

Introduction

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*,¹ an ideologically subversive poem of some 3000 lines extolling the virtue of women and codifying the perfidy of men.

Barbara Lewaliski correctly includes Lanyer in "the most articulate female voices of the era, women who [have found] impressive literary means to contest the place assigned them in Jacobean patriarchal culture,"² who resist "its usual construct of women as chaste, silent, and obedient,"³ women who

rewrite discourses which repress or diminish women -- patriarchy, gender hierarchy, Petrarchanism, Pauline marriage theory, and more -- by redefining or extending their terms, or infusing them with new meaning⁴

Lewalski further notes that the *Salve Deus* "disrupts our genre expectations for a meditation on or narrative of Christ's Passion by its insistent subtext contrasting the good women associated with Christ's Passion to the evil men."⁵ Susanne Woods suggests the work "has no generic predecessor among English women poets."⁶ They are both correct. The *Salve Deus* is not a mediation or religious narrative, nor did English women poets write its generic predecessors: the

Salve Deus fulfills the genre expectations for epic, and its generic predecessors were written by men.

Lanyer's poem may be the first epic published in modern English;⁷ 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 1580.⁸

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,⁹ and Quintillian¹⁰ as she structures this classical *epideictic* oration, in which she suggests the seditious notion of equality between the sexes.

In the surreal, visually suggestive "Author's Dreame to the Ladie Marie," Lanyer combines conventional masque metaphor and image with scriptural "history" to introduce the equally subversive ideology of democracy, wherein inherent

divisions between aristocracy and plebscote vanish. As King James's Danish queen Anna uses what Jersey Limon calls "the sacred space" of masques to invert patriarchal ideology, so Lanyer uses the verbal recreation of images set free in that "sacred space" to subvert feudal class structure.

While adhering strictly to Tasso's guidelines, she creates a trans-generic epic, a poetic endeavor of heroic proportion that incorporates many of the rhetorical and poetic modes popular during the Tudor/Stuart reigns. Lanyer's "little booke," then, must be seen as a portfolio of the artist's best work, to be presented -- as it was presented -- to the reigning literary power brokers, an appeal to the legitimating authority of the Renaissance feminine *literati*. Lanyer, in *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* and in its dedications, presents her subversive arguments to the most powerful women of James I's reign. Her straightforward attempt to break into male patronage circles is evinced not only by direct pleas to her would-be patrons, but by the nature and structure of the book itself, which is a catalogue of rhetorical expertise. This portfolio, written in varying poetic and prose forms, has been carefully prepared to showcase Lanyer's extensive rhetorical prowess. Among its generic and stylistic varieties are sections written in Aristotelian prose argument, dream vision, rhyme royale, heroic couplet, heroic quatrain, and the title poem itself,

"Salve Deus," written, as was Tasso's epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in *ottava rima*.

Salve Deus Rex Judæorum may be seen in its subject and composition as an epic, the first published by an Englishwoman and one of the first in modern English. Further, I suggest that Lanyer intended her epic to be a portfolio, a vehicle by which she could display her rhetorical talents to patrons, and that she, rather than "feminize" accepted contemporary structures, inherently masculine structures, adopted them as they were and used them to present her distinctly feminine message: "Let us have our liberty again."¹¹

Notes

¹ 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.

² Barbara Keifer Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

³ Lewalski *Writing Women* 2.

⁴ Lewalski *Writing Women* 4.

⁵ Barbara Keifer Lewalski. "Old Renaissance Canons, New Women's Texts: Some Jacobean Examples" in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1994), 400.

⁶ Susanne Woods. "Aemilia Lanyer" *DLB Seventeenth-Century British Nondramatic Poets, First Series, V* 121. (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman, 1992), 215.

⁷ 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 suspition of present time" (Spencer 1).

⁸ 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* (Treip 53). See also C.P. Brand, *Torquato Tasso* (Cambridge, 1965). Edward Fairfax's translated version was available in 1599.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Aemilia Lanyer. "Eve's Apology" in "Salve Deus Rex Judæorum." Susanne Woods, ed. *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 87, 825. All further references to individual poems in *Salve Deus* will be indicated by title and line number from this edition.