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# Rewriting Eve as an Act of Resistance

## 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>-century Women's Interpretations of Eve

*Until lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt glorifies only the hunter.*  
Nigerian Proverb

«Literature of Resistance» was a term coined by Ghassan Kanafani in 1966 to describe literature produced by Palestinians writing about their experience of Israeli occupation, exile, and oppression.<sup>1</sup> By associating literature with resistance, Kanafani called attention to the production of literature «as a political and politicized activity,» a way to claim power by reasserting one's story, one's humanity, and one's identity in the face of injustice and oppression.<sup>2</sup> For almost a century prior to Kanafani's work, Palestinian Arabs who had lived in the land for generations experienced a growing sense of dislocation as waves of Jewish immigrants, with the support of Britain, poured into Palestine with the intention of establishing a Jewish homeland there. In the decades after Israel's Declaration of Independence and the 1948 Palestine War, the situation for Palestinian Arabs grew increasingly dire. More than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were forced to leave, many relocating to one of 49 different United Nations supported refugee camps scattered across the Arab world. And though the more than 150,000 Palestinian Arabs that remained in what was now the State of Israel were granted Israeli citizenship, from 1948-1966 they were subjected to martial law, which included the imposition of curfews, travel restrictions, arrest and detention without trial, and the confiscation of homes, personal property, and land by government authorities. In other words, they became a colonized people, subject to laws which served the interests of their «foreign rulers» but which increasingly left them lacking autonomy, security, and the stability necessary for human well-being. While Palestinians lacked the ability to control these external realities, through literature they could give voice to their experiences, subverting, and even destabilizing the dominant narrative that sanctioned the hegemonic power of their oppressors and in this way, protesting the wrongs and injustices committed against them. In other

1 B. Harlow: Resistance Literature, New York 1987, 2.

2 Ibid., 28.

words, the production of literature became for them a means of resisting their subjugation and entering into the arena of the struggle for power.

The recognition of this relationship between literary production and resistance in literary studies has been a helpful one in a number of ways for understanding and appreciating the literature produced by colonized peoples or oppressed underclasses in their struggle for liberation. For one, by identifying and categorizing literature in this way, the works of marginalized and oppressed people, which are often hidden, ignored, and excluded from the literary corpus, receive greater visibility and recognition. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes, the category «resistance literature» invites readers to consider these texts on their own terms, that is, not only or even primarily for their aesthetic or literary contributions but for how they effect resistance, the strategies they employ to advocate for justice and/or to destabilize the dominant narrative that makes injustice tolerable or invisible.

While women in history did not constitute a colonized people *per se*, they did experience subjugation under the hegemony of patriarchy in many places around the world and through much of history. This is not to say that all women were oppressed. Exactly how patriarchy impacted the quality of women's lives was dependent on a constellation of factors that included race, class, geographical location, and time in history. However, it is to say that within patriarchal societies, women collectively shared in the struggle of living under a set of cultural mores that denied them the basic right and freedom to self-determination, mores that were supported by, if not rooted in, a metanarrative that characterized women as the inferior sex.<sup>3</sup>

In time, the tides of social opinion about the nature of women would change and by the late 19th century, women and men across Europe and North America were actively protesting the inequalities of the sexes through the Women's Rights movement. In 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York, over 300 people would attend the first Woman's Rights convention in the United States, an event that would launch the women's suffrage movement. The Declaration of Sentiments, which became the Convention's manifesto describing women's grievances and demands, began with an amended introduction to the American Declaration of Independence, «we hold these truths to be self-evident; that all

3 G. Lerner: *The Creation of Patriarchy*, New York 1986, 16-17.

men *and women* [italics mine] are created equal.»<sup>4</sup> One hundred years later, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which stated in Article 1 that «all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights», adding the clarifying remark in Article 2 that «everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.»<sup>5</sup>

