“QUIA SIMILIA SIMILIBUS APPLAUDANT”: VISUAL VARIATIONS OF GENESIS 3 IN THE MEDIEVAL MIND

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT

"Quia Similia Similibus Applaudant": Visual Variations of Genesis 3 in the Medieval Mind

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Literature Review

Existing scholarship around the iconography of Genesis 3 in the middle ages rarely addresses the woman-headed serpent as the fundamental interest. The few articles that do concern themselves with the woman-headed serpent are informative on its origins and influences, but either depict a catalog of iconographic and textual examples or deviate into nebulous lore. Using J.K. Bonnell's article alongside various other articles from Nona C. Flores, Stephen Greenblatt, Katie Normington, and John Flood this thesis is aimed at addressing how the medieval mind used variations of the woman-headed serpent to form ideas about women, sin, and femininity.

Thesis Statement

The antifeminist moralization within medieval society tendency to mythologize the serpent from Genesis 3 into a temptress, Satan, and a woman has impacted the majority illiterate population of Medieval Europe to the point where their ideas permeate well into history. The woman-headed serpent of medieval and renaissance renditions of Genesi3 might have lost favor, but the coupling of women with the ideas of sin, temptation, reptiles, and evil linger.

Theoretical Framework

The driving standards of literary theories behind this thesis will be feminist theory and new historicism. While I will also take into consideration the historical aspect of the images and the literature that accompanies them, the main focus is to examine how they affected gender relations within medieval society and religion.

Project Description

A study of the medieval artistic trend of shaping the serpent from Genesis 3 with the head of a woman and how it has become an incentive to associate antifeminist ideas with the origin of sin in Christian thinking. A thorough study of the theology of Medieval Europe in accordance with the woman-headed serpent in iconography is used to reinforce a claim that Eve, the Fall of Mankind, and the serpent, were consistently distorted in order to maintain a certain social structure. Additionally, theological ideas of the Late Middle Ages concerning typographic structures that align Adam with Christ and Eve with Mary contradict the antifeminist lens of iconography concerning Genesis 3. Comprehensive knowledge of the story of Adam and Eve through history up until Petrus Comestor's *Historia Scholastica* not only reinforces the Eve-Mary pair but might influence artists on how they depict the woman-headed serpent. In looking at the serpent as a mirror to Eve the idea of one fault is drawn to Eve as an individual, the serpent as a distinctly different virgin-faced may point the finger at women as a gender.

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INTRODUCTION

The question of origin is a commonplace theme that reverberates throughout our history as a species. The search for where we came from, who we came from, and our purpose in life has not lost its ability to produce new theories as time has progressed, and it is the sheer magnitude of answers that make the ones that reoccur particularly interesting. From the Babylonian stories of the *Enuma Elish* and *Gilgamesh* to the Judea-Christian Adam and Eve our conjecture of origin speaks to the physical world as well as the internal human experience. The need for an explanation of how we have arrived where we are at this moment addresses the way humans perceive the linear progression of their own history within time. In other words, humans have a hard time grasping the idea that we popped into existence without the initial exertion of a creator, first mover, or force of energy. An answer to our origins comforts us no matter how invalid it may seem because believing in anything is better than the unknown. The creation of an origin story is unique among humans, the animals that cohabit the world do not sit around pondering about where they come from and why. We could look at this as an achievement or as proof that we are lost, "disoriented, uncomfortable in our own skin, in need of an explanation" (Greenblatt 17). Though making up an origin story is innocent enough in its own right the societal and psychological implications are harder to predict.

When the Judea-Christian writings of Genesis told of God the creator, man, woman, garden, and serpent started to dominate in the minds of ancient Europeans the Genesis writer(s) could only dream of great thinkers like Augustine, Jerome, Milton, and Darwin to dedicate chunks of their life into deciphering their words. The societal and psychological effects of various commentary, exegesis, and reproductions of the first 3-4 chapters of Genesis can be

described as simultaneously profound and elusive. For example, attempting to point to the progression of antifeminist ideas in history since the spread of Christianity as the direct result of Eve's temptation and subsequent fall of mankind is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, if we narrow the scope by time period, influence, and availability of texts the transgression of the blame for the Abrahamic religion's first man and woman is easier seeded out. For argumentative purposes, this thesis will primarily address representations of Genesis 3 from the Late Middle Ages into the early years of the Renaissance in Europe. It was at this time near the end of the twelfth century that the French theological writer, Peter Comestor, wrote his Biblical paraphrase, *Historia Scholastica*. The comprehensiveness of the text was due to Petrus Comestor's reputation as a writer, his last name was a Latin nickname, "the Eater" because he would devour book after book. The *Historia* is "called 'one of the most famous books of the Middle Ages' and even 'the most famous book of the Middle Ages' by modern scholars (Flores 169). Though Comestor was a man of vast knowledge the popularization of a certain part of Genesis 3 that he attributes to the English Benedictine monk Bede is found to be unsubstantiated and the original words of Comestor alone. When in Genesis 3 Satan, in the guise of the serpent, tempts Eve to disobey God and eat from the Tree of Knowledge Comestor says, "*He also chose a certain kind of serpent, as Bede says, which had the countenance of a virgin, because like favors like.* [1] This reworking of the Edenic serpent influenced artists, scholars, theologians, and writers for the next 400 years. It was not uncommon to find an image of Eve reaching for the forbidden fruit handed to her by a hybrid creature with the bottom half of a traditional zoomorphic serpent and the head, and sometimes full torso, of a woman.

