
Gnosis in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

WENDY MILLER ROBERTS
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

The problem of introducing *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* into literary history, Marshall Grossman poses, is that “if, as appears to be the case, Lanyer’s publication had, in fact, no historical consequence, failed to cause anything at all, in what sense (if any) was it a literary historical event?” (“Gendering” 128). This question pierces the center of Lanyer scholarship: if Lanyer did not participate “in any great way in the construction of English literature” (Grossman, “Gendering” 129), what do we do with her? Reconstructing the historical and cultural situation with hopes of discovering her place in the literary community has been one avenue. Another has been using her work to help in the task of negation: “to allow us to hear differently and for the first time the heretical voice that the canonical form suppresses” (Grossman, “Gendering” 140). I utilize biblio-historical research with the intention of “doing” something with Lanyer that is specifically not placing her work within the canon. Instead, her work resides within a literary tradition of sorts, one embracing a counter hermeneutic that undermines the Christian reading of the Bible undergirding English literature. Though Lanyer’s work might not qualify as a literary historical event within the confines of the canon, it participates in the counter-religious tradition Gnosticism that has been a subversive force in the literature of Christianity, constructing an alternative to the narrative of Christendom.

Kari McBride and John C. Ulrich have convincingly demonstrated that one of the most important influences on Lanyer’s work was Henricus Cornelius Agrippa’s *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (*Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*), which helps account for Lanyer’s radical arguments in favor of women’s superiority and a reversed sex-gender system as opposed to an egalitarian model. Agrippa’s *De nobilitate* was birthed from his philosophical skepticism and conviction that every argument can be overturned with a stronger argument to the contrary. The claim of women’s inferiority could be reasonably overturned with arguments for women’s superiority because, for Agrippa, science and reason could not lead to truth, only to opinion and arbitrary custom. Whether he actually believed his arguments that became extremely influential on the development of the

querelle des femmes remains questionable.¹ His ultimate purpose was to prove his philosophical stance through a test case of the woman question. Albert Rabil, Jr., in his introduction to his translation of Agrippa's work, explains:

Both his skepticism with regard to past authorities and his empiricism are evident in Agrippa's declamation on women. His arguments all follow from several major premises: that the oppression of women supported by medical practitioners, philosophers, the Bible, theologians and lawyers has been based on custom; that all customs are arbitrary, so that there is no theoretical justification for the status quo; and that, using the texts on which oppressive interpretations have been based, one may just as well arrive at opposite conclusions.

Agrippa's declamation bears out these conclusions.... The opposite of the inferior status of women is not their equality with men but their superiority, and so this becomes his thesis. (12-13)

As Lanyer "rehearses and elaborates the Agrippan arguments" in her defense of Eve, her thesis also becomes the superiority of women, even if she will settle for mere equal treatment, and it appears "almost certain that [Lanyer] knew Agrippa's contribution to the *querelle*" (McBride and Ulreich 105, 107).

McBride and Ulreich's convincing findings are rare, as one problem for Lanyer scholars has been, and continues to be, the lack of specific historical information surrounding Lanyer's life and studies, which severely limits the authority with which one may claim that specific texts and persons influenced her. Though Lanyer most likely drew upon Agrippa for "Eves Apologie," we do not know the extent of her familiarity with his work. Nevertheless, accepting that Lanyer was acquainted with at least one of Agrippa's texts increases the likelihood that she was familiar with the occult, since he has been thoroughly linked to the Gnostic and hermetic traditions.² Believing science and reason fail to connect humanity with truth, Agrippa advocated "a mysticism which in [his] view aims at the deification of man, using ritual aids for purification of the soul (including the sacraments of the church), and applying the secret religious knowledge contained in various gnostic traditions" (Nauert 187).

Though Agrippa has been linked to Lanyer through his participation in the *querelle des femmes*, his Gnostic beliefs have not been considered. Scholarship like McBride's and Ulreich's has helped identify many of the sources and elements Lanyer drew upon to redeem her sex, yet her treatment of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil within "Eves Apologie" remains obscure, and the strangeness of her arguments concerning knowledge and the necessary implications are, at best, out of sort with her otherwise traditional treatment of the Passion. Much of recent Lanyer criticism has revolved around defining Lanyer's radical poetics as participating in specific traditions of biblical interpretation or feminist dialogue, attempting to piece together answers to a fundamental question: who is Amelilia Lanyer and

in what tradition do we place her? Whether Agrippa influenced Lanyer directly or other various Gnostic influences circulating in the culture aided her exegesis, it is my contention that Lanyer, drawing from her available sources with the primary purpose of establishing her own poetic authority, rewrote Scripture in a manner similar to the Christian Gnostics before her. When Aemilia Lanyer published *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in 1611, she not only contributed to the *querrelle des femmes* by rehearsing the Agrippan arguments of female superiority, she also subverted the Genesis narrative in a daring manner unique among her contemporaries. While others defended women within a general *episteme* of belief, Lanyer approached the Genesis narrative with a skepticism similar to first- and second-century Gnostic readings. Examining “Eves Apologie” in relation to Gnostic theology not only illuminates Lanyer’s unusual interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge, but also her own struggle for authority, both against traditional accounts of Scripture and against her own sex, while accounting for her seemingly anomalous arguments within a viable tradition.

