Women and Religious Authority: Passion and Reason in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* and Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

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Abstract: Elizabeth Barrett Browning challenges traditional poetic conventions within the patriarchal realm of religious devotional poetry in *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838).[1] This essay examines Browning's striking connection to her seventeenth-century predecessor Aemilia Lanyer, author of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611). Browning and Lanyer rework the male-centric devotional poetic mode in order to destabilize the social restrictions and biases placed upon women within the genre. Both poets ultimately argue that the concord of emotion and reason establishes women's authority in religious devotional poetry over their male-poet contenders.

Any canonical list of renowned religious devotional poets tends to exclude women poets. While the poetry of authors such as John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan certainly acquaint readers with an impressive repertoire of devotional poetics, female authorship within the genre must also be revered with equal consideration. Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning challenges and redefines traditional poetic conventions within her devotional poetry—most notably in *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838).

[1] While Browning published *Seraphim and Other Poems* using her maiden name, Elizabeth Barrett, I refer to her by her more commonly known married name, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, throughout.

It is crucial to link Browning to her seventeenth-century predecessor Aemilia Lanyer. I posit that Lanyer's controversial *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) shares similarities with Browning's "The Seraphim" with respect to religious devotional poetry—in particular, through her adaptation of the Crucifixion of Christ. Victorian social constructs of the sensible woman during Browning's lifetime promoted passivity, silence, meekness, and forgiveness. These constructs were not unfamiliar to the Protestant society of Lanyer's lifetime, which was hostile toward outward physical displays of devotion and mourning, behaviours then typically associated with women. Christian traditions that perpetuated the notion that women were far more susceptible to passions and emotions upheld the exclusion of women as contributing participants in devotional poetry. In other words, external displays of emotions were depicted as excessively ostentatious and effeminate (Kuchar 62). Moreover, both Browning and Lanyer received criticism for speaking in the active voice of a male-dominated position, a prophet, within their devotional poetry (Cianciola 375). Browning inherits and expands upon certain literary modes formerly employed by Lanyer in order to clarify the necessity of women's sensibilities and their strengths. At bottom, both poets indicate that the concord of emotion and reason establishes women's authority in religious devotional poetry. This essay will illuminate the ways in which both Lanyer and Browning show that, in fact, women's propensity towards human passions positions them closer to Christ than their male-poet contenders.

I. Reserve versus Public Display of Devotion

The Tractarian notion of reserve purports that certain emphasis in religious poetry must be placed on what is kept hidden, rather than what is exposed (Cianciola 374). An individual's internal reflections during worship and contemplation are meant to be a private affair. The Catholic Church and European Christianity emphasize this conceit (Kuchar 52). Femke Molekamp explains that "the daily life of a liter-

ate Protestant woman in early modern England would have been shaped by acts of devotional reading and meditation, with the Bible as the most intensively read devotional text" (53). Therefore, both poets likely acquired a predisposition towards writing devotional poetry as a result of the Bible's prominence.

For the early modern English woman, social norms stressed that the public performance of excessive emotion was analogous to idolatry. In Lanyer's lifetime, Calvinist reformers characterized outward acts of devotion as effeminate and superfluous (Kuchar 62). Within a Protestant context, society was more hostile to physical displays of devotion and mourning than their Counter-Reformation cultures (Kuchar 52). Similar social conditions plagued Browning in Victorian England. Although more women participated in religious devotional poetics, Cianciola explains that "nineteenth-century women who wrote about theology were often taught to walk softly, if at all" (375). Browning's critics expressed concern that she overreached her bounds as a woman by addressing sacred topics so directly and boldly in her poetry (Cianciola 374). Critics across these literary time periods refuse to acknowledge that emotion and reason can coexist. As far as society was concerned, women possessed a propensity for melancholy and emotional unsteadiness, which inhibited their cognitive reasoning (Molekamp 57). Hence, an individual possessed by their emotion was irrational, sinful, and a poor Christian, and "no professed humility can cover the sin of 'overambition,' especially in that hallowed space 'between the material and spiritual'" (Cianciola 374). This conceit attempts to reinforce male power and rationality over women's emotions in poetry. However, I argue that this liminal space acts in accordance with Cartesian principles, which support passion's ability to transition interchangeably through the material and spiritual realms. As Molekamp asserts, seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes believed that the passions crossed the boundaries between the ontologically distinct body and soul. Therefore, the passions were both physically and spiritually transformative (Molekamp 57). It is this sacred space that Lanyer and Browning transcend via their poetics, which allows them to justify the ways of women to men.

