

## Refashioning English Estate as Feminine Paradise: Aemilia Lanyer's Country-house Poem "The Description of Cookham" (1610)

This article proposes to investigate an elegiac poem, "The Description of Cookham", which Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645) wrote and published in 1610-11 at the request of her patron Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland – the first estate poem in English literary history and the first written by a woman. Property assumed a central role in the concepts of self and society, particularly as around the sixteenth century it began to be thought of in territorial and possessive terms. Lanyer's poem, inserted in her proto-feminist work *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, celebrates the existence and, at the same time, mourns the loss of a unique paradise – a feminocentric *locus amoenus*. The legal system of Patrilinear descent is overturned in the text by the creation of a separatist feminine community. Cookham metonymically represents not the political integrity or good stewardship of its owner, but the subjectivities of its female guests and chronicler. In manipulating features of Petrarchism, the pastoral and the country-house genre, Lanyer fashions herself as a nature poet by using material that traditionally had silenced women.

Keywords: Lanyer, poetry, Renaissance, geography, gender, paradise.

## Remodelando Propriedade Inglesa como Paraíso Feminino: Aemilia Lanyer e o *Country-house Poem* "The Description of Cookham" (1610)

Este artigo propõe-se investigar um poema elegíaco, "The Description of Cookham", que Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645) escreveu e publicou em 1610-11 a pedido da sua patrona Margaret Clifford, Condessa de Cumberland, constituindo o primeiro *estate poem* na história da literatura inglesa e o primeiro escrito por uma mulher. A propriedade assumiu um papel preponderante nos conceitos de sujeito e de sociedade, particularmente a partir do século XVI, altura em que se começou a pensar em termos territoriais e possessivos. O poema de Lanyer, inserido na sua obra proto-feminista *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, celebra a existência e, ao mesmo tempo, lamenta a perda de um paraíso único – um *locus amoenus* feminocêntrico. O sistema patriarcal de herança é revertido neste texto através da criação de uma comunidade feminina separatista. Cookham representa metonimicamente não a integridade política ou a boa administração do seu dono, mas as subjectividades das suas convidadas e da sua cronista. Ao manipular aspectos do Petrarquismo, do pastoral e do género *country-house*, Lanyer apresenta-se como poeta da natureza, fazendo novo uso daquelas convenções que tradicionalmente serviram para silenciar as mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Lanyer, poesia, Renascença, geografia, género, paraíso.

*All I ask is the privilege for my masculine part the Poet in me, [...] If I must not, because of my Sex, have this freedom, but that you will usurp all to your selves, I lay down my Quill ... for I am not content to write for a Third day only. I value Fame as much as if I had been born a Hero ...* Aphra Behn, 1687

Any discussion of early modern female authorial agency, and female heroism, is necessarily complicated by the unstable and fluid nature of subjectivity and textual production in sixteenth and early seventeenth-century England. Nevertheless, Janet Clare states that

during this period “The writings of women, [...] , had at least one common aspect: women writers represented in their work *an alternative culture* which ran alongside the dominant culture, and in writing as some did with a view to publication, they were transgressing boundaries” (1996: 1, my emphasis). The simple act of writing, and of pursuing publication, sent a woman outside her domestic realm into the broader world of public conversation. Writers like Aphra Behn knew that publishing one’s work, and eventually attaining poetic fame, displayed a desire to venture beyond the world traditionally assigned to women. As Elaine Hobby observes, women’s works formed “less than one percent of the total of texts published in the period” and it was not only a question of access to education but of *propriety*, “Because a woman’s honour was still her most valuable asset, any potential attack on her virtue could be socially catastrophic” (Hobby 1988: 2-7). And, as Anita Pacheco suggests and Behn again knew, “A woman’s public speech or writing became symptomatic of sexual promiscuity”, so the poetess quickly became associated with the punk or prostitute (1998: 7-8). Besides being traditionally a male domain, poetry was held up as an ideal, intangible art form that should not be sullied with notions of money and publication rights. Thus, the rare woman who ventured to publish had to appease her critics by paradoxically reinforcing their belief in her inherent inferiority and apologizing for her rash brazenness in attempting to have her work published.<sup>1</sup>



Picture 1. Miniature portrait of ‘Unknown Lady’ by Nicholas Hilliard, 1593

These observations are particularly pertinent in the case of an early modern woman poet who willingly put herself and her reputation on the line for the chance to participate in the exclusive world of knowledge and public discourse. Aemilia Lanyer (1569-1645), gentlewoman in decline, daughter and wife of court musicians and cast-off mistress of Queen Elizabeth’s Lord Chamberlain,<sup>2</sup> comes to our attention because in 1611 “she did something extraordinary for a middle-class woman of the early seventeenth century: she published a small volume of religious, epideictic verse,<sup>3</sup> the *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*”, (Grossman

<sup>1</sup> Poets such as Katherine Philips often put on an elaborate show to create the impression that they were unwilling poets or that they had no serious pretence. Others resorted to attributing their creative urge to God or some amorphous muse, thus granting a small degree of tolerance and unimpeachability (Barash 1996: 61-2).

