

“The Fortunate Fall” and Sixteenth-Century Culture | BY LORA GERIGUIS

Within forty years of its introduction in 1611,” distributors Brown and Marley assert, “the King James Version had displaced all others extant [and it had] inspired and influenced much of the best of our literature.”¹ The enduring works of literature that took seed in the fertile climate of the KJV include the well-known poems of John Donne (1572–1631) and George Herbert (1593–1633), as well as the lesser-known works of their contemporaries, male and female. Much of this poetry, prior to and following Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, reflects upon the “fortunate fall,” the idea that the fall into sin was in fact fortunate because it was the precipitating action necessitating, and thereby enabling, the plan of salvation.

Ordained as an Anglican priest during James I’s reign (1603–1625), John Donne, in “An Anatomy of the World” (1611), suggests that the wedge of sin exerted pressure on the universe even prior to creation, thereby forming a fissure in the prelapsarian environment:

*Then, as mankind, so is the world’s whole frame
Quite out of joint, almost created lame:
For, before God had made up all the rest,
Corruption entered, and depraved the rest.* (191–194)²

Donne’s linking of ecology and theology reflects the KJV treatment of the Eden story, which repeatedly positions nature as alternatively joined to the divine and human actors in the story.

The two accounts of human creation recorded in Genesis 1 (“Let us make man in our image...and let them have dominion over...the earth” 1:26) and Genesis 2 (“The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground” 2:7) are both told in relationship to these three characters: divinity, humanity, and ecology. This pattern is repeated in Genesis 3 and 4 with the narration of the Fall and Cain’s

murder of Abel, during which the earth, plants, and animals once again function as mechanisms for testing human faithfulness to God’s laws (forbidden fruit versus permitted fruit, sheep versus produce). Nature too is forced to share in the deadly consequences of sin. Donne replicates that linkage when he asserts that the world felt “the consuming wound” of the Fall (248):

*The noblest part, man felt it first; and then
Both beasts and plants, cursed in the curse of man.
So did the world from the first hour decay,
That evening was beginning of the day.* (199–203)

Donne’s emphasis that evening, not morning, forms the beginning of the day repeats the poetic device from the KJV (“and the evening and the morning were the first day” 1:5), which figures darkness as the prerequisite to light, itself a play upon the “fortunate fall” concept that sin is the catalyst to salvation.

In the “Epistle Dedicatory” to the 1611 publication of the KJV, the translators draw a similar parallel to the death of Queen Elizabeth and the coronation of King James:

*[U]pon the setting of that bright Occidental Star, Queen Elizabeth of most happy memory, some thick and palpable clouds of darkness would so have overshadowed this Land, [...but that] the appearance of Your Majesty, as of the Sun in its strength, instantly dispelled those supposed and surmised mists, and gave unto all that were well affected exceeding cause of comfort.*³

This requisite flattering of the patron clearly reproduces tropes from both the creation and redemption narratives, with its darkness-to-light structure, including the perennial nature imagery. Both Donne and the translators of the KJV engage nature, not merely as the setting for the story of salvation, but as integral to its plot and meaning.

George Herbert, son of a patron to John Donne and

himself an Anglican priest, collapses the elements of divinity, humanity and the environment into a single image. His poem "Paradise" (1633) figures man—both the first and second Adam—not as placed into a garden or hung onto a tree, but as the tree itself:

*I bless thee, Lord, because I GROW
Among thy trees, which in a ROW
To thee both fruit and order OW.*

*What open force, or hidden CHARM
Can blast my fruit, or bring me HARM
While the inclosure is thine ARM?*

*Inclose me still for fear I START.
Be to me rather sharpe and TART,
Than let me want thy hand and ART.*

*When thou dost greater judgments SPARE,
And with thy knife but prune and PARE,
Ev'n fruitful trees more fruitful ARE.*

*Such sharpness shows the sweetest FRIEND:
Such cuttings rather heal than REND:
And such beginnings touch their END.⁴*

Herbert's tree first innocently trusts in its immortality, but after recognizing the decay of death, wishes to be pruned into closer communion with the divine Gardener. The poem figures the concept of the "fortunate fall" by linking the "beginnings" to the end, creation to salvation, and in

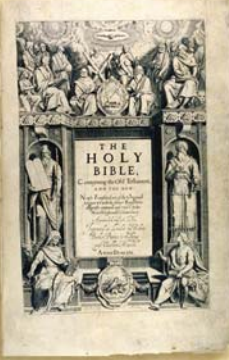
the assertions that "cuttings rather heal than REND." This elegantly simple poem figures the fall of humanity and the sacrifice of Christ in one powerfully economic metaphor.

