

## Writing in Service: Sexual Politics and Class Position in the Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer and Ben Jonson

The growing and increasingly central interest in writings by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women is beginning to have some material effects on the literary profession. In the fifth edition of the *Norton Anthology* (published in 1986), for example, a literature teacher could find a couple of poems by Lady Mary Wroth, one psalm by the Countess of Pembroke, and two poems by Queen Elizabeth. In the just-published sixth edition (1993), the number of texts by women has significantly increased, both in number and variety. One notable change is the inclusion of Aemilia Lanyer as a major author, a figure until very recently entirely absent from literary history, much less the canon.

The *Norton Anthology* is at once a commercially sensitive gauge of what will sell to changing populations of teachers and students and also a powerful shaping tool of the literary canon. Nevertheless, it will take at least a generation for the profession of literary studies to internalize these newly visible texts into our sense of literary history, for the only way they can be internalized is through a series of subtle and radical shifts in our assumptions about Renaissance and seventeenth-century literature and culture. An overriding assumption which must be questioned, for example, is our still-lingering sense of Renaissance writing as somehow aristocratic. One thing the archaeology of early modern women's writing can show us is the pattern of our professional attention. Twenty years ago, even ten years ago, the only Renaissance woman writer an English professor was likely to know anything at all about was Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke and then only because of her editorial shepherding into print of her brother's *Arcadia*. First Elizabeth and then Lady Mary Sidney Wroth joined the Countess of Pembroke in our readings, forming a sort of vestibule to our construction of the now-assembling texts of women's writing, a vestibule which resembles in its names and its purpose the prestigious dedicatory collection at the front of a newly-published Renaissance text.

In these initial stages of discovery we have also tended to group women writers together simply as women, and we have then attended to their shared difficulties of speaking in a male-dominated discourse. Without exception, current studies devoted to early modern women writers have emphasized an idealized sisterhood among them, even though these studies discuss highly varied configurations of women across several generations and even across continents.<sup>1</sup> It would ultimately be a disservice to women writers and a distortion of their real power, however, to segregate them permanently as a subset of Renaissance literature and to romanticize their shared gender into a politically and intellectually univocal force. The mantra "race-class-gender" is not a unified chant, but a braided and abrading puzzle.

In an attempt to acknowledge contingencies of gender and class and, to some extent, even of race, I will focus on the politics of publication engaged in by two members of the service entourage surrounding powerful, wealthy women—a man, Ben Jonson, and a woman, Aemilia Lanyer, writing at the same time and to many of the same people. My concern is also, at least implicitly, with the politics of current literary criticism in Renaissance studies and feminist criticism in particular, politics which have left largely unchallenged the orthodoxies of traditional literary history so that women writers remain the lacy, decorative frill on the edge of a fabric that has not changed.

One of the central questions feminist criticism has asked of early modern women's writing is how a woman enters the psychomachia of writing performance. In order to begin to understand that question, however, it is important to acknowledge that it is virtually impossible to separate out gender as a category unrelated to class position. The crisscrossing of gender and class is particularly intricate and codependent in the Renaissance when writing venues themselves carry class and gender stigmas.<sup>2</sup> Manuscript was seen as a more private, class-bound form of publication, for example, and writers like Philip Sidney or John Donne were extremely leery of appearing in print for fear of seeming common and thereby losing the insider positions they were vying for by seeming carelessly clever. The public, commodified circulation of print, on the other hand, was seen by those with court ambitions as a cheapening, chancy, even dangerous business. Spenser tried it in *The Faerie Queene* with a notable lack of success. Increasingly during this period, writing venues began to acquire gendered associations as well. As the dominance of print culture expanded decade after decade from Elizabeth's reign up through the

civil war, manuscript became, in practice, a feminine mode of writing, suspect but carefully surveilled, containable and decorous; print, on the other hand, was figured as a more daring, aggressive, *masculine* mode. Women like the Countess of Pembroke wrote freely and at the highest level of accomplishment for class controlled manuscript circulation, but would appear in print only as the ministering handmaiden for the body of a dead brother's works.<sup>3</sup> By the middle of the seventeenth century, the axes of manuscript/aristocratic/feminine, on the one hand, and print/Parliament/masculine, on the other, are strikingly visible in the print battles of the civil war; John Milton's late and agonized decision to begin to print his writing, for example, is also a decision to become somehow a *man* at last.<sup>4</sup>

In the single voices of two individual writers of the late Renaissance, Aemilia Lanyer and Ben Jonson, we may hear the complicated, self-conscious and subconscious constructing dialectic of gender and class, a dialectic which can illuminate the field of writing at the moment when women began to advance inexorably upon it. In many significant ways, Lanyer and Jonson have more in common with each other than does Lanyer with other important women writers of her generation. Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke and Lady Mary Sidney Wroth, for example, defined themselves not only as women, but also and very centrally as members of a powerful aristocratic family. They were so defined by their culture, and their decisions about what to circulate among their group in manuscript and when to release Sidney manuscripts into the print market were defined as much by their social status as by their gender.

