Characterizing Rebecca: *Order And Disorder* and Lucy Hutchinson's elaboration in biblical negative space

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Abstract

The first five cantos of Lucy Hutchinson's *Order and Disorder* were published (anonymously) in 1679, twelve years after John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: both poems retell the story of *Genesis*. The full twenty cantos of Hutchinson's poem, however, remained only in manuscript until its first complete publication in 2001. I will examine Hutchinson's methods of characterization for the biblical Rebecca, with particular focus on the employment of "negative narrative space" to perform the characterization and fulfil her poem's goals. This essay examines the *process* of characterization and its effects, rather than providing a character study. Milton's characterization methods in *Paradise Lost* will provide a background for the discussion.

In the Bible, Rebecca's motivations for marrying Isaac, quickly and sight-unseen, are obscure. Hutchinson employs this absence of source narrative—"negative narrative space"— to elaborate on motivation and perform the characterization of Rebecca. Hutchinson's method concentrates on the power of the poetic voice rather than (somewhat in contrast to Milton) the utterances of the characters. Such characterization allows Hutchinson to fulfil her poem's aims and erect Rebecca as an exemplar for contemporary feminine behaviour, thereby demonstrating the relevance of the biblical narrative to contemporary (17th century) concerns.

Introduction

The first five cantos of Lucy Hutchinson's poem *Order and Disorder*[1] were printed

(anonymously) in 1679, twelve years after Milton's first edition of *Paradise Lost* was printed.

Hutchinson's long poem, like Milton's epic, sets out to retell parts of Scripture, specifically

Genesis; the relative timing of Hutchinson's and Milton's compositions places them at least

in dialogue with each other, if not in active competition.[2] It has in fact been suggested that

Order and Disorder represents a "veiled rebuke" of Milton (Moore 3: 21). However, *Order*

and Disorder was not properly attributed to Hutchinson until much later (having originally

been ascribed to Hutchinson's brother, Sir Allen Apsley), and the last fifteen cantos existed

only in manuscript until being published in full in the 21st century. *Order and Disorder,* then,

is a recently discovered and relatively unexplored long poem[3] from restoration England that

engages with the same subject matter as the canonical *Paradise Lost* and was written by a

woman with political and theological views substantially similar to Milton's (Norbrook 'A

Devine Originall' 13). Despite these similarities, however, *Order and Disorder* diverges in

many ways from the approach taken by Milton in his epic.

For example, there is stark contrast between Milton's and Hutchinson's treatment of

the fall of Satan and his crew. Milton spends two books (some 1800 lines of poetry, and

around twenty percent of the entire epic) expounding on the causes of the bad angels' fall. On

the same topic, Hutchinson says only this: "Of their rebellion and their overthrow / We will

not dare t' invent" (4:44–45). A reader with experience of *Paradise Lost* will surely come to

Order and Disorder and find Hutchinson's treatment a shock. If we are to accept that these

two poems are meant to serve, at least to some degree, the purpose of educating, then it must

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[1] The poem's full title is *Order and Disorder: or, the World Made and Undone. Being Meditations upon the Creation and the Fall; as it is recorded in the beginning of Genesis.*
[2] See Elizabeth Scott-Bauman's chapter "Lucy Hutchinson, the Bible and *Order and Disorder*" in *Forms of Engagement* (171) for a review of the personal connections between Milton and Hutchinson.
[3] Whether or not Hutchinson's twenty-canto work is an "epic" is contentious (Ross 483-497).

be that on this point the two authors have different lessons to administer and, as I will demonstrate, different methods of administering them. It might be that Milton's lesson exists in his imagining of the bad angels' fall, while Hutchinson's lesson exists in *not* imagining it[4] at all—a standpoint that meshes satisfyingly with Hutchinson's belief in the integrity of scripture and its ability to interpret itself (Scott-Baumann 195).

