

Contributi/8

The Profanely Erotic Bridegroom Passages in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

Susan Lauffer O'Hara  0009-0004-4523-9987

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Arguing against many critics who posit that Aemilia Lanyer was a devout, pious Protestant, I focus on the biblical *Song of Songs* derived Bridegroom passages of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and the yet unexplored intrusion of the narrator who confesses her profanity at the eroticization of the risen Christ, satirizing and parodying the practice of affective piety and the sacrament of confession. Lanyer's clever, titillating, sexualized poetry becomes a cynical performance in light of the extravagant conventions of affective piety, a piety still current in the literary and religious cultures of her day. Through the lens of affective piety, it may be possible to assess more fully early modern women's daring attempts at writing, a writing which, for Lanyer, parodies, satirizes, and critiques a society bound by religious and social mores, a decorum stifling in its intensity, potentially dangerous to its dissenters.

Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum is a controversial work written by a controversial author, Aemilia Lanyer, whose poetry was published in 1611¹. One of the controversies surrounding Lanyer's work centers on the question of her religious devotion and piety. Some critics, such as Barbara Lewalski, agree that the *Salve Deus* is decidedly Protestant and feminist in tone, appealing to a «community

¹ All references to the poems are from A. Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. S. Woods, New York 1993. Woods notes that Lanyer (1569-1645) was the daughter of court musician Baptist Bassano and Margaret Johnson (xv). At eighteen she became the mistress of Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon, Queen Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain. Once pregnant by Hunsdon, Lanyer was married to Alfonso Lanyer, a court musician (xviii). Woods places Lanyer among professional poets who sought patronage (xxxii) and notes that, «the prefatory poems are all dedications, beginning with poems to three royals: Queen Anne, her daughter Princess Elizabeth, and Lady Arbella Stuart [...] There follow poems to various female aristocrats; a prose dedication to Lanyer's chief patron, Margaret, Countess Dowager of Cumberland; verse again for Katherine, Countess of Suffolk and for Margaret's daughter Anne [Clifford], Countess of Dorset; and finally a prose preface "To the Vertuous Reader." The poem is framed by dedicatory praise of Margaret of Cumberland, and the concluding "Cooke-ham" is written for her and her daughter Anne» (xxxiii-iv).

of good women» and that Lanyer is «profoundly religious»². Wendy Wall, arguing against any judgment of blasphemy for Lanyer's erotization of Christ, cites a study by Leo Steinberg who has shown that «erotic Renaissance pictorial representations of Christ were quite common [...] a sanctioned theological discourse on the Incarnation»³. More recently, Michael Holmes writes about Lanyer's devotion to God and other women: «Her visions of past and future utopian worlds consistently place love of the deity in and through a community of women at the center of personal happiness and social justice»⁴. There is some disagreement, however, as to how sincere Lanyer is, how devout, or whether the *Salve Deus* is a performance in a bid for patronage. Marie H. Loughlin has summarized the position, «it is tempting to view the poem either as a radical appropriation of scripture to re-envision woman's relationship with God, Christian institutions and texts, or as a fatally compromised and ultimately cynical use of scripture to further this particular poet's patronage goals»⁵.

1. The Argument

It is this idea of performance, of this cynicism, and the narrator's subsequent confession of inappropriateness in the Bridegroom passages, that is the subject of this article. I argue that Lanyer displays, in these passages, a disturbing sexual tension of eroticized longing. Lanyer's somewhat discursive text centers full force on the four Bridegroom stanzas with a disturbing sexual performance that is at once very personal, very intimate, and decidedly self-absorbing for the narrator alone, a display of emotion more in keeping with early modern affective piety. I further argue that by the overt display of lust and longing, the author of these passages engages in erotizing Christ's body through, not only the often-used biblical Song of Songs, but also the qualities and conventions of affective piety resulting in her own self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, and notoriety, calling

² B. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England*, Cambridge 1993, p. 219. Other critics noting Lanyer's devotion are: E. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* Princeton, NJ 1987, 182. S. Trill, *Reflected Desire: The Erotics of the Gaze in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, *Women and Culture at the Courts of the Stuart Queens*, ed. by C. McManus New York 2003. S. Woods, *Introduction to The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. S. Woods, New York 1993, xli.

³ W. Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* Ithaca 1993, pp. 322, 327.

⁴ M. Holmes, *Rich Chains of Love: Desire and Community in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, in *Early Modern Metaphysical Literature*, London 2001.

⁵ M. Loughlin, *Fast ti'd unto them in a golden Chaine: Typology, Apocalypse, and Woman's Genealogy in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «Renaissance Quarterly» 53, 2000, p. 133. Other critics questioning Lanyer's religious sincerity are: L. Schnell, *Breaking 'the rule of Cortezia: Aemilia Lanyer's Dedications to Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies», 27 (1), 1997, 84. B. Berry, *Pardon [...] though I have digrest: Digression as Style in 'Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum'*, in M. Grossman (ed.), *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, Lexington KY, 1998, pp. 225, 227.

attention to herself to procure the patronage of Margaret Clifford, other notable women, and possible male patrons⁶.

The eroticism, the indecorum of Lanyer's text, displays the affective excesses of this author as she holds up Christ's body as object. Arguing against critics' assertions for a devout Protestant approach to Lanyer's poem, this article focuses on the four Bridegroom stanzas within *Salve Deus*, the first two of which display the eroticized male body, one of ultimate perfection. In the last two stanzas, however, a desexualization takes place, an abrupt shift of focus, an abrupt drawing up of the narrator, for she «cannot wade so deepe,» deceiving herself in the fantastical world of Christ as lover, of Christ as her lover. This self-deception suddenly takes on importance because the speaker seems more emotionally and erotically involved, for she candidly confesses she has gone too far. And it is this confession which is different from other religious writers of the period because it is the narrator who believes the eroticism is wrong, that it has gone too far. With this redirection of focus from the eroticized Christ to the emotionally charged speaker, with this important, salient intrusion of the narrator, an intrusion which has not been critically addressed, the reader begins to question the performance of eroticism which has just occurred. Reading Lanyer's poetry in light of the conventions of affective piety, an eroticism still current in the literary and religious cultures of her day, it may be possible to assess more fully, to see more clearly, early modern women's daring attempts at writing, a writing which, for Lanyer, parodies, satirizes, and critiques a society bound by religious and social mores, a decorum stifling in its intensity, potentially dangerous to its dissenters.

