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HOW ST. AUGUSTINE INVENTED SEX

He rescued Adam and Eve from obscurity, devised the doctrine of original sin—and the rest is sexual history.

By Stephen Greenblatt

One day in 370 C.E., a sixteen-year-old boy and his father went to the public baths together in the provincial city of Thagaste, in what is now Algeria. At some point during their visit, the father may have glimpsed that the boy had an involuntary erection, or simply remarked on his recently sprouted pubic hair. Hardly a world-historical event, but the boy was named Augustine, and he went on to shape Christian theology for both Roman Catholics and Protestants, to explore the hidden recesses of the inner life, and to bequeath to all of us the conviction that there is something fundamentally damaged about the entire human species. There has probably been no more important Western thinker in the past fifteen hundred years.

In the "Confessions," written around 397, Augustine described what happened in the bathhouse many years earlier. That day, Patricius, his father, saw in him the signs of *inquieta adulescentia,* restless young manhood, and was—in Sarah Ruden's new, strikingly colloquial translation—"over the moon" at the thought of someday soon having grandchildren. It is easy, even across a vast distance in time, to conjure up a teen-ager's exquisite embarrassment. But what fixed itself in Augustine's memory, instead, is something that happened when they got home: "In his glee he told my mother—it was the sort of tipsy glee in which this sorry world has forgotten you, its creator, and fallen in love instead with something you've created." (Augustine's "Confessions" are addressed to his God.) His mother, Monica, was a pious Christian and responded very differently. Since God had already started to build his temple in her breast, she "endured a violent spasm of reverent, tremulous trepidation." The unbaptized adolescent's sexual maturity had become the occasion—not the first and certainly not the last—for a serious rift between his parents.

Patricius did not concern himself with his son's spiritual development in the light of Jesus, nor did he regard the evidence of his son's virility with anything but delight. In response, Monica set out to drive a wedge between son and father. "She made a considerable bustle," Augustine writes, admiringly, "to ensure that you, my God, were my father, rather than him."

About one thing the father and mother agreed: their brilliant son should obtain the education his gifts deserved. The young Augustine had been sent to study in the pleasant town of Madauros and had shown remarkable facility in literary interpretation and performance. The university at Carthage seemed within reach—followed, possibly, by a lucrative career in law or public speaking. Patricius, a man of modest means, scrimped and networked for a year to collect the needed funds. When Augustine left Thagaste, he must have seen his father for the last time, for in the "Confessions" he mentions that when he was seventeen Patricius died. The mention is a conspicuously cool one.

If the grieving widow also felt some relief at his death—given that he was a dangerous influence on her beloved son—any hopes she might have had that Augustine would embark at once on the path of chastity were quickly dashed. "I came to Carthage," he writes, "to the center of a skillet where outrageous love affairs hissed all around me." His confession that he polluted "the shared channel of friendship with putrid rutting" sounds like an overheated account of masturbation or homosexuality; other, equally intense and equally cryptic phrases evoke a succession of unhappy affairs with women. The feverish promiscuity, if that is what it was, resolved fairly quickly into something quite stable. Within a year or two, Augustine had settled down with a woman with whom he lived and to whom, in his account, he was faithful for the next fourteen years.

The arrangement was probably the best that Monica could have envisaged at this stage for her son, given his restless sexual energies. What she most feared was a hasty marriage that might hinder his career. Merely living with a woman posed much less of a threat, even when the woman gave birth to a son, Adeodatus. By the standards of the time, the relationship was a respectable one. At least from Augustine's perspective—and that is the only perspective we have—there was no thought of his marrying the woman, whose name he does not even bother to provide. He expects his readers to understand the difference "between the sanctioned scope of marriage, a bond

contracted for the purpose of producing children, and a deal arising from lustful infatuation."

Priding himself on his intelligence and his literary sensitivity, he studied law; he honed his rhetorical skills; he entered dramatic competitions; he consulted astrologers; he mastered the complex, sinuous system of thought associated with the Persian cult known as Manichaeanism. Augustine carried his Manichaeanism, along with his mistress and his son, from Carthage to Thagaste, where he taught literature, and then back to Carthage, where he gave courses on public speaking, and then to Milan, where he took up an illustrious professorship of rhetoric.