Gnosticism, with its assorted mystic teachings, is a broad and highly contested category in historical theology, varying in specific belief according to geographical and historical location. The particular strain of Gnosticism that interacted with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures comparable to Lanyer adhered to belief in a demiurge and the availability of secret knowledge to an elect few.³ One criterion for identifying Gnosticism, offered by Ioan P. Couliano in his sophisticated historical treatment of Gnosticism, *Tree of Gnosis*, is its preoccupation with “*ecosystemic intelligence*,” or “the degree to which the universe in which we live can be attributed to an intelligent and good cause” (xv). Most Gnostics addressed theodicy, the attempt to reconcile an imperfect world with a good Creator, by displacing the evil within creation onto a demiurge, an evil god who created the material world, while ascribing the creation of the spiritual world to the true, good God. The impetus to impute the material creation to a lesser god arose from within Greek thought, which viewed the ideal or spiritual realm as good and material existence as evil. That the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures attributed the creation of the world to Yahweh was problematic in the Gnostic worldview and prompted a skeptical reading, spurring them to apply “creative misprision” with a subversive force unparalleled in the ancient world (Couliano 128). “Once the biblical Demiurge was caught boasting of his uniqueness and became suspect of ignorance of a higher God,” Couliano explains, “the entire Bible, starting obviously from Genesis, had to be reassessed and reinterpreted” (128). These Christian Gnostics saw the “truth” of the Genesis narrative by recognizing that the Creator Yahweh was actually the evil Creator or Demiurge and that the Serpent was the true good God, the Logos or Christ. Like

orthodox Christians, the Gnostics believed the Genesis story; their dispute was not with the accuracy of the events but with the identity of the characters and the meaning of their words and actions (Luttikhuisen 144).

The Christian Gnostics believed that the true identity of the Old Testament God, who punished his children and acted out of jealousy and envy, was readily apparent to those who had “eyes to see.” The Gnostic scripture *Testimony of Truth* clearly espouses this view in its rewriting of the Genesis narrative:

But what sort is this God? First he maliciously refused Adam from eating of the tree of knowledge, and, secondly, he said, “Adam, where are you?” God does not have foreknowledge? Would he not know from the beginning? And afterwards, he said, “Let us cast him out of this place, lest he eat of the tree of life and live forever.” Surely, he has shown himself to be a malicious grudge! And what kind of God is this? For great is the blindness of those who read, and they did not know him. (Codex IX, par. 20)

Testimony of Truth succinctly demonstrates the interpretive strategy of the Gnostics—a skeptical hermeneutic that refuses to read with the grain, preferring instead to find the hidden spiritual truth behind the written text. The Gnostic reading of the Fall turns the story upside down: instead of sinning, Eve saw through the evil Demiurge and sought the true *gnosis* by eating the fruit. The Serpent, an ancient symbol of divine wisdom, was the true good God leading Eve and Adam to their destiny—to be like gods in their possession of knowledge—through Eve. Eve was not deceived: she was the “seeker and source” of knowledge (Miller 159). Though *Testimony of Truth* was not available to Lanyer,⁴ she could have had access to similar, though fragmented, interpretations in the Early Modern period through Church Fathers speaking against Gnostic heresy. For example, Augustine writes, “*Ophitae a colubro nominatae sunt: coluber enim Graece ὄφις dicitur. Hunc autem Christum arbitrantur*” [“The Ophites are named after the serpent: for in Greek a serpent is called *ophis*. But this serpent they believe to be the Christ”] (Migne).

The Gnostic tradition quietly survived in diverse manifestations as a heretical exile, while the orthodox readings of Genesis defined the official structure of salvation history for the Catholic and Protestant churches. In the Early Modern period, the Genesis story was a primary locus of discussion regarding the nature of the world, government, and people, “and readings of it were indispensable parts of the religious, social, and political life of the time” (Almond 214). It should not seem unusual, then, that the central authority for the nature of women and their place in society was rooted in the Genesis narrative as well. The very “foundation of Renaissance discourse about the essential nature and function of women” was the Genesis account of the creation and fall of humanity, and it “became an especially complex

site of negotiation for writers whose explicit agenda was to challenge *from a feminine perspective* the dominant cultural attitudes toward women” (McManus 194).

Revealing the intense and complex exchange between those who employed the Genesis narrative to rule women and those who attempted to free them from its traditionally held implications, the pamphlet wars between 1580 and 1640 document one such line of discourse on the status of women. When addressing the creation of Adam and Eve, Barbara McManus summarizes the three areas pamphlet writers tended to focus on: “place (earth for man, Paradise for woman), the original substance (dust/earth for man, a rib/living flesh for woman), or the order of creation (man first, woman second)” (200). Lanyer’s rhetorical strategies coincide in many ways with those presented in the five “woman”-authored Tudor-Stuart pamphlets.⁵ However, the most interesting aspects of her arguments emerge where she deviates from those presented by her contemporaries. Focusing on the Fall differentiates Lanyer from two of the pamphlet writers who avoided the topic altogether; the others’ treatments were “ambiguous” in nature, which, McManus concludes, “mark[s the Fall] as a particularly conflictual site for negotiations with the dominant discourse” (202). Though there were several attempts to turn Eve’s fall to the woman’s advantage, the fact that Eve sinned first was difficult to defend without resorting to an endorsement of the notion of woman’s inherent weakness. Lanyer, recognizing this primary hurdle to women’s equality and ontological status, suggests the possibility that Eve did not in fact sin after all.

