UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

DR. JOE C. JACKSON COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Edmond, Oklahoma

Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry of Dialectical Devotion

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

By

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Edmond, Oklahoma

2010

Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry

of Dialectical Devotion

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

April 20, 2010

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TITLE OF THESIS: Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry of Dialectical Devotion

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Dr. G.S. Lewis

PAGES: 97

Disparate and dialectical dialogues characterize sixteenth-century British cultural, religious, and political ideologies. Christian ideology, in its various forms and interpretations, was most commonly cited as support for various political and cultural debates, particularly the *querelle des femmes*, the formal controversy regarding women's equality. Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, when read in its entirety including the dedicatory and closing poems, enters the formal controversy and establishes spiritual and political equality for women, while working within existing Christian ideology and adhering to biblical source texts. Lanyer weaves a coherent woman-centered theology by creating a tapestry from the disparate dialogical threads of patriarchal ideology and medieval mystical tradition, framed by the conventions of British sonnets and Courtly Love.

Acknowledgements

Make glad and sorry seasons as thou fleet'st,
And do whate'er thou wilt, swift-footed Time

 - *William Shakepseare*

The past two years I have invested in this work make me keenly aware of Time, and the swiftness of its passing. My experience working with this text has been a rewarding one, and I want to extend my thanks to those who passed the time with me. To my friends, thank you for the countless hours of listening to me talk through my ideas, and also for the moments you offered encouragement. To Dr. Macey and Dr. Rice, thank you for your thoughtful responses to my text, and for your willingness to assist whenever I needed it. Finally, to Dr. Lewis, I extend my unending thanks. You are my teacher, my mentor, and my friend, and this work could not have been completed without you.

Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry of Dialectical Devotion

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Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry of Dialectical Devotion

Introduction

I first encountered Aemilia Lanyer in a sixteenth-century British literature seminar in my senior year as an undergraduate. I immediately became interested in her, first intrigued by A.L. Rowse's suggestion that Lanyer is the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnet, but it was Lanyer's implementation of sonnet conventions that piqued my curiosity even further. Though Lanyer published in 1611 and did not write in the sonnet form, she is still kin to the sonneteers of the Elizabethan age, implementing the framework of longstanding sonnet convention to emphasize the dialectic present in the culture and its aesthetic practice.

Studying Lanyer in concert with Shakespeare, Marlowe, Donne, and Spenser, and building on the foundation of the Italian sonnets with Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* created a

unique framework within which to view the *Salve Deus*, Lanyer's principal work. Sixteenth-century English cultural ideology is characterized by theological tension, which manifests itself in the literature and political debates of the time. Lanyer's presentation of the devotion of women creates another thread in the dialectic of religious ideology and devotion that is present in Christian theological and literary tradition. Lanyer's text illuminates the tensions present in sixteenth-century English culture, resolving the paradoxical views on women by weaving together past literary and religious tradition.

The threads of devotion present throughout Lanyer's text comprise a portion of a tapestry of religious writings. Lanyer's text brings into relief the dialectic of devotion by weaving the conventions of past devotional writing together with the binding thread of accepted convention. Contrary to some critical arguments, her devotion is not a veil thrown over her work in order to make the feminist message acceptable, but rather an expression of devotion that is constructed from past tradition and adherence to Biblical text. The permeation of religion into every facet of life, which is expressed in the text of the *Salve Deus*, is an element of devotion practiced by Christian mystics. Lanyer does not separate

religious ideology from politics, but, instead, provides a text that epitomizes woman's worthiness of equality in everyday life and her superiority in spiritual matters.

Lanyer's tapestry is woven from the threads of medieval mysticism and courtly love language and conventions and is bound by an ideology that returns to and strictly adheres to the source texts of the Old and New Testaments. In this way she steps into the dialectic, but instead of creating more tension, she presents a way to weave the disparate elements of religious ideology together. By idealizing and feminizing Christ in the fashion of the sonnets and, further placing Christ's most devoted followers on equal footing with him, Lanyer employs a narrative strategy in her verse that creates a new dialogue and narrative that is free of the theological and philosophical tensions present in mainstream sixteenth-century English cultural and religious ideology regarding women.

Lanyer, born in 1569, was the daughter of court musician Baptist Bassano and Margaret Johnson. The majority of the information regarding her comes from the journals of London astrologer Simon Forman, the rest from public record and the autobiographical elements of the *Salve Deus* (Woods, *Poems*, xv). First through her parents, then through her

position as mistress to Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon, and her subsequent marriage to court minstrel Alphonso Lanyer, she moved in court circles throughout her life. Because of her position, she was afforded greater education than her class status warranted, and this education is demonstrated in her sophisticated verse. Further evidence of her education is illustrated by documents written for a lawsuit she levied against a landlord in a rents dispute (Woods, *Poems*, xxvii). Her active participation in this dispute demonstrated her level of education and her strong spirit.

Lanyer's movement within the court circles also led to A.L. Rowse's speculation that she might be the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets. While Lanyer is now recognized as a poet in her own right, her movement within court circles during Shakespeare's lifetime emphasizes her kinship with the sonneteers of the sixteenth century, even though publication of her work took place in the Jacobean era. The methods used in Lanyer's text revisit the conventions of the sonnet, which traditionally idealized a Lady, placing her on a pedestal as an object of inspiring or torturing desire. The sonnet employed courtly love language and the literary device of a Lady, working within the strict framework of poetic structure, to discuss matters such as spiritual growth, personal suffering, or political strife.

The love language present in the sonnets harkens back not only to the tradition of courtly love, but also to the devotional outpourings of the medieval mystics. The shift throughout Western Europe in the twelfth century from a militant religious outlook to a religion that focused on mystical romance between Christ and devotee created a unique opportunity for women to become more active in devotional practices (Flinders 1). The near simultaneous development of the courtly love tradition and growth of the Christian mystical tradition complemented each other, as the language used to describe and idealize the Lady also proved useful to describe and idealize Christ as lover.

Using the language developed in the courtly love tradition, sixteenth-century English poetry provides many sonnets, which often take as their subject women, objects of love, placed on pedestals far out of the reach of their admirers. Before Sidney gave us Stella and Spenser gave us Gloriana, however, Petrarch gave us Laura, building on Dante's portrayal of Beatrice to establish the conventions not only of the sonnet, but also of all English Renaissance poetic expression (Lewis, Aug 26, 2007). Petrarch’s ladylove, the beautiful Laura, serves not only as tormenter, remaining just out of reach, but also as inspiration, leading him to God. The type of woman changes

as we move into the sonnet sequences of the sixteenth century, yet the conventions are preserved. In the introduction to his anthology, Robert M. Bender tells us that the rigid form of the sonnet creates a framework for the poet to work against (2). Gary Waller's discussion of the sonnet illustrates the uses of Petrarchan framework in English poetry, noting that the "characteristics of paradox and balanced desire of frustration . . . gives the thought its tension" (79). Sir Philip Sidney adopts Petrarch's standard, using his lady as the source of his artistic inspiration, yet realizing that Stella pulls Astrophil down into misery rather than lifting him up to heaven, as is the case with Petrarch and Laura, the model for this tradition. Despite the different uses of the lady, both poets have developed a literary construct for the purpose of discussing other issues. While Laura and Stella are both based on real women, those we see in the *Rime Sparse* and *Astrophil and Stella* are not the flesh and blood women whom Petrarch and Sidney encountered. They are fictions developed for the purposes of the poet.

While there is a precedent in Dante's portrayal of Beatrice for Petrarch portraying Laura as spiritual inspiration, there is also another, and more dominant, image of women as sinful and depraved beings. An extension

of the Aristotelian belief that women were defective men (Matheson 56), this ideology of women as evil is also a result of Eve being assigned responsibility for Original Sin. An intriguing dichotomy occurs in the contrast between the Virgin Mary and Eve, correlating to the contrast between Laura, who leads to heaven, and Stella, who leads to despair. This contrast reflects the view of women as chaste and pure at the same time that they are portrayed as the root of evil and shame in Christian tradition.

My use of the term "ideology" is consistent with Roland Barthes's understanding of the concept. Barthes identifies ideology as unconscious assumptions that are culturally conditioned over time. This coincides with Gary Waller's usage in his exploration of sixteenth-century poetry:

> Ideology is being used not to mean a static set of false or partial ideas which lie behind and determine the meanings of texts, but rather a complex of distinctive practices and social relations which are characteristic of any society and which are inscribed in the language of that society. 'Ideology' therefore applies to all the largely unconscious assumptions and acts by which men and women relate to their world; it is a system of images, attitudes, feelings, myths, and gestures which the members who make up that society habitually take for granted. All societies are held together by an ideology. (9)

The ideology of sixteenth century England was strongly dependent on religious imagery and attitudes that

established a right place and position for every individual within the group. A prevailing religious image complex, even today, is that of Adam and Eve being cast from the Garden of Eden because of Eve's sin of eating the forbidden fruit, and in turn, corrupting Adam by tempting him to eat of the fruit as well. Because Eve was assumed to be the cause of Original Sin, woman's rightful place in society was established as one of subservience to man, and was believed to be obviously prone to evil and inferior to him in intelligence as well.

This argument, coupled with the Aristotelian belief that women are flawed human beings, was at the center of the *querelle des femmes*, or the debate about women. Linda Woodbridge and Sue Matheson, among others, contextualize and discuss the *querelle*. Matheson's discussion is particularly useful in understanding Lanyer's position in this debate. Eve was blamed for the Fall from Eden, and her curiosity was alleged to have been the cause of this fall. As a result, the question of whether or not women should be educated, and in what capacity they should be educated, was an intensely debated topic (Matheson 55). Women in power also became a heated issue, which is not surprising, considering the number of women in power at the time. The arguments of intellectuals, such as John Knox and King

James I, were strongly influenced by Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (56), and "pamphleteering became the medium in which the woman controversy was most energetically conducted" (57).

After the death of Edward VI, English subjects were required to adjust not only to a return to Catholicism, but also to the concept of a female heir to the throne. Mary Tudor's reign was tumultuous, to say the least. Her marriage to Philip II of Spain and her strict adherance to Catholicism sent many Protestant subjects out of the country for fear of being tried for heresy (Logan & Greenblatt 476). Upon her death and Elizabeth's ascension to the throne, subjects were required to readjust to Protestantism, and also to a queen without a king.

