

## AEMILIA LANYER AND SHAKESPEARE'S HELENA

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### Introduction

Not much is known about the middle class women from the Elizabethan and Jacobean era who served the aristocracy and lived on its edge. Aemilia Lanyer and Shakespeare's Helena, a real woman and a dramatic character, are two such women. By considering one of Shakespeare's female characters alongside a real woman from the period who shared a similar social predicament, much may be learnt about the cultural position of women at the time, the limits upon women's agency, and the efforts by some women to pursue their aspirations and desires within these limits. By taking this New Historicist approach we may also learn something about Shakespeare in the context of his time. This article will look at Lanyer, who served as a companion to the Countess of Cumberland, and Helena from *All's Well That Ends Well*, who was a companion to the Countess Rossillion. It will examine their lives and choices and compare their situation with the aristocratic women they served. The article will look for parallels in the circumstances of all these women.

### Lanyer and Helena

Aemilia Lanyer lived on the outer margins of court life and its attendant power and wealth. Long known as A. L. Rowse's 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets, an assertion which is still the subject of scholarly debate, Lanyer was an important woman of her time, whether or not she was Shakespeare's mistress.<sup>1</sup> Rather than being known primarily as a possible candidate for the dark lady, Lanyer should be recognized as being an early and important feminist voice. Her long poetic work *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, which was published in 1611, the same year as the King James Bible (Woods 1993, xxx), when she was forty-two years old, was in many respects both groundbreaking and innovative.

Lanyer took the conventional genre of religious poetry, a genre considered respectable for women to write in, and reinterpreted Biblical stories from the women's point of view by giving the women in these stories a voice. Other women writers of the period, such as Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, similarly 'relegated to the margins of discourse' because of their gender, were also using the cover of conventional genres to say subversive things (Hannay 1990, 91). Presenting a defence of women, Lanyer argues in 'The Passion Of Christ' that men, not women, bear full responsibility for Christ's crucifixion. For Lanyer, women have a stronger identification with Christ's suffering because, like them, he also suffered under aggressive male institutional power (Clarke 2000, xxxi-xxxiv). In the section titled 'Eve's Apologie in defence of Women', Lanyer states that Eve was less to blame for the Fall than Adam, who knew better. Lanyer dedicated *Salve Deus* to a community of educated and intellectual aristocratic women. These dedicatees are nine specific women: Queen Anne, Princess Elizabeth, Lady Arabella Stuart, and the Countesses of Kent, Pembroke, Bedford, Cumberland, Suffolk, and Dorset; the work is also dedicated 'to all vertuous Ladies in generall' and 'To the Vertuous Reader'. As such, by seeking their patronage, according to Susanne Woods, 'she may have been the first English woman to...claim for herself a professional poetic voice' (Woods 1993, xv). Although this is debatable, as there is also the case of Isabella Whitney who, unusually for a woman of the period, had two of her works printed - *The copy of a letter* was published as early as 1567 (Clarke 2000, xiii) - Woods is correct in saying that 'this unapologetic creation of a community of good women for whom another woman is a spokesperson and commentator is

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<sup>1</sup> See for Aemilia Lanyer as the dark lady: A.L. Rowse, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved. A Modern Edition with Prose versions, Introduction and Notes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Macmillan, 1973) pp. xxxv-viii and René Weis, *Shakespeare Unbound* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007) pp. 169-184; for against see Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977) p.549, and David Bevington, 'A.L. Rowse's Dark Lady' in Marshall Grossman, ed. *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998) p.10.

unusual and possibly unique in early seventeenth-century England' (1993, xxxi). Lanyer uses her poetic voice to write for women about women. In this respect Lanyer's work is extraordinary. Elaine Beilin stresses this point, stating she was 'the first woman seriously and systematically to write epideictic poetry, the poetry of praise, about women' (1987, 177).

*Salve Deus* was written by Aemilia Lanyer while she lived at the royal manor of Cookham with Margaret Russell Clifford, the Countess of Cumberland, and her daughter, Lady Anne Clifford, during some or all of the period between 1603 to 1605 (Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 29). Lanyer's work is also innovative in that it includes what is believed by many scholars to be the first country-house poem, 'The Description of Cooke-ham' (Lewalski 1991, 88; Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 117). This was published before Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst', and Lanyer deserves the acknowledgement for having brought a new genre into English literature.<sup>2</sup> Margaret Clifford spent time with her daughter at Cookham, part of her brother's estate, as a retreat while she was estranged from her errant husband, George, the third Earl of Cumberland; he reconciled with his wife and daughter shortly before his death (Grossman 1998, 136). Lanyer wrote *Salve Deus* at Margaret Clifford's behest and credits her with being both her model and her inspiration (Lewalski 1991, 100). As a member of the minor gentry, Lanyer would have spent time with the Cliffords as a companion, and would be classified as a middle class or gentlewoman servant. Part of her duties may have included tutoring Lady Anne and using her musical abilities (Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 31).

