

To All vertuous Ladies in Generall: Voicing Female Spirituality in the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645)

Tomáš Jajtner

University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice

Abstract

The present article deals with the poetry of Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645), arguably the first professional English woman poet. It focuses on Lanyer's "feminist spirituality", i.e. her delineation of women's spiritual genius based on their specific dispositions. The article discusses Lanyer's strategy in reassessing the role of women in Christianity and the fields in which the female spiritual "organism" can develop without the necessarily polemical aspects of sexual differences. The article argues that Lanyer uses the genre of devotional poetry (and spirituality) to claim a space of autonomy for women that was unthinkable in other fields.

Keywords: Aemilia Lanyer, English Renaissance poetry, devotional poetry, poetry and spirituality

1. Introduction

In the history of English devotional writing, the year 1611 will forever be associated with the publication of the canonical Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible and Aemilia Lanyer's (1569–1645) collection *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. The latter work is remarkable from a number of perspectives, but two stand out as especially important: never before in the history of English literature had a collection of religious poetry been published with a woman's name on the title page, moreover with such a bold objective of offering a critical and thoroughly female view of the key issues of Christian spirituality. Mary Sidney Herbert's remarkable translations of the Psalms (written around 1600) were not

printed until 1823, and Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed* appeared in 1621¹. Aemilia Lanyer thus enjoys an extraordinary standing amongst early modern female poets: she voices her poetic vocation and her project of an independent, i.e. un-derived female spiritual destiny with a confidence that had not been seen before.

The recent critical assessment of her work has predominantly focused on the “protofeminist” aspects of her work and the discourse of femininity in early modern England². In this article I want to reassess her work in the context of English devotional writing as a remarkable attempt to delineate the basic principles of female spirituality “to all vertuous Ladies in generall” (Lanyer 12)³. I will argue that Lanyer's poetry not only voices women's otherness in relation to men's writing, but also aims at defining a unique, female spiritual “organism.” It thus restructures some of the basic principles of Christian spirituality and refreshes the language used by this spirituality.

2. Defining female spirituality: Lanyer's traditionalism and daring

The classical theological understanding of spirituality refers to the realization of one's own spiritual identity in relation to the salvific event.⁴ In other words, the salvific event in its objective, ontological nature (in se) is “translated” into the language of individual experience; i.e. it is subjectified as a response that re-discovers both the “objective” core of the Revelation and its hic-et-nunc relevance in one's life. Spirituality can thus be defined as an individualized reading of the “newness” of the Christian experience, of the “reality” of the “new creature” (καινη κτισις, see Gal 6:15).⁵

However, this process necessarily involves a thorough reading of the situatedness of the believer, i.e. the individual spiritual calling which takes into account the givenness of their identity. In this context, Lanyer's “daring” in relation to the female specificity in spiritual matters is not necessarily a radical *relecture* of the tradition, but in fact represents a drawing of consequences from the basic presupposition of the salvific event being subjectified.

One of the striking facts about early modern women's poetry is the conspicuous prevalence of devotional writing. The norm was “to go divine,”⁶ and the emergence of female subjectivity in this period was inextricably bound to the notion of the liberation that women could experience in the realm of religious verse. The symbolic nature of religious language and the autonomy of theological discourse based on analogical reference thus offered a relative freedom from constraints and from accepting masculine definitions of woman as “‘other’ in relation to man’,”⁷ and possibly exploring versions of this otherness in themselves.⁸ It could be used to redefine notions of manhood and womanhood on a deeper, anthropological level, and thus raise a number of socially dynamic, if not subversive, ideas.