An antithetical image to the depraved and sinful Eve is that of Mary, the virgin mother of Christ. With the advent of Protestantism and the precarious position of Catholicism, the cult of the Virgin Mary was replaced by the Cult of the Virgin Queen. Studies on the political ramifications of Elizabeth's position as sovereign monarch abound. Two particular studies, one by Leah S. Marcus and the other by Theodora A. Jankowski, explore the concept of androgyny as employed in order for Elizabeth I to secure authority. Jankowski writes, "Elizabeth became a

representative of the suppressed cult of the Blessed Virgin as well as the total Tudor woman" (70). In Elizabeth's precarious position as a lone female monarch, she necessarily had to fashion a new language and symbolism to refer to herself, considering that "no language existed for describing the nature of female rule" (54). Cleverly applying masculine terms to herself, such as Prince and King, she commanded the authority of a male leader, but also used her female body to assert the authority of a Queen, and further, the authority of a mother for her children (65). Elizabeth's "Speech to the Troops at Tilbury" exemplifies her use of androgynous language:

> I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and a king of England, too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain, or any prince of Europe, should dare to invade the borders of my realm; to which, rather than any dishonor should grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field. I know already for your forwardness you have deserved rewards and crowns; and we do assure you on the word of a prince, they shall be duly paid you. (597)

By carefully crafting this image for herself, Elizabeth provided a substitute for the Virgin Mary in the hearts of her people, also creating a virtuous example of womanhood. These dual images of man/woman, virgin/mother served as a tool allowing Elizabeth I to work against and within the

framework of her day, just as the poets at Court were compelled to do, while also providing a valuable contradiction to the sinful image of Eve. If a woman could be such a shining example for her people and could inspire Spenser to create Gloriana, perhaps women weren't as corrupt as the ideology held them to be.

Lanyer's use of the disparate elements of Christian theology and Medieval and Renaissance literary tradition, challenges dominant views regarding women in order to develop a new dialogue that places women on equal spiritual, and therefore political, footing with men. The tensions present between Renaissance ideological and theological traditions are brought into relief and relieved through her emphasis on personal experience, rather than with accepted and dominant beliefs. The chapters in this study, *Aemilia Lanyer's Threads in the Tapestry of Dialectical Devotion*, examine Lanyer's implementation of tradition in order to deliver her message. "The Dialectic of Comfort and Suffering: Lanyer's Retelling of the Passion of Christ," demonstrates her use of a personal voice and personal experience in the *Salve Deus*. She places herself directly in the narrative, addressing Christ and the Countess of Cumberland and drawing comfort from the account of Christ's suffering, humiliation, and subsequent

exhaltation. "The Dialogue of Equality: Eve's Exoneration and the *Querelle des Femmes*" demonstrates that the *Salve Deus* is part of the *querelle des femmes*, the formal debate regarding women. Lanyer uses accepted sixteenth-century Engish ideology and reliance on Biblical text to prove women's spiritual equality with men. The next chapter, "Content and Form: Dialectic Tension of Sonnets and Courtly Love," demonstrates adherence to the conventions of courtly love, love language, and the sonnet. Lanyer idealizes women and Christ, placing women in a position of high favor and near equality with him. The final chapter, "Discourse of Mortification and Love: Dialectic of Mysticism and Spiritual Union," visits the concepts of Christian mysticism. Lanyer uses this tradition to accentuate women's experience and close affinity to Christ, and further establishes female virtue.

The seemingly disparate threads of centuries of theological and ideological practice are woven together to create a unified perspective that acknowledges the equality of all virtuous followers of Christ and grants spiritual and political authority to women.

The Dialectic of Comfort and Suffering: Lanyer's Retelling of the Passion of Christ

Chapter 1

Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, published in 1611, has provoked questions concerning its treatment of the relationship between women and virtue. While the poem does share similarities with other works of devotional literature, the differences have garnered the greatest amount of attention from the critics. Rather than treating Lanyer's Passion narrative as devotional literature, critics often interpret the *Salve Deus* as a feminist tract loosely disguised by religion, and some see it as a purely mercenary bid for patronage. As Pamela Benson discusses, devotional literature was already an acceptable genre for female writers, presenting a ready avenue for Lanyer's message, which is one of female equality achieved through religious devotion. She emphasizes Lanyer's quest for

patronage, claiming that "if we peel away the words calculated to attract patronage like the layers of the proverbial onion, little, if anything, is left" (244).

The bold feministic nature of Lanyer's writing need not negate devotion, and the bid for patronage does not signal misuse of the religious subject, or lack of subject beyond patronage. Asserting female goodness and superiority in spiritual matters does not undermine the motives or message of devotional literature. Instead of assuming Lanyer's treatment of religion to be a façade, I follow Barbara K. Lewalski's interpretation of the *Salve Deus* as presenting a feminocentric writing of the Passion ("Of God and Good Women"), but I argue that Lanyer's use of religious material creates an opportunity for women to experience and be empowered by the crucifixion in a way unique from men.

As Lewalski discusses in her article, "Seizing Discourses and Reinventing Genres," Lanyer

> challenges patriarchal ideology and the discourses supporting it, opposing the construct of women as chaste, silent, obedient, and subordinate, and displacing the hierarchical authority of father's and husbands. (49)

Lewalski and several other feminist critics see *Salve Deus* as creating a community of good women that contrasted sharply with men and their faults through the use of

dedicatory verse directed to female patrons. Sharon Cadman Seelig, for example, interprets the nobility addressed in the dedicatory verses as constituting a community of strong women. In a similar vein, Ina Schabert describes Lanyer's work as a recreation of the Eucharist, with each woman in the dedicatory passages invited to partake of a sacrament officiated by Lanyer. Lewalski also notes that “this is apparently the first English instance of female patron and female literary client” ("Seizing Discourse" 50). Lanyer's patronage-seeking has caused much critical debate, causing some critics to read her work “as a bid for court patronage” (Matheson 51), as if that in some way diminishes the value of the text. Sue Matheson notes, however, that patronage was the common method of support for artistic endeavors for men and women, and the special attention paid to this point is due to Lanyer’s gender (53). While issues of patronage are not the major focus of current Lanyer criticism, the debate over this subject still raises questions for the modern reader that illustrate the unusual nature of the text. Women writers did not commonly seek patronage at this time, inhabiting instead the role of patroness. Because Lanyer sought patronage, she is not behaving in the manner typical of women writing devotional

texts, and the nature of her devotion has therefore been called into question.

While critics such as Lewalski acknowledge that Lanyer was religious, because she was a product of a time dominated by religious ideology, they still focus largely on feminist readings, as Suzanne Trill, who traces the development of Lanyer criticism from A.L. Rowse's discovery of her in 1973 to the current trends, discusses at length. Trill observes that while religion is always acknowledged, it is often dismissed or subordinated in favor of the feminist threads of the text. Such an approach limits Lanyer's work, Trill agrees, by honing in on the feminist readings while largely ignoring the devotional aspects of the text, or acknowledging them only because they are a part of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideology. There is no reason why the Passion narrative cannot be both devotional and feminist. Lanyer declares her motives in the dedicatory piece, "To the Vertuous Reader." This dedication appears in prose, setting it apart from the text along with the dedication to Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland, and the epigraph, "To the doubtfull Reader." Because of this clear declaration, the feminist elements of the text must be addressed, but Lanyer's poems, as Trill points out, are taken piecemeal in critical readings, rather than

considered in their entirety (72). Rather than viewing the *Salve Deus* as a single text, critics view the dedicatory verses and the Passion narrative separately, holding up the feminist sections for the closest inspection.

While there is a movement towards religious readings of Lanyer's texts, the radical nature of the *Salve Deus* and the dedicatory verses demand the majority of the critics' attention. Lanyer's work is, in fact, part of a long-standing tradition of devotion, traceable to the Middle Ages. Lanyer does indeed appear radical for her time, and she is creating a new text, but she is building upon the dialectic and dialogues that have existed in Christian theology since the earliest theologians and their writings. By building on past tradition, Lanyer illustrates ideological tensions concerning the nature of women by focusing on personal experience to present her argument for the equality of women.

Despite the widespread belief that a blanket of oppression was thrown over women until the feminist movements began, there is no consistent treatment of women throughout history. There is, however, a long-standing theological debate regarding women's equality or inequality, as the case may be, with men. Lanyer carries on this tradition, shifting to an extremely personal level,

creating a text that is a hybrid of the preceding traditions, and renewing a dialogue that revisits the idea of a Mother Christ that appears in the mystical tradition of the Middle Ages.

Meditation upon the Passion of Christ was a common and necessary part of religious devotion, particularly in mystical practice. The individual meditated upon Christ's suffering in order to contemplate his or her unworthiness of receiving Christ's sacrifice. Lanyer's text, while it does integrate feminist and religious concerns, also continues in the devotional aspects of contemplation of Christ's suffering. By relating the suffering of Christ to the suffering of the Countess of Cumberland, Lanyer also creates a dialogue between past Christian traditions and contemporary concerns by creating a text that offers personal comfort garnered from the tradition of suffering, in this case, the shared suffering of women and Christ.

"To the Vertuous Reader" uses direct and clear language, free from the literary allusions and grand metaphors that pervade Lanyer's verse. Her works express concern regarding the way women are maligned when they are most deserving of reverence. She begins,

> Often have I heard, that it is the property of some women, not only to emulate the virtues and perfections of the rest, but also by all their

> powers of ill speaking, to eclipse the brightnes of their deserved fame: now contrary to this custome, which men I hope unjustly lay to their charge, I have written this small volume, or little booke, for the generall use of all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome. (1-7)

Lanyer's words suggest that her target audience is women, as she notes specifically that it is for "Ladies and Gentlewomen." Her use of men only in the third person also suggests her intent for the book to be read by women, and this allows her to use stronger words regarding men than she would otherwise be able to do. Because she is directing all of her comments in her epistle to the reader towards women, men need not be offended because the words are not intended for their eyes. She also offers criticism of women, continuing to explain her reason for writing:

> that all women deserve not to be blamed though some forgetting they are women themselves, and in danger to be condemned by the words of their owne mouthes, fall into so great an errour, as to speake unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe. (11-15)

In short, she asserts that men slander women enough without women participating in this activity as well. Her words to women are much more gentle than those for men, who, "forgetting they were borne of women. . . doe like Vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred, onely to give way and utterance to their want of discretion and goodnesse"

(19-24). She continues for several lines, referring to the men who crucified Christ and juxtaposing Old Testament men with virtuous women. She notes that Christ himself favored women in his life, and she reminds her readers of many female martyrs and saints in history. She closes, saying, "All which is sufficient to inforce all good Christians and honourable minded men to speake reverently of our sexe, and especially of all virtuous and good women" (54-56). The instruction here is plain and difficult to ignore, for if, now, anyone should choose to speak ill of women, they must be bad Christians, and dishonorable as well. In this way, she asserts the necessity of recognizing the goodness of women.

