

Marrying Christ: Bernard of Clairvaux and the Song of Songs in Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

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Abstract

In 1611, an Englishwoman named Aemilia Lanyer published a volume of poetry and prose titled *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Throughout the volume, which centres on an 1800-line retelling of Christ's death and resurrection, Lanyer draws from the Song of Songs as well as other biblical texts to produce an image of Christ as a Bridegroom. In so doing, Lanyer inserts herself into a hermeneutical genealogy populated by both Protestant and Catholic writers. A key figure in this interpretive tradition is the twelfth-century abbot and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, whose sermon cycle on the first part of the Song of Songs offers a detailed character study of the Bridegroom. This article examines the cross-confessional nature of the bridal-mystical tradition epitomized by Bernard before conducting a close reading of the images that Lanyer associates with Christ. Ultimately, this article suggests that Lanyer puts bridal theology to a new communal use by producing a devotional poetic space in which female readers can engage with each other through Christ and with Christ through each other.

Keywords: Aemilia Lanyer; Bernard of Clairvaux; Song of Songs; bridal theology; Christology

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Introduction

Communal female spirituality is a central tenet of seventeenth-century poet Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*.² Critical discussions of the work have often understood its construction of womanhood in terms of a shared experience of Christ and have tended to consider the poem's maternal Christology in relation to a devotional female gaze (see Mcgrath, 1997; Molekamp, 2012; Mueller, 1998). In these readings, Christ becomes the feminized object of women's contemplation as he nurtures them with his body and blood. Yet equally important to *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*'s understanding of female spirituality are Lanyer's invocations of the Song of Songs and, to a lesser extent, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13), which together produce an image of Christ as a lively, resurrected Bridegroom who pursues and is pursued by his Bride. While several critics have addressed different aspects of this nuptial Christology (Busfield, 2015; DiPasquale, 2000; Keohane, 1997; Mcgrath, 1997), Lanyer's interpretation of the Song of Songs and its contribution to her socio-spiritual project has yet to be studied within the specific context of the biblical text's broader interpretive history.

This article explores how Lanyer appropriates the existing hermeneutic tradition that surrounds the Song of Songs for her own radical, woman-focused project by examining *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*'s nuptial themes alongside the work of twelfth-century Cistercian abbot and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard's seminal sermon cycle on the first part of the Song of Songs outlines a detailed (if incomplete) allegorical interpretation of the Song's principal characters: the Bride and the Bridegroom. Significantly, in both *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and Bernard's sermons, the Bride is alternately identified with the "holy Church" and with the "constant soule" of an individual Christian (*S.D.* lines 1294, 1343). Moreover, as literary scholars Femke Molekamp (2013, p. 244) and Joseph Teller (2013, pp. 321–322) have shown, Bernardine spiritual practices—particularly those that meditated on the Crucifixion—pervaded early modern Protestant devotional traditions. Taking these factors into consideration, this article argues that Bernard's sermons provide key contexts for understanding Lanyer's portrayal of the overlap between personal and group spirituality. Furthermore, the article shows that, by removing Bernard's ideas from their masculine monastic origins, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* imagines a network of Brides and Brides-to-be whose relationships with each other facilitate and are facilitated by their union with the Bridegroom.

The Bride and the Bridegroom from Bernard to Lanyer

Lanyer's hermeneutic is best understood in the context of both her immediate religious environment and the interpretive tradition that preceded her. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was published in 1611, the year that the *Authorized King James Bible* was completed and adopted as the Church of England's translation of choice. Both texts were published six years after a group of English Catholics attempted to assassinate James I in the Gunpowder Plot, and nearly eighty years after England's ecclesiastical break with Rome. In other words, Lanyer's writing is the product of an environment that offered a "richly interwoven diversity of religious perspectives" (Molekamp, 2012, p. 313). The relationship between religious diversity and England's ruling body had been uneasy since King Henry VIII installed the Church of England in 1534. However, with the 1603

² Note that *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is the title given to Lanyer's volume as well as to the passion poem. In parenthetical citations, *S.D.* denotes the main poem; prefatory material is cited by title and line number.