“Eves Apologie” begins with a common defense: Adam was more culpable because he was stronger than Eve and able to resist the Serpent. While Eve was merely a “(poure soul) by cunning. . . deceav’d” and innocently ignorant of the Serpent’s plan, “*Adam* cannot be excusde” because “What Weaknesse offerd, Strength might have refusde” (773-779). Lanyer delineates the two decisions by insisting that Eve did not have a clear rubric for making a right or wrong choice but was tricked into thinking she was choosing right; Adam, on the other hand, had a clear rubric—“Gods holy word” received straight “from Gods mouth”—and instead of having to face the “Serpents falshood,” he only needed to refuse the fruit from the “weak” Eve’s hand (782, 787, 799). Lanyer’s “situational ethics” attempt to both exonerate Eve of her crime by legitimizing her decision on the basis of her good intent in a morally ambiguous situation and to increase the severity of Adam’s crime by recounting the clear moral guidelines he was given to confront an unambiguous situation. She also compares the tempters: while Eve battled the wise Serpent, Adam merely had to refuse Eve’s offer. By the end of her argument, Lanyer’s initial assessment of Eve as the weaker partner becomes obviously disingenuous, having been strategically employed to elicit a defense of Adam that entails Eve’s strength. Lanyer’s defense

of the Fall thus becomes one of the few defenses of its time that does not appeal to women's essentially weak nature to sustain the argument.

Having compared the different situations Eve and Adam encountered, Lanyer concludes, "If *Eve* did erre, it was for knowledge sake, / The fruit beeing faire perswaded him to fall" (877-878). Lanyer clearly indicates her judgment of Adam: he fell because of the outward appearance of the fruit, a remarkable indictment considering that Early Modern women were frequently accused of external and frivolous preoccupations. In one stroke, Lanyer reverses the expected critique of women's superficiality and instead credits women with a preoccupation exclusively associated with men: knowledge. In addition to the witty gender switch, Lanyer negotiates two potentially radical turns within this one powerful line: first, she questions the assessment of Eve's action as sin and then reinterprets the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in a positive light. Both exegetical moves are unprecedented within the documented orthodox Christian discussion of Genesis, and both turn the narrative's traditional interpretation on its head.

The phrase, "If *Eve* did erre," signals a critical turn in Lanyer's defense of Eve, explicitly stating what she has only implied so far (797). The assertion that Eve's situation resulted in her innocently making what she believed to be the right choice could be interpreted to mean she did not actually sin. Lanyer seems to suggest that Eve cannot be held accountable for being led blindly astray; she was innocent, and she was merely deceived. Later, Lanyer admits that Eve's "fault was onely too much love," which is obviously rhetorical, as a fault of loving too much is really no fault at all (801). Additionally, "it was for knowledge sake" follows the qualifier "If *Eve* did erre" (797) moving her question of Eve's sin from the arena of Eve's blindness to that of her knowledge. "If *Eve* did erre" can be interpreted in the context of Lanyer's earlier statements regarding Eve's deceived state (i.e., Eve's culpability should be questioned because, although she made a mistake, she was deceived), but it can also be read as implicitly connected to "knowledge sake." In other words, Lanyer asserts Eve was pursuing knowledge, after rhetorically implying, through a construction similar to faulting Eve for love, that this cannot constitute a mistake. Lanyer issues a remarkable challenge: she does not assume Eve's guilt but rather her innocence and adduces her virtuous pursuit of knowledge. This argument for Eve's innocence logically entails that Scripture records Yahweh unjustly punishing an innocent person, a position problematic within a traditional Christian hermeneutic hinging on belief in God's goodness, holiness, and justness. In so arguing, she questions the authority of traditional orthodoxy, as well as Yahweh's virtue, positioning both in the margins where their plausibility must be defended and not assumed.

With this one line, “If *Eve* did erre, it was for knowledge sake,” Lanyer fundamentally shifts the meaning of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil by presenting the knowledge the Serpent offers Eve as something inherently good and valuable. She writes, “Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he tooke / From *Eves* faire hand, as from a learned Booke” (807-808). Eve received the knowledge that is the source of man’s great scholarship through the Tree’s fruit and imparted it to Adam, who because of her gift has flourished with understanding and academic prowess to the point of committing the sin of pride. Marshall Grossman highlights Lanyer’s figuration of the Tree of Knowledge “as a gift of Eve misused by men” (“Gendering” 140), a misuse that occurs precisely because men have flaunted it over women and have forgotten from whom it came and at what great sacrifice. The passage implies, Naomi J. Miller contends, that what comes from the hand of a woman “may not only be compared to a learned book, but may even prove a source for learned books” (158). Lanyer maintains clearly what Miller calls “the originary innocence of Eve” and situates her as both a “seeker and source of knowledge” (159).

