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"The First Fruits of a Woman's Wit": Reclaiming the Childbirth Metaphor in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

Carolyn Mae Shakespear
Brigham Young University

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Carolyn Mae Shakespear

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Kimberly Johnson, Chair
Sharon Harris
Brice Peterson

Department of English

Brigham Young University

ABSTRACT

"The First Fruits of a Woman's Wit": Reclaiming Redemption
Through the Childbirth Metaphor in Aemilia Lanyer's
Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

Carolyn Mae Shakespear
Department of English, BYU
Master of Arts

The childbirth metaphor adopts imagery from female bodies carrying and delivering children to describe the effort and relationship of a poet to his/her poem. This was a commonly used trope in the renaissance, particularly by male authors. This thesis examines the way early modern woman poet, Aemilia Lanyer uses the childbirth metaphor in her poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.* Lanyer ultimately considers not only the physical realities of childbirth in her use of the metaphor, but also the emotional, social, and theological consequences. By doing so, I argue that Lanyer reclaims the metaphor from her male contemporaries in order to justify women's participation in literature and theology. Lanyer adopts a position analogous to the Virgin Mary as she "births" her poem. As she situates all women as powerful procreators, she claims a poetic priesthood through motherhood.

Keywords: Aemilia Lanyer, childbirth metaphor, early modern literature, early modern women writers, renaissance, poetry, Virgin Mary, priesthood, creativity and procreativity

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Introduction

Aemilia Lanyer is arguably one of the most remarkable female writers of the early modern era. In 1611, a time when women's writing was seen as largely for the private sphere and definitely not for profit, she published a collection of poems, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,* intended for public consumption as she sought to become a professional poet (Woods xxxi). Lanyer, as the daughter of a court musician, was well-educated and surrounded by aristocracy, despite not being aristocratic herself. Her ability to write and her drive to publish reflects an ambition undaunted by her background and the limitations surrounding her gender in renaissance society. Unlike many of her female colleagues, her own name appears on the title page of her published work.[1] A bold move as most other women authors at the time were identified solely by their relationship to men, if they were identified at all.[2] The poems consist of eleven dedicatory pieces (nine in verse and two in prose), a longer poem detailing the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and a shorter country house poem (the earliest existing example of the genre).

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[1] A few examples: Anne Bradstreet (whose work was published in 1650) is only identified as "A Gentlewoman in New England" on the title page of her poetry collection. Mary Sidney, having equal authorship over the psalter she translated alongside her brother and which she completed after his death sometime in the 1590's is not even mentioned on the title page of the manuscript.

[2] Lanyer's relationship to her male society is made clear on the title page. It reads, "Written by Mistris Aemilia Lanyer, Wife to Captaine Alfonso Lanyer Seuant to the Kings Majestie." However, I still believe there is significance in the fact that her full name appears on the title page and that her name precedes both her husband's and any mention of the king.

Throughout the work, Aemilia Lanyer presents Christian theology and Christian experience from a woman's perspective. She uses the personae and voices of biblical women to invite her contemporary audience to be part of a female worship community, one set apart from male voices. Sharon Seelig sees this community as an imaginary literary circle, modeled after such existing circles in early modern society; Constance Furey views it as a creation springing from a desire for a female utopia, and Elaine Beilin observes a gathering that pushes against misogynistic views by noting Lanyer's particular emphasis on the virtues embodied by the ladies she has included within her imagined community. As explored by Julianne Sandberg, Yaakov Mascetti, and Femke Molekamp, Lanyer seeks to gather this community of women worshippers around a sacrament table in order to partake of her poem as though it were a eucharistic feast. As Molekamp writes, "Lanyer reverses the doctrine of incarnation—'the Word made flesh'— in order to access Christ as the Word, presenting the crucified Christ as the body made text, and her book as constructed of the materials of Christ's body" (312). Lanyer invites her community of women to read this text in a contemplative and reverent manner, in order to participate in a eucharistic rite. Mascetti argues that Lanyer occupies the role of priest within her imagined community as she adopts a position as the one who prepares and offers the figurative sacrificial lamb.

Scholars have looked at the way Lanyer claims this priestly authority through an exploration of motherhood. Naomi Miller specifically looks at the way maternal relationships functioned in the early modern era, arguing that Lanyer uses recognized maternal authority to claim her priestly religious authority. Gary Kuchar also sees Lanyer as claiming a priestly authority through motherhood and argues that she does so through her theological representation of the Virgin Mary. He claims that Lanyer depicts Mary using Catholic imagery and argues that

Lanyer claims a priesthood lineage through the Virgin Mary. I agree with these scholars and their work is foundational for my own. However, there is more to be explored about how Lanyer uses the women's physical bodies and experiences of motherhood to both create her community and establish her claim to poetic and ecclesiastical priesthood. In this thesis, I examine Lanyer's application of the commonly used childbirth metaphor. Lanyer's text is a unique example of a female voice engaging in this literary metaphor already well-established by male voices. Lanyer utilizes the perceptions and understandings of childbirth in her use of the metaphor in order to create her own female community and establish her priestly authority. I believe that Lanyer uses the birthing metaphor to claim authority over her community, her text, and her priesthood.

