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Reading the Space of the Closet in Aemilia Lanyer’s  
Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum  
KATHERINE R. LARSON

In 1646, a clergyman lamenting the conflict between Independent and Presbyterian factions in the English Civil War addressed an entreaty “To a Vertuous and Judicious Lady, who (for the exercise of her Devotion) built a Closet, wherein to secure the most Sacred Booke of COMMON-PRAYER, from the view and violence of the Enemies thereof.” The author personifies the prayer book as a mourner who appears at the door of the lady’s closet begging for protection:

I cannot choose but think, it was your care,  
To build your Closet for distressed PRAYER;  
Which here in mourning clad, presents it selve,  
Begging some little corner on your shelve:  
For since ’tis banish’d from all publique view,  
There be none dare it entertain, but you.

The poem goes on to liken the Book of Common Prayer to Christ. “[C]ondemn’d to die” and “crucify’d” by zealots, the prayer book seeks respite from a topsy-turvy world where “Kings must be Subjects now, and Subjects, Kings.” It ultimately finds “a place whereon to lay its head” in the lady’s private chamber. Within the boundaries of the closet, beyond “publique view,” the meeting between the “Vertuous . . . Lady” and her book stands in for a physical encounter with Christ. The lady controls access to this exclusive and protective space, which defends the prayer book against its enemies. The poem appeared thirty-five years after the publication in
1611 of Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and reflects a context in which private estates and the chambers within them operated as the front lines of the Civil War. Yet, Lanyer’s poetic Passion account shares its emphasis on the privacy, controlled access, and eroticized reading practices associated with the closet.

Throughout *Salve Deus*, Lanyer constructs metaphorical closets that house encounters between herself, her female dedicatees, and a textual Christ. References to these closets, conceived in both architectural and physiological terms, appear most frequently in her paratext of dedicatory epistles and poems addressed to nine aristocratic Jacobean women, virtuous ladies, and the virtuous reader. Like the bedraggled prayer book, Lanyer’s text blurs with Christ’s body and receives protection, entertainment, and accurate interpretation within her patrons’ closet-like hearts. Lanyer’s description of the Cookeham estate in the country house poem that concludes her work likewise assumes features of the closet, emblematizing a private Edenic realm that makes possible Lanyer’s interaction with her dedicatees, Margaret and Anne Clifford. In addition to these smaller closets that pervade *Salve Deus*, Lanyer characterizes her text more generally as a closet that grants her dedicatees exclusive access to Christ. Crucially, she positions herself as holding the keys to that space, claiming the authority to control her patrons’ reading experience even as she enjoys proximity to them. In what follows, I argue that Lanyer deploys the imagery of the closet and its key in an attempt to oversee her readers’ access to and experience of her text and Christ and to facilitate her own imaginary encounters with her dedicatees. The closet becomes a central device through which Lanyer cultivates her relationship with her patrons and negotiates the class differences separating her from them.

The question of social, spatial, and textual access is pivotal to Lanyer’s project. As Leeds Barroll has argued, it is difficult to know how much access to her potential patrons the nonaristocratic and uneducated Lanyer actually enjoyed. Barroll contextualizes Lanyer’s bid for patronage “within the hard exigencies of her social milieu” and posits that her gender and social status “seriously handicapped [her] as a player in the Court game.” Lanyer is not always very adept in petitioning her social superiors; her failure to prioritize the most influential patrons within *Salve Deus* and
its prefatory apparatus illustrates her lack of experience with negotiating court hierarchies. She claims close personal connections with Susan Bertie, Countess Dowager of Kent, “the Mistris of my youth,” and with Margaret and Anne Clifford. Yet, as Barroll suggests, her “need to insert herself into an aristocratic context” (35) may have led her to exaggerate or even fabricate the nature of those relationships. Despite the difficulties that Lanyer likely faced in securing access to her aristocratic dedicatees in life, she clearly imagines herself accessing them through her writing. She expresses the hope that her depiction of Christ will diminish the social distance separating her, “a stranger” (36), from women like Katherine, Countess of Suffolk. Grieving her departure from Cookeham, she situates her poetry as an alternative space within which to visit with the Cliffords and urges her dedicatees to enter into, read, and approve of her text. I contend that Lanyer’s deployment of the metaphor of the closet becomes a vital component in her attempt to control her social position relative to her dedicatees. In addition to figuring her patrons’ hearts and minds as private closet spaces, Lanyer situates her text as a closet that facilitates the erotic encounters between her dedicatees and Christ, provides an exclusive space for self-reflection, and houses her own imaginary meetings with her patrons. Lanyer consistently emphasizes spatial and textual access and control in Salve Deus to validate her authority as writer and mediator of Christ’s Passion and to position herself as a part of an exclusive coterie community.

