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THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER-SPECIFIC AUDIENCES IN THE  
WORKS OF EARLY 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY WRITERS

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***Abstract:** My article centres on the intricate intertwining of gender, sexuality, identity and writing in the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, dealing with Aemilia Lanyer's most famous work Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (1611) a cornerstone in the construction of female readership, offering at the same time an example of a collaborative rather than competitive model for literary creation, advancing the plea for a female genealogy.*

***Keywords:** female genealogy, female readership, proto-feminism, querelle des femmes, revisionism*

**Introduction**

Canonical in terms of early modern women's writing, Lanyer's 1611 collection of poetry, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is a compelling medley of

genres including eleven encomiastic dedications, themselves deploying a whole range of poetic forms and 2 prose pieces. Pride of place is held by a long poem reenacting Christ's passion; the poem begins with the apotheosis of Elizabeth I "And crown'd with everlasting Sov'raintie; Where Saints and Angells do attend her Throne, And she gives glorie unto God alone" and ends with the apotheosis of another woman, the Countess of Cumberland, in what is considered to be the earliest of English country house poems, (predating Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst" of 1616) *Cook-ham*, the Berkshire village, the former estate of the Countess of Cumberland being conceived of as a paradise of women, inhabited by unfallen females (Pearson 1998:45); there is also a final prose address "To the Doubtfull Reader" where Lanyer says that she dreamed of the book's title long before she wrote the book, thus implying its divine commissioning.

We are in general tributary to the received wisdom about the patriarchy of the Jacobean age, an oppressive and repressive period for women, as a glorious court ruled by a powerful woman gave way to a court whose ethos was prevalently masculine and homosocial, if not homosexual as well (see Lewalski 1991). Catherine Belsey mentions the "recurrent disappearance of mothers from interpretations of the fifth commandment [honour thy father and thy mother]" during the Jacobean period, when women's public persona became entirely obliterated (Belsey 1985:158).

Misogynist plays and tracts of the age vie with one another for underscoring the inferiority of women in the hierarchy of being and their immorality (John Knox's *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* and Robert Gould's *Love Given O'er: Or a Satyr on the*

*Inconstancy of Woman* would be two examples only). At the same time Lanyer's was an age that gave numerous examples of women making serious inroads into patriarchal power, women that given the right opportunities could flourish in politics and arts, giving the lie to notions of female inferiority, exemplary being not only Elizabeth I and Anne of Denmark but a host of women aristocrats and writers in their own right, nine of whom are among Lanyer's dedicatees in the poem discussed here. Although Elizabeth disappeared from the scene her model continued to influence and inspire the emergence of talented and ambitious authors whose literary endeavours perfectly illustrate resistance to the prevalent patriarchal ideology and the gradual construction of female networks, communities and readership.

### **Protofeminist Revisionism in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

Lanyer's book is radical in its theology and gender politics and could aptly be called proto-feminist. Both the prefatory poems and the title poem argue for women's religious and social equality. Although the title would suggest a celebration of masculinity (a verb and three masculine nouns) it is meant to emphasize and empower the female at every level, literary, political and spiritual.

Revisionist tendencies and in particular Bible criticism and reinterpretation are common traits of works penned by early English women authors from Jane Anger's *Her Protection for Women*, a pamphlet published in 1589 to Esther Sowernam's *Ester Hath Hang'd Haman* (1617), Margaret Fell Fox's *Womens Speaking Justified* (1667) and Sarah Fyge Egerton's *The Female Advocate* (1686) in which the latter answered a grossly misogynist attack by

Robert Gould with a long poem at the tender age of 14. It so outraged her father he banished her from his house (Lerner 1993:153). They all offer fresh feminist glosses on Genesis chapter 3, the Scriptures alongside classical philosophy being invoked for centuries by masculine voices pronouncing upon women's inferior and posterior ontological status when compared with men.