She finishes with an humble appeal to virtuous and good women, referring her "imperfect" work to her readers and hoping that, "they will rather, cherish, nourish, and increase the least sparke of virtue where they find it, by their favourable and best interpretations, than quench it by wrong constructions" (59-61). This closing is typical of poetry of the era, as poets ingratiated themselves to their audiences, beseeching favor and posturing humility. Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* exemplifies this in the opening verses: "Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds/ To blazon amongst her learned throng" (7-8). In the stanzas

that follow, he calls upon the Muse, alluding to Queen Elizabeth, referring to himself as "thy weaker novice" (11), and pointing out his "weake wit" and "dull tong" (18).

Rather than call on the Muses for inspiration, Lanyer simply asks the Ladies to forgive the flaws in her work and to receive enrichment from her verses. The humility and self-disparagement Lanyer presents is likely a façade used for the sake of poetic convention. It does not match her bold language, but demonstrates that she keeps with convention where she is able, perhaps to compensate for the times when she takes liberty with Christian ideology and tradition.

Because she is so forthright in her purpose, her retelling of the Passion from a feminine perspective does not detract from her devotion. Rather, it accentuates the female religious experience and emphasizes the "feminine" qualities of Christ: obedience, meekness, and submissiveness. She views Christ's sacrifice with female eyes, which is fitting because she is a woman. The female perspective also creates a text remarkably suited to her lady, the Countess Margaret of Cumberland. The lengthy addresses to the Countess and the particular details of the text suggest that it was designed specifically for her, as

a comfort in her times of struggle. As pointed out by Catherine Keohane, the Countess was battling for her daughter's legal right to inheritance (378). Keohane argues that the Countess is a Christ figure, mistreated by men in the same way that Christ was judged and crucified by men (378). Rather than asserting that the Countess is Christ, Lanyer provides the reminiscence of Christ's sufferings as a source of solace and courage.

Turning to the Passion narrative itself, Lanyer's telling, for the most part, stays close to the events of the Gospels, though there are differences in her treatment of the narrative. Lanyer takes poetic license, greatly increasing the role that Pilate's wife played in defending Christ. Only the Gospel of Matthew mentions Pilate's wife at all, and the account is brief. She requests that Pilate keep out of the affair and have nothing to do with that "just man" (27:19). This brief request is hardly the eloquent and intelligent defense that Lanyer includes in the text of her passion. Perhaps this is why "Eve's Apologie in Defense of Women," coupled with the dedicatory verse, receives the majority of critical attention. The feminist tract is definitely worthy of attention, but this temporary departure from the source text should not eclipse the rest of the poem, which provides the reader with an

emotional experience of the Passion on the parts of Christ and the reader.

While the four Gospels differ in minor respects concerning the Passion, they all recount it in the third person. Lanyer deviates from this, directly addressing Christ in several instances, creating the impression that she witnessed the events firsthand. The personal nature of this poem and its direct application to the Countess of Cumberland is immediately evident. The early stanzas exalt her, establishing Lady Margaret's virtue, and Lanyer goes on at length about the comfort Christ offers her:

> Tis He that doth behold thy inward cares,
> And will regard the sorrowes of they Soule;
> Tis He that guides thy feet from Sathans snares,
> And in his Wisedome, doth thy waies controule:
> He through afflictions, still thy Minde prepares,
> And all they glorious Trialls will enroule:
> That when darke daies of terror shall appeare,
> Thou as the Sunne shalt shine; or much more cleare. (49-56)

In this way, Lanyer emphasizes the special connection between the Countess and Christ, due to her virtue and her service to him. Because Christ is with her and in control of her life, the Countess can take comfort in her struggles, knowing that she will emerge from them brighter than before.

The personal nature of the poem continues as Lanyer begins the actual Passion narrative several stanzas later. After Christ tells his disciples they will be offended by him, Lanyer makes her first address to Christ: "Sweet Lord, how couldst thou thus to flesh and blood / Communicate thy griefe? tell of thy woes?" (377-378). She continues, speaking directly to Christ as he suffers in Gethsemane, watching with him even as his disciples slumber. She marvels at the frailty of the disciples, saying, "Although the Spirit was willing to obay, / Yet what great weakenesse in the Flesh was found!" (425-426). Her criticism of the weakness of the flesh is significant here, because with every mention of the Countess, her spiritual goodness is emphasized and her physical beauty rarely mentioned, and then only as a reflection of her spirituality.

The direct addresses to Christ parallel the direct addresses later made to the Countess after the Passion narrative concludes. In the same way that Lanyer laments the shoddy treatment Christ received, she laments the sorrows of the Countess. In the same way that Christ's sacrifice is glorified, so too is the Countess:

> Oft times hath he made triall of your love,
> And in your Faith hath tooke no small delight,
> By Crosses and Afflictions he doth prove,
> Yet still your heart remaineth firme and
> right;

> Your love so strong, as nothing can remove,
> Your thoughts beeing placed on him both day and night,
> Your constant soule doth lodge betweene her brests,
> This Sweet of sweets, in which all glory rests. (1337- 1344)

The language that Lanyer uses in her address to the Countess is the love language found in the Petrarchan sonnets. Extreme devotion to the Lady, betterment through suffering, and the beloved's position out of reach are significant. This language accentuates the intimate relationship that the Countess holds with her Savior. Because of his love and her service to Him, in an inversion on type, Christ takes the position of the Lady in this courtly relationship, while the Countess takes the position of the lover. Yet, she will not have to waste away with longing. Instead, she can experience her lover through her good acts and kindness to others.

The rest of the poem mentions great women from mythology, history, and the Bible, only to say that they are nothing in comparison to the Countess because of her inspiring relationship with Christ and her undying faithfulness. Lanyer closes the poem by identifying the Countess as her inspiration to write: "Whose excellence hath rais'd my spirits to write, / Of what my thoughts could hardly apprehend; / Your rarest Virtues did my soule

delight" (1833-1835). The virtue of the Countess has inspired devotion and faith in Lanyer, who in turn comforts the countess with the same faith and devotion.

The purpose of this narrative, then, is not simply to provide yet another example of devotional writing, nor to cover up a feminist tract, but to create a personal connection that can provide comfort and solace. Lanyer's emphasis on Christ's particular sufferings creates an affinity with the sufferings of women. Lanyer's devotion to her Lady, the Countess of Cumberland, is manifested in this effort to create a book that can bring comfort to her, and to other women as well.

Lanyer's emphasis on the personal suffering of Christ, as well as on the suffering of Christ's female followers, accentuates the tension between the formal structure of tradition and the personal experience of the individual. In this way, her poetry is moving towards the metaphysical tradition, but it is also firmly grounded in Medieval and Renaissance ideology. The mystical traditions that arose in the twelfth century with St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* and the humanist thought that developed throughout Renaissance philosophy emphasized, respectively, the experience and reason of the individual.

The *Salve Deus* successfully builds upon the traditions that came before, using the ideological tensions concerning the goodness of women to focus on personal experience and open a dialogue that illustrates the contradictory nature of Christian theology regarding women in general and the dialectical nature of Renaissance thought in particular.

The Dialogue of Equality: Eve's Exoneration and the *Querelle des Femmes*

Chapter 2

The dialectical nature of comfort found in suffering is a prevalent motif in Christianity. Comfort is derived from the belief that Christ died on the Cross for the redemption of inherently sinful mankind. Lanyer's text personalizes this element, focusing on the body of Christ rather than the Cross itself. She continues this personalization in the most overtly feminist elements of the text, particularly with the exoneration of Eve.

Imagery of Adam and Eve being cast out from the Garden of Eden is prevalent in sixteenth century culture, particularly emphasizing Eve's sin of eating the forbidden fruit and corrupting Adam in turn. Eve's guilt in perpetrating original sin served, in Medieval Christian theological thought, to justify the subjugation of women

and continued to do so well beyond Lanyer's lifetime. The claim that women were inherently evil commonly justified limiting education for women and as proof of inferior intellect. This ideology, coupled with the Aristotelian belief that women were defective men, served as the basis for the *querrelle des femmes*, the debate about women. The Patristics, as the early church fathers are termed, began this debate in the Middle Ages, and it continues today. In England, the controversy was particularly heated by the mid-sixteenth century, and continued to grow following the ascension of James I to the throne.

Sue Matheson discusses the *querrelle des femmes* at some length, noting that pamphlets on both sides of the debate were published, and that women's exercise of power, along with the question of women's education, was a primary focus of the debate. Popular interpretation of Paul's letters served as fodder for misogynistic arguments, with his claim that men were the head of a marriage and women the body, the most commonly cited proof of women's mandated subservience to men (Matheson 56). Linda Woodbridge's study is invaluable to an understanding of the structure of the *querelle des femme*. Woodbridge makes clear the distinction between literature belonging to the formal controversy concerning women, and literature that is merely

misogynistic in theme. Texts belonging to the formal controversy all possess certain features and observe specific rhetorical constructs (13). The works included in the formal controversy concern themselves exclusively with the nature of woman in general, employ *exempla*, argue their case abstractly and theoretically, and utilize classical oration and dialogue as their typical literary mode (14). While the formal controversy over women began in the Middle Ages, Woodbridge notes that Renaissance humanism gave it a new flavor. Most influential in the debate in England were Henry Cornelius Agrippa and Sir Thomas Elyot (16).

Woodbridge argues that a great deal of the literature in the formal controversy served only as practice or as a demonstration of rhetorical skill, and she also notes that it generally reinforced the categories of "good" and "bad" women, simply reiterating stereotypes from biblical and classical accounts. Agrippa provides a notable exception, as he uses extreme hyperbole to posit that women are, indeed, superior to men, only to draw back from his jesting and assert that sexual double-standards and the assertion of the superiority of one sex over the other is illogical (38-42). Because Agrippa illustrates the social and legal inequalities of women, Woodbridge identifies him as "head

and shoulders above his contemporaries as a realist in the study of sexual politics" (43).