Wroth, for example, was a visible figure, invested with complex significance. We need only read Jonson's epigram "To Mary Lady Wroth" where he acknowledges that we "know [her] to be a *Sydney*, though un-named" (*Epigrammes*, CIII); we need only remember her living presence in the landscape of "Penshurst," one of the "great lord's "own" children, to realize that a feminist analysis of Wroth and of poetry addressed to Wroth must take into account not only concepts now shaping our sense of early-modern women such as "dismemberment" or "voyeurism" or "silencing" but also the real power of this and other individual women as part of a social network.<sup>5</sup> In Jonson's representation of Wroth, she rises above the name of wife, her birth heritage so luminous in her writing that she reclaims her Sidney name. The public appearance of Wroth's *Urania* (a massive pastoral romance modeled to some extent on her uncle's *Arcadia* and incredibly detailed in its allusions to court scandals, many

of them her own) was indeed a breach of social and sexual decorum. By printing her own words, Wroth disturbed the system where someone like Ben Jonson had been assigned the job of writing about someone like her in carefully muffled metaphoric terms. Nevertheless, it was a system set up to have Lady Mary Sidney Wroth within it.

For any woman writer, clearly, the risks of leaving the private world of manuscript circulation and entering the print market were high. For women who were not aristocratic, however, women who did not carry the fragile carapace of privilege and tradition, the entry into a print forum required a different series of negotiations. With whom could and did women who were *not* Sidney's align themselves in devising a print appearance? To what extent would a woman be *breaking* company with other women by publishing?

Two closely contemporary print appearances—Ben Jonson's *The Forrest*, published as one part of his 1616 *Workes*, and Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, published in 1611, present a near perfect test case for enriching our sense of writing performance in a system where, we must now in these latter days again acknowledge, women, as well as men, were authors. When we place Lanyer next to Jonson we learn a great deal about each of them as individual writers. We also learn more about concepts of authorship in the late Renaissance, more about the strains (both sexual and social) which, within three decades, would change English society, and more about the relationship of genre to social crisis. In other words, when Lanyer is fully in the canon, the canon will change at a number of perhaps unexpected pressure points.

Before we can think with some objectivity we must, however, look our own critical bogeys in the face. Our sense of Renaissance women, particularly of non-aristocratic Renaissance women, has been as deeply and romantically shaped by Virginia Woolf as our sense of Jacobite Scotland has been shaped by Sir Walter Scott.<sup>6</sup> Virginia Woolf's powerful parable in *A Room of One's Own* of Shakespeare's sister Judith has affected generations of readers, stirring the fundamental beginnings of feminist scholarship and women's studies.<sup>7</sup> In Woolf's telling, Shakespeare was lucky enough to have a modest but sufficient education and to be able, after a charmingly rakish youth, to set off to London "where he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets and even getting access to the palace of the queen."<sup>8</sup>

But Woolf imagines that Shakespeare had a gifted sister who remained at home, uneducated, while her parents tried to force her into a life of conventional wifhood. Woolf imagines her rebelling and fleeing to London, fleeing to the same stage door where her brother had first found his way, but there "men laughed in her face" at her wish to become an actress and the manager "hinted—you can imagine what. . . . At last, for she was very young" and because she reminded him of Shakespeare, she was taken as a mistress by the manager and became pregnant. "Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?"—she killed herself and was buried like a witch at the crossroads (50).

Woolf is a powerful and imaginative story-teller and her influence on feminist readings of the Renaissance has been profound, both on our sense of the wounded desperation of early modern women writers and on our sense of the damaging domination and misogyny of canonical male writers like Milton. Yet there is something worrisome about Woolf's pathetically charming and seemingly sympathetic little story, for it romanticizes, and thereby eradicates, the possibility of Shakespeare's sister's writing voice. After her story of fragile genius driven mad and destroyed by rigid sexual mores, Woolf concludes "That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius. . . . But it is unthinkable that any woman in Shakespeare's day should have had Shakespeare's genius. For genius like Shakespeare's is not born among labouring, uneducated, servile people. It was not born in England among the Saxons and the Britons. It is not born today among the working classes. How, then, could it have been born among women?" (50).

There is now another story to be told, however, a story strikingly like Woolf's in some details but powerfully different in its conclusions. Aemilia Lanyer is one of the few early modern women writers whose work was available on the library shelf as early as the 1970s. Even as I write this in the spring of 1993 it is still not possible to find Lanyer published free-standing under her own name, however. Until a modern edition of Lanyer appears later this year, Lanyer will be found shadowed under the name of Shakespeare. In 1978 A. L. Rowse, a famously crotchety Shakespeare scholar, published a theory he had been developing for a decade, asserting that Lanyer is the Dark Lady of the sonnets. Rowse reprinted Lanyer's 1611 book, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, which he regarded as a nearly negligible piece of writing, as another bit of evidence in the endlessly fascinating hunt

for Shakespeare's biography.<sup>9</sup> No one has since fully accepted Rowse's theory about Lanyer's relationship with Shakespeare, but neither is it implausible. Certainly, given the connections Rowse traces, Shakespeare would have known her. What follows, framed by a pronounced dose of irony in giving Shakespeare once again the possessive place, is the counter-story of Shakespeare's maybemistress, Aemilia.