2. Affective Piety in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Affective piety carried too far, however, is shocking despite the creative sacredness of the experience or the poetry which stems from these accounts. Lanyer is shocking with her erotized Bridegroom, as is John Donne, her contemporary, whose sacred poetry's eroticism is notorious for charges of blasphemy and profanity. Indeed, Helen Hackett, writing of the «general poetic fashion for mingling the sacred and the erotic» in the early modern period, remarks on the sexual frankness designed to provoke and the violence and «injurious imagery» barely restrained in Donne's «Batter my heart» or his Holy Sonnet 13's «self-

⁶ Other critics have noted possible male patrons: L. Barroll, *Looking for Patrons*, in M. Grossman (ed.), *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, Lexington KY, 1998, p. 36, 40. Barroll discusses Lanyer's husband, Alfonso Lanyer, and his efforts to secure the male patronage of Thomas Jones, Archbishop of Dublin and Prince Henry, S. Woods, *Introduction*, xlviii, xlix; B. Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England*, p. 226. K. Larson, *Reading the Space of the Closet in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal», 2, 2007, p. 11

consciously disgraceful» linking of the profane with the sacred⁷. But the secular, in Donne, is also linked to the sacred as in Elegy 19 with its religious ceremonial rituals inscribed in taking his mistress to bed, as Raymond-Jean Frontain has argued. The poem «steams with hot-blooded sexual allusion,» with aggressive sexuality, subtle sexual double entendres, and references to phallic erection, and Donne's ceremonials scripturally based insist that the «sexual experience is spiritually enlightening»⁸.

But Donne was not the only poet who combined the sacred and the erotic in the 1590s and early 1600s. Like Donne, poets such as Barnabe Barnes, Henry Constable, William Alabaster, Thomas Randolph, and Thomas Carew wrote about spiritual experience in terms of the body, the erotic. Constable, in particular, «is able to perpetuate the pre-Reformation tradition of using erotic language to express spiritual experience»⁹. Influenced by the spiritual ecstasy of the Counter Reformation aesthetic of such mystics as Saint Teresa of Avila, these poets, Hackett argues, use Catholic practices such as visits to shrines, prayers for intercession, etc., specifically Catholic practices, for the purposes of outrageous blasphemy, of shock, of the danger and the thrill of referencing those Catholic practices which Protestantism rejected as «idolatrous and sinful»¹⁰.

Indeed, Katherine Larson argues that Lanyer's text itself is a closet that houses «erotic encounters between her dedicatees and Christ» and that medieval affective piety is actually the precursor¹¹. Following Larson's argument, parts of Lanyer's *Passion* could also be labeled affective piety. For example, Lanyer, in gruesome detail, describes the dying Christ:

His joynts dis-joynted, and his legges hang downe,
His alabaster breast, his bloody side,
His members torne, and on his head a Crowne
Of sharpest Thorns, to satisfie for pride:

Lanyer then addresses Lady Cumberland as the «Deere Spouse of Christ» and calls the dying Christ «thy Love»: «And here both Griefe and Joy thou maist Unfold, / To view thy Love in this most heavy plight». Lanyer continues in almost rapturous language, combining the violence of the *Passion* with terms of joy, light, sweetness, and love, all elements of affective piety:

⁷ H. Hackett, *The Art of Blasphemy? Interfusions of the Erotic and the Sacred in the Poetry of Donne, Barnes, and Constable*, «Renaissance and Reformation», 28 (3), 2004, p. 48.

⁸ R. Frontain, *Donne's Erotic Spirituality: Ovidian Sexuality and the Language of Christian Revelation in Elegy XIX*, «Ball State University Forum», 25, 1984, p. 46.

⁹ H. Hackett, *The Art of Blasphemy?*, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹ K. Larson, *Reading the Space of the Closet*, p. 7. Larson gives some examples of the intimacy with Christ's body which Lanyer encourages in the *Salve Deus*: «Lanyer urges Anne Clifford to 'lodge [Christ] in the closet of your heart' 947), enjoins Susan Bertie to 'Take this faire Bride-groome in your soules pure bed' (20), encourages Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, to bathe her soul in the 'flood' (38) of Christ's blood» (6).

Bowing his head, his bloodlesse body cold;
Those eies waxe dimme that gave us all our light,
His count'nance pale, yet still continues sweet,
His blessed blood watring his pierced feet.
O glorious miracle without compare!
Last, but not least which was by him effected;
Uniting death, life, misery, joy and care¹².

Thus from the thirteenth century onward, affective piety was increasingly directed to lay people through publication in the vernacular and became popular among women, whereby highly emotional contemplation was a means to access the spiritual. These writings focused on mysticism and include texts from such authors as Julian of Norwich, the accounts of female martyrs in *Ancrene Wisse*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*, all of which emphasize Christ as lover, husband, son or brother and attend closely «on the Eucharist as a means of attaining physical intimacy with him»¹³. Femke Molekamp argues that affective piety was Augustinian in nature, and that female contemplative practices continued into the early modern period and mystical marriage with Christ became «part of a female economy of affective devotion as uttered by women»¹⁴. The highly affective nature of these devotions is reflected in surviving meditation books and spiritual journals of early modern women. Molekamp continues, «The 'secret' hours that women spent with God, feasting on spiritual meals in the intimate recesses of their home, were essentially meditative»¹⁵. And as we can see from the Countess of Warwick's writings in 1668, the meditative practice could be «rapturous,» for her affections are moved to «large and ravishing thoughts of the joys of heaven»¹⁶. Indeed, Lucy Busfield writes of the Calvinist John Hayward's popular *Sanctuarie of a Troubled Soul* where Hayward «contemplated Christ's Passion within the affective framework of a divine love-affair»¹⁷.

