Catholic and Protestant Interpretations of the Song of Songs

Lanyer's own religious heritage is uncertain. Her father's family may have been Jewish, her parents may have been radical Protestants, and her husband may have been Catholic. Furthermore, the women to whom Lanyer addresses her writing were of diverse confessional backgrounds.

Thus, my project proposes a reading of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum focused on the ways that Lanyer appropriates monastic/bardine nuptial allegory in order to elaborate the connection between group and individual spirituality within the context of a radical, woman-focused community.

Introduction

In 1611, an Englishwoman named Aemilia Lanyer published Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, a volume of poetry and prose centered on an 1800-line retelling of Christ's death and resurrection.

Throughout the passion poem, Christ is presented as both a suffering, mothering figure who feeds his followers with his body and blood, and as a lively, risen Bridegroom who actively pursues and is pursued by his Bride. In order to construct this second image, Lanyer draws from two key Biblical sources: the Song of Songs, and, to a lesser extent, the Parable of the Ten Virgins from the gospel of Matthew.

Because its highly erotic language seems to be out of place among the other books of the Hebrew Bible, the Song of Songs is often interpreted by Christian exegetes as an allegorical representation of the relationship between Christ and his followers.

A key figure in this hermeneutic tradition is the twelfth-century Cistercian abbot and mystic Bernard of Clairvaux, whose sermon cycle on the first part of the Song of Songs outlines a detailed interpretation of the Song's principle characters: the Bride and the Bridegroom.

Although he died in 1153, Bernard had a significant influence on early modern Protestant devotional practices. Furthermore, in both Bernard's sermons and Lanyer's poem, the Bride is alternately identified with the Church and with the soul of an individual Christian.

Thus, my project proposes a reading of Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum focused on the ways that Lanyer appropriates monastic/bardine nuptial allegory in order to elaborate the connection between group and individual spirituality within the context of a radical, woman-focused community.

Works Cited


MARRYING CHRIST:
Bernard of Clairvaux and the Song of Songs in Aemilia Lanyer's Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum

A brief description of his beautie upon the canticles

This is that Bridegome that appeareth so faire, So sweet, so lovely in his Spouses sight, That unto Snowe we may his face compare, His cheekes like skarlet, and his eyes so bright, As purest Doves that in the rivers are, Washed with milke, to give the more delight, His curled lockes so beauteous to behold, Blace as a Raven in her blackest hew, His lips like skarlet threeds, yet much more sweet Than is the sweetest honey dropping dew, Or hony combs, where all the Bees do meet; Yea, he is constant, and his words are true, His cheekes are beds of spices, flowers sweet; His lips like Lillies, dropping downe pure mirrhe, Whose love, before all worlds we doe preferre. (Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum 1905–1910)