Entering with unprecedented vigour and sense of empowerment the century-long polemic tradition of the *querelle des femmes*, the late sixteenth-century and early-seventeenth century English women authors emphasize that Adam should take most of the responsibility for the Fall since he was deemed to be theologically and ontologically anterior and primary, so he should have advised Eve; moreover God recognizes Eve's lesser role in the lapsarian drama by tempering Eve's punishment with mercy and making her the mother of the human race and one of her descendants the mother of Christ (Gamble 2004:5-8).

This revisionist feminist version of the events from the Scriptures is central to Lanyer's version of Christ's Passion, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* being a meditation on the Passion which argues that men and not women were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Women including Pontius Pilate's wife are presented as virtuous and grieving onlookers who do not collude in Christ's execution (Gamble 2004:12-13) and they create an influential female audience in this major religious drama, whereas all judges, scribes and Elders of the Land were men. Moreover, in an extended section entitled "Eves Apologie in Defense of Women" Lanyer argues that Eve was less culpable than Adam, then compares women's sinfulness in the Edenic context to men's sinfulness in the

context of the crucifixion, advocating in the end women's social and religious equality with men.

Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdain  
Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny?  
If one weake woman simply did offend,  
This sinne of yours hath no excuse, nor end.

One of the chief techniques of pro-women argumentation is the invocation of virtue construed in the feminine - Deborah, Jael, Judith, Susanna, Helen, Lucrece, Octavia, Rosamund, Matilda -, although in Lanyer's text the role of simple women is emphasized in the passion narrative, the women of Jerusalem being foregrounded as protagonists on equal terms with Pontius Pilate's wife, the Virgin and the other Maries. This is only one of the features that entitles comparisons with Christine de Pizan, famous for being most likely the first woman to have added a strong female voice to the *querrele des femmes* debate that had had before her only men on both sides of the fence (defenders and detractors of women) and who at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> century launched an impassionate defence of women in her feminist utopia *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*.

One of the landmarks of Lanyer's lengthy poem is the emphatic feminization of Christ himself, as Pearson rightfully claims, born without the assistance of man, and displaying the primarily female virtues of endurance, meekness, patience, obedience, chaste behaviour and even beauty (1998:46).

He plainly shewed that his owne profession

Was virtue, patience, grace, loue, piety;  
And how by suffering he could conquer more  
Than all the Kings that euer liu'd before.

The beauty of the World, Heauens chiefest Glory;  
The mirrour of Martyrs, Crowne of holy Saints;  
Loue of th'Almighty, blessed Angels story;

As Irigaray says in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (1985:259), the human incarnation of the son is the most feminine of all men. Moreover, his vulnerability to slander and his silence are contrasted with the corrupt uses to which language is put in the mouths of those who betray him; vituperation and invective are characteristic of such passages: blasphemers like wicked Caiaphas, *vipers defacing the wombes wherein they were bred*, proud and arrogant Apostles and Prophets *dishonoured Christ, Against those Vipers, objects of disgrace, Beeing the Scorpions bred in Adams mud, Whose poy's'ned sinnes did worke among thy foes*, monsters, blind, dull, weak, stony-hearted, full of spite, wicked actors, hateful vengeful foes, Jewish wolves, biting and prophaning truth.

### **Divine Grace Construed in the Feminine**

Throughout the poem and also in her 11 dedication pieces penitence, grace, the intimacy of the relationship with God are construed in the feminine. Praises are showered on Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, first and foremost for her being a translator of the *Psalms*, - instrumental to the

articulation of penitence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, essential to Protestant confessional requirements and church liturgy (Trill 1998:37-40). Not only were they recommended for daily reading, but they became gradually a crucial discourse in the construction of autobiographical writing (she continued her brother's translation of the *Psalms* cut short by Philip Sidney's untimely death, translating *Psalms 44-150* in a dazzling array of verse forms). Their huge importance in the development of English poetry in the next two centuries is celebrated by John Donne in a poem dedicated to them.

Pembroke's literary achievements and her greater penitential devotion are lauded without reserve. Penitential devotion, alongside the recurrent tropes of humility and self-abasement deployed in the text should not be cursorily considered as mere conventions typical of the discourse of women authors: they should be seen in the broader perspective of women's being likened to Christ. Men in their inability to abase themselves, to articulate emotionally their religious passion and their penitential discourses are less able to achieve such intimacy with God.