The claim that Eve gave Adam the fruit “Whereby his knowledge might become more cleare” differs dramatically from the traditional understanding of Adam’s knowledge and the Tree’s effect on humanity (804). Seventeenth-century renderings of Adam acknowledge his ontological perfection at creation, including epistemic perfection, and the hope of science was to uncover the prelapsarian Adamic knowledge (Almond 44). Philip C. Almond, in his book *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought*, explains that “Adam’s encyclopedic knowledge” was “an imaginative construction” based on Adam’s ability to name the animals according to his “innate knowledge of their essential natures” (45). Almond surveys several discussions surrounding Adam’s perfect knowledge, all of which assume Adam was complete in his knowledge at creation but incomplete after the Fall, concluding that Lanyer’s theological contemporaries understood the knowledge gained by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil as negative (45, 202). Following the tradition of Augustine, exegetes variously suggested that the knowledge Adam gained through the fruit was that of the experiential difference between good and evil (Almond 194), or in the words of Milton, the knowledge acquired was “good lost and evil got” (9.1072). Adam’s moral perfection entailed that he already had a didactic knowledge of good and evil while remaining innocent of an experiential knowledge of evil. In this sense, the Tree of Knowledge was a negative gain—it was the introduction of evil and suffering into human experience.⁶

Lanyer’s positive reading of the Tree of Knowledge seems to be an anomaly and does not concur with any orthodox Christian religious tradition, rendering the attention to Lanyer’s unique contribution all the more warranted. Debra Rienstra convincingly

argues that Lanyer successfully carves out a place for herself as a female prophetic voice inspired to rewrite Scripture defying “interpretive tradition” while putting forth her own “astonishing radical exegesis of Scripture” (80, 82). Lanyer’s exegesis “lays bare the truth of Scripture that had lain hidden, from [Lanyer’s] point of view, behind a centuries-old veil of mean-spirited and misguided interpretation” (Rienstra 82). While Lanyer may well have been opening the “hidden” truth of Scripture to her generation and re-envisioning 1,500 years of tradition, her most progressive moves are not unique in the history of Christian theology. Her skeptical hermeneutic and subtle subversion of the Fall closely mirror the approach of the Christian Gnostics as they interacted with the Genesis narrative in the first and second centuries. It is surely next to impossible to claim with certainty at this point in the development of Lanyer scholarship that she was aware of the condemned tradition she was subtly broaching by establishing a specific text or particular influence connecting her to the Gnostic tradition, though it is plausible that she became generally acquainted with it through the writings of Agrippa.⁷ Regardless of whether one argues for a unified and continuous Gnostic tradition, manifestations of Gnostic thought are known to have emerged in various places and forms into the Middle Ages, giving rise to prolific hermetic practices and beliefs in the Renaissance (Faivre 121). The complexity of Early Modern Christian thought surfaces in Marlowe and Milton in A.D. Nuttall’s study, *The Alternative Trinity*, which pays close attention to the complication of Gnostic and hermetic influences in their writing. The uncertainty as to whether Lanyer was formally familiar with the tradition in which she was participating, or whether it could be labeled Gnostic proper, does not negate the presence of Gnostic elements in her writing. While I am not claiming that Lanyer was a Gnostic, I am suggesting that her arguments for Eve’s reclamation bring her to a place strikingly similar to Gnostic interpretation and, whether she intended it or not, subvert the Genesis narrative in a way previously unexplored.

Both Lanyer’s and the Gnostics’ interpretation represent Eve as this “seeker and source” of knowledge who eats the fruit to the betterment of humanity. Both focus on Christ as opposed to Yahweh; the central story for Lanyer is Christ’s Passion, the narrative she chooses not to undermine. However, it appears that Lanyer does not follow through on her own implications, showing little evidence of actually having thought out the ramifications of her arguments on the nature of Yahweh’s character. Lanyer does not, it must be supposed, begin her investigation of Genesis predisposed to Gnostic dualism; her primary objectives are to free women from the burden of Eve’s guilt and to promote her own authority. While Lanyer secures Eve’s innocence and virtuous search of knowledge, she positions Yahweh as an unjust punisher of an innocent person as well as a god of questionable character found

lying to his newly created companions in order to keep a good gift from them. This must, of course, be inferred, as Lanyer does not write it. Instead, she attempts to hold such mutually exclusive conclusions in tension and even seems to undermine her strongest argument, "If *Eve* did erre," with language that insists Eve was tricked. Assuming the best of Lanyer's logical capabilities, the incongruities in her poem suggest that either she was not personally ready to accept the heretical entailments of her arguments, or her audience was not.⁸

Though Lanyer does not explicitly state her evaluation of Yahweh, she already situates herself in a precarious position for an orthodox Christian (Catholic or Protestant) before she begins her subversive account of Genesis and the gendered *gnosis* that ensues by identifying with the serpent as the source of wisdom. In her call "To all vertuous Ladies in generall," Lanyer asks women to anoint themselves with Aaron's priestly oil, taking on the position of priests and preparing themselves to see their King (36-42). She then beckons them to enter a chariot guided by "simple Doves, and subtill serpents," which will lead them "to the fields of rest" where they will find themselves "transfigur'd with [their] loving Lord" (49, 58, 51). That Lanyer aligns herself with Eve by asking the serpent to guide women to paradise, as well as guide her in rewriting Scripture, may rest solely on the ancient association of the serpent with wisdom; however, this ancient association was a primary reason the Christian Gnostics identified the serpent as the Christ. Clearly, Lanyer already positions herself with the serpent prior to actually addressing the Genesis scene, which suggests her unstated implications toward Yahweh's character versus the serpent's may well have been thought through and at the very least reveals a consistency of Gnostic thought.

