



Eve's Evil Legacies
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Evil women. This is the first of a series of lectures about evil women, so, before turning to Eve's evil legacies, I want to draw attention to the difficulties and tensions involved in presenting a series of lectures on "Evil Women". What is meant by "evil" and "women", and what happens when these two concepts are placed together?

Two questions immediately arise. First, what do we mean when we talk about "evil"? This will be developed and elaborated in these six talks. Briefly, however, my reflections on evil will circle around issues of human agency – including acts of perpetrating, maintaining, or ignoring harms to sentient life. In this sense, evil is always relational, not abstract. I agree with philosopher Claudia Card when she writes that "many things are disappointing, undesirable, or just bad, without being evil": in contrast, evil actions inflict "losses or deprivations" to "what is basic to a tolerable existence". This approach will be nuanced as these lectures progress and as we turn to different genres of evil, including its primary, witching, monstrous, sexual, institutionalised, and radical forms of evil. In each lecture, I will be asking: why has the label "evil" been assigned to this individual or group? Is it a fitting characterisation? Are there grey zones?

Given that I have been allocated only six lectures, I have to be extreme selective in my choices. We will not explore so-called "natural evils", such as pain or natural disasters that kill and maim thousands of human and non-human animals and destroy the environment. These are often believed to result from human vices or to be punishments for transgressing the commandments of a Deity. I have also been forced to ignore a universe of very human evils. Girls and women have played prominent roles in some of the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century – we just have to think of the undeniable evil of the holocaust (girls and women turning a blind eye to the deportation of their neighbours to labour and death camps), the Rwandan genocide (which resulted in the first conviction in an international court of a woman for rape and genocide), the conflict in the former Yugoslavia (where women oversaw torture camps), or the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (where women actively participated in over 40 per cent of the sexual assaults).

Rather, I will be paying attention to the evils carried out by a small group of individuals with moral agents. They include iconic women such as Eve, fictional ones such as a cruel nurse, and flesh-and-blood women who are responsible for inflicting harm on others. As we will see, these evils not only harm the immediate victims: they also have wider cultural effects. Evil female agency can rebound on the wider community of girls and women – that is, it contributes to the oppression of girls and women, the denigration of feminine powers, and the imposition of controls over female sexuality, intellect, and autonomy.

If the first question posed by my lecture series on "Evil Women" is "what is evil?" and involves the narrowing of the concept to six discrete case studies, the second is "what is meant by evil women?" It may seem perverse to ask whether there is such a thing as "women". Trans and non-binary voices

must be acknowledged, especially since they have been side-lined until recent decades. It is equally important to point to the fact that femaleness is the majority gender. Too often the label “woman” assumes a western, white, heteronormative, middle-class, adult female. This is where the insights of Kimberlé Crenshaw, a legal academic and one of the founders of Critical Race Theory, are invaluable. In her influential article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989), Crenshaw introduces the concept of intersectionality. She points out that the focus of white feminists in the West “on the most privileged group members” (that is, other white women) “marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened”. Furthermore, she argues, it is not enough to simply add Black women to “an already established analytical structure”. This is because “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism”.

If we apply Crenshaw’s insights to our interest in evil women, attention must be paid not simply to gender, but the compounding effects of gender, race, class, caste, religion, (dis)ability, sexuality, age, generation, and so on. I hope that by focussing on six concrete case studies and by adopting an intersectional approach, I will be able to avoid essentialising the concept of “woman”. The evil women I will be spotlighting exist within variable intersectionalities of identity and power relations. All are imagined or framed in relational terms as white (although we may want to ask: was Eve white?). However, it is not possible to separate out their femaleness from their class (important in our discussions about Amelia Dyer, the prolific baby killer, or Myra Hindley, the sadistic killer), sexuality (Mata Hari), age (Snow White’s Evil Stepmother), and occupation (a nurse).