What we see at work in Lanyer's revisionism of Christ's passion is the reversal of hierarchies: the powerful are judged by the weak, the all-commanding King submits to be counted a *seeming tradesman's son* and such reversals prove to be very profitable for those removed from the sources of power in society on grounds of class or gender (Pearson 1998:47)

Greatnesse is no sure frame to build vpon,  
No worldly treasure can assure that place;  
God makes both euen, the Cottage with the Throne,  
All worldly honours there are counted base,

Those he holds deare, and reckneth as his owne,  
Whose virtuous deeds by his [especiall] grace  
Haue gain'd his loue, his kingdome, and his crowne,  
Whom in the booke of Life he hath set downe.

Indeed if in the new Jerusalem he that is the greatest may be the least, then the weaker and more oppressed have more to gain:

But yet the Weaker thou dost seeme to be  
In Sexe, or Sence, the more his Glory shines,  
That doth infuze such powrefull Grace in thee,

It comes as no surprise that the high esteem in which women are held would recommend them for high offices - those that are considered the province of men, those of saintly and even divine priests anointed with *Aaron's pretious oil*. The Countess of Cumberland and her daughter Anne Clifford are seen as female St Peters and Mary Sidney is represented as nothing short of a God figure:

Directing all by her immortall light,  
In this huge sea of sorrowes, griefes, and feares;  
With contemplation of Gods powrefull might,  
Shee fills the eies, the hearts, the tongues, the eares

### **Women Reclaiming Authorship**

Lanyer engages actively with all kinds of demeaning tropes for women, reopening the debate on women as books and texts. Women as books, texts to

be read or blank pages to be inscribed by the masculine hand are repressive metaphors in the age and they feature as a recurrent sexist stereotype in many writings of the time - Desdemona *fair paper, this most goodly book* on which Cassio has allegedly written *whore*; Sidney's Stella is a 'fair text' into which the poet will 'pry'; in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* women are books in which their faults can be read (*poor women's faces are their own faults' books*), texts so volatile that women cannot be considered subjects, agents or authors of their own actions, but only the paper, the instrument that awaits authorship in men's hands. But as with the biblical argument turned on its head by Lanyer to achieve opposite effects, she reclaims and reworks such repressive images:

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

so woman becomes nothing less than the generatrix of men's learning (Pearson, 1998:51), no longer the passive page awaiting man's inscription but she gains agency and becomes an author in her own right. Here again we feel tempted to speculate that among the books that she might have consulted in the well-stocked libraries that Lanyer had the privilege to use - as she was fostered in the household of Susan Bertie Wingfield, Countess Dowager of Kent and later the household of Margaret, Countess of Cumberland, and her daughter, Anne Clifford - she might have chanced upon the English translation of Christine de Pizan's works. Her *Livre de la Cité des Dames* was first translated into English by Brian Anslay in 1521 (see Curnow 1976:300-345). In a revolutionary and

radical way, Christine makes women the inventors of all arts, sciences and crafts in her masterpiece of 1405 (Pizan 1998[1405]:64-86).

Throughout the dedications in Lanyer's poem images of books, texts, reading and writing are recurrent, the central tenets of Christian religion - incarnation, atonement, redemption and judgment, being frequently imaged as acts of reading and writing. Women's entitlement to authorship, their literacy and their legitimacy as readers and writers are authorized by Christ Himself (Pearson, 52). He is the book, the reader, writer, and also, like the woman herself, text and muse at the same time, the inspiration of the poet *whose power has given me power to write/ He is able to reade the earthly storie of fraile humanity/ and he writes the Covenant with his pretious blood. He has written the virtuous in the book of life in the eternal book of heaven and has cancelled the black infernall booke of due punishment; at the last judgment when the heavens shall depart as when a scrowle is rolled Christ will open the books and undoe the Seales/In deepe Characters, writ with blood and teares.*

### **Constructing a Female Readership**

Lanyer's feminist revisionism of Christ's passion and her vindication of women certainly connects her to the tradition of early female authors joining the *querelles des femmes* pamphlet debate, but it also connects her to developing narratives of professional authorship and - like Christine de Pizan - she proudly claims to have been divinely inspired, as in her dream *she was appointed to performe that Worke* (comparisons are also invited to Ben Jonson and even John Milton, who also famously claimed to be divinely inspired poets).