Regardless of Lanyer's seeming reluctance to directly address Yahweh's ethical status, she seizes upon the idea of Eve's special or secret knowledge in order to reverse the traditional interpretation of woman within salvation history. While Lanyer exonerates Eve, she nevertheless holds Adam responsible for sinning because he was tempted by lust and failed to seek true knowledge. Her delineation, which Janel Mueller thoroughly comments upon, between the men's and women's responses to Christ further separates the sexes; for Lanyer, it is the "women alone [who are] capable of recognizing and receiving the incarnate divine Word aright" (106). Lanyer demonstrates this womanly ability through Eve's recognition of the good fruit and the women's recognition of Christ before he is crucified, acts that have radical implications for women under Eve's shadow: instead of finding themselves the inheritors of sin and the misogynistic arguments that have traditionally followed, women find themselves the blessed seekers of knowledge, who, like their first mother, may have intuitional access to the truth to which men are blind. While men can attain this

knowledge, it is the women who have recognized it first—both at the foot of the Tree of Knowledge and at the foot of the Tree in Golgotha. Indeed, as Kari McBride has asserted, Lanyer's work does "resemble...a kind of liberation theology" (79). It also resembles an old and condemned theology—a theology that not only liberates women from the tyranny of the Fall, but also subverts the orthodox reading of the entire Biblical narrative.

Instead of a salvation history hinging on the woman's sin necessitating her exclusion from leadership and speech, Lanyer's salvation history begins with man's sin culminating in man's murder of God. Women correctly identify knowledge and Christ while men flounder during both the Fall and the Passion, a circumstance buttressing Lanyer's understanding of the Crucifixion of Christ "as a public, historical action taken by men alone" that "vindicates, once and for all, female nature and feminine values and...authorizes gender equality ever after" (Mueller 101). Lanyer concludes that men's "fault beeing greater" (murdering God versus eating forbidden fruit) should necessitate men's willingness to accept women's equality. This conclusion, however, radically understates the actual implications: in light of women's special access to understanding that frees them from original punishment by Yahweh and subsequent historical punishment from men, as well as Lanyer's assessment of men as the weaker sex that truly fell and then crucified the Logos when he came to save them, simple equality would be nothing short of a gift from women to men. Salvation history becomes necessary because of, and for, men, while women are positioned so closely to Christ that equality with men seems impossible; women are superior, and Lanyer's question—"Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdain / Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny?"—functions not only as a rhetorical question un-grounding the male position of authority, but also as a subtle threat turning on the word "greater" (829-830). She puts male authority on notice of female superiority and, like Christ, will offer friendship and brotherhood, a kind of equality with God, while implying the equality is only a matter of grace.

The extent of women's superior status becomes evident in Lanyer's portrayal of Christ, which several scholars have regarded "as specifically feminine" or as belonging "in some particular way to women" (Richey 113, McGrath 230), noting the way she blazons Christ into a physical feminine figure with "cheekes like skarlet," "eyes so bright /...washed with milke," "curled lockes," and "lips, like Lillies" (1308-1319). Recognizing that Lanyer's exegetical preoccupation is with gender equality not theodicy, it seems a natural gesture to distance the incarnate Christ not from the body, but from the male body. Apart from the dichotomy created between those who have access to truth and those who do not, the binary most prevalent in Gnosticism lies between the physical and the spiritual, which resulted in various Christological

problems. The belief in the evil nature of matter prompted the rejection of Yahweh, the creator of the physical world, and the acceptance of Christ as the true, spiritual God—a belief that quickly became problematic when paired with Christ's incarnation. Docetism,⁹ from the Greek word *δοκεῖν* meaning “to appear” or “to seem,” became a consistent tenet of Gnostic sects, though in variation, explaining Christ's incarnation in a manner consistent with their dualistic philosophy by denying the actual materiality of his body. When Christ came to earth he only appeared to take on a physical body; in actuality, he did not.

