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Was Shakespeare a Woman? (A cheat sheet with quotations and section descriptions)

By Elizabeth Winkler

The authorship controversy, almost as old as the works themselves, has yet to surface a compelling alternative to the man buried in Stratford. Perhaps that's because, until recently, no one was looking in the right place. The case for Emilia Bassano.

Quotations:

- Who was this woman writing “immortal work” in the same year that Shakespeare’s name first appeared in print?
- Shakespeare’s life is remarkably well documented—yet no records from his lifetime identify him unequivocally as a writer.
- Emilia Bassano’s life encompassed the breadth of the Shakespeare canon: its low-class references and knowledge of the court; its Italian sources and Jewish allusions; its music and feminism.
- Bassano’s life sheds possible light on the plays’ preoccupation with women caught in forced or loveless marriages.

Section Summaries:

Section 1: Introduction. Discusses the author’s past relationship with Shakespeare, attending plays and reading in school. Remembers the multitude of strong female characters and female friendships in the plays.

Section 2: Introduces the long-standing controversy over the authorship of the plays. Lists possible alternative authors, all male. Describes dogmatism on both sides. Proposes that being female would provide an author in Elizabethan times a strong motive to use a pseudonym.

Section 3: Begins to discuss evidence that the author of Shakespeare’s plays might have been a woman. Cites an Elizabethan critic writing about an unnamed woman producing “immortal work.” Suggests two candidates, Mary Sidney, sister of the poet Philip Sidney, and Emilia Bassano, a poet and musician who some critics have suggested may have been Shakespeare’s mistress.

Section 4: Lists prominent Shakespeare skeptics. Argues that while Shakespeare’s life is well-documented, there are no documents that identify him as a writer. What do exist show him as “a mercenary impresario of the Renaissance entertainment industry,” but not a writer. There is no such gap for other writers of the period.

Section 5: Describes Elizabethan contemporaries including Ben Jonson directly or indirectly accusing Shakespeare of plagiarism.

Section 6: Asks how a man born in Stratford educated up to age 13 could have the knowledge of literature, the law, science, music, war, the royal court, and the world displayed in the plays. Notes that his will contained descriptions of many properties and possessions, including a bed, but no books of any kind.

Section 7: Describes meeting with John Hudson, a Shakespeare scholar who has been writing about Emilia Bassano for years. Describes many connections between Bassano’s life and Shakespeare’s plays.

- Mistress to the master of court entertainment Henry Carey, who was also a patron of Shakespeare's acting company
- Lived on the boundaries of many social worlds, both lower class and courtly
- Had both Italian and Jewish connections
- Had professional knowledge of music
- Had many aristocratic connections
- Her name, Emilia, is the most common female name in the plays, but appears in no other writer's plays at the time
- Had published books of poetry
- Many parallels between her life and incidents in the plays.

Section 8: Makes a connection between Italian skin color and English, arguing that for Elizabethans, anyone darker than a typical Englishman was "black." This is connected to dark figures in the sonnets, such as the "Dark Ladie."

Section 9: Makes connections between Bassano's life and feminist content in the plays.

Section 10: Describes meeting with Mark Rylance of the Globe Theater Company, who favors Mary Sydney. Describes attending a meeting of the Shakespeare Authorship Trust (a group of skeptics), who were eager to learn more about Bassano.

Section 11: Concludes by describing her reaction to a performance of Antony and Cleopatra in which she listened for the "poet in her words."

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/06/who-is-shakespeare-emilia-bassano/588076/>