Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645): brief biography
Aemilia Lanyer was a middle-class London woman of Jewish-Italian descent and the mistress of Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon, Queen Elizabeth I’s lord chamberlain, a man forty-five years her senior. When she became pregnant by him in 1592, she was quickly married to Alphonso Lanyer. Her son was born in 1593. She was the first Englishwoman to publish a substantial volume of original poems, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611). Some critics have identified her as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare’s Sonnets, but there is no evidence that this is the case.

Lanyer is now seen as a major literary figure. Her work crucially alters our reading of her male contemporaries such as Donne, Shakespeare, Jonson, and (later) Milton. Jennifer Summit argues that “the religious, political, and cultural conflicts that attended the English Reformation brought together ‘English literary history’ and ‘the woman writer’ as parallel, and newly urgent, concerns.” (2000, 109). Barbara K. Lewalski: Lanyer’s “feminist perceptions can be rendered only in terms of the discourse of scripture, but they force a radical imaginative rewriting of its patriarchal norms to place women at the center” (1993, 219). *Salve Deus* is a comprehensive “Book of Good Women.” (Trill 2001, 69)

How is sexuality articulated in the early seventeenth century in “Eve’s Apology”? To note:

- The revision of the Biblical tradition of Eve was not all that subversive for the time (cf. the *querelle des femmes*)
- Doesn’t go against prevailing models of female virtue – chaste, pious, virtuous.
- Lanyer doesn’t mention female obedience but women are still expected to be subordinate.
- Nothing Lanyer says about female subjecthood would have been disquieting to her culture.
- The work’s “feminism,” such as it is, is to do with giving women access to Christ, “through identification with a suffering, weakened and largely silent Christ” (Clarke 2000, xxi).
- Sexuality? The challenge to women’s association with Eve’s sinfulness? The reinforcing of contemporary notions of marriage?

Notes on “Eves Apologie”
Look at the dedicatory prefaces to *Salve Deus, To the Doubtful Reader* and *To The Virtuous Reader* (Norton, 1431-3). The first authorizes the work by presenting it as a dream-vision. It offers the poem “in honor” of the female sex (74) and as a riposte to the defaming of women. The second preface commends the work as a book “for the general sue of all virtuous ladies and gentlewomen of this kingdom” and chides “evil-disposed men … [that] do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred” (p. 1432). It endorses the female virtue of Biblical “wise and virtuous women,” such as Deborah, Judith, and “chaste Susanna” (p. 1433). The last three sentences of the second preface repeatedly endorse female virtue.
“Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women” (of which you only have a part) opens with the narrator’s account of the crucifixion, up to Judas’s betrayal and Pontius Pilate’s judgment. The allusion to Pilate’s failure to heed the words of his “most worthy wife” (l. 7) is a reference to the well-known legend of Pilate’s Wife’s dream [Mt 27,19], in which Satan tried to make Procula dissuade her husband from condemning Christ, which would have meant there would have been no salvation. The structural parallels between Eve’s temptation (and the Fall) and Pilate’s Wife’s dream are very striking (for the Dream of Pilate’s Wife, see ll. 90 ff.). But note that Lanyer reverses the meaning of the legend, by urging Pilate to heed his wife’s words, and by making Procula “worthy.”

The narrator points to the irony of Pilate’s doing the thing that goes against his heart (12) and condemning the person who must be his Savior (13).

The narrator enjoins women not to “glory in men’s fall” (the fall of Adam and of Pilate, 15). Men, she says, have after all been given the power to “overrule us all” (16); in other words, she affirms the gendered hierarchies of the day. But this also points to Adam’s failure to overrule Eve. For some medieval commentators, Adam’s sin was worse than Eve’s, because he should have refused to allow his authority to be overruled (see below). Lanyer hints at male weakness more than male sinfulness.

“Eves Apology” then engages the consequences and paradoxes of the felix culpa (“happy fault”: cf. the medieval lyric “Adam Lay Ybounden”) from a proto-feminist point of view. But what is the “now” of l. 17? As Clarke suggests in her edition of the poem, this could refer to Christ’s crucifixion, or “the moment of my writing this poem” or “this moment in history” – or all of these. Pilate’s “indiscretion” – his refusal to listen to his wife and his allowing Christ to die – sets all humanity free. It also, affirms the narrator, makes Eve’s fault of eating the apple appear much less. Eve was “simply good” (21) in offering to Adam what she held most dear; she could not have foreseen the consequences. Is Lanyer here making a virtue of women’s weakness? Is she infantilizing women? It was not Eve but the “subtile serpente” that betrayed “our sex” (23). Eve’s was an “undiscerning ignorance” (25) because there was no understanding of evil before the fall. Had she, “poor soul,” known the consequences, she would not have “condescended” (28) [consented] to his request. Thus Lanyer avoids blaming Eve for women’s appetite or concupiscence or babbling, as so many medieval commentators did. Eve simply “alleged God’s word” which the serpent denied (31).