<sup>2</sup> Aemilia Bassano, of Italian descent on her father’s side, was for some years the mistress of Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon, who was forty-five years her senior and a notable patron of the arts (including Shakespeare’s company); and she was maintained by him in some wealth and style. To cover up a pregnancy by Hunsdon, resulting in the birth of her son Henry, she was married at twenty-three years old to Captain Alphonso Lanyer, one of Queen Elizabeth’s musicians.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Epideictic’ is, according to Aristotle in his *Art of Rhetoric*, public speech of praise (or blame), one of the three branches of rhetoric (the other two being political and judicial speech). Its objective is to promote shared values in the community.

1998: 2). This Londoner, of probable Jewish ascendancy, was the first Englishwoman to publish a book of original poems, thus introducing a forceful female authorial voice into the Jacobean cultural scene. Although she works in the established genres of the poetry of praise, Lanyer's aggressive position on the *querelle des femmes* is anything but occasional or contingent.<sup>4</sup> Rather it forms a unifying structure that integrates the various parts of her book. As Barbara Lewalski has pointed out, Lanyer's work as a whole is conceived as a "Book of Good Women", which presents a female community clearly separated from male society and its supposed evils, reaching from Eve herself to contemporary patronesses (1998: 49). Lanyer's dedicatory poems are seen as "emphasizing the legacy of virtue from mothers to daughters" that also affects their poet-celebrant herself (49). These works, appearing together in the same collection, complement each other in their celebration of feminine heroism, much as the medieval writer Christine de Pisan sought to fashion in her *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405).

A middle-class woman of no fortune, Aemilia Lanyer nonetheless enjoyed the attention of some important Elizabethans – the Queen, Lord Hunsdon, the countess of Kent, and the countess of Cumberland; and written records, though few in number, suggest that she was a woman of considerable intelligence and spirit. She apparently received a good humanist education, was acquainted with the learned Arabella Stuart and familiar with the versified psalms of Mary Sidney.<sup>5</sup> During her seventy-six years of existence, she had seen most of the reigns of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), being listed as a pensioner, which indicates a steady income. But although James's reign offered the Lanyers some financial security, it was not a reign sympathetic to women, particularly women who spoke out publicly. It is, therefore, not likely that Lanyer received any substantial patronage from her remarkable book of poetry. *Hail God King of Jews*, registered in 1610 and published in 1611, appeared at the same time as King James's version of the Bible, John Donne's *First Anniversary*, and printings of several quarto plays by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe. Whether or not Aemilia Lanyer continued to write, she apparently never attempted publication again, thus failing to a certain extent to reaffirm her position as a precursor. But she has lately become notorious due to her identification as the 'Dark Lady' of or behind William Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, and some critics have even found mutual references to their respective works (Picture 2). If this association were ever proved true, which is not really the case, it would certainly provide a fascinating occasion to shed a new light on the work of both poets, broadening our view of the literary middle class in early modern London.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A massive body of writings, both serious and satiric and in several languages, arguing the issue of women's worthiness or faultiness, beginning in the Middle Ages and extending over several centuries, included sermons, tracts, manuals of domestic advice, poems and plays. Some notable examples in English literature were Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*.

<sup>5</sup> Her work is very much influenced by Sidney, namely her insistence on identifying with a community of maidens in Psalm 68, and her quest for a transcendent space within which female pleasure and voice become authoritative and even divine. Lanyer was educated by Susan Bertie, the Countess of Kent and her education included Latin, some Greek and rhetoric. She also ran a school from 1617-19 and spent time as a music tutor with Margaret, Countess of Cumberland.

<sup>6</sup> Being five years younger than the English bard, she has been frequently identified as the dark mistress of Shakespeare's 154-sonnet sequence, although there is no real proof of this connection. The only evidence is that Shakespeare and Lanyer were both alive in London at the same time, and that they were both associated with Henry Cary. In the 1970s, the historian A. L. Rowse built this argument on Court apothecary and astrologer Simon Forman's diaries and Lanyer's intimate association with the lord chamberlain (Lord Chamberlain's Men was the theatrical troupe that included William Shakespeare). The modern actor and playwright Tony Haygarth, who has examined their relationship and Lanyer's influence in Shakespeare's work, believes having not only established who she was, but what she looked like, basing himself in Nicholas Hilliard's miniature portrait of 'Unknown Lady, aged 26, formerly called Mistress Holland' (Picture 1). Critics who have researched the poets' mutual references are Martin Green and Stephanie Hughes.



