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Doctrine and Paradigm: Two Functions of the Innovations in *Genesis B*

The Old English *Genesis B* has received a great deal of attention for its apparent mitigation of Eve's guilt. This theme has, however, been variously interpreted by modern critics. Sceptics cannot deny that the messenger's temptation of Eve depends on loyalty not presumption; but those reading in the account a strong mitigation must admit that the tempter displays a number of inconsistencies that Eve should be able to recognize for what they are. It seems that by his innovations the poet intended to emphasize the subtlety of the temptation as well as the inevitability and gravity of the resulting punishment, thus shaping the narrative into a warning for its audience. Additionally, the first parents' behaviour is brought into accordance with their role in salvation history. In order to reach these aims, the poet had to abandon Eve's pride as the occasion of the Fall, and neglect the theological differentiation between the sexes.

It has often been assumed that the *Genesis B* poet¹ intended at least partly to exonerate Eve from her first guilt. Already in 1875, Sievers could remark without further explanation that all the poem's doctrinal innovations relating to the temptation were designed to minimize the guilt of the first parents.² Ker was only slightly more specific when he noted that to the poet, "[t]he ordinary theological motives, gluttony and vainglory, did not seem sufficient. The poet would not so degrade the Protoplast. Adam and Eve are beguiled by the lies of the serpent."³ In 1896, Gurteen wrote that Eve "falls, but only in the hope of saving *him* [Adam]. Even if she does bring 'woe' on all mankind, it is done with a noble motive, and Cædmon's Eve is the prototype of true Womanhood, selfless and self-sacrificing."⁴ More detailed studies have been conducted in recent times, the most notable of which is that by Susan Burchmore, who, like Gurteen, had in mind specifically the mitigation of Eve's guilt, as opposed to Adam's. When the traditional allegorical exegesis is applied, in which Eve represents the senses and Adam reason, she argued, Adam is found doubly guilty: he ought not to have trusted sensory data, and he ought not to have disregarded his own, rational registration of the tempter's message. Eve, on the other hand, may be expected to misrepresent reality: this is a known characteristic of the senses.⁵ Moreover, while medieval commentators agree that Eve was able to see through the serpent's promises, *Genesis B* omits the biblical interrogation in which Eve shows her familiarity with God's command, thereby omitting her inexcusability.⁶ Eve, endowed with the weaker mental faculty, made a

mistake in overruling the better judgement of her spouse; but her mistake is one of loyalty not pride.⁷ Glenn Davis drew a similar contrast between the treatments of Adam and Eve: Adam, he claimed, is persuaded by “sensory temptations”; Eve falls out of loyalty to Adam.⁸

This scholarly vindication of Eve has not gone uncontested. The most notable challenge to the view is that by Rosemary Woolf. Arguing on the basis of analogues, she showed that the tempter’s disguise and his claim to be God’s messenger need not reduce Eve’s guilt: the twelfth-century *Mystère d’Adam* shares with *Genesis B* the first characteristic and the *Vita Adae et Evae* contains both, but neither of these works suggests that these circumstances render Eve less culpable.⁹ Following the Bible,¹⁰ orthodoxy held that woman was created inferior to man. The ubiquitousness of this tradition, combined with the tempter’s promise to Eve, “[m]eaht þu Adame eft gestyran” (568),¹¹ made it impossible for a medieval poet, translator, or audience, lay or learned, to miss the implications of power. Therefore, Woolf reasoned, the tempter’s guise is unconvincing and Eve believes his words only because she wants to believe them out of a sinful desire of power.¹² Doane argued in a similar vein: the only thing that can make Eve follow the tempter’s counsel is the pride generated by her opportunity to usurp Adam’s responsibility. “[I]t is doubtful that Eve has ‘good’ intentions,” he concluded, “or at least if she has, Hell, as they say, is paved with them.”¹³ Vickrey, focussing on the vision Eve receives at her consumption of the fruit, arrived at the conclusion that Eve’s vision serves to emphasize her guilt. After eating the fruit, Eve receives a vision in which she is able to see widely across heaven and earth (600-9a). When relating to Adam what has happened, she says, speaking of God:

Ic mæg heonon geseon
 hwær he sylf siteð, (þæt is suð and east),
 welan bewunden, se ðas woruld gesceop;
 geseo ic him his englas ymbe hweorfan
 mid feðerhaman, ealra folca mæst,
 wereda wynsumast. (666b-71)¹⁴

