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‘A Christal Glasse for Christian Women’: Meditations on Christ’s Passion in the Devotional Literature of Renaissance Women

By Frances James¹

Abstract

This essay explores the complex relationship between women’s devotional writing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and the female claim to the authority to represent Christ’s body in textual form. I focus on the literary devices which female authors used to represent Christ in their writing and attempted to establish their own authorial voices within the means of public expression available to them. I advance a reading of Katherine Parr’s *The Lamentacion of a synner* (1547) and Elizabeth Tudor’s *A godly medytacyon of the christen sowle* (1548) as early Renaissance attempts to reconcile female authorship with the necessity of claiming divine authorisation and inspiration to write. I argue that these texts also express a longing for what Katherine Parr calls a ‘booke of the crucifixe’ (C.ii.), through which it would be possible for women to speak with a legitimate, individual female voice that did not require the authorisation of a patriarchal God. I then propose that Aemilia Lanyer’s poem *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) presents a more confident externalisation of Christ’s body which authorises Lanyer to claim the *corpus Christi* for her female readers and assert her own voice by textually representing Christ. Lanyer uses the devotional text to claim the legitimising power of the male gaze by reversing its direction and focusing the gaze of her female reader on the body of Christ. I conclude that Lanyer depicts Christ’s body as a ‘christal glasse’ in which women may realise their own unmediated, undiluted voice, rather than attributing their words to a divine source and calling God to turn his redeeming gaze on the to-be-looked-at female object.

Keywords: Aemilia Lanyer; Renaissance writing; Christianity

Introduction

Less than a year after the reign of Elizabeth I began, a bitter controversy erupted which seriously threatened the stability of her Religious Settlement of 1559 and its newly formed compromise over religious reform. This heated situation was brought about by what John Jewel, the newly created Bishop of Salisbury, described in his letters as a ‘little silver cross’, a small crucifix that Elizabeth kept on the altar in the Chapel Royal, despite other such ornaments having been removed from London churches in August 1559 and publicly burned. When the new Queen returned from a summer progress in late September 1559 and found that the crucifix in her private chapel had also been removed, she ordered it to be reinstated, producing a scene of uproar witnessed by the Spanish ambassador Bishop de Quadra, who recorded that ‘so great was the crowd at the palace that disturbance was feared in the city’. While Elizabeth’s chaplains were outraged, Elizabeth insisted on retaining her crucifix, and by February 1560 the dissent among her

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bishops was such that Jewel wrote that ‘the crosses of silver and tin, which we have every where broken in pieces, must be restored, or our bishoprics relinquished’ (qtd. in Haugaard 185-89). Ultimately, a compromise was brokered which allowed Elizabeth to keep the ‘little silver cross’ in her chapel without forcing her bishops to reinstate crucifixes in their own churches. The Queen, then, had risked the leaders of her church uniting against her and undermining her reign during its first year over one small image of Christ’s body on the cross (Haugaard 198). This incident graphically illustrates the importance Elizabeth placed on the ability to contemplate Christ’s crucified body, an ability which other women had recognised as vital and empowering for centuries.

For female mystics in the early medieval period the *corpus Christi* had become a powerful devotional object; representing Christ’s body enabled these women to legitimately transfer their religious experiences from a private, contemplative space into an external textual form that entered the public sphere, an opportunity otherwise denied them by a society which attached a ‘stigma of dangerous visibility’ to women who attempted to claim a public voice through authorship and publication (Hull 18). Such women were able to claim the authority to represent Christ’s body textually, however, through the ‘call-to-write vision’, a divine command which could be used to ‘provide legitimisation to the public for the communication of a woman’s visions’ (Voaden 55). If a woman received the authorisation for, and even the content of, her writing directly from God, then her right to make her words public was seemingly unquestionable, and so female authors working in the Renaissance were later able to draw on this established sense of divine endorsement, if not the claim to a direct command from heaven to write, in order to publish devotional works in post-Reformation England. However, women’s relationship to the devotional work was complicated due to their dependence on a voice that was not ultimately theirs, but was given to them by God in order to speak publicly. The differentiation between an internal devotional experience, of which a woman could have complete possession, and the channelling of such an experience through the authorising voice of another, an inherently male God whose word was most often transmitted through the patriarchal institution of the Church, can thus be seen as a source of anxiety in the writing of female Renaissance authors.

The aim of this essay is to explore this complex relationship between the necessary internalisation of female devotion and the authority of the body of Christ as a means by which women could make their words public through the external medium of the devotional text. It will focus particularly on the literary devices through which female authors claimed this right to represent Christ and attempted to establish their own authorial voices within the means of public expression that were available to them. A body of research exists investigating the effect of cultural and religious limitations on female authorship and the establishment of a legitimate public voice for women, contributed to by Suzanne Hull, Margaret Patterson Hannay, Lesley Smith, and Jane Taylor, among others. The intention of this essay, however, is to focus on women’s relationship with, and representations of, Christ’s Passion in Renaissance devotional texts. In this way, I will show how the portrayal of Christ’s body functioned as a means via which women attempted to reconcile their own authorial voices with a genre which claimed its authority through the voice of another. Katherine Parr’s *The Lamentacion of a synner* (1547) and Elizabeth Tudor’s *A godly medytacyon of the christen sowle* (1548) can be viewed as early Renaissance attempts to reconcile female authorship and divine

