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Woman Before and After the Fall: a comparison of Luther's and Calvin's interpretation of Genesis 1–3

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The status and role of woman in relation to man, and more specifically of wife in relation to husband, may be considered one of the last issues on which the contemporary Christian community may learn from the past. Has it not arisen as a distinctively modern question, posed almost by the very inadequacy of traditional attitudes and convictions? In historical fact the evangelical tradition has probably displayed less uniformity on this subject than is commonly supposed.¹ Be that as it may, it is worthwhile examining the contribution of significant shapers of this tradition, especially at the level of biblical exegesis. What did Luther and Calvin make of the portrayal of woman in relation to man in Genesis 1–3? For Luther, we will use his *Lectures on Genesis*, which he began in June 1535, broke off at Genesis 3:15 and then resumed in January 1536; and for Calvin, the *Commentary on Genesis*, which he commenced in 1550 and brought to publication four years later.²

Before the Fall

Luther's vision of human life before the Fall was a very rosy one. Indeed he repeatedly stresses that because of the disabling effects of the Fall we can no longer imagine how wonderful was the experience of Adam and Eve.³ Yet, from the first, the female was inferior to the male. Here is Luther's comment on Genesis 1:27:

Although Eve was a most extraordinary creature—similar to Adam as far as the image of God is concerned, that is, in justice, wisdom and happiness—she was nevertheless a woman. For as the sun is more excellent than the moon (although the moon, too, is a very excellent body), so the woman, although she was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige... This sex may not be excluded from any glory of the human creature, although it is inferior to the male sex.⁴

At this stage Luther has no textual basis for such an assertion. Indeed, it cuts across what he recognizes to be the main import of this verse, namely, 'that Eve, too, was made by God as a partaker of the divine image and of the divine similitude, likewise of the rule over

everything.' But he cannot forget that 'the woman appears to be a somewhat different being from the man, having different members and a much weaker nature.' Such comments anticipate what later verses will provoke him into saying.

What Luther means by woman's created inferiority to man is made more puzzling by his comments on the fuller story of the making of woman in Genesis 2:18ff. Here he unambiguously ascribes her subjection to man to the sin of the Fall:

Eve was not like the woman of today; her state was far better and more excellent, and she was in no respect inferior to Adam, whether you count the qualities of the body or those of the mind.⁵

Nothing that Luther says about God's use of Adam's rib touches upon this point, but the Hebrew word-play between 'woman' and 'man' in Genesis 1:23 provokes the following statement:

Whatever the husband has, this the wife has and possesses in its entirety. Their partnership involves not only their means but children, food, bed and dwelling; their purposes too are the same. The result is that the husband differs from the wife in no other respect than in sex; otherwise the woman is altogether a man. Whatever the man has in the home and is, this the woman has and is.⁶

He can even say, in commenting on Genesis 3:16, that 'if Eve had persisted in the truth, she would not only not have been subjected to the rule of her husband but she herself would also have been a partner in the rule which is now entirely the concern of males.'⁷

The pendulum swings back again, however, as Luther comes to the assault of Satan:

[Satan attacked] the weak part of the human nature, Eve the woman... Although both were created equally righteous, nevertheless Adam had some advantage over Eve. Just as in all the rest of nature the strength of the male surpasses that of the other sex, so also in the perfect nature the male somewhat excelled the female.⁸

Adam would have defeated Satan! Luther has now virtually demoted unfallen woman to the moral inferior of man. No longer can his first comment be discounted as careless inconsistency, nor can woman's inferiority be thought of solely in terms of physical weakness or secondary origin.

Calvin's exegesis of Genesis 1:27 emphasizes the conjugal bond. The verse implies that the male on his own was only half a man. Hence Malachi 2:15 describes the pair created by God as 'one man' (cf. RSV mg.).⁹ Calvin's first emphasis in treating Genesis 2:18 ff. is that 'man was formed to be a social animal'.

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In the conjunction of human beings, that sacred bond is especially conspicuous, by which the husband and wife are combined in one body and one soul.

