



The First Woman Question

Document Version

Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

Morse, H. (2017). The First Woman Question: Eve and the Women's Movement. In Y. Sherwood (Ed.), *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field* Oxford University Press.

Published in:

The Bible and Feminism

Citing this paper

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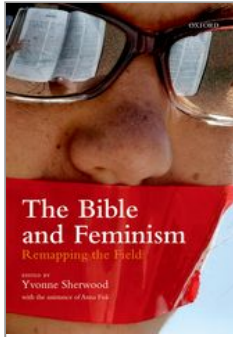
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University Press Scholarship Online
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The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field

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Print publication date: 2017

Print ISBN-13: 9780198722618

Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2018

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198722618.001.0001

The First Woman Question

Eve and the Women's Movement

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DOI:10.1093/oso/9780198722618.003.0004

Abstract and Keywords

In this chapter I examine the ways in which female writers and protesters have appropriated the Bible's first woman in their challenges to female subordination in patriarchal culture, and in their own articulation of what it is to be 'Woman'. In particular I focus on the significance of the figure of Eve in the history of feminism to demonstrate the importance of women's voices in the Bible's reception, as well as to explore the impact Genesis 2-3 has had on the women's movement. Thus I reflect on the symbiotic relationship between women's writing and women's material culture and the biblical text, considering some of the interpretative strategies used within them to demonstrate that not only have women's readings frequently worked to reject negative, derogatory images of the woman in Genesis 2-3 but that they have also actively appropriated and rewritten Eve as their champion rather than their curse.

Keywords: Eve, Genesis, feminism, women's writing, reception history

One of the central biblical texts for feminist scholarship has been Genesis 1-3, with feminist scholars returning to these chapters time and again to re-evaluate the image of woman that they supply, to consider what this might tell us about the author(s) and editor(s) who wrote and redacted them, the environment out of which the text grew, or the theological implications it might have had in its ancient context, as well as its possible implications in the contemporary world.¹ Consequently, numerous feminist readings of Eve have emerged within the academy, in the works of Phyllis Tribble, Phyllis Bird, Carol Meyers, Mieke Bal, and many more.² Amongst many feminist biblical scholars working with Adam and Eve's story, there has been a strong tendency to endeavour to remove the 'debris' of traditional patriarchal interpretations in order to get to the text's 'real' meaning. In this chapter, however, I argue that feminist scholarship need not clear away this baggage that does undoubtedly dominate academic and popular understandings of Genesis 1-3, but rather to add to it. Given that it is impossible to deny the powerful history of interpretation that unavoidably accompanies the biblical text, and that it is equally problematic to pursue an objectively 'real' or the 'true' meaning of the narrative, I suggest, along with a growing number of others, that one fruitful though under-represented mode of feminist scholarship is to give a stronger voice to women's encounters with the Bible through history.³

(p.62) By failing to fully integrate women's voices into biblical reception history, biblical studies remains complicit in the monopolization of scripture by male voices. To accept that historically Genesis 1-3, for example, has been a text only used to repress and subordinate women is to erase those women writers who have employed Eve's story as a means of self-reflection and self-liberation. It also minimizes the complexity of the significant political, social, and cultural roles biblical texts have played in the construction of gender. In this chapter, then, I will consider the way in which Eve has been used by women in their struggle for equality and emancipation. While I will be looking at the way women have read the Bible, I am not only seeking to consider women as biblical interpreters, but also to examine how women have used the first woman to think with about their gender, and have employed her in their cultural, social, and political works of protest.

Here I take a wide view of the 'women's movement', acknowledging that although usually associated with the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suffrage movement or women's activism of the 1960s, women have been engaged in responding to the 'woman question' from as early as the fifteenth century.⁴ This chapter divides this history into three broad stages of development: the *querelle des femmes*; first-wave feminism; and second-wave feminism.⁵

Eve and the *Querelle des Femmes*

In a landmark essay written in 1972, Joan Kelly argued that, despite popular belief that feminism only came about in the modern world, there was 'a 400-year-old tradition of women thinking about women and sexual politics in European society before the French Revolution'.⁶ The gender debate in which women participated between 1400 and 1780 to defend their sex was known as the *querelle des femmes*.⁷ The pioneering female figure for this ongoing cultural conversation was Christine de Pisan, a self-educated woman, who in 1405 wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she defended her sex against the deeply ingrained misogyny she encountered in her late medieval life.

(p.63) The work opens with Christine ending a day of study by picking up a little book to provide her with some light relief. Yet, within its pages she finds such an 'appalling' image of woman that Christine is left troubled, asking, 'Oh Lord, how can this be? Unless I commit an error of faith, I cannot doubt that you, in your infinite wisdom and perfect goodness, could make anything that wasn't good'.⁸ Yet the misogyny she encounters in this little book is so effective that despite her desire to believe in the goodness of all of God's creation, including women, Christine cannot help but ask God why she hadn't been born male and so be 'as perfect a creation as man claims to be'.⁹ By employing this allusion to the story of the creation of the first woman, Eve, Christine's defence of women is implicitly staged as a polemic against male writers' and philosophers' claims that females are inherently flawed and subordinate by comparison to the perfect male. Furthermore, by using the biblical story as the foundation for her argument, Christine's social and political argument in favour of women also took on a theological dimension, as she clearly demonstrates to her reader her belief that the slander of women was tantamount to blasphemy.

Into this moment of darkness arrive the luminous figures of Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice who have been sent by God 'to restore order and justice', namely to remedy the situation of women.¹⁰ In order for this to take place, the three Virtues encourage Christine to build a women-only city that might defend her sex against the misogynies of her day. Into this city, Christine will bring numerous famous women of worth from throughout history, and collectively the city of extraordinary women will function as proof of the value of the female sex.