Though it is unlikely that Lanyer intentionally utilized this doctrine, she seems to have been naturally drawn to a gendered variant of it as a way to reconcile Christ's manhood with woman's special status. While Lanyer speaks of the flesh as “a burthen to us, / Knowing it serves but onely to undoe us,” she does not clearly deviate from the orthodox understanding of the battle between the flesh (metaphorical for the sin nature) and the spirit (1743-1744). However, because she is more concerned with gender inequality than she is with the question of theodicy, she concentrates on the difference between the male and female body instead of the physical and spiritual body. Her dualism and resulting “Docetism,” then, are uniquely and intimately linked to gender, as she superimposes the male/female binary over the Gnostic opposition physical/spiritual. With this overlay of gender on the body/spirit opposition, it seems logical that Christ's body would only appear masculine while Lanyer discerns the true feminine nature of his incarnation. If Lanyer has special knowledge here, it is to show her readers that Christ's body, and hence his identification, was female. Like the Gnostics who held to various forms of Docetism in order to explain Christ's bodily experience in a manner that would separate him from evil matter, Lanyer expresses a “gendered-docetism” consistent with her rendition of salvation history. Lanyer's insight into the true feminine-bodied Christ resembles the Gnostic revelation that Christ only *appeared* to have a material body—her Christ only *appeared* to have a male body—both figuring his body differently in order to protect his purity, whether it be from materiality or masculinity.

Ultimately, Lanyer's reversal of the traditional understanding of Soteriology and Christology provides her with a framework that universally, in McBride's words, “redeems the category woman” (77); however, the redemption of woman does not ensure that each individual woman has access to *gnosis*, a point Lanyer strategically builds upon to establish her own poetic authority. Though early Lanyer scholarship focused on Lanyer's establishment of a community of women, increasing attention to class issues has complicated the notion, especially within the dedications. Michael Schoenfeldt aptly emphasizes that “Indeed, although the dedications contain conventionally servile praise of the women they address, they also exhibit an unconventionally

bold capacity to remind these comparatively powerful women of the arbitrariness of the hierarchy on which their privilege depends” (213). Others, such as Andrew Barnaby and Lisa J. Schnell, stress that while interpreting Lanyer’s work it must always be remembered that though she occupied a marginal status, “she wished to be a member of the very class she holds up to scrutiny” (112). Lanyer’s community of women, then, united in opposition to men, provides a binary structure, which “usefully and strategically reinforces the connections of the relational and contestatory ‘us’ against ‘them’ and, valuably for the purposes of the poem’s critique, helps mask the breaks in the ideally represented ‘us’” (McGrath 218).

Placing Lanyer within the Gnostic tradition does not smooth over these breaks; rather it helps account for the presence of fractures. Lanyer’s systematic and, at times, subtle undermining of gender and class creates the possibility for a community of women united in their superiority to men, yet implicitly inferior to the inspired messenger, herself. Though she is motivated to replace the existing social structure of aristocratic privilege and its arbitrary bloodlines, she does so with a hierarchy based on access to God through special knowledge. Lanyer’s prophetic voice and revelation of *gnosis* elevates her above the dedicatees, revealing a subtle power struggle against those in her “ideally represented ‘us.’” It is *her* book, after all, that she is striving to authorize as the source of knowledge, and while women may recognize Christ in contrast to men who “call Christ a blasphemer,” it is Lanyer who “can name him truly” through her poetic rewriting of Scripture (Mueller 111). The special status Lanyer grants to herself logically follows in the context of Gnosticism, a context fundamentally grounded in exclusion. Believing that only a select few would find the secret mysteries behind Christ’s teachings resulted in Gnostics excluding most of the Christian community from the inner circle of knowledge and gave rise to the saying recorded by Irenaeus that only “one in a thousand and two in (ten thousand)” have access to *gnosis* (59). Secret knowledge necessitates the “others” from whom knowledge must be kept, a principle Lanyer relies upon to establish a reversed hierarchical sex-gender system rather than an egalitarian system, as well as her own special status rather than an equal community of women.

Lanyer’s unique position among women becomes solidified in *Salve Deus* as she intentionally conflates herself with Christ. Lanyer’s Christology emphasizes the lowliness of Christ in contrast to his kingly birthright, laying the foundational principle for all who seek glory: relinquish it. Following this principle, Lanyer rivals the Apostle Paul’s aptitude for boasting in weaknesses by drawing attention to her low social status and identifying herself in the humble image of Christ:

In the meane time, accept most gracious Queene
This holy worke, Virtue presents to you,
In poore apparell, shaming to be seene,
Or once t'appeare in your judiciaall view:
 But that faire Virtue, though in meane attire,
 All Princes of the world doe most desire. ("Queenes" 61-66)

In this passage, as in many others, Lanyer equates both herself and Christ with Virtue to such a degree that Virtue's identity becomes unclear; "Even in this 'meane time' before the establishment of the radical reign of the New Jerusalem, the poet is already conflated with Christ and his superior status," which paradoxically requires conflation with his lowliness (McBride and Ulreich 346). Lanyer also conflates Christ and her book in order to declare its greatness; both are "in poore apparell" yet both "all Princes...doe most desire" ("Queenes" 63, 66).