Lanyer’s dedication to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, which offers the most explicit allusion to closet space in Salve Deus, demonstrates the inwardness, exclusive access, and potential eroticism associated with the closet in early modern England. The poem opens as follows:

Me thinkes I see faire Virtue readie stand,
T’unlocke the closet of your lovely breast,
Holding the key of Knowledge in her hand,
Key of that Cabbine where your selfe doth rest,
To let him in, by whom her youth was blest
The true-love of your soule, your hearts delight,
Fairer than all the world in your cleare sight. (32)
Fusing architectural and physiological notions of inwardness, the stanza situates the Countess’s heart as a “closet” or “Cabbine” that contains her inner self. Architectural change in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England made the closet a particularly apt vehicle for describing inwardness. The development of specialized and increasingly personal spaces within the home provided individuals with retired rooms within which to read and reflect, strongly impacting discourses of privacy. Such rooms did not necessarily equate privacy with solitude, nor did they neatly demarcate boundaries between private and public. However, the closet was associated with interiority and with religious and secular non-public activities. In The Practice of Christian Graces (1658), for instance, Richard Allestree differentiates between private prayers in his closet and family prayers, which he terms “publick addresses to God.” He describes the closet as a place where one engages in “private duties . . . , a man’s own private prayers, reading meditating, and the like.” Descriptions of physiological chambers associated with the mind and the heart appeared increasingly interchangeably with allusions to architecture in theological and moral writings that urged readers to retreat into the closet of the heart for prayer and self-examination.

Emblematized by Virtue’s key in Lanyer’s poem, controlled access to the closet made such withdrawal possible. Lena Cowen Orlin characterizes the closet, whether used for personal reading, household storage, religious meditation, small gatherings, or domestic activities, as a space that could be closed and locked. The closet’s lock and key figure the ability to exclude others or to demarcate privacy for oneself; the OED underscores “the power of custody, control, admission of others, etc., implied by the possession of the keys of any place.” As Sasha Roberts has shown, the distribution of household keys amongst servants and family members ensured a hierarchy of rooms organized along decreasing levels of access. The recurrent metaphor of the individual breast or mind as a closet in the period also illustrates the secrecy and concealment associated with the space. In his popular 1599 letter-writing manual, The English Secretary, Angel Day commends the secretary who can keep his master’s secrets, like a good closet, under lock and key. Given the male preoccupation with the confinement and surveillance of women’s bodies and activities, locks and keys became problematically empowering tools when appropriated
by women. Material keys offered early modern women the possibility of privacy and independence; Anne Clifford, for instance, specifies in her diary that she seeks refuge in her closet from her financial disagreements with her husband and enjoys reading and being read to by her servants in that space.

Lanyer seems to have been well aware of the power associated with keys. Only three figures have access to keys in *Salve Deus*, each either female or feminized: Virtue, Margaret Clifford, and Christ. In Lanyer’s dedicatory poem to the Countess of Bedford, a female Virtue prepares to unlock the closet of the Countess’s heart. Lanyer describes her key as the “key of Knowledge” that controls entry to Bedford’s inner self: “Key of that Cabbine where your selfe doth rest” (32). The sanctity of the Countess’s body as closet promises chaste closure, while the presence of “faire Virtue” heralds an innocuous spiritual encounter. Yet, as Wendy Wall highlights, the scene in this “spiritual bedroom . . . is fraught with sexual overtones.” Virtue, a procurer “readie” to allow the Countess’s “true-love” to access the closet of her heart, facilitates the encounter between Bedford and Christ. Lanyer intensifies the eroticism of their meeting later in the poem, urging her patron to “entertaine this dying lover” in her heart’s “bowre” (32–33).

Access to an aristocratic woman’s closet was often limited to an exclusive circle of female servants who maintained the secrecy of their mistress’s closets and cabinets even after her death. Virtue assumes the role of such a servant. She controls access to Bedford’s chamber, facilitates an encounter between her mistress and Christ, and conceals the activities taking place behind the locked doors of the Countess’s heart. The poem underscores both the independence and the potential for secrecy and eroticism that a woman’s keys and her closet represented.

Margaret Clifford, Lanyer’s primary dedicatee, holds the keys to a very different space: the kingdom of heaven. In the main poem of *Salve Deus*, St. Peter grants his keys to Clifford “with a Spirituall powre” (109). Clifford’s faith and prayers, combined with Christ’s grace, become the metaphorical keys that facilitate her entry to heaven. Micheline White has argued that these keys demonstrate the charity and compassion of Lanyer’s dedicatees as they minister to others. Clifford’s keys do symbolize her Christian virtue. However, they also suggest the access, proximity, and affinity to Christ.
that Clifford, along with the other dedicatees, enjoys. Christ—who is feminized throughout the poems—is the only other figure in Lanyer’s work to have keys. Lanyer calls him the savior “Who tooke the keys of all Deaths powre away, / Opening to those that would his name obay” (103). Just as Virtue opens the closet of Bedford’s heart to Christ, Christ opens the door of heaven to Lanyer’s female patrons. The keys of these three figures underscore Lanyer’s preoccupation with exclusive spaces, access to which is restricted to and controlled by virtuous women. These spaces become in turn the site for women’s privileged encounters with Christ.