death of Elizabeth I and her “cautious” religious policy, as well as James I’s subsequent ascension to the throne, religious tensions in England rapidly escalated (Dures & Young, 2022, p. 9). Despite James I’s early attempts to maintain a policy of tolerance towards English Catholics (Questier, 2019, p. 273), the 1605 Gunpowder Plot convinced the king that stricter religious legislation was necessary to preserve his life and rule (Dures & Young, 2022, pp. 79–81). In 1606, Parliament decreed that English citizens could be required to swear an Oath of Allegiance to James I instead of to the Pope. This legislation effectively denied that Pope Paul V and his successors had the right to depose rulers, and prominent Catholic theologians throughout Europe thus condemned the oath as being akin to heresy (p. 87). Following a Catholic zealot’s assassination of King Henry IV of France, James I began to enforce the oath more widely. By 1610, English Catholic archpriest George Birkhead reported that England’s prisons were “filled againe” with Catholic recusants (p. 88).

Despite growing hostility, Catholic belief persisted in England (Dures & Young, 2022, p. 90), and the enduring heterogeneity of Jacobean religiosity is visible in both the content and contexts of Lanyer’s work. Not only did Lanyer meld Catholic and Protestant theology and iconography, but she also dedicated her work to a group of women who possessed a variety of religious beliefs—from the staunchly Puritan Countess of Cumberland Margaret Clifford to Anne of Denmark, James I’s privately Catholic wife (Meikle & Payne, 2008). Although it is difficult to discern what Lanyer herself believed,³ the possible influences of Judaism, Catholicism, and various forms of Protestantism on the poet’s personal spiritual formation can be read as a microcosmic representation of the broader Jacobean religious ecosystem, the diversity of which is further reflected in the nuptial iconography of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. This article focuses primarily on the section of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* that immediately follows Lanyer’s account of Christ’s resurrection. This part of the poem draws heavily from the Song of Songs, a work of highly symbolic love poetry found in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible and attributed to King Solomon in both Christian and Hebrew traditions (Exum, 2011). Also called the Canticle of Canticles and the Song of Solomon, the Song of Songs takes the form of a dialogue between a Bride, Bridegroom, and third party identified as the Daughters of Jerusalem. The open and extensive sexuality of the Song of Songs sets it apart from the rest of the Christian canon and, as a result, until the nineteenth century, Christian exegetes tended to read the book allegorically (Exum, 2011). Indeed, as literary historian George Scheper (1974) has shown, commentators on either side of the Christian Reformation understood the Song of Songs to represent the nuptial relationship between Christ and his followers. Nevertheless, a multiplicity of perspectives existed within this interpretive tradition. According to Scheper, pre- and post-Reformation writers often differed in their interpretations of the tone of the nuptial relationship and the precise identity of the Bride (p. 558). Understanding this interpretive difference is crucial to grasping the cross-confessional nature of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Thus, the remainder of this section provides an overview of Catholic and Protestant perspectives on the Song of Songs to clarify how Lanyer locates her work within a tradition of understanding Jesus as a romantic and erotic figure.

³ While archival records suggest that Lanyer was baptised into the Church of England, her precise religious heritage remains uncertain (Molekamp, 2012, p. 313). The poet’s father may have been of Jewish descent, but it is also possible that Lanyer’s parents were “radical Protestant partisans” (Woods, 1999, pp. 5–7). Furthermore, evidence suggests that Lanyer’s husband was raised in a Roman Catholic household (Molekamp, 2012, p. 313).

Medieval and early modern Catholics often described their spiritual union with Christ in erotic terms. In his 31st sermon on the Song of Songs, Bernard calls Christ “the Word, who penetrates without sound” and “a bashful bridegroom maneuvering for the hidden embraces of his holy lover, for the bliss of her kisses” (Sermon 31.III). Hadewijch of Brabant, a thirteenth-century Flemish beguine (un-cloistered religious devotee) also describes the relationship between God and the Christian soul using the language of interpenetration: “they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, soul in soul” (ca.1250/1980, p. 66). According to the sixteenth-century Carmelite mystic Teresa of Avila, Christ draws the soul of the contemplative Christian “so closely to Him that she is like one who swoons from excess of pleasure and joy and seems to be suspended in those Divine arms and drawn near to that sacred side and to those Divine breasts” (ca.1577/2002, p. 384). Finally, in his “Spiritual Canticle,” the sixteenth-century priest and mystical poet John of the Cross shows the soul giving itself over entirely to Christ:

There He gave me His breasts,
There he taught me the science full of sweetness.
And there I gave to Him
Myself without reserve;
There I promised to be His bride.
(ca. 1622/2002, stanza XXVII)

For each of these writers, the relationship between Christ and the Christian soul is intensely intimate and, although historical evidence has yet to confirm that Lanyer was directly influenced by the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, Hadewijch of Brabant, Teresa of Avila, or John of the Cross, Lanyer shared their interest in this deeply personal conception of Christ. Thus, as key figures in pre- and post-Reformation Catholic thought, these mystics are useful for contextualizing *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* within a broader, predominantly Catholic, hermeneutic, and devotional tradition. According to this tradition, the relationship between the soul and Christ is not corporeal; that is, the liaison does not take place in the “world of the creatures” (Bernard, Sermon 31.III). Although expressed in sensual, erotic language, the marriage of the Bride and Bridegroom is ultimately a spiritual rather than fleshly union.

Early modern Protestants also understood the relationship between the Bride and the Bridegroom to be a metaphysical union. However, while Catholic mystical exegesis of the Song of Songs tended to focus on the book’s eroticism, Protestant hermeneutics often concentrated on “the moral qualities of the marriage contract” (Scheper, 1974, p. 558). This school of thought is particularly evident in pioneering German reformer Martin Luther’s sixteenth-century description of the relationship between Christ and the Christian soul:

[S]ins, death, and damnation are Christ’s while grace, life, and salvation will be the soul’s. For if Christ is a bridegroom he must take upon himself that which are his bride’s, and he in turn bestows on her all that is his. (2008, p. 62)

In the words of Lutheran theologian Jack Kilcrease (2014), this bridal theology entails an “exchange of realities” that results in the believer’s salvation (p. 274). In the same way that earthly marriage bestows a new legal status upon the bride, spiritual marriage bestows a new moral and existential status upon the believer. As the final section of this article shows, this existential

transformation of the faithful believer into a Bride of Christ was taken up by Lanyer in order to describe the mutual relationship between Christ and his community of female followers.

While Luther's nuptial theology holds that the Bride of Christ is an individual Christian soul, allegorical interpretations of the Song of Songs produced by Jacobean Protestants tended to view the Bride in more collective terms. Indeed, exegetes writing in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot used the idea of the English Protestant Church as the Bride of Christ to propagate anti-Catholic sentiment (Clarke, 2011). For example, in his 1609 prose paraphrase of the Song of Songs, future Bishop of Norwich Joseph Hall (1609) describes the Bridegroom as praising the Bride for winning the commendation of "all those forraine assemblyes, which might seeme to be rivalles with thee" (as cited in Clarke, 2011, p. 24). In keeping with Luther, Hall understood the Bridegroom to impart a new moral status and spiritual authority upon his Bride; however, rather than configuring that status in terms of personal salvation, Hall presented the Bride's status in terms of political superiority. Of course, given the religious diversity of Jacobean England, theological variation was to be expected. Prior to Lanyer, several English Protestant writers eschewed the political angle taken by Hall and construed their relationships with Christ in personal, nuptial terms (Busfield, 2015, p. 132–134). For example, Calvinist writer John Hayward's widely circulated *Sanctuarie of a Troubled Soule* (1601) precedes *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in appropriating the language of the Song of Songs in order to describe Christ as a Bridegroom (as cited in Busfield, 2015, p. 133). Although Lanyer's poem draws on a collective bridal identity akin to Hall's political Bride, Lanyer's Bride also evokes a personal experience of the Bridegroom in keeping with Hayward's *Sanctuarie*. Indeed, what sets *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* apart from its Jacobean Protestant contemporaries is Lanyer's approach to the Bride's gender: while Hayward's book presents a non-gendered bridal soul ("it") (Busfield, 2015, p. 134), and while Hall's ecclesial Bride encompasses all Church of England members, no matter their gender, Lanyer makes explicit the femininity of the Bride through the textually produced union between Lanyer's female readers and Christ the Bridegroom.