However, Hutchinson's firm and outright refusal to speculate outside Scripture in this instance contrasts rather markedly with her willingness to elaborate in other aspects. This willingness is especially apparent for her characters, and among them, particularly for her female characters. This inconsistency in Hutchinson's degree of invention is partially, I will argue, due to what she is attempting to achieve, but also partly due to the anticipated distribution (or non-distribution) of her poem (Wilcher 25). In the poem's Preface, she writes "These meditations were not at first designed for public view." She may, therefore, have allowed herself more freedom in writing material that she expected never to become publicly available and to which her name was not attached. Robert Wilcher has identified just such an increasing degree of "imaginative freedom" (25) as the poem progresses.

Hutchinson and Milton both provide readers with license to consider intentionality. Both state their purpose early. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton famously sets out to "justify the ways of God to men" (1:26). In contrast, in the preface to *Order and Disorder*, Hutchinson brands her verse as "meditations". This fits well with the poem's aim as given by Hutchinson within the verse itself: "Let the sacred theme that is my choice / Give utterance and music to my voice, / Singing the works by which thou [God] art revealed" (1:35–37). Hutchinson's job, then, is to sing (in poetry) and meditate upon the works of God—but only those "by which thou art revealed". That is, she will sing only of those elements of the "sacred theme" that are

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[4] It is worth noting the general applicability of this lesson, too. Hutchinson writes, "*We* will not dare t' invent" rather than "*I* will not dare t' invent". Clearly it's not just she who should stay clear of non-scriptural territory, but all of us. This universalization of scriptural lessons is a feature of Hutchinson's poem.

recorded in God's word, and nothing else: "What dark eternity hath kept concealed … It were presumptuous folly to enquire" (1:38–41). Hutchinson's intention is different from Milton's: she will sing of God's art, and meditate upon the sacred themes. This intention is more diffuse, as represented by her less direct poetic statement of intent, and more self-referential (her audience is, to some degree, herself).[5]

Not only do these stated aims provide authorization to consider the poets' intentions, but they also provide a lens through which to view the processes of characterization. That is, the aims of each poem affect how characterization is approached and deployed. Hutchinson's is a meditation, and the demands of and on characterization differ from those required by Milton's theodicy. This essay examines Hutchinson's process and methods of characterization—her pedagogical technique—for the biblical person of Rebecca, with particular focus on the employment of "negative narrative space" to perform the characterization and fulfil her poem's goals.

Negative narrative space

Negative space in a narrative is a location in a text where things exist or happen but are not directly available to the reader. For Thomas Merrill, negative space in Scripture is where religion lives:

> In the Bible … we find statements like "God said, Let there be light; and there was light"; "Once I was blind. Now I see." The gaps in the middle of these assertions are repositories of religious faith, experience, dogma and mystery which are the

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[5] Hutchinson begins her poem's Preface with "These meditations… were fixed upon to reclaim a busy roving thought from wandering into the pernicious and perplexed maze of human inventions; whereinto the vain curiosity of youth had drawn me…"

"unspoken connectives" which the sacred ethos of a particular age unconsciously supplies. (7)

Merrill references Erich Auerbach, who states that the style of the Bible is characterized by paratactic gaps, lacunae, and mysterious omissions (3-19). One does not need to be religious to understand what Merrill is getting at: these gaps, omissions, and lacunae provide space for a reader to make "unspoken connections" (7). Parataxis allows space for a reader to inhabit the text—to dwell in the narrative's negative space—by failing to provide causality within individual sentences and passages. A wedge can be driven into a narrow crevice of text to expand it, creating a sort of textual vacuum—which sucks us in. On the page, the negative space in "Once I was blind. Now I see" is minor, only a full stop and the single type-space that follows. What for Merrill is a place in the text in which he can find faith can provide different opportunities for other readers—and other writers, such as Hutchinson and Milton.

The Bible is, of course, the primary source for both *Order and Disorder* and *Paradise Lost.* What is omitted, paratactic or left out of Scripture with regards to its characters provides the negative space from which Milton's and Hutchinson's characters may be born and grow. Consider this passage from Genesis 3:6 describing Adam and Eve's transgression in Paradise: "She took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." Around each punctuation mark is a potential cavern of negative space. Merrill would, I believe, suggest that a good Christian ought to sit a while on each piece of punctuation and revel in its religiosity, its "logical impropriety" (7), percolate in the presence of this "God talk" (1), and allow faith to prevail. Milton and Hutchinson instead elaborated in the negative space provided by the paratactic style and lacunae, and employed characterization to explain the passage. Eve took of the fruit *and she ate*? How can this be? What went through her mind? Was she crazy/stupid/demented? Characterization would

become an explanation. In *Order and Disorder*, the characters provide opportunities for meditations; in *Paradise Lost*, the characters perform the theodicy.

