

WRITING TO WOMEN: AEMILIA LANYER AND THE RHETORIC OF EQUALITY

by

Daniel Bergman

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
July 2015

© Copyright by Daniel Bergman, 2015

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iii
List of Abbreviations Used.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Publicizing the Private Sphere: Print Culture and Early Modern Women.....	6
III. Rhetoric and Class: Reading Lanyer’s Poetry as a “Conversation between Friends”	17
IV. Mirror Images: Reciprocity and Flexibility in Erasmus and Lanyer.....	27
V. Conclusion.....	41
Bibliography.....	44

ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last few decades, much has been written on the subject of Aemilia Lanyer's relationship to the all-female dedicatees of her major 1611 publication, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. While some critics read Lanyer's decision to direct her appeals for patronage solely toward members of her own gender as a conscious attempt to establish a female literary community, others contend that Lanyer's clear awareness of the differences in social status between herself and her dedicatees ought to forestall hasty pronouncements regarding her promotion of "sisterhood." However, by examining the dedicatory epistles appended to *Salve Deus* in the context of early modern letter-writing culture and the epistolary theory of Desiderius Erasmus, the following thesis aims to dissolve this artificial dichotomy – arguing that Lanyer's work neither blithely ignores nor absolutely embraces class antagonism but, rather, encourages dialogue between women from a variety of social backgrounds.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

ADLM	The Authors Dreame to the Ladie <i>Marie</i> , the Countesse Dowager of <i>Pembrooke</i>
SD	Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum
TLA	To the Ladie <i>Arabella</i>
TLAD	To the Ladie <i>Anne</i> , Countesse of <i>Dorcet</i>
TLK	To the Ladie <i>Katherine</i> Countesse of Suffolke
TLM	To the Ladie <i>Margaret</i> Countesse Dowager of Cumberland
TLS	To the Ladie <i>Susan</i> , Countesse Dowager of Kent, and Daughter to the Duchesse of Suffolke
TQEM	To the Queenes Most Excellent Majestie
TVR	To the Vertuous Reader

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank John Baxter for all his help with this project, including – perhaps most importantly – his wise suggestion to search for inspiration in the work of Erasmus. I also owe significant debts of gratitude to Lyn Bennett and Christina Luckyj, for their thoughtful comments and suggestions; to my fellow graduate students in English and my friends outside the department, for listening patiently to my endless concerns about meeting deadlines; to Leonard Diepeveen, for directing me toward grad school in the first place; and, above all, to my wonderful parents, whose intelligence, kindness, generosity and patience has shone through every anxious cross-country phone call and celebratory Skype conversation.

I. Introduction

Over four hundred years ago, in early 1611, an aspiring English poet named Aemilia Lanyer published a slim volume of religious poetry that included several dedications addressed to high-ranking women within the Jacobean court circle. Over five years ago, in early 2009, a group of three friends from across the United States launched a website designed to encourage independent artistic creation by putting writers, musicians and video game developers in touch with a worldwide community of potential financiers. Admittedly, Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and the online crowdfunding forum now known as Kickstarter may not share many obvious qualities in common, but the two remain connected across the interstices of time and technology by a profound interest in the dynamics of patronage. Like Lanyer in her dedicatory epistles, Kickstarter users interact directly with their clientele, offering potential backers the opportunity to participate in the creative process by contributing money toward the completion of specific projects. Moreover, by the website's own admission, "launching a Kickstarter is a very public act" that leaves the site's users vulnerable to reputational damage should their projects not succeed (Kickstarter FAQ), a risk that Lanyer – given her tenuous status as a woman writer in an era of male-dominated publishing – would have understood all too well. Finally, in addition to delivering the results of a fully-realized artistic vision, Kickstarter expects its "creators" to provide customized "rewards" – in the form of T-shirts, DVD's or even face-to-face meetings – meant to act as additional incentives for donors (Kickstarter FAQ); similarly, Lanyer's dedicatory verses include bold promises regarding the spiritual value of her main poem that, while very likely sincere, might also have tempted a greater number of God-fearing prospective

patrons to contribute to her project. In these ways, websites such as Kickstarter provide useful, if imperfect, contemporary analogies for early modern patronage practices – suggesting that the art of crafting a compelling public persona is one that transcends generational boundaries. Understanding Lanyer’s approach to the marketing of her own poetry, then, may well afford valuable insights to contemporary cultural critics interested in both the rhetoric of online self-promotion and the impact of material factors on the production of creative goods.

Of course, Kickstarter’s daily activity does not exactly replicate that of the early modern patronage market. Just as the type of art being proposed by creative entrepreneurs has shifted – with graphic novels and sci-fi epics replacing Christian devotional poetry – so too have the class boundaries that define the social environment in which that art is produced. Whereas members of the nobility constituted the only reliable means of support for medieval and early modern writers, crowdfunded Kickstarter artists now rely on contributions both large and small from a broad range of individuals: in an online testimonial, in fact, one beneficiary of this unrestricted donation system calls it “the most democratic way art has ever been made” (What is Kickstarter?). Hyperbole aside, the Kickstarter model is certainly less feudalistic than its Renaissance counterpart – promoting, through the small scale of many of its projects, a more intimate and egalitarian approach to the relationship between “backer” and “creator.” At the same time, however, this modern attitude owes a considerable debt to the efforts of patronage-seeking poets such as Lanyer, whose awareness of social inequities forms a cornerstone of her work. Indeed, rather than adhering to the rigid dictates of her society by using her dedications solely to ingratiate herself to her social superiors, Lanyer instead combines

flattery with forthrightness – addressing her dedicatees as equals in terms both spiritual and rhetorical. In so doing, she follows in the footsteps of sixteenth-century rhetorician Desiderius Erasmus, who continually reminds the readers of his manual *On the Writing of Letters* about the principle of reciprocity so integral to the exchange of correspondence and exhorts them to assert the right to equal speech that such a principle implies. By insisting, in this way, on language’s determining influence in the construction of social relations, Erasmus may provide Lanyer with the philosophical impetus to orient the tone and content of her own dedicatory letters away from sycophancy and toward the kind of egalitarianism that also underlies – at least in theory – contemporary forms of patronage. In this sense, examining Lanyer and Erasmus in tandem offers modern Lanyer scholarship a new lens through which to assess the extent of the poet’s innovations while simultaneously confirming her considerable understanding of existing rhetorical conventions.

Achieving some form of equal status with her aristocratic interlocutors is of special importance for a writer like Lanyer, who spent most of her life on the outer margins of court society. As the daughter of a court musician and, later, the reported lover of Queen Elizabeth’s Lord Chamberlain, Lanyer enjoyed a level of access to educational resources and a degree of material comfort that would have been denied to women from strictly working-class families (Woods xv). According to scholarly speculation, however, the future poet’s luck turned in 1592, when she became pregnant with the Lord Chamberlain’s son and was promptly married off to another court musician

named Alphonso Lanyer (Woods xviii).¹ From this point forward, historical documents suggest that Lanyer lived with the threat of financial ruin constantly hovering above her head, if never quite descending: her new husband, though apparently sincere in his efforts to secure a knighthood and better their joint situation, lost a good deal of Lanyer's familial inheritance "in a series of foolish investments" (Coiro 338). Viewed through the lens of these biographical circumstances, Lanyer's need to garner the financial support of her former aristocratic acquaintances takes on an urgency that manifests itself in her dedicatory verse-letters as a delicate balance between tact and self-assertion. As part of this concerted promotional effort, Lanyer insists upon her poetry's ability to speak for all women: its mission statement, she claims, is to convince "all good Christians and honourable minded men to speake reverently of our sexe, and especially of all virtuous and good women" ("TVR" 54-56). Whether Lanyer is entirely sincere in this approach to gender politics or whether her proto-feminist stance constitutes a marketing ploy directed at her all-female audience is likely an unanswerable question, although the two options are far from mutually exclusive. What is certain is that Lanyer locates herself within a tradition of women's devotional writing and makes the experience of marginality and oppression – counterbalanced by the desire for greater autonomy and self-determination – a central theme of her poetry. Bound up with her Erasmian preoccupation with reciprocity and equality, then, is a keen awareness of the precarious, but not altogether helpless, position of women in Jacobean society.

¹ In her overview of Lanyer's biography, Susanne Woods relies heavily on transcripts of conversations between the poet and the astrologer Simon Forman, drawn from Forman's own diaries. While Forman was notorious for embellishment, Woods believes that his casebooks – if "read carefully and critically" (xv) – can provide crucial insight into the desires and disappointments of a woman whose life generally remains shrouded in mystery. To date, Woods' version of events remains the most authoritative.