Finally, I am inspired by French philosopher Michel Foucault’s genealogical approach, which seeks to unearth the power relations involved in the production and circulation of knowledge about the concept of “evil”. I ask: What is evil? What is “woman”? What economies of knowledge produce the evil woman? What role is played by religion, law, psychiatry, and other disciplining institutions? What are the official and unofficial discourses circulating around evil women? How does the evil woman appear as a material presence in history? Throughout all these lectures, evil is conceived of as a discursive construct, by which I mean that it is used in strategic ways to give meaning to ideologies and practices.

So, after this long preamble, let me start with the Jewish and Christian Creation myth, in which the first woman, Eve, introduced Evil into Paradise, leading to the banishment of humanity (and, indeed, all life) from the Garden of Eden. There are other wayward women in the Bible, including Mary Magdalene, Delilah, Salome, and Lot’s wife, but none competes with the myth of Eve. Her curiosity and disobedience to God’s command loosened evil into the world.

The story is familiar. Its bare bones involve Eve being tempted by Satan (who appears in the form of a serpent) to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which Adam had been forbidden to touch. According to Genesis 3:6,

“and when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.”

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is often referred to as the apple tree, possibly because when Saint Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he used the word malum, which is the Latin word for both evil and apple. Some Jewish scholars, however, contend that the fruit was a grape or pomegranate; Muslim scholars maintain it was a banana.

The precise identity of the Tree makes no difference. Eve’s plucking, eating, and sharing of the fruit was what created time and, therefore, history. Not only were the serpent and Adam cursed, but a special punishment was reserved for women, as the descendants of the original Eve. Genesis 3:16 tells us that God told Eve that

“I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

Subsequently, then, the myth of Eve’s monstrous agency has been employed to justify patriarchal ideologies and practices.

Since ancient times, this story of Eve’s curse has led to her and her female descendants to be reviled. In the book of Ecclesiastes (also known as the “Book of Ben Sirach”), written in the early second century BCE, Sirach contends that “Sin began with a woman and because of her we all die”. The Christian Church Fathers complained that Eve “beguiled her husband by pleasures”, thus proving “to be an enemy rather than a helpmate”. In *De cultu feminarum* (1:4-6), Tertullian insisted that, as descendants of Eve, women were “the devil’s gateway”. He addressed women directly, charging that

“you are the unsealer of that (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. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunics of skins?”

Similarly, John Chrysostom maintained that “the woman taught [the man] once... and ruined all”: this was why he contended that women should be forbidden to teach. For Jerome, Dracontius, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Heinrich Kramer, and James Sprenger (to list just a few), Eve’s story was proof of female inferior, even evil, nature.

In more recent centuries, Eve’s original sin has been employed to justify violence against women. An obvious example is during the trials of witches in the pre-modern period, when women were accused of being the instrument through which the devil wrought havoc. Although boys and men were also accused of witchcraft, most victims were the descendants of Eve: it was girls and women (many menopausal ones) who were attacked, tortured, killed, in the name of the Holy One. They were also trapped in an impossible tension. On the one hand, witches were castigated for being feminine, weak, and insane while, on the other hand, they were formidably powerful with duplicitous intellects and sexualities that could deny access of entire communities to Divine Love. They were diabolical Eves.

Witch trials were an extreme use of the myth of Eve, but even mild, rhetorical uses of Eve’s name have served to thwart female prospects and progress. In nineteenth century Britain, for example, Eve was an excuse to confine women to domestic spheres. A poem by Christina Rossetti portrays Eve musing about her sin. Part of the poem reads:

*“As a tree my sin stands
To darken all lands;
Death is the fruit it bore....
The Tree of Life was ours,
Tree twelvefold-fruited,
Most lofty tree that flowers,
Most deeply rooted:
I chose the Tree of Death....
I, Eve, sad mother
Of all who must live,
I, not another,
Plucked bitterest fruit...”*

While *“the serpent in the dust/... Grinned an evil grin”*. In her advice book Womankind (1877), novelist Charlotte M. Yonge was equally harsh, maintaining that

“I have no hesitation in declaring my full belief in the inferiority of woman, nor that she brought it upon herself. I believe – as entirely as any other truth which has been from the beginning – that woman was created as a help meet to man.... When the test came, whether the two human beings would pay allegiance to God or to the Tempter, it was the woman who was the first to fall, and to draw her husband into the same transgression. Hence her punishment of physical weakness and subordination.”