Vickrey concluded that the image of God seated would have brought to the minds of the audience the concept of Judgement Day, thereby confirming for them Eve’s error, although she herself could not have

known the concept of Judgement Day.¹⁵ He added that Eve is certainly not released of all guilt, at least if “hwær he sylf siteð” refers to a vision of God and not of his throne alone: irrespective of what Eve believes, the audience would know that man cannot behold God in the present life, as many a medieval commentator has argued on the basis of Matthew 5.8;¹⁶ and God certainly cannot be reached through disobedience.¹⁷

As rightful as it was of Vickrey and Woolf to warn against too lenient a judgement of Eve, a number of shortcomings may be pointed out in their respective argumentations. Woolf’s analogues are sufficiently strong to warrant comparison, and a relation between the texts is not impossible. However, it is only on the points of the tempter’s disguise, his claim of serving God, and the tempter’s play on her desire to rule over Adam that Woolf built her argument, since these are the parallels between the various works; but these do not seem to be the decisive factors to make Eve yield. What seems to me to carry the greater weight is the threat employed by the tempter when he indicates the consequences of refusal:

Ic wat, inc waldend god

abolgen wyrð, swa ic him þisne bodscipe
 selfa secge, þonne ic of þys siðe cume
 ofer langne weg, þæt git ne læstan wel
 hwilc ærende swa he easten hider
 on þysne sið sendeð. Nu sceal he sylf faran
 to incre andsware; ne mæg his ærende
 his boda beodan; þy ic wat þæt he inc abolgen wyrð,
 mihtig on mode. (551b-9a)¹⁸

Adam has just told the tempter, “þu gelic ne bist / ænegum his engla þe ic ær geseah” (538b-9);¹⁹ but now, Eve is made to believe not only that Adam was wrong in his judgement, but also that grave punishments are to follow if the misunderstanding is not rectified before God hears of it. Regardless of all the considerations Eve might be expected to include in her judgement of the situation, the possibility, however remote, that the creature is speaking the truth apparently presses itself strongly onto her mind: not only would she then be guilty of disobedience if she disbelieved the messenger, but her spouse and master would also suffer

punishment. The poet stresses these considerations when he tells us that Eve brings about the Fall “þurh holdne hyge” (708). To Woolf, the suggestion in line 568 that Eve might *Adame gestyran* may have been an invitation to wield greater power, but the phrase should be seen in the light of her loyalty, because the poet tells us this is the sentiment that has overturned the balance.²⁰ In this context, *gestyran* should therefore be taken to mean “correct, guide,” in the way one corrects the bearing of a vehicle when it is headed for a tree. An additional criticism of Woolf’s position may be directed at her strong reliance on the tradition in which she placed *Genesis B*. “[T]he *Mystère d’Adam*,” she asserted, “can be used as an aid to the correct interpretation of *Genesis B*, since the same plot occurs in it, but without the elements, such as the poet’s sympathetic interventions, which have led to misunderstanding.”²¹ While one is justified in taking recourse to textual sources and analogues when the meaning of a passage is obscure, as, for instance, in the *Brunanburh* fragment or the first stanzas of *Deor*, one had better stop short of giving more credence to the evidence from these sources and analogues than to that from the text under study. In rejecting *Genesis B*’s sympathetic portrayal of Eve as spurious, Woolf ignored the significance which this betrayal of the poet’s sympathies carries with regard to the poem’s narrative. A loyal mind is not described as merely a characteristic of Eve; instead, it is her driving force in accepting the fruit (708). As for Vickrey’s position, his remarks on the possibility of beholding God are valuable for increasing our awareness of the scene’s dramatic irony, but when considered for the question of Eve’s culpability they lead to the problematic question of how much of this all prelapsarian man could know. The only knowledge explicitly attributed to Adam in the biblical account is that of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and its prohibition, and that of the names of the animals, for Adam himself had named them.²² How much theological knowledge he was thought to have possessed cannot be established; but it may be concluded from the biblical Fall that the prohibition was considered his introduction to ethics, and the Fall his first encounter with evil. Whatever knowledge the *Genesis B* poet believed him to have possessed, Eve, having had the *wacran hige*, will not have surpassed him (590).²³