In one of the dedicatory epistles prefacing her text, entitled "To the Vertuous Reader," Aemilia Lanyer reminds her audience that Christ himself was "begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman" just as worshippers are begotten by, borne by, nourished by, and obedient to Christ (Lanyer 49). This emphasis on mothering by Christ and for Christ, is part of Lanyer renegotiating her maternal authority, not only in her society, but also theologically. By reclaiming the childbirth metaphor commonly used by her male contemporaries as they wrote of their own creative output in terms of birthing a child, Lanyer uses her experience as a woman and a mother to join a well-established literary tradition, demonstrating her ability, and perhaps her inherent, God-given right, to parent a text.

The Renaissance literary scene saw widespread use of the childbirth metaphor by male authors. The conventions of the metaphor are fairly straightforward: The poet suffers pains comparable to those of reproductive labor in order to deliver a poem safely into the world, while the poet's muse often acts either as a sexual partner or as an attending midwife. For example, these lines from the opening sonnet of Philip Sidney's sonnet cycle, *Astrophil and Stella*:

Thus great with child to speake, and helpless in my throwes,

Biting my trewand pen, beating my selfe for spite,

'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and write.' (Sonnet 1, lines 12-14)

By using birthing language, Sidney expresses an urgent need to expel the poem from his person. Relief finally comes and the poem takes on a corporeal form through ink and paper. Typical of the way men treat the birth metaphor, Sidney's example is focused on the most obvious parts of the birthing experience: the drama of labor and the imminent delivery. The identity of the poet becomes that of a pregnant woman—"great with child to speake"— who is "helpless in my throwes" as they experience the pangs of labor.

In her use of the metaphor, Lanyer explores nuances of childbearing that are less obvious to the outsider male gaze. While Lanyer includes many physical aspects of the signs and symptom of pregnancy and labor, she focuses much more on the complex social, emotional, and theological consequences of gestation and delivery. She emphasizes the female connectivity and community that is created while becoming a mother, the access women have to the redemptive power of Christ through their experiences of childbearing, and the female authority extant in the birthing room. It is evident that Lanyer was aware of the social and gendered implications of the metaphor as used by her contemporaries even as she expands the metaphor to fit her experiences as a woman and mother. For Lanyer, the childbirth metaphor is much more than a vehicle for expressing her own struggles as a writer. It instead becomes an integral part of claiming maternal, priestly, and poetic authority.

The Childbirth Metaphor

During the Renaissance, the childbirth metaphor gained popularity among English authors, particularly poets. Anxiety surrounding royal succession along with an increased interest in the scientific community as to the nature of birth and the treatment of laboring women urged along a growing interest in childbirth during the Renaissance (Mischo, Harvey). The use of the metaphor is undoubtedly "historically complex: it indicates the Elizabethan ambivalence toward the homologous functioning of poetic creation and procreation" (Mischo 53). Creation and procreativity were often linked through renaissance views of the uterus. The uterus, an extremely influential organ on a woman's temperament, was thought to be heavily influenced by the imagination. Because of this medical theory, imagery surrounding a woman's reproductive system was readily used to describe imaginative endeavors. Notably, "although women themselves did not have access to or control over the power their physiology bestowed on them, they were nevertheless the locus of imaginative creativity" (Harvey 112).

As Susan Standford Friedman points out in her article "Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor," the metaphor is too pregnant with meaning to be looked at neutrally (53). The childbirth metaphor is founded in part upon assumptions about how female bodies functioned during reproduction. "Renaissance physiology privileged the connection between women and the imagination because of the uterus, which was putatively susceptible to the influence of both the moon and the imagination" (Harvey 112). It is a metaphor inherently gendered by its reference to the female body and its use is complicated by implicit gender roles and stereotypes extant in the culture. An author cannot reference childbirth without invoking female bodies and the powers within and limitations placed upon them. However, Friedman asserts that "although [the childbirth metaphor's] basic analogy validates women's participation in literary creativity, its contextual reference calls that participation into question" (Friedman 54). The complex

"contextual reference" Friedman is referring to as it relates to early modern English culture was not generally in favor of allowing women to participate in literary creativity and was even beginning to oust women from their positions of authority during childbirth.

Poets' use of the metaphor reflected early modern society's cultural attitudes towards conception, pregnancy, and birth. These attitudes were in a state of renegotiation during the early modern period.[3] During Tudor times, understanding of childbirth mostly relied upon the Galenic model of procreation; however, towards the mid-1600s, the Aristotelian model emerged and eventually replaced the Galenic model.[4] In the Galenic theory of biological sex, women were thought to be underdeveloped men. A woman's reproductive organs were understood to be an exact copy of a man's, just turned outside in (see Figure 1). It was thought that every fetus had the potential to become male, but failed to do so if the mother's womb was too wet and cold. Early modern medical culture, therefore, had a more fluid understanding of gender, one that imagined it possible for men to "regress" biologically in order to take a position as mothers to

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[3] My understanding of this "renegotiation" is largely drawn from John Brett Mischo's work "'Great with Child to Speake:' Male Childbirth and the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequence."