It is commonly assumed that the concern for women's rights and women's equality began with these movements, an assumption that is reinforced by the identification of feminist activity and thought in this period as first-wave feminism. However, long before the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women were protesting and resisting their diminishment and subjugation through a variety of measures, not least of which was through the circulation of literary texts that challenged the fundamental premise on which patriarchy was justified. A good example of this is the body of texts that engage the story of biblical Eve, written and circulated by European women writers between the 15th-17th centuries. This period in history is often remembered as a time of intellectual and cultural awakening, a renaissance that was characterized by a surge of interest in classical scholarship, and by artistic advancements and scientific innovation. It was also, however, a time that witnessed the revival and new publication of misogynist texts and full-scale literary attacks on women. These attacks were buttressed by the work of early biblical interpreters who, influenced by Greek philosophy and Aristotelian thought, concluded that Eve was an inferior and secondary creation, fickle and easily tempted, who bore primary responsibility for plunging the world into sin. And because Eve was the first woman, early interpreters attributed to her an archetypal status such that she came to represent all women. As Eve was woman, so all women were Eve. The implication of this close association between Eve and the female sex was that all women were held collectively responsible for Eve's sin and guilt. This conviction is captured well in Tertullian's notoriously polemical address to women in *On Christian Apparel*:

- 4 «The Declaration of Sentiments by the Seneca Falls Conference (1848),» Edsitement!, <https://edsitement.neh.gov/feature/declaration-sentiments-seneca-falls-conference-1848> (accessed Aug 1, 2018).
- 5 «The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,» United Nations, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> (accessed July 13, 2018).

And do you not know that you are (each) an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of the (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die.<sup>6</sup>

For early interpreters, woman's role in the fall becomes a compelling justification for universal male headship. According to Augustine, while woman, as a secondary and derivative creation, is by nature, subject to her husband, the hierarchical ordering of the sexes takes on a new significance in a fallen world, becoming God's means for restraining the increase in sin.<sup>7</sup> Male headship, then, was seen as a divinely ordained system that functioned as a kind of grace to the world in thwarting woman's moral degeneracy and limiting her ability to spread sin further.

For women to accede to this rendering of Eve was to accept their own inferiority and the justification for a system of patriarchy that made them subordinate to fathers, husbands, and brothers who by law and by custom, denied them the right to own property, to pursue formal education, to marry freely, to vote for civic leaders, to participate in public affairs, to choose a profession, and to share in ecclesiastical leadership. In an effort to challenge a legal and social structure that denied them personhood and agency, women took up the pen to fight back, rereading the story of Eve in ways that fundamentally challenged the dominant narrative which animated patriarchy. They wrote to provide an alternative rendering of Eve, and an alternative rendering of women, asserting their agency as interpreters of the Bible and resisting the reductive characterization of Eve that held women in submission.

Though many of their writings were quite popular in their own day, in the modern period, these works have received scant attention, quite likely because they don't fit our scholarly categories very well. They may or may not have literary or aesthetic value. They often don't go far enough in their appeals for equality to be classified as feminist literature. And while they popularized cer-

6 Tertullian: *On Christian Apparel*, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.): *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Volume 4: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Part First and Second, Grand Rapids 1988, 1.1.14.

7 Augustine: *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (ACW 42), trans. J. Hammond Taylor, Mahwah 1982, 11.37.

tain interpretations of Eve, only occasionally did women writers produce truly original insights into the biblical text. In terms of artistic or theological merit, then, these writings are not likely to command our attention. And yet, I would argue that these writings are critical to gaining a fuller and deeper picture of the history of women's long-suffering and struggle for equality and the role biblical interpretation has played in both women's subjugation and women's liberation. In other words, these writings reflect women's voices in this history of struggle and signal women's resistance to their subjugation. Given this function of women's writings on Eve in this period, a fruitful method of inquiry may be to study them as resistance literature, that is, to explore how women writers signaled their resistance, identifying the discernible strategies they employed in their rereading of Eve to advocate for gender justice and/or deconstruct notions of their own inferiority. In an effort to better understand and appreciate these writings and women's history of struggle, then, the rest of this article will consider the strategies that surface in the writings of 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>-century European women in their interpretations of Eve.<sup>8</sup> The goal in this article is not to be exhaustive but rather illustrative, highlighting three such strategies that were especially common and important to women writers in their work of resistance.

### *Reinterpreting Eve*

One of the most common strategies women writers adopted was reinterpreting the character of Eve. If all women were Eve, then how one construed Eve determined one's attitudes toward women. While the received tradition had attributed to Eve a Pandora's box full of negative qualities, women interpreters discerned in Genesis 1-3 a more noble Eve, an Eve who was especially blessed and honored by God, created to be Adam's equal partner and companion in life. Reflecting on the details of Eve's creation, for example, Christine de Pizan, a young Viennese writer of the late 14<sup>th</sup>-early 15<sup>th</sup> century, rejects the notion that being created from the man's rib signifies the woman's inferiority or secondary status. Instead, she notes that while the woman could have been created from the man's feet, God made her from the man's side. This, for de Pizan, indicates a relationship of mutuality, intimacy, and equality, suggesting «that she should stand at his [man's] side as a companion and never lie at his feet like

8 See A. Benckhuyzen: *The Gospel According to Eve: A History of Women's Interpretation*, Downer's Grove, forthcoming.

a slave, and also that he should love her as his own flesh.»<sup>9</sup> In other words, she is to be man's partner and friend, not his inferior or subordinate.