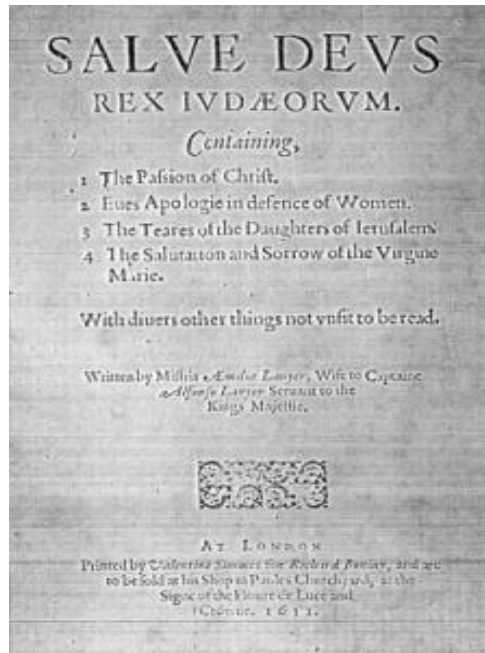
Picture 2. "Shakaemilia" in *jewcy.com images*

*Salve Deus* begins with eleven dedicatory pieces, nine in verse and two in prose, each of which celebrates in some fashion the achievements and community of women: to James's consort, Anne of Denmark, to Princess Elizabeth Stuart, "To all virtuous Ladies in general", to Lady Arabella Stuart (James's perceived rival for the throne), to Lady Susan, Countess Dowager of Kent, to Lady Mary, the Countess of Pembroke (who is Mary Sidney, sister of the poet and herself a recognized author), to Lady Lucy, Countess of Bedford, to the Lady Margaret, Countess of Cumberland (in prose, her principal dedicatee), to Lady Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, to Lady Anne, Countess of Dorset (Margaret's daughter, fighting to inherit her late father's lands), and to "the Vertuous Reader" (in prose).<sup>7</sup> For Lewalski, "the qualities Lanyer associates with her gallery of good women – heroic virtue, extraordinary learning, devotion to the Muses, and high poetic achievement – implicitly challenge patriarchal constructs of women" (1996: 49) and justify her own poetic undertaking. This unapologetic creation of a community of good women for whom another woman is the spokesperson and eternizer is unusual and possibly unique in early-seventeenth-century England. During the sixteenth century Englishwomen found voices through Protestantism, which affirmed the supremacy of individual conscience, even in women, to which God could speak directly. They became increasingly free to translate religious works and write of their own religious experience, even to the extent of producing religious verse. Yet her work, although she is identified on the title page as "wife to Captaine Alfonso Lanyer", is different from its predecessors in its sustained and exclusive dedication to women patrons. By contrast to female authors such as Mary Sidney, Anne Lok and Elizabeth Melvill (Lady Culros), Lanyer's religious poem claims biblical and historical authority and grants the viewpoint of women as much or greater authenticity as that of men.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The concluding prose epistle, "To the Vertuous Reader", reaches beyond the named dedicatees to a general female audience (and to well-disposed male readers as well).

<sup>8</sup> Lok appended a poetic meditation on the fifty-first Psalm to her translation from the French of John Calvin's *Sermons upon the Songe that Ezechias made after he had bene sicke* (1560). Mary Sidney translated 107 psalms, completing the sequence begun by her brother, Sir Philip Sidney, and wrote sophisticated lyric versions of Psalms 44-150, which were much admired by Donne and Jonson, as well as Lanyer. Elizabeth Melvill published *Ane Godlie Dreame*, an original dream allegory, in Edinburgh in 1603.



Picture 3. Cover page of the first edition of *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*

The dedicatory poems situate Lanyer among the increasing number of professional poets who sought support through patronage. This system claimed, in turn, to reflect classical models and ideals: the classical epideictic tradition saw the poetry of praise as a means of affirming social and cultural values.<sup>9</sup> Lanyer knew the expected ritual for the lower-born poet to acknowledge unworthiness in speaking to his social betters. But these encomiastic dedications in fact *rewrite* cultural and literary discourses pertaining to courtiership and patronage. As Lanyer's particular stance is complicated by her status *as* a woman and a commoner, she claims a special identity with her dedicatees in order to assert the dignity and merit of all women. The central topic of her work, which is Christ's Passion, seems to provide another authority for publishing her verse. If women are not expected to write, they are expected to experience the joy and power of conversion and cannot be prevented from expressing what God has spoken to them. Lanyer thus claims that her full conversion to Christ resulted from the influence of her main dedicatee, the countess dowager of Cumberland ("From whose desires did spring this work of grace"), as well as other women with a godly influence on her.<sup>10</sup>

