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Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*: Protofeminism, Piety, or Transcendence?

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Abstract

The first known English woman to publish an original volume of poetry, Aemilia Lanyer continues to be a controversial figure in the early modern tradition. Lanyer was not an aristocrat; her connections to the court included a sexual liaison with Queen Elizabeth's cousin and her dedication in Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum *(1611) was to women of nobility. Written in the conventions of religious poetry, her work is a defense of Eve in the voice of Pilate's wife. At times the voices of the speaker and the poet appear to be intertwined in a subversion of the misogynist view of Eve's actions, contesting contemporary patriarchal hegemony. However, it is also arguable that despite her less than "virtuous" background and in the face of her possible financial or feminist ambitions, the Christian influences evident in her poetry suggest that Lanyer was a spiritually motivated woman whose work offers a hermeneutic for authentic Christian spirituality.*

Was Aemilia Lanyer a protofeminist challenging the misogynist attitudes of her culture; was she a marginalized and ambitious self-promoting woman in financial crisis seeking fame and fortune, merely finding a voice through religious discourse—the only language deemed suitable for women; or was she a deeply spiritual, albeit flawed, individual claiming divine authority through the feminine voice to challenge and subvert the social and religious hierarchy of her day? Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex*

Judaeorum (1611), the first original volume of poetry published by a woman in England, has provided critics with more questions than answers. Written early in the reign of James I, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, and, more specifically, the central poem from which the volume takes its title, must be read in the context of patronage and patriarchy; nevertheless, second wave feminists continue to read her poem as an early example of protofeminism. Lanyer's intentions are clouded further by her dynamic and unpredictable authorial subjectivity, which, I argue, invites the reader to consider the poem as a transcendent hermeneutic of authentic Christianity.

Aemilia Lanyer was knowledgeable in Latin models of verse and familiar with the English literary tradition, particularly the work of Sir Philip Sidney and his sister, the Countess of Pembroke.[1] Lanyer opens her three-part volume with various dedications to patronesses that are written in a combination of prose and pentameter verse and concludes with a country house poem in iambic pentameter couplets.[2] The central poem, consisting of 1,840 lines in ottava rima stanzas,[3] presents the story of Christ's crucifixion from the point of view of women such as the Countess of Cumberland (her principal patron),[4] the daughters of Jerusalem, the Virgin Mary, and Pilate's wife, whose viewpoint is the focus of this paper.

As a female writer, Lanyer pressed against the gendered boundaries of her sex, vocation, and religion. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* has been described as "the most astonishing assertion of female independence on record" from the early modern period.[5] In a time when writing was a masculine vocation, a woman writing for publication provoked misogynist attacks. Ambition was not a feminine virtue. Publication by a woman was associated with being unchaste.[6] Within this context

1 Susan Woods, "Aemilia Lanyer, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum," in *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 127.

2 Ibid., 132. Lanyer's poem *The Description of Cooke-ham* is the first country house poem published in English.

3 Ibid., 131.

4 Ibid., 127.

5 Ibid., 132.

6 Debra K. Rienstra, "Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, Psalmes," in *A Companion to Early Modern Women's Writing*, ed. Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 122.

Aemilia Lanyer established herself as the first woman in England to publish a volume of poetry as a means to support herself. Four decades later Margaret Cavendish, who published in 1653, would still be considered a "whore" for doing so.

In response to such attitudes, and like many women of her time, Lanyer found her feminine voice through the religious discourse of her day. The only appropriate lexicon available to women writers was the Scriptures. Lanyer's imagination was governed by its terms.[7] She probably drew her inspiration from the Countess of Pembroke's earlier work *Psalmes*, which remained in manuscript form until the nineteenth century. One might argue that both Pembroke and Lanyer engaged in exegesis of Scriptural text; however, Pembroke did not push the boundaries of Scriptural meditation prescribed for women by offering an alternate reading of the text, or by publishing her work.[8] Pembroke completed the work her brother had begun and employed poetic paraphrase in transposing the Psalms into Elizabethan idiom,[9] whereas Lanyer released her feminine imagination in an interpretive account of the Passion of Christ.

Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* draws closely on the Gospel accounts of Christ's Passion, but makes a notable and radical exception in *Eve's Apologie*, which Lanyer extrapolates from one verse in the Gospel of Matthew. The power of Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* fixes the defense of Eve, and thus the *querelle de femmes,* upon the Passion of Christ. Central to the entire *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is the speech by Pilate's wife, taken from Matthew 27:19, which states, "While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: 'Don't have anything to do with this innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.'"[10] Achsah Guibbory points out that the Gospel of Matthew is the only one of the four synoptic gospels to mention Pilate's wife; but her words went

7 Barbara K. Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women: The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," in *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985), 207.