Bernard, the Song of Songs, and *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

The remainder of this article discusses the manner in which Lanyer built upon both Protestant and Catholic hermeneutic traditions to incorporate both Church-as-Bride and soul-as-Bride interpretations of the Song of Songs into her communal vision of female spirituality. This section therefore turns to Bernard's commentary on the Song of Songs to better understand the two writers' hermeneutics as mutually revelatory. Bernard and Lanyer are congruous in their treatment of the relationship between Christian virtue and Christian community; each author connected this community with the mystical Bride's perfumed ointments. Lanyer introduced these ointments in an account of the discovery of Jesus' resurrection by a group of female followers (see Luke 23:55–24:9; Mark 16; Matthew 28:1–10):

The *Maries* doe with pretious balmes attend.
But being come, they find it to no end.
For he is rize from Death t'Eternall Life,
And now those pretious oyntments he desires
Are brought unto him, by his faithfull Wife
The holy Church; who in those rich attires,

Of Patience, Love, Long suffring, Voide of strife,
Humbly presents those oyntments he requires:
The oyles of Mercie, Charitie, and Faith,
Shee onely gives that which no other hath.
(Lanyer, *S.D.*, lines 1289–1296)

Partway through this account of the miracle at the tomb, Lanyer’s conception of the “oyntments” shifts from the balms and spices prepared by the “Maries” to the sensual perfumes described in the Song of Songs. These one-and-a-half stanzas mark a transition point in the poem as the narrative moves from a retelling of Christ’s passion into an interpretation of the Song of Songs. While the risen Christ of the Gospels no longer requires funeral ointments, the Bridegroom of the Song of Songs makes his desire for the Bride’s “pretious oyntments” clear: “How fair is thy love, my sister my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! And the smell of thine ointments than all spices!” (*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Song of Solomon 4:10). Thus, Lanyer’s identification of the Bridegroom with Christ is obvious. Less clear, however, is the identity of the Bride. In the above-quoted stanza, Lanyer identifies the Bride as “the holy Church;” however, towards the beginning of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Lanyer tells her dedicatee Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, that Christ is the “Husband of your Soule” (*S.D.*, line 254). It seems, then, that Lanyer has produced two distinct nuptial theologies—an ecclesial version more in keeping with Hall, and a personal, spiritual version more in keeping with Hayward and the Catholic mystics.

In order to understand how these two nuptial theologies are related, it is useful to consider Bernard’s thoughts on the Bride’s ointments. In his twelfth sermon, Bernard argues that the Bride, perfumed with the ointments of perfect virtue, must represent the Church, “[f]or what she lacks in one member she possesses in another according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Sermon 12.vii). In other words, while no single Christian is virtuous enough to be worthy of the Bridegroom, the Church is worthy as a whole. Bernard also clarifies that the ecclesial Bride and mystical Bride are not discrete entities, “for what all of us simultaneously possess in a full and perfect manner, [each] single one of us undoubtedly possesses by participation” (Sermon 12.vii). Similarly, Lanyer’s ecclesial Bride, who brings “oyntments” and “oyles” of virtue to the Bridegroom, “gives that which no other hath” (*S.D.*, lines 1294–1296). Clearly, both Bernard and Lanyer understand the Christian community to enable individual closeness with God. Lanyer further develops the symbiosis between the bridal Church and bridal soul in her most explicit reference to the Song of Songs, titled “A briefe description of his beautie upon the canticles.” Immediately following the women’s discovery of the resurrection, this blazon adopts the language of the Song of Songs to describe the beauty of the risen Christ:

This is that Bridegroom that appeares so faire,
So sweet, so lovely in his Spouses sight,
That unto Snowe we may his face compare,
His cheekes like skarlet, and his eyes so bright
As purest Doves that in the rivers are,
Washed with milke, to give the more delight;
His head is likened to the finest gold,
His curled lockes so beauteous to behold;

Blacke as a Raven in her blackest hew;
His lips like skarlet threads, yet much more sweet
Than is the sweetest hony dropping dew,
Or hony combes, where all the Bees do meet;
Yea, he is constant, and his words are true,
His cheekes are beds of spices, flowers sweet;
His lips like Lillies, dropping downe pure mirrhe,
Whose love, before all worlds we doe preferre.
(*S.D.*, lines 1305–1320)

Throughout this section, Lanyer uses first-person plural pronouns (“us” and “we”) to describe the Bride’s reaction to her Bridegroom. At first, these plural pronouns seem to indicate Lanyer’s commitment to the trope of the Church-as-Bride. However, as the final portion of this article shows, when read within the broader interpretive landscape of the poem, the plural language of the “briefe description” contributes to a vision of Margaret Clifford’s personal union with Christ as being enabled by communal spiritual support. In other words, the nuptial event engenders the participatory model of virtue outlined in Bernard’s twelfth sermon. By observing the Countess of Cumberland’s spiritual marriage with Christ, Lanyer’s readers become onlookers to the Bridegroom’s beauty, perfumed themselves with ointments of virtue.

