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Resisting the Marriage Plot

Faith and Female Agency in Austen, Brontë, Gaskell, and Wollstonecraft

December 21, 2021 | \$30, 272 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5071-6

"A refreshing, intelligent, and unexpected study. Through a close reading of a diverse cluster of nineteenth-century women novelists, this book very effectively challenges the conventional idea that Christian faith simply reinforced the subjugation of women and shows how it could in fact nourish and deepen resistance to a 'Miltonic' mythology of passive female perfection."

Rowan Williams, University of South Wales, former archbishop of Canterbury

Manipulating Milton

Milton's ubiquitous Eve myth begged a response by Christian female novelists who would follow. Their work marks a critique of and response to Milton: a deliberately nonmythic resistance to Milton's mythic Eve. In order fully to understand Milton's influence during this period and the narrative responses that would follow, this section briefly examines John Milton as a father of English literature and the reality that, alongside the rise of the novel and the influence of women on the form, *Paradise Lost* evoked strong negative responses from female writers. Thus, this section next explores the specific ways in which Milton's Eve was a perversion of the biblical Eve. Finally, in response to this perversion, this section demonstrates the ways in which many women during the Romantic and Victorian eras rejected Milton's picture of Eve as well as the double bind she represented, going so far as to blind their literary heroes. Simultaneously and contradictorily, Milton's Eve was represented by him as the idealized picture of womanhood as well as the cause of original sin. As a literary figure, therefore, she was sharply rejected in favor of more resistant, less naive, heroines.

Though John Milton was a literary icon, he was also a biblical mythologizer. *Paradise Lost*, published in 1667, a mere century before a wave of revolutions would rock Western civilization, uses epic conventions to grotesquely expand the brief biblical account of the fall of Satan and his legions, and the eventual banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. After an invocation to the muse, Milton begins in medias res, with Satan and his army awaking in hell after their fall. Satan begins by rebelliously proclaiming, "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a hell of Heav'n." With this resolution in mind, Satan plots to free himself from the chains of hell, travel across the great chasm to earth, and tempt Adam and Eve and thus all humanity to their "first disobedience." His temptations are successful when he convinces Eve to eat the fruit that will allow her to see and discern evil. His achievement establishes Satan as the obstinately rebellious antihero of *Paradise Lost*. The narrative also established Eve as overly ambitious and thus our necessarily dependent "first mother" whose personal agency singlehandedly led to the fall of humanity. Early female novelists rejected this construction of womanhood.

Milton's interpretation of the Genesis narrative reflected his contemporary moment, echoing the Protestant Reformation. In his work *The Puritan Revolution*, Don Wolf elucidates Milton's influence in moving the masses away from the prescriptive practices of Calvinism and toward the interpretive practices of Puritanism. He claims that Milton embraced a "rebellious individualism," claiming that "individualistic Gospel searching was the central impetus of Milton's radicalism, both religious and political so it also, in varying degrees, lighted and sustained reforming fires in almost all the radicals of the time." Though often remembered as a Puritan, Milton was an individualist who embraced the humanistic pursuit of knowledge, picking and choosing which church doctrine he would embrace.

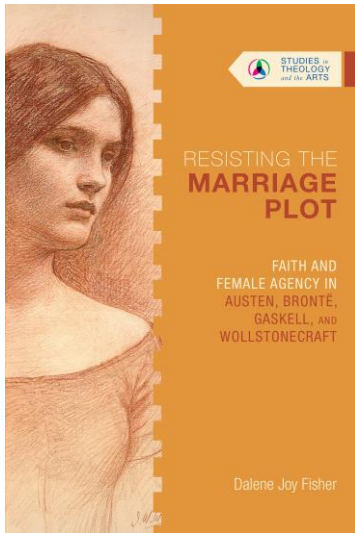
Milton's relationships with women also reflected his radical individualism and willingness to deviate from culturally accepted ideology. Milton was thirty-four years old in 1643 when he married his first wife, Mary Powell, a beautiful seventeen-year-old, but she deserted him one short month after their marriage. It was during his separation from Powell that Milton wrote a treatise in defense of divorce, which argued for lawful divorce on the basis of incompatibility, breaking with both the Anglican Church and Puritan Reformers. To be more specific, Milton bemoaned the inequity of being yoked to an inferior being. Key to this discussion is the reality that at the time, it was men, not women, who could file for and obtain a divorce. It seems that Milton felt shackled to an inferior coy virgin, stating, "The soberest and best governed men are least practiced in these affairs; and who knows not that the bashful muteness of a virgin may oftentimes hide all the unliveliness and natural sloth which is really unfit for



