

# Literal and Spiritual Births: Mary as Mother in Seventeenth-Century Women's Writing

VICTORIA BROWNLEE, *National University of Ireland, Galway*

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*Mindful of the complex position of Christ's mother, Mary, in post-Reformation Europe, this article examines how two women writers read Mary's fleshly relationship with Christ. Reading the Bible typologically, Aemilia Lanyer and Dorothy Leigh determine that Mary's material labor has spiritual consequences, because, in delivering Christ, she delivers God's plan for salvation and inaugurates the new covenant. But, interpreting Marian maternity in this way, Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and Leigh's *The Mothers Blessing* also suggest that the new covenant initiates a form of maternity that has sustained spiritual resonance for all women and has profound implications for the female writer.*

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## INTRODUCTION

IN THE SET of prayers dedicated for use during childbirth in Thomas Bentley's (ca. 1543–85) *The fift lampe of virginities* (1582), the woman experiencing the “nips, pinches, and pangs” of labor is encouraged to ruminate on the words spoken to “Our grand-mother Eue, and in hir to vs all; I will increase thy sorowe, when thou art with child: with paine shalt thou bring foorth thy children.”<sup>1</sup> Within these prayers, Eve alone is the antecedent of the expectant mother and it is significant that biblical matriarchs such as Sara, Hannah, Bathsheba, and Christ's mother, Mary, who are elsewhere commended to the reader as exemplars of “motherlie and carefull affection,” disappear from view.<sup>2</sup> As the sorrowing mother experiences the legacy of Eve's sin in Genesis, she has, according to the schema of the prayers, cause to reflect on her own transgression: “our sins . . . hath made [labor] to be dangerous, painefull, and full of perill, which thou didst laie vpon our grand-mother Eue, and vpon all vs hir posteritie, as a correction and punishment for sin: and therefore I confesse

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<sup>1</sup>T. Bentley, 1582a, 96.

<sup>2</sup>T. Bentley, 1582b, B2<sup>r</sup>.

deere God, that through my manifold sins, I haue not onlie deserued this thy rod of correction, but far sorer, and more greuous punishment.”<sup>3</sup> Recollection of the Bible’s first mother drives the sorrowing woman to claim Eve’s sin as “our sin,” and induces a moment of confession that accepts the pains of labor as a deserved punishment for personal wrongs. As the bequest of a guilty foremother, labor pain becomes in these prayers evidence of women’s continuation in sin.

Bentley’s elision of labor pain with female sin both past and present is by no means exceptional.<sup>4</sup> In her study of early modern attitudes toward reproduction, Mary E. Fissell notes that, after the Reformation, women were regularly called to “identify with Eve,” whereas in the medieval period, they commonly “identified themselves with the Virgin by going to Mass, praying specifically to her, and wearing relics or sanctified objects related to her.”<sup>5</sup> While totalizing assessments that suggest an acute pre-/post-Reformation shift in Mary’s significance have been shown to be problematic, Fissell is one of a number of scholars who continue to suggest that the importance of Mary’s motherhood, and more specifically the processes of her maternal body, was reduced in the wake of the Reformation.<sup>6</sup> The intense theological speculation on the significance of anatomical changes to Mary’s birth canal or the mystical properties of her breast milk that characterized medieval and later Roman Catholic writings,<sup>7</sup> gave way to a denial of the efficacy of the physical processes of the Marian body and a more general praise of her piety and faith in the work of Reformists.<sup>8</sup> And, as the miraculous connotations of Mary’s pregnancy and labor faded, there were consequences for female bodies more generally; in essence, as Fissell quips, “the womb went bad.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup>T. Bentley, 1582a, 102.

<sup>4</sup>For additional examples, see Hamilton, 226; Ainsworth.

<sup>5</sup>Fissell, 46.

<sup>6</sup>Recent studies that have illuminated Mary’s continuing importance among Reformers, and disavowed any straightforward erasure of her presence in early modern England and those parts of Europe that accepted religious reform, include Tvard; Kreitzer; Heal; Waller. For scholarship beyond Fissell that suggests that the significance of Marian motherhood was reduced by religious reform, see Beattie; Ellington.

<sup>7</sup>For an example of this manner of reading Mary’s body, see Loarte; for an overview of Roman Catholic understanding of the Virgin’s body, see Ellington, 48–59; Waller, 33–35; Kristeva.

<sup>8</sup>It is not, then, that Protestants abandoned discussion of the biological processes of Mary’s body, but that attention to them became part of a rejection of Roman Catholic emphasis on the miraculous nature of the Marian body. For more on this distinction, see Heal, 64–115; Waller, 55–79.

<sup>9</sup>Fissell, 54. Other scholars have similarly noted that Reformed attitudes toward Mary had consequences for women. See Beattie, 131; Crawford, 47; Dolan, 121–22; Hill, 389.

Bentley's prayers for the laboring woman are suggestive of the way in which readings of Eve, cursed in Genesis 3:16 to bear children "in sorowe," contributed to a souring of the maternal functions of the female body.<sup>10</sup> An emphasis on Eve's maternity renders the womb a site of sin rather than salvation, and its denigrated position is a concern of female writers who sought to reconceive the status of women and motherhood in early seventeenth-century England. Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645), in her prefatory letter to the reader in *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (Hail God king of the Jews; 1611), chastises those men who "doe like Vipers deface the wombes wherein they were bred, forgetting that 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."<sup>11</sup> In *The Mothers Blessing*, which went through twenty-three editions after its publication in 1616, Dorothy Leigh (d. 1616) suggests a similar depreciation of the maternal body. She reminds her readers that, although Eve was a mother who brought "great and wofull shame" to all women, Mary's maternity "brought vs a Sauour."<sup>12</sup> As Leigh's comparison suggests, an assessment of motherhood that is properly oriented in scripture will acknowledge the historic importance of Mary's maternal contribution as well as Eve's sin. For both Lanyer and Leigh, a reevaluation of the female body turns, as this article suggests, on the Marian body because it alone facilitated Christ's humanity. Mary, without man, provides the material substance necessary for redemption and, in doing so, is found to mark the maternal body as a site of spiritual significance. Reading the Bible, Lanyer and Leigh determine that Mary's material labor has spiritual consequences, because, in delivering Christ, she delivers God's plan for salvation to the earth and inaugurates the new covenant. Because this covenant fulfils that which was promised in the Old Testament, it must, according to biblical typology, atone for Eve's sin. But these writers also suggest that the new covenant initiates a form of maternity that has, within the Christological dispensation, profound

<sup>10</sup>Geneva Bible, Genesis 3:16. All further biblical quotations have been taken from this edition. It should be said that Eve's actions in the opening chapters of scripture made Genesis a central proof-text in debates on gender in the early modern period. This biblical book became, as McManus, 193–94, explains, "the foundation of Renaissance discourse about the essential nature and function of women." For more on how Eve was read in the period, see Almond, 143–209.

<sup>11</sup>Lanyer, 48. As the dedicatory poems are numbered separately in this edition of *Salve Deus*, poetic references cite the page number followed by the line number.

<sup>12</sup>Leigh, 35–36.

spiritual resonance.<sup>13</sup> For if, as *Salve Deus* and *The Mothers Blessing* advocate, the Bible is read typologically, Marian maternity becomes a mechanism of deliverance, and the inheritance of the “Mother of our Lord” becomes a motherhood rich in spiritual issue and consequence.<sup>14</sup>

### MARIAN TYPOLOGIES AND THE LABOR OF FEMALE FLESH

Biblical typology was among the most commonly practiced, and influential, exegetical methods of the early modern period.<sup>15</sup> A typological reading of the Bible, which the Reformers sought to paradoxically accommodate within their commitment to scripture’s “one sense, which is the literal sence,” was used to discern, and construct, the hermeneutic unity of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>16</sup> Within this interpretative framework, the Old Testament was understood to have resonance beyond its literal, historic meaning and was found to speak of Christ. The apostle Paul laid the foundations for this manner of biblical reading when he explained to the Colossians that the law is “a shaddowe of things to come,” and rebuked the Galatian Christians for believing that observance of the law was

<sup>13</sup>Although a number of scholars have referenced Lanyer’s use of biblical typology within larger considerations of her engagement with the Bible’s contents (White, 330; DiPasquale, 2000; Lewalski, 1979; Loughlin), there has not been a sustained interrogation of how the structures of this exegetical practice underpin the poem’s conception of literal and spiritual maternity, and facilitate the relationship constructed between the Old and New Testaments. Other scholars who have more broadly considered how the Bible shapes Lanyer’s poetic project include McBride and Ulreich; Phillippy; Longfellow, 59–91; Rienstra; Rogers; Molekamp, 2012. Leigh’s work has been considered in relation to its genre and female writing (Wayne; Poole; Heller), but discussion of how the Bible is read in *The Mothers Blessing* remains limited. Notable exceptions include sections of Gray; Beilin; Snook, 57–80 — although none addresses typology directly.