Characterizing Rebecca in *Order and Disorder*

The characterization of Rebecca is representative of Hutchinson's technique in *Order and Disorder*. In a rather deconstructive act, I have tabulated Rebecca's speech acts from Canto 16 regarding her union with Isaac. Alongside her utterances in *Order and Disorder* below are her utterances from the 1611 King James Authorized Version (AV) Bible.[6] These spoken lines advance the poem's plot, but do little to perform Rebecca's characterization beyond that provided by the biblical source text.

Rebecca's speech in *Order and Disorder*	Rebecca's speech in Genesis[7]
"Drink sir," she said, "and when you have enough, / I'll give your beasts." (73–74)	And she said, "Drink, my lord" [and then] she said, "I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking." (24:18)
"Bethuel my sire, Nahor my grandsire are," / Said she, "and Milcah me to Bethuel bare." (91–92)	And she said unto him, "I am the daughter of Bethuel the son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor." (24:24)
"Sir," said she, "we can give you a retreat, / Nor shall your camels want room or meat." (95–96)	She said moreover unto him, "We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in." (24:25)

These are the last words in both texts that Rebecca speaks on the subject of her arranged marriage (with the exception of "I will go" in Genesis 24:58, which is not replicated

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[6] Hutchinson seemed to have read and used both the AV and the Geneva Bible for writing *Order and Disorder* (Scott-Baumann 171); the choice of the AV as the comparator does not significantly affect the argument. Note that the spelling "Rebekah" is used in both the Geneva and AV Bibles; despite this, Hutchinson uses the "Rebecca" spelling.

[7] I have added speech marks in the biblical text, to make it easier to distinguish Rebecca's words from those of the narrator.

in the poem). The degree of correspondence in *speech* is clear: Hutchinson has undertaken

essentially no elaboration in what Rebecca says. This point needs to be discussed in the light

of Sims' notion of "authoritative reality" (8). Sims says that among other problems Milton

faced with the composition of *Paradise Lost*:

> …was the problem of making the persons seem real, even those whose otherworldly
>
> character removed them from the ordinary experience of the reader, and the problem
>
> of giving the stories a prevailingly Scriptural authoritativeness even when the poet's
>
> imagination took him far afield from actual Scripture. (8)

It seems that Hutchinson looks to derive her "authoritative reality" through the accurate

representation of characters' utterances, while Milton, according to Sims, made his poem

such a "virtual mosaic of Biblical echo" that the poet seemed to speak with "textual authority

backing every phrase of the poem (8). In other words, Hutchinson does not perform her acts

of characterization through the character's speech, but rather through elaborations on

interiority.

      To make this point explicit I need to draw attention to an extended section of the

poem that follows the success of the servant's suit of Rebecca:

The friends at last	171
Referred it to Rebecca, and she cast	
It for the present voyage; wherefore they,	
Giving her fit attendants, the next day	
With blessings to her spouse the virgin sent,	175
With whom a nurse and train of women went.	

How different were those virtuous days from ours!

Beauty and goodness then were women's dowers

Whom pride of their own wealth did not erect

To haughty carriage, but with due respect　　　　　　　　180

Obeying their own husbands, they became

Strangers to their first family and name.

Not want of filial love or piety

Made fair Rebecca here so soon agree

Forever from her father's house to go,　　　　　　　　185

But she believed, since 'twas concluded so,

A short stay might her pious griefs augment,

And make her virtuous courage to relent,

Softened with her fond mother's melting tears,

Which might have filled her with such doubts and fears　　190

As would have stopped the entrance of that love

That must the blessing of her whole life prove;

And since she must forsake her native home,

She wisely chose occasion now to come

With obligations to her future lord　　　　　　　　195

Who needs must kindly take her quick accord,

Without impeachment to her modesty

So freely given, but yet not till she

Was by her parents first disposed; and then

With prudence maids incline unto those men　　　　　200

To whom their future service is designed

When it becomes their duty to be kind.