The title poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, is indeed a subtle and complex work containing 1,840 lines of *ottavarima*, in iambic-pentameter stanzas. Lanyer attributed the title to a religious dream she had had many years before its writing, and it may as well be related to prophetic works of the time, especially during the course of the pamphlet wars concerning women.<sup>11</sup> For a woman to write authoritatively on so sacred a subject is unusual, but for her

<sup>9</sup> This form of poetic oratory or rhetoric surpasses mere praise or blame, it calls upon us to join with our community in giving thought to what we witness, and such thoughtful beholding in commemoration constitutes memorializing, not just acknowledging temporality and contingency.

<sup>10</sup> Lanyer also credits Margaret for nurturing her talent and commissioning her country-house poem. The others include the countess dowager of Kent, in whose household she had resided as an unrepentant young woman, Queen Anne through her godly example, and the countess of Pembroke through her psalms.

<sup>11</sup> Her title recalls the Bible's account of the soldier who crowned Christ with a wreath of horns and mocked him. The five Tudor-Stuart pamphlets that gave origin to the so-called *querelle des femmes* were authored under the pseudonyms Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, Constantia Munda, Jane Anger, and co-writers Mary Tattle-well and Joane Hit-him-home, some of which may have actually represented women writers. But one of the most important influences on Lanyer's work was Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*.

to revise fifteen hundred years of traditional commentary in the process is unheard of.<sup>12</sup> The title page (Picture 3) suggests four separate poems: *The Passion of Christ*, *Eve's Apology in Defence of Women*, *The Tears of the Daughters of Jerusalem*, *The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgin Marie*; but these are linked through an iconoclastic re-reading of the Bible. The poem starts with personal references and has a strong polemical thrust, attacking the vanity and blindness of men and justifying women's right to be free of masculine subjugation. Many of the arguments are put in the voice of Pilate's wife who, according to the Bible, warned her husband to "have nothing to do with that just man", Jesus (Matt. 27.19). Lanyer expands that brief warning, which Pilate ignores, into a lengthy "apologie" or defense and explanation for Eve, in which the voices of narrator and Pilate's wife seem to merge. She thus attempts to *create* the voices of women who have not been heard in the Bible, and concludes with a forthright demand for gender equality:

Then let us have our liberty again,  
 And challenge to yourselves no sovereignty.  
 You came not in the world without our pain,  
 Make that a bar against your cruelty;  
 Your fault being greater, why should you disdain  
 Our being your equals, free from tyranny?  
     If one weak woman simply did offend,  
     This sin of yours hath no excuse nor end,  
(81-88)

Lanyer's text also provides us with an idea of feminine *versus* masculine discourse. The poet finds that men are responsible for mankind's suffering and that through their reading of biblical texts, they blaspheme Christ. She claims that it is through woman (and Mary, in particular) that salvation came, and it is *through* the writing of women that faith may be properly understood. After a short initial tribute to the late Queen Elizabeth I, Lanyer moves to a lengthy meditative dedication of her work to the countess of Cumberland, where she refers that this poem is not "Those praiseful lines of that delightful place, / Which you commanded me" (a reference to the celebration of Cookham), but instead a praise of Christ's "almighty love", which will comfort the worthy countess in her unhappiness. But Lanyer's version of Christ's Passion becomes woman-centred throughout, rehearsing a complete reversal of power by chronicling female virtues and suffering as part of her strategy for comforting and praising the countess.<sup>13</sup>

It is not a coincidence that the references to Margaret's unhappiness involve issues of property, namely her alienation from her late husband, George Clifford, third earl of Cumberland, and the legal battles with his relatives that followed his death in 1605. Lanyer may well have sympathised with her dedicatee because after her own husband Alphonso died in 1613, she too found herself in protracted legal battles with his relatives over the income from the 'hay-and-grain' patent he had received from King James in 1604. She must have known that Margaret championed the claims of her daughter and only heir, Anne Clifford, and refused King James's and the court's offer of cash settlements that were short of Anne's legal claim to the various Cumberland land and titles. Cookham was precisely one of the large and beautiful estates to which Margaret felt her daughter was entitled (Picture 4). Although today the house and estate do not survive, the area is still considered a beauty spot: "Located in Berkshire a few miles from Maidenhead, it has extensive frontages on the Thames, rich woodlands, lush meadows, picturesque scattered hamlets, and high hills in the west"

<sup>12</sup> A useful contrast may be made between Lanyer's *Salve Deus* and Queen Catherine Parr's *The Lamentacion of a Sinner* (1547), which set a model for women writing on religious matters, but which in fact makes no challenge to the primacy of men.