<sup>14</sup>Lanyer, 95 (line 1031).

<sup>15</sup>For an assessment of typology’s importance to early modern exegesis and thought, see Luxon; Freinkel; Streete, 2009 and 2012; Killeen, 2010 and 2011. While typology remained the dominant way of reading the Bible in the early decades of the seventeenth century, it is worth mentioning that alternative approaches to biblical interpretation were emerging. It is possible, for example, to trace the beginnings of the philological and historical exegesis commonly associated with the Enlightenment to the work of some Reformers and radical writers. For more, see J. H. Bentley; Frampton.

<sup>16</sup>Tyndale, R2<sup>v</sup>. Although the Reformers attempted to champion typology as a nonallegorical mode of reading, both Luxon and Freinkel have shown that these differences were largely semantic and that typology, like allegory, produced highly figurative forms of exegesis.

necessary for salvation.<sup>17</sup> For Paul, the “Body,” or meaning, of the law is found “in Christ.”<sup>18</sup> In his letter to the Galatians, a reading of the Old Testament narratives of Hagar and Sarah (Gen. 16–18) proves that to continue in the law is to misinterpret its announcement of the new covenant under Christ:

Tell me, ye that will be under the Law, do ye not heare the Law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sonnes, one by a seruāt, & one by a freewoman. But he which was of the seruāt, was borne after the flesh: and he which was of the fre woman, *was borne* by promes. By the which things another thing is meant: for these *mothers* are the Two Testaments, the one which is Agar of mount Sina, which gendereth into bondage, (For Agar *or Sina* is a mountaine in Arabia, & it answereth to Jerusalem which now is) and she is in bondage with her children. But Jersuaem, which is aboue, is fre: which is the mother of vs all. For it is written, Reioyce thou barren that beareth no children: breake for the, & crye, thou that trauailest not: for the desolate hathe many mo children, then she which hathe an husband. Therefore, brethré, we are after the manner of Isaac, children of the promes.<sup>19</sup>

Read in light of Christ, Paul finds “another thing is meant” by the Genesis narrative, and understands Hagar and Sarah as figures for the old and new covenants, here termed “Testaments.” Sarah, understood as a figure of the New Jerusalem that is a spiritual, heavenly community, gives birth to a child of “promes,” Isaac, who is a type of those who are born according to the spirit rather than “the flesh.” The analogy between that which was promised by the law and that which was fulfilled by Christ turns, then, on a distinction between flesh and spirit. And it is one that teaches, as John Calvin (1509–64) explains in a comment on this passage, that children of the new covenant do not hope in “carnal, earthly, and temporal things, but in . . . spiritual, heavenly and eternal benefits.”<sup>20</sup> According to Paul’s exegesis, living under the law is akin to being born of the flesh; both are merely a shadow, or a type, of spiritual rebirth.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Colossians 2:17; Galatians 3–4. See also Paul’s teaching in Romans as well as 2 Corinthians 3:13–18 and Hebrews 10:1. For an overview of Paul’s understanding of the Old Testament, see Dunn.

<sup>18</sup>Colossians 2:17.

<sup>19</sup>Galatians 4:22–28.

<sup>20</sup>Calvin, 459 (2.11.10). For a detailed consideration of how this passage from Galatians was interpreted by Reformers, and on Paul’s reading of this passage of Genesis more generally, see Luxon, 16, 77–96.

<sup>21</sup>Before Paul, the distinction between a birth of the flesh and that of the spirit was made by Jesus, who explained to Nicodemus the need to be “born again” to “see the kingdom of God”: John 3:3.

For many sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentators, however, Paul's understanding of the hermeneutic relationship between Old Testament shadow and Christological fulfillment did more than authorize a reciprocal reading of scripture's two Testaments. Commenting on Galatians 4:22–28, William Perkins (1558–1602) explains that Paul speaks of those in his time who “went about to establish their owne righteousnesse by the lawe. . . . And the Papists of our time, who will not be subiect to the iustice of God, but set vp their owne iustice in the keeping of the law.”<sup>22</sup> Following the apostle's example, Perkins finds that “another thing” is meant by Paul's words: the enslavement of Hagar and the Galatians foreshadows those who continue to live in bondage in “our time.” Perkins's extension of Paul's typology of Genesis to include the early modern present was permissible under what had become, by the seventeenth century, a firmly established expansion of typology to include secular history within a continuing process of typological fulfillment.<sup>23</sup> For early modern exegetes, understanding the precise connections between the Old Testament and the New, and both Testaments and the present age, was an important activity because the typological ligatures discerned revealed the Bible's contents to be part of what Kevin Killeen terms an “omnipresent history.”<sup>24</sup>

Understood typologically, the Bible's narratives had living relevance because they prefigured contemporary persons and events: King James was, according to Archbishop John Williams's (1582–1650) reading of 1 Kings 11:41–43, “Great Britains Salomon,” and, for George Gifford (1547/48–1600) and many other Protestant commentators, John's words in Revelation 17 clearly revealed that “Rome is this filthie whore of Babylon.”<sup>25</sup> But typological readings of scripture are not confined to the work of churchmen and sermonizers. The Protestant emphasis on scrutinizing scripture for its personal relevance means that the

<sup>22</sup>Perkins, 342.

<sup>23</sup>Committed to scripture's single, literal sense, many Reformers worked to classify Paul's reading of Genesis as typology. William Whitaker's (1547/48–1595) attempt is suggestive of this endeavor: Paul “does not make a two-fold sense of that history . . . for that history is not accommodated by Paul in that place allegorically, but typically; and a type is a different thing from an allegory. The sense, therefore, of that Scripture is one only, namely, the literal or grammatical”: Whitaker, 406. In this reading, the new covenant through Jesus fulfills, rather than erases, the Genesis history and is deemed the single sense or literal meaning. For a discussion of the difficulty of distinguishing allegory from typology based on Paul's reading of Hagar and Sarah, see Luxon, 77–101; for the popularity of Galatians 4 and its relationship to the Reformers commitment to the literal sense, see Lewalski, 1979, 120.

<sup>24</sup>Killeen, 2010, 492. Lewalski, 1977, 81, links the reformed emphasis on applying scripture to the self to this expansion in typological readings. For further discussion of the development of typological applications in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see also Galdon, 5; Keenan, 262.

<sup>25</sup>Williams, title page; Gifford, 340.

effects of this reading practice are discernible across a variety of writers working in a range of genres, including private meditations, conduct literature, letters, woodcuts, and poetry. Women readers were, importantly, not excluded from the typologizing imperative. Femke Molekamp's important study *Women and the Bible in Early Modern England* demonstrates that many women engaged "in non-linear modes of reading the scriptures. These included typological readings of the Bible, liturgical readings, and repetitive, meditative readings."<sup>26</sup> Among their female contemporaries, Lanyer and Leigh's awareness of the central tenets of biblical typology may not, then, be considered exceptional. Yet both writers' sustained application of this knowledge to produce readings that are as sophisticated as they are innovative is certainly remarkable, and has much to say about the way in which typology underpinned the alternative biblical readings and altered theologies that emerge in female exegesis of the seventeenth century.

For Dorothy Leigh in *The Mothers Blessing*, typology facilitates an intricate reinterpretation of scripture that is to the advantage of mothers as well as her own writing project. The centrality of the Bible to Leigh's conception of her work is declared on the title page with the words of King Solomon in Proverbs 1:8: "My sonne, heare the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the lawe of thy mother." Quoting from a biblical book that, as this verse and the later inclusion of Bathsheba's instructions to Lemuel in Proverbs 31:1–9 suggest, affords space and significance to maternal, as well as paternal, wisdom, Leigh begins the work of aligning her maternal advice with biblical models of motherly instruction. Within this endeavor, Christ's mother, Mary, is paramount. Leigh arrives at her consideration of Marian maternity via a discussion of the exemplary chastity of Susanna, whose story is told in Daniel 13.<sup>27</sup> Readers are encouraged to "bee, as [Susanna] was, chaest, watchfull, and wary," and it is this initial concern for the preservation of female chastity that prompts a recollection of that "woman vertuous aboue all other women," Mary.<sup>28</sup> While Leigh wishes that "all women . . . woul[d]e learne of this blessed Virgin to bee chaste," it becomes clear that Mary's significance extends beyond her suitability as the archetypal female exemplar when she is declared a site of "blessing . . . to vs women."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Molekamp, 2013, 15.