Arcangela Tarabotti, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian writer who was forced by her father to take vows as a Catholic nun at age 16, similarly sought to rehabilitate Eve as part of a larger strategy to challenge religious sanction for what she referred to as «paternal tyranny.» Tarabotti reconceives the traditional image of Eve in a number of ways, including challenging established notions of what it means that Eve was created to be man's helper. Rejecting the idea that the term «helper» implies a subordinate status, Tarabotti argues instead that Gen 2:18, «And the Lord God said: It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a help like unto himself,» signals parity between the sexes. «As soon as His Majesty said the word *help*,» He immediately added, «*like unto himself*,» implying that woman is of just as much value as man. So,» she warns her male readers, «do not boast about your superiority . . . »<sup>10</sup> Also reflecting on Gen 2:18 and man's need for help, 17<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian writer Moderata Fonte notes that the man appears to be deficient without the woman. Since the woman's creation completes an imperfection in the man, she argues, women cannot be inferior to men. «If they need our help, when we are just the same as them in every quality and substance,» Fonte observes, «then that must mean that they are inferior to us and should cede power to us.»<sup>11</sup>

Women writers made similar arguments for women's eminent value and worth based on the raw materials from which the man and the woman were variously created. De Pizan, for instance, notes that Adam is made from the mud of Damascus outside of the garden while Eve is formed in Paradise from the noblest substance of God's created order, that is, from the man himself.<sup>12</sup> As

9 C. de Pizan: Letter of the God of Love, in T. Fenster and M. Carpenter Erler (eds.): Poems of Cupid, God of Love, New York 1990, 596-604; C. de Pizan: The Book of the City of Ladies, trans. R. Brown-Grant, London 1999, 1.9.2. A similar statement is found in P. Lombard: The Sentences Book 2: On Creation, ed. G. Silano, Toronto 2008, 2.18.2.104.

10 A. Tarabotti: Paternal Tyranny, trans. L. Panizza, Chicago 2004, 50.

11 M. Fonte: The Worth of Women, trans. V. Cox, Chicago 1997, 168.

12 de Pizan: City of Ladies (n. 9), 1.9.2. For this observation, see also Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel (Fathers of the Church 42), trans. J. Savage, Washington 1961, 4.4.24-25. Note, however, that Ambrose argues the opposite of de Pizan, explaining why location and material of creation does not indicate God's special grace, honor, or blessing. A more positive interpretation is found in a sermon of Humbert de Romans, a Master of the Dominican order referenced in S. Tugwell (ed.), Early Dominicans: Selected Writings (The Classics of Western Spirituality), New York 1982, 330.

de Pizan points out, if the raw materials from which something is made indicate something about the thing's stature, then Eve is a very noble creature indeed, having been made from the man, in Paradise, by the hand of the Creator. Fonte goes further, arguing that «the first man, Adam, was created in the Damascene fields, while God chose to create woman within the Earthly Paradise, as a tribute to her greater nobility.»<sup>13</sup> Reflecting a similar sentiment, Tarabotti observes that it is the woman, not the man, who is depicted as the crowning glory of God's creation, «the compendium of all perfections.»<sup>14</sup>

Based on these observations, some women writers found in Genesis 1 & 2 a case for women's superiority. In the end, however, de Pizan cautions against reading into the text strong differentiations between the man and the woman. Instead, she insists that both Genesis 1 and 2 emphasize similarity and equality rather than difference between the sexes. De Pizan sees this most profoundly in the assertion of Gen 1:27 that both male and female are created in the image of God. Taking her cues from early interpreters, de Pizan argues that the image of God is located in the soul and reflected in intelligence, rationality, skill, judgment, and good sense.<sup>15</sup> Different from the body, which bears biological distinctions associated with gender, de Pizan observes that the soul transcends gender difference. Souls are neither male nor female as God is neither male nor female. Instead, God places the same image of himself, the same equally good and noble soul with all the same moral, intellectual, and spiritual capacities, in both man and woman. The implication, for de Pizan, is that in all the ways that fundamentally define what it means to be human, man and woman are equal.<sup>16</sup>

