

The Epic Structure and Subversive Messages of Emilia
Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*

By Melanie Faith

Abstract

Despite the well-documented patriarchal restrictions placed upon the composition of Renaissance women writers, Emilia Lanyer wrote -- both within and against the strictures that bound women to translations of religious works and other forms of devotional writing -- *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*,ⁱ an ideologically subversive poem of some 3000 lines extolling the virtue of women and codifying the perfidy of men.

Lanyer's poem may be the first epic published in modern English; " it is certainly the first epic ever published by an Englishwoman. I base my assertion largely upon the works of Torquato Tasso, the first poet to produce an epic poem in a modern European language, whose rhetorical works - *Discorsi dell 'Arte Poetica and Discorsi del Poema Eroica*, which painstakingly examine epic structure and intent -- and whose epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, were available in England by 1580."ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only does Lanyer appropriate and adapt the historically male epic form in the writing of *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, but within the strictures of contemporary literary convention and of patriarchal society at large, she submits a formal prose argument "To the Vertuous Reader," in which she admonishes women to abandon internalized patriarchal perceptions. Like male Renaissance rhetors, she follows Aristotle, Cicero,ⁱ and Quintillian^v as she structures this classical epideictic oration, in which she suggests the seditious notion of equality between the sexes.

Lanyer's book, entitled *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, will be indicated with italics. The poem proper of that book will be indicated with quotation marks.

It can be argued that *Salve Deus* is the first epic written in modern English. According to Tasso's theories, the distinction between romance and epic is that the theme of a romance is invented and that of an epic is historical. The *Faerie Queene*, then, according to Tasso, is a romance. Further, Tasso requires that the subject of an epic be taken from Judeo/Christian history. The subject of Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, allegory based upon the legends of king Arthur, is taken from legend: "I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also further from the danger of envy, and suspicion of present time" (Spencer 1).

Tasso has been characterized by Mindelle Triep as "the most significant theorist and practitioner of allegorical epic in the Italian

Renaissance." Further evincing the historical authority of Tasso's works

is Spenser's reference to them in the 1589 letter to Raleigh prefacing the first three books of *The Faerie Queen* (Triep 53). See also C.P. Brand, *Torquato Tasso* (Cambridge, 1965). Edward Fairfax's translated version was available in 1599.

Close reading of "To the Vertuous Reader" reveals that Lanyer made use of those Ciceronian topics suitable to her argument: genus and species, definition, causation, contradiction, circumstance, contraries, and consequents.

Ong notes that Tudor educators taught Aristotle's divisions: exordium, narration or proposition, proof, and conclusion, as discussed in *Rhetoric* (iii 13); Cicero's six (sometimes five) divisions: exordium, narration, division, proof, refutation, and conclusion found in *De Oratore* (ii, 19); and variations of Erasmus and Quintillian.