authorisation through the use of the tropes of medieval women's devotional literature. At the same time, these texts express a longing for what Parr calls a 'booke of the crucifixe' (C.ii.), through which it would be possible for women to speak with a legitimate external voice that is not entirely realised in these texts. Aemilia Lanyer's poem *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) can be regarded as a culmination of Parr's hopes and a more confident externalisation of Christ's body; Lanyer lays claim to the *corpus Christi* for her female readers and asserts her own voice through the textual representation of Christ. Lanyer uses the devotional text to claim the legitimising power of the male gaze by reversing its direction and focusing the gaze of her female reader on the body of Christ. Lanyer, then, depicts Christ's body as a 'christal glasse', in which women may recognise and realise their own 'public' voices.

'Beholde Lord howe I come to the': Katherine Parr and Elizabeth Tudor

Katherine Parr published her prose work *The Lamentacion of a synner* in November 1547, only months after the death of her husband Henry VIII. Published at the 'desire of the righte gracious ladie Caterin duchesse of Suffolk' (A.i.), a manuscript of the text had previously circulated among the ladies of the court, intended for use as a meditational guidebook for noblewomen (King 50). Despite Parr's emphasis on her Protestant conversion and her denunciation of the 'bisschoppe of Rome' as an 'evyll usurpoure of Christes power' (A.iii.), the text's concern with 'blindnesse' and the redemptive power of the ability to see relates it to the medieval Catholic meditational practice of *compositio loco*. This internal contemplative practice is linked by Louis Martz with the Ignatian devotional tradition of carrying out 'Spiritual Exercises', which involve the 'vivid imagination of a scene by means of the memory and the senses; methodical analysis of the subject by reason; and colloquy with God' (25). Individuals were thus encouraged to construct images of religious events, such as the crucifixion, in order to form closer spiritual connections with God (25). The title page of the printed text of 1547 declares Parr's purpose in writing it as 'bewayling the ignoaurance of her blind life' (A.i.), and Parr asserts that her lack of vision precluded her from attaining salvation as it led her to 'obfuscate and darken the great benefite of Christes passion' (A.iv.). In this way, Parr aligns the individual's ability to perceive a clear image of Christ's suffering on the cross with the 'true faith' that brings redemption.

Parr sites this image of the Passion in an extended metaphor of the 'booke of the crucifixe', which she instructs her reader to study, as God 'hath most compendiously written therein, all truth, profitable and necessary for our salvacion' (C.ii.). This central image of Parr's text can be seen to represent the anxiety in her work surrounding the legitimacy of the female voice and the uneasy relationship between internal contemplation and external textual transmission. It is clear that Parr does not present her own book as the redemptive 'booke of the crucifixe', as she does not give her image of a spiritual text a physical incarnation, defining the reading of this book as 'inwardlye to behold Christ crucified upon the crosse', rather than viewing her own external manuscript (C.ii.). Parr's invocation of St. Paul's command that women should 'be obedient to theyr husbandes, and . . . keepe silence in the congregacion', which occurs towards the end of the text, also exposes a seam of underlying doubt about the legitimacy of her own book, negating the possibility that her work could embody the saving grace of the image of Christ's Passion (G.v.). The image of the 'booke of the crucifixe' contains within itself

uncertainties about the validity of an authentic female voice and anxieties about channelling the 'female' text through the voice of another. Janel Mueller has identified this image as not being original to Parr, arguing that it was first employed in a sermon given by John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. In this sermon Fisher describes 'the two planks of Christ's cross' as the 'boardes' of the book of the crucifix, on which its leaves, the 'members of his most precious and blessed body', are spread, while the skin of Christ's body serves as the parchment on which 'the lines to be read are the marks of the whiplashes, the red letters his blood, the blue letters his bruises' (32-3). Parr's lack of confidence in the concept of an 'authentic' female voice in which to write such a book of salvation is indicated, to some extent, by her need to derive the central image of her own text from the work of another writer. It is further compounded by her insistence on the inherently internal nature of such a book. Parr affirms that in contemplating an inward image of the crucified Christ, the beholder 'may see . . . the bewtie of the soule, better than in all the bookes of ye worlde' (C.ii.). In order to make a truly faithful and legitimate record of the female experience of Christ, this record must be kept internally so that the integrity of the female voice is not compromised. Parr does not have confidence in the ability of the physical text to authentically express the female voice; an 'internal' text, on the other hand, allows the beauty of the female soul to be seen clearly, as it preserves a woman's selfhood accurately without external dilution. However, Parr's emphasis on the necessity of *compositio loco* is complicated by the underlying longing that the *Lamentacion* expresses for the existence of a physical 'booke of the crucifixe', in which the female experience of Christ's Passion could be accurately recorded. Parr laments that 'we be yet so carnall & fleshly' that a spiritual text is not sufficient to restrain our sinful physical impulses and desires. She wishes, instead, that 'we had the love of god printed in oure hartes' as it would 'kepe us backe from running astray' (G.v.). This image of the book of the crucifix being imprinted on the heart may seem to connote an internal text, but it remains deeply physical, its letters ingrained on the heart as if it were paper. Furthermore, the specific invocation of 'printing' suggests an intensely tangible mechanical process from which a permanent physical impression is produced. This would be a concrete text that the reader would actively engage with through participatory meditation, as a 'bit to holde . . . in' the 'unbridled coltes' which we resemble in our headstrong and fleshly nature (G.v.). The sense remains, at the end of the *Lamentacion*, that Parr's 'booke of the crucifixe' has yet to be realised, and her text, despite its clear anxiety over the legitimacy of external spiritual contemplation for the female voice, contains a deep-rooted longing for her spiritual book to find a physical incarnation in which an authentic female voice could be usefully realised.