Women writers similarly reinterpreted traditional renderings of the Eve found in Genesis 3. The received tradition depicted the Eve of Genesis 3 as a woman who was easily swayed by the serpent's words, who tempted/seduced her husband to join her in disobedience, and who thereby plunged the world into sin and strife.<sup>17</sup> Women writers, however, offered «quite another and con-

13 Fonte: Worth (n. 11), 60.

14 See Fonte: Worth (n. 11), 61 and Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny* (n. 10), 45-46.

15 A similar notion is put forward by Augustine: *Genesis* (n. 7), 6.12; P. Schaff (ed.): *City of God, Christian Doctrine* (NPNF 2), Peabody 1995, 12.23.

16 de Pizan: *City of Ladies* (n. 9), 1.9.2.

17 These arguments are cited by Aquinas: *Summa Theologica*, trans. Father of the English Dominican Province, New York 1948, 2-2163.4.

trary viewpoint.»<sup>18</sup> A good example is found in the work of Isotta Nogarola, a 15<sup>th</sup>- century Italian humanist, who offers a defense of Eve in her disquisition *Dialogue on the Equal or Unequal Sin of Eve and Adam* (1451).

Examining Genesis 3 closely, Nogarola concludes that the sin of Adam, not Eve, was the greater sin. Eve sinned not out of pride, Nogarola reasons, but because she desired knowledge, a claim Nogarola supports by appealing to Gen 3:6, «So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.»<sup>19</sup> Knowledge, Nogarola contends, is a natural desire, common to all human beings and thus not, in and of itself, sinful. It is true, she acknowledges, that Eve sinned – her desire for knowledge overpowered her judgment and she fell prey to the serpent's deceptions. But Eve's sin paled in comparison to Adam's who ate in the full knowledge of his wrongdoing, intentionally transgressing God's command.<sup>20</sup> Unlike Eve, then, who was «misled,» Adam put his own will above the will of God and in doing so, showed contempt for God and God's will. As such, Adam committed the graver sin, Nogarola argues.<sup>21</sup>

Nogarola goes on to consider who is more responsible for original sin. Traditional interpreters attributed this to Eve who, they claimed, plunged the whole world into sin. Nogarola, however, challenges this assertion. Eve «harmed only herself,» she writes, «. . . but the man Adam spread the infection of sin to himself and to all future generations.»<sup>22</sup> Nogarola notes that the Apostle Paul seems to take this position as well. «As the Apostle Paul says,» she comments,

- 18 I. Nogarola: Complete Writings: Letterbook, Dialogue on Adam and Eve, Orations, ed. M. King, Chicago 2003, 146.
- 19 Nogarola: Complete Writings (n. 18), 152. Contra Augustine and Aquinas who claim that Eve sinned because of pride, Augustine: Genesis (n. 7), 11.30, 35; Aquinas: *Summa* (n. 17), 2-2.163.4.
- 20 Nogarola quotes Augustine here, «Sin is the will to pursue or retain what justice forbids» which she attributes to P. Schaff (ed.): *On Nature and Grace* but is found in *On Two Souls, Against the Manichaeans* (NPNF 4), Peabody 1994, 11. Aquinas also quotes Augustine's definition of sin in *Summa* (n. 17), 1-2.71.6 Obj. 2 and given her level of engagement with Aquinas throughout her disquisition, this may, in fact, be Nogarola's source.
- 21 Nogarola: Complete Writings (n. 18), 152.
- 22 Nogarola's argument here is based on the widely held belief that in the act of procreation, the female is a passive recipient of the male seed and contributes little to the fetus. Like other qualities and characteristics, then, sin is transmitted through the male seed. Complete Writings (n. 18), 147.

«all sinned in Adam.»<sup>23</sup> Anticipating the argument that Eve is to be blamed because she led Adam to sin, Nogarola contends Adam was a free agent and as such, must be held responsible for his own sin. To blame Eve is to suggest that Adam's will was weak and easily compromised, making him morally inferior to the woman.<sup>24</sup> Nogarola rejects this idea out of hand, committed to the notion that both Adam and Eve acted out of free will and are responsible for the choices they made. This being the case, since it is through Adam that sin was passed to the whole human race, it is Adam and not Eve who is responsible for original sin.

