
Milton’s Paradise Lost is the preeminent retelling of the Fall of mankind in early modern England, recasting the Genesis narrative into an epic poem that engages with Restoration England’s most trenchant questions of social and political identity. Recent generations of students have learned to interrogate Milton’s poem not so much as a complete withdrawal from his polemical career but as a relocation of his energies into a vast biblical poem to which socio-political questions of free will, reason, and personal liberty remain central. It has also been possible in recent years to complement the reading and teaching of Milton’s poem with Lucy Hutchinson’s Order and Disorder, a twenty-canto retelling of the Creation and Fall that was first published in David Norbrook’s fine edition of 2001. Order and Disorder, most prominently, has enabled a pedagogical version of what the editors of the present anthology describe as a “thought experiment”: a creative reimagining of dominant literary and social history from Eve’s point of view. Early Modern Women on the Fall greatly extends these pedagogical possibilities, providing a wide range of early modern women’s writings on what the editors describe as “the most formative story of their culture” (2). How better to engage with women’s experience of early modern literary, social, religious, and political life than to read their versions of the most “inescapable” of cultural narratives: that of Eve and Adam, their original sin, and the Fall of mankind?

Early Modern Women on the Fall anthologizes a number of texts that are already prominent in explorations of early modern women’s writing: “Eve’s Apology” in Aemilia Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum; Anne Southwell’s witty little poem on the creation of Eve, “All married men desire to have good wives”; the querelle des femmes texts of Rachel Speght, Esther Sowernam, and Joan Sharp; and the prose tracts on women’s education by Bathsua Makin, Mary Astell, and Lady Mary Chudleigh. Not only do the selections enable apposite comparative readings — the querelle des femmes texts as a cluster; Makin’s, Astell’s and Chudleigh’s proposals against each other — but the delightful diversity of women’s approaches
to the Fall narrative is revealed. Lanyer addresses Pontius Pilate defiantly, describing Eve’s and women’s fault as “much less” than his in betraying Christ, and Anne Southwell’s depiction of a “blockish Adam” asleep at the miracle of Eve’s creation provides an acerbic counterpoint to Hutchinson’s Eve, who takes upon herself full culpability for the betrayal of her spouse as she laments their exclusion from Paradise. Sarah Fyge sets out to vindicate her sex in her poetic answer (1686) to Robert Gould’s misogynist Love Give O’er or, a Satire against the Pride, Lust, and Inconstancy etc. of Woman (1682); and Makin and Astell interrogate the Fall as the narrative invidiously defining attitudes towards women’s acquisition of knowledge. Overall, the texts collected in the volume amply illustrate the editors’ contention that “Imagining Eve’s voice in early modern England entailed direct engagement with the most contentious issues of identity in political and social life” (1–2) and that religion and the story of Eve’s fall did not function only to disempower and silence early modern women (7).

Some writings on the Fall are published here for the first time. Dorothy Calthorpe’s description of the Garden of Eden is delightfully evocative of the seventeenth-century estate, as marble lions stand “in niches of the marble wall . . . gushing out of their mouths sweet waters” (134); in Calthorpe’s retelling, Adam’s sin violates the divine entailment of the Edenic estate. In the classroom, comparison would be possible with Lanyer’s “Description of Cooke-ham” or Hutchinson’s Elegies. The selections from Mary Roper’s The Sacred History complement those published in Jill Seal Millman and Gillian Wright’s Early Modern Women’s Manuscript Poetry (2005) and provide the full texts of Roper’s lines on “The Creation of Man” and “Man’s Shamefull Fall.” Lucy Hutchinson’s Order and Disorder is very substantially extracted: all five cantos that were published in 1679 are included in full, enabling a thorough exploration of her text, either in its own terms or in comparison to Paradise Lost. For the latter purpose, it would perhaps have been helpful if the editors had included Hutchinson’s preface to the printed text, although this is available in Norbrook’s edition. Other of the selections are ingenious rather than completely strict interpretations of the volume’s framing theme: Anne Southwell’s mock elegy on her friend Cicely, Lady Ridgeway, is an engaging and metaphysically adventurous poem, but its relationship to the Fall is arguably tangential.
A more thematically-accurate selection might have been Southwell’s verse letter to Bishop Adam of Limerick, a less satisfying poem that engages directly with Adam’s Fall. Katherine Philips’s poem “To Antenor, on a Paper of Mine” is included on the basis of its reference to Eve’s fault as an analogy for her own indiscretion in penning a pro-monarchical poem that threatened to cause problems for her parliamentarian husband. This is a fierce and accomplished poem, but it necessarily stands in this edition in isolation from Philips’s other work, removed from its context in a highly-charged episode of poetic manuscript exchange.

The question of how to represent context — and what context to provide — is a challenging one for an anthology of this kind, and Dowd and Festa do an admirable job. The introduction provides a lucid and accessible delineation of Reformation theology and patriarchal political theory, and the poems are well annotated. Less successful in my view is the decision to relegate biographical and contextual discussion of each author to a brief description in an appendix rather than provide the headnote to each author that is conventionally found in literary anthologies. The editorial philosophy that drives this decision is laudable and thoughtfully articulated: a desire to discourage the biographical readings that have been “a default category of analysis” in women’s writing (20). But this decision may decontextualize, and sometimes does decontextualize, the texts at hand. As a case in point, the critical annotations that compare Mary Roper’s A Sacred History to Milton’s opening invocation to Paradise Lost create, in the absence of any framing commentary, a direct parallel between the two texts in which Roper’s poem can only come off the worse. While the editors are right that “one cannot generalize too reductively about the conditions of literary production for women (nor for men, for that matter) during the early modern period” (14), a woman such as Roper is writing according to a set of conventions — meditational, rhetorically-modest, manuscript — that are so unfamiliar to the undergraduate or general reader that more detailed framing would seem to be required.

Of course, the difficulties of presenting an anthology of exclusively female-authored texts while seeking to minimize simplistic biographical interpretation are not easily resolved. This is an enormously valuable anthology that provides a wealth of well-chosen material, and does
extremely well in meeting its target audience of the student or general reader. The category of selection, the narrative of the Fall, is a masterstroke. The focus on an episode so central to the culture and the canonical literature of early modern England is more likely than most to meet the challenge of bringing women’s texts into the classroom within the parameters of the twelve-week undergraduate class. *Early Modern Women and the Fall* is an ideal anthology to set alongside *Paradise Lost*, and in its rich and diverse selection of texts, extensively excerpted, it provides plenty of substance for more advanced courses with a stronger focus on early modern women’s writing.

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