Eve’s transgression was used to justify female subordination. In the words of southern clergyman James Henley Thornwell, women should be refused the “rights of the citizen”, on the grounds that they had tasted of evil.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that nineteenth century British, European, and American texts routinely pitted Eve (the harbinger of evil) against their other preoccupation: that is, “The Angel in the House”. Any number of iconic texts elaborate this view. But it appears even in the most prosaic Victorian texts. Take Tom Slender’s “Women and their Ways”, published in London Society: An Illustrated Magazine of Light and Amusing Literature for the Hours of Relaxation in 1867. His article starts with the words,

“From the day when Eve first came before Adam, “a woman fair and graceful spouse”, down to the present time in which we live, woman has been both the blessing and the curse of mankind. She has been the cause of strife and ruin, of misery and bloodshed among nations, and in domestic life has not infrequently been the discordant and jarring element. Yet she is also the very type and embodiment of all grace and virtue, the source and centre of peace and reconciliation, the one gracious influence which softens and humanizes mankind.”

The Rev. Gordon Calthorp, vicar of St. Augustine’s in Highbury, concurred. He observed that Eve had

“what no other woman ever had, experience both of a state of innocence and of a state of sin; and yet again, throughout the whole of a long and chequered life, she must have felt the keen sorrow of looking back to the brightness of Paradise, and of looking down upon the spreading darkness of the evil which she herself had been the means of introducing into the world.”

Calthorp even blamed Eve for the fact that her son, Cain, murdered her other son, Able. Thus, murder was the “ripened fruit of her transgression in the garden of Eden”.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, debates about Eve’s actions in bringing evil into the world were discussed in the context of Darwinian thought. Was it possible to reconcile the story of creation and The Fall with science? Many theologians then (and now) have observed that there are actually two stories of creation in the Book of Genesis. The first was egalitarian and involved the simultaneous creation of the two sexes: “male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Some current theologians have taken this to mean that the first human was a hermaphrodite. According to scriptural historian Phyllis Trible, the word “ha-adham”, which scholars usually translate as “Adam”, actually refers to a creature that is gender neutral, neither male nor female. I will return to these modern debates near the end of this talk. In contrast, the second creation story states that Eve was created from Adam’s rib or side. For late nineteenth and early twentieth century theologians, it was possible to reconcile the first account of creation with evolutionary theory; the second account was

less easy to accommodate. As historian Diarmid Finnegan points out, this was not just a case of theological scrupulosity: it struck at the heart of “important theological truths”, including

“monogamous marriage, the indissoluble (and for some, sacramental) character of the marriage union, the subordinate position of wives to husbands, and the designation of the domestic sphere as woman’s allotted place.”

After all, after God had fashioned Eve out of Adam’s rib, He said: “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (Genesis 2:24) and God’s subsequent curse of Eve included the phrase that “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16). In other words, if you take away a belief that Eve was created from Adam’s body and if you paper over Eve’s responsibility for introducing evil into the world, then the subordination of women to patriarchy becomes less defensible. Denying Eve’s transgression also undermined Saint Paul’s prohibition of women speaking in Church or teaching the scriptures – which were important prohibitions for Presbyterian, Catholic, and Orthodox religions, for example. At a time when women’s rights were at the heart of political debates, conservatives maintained that there were significant risks in reinterpreting Biblical texts. In the words of George Tyrrell, Jesuit priest and prominent British Catholic, rationalising the Biblical account of Eve’s creation and her central role in The Fall, threatened

“the primitive and divine institution of marriage; the belief in its elevation to the dignity of a sacrament typical of the relation of the Church to Christ her head and master – all this is relegated to the region of myth.”

He warned that, if the Church ignored the creation story of Eve and her role in The Fall, then marriage and the mastership of the husband in that relation would simply become an “ancient superstition”.