From this perspective, Lanyer's dissatisfaction with the state of early modern social relations leads to an attempt to recalibrate these dynamics using the transformative power of language. Accomplishing such an ambitious feat evidently requires familiarity with fundamental rhetorical principles; happily, while the gaps in her biography prevent contemporary scholars from assessing exactly what texts she might have read as part of her informal courtly education, her poetry itself indicates more than a passing acquaintance with the fundamental tenets of Classical oratory – including, most particularly, the Aristotelian division of rhetorical matter into three constituent parts known as *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*. Of these three categories – which, respectively, denote attention to a speaker's voice, the subject matter chosen by that speaker and, lastly, the effect of the speaker's words on his or her audience – the first is probably most important for understanding the strategies employed by Erasmus and Lanyer. According to S. Michael Halloran, for instance, "*ethos* is what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe" (60). Establishing immediate credibility is an urgent imperative for a writer such as Lanyer, whose livelihood depends upon gaining the trust of her audience. This approach also clearly aligns with Erasmus' belief that letter-writers ought to "dispense with needless prefaces, [and] use the most telling words" if they wish to be taken seriously by their interlocutors (21). However, what sets Lanyer apart from Classical rhetors – and even from Erasmus – is her insistence upon the inseparability of a poem's voice from its content. In other words, Lanyer makes reciprocity the focal point of not only her poetry's *ethos* but also its *logos* – ultimately presenting each prospective patron with a letter whose style directly influences its subject matter.

II. Publicizing the Private Sphere: Print Culture and Early Modern Women

With the publication of *Salve Deus* in 1611, Lanyer entered into a literary marketplace in which eking out a living had become an arduous task. The artistic patronage system that had flourished in England during the reign of Elizabeth I² was, in the early years of Jacobean rule, showing strain under the pressure of an increased number of aspiring professional poets competing for the attention of a shrinking pool of aristocratic donors. As Erin McCarthy notes, “a government post or a permanent position in a noble household was the best possible outcome for an early modern patronage seeker and, by the early seventeenth century, there were not enough positions to go around” (50). At the same time, the possibility of earning adequate compensation from book sales was practically non-existent; with “no hope of receiving a share of the profits” under the contractual model of the age, the only avenue for professional remuneration available to writers took the form of a one-time payment, handed down from publisher to author, that “would have been roughly equivalent to what [the author] would have received from a single patron” (McCarthy 51). Given these straitened circumstances, Lanyer’s willingness to “cast a wide net in her search for patronage” (McCarthy 50) by filling nearly half of her printed volume with artful praise for nine different Jacobean noblewomen must be interpreted within the context of economic necessity.³ On a basic level, then, the dedicatory poems that preface “*Salve Deus*” serve not only as artful

² See Ng 445-46 for an extensive discussion of the decrease in courtly support for the arts under James I.

³ The notion that the dedications to “*Salve Deus*” form the foundation of a wide-ranging search for patronage is now a commonplace assertion within Lanyer scholarship. For further insight into the details of this endeavour, as well as its motivating factors, see Barroll 29-48, Longfellow 65, Ng 433-451, Schnell 79, Woods xv-xlii and Mueller 100.

advertisements for their author's skill but also as blunt admissions of the precariousness of that same author's social position.

In addition, this almost-unprecedented number of dedications⁴ provides Lanyer with ample room to justify what could have been perceived by her contemporaries as a bold and morally compromising foray into the nascent world of print publication.

"Because it bridged socially differentiated readers," Wendy Wall remarks in *The Imprint of Gender*, a thorough materialist investigation into the dynamics of Renaissance literary culture, "print played indiscriminately on real and perceived fears about the collapse of social difference" (12). In other words, building on the work of literary historian J.W. Saunders, Wall contends that the print industry's capacity to unite readers from a wide variety of social backgrounds stood in revolutionary contrast to the upper-class preference for manuscript exchange – a practice in which "poetry, imagined as the product of an aristocratic social ethos, sustained and policed the social boundaries that defined 'equals or near-equals in social status'" (13). Within this context, Lanyer's decision to preface her major poem with a series of poetic commendations in praise of specific members of the landed gentry could be seen as an attempt to mitigate the potential damage done to her patronage prospects by her participation in a medium understood to be "disreputable" and vulgar (Wall 3). If Lanyer's goal was to attract

⁴ As McCarthy notes, Lanyer was not entirely alone among her contemporaries in her decision to preface her major poem with several epistolary dedications: Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, published in 1596, includes seventeen such prologues, while Henry Lok's 1597 publication of *Ecclesiastes* contains an unwieldy sixty. However, McCarthy also adds that those books are "much bigger than *Salve Deus*" – meaning that, unlike in Lanyer's slim volume, "dedications do not make up half their contents" (51-52).

aristocratic patronage as well as a mass audience,⁵ then the dedications may well have been a shrewd and necessary attempt to navigate the divide between private and public forms of authorship.

Yet, although the medium of print publication may have initially destabilized the boundaries between social classes, the same cannot be said for its effect on early modern gender relations. Indeed, if anything, print provided a forum in which existing patriarchal norms could be renewed, re-enacted and reified. According to Wall, for example, authors desperate for cultural legitimation would often compare their newly published texts to women's bodies as a means of demonstrating their mastery over their materials and thereby diminishing the degree of the book's perceived threat to the social order (2, 282). Unsurprisingly, this habit of reducing "the female body" to "a medium for articulating power" quickly produced "a masculinized notion of authorship" that limited the possibility for women's participation in the publication process in any capacity other than that of "tropes necessary to the process of writing" or "figures for male desire" (Wall 282). In addition, women found themselves beholden to conceptions of feminine virtue that hinged upon "the rampant idealization of chastity" and a consequent emphasis on the benefits of "[remaining] safely enclosed within the home rather than engaged in the circulation of social signs or events" (Wall 280). To assume, however, that these ideological obstacles were successful in their attempts to dissuade early modern women from pursuing careers in literary production would be to fall victim to the lingering

⁵ In contrast to most scholars – who tend to view the dedications in relation to their impact on Lanyer's patronage prospects – McCarthy points out that the volume's opening section "highlights the book's suitability and desirability for female readers" (54). From this perspective, the dedications help to ingratiate Lanyer to potential patrons while simultaneously serving as advertisements of the book's subject matter to a general reading public.

influence of male-centric conceptions of authorial history. Rather, as Wall argues, “the strict limitations placed on women’s social and mental activities only make their literary experiments more impressive” (283). In some cases, even, women writers explicitly appropriated “masculine” rhetoric in order to “attend to female concerns” (Wall 283) – using subjects and styles gleaned from the perusal of male-authored works to fashion subversive arguments in defence of women’s moral and artistic sophistication. Put another way, though the early modern publishing world was certainly starkly stratified in terms of gender, female authors such as Lanyer continued to seek out gaps in the existing structure through which their own voices might be heard.

Despite the transgressive nature of this feminine foray into print, most women writers working in England within the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries were drawn to the relatively conventional realm of Christian devotional poetry. Undoubtedly, on one level, this focus on divinely-inspired subject matter reflects an acquiescence to cultural expectations regarding proper “womanly” behaviour. As Helen Wilcox observes, “most of the women [writing devotional poetry at this time] did not seem to be troubled by questions of authorship,” adding that “few of them... made claims for their poetic status or acknowledged a formal vocation” (22). Indeed, from a modern perspective, what is remarkable about these women – whose ranks include figures such as Elizabeth Major, Jane Cavendish and Ann Collins – is precisely the fact that they clearly feel comfortable putting ink to paper without needing to obtain the approval of a wider (male) public or assert a concrete authorial identity. Yet, even within these deeply private missives to God, Wilcox notes a burgeoning spirit of self-assertion that counterbalances and complicates the poets’ professed reason for writing. Stressing “the difficult relationship

between emerging selfhood and a proper devotional attitude,” this critic references the example of mid-seventeenth-century writer Elizabeth Newell, who concludes a manuscript devoted to describing God’s “just and powerfull hand” by signing her name three times “in her own ‘hand’” (Wilcox 23). Here, Newell’s desire to take credit for her own work – however fleeting and worldly that credit might be – threatens to disrupt her communion with God as well as her commitment to a passive acceptance of the “just” tribulations of earthly life. Like Lanyer’s dedications, Newell’s thrice-repeated signature conjures up an image of a poet struggling to find a balance between writing for private pleasure and presenting one’s text for public consumption. Furthermore, this small act of self-validation suggests that the devotional genre may have opened a space for the expression of independent thought that could not thereafter be closed – creating an environment, nestled within the cracks of so-called “masculine” rhetoric, in which women writers could gain in confidence regarding their own poetic abilities while simultaneously identifying themselves as authentic vessels of divine truth and authoritative interpreters of Christian doctrine.