Keys offered women access to knowledge as well as to space. In its non-material sense, a key is “That which serves to open up, disclose, or explain what is unknown, mysterious, or obscure; a solution or explanation,” while in the case of ciphers or riddles, a key “facilitate[s] the work of learners.” Pamphlets and books associating keys with knowledge or learning were widely disseminated in the early modern period, exemplified by Thomas Achelley’s The Key of Knowledge Contayning sundry godly prayers and meditations (1572). In his dedicatory epistle to Lady Elizabeth Russell, the sister of Lanyer’s dedicatee Margaret (Russell) Clifford, Achelley elides such knowledge acquisition with his addressee’s closet reading:

I haue compiled this little booke of Prayers grounded vpon the deuine promises contained in the sacred Scriptures, . . . crauing that as ofte soeuer, as God shall put it in your mynde to withdrawe your selfe into your closet, there to meditate vpon the heauvenly promises . . . that then you would vouchsafe to take this booke in hand.

Achelley, like Lanyer, displays confidence in the virtue of his dedicatee’s reading practices. However, a woman’s ability to lock herself within a room to access textual knowledge more often prompted anxiety. In The English Gentlewoman (1631), Richard Brathwaite famously posits a divine system of surveillance for women’s closet activities:
Be you in your Chambers or priuate Closets; be you retired from the
eyes of men; thinke how the eyes of God are on you. Doe not say, the
walls encompasse mee, darkenesse o're-shadowes mee, the Curtaine
of night secures me: These be the words of an Adulteresse: Therefore
doe nothing priuately, which you would not doe publikely. There is no
retire from the eyes of God.21

Brathwaite’s paranoia about the secrecy of the closet is noteworthy both for
his attempt to glean information about women’s closet activities by imagi-
nary espionage and for his insistence on texts and artwork as sexual catalysts.
Prefatory material addressed to women readers heightened the elision of
transgressive sexuality and reading by figuring women “entertaining” their
books, hiding them under their skirts, and cradling them in their laps to
read.22 In a letter to Lady Grace Darcy prefacing A Direction for the weaker
sort of Christians (1609), William Bradshaw contrasts the titillating textual
experience of Darcy’s closet reading with the sexualized commonness of his
newly published work: “I hope that you which haue giuen [my papers] some
entertainment in your closet, wil not passe by them as vnknowen, now they
present themselues vnto you in the street.”23 The closet emerged as a focal
point for this fusion of textual and sexual practice.

Erotic closet encounters with Christ as W ord or text offered a unique
variation on the anxiety prompted by women’s private reading. Women
reading the scriptures or meditating on Christ in their chambers were
ostensibly engaging in the sort of closet activities that Brathwaite should
have condoned. Yet, as Lanyer’s address to the Countess of Bedford dem-
onstrates, such encounters were still eroticized. Even the scruffy prayer
book in the quotation that opened this article is figured as Christ desiring
“entertain[ment]” as it lies in the lady’s chamber. Lanyer’s depictions of her
dedicatees encountering Christ through her text in closet-like spaces go
even further in their fusion of religious reading and erotic intimacy with
Christ. In the dedicatory poem to Arbella Stuart, Lanyer situates the meet-
ing between female patron and Christ in Stuart’s bedchamber, with Stuart
rising from bed to read Lanyer’s poetry. Lanyer’s book quickly blurs with
Christ’s body, propelling Stuart from the experience of voyeuristic reading
to spiritual consummation:
Come like the morning Sunne new out of bed,
And cast your eyes upon this little Booke,
Although you be so well accompaned
With Pallas, and the Muses, spare one looke
Upon this humbled King, who all forsooke,
That in his dying armes he might imbrace
Your beauteous Soule, and fill it with his grace. (17)

Sasha Roberts has demonstrated the ease with which textual and sexual practice merge in representations of the female subject reading in bed, the scene functioning as “a prelude to her entertaining a lover, or client.”