This continues to be his main theme as he considers woman's creation as man's 'help'. Yet there are hints of something more than a harmonious society between the pair. Glancing back to chapter 1, Calvin affirms that 'the woman also, though in the second degree, was created in the image of God.' Moreover, the reciprocity involves not only woman's assignation as a help to the man but also man's 'filling the place of her head and leader'. The male's priority in creation entails the woman in being a complementary counterpart to him—the male, that is, is the datum by relationship to which the female's being is determined.¹⁰

Furthermore, when Calvin comes to Genesis 2:21–23, he almost assimilates his established interpretation of Genesis 1:27 to the later passage:

To the end that the conjunction of the human race might be the more sacred, he purposed that both males and females should spring from one and the same origin. Therefore he created human nature in the person of Adam, and thence formed Eve, that the woman should be only a portion of the whole human race. This is the import of the words of Moses which we have had before [Gen. 1:27]... In this manner Adam was taught to recognise himself in his wife, as in a mirror; and Eve in her turn, to submit herself willingly to her husband, as being taken out of him.

But the theme of submission¹¹ is secondary in Calvin's exposition to that of completeness, complementarity, mutual society and love.

Something was taken from Adam, in order that he might embrace, with greater benevolence, a part of himself... He now saw himself, who had before been only half complete [Latin, *dimidius*], rendered whole [*integrum*] in his wife.¹²

And in Genesis 2:23 Calvin represents Adam as saying:

Now at length I have obtained a suitable companion, who is part of the substance of my flesh, and in whom I behold, as it were, another self.¹³

We must note that Calvin nowhere uses Luther's language of inferiority,¹⁴ nor does he risk his reputation with hazardous speculations about Eve's greater vulnerability to Satan.

Woman's marital and sexual role

The marital and sexual role of woman, according to God's created order, has been hovering below the surface of the preceding

paragraphs. Luther again magnifies the splendour of the age of innocence:

How blessed was that state of man in which the begetting of offspring was linked with the highest respect and wisdom, indeed with the knowledge of God!¹⁵

Prior to the Fall intercourse was as natural, sacred and 'respectable' as having a meal with one's wife.¹⁶ Luther interprets the Hebrew of the end of Genesis 2:18 (*k^eneġdô*) to mean 'which should be about him', i.e., the female 'should everywhere and always be about her husband.' He believed that the animals copulated only once a year; it was not so with Adam and Eve in God's intention.¹⁷ Moreover, 'in the state of innocence women would not only have given birth without pain, but their fertility would also have been far greater.' 'Women would have given birth to a much more numerous offspring'—by which Luther means at least more frequent multiple births of twins, triplets and quadruplets.¹⁸

The children that were born would not have needed their mother's milk for so long a time. Perhaps they would have stood on their feet immediately, as we see in the case of chicks, and would have sought their food without any effort on the part of their parents.¹⁹

In sketching woman's role in life, Luther's thoughts seem preoccupied with her child-bearing function: 'The entire female body was created for the purpose of nurturing children.' Even little girls look after babies skilfully, but a man does it as clumsily as a camel trying to dance.²⁰ The 'good' yet to be realized in Genesis 2:18 was 'the increase of the human race'. Woman was brought into being to be 'a helper for Adam, for he was unable to procreate alone.' The verse provokes Luther into an attack on 'people who do not want to have children', who fail to 'marvel at procreation as the greatest work of God'. The loneliness from which Adam needed to be delivered consisted in his lack of a partner for procreation. Hence Luther can even say:

Today, after our nature has been corrupted by sin, woman is needed not only to secure increase but also for companionship and protection

—as though these latter did not belong to God's purpose in creating woman alongside man. Luther's blinkered outlook is starkly expressed in the following sentence:

When God says: 'It is not good that man should be alone', of what good could he be speaking, since Adam was righteous and had no need of a woman as we have, whose flesh is leprous through sin?²¹

It is also strange to find Luther fixing the establishment of the church—in God's preaching to Adam in Genesis 2:16–17—before Eve was created and hence before the creation of the first human society of home and household.²²

