



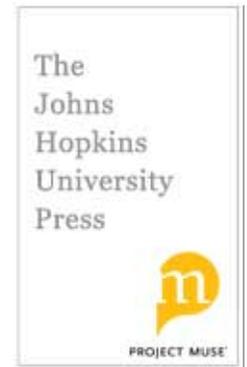
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Early Modern Women on the Fall: An Anthology ed. by Michelle
M. Dowd, Thomas Festa (review)

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(Review)

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in Shakespeare's thought without arguing for either side. The wealth and diversity of the scholarly treatment of Christianity in Shakespeare's plays is illustrated by the excellent collection of excerpts Roy Battenhouse presents in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension: An Anthology of Commentary* (1994), a collection which gives some of the best arguments presented by the scholarly community for the presence of Christianity in Shakespeare's work. Boitani's work is a thing apart from all of these scholarly studies of Shakespeare's Christianity. Instead it gives personal, sometimes idiosyncratic, readings by a consummately close reader of Shakespeare's work. Boitani picks up on phrasing and connections that readers have missed and shows their importance within the context of the work. This is not a narrow study for nit-picking scholars who expound esoteric theories, but a loving reading by an admirer and appreciator of Shakespeare's work who happens to have the expertise and breadth of knowledge of the literary tradition preceding Shakespeare's writing to give it full understanding and measure. This is a book to be treasured and savored by lovers of Shakespeare and also those readers who want to understand better what the bard is up to and the world of the mind he inhabits.

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Early Modern Women on the Fall: An Anthology. Edited by Michelle M. Dowd and Thomas Festa. Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012. ISBN 978-0-86698-458-4. Pp. 386. \$60.00

In this anthology, Michelle M. Dowd and Thomas Festa gather a varied selection of seventeenth-century women's writing inspired by the narrative of the Fall, particularly the character of Eve. As the editors note, "Imagining Eve's voice in early modern England entailed direct engagement with the most contentious issues of identity in political and social life" (1-2). The authors of these texts engage such "contentious issues," from education to breastfeeding to poetry to theology, as they explore the Fall as a basis for early modern theories about gender, society, and vocation. In publishing this anthology, Dowd and Festa hope to "dispel the simplistic myth that religion functioned only to disempower women in the pre-modern era, or that the story of Eve's fall did not have a productive as well as a counterproductive force in English society" (7). Including a wide range of writings inspired by the Fall narrative, the anthology illustrates the generative power of this tale to spark discussion, debate, and imaginative writing in the early modern period.

Early Modern Women on the Fall includes relatively well-known voices, such as Aemelia Lanyer (selections from *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*), Katherine Philips ("To

Antenor, on a Paper of Mine”), and Mary Astell (*A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*) alongside texts that have never before appeared in a modern edition, including Dorothy Calthorpe’s “A Description of the Garden of Eden” and selections from Mary Roper’s *The Sacred History*. Among the other texts are poems by Margaret Cavendish (“Poets Have Most Pleasure In This Life”), Lucy Hutchinson (selections from *Order and Disorder*), and Jane Barker (“A Farewell to Poetry, With a Long Digression on Anatomy”), and prose works by Bathsua Makin (*An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen*) and Elizabeth Clinton (*The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery*). Along with their chronologically-ordered selection of poetry and prose, Dowd and Festa include appendices containing the first three chapters of Genesis in both the Geneva and Authorized (King James) versions of the Bible, the marriage service from the 1559 *Book of Common Prayer*, biographical and textual notes, and a selected bibliography for further reading.

Dowd and Festa address this anthology to both student readers and the general public. To that end, they ground their editorial practices in accessibility, describing their edited texts as “standardized, Americanized, and lightly modernized” (15). Their notes for each work are also geared toward accessibility and comprehension; for example, their first footnote to the selections from Dorothy Leigh’s *The Mother’s Blessing* places this work in its generic context as a “mother’s legacy,” briefly explaining the genre and directing readers to further information on both genre and work (29n1). Dowd and Festa also use their notes to define unfamiliar terms and to gloss Biblical, literary, and historical mentions of such figures as Hannah (75n10), Nicostrata (151n95), or Brutus (276n57). In addition to providing this information, Dowd and Festa deliberately include as many complete texts as possible (such as those by Astell, Clinton, and Makin) rather than shorter selections, making these texts particularly useful for comprehensive discussion and inquiry (16). Through their editorial and selection practices as well as their careful notes, Dowd and Festa successfully create an anthology suitable for initial encounters with the rich world of seventeenth-century texts.

A major strength of *Early Modern Women on the Fall* springs from another of its goals: inviting comparison of the selected works with each other and with others from the period. Dowd and Festa stress in their introduction that their purpose is “emphatically *not* to re-segregate women’s writing,” expressing the hope that readers will place these texts in conversation with other works, perhaps beginning with the Fall as narrated in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (17). One advantage of the themed anthology is that, especially because of the editors’ choice of the Fall as their guiding text, such comparison practically makes itself. Readers familiar with Milton (and Genesis) will find much to compare and contrast in the ways that Lanyer, Hutchinson, Roper, Lady Anne Southwell, and Alice Sutcliffe narrate their versions of the Fall. In addition, many of the works within this anthology contain parallels; Astell and Makin make very similar arguments for women’s education, and Rachel Speght (*A Muzzle for Melastomus*), Esther Sowernam (selections from *Esther Hath*

Hanged Haman), and Joan Sharp (“A Defense of Women”) are all responding to the same misogynistic pamphlet. Along with these obvious sites of comparison, these texts invite more subtle interpretation as they present the character of Eve (Lanyer, Sowernam) or connect the Genesis narrative to contemporary issues (Barker and anatomy, Cavendish and poetry, Chudleigh on theology). All in all, Dowd and Festa have created rich opportunities for discussion and scholarship through the comparative force of these texts.