In order to build the city's foundation Christine must remedy some of the preconceptions concerning her sex that she has inherited from the culture and literature surrounding her. Thus she puts numerous questions to Lady Reason concerning the status of women. It at this very early point in the book that Christine offers a fuller interpretation of Eve's story. In particular, Christine wishes to understand why contemporary medical theory, which was built on Aristotelian biology, explained that female children were the product of a defect in the womb. Reason responds by reminding Christine of the biblical creation story, and focusing on the woman being created from the side of the man:

There He put Adam to sleep and created the body of woman from one of his ribs. This was a sign that she was meant to be his companion standing at his side, whom he would love as if they were flesh, and not his servant lying at his feet.¹¹

While many medieval theologians did take woman's creation as a sign of her inferiority to man, through Reason's exegesis of Gen. 2.22 Christine builds on an existing tradition which recognized that Eve was made his equal. By putting this in the mouth of a **(p.64)** divinely commissioned Virtue, Christine adds authority to her interpretation of the biblical story.

Crucially, given Christine's late medieval environment, she goes on to affirm that woman is made in the image of God—a fact she notes her readers may not be aware of.¹² In doing so Christine directly engages with the common tendency amongst Christian male interpreters such as Augustine and Aquinas, a tendency that still influences popular Western conceptions of the first woman, of developing an image of the woman as being simultaneously equal *and* inferior to man. For Augustine, for example, the female was associated with the lower human faculties of the senses, while the male represented the mind. Though he argued that women were equal in the image of God, in *De Trinitate* (12.7.10) he concluded that male and female *together* are in the image of God, but that the female *alone* is not.¹³ Furthermore, while on the spiritual plane of creation men and women might be equal, in the social reality, woman, because of her weak body, was naturally subordinate to man. For Christine, however, there was no question, the creation account was clear on the fact that male and female were both made in the image of God.

Rather than emphasize the physical inferiority of woman, Christine inverted the popular argument of priority by suggesting that as God's creation developed, it improved. Thus Reason explains to Christine:

Whilst we're still on the subject of how the human body was formed, woman was created by the very finest craftsmen. And where exactly was she made? Why in the earthly paradise. What from? Was it coarse matter? No, it was from the finest material that had yet been invented by God. From the body of man himself.¹⁴

By allowing Lady Reason to emphasize the refined substance the first woman was made from and her perfect place of birth, Eden, as well as drawing attention God's role in building Eve, Christine implicitly re-affirms the potentially blasphemous consequences of concluding that the woman was made defective. For Christine, to question the perfection of woman is to question the perfection of God's creative power. Indeed, Christine goes as far as defending the creation of women by commending Eve for her sin, when she observes that the creation of the first woman should not be equated with the first sin, but also with the potential for human redemption, for 'man has gained far more through Mary than he ever lost through Eve'. By using clever biblical interpretation, which she delivers to her reader from the mouth of a God-sent Virtue, Christine destabilizes the negative traditions of woman as inferior to man and cause of ruin for mankind, and critiques the denial of female authority on matters of scriptural interpretation and religious education. Her reading of the biblical text is multilayered in its potency, functioning simultaneously as a social, a theological, and a literary act of protest.¹⁵

(p.65) While these interpretations were not entirely unique to Christine, and do appear periodically in the reception history of Eve both before and after her early fifteenth-century text, they do nonetheless offer an alternative to the mainstream interpretations of Eve during the time that she was writing.¹⁶ Crucially for this chapter, they are employed by a woman as a rhetorical device to defend her sex. Thus they offer an important insight into a real historical woman's encounter with a text that had been the 'proof' of female inferiority for centuries before. Though Christine does not use these arguments to radically challenge women's social status quo, maintaining the importance of married life and female obedience, she is highly significant for her development of a defence of women's equal abilities to men's 'military prowess, leadership, ingenuity and intelligence'.¹⁷

Increasingly Christine's work has been mentioned in passing by various feminist biblical scholars wishing to acknowledge the history of women's interpretation of the Bible from a gynocentric perspective. I argue, however, that it is important to contextualize de Pisan's reading, which offers not only an example of a woman reading the Bible, but also an essentially *political* and *moral* appropriation of the text. Although her book contained examinations of numerous biblical women, including Eve, who she placed into her city, de Pisan also considered many other famous women from the classical world and Christian history. Indeed, this work is in many respects typical of late medieval didactic literature, and has numerous similarities to Boccaccio's *On Famous Women*, an example of a number of male defences of women that were penned by humanist male authors that used exemplary women as proof texts for the value of the female sex. Thus she is not first and foremost a pro-woman biblical exegete, but rather, a female rhetorician and writer, employing Eve to think with about her gender, and to support her argument for the vindication of all women from misogyny. It is not just her desire to save the biblical text from misogynist hands that we must acknowledge, then, but the more profound way in which she uses Genesis 2–3 in a social and cultural defence of her sex.

Christine's book was well received in her time, with numerous copies being made in French as well as in English translation. Indeed, Jennifer Summit describes her as the 'most widely read woman writer of the fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England', with copies of her books owned by members of the elite classes throughout the country.¹⁸ However, her authorship of these popular works began to be contested both in France and in England. By the sixteenth century in France Boccaccio was credited with the real work behind *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Christine seen as a mere paraphraser, while English translations of her books and poetry failed to name her as author at all.¹⁹ **(p.66)** Thus, while Christine is a pioneer of women-authored polemics against misogyny, the impact of her work beyond the elite classes during her life time and in the centuries following is difficult to discern.