Lanyer was the daughter of an Italian musician, Baptista Bassani, who had come to England in the mid-sixteenth century to serve as paid amusement and polish in the rather rough-around-the-edges Tudor court and had married an Englishwoman named Margaret Johnson. It is at this point in the early modern period still fairly anachronistic to speak of a middle or working class, but clearly the Bassani family inhabited the same social sphere as Shakespeare or Ben Jonson—talented, educated people using their wits to carve out a successful life in a changing society. Aemilia Lanyer's one surviving work, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is stridently Christian in its argument, constructing the Old Testament as a time when women might indeed bear some of the guilt for human frailty, but celebrating Christ's coming as the moment when women completely redeemed themselves from the Fall, by nurturing Christ and defending him, while men persecuted and killed one of their own in cowardly jealousy and hatred. In considering Lanyer's class position, gender position, and her startlingly feminist poem, it is also critically important to note that Aemilia Lanyer is a second-generation Jew, one of the very few people of Jewish heritage in England at this time. (In this, too, Lanyer's real story interlaces with Woolf's fantasy in elaborate and fascinating counterpoint.)

Lanyer became the mistress of the powerful Lord Hunsdon, Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain and patron of Shakespeare's acting company. When she became pregnant by Hunsdon, however, she was married off to another musician, Alfonso Lanyer, who was a Catholic. It is really impossible to emphasize strongly enough how marginal, how unusual her position was in Renaissance England—as a Jew, converted or not, as an Italian, as the wife of a Catholic, as a woman artist making a living as a fringe member of the court. Lanyer herself makes clear that Elizabeth read her poetry and was generous in her patronage, but Alfonso Lanyer lost all her money in a series of foolish investments. By the time Aemilia Lanyer wrote *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* Elizabeth had been dead for almost a decade, there was a new sovereign who was much less generous to poets, and Aemilia

Lanyer was forty and probably no longer in the position to sell her beauty for favors (as contemporary gossip claims she had done earlier).<sup>10</sup>

Lanyer serves as a strikingly de-romanticizing counter-narrative to Woolf's sad story of Shakespeare's sister. She met everyone, knew everyone, practiced her art, exercised her wit, and even got access to the palace of the queen. She got pregnant, lost everything, but she didn't kill herself, she self-consciously identified herself with the laboring classes, and she wrote. And she is far from the only example of what we can tentatively call middle-class women writing at this time. *A Room of One's Own* has been a critical text in opening a still widening wedge for women in the academy, both as writers and readers. Lanyer's complex counter-story is now visible to us in part because of Woolf's elegant challenge. But *A Room of One's Own* embodies, too, the conservative class prejudices embedded in our profession. Even as it asks that we turn the house of writing open, it presumes still a serving class ministering and silent somewhere in that house. We need to question continually the story literary history has been telling us. The call to question was, after all, Woolf's manifesto. And Aemilia Lanyer's writing will call into question many old assumptions.

Lanyer's book, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is one interwoven text constructed of, first, up to ten prefatory pieces to different aristocratic women. She had some eliminated and others rearranged in at least four separate printings in order to tailor them for presentation to different patrons; the chief focus of her hopes, however, seems to have been Margaret Clifford and her daughter Anne who had retreated to the country as the result of a dispute with the Clifford men about Anne's right to inherit property. The next section of the book is an aggressively feminist preface, "To the Vertuous Reader"; and then the body of the poem retells the story of the fall and of Christ's passion in a way that makes women the redemptive figures in the New Testament dispensation and men the betrayers of Christ. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* ends with the first country-house poem published in England, "The Description of Cooke-ham." Lanyer's poem centers on the grounds of Cooke-ham where three women—Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset and later to be Countess of Pembroke and Montgomery, and Aemilia Lanyer—wander in Christian contemplation. It is a gorgeous Eden, walled and safe from a fallen world. One of the striking things about this country-house poem is that Cooke-ham was not the ancient family seat of

the Clifford family, but a temporary refuge loaned or rented to these women by the king while they persisted in their stubborn fight to be allowed, as women, to inherit land, an outrageous claim.<sup>11</sup> For reasons that are not made clear in the poem, the Clifford women have left Cooke-ham; there are other estates for them. But for Lanyer the exclusion from paradise seems final. They have left her behind and asked her to write a poem in memory of their time there.

The two framing thirds of *Salve Deus*, the long section of poems addressed to women of rank and virtue and the concluding country-house poem, may be closely and fruitfully paired with Ben Jonson's *The Forrest*, for Jonson's book is similarly a collection of deftly panegyric poems to powerful aristocrats within which is positioned his extremely famous country-house poem, "To Penshurst." The fifteen odds and ends of lyric and epideictic poetry in *The Forrest* are gathered around the motivating factor of praise for the Sidney family. Several of these poems are addressed to women; indeed, one long poem, "To the World A Farewell for a Gentlewoman, Virtuous and Noble," is spoken in the voice of a noblewoman who renounces courtly pleasures and retreats, like the Clifford women, to the country. Jonson's country-house poem, "To Penshurst," which describes the ancestral home of the Sidney family in Kent, is the book's masterpiece.

The country-house poem is a genre which has attracted a great deal of critical attention, especially in recent years, and "To Penshurst" is the set-piece of this very impressive critical dialogue among marxist, formalist, and new historicist critics. "To Penshurst" is also a bedrock of the English canon. Any conventionally trained college English major is at least glancingly familiar with the subtle and superb craftsmanship of Jonson's artful compliment that begins:

Thou art not, *Penshurst*, built to envious show,  
Of touch, or marble; nor canst boast a row  
Of polish'd pillars, or a roofof gold:  
Thou hast no lantherne, whereof tales are told;  
Or stayre, or courts; but stand'st an ancient pile,  
And these grudg'd at, art reverenc'd the while.

