

LEGENDS OF THE FALL

Marina Warner [The New York Review of Books](#) [September 28, 2017 issue](#)

Reviewed: [**The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve**](#) by Stephen Greenblatt

In 1872, when the brilliant young Assyriologist George Smith found a cuneiform tablet in the British Museum inscribed with part of the story of the Flood, he became so excited that he began undressing, though the comparative literature scholar David Damrosch thinks that he might have been merely loosening his collar, Stephen Greenblatt tells us—still sign enough to alarm Smith’s Victorian confreres into fearing that he was overborne with passion. It’s a famous moment in the history of literature because Smith, who was a devout Christian, believed that his discovery revealed continuity between the Bible and the far more ancient Epic of Gilgamesh, in which a Babylonian Noah appears. Smith took his discovery as proof that the Bible was true history: here was testimony to the Deluge from an older, independent source. Dated to around 2100 BCE, the poem is the earliest extant work of literature we have. (When Greenblatt says “quite possibly the oldest story ever found,” he is being very cautious.)

George Smith’s reading of the tablet could be turned around. Rather than confirming the veracity of the Bible, the Gilgamesh account of events at the beginning of human society more likely reveals the contingency of Genesis: the story received for centuries by Jews and Christians as revealed truth is only one of many entwined stories, inherited and invented, preserved, forgotten, and recast. As Greenblatt describes, with the lucidity we expect from him, the cosmic struggle of Tiamat and Ea and other deities in the Babylonian creation myth only survived in a copy of Berossus’s *History of Babylonia*, made by Eusebius, which was itself lost and survives in a single copy of an Armenian translation. As for the great Epic of Gilgamesh, it lay buried in the library of Nineveh until Layard’s dig of 1845, the key to its script lost, its magnificent narrative unread until George Smith’s work of decipherment. Meanwhile the Bible account traveled far and wide and prevailed.

The life of any artifact or work of literature is subject to happenstance. How it travels and settles, takes root and effloresces, depends on so many various and unpredictable factors—on wars and the weather, on one reader’s serendipitous encounter or a rare individual’s advocacy, as Greenblatt excitingly described in *The Swerve*, which recounts the adventures of Lucretius’s *De rerum natura*. But at the heart of all this unpredictability, the struggle for authority continues and seeks to establish an appearance of reason, inevitability, and normality.

In *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, Greenblatt surveys the vicissitudes that made the account of human origins told in Genesis 1–2 the preeminent one. It was this account that shaped the history of human relations in the Christian world—with infants deemed born in sin, women proclaimed “the devil’s gateway,” and sexuality demonized. In a collection of essays Greenblatt edited called *Cultural Mobility* (2009), he invoked the medieval concept of *contingentia*, “the sense that the world as we know it is not necessary: the point is not only that the world will pass away, but also that it could all have been otherwise.” It could all have been otherwise: this could be his motto.

Greenblatt follows the story of Adam and Eve through theology, literature, art, biology, and even an excursus into paleontology, with a wistful eye for the counterfactual. He reviews the metamorphoses of scripture’s reception from God’s immutable word to fantastic myth (though not for all, of course) and makes a case for its force when read as imaginative literature: “The narrative becomes a just-so story,” he writes; “if it is powerful enough it becomes a work of art. The drift toward make-believe did not have to end in disillusionment.”



Blake 1808
Blake 1808

‘Satan Watching the Caresses of Adam and Eve’; illustration by William Blake for John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, 1808

Greenblatt’s most persuasive and passionate argument considers the interactions between Genesis and the Epic of Gilgamesh. He argues that the creators of the Genesis story, who would have come to know Babylonian cosmology during the Hebrews’ long captivity in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, told their own story of the beginning in dialogic dispute with their masters. The creation story in the Bible can be read as a conscious riposte to the Babylonian creation myth, a defiant manifesto for the true religion, written by the chosen people against their pagan rivals and masters. After Cyrus freed the Hebrews in 539 BCE, they began to consolidate themselves as an independent society, and this meant taking purificatory measures, which included eschewing Babylonian customs and dress and forbidding intermarriage. As the prophet Ezra declares, “The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands.” The Old Testament bequeathed the features of Moloch and Baal to Satan and his devils and made Babylon a symbol of profanity. But, asks Greenblatt, “How do you uproot deeply held beliefs?” With a flourish, he replies, “You change the story.”

