

## ASTORM CALLED *EMILIA*

### Was *Æmilia Bassano* the Dark Lady or even the Hidden Author?

By Kevin Gilvary

When Michelle Terry was first appointed artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in 2017, she commissioned a new work about an overlooked female poet. Morgan Lloyd Malcolm developed a play from the known facts of the life of *Æmilia* (more often spelt *Emilia*) Bassano, who was the daughter of an Italian court musician, a published poet, mother, teacher and, we might add, a proto-feminist. Morgan Malcolm also repeated the claim that *Æmilia* had been Shakespeare's muse, the 'dark lady' of the sonnets. Furthermore, the play, *Emilia*, illustrates that her verses were used widely but attributively by Shakespeare. The play was performed to great critical success at the Globe Theatre in 2018 and it subsequently transferred to the West End in 2019, achieving three out of five stars in a *Time Out* review.



Reproduced  
from *Emilia* at  
the Globe  
Theatre in  
London

In the play, *Æmilia* finds a fierce, feminist spirit. She is indeed the 'dark lady' and also supplies many speeches and ideas to a distinctly male chauvinistic William Shakespeare. The play is full of passionate anger and defiance. It clearly resonates with the times and the #metoo movement.

Later last year, the Shakespearean Authorship Trust convened a conference at The Globe on ‘*The Merciful Construction of Good Women: Gender, Shakespeare and Authorship*’, at which an American journalist, Elizabeth Winkler, spoke about the possibility of Emilia Bassano being the true author of the works of Shakespeare.

Winkler later published her paper in *The Atlantic* (June 2019 edition), a cultural and literary magazine based in Washington, DC. It was elegantly written, guiding a reader from interest in Shakespeare’s works, through doubts about the authorship, to reasons in favour of Bassano’s candidacy. The article attracted many positive reviews but also some incredibly unpleasant reactions.

However, as an historical exercise, the huge gaps in the documentary record of Æmilia’s life were filled in with much speculation. So let us begin with a consideration of what is actually known about this dark lady.



Miniatures by Hilliard:  
unknown sitters (c.1590  
and 1593), possibly  
Æmilia Lanier, née  
Bassano.

## Life of Æmilia Bassano

Æmilia Bassano was baptised at the church of St. Botolph-without-Bishopsgate in 1569. Her mother was English and her father, Baptiste Bassano, was a musician from Venice who performed at the royal courts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. He may have had a Jewish background. Little is known of her English mother, Margret Johnson. When Æmilia was seven, her father died, and Æmilia says she was looked after by Susan Bertie, Countess of Kent, under

whose care she received a literary education. (There are no records in the Countess' archives to confirm this.) Æmilia was very grateful, calling the countess 'the Mistris of my youth,/The noble guide of my ungovern'd dayes'. Susan was the elder sister of Peregrine Bertie, who married Lady Mary Vere, sister of the Earl of Oxford. So it is possible that Oxford knew Æmilia through this family connection. At some point she went to live with Margaret Clifford, Countess of Northumberland (1560–1616), who spent much time at the court of Queen Elizabeth I.

When she was in her early twenties, Æmilia became the mistress of Henry Carey, Baron Hunsdon (1526–96), who served as the Lord Chamberlain and master of entertainment in the royal household. Hunsdon was forty years older than she was and treated her with affection and respect, maintaining her 'in great pomp'. Through him, she might well have had contact with court entertainers, both musicians and actors, but it is not documented. In 1592, she came to marry another court musician, her cousin Alfonso Lanyer, an event that took place at St. Botolph-without-Bishopsgate. This church was directly opposite Fisher's Folly, which Oxford had used as his base in the 1580s. A son, Henry, was born in 1593 and a daughter was born (and died) in 1597.

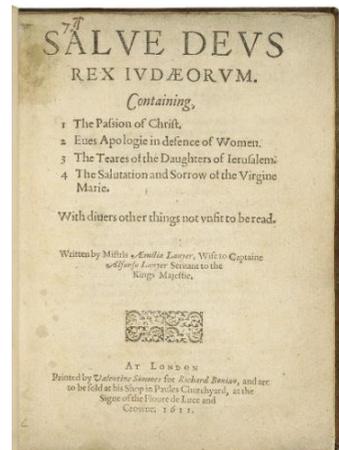
There is no sure likeness of Æmilia, but in 2003 the late actor and playwright Tony Haygarth put forward the identification of a miniature by Nicholas Hilliard (illustrated above, image on the right), which is on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum (British Galleries, P.8-1945).

This picture was entitled 'Unknown Lady, aged 26, formerly called Mistress Holland' and dated to 1593. Haygarth was researching Æmelia for his play *Dark Meaning Mouse*, which examines Shakespeare's (alleged) relationship with his 'dark lady' and her influence on his work. Certain details in the work persuaded Haygarth of the identity: her dark hair; her beauty; the sitter's bodice is decorated with the moths and mulberry trees of the Bassano coat of arms; and the stag of the Earl of Essex, who was her husband's patron.