Lanyer's arguments regarding the superiority of women, particularly as they are presented in "Eve's Apologie," create a hyperbole similar to Agrippa's, as her argument creates a paradox in which either Eve and women must be exonerated from the guilt of Original Sin, or Adam and men must admit that they are inferior because they were fooled by a woman. While Sue Matheson places Lanyer's text within the context of the *querelle des femmes*, she does not define the *Salve Deus* as a text in the tradition of the formal controversy, but instead presents it as an "unconventional rereading of the Bible" that "posited a radical redefinition of human nature in which her use of praise and blame in the epidiectic manner was clearly an opening gambit" (58). Matheson argues that Lanyer was promoting "spiritual equality of the sexes rather than the elevation of one at the political expense of the other" (65). In this sense, Lanyer's text presents a similar argument to that of Agrippa's, as defined by Woodbridge.

Pushing Matheson's argument further suggests that Lanyer's text follows the convention of the formal controversy of the *querelle des femmes*, but also that Lanyer's rereading of humanity's fall is not as radical as

the majority of critical readings imply. Apart from extending the role of Pilate's wife, Lanyer closely follows the Bible in her telling of the Passion. She continues this trend in recounting the Fall, cutting through the centuries of theological debate and relying on scripture to establish Eve and Adam's equal responsibility for Original Sin.

Lanyer's hyperbolic attacks on the men follow the trend of fallacious argument established by the formal controversy regarding women. Lanyer's verses take the form of debate, use *exempla,* and consist of the parts of traditional judicial oration, identified by Woodbridge as typical of the *querelle*:

> the *exordium* or introduction, *narratio* or statement of facts, *confirmatio* or proof, *refutatio* or refutation of opposing arguments, and *peroratio* or conclusion… Some added further parts, such as the *partitio*, a forecast of structure, the *propositio*, a statement of theses to be demonstrated, and the *digressio*, a digression. (Woodbridge 25)

While the *Salve Deus* is comprised of several different genres, Lanyer's text does fall into the categories of traditional oration. The dedicatory verses serve as the *exordium;* "To the Vertuous Reader," where Lanyer's language is most bold, marks the beginning of the *narratio*; the body of the poem comprises the *confirmatio* and *refutatio*; and "To the doubtfull Reader" provides the *peroratio* with its

justification of divine inspiration. "Eve's Apologie" and "Description of Cooke-ham" both serve as *digressio*, contributing to Lanyer's thesis, but are often mistakenly treated by critics as the most important sections.

Boyd Berry discusses the *Salve Deus* as a series of digressions implemented as rhetorical strategy. He argues that the poem

> opens and closes with a sense of mischief, perhaps, of satire, of invective, or even hard-headed complaint at work in language which questions and subverts important formal features of male discourse of the age. (212)

The digressions in the text serve to illustrate the dialectal relationship of Christianity and Renaissance thought. Seemingly out of place in a Passion narrative, "The Description of Cooke-ham" revisits the virtues of the Countess of Cumberland, providing the closing imagery of a woman reigning over a paradisiacal estate that mourns her departure, while "Eve's Apologie" brings into tension some of the common arguments leveled in the *querelle des femmes* tradition.

Lanyer launches into this debate not only by breaking tradition, by seeking female patronage and by dedicating the *Salve Deus* only to women, but also by directly challenging the patriarchal assertion of the inferiority of women while still remaining within the established

framework of patriarchal culture. Lanyer’s use in the *Salve Deus* of the established poetic conventions of the sixteenth-century sonnet, as well as her apparent adoption of elements of the traditional view of women, is in fact subversive. Writing within an acceptable genre for women, the religious devotional, Lanyer abides by the cultural laws that restricted the public voice and religious authority of women. The content of the devotional she produces, however, reveals a feminist text that is dedicated to, about, and defensive of women, even as it operates within the religious and secular conventions and thought-processes of the day.

Lanyer's appeal to female patrons serves not only to mark the first instance of a woman seeking female patronage; it also establishes a community of female literacy. This community of women, however, is fictitious, serving as a device to carry out the work of the poet, much as the idealized women of the sonnets served as devices for the sonneteers. As Sharon Cadman Seelig discusses, the “dedications construct a fictive community that functions as an alternative to the patriarchal structure” (50). Figuratively, Lanyer's dedications gather exemplary women into a community. On a practical level, her praise and supplication to the dedicatees are traditional among male

sonneteers. For example, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* opens with a dedication to Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southamption:

> I know not how I shall offend in dedicating my unpolisht lines to your Lordship, nor how the worlde will censure mee for choosing so strong a proppe to support so weake a burthen, onelye if your Honour seeme but pleased, I account my life highly praised, and vowe to take advantage of all idle houres, till I have honoured you with some graver labour. (1705)

Shakespeare's language is humble and self-effacing, and it speaks of the extreme worthiness of the Earl. Placed in the same category of writing as those of her male contemporaries, Lanyer's dedicatory verse proves to be not nearly as audacious or unusual as it first appears, but instead appears to be in keeping with convention. The opening dedication, "To the Queenes Most Excellent Majestie," uses language similar to the praising and self-effacing words of Shakespeare's dedication to the Earl:

> Renowned Empresse, and Great Britaines Queene,
> Most gratious Mother of succeeding Kings;
> Vouchsafe to view that which is seldome seene,
> A Womans writing of divinest things:
> Reade it faire Queene, though it defective be,
> Your Excellence can grace both It and Mee. (1-6)

Lanyer follows convention by making use of dedicatory verse, but in the process she also signals the rare nature of her text.

The dedicatory poems, as Ina Schabert points out, recreate the Last Supper with Lanyer presiding as Christ's representative, while the women she invites to read her work stand in for the disciples present at the Last Supper. In this way, Lanyer "demonstrate[s] the demand for full participation in the life of the church and its institutions for women," by taking on the office of priest (158). Schabert goes on to say, "Lanyer claims that it is [women] who are God's best and chosen priests" (158). By emphasizing the virtues of women, the community of women that Lanyer summons creates a text within which she can express women's need for and natural right to participate in the religious community in an official capacity, and, by extension, argues for their direct participation in the political community as well.

As she was writing during the misogynistic reign of James I, Lanyer had to tread carefully because of the dangerous nature of her text. Operating within the context and beliefs of the day, Lanyer managed to claim religious authority and a public voice for women in such a way that it followed the dogma of the day. She thus conforms to the tradition of poetry of the sixteenth century as described by Waller: "Struggle with and within the power of the court, then, constitutes sixteenth-century poetry's most

important characteristic" (30). Waller's discussion illuminates the ways in which literature demonstrates the struggle between the dominant ideology and cultural elements that run counter to this ideology. The atmosphere of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was one of constant struggle with the Court, the dominant force, imposing itself on private and public life (28). Because the monarch served also as the head of the Church, political struggle was inextricable from religious struggle. By asserting women's equality in the religious domain, Lanyer, by extension, asserted women's equality in the political realm as well.

Lanyer transgressed convention not only by claiming religious and, by extension, political rights for women, but also in addressing women of a higher social class than her own. As Susanne Woods notes, any address across the classes was "technically a transgression" and "the risk of offence was always at hand" (101). This, combined with Lanyer's openly seeking patronage and the fact that she made her work public, which not many women were yet doing, demonstrates that she was not behaving in the typical fashion of an English woman. Pamela Benson notes that Lanyer was able to write and act in a way different from that of an English woman because she was *not* an English

woman. Benson discusses Lanyer's unique position of familiarity with the court and participation in English life, yet as part of a different culture. Benson argues that Lanyer's existence as the Other, in gender and race, allowed her to behave as an English man rather than an English woman (244), making her religious devotionals public rather than reserving them for private use or circulation among friends, as was common among women in England. In support of her argument, Benson notes that in Italy, women's opportunity for participation in professional life was greater, affording Italian women, under specific circumstances, freedoms that were only accorded to men in England (245). Lanyer's Italian roots, then, predisposed her to take greater freedoms than many English women felt able to do.

While a large portion of the *Salve Deus* focuses on the Countess of Cumberland and her plight, delineating the spiritual worthiness of women, Lanyer's feminist argument in “Eve’s Apology in the Defense of Women” is much bolder than elsewhere in the poem. She catches logical fallacies in the androcentric ideology of the day, condemns men for their own mistakes, and removes the blame and curse of Original Sin from women. “Eve’s Apology” takes the form of an apostrophe to Pontius Pilate. The persona is his wife,

and she is pleading with him to spare Christ at the time of the crucifixion. The seemingly appropriate action of a woman begging for something from her husband starts out as a plea and turns into an indictment of men, placing responsibility for Original Sin and the crucifixion on their shoulders.

Lanyer traps the male reader by pandering to the ideology of male supremacy. Men may disagree with her assertion that they are responsible for Original Sin, but in doing so they will deny their superiority and admit to having let a woman lead them astray. Another option is agreement that men are superior and women are inferior, but this would lessen Eve's responsibility for Original Sin. Even if Lanyer's male readers choose to agree that men are superior and still deny responsibility for Original Sin, this does not provide a way out. Eve's crime of eating the fruit pales in comparison to Pilate's crime of allowing Christ's crucifixion. As the poem says, “Her weakness did the serpent’s words obey,/ But you in malice God’s dear Son betray” (71-72). Lanyer's rhetoric minimizes Eve's sin and maximizes Pilate's guilt in carrying out the crucifixion, using the same methods of hyperbole established in the formal controversy regarding women. She creates a dialectic that causes a difficult situation for male readers

regardless of whether they decide to agree or not. If they agree that men are superior, they also accept that they are evil: “If any evil did in her remain/ Being made of him he was the ground of all” (65-66); if they disagree, they deny that men are strong and intelligent because Adam did not know better than to listen to Eve: “What weakness offered, strength might have refused/ Being lord of all, the greater was his shame” (35-36). This type of either/or argument is, of course, a logical fallacy, but consists of the same type of arguments leveled against women in the *querelle des femmes*. By inverting the typical argument, Lanyer identifies its flawed nature.

The trick in this poem that snares the reader is that Lanyer agrees with the dominant ideology concerning women. If women are inferior, why are they are held responsible for humanity's expulsion from Eden? Lanyer argues that Eve could not have possibly known what she was doing when she ate the fruit, but Adam did. Pilate knew what he was doing when he allowed Christ’s death, yet he ignored the pleas of his wife. Whose crime was greater: men acting in spite of their knowledge of their error, or women acting in the ignorance natural to their sex? Lanyer has made her point. She has exposed a flaw in contemporary arguments regarding women's morality, and she has done so using accepted

ideology. Her narrative strategy leaves no choice for the reader but to agree, whatever the accompanying emotions may be. By engaging in the formal controversy, she has forced men to claim responsibility for Original Sin or admit to inferiority, allowing that women have intelligence.