Viewing the textual Christ leads Lanyer’s patrons to intimacy with his body. Lanyer urges Anne Clifford to “lodge [Christ] in the closet of your heart” (47), enjoins Susan Bertie to “Take this faire Bridegroome in your soules pure bed” (20), and encourages Katherine, Countess of Suffolk, to bathe her soul in the “flood” (38) of Christ’s blood. Christ’s body appears repeatedly in Salve Deus as a text that is metaphorically “entertained” by Lanyer’s readers within the closet-like space of the heart.

Contemporary religious poetry, notably that of John Donne, George Herbert, and Richard Crashaw, offered numerous examples of eroticized, intimate, and often graphically physical representations of Christ, particularly within the context of his Passion. However, the tradition of medieval affective piety stands as perhaps the most important precursor to Lanyer’s depiction of her patrons’ closet experiences with Christ. Affective piety, which emerged in the late thirteenth century, insisted on “the physical as a legitimate means of access to the spiritual.”

Made available through vernacular texts, teachings and writings concerning mysticism were increasingly directed beyond religious communities to lay people. As such, this form of spirituality became accessible to and popular among women. Exemplified by the Showings of Julian of Norwich, the accounts of female martyrs in Ancrene Wisse, and The Book of Margery Kempe, affective piety placed particular emphasis on the human Christ as lover, husband, son, or brother and on the Eucharist as a means of attaining physical intimacy with him.

Margery Kempe, for instance, inserts herself into her meditations on Christ’s life and Passion with exquisite physical detail: she weeps and
howls, gazes on Christ's bruised body, caresses his toes, and comforts Mary with a hot drink. Moreover, although she negotiates a strict vow of chastity within her own marriage, her encounters with Christ are profoundly erotic. She describes her regular meetings with him as a “dalyawns,” a word that denotes both spiritual communication and physical intercourse.27 Unlike Lanyer’s patrons, Kempe is illiterate. Her intimacy with Christ is grounded on prayer and visionary experiences prompted by communion, iconography, and attendance at sermons and religious readings rather than by her own private reading. Yet, her encounters with Christ in her bedchamber provide an important precedent for Lanyer’s depiction of an eroticized Christ experienced through closet reading.

Even as she figures her readers’ hearts and minds as private closet spaces, Lanyer situates her own text as a closet that houses these erotic encounters between her dedicatees and Christ, provides her with access to her patrons, and defends her Passion account from male interference. Lanyer’s insistence throughout the dedicatory poems on exclusive access to her text and to Christ plays a crucial role in establishing her poems as metaphorical closet space. Gérard Genette emphasizes that one of the most potent functions of paratextual material is its ability to command or instruct a reader to approach a text in a particular way.28 His characterization of the paratext as a transaction zone that conveys authorial intention to the reader recalls J. Hillis Miller’s reading of the prefix “para” as a marker of threshold, a liminal boundary between interior and exterior spaces.29 The paratext both prepares a reader to enter and interpret a text and protects that text against readings that clash with authorial and editorial goals. It is a powerful space, implying authorial ability to cajole readers into a desired stance and to invite them across the textual threshold on the author’s terms. The imagery of access and architectural boundaries that surrounds the paratext evokes the exclusivity of closet space. The analogy is particularly apt in the case of Salve Deus. As the threshold to her Passion narrative, Lanyer’s dedicatory poems underscore her desire to direct her patrons’ access to her text and thereby to increase her own access to their favor. Lanyer uses the metaphor of the closet to construct an aristocratic coterie of readers and to situate herself as member of that exclusive gathering.
Throughout the dedications, Lanyer assumes a role akin to the Countess of Bedford's Virtue holding a “key of Knowledge” (32) that enables her to direct access to her textual chamber. Virtue, who Mary Silcox rightly characterizes as an ambiguous figure in Lanyer’s work, often functions as a stand-in for Lanyer in the prefatory poems.30 Lanyer introduces Virtue in her dedicatory poem to the queen, declaring that she presents “This holy worke” (6) to Anne. Virtue stands “In poore apparell, shaming to be seene” (6), like the self-deprecating Lanyer who offers her text to her patron. In “To all vertuous Ladies in generall” Lanyer again suggests a parallel between herself and Virtue. This time, Virtue presents the women with a text: “Come wait on hir whom winged Fame attends / And in her hand the Booke where she inroules / Those high deserts that Majestie commends” (12). The lines’ slippery third-person pronoun blurs the boundaries between Virtue and Lanyer-as-author presenting her book as a model for her female community. The “key of Knowledge” in the poem to the Countess of Bedford thus becomes a metaphor of access connected to the act of reading and, in particular, the act of reading Lanyer’s poems. It is Lanyer who figuratively provides access to the closet of her book, Lanyer who directs the encounters between Christ and his beloved women, and Lanyer who entreats her social superiors to “entertaine this dying lover” (33). By linking herself with the figure of Virtue, Lanyer defends her authorial project and directs her social superiors even as she commends them for their goodness: “Let Virtue be your guide, for she alone / Can leade you right that you can never fall” (12). Like Virtue, Clifford, and Christ himself, Lanyer holds keys promising exclusive access to her textual chamber.