While memory of Christine's authorship may have suffered during the sixteenth century, it is precisely at this time that the *querelle* began to flourish in England. Following the advent of the printing press, the Reformation, and the rise of a powerful female monarch in England, numerous pamphlets debating male and female roles appeared, some of them apparently authored by women. These include Jane Anger's eponymous *Jane Anger's Protection for Women* in 1589 and three more in 1617: Rachel Speght's *Mouzell for Melastomous*, Ester Sowernam's *Esther hath Hang'd Haman*, and Constantia Munda's *The Worming of a Mad Dog*. Thus, while 'the gender debate finds its elite origin in manuscript circulation on the Continent in medieval-and-early-Renaissance France and Italy. ... In Jacobean England, the debate shifts from manuscript to print and acquires new popularity'.²⁰ Consequently, the interpretations of Eve by female pamphleteers were not only accessible to the nobility, but had the potential to reach the ever-growing numbers of literate middle-class women in seventeenth-century London, with pamphlets becoming 'the primary means of creating and influencing public opinion'.²¹ Consequently, the biblical interpretation offered by these female-authored pamphlets in support of women had the potential to be considerably more impactful than ever before.

Furthermore, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a considerable increase in middle-class access to the vernacular English Bible, with the Geneva Bible 'help[ing]to introduce and sustain a female readership of the Bible in English' during Elizabeth's reign.²² Consequently, with an increase in female literacy, and an increase in access to vernacular Bibles, women's interactions with the biblical text increased too.²³

As the first woman, and the mother of all other women, Eve's creation and her actions featured in each of these pamphlets, and she proved integral to the authors' articulations of what it was to be 'woman'.²⁴ Barbara McManus succinctly summarizes the integral nature of biblical exegesis for women writers when she writes, 'Because the biblical account of the creation and fall of human beings carried the weight of divine authority, it constituted the foundation of Renaissance discourse about the essential nature and function of women'.²⁵ I would add that the same is true of earlier and later writings by women.

(p.67) For this chapter I will focus on the work of Rachel Speght as there is positive evidence to support the view that she was indeed a real woman, while this is more difficult to prove for the other pseudonymous writers.²⁶ In 1617 Rachel Speght published a pamphlet, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, offering another female perspective to the gender debate. Written as a direct response to what she believed to be a blasphemous and 'heathenish' work by Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615), Speght's polemic was more directly centred on the Genesis account than de Pisan's work. Though Speght, like de Pisan, found herself unable to contest Eve's sin, she nonetheless developed a number of interpretative strategies to reclaim the first woman. She begins her defence of women by defending her creation; so on the formation of Eve she wrote that the woman 'was of a refined mould, if I may so speake: for man was created of the dust of the earth, but woman was made of a part of the man, after that he was a living soule: yet shee not produced from the Adams foote, to be his too low inferior; not from his head to be his superior, but from his side, neare his heart, to be his equal'—not only does this directly respond to Joseph Swetnam's argument that women are 'crooked by nature' because 'they were made of the ribbe of man', but also echoes de Pisan's statement considered earlier.²⁷ Indeed, Speght uses the patriarchal assumption that women are inferior to men to support Eve's lesser sin, because she was weaker and more easily seduced. This interpretation of the snake approaching the woman is also used by Augustine to emphasize man's superiority, but here Speght deftly uses it in the woman's favour as a means of exonerating her.

Speght also picks up on the prevalent theme of woman as the conduit for man's sin, considering whether Eve should really be blamed for Adam's choice to eat the fruit. Rather than emphasizing the woman's role in this part of the story, Speght cleverly employs an image of fire to argue that the man should be made to take responsibility for his actions:

For if a man burne his hand in the fire, the bellowes that blowed the fire are not to be blamed, but himselfe rather, for not being carefull to avoyde the danger: ... no more is woman simply to bee condemned for mans transgression: for by the free will, which before his fall hee enjoyed, hee might have avoyded, and beene free from being burnt, or finged with that fire which was kindled by Sathan, and blowne by Eve

(p.68) Though Speght does not deny Eve's role in the matter, she is keen to make sure that Adam's part too is made clear. Indeed, from her analysis of the punishments placed upon the couple by God, Speght strengthens her argument for man's greater responsibility for humanity's sin. She observes that while Eve's punishment is restricted to women, the man's sin places a curse on the whole earth, which Speght takes as evidence of Adam's greater culpability.

In addition to minimizing Eve's responsibility for sin in comparison to her male counterpart, Speght also gives considerable attention to the first woman's role in redemption:

... the first promise that was made in Paradise, God makes to woman, that by her Seede should the Serpents head be broken: whereupon Adam calls her Hevah, life, that as the woman had beene an occasion of his sinne, so should woman bring forth the Saviour from sinne, which was in the fullness of time accomplished.

In a clever interpretative act of play, Speght employs Gen. 3.15 and 3.20 to develop a specifically feminine image of salvation history, in which women may be sinners, but they are also vehicles of redemption. This she specifically relates to Eve, 'by Hevah's blessed seed (as Saint Paul affirms) it is brought to passe, that male and female are all one in Christ Jesus', and thus constructs a female genealogy in which Eve is both the first to sin, but also the 'grandmother' of human redemption through the Virgin's birthing of Christ. Speght uses the term 'woman' to blur the relationship between Eve and Mary, allowing them to become closely aligned, indeed, almost indistinguishable from one another as agents of 'life', and as Woman.