The view of the Fall presented in Lanyer's poem shifts the blame from Eve to Adam, still relying heavily on Christian theology. Yet Christianity is not the only worldview available. As Benson has suggested, Lanyer was most likely of Jewish descent, and, considering the volatile religious environment in England, it is possible that Lanyer still held Jewish beliefs, albeit secretly. In the Hebrew and King James Bible, as well as other translations, a literal reading shows Adam and Eve stand together, side-by-side, and eat the fruit, placing the blame for the Fall equally on Adam and Eve. She is still the first to eat the fruit, but the verse does not portray her as alone when she does so: "And she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). As noted Kvam, Schearing, and Ziegler's study, this interpretation depends on how the phrase "with her" is understood:

> the prepositional phrase, 'immah can be understood 'with-her' if understood as having the attribute of a noun. If it is understood

> adverbially as 'gave it to her husband [also]' then it does not have to be translated. The former position is supported by the following narrative elements: (I) the woman is at the man's side at the end of Genesis 2 and the she is never said to have left, (2) the serpent reports the command in the plural and Eve answers using 'we,' and (3) the eyes of both are opened simultaneously (instead of the woman's first and then the man's). (33)

According to this analysis, the Genesis narrative places Adam and Eve together at the time of the Fall. Eve is the first to fall, but the source text for the concept of Original Sin does not necessarily fault Eve more than Adam.

The debate about women minimized the fact that God punished both Adam and Eve for the Fall, instead focusing on Eve's transgression. Both are cast out of the garden, each with a special burden to bear. As God says to Adam in the garden:

> The ground shall be cursed for you; you shall eat of it in sorrow all the days of your life. And it shall bring forth thorns and thistles for you, and you shall eat the plant of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Unlike Eve, Adam is not offered any chance of redemption. He will work in sorrow until the end of his days, when he will return to the dust from which he was made. Eve, on the other hand, is punished by pain in childbirth, but also offered redemption through her offspring, who will be set in opposition to the serpent. The scripture establishes the

groundwork for the argument that Eve's Fall is redeemed through the Virgin Mary's role as Christ's mother, but also underlines Lanyer's point that Adam's transgression was greater than Eve's.

Lanyer's dialectical argument illustrates the ridiculous nature of the arguments in favor of women's subjugation by placing men in the same position of guilt that women have held for centuries. Holding all women to be inferior and even evil because of a sin for which Eve was not wholly responsible is not logical. By posing an equally illogical attack on men, asserting that they are either evil or inferior, Lanyer accentuates the fallacies present in the *querrelle des femmes*, creating a framework in which to discuss the virtues of women. This discussion of female virtue revisits religious beliefs of the Middle Ages, hearkening back to traditions such as the Cult of the Virgin while reiterating mystical traditions that focused on suffering in order to glorify Christ. Lanyer successfully exonerates Eve by drawing together the threads of past religious tradition.

Content and Form: Dialectic Tension of Sonnets and Courtly Love

Chapter 3

Lanyer's adherence to the rules of the *querelle des femmes* and sixteenth-century ideological views regarding women resolves the tension between what is believed and culturally perpetuated and what is logical. The dialectic nature of the debate about women, based largely on religious ideology that could both revere Mary and scorn Eve, expanded into the secular world as well, where the purity of women was exalted, but at the same time their inherent evil was cited as reason to limit education and deny rights to political participation. These types of contradictions are also reflected in the literature of the era, beyond the literature of the formal debate about women. The sonnet, which burgeoned in England in the sixteenth century, is itself dialectical as the rigid form

and intricate content push and pull against each other in tension, and this type of tension is evident in Lanyer's work.

Under the influence of the sonneteers and the shifting dynamic in women's place in British culture, Lanyer crafted the *Salve Deus*. While the form of her verse does not adhere to the rigid structure of the sonnet, she utilizes the methodology presented by the structure, using, instead of the line structure and rhyming patterns, the convention and device of the idealized lady established by the sonnet and the courtly love tradition. In this way, Lanyer adheres to the tradition of sixteenth-century poetry to push against the established framework, while remaining within it.

The idealized notion of women used in the sonnet developed from the courtly love tradition. The woman placed on the pedestal is not a real woman, but a device for the poet. Two prime examples, Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* and Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, demonstrate the sharpest contrast in uses of the ideal woman. The dichotomy created between Petrarch's virtuous and inspiring Laura and Sidney's Stella, who only brings misery, mirrors the dichotomy of Mary and Eve, the virtuous virgin and the initiator of Original Sin, who were used to illustrate purity and sin, respectively.

The concept of the ideal woman was not relegated only to literature, but was also encountered in daily life. Sixteenth-century England was required, with the ascension first of Mary Tudor to the throne and then of Elizabeth I, to readjust its concepts of leadership. Mary took a husband, so the struggle wasn't as great, but the ascencion of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, required a major adjustment in ideological concepts. A culture that thought in binary opposites suddenly faced a collapse in expected gender roles and leadership structure. This was no King/Queen pair, but now a sovereign, unmarried Queen. To cope with this, Elizabeth had to create a new terminology for herself. She became the Mother, the King, the Prince, with her female body encompassing all the concepts that England needed in order to feel secure in its ruler.

As the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth could be the Mother and Bride to the country. Her loyalty was undivided, which had been a concern with Mary Tudor in her marriage to Philip of Spain. With no husband or children to distract her, Elizabeth's only concern was her country. Partly because of tensions with Spain, England at this time was an anti-Catholic environment (Logan & Greenblatt 477). As a result, practices such as reverencing of the Virgin Mary could be viewed with suspicion. Elizabeth, in her capacity as Virgin

Queen, served to replace the Virgin Mary in the hearts of her subjects. English Protestantism, particularly after Mary Tudor's Inquisition, was suspicious of Catholic tradition, causing difficulty in devotion to and idealization of the Virgin Mary. English nationalism, however, did allow for the idealization of their Virgin Queen.

Edmund Spenser offers the idealized image of the Virgin Queen in *The Faerie Queene* in the character of Gloriana, once again taking inspiration from a real woman in order to create a literary one. In Spencer's effort to create an English epic, the authority figure in this text is a Queen, not a King. This reflects the shifting ideology of the time, and Elizabeth's powerful place in the hearts of her subjects. The idealization of Elizabeth I also makes use of the past tradition of courtly love, by idealizing a lady.

The basis for the content of the sonnet develops from the courtly love tradition. This term, *amour courtois*, was coined by Gaston Paris in 1883 and refers to the system of courtly manners and love language inspired by French troubadours and put into action in the courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne (Denomy 44). The tradition in Europe is commonly accepted to have its origins in the

poetry of twelfth-century troubadours in the south of France, who took inspiration from Arabic verse, as well as Ovidian narrative and Christian orthodoxy (Moore 624). Guilhelm IX of Aquitaine's writings are the earliest extant texts we have (Moller 39). As he was grandfather to Eleanor of Aquitaine, it is possible that his participation in the literary tradition of the troubadours influenced the establishment of her court of love at Poitiers.

Andreas Cappellanus, also known as André the Chaplain, wrote *The Art of Courtly Love* in the twelfth century at the request of Marie de Champagne, Eleanor's daughter, in order to detail the practices of Eleanor's court of love. As Georges Duby details, the act of Courtly Love took place between a knight and a lady, the lady usually of higher social station than the knight, and, traditionally, married (250). The key emotion in this practice, as noted by Alexander J. Denomy, is that of desire:

> Since complacency in the attainment of the beloved may lead to quiescence in the beloved object and so to satiety, troubadour love must remain desire, a yearning that is unappeased. In its purest form, it eschews physical possession because, once consummated, desire decreases and tends to vanish. (44)

The concept behind Courtly Love is that suffering and desire will better the sufferer. The concept trickles over

into religious matters as well, with the idea that unfulfilled desire improves the soul.

Courtly Love placed women firmly on the pedestal of idealization, creating yet another aspect of the Eve/Mary dichotomy with the concept of Ideal/Un-ideal. While some critics have argued that courtly love improved the placement of women in culture, in some ways, it created an even greater oppression; the pedestal may as well have been a cage, for women have been locked in it ever since. Once women were idealized, actual women's flaws were emphasized to a greater extent, particularly in literary traditions. Perfection was no longer an aspiration, but instead became a requirement.

The Courtly Love tradition, as well as having roots in the Ovidian and troubadour traditions, holds close kinship with the Christian mystical tradition developed from St. Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*. The love language used in love ballads and sonnets is similar to that used to describe the relationship with Christ (Flinders xxi). The concept of achieving spiritual improvement through the suffering of love is prominent throughout the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and persists to the current day. Denomy notes:

> Courtly Love is a species of that movement inherent in the soul of man towards a desired object. It is this object, the final object, which specifies love and differentiates its manifestations one from the other. When the object of love is the pleasure of sense, then love is sensual and carnal; directed towards the spiritual, it is mystic, towards a person of the opposite sex, sexual, towards God, divine. Courtly Love is a type of sensual love and what distinguishes it from other forms of sexual love, from mere passion, from so-called platonic love, from married love is its purpose or motive, its formal object, namely, the lover's progress and growth in natural goodness, merit and worth. (44)

The concept of spiritual love, garnered from the teachings of St. Bernard's sermons and the work of other theologians, inspired the Christian mystical traditions of the Middle Ages. Spiritual love's transcendence of physical conditions is also integral to the literary traditions of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Aside from the cycles of chivalric romance and Chaucer's sometimes parodic, sometimes tragic use of the tradition in the Middle Ages, courtly love provided rich material for the sonneteers. The Italian sonnet took on its solidified form with Petrach's *Rime Sparse*. The structured form of the sonnet allowed for the exploration of the tumultuous emotions accompanying love, but also turned the idealized woman, the beloved, into a medium to discuss other ideas. The idealized woman had her place in literature and art much earlier than the age of the sonnet,

of course, but the sonnet exemplifies the poet's capabilities to use her as a literary device.

