

**“MY FATHER’S DAUGHTER”:  
DEBORAH MILTON’S BIOGRAPHY OF SILENCE**

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*ABSTRACT. In The Tree of Knowledge (1990) Eva Figes re-creates the life of John Milton’s daughter, Deborah, who, due to the poet’s blindness, became the actual “hand” of the author. At the end of her life she gives us an alternative vision of the poet both as father and writer in a narrative which, as opposed to the centrality of Milton’s narratives, concentrates upon the marginal aspects of everyday life. Thus, in Figes’s novel the “grand narrative” constituted by Milton and his work is displaced by Deborah’s “petite histoire”, which paradigmatically exemplifies the role women have been assigned in History. That displacement of one narrative by another is in itself an occasion to re-consider the validity and the culturality of our notions of historical relevance.*

On a cold winter night in London, a restless father, unable to sleep, wakes his daughter up and makes her sit by the chimney and open a book written in some strange language, Latin or perhaps Greek, which the girl is able to read with absolute perfection but cannot, however, comprehend. She is Deborah Milton, John Milton’s youngest daughter. Because of his blindness, the poet would have his daughter read aloud the texts necessary for him to create his own work in his imagination. After this process of creation, Deborah is again needed to take down on paper the poems or the political or philosophical treatises which sometimes she is totally unable to understand because they were written in one of those languages. Many years later, now an old lady, she arouses the curiosity of scholars interested in her father’s work: they just cannot believe that Deborah has such skills and want to find out whether all this is true.

In *The Tree of Knowledge* Eva Figes, literary critic as well as novelist,<sup>1</sup> makes use of these biographical data in order to narrate the story of Deborah Milton from a double perspective: materialistic –as it reflects the way in which education is conditioned by economic circumstances–, and linguistic –because woman can have only a partial access to culture since she is not allowed to integrate the signifier and the signified–. Figes’s novel organizes itself also as a series of reflections on the lesser known aspects of this paterno-filial relationship,<sup>2</sup> thus producing both a re-writing of Milton’s historical image and a re-consideration of the process by means of which History is created through writing.<sup>3</sup>

Echoing Arachne in her weaving of stories about women who rebelled and were punished, Eva Figes articulates a narrative where the main thread is an oppositional discourse which vindicates the female figure and in the texture of which one can see the confluence of the political and the domestic, the universal and the personal.<sup>4</sup> This fusion may, however, turn into confusion as Deborah herself suggests in her monologue:

I often confused his bitterness concerning all that had gone amiss in the great world with his domestic discontents, being more familiar. Was it my mother who had brought about the Fall and troubled times? Was my childish failure to obey his every wish the reason for the turmoil in the streets and his displeasure? (65)

The interaction between these different realms is made patent in the way in which the daughter’s *petit histoire* changes the father’s *grand histoire* –at least, as far as our perception and recognition of Milton as a historical figure is concerned– in the same way that Eve’s simple gesture of accepting the apple brings about complex consequences to the whole of humankind. Within the novel a special emphasis is placed on the difference

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1. Her novels, which have been awarded or shortlisted for some of the most prestigious literary prizes in Britain, include *Winter Journey* (1967), *Days* (1974), *Nelly’s Version* (1977), *Light* (1983), *The Seven Ages* (1986), *The Tree of Knowledge* (1990), *The Tenancy* (1993), and *The Knot* (1997). As a critic she has written pioneering work on feminist issues: *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (1970), *Sex and Subterfuge: Women Novelists to 1850* (1982), and *Women Letters in Wartime: 1940-1945* (1994).

2. Figes’ text is not the first one to put that relationship under critical scrutiny: Robert Graves’ *Wife to Mr Milton* (1944) and William Empson’s *Milton’s God* (1961) also deal with the poet’s patriarchal attitudes. However, Figes herself has stated (Figes 2000) that her direct source of inspiration was Joseph Addison’s interview of Deborah Milton, and this is reflected by the very narrative structure of the novel in which the protagonist recollects memories of her father for a nameless interviewer.

3. The specular relationship seems to be obvious: one must bear in mind that Milton’s emblematic text, *Paradise Lost*, is itself a re-writing of Adam and Eve’s fall.