There are other conventions of erotic mysticism prevalent in the writings of both the mystics themselves and the poets who draw on mystic experiences to describe the very heights of human encounters with the divine. Gastronomic-olfactory imagery, costly and exotic in its enticing eroticism, mixes the appetites in such Crashaw poems as «Name of Jesus,» «the divine name, with all its

¹² S. Woods, *Introduction*, p. 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ F. Molekamp, *Reading Christ the Book in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «Studies in Philology», 109, 2012, p. 328. Molekamp traces the history of medieval mysticism to the practice of affective piety in the early modern period, offering numerous examples of aristocratic English women who engaged in the practice, thus establishing its presence in the culture.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

¹⁶ Quoted in F. Molekamp, *Reading Christ*, p. 328.

¹⁷ L. Busfield. *Gender and the Spectacle of the Cross: Aemilia Lanyer in Context* «Reformation & Renaissance Review» 17 (2), 2015, pp. 129-141.

'Nectareall fragrancý,' has SWEETES . . . suck't from out it'¹⁸. The function, of course, is to shock. Georges Bataille, writing of eroticism's purpose states:

The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity¹⁹.

This lack of continuity of which Bataille writes, this breaking up of identity, of the individual, this loss of self, of normal function, results in a «breaking down of established patterns»²⁰. This whole business of eroticism can be seen enacted and aggrandized, staged and hyped into extravagance in the poetry of not only Donne, Crashaw, and others, but the poetry of Aemilia Lanyer as well. But it is Lanyer's narrator who confesses that the eroticization of Christ has gone too far.

3. The Bridegroom

The type of eroticism in Lanyer's poetry is as controversial as her perceived devotion and piety. Many critics, like Wendy Wall, have argued that Lanyer's Christ is a feminized Christ who has taken on the characteristics of the ideal woman, one who is constant, truthful, and one that is the reflection of the community of virtuous ladies to which Lanyer has dedicated her poem²¹. Arguing for a more masculine Christ, several critics, like Theresa DiPasquale, have argued for Christ as the consummate male lover, not a feminized Christ, one who is «gloriously, specifically *male*, a God whose freely-flowing blood is the ultimate ejaculation»²². While it is true that the speaker, in the dedicatory poems, uses the language of erotized romantic love in the Petrarchan tradition, calling Christ a «lover,» «love» and «Bridegroom» of the other women, Lanyer's narrator reserves the most erotized version, the most aggressively displayed version of Christ for herself alone. Lanyer's Christ in the Bridegroom stanzas, I argue, is an idealized chivalric lover that is masculine, heterosexual, honorable, and true, one pledged to the narrator, and not to the Lady Cumberland. I further argue that the narrator in these stanzas has been drawn into the poem at this point, the Lady Cumberland forgotten as the narrator fantasizes about Christ as her perfect Petrarchan lover. Christ has become for this narrator an erotic object-choice, aspects of the flesh catalogued, true to the form of not only courtly love conventions, but early modern affective piety as well. Here, Lanyer, like the sonnet sequence authors of the period, focuses on the various parts of the body, in this case the male anatomy, face, cheeks, hair, lips, much like,

¹⁸ A. Wong, *Mystic Excess: Extravagance and Indecorum in Richard Crashaw*, «Cambridge Quarterly», 39 (4), 2010, p. 361.

¹⁹ G. Bataille, *Erotism*, trans. M. Dalwood, London 1962, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ W. Wall, *The Imprint of Gender*, p. 329.

²² T. DiPasquale, *Woman's Desire for Man in Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «Journal of English and German Philology», 2000, p. 362.

interestingly enough, Mary Wroth's catalogue of Amphilanthus in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. And like the Christian women practicing affective piety she dwells on the beautiful risen Christ, meditating, rhapsodizing. But what is revealed here is this meditation is not on the divine, but on the sensuousness of the male body imagined before us.

Lanyer's yearning desire in the Bridegroom passages, her eroticism and extravagance, her images of the flesh are all conventions of affective piety. Like the reigning poets of the day, Lanyer uses literary conventions such as the blazon and biblical allegory to enhance her poetry. But the biblical allegory in the Bridegroom passages has been changed. Instead of her use of the Song of Songs as an allegory for Christ as the Bridegroom, and the Bride as either the holy Church or the Christian soul as many writers of the medieval and early modern periods have done, Lanyer uses the references to this very famous biblical poem as a depiction of Christ as her lover²³. Therefore, the literary conventions of affective piety, blazon, and biblical allegory become conflated in the hands of this female poet, which results in a release from convention whereby she becomes sexually explicit and empowered. Her eroticism, however, becomes disturbing when we realize the male body which is displayed in *Salve Deus* is that of the crucified and risen Christ. As the narrator catalogs the body of Christ, she becomes caught up in a sensuous display of male body and female longing.

4. The Bridegroom Passages

While there are differing views on what bible Lanyer consulted when writing *Salve Deus*, Andrew Fleck contends that Lanyer used a variety of bibles. Below is a section of Chapter 5, verses 10-13 of the *Song of Solomon* from the Geneva Bible, a bible Lanyer favored:

My well beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest of ten thousand.
His head is as fine gold, his locks curled, and black as a raven.
His eyes are like doves upon the rivers of waters, which are washed with milk,
and remain by the full vessels.
His cheeks are as a bed of spices, and as sweet flowers, and his lips like lilies
dropping down pure myrrh.