Calvin's discussion of these texts lacks Luther's keen speculative interest, and also speaks far more of marriage than of procreation. 'They shall be one flesh', for example, evokes from Calvin little more than a clarification of monogamy as the divine pattern.²³ As we have seen, Genesis 2:18 ('It is not good for man to be alone') speaks to Calvin of humanity's social calling in broader terms, it seems, than the marital union, although 'in the conjunction of human beings, that sacred bond is especially conspicuous.' The inter-personal relationship clearly looms far larger for Calvin than for Luther:

If the integrity of man had remained to this day such as it was from the beginning, that divine institution would be clearly discerned, and the sweetest harmony would reign in marriage; because the husband would look up with reverence to God; the woman in this would be a faithful assistant to him; and both, with one consent, would cultivate a holy, as well as friendly and peaceful partnership (*societatem*).²⁴

In exegeting carefully the particle in the last Hebrew word in Genesis 2:18 (*k'neḡdō*), Calvin brings out the note of correspondence and equality between man and woman. A divergent interpretation is then refuted which is almost certainly Luther's:

Hence is refuted the error of some, who think that the woman was formed only for the sake of propagation, and who restrict the word 'good', which had been lately mentioned, to the production of offspring. They do not think that a wife was personally necessary for Adam, because he was hitherto free from lust; as if she had been given to him only for the companion of his chamber, and not rather that she might be the inseparable associate of his life.

So the Hebrew particle 'is of importance, as intimating that marriage extends to all parts and usages of life.'²⁵

The effects of the Fall

How did the Fall affect the position and experience of woman, according to these Reformers' expositions of Genesis? 'We are today like a corpse of that first human being', says Luther.²⁶ He descends to harsh, even crude, language to depict the fearful blight of 'the leprosy of sin' (as he repeatedly calls it) on womankind. His opinion that woman's subjection to man 'was imposed on her after sin and because of sin' has already been cited. This fate involves the loss of partnership in man's dominion and her confinement to household

management. Here is part of Luther's comment on Genesis 3:16, where his *Lectures* follow the Vulgate in the third line: 'You will be under your husband's power' (rather than 'Your desire shall be unto your husband').²⁷

Eve has been placed under the power of her husband, she who previously was very free and, as the sharer of all the gifts of God, was in no respect inferior to her husband... Rule is now entirely the concern of males... The woman... is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home, and for this reason Paul, in Titus 2:5, calls her an *oikourgos*... The wife should stay at home, and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state.²⁸

'Companionship', 'protection' and 'management of the household' devolved upon woman only after the Fall.²⁹

But this is only part of the story. Luther cites the popular saying, 'A wife is a necessary evil' (Calvin dismisses it as 'a vulgar proverb').³⁰ This side of the Fall 'we are compelled to make use of this sex in order to avoid sin', although one is ashamed to say so. Luther harps obsessively on the wife's sexual role as an antidote to male sin. 'Those who live outside the married state burn most shamefully.' The provision of coverings for nakedness showed that 'through sin the most useful members [of the body] have become the most shameful.' Marriage today is attended by 'epileptic and apoplectic lust'. It belongs to our penal condition that husbands cannot make use of their wives 'without shame', 'without the horrible passion of lust', and 'without a pleasure so hideous and frightful' that physicians compare it to epilepsy. The act of procreation degrades mankind almost to the level of the brute beasts.³¹ Furthermore, the female lot undergoes all the perils of pregnancy and the trials of child-rearing:

From the time of conception, during birth, and during all the rest of her life, while she devotes herself to her children, she will encounter various dangers

which are punishments for original sin. 'The female sex has been greatly humbled and afflicted, and it bears a far severer and harsher punishment than the male.'³²

And yet her plight is not totally wretched. In addition to the hope of eternal blessedness, Eve enjoys many compensations in her burdensome life. She is not repudiated by God, or deprived of the blessing of procreation. She 'keeps her sex and remains a woman'. She is not 'separated from Adam to remain alone and apart from her husband', and she retains 'the glory of motherhood'. Above all, she

nourishes the confident hope that 'from her will come the seed who will crush the head of Satan.' Godly women are enabled to 'delight in God's gifts and blessings and also bury the punishments, annoyances, pains, griefs and other things'—but only the godly. Godly husbands promote this, by transferring through marriage part of these punishments upon themselves.³³ Nevertheless, although Luther never loses sight of the survival of the basic contours of God's created order, recognizable despite the depredation of sin, his instinctive emphasis in commenting on Genesis 1–3 is to sound the note of woe and distress. In dealing with the story prior to the Fall, he is quite incapable of refraining from delineating its effects. Hence many of the sentiments cited above hang pegless in contexts where Luther has outrun the text before him. Moreover, he also enunciates the principle that corruption has not stood still since that calamitous day. The world has gone on deteriorating, and the penalties have continually increased.³⁴