<sup>27</sup>Daniel 13 was included in the Apocryphal section of the Geneva Bible and King James Bible and appeared in the Vulgate as well as the Douay Rheims translation. Leigh and her readers would also have been familiar with Susanna because she was popularly invoked in discussions of female behavior, commonplace books, and conduct manuals, as well as sermons and art. Several stanzas in *Salve Deus* are also devoted to Susanna. For consideration of these, and how Susanna is positioned as an antecedent of the Countess of Cumberland, see DiPasquale, 2000, 365–69.

<sup>28</sup>Leigh, 33–34.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 37.

Leigh understands Mary to be a source of “blessing” specifically because her contribution to biblical history absolves women from the legacy of Genesis: “through that gracious Virgin . . . it pleased GOD to take away the shame, vvhich EVE our Grandmother had brought vs to.”<sup>30</sup> In this reading, Mary functions as a typological counterbalance to Eve’s sin, and her position as such permanently alters how the Genesis narrative is to be interpreted: “For before, men might say, The woman beguiled me, and I did eate the poysoned fruit of disobedience, and I dye. But now man may say, if he say truly, The woman brought me a Sauour . . . *The seede of the woman hath taken downe the Serpents head*; and now whosoeuer can take hold of the seed of the woman by faith, shall surely liue for euer.”<sup>31</sup> Offsetting Eve’s provision of sin with Mary’s provision of a Savior, Leigh stresses that the connections she discerns in these women’s narratives is biblically inscribed. Her paraphrase of Genesis 2:15 (“I will also put enimitie between thee and the womā, & between thy sede and her sede. He shal breake thine head, & thou shalt bruise his heele”) is a sharp reminder that God not only appointed a woman to a seminal role in his plan for salvation, but chose to reveal this at the beginning of biblical history.

Unsurprisingly, this verse was important to other women writers who similarly sought to ground a reconsideration of Eve’s sin in wider biblical readings. For Rachel Speght (ca. 1597–1661), writing in response to Joseph Swetnam’s attack on women through Eve, Genesis 2:15 points to an alternative biblical legacy for women and shifts attention away from Eve’s punishment toward that which absolves it: “the first promise that was made in Paradise, God makes to woman . . . that as the woman had beene an occasion of his sinne, so should woman bring foorth the Sauour.”<sup>32</sup> Writing later, Alice Sutcliffe’s (fl. 1624–34) lengthy admonishment of Eve’s disobedience gives way to an acknowledgement of the significance of this promise: “Yet courage Woman . . . / thy Seed / . . . shall Sathan deadly wound.”<sup>33</sup> As these examples suggest, a right reading of Eve’s punishment will include Genesis 2:15. But, more specifically, as Leigh’s lines suggest, it will precipitate a recognition of that which was promised to Eve reaching fruition in the body of Mary. Drawing a distinction between “before” and “now,” Leigh reminds her readers that they are witnesses of the new covenant and must read scripture as such. To continue to focus on Eve’s damnation is to read the Bible according to the old covenant — to be, as Calvin said of the enslaved Galatians, “blind and accursed” and “content with present shadows” because of a refusal to “stretch their minds to Christ.”<sup>34</sup> If scripture is read “truly,” Leigh asserts,

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 35–36.

<sup>32</sup>Speght, 6.

<sup>33</sup>Sutcliffe, 150.

<sup>34</sup>Calvin, 460 (2.11.10). For further discussion of the Reformed understanding of Jewish “blindness,” see Preus, 16–20, 268.



and rooted in the “now,” exegesis will acknowledge the significance of Mary’s contribution and accept her, as I.B. claimed in *Virginia* (1632), as “that instrument of ioy / Which Eue’s sad curses did to blessings turne.”<sup>35</sup> According to the terms of Leigh’s exegesis, a refusal to accept Mary’s maternity as a fulfillment of Eve’s legacy effectively denies the New Testament revelation of the Savior.

While Genesis 2:15 is used to biblically authorize the typological connectedness of Eve and Mary, Leigh’s subsequent move to explore how the Virgin is prefigured by five Old Testament women is a more speculative endeavor. These women, selected because “the first letters of [their] names doe make [Mary’s] whole name,” are presented to the reader as follows:

*Michal,*  
*Abigail,*  
*Rachel,*  
*Iudith, &*  
*Anna.*<sup>36</sup>

This typesetting literalizes the perceived ligatures between scripture’s two Testaments in a way that positions Mary as the fulfillment of the five Old Testament women named.<sup>37</sup> According to typological standards, Mary becomes the antitype of these women because their qualities are found to coalesce and reach fruition in her body; their “vertues,” Leigh explains, are “wholly combined in her.”<sup>38</sup> The way in which Leigh visually conjoins Mary with her Old Testament antecedents is especially important because, as Gary Waller explains, “the Old Testament heroines were dissociated from Mary by the Reformers and seen rather as exempla of heroic, obedient and faithful women, virtuous Protestant witnesses for the faith.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the last woman on Leigh’s list, Hannah, was regularly championed in Reformed writings as the ideal biblical mother, and, as Michele Osherow has shown, in many senses “replaces the Virgin Mary in Protestant considerations of a motherly figure.”<sup>40</sup>

By interweaving the names of popular Old Testament exemplars like Hannah with Mary’s name, Leigh reconjoins Christ’s mother to her biblical predecessors and suggests a biblical omnipresence more commonly found in medieval and

<sup>35</sup>I.B., 26.

<sup>36</sup>Leigh, 41. It should be noted that, in this section of *The Mothers Blessing*, Leigh, 41, claims to draw on a list of names compiled by “godly and reuerend men of the Church.”

<sup>37</sup>In this point, I build on Gray’s observation that Leigh uses this “miniature acrostic” to evoke a “biblical master narrative” that “testifies to a wide sphere of female activity and public piety”: Gray, 575.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid. When used in relation to typology, *antitype* refers to “that which is shadowed forth or represented by the ‘type’ or symbol”: *Oxford English Dictionary*, def. 1.

<sup>39</sup>Waller, 56.

<sup>40</sup>Osherow, 2009, 74.

Roman Catholic readings.<sup>41</sup> The teachings of sixteenth-century Jesuit scholar Peter Canisius (1521–97) recalled in *The widdoves mite* (1619), for example, find Mary in “the woman whose seed was promised in Paradise,” but also claim her as “the true Rebecca; The true Iudith; The true Esther; The true temple and Sanctuary of God prophesied by Ezechiel, and the very way of Saints . . . She was that which Moyses saw in the bush and fire; the mysticall Arke of the Testament. . . . Now in the new Testament, behold that vnited which before you saw scattered.”<sup>42</sup> While Leigh might not go as far as to suggest that Mary, rather than Christ, enables the full meaning of the Old Testament to become clear, her typology, which similarly outlines how various Old Testament narratives foreshadow Mary, is no less evocative: “[Mary] was as faithfull to her husband, as *Michal*, who saued her husband *Dauid* from the fury of *Saul*, although hee were her father and her King, not preferring her owne life before the safety of her husband. She was as wise as *Abigail*, who is highly commended for her wisdome: amiable in the sight of her husband, as *Rachel*: stout and magnanimous in the time of trouble, as *Iudith*: patient and zealous in prayer, as *Anna*.”<sup>43</sup> Evidently, Leigh intends “MARIA” to conjure a series of biblical intertexts that attest to the Virgin’s significance and, by following the acrostic of Mary’s name with this explanatory note, she pinpoints the precise qualities and narratives she seeks to arouse.

Significantly, these lines credit Mary as the antitype of a series of women whose narratives challenge the masculinity and authority of men. A glimpse of Rachel, perhaps the most conventional of the biblical women Leigh names, moves the Israelite leader Jacob to weeping (Genesis 29:11), while Hannah’s zeal causes her to reject Elkanah’s acceptance of her barren state (1. Sam. 1:8) and entreat God to give her a son in the Bible’s first prayer to God (by an individual other than a prophet) in the sanctuary.<sup>44</sup> Michal, Abigail, and Judith are each praised by Leigh for acts of autonomy with political consequences. The praise of Michal originates in 1 Samuel 19:11–17, where she is found engineering the escape of her husband and the deception of her father, in a narrative that is marked by David’s silence in the midst of his wife’s ingenuity.<sup>45</sup> The subsequent

<sup>41</sup>See Waller, 56, for a discussion of Marian omnipresence in medieval readings of scripture.

