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### **Æ**Emilia Lanyer's Place in the Literary Canon

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

This Honors Thesis entitled **"Aemilia Lanyer's Place in the Literary Canon"** written by **Mary Beth Barton** and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers for the literary canon.

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Third Reader

Director of the Carl Goodson Honors Program

November 15, 1996

## Introduction

Aemilia Lanyer's poetry has been hidden in obscurity since its first appearance in 1611. Despite the efforts of Renaissance--and, more aggressively, feminist--scholars to bring her Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum to the attention of the literate public, the mention of Lanyer's name still elicits frowns and scratched heads from non-specialist readers. Attempting to canonize such a little-known author almost screams literary affirmative action to conservative readers, especially when the validity of Lanyer scholarship has not been determined. Before such action, affirmative or otherwise, can be taken, we must first define modern criteria for the literary canon, and then examine Lanyer's poetry on its own merits. Only then can her position as a representative of her gender and culture be considered as a factor in canonization.

In this thesis I will attempt to introduce Lanyer's poetry to a new audience by explicating major passages of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, particularly her non-traditional Biblical allusions and interpretations. I will also present what is known about her life and her relationships with the women she solicited as patrons. I will then construct an argument in favor of Lanyer's works being canonized.

## 1) Definition of "canon"

Traditionally, the Western canon has been composed of writers whose works have survived the tests of time and social conventions, such as Homer, Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare. This idea of a fixed body of literature, spanning centuries, with which English-speaking students should be familiar, has been challenged during the last twenty years by advocates of women and other minority groups who seek to abolish the undeniable history of "dead white male" dominance in this realm. Thanks to their scholarship, a fairly large chunk of previously obscure literature has been added to anthologies and is currently being taught to (or discovered by) students.

Obviously, we now have access to a more diversified canon, to judge from the vast selection of literary anthologies, from the Norton Anthology of Women Writers to Breaking Ice, Terry McMillan's collection of contemporary African-American fiction. But a work anthologized does not a work canonized make, at least not in the collective student's mind. As our brains are bombarded throughout our education with Great Names and Equally Great Titles (Ovid--Odyssey--Othello--O Pioneers!), filtering out which ones actually merit inclusion in the canon seems insignificant compared with the immense task of simply reading them. New, politically correct Greats, such as Samson Occom or Aemilia Lanyer, tend to be forgotten quickly

no matter how enthusiastically an instructor teaches them. A culture saturated with allusions to Romeo and Juliet and Huck Finn does not allow for much embracing of, say, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton. Much as scholars would like to change it, the canon exists most concretely in readers' minds, rather than in their books. The Greats have permeated our reading psyches sufficiently to prevent drastic alteration of the literary canon, at least until literary specialists can push references to "new" discoveries into popular culture (Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum as the NBC Sunday Night Movie?) as they have with traditionally-studied works (Les Miserables).

Readers of the late twentieth century do favor political correctness, though, and as literary scholars smirk behind their copies of The Ormulum, the canon is slowly expanding to accommodate formerly unfamiliar works. We know about some texts by traditionally under-represented minorities, and we are expected to know more each year as new titles appear on the GRE. The question posed by old-school critics is whether the standards for the canon have changed from those of text quality to those of author background. No matter how cleanly a given author can be pigeonholed into representing those of like mind and background, readers will probably not be impressed with a Shakespeare contemporary unless that author sings brilliance. Critics of less-accepted texts, such as Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, must be prepared to defend tirelessly

the quality of the work itself until it is a staple in the literary diet.

I say all this because my subject, Aemilia Lanyer, has become a hot critical topic in the past four or five years, yet few undergraduates recognize the name, much less her poems. The 1993 edition of the Norton Anthology of British Literature (Vol. 1) includes "The Description of Cooke-ham" and the "Eve's Apologie" sections of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum; this is a fairly reliable indication of what will eventually be in the collective mental canon. Judging from who is publishing criticism about Lanyer, those who want her anthologized are primarily--and understandably--women. There has been little published comment from male critics. The most prolific of those, A.L. Rowse, practically ridicules the idea of serious Lanyer study with his introduction of her as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets<sup>1</sup>, and his scholarship has subsequently been scorned in recent criticism.

Twenty years after Rowse's re-discovery of it, Lanyer's work has been anthologized, but it cannot fairly be considered part of the canon, and therein lies its mystery. Of uncanonical texts, Renaissance scholar Barbara Lewalski says, "They come before us trailing no clouds of glory which we may puff up further, or deflate, with our hot critical breath. They are bare and unaccommodated, without the accretion of scholarship and criticism through the ages that so largely determines how we understand and value literary

works" ("Old" 398). Their introduction to anthologies brings new questions to the idea of canonization. Typical questions--Has Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum stood the test of time? Has it profoundly influenced its culture or ours? --cannot be answered affirmatively, but applying such criteria to a lost text seems unfair. We must familiarize ourselves sufficiently with Lanyer's work to understand whether further criticism is even necessary, since its re-introduction to readers is so recent.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the questions will be rephrased:

Does the text have literary quality? Is the subject valid? Does it deal with important issues? Is the style unique to its author? Why hasn't the work been part of the canon? When these questions have been answered, exclusive of the author's background, we may then ask: Who was Aemilia Lanyer?

I hope the following sections answer all of these questions satisfactorily.

## 2) Explication

## a. "To the Vertuous Reader"

In "To the Vertuous Reader," the prose introduction to the title poem, Lanyer reveals her underlying theme: despite her culture's attitude toward women, Christ found them worthy of notice and reverence; therefore, men should treat them with respect. She slyly insulates her work from negative criticism in the first 15-20 lines; her implication is that women who criticize another woman--or, in this case, a woman's poetry--merely "shew their owne imperfection in nothing more"; i.e., any female reader of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum who does not respond positively is actually "speake[-ing] unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe," thus destroying the bond of sisterhood that Lanyer attempts to construct with her treatise. Feminist critics tend to be revisionist in their readings of this passage, imposing on it the ideals of the modern women's movement.

Such techniques of criticism are difficult to avoid when the work in question so conveniently predates modern ideas. For example, Lanyer's thrust in much of the text calls for female bonding between her readers and herself. Austen's Isabella effectively parrots this attitude in Northanger Abbey: "Men think we can't be friends," she says. Lanyer proposes in lines 1-13 "to make known to the world, that all women deserve not to be blamed" for Eve's error and mankind's consequent fall into sin. She anticipates a united front on



which women do not quarrel among themselves over trival things. Three hundred fifty years later, Malcolm X repeated to readers of his autobiography that such unity was the only way his people could overcome white oppression. Lanyer anticipates even a recent theory of menstruation's flushing male-instigated pathogens from the womb: the men she admonishes "doe like Vipers deface the wombes wherein they were bred."