[1] "*Elegit etiam quoddam genus serpentis, ut ait Beda, virgineum vultum hahens, quia similta' similihus applaudan*t" Flores 168.

The recognized Biblical text at this time was only to be printed in Latin so to speculate that much of the population had a hazy grasp of the specifics (or lack thereof) from Genesis 3 can be allowed. The majority of the population were peasants who were not afforded the opportunity of an education where they could learn to read and comprehend the Bible on a textual level. Therefore peasants relied on the surrounding environment and social structure to inform their perception of reality and morality within their religious beliefs. If the masses put their trust in the educated few speaking from the pulpits or from images they may have encountered then the woman-headed serpent transforms from Satan's tool of deception to something far more sinister. By looking at the visual representations of Genesis 3 circulated in the Late Middle Ages it can be theorized that the fortunate few who owned an illuminated form of exegesis or the picture Bible had a good chance of seeing the fall of mankind represented by a woman-headed serpent reaching after Eve. For the peasants, a popular visual aid to their understanding of scripture came from the mystery cycles performed during certain church holidays. I will discuss later the specifics of the Chester cycle as and the Cornish drama *The Creation of the World*. In one of the more explicit cases, *The Drapers' Play* from the Chester cycle, the stage direction explicitly states a type of serpent with a female visage. While lords and ladies sat musing over pictorial versions of Adam and Eve the peasants saw Genesis reenacted on makeshift stages repeatedly

With the widely popular Biblical paraphrase, *Historia Scholastica*, woman-headed serpents in iconography and dramatic performances, and the superstitious climate of the time women had nowhere to hide from the persecution of their sex based on renditions of Genesis. Even the world-renowned Renaissance artist, Michelangelo, painted his portrayal of the tempter with the full upper half of a human woman complete with long blond hair matching Adam's in

The Fall and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden, on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the early fifteenth century. Though the modern reader's exposure to Comestor, Medieval illuminated manuscripts, and stage directions of mystery cycles is probably nonexistent the highly ornamented Sistine Chapel has only grown in popularity and influence since its inception. It merely takes one look up to the chapel's ceiling for the thousands of people who visit the Vatican each day to witness Michelangelo's very human and very female serpent handing Eve the forbidden fruit and the subsequent expulsion of the pained couple from paradise. The woman-headed serpent today is mainly a cause of confusion and curiosity, but for the eyes of someone in the middle ages, it gives a concrete mental image of the scene that created all the pain and sin they experience. My goal in this thesis is to understand the full psychological and societal weight the woman-headed serpent in visual reproductions of Genesis 3 had in the Late Middle Ages. Furthermore, I will argue that select variations in the woman-headed serpent would either assist or hinder the amount of guilt prescribed to the woman for original sin.

CHAPTER I

ORIGINS

Variations

In the middle of the nineteenth century, English archeologists uncovered fragmented clay tablets in Nineveh (Mosul, Iraq). With further excavations and the persistent work of George Smith, who was fascinated with ancient Mesopotamia and later pioneered the study of Assyriology, a creation story predating the Hebrew Adam and Eve was finally rediscovered (Greenblatt 43-45). The Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, a text forgotten for thousands of years seemed to suggest that the pious Hebrews that took on the task of rebuilding their temple in Jerusalem when Cyrus the Great freed them from Babylonian captivity in 547 BC were influenced by the ancient myths of their captors. Smith would later translate another clay tablet, similar to the 7 tablets that make up the *Enuma Elish*, to find compelling evidence that ancient Mesopotamian mythology influenced the Hebrew scriptures- especially Genesis. The story of Noah's ark surviving the destructive flood of his known world shares commonalities with a shattered clay tablet of the Mesopotamian flood myth the *Atrahasis*. When Smith was translating the *Atrahasis* he realized that an antediluvian flood story would pivot the course of Genesis scholarship. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, Stephen Greenblatt explains what the discovery of the *Atrahasis* might have felt like:

> Smith understood that what he had stumbled upon, after more than two thousand years, would reanimate the half-buried disturbances and unsettle even his most complacent Victorian contemporaries. It was as if you had grown up with an inheritance you thought you perfectly understood and in which you took great pride, but now that inheritance had

been made to seem less comfortable, coherent, and sustaining. Your stories were no longer entirely your own. You had strange ancestors you never dreamed that you had. (50)

Though the flood story that Smith was translating was an abbreviated form of the *Atrahasis* from the great epic *Gilgamesh* the narrative has links, invisible to Augustine, Milton, and Dante, that work to connect ancient Mesopotamia to the Genesis storyteller. I highlight these ancient texts and their discovery to better grasp the inspiration for the sparse origin story written in the opening chapters of Genesis. It is important to note the similarities between the account of Adam and Eve and the Mesopotamian myths that bled into the exiled Hebrews in Babylon. A Biblical account of how the Hebrews felt in their captivity is seen most strikingly in Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when
we remembered Zion.