Lanyer describes the union of Bride and Bridegroom in another extraordinarily allusive sequence following the “briefe description.” In this case, the Bride is specifically identified as Margaret Clifford. Akin to Bernard and Hadewijch, Lanyer portrays the marriage as a mystical, interpenetrative, spiritual mingling of Bride and Bridegroom. Lanyer begins by asking Cumberland to take the image of Christ’s beauty into the “holy shrine” of her heart (*S.D.* line 1327). She then entreats the Countess to embrace the crucified Christ. Finally, Lanyer praises the intensity and steadfastness of the Countess’s love for Christ:

Oft times hath he made triall of your love,
And in your Faith hath tooke no small delight,
By Crosses and Afflictions he doth prove,
Yet still your heart remaineth firme and right;
Your love so strong, as nothing can remove,
Your thoughts beeing placed on him both day and night,
Your constant soule doth lodge betweene her brests,
This Sweet of sweets, in which all glory rests.
(*S.D.*, lines 1337–1344)

The poet’s tact is evident in this stanza: by pairing the Puritan Countess’s love for Christ with her faith in him, Lanyer appeals to the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide*—that is, justification by faith alone—while also incorporating the highly sensual language of Catholic bridal mystics. Furthermore, although Lanyer does not explicitly link this stanza with the Song of Songs, as she does in the “briefe description,” Canticle motifs remain evident throughout. For example, while Lanyer’s reference to “Crosses and Afflictions” likely alludes to Margaret Clifford’s marital and

legal troubles,⁴ the stanza’s description of the Countess’s steadfast longing for Christ also associates Cumberland with the Bride of the Song of Songs. In the biblical Canticle’s fifth chapter, the Bride describes a dream in which she loses her Bridegroom and remains “sick of love” as she searches for him in the nighttime city streets (*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Song of Solomon 5:6–8). By praising the Countess’s faithfulness, Lanyer implicitly assures Clifford that her feeling of being separated from Christ is an illusion brought about by earthly hardships in the same way that the Bride’s separation from her Bridegroom is the product of a dream. Moreover, just as the Bride is joyfully reunited with her beloved in the sixth chapter of the Song of Songs, Lanyer suggests that the Countess will be joyfully united with her spiritual husband.

Beyond their shared hardships, Margaret Clifford and the Bride of the Song of Songs are linked in the above stanza through the image of the “Sweet of sweets” lodged between the breasts of the Cumberland’s “constant soule.” Indeed, with Bernard providing useful hermeneutic context, it becomes clear that Lanyer uses this turn of phrase to deepen the union between Christ and the Countess. The breasts of the Bride are of particular interest to Bernard, and he devotes a significant amount of space in his sermons to analyzing a line spoken by the Bride in the Song of Songs’ first chapter: “A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me; he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts” (*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Song of Solomon 1:13). It is almost certain that Lanyer’s “Sweet of sweets” alludes to this bundle of myrrh—a symbol that Bernard interprets as a reminder that Christ’s momentary agony “will become one future day an immense profusion of glory” (Sermon 43.I). Thus, beyond an association with the Bride of the Song of Songs, the Countess’s hardships also associate her directly with the Bridegroom. In fact, towards the beginning of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Lanyer produces an image of the Countess’s troubles that closely resembles Bernard’s “immense profusion of glory:”

He through afflictions, still thy Minde prepares,
And all thy glorious Trialls will enroule:
That when darke daies of terror shall appeare,
Thou as the Sunne shalt shine; or much more cleare.
(*S.D.*, lines 53–56)