Besides, when sorrow must pierce through our hearts,

'Tis better to receive quick-flying darts

Than while we sit expecting an ill fate   205

To grow more sensible of its sad weight.

Amazement dulls our sense of sudden blows,

And when they're past we seek to cure our woes.

Rebecca gave herself no time to make

Reflection on those joys she must forsake—   210

Dear parents, loving friends, her native place—

An unknown land and husband to embrace.

Had she considered this perhaps it might

Have filled a tender virgin with affright,

Yet could not have her destiny controlled.   215

Tedious consideration checks the bold;

Whilst cautious men deliberating be,

They oftener lose the opportunity

Which daring minds embrace than with their wise

Foresight escape the threatened precipice.   220

Where choice is offered we may use the scales

Of prudence, but where destiny prevails,

Consideration then is out of date

Where courage is required to meet our fate.

Wherefore, with her dear home the parting bride   225

Forsook her tender thoughts, and now applied

> Herself unto her present state: in which
>
> Hearing her spouse was godly, honoured, rich,
>
> Her hopes of happiness with joy she greets,
>
> And gladly so her future blessings meets.   230

This is a monumental mediation, and in fact continues until line 246. Some of these lines encompass actions, such as discussions, decisions, departures, arrivals; however, perhaps the most thorough performance of characterization begins at line 177 with "How different were those virtuous days…" and ends at line 230 with "And gladly so her future blessings meets." This is a prime example of a section in which Hutchinson "suspends the action to discourse on its meaning" (Norbrook 'Poem and Contexts' xxv). These are fifty-five lines of poetry in which nothing "happens" except for poetic elaboration and mediation. These meditations are particularly concerned with characterization, and especially with characterization as a means of moralizing and memorializing God's word—that is, characterization as a means of fulfilling the poem's aim.

The location in the Bible for this meditation is *Genesis* 24:61–62. Verse 61 ends with "And the servant took Rebekah away, and went his way" and verse 62 starts with "And Isaac came…" Hutchinson, then, has driven a wedge between these two verses and levered her poetic mind into the negative space. There she inhabits Rebecca as a psychological being—but, in the midst of that inhabitation, she exits Rebecca too, so that she might step back to elevate Rebecca as an exemplar.

Prior to line 177, the poetic voice is narrating the action in an essentially standard third-person mode. Line 177 itself ("How different were those virtuous days from ours!") is an abrupt exit from the action, and marks a different mode of narration—one concerned less with story and more with moral implications. Such shifts into and out of Rebecca's mind

occur several times in the subsequent lines, and become a hallmark of Hutchinson's technique. Characterization, then, is a means by which Hutchinson can work her way up to universal wisdom. The poem's didactic quality could be thought of as peaking in particular phrases where the poet's universal moralizing leads to epigrammatic moments. "Tis better to receive quick-flying darts" (16:204) and "Tedious consideration checks the bold" (16:216) have the qualities of epigrams, such that these lines might be lifted out of the text and applied in new situations. The transportability of these moments is reinforced by the match between lineation and syntax—each statement is syntactically complete within the line of poetry.

One of the most striking differences between Rebecca's story in the Bible and Hutchinson's version is the absence of explicit motivation in the original, and the degree to which it is dealt with in the poem. The first clear examination of Rebecca's motivation occurs when the poet writes "Not want of filial love or piety / Made fair Rebecca here so soon agree" (16:183–184). This is a response to what the poet must imagine is sitting in the reader's mind, or perhaps what she imagines *ought to be* sitting in the reader's mind. The method used initially is to "rule out" the less desirable and more simplistic option, "want of love or piety" (16:183), which then opens the door to alternatives.