Parts of Genesis, which was edited into its known version in the fifth century BCE, had begun to form before the Hebrews left Babylon: “The dream of the master text, the truth stripped of all uncleanness, was part of a concerted effort to resist the powerful culture of the surrounding peoples, to refuse their reigning divinities, abjure their forms of worship, and reject their accounts of the world.... The Torah helped to turn Hebrews—a tribal people occupying a particular, highly vulnerable territory—into Jews.”

The correlations between the two origin stories are many but proceed antiphonally: in Gilgamesh, the scene opens in a great city, Uruk, not a garden, and the gods and goddesses are on the side of humans, who have begged for help against the excesses of the demigod Gilgamesh, their ruler, who tyrannizes them, taking their wives and property. In answer the gods create the wild man Enkidu by pinching off a lump of clay. He is as strong and as beautiful as Gilgamesh but uncivilized. A goddess intervenes, and a woman, Shamhat, a hierodule, or sacred harlot, is given the task of humanizing this new creature—through sex. After wild nights together, Enkidu finds that the animals he once ran with now shun him.

Greenblatt reads these scenes, and their sequels, as stories of creation and coming to awareness (i.e., knowledge of good and evil) through the agency of a woman, and an experienced, sexual woman at that. He pithily remarks, “Genesis rewrites initiation as transgression.” Later, when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh learns the meaning of sorrow and loss, and confronts the inescapability of human death. When the goddess Ishtar solicits Gilgamesh to be her consort, he rejects her bitterly: the love she offers is treacherous, and the gods’ care for their creatures capricious and neglectful. Human disobedience is made admirable.

Many of these themes and motifs have traveled into other poems and stories: they echo in the tales of Odysseus and Theseus and Circe and in Arabic and Persian romances. (The Orientalist Stephanie Dalley has argued that the name of the hero Buluqiya in a long quest tale in the Arabian Nights derives from Gilgamesh.) The deep and troubling questions the epic raises—about the behavior of gods toward their creation, the ethics of sexuality, the interrelations of animals and humans, and the fact of death—inspired a divergent vision in the authors of Genesis. Greenblatt writes: “a tale of joyous sexual initiation; a gradual ascent from wildness to civility; a celebration of the city as the great good place; a difficult, reluctant acceptance of mortality.... Instead, we inherited Genesis.... What was a triumph in *Gilgamesh* is a tragedy in Genesis.”

Greenblatt laments the censorious turn that the story takes in Genesis, and yet he finds much to celebrate and consider. As a Renaissance and literary scholar he is fascinated by allegory—how can one not be an allegorist,

he implies, when reading of magic trees and a talking snake? At the same time, his heart is fired by Renaissance verisimilitude: he admires Dürer's intense and detailed 1504 engraving of Adam and Eve, and our first parents as brought to life and speech by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

The tension between literal and allegorical ways of reading biblical stories inspired much fruitful discussion in the early years of Christianity. A cache of manuscripts that was unearthed near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi in 1945 revealed sharp resistance, alternative versions, and new ways of reading, as Elaine Pagels has described in her pathbreaking studies *The Gnostic Gospels* and *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*. (Greenblatt could have acknowledged her spadework more generously.) Why did a loving God forbid creatures whom he had made in his own image to have knowledge of good and evil? How were our first parents to know what was right or wrong without such knowledge? How could evil be in the garden at all (not to speak of a talking snake)? And there were many other questions, some of them more practical: What language did they use to talk to each other? How long were they in Eden? (Dante makes it a very brief matter—only six or seven hours, Adam tells the poet in *Paradiso*.)

When the story migrated into the Koran and Islamic beliefs, some of these knots were unpicked: Satan was excluded from the garden because he refused to bow down before the new creatures God had made, whom God had ordered all the angels to worship for their perfections. Satan protested that, being made from fire, he was superior to Adam and Eve, who were only made of earth. In the Muslim narrative, Eve isn't condemned to the same degree—the Koranic Adam doesn't blame her for making him eat the forbidden fruit. The stories of their survival after the Fall are filled with marvelous visions and miracles, and Adam is included later among the Prophets.