Finally, Nogarola considers the punishments meted out on Adam and Eve. A common argument was that Eve's punishment was greater than Adam's, suggesting that her sin was more egregious. Eve, after all, was cursed with both her own punishment, pain in childbearing, and Adam's, toil in laboring over the earth and death. Appealing to the grammar of the text, however, Nogarola notes that in Gen 3:17-19 when God addresses Adam, God uses the singular pronoun «you.» The implication is that in these verses, God is addressing Adam alone and not Eve when he says, «By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.» That the woman also experiences death, Nogarola argues, is not because she assumes both Adam's punishment and her own, but because Adam's punishment is so great that it radiates beyond the man to affect all of creation.<sup>25</sup> As such, everything in creation is subject to death through no fault of its own, but rather, because Adam sinned.

If the severity of the punishment is an indication of the enormity of the sin, Nogarola wonders, and if one takes the punishments of the man and the woman separately as the grammar suggests, the man's punishment is clearly more terrible than the woman's, death being a more severe sentence than pain

23 Ibid., 154. Nogarola is alluding to Rom 5:12, «Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned – » and 1 Cor 15:22, «for as all die in Adam, all will be made alive in Christ.»

24 Ibid., 154-55. For support, Nogarola cites Bernard of Clairvaux, «Free will, because of its inborn nobility, is forced by no necessity.» It is not immediately clear from where she derives this quote but the ideas are reflected in *On Grace and Free Choice*, trans. D. O'Donovan, Kalamazoo 1971, 1.2 and 4.9. Again, Nogarola quotes Augustine: «God cannot act against that nature which he created with a good will.» Reply to P. Schaff (ed.): *Faustus the Manichaean* (NPNF 4), Peabody 1994, 26.3 as quoted by Aquinas: *Summa* (n. 17), 1.105.6.

25 Nogarola: *Complete Writings* (n. 18), 146.

in childbirth.<sup>26</sup> The implication, as Nogarola notes, is that women ought not to be held in perpetual subjugation for Eve's sin when Adam sinned more.

Other women writers of this period also questioned the significance and function of the «judgements» in Gen 3:14-19. Tarabotti, for instance, notes that the word «curse» is absent in God's address to Eve and concludes that God does not «punish» Eve, he only punishes Adam by cursing his labor. When God speaks to Eve in Gen 3:16, he describes for her the consequences of sin and the way it will corrupt the male-female relationship. «Thou shalt be under thy husband's power, and he shall have dominion over thee.» Rather than a punishment, Tarabotti suggests we are to read this as a warning, cautioning women that their husbands will try to strip them of all authority should they succumb to their «wifely sentiment» and yield to their husband's demands.<sup>27</sup> In other words, by outlining the consequences of sin, God means to advise and encourage women against surrendering their freedom to men.

Similarly, 17<sup>th</sup> century English writer Mary Astell advocates for reading Gen 3:16, «your husband shall rule over you,» as a prediction rather than a command. She observes that Gen 27:40, Isaac's «blessing» to Esau that «you will serve your brother» is commonly interpreted in this way on the assumption that God would not sanction the arbitrary subjugation of one brother to the other. Similarly, she argues that Gen 3:16 is more appropriately read as a prediction of what happens between a husband and a wife in a sinful world, not what God prescribes.<sup>28</sup> For Astell, wifely subjugation is not a command that represents the divine will. Rather, it is a description of how sin has marred and distorted male-female relationships.

For women interpreters, then, Eve was not the archetypal weak and fickle woman who plunged the world into sin. She was created to be a companion and partner to the man, his equal in rationality and moral sensibility, so that he might not be alone. Together, they were to be co-regents over the earth, ruling over the animals and the created order with authority and dominion. And while Eve was the first to fall into sin, she alone cannot be blamed or held responsible for original sin, as hers was not the only or even the most heinous offense. In an effort to change the narrative, then, instead of characterizing Eve as a

26 Ibid., 147.

27 Tarabotti: *Paternal Tyranny* (n. 10), 52.

28 M. Astell: *Political Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), Cambridge 1996, 19.

threat, a problem to be controlled lest sin increase, women interpreters depicted her (and all women along with her) as an image bearer of God with dignity and worth. Even after the fall, many women writers noted that in Gen 3:15, God said to the serpent and promised the woman, «I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; she will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.»<sup>29</sup> Rather than reducing her to her sin, then, they saw in her the mother of redemption, the means by which God would bring about his redemptive purposes. By reconceiving Eve in more positive ways, women writers resisted and pushed back against the notion of women as the weaker sex that animated social systems of male dominance and patriarchy.