Petrarch's sonnets express his love for Laura, a woman whom he may have seen only once, or who may have been a completely imagined poetical device (Durling 4-7). Petrarch uses the misery of love instead to explore concepts of spiritual exaltation. Petrarch, as a first generation successor of Dante, may have received the inspiration for the model of Laura as an improving presence from Dante's portrayal of Beatrice. Despite debate over the figurative or literal nature of Laura, Petrarch claims to have seen her once and to have fallen in love with her virtue (Durling 6). She became the source for 366 sonnets that rival modern-day country songs with their mournful expressions of longing and sorrow for the beautiful Laura. The tension between what is real and what is fictitious is framed by the stricture of the sonnet form.

Petrarch's use of the courtly love tradition to discuss spiritual growth demonstrates the tactic of working within an established system to present new concepts. Similarly, Lanyer remains carefully within acceptable cultural parameters, as with her adherence to the norms of the *querelle des femmes* and the Christian argument of male superiority discussed in the previous chapter. She also

adheres to the conventions of the sonnet first by idealizing women and then by feminizing the idealized form of Christ, using him as a literary device to illustrate the spiritual and political state of women. Instead of merely idealizing a woman, however, Lanyer also idealizes Christ. Through this inversion on tradition, she establishes the spiritual equality and goodness of women, conveying a poignantly personal and female experience of Christ's Passion.

Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* takes us through cycles of despair, then joy, and back to despair again, creating a rollercoaster of emotion as the poet equivocates between desire for Laura and exaltation at the mere thought of her. The third sonnet exemplifies his stricken state upon first seeing Laura:

> It was the day when the sun's rays turned pale with grief for his Maker when I was taken, and I did not defend myself against it, for your lovely eyes, Lady, bound me. (1-4)

This moment when Laura captures his heart is one of grief, and the close of the poem accuses Love of playing unfairly by catching him in an unguarded moment. Here, the idea of the Lady having power over him begins to emerge, and it continues in the fourth sonnet in the sequence. This sonnet opens by citing Christ's humble beginnings in Judea, in

lines 9-11, and closes with, "And now from a small village He has given us a sun, such that Nature is thanks and the place where so beautiful a lady was born to the world" (12-14). Here, the lady is exalted in terms of religion and is presented as a gift from God, her birth compared to Christ's humble beginnings.

Progressing through the sequence, the poet alternates between emotional highs and lows. Sonnet six speaks of the "snares of love" (3), but sonnet seven presents Laura as his guide. The trend that develops involves Petrarch's use of despair to achieve spiritual enlightenment, with Laura as the source of this enlightenment. Sonnet thirteen perfectly exemplifies this: "from her comes the courageous joy that leads you to heaven along a straight path, so that already I go high with hope" (12-14). While there are relapses into despondency, the religious benefits of his love increase as we continue through the sequence. The earlier sonnets which lament Love's unfair act in catching him off guard and deplore the captivating capability of Laura's eyes, now subvert Love to the use of Faith, exemplifying the dialectical nature of a religious language that at once is spiritual and erotic.

Lanyer's text takes the reader through similar emotional highs and lows, at times rejoicing in the virtue

of the Countess, or the beauty and goodness of the Christ, and at others sorrowing in the pain and suffering both must endure. She begins with the literary device of the community of women, as Sharon Cadman Seelig discusses. Further, Lanyer promises immortality to the subjects of her poetry, idealizing the women in the dedicatory verse as was traditional among male sonneteers. As the opening stanzas of the title poem promise, the women will be remembered for their virtues, immortalized by Lanyer's pen: "To the great Countesse now I will applie/ My Pen, to write thy never dying fame" (9-10). This twist of the sonnet convention causes a woman to idealize a woman. The transgression of gender roles continues as Christ is feminized and immortalized through verse, becoming the idealized lover. Yet, this lover is not out of reach, as the virtuous and worthy women of the work are described as his brides, wed to him through their piety, as "To all vertuous Ladies in generall" illustrates:

> 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.
> (8-14).

As John Rogers discusses, women readily identified with Christ:

> The already feminized figure of the scriptural Christ offers itself perhaps too readily to a devotional poet seeking an identification with a redeemer whose obligation to chastity, silence, and obedience surpass even her own. (9)

In this respect, women move easily into the realm of Christ's servants and even his equals. Lanyer, as an Italian, possibly of Jewish descent (Schabert 161), can relate to Christ even more as they are both members of marginalized groups. This identification with Christ makes possible Lanyer's assertion of her religious authority and of the worthiness of women. She draws not only upon examples of the dedicatees of her work but also on the examples of Elizabeth I, who is mentioned several times in the dedications, and the example of the Virgin Mary.

In Lanyer's text of the Passion narrative, Christ is described in feminized terms, completing the inversion of sonnet conventions. The poem evokes a feminine Christ by describing him as related to nature and as inflaming his devotees with his love, much as Petrarch was inflamed with love for Laura. In the opening stanzas of the *Salve Deus*, Lanyer begins with an address to the Countess of Cumberland, speaking of the Countess's relationship with Christ who is experienced through nature:

> All worldly creatures their due course to runne,
> Unto His powerfull pleasure all subjecting:
> And thou (deere Ladie) by his speciall grace,
> In these his creatures dost behold his face. (29-32)

Continuing with the description of the relationship with Christ, Lanyer describes him as beautiful: “Whose all-reviving beautie, yeelds such joyes/ To thy sad soule plunged in waves of woe” (33-34). The beauty of Christ provides joy for his followers and lifts them out of misery, much as the inspiring thoughts of Laura lifted Petrarch from his despair. The love language established by Petrarch and utilized so well by sixteenth-century poets is also used by Lanyer, as the following sentence shows: “With his sweet love, thou art so much inflamed” (43). Further, Christ favors those who possess the qualities that were demanded of women: “He joyes the Meeke and makes the Mightie sad” (75). Women, in their submission, receive Christ's favor.

Lanyer's text, when dealing with women's relations to Christ, makes greatest use of the exalted form of the idealized woman and the idealized Christ. In dealing with male relationships to women and to Christ, however, she focuses instead on elements of despair. Christ's apostles are indicted for betrayal, causing suffering and pain: "That very Night our Saviour was betrayed, /Oh night!

exceeding all the nights of sorrow" (329-330) and, "He told his deere Disciples that they all / Should be offended by hi, that selfe night, / His Griefe was great, and theirs could not be small" (337-339). Emphasizing suffering in this way, contrasted to the joy in relationships involving women, invokes the dialectic of suffering and love typical of the sonnet form.

English poets made full use of this dialectical potential of Petrarch's Italian sonnets, both in form and content. Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* uses the structure of the sonnet, but instead of holding Stella up as inspiration to reach heaven, Astrophil realizes that she will only lead him to misery and despair, even as he places her on the pedestal out of his reach. Sidney opens his sequence by speaking of his hope that his verses will win pleasure from his lady: "Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,/ That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain" (1-3). The tone differs from Petrarch's sonnets, as Sidney begins with the idea of a cruel mistress, a woman who enjoys Astrophil's suffering rather than providing a spiritual resource.

Astrophil's love does give him inspiration to write, though his words "came halting forth" (9). When he turns to his Muse, however, she directs, "look in thy heart and

write" (14) which implies that his inspiration comes from his love for Stella. From the start, it is clear that this inspiration is not a positive experience for Astrophil. The second sonnet in the sequence minces no words regarding the effect on the poet: "Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbed shot, / Love gave the wound, which while I breathe will bleed;" (1-2). The motif of Cupid's arrow is common enough in love poetry, yet the image of blood and the struggle that follows do not denote the lighthearted images of a sweet cherub kindly bringing love. Falling in love is a process his muse mandates and that he cannot resist: "I saw and liked; I liked but loved not;/I loved, but straight did not what love decreed;/At length to love's decrees I, forced, agreed" (5-7).

The remainder of the sonnet demonstrates the inner turmoil created within the poet as he is forced by the conventions and emotions of love to praise what imprisons him and to suffer as he writes:

> I call it praise to suffer tyranny;
> And now employ the remnant of my wit
> To make myself believe that all is well,
> While with a feeling skill I paint my
> hell. (12-14)

While Petrarch takes his despair and turns it to religious purposes, creating a virtuous Laura who occupies a pedestal beaming heavenly rays, Sidney gives us instead a Stella who

looks down from her pedestal into her lover's hell. The sonnet does not imply that Astrophil's love will benefit him in any way but, instead, paints an image of love as hell and torment. There is no redeeming quality in Stella, no chance that Astrophil can be led to heaven. From the start, the wound of love is painful, and the poet is reluctant even to feel the emotion, at first trying to disobey and attempting to resist.

Lanyer praises the Countess of Cumberland and, by extension, the virtues of women for the first two hundred and fifty-six lines, interrupting herself briefly to draw attention to the contrast between women and men that this praise evokes. She discusses how virtue is the best quality and how beauty in women has only gotten them into trouble, as with Matilda, who was pursued by King John. After citing these virtuous women and the lascivious men who pursued them, she notes "*Adams* fall" (259) and "*Judas* kiss" (260), sharply contrasting women's virtue with men's evil. This contrast builds the platform for feminizing Christ, as he is pure and virtuous, closer in kind to women than men. The next several stanzas serve as an apology for a lowly woman's attempt to write, repeating her faults but asserting that she need not apologize at all because of her topic: "To write of Him and pardon crave of thee/ For time

so spent I need make no excuse" (266-67). Lanyer also asserts her authority, saying that her flaws as a weak woman cause Christ's glory to shine that much brighter: "But yet the Weaker thou doest seeme to be/ In Sexe or Sence, the more his Glory shines" (289-90). This verbal prostration and humbling of the poet anticipates Lanyer's description of Christ's literal prostration when he submits himself to the will of God at the moment of crucifixion, the submission required of Christ to the Father coinciding with women's required submission to husbands and fathers.

The resurrected Christ is described as the "Bridegroome that appears so faire" (1305), the language accentuating his soft qualities, not the strength and robust attributes that we might expect in the description of a man. He is "sweet, so lovely in his Spouse's sight,/ That unto Snowe we may his face compare,/ His cheeks like skarlet" (1306-08). The next stanza describes his "lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet/ Than is the honey dropping dew" (1314-1315). This image of a beautiful man, highly feminized, complements the description of the feminine qualities of virtue, honesty, and obedience established in the dedicatory verse.