[4] John Brett Mischo argues that male poets' use of the childbirth metaphor reflected this change in medical theory over time, with a distinct shift towards Aristotelian thinking later in the 17th century. I fail to see a clear chronology supported in the poets' works. Instead, I see multiple authors using both models throughout their lifetimes. I believe this is indicative of the complex exploration of childbirth happening medically, as well as the grappling the authors themselves underwent trying to exclude the female to preserve the male ego, while facing the biological reality of the necessity of the female body in procreation.

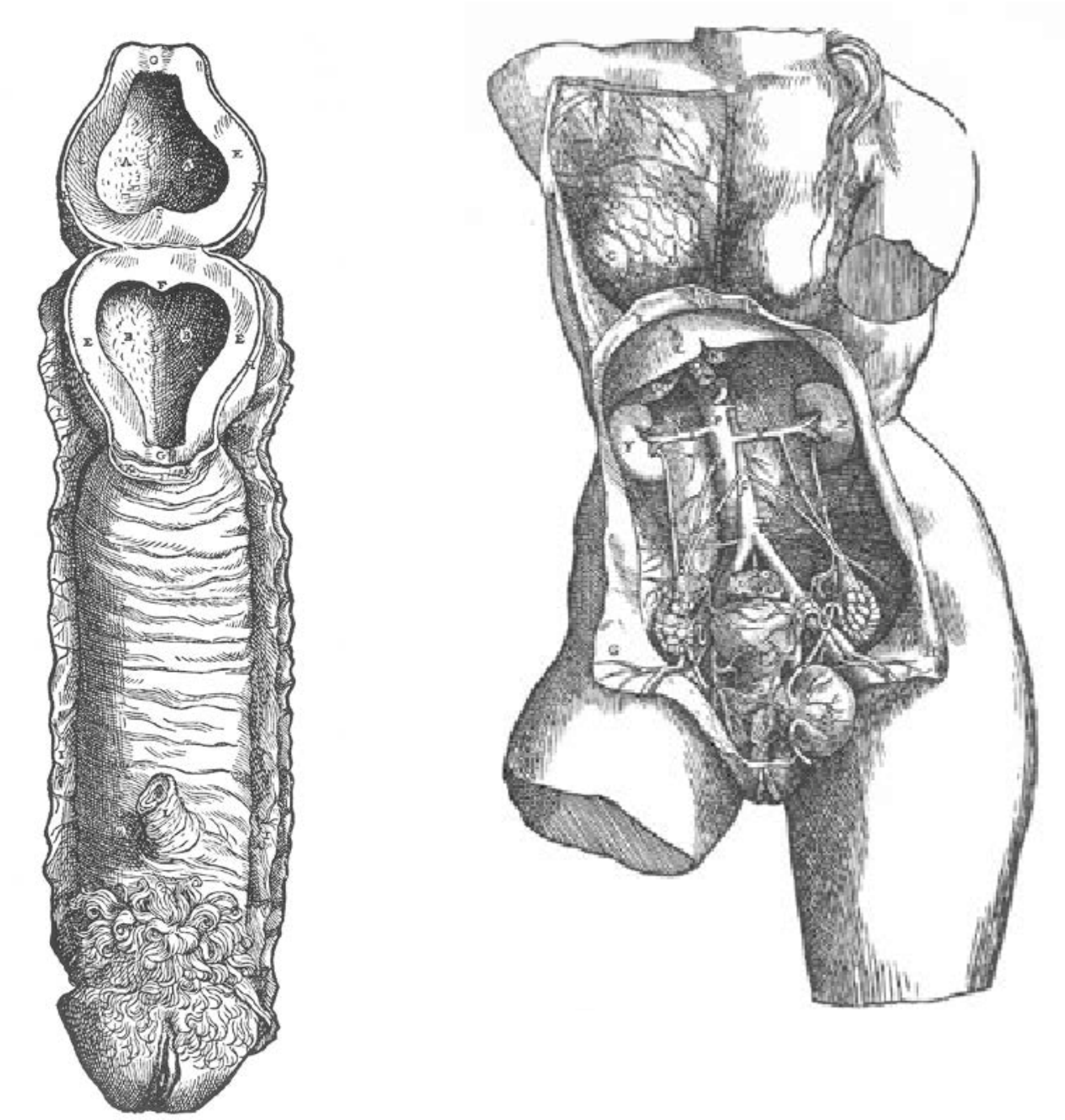

Fig. 1. Andreas Veslius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1555). The figure to the left is a depiction of a human vulva, vagina, and an opened uterus. The figure to the right is a cross section of a woman's torso.

their text (Mischo 55). This fluidity of gender allows men to use the metaphor almost as though they were female. This resulted in a "strange transvestism of the male poet giving birth to his own voice" (Harvey 84). In Sonnet 37 of *Astrophil and Stella*, Sidney describes the poet's body as actually becoming feminine: "My mouth doth water, and my breast doth swell, / My tongue doth itch, my thoughts in labor be" (lines 1-2). The poetic pregnancy produces symptoms that manifest physically. William Shakespeare describes his brain as a feminine organ: "ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse, / Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?" (Sonnet 86, lines 3-4).