Like Christine de Pisan, Speght's claims for women are not immediately recognizable as modern feminism. She did not question women's roles as mother and wives, though she did argue for more balanced, rather than hierarchical, marital relationships and for the equality of the sexes. Her writing also implicitly supported the political, public voice of women and commended women's education. Thus, Speght's writing is clearly both an example of gynocentric reading, as well as a political, polemical pamphlet written to dispel some of the most misogynist beliefs of her time. She frames this defence as a defence of God and his created order, and thus a defence against blasphemy. But though she appeals to theology to make her case, Speght is nonetheless engaged in an active political debate; as Sarah C.E. Ross suggests, in the seventeenth century, 'women's religious poetic expression could encompass political articulation' and this is precisely the way in which *Mouzell for Melastomus* functions.²⁸ Indeed, Christina Luckyj has argued that not only was Speght's work a rally against Swetnam's misogyny, but also a statement of her broader political views. Thus Luckyj contends that not only was Speght's emphasis of Adam's failure as the stronger of the first couple a means of exonerating woman of sole responsibility of sin, it also functioned as a political allegory for poor rulership. Speght's text, Luckyj suggests, was an overt argument against misogyny and an implicit critique (p. 69) of James I's failures as a ruler.²⁹ In this reading, Eve becomes representative of women who have been failed by men, but also of a nation failed by its monarch. By employing Eve's relationship with Adam as a motif through which she could express her own political views publically, Speght

elevates the personal and domestic as metaphors for the state of the nation. In so doing, Speght not only affirms the worth and dignity of women, but also offers the 'good counsell' ... of a conscientious subject for the benefit of both her godly readers and the 'governor' of the 'domesticall kingdom' of England.³⁰

In these two examples of women's contribution to the gender debate during the late medieval and early modern period that I have given in this section, it is clear that women were active in the reinterpretation of the Genesis story in order to defend their sex and to defend Eve.³¹ While their writings do not always take a recognizable form of feminism for modern readers, they nonetheless represent significant moments in the history of interpretation of the first woman, which rebut, manipulate, or entirely depart from the mainstream Christian interpretation of Eve as inferior and subordinate, responsible for the death and destruction of humanity. At a time when the Bible was still unquestionably accepted as an authoritative source, it was integral for women wishing to defend their sex to defend scripture's first woman, Eve. Thus, the Woman Question was arguably often synonymous with the 'First Woman Question'.

Nonetheless, these early women engaged with interpretative questions and techniques that are still being employed by feminist biblical scholars today. So not only do they give us an insight into how women used the Bible to 'think with' about their gender, they also offer a foundational history of women's biblical interpretation that was not professionalized, nor neutrally academic, but deeply political and engaged in deciphering the moral value of biblical texts in relation to gender and society.

Eve and First-Wave Feminism

As with the *querelle des femmes*, the beginnings of first-wave feminism—primarily associated with women’s battle for suffrage—is linked to one initiatory figure, Mary Wollstonecraft, and her seminal text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written in (p.70) 1792.³² Here she argues that women were equally as rational as men and thus deserved equal education, rights, and freedom. This text shaped the establishment of an active women’s movement throughout the late eighteenth to early twentieth century, leading women in Great Britain, Europe, and America to fight for their equal social and legal rights. This was followed by the main action of first-wave feminism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the formation of a series of unified movements organized to effect political change. By the early twentieth century they were successful in securing the vote—women over thirty first achieved the vote in the UK in 1918, though it wasn’t until 1928 that they received completely equal suffrage to men, and women’s suffrage was granted in every state in the US by 1920.

Although Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was primarily a secular political treatise arguing for equal rights for women, in the second chapter she assesses ‘the prevailing opinion of a sexual character’, the contemporary and historical assumptions about the nature of Woman. Interestingly, unlike de Pisan and Speght, Wollstonecraft challenges the interpretation of Eve as a figure of frailty and weakness, in particular taking Milton’s re-writing of the first woman to task:

[T]hus Milton describes our first frail mother; though when he tells us that women are formed for softness and sweet attractive grace, I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the sense of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation.³³

So, unlike de Pisan and Speght, who do not use Eve to explicitly critique the domestic roles of women, here Wollstonecraft takes issue with the way in which male biblical interpreters have used the story of Eve to portray women as pliant helpers for men.³⁴

Having critiqued the traditional readings surrounding Eve's story, Wollstonecraft also demonstrates scepticism concerning the historical veracity or value of the biblical text and its suitability as proof of female inferiority. Indeed, she entirely rebuts a literal reading of the Genesis 1-3 as proof that 'woman was created for man' on the basis that since 'very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam's ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground'.³⁵ Furthermore, not only does Wollstonecraft question the **(p.71)** historicity of the account, and thus its validity in arguments concerning the relations between the sexes, but she also begins to formulate a hermeneutic of suspicion that is regularly employed by modern feminists. She takes a radically sceptical approach to the biblical story, suggesting that

it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion, and his invention to shew that she ought to have her neck bent under the yoke, because the whole creation was only created for his convenience or pleasure.³⁶

While de Pisan and Speght wished to rehabilitate the Bible as part of their campaign for women's worth, Wollstonecraft's secular liberal feminism led her to reject Genesis 1-3 as a narrative purposively constructed by men in order to oppress women. She uses the developments in biblical scholarship following the Enlightenment, which increasingly understood the Bible as essentially human, employing it to her own feminist end. Nonetheless, for Wollstonecraft, Eve's text remains important as a symbolic site of female oppression, a religious and cultural myth that had been used for centuries to oppress women that required feminist attention and ultimately rejection as part of the ongoing pursuit of secular emancipation and equality for women.