This tradition of appropriating a socially-sanctioned space – such as that of private devotional poetry – to develop artistic skill and critical habits of mind owes a surprising amount to the example of Renaissance humanist Thomas More. While better-known for his utopian writings and infamous political struggle with Henry VIII, More also stands out among sixteenth-century heads of household for his resolute insistence on educating his daughters. In *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, Pamela Benson highlights this encouragement of learning, arguing that More’s personal correspondence with his children and their tutors – along with an epigram published in 1516 regarding the

most desirable attributes one could find in a wife – “reveal More’s conviction that the primary purpose of the education of women is to improve their spiritual lives” (158) so that they might eventually possess “spiritual autonomy within a society that provides [them] with no social autonomy” (159). As with later generations of female devotional poets, then, More appears to have recognized the refuge for intellectually-minded women offered by religious study: approaching an understanding of divinity, after all, requires some degree of familiarity with canonical texts and classical methods of reasoning. Framing women’s education as a spiritual mission also shields its pupils from accusations of unvirtuous behaviour; as Benson explains, More sought to convince those in his immediate social circle that “if women have been less than moral in the past, it is because men have cut them off from the knowledge that would have led them to be virtuous” (181). From this perspective, More’s writings set an important cultural precedent for women writers – including Lanyer – in search of a way to combine their religious principles with their desire for access to literary modes of expression.

However, despite this deeply-ingrained respect for learned women, More’s proposed model of female education stops short of encouraging its adherents to display their talents publicly – signaling a deference to established custom that once again inhibits any attempt at forms of expression that lie beyond the bounds of what Wall refers to as “domestic piety” (280). Scholarly evaluations of More’s reticence on this point vary widely: while Valerie Wayne views the humanist instructor’s “emphasis upon ethical conduct” as “yet another means of restricting [women’s] behavior and intellectual growth” (19), Benson generously interprets More’s “acceptance of the conventional exclusion of women from public roles” as entirely consonant with his belief that “the

spiritual life was superior” along with his own desire to withdraw into private contemplation (168, 171). Whatever More’s true intentions, there can be little doubting the strength of his convictions regarding the moral benefits available to women who remain firmly ensconced within the home.

This perspective contrasts sharply with the one advanced a generation later by Thomas Elyot throughout his 1540 *Defence of Good Women*, in which he attempts to link women’s possession of personal moral virtue with their potential for political action. From Benson’s perspective, Elyot’s *Defence* – written as a Platonic dialogue – hinges on the assertion that “the capacity for private sexual fidelity indicates a capacity for public justice;” in other words, because both activities constitute a form of “faith” or promise-keeping, a woman who is capable of the first must necessarily be capable of the second (187-88). Elyot then goes on to present an overview of several historical women renowned not only for their faithfulness to their husbands but also for their ability to reason and their wise management of the household accounts (Benson 191). By suggesting that these skills naturally cross over into the public realm for women as much as men, Elyot introduces a political edge to More’s belief in the value of female education – exploiting popular perceptions regarding the special affinity between women and domestic life in order to undermine and subvert them.

Into this debate on the appropriate place for a woman in society steps Aemilia Lanyer, whose *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* – by its very nature as a published copy of devotional verse – straddles the line between the public and private spheres. By recounting the story of Christ’s Passion to a built-in audience of women, Lanyer’s poem transforms the personal experience of communicating with God into a public event. The

poet establishes her focus on communal spirituality early in the text, while explaining her choice of subject matter to the Countess of Cumberland: “His Death and Passion I desire to write, / and thee to reade, the blessed Soules delight” (*SD* 271-72). In this moment, Lanyer reveals that her ambitions extend beyond a re-telling of Scripture – inserting herself and her own authorial “desires” into a poem that already includes the presence of both Christ and Margaret Clifford. In doing so, Lanyer turns her devotional efforts into a kind of performance, in which she occupies a lead role. Although Wilcox notes that “there is a surprisingly strong sense of women devotional poets participating within communities, whether linked by doctrinal, intellectual, or social interests” (28), many of the authors she references wrote forty to fifty years after Lanyer first published her volume, at a time when the writing of poetry had become a slightly more acceptable mode of political expression for women;⁶ moreover, very few of these devotional revolutionaries attempted to follow Lanyer by building a prospective audience into the very fabric of their poems. Spirituality may well have been “communal” during the Renaissance, as Wilcox claims (28), but its written expression by women – as Wall and Benson’s detailed studies demonstrate – was still an issue of serious debate. Within this context, Lanyer’s attempt to radically publicize a genre of writing that had, as yet, only been granted to women for their private edification marks a significant, if not altogether unprecedented, development.

In addition to broadening the scope of her poem to include a variety of voices, Lanyer pushes her work even further beyond the private sphere by arguing explicitly that women can convert their inner spiritual integrity into public acts of virtue. Indeed, for

⁶ Suzanne Trill notes that “female prophets played a significant part” in disrupting the status quo during the mid-seventeenth-century English Civil Wars (76).

several scholars – including Kimberly Anne Coles – the idea that women possess the “faith” needed to “unfailingly recognise who and what Christ is” (Coles 173) forms a central tenet of the unconventional theology underpinning Lanyer’s poem. In other words, Lanyer follows the example of Elyot – whether knowingly or not – in asserting that the concept of “faith” forms a link between the contemplative realm of domestic piety and the external realm of action and justice. Throughout her description of the Passion, for instance, Lanyer draws clear lines of distinction between the corrupted ethical perspectives of the men who put Christ to death and the virtuous, unclouded sight of the women who, in Lanyer’s telling, immediately recognized Jesus as the Son of God. In one remarkable stanza, Lanyer sharpens this contrast to the highest possible degree as she re-imagines the procession leading Christ to his crucifixion:

First went the Crier with open mouth proclayming
The heavy sentence of Iniquitie,
The Hangman next, by his base office clayming
His right in Hell, where sinners never die,
Carrying the nayles, the people still blaspheming
Their maker, using all impiety;
The Thieves attending him on either side,
The Serjeants watching, while the women cri’d. (*SD* 961-68)

In this version of events, as Achsah Guibbory points out, “Lanyer presents women as the only ones to recognize Christ’s innocence, remain constant in their devotion, and be moved by compassion” (198). This notion of feminine “constancy” closely parallels the claims made by Elyot regarding women’s capacity for public justice; however, in this

case, Lanyer suggests that it is women's utter devotion to Christ – an even more worthy object of affection than their husbands – that justifies this vocal display. Even more notably, the women in this passage appear as a collective, while their male counterparts derive their identities from their dubious professions. While, in other circumstances, this lack of individuation might be cause for feminist concern, here it serves as a rhetorical means of shielding all women from complicity in a male-perpetrated act of violence. At this moment, then, women not only become “active subjects of their own religious experience” (McGrath 344) but actually harness that divine inspiration to engage in a visible act of solidarity with Christ and with each other – translating their private and socially-sanctioned religious convictions into a moment of oppositional public action.

Generally, Lanyer's prefatory dedications to “Salve Deus” mirror this tendency to shuttle between self-effacing praise – devoted, in this context, primarily to female members of the seventeenth-century nobility whose wealth and status marks them as suitable artistic patrons – and surprising assertions of agency. Indeed, although the volume ostensibly opens with an epistolary encomium addressed to Queen Anne, its author consistently interrupts this celebration of the most powerful woman in England to comment on the poverty of her poetic abilities and material situation. As in “Salve Deus” itself, however, Lanyer blends these secular observations with allusions to the divine power wielded by both Queen Anne and the “mightie Monarch” (*TQEM* 44) of the New Testament:

My weake distempred braine and feeble spirits,
Which all unlearn'd have adventur'd, this
To write of Christ, and of his sacred merits,

Desiring that this Booke Her hands may kisse:

And though I be unworthy of that grace,

Yet let her blessed thoughts this book imbrace. (*TQEM* 139-44)

Tellingly, despite Lanyer's repeated professions of humility, this stanza contains just as many first-person references to the poet as it does third-person references to the "Renowned Empresse" (*TQEM* 1) whose greatness constitutes the supposed basis for the poem's existence. In other words, though she continues to direct attention to more conventionally impressive figures, Lanyer makes sure to assert her own presence within the text at consistent intervals. Even her focus on the relative inferiority of her social position allows her to heighten her profile: by referring to Christ as "the hopefull haven of the meaner sort" (*TQEM* 50) and informing the Queen that "my wealth within his Region stands" (*TQEM* 55), Lanyer trades on Christian precepts regarding the value of meekness and humility to imply that her lack of fame and money may, in fact, be a virtue. In these statements, as Ann Baynes Coiro remarks, Lanyer combines the "promotion of a leveling Christian radicalism" with "a wonderful degree of self-promotion" (344) – providing what Lynette McGrath refers to as "an example of a woman writer employing an acceptably conventional topic... to conceal a level of subversive discourse in which she pursues the revolutionary possibility of self-definition" (211). Fundamentally, then, Lanyer's dedication to Queen Anne employs many of the same strategies as the poem it prefaces, as it works within the safe confines of religious rhetoric to advance a controversial critique of early modern social organization as well as a highly public assertion of its author's own poetic voice.