II. Lanyer and *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum's controversy lies in Lanyer's fixing her female gaze upon the Crucifixion of Jesus. Lanyer appropriates and inverts the blazon, a literary device traditionally employed by male poets to describe and catalogue the bodies of women, to anatomically comment upon and dissect Christ. She also injects Mary and the Daughters of Jerusalem with unbridled passion and emotion during the Crucifixion. Moreover, Lanyer holds men accountable for their transgressions within the Bible, which implicates them in the death of Christ, while simultaneously advocating for the vindication of women. Lanyer prefaces *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* with "To the Virtuous Reader," wherein she evokes powerful female iconography from the Bible in order to remind readers, male readers in particular, of "all which is sufficient to inforce all good Christians and honourable indeed men to speak reverently of our sexe, and especially of all virtuous and good women" (*The Poems* 78). *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* formidably fashions women as authoritative and naturally inclined to transcendental grace as a result of their emotional and intellectual capacities.

When Lanyer invokes the disciples of Jesus, she writes, "Though they protest they never will forsake him / They do like men, when dangers overtake them" (*Salve* 631–32). Lanyer criticizes the disciples and suggests that during the moments when men should be conventionally strong, they exhibit weakness. Following these accusations, she claims that men are truly at fault for the Fall as chronicled in the Book of Genesis when she writes, "Let not us Women glory in Mens fall / Who had power given to over-rule us all" (759–60) and "Till now your indiscretion sets us free / And makes our former fault much less appeare" (761–62). Moreover, Lanyer endeavours to implicate Adam for his participation in the Fall:

> But surely *Adam* can not be exusde
> Her fault though great, yet hee was most too blame;
> What Weaknesse offered, Strength might have re
> fusde
> Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame. (777–80)

If Adam were truly powerful, then he should have been capable of stopping Eve and preventing the Fall from occurring. Lanyer provocatively supposes that if strength is truly the faculty of man, then it is shameful that Adam's purported strength was absent in pre-lapsarian Eden. Adam failed Eve, and Lanyer vehemently suggests that "Her weaknesse did the Serpents words obay / But you in malice Gods deare Sonne betray" (815–16). Lanyer succinctly recapitulates the follies of men when she writes, "What can be expected / From wicked Man, which on the Earth doth live?" (737–38).

After Lanyer denounces Adam and the disciples for their indiscretions, she shifts her focus to the Daughters of Jerusalem and the Virgin Mary. When Lanyer writes, "Your cries inforced mercie, grace, and love / From him, whom greatest Princes could not moove" (975–76), she establishes that these qualities associated with women and weakness are more significant towards spiritual enlightenment. Their external displays of emotion are the strengths that vindicate and justify them in the eyes of God.

When Mary witnesses Jesus crucified, "she swouned; / How could she choose but thinke her selfe undone" (1012–13). This remarkable moment comports Mary as an individual engrossed in emotion, a woman moved by her passions. Mary's unsuccessful restraint of her passions reveals, as Kuchar observes, "her capacity to feel and express sorrow … and thus [is] intimately related to Christ's agony" (50). Kuchar further suggests that the deeply physically anguished dimension of Mary's grief is what "best expresses the Virgin's exemplarity and … best conveys her priestly role within the Crucifixion" (50). This demonstrates the Cartesian conceit of the passions as a necessary component for profound spiritual understanding. Mary's swooning suggests that she is impassioned, but I propose that, when Lanyer writes that Mary could only "choose but thinke her selfe undone" (*Salve* 1013), Mary is also in complete control of her reason. Only a reasonable individual could fully understand and process the complex emotions involved in such a profound event. Some critics in Lanyer's time positioned Mary as stoic, suggesting that rationality and emotion are mutually exclusive and women are incapable of dis-

playing both at once. This unflattering and sanctimonious critique displaces rationality from the Virgin Mary, rendering her experience of the Crucifixion as irrational and superfluous. Lanyer rejects the conceit that physical expressions of grief are analogous to irrationality and weakness. Lanyer's vision of the Virgin Mary is a courageous effort to empower women by attributing religious authority to them by way of the power attributed to them as mothers, suggesting a natural inclination to be closer to Christ (Kuchar 56). Lastly, Lanyer depicts Jesus in a compromised and vulnerable state, placing him closer to the realm of women than that of men when she writes, "His bowells drie, his heart full fraught with griefe / Crying to him that yeelds him no reliefe" (*Salve* 1167–68). The Son is participating in a violent outward display of emotion at his Crucifixion, which positions him in a vulnerable woman-like state similar to that of Mary (or the women in the poem). Christ's passions align closely with women's alleged propensity towards human passions and, hence, positions them closer to transcendental grace.