Lanyer's collection starts with a series of dedicatory poems; indeed, this was a well-established practice of Renaissance poets “who sought support through patronage.”⁹ All of these poems are dedicated to women, and Lanyer presents a gallery of exemplary patronesses whose spiritual integrity facilitated her own conversion. The crucial figure in this context was Margaret, the countess dowager of Cumberland, whose spiritual influence on Lanyer seems to have been essential. The dedicatory poems define the spiritual environment, accommodating Lanyer's meditations on the key contents of the salvific event *seen*

within this environment and *written for* that environment. The interpretative key to the effort undertaken by Lanyer in the text can be found in the prose introduction “To The Vertuous Reader.” In the text, she identifies both her intended audience, as well as the effort to redefine femininity spiritually:

I haue written this small volume, or little booke, for the generall use of all vertuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome; and in commendation of some particular persons of our owne sexe [...] this haue I done, to make knowne to the world, that all women deserve not to be blamed though some forgetting they are women themselves [...] (48)

With reference to a number of major women figures in the Bible, she postulates women’s autonomy and significance in the project of salvation. Indeed, the major moments in the history are unthinkable without women’s mediation:

it pleased our Lord and Saviour Iesus Christ, without the assistance of man, beeing free from originall and all other sinnes, from the time of his conception, till the houre of his death, to be begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman; and that he healed women, pardoned women, comforted women: yea, even when he was in his greatest agonie and bloodie sweat, going to be crucified, and also in the last houre of his death, tooke care to dispose of a woman: after his resurrection, appeared first to a woman, sent a woman to declare his most glorious resurrection to the rest of his Disciples. [...] (50)

The final goal of the work is to draw the conclusions out of these findings and thus show the paths of “virtue” to the ladies. In that sense, the “increase of virtue” stands for overall spiritual growth:

To the modest sensures of both which, I refer these my imperfect indeavours, knowing that according to their owne excellent dispositions, they will rather, cherish, nourish, and increase the least sparke of virtue where they find it, by their favourable and beste interpretations, than quench it by wrong constructions. To whom I wish all increase of virtue, and desire their best opinions. (50)

In other words, “To the vertuous Reader” summarizes Lanyer’s overall approach to the objective of devotional poetry: the spiritual calling is derived both from the “facts” of the Revelation (especially the position of Eve and Mary in the story of salvation), but also in the “created givenness” of femininity (i.e. the dialogical and mutually completing nature of the two sexes, the analogical nature of Christ’s sexuality, and finally, the “female, motherly logic” in framing various social phenomena in a polemical tone, in terms of opposition to masculine conceptions). Lanyer reads the information in the Book of Creation and the Book of Revelation¹⁰ and tries to draw the consequences of doing so: in this way she creates a thoroughly female world in her poems (including the remarkable final landscape poem *A Description of Cooke-Ham*), in which the sexes are given their respective relevance in framing the divine plan, yet which represents a world where female calling and “logic” are autonomous and un-derived from the masculine.

3. Female relationality: being a chaste bride, a compassionate wife and a loving mother

Lanyer's crucial concept for defining the female spiritual "organism"¹¹ is derived from women's relationality, i.e. from their orientation towards a full commitment to another being, either as a *chaste bride*, a *compassionate wife* or a *loving mother*. The first of these concepts – referred to as "virtue" or chastity – stresses the integral concentration of the self towards a "spiritual" partnership with God or, indeed, to the feast of the *sponsalia* between God and humanity. In one of the introductory dedications, *To all vertuous Ladies in general*, this virtue/chastity is a crucial prerequisite for entering into the spiritual realm: a virtuous woman needs to "concentrate" her inner integrity to be ready for the Bridegroom to enter the banquet (cf. the parable of Ten Virgins, Mt 25,1–13):

Each blessed Lady that in Virtue spends
Your pretious time to beautifie your soules;
Come wait on her whom winged Fame attends
And in hir hand the Booke where she inroules
Those high deserts that Maiestie commends:
Let this faire Queene not unattended bee,
When in my Glasse she daines her selfe to see.

