Casey-Lyne Lodge
ARC

Aemilia Lanyer’s Defense of Women

In the 17th century, the Christian Bible was integral to literature as a common framework that was accessible to all, regardless of class, educational background, or gender. In *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, Aemilia Lanyer uses the Bible as a literary source in order to offer her own interpretation of Biblical material. Due to the Bible’s universal and authoritative reach in her British society, Lanyer uses Scripture as common ground to look at from her unique female perspective. Lanyer uses this borrowed authority to argue for mercy for women in a section of *Salve* that is commonly referred to as “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women.” Lanyer counters the Scripturally-grounded justification of the denigration of women due to Eve’s sin with her own Scripturally-grounded defense of women. In “Eve’s Apology,” Lanyer uses the Bible as a source in order to affirm the unique spirituality experienced by women by offering alternate perspectives and narratives of Scripture, probing the spiritual connection that women share with Christ, and affirming women’s value and identity.

Lanyer offers *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* as a woman-centered retelling of the Gospel. She claims that her work “agree[s]…with the Text” of Scripture more accurately than the common interpretations of “more faultie men” by whom women are so “very defamed” (DiPasquale 122). Lanyer wrote *Salve* in 1611 which is the same year that the Authorized Version, commissioned by King James, was completed. By producing *Salve* during this time, Lanyer proclaimed her authority as a woman to read and interpret Scripture while asking for the queen’s patronage of her work (Guibbory 193). Ultimately, *Salve* is a “poem about difficulties of interpretation” (qtd. in Clarke 158). By allowing the women’s narrative to take up the center
argument of “Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women,” Lanyer allows for other voices to contribute to the story of Christ in order to question the assumptions that had been a result of reading Scripture from a male-dominated perspective.

In particular, Lanyer reimagines Eve’s responsibility for the Fall of creation as resulting from ignorance instead of deliberate disobedience. The Genesis account itself offers little opportunity for Eve to be cleared of guilt. In the King James version, it says, “she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Genesis 3:6, *King James Version*). While Lanyer does not try to twist Scripture by denying Eve’s disobedience of God, she suggests that Eve acted out of love and ignorance: “But she (poore soul) by cunning was deceav’d, / No hurt therein her hamelesse Heart intended” (Lanyer 773-4). In comparison, the narrator suggests that men’s sin was far worse because they acted out of thoughtful disobedience: “No substil Serpents falshood did betray him, / If he would eate it, who had powre to stay him?” (799-800). If men are assumed to be dominant while women are passive, then the same societal logic must apply to the Fall and, therefore, the assumption of guilt where Adam actively disobeyed God while Eve only did so because she did not understand the implications of her actions. Lanyer picks up on the silence in Scripture so that, while the sanctity of Scripture is maintained and upheld, how she interprets it allows for a reimagining of societal justice.

“Eve’s Apology” begins with the story of Pontius Pilate’s wife, Procula. In Scripture, Procula tries to dissuade Pilate from action against Jesus. She shows divine foresight and discernment before Christ’s trial. Matthew 27:19 says, “When he[, Christ,] was set down on the judgement seat, [Pilate’s] wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him” (King James Version).
Lanyer highlights this moment where a woman in Scripture exhibits divine foresight and discernment. She then uses this authoritative Scriptural moment in order to set up a contrast between Pilate’s condemnation of Christ and Procula’s pleas for mercy.

Surprisingly, Procula has even less of a voice in Lanyer’s retelling than in Scripture. Procula’s words are only alluded to by the narrator: “But heare the words of thy most worthy wife, / Who sends to thee, to beg her Saviours life” (Lanyer 751-2). Lanyer suggests that the words themselves are not as important as the spirit behind them, for while Pilate is unable to see the reality of Christ’s divinity, Procula already recognizes Christ as her saviour. As a careful and sensitive reader, Lanyer never seeks to usurp the authority and veracity of Scripture. Rather, she meditates on the Bible and draws attention to the gaps and omissions in the Biblical text that have allowed for the model of fallen and corrupting women to pervade society (Clarke 159).

Lanyer seeks to find those moments in the text where there is room for leniency for women as well as responsibility for men. Lanyer rejects Eve’s guilt as a contemporary Biblical stereotype and shifts the blame back to Adam who, as she argues, was “most too blame” (Lanyer 778) for what “Weaknesse,” Eve, offered, “Strength might have refusde” (779). By doing so, Lanyer seeks to elevate the position of women as beings with unique voices that are contrasted with the image of them as dictated by the dominant male narrative. If the interpretation of sacred text has fallen to men, then creating a different voice, a female voice, to compliment or complicate that singular interpretation can help create a holistic Scriptural understanding.

By including “Eve’s Apology” within the greater work of Salve, Lanyer associates women with Christ and argues for the inclusion of women in a spiritual experiences that they had often been denied. Lanyer criticized the continued distance between women and the sacred that had worsened since the Protestant Reformation (Guibbory 192). Since the movement away from
the Catholic tradition entailed getting rid of monastic orders and religious houses, women were deprived of a special form of religious experience. Also, by rejecting the adoration of the Virgin Mary and the female saints, this move to Protestantism removed many positive spiritual models for women. Therefore, Lanyer’s “Apology” fits in nicely within the “broad historical context of women’s vexed relation with the sacred” (Guibbory 192). Not only does Lanyer suggest that women should be allowed to participate in spiritual matters, but she also suggests that women possess a unique and vital connection to Christ. This idea goes back at least as far as Julian of Norwich in the 14th century who figured Christ as a mother-like figure. Since this connection is both intimate and legitimized through the assertion of divine connection, Lanyer suggests that women have a measure of authority within the realm of spiritual matters (198).