<sup>13</sup> Lanyer strategically emphasizes that her poem is not a conventional work of praise and comfort but, in fact, a committed address to the cause of dispossessed womankind. And, significantly, the version of the Passion Lanyer describes follows closely Matthew 26.30 – 28.10, the only version which includes the warning of Pilate's wife. She also borrows freely from other Gospels, taking references to notorious biblical women wherever they appear.

(Lewalski 1993: 234). Cookham was, at the time, a royal manor between London and Oxford in the use of Lady Cumberland's brother, Lord William Russell (Picture 5).<sup>14</sup> The details and exact date of the poet's visit to the contested estate are obscure but, around 1607, the countess and her daughter had apparently gone there with the double purpose of inspecting the properties and spending the summer. Schleiner mentions that "Aemilia Lanyer must have been employed among temporary staff at Cookham Dean" because "in her concluding poem [...] she portrays herself waiting there for the ladies' party to arrive and still being there after they had left [...]" (1994: 23).<sup>15</sup>



Picture 4. Bridge over the river Thames at Cookham.

"The Description of Cooke-ham", the last poem in Lanyer's volume, suggests that the poet was aware of country-house poems by Horace and Martial, and that she was writing in the Augustan tradition of contrasting an idyllic natural order with a fallen human civilization – themes which Jonson, Thomas Carew, Robert Herrick, and Andrew Marvell variously exploit.<sup>16</sup> More to the point, however, is her exploration of the natural order as a mirror of human feeling, a device firmly grounded in the pastoral tradition and its English representations. The poem is a moving valediction to the pleasures of a noble country estate, in which Lanyer memorializes an environment of sweet companionship that she claims to have shared with the countess of Cumberland and her daughter, Anne Clifford, a companionship especially reflected by the natural world.<sup>17</sup> The poem's 210 lines in pentameter couplets are roughly divided into an introductory farewell (lines 1-10), an invocation to the countess to contemplate the past beauty of the setting and its responsiveness to her presence (lines 11-74), a reflection on the natural world of Cookeham as an image of God (lines 75-92), a praise of Anne Clifford (lines 93-102), a diatribe against fortune, which has exiled all three from Cookeham (lines 103-126), a portrait of Cookeham's grief at their departure, symbolized by the move through autumn to winter (lines 127- 146), a description

<sup>14</sup> The building itself was a gabled manor house begun in the 15th century and with 16th century alterations. It had been once the home of the Russells, Earls of Bedford, and had several unusual architectural features, including a secret hiding hole, and a medieval undercroft. It also boasted an intriguing mix of historical garden styles: Tudor gardens, a hedge maze and a physic garden.

<sup>15</sup> Lanyer must have served as attendant and instructor to the then seventeen-year old Anne. "Musical ability may well have been one of her qualifications, since she says that she 'did always bear a part' in the ladies' 'recreations' and portrays the countess often singing Psalms (139)." (Schleiner 1994: 23).

<sup>16</sup> Lanyer's poem was in many ways pioneer because it was published five years before Jonson's own country-house exemplar "To Penhurst" (1615-16). What sets her poem apart from his, an encomiastic epigram, is the powerful elegiac tone that she uses.

<sup>17</sup> "Lanyer's poems indicate that she served the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter only briefly during a particular summer, perhaps for a few weeks, but that was enough for an attachment to form that inspired" the poet. (Schleiner 1994: 23).

of the countess's gracious leave-taking, centrally figured by her kiss on the great oak tree, which the poet claims to have stolen from the oak (lines 147-176), a reprise of nature's mourning (lines 177-204), and the poet's concluding farewell (lines 205-210).

Lanyer's conclusion implies again that the poem was commissioned by the countess ("Wherein I have perform'd her noble hest"), and therefore asserts itself as a professional work in a longstanding tradition of poet as memorializer of great places, persons and deeds. Cookeham's epithet, "that delightful place," recalls both the classical *locus amoenus* and the Christian Eden, both worlds where the natural order reflects social and spiritual harmony. But the imperfections of the larger world, signified by "fortune" and "occasions," conspire to send the countess, Anne, and the poet away from the place and from each other. The poet loses the rich companionship of her social superiors, but in the process she creates a poem that eternizes the place and its former inhabitants, including herself. Despite the poem's melancholic topic, it therefore concludes the volume with an unmistakable and unabashed claim for the poet's classical role as a participant in the social order she celebrates.<sup>18</sup> As the modern Scottish poet John Burnside has stated, "So it is that all poetry of place, while it appears to concern itself with landscape, is as often about identity and community", adding that "the poem of place speaks of the relationship of the individual to a specific place at a particular point in time" (6).<sup>19</sup> According to Lynette McGrath, female communities isolated from male control could function as secure spaces within which women could speak and act as agents – the idea of a *protected space* that paradoxically authorizes and enables female articulation (McGrath 2002: 21, my emphasis). The poem, thus, speaks volumes about Lanyer's desire to use poetry to create a place for herself and for women in the highly stratified, gender-conscious world of Jacobean society.