Put on your wedding garments every one,
The Bridegroome stayes to entertaine you all;
Let Virtue be your guide, for she alone
Can leade you right that you can never fall;
And make no stay for feare he should be gone:
But fill your Lamps with oyle of burning zeale,
That to your Faith he may his Truth reveale. (12)

In the main poem of the collection "Salve Deus, Rex Judaeorum," Lanyer expands on this idea by defining this chaste Bride, adorned for the Bridegroom, as "beyond" the earthly, "outward" concepts of Beauty. In fact, a whole section of "Salve" is entitled "An Invective against outward beauty unaccompanied with virtue." Beauty – or, using Lanyer's words, the "whiteness" of virtue – is also a trap, wherein a woman may ruin her spiritual dispositions:

For greatest perills do attend the faire,
When men do seeke, attempt, plot and devise,
How they may overthrow the chastest Dame,
Whose Beautie is the White whereat they aime. (60)

The tangible model for this "virtue/chastity" is the dowager Lady Cumberland, who acquired such skill in "controlling" the various things that stir her, so that they can all be directed towards "reckoning" the true "Husband" Christ:

This Grace great Lady, doth possesse thy Soule,
And makes thee pleasing in thy Makers sight;
This Grace doth all imperfect Thoughts controule,
Directing thee to serve thy God aright;
Still reckoning him, the Husband of thy Soule,
Which is most pretious in his glorious sight:
Because the Worlds delights shee doth denie
For him, who for her sake vouchsaf'd to die. (62)

In fact, Lady Cumberland is alluded to at a number of places in the text: she is called “Deere Spouse of Christ” or “Pure Thoughted Lady”; in other words, she seems to incarnate the ideal of an integrated woman, a bride waiting for the bridegroom.

Once Lanyer starts retelling the passion of Christ,¹² she focuses on the role of women in the story. The first notable woman is the wife of Pontius Pilate, who advises him not to sentence Jesus to death:

[...]heare the words of thy most worthy wife,
Who sends to thee, to beg her Saviours life.

Let barb'rous crueltie farre depart from thee,
And in true Justice take afflictions part;
Open thine eies, that thou the truth mai'st see,
Doe not the thing that goes against thy heart;
Condemne not him that must thy Saviour be;
But view his holy Life, his good desert [...] (84)

Similarly the “Daughters of Jerusalem” showed their broken hearts and cried for the innocent victim. This “did mooue their Lord, their Louer, and their King,/To take compassion” (93) on them. The power of women’s tears makes the final journey humanely bearable. The compassionate wife thus presents another form in which women can enjoy their spiritual autonomy.

In the following section, the focus moves to the “sorrow of virgin Mary,” and the horror of Christ’s crucifixion opens up another “feminist” theme: that of the *loving mother*. Mary is confronted with a double loss, since she loses both her son and her Redemeer; in other words, her drama is presented as that of a faithful woman (indeed, the former virgin fully concentrated on her calling) who totally surrenders to the incomprehensible. Mary’s strength is her “submissive heart” to the will of her heavenly Father (and Husband). Mary’s typological significance becomes clear from the close proximity to another section addressed “To my Ladie of Cumberland,” where she is admonished to behold the scene of the crucifixion as the “Deere Spouse of Christ” and spiritually identify with the Saviour while taking part in the suffering:

This with the eie of Faith thou maist behold,
Deere Spouse of Christ, and more than I can write;
And here both Griefe and Joy thou maist unfold,
To view thy Love in this most heavy plight,

Bowing his head, his bloodlesse body cold;
Those eies waxe dimme that gave vs all our light,
His count'nance pale, yet still continues sweet,
His blessed blood watring his pierced feet. (101)

In that sense, Lanyer reiterates the maxim of Marian spirituality from the Gospel of St Luke: when faced with the incomprehensibility of the virgin birth, Mary responded with the inner movement of the heart: "And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." (Lk 2:19).

Lanyer's female spirituality thus stresses the autonomous nature of female spiritual dispositions; however, the relationship of the two sexes is not necessarily polemical and contrasting: they are interrelated. This brings us to another important topic.

4. Men and women: the measure of dependence of the two sexes

Lanyer accepts that women are physically weaker and supposedly inferior to men, however, that may precisely be the point of contention in understanding the lamentable state humanity seems to find itself in. The most widely anthologized part of Lanyer's poetry, the section of *Slave Deus, Rex Judaeorum* entitled "Eves Apologie," expands on the consequences of this supposed inferiority. If one asks the question who is responsible for the Fall, one needs to take into account the respective "natural dispositions" of a man and a woman:

Our Mother Eve, who tasted of the Tree,
Giving to Adam what she held most deare,
Was simply good, and had no powre to see,
The after-comming harme did not appeare:
 The subtile Serpent that our Sex betraide,
 Before our fall so sure a plot had laide.