It is the classic example of a poem enshrined in and defining of literary history, the founding instance of an important genre in English. But in fact, it is *not* the first country-house poem; Lanyer's, published five years earlier, is.

The two collections, then, invite comparison: both heavy with

praise of patrons, some the same people, both grounded by the two earliest country-house poems in English, both structured around the role of the poet speaking. One striking difference between the two is Lanyer's long central section on the fall of Eve and on Christ's passion and the redemption of women. The central narrative is particularly fascinating because of its pre-Miltonic subversion of the story of Christian history, and also in light of Lanyer's heritage as a Jew. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* should become a text crucial in our reconfiguration of literary history not only in its conflicted narrative of gender and class but also and connectedly in its narrative of gender and race. In Lanyer's poem, it is not Jews who kill Christ, but men; at the same time, any real possibility of freedom and dignity for women begins with Christ's coming. For the purposes of comparing Lanyer and Jonson, I will emphasize the social and poetic negotiations of the panegyric poems of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and *The Forrest*, but Lanyer's bold, passionate Biblical narrative lies at the vibrant center of her text, complicating her praises and sharply highlighting the containments of Jonson's poetry and his unease with religious themes. When we read Jonson's *Forrest*, we read one of the most handsome, tactful and, at the same time, melancholy works of social poetry in the Renaissance. When we read Lanyer's triptych of praise, passion, and country-house poem we read one of the most audacious, deliberate, and intensely personal social critiques to be published in the early seventeenth century.

*Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is a radical poem—a poem in which Christ comes for the poor, the ignorant, those at the bottom of the English social structure, not just for the rich and well-born. It is, as Barbara Lewalski and other critics have argued, an affirmation of good women, but it is very explicitly not an affirmation of *all* women. A crucial part of her social radicalism is that Lanyer is writing as a *woman* writer to aristocratic women; her writing is as edgy, self-fashioning, and socially self-conscious as Jonson's ever is. We cannot read her right until we read her sophisticated irony about her position in a world where she is dependent on a matriarchy she often resents.

In the prefatory poems and in the closing country-house poem, Lanyer alludes to a life of cultured servitude, amusing companion in the households of Countesses. Something of a Renaissance Lily Bart. To place her in the same position with the Countess of Pembroke, or Lady Mary Wroth, or Lucy, Countess of Bedford simply because she is a woman is a flattening distortion of her marginal, precarious position. Both Lanyer and Jonson lived dependent on these women and,

to a large extent, their writing personalities were generated by the resentments and needs that these service relationships created. It is now a critical commonplace to discuss Ben Jonson's misogyny, his need to lash out at writing women as threats to his masculinity. Placing Jonson's anger next to Lanyer's, however, should destabilize any simple sense of gender wars.

The best known passage in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is its feminist attack on men in Lanyer's address "To the Vertuous Reader": "evill disposed men, who forgetting they were borne of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the meanes of women, they would be quite extinguised out of the world, and a finall ende of them all, doe like Vipers deface the wombes wherein they were bred, onely to give way and utterance to their want of discretion and goodnesse (77). But we should not excise the passage on men out from the long passage of which it is only a small part. It seems relatively easy for Lanyer to dismiss men, viperous Pilates that they are, but the real danger to Lanyer's project is women. She is praising women in her "little booke" because she says women have been defamed as defamers of women: "And this have I done, to make knowne to the world, that all women deserve not to be blamed though some forgetting they are women themselves, and in danger to be condemned by the wordes of their own mouthes, fall into so great an error, as to speak unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe." Lanyer herself, of course, has been the object of ill-speaking, a woman who would, according to surviving gossip, trade a good time for a living. It may seem that she here utterly refutes my argument about her ironic, sometimes bitter tone toward women of the class above her, the class she served. Yet she is acknowledging exactly the situation to which I point. There is tense anger and danger in women's voices and women's textual interpretations, clearly. The whole point of her project in the opening of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is to shore up for herself some kind of protection from attack by women. She begs her readers to "increase the least sparke of virtue where they will finde it, by their favorable and best interpretations, [rather] than quench it by wrong constructions" (78).

Yet, in a move familiar to us from Jonson and other Renaissance writers when introducing particularly dangerous texts, Lanyer invites the very interpretations and the very danger she openly disclaims. Given our warning about seeking virtue, what kind of construction can we put on the prefatory poems? If we begin with the lead poem, "To the Queen's most excellent Majestie," it is hard to see how *not* to

find a wrong construction.<sup>12</sup> Queen Anne is called on to "grace" this volume. She can do this not because she is necessarily virtuous, but because she has "rifled nature of her store," "dispossest" all the goddesses of their "richest gifts,"

The Muses doe attend upon your Throne,  
With all the Artists at your becke and call.  
(41)

Anne is invited to look into this mirror and see not herself, as Elizabeth was asked to see herself in the mirror of *The Faerie Queene*, but another Majestie:

He that all Nations of the world contold,  
Yet tooke our flesh in base and meanest berth:  
Whose daies were spent in poverty and sorrow,  
And yet all Kings their wealth of him do borrow.  
For he is Crowne and Crowner of all Kings,  
The hopeful haven of the meaner sort.  
(42)

The Lanyer persona, in sharp contrast, has nothing in Anne's world—her "wealth within his Region stands. . . . Yea in his Kingdome onely rests my lands/ Of honour" (43).

