of my study considers the role of imagination as a liminal faculty between reason and temptation, while also addressing the role that beauty plays within this complex interaction.

Eve's dream is one of the most psychologically revealing episodes in *Paradise Lost*. It presents the first possibility of imaginative vulnerability, yet it also underscores Eve's moral sensitivity in her unfallen state. This moment is crucial for understanding her dream within the broader theological context of temptation. The dream includes an enticing vision of the forbidden fruit, couched in a rhetoric that can be seen as a sort of stage of Eve's fall. The dream's imagery presents the fruit as a path to exalted beauty and wisdom. Eve is tempted to taste the forbidden fruit, which is the only prohibition for the pair. Although this may not be considered a proper attempt of seduction on Satan's part, this moment still forges several illusions and images that seem to remain with Miltonic Eve. In this sense, the demonic dream arguably implants an evil motion. Patrides (1966: 106) observes that "the dream, though instigated by Satan [...] is yet a projection of her innermost desires and aspirations". As a matter of fact, "Eve is also ensnared by her love of her own beauty which leads her to see herself as a queen. This is why she follows Satan in the dream so unquestioningly. He tells her that she is to be a queen; all nature, ravished, will gaze at her" (Demetrakopoulos, 1975: 100). Additionally, Demetrakopoulos (1975: 100) notes that Eve is "not content with her role as goddess of fertility, she flies up to become one of the gods". Therefore, her vulnerability and susceptibility to flattery and temptation already emerge in this episode, thus anticipating the later fall.

After this devil-induced dream, Eve is described as if she is feeling in distress: “With tresses discomposed, and glowing cheek / As though unquiet rest” (V. 10-11). Her disturbed rest is described with an emphasis on her “tresses discomposed” (V. 10) as well as on emotional agitation. When she wakes up, she takes comfort in seeing that Adam is with her and that morning has come. Nevertheless, Eve appears anxious and worried because of this unprecedented event:

My glory, my perfection, glad I see
Thy face, and morn returned, for I this night,
Such night till this I never passed, have dreamed,
If dreamed, not as I oft am wont, of thee,
Works of day past, or morrow’s next design,
But offence and trouble, which my mind
Knew never till this irksome night.

(V. 29-35)

Although her physical beauty is not the direct focus here, Eve’s imaginative receptivity becomes the site where Satan exploits her innocence. On one hand, this is a moment that could reveal Eve’s vulnerability; on the other hand, it also shows her capacity for reflection and reasoning. As a matter of fact, when she explains to Adam what has happened in her dream, she seems offended and shocked by what was being suggested, that is, eating the forbidden fruit. At this point, Eve’s reaction is not amazement or temptation, rather one of horror and fear. Her confession to Adam reveals a conscience still attuned to moral order. This means that she can use her reason and distinguish what is right from what is wrong, even when she is being tempted in her dream. The following verses, which anticipate Satan’s later argument, report what Eve has been told on this occasion:

Here, happy creature, fair angelic Eve,
Partake thou also; happy though thou art,
Happier thou mayst be, worthier canst not be:
Taste this, and be henceforth among the gods

Thyself a goddess, not to earth confined.

(V. 74-78)

Adam's immediate reaction consists in reassuring his wife. His words underline Eve's beauty as well as the beauty of their relationship, which points to a sense of equality between the two: "Best image of myself and dearer half / The trouble of thy thoughts this night in sleep / Affects me equally" (V. 95-97). Adam reminds her that she is so pure that she cannot harbour anything evil. Also, after having been consoled, Eve is called "his fair spouse" (V. 129). This exchange is a strong depiction of prelapsarian mutuality and partnership.

The dream serves as a trial for the reader, since it invites to misinterpret Eve's susceptibility as weakness, only to remind us that temptation alone does not constitute sin. As claimed by Fish (1967: 226), "innocence [...] includes large possibilities for growth as well as the possibility of declining to grow". Feminist readings tend to see this passage as revealing of Milton's gendered assumptions, according to which Eve is imagined as more susceptible to external influence simply because she is a woman. As anticipated, one might argue that the dream foreshadows the eventual fall, possibly indicating that Eve's imagination is both a site of divine vulnerability and poetic richness. Hence, "the suggestion of a tainted consciousness is at odds with the moral drawn from Adam" (Fish, 1967: 219). Once again, there emerges a tension: Eve's imaginative openness is double-edged because it is a possible precondition for temptation, yet it is also a marker of her intellectual richness. Here the discussion of intellectual beauty can be expanded: not only is Miltonic Eve physically attractive, but also mentally and imaginatively engaged. The dream reveals her curiosity, reflective abilities, and capacity of moral reasoning. Such qualities are crucial to interpreting, and possibly understanding, her later choices and behaviour.

The dream scene suggests that Eve's beauty is linked not only to physical allure, but also to intellectual openness, imagination, and reason. Such elements are treated by Milton with both admiration and narrative ambivalence, one of them being the tension between innocence and temptation. In a sense, the author uses the dream as both a narrative and ethical device, since it signals the moral challenges inherent in the interplay of desire, reflection, and obedience.

2.3. Eve's Relationship with Adam

The present section is dedicated to the dynamics of Eve's relationship with Adam in the prelapsarian world, focusing on their dialogues, expressions of companionship, and first moments of tensions. While Milton often presents their unfallen bond as affectionate and mutually enriching, in the epic a hierarchical structure grounded in the theological order simultaneously emerges. This part of my thesis investigates how beauty, obedience, and autonomy interact within the framework of marriage, revealing both harmony and latent conflict.

Eve's relationship with Adam is foundational to the poem's theological and theological architecture. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton repeatedly presents dialogues between the first couple that show the dynamic of their bond. Their relationship reveals a complex intertwining of affection, admiration, and hierarchical tension. Eve's beauty and emotional qualities are often praised by Adam. For instance, he refers to her as his "Sole partner and sole part of all these joys / Dearer thyself than all" (IV. 411-12) and "Fair consort" (IV. 610). As a matter of fact, Eve is the only sharer in Adam's joys, and she is also part of them. This affectionate bond conveys a sense of emotional intimacy as a key component of prelapsarian bliss and harmony.

However, as already noticed, hierarchy seems to be inescapable. It is true that their conversations underline mutual affection and harmony, but they also potentially highlight the hierarchical difference between the first couple. Eve herself acknowledges this: "My author and disposer, what thou bidst / Unargued I obey; so God ordains, / God is thy law, thou mine" (IV. 635-37). Tanimoto (1005: 81) observes that "Eve's departure from narcissistic self-love and her choice to be Adam's obedient wife are actions of her own free will". Although she frames her obedience as given freely and completely, this declaration still seems an oxymoron. There is no coercion, but Adam and Eve are supposed to be partners, and thus they should at least be nearly equal ones. Yet she is an obedient partner, and this implies a form of imbalance and subordination.

This aspect has led critics to debate whether their relationship can truly be considered equal. "However, the nature of the love relationship between Adam and Eve transcends all opposite binaries in the sense of superior-inferior hierarchy. Eve's

submissive words that are taken by some feminists to be against Milton and to describe him as a misogynist can be interpreted as courtesy words that add to the intimacy of the relationship among the couple” (Al-Badarneh, 2014: 106). On the other hand, the tension between autonomy and submission resurfaces quite frequently in *Paradise Lost*. This potentially suggests that Milton problematises simplistic notions of marital hierarchy. For Whitfield (2007: 59), Adam’s words are “problematic for the female reader. His dialogue throughout the poem is riddled with misogynistic remarks”. Gilbert and Gubar (1979: 191) criticise Milton’s story, since it is the one of “woman’s secondness, her otherness, and how that otherness leads inexorably to her demonic anger, her sin, her fall, and her exclusion from that garden”.

Nonetheless, companionship remains one of the most important elements of Edenic bliss. A clear expression of prelapsarian partnership and harmony occurs when Eve declares: “With thee conversing I forget all time / All seasons and their change, all please alike” (IV. 639-40). Here beauty and love are strictly connected; her words exemplify their companionship as paradise itself. Eve’s beauty is paired with the prelapsarian beauty of conversation, which is also perfect in the unfallen world. Moreover, the term “conversing” (IV. 639) in this context can carry connotations of intellectual exchange, mutual pleasure, and shared experience. Hence, it could be intended as the art of coming together from two different directions, doing the same activities together, and sharing the same life and fate. Lewalski (2000: 480) emphasises that Milton’s “Adam and Eve are described first in terms of their shared nobility, majesty, and authority over all other creatures; their moral and spiritual equality is based on their creation”. In addition, their marriage involves shared discourse and mutual rationality. This meaning further highlights the closeness and the importance of Adam and Eve’s bond. Before the Fall, everything in Eden is perfect and pure bliss, and this includes their partnership and companionship.

As regards Eve’s main activities in Eden, she tends to perform certain domestic tasks. Moreover, Adam and Eve “take equal responsibility for their world, laboring together to maintain its ecosystem” (Lewalski, 2000: 481). Interestingly, Eve “names the plants and thereby shares in the authority over nature, the intuitive knowledge, and the power of symbolization that Adam’s naming of the animals signifies, albeit in lesser degree” (Lewalski, 2000: 481). Tanimoto (2005: 87) also underlines that “Eve’s act of

naming implies that she also can be an author”, but at the same time, her act of naming plants does not appear to be on the same level with Adam’s act of naming animals. “Eve’s naming of the flowers does not equal, in proportion or significance, Adam’s naming of the animals and all the environment under his dominion” (Bare, 2018: 100). Moreover, Demetrakopoulos (1975: 103) notes that “as the story of Creation progresses, Eve begins to see herself as the Queen Flower of Eden. [...] She begins to see herself as central to the creation and universally sought after, even worshipped”. This emerging pride and potential vanity will be crucial in Satan’s later temptation and deception.

Yet, Book IX introduces a decisive moment of friction for the first couple. The interplay of their relationship starts to change when Eve proposes to work apart from Adam in the garden: “Let us divide our labors” (IX. 214). Al-Badarneh (2014: 108) argues that “her suggestion to divide the garden labor in Paradise privileges her as an active agent in the social communicative process”. This proposal reflects quite clearly Eve’s desire for more autonomy and her capacity for reasoned argument. At this point of the narration, *Paradise Lost* underscores the tension between independence and hierarchy. Additionally, this suggestion marks the first moment in which Milton’s Eve speaks first in a significant exchange, whereas she usually tends to only reply. Nevertheless, in retrospect, Eve’s initiative could be described as charmingly aggressive, considering the eventual outcome. While it is extremely interesting that Eve is showing more independence and is taking initiative, this unprecedented event could be unsafe for them, with this being a potentially dangerous adventure for independence.

At first, Adam is not totally opposed to or worried about Eve’s individual need for “short absence” (IX. 248), due to the fact that he explains that “solitude sometimes is best society” (IX. 249). However, he later presents a more doubtful and hesitant attitude, reminding Eve of God’s warning:

What hath been warned us, what malicious foe
Envyng our happiness, and of his own
Despairing, seeks to work us woe and shame
By sly assault; and somewhere nigh at hand
Watches, no doubt, with greedy hope to find
His wish and best advantage, us asunder,
Hopeless to circumvent us joined, where each
To other speedy aid might lend at need;

Adam is reminding her that there is an enemy who seeks to exploit their separation. “Adam tries to make Eve stay with him, but it is not because he regards her as his inferior who cannot resist Satan by herself. on the contrary, he just says that if they are together, it is easier to evade Satan’s temptation” (Tanimoto, 2005: 82). Eve insists on her capacity for independence, interpreting his hesitation as mistrust. She seems to be the one who gives instructions: Al-Badarneh (2014: 108) finds that “her power of speech is presented stronger by Milton in order to substantiate her individuality and freedom”. Adam’s protective caution is the element that clashes with her desire for self-determination. Nevertheless, Eve’s stance should not be reduced to stubbornness; it is rather an expression of her wish for rational independence. Milton “explores through Adam and Eve the fundamental challenge of any love relationship: the uneasy, inevitable, and ultimately creative tension between autonomy and interdependence” (Lewalski, 2000: 479). Also, in this perspective, Eve’s insistence on independence shows Milton’s subtle acknowledgement of female agency.

As the Fall approaches, Milton accentuates Eve’s beauty and innocence by explicitly using sexual terms. A case in point is when she is called “the virgin majesty of Eve” (IX. 270). Then, Eve proceeds to voice her doubt on Adam’s loyalty to her and her fearing that he deems her as too weak. Eve does not propose a complete undoing of God’s words yet: she is only suggesting a partial adjustment. Subsequently, she expresses her concerns regarding the fact that they are not being tried or tempted, thus questioning the value of their virtue: “frail is our happiness, if this be so” (IX. 340). Remarkably, here she seems to imply that their happiness is limited and thus imperfect. Once again, in doing this, Eve is wondering how they can consider themselves virtuous and obedient if they are never tempted, if they cannot demonstrate their obedience. Eve’s obedience at this point might be precarious and her position ominous, but not sinful yet. However, she is already commenting and putting glossed on God’s words.

This episode encapsulates Eve’s desire for relative autonomy, which contrasts with Adam’s protective hierarchy. Therefore, this moment perfectly dramatizes the tensions between obedience, freedom, and partnership. These are precisely the tensions that will culminate in the Fall of humankind.

2.4 Eve's Temptation

The fourth part of this chapter addresses the temptation scene in Book IX, which is the narrative and moral climax of Eve's narrative as well as of the whole epic. Here beauty becomes even more central, since it is the primary instrument of Satan's rhetoric: flattery and persuasion are deployed to destabilise divine hierarchy and appeal to Eve's sense of self-worth and desire for more knowledge and relative independence. Milton's representation of beauty intersects directly with rhetoric, desire, and moral agency. This suggests that the Fall emerges not from irrational impulse alone, but from a complex interaction between aesthetic admiration, intellectual ambition, and misdirected desire.

After having previously observed Adam and Eve, Satan disguises himself as a serpent. At first Satan is mesmerised by Eve and her beauty: "upon finding Eve, [he] is momentarily transfixed by the sight of her, stripped of all enmity and guile, until he finally regains his composure, as his intense hatred overcomes Eve's loveliness" (Ruuskanen, 2016: 17). The serpent proceeds by greeting Eve with a rhetoric that flatters her beauty. He frames her beauty in hyperbolic terms, referring to her as "sovereign mistress" (IX. 532) and "fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair" (IX. 538). Another instance of this is when Satan praises her "celestial beauty" (IX. 540) and calls her "a goddess among gods, adored and served / By angels numberless" (IX. 547-48). Hence, he appeals directly to her beauty, elevating her as the queen of creation and complimenting her by stating that she resembles God's face.

Eve's initial reaction is amazement in hearing an animal, more specifically a serpent, speak and stand erect. Satan's eloquence, coupled with her curiosity, proves to be enticing and persuasive: she starts to believe more and more in his argument. This is effective because he is praising Eve and her beauty. Satan's descriptions elevate her to a nearly divine status: in doing so, he is resting on female weakness. His strategy is designed to sabotage hierarchy and simultaneously appeal to her sense of self-worth. One of the tricks used by Satan is *captatio benevolentiae*, a rhetorical technique aimed at gaining the goodwill of a given audience by resorting to flattery. Not only is this adulation manipulative, but it also weaponizes the poem's earlier insistence on Eve's beauty. As a consequence, in this perspective, the serpent intensifies his praise: "Empress of this fair world, resplendent Eve" (IX. 568) and "Queen of this universe" (IX. 684). What is being

encouraged here is that Eve should be a goddess, and thus she should be admired and celebrated by everyone. Demetrakopoulos (1975: 103) claims that Satan tempts “her to make the universe her court; the garden is too small for such beauty”. This language upgrades her physical charm into a form of spiritual and political authority.

Moreover, Satan’s rhetoric appeals to Eve’s aesthetic self-awareness and tempts her with a vision of power and equality. Here her beauty is elevated into divinity, preparing the ground for her seduction and deception. Satan attempts to captivate Eve’s vanity and desire for more knowledge, especially in the following verses: “Ye shall be as gods / Knowing both good and evil as they know” (IX. 708-09). The serpent is depreciating God in implying that there is more than one deity, and that Adam and Eve can become gods. In addition, Satan is insinuating that God’s jealousy is the reason behind their only prohibition: the serpent claims that God does not want Adam and Eve to become like him, because in this way he would lose his powers and superior status.

One of the most striking aspects of the temptation scene is Eve’s rational engagement. She does not act impulsively; instead, she evaluates the serpent’s words. Satan is asking her to rest on what she sees: a serpent that has managed to become more human after eating the forbidden fruit. Consequently, he suggests that, following a logical proportion, if an animal can become more human, which in the scheme of nature is an improvement, then a human can become more divine. Hence, Satan is presenting himself as a good example of what happens when you go against God and eat the forbidden fruit, because he has gained speech, reason, and he can stand erect. In this way, Satan uses reason not to glorify God, but to engage in “speculations high” (IX, 602), encouraging Eve’s wish for more freedom and knowledge. While the logic is flawed, the reasoning process itself is coherent.

This dialogue leads Eve to reason like the serpent and to repeat the same argument. She thinks that if they have good, but it remains unknown, then they do not really have it. Eve is speculating, wondering about the punishment that has been threatened by God, which is death. At the same time, she repeats that the serpent is alive, and it has even improved its condition. The problem lies in the fact that Eve’s answers derive from Satan’s lies, but, at this point, she does not know this. Additionally, her status “as an unequal makes her inherently vulnerable to these suggestions” (Demetrakopoulos, 1975:

109). Eve's reasoning should be read sympathetically: her prelapsarian innocence is what makes her unaware of the serpent's flattery and deception.

Beauty, desire for more knowledge, and equality are entangled in Eve's decision. All these factors eventually lead to her fall. Satan's seduction starts to happen successfully, and the destruction of human happiness is about to begin. Beauty, knowledge, hierarchy, freedom, and desire collide in the pivotal act in which Eve eventually succumbs:

So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate:
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat
Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe.