. . . . . .

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he
be, that rewardeth thee as though hast served us.
Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against
the stones. (1, 8-9)

The gruesome image of children being thrown against stones only proves to serve as evidence at the disparity pious Hebrews felt watching the teachings of Yahweh intermingle with the myths and beliefs of their captors. It did not help that the Babylonian stories were older by more than a thousand years and their integrity came from their reach into a deep historical past through

concrete written accounts. The Genesis storyteller must have known this disparity for what came forth was a complete upheaval of the motifs laid out in *Gilgamesh* and the *Enuma Elish*.[2]

The First Man and Woman

The primeval history of Genesis (1:1-11:26) gives us some of the most discussed and studied parts of the Bible, but the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Mankind definitely creates the most stir. The purpose of this thesis is not to delve into the works of Dante and Milton who both wrote with the first man and woman in mind, but it is necessary to underline that Adam and Eve have a profound presence in our minds. From looking at the text alone Genesis is fairly simplistic. Life is created ex nihilo by God, Adam is created from earth, Eve is created from Adam's rib, God commands Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Eve is tempted by a serpent, Adam and Eve disobey God's commandment, they are expelled from Paradise. The Genesis storyteller took away the individualism of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and instead creates the first marriage with Adam and Eve and stresses this union:

> And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of Man.
>
> Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. (Gen 2:23-24)

The idea that Adam and Eve were "one flesh" did not imply that they resembled a biform creature, but that the companionship between the two was not to be taken lightly. When the serpent tempted Eve and Adam took the fruit from Eve it was as husband and wife not as man and woman. They shared the culpability of disobeying God and were cursed accordingly. To

[2] See the Norton Critical Edition of the King James Version edited by Herbert Marks pp. 1716-30; the epic of *Gilgamesh* and Genesis both include a human being formed from clay by a god, the man's estrangement from nature is due to a woman, the possession of a plant of immortality circumvented by a serpent etc.

trace how thoughts circulating around who was to blame for the creation of sin shifted more to Eve than Adam would be tedious. What can be said is that by the medieval age in Europe, (*c*. 1100-1453) Eve has assumed the role of the creator of sin and the serpent assumed the role of Satan even though the nowhere in the text of Genesis does the serpent have any connections to Satan. In looking at early traditions in the West the picture that was formed of Eve can best be summoned up by Andrew of Saint Victor who said in his commentary on the Octateuch in 1147 that, "the serpent was not speaking by itself but was possessed by the devil…a sign of Eve's great simplicity that she was not dumbfounded or startled when a hitherto mute brute started to speak to her" (Kelly 303).

Comestor's Influence

As mentioned in the introduction Peter Comestor was a French theologian and writer of the popular medieval biblical paraphrase, *Historia Scholastica*. In the late twelfth century Comestor maintained the position of Chancellor of Norte Dame and Dean of the cathedral school which gave him the power to simultaneously hold the chair of theology. It was during this time, from around 1168-1173, that "Peter Comestor dedicated the *Historia Scholastica* to William of Champagne, Archbishop of Sens…[which] constitutes the sole internal evidence for dating the *History*" (Clark 5). Comestor was a highly cultured academic who vehemently read any book he could attain making a name for himself as "the Master of Histories" (Kelly 308). The influence of the *Historia* was seen almost immediately following its publication in 1173. For example, before he was a cardinal, Stephen Langton studied at the University of Paris and "lectured on the entire *Historia scholastica* sometime before 1176" and revised this lecture course twice before 1179 (Clark 7). From Medieval universities to Benedictine and Franciscan friars the *Historia* was a successful touchstone to understanding Biblical scripture and popular religion in the 12th-14th

centuries. Having said that, the shocking truth today is that Comestor's *Historia* is largely overlooked by scholars despite its influence on theological developments and their intricacies in the 12th-13th centuries. Despite its current abandonment the *Historia* become a staple in medieval religious teaching, and fathered a powerful shift in how the serpent from Genesis 3 was viewed:

> "The serpent was more cunning than all other animals," both by nature and by accident—by accident, because it was filled with the demon. For when Lucifer had been cast out of the paradise of spirits, he envied man, because he was in the paradise of bodies. He knew that if he made him transgress he too would be cast out. Because he was afraid of being found out by the man, he approached the woman, who had less foresight and was "wax to be twisted into vice" and this by means of the serpent; for the serpent at that time was erect like a man, since it was laid prostrate when it was cursed; and even now the pareas is said to be erect when it moves. *He also chose a certain kind of serpent, as Bede says, which had the countenance of a virgin, because like favors like;* and he moved its tongue to speak, though it knew nothing itself, just as he speaks through the frenzied and possessed.[3]

What Comestor is trying to explain is that the serpent took on the countenance of a virgin to better persuade Eve to disobey God's commandment to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The woman-like features attributed to the serpent serve as a tool that Satan uses to deceive, but Comestor connecting this information to the Venerable Bede simply has no textual proof. What occurred next could not have been predicted by Comestor or his contemporaries.