Lanyer uses these verses to construct her own bridegroom passages, weaving some of the wording into her own vision of the resurrected Christ in quite beautiful language and flowing verses²⁴. While Lanyer's blazon of the Crucified

²³ See, for example, H. Wilcox's discussion of the traditional reading of Christ, the Bridegroom passages, *Whom the Lord with love affecteth: Gender and the Religious Poet, 1590-1633*, in D. Clarke (ed.), *This Double Voice: Gendered Writing in Early Modern England*, New York 2000, p. 202. See also, E. Clark, *The Celibate Bridegroom and His Virginal Brides: Metaphor and the Marriage of Jesus in Early Christian Ascetic Exegesis*, «Church History», 77 (1), 2008, pp. 1-25.

²⁴ A. Fleck, *To Write of Him and Pardon Crave: Negotiating Biblical Authority in Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies», 47 (3), 2017, pp.

Christ is moving in its evocation of pity, the blazon of the risen Christ celebrates his humanity:

This is that Bridegroom that appears so faire,
So sweet, so lovely in his Spouses sight, (1305-06)

From the very beginning the narrator dwells on Christ as lover – the «Bridegroom» that is «so faire,» «so sweet,» «so lovely.» Using phrases from the Song of Songs, Lanyer dwells on the beauty of Christ with a list of adjectives, heightening the import with the repetition of the adverb intensifier, «so.» But it is the spouse of the second line that holds the key to the passage. In the introduction to the passion, the narrator refers to Christ as the «Husband» of Lady Cumberland's «Soule» (253). The reference, here, is quite clear, since Lanyer has provided us with a note in the margin which reads: «To the Ladie of Cumberland the Introduction to the passion of Christ» (62). There is no mistaking that Lanyer intended the Lady Cumberland as Christ's spouse. Similarly, after the blazon of the crucified Christ, Lanyer refers to Lady Cumberland as «Deere Spouse of Christ» (1170). Again, Lanyer makes it undoubtedly clear that the spousal reference is to Lady Cumberland because the margin note states: «To my Ladie of Cumberland» (101). At the beginning of the Bridegroom stanzas, however, there is no such clarity. There is no marginal note for this stanza, no reference to whom spouse refers. It is not until we get to the third stanza of the Bridegroom passages where Lanyer, again, makes it clear that she is leaving in Lady Cumberland's heart «His perfect picture, where it will stand» (1325). Again, we know that Lanyer intends to give this picture of Christ to the Lady Cumberland because of an in-text address, «Therefore (goode Madame)» (1325), and the marginal note, «To my Ladie of Cumberland» (108). Thus, Lanyer is very precise in her marginal notes, giving explicit indications when she wants to designate Lady Cumberland the spouse of Christ. What is striking about the first two lines of the Bridegroom stanzas is that there is no indication that Lady Cumberland is intended as the spouse of Christ at this point in the poem. Given the above, and the remainder of this stanza and the next one, we can assume that the speaker here intends to have the Bridegroom for her spouse, intends to possess him for herself, in the tradition of affective piety. It is, as we will see, only the mangled, bleeding body of Christ, «a man in miserable case,» which she gives to the Lady Cumberland two stanzas later (1330). The handsome, lovely Bridegroom she reserves for herself. This sexualized speaker's possessiveness is already apparent in the first two lines.

545-560. See also R. Gregory, *Marrying Jesus in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe: Popular Culture and Religious Reform*, New York, 2016. *Geneva Bible, Song of Solomon*, 1560, Genevabible.org. Accessed 25 June 2014. E. Jones, *Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum and the King James Bible*, in K. M. S. Bezio and S. Oldenburg (eds.), *Religion and the Early Modern British Marketplace*, London 2021. Jones argues that Lanyer challenged the authoritarianism of the *King James Bible* with her subversive text.

Continuing on with the blazon of the risen Christ, Lanyer catalogs His attributes with the aid of the Song of Songs:

That unto Snowe we may his face compare,
His cheekes like skarlet, and his eyes so bright
As purest Doves that in the rivers are,
Washed with milke, to give the more delight; (1307-10)

Female desire and longing permeates the lines as the speaker catalogs her lover's attributes, attributes which emphasize the white skin and red cheeks of the ideal English beloved of the Petrarchan inspired male love poetry of the early modern period. Here Lanyer, like Mary Wroth, has reversed the Petrarchan love poetry, describing the male lover in terms of the ideal British beauty's red and white, cataloging the attributes in a blazon, holding up the male body as object, an object much beloved, female desire «delight[ing]» in and savoring the male body. Compare, for example, Mary Wroth's blazon of Amphilanthus from *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*²⁵:

Can pleasing sight, misfortune ever bring?
Can firme desire a painefull torment try?
Can winning eyes prove to the hart a sting?
Or can sweet lips in treason hidden ly? (1-4)²⁶

Here Pamphilia traditionally catalogs the virtues of her beloved, the male body before her – his «pleasing sight,» his «firme desire» (erection), his «winning eyes,» and his «sweet lips.» What is dramatized in this quatrain is a female persona taking pleasure in the sight of a nude male body which promises pleasure. Lanyer, like Wroth, has us watching the display of male body, has us watching *the speaker* watching the display of male body, which just happens to be the risen Christ. This double erotic gazing is titillating in its voyeurism, in its performance. This is theater²⁷.