In her study of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Catherine Keohane (1997) has proposed that this description of Cumberland’s suffering and eventual glory contributes to a portrait of the Countess as “surpassing Christ” (p. 384). While compelling, this reading overstates Lanyer’s alignment of the Countess with Christ. In fact, elevating Cumberland above Christ would have been detrimental to the community of Christian women for whom the poem was written. As literary scholar Gary Kuchar (2007) has shown in his discussion of *Salve Deus’* Mariology, Lanyer was not interested in configuring a “disembodied ideal” of female authority but, rather, in producing “a physically real, emotionally expressive, and intellectually engaged exemplum of female spiritual power” (p. 73). Thus, reading the Countess’s relationship with Christ in terms of a union produces a more fruitful vision of women’s spiritual power as rooted in a shared experience of suffering. By bringing Christ into the inner shrine of her heart and lodging him between the breasts of her soul,

⁴ George Clifford, third Earl of Cumberland, was notoriously unfaithful to Margaret, and the couple separated in 1600. Following the early deaths of the couple’s sons, George disinherited his daughter Anne Clifford and willed his estates and properties to his brother instead. Until her death in 1616, Margaret Clifford dedicated herself to the fight for Anne’s legal claim to her inheritance (Spence, 2015).

Cumberland becomes spiritually one with Christ. Moreover, as the coda to this article demonstrates, this union is both beneficial for the Countess and for Lanyer’s wider community of female readers. Like Bernard’s meditative sermons on the Song of Songs, Lanyer’s poetic account of the Countess’s marriage is an event that is meant to be shared with others.

Coda: The Wise Virgins and the Daughters of Jerusalem

Having shown how Lanyer engaged with diverse interpretations of the Song of Songs to develop an individually agentic vision of female spiritual power, this article concludes with an examination of the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1–13) to explore how Lanyer broadens this vision to include a wider community of women. In the parable, Jesus likens the kingdom of heaven to ten female wedding guests. Five are “wise” women who carry lamp oil, and five are “foolish” women who leave their lamp oil behind (*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Matthew 25:2). As the wedding procession approaches, the latter realize that they have run out of fuel and must leave the wedding to purchase more, thereby missing the arrival of the bridegroom. When they ask to be let back into the wedding, the bridegroom refuses because he does not know them. Jesus concludes the parable with this warning: “watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 25:13).

Lanyer’s engagement with the Parable of the Ten Virgins occurs outside of her volume’s titular passion poem and, thus, addresses a large group of educated female readers more directly than would have been possible in a poem with a specific dedicatee. In a prefatory poem titled “To all vertuous Ladies in generall,” Lanyer projects the parable onto “Each blessed Lady that in Virtue spends / *Your* pretious time to beautifie *your* soules” (lines 1–2, italics mine). By slipping from the third-person perspective of “each blessed Lady” into the second-person (“your”), Lanyer projects virtue directly onto readers and personalizes the experience of meeting Christ as a Bridegroom. When instructing readers to ready themselves for the wedding celebration, Lanyer extrapolates a speech to the wise virgins from Jesus’s parable to emphasize their virtue (in keeping with the “Maries” at the empty tomb) and their faith (in keeping with the Countess of Cumberland):

Put on your wedding garments every one,
The Bridegroome stayes to entertaine you all;
Let Virtue be your guide, for she alone
Can leade you to right that you can never fall;
And make no stay for feare he should be gone:
But fill your Lamps with oyle of burning zeale.
That to your Faith he may his Truth reveale.
(“To all virtuous ladies,” lines 8–14)

Although the virgins depicted in Matthew 25 are wedding guests, and the “wedding garments” described by Lanyer are not necessarily bridal attire, this stanza recalls Lanyer’s extensive description of Christ as a Bridegroom in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. Indeed, reading these two sections in tandem affirms that the plurality of Christ’s admirers in the “briefe description” implies *both* an ecclesial Bride *and* a group of onlookers who are privy to the mystical union of Christ with Cumberland’s soul (*S.D.*, lines 1305–1320). This subtle distinction between the onlookers and the Bride herself enables Lanyer to reach beyond Margaret Clifford and draw in a community

of virtuous women by associating female readers with the wise virgins, whose virtue and steadfastness grant them access to the Bridegroom. Clearly, the wise virgins are a key source for Lanyer’s vision of women’s spirituality; however, they are not the only biblical group of women emphasized by Lanyer as a model for a female, Christ-oriented, spiritual community.