Lanyer's closeness to Christ, achieved through her virtuous economic position, distances her dedicatees from Christ by virtue of their wealth. Throughout her dedications, Lanyer subtly undermines the authority and prestige of her potential patrons by continually reminding them that they cannot depend on their "worldly honours," which in Christ's kingdom "are counted base," warning them that when they "enter with the Bridegroom to the feast /...he that is the greatest may be least" ("Ladie Anne" 20, 15-16). Lanyer, on the other hand, will be greatest because, as she claims, "my wealth within his Region stands, /...Yea in his kingdome onely rests my lands, /...Though I on earth doe live unfortunate, / Yet there I may attaine a better state" ("Queenes" 55-60). Challenging her patrons' rights to a privileged birth, Lanyer questions:

 What difference was there when the world began,
 Was it not Virtue that distinguisht all?
 All sprang but from one woman and one man,
 Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall? ("Ladie Anne" 33-36)

It is virtue alone that elevates a person in Christ's economy, and this virtue grows most clearly out of one's unity with Christ's identification with humanity. To be like Christ is to be like Christ literally—poor, despised, and powerless. Virtue becomes, for Lanyer, the pre-condition of one who has access to *gnosis*, and those who are female, as well as those who lack social standing, readily perceive it. Those who enjoy a privileged social status are not only enjoying a temporary illusion by refusing to acknowledge that "God makes both even, the Cottage with the Throne," but are also in danger of losing access to God's house: "Gods Stewards must for all the poore provide, / If in Gods house they purpose to abide" ("Ladie Anne" 19, 55-56). For Lanyer, the poor will inherit the earth, along with all "Titles of honour which the

world bestowes,” as these “To none but to the virtuous doth belong” (“Ladie *Anne*” 25-26). In other words, Lanyer, following her own Christology, positions herself with the lowly Christ in order to receive his exalted status. While her desired poetic and financial success may seem to ironically jeopardize her superior lowly status, the upside-down hierarchy she proposes strategically ensures that if her patrons fund her, she remains as Christ—lowly but raised to her proper position. At its essence, this is what *gnosis* engenders: the gift of access to secret truths imparted during a personal and mystical experience between God and the humble supplicant paradoxically raises the appointed recipient to a position of prestige and authority.

While creating a community of women bound together through superior access to truth, Lanyer clearly sets herself apart as the inspired messenger chosen to lead the community to the secret knowledge of God. Positioning herself as an Apostle, Lanyer declares, “*Silver nor gold have I none, but such as I have, that give I you.... I present unto you even our Lord Jesus himselfe...and as Saint Peter gave health to the body, so I deliver you the health of the soule*” (“Ladie *Margaret*” 2-10). Her mirror, which discerns the presence of virtues in the dedicatees and “declares them to be true,” along with her invitation to the patrons to dine with Christ the Bridegroom, implicitly claim authority for Lanyer (“Ladie *Marie*” 212). She, synonymous with Virtue, will guide them to *gnosis*:

Let Virtue be your guide, for she alone
Can leade you right that you can never fall;
And make no stay for feare he should be gone:
But fill your Lamps with oyle of burning zeale,
That to your Faith he may his Truth reveale. (“vertuous Ladies” 10-14)

As she calls all women to the heavenly banquet, her priestly hands distribute her book, which is Christ: “Receive him here by my unworthy hand, / And reade his paths of faire humility” (“Ladie *Marie*” 221-222). Lanyer has the *gnosis* and the women who desire access to it must come through her—the prophetic voice, the Christ mediator, the one who will make them all Eves by imparting the fruit—thereby acknowledging the importance and authority of her poetic work.

Ultimately, Lanyer’s impetus for aligning herself with Christ and against Yahweh is for an “empowering sense of authorization, of authority, to write and publish” (Mueller 99). If Lanyer can position herself closer to Christ than to Paul and closer to wisdom than to Yahweh, she will secure her authority to rewrite scripture and women’s history, as well as her prophetic and poetic voice. It seems by the end of Lanyer’s poem, truth is intuitively available to all virtuous women, but most available to her. She has received the Word and mediated it; it is her access to truth that

frees women from the curse of Eve, and it is from her hands that they must receive their “heavenly food” (“Ladie *Katherine*” 50, 51). Similar to the views of Agrippa and the early Christian Gnostics, Lanyer does not ultimately locate authority in her ability to reason or in the institutional church. Instead, she bases her book of knowledge on her own experiential and direct access to mystical knowledge. Her authority to mediate Christ and gather a community around the truth revealed to her rests solely on her claim “that I was appointed to performe this Worke” in a dream “delivered unto me in sleepe many yeares before I had any intent to write in this maner” (“doubtfull Reader” 139). When introducing Gnosticism, Werner Foerster points out, “The Gnostic is not called as any isolated person....The Gnostics do not exist as individuals, but as a community which in each case gathers round one who has received the ‘call’ and hands it on, as in most Christian ‘sects,’ which are named after the founder” (7). In this vein, Lanyer has been “appointed to performe this Worke,” and the community of women should follow.

In the context of the Gnostic tradition, Achsah Guibbory’s phrase, “The Gospel According to Aemilia,” takes on new significance (191). Whether Lanyer knew the tradition or not may remain uncertain, but the similarities are too striking to overlook. Perhaps she was exposed to Gnostic ideas through Agrippa. Perhaps she, like the mystic women before her, could establish her own authority only through a mystical experience leading to knowledge grounded in personal experience as opposed to the Church. Or, perhaps she intuited the hopelessness of saving Eve from her Fall without reversing the entire narrative, coincidentally ending up in a place similar to the Gnostics via their shared hermeneutic. Whatever the source, Lanyer can plausibly be read in the continuing Gnostic tradition, a space that has traditionally questioned and subverted authorized truth while claiming personal access to divine knowledge. ✱

Notes

¹ See Albert Rabil, Jr.’s Introduction to *Declamation* for a summary regarding critical treatments of Agrippa’s investment in the woman question.