Caroline Bynum, writing about the distinctions between male and female forms of mysticism in the later Middle Ages, states: «Women were more apt to somatize religious experience and to write in intense bodily metaphors; women mystics were more likely than men to receive graphically physical visions of God; both men and women were inclined to attribute to women and encourage in them intense asceticisms and ecstasies»²⁸. Commenting on Bynum's findings, Amy Hollywood notes that it is in only female authored mystical texts, not male

²⁵ M. Wroth, *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. J. A. Roberts, Baton Rouge 1983, p. 87.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

²⁷ This paragraph was taken from S. O'Hara, *The Theatricality of Mary Wroth's Pamphilia to Amphilanthus: Unmasking Conventions in Context*, Selinsgrove 2011, pp. 45-47.

²⁸ C. Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, New York 1991, p. 194.

authored texts, that we find these intense bodily metaphors²⁹. Notice below the intensity of Lanyer's description of Christ's body:

His head is likened to the finest gold,
His curled lockes so beauteous to behold;
Blacke as a Raven in her blackest hew; (1311-13)

Although Lanyer does not use metaphors in the lines above, her similes are intense and hyperbolic. Christ's head is «likened to the finest gold,» precious, exotic, of the east, intensely exquisite, of inestimable value. His hair so «beauteous to behold,» accentuates the luxuriousness of His hair, hair that hyperbolically is almost too beautiful to perceive, hinting at the speaker's barely controlled sexual attraction to this divinity's physical attributes. She continues on, comparing the blackness of His hair to a «Raven in her blackest hew,» calling to mind the shiny intensity of a raven's blackness, the form of the word «black» repeated twice, the alliteration picking up on the previous line's «beauteous» and «behold.» The word «His» is also repeated twice, emphasizing gender, dwelling on masculinity, bordering on ecstasy. Lanyer, writing in the intensity of the period's affective piety, has developed the persona to the point where we begin to perceive her religiosity as a disturbing, self-induced rapturous yearning. Indeed, Laurie Finke, commenting on the writings of many female mystics, labels them emotional, with intensely personal involvement, an «affective nature,» which «may in fact be expressed through violence on the body»³⁰.

Also unsettling is Lanyer's use of biblical conventions that are extravagant in their indecorum, situating her in the genre of early modern affective piety. The speaker continues:

His lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet
Than is the sweetest hony dropping dew.
Or hony combes, where all the Bees doe meet; (1314-16)

The first phrase of this passage, «His lips like skarlet threeds» is a direct quotation from the Song of Songs³¹. Here Lanyer adds phrase upon phrase, building upon and sensualizing the quotation she has copied from the *Canticles*. The phrase «yet much more sweet» enhances the appearance of the scarlet lips, drawing on the sense of taste which can only be accomplished by kissing the lips. She pushes further, building the image with words that roll off the reader's tongue, involving us further with: «sweetest hony dropping dew.» His lips are again described three lines later for they are like «Lillies, dropping downe pure

²⁹ A. Hollywood, *Suffering Transformed: Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and the Problem of Women's Spirituality*, in B. McGinn (ed.), *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, New York 1994, p. 90.

³⁰ L. Finke, *Mystical Bodies*, in U. Wiethaus (ed.), *Maps of Flesh and Light: The Religious Experience of Medieval Women Mystics*, Syracuse NY, 1993, p. 37.

³¹ S. Woods, *Introduction*, p. 107.

mirrhe.» The myrrh, here, referring to the fragrance of his lips, his mouth. The richness of the adjectives used in this passage, as well as the emotions which they evoke, lead us to believe that the narrator has tasted Christ's lips, or at least had fantasized about doing so. Thus, Christ's divinity is further reduced while the man, the lover, remains. Drawing on the gastronomic-olfactory imagery of early modern affective piety, the speaker is caught up in the sensuousness of the male body before her, losing her identity in eroticism as Bataille posits³². Engrossed in the eroticism, in the sweet taste, the smell, the rapture, not the divinity, but rather the maleness of Christ, the speaker has lost her identity, her concept of self.

As the honey drops from this lover's sensuous lips, we are reminded of his constancy and the truth of this perfect lover's words:

Yea, he is constant, and his words are true,
His cheeks are beds of spices, flowers sweet;
His lips, like Lillies, dropping downe pure mirrhe,
Whose love, before all worlds we doe preferre. (1317-20)

His constancy and His truthfulness are standard courtly love attributes for this male beloved. He is the perfect aristocratic lover according to the chivalric romances, honorable, steadfast, loyal and true. In Lanyer's eroticized Christ, in her ardor, she has created a fantasized perfect lover. She continues, and again dwells on the physical aspects, the loveliness of his cheeks, the sweet fragrance of his male presence. At the end of this stanza, the narrator rejects "all worlds" for the microcosmic world of two lovers, Christ the man, the lover, and his beloved. The speaker's loss of self in this microcosm, the rapture, the self-absorption, the «partial dissolution of the person» caused by the eroticism as Bataille would have it, renders the speaker enraptured, enthralled, seemingly without awareness of her surroundings. Lanyer has again taken convention and manipulated it for her own ends, creating an erotic world where mortal joins with Christ, where the body is displayed, and the senses gratified. This union with Christ the lover is the ultimate metaphor of early modern affective piety. In a clever collapse of boundaries between erotic affective piety and courtly love conventions, Lanyer skillfully negotiates between the sacred and the profane, titillating readers.

5. The Confession

But there is an abrupt shift in focus in the third stanza of the Bridegroom passages when Lanyer's narrator drops her focus on the eroticized Christ and instead forces the focus on herself as if she is ashamed of the titillating eroticism she has just envisioned. With this intrusion of the narrator, the emphasis is on

³² For a discussion of gastronomic-olfactory imagery see A. Wong, *Mystic Excess*, p. 364.

self in the third stanza with the repetition of first person personal pronouns «I» and «me.»

