
Was Shakespeare a woman?

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On a spring night in 2018, I stood on a Manhattan sidewalk with friends, reading Shakespeare aloud. We were in line to see an adaptation of Macbeth and had decided to pass the time refreshing our memories of the play's best lines. I pulled up Lady Macbeth's soliloquy on my iPhone. "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here," I read, thrilled once again by the incantatory power of the verse. I remembered where I was when I first heard those lines: in my 10th-grade English class, startled out of my adolescent stupor by this woman rebelling magnificently and malevolently against her submissive status. "Make thick my blood, / Stop up th' access and passage to remorse." Six months into the #MeToo movement, her fury and frustration felt newly resonant.

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Pulled back into plays I'd studied in college and graduate school, I found myself mesmerized by Lady Macbeth and her sisters in the Shakespeare canon. Beatrice, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, raging at the limitations of her sex ("O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace"). Rosalind, in *As You Like It*, affecting the swagger of masculine confidence to escape those limitations ("We'll have a swashing and a martial outside, / As many other mannish cowards have / That do outface it with their semblances"). Isabella, in *Measure for Measure*, fearing no one will believe her word against Angelo's, rapist though he is ("To whom should I complain? Did I tell this, / Who would believe me?"). Kate, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, refusing to be silenced by her husband ("My tongue will tell the anger of my heart, / Or else my heart concealing it will break"). Emilia, in one of her last speeches in *Othello* before Iago kills her, arguing for women's equality ("Let husbands know / Their wives have sense like them").

I was reminded of all the remarkable female friendships, too: Beatrice and Hero's allegiance; Emilia's devotion to her mistress, Desdemona; Paulina's brave loyalty to Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*; and plenty more. ("Let's consult together against this greasy knight," resolve the merry wives of Windsor, revenging themselves on Falstaff.) These intimate female alliances are fresh inventions—they don't exist in the literary sources from which many of the plays are drawn. And when the plays lean on historical sources (Plutarch, for instance), they feminize them, portraying legendary male figures through the eyes of mothers, wives, and lovers. "Why was Shakespeare able to see the woman's position, write entirely as if he were a woman, in a way that none of the other playwrights of the age were able to?" In her book about the plays' female characters, Tina Packer, the founding artistic director of Shakespeare & Company, asked the question very much on my mind.

Theories that others wrote the corpus of work attributed to William Shakespeare (who was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564 and died in 1616) emerged in the mid-19th century. Assorted comments by his contemporaries have been interpreted by some as suggesting that the London actor claimed credit for writing that wasn't his. But more than two centuries passed before alternative contenders began to be promoted—Francis Bacon; Christopher Marlowe; and Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford, prominent among them.* They continue to have champions, whose fervor can sometimes border on fanaticism. In response, orthodox Shakespeare scholars have settled into dogmatism of their own. Even to dabble in authorship questions is considered a sign of bad faith, a blinkered failure to countenance genius in a glover's son. The time had come, I felt, to tug at the blinkers of both camps and reconsider the authorship debate: Had anyone ever proposed that the creator of those extraordinary women might be a woman? Each of the male possibilities requires an elaborate theory to explain his use of another's name. None of the candidates has succeeded in dethroning the man from Stratford. Yet a simple reason would explain a playwright's need for a pseudonym in Elizabethan England: being female.

Who was this woman writing "immortal work" in the same year that Shakespeare's name first appeared in print? Long before Tina Packer marveled at the bard's uncanny insight, others were no less awed by the empathy that pervades the work. "One would think that he had been Metamorphosed from a Man to a Woman," wrote Margaret Cavendish, the 17th-century philosopher and playwright. The critic John Ruskin said, "Shakespeare has no heroes—he has only heroines." A striking number of those heroines refuse to obey rules. At least 10 defy their fathers, bucking betrothals they don't like to find their own paths to love. Eight disguise themselves as men, outwitting patriarchal controls—more gender-swapping than can be found in the work of any previous English playwright. Six lead armies.

From Our June 2019 Issue

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The prevailing view, however, has been that no women in Renaissance England wrote for the theater, because that was against the rules. Religious verse and translation were deemed suitable female literary pursuits; "closet dramas," meant only for private reading, were acceptable. The stage was off-limits. Yet scholars have lately established that women were involved in the business of acting companies as patrons, shareholders, suppliers of costumes, and gatherers of entrance fees. What's more, 80 percent of the plays printed in the 1580s were written anonymously, and that number didn't fall below 50 percent until the early 1600s. At least one eminent Shakespeare scholar, Phyllis Rackin, of the University of Pennsylvania, challenges the blanket assumption that the commercial drama pouring forth in the period bore no trace of a female hand. So did Virginia Woolf, even as she sighed over the obstacles that would have confronted a female Shakespeare: "Undoubtedly, I thought, looking at the shelf where there are no plays by women, her work would have gone unsigned."