#### *De-essentializing Eve*

A second strategy women writers adopted to decry their own diminishment and subjugation is de-essentializing Eve, that is, challenging the presumption that «all women are Eve.» Three women writers who incorporated this strategy into their own writing for resistance were Christine de Pizan, and 17<sup>th</sup>-century writers Aemilia Lanyer and Sarah Egerton. Both de Pizan and Lanyer wrote their works out of a weighty concern that women were internalizing negative stereotypes about themselves, allowing cultural rhetoric about women's inferiority, fickleness, and licentiousness to define them. In an effort to resist these depictions, many of which were based on the interpretation of Eve, de Pizan and Lanyer question the assumption that Eve's character and behavior were representative of all women.

Lanyer aired her resistance in a work entitled «Eve's Apology in defence of Women,» a poem that is set within the context of the trial of Jesus under Pilate. Pilate had decided to give in to the Jewish authorities in allowing Jesus to be crucified. In response, Pilate's wife delivers an impassioned plea, exhorting her husband to reconsider this decision. Through the voice of Pilate's wife, Lanyer compares the sin of Eve with that of Pilate. «Her weakness did the serpent's words obey, but you in malice God's dear Son betray.»<sup>30</sup> Given that Pilate allowed Jesus to be crucified, Lanyer argues, it is Pilate, not Eve who committed

29 For this line of argument, see especially R. Speght: *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*, ed. B. Kiefer Lewalski, New York 1996, 6, and E. Sowernam: *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman*, London 1617, 10.

30 A. Lanyer: *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. S. Woods, New York 1993, 70-80.

the greater sin. As such, Lanyer wonders on what basis do men assume power over women. «Your fault being greater, why should you disdain our being your equals, free from tyranny?» Lanyer asks.<sup>31</sup>

The larger question Lanyer seems to be raising through this poem, however, is the rationale for holding all women responsible for Eve's sin. «If one of many worlds could lay a stain upon our sex, and work so great a fall . . . what will so foul a fault amongst you all?»<sup>32</sup> What Lanyer wonders is if all women are held responsible for Eve's sin, should not all men bear the guilt of Pilate's? While Lanyer herself never answers the question, she opens the door to reconsidering the essentialism that attributes to women Eve's sin and guilt.

While Lanyer seems only to hint at the notion that all women should not be held responsible for Eve's sin, de Pizan is much more explicit. In *Letter to the God of Love*, de Pizan distinguishes between the Eve of Genesis 3 and the woman created in Genesis 1 and 2. In the first two chapters of Genesis, the reader encounters the creation of the archetypal man and woman as God intended them to be, de Pizan suggests. In Genesis 3, however, there is a shift in the focus of the narrative, moving the spotlight away from the creative activity of the Creator to focus on the lived reality of the created. In other words, here we see Adam and Eve in a specific moment in time, conversing, eating, and sharing. Because of this shift from speaking about the man and the woman in terms of generalities to describing particular events and experiences, de Pizan suggests that Genesis 3 is narrating a day in the life of Adam and Eve, which is to say that the specific choices they make here are theirs alone. For this reason, de Pizan argues that one ought not judge all women by the actions of Eve in Genesis 3. Instead, just as not all angels are bad because some fell from grace, so Eve's heeding the serpent's words does not prove that all women are weak and prone to sin.<sup>33</sup> «Commonly, one alone won't prove the rule,» she contends.<sup>34</sup> The implication is that Eve's sin should not be attributed to all women nor should all women be held accountable for her sin.<sup>35</sup>

31 Ibid., 85-86.

32 Ibid., 67-72.

33 de Pizan: *Letter of the God of Love* (n. 9), 193-96.

34 Ibid., 649.

35 As if to reinforce this distinction, de Pizan follows the biblical text in not referring to the woman with specificity and individuality, that is, by using her the name Eve until she discusses Genesis 3.