It is in this role, as a companion to a countess, that parallels can be drawn between Aemilia Lanyer and Shakespeare's Helena from *All's Well*. Helena is also a companion to a countess and is from the middle class. She is the orphaned daughter of a well-known doctor. Like Lanyer, she is educated, witty and intelligent; like Lanyer, Helena has ambitions beyond her social class. Her low station is in fact unique among Shakespeare's heroines (Bevington 2004, 372) and this is what makes her so unusual a character and one whose actions raise such strong opinions. The egalitarian views expressed in Lanyer's poetry are acted upon by Helena, even though she is painfully aware of her own lowly position, as she aims to marry Bertram, Count Rossillion, with whom she has fallen deeply and obsessively in love. Held in high estimation by others and thought of as a 'jewel' (5.3.1), to Bertram she is nothing more than a servant in his mother's household. He tells her, 'be comfortable to my mother, your/mistress, and make much of her' (1.1.77-78). Bertram views this subservient role to be her station in life (Leggatt 2003, 25). For Helena, however, he is the equivalent of 'a bright particular star' (1.1.88) and is way above her.

It is interesting to note that both these gentlewoman companions, Helena and Lanyer, have been linked to Shakespeare's sonnets. While Lanyer has long been debated as the possible 'dark lady', Helena is now, based on recent scholarship, being viewed as the male voice of the sonnets. Helena's self-abnegating and obsessive love for Bertram echoes the language of Shakespeare's sonnets, and if we suspend gender stereotypes, Helena can, in fact, be seen as the male voice of the sonnets. Recent scholars have looked at the affinities between the language Helena uses and that of the 1609 sonnets, particularly sonnets 36, 57, and 87 (Waller 2007, 33; Duncan-Jones 2009). Helena's letter to the Countess, in the form of a sonnet, blames herself for Bertram's departure to fight in a war. Katherine Duncan-Jones has drawn parallels between Helena's letter blaming her 'Ambitious love' (3.4.5), her writing 'He is too good and fair for death and me' (3.4.16), and the words of Sonnet 87: 'Farewell thou art too dear for my possessing'. Nowhere else in Shakespeare do we see such self-abnegation and obsessive love as in Helena and in the male speaker of the sonnets (Duncan-Jones 2009).

To understand Aemilia Lanyer's situation and her extraordinary accomplishment in producing a poetic work like *Salve Deus* after a life of hardship, it is necessary to take a brief look at her biography. Aemilia Lanyer was born in London in 1569, and was the daughter of Queen Elizabeth's court musician Baptist Bassano, a Jewish Venetian, and his common-law wife Margaret Johnson. Her father died when she was only seven and her mother when she was just eighteen. With her

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<sup>2</sup> 'Penshurst' written 1612, published in Jonson's *Works* (1616). Lanyer's work was entered into the Stationer's Register on 2 October 1610, and published in 1611.

mother's death Lanyer was left with no immediate family, her only sister having died earlier. Around this time Lanyer became the mistress of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, Queen Elizabeth's cousin and Lord Chamberlain, a man who was forty-five years older than her. At the age of twenty-three and pregnant, she was married for convenience to Alfonso Lanyer, a court musician like her father. Shortly after, she gave birth to a son whom she named Henry, and a few years later to a daughter, Odillya, who died in infancy (Woods 1993, xv-xxv).

From the diaries of Simon Forman, the astrologer whom Lanyer consulted, we learn of her relationship with Lord Hunsdon and with her husband:

(May 17): She was paramour to my old Lord Hunsdon that was Lord Chamberlain and was maintained in great pride; being with child she was for colour married to a ministrel.

(Sept 2): She hath been favoured much of her Majesty and of many noblemen, hath had great gifts and been much made of - a nobleman who is dead hath loved her well and kept her. But her husband hath dealt hardly with her, hath spent and consumed her goods. She is now very needy...

(Rowse 1997, 99-100)

Lanyer had consulted Forman because of her frequent miscarriages and on the possibility of her husband obtaining a knighthood for his service in the Earl of Essex's military campaign. It was very important to her to see her family position elevated, but this never happened. Her regret is evident in being married off to a man like Alfonso, who spent all her money, and in losing her relationship with the powerful man who provided her with access to court.