The Islamic commentaries also explain the talking snake with nice ingenuity: Satan managed to inveigle himself into the Garden by tempting the animals with a promise to ward off mortality. He first tries to talk the peacock into letting him in, but the peacock refuses and offers instead to fetch the serpent who is “the leader of all the beasts of Paradise” and is “teaching [Adam and Eve] about the trees.” The fallen angel approaches the snake and says, “I see a space between your two fangs. I can fit there.” So the serpent—a she in this story—opens her jaws and Satan leaps inside.

The Christian theologian Marcion, in the mid-second century, posited an evil creator alongside the father of Jesus Christ to explain the existence of suffering, pain, and pests such as mosquitoes and scorpions. He gained followers, and the Marcionites even suggested rejecting the Old Testament altogether. He was declared a heretic and his works were destroyed. Another dissident, a Gnostic commentator, pointed out that Adam and Eve did not die as the creator said they would if they ate the fruit, but that instead their eyes were opened. He went on to ask, “But of what sort is this God?... Surely he has shown himself to be a malicious envier.”

Augustine was the principal architect of Christianity's commitment to the absolute reality of the Eden story, which assigns to our first parents full responsibility for suffering and death entering the world through the God-given gift of free will. They chose to sin, and Augustine formulated out of this story the doctrine of original sin, which declares that the transgression of Adam and Eve was transmitted in the act of sexual union to all their descendants. Greenblatt emphasizes Augustine's obsessive drive to define, prove, and defend his interpretation of Scripture and the moral he extrapolated from it: a fateful exegesis that dominated Christian belief for centuries and still forms part of Catholic as well as much Protestant doctrine.

In a chapter called “In the Bath-house,” Greenblatt takes his lead from the *Confessions* and reprises how Augustine's father exulted, when they were at the baths together, to see that his young son had reached puberty, *inquietu adolescentia*. (Greenblatt suggests Augustine's father saw his son's “involuntary erection, or

simply...recently sprouted pubic hair.”) His ardently pious mother, however, reacted with horror at these signs of what the saint would later decry as concupiscence. Following a notion he developed in his book on Lucretius, Greenblatt could have called this bathhouse moment a swerve—a point at which history takes a slight deviation from a predictable course. But for him a swerve is a positive shift, not the braking halt that Monica—Saint Monica, patron of child abuse, Greenblatt tells us, with a nip of irony—called on Augustine to make, instilling, in Greenblatt’s view, an early and durable suspicion of sex and the body. The mother does not come off well in Greenblatt’s account, and he hints at his own reasons for such wariness about interfering mother love.

Too much emphasis is given to this moment, and the triumph of the dismal, utterly depressing, and controlling Augustinian view of human nature could be another example of contingency. Augustine’s eloquent and most acute opponents—Pelagius and, later, Julian of Eclanum—nearly overcame his arguments. Julian declared, “Human nature in infants is whole and sound, and, in adults, capable of choosing” good or evil. Again Pagels is more searching and illuminating on these conflicts.

Greenblatt’s concerns lie elsewhere: “brilliant new technologies of representation,” he writes, “finally succeeded in conferring a convincing sense of reality upon the first humans and in bringing their story fully to life.” His inventory of various representations of Adam and Eve is necessarily partial—he speeds through the catacombs to the eleventh-century bronze doors of the Hildesheim Cathedral, the lovely siren-like Eve at Autun (signed by Gislebertus), and Masaccio’s grievous stricken couple in Florence, “utterly bereft and miserable,” until he finally comes to Dürer, whom he admires for his depiction of Adam and Eve above all. By making this as an engraving to be copied and widely circulated, the German artist spread his humanist allegiances to the idealized nude of his classical precursors and to belief in the accomplishments and potential of the creatures God made: “I believe,” Dürer declared, “that no man liveth who can grasp the whole beauty of the meanest living creature.”