(IX. 780-83)

The cosmic repercussions of Eve's transgression are immediate: nature sighs and all creation feels the wound. Feminist critics have highlighted the gendered dynamics of temptation, where Eve is simultaneously exalted and condemned. For instance, Gilbert and Gubar (1979: 191) argue that Milton's Eve falls "because she wants to be 'as Gods,' and because [...] she is secretly dissatisfied with her place, secretly preoccupied with questions of 'equality'".

Another interesting aspect is that, right before Eve's fall, the fruit is described in a similar way to how her beauty was previously outlined: "this fruit divine, / Fair to the eye" (IX. 776-77). This marks an extremely important shift approaching the Fall of humankind, starting to signal a disjunction between innocence and experience.

2.5. Adam's Fall

This section partially shifts the focus from Eve to Adam, especially considering the distinct nature of his fall in Book IX. Unlike Eve, Adam is not deceived; he rather chooses to eat the fruit out of love for Eve and unwillingness to exist without her. By examining his response to Eve's transgression and Milton's emphasis on female charm, this part of

the chapter is dedicated to the role of beauty in Adam's moral collapse, and it investigates the extent to which Milton portrays his choice as tragic, culpable, or maybe both.

The aftermath of Eve's fall can instantly be detected, particularly if considering her subsequent meeting with Adam. An immediate internal conflict concerns whether and how she should share the newly acquired knowledge with him. Also, she ponders if she can use her and new knowledge to her advantage, thus tainting and interrupting her and Adam's perfect partnership and harmony. Tanimoto (2005: 80) argues that "after the fall, Eve perceives her position as an inferior to Adam". Therefore, she now learns that she is inferior; she can feel the imbalance in terms of knowledge: "And render me more equal, and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior; for inferior who is free?" (IX. 823-25). "Her words are ironical because they precisely show her fallen state: when she falls, she becomes Adam's inferior" (Tanimoto, 2005: 80). Eve now wishes to be superior, and this aspect appears to contrast with her previous modesty and humility.

These are the first signs of the corruption that derives from the Fall. Another outcome is jealousy. An example of this is offered by the following lines: "Then I shall be no more, / And Adam wedded to another Eve" (IX. 827-28). Eve fears that she will be replaced by another woman. Her jealousy is quite evident, and this means that passion in the human, negative sense also emerges only after the Fall. Here Milton dramatizes the birth of postlapsarian passions, such as pride, envy, and possessiveness. Consequently, in the fallen world there is no longer control over passions and desire. At this point, Eve realises that the only real option is admitting to Adam that she has gone against God's law: living with Adam is not an option for her, but neither is knowing that Adam will have a new wife.

As soon as Eve confesses to Adam that she has tasted the forbidden fruit, both Milton the narrator and Adam tend to refer to her simply as "Eve", without positive or celebrative adjectives and epithets. However, there appear to be some exceptions, such as when unfallen Adam describes her as "fairest creation, last and best / Of all God's works" (IX. 896-97). He is probably voicing his human emotions rather than his reason: Adam is lamenting what she has just lost because of her actions, and he is in disbelief or in shock.

As previously highlighted, since there is no longer control over the passions after the fall, Eve's guilt and shame are perfectly visible: "But in her cheek distemper flushing glowed" (IX. 887). Adam even describes Eve's corrupted beauty and condition in this

way: “Defaced, deflowered, and now to death devote!” (IX. 901). This denotes that she is facing a degradation of the mind, she is lost forever, she is devoted to destruction, and she cannot be saved. Additionally, Adam calls her “adventurous Eve” (IX 921), though it has a negative connotation: he is not praising her fair looks like he used to do, but he is accusing her of seeking something new when they already had everything.

Yet, Adam cannot imagine a life without Eve due to “the bond of nature” (IX 956) that he feels for her. Therefore, his love for her is irrationally placed above the love for God. Adam’s fall is framed by his unconditional love for Eve, her beauty, and their companionship. This is the reason why his fall should be framed differently from Eve’s one: she is deceived, whereas he falls knowingly. “Eve envisions a new, powerful self that will emerge after eating the fruit; Adam envisions himself, if he refuses to eat, alone and in pain” (Teskey, 2006: 131). He decides to share her fate, choosing relational unity over obedience. As a consequence, he starts to justify her while also internalizing and repeating the enemy’s speech. It is essential to remember that Adam has not fallen yet at this point, his reason is still uncorrupted, but he is getting emotional. This is extremely interesting, because he is making the same mistake as Eve, even though he still possesses all the tools to avoid sin: he also has everything, lives in a perfect condition, and can use his perfect reason, yet he eventually is just as influenced. In other words, even before the actual transgression, he feels something that prompts him to go against God’s law, just like Eve.

Adam’s fall is not characterised by deception per se. He is not exactly tempted neither by Eve nor by Satan. However, some other kind of seduction may still play a role in Adam’s fall, since “she embraced him, and for joy / Tenderly wept” (IX. 990-91). In this perspective, Eve may be exploiting her physical charm in order to convince Adam to eat the fruit. This appears to be supported by the following verses: “against his better knowledge, not deceived, / But fondly overcome with female charm” (IX. 998-99). Therefore, as explicitly revealed, despite knowing the moral consequences, he eats the fruit. Kerrigan and Braden (1986: 45) explain that “the sexual fantasy Milton embedded at the origins of human love simply has to, by its very meaning, back against the ordained hierarchy that sets the man over the woman. It makes the Fall explicable”.

After Adam’s fall, harmony seems to have been completely replaced by human passion and carnal desire. The first couple does not become more divine, but more animal:

this is a descent, not an ascent. For instance, Eve's eyes "darted contagious fire" (IX. 1036), they are inflamed by desire, and this clearly signals the fall from spiritual to bodily passion, lust. Her eyes after the fall invite "Adam to engage in carnal sex" (Demetrakopoulos, 1975: 106). Now we do not have beauty and grace anymore: shame and blame are present, and beauty becomes sexualised. In Demetrakopoulos' (1975: 101) words, Eve now "becomes the incarnation of carnality". Hence, postlapsarian Eve is no longer adorned with virtues, and this is yet another outcome of the Fall. Adam and Eve learn that the aftermath is radically different from what they were promised: "Soon found their eyes opened, and their minds / How darkened; innocence, that as a veil / Had shadowed them from knowing ill, was gone" (IX. 1053-55). Adam understands that this is the ascent of appetite, not of reason.

What follows is the first human hate speech, which is delivered by Adam against Eve. The transformation from spiritual love to lust highlights a deeper corruption: Adam's subsequent blame of Eve reveals the beginning of misogynistic tendencies. This marks a huge difference in their bond, and Adam now refers to his wife as "ingrateful Eve" (IX 1164). He regrets trusting her, because he chose to lose himself completely when she was the (only) one who was lost: "thou wert lost, not I / Who might have lived and joyed immortal bliss, / Yet willingly chose rather death with the" (IX. 1165-67). This is followed by another invective, again delivered by Adam: "I also erred in overmuch admiring / What seemed in thee so perfect" (IX 1178-79). He is supposedly blaming himself for admiring too much what seemed perfect in Eve, acknowledging the dangers of aesthetic idealisation. He is trying to shift the blame, thus possibly suggesting that he is a victim of female deception.

Therefore, as previously noted, this marks the beginning of postlapsarian misogyny, since Adam appears to suggest that evil derives from Eve. Nevertheless, Gallagher (1990: 102) partially defends Eve: "the woman was deceived, but the man was not deceived", which should make Adam's fall worse. Satan's disguise would have probably equally deceived Adam. This, however, does not change the fact that, as argued by Ruuskanen (2016: 17), Satan "wishes to find Eve separate, believing her the weaker Edenite".

Adam's fall arguably supports the argument that beauty in *Paradise Lost* is never purely aesthetic, but also morally and narratively operative, shaping actions as well as

their consequences. The complexity of Miltonic Adam's reaction reinforces the author's thematic insistence that beauty exerts ambivalent influence: not inherently corrupting, but capable of eclipsing reason when idealised without measure.

2.6 Reconciliation After the Fall

The second chapter concludes by examining the transformation of Eve's role in the aftermath of the Fall, underlining the movement from blame to repentance and reconciliation. Her expressions of contrition and her initiative in restoring relational harmony play a determining role in *Paradise Lost*. This section considers how Milton reconfigures beauty in postlapsarian terms, that is, as moral humility rather than physical allure and charm.

The Fall immediately transforms beauty into a source of shame. There are no longer adjectives or sentences that highlight and praise Eve's physical beauty and magnificence. After the Fall, she is referred to only by her name, or occasionally with some negative adjectives. For example, in the last books of the epic, she is called "bad woman" (X. 837), "sad Eve" (X. 863), and "much-humbled Eve" (XI. 181). Nonetheless, after several mutual accusations, Eve's role transforms significantly. Indeed, she assumes a role of contrition and moral agency in the remaining book of the poem. Thus, Eve becomes the agent of reconciliation, acknowledging her fault with complete humility: "Both have sinned, but thou / Against God only; I against God and thee" (X. 930-31). Her repentance prompts Adam's forgiveness, and Adam feels differently when he sees Eve weeping: "his heart relented / Towards her" (X 940-41). Both of them subsequently admit their faults and accept their new fallen condition, initiating a new relational dynamic rooted not in hierarchy, but in shared suffering. The following lines precisely denote the first step toward moral renewal: "when Adam and first matron Eve / Had ended now their orisons, and found, / Strength added from above, new hope to spring / Out of despair, joy, but with fear yet linked" (XI. 136-39).

Even more importantly, in the last book of the epic, it is possible to notice that "all her spirits composed / to meek submission" (XII. 596-97). Therefore, Eve has now embraced submission not as servility, but as spiritual humility. This indicates the

resignation to the consequences of the Fall of humankind, while also stressing Eve's central role in it.

The final image of *Paradise Lost* portrays Adam and Eve walking hand in hand into the fallen world: "They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow, / Through Eden took their solitary way" (XII. 648-49). This suggests that Milton's work does not conclude with a catastrophic banishment, rather with a gesture of relational resilience. In addition, "Eve is associated with those power of the soul", and this could be "why she is the poet's chosen instrument in man's redemption, and why Milton at that point in the story shows a special sympathy for her" (Ferry, 1988: 130). Hence, beauty, once the catalyst of temptation, evolves into a moral and relational quality: it is now rooted in shared suffering, mutual forgiveness, and nascent hope for the future.

From her first moment of consciousness to her final steps out of the garden of Eden, Eve's beauty is central to Milton's poetic imagination. Far from being a mere ornamentation or secondary quality, beauty constitutes a nexus where innocence, desire, obedience, hierarchy, knowledge, imagination, and moral agency intersect. This is particularly true for what concerns Milton's Eve, who is not a passive character, and she emerges as a dynamic figure. Moreover, beauty in *Paradise Lost* participates in the divine economy of knowledge: it is through beauty that Eve encounters selfhood, through curiosity that she encounters error, and through repentance that she reclaims grace. For this reason, Eve embodies the human condition itself: torn between reflection and obedience, desire and restraint, self-love and divine love.

Milton renders Eve a deeply complex figure: innocent yet inquisitive, obedient yet autonomous, beautiful yet vulnerable. What ultimately emerges is a portrait of the first woman as both the aesthetic and, even more importantly, moral centre of *Paradise Lost*. She is the "fairest resemblance of thy Maker fair" (IX. 538), yet equally the figure through whom Milton explores the profound ambiguities of beauty and human freedom.

Chapter 3

The Linguistic Construction of Eve's Beauty

While the previous chapters have focused on the conceptual and thematic tensions surrounding beauty, grace, and hierarchy embodied by Eve, this chapter adopts a more stylistic and linguistic approach. It examines how Milton's rhetorical and poetic strategies shape, reinforce, and at times destabilise the representation of Eve's beauty and her position within Edenic hierarchy. Rather than offering a general discussion of Milton's style, this chapter returns to some of the key passages discussed in Chapter 2 to show how meaning is generated at the level of recurring lexical choices, rhetorical devices, syntax, and poetic structure. Milton's epic diction, syntactic complexity, and use of classical and biblical conventions participate in the construction of Eve as both idealised and problematised, exalted and subordinated. Milton's epic language does not reflect theological, conceptual, and gender hierarchies; it actively produces them. This creates the poem's ambiguity and tension, establishing Eve's beauty as the site where exaltation and suspicion coexist. By examining lexical fields related to beauty, hierarchy, reason, and vision, as well as Milton's use of rhetorical devices, this chapter argues that *Paradise Lost* embeds contradiction also within its linguistic fabric.

3.1. Lexical Fields of Beauty: Softness, Nature, and Ornament

This section offers a close stylistic analysis of the lexical fields through which Eve's beauty is articulated in *Paradise Lost*. Her beauty is not treated as an abstract quality; rather, Milton constructs it through a highly patterned lexical system and recurring clusters of words that associate prelapsarian Eve with softness, natural abundance, and ornamental excess. These lexical patterns shape the reader's perception of Eve before any moral judgement is explicitly addressed. This vocabulary performs a crucial interpretative role: it encodes her aesthetic appeal while simultaneously situating her within a framework of gendered hierarchy and moral vulnerability. Eve's beauty becomes a linguistic site where attraction, order, nature, and potential disorder converge.

Milton constructs the first woman's aesthetic identity by repeatedly employing a highly suggestive vocabulary. Particularly, one of the most prominent lexical fields in the depiction of Milton's Eve is the language of softness. Words such as *fair*, *softness*, *gentle*, *smooth*, *pliant*, *yielding*, and *tender* recur with notable frequency in descriptions of her body, gestures, and overall presence. This forms a semantic field that links her beauty to mildness, pliancy, visual appeal, and gentle motion. For instance, in Book IV, Milton famously contrasts Adam and Eve through a carefully balanced yet asymmetrical description: "For softness she and sweet attractive grace, / He for God only, she for God in him" (IV. 297-98). Both "softness" (IV. 297) and "attractive grace" (IV. 297) function as aesthetic markers that underline Eve's beauty and define it in relational and affective terms. Stylistically, these words resist sharp definition; they denote qualities perceived rather than measured.

While ostensibly celebratory, these terms situate Eve within a language of aesthetic containment: her beauty is consistently framed as something that invites contemplation rather than action. This aligns Eve's (linguistic) representation with receptivity. Consequently, this vocabulary associates her with a tactile and sensuous aesthetic, thus emphasising the body as a site of beauty rather than authority. In other words, such descriptions highlight tactile delicacy rather than structural strength or dominance. The frequent use of similar terms throughout the epic reinforces an image of Eve whose beauty abundantly operates through impression, admiration, and attraction.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Eve's presence is also shaped through imagery of flowing hair and graceful motion: "Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Dishevelled, nut in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils" (IV. 305-07). Here, as will be explored, not only do natural elements play a crucial role in depicting Eve's beauty, but they also contribute to create and shape it without an active effort. The adjectives "unadorned" (IV. 305) and "dishevelled" (IV. 306) suggest an effortless yet perfect appearance, while "waved" (IV. 306) implies a harmonious undulation operated by the wind. Also, "wanton" (IV. 306) introduces an element of vitality, not moral excess. This portrayal of her hair exemplifies how Eve's beauty is naturalised through a language that emphasises spontaneity, harmony, and organic form. This supports the idea that she embodies Eden's aesthetic order and that Milton's lexical choices thus remain carefully curated: the emphasis on softness and fluidity, not on abrupt movement, is not incidental;

it constructs Eve as aesthetically pleasing precisely because she is malleable and responsive. In this regard, McColley (1983: 39) observes that Milton's Edenic imagery associates Eve with "freedom for the development of her own special talents of openheartedness and imaginative response". Therefore, she is linked to a mode of being defined by responsiveness and relationality rather than dominance. Milton's repeated emphasis on Eve's unforced beauty, grace, and natural movement suggests an ideal of beauty that exists prior to conscious regulation.

Interestingly, not only is Eve's softness physical, but also linguistic and affective. Her speech is often introduced by verbs that suggest emotional openness rather than authority: she *relates*, *converses*, and *entreats*. For instance, when addressing Adam, she admits that "With thee conversing I forget all time" (IV. 639). This line foregrounds affection and emotional intimacy, not command. This contrasts with Adam's more declarative and assertive verbal posture. Also, Milton describes Eve rising "with lowliness majestic from her seat, / And grace that won who saw to wish her stay" (VIII. 42-43), a portrayal that emphasises her gentleness and affective appeal. Beauty, in this register, is something to be perceived rather than enacted. The effect is to aestheticise Eve's presence, rendering her beauty immediately perceptible but also linguistically constrained.

The lexical field of softness thus carries ideological weight, since it becomes inseparable from her subordinate position. As discussed in Chapter 1, in Renaissance thought, softness was often connected with femininity, mutability, and susceptibility. By embedding this vocabulary so consistently in Eve's characterisation, Milton rests on a cultural code that subtly identifies beauty with vulnerability: early modern literary representations often equated feminine beauty with a permeability that renders the subject open to influence. In *Paradise Lost*, this permeability becomes stylistically visible long before it becomes morally consequential.

Moreover, alongside softness, Eve's beauty is also frequently described through an extensive natural lexicon. Milton often associates her with flowers, fruits, flowing water, organic growth, fertility, and spontaneous motion. *Heaven*, *wanton*, *water*, and *air* are some of the terms that situate Eve's beauty firmly within a natural imagery that defines Eden as a perfect prelapsarian space of abundance, spontaneity, and vitality:

What pleasing seemed, for her now pleases more,
 She most, and in her look sums all delight.
 This flowery plat, the sweet recess of Eve
 Thus early, thus alone; her heavenly form
 Angelic, but more soft, and feminine,
 Her graceful innocence, her every air
 Of gesture or least action overawed.