De Pizan was not alone in this conviction. Sarah Egerton also maintained that while Eve's original goodness and nobility are inherent characteristics of all women, Eve's choices and their consequences are hers alone. Egerton's point here in attributing to women Eve's original goodness and nobility is not to question formulations of the doctrine of original sin as if sin is not somehow passed on from generation to generation as an inherited and alien guilt. Rather, what Egerton wants to undercut is the tendency to essentialize Eve's moral failures as if her choices point back to an inherent character flaw or weakness particular to womankind. Tongue in cheek she writes, «Heaven is not so bankrupt so as to grant one soul to all women.»<sup>36</sup> For this reason, it will not do to make Eve or Jezebel the measure of all women. Each woman, each person deserves to be sized up individually. When women are assessed as real people, one finds in them not predominantly lust, pride, and inconstancy, Egerton argued, but a genuine striving for virtue.

By unshackling women from Eve and Eve's guilt, women writers distanced women from the negative talk about Eve. Eve fell into sin. But Eve does not represent all women and her sin should not define or limit women's place and role in the world. In effect, by making this claim, women writers deconstructed the rationale for women's subjugation, exposing male dominance as unjust and self-serving and making a case not just for equality between the sexes, but for a freedom for woman to make their own stories without being burdened with Eve's.

### *Re-appropriating Eve's Story*

A third discernible strategy women writers adopted in their work of resistance, and the last one to be discussed here, was the re-appropriation of traditional renderings of Eve to support greater freedoms for women. To some, the acceptance of traditional interpretations of Eve and subsequently all women as weak, inferior, and fickle, may not seem like resistance at all. But by embracing these conventional, widely accepted readings of Eve, women interpreters were able to subvert other aspects of them, such as the significance of these readings for women's daily lives. This strategy is clearly evident in the work of the aforementioned Isotta Nogarola, and 17<sup>th</sup>-century English writer Bathsua Makin.

36 S. Egerton: The Female Advocate, in: M. Dowd and T. Festa (eds.): Early Modern Women on the Fall, Tempe 2012, 395-412

Nogarola, for instance, readily conceded that women are the weaker sex. However, for Nogarola, this is less a concession on her part about the nature of women and more a strategy for relieving women of the responsibility for original sin. If Eve is the weaker sex, more susceptible to moral wavering and inconstancy, Nogarola contends, then she cannot be held more culpable for original sin than Adam, for «where there is less intellect and less constancy, there is less [blame for] sin.»<sup>37</sup> For Nogarola, women are not so much perpetrators of sin and evil as they are victims of it.<sup>38</sup> By characterizing Eve in this way, Nogarola resists what had become a common practice of demonizing the female sex, and harnesses the characterization of women as weak and helpless in an effort to cultivate a more sympathetic estimation of women.

The more objectionable example of re-appropriating the story of Eve, however, was put forward by Bathsua Makin in her advocacy for female education in *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewoman* (1673). Makin was troubled by women's lack of access to education of the sort young men received, the learning of languages and training in the liberal arts. Educational opportunities that did exist for women were often only accessible to the upper classes and consisted of learning the necessary graces of being a lady. The assumption was that women would not need an education to fulfill their destiny as a wife and mother, nor did they have the intellectual capacity to benefit from the stimulation and rigor of a classical education. As such, the common perception was that education would only be wasted on women.

Makin, however, argues that if women are morally and intellectually weak, as Gen 2-3 suggests, then an education is more, not less, crucial to their development. For Makin, it is precisely because women are weak and dull-witted that they need an education. How else will they learn to resist the temptations of daily life or to cultivate the moral fortitude it takes to be virtuous people? Eve, who was unable to «distinguish a true and forcible argument from a vail and captious fallacy,»<sup>39</sup> exemplifies what happens when women are left ignorant. Without learning, «heresiarks creep into houses, and lead silly women captive, then they lead their husbands, [and] both their children; as the Devil

37 Nogarola: Complete Writings (n. 18), 146.

38 Hildegard von Bingen of the 12<sup>th</sup> century makes a similar argument. See R.L.R. Garber: *Where is the Body?* in: Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays, ed. M. Burnett, McInerney 1998, 103-132.

39 B. Makin: *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewoman*, London 1673, 25.

did *Eve*, she her husband, they their posterity.»<sup>40</sup> As «evil seems to be begun here in Eve,» Makin adds, «and to be propagated by her daughters,»<sup>41</sup> educating women, investing in their moral and intellectual development, is essential to curb the spread of sin.