In Augustine's decade-long ascent, there was one major problem, and her name was Monica. When he arrived at Thagaste for his first teaching position, Augustine's mother was loath to share a house with him, not because of his mistress and child but, rather, because of his Manichaean beliefs. Those beliefs—the conviction that there were two forces, one good and the other evil, at war in the universe—were repugnant to her, and she made a conspicuous show of weeping bitterly, as if her son had died.

Her tears were redoubled when, back at Carthage, he prepared to leave for Rome: "She was hanging onto me coercively, trying to either stop my journey or come along with me on it." Lying, he told her that he was only seeing off a friend, and persuaded her to spend the night at a shrine near the harbor. "I got away, and got away with it."

The son must have felt some guilt. And yet, in remembering this moment, he allowed himself for once to express some anger toward his mother: "Her longing, which was physical, was taking a beating from the justified whip of sorrow." The phrase Augustine uses for this longing—*carnale desiderium*—might seem more appropriate for a lover than for a mother. Monica had taken whatever was blocked or unsatisfied in her relationship with her husband and transferred it to her son. Augustine, suffocating, had to flee. And the suffering that his escape visited upon her was, he reflects, her due as a woman: "these tortures revealed the vestiges of Eve she had within her, as with groans she searched for what she had given birth to with groans."

In Genesis, the consequence of Eve's disobedience is twofold: women are condemned to bring forth children in pain and to yearn for the husbands who dominate them. As Augustine looks back at his relation to his mother, child and husband are merged in

him: she brought him with sorrow into the world and she sought him with sorrow through the world. For his grieving mother's search for her son did not end at the harbor in Carthage. A few years later, when Augustine took up his post in Milan, Monica sailed from North Africa to join him.

This time, he did not flee. Though he was not ready to be baptized a Catholic, he told his mother that he had been deeply impressed by Ambrose, the Catholic bishop of Milan. Ambrose's powerful sermons helped to undermine Augustine's contempt for the apparent crudeness of the Bible's stories. What had originally struck him as absurdities began to seem like profound mysteries. His long-held intellectual and aesthetic certainties were crumbling.

All the while, Augustine's career continued on its course. He met his students in the morning, and spent his afternoons with his close friends, discussing philosophy. His mother, now settled in his household, sought to change her son's life. She busied herself with arranging a favorable marriage, and found a suitable Catholic heiress whose parents agreed to the match. The girl was almost two years shy of marriageable age, though, and so the wedding had to wait.

In the meantime, Monica engineered another change in her son's life. The woman with whom he had been living "was torn from my side, because she was supposed to be an obstacle to my marriage," Augustine writes. "My heart, which had fused with hers, was mutilated by the wound, and I limped along trailing blood." Of his mistress's feelings, he gives us no glimpse, noting simply, "She went back to Africa, vowing to you that she would never know another man." Then she is gone from his account, leaving him with the gnawing sexual appetite that she had served to appease. He quickly took another mistress.

Yet, as he soon came to testify, God's grace works in strange ways. In little more than a year's time, Augustine had converted to the Catholic faith. Shortly thereafter, now baptized, he broke off his engagement to marry, resigned his professorship, vowed himself to perpetual chastity, and determined to return to Africa and found a monastic community. By running away from his mother, he had, without realizing it, embarked on a spiritual journey that would surpass her utmost dreams.

Characteristically, he was able to embrace Lady Continence, as he put it, only in the context of a much larger rethinking of the nature of sexuality. He needed to understand the peculiar intensity of arousal, compulsive urgency, pleasure, and pain that characterizes the human fulfillment of desire. He was not looking back on these feelings from the safe perch of a diminished libido, or deluding himself that they were abnormal. As a young man who had already fathered a child, he knew that, for the entire human species, reproduction entailed precisely the sexual intercourse that he was bent on renouncing. How could the highest Christian religious vocation reject something so obviously natural? In the course of answering this question, Augustine came to articulate a profoundly influential and still controversial vision of sexuality, one that he reached not only by plumbing his deepest experiences but also by projecting himself back into the remotest human past.

In the Roman port of Ostia, a few days before setting sail for Africa, Augustine and his mother were standing by a window that looked out onto an enclosed garden, and talking intimately. Their conversation, serene and joyful, led them to the conclusion that no bodily pleasure, no matter how great, could ever match the happiness of the saints. And then, "stretching upward with a more fiery emotion," Augustine and Monica experienced something remarkable: they felt themselves climbing higher and higher, through all the degrees of matter and through the heavenly spheres and, higher still, to the region of their own souls and up toward the eternity that lies beyond time itself. And "while we were speaking and panting for it, with a thrust that required all the heart's strength, we brushed against it slightly."