<sup>42</sup>A.G., 66–67.

<sup>43</sup>Leigh, 42.

<sup>44</sup>Osherow, 2009, 45, notes the seminal importance of this first prayer by an individual, and terms it “a critical episode in the Bible.” *Ibid.*, 47–49, also discusses how the biblical text emphasizes Hannah’s independence from Elkanah.

<sup>45</sup>Osherow, 2015, 84, notes that all the active verbs in the biblical text are attributed to Michal, and has shown that, typically, Michal was chastised for the lies she tells in this passage as well as her later derision of David’s celebration before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam. 6). In light of this common denigration of Michal’s narrative, Leigh’s selection of Michal, instead of Miriam, for example, is unusual and may be understood as a reclaiming of her significance in biblical history.

commendation of Abigail's wisdom is similarly rooted to a biblical text that is celebratory of female single-mindedness. Abigail's reparations to David and his army for Nabal's churlishness are explicitly devised and conducted without her husband's consent (1 Sam. 25:19), and news of her resourcefulness is cited as a direct cause of Nabal's death (1 Sam. 25:37). Abigail's delivery of her household chimes with Leigh's praise of Judith's bravery, which, in the face of the ineptitude and weak faith of city officials, saves a city from the Assyrian army. Beheading their general, Holofernes, with his own sword, the biblical book devoted to her industry and valor marks her as a political liberator of the Israelite nation. What is notable in Leigh's invocation of the narratives of Michal, Abigail, and Judith in particular to praise Mary is that, in each case, God chooses to bring victory "by the hand of a woman."<sup>46</sup>

These independent women of the Old Testament, celebrated for unfeminine and perhaps even unsavory traits, seem curious forerunners to Mary, who was typically praised by Reformers for her piety and maternal affection.<sup>47</sup> Yet the very peculiarity of these antecedents is revealing because they suggest that the significance of Marian maternity surpasses exemplarity. As the mother of Christ, Mary too engages in an act of deliverance, but it is one that marks her as a spiritual, rather than political, rescuer of God's people; as Leigh explains, "now man may say . . . I feede of [the Sauour] by faith and liue . . . by God, working in a woman: man can claime no part in it."<sup>48</sup> As Leigh foregrounds the divine importance of Mary's maternity for salvation and celebrates the exclusion of men from the incarnational plan, her inclusion of Old Testament women who are praised for autonomous acts of deliverance seems appropriate. Her explanation of the Marian acrostic reveals that true appreciation of Mary, and an understanding of the significance of her maternity, logically emerges from a hermeneutic appreciation of the relatedness of both Testaments.

A typological reading of the Old Testament in light of the New reveals a Mary who embodies, both in person and name, the variety of important roles women have played across biblical history. This lineage of providentially important women is found, however, to have significance beyond Mary when Leigh suggests that her inheritance of virtues is available to all women: "Seeing then, that by this one name [Maria], so many vertues are called to remembrance, I thinke it meete, that good names be giuen to all women, that they might call to minde the vertues of those women whose names they beare."<sup>49</sup> Here Mary's name, and naming women more generally, functions as a signifier of women's worth and potential. The implication is that, as individuals are given biblical

<sup>46</sup>Judith 13:25.

<sup>47</sup>For an overview of Reformed readings of Mary, see Heal, 64–115.

<sup>48</sup>Leigh, 35.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 42–43.

names, such as Abigail or Judith, they accrue a figurative connection to a host of biblical predecessors.<sup>50</sup> For Leigh, because all the virtues of biblical women are encapsulated in “one name,” “Marie,” the process of naming becomes a means of illuminating and expanding a typological network of virtuous women across sacred and secular history.<sup>51</sup> According to Leigh’s exegesis, in giving birth to the Savior, Mary exonerates women from Eve’s legacy, but she also connects contemporary women to their virtuous Old Testament predecessors whose faithful, brave, independent, and zealous examples they are authorized to follow.

By reading Mary typologically, Leigh uncovers a network of women across biblical history whose alternative virtues foreshadow the spiritual and political impact of Mary’s maternity and, consequently, the significance of contemporary women. It is an exegetical strategy deployed to similar effect at the beginning of Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. While the opening prose address to the reader likewise works to establish a biblical community of virtuous and powerful women, Lanyer is more pointed in her assessment of the collective significance of the Old Testament women she chooses. The women she names are each used by God to bring down the “pride and arrogancie” of men: “As was cruell *Cesarus* by the discreet counsel of noble *Deborah*, Judge and Prophetesse of Israel: and resolution of *Jael* wife of *Heber* the Kenite: wicked *Haman*, by the divine prayers and proceeding of beautifull *Hester*: blasphemous *Holofernes*, by the invincible courage, rare wisdom, and confident carriage of *Judeth*: & the unjust Judges, by the innocency of chaste *Susanna*: with infinite others, which for brevities sake I will omit. As also in respect it pleased our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ . . . to be begotten of a woman.”<sup>52</sup> The structure of her exegesis, moving as it does from Old Testament to New, emphasizes women’s providential contribution across biblical history, but it also suggests, by the standards of typology, that the most significant created being used by God was a woman and mother. By placing Mary at the end of a list of faithful Old Testament women, Lanyer demonstrates that her celebration of Marian maternity is not borne from a belief in Mary’s intercessory abilities, but logically emerges from a form of biblical reading authorized by Reformists.

The inclusion of Mary within a list of powerful women who undo the evil plans of men also marks Marian maternity as a mechanism that offsets specifically male-authored sin — a suggestion that anticipates the later poetic emphasis on the catalogue of male wrongs that drive the Passion narrative and contribute to Christ’s death. In the address to the reader, Mary inherits a biblical lineage that, with the exception of Susanna, is notable in its political and

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 41. For further discussion of the attention given to naming children in *The Mothers Blessing*, see Heller, 73–78.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Lanyer, 41.

providential resonance. Through the actions of Deborah, whose speech mobilizes the Israelite army whom she accompanies into battle against the Canaanite army (Judges 4), and Jael, who brings an end to the conflict by hammering a tent peg into the temple of their General, *Cesarus*, God fulfills the prophesy to deliver Israel's enemy "into the hand of a womā" (Jud. 4:9) and saves the nation; and Esther and Judith's contribution to the respective downfalls of Haman and Holofernes similarly results in the rescue of their peoples from death.

Grouping Mary alongside a series of women whom God uses to save his chosen people, motherhood is transposed from womanly convention into a divinely ordained act of rescue: "it pleased our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, without the assistance of man . . . from the time of his conception, till the houre of his death, to be begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman; . . . yea, even when he was in his greatest agonie and bloodie sweat, going to be crucified, and also in the last houre of his death, tooke care to dispose of a woman."<sup>53</sup> According to this description, Mary's significance hinges on her maternal body because, as a woman, she had the biological capacity to facilitate the incarnation. Indeed, the maternal functions of the female body are understood here to be central to Mary's divine selection for this historic task. Tying Christ's conception, birth, and sustenance to Mary's maternal body, Lanyer showcases how pregnancy, labor, and breastfeeding are intrinsic to the Bible's ultimate act of salvation. Her Jesus is a fleshy one, and readers are reminded that the sweating and suffering Christ on his way to the cross was made human through the physical processes of a laboring and nourishing female body. Physically bringing God to earth, Christ's humanity is the direct inheritance of his mother, and here the relationship between mother and son, rather than father and son, takes precedence.<sup>54</sup> The bond between Christ and Mary importantly turns on their fleshy connection as Christ's physical "agonie" opens into a remembrance of his mother before his death. By emphasizing that Mary's centrality extends beyond the birth, nurture, and obedience of the Christ child and into salvific narratives of the Christ man, Lanyer locates the tasks of mothering alongside the conclusion of the divine plan for salvation through the cross.

Foregrounding how the atonement is dependent on an intermingling of the material processes of maternity with the divine plan of incarnation, Lanyer is, like Leigh, at pains to assert that this salvific act is accomplished "without the assistance of man."<sup>55</sup> As such, the Marian body, as a site where God meets female flesh, is marked as the location of a birth unlike any other. Thomas Adams

<sup>53</sup>Lanyer, 49–50.

<sup>54</sup>For more on how Lanyer represents Christ's obedience to his mother, see Miller, 157.

<sup>55</sup>Lanyer, 49.