To fully understand the significance of female community in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the motif of the Daughters of Jerusalem must also be considered. The Daughters of Jerusalem appear twice in the Christian Bible: first, as the third speaking party in the Song of Songs alongside the Bride and the Bridegroom; and, second, in the Gospel of Luke as female mourners to whom Christ instructs, “weep not for me, but weep for yourselves, and for your children” (*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Luke 23:28). In her passion poem, Lanyer dramatizes this moment to emphasize the affective nature of the daughters’ relationship with Christ:

These poore women, by their piteous cries
Did move their Lord, their Lover, and their King,
To take compassion, turne about, and speake
To them whose hearts were ready now to breake.
(*S.D.*, lines 981–984)

In this moment of “mutual compassion,” the daughters engage in a reciprocal relationship with Christ: their “piteous cries” move Christ to pity them and accept the burden of their sorrow as they receive his grace (Herrold, 2020, p. 380). In this way, each Daughter of Jerusalem becomes a bride in an exchange that resembles both the Countess’s experience of shared suffering with Christ and the Lutheran nuptial theology outlined in the first section of this article.

In the Song of Songs, however, the Daughters of Jerusalem are not brides but, instead, act as bridal companions. Thus, in the context of Cumberland’s marriage in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, the daughters can be understood as proxies for the poem’s readers, who witness the Countess’s union with Christ. In the Song of Songs, the Bride enlists the daughters’ help in searching for the Bridegroom after dreaming of his absence (5:8). In order to convince the daughters to assist her, the Bride offers this description of the Bridegroom’s beauty:

My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.
His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven.
His eyes are as the eyes of doves by the rivers of waters, washed with milk, and fitly set.
His cheeks are as a bed of spices, as sweet flowers: his lips like lilies, dropping sweet smelling myrrh.
His hands are as gold rings set with the beryl: his belly is as bright ivory overlaid with sapphires.
His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedars.
His mouth is most sweet: yea, he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, and this is my friend, O daughters of Jerusalem.
(*Authorized King James Version*, 2008, Song of Solomon 5:10–16)

This speech is mirrored in Lanyer’s “briefe description” of the risen Christ. When she describes Jesus’s “cheekes [as] beds of spices,” his eyes as “purest Doves,” and his hair as “a Raven in her blackest hew,” Lanyer signals that, for a brief moment, she, rather than Cumberland, inhabits the persona of the Bride (*S.D.* lines 1318, 1308–1309, 1313). Furthermore, by parroting the Bride’s words, Lanyer further blurs the lines between herself as speaker, Cumberland as subject, and the broader audience of female readers as onlookers. Like the wise virgins, Cumberland as well as Lanyer and her female readers are united with each other through their steadfast desire for Christ and, like the Bride and the Daughters of Jerusalem, are each united with Christ through each other’s assistance and encouragement. Thus, any ecclesial vision of the Bride that might be produced by this blazon (and by the volume as a whole) is inseparable from the reader’s personal relationship with Christ.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is important to remember that, in practical terms, Lanyer’s writing offered a means of obtaining influence. Indeed, a momentary return to Bernard indicates how *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*’s vision of individual-yet-communal spirituality might have empowered Lanyer’s personal quest for authority. Bernard figures the Bride as a mother and the Daughters of Jerusalem as maidens who “anticipate their own reward in that of their mother” (Sermon 23.II). When Lanyer conceives of herself as the Bride and her virtuous female readers as the Daughters of Jerusalem in the “briefe description” (*S.D.*, lines 1305–1320), she elevates herself within a feminine, ecclesial bridal body. Thus, in the same way that Bernard’s sermons enable his monks to “feed on bread rather than milk” (Sermon 1.I), Lanyer’s poems enable her to become a mother-priest who nourishes her readers with the “wholesome feast” of Christ’s passion and resurrection (“To the Lady Elizabeth’s Grace,” line 9). Ultimately, by providing female readers with an opportunity to “anticipate their own reward,” Lanyer works across denominational divides to create a vision of the Bride of Christ that is simultaneously ecclesial and individual. Using Cumberland as an example, Lanyer collapses interpretive differences regarding the precise nature of the marriage allegory and produces a vision of communal satisfaction wherein an individual soul’s marriage with Christ brings spiritual pleasure to many. Perhaps most importantly, Lanyer’s vision of female community is radically self-sustaining: each spiritual wedding produces a new set of wise virgins and daughters of Jerusalem who will one day become Brides themselves.

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