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[3] Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*. "'Serpens erat callidior cunctis animantibus' et naturaliter et incidenter. Incidenter, quia plenus erat daemone. Lucifer enim daiectus a paradiso spirituum invidit homini, quod esset in paradiso corporum, sciens si faceret eum transgredi, quod et ille eiceretur. Timens vero deprehendi a viro,mulierem minus providam et certam [sic; *lege* ceream] in vitium flecti aggressus est, et hoc per serpentem, quia tunc serpens erectus est ut homo, quia in malediction prostratus est; et adhuc, ut tradunt, phareas erectus incedit. Elegit etiam quoddam genus serpentis, ut ait Beda, virgineum vultum habens, quiz similia similibus applaudant, et movit as loquendum linguam eius, tamen nescientis, sicut et per fanaticos energumenos loquitur."

Starting in the early thirteenth century the woman-headed serpent found its form come to life through the copious mediums such as: illuminations of the Bible and biblical paraphrases, devotional pieces, stained glass, frescos, sculpture, and dramatic performances. From one mention of the appearance of the Edenic serpent in Comestor's *Historia* came an artistic trend that delegated his paraphrase visually dominate over the primary scripture it was commentating over. The woman-headed serpent would continue to persistently show up in visual representations of the Edenic serpent from Genesis 3 for almost 400 years.

While the *Historia*'s gradual lack of importance can be attributed to the procession of history and how knowledge is disseminated and shared- the mystery behind the author remains relatively unaccounted for to this day. The few articles and books written on Peter Comestor, also known by the name Pierre le Mangeur, have been just as vague as his justification for the woman-headed serpent. The two main sources that have proved to be thorough and beneficial for my purposes here are Mark J. Clark's 2015 book *The Making of the Historia Scholastica* and Saralyn R. Daly's 1957 article "Peter Comestor: Master of Histories", but just as the time between the pieces suggests Peter Comestor is just not a well-researched topic. This puzzles me considering that at the time of his involvement in the study of theology in the twelfth century the concept of a university was just beginning to take holdWhile my research has to do with medieval theology, and society I have read many articles and books, scanned many abstracts and references pages and noticed that Comestor would blip across the radar every now and then but consistently disappeared into the ether of Lombard, the mystics & the copious papal decrees. Much like his paraphrase, Comestor is tossed from relevant history. This is not to say Comestor or the *Historia* are completely blotted out, it seems like he was considered quite important and famous as academics of the medieval age repeatedly referred to his comprehensive skill

displayed in the *Historia*. The thirteenth century French chronicler, Robert of Auxerre wrote in the 1173 record, "Peter Comestor is considered renowned in France, the foremost of the Parisian Masters, a most eloquent man excellently instructed in the divine Scriptures, who joining together in one volume the histories of both Testaments, produced a work, useful and pleasing" (Clark 1). Whether he actually believed his own argument for Genesis 3 and the woman-headed serpent as something existing beyond an allegorical sphere remains questionable. Taking into account the hugely popular allegorical Biblical exegesis of typology that reached its apex in the high Middle Ages (1000-1250 A.D), right around the time of the *Historia*'s publication, it is a better case to suggest his commentary as allegorical. An argument against this is that "Comestor's method was inspired by the Victorine School of exegesis that emphasized the literal sense of the Bible" (Flood 71). Allegorical or literal, Comestor's personal opinion on the matter did not stop the impending popularity of typology which is expressed directly through works of art. For typological Genesis Mary became Eve's redeemer and Jesus became a 'type' for a second Adam, the question here is what "type" did this biform female serpent fit into?

I would like to close this section by taking a final look at the "Master of Histories", Peter Comestor, through the words escribed on his epitaph which demonstrate the fact that he was one of the preeminent educators of the Middle Ages as well as a mortal man in the clutches of time and history:

> Peter I was, beneath a stone see now entombed I lie,
> Devourer was I called in life, now here devoured am I;
> In life I taught, and now in death this lesson learn from me:
> What ye are now once was I, what I am ye shall be.[4]

[4] Sarahlyn R. Daly, "Peter Comestor: Master of Histories." *Speculum*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1957, pp. 73.
Petrus eram, quem petra tegit; dicusque Comestor,