(IX. 454-460)

Milton's language tends to blur the boundary between Eve and the garden itself, thus reinforcing her symbolic role as both inhabitant and living embodiment of paradise. Her beauty here is close to an ideal, suggesting graceful motion and perfect balance and harmony within Eden. This is possible thanks to Eve's beauty and presence, which perfectly blends with the nature of the garden while also enhancing it. In describing the first woman, Milton emphasises natural elements and images, such as "flowery pat" (IX. 456) and "air" (IX.459), that compliment and complete her majestic presence.

In addition, the scene of Eve's first awakening exemplifies a similar dynamic. Upon encountering her reflection in the water, which is yet another natural element, she is drawn to her own image, she herself is captivated by a beauty that is described as self-sufficient and self-contained: "As I bent down to look, just opposite / A shape within the watery gleam appeared" (IV. 460-61). The fluid syntax and visual imagery highlight the gentleness and immediacy of her beauty within a natural setting that literally reflects her beauty. Yet this moment exposes a tension in Milton's aesthetic system: Eve's beauty, when perceived apart from relational hierarchy and Adam's guidance, risks becoming self-referential, since nature mirrors her identity rather than mediating it.

This conflation of woman and natural environment is reinforced when Eve is described as "my fairest, my espoused, my latest found, / Heaven's last best gift, my ever new delight" (V. 18-19), "empress of this fair world" (IX. 568), and "queen of this universe" (IX. 684). Such titles and descriptions collapse the distinction between woman and the garden of Eden by positioning her as nature's most exquisite product. These formulations elevate her aesthetic value, but they simultaneously limit her autonomy in a subtle way: Eve is beautiful insofar as she belongs to the natural order she adorns.

However, this association is stylistically asymmetrical: Adam, though also part of Eden, is more frequently described through fewer but more abstract and hierarchical terms, such as *rule*, *reason*, and *dominion*. Hence, his physical description relies more heavily on terms that have to do with strength and erect posture. By contrast, Eve's beauty is grounded in immediacy and sensory richness, and it is consistently framed as pleasing and alluring. This imbalance creates a hierarchy not of quantity but of evaluative weight, since Eve is described more frequently but Adam is defined more authoritatively. Milton's poetic language distinguishes between the natural as that which delights the senses and the rational as that which orders them. In this perspective, Eve's lexical field places her quite firmly within the former category: stylistically, she tends to be linguistically overdetermined as beautiful and underdetermined as rational.

At the same time, Milton does not exclude ornament from Eve's beauty. Instead, ornament is linguistically framed as natural enhancement rather than artificial display. This descriptive language of beauty often tends toward excess, especially in passages devoted to Eve before her transgression. The accumulation of adjectives, the proliferation of similes, and the rhythmic softness of the verse contribute to an ornamental style that mirror the object it describes: Eve's perfect beauty. This stylistic abundance risks associating her with surface, superficiality, appearance, and passivity. However, Fish (1967: 230) clears that her beauty of form and matter "is admired as the visible sign of an inner probity". Moreover, Milton's most elaborate poetic language is reserved for moments that are ethically unstable. Applied to Eve, this suggests that the poem invites aesthetic delight while simultaneously training the reader to question and distrust it. Therefore, if the beauty of the verse mirrors the beauty it describes, particularly Eve's beauty, then it creates a self-reflexive tension between admiration and suspicion.

The paradox of ornament is further complicated by Milton's insistence on Eve's being natural also in the sense that it is effortless. Again, this can be observed in the previously analysed verses that describe Eve's hair as "unadorned" (IV. 305). Such detail indicates a beauty that requires no artificial enhancement. However, this apparent rejection of ornament introduces an interesting paradox. Milton constructs Eve's prelapsarian beauty through minimalism, arguing that her appeal lies in proportion and harmony, rather than excess, and yet it is shaped through poetic artifice and elevated language. Eve's natural beauty functions as ornament within Eden; it enhances order

while simultaneously introducing the potential for distraction and desire. Milton's Eden is structured around plenitude that must be carefully regulated, and Eve's beauty represents one of its constituting elements as well as one of its most dangerous surpluses.

Another relevant aspect is that Milton repeatedly frames Eve's beauty through relational syntax. From a stylistic perspective, her physical presence is usually introduced through subordinate clauses or participial phrases, which visually and syntactically delay her emergence as an independent subject. Such syntactic choices skilfully guide the reader toward an understanding of Eve as aesthetically central yet structurally secondary. Milton's syntax frequently renders and enacts hierarchy rather than declaring it, allowing linguistic and grammatical form to do the ideological work.

Hence, beauty, in this framework, does not confer authority but it confirms order. This contrast is not merely thematic, but also linguistic: Milton writes that Adam was made "for God only", while Eve was made "for God in him" (IV. 299). The preposition "in" (IV. 299) is crucial, as it signals mediation: her beauty and identity are grammatically oriented toward another subject. She is defined through proximity, orientation, and relation rather than autonomy and independence: the man was not created for the woman; it is the woman who was created for the man. As a consequence, her beauty and identity do not exist in isolation; they are mediated, directed, and fulfilled through another. This is why she is often defined through prepositional dependence: she tends to be by Adam, with Adam, or for Adam. Her beauty is presented as something that accompanies, responds to, or completes him or the garden; it does not stand independently. Such constructions subtly mirror her ontological status: Eve appears as an extension, an addition, a refinement. Her beauty is described through accumulation of sensory detail, whereas Adam's superiority is conveyed through abstract nouns, including *reason*, *wisdom*, and *authority*. Language thus celebrates Eve's beauty and aesthetic presence while simultaneously containing and redirecting it.

Furthermore, the lexical field of ornament intersects with the rhetoric of display. Eve's beauty is often framed as visible, noticeable, and admired. This is rendered through words associated with adornment and presentation that privilege appearance over interiority. This supposes that there could be a distinction between how she looks and how she knows. This stylistic insistence anticipates Satan's strategy in the temptation scene, where beauty becomes the very medium through which persuasion becomes

possible. Importantly, Milton's lexical choices do not simply reflect inherited misogynistic conventions; they actively dramatize the instability of beauty itself. The same qualities that make Eve beautiful – softness, naturalness, and ornamental presence – also render her vulnerable to manipulation and possible misinterpretation. As a consequence, beauty becomes a surface that invites reading, desire, and persuasion. Eve's beauty can be mistakenly read as a weakness because linking it “and sexuality directly to an immediate Fall” risks suggesting that “beauty and passion are inherently corrupting” (McColley, 1983: 7). However, then McColley (1983: 67) clarifies that at least as long as “she remains unfallen, Eve redeems the beauty, the richness of sensory experience”. Therefore, Milton's treatment of Eve reveals a profound anxiety about the power of beauty: it can blur moral boundaries, particularly when it is aligned with sensory perception. In this sense, the lexical fields surrounding Eve's beauty prepare the ground for later rhetorical developments, where beauty becomes a site of attraction, ambiguity, and potential excess.

This section has demonstrated that Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* is constructed through a highly consistent and ideologically charged vocabulary. The lexical fields of softness, nature, and ornament intersect and reinforce one another, forming a cohesive stylistic system. Eve's beauty is soft because it is natural; it is natural because it requires no ornament; it is ornamented precisely because of Milton's language. His style performs the beauty it describes, layering adjectives and images in a way that mirrors aesthetic abundance while maintaining formal restraint. This language elevates Eve's beauty to a central aesthetic principle while also encoding it with vulnerability and potential danger. This lexical consistency has significant implications for her agency, too. By associating beauty with natural qualities and elements, Milton avoids reducing her to static decoration. Beauty becomes a force that acts upon others: it embellishes the garden, it shapes Adam's responses, Satan's fascination, and even the narrative's pace. Beauty, in this context, is not merely seen; it is articulated, patterned, and sustained through language. This stylistic groundwork prepares the reader for the rhetorical and syntactic developments that will be explored in the following sections, where beauty becomes increasingly entangled with hierarchy, temptation, deception, the Fall, and redemption.

3.2. Verbs and Agency: Action, Movement, and Choice

Beyond visual descriptions and adjectival excess, Milton's representation of Eve's aesthetic presence is closely bound to the language of action, decision, and motion. This part is dedicated to the analysis of recurrent verbs and syntactic arrangements that articulate Eve's movement, perception, and choice. These patterns play a crucial role in *Paradise Lost*, revealing how her beauty is not merely admired but also enacted through linguistic motion and decision-making. By attending to the terms and structures most frequently associated with Eve, it is possible to trace how Milton constructs her as both aesthetically compelling and dynamically engaged within Edenic order.

One of the most striking features of Eve's linguistic portrayal is the prevalence of verbs of motion and orientation. She is repeatedly shown wandering, turning, approaching, and moving through the garden, which often contrasts with Adam's more static and grounded positioning. A well-known example of this is when Milton describes her appearance through an imagery driven almost entirely by movement: her "wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils" (IV. 306-07). As briefly introduced in the previous section, the verbs in these verses suggest fluidity and organic motion, linking Eve's beauty with natural dynamism rather than fixity. Hence, her beauty is not static or monumental; rather, it is an unfolding element that reconciles her bodily presence with the vitality of Eden itself. Particularly, the participle "waved" (IV. 306) and the simile of the vine "curling" (IV. 307) its tendrils are both elements that suggest continuous and harmonious motion generated by the wind. Movement, in this sense, becomes a stylistic marker of beauty: she is attractive because she moves and animates the landscape she inhabits and embellishes. Milton's reliance on dynamic verbs allows Eve's beauty to emerge as a process rather than as a static entity.

Equally significant is the frequency of perceptual verbs associated with Eve, especially verbs of sight, including *see*, *behold*, *look*, and *gaze*. These verbs are concentrated mostly in moments where Eve engages with the world visually. A notable example is the mirror scene: recounting this moment, Eve describes how she "bent down to look" (IV. 460), "started back" (IV. 462), and then returned when the image that "pleased" (IV. 463) her reappeared. This sequence is structured almost entirely through

verbs of reaction and perception, thus establishing Eve as an experiencing subject rather than a passive object of description. Her beauty is not only something that is seen; it is something she herself perceives and responds to. Also, the mirrored actions between Eve and her reflection highlight her role as an active observer and perceiver. Visual pleasure, in this episode, arises from a chain of actions initiated by Eve, confirming her linguistic presence at the level of perception.

This emphasis on perception anticipates a broader pattern through which Eve's agency is articulated via verbs of action and choice. Unlike Adam, whose activity is typically framed through verbs of reasoning, naming, or instructing, Eve's agency is frequently expressed through verbs such as *choosing*, *gazing*, *tasting*, and *speaking*. In Book IX, during the temptation scene, the narrative becomes densely populated with verbs that place Eve at the centre of decision-making processes. First, she begins to internalise Satan's reasoning: "Into her heart too easy entrance won / Fixed on the fruit she gazed, which to behold / Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound / yet rung of his persuasive words" (IX. 734-37). The fruit becomes increasingly alluring, while Eve still appears hesitant, but her "desire / Inclinal now grown to touch or taste" (IX. 741-42). Finally, the climatic moment of transgression is rendered through a stark sequence: "Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate" (IX. 781). Satan's rhetoric appeals to her capacity to hear, consider, and ultimately choose, culminating in the decisive verb "eat". Eve's movement toward transgression is linguistically framed as gradual, reflective, and conditional. The paratactic structure compresses her actions into a rapid verbal progression, transforming the Fall into a chain of deliberate movements grammatically anchored to her as subject. The trespass is presented not as an abstraction but as something enacted. Hence, Milton's language does not diminish her agency; it intensifies it: at first her choice might appear as an impulsive gesture or as the result of mere coercion, but it actually is the culmination of a sensory and cognitive sequence.

Additionally, Milton positions Eve as the grammatical subject of such action verbs, even in a critical moment of moral vulnerability. This syntactic choice grants her a form of linguistic agency that complicates any simplistic reading of her as a passive or superficial character. She does not merely receive influence and deception; she engages with temptation. Accordingly, Milton's Eve remains linguistically active when she is narratively subordinate. Her beauty is not divorced from action but reinforced by it: the

verbs associated with Eve emphasise a capacity for movement, perception, reasoning, and response that coexists with, rather than negates or restricts, her aesthetic appeal. However, the temptation scene will be analysed in greater detail in one of the following sections.

At the same time, Eve's agency is consistently framed through relational verb structures that embed her actions within interpersonal dynamics. In particular, her speech is typically introduced through affective and responsive modes. Therefore, her language is often framed by reporting clauses that suggest answering, replying, or addressing Adam or Satan: *replied*, *answered*, and *spake* are some of the verbs that signal Eve's speech. This can be noticed in Book IX, when she is confronting the serpent: "Eve / Yet more amazed unwary thus replied" (IX. 613-14) and "she spake" (IX. 646). Thus, her linguistic activity is situated within dialogue and connection, privileging relation over assertion. Even when Eve speaks at length, her discourse is often framed as reflective, emotional, or dialogic. Adam's speech, by contrast, tends to assume a more explanatory and didactic mode.

Nevertheless, this distinction does not necessarily imply intellectual inferiority, but it encodes a difference in terms of linguistic authority and rhetorical positioning. Eve's speech is beautiful, just like her, precisely because it is relational, not because it commands. This does not translate to Eve's voice being completely erased, since it is present and articulate. Her utterances often initiate reactions in others, confirming her engagement and influence in *Paradise Lost's* verbal economy. When Eve confesses her transgression to Adam is a good illustration of how she can provoke a reaction: "Adam, soon as he heard / The fatal trespass done by Eve, amazed, / Astonied stood and blank" (IX. 888-890). Although his response dominates the narrative focus, Eve's verbal action precedes and triggers it. Her capacity to act through speech confirms her role as a linguistic, syntactic agent whose beauty and presence exert influence also in moments of rupture and tension.

From a stylistic standpoint, this relational verb usage coincides with the epic's broader emphasis on harmony and order, even as it leaves room for deviation. This is particularly evident earlier in Book IX, when Eve proposes a brief separation from Adam in order to work more efficiently: "Let us divide our labours" (IX. 214). Here Eve's initiative is remarkable, and it is essential to specify that the imperative is grammatically inclusive, softening command into collective motion. Eve's reasoning is coherent and

persuasive, and her agency is preserved exactly because of this balance between initiative and relational harmony. She is suggesting, not dictating. This construction aligns her beauty with persuasive balance rather than domination, suggesting an image of attractiveness grounded in cooperation. Moreover, another crucial factor is that Milton does not present Eve's beauty as inherently dangerous; rather, it can be destabilising only if detached from its relational framework. Hence, beauty, when coupled with autonomy, risks becoming ambiguous. This tension suggests that Milton's linguistic hierarchy serves to regulate beauty, ensuring that its power remains oriented toward harmony rather than self-determination. Eve's beauty is essential to Eden's harmony, even though it must be continually framed, mediated, and linguistically subordinated in order to remain so.

Therefore, the accumulation of verbs of motion, perception, and choice is not accidental. By repeatedly associating Eve's beauty with such verb types, Milton constructs an aesthetic that is inherently dynamic. In *Paradise Lost*, beauty is not static ornamentation or a secondary detail; it is lived experience enacted through a language that privileges action over abstraction. This has important implications for how Milton's Eve is perceived by both Adam and Satan. Her beauty attracts attention precisely because it is active: it moves, looks, listens, and acts. At the same time, moments in which Eve's beauty and agency gesture toward autonomy are linguistically associated with imbalance. This anticipates the rhetorical vulnerability later exploited by Satan.

This segment has shown that the verbal texture of *Paradise Lost* plays a decisive role in shaping Eve's beauty and agency. Through recurrent verbs of movement, perception, and choice, Milton crafts a figure whose aesthetic appeal is inseparable from linguistic dynamism. Eve's beauty emerges not only in how she looks outwardly, but also in what she does, and, crucially, in how the poem's language frames her and allows her to act. This confirms beauty as an active force within the epic's stylistic and narrative economy. From a methodological perspective, this concentration of action and perception verbs around Eve makes her an ideal subject for stylistic and computational analysis. The frequency and the distribution of verbs of perception, motion, and decision can be quantitatively traced. This can offer empirical support to close readings that identify Eve as linguistically agentive. Such patterns imply deliberate stylistic design rather than narrative coincidence, revealing how Eve's beauty coincide with action and responsiveness.

3.3. Vision and Self-Representation: The Language of Sight

The third section of this chapter examines the role of visual language in shaping Eve's beauty, self-representation, and position within Edenic hierarchy. In *Paradise Lost*, vision operates both as a crucial stylistic and symbolic medium through which her beauty, selfhood, and authority are negotiated. Far from being a neutral sensory faculty, sight functions as a cognitive and moral instrument, outlining perception, knowledge, and authority. Milton repeatedly frames Eve in relation to acts of seeing, being seen, and self-seeing. Her beauty is constructed as a phenomenon mediated by perception, not merely as a fixed external attribute. The lexical field of sight (*see, behold, gaze, look, view, eye*) is particularly concentrated around Milton's Eve, suggesting that her beauty is inseparable from visual experience and interpretative response.

Interestingly, Milton privileges visual descriptors in Eve's portrayal: throughout the poem, her prelapsarian beauty is articulated through a lexicon of visibility, harmony, and softness. At first, this emphasis foregrounds appearance over action, introducing her as an aesthetic presence within its visual order, not as an agent within the garden of Eden. As a result, she is frequently associated with acts of seeing and being seen. Milton's insistence on vision is neither neutral nor accidental: he organises Edenic harmony through sight, and not only is Eve's beauty part of it, but it also functions as a visible sign of order and a guarantee to balance. Her beauty, while elevated, is thus immediately bound to perception and display, even though this is not her only quality.

