Pandora and Eve: Sex as the Root of All Evil

The Prometheus Myth directs itself to a remarkable variety of questions, ranging from the origin of fire and civilization to the evolution of sacrificial customs.[1] Above all, however, this myth is an attempt to probe the origins of Evil: why must we endure suffering and death? Every culture has felt compelled to grapple with this problem. It is especially striking that the Biblical explanation of Evil is so similar to that supplied by classical mythology. In dealing with the problem of Evil, the stories of Pandora and Eve refer us to a type of original sin or error. This is committed by a male, but it consists in succumbing to a temptation posed by a woman. We may well ask why both Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian accounts of creation apparently depict woman as the root of man's evils. Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug might be inclined to dismiss these myths as an indication of man's suspicion of woman, a perfect example of male chauvinism. I rather believe, however, that they signify not so much man's suspicion of woman but rather society's suspicion of sex.

The idea that there is a sexual kernel in the myths of Pandora and Eve is hardly novel or radical. Some of the more popular mythological handbooks allude to the possibility of such an interpretation. In Morford and Lenardon's *Classical Mythology*, for example, we read in reference to Pandora that "... some... see the woman and her jar as symbols of the drive and lure of procreation."[2] It is not difficult to find this type of reference to a vaguely sexual interpretation of the myth.[3] What I have failed to find, however, is a detailed, systematic, documented study of possible sexual symbolism in the Eve/Pandora theme.[4] The present essay is exploratory rather than exhaustive. My limited aim is to place in perspective the long history of this sexual interpretation and to adduce some fresh evidence for its plausibility.

[1] For an abundance of interesting comparative material on man's mythical acquisition of fire, see J. G. Frazer, *Myths of the Origin of Fire* (London 1930).

[2] M. P. O. Morford and R. J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York 1971) 43.

[3] Cf. M. Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* (New York 1962) 109: "Evil things were collected in a casket or box — familiar to psychologists as a symbol for the mother's womb — which Pandora opened .... the poet of the *Works and Days* echoes those many myths in which the primal Fall is blamed on sexual desire."

[4] For a discussion with bibliographical notes, see D. and E. Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: the changing aspects of a mythical symbol*[2] (New York 1962) 3-13. This famous study offers only a few, brief references to the psycho-sexual dimension of the myth: cf. pp. 77, 79 (note 1), 111-13. See also the bibliographical notes in M. L. West's commentary *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 307-308. In relatively recent years three provocative psychological studies of the Adam and Eve account have appeared: T. Reik's *Myth and Guilt* (New York 1957) and *The Creation of Eve* (New York 1960), and R. L. Rubenstein, *The Religious Imagination* (Indianapolis 1968). None of these works, however, devotes any attention whatever to Pandora.

It is impossible to state exactly when the sin of Adam and Eve was first recognized (or first interpreted) as a sinister representation of sexual intercourse. The beginnings of such an interpretation lie in early Judaic folklore and traditions which antedate the Christian era. Specifically, the earliest reference to Eve as an archetypal seductress appears in the Aggadah, "that part of Jewish literature which consists of legends, myth, and folklore of the rabbis of the Talmudic period."[5] As Rubenstein has observed:

> In the Bible [Eve] offends by eating the forbidden fruit. In the Aggadah her sin is explicitly sexual. Eve was infused with lust when she copulated with the serpent. She went from the serpent to promiscuous relationships with night demons during the one hundred and thirty years that Adam held aloof from her. She also bore the night demons many children. Eve was the despair of God, according to the rabbis. He tried his best, but failed to make her chaste and modest."[6]

Among ancient sources which can be dated more precisely, perhaps the earliest reference to a sexual dimension in Adam and Eve's sin is to be found in Philo of Alexandria's writings (ca. 40 A.D.). In his *Allegorical Interpretations of Genesis* (Bk. 2, chap. 18), Philo interprets the coiled serpent of the story as "a bond of sexual love and desire" (*desmos . . . erôtos kai epithumiâs*). The temptation posed by the serpent, according to Philo, is pleasure in general and sexual intercourse in particular.[7] This same view passed over into early Christian theology as well. St. Ambrose, for example, in his homily *On Paradise* (ca. 375 A.D.) lends a sensual aura to the First Sin when he describes the serpent as the symbol of "bodily delights" (*corporalis delectatio*).[8]

As additional examples (but from literary rather than theological sources), two distinguished poets of more recent centuries provide striking testimony that a sexual view of the myth is a deeply established tradition in Western

[5] Rubenstein (above, note 4) 22.