Written specifically to praise women and to place women at the heart of Christianity, her poem aims at having women participate in the debate over women's access to education, literacy and she strongly avers that by becoming authors and readers women do not transgress the boundaries of female virtue. Lanyer's poem is exemplary as far as claiming female authorship goes. It engages with the emergence of professional authorship in the early modern period through the sustained endeavour of the deliberate self-construction of an author and her audience. In *Renaissance Women* (1994) Diane Purkiss suggests that in her collection Lanyer creates an interpretive community of female virtue by bringing together the power of women as readers in order to register and display that power. Studying the dedications provides insight into the process by which Lanyer defines her reading audience and develops a female community predicated upon that audience; also by invoking the literary merits of some of her dedicatees, although all of them were patrons of the arts if not writers (in particular Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, Lucy Bedford and Ann Clifford with her *Diary*), we see her efforts to find her place in a female cultural genealogy.

The female dedicatees are not at all a mere convention; they are the subject, the content, the very instrument of the poem, *the ground I write upon*, they are all celebrated as powerful and with an established place in the world of letters, but at the same time they inspire, generate literary texts like their mythological counterparts, the Muses.

One wonders how well Lanyer knew the women to whom she dedicates her writing. Emilia Lanyer, *née* Bassano, was a member of Queen Elizabeth's court, but she was decidedly on its fringes and her paternal ancestors were court

musicians who had come to England from Venice at the end of Henry VIII's reign. The poet was educated under the direction of Susan Bertie Wingfield, Countess Dowager of Kent whose Protestant humanist circle had a profound influence on the young Lanyer (there is internal evidence about this in Lanyer's poem: *Susan Berte Grey Your beauteous Soule, and fill it with his grace./ You that were the Mistris of my youth, / The noble guide of my ungovern'd days*).

The practice of being sent from one's family to be trained up in service in an aristocratic household, like that of Susan's, was then widespread and she was later attached to the household of Margaret, Countess of Cumberland, and her daughter, Anne Clifford, both of whom are repeatedly addressed throughout the poem.

Lanyer must have been educated along with the noble girls whom she attended, for her work shows familiarity with poetic genres and verse forms and with the 1560 Geneva Bible. Later in her life she embarked upon an affair with Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Elizabeth I's cousin and chamberlain (45 years her senior) and a patron of the arts and theatre (he was the patron of Shakespeare's theatre company, known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men), which ended in 1592 when she became pregnant with his child and was married off to Alfonso Lanyer, another court musician, her first cousin once removed, in 1592 (Lasocki and Prior 1995:106;102). Like the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter Anne Clifford she will have a long court wrangling with her late husband's brother and the latter's heirs. Interestingly, Lanyer first came to prominence as a subject of literary study as one of the early candidates for Shakespeare's "dark lady" in the sonnets; however, that claim has subsequently been disproved. (It was Alfred Lesley Rowse who advanced this hypothesis in

*Shakespeare The Man* of 1973. However, more recently scholars refuted his claims, acknowledging, however, the great influence exerted by Rowse on Lanyer studies, see Bevington, 1998:10-28)

The degree of contact that Lanyer had with the noblewomen to whom she dedicates her poems in 1611, almost twenty years after her marriage, remains a problematic question in Lanyer scholarship, but it is important to note that Lanyer does not simply write in search of patronage—she specifically writes in search of patronesses. While the dedications are often ignored or simply taught as paratextual material indicating nothing more than Lanyer’s fierce and insistent desire for patronage, the biographical ramifications of Lanyer’s dedications pale in comparison to their conceptual significance. Women as texts to be read by other women is a new and innovative trope and to achieve her goal Lanyer lays emphasis on mirroring, reflection, and similarity. Throughout the dedications Lanyer insists that her text is the “true mirror” of its readers’—and its dedicatees’—virtue. Mirror which is a key image in the Elizabethan age for a work of literature is at the same time a conventional female symbol, hence the accumulation of literary creativity and femaleness, as Pearson astutely remarks (1998:50-51). The works of her dedicatees are mirrors themselves, mirrors of their virtues, self-mirroring and self-fashioning become thus leading traits in the text.