Despite the anxiety surrounding Parr's ability to externally represent a true image of Christ's Passion – 'For I am so ignorant blinde, weake & feble, that I cannot bring my selfe out of this intangled & wayward mase...of synne' (B.ii.) – she does not hesitate to command and direct God's gaze, which sees everything clearly, and, as Helen Wilcox notes, shines an 'intense spotlight on her physical and spiritual being' (10). This brings into unbearably sharp focus Parr's own failings as 'a sinner, sycke, & grievously wounded' (B). Parr does not, however, contravene the normative social function of the gaze, which typically takes the form of a male look directed at a female object: to gaze, after all, as Jonathan E. Schroeder observes, 'implies . . . a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze' (208). Parr is not able to

entirely reverse the gaze herself, but she does take control of an ultimately powerful, divine gaze at a moment when she is spiritually laid bare before God by directing exactly where his gaze should fall, declaring boldly 'Beholde Lord howe I come to the' (B). The gaze remains intra-diegetic, as Parr directs it inwardly onto the internal image of Christ's Passion she has constructed in her spiritual 'booke of the crucifixe'. Despite the knowledge that she 'deserved to be cast in to hell fier' (B.ii.), due to her blindness and inadequate faith, Parr still has the confidence to instruct God to 'Cast me not oute of thy sight' (B) and to keep his redeeming gaze focused on her. Parr's command of the gaze thus indicates that she has begun to take steps towards claiming female authority to externalise women's experiences of God in an authentic public voice, but has yet to entirely realise this authority due to the inherent doubt in the text over the female ability to legitimately claim this power. In her command of the gaze, then, she still constructs herself as its inferior object, even if she has the ability to determine where it falls.

Elizabeth Tudor's devotional text *A godly medytacyon of the christen sowle*, a translation of Marguerite de Navarre's *Le Miroir de l'Âme Pécheresse*, also occupies this somewhat anxious and uncertain position of a text in transition, caught between an insistence on the internalisation of the female religious experience and an appropriation of the female right to an authentic external voice. That Elizabeth's text should embody a similar status to the *Lamentacion* is not surprising considering that the eleven-year-old princess undertook the translation in 1545 as a New Year's gift for her stepmother, Katherine Parr. Parr herself may, as Susan Snyder asserts, 'have suggested the *Miroir* to the young Elizabeth', as she herself admired Marguerite de Navarre's 'commitment to humanism and religious reform' (453-54). The history of the text itself also embodies this status of internal conflict, as after being published at Alençon in 1531, Marguerite's text was condemned by the Sorbonne two years later in response to her removal of some reactionary professors from the university, until the institution was forced to offer an apology and retraction due to the intervention of her brother, Francis I of France (Prescott 62). Furthermore, when Elizabeth's translation was printed in 1548, her authorial voice was compromised by the agenda of her publisher, John Bale, who printed it enclosed by his own preface and conclusion in order to praise what he perceived as Elizabeth's Protestant zeal in the hope of encouraging more radical religious reform under her brother, Edward VI (King 52). Thus, *A godly medytacyon* can be seen to be affected by the same anxiety over its own status as 'female' devotional texts such as Parr's *Lamentacion*; this is reflected in the complex relationship between internal and external representations of the female experience of Christ in Elizabeth's text.

A godly medytacyon opens with the same profession of blindness to God's redeeming grace with which Parr's text commences. Elizabeth stresses the necessity of looking inwardly to find the root of her failings, as if she tries to look outwardly for the right path to follow 'a branche cometh and closeth myne eyes, and in my mouthe doth fall when I wolde speake'. Likewise, her external voice is negated if she attempts to speak of her struggle: 'If my sprete be sturred for to harken, than a great multytude of leaves doth entre in myne eares, and my nose is all stopped with flowers' (B.iii.). Although she does not explicitly use the image of the 'booke of the crucifixe', Elizabeth compounds this emphasis on inward contemplation by asserting that she has broken the promise made at her baptism that she 'alwayes through faythe in thy passyon shuld fele the mortyfycayon of my fleshe & dwelle alwayes with . . . the crosse' (B.iv.), as she has

not faithfully internalised this image of Christ's suffering. Although Elizabeth invokes God's gaze retrospectively, praising God who 'beholdynge my blyndnesse . . . dedyst open the waye of my salvacyon' (B.v.), she does not assertively direct it on herself, and negates any possibility of an empowering reversal of the gaze at the end of the text by asserting the futility of attempting to perceive the entire nature of God. She likens her view of divinity to looking at the sun, when 'one only sparcle of hys light doth blynde the eye . . . But aske the eye what he hath seane, and he wyll saye that he hath beholden the whole bryghtnesse of the sunne' (E.iv.). The text closes with an even stronger negation of women's ability to externally represent their relationship with God through a legitimate female voice by invoking St. Paul's teaching that women should be silent in church, as Elizabeth declares that she 'wyll holde my peace & bestylle, folowyng . . . hys teachynges' (E.v.).