Male poets also took on a more feminine role in the "conception" of a poem. In Galenic theory, men and women were seen as taking on biologically equal roles in generation as both men and women were thought to contribute seed or creative material during conception. Although Galen did take great lengths to prove the superiority of masculine seed as hot and active, over the feminine seed which was watery and cold (Galen, as qtd. in Mischo, 59). It was widely recognized, however, that women had an essential role in procreation. Thomas Raynalde's obstetrics manual published in 1540 even goes so far as to acknowledge, "yf a man would demaund to whom the chylde oweth most his generation, ye may worthely make aunswere that, to the mother" (qtd. in Mischo 59). Poets adopted a submissive, feminine position as they deployed this familiar metaphor claiming that they were filled with inspiration from an outside source, while still maintaining some kind of agency and responsibility towards their poetic progeny.[5] John Donne describes his thoughts as being "something worth" because they are "Pregnant of thee" ("A Valediction: of Weeping," lines 4, 6). Sidney "cannot choose but

[5] In the case of the English sonnets, the masculine seed, or stuff for inspiration, was usually provided by a female patron. See John Brett Mischo for further elaboration.

write my mind / And cannot choose but put out what I write," taking on a passive, role during conception and delivery, but acknowledging that the author/mother has a significant role in the "put[ting] out" of the verse (Sonnet 50, lines 9-10). Shakespeare's thoughts do not succeed in coming to full fruition because the lover does not pay him enough attention and therefore "lacked [the poet] matter; that enfeebled mine [verse]" (Sonnet 86, line 14). In this instance, the poet adopts a passive role in conception, waiting on the object of his affection to provide the "matter" necessary to allow the poem to grow properly. The poet is not a creator as much as a "recreator" or a feminine vessel carrying the seed of inspirational matter (whether given by muse, God, or other source) which then grows and develops into poetic offspring (Petrochenkov 33).

However, we also see male poets working to de-emphasize or remove the necessity of female participation in procreation during their use of the childbirth metaphor, in order to preserve and assert their masculinity. The Aristotelian model of sex "sharply delineated male and female to construct a well-defined division of procreative labor" (Mischo 65). Now, only men were thought to contribute any kind of substantive material in the process of generation, while women were limited to a role as carriers for male creative material (Clark 264). While in the Galenic model, male poets took the position as mother-carriers by taking on feminine qualities in order to contribute feminine creative material, in the Aristotelian model they could preserve their masculinity by insisting that creativity only came from father-inspirers. This approach determines that man (and most often not necessarily "mankind," but the gendered term man), is capable of creation in and of himself without outside influence. Men could produce the material necessary for creation alone without needing any contribution from female seed. Male poets

could become both mother and father to their texts.[6] In *Delia*, Samuel Daniel describes himself as the single Father to his own text. "Go wailing verse, the infants of my love, / *Minerva*-like, brought forth without a Mother" (*Delia,* Sonnet 2, lines 1-2). The poem is born as the goddess Minerva, directly from the father's brain. Shakespeare also wrote his so-called "procreation sonnets" to a male subject, suggesting that poetic procreation was possible between male inspirer and male poet, rather than the traditional female-male pairing.

By adopting the role of both mother and father, male poets strangely shut out female influence in their texts. If there is no need for a woman to create, men can be self-sufficient in their poetic procreation. In this iteration of the childbirth metaphor we see poets self-impregnate with their own "internal creative spark" (Petrochenkov 33). While the "*pregnant* body is necessarily female; the *pregnant* mind is the mental province of genius…understood to be inherently masculine" (Friedman 75). As women are "excluded…from the literary club…poems are born only through male mothers" which delegitimizes any text written by a female writer, as it does not fall within the patriarchal line of literature. (Petrochenkov 41). By this way of thinking, women are only capable of being impregnated by a male source, in order to produce literary text. During the Renaissance, it was far more appropriate for women to translate or "reproduce" male-authored texts rather than putting forth any original work and this masculine source was most commonly religious material. Notably, Lanyer's text falls within this acceptable range for women authors. Her source of inspiration is the Bible and her work can be seen as a

[6] For a more robust conversation and examination of self-contained inspiration, see Petrochenkov's chapter "The Poet as God of the Text" in *Pregnancy and Birth as Metaphor,* pp. 26-36.

theological meditation on religious text. By doing so, her subject matter is in line with the expectations for female writers at the time and is legitimized under a male literary lineage. However, in her use of the birth metaphor, Lanyer expanded the terms by which one might occupy the position of the poet-mother.