8 Rienstra, 122.

9 Ibid., 115.

10 *The Study Bible*, New International Version, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 1985).

unrecorded.[11] In Lanyer's interpretation of Matthew's account, Pilate's wife does not remain silent—it is she "[w]ho did but dream, and yet a message sent."[12]

From one Scripture verse mentioning a dream, Lanyer imaginatively extrapolates a twelve-stanza defense of Christ's innocence, and at the same time an *apologia* of Eve/womankind. The words of Pilate's wife boldly accuse Pilate of a greater sin than Eve's. "Her weakness did the serpent's word's obey;/ But you in malice God's dear son betray./ Whom if unjustly you condemn to die,/ Her sin was small, to what you do commit;/ All mortal sins that do for vengeance cry,/ Are not to be compared unto it:/ . . . This sin of yours, surmounts them all…/."[13] Furthermore, Lanyer presses the case for gender equality: "Your fault being greater, why should you disdain/ Our being equals, free from tyranny?/ If one weak woman did offend,/ This sin of yours, hath not excuse nor end."[14]

Speaking through the persona of Pilate's wife, the feminine voice protests the authority of the husband/male as well as the crucifixion of Christ. Subsequent authors, notably Rachel Speght, in her tract *A Mouzell for Malastomus* (1617), may have drawn inspiration from Lanyer. In her response to Swetnam's *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle Froward and Unconstant Women*, Speght would argue to exonerate Eve in terms closely resembling Lanyer's.[15] Furthermore, years later, the Royalist Cavalier poet Katherine Philips would redefine sin as the "silence" of not speaking out against the execution of a king in *Upon the Double Murder of King Charles.*[16] Perhaps she, too, drew her

11 Guibbory, "The Gospel According to Aemilia: Women and the Sacred," *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 199.

12 Aemilia Lanyer , "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum" in *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black, and Holly Faith Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1985), 91 (line 834).

13 Ibid., lines 815-820; 823.

14 Ibid., lines 829-832.

15 Janelle Mueller, "Feminist Poetics of Aemilia Lanyer's 'Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,'" in *Feminist Measures: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*, ed. Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 232.

16 Holly Faith Nelson, "Katherine Philips," from Seventeenth-Century Women Writers Lecture Notes, English 416/607 (Trinity Western University, 2007), 5.

inspiration from the feminine voice of Pilate's wife who spoke out against the execution of a king.

In addition to straining gendered categories, Lanyer penetrated the boundaries of class, further distinguishing herself, a commoner, from the mostly high-born women writers of the Jacobean period. The dedications comprising the first part of the book list aristocratic and literary women as patrons and virtuous readers. While some critics view this as Lanyer's attempt to envision an all-female society, such as the setting of her country house poem *The Description of Cooke-ham*, Su Fang Ng posits that Lanyer's search for patrons was difficult and that these names represented her attempt to aspire to the gentried class.[17] According to Ng, Lanyer ambitiously proffered multiple dedications in an attempt to "carve a poetic space for herself" in "economic terms."[18]

Clearly, Lanyer was not one of "them" by birth. Aemilia (born Bassano) was the daughter of a Venetian Jewish family of musicians who had been Christianized. The Bassanos relocated to the court of England "as members of the King's Musick, on the invitation of Henry VIII."[19] Barbara K. Lewalski describes Lanyer as "an insider to court circles, but an outsider in rank and ethnic descent."[20] Adding to Lanyer's profile, Susan Woods notes the family's connections to the reformed Protestant movement and that Aemilia was educated in the household of the Dowager Duchess of Kent, daughter of the Protestant heroine the Dowager Duchess of Suffolk. She also lived for a time in the household of the Countess of Cumberland, whom she would later credit with inspiring and fostering her poetic talent.[21] At age eighteen Aemilia Bassano was orphaned and became mistress to Queen Elizabeth's cousin, the Lord Chamberlain Henry Cary, Lord Hunsdon. Impregnated by the elderly Hunsdon, Aemilia was married off to Alfonso Lanyer, a court musician who misspent the small fortune she had acquired from Hunsdon.