By allying herself with Virtue, Lanyer imaginatively enjoys the proximity to her patrons that eludes her in daily life. When she depicts her patrons lodging Virtue, who in the dedication to Queen Anne Lanyer also associates with Christ, within the cozy boundaries of their hearts, Lanyer implicitly inserts herself into this intimate space. Lauding Anne Clifford’s “faire breast” as the place where “true virtue then was hous’d” (134) in “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer at once praises her patron’s virtuous actions, locates Christ in the closet-like space of her heart, and grants herself access to the most intimate part of her patron’s self. Moreover, the
strategy enables her to claim comparable status to her dedicatees. Lanyer repeatedly praises her chosen women, particularly the Cliffords, for their virtue. In the dedication to Anne Clifford, Lanyer urges her to cultivate the virtue bequeathed to her by her mother as the apex of her honor (43). In the conclusion of the main poem of *Salve Deus*, Lanyer contends that Margaret Clifford’s “rarest Virtues” (129) surpass the most exemplary biblical and classical women. She goes on to characterize her patrons’ bodies as “beauteous bowres where true worth should repose, / And where his dwellings should be built most strong” (42). The architectural allusions are again suggestive of the closet. Associating herself with the figure of Virtue and heralding her dedicatees as virtuous paragons, Lanyer subtly claims comparable status for herself even as she displays her longing to assimilate her patrons.

Lanyer’s insistence on the strength and security of the “bowres” of her patrons’ hearts and of her own textual dwelling further underscores her claim for textual authority and exclusivity. Anticipating the virtuous woman who built a closet to shelter the Book of Common Prayer from its enemies in 1646, Lanyer uses the interlocking closet spaces of her poem and of her dedicatees’ bodies to shield Christ and his devotees from faulty interpretation. Ann Baynes Coiro has convincingly argued that Lanyer’s dedicatory poems reveal her determination “to shore up for herself some kind of protection from attack by women.” However, Lanyer seems equally determined to protect her text and her exclusive female community from the faulty male gaze. She depicts Christ’s crucifixion as a direct consequence of men’s inability to identify or interpret Christ and warns her female readers in “To the Vertuous Reader” that men will misinterpret their behavior. Most of the men in Lanyer’s Passion account are blinded by “Sinnes ugly mists” (81). In the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples “shut those Eies that should their Maker see” (69). The high priests and scribes who come to arrest Jesus fail to recognize him. Even the disciple Peter’s fervent insistence on his unwavering faith becomes an ironic commentary on male short-sightedness: “No mote,” Lanyer quips, “could happen in so cleare a sight” (66). These consistent visual misinterpretations undermine male appeals to privilege and learning in *Salve Deus* and implicitly deny men voyeuristic access to her patrons’ closet activities with Christ.
Her exclusion of male dedicatees from her poetic paratext reinforces her defensive stance. Men are barred from Lanyer’s privileged female space by metaphorical lock and key as well as by their blindness.

In contrast, Lanyer foregrounds the visual acuity of her female protagonists and dedicatees. The Daughters of Jerusalem who greet Jesus with their tears as he walks to Calvary are the only people in the crowd to recognize his divinity, while Pilate’s wife sends a message from the sidelines at Jesus’s trial to urge her husband to “Open thine eies, that thou the truth mai’st see” (84). Liking her community of virtuous women to these discerning participants in her Passion account, Lanyer warns “all vertuous Ladies” (12) not to let “dimme shadowes” deceive their “cleare eyes” (14). Clear-sightedness promises knowledge, authority, and even divinity in *Salve Deus*; Lanyer praises Christ for the steadfastness of his gaze as he “read[s] the earthy storie / Of fraile Humanity” (32) and associates Margaret Clifford’s priestly keys with her “perfit sight” (117) and her ability to impart clear-sightedness to others (109–110). Her defense of women’s visual acuity implicitly validates her own interpretation of the Passion. Lanyer’s decision to liken her poem to a reflective mirror or glass is suggestive in this regard. She describes *Salve Deus* as a mirror that presents her dedicatees with a truthful reflection of Christ and of themselves: “I here present my mirrour to her view, / Whose noble virtues cannot be exempt, / My Glasse beeing steele, declares them to be true” (31). The metaphor establishes *Salve Deus*, like the closet, as a site prompting knowledge through self-examination and private reflection. Fittingly, the trope of the mirror developed simultaneously and often interchangeably with allusions to chambers and closets and similarly connoted privacy and inwardness. By situating herself as the owner of a textual mirror, Lanyer aligns herself with the owners of material mirrors, which before 1630 were valuable commodities associated with an aristocratic lifestyle and stored in closets, cabinets, and chambers. The image thus contributes to her bid for social access even as it reinforces her claim to textual authority.