That undiscerning Ignorance perceav'd
No guile, or craft that was by him intended;
For, had she knowne of what we were bereav'd,
To his request she had not condescended.
But she (poore soule) by cunning was deceav'd,
No hurt therein her harmlesse Heart intended:
 For she alleadg'd Gods word, which he denies
 That they should die, but even as Gods, be wise. (85)

However absurd or scandalous the effect of such reasoning may be today, the point for Lanyer was ultimately the interdependence of the two sexes and mutual respect for their respective limits. Adam should have been aware of Eve's frailty, and therefore blaming the Fall on her is simply unfair and wrong. His "superiority," based on his "seniority" in the order of creation and strength, should have prevailed over Eve's fragile emotionality:

But surely Adam cannot be excus'd,
Her fault, though great, yet he was most too blame;
What Weaknesse offred Strength might have refus'd,
Being Lord of all the greater was his shame:
Although the Serpents craft had her abus'd,
Gods holy word ought all his actions frame:
For he was Lord and King of al the earth,
Before poore Eve had either life or breath. (85)

Ultimately, Eve's major fault was "too much love,/ Which made her give this present [i.e. the apple]to her Deare" (86). Since Eve typologically stands for the "ewig Weibliche," when Lanyer meditates on the scene of the trial before Pilate, she again stresses the scandal of "missing each other." Pilate surrenders to the trap of power ("*Pilate*, this can yeeld thee no content,/To exercise thine owne authoritie" (89), while not listening to the intuition of his wife, who recognizes Jesus as a "just man." The freeing of Barabbas only proves the point that this is a man whose limit is the hunger for power and the fear of losing it. By doing so, Pilate loses his "Honour," a quality which is the prerequisite of a just judge:

Base Barrabas the Thiefe they all desire
And thou more base than he, perform'st their will;
Yet when thy thoughts backe to themselves retire,
Thou art unwilling to commit this ill:
Oh that thou couldst unto such grace aspire,
That thy polluted lips might never kill
That Honour, which right Judgement ever graceth,
To purchase shame, which all true worth defaceth.

Art thou a Judge, and askest, What to doe
With One, in whom no fault there can be found?
The death of Christ wilt thou consent unto
Finding no cause, no reason, nor no ground?
Shall he be scour'd and crucified too?
And must his miseries by thy meanes abound?
Yet not asham'd to aske what he hath done,
When thine owne conscience seeks this sin to shunne. (88)

In order to understand Lanyer's interpretation of the interdependence of the two sexes and their respective weaknesses, we should refer to the consequences of the Fall as we find them in the biblical narrative in the book of Genesis. Although the text of "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" does not openly refer to it, Lanyer conspicuously reiterates God's curse over Adam and Eve after they had eaten from the forbidden tree. The original mutual givenness of Adam and Eve, their harmonizing, pre-fall interdependence, is broken. From that moment on, Eve will be "ruled" by Adam and Adam will struggle in vain to regain his power over the rest of creation. Instead of being the sovereign lord of all, Adam the man is subjected to the vicissitudes of an uncertain fate:

And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. [...]