Anne is invited to a feast given by a great Lady, richly dressed by Lanyer with Honour, Eve herself. There is clearly a price to be paid for this feast, however. The queen is being subjected throughout the poem to a sustained critique for failing to provide the patronage to Lanyer that Elizabeth had done. Lanyer asks explicitly and repeatedly for money in this opening poem. And she plays the humility topos in gendered terms—I'm just a woman, just ignorant, please elevate my mind. The juxtaposition of the request "in a Woman all defects excuse," however, and the addressee, "peerlesse Princesse," absolutely levels either Lanyer's claim to find women defective or the queen's right to claim superiority. Lanyer's request for help from her "superiors" is as two-edged as Milton's Eve's was to be; indeed, and significantly it is couched in the same terms as Eve's censored request for knowledge from Adam about the heavens in Book 8 of *Paradise Lost*:

For even as they that doe behold the Starres,  
Not with the eie of Learning, but of Sight,  
To find their motions, want of knowledge barres

Although they see them in their brightest light:  
So, though I see the glory of her State,  
Its she that must instruct and elevate.

(45)

In Lanyer's complicated text, there are two kinds of elevation—spiritual and worldly. The women in the prefatory company of women shift in and out of the two spheres, accompanied by dizzying switches of tone. What she insists virtuous ladies see throughout *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is a leveling Christ. "Glory can end what Grace in you begun," she warns; only of "heavenly riches make your greatest horde."

We should not forget, however, that Lanyer has a specific suggestion about where these rich ladies might get rid of some of their excess money. For the irony of the prefatory poems is at least triple: criticism of the aristocratic ladies studded with inestimable wealth, promotion of a leveling Christian radicalism, and, at the same time, a wonderful degree of self-promotion. To Lady Margaret Clifford, her chief patron in times past, she begins "Right Honourable and Excellent Lady, I may say with St. Peter, 'Silver nor gold have I none, but such as I have, that give I you.'" To Lady Susan Bertie, in whose household she served as a young woman, she ends with a stinging claim for the freedom of her poem:

And since no former gaine hath made me write,  
Nor my desertlesse service could have wonne,  
Onely your noble Virtues do incite  
My Pen, they are the ground I write upon;  
Nor any future profit is expected,  
Then how can these poor lines go unrespected?

(54)

The final poem in the front matter lays aside the mockery and intermittent resentment that has rippled throughout. Addressing Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Lanyer is startlingly explicit:

Greatnesse is no sure frame to build upon,  
No worldly treasure can assure that place;  
God makes both even, the Cottage with the Throne,  
All worldly honours there are counted base;  
.....  
What difference was there when the world began,  
Was it not Virtue that distinguisht all?

All sprang but from one woman and one man,  
Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?  
Or who is he that very rightly can  
Distinguish of his birth, or tell at all

In what meane state his Ancestors have bin . . . ?

(72-73)

One need which propels Lanyer into print is service to women she hopes to win as patrons, but there is under that need a complicated and subverting anger against gender roles and class roles. Lanyer has addressed not only Queen Anne and the Clifford women but also, among others, the Princess Elizabeth, Lady Arabella Stuart, Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke and Lucy, Countess of Bedford. It would be a mistake to claim that all these women's lives were somehow secure because of their wealth and position. Lanyer pulled the poem to Arabella Stuart because of her dangerous disgrace; the Clifford women spent years fighting their own husband and father for Anne Clifford's rightful inheritance of lands. Yet their marginalization is crucially different from Lanyer's. Above all, Aemilia Lanyer is a *writer*, who writes in service to those above her while acutely conscious of those below. The strains of that service on her writing crisscross and undergird the poem's collage.

Ben Jonson's *The Forrest* is, by contrast, an oddly retreating book: it is, after all, Jonson's last collection of poetry crafted for and allowed a public appearance (its companion book, *Epigrammes*, being the first). It begins with "Why I Write Not of Love," that linking of tight poetic form with his own age and impotence. The collection could indeed be read as a linked meditation on fertility and impotence. "To Penshurst" hymns the generative successes of the Sidney family, but "To the World" hymns the virtuous Gentlewoman's choice to retreat into her own bosom. The "Celia" songs from *Volpone* are wonderful with calculated lust, but *The Forrest* ends with Jonson's rarely discussed but very moving prayer of hopelessness and despondency at the thought of ongoing life. While Lanyer is vividly excited and determined about seizing the print forum, Jonson is divided, half-hearted about *The Forrest's* project of public praise. A book that begins with a poem like "Why I Write Not of Love" where the poet displays tightly packed irony and despair at his own failure at heat and life and ends with the loathing of the world so movingly spoken in "To Heaven" is a book structured by a weird ambivalence about public life and private life, about a poet's paying job and a poet's desire,

about the poet's own physical, sexual life and his role as a crafter of public sentiments. Jonson was proudly uneasy about the service of praise he offered to those who could reward him. Yet, deeply desirous of being allowed to be enclosed within a country-house garden, Jonson publishes an edgy support of the aristocratic status quo. Lanyer stands startlingly close to Jonson in class position and formal convention, and yet her text is startlingly different. Left alone within a rented and then absented country-house garden, she publishes a radical manifesto.