Elizabeth introduces a conflicting assertion of women's right to externally represent Christ, however, through her use of the medieval trope of the fluidity of divine gender in her translation. Parr's description of Christ's submission to his crucifixion, which he met with 'humilitie pacience, liberalitie, modestie gentlenes' (C.v.), could be seen to exemplify merits commonly associated with femininity. In 1630 Diana Primrose selected similar qualities to inform her series of poems *A Chaine of Pearle*, virtues which she recommended to 'All Noble Ladies and Gentlewomen' (qtd. in Travitsky 110) and praised in the late Elizabeth I herself. Parr makes it clear, however, that these are 'divine vertues' (C.v.), and her representation of Christ's body remains fixed as masculine. While Elizabeth first employs the *sponsa Christi* motif in order to claim a privileged relationship with Christ, constructing him as the masculine counterpart to a series of specifically feminine connections as she represents herself as Christ's 'mother, daughter, syster and wyfe' (B.v.), this conventional series of relationships is problematised by the introduction of a more fluid representation of Christ's gender. After stressing Christ's masculinity by constructing him as a son, father, brother and husband to herself, Elizabeth abruptly introduces the concept of a potentially gender-encompassing Christ who, because 'he ded joyne hymselfe unto our fleshe', allows Elizabeth to be 'bolde to call him syster and brother' (B.v.). Elizabeth thus draws on the medieval tradition of female mystics representing the fluidity of Christ's gender in order to emphasise the potential femininity of the *corpus Christi*, and thus claim a privileged understanding of Christ's body that authorised them to textually represent it. Caroline Bynum has discussed the fundamental alignment in medieval Christianity of Christ's body with the condition of femaleness, which she sees as rooted in 'medieval texts . . . [that] saw the Church as the body of Christ. And *ecclesia* was, of course, feminine, as a noun and as an allegorical personification', showing that women were implicitly aligned with Christ's body due to their femininity (1991, 93). Although Elizabeth does not offer an image of a completely feminised Christ, she can be seen to infer that Christ's body represents and contains both masculinity and femininity, offering women an affinity with Christ equal to that shared by men.

This sense of the fluidity of divine gender is compounded by what Anne Prescott has identified as a deliberate alteration from Marguerite de Navarre's text. In a reference to God's paternal love for the author as a daughter, the acclamation 'O what swetnesse doth proceade out of that paternyte' (C), as Prescott notes, 'shows clearly that the line refers to a father's love for a daughter', gendering God and his incarnation in Christ as

masculine (69). However, in the preceding line Elizabeth alters the French text, which correspondingly praises ‘Père, fille, o bienheureux lignage!’ (ll.350), to ‘*mother*, daughter, O happy kynrede’ (C), thereby constructing the divine relationship as occurring between a mother-God and a daughter. In this way, Elizabeth configures women’s relationship with God in terms of the uniquely feminine bond of maternity. Prescott conjectures that this alteration was symbolic of Elizabeth’s own confusion and anxiety over such relationships, as she ‘had cause to feel within her very marrow the pain and ambiguity of family ties’. That said, *A godly medytacyon* also marked an early attempt by Elizabeth to lay claim to an authentic female voice within the limitations of a prevailing ideology of female silence (68). The affirmation ‘Seynge that I do heare the[e Christ], I wyll heare nothyng that letteth me from . . . thy voice. Syth that I may frely talke with the, I wyll comen with non other’ (D.v.) could be regarded as the beginning of a realisation that in women’s ability to represent Christ lies the source of their ability to claim an unmediated voice for themselves, a voice that does not have to be presented as the word of God to be legitimate. If Christ embodies femininity, then it is their own female voice which they find in him, one which allows them to ‘frely talke’ about Christ. The texts by Elizabeth Tudor and Katherine Parr represent the longing for this voice and the dawning of the realisation that claiming it might be possible; but in the work of Aemilia Lanyer this voice would be brought into being through the creation of an external ‘booke of the crucifixe’.

Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* as the ‘booke of the crucifixe’

Aemilia Lanyer’s work can be regarded as the physical incarnation of Parr’s ‘booke of the crucifixe’, developing the techniques which Parr and Elizabeth Tudor began to explore, and reworking tropes from medieval religious texts in order to lay claim to Christ’s body and a legitimate female voice with which to represent it. Whereas Parr created a spiritual text through an internal image of Christ’s crucifixion, and directed God’s redeeming gaze onto this image, Lanyer offers up her own text as the physical incarnation of this spiritual book which can be outwardly contemplated in the mode of the medieval tradition of participatory meditation. Unlike the *compositio loco* technique employed by Parr, participatory meditation stemmed from Augustine devotional practices and required a far more active, external engagement with Christ’s crucified body in meditations on the Passion. Aelred of Rievaulx employed this technique in his writing as he urged his readers to use his descriptions of the Passion to imagine that they were actually present at the event, so that they could become more emotionally involved in the episodes they imagined witnessing. Aelred believed that instead of an inward ‘remote gaze’, an ‘active and tactile involvement with the body itself’ was necessary to experience Christ’s torment fully (Bestul 40). Aelred’s language is highly sensory; the meditator is not only able to look on, but also to touch, Christ’s body. He writes that ‘wounds have been made in his body . . . in which, like a dove, you may hide while you kiss them one by one. Your lips, stained with his blood, will become like a scarlet ribbon and your words sweet’ (qtd. in Bestul 39).

Lanyer makes it clear from her first dedicatory poem that her own text contains the redeeming image of the crucified Christ, rather than prompting her reader to inwardly construct such an image. ‘Here’, she instructs Queen Anne ‘may your sacred Majestie behold / That mightie Monarch both of heav’n and earth’ (43-44). The imperative ‘Here’

locates the image of Christ firmly within the printed letters of the page itself, offering them up to the scrutiny of the monarch. This adamant assertion is repeated several stanzas later in order to stress the legitimacy of Lanyer's text: 'For here I have prepar'd my Paschal Lambe, / The figure of that living Sacrifice' (85-86). Again, then, Lanyer invokes the power of her words to contain and embody Christ. Having established that it is her words which construct an image of Christ, Lanyer goes on to stress the link between the physicality of her text and its representation of Christ's physical body in the poem dedicated 'To the Ladie Lucie, Countesse of Bedford'. Here, she depicts Christ's body as a text which can be read. In a close echo of John Fisher's metaphor of the textual properties of Christ's body, the source for Parr's image of the 'booke of the crucifixe', Lanyer emphasises the visual signification of the *corpus Christi*, '[i]n whose most pretious wounds your soule may reade / Salvation, while he (dying Lord) doth bleed' (13-14). This implies that as the Countess of Bedford reads Lanyer's text she will actually be interpreting the bloody marks on Christ's body.

The effect of Lanyer's externalisation of the contemplation of Christ's Passion by locating Christ's image within her own text is to complete the process of reversing the gaze that Parr partially accomplished; in offering her book up as the external focus for meditation, Lanyer requires her readers to gaze on the external image of Christ's body that she presents, rather than contemplating their own internal copy. Lanyer commands Queen Anne directly to 'Look' at Christ in her text as a 'Mirrour' of perfect humanity and divine love (37), while this reversal of the gaze is reinforced in the dedicatory poem addressed 'To the Lady Arabella'. Here, as Lanyer informs her addressee, the attainment of salvation lies within Arabella's own power to direct her gaze. Lanyer instructs her authoritatively to 'cast your eyes upon this little book' (9), as all that is required is for the Lady to 'spare one look, / Upon this humbled king' (11-12) inscribed in Lanyer's text and Christ will 'embrace / Your beauteous soul and fill it with his grace' (13-14). In the *Salve Deus* proper, Lanyer compounds this explicitly feminine claim upon the gaze by offering up an image of Christ's 'eyes with teares, his body full of wounds' (1159), and showing that the power of salvation that is available to the possessor of the gaze transcends even the power of her words to represent Christ's body. By looking at Christ the reader may see 'more than I can write; / And here both Griefe and Joy thous maist unfold' (1171), transferring the authority to interpret the marks inscribed on Christ-as-text from author to reader.

Lanyer's confident claiming of the gaze, and the conferral of its redeeming power onto her readers, has consequences on the object of the newly reversed gaze, the *corpus Christi* itself. Since the dynamics of the gaze are heavily gendered, Lanyer's reversal of the gaze, in which Christ becomes the 'gazed-on', has the effect of compounding the fluidity of divine gender which Elizabeth Tudor began to touch on, reconstructing Christ's body to contain markedly feminine qualities. The process of Christ's feminisation under the female directed gaze is initially facilitated by Lanyer's identification of attributes in Christ that were most commonly upheld in the early modern period as qualities that expressed an ideal femininity, as Christ submissively surrenders his body to Pilate. Lanyer identifies and foregrounds Christ's 'virtue, patience, grace, love, piety' (958) – attributes which she aligns with feminine worth in the opening dedications of the text. As Elaine Beilin notes, the dedications to the seven noblewomen could be seen to refer to the 'seven spiritual virtues which emanate from the seven gifts

of the Holy Ghost and lead to the seven beatitudes', associating the shining examples of femininity to whom the poems are addressed with these spiritual gifts which included 'fear of God, piety . . . humility, benignity, discretion, strength [and] mercy' (188).