It is difficult to convey in translation the power of the account, and of what it meant for the thirty-two-year-old son and the fifty-five-year-old mother to reach this climax together. Then it was over: *suspiravimus*. "We sighed," Augustine writes, and returned to the sound of their speech.

The moment of ecstasy that Augustine and his mother shared was the most intense experience in his life—perhaps, as Rebecca West remarked, "the most intense experience ever commemorated." A few days later, Monica fell ill, and died soon after. The "Confessions" does not take the story of Augustine's life further. Instead, it turns to a philosophical meditation on memory and an interpretation of the opening of Genesis, as if that were where his whole autobiography had been heading. Why

Genesis? And why, in the years that followed, did his attention come to focus particularly on the story of Adam and Eve?

Pagans ridiculed that story as primitive and ethically incoherent. How could a god worthy of respect try to keep humans from the knowledge of good and evil? Jews and Christians of any sophistication preferred not to dwell upon it or distanced themselves by treating it as an allegory. For Philo, a Greek-speaking Jew in first-century Alexandria, the first human—the human of the first chapter of Genesis—was not a creature of flesh and blood but a Platonic idea. For Origen, a third-century Christian, Paradise was not a place but a condition of the soul.

The archaic story of the naked man and woman, the talking snake, and the magical trees was something of an embarrassment. It was Augustine who rescued it from the decorous oblivion to which it seemed to be heading. He bears principal responsibility for its prominence, including the fact that four in ten Americans today profess to believe in its literal truth. During the more than forty years that succeeded his momentous conversion—years of endless controversy and the wielding of power and feverish writing—he persuaded himself that it was no mere fable or myth. It was the key to everything.

He brought to his interpretation not only his philosophical acumen but also memories that reached back decades—to the signs of *inquieta adulescentia* that made his father babble excitedly to his wife about grandchildren. Through a sustained reflection on Adam and Eve, Augustine came to understand that what was crucial in his experience was not the budding of sexual maturity but, rather, its unquiet, involuntary character. More than fifty years later, he was still brooding on this fact. Other parts of the body are in our power, if we are healthy, to move or not to move as we wish. "But when it must come to man's great function of the procreation of children," he writes, "the members which were expressly created for this purpose will not obey the direction of the will, but lust has to be waited for to set these members in motion, as if it had legal right over them."

How weird it is, Augustine thought, that we cannot simply command this crucial part of the body. We become aroused, and the arousal is within us—it is in this sense fully ours—and yet it is not within the executive power of our will. Obviously, the model here is the male body, but he was certain that women must have some equivalent

experience, not visible but essentially identical. That is why, in the wake of their transgression, both the first woman and the first man felt shame and covered themselves.

Augustine returned again and again to the same set of questions: Whose body is this, anyway? Where does desire come from? Why am I not in command of my own penis? "Sometimes it refuses to act when the mind wills, while often it acts against its will!" Even the aged monk in his cell, Augustine acknowledges, in "Against Julian," is tormented by "disquieting memories" crowding in upon "chaste and holy intentions." Nor can the most pious married couple get anywhere "without the ardor of lust."

And this ardor, to which Augustine gives the technical name "concupiscence," was not simply a natural endowment or a divine blessing; it was a touch of evil. What a married man and woman who intend to beget a child do together is not evil, Augustine insisted; it is good. "But the action is not performed without evil." True, sexual intercourse—as Augustine knew from long experience with his mistress and others—is the greatest bodily pleasure. But the surpassing intensity of pleasure is precisely its dangerous allure, its sweet poison: "Surely any friend of wisdom and holy joys . . . would prefer, if possible, to beget children without lust."

Augustine's tortured recognition that involuntary arousal was an inescapable presence —not only in conjugal lovemaking but also in what he calls the "very movements which it causes, to our sorrow, even in sleep, and even in the bodies of chaste men"— shaped his most influential idea, one that transformed the story of Adam and Eve and weighed down the centuries that followed: *originale peccatum,* original sin.