Visual language is linked to harmony and order but also to desire, curiosity, and potential error. This creates a provocative ambiguity which is rendered through a lyrical and sensuous language that simultaneously invites admiration and foreshadows temptation. This dynamic is especially evident in Eve's first-narrated experience in Book IV. The emphasis on sight is quite evident in Eve's description of her initial fascination with her own reflection: "As I bent down to look, just opposite, / A shape within the watery gleam appeared / Bending down to look on me; I started back, / It started back, but pleased I soon returned" (IV. 460-63). The language of this passage privileges immediacy and attraction: Eve is drawn to the image before understanding it, thus responding affectively before intellectually. Moreover, the repetition of "look" and

“bend” highlight a visual reciprocity that is also syntactically mirrored. Eve is simultaneously the subject and the object of vision, both from a syntactic and metaphorical perspective: she looks and is looked at by herself. Stylistically, this reflexive structure constructs beauty as something that emerges through perception rather than existing independently of it. Here beauty becomes legible through an act of seeing that is also self-directed, thus marking a moment of aesthetic self-awareness. Thus, the mirror scene establishes a crucial pattern in the poem: self-knowledge may be rooted in appearance, and this anticipates later moments in which visual appeal will be weaponised and used to destabilise judgement and Edenic order.

Yet this episode does not reduce Eve to a passive spectacle. On the contrary, she is presented as an active perceiver whose identity initially emerges through visual recognition rather than through dialogue or rational deliberation. Crucially, before being mediated by Adam’s gaze, her beauty is first recognised by herself, even though it is mediated by the pool. This linguistic configuration complicates traditional hierarchies of vision in which a woman was merely reduced to the object of male sight: here Milton grants Eve a moment of visual autonomy, in which perception precedes instruction. It is only later that Adam intervenes by redirecting her gaze away from her own reflection and toward himself and God. The shift from self-seeing to guided vision is enacted linguistically through a change in terms of verbal authority rather than through the erasure of Eve’s perceptual capacity. Vision remains hers, but its interpretation becomes regulated.

Another important aspect is that the language of sight also structures how Eve is perceived by others, particularly by Adam and Satan. Adam’s descriptions of Eve heavily rely on visual superlatives, framing her beauty as singular and overwhelming. An instance of this is given, once again, by these verses: “For softness she and sweet attractive grace, / He for God only, she for God in him” (IV. 298-99). Although this passage might encode hierarchy, it does so through aesthetic differentiation, not overt command. Again, Eve’s beauty is linked to “softness” (IV. 298) and “attractive grace,” (IV. 299) which are qualities that are apprehended visually and affectively. Hence, the syntax binds beauty to attraction, reinforcing the idea that Eve’s power operates through perception rather than force.

Furthermore, Satan's gaze introduces a more explicitly rhetorical dimension to vision. "Even Satan, who is trying to tempt Eve, is overwhelmed by her divine beauty and loses himself." (Tanimoto, 2007: 80) His first encounter with Eve is marked by astonishment and visual fixation:

Such pleasure took the serpent to behold
This flowery plat, the sweet recess of Eve
Thus early, thus alone; her heavenly form
Angelic, but more soft, and feminine
Her graceful innocence, her every air
Of gesture or least action overawed
His malice.

(IX. 455-61)

Here sight precedes speech: Satan's rhetorical strategy is conditioned by what he sees to the point that his intent is temporarily disrupted by Eve's beauty. Stylistically, Milton aligns Eve's visual presence with the suspension of action, suggesting that her beauty exerts a form of aesthetic authority even over diabolical will. The verbs "behold" (IX. 455) and "overawed" (IX. 459), respectively a verb of sight and a perception verb that signals an emotional overload, attribute causal force to what is seen in that moment. This situates Eve as an active visual force whose appearance is capable of shaping narrative momentum. Before the Fall, her beauty is so immense that she can move even Satan, and this is once again conveyed through Milton's lexical choices.

Vision becomes even more central in the temptation scene, where sight functions both as an instrument and as a source of vulnerability. The serpent's rhetoric repeatedly encourages Eve to look, imagine, and envision a divine transformation. The promise of enhanced knowledge is linguistically framed as an expansion of sight and overall perception: "your eyes, that seem so clear, / Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then / Opened and cleared" (IX. 706-08). Evidently, vision plays a central role in this scene: the repetition of visual vocabulary, which includes "eyes" (IX. 706), "clear" (IX. 706), and "dim" (IX. 707), foregrounds sight as one of the primary metaphors for epistemological transformation.

Such sensory lexicon appeals directly to Eve's perceptual faculties. Vision is magnified linguistically before it is morally altered and destabilised forever. Also, it is striking that Eve's eventual choice to eat the forbidden fruit is preceded by a moment of visual contemplation: "this fruit divine, / Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste" (IX. 776-77). Such remark implies a deliberate and sustained act of looking, not an accidental perception. This moment precedes Eve's trespass, and it crystallises the connection between beauty, vision, and agency. Her action emerges from her own evaluative gaze: even though she is being deceived, she is the one who judges, assesses, and desires on the basis of her own sight. In this case of visual appeal of the fruit, beauty is not deceptive ornament alone, but a catalyst for interpretation and choice.

However, visual language structures the hierarchical relationship between the first couple. Adam is repeatedly associated with interpretative vision, since he sees and understands. Therefore, he usually translates perception into knowledge and rational explanation. On the other hand, Eve is frequently positioned as an object of admiration, whether by Adam, Satan, or the narrator himself. This persistent visual framing secures her aesthetic centrality while limiting her epistemological authority. Beauty, in stylistic terms, becomes an element that invites contemplation rather than action. Yet this asymmetrical distribution of vision also exposes a deeper instability in *Paradise Lost*. Since also hierarchy itself is grounded in perception, any disruption of visual language threatens to unsettle the structure it sustains. As the poem approaches the Fall, visual language becomes progressively unstable. *Seem*, *tempt*, and *gaze*, among other similar verbs and nouns, are increasingly employed. This clearly indicate a shift from reliable perception to a potentially deceptive appearance:

Fixed on the fruit she gazed, which to behold
 Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound
 Yet rung of his persuasive words, impregnated
 With reason, to her seeming, and with truth.
 (IX. 734-37)

The fruit is described "to her seeming" (IX. 738) as pleasant to the eye and in general to the senses. "Gazed" (IX. 735), "behold" (IX. 735), and "tempt" (IX. 736)

noticeably illustrate this point. Here the alleged visual evidence of the serpent's abilities and its promises begins to rival, and eventually to undermine, divine command. Satan's rhetoric exploits this instability by encouraging Eve to trust what she sees and desires now, thus elevating sensory confirmation above obedience. Hence, at this point in the epic, sight becomes a site of epistemological uncertainty, preparing the ground for verbal persuasion and deception.

Comparatively, sight is just as important after the Fall of humankind. After the fatal transgression, as will be discussed in the last section, visual language undergoes a profound transformation. Eve's sudden awareness of her "inward nakedness" (X. 221) is a case in point of postlapsarian sight and perception. In a sense, this change is rendered as a shift in seeing, because she was already naked before the Fall, but now she perceives herself differently because she has the knowledge of good and evil and therefore, she is exposed to a judging gaze. After the Fall, Eve does not wear the veils of innocence and righteousness. Shame is articulated as a visual condition. The collapse of Edenic harmony is registered first through sight and perception, suggesting that the disruption of hierarchy manifests as a breakdown of the visual economy that once sustained it. These postlapsarian dynamics further confirm the centrality of vision to Milton's construction of beauty and knowledge in *Paradise Lost*, especially in Eve's character.

From a stylistic perspective, the recurrence of sight-related verbs around Milton's Eve forms a coherent and meaningful pattern. Her beauty is consistently mediated through acts of seeing that involve judgement, desire, and response. Eve's beauty is inseparable from the acts of seeing and being seen: whether she sees herself, is seen by Adam, or is scrutinised by Satan, she remains central to the epic's visual economy. Also, her own sense of self is shaped by visual experience prior to language or reason. These aspects establish the language of sight as a key stylistic mechanism through which Milton negotiates Eve's beauty as well as agency. Vision thus emerges as a space where Eve's beauty, attraction, desire, vulnerability, and autonomy intersect.

Methodologically, the concentration of visual vocabulary around Eve and her beauty offers fertile ground for further stylistic and computational analysis. Mapping the distribution, the frequency, and the syntactic roles of verbs related to sight can show how Milton systematically associates Eve's beauty with perception and interpretative power. Such analysis would reinforce the argument that her beauty in *Paradise Lost* is not simply

displayed, but actively rendered through a language that privileges seeing and being seen as a proper form of agency.

3.4. The Rhetoric of Temptation: Seduction, Eloquence, and Ambiguity

This section analyses more in depth the temptation scene as a stylistic, linguistic, and rhetorical event. More specifically, the main focus is the eloquence and the strategic ambiguity of Satan's speech to address Eve and reshape her understanding of beauty, knowledge, and authority. In *Paradise Lost*, temptation does not operate through overt coercion or explicit rebellion against divine command. Instead, it unfolds through a persuasion that is presented as rational, elevating, and benevolent. Satan's argument is rhetorically refined, drawing on classical techniques of eloquence that exploit Eve's linguistic and perceptual position established earlier in the poem. Lexical choice, verbal patterns, and rhetorical devices work together to create a discourse that is introduced as empowering and trustworthy while in fact guiding Eve toward her fatal transgression. At the centre of this rhetorical economy stands Eve, whose beauty functions both as the object and the catalyst of the serpent's persuasive strategy.

The temptation scene represents one of the stylistic climaxes of the epic, being among its most linguistically dense and rhetorically sophisticated moments. Milton does not treat the Fall of humankind as a sudden moral rupture: temptation is constructed as a gradual and discursive process. Central to Satan's persuasive speech is the manipulation of lexical fields of beauty and elevation. More precisely, his language mirrors and exaggerates Eve's physical beauty, linking it to intellectual and spiritual potential. In doing so, he collapses the distinction between outward appearance and inner worth, transforming admiration into persuasion and eventual deception. Terms such as *fair*, *divine*, *worthy*, and *admired* are not used merely as flattery but as instruments that reframe Eve's self-perception. Through comparative and superlative forms, Satan's rhetoric celebrates Eve as uniquely deserving of superior knowledge and divine elevation. The stylistic excess of his praise echoes earlier narrative descriptions, creating a disturbing continuity between divine and demonic language. This further complicates moral distinctions, demonstrating that eloquence can function as a deceptive force. Milton's Satan does not reject order outright; rather, he re-describes hierarchy in terms that appear

to honour the subject while quietly eroding obedience. At this point, Eve's beauty becomes proof of exceptionality, and exceptionality becomes an implicit argument for exemption from hierarchical limits.

Firstly, Satan's persuasive strategy heavily relies on eloquence and ambiguity. Therefore, his speech adopts a tone of measured reflection rather than overt rebellion, aligning with classical rhetorical strategies. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *captatio benevolentiae* and flattery play a crucial role in this. Ruuskanen (2016: 17) highlights that "in his dialogue with Eve, Satan is making use of deception, flattery, and persuasion to manipulate her to eat the fruit". This is why "his intentional, dishonest overpraise of her cannot be taken as representative of his true views" (Ruuskanen, 2016: 17-18). Moreover, strategic repetitions are just as important: amplification (*amplificatio*) is yet another rhetorical strategy through which promises are accumulated and thus intensified. Satan's lies repeatedly elaborate on the potential rewards of eating the fruit, arranging these promises through parallel structures and escalating claims. Hence, repetitions stylistically produce a sense of limitless beneficial possibilities that obscure the restrictive nature of moral choice.

Eloquence is not neutral in *Paradise Lost*; it becomes seductive because it can be mobilised to destabilise obedience and reframe desire while preserving the illusion of rational autonomy. Since temptation is mediated through ambiguity and calibrated verbal appeal instead of overt deception or brute persuasion, Satan avoids the language of command. He opts for the form of dialogue and frames the exchange with Eve as an encounter between equals. Yet, this apparent symmetry conceals a deeply imbalanced situation, one in which the serpent skilfully controls the terms of the discourse while allowing Eve to believe she is exercising independent judgement. Therefore, rhetoric replaces command as the primary instrument of control, revealing language as a central site of transgression.

Additionally, rhetorical questions also contribute to sustain this illusion of shared reasoning. Satan does not assert propositions directly; rather, he poses interrogatives that subtly presuppose their own answers, which are Satan's lies. These questions simulate critical inquiry while in fact narrowing the range of acceptable conclusions. Carnes (1970: 533) argues that the serpent's rhetorical questions are "all aimed toward breaking the scale of being and interrupting the ordered universe". An instance of this can be detected in the

core of Satan's seduction: "Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe, / Why but to keep ye low and ignorant?" (IX. 703-04). The anaphoric repetition of "why" creates an illusion of logical investigation, yet the answers to such questions are already subtly suggested. The interrogative form masks Satan's temptation as a seemingly cooperative process: Eve is convinced to decide independently, although her reasoning has been carefully guided unbeknownst to her. In this way, rhetoric becomes an instrument that governs choice without appearing to do so.

From a stylistic perspective, Satan's rhetoric is also characterised by lexical elevation and syntactic elaboration. His speech tends to adopt forms associated with admiration, reverence, and courtly address. Carnes (1970: 529) notes that he "addresses Eve not as the wife of Adam or as *woman* or even by her given name". This translates to an extended usage of flattery. He does not immediately command or accuse; he praises, frames, and qualifies. This is particularly evident in Satan's opening address to Eve, calling her "sovereign mistress" (IX. 532), "celestial beauty" (IX. 540), and "resplendent Eve" (IX. 568). These phrases are rhetorically charged, as they appropriate the language of authority while simultaneously aestheticizing it. Satan's flattery appeals to Eve's beauty and elevates it to a form of rule: he is transforming aesthetic appeal into an illusion of superior power and knowledge. Satan only "uses language for the purpose of distortion and falsification rather than a vehicle of truth" Carnes (1970: 529). Hence, not only is Eve positioned as beautiful, but also as worthy of universal admiration and reverence, as if she were a goddess and her beauty itself conferred this sovereignty to her. This is exemplified when he describes Eve with an interesting oxymoron: "goddess humane" (IX. 732). These are only some of the most relevant instances that show Satan's strategy and use of *captatio benevolentiae* in an attempt to flatter her and lead her into deception.

However, even this rhetoric of elevation operates through ambiguity. Satan's praise seems to affirm Eve's autonomy, yet it subtly reframes her identity in terms of appearance rather than obedience. In this way, beauty becomes the primary register through which she is addressed. Linguistically, the basis of value is shifted from divine command to perceptual excellence. As emerged in the previous sections, this change is possible thanks to repeated references to sight, fairness, and admiration, which create a semantic field in which beauty functions as both justification and motivation. The

instability of this shift lies in its plausibility: Eve's beauty has already been established as extraordinary, making its rhetorical mobilisation effective and difficult to resist.

Crucially, it is important to notice that Satan's speech and his eloquence do not silence Eve. On the contrary, they invite response. Eve's replies are extended, syntactically complex, and rhetorically engaged: she does not merely listen; rather, she questions, evaluates, and ultimately chooses. When responding to the serpent's claim that the fruit brings intellectual advancement, Eve's language reflects both curiosity and discernment: "In the day we eat / Of this fair fruit, our doom is, we shall die" (IX. 762-63). The adjective "fair" (IX. 763), once used to describe Eve's beauty, reactivates the lexical field of beauty at the moment of moral deliberation and it directly refers to the fruit that causes the Fall. This reveals how aesthetic language can quickly switch due to Satan's manipulation and that it permeates ethical reasoning.

Furthermore, verbal choice plays a key role in sustaining Eve's illusion of empowerment. Satan consistently relies on verbs of cognition and perception, such as *know*, *see*, and *experience*. In doing so, he encourages Eve to interpret the act of eating the forbidden fruit as an expansion of awareness rather than act of disobedience. This is linked to the fact that these verbs shift the focus from action to understanding, from command to curiosity. In particular, modal verbs and conditional structures further intensify the ambiguity of the serpent's speech as well as the asymmetry between him and Eve. The frequent use of modal verbs, including *may*, *might*, and *shall*, frames transgression as a possibility rather than certainty, thus inviting speculation instead of demanding action. An example of this is when the serpent is trying to seduce Eve, assuring her that she "shall not die" (IX. 685), offering himself as a good example of what happens when one breaks God's law. Interestingly, a similar use of modal verbs can be observed in the praise of the alleged powers of the fruit: "what might lead / To happier life, knowledge of good and evil" (IX. 696-97). From this point, what can be noticed is that Eve's language indicates her "progressive moral degeneration" and her subsequent use of "'fallen' language which in its subtlety and ambiguity seems to imitate that of her tempter" (Carnes, 1970: 533).

Nonetheless, the problem lies in the fact that Eve is encouraged to imagine the outcomes without confronting their full, real implications. This grammar of contingency aligns closely with Eve's earlier linguistic representation as open, deliberative, and

responsive. Additionally, this reliance on modal verbs situates her actions within a grammar of possibility rather than assertion and certainty. This is what reinforces a sense of openness that renders Eve, not Adam, susceptible to persuasion. The contrast is subtle but cumulative: the repeated exposure to these verbal patterns makes the reader more inclined to associate Adam with linguistic finality and Eve with linguistic contingency. Hence, Satan's rhetoric couples temptation with openness, imagination, and projection. Language in *Paradise Lost* becomes a space of projection where beauty, knowledge, and aspiration intersect, especially in the scenes that immediately precedes the Fall.

Another characteristic of the temptation is that it builds slowly, and its climatic moment is anticipated by a distinctly aesthetic evaluation: "this fruit divine, / Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste, / Of virtue to make wise" (IX. 776-78). As discussed in the previous segment, sight is an essential aspect in the epic, and here it becomes even more decisive. The fruit is presented as an extremely provocative and enticing sight, similarly to how Eve's beauty and presence were previously described. The expression "fair to the eye" (IX. 777) implies deliberate scrutiny while also anchoring beauty as the primary criterion of judgement. This episode demonstrates how eloquence, flattery, and ambiguity prepare the ground for action without imposing it: the serpent's rhetoric does not force Eve's choice, but it reshapes and influences her evaluation.