Along with inviting strong comparisons, the selections in this anthology provide a helpful mixture of more and less familiar texts. The choice of the Fall as a theme for this anthology means that some of the best-known early modern women writers (Mary Sidney Herbert, for example) are not included. However, Dowd and Festa balance more well-known authors (Lanyer, Astell) with those less likely to be familiar to the general reader. One of the most intriguing works is Calthorpe’s “Description of the Garden of Eden,” which appears in print for the first time and describes Eden as a fantastical English estate: “[A] fine wilderness parted from the rest of the garden with a wall made of massy silver, and the walks cut with such art that one could hardly find the way out again. The hedges were nothing but oranges and lemons ... and citrons and other rarities that I want names for” (134). Such a description invites rich interpretation, whether historical, literary, or scholarly. Similarly, Makin’s *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen* is a less familiar text than Mary Astell’s *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, but both, in the editors’ terms, employ “the discourse of the Fall to comment on women’s acquisition of knowledge” (137n1). In sum, this interesting mixture of texts combined with Dowd and Festa’s careful notes and well-selected supplementary material make this anthology a highly useful volume for readers interested in any of the subjects involved (women’s writing, the seventeenth century, the Fall).

The few weaknesses of this volume stem from the same goals as its strengths. Dowd and Festa’s quest for accessible texts causes them to leave out editorial discussions except for a few footnotes (such as 115n2, where they briefly discuss that a word in the MS that they render “see” is spelled “se” and might also mean “say”). They explain in their introduction that “students curious about such details” can consult the original works or modern editions (15), but without some guidance, students and general readers are unlikely to be aware that these editorial issues exist or know where to locate them in a particular text. On the other hand, this volume’s notes at times explain things that any reader could deduce; for example, that “oer” is “a contraction of ‘over’” (115n4) or that “assign’d” means “assigned” (68n11). These moments are rare, however, in comparison to the many helpful notes and valuable texts available in this volume.

One other weakness of *Early Modern Women on the Fall* is structural: Dowd and Festa place the biographical information for each author, along with textual information about both early and modern editions, in Appendix 4. In addition to separating this information physically from the primary texts, the editors do not

provide page or endnote numbers to guide readers. Dowd and Festa explain their rationale for this structure in their introduction, arguing that since early modern women's writing is often read "primarily (and sometimes exclusively) in terms of the author's biographical information, at the expense of other important contexts," physically separating text and biography is important for counteracting these tendencies (20). Dowd and Festa should certainly be applauded for attempting to prevent such circumscribed interpretation. However, they have written their biographical and explanatory notes in a way that discourages such interpretation. When they provide biographical or historical information that is more extensive than the author's family and major works, it is of the type that is immediately relevant to comprehending the work at hand: that Speght's *A Muzzle for Melastomus* is a response to Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women*; that Alice Sutcliffe was probably Catholic; that Lucy Hutchinson was Calvinist. Indeed, occasionally the biographical information Dowd and Festa provide is too streamlined, omitting Katherine Philips's designation as "Orinda" and the fact that Jane Barker's brother was named Edward and died young (despite the fact that he is mentioned in her "Farewell to Poetry"). In general, Dowd and Festa have set an interpretive example for their readers by providing only the necessary context and refraining from interpretive comments in their own notes. Through these methods they accomplish their purpose of resisting biographical interpretation, and the isolation of such notes in the appendix only decreases the likelihood that student readers, or the general public, will encounter them.

This slight structural weakness should not prevent interested readers and teachers from using *Early Modern Women on the Fall*. Most obviously, these texts may be read in conjunction with Milton and other seventeenth-century writers on the Fall; comparisons of Milton with Lanyer and Hutchinson, both of whom provide Creation and Fall narratives, already exist, but the comparisons and contrasts between Milton's Eve and Lanyer's (whose "fault was only too much love" [27]), for example, are rich. Additionally, Calthorpe's "Description of the Garden of Eden" has potential for similar comparison (perhaps particularly Adam's lament over his "cursed and unhappy dinner" [135]). More broadly, this anthology, or selections from it, could fruitfully be used in nearly any study of the varied interpretations of the Creation story in Western culture. Stemming from these writers' interpretations of the Fall are their answers to timeless and important questions of identity and vocation: how can we best develop our "intelligent souls" (Astell 302)? How do we prepare for the "sure uncertainty" of life and death (Sutcliffe 107)? Finally, this anthology can expand our knowledge of seventeenth-century writers, introducing us to the strong voices of women who are variously witty, serious, passionate, and satiric, voices that ought to be heard alongside the more well-known voices of their male counterparts. Dowd and Festa do an excellent job of making these writers available, and *Early Modern Women on the Fall* should be welcomed by readers with historical, theological, or literary interests.

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