Despite Wollstonecraft's early and vehement rejection of the biblical story, it is evident that there remained an insistent need to acknowledge and respond to Genesis 1-3 as the women's suffrage movement began to gain momentum in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed, even amongst openly atheist feminist thinkers—female 'infidels'—Eve could function as a potent symbol in their cause. Yet while her text, and indeed the Bible as a whole, was to be rejected as a key source of women's oppression according to Harriet Law, freethinker and feminist, it could also be a source for resistant reading. Thus, though she rejected the Genesis text in the edition of the *Secular Chronicle* that she edited in 1876, Law had previously appropriated Eve (at a political meeting in Newcastle in 1869) as a symbol of female activism against oppressive patriarchal systems.³⁷ Law claimed that 'instead of "cursing" our Biblical mother for bringing about the Fall of Mankind, she in fact deserved our "reverence" ' for bringing 'knowledge into the world against the will of an authoritarian God'.³⁸

In contrast to de Pisan, who could only commend Eve's sin in view of Mary's redemptive qualities, Law's irreverence towards scripture allowed her to radically reframe Eve at the first feminist. Law's praise of Eve, and, indeed, identification with the first woman was something that recurred throughout first-wave feminism, with numerous women associating themselves with the first woman. Thus, the 'New Woman' who emerged in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, was symbolized as a type of Eve, or new Eve.

(p.72) This motif was especially prevalent in fin-de-siècle France.³⁹ For many male writers, the 'New Eve' or 'daughters of Eve' functioned as a symbol of the 'New Woman', a woman who challenged traditional gender roles, who took up employment, who rode a bicycle! For the most part, the 'New Woman' was treated with caution and suspicion by these men, leading Elizabeth Menon and Virginia Allen to suggest that their negative identification of the new liberated woman with the figure of Eve contributed to the development of *femme fatale* iconography.⁴⁰ On the other hand, women writers and activists in nineteenth-century France, such as Sibylle-Gabrielle Marie-Antoinette de Riquetti de Mirabeau and Marie Deraismes, also appropriated Eve, but for them she became a potent symbol not only of women's victimization at the hands of men and patriarchal tradition, but also of women's rebellion, independence, and knowledge.⁴¹

A similar motif of New Woman/New Eve is also discernible in a twentieth-century essay written by suffragette Teresa Billington-Greig, denouncing the militant feminism of the Pankhursts, which she entitled 'The Old Eve in Suffrage Colours' (c.1913).⁴² In the opening pages of her polemic, Billington-Greig writes:

[B]linded by sex-revivalism which originated with the Pankhursts and has now permeated all the suffrage organisations, she sees herself as a new birth, not the old Eve, but as a new Eve re-born in a second more glorious incarnation. And yet she is but the old Eve in new colours.⁴³

She believed that the Pankhursts, and the loud, public protest of those who followed her had ‘tainted all other suffrage societies’, and critiques the ‘glamour and false glory attached to the modern suffrage movement’. In particular, she frames this brand of suffragism as the ‘old Eve in new colours’ because Pankhurst and her followers focused so strongly on the fight for women’s suffrage, and not, in Billington-Greig’s opinion, on broader social and political equality; for them, she writes, the ‘vote is the magic wand’. Her use of the Eve imagery becomes clearer still later on in the essay. She critiques suffragette support **(p.73)** of reform acts such as the ‘White Slave Act’—the Criminal Law Amendment Act—passed in 1912 to curb prostitution—because she believed they would worsen the situation of prostitutes rather than improve it, writing:

the underlying assumption of the Act are all those of the old Eve, of the feeble, dependent, prudish, emotional woman ... thus the Act assumes that women are weak and ignorant enough to be trapped against their will and that they have no weapons of offence or defence against the procurers ... it commits its supporters first, to the doctrine of the inferiority of women, and second, to the acceptance of a greater sex liberty for men than for women.⁴⁴

Whether or not Billington-Greig’s evaluation of this Act or its support by militant suffragettes is accepted, it is clear that she uses the figure of Eve, and in particular the old Eve as she had been mythologized in patriarchal Western tradition—weak—as a means of deriding a mode of feminism she would not support. Interestingly, rather than rejecting the notion of the New Woman as the New Eve entirely, which many male writers did, Billington-Greig found those suffragettes who believed themselves to be ‘new Eves’, to be profoundly deluded and unworthy of the title. Because, in her view, these women had not yet fully thrown off the assumptions of patriarchy, and so they did not deserve the radically rewritten image of the New Eve, ‘capable of consistent intellectual reconstruction of the position of women’.⁴⁵

While the examples given in this section are all from popular, secular first-wave feminist discourse, it would misrepresent this period of the suffrage movement to frame it as a solely secular endeavour. For many women, religious emancipation was a critical step towards social and political emancipation. Thus, for suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the interpretation of Scripture was crucial. Indeed, her *Woman's Bible*, published in 1898, was not only one of the first thorough attempts at a gynocentric approach to the entire Bible that engaged with the modern practices of historical criticism and text criticism: it also functioned as an inherently political document, as she believed 'that the supreme impediment to women's advancement was the widespread, long-standing belief that women's subordination was divinely ordained by an infallible Bible'.⁴⁶ In some ways, then, Stanton's concern about the fallibility of the human-authored Bible echoes Wollstonecraft's.