Having been told what Rebecca's motivations were *not*, we are then given this:

> But she believed, since 'twas concluded so,
>
> A short stay might her pious griefs augment,
>
> And make her virtuous courage to relent,
>
> Softened with her fond mother's melting tears,
>
> Which might have filled her with such doubts and fears   190
>
> As would have stopped the entrance of that love
>
> That must the blessing of her whole life prove (16:186–192)

The phrase "pious griefs" has the tinge of oxymoron about it: should not piety lead to consolation rather than "griefs"? But, this is to be expected. After all, such griefs are the result of what we read as a natural conflict between Rebecca's filial love and her piety. Her love of her family drives her to stay, but the same love drives her to leave (it is, after all, a daughter's obligation to marry and cleave unto her husband). Into this mix Rebecca must add the potential for a competing type of love—that for her future husband. To stop the "entrance of that love" (16:191) would be reckless, especially as that love will prove to be "the blessing of her whole life" (16:192). Overall, the contradictory nature of this phrase works hard to characterize Rebecca, not least because it humanizes her: there seems little that could be more human than to experience multiple and conflicting emotions at the same time. Rebecca, then, is infused with verisimilitude—the sort that is not present in the biblical tract. And this humanization has a secondary effect: the reader sees the narratives of the Bible as somewhat more "real" than they might previously have seemed.

The passage leaves us, I think, if not in doubt over Rebecca's motivations, then in some doubt over how she rationalized them to the point where she could act. Were her motivations the result of reason? That is, did she leave simply because she "knew" that she would have to, and it was better to receive the "quick-flying darts"? Or was she primarily emotionally motivated; that is, did she leave because it was too psychologically painful to stay? Or perhaps did she leave because the "pull factors" were rather exciting: "Hearing her spouse was godly, honoured, rich, / Her hopes of happiness with joy she greets, / And gladly so her future blessings meets" (16:228–230). The answer is surely that it is none of these reasons in isolation. The characterization is such that Rebecca is human: her emotions and reasoning interact with complexity to lead to her actions and, at the point at which she has

reached a conclusion about what to do, she performs the exceedingly human act of post-hoc rationalization (lines 228–230). At the point of this rationalization, her destiny is set.

Rebecca *versus* Eve as literary monuments in *Order and Disorder*

Authorial intrusion in *Order and Disorder* works to create exemplars of the characters. Here are the lines in Canto 4 dealing with Eve's transgression, put alongside the lines of meditation on Rebecca from Canto 16:

Eve (canto 4, 179–184)	Rebecca (canto 16, 176–182)
Though unexperience might excuse Eve's fault, / Yet those who now give way to an assault, / By suffering it alone, none can exempt / From the just blame that they their tempters tempt, / And by vain confidence themselves betray, / Fondly secure in a known desperate way.	How different were those virtuous days from ours! / Beauty and goodness then were women's dowers, / Whom pride of their own wealth did not erect / To haughty carriage, but with due respect / Obeying their own husbands, they became / Strangers to their first family and name.

These passages make explicit the lessons to be taken from Hutchinson's characterizations. The character of Eve is serving as a model for how *not* to behave (all the while somewhat excusing the particular transgressions that she perpetrated). Hutchinson is referring to Eve to try to reconstruct the "character" of her fellow women. The "assault" in this instance is sexual—Satan's temptation of Eve was often viewed as a sexual seduction (Green 161), and Hutchinson's reference to "lewd men" several lines earlier helps to clarify this point (4:173). The implication is that such women "give way" to assault through their choice of solitariness. This seems clear enough, but Hutchinson elaborates: no-one may "exempt" such women from "just [that is, right and appropriate] blame". In fact, Hutchinson relieves the seducers of

their portion of the blame by saying that it is the women who "their tempters tempt." (All this amounts to a poetic seventeenth-century version of the modern misogynistic commonplace "she was asking for it.")[8] These lines work firstly to characterize Eve in the poem, and secondly to construct Eve as a personified warning for women who would tempt sin. The construction of this literary monument is also indicated by a shift in tense. The lines preceding this authorial intrusion are uniformly in the past tense, retelling an event; however, we are lurched into the present by "But so the devil then so lewd men now" (4:173). The present tense operates in several ways: it addresses the reader directly, removing them from the safe distance the retelling had provided; it allows the statements to stand in any present moment; by contrasting so explicitly with "the devil *then*" it works to hurl the past episode into parallel with the reader's present, aligning the moments and amplifying the applicability of the history to the present day; and, through the deployment of the word "now", it implies an enduring currency of the lesson—the message is still important right "now".

