

AEMILIA LANYER AND THE MARGINAL PROTO-ENLIGHTENMENT

*Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he tooke
From Eues faire hand, as from a learned Booke.*

- Aemilia Lanyer from “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women” in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), lines 779-780¹

On what might have been an unseasonably cool day, October 2, 1610, Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645) did something extraordinary:² Disregarding institutionalized female social conventions and expectations, she entered Stationer’s Hall in central London and registered her book, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.³ The act was radical: it was the first time in England a woman took official steps to register a publication of her own, and the book stretched boundaries of literary expression. The volume comprised dedicatory prose and poems, a poem of Christ’s Passion, and a Country House poem. The latter is a genre she pioneers. The dedications and aim of publication are both also innovative—pursuing ladies for patronage.⁴ Linguistically, it

¹ Lanyer, Aemilia. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. 1611. *Women Writers Online*, Women Writers Project, Northeastern University.

² For information and linkages of the depopulation of the Americas and resultant climate change, usually referred to as the “Little Ice Age,” see Skopyk, Bradley. “Appendix A: Reconstructing Colonial Mexico’s Climate.” In *Colonial Cataclysms: Climate, Landscape, and Memory in Mexico’s Little Ice Age*, 213–45. University of Arizona Press, 2020. One theory I’d like to research further is that the resultant climate change from the depopulation (loss in agriculture and pandemics) joined with new discoveries in print technology and exploration to push Europeans indoors with resultant uptick in literature, writing, scientific experimentation, and religious/spiritual reflection. Something like a “Planetary Enlightenment.” For one foray into the impact of humans as a geological agent, see Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2021.

³ Registered on October 2, 1610, but published in 1611. See McCarthy, Erin A. “Speculation and Multiple Dedications in ‘Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 55, no. 1 (2015): p. 46.

⁴ Lewalski, Barbara K. “The Lady of the Country-House Poem.” *Studies in the History of Art* 25 (1989): pp. 261, 265.

encompasses a feminist critique of the subjugation of women via heretical satire. In short, Lanyer and her work are reflective of proto-feminist independent and enlightened thought as elicited from fluency in literature, several decades before the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement began.⁵ This centers Lanyer and her text at the vanguard of a movement that most scholars agree was only engendered decades later, and driven primarily by males. Therefore, the case of Aemilia Lanyer and her book challenge entrenched understandings of the Enlightenment in multifaceted ways: using humanist archetypes her text plays against gendered expectations by cannibalizing the logic of English patriarchal society with its own trope. In novel pursuit of female patrons, she utilizes her mind and pen to achieve status and position, a departure from contemporary notions of labor acceptable for women.⁶ Her main criticism, as seen in the excerpt above, is a particularly excellent example of both emergent enlightened thought as well as proto-feminist critique. In her book, especially in *Eve's Apology*, Lanyer exposes a literal and metaphorical paradox at the heart of her religious and society: Why should Eve be blamed for the fall of man by sharing the accursed apple when only Adam was blessed with the God-given knowledge of the apple's inherent evil?⁷

Aemilia Lanyer was born at St. Botolph's Gate, East London, to Baptista Bassano (d. 1576), a Venetian court musician, and Margret Johnson (d. 1587), his common-law wife.⁸ The Bassano family emigrated to England in 1538. There is circumstantial evidence that the Bassanos

⁵ In this I critique Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* as it pinpoints 1650 as a watershed year in the emergence of enlightened thinking. Israel, Jonathan Irvine. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 3.

⁶ Gowing, Laura. *Ingenious Trade: Women and Work in Seventeenth-century London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 240-41. Also, Wall, Wendy. "Our Bodies/Our Texts?: Renaissance Women and the Trials of Authorship." In *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, editors Carol Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993: p. 52.

⁷ Consider her radical patriarchal critique in conversation with Foucault, Michel. *Power / Knowledge*. Ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980, p. 122.

⁸ Woods, Susanne. *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 4-5. Scholarship suggests Margret Johnson was aunt to composer and lutenist Robert Johnson, of Shakespearean fame, weaving the story of Aemilia Lanyer even closer to the famous bard.

were of Jewish heritage, but they were Catholic in Venice, and certainly converted to Protestantism once settled in England.⁹ These facts hint at religious, sexual, and social change in her early years that other scholars have signaled, and which likely informed the textured, inter-religious flexibility of her writing.¹⁰ Her father died when she was seven, and though the circumstances of leaving her natal home are unclear, she nevertheless found herself in the household of Susan Bertie, dowager Countess of Kent. She reports her foster mother as the “noble guide of my ungoverned dayes.”¹¹ Here she received the best education the late sixteenth century could allow a female,¹² in an era when literacy is in ascendancy over embroidery.¹³ As Aemilia grew into adolescence she was in orbit of the highest of social spheres of her time, and she herself reports that, “Since great Elizaes favour blest my youth,” indicating her position as a favorite in the royal court.¹⁴ This biography establishes Aemilia in the courtly gentry yet without the stability of an aristocratic title like others in her sphere. Worse, her sex meant no real ability to solidify her own place as a woman, and furthermore, no father to advocate for her. Particulars of this era include coverture, a legal and social framework that sat men atop their wives, granting them power over their “bodies, property, and legal status.”¹⁵ In short, she learned at a tender age that a company of learned women could provide a more constant stability than dependency upon males. At age eighteen with her mother’s death she was an orphan, but ensconced on the