Lanyer spent two periods of her life at the homes of two different countesses and talks of both with fondness and respect. Like Shakespeare's Helena, after her father's death Lanyer spent time in the household of a countess, in her case the Countess Dowager of Kent, Susan Bertie. This is believed to be from the age of seven to twelve, with Lanyer returning to her mother when the Countess remarried (Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 15). In her dedication 'To the Ladie Susan,' in *Salve Deus*, Lanyer calls her 'the Mistris of my youth. / The noble guide of my ungovern'd dayes' (1-2). It is here and during this period that Lanyer would have received an education and, in spite of her father's early death, had continued contact with court circles (Woods 1993, xviii). Helena too respects her 'honorable mistress' (1.2.136), the Countess Rossillion, to whose care her father has entrusted her after his death. She trusts her enough to confide her love for Bertram in her, saying, 'I know I love in vain, strive against hope' (1.2.198). The Countess's reaction is not one of disdain at Helena having feelings for her son, but instead one of comfort and support. The Countess has maternal feelings for Helena and because of her 'virtue,' and in spite of her lack of family position, can see her as a possible daughter-in-law. In the play it is the relationship between these two women that is the most explored.

Helena and Lanyer, as young, marriageable girls, must have been around the same age at this stage in their lives. It is interesting to see the choices they made. Lanyer, without the support and shelter of her own family or that of an older aristocratic woman, became the mistress of a much older, very well connected and powerful man. With her limited prospects, Lord Hunsdon must have been an option too enticing to refuse. Helena, by contrast, although also without an immediate family, has the support and collusion of the Countess in her desire to marry Bertram. Like Lanyer, Shakespeare's humble heroine expresses feminist ideas. She wants to lose her virginity 'to her own liking' (1.1.151), and her insistence on a woman's right of sexual choice and the ownership of her own body is a radical idea for a woman of her time (Waller 2007, 32). She moves from a feeling of despair at her status, 'that we the poorer born, / whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes' (1.1.182-183) to determination saying:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie  
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky  
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull  
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.  
(1.1.216-219)

Helena realizes that after the loss of her father, she has to make her own future. Perhaps, along with being in love with Bertram, she wants to be part of this grand family, because it is where she has received love and kindness from the Countess. She pursues and marries the reluctant Bertram with determination—as she says ‘her intents are fixed’ (1.2.229)—and claims him as a reward for healing the King from his illness. While Lanyer uses the cloak of religious poetry to state her views, Helena uses the cover of medicine, the healing art considered respectable for women, to pursue her desire for Bertram. In this way both women use covers for what they really intend. When Bertram refuses to consummate the marriage, Helena goes as far as using a bed trick to finally win him. Helena’s low station and her insecure position as a companion contribute to her actions. Living on the edge of society, both Helena and Lanyer have few options in their lives; they take actions and make decisions they may not have, had they the protection of a family or personal wealth.

In looking at Lanyer and Helena, we can also learn something about Shakespeare in the context of his time. As a player on the fringes of the court, Shakespeare must have also shared a similar sense of social insecurity as Lanyer and his fictional Helena. While Shakespeare shows some ambivalence in his plays towards social mobility, both in Helena’s character and in that of Edmund in *King Lear* (who pursues it with malevolence), he personally did much to elevate himself and his family to the gentry. This is evident in the procurement of the coat of arms, which enabled Shakespeare to sign himself as a gentleman and which was granted to his father John Shakespeare in 1596, some twenty-five years after he had first applied for it. A year later Shakespeare purchased New Place, believed to be the second largest house in Stratford. This establishment of his family’s social position must have also helped to alleviate the anxiety he undoubtedly felt while growing up seeing his father’s failing fortunes (Holland, *ODNB*).

By the time Aemilia Lanyer arrived at Cookham to be a companion to the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter Anne Clifford, she had already suffered many hardships. She had been dispensed with by Lord Hunsdon after she became pregnant, and had been married off to Alfonso who had dealt ‘hardly’ with her, having put her in debt. She had also experienced several miscarriages and suffered the loss of her only daughter. Disappointed in Alfonso’s prospects, she was, as Barbara K. Lewalski has describes her, ‘a gentlewoman in decline’ (1991, 87). For Lanyer, the time at Cookham was a refuge from life’s harsh realities and a return to the aristocratic glory she had known in her youth (Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 31). Cookham, as a home under a woman’s charge, represented a refuge from the male dominated world, and Lanyer saw her time there with Margaret and Anne Clifford as an idealized world. It was a place dear to the Countess of Cumberland, and one where social differences between the poet and the Countess were ‘subdued by an idealized order of exercise, contemplation, and conversation’ (Woods 1999, *Lanyer* 117). In this environment Lanyer was inspired to write *Salve Deus*; she found a poetic voice that argues against class privilege and calls for women’s religious and social equality (McBride). In her dedication to Lady Anne Clifford, Lanyer expresses her egalitarian views:

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,  
Before some one of worth did honour win.