III. Browning and "The Seraphim"

Following Lanyer, Elizabeth Barrett Browning refuses to accept restrictions placed upon women's devotional poetry in her composition of "The Seraphim." As Karen Dieleman observes, Browning integrates devotion and exegesis, turning to more positive ends the usual stereotype of tears as weakness (63). More importantly, Browning elucidates how emotion and cognition coalesce within "The Seraphim." Cianciola writes that "the devotional mode as a poetic discourse of 'spiritual formation' … [employs] tropes of the human soul [that] connect spiritual reflection with lived experience in order to engage cultural issues of literary and religious authority in Victorian England" (367). Browning engages reason and emotion concurrently within "The Seraphim" to convey women's natural inclination to be closer to Christ, emulating a position that is strikingly similar to Lanyer's.

Browning tasks her seraphim, the angels Ador and Zerah, with the disarmament of men and equips women with the necessary tools to fully experience grace, namely reason and emotion. In "The Seraphim," Christ's meekness, forgiveness, silence, and tears align him with the virtues that were associated with women in Victorian England. Therefore, Browning's gender has authority in addressing the Crucifixion as a poet-prophet. Initially, Ador rejects the tears of women weeping at the Cross. He proclaims, "All women! yea! all men! / These water-tears are vain— / They mock like laughter" (Barrett 40), to which Zerah replies, "Mine Ador! it is all they can!" (Barrett 41). Julie Straight points out that "Ador scornfully rejects the tears of a woman kneeling beneath the cross 'With a spasm, not a speech' … as an unworthy response to the Crucifixion" (281). Ador's attitude towards the women echoes the Christian traditions that reject outward displays of physical devotion. However, the women crying resemble Christ more closely than the male seraphim that cannot actively participate in "the mystery of his tears" (Barrett 24). Zerah reaffirms his incapacity to mourn and says, "Thou woman! weep thy woe! / *I* sinless, tearless—loving am, and weak!" (Barrett 42; emphasis original). For Browning, emotional "weakness" begets strength, and the seraph's incapacity to participate in weeping truly bears the sign of weakness.

Ador interjects and says, "Love Him more, O man, / Than sinless seraphs can" (Barrett 56). Browning elucidates how the male seraphs are excluded from the grace of God that requires human emotion. Angel voices exclaim, "We faint—we droop— / Our love doth tremble like fear" (Barrett 72). Browning echoes Lanyer in her depiction of the angels fainting. This is an important depiction because it was established through Ador and Zerah that seraphim lack the capability to be engrossed in emotion. However, this lack is contradicted by the fainting that the seraphim participate in, which suggests an overflow or excess of passion. This act is analogous to Lanyer's depiction of Mary swooning at the cross and suggests that a commixture of reason and emotion is necessary to achieve spiritual transcendence and to understand the ways of God.

Browning echoes Lanyer once more when she directs blame towards biblical male figures by personifying the Earth with the voice and point of view of a woman. The Earth says, "'Adam, Adam! thou didst curse us— / Thy curse is on us yet!'—— / Unwakened by the ceaseless tears" (74). This passage predicates the responsibility for the Fall on Adam's ignorance and his inability to participate in emotional devotion. Browning places the spotlight on the failures of Adam and the two male seraphim. Their ignorance prevents them from achieving transcendental grace. The exemplary outward displays of devotion by the weeping women in "The Seraphim" reinforce that passion is necessary to gain spiritual understanding. In Browning's epilogue, she hopes "That feeble ones, the frail and faint like me, / before his heavenly throne should walk in white" (78). Straight contests that "[Browning] juxtaposes Christ's meekness, forgiving spirit, and silence—virtues her society applauded in women" (272) against masculine figures who embody stereotypically gendered terms such as strength, pride, and knowledge. By asserting that feminine-coded emotion and passion is necessary to religious devotion, Browning carves out a space for herself as a devotional poet, proving that gender does not prohibit her writing with religious authority in "The Seraphim."

In Browning's preface to *The Seraphim, and Other Poems,* she asks readers, "Are we not too apt to measure the depth of the Savior's humiliation from the common estate of man, instead of from His own peculiar and primævil one?" (Barrett xi). She boldly undertakes the role of woman prophet within "The Seraphim" in an attempt to convey a meaningful relationship with Christ. She attempts to vindicate women from centuries of prior blame for possessing a quality that, in fact, suggests that women are significantly more in accordance with the spiritual realm. Similarly, Lanyer writes in "To the Vertuous Reader" that "all women deserve not to be blamed" and scrutinized (77). This undertaking to destabilize the social restrictions enforced upon women in devotional poetry positions both Lanyer and Browning as forward-thinking women for their respective times. Female

weakness inverts into strength, and male knowledge inverts into ignorance. Their efforts are laudable, and I firmly maintain that both earn their place on the list of recognized devotional poets. Browning adopts similar attitudes and literary modes in "The Seraphim" to those of Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* to serve as a commentary upon women's restrictions in devotional poetry, which remain upheld by social constructs. In sum, Browning and Lanyer distinctly espouse the devotional poetic mode as a conduit for spiritual integration and call for the amalgamation of passion and reason to achieve grace with Christ.

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