A healthy balance was brought into the debate by Robert Emmett Finnegan. He pointed out that one kind of knowledge Eve does possess is a personal knowledge of her Creator, which knowledge must have been enough for her to recognize the tempter’s insincerity. A second clue she ought to have understood is the tempter’s inconsistency: claiming to be God’s messenger, he betrays his purported lord through his proposal

to withhold information from him. Additionally, he suffers a few slips of the tongue that would have given him away to the critical interpreter. Eve thus has enough knowledge to be able to see the tempter for what he is.²⁴ All the same, Finnegon went on, she apparently fails to apply her critical faculty and does not see what is going on. By Augustine's standards, ignorance is no excuse. Eve's ignorance does, however, exempt her from the sin of *superbia*. She is vincibly ignorant and therefore guilty, but in a lesser degree than the fallen angels.²⁵

In order to assess the poet's view on Eve's culpability, it is necessary to understand his purpose in altering the biblical account. Even if he followed an alternative tradition, as Woolf believed, his apology on Eve's behalf has not been found elsewhere. This is therefore the first element to which we should turn.

The apology seems to have been intended to emphasize the difficulty of distinguishing between right and wrong, thus facilitating identification with Eve. The longest apologetic passage runs as follows:

Heo dyde hit þeah þurh holdne hyge, nyste þæt þær hearma swa fela,
 fyrenearfeða, fylgean sceolde
 monna cynne, þæs heo on mod genam
 þæt heo þæs laðan bodan larum hyrde,
 ac wende þæt heo hylde heofoncyniges
 worhte mid þam wordum þe heo þam were swelce
 tacen oðiewde and treowe gehet,
 oðþæt Adame innan breostum
 his hyge hwyrfde and his heorte ongann
 wendan to hire willan. He æt þam wife onfeng
 helle and hinnsið, þeah hit nære hatan swa,
 ac hit ofetes noman agan sceolde;
 hit wæs þeah deaðes swefn and deofles gespon,
 hell and hinnsið and hæleða forlor,
 menniscra morð, þæt hie to mete dædon,
 ofet unfæle. (708-23a)²⁶

While his audience dwell on the enormous consequences of Eve's action, the poet hastens to balance the picture: Eve did not sin intentionally; instead, she believed the messenger's words and served as an unwitting vessel for his malice. This picture is confirmed by the subtlety of the temptation. Although the biblical account states that "serpens erat callidior cunctis animantibus terrae" (3.1),²⁷ it has the serpent seduce Eve with an appeal to her presumption ("eritis sicut dii," 3.5).²⁸ The Old English redaction shows a far subtler temptation in having the tempter appeal to Eve's loyalty. While the poem's audience may have had difficulty identifying with Eve when she yielded to an offer that had never been granted them in their own lives, namely to become like a god, all will have understood the call of loyalty as expressed in *Genesis B* and sympathized to some extent with her dutiful response. Thus Eve's misdeed becomes a tragedy with which people could identify, through the application of what Woolf rightly called "psychological realism."²⁹

Besides the difficulty of assessment, the poet stresses the gravity of the consequences of Eve's mistake. The combination of these two emphases serves to point out the precarious balance of a morally just life, which balance pertains both to the first parents and to the (Anglo-)Saxon audience. In spite of all the mitigating circumstances, the poet accentuates the gravity and the definite nature of the Fall's consequences. It was indeed in this deed that mankind accepted its doom, he insists; in the space of a moment, *menniscra morð* has been brought about and the course cannot now be altered (717b-23a). The earnest of the situation is further emphasized by the couple's recognition of its serious nature: this recognition is brought out in man's repeated prayer sessions (777b-83a), in the representation of his fears (767b-9a), and in Adam's lengthy description of the evils he is able to perceive after his consumption of the fruit (790-815). The subtlety of the temptation makes clear how easily man may fall if his attention slackens in the slightest, which consideration is a lesson for the audience to apply in their personal lives; but the ease with which one may fall in no way diminishes the irrevocable and grave nature of that fall. In effect, the poet tells his audience to watch and pray, just as Christ tells his drowsy disciples at Gethsemane.³⁰