III. Rhetoric and Class: Reading Lanyer's Poetry as a "Conversation between Friends"

As Coiro's statement indicates, most Lanyer scholars agree that Christian doctrine plays a significant role not just in allowing the author to allay fears regarding the publication of her text but also in enabling her to speak to her potential patrons on relatively equal terms. In general, these critical analyses focus on the rhetorical strategy deftly laid out in the epistle to Queen Anne – arguing that Lanyer, in the tradition of the devotional poets, compares her own lowliness to that of Christ as a means of assuming the spiritual authority necessary to speak frankly with her noble addressees. Kari Boyd McBride succinctly articulates this critical perspective when she writes that "Lanyer's evocation of the religious order subverts the privilege of title" by reminding the poet's aristocratic audience that "like Lanyer and her book, Christ is only seemingly poor and without title; in the more 'real,' religious world... they are a means to salvation" (71).⁷ For McBride, Lanyer's dedication "To the Ladie Anne, Countesse of Dorcet" stands out as the preeminent example of this methodology: in the poem's assertion that "God makes both even, the Cottage with the Throne" ("TLAD," 19), McBride understands Lanyer to be appealing to "a higher 'reality'" in which earthly titles will cease to hold any meaning and where the humble author will finally "gain her reward" (71-72). In this way – as Coiro, McBride and their fellow critics suggest – Lanyer's emphasis on the more egalitarian aspects of Christian doctrine grants her greater freedom in her engagements with potential patrons. By addressing her dedicatees as spiritual equals, in other words,

⁷ John Rogers also suggests that Lanyer's belief in her own spiritual authority informs her presumptuous attitude, for better or for worse. In his view, "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 surpasses even her own" (437).

Lanyer seems to succeed in transcending the material divisions that keep her isolated from her wealthier interlocutors.

While religious discourse clearly plays an important role in Lanyer's dedicatory poems, however, there are moments when the author's focus on earthly imbalances threatens to supersede her patient attention to spiritual matters. In her address to Lady Anne, for instance, Lanyer dwells repeatedly and at length upon the dangers of "base affections" ("TLAD," 50), "worldly pleasures" (52), and "titles of honour which the world bestowes" (25) – all in the service of warning her dedicatee, somewhat ominously, that "no worldly treasure" can ensure individual "greatnesse" (17-18). Certainly, as McBride suggests, Lanyer concludes this epistle by confirming the meaninglessness of earthly possessions in comparison to God's love (114) and the promise of eternal life (120); yet, the poet's decision to devote nearly six stanzas to an indictment of worldly possessions in the middle of what is, after all, likely an extended appeal for financial assistance suggests that Lanyer continues to attribute real value to material measures of equality. Lisa Schnell makes this same argument in her influential essay about the class-based resentments that permeate the dedications, writing that "Lanyer is unable – and, it would seem, unwilling – to gloss over the enormous differences that exist between her and her addressees" (95). In the very vehemence of its rejection of the worldly obsession with social status, then, Lanyer's dedication to Anne of Dorset reveals a deep preoccupation with that very subject. From this perspective, however strong Lanyer's faith in future glory might be, her poetic critique of decadent nobility gestures toward a desire for a form of equality whose impact might be felt in this life just as much as in the next.

Nowhere is this effort to imagine – and perhaps even implement – equitable social relations between artist and patron more evident than in the tone of personal familiarity of Lanyer’s dedicatory appeals. While none of the other dedications reckon quite as explicitly with early modern disparities in wealth and social standing as that addressed to Lady Anne, the majority of them nevertheless participate to some extent in the creation of an uncommonly forthright poetic *ethos*. At the beginning of her note to Susan Bertie, for instance, Lanyer immediately establishes a close connection with the Dowager Countess of Kent by reminding this public figure of their joint history. “Come you that were the Mistris of my youth, / The noble guide of my ungovern’d dayes,” Lanyer’s poetic alter ego commands, inviting Susan to “grace” the author’s re-telling of Christ’s Passion with her readerly presence (“TLS,” 1-2, 6). Here, Lanyer not only displays few qualms about employing the imperative voice to address her social superior but also justifies this coercive friendliness by – according to some scholars – stretching the truth about her previous interactions with the Dowager Countess. Leeds Barroll, for one, uses historical evidence regarding the whereabouts of Susan of Kent during the period of Lanyer’s youth to suggest that a prolonged period of intimacy between the two women “is, in the end, imagined only with difficulty” (31); similarly, Erica Longfellow suggests that Lanyer likely “exaggerated small favours received from [aristocratic women] and imagined a more sustained relationship” (65). Although not all Lanyer scholars share in these doubts,⁸ the possibility that the poet might not have known her dedicatees as well as she

⁸ Barbara K. Lewalski, in particular, insists that Lanyer’s representations of her interactions with her aristocratic addressees should be taken at face value – arguing that the poet “would fail in her obvious bid for patronage if she were to falsify too outrageously the terms of a relationship” (35). At the same time, though, she admits that the prefatory poems demonstrate a penchant for “hyperbole” and that a “lack of external

claims makes the confidence with which she asserts her right to address them all the more remarkable. In this sense, Lanyer's attempts to initiate a more immediately egalitarian relationship with her social superiors depend at least as much on the presumptuously conversational nature of her poetic voice as on the levelling tropes of religious discourse that, to date, have received much more critical attention.

While the ease with which Lanyer gives orders to the Dowager Countess of Kent may come as a shock – especially given the anxieties surrounding class and the printed word during the Renaissance – the work of itinerant early modern scholar Desiderius Erasmus provides an important precedent. In fact, from the very outset of his 1522 manual *On the Writing of Letters*, Erasmus insists upon the egalitarian potential embedded in the rhetoric of written correspondence. “If there is something that can be said to be characteristic of this genre,” he suggests, “I think that I cannot define it more concisely than by saying that the wording of a letter should resemble a conversation between friends” (20). To preserve this emphasis on reciprocity, he advises his readers to avoid participating in common conventions of letter-writing that re-inscribe pre-existing social hierarchies through their explicit obsequiousness. For instance, he counsels his pupils to place their own names ahead of those of their addressees when beginning their letters, “even if the person to whom [the letter] is written is of far higher rank” (51) – granting a level of typographical authority to the sender that transcends class divisions and immediately asserts a sense of personal familiarity. Erasmus' disdain for unnecessary or hyperbolic praise is even more colourfully pronounced: at one point, he argues that “those who suffered blows, had soup poured over them, were hit by a bone, and pissed

evidence” makes it nearly impossible to determine the true nature of Lanyer's connections to other literary women of her era (35).

on, would never deign to use such greetings as we Christians use to flatter persons of importance” (53). Considered in the context of these ideas, Lanyer’s prefatory epistles gain new depth and resonance: by their very nature as verse letters, her dedications act as markers of an equal or potentially equal dialogic exchange. Here once again, then, Lanyer takes a well-established mode of discourse – namely, the humanist letter-writing tradition – and maximizes its latent potential for subversion in the interest of promoting her own poetic voice.

Perhaps due to the generational gap between Erasmus and Lanyer, critics have yet to examine them in tandem. This lack of attention, however, should not be taken as a referendum on the merits of studying the two writers alongside one another, since they are tightly connected by several thematic and biographical threads. They both clearly agree, for example, that letter-writing is the most theoretically important and socially useful form of rhetoric – a conviction best outlined in the Erasmus’ decision to devote years to putting together a manual on the subject as well as Lanyer’s willingness to preface her first piece of published work with an unusually high number of dedicatory epistles. Even more importantly, the two writers each favour a boldly assertive style of letter-writing that aims to reformulate even the most hierarchical of relationships into a symbiotic linguistic exchange. According to Magnusson, for instance, “presumption” forms the bedrock of Erasmus’ epistolary approach, since “to speak with special care to avoid assumptions about the hearer’s ability to perform a request or willingness to consider the request is to keep one’s distance and to reassure by affirming the hearer’s superiority” (71). This statement could just as easily describe the philosophy underlying Lanyer’s dedications, as she chooses to advise and instruct her addressees rather than to

simply sing their praises. Taken together, these several similarities suggest a deep ideological affinity between the two writers; indeed, were it not for the gulf of years between them, one might suspect they had been exchanging letters of their own.