4. Although Arachne is always identified with a spider, this identification usually ignores that this is only the result of a metamorphosis. The origin is the weaver’s challenge to Athena by featuring in her tapestry images of rebellion and disobedience. That is why the myth is often taken as the emblem of an anti-hierarchical poetics, as in “Aracnologías: Reflexiones sobre el espacio estético femenino”, by Teresa Gómez Reus and Africa Vidal.

between the stories which the old servant used to tell Deborah, when she was a child, and the stories her father had her read to him. Talking about the Civil War, she remembers how "[o]ur old servant would speak of those times....I liked to help her in the kitchen, more than to do my father's bidding, for she would gossip of old times in such a manner as made them live for me" (55).

Similarly, Milton's daughter adopts a relativistic position which greatly contrast with her father's clear-cut moral definitions also derived from the works which he advocated and re-created as a poet and where the notions of good and evil were always clearly demarcated. Deborah's relativism becomes skepticism when the issue at stake is one of Milton's personal and political great endeavours –that is, the confrontation between monarchy and parliament which culminated in the English Civil War– and its quality as "grand narrative" of liberation. Through her monologue she questions the outcome of this historical event inasmuch as it meant no liberation whatsoever to the oppressed sectors of the age, among them, in particular, women. Against the background of other narratives of liberation, such as the ideological revolution of Puritanism a century before, and even Christ and the Church's discourse of liberation, revolution –as a libertarian theory which must be put into practice– is here regarded with suspicion, which in itself is an example of how History and its fetishes can be re-written from the position of the marginalized and the dispossessed.

In revising Milton's figure and the ideas which he advocated, Figes' text tries to show the other side of the artist; in other words, what being a genius involves and demands. As the novelist stated, "obviously, artists are not perfect human beings" (2000: 179), and indeed Milton is now presented to the reader as a signifier to which a new signified can be attached, this time from the perspective of his daughter.<sup>5</sup> This would make up for the fact that she had been always deprived of meanings of her own since for her both signifiers and signifieds had their source in the paternal figure.

In clear contrast with the official History, we find in the novel a silenced or apocryphal version which places itself on the margins of a strongly hierarchical system that pervades the economic, the social, the political, the sexual and the religious. This ideological context both originates and explains the narrative, in which, however, we find an alternative view of that context: an inquiry into its darker side in the guise of an unknown version of Milton both as a father and as an author. One must also emphasize the contrast between the History narrated by Milton in *Paradise Lost* and the story narrated by his daughter in this novel; in other words, the contrast between, on the one hand, the grandiosity of a story affecting the whole of humankind, and on the other, the

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5. This inquiry into the unknown side of the artist –in this case the French painter Claude Monet–is also the subject matter of her novel *Light* (1983).

everyday-life quality of a story which affects apparently one single person, but implicitly all women. In doing this, Figes seems to be in line with recent trends in historiography which focus more on the private and the everyday life than on the public and extraordinary, examples of which can be found in P. Ariès and G. Duby's *Historia de la vida privada*, G. Duby and M. Perrot's *Historia de las mujeres*, B. S. Anderson and J.P. Zinsser's *Historia de las mujeres: Una historia propia*, A. Briggs' *A Social History of England*, and R. Bridenthal and C. Koonz's *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*.

Figes uses Deborah Milton's story as a case study to discuss and reveal the way in which history becomes precisely that, "History": who writes it; how do certain events become historical facts; how do specific individuals achieve historical notoriety; or ultimately who decides that the stories (the truths?) of certain people are more relevant than the stories (the lies, perhaps?) of other people.<sup>6</sup> But more specifically, Figes is interested in exposing how History constitutes itself not only as a set of "grand narratives" about men, but particularly a set of narratives about "great men"—such as Milton, God, or some king—in a closed system which has traditionally excluded women because of their alleged unworthiness in historical terms. Woman is thus alienated from written culture and from the canon, which therefore renders her unable to re-create, re-write, or appropriate a literary tradition and denies her the very possibility of becoming and remaining a part of History: that is to say, the possibility of positioning herself as historical subject, a maker of History, a maker of historical meanings. That is why the oblivion of women's historical existence entails for Figes a larger epistemological issue, in the sense that a re-vision of women's role in History necessarily implies a re-consideration of the subject matter of historical discourse: "History..., because of women, has to be re-angled....because, you know, half the population is never mentioned in official History" (2000: 180).