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conversation?" Milton later explained his abhorrence to domestic bondage, saying, "It is to little purpose for him [a man] to make a noise about liberty in the legislative assemblies, and in the courts of justice, who is in bondage to an inferior at home—a species of bondage of all others the most degrading to a man." It appears that the degradation Milton feared most, then, was not that of an unhappy marriage, but bondage to "an inferior."

It seems logical, then, that Milton's perverse depiction of Eve and her subsequent inequality and subjection reflects his view of women. From the moment we meet Adam and Eve in the garden, Milton depicts mother Eve intellectually bound to Adam, a picture of inequality and subjection:

Whence true authority in men; though both
Not equal, as their sex not equal seem'd;
For contemplation hee and valour form'd,
For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,
Hee for God only, shee for God in him.

Milton envisions womankind, from the beginning of time, not just in complementary roles, as many orthodox Christians still claim as accurate, but unequal. Milton suggests here that Eve is separated from God, only to look for God through Adam's agency.

Milton's epic, then, depicts Eve's desire to be her own agent as precisely the problem. The King James Version of the Bible, the text used by Puritans, indicates that Adam was "with" Eve when she partook of the fruit, suggesting dual blame for the fall. In Milton's version, the female is perfectly beautiful and wonderfully domestic, but when she obtains a measure of freedom—freedom gained by transgressive independence—her judgment fails her entirely.

Milton's depiction of Eve's naive lack of judgment when she steps away from Adam's watchful eye is disturbing. Her ambition to be independent appears transgressive. Instead of working together with Adam, Eve suggests that they divide the labor, taking her away from Adam's watchful eyes. Adam reluctantly allows Eve to work alone, but with a warning on his lips:

The Wife, where danger or dishonour lurks,
Safest and seemliest by her Husband stays,
Who guards her, or with her the worst endures.

Away from his supervision, she is surely at risk of falling into questionable circumstances.

Nevertheless, Eve assures Adam that she knows of the dangers lurking about Paradise, scolding him for doubting her ability to resist temptation. Despite the warnings, Eve does begin to work alone, and Adam's fears become reality. Eve is "impregnated" by Satan's falsehood. The language suggests that she has been mentally raped due to lack of protection. Eve eats the fruit. She contemplates her deed, considering keeping this knowledge-producing fruit a secret. In her sinfulness, she yearns for equality:

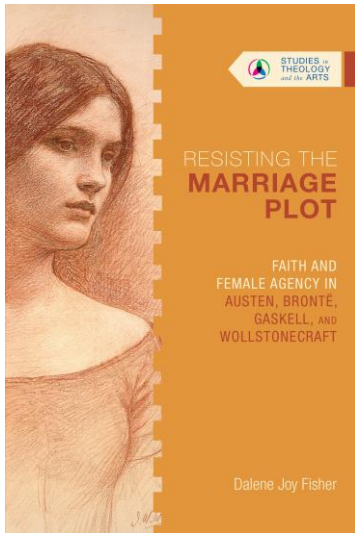
to add what wants
In Female Sex, the more to draw his Love,
And render me more equal, and perhaps,
A thing not undesirable, sometime
Superior; for inferior who is free?



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Eve eventually decides to share the fruit with Adam. She plucks a bough from the tree and returns to his side. She shares her transgression with Adam. He listens, horrified. Milton creates a scenario where Adam can choose to remain blameless before God; he can avoid death by not eating the fruit. But Eve, jealous for his love, is pleased when he decides to eat, damning himself along with her:

she embrac'd him, and for joy
Tenderly wept, much won that he his Love
Had so ennobl'd, as of choice to incur
Divine displeasure for her sake, or Death.

Adam eats. They become intoxicated with desire. She has persuaded Adam to fall, and he relishes her for it. Lasciviously, Adam and Eve fall to "carnal desire." Eve, beautiful, domestic, but ultimately ignorant, brings the superior male into her fallen world. Ironically, this man seems to have little choice. He cannot help but be attracted to this wanton creature.