CHAPTER II

DECEPTION IN DISGUISE

Matron or Maiden

The forms of expression and communication in the Middle Ages are few and far between which is in part because society and everyday life revolved around the church. The social system was a strict hierarchy with the church dominating in power and little hope for social mobility. The majority of the population, around 90%, were considered peasants who had little to no education. Feudalism prevented these peasants the freedom to try to move beyond the social class they were born into. We begin to see slight changes to the system, when the High Middle Ages saw the rise of the bourgeoisie, or middle class, as a third social class integrated between nobility and those that labored for nobility (serfs, servants, peasants, knights, etc.). A main feature for this new middle class was commerce and though merchants usually came from wealthy families the nobility grew increasingly worried about the bourgeoisie and their outward demonstration of their newfound wealth. It wasn't solely the nobility that noticed a particular danger in the merchant class, the church also found the social addition unsettling. Those in power, the nobility and the church, feared that the merchant class would disrupt their coveted strict social order. All these turbulent emotions found outlet though oppressive sumptuary laws which dictated what someone of a certain socio-economic status was and was not allowed to wear, eat, or hunt. The word 'sumptuary' is defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as, "designed to regulate extravagant expenditures or habits especially on moral or religious

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Nunc comedor. Vivus docui, nec cesso docere
Mortuus; ut dicat qui me videt incineratum:
Quod sumus, iste fuit, erimus quando quod iste.

grounds" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). Everything from what colors could be word to where the textiles for clothing originated from was written into law in extreme detail which enforced and maintained a clearly divided class system. It is important to note sumptuary laws because they have the ability to accurately show how what one wore in the Middle Ages communicated volumes about each individual. Especially when artists came to visually representing pre-lapsarian Genesis with post-lapsarian contemporary dress. The best example of this is notability seen with representations of The Temptation of Eve by the woman-headed serpent whose variants included a veiled, hatted or coiffed headdress. Why would an artist, or patron, prescribe the Edenic woman-headed serpent with contemporary fashion? The best answer comes from Frances Guessenhoven's article, "The Serpent with a Matron's Face: Medieval Iconography of Satan in the Garden of Eden", where she states how variants in the woman-headed serpent took advantage of the social status ascribed to fashion as dictated by culture and law. By the late thirteenth century women rarely went anywhere in public without a head covering, but this was a distinction from the ancient tradition of women's head coverings that was mandated by divine law by St. Paul,

> Every man praying or prophesying with his head covered, disgraceth his head.
>
> But every woman praying or prophesying with her head not covered, disgraceth her head: for it is all one as if she were shaven.
>
> For if a woman be not covered, let her be shorn. But if it be a shame to a woman to be shorn or made bald, let her cover her head.
>
> The man indeed ought not to cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of the man. (1 Cor. 4-7)

The shift from women wearing their hair down and free to being covered at all times in the thirteenth century mimicked Paul's warning, but now it had the added weight of the fashion trends of the era and the sumptuary laws. Gussenhoven goes on to explain that, "while a woman's loose hair and uncovered head connotes virginity, the woman's hat connotes the married state… [as well as being] symbolic of submission to one's husband" (208). An example of the woman-headed serpent as a matron is seen in the Morgan Crusader Bible from the mid-thirteenth century where the serpent clings to the tree with lizard-like legs, red feathered wings, a long serpentine neck, and a coiffed woman's head (see figure 1).[5] In this specific illustration both Adam and Eve are seen with the forbidden fruit held close to their mouths demonstrating that the disobedience has already occurred, but due to Eve's extended arm across the tempter toward her husband, the blame for their now inevitable fall is given more to her. As mentioned before the covering of a woman's head demonstrated obedience to her husband which is the exact opposite of Eve's actions in Genesis 3. The irony of having a matron Edenic serpent represent obedience as original sin is brought into this world through disobedience to God reinforces medieval anti-feminist moralizations of scripture. Whether the artist created each hatted serpent by his own influence or from a manual by church officials describing how each biblical event should be represented, the fact remains that covering the hair of the woman-headed serpent completely disregards Comestor and by extension separates itself from his authority. Remember that the entire idea of the woman-snake hybrid came from Comestor and that he specified its marital status when he stated the serpent, "had the countenance of a *virgin*" (Kelly

[5] Early renditions of the woman-headed serpent often looked more like a sphinx, which is usually noted as female, than a serpent from the neck down. The limbs of the pre-lapsaian serpent are meant to reinforce the curse God assigns the serpent in Genesis 3:14, "And the Lord God said to the serpent: Because thou hast done this thing, thou art cursed among all cattle, and beasts of the earth: upon thy breast shalt thou go, and earth shalt thou eat all the days of thy life."

108). In order to applicably show that the woman-headed serpent was a virgin, the illustrations should all have long flowing hair which, like Guessenhoven says, is a prime enforcer of virginal identity. The matron serpent is proof that artistic choices could morph into something bigger than the biblical commentary they modeled.