After the death of her daughter, Æmelia went to consult the astrologer Dr. Simon Forman, who kept detailed notes of his dealings with clients. Her

husband, Alfonso, was away from home sailing on the Islands Voyage with the Earl of Essex, hoping to capture the Spanish fleet on the Azores. During the second half of 1597, Forman records ten consultations with Æmelia who wanted to know, amongst other things, whether Essex would knight her husband and thus make her a Lady.

Forman's interest in Æmelia seems to have been mainly sexual. He was hoping he would be able to 'halek' with her – i.e. have sex. He seems to have been unsuccessful and lost interest. Forman records briefly one further consultation with Æmelia in 1600. There is no further mention of her in the records until 1611, when she published a volume of poetry dedicated to several women, either patrons or potential patrons. It was the first published collection of poetry written by a woman in England. In the volume, which was called *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* ('Hail, God, king of the Jews'), the Crucifixion is described from the point of view of the women who loved Jesus. There is also a long poem in which Eve gives a robust defence of women. In the Preface 'To the Vertuous Reader' she mentions some aspects of her life, including her time with the Countess of Kent, and she attacks men who 'forgetting they were borne of women ... doe like Vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred'. Sales of the volume seem to have been disappointing and she failed to secure any patronage. After her husband died in 1611, it is said that she ran a school for girls, but this was not successful. The play, *Emilia*, suggested that the school was for battered wives, whom Æmelia encouraged to express their thoughts and experiences. However, there is no record of the pupils who attended. Little is known about the rest of her life and she died in Clerkenwell in 1645.



## Claim to be the ‘dark lady’

Æmilia Bassano’s claim to be the ‘dark lady’ was put forward by A. L. Rowse. In 1964, Rowse published *William Shakespeare: A Biography*, in which he proclaimed himself the first to solve some of the mysteries of the sonnets, dating them to 1592–95 and identifying the rival poet as Christopher Marlowe. It was widely noted, however, that both claims had been advanced previously – and that definitive evidence was lacking. In 1973, Rowse published a second biography, *Shakespeare the Man*, in which he announced that the ‘dark lady’ was Æmilia Lanier (née Bassano).

Rowse was impressed that she had a connection with the Lord Chamberlain’s Men (through the Lord Chamberlain himself); that she came from Theatre, lived at Bishopsgate and was the daughter of an Italian court musician. Rowse found a description of her in the diaries of the astrologer Simon Forman, who recorded the quack advice and amorous dealings with classy women who had problems with sex and pregnancy. One of these clients was Æmilia Lanier, who sought his help in 1597 when her daughter died, but spurned his repeated advances. Clearly, she was attractive, strong-willed and partly Italian. She was nimble at the keyboards. Rowse noted that in *Othello*, the rights of women were stirringly argued by a character called Emilia, who was the companion to an aristocratic lady. Finally, Rowse was triumphant in finding that Forman described her as ‘very brown’. Only Forman didn’t. Rowse mis-read ‘brown’ in the diary for ‘brave’. Forman described her as:

hie minded [haughty] ... hath something in her mind she  
wold have don for hir ... can hardly keep secret she was  
very brave [splendid in appearance] in youth [diplomatic  
transcription by Pamela Benson]

Of course, with an Italian father, she may well have had a darker complexion than most English women, and possibly even ‘black wires’ growing out of her head. Regarding her relationships, there was no record of any lover other than Lord Hunsdon (if ever her relationship with him was sexual). So she may have been the ‘dark lady’ of the sonnets. Or someone else might have been. Or the

poet did not portray a real person, just a figment of his imagination. The casebooks are available online at [www.casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk](http://www.casebooks.lib.cam.ac.uk) (*De arte geomantica*, MS Ashmole 354, ff. 246r, 250r, 252r, 252v). However, they do not provide any evidence of a connection between Æmilia Bassano and Shakespeare.

### **Claim to be the unaccredited author of the Shakespeare canon**

In 2007, a British theatre director called John Hudson staged *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Abingdon Theater in New York. He had been studying Bassano as a claimant to the authorship for a number of years and in *The Dream* he saw parallels between Titania and Oberon's feud and the Jewish-Roman war of the first century. So he subtitled his play *A Comic Jewish Satire* and changed it into a Semitic war. He identified Titania with the Emperor Titus and Oberon with the Jewish god Yahweh. Bottom was Jesus. For Hudson, the cutting up of bees at the command of Titania was an allegory of the slaughter of the Jewish rebels, the Maccabees. Whereas Shakespeare's *Dream* ends with weddings and revelry, Hudson's *Midsummer* ended with the Apocalypse.

Hudson found Bassano a good claimant partly because of the profuse references to music in the works and to a large number of Hebrew words. He claimed that the Bassanos were originally Jewish. Furthermore, he found many references to characters with the name Bassano. Interestingly, Oxfordians have been studying this line for some time. Gary Goldstein, in an article originally in *The Elizabethan Review* and available on the DVS website, showed that the author of *The Merchant of Venice* had considerable knowledge of Hebrew. Gary identified the name Shylock with Shelach or Shalach from Genesis 10 and 11 of the Old Testament (misspelled Selah and Salah in Greek and Latin versions) and also the names Chus and Tubal.