Both Luther and Calvin devote rather more space in their commentaries to Genesis 3 than to each of the first two chapters. Calvin's altogether more disciplined method (Luther's exposition of these chapters is twice as long as Calvin's) precludes all but a couple of references to the consequences of the primal sin during his consideration of chapters 1–2. But on Genesis 2:18 he makes two points that do not appear on the later chapter. First he speaks of the 'strifes, troubles, sorrows, dissensions and boundless sea of evils' that have in large measure overwhelmed 'the sweetest harmony' that characterized marriage before the Fall. Secondly he alludes briefly to the additional service woman's sexual role fulfils since the Fall, in that man's 'depravity' of appetite also requires a remedy.³⁵

Otherwise Calvin's sole comment on the particular impact of sin on womankind occurs on Genesis 3:16, where he again establishes a twofold penalty.³⁶ Her 'pains' comprise 'all the trouble women sustain during pregnancy... until delivery, which brings with it the bitterest anguish. It is credible that the woman would have brought forth without pain, or at least without such great suffering if she had stood in her original condition.' Notice Calvin's cautious reserve in this last sentence, nor does he extend woman's special troubles into child-rearing. Her second great penalty is subjection.

For this form of speech, 'Your desire shall be unto your husband', is of the same force as if he had said that she should not be free and at her own command, but subject to the authority of her husband and dependent upon his will; or as if he had said, 'You will desire nothing but what your husband wishes'.

Calvin then somehow manages to make 'Unto you shall be his desire' (Genesis 4:7) mean the same thing, before concluding:

Thus the woman, who had perversely exceeded her proper bounds, is forced back to her own position. She had, indeed, previously been subject to her husband, but that was a liberal and gentle subjection; now, however, she is cast into servitude.

Eve's 'liberal and gentle subjection' was obviously compatible with 'the sweetest harmony' in marriage. Now her 'servitude' will be experienced amid the clashes and tensions of a fallen partnership.

Comments

A comparison of the two Reformers' treatment of this theme in Genesis 1-3 provides a sound insight into their respective styles as biblical exegetes. Calvin's caution and sobriety contrast markedly with Luther's rumbustious vigour. It is not only the Christian feminist who will feel more at ease with Calvin than Luther (although one suspects neither will strongly appeal to her—or him); the serious Bible student will also know which of the two to prefer. Luther's exposition, to a greater extent than Calvin's, betrays the heavy-laden influence of the Augustinian tradition of interpretation, which maximized the perfection of life before the Fall (evident in Luther's speculations about hyperfertile and trouble-free child-bearing had not the Fall supervened) and hence heightened its disastrous consequences. Luther also found powerful illumination of the Genesis story in 1 Corinthians 7, especially verse 9—'better to marry than to be aflame with passion.' There can also be little doubt that we should discern, in their portrayals of woman's fortunes after the Fall, the outworking of Luther's weaker and Calvin's stronger doctrine of sanctification. *Simul justus, simul peccator* may be a better guide in soteriology than in ethics. Calvin also gives greater prominence than Luther to the social and interpersonal, rather than strictly sexual, dimensions of the relationships in which woman and wife are involved.

But Calvin's exegesis is by no means faultless. No less than Luther (and perhaps more culpably, since he recognized that the Hebrew did not support the Vulgate's version) he misinterpreted 'Your desire shall be for your husband' in Genesis 3:16. This failing leads him to exaggerate the wife's penal subjection to her husband as a consequence of the Fall. Both Reformers bequeathed an overdrawn prescription of male marital rule this side of the Fall.