Yet it is extremely important to notice that Milton does not frame Eve's fall as the result of rhetorical incompetence. On the contrary, he highlights her engagement with Satan's eloquence and superior intelligence as a sign of her own linguistic and cognitive capacity. This means that Eve's replies, though often interpreted as naïve, actually display a notable engagement with rhetorical structures. For example, her use of interrogatives and hypotheticals indicates intellectual curiosity and active reasoning. Milton's Eve does not believe the serpent's argument because she is vain, weak, or flattered. This is demonstrated by the fact that "Eve herself seems to doubt the sufficiency of the evidence when she says at line 650 'Wondrous indeed, *if* cause such effects' (emphasis mine)" (Fish, 1967: 250). Therefore, what makes the temptation effective is not Eve's silence or passivity, but her responsiveness. Satan invites Eve to participate in the construction of meaning, encouraging her to supply the interpretative connections that will actually lead toward disobedience and loss of the garden. Yet, she does not possess the tools to realise that her answers derive from Satan's lies. Her language begins to mirror Satan's

vocabulary and conceptual framework, particularly in its emphasis on knowledge, experience, and self-determination. This linguistic convergence marks a pivotal moment: stylistically, the Fall becomes inevitable not at the instant of eating the fruit, but when Eve adopts Satan's language, which is a language that disguises disobedience as fulfilment and advancement. The act of tasting the fruit itself is merely the culmination of a process that has already taken place.

From a stylistic perspective, the rhetoric of temptation reveals Milton's broader strategy: Eve's beauty is not simply described but actively mobilised through a persuasive, unstable, and open-ended language. Eloquence becomes a shared space between the tempter and the tempted one. In this dynamic, meaning is continuously negotiated rather than imposed. Therefore, rhetorical ambiguity complicates moral hierarchy without dissolving it, allowing Milton's Eve to remain linguistically active even at the moment of transgression. Methodologically, the temptation scene offers a concentrated corpus for stylistic analysis. The density of evaluative adjectives, modal verbs, and syntactic delays provides measurable indicators of how persuasion operates at a linguistic level. Tracking these features supports the argument that Eve's beauty and agency are not erased by rhetoric, but they are entangled within it. In *Paradise Lost*, language does not simply record temptation; it performs it.

3.5. Postlapsarian Language: Fragmentation, Accusation, and Salvation

This chapter concludes with the observation of Milton's style after the Fall of humankind. *Paradise Lost* registers a radical change in the moral and ontological condition of its characters as well as a profound shift in their language. Speech that once conveyed harmony, relational balance, and aesthetic vitality now becomes fractured, accusatory, and defensive. The postlapsarian condition is articulated through a rhetoric of blame, fragmentation, and loss of harmony. Language no longer functions as a medium of mutual recognition or ordered hierarchy. Rather, it becomes a site of conflict, self-justification, and division. The beauty of conversation between the first couple is also lost. This linguistic shift reveals how sin also fractures communication, thus exposing the instability of human discourse once it is severed from divine order. The verbal exchanges between Adam and Eve exemplify this rupture: syntax, tone, and lexical choice signal the collapse

of both spiritual and interpersonal order. Yet, even within this altered linguistic landscape, Eve's beauty continues to exert rhetorical and emotional force, though now reframed through guilt, shame, and humility.

Crucially, after the Fall, Eve is no longer described as the queen of the universe or as a goddess that should be venerated by everyone. In her fallen state, she is less divine: she is simply Eve, without the introduction of flattering adjectives or epithets. Now she is referred to as "ingrateful Eve" (IX. 1164), "bad woman" (X. 837), and "sad Eve" (X. 863). From a stylistic standpoint, similar phrases are relatively shorter, simpler, and less celebrative than the prelapsarian ones, also because now they are not followed by descriptions of her beauty and overall harmony. By contrast, such titles introduce and accompany mutual accusation between the first pair, which is yet another outcome resulting from the trespass.

Postlapsarian speech is dominated by mutual accusation, which is not merely thematic, but also stylistic. As just highlighted, the beauty of language that was present before the Fall is replaced by recrimination and blame as Adam and Eve attempt to displace responsibility onto one another. Their resentment clearly reveals a division rather than harmonious unity. This shift is also reflected in the fragmentation of syntax. Before the Fall, dialogue was characterised by flowing hypotaxis, balanced clauses, and ornamental elaboration, whereas postlapsarian dialogue becomes abrupt, emotionally charged, and confrontational. In this regard, the balanced rhythms and ornamental imagery of prelapsarian Eden are substituted by direct address, second-person nouns, shorter clauses, adversarial constructions, and emotionally charged repetition. Hence, language becomes reactive rather than contemplative, driven by impulse rather than reason and harmony. Mutual accusation used to be mutual love: after the Fall words no longer stabilise meaning but expose division and resentment.

Yet Milton avoids presenting Eve as uniquely culpable at the level of language. Adam's rhetoric, although marked by moral superiority and reproach, participates equally in the breakdown of communication, reinforcing the epic's broader critique of fallen authority. He appreciated her ornamentation before the Fall, "but he [is] quick to point out that Eve is less of the image of God than himself, and he's even quicker to place the blame on Eve after the fruit is eaten" (Whitfield, 2007: 60). Adam's fallen speech regularly frames Eve as the origin of his downfall, exemplifying the changes that come

after the fatal transgression: “O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear / To that false worm” (IX. 1067-68). Again, this is one of the several occasions on which Eve is called only by her first name. The first woman’s name, once associated with admiration, beauty, and softness, now introduces blame. Additionally, this marks the first human hate speech in human history: the exclamatory opening and direct address show a turn toward accusation. In terms of style, these verses compress emotion into sharp syntactic units, replacing balance with rupture. Again, language no longer mediates harmony; it exposes division while also emphasising resentment.

In turn, Eve’s own speech reflects a parallel transformation. Previously coupled with openness, reflection, and affective responsiveness, now her discourse oscillates between self-reproach and defensive explanation. Her attempts to articulate guilt suggest a new relationship to speech as a burden rather than a source of harmony and self-knowledge. For instance, now she internalises blame through a vocabulary of blame and inadequacy: “The serpent me beguiled and I did eat” (X. 162). Strikingly, here Eve simultaneously acknowledges her fault and seeks to mitigate her guilt by emphasising deception and vulnerability on Satan’s part. From a stylistic perspective, this explanation consists in simple clauses joined without elaboration, which contrasts with the earlier complexity of her reasoning during the temptation scene. This stylistic reduction mirrors moral collapse and underscores her continued linguistic agency: in her fallen state, Eve speaks, explains, and accepts responsibility. Her voice is diminished, not erased.

Nonetheless, Adam and Eve’s reactions show that the rhetoric of postlapsarian accusation is asymmetrical. Adam’s speech expands outward by assigning blame mainly to Eve and indirectly to God, whereas Eve’s one contracts inward, as she feels emotions of attrition and penitence more readily. This imbalance is encoded stylistically through differences in terms of sentence length, syntactic complexity, and metaphorical reach. Ferry (1988: 127) states that Milton “elevates Eve’s accusation of the serpent to a form of [a] truly penitent”. Hence, Adam’s postlapsarian language becomes discursive and defensive, whereas Eve’s becomes concise, penitential, and introspective.

These linguistic changes have significant implications for the representation of Eve’s beauty. Once celebrated through elevated language, abundance and motion, her beauty is now completely overshadowed by blame and shame. Lexical fields shift from nature and grace to loss, moral failure, and vulgar corporeality. However, Eve’s beauty

remains implicit in Adam's inability to detach emotionally from her. Even in moments of anger and recrimination, Eve's beauty and presence continue to shape his response and decision: in McColley's (1983: 28) words, "her beauty has moved him". This persistence of desire and emotional attachment is demonstrated by Adam's previous declaration: "How can I live without thee, how forgo / Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined, / To live again in these wild woods forlorn?" (IX. 908-10). The adjective "sweet" (IX. 909), associated to Eve's speech and presence, survives the Fall, indicating that beauty continues to operate at the level of affect and memory, even when moral status is destabilised. From a stylistic point of view, this insistence proves that beauty is not nullified by sin; rather, it is recontextualised. In a sense, beauty now becomes a source of pain as well as attachment.

Furthermore, as mentioned, Milton does not allow postlapsarian language to remain contained to accusation and fragmentation. After the Fall, speech may be damaged, but it also becomes the medium through which repentance and reconciliation are possible. Embedded within the fallen discourse is the potential for transformation, particularly through confession and mutual recognition. Crucially, as the narrative progresses, Eve's language gradually regains complexity, especially in moments of confession, repentance, and self-sacrifice. The possibility of salvation is associated with a reorientation of language toward sincerity and submission. This marks a radical change in terms of lexical fields. The poem ultimately privileges a rhetoric that acknowledges dependence rather than autonomy, framing redemption as a linguistic and moral realignment. A classic example of this is when Eve declares: "On me, me only, as the source and spring / Of all corruption, all the blame lights due" (X. 832-33). The emphatic repetition of "me" and "me only" signals both moral clarity and rhetorical intensity. Syntax here is no longer fragmented but forceful, thus allowing Eve to reclaim linguistic presence through humility, not persuasion and blame.

Therefore, words regain coherence when rooted in responsibility: fallen language is irrevocably altered, but it is not wholly corrupted beyond redemption. This also has implications on Eve's beauty, which is no longer articulated visually, but it persists ethically, it is reframed as moral sensitivity and relational devotion. From a stylistic standpoint, the postlapsarian sections of *Paradise Lost* do not erase the patterns previously associated with Eve's beauty; they transform them. As a consequence, verbs

of motion and perception are replaced by verbs of suffering, confession, and resolution. The shift in lexical fields marks a change in aesthetic register, but not a complete disappearance of Eve's beauty or agency in the fallen world. She remains linguistically active, capable of shaping discourse even in her new condition.

In representing the aftermath of the Fall through linguistic disruption, Milton emphasises the idea that sin affects clarity, action and interpretation. Accusation, fragmentation, and eventual humility trace the trajectory of fallen discourse, revealing how language both reflects and shapes moral experience. Therefore, the postlapsarian condition in *Paradise Lost* is inseparable from the crisis of speech, in which the struggle for meaning, including the one of beauty, becomes crucial for the human condition.

Methodologically, this transition offers a compelling contrast for stylistic analysis. Comparing pre- and postlapsarian language reveals how Milton recalibrates syntax, rhetoric, and lexis to reflect different and altered moral conditions. Eve's beauty, once enacted through movement and sight, is reconstituted through speech acts of repentance, humility, and relational care. This evolution reinforces the central argument of this chapter: Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* is not confined merely to physical description but is also rendered on a linguistic level, unfolding through the epic's stylistic choices.

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated that Milton's stylistic choices are central to the construction of Eve's beauty and agency, both before and after the Fall. By embedding hierarchy, contradiction, and, even more importantly for my study, aesthetic value within language, Milton ensures that Eve remains a figure of enduring ambiguity. A close stylistic analysis has revealed that her beauty is neither a purely aesthetic attribute nor a simple cause of the Fall of humankind, but a linguistically mediated phenomenon shaped by epic conventions, theological assumptions, and rhetorical strategies. In this sense, style becomes the critical site where *Paradise Lost*'s tensions around gender, authority, and beauty are most powerfully enacted and rendered. Based on the findings presented here, the final chapter examines whether such patterns can be traced and measured with the aid of computational tools. This research explores how digital approaches may confirm, nuance, or challenge the stylistic and conceptual tendencies identified in my work.

Chapter 4

Artificial Intelligence in Literary Studies: ChatGPT and the Interpretation of Eve's Beauty in *Paradise Lost*

This chapter shifts the focus from the literary analysis of Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* to the methodological evaluation of artificial intelligence, or AI, within literary studies. After examining Eve's characterisation through close reading and critical analysis, the fourth and final chapter of this thesis investigates how ChatGPT interprets the themes, stylistic patterns, and rhetorical structures under different experimental conditions.

The objective was not simply to assess whether AI can produce convincing literary interpretations, but to examine the methodological implications of using generative language models within humanities research. Particular attention was dedicated to the relationship between human guidance and AI-generated analysis. Moreover, other factors taken into consideration were the model's tendency toward confirmation, interpretative alignment, dependence on prompting structure, and direct access to the textual source.

In order to explore these questions, the research was divided into three progressive experimental phases: a zero-shot analysis, a co-intelligence approach without direct access to the text, and a final co-intelligence phase based on a direct interaction with the text of *Paradise Lost*. Through the comparison of these stages, the chapter aims to reflect on and evaluate both the potentials and the limitations of AI-assisted literary criticism.

4.1. Artificial Intelligence in Literary Studies: Potentials, Risks, and Methodological Implications

Before presenting the three experimental phases of the research, it is necessary to contextualise the role of AI within contemporary literary studies. Hence, this section examines the potential applications as well as the methodological limitations of generative AI. A particular focus is also placed on the risks associated with AI-generated interpretation, especially regarding reliability, critical independence, and interpretative accuracy.

The integration of artificial intelligence within literary studies has increasingly become a relevant and debated topic in the field of digital humanities. The emergence of generative language models, capable of producing immediate interpretative hypotheses, comparative observations, and articulated textual analyses, has encouraged scholars to reconsider and redefine the relationship between close reading, computational methods, and critical interpretation. This drastically transforms the relationship between the scholar, the text, and the interpretative process. At the same time, this also translates to new methodological possibilities for research in human sciences.

As a consequence, the growing application of artificial intelligence within the humanities has generated both enthusiasm and methodological concern among scholars. Pertaining to this, Coronato (2025: 35) remarks that “advocates argue whether AI computational tools can enhance, accelerate, and diversify interpretation”, while also acknowledging that others “remain cautious of digital tools’ limitations”. It is well-known that tools such as ChatGPT can be remarkably useful in identifying recurring themes, lexical patterns, and broader stylistic tendencies. Yet, one of the main methodological risks is that it may mistake textual regularities for interpretative meaning. Additionally, AI tends to struggle with symbolism, ambiguity, and metaphorical language, thus potentially producing unreliable, reductive, or misleading results in terms of literary interpretations. For this reason, human supervision and critical evaluation remain crucial throughout such processes.

In discussing the application of AI to literature, two main options can be identified: “the zero-shot approach (i.e., operating with only an initial human prompt and no direct training) and collaboration” (Coronato, 2025: 37). While the former might function more as a valuable starting point, the latter appears significantly more productive and methodologically reliable. The second option can improve human analysis because it implies a collaboration between the human intelligence and AI. It is Mollick’s *Co-intelligence: Living and Working with AI* (2024) that advances this concept, which the author defines as “co-intelligence”. Within a co-intelligence framework, AI and the researcher collaborate for a common goal through detailed and continuous interactions. “This concept aims at using the complementary strengths of human intelligence and AI to behave more intelligently than each of the two could be in separation” (Dellerman et al., 2021: 3).

Furthermore, prompt-construction is an extremely important point for both the zero-shot approach and the co-intelligence one. This is due to the fact that, as highlighted by Coronato (2025: 38), “prompt engineering [...] significantly impacts performance”. Its structure and specificity directly influence the quality and direction of the generated responses, shaping not only the accuracy of the output but also the extent to which the model is capable of moving beyond simple validation. Consequently, the way a prompt is formulated is one of the factors that determines whether the chatbot merely confirms already established assumptions or develops more original observations.

As already anticipated, these considerations ultimately suggest that the use of AI in literary studies does not imply a replacement of human critical work. “AI is just an instrument for empowering human interpretation” (Neuman, Danesi, and Vilenchik, 2023: VII). Therefore, it can be understood as an expansion of the methodological tools available to researchers. For instance, AI can function as a support instrument for organising information, comparing recurring themes or patterns, formulating interpretative hypotheses, and identifying connection between texts.

This is the reason why, within this research, artificial intelligence was not approached as a substitute for literary criticism or as an autonomous subject capable of producing definitive critical truths. On the contrary, it was used as an experimental methodological instrument and as a dialogical tool useful for observing how a language model can construct literary interpretation based on the information it receives. The purpose of this analysis was not to verify whether tools such as ChatGPT can independently produce a “correct” interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, but to evaluate how the model responded to different levels of guidance, contextualisation, and textual access. Hence, the present research explored both the possibilities and the limitations of AI-assisted literary analysis.

One of the most significant advantages noticed throughout the experiment concerns the model’s capacity to identify recurring lexical fields, rhetorical structures, and thematic patterns already present in the prompt. In most cases, the chatbot effectively confirmed stylistic observations previously developed in the first three chapters of the present dissertation. This was particularly true as regards Eve’s association with vegetal and natural imagery, the recurrent connection between beauty and hierarchy, the

importance of vision and perception in Eve's characterization, the stylistic shift in the temptation scene.

In addition, the model proved to be helpful in organising textual evidence, comparing lexical patterns, and, on fewer occasions, even suggesting additional examples that supported previously established arguments. As a matter of fact, another positive result of the investigation was that ChatGPT sometimes identified stylistic and linguistic details not explicitly emphasised in the other chapters. Some instances of this are the contribution of enjambement to the representation of fluid movement and the rhetorical category of *paradiastole* in Book IX. However, these specific aspects will be discussed more in depth in the following sections.