⁹ Woods, *Lanyer*, pp. 3-6, and Lasocki, David. “Bassano, Alvisse (d. 1554), musician and instrument maker.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 10 May, 2022.

¹⁰ Herrold, Megan. “Compassionate Petrarchanism: The *Stabat Mater* Dolorosa Tradition in Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.” *Studies in Philology* 117, no. 2 (2020): 366-67.

¹¹ Grossman, Marshall, ed. “Introduction.” In *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, 1st ed.. University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. 1. Also, Hutson, Lorna. “Lanier [Lanyer; née Bassano], Emilia [Aemilia, Amelia] (bap, 1569, d. 1645), poet.” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 23 Sep. 2004; Accessed 10 May, 2022.

¹² Demers, Patricia. *Women’s Writing in English: Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁴ Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, a4v.

¹⁵ For some peculiarities of coverture, see e.g. Gowing, Laura. *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 58. Peters, Christine. *Women in Early Modern Britain, 1450-1640*. Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 9.

periphery of court she turned back to dominant male forms and found a kind of social stability in her adulthood—mistress to a high-ranking nobleman.

Henry Carey (1526-1596), 1st Baron Hunsdon, served as Lord Chamberlain to his cousin Queen Elizabeth.¹⁶ Therefore he was central to court machinations and entertainment, including his sponsorship of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the troop of actors that included William Shakespeare.¹⁷ Much ink has spilled in arguments for Aemilia's social orbit as Carey's mistress, in particular the spheres she inhabited, and whether she would have known Shakespeare himself. Furthermore, scholars use Aemilia's Venetian or "Jewish" heritage to speculate upon her complexion,¹⁸ and marshal Early Modern morality in terms of "light" and "dark" to aim at her as the bard's "Dark Lady."¹⁹ Recently, popular theories such as a recent article in *The Atlantic* hypothesize she penned some of the works attributed to Shakespeare, or that perhaps she formed part of a community of literate women. Hypothetically, due to their sex or social position, women might prefer to use the then-actor as a male cipher for "ghost" authorship.²⁰ Although the it is unclear exactly when the chronological genesis of a custom of cross-gendered *nom de plume* began in women's publications, certainly it was well established and in place in the succeeding centuries, continuing until today.²¹ William Shakespeare's (or any man's) name could lend legitimacy where the work of a woman might be derided or considered unpublishable. The lines,

¹⁶ Ekmekçioğlu, Neslihan. "Aemilia Bassano Lanier's New Perspective on Women in the Poem "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum." *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 51, no. 2 (2018): 22–29.

¹⁷ Gurr, Andrew. "Three Reluctant Patrons and Early Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1993): pp. 159, 161.

¹⁸ Though her maternal English heritage debunks the theory of darker skin tone from Jewish-Venetian heritage, there is also the case of the portrait of "Unknown Woman in Black" by Marcus Gheeraerts, the younger. Speculated to depict Aemilia in 1592. See Woods, *Lanyer*, p. 18.

¹⁹ Most impactful: A.L. Rowse's identification of Aemilia as "Dark Lady" in his 1973 edition of the Sonnets, however, this is no longer accepted at all. However, because Rowse drew such attention to her via the bard, it meant more scholarship brought analysis to the woman as a writer in her own right. See e.g. Bevington, David. "A.L. Rowse's Dark Lady." In *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, edited by Marshall Grossman, 1st ed., 10–28. University Press of Kentucky, 1998, p. 10.

²⁰ See e.g., Winkler, Elizabeth. "Was Shakespeare a Woman?" *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, June 19, 2019.

²¹ The tracing of male-gendered "ghost" authorship lies outside the lines of this essay, though certainly anxieties about women's publishing are well-established. See e. g. Wall, "Our Bodies/Our Texts," p. 52.

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet,” seem particularly appropriate.²² It is important to note, however, that despite the growing scholarship suggesting Aemilia as muse, dark obsession, or author, there is no concrete evidence to prove that she knew Shakespeare, although sources do signal the two shared social spheres.