Stanton approached the first chapters of Genesis under the influence of the documentary hypothesis, separating the two creation accounts. For her the creation story in Genesis 1:26-7 offered unequivocal evidence for the original and divinely ordained equality of man and woman, and furthermore it demonstrated that because both male and female were made in the image of God, so there must be a female element in the Godhead. When it came to Genesis 2, she dismissed its apparently hierarchical view of the sexes as the work of 'some wily writer, seeing the perfect equality of man and woman in the first chapter, [who] felt it important for the dignity and dominion of man to effect **(p.74)** woman's subordination in some way'.⁴⁷ She distinguishes the two by stating that 'The first account dignifies woman as an important factor in the creation, equal in power and glory with man. The second makes her a mere afterthought ... The only reason for her advent being the solitude of man'.⁴⁸ She thus takes similar issue with the second account of the biblical text as Wollstonecraft, framing it with the anti-Jewish assertion that 'some wily writer', a Jew, deliberately wished to erase the original, correct message of divinely ordained equality between the sexes.⁴⁹

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's book offered such a radical approach to feminism, the pursuit of suffrage, and the social significance of the Bible that she found herself without acceptance by either academic biblical studies or indeed the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Stanton had held the role of president of the latter, yet the bestselling success of her book was 'much to the horror of many suffragists', leading the NAWSA to formally denounce *The Woman's Bible*.⁵⁰

Thus while Stanton's work in *The Woman's Bible* is primarily an example of feminist biblical commentary, she nonetheless stands in a tradition of women who have used the biblical story in a number of ways to support women: theologically, socially, culturally, and politically. While these women have differed in their position on the relation between the sexes and their approaches to the biblical text, they have all supported the belief that Eve was a victim of man in some way, either through the process of interpretation, or by the hand of the writer who recorded her story. Consequently, they identified with Eve's fate as a casualty of patriarchal culture, and so her recuperation from patriarchy could function as symbolic of their own emancipation.

Eve and Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism is usually identified with the Women's Liberation Movement from the 1960s onwards. The concerns of second-wave feminism were wide-reaching, with women demanding better legal, political, and social status, including fair pay and (p.75) equal rights in the workplace, equal education, childcare, and the right to contraception and abortion, all of which were outlined as central demands of the Women's Liberation Movement at their first conference in Oxford in 1970.⁵¹ As Sue Thornham describes, the varied aims and outlets of second-wave feminism 'sought both to voice ... women's immediate and subjected experience and to formulate a political agenda and vision'.⁵² Two seminal works for second-wave feminism, Simone de Beauvoir's, *The Second Sex*, and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* mention the figure of Eve—indeed Beauvoir's title reflects the traditional interpretation of the woman in Genesis 2 being formed second and secondary to the man.⁵³ Both feminists appear in the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft in their strong hermeneutic of suspicion which leads them to reject outright the story of Eve as a man-made mechanism for oppressing women. In this section of the chapter, however, I wish to look at another underrepresented element of the Women's Liberation Movement, particularly within biblical studies: its grassroots material culture.

Perhaps the most iconic example of an allusion to Eve in the Women's Liberation Movement is the feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*. Launched in 1972, *Spare Rib* was 'the most significant magazine of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain of the 1970s and 80s'.⁵⁴ Founded by Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott, the aim of *Spare Rib* was to provide a space in the media for women to write, discuss, and read about crucial issues that both felt to be missing in mainstream media.⁵⁵

Initially the idea of calling the magazine 'Spare Rib' was a joke made over a meal of Chinese food shared by Rowe, Boycott, and friends. While discussing potential titles, one of the guests jokingly suggested 'spare rib'. Recalling that day, Rowe explains that 'late that night, mulling over the evening, I had a light bulb moment and realised this would be a brilliant name for our new magazine'. While the biblical echoes were clear to Rowe, so was the opportunity to subvert them—'turning that around to foreground the female (Eve out of Adam's rib)'—as well as an important sense of 'new birth, creating something new'.⁵⁶ There was also clearly a humorous element to the choice of name, a subversive **(p.76)** and irreverent sense of fun, which marks the introduction of a feminist strategy of interpretation that really came to the fore with the second-wave movement: satire. Whereas de Pisan and Speght attempted to rehabilitate Eve, and Wollstonecraft and Cady Stanton entirely rejected the narrative as irredeemably misogynist, Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott playfully appropriate the negative Eve tradition in a subversive act of revision.

Their editorial in the first issue appears to play knowingly on the importance of the allusion to the first woman and the creation in their choice of title: 'Spare RIB is a beginning'.⁵⁷ Yet, in hindsight Marsha Rowe suggested that 'We intended no less than to take on the culture of the whole western world. Finding a new language for both image and word to establish women's changing identity'.⁵⁸ Indeed, the magazine carved out a crucial space for women to create and recreate what being a woman meant, and thus to rewrite the old, misogynistic image of Eve, metonymic Woman, the 'spare rib', into something rebellious, knowing, and powerful. By appropriating 'Spare Rib', the magazine also appropriated Eve, and, because of its important position in the cultural history of the Women's Liberation Movement, offers a potent example of the ways in which women continued to reshape the negative image of Eve by actively participating in reframing her.

Throughout the pages of *Spare Rib* from 1972–93 Eve repeatedly reappears, in women’s poetry and reviews of women’s poetry that take Eve as their subject matter, in feminist art that tackles the symbol of Eve, and in essays on the biblical text itself. Yet not only did Eve permeate the artistic and academic work of women’s lives, she also appeared as a symbol of their activism; not only did the first woman stand behind the name of one of the most influential feminist magazines, she also appeared—and still does—in grassroots material culture of the Women’s Liberation Movement campaign on badges, stickers, and t-shirts.⁵⁹ In issue 108 of *Spare Rib*, published in 1981, the second page is taken up with advertisements, which included several different groups selling badges. The Cromer Street Women’s Centre, that was supported by the GLC, offered a mail order service on a number of badges for 30p. The slogans offered included ‘Girls rule OK’ ‘Boy rule *not* OK’ ‘MSchief’, ‘When God created man she was only experimenting’, and ‘Eve was framed’.⁶⁰

In much the same way that *Spare Rib* was a satirical appropriation of Eve and her cultural baggage, so too was this last slogan. By wearing a badge emblazoned with the phrase ‘Eve was framed’ which was often, though not always, accompanied by the image of an apple, women situated themselves in a problematic history, whilst showing a sense of identification and solidarity with the first woman. She, like them, was a victim of the **(p.77)** system, and her first protest became an emblem of the protest of women in the twentieth century.