Although this section of the book is written with heartfelt enthusiasm, it’s a bit thin, and Greenblatt’s description of the image leaves many fascinating features unexamined: Why a parrot in the tree, for instance? To my eyes, Dürer remains a flinty narcissist, and his images of women (including his Eve) often coldly anatomical, their meticulously rendered allure reverberating with misogynistic terrors of the period, rather than inwardly understood, let alone sympathetically inhabited (as in the case of the drawing of his mother).

Did Adam and Eve make love before the Fall? This question has excited many great minds. A rabbi, Jeremiah Ben Eleazar, in the second century CE pondered Aristophanes’s story in Plato’s *Symposium* of primordial hermaphrodites and speculated that Eve was made as Adam’s helpmeet only after he had tried to unite with all the animals and found them wanting. Other scholars imagined sexual union without passion or desire, a kind of breathing or painless transfusion; yet others, following the Greek fathers and their Platonist sympathies, invoked Paradise itself as something close to joyful sexual union. It’s clear that this book couldn’t include everything, and Greenblatt is primarily a scholar of the Renaissance, but his appetite for stories could have led him fruitfully to explore medieval fantasies about life in Paradise, such as Bernard Silvestris’s *Cosmographia* or Eriugena’s blissful metaphysics of sexual union in *Periphyseon* (*On the Division of Nature*). These authors would give crucial support to his enthusiasm for allegory, colored in their case by the Platonism of such thinkers of the early Greek church as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.

Later opposing voices—and there were many more—for whom the goodness of God’s creation included human sexuality, and even the female sex, need more airing and discussion in Greenblatt’s account. Two learned women of the Renaissance who struggled against the prevailing misogyny of Christian dogma make brief entrances: the humanist Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466), who wrote a “Dialogue on Adam and Eve,” and Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), who fulminated against the marriage market and the forced enclosure of

dowerless or otherwise ineligible women in convents. (She was herself disabled and put away against her will.) In her *Paternal Tyranny*, a brave forerunner of Diderot's much more famous attack in *La Religieuse*, Tarabotti denounced these patriarchal abuses. The Inquisition censored both of their works, and both have only been translated recently, in the enterprising series the Other Voice in Early Modern Europe. I would have liked to hear more from these other, fiery minds, not to change the story in a wishful fashion, but to intensify the depth of field as Greenblatt's historical horizon widens.

It was John Milton, the regicide republican and Puritan, poet and activist, who unashamedly evoked the glorious tenderness and delight of sex for Adam and Eve before the Fall—and imagined angels doing it as well—in a richly intricate language that clothes the laconic Bible narrative in lavishly sensuous imagery, sinuous syntax, and intimate intensity.

Milton married at the age of thirty-three (late in those days), and his first wife, Mary Powell, left him to return home after little more than a month. Greenblatt sees this crisis—the reasons for her departure remain mysterious—as the event that “realigned everything in Milton's life and decisively shaped the great poem he would eventually write about Adam and Eve.” Like the bathhouse, the abandoned nuptial bed becomes the crucible for great consequences. Milton turned his formidable rhetorical arsenal to a pamphlet on no-fault divorce and referred to Genesis for justification of marriage as freely chosen companionship. Later, Mary came back: the Civil War heightened the difficulties of surviving for her family (they were Royalists and Cromwell's New Model Army was winning), but she died after the birth of their fourth child, a daughter.

When the fortunes of the Commonwealth turned, Milton was in grave danger for his polemical writings and his revolutionary loyalties; he was also by 1652 completely blind. Still, he got married again, to Katherine Woodcock, who was twenty years younger. She too died, of “a consumption,” also after giving birth, the baby following her a month later. She is probably the subject of Milton's most poignant, elegiac sonnet, “Methought I saw my late espoused saint.” She visits him in a dream, and he hopes “to have/Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint.” Just so, without restraint, unveiling their faces and bodies, Milton went on to imagine delightful mutuality between Adam and Eve before the Fall—and afterward, when they set out on their new existence: “They hand in hand, with wand'ring steps and slow,/Through Eden took their solitary way.”