In this section, Lanyer's voice is much more forceful than in the poems; her emphasis shifts from the goodness of women to the innate evil of men, and the effect is a tone far more bitter than her usual one. She seems more intent on displacing men from their positions and less determined to elevate women. Her lack of subtlety may be by design; the first half of her book, consisting of dedicatory poems, is devoted to this elevation of women, and "To the Vertuous Reader" might be read as an explanatory passage: now that we have all these good women up here, we need to knock the men down a few pegs. It is less a buffer between the dedicatory poems and the passion poem than a rusty-toothed zipper that joins them, and her mention of Christ serves as a mere lubricant to justify her caviling at the atrocities of men. She suggests in line 31 that "God himselfe" sanctified the putting-down of men by his delegation of "wise and vertuous women, to bring down theer pride and arrogancie." Her list of such women includes the Biblical Deborah, Esther, and Jael and the apocryphal Susannah and Judith, but noticeably omits

Delilah, the Philistine woman who brought down Samson's "pride and arrogancie." In this, Lanyer's Christian focus overrules her purpose of deriding men; she also neglects Salome, whose dancing reduced her father to giving her anything she desired. Though these examples would strengthen Lanyer's case of women's power over men, she does not resort to using them. Delilah and Salome, more than any other women in the Bible, exemplify the sin women were capable of--using their femininity to overpower men. Their inclusion in the list probably would have given men a bit more leverage to point fingers at Eve and her daughters, so their omission is noteworthy. Angry as Lanyer's address reads, it does not go to all levels to show men's weakness. She does keep to the "wise and vertuous" criteria.

"To the Vertuous Reader" contains the most often quoted passage of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, the sentence about Jesus's being pleased to be born of a woman, to keep company with women, and to elevate women to respectful positions during his ministry on earth. The last several phrases do deal with Christ's relations to women, but rarely addressed are the first two epithets--"without the assistance of man, beeing free from originall and all other sinnes." The Divine Conception is referred to in every gospel, and Christians explain that the Virgin Mary was implanted with the seed of the Holy Spirit so the holiness of her womb would not be linked to the sex act. Only Matthew, the gospel on which Lanyer's passion poem is based, says much about Joseph.

"Without the assistance of man" probably refers to the conception itself, but the following lines imply that Jesus basically lived out his days without any help from men (who are sublimated to the name "the rest of the disciples"). He also lived "beeing free from originall and all other sinnes." Jesus, suggests Lanyer, did not inherit the curse of the apple, as we know, but she distinguishes "originall" here from "all other sinnes." This distinction specifies the sorts of sins Jesus was free from: not only lust, which many laymen and some theologians consider the original sin, but also other transgressions. We could read this phrase, "Not only was Jesus immune to Eve's mistake in the Garden, but neither did he fall to malice, envy, gluttony, pride, wrath, or greed." She emphasizes "originall sinne" because of Eve, to introduce the radical concept that we are about to encounter.

## b. "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum"

The doctrines of the Bible so imbued the literature of the Jacobean Age that pinpointing its specific influences would be difficult, especially when dealing with a religious work such as Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum. Despite the degree to which Biblical allusions are embedded in Lanyer's poetry, some observations can be made about their relevance and Lanyer's altering of the generally accepted scriptural interpretations. In the title poem, Lanyer presents the story of Christ's crucifixion almost exactly like the Biblical version, but she emphasizes a few points that the four gospels minimize, chiefly concerning the roles of women.

In the first few stanzas, Lanyer addresses the Countess of Cumberland, and gradually incorporates in her praise the subject of God and His power. In line 32 we see hints of His omnipresent quality as, in apostrophe, Lanyer observes that the Countess "In these his creatures dost behold his face." She seems to warm up to this approach in the next several lines, and her style is premonitory of Blake's Songs of Innocence<sup>3</sup> as she describes a loving, all-controlling God in lines 46-48:

Tis He that made thee, what thou wert, and art:

Tis He that dries all teares from Orphans eies,

And heares from heav'n the wofull widdows cries.

The beginning of "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" gives a hymnlike portrayal of God as creator and faithful father to all his

children. Lanyer's Maker is a lover of orphans and widows and, she assumes, a comfort to her readers.

Much of the rest of the poem contains direct echoes of Biblical passages. Lanyer employs several of the Bible's metaphors, sometimes using almost identical phrasing. For example, line 63 mentions Jesus as having "put on righteousness" as Isaiah's God "put on righteousness as a breastplate" (Isa. 59:17). Lanyer revives other Biblical images, such as Jesus' "glory, that was solde/ For all our sinnes"; (61-2) the concept of Christ's being sold as a slave for sinners' forgiveness is found in Mark 10:45, in which he is described as having come "to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." One of the common allusions in the first part of the poem is to the Beatitudes. Lanyer often gives a short list of the qualities Christ praised in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:3-10), as she does in line 71 ("patience, faith, long suffring, and thy love,/ He will reward with comforts from above"). She goes on in the next stanza to allude to at least six different Biblical texts:

With Majestie and Honour is He clad, (Job 40:10)  
 And deck'd with light, as with a garment faire, (Ps. 104:2)  
 He joyes the meeke, and makes the Mightie sad, (Mt. 5:5)  
 Pulls downe the Prowd, and doth the Humble reare: (Ps. 3:34)  
 Who sees this Bridegroome, never can be sad; (Mt. 25)  
 None lives that can his wondrous workes declare:

Yea, looke how farre the Est is from the West, (Ps. 103:12)

So farre he sets our sinnes that have transgrest. 80

The fatherly God becomes, in the next several lines, a powerful being revered by all creatures. She speaks of his "angry presence" (line 84) and points out that "He searcheth out the secrets of all mindes" (line 85), much like the God of 2 Chronicles 16:9 whose "eyes...range throughout the earth to strengthen those who are committed to him." Lines 105-110 predict the wrath of God toward "them that double-hearted bee,/Who with their tongues the righteous Soules doe slay." Whether Lanyer means by this the Biblical Pharisees or judgmental Jacobean men is unclear. God becomes a jealous, vengeful, Old Testament Jehovah in this and the next stanza, then reverts to the forgiving deity who "raiseth up the Poore out of the dust" (line 124).

Katherine Duncan-Jones points out that lines 129-136 almost exactly parallel Psalm 15 (23) in both the idea and the phrasing. Lanyer's repeated allusions to the Psalms are likely because of her readers. The Countess of Pembroke published her own versions of several of the Psalms, so she would have probably appreciated Lanyer's, and the Countess of Cumberland was pictured clutching a copy of the Psalms in her family portrait (Duncan-Jones 23).