In addition to these similar theoretical interests, the notion that Lanyer could have physically encountered the writings of either Erasmus or one of his many followers at some point during her lifetime is far from implausible. While much of the poet's biography remains shrouded in uncertainty, the rhetorical sophistication of her verse suggests a deep familiarity with the work of male literary theorists. Lyn Bennett, for example, argues that Lanyer must have been familiar with the work of Thomas Wilson, who published a handbook of writerly advice entitled *The Art of Rhetoric* in 1560. To support her claim, Bennett asserts that Wilson's opinions regarding the principle of poetic decorum "closely correspond with what appear to be Lanyer's own" (211) – employing a line of reasoning that could equally be applied to the resemblances between the works of Lanyer and Erasmus. Furthermore, Bennett writes, Lanyer likely would have first read Wilson's volume during her reported childhood stay in the Bertie household, since Wilson himself had resided there at one point in his career (211). Indeed, even if – as Barroll suggests – Lanyer exaggerated the terms of her acquaintance with Lady Susan, most commentators hold the Kent household's library to be the most logical environment in which Lanyer would have become acquainted with English writing manuals, given the limited educational opportunities available to daughters of court musicians during the Renaissance. Susanne Woods, for her part, argues that "access to this noble household was very likely access as well to the education that informs Lanyer's poems" (xvii), while Coles speculates that time spent amongst Susan Bertie's book collection "would

have provided [Lanyer] with a Protestant humanist education from the years of seven to twelve” (151). Moreover, Lanyer likely would have possessed access to the extensive library of Queen Elizabeth’s Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hunsdon, during the period in which the two were reportedly involved in a romantic relationship (Coles 152) – increasing the chances that she would have been directly familiar with Erasmus’ work even further. Given these suggestive biographical confluences and the already striking similarities between the ideological temperaments of the two writers, reading Lanyer’s dedications in the light of Erasmus’ theories of epistolary rhetoric opens up a potentially fruitful – and as yet unexplored – avenue of critical inquiry.

Admittedly, the vast array of opinions and insights included in Erasmus’ wide-ranging letter-writing manual do not all apply equally to a study of Lanyer’s dedicatory epistles. As one might expect, given the painstakingly thorough nature of his treatise, Erasmus occasionally veers into digressive asides whose usefulness remains debatable, as when he takes twenty-three printed lines to define the meaning of the word “definition” (123). Nevertheless, this attention to detail – especially during his discussions of specific types of letters – often provides telling clues as to where Lanyer might have derived particular inspiration. For instance, in his description of the letter of praise, he advises his students to foment the goodwill of a hypothetical addressee “by enlarging upon his previous achievements... now alluding to the way, now to the place and time, now to the person and the difficulty of the situation” (80). This appeal to a personal knowledge of the addressee’s virtues also forms an integral part of Erasmus’ blueprint for persuasive letters of request. Referring once again to an imaginary recipient, the humanist scholar tells his students to “argue from his own person, recalling with gratitude his kindness to

ourselves and to others” and to “say that we wish the ties between us... to become stronger” (173). Whether derived directly from Erasmus’ manual or not, both of these strategies are on clear display in Lanyer’s appeal to Susan of Kent, the “Mistris” of her “ungovern’d dayes.” Moreover, in her epistle to Queen Anne, Lanyer appears to follow Erasmus’ recommendation to “disparage” her own poetic abilities but provide “splendid promises of... devotion and interest” (173), while her double-voiced ode to Anne of Dorset hews closely to Erasmus’ injunction to “mitigate the harshness of criticism with praise” when writing an advisory epistle (189). In this sense, similarities between Erasmus’ handbook and Lanyer’s dedications appear on a small as well as an extended scale, with examples of some of the rhetorician’s most meticulously precise instructions permeating the poet’s prefatory verses.

Ultimately, however, no letter-writing principle unites Erasmus and Lanyer more than that of rhetorical flexibility. Although the former author admits that the conversational nature of letter-writing generally “favours simplicity, frankness, humour, and wit,” he continually insists that any attempt to impose firm limits on epistolary style and subject matter would be a “fruitless and absurd” endeavour (20). As Judith Henderson points out, Erasmus defends this latter assertion by appealing to the rhetorical principle of decorum (353). “Whatever would not have escaped criticism in other forms of writing,” he explains, “can be defended here either in consideration of the topic, or the person of the writer, or the character, condition, or age of the recipient” (20). In other words, well-written letters do not follow an easily-reproducible formula but, rather, adapt themselves to specific contexts and circumstances – taking on different styles based on the rhetorical requirements of a given situation. Moreover, by stressing the need to take

the recipient's personal attributes into account, Erasmus clearly draws attention to the role played by audience response in determining the effectiveness of a piece of epistolary writing. In Henderson's view, for example, Erasmus believes that if a letter's "style is loquacious, it can be justified as having been written to an avid reader or to one with leisure; if erudite, to an erudite man; if artless, to an ignorant reader or one pleased by simplicity" (353). From this perspective, letter writing – already figured as a conversational exchange among equals – becomes an even more intensely collaborative activity. For Erasmus, neither sender nor recipient possesses full control over the meaning of a letter; instead, both writers and interlocutors participate in establishing the rhetorical and semantic terms of their discussion.

While contemporary critics have noted that this emphasis on epistolary flexibility is not absolutely unique to Erasmus, their work also suggests that the degree of importance that the Renaissance thinker attaches to the concept still sets him apart from other humanists of his era. For instance, in her overview of "Tradition and Innovation" in Erasmus' letter-writing handbook, Erika Rummel argues that the Renaissance scholar was "perhaps more careful than other writers to qualify every rule" and expresses a certain degree of awe with regard to "how studiously Erasmus avoided committing himself to any norm" (303). For her part, Henderson adds that Erasmus' insistence that a letter's "style must be flexible" stands in sharp contradistinction to the unwavering focus on brevity and simplicity promoted by his intellectual peers (352). Importantly, as all the preceding evidence makes clear, this singularly pronounced preoccupation with decorum holds political implications: by refusing to propose an unequivocal and binding set of letter-writing rules, Erasmus re-articulates the "abhorrence of violence, coercion, and

authoritarianism” (Rummel 305) that underlies so many of his most famous pieces of writing, both educational and otherwise. In other words, Erasmus advances a conception of letter-writing that adheres to its traditional definition as a private conversation between friends while also highlighting the politically liberating possibilities implied by the reciprocal nature of this conversational model. Essentially, then, when Lanyer decides to publish her letters to aristocratic women rather than privately sending them away, she takes a first step toward fulfilling the genre’s political potential – taking a traditionally private form of writing and, in a move that parallels the work of other female devotional poets as well as of Erasmus, imbuing it with unmistakable public significance.

IV. Mirror Images: Reciprocity and Flexibility in Erasmus and Lanyer

From this perspective, the writings of Erasmus and Lanyer seem to complement one another perfectly, with the poet carrying out the rhetorician's instructions in uncannily precise fashion. The pairing, however, may not be as ideal as it first appears. As Lynne Magnusson remarks, "given Erasmus's chief recommendation for composing letters of a flexible decorum that varies style with situation and relation, it is surprising how consistently Erasmus's collected examples exhibit the presumptive style;" moreover, she writes, this latter style "is specifically gendered masculine" (72). While Magnusson's first claim presents few obstacles to an Erasmian reading of Lanyer – presumption, after all, forms the bedrock of the transgenerational connection between the two literary figures – her second assertion is more troubling. Does Erasmus, in fact, pre-emptively and categorically deny women writers the possibility of appropriating his "presumptive" discourse? Certainly, as Magnusson suggests, Erasmus describes "the style particularly suited to the letter of encouragement" as being "robust," "impressive," "vigorous" and, ultimately, "masculine" (90). Yet, although this statement undeniably subscribes to the period's gender norms, it still refers to only one out of the many types of letters modelled in Erasmus' extensive handbook. By contrast, the author himself admits that less "masculine" styles have their place – suggesting that "the flowery, elegant, and witty have charm" (90). He also provides examples of many other types of letters whose styles need not be so aggressive, including letters of consolation (148), request (172) and friendship (203). By assuming, then, that "Erasmus's specific recommendation of a style for letters of encouragement" is "characteristic of his presumptive style in general" (72), Magnusson may overstate the case. While Erasmus' text clearly aims its instructions at a

male audience by referring to its addressees in the masculine third person and using exempla that revolve around topics such as whether to take a wife (130), it acknowledges that presumptive rhetoric comes in a variety of forms and adapts itself well to a variety of genres; in the end, finding a way to establish a sense of familiarity and equality between oneself and one's interlocutor is the only strict requirement. In this sense, Erasmus' emphasis on linguistic flexibility trumps even his most deeply-held and unexamined prejudices.