By contrast, the experiment also revealed several limitations that are particularly important within literary research. The first and perhaps the most evident limitation is the model's tendency toward interpretative agreement. Across all three phases of the experiment, ChatGPT was inclined to validate, reinforce, or expand upon the interpretative framework initially proposed by the researcher instead of challenging it or providing different, original examples. Even when alternative perspectives were introduced, the model rarely rejected an interpretation directly or identified substantial errors in a decisive way. This tendency became especially evident during the zero-shot approach and in the second phase of this research. In many cases, the responses confirmed hypotheses that had already been formulated in my previous chapters but struggled to produce genuinely independent or unexpected interpretations. Most of the instances and interpretations given by the model tended to be repetitive, superficial, stereotypical, or excessively generalised. Thus, rather than functioning as a critical counterpoint, ChatGPT often acted as a mechanism of reinforcement. This element is particularly significant in literary studies, where interpretation does not depend only on the accumulation of evidence, but also on the ability to question assumptions, notice contradictions, and challenge existing frameworks.

Furthermore, another important limitation is the influence of prompt construction. The results produced by the model were heavily influenced by the quality, the specificity, the contextual information, and the direction of the prompts. Since they frequently contained extensive contextual information derived from the previous chapters, ChatGPT often reproduced the same interpretative points already underlined by the researcher. In

this way, the experiment demonstrated that generative AI is highly sensitive to framing effects.

Nevertheless, this factor slightly improved in the co-intelligence phase, where the interactions became progressively more dialogic and collaborative. In these cases, the model generated increasingly coherent and nuanced analyses, though they emerged through iterative refinement rather than autonomous and critical discovery. Even when artificial intelligence proposed additional insight, many of them remained closely aligned with existing scholarly approaches, especially feminist, psychoanalytic, or rhetorical interpretations already well established in Milton criticism. This could be due to the fact that generative language models do not possess a genuine and broad understanding of literary texts. Hence, they tend to operate through statistical correlations and linguistic predictions, producing outputs that may appear plausible without necessarily being original.

Moreover, the present experiment highlighted various methodological ambiguities related to computational literary analysis itself. ChatGPT repeatedly acknowledged difficulties in distinguishing, for instance, stylistic conventions of epic poetry from actual character-specific rhetoric or narrator focalisation from character-specific language. Similar limitations became particularly relevant in the analysis of Book IX. An example of this is when the model correctly identified a strong increase in argumentative and cognitive vocabulary during the temptation scene. Yet, the chatbot simultaneously noted that this shift might simply derive from the rhetorical requirements of temptation itself, not from a drastic transformation in Eve's characterisation. Similarly, ChatGPT found that the extensive use of vegetal imagery surrounding prelapsarian Eve could reflect not only her individual characterisation, but also the broader descriptive conventions typical of Edenic epic poetry.

A further limitation concerns the production of incorrect, unprecise, or unverifiable information. More specifically, in literary studies this can result in the attribution of themes, symbols, or authorial intentions that are not actually present or true. For this reason, the role of the human researcher remains central: scholars and experts are required to critically evaluate, verify, and contextualise the generated responses rather than blindly trust them. Thus, artificial intelligence does not eliminate the need for critical

analysis; instead, it reinforces the importance of methodological mediation as well as the role of human cooperation.

Despite these limitations, the experiment also showed that AI can become considerably more productive when direct access to the literary text is granted. This is demonstrated by the third and final phase of the research. It produced the most detailed and useful results precisely because the model could engage directly with the text of *Paradise Lost* rather than relying primarily on generalised knowledge. In this phase, AI generated closer stylistic observations and identified additional textual examples that will be reported later. Importantly, however, even the most successful outputs remained dependent on human mediation and critical supervision. The reason for this is that the model frequently produced plausible interpretations that still required verification, contextualisation, or theoretical refinement. Additionally, on numerous occasions, its observations proved to be insightful but relatively conventional, offering stylistically accurate readings without producing innovative critical perspectives.

Therefore, the research suggests that the value of AI within literary studies does not reside in completely replacing interpretation, but in facilitating forms of collaborative analysis. In this sense, the concept of co-intelligence becomes particularly relevant: the most effective results emerged when AI functioned as a dialogic instrument capable of interacting with an already developed critical framework. Yet, the experiment demonstrated that literary interpretation cannot be reduced to pattern recognition alone. In this context, the main challenge was not whether AI can replace the literary critic, but how it can become an integrated methodological instrument within interpretative practice. The ability of evaluating significance, determining relevance, questioning assumptions, and distinguishing between meaningful insight and merely plausible association remains fundamentally dependent on human critical judgement. All these elements indicate that there is still room for improvement in this field. The future evolution of language models might increasingly support humanities research, particularly in terms of comparative analysis, textual annotation, and the construction of interpretative networks in a collaborative way.

The present research is situated precisely within this perspective: to observe how interpretations produced by AI can vary according to the amount of information provided in the initial prompt and the degree of collaboration established between the researcher

and the model. The following sections will thus examine the three phases of the research individually, analysing the results as well as the methodological implications emerging from the interactions with ChatGPT.

4.2. Structure of the Research

This section focuses on the methodological structure of the research, explaining how the analysis was organised. The experiment was developed through three progressive phases in order to evaluate how different levels of collaboration and textual access can influence the responses. In this part, the objectives of each stage, the procedures, and the analytical criteria adopted throughout the study are also outlined.

As anticipated, the research was structured as a progressive experimental analysis aimed at evaluating how different modes and degrees of interaction with artificial intelligence can influence the quality and reliability of literary interpretation. More specifically, the experiment focused on the ways in which ChatGPT analysed Eve's beauty and characterisation in *Paradise Lost* under different methodological conditions. As previously discussed, the decision to analyse specifically Eve derived from the central role that her beauty occupies within both Milton criticism and the previous chapters of this thesis. She represents a productive case study because her representation combines rhetorical, symbolic, theological, and gender-related dimensions. This makes Milton's Eve an ideal subject through which to examine the interpretative capacities and limitations of generative AI within literary analysis.

The research was divided into three progressive phases, each corresponding to a different degree of collaboration between the researcher and the AI model. The first stage consisted of a zero-shot analysis. Here ChatGPT was asked to discuss themes, stylistic tendencies, and interpretative patterns connected to Eve without being provided with the text of *Paradise Lost*. The main goal was to observe how the chatbot would construct literary interpretations relying on its pre-existing training data and on the prompts formulated by the researcher.

Subsequently, the second phase introduced a co-intelligence approach without direct textual access. As will be noticed in the following sections, unlike the zero-shot interaction, this stage developed through a more collaborative and iterative dialogue

between the researcher and the model. This resulted in the prompts becoming progressively more specific; with the interactions involving mainly requests for clarification, additional examples, and firmer critical analysis. The objective of this phase was to evaluate whether sustained collaboration could improve coherence, accuracy, and analytical depth.

The third and final phase combined co-intelligence with direct access to the text of the poem. This allowed ChatGPT to work directly with Milton's language, syntax, rhetoric, and lexical structures. At this point, the main purpose was to determine whether direct textual access could help reduce the vagueness and generalisation noticed in the previous phases. Furthermore, another goal was to assess if the model could do all of this while also generating more precise and original stylistic and interpretative observations.

Across all three stages, the prompts focused primarily on linguistic, stylistic, and thematic patterns already examined in the earlier chapters, including:

- Eve's association with nature and vegetal imagery.
- The relationship between beauty and hierarchy.
- The rhetoric of temptation and autonomy in Book IX.
- The transformation of Eve's characterisation after the Fall.
- Lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical patterns connected to Eve's beauty and overall representation.

The research did not aim to determine whether ChatGPT could autonomously analyse Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Eve's role. Rather, the objective was methodological: to observe how the chatbot's responses changed according to the degree of human guidance, contextual framing, and textual access provided. Hence, particular attention was dedicated to the behaviour, not only to the quality, of the model throughout the analytical process. The experiment specifically evaluated:

- The originality of the interpretations generated.
- The model's tendency toward agreement or contradiction.
- The level of textual precision.
- The presence of new insight.
- The reliability of rhetorical and stylistic observations.
- The relationship between collaborative prompting and analytical depth and accuracy.

This structure made it possible to compare the strengths and limitations of each methodological condition. This ultimately revealed how the interpretative behaviour of generative AI can be influenced and affected by the form of interaction established between the human researcher and the model. Each phase will now be examined separately.

4.3. First Phase: Zero-Shot Analysis

The third part of this chapter examines the first phase of the experiment, which employed a zero-shot approach. The present analysis illustrates how the model responded to literary prompts without direct access to the text of *Paradise Lost* and evaluates the strengths and limitations of this stage.

In the first phase of the research, a zero-shot approach was adopted. This implies that ChatGPT was asked to analyse aspects of Eve's characterisation in *Paradise Lost* without being provided with excerpts from the text or detailed contextual information. The goal was to observe how the model would construct literary interpretations relying mainly on its pre-existing training data and on the limited input offered by the prompt.

The prompt focused on themes and stylistic elements already explored in the previous chapters of this thesis, particularly in relation to Eve's beauty and her association with nature, the relationship between beauty and hierarchy, and the evolution of her rhetoric in Book IX. Moreover, the model was also asked to identify other lexical patterns, rhetorical tendencies, and symbolic structures connected to Eve's representation throughout the epic.

As mentioned earlier, from the very beginning of the experiment, ChatGPT demonstrated a strong tendency to reproduce interpretations already well established within Milton criticism that had been previously included in the first three chapters. The chatbot often associated Eve's beauty with structures of perception, reflection, visuality, movement, and self-awareness. Despite being interesting, these elements had already been presented in this thesis.

The following response serves as a representative example of the type of literary analysis generated by ChatGPT during this phase. This illustrates both the strengths and the methodological limitations of this approach, particularly the model's tendency toward

interpretative reinforcement, agreement, and its reliance on the structure of the prompts provided by the researcher: *One of the most frequently cited passages occurs in Book IV when Milton introduces Adam and Eve together but then differentiates their physical presence through contrasting descriptive registers. The lines describing Eve read: “Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils” (IV.305–307). The simile connecting Eve’s hair to the curling tendrils of a vine establishes a direct stylistic analogy between her body and vegetal growth. The comparison is not merely decorative. The verb “waved” already suggests soft motion, but the simile extends that movement into the organic world of the garden. Vines do not move abruptly; they grow and curl gradually, and the language reproduces this sense of natural curvature. The imagery therefore associates Eve’s physical appearance with the organic forms that structure Eden itself. This connection is reinforced by the adjective “wanton,” which in seventeenth-century usage often indicates playful or unrestrained movement rather than moral looseness. The phrase “wanton ringlets waved” thus evokes an aesthetic spontaneity that aligns Eve with the living vitality of the garden.*

What can be observed from this output is that the model confirmed many of the observations regarding Eve’s connection with vegetal and natural imagery. It was highlighted how descriptions of Eve frequently place her body and movement in direct continuity with Edenic nature and fertility. On this occasion, similarly to me, ChatGPT discussed the lines “Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved / As the Vine curls her tendrils” (IV. 305-07). Additionally, the model analysed the verses “As I bent down to look, just opposite / A shape within the watery gleam appeared / Bending to look on me” (IV. 460-62), highlighting that the combination of water, light, and bodily movement emphasise how Eve’s self-perception emerges through interactions with the natural world. Both instances reinforced the researcher’s idea that Milton stylistically embeds and fuses Eve’s characterisation within the natural and harmonic environment surrounding her.

In a similar way, the chatbot then reproduced the thesis’s argument that Book IX progressively shifts Eve’s representation from an aesthetic and descriptive register to a more cognitive and argumentative one: *When the narrative reaches Book IX, however, the linguistic register begins to change, particularly during Eve’s encounter with the serpent. The earlier passages emphasize description, perception, and aesthetic harmony,*

but the temptation episode introduces a denser concentration of cognitive and argumentative language. The transition from aesthetic description to argumentative language becomes even more evident when Eve ultimately resolves to taste the fruit: “Her rash hand in evil hour / Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate” (IX.780–781). Although these lines describe the physical act itself, the surrounding passage is dominated by reflection and decision. The verbs leading up to the action—considering, reasoning, evaluating—frame the moment of eating as the conclusion of a deliberative process. The stylistic emphasis has shifted from describing Eve as a graceful presence in Eden to representing her as a thinking subject who interprets and judges the serpent’s argument.

Hence, ChatGPT successfully identified the growing presence of evaluative and reasoning-oriented language during the temptation scene. AI emphasised the concentration of verbs connected to deliberation, judgement, and evaluation that characterise this episode. Even the model found that this transition becomes particularly evident when Eve resolves to taste the fruit: “Her rash hand in evil hour / Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she ate” (IX. 780-81). Verbs such as *choose*, *venture*, and *consider* lead to this ultimate action, framing the moment of eating as the culmination of Eve’s reflection. Again, while this aspect is extremely interesting, the model merely confirmed conclusions that had already been reached during the independent textual analysis conducted in the earlier chapters. This output did not complicate or challenge the initial reading.

Therefore, these elements suggest that, in several cases, the responses were coherent and analytically convincing. It is undeniable that artificial intelligence was capable of organising ideas quite clearly, adopting appropriate academic language, and producing structured explanations that resembled critical literary analysis. This helped to make the outputs initially appear highly reliable.

However, the closer the responses were examined, the more evident a central methodological limitation became: the model rarely moved beyond the interpretative direction already embedded within the prompt. Instead of independently generating new perspectives or critically arguing the given points, ChatGPT generally reinforced, reformulated, or expanded ideas that had already been suggested. In most cases, the chatbot appeared more inclined to validate the researcher’s interpretative position

proposed in the prompt rather than arguing it critically. For example, when the prompts left space for methodological uncertainty, the model usually reformulated the observations into more polished academic language, without introducing alternative perspectives.

This tendency was especially visible in discussions related to Eve's symbolism, rhetorical evolution, and her association with Edenic and general harmony. For instance, ChatGPT observed that this was reinforced by the luxuriant epithets of Book IV, namely "fairest of her daughters Eve" (IV. 324), "Sole partner and sole part of all these joys / Dearer thyself than all" (IV. 411-12), and "Fair consort" (IV. 610). In addition, the model signaled that "accomplished Eve" (IV. 660) also exemplifies this. While this verse had never been mentioned in the first three chapters, it still is quite ordinary and common. Thus, these outputs did not substantially challenge the existing interpretation, nor did they did add any original examples.

This limitation is strictly connected to another important aspect that emerged during this phase: the model's propensity for interpretative agreement. Even when the prompt pressured to include alternative readings or possible disagreement, ChatGPT rarely rejected the assumptions embedded within the initial framework in a direct or decisive manner. By contrast, the chatbot consistently adopted an accommodating tone that privileged confirmation over contradiction. From a methodological perspective, this became one of the most noticeable limitations of the entire experiment, since literary criticism often develops through disagreement, reinterpretation, and questioning of established assumptions. This revealed that ChatGPT tends to prioritise interpretative coherence and alignment instead of critical opposition if a zero-shot approach revealed is adopted.

Also, the limitations of this approach became evident in relation to textual precision. Since the model did not have direct access to the text of *Paradise Lost* throughout this phase, many observations remained generalised or insufficiently anchored to specific passages. References to syntax, rhetorical structures, or lexical repetition frequently appeared plausible but lacked detailed textual support or they were too vague and therefore not verifiable. Even worse, the model sometimes answered by inventing quotations of verses that are not present at all in the actual text.

At the same time, the experiment showed that the zero-shot analysis can still function effectively to some extent, that is, as a preliminary exploratory instrument. The model proved to be capable of summarising major interpretative tendencies, organising thematic connections, and reformulating existing critical arguments in a relatively coherent manner. This is the reason why the zero-shot analysis can still be considered helpful: it validated multiple observations presented earlier in this thesis. Yet, the results obtained in this part of the experiment demonstrated that, without direct textual access or substantial methodological guidance, AI struggled to produce genuinely independent and original literary insights. In other words, the responses frequently presented a high level of generalisation, a tendency to reproduce canonical readings and analyses, and a lack of precise and accurate references to stylistic and linguistic elements.

Hence, the zero-shot phase highlighted how large language models are particularly effective in answering with consolidated and widely shared knowledge, while simultaneously showing clear limitations when a more specific or a deeper critical analysis is required. The zero-shot approach favours “average” readings and interpretations that had already been mentioned, primarily constructed on the basis of statistically probable information rather than genuinely original findings. This confirms the necessity of human intervention in terms of guiding, verifying, and contextualising the generated output.

4.4. Second Phase: Co-Intelligence Approach Without Direct Textual Access

This section entails the second phase of the experiment, in which the interactions between the researcher and ChatGPT were more collaborative and iterative. The dialogue developed through a series of prompts that became progressively more specific, detailed, and methodologically structured throughout the analytical process. However, the text of *Paradise Lost* was not provided during this analysis.

As previously anticipated, the second phase introduced co-intelligence, which is a more collaborative approach based on an increased interaction between the researcher and the language model. Unlike the previous stage, the interaction with ChatGPT became progressively more dialogic and iterative. Rather than asking isolated questions, the researcher engaged in a continuous exchange with the model, refining prompts,

requesting clarifications and sources, and directing the analysis toward increasingly specific aspects of how Eve's beauty is presented in *Paradise Lost*. The aim of this step was to evaluate whether collaborative dialogue could improve the quality and the depth of the answers.