The seventeenth century's polarization of sexual difference makes feminine autobiographical writing a privileged strategy of "geographical delinquency", and we might ask if "the untimely inscription of the feminine in a spatial, social, and epistemological sphere theoretically reserved for men [...] brings into play the absolute geography of social relations" (Regard 3). Gilles Deleuze has characterized the English as being happy simply to "inhabit", associating this idea with a tradition of pragmatic thought traceable back to the philosopher David Hume, who, in effect, defines the "I" as nothing more than 'habit'. Thus, for Deleuze, the English "I" has always issued forth, not from a heart of hearts, but from an "environment", "in terms of an immanence of a radical experience" (2003: 101), such as the one expressed by the poet William Wordsworth. Geography is not here merely variable matter and 'places'; it is a mental landscape, a becoming rather than a history (Deleuze 91-92). If we subscribe to Deleuze's way of thinking, indeed, never more than in England has the story of self-formation been so associated with a 'milieu'. Put in other words, never more than in England has becoming been conceived of as 'geography'. Hume and the English, Deleuze affirms, "liberate conjunctions" because they conceive of being-in-the-world as "a geography of relationships" (70). A proper name is not what makes the measure of the self: it is a heterogeneous arrangement, a "co-functioning" (84), a multiplicity of liaisons and relationships, through different ages, different reigns, and even different sexes.

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, there would be no similar audacity by a woman writing in English for at least another generation, when Katherine Philips and Margaret, Duchess of Newcastle, made their different claims for public attention.

<sup>19</sup> John Burnside is one of Britain's foremost exponents of ecological poetry. Across ten collections of verse to date, he has been unwavering in his investigation of the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. A significant aspect of his work across the genres of his writing is an investigation of masculinity and, in particular, his view of masculine identity as unable to recognise its independency with others. Despite Burnside's prolific output since the late 1980s—he has also published novels and short fiction, as well as a volume of memoirs—he has thus far received comparatively little critical attention.





Picture 5. The 15th century church of St Michael's, housing monuments to generations of the Russell family

In England, by the middle of the seventeenth century, the latent proprietary connotations of the territorial or spatial conception of the self became overtly manifest (Wayne 1984: 23), and the individual's 'person' was identified with private property (C.B. Macpherson). Whereas the term 'property' (or 'propriety') had formerly signified a relationship, by the seventeenth century the relational concept was subordinated to the more reified notion of a thing (Wayne 23). Protestantism, with its emphasis on the domestic environment as the centre of religious training and discipline, enabled the English aristocrats to view themselves as providential administrators of 'Nature' in the form of land, household, and tenants (Wayne 25). The genre of the country-house poem emerged as part of this redefinition, in which architecture and landscape – and the poetry in which these were celebrated – constitute “stages in the preliminary ‘mapping’ of an ideological domain” (ibid). In this sense, Ben Jonson's topographical poem “To Penshurst” (his 1616 dedication to Philip Sidney's Kent estate) is not a poetic description of a house so much as it is an attempt to evoke the significant connotations of the term 'home' (ibid), seen as a native English phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Charles Molesworth argues that the “strategy of metonymy” in such poems is a way of establishing the connection between value in the sense of property and value in its more spiritual sense. The description of the corporeal estate as a *locus amoenus* validates the panegyric to the incorporeal virtue of the owner (quoted in Wayne, 29). It is by calling upon mythological resonances of the Golden Age and Arcadia that the estate becomes itself a mythical place “in which dwelling is the relationship with others, without denial or deprivation of one's own being, and of such a place as a model for human relationships on a larger social scale” (Wayne 173).<sup>21</sup> For Lewis Mumford, the country-house ideal functions as a social myth, a “collective utopia” that springs from “a collective consciousness” (1963: 193).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Jonson's poem idealizes country life and sets up an opposition between the city and the country. The poet tells us that Penshurst was not built to show off the wealth of its owners, and is far from ostentatious. He seems to take a Christian standpoint in his encouragement of modesty and his veiled criticism of vanity. The idea that nature is beautiful and does not need decoration is emphasised. In the central part of the poem, Jonson makes Penshurst sound like a countryside Utopia. He shows that it is the kind of place that embraces the lower classes and allows them to eat at the same table as the king of the country, a place of hospitality. The connection with the Sidney family, patrons of the arts, gives the impression that Penshurst was the epitome of an educated, cultured household.