This idea became one of the cornerstones of Christian orthodoxy—but not before decades of dispute. Chief among those who found it both absurd and repulsive was a British-born monk, Pelagius. Almost exactly Augustine's contemporary, he was in a certain sense his secret sharer: an upstart from the margins of the Roman world who by force of intellect, charisma, and ambition made his way to the great capital and had a significant impact upon the empire's spiritual life.

Pelagius and his followers were moral optimists. They believed that human beings were born innocent. Infants do not enter the world with a special endowment of virtue, but neither do they carry the innate stain of vice. True, we are all descendants of Adam and

Eve, and we live in a world rife with the consequences of their primordial act of disobedience. But that act in the distant past does not condemn us inescapably to sinfulness. How could it? What would be the mechanism of infection? Why would a benevolent God permit something so monstrous? We are at liberty to shape our own lives, whether to serve God or to serve Satan.

Augustine countered that we are all marked, in our very origins, with evil. It is not a matter of particular acts of cruelty or violence, specific forms of social pathology, or this or that person who has made a disastrous choice. It is hopelessly shallow and naïve to think, as the Pelagians do, that we begin with a blank slate or that most of us are reasonably decent or that we have it in our power to choose good. There is something deeply, essentially wrong with us. Our whole species is what Augustine called a *massa peccati,* a mass of sin.

The Pelagians said that Augustine was simply reverting to the old Manichaean belief that the flesh was the creation and the possession of a wicked force. Surely this was a betrayal of Christianity, with its faith in a Messiah who became flesh. Not so, Augustine responded. It is true that God chose to become man, but he did this "of a virgin, whose conception, not flesh but spirit, not lust but faith, preceded." Jesus' existence, in other words, did not depend upon the minutest touch of that ardor through which all other human beings are generated: "Holy virginity became pregnant, not by conjugal intercourse, but by faith—lust being utterly absent—so that that which was born from the root of the first man might derive only the origin of race, not also of guilt."

The crucial word here is "guilt," *crimen*. That we are not untouched by lust is our fault —not the result of God's will but the consequence of something that we have done. It is here, when Augustine must produce evidence of our individual and collective perfidy, that he called in witness Adam and Eve. For the original sin that stains every one of us is not only a sin that inheres in our individual origins—that is, in the sexual arousal that enabled our parents to conceive us—but also a sin that may be traced back to the couple in whom our whole race originates. And now, in order to protect God from the charge that He was responsible for the innate defects in His creation, everything depended on Augustine somehow showing that in Paradise it could all have been otherwise; that our progenitors Adam and Eve were not originally designed to

reproduce as we now reproduce but that they perversely made the wrong choice, a choice in which we all participate. To do this, Augustine would have to burrow into the enigmatic words of Genesis more deeply than anyone had done before. He would have to reconstruct the lost lives of our remote ancestors. He would have to find his way back to the Garden of Eden and watch our first parents making love.

The way forward, he became convinced, was first and foremost to take the words of Genesis as literally true. The Hebrew origin story might seem like a folktale, of the sort he had looked down on when he was a young man. But the task of the true believer was not to treat it as the naïve covering of a sophisticated philosophical mystery. The task was to take it as the unvarnished representation of historical truth—to make it real —and to persuade others to take it that way as well.

Plunging into the project with characteristic confidence, Augustine embarked on a work, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," that aimed at discussing "the scriptures according to their proper meaning of what actually happened." For some fifteen years, he labored on this work, resisting the urgings of his friends to complete it and make it public. Of all his many books, it was probably the one to which he devoted the most prolonged and sustained attention.

In the end, it defeated him, and he knew it. The problem is that not every word of Genesis can be taken literally, however much one tries, and there is no simple, reliable rule for the appropriate degree of literal-mindedness. The Bible tells us that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit "the eyes of both of them were opened." Does this mean that they had been made with eyes sealed shut "and left to wander about blind in the paradise of delights, feeling their way, and so to reach and touch all unawares the forbidden tree too, and on feeling the prohibited fruits to pick some without knowing it"? No, it cannot possibly mean this, for we have already learned that the animals were brought to Adam, who must have seen them before he named them; and we have been told that Eve saw that the fatal tree was good for eating "and pleasing to the eye." Still, Augustine reflects, just because one word or phrase is used metaphorically, "it does not mean that the whole passage is to be taken in a figurative sense."