Perhaps the most striking effect of comparing Lanyer and Jonson is the inescapable and disturbing pairing of "To Cooke-ham" and "To Penshurst." For one thing, such a pairing highlights the absence of Lanyer's writing from the outstanding body of critical work on the country-house poem. Because this is a genre so finely packed and so oddly short-lived, the country-house poem lends itself richly to formal, generic and sociopolitical readings. The genre has become a paradigm for central debates in seventeenth-century studies: to what extent is the genre "new" and to what extent an amalgam of classical forms? to what extent is it a "happy ethic of consuming," in Raymond Williams's words, where the existence of labor is simply extracted so as to leave the pleasures unadulterated?<sup>13</sup> to what extent is it a reflection of growing ostentation and the Crown's attempt to control its aristocracy? Each side would agree, however, that the genre uses vast country seats as vehicles to praise or analyze the power of the feudal structure of family property inherited through primogeniture. Labor, capital, and social change are thus the terrifying undertext that the form exists to repress.

"To Cooke-ham" must complicate the debate: a poem *by* a forty-year-old woman with fading prospects of court preferment; a poem *to* women who are claiming their right to property inheritance in the face of the entire patriarchy, including the King; a poem *on* an estate which is not the family seat, but a temporary, rented or borrowed refuge.

As revealing as the different extrinsic circumstances of property and inherited power are the intrinsic positionings of the poet figure within the garden in each poem. Jonson's Penshurst exists always in the now, a place where Jonson can go and be treated like an equal, can eat all he wants of the best food,

Where the same beere, and bread, and selfe-same wine,  
That is his Lordships, shall be also mine. . . .

Here no man tells my cups; nor, standing by,  
A waiter, doth my gluttony envy:  
But gives me what I call, and lets me eate,  
He knowes, below, he shall finde plentie of meate.

The Jonson figure in the poem attributes parsimony at other houses' tables not to the lord but to the servant class who, in places less liberal than Penshurst, stint on serving less important guests like Jonson so that there will be food to go around below stairs later. Jonson structures into the poem the powerfully embracing feeling that while a guest at Penshurst:

. . . all is there;  
As if thou were mine, or I raign'd here;  
There's nothing I can wish, for which I stay.

Penshurst becomes a fantasy redress of Jonson's own social unease, caught between his patrons and the servants he mocks and who mock him. Lanyer's Cooke-ham, on the other hand, is a desolate place; this country-house poem is a poem of loss, the poet figure left behind in a ruptured Eden to memorialize paradise lost. The persona of the woman poet begins by describing her role as the kept writer of aristocratic women exiled in country retreat:

. . . where the Muses gave their full consent,  
I should have powre the virtuous to content:  
Where princely Palace will'd me to indite.  
(137)

One of the things for which we feel uneasy admiration in Jonson's poem is the astonishing tact with which he makes Penshurst a metaphoric vehicle for the great chain of being *and* a repressive class system; it takes a skilled eye to open up the ideology of his almost seamless poem. Lanyer's poem uses a strategy sharply different, making the artifice of the pathetic fallacy part of the subject of her poem. The place becomes a living tribute to Lady Clifford's power, she "From whose desires did spring this worke of Grace." "The Walkes put on their summer Liveries,/ And all things else did hold like similies" (137). And so throughout the body of the poem the garden becomes a garden of similies, the central oak, a man defending her from Phoebus's advances, for example, or the vista she saw from under the tree—hills, vales and woods—are men "as if on bended knee" (139) pleading before her.



Raymond Williams has described the ways in which similes function in the country-house poem genre to mystify the social order into the natural order. The heavy use of simile in Lanyer's poem, however, is openly subversive. After an extended list of elaborate similes comparing nature in the Cooke-ham garden with adoring subjects, the poet's voice breaks out in an address to Fortune which is clearly an address to the fortunate as well:

Unconstant Fortune, thou art most too blame,  
 Who casts us downe into so lowe a frame:  
 Where our dear friends we cannot dayly see,  
 So great a difference is there in degree.  
 Many are placed in those Orbes of state,  
 Parters in honour, so ordain'd by Fate;  
 Neerer in show, yet farther off in love,  
 In which, the lowest alwayes are above.  
 But whither am I carried in conceit?

The abrupt question addresses the essential danger and power of this poem. She begins by hymning the fated order of a society where some are privileged and some are low; she veers into a Christian critique of worldly power, and then she addresses the dangerous power of poetry itself. The passage is a microcosm of the poem. It goes on:

My Wit too weake to conster of the great.  
 Why not? although we are but borne of earth,  
 We may behold the Heavens, despising death;  
 And loving heaven that is so farre above,  
 May in the end vouchsafe us entire love.  
 Therefore sweet Memorie doe thou retaine  
 Those pleasures past, which will not turne againe.  
 (140)

Lanyer's final memory, however, is at once gaspingly funny and demeaning. Lady Clifford takes her farewell of Cooke-ham and, in a highly stylized, highly self-conscious gesture of pathetic fallacy, the poet has all the flowers and trees fade into autumn as a way of mourning the lady's grand exit. The patron lady and the poet pause under the great oak, however:

To this faire tree, taking me by the hand,  
 You did repeat the pleasures which had past,  
 Seeming to grieve they could no longer last.