This struggle between an explicit focus on rhetorical expansiveness and an implicit unwillingness to reconsider certain core cultural assumptions extends also to the treatment of class in Erasmus' letter-writing manual. Naturally enough, given his belief in the fundamental mutuality of written correspondence, Erasmus' discussions of socially-imposed divisions most often focus on how to overcome them rather than assist in their perpetuation. Moreover, he explicitly expresses contempt for those who would rather spend their time "in the courts of princes" amassing "rich benefices" than working hard to improve their linguistic capabilities (22). However, this same emphasis on the necessity of education leads to a disdain for the unlearned that often expresses itself in terms of social stratification and moral judgment. "You repeatedly protest that Horace's diction is abstruse, but for the educated his learned clarity is what is most admired," Erasmus informs an imaginary pupil. "I think you will conclude that the darkness exists in you, not in the author." As a solution, Erasmus proposes finding "a single mode of correct speech" for every letter-writer to use (17) – a suggestion that entirely contradicts his own convictions regarding the benefits of variety in language. These kinds of pronouncements raise the spectre of another potential obstacle to reading Erasmus and

Lanyer side-by-side: whereas the former is the beneficiary of a patriarchal education system designed to maintain existing inequities, the latter represents an entire group of people who were denied access to learning on the basis of gender alone. At the same time, though, Erasmus' definition of "correct speech" is much less rigid than it initially appears, as he concludes his remarks on the comparative advisability of simple and "abstruse" methods of communication by once again insisting that the writer's choice of style ultimately depends upon "the subject and recipient of the letter" (18). Indeed, as Henderson suggests, this section might actually constitute a roundabout defence of the principle of decorum: in response to fellow rhetoricians who "insist that the letter use only colloquial diction, avoiding all erudite words," Erasmus argues that the epistolary format should remain equally open to "erudite men" who wish to employ it as a means of extending their "scholarly games" (353). "Correct speech," in this context, is language that employs the right words for the occasion rather than stubbornly adhering to a predetermined rule. In the end, then, despite his clear suspicion of the uneducated masses, Erasmus gives no indication that someone like Lanyer – especially given her high degree of informal education – would be unable to write commendable letters, as long as she were willing to abide by the "rule" of decorum and take the personalities of her addressees into account.

Admittedly, this focus on the recipient's character constitutes an integral component of all early modern patronage poetry. After all, the genre as a whole structures itself around the give-and-take at the heart of the patron-client relationship: poets, either implicitly or explicitly, pledge to devote their talents to broadcasting their benefactors' fame in exchange for financial remuneration or employment. This "ideology of service"

(Lamb 57) certainly seems to be on full display throughout some of Lanyer's dedications, as she continually reminds her readers that her ability to keep writing will eventually benefit their reputations. In her epistle to Queen Anne, for instance, Lanyer refers to her nation's monarch as someone "whose powre may raise my sad dejected Muse, / From this lowe mansion of a troubled mind" (126-27) and "whose princely favour may such grace infuse, / That I may spread her virtues in like kind" (128-29). Though she softens the economic terms of the patronage exchange by translating them into poetic and spiritual metaphors, Lanyer nevertheless takes this opportunity to remind the Queen of her personal stake in the poet's artistic project. When phrased in this way, the reciprocity of patronage poetry appears to mimic – or possibly even anticipate – the strategies for egalitarian communication set out in Erasmus' manual. This impression, however, collapses with the recognition that most poets seeking patronage tend to emphasize the service they can provide in promulgating the influence of an already privileged member of society. For one group of Lanyer scholars, the poet's participation in this acquiescence to the established social hierarchy wholly negates any possibility of radical intent in her work. According to these critics, passages such as those found in the dedication to Queen Anne imply that Lanyer's "bid for patronage is a fundamentally conservative one" that indicates a desire to "move up the ladder" rather than wholeheartedly challenge the stratified nature of early modern interpersonal relations (Longfellow 69). Considered solely as conventional patronage poetry, then, Lanyer's texts fail to engage her readership in the kind of evenly reciprocal relationship advocated by Erasmus – offering a reminder that while letter-writing is a medium with socially-levelling potential, its promise is not always entirely fulfilled.

Happily, however, Lanyer often steps outside the restrictive confines of convention to exploit the egalitarian possibilities offered by the activity of personal correspondence. In keeping with her habit of inserting her own personality into her poems in equal proportion to the identities of her anticipated interlocutors – and in contrast to the claims of those who associate her with unequivocal conservatism – Lanyer expends the majority of her poetic energy on closing the social gap between herself and her addressees. Her appeal “To the Ladie Anne,” in particular, presents several striking examples of this equalizing impulse. Lanyer begins carefully to delineate the dynamics of her relationship with Anne throughout the poem’s first stanza:

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 settled & protected;
If highest thoughts true honour do imbrace,
And holy Wisdom is of them respected:
Then in this Mirrour let your faire eyes looke,
To view your virtues in this blessed Booke. (“TLAD” 1-8)

Notably, Lanyer opens her epistle by placing the pronouns “you” and “I” side-by-side – making them inseparable within the syntax of the first line. From there, the poem’s representation of the balance of power between the two women only becomes murkier: while Lanyer unequivocally presents Anne as the inspiration for “Salve Deus” in its entirety, she simultaneously casts herself as the authority responsible for constructing the “frame of Glory” (2) within which Clifford is about to encounter divine truth. The

ambiguity of this relationship reaches its apex in Lanyer's final couplet, wherein the poem figures the act of interpretation as an equal exchange between sender and addressee. Without the "Mirroure" offered by "Salve Deus," Lanyer suggests, Anne will remain unable to recognize her own inner virtue.⁹ At the same time, though, the metaphor also suggests that Lanyer's verses would be devoid of significance were it not for Anne's readerly presence: an empty mirror, after all, has nothing to reflect. In this moment, then, Lanyer succeeds in activating the hierarchy-shattering potential embedded in the natural reciprocity of letter-writing – creating, in the process, a truly mutual connection with her social superior.

Given its utility in equalizing the relationship between sender and recipient, the metaphor of the text-as-mirror proves unsurprisingly popular throughout Lanyer's dedicatory epistles. Again and again, Lanyer attempts to sell her addressees on the idea that "Salve Deus" possesses the capacity to capture, amplify and reflect back their best qualities. In her missive to Mary Sidney, for example, Lanyer begs pardon for what she acknowledges will be a "bold attempt" (209) before making her final pitch: "I here present my mirroure to her view," she writes, referring to the Dowager Countess of Pembroke in the third person, "whose noble virtues cannot be exempt, / My Glasse being steele, declares them to be true" ("ADLM" 210-12). Later, in the prose epistle dedicated to Margaret of Cumberland, the poet reiterates this favoured conceit, informing the Countess that "Salve Deus" represents "the mirroure of your most worthy minde, which

⁹ Admittedly, Lanyer's use of the mirror metaphor is not particularly original: as Barbara Bowen remarks, the device is a "conventional" one that "comes to Lanyer through a rich history of Biblical exegesis" (230). Lisa Schnell, meanwhile, agrees that the mirror metaphor is a "common trope" but suggests that Lanyer's innovation lies in using this device to remind her readers of her own role in shaping their public image (82-83).

may remaine in the world many yeares longer than your Honour, or my selfe can live, to be a light unto those that come after” (“TLM” 30-33). Even in the poem addressed to Queen Anne, in which Lanyer seems to acquiesce to the hierarchical status quo, the author offers up the possibility of a more equitable patron-client relationship when she asks her social superior to “looke into this Mirrour of a worthy Minde, / Where some of your faire virtues will appeare” (“TQEM” 37-38). Crucially, this choice of imagery happens to align with Lanyer’s Erasmian attitudes regarding the role of language in reimagining social relations: mirrors, like words, hold the potential to distort reality as much as to reflect it. In this sense, while holding up a mirror may superficially appear to be an act of passive subservience, Lanyer’s use of the trope functions instead as an assertion of equal agency in the creation of the poem’s meaning. Put another way, Lanyer places a concrete symbol of Erasmus’ insistence on the radically transformative power of language at the core of her poetry’s subject matter – turning almost every epistle into a veritable hall of mirrors meant to destabilize existing hierarchies and re-orient the dynamics of cross-class interaction.

For Lanyer, this interest in mirrors parallels an even broader fascination with the reciprocal dynamics of vision on display throughout her dedications. Most particularly, the poet repeatedly emphasizes the function of vision in a religious context – inviting her dedicatees to gaze upon Christ’s suffering in the form of her own poetic narrative. This focus on sight makes an emphatic entrance in Lanyer’s letter of request to Queen Anne, wherein the poet asks her addressee to bestow favour upon “Salve Deus” despite the poem’s lack of superficial adornment:

This holy worke, Virtue presents to you,

In poore apparell, shaming to be seene,
Or once t'appeare in your judiciall view:
But that faire Virtue, though in meane attire,
All Princes of the world doe most desire. ("TQEM" 62-66)

Beyond the stanza's typically Christian assertions regarding the value of humility, the repetition of words such as "seene," "appeare" and "view" draw considerable attention to the act of looking. Moreover, by personifying the figure of "Virtue," Lanyer introduces into her poem an entity capable of returning the Queen's gaze – establishing the same kind of even exchange implied by the mirror metaphor while also, this time, offering something beyond a reflection of the reader's own likeness. In her dedicatory epistle to Arabella Stuart, Lanyer further clarifies the terms of her offer in a bid for her interlocutor's attention:

Although you be so well accompan'ed
With *Pallas*, and the Muses, spare one looke
Upon this humbled King, who all forsooke,
That in his dying armes he might imbrace
Your beauteous Soule, and fill it with his grace. ("TLA" 11-14)

Here, the poet reveals Christ to be the source of Virtue's physical presence within her text as well as a figure able to reciprocate the noble lady's contemplative scrutiny in his own right – creating a zone of indistinction between text and reader. Generally, then, Lanyer's representation of sight as an exchange – rather than a one-sided intrusion – aids in further entrenching the reciprocal spirit of Erasmus' letter-writing manual into the content of her own epistolary poems.

