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A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



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Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 3, No. 2, (December 2012), pp. 113-122.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/stapleton%20article.html>

**Teaching *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*:
Aemilia Lanyer and Early Modern Authorship**

by Kristiane Stapleton

Canonical in terms of early modern women's writing, Aemilia Lanyer remains wildly underrepresented in more general courses and for more general audiences. Her 1611 collection of poetry, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is an uneasy assortment of genres including eleven encomiastic dedications encompassing a range of poetic forms and even prose; a lengthy title poem reenacting Christ's passion; and an early country house poem praising Cooke-ham, the Countess of Cumberland's former estate. Due to this fragmentation, it is often taught in excerpts of the title poem and the country house poem that do not represent the primacy of the dedications in Lanyer's original text. While teaching Lanyer at all allows for some representation of early modern female authorship in a survey course, and any representation is better than none, I prefer to teach Lanyer's dedications. I teach the dedications to motivate my students to consider and engage with the emergence of professional authorship in the early modern period through a sustained example of the deliberate self-construction of an author and her audience.

Lanyer's dedications can be taught at any level, from a few days of discussion in a survey course to a week in an upper division seminar. They can be taught on their own or as a prelude to "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" and "The Description of Cookeham," the poems that make up the rest of Lanyer's collection and that are regularly excerpted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. I use Susanne Woods' 1993 edition of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, which is readily available (even in a Kindle edition!), quite affordable, and includes all of the dedications, providing an accurate picture of Lanyer's entire collection and the emphasis placed upon what is ostensibly prefatory, paratextual material.^[1]

A close reading of Lanyer's dedications in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in the classroom showcases the active and simultaneous construction of readership and authorship, establishing a set of questions that can be applied productively to other medieval and early modern texts and authors. These questions are central to my teaching of Lanyer's dedications: how does she position herself and her authorship in her eleven dedications to individual noblewomen and her hoped-for female readers? Why are the dedications themselves not just empty praise—what is it that makes them worthy of consideration and instruction? In fact, these questions can guide a semester-long seminar, whether that seminar is interested in gender and connects Lanyer to other female authors or the *querelles des femmes* pamphlet debates, or interested in genre and connects Lanyer to developing narratives of professional authorship and explores her

work alongside Ben Jonson and even John Milton, who also famously claimed to be a divinely inspired poet.

Studying the dedications provides insight into the process by which Lanyer defines her reading audience and develops a female community predicated upon that audience. She does so methodologically through her emphasis on mirroring, reflection, and similarity, but she also does so thematically through her exploration of the reciprocity of grace; the legacy of previous female authors like Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke; and the possibility of an entirely female community preserved in fiction, in this book, even if it cannot exist in reality. I find Lanyer's text to be an important lynchpin in class discussions of gender and genre, but, most importantly, the deliberate construction and regulation of authorship.

Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

Turning to the text reveals the sheer number of pages occupied by the dedications in comparison with Lanyer's title poem, "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" and her country house poem. *Salve Deus* the collection opens with what seems like an excessive number of dedications, all directed towards her hoped-for patronesses.^[2] Lanyer has eleven dedications, nine of which are directed at notable individual women, and two that she addresses to "all vertuous Ladies" and to her "vertuous reader." In

order, Lanyer dedicates her poem to: Queen Anne, her daughter Princess Elizabeth, “all vertuous Ladies in generall,” Lady Arabella Stuart, the dowager Countess of Kent, the dowager Countess of Pembroke (who receives the longest dedication), the Countess of Bedford, the dowager Countess of Cumberland (who receives attention throughout the text, especially in “The Description of Cooke-ham”), the Countess of Suffolk, the Countess of Dorset, and the “Vertuous Reader.” After “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum” and “the Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer ends her text with one final dedication, “To the doubtfull Reader,” where she claims that she was divinely inspired to write her collection.

How well did Lanyer know these women? Aemilia Lanyer, *née* Bassano, was a member of Queen Elizabeth’s court, but she was decidedly on its fringes. She was first exposed to the court through her family, a family of court musicians, but she later embarked upon an affair with Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Elizabeth I’s cousin and chamberlain (which ended in 1592 when she became pregnant with his child and was married off to Alfonso Lanyer, another court musician). 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.^[3]

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, particularly in the classroom. I will discuss three examples of conceptual complexity in Lanyer’s dedications: her use of mirroring and similarity to construct a female reading audience, her insistence upon active readership and the reflection of the exemplary reader in her text, and her awareness of the dangers of constructing a community of women when individual women may not see themselves reflected there in order to give a sense of the flexibility and applicability of the text even when read through one set of organizing metaphors.

Throughout the dedications Lanyer insists that her text is the “true mirror” of its readers’—and its dedicatees’—virtue. 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 and VI, Lanyer implores her to “Looke in this Mirroure of a worthy Mind, / Where some of your faire Virtues will appeare;” (37-38). The language of praise connects reader and author in a strategic act of reflection and a deliberate obfuscation of authority that can keep a discussion hopping: whose “worthy Mind” is reflected here? Lanyer’s or the Queen’s? Or does this

foreshadow Lanyer's later praise of Margaret the Dowager Countess of Cumberland, when in her later dedication she explicitly presents her book as "the mirroure of *your* most worthy minde" (29, emphasis mine).^[4] However, at this moment in the dedications the ownership of the mind remains deliberately in question. What does this ambiguity accomplish?