² For a historical treatment of the Gnostic tradition see *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, edited by Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraff, and Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels*.

³ Whether this particular form of Gnosticism arose before or after the advent of Christianity is of little consequence.

⁴ *The Testimony of Truth* is part of the Nag Hammadi Library collection, which was not discovered until 1945. I use it because it is a succinct presentation of the Gnostic understanding of the Fall.

⁵ The five Tudor-Stuart pamphlets were authored under the pseudonyms Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, Constantia Munda, Jane Anger, and co-writers Mary Tattle-well and Joane Hit-him-home, some of which may have actually represented women writers.

⁶ Even in light of the *felix culpa*, which interpreted the Fall in light of Christ's redemptive work, the Tree's immediate effect on humanity was still considered negative and a moral failure.

⁷ Additionally, Irenaeus and Augustine make explicit references to Gnostic belief but there is no positive evidence that she read them.

⁸ A.D. Nuttall, in his study of Milton and Gnosticism, makes a similar observation regarding Milton's reluctance to verbalize God's wickedness in *Paradise Lost* (*The Alternative Trinity* 83).

⁹ Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Hippolatus all wrote against Docetism and it was formally condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Works Cited

- Agrippa, Cornelius. *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Almond, Philip C. *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1999.
- Barnaby, Andrew and Lisa J. Schnell. *Literate Experience: The Work of Knowing in Seventeenth-Century English Writing*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.
- Couliano, Ioan P. *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*. Trans. H.S. Wiesner and Ioan P. Couliano. New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
- Faivre, Antoine. "Renaissance Hermeticism and the Concept of Western Esotericism." *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times*. Ed. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraff. New York: State University of New York, 1998. 109-123.
- Foerster, Werner. Introduction. *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972. 1-26.
- Grossman, Marshall, ed. *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

- . "The Gendering of Genre: Literary History and the Canon." Grossman 128-142.
- Guibbory, Achsah. "The Gospel According to Amelia: Women and the Sacred." Grossman 191-211.
- Irenaeus. "Basilides in Adv. Haer. I 24." Foerster 59-83.
- Lanyer, Aemilia. *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Ed. Susanne Woods. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Luttikhuizen, Gerard P. "A Resistant Interpretation of the Paradise Story in the Gnostic *Testimony of Truth* (Nag Hamm. Cod. IX.3) 45-50." *Paradise Interpreted: Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*. Ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuizen. Leiden: Brill, 1999. 140-152.
- McBride, Kari Boyd. "Sacred Celebration: The Patronage Poems." Grossman 60-82.
- McBride, Kari Boyd and John C. Ulrich. "'Eves Apologie': Agrippa, Lanyer, and Milton." *All in All: Unity, Diversity, and the Miltonic Perspective*. Ed. Charles W. Durham and Kristin A. Pruitt. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999. 100-111.
- McGrath, Lynette. *Subjectivity and Women's Poetry in Early Modern England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.
- McManus, Barbara. "Eve's Dowry: Genesis and the Pamphlet Controversy About Women." *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 University Press, 2000. 193-206.
- Migne, J. P. *Patrologia Latina*. 1844-1855. *Patrologia Latina: The Full Text Database*. Vol. 42: Augustinus Hipponensis. 12 Aug. 2004. <<http://pld.chadwyck.com/>>.
- Miller, Naomi J. "(M)other Tongues: Maternity and Subjectivity." Grossman 143-166.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost. John Milton: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Mueller, Janel. "The Feminist Poetics of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*." Grossman 99-127.
- Nauert, Charles G., Jr. *Agrippa and the Crisis of Renaissance Thought*. Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences. 55. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965.
- Nuttall, A.D. *The Alternative Trinity: Gnostic Heresy in Marlowe, Milton, and Blake*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Rabil, Albert, Jr. "Agrippa and the Feminist Tradition." Introduction. Agrippa 3-37.

- Reinstra, Debra. "Dreaming Authorship: Aemilia Lanyer Countess of Pembroke." *Discovering and (Re)Covering the Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*. Ed. Eugene R. Cunnar and Jeffrey Johnson. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001. 80-102.
- Richey, Esther Gilman. "'To Undoe the Booke': Cornelius Agrippa, Aemilia Lanyer and the Subversion of Pauline Authority." *English Literary Renaissance* 27.1 (1997): 106-128.
- Schoenfeldt, Michael. "The Gender of Religious Devotion: Aemilia Lanyer and John Donne." *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*. Ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. 209-233.
- Testimony of Truth*. Trans. Soren Giversen and Birger A. Pearson. *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Revised edition. Ed. James M. Robinson. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990. *The Gnostic Society Library*. The Gnostic Society. 13 Aug. 2004. <<http://www.gnosis.org/library.html>>.
- Van den Broek, Roelof, and Wouter J. Hanegraff, eds. *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*. New York: State University of New York, 1998.