Ah! Give me leave (good lady) now to leave
This taske of Beauty which I tooke in hand,
I cannot wade so deepe, I may deceive
My selfe, before I can attaine the land: (1321-24)

With this focus on «I,» Lanyer is quite obviously calling not only our attention to «This taske of Beauty» which she has accomplished, but with the addition of «good lady» she is particularly singling out the Lady Cumberland to admire her poetry. The marginal note specifically denotes «To my Ladie of Cumberland» (108). The tone is one of poet searching for commendation which is signaled by the abrupt shift from the eroticism of Christ the Bridegroom to a focus on poetic accomplishment. In this stanza we can also see the abrupt separation from the sensual world created in the previous two stanzas. The repetition of «leave» in the first line and the reiteration of «leave» in the fifth line signal a moving away and abandonment of the previous eroticism. The next two lines comprise a metaphor which is exceedingly important for our understanding of these four Bridegroom stanzas, and perhaps the whole poem as well. «I cannot wade so deepe [...] before I can attaine the land» (1323-24), metaphorically suggests the plight of someone who has waded into water so deep that the water is engulfing her before she can either make it back to land or cross over to the land. Regardless of the situation, this is an image of someone who has gone too far. For Lanyer's speaker, the phrase «I cannot wade so deepe» externalizes the internal conflict of the narrator, who candidly confesses her guilt at the obvious eroticism of Christ the Bridegroom. The next phrase, «I may deceive / My selfe» (1323-24), carries the confession of guilt further, carries the internal, emphatic «My selfe» again externally, so that we may see the pain of guilt, so that the Lady Cumberland can see the effacing of self, so that other possible patrons, male and female patrons, can see the deliberate eroticizing of Christ as a titillating, sinful confession. The once brash, emboldened narrator worries whether she «can attaine the land,» can attain the patronage or can obtain forgiveness for the irreverence of sexualizing Christ. The tone here is plaintive, one of the anxiety of the patronage seeking poet. But it is the narrator's intrusive confession of having «wade[d] so deepe,» which leaves us questioning the narrator's word usage. For this confession, this admission of guilt, makes the eroticism all the more titillating, suggesting Lanyer is making a bid for the patronage of both female and male readers who might just find the juxtaposing of erotic affective piety, with the violence it entails, all the more intriguing, the confession all the more titillating. As Larson points out, there was a male fascination with access to the

female closet, a male desire to spy on women's reading, a transgressive voyeuristic male gaze to which, I argue, Lanyer seems to be playing³³.

6. The Mangled Bleeding Christ

The above critical function of confession, this admission of guilt renders the persona self-censoring, if not self-punishing, and leads to a redirection in focus whereby Lady Cumberland's heart becomes the vessel for Christ's perfect picture:

Therefore (good Madame) in your heart I leave
His perfect picture, where it still shall stand,
Deeply engraved in that holy shrine,
Environed with Love and Thoughts divine. (1325-28)

Lanyer moves away from the eroticism of the earlier stanzas and refocuses on the divinity of Christ. She also focuses on the heart of the Lady Cumberland, which is a «holy shrine,» one that is filled with love and meditates on the divinity of Christ. The alliteration of «still shall stand» and «shrine» becomes insistent, blunt and to the point, despite the aside, «(good Madame).» The picture of Christ will be «Deeply engraved,» emblazoned and memorialized.

In the next stanza Christ is a «God in glory» and «a man in miserable case.» There are no references to the sexualized, perfect chivalric lover of the first two bridegroom stanzas:

There may you see him as a God in glory,
And as a man in miserable case;
There may you reade his true and perfect storie,
His bleeding body there you may embrace,
And kisse his dying cheeks with teares of sorrow, (1329-33)

Lady Cumberland is to treasure Christ's «perfect picture» as either a God or as a man dying on the cross, not as the perfect human lover, the bridegroom, a lover in all his physical, earthly glory as he was represented in the first two stanzas. Here the «man in miserable case» is fleshed out in violent images of the dying Christ, «His bleeding body there you may embrace / And kisse his dying cheeks with teares of sorrow.» The extravagant destruction of flesh, a flesh that only two stanzas ago was eroticized, has been incorporated into Lanyer's convention following early modern affective piety.

Lanyer presses on with the violent images of all Lady Cumberland's prayers and all her good deeds stopping Christ's «cruell wounds that bleeds»:

³³ K. Larson, *Reading the Space of the Closet*, p. 11.

With joyfull grieve, you may intreat for grace;
And all your prayers, and your almes-deeds
May bring to stop his cruell wounds that bleeds. (1334-36)

The «you» singles out Lady Cumberland, focusing on her good deeds as acts of Christian charity, showcasing the Lady Cumberland's love for Christ. Thus, according to Constance Furey, Lanyer «alludes to the process whereby an example becomes a catalyst. When one is sympathetic, inclined to see the good, one is inclined to emulate the good that one sees»³⁴. Lady Cumberland is an example to all Christian women and therefore they should follow her lead in performing good deeds.

But let us examine Lanyer's stratagem more closely. We assume in the third stanza of the bridegroom passages that the narrator is giving to Lady Cumberland the «perfect picture,» that is, the perfect picture she has just described as Christ the Bridegroom, the beautiful and sexualized man, the man in all His earthy flesh, the man for which this speaker yearns. But instead, we find out in the beginning of the fourth stanza that the Christ the speaker is giving to Lady Cumberland is the bloody, tortured, crucified Christ, the «man in miserable case.» This possessive persona has reserved Christ the Bridegroom for herself only. The visceral, pathetic, sorrow-inducing picture of Christ is sketched out with such descriptions as «bleeding body,» «dying cheekes,» and «cruell wounds that bleeds.» The violence of affective piety has been foisted, slyly and underhandedly thrust on the Lady Cumberland, while the eroticism, the beauty, the languishing, the microcosm of two lovers is reserved for the speaker alone.