These ideas manifest themselves in Deborah's great interest in the educational quality of History. That the purpose of History is educational is already present at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, but it is also found in the archangel's narratives about the chain of events leading up to the creation of Eden and also in the "histories of the world", a recurrent *topos* in the epic tradition. In a fashion that clearly defines her own position, Deborah re-writes such an erudite and refined discourse when she gives her own version of the English Revolution: she turns the chronicle of the disintegration of Cromwell's regime into a fable, which, as a school mistress, she tells her pupils. Thus she manages to show, on the one hand, that any historical event can be narrativized and therefore be

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6. Milton's daughters, incidentally, have been accused of being the source of Milton's bad reputation both as man and as father. See for example Christopher Hill, 141-45.

given a sense of ineluctability; and on the other, that the narrative frame that is used already implies a number of connotations, in this case the moralizing dimension of History, and therefore, its potential to teach future generations.

But this re-writing requires the existence of intertexts which provide meaning and allow the reader to appreciate the quality of the new text. In the case of Figes' novel we not only find the aforementioned historical intertext, but there are also allusions to a biographical intertext that is necessary to contextualize Milton's views on women in historical terms: it has been frequently argued that his misogyny may have its source in his personal experience in marriage in strong contrast with his theoretical views, particularly in relation to the question of divorce. Christopher Hill tries to close this gap between private opinions and public claims, by stressing that Milton's views are bound by the historical context in which they were produced and received:

The only people in the seventeenth century who came anywhere near making women equal with men were Diggers, Ranters and Quakers, who believed that men and women were perfectible on earth, could get back behind the Fall....[T]o criticize Milton because he stated a theory of male superiority is like criticizing him because he did not advocate votes or equal pay for women. No one, to my knowledge, in the seventeenth century claimed that women were wholly equal to men, just as no one, not even Levellers, seriously proposed to give them the vote. [Thomas] Edwards asked, as the height of irony, whether women should have political power, together with servants and paupers. (118)<sup>7</sup>

The very fact that Deborah establishes a parallel between the poet's family conflicts and the political tensions of his time; that she presents us with details of her father's everyday life; or that she tells us about the economic, and above all, affective consequences that his marriage failure had on his daughters, undoubtedly imply a new vision of a man blessed with fame.

In this sense, the blindness of the father is an important aspect due to the effects it generates: blindness not only exists at the level of the real, but also at the level of the symbolic. In the novel there is a recurrent leit-motif which can be basically summarized as "reading is bad for your eyes", and against this background blindness is given different meanings: it can be a gift, and in this sense the novel creates a contrast between the inability to see (physically) and the visionary character which Deborah perceives in her father –"None had dreams more fanciful, more glowing, than my father" (28)– linking Milton's epic work with that of his famous and blind predecessor, Homer. But at

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7. Hill also points out the autobiographical elements in *Paradise Lost*, specially in the relationship between Adam and Eve (128-30).

the same time blindness is God's punishment for his support of Cromwell's cause, drawing a parallel between Cromwell's rebellion against the sovereign and that of Lucifer against God.<sup>8</sup> Within this Christian frame of reference where the sins of the parents also bring consequences to the children, Deborah laments her father's blindness and how had he not been blind and had been able to see his daughters he might have been able to love them more for their beauty and their personal qualities: "...we might have given him cause for pride had he looked upon us differently" (137). But the reader of the twentieth century, reading a twentieth-century novel against the frame of contemporary literary criticism and psychoanalysis, cannot avoid taking into consideration the idea of the male gaze with its phallic connotations, and perceive in all this an ironic twist, since the fact that the father is blind means that, within an oculo-centric tradition, he is symbolically castrated.

Both the question of knowledge and the question of rebellion come together in the literary intertexts, thus creating other parallels. Among those intertexts the most important is undoubtedly *Paradise Lost*, a narrative about the origins of humankind and the Fall caused by a woman. To taste the fruit and to possess the knowledge of Good and Evil offered by the forbidden tree is for Deborah a useless achievement because of our inability to distinguish between one and the other. When recollecting the last moments of Cromwell's regime, she points out:

This I chiefly now remember, not the cheering crowds, the bonfires, and the like, but my perplexity, at such division, that light was dark, dark light, and grown men living under God were so divided. It was the earliest inkling to my childish mind that eating from the tree by our first parents, though bringing to us knowledge of both good and evil, brought us not sufficient insight to tell us which was which on all occasions. (122-123)

Even more than that, Good and Evil are presented not as absolutes but as categories with a strong historical component. This moral and historical relativism can be seen within the limits of the novel in the related debate concerning the opposition between law and conscience, between society and individual, which has as its ultimate reference the puritan debate between free will and predestination, a very relevant issue in Milton's time. The protagonist of the novel recalls what her uncle, a lawyer, thought about this:

The law is yet the law, and must be obeyed. He thought it wrong for any man to put himself above it for conscience merely. Else each becomes a law unto