But how do you know? How did Eve know what the serpent meant when he said, to tempt her, "Your eyes will be opened"? It is not as if the stakes were low. For Augustine,

at least, they could not have been higher: it was a matter of life or death, not only for the first parents but also for all their descendants. And yet there is no fixed rule for interpretation: "the writer of the book," Augustine writes, "allowed readers to decide for themselves."

Small wonder that Augustine took so long to write "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," and that, whenever he could put his hands on it, he clung like a drowning man to the literal sense. In the case of "Your eyes will be opened," he was certain that there must have been, after all, something that the couple actually saw for the first time after their transgression, something not merely metaphorical: "They turned their eyes on their own genitals, and lusted after them with that stirring movement they had not previously known."

The key to this understanding had been hidden all along in Augustine's own experience. The *inquieta adulescentia* that delighted the adolescent's father and horrified his mother could now be traced all the way back to the original moment when Adam and Eve felt both lust and shame. They saw for the first time what they had never seen before, and, if the sight aroused them, it also impelled them to reach for the fig leaves to cover as with a veil "that which was put into motion without the will of those who wished it." Until this moment, they had possessed—for the only time, Augustine thought, in the whole history of the human race—perfect freedom. Now, because they had spontaneously, inexplicably, and proudly chosen to live not for God but for themselves, they had lost their freedom. And they were ashamed.

But what was the alternative that they—and we—lost forever? How, specifically, were they meant to reproduce, if it was not in the way that all humans have done for as long as anyone can remember? In Paradise, Augustine argued, Adam and Eve would have had sex without involuntary arousal: "They would not have had the activity of turbulent lust in their flesh, however, but only the movement of peaceful will by which we command the other members of the body." Without feeling any passion—without sensing that strange goad—"the husband would have relaxed on his wife's bosom in tranquility of mind."

How would this have been possible, the Pelagians asked, if the bodies of Adam and Eve were substantially the same as our bodies? Just consider, Augustine replied, that even now, in our current condition, some people can do things with their bodies that

others find impossible. "Some people can even move their ears, either one at a time or both together." Others, as he personally had witnessed, could sweat whenever they chose, and there were even people who could "produce at will such musical sounds from their behind (without any stink) that they seem to be singing from that region." So why should we not imagine that Adam, in his uncorrupted state, could have quietly willed his penis to stiffen, just enough to enter Eve? It all would have been so calm that the seed could have been "dispatched into the womb, with no loss of the wife's integrity, just as the menstrual flux can now be produced from the womb of a virgin without loss of maidenhead." And for the man, too, there would have been "no impairment of his body's integrity."

This was how it was all meant to be for Adam and Eve. But, Augustine concludes, it never happened, not even once. Their sin happened first, "and they incurred the penalty of exile from paradise before they could unite in the task of propagation as a deliberate act undisturbed by passion." So what was the point of this whole exercise of trying to imagine their sex life? It was bound up with Christian polemic and Christian doctrine—with an attempt to refute the Manichaeans and the Pelagians and with a vision of Jesus as the miraculous child of a virgin who became pregnant without the experience of ardor. Along with these doctrinal purposes, Augustine's obsessive engagement with the story of Adam and Eve spoke to something in his life. What he discovered—or, more truthfully, invented—about sex in Paradise proved to him that humans were not originally meant to feel whatever it was that he experienced as an adolescent and afterward. It proved to him that he was not meant to feel the impulses that drew him to the fleshpots of Carthage. Above all, it proved to him that he, at least in the redeemed state for which he longed, was not meant to feel what he had felt again and again with his mistress: the mother of his only child; the woman he sent away at his mother's behest; the one who declared that she would never be with another man, as he would never be with another woman; the one whose separation from him felt, he wrote, like something ripped from his side.

Adam had fallen, Augustine wrote in "The City of God," not because the serpent had deceived him. He chose to sin, and, in doing so, he lost Paradise, because he could not endure being severed from his sole companion. Augustine had, as best he could within the limits of his fallen condition, undone Adam's fatal choice. With the help of his sainted mother, he had severed himself from his companion and had tried to flee from

ardor, from arousal. He had fashioned himself, to the best of his extraordinary abilities, on the model of the unfallen Adam, a model he had struggled for many years to understand and to explicate. True, he still had those involuntary dreams, those unwelcome stirrings, but what he knew about Adam and Eve in their state of innocence reassured him that someday, with Jesus' help, he would have total control over his own body. He would be free. ♦

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