A tantalizing nudge lies buried in the writings of Gabriel Harvey, a well-known Elizabethan literary critic. In 1593, he

referred cryptically to an “excellent Gentlewoman” who had written three sonnets and a comedy. “I dare not Particularise her Description,” he wrote, even as he heaped praise on her.

All her conceits are illuminate with the light of Reason; all her speeches beautified with the grace of Affability ... In her mind there appeareth a certain heavenly Logic; in her tongue & pen a divine Rhetoric ... I dare undertake with warrant, whatsoever she writeth must needs remain an immortal work, and will leave, in the activest world, an eternal memory of the silliest vermin that she should vouchsafe to grace with her beautiful and allecive style, as ingenious as elegant. Who was this woman writing “immortal work” in the same year that Shakespeare’s name first appeared in print, on the poem “Venus and Adonis,” a scandalous parody of masculine seduction tales (in which the woman forces herself on the man)? Harvey’s tribute is extraordinary, yet orthodox Shakespeareans and anti-Stratfordians alike have almost entirely ignored it.

Until recently, that is, when a few bold outliers began to advance the case that Shakespeare might well have been a woman. One candidate is Mary Sidney, the countess of Pembroke (and beloved sister of the celebrated poet Philip Sidney)—one of the most educated women of her time, a translator and poet, and the doyenne of the Wilton Circle, a literary salon dedicated to galvanizing an English cultural renaissance. Clues beckon, not least that Sidney and her husband were the patrons of one of the first theater companies to perform Shakespeare’s plays. Was Shakespeare’s name useful camouflage, allowing her to publish what she otherwise couldn’t?

Shakespeare’s life is remarkably well documented—yet no records from his lifetime identify him unequivocally as a writer.

But the candidate who intrigued me more was a woman as exotic and peripheral as Sidney was pedigreed and prominent. Not long after my Macbeth outing, I learned that Shakespeare’s Globe, in London, had set out to explore this figure’s input to the canon. The theater’s summer 2018 season concluded with a new play, Emilia, about a contemporary of Shakespeare’s named Emilia Bassano. Born in London in 1569 to a family of Venetian immigrants—musicians and instrument-makers who may have been Jewish—she was one of the first women in England to publish a volume of poetry (suitably religious yet startlingly feminist, arguing for women’s “Libertie” and against male oppression).** Her existence was unearthed in 1973 by the Oxford historian A. L. Rowse, who speculated that she was Shakespeare’s mistress, the “dark lady” described in the sonnets. In Emilia, the playwright Morgan Lloyd Malcolm goes a step further: Her Shakespeare is a plagiarist who uses Bassano’s words for Emilia’s famous defense of women in Othello.

Could Bassano have contributed even more widely and directly? The idea felt like a feminist fantasy about the past—but then, stories about women’s lost and obscured achievements so often have a dreamlike quality, unveiling a history different from the one we’ve learned. Was I getting carried away, reinventing Shakespeare in the image of our age? Or was I seeing past gendered assumptions to the woman who—like Shakespeare’s heroines—had fashioned herself a clever disguise? Perhaps the time was finally ripe for us to see her.

The ranks of Shakespeare skeptics comprise a kind of literary underworld—a cross-disciplinary array of academics, actors (Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance are perhaps the best known), writers, teachers, lawyers, a few Supreme Court justices (Sandra Day O’Connor, Antonin Scalia, John Paul Stevens). Look further back and you’ll find such illustrious names as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Henry James, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller, and Charlie Chaplin. Their ideas about the authorship of the plays and poems differ, but they concur that Shakespeare is not the man who wrote them.

Their doubt is rooted in an empirical conundrum. Shakespeare’s life is remarkably well documented, by the standards of the period—yet no records from his lifetime identify him unequivocally as a writer. The more than 70 documents that exist show him as an actor, a shareholder in a theater company, a moneylender, and a property investor. They show that he dodged taxes, was fined for hoarding grain during a shortage, pursued petty lawsuits, and was subject to a restraining order. The profile is remarkably coherent, adding up to a mercenary impresario of the Renaissance entertainment industry. What’s missing is any sign that he wrote.