An impoverished, blind widower with three children, a marked man under the Restoration for his part in the Civil War, Milton again got remarried five years after Katherine's death, to Betty Minshall, thirty years younger than he. It was during these last, beleaguered years that he dictated the epic *Paradise Lost*, inspired by a Muse whom he named Urania and who came to him in the night or in the early hours.

Greenblatt brings a storyteller's sense of drama to the turbulent life of the poet and, as he does with Augustine and his mother, views the making of a major work, not without a touch of identification, through the lens of his private and public struggles. Adam becomes a type of everyman, Eve an everywoman, and their union a figure of love: for Greenblatt, reading Milton reading Genesis, the Bible story is uniquely admirable because it acknowledges the importance of a man and woman “cleaving together.” When God presents him with Eve, Adam “utters a jubilant welcome, an ecstatic poem”; Robert Alter's translation draws attention to the fusion in difference of their two beings: “This one shall be called Woman (*ishah*)/for from man (*ish*) was this one taken.” “Within his tiny scope,” writes Greenblatt, “the Genesis storyteller finds the time to repeat and repeat the strange, ecstatic feeling that the man and the woman are what he calls ‘one flesh.’”

Of Milton, Greenblatt writes, “More than a thousand years after Augustine, Adam and Eve have finally become real.” But this supersaturated reality runs the risk of no longer commanding assent, the very accuracy of the

characters' depictions giving them a deathly falsity. In the last section of Greenblatt's book, the truth of Adam and Eve's story gradually loses its powers of persuasion: the story's audience begins to leave, some shaking their heads in mockery, some in sorrow.

Isaac La Peyrère, a precocious skeptic who was raised Calvinist, wondered how the banished Cain founded a city, as is related in Genesis. Who was out there for him to marry? La Peyrère's questioning grew more rebellious, and against the background of so many newly discovered lands and peoples all over the world, he proposed, in his book *Prae-Adamitae* (*Men Before Adam*, 1655), that there had been other men and women besides Adam and Eve at the beginning and that the Bible gave only one myth of origin among many, a specifically Jewish story. (La Peyrère was himself descended from Marranos, as Jewish converts were known in Iberia.) But polygenesis, as this theory came to be called, was rank heresy, and La Peyrère was forced to recant. His profession of faith echoes Galileo's: "If the pope said [his idea] was wrong, then it must be wrong."

Later, La Peyrère's analysis was twisted to become the pretext for racists to argue "that the peoples of color whom they had enslaved were not in fact descendants of Adam and Eve." Abolitionists retaliated, grounding the equality of all humanity in our shared parents—another "useful reminder" in Greenblatt's view, of "the leveling power that is always latent in the Adam and Eve story."

In a startling coda, the author travels to the Kibale National Park in Uganda to observe chimpanzees in their natural habitat. He takes their state to be Edenic, without knowledge of good and evil, with other, murkier resemblances to "the theologian's dream of life before the Fall. The females are dominated, but they lack any concept of domination." He muses on deep time and on the scientific worldview since Darwin, which cannot account for moral choice, the crux of the drama in Eden. This leads him to an unexpected statement: "Millions of people in the world, including many who grasp the underlying assumptions of modern science, continue to cling to the peculiar satisfaction that the ancient story provides. I do."

The Swerve was lifted by its joyful appreciation of two attractive and radical figures of intellect and imagination: the poet and scientific visionary Lucretius and the humanist scholar and manuscript hunter Poggio Bracciolini. It brimmed with the excitement of the world changing in front of one's eyes. But the Genesis drama is, by contrast, a dispiriting tale of persistent regulatory oppression; the heroes of Greenblatt's story—Dürer, Milton—however brilliant, are not easily likeable, and his discussion of post-Darwinian inquiry necessarily cursory.

After the powerful opening chapters, the end feels wavering. The rise in religious beliefs, in the classroom and throughout the political spectrum, has made analyzing interactions between doctrine and ideology, make-believe and literature, a far more sensitive undertaking. (I've been worried recently when lecturing on Genesis and Voltaire about the reactions of some pious students.) It has become more difficult to communicate how literature has different ways of being true, that it could all still be otherwise.

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