Lanyer delves back into the subject of God's judgement of the wicked in 137-144; she tries in the last line to offer a cutting remark to those "that thinkes the Lord is blind

when he doth winke," but her image is almost comical to the modern reader. We do not typically think of God as a winker, but the suggestion does give Him a quirrier personality than that of the alternately gentle and harsh Lord described thus far. Lanyer may be referring to the infinite forgiveness God has for those Biblical characters who seem to be the "favorites." The Old Testament reader who wonders why the adulterer and murderer David (2 Samuel 11) was considered a man after God's own heart may attribute the forgiveness to an extra-long wink.

In line 145 Lanyer apologizes to the Countess for the digression from what began as a eulogy to her. However, she would not have unintentionally wandered from her subject, the Countess. We know she must have had some reason; she gives us a glimpse of the Lord she serves, varied as her descriptions are. Her point, as the "Eve's Apologie" section will demonstrate, was to empower women as worthy of respect because Christ respected them. So the purpose of her digression might have been to show the great qualities of God, to prove that the attainment of His respect was something to be valued. In "Re-Writing Patriarchy and Patronage," Barbara Lewalski notes that Lanyer "proposes Christ as the standard that validates the various kinds of female goodness her poems treat" (102). For this reason, a proper introduction of Christ would be necessary for Lanyer to prove her point.

The "Invective against outward beutie unaccompanied with virtue" section (lines 185-248) decries the value of physical

beauty alone, which may or may not have a Biblical source (see 1 Peter 3:3-6, Proverbs 11:22, Mt. 23:25-26). Lanyer dismisses "that outward Beautie which the world commends" (185) and extols "those faire Virtues which.../Are always fresh.../They make thy Beautie fairer to behold" (lines 189-191). She mentions "those matchlesse colours Red and White" in line 193, which take double meaning in the Jacobean and Biblical contexts. According to Carroll Camden, red and white were colors closely associated with beauty in the Elizabethan Age. The period was "one of violent contrasts, and it was no exaggeration to say that the fairest women are 'as white as snow and as red as blood'" (21). These women, notes Camden, were so intent on attaining this fairness that they used harmful cosmetics like ceruse (white lead) to achieve whiteness, then added red lips and cheeks. The snow/blood comparison goes back to the Christian simile of Christ's blood cleansing us "white as snow" from our sins.

Lanyer attacks men in this passage for trying to "overthrow the chastest Dame,/ Whose Beautie is the White whereat they aime" (lines 207-8). This phrase is especially clever, and its meaning has not been definitively discerned by modern critics. Susanne Wood considers the "white" the breast of the deer (Lanyer 60), while Duncan-Jones thinks it the bull's-eye of a target. The "aime" may also be interpreted as a French pun on the word for "love." The whole passage, as the tragedies of literary and mythological fallen beauties are listed, has the ring of the "ugly



feminist" stereotype. As it progresses, the influence of Jesus' teaching becomes doubtful; the tone is filled with bitter invective rather than love-thy-neighborly gentleness.

Lanyer returns abruptly to addressing the Countess of Cumberland in line 249, and repeats earlier words like "pretious" and "glorious" to describe the relationship with Christ. She also introduces the concept of Christ as the Christian's bridegroom, one she takes from the Pauline letters and from Jesus' parable of the ten virgins and refers to through the rest of her poem. Lanyer calls Clifford her "Co-heire of that eternal bliss" (line 258), both establishing her as fellow Christian and eliminating the gap between patron and poet. As Co-heires they are "by Adams fall/ Mere Cast-awaies, raised by a Judas kisse" (259-260) which is, incidentally, a beautiful phrase. That Lanyer defines their position in terms of men's actions shows the quandary she is in as a woman trying to avoid dependency on men.

The actual passion story begins at line 329, and is introduced by a marginal note. Lanyer describes Christ's night at the Mount of Olives as one man's agony before his anticipated death. We see Christ as a suffering man, not as a generous deity. She focuses on the disciple Peter for several stanzas, as one who "thought his Faith could never fall," (341) and mocks him for thinking "No mote could happen in so cleare a sight" (342), alluding to Matthew 7:3-5. She also provides a narrative of Peter's denial of

Christ. Her reason for centering on Peter is not clear; Jesus called him the "Rock" on which his church would be built, so Lanyer may have decided to make him a key player in her poem as well.

Lanyer sometimes sacrifices precision for the sake of meter and rhyme, as in line 369 when she calls James and John "sons of Zebed'us" to rhyme with "discusse," rather than specifically naming them. Other than that, her style is easy to follow, and fairly consistent. She presents a matter-of-fact story about Gethsemane without elaborating or glamorizing too much.

She begins an apostrophe to Christ in line 377; the tone is not that of a prayer, but a monologue. Lanyer may have been demonstrating the closeness she felt to Christ by using the second person. She becomes more defensive of Jesus and antagonistic toward the disciples who accompanied him to the Mount of Olives. Line 388 accuses them, as they sleep while Jesus prays, of guilt for His death: it refers to them as those "whose sinnes did stop thy breath." The tone remains disdainful of the men, who "could not watch one houre for love of thee" (418). Lanyer adds in line 425, "They slept in Ease, whilst thou in Paine didst pray;/ Loe, they in Sleepe, and thou in Sorow drown'd." The Gospels, of course, do not harp on this matter quite so much, as the sleepers were the authors' contemporaries. Lanyer's harsh attitude toward the disciples contrasts sharply with the worshipful love she demonstrates for Jesus. He is portrayed as a

desperate creature, who as he prays "no hope, no ease, no rest could'st finde" (435). Lanyer twice mentions an "angel" (lines 411 and 431) appearing to Jesus; its Biblical parallel is found only in Luke 22:43.

As the moment of death draws near, the speaker asks of Christ, "What could thy Innocency now expect,/ When all the Sinnes that ever were committed,/ Were laid to thee, whom no man could detect?" (lines 449-451) The image is of the "Sinne" as a package hidden on his person, as if he were above suspicion of sin and made the sacrifice because someone else--an accomplice, perhaps, or the true criminal, the sinner--defected. A few lines later, Lanyer introduces the idea of impending death for Jesus, as Death ominously "presents himselfe" (458).

The moment of Christ's return to the sleeping disciples is for Lanyer the apex of Christ's paradoxical role as a divine human, as "King of Heaven, and Monarch of the Earth" (474). Her Christ's hour in Gethsemane reduces him to extreme "Humilitie"; she points out his humble birth conditions ("so meane a berth") and the consequent rise in status he achieved through "Grace, Love, and Mercy." Lanyer indirectly alludes to her earlier emphasis on virtue. Christ's noble qualities were not diminished, she affirms, by humble circumstances. Throughout the poem the implication is that the negative inverse of that statement also holds true: virtuous women, because of their goodness, can rise above their status as female (and Lanyer above hers as

court reject).