From January 1863: Nathaniel Hawthorne considers authorship while visiting Stratford-upon-Avon

No such void exists for other major writers of the period, as a meticulous scholar named Diana Price has demonstrated. Many left fewer documents than Shakespeare did, but among them are manuscripts, letters, and payment records proving that writing was their profession. For example, court records show payment to Ben Jonson for “those services of his wit & pen.” Desperate to come up with comparable material to round out Shakespeare, scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries forged evidence—later debunked—of a writerly life.

To be sure, Shakespeare's name can be found linked, during his lifetime, to written works. With *Love's Labour's Lost*, in 1598, it started appearing on the title pages of one-play editions called "quartos." (Several of the plays attributed to Shakespeare were first published anonymously.) Commentators at the time saluted him by name, praising "Shakespeare's fine filed phrase" and "honey-tongued Shakespeare." But such evidence proves attribution, not actual authorship—as even some orthodox Shakespeare scholars grant. "I would love to find a contemporary document that said William Shakespeare was the dramatist of Stratford-upon-Avon written during his lifetime," Stanley Wells, a professor emeritus at the University of Birmingham's Shakespeare Institute, has said. "That would shut the buggers up!"

FROM THE ARCHIVES

In 1991, *The Atlantic* commissioned two pieces from admittedly partisan authors, Irving Matus and Tom Bethell, to examine and debate the argument:

In Defense of Shakespeare

The Case for Oxford

By contrast, more than a few of Shakespeare's contemporaries are on record suggesting that his name got affixed to work that wasn't his. In 1591, the dramatist Robert Greene wrote of the practice of "underhand brokery"—of poets who "get some other Batillus to set his name to their verses." (Batillus was a mediocre Roman poet who claimed some of Virgil's verses as his own.) The following year, he warned fellow playwrights about an "upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers," who thinks he is the "onely Shake-scene in a countrey." Most scholars agree that the "Crow" is Shakespeare, then an actor in his late 20s, and conclude that the new-hatched playwright was starting to irk established figures. Anti-Stratfordians see something else: In Aesop's fables, the crow was a proud strutter who stole the feathers of others; Horace's crow, in his epistles, was a plagiarist. Shakespeare was being attacked, they say, not as a budding dramatist, but as a paymaster taking credit for others' work. "Seeke you better Maisters," Greene advised, urging his colleagues to cease writing for the Crow.

Ben Jonson, among others, got in his digs, too. Scholars agree that the character of Sogliardo in *Every Man Out of His Humour*—a country bumpkin "without brain, wit, anything, indeed, ramping to gentility"—is a parody of Shakespeare, a social climber whose pursuit of a coat of arms was common lore among his circle of actors. In a satirical poem called "On Poet-Ape," Jonson was likely taking aim at Shakespeare the theater-world wheeler-dealer. This poet-ape, Jonson wrote, "from brokage is become so bold a thief,"

At first he made low shifts, would pick and glean,
Buy the reversion of old plays; now grown
To a little wealth, and credit in the scene,
He takes up all, makes each man's wit his own

What to make of the fact that Jonson changed his tune in the prefatory material that he contributed to the First Folio of plays when it appeared seven years after Shakespeare's death? Jonson's praise there did more than attribute the work to Shakespeare. It declared his art unmatched: "He was not of an age, but for all time!" The anti-Stratfordian response is to note the shameless hype at the heart of the Folio project. "Whatever you do, Buy," the compilers urged in their dedication, intent on a hard sell for a dramatist who, doubters emphasize, was curiously unsung at his death. The Folio's introductory effusions, they argue, contain double meanings. Jonson tells readers, for example, to find Shakespeare not in his portrait "but his Booke," seeming to undercut the relation between the man and the work. And near the start of his over-the-top tribute, Jonson riffs on the unreliability of extravagant praise, "which doth ne'er advance / The truth."

From September 1904: Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrates Shakespeare

The authorship puzzles don't end there. How did the man born in Stratford acquire the wide-ranging knowledge on display in the plays—of the Elizabethan court, as well as of multiple languages, the law, astronomy, music, the military, and foreign lands, especially northern Italian cities? The author's linguistic brilliance shines in words and sayings imported from foreign vocabularies, but Shakespeare wasn't educated past the age of 13. Perhaps he traveled, joined the army, worked as a tutor, or all three, scholars have proposed. Yet no proof exists of any of those experiences, despite, as the Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper pointed out in an essay, "the greatest battery of organized research that has ever been directed upon a single person."