Unfortunately, Milton's elaboration of and addition to the biblical account influenced generations after him. *Paradise Lost*, widely read by the educated populace, was a defining narrative of the eighteenth century and thus begged confrontation by the female novelists of the period that followed him—the period of the early novel. Many rejected Milton's Eve; this rejection is evident in the heroines who lined the pages of early novels penned by women, and it demonstrates the working out of femininity that was an arduous task for several generations of women who were only beginning to find their place alongside their male counterparts in the public sphere. Early female novelists aided in this cultural shift by producing heroines who altered the model of womanhood from an Eve figure with her physical beauty and spiritual weakness, to autonomous heroines with moral fortitude and spiritual agency. Thus, their novels produced heroines markedly different from Eve, heroines who demonstrated truly virtuous, even Christian, womanhood.

Wollstonecraft was a well-known outspoken opponent of Milton, but through the emerging novel, other writers like George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Elizabeth Gaskell, to name a few, also directly confronted the Miltonic Eve by creating fiercely independent, spiritually conscientious heroines. The result was sharp censure of patriarchal narrative, the type that spurred along early feminism. Through the novel, female authors were freeing women from the cognitive dissonance of Miltonic womanhood—a simultaneous idealization and villainization of women that plagued the eighteenth century and bled into the nineteenth century.

Women who lived directly in Milton's shadow—women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—were caught in a double bind: on one hand, trapped by the oppressive growing ideal of "the angel in the house" but on the other hand, like Pandora and Eve before, villainized as the cause of all hardship and immorality. So while women were expected to exemplify submissive perfection, they were also continually punished for the sins of humanity. This emotional and spiritual abuse was fueled by previous narratives. In Milton's myth, the flawless Eve operates as a domestic goddess, but as soon as she steps outside of her "proper sphere," chaos ensues. Early female novelists sought to abolish this contradictory picture of Eve, and thus womanhood, using literary fiction to fight societal fiction.

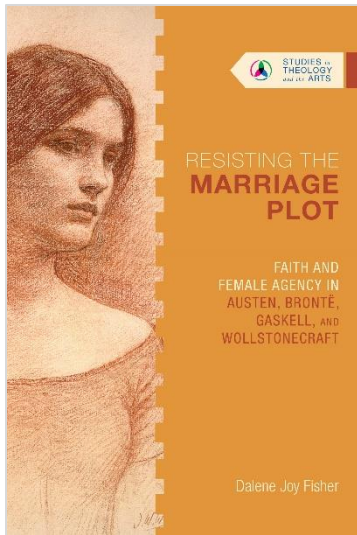
—Adapted from the introduction "'Doing God's Work': Female Heroines in Response to Milton's Eve"



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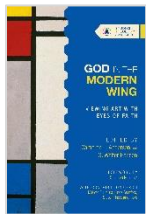
Fiction has long been used to cast vision for social change, but the role of Christian faith in such works has often been overlooked. In this STA volume, Dalene Joy Fisher examines how the works of Jane Austen, Anne Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Mary Wollstonecraft challenge cultural expectations of women and marriage, exploring how Christianity can be a transformative force of liberation.

Theology, Art, and Cultural Engagement

IVP Academic's Studies in Theology and the Arts (STA) series seeks to enable Christians to reflect more deeply upon the relationship between their faith and humanity's artistic and cultural expressions. By drawing on the insights of both academic theologians and artistic practitioners, this series encourages thoughtful engagement with and critical discernment of the full variety of artistic media—including visual art, music, literature, film, theater, and more—which both embody and inform Christian thinking.

“Studies in Theology and the Arts provides Christian scholars, artists, and church leaders with an opportunity to shape our theological perspective on the arts in light of the creative realities of our Maker God. These resources can help by extending the salvific narrative into broader creation and new creation narratives, enriching our grasp of the gospel and revealing how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”

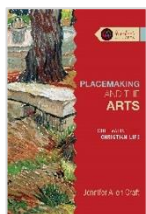
—Makoto Fujimura, visual artist and author of *Culture Care* and *Silence and Beauty*



God in the Modern Wing: Viewing Art with Eyes of Faith

Edited by Cameron J. Anderson and G. Walter Hansen | October 12, 2021 | \$30, 260 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5069-3

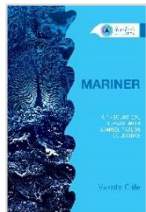
Should Christians even bother with modern art? This STA volume gathers the reflections of artists, art historians, and theologians who collectively offer a more complicated narrative of the history of modern art and its place in the Christian life. Readers will find insights on the work and faith of artists like Marc Chagall, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Andy Warhol, and more.