Lanyer consistently advertises her poetry as the means to a genuine voyeuristic encounter with Christ, insisting that it is her version of the Passion story that will reveal Christ to her readers. She connects her dedicatees’ visual acuity with the experience of encountering and reading
Christ’s body within their closet-like hearts. References to the female gaze hovering on Christ within a retired space are frequent and explicit. She tells Lady Katherine that, “Heere I present to you the King of kings: / Desiring you to take a perfit view, / Of those great torments Patience did indure” (38). Lanyer similarly urges Margaret Clifford to welcome Christ and engrave him within the “holy shrine” (108) of her heart. She entreats her to gaze on the dismembered body of the crucified Christ:

This with the eie of Faith thou maist behold,
Deere Spouse of Christ, and more than I can write;
And here both Griefe and Joy thou maist unfold,
To view thy Love in this most heavy plight. (101)

Elsewhere, encouraging Lady Katherine to let her daughters emulate their mother’s reading habits, Lanyer boasts that,

Heere they may see a Lover much more true
Than ever was since first the world began,

Here may they see him in a flood of teares,
Crowned with thornes, and bathing in his blood;
Here may they see his feares exceed all feares[.] (38–39)

Lanyer’s deployment of the deictic “here” in anaphora appears as a frequent rhetorical, and inherently propagandistic, strategy in Salve Deus. Such passages seemingly situate Lanyer’s virtuous women in the position of the male Petrarchan lover cataloguing the beloved’s physical attributes. Yet, Lanyer pushes beyond the boundaries of Petrarchan conceits and unconsummated desire to a stance that combines the erotic language of the Song of Songs with the physicality characteristic of medieval affective piety to depict her female community actively desiring and enjoying intimacy with Christ.37 In the dedication to Anne Clifford, for example, the invitation to gaze on Christ’s suffering and death becomes an invitation to her patron to embrace Christ in her soul’s arms (46). Lanyer concludes that Christ represents “all that Ladies can desire” (40). Her prefatory material, structured in part as invitations to a privileged feast, is specifically designed to deter-
mine reader access. Lanyer situates herself in a position of relative power as bearer of the keys to transformative and authoritative interactions with a textual Christ. In so doing, she validates her project and amasses some influence for herself that compensates for her social inferiority even as she imagines herself as a part of an aristocratic coterie community.

These strategies conform to the self-validating nuances pervading Salve Deus. Kari Boyd McBride has argued that Lanyer’s use of ambiguous syntax, ostensibly celebrating her patrons’ status and ability, undermines their position in favor of Lanyer’s own textual authority. In the dedication to Queen Anne, for instance, McBride reads Lanyer’s insistence that the queen “judge if it agree not with the Text” (6) as seemingly praising Anne’s textual skill but really asking her “merely to confirm Lanyer’s right reading of the Bible.” The poem thus places limits on the queen’s authority as reader. Ann Baynes Coiro has traced similar tactics in her reading of the poem and of Salve Deus more generally as a “sustained critique” of “aristocratic ladies studded with inestimable wealth” for failing to reward Lanyer with patronage. Lanyer’s construction of her text as exclusive space displays the same propensity for strategic self-validation. On one level, Lanyer lowers herself before her patrons, declaring that any worthiness displayed by her text stems from Christ’s elevation of the lowly and from her patrons’ favor: “That so these rude unpollisht lines of mine, / Graced by you, may seeme the more divine” (4). At the same time, she maintains that if her patrons desire to view Christ, it is her text that provides them with that experience: “Looke in this Mirrour of a worthy Mind / . . . Here may your sacred Majestie behold / That mightie Monarch both of heav’n and earth” (5). The imperative “Looke” and the deictics “Here” and “this” underscore Lanyer’s insistence on her book’s authority. This is not to deny that Lanyer constructs her patrons as skilled readers, nor that she desires—and needs—her aristocratic dedicatees to grace her text with their approval. However, as Edith Snook contends, “determining what and how to read, was itself a form of social power.” In claiming the authority to guide her dedicatees’ reading experiences and their access to her poems and to Christ, Lanyer claims some symbolic capital for herself. Her insistence on exclusive access to her textual closet becomes a crucial strategy in her quest for preferment.
In addition to the closet spaces that Lanyer constructs in the hearts of her patrons and her own textual closet, there is a third metaphorical closet in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*: Cookeham. In “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer figures the estate where she stayed with Margaret and Anne Clifford as a utopian space of retirement that privileges reading, female community, and intimate protected encounters with “Christ and his Apostles” (133). Lanyer prioritizes description of the grounds over the house. Yet, she retains architectural images in her depiction of nature and the women’s activities at Cookeham. The trees shape themselves into “Canopies” (131) to shield the Cliffords from the sun, while the oak under which Margaret Clifford sits to meditate and read lowers its branches to form an “abode” (132) for her. Moreover, when Lanyer credits Cookeham with inspiring her poem, she locates it as the site of true virtue in a line that connects the estate with the closet-like space of the heart: “Farewell (sweet Place) where Virtue then did rest, / And all delights did harbour in her breast” (130). Later in the poem, Lanyer again invokes the image of Anne Clifford’s heart as closet, specifying that it, too, houses Virtue (134). Finally, within the Edenic feminine sphere that Cookeham represents, Lanyer emphasizes the pleasure derived from textual meditation, conversation with Christ, and reading; the kiss stolen from the Countess’s tree lends an erotic tone to the pleasurable world embodied in the estate. Exemplifying the realm of “entire love” (135) that Lanyer yearns for in her appeals for the eradication of social barriers, Cookeham becomes a protected sphere that gives her privileged access to the Cliffords and their textual activities and enables all three women to enjoy intimacy with Christ. The poem maps out, in miniature, the coterie community that Lanyer tries so hard to create throughout *Salve Deus*. In so doing, it underscores Lanyer’s quest for space sequestered from male interference and enables her further to advance her claim for authorial recognition and social access. Once deprived of the sheltered world of Cookeham, Lanyer turns to the writing of *Salve Deus* to construct her own exclusive textual space.