Genesis, of course, cannot tell the whole story. If such and such were the damaging effects of the intrusion of sin upon the position and experience of woman and wife, how far were they undone by Christ the Redeemer? It is not sufficient to dismiss unwarranted inferences drawn from Galatians 3:28—'in Christ Jesus neither male nor female'. We must show how in Christ, through the Spirit,

woman's and wife's fallen relations with man and husband are renewed. To address this question to the Reformers would require another article (which one suspects would be somewhat briefer than this!). In this study it is enough to have exposed the gross exegetical deficiencies of the Luther whose heroic achievement was commemorated in 1983, half a millennium after his birth, and to have shown that the more scholarly Calvin is not a wholly sure-footed guide in this area of contemporary Christian concern.

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NOTES

Abbreviations:

- CO** *Joannis Calvini Opera quae extant Omnia*, 59 vols (= *Corpus Reformatorum* vols 29–87), G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss, eds (C.A. Schwetschke, Brunswick 1863–1900).
- CTS** *Calvin Translation Society*, 40 vols (Edinburgh 1843–55).
- LW** *Luther's Works*, 55 vols, J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann, eds, 'American edition' (in English translation) (Fortress Press and Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia; Concordia, St Louis 1958ff.).
- WA** *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Herman Böhlau, Weimar 1883ff.).

- 1 cf. Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (Harper & Row, New York 1976), pp.85–98, 'The Evangelical Roots of Feminism'.
- 2 Both works are referred to hereafter simply as *Genesis* and are cited by biblical chapter and verse, together with volume and page or column numbers of the standard editions and translations. Richard Stauffer, the doyen of French Calvinist scholars, is editing Calvin's unpublished sermons on Genesis; cf. 'Les sermons inédits de Calvin sur le livre de la Genèse', *Rev. de théol. et de philos.*, 3rd. ser., 15 (1965), pp.26–36. cf. his monograph cited in n.14 below, and his study, 'L'exégèse de Genèse 1/1–3 chez Luther et Calvin', in *In Principio: Interprétations des premiers versets de la Genèse* (Études Augustiniennes, Paris 1973), pp.245–66, and in Stauffer, 'Interprètes de la Bible: Études sur les Réformateurs du XVI^e Siècle', *Théologie Historique*, 57 (Beauchesne, Paris 1980), pp.59–85.
- 3 'How awful the fall into original sin was, since the entire human race knows nothing of its origin', *Genesis* 2:21 (WA 42, 96; LW 1, 128).
- 4 *Genesis* 1:27 (WA 42, 51–2; LW 1, 68–9).
- 5 *Genesis* 2:18 (WA 42, 87; LW 1, 115).
- 6 *Genesis* 2:23 (WA 42, 103; LW 1, 137).
- 7 *Genesis* 3:16 (WA 42, 151; LW 1, 203).
- 8 *Genesis* 3:1 (WA 42, 114; LW 1, 151).
- 9 *Genesis* 1:27 (CO 23, 28; CTS 1, 97, where the translation is not wholly adequate).
- 10 *Genesis* 2:18 (CO 23, 46–8; CTS 1, 128–30).
- 11 Later, on Gen. 3:16 (CO 23, 72; CTS 1, 172) he calls it 'a liberal and gentle subjection'.
- 12 *Genesis* 2:21 (CO 23, 49; CTS 1, 132–3, where again the English rendering is unsatisfactory).
- 13 *Genesis* 2:23 (CO 23, 50; CTS 1, 135).