The next stanza describes the approach of Judas Iscariot, who betrays Jesus "in the hands of Sinners" (488). Lanyer's word choice suggests a contrast not only between Jesus and his persecutors, since he is sinless, but also between the Sinners and the three sleeping in the garden. Her "Sinners" evolve in the next stanza to "Fooles" (495), "Monsters" (497), and an "accursed crew" (513) who "[seek] by force to have their wicked Wils" (491). In Lanyer's account, evil pervades those who conspire against Jesus. She allows them no lenience in their wrongdoing. Her judgment of them as implied in lines 489-504 accuses them of incredible ignorance--they don't even recognize God when he is before them in human form; as she says, "When Heavenly Wisdome did descend so lowe/ To speake to them," they still do not realize what they were doing by crucifying him.

The rhythm of lines 505-512 is especially clear and aesthetically pleasing; the meter is clean with crisp masculine endings, the parallel descriptions ("How blinde.../ How dull!.../ How weake!") serve to emphasize both the beauty of the word and the passion of Lanyer's feelings. By contrast, her description of Jesus' voice to their demands slides into a lethargic tone, with a forced meter and uneven accents: we are expected to read "Onely desires the rest might goe their way" (520) as Christ's kingly wishes in iambic pentameter. Interestingly, Lanyer does not mention Satan as a possible factor in the devisings of the

persecutors. She attributes the evil deeds solely to the "Vice" (526) and "Sinne" (527) of the men:

And Virtue now must be suppressed by Vice,  
 Pure Innocencie made a prey to Sinne, 527  
 Thus did his Torments and our Joyes beginne.

Lanyer does not specify who the plural first person includes. We may assume, from her intended readership, that she means herself and the women, but it may also indicate all Christians. In lines 641-648 Lanyer lists epithets of Jesus much like those found in Isaiah 9:6 (Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace); Lanyer's, though, are based more on actions and derived from hindsight rather than prophecy.

Jesus' trial before Pilate puts Eve and all other women on the witness stand. The rationalization is that Pilate, a human, allows Jesus to die; in effect, he kills God. "Doe not in innocent blood imbrue thy hands," she implores in line 750, alluding to the famous washing of Pilate's hands after he turns Jesus over to the crowd.<sup>4</sup> Lanyer reads into the short Biblical description of Pilate's role in the crucifixion his own motives; the threat of the rioting crowd does not excuse him from blame. Here the fate of Jesus rests solely with Pilate; he, a man, bears responsibility for Christ's death. As Ann Coiro says, "In Lanyer's poem, it is not Jews who kill Christ, but men; at the same time, any real possibility of

freedom and dignity for women begins at Christ's coming" (365). Though Lanyer does not make the connection, one might use her logic to make Pilate responsible for Christ's redemption of sinners, since he allowed Him to die. This logic introduces us to that of "Eve's Apologie," the passage from lines 761-936 that most clearly demonstrates Lanyer's female viewpoint. She argues that Pilate's act is a worse sin than Eve's sharing the forbidden apple with Adam, so the burden of sin should rest no longer on women's shoulders, but on men's.

The first lines of the section, "Till now your indiscretion sets us free,/ And makes our former fault much less appeare" (761-762) immediately establish the offensive stance. Rather than a true apology for Eve's earlier misdeed, as the title implies, the passage focuses on the thoughts of Pilate as he decides what to do with Jesus. It is unclear whether the speaker is Lanyer herself or Pilate's wife; the opinions are definitely Lanyer's, but she never specifies who is speaking.

The argument is that Pilate's sin of not saving Jesus' life is worse than Eve's of eating the forbidden apple. Lanyer suggests that Eve's "fault was only too much love" (801) and that by offering the forbidden apple she was only "Giving to Adam what shee held most deare" (764). These ideas seem to fly in the face of feminists, some of whom might be offended by the defense that Eve's naivete and adoring love of Adam caused her to make a stupid error.

Lanyer's Eve is not elevated to a respectful position by comparison with Pilate; rather, she is dismissed as a stupid broad who didn't know any better than to take a serpent's word over God's. The use of passive voice ("she...by cunning was deceived") in line 773 implies something happened to Eve; she did not actively do wrong. Lanyer showers pity on Eve ("poor soule," line 773) and on her sex ("poore women," line 794) and shifts the blame for the apple incident to Adam, who "was most too blame" (line 778). Adam's fault in taking the apple, Lanyer proposes, was even greater than Eve's in offering it: she was deceived by the serpent, but Adam was tempted simply by the "fruit being faire" (798).

The irony, Lanyer says in lines 807-808, is that Eve is blamed for the fall into sin:

Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he tooke  
From Eves faire hand, as from a learned Booke.

As Lynette McGrath explains, "they [men] now boast of the knowledge they acquired through Eve, berating her for her role in this acquisition, while at the same time denying Eve's daughters access to her hard-won knowledge" (335).

Lanyer exploits Pilate's weakness, his submission to the crowd's demands, to accuse him of forsaking God and his wife (i.e., women) to keep the peace. Of this,

All mortall sinnes that doe for vengeance crie,  
Are not to be compared unto it. 820

Because Pilate is now responsible for the fall of humankind, rather than Eve, Lanyer demands, in an across-the-centuries

apostrophe, for him to

. . . let us have our Libertie againe, 825  
 And challenge to your selves no Sov'raigntie,  
 You came not in the world without our paine,  
 Make that a barre against your crueltie;  
 Your fault being greater, why should you disdain  
 Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny? 830

If one weake woman simply did offend,

This sinne of yours, hath no excuse, nor end.

This stanza is a blatant address not only to Pilate but also to Jacobean men; Lanyer wants compensation for the killing of Jesus in the form of "Libertie" for women. Lanyer makes Pilate's wife a representative who "speakes for all" (834) women when she requests her husband to "have nothing to do with that just man" (Mt. 27:14).

Lanyer knew that our perception of Eve affects, ultimately, our perception of the female sex. As Deirdre McCrystal points out in "Redeeming Eve," the Genesis story has really shaped our ideas about gender difference (490). If men can accept Eve's wrongdoing, and take the responsibility for Pilate's, they will have to respect Lanyer and her "Co-heires."

Lanyer lifts the dream motif from the Bible and uses it, to some extent, in her rendering of the Passion. Because of a dream earlier in the day, Pilate's wife, in lines 834-837, bids him not to interfere with the trial of Jesus:



Witness thy wife (O **Pilate**) speakes for all;  
 Who did but dreame, and yet a message sent,      835  
 That thou should'st have nothing to doe at all  
 With that just man . . .