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8. The case of Lucifer is also interesting in the sense that, being initially "the bearer of light", he turns into "the prince of darkness", which again reveals the connotations of the term "light": centrality and subjection to the conventions created by the father.

himself and chaos follows. These are nice points of philosophy, not easily resolved....What if the law be wrong, must we obey it? Yet, if each man takes his conscience as his guide he is like to become a law unto himself, and conscience often tells us that which we would hear. (69)

For Deborah, as she states further on, the problem of Good and Evil is ultimately a question of personal choice: “...Lord, when Thou didst vouchsafe us freedom, Thou didst give it not to us so we should plunder, but to choose betwixt good and evil. This was the freedom Thou didst see fit to give us, and I fear we choose but evil” (97).

In a similar vein, the myths that help us understand the world are revealed as historically constructed. The Bible, for example, is not only a literary intertext for Figs’ novel, but also works as a personal guide which allows characters to explain their own everyday life: “We knew our Bible...and saw in it a map for past and future, that should guide us on a way that none had trod before” (118). Even so, Deborah can perceive its time-bound quality and, thus, see the story of Adam and Eve as a legitimizing narrative which eventually loses its power to provide explanation and has to be substituted by other narratives: “This is another age, and men live now by other certainties. The Bible now is like some ancient tale, told to divert the childhood of our race, but put aside since then” (123). This social construction of myths and truths is closely related to the ideas of secularization, to the contrast between the myths of Milton’s time and those of the eighteenth century, and in political or philosophical terms, to the growing anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment.

At times myths are inscribed with new meanings. Deborah, for example, interprets the idea of paradise in terms of the idea of freedom, and *Paradise Regained* in terms of what later generations would call the materialization of socialist utopia:

And though it seems not so, it is self-interest to think not just on self: not to gain reward in Heaven, but here upon this earth. For we must dwell upon this earth together, and whilst my brother and my sister want for food and shelter, we shall not undo the sin of Adam, nor shall there be a Paradise regained upon this earth, nor Second Coming. (58)

At a later stage, Deborah remarks that “[t]o taste the heady fruit and then to be deprived, it wounds the spirit”, and sees herself as “a wild and unschooled spirit which, having tasted freedom, craved for it” (148).

The quality of the myth comes also under scrutiny: is the tree of knowledge really a symbol of knowledge or is it rather a symbol of obedience? For God, it is totally a matter of testing man’s obedience, but Satan sees it in terms of an intellectual temptation.<sup>9</sup>

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9. For a detailed analysis of this issue see B. Willey, 197-236.

Milton's text contains a further contradiction, also present in Figes' novel, in its treatment of that Promethean myth. If associated with women, in contrast to the male figure which is given heroic qualities, this myth always connotes sin, when in both cases the question amounts to the same thing: the desire to obtain knowledge. Like Eve taking the fruit and passing it on to Adam, Deborah transmits the knowledge to her father (by reading to him). This creates an apparent paradox, since, theoretically, it should be the other way round, that is, the father should be the source of knowledge, of meaning, of language. But that is how it really is, since Deborah does not choose knowledge, she simply reproduces what others create, select and impose, remaining, like Eve, a mere mediator.<sup>10</sup>

This play of intertexts generates an interesting web of implicit correspondences and identifications. When Deborah points out that "my father was like a king within his household" (42), she simply transforms her narrative into an act of rebellion, which in turn is an echo of Lucifer's rebellion against God, of Eve's against God's prohibition, and Cromwell's against an absolutist monarchic order. Thus, Milton ends up being identified with God, while Deborah identifies herself with Eve, and the tree of knowledge becomes the appropriate knowledge –that is, signifier plus signified– of Greek, Latin or Hebrew. In this set of comparisons the common denominator is the idea of the Father and the identification of man with God while humankind is represented by a woman. But even more important is the awareness that the knowledge which will make women equal with gods (or perhaps with men?) is nothing but the full knowledge of language, that is, with a capacity to create their own meanings.

That is why, Milton's instrumental relationship with his daughter forces the reader to consider women's relationship with language and culture. Deborah can recite and write by heart but does not know what the text means. In that way, she can only repeat the text but never re-create it, or create another text from it, as his father does with the Bible or with classical epic.<sup>11</sup> In Figes' novel a frequent allusion is made to the difference between reading and knowledge. Milton seemed to have very clear ideas about it: "One tongue, he would say, was enough for any woman" (4); and Deborah summarizes the situation: "I was taught...to read a little in my mother's tongue with understanding, but my father's many tongues without due comprehension" (125). But she is also aware that this lack is gender-based: "I think my father used my cousins, though his pupils, as his eyes, much as he used my sister and myself. But on account of their sex, and being paid for his services, he did teach them to understand that which they read aloud" (4).