By presenting her work in this way, she is able both to invent and draw upon a network of patronesses and imagined readers. In her first dedicatory poem to Queen Anne, the wife of James I, Lanyer implores her to *Looke in this Mirrour of a worthy Mind, / Where some of your faire Virtues will appeare*; While Lanyer’s mirror reflects some of the Queen’s virtues back at her, that act

of identification becomes possible for all virtuous women and thus by balancing the discourses of praise and individual exemplarity with community in an act of reflection and contemplation, the virtues reflected in the text encourage any reader to reflect upon her own virtue. Exactly as the common women of Jerusalem become protagonists in the passion of Christ, all women become the equals of her dedicatees creating in this way a strong sense of female solidarity. Active, participatory readership is necessary for Lanyer's project to succeed—without it her text remains incomplete and unfinished.

### **Striving Towards a Female Cultural Genealogy**

In Lanyer's poem female networks and female genealogies are buttressed by the concept of maternity, literal and metaphorical: Anne of Denmark and Elizabeth of Bohemia; Catherine Brandon, Duchess of Suffolk and Susan Bertie Wingfield; or Margaret, Countess of Cumberland and her daughter Anne Clifford. Margaret and Anne engaged in a protracted legal battle to contest the will of George Clifford, husband and father setting themselves against the whole of Jacobean patriarchy, father, husband, male relatives, Archbishop of Canterbury and James himself included. (Lewalski 1991:90)

Ann Clifford's *Diary* is praised today for its intensely introspective and personal character that makes it almost unique for its time (it was edited and published in 1923 by Vita Sackville West, a descendant of the brother of her first husband, Richard Sackville, Earl of Dorset). Her diary also communicates her sense of worth, her authority judgment on all the men around her, emphasizing matrilineal heritage and kinship networks - the Russel aunts, Queen Elizabeth and Anne, who much loved her as a child, the countesses of

Bath and Warwick. She also enlarges upon her humanist education, her favourite books and authors. She starts her *Diary* in 1603 recording with the eyes of a 13-year old girl a flurry of impressions caused by the death of Elizabeth I and the succession of James I and Anne of Denmark. As Lewalski points out, the *Diary* celebrates the emergence of a female self, empowered to resist existing social norms and find strength in female bonding and expressing women's conviction that the Divine Patriarch was their ally against the earthly patriarchs (1995:95-96).

### **Conclusion**

In Lanyer's poem female networks and maternity are celebrated over patriarchal networks of power transmission, Elizabeth featuring as *virgin mother of the common-weale*. At the same time the poetic structure of her lengthy poem is modelled on women's pregnancy, as the imbrications of themes can be seen in terms of a web of maternities where the appeal to female patrons contains the passion story, which contains the speech of Pilate's wife and that one the vindication of Eve and then Eve is seen as the creative force behind all generations of women. We can conclude that in an Irigarayan sense the narrative functions as 'a series of enfoldings modelled on pregnancy (47) wombs within wombs' (Pearson 1998:47).

Lanyer scholars often underline the personal motivation underlying her extraordinary choice of dedicatees. After all, Lanyer was a Jacobean woman who published literary work and so emerged dangerously from the private realm to which she was confined by the patriarchal terms of her time (the very term 'public' suggested moral dissolution for women as we can understand

from Othello's disparaging 'thou public commoner' in *Othello*, IV, scene 2,). Her work should be celebrated above all as an extraordinary defence of women's writings and their reading in which disparities of power and class are erased and women's activities of writing and reading become not only virtuous but even god-like activities. Lanyer's poem helps us understand how early modern English women read and wrote their world and themselves.

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