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Gen 3,9–19)

The broken parallelism of the two sexes runs through Lanyer's text: men are hungry for power – without ultimately being able to take hold of it – while women weep powerlessly over the fate of innocent victims. The story of Jesus being dragged through the streets of Jerusalem with the weeping “Daughters of Jerusalem” along the way, as well as the contrast between cruel, ruthless soldiers and compassionate women accompanying the scene of the crucifixion, is telling:

When spitefull men with torments did oppresse
Th'afflicted body of this innocent Doue,
Poore women seeing how much they did transgresse,
By teares, by sighs, by cries, intreate, nay prove,
What may be done among the thickest presse,
They labour still these tyrants hearts to moue:
In pitie and compassion to forbear. (94)

Lanyer thus provides her own conclusion to the problem of the relation between men and women in the *status naturae lapsae* (i.e. the state of the fallen nature): no-one is now born “without our paine” (87) and men's supposed power over women does not exonerate men from their cruelty and from all the other consequences of the Fall. This meditation over the interdependence of the two sexes leads to a postulation of a sense of new “Libertie” and equality in the spiritual realm:

Then let us have our Libertie againe,
And challenge to your selves no Sou'raigntie;
You came not in the world without our paine,
Make that a barre against your crueltie;
Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdain
Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny?
If one weake woman simply did offend,
This sinne of yours hath no excuse, nor end. (87)

The consequences of this idea for the social aspects of women's spirituality are far-reaching: women are not only un-derived from men; their absence in public life is a sign of lack. In Lanyer's poetry, women subvert a male-dominated world through their "logic of powerlessness."

5. Beyond social boundaries: potentially subversive aspects of the powerless "female logic"

Lanyer's project of women's spirituality also takes into account the potentially subversive aspects of postulating the equal dignity and mutual interdependence of the two sexes. Women's capacity for compassion, based on their emotional intelligence and their bodily union with their offspring, tends to question institutions related to men's exercise of power. In the dedicatory poem "To the Ladie Anne, Countesse of Dorset," Lanyer questions the "givenness" of hierarchical orders in the society. Meditating on the value of various "Honours" typical for the contemporary society, she asks how much they actually relate to the divine design:

What difference was there when the world began,
Was it not Virtue that distinguist all?
All sprang but from one woman and one man,
Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?
Or who is he that very rightly can
Distinguish of his birth, or tell at all,
 In what meane state his Ancestors haue bin,
 Before some one of worth did honour win? (42)

Lanyer talks about a man, a "he" who should question the "earthly" idea of honour, or rather associate it with the spiritual category of "virtue," related to the exercise of power respecting the weak and the poor:

Nor is he fit for honour, or command,
If base affections over-rules his mind;
Or that selfe-will doth carry such a hand,
As worldly pleasures have the powre to blind
So as he cannot see, nor understand
How to discharge that place to him assign'd:
 Gods Stewards must for all the poore provide,
 If in Gods house they purpose to abide. (43)

Nevertheless, the dedicatee that is truly "fit" for this "virtue" is a *woman* – the mentioned Anne, Countess of Dorset: "For your faire mind I hold the fittest place,/ Where virtue should be settled & protected"(41). In fact, women seem to have the capacity to "humanize" and subvert the logic of long-established orders of things or power itself.

When praising her patroness, Lady Cumberland, Lanyer contrasts the "wanton" life at the court with the kind harmony of her country retreat. By doing so, she serves the merciful order of "heav'nly powres":

Thou from the Court to the Countrie art retir'd,
Leaving the world, before the world leaves thee:
That great Enchantresse of weak mindes admir'd,
Whose all-bewitching charmes so pleasing be
To worldly wantons; and too much desir'd
Of those that care not for Eternitie:
But yeeld themselves as preys to Lust and Sinne,
Loosing their hopes of Heav'n Hell paines to winne.

But thou, the wonder of our wanton age
Leav'st all delights to serve a heav'nly King:
Who is more wise? or who can be more sage,
Than she that doth Affection subject bring;
Not forcing for the world, or Satans rage,
But shrowding vnder the Almightyes wing;
Spending her yeares, moneths, daies, minutes, howres,
In doing service to the heav'nly powres. (58)

The archetypal biblical subversion of this type of order to which Lanyer alludes is the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55). Mary – “most beauteous Queene of Woman-kind” (95) – praises God’s “reversed order” of the world, i.e. the paradoxical “power of the powerless”: “For the Almightye magnified thee,/And looked downe vpon thy meane estate;/Thy lowly mind” (95).¹³ Christ “joyes the Meeke, and makes the Mightie sad,/Pulls downe the Prowd, and doth the Humble reare” (54). For Lanyer, indeed, the spiritual order invites a major revisionism of the “glory” of the earthly orders:

But yet the Weaker thou dost seeme to be
In Sexe, or Sence, the more his Glory shines,
That doth infuze such powrefull Grace in thee,
To shew thy Love in these few humble Lines;
The Widowes Myte, with this may well agree,
Her litle All more worth than golden mynes,
Beeing more deerer to our loving Lord,
Than all the wealth that Kingdoms could afford. (64)

This “power” is later associated with a number of women: Pilate’s wife, Deborah, Judith, and indeed Lanyer’s patroness, Countess of Cumberland. In contrast to these, men tend to be cold and calculating, idolatrizing the stiff orders of old. Typically, Caiphas represents a “wicked Man” of whom nothing is to be expected:

By this Example, what can be expected
From wicked Man, which on the Earth doth liue?
But faithlesse dealing, feare of God neglected;
Who for their priuate gaine cares not to sell
The Innocent Blood of Gods most deere elected,
As did that caytife wretch, now damn'd in Hell:

If in Christs Schoole, he tooke so great a fall,
What will they doe, that come there not at all. (82)

However, the Countess of Cumberland – with whom Lanyer contrasts these corrupt masculine manners and to whom she also dedicates the final part of the central poem of the collection – seems to embody the virtues of the Gospel. She is humble, modest, merciful, caring, compassionate, and fully committed to the works of charity. By that she almost manages to – so to speak – reverse the order of heavens: indeed, these works of love are, spiritually, equal to the keys of St Peter that open the gates of heaven:

These workes of mercy are so sweet, so deare
To him that is the Lord of Life and Loue,
That all thy prayers he vouchsafes to heare,
And sends his holy Spirit from aboue;
Thy eyes are op'ned, and thou seest so cleare,
No worldly thing can thy faire mind remoue;
Thy faith, thy prayers, and his speciall grace
Doth open Heau'n, where thou behold'st his face.

These are those Keyes Saint Peter did possesse,
Which with a Spirituall powre are giu'n to thee,
To heale the soules of those that doe transgresse,
By thy faire virtues; which, if once they see,
Vnto the like they doe their minds adresse,
Such as thou art, such they desire to be:
If they be blind, thou giu'st to them their sight;
If deafe or lame, they heare, and goe vpright. (109)

For Lanyer, women are spiritually mature and autonomous. However, their capacities can fully shine forth when their respective qualities are to be compared with Christ – the powerless, paradoxical “Rex Judaeorum.” The ultimate source of women’s spiritual identity is thus the measure of their identity with the passion and resurrection of Christ.¹⁴

6. Christ as a woman – the fluidness of divine sexuality

“One of the landmarks of Lanyer’s lengthy poem is the emphatic feminization of Christ himself” (Dascal 217). He reflects the commonplace stereotypes associated with femininity – patience, mildness and silence,¹⁵ as well as his “all-reviving beautie” (51). The latter quality is contrasted not only with the dubious cult of beauty in this “wanton age,” but also with the “manly” qualities represented by the actors in the drama. Christ is not openly transgendered,¹⁶ but the above-mentioned female characteristics are conspicuously emphasized.

In the central poem of the collection “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,” Lanyer stresses Christ’s obedience and surrender to the will of the Father. Unlike his apostles, he is faithful

to his identity of bringing new life to the world. As a pregnant woman in the hour of her delivery, she is fully determined to surrender to this mission:

But what could comfort them thy troubled Minde,
When Heaven and Earth were both against thee bent?
And thou no hope, no ease, no rest could'st finde,
But must restore that Life, which was but lent;
Was ever Creature in the World so kinde,
But he that from Eternitie was sent?
To satisfie for many Worlds of Sinne,
Whose matchlesse Torments did but then begin. (70)

