

– Good, thoughtful analysis with evidence of pressing beyond the literal sense of the narrative to point out ironies and interesting readings. Nice work. Works cited needed. 90.

English 312: Major British Writers to 1800

Final Essay

May 2, 2012

### Eve's Apology

“Eve's Apology in Defense of Women” is a poem that is written in the voice of Pontius Pilate's wife, pleading with her husband to spare the life of “faultless” (2) Jesus. Pilate's wife compares the pending crucifixion of Jesus to Eve's original sin, continuing on to say that if Pilate carries out this offence, he will have committed a sin far greater than the one Eve committed in the Garden of Eden so many years ago. There is however, an intricacy to this poem that is simultaneously clever and all too knowing due to the fact that this piece of literature was of course crafted, not by Pontius Pilate's wife, but instead by the early seventeenth century poet, Amilia Lanyer, knowing full well that Pilate does in fact move forward with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Through this poem, Amilia Lanyer uses irony, not to excuse the role that a woman played in original sin, but to point out that men, such as Adam and Pilate, are also to blame for the sins of the world, and she does so in such a logical fashion that it becomes hard to argue with her reasons for why men and women should be considered equal. Good. Topic, arg, and method clear.

The text leads one to believe that if Pilate were to carry out this unjust deed, equality, or at least the hope for equality, between the sexes would open up. In the line, “Let not us women glory in men's fall,” (15) Lanyer carefully chooses the word glory, meaning to exult with

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triumph (OED, glory, v., def. 1.), as if to warn against this initial reaction that all women would share in, if indeed men were to fall from their position of power. Although the line is carefully crafted as if to say, “Let us hope, for the sake of man, that Pilate chooses wisely, sparing the life of Jesus,” a savvy reader will know that this is of course not the case.

It is in the first three stanzas in which one realizes that just as Eve will come to represent all women in this poem, Lanyer paints Pilate as the representative of all men. Good claim In the lines, “Till now your indiscretion sets us free./ And makes our former fault much less appear;” (17-18) the “us” that are now “free” are all of women, set free by the actions (or in this case, the pending actions) of Pilate, who is carrying out an act which makes the “fault” of women less apparent. Just as Eve’s decision to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is held against the female gender, it is only fair that the entire male gender should then be held accountable for the crucifixion of Jesus. GOOD support!

Having made the connection between Eve’s “former fault” (18) and Pilate’s inevitable crucifixion of Jesus, the poem moves away from Pontius Pilate for the moment, opting instead to delve deeper into the roles that not only Eve, but also Adam, played in the act of original sin.

Lanyer is not so quick to cast the entire blame on Eve, writing:

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.  
Although the serpent’s craft had her abused,  
God’s holy word ought all his actions frame,  
For he was lord and king of all the earth,  
Before poor Eve had either life or breath, (33-40)

Here, fault is not simply being passed from Eve to Adam, but rather, the idea is presented that both are to share in the blame. Eve, who usually takes the brunt of said blame, having convinced Adam to take part in the eating of the forbidden fruit, comes across as the less guilty of the two. This stanza is rife with ironic undertones, referring to Eve as “weakness” and Adam as “strength” in a way that makes it very clear that if Adam were truly the embodiment of strength then he would have turned down Eve’s offerings. As for Eve being represented as weakness, this too is ironic, winking at the common misconception that women are by far the weaker of the two sexes. Very good analysis!

Weakness was not the true reason for Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit, nor her reason for sharing it with Adam. As Lanyer states, “If Eve did err, it was for knowledge sake;/ The fruit being fair persuaded him to fall:” (53-54). This take on the situation, presents Eve’s disobedience in a completely different light, and although she may have been persuaded by the “serpent’s falsehood” (55) it was not purely out of weakness, but rather out of the desire for acquired knowledge that she consented. Good – push further – how does this reflect on Eve?

As for Adam, his excuse for partaking in the eating of the fruit is not nearly as ambitious or excusable. Adam’s persuasion and eventual fall comes from “The fruit being fair...” (54), and it is said that, “If he would eat it, who had power to stay him?” (56). Adam was deemed ruler of the earth, having no one to answer to but God, Himself, so if Adam made up his mind to eat the forbidden fruit, there was no one who could put a stop to it, no one to tell him that what he was doing was wrong, and as “lord and king of all the earth” (39) Adam simply should have known better. Despite all of these arguments, it is still Eve (and therefore all women) who takes the fall for original sin.

Bringing this back full circle to Pontius Pilate, Pilate's wife makes her final pleas, claiming that, "Her sin was small to what you do commit;" (74), here, her being Eve, of course. This is where the comparisons between Eve and Pilate begin to materialize and one can see why this format was chosen to write such a poem. Lanyer writes:

Then let us have our liberty again,  
And challenge to yourselves no sovereignty.  
You came not in the world without our pain,  
Make that a bar against your cruelty;  
Your fault being greater, why should you disdain  
Our being your equals, free from tyranny?  
If one weak woman simply did offend,  
This sin of yours hath no excuse nor end, (81-88)

The entire poem hinges on this very stanza, and all the major themes are presented clearly. Through the voice of Pontius Pilate's wife, it is as if Lanyer is speaking directly to the men of her time, rather than to Pilate himself. She claims that women should no longer be subjected to the rule of men, for the pain of bringing a man into this world is punishment enough for the single sin in which Eve partook. What Eve did was in no way worse than what Pilate carries out through "malice" (72). Eve was deceived, but the word malice implies that the execution of Jesus is being carried out through ill will and desire to do evil. Very good claim/support.

Amilia Lanyer conceived a more than clever way to get across her point that the subjugation of women based on the idea that all women are to be held accountable for the actions of Eve can no longer be considered valid, for if all women are responsible for original sin, then by that logic, all men are to blame for the death of Jesus Christ. Her arguments point out the sheer ludicrousness of this idea and she uses reasoning to show just how ridiculous and outdated (even at the turn of the seventeenth century) this way of thinking was and is.