This emerging portrait of Aemilia Lanyer paints her as an "attractive, strong-willed and ambitious woman who tried many

17 Su Fan Ng, "Aemilia Lanyer and the Politics of Praise," *ELH*; 67.2 (2000), 434-5.
18 Ibid., 448.
19 Mueller, "Feminist Poetics of Aemilia Lanyer's 'Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,'" 209.
20 Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women: the Poems of Aemilia Lanyer," 212.
21 Woods, "Aemilia Lanyer, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum," 125.

things to reconnect with the world of power she felt she lost with her marriage to Alfonso."[22] Knowledge about Lanyer's circumstances has been gleaned mostly from the diary of Simon Forman, an astrologer she visited in 1597 to find out if she might "become a lady."[23] Damning Lanyer's feminine virtue, Simon Forman's diary entries imply sexual encounters with her. He writes that she was a "whore." With the diary as a source, A.L. Rowse speculated that Lanyer was Shakespeare's "dark lady."[24] However, David Bevington questions whether Forman's entries have a solid basis, suggesting that they might be accusations produced by a spurned Forman, who possessed the knowledge that Lanyer had been Hunsdon's mistress.[25]

Whether manipulative in her quest for patronage or sexually motivated, Aemilia Lanyer's own relation to the sacred seems admittedly questionable. Can the perceived contrariety between spirituality and economic and sexual empowerment be explained by casting Lanyer as a protofeminist? Taking up the controversy over women's authorship, the *querrelle de femmes*, Lanyer frames a defense of the female sex in the genre of religious poetry. *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is a woman-centered work that explicitly confronts misogyny and the injustices of male domination of women.

Janelle Mueller describes Lanyer as a revisionist. In her view, the dedications to females preceding the *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* are in response to "dedications made to high born personages." Not only the dedications, but "the sacred genre of devotional meditation on biblical subjects in verse" are, each, literary vogues made current by male writers.[26] Mueller suggests that one reason for Lanyer's patronage-courting strategies and specifically scriptural subject matter is the development in poetry of female moral agency, as portrayed by the character of Cleopatra, or in theatrical representations of feminine evil such as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth.[27] Kari Boyd McBride argues for a feminist interpretation of Lanyer's use of female biblical heroines, and

22 Ibid., 125.

23 Lewalski, "Of God and God Women," 207.

24 David Bevington, "A.L. Rowse's Dark Lady," *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and The Canon,* ed. Marshall Grossman (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 20.

25 Ibid., 20.

26 Mueller, "Feminist Poetics," 212-3.

27 Ibid., 215.

states, "rather than being defined by their subservient relationships to men or patriarchal concerns of the Bible, these women are defined by their superiority to or even violent dispatching of men."[28]

Lewalski notes that in *To the Virtuous Reader*, Lanyer passionately denounces those men who, "forgetting they were borne of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the means of women, they would be quite extinguished out of the world…"[29] Ng agrees that it is in this dedication, the only part of the work addressed to male readers, that Lanyer is most thoroughly feminist, cautioning the male reader not to imitate men who forget their origins.[30] However, while Lanyer, in her dedications, creates a female lineage of mothers and daughters that seems to imply an all female society (not unlike the edenic atmosphere of Cooke-ham), her quest for patronage and financial support contests these second wave feminist assumptions that identify Lanyer as a protofeminist.

However, Christian influences evident in her poetry and the possibility that Lanyer was herself a spiritual individual suggest that Lanyer was more than a self-serving writer; in fact, she was a female religious poet. Nevertheless, Lewalski is cautious about categorizing Lanyer's poem as "religious," arguing that "Lanyer emphasizes Christ's Passion as the focus for all the forms of female goodness—and masculine evil—her poems treat."[31] Lewalski claims that Lanyer has fused religious devotion with feminism, thereby asserting the "essential harmony of these two impulses."[32] As Guibbory notes, Lewalski concedes that "Lanyer appears to be sincerely, if not very profoundly religious."[33] Of Lanyer, Elaine Beilin claims, "[her] devoted praise of women, from her apology for Eve, does not derive solely from anger or even as a desire for justice. Rather, it evolves from her own

28 Kari Boyd McBride, "Sacred Celebration: The Patronage Poems, in *Amelia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1998), 67.

29 Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women," 212; Aemilia Lanyer, "To the Virtuous Reader" and "Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum," *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black and Holly Faith Nelson (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1985), 83.

30 Ng, "The Politics of Praise," 438; Lanyer, "To the Virtuous Reader" in *Broadview*, 83.

31 Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women," 207.