These stratagems on the part of Lanyer, the intrusion of the narrator and her confession of the eroticization of Christ and the foisting of the violent picture of the bloody and crucified Christ onto the Lady Cumberland instead of the image of the lovely Bridegroom, create doubt in the minds of readers³⁵. The text forces us to question the effect of the poem on readers. Is she surreptitiously making fun of the devotion and piety of very religious Christians, ones practicing affective piety? Is she satirizing the aspects of early modern affective piety, what she considers an over-the-top piety? Arguably, there are some aspects of formal satire in which Lanyer engages. Northrop Frye, writing in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, discusses the conventions of satire: «Two things, then, are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. Attack without humor, or pure denunciation, forms one of the boundaries of satire. . . . To attack anything, writer and audience must agree on its undesirability»³⁶. Some

³⁴ C. Furey, *The Selfe Undone: Individualism and Relationality in John Donne and Aemilia Lanyer*, «Harvard Theological Review», 99 (4), 2006, pp. 469-486.

³⁵ For an opposing reading of the passage, *Therefore (good Madame) in your heart I leave*, see M. Lamb, *Patronage and Class in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, in M. E. Burke, *Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*, ed. Syracuse NY 2000, p. 49.

³⁶ N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton 1957, p. 223.

would think Lanyer's eroticized Christ both fantastical and absurd, while the violent, detailed description of the bloody and suffering Christ seems grotesque following the beauty and dignity of the Bridegroom. As readers we linger on the image of the Bridegroom's lovely magnificence and then we are hit, when we least expect it, with the grotesque images of the tortured Christ. According to John Shawcross, the satirist raises a question from a critical point of view and the writing «deals only with issues and offers that substance to be evaluated by the reader»³⁷. The satirist controls and directs that evaluation and through «exaggeration, understatement, or distortion» takes on a satiric mode³⁸. What Lanyer is doing is deliberate performance, a vivid illustration. She offers us an exaggerated sexualized image of Christ, which makes us uncomfortable, and sets us up to make judgments on it. What she is calling into question, what is essentially the point of attack, is the practice of early modern affective piety³⁹. The confessional parody is witty, especially since there is an abrupt turn coupled with the sudden realization that the speaker has substituted the Bridegroom with the suffering Christ.

The ideal, the value center which is urged through Lanyer's satire becomes clear in the stanzas following the Bridegroom passages. Shawcross describes the structure of verse satire: «Once that author has loaded the poem to create an argument siding one way or the other, a mode has been established. The satiric mode, common but not always in evidence in verse satire, aims at a certain effect from its reader and may define the author's siding with one belief or another»⁴⁰. The effect Lanyer wishes to create through this demonstration of wit, humor, and satire, the belief she is siding with is the ethos of charitable works. The stanzas following the Bridegroom are a catalog of all the charitable works Lady Cumberland has performed. Christ comes to her in the guise of the «imprison'd, naked, poore, and bare, / Full of diseases, impotent, and lame / Blind, deaf, and dumbe» (1353-55). At the sight of such misery, Lady Cumberland «bestow'st all paines, all cost, all care, / That may relieve him, and his health repaire» (1359-60). Lanyer has thus juxtaposed what seems to be her impression of the static practice of intense prayer leading to rapture and confession with the very active emphasis on charitable works. Thus, through the eroticized and satirized Christ and the parody of confession, Lanyer mocks aspects of affective piety while privileging the important tenet of Christianity, a tenet fully embraced by pious, devout female courtiers, especially this particular devout courtier, Lady

³⁷ J. Shawcross, *Verse Satire: Its Form, Genre, and Mode*, «Connotations» 10 (1), 2000-2001, p. 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁹ A. Baynes Coiro, *Writing in Service: Sexual Politics and Class Position in the Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer and Ben Jonson*, «Criticism», 35, 1993, p. 362. Coiro states: «It is really impossible to emphasize strongly enough how marginal, how unusual her position was in Renaissance England – as a Jew, converted or not, as an Italian, as the wife of a Catholic, as a woman artist making a living as a fringe member of the court».

⁴⁰ J. Shawcross, *Verse Satire*, p. 19.

Cumberland, for it is in her charitable works that her virtue resides⁴¹. This virtue Lanyer portrays as «A thousand deaths shee every day doth die» (1440). Peter Medine, writing about English Renaissance satire states, «the two concerns of the satirist – to upbraid vice and to enforce virtue – merge into a single concern for truth; for the satirist, vice lies in untruth and virtue in wisdom and integrity»⁴². Lanyer seems to be lampooning affective piety practices while emphasizing a potential patron's virtue and integrity, Lady Cumberland's devotion to the needy through «all paines, all cost, all care»⁴³.

Writing of Donne's integration of the sacred and profane, Lindsay Mann argues Donne a product of his milieu, a period when ascetic and spiritualizing mysticisms were at odds with «skeptical and empirical naturalisms, such as the libertinism associated with Montaigne and his followers, the skeptical realism of Machiavelli and his school, the empiricism of Telesio, Galileo and Bacon»⁴⁴. We must not forget that Lanyer was of this age. At least four critics have called into question Lanyer's sincerity. Recall the quotation from Loughlin, page two, discussing Lanyer's work as a cynical use of scripture⁴⁵. Ann Coiro, writing of Lanyer's country house poem, «To Cooke-ham,» calls her use of similes «openly subversive,» for «the poet's voice breaks out in an address to Fortune which is clearly an address to the fortunate as well.» Coiro also calls Lady Clifford's farewell of Cooke-ham «gaspingly funny and demeaning»⁴⁶. Readers are led to believe that Clifford takes leave of the narrator with a kiss. Coiro elaborates: «We are moved by the act of sisterhood. By the next line, however, «To Cooke-ham's whole over –wrought, high art structure of ingratiating simile falls into a ludicrous joke: we realize that Lady Clifford has kissed the tree»⁴⁷. Lisa Schnell, commenting, like Coiro, on the tree kissing above, states that «the countess's unfettered affection for a tree has unmistakable comic, and bitter, irony [...] [Lanyer] must finally steal a kiss from the tree to get what is, in the context of the poem, rightfully hers»⁴⁸. Commenting on Lanyer's choice of the «astonishing» and «strange» title for her volume, John Rogers recalls the biblical account of the

⁴¹ N. Warren, *The Embodied Word: Female Spiritualities, Contested Orthodoxies, and English Religious Cultures, 1350-1700*, Notre Dame, IN, 2010. Warren contends that the separation between medieval Catholicism and early modern Protestantism is less fixed than often presumed.