Placemaking and the Arts: Cultivating the Christian Life

by Jennifer Allen Craft | October 30, 2018 | \$32, 280 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5067-9

What role does place play in the Christian life? In this STA volume, Jennifer Allen Craft gives a practical theology of the arts, contending that the arts place us in time, space, and community in ways that encourage us to be fully and imaginatively present in a variety of contexts: the natural world, our homes, our worshipping communities, and society.



Mariner: A Theological Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge

by Malcolm Guite | February 13, 2018 | \$40, 384 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5068-6

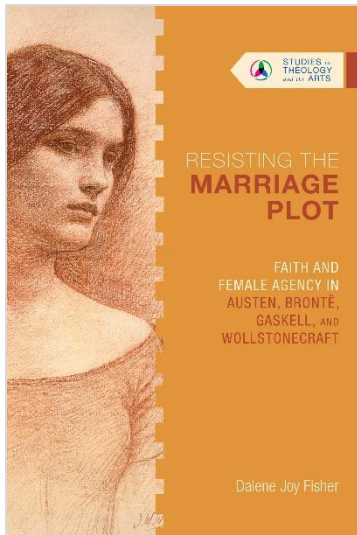
Poet and theologian Malcolm Guite leads readers on a journey with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose own life paralleled the experience in his famous poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” On this theological voyage, Guite draws out the continuing relevance of this work and the ability of poetry to communicate the truths of humanity's fallenness, our need for grace, and the possibility of redemption.



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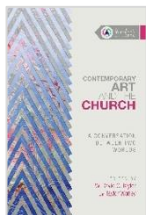
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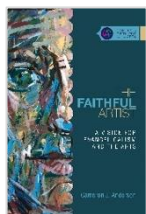
A Subversive Gospel: Flannery O'Connor and the Reimagining of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth by Michael Mears Bruner | October 24, 2017 | \$30, 260 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5066-2

The good news of Jesus Christ is a subversive gospel, and following Jesus is a subversive act. Exploring the theological aesthetic of American author Flannery O'Connor, Michael Bruner argues that her fiction reveals what discipleship to Jesus Christ entails by subverting the traditional understandings of beauty, truth, and goodness.



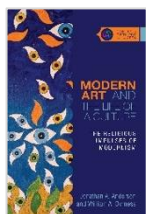
Contemporary Art and the Church: A Conversation Between Two Worlds Edited by W. David O. Taylor and Taylor Worley | June 20, 2017 | \$30, 246 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5065-5

The church and the contemporary art world often find themselves in an uneasy relationship in which misunderstanding and mistrust abound. Drawn from the 2015 biennial CIVA conference, these reflections from theologians, pastors, and practicing artists imagine the possibility of a renewed and mutually fruitful relationship between contemporary art and the church.



The Faithful Artist: A Vision for Evangelicalism and the Arts by Cameron J. Anderson | October 10, 2016 | \$28, 283 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5064-8

Drawing upon his experiences as both a Christian and an artist, Cameron J. Anderson traces the relationship between the evangelical church and modern art in postwar America. While acknowledging the tensions between faith and visual art, he casts a vision for how Christian artists can faithfully pursue their vocational calling in contemporary culture.



Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism by Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness | May 24, 2016 | \$35, 376 pages, paperback | 978-0-8308-5135-5

In 1970, Hans Rookmaaker published *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, a groundbreaking work that considered the role of the Christian artist in society. This volume responds to his work by bringing together a practicing artist and a theologian who argue that modernist art is underwritten by deeply religious concerns.

Forthcoming titles include:

- **The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts**
by Jeremy S. Begbie, Daniel Train, and W. David O. Taylor | March 29, 2022 | \$30, 280 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0326-8
- **Seeing Is Believing: The Revelation of God Through Film**
by Richard Vance Goodwin | July 5, 2022 | \$32, 290 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0200-1



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