

Defense of Women: an Interpretation of the Fall  
by Justin Killam

In Eve's Apology in *Defense of Women* Lanier uses two well known biblical stories in an attempt to defend women against the accusations against them and to show that women and men should be equal. Lanier cleverly creates the letter of Pilate's wife to him, telling him not to condemn Jesus to death, to frame her reinterpretation of one of the most widely used biblical stories to justify the poor treatment of women as secondary to men, the fall of Adam and Eve. Not only does Lanier reinterpret the fall to support her statement of equality, but she then contrasts it to the biblical story of Pilate's condemnation of Jesus to crucifixion and death, giving further support to her views as well as basing her arguments on existing scripture. It is a powerful argument for the equality of men and women.

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve and original sin was used to justify the treatment of women as inferior to men. It was argued that Eve caused the fall, it was all Eve's fault and Adam had been deceived by her. From her wickedness all women would be wicked and had to be carefully watched, controlled and guarded against, or what happened to Adam would befall all men and they would be betrayed by women. Of course the wish to keep women dominated was nothing new, but the importance of Christianity in the everyday life of people could easily be taken advantage of by using the scripture based story to justify the continued oppression of women.

Lanier's first challenge was to overcome this already widely accepted and used interpretation of the biblical story. To defend women from this justification of their treatment Lanier reinterprets the story instead of attacking it, using the story of the fall to support her own views. In the fall it is Eve that first sins and then offers the forbidden fruit to Adam who then joins her in sin. This had always been portrayed as negatively as possible, making Eve out to be an evil temptress and this portrayal is what Lanier must first contend with in her story.

Lanier alters this portrayal by first pointing out that the line of communication and knowledge flows from God to Adam and then to Eve. A point that has been used to support the superiority of man, but in this case Lanier uses it to demonstrate his failure. Lanier proposes that Eve had succumbed to temptation in her ignorance, while Adam had succumbed to temptation with a greater understanding of what would happen, what he was doing and with a greater strength to resist that temptation. It is an ironic as well as creative twist that Lanier uses man's self proclaimed superiority against him, "But surely Adam cannot be excused; / Her fault though great, yet he was most to blame. / What weakness offered, strength might have refused; / Being lord of all, the greater was his shame;" (NALBW, 37, Lines 33-36) and it is the use of this twist that works so well for Lanier's argument. She in no way rejects anything that is in the scripture, instead focusing only on questioning the common interpretation of that scripture.

In a continuing attempt to address the view of Eve being a wicked temptress who knowingly caused Adam to fall, Lanier continues to portray Eve as an innocent, sharing the forbidden fruit with Adam because of her love for him, "Giving to Adam what she held most dear, / Was simply good, and had no power to see;" (NALBW, 36, Lines 20-21). While Lanier continues to portray Eve's motivation to share as, ""whose fault was only too much love, / Which made her give this present to her dear," (NALBW, 37, Lines 57-58) her argument falls short when continuing to present Eve as an innocent. Eating of the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil would mean that she would be ignorant no longer and know just what she was sharing with Adam, she would know the difference between good and evil. Perhaps this is why Lanier focuses more on portraying

Eve's motivation as love for Adam.

Regardless of the focus on Eve's love for Adam, Lanier does make a small attempt to address the issue of the evil in Eve and once more Lanier cleverly takes what is traditionally used to support the domination of women and turn it to support her own purpose for equality. Lanier refers to the second Genesis story of creation of man and woman, "If any evil did in her remain, / Being made of him, he was the ground of all." (NALBW, 37, Lines 65-66) in which Eve is created from a rib of Adam. Traditionally it is used to portray women as secondary, created of man, a lesser creation, however Lanier uses this to downplay the possible evilness within Eve, since anything within her would have come from Adam.