In Lanyer's narrative, Pilate's wife speaks for all women. Line 833 points out that "we [women] never gave consent" for the crucifixion of Jesus to occur; in fact, by Lanyer's logic, women (as represented by Pilate's wife) actively protested it. Surprisingly, Lanyer does not comment on the source or significance of the dream. Though she does extend the reconstructed speech of Pilate's wife considerably beyond what St. Matthew records, she does not provide the rest of the actual message: "for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him" (Mt. 27:19). The omission of the explanation, if intentional, may be to avoid the reader's negative perception of either the subject, Jesus, or of the speaker: as described in earlier passages, Jesus should not cause anyone to suffer, in somniō or otherwise. To add to the illusion of the wife as a perfect woman for Lanyer's defense, Pilate's wife, in the poem, considers herself one of Christ's followers ("who sends to thee, to beg **her Savior's** life," line 752). Again, Lanyer sacrifices the truth of her argument to present the image she wants.

That Pilate's wife derived her warning from a dream suggests, for Lanyer, that such a source is respectable. She attributes the inspiration for the title of her work to a dream during a

sleepe many years before I had any intent to write in this maner, and was quite out of my memory, untill I had written the Passion of Christ, when immediately it came into my remembrance, what I had dreamed long before; and thinking it a significant token, that I was appointed to performe this Worke, I gave the very same words I received in sleepe as the fittest Title I could devise for this Booke (139).

Having already introduced the dream medium for Pilate's wife, Lanyer may have felt more comfortable supplying it as backup for her own reasoning. Within the context, "To the doubtfull Reader" seems out of place; all the other poems are addressed to women, be they specific patrons or simply "Vertuous" readers (who would, because of their virtue, have to be women). The last page seems tacked on for the sake of men who may happen to pick up the volume, or for the especially pious reader who suspects Lanyer's motive and authority. But the poetic flow of the prose and the story-like form of the explanation establish that this piece is as carefully penned as the rest of the book.

Both Pilate's wife and Lanyer use their dream messages to deflect blame from themselves. Pilate's wife tries to avoid the trouble she foresaw, and she has the added duty of protecting her husband from what Lanyer perceives as the worst sin of mankind, that of crucifying Jesus. Biblically, she wants only to evade the suffering that her dream prophesied, but in Lanyer's version, she represents all of

womankind in her plea to Pilate not to "seeke the death of him that is so good" (line 839). Likewise, Lanyer's religious interpretations may seem arrogant to the unsympathetic reader; with the explanation of her dream she can both give plausible meaning to her purpose and claim divine sanction for her work, with the implication that her conscious mind would not have devised so grand a name for it unless it were "appointed" to her.

The dreamers also apply their dreams handily to their respective situations. Pilate's wife takes her vision of suffering seriously, and considers it a strong enough warning that she sends her husband the message at a fateful hour. She does not, as far as we can deduce from the text or from the story in Matthew, hesitate or feel embarrassment in trusting its verity. Lanyer interprets her dream of a title more liberally, and claims not to have been influenced by it until after writing her poem. But she, too, assumes that it is meant for a specific purpose and believes in her own ability to understand that purpose, conveniently assigning it to her magnum opus.

## c) Cooke-ham

Many critics have suggested that "The Description of Cooke-ham" be compared to Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst." Both poems are of the "country-house poem" genre, and each takes a point of view and employs a style different enough from the other to assure an interesting contrast. However, such a comparison is unnecessary for a comprehensive reading of Lanyer's poem. To the reader who knows the historical background of the characters and setting of Cooke-ham, "The Description" stands quite steadily on its own.

Lanyer's poem was the first poem to be published in the "country-house poem" genre. In such poems, the setting is vital to the theme; the house and surrounding gardens, fields, and forests take on human emotions, like love, melancholy, and joy. The pathetic fallacy is committed with a vengeance. Lanyer either invented this form of eulogies addressed to or in honor of a rural estate, or, as Barbara Lewalski suggests ("Re-writing" 104), she saw a manuscript of "To Penshurst" before its publication. Jonson is normally credited with the invention of the genre, though Lanyer's poem was published before his. Because of this historical uncertainty, Lynette McGrath includes Lanyer among the women "whose literary originality and inventiveness have been obscured to the benefit of a better known male writer" (332).

The poem was written for the benefit of the Countess of Cumberland, who had commissioned Lanyer's other work. It is

a lamentation concerning the earthly laws that forced the Countess, her daughter Anne, and Lanyer herself from Cooke-ham. After the Countess's husband died, she fought for her right to continue living at his estate. Lack of money (the "Unconstant Fortune" of line 103) and her sex kept her from her goal, and now, in the poem, she must return to her own land, while her daughter marries into another family. Lanyer, who undoubtedly exaggerates the closeness of her relationship to the dwellers of Cooke-ham, is especially sad that she can no longer associate with her friends because of the class divisions imposed on them.

Lanyer begins with a farewell to the place itself. She gives an obligatory nod to her patron, the Countess, in line 5, then goes on with her description. Lanyer does not invoke the Muses outright, but she assures us in line 3 that she has "their full consent." Line 8 tells us that "all delights did harbour in (Cooke-ham's) breast," emphasizing the splendidness of the place. Later in the poem, the estate becomes representative of the glory of God (lines 76-92); Lanyer obviously highly esteems the residence.

The second section addresses the Countess, and reminds her that the beauty of Cooke-ham is due to her presence. Lanyer tries to console her on the loss of her home in lines 14-17:

Vouchsafe to thinke upon those pleasures past,  
As fleeting worldly Joyes that could not last,

Or, as dimme shadows of celestiaall pleasures,  
Which are desir'd above all earthly treasures.

These words imply that only the thought of heaven will encourage the Countess to put things into perspective. Lanyer reflects how the house decorated itself with ornaments and how the gardens and trees bloomed beautifully to prepare for the Countess's last visit. Every part of the estate that could change for the better, did. The blatant personification of these things does not escape the reader's attention, but the imagery is vivid enough to keep the device from seeming too forced. Line 26 describes a particularly unusual scene: the trees shade the sun **from** her eyes; the sun needs protection from the brightness of the Countess. Lanyer also uses Philomela, who thinks Cooke-ham's loss of the Countess is comparable to her loss of voice and virtue, to emphasize the importance of the lady to her estate.

