The Macksey Journal

Volume 2 Article 146

2021

The Cottage and the Throne: Intersections of Class, Religion, and Gender in the Dedicatory Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer

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Abstract

To preface her book of religious poetry, *Salve Deus Rex Judacorum,* early modern poet Aemilia Lanyer included several dedicatory poems, each written for the purpose of obtaining patronage and therefore securing income for herself. As a member of the minor gentry, writing poetry was not a purely spiritual or artistic pursuit for Lanyer; unlike many upper-class women, she needed the money to support her lifestyle. Lanyer engages with this tension in her poetry, identifying herself with her upper-class subjects based on gender and religion, but simultaneously challenging the impassable barrier of class that stands between herself and her subjects. Though Lanyer challenges societal assumptions about the prevalence of class and gender hierarchies, her poetry is pervaded by a desperate self-deprecation and a reliance on the readership of these upper-class women, creating a tension in her poetry that remains unresolved even for the modern reader. Through literary analysis and the discussion of existing literary criticism, this paper examines the questions that arise for modern readers of Lanyer's poetry: Did she truly hope to elevate herself to an upper-class status through her rhetoric? Or was her flattery a cover for a bold critique of class hierarchies?

Keywords: Aemilia Lanyer, Early Modern, Protestant, Gender, Class, Religion, Patronage

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

There is a unique, contradictory tension that arises in the poetry of Aemilia Lanyer. In the several dedicatory poems prefacing *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, her book of religious poetry published in 1611, Lanyer writes for the purpose of securing income for herself through the process of obtaining patronage for her writing. This was an extremely common practice in Lanyer's time — even extremely well-known authors such as Shakespeare sought to obtain patronage. Unlike many other writers of her time, Lanyer challenges the status quo in her patronage poems. In many of these poems she challenges assumptions about class and her own position in the world. In the article, "Speculation and Multiple Dedications in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,"* author Erin McCarthy explains some of the historical context of Lanyer's life. Though she grew up surrounded by members of the upper class, Lanyer was a part of the minor gentry for most of her life. Since her father was a court musician, Lanyer was able to view and possibly participate in some of the pleasures of court and an upper-class lifestyle but was unable to truly attain an aristocratic status. Unlike the women of the English court, writing poetry was not a purely spiritual or artistic pursuit for Lanyer — she needed the money to support her lifestyle. Appealing to these upper-class women was not only a personal goal, but a financial one as well. This desperation for upper-class approval and patronage is what makes Lanyer's poetry so unique; in the same breath that Lanyer minimizes the importance of class, she also deprecates her own writing and reveals a desperate need for the readership of the upper-class women she dedicates her poetry to. However, the legitimacy of Lanyer's class critiques are clouded by the obvious impassability of class barriers for a woman of her position. Contradictions like these create an immense tension in Lanyer's poetry and raise questions about Lanyer's intentions that are debated by literary scholars even today.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

Through a discussion of her devotional subject matter and expressions of modesty that often turn self-deprecating, Lanyer situates herself within a tradition of women's religious writing that is socially permissible. While male authors in the early 1600s were typically free to choose their own subject matter, women were strictly limited to "religious and moral subjects" (McCarthy 45). While the main content of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is strictly religious in nature, the dedicatory poems combine religious imagery with high praise of the virtuous women the book is dedicated to. In the first lines of her poem, "To the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty," which is dedicated to Queen Anne, the wife of James I, and their daughter, Elizabeth I, Lanyer describes the nature of her writing as "a woman's writing of divinest things" ("To the Queen…" 4). By identifying the intent of her poetry as religious, Lanyer ensures the social permissibility of her writing, as religious devotion was one of a few accepted subjects of writing for women at the time. McCarthy identifies Lanyer's poetry as "self-consciously inclusive, inviting readers to join, or at least acknowledge and support, a community of good Protestant women" (McCarthy 55). Even in religious writing, however, there were still assumptions about the quality of women's writing. To assuage the danger of these assumptions, Lanyer expresses doubt about her own writing, stating that her work is "in poor apparel, shaming to be seen" ("To the Queen…" 63), degrading her poetry through an association with the "poor" lower class. In the poem, "To the Lady Anne, Countess of Dorset," Lanyer apologizes for the possible failings of her work, asking Lady Anne to "pardon me, / If out of wants, or weakness of my brain, / I have not done this work sufficiently" ("To the Lady Anne…" 138-141). This deprecation of her own poetry prevents Lanyer from being seen as presumptuous or overly confident. By playing into sexist assumptions about the poor quality of women's writing, Lanyer ultimately enables

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the publishing of her work. Clearly Lanyer did not have extreme doubts about the quality of her writing, otherwise she would not have dedicated poems to the Queen herself and asked for her readership. However, Lanyer does hope that Queen Anne's "excellence can grace both it [the poetry] and me" ("To the Queen…" 5-6). This sentiment is echoed in many of Lanyer's dedicatory poems: she hopes that the reader's virtue might make her poems worth reading. By suggesting that her poetry has little worth without the virtue of her readers, Lanyer continues the previously discussed disparagement that enables the publishing of her work.