And with a chaste, yet loving kisse took leave.

(141-42)

We are moved by the act of sisterhood. By the next line, however, "To Cooke-ham"'s whole over-wrought, high art structure of ingratiating simile falls into a ludicrous joke: we realize that Lady Clifford has kissed the tree.

The poem ends with quietly scathing anger. Lanyer has indeed written the poem she has been asked to write by her patroness, but she publishes it. By the act of publication, she breaches the walls of the garden.

This last farewell to *Cooke-ham* here I give,  
 When I am dead thy name in this may live,  
 Wherein I have perform'd her noble hest,  
 Whose virtues lodge in my unworthy breast,  
 And ever shall, so long as life remaines,  
 Tying my heart to her by those rich chaines.

(143)

In the Renaissance, women were bound by rich chains of marriage, of service. Aemilia Lanyer shows us the chains of obligation, need, love, and sometimes humiliation which bind her to the women above her. We should be moved by the sisterhood, but we should not be blind to the rich chains.

Lanyer and Jonson bear witness together to the shaping difficulties of gender, writing and service. Lanyer's anger at and fear of the power of women is in many ways greater than Jonson's. Her act of print publication is a rejection of her private role as a woman of service within a patriarchy. It must take, however, all the backing of Jesus Christ to propel her into that place. Jonson seems in many ways to be yearning for exactly the social gender expectations which Lanyer rejects. The poet in "To Penshurst" fantasizes retreat into a comforting estate where there will be clean sheets and lots of food, where he will be able to write marvelous poetry and escape the taint of the service class he feels nipping at his parvenu heels. Jonson is the poet literary history regards as the *man* who first took control of print culture, who laid out his writing in the physical space of the 1616 *Workes*. But Jonson is torn. In "To Penshurst" he scorns the builders of "proud, ambitious heaps" and praises an aristocratic family with a chaste wife and an immanent Lord existing somewhere out of and above the poem as a shaping force. The male narrator's voice is

rather pathetically willing to be allowed to sit at table and be protected temporarily from the service class. He joins within Penshurst the women and children and ripe daughters. "To Penshurst" is a beautifully elaborated dance of social and sexual acquiescence.

In his "Penshurst," Jonson inscribes the Sidney oak within whose "writhed bark" angry or desolate men have cut the names of women they have failed to possess; in her "Cooke-ham" Lanyer inscribes the oak kissed by Lady Clifford. The sexual interplay with the oaks is, clearly, wholly different. But furthermore, in transcribing this act within her poem, Lanyer goes far beyond the delimitations of Jonson's exquisite panegyric. She wrests the (rented) oak away from the Cliffords by kissing it herself; she steals from the similes of praise the power those similes bestow upon the praised. It is Lanyer's choice to display openly the "rich chaines" even if she cannot fully throw them off. In displaying, in *printing*, she takes control—no longer a simile herself, one of the emblematic daughters of service or the wife who makes Penshurst such a lovely frieze of male power. For Lanyer, the act of printing is an act of defiance in several registers. When we have thought about country-house poems we have summoned a genre of conservative pieties, poems shoring up the walls against the powerful realities of labor and capital. We can no longer think about the genre without Lanyer as one of its two originary instances. The walls of the estate had already been breached.

Finally, Milton can help us think in this instance about the costs and legacies of gender and writing. Milton's early poetry, written from the mid-1620s until the 1645 *Poems*, is heavily influenced by Jonson. In form, in classical learning, and even in its politics, Milton's early writing marks him as a son of Ben. Milton had tremendous difficulty letting go of this early writing. We see much of that anxiety dramatized in *Areopagitica*. It was the work of the feminine place, the Lady's closet, the aristocratic manuscript realm which Milton found so appealing. After the searing experience of the war, interregnum, and restoration, however, Milton's poetry changes utterly. Instead, we have a radical Christian vision of a garden within us all. That garden has been read as famously unfeminist, famously explicit in its underscoring of the patriarchy. Virginia Woolf, for one, condemns John Milton with aristocratic distaste as a woman writer's bogey. In the questioning voice of Milton's Eve, however, the woman who asks for knowledge, who accepts the responsibility of bringing Christ into the world, the woman who leads us out of the garden and into the world in the most powerful act of *printed* poetry yet written, we hear

the voice of women writing for print—we hear the voice of Aemilia Lanyer.

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## Notes

1. I want to express gratitude at the outset to scholars like Barbara Lewalski, Elaine Beilen, and Ann Rosalind Jones, among many others, who have brought into the profession's active discussion writers long forgotten or trivialized to footnotes. In each of these scholars' groundbreaking works, however, women are pulled together and away from their socioliterary contexts by the assumptions of feminist literary theory or simply by social assumptions about gender as a radically separating category. See Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Womens' Love Lyrics in Europe, 1540-1620* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Barbara Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women" in *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret Patterson Hannay (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1985), 203-24 and Professor Lewalski's forthcoming book on Renaissance women writers.

It is important to recognize as well the particular debt of gratitude we owe to editors, many of them young scholars still in graduate school, who are working to provide us with modern editions of Renaissance women writers. The Brown Women Writers Project, for example, has made it possible to teach dozens of writers otherwise unavailable.

