ABSTRACT

KATELYN TAYLOR ALLEY. "Heare the words of thy most worthy wife": Writing Women’s Voices into Early Modern Marriage Discourses in Aemilia Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum and Lady Anne Southwell’s Manuscript Poetry. (Under the direction of Professor Margaret Simon.)

This capstone investigates representations of marriage in Aemilia Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum (1611) and Lady Anne Southwell’s manuscript poetry (c. 1626-1636). When Lanyer and Southwell were writing, cultural ideas about marriage were in flux due to Henry VIII’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon and the reign of the unmarried, childless Elizabeth I in the previous century, and the realities of marriage were interrogated through the lens of Adam and Eve’s union and the mystical union between Christ and the church illustrated by Paul in Galatians 5. Male writers frequently neglected to attend to the metaphor of mystical marriage as an analogue for earthly marriage, while female writers sought to understand and reimagine earthly marriage through this ideal of mystical marriage. Aemilia Lanyer falls into an exegetical tradition of rehabilitating the narratives of biblical women, but she was the first to insert women’s voices into these discourses and claim authority for early modern women’s own narratives. Her close contemporary, Anne Southwell, struggles under the accumulated weight of Pauline rhetoric as she works to articulate a clear definition of the ideal marriage in her manuscript poetry. She recognizes that conflating modes of marriage problematizes attempts to circumscribe gender roles and attempts to reconcile the resulting paradoxes by imagining male and female attributes coming together in the metaphorical body of the bride of Christ. While they recognize the real gendered hierarchy of marriage in the seventeenth century, both of these writers offer new interpretations of the teachings of Paul that assert women’s spiritual superiority.