By identifying religion as a shared factor between herself and her upper-class patrons, Lanyer attempts to diminish class barriers. The difference in class between Lanyer and the subjects of her dedicatory poems is an ever-present tension, especially since the poems are written with the intention of obtaining patronage. This tension is increased by the knowledge that Lanyer is not merely appealing to random upper-class women. As McCarthy explains, "These ladies were not only powerful; they were also the most important female dedicatees of the first decades of the seventeenth century" (55). Therefore, when Lanyer hopes that though "I on earth do live unfortunate", in heaven she "may attain a better state" ("To the Queen…" 59-60), she is calling attention to her own lower-class, unfortunate position, but also attempting to erase this class distinction. By aligning herself with the Queen (and many of her other female subjects) based on shared religion, she suggests that class divisions on earth are not so important, since both are good Protestant women and will go to heaven. She makes a similar argument about the earthly, and therefore unimportant, nature of class when she states that "God makes both even, the cottage with the throne," ("To The Lady Anne…" 19). Regardless of class, Lanyer notes that "Death seizeth all, he never spareth one, / None can

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prevent or stay that tyrant's rage, / But Jesus Christ the Just" ("To The Lady Anne…" 124-126). By invoking images of God as interested only in deeds rather than fortune and Death as indiscriminatory, Lanyer attempts to lessen the barrier of class between herself and the women she addresses.

Though Lanyer attempts to use religion to unify herself with her subjects, the overbearing impact of class on the circumstances of the poem's origin and purpose renders this attempt a temporary success at best. Lanyer consistently relies on her upper-class readers to imbue her work with virtue. She hopes that the Queen might "look in this mirror of a worthy mind / Where some of your fair virtues will appear" ("To the Queen…" 37-38) and therefore increase the value of her work. This reliance on the favor of upper-class patrons reveals the inseparability of class issues from Lanyer's poetry. She is forced to take up a subordinate position, flattering for the sake of patronage but also for the success of her work. Because she is not upper-class, she cannot provide value to her work alone and must rely on the favor of upper-class individuals. In addition, though Lanyer aligns herself with her addressees on the basis of religion, the same class-based reliance is evident in even the religious moments in her poetry. Lanyer hopes that her book will "by her [the Queen's] fair eyes be blest" ("To the Queen…" 95). Despite Lanyer's earlier assertions that class divisions are less important in the eyes of God, the Queen is the one doing the blessing while Lanyer is the recipient. This religious hierarchy reinstates class hierarchies, since the Queen will be above Lanyer no matter how she might attempt to relate to her on the basis of religion.

Lanyer presents gender as a marker of a collective experience which transcends class, attempting to unify herself and her subject under the shared experience of womanhood.

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Addressing the Queen, Lanyer refers to “our heavy burden” of womanhood which they bear together (“To the Queen…” 121). By using the possessive plural pronoun *our*, Lanyer unites herself and the Queen on the basis of gender. Since Lanyer would likely not presume to lower the status of the Queen, this claim temporarily elevates Lanyer to the status of a queen, as they share the experience of gender. In a similar way, when Lanyer refers to Eve as “that dear mother of our common-weal” (“To the Queen…” 170), she elevates herself to the status of the Queen, but this time because they share a “mother” and therefore royal bloodline. Though womanhood as a shared identity may not seem radical to a modern audience, Lanyer’s claims *are* radical, as she seeks to temporarily dissolve class barriers between herself, a member of the minor gentry, and the Queen, the highest-ranked woman in England.

Though Lanyer tries to connect with her potential patrons through the shared experience of gender, Lanyer’s excessive flattery of her subject reveals the inseparability of class issues from her poetry. The very process of having to obtain patronage is intrinsically tied to class. It is a relationship in which the patron provides funding and the poet serves — and is therefore intrinsically hierarchical. Lanyer addresses the Queen: “Since in estate and virtue none is greater / I humbly wish that yours may light on me: / That these so rude, unpolished lines of mine, / Graced by you, may seem the more divine” (“To the Queen…” 32-36). In these lines, Lanyer recognizes that some, like the Queen, are elevated in estate and virtue. In addition, Lanyer displays her reliance on this elevation, since without the virtuous reader her poem would not have value, and without the upper-class reader she would not have support or income. A similar reliance is revealed by Lanyer’s frequent comparison of her poetry to a mirror. She hopes that her reader will “in this mirror let your fair eyes look, / To view your

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virtues in this blessed book" ("To The Lady Anne…" 7-8). This metaphor of her poetry as a mirror which reflects the virtues of the upper-class reader once again reveals Lanyer's reliance on the patronage of upper-class women. Keeping with the metaphor of the mirror, without a virtuous reader to reflect her virtues upon the poetry, Lanyer's poetry would remain blank, or empty of virtue and value.

Though Lanyer challenges societal assumptions about the prevalence of class and gender hierarchies, her poetry is pervaded by a desperate reliance on the readership of these upper-class women. This tension leaves modern readers with more questions than answers about Lanyer's intentions. Did Lanyer truly hope to elevate herself to an upper-class status through her rhetoric? Lanyer's consistent self-deprecation of her own writing would seem to suggest that she did not. Was her flattery a cover for a bold critique of class hierarchies? Though Lanyer does engage in flattery in her dedicatory poems, they are considered to be no more over-the-top than any other patronage poems of the time (McCarthy 49). Perhaps Lanyer sought to leave a legacy behind — she does declare her "intention to write in praise of some women to provide an example to and instruction for all women" (59). Though she engages in a tradition of religious, devotional writing, she is the first woman to do so openly and for profit. Perhaps Lanyer's poetry is a lesson in patience, self-discipline, and social progress — one should know when to acquiesce, when to challenge, and, most importantly, when to do both.

Published by JHU Macksey Journal, 2021

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