This sentiment was clearly articulated when the slogan also became the title of an important ‘polemic against the law’ written by Helena Kennedy QC in 1992, in which she critiqued the treatment of women by the UK justice system. In the first chapter of *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice*, Kennedy, with a now-familiar feminist wit and satirical approach, compares the ‘case’ of Eve to the plight of women. She writes:

It was only later that I came to the conclusion that Eve had been framed ... my sense of natural justice balked at the idea of holding women responsible for male transgressions ... Transportation from Paradise is one thing, but a sentence of eternal damnation when the conviction had to be based on the uncorroborated testimony of a co-accuser must surely constitute a breach of international standards on human rights. Poor old Eve. I wonder if she would have done *any* better with a good defence lawyer.⁶¹

Thus, with tongue-in-cheek, Kennedy uses the symbolic framing of Eve to introduce her argument that British courts systematically failed women because 'in many areas of the law women still suffer from antiquated views'.⁶² In doing so Kennedy implies that just as 'Eve was framed', so too are the women being tried in modern law courts in Britain.

It is this identification of the plight of Eve, a victim of the patriarchal system, that seems to underlie the slogan that so many women took to wearing in protest against the male dominated social, political, and cultural environment they *still* found themselves in thousands of years after Genesis 2-3 was written. Thus, Eve remained, from the elite beginnings of feminism in Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* to the grassroots protest of the Women's Liberation Movement, a powerful figure in women's interpretation of the Bible but also in their pursuit of equality and emancipation. She was a symbol of the longevity of female oppression, and when she was free so would be Woman.

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Notes:

⁽¹⁾ Joseph Abraham, *Eve: Accused or Acquitted? An Analysis of Feminist Readings of the Creation Narrative Texts in Genesis 1-3*. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002).

⁽²⁾ e.g. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁽³⁾ Scholars who are currently engaged in this question include: Marion Ann Taylor, Nancy Calvert-Koyzis, Joy Schroeder, Elizabeth Gössman, and David Gunn. Many of the women writers that I examine here have an entry in Taylor's reference work, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

⁽⁴⁾ Joan Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the "Querelle des Femmes", 1400-1789', *Signs*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1982): 4-28; Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, 'Early Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion To Feminism And Postfeminism*, edited by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), 3-14.

⁽⁵⁾ *querelle des femmes* Roberta Krueger, 'Towards Feminism: Christine De Pizan, Female Advocacy, and Women's Textual Communities in the Late Middle Ages and Beyond', in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 590-603.

⁽⁶⁾ Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the "*Querelle des Femmes*" ', 5.

⁽⁷⁾ Kelly, 'Early Feminist Theory and the "*Querelle des Femmes*" ', 5.

⁽⁸⁾ Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, ed./trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (London: Penguin, 1999), 7.

⁽⁹⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 7.

⁽¹⁰⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 10.

⁽¹¹⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 22.

⁽¹²⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 22.

⁽¹³⁾ Cf. 1. Cor. 11.7-10.

⁽¹⁴⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, 23.

⁽¹⁵⁾ Christine also suggests that Eve should be praised for her sin because it was a *fortunate fall*, because without falling humanity could not have been redeemed by God. I have not included this here, however, because this text as I understand it, while it does work to exonerate the Eve of sin, and commend her creation, in terms of the significant action of women, it Mary who is of greater importance.

⁽¹⁶⁾ See Krueger, 'Towards Feminism', 595.

⁽¹⁷⁾ de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, xviii.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Jennifer Summit, *Lost Property: The Woman Writer and English Literary History, 1380-1589* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 61.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Susan Groag Bell, *The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy* (Berkeley/London: University of California Press, 2004), 151 *Lost Property*

⁽²⁰⁾ Rachel Trubowitz, *Nation and Nurture in Seventeenth-Century English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 68.

(²¹) Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26.

(²²) Femke Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England: Religious Reading and Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 7.

(²³) Molekamp, *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England*, 9-10.

(²⁴) Elaine Beilen, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

(²⁵) Barbara McManus, 'Eve's Dowry: Genesis and the Pamphlet Controversy about Women', in *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, edited by Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove, and Karen Nelson (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 193-4.

(²⁶) Barbara K. Lewalski, 'Speght, Rachel: Genesis and the Pamphlet Controversy about Women', in *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, edited by Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove, and Karen Nelson (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 193-206.

(²⁷) Mouzella Mouzell for Melastomus, *the Cynicall Bayter of, and foule mouthed Barker againft Evahs Sex*<http://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/WWO/search?keyword=eve#!/view/speght.movzell.xml>. Joseph Swetnam, *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (London: Richard Cotes, 1645).

(²⁸) Sarah C.E. Ross, *Women, Poetry, and Politics in Seventeenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 38.

(²⁹) James Purkis, 'Rachel Speght as "Critical Reader"', *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2014): 107-26.

(³⁰) Christina Luckyj, 'A Mouzell for Melastomus in Context: Rereading the Swetnam-Speght Debate', *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 40 (2010): 113-31.