The obedience and silence of Jesus takes on another major “female” feature before Caiphas. There he is presented as “sweet Iesus” (82) who will become a subject of violence: as with a raped virgin, Caiphas will make his “pray...of his most pretious blood” (82). He is stripped of his “roabes,” and his “Innocency” is shown to the mob. The only spectators to understand the indignity of the moment are again women – the mentioned “Daughters of Jerusalem,” Mary and, indeed, the “Maries” who are about to anoint the dead body.¹⁷

The resurrection represents the triumph of this feminized Saviour: the cruel order instituted by men is broken by Christ’s kind and meek “female” qualities. It is no surprise anymore that even the one who is to continue in Christ’s mission on this earth – the church – is feminized as well:

For he is rize from Death t’Eternall Life,
And now those pretious oyntments he desires
Are brought unto him, by his faithfull Wife
The holy Church; who in those rich attires,
Of Patience, Love, Long suffring, Voide of strife,
Humbly presents those ointments he requires:
The oyles of Mercie, Charitie, and Faith,
Shee onely gives that which no other hath. (107)

The church is the “faithfull Wife” desiring her husband. Christ’s “new” beauty is modelled upon the Song of Songs (indeed, it is *a briefe description of his beautie vpon the Canticles*) and the process of the heavenly *sponsalia* presented in deeply eroticized language:

Blacke as a Raven in her blackest hew;
His lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet
Than is the sweetest hony dropping dew,
Or hony combes, where all the Bees do meet;
Yea, he is constant, and his words are true,
His cheekes are beds of spices, flowers sweet;
His lips like Lillies, dropping downe pure mirthe,
Whose loue, before all worlds we doe preferre. (107)

The final stage – the admonition to Lady Cumberland – corresponds to the last stage of the Christian *lectio divina*, i.e. *contemplatio*,¹⁸ which is meant to apply the “reading”

of the signs while tasting the fruits of grace. As I have mentioned above, it summarizes the relevance of the long meditation for an authentic female spirituality: integrating one's femininity into a new commitment to the spiritual union with the divine Husband. In that sense, the spiritual journey proposed by Lanyer comes full circle.

7. Conclusion

We have seen how Lanyer views women's devotional poetry as claiming and re-claiming women's autonomy in spiritual matters. For her, the "difference" between being male and female is the basis of two distinct spiritual destinies, and also the grounds for justifying women's equality. She stresses the interdependence of the two sexes; her original reading of the pre-Fall harmony of man and woman and the subsequent "broken parallelism" represents a remarkable attempt to reflect on the "gender problem" in the early modern period. Her vision of Christ's death and resurrection, seen through the lenses of powerless, female logic, seeks to reclaim the salvific event as being truly universal.

In fact, the polemical aspects of her poetry (especially the underestimated and generally overlooked female spiritual genius) are meant to affirm and re-affirm femininity in a field where women were granted relative liberty, i.e. in writing religious verse. Given the authority attributed to theological discourse at the time, this field offered a sense of anthropological and social experimentation which matches some of the major achievements of the secular literature of the age.

Studying the poetry of Aemilia Lanyer is more than just a curiosity in gender studies. It is a true literary event: by "refreshing" the language of devotional verse, it seeks to claim new fields of liberty. In that sense, it also reaffirms poetry as a major agent of freedom.

Notes

¹ Strictly speaking, there had been several attempts by women to produce religious verse in English prior to Lanyer. The first was probably Anne Lok's (or Locke, 1530–after 1590) *Meditation of a Penitent Sinner: Written in Maner of a Parphrase upon the 51. Psalme of David* (1560), which is now generally recognized as the first sonnet sequence in the English language. Unlike Lanyer's work, however, Lok's work was published unsigned. The second attempt was by Elizabeth Melvill, Lady Culros (c. 1578–c. 1640), whose *Ane Godlie Dreame* (1603) is strictly speaking a piece of Scottish literature "compylit in Scottish meter." Cf. Michael R. G Spille: "A literary 'first': the sonnet sequence of Anne Locke (1560) an appreciation of Anne Locke's Sonnet Sequence: A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner ... with Locke's Epistle to the ... Duchesse of Suffolke." *Renaissance Studies* 11.1 (March 1997): 41–55. A good summary of women's verse can be found in Susanne Woods' classic monograph on Lanyer (vii-viii).