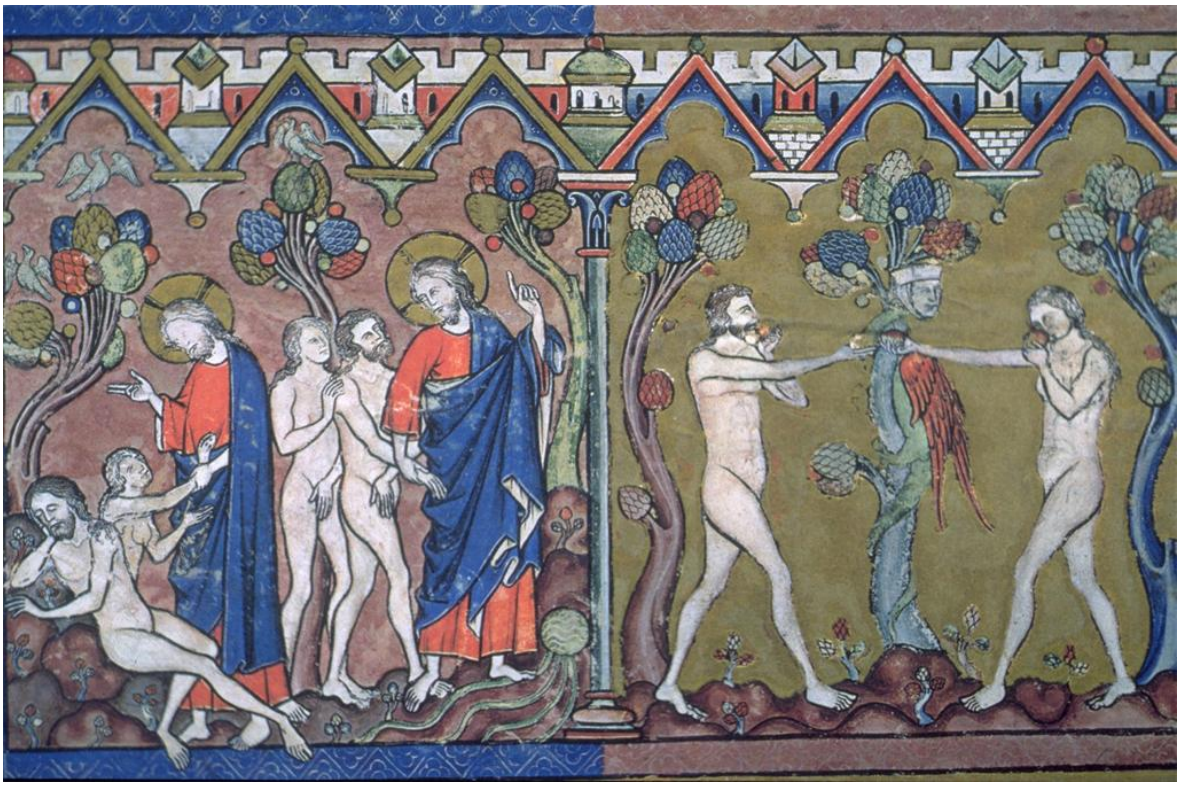

Figure 1. [L] Creation of Eve; [R] Fall of Mankind; detail of illumination from fol. 1 v of the Morgan Crusader Bible (aka. Shah Abbas Bible; Maciejowski Old Testament). ca. 1250. MS Illumination. MS. M. 638. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, ARTstor.

The logical answer for the how the matron temper of Genesis 3 originated, besides to perpetuate misogynistic ideals of gossiping wives, is that the artists who created the images had not come into contact with Comestor's Historia. Instead, they followed the artistic trend that had been dominating representations of the fall of mankind for over 100 years. They painted what *they* knew women to look like- hatted, veiled and coiffed. The reason Eve's hair remains loose in

every image is to give a chronological reference to scripture that states plainly that she is not yet fallen. While the maiden serpent is repeated often in devotional commissioned works such as illuminated Bibles, books of hours, and psalters the most famous sighting is one of the few examples of the woman-headed serpent still surviving in the minds of today's culture- Michelangelo's ceiling painting in the Sistine Chapel (figure 2).

Figure 2. Michelangelo. "Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve; Expulsion from Paradise." 1508-1512. Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, ARTstor.

I mentioned Michelangelo's painting in the introduction, and how it keeps a firm foothold in modern fascination unlike the plethora of woman-headed serpents that predate it. What is fascinating about the painting is that it clearly differentiates Eve from Adam and the serpent. The serpent, almost wholly woman "reaches down the fruit to Eve, who takes it from a recumbent contrapposto pose, stretching up her hand for the fruit which Adam, standing over her, greedily

reaches to pluck" (Trapp 252). Unlike many of the other maiden serpents, the serpent and Eve here do not share common features, in fact, it seems that Adam is more like the woman-serpent than the first woman is. Many have speculated that the similarities in appearance of Adam and the serpent, their hair color, and facial features, point to the Jewish legend of Adams first wife, Lilith. The legend of Lilith is fascinating, to say the least, but she wields little authority in the High Middle Ages making her unsubstantiated in any claims to her involvement in the above scenario if I were to mention any. I chose to use Michelangelo's woman-serpent as the best example of the maiden-serpent for two reasons: first, the fact that Eve and the serpent are represented as separate individuals plays a key role in my argument in the next chapter, and second, because of its enduring popularity. "The Sistine Chapel is arguably the most visited room in the world", states Philip Puellella reporting for a 2012 *Reuters* article. The ceiling is gazed at by some 5 million people annually, one would think the scene of Adam and Eve's temptation would incite more questions that could possibly lead to better answers. For the spectators of the High Middle Ages, there was no Sistine Chapel to question, but there were the cyclical dramatic performances to which that large, but obscured, percentage of the population were privy to.