[6] Rubenstein (above, note 4) 47. (See further his notes *ad loc.*).

[7] As Philo explains in his peculiarly allegorical style: "The reason why pleasure takes the symbolic form of a serpent is as follows. The movement of pleasure like that of the serpent is tortuous and variable. To begin with it takes its gliding course in five ways, for pleasures are occasioned by sight and by hearing and by taste and by smell and by touch. Those connected with sexual intercourse, however, prove themselves the most violent of all in their intensity . . ." (Philo, *Allegorical Interpretations of Genesis*, Bk. 2, chap. 18, sect. 74). My translation is adapted from that of F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *Philo, Vol. I* (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass. 1929) 271.

[8] *Sancti Ambrosii Opera Omnia*, Vol. 1, part 1 (=J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, XIV [Paris 1882]) 329. The Church Fathers, incidentally, made a number of superficial comments on the parallels between Eve and Pandora: see D. and E. Panofsky (above, note 4) 11-13.

thought. Milton in his *Paradise Lost* (9.990ff.) gives perhaps the most famous version of the story outside of the Bible itself. His description of Eve's enticing Adam to eat the forbidden fruit is merged with an erotic seduction scene which follows immediately. The two scenes function closely together to describe man's Fall from Innocence.[9] For a similarly erotic view of the myth we may compare some striking lines in Goethe's *Faust* (Part I, scene 21). Like the poets of classical antiquity, Goethe here uses apples as a symbol of the allurement of the female breast, and relates this erotic symbolism specifically to the forbidden fruit of Paradise:

Faust (dancing with the Young Witch):
A lovely dream once came to me,
And I beheld an apple-tree,
On which two lovely apples shone;
They charmed me so, I climbed thereon.
The Lovely Witch:
Apples have been much desired by you,
Since first in Paradise they grew;
And I am much moved with joy to know
that such within my garden grow.
(Bayard Taylor's translation, slightly modified)[10]

It would be absurd, of course, to argue that the mere antiquity (or even the pervasiveness) of this interpretation establishes its validity. At the same time, however, it is proper and important to note that the sexual interpretation of the Eve myth is by no means a recent Freudian invention. On the contrary, this view of the myth is at least 2,000 years older than psychoanalysis.

Against this background the recent psychoanalytic treatments of the myth may perhaps be viewed now in a clearer perspective. Freud himself was the

[9] It has often been observed that in this scene from man's Fall Milton has borrowed extensively from Homer's famous interlude (*Iliad* 14.153ff.) in which Zeus is seduced by Hera. For a recent analysis of these parallels, see N. P. Gross, "Zeus and Adam: Pagan Rhetoric in the Garden of Eden," *CB* 52 (1975) 29-31. Cf. also Milton's explicit comparison of Pandora and Eve in his description of the first marriage (*Paradise Lost* 4.708-19):

Here, in close recess,
With flowers, garlands, and sweet-smelling herbs,
Espoused Eve decked her first nuptial bed,
And heavenly choirs the hymenaean sung,
What the day the genial Angel to our sire
Brought her in naked beauty more adorned,
More lovely than Pandora, whom the gods
Endowed with all their gifts, and O too like
In sad event, when to the unwiser son
Of Japhet brought by Hermes, she ensnar'd
Mankind with her fair looks, to be aveng'd
On him who had stole Jove's authentic fire.

[10] Cf. S. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* (=*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* IV [London 1953] 287).

first to apply his new creation psychoanalysis to the myth of Adam and Eve. In his masterful but extremely controversial *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud made an ingenious attempt to relate the Biblical account of Paradise to his theory of the Primal Horde. Freud's theory was received with almost universal skepticism by anthropologists, and I must confess that I am not convinced by his attempt to force the Biblical myth into the mould of the primal horde and the primal father.[11] It should be observed, however, that in recent years even the most controversial parts of *Totem and Taboo* have received a more sympathetic treatment from a number of thoughtful and distinguished scholars.[12] A particularly interesting and sympathetic analysis of Freud's interpretation has been offered by Richard Rubenstein, who says in part:

> There are tantalizing parallels between the Adam and Eve story and Freud's myth. In both the condition of man is guilt-ridden, incomplete, and unsatisfactory as the result of an original misdeed. In both the original sin involves a forbidden act of oral incorporation. In *Totem and Taboo* the victim is the primal father. In the Bible the Fall is brought about by the "forbidden fruit" . . . Freud saw the biblical account as a distorted "remembrance" of the primal patricide. According to Freud, the forbidden fruit was the primal father.[13]

