

ENGL 312

May 2, 2012

As always, this is really well argued and a pleasure to read. You've teased out some important ambiguities and implications for this poem and Lanyer's techniques. Well done!

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Establishing Superiority through a Defense of Eve

The infamous story of Adam and Eve is one with a very influential and prominent affect on both literature and simply humanity. The interpretation of the story is fairly universal in that Eve is typically perceived as being the weaker sex that caused the fall of mankind. This understanding can be seen in such significant works as Milton's *Paradise Lost* as well as societal justifications for the inherent inferiority of women. Aemilia Lanyer's poem entitled "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women", unapologetically, perhaps ironically, challenges this cut and dry explanation for the notorious biblical story. It is important to note that during the seventeenth century, when this work was written, the word "apology" could be understood in two very distinct ways. One is the traditional sense of "pleading off from a charge or imputation" (OED, apology, n., def. 1). The other sense, used less formally, is that of "justification, explanation, or excuse, of an incident or course of action" (OED, apology, n., def. 2). This double meaning seems to be meticulously intentional and essential to interpreting Lanyer's poem. Good! While the initial tone of the poem seems to suggest a traditional plea for forgiveness, the arguments she

makes throughout the work instead suggest a defense of her gender. Lanyer uses the irony present in the Garden of Eden story not only to excuse the female sex, but also to establish her credibility as a female author during the seventeenth century. Excellent intro, hat sets out your argument and what's at stake!

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Despite what the title of the poem might suggest, Eve is not actually the speaker of the poem. Instead, Lanyer has the poem's premise centered on a letter written by Pontius Pilate's wife, begging her husband to spare Jesus' life. Through the process of making this plea, she also comments on the ill treatment women receive at the hands of men, presumably justified by a misinterpreted biblical passage. The narrator compares the persecution of women to Pilate's decision to condemn an innocent man. She pleads, "Open thine eyes, that thou the truth may'st see /... Let not us women glory in men's fall, / Who had power given to overrule all" (11; 15-16). Lanyer uses the hindsight of what would in this context be largely accepted as truth, that Jesus was in fact not only an innocent man but the son of God, to give credibility to her argument. The ambiguity of "man's fall" allows this passage to work in reference to both the fall of Adam, and the forthcoming fall of Pilate. Because of the manner in which she uses the persecution of women as a metaphor for the persecution of Jesus, or vice versa, she makes the two one and the same. Thus, if one accepts Jesus' innocence as truth, one must also accept the innocence of women. Fantastic ideas!

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In that same vein, her use of Pilate as representative of Adam, as well as man in general, has very heavy implications. One is, as she states, that he "had power given to overrule all" (16). Just as Pilate could have changed the course of the fate of Jesus, Adam had the power over Eve and therefore control to change the fate of mankind. However, perhaps more significant is the simple fact that Lanyer puts women in the role of Pilate's wife, who apparently had more

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knowledge than her husband about the nature of Jesus, as well as puts the gender in the position of Jesus himself thus making them all martyrs. ← there's a lot in this sentence. I might suggest that you break it up, unpack the ideas, and let them each shine separately rather than being thrown together in a really complex sentence. Men on the other hand are representative of Pilate, one of the most significant archetypes of evil, as the savior's death is historically put in his hands. The associations made between women with knowledge and men with power become essential as the poem progresses. Good!

Despite the subtle comparison of womankind to the faultless son of God, Lanyer does not entirely excuse Eve. Instead she plays upon the stereotypes that already exist towards women and claims that she had good intentions but was perhaps weak, thus allowing her to be deceived. In spite of this flaw, Lanyer is still very sympathetic towards her "mother Eve" (19). She claims that, "But she, poor soul, by cunning was deceived; /No hurt therein her harmless heart intended" (29-30). In choosing words such as "poor" and "harmless", she once again fixes the image of Eve as having been a victim rather than having her action be characterized by the common interpretations of gluttony, pride, or ambition. Good (this is the first time I've read Lanyer after our satire unit, so part of me wonders whether she isn't overplaying women's "weakness" in a lighter version of the *reductio ad absurdum* we discussed) She does not however offer Adam this same type of pardon. She goes on to blatantly condemn Adam for his actions claiming that he "cannot be excused" (33) because he was the self-proclaimed stronger of the two sexes and should have been able to refuse temptation, therefore "greater was his shame" (36). This claim leaves the male readership with a seemingly impossible conundrum. If they view themselves as stronger than woman, then they are at fault for the fall of man. To deny fault would require a submission to weakness that would put them on the same level as women. Lanyer uses this irony

to create a situation without a favorable outcome for men, further pardoning her own sex.

Wonderful indication of why your readings are important!

With the argument concerning the irony of men's assertion of dominance over women firmly established, Lanyer is then able to extend that idea and address the heart of her argument regarding knowledge. Pilate's wife implies that Adam failed not only in a sense of power, but due to the fact that his rationale for forsaking God was less logical than his female counterpart: "If Eve did err, it was for knowledge sake; / The fruit being fair persuaded him to fall: / No subtle serpent's falsehood did betray him; / If he would eat it, who had power to stay him" (53-56). Adam's motivations were in response to the beauty of both the apple and Eve, whereas the persecuted Eve faltered due to an intellectual quest for knowledge. By making this distinction using archetypes for the inherent nature of the genders, Lanyer is essentially claiming that woman are not only equal, but superior in terms of intellectual pursuits. Men on the other hand are easily manipulated by beauty; a claim that is once again subtly implying a power that women possess over men. Good!

Lanyer pushes this claim even further by playing on a common justification for female inferiority. Because Adam was made by God, followed by Eve being made from Adam, it is often suggested that this proves that women are inherently inferior in that they were derived from a man. Without Adam, Eve could not exist thus affirming the natural and right nature of her submission to him. Lanyer then uses this logic and turns it upside down to once again accuse Adam. She claims that "If any evil did in her remain, / Being made of him, he was the ground of all" (65-66). However, she does not use this logic only to pardon the female sex, but also to offer it its own sense of superiority. If superiority is determined by derivation, then intellectually women must be superior since Adam only came to knowledge because of Eve: "Yet men will

boast of knowledge, which he took / From Eve's fair hand, as from a learned book" (63-64).

Furthermore, if woman's evil is derived from man, it too must be inferior, just as Adam's knowledge must be inferior to Eve's. Interesting!

The fact that every layer of Lanyer and Pilate's wife's arguments seems to address knowledge in some way, this issue then comes to the forefront of the poem. It is clear throughout the work that Pilate's wife has more knowledge than her husband when it comes to the consequences of what he is about to do. One of the many justifications Lanyer uses for Eve is that her pursuit of knowledge was a more noble reason to sin than Adam's simple desire. Finally, by the logic of a common justification for male superiority, women must be more advanced when it comes to knowledge. These claims put in context with the fact that Aemilia Lanyer was a woman writer in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it would allow for a more personal interpretation of the defense found in the poem. Lanyer may be defending woman as a whole, but the emphasis put on knowledge seems to suggest that she is also urging the literary world and her readership to acknowledge her credibility as a woman and a writer. Excellent reassertion of your unique view! This is done not only by the argument itself that women were the origin of man's knowledge, but also in the manner in which she is able to construct such an argument. She argues for the recognition of female intellect not only in her writing, but in how it is written.

Works Cited

“apology, n.” The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. OED Online. Oxford University Press. 30 April 2012<<http://www.oed.com.www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/view/Entry/9332>>

Lanyer, Aemilia. "Eve's Apology in Defense of Women" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Eighth ed. Vol. B. New York, NY, 2006. 1317-319. Print.