This uncertainty concerning the boundary between observer and observed is precisely what motivates Ryan Singh Paul in his personal inquiry into Lanyer's poetic corpus. Indeed, from Paul's perspective, the destabilizing evenness of the intellectual and spiritual exchange posited between text and reader constitutes the most salient feature of the poet's rhetorical and philosophical strategy in "Salve Deus." "Lanyer emphasizes a mutuality of vision," Paul argues, "as to be seen (by God) is also to see (his light)" (178). In other words, Paul suggests that Lanyer's entire theology finds its foundation in the same kind of reciprocal dynamics that govern Erasmus' approach to the epistolary rewriting of social relations. To read "Salve Deus" is, Paul argues, to be read by it, since it positions its aristocratic readers as both privileged spectators to the story of Christ and humble recipients of his divine gaze. Though he deals with Lanyer's major work on its own, Paul's insights resonate in an equally meaningful way throughout the poem's preceding dedications – especially in regard to the treatment of the idea of virtue in Lanyer's letters. Without question, as the excerpts from the epistles to Queen Anne and Anne of Dorset indicate, the source and nature of human virtue stands out as a central thematic preoccupation within Lanyer's poetry. In fact, at its core, Lanyer's address to Anne of Dorset constitutes an extended poetic negotiation of the concept – one that ultimately erases the division between the twin poles of Christian salvation, grace and works, in the same way that Lanyer's poems obscure the distinction between subject and object. At one point, for example, Lanyer praises Clifford for the "faire virtues" of her mother's "honourable deeds" (74-75); yet, at another, she speaks of virtue as something "bestow'd" upon humankind by a higher power (29). Eventually, rather than deciding this question conclusively, Lanyer tentatively posits a harmony between the two principles –

suggesting that grace provides a necessary foundation for righteous deeds. Praising Anne, she states:

Your pleasure is the word of God to heare,
That his most holy precepts you may know:
Your greatest honour, faire and virtuous deeds,
Which from the love and feare of God proceeds. (109-112)

The reciprocity of this exchange – in which grace facilitates action while action diffuses grace into the world – aligns neatly with Paul’s emphasis on the ambiguous assignment of agency within Lanyer’s treatment of the dynamics of vision: at times, Lanyer grants her readers the authority to gaze upon Christ’s mutilated body, while at others she figures Christ as the one actively gracing her readers with his generous looks. Tellingly, the conception of virtue as mutually constituted by works and grace also echoes Erasmus’ description of a letter as a “mutual conversation between absent friends” (20). In other words, this crucial facet of Lanyer’s theology – namely, her presentation of the relationship between God and his followers as one premised on a fundamental reciprocity – lends itself naturally to the Erasmian version of epistolary writing in which it finds itself embedded.

Even more importantly, Lanyer’s conception of virtuous action as the product of a mutual exchange between God and the individual serves as a forthright justification of her place in society as a published woman writer. Like the manuscripts belonging to devotional poet Elizabeth Newell, Lanyer’s work foregrounds the struggle to find a balance between passive submission to God’s grace and active assertions of her own authority. This tension rises directly to the surface at the opening of her epistle to

Katherine of Suffolk. Lanyer begins the poem by unabashedly drawing attention to herself, admitting that “it may seeme right strange” (“TLK” 1) for her to “presume” (2) to address a Countess with whom she has had no previous acquaintance; however, she quickly follows this self-aware statement with humble references to God’s overpowering greatness, arguing that both she and her interlocutor “must needs give place” to the superior might of “celestiall powers” (8-9). Yet, after examining both sides of the argument, Lanyer reveals that the two aspects of her writing are not, in fact, opposed. “His powre hath given me powre to write,” she tells Lady Katherine – suggesting that her poetic abilities derive from God’s benevolence while nevertheless refusing to cede those same abilities back to God or anyone else. In this statement, in other words, she stakes a claim to writerly authority without abandoning her devout posture, arguing instead that these two facets of her self-presentation are mutually constitutive: her devotion to God gives her the power to write just as this power to write, in turn, allows her to express God’s glory. Ultimately, the principle of reciprocity that governs the epistolary genre of Lanyer’s dedications provides the poet with a means of articulating the tension at the centre of her identity as a devotional woman writer in terms that are empowering rather than inhibiting – allowing her to make a virtue, quite literally, out of her own precarious situation.

Yet, despite the sustained use of tropes intended to evoke a sense of equality, some critics contend that Lanyer’s focus on self-authorization ultimately results in the assertion of a kind of spiritual superiority that violates the logic of equal exchange so integral to Erasmus’ conception of letter-writing. Schnell, for her part, points to Lanyer’s choice of diction in her epistle to Margaret of Cumberland as representative of this

philosophical imbalance – focusing particular attention on what is, admittedly, one of the poet’s most remarkable statements. Introducing her retelling of the Passion to the Countess, Lanyer claims that her poem is essentially equivalent to “even our Lord Jesus himself, whose infinit value is not to be comprehended within the weake imagination or wit of man” (“TLM” 6-9). At this moment, Schnell argues, Lanyer “disrupts the economy of the gift-exchange entirely by being seen to give a gift that can under no earthly set of circumstances be reciprocated” (85). In other words, by underscoring the “infinit” (“TLM” 7) and “inestimable” (29) value of her religious insight, Lanyer does not close the gap between herself and her potential patrons so much as establish a new world order in which she wields incommensurable power over her salvation-seeking addressees. Audrey Tinkham reiterates this point of view in her more recent analysis of “Salve Deus,” suggesting that Lanyer is “every bit as invested in a hierarchy as her social betters, but her model of virtue sets up a hierarchy in which she is at the top” (71). For these critics, then, Lanyer’s dedications are not meant to initiate a conversation but, rather, to affirm the poet’s own sense of spiritual entitlement.

Such an argument, however, depends upon the assumption that Lanyer herself believes that her aristocratic addressees have nothing to offer that could possibly measure up to her promise to reveal “ultimate truth” (Schnell 92). While this belief is understandably attractive to modern readers searching for a radical version of Lanyer, the majority of the evidence offered by the dedications suggests that her claims to poetic authority – while certainly presumptuous – revolve around a more moderate but equally ambitious preference for dialogue over one-sided demonstrations of strength. As indicated by her use of the mirror metaphor in the dedication to Anne of Dorset, Lanyer

presents each patron as part of the inspiration for her poem while also suggesting that her work would be meaningless without readers. In her account of her time in the Bertie household, for instance, Lanyer credits Lady Susan with initially introducing her younger self to the Word of God – comparing her aristocratic mentor to “the Sunnes virtue” and herself to “that faire greene grasse, / That flourisht fresh by your cleere virtues taught” (“TLS” 9-10). Mary Sidney, meanwhile, receives special notice as someone whose status as one of the foremost literary women of her time acts as a motivating force behind Lanyer’s own artistic ambitions and whose poetry “fils the eies, the hearts, the tongues, the eares / Of after-comming ages, which shall reade / Her love, her zeale, her faith, and pietie” (“ADLM” 160-62). Finally, Lanyer praises Margaret of Cumberland as a beacon of the kind of Christian virtue with which the author hopes to infuse her poem. “I pray God send your Honour long to continue,” Lanyer writes, “that your light may so shine before men, that they may glorifie your father which is in Heaven: and that I and many others may follow you in the same tracke” (“TLM” 34-38). This image of the poet as a humble disciple of Lady Margaret’s spiritual teachings clashes with Schnell and Tinkham’s perception of Lanyer as haughtily superior in her religious convictions. Yet, instead of simply discarding these critical insights, a greater effort should be made to recognize the ways in which Lanyer’s moments of genuine humility counterbalance other moments of undeniable condescension: she may offer her readers special insight into religious truths, but she also affirms the equally important role played by those same readers in bringing her insights to life through their anticipated patronage as well as their own displays of personal virtue. In this sense, then, Lanyer maintains a spirit of evenness and reciprocity in her work by suggesting that the contributions of her addressees in

inspiring her prophetic work and enabling its continuation are just as invaluable as the spiritual comforts her poem promises to extend.