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10. Many interpretations of Genesis stress the linguistic dimension of temptation in the sense that Eve simply transmits and reproduces the words of the serpent.

11. For a detailed study of Milton's use of classical epic see F.C. Blessington.



Deprived of access to the signified she can only inhabit the realm of the signifier, unable to transcend its material quality in order to develop the potentiality of the sign, and even less able to combine different signifiers and signifieds to construct alternative representations of the world. Languages can be read and transcribed but cannot be understood, books can be used as wood for the fire, or to stand upon, or to be sold in order to buy some food: in all of these instances what is emphasized is the basic material aspect of language and of the cultural products derived from it. We should not be surprised at this utilitarian quality which Deborah assigns to language if we consider that she has always thought of its use “in the service of” the paternal figure.

In the novel, indeed, Figes makes use of the Lacanian metaphor of the “Law of the Father” in a literal sense, by showing Milton as a father who monopolizes control over language –as well as the knowledge of the sources and of the classics– and allows her daughter to have access only to a fragmented and incomplete version of it. By doing so, Figes seems to subscribe to the tenets of feminist discourse which suggest that women’s marginalization in the symbolic order can greatly explain their later alienation from language and culture. After all, the possession of language implies the possession of the canon, of a written culture, of a literary tradition which woman is deprived of and with which, therefore, she cannot identify.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically enough, many years after his death the father-author becomes present through the remaining relics that used to legitimize his authority: his books, pamphlets, seal and autographs thus become the testimony of his fame for scholars and editors who claim some further sign of his genius from an old Deborah,<sup>13</sup> when the actual “hand of the author,” the real material maker of the texts, is his daughter, who will die anonymous and poor.

In contrast with the canonical and well-known story told by Deborah’s famous father, the issue of anonymity presides in Figes’ novel, since Deborah’s presence is only visible through the interstices of an authorless narrative: no one gives the reader the name of the protagonist of this story. We only know her name indirectly through the very act of telling her own story, and not even then do we know who is speaking: her name can only be known through other narratives (biographical, for example). After all she is still defined in relation to the father –“My father’s daughter”– which keeps her from signing her own creation since she does not even have the copyright on her own name, or, in other words, she cannot legitimize the origin of the text. It is through her own

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12. Feminist criticism has drawn attention to female alienation from a canon formed and transmitted in a patrilinear order. The best known representative of that kind of genealogical theory is Harold Bloom and his famous *The Anxiety of Influence*.

13. It is not difficult to see here an echo of Henry James’ *The Aspern Papers* which explores the issue of fetishistic necrophilia in the figure of an unscrupulous scholar in search of documents by a deceased author. A modern treatment of this topic can be found in Antonia Byatt’s *Possession*.

“little” story that she comes to exist as an individual and that her identity, denied by her father’s grand narrative, is finally acknowledged.

Unlike other historiographic writings which try to recover the voices of exceptional women –in what feminist criticism calls compensatory strategies–, Figes avoids labels such as “major women writers” or “great women writers” because as socialist feminist she is aware that such distinctions imply a bourgeois and patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, she keeps Deborah anonymous and silenced, but paradoxically enough her narrative is very eloquent about the place of ordinary women in the economic and legal discourses of her time.

As we have been arguing up to this point, the sign is manipulated through the exercise of patriarchal and canonical power, but it is also true that in Figes’ novel this process is inserted within a materialist metanarrative: throughout the novel Milton’s daughters are depicted as active part of a productive system, and yet they are excluded from its benefits and likewise alienated from the wealth generated by their work not only in material terms but also, implicitly, in cultural terms.<sup>14</sup>

The structural motif of the female dispossession of the sign, and ultimately of language, has to be understood as part of a more global concept which includes other more material aspects of existence, such as knowledge, culture and wealth. A specific example of this dispossession refers to the question of how inheritance can establish a difference between sons and daughters. Actually, inheritance –like the canon or the literary tradition– is transmitted patrilinearly, and Milton, having no sons, benefitted other male members of his family, and left his daughters only a box full of somewhat revolutionary pamphlets and the non-existent dowry of their mother: “For you must know –my cousin wrote of it– that though I am my father’s daughter, he made me not his heir. I speak, sir, not of the dowry denied me, but of the learning in which he was so rich. Had I been his son, that died in infancy the year that I was born, it might have been otherwise” (3). Milton’s legacy does not even have an intellectual quality as might be expected from such a learned author. The education which he so “generously” gave her daughters does not allow them to re-create culture, since it is rather of an instrumental kind insofar as it turns them into a mere appendage of himself.