While the Fall figured prominently in seventeenth-century discussions of theology, philosophy, and even romance, it was in the arena of gender politics that the debate was the most intense.⁵ The Eden narrative was a contested field among both male and female poets, as it became ground zero in the gender wars. Misogynists claimed that Eve was proof that all women (not a single character in history, but an entire gender) are prone to evil and therefore should be socially, spiritually, and politically marginalized. One example of the typical argument made in favor of women's culpability for the fall can be seen in the title of Joseph Swetnam's vicious tract, "The Arraignment of Lew, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women" (1615).

Rachel Speght (1597—after 1621) was just 20 when she published her tract, "A Muzzel for Melastomus" (1617), which means "black mouth," her name for Joseph Swetnam. That Speght wrote and published at all is remarkable, given the prohibitions against women doing so at the time, made possible only by the consent of her minister father. But even more significant is the fact that she engaged the KJV as a scholar, citing it closely and repeatedly in the course of her arguments, convinced by her reading that God had made women to be the equal of man, and that God would not approve of the tirades of Joseph Swetnam:


King James Bible and Contemporary English Literature

King James I of England
Coronated 1603



**King James
Authorized Version**
1611 (EMD)

John Donne
Anglican priest, poet,
1572 - 1631
"Anatomy of the World,"
1611



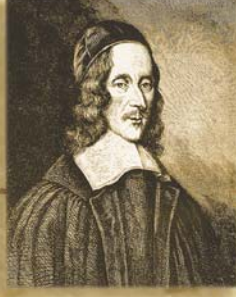
William Shakespeare
Died 1616



Aemilia Lanyer
A musician in
the court of King James
(pictured)
1569 - 1645
"Salva Deus Rex
Judaeorum," 1611

Rachel Speght
17th-century feminist,
1597 - 1621
"A Muzzel for
Melastomus," 1617





George Herbert
Metaphysical poet, 1593-1633
"Paradise" 1633
Portrait by Robert White
1674

Good had it been for you to have put on that muzzle which Saint James would have all Christians to wear: 'Speak not evil one of another' (James 4:11). . . . True it is, as is already confessed, that women first sinned, yet find we no mention of spiritual nakedness till man had sinned. Then it is said, "Their eyes were opened" (Gen. 3:7), the eyes of their mind and conscience, and then perceived they themselves naked. . . . [T]hat she might not of him who ought to honor her be abhorred, the first promise that was made in Paradise God made to woman, that be her seed should the serpent's head be broken (Gen. 3: 15).⁶

Speght's writing demonstrates that she viewed the KJV Bible as a text she could personally take refuge in, both as a writer and a woman.

Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645) was another woman whose poetry drew weapons from the Bible to defend rather than denounce women. A musician in King James' court, her work, *Salva Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), was published the same year as the KJV. Lanyer harnesses the story of Pilate's condemnation of Jesus as an example of a crime much worse than Eve's. In the marital drama of the Pilate household, Lanyer reminds us, the wife urges the husband not to sin. Lanyer argues that the vision of Christ's divinity Pilate's wife receives is proof of God's approval of women, even after the Fall. Having prosecuted Pilate, Lanyer turns to defend Eve, whose "fault was only too much love. . . . No hurt therein her harmless heart intended" (58, 30):

But surely Adam cannot be excused;
Her fault though great, yet he was most to blame;
What weakness offered, strength might have refused
Being lord of all, the greater was his shame. . . (34–37)

[Adam] Who being framed by God's eternal hand
The perfectest [sic] man that ever breathed on earth;
And from God's mouth received that strait command. . . (41–43)

Yet men will boast of knowledge, which he took
From Eve's fair hand, as from a learned book. . . (63–64)

If any evil did in her remain
Being made of him, he was the ground of all. . . (65–66)

Lanyer's argument may be circular—don't blame women, we're the weaker sex, but don't hold that weakness against us either—but given her cultural environment, any small step away from universal responsibility for the Fall was a giant leap forward for womankind.