<sup>21</sup> According to Nicole Pohl, “This mythical quality explains why aspects of the estate poetry heritage are perpetuated from the seventeenth century into the modern age with manifestations in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* (1816) and *Mansfield Park* (1814), Daniel Defoe's *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-26), Vita Sackville-West's *The Land* (1926) and *The Garden* (1946), and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)” (Pohl 2002: 224-5).

<sup>22</sup> Together with Lanyer's and Jonson's examples, Thomas Carew's “To Saxham” (1640) and Marvell's “Upon Appleton House” (1681), although formally distinct, all present ideals of community, simplicity, responsible use of wealth and property, good housekeeping and hospitality.

“A Description of Cookham”, a nature poem of both praise and lament, celebrates precisely the existence and, at the same time, mourns the loss of a unique paradise:

Farewell, sweet place, where virtue then did rest,  
 And all delights did harbour in her breast;  
 Never shall my sad eyes again behold  
 Those pleasures which my thoughts did then unfold.

(7-10)



Picture 6. Richard Maitland de Lauderdale, circa 1700, *Birds by a Pond*

The estate, the personified natural surroundings, and indeed the women of the place, including the patroness, blend into a *locus amoenus* (literally, a ‘mild place’):

The walks put on their summer liveries,  
 And all things else did hold like similes:  
 The trees with leaves, with fruits, with flowers clad,  
 Embraced each other, seeming to be glad,  
 Turning themselves to beauteous canopies  
 To shade the bright sun from your brighter eyes;

(21-6)

Still, the personification of nature is inferred through a strategy of highlighting the role of the poet herself, and her dedicatee, in the depiction of this earthly paradise:

Oh how me thought each plant, each flower, each tree  
 Set forth their beauties then to welcome thee.

(33-4)

All of this perfect bliss, though, is immediately perceived by the poet as transient or ephemeral, due to their impending departure:

And you, sweet Cookham, whom these ladies leave,  
 I now must tell the grief you did conceive  
 At their departure: when they went away,  
 How everything retained a sad dismay;  
 [...]
 The trees that were so glorious in our view  
 Forsook both flowers and fruit; when once they knew  
 Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,  
 Changing their colours as they grew together.

[...] (127-40)

It seems as if nature is there for the sole purpose of pleasing Lady Margaret, as the birds come to attend her and the banks, trees and hills feel honoured to receive her (Picture 6). Nature is personified throughout the poem, and when the lady leaves appears to go through a process of mourning: “Everything retained a sad dismay” (129). This unrealistic notion of human control over the elements greatly flatters the lady, and the poem is therefore likely to gain Lanyer’s

favour with the Countess. The poet's suggestion that the countryside is mourning her departure is simply grounded in the natural *simile* or *conceit* that summer splendour is fading away with the coming of autumn. With the departure of the three women (the countess, her daughter Anne and the poet), the paradise withers away, "The house cast off each garment that might grace it, / Putting on dust and cobwebs to deface it" (201-2), but the poet remains to celebrate and eternalize these blissful times and herself in poetry:

This last farewell to Cookham here I give:  
When I am dead, thy name in this may live.  
(205-7)

The conclusion is somewhat ironic, and in a double sense too: The poet seems to imply that it is not likely that either she or the countess will ever see that place again, and that the only consolation that is left for them is that this 'experience of place' will be perpetuated through a feminine text and not a masculine one. For Nicole Pohl, this couplet epitomizes the process of self-fashioning typical to Lanyer, based on her manipulation of Petrarchism, the pastoral and the country-house genre to construct her poetic vocation (Pohl 2002: 227); Lanyer deliberately, but ironically, appropriates the Shakespearean convention of using the poem as a form of immortalization of the poet's topic.

Also, unlike women in later, male-authored poems, Margaret Clifford is not the mere adjunct of the master of the house but, as much as Lanyer, is a subject in her own right; this, in spite of the fact that the class division between writer and patron remains intact. Thus, as Pohl argues, "Cookham metonymically represents not the political integrity or good stewardship of its owner, but the empowered subjectivities of its female guests and chronicler." (228) In fact, as Barbara Lewalski has referred, the poem "celebrates an estate without a lord – or indeed any male inhabitants – but with a virtuous mother and daughter as its defining and ordering principle" (1998: 50). But "The Description of Cookham", as Marshall Grossman pertinently observes, takes for its occasion *not* the dwelling of the Clifford women on the estate (in the sense of Jonson's celebration of Penshurst as an estate on which the 'lord dwells') but their *leave-taking*, providing a "dramatic reference to the peculiar legal institutions of Patrilinear inheritance as they affected the lives of real women." (1998: 6). In this context, Lanyer's problems with her late husband's male heirs may be of interest because they suggest how common such litigation was, and because "they fulfil the poem's attempt to establish a community of female interest across class lines, of which Lanyer was painfully aware" (Grossman 1998: 6):