Lanyer’s narrative assumes a sympathetic resonance between women and Christ. Indeed, throughout the poem, both Christ and women are overlooked and oppressed by society as a whole. Lanyer specifically suggests a moral and gendered reading of the persecution and crucifixion of Christ (Clarke 158). She suggests that while men, represented by Pilate, Herod, and the Sanhedrin, betrayed and executed the Son of God, a woman was able to sympathize with the suffering of Christ and plead for his life. Procula, a woman, shared spiritual proximity with Christ that was lacking in men. Procula’s sympathetic allegiance with Christ’s suffering shows her to be a true disciple: “who sends to thee, to beg her Saviour’s life” (750). Lanyer’s inclusion of the term “Saviour” suggests that Procula was aware that Christ was who he claimed to be. She was attentive to God’s voice and acted faithfully: “Who did but dreame, / and yet a message sent” (835). Pilate’s lack of understanding, therefore, seems all the more damning in comparison after hearing the “words of [his] most worthy wife” (751). Indeed, Procula’s intercession was to prevent the greatest sin of all: the killing of Christ. Then, following the argument, if all women
can be held responsible for Eve’s sin, then all men can be held responsible for Pilate’s sin: “This sinne of yours, surmounts them all as farre / As doth the Sunne, another little starre” (823-4). Procula’s quiet but present voice permits a moment of possibility where a woman tried to prevent the greatest evil of all. Indeed, Lanyer could be suggesting that Christ’s death was a crime of men and not, in fact, a crime of humanity (Coles 171). The societal narrative that shamed women for Eve’s actions is from the same Scripture that condemns men’s actions as well. While women are certainly not blameless, neither are men. She writes, “But surely [he] can not be excuse, / Her fault though great, yet hee was most too blame” (Lanyer 777-8).

In *Salve*, Lanyer uses the spiritual authority of Holy Scripture as a means of creating a literary and sacred environment for women that could be practically applied to her own situation. Not only is the narrator attempting to vindicate Eve, but she also speaks on behalf of all women. As the Church grew, women were distanced from authoritative, direct contact with the divine (Guibbory 191). Women the feminine’s association with the body or “flesh” placed women in a subservient and resoundingly negative position. In contrast, Lanyer argues that if women are united in the guilt of Eve then women should continue to be united in the virtue and devotion exhibited by Procula. By this, Lanyer comments on how women can and should participate in the spiritual as opposed to how they were expected to in real life.

Though mentioned only briefly, Lanyer seizes upon Procula’s exhibition of surprising agency. Lanyer uses that moment of particularity to speak of all women universally. For, just as Eve’s particular sin and subsequent blame had been passed down from woman to woman, so too should the foresight and faithfulness of Biblical figures apply generously and generally to all women: “Witness thy wife (O Pilate) speakes for all” (Lanyer 834). Lanyer does not suggest that women can or should in any way usurp the position and authority of men, but rather asserts
the spiritual connection to Christ that women possess and that prophetesses of Scripture speak for all women.

However, though Lanyer seeks to add a contrasting female voice to the realm of spiritual discussion, she does not give the characters in her narrative voices. Instead, Lanyer grants herself authority over the events as a mediator of the renegotiation of the relationship between men and women in the spiritual sphere. By silencing all voices but her own, Lanyer reflects the history of the interpretation of Scripture: one-sided and authoritarian. She harshly criticizes Pilate who, just as Eve represents all women, represents all men: “her weaknesse did the Serpents words obay; / But you in malice Gods deare Sonne betray” (Lanyer 815-6). While some might argue that “Eve’s Apology” certainly calls for a complete reversal of guilt, Lanyer’s carefully constructed Biblical narrative negotiates a kind of cease-fire. She addresses men and says, “Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdaine / Our being equals, free from tyranny?” (Lanyer 829-30). If men’s close-handed control of power has lead to the death of Christ and the saddling of innocent women with blame, then the least that men can do is stop using Biblical authority to punish women for Eve’s sin: “You came not in the world without our paine, / Make that a barre against your cruelty” (827-8). Lanyer’s ferocious attack of men is not, in fact, to blame men, but rather to affirm the value and identity of women apart from the interpretation of Scripture that views them as evil.

Ultimately, Lanyer in “Eve’s Apology in Defence of Women” does not seek to upset or revolutionize the centrality of the Bible in everyday life. She does, however, suggest a re-thinking of how society has interpreted the Bible and how women figure within that narrative. Lanyer borrows the authority of Scripture for her argument for the value of women. Any other source material could not possibly have had the same effect because the Bible possesses a unique
divine authority. Though controversial to suggest an alternate reading, Lanyer’s poetry is much more impactful than if she chose any other text. Simply put, no other text has as powerful a reach as Scripture for Lanyer’s purposes. By using the Bible in a defense of women and an attack on men’s vaulted esteem, Lanyer suggests a much more equitable and kind treatment of other human beings, regardless of gender.

Works Cited