Childbirth in Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

Unlike men who use the childbirth metaphor, women who describe their poetic efforts as a birth often speak with a voice of literal experience.[7] Lanyer's own motherhood began with an illicit pregnancy as the result of an affair with the married aristocrat, Henry Carey. In order to avoid scandal, she was married to Alfonso Lanyer in 1592. After her marriage, it appears that Lanyer experienced some years of infertility. During this time, her husband spent a large portion of her money and it seems Lanyer missed the comfort and pleasure of court life as their debts grew. In 1597, she visited astrologer Simon Foreman to find, among other things, a solution for her many miscarriages. Finally, a daughter was born to Lanyer, in December of 1598, ending her years of fruitless hope. Suzanne Woods comments "It seems likely that this birth of a female child after a history of miscarriages had a strong impact on Lanyer's sense of her own continuing identity" (Introduction to *SDRJ*, 24-25). Woods suggests the daughter's name, Odelia, was a possibly an allusion to Lanyer's own name (Aemilia) along with a nod to her burgeoning identity as poetess (Ode). However, the joy of a new child turned to sorrow when Odelia died nine

[7] In her article, "Metaphors of Motherhood: Claiming Back the Female Body in the Poems of Mary Sidney and Mary Wroth," Emma Clark emphasizes the tangible understanding of childbirth that both Sidney and Wroth applied to their use of the metaphor.

months later. Having been frustrated in her procreative duties as a woman in early modern England, Lanyer replaced fruit of the womb with the fruit of her wit.[8]

In one of the pieces prefacing the main poem, "To the Vertuous Reader," Lanyer frames the interactions women have with Christ through language of childbirth. She writes passionately about God's consideration towards and special relationship with women.

> Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ…healed women, pardoned women, comforted women: yea, even when he was in his greatest agonie and bloody sweat, going to be crucified…tooke care to dispose of a woman: after his resurrection, appeared first to a woman, sent a woman to declare his most glorious resurrection to the rest of his Disciples. (49)

The description of Christ's interaction with women ("healed, pardoned, and comforted") is reminiscent of several aspects of birthing. All these actions also took place during and after a literal birth in the early modern period. Healing rituals were an essential part of the birthing process in early modern England. New mothers would adhere to strict rules confining them to bed and a dark room for three days after delivering their child. After which, the mother would gradually begin to move about first the birthing room, and then the rest of her house until she was sufficiently healed from labor—or, for the poorer classes, until wifely and motherly responsibilities insisted they resume their former level of activity. Following the birth, as her first public outing, one of the most important things a mother did was a "churching" ceremony where she approached her local priest in order to thank God for delivering her from the dangers of

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[8] For more information on what and how we know details of Lanyer's life, see the biography in Suzanne Woods' edited version of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum.*

childbirth and also receive forgiveness for having conceived and birthed in sin (Sim 23). Of course, throughout the entire birth and recovery period, midwives alongside female friends and family members attended to the mother's physical needs and comfort.

In early modern England, the social norms surrounding birth were quite different than they are now. "Today we tend to regard childbirth as a medical event, a time to be near skilled doctors and nurses, whereas in the sixteenth century it was much more of a social event, a time when a woman wanted to be surrounded by her female friends and relations" (Sim 20). An expectant mother would gather the most important women in her life (or her soon-to-be-born child's life) to witness the arrival of the baby. Before birthing chambers were overrun by male medical professionals in the later 17th century, the birthing room was almost exclusively a female space.[9] Mothers, sisters, friends, and midwives assisted with births. The delivery room was a sanctuary away from male society. This space away from male eyes, ears, and voices allowed for women to take charge of their own surroundings. Birth was a time and space for women to separate themselves from the male-ordered society they generally lived in and move inward to a space of reflection, reconnection, and renewal.

It is clear throughout her writings that Lanyer sought to establish a female community among her readers comparable to the female sociality that existed in birthing rooms. Seelig argues that the dedicatory poems in Lanyer's work are much more than "a bid for patronage" but instead represent Lanyer deliberately bringing together an imagined community of women (93).

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[9] Male doctors were only called in times of emergency and their presence in a birthing room often meant death for either mother or baby was imminent. The term "man-midwife" did not show up in English vocabulary until the 1600's (Harvey 88-89).

This figurative private space is analogous to the utopia Furey and other scholars argue Lanyer is trying to create: a place for women to "to read, to write, to speak, to create different roles for themselves" separate and distinct from her current male-dominated society (562; see also Seelig, Beilin). She describes such a space in "The Description of Cooke-ham," where she "first obtain'd / Grace from that Grace where perfit Grace remain'd; / And where the Muses gave their full consent, / I should have powre the virtuous to content" (130, line 1-4). Lanyer depicts Cookeham as the womb in which her identity as poet was born and where she also could begin to "gestate and create" within a uniquely female space (Furey 564).[10]

The women called into the birthing room held an important role as witnesses of the birth of the child. As poet-mother, Lanyer exercises her maternal authority as mother of her text to invite a female community to gather in order to witness the birth of Christ incarnate—flesh made word.[11] The visual observation of Christ is central to Lanyer's invitations to her readers. To the Princess Elizabeth she writes, "though your faire eyes farre better Bookes have seene; / Yet being the first fruits of a woman's wit, / Vouchsafe you favour in accepting it" (11, lines 12-14). The observation and subsequent acceptance of the child-verse is an essential task given to the members of Lanyer's created community. Michelin White observes that while Lanyer condemns the apostles that could not watch with Christ during the hours preceding His

[10] Furey makes much of Lanyer's "sense that authors could rewrite their place in society even as they imagined the world itself anew" (564).