Unconstant Fortune, thou art most to blame,  
Who cast us down into so low a frame,  
Where our great friends we cannot daily see,  
So great a difference is there in degree.  
(103-16)

As Jonathan Post mentions, "In a very precise sense, Lanyer's poem is a farewell to a place to which she never belonged" (1999: 225). For him, "Imagining a female community is not the same as *being* an inhabitant of that community" (225); a middle-class woman's writing did not provide entry into the great houses of the day – in this case, the great building is not even glimpsed by Lanyer, that is, there are no references to it in the poem.

According to Marshall Grossman, Lanyer's poem attacks the substitution of land (wealth-patrimony) for woman (mother) that characterizes the rhetoric of patrilinearity (1998: 135). The very different legal relations to landed property experienced by men and women within a system governed by the principle of Patrilinear primogeniture may be exemplified by the gender specific ways in which trees are used to figure the relation of land to lord and lady. Whereas in male-authored poems such as "To Penshurst", the tree is a permanent sign of the lord's rootedness to the land he owns, the tree in "Cooke-ham" serves as a focal point for

feminine companionship and endeavour during the women's stay but loses its significance in their absence; this because its function as a meditative lever lies dormant. As in winter,

Each arbour, bank, each seat, each stately tree,  
Looks bare and desolate now for want of thee;  
Turning green tresses into frosty gray  
While in cold grief they wither all away.

(191-94)



Picture 7. Birket Foster (1825-1899), *The Old Oak Tree*, watercolour dating from around 1862

Lanyer combines the image of an oak, also a symbol of the English nation (Picture 7), and a strategically motivated pathetic fallacy to disrupt an immediate identification of woman and nature. Thus the poet coming to “That Oak that did in height his fellows pass,” remarks

How often did you visit this fair tree,  
Which seeming joyful in receiving thee,  
Would like a Palm tree spread his arms abroad,  
Desirous that you there should make abode.

(59-62)

This image may be connected to her treatment of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil within “Eve’s Apologie”, and Lanyer develops the alternative notion of a lateral or synchronic community of women. The poem thus presents a specific resistance to the recollection of the past as *history*, allowing us to hear for the first time the heretical voice that the canonical form of the country-house genre suppresses.

In her turn, Naomi Miller speaks of the strong “homosocial bonds” between the three women in Cookham as a sort of enabling power for the poet’s writing voice (1998: 161). Her “Hand and Quill” are not only guided by divine and female authority but also illumined by female loving affection: “Oh what delight did my weak spirits find/ In those pure parts of her well framed mind” (97-8). Lanyer praises the Countess’s use of the estate as a site for the transmission of knowledge from mother to daughter, “Where many a learned Book was read and scanned” (161). By contrast to Eve’s expulsion from Eden after her initial pursuit of knowledge, the already learned Countess of Cumberland departs Cookham of her own accord to carry out the responsibilities to her lineage. Thus, maternal authority is conceived in intellectual and spiritual terms rather than merely physical ones. The constraint and intimacy implied by the kiss bestowed by the Countess upon “that stately Tree”, and claimed back by the poet herself, becomes a living testament to the ties which have informed a single location with such communicative vitality. In closing, Lanyer declares that the virtues of the Countess lodge with her, “Tying my heart to her by those rich chains” (210).

Central to Lanyer's text is the idea of a *protected space* that paradoxically authorizes and enables female articulation: "the muses gave their full consent, / I should have power the virtuous to content" (3-4); thus, female community isolated from male control functions as a secure space within which women can *speak* and *act* as agents. In spite of this, as Mellor and Post mention, Lanyer failed somehow "to create a future for herself and her poem", which was only reprinted 350 years later (2002: 2). This could be explained by the facts that not only did she lack the aristocratic credentials that might have allowed her and her work continued visibility but the idea of an individual female author was itself unthinkable at the time. She was indeed prototypically modern in proposing a highly suggestive trope of a female literary tradition through the *reinvention* of the male estate poem. As Grossman states, "Lanyer enters the canon by disrupting it" (8); by developing a contrary voice out of the literary historical materials of scriptural tradition, established (male-dominated) genres, the patronage system, and the patriarchal legal institutions which governed the descent and management of property – both material and symbolic – in early modern England.

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