Lanyer’s decision to publish her work problematizes her representation of secluded closet spaces and her longing for an exclusive coterie. Although she addresses her text solely to women, publication opens her text to the gaze of a reading public that includes men, an act seemingly
at odds with her claim for exclusivity and protection from the male gaze. Moreover, by publishing *Salve Deus*, Lanyer taps into the male fascination with access to the female closet. She constructs a reading experience whereby readers who buy her work will assume the transgressive stance of voyeurs gazing on her dedicatees who are themselves gazing on the Christ. Even as it capitalizes on the male desire to spy on women’s closet reading, this decision implicitly denies Lanyer’s patrons the privacy and exclusivity they command by virtue of their social status. As such, publication contributes to Lanyer’s self-authorization. By revealing her patrons to the public gaze, publication challenges the privileges of social rank. Ann Baynes Coiro suggests that Lanyer derives the force of her social critique and a considerable degree of authority from her decision to exhibit her patrons and the “chains of obligation, need, love, and sometimes humiliation which bind her to the women above her” to the public eye: “In displaying, in *printing*, she takes control.” The decision to publish moves Lanyer into a position of relative authority as she, once again, determines access to her text and commands textual meaning. Just as she declares to her female patrons that it is through her text that they will gain access to Christ, the dedicatory epistles announce to her wider readership that *Salve Deus* facilitates an authoritative encounter with the suffering Christ. As Wendy Wall highlights, the act of publication could paradoxically “create the sense of an inner space.” Lanyer’s textual closet, like its architectural counterparts in the early modern period, exists on the boundary between public and private. If it cannot replicate the exclusive circulation of an aristocratic manuscript, her published text still claims the authority to give its audience a privileged view into Christ’s closet encounters with her dedicatees.

In “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer lashes out at Fortune for relegating her to a social “frame” that distances her from her patrons:

Unconstant Fortune, thou art most too blame,
Who casts us downe into so lowe a frame:
Where our great friends we cannot dayly see,
So great a diffrence is there in degree. (134)
To compensate for that social disparity, Lanyer creates an alternative “frame” with her poetry: “This frame of glory which I have erected, / For your faire mind I hold the fittest place, / Where virtue should be setled & protected” (41). Like the lady who built a closet to protect the Book of Common Prayer, Lanyer credits herself with the construction of a textual and architectural “frame” that enables her dedicatees to entertain their beloved in safety. Juxtaposing this imagery of access and protection with the ambiguous figure of Virtue, Lanyer imagines herself entering the chambers of her virtuous patrons’ hearts along with Christ. In so doing, she achieves proximity to and intimacy with her “great friends” and claims comparable worth for herself. Throughout Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, Lanyer emphasizes the secrecy and control emblematized by the closet in an attempt to cultivate a privileged relationship with her dedicatees and to accrue status for herself. The claim to control the relationship between reader and author did not, of course, guarantee that readers would interpret a text according to the author’s desire. There is no evidence to suggest that Lanyer was ever successful in securing patronage, reflecting the elusiveness of her bid for social preferment through textual control. However, her emphasis on social, spatial, and textual access, manifested in the metaphors of the closet and its key, figures her longing for authority and favor and stands as a central strategy in her quest for self-promotion and patronage. Wielding the key to her book and to Christ, Lanyer situates herself in a position of privilege relative to her aristocratic dedicatees, challenging the differences in rank that separated them in daily life and validating her authorial project.