Medieval Mystery Cycles

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries gave rise to mystery plays that were to be performed in cycles on a certain church holiday, such as the feast of Corpus Christi, in a procession of the town. The plays usually recounted the history of the universe through biblical stories from the creation of Heaven and Earth to the Last Judgement. As mentioned before, this was a time when a new and upcoming middle class had funds to contribute back to their town and sponsoring one of these cyclical plays was usually a good way of doing just that. The specific groups of

craftsman or merchants formed into guilds who took their choice of which play to sponsor and put on in respects to the services they provided. For example, in the Chester cycle, the drapers had the task of clothing Adam and Eve after their fall from grace in Genesis 3. The cycle dramas "became very popular and were an effective means of presenting the Bible as a living book to a large and impressionable audience in Britain" (Fowler 3). To describe the audience as "impressionable" only warrants attention to the unsubstantiated ways they might have tried to interact with scripture before these plays. The cycle dramas were performed in the vernacular while all other religious instruction and teaching were done in Latin. While the middle class was growing at this time the majority of the population remained unlettered and poor looking blankly up at the pulpit at mass while foreign words passed by. With the entire social structure dominated by the church, the peasants were left in the dark a lot of the times. That's why the surviving manuscripts of cycles like Chester, York, and Wakefield are so important in deciphering everyday life of the common man in medieval England. These plays are valuable to contemporary scholars, but they also suggest another outlet like the sumptuary laws that could be manipulated to configure repressive ideas. While the sumptuary laws were harsher for women they still applied to men making them seem more class justified. The cycle plays, on the other hand, painted women like Eve, Noah's wife, and Mary Magdalen in very dark colors, thus perpetuating antifeminist moralization of scripture. J.K. Bonnell points out by quoting M. Cohen, that even if the artists creating pictorial representations of the Bible are unlearned, the authors of the plays were:

> 'the clerks, chaplains, bishops or doctors who directed what was needful to the artisans were also those who made, organized, and put on… the mystery plays, whether in the

choir, in the nave, or in public places. Their material was drawn either directly from the Bible, or more often from Scholastic Histories… of every sort. (279)

For Bonnell the cycles are the main literary source, besides Comestor's *Historia scholastica*, where the woman-headed Edenic serpent lives on. The leading example is in the *Drapers' Play* from the Chester cycle where there is a clear direction for the woman-serpent,

'A manner of an Adder is in this place,
That wynges like a byrd she hase,
feet as an Adder, a maydens face;
her kinde I will take.' (De Creatione Mundi 28)

If Chester's *Drapers' Play* was the sole case for the woman-headed serpent in medieval drama then the argument for the dramatic performance influencing the laity would be weak. Instead, there are two other plays that vividly mention Comestor's serpent. The Cornish *Creacion of the World* has the Edenic tempter with, "' a wonderful face, | very like a maiden' where in addition, Lucifer's 'voice is all changed, just like a maiden'" (Flood 72). Another example of the woman-headed serpent in medieval literature is the Middle English allegorical narrative poem by William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, where the serpent is found as a, "'lusard with a lady visage'" (72). So if one could not afford a beautifully illuminated devotional manuscript or make time to see the great works of Michelangelo or Raphael, the woman-headed serpent was never far from home. Having said this, it may be a textual anomaly by part of Comestor but through the 400 years since the *Historia*'s publication, the woman-headed serpent became a staple figure in the minds of the majority of the medieval population no matter status, creed, or gender. The idea that one of the most psychologically impactful books of the Bible is given a strong undercurrent of antifeminist moralizations through the woman-headed serpent is unsettling, to say the least. From

the sparse text of Genesis 3, the serpent changes from a cunning creature created by God to Satan, then into Satan's tool as the form of a woman-serpent hybrid.

CHAPTER III

SHIFTING BLAME

Eve's Mirror or Fellow Woman

As mentioned before the argument for the final section of this thesis will focus primarily on the culpability assigned to Eve with regards to the appearance of the woman-headed serpent compared to Eve's in visual reproductions of Genesis 3. In his commentary on Comestor's woman-headed serpent St. Bonaventure declared:

> Thus it is true, that if he had been in human form, it would have been easier to talk [to Eve], but divine providence did not permit this, but also allowed the devil's caution to rule in due proportion; and the body of a serpent was allowed him; that had, however, the face of a virgin, as Bede said, and the rest of the body was that of a serpent, so that from one end her could be concealed, from the other discovered. (Flores 170)

In the learned commentary of the *Historia* and in the majority of the literary woman-headed Edenic serpents from the High Middle Ages to the late sixteenth-century the appearance remains that of a maiden. Nevertheless, the human imagination, as we have learned, will take a mile if given an inch when representing the woman-serpent hybrid. Some illustrations have the ability to dramatically tip the scales of just how much blame should be given to Eve for original sin. Figure 3 is an illustration from *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* from the fourteenth century that depicts the figures of the woman-headed serpent, standing prostrate on the tip of a long serpentine body with spotted wings and clothed, and the unashamed naked Eve as they converse.