This dedication draws the Queen into Lanyer's collection, urging her to look for signs of worth in herself, in the mind that created the mirror, and in the other women who are later reflected in it.^[5] While Lanyer's mirror reflects some of the Queen's virtues back at her, that identification, that sameness, becomes possible for all virtuous women, 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. What is it that Lanyer is asking for from her readers and why is such participation central to the success of her authorship? Active readership is necessary for Lanyer's project to succeed—without it her text remains incomplete and unfinished. I encourage my students to consider what it means to read actively in this text and in others we study.

Rather than taking the responsibility for disseminating and representing virtue upon herself as the author of the text, Lanyer diffuses that responsibility to her readership, urging her reader(s) to join the previous dedicatees and view herself or

themselves within the mirror as well. For example, in her dedication “To the Ladie *Anne*, Countesse of Dorcet,” she writes:

To you I dedicate this worke of Grace,
This frame of Glory which I have erected,
For your faire mind I hold the fittest place,
Where virtue should be setled & protected;
If highest thoughts true honor do imbrace,
And holy Wisdom is of them respected:
Then in this Mirrour let your fair eyes looke,
To view your virtues in this blessed Booke. (1-8)

Lanyer has provided the “frame” but has not dictated the contents; she presents the virtue in her book as coming from her reader’s “faire mind.” This both enables and limits her authorship, a paradox that fascinates my students. Her emphasis on active readership clearly enables her writing on an individual level: Lanyer can present her text as individually tailored to represent each virtuous reader, each virtuous woman. However, on a communal level things become more complicated. On the one hand, she can claim that her reader should pick up her text in an attempt to foster female virtue because of the principle of sameness she elucidates throughout the dedications—if one woman is virtuous then she can act as a mirror for other women and reflect that virtue upon them. On the other hand, that very principle of sameness threatens to undermine the entire project of feminine virtue and the appreciation of Lanyer’s text. If one virtuous woman can represent all virtuous women, then what happens if a woman isn’t virtuous? Does that then reflect upon all women as well?

In "To all Vertuous Ladies in General" and "To the Vertuous Reader," which are her most general dedications, Lanyer explicitly articulates her exploration of the problems and possibilities inherent in creating a unified community from an assortment of individuals. Even as they function as the actual construction sites for the broader community, as the dedications that will build a community beyond the potential aristocratic patronesses Lanyer names, they still reveal the fissures and fractures in the community Lanyer imagines. That community is fragile and constantly at risk of disruption, defamation, and destruction, as we see:

"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... And this have I done, to make knowne to the world, 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 speak unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe." ("To the Vertuous Reader" 1-15).

Lanyer cannily presents any female reader who opposes her text as a betrayer of her sex. At the end of this dedication she exhorts her readers to "cherish, nourish, and increase the least sparke of virtue where they find it, by their favourable and best

interpretations, [rather] than quench it by wrong constructions.” (59-61). Those who dislike Lanyer’s text are not just early literary critics; they destroy virtue with their slanderous tongues. Intrigued and appalled by this blatant positioning, my students consider not only how Lanyer defines her community of readers but also how other authors include and exclude in order to define their audiences—both in the early modern period and today.

I find teaching Lanyer in a survey or in an advanced undergraduate class to be a very useful way to talk about praise poetry, patronage, and early modern networks, while foregrounding the developing concept of professional authorship. I also find it to be an incredibly helpful text in terms of teaching generic adaptation and innovation—comparing Lanyer’s dedications to other dedications, for example, or looking at her country house poem alongside examples of the genre by Ben Jonson, Andrew Marvell, and others. My students are usually excited to talk about prefatory material because it helps them to think about the text as a material object while also thinking about the ways that authors use their texts to construct their audiences, a concept they find fascinating and that we can easily connect both to popular genres and texts today and to the elaborate positioning of prominent early modern texts like Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* and Jonson’s folios of his works. Aemilia Lanyer and *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* are well worth spending some time with in an introductory or an advanced undergraduate classroom.

Endnotes

[1] Lanyer, Aemilia, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. Susanne Woods, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

[2] This list of dedications also comes from Susanne Woods' modern edition of Lanyer's text. Woods rightly points out that the dedications vary in certain copies of Lanyer's text, but these are the standard dedications, appearing in five of the nine existing copies. The other manuscripts appear to have deliberately omitted dedications for specific audiences or to have missing pages.

[3] A. L. Rowse first presented Lanyer as his candidate for the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets in *Shakespeare The Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973). For more information on the problems with Rowse's presentation of Lanyer, see "A.L. Rowse's Dark Lady" by David Bevington in *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp.10-28. Bevington establishes the influence Rowse has had on Lanyer studies before going on to refute most of his claims and recontextualize the remainder.

[4] Lanyer explicitly says in her later dedication, "To the Ladie *Margaret* Countesse Dowager of Cumberland," that her book is "the mirroure of your most worthy minde" (29).

[5] As Naomi Miller argues, "Lanyer reconfigures the mirroring potential of verse, traditionally claimed by male Renaissance poets to depict women as objects in mirrored opposition to their own subjectivity, in the service of constructing femininity in female-authored terms" (150). For more on this, see Naomi J. Miller. "(M)other Tongues: Maternity and Subjectivity" in *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), pp. 143-166.

Works Cited:

Lanyer, Aemilia, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. Susanne Woods, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).