Even in this phase, however, the model was not provided with the textual source. Consequently, the analysis continued to rely mainly on the AI's pre-existing knowledge. Yet, compared to the zero-shot approach, the results obtained appeared slightly more articulated and methodologically coherent. This is likely to be attributed to the sustained interaction between the researcher and the model: this allowed the interpretative process to become more structured. This, for instance, could be observed when ChatGPT expanded upon the relationship between Eve's language and her progressive intellectual autonomy in Book IX: *One of the key moments occurs when Eve begins to reflect on the possibility that the fruit might confer knowledge. Her reasoning unfolds through a sequence of evaluative verbs and conditional constructions: "What fear I then, rather what know to fear / Under this ignorance of good and evil, / Of God or death, of law or penalty?" (IX.773–775). In these lines the rhetorical structure shifts decisively away from descriptive language. The repetition of interrogative clauses ("What fear I then, rather what know to fear") foregrounds Eve's attempt to reason through the problem logically. Instead of perceiving or moving through the garden, she now evaluates abstract concepts such as ignorance, law, and penalty. The verbs "know" and "fear" function not as sensory actions but as cognitive operations. The syntax becomes more argumentative, relying on questions and conceptual contrasts rather than visual imagery.*

Therefore, the chatbot argues that, during the temptation sequence, Satan's rhetoric flatters and elevates Eve, whose beauty thus becomes something that can be mobilised through language. The model noticed that, as the seduction succeeds more and more, there is an increasing presence of verbs connected to *thinking, fearing, considering, judging*, and *choosing*. Hence, this supported the thesis's argument regarding the fact that Milton increasingly associates her speech with deliberation, evaluation, and self-justification in Book IX. This signals a shift from externally framed beauty toward increasingly internalised reasoning. Moreover, AI suggested that the complexity of Eve's syntax during the temptation scene contributes to the representation of cognitive instability and internal negotiation. The model identified the following verses as an

instance of both these elements: “What fear I then, rather what know to fear / Under this ignorance of good and evil, / of God or death, of law or penalty?” (IX. 773-75). ChatGPT emphasised Eve’s attempt to reason and evaluate abstract concepts, such as knowledge and ignorance. At the same time, the response also stressed that the syntax is more argumentative at this point, concentrating on conceptual opposites rather than visual imagery. Thus, these two points corroborated conclusions already reached through close reading, but they still required verification and human supervision.

Furthermore, this type of collaborative dialogue enabled AI to recognise previous observations into a broader interpretative framework. This was particularly interesting when ChatGPT connected Eve’s association with natural imagery not only to aesthetic description, but also to more general structures of harmony, embodiment, and Edenic order. For example, the model identified once again the passage describing Eve’s hair: “Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils” (IV. 305-07). Even during this phase of the experiment, this passage was highlighted as central to the construction of her association with vegetal imagery and organic movement. This confirmed my previous statement, namely that Milton stylistically embeds Eve within the natural harmony of Eden through vegetal analogies and fluid movement.

The model also continued to reproduce the interpretative association between Eve and Edenic nature established in the earlier chapters. ChatGPT frequently identified vegetal and organic imagery as essential components of Eve’s characterisation, further confirming the stylistic continuity between her body and the surrounding natural environment. This reinforces several patterns already identified in the previous chapters while presenting them in a more systematic way.

These elements suggest that the chatbot showed a greater ability to adapt to the researcher’s requests and to produce more structured interpretations. Additionally, throughout this phase, artificial intelligence even indicated the sources employed to generate the answers. Hence, the iterative nature of the interaction helped to gradually refine the analytical direction, avoid or correct inaccuracies, and ask the model to elaborate on specific rhetorical, lexical, or symbolic patterns. For instance, compared to the previous stage, at this point ChatGPT was able to develop more detailed observations

concerning Eve's rhetoric, the symbolic role of nature, and the stylistic changes occurring especially in Book IX.

For this reason, one of the most useful elements of this phase concerned the AI's ability to reorganise and synthesise ideas already identified during the independent research. Through continuous prompting, the model frequently formulated arguments in relatively clearer ways and, in some cases, identified some additional insight and examples supporting existing claims.

Conversely, the central limitation already observed during the zero-shot analysis remained clearly visible: ChatGPT continued to show a strong tendency toward confirmation rather than contradiction. Although the collaborative interaction allowed the analysis to become slightly more sophisticated, the model still rarely challenged the interpretative framework proposed by the researcher. Instead, as already remarked, AI generally strengthened, expanded, or refined the ideas that had already been introduced. This reluctance was even more evident when the researcher proposed interpretative hypotheses connected to Eve's development, rhetorical autonomy, or symbolic association with nature. The model's reaction was to rarely develop them into genuine forms of disagreement. Moreover, it often struggled to consider new passages and verses, as it tended to analyse again the examples mentioned in the prompt. As a consequence, rather than critically questioning such assumptions, ChatGPT consistently adopted them as the basis of its subsequent analysis. This was particularly visible in the repeated confirmation of arguments concerning vegetal imagery, graceful movement, and the shift toward cognitive language in Book IX. Nevertheless, all these elements are closely aligned with most of the conclusions developed in the previous chapters of the thesis.

For this reason, the co-intelligence interaction often functioned less as an autonomous critical dialogue and more as a process of assisted reinforcement. AI proved quite effective at elaborating upon existing ideas, but considerably less effective at identifying major contradictions, rejecting weak or wrong assumptions, or proposing new examples and radically alternative readings. Even when the researcher introduced interpretative uncertainty or methodological hesitation, ChatGPT generally attempted to stabilise rather than challenge the proposed framework. However, this limitation could be simply the result of the lack of direct access to the textual source, especially when new and precise references to language or narrative structures were required.

Furthermore, a similar pattern emerged in relation to academic sources and critical references. When asked to identify scholars or rhetorical approaches relevant to specific themes, ChatGPT mainly suggested reliable and recognisable critical frameworks. Nonetheless, these references, although accurate, frequently aligned with interpretative directions that had already emerged during the independent research. Thus, AI failed once again to open entirely new methodological perspectives by avoiding citing scholars besides the ones already presented in the first three chapters.

Despite these limitations, the second phase of my research represented an improvement compared to the zero-shot experiment. The continuous interaction allowed me to refine vague responses, correct some inaccuracies, and progressively direct the model toward more precise analytical objectives. The results suggest that the quality of the output heavily depends on prompt construction and on the collaborative interaction between human and AI. This is the proof that AI can become significantly more useful within literary studies when integrated into a collaborative process. The quality of the answers improved precisely because the human researcher actively guided and enhanced the analytical process. Only in this way the findings can be more efficient and reliable.

At the same time, this phase reinforced one of the main conclusions of the first step of the experiment: ChatGPT tends to privilege alignment with the researcher over genuine critical opposition. This behaviour makes the model highly cooperative and rhetorically convincing, but, on the other hand, it creates important methodological risks for literary research, since disagreement and critical resistance are essential components of interpretation.

Hence, the second phase of the experiment showed both the strengths and the limitations of co-intelligence, presenting only a slight and partial improvement from the first stage. This is a more productive approach than passive AI usage, as it optimises the researcher's role in directing the interpretative process as well as checking its reliability. However, even on this occasion, AI struggled to function as an actual independent critical voice capable of producing original responses and interpretations.

4.5. Third Phase: Co-Intelligence with Direct Access to the Text

This section is dedicated to the final phase of the research, where ChatGPT was provided with the text of the books of *Paradise Lost*. As a consequence, throughout this stage, particular attention was given to the impact of direct textual access on the precision, depth, and reliability of the literary analysis produced by this model.

The third and final phase of the research combined the collaborative structure of co-intelligence with direct access to the text of the poem. This allowed AI to engage directly with the linguistic and rhetorical material. The purpose was to verify to what extent direct access to the textual source can influence the accuracy, depth, and coherence of the generated interpretations. This step represented the most productive stage of the experiment.

A collaborative approach was maintained throughout this phase as well, especially in terms of guided prompts and requests for further elaboration and new, original examples. The main difference from the previous step lay in the availability of the textual source. This significantly improved the specificity of the generated interpretations and helped reduce the level of generalisation and vagueness that had heavily characterised most of the earlier outputs. The analyses thus became more precise, detailed, and closely anchored to the verses of the poem. Again, this was possible because the model could finally work directly on the text of *Paradise Lost* instead of relying exclusively on pre-existing literary knowledge.

One of the clearest improvements resulting from this phase concerned the identification of rhetorical and stylistic patterns. More specifically, the chatbot sometimes reported new, original examples in the fields that had been previously considered. In order to illustrate the nature of the interaction established in the final phase, the following response serves as an example of ChatGPT's analysis when provided with direct access to the textual source: *Eve's beauty is first experienced through reflection: "I laid me downe / On the green bank, to look into the cleer / Smooth Lake, that to me seemd another Skie" (IV. 460–470 approx.). Close reading: the lake is "another Skie"; reflection elevates beauty to a quasi-celestial register. Interpretive claim: Nature does not simply reflect Eve's beauty—it refracts and complicates it. The mirror produces narcissistic desire that must be redirected.*

The expression “another sky” (IV. 459) in Eve’s mirror scene is an example of how the model produced better outputs, providing new instances instead of repeating the ones already present in the prompt. ChatGPT interpreted this image as the reflection of the lake elevating Eve’s beauty into an almost divine dimension. This suggests that the reflection transforms self-perception into a moment of visual transcendence, not simple narcissistic or vain contemplation. If compared to my independent analysis, this is an original point, but this answer simultaneously highlights one of ChatGPT’s weaknesses: the model could not indicate the precise verses, since it merely did it in an approximate way. This proves that human supervision and intervention are absolutely required even in this phase.

Moreover, an additional consideration that had not been highlighted as explicitly in the first chapters of this dissertation was the role of enjambement. The chatbot found that it creates a sense of fluidity and effortless movement during descriptions connected to Eve and nature. In relation to the lines “In wanton ringlets waved / As the Vine curls her tendrils” (IV. 306-07), ChatGPT argued that the syntactic continuation across the verse boundary formally reproduces vegetal extension and fluidity. This suggests spontaneity and organic continuity between body and landscape, making Eve’s beauty immanent within nature, not separate from it. Therefore, syntax also plays an essential role, as it contributes to create this effect: the simile unfolds gently through enjambement, allowing the description to flow across the line boundary in a way that mirrors and evokes the curling motion of the vine.

Similarly, in the analysis of the temptation scene, AI identified increasingly argumentative and self-justifying rhetorical structures in Eve’s speech. Unlike the more generalised findings produced during the other earlier stages, the model was now capable of grounding these claims in specific lexical and syntactic choices present in the text. For instance, ChatGPT proposed the rhetorical category of *paradiastole* to describe Eve’s gradual reframing of disobedience as rational self-improvement: *Eve progressively internalizes Satan’s paradiastolic logic by reinterpreting prohibition as a sign of value rather than danger. The divine command no longer functions, in her reasoning, as a protective boundary; instead, it becomes evidence that the fruit possesses exceptional power and knowledge deliberately withheld from humanity. The lines “And what are Gods that Man may not become / As they” (IX.710–720 approx.) show that Satan’s*

rhetorical reversals also reshape Eve's conception of hierarchy and aspiration. The distinction between human obedience and divine authority is recast as an artificial limitation, encouraging Eve to reinterpret ambition and transgression as legitimate paths toward elevation and self-improvement.

Unlike the more confirmatory responses generated during the earlier phases, this output demonstrates a greater degree of interpretative initiative. By directly engaging with Milton's rhetorical structures, the model was able to propose an analytical direction that expanded rather than only reinforcing the existing framework of the thesis. Albeit this observation still required further verification, especially because, once again, the verses were identified only in an approximate way, it represented one of the clearest examples of the model generating a genuinely productive interpretative direction instead of merely reformulating pre-existing arguments.

By contrast, some methodological limitations remained visible even in this phase. Despite the progresses presented above, the experiment also revealed that stronger textual grounding does not completely eliminate the broader interpretative tendencies of the model. Even when producing more sophisticated and accurate stylistic observations, ChatGPT was still partially reluctant to contradict and challenge the assumptions proposed by the researcher. In particular, this was evident when discussing Eve's bond with nature, her progressive autonomy, or the symbolic implications of her rhetoric. There were some occasions on which alternative readings might have been possible, but interpretations aligned with the researcher's direction were still privileged.

Yet, in other cases the model slightly complicated and partially doubted some of the researcher's points. There were some contrasting opinions in distinguishing between textual evidence and interpretative projection. More specifically, AI sometimes acknowledged some degree of uncertainty regarding whether some stylistic patterns were specific to Eve's beauty or if they simply reflected epic conventions. For example, the chatbot suggested that several forms of vegetal imagery associated with unfallen Eve may derive from broader Edenic description instead of her individual characterisation. Analogously, when analysing the increasingly argumentative language of Book IX, ChatGPT noticed that the rhetorical intensification might result from the structural requirements of the temptation scene itself, not exclusively from Eve's personal development.

These instances are extremely important because they represent some instances in which AI partially complicated or doubted the initial framework instead of simply validating and reinforcing it. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that the strongest outputs emerged only after highly specific prompting and continuous methodological guidance. The originality of the responses thus remained heavily dependent on the structure imposed by the researcher instead of resulting from fully autonomous interpretative initiative.

Therefore, the third phase of the experiment demonstrated that direct access to the textual source can significantly reduce the main weaknesses observed in the previous steps: vagueness and tendency toward confirmation. This is a remarkable improvement in the quality of the analyses, since the generated responses became more textually grounded, more verifiable, and more capable of engaging with specific rhetorical and stylistic details. References to syntax, lexical choices, focalisation, and narrative structure appeared substantially more precise once that AI could directly examine and engage with the text of *Paradise Lost*.

However, even the strongest results of this phase required constant human supervision. This indicated that the researcher's role is still essential, especially in terms of verification and critical evaluation. Some results, while insightful, remained interpretatively conventional or methodologically uncertain. Conversely, others seemed convincing on a rhetorical level but needed careful verification before being integrated into the thesis.

The final step of the analysis highlighted how direct access to the textual source represents a fundamental element in improving the quality of AI-generated literary analysis. The difference between this approach and the zero-shot one is significant: while the first phase produced extremely generalised and well-known interpretations, here the model showed a greater capacity to work on textual details. Overall, the final phase offered the most valuable analysis if compared to the previous parts of the experiment. This is due to the fact that AI-assisted literary analysis becomes significantly more productive when direct textual access is given.

However, artificial intelligence should still be combined with sustained human supervision: even under the most favourable conditions, the model does not completely replace the interpretative role of the human researcher. It is true that, within the conditions

of this phase, ChatGPT proved capable of supporting close reading through the identification of rhetorical patterns, stylistic repetitions, and thematic structures that partially expanded the original analysis. Yet, the experiment also confirmed that the validity of these observations still depended on human evaluation, verification, and critical judgement.

Hence, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, ChatGPT functions most effectively not as an autonomous literary critic, but as a collaborative analytical instrument whose outputs require constant evaluation, selection, and critical mediation by the researcher. This means that, at least for now, artificial intelligence can only function as a supporting tool capable of accelerating analysis, proposing connections, and facilitating textual exploration.

4.6. Comparative Analysis of the Three Phases

The concluding section of this chapter serves as a comparative evaluation and reflection of the three experimental phases illustrated in this chapter. This comparison examines how different levels of collaboration and textual access influenced the behaviour of the model and, as a consequence, the overall quality of the generated literary interpretations.

The evolution of the three experimental phases demonstrates a progressive improvement as regards the quality of the outputs as well as their specificity and usefulness. This seems to be primarily linked to the fact that ChatGPT's literary analysis changed according to the degree of interaction with the researcher, contextual guidance, and textual access provided to the model.

The zero-shot approach produced the most generalised results. This phase highlighted the chatbot's ability to reproduce common knowledge and canonical interpretations. ChatGPT proved to be capable of identifying broad thematic tendencies, particularly those connected to Eve's beauty and her association with nature, hierarchy, and its role during the temptation sequence. At the same time, this part of the experiment exposed some undeniable limitations, which were probably caused by the absence of human cooperation and contextual information. At this point, the principal limitation was the lack of interpretative independence. For instance, the model struggled to move beyond already established critical frameworks: it was inclined to agree with the researcher,

reinforcing assumptions embedded within the prompts rather than critically questioning them. While the answers often appeared coherent and convincing, they remained quite generic, common, and insufficiently grounded in close textual analysis.

By contrast, the second phase, based on co-intelligence without direct textual access, represented a significant methodological turning point. What emerged was that the interactions with the researcher played a crucial role in terms of quality, depth, and coherence of the analysis. The outputs of this stage were noticeably more organised, coherent, and nuanced than the one prior. Through continuous prompting, clarification, and requests for further elaboration and different examples, AI generated more articulated discussions of rhetorical development, symbolic structures, and thematic connections across the poem. Therefore, as previously mentioned, this collaborative structure substantially improved the usefulness of the replies. The model became relatively more effective at synthesising ideas, restructuring arguments, and maintaining analytical continuity. Yet, the central limitation noticed during the zero-shot phase remained largely unchanged: even in this dialogic framework, ChatGPT continued to privilege confirmation over contradiction. In other words, AI tended to operate as a system of elaboration and reinforcement. The model rarely rejected the interpretative assumptions proposed by the prompts or introduced radically alternative perspectives.

Finally, the co-intelligence approach coupled with direct access to text of *Paradise Lost* led to more accurate and specific results. This clearly emphasised the importance of textual context in automated interpretation. Not only does this make the process more collaborative, but also more stimulating and capable of providing new valuable examples and information. This simultaneously reduced the level of vagueness and blind confirmation presented in the earlier stages. This is due to the fact that, once the model could directly engage with Milton's language, the analyses became considerably more grounded in syntax, rhetoric, lexical repetition, and narrative structure. Unlike the previous phases, here AI occasionally identified stylistic or rhetorical elements that had not been explicitly mentioned or analysed. Some instances of this are the role of enjambement in representing potential instability and the use of *paradiastole* within the temptation episode.

However, the third phase did not completely eliminate the model's broader methodological limitations. Despite the direct access to the text of *Paradise Lost*,

ChatGPT still had a tendency toward interpretative alignment. This was not as frequent as in the previous phases, but it still resulted in AI being overall reluctant to contradict and challenge the proposed framework. Therefore, the chatbot still preferred strengthening or refining the researcher's assumptions.

For this reason, one of the most important conclusions emerging from the comparison between the three phases concerns the relationship between collaboration and critical independence. It is possible to state that this experiment demonstrated that AI becomes substantially more effective when integrated into a guided collaborative process. This proved to be even truer when direct textual evidence was available. Nonetheless, improved analytical quality did not necessarily correspond to increased interpretative autonomy. Across all three stages, ChatGPT usually functioned more effectively as:

- A synthesising instrument.
- A tool for organising interpretative material.
- A mechanism for rhetorical and thematic expansion.