V. Conclusion

As these many examples suggest, Lanyer makes a point of embedding the principle of reciprocity into the subject matter of her prefatory epistles at every opportunity. Working within the tradition established by Erasmus' theorization of letter-writing, the poet opens her bold foray into professional writing not only by addressing her potential patrons as friends and equals but also by making friendship and equality the central themes of her poetic work. A single stanza in her verse letter to Mary Sidney, in its explicit foregrounding of ideas of harmony and mutuality, provides a succinct crystallization of this approach. In the midst of her pastoral tribute to Sidney's own poetic achievements, Lanyer imagines an allegorical competition between the forces of Art and Nature that ends in peaceful agreement due to the intervention of Sidney and her company of women, who decide that neither of the duelling parties "should excell, / Or her faire fellow in subjection bring" ("ADLM" 91-92). Instead, the women agree, Art and Nature ought to co-exist alongside one another "equall in state, equall in dignitie, / That unto others they might comfort give, / Rejoycing all with their sweet unities" (94-96). In this ideal world, the boundary between Art and Nature dissolves – revealing that the two traditional sources of literary creation actually inform, rather than oppose, one another. Even more telling is the fact that the person responsible for effectuating this communion is a woman writer – an acknowledgement, perhaps, of a capacity for compromise developed by Sidney over decades of occupying a mediating position between submission to higher authorities and the pursuit of self-definition. By praising Sidney in this way, Lanyer highlights the power of written language to reconfigure even the most intractably oppositional of relationships while also emphasizing the benefits this kind of

rhetorical power might afford to writers suffering on the margins of an exclusionary conception of authorial identity. Though many of these topics are discussed at length in Erasmus' letter-writing manual, Lanyer pushes them one step further by building the philosophical underpinnings of Erasmus' stylistic recommendations into the very content of her epistolary poetry. In other words, to borrow from the terms of Classical oratory that informed the Renaissance fascination with rhetoric, Lanyer dismantles the rigidly-policed boundaries surrounding early modern authorship by explicitly incorporating the dialogic *ethos* of Erasmus' theory into the egalitarian *logos* of her own epistolary dedications.

Throughout her dedications, Lanyer speaks as a woman, on behalf of women, to other women – giving voice to her identification with femininity in a myriad variety of ways. To put this notion another way, the *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos* of the material that prefaces Lanyer's major piece of work all revolve around the question of what it means to be a woman with aspirations toward public self-definition in the early modern era. Inextricably tied to this emphasis on female identity is an equally strong focus on Christian virtue: according to Lanyer's epistles, this concept is what ties her community of women together in mutual bonds of grace and inspiration. However, as critics such as Schnell and McBride point out, to represent Lanyer as articulating an *ethos* representative of some kind of generalized "female experience" ignores the pressure imposed on Lanyer's rhetoric by her awareness of the social divide separating her from her poem's dedicatees. To account for Lanyer's individual distinctness, her emphasis on reciprocity must be understood as a product of her double marginalization on the grounds of both gender and class. By positing the patronage relationship as a more or less equal exchange,

Lanyer attempts to combat both of these hierarchies at once – re-orienting the public discussion surrounding women in print by promoting a definition of authorship predicated on dialogue rather than mastery.

In so doing, Lanyer participates in a tradition of letter-writing inaugurated by Erasmus and his fellow humanists, whose flexible rules for the medium and emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between sender and recipient offer an important precedent for Lanyer's efforts to overcome the twin barriers of class and gender. Yet, instead of simply adopting Erasmus' friendly style, Lanyer's dedicatory poems together constitute a wide-ranging investigation into the very logic of friendship and the possibility of genuine reciprocity in matters both earthly and divine. Though she stops short of claiming to have resolved the hotly-disputed tension between grace and works, she certainly advances a version of Christian theology that complements the spirit of mutuality informing her poetry's style – re-framing the Passion narrative to suggest a special bond between women and Christ in which the latter figure functions as both the object of the female gaze and the agent of female salvation. In the end, further investigation into the links between Lanyer's personal interpretation of Scripture and the medium in which her dedicatory epistles participate is likely needed before any definitive parallels between the two can be established. At the very least, however, reading Lanyer alongside Erasmus offers a new perspective on the poet's attempts to combat constraints imposed by early modern class and gender prejudices by recognizing her neither as a radical nor a reactionary but, instead, as a writer working within available conventions to envision a model of literary production premised on equality and exchange. Four hundred years later, the influence of that vision only continues to grow.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barroll, Leeds. "Looking for Patrons." *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*. Ed. Marshall Grossman. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998. 29-48. Print. Studies in the English Renaissance.
- Beilin, Elaine V. *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987. Print.
- Bennett, Lyn. *Women Writing of Divinest Things: Rhetoric and the Poetry of Pembroke, Wroth and Lanyer*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2004. Print.
- Benson, Pamela Joseph. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*. University Park: Penn State UP, 1992. Print.
- Bowen, Barbara. "Aemilia Lanyer and the Invention of White Womanhood." *Anne Lock, Isabella Whitney and Aemilia Lanyer*. Ed. Micheline White. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 219-48. Print.
- Coiro, Ann Baynes. "Writing in Service: Sexual Politics and Class Position in the Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer and Ben Jonson." *Anne Lock, Isabella Whitney and Aemilia Lanyer*. Ed. Micheline White. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 333-52. Print.
- Coles, Kimberly Anne. *Religion, Reform and Women's Writing in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: CUP, 2008. Print.
- Erasmus, Desiderius. "De Conscribendis Epistolis." Trans. Charles Fantazzi. *Collected Works of Erasmus*. Ed. J.K. Sowards. Vol. 25. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1985. 1-254. Print.

- Guibbory, Achsah. "The Gospel According to Aemilia: Women and the Sacred." *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*. Ed. Marshall Grossman. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998. 191-211. Print.
- Halloran, S. Michael. "Aristotle's Concept of Ethos, or If Not His Somebody Else's." *Rhetoric Review* 1.1 (1982): 58-63. Web. 29 June. 2015.
- Henderson, Judith Rice. "Erasmus on the Art of Letter-Writing." *Renaissance Eloquence*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983. 331-55. Print.
- Lamb, Mary Ellen. "Patronage and Class in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*." *Women, Writing and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain*. Ed. Mary E. Burke, Jane Donawerth, Linda L. Dove and Karen Nelson. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000. 38-57. Print.
- Lanyer, Aemilia. *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Judaeorum Rex*. Ed. Susanne Woods. Oxford: OUP, 1993. Print. Women Writers in English 1350-1850.
- Lewalski, Barbara K. "Re-writing Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anne Clifford, and Aemilia Lanyer." *Anne Clifford and Lucy Hutchinson*. Ed. Mihoko Suzuki. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 23-42. Print.
- Longfellow, Erica. *Women and Religious Writing in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004. Print.
- Magnusson, Lynne. *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters*. Cambridge: CUP, 1999. Print.
- McBride, Kari Boyd. "Sacred Celebration: The Patronage Poems." *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*. Ed. Marshall Grossman. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998. 60-82. Print. Studies in the English Renaissance.

- McCarthy, Erin A. "Speculation and Multiple Dedications in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 55.1 (2015): 45-72. Web. 4 June. 2015.
- McGrath, Lynette. "'Let us Have Our Libertie Againe': Amelia Lanier's 17th-Century Feminist Voice." *Anne Lock, Isabella Whitney and Aemilia Lanyer*. Ed. Micheline White. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 201-218. Print.
- Mueller, Janel. "The Feminist Poetics of 'Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.'" *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*. Ed. Marshall Grossman. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1998. 99-127. Print.
- Ng, Su Fang. "Aemilia Lanyer and the Politics of Praise." *ELH* 67.2 (2000): 433-51. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Paul, Ryan Singh. "To See and Be Seen: Aemilia Lanyer's Poetics of Vision." *Masculinities and Femininities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Ed. Frederick Kiefer. Turnhout: BREPOLs, 2009. Print.
- Rogers, John. "The Passion of a Female Literary Tradition: Aemilia Lanyer's 'Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 63.4 (2000): 435-46. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Rummell, Erika. "Erasmus' Manual of Letter-writing: Tradition and Innovation." *Renaissance and Reformation* 13.3 (1989): 299-312. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Schnell, Lisa. "Breaking 'the rule of *Cortezia*': Aemilia Lanyer's Dedications to *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27.1 (1997): 77-101. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.

- Tinkham, Audrey E. "'Owning' in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* ('Hail God King of the Jews')." *Studies in Philology* 106.1 (2009): 52-75. Web. 4 June. 2015.
- Trill, Suzanne. "Feminism versus Religion: Towards a Re-Reading of Aemilia Lanyer's *Sakve Deus Rex Judaeorum*." *Renaissance and Reformation* 25.4 (2001): 67-80. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Wall, Wendy. *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.
- Wayne, Valerie. "Some Sad Sentence: Vives' *Instruction of a Christian Woman*." *Silent but for the Word*. Ed. Margaret P. Hannay. Kent: Kent State UP, 1985. 15-29.
- Wilcox, Helen. "'My hart is full, my Soul dos ouer flow': Women's Devotional Poetry in Seventeenth-Century England." *Forging Connections: Women's Poetry from the Renaissance to Romanticism*. Ed. Anne K. Mellor, Felicity Nussbaum, and Jonathan F.S. Post. San Marino: Huntington Library Press, 2002. 19-38. Print.
- Woods, Susanne. "Introduction." *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Ed. Susanne Woods. Oxford: OUP, 1993. xv-xlii. Print. *Women Writers in English 1350-1850*.