2. For the intersections of gender and class in publication see Wendy Wall, "Disclosures in Print: The 'Violent Enlargement' of the Renaissance Voyeuristic Text," *SEL* 29 (1989): 35-59; and see my "Milton and class identity: the publication of *Areopagitica* and the 1645 *Poems*," *JMRS* 22 (1992): 161-89. See also J. W. Saunders's important article, "The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry," *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 139-64 and Arthur F. Marotti's *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) and "Poetry, Patronage, and Print," *YES* 19 (1991): 69-82. On the freedom women could exercise in the manuscript forum, see Margaret Ezell, *The Patriarch's Wife: Literary Evidence and the History of the Family* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

3. See Mary Ellen Lamb's excellent book, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

4. On the cultural and psychosexual conflicts surrounding Milton's emergence into print, see Coiro, "Milton and class identity."

5. These and all further references to Jonson's poetry will be from *The Complete Poetry*, ed. William B. Hunter, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1963).

6. Gilbert's and Gubar's influential study, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) uses Woolf's various brief comments on Milton and her invented character Judith Shakespeare to construct important parts of

their argument about the suppression of women in the canon. See particularly the chapters "Milton's Bogey: Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers," 187–212, and "The Aesthetics of Renunciation," 539–80. Another extremely influential piece, Christine Froula's "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 321–47, also uses Woolf to round angrily at "Milton." Margaret J. M. Ezell has written an incisive critique of Woolf's influence on what feminist critics have anthologized as representative of women's writing ("The Myth of Judith Shakespeare: Creating the Canon of Women's Literature," *New Literary History* 21 [1990]: 579–92). Ezell explores Woolf's influence much more fully than I have done here. Rather than my interest in printed writing by non-aristocratic women, her plea for rebalance stresses the importance of manuscript writing by Renaissance women.

While I do feel we need to be more critical in our readings and uses of Woolf, I also want to acknowledge clearly the nuance and brilliance of her readings of Renaissance texts and culture. Woolf's essay on Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, for example, remains among the best critical assessments of this still-neglected figure.

7. Woolf's parable has sufficient popular currency to be invoked in the name of a successful rock group, "Shakespeare's Sister."

8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 29. Further parenthetical references will be to this edition.

9. *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady: "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum"* by Emilia Lanier, Introduction by A. L. Rouse (London: Jonathan Cape, 1978). Rouse assesses Lanier's poetry in a revealingly relative frame: "What is . . . surprising is that she is a fair poet, far superior to the Queen, for example, who wrote antiquated doggerel. In fact, except for Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke, Emilia is the best woman poet of the age. This is not saying much. . . . Her defect indeed is that she was too facile and fluent: she wrote too much, she padded out what she had to say—it would have been much more effective if shorter. (One remembers what Forman said about her talking too much, she 'can hardly keep a secret.')

10. Simon Forman records his relationship with Lanier in his diary. She came to him, he said, to have her fortune cast to see "whether she should be a lady or no." Thereafter Lanier and Forman began, according to Forman, some kind of a sexual relationship in which she agreed "for lucre's sake to be a good fellow." The actual details of Forman's telling, however, describe a woman who was the aggressor and controller of whatever relationship they had together (quotations from Forman taken from Rowse, 12).

11. See Barbara Lewalski, "Re-writing Patriarchy and Patronage: Margaret Clifford, Anne Clifford, and Aemilia Lanier," *YES* 21 (1991): 87–106.

12. For the first sustained analysis of the importance of Anne of Denmark and her personal court in English politics and culture, see Leeds Barroll's important forthcoming study.

13. *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 30.

## Jonson's Folio and the Politics of Patronage

### 1

The publication of Jonson's collected volume of *Works* has rightly come to be regarded as a momentous event, rich in symbolism for the cultural transformations beginning to crystallize in early modern England. When the wits jibed in 1616 that "*Bens* plays are works, when others works are plaies,"<sup>1</sup> they were not merely making a joke at the expense of someone who was their most dangerous literary competitor. Rather, the flurry of outrage and amusement which this volume sparked off acknowledged that Jonson's ambitious packaging of his theatre scripts, poems and miscellaneous entertainments as if they were classically-grounded *opera* was testimony to pervasive changes in the environment within which the early modern writer was working. In the short term, the impact of "THE WORKES OF Benjamin Jonson" may have helped to encourage the publication of similar collections to follow, for Shakespeare, Donne and Milton.<sup>2</sup> In the longer term, the writerly self-consciousness of Jonson's volume—its establishment of a canon of definitive texts, its employment of printing-house technology to confer physical coherence and identity on the Folio, and its elevation of the poet from playhouse employee to autonomous creator—seems to signal the emergence of a new and distinctively modern idea of the author. Its packaging enunciates with remarkable prescience themes of authorial selfhood and control that were to become dominant in the ensuing century.

Jonson's self-fashioning in the Folio is clearly seen in his careful exploitation of its textual features to project the author as a stable, self-determining and consistent persona. He ignored all his early hackwork and collaborations, and suppressed the information that *Sejanus* had been co-authored; he made extensive revisions to his early plays, particularly upgrading *Every Man In* so that it appeared to be the initiation of a new way in contemporary comedy; and he organized the volume as a whole so as to imply that it delineated an inexorable advance towards professional and social acclaim. Experimental comical satires lead into fully achieved comedies and trage-