By linking education and economic circumstances Figes aligns herself with other materialist theories which maintain that education gives access to higher levels of welfare and justice. In fact, the feminist interpretation of the materialist analysis is based on the premise that the difference between male and female is strongly rooted in social and economic inequalities. That generic difference is thus not naturally given but

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14. In connection with this, notice the recurrence of the word “profit” in the novel and its relationship with the word “fruit”, already in the opening line of *Paradise Lost*.

historically constructed, as Deborah herself, making significant use of popular culture, points out: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” (49); and it has been systematically reinforced by biological, theological and anthropological arguments which have perpetuated male supremacy at the expense of women –“...now our gentlemen have given over digging, being sent to college, and Eve yet sits and spins” (49)–. Because of her sex, Deborah is denied a knowledge which her father does enjoy from a position of power.<sup>15</sup> But here Deborah is clearly allowed to be only a daughter and cheap labour, the victim of a patriarchal authority which is exercised both in the domestic/private and professional/public spheres.

Deborah distrusts narratives of liberation –also patriarchal products– because they contain an implicit social and generic double standard:

Men such as my father, who would have those set above them not their betters, would keep those born below them still inferior, to do their will. To feed their purpose, not our bellies, this is their intent. And so it is that men cry liberty, to which we must submit, slavish to their authority....I am born free, they say, but thou, being born to serve me, that is, born a woman, are not so. (42-44)

As a woman she has experienced that discrimination which has its source in the purely biological –“Our sex made us unworthy” (8)–. That is why for Deborah the only possibility to compensate that disadvantage is through education, that is, by appropriating the standard knowledge of a society and, rather than through faith or revolution (as the one advocated by her father), by fighting against the alienation created by the lack of such knowledge. In fact, Deborah substitutes those libertarian narratives by a reverie which anticipates later socialist utopias and which culminates in an image of the protagonist taking her own daughter by the hand to make her a full participant in the knowledge her father denied her.

Milton’s fame yields before the unorthodox language of his daughter, as it challenges the monologic position of the paternal figure. Similarly, Figes defies the received ideas in Milton’s canonical criticism, since she does not only write an unknown version of the poet’s life but she also offers an alternative to the academic canon which enthroned him as a totemic figure within literary tradition.

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15. Throughout the novel paternal authority is made to identify with that of other male figures such as the King and God. After all, the post-Revolution crisis of legitimation, experienced by patriarchal institutions (family, Church and State) evidences also a crisis in the male subjectivity that informs and supports them. In connection with this, Mark Breitenberg analyses how Restoration literature displays examples of masculine unease in a wide range of sites, including jealousy, cuckoldry anxiety, cross-dressing, homoerotic desire, humoral psychology, or the very ideas of honour and reputation. It is not difficult to see how in the seventeenth-century literature the domestic order seems to mirror the religious and political order, being the husband’s unstable position at home somehow analogous to that of God’s or the King’s in their respective realms.

Figes, as a literary critic, is aware that this alternative discourse is another strategy to impose a particular *Weltanschauung*. Thus, in the novel we discern a process of estrangement (in the formalist sense of the term) from specific critical paradigms –poststructuralism, feminism, marxism– and their respective icons –“Law of the Father,” “male gaze,” “literary paternity,” “alienated labour”–, which throughout the novel are considered from an unusual perspective. Insofar as Figes employs a work of fiction to implicitly re-consider the discourses of literary criticism, her text also becomes a cross-roads of different genres or modes of writing the borders of which become blurred, thus turning the novel into a critical contribution to the figure of Milton.

As we have seen, from what we might call a postmodern frame of reference, Figes re-writes History, challenges canonical critical discourses, rejects monological positions, recovers silenced voices, integrates apparently hostile discourses, allowing for a dialogic relationship between center and margins. At an early stage in the novel, Deborah says: “... we durst not argue. Women and servants must obey, not speak their minds” (8), an idea that recurs at the end: “Though I am my father’s daughter, I must keep silent” (154): daughter, woman, poor, anonymous and in a sense illiterate, Deborah embodies all aspects of marginality, but her silence is paradoxically much more revealing than other great voices.

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