(33-40)

For Lanyer it is 'virtue' that makes a person superior, not their aristocratic birth. In *All's Well*, the Countess thinks of Helena as 'a maid too virtuous' (3.2.31), but Bertram cannot get past Helena's low station to see this quality in her. He tells the King, whose life Helena has just saved using the medical knowledge her father left her: 'She had her breeding at my father's charge. /A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain/ Rather corrupt me ever!' (2.3.114-116)

In her attempt to win Bertram even after he has been coerced into marriage with her at the King's order, Helena has to look to other women for help and support. This community of women includes the Countess, the Florentine Widow Capilet, Diana, and Mariana. It is only through their combined agency that Helena is successful. According to Gary Waller, Shakespeare surrounds Helena with a support group of women and uniquely in *All's Well* affirms the collective power of women's solidarity (2007, 35). After being reunited with Bertram at the end of the play, it is to the women that Helena turns, first to the Countess and then to the Widow Capilet, recognizing their shared bond and their success (Waller 2007, 48).

Women were connected by their shared oppression regardless of their rank (McGrath 1992, 337). Lanyer and the Countess of Cumberland shared a bond of harsh treatment by men. Just as Cookham had been a refuge for Lanyer, it was the Countess's retreat from her difficult marriage. The valedictory 'Description of Cooke-ham' reflects both the Countess's sadness at leaving Cookham for a deathbed reconciliation with her husband, and also Lanyer's sadness at leaving this idealized world. In spite of her aristocratic position, Margaret Clifford had also been 'hardly' dealt with by her husband. George Clifford was notorious for his affairs with other women, and at some stage had begun to live apart from his wife (Holmes, *ODNB*). The Countess had been found dispensable by the Earl, as Lanyer had been by Lord Hunsdon (McGrath 1992, 336). Inspired to write in this background, Lanyer called on women to support each other and not count on men. Like Helena, Lanyer looks to a community of women for support; in her case it is the community of women she formed in her dedication. As a writer she looks to this community for poetic and religious inspiration, and for patronage.

After leaving Cookham, it is not known if Lanyer wrote anything else. Her life after her husband's death paralleled Margaret Clifford's in some aspects, in spite of their very different positions in society. Both women fought legal battles with their husbands' families for inheritance or what they believed was their rightful due. On his death George Clifford's title and estate went to his brother, Francis Clifford, as he had no sons. Not wanting to break the entail, he did not even leave Anne, his only child, the estates, castles and titles he could have. Some of those properties constituted Margaret Clifford's jointure, and until her death in 1616 she fought continuous legal battles as she struggled for her daughter's rights. Anne Clifford, vowing never to give up her lands, continued the fight—the protracted legal dispute dominated her life—finally obtaining her inheritance in 1643 after her uncle died with no male heirs (Spence, *ODNB*).

Women, whether they held the high station of a countess or the humble one of a gentlewoman's companion, suffered as widows because of the values and norms of a patriarchal society. After her husband's death in 1613, Lanyer gave her brother-in-law the grant of the monopoly for the weighing of hay and straw in London, which had been granted to Alfonso by William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Lanyer did this with the understanding that she would receive a portion of the profits, but instead had to take her brother-in-law to court to try and recover them. In 1635, at the age of sixty-two, she was still fighting legal battles; having endured the loss of her son two years earlier, she stated that she was 'in great misery having two grand-children to provide for'. Lanyer died in 1645, aged seventy-six - it is not clear whether she received the full amount due her (McBride). Position being no protection, Shakespeare's fictional Countess also suffers as a widow under a patriarchal system. Her only child, Bertram, is taken from her under the system of wardship to be the King's ward. She articulates her grief at this: 'In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband' (1.1.1-2).

Another parallel that can be drawn connecting these real and fictional women is their shared belief that God is on their side in a male dominated world. Helena, striving to win Bertram, thinks that with her father's legacy of medical knowledge she will have help from above (Bevington 2004, 372) and believes 'that his good receipt/ Shall for my legacy be sanctified/ By th' luckiest stars in heaven' (1.3.242-244). In Lanyer's 'imaginary vision' God testifies for women and takes their side (Lewalski 1991, 102). In 'To the Vertuous Reader' Lanyer states: '[God] gave power to wise and virtuous women/ to bring downe their [men's] pride and arrogance' (32-33).

## Conclusion

In a patriarchal society women were connected through their shared experience of oppression. According to Lewalski, Lanyer re-writes patriarchy by revising the fundamental Christian myths of Eden, the Passion of Christ and the Communion of Saints by putting women at their centre (1991, 106). In her profeminist voice Lanyer attempted to redeem all women, as Beilin has stated, by redeeming Eve, the first woman, and by identifying 'feminine virtue with Christ's virtue' (1987, 207). Aemilia Lanyer recognized and articulated in her work that women's strength lay in a community of women. What is extraordinary is that she as a real gentlewoman companion and Shakespeare's Helena, a fictional companion, both came to this same conclusion, and looked for support in a community of women.

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