⁽³¹⁾ Numerous other women's writings from the early modern period that offer gynocentric re-readings Eve as an important figure could have been included here. See Lerner's chapter, 'One Thousand Years of Women's Biblical Criticism' in *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for a wide-ranging examination of various women's biblical interpretation.

⁽³²⁾ Valerie Sanders, 'First Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), 15.

⁽³³⁾ Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Blacksburg, VA: Virginia Tech, 2001). Available at <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/bodleian/detail.action?docID=10001970>, 13. Clearly there is a problematic Orientalist perspective at work in Wollstonecraft's writing, which is not uncommon amongst early white feminists and is now increasingly under scrutiny. See Joyce Zonana, 'The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*', *Signs* vol. 18, no. 3 (1993): 592-617.

⁽³⁴⁾ In the entry on Wollstonecraft in Taylor's *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, it is argued that she 'eschews a direct engagement with Scripture and shapes a mediated feminist critique of it by addressing two key appropriations of it' (539). I argue, however, that Wollstonecraft does both—she engages with and dismisses traditional interpretations of Eve for much the same reason she dismisses the biblical text itself; because both are products of the hands of men.

⁽³⁵⁾ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 19.

⁽³⁶⁾ Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 19.

⁽³⁷⁾ Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 136.

⁽³⁸⁾ Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism*, 1.

⁽³⁹⁾ This connection is evident from the title of three articles written about nineteenth-century French feminism: Michelle Perrot, 'New Eve and the Old Adam: French Women's Condition at the Turn of the Century', in *Behind the Line: Gender and the Two World Wars*, edited by Margaret Randolph Higgonet et al. (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1987), 51-60; the chapter 'A New Eve? Bourgeois Women in the Belle Époque' in James F. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000). Both of these pieces allude to, but do not greatly expand upon, the motif of the New Woman/New Eve. For more direct treatment of the theme and the gendered use of the image of Eve and her daughters, see Elizabeth Menon, 'Les Filles d'Ève in Word and Image', in *Writing and Seeing: Essays on Word and Image*, edited by Rui Carvalho Homem and Maria de Fátima Lambert (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2006), 157-73.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ *Les Filles d'Ève* Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing, 1983).

⁽⁴¹⁾ For further discussion see Menon 'Les Filles d'Ève in Word and Image', 169-73.

⁽⁴²⁾ Teresa Billington-Greig, *The Non-Violent Militant: Selected Writings of Teresa Billington-Greig*, edited by Carol McPhee and Ann FitzGerald (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

⁽⁴³⁾ Teresa Billington-Greig, 'The Old Eve in Suffrage Colours', c.1913. Collection: papers of Teresa Billington-Greig held by LSE Library, ref. 7TBG/2/G/4/08, 2.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Billington-Greig, 'The Old Eve in Suffrage Colours', 12-13.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Billington-Greig, 'The Old Eve in Suffrage Colours', 18.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Taylor, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, 470.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective* (New York: Dover Publications, 2002), 21.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 20.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ *The Woman's Bible* *The Women of Israel* Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 146-89.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Janice E. Ruth, 'Draft of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, ca. 1895', in *Selected Documents Celebrating the Manuscript Division's First 100 Years at the Library of Congress*. Available at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(mcc/049\)\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mcc:@field(DOCID+@lit(mcc/049))).

⁽⁵¹⁾ Sue Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism', in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Sarah Gamble (London: Routledge, 2001), 27.

⁽⁵²⁾ Thornham, 'Second Wave Feminism', 27.

⁽⁵³⁾ See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, edited and translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, and Sheila Rowbotham (London: Vintage, 2011). It is through cultural myths such as Eve and Pandora's, that woman is made, as is alluded to in her famous phrase 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman' (267). Millett offers an interpretation influenced by psychology, reading the snake as a phallic tempter, and the story as a myth of negative human sexuality, and the woman Eve, the 'afterthought' as the progenitor of human suffering and sin. See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 5th edn. (New York: Columbia University, 2016), 52-4.

⁽⁵⁴⁾ Louise Kimpton Nye, 'Introduction: Spare Rib: The First Nine Years' Online: <http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/articles/introduction-spare-rib-the-first-nine-years>.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ The first edition of the magazine included a manifesto which clearly laid out the position of the magazine, which was to pursue a collaborative goal of 'achieving collective, realistic solutions to women's problems ...' (Spare Rib, 'Spare Rib Manifesto', *Spare Rib* vol. 1 (1972). Available at <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/facsimile-of-spare-rib-manifesto>). The digital collection can be viewed at <https://journalarchives.jisc.ac.uk/britishlibrary/sparerib>.

⁽⁵⁶⁾ This was shared with me by Marsha Rowe via email correspondence on 18 April 2016.

⁽⁵⁷⁾ *Spare Rib*, vol.1, 3.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ Nye, 'Introduction: Spare Rib'.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ Another crucial element of British second-wave iconography was the bitten apple used by the feminist press, Virago—long before the famous technology company took it up as their own. Interestingly, this publishing house initially grew out of *Spare Rib* magazine, as Spare Rib Books. By choosing the fruit of knowledge as their logo, and placing this on the front of their books, the publishing house effectively made each of their readers an Eve, reading and gaining women's writing and hearing women's voices that had been denied a platform for centuries.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ These badges appear in the Women's Archive at LSE. See <http://twl-calm.library.lse.ac.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&pos=1>.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Helena Kennedy, *Eve was Framed: Women and the British Justice System* (London: Vintage, 2005), 16.

⁽⁶²⁾ Kennedy, *Eve was Framed*, 29.