[11] For more about this "reverse doctrine of incarnation," see Femke Molekamp's work "Reading Christ the Book in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611): Iconography and the Cultures of Reading."

crucifixion, the women in the poem are continuously praised "for displaying watchfulness, the very virtue that the disciples lack" (333). Lanyer encourages and praises women's attention toward Christ as they attend and become special witnesses of His poetic birth.

The women named in her dedicatory poems were "a group of women who were powerful at court, distinguished for learning, for endurance and independence, for religious faith and action….The virtuous ladies [Lanyer] praises are…powerful and exemplary figures" (Seelig 93). Inviting these women specifically to the birth emphasizes its significance as the birth of not only a person of great political and social importance, but a God who desires to gather his followers who exemplify the virtues he values. But Lanyer also makes a point of inviting "all Vertuous Women in Generall." At the "birth" of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Lanyer is calling these women to congregate, placing them all in an equal position below Christ. By doing so, Lanyer makes the case that all women are important to their Lord and Savior. She provides a space for all women, regardless of class to congregate in the birthing chamber as she births the body of Christ. She invites these women into a space outside of the regularly structured community in order to reflect and renew themselves as they partake of the saving sacrament presented to them in this birth of Lanyer's poem. In addition to creating a feminine space for partaking in the saving sacrament, Lanyer presents childbirth itself as something that has inherent redeeming power.

In early modern Protestant theology, childbirth was both damning and saving for women. Early modern theologians most commonly read the account in Genesis 2:16 as God cursing Eve with the pain and burden of childbearing as punishment for eating the fruit. However, the doctrine as found in 1 Timothy 2:15, that "the woman being deceiued was in the transgression[,] Notwithstanding, through bearing of children she shalbe [shall be] saued if they continue in faith,

and loue, and holines with modestie" suggests that women can be exonerated from Eve's sin through their role as mothers (Geneva Bible 1560). Lanyer leans into this idea that women's bodies and procreative capabilities have more than made up for Eve's punishment in the garden. She writes to men on behalf of all women,

> Then let us haue our Libertie againe,
>
> And challendge to your selues no Sou'raigntie;
>
> You came not in the world without our paine,
>
> Make that a barre against your crueltie[.] (87, lines 825-828)

Lanyer accuses men of being at fault for their "crueltie" and "disdain" towards women. She insists that women ought to be respected and held as equals as they are justified through the pain and sacrifice necessary to bring children "in the world." Lanyer offers evidence for the saving nature of childbearing in her depiction of the Virgin Mary. Brownlee argues that "Lanyer positions Mary as Eve's antitype…she situates her pain-free birth as the fulfillment of the curse of pain Eve bequeathed to all women when she pointedly describes the Virgin as 'A maiden Mother, subject to no paine . . . / Making thee Servant, Mother, Wife, and Nurse / To Heavens bright King, that freed us from the curse' (Lanyer 97-98, lines 1038, 1087-1088)" (1312). While Genesis promises pain, Lanyer suggests that Mary was "subject to no paine" during the birth of her Divine Son. This "fulfillment of the curse," as Brownlee calls it, allows Lanyer to advocate for childbearing to be a saving rather than a damning experience.

Lanyer is especially careful to remind the reader that without Mary's essential role bearing the body of Christ, salvation would not be possible. Victoria Brownlee writes, "[Lanyer's] Jesus is a fleshy one, and readers are reminded that the sweating and suffering Christ on his way to the cross was made human through the physical processes of a laboring and

nourishing female body" (1309). Christ's redeeming act is dependent on Mary's feminine procreativity. Lanyer reminds readers that "it pleased our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, without the assistance of man…to be begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman" ("To the Vertuous Reader" 49). Mary's feminine procreative powers are emphasized as Lanyer notes that only feminine creative materials were needed to create Christ's earthly body. No man took part in that sacred conception. As a female poet, Lanyer is able to claim her right to independent poetic creation through Mary's example, echoing the use of the childbirth metaphor by male poets under the Aristotelian model. As Mary's female body made it possible for her to bear Christ, the "faultlesse fruit," Lanyer, through her female wit, bears Christ anew, the "first fruits of a woman's wit" (95 lines 1025, 1026; 11, line 13). Lanyer is able to profess that her poem is the sacrificial body of Christ because, unlike any male poet, Lanyer possesses physical procreative abilities as well as intellectual creative power. Her feminine creative material is sufficient to independently produce a poem that embodies Christ. This fusion of literal procreation and figurative creation allows *Salve Deus* to become the body of Christ, "the figure of that living Sacrifice" (7, line 86).