- 14 The only exception (*Genesis* 1:26; *CO* 23, 27; *CTS* 1, 96) occurs in a discussion of 1 Cor. 11:7 where Paul, as Calvin understands it, denies woman to be the image of God. 'The solution is short; Paul there alludes only to the domestic relation. He therefore restricts the image of God to government, in which the man has superiority over the woman and certainly he means nothing more than that man is superior in the degree of honour.' The note of inferiority comes out more clearly in Calvin's sermons; cf. R. Stauffer, *Dieu, la création et la Providence dans la prédication de Calvin, Basler u. Berner Stud. z. hist. u. system. Theol.*, 33 (Peter Lang, Berne, Frankfurt and Las Vegas 1978), pp.210-11, disagreeing with A. Bieler, *L'homme et la femme dans la morale calviniste* (Labor et Fides, Geneva 1963).
- 15 *Genesis* 1:28 (*WA* 42, 53; *LW* 1, 71).
- 16 *Genesis* 2:18 (*WA* 42, 89; *LW* 1, 116-17; cf. on 3:16, *WA* 42, 151; *LW* 1, 202).
- 17 *Genesis* 2:18 (*WA* 42, 88-9; *LW* 1, 117).
- 18 *Genesis* 2:22 (*WA* 42, 100; *LW* 1, 133) and 3:19 (*WA* 42, 162; *LW* 1, 217).
- 19 *Genesis* 2:15 (*WA* 42, 78; *LW* 1, 102).
- 20 *Genesis* 3:16 (*WA* 42, 151; *LW* 1, 202).
- 21 *Genesis* 2:18 (*WA* 42, 87-9; *LW* 1, 115-18).
- 22 *Genesis* 2:16-17 (*WA* 42, 79-80; *LW* 1, 103-5).
- 23 *Genesis* 2:24 (*CO* 23, 51; *CTS* 1, 136). Calvin already condemns polygamy, which he will continue to do as occasion arises in *Genesis*. The abuse seems to bother Luther much less. Contrast their comments on Lamech's polygamy (*Gen.* 4:19), *WA* 42, 233, *LW* 1, 316-17, with *CO* 23, 99, *CTS* 1, 217.
- 24 *Genesis* 2:18 (*CO* 23, 46-7; *CTS* 1, 128, 129-30).
- 25 *Genesis* 2:18 (*CO* 23, 47-8; *CTS* 1, 131).
- 26 *Genesis* 1:31 (*WA* 42, 56; *LW* 1, 73).
- 27 His Latin follows the Vulgate rendering, *sub viri potestate eris* (*WA* 42, 138). The idiomatic German of his Old Testament (1523), *du solt dich ducken fur dennem man*, gave way to the more dignified *dein wille sol deinem Man unterworfen sein* in the complete Bible of 1545 (*WA Deutsche Bibel* 8, 44-5). Calvin (see below) interpreted 'Your desire shall be unto your husband' (*Ad virum erit appetitus tuus*) in the sense of Luther's Latin. NEB and NIV agree with RSV's 'Your desire shall be for your husband'.
- 28 *Genesis* 3:16 (*WA* 42, 151; *LW* 1, 202-3).
- 29 *Genesis* 2:18 (*WA* 42, 88; *LW* 1, 116).
- 30 Luther, *Genesis* 1:26 (*WA* 42, 51; *LW* 1, 67); Calvin, *Genesis* 2:18 (*CO* 23, 47; *CTS* 1, 129). By contrast before the Fall, says Luther, 'No other beautiful sight in the whole world appeared lovelier and more attractive to Adam than his own Eve.'
- 31 *Genesis* 2:18, 3:7, 2:22, 2:18, 1:28 (*WA* 42, 88, 89, 126, 100, 89, 53-4; *LW* 1, 116, 118, 168, 134, 118-19, 71). Just as, for Luther, marriage was almost a biological necessity for male chastity (cf. P. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* [Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1972], pp.86ff.), so he used *Esther* 1:12-2:17 to support rejection of a wife who refused matrimonial sex, and subsequent remarriage: 'If she refuses, get rid of her; take an Esther and let Vashti go'; *Estate of Marriage* (1522); *WA* 10¹¹, 290, *LW* 45, 33-4.
- 32 *Genesis* 1:28, 2:15, 3:17-19, 3:16 (*WA* 42, 54, 78, 153, 148, 149-50; *LW* 1, 71, 102, 205, 198, 200). Luther details the horrors of pregnancy at this last reference.
- 33 *Genesis* 3:16 (*WA* 42, 148, 150; *LW* 1, 199, 200-1).
- 34 *Genesis* 3:17-19 (*WA* 42, 153-5; *LW* 1, 206-7).
- 35 *Genesis* 2:18 (*CO* 23, 47; *CTS* 1, 130).
- 36 *Genesis* 3:16 (*CO* 23, 72; *CTS* 1, 171-2, where the Victorian modesty of the translator left the detailed pains of pregnancy untranslated in a footnote!).