Under the gaze of Lanyer's readers, Christ's body is physically reconfigured as a manifestation of feminine beauty, 'his head . . . likened to the finest gold' (1311), and his 'lips like lilies, dropping down pure myrrh' (1319). Lanyer's representation of Christ's body under the female gaze is perfectly echoed by William Gouge's 1622 image of ideal femininity, as he depicts a woman who is worthy to be the 'spouse of Christ' as one whose 'eies are said to be as *doves eies*, her *lips to drop as honie combs*' (112). Lanyer portrays Christ using almost identical imagery, suggesting that under the gaze of the female reader he has come to embody this feminine ideal as 'his eyes [are] so bright / As purest doves that in the rivers are / Washed with milk' (1308-10). His lips, moreover, are 'like scarlet threads, yet much more sweet / Than is the sweetest honey-dropping dew / Or honeycombs' (1314-316). Lanyer extends this feminising effect of the gaze further towards the end of her poem by employing the medieval trope of Christ as mother, which Caroline Bynum has identified in the tendency of female writers to associate Christ's suffering on the cross with the birth pangs a mother must endure for her child (1982, 131). In some medieval paintings of the crucifixion, such as Qurizio of Murano's *The Saviour* (1460-1478), Christ's wounds were even depicted as breasts, clearly indicating his nurturing, maternal female qualities. Lanyer echoes Julian of Norwich's alignment of Christ's blood with the life-giving sustenance a mother provides for her child from her own body by depicting the blood flowing from the crucified *corpus Christi* as 'Sweet nectar, and ambrosia, food of saints / Which whoso tasteth never after faints' (1735-1736), and also invokes the language of maternity by representing this divine sustenance specifically as 'Sweet milk, wherewith we weaklings are restored' (1738), inferring a mothering relationship between Christ and the Christian souls that his 'Swift sugared currents . . . salvation brings' (1731). This depiction of Christ as mother is the final stage in the gradual reconstruction of Christ's body under the gaze of Lanyer's female readers, as Christ first comes to embody qualities of virtuous feminine behaviour, then the physical markers of feminine beauty, and finally the physiologically and socially feminine role of motherhood.

Lanyer's accomplishment of this reversal of the gaze can be linked to a new Protestant meditational style emerging at the beginning of the seventeenth century, as in 1603 'the first important Protestant treatise on meditation' was published, Richard Rogers' *Seaven treatises* (Lewalski 148). Although Rogers denounced Catholic methods of meditation as a 'ridiculous' practice of restricting 'men to a daily taske of reading some part of the storie of Christs passion', his text was influential in advocating the meditational method of application to the self which was a distinguishing feature of Protestant devotion (252). While this form of devotion could be seen to have the same aim as the medieval Catholic tradition of participatory meditation, producing 'experiential knowledge' of the divine subject being contemplated, the Protestant method of application to the self involved tracing the interrelation between the devotional text and the Christian's own experience, calling for 'the application of the subject to the self' (Lewalski 149). This process of application to the self can be seen to inform the reconstruction of Christ's body into an ideal form of femininity in Lanyer's work, as under the female gaze Lanyer's textual representation of Christ, the subject for devotion,

is related to the experience of those Christians who are contemplating this subject, the 'vertuous ladies' (3) who constituted Lanyer's intended audience for her text. The textual framework through which this process of application to the self is accomplished is informed by the typically Catholic focus on Christ's physical body and the medieval trope of Christ as mother. Such tropes grant Lanyer and her readers access, as women, to the text of Christ's body through Catholic allegorical traditions which align the *corpus Christi* with femininity. As Lewalski summarises the process of Protestant meditation, the 'Christian's experience is to comment upon the text, and the text upon his [or her] experience' (155). Lanyer's text similarly readjusts itself to accommodate the reader's experience as it unfolds, as this process facilitates a female claiming of the gaze and the textual representation of Christ's body is gradually reconstructed and feminised. Thus, in Lanyer's poem, rather than having the 'booke of the crucifixe' inscribed within the meditator as an internal image of Christ's Passion, the reader is instead inscribed onto the physical, external text of Christ's crucified body: 'For by his glorious death he us enrolls / In deep characters, writ with blood and tears, / Upon those blessed everlasting scrolls, / His hands, his feet, his body and his face' (1724-727).

'A christal glasse for Christian women': The Countess of Cumberland and the Body of Christ

The seemingly direct relationship between the 'vertuous ladies' who form Lanyer's intended audience for the *Salve Deus* and the *corpus Christi* embodied in her text is complicated by an additional visual layer created in the text by Lanyer's proposed patroness Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland. The Countess occupies a transitional space between the interior and exterior of the text as she is both represented within the poem and addressed externally as one of its anticipated readers; she is thus able to look on Lanyer's representation of Christ simultaneously from inside and outside the text. Lanyer constructs the Countess as another onlooker present at Christ's Passion alongside the daughters of Jerusalem and the Virgin Mary, privileged women who are able to perceive Christ's divine nature with 'Eagles eyes' (991). This contrasts sharply with the clouded gaze of Caiaphas' 'Owly eies', which 'are blind, and cannot see' (712). Lanyer holds up Christ's broken body with 'joints dis-joynted' (1161) and 'members torne' (1163) to the Countess's gaze within the text, assuring her that '[t]his with the eie of Faith thou maist behold' (1169). However, while it is the representation of Christ's body in Lanyer's text that constitutes the 'Booke' (1351) which the Countess of Cumberland's soul desires that her 'eyes continually may looke' (1352) upon, Lanyer complicates the Countess's relationship to the text as she declares that the 'perfect picture' of Christ's body has been '[d]eepely engraved in that holy shrine', which is located in the Countess' 'heart . . . / Environed with love and Thoughts divine' (1325-28). If the Countess contains Christ's image within herself, and those who read Lanyer's text are not, therefore, gazing on an external textual embodiment of Christ, but are, in fact, merely being allowed to 'reade his true and perfect storie' (1331) in the Countess of Cumberland's own words, this would seem to prevent Lanyer's intended female audience from directly possessing Christ's body. If, after all, it is not the *Salve Deus* itself that functions as the 'Glasse' in which Lanyer has 'prepar'd my Paschal lambe, / The figure of that living Sacrifice' (85-86) for her readers to gaze upon, but the Countess's 'most worthy minde' (32) that is the 'mirrour' (31) in which Christ's image may be looked upon, then Lanyer cannot be seen