In this reading of the account, it is significant that Eve's subordinate position as a woman appears to be no obstruction to the male audience's identification with her. Man's superiority over woman is rooted in Scripture³¹ and has been amply confirmed by such thinkers as Augustine.³² Moreover, Paul asserted that Eve was not made in God's image;³³ this implies that womankind comes close to being a different species

altogether. Nevertheless, the *Genesis B* poet goes so far in facilitating an identification with the first mother of this subordinate race that he risks outright heresy. With this aim of identification in mind, he could not place much emphasis on the essential differences between man and woman, and indeed he does not. True, he asserts that Eve possesses the *wacran hige* (590), but in its context, this remark serves more than anything else as an excuse for her yielding. Adam elaborately bewails the fact that he has requested Eve's creation since she has now become his undoing; but his own guilt is also implied in the couple's prayer for a fitting punishment (777b-83a), and the plural includes Adam in the observation that "hie godes hæfdon / bodscipe abrocen" (782b-3a). While the poet could not diverge too radically from contemporary tradition, the gap of culpability between man and woman receives no special emphasis.

Rather than serving a proto-feminist agenda, this levelling out of the differences between the sexes appears to be a by-product of the poet's Christianization of the Fall narrative. As noted, the medieval Western Christian tradition had strong ideas about the respective natures of the sexes. In *Genesis B*, however, the importance of this view is subordinated to the poet's aim of rendering the first parents compliant with Christian values. More specifically, Adam and Eve are made to participate in the penitential tradition. While in the early medieval period this tradition had not reached the degree of standardization it was to receive in later centuries, the three elements of contrition, confession, and formal penitence could already be discerned.³⁴ Not only is the biblical Genesis too succinct to mention the couple's response to their Fall; it also predates Christianity, and specifically the doctrine that Adam and Eve were to obtain salvation at the Harrowing of Hell. In order to justify this rehabilitation, it had to be supposed that the couple had shown the proper attitude required for a forgiveness of sins. In *Genesis B*, Adam and Eve's remorse after Adam's consumption of the fruit is immediate and intensive. Whether triggered by guilt (769b-70a), fear of repercussions (767b-9a, 802b-15), or both, the couple's mood throughout the remainder of the interpolation is characterised by remorse. Contrition seems in place, while confession is implied in the couple's repeated prayers, in which they also ask to undergo punishment for their misdeed (777b-83a). They thus express their willingness to undergo all three elements of the penitential tradition.

While *Genesis B* is heterodox in its omission of pride as the occasion of the Fall, that same element served to render the story of the Fall more realistic and practical as a warning aimed at the poem's audience. Together with a second notable innovation, namely Adam and Eve's penitent attitudes, this development

helped prepare the Judaic Genesis narrative for the theological reality of the medieval Western sphere but also for a decidedly practical application. Adam and Eve are prepared for their destinies in Christian salvation history, but they are also made into a warning against sin and a paradigm of penitence, in effect a handbook of prevention and cure.