According to Lanyer's account, Mary also participates in bearing spiritual suffering alongside Christ. As the mother of Christ, Mary's "griefes" are "extreme, although but new begun" (94, line 1011). The "new begun" pains Mary experiences are the pains of birth she previously avoided during her pregnancy and labor. This delay of the birth pains suggests that Mary's "sorrow [at the time of the crucifixion] is the fulfillment of the Annunciation" (Kuchar 58). Mary's sacred mission as Christ's mother is only fully accomplished as she personally takes part in the suffering of Christ. Lanyer writes of Mary's suffering: "To see his bleeding body oft shee swouned" (94, line 1012). Kuchar argues that Lanyer's version of Mary matches the

medieval idea of the "Swooning Virgin—"a Mary who suffers and atones alongside her Son. Her act of swooning is a physical manifestation of her active participation in Christ's pain. Kuchar argues that by returning to a more catholic version of Mary, Lanyer makes a case for Mary becoming a "co-redemptrix in order to make the Lutheran promise of the priesthood of all believers genuinely meaningful for women, particularly for herself as poet-priestess" (48). Significantly, Lanyer describes Mary's suffering at the foot of the cross before she turns our readerly attention towards Mary's call to birth the Son of God. This recounting of events out of order "emphasizes the symbolic relations between Mary's role under the Cross and her role as Mother of God" (Kuchar 58). Lanyer foregrounds childbearing as the link between the two events. As Mary had an integral role in delivering Christ, she also has an integral role in delivering His salvation to "All Nations of the earth" through her priestly authority as mother (95, line 1026).

Along with suffering in tandem with the Savior at the foot of the cross, Mary becomes a midwife for Christ, attending to Him as He carries out His divine mission. Lanyer's depiction of Christ's suffering echoes that of childbirth, "His blood, his teares, his sighes, his bitter groanes" (91, line 926). His moment of death becomes the birth of salvation,"With sharpest pangs and terrors thus appailde, / Sterne Death makes way, that life might give him place;" (101, lines 1157-1158). While her son delivers life to "his deere elected," Mary is found "wayting on her Sonne" (102, line 1180; 94, line 1009). Her "new begun" grief gives her the power to assist in Christ's sorrow (94, line 1011). As she weeps on His behalf, "Her teares did wash away his pretious blood" (95, line 1017). While Christ suffers, Mary acts as a midwife as she actively attends to Him, "Who on his shoulders our blacke sinnes doth bear" (99, line 1121). By "wayting" on Christ, she tends to His needs during the birth experience and then cleans His

blood from the ground with her own tears. Blood is a normal product of delivering a child and *the* physical product of this spiritual delivery, as the blood symbolizes the sanctifying power that Christ offers through His bearing of sins. Mary tends to the body and blood of Christ just as priests attend to the bread and wine—the symbolic (or literal) manifestation of Christ's body—during the preparation of the eucharist. Notably, in the early modern birthing room, women were authorized to exercise ecclesiastical power to christen the infant if survival seemed unlikely (Harvey 87). Mary, therefore, has her priesthood solidified through not only her maternal authority, but also as she becomes the midwife-custodian of Christ's blood.

Lanyer further expands Mary's authority and role by turning her into a mother-poet. During the interaction between Mary and Christ as He suffers on the cross, Christ offers His mother comfort as she weeps for Him as He is crucified. He reminds her of her troubled heart at the time of her divine calling that was soothed by the message "deliver[ed]" by an angel that she would "beare a child, although a Virgin pure" (96, line 1050; 97, line 1064). In almost a reversal of the childbearing metaphor, Lanyer describes the announcement of the physical Christ as happening in figurative, literary terms. Rather than focusing on the physical aspects of birthing the Christchild, Lanyer brings attention to the intellectual weight of the moment. She emphasizes "this high message" from the angel and the "pure thoughts" of Mary (96, lines 1049, 1058). The "words" of the angel cause Mary "to muse." In Lanyer's retelling of the Annunciation, musing over intellectual creation and birthing in physical procreation are inextricably linked. Similar to Sidney's description of the suffering poet who finds relief in delivery after the inspiration from his Muse, Mary experiences a "troubled heart" which at the words of the angel turns to "joy that God vouchsaf'd to send / His glorious angel" (96-97, lines 1056, 1062). Mary becomes a poet as she receives the holy inspiration/impregnation from God to birth His child.

Lanyer argues that her own inspiration to write echoes the divine mandate of the Virgin Mary's annunciation. After the angel Gabriel explained to Mary that she would bear the Son of God, Mary responds, "Behold the servant of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38, Geneva Bible 1603). Mary demonstrates humility in subjecting herself to the will of God in order to bear a child. Lanyer exhibits similar willingness to be a vessel in the hands of God to carry and deliver the "Matter" she has been entrusted with in spite of her "barren skill" (64, line 313). In an end-note "To the doubtfull Reader," Lanyer explains that the title *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was "delivered unto me in sleepe many yeares before I had any intent to write in this maner" (139). She recalls the dream after having written her account of the Passion and "thinking it a significant token" she makes the conclusion "that I was appointed to perform this Worke" (139). Lanyer adopts the role of the passive poet, inspired by a heavenly source. And by doing so, describes herself as a Marian figure, securing her authority and legitimacy as a mother-poet underneath the maternal poetic lineage that begins with Mary, the poet-mother. Just as the Virgin Mary responded to the call of the angel Gabriel, Lanyer presents herself as a poet ready to submit to the will of God and acknowledge her place as a holy vessel called to carry the essence of God, suggesting that her own claim to priestly authority is patterned after Mary's.