The tree that comes into play late in the poem is first introduced in line 53. It "did in height his fellowes passe," so we know it appears imposing, but it succumbs to whatever its mistress desires, "joying his happinesse when (she was) there" (line 66). Elaine Beilin compares this passage to Psalm 92 because of the mention of both a cedar and a palm tree in lines 57-61 (204). The Psalm uses the tree image to describe how "the righteous will flourish... they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon" (v. 12). The tree, then, embraces

the Countess as a fellow righteous soul. Psalm 92 goes on to extol God as the righteous would, as we presume the Countess does. The image of the tree as representative of the righteous is found frequently in the Old Testament (Psalm 72:7, 1:3, 52:8; Jeremiah 17:8, Hosea 14:6); Lanyer's readers would have been familiar with some, if not all, of those images.

Lines 75-92 introduce the Countess's Wordsworthian approach to God. She worshipped in the woods, and managed to imitate the great men of the Bible while taking her outdoor stroll ("In these sweet woods how often did you walke,/ With Christ and his Apostles there to talke"). Lanyer feels that the Countess could as easily be a woman of God among the trees as in a church.

Lanyer introduces Anne in line 93. As definitively female as the poem has been heretofore, what with the flowers and a divine woman walking around in a male-less bliss, it takes a turn here for the patriarchal. Anne is defined first by her father's blood, then by her recent marriage, before her own character is described. Lanyer "grieves" (99) at her separation from Anne, whose vague inner qualities match her outer beauty. Because Lanyer was twenty years older than Anne, it is doubtful she was as close a playmate as she implies in lines 119-122.

In line 103, Lanyer blames the worldly overemphasis on money for the breakup of the paradise at Cooke-ham. If not for these nasty politics, she says in line 110, she would be able to remain with her "great friends" and would not have

to be ashamed of her low place in society. She redeems herself and her lack of money in lines 111-112 with thoughts of the Christian escape to heaven, as she earlier implored the Countess to do. All the women must leave, but as Ann Coiro points out, the difference between Lanyer and the Cliffords is that "there are other estates for them. But for Lanyer the exclusion from paradise seems final" (364).

In an apostrophe to Cooke-ham itself (line 127), Lanyer says she must divulge its secret sadness at the women's departure. The summer changes to autumn because, we learn, the estate has lost all its joy (and so the trees their leaves) with the farewell of the women. The elements of nature realize that their feelings alone cannot make the Countess and her company stay, and their tears fall all around them, as if to say, "Why will ye leave us all?" (line 140).

The Countess's "occasions" require her to leave Cooke-ham in line 147. Lanyer details the good-bye she takes of each part of the place: the creatures, the flowers, and, saddest of all, her beloved tree. The tree, as symbol of the strength of her faith in God, holds a lot of meaning for the Countess, and, as she takes leave of Cooke-ham, she gives the tree a "chaste, but loving kiss" (line 165).

In line 165, Lanyer, having felt self-pity through this whole sequence of events, takes the kiss back from the tree, "scorning a sencelesse creature should possesse,/ So rare a



favour, so great happinesse" (lines 167-168). She will not kiss it again because she might accidentally release some of the Countess's (stolen) kiss back to it. This reasoning becomes more rational when we remember that the tree represents something beyond itself. Lanyer resents abandoning the joy she has known in this Cooke-ham Eden and feeling that the Countess regrets leaving the tree more than Lanyer herself. In Lisa Schnell's explanation of this act, Lanyer has to kiss the tree to get any sort of acknowledgement from Clifford (33). We may, then, read Lanyer's choice of Christian themes as a way to acquire a piece of the righteousness represented by the tree; if the Countess appreciates virtue, Lanyer must embrace virtue to earn her approval.

In the final stage of the Countess's good-bye, the desolate fall becomes a more desolate winter. No beauty is left behind as the country house is abandoned. Instead of the previous "ornaments," cobwebs cover the house, and even the "Delightfull Eccho" has left the grounds. Geoffrey Hiller parallels the emptiness of the estate and the sadness of the creatures with the rejection Lanyer herself feels at the departure (45).

The last few lines constitute a final farewell to Cooke-ham. Lanyer repeats the sentiments she expressed earlier in the poem and adds that her name will always be tied to Cooke-ham's because she has tried to express its charms in a poem that will endure after they both are no

more. Schnell calls it "an elegy for Lanyer herself" (32) because her sense of loss at being turned out of Cooke-ham is at least as great as Cooke-ham's in losing the women. The writing of the poem is the only means she has of connecting with the happiness of her past there.

## 4) Dedications

Contrary to the title page's implication, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum does not deal chiefly with 1) The Passion of Christ, 2) Eves Apologie in defence of Women, 3) The Teares of the Daughters of Jerusalem, or 4) The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Mary. Rather than serve as a table of contents, these titles provide a glimpse into the main body of the title poem. By highlighting such innocuous portions of the text, Lanyer may have deflected uninformed criticism from those who felt women should write only on religious topics. The strictly religious parts of the book comprise only about a sixth of its total volume. The rest consists of dedicatory poems, a textual introduction, and a postscript explaining Lanyer's motivation and authority.

The book opens with eleven dedicatory poems, addressed solely to women. Various remaining copies of the book contain different patronage poems; the one most frequently omitted (or removed) is that to the Lady Arabella. She was perceived as a threat to King James' power at the time of publishing; thus her poem was eliminated from some of the presentation copies.

"To the Queenes most Excellent Majestie" addresses Anne of Denmark, wife of James I and a woman known to patronize other writers and musicians. By choosing the Queen as her first subject, Lanyer exhibits both logic and boldness: she is wise to invoke the Queen's grace, but risks what standing she may have with the radical subject matter and with the

inclusion of Arabella in the list of dedicatees. According to Retha Warnke, King James displayed "hostility toward learned women" (194), so Lanyer probably had very little chance of obtaining patronage from the queen.

The lyrics begin with expected flattery of Anne; Lanyer first asks her to

Vouchsafe to view that which is seldome seene,  
 A woman's writing of divinest things:  
 Read it faire Queene, though it defective be, 5  
 Your Excellence can grace both It and Mee.

In this first stanza, Lanyer establishes both the tone (pleading) and rhythm (iambic pentameter) that she will maintain throughout Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum. As the book progresses, Lanyer mixes Biblical and classic mythological allusions, as she does in her flattery of Anne:

For you have rifled Nature of her store,  
 And all the Goddesses have disposed  
 Of those rich gifts which they enjoyed before,  
 But now great Queene, in you they all doe rest. 10  
 If now they strived for the golden Ball,  
 Paris would give it you before them all.

Lanyer goes on to specify which particular gifts have been stolen from each goddess and bestowed on the Queen. Her choice of images seems odd in its context: a Biblically based theme which seeks to convert its readers to Lanyer's interpretation of the Crucifixion would seem to necessitate excluding mention of other systems of belief. Lanyer was

either demonstrating her education here, or she didn't feel that Biblical female role models expressed the high sentiments she means to convey.