This feminized form of Christ only increases the heinous nature of man's crime in crucifying one who is so

truthful and pure, the Son of God. Not content to remind men of their serious guilt in crucifying Christ, Lanyer brings Eve into the picture, and she is relieved of the burden of Original Sin. Following the contrasts established earlier between Laura and Stella, the Virgin Mary and Eve, and now the contrast between virtuous women and depraved men, as well as the contrast between Christ and depraved men, the conventions are turned on their head once again as depraved Eve is established as a virtuous woman and responsibility for the Fall, as anticipated in the poem, is placed on Adam (259).

Lanyer's use of sixteenth-century sonnet conventions enables her to create a text that stays within the framework of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century patterns of belief. The conventions are familiar yet alien, as the framework is stretched and turned to create a literary community of women united in piety and righteousness against the worldly community of men. The text assumes humility at the same time that it boldly takes possession of religious authority for the marginalized female sex. The text undermines and then overturns the dogma that condemned women as depraved, revealing that the laws and religion "doe pretend against the truth, untruths they seeke to frame" (548-49). In the tradition of the

sonnet, Lanyer's verse reveals the dialectical nature of English national and religious assumptions. She is submissive, but at the same time speaks with an authority made possible by the previous female authority of Elizabeth I. Lanyer is able, by illuminating these tensions, to create a dialogue that claims spiritual authority and moves her marginalized position in society to center stage.

Discourse of Mortification and Love: Dialect of Mysticism and Spiritual Union

Chapter 4

Rising simultaneously with the tradition of courtly love is yet another discourse that holds suffering in tension with love. The concept of Christ as bridegroom and devotees as brides created yet another aspect of the constantly shifting discourse of religiosity and gave rise to mysticism in Christianity (Flinders xxi). The paradox of a worship practice that emphasizes becoming one in Christ through mystical experiences of love, coupled with practices such as self-mortification and deprivation, created a new type of worship, different from previous militant practices demonstrated in the Crusades.

Queen Elizabeth I set the precedent for official female religious authority as head of the Church of

England, but the unofficial religious expression of the female mystics was in place long before. Lanyer revisits this tradition in her writing. The ease with which women identified with Christ is brought strongly into relief throughout the dedicatory verses and her Passion narrative. She also asserts her authority, saying that because of her flaws as a weak woman, Christ's glory shines that much brighter: "But yet the Weaker thou doest seeme to be/ In Sexe or Sence, the more his Glory shines" (289-90). Lanyer is verbally prostrate, in parallel to her later description of Christ's literal prostration when he submits himself to the will of God:

> Such great Indurements who did ever know,
> When to th' Almighty thou didst make resort?
> And falling on thy face didst humbly pray,
> If 'twere his Will that Cup might passé away.
> Saying, Not my will, but thy will Lord be done. (397-401)

In Lanyer's text, this submission to the will of the father closely coincides with women's expected submission in patriarchal society. Christ willingly sacrifices himself for the benefit of humanity, and while women's submission wasn't necessarily always willing, Lanyer emphasizes willing sacrifice and humble suffering in her text. This humble attitude, epitomized by the Countess, creates an affinity between women and Christ. As he suffers on the

cross, the words and actions of men hold little value for Christ. Instead, he calls out to comfort the weeping women who grieve for him: "Yet these poore women, by their pitious cries/ Did moove their Lord, their Lover, and their King" (981-82).

The discourse of Christian mysticism, similar to the language of courtly love, brings into tension the concepts of comfort and suffering. Lanyer continues the discourse of mysticism, using the tensions to create a place for women in religious and secular life. She claims divine inspiration in writing her verse, as the mystics claimed divine revelation in their visions, justifying her choice of title as well as asserting authority to write the text in the first place. The title came to her in a dream from God, so she thought it only fitting that she use the title and write the Passion narrative. Lanyer, speaking in her final dedication of the dream in which the title came to her, says: "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 book" (139). Here, she treads on dangerous ground, though perhaps more safe in a Protestant environment than a Catholic one. Again turning to Woods' article, Woods notes, "The Protestant doctrine of the

unmediated conscience could not allow any authority to gainsay a woman's belief that she had 'been appointed to performe this Worke'" (113). If Lanyer had written in the pre-Elizabethan period, it is likely that she could have been tried for heresy. Despite the precedent of past and contemporary mystical writers, mystical visions were investigated by the Church and could be termed heretical (Brun & Epiney-Burgard xvi). However, Elizabeth set a precedent for women taking on religious authority in her dual roles as Queen of England as well as leader of the Anglican Church (Schabert 159). This allowed Lanyer to assert female religious authority, demonstrated by Schabert interpretation of the *Salve Deus* as a recreation of the Last Supper, with Lanyer filling the role of Christ (158).

Western Christian mysticism began in the late eleventh century in Europe. The twelfth century "witnessed the birth and blossoming of the doctrine of courtly love" as well as a burgeoning of Christian mystical traditions (Brunn & Epiney-Burgard *xxv*). This century provided the system for Petrarch to express his woes at length in his sonnet sequence the *Rime Sparse*, and in the same century St. Bernard of Clairvaux delivered his *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Brunn & Epiney-Burgard *xxv*). In this series of sermons St. Bernard emphasizes the metaphor of Christ as

the bridegroom and the bride as the church (Flinders 1). This metaphor provided an appealing new way for religious devotees, particularly women, to express their spiritual experiences. Carol Lee Flinders says that, until that time, "the God of Christians was imaged as a king or a judge, and the basic model of Christian experience reflected the feudal structure of life itself" (1). Christians thought of themselves as "warriors" in a battle between good and evil. St. Bernard's sermon changed this perspective, and he encouraged the monks under his instruction to "consider *themselves* the brides of Christ" and "ready themselves in every way for the kiss of Christ—for the experience, that is, of mystical union with God" (2). The metaphor of Christ as bridegroom and devotees as brides laid out in St. Bernard's sermons set the standard for male and female devotees and created a religious and spiritual language closely related to love language. This metaphor also provided a way for female devotees to bring their own unique experiences as women to spiritual practices. As Flinders notes, for women "nuptial mysticism was an unprecedented validation of their own femininity" (2). Because women often assumed the position of literal brides in life, adopting the figurative position as a bride of

Christ offered an even deeper meaning for them than for men.

Flinders goes on to discuss the thirteenth century as an era of blossoming of Christian mysticism, and also as a time that is "nearly unique in Western history for the extent to which feminine voices were raised, tolerated, and even revered" (1). Femininity was undergoing a change in perception, however, and this reverencing of the feminine did not extend in all areas to appreciation of actual women or the ways they were treated (3).

Women had followed monastic and religious lifestyles in previous centuries. Women of all ranks and areas of life could be found in convents, and from the third century until about the sixth century, deaconesses performed duties in the church, such as the baptism of women, and visiting and instructing women when they were ill (Shahar 23). Shulamith Shahar notes that the Celtic traditions of women and men officiating together in religious ceremonies continued in northern Gaul and Ireland until the beginning of the sixth century, but this was later deplored because of theological interpretations of Pauline doctrine regarding women, and it swiftly became the case that women officiated "only in heretical movements" (23). The basis for the theological stance of female inferiority stems from

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, and also from First Corinthians. Ephesians states: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church" (5:22-23). This verse is continually quoted in order to justify female subservience to men, and in some instances, male brutality to women. What is often and erroneously overlooked, however, are the verses that precede and follow this: "Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (5:20-21). These words apply to all Christians, not just women, emphasizing that all devotees humble themselves in service of God.

The words that follow the exhortation for women to submit to their husbands also deserve attention: "husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (5:25). Paul's words require that husbands sacrifice for their wives in the same manner that Christ sacrificed himself for mankind. He goes on, providing much more instruction for husbands in this matter than he has for wives:

> so ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but

> nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church. (5:28-29)

Issue can still be taken with the demand that women submit to their husbands, but husbands are also required to care for their wives with as much care as they take for themselves, creating a relationship of mutual nurturance. Lanyer's text emphasizes male mistreatment of women, and it celebrates the nurturing bond between women and women, and women and Christ, strengthening the concept of women as brides of Christ.

The other verse that is most problematic for contemporary scholars, and provides support for denying religious authority to women, is I Corinthians, 14:34-35:

> Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience as also saith the law. And if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

Again, when lifted out of context, these verses are discriminatory. When placed in context of time and purpose, however, the message is not as harsh. The verses preceding the exhortation for women's silence in church ban others, not just women, from speaking in church, for the sake of preventing misinformation. As William Barclay discusses, Paul's letters, with some exceptions, were written for specific situations (xiv). Regarding First Corinthians,

Barclay provides the historical context for the letter and notes that Corinth was "a byword for evil living" (2). On the Acropolis above the city the temple of Aphrodite, possessing 1000 sacred prostitutes who practiced their trade in the city streets, contributed to Corinth's reputation for debauchery (3). Because Christianity was a young religion, it was imperative that "absolutely nothing must be done which would bring upon the infant Church the faintest suspicion of immodesty" (136). Considering that at this time, Greek women led relatively secluded lives (135) Paul's motivation in silencing women in church was likely to protect the reputation of the Church and avoid breaching cultural codes, rather than any sinister desire to oppress.

Theologians such as Jerome took St. Paul's doctrine regarding women, along with the account of the Fall in Genesis, and interpreted it in such a way as to emphasize Eve's role as the temptress and perpetrator of Original Sin (Shahar 23). At the beginning of the twelfth century, this doctrine combined with a reverencing of the Virgin Mary to create an interesting paradox. Mary's purity counteracted Eve's sin, redeeming women in the eyes of certain theologians. Anselm, for example, revered the Virgin, and St. Bernard wrote many sermons exalting her as well (Shahar 24). Mary Magdalene also became revered at this time, as

the paradoxical repentant sinner (25), creating yet another interesting facet in the religious paradigm of Eve's transgression and the Virgin's purity. This paradox is emphasized by the theology that exalts Mary's virgin state and deplores the natural state of women, as is demonstrated in Shahar's discussion of Abelard's distaste for natural childbirth (26). Mary's position of reverence resulted not from any natural element of her womanhood, but rather from her close affinity to God. Shahar notes that,

> Anselm stresses the affinity of the Holy Virgin with God the Father, since they have a common son; her affinity with the Son, since she is his mother; and her affinity with the Holy Ghost, through whom she conceived her son. (24)

The affinity of the Virgin with God and the Holy Ghost stresses the difference between women living in the world and women who have chosen a religious life. The woman who gives natural birth is, at least in the mind of Anselm, not to be exalted in the same manner as the Virgin Mother. The sexless nature of the Christ's conception purifies Mary, not the female act of giving birth. In this respect, female mystical tradition is in tension with theology, as women brought their unique experiences of childbirth and wifehood into their relationship with Christ. For women, the blood and suffering of Christ's Passion brought to mind birth pains, rather than masculine images of war (Flinders 5).