Lanier finishes her reinterpretation of the fall and does a good job of it. She does not seek to contradict scripture in anyway, instead using it to her advantage as well as turning accepted interpretations back on themselves to further support her own interpretation. Eve is still the first to have committed sin, it is still Eve who leads Adam to fall with her, but the wickedness of her crime is made much less severe and shifts much of the blame to Adam to make them both equally guilty of the Fall. Her ignorance leads to her to sin, but Adam should have known better and she did not share with Adam out of evilness but instead out of love. Finally if Eve is as evil as she has been portrayed, then it is rooted in Adam since she was created from him. Already she has developed a good argument for the equality of women and men, but she continues to develop it by contrasting her interpretation of the fall with Pilate's condemnation of Jesus.

The first interesting contrast that Lanier makes between the events of the fall and the events of Christ's judgement is the line of knowledge that is involved. Within the fall, God spoke to Adam and it was Adam's responsibility to speak of God's word to Eve. Apparently he doesn't do such a good job since she falls prey to the manipulations of the serpent. However in this case it is a woman that receives word from God and then it is her responsibility to inform a man. Pilate's wife receives word from God and takes this responsibility seriously, sending word to Pilate, "Do not in innocent blood imbrue thy hands; / Bur hear the words of thy most worthy wife, / Who sends to thee, to beg her Saviour's life." (NALBW, 36, Lines 6-8) but of course Pilate ignore her. It was not in ignorance that Pilate condemns Jesus. In contrast to Eve's crime, Pilate's is far worse for he knew what he was doing.

Not just does the knowledge of what he does make his crime worse than Eve's, but the crime itself is far worse than Eve's. The condemnation of Jesus Christ, the son of God, God himself even, to the torment of crucifixion, a horrible death. Although he is pressured by others no one deceives him into doing it, he has knowledge that Jesus is innocent and yet Pilate condemns him anyway. Lanier directly contrasts the two crimes, "Her weakness did the serpent's words obey. / But you in malice God's dear son betray, / "Whom, if unjustly you condemn to die, / Her sin was small to what you do commit." (NALBW, 38, Lines 71-74) and then continues to further condemn Pilate's crime as greater than sins ever committed.

The purpose of contrasting Pilate's crime with Eve's is simply that Pilate is a man. Eve and her sin has been used to justify the condemnation of all women, Lanier does the same with Pilate, using his crime as a man to condemn all men. First she lessens the severity of Eve's crime and thus the sin of all women, then uses the severity of Pilate's, and thus all men's, crime and pulls all men down into the same severity of sin as women, even going so far as to sink men below women. The purpose and message of Lanier is summed up in,

Then let us have our liberty again,  
And challenge to yourselves no sovereignty.  
You came not in the world without our pain,  
Make that a bar against your cruelty;  
Your fault being greater, why should you disdain  
Our being your equals, free from tyranny?  
(NALBW, 38, Lines 81-86)

which interestingly enough places man's sin as far worse than woman's and yet still seeks only equality. Lanier doesn't conclude with the superiority of woman over man even though her argument would suggest such, but considering the difficulties of being accepted as simply being equal this is not surprising. Again Lanier uses something attributed to the sins of women to her advantage, asking men to remember the pain that women had to endure to bring them into the world before being causing anymore pain to women. The pain of childbirth being one of the punishments that God gave to Eve and down to all women.

Lanier is a writer in a time when writers were not supposed to be women. She writes an incredibly well created argument for the right of equality to all women with many clever uses of the very things often used to condemn women to instead support their equality. She defends women from condemnation justified by the often used crime of Eve in the fall and then goes further to condemning all men, justifying it with the far greater crime of Pontius Pilate. Of course, because of the time it was written in, Lanier's message would not have been taken too seriously accept in that her work would be attacked by men in order to defend their views and put the woman in her proper place. However, this does in no way diminish the power of her message and Lanier's *Eve's Apology in Defense of Women* would no doubt have been influential in other women, especially other women writers, adding to the gradual change in gender views and helping the cause of woman's equality.