Lanyer begins in line 73 her coaxing of the reader to identify and agree with her on behalf of shared gender. She offers a particular portion for the queen to read:

Behold, great Queene, faire **Eves** Apologie,  
 Which I have writ in honour of your sexe  
 And doe referre unto your Majestie, 75  
 To judge if it agree not with the Text,  
 And if it doe, why are poore Women blam'd,  
 Or by more faultie Men so much defam'd?

This stanza contains the basic appeal Lanyer makes to all of her dedicatees: she uses the common bond of womanhood to bridge the economic and social gap between them. She also challenges them to compare her version of the Passion with the Bible itself. Her tone abruptly changes from simpering to demanding in the last couplet. Lanyer uses an us-against-them approach in hopes of securing her readers' approval.

Lanyer uses the metaphors of "feast" and "mirror" throughout the book to describe her poem;<sup>5</sup> the feast alludes to the Passover and suggests an aura of heavy partaking (of Lanyer's wisdom, perhaps?) in honor of Christ, and the mirrors allow the readers to see their virtuous selves reflected in the Biblical examples of good women that Lanyer mentions later. The women addressed were all Christians; they would have been familiar with Biblical imagery like the

Jewish feasts and the mirror of 1 Corinthians 13. In her dedicatory poems, Lanyer provides only select delicacies for her readers' palates. She flatters them extensively and sneaks her pseudo-feminist ideas into the main course, as any dinner party hostess might do with her extra zucchini.

Surprisingly, in lines 145-150 Lanyer makes a brief apology for attempting to write: "Not . . . that I would compare with any man," (148) she stammers, but the modesty seems artificial. Lanyer's determination to prove a point--that is, that women are worthy of respect--makes her subservience detrimental to her argument. Her reader knows that any inferiority Lanyer may have actually felt toward men was not too strong, or she would not have written at all.

In "To all vertuous Ladies in generall," Lanyer invites the rest of her readers--those who don't get their own poems--to her "feast." She advises them to put on "wedding garments," for the "Bridegroom" will be there; her "virgins" (Mt. 25:1-13) will not be unprepared for Christ. The images vacillate between the Christian images of virgins and Greek and Roman mythological characters; in the fourth and fifth stanzas, the readers are encouraged to frolic with Minerva, Venus, and Cynthia. The juxtaposition of Christian and pagan illusions creates a busy atmosphere for the readers; as they don "Daphne's crowne" in line 25, they must also be prepared to anoint themselves with "Aarons pretious oyle" in line 36. Lanyer's main point in writing this poem is to cover any ground she may miss in her specific patronage poems; the book

was distributed to many more potential patrons than those to whom it was dedicated.

Lanyer was fairly well acquainted with Margaret and Ann Clifford; apparently Margaret had commissioned Lanyer to write about Cooke-ham. The style of their dedications is much more familiar than in the others, and the pages are a bit more elaborately designed. In the Chapin Library copy of the original, both of the letters beginning the text are adorned with flowers and vines, distinguishing their pages from those of poems to less prominent dedicatees.

According to Barbara Lewalski, Lanyer owed her religious conversion to Margaret Clifford ("Of God" 207); the two seem to have shared a mutually beneficial relationship. Lanyer apparently felt herself worthy to teach her religious convictions to Clifford and others.

The address to Margaret is unique because it is in prose; aside from the "To the Vertuous Reader" and "To the doubtfull Reader" sections, it is the only part of the book not in verse. It does not flatter its reader quite as much as the other dedications; the effect is that of a memo affixed to an expected report. Lanyer begins with Peter's declaration: "Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have, that give I you" (Acts 3:2-8). What she has, as we know, is the story of Christ's passion, and she departs from her usual embellishing style to apologize for any "blemish" she may impart on the Gospel story. She proclaims to "deliver the inestimable treasure of all elected soules, to bee perused at convenient

times" (lines 29-30). Lanyer takes almost a Petrarchan stance on her presentation of the passion: she sees her poem and its connection to Clifford as something "which may remaine in the world many yeares longer than your Honour, or my selfe can live, to be a light unto those who come after" (lines 31-33). This last also alludes to Matthew 5:16; in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he instructs his disciples to "let [their] light shine before men."

The relationship Lanyer and Clifford shared was based on an intellectual respect, judging from the familiarity with which the dedication is written, and on the bond they shared as Christian women. Both Lanyer and Clifford had spendthrift husbands, as detailed in Lewalski's description of the women ("Re-Writing" 96), and neither had a satisfying marriage. Clifford's husband had extramarital affairs and at one point left his wife and daughter to fend for themselves ("Re-Writing" 90). Lanyer had been practically sold to her husband to cover her pregnancy.

Anne Clifford's dedication is not as familiar as Margaret's; Lanyer treats her as someone who knows and intimidates her. The ideas repeat those of earlier poems--the importance of her story, the worthiness of her reader--but also include the obvious bridges she tries to establish between her patrons and herself. Line 19 reads, "God makes both even, the Cottage with the Throne," and she later asks, "All sprang but from one woman and one man,/ Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?" (lines 35-36) The



theme, as interpreted by Woods, is "virtue is true nobility" (42). Lanyer could apply this theme both to herself and to Anne, who spent several years trying to gain her father's inheritance after his death and was probably as frustrated with her financial situation as Lanyer was with hers.

The patronage poems give us a glimpse into Lanyer's personal life; they are really the only link we have, besides the astrologer Simon Forman's records, to her relationships with her contemporaries. From the poems we know that Lanyer was not pleased with her present social situation and that she thought her readers could change it, either with their funds or perhaps by simply acknowledging Lanyer's competence as a poet and a friend.

## 3) Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645)

Aemilia Lanyer was born in 1569 to Baptista Bassano and his common-law wife, Margaret Johnson. Her father was a possibly Jewish native of Venice who apparently converted to Christianity; Aemilia's church records show she was christened at St. Bartolph's, Bishopsgate, 27 January 1569. Little is known about her childhood, but we can infer from her poetry that she had a classical education in Greek mythology and Latin. Her father was a musician for the royal court. Probably because of his position as an entertainer, Aemilia was exposed to members of the court and may have gotten her education there. Her father died when she was seven or eight years old. There is no record of who provided financially for he and her mother.

By the age of seventeen she had become the mistress of Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon and Queen Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain and first cousin. According to Simon Forman, an astrologer whom Lanyer visited a few years later, he "kept her well" for five to six years, and eventually got her pregnant. We can only imagine what Lanyer's reputation might have sunk to within the court circle.<sup>6</sup> Presumably to salvage hers and his own, Lord Hunsdon married her off to Alfonso Lanyer, a court musician like her father. Aemilia had her son Henry in early 1593, and after a series of miscarriages (according to Forman) she had another child, Odillya, in 1598, who died nine months later. Her husband

was often absent in his duties to the king, which left her to care for the child and, presumably, to establish or maintain ties with the women to whom she would later offer her writing services.