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.

In fact, a document that does exist—Shakespeare's will—would seem to undercut such hypotheses. A wealthy man when he retired to Stratford, he was meticulous about bequeathing his properties and possessions (his silver, his second-best bed). Yet he left behind not a single book, though the plays draw on hundreds of texts, including some—in Italian and French—that hadn't yet been translated into English. Nor did he leave any musical instruments, though the plays use at least 300 musical terms and refer to 26 instruments. He remembered three actor-owners in his company, but no one in the literary profession. Strangest of all, he made no mention of manuscripts or writing. Perhaps as startling as the gaps in his will, Shakespeare appears to have neglected his daughters' education—an incongruity, given the erudition of so many of the playwright's female characters. One signed with her mark, the other with a signature a scholar has called "painfully formed."

"Weak and unconvincing" was Trevor-Roper's verdict on the case for Shakespeare. My delving left me in agreement, not that the briefs for the male alternatives struck me as compelling either. Steeped in the plays, I felt their author would surely join me in bridling at the Stratfordians' unquestioning worship at the shrine—their arrogant dismissal of skeptics as mere deluded "buggers," or worse. ("Is there any more fanatic zealot than the priest-like defender of a challenged creed?" asked Richmond Crinkley, a former director of programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library who was nonetheless sympathetic to the anti-Stratfordian view.) To appreciate how belief blossoms into fact—how readily myths about someone get disseminated as truth—one can't do better than to read Shakespeare. Just think of how obsessed the work is with mistaken identities, concealed women, forged and anonymous documents—with the error of trusting in outward appearances. What if searchers for the real Shakespeare simply haven't set their sights on the right pool of candidates?

Read: An interview with the author of 'The Shakespeare Wars'

I met Emilia Bassano's most ardent champion at Alice's Tea Cup, which seemed unexpectedly apt: A teahouse on Manhattan's Upper West Side, it has quotes from Alice in Wonderland scrawled across the walls. ("off with their heads!") John Hudson, an Englishman in his 60s who pursued a degree at the Shakespeare Institute in a mid-career swerve, had been on the Bassano case for years, he told me. In 2014, he published Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Amelia Bassano Lanier, the Woman Behind Shakespeare's Plays? His zeal can sometimes get the better of him, yet he emphasizes that his methods and findings are laid out "for anyone ... to refute if they wish." Like Alice's rabbit hole, Bassano's case opened up new and richly disorienting perspectives—on the plays, on the ways we think about genius and gender, and on a fascinating life.

Hudson first learned of Bassano from A. L. Rowse, who discovered mention of her in the notebooks of an Elizabethan physician and astrologer named Simon Forman. In her teens, she became the mistress of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, the master of court entertainment and patron of Shakespeare's acting company. And that is only the start. Whether or not Bassano was Shakespeare's lover (scholars now dismiss Rowse's claim), the discernible contours of her biography supply what the available material about Shakespeare's life doesn't: circumstantial evidence of opportunities to acquire an impressive expanse of knowledge.

Bassano lived, Hudson points out, "an existence on the boundaries of many different social worlds," encompassing the breadth of the Shakespeare canon: its coarse, low-class references and its intimate knowledge of the court; its Italian sources and its Jewish allusions; its music and its feminism. And her imprint, as Hudson reads the plays, extends over a long period. He notes the many uses of her name, citing several early on—for instance, an Emilia in *The Comedy of Errors*. (Emilia, the most common female name in the plays alongside Katherine, wasn't used in the 16th century by any other English playwright in an original work.**) *Titus Andronicus* features a character named Bassianus, which was the original Roman name of Bassano del Grappa, her family's hometown before their move to Venice. Later, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the romantic hero is a Venetian named Bassanio, an indication that the author perhaps knew of the Bassanos' connection to Venice. (Bassanio is a spelling of their name in some records.)

Further on, in *Othello*, another Emilia appears—Iago's wife. Her famous speech against abusive husbands, Hudson notes, doesn't show up until 1623, in the First Folio, included among lines that hadn't appeared in an earlier version (lines that Stratfordians assume—without any proof—were written before Shakespeare's death). Bassano was still alive, and by then had known her share of hardship at the hands of men. More to the point, she had already spoken out, in her 1611 book of poetry, against men who "do like vipers deface the wombs wherein they were bred."

Prodded by Hudson, you can discern traces of Bassano's own life trajectory in particular