Later, in conference with astrologer Simon Forman, Aemilia describes her relationship with Henry Carey. She claims he “maintained [her] in great pride,” and she was happy. This debunks speculation about the imbalance of power pertaining to social position in the romance. Although he was 45 years her senior, she appears to have felt respected in their union.²³ When she found herself pregnant with his child in 1592, she was cast aside, an unfortunate and regular occurrence for women in her place in that era.²⁴ Once more in need of stability, Aemilia turned to the established norms for succor. She married a gentlemen and court musician, her cousin, Alfonso Lanyer. Unfortunately, sources indicate theirs was an unhappy marriage, which resulted in the loss of her fortune, miscarriages, and abuse.²⁵ Thus far, Aemilia may seem interesting, but not exceptional. As a woman of her time intent on finding stability, she followed expected routes, rendering it provocative that her book is entirely dedicated to women.²⁶ Having lost her father, she could depend upon a noblewoman for support; once she lost her mother she found love in a nobleman’s arms. Finally, when pregnancy narrowed her choices even further, she found legitimacy as a wife to a man of social parity. In short, through many trials she proved able to navigate the particular circumstances of her time and settled in the expected place of her era:

²² Shakespeare, William. 2008. *Romeo and Juliet*. [Waiheke Island]: The Floating Press, p. 62.

²³ Woods, *Lanyer*, p. 16.

²⁴ For courtly practices surrounding unwanted pregnancies, see Rickman, J. *Love, Lust, and License in Early Modern England: Illicit Sex and the Nobility*. London: Routledge, 2008. For the contemporary social practice of legitimizing children in a community, including forced marriages to other men in their social strata when pregnant, see Gowing, *Common Bodies*, pp. 185, 187.

²⁵ McCarthy, “Speculation and Multiple Dedications,” p. 50.

²⁶ For the layers of her network of aristocratic patronesses, see esp. Woods, *Lanyer*, pp. 8-9.

as a wife and mother. However, Aemilia was a woman with something to say about the acceptable stations of womanhood, especially in reference to the circuitous biblical thinking that stationed a woman's place under the "cover" of man: women were blamed for mankind's fall from grace due to the biblical concept of "Original Sin." The dedicatory texts suggest she was no longer complacent in dependency upon males.

Aspects of the Enlightenment are crystallized in the collective consciousness as thus: advancement of reason over superstition, a new faith in science as revelatory of universal truth through development of methodological proof, and disdain of the Judeo-Christian notion of "Original Sin."²⁷ The Enlightenment levels humanity, freely disseminates knowledge, and promises a utopian future, or Golden Age, as accessed through a marriage of enlightened discourse and scientific advancements.²⁸ In 1611 Aemilia Lanyer published *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and demonstrated through its content as well as the action of publication an enlightened feminist critique several decades before the intellectual movement is considered to have begun. The work also highlights a criticism of the misogynistic tropes upon which many institutions in her society were based. The iniquitous belief that women alone were responsible for the fall of man is set in sharp relief and exposed through heretical literary interpretation. The subsequent notion of women's incapability of rational thought or political action is thereby challenged. However, in identifying Amelia as a proto-enlightened outlier, Enlightenment moorings are cast adrift.²⁹ While there is little doubt the emergence of printed literature and widening readership led to a boom in intellectual ideas, any aim to quantify an era such as the

²⁷ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 596.

²⁸ Even the notion of the Golden Age myth has seeped into modernity, see e.g. Hobsbawm, E. J. *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*. 1st American ed. New York: Pantheon Books, 1994, p. 10.

²⁹ Demers, Patricia. "Studying Early Modern Women Writers." In *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England*, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 4. As above, I am juxtaposing her chronological placement and sexism in his analysis of Spinoza in Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 86.

Enlightenment should be met with suspicion. Indeed, even the genesis of the label is problematic. Stemming from an older Petrarchan concept that shrouds another era in darkness in order to gain ascendancy, it discursively juxtaposes light and dark in terms of intelligence and primitivism.³⁰ Ergo, the aims of enlightened thought are unrealistic and divisive. The utopian future that is the functional goal of enlightened modernity is linked with a spiritual/metaphysical resurrection akin to the Christian belief in Jesus' return. This echoes another idealistic "Golden Age" as transposed from an obscure classical myth.³¹ Although Early Modern literary tropes frequently mix or verge classical myth with Christian hegemonic belief, the two are mutually exclusive. While a struggle toward an ideal is ever a worthy cause, the horizon upon which that ideal sits is by definition unreachable.³²

Challenges to textual enlightenment include the case of Domenico Scandella.³³ Carlo Ginzburg contextualizes "Menocchio's" literacy with resultant "reason." His cosmological belief then differed from the Catholic hegemonic establishment.³⁴ Another aim of the Enlightenment is knowledge through scientific proof. Steven Shapin shows, however, that at its emergence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the "Scientific Revolution" was treated as suspect. Pursuit of science through proof was at cross purposes with established Christian notions of the universe.³⁵ Nevertheless, scientific ideas would serve to ignite minds in elite spheres, eventually developing from "natural philosophy" to "science."³⁶ The secularization of scientific proof, elite education,

³⁰ Nelson, Janet L. "The Dark Ages." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (2007): pp. 192-93. "Period labels are neither inert nor innocent. They attract value-loadings."