Adam can’t be excused for what happened (33). The poem works here with the traditional gendered hierarchies (men are morally strong, women morally weak – Lanyer again calls Eve “poor Eve” (40)), but it overturns these hierarchies: Adam should have known better because he had the superior authority. Eve may have demonstrated “weakness” (35) but his “strength” was wanting, and so his shame should be greater (36). He was “the perfectest man that ever breathed on earth” (42) and he was the only one to have heard the warning against eating directly from God’s mouth [Gen 2,16-17]. He had the ultimate authority and yet for the sake of “one apple won” he lost the breath [inspiration/spoken word] that God had breathed in “his beauteous face” (46-7), bringing down all humankind. Note the pleasing chiasmus of “one apple wonne to lose that breath.” And then Adam laid “the fault on Patience’ back” (49), figuring Eve and all “poor women” as having to patiently endure men’s failure of authority. The argument throughout focuses on men’s misuse of their power and authority. Adam lacked “discretion” (51) – and he
had not even heard the serpent’s arguments (52), with the suggestion that he was therefore doubly weak. In any case Eve erred because she wanted knowledge (a good thing) – but Adam was swayed by the fact that the fruit was “fair” (54) (a lesser thing). He wasn’t betrayed by the serpent – and, after all, if he wanted to eat it there was no one to stop him. This is a dig at Adam’s presumption.

Certainly, Eve couldn’t have stopped him. Her only fault was to love Adam too much (56), which reinforces wifely devotion and the ideal of companionable marriage, and that is why she offered him the “present” of the apple: so that he too could experience knowledge. He never reproved her weakness, even though he knew of God’s injunction. Men “boast” of their knowledge – but Adam took his from Eve’s “fair hand”, as if from a “learned book” (64): she brought knowledge into the world. Men don’t have a monopoly on knowledge.

If she had any evil in her, then it came from Adam because she was created from him (66). If “one of many worlds” (Eve as a microcosm of Adam, or perhaps Satan, who comes from two worlds – heaven and hell) could “stain” our sex and work so great a fall, then what would the consequences of “so foul a fault” had been if it had been men that were tempted? i.e. men have further to fall and their sin is of the greater magnitude. The implication is that things would have been much worse if man had instigated the sin.

Eve’s sin was small (74) compared to those committed by men. Lanyer here questions the notion of women’s role in original sin. The forces of Satan were behind her sin. Men’s sin “surmounts” [surpasses] women’s as the sun’s a “little star” (80).

81 is Lanyer’s strongest call to arms: let us women have our liberty again. But liberty in what sense? In her edition Clarke says it is the liberty that Eve enjoyed before the Fall. Men should not arrogate sovereignty to themselves. They could only have been born through women’s travail and pain, which should temper their cruelty. Since men’s fault is greater, why should men disdain women being their equals, in the sense of both desiring to be “free from tyranny”? This is a very strong argument that promotes gendered equality rather than a maintaining of the status quo. It stresses sexual difference, but attributes new values to each side. Lanyer mostly seems to be a believer in women’s difference as well as women’s equality with men, but she doesn’t set up female difference as superior.

Women, the narrator says, never consented to men’s sin, which is inexcusable and endless (88). The Dream of Pilate’s Wife is read not in terms of the medieval felix culpa, that is, Procula tried to prevent Christ’s death and therefore humanity’s salvation) but rather as the opposite: Procula is presented as a woman trying honestly to warn her husband not to have anything to do with “that just man” (93). Lanyer redeems Pilate’s wife here, an interesting structural parallel with her rewriting of Eve’s action.

References and Further Reading


Lewalski, Barbara K. “Writing Women and Reading the Renaissance.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 44.4 (1991), 792-821.


**Adam lay ybounden** (15th century)

Adam lay ybounden,
Bounden in a bond;
Four thousand winter
Thought he not too long.
And all was for an apple,
An apple that he took,
As clerkës finden written
In their book.
Nor had one apple taken been,
The apple taken been,
Then had never Our Lady
A-been heaven's queen.
Blessed be the time
That apple taken was.
Therefore we may singen
Deo gratias!

![Image of a book cover]