Notes

1. Anon., To a Vertuous and Judicious Lady who (for the exercise of her Devotion) built a Closet (London, 1646), n.p. An early version of this article was presented at the 2004 Sixteenth-Century Studies Conference in Toronto. I am grateful to the Society for the Study of Early Modern Women for sponsoring the panel of which my paper was a part and to Christiane Andersson, Anna Beer, Lyn Bennett, Piers Brown, Elizabeth D. Harvey, Lynne Magnusson, and the anonymous readers of Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal for their suggestions and comments.

2. Leeds Barroll, “Looking for Patrons,” in Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the


12. Angel Day, *The English Secretary, or Methods of Writing Epistles and Letters* (Gainesville: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), sig. Nn2r. Day writes: “The Closet in euerie house, as it is a reposement of secrets, so is it onelie (as I saide before) at the owners, and no others comauandement: The Secretorie, as hee is a keeper and conserver of secrets, so is hee by his Lorde or Maister, and by none other to bee directed. To a Closet, there belongeth properlie, a doore, a Locke, and a key: to a Secretorie, there appertaineth incidentlie, Honestie, Care, and Fidelitie.”
13. Mark Wigley, “Untitled: The Housing of Gender,” in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 327–389. Although the function of the closet did not divide male and female activities along such clearly demarcated lines of public and private or male and female as Wigley maintains, evidence does point to the gendering of closet space. Alan Stewart and James Knowles have demonstrated that the male closet, typically furnished with books, papers, and writing material, was an exclusive space devoted to business, exemplified by secret closet transactions between a master and his secretary. In *The Happines of the Church* (London, 1619), 348, Thomas Adams lists the contents of a chest in a man’s “Closet and Cabinet” as “his bonds & morgages, money and plate,” valuable objects associated with property, lineage, and estate management. Based on household inventories, women’s closets seem to have been devoted rather to domestic affairs. The subtitle of *The good Huswifes Handmaide for the Kitchen* (1594) lauds its importance in furnishing a “Closet of prouision for her Houshold,” while the anonymous *A Closet for Ladies and Gentlewomen* (1608) promises to yield the “Art of preseruing, Conseruing, and Candying” and “soueraigne Medicines and Salues, for sundry Diseases.” Other records, like the diaries of Anne Clifford and Margaret Hoby, testify to the centrality of reading, meditation, and solitude in women’s closet experiences.


15. Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 327. In Wall’s reading, Christ unlocks the door. Lanyer makes it clear, however, that Virtue has the key and provides access to Christ.

16. One of the definitions of “bower” current in the early seventeenth century was “An inner apartment, esp. as distinguished from the ‘hall,’ or large public room, in ancient mansions; hence, a chamber, a bed-room.” Like the closet, the word applied particularly to “a lady's private apartment” and often held sensual and sexual connotations, exemplified by Spenser’s Bower of Bliss. *OED*, s.v. “bower,” n. 1, def. 2.


27. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen (London: Early English Text Society, 1940), 40. The *OED* defines “dalliance” as “Talk,. . . usually of a light or familiar kind” (def. 1) and as “Sport, play (with a companion or companions); esp. amorous toying or caressing” (def. 2).


32. Despite her condemnation of male interpretation, Lanyer did solicit Prince Henry for patronage with a presentation copy of *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*; she did not, however, include him amongst her dedicatees. She also relied on her husband’s approbation of her text. The title page proclaims Lanyer’s authorship specifically in relation to him: “Written by Mistris Aemilia Lanyer, Wife to Captaine Alfonso Lanyer Servant to the Kings Majestie.”

33. In “Why the Lady’s Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun,” in *Women, Texts and Histories*, ed. Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 13–38, Lorna Hutson describes the structure of Lanyer’s Passion narrative as a ‘drama of interpretation’ centering around Christ’s appearances that is designed to test individual ability to respond to Christ’s suffering. For Hutson, it is the women in the Passion narrative who demonstrate discerning compassion.


35. Lanyer’s textual mirror also reveals her dedicatees’ faults. The mirror becomes an important device in Lanyer’s critique of Anne’s failure to grant her patronage. She invites the queen to look in her mirror and view Christ’s very different model of majesty.


39. Ibid., 69.


43. Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 177. Civil War pamphlets capitalized on this notion, giving readers the impression that they were eavesdropping on a private epistolary conversation or viewing the contents of a secret cabinet. See Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 7–8; and Lois Potter, *Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 61.