Makin goes on to offer another reason why women should be given an education, that is, so that they might be good help-meets for their husbands. «God intended Woman as a help-meet to Man,» Makin writes, «in his constant conversation, and in the concerns of his family and estate, when he should most need, in sickness, weakness, absence, death, etc. When we neglect to fit them for these things, we renounce God's Blessing he hath appointed women for, are ungrateful to him, cruel to them, and injurious to ourselves.»<sup>42</sup> In other words, if women are to do the job of «help-meet» successfully, being able to counsel their husbands in their business dealings and attend to them when they are gone, they will need the proper training and education. To deny them such is to limit their ability to live into their divinely appointed role of help-meet.

Makin is not very popular among feminists today with her affirmations that women are the intellectually and morally weaker sex, created to serve as a help-meet to man. It may help to know, however, that Makin understood that in her advocacy for women's education, she was making significant concessions in the debate about the nature and role of women. «To ask too much is to be denied all,» she writes.<sup>43</sup> Conscious that she is participating in the arena of struggle, Makin is prepared to negotiate and to accept small wins for the sake of progress toward the larger goal. Her strategic use of the story of Eve, concessions and all, then, forms part of a larger body of work that was involved in challenging the hegemony of male dominance and became a stepping stone in the fight for women's rights and freedoms.

All the women's writings surveyed here form part of that history. The value of recovering their work comes from the fact that it gives us access and insight into the long history of women's resistance to their own diminishment and to the ways in which Scripture factored into their resistance. Through their writings, what becomes painfully apparent is the questionable foundation on which patriarchy was justified. What women writers of the 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries

40 Ibid., 25.

41 Ibid., 7.

42 Ibid., 23.

43 Ibid., 4.

show is that while the opening chapters of Genesis had been used to justify their diminishment, this was not only or even the most obvious way to interpret the story of Eve. In effect, their refusal to concede to an interpretation of Scripture that violated their understanding of who God had made them to be and their willingness to expose the pain and suffering they endured under the system of patriarchy, undercut the validity of traditional interpretations. For as Augustine himself never tired of saying, only when our interpretations promote love for God and love for others do we properly understand the biblical text.<sup>44</sup> By exposing traditional readings of Eve as promoting oppression rather than love, women writers suggested that perhaps the early church fathers had gotten it wrong, that rather than hierarchy between the sexes, God had created woman and man as equals and neither had been given divine sanction to lord it over the other.

Until recently, we didn't know of these women interpreters and their work, and many women's writings in history continue to remain lost or forgotten. However, it is not hard to see that they prepared the ground for the social and political reforms of the 19th and 20th century that have led to greater rights, freedoms, and opportunities for women. In this sense, the efforts of those who continue today to advocate for women's full equality stand on their shoulders and within the tradition they set forth, even as they, in turn, stood in the tradition of biblical Eve – rightly interpreted, of course.

44 Augustine: *De Doctrina Christiana* (NPNF 2), ed. P. Schaff, Peabody 1995, 1.35-36.

*Abstract*

The feminist movement, with its concern for women's equality and rights, is commonly traced back to the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Long before this time, however, women were protesting and resisting their subjugation through the writing and circulation of literary texts. This article explores women's resistance to patriarchy in the writings of 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century European women who wrote on biblical Eve. The details of Eve's creation and her role in the fall were often used to support the subjugation of women to men. Women writers, however, adopted various strategies to disrupt or rewrite this narrative. Three such strategies will be discussed here: reinterpreting Eve, de-essentializing Eve, and re-appropriating Eve.

Die feministische Bewegung mit ihrem Engagement für die Gleichstellung und die Rechte der Frauen geht im Allgemeinen bis in die Mitte des späten 19. Jahrhunderts zurück. Bereits lange vor dieser Zeit protestierten und widersetzten sich Frauen jedoch ihrer Unterwerfung durch das Schreiben und Verbreiten literarischer Texte. Dieser Artikel untersucht den Widerstand europäischer Frauen des 15. und 17. Jahrhunderts gegen das Patriarchat in deren Schriften über die biblische Eva. Die Umstände von Evas Schöpfung und ihre Rolle im Sündenfall wurden oft zur Unterstützung der Unterwerfung von Frauen unter Männer beigezogen. Mit verschiedenen Strategien kämpften Schriftstellerinnen gegen dieses Narrativ an. Drei solcher Strategien werden hier diskutiert: Neuinterpretation, De-Essenzialisierung und Neuaneignung Evas.

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