(1583–1652) makes this clear when, contemplating the creation of Adam, Eve, and their descendants, he notes that Christ's origin "was of a different maner from all these. 1. not of no precedent flesh, as *Adam*. 2. Not of a man without a woman, as *Eue*. 3. Not of man and woman, as all we. 4. But after a new way; of a woman, without a man."<sup>56</sup> While Christ's creation from female flesh marks his birth as unique, the Marian body, facilitating as it did a meeting of flesh and spirit, inaugurates the possibility of an alternative, spiritual birth. German theologian Jakob Böhme (ca. 1575–1624) elucidates this additional importance: Mary was "highly *blessed among* and above all *women* Ever since Eve; for the Covenant opened it selfe in her."<sup>57</sup> Although Mary gave birth to God in flesh, in doing so, her womb also becomes the origin of the new covenant, that which was, according to Paul in Galatians 4:22–28, spiritual matter. By reminding her readers that Christ's physical suffering, on which the salvation plan hinged, was dependent upon female flesh, Lanyer affords Mary a role in spiritual, as well as physical, formation. As such, her address to the reader begins the work of translating the significance of Marian motherhood from the domestic and physical to the spiritual and historical that characterizes the later poetic sections addressing Mary.

Lanyer's alignment of Mary's maternity with the activities of female rescuers who overthrow men, and her attribution of Christ's material body to woman alone, heralds the important distinction drawn between the spiritual substance of male and female flesh in the poem proper. The poetic narrative opens on the night of Christ's betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane and begins its cataloging of male wrongs with the sleeping disciples. This retelling of the disciples' inconstancy, as detailed in the synoptic Gospels, is, however, shot through with a remembrance of the Genesis account of creation and the Fall. It is, Lanyer suggests in the poem's first direct use of a biblical intertext, specifically because the disciples are "Scorpions bred in *Adams* mud" that they fail in their duties toward Christ.<sup>58</sup> This allusion to man's creation in Genesis 2:7 from "the dust of the ground" lays blame for the disciples' deficiencies firmly at Adam's feet, but it is also suggestive of a broader concern to illuminate the separate origin and, consequentially, intrinsic flaws of male flesh in particular. The New Testament men, whose sins Lanyer exposes in *Salve Deus*, pointedly have their substance in "dust and earth," a composition that marks them as Adam's sons in character as well as form.<sup>59</sup> As Adam's heirs, the men possess "great weaknesse in the Flesh" and are given to sin.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Adams, 288.

<sup>57</sup>Böhme, 62.

<sup>58</sup>Lanyer, 67 (line 381). Lanyer's account of the failings of the sleeping disciples in the garden of Gethsemane is interspersed with references to the sins of a series of Old Testament men, including David; Solomon; the Israelites' Egyptian oppressor, Pharaoh; as well as Adam.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 80 (line 675).

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 70 (line 426).

Lanyer's interest in the sinful legacy of Adamic flesh is specifically suggested in her assessment of Petrine conceit. Peter's show of loyalty to Christ was stimulated, Lanyer interprets, by a conviction that he was "above" his companions, and his arrogance prompts a declaration that, of all the disciples, "he was most too blame."<sup>61</sup> This evaluation of Peter is interesting because it directly echoes the later assessment of Adam in "Eves Apologie": "[Eve's] fault, though great, yet he was most too blame."<sup>62</sup> The exact repetition of this phrase positions Peter as an antitype of Adam and, in doing so, reiterates that the sins of Adamic flesh stretch from Genesis to the Gospels. The subtle allusions to Genesis that intersperse Lanyer's Passion suggest that Gethsemane, that "blessed Garden" beset by "Vipers," is a second Eden.<sup>63</sup> Understood as such, the catalogue of male failure that stretches from the disciples to Christ's executioners operates, in many senses, as an alternative to Genesis 3, a point made clear when Lanyer urges in the verse preceding "Eues Apologie": "Let not vs Women glory in Mens fall."<sup>64</sup> Evidently, it is "Mens fall," rather than Eve's fall, that begins *Salve Deus*.

It is significant that within Lanyer's retelling of this New Testament fall, women are excluded from the fleshly weakness that cripples men. In fact, Lanyer has it so she has to read the Bible backwards, to Eve, to locate a female sin of similar magnitude and even then, this sin is not consummate with the male wrongs previously considered: "[Eve's] sinne was small, to what you doe commit."<sup>65</sup> Importantly, Lanyer claims the sins of New Testament men to have hermeneutic significance beyond the Gospels; reading Genesis from the vantage point of the Passion "makes our former fault muche lesse appear."<sup>66</sup> Once again, Lanyer's exegesis pivots here on a clear understanding of the typological relationship the two Testaments of scripture share, and it is an understanding that enables her to position male betrayal of Jesus as a fulfillment of Eve's betrayal of God in the garden. In keeping with the trajectory of typological exegesis, where that which is promised is merely a shadow of what is to come, the sins of New Testament men exceed not only those of the Genesis Fall, but "All mortall sinnes" collectively: "This sinne of yours, surmounts them all as farre / As doth the Sunne, another little starre."<sup>67</sup> These stanzas reinforce that sound

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 66 (lines 355–56).

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 85 (line 778). For a detailed consideration of Lanyer's rereading of Genesis 1–3 and how it can be read as a response to the contemporary *querelle des femmes*, see Beilin, esp. 177–207; Lewalski, 1998.

<sup>63</sup>Lanyer, 67 (lines 363, 365).

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 84 (line 758).

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 86 (line 818).

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 84 (line 762).

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 87 (lines 823–24).

exegesis is that which reads the whole Bible and informs a change of behavior, a point made clear when men, having recognized their responsibility for Christ's death, are called to alter their attitudes toward women:

Then let us have our Libertie againe,  
 And challenge to your selves no Sov'raintie;  
 You came not in the world without our paine,  
 Make that a barre against your crueltie.<sup>68</sup>

As Lanyer makes a case for a shift in male perception of women based on right biblical reading, she also explicitly calls for a shift in attitudes toward motherhood, reminding her readers that men are dependent on the "paine" of childbirth for their continuation. Although, as Bentley's prayers suggest, childbirth pain had become a marker of women's fault in the Genesis Fall, in Lanyer's reading, the travails of female flesh are cited as a "barre" to male cruelty and that which demand respect.

This alternative view of labor and motherhood is underpinned by a reading of Mary's relationship with Eve, and Lanyer's understanding of the significance of Marian motherhood more generally. That Lanyer positions Mary as Eve's antitype is clear, but she also situates her pain-free birth as the fulfillment of the curse of pain Eve bequeathed to all women when she pointedly describes the Virgin as "A maiden Mother, subject to no paine . . . / Making thee Servant, Mother, Wife, and Nurse / To Heavens bright King, that freed us from the curse."<sup>69</sup> Deftly shuttling between New Testament and Old, Lanyer claims the birth of Christ as the typological fulfillment of the Genesis curse. Her Mary suffers "no paine" and is therefore exempt from the Genesis promise that women would bear children "in sorowe."<sup>70</sup> Lanyer's conception of a Marian labor that is pain free chimes with a reading of Mary's childbirth that predominantly concerned Roman Catholic writers.<sup>71</sup> The Spanish Jesuit Gaspar Loarte (1498–1578) reminded readers of his *Instructions and aduertisements, how to meditate the misteries of the rosarie of the most holy Virgin Mary* (1597) of the distinction between Mary's disposition during labor and that of other women:

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 87 (lines 825–28).

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 97–98 (lines 1083, 1087–88). Beilin, xix, for instance, refers to Lanyer's Mary as a "second Eve."

<sup>70</sup>Genesis 3:16. For discussion of the ideas surrounding Mary's pain-free childbirth, see Beattie, esp. 100–03.

<sup>71</sup>It should be said that although this article demonstrates how Lanyer's Mary accrues a rather Roman Catholic aesthetic in some places of the poetic narrative, it is not concerned with assessments of Lanyer's confessional position. Scholarship has shown how Lanyer's text is dedicated to eminent Protestant women and noted that, although of Jewish descent and married to an Italian Catholic, Lanyer socialized at court and moved in largely Protestant circles (see, for instance, Barroll; Gray). For a detailed discussion of Lanyer's awareness of other aspects of Roman Catholic theology, see Kuchar.