³¹ Hardman, C. B. "Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* and the Stuart Golden Age." *The Review of English Studies* 45, no. 178 (1994): pp. 221-22.

³² Koselleck, Reinhart, Javier Fernández Sebastián, and Juan Francisco Fuentes. "Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck." *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 2, no. 1 (2006): p. 120.

³³ Ginzburg, Carlo. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980.

³⁴ For Augustan notions of the "Age of Reason," see Apetrei, S. L. T. *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early Enlightenment England*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 21-22.

³⁵ Shapin, Steven. *The Scientific Revolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 43-44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

and a notional, conceptual order to life also evolved to inform political ideas with increasing polarizing rhetoric.³⁷

In *Radical Enlightenment*, Jonathan Israel revises the impact of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment and dials the movement back to the year 1650. After that, “a general process of rationalization and secularization set in which rapidly overthrew theology’s age-old hegemony in the world of study, [...] and led a few openly to challenge everything inherited from the past...”³⁸ Israel’s main subject of study is Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), a Dutch philosopher of Portuguese Jewish Sephardic extraction. The case of Spinoza’s variegated background mirrors Lanyer in its converging transnational background. It is revelatory that the two echo one another in their production of subversive, radical thought. Yet Spinoza, despite Israel’s boast of comprising the “intellectual backbone of the European Radical Enlightenment everywhere,” still considered females “too weak to assert themselves and stand up to men.” In this, Spinoza and Lanyer diverge as she points out a fundamental, biblically revealed frailty of man. Contrasted with women’s bravery at Christ’s Passion, the flight of Jesus’ disciples is cast in disparaging hues. She highlights an an equal or even greater betrayal than the “fall” occurs when the men decamp from their Savior’s side. Aemilia challenges: “Though they protest they never will forsake him, / They do like men, when dangers overtake them.”³⁹

Dominick LaCapra said to “question a reliance on golden-age mythology that nostalgically invokes the glories of a more ‘objective,’ less ‘deconstructive’ past.”⁴⁰ Ergo, past and present live in constant interrogation. Reflected like this, Aemilia Lanyer, as author and

³⁷ *Ibidem*. See also, Harrington, Anne. *Reenchanted Science: Holism in German Culture From Wilhelm II to Hitler*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. xv-xvii.

³⁸ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 4.

³⁹ Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, C2v.

⁴⁰ LaCapra, Dominick. “History, Language, and Reading: Waiting for Crillon.” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995): p. 802.

feminist, first conformed to social expectations in dependence upon males for legitimacy. Later, she depended only upon herself. Mirrored too is the reinterpretation of her words in the gravitational orbit of a male contemporary, Shakespeare. Richard van Oort links a medieval past to modernity via Shakespearean conduit and elaborates, “[literate] centrality is nothing when compared to the historical longevity of its cultural precursor, which is religion.”⁴¹ From that angle, the depth of Aemilia Lanyer’s work resounds even more. As a transnational, cultural, spiritual, intellectual, social, and sexual “other,” she thrived in the marginal space of most categorizing aspects of her society.⁴² By the turn of the seventeenth century, even with the threat of a dynastic change which might destabilize her inroads to Crown patronage, Lanyer identified her next best method of stepping into a resilient future: reconnecting with and speaking directly to a community of women holding positions of power. These women read her heretical satire in all its prismatic nuance, and were able to appreciate the subtle weave of refined religious rhetoric in exposing misogynist tropes. In harnessing her exteriority, she penned a critique of systemic sexism with enlightened methodologies. Near the end of her life, she is listed as a “pensioner,” hinting that at least one great lady identified in the dedicatory section may have granted her patronage.⁴³ Perhaps it was Queen Anne herself, the subject of Aemilia’s first dedicatory text.⁴⁴ On the one hand, Lanyer’s ability to survive in the shadows of nearly every facet of society “birthed” *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. On the other, her unique liminality alone draws a spotlight of analysis. My preference: to simply consider her as any Enlightened woman—dimensional, complex, creative, and ahead of her time.

⁴¹ Oort, Richard van. “Shakespeare and the Idea of the Modern.” *New Literary History* 37, no. 2 (2006): pp. 319–39.

⁴² Wall, “Our Bodies/Our Texts?” pp. 66-69.

⁴³ Aemilia Lanyer was buried at St. James, Clerkenwell, April 3, 1645. See Woods, *Lanyer*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, a3r.

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