Hudson gave an outline of his case in *The Oxfordian* (2009) which was answered by the then editor, Stephanie Hughes, who points out *inter alia* that Oxford could have learned Hebrew in the eight years under his tutor, Sir Thomas Smith, whose library contained Sebastian Münster's Hebrew version of the Old Testament, Münster's *Hebrew-Latin Grammar*, and a Hebrew version of the *Proverbs of Solomon*.

In 2014, Hudson's book was published by Amberley. In this, he makes further claims that she was only thirteen when she 'became mistress to the fifty-six-year-old Lord Hunsdon', that she also had an affair with the playwright Christopher Marlowe (unknown), and that when she became pregnant (unknown) she was exiled from court (unknown). Hudson takes it for granted that she was the mysterious 'dark lady' in Shakespeare's sonnets. He concludes that 'Amelia Bassano was in all the right places and had all the right knowledge, skills, and contacts to have produced the Shakespearean canon'. Circumstantial: yes. Documented: no.

In 2016, Mary Sharratt published *The Dark Lady's Mask: A Novel of Æmelia Bassano Lanier*, which starts from the known facts about her life but then weaves a set of fictional possibilities.

### **Æmelia Bassano at the SAT and in *The Atlantic*.**

The theme of the Shakespearean Authorship Trust Conference in October 2018 at Shakespeare's Globe in London was: 'The Merciful Construction of Good Women: Gender, Shakespeare and Authorship' and other speakers included Robin Williams on Mary Sidney, and Claire van Kampen on Lady Jane Lumley.

You can see their presentations at this link:

[www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk/pages/videos](http://www.shakespeareanauthorshiptrust.org.uk/pages/videos)

Æmelia Bassano was the subject of the keynote address by Elizabeth Winkler (which is not available on video) and her essay has now been published by *The Atlantic* monthly magazine (June 2019). The piece has been widely read and has attracted positive responses from those interested in the Shakespeare Authorship Question, appreciating her determination to discuss it (as it deserves to be) in thoughtful media.

However, Winkler's article has also attracted some very negative comments on social media such as Twitter, where she has been compared to a flat-earther. She must find it exhausting and demoralizing. One journalist from *The Times*, Oliver Kamm, warns that he has been planning to write 'an account of the fiasco'. He denies that there are scholars such as Professor William Leahy and

others who are interested in the authorship question and accuses Winkler of being a conspiracy theorist:

‘Winkler’s article is a farrago that should never have been conceived, pitched, commissioned or published.’

Oliver Kamm

Another response, written by Dominic Greene in *The Spectator US*:

‘The “case” for anyone but Shakespeare is always a fantasy in pursuit of facts. Winkler’s article, like every case for Shakespeare not having been Shakespeare, repeatedly commits the elementary error of historical writing. Absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence. It is strange that Shakespeare doesn’t refer to books in his will. But it doesn’t mean that he didn’t read. Hitler, after all, did not attend the Wannsee Conference. But that doesn’t mean he didn’t order the Holocaust.’

It is hard to understand how Shakespeare ‘scholars’ get away with their speculation, fabrication and false comparisons (the gratuitous allusion to Hitler and the Holocaust is particularly galling). Honest attempts to examine the evidence are dismissed out of hand. Diana Price (author of *Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Biography*) is simply passed over. Winkler herself replied with decorum:

“Any worthwhile history is a constant state of self-questioning,” the author Hilary Mantel observed. It was in that spirit of skepticism that I undertook a provocative inquiry, exploring the possibility of a woman’s hand in the works of Shakespeare.’

She continued:

‘Following the traditions of *The Atlantic*, I questioned uncritically-held assumptions instead of treating pronouncements by authorities as truth ...’

Well said, Æmilia would have been proud of you!

## Conclusion

I do not think it likely that Æmilia Bassano was the author of the works of Shakespeare, but I accept that she may have been the ‘dark lady’. Certainly, she was intelligent, articulate and cultured, and we should celebrate her significance as a pioneering female author. Further investigation into her life would be most apt if more primary evidence could be found about her, perhaps in correspondence or journals from the time. Elizabeth Winkler is greatly to be congratulated for researching the subject and for publishing it. *The Atlantic* journal is to be praised for running the story. As for those who have abused her position, well, they need to be confronted by the evidence.

## References

I would like to thank **Bryan H. Wildenthal** of the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship for his help in preparing this article.

For further discussion on candidates for The Dark Lady see:

**Stephanie Hopkins Hughes**, ‘New Light on the Dark Lady’, *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, 22 September (2000)

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**Stephanie Hughes** replied to the claims of Bassano and other candidates in the same edition of *The Oxfordian*

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<https://reviewsgate.com/dark-meaning-mouse-to-4-october/>
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