Lanyer's portrayal of Christ evokes imagery that lends itself to feminine experience. The feminine characteristics, previously emphasized in Christ's actions, are now part of his physical description. During Christ's trial, he maintained silence in a submissive manner, and now he is in a weakened state, "Bleeding and fainting in such wondrous sort/ As scarce his feeble limbes can support" (1135-36). The description of the crucifixion places Christ in a completely vulnerable position, his battered body and torn clothes emphasizing his vulnerable state as he hangs on the cross, "His joynts dis-joynted, and his legges hang downe,/ His alabaster breast, his bloody side" (1161-62) while they "his holy garments do divide" (1166). The humiliation of Christ and the desecration of his body relate closely to the practice of mortification by religious ascetics and practiced by the mystics.

Mystics adopted, as did other monastic orders, ascetic lifestyles dedicated to service and poverty. The goal of living Christ-like lives is to become closer to Christ and to become one in spiritual union with God. This concept is discussed in St. Bernard's *Sermons*, with emphasis on the practice of self-control and separating oneself from earthly desires. In the first sermon, he states:

> One uproots pernicious habits of mind and body with the hoe of self-control. The other [excessive love of the world], by the use of enlightened reason, quickly perceives a delusive tinge in all that the world holds glorious, truly distinguishing between it and deeper truth. (2)

This concept of self-control and reason emphasizes the experience and cognition of the individual. This focus made it possible for mystics to receive revelations that were considered valid.

St. Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs* emphasized union with God in the form of worship and fueled mystic development across Europe. St. Bernard's worship style required intense introspection and focused on personal experience. Sermon Three begins:

> Today the text we are to study is the book of our own experience. You must therefore turn your attention inwards, each one must take note of his own particular awareness of the things I am about to discuss. (16)

Emphasis on personal experience and response to Bernard's sermon encouraged and also enabled the mystical tradition, as it required emotional response. Emotional involvement is particularly enhanced by the extensive discussions of the "kiss" of Christ throughout the sermon sequence.

As Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard make evident, mysticism did not necessarily manifest itself in the same way all across Europe, but changed and shifted

from its inception in the twelfth century and throughout the Middle Ages. Despite the differences over space and time, however, certain traits define mysticism. Evelyn Underhill's work in the early part of the twentieth century established the psychological effects and spiritual nature common to all mystical experience. Jess Byron Hollenback presents a study of mysticism in its modern sense, but traces it back to its medieval roots. The definition he provides of mysticism is helpful here:

> . . . mysticism incorporates two important elements: a distinctive mode of experience or consciousness and the individual's responses to that unusual modality of experience. It is evident, then, that the term 'mysticism' is not synonymous with 'mystical experience,' for the latter refers only to the first of these two elements. 'Mysticism' is instead a comprehensive term incorporating both the mystical experience and the individual's response to it. (1)

This coincides with Brunn and Epiney-Burgard's study, as they emphasize the experience of mysticism, but also assert that some mystics, particularly those of noble ranks, possessed educations rivaling those of men, and that there was culture "both literary and spiritual" (xvi) of mysticism. The study also emphasizes that the ultimate aim of mystics was "to transcend themselves and to be 'melted in God,' in a union that excludes all intermediaries (*sine medio*)" (xviii).

Along with Bernard's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, William of St. Thierry also influenced mysticism. The dual aspects of mysticism, the Mysticism of Love (*Minnemystik*), and the Mysticism of Being (*Wesenmystik*) developed out of the courtly love tradition, and the Augustinian tradition, respectively (Brunn & Epiney-Burgard xxv-xxvi). Mysticism of Being emphasized becoming one with God, focusing on the Trinitarian theology, and this was an essential part of Beguine spirituality (xxvi). By comparing Exodus 3:14 and John 10:18, William establishes the concepts of the self inhabited by God, emphasizing that there is no possible existence outside of God, but that we, unlike Christ, who already exists inside of God, must become one with God(xxvi).

Currently, Hildegard, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich number among the best-known mystics. They embody many of the characteristics of Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages. Taking a closer look at Julian allows examination of specifics concerning the mystics, though her case is not by any means the only one. As noted by Clifton Wolters, Julian's *Revelations* "were recognized from the first to have more than a private and personal value" (13). While not all revelations received the same acceptance,

there were women across Europe throughout the Middle Ages who had mystical experiences of God's love.

Edmund Colledge and James Walsh note that "her doctrines, in her age equally singular, of the godly will of the soul, never separated from God by sin, and of 'God our Mother' point to her deep familiarity with the writings of William of St. Thierry" (20). This familiarity with William, as well as the language she uses, affiliates Julian with Beguine mysticism in the manner of theological and spiritual worship, particularly in the ways that God is feminized and worshipped as a lover.

The education and complexity of theological thought that Julian demonstrates in her writings reflects the deep spiritual and theological culture and grounding that existed in mystic communities throughout the Middle Ages, as well as providing the basis for the grounding of religious thought as it progressed throughout the Renaissance. Her report and explanation of her vision demonstrate the introspection required of mystical worship, and they also reflect the depth of her spiritual experience. In the first chapter of the Short Text, she discusses her desire for three wounds, and explains the reason for this desire on multiple levels, closing the chapter with an explication of what each wound represents:

> the wound of contrition, the wound of compassion, and the wound of longing with my will for God. Just as I asked for the other two conditionally, so I asked for this third without any condition. The two desires which I mentioned first passed from my mind, and the third remained there continually. (*Showings* 127)

Her words illustrate a kinship with St. Bernard's sermon, particularly the longing for God and the emphasis on her will and desires.

Self-denial and mortification brought the devotee closer to Christ by creating a shared experience of suffering. The depravation of the body was thought to bring the purification and growth of the spirit (Pepler 95-108). Lanyer's emphasis on the suffering of women, her Countess of Cumberland in particular, demonstrates the spiritual purity and worthiness of women. Because they suffer and deny themselves, women are stronger in spirit, and so closer to Christ.

The placement of the mystics within accepted theological tradition was precarious; while cases such as Hildegard and Julian did indeed occur, mystical experiences weren't always considered valid. Women such as Margery Kempe were regarded often as nuisances, particularly in Kempe's case because of her penchant for hysterics as she traveled on pilgrimage. Despite the precarious position of the mystics, the concept of a union of love with Christ

remains dominant in many Christian traditions. This furthers the contradictions existing in a faith that has, at the same time, the judgmental and awful Jehovah in the Old Testament, and the meek and compassionate Christ in the New Testament. It expands as well the contradictory notions of a religion that condemns women for Eve's sins and exalts women because of Mary's enabling of Christ's birth. Lanyer illuminates these tensions between cultural ideology and consciously adopted belief and attempts to resolve them in her text.

Mystics were able to reclaim religious authority through the unique feminine experiences they could bring to an erotic-spiritual relationship with God, because they could actualize what it meant to be a bride of Christ in a way that male devotees simply could not. Lanyer's text claims this same religious authority for women, putting forth their worth because of their gender rather than in spite of it, while at the same time creating a dialogue between past tradition and current practice, revealing once again the tensions and contradictions of Christian theology and English practice.

The Resolutions of Dialectic: Lanyer's Completed Tapestry

Conclusion

Reading the *Salve Deus* through the ideological lenses of the sixteenth century demonstrates Lanyer's use of the varied movements and practices present throughout the Christian tradition to create a unified and woman-centered perspective. Her fidelity to the biblical text successfully establishes equality for women, negating misinterpretations of Christian theology and undermining misogynistic thought.

By maintaining fidelity to the biblical text, Lanyer manages to weave together the dialectical dialogues present in the religious and political traditions with which she works. Beginning with the dichotomy of comfort and suffering, she demonstrates women's inherent goodness and asserts their favored position as Christ's brides. She relates the unique sufferings that women endure to Christ's experience of humiliation and suffering in his sacrifice

for humankind. Her emphasis on the Countess's spiritual goodness underscores the spiritual goodness of all women.

Once the goodness of women is established, Lanyer catches the thread of the *querelle des femmes* and, while following the conventions of the formal debate about women, successfully removes the bulk of blame from Eve's shoulders. Lanyer's adherence to biblical text supports the argument that women are not solely responsible for Original Sin but share the blame with Adam. Her hyperbolic argument that all the blame lies with men draws attention to fallacious arguments raised against women and accentuates the flawed logic of arguments for female inferiority, while solidifying her stance of equality.

Holding true to sixteenth-century poetic convention, Lanyer works within the framework of the ideology of Courtly Love, incorporating yet another thread of the religious and literary traditions into the tapestry of the *Salve Deus*. The concept of the Ideal Lady is employed to idealize Christ, placing him on the pedestal to be worshipped by female devotees, inverting the tradition of the Lady on the pedestal, who is worshipped and served by her knight. Lanyer's use of the conventions of Courtly Love brings into play the same devices employed by sonneteers of the sixteenth century. She does not observe the form of the

Italian or the English sonnet, yet she adheres to the cultural and religious framework of the sonnets, pushing against without transgressing the boundaries of established thought. Because she remains within this framework, Lanyer is able successfully to weave together seemingly contradictory theological perspectives.

The final thread in Lanyer's tapestry draws on medieval mystical tradition. Emerging from the same ideology that inspired Courtly Love, the mystical tradition finds spiritual exaltation in deep introspection and the contemplation of Christ's Passion and suffering. The metaphor of Christ as bridegroom and the devotee as bride that developed from St. Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons struck a chord with women, who had no place in the militant worship style of the Crusades. Lanyer emphasizes feminine experience in her dedicatory verses and in her elaboration of women's participation in her retelling of the Passion narrative. This retelling serves to illustrate once again the favored position that women hold with Christ, as well as to advance the argument for women's spiritual and political equality. This final thread in the tapestry uses women's unique experiences to demonstrate the heights of spiritual enlightenment that women alone can achieve.

Lanyer's text, at first studied only because of the implication that Lanyer might be Shakespeare's lover and later because of its strongly feminist overtones, successfully weaves together seemingly disparate religious and ideological traditions. Her ability to create a dialogue out of the dialectic elements of political and theological traditions reveals the cohesive potential of the separate threads. Woven into a unified theological perspective, the threads compose a powerful argument for spiritual and political equality for women.

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