Such anxieties were linked to fears about Eve’s sexuality and, by extension, the transgressive sexuality of all women. It was only after eating the Forbidden Fruit, that Adam and Eve realised that they were naked. As John Milton made clear in Paradise Lost, immediately after tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, Eve seduced him. It did not need a genius of Freud’s stature to note that the snake is a phallic symbol and the apple, a woman’s breast.

Admittedly, not all nineteenth century commentators accepted the sexual symbolism of serpent and apple. My favourite rebuttal appears in an article entitled “The Coming of Sin”, authored by Alexander Brown and published in the London Quarterly Review in 1903. Brown scoffed at “some anthropologists” who, “raking in the slums of heathen dissoluteness” believed that the serpent was “a symbol of the Phallic principle” and attempt “to foist the sexual reference into our narrative”. He contended that such interpretations “grotesquely fail”. He was equally unconvinced by the belief that the “serpent symbol” originated “in the Bacchic orgies”, meaning that “the tree whose fruit was eaten was the vine, and Eve’s sin drunkenness”. Rather, he contended,

“We are on broader and surer grounds if we keep to the simple conception that the serpent is symbolic of man’s [sic] animal wisdom or instinctive prudence divorced from the inner voice of God. The serpent must represent a power which can make its voice heard in Eve’s soul.”

This was why the serpent chose to address Eve first: she was closer to animalistic or instinctive life. It was an argument endorsed by a person signing himself “G.M.A.” in an article entitled “Eve and the Serpent; Or, Some Modern Gems of Thought in their Original Setting”, published in The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine in 1887. He asked,

“Why did the enemy of souls choose, in the first instance, to address himself, not to the father, but to the mother of the human race? Was it because the stolid mind of the man was less liable to be beguiled than the finer susceptibilities of the woman, whose whole nature quivered with sympathy and potential appreciativeness; to whom, as to so many of her descendants, “the beautiful” seems right by force of beauty?”

In other words, not only was Eve the weaker vessel, she was also vain and easily swayed by beautiful things, as were all members of her sex. The result, though, was a catastrophic darkness and banishment from Paradise since, “if the light in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!”.

However, Eve has her defenders. Nineteenth century proponents of women’s rights frequently addressed the obstacle that Eve’s original sin posed for their causes. As leading suffragist Millicent Garrett Fawcett complained in an 1878 article on “the future of Englishwomen”,

“Too often our opponents base their remarks on such an observation as “Adam was first made, then Eve”, and appear to believe that no one will be tempted to complete the implied analogy and say “Adam first had household suffrage, then Eve”; or “Adam first studied medicine, then Eve”.”

The most influential nineteenth century activist to tackle Eve’s legacy was Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Her two-volume, collaborative work, The Woman’s Bible (1895 and 1898), set out to reimagine the Bible from a female and even feminist (although she would not have used that term) perspective. For Stanton, the traditional telling of Eve’s evil was an all-too-familiar example of ancient misogyny. The “allegory” of Eve being open to evil was the story on which “all the enemies of women rest their battering rams, to prove her inferiority”. She complained that

“The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race.... Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage.... And in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man’s bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital question of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home.”

The Biblical story did not have to be told that way, Stanton maintained. Eve’s action on plucking and eating the apple could equally be seen as revealing Eve’s superior intelligence and enquiring spirit. These were traits to be commended, not disparaged.

Furthermore, like some other theologians at the time, Stanton took inspiration from the fact that there were two, not one, creation story in the Book of Genesis: that is, simultaneous creation and the tale of the rib. She insisted that the first version that was the true one. Since there was “something sublime in bringing order out of chaos”, it was “wholly inconsistent with a petty surgical operation”.

In recent decades, feminist scholars of ancient theological texts have elaborated on the “two creations” arguments. For example, Phyliss Tribble notes that

“In Hebrew literature the central concerns of a unit often appear at the beginning and the end in an exclusion device. Genesis 2 evinces this structure. The creation of man first and woman last constitutes a ring composition whereby the two creatures are parallel.”