⁴² Peter E. Medine, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Verse Satire*, «Pacific Coast Philology», 7, 1972, p. 50.

⁴³ C. Keohane, *That Blindest Weakenesse Be Not Over-Bold: Aemilia Lanyer's Radical Unfolding of the Passion*, «ELH», 64(2), 1997, pp. 359-390. Keohane notes the emphasis placed on good works by both Catholics and Protestants: «'Worke' or activity recalls the Catholic (and also Protestant) valuing of works, works either in the Catholic tradition which ensured one's getting to heaven, or in certain Protestant traditions which served to demonstrate one's being of the elect» (369).

⁴⁴ L. Mann, *Sacred and Profane Love in Donne*, «Dalhousie Review» 65, 1985-1986, p. 535.

⁴⁵ M. Loughlin, «Fast t'ld unto them in a golden Chaine», p. 133.

⁴⁶ A. B. Coiro, *Writing in Service*, p. 372.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 373. For a differing view of this incident in the Cooke-ham poem, see A. Greenstadt, 2008 *Aemilia Lanyer's Pathetic Phallacy*, «Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies», 2008, p. 67-97.

⁴⁸ L. Schnell, *Breaking 'the rule of Cortezia'*, p. 33.

soldier who mocked Christ with «Hail the king of the Jews.» Rogers notes that readers are invited to identify not with Christ as expected, but with his crucifiers, prompting Lanyer to apologize in a postscript, «To the doubtfull Reader,» claiming the mocking phrase came to her in a dream many years before⁴⁹.

Critics have thus rightfully questioned Lanyer's motives and sincerity. The possible satire, the cynicism, the parody, the irony, the subversive quality of the text and the act of publishing it, all call into question Lanyer's choices in writing the poem. Like the switch above which Coiro notes when the reader is led to believe Lady Clifford has kissed the speaker and in reality has kissed the tree, similarly we are led to believe that the speaker gives Lady Cumberland the picture of the beautiful and sexualized Bridegroom when in reality she gives her the picture of the tortured, bloody, and dying Christ. These clever maneuvers, the abrupt confession, and the sudden shifts in text force us to consider Lanyer's sense of humor and the aspects of satire contained within her work.

Given her stratagems, the structure of the satire, her motive of the ideal, and her wit, Lanyer is a far more complicated and successful writer than others of the period. Jack Winner, writing of failed satirists of the period, states, «Virulence of attack arrives only at the expense of careful structure and larger coherency»⁵⁰. The careful structure of Lanyer's attack on early modern affective piety signaled most importantly, saliently, by the narrator's intrusion, cannot be emphasized enough. She moves carefully, methodically through a detailed picture of the eroticized Christ, cataloging in this intrusion in intimate detail his various sensuous parts, focusing specifically in this intrusion, making sure her voice is heard, making sure that this meditation on Christ is carried too far to the point that the narrator feels the need to confess. She then confesses to the blasphemy with a first-person intrusion, moves to offer amends by giving Lady Cumberland a «perfect picture» of the Bridegroom, and then, unexpectedly, gives her the suffering Christ instead, all the while the coherency of the satire is waged for privileging the ideal of Lady Cumberland's ethos of charitable works, an ethos which the community of good women should emulate. Thus, the integrity of the satiric voice is preserved.

Lanyer has thus garnered our attention with the erotized Christ in a blatant performance of self-aggrandizement, self-promotion, and self-seeking notoriety which just might have gained her the patronage she so desperately sought. Through the bridegroom passages, she has juxtaposed the erotized Christ with violent images of the Passion, deftly utilizing the conventions of early modern affective piety, which are disturbing in their violence. Lanyer has thus satirized female piety and parodied the practice of confession in a cynical use of religion for her own material ends. Recall the narrator's erotized Christ with her fixation on His body, the dwelling on His virtues, the rapturous-like catalogue of

⁴⁹ J. Rogers, *The Passion of a Female Literary Tradition: Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, «The Huntington Library Quarterly», 63, 2000, pp. 445-446.

⁵⁰ J. Winner, *Ben Jonson's Epigrammes and the Conventions of Formal Verse Satire*, «Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900», 23, 1983, p. 68.

His features, His masculinity. Recall also the narrator's salient intrusion, the confession of having gone too far in Christ's erotization. And of course, there is the narrator's seeming implication of a self exposed, of a self transgressing, of a self garnering notoriety and thus with notoriety, hopefully, there is patronage. She is therefore wildly brazen and amazingly, audaciously defiant, part of what Mann calls the «skeptical and empirical naturalisms» of the age, and not a devotee of the austere, ascetic affective piety of the era. Juxtaposing early modern affective piety and Lanyer's poem gives us more insight into early modern women's daring attempts to defiantly critique a culture which consistently stifled any type of female dissention. Whether satire or no, the Bridegroom stanzas are a remarkable performance, a collapse of propriety through which an early modern woman was able to display not affective piety, but an earthy female desire for an idealized courtly lover through the use of early modern affective piety.

Susan Lauffer O'Hara
Georgian Court University
✉ sohara@georgian.edu

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