A few years after the appearance of *Totem and Taboo*, Ludwig Levy published a brief psychoanalytic study of "Sexual Symbolism in the Biblical Story of Paradise."[14] Here he proposes among other things that the apple symbolizes the female breast, the eating of the fruit is a euphemistic expression for intercourse, and the serpent is a phallic symbol. Levy's main points are generally reasonable and convincing, but as time passed symbolic interpretations of the Fall of Man became more complex and far-fetched. Typical of these is Géza Róheim's article "The Garden of Eden," a cluttered and confused elaboration of Freud's view of the myth.[15] Róheim turns the Adam and Eve relationship into a full-blown Oedipus complex. The latent meaning of the story, he suggests, is basically that Adam is the Son who fights the victorious battle against the Primal Father (God or Jehovah). In turn, according to Róheim, Adam committed incest with his mother Eve, and

[11] For a now famous critique of Freud's theory (which well characterizes anthropologists' generally negative reaction to *Totem and Taboo*), see A. L. Kroeber, "Totem and Taboo: An Ethnologic Psychoanalysis," *American Anthropologist* 22 (1920) 48-55. Kroeber adopted a slightly less critical stance in his later article, "Totem and Taboo in Retrospect," *American Journal of Sociology* 45 (1939) 446-51.

[12] For sympathetic readings of Freud's theory, see Rubenstein (above, note 4) 43-57, and E. Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* III (London 1957) 344-57.

[13] Rubenstein (above, note 4) 44.

[14] L. Levy, "Sexualsymbolik in der biblischen Paradiesgeschichte," *Imago* 3 (1917) 16-30.

[15] G. Roheim, "The Garden of Eden," *Psychoanalytic Review* 27 (1940) 1-26, 177-199.

was then afflicted with guilt and remorse. He attempts to buttress his interpretation with numerous but chaotic references to comparative myths. Although he surveys the entire mythological spectrum from Gilgamesh to Atlas, his main thesis (for me, at least) remains quite dubious. A more recent and rather incredible theory has been offered by Francis J. Mott: the Garden of Eden represents the womb, Adam is the fetus, Eve symbolizes the placenta, the serpent is the umbilical cord, and the Fall of man (that is, the birth of man) brings his blissful pre-natal life to an end![16]

It seems quite obvious that these more recent symbolic interpretations have gotten quite out of control. In spite of their excesses, however, the psychoanalysts (like the early Hebrew and Christian commentators on *Genesis*) were basically correct, I believe, in suspecting a sexual kernel in the myth. While attempting to avoid their excesses, let us return to the basic thesis that ultimately the myths of Eve and Pandora signify not so much man's suspicion of woman, but rather society's suspicion of sex.

An emphatic principle in modern psychology is that society is very much afraid of sexuality and therefore usually attempts to regulate and repress it rather strictly.[17] The rationale for this principle is not obscure: if sex were promiscuous and completely unregulated, then society and the family as we know it would disintegrate. On the basis of this simple but fundamental principle, it seems not unreasonable to suggest the following propositions:

(1) organized human society, as part of its struggle to perpetuate itself, considers it vital to its interests to repress, regulate, and control sex;
(2) this has resulted in society's developing a deep-seated suspicion of sex;
(3) among the vehicles for the expression of society's concerns, morals, and suspicions are religion and myth.

This is not to say, of course, that religion is merely a tool which is manipulated by society. Religion and myth are obviously extremely complex subjects, and they deserve and demand to be studied from many different perspectives. From the viewpoint of the social scientist, however, one of the most prominent functions of religion which emerges is that of serving as a vehicle to convey society's deepest concerns and suspicions.

The preceding considerations, I believe, lend additional weight and

[16] F. J. Mott, *The Myth of a Chosen People* (London 1953) 41. This catalog of modern symbolic/psychological interpretations could be extended considerably; see, e.g., Reik (above, note 4), esp. 130-67, and Rubenstein (above, note 4) 43-57.