² See e.g. Elaine Beilin. *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987); Kate Chedzgoj, Melanie Hansen and Suzanne Trill, eds. *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing* (Keele: Keele UP, 1996); Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke. *"This Double Voice": Gendered Writing in Early Modern Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan,

2000); Marshall Grossman, ed. *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998); Barbara Smith and Ursula Appelt, eds. *Write or Be Written: Early Modern Women Poets and Cultural Constraints* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), Susanne Woods. *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), , Barbra Kiefer Lewalski. "Writing Women and Reading the Renaissance." *Renaissance Quarterly* 44.4 (Winter 1991): 792–821; Constance Furey. "The Self-Undone: Individualism and Relationality in John Donne and Aemilia Lanyer." *The Harvard Theological Review* 99.4 (October 2006): 469–486.

³ All citations from Lanyer are taken from the Oxford edition of her poems *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Ed. Susanne Woods (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

⁴ In a recent companion to Christian spirituality, Sandra M. Schneiders starts her discussion of Christian spirituality with the following definition: "Christian spirituality as an academic discipline studies the lived experience of Christian faith, the subjective appropriation of faith and living of discipleship in their individual and corporate actualization(s)." Later on she specifies the definition, saying that spirituality is "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives" (Schneiders, 15, 17).

⁵ In this classical formulation of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the relevant thing to define a true Christian is not his historical nor religious origin, but his new life in Christ. Cf. also his previous formulation of the same "experience" in Gal 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Italics are mine.)

⁶ "One of the characteristics of women's love poetry in early modern England was that, in order to appear at all, in many cases it had to go divine. With the exception of Lady Mary Wroth, the handful of English poets from this period whose work is currently anthologized and reproduced for the twenty-first century classroom are mostly religious poets..." (Miller 196).

⁷ Cf. Miller, 196.

⁸ See Irigaray, Luce. "The Sex Which Is Not One." *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Transl. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), 26, 28-29.

⁹ "Æmilia Lanyer" *Poetry Foundation*. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/aemilia-lanyer#poet>. Unfortunately I was not able to track down the author of this interesting article.

¹⁰ I am now referring to the classical division used by Augustine in his treatise *De Doctrina Cristiana*. Cf. Augustine, Saint. *De Doctrina Christiana* Transl. by D.W. Robertson (New Jersey: Apprentice Hall, 1997).

¹¹ I am employing this term, which is used in theological discourse, to point out the organic, integrated quality of spiritual, i.e. "supernatural" life that corresponds to the organic organization of the body, i.e. of "natural" life.

¹² In the original version this is indicated by the inscription: "*Here begins the Passion of Christ.*"

¹³ The biblical text in KJV runs as follows: "My soul doth magnify the Lord,/ And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour./ For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed."

¹⁴ "Lanyer's authority for her version of the passion [...] in her identification with, and the ability to interpret, Christ's passion." Susanne Woods. *Lanyer – A Renaissance Woman Poet* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 149–150.

¹⁵ Cf. Helen Wilcox. "Lanyer and the Poetry of Land of Devotion." *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 245.

¹⁶ A paradoxical device one may find in 17th-century devotional poetry, e.g. in Crashaw's poem "The Flaming Heart Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa."

¹⁷ "She [Lanyer] portrays that understanding as quintessentially female, from the voice of Pilate's wife which moves imperceptibly back to that of the narrator (ll. 749–912), through the tears of the daughters of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the Virgin Mary (ll. 968–1136), to that particular insight of the countess of Cumberland (ll. 1329–68). See Woods, 150.

¹⁸ I am referring to the classical theory found in the *Scala Claustralium* (i.e. Ladder of the Monk) of Guigo II (before 1174–1193), which distinguishes four parts of the *Lectio Divina*, namely *lectio – meditatio – oratio* and *contemplatio*.

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Address:

University of South Bohemia

Department of English

Branišovská 31a

370 05 České Budějovice

Czech Republic

tjajtner@ff.jcu.cz