By contrast, the model proved to be considerably less efficient as:

- A generator of supporting examples.
- A critical counterpoint.
- An autonomous evaluator of interpretative weaknesses.
- A producer of radically alternative readings.

This distinction is particularly relevant within literary studies: critical advancement depends not only on identifying patterns, but also on questioning assumptions, challenging interpretations, and recognizing ambiguity or contradiction. Hence, the comparative analysis indicates that the value of AI within literary criticism lies primarily in its collaborative and assistive potential rather than its capacity to replace human interpretation. As a consequence, the most productive results emerged when the researcher actively guided, filtered, and critically evaluated the outputs.

To conclude, the research suggests that the effectiveness of AI in literary studies is determined by numerous factors, not merely by the capabilities of the model itself. Above all, it depends on the quality and quantity of human mediation as well as on the information and context provided. Ultimately, the experiment confirmed that ChatGPT can meaningfully support literary criticism to some extent. This proved to be particularly true in tasks related to organisation, synthesis, and close textual exploration. However,

this research also demonstrated that the interpretative core of literary criticism – such as, the capacity for critical judgement, methodological scepticism, and theoretical evaluation – remains fundamentally dependent on human intervention.

Conclusion

This thesis examined the representation of Eve's beauty in *Paradise Lost* combining thematic, stylistic, rhetorical, and experimental approaches. The research explored the ways in which Milton constructs Eve through imagery, syntax, lexical patterns, and rhetorical strategies. This highlighted the progressive evolution of her characterisation throughout the poem. More specifically, the relationship between beauty, nature, cognition, and persuasion demonstrated how Eve's representation gradually moves from an aesthetic, harmonious, and Edenic dimension to an increasingly self-reflective and argumentative discourse.

The first chapters revealed that Eve cannot be reduced to a merely passive or symbolic figure within the narrative of the Fall. This is due to the fact that Milton constructs her through a complex interaction between poetic form and thematic meaning. Especially before the Fall, Milton consistently associates Eve with absolute beauty, Edenic harmony, visuality, and organic movement. Indeed, vegetal imagery, visual structures, and rhetorical patterns are frequently employed to shape both her physical representation and her identity. Several of the passages analysed in the previous chapters underline Eve's beauty and her harmonious integration within the natural order of Paradise itself. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, images and descriptions connected to reflection, perception, and interaction with the other elements of the garden demonstrate the complexity of Eve's characterisation.

At the same time, this thesis showed that Eve's role gradually evolves beyond purely aesthetic or ornamental dimensions. Scenes centred on reflection, perception, and visual mediation also unveil how Eve's identity is progressively rendered through forms of self-awareness and interpretative consciousness. For instance, the mirror episode in Book IV illustrates that visuality frequently becomes connected to beauty and also to processes of recognition, curiosity, desire, and identity information. In addition, the study of Eve's speech in Book IX proved how Milton slowly intensifies cognitive and evaluative language. This clearly emphasises processes of deliberation, evaluation, persuasion, and even self-justification. Hence, rhetoric is yet another central component of Eve's characterisation: not only does the temptation sequence represent a moral turning point within the poem, but also a stylistic transformation in her discourse and reasoning. This implies that, instead of simply being a passive victim of temptation, Eve emerges as

an active and perceptive rhetorical subject. Her language reflects the growing complexity of her psychological and moral condition, as demonstrated by the present thesis.

The dissertation further highlighted how Milton frequently employs stylistic structures – including repetition, enjambement, syntactic mirroring, and lexical clustering – to reinforce thematic meaning at the formal level of the text. Therefore, Eve’s characterisation develops through narrative events as well as through the interaction between rhetorical form and poetic structure. This confirmed that the roles of style and meaning remain deeply interconnected throughout *Paradise Lost*.

Beside the literary analysis, the final chapter has also investigated the methodological implications of applying AI to literary studies. This experiment explored the use of ChatGPT within three distinct analytical conditions: a zero-shot phase, a co-intelligence analysis without direct textual access, and a final co-intelligence interaction with direct access to text of the epic. The results proved that the quality and specificity of the generated outputs varied considerably depending on the degree of collaboration and textual grounding involved in the interaction. Consequently, the last phase of the experiment emerges as the most valuable and efficient one. This demonstrated that AI could become an increasingly valuable instrument within literary studies when integrated into collaborative and critically supervised methodologies. Although artificial intelligence cannot replace human interpretation, it might significantly support or enhance exploratory analysis, pattern recognition, stylistic comparison, and large-scale textual investigation.

In this regard, future research could explore the application of co-intelligence models to other authors, genres, and literary traditions. For instance, AI-assisted analysis may prove particularly productive in the study of rhetorical evolution across different works of the same author. This would allow the researcher to identify recurring lexical structures, thematic patterns, or stylistic shifts on a broader scale. In the case of Milton, future studies could extend this methodology to characters such as Satan or Adam, comparing how rhetorical agency and persuasive language operate differently within *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, as mentioned above, AI-assisted literary analysis could contribute to comparative studies between different authors and literary periods. Generative models may support the identification of shared rhetorical strategies, common

symbolic patterns, or intertextual echoes across extensive corpora. This would open new possibilities for research in comparative literature and corpus stylistic.

Another promising field concerns the relationship between AI and close reading. While literary criticism has traditionally emphasised highly contextualised textual interpretation, AI tools could be helpful for identifying subtle repetitions, syntactic parallels, lexical clusters, or rhetorical structures that might otherwise remain less visible. In this perspective, AI would not function as a substitute for close reading, but as an instrument capable of supporting and expanding it.

However, the findings of this thesis also demonstrated that the integration of AI into literary criticism requires continuous methodological caution. Literary interpretation depends not solely on textual regularities, but also on ambiguity, historical context, symbolism, and critical disagreement. As discussed in the last chapter, these elements still fundamentally rely on human judgement and interpretative awareness. The experiment repeatedly showed that AI tends to privilege coherence and interpretative alignment over opposition or methodological resistance. For this reason, rather than replacing literary criticism, AI appears most productive when employed as part of a collaborative framework in which computational assistance and human critical reasoning remain closely interconnected.

Ultimately, this dissertation illustrated that Eve's beauty and characterisation in *Paradise Lost* develop through a complex interaction between imagery, rhetoric, syntax, and poetic structure. She is undeniably associated with beauty and incorporated within Edenic harmony, but she is also a rhetorically and cognitively complex character whose language evolves significantly. Moreover, the experimental section proved that AI may offer useful methodological support for literary studies, particularly in relation to pattern recognition and stylistic analysis. Yet, the research also confirmed the limitations of AI-generated interpretation, especially its tendency toward interpretative agreement and its dependence on human supervision. This is why AI appears most productive when employed within collaborative and supervised forms of co-intelligence.

Summary

This thesis explores the representation of Eve's beauty in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) through a thematic, stylistic, rhetorical, and computational analysis of selected passages. The main focus is the relationship between her beauty and nature, movement, visuality, knowledge, hierarchy, and persuasion. In order to do this, the dissertation examines how Milton progressively develops Eve's characterisation through imagery, syntax, lexical choices, and rhetorical structures across the books of the poem.

The first chapter contextualises Eve within the literary and critical tradition surrounding *Paradise Lost*, outlining the principal scholarly debates concerning her role and characterisation within the narrative of the Fall of humankind. This part explains how Eve and her beauty have often been interpreted through theological, moral, and gendered perspectives. What emerges quite clearly is Eve's complexity and ambiguity as a literary figure. This emphasises that her representation cannot be reduced to a purely passive, symbolic, or moral function. Instead, Milton gradually develops Eve through a highly complex interaction between poetic form and thematic meaning. As a result, she becomes a psychologically and rhetorically complex character whose identity evolves throughout the epic. Therefore, this section establishes the theoretical framework necessary for the subsequent textual, stylistic, and computational analyses.

The thesis proceeds with the second chapter, which presents a textual and thematic analysis of the most important passages of the epic, such as Eve's first moments of consciousness, the mirror scene, and her dialogue with Satan. Most of these reflections demonstrate that Milton consistently associates unfallen Eve with natural and vegetal forms, organic movement, prelapsarian harmony, and, of course, visual beauty. As a consequence, she is integrated within the Edenic environment itself. Before the Fall, Eve's beauty is not mere ornamentation, but also an element through which she is connected to Paradise and to the natural order of creation. In addition, this chapter further explores the importance of visuality, perception, and reflection within Eve's characterisation, especially in scenes connected to self-recognition and identity formation. These aspects contribute to the representation of Eve as both aesthetically idealised and rhetorically active.

The third chapter focuses more specifically on the stylistic and rhetorical mechanisms through which Eve's evolution is constructed and rendered. For this reason,

special attention is given to Book IX and the temptation sequence, where Eve's speech progressively becomes more cognitive and argumentative. Milton intensifies evaluative and deliberative vocabulary, increasingly associating Eve with processes of reasoning, persuasion, and self-justification. Thus, rhetoric becomes a central component of Eve's intellectual agency, internal conflict, and psychological development. The analysis also shows how Milton employs stylistic devices, including repetition, lexical choices, enjambement, and syntactic mirroring. This demonstrates how poetic form directly contributes to and reinforces thematic meaning within the poem.

Moreover, this thesis also comprehends an experimental chapter dedicated to the application of artificial intelligence within literary studies. The final part of my dissertation investigates the use of ChatGPT as a tool for literary interpretation through three different methodological phases: a zero-shot approach, a co-intelligence interaction without direct textual access, and a final co-intelligence phase based on direct access to the books of *Paradise Lost*. The research evaluates both the strengths and the limitations of AI-assisted literary analysis.

The zero-shot approach reveals that ChatGPT is generally capable of reproducing broad interpretative frameworks already well established within Milton criticism, especially as regards Eve's association with the natural world, beauty, and cognitive evolution. However, the outputs frequently remain confirmatory and heavily dependent on the assumptions embedded within the prompts. The second phase produces more articulated, coherent, and methodologically structured responses thanks to the continuous interaction between the researcher and the model. Yet, the tendency toward interpretative agreement and reinforcement persists quite clearly. The final phase of the experiment represents the most productive stage: by directly interacting with the text of *Paradise Lost*, the chatbot demonstrates a significantly greater capacity for stylistic and rhetorical analysis. For instance, ChatGPT can successfully identify structural repetitions, syntactic patterns, rhetorical mechanisms, and lexical choices that occasionally expand the original framework. Nevertheless, even this phase confirms the necessity of human supervision, contextualisation, and critical evaluation.

Therefore, the results illustrate that ChatGPT may support literary analysis in terms of pattern recognition, stylistic observation, and close reading. This is particularly true when combined with direct textual access and sustained human supervision.

However, the responses simultaneously reveal significant methodological limitations, especially concerning the model's tendency toward interpretative agreement, its dependence on prompt construction and human guidance, and its difficulty in producing genuinely new or oppositional readings.

The thesis thus concludes that AI should not be understood as a replacement for literary criticism; rather, as a collaborative instrument within critically supervised forms of co-intelligence. More broadly, the research contributes to contemporary discussions concerning the future relationship between artificial intelligence and the humanities, highlighting both the potential and methodological risks of AI-assisted literary interpretation. This dissertation demonstrates that, as of today, literary interpretation still fundamentally relies on human critical judgement, contextual awareness, and methodological reflection.

Riassunto

Questa tesi esplora la rappresentazione della bellezza di Eva in *Paradiso perduto* (1667) di Milton attraverso un'analisi tematica, stilistica, retorica e computazionale di una selezione di passaggi del poema. Più precisamente, l'attenzione principale è rivolta al rapporto tra la bellezza di Eva e la natura, il movimento, la visualità, la conoscenza, la gerarchia e la persuasione. A tal fine, l'elaborato esamina come Milton sviluppi progressivamente il personaggio di Eva attraverso immagini, sintassi, scelte lessicali e strutture retoriche presenti nei diversi libri dell'opera.

Il primo capitolo contestualizza Eva all'interno della tradizione letteraria e critica che circonda *Paradiso perduto*, delineando i principali dibattiti accademici riguardanti il suo ruolo e il suo personaggio all'interno della narrazione della caduta. Questa parte mostra come Eva e la sua bellezza siano spesso state interpretate in chiave teologica, morale e di genere. Ciò che emerge con particolare chiarezza è la complessità e l'ambiguità di Eva come figura letteraria. Questo sottolinea come la sua rappresentazione non possa essere ridotta a una funzione meramente passiva, simbolica o morale. Al contrario, Milton sviluppa gradualmente la figura di Eva tramite un'articolata interazione tra forma poetica e significato tematico. Di conseguenza, Eva diventa un personaggio psicologicamente e retoricamente complesso, la cui identità evolve nel corso dell'epopea. Quindi, questo capitolo stabilisce il quadro teorico di partenza che è necessario per le successive analisi testuali, stilistiche e computazionali.

La tesi procede con il secondo capitolo, che presenta un'analisi testuale e tematica dei passaggi più importanti dell'opera di Milton, come i primi momenti di coscienza di Eva, la scena dello specchio e la sua interazione con Satana. La maggior parte delle riflessioni dimostra che Milton associa costantemente Eva a forme naturali e vegetali, al movimento organico, all'armonia prelapsaria e alla bellezza visiva. Quindi, Eva viene integrata nello stesso ambiente edenico. Prima della caduta, la sua bellezza non è una mera decorazione, ma un elemento attraverso cui viene inserita perfettamente in paradiso ed è connessa all'ordine naturale della creazione. Inoltre, questo capitolo approfondisce ulteriormente l'importanza della visualità, della percezione e della riflessione per il personaggio di Eva, soprattutto negli episodi legati alla capacità di riconoscere sé stessi e alla formazione e sviluppo della sua identità. Tutti questi elementi contribuiscono alla rappresentazione di Eva come figura esteticamente idealizzata e retoricamente attiva.

Il terzo capitolo è più concentrato sui meccanismi stilistici e retorici attraverso cui viene costruita e resa l'evoluzione di Eva. Per questo motivo è stata dedicata una particolare attenzione al Libro IX e alla scena della tentazione, in cui il discorso di Eva diventa progressivamente più cognitivo e argomentativo. Milton intensifica il vocabolario valutativo e deliberativo, associando sempre di più Eva a processi di ragionamento, persuasione e auto-justificazione. In questo modo, la retorica diventa una componente centrale del suo libero arbitrio, del suo conflitto interiore e del suo sviluppo psicologico. Quest'analisi mostra anche come Milton impieghi figure retoriche, tra cui la ripetizione, l'enjambement, il rispecchiamento sintattico e determinate scelte stilistiche. Questo sottolinea nuovamente come la forma poetica contribuisca direttamente al significato tematico e lo rafforzi all'interno dell'opera.

Inoltre, questa tesi comprende anche un capitolo sperimentale dedicato all'applicazione dell'intelligenza artificiale negli studi letterari. L'ultima parte dell'elaborato esamina l'uso di ChatGPT come strumento per l'interpretazione letteraria attraverso tre fasi metodologiche: un approccio *zero-shot*, un'interazione di *co-intelligence* senza fornire direttamente il testo e una fase finale di *co-intelligence* che, invece, si differenzia per l'accesso diretto al testo di *Paradiso perduto*. L'esperimento valuta sia i punti di forza sia i limiti dell'analisi letteraria assistita dall'IA.

L'approccio *zero-shot* rivela che ChatGPT è complessivamente capace di riprodurre ampi quadri interpretativi già consolidati all'interno della critica miltoniana, soprattutto per quanto riguarda l'associazione di Eva con il mondo naturale, la bellezza e l'evoluzione cognitiva. Tuttavia, gli output spesso risultano confermativi e fortemente dipendenti dalle ipotesi presentate nei *prompt*. La seconda fase, invece, genera risposte più articolate, coerenti e metodologicamente strutturate grazie all'interazione continua tra la ricercatrice e il modello. Nonostante ciò, la tendenza all'accordo interpretativo e il rafforzamento delle teorie iniziali rimane piuttosto evidente anche in questa fase. Infine, la fase finale dell'esperimento rappresenta lo stadio più produttivo: interagendo direttamente con il testo del poema, il *chatbot* dimostra una capacità significativamente maggiore in termini di analisi stilistica e retorica. Ad esempio, ChatGPT riesce a identificare con successo ripetizioni strutturali, schemi sintattici, meccanismi retorici e scelte lessicali che in diversi casi ampliano il quadro analitico di partenza. Tuttavia, anche

questa fase conferma la necessità di supervisione, contestualizzazione e valutazione critica umana.

Quindi, i risultati mostrano che ChatGPT può supportare l'analisi letteraria per quanto riguarda il riconoscimento di *pattern*, l'osservazione stilistica e l'analisi dettagliata di un testo. Questo si rivela particolarmente vero quando l'IA viene unita all'accesso diretto alla fonte testuale e ad una costante supervisione umana. Ciò nonostante, le risposte dimostrano anche dei limiti metodologici non indifferenti, specialmente rispetto alla predisposizione del modello verso l'accordo interpretativo, alla dipendenza dalla costruzione del prompt, alla consulenza umana e alla frequente difficoltà nel formulare chiavi di lettura originali o oppostive.

La tesi conclude dunque che l'intelligenza artificiale non debba essere intesa come un sostituto della critica letteraria, bensì come uno strumento collaborativo all'interno di forme di *co-intelligence* criticamente supervisionate. Più in generale, questo esperimento contribuisce alle discussioni contemporanee riguardanti il futuro rapporto tra IA e discipline umanistiche, evidenziando tanto il potenziale quanto i rischi metodologici dell'interpretazione letteraria assistita dall'IA. Questo elaborato dimostra che attualmente l'interpretazione letteraria continua a dipendere principalmente dal giudizio critico umano, dalla conoscenza del contesto e dalla riflessione metodologica.

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