The meditation on Rebecca accomplishes a similar end. The first line ("How different were those virtuous days from ours!") both jolts the reader out of the narrative and executes a rhetorical effect: Rebecca was one of the good ones, and it is exasperating that contemporary women do not heed her example. As with the former passage, the Rebecca intrusion also brings the event from the distant, scriptural past into the present, therefore highlighting its relevance to the reader. The reference to the days that are "ours" involves the reader directly in the lesson. The "haughty carriage" is certainly a reference to the perceived deterioration of women's conduct in Hutchinson's time, achieved by stating that such conduct was non-existent in Rebecca's days.

The characterization in the two passages differs: Eve is characterized as a negative exemplar, while Rebecca is characterized as a model for female decorum. The poet, however,

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[8] Robert Mayer emphasizes that Lucy Hutchinson "embraced a misogynistic tradition" (306).

did not stop there: she also built Rebecca into a model for the male behaviour. This is one of the morals derived from Rebecca's characterization:

> Tedious consideration checks the bold;
>
> Whilst cautious men deliberating be,
>
> They oftener lose the opportunity
>
> Which daring minds embrace than with their wise
>
> Foresight escape the threatened precipice.
>
> Where choice is offered we may use the scales
>
> Of prudence, but where destiny prevails,
>
> Consideration then is out of date
>
> Where courage is required to meet our fate. (16:216–224)

It is important to remember here that the poet is still circling in Rebecca's negative space. That is, the poet is meditating on Rebecca. With this in mind, it strikes me as a startling piece of elaboration. The lesson is that we ought to distinguish between matters of "destiny" and matters of "choice": the former matters require immediate courage to enact, while the latter may be considered and weighed in "the scales of prudence." It must be concluded, given the location of this meditation, that the poet considers marriage a matter of destiny rather than choice—at least in the Bible, although the fact that she meditates on this point suggests that it may be a universal truth. This provides an interesting paradox: Rebecca is granted a remarkable degree of agency in administering her own life, but at the same in some matters (such as marriage, and presumably other domestic spheres) she has no agency at all. Or, to express it another way, Hutchinson is simultaneously indicating that women are to be subordinate to men (it is Rebecca's "destiny" or "fate" to do the bidding of her future

husband) but by no means inferior (her perceptiveness and fortitude is impressive). Secondly, the passage erects Rebecca as a person on whom men may model their behaviour. Rebecca is not just someone from whom women may learn decorum, but someone from whom men may extract understanding and gain knowledge of how to act in certain matters.[9]

These paradoxes and ironies act to reinforce the performance of Rebecca's character. Just as a person may be psychologically contradictory, they may also both represent and deny the notions of equivalent female agency and intellect.

Conclusion

The Oxford Companion to the Bible calls Rebecca "a woman of insight and determination" (642). This picture is primarily the result of her perceptive understanding of her twin sons' natures, and her ability to manipulate the old and blind Isaac into blessing her favoured son (Jacob) rather than Isaac's favourite (and first-born) Esau (Canto 18:16–68; Genesis 27). Hutchinson brings Rebecca's qualities of insight and determination forward in the narrative and translates them into previously unknown and unexplored motivations for agreeing so quickly to marry Isaac. However, Hutchinson must be said to add wisdom to Rebecca's list of attributes—an elaboration of Rebecca's characterization in the negative space of the biblical source. Rebecca's characterization is a key means by which Hutchinson is able to fulfil the aims of her poem and erect Rebecca as an exemplar of feminine decorum with enduring relevance.

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[9] Corresponding tones have been noted in *Paradise Lost*. For example, Sharon Seelig says: "Eve, I am convinced, is not merely Milton's model for womanhood but his model for mankind." (71)

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