The events leading directly to the publication of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum can be merely speculated upon. What would have motivated a woman of Lanyer's shaky social standing to publish a book reversing centuries of patriarchal Biblical interpretation? Lanyer's lifestyle didn't quite gel with the pious statements she makes in her book. To our knowledge, she did not do any other work, physical or literary, to advance the idea of women's innate virtue. Lanyer claims in her postscript that she was inspired in a dream. This would explain the contradiction between Lanyer's actions and her society's expectations of a woman's role. Both English Renaissance social customs and the Pauline letters called for women to remain silent, especially in public. What but divine inspiration would cause Lanyer to violate these precepts?

Of Lanyer's writings, only Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum has survived, which is remarkable considering that small volume's quality of content and style. Because there are so few extant copies, some scholars have assumed that its publication met with little response, warranting no further words from Lanyer. This, too, is strange, given its controversial subject matter and Lanyer's revolutionary technique of targeting only women for patronage. The modern scholar must reason out why Lanyer would defy convention by

publishing a single book that goes against the beliefs of most traditional Christians. As Lynette McGrath points out, Lanyer was not only writing about divine subjects; she was "audaciously reconstructing and resituating them" (340).

All four Gospels mention the women on whom Lanyer focuses in the title poem, but none of them makes much of the fact that men crucified and tortured Jesus, as she does. Luke's gospel does tell about the "Daughters of Jerusalem" whom Lanyer highlights in Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum. The Biblical version her passion poem follows most closely is Matthew's, the only gospel that mentions Pilate's wife. Lanyer, like most literate Christians in her time, was familiar with the Bible and avoided contradicting its text outright, but she did add enough original interpretation to keep her poem from being merely a scriptural echo.

The Biblical basis of Lanyer's work was carefully construed to appeal to her readers, all of them Christians. Her work appeared a few months before King James' Authorized Version of the Bible was to be published, so she may have cashed in on the hype by presenting her work as Biblical commentary. Whether Lanyer made any money from her attempt is unknown. Most of the women to whom she wrote patronage poems did have access to funds for Lanyer's benefit, but there is no evidence that any of them obliged her. Because women did not customarily publish their work at that time--to do so was considered cheap--she may have ruined her

chances of obtaining patronage by using the traditionally male medium of publication. Anne Baynes Coiro asks, "To what extent would a woman be breaking company with other women by publishing?" (360) Those with long memories would not have forgotten Lanyer's affair with Lord Chamberlain, so she was really in no position to offer theological insights to her social superiors, especially in published form. Something of Lanyer's spunk is revealed by her writing a book, if it was for money, rather than doing something else. She took a risk in doing it, and we can venture that her publisher did, too.

Barbara Lewalski suggests three reasons Lanyer may have felt exempt from societal rules forbidding publication: the "excellence of her subject [Christ]," "divine sanction" as indicated in her postscript, and "legitimation by the Countess of Pembroke" ("Old" 405), who had published her own versions of the Psalms, leading the way for Lanyer. The demanding voice of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum apologizes only nominally for its assured tone, and Lanyer's excuse is, as found in "To the doubtfull Reader," the inspiration of her dream. The question of social acceptance does not take precedence over her message or even slightly challenge it. Lanyer could not have been ignorant of the cultural boundaries she was breaking and was surely aware of the scantness of her chance of reaping any financial rewards. Though she definitely hoped for patronage, that does not seem to be the key justification for her book.

From this glaring lack of evidence to the contrary, can we assume that Lanyer was inspired by God? Might her text be regarded as a female-friendly parallel to Matthew's gospel? I propose that, in any case, Lanyer truly felt she was an instrument of God for the sharing of the SDRJ message. No other explanation makes sense: she had little hope of actually obtaining patronage from her dedicatees, she risked further ostracization from the court circle by publishing, and she had no previous history of promoting the idea of female equality among her peers. The authoring of such a book appears as an anomalous event in Lanyer's life.

Inspired as she was, divinely or not, it seems odd that Lanyer's poems made so small a dent in anyone's way of thinking. Public opinion of women in Britain did not change abruptly in 1611, and her poems were easily overshadowed by the appearance of King James' authorized Bible that same year. Ultimately, Lanyer's beliefs in the worthiness of women produced her version of Christ's crucifixion and the surrounding events. As a feminist 300 years ahead of her time, Lanyer recognized that even her religion was based on patriarchy, and she presumably set out to reverse it.

## 4) Lanyer canonization

It is difficult for the contemporary reader not to take a revisory view of Lanyer's work. We come to her poetry having read Woolf and Wollstonecraft<sup>7</sup>, and want to interpret her ideas with our feminist-oriented minds. But Lanyer had no such influences, and her poems do not struggle between religious and secular ideas. She presents only what she knows, as she has determined for herself. The approach she takes to the Crucifixion--detailing each discrete event with her own opinions, interrupting herself to explain different aspects of the story--forces her reader to examine not only her poetic techniques, but to understand the narrative of an earthly (albeit sinless) Jesus Christ. She inadvertently brings the modern reader from lofty theology to the basic facts and tenets of Christianity; her matter-of-fact tone challenges us **not** to believe them, as she assumes our acceptance of the gospel.

To the modern reader, Lanyer's take on the Crucifixion alone is interesting enough to merit canonization. The irony of her rediscovery is that had she been she a well-respected Renaissance man, the position she envied, she would never have needed to write. If women had been treated as she wished, she would not have published. But in the writing of her ideas, she preserved her work and the memory of her patrons. Though she does not speak for all the women of her time, her voice is significant and clear enough to deserve a hearing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aside from a few scant acknowledgements in Elizabethan scholarship, Rowse was the first to present Lanyer's poems to the literary public. See his "Shakespeare's Dark Lady."

The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Woods' 1993 edition of Lanyer's poems, as a consequence of the Brown Women Writers Project, has encouraged a greater flurry of critical activity than did Rowse's.

<sup>3</sup> Especially his "Little lamb, who made thee?/ Dost thou know who made thee?"

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 27:24 reads, "When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. 'I am innocent of this man's blood,' he said. 'It is your responsibility!'"

<sup>5</sup> See Lynette McGrath, "Metaphoric Subversions: Feasts and Mirrors in Amelia Lanier's SDRJ," LIT 3 (1991): 101-113.

<sup>6</sup> Rowse speculates that at this time, Lanyer was romantically involved with William Shakespeare.

<sup>7</sup> See Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Mary Wollstonecraft's A Vindication of the Rights of Women.



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