to have progressed at all from Parr's internal image of Christ's body, as she has merely been urging her readers to regard another such image – one contained within the Countess's mind.

Lanyer does not, however, simply uphold the Countess of Cumberland as a paradigm of ideal Christian femininity. It was, after all, a common early modern practice for male authors to praise their wives in print, as in Philip Stubbes' memorial tract of 1592, entitled *A Christal Glasse for Christian Women*, in which he presented a 'rare and wonderfull example, of the vertuous life & Christian death' of his wife Katherine who 'was a mirrour of woman-hood' (44). Instead, the Countess is constructed as an intermediary between Christ and the 'vertuous ladies' to whom the *Salve Deus* is addressed, allowing other women to view Christ's body through her own privileged gaze in order to bring them closer to a physical experience of the *corpus Christi* and to lend authority to their possession of this power to look on Christ. Lanyer accomplishes this by drawing on the medieval devotional trope of the 'dieu d'amors', as she can be seen to depict the Countess as a personification of 'Minne' or 'Lady Love', a figure borrowed from medieval romance. Linked to the medieval *Brautmystik* trope, which employed 'nuptial and erotic imagery to describe the soul's union with God' (Bynum 1982, 141), the depiction of Christ as a 'dieu d'amors' has been identified by Barbara Newman as a conflation of the *Brautmystik* and the secular 'Fine amour' of medieval romance. This device stemmed from the work of Gérard of Liège, a thirteenth-century author who wrote the *Règle des Fins Amans*, a devotional guidebook in which he 'wove passages from Augustine and Bernard, vernacular love lyrics, and the Song of Songs into a single *ars amatoria*' (140). Gérard instructs his reader that '*Fin amant* is the name for men and women who love God *finement* . . . that is, purely, with all our heart, with all our strength, and with all our virtue' (qtd. in Newman 141). Christ is, then, depicted as a courtly lover and the writer as his *amie*, striving to deserve and possess this lover by undergoing tests of fidelity and sacrifice. 'Minne', the pinnacle of perfect love for Christ, is personified as Lady Love in Gérard's text, the ideal to which the *fin amant* aspires in order to achieve communion with Christ's divine love. In the *Règle des Fins Amans* this personification of Minne can be seen to function in a similar role to the Countess of Cumberland's intermediary position in the *Salve Deus*.

Newman describes the figure of Minne as standing 'in a relation of specularity with the writer' as 'an alter ego' or projection of an ideal love for Christ, while the Countess also stands in a specular relationship with Lanyer's readers as she both views Christ's body as it is held up to her gaze in the text and also reflects Christ so that others may gaze on him (154). As feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray have noted, the quality of specularity 'involves both looking and reflecting, deriving from the Latin *specere*, "to look", and *speculum*, meaning "mirror"' (qtd. in Moi 130), a quality which the Countess's status as both a viewer and a reflector embodies. As the figure of Minne, the Countess is therefore able to bring the reader closer to Christ and offer a more encompassing gaze than the reader would have access to without her mediation, just as in the *Règle des Fins Amans* Minne functions to separate 'only the subject and object to effect a more conscious union', and not to distance the *amie* from Christ. Furthermore, laying claim to Christ's body through an intermediary does not lessen the authenticity of the female voice with which it is textualised precisely because Minne is an 'alter ego' or idealised projection of the author seeking to gain access to Christ. In the *Règle*, if the

writer is possessed by Minne 'it is in the act of becoming Minne, it is because . . . [the writer] ontologically *is* Minne', striving to embody this projection of a perfect alternate self who is able to achieve communion with Christ (Newman 155). Lanyer is thus able to forge her own public voice to represent Christ's body through the mediation of the Countess of Cumberland, as it is with her own voice that she textually constructs this empowering intermediary.