- ¹ Some critics hold that the poem was never “translated” from Old Saxon; rather, it has undergone a process of repeated “familiarization” (A.N. Doane, *The Saxon Genesis: An Edition of the West Saxon Genesis B and the Old Saxon Vatican Genesis*. Madison, 1991, p. 49; see also R. Delorez, “Genesis: Old Saxon and Old English.” *English Studies* 76.5, 1995, 409-23, at 419). Whether or not this hypothesis is correct, my term “Genesis B poet” is not intended to suggest that the poem is primarily an Anglo-Saxon creation, nor does the word “poet” reflect a supposition on my part that Old Saxon or Old English poetry consisted of isolated creations that formed no part of a larger tradition. I use the term “poet” in a loose sense to refer to any individual or number of individuals responsible for the conscious creation or adoption of the elements discussed.
- ² Eduard Sievers, *Der Heliand und die angelsächsische Genesis*. Halle, 1875, p. 22.
- ³ W.P. Ker, *The Dark Ages*. 1904. London, 1955, p. 259.
- ⁴ S. Humphreys Gurteen, *The Epic of the Fall of Man: A Comparative Study of Cædmon, Dante and Milton*. 1896. New York, 1964, p. 216. Emphasis Gurteen’s.
- ⁵ Susan Burchmore, “Traditional Exegesis and the Question of Guilt in the Old English Genesis B.” *Traditio* 41, 1985, pp. 117-44, at 119-28.
- ⁶ Genesis 3.1-3; *De Genesi ad litteram* 11.30; Burchmore pp. 130-31. All biblical references are to Robert Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*. Stuttgart, 4th rev. ed., 1994. The reference to Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram* is to Joseph Zycha, ed., *Sancti Aureli Augustini De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim eiusdem libri capitula, De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber, Locutionum in Heptateuchum libri septem*. 1899. New York and London, 1970.
- ⁷ Burchmore pp. 131-34.
- ⁸ Glenn M. Davis, “Changing Senses in Genesis B.” *Philological Quarterly* 80.2, spring 2001, pp. 113-31, at 115-16.
- ⁹ Rosemary Woolf, “The Fall of Man in Genesis B and the *Mystère d’Adam*.” *Studies in Old English Literature in Honor of Arthur G. Brodeur*, ed. Stanley B. Greenfield. Eugene, 1963, pp. 187-99, at 190-93.
- ¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11.3, 7-9; Ephesians 5.22-24.
- ¹¹ References to Genesis B are by verse line to George Philip Krapp, ed., *The Junius Manuscript. The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records I*. New York, 1931.
- ¹² Woolf 195-96; cf. *De civitate Dei* 14.13. Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb, eds., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De civitate Dei. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 48. Vol II: Libri 11-22*. Turnhout, 1955.
- ¹³ Doane pp. 143-44; 152.
- ¹⁴ “From here I can see where he himself is seated (in the southeast, that is), surrounded by riches, who created the world; I see his angels moving about him in feather-dress, the greatest of all races, the most delightful of hosts.”
- ¹⁵ John F. Vickrey, “The Vision of Eve in Genesis B.” *Speculum* 44.1, January 1969, pp. 86-102, at 86-91.

- ¹⁶ “[B]eati mundo corde quoniam ipsi Deum videbunt,” i.e., “blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.”
- ¹⁷ Vickrey pp. 96-98.
- ¹⁸ “I know that the Lord God will become angry with the two of you, if I myself convey this message to him when I come the long way from this errand, that you do not properly follow whatever message he sends on this journey from the east. Now he himself will have to journey to [obtain] your answer; his messenger cannot deliver his message; by this I know that he will become angry with you, [the] mighty in mind.”
- ¹⁹ “[Y]ou are not like any of his angels that I have seen before.”
- ²⁰ Woolf pp. 194-95.
- ²¹ Woolf p. 198.
- ²² Genesis 2.20, 16-17.
- ²³ Cf. Robert Emmett Finnegan, “Eve and ‘Vincible Ignorance’ in Genesis B.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 18.2, Summer 1976, pp. 329-39, at 329-30.
- ²⁴ Finnegan pp. 330-33.
- ²⁵ Finnegan pp. 333-36. Finnegan seems to reject the view that the understanding of Eve’s culpability as expressed in Genesis B is heterodox; it is unclear to me how this position may be maintained in the recognition that Eve is not guilty of superbia (Finnegan p. 330).
- ²⁶ “But she did it out of a loyal mind. She did not know that so many harms would follow, fiery torments to mankind, because she had taken to heart what she had heard by the counsels of the hateful messenger; but she thought that she was carrying out the allegiance of the heavenly King with those words which she presented to the man as a token, and she vowed [her] trustworthiness until from within his bosom Adam’s mind changed and his heart turned to her will. At the hands of the woman he received hell and death, although it was not so called, but instead it had to bear the name of fruit; but it was death’s sleep and the devil’s deception, hell and death and the loss of salvation, the death of mankind, that they took for food, an evil fruit.”
- ²⁷ “[T]he serpent was more cunning than all the animals of the earth.”
- ²⁸ “[Y]ou will be like gods.”
- ²⁹ Woolf p. 198.
- ³⁰ Mark 14.32-40.
- ³¹ 1 Corinthians 11.3, 7-9; Ephesians 5.22-24.
- ³² Confessiones 13.32. Lucas Verheijen, ed., *Sancti Augustini Confessiones libri XIII*. Corpus Christianorum Series Latina. Turnhout, 1981.
- ³³ 1 Corinthians 11.7.
- ³⁴ See, e.g., Sarah Hamilton, *The Practice of Penance, 900-1050*. Royal Historical Society Studies in History N.S.

Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2001.