[17] Perhaps the most famous statement of this now fundamental psychological axiom is chapter four of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (=*Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. XXI [London 1961] 99-107).

plausibility to the sexual kernel of the Eve myth which has been intuited by early Judeo-Christian writers, poets such as Milton and Goethe, and modern psychoanalysts alike. Turning first to the Biblical myth of the first woman and first sin, we encounter Eve tempting Adam to eat some of her fruit. The explication of this symbolism hardly requires a Sigmund Freud. Receiving the fruit from the woman is a very thinly disguised variant of symbolism as old as Western literature itself. Receiving the fruit — like plucking fruit from a tree, or a flower from the untouched meadow, or the grape from the vine — is an ever-recurring symbol of sex in general, and loss of virginity in particular.[18] Admittedly, this interpretation does not adequately account for some very important aspects, such as the allusions in *Genesis* to the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.[19] There seems to remain, however, a very powerful suspicion of sex which depicts it in a sense as the root of evil.

The situation is quite similar in the Greek myth of Pandora.[20] Here evil is described as having arisen when the first woman opened her jar or box. The ancient versions, beginning with Hesiod, consistently refer to Pandora's jar; later, thanks to the variant which was apparently introduced by Erasmus in 1508, came the tradition of Pandora's box.[21] In teaching Pandora and other classical myths, I find that students often have some strange ideas about sexual symbolism (such as the vulgar use of the word "box" in English). Some seem to think that this sort of symbolism was invented by American college students in the 1920's, or by Sigmund Freud slightly before that. Such symbolism, however, is not a recent invention: it is simply *there*, deeply rooted in the human psyche, clearly attested in classical Greek literature.[22]

It may be objected, however, that ancient versions of the myth consistently refer to Pandora's jar or vase (*pithos* in Hesiod). In support of this sexual

[18] A wealth of material on the sexual imagery of fruits and gardens is cited by J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (New Haven 1975) 134-36. Cf. the beautiful description of the bride in a surviving fragment of Sappho's epithalamium:

> Like the sweet apple turning red on the branch top, on the/top of the topmost branch, and the gatherers did not notice it,/rather, they did notice, but could not reach up to take it. (Sappho, frg. 105a; trans. Richmond Lattimore)

Similarly, when Priapus spoke of "picking fruit" (*libros non lego, poma lego*), the sexual allusion was perfectly clear to his audience; cf. *Priapea* 68.2 and G. Vorberg, *Glossarium Eroticum* (Hanau 1965) 509.

[19] For some interesting speculation on this problem, see J. Frazer, *Folklore of the Old Testament*, I (London 1919) 45-52.

[20] For a good summary of the ancient sources, see D. and E. Panofsky (above, note 4) 3-10. Classical scholarship on the myth has been scanty and mainly directed to limited aspects such as the problematical interpretation of Hope and its remaining in the jar.

[21] See D. and E. Panofsky (above, note 4) 14-25.

[22] For "box" as a female sexual symbol, see J. Henderson (above, note 18) 108 (citing Aristophanes, *Peace* 666 and *Lysistrata* 1184).

symbolism, Henri-Paul Jacques' recent monograph on the Danaids myth has supplied a wealth of comparative evidence — psychoanalytic, anthropological and linguistic.[23] He devotes a lengthy chapter to "le symbolisme des vases," which thoroughly documents that this symbolism transcends any particular region or era and is by no means a modern (much less Freudian) invention. Jacques' chapter, however, is notably disappointing in one respect: amid all of his evidence, he does not cite even a single instance of this vase-symbolism in a classical author. The omission is puzzling since there are, in fact, a number of clear examples in classical authors where a jar or vessel functions as a female sexual symbol. The Greek words *trublion* (bowl) and *lopas* (pan or dish) assume this role in Aristophanes, as does *angos* (pail, vessel) in Hippocratic medical writings.[24]

In summary, the image of Pandora opening her jar is the exact equivalent of Eve offering Adam her fruit. It functions on at least one level as a sinister, symbolic, distorted representation of the sexual act. It is sinister because society has a deep-seated suspicion of sex; it is symbolic and distorted because society usually tries to disguise its suspicions and prejudices, and is rarely willing to treat sex frankly.[25]

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[23] H. - P. Jacques, *Mythologie et Psychanalyse: le châtiment des Danaides* (Ottawa 1969).

[24] For *trublion* and *lopas* and related sexual imagery, see Henderson (above, note 18) 143-144. For *angos*, see Hippocrates, *Epidemiai* 6.5.11 (cited by L S J s. v. *angos* III). The word *pithos* itself is apparently not attested in this specific sense.

[25] An earlier draft of this paper was presented before the Classical Association of the Middle West and South (April 12, 1974).