The parallels between the Countess of Cumberland and the medieval figure of Minne also have consequences for the way in which the *corpus Christi* itself is represented beneath the Countess's gaze. Lanyer's use of the medieval fusion of the *Brautmystik* trope and the language of secular romance allows the Countess to occupy the positions of both bridal and courtly self vis-à-vis her divine beloved, and thus the body of Christ is transformed into an erotic object beneath the Countess's gaze. As the bridal self or 'Deere Spouse of Christ' (1170), the Countess's experience of Christ is governed by the rhythms of desire and fulfilment, meeting and parting; as Lanyer observes 'Of joys and griefes both equall thou dost prove' (155). Her love for Christ is confident and content, a 'constant faith like to the Turtle Dove' (157), and a mild and fruitful union in which she is occupied by 'maternal' duties, providing a spiritual example for those who look to her for guidance, 'Spending her yeares, moneths, daies, minutes, howres, / In doing service to the heav'nly powres' tirelessly and unflinching (175-76). As the courtly self, however, romantic desire for Christ, rather than patient service, governs the Countess's relationship with her beloved, and the unfulfilled courtly self undergoes trials and sacrifices in an attempt to be worthy of Christ's love. Thus the strength of the Countess's desire for Christ has required her to renounce all earthly pleasures as she is drawn 'from caring what this world can yield' (154) while she '[c]ontinues combat' (158) against evil and temptation in order to satisfy her desire for Christ's love; his 'all-reviving beautie' (33) is all that can satisfy her 'sad Soule, plunged in waves of woe' (34). Lanyer depicts the Countess's love for Christ through the imagery of the knight of the medieval romance battling to win the hand of the beloved, presenting sin as a 'many headed monster' (1490) against which the Countess wages 'warre' (1489) and 'every day fresh combates does begin' (1492). She does not, then, wait passively for Christ the bridegroom to claim her, and so under the Countess's gaze Christ's body becomes the erotic object on which this active and unrelenting desire is focused.

Conclusion: 'Syth that I may frely talk with the, I wyll comen with non other'

From medieval female mystics, who could only produce devotional texts through the legitimising power of the divine 'call to write' vision, to Katherine Parr, who created an image of an external 'booke of the crucifixe' but could only internalise her own textual representation of Christ's body and invite God's gaze to inwardly penetrate her, Aemilia Lanyer can be regarded as the vital link in a lineage of female authors attempting to claim a voice with which to represent Christ's body. The progress that Lanyer makes from the medieval female mystics, who received their words directly from God and had to write in the voice of a divine other if they were to write at all, is epitomised by an ironic concluding paragraph to her work entitled 'To the doubtfull Reader'. In this paragraph Lanyer adds, almost as an afterthought, that she received the title of her poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, 'in sleepe / many yeares before I had any intent to write in this / maner' (3-5). However, it was only once she had completed her own composition of the

entire text that she recalled this ‘significant token’ (8) of divine intervention and decided to use it as the ‘fittest Title I could devise for this Booke’ (10). The splicing of this paragraph onto her completed work seems suggestive of a parody of the attribution of a female writer’s words to divine authorship, a technique upon which medieval female mystics were utterly dependent and early Renaissance female devotional writers, such as Parr and Elizabeth Tudor, could not entirely detach themselves from, but which Lanyer is able to dismiss as disappearing ‘quite out of my memory untill I had written / the Passion of Christ’ (5-6).

This essay has attempted to establish a female lineage of women meditating on Christ’s Passion through the common literary tropes that were available to them and which they were able to use in different ways in their texts. The argument in favour of such a sense of progression in their ability to represent Christ’s body does not, however, depend on Lanyer having read or even been aware of the texts of her predecessors, Parr or Elizabeth Tudor. Nor, indeed, does this essay seek to suggest any direct connection of deliberate intertextuality between the three central authors discussed, but rather to propose that the variations in the responses of each female writer to the same image of Christ’s crucified body can speak powerfully of how each woman attempted to relate Christ’s body to her own experience of being female and to authentically represent the connection she perceived between Christ’s physical incarnation and her own femininity. Critics such as Lyn Bennett have concluded that the intervening decades between the late 1540s, when the texts by Parr and Elizabeth Tudor were published, and 1611, when the *Salve Deus* first appeared in print, offered Lanyer the opportunity to take a radical proto-feminist stance in her work that would have been unthinkable to her literary predecessors, and to create a text that presents ‘a specific resistance to the recollection of the past as *history*’ (Bennett 178). Even so, Lanyer was still writing within the boundaries of socially acceptable forms of female literary expression, claiming her authority to speak through the same subject matter as Parr and Elizabeth Tudor. Lanyer can, however, be seen as one of an ‘increasing number of women writers who were inserting themselves into established dialogues, negotiating positions from which to claim authority or define self, and changing the very forms that identity would take’ (Matchinske 7). Writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, she succeeds in working within an established female tradition of contemplating the Passion to textualise a woman-Christ – a Christ who contains the qualities of an ideal femininity and is the exclusive possession of the female gaze that perceives this femininity. Katherine Parr and Elizabeth Tudor anticipated the ability of women to see aspects of themselves within the ‘crystal glasse’ of Christ’s body and to reconstitute Christ’s body to reflect their own feminine experience by gazing on the *corpus Christi*, but Aemilia Lanyer was able to bring what they tentatively began to explore to fruition, aided by the development of a Protestant meditational style which reversed the Catholic tradition of participatory meditation and permitted application of the divine subject to the self. In creating a textual representation of Christ’s body that is determined by the effects of a uniquely female gaze, rather than attributing her words to a divine source and calling God to turn his redeeming gaze on the to-be-looked-at female object, Lanyer claims an unmediated female voice with which to speak of Christ – and of women.

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