Abraham Cowley (1618–1667) was born into aristocratic privilege just in time to lose it all and share the court's exile in France during the English Commonwealth (1649–1660). Despite writing 50 years after Lanyer, he found it necessary to engage with the arguments she had set out. His poem, "Tree of Knowledge. That there is no knowledge" (1656), directly contradicts Lanyer's assertion that men took "knowledge/From Eve's fair hand, as from a learned book" (63–4). Of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Cowley writes:

1649 Execution of King Charles I

Abraham Cowley
Poet; child prodigy
1618 - 1667
"Tree of Knowledge,"
1656

Paradise lost.
A
POEM
IN
TEN BOOKS.
The Author J. M.
Licensed and Entred according
to Order.
LONDON
Printed, and are to be sold by Peter Parker
under Great Church, near Aldgate; and by
Robert Bayly at the "Tree of Knowledge" in
St. Dunstons Church, near to Smiths-Fields.
And where they were first sold.
MDCCLXVII

John Milton
Political and
Religious Poet
1608 - 1674
"Paradise Lost,"
1667

POEMS
UPON
SEVERAL OCCASIONS.
By Mrs. L. A. P. O. R. of Brackley
in Northamptonshire.
LONDON,
Printed: And sold by T. Dobson in Strand Lane.
MDCCLXVIII

Mary Leapor
Poet, cook, scullery maid
1722 - 1746
"Man the Monarch," 1748

"Pride and Prejudice"
by Jane Austen, 1796 - 1813

"A Tale of Two Cities"
by Charles Dickens, 1859

"Ye cannot know and live, nor live or know and eat."
 Thus spoke God, yet man did go
 Ignorantly on to know;
 Grew so more blind, and she
 Who tempted him to this, grew yet more blind than he.

The only science man by this did get,
 Was but to know he nothing knew:
 He strait his nakedness did view (12–19)⁷

Cowley is here engaged more in social critique than theological disputation. He is employing the Fall as an argumentative mechanism to prop up a patriarchal system set in disarray by the execution of King Charles I in 1649.

Mary Leapor (1722–1746), though less scholarly than her literary foremothers, was no less determined a writer. The daughter of a gardener and a domestic servant herself, Leapor was once fired for trying to cook and write poetry at the same time. Her treatment of the Genesis story braids the two threads of environmental foregrounding identified in Donne's and Herbert's works with the gender politics of Speght and Lanier. In "Man the Monarch" (1748), Leapor parallels Adam's role in naming the animals to the right he claimed to marginalize his wife by pejoratively naming her as well.

When our Grandsire nam'd the feather'd Kind,
 Pond'ring their Natures in his careful Mind,
 'Twas then, if on our Author we rely
 He view'd his Consort with an envious Eye;
 Greedy of Pow'r, he bug'd the tott'ring Throne;
 Pleased with the Homage, and would reign alone;
 And, better to secure his doubtful Rule,
 Roll'd his wise Eye-balls, and pronounc'd her Fool.
 The regal Blood in distant Ages runs:
 Sires, Brothers, Husbands, and commanding Sons,
 The Sceptre claim; and ev'ry Cottage brings
 A long Succession of Domestic Kings. (54–65)⁸

Leapor treats the Fall as unfortunate, not in the theological sense, but in terms of how the Eden narrative precipitated the political and spiritual marginalization of women, figured in the dominion of animals, that brought disharmony into "ev'ry Cottage."

The staying power of the KJV as a central text of Christianity for the past 400 years is due in part to its literary qualities. The opening phrase, "In the beginning, God..." ranks as a literary model on par with the openings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Who there?"),⁹ Jane Austen's *Pride*

and *Prejudice* ("It is a truth universally acknowledged"),¹⁰ and Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* ("It was the best of times, it was the worst of times").¹¹ Its beautiful language, powerful narratives, and spiritual truth have made the KJV a "well springing up into everlasting life"¹² that literary authors drink from again and again. ■

Footnotes

1. Brown and Marley, owners and distributors. *The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testament: King James Version*. (Philadelphia: The National Publishing Co, 1973), preface.
2. Carey, John, ed. *John Donne: The Major Works*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), 207–218.
3. *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: Authorized King James Version*. (United States of America: Collins World, 1975), preface.
4. Rumrich, John, and Gregory Chaplin, eds. *Seventeenth-Century British Poetry, 1603–1660*. (New York: Norton, 2006), 271–272.
5. For a philosophical treatment see Thomas Traherne's "Eden" (c. 1670); for a romantic treatment see John Wilmont's "The Fall" (c. 1680).
6. Lewalski, Barbara, ed. *The Polemic and Poems of Rachel Speght*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 1–29.
7. "The Tree of Knowledge." *Wikisource*, The Free Library. <http://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=The_Tree_of_Knowledge&oldid=633867> (accessed February 28, 2011).
8. Fairer, David, and Christine Gerrard, eds. *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 316–317.
9. Shakespeare, William. Evans, G. Blakemore, ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
10. Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*, Tony Tanner, ed. (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 3.
11. Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*, George Woodcock ed., (New York: Penguin, 1970), 35.
12. John 4:14 (KJV).

Lora Edmister Geriguis is an assistant professor of English at La Sierra University, where she teaches seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature and directs the MA in English program. She and her husband, David, have three children.