This engagement in writing as a submissive vessel parallels the use of the birthing metaphor by men of the time, under the Galenic model. She adopts a posture of humility and reverence, passively accepting poetic inspiration as given her to God. Lanyer is careful to present her writing as acceptable to the male-dominated society she is writing in but argues that her nature as a poet-mother compels her to impart her verse.

> But my deare Muse, now whither wouldst thou flie,
>
> Above the pitch of thy appointed straine?

With *Icarus* thou seekest now to trie,
Not waxen wings, but thy poore barren Braine,
Which farre too weake, these siely lines descrie;
Yet cannot this thy forward Mind restraine,
But thy poore Infant Verse must soare aloft,
Not fearing threat'ning dangers, happening oft. (63, lines 273-280)

In her use of the birth metaphor here, she claims that she cannot help but birth the poem, even if it is "above the pitch of [her] appointed straine." Lanyer appears hyper-aware of the social constraints placed on women poets—comparing her efforts to write to those of Icarus trying to fly—and it seems to be those constraints, rather than her own "forward Mind" that causes her "Braine" to be "barren." Nonetheless, her "poore Infant Verse must soare aloft," just as a mother in labor cannot halt the forward progress of her body during childbirth. The creative power of her maternal wit necessitates the birth of the poem.

Lanyer suggests that it is primarily her nature as a female, a woman, and a mother that grants her poetic capabilities. In her dedicatory piece to Queen Anne, she writes,

And since all Arts at first from Nature came,
That goodly Creature, Mother of Perfection,
Whom *Joves* almighty hand at first did frame,
Taking both her and hers in his protection:
Why should not She now grace my barren Muse,
And in a Woman all defects excuse. (10, lines 151-156)

Interestingly, we get an example of the birth metaphor of a woman-poet-mother being "impregnated" by a feminine source, Nature. In this passage, Lanyer emphasizes that Art, the

ability to compose and produce poetry, originated from Nature, the "Mother of Perfection." Lanyer argues that all poetry sprang from motherhood. All poets are borrowing Nature's creative capacities in order to produce poetry. Lanyer, by virtue of possessing a female, maternal body, has the gift of procreation as given to her from Nature. She has an innate ability to create and produce, and although, by her own admission, her poetic womb appears to be barren, in this instance, the "Mother of Perfection," from whom "all Arts at first…came," grants Lanyer the power to produce from an otherwise fruitless womb as she receives "grace [for her] barren muse" (10, lines 151, 152 and 155). The grace she receives from nature, is like the grace that she receives from God. The poem Lanyer produces from her "barren skill" is her testament to the grace, power, and sanction God grants to women to produce creatively (64, line 313). In a community of women intensely restricted in the kinds of creative children they could produce, Lanyer proposes that God is pleased "t'illuminate my Spirit / And giue me Wisdom from his holy Hill" as proved by his willingness to make fruitful her barren womb (65, lines 321-322). God authorized her use of priestly, (pro)creative powers to create "this pure unspotted Lambe" and offer it as a sacrament to her willing readers.

Conclusion

Throughout her use of the birth metaphor Lanyer seeks to create a female space where she can claim her poetic authority through the maternal example of Mary and her own inherent procreative power. She traces her own authority through her ability to suffer the pangs of labor and to bear children alongside Mary and Christ, and she invites her audience to do the same. Lanyer ultimately encourages all women to recognize their own creative powers, which are an extension of the priesthood they could claim through their capacity as birthing mothers.

In the moment of crucifixion—the central example of bearing in the poem—Christ is surrounded by his own community of women, as though His bearing of sins and suffering is taking place within a Tudor birthing room. These women stand beside Mary to observe the crucifixion. The women's "teares," "sighes," and "cries" parallel Christ's "teares, his sighes, his bitter groanes" (94, line 996; 91, line 926). Lanyer suggests that they, like Mary, take part in His suffering. They use their voices to empathize with Christ and address the crucifying men. "By teares, by sighes, by cries intreat…They labor still these tyrants [the soldiers crucifying Christ] hearts to move" (94, lines 996-998). These women, by virtue of their suffering and experiencing bearing alongside Christ, are able to use their voices in "labor" to "intreat" the men in their vicinity. In this moment at the cross, she suggests that all women have the capacity and authority to not only bear children but bear alongside Christ and eventually bear their voices. By reclaiming childbirth as an inherent womanly power, Lanyer creates a space for women's authority as both priests and authors. Women's feminine inheritance extends beyond their physical procreative capabilities and encompasses their potential creative power as priests and poets.

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