“Thou shalt finde, howe in counter change of griefes which other women feele in child-birth, she felt a strange and ineffable solace, a singuler ioy and diuine consolation.”<sup>72</sup> A.G., writing in 1619 in response to those Reformers who, in seeking to stress Mary’s humanity, asserted that she experienced the normal processes of labor, rebukes those that “thinke, & often say, *That she was deliuered of our Sauour after the same laborious, vulgar, and vncomly manner to which other women are subiect by their descende[n]ce from Eue.*”<sup>73</sup>

While the distinction between Eve’s and Mary’s laboring may be drawn more forcefully by A.G., Lanyer’s assessment of Mary’s painless childbirth nonetheless insists that Marian maternity marks a change from the Genesis curse. In representing a Mary whose labor is untainted by the Fall, Lanyer’s vision of Marian maternity resonates with that of John Pettus (ca. 1613–85), who, in his 1674 commentary on Adam and Eve, explained that Mary’s painlessness was what God had intended for all women: “*Mary* without fraction of any Membranes, which causeth that virginate effusion of bloud, and consequently pain; and also without pain . . . brought forth a child: so should every woman (’tis suppos’d) have enjoyed the like benefit, had not this curse come upon them.”<sup>74</sup> While Pettus continues to conceive of labor pain as a sign that women remain under the Genesis curse, God’s raising of Mary from “poore degree” to “Mother . . . To Heavens bright King” is, according to Lanyer, an act that alters the significance of childbearing for all women. It is deemed that which “freed us from the curse.”<sup>75</sup> The “us” here is significant because through it the narrative claims Mary’s painless labor as an outward sign of the new covenant’s significance for laboring women; in giving birth to the Savior, Mary fulfills God’s promise of deliverance through woman’s “sede” and renders the curse obsolete.<sup>76</sup> Although women may continue to experience labor pain, after Mary this pain has, according to the exegetical program of *Salve Deus*, altered significance for all time. It is now a “barre” to male cruelty.

The insistence in these lines that Mary’s painless labor has consequences for women who live under the new covenant once again renders Marian motherhood as a task that has a spiritual, and figurative, significance that transcends the historic moment of Christ’s birth. The divine importance of Marian maternity beyond the birth narratives is registered again later in the poem when Lanyer represents a Mary who physically reacts to Christ’s death; she writes: “Her griefes extreame . . . / To see his bleeding body oft shee swooned.”<sup>77</sup> Gary Kuchar’s discussion of *Salve Deus* has shown that this specific description of a swooning Mary engages with the *lo spasimo*

<sup>72</sup>Loarte, 23.

<sup>73</sup>A.G., 82.

<sup>74</sup>Pettus, 136.

<sup>75</sup>Lanyer, 98 (lines 1087–88).

<sup>76</sup>Genesis 3:15.

<sup>77</sup>Lanyer, 94 (lines 1011–12).

controversy that broke out in the medieval period over artistic representations of Mary at the cross.<sup>78</sup> The crux of the matter was whether or not Mary watchfully stands by the cross or swoons and actively suffers alongside the crucified Christ.<sup>79</sup> It is the doctrinal implications of the latter that are of course significant, because a physical response from Mary under the cross functions as an admission that she is a participant in the redemptive process.<sup>80</sup> Yet Lanyer's representation of a swooning Mary does not simply suggest the poem's endorsement of a woman's involvement in redemption.

According to the depiction common in medieval paintings, a swooning Mary was one who was experiencing the pains of childbirth, and therefore is a description that specifically marks her maternity as that which enables her to be cooperative with Christ.<sup>81</sup> Within the swoon, as Amy Neff explains, "[Mary's] childbirth pain, like Christ on the cross . . . pays the price required for mankind's salvation" and becomes indicative of her position as spiritual mother of believers.<sup>82</sup> The suggestion that Mary became a mother again at the foot of the cross has a scriptural basis in John 19:26–27, when Jesus commends Mary to John as "thy mother," and the disciple to his mother as a "sonne." This new maternity was read by a number of early church fathers, including Ambrose, as an analogy for Mary becoming mother to those who, through the Crucifixion, become sons and daughters of the church.<sup>83</sup> By representing a Mary who swoons, then, the poem infuses maternity with spiritual, and indeed redemptive, efficacy, and it does so in a way that begins to distinguish between literal and spiritual motherhood. Mary's swoon under the cross arises from "griefes extreme . . . but new begun," suggesting that she now suffers those pains Lanyer claims she had avoided in physical childbirth.<sup>84</sup>

Just as the Crucifixion inaugurates Mary's maternal suffering, so too it begins the travails of the female flesh she has bequeathed to her son. Christ's inherited

<sup>78</sup>Kuchar. Kuchar, 44, argues that a swooning Mary is "at the center of Lanyer's project of imagining women in clerical roles."

<sup>79</sup>Neff, 254, explains that the suggestion that Mary swooned under the cross first gained traction in the thirteenth century and could be seen "countless times" by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

<sup>80</sup>In Reformed thought, Mary was not engaged in the redemption process. She was merely a witness to the atonement. For a discussion of Mary's passivity, see Ellington, 50–51; Allen, 383–97.

<sup>81</sup>For a detailed discussion of artistic representations of the swoon as childbirth, see *Hamburgh*; Neff.

<sup>82</sup>Neff, 267.

<sup>83</sup>See *ibid.*, 255.

<sup>84</sup>Lanyer, 94 (lines 1011–12). Ellington, 192–93, traces the "public portrayal" of Mary's labor at the cross in sixteenth-century art and sermons and describes it during this time as "popular." For an overview of attitudes toward Mary's labor pain in Christian history, see Neff; Kuchar, 57–58. See also Kuchar, 57–71, for further consideration of how Lanyer's representation of Mary's swoon, and activity during the Passion more generally, suggests that she "give[s] birth to the redemption" (58).

female flesh is foregrounded because his pain is reminiscent of the travails of maternal labor; his suffering, unlike his birth, rends the material body, resulting in an emission of “His blood, his teares, his sighes, his bitter groanes” and physical rupture as “his members” are “torne.”<sup>85</sup> Yet it is at the moment of death that Lanyer’s Christ is most clearly figured as a laboring mother whose pains bring forth spiritual life: “With sharpest panges and terrors thus appailde, / Sterne Death makes way, that life might giue him place.”<sup>86</sup> Christ’s body undergoes the pangs, groans, and sighs of a physical travail which, like Mary’s swoon, produces spiritual issue. The poem, having earlier denigrated male flesh as inherently sinful, continues here to reiterate the redemptive properties of female flesh. Christ’s suffering is made possible because of the flesh he inherited from a woman “without . . . man,” and it is an inheritance that continues in Lanyer’s retelling of the Crucifixion to be exclusively female and maternal.<sup>87</sup>

The suffering of Mary’s flesh in the redemptive process signals how her role as biological mother, foregrounded earlier in *Salve Deus*, is superseded by a maternal role that is spiritual during the Passion. As she labors alongside Christ for salvation, Mary is represented in an active, nurturing role that announces the inauguration of a maternity that figuratively extends beyond physical, or literal, biological processes, to include the spiritual nurture of future generations. Her body is seen producing “tears” that “wash away [Christ’s] pretious blood” that “sinners might not tread it under feet,” and, as these tears prevent the defilement of Christ’s blood, they perform, as Theresa M. DiPasquale explains, “the work of the new ‘Covenant.’”<sup>88</sup> Set apart from “sinners,” Mary is also later found “upon her knees” tending to that which “must be gath’red.”<sup>89</sup> Undertaking this physical care of Christ’s blood, the material body of Lanyer’s Mary facilitates the process of redemption beyond the stable, this time enabling it to be completed. In representing Mary in this way, *Salve Deus* carves out a central position for childbirth and motherhood in the Passion narrative as well as the birth narrative.

#### FIGURATIVE MATERNITY AND THE LABOR FOR SPIRITUAL REBIRTH

The way in which *Salve Deus* represents a maternal body that shifts to perform spiritual tasks under the new covenant resonates with the extension of Mary’s

<sup>85</sup>Lanyer, 91 (line 926); 101 (line 1162).

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 101 (lines 1157–58).

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>88</sup>Lanyer, 95 (lines 1017–18); DiPasquale, 2008, 136.