Indeed, Tribble goes further, claiming that in the ancient texts Eve is “the more intelligent one, the more aggressive one, and the one with greater sensibilities”. When she views the Tree of Knowledge, she assesses it as food, beauty, and source of wisdom. As such,

“the initiative and the decision are hers alone. There is no consultation with her husband.... In contrast, the man is a silent, passive and bland recipient.... His one act is belly orientated, and it is an act of quiescence, not of initiative.”

John Phillips’ Eve: The History of an Idea (1984) makes the important point that prioritising the second creation account over the first is a political and gendered decision. He maintains that

“If the woman is created simultaneously with the man, she is “perfect” also, and shares equally in the work of lordship. If she is created after him, she is somewhat less than perfect and belongs to the realm over which he exercises lordship. In preferring the second account, then, interpreters prefer an Eve who is religiously, socially, politically, and sexually under the control of her husband.”

Today, the legacy of Eve and The Fall continues to denigrate the lives of girls and women, as well as other minoritized groups. One extreme example is what is called “Eve teasing” in Bangladesh. This refers to the practice of young men sexually humiliating, abusing, and assaulting women in public places or offices. It is a form of sexual harassment that has led to incredible suffering, even suicides. According to a survey carried out by the Bangladesh National Women’s Lawyers’ Association, 90 per cent of girls aged 10-18 have been “Eve teased”. The term is important since it places responsibility for sexual harassment and molestation on the victims – they are Eve’s descendants, and so deserving their abuse.

“Eve teasing” is an evil practice that justifies itself by alluding to the Original Sin. Still others turn the evil around, divesting it of its sting by eroticising Eve’s actions. The “badness” of evil has been made sexy. This is common in twentieth century imagery. Eve has become an iconic image of sensual pleasures, popular in advertisements and popular culture. In the West, seeing a woman with an apple, or peering coyly from behind a tree, immediately signals Eye-the-temptress. One of the most explicit of these can be seen in the opening credits of the TV show Desperate Housewives, which plays on one of Lucas Cranach the Elder’s Adam and Eve paintings of the sixteenth century. It starts with Adam and Eve standing together in Eden, naked except for vine leaves covering their genitals. As a malevolent serpent hands Eve an apple, a giant apple crushes Adam. The screen immediately shows the title Desperate Housewives. This Eve is sexy and dangerous. She is also not worthy of veneration. Once again, we are “Killing Eve”.

In conclusion, the story of Eve’s decisive contribution to “The Fall” of humanity has been instrumental in the myriad evils inflicted on girls, women, and other minoritized groups. She has been constructed as the “Other” to Adam, the male who is fully human. But Eve’s fate encourages us to think about alternative readings and, importantly, about the gender of evil. If evil is about causing or allowing grievous harms to human and nonhuman animals as well as the environment, then its gender as female is less obvious. Man and woman both precipitated the Fall from a perfect Eden that had been created on a God-like scale, into a temporal, imperfect, world characterised by change, pain and suffering, corruption and death. The new world that was inaugurated was one of violence. On this human scale, however, murderous violence has largely been a male inheritance: a world where Cain slaughtered his brother Abel, and so on for generations. God assigned Adam to name and classify nature: he is the scientist, tasked with uncovering forbidden secrets. One of the many great evils of the twentieth century – the lethal violence unleashed by the creation of the atomic and nuclear bombs – implicate present-day Adams eating from the Tree of Scientific Knowledge, usurping the Creator in order to “play God”. They ate an apple that would plague humanity for all time and threaten to destroy all creation. And Eve’s closest descendent, Mary, has been protecting the weak, healing the suffering, and caring for the victims of man’s folly.

Further Reading:

Joanna Bourke, *Wounding the World: How Military Violence and War-Play Are Invading Our Lives* (London: Virago, 2014)

Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics*, University of Chicago Legal Forum (1989)

John Phillips, *Eve. The History of an Idea* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984)

Diarmid A. Finnegan, *Eve and Evolution: Christian Responses to the First Woman Question, 1860-1900*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 75.2 (April 2014)

Phyllis Trible, *Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread*, in Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (eds.), *Womanspring Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979)

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