Figure 3. The Serpent Tempting Eve. Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, The Illustrated Bartsch, fol. 12r, ca. 1473.*

The crowned woman-serpent was another stylistic variant stemming from the tradition that Comestor's woman-headed serpent spun forth. Instead of identifying as a married or unmarried, as with the matron or the maiden serpents previously analyzed in chapter 2, the crowned serpent is a way in which the artists, or those dictating the artists, were able to show the appeal to the first sin of pride. Flores makes a good argument on this, "the ultimate earthly headdress is, of course, a crown, and royal regalia were common attributes given to both literary and visual personifications of pride, 'the sin of exaggerated individualism'" (179). Pride was said to have been the first sin committed by Eve as the tempter lured her with promises of transforming into a god. The individualism of pride is noted in the illustration by lack of Adam and mirrored by his presence in the next folio of this collection at the moment of his temptation by Eve (see figure 4).

The crowned serpent not only demonstrates Eve's pride but "the feminization of the serpent through its hairstyle doubles the virulence of the antifeminist sentiments of the text because the illustration virtually shows *two* women sharing the responsibility for man's fall" (Flores 179). When the illustrations exploit the idea that Satan used the countenance of a virgin as a tool to instead use it as a means to a misogynistic end with the serpent representing a female character on her own with her own traits (i.e. married, virgin, royal, rich, etc.) then Eve's culpability is shared not with Adam, but with her gender.

Figure 4. The Fall of Man -- Adam and Eve Eating the Fruit. Speculum Humanae Salvationis, *The Illustrated Bartsch, fol. 15v, ca 1473.*

On the other hand, the instances where the female serpent seems to mirror the appearance of Eve should not be overlooked as harmless, but considerably less so compared to the two women present at the time of the fall. While representing the artistic tradition that Satan addressed Eve in the Garden under the disguise of a maiden it is only logical that he would have

to use the mirrored image of Eve, for she was the only woman to ever have existed. To delineate the woman-headed serpent in any other form other than Eve's would have been just as foreign to Eve as a talking snake would have been. How is Eve meant to know what another woman looks like when all she has witnessed is Adam and possibly a hazy reflection of herself? A famous version of the doppelganger Eve and serpent duo is Hieronymus Bosch's *Triptych of the Haywain* from around the start of the sixteenth century (figure 5). In keeping with artistic trends of the time Bosch painted many biblical events all occurring in the same space. In the lower right corner, the temptation of Eve is being played out by a mirror image of Eve as the woman-headed serpent. From everything from their hair to the directions of their bodies these two characters are intended to mirror one another. Another justification for the twin Eve in the serpent is that Eve is considered a virgin until her fall from grace, this would coincide with Gussenhoven's argument on women's loose hair representing virginity and with the literary sources for the woman-serpent biform as a maiden. The culpability here is reversed from figures 4 and 5 to be just Eve ass the creator of original sin, and Adam and Eve as the transgressors that brought about mankind's fall from grace. With one woman seemingly present at the time of the temptation and transgression the idea that the entire female sex is to be inherently blamed loses much authority.

Figure 5. Bosch, Hieronymus, "Triptych of the Haywain; detail of left panel with the Garden of Eden", c. 1500. Museo del Prado, ARTstor*,*

CONCLUSION

To conclude my study of the woman-headed serpent of the High Middle Ages it is prudent that I mention how forceful images were before the widespread dissemination of them through the printing press. In today's modern day world we see hundreds of thousands of images every day. Becoming desensitized to pattern recognition and the initial surprise of images is something that is learned early in life, but for those who coveted these recreations of their known world in the High Middle Ages these images had the ability to dramatically impact their lives and by extensions the society. With the publication of Peter Comestor's biblical paraphrase, Historia Scholastica, in 1173 came a flood of variants on what he commented on as Satan's tool to better persuade Eve with taking the form of a virgin. As I have explained the matron serpent, the crowned serpent, one woman in the Garden, or two the message of antifeminist moralizations remains the same. The stories etched into medieval Christian's psyches from Genesis are extremely valuable for their moral beliefs and how they made sense of the pain of their lives. To put the cunning serpent first into the mold of Satan then into that of a woman gives history the chance to write itself against women and justify it. I would like to leave this thesis by quoting from English author Daniel Defoe who stated in his *History of the Devil*, "Really, it were enough to fright the Devil himself to meet himself in the dark, dressed up in the several figures which imagination has formed for him in the minds of men" (Flores 170).

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