<sup>89</sup>Lanyer, 95 (lines 1020–22). Kuchar, 58–61, reads Mary’s actions here in connection with Isaiah 11:1 and teases out how her representation as a spiritual gardener can be read in relation to the poem’s concern with the clerical authority of women.

significance beyond the birth narratives in *The Mothers Blessing*. Leigh's praise of Marian maternity suggests a Mary who, in physically nourishing the infant Christ, becomes involved in the sustenance of believers across Christian history. Readers are forced to recall how the provision of spiritual food was dependent on the Marian body ("The woman brought me a Sauour, and I feede of him by faith and liue"), and, later, Leigh more directly implicates Mary in the nourishing process when she boldly declares: "except they feed of the seed of the woman, they haue no life."<sup>90</sup> The recurring emphasis on Mary's provision of Christ's body on which believers "feed" is significant because it seems to draw on an understanding, common in the medieval period, of her body as the site of a banquet or wedding feast for believers.<sup>91</sup> Figuring Mary's womb as such a dining chamber, Parisian chancellor Jean Gerson (1363–1429), in a sermon on the Annunciation, termed her as a "hostess" who provided "dishes" through which her guests could be "nourished by [Christ's] fullness."<sup>92</sup> But a Mary whose (breast)feeding sustains the believer, as Leigh suggests, is one who also resonates with the redemptive significance afforded to Marian lactation in Roman Catholic thought.

Within the broader medieval "fetishization" of the Marian body, Mary's breast milk became what Waller terms, "a major . . . relic" and, assumed to have redemptive properties, continued to be a source of fascination into the seventeenth century.<sup>93</sup> Writing in 1610, William Crashaw (ca. 1572–1626) explains in *The Jesuites Gospel* (1610) that Mary's breast milk was embroiled in the Roman Catholic equation of Virgin Mother with Son with the result that "the pappes of a Woman [are] equalled with the wounds of our Lord, and her milke with his blood."<sup>94</sup> Although Leigh steers clear of any doctrinal suggestion that Mary participates in the redemption of humankind from sin, she does position Christ's mother as a redemptress of women when she claims, "except they feed of the seed of the woman, they haue no life. Will not therefore all women seek out this great grace of God, that by *Mary* hath taken away the shame, which before was due vnto vs euer since the fall of man?"<sup>95</sup> In giving birth to the Savior, Mary is found to eradicate Eve's legacy but also to inaugurate a new, grace-filled dispensation that permanently alters the position of women. Because of Mary's maternity, a spiritually enriched conception of motherhood is now divinely permissible for all women.

<sup>90</sup>Leigh, 35, 36.

<sup>91</sup>See Ellington, 49–51.

<sup>92</sup>Gerson in Ellington, 49. The connection between Mary's body and banqueting has scriptural basis in Song of Songs and Revelation. See Waller; Ellington.

<sup>93</sup>Waller, 33, 45. See also Ellington, 59.

<sup>94</sup>Crashaw in Waller, 20. See also Crashaw, 32.

<sup>95</sup>Leigh, 36.

Leigh identifies a spiritual dimension within her own maternal role when, defending *The Mothers Blessing*, she asks: will not a mother “blesse [the child of her wombe] euery time it suckes on her brests, when shee feeleth the bloud come from her heart to nourish it?”<sup>96</sup> Here breastfeeding is credited with a spiritual outcome — blessing — an indicator that, as a mother, she is naturally equipped to spiritually and physically nurture her children. While Catherine Gray suggests that this comment mobilizes “seventeenth-century medical theories regarding mother’s milk as a concoction of the blood” to create “a continuity between the role of the mother and that of spiritual guide,”<sup>97</sup> Leigh’s conflation of the biological and spiritual is perhaps better understood in relation to the redemptive potential of Marian lactation. A mother who can spiritually “blesse” her child through nursing is akin to a Marian mother who literally nourishes Christ but also spiritually nourishes believers. Leigh more clearly positions herself as the typological fulfillment of this spiritually nourishing Mary with the claim that she too provides “spirituall food of the soule.”<sup>98</sup>

Leigh is not alone in her conception of a Mary whose divine contribution is found to elide flesh with spirit and body with soul, or in reading herself as the typological fulfillment of a Marian mother with a spiritual remit. In a meditation on “the soules affinitie with Christ” in Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrons* (1582), the speaker contemplates Mary’s bond with Christ, resolving that “as thou art his corporall mother, so art thou through faith his spirituall mother: and I following thy faith with all humblenesse, am his spirituall mother also.”<sup>99</sup> Here identification with Mary allows the speaker to claim her position as a spiritual mother and, in doing so, evidences the existence of a thought process that understands Mary’s material motherhood to shade into a powerful model of spiritual parentage. While in Bentley’s meditation, this outward movement enables the soul to fully realize its kinship with Christ, in *The Mothers Blessing* this typological trajectory facilitates a move from the conflation of flesh and spirit to the resolution of flesh as spirit.<sup>100</sup> This shift becomes apparent when, in a schema redolent of Mary’s sorrowing under the cross, the fleshly pains of childbearing are positioned as a prelude to the spiritual labor for souls by Leigh: “My deare Children . . . *Can a Mother forget the child of her wombe?* . . . Is it possible, that shee, which hath carried her child within her, so neere her hart, and brought it forth into this world with so much bitter paine, so many grones and

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>97</sup>Gray, 572.

<sup>98</sup>Leigh, 10.

<sup>99</sup>Bentley, 1582b, 5, 8.

<sup>100</sup>Gray, 572–73, 576–80, has also considered how Leigh’s concept of motherhood “slide[s] between the spiritual and material” examining how this rhetoric facilitates political and religious critique and justifies the spiritual nurture of her sons.

cries, can forget it? nay rather, will shee not labour now till Christ be formed in it?"<sup>101</sup> Over the course of these lines, the responsibilities of material motherhood give way to spiritual concerns, a movement that is biblically authorized by Isaiah 49:15, some of which is quoted directly: "Can a woman forget her childe, and not haue compassion on the sonne of her wo[m]be? though they shulde forget, yet will I not forget thee." The entirety of this verse illuminates an important distinction between material and spiritual parentage because, although God initially uses the bonds between mother and son to communicate his commitment to the people of Zion, the literal mother is, ultimately, superseded by the more constant, divine parent. Leigh's citation and exegesis of this biblical text suggests that literal and spiritual maternity are not equivalent: material labor — that is, giving birth to flesh — is understood as a figure or type of a maternity that is spiritual.

Leigh's understanding of her place within this hierarchy of maternity allows her to designate the writing of *The Mothers Blessing*, like the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, as a natural, maternal compulsion: "Could Saint *Paul* say vnto the *Galatians*, that were but strangers to him concerning the flesh . . . *My little children, of whom I doe trauaile againe in birth, vntill Christ be formed in you?* . . . And can any man blame a mother (who indeed brought forth her childe with much paine) though she labour againe till Christ bee formed in them? . . . Therefore let no man blame a mother, though she something exceede in writing to her children, since euery man knowes, that the loue of a mother to her children, is hardly contained within the bounds of reason."<sup>102</sup> Conceiving of himself as a spiritual mother, Paul's words in Galatians 4:19 underpin a typology of maternity that positions the figurative ability to give birth to Christ in the soul as the natural fulfillment of the literal labors of the female body.<sup>103</sup> Because Paul is compelled by metaphoric "trauaile" to write to the Galatians, a mother, connected by "flesh" as well as spirit, must then likewise "labour" in written text to deliver Christ to her children.

Leigh's figurative use of the term "labour" reminds her readers that she is, like Sarah, a mother of the "promes," or the new covenant, and therefore labors for children of the spirit, rather than the flesh.<sup>104</sup> As is made clear elsewhere in the

<sup>101</sup>Leigh, 9–10.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 10–12. Poole, 75, explains that Leigh's discussion of her labor, and the representation of her text as a child, is part of an authorial strategy that allows her to claim "a position and authority which men cannot hold, and cannot easily refute." See also *ibid.*, 82; as well as Heller, 57–58, for more on how Leigh authorizes her writing.

<sup>103</sup>Paul's figurative understanding of himself as a mother opens out into his later reading of Sarah in this chapter as a spiritual, rather than a literal mother. For discussion of Paul's figural motherhood, and how it was read in the early modern period, see Luxon, esp. 80–96.

<sup>104</sup>Galatians 4:28.

text, she is engaged in a “labour for the spirituall food of the soule,” and she explains to her readers that “you may see it is a labour: but what labour? a pleasant labour, a profitable labour: a labour without the which the soule cannot liue.”<sup>105</sup> Just as literal labor has been replaced with a labor that is spiritual, so too has the material nourishment of the maternal body been replaced by the spiritual food provided in *The Mothers Blessing*. Her textual labor delivers the body of Christ to her readers, without which they will, like the children of Israel without provision of manna, “starve.”<sup>106</sup> In literally giving birth to sons and figuratively giving birth to a text that she understands will facilitate spiritual rebirth, Leigh’s motherhood follows the trajectory of Marian maternity. Reading the Bible typologically, she finds that she too is a mother whose flesh resolves itself as spiritual matter.