32 Ibid.

33 Guibbory, 192.

piety and her poetic calling as a Christian visionary who yearns for a world greatly different from the one she knows."[34] Mueller identifies Lanyer's spirituality as the "spiritual power of femininity" that "holds extreme revisionary implications for "men's control of society, art and the worldly destiny of women."[35]

The revisionary implications of Lanyer's hermeneutic of the Passion are many. First, Lanyer's defense goes much further than Speght's would, or that of any other early modern women writers, stating that, while Eve desired knowledge, it was not Eve's weakness but her inherent innocence that caused her to believe the deception. Although, as Lewalski notes, the poet follows traditional interpretation by admitting Eve's deception, Lanyer claims Eve sinned for "knowledge sake," while Adam's motivation for sinning was far more sinister. Furthermore, Lanyer deliberately omits a rationale for Adam, such as St. Augustine's admission of Adam's social love for Eve and, through Pilate's wife, exonerates Eve, "whose fault was only too much love."[36]

Lewalski further points out that Lanyer locates knowledge in woman's act; the narrator of the poem explains, "Yet men will boast of knowledge, when he tooke/Frome Eve's faire hand, as if from a learned book." [37] Lanyer thereby undermines the male stake in learning.[38] The result, as Guibbory argues, is that Lanyer's defense emphasizing Eve's simplicity could be considered a plausible interpretation of the biblical account in Genesis. Lanyer has overturned a misogynist view of Eve's actions, recasting Eve as virtuous for her trusting nature. More importantly, Lanyer overturns centuries of male exegesis of the Fall.[39]

Critics acknowledge the profound implications of reading Lanyer's inventions within the context of biblical hermeneutics.[40] Guibbory views Pilate's wife's speech in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* as central

34 Elaine Beilin, "The Feminization of Praise: Aemilia Lanyer," in *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the Renaissance*, ed. Elaine Beilin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 180-1.

35 Mueller, "Feminist Poetics," 227.

36 Lewalski,195; Lanyer in *Broadview,* 91 (line 801).

37 Lanyer, in *Broadview,* 91 (line 808).

38 Lewalski, 195.

39 Guibbory, 199.

40 Karen Robertson, "Review of *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre and the Canon*," *Shakespeare Studies* 28 (2000), 317.

to Lanyer's interpretation of the significance of Christ's crucifixion. Pilates' wife, with whom Lanyer identifies, possesses the *interpretive power*, the *right*, and the *responsibility* to speak publicly. As previously noted, the Gospel of Matthew is the only Gospel to mention Pilate's wife or her words to Pilate about a dream. On this point Guibbory suggests that women were silenced by the men who wrote the Gospels.[41] Whether or not the individual Gospel writers held to the dominant view of their day that women were to keep silent, the accepted view put forward by feminist scholarship points out that the Gospels were written within the structures and confines of the patriarchal society in which the early Church was founded, and in which the tradition of Biblical interpretation followed. Thus, for Pilate's wife, and for Lanyer, "[T]he words of both women violate the codes of their respective societies that encourage the silence of woman and their subordination to the authority of husbands."[42]

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Lanyer's poem is that Eve's actions are examined and weighed against the actions of Pilate; consequently, Eve's sin is portrayed as relative to the greater malice that Pilate exhibited by betraying Christ.[43] Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern whether the narrative voice is Lanyer's or that of Pilate's wife. In the beginning of the eleven-stanza defense of Eve, Pilate's wife exhorts her husband to "hear the words of thy most worthy wife/ Who sends to thee to beg her Saviour's life,"[44] yet the defense ends with the words, "Witness thy wife (O Pilate) speaks for all."[45] The narrator speaks for Pilate's wife and for all women, and perhaps for all humanity.

The powerful effects of Pilate's wife's speech and Eve's defense simultaneously transcend gender, cultural, and religious barriers. God's judgement of the Fall in Judaic and Christian traditions is overturned. For Lanyer, patriarchy was rooted in the Fall of Adam and Eve. However, if men, through the act of Pilate, commit a worse sin by crucifying Christ, "their doing so sets women free from men's

41 Guibbory,199.

42 Ibid.

43 Mueller, "Feminist Poetics," 233; Lewalski, "Of God and Good Women," 196.

44 Lanyer, in *Broadview*, 90 (lines 751, 752).

45 Ibid., 91 (line 834).

rule."[46] Just as the patriarchal Church placed the culpability for the Fall squarely on Eve, leading to doctrines that subjugated women, Lanyer locates the crucifixion of Christ on male culpability. Secondly, Mueller notes that "Lanyer's Jewish background may have enabled her to conceive the agency at issue in gendered terms, rather than ethnic ones that were commonplace throughout Christian Europe."[47] The culpability for Christ's crucifixion does not lie with the Jews but with men (Judas, Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate). Thirdly, Christ is not understood by men, not even those male friends within his private sphere. Peter, James, and John—Christ's favourite disciple—fall asleep while he prays in Gethsemane: "Their eyes were heavy and their hearts asleep."[48] Sleep may be viewed as a metaphor for the condition of male spirituality. It is the women, in the Gospel accounts, who are vigilant.[49]

Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum may be viewed as Lanyer's early modern feminist revision of Protestant religious doctrine, but it may also be received as a transcendent hermeneutic of Christianity, and, arguably, as Lanyer's own model of authentic spiritual devotion. Critics agree that Lanyer successfully locates women at the heart of Christianity; she grants them a "special place in the gospel message";[50] she views them "as the genesis of salvation";[51] she presents them "as Christ's true apostles";[52] and she promotes them as the site of humanity's redemption.[53] Moreover, Lanyer, as a female poet, recognizes Jesus for who He is.[54] Thus, Lanyer not only presents women as redeemed through Christ, but she also identifies them as central figures in the

46 Mueller, 233.

47 Ibid., 236.

48 Mueller, "Feminist Poetics," 219; Lanyer, in *Broadview*, 88 (line 465).

49 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus are noted in all the Gospel accounts. See Mathew 27:55-56, 61 and 28:1-8; Mark 15:47 and 16:1, 9-10; Luke 23:55 and 24:1-10; and John 19:25 and 20:1,10-18.

50 Beilin, 179.

51Guibbory, 192.

52 Ng, 439.

53 Lewalski, 215; Mueller, 215. Lewalski points out that Lanyer emphasized the apostles as failures, and that women announced the resurrection; Mueller writes that, according to Lanyer, women alone are capable of receiving the incarnate divine word.

54 Mueller, 222.

spiritual lineage of redemption, recognizing—seeing—who Christ is. The female narrative voices in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* not only see/recognize, but also speak out to acknowledge that the man before Pilate is "God's dear son,"[55] "faultless Jesus,"[56] "innocent blood,"[57] and her "Saviour."[58] Although patriarchal society did not view all women as virtuous, and constructed the idea of the "virtuous woman" in the first place, Lanyer, who speaks for women, recognizes that true virtue comes from Christ, "…whose own profession/ Was virtue, patience, grace, love, piety."[59] As a result, one could conclude that Lanyer would have understood the message of the Gospel as the transcendent power of the risen Christ to overturn the dominant structures of this world and to dissolve the binaries of nature/culture, passion/reason that determined virtue in the early modern period.[60] Lanyer understood virtue to be Christ-likeness. Along with patience, grace, love, and piety, such virtue is, like Jesus, "faultless."[61] For the Christian this would mean a renewed innocence through Christ's grace and forgiveness.

Aemilia Bassano Lanyer was a socially marginalized woman, a woman considered by men as "sinful." Through *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, Lanyer attempts to redeem her gender's station socially and spiritually through a powerfully alternate hermeneutic of the Gospel message. Critics describe Lanyer as a woman of her time but, given her imaginative interpretation, one might view her as a woman *before* her time. Women's virtue, therefore, is not defined by the patriarchal attitudes that have interpreted the biblical account of the Fall. Rather, virtue is Christ-modelled, and seemingly more readily recognized by women than men. From one account in the Gospel of Matthew, Lanyer refocuses our attention on Pilate's wife who, in

55 Lanyer in *Broadview,* 91 (line 816).

56 Ibid., 90 (line 746).

57 Ibid., (line 750).

58 Ibid., (line 752).

59 Guibbory, 183; Lanyer, in *Broadview*, 92 (lines 957, 958).

60 Risa S. and Micah Bear, "Pamphilia to Amphilanthus: Lady Mary Wroth." Renascence Editions. University of Oregon, 1992. 6 of 61. http://darkwing.uoregon.edu accessed May 29, 2007. Mary Wroth, writing a decade after Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was published, conceptualized female virtue as normative to both genders in *Urania.*

61 Lanyer, in *Broadview,* 90 (line 746).

a patriarchal religious culture, spoke out in Christ's defense. Lanyer reclaims Pilate's wife from obscurity and interprets the feminine narrative voice eviscerated from the male-authored account. She notes that throughout the Gospel accounts, women recognized the crucified Christ as the Son of God. It is a devoted woman who, deemed sinful by her culture and in particular by the male disciples, poured oil on Jesus' feet.[62] Lanyer also breaks with convention by presenting a hermeneutic for an authentic spirituality, which invites the reader to consider that Lanyer understood the nature of Christ's transcendence in the midst of the restrictive categories of religion, culture, class, and sex.

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62 Luke 7:36-49. Note verse 48: "Then Jesus said to her your sins are forgiven." See also Matthew 26: 6-13 and Mark 14:1-9. Further note that John 12:1-7 offers an account of Mary, the sister of Lazarus and friend of Jesus, who poured oil on Jesus' feet at the objection of Judas Iscariot.

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