While Leigh’s suggestion that she is a spiritual mother in the tradition of Mary, as well as the apostle Paul, makes a bold statement about the providential importance of her work, Lanyer’s conception of her place within biblical matrilineage is yet more audacious. Early in *Salve Deus*, Lanyer invokes the Old Testament tradition of barrenness when, in apparent deprecation of her skill, she refers to her “barren Muse,” “barren Braine,” and “barren skill.”<sup>107</sup> But the barren women of the Old Testament are, importantly, not childless for long: Sarah, the barren wife of Abraham, was used to establish the Israelite nation when she bore Isaac in her nineties (Gen. 17:17–19); Rebecca, whose barrenness is revealed in the prayers of her husband, Isaac, later gives birth to Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:21–26); Rachel, beloved yet barren wife of Jacob, eventually gives birth to her husband’s favored sons, Joseph and Benjamin (Gen. 29:31; 35:24); and the prayer of the barren wife, Hannah, leads to the birth of the Israelite judge, Samuel (1 Sam. 5–28). These narratives reveal that, within the Old Testament, acknowledgments of barrenness regularly precede a birth of considerable importance.<sup>108</sup>

In light of this tradition, Lanyer’s representation of herself as a barren mother may be read as a bold announcement of a birth of substantial magnitude: that of “our Lord Iesus himself.”<sup>109</sup> Lanyer’s presentation of *Salve Deus* to her readers as the textual body of Christ is, as a number of scholars have noted, a recurring concern. Patricia Phillippy suggests that “the *corpus Christi* is literalized in Lanyer’s literary corpus,” and, more recently, Femke Molekamp has traced how

<sup>105</sup> Leigh, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. See Snook, 65, for further discussion of how Leigh understands the manna provided for the Israelites in relation to the nourishment provided by mothers. See also the discussion by Gray, 571–73, of Leigh’s understanding of the spiritual provision she offers to her children.

<sup>107</sup> Lanyer, 10 (line 155); 63 (line 276); 64 (line 313).

<sup>108</sup> See Osherow, 2009, 47; Alter, 85.

<sup>109</sup> Lanyer, 34.

“her book is constructed of the materials of Christ’s body” to reveal Christ “not merely represented but actually incarnated” in the text.<sup>110</sup> If Lanyer claims Christ to be incarnated within *Salve Deus*, her deliverance of this body to the reader must logically declare her to be the embodiment of his mother. Her position as a second Mary is strongly suggested at the close of *Salve Deus* when she reveals that, like Christ’s mother, who was informed of her motherhood in a visit from the angel Gabriel, and following the convention of the annunciation to the barren wives of the Old Testament, she received news of her divine nomination to deliver a sacred body of text into the world; in a dream, she was “appointed to performe this Worke.”<sup>111</sup> Her position as Mary’s successor is further encapsulated in the repeated insistence that, in penning *Salve Deus*, she too gives birth to that which will provide spiritual nourishment; her poem is frequently termed a sacred “Feast” wherein her readers may “feed upon” the “Paschal Lambe” she has prepared.<sup>112</sup> The recurring use of images of feeding and banqueting across *Salve Deus* is reminiscent of the symbols of eating and sustenance that proliferate in Marian writings, meaning that it is not necessary to understand this imagery, as Micheline White does, as Lanyer’s performance of an exclusively male “priestly task of ‘feeding’ her readers with the Word.”<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup>Phillippy, 101; Molekamp, 2012, 312.

<sup>111</sup>Lanyer, 139. Lanyer also figures herself as a sorrowing mother in the “preamble of the Author before the Passion” by referring to the pursuit as her “Labour” for “Infant Verse”: *ibid.*, 62–63 (lines 269, 279).

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 7 (lines 83, 85–89). Lanyer’s repeated use of feasting imagery has been a point of interest in scholarship of her work. Scholars have noted the connection between Lanyer’s feast and the celebration of the Eucharist (Schoenfeldt; McBride; DiPasquale, 2008; Molekamp) and preaching (White), but not, as suggested here, with the medieval tradition of Marian nourishment. It is also worth noting that, elsewhere in the text, Lanyer’s patrons are informed that this feast will deliver “health of the soule” (34), and the healing properties afforded to *Salve Deus* further align its author with Mary who, in medieval tradition, was regularly associated with spiritual healing. For a seventeenth-century example, see the medical imagery used in Stafford, 17–18.

<sup>113</sup>White, 331. See also DiPasquale, 2008, 313, who connects Mary to ideas of female priesthood. It is not incompatible to view Lanyer in both a clerical and maternal role. Acknowledgement of how the text’s feasting imagery resonates with Marian nourishment illuminates that Lanyer is the inheritor of a powerful medieval tradition of maternal importance. Reading Lanyer’s feast in relation to the Marian tradition of feeding and banqueting also adheres to White’s understanding of the representation of the Marys in *Salve Deus* as Christ’s true disciples in the tradition of Song of Songs (see White, 334–36). It should be said that the feast in *Salve Deus* is further tied to Mary in the work’s evocation of Song of Songs and Revelation, suggested when Lanyer calls her readers “To enter with the Bridegroom to the feast” (41:15). Mary was frequently associated with the bride of the Song and the book of Revelation. For more, see Astell, 42–72.



Rather, within the context of the work's broader interest in Mary, Lanyer's provision of spiritual nourishment lays claim to a typological inheritance of Marian maternity that is spiritual, one that illuminates a female tradition of spiritual nurture that originates in the birth narratives but stretches across time.

Lanyer's celebration of Mary's exegetical significance from Genesis through to the Gospels and into the present age demonstrates the symbolic tenacity of Marian maternity in the seventeenth century. For her, as well as Leigh, Mary's example transposes childbearing from a curse into a crown for all women, for all time, and becomes central to the formulation of the spiritual motherhood that authorizes their works. Although Mary might be the one who literally gives birth to Christ, Lanyer and Leigh, with varying degrees of directness, understand themselves as the typological fulfillment of that mother. Their attempt to elevate and extend the remit of motherhood in *Salve Deus* and *The Mothers Blessing* relies on the typological structure of shadow and fulfillment, a trajectory that facilitates the transposition of literal maternity into figural maternity and allows flesh to resolve itself as spirit: Mary's physical maternity gives way to a spiritual maternity because, in giving birth to God in flesh, her body facilitates spiritual rebirth under the new covenant. Mary's provision of spiritual nourishment is fulfilled in the provisions of authorial mother within whose work the fleshly birth of Christ becomes a textual rebirth of divine truth. Read typologically, the Marian body, with its womb, birth canal, blood, pain, and breast milk, is always fulfilled by spiritual matter.

Consequently, the effort to elevate motherhood by illuminating the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual maternity involves, by typological standards, the resignation of its materiality, its realness, to the realm of the shadow. Leigh's physical labor for her children is fulfilled by her "traualie" for their spiritual rebirth, a "labour" for "Christ [to] be formed."<sup>114</sup> This spiritual maternity is deemed a truer labor than labor of the flesh; the "best labour is for the foode of the Soule," because it is "a labour without which the soule cannot liue."<sup>115</sup> For Lanyer, the process of poetic labor has produced a "figure" of Christ's dying body; *Salve Deus* is termed "my Paschal Lambe, / The figure of that living Sacrifice."<sup>116</sup> Material labor is a figure of spiritual maternity that generates only spiritual matter. According to this trajectory, literal maternity must be a type, which is superseded, fulfilled, rendered obsolete, like the Old Testament law, by its promised antitype of spiritual maternity.<sup>117</sup> In the end, Lanyer and Leigh celebrate the mother who is, as Thomas Luxon says of Paul's

<sup>114</sup>Leigh, 11.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 7, 5.

<sup>116</sup>Lanyer, 7 (lines 85–86).

<sup>117</sup>This trajectory chimes with the discussion by Luxon, 89–95, of the implications of Paul's distinction between the births of the Old Testament mothers Hagar and Sarah.

interpretation of Sarah, “not a mother in any fleshly sense.”<sup>118</sup> Inferring that true motherhood, like truth birth, is spiritual rather than physical, *Salve Deus* and *The Mothers Blessing* ultimately retreat from the materiality of the maternal. To become a spiritual mother, the literally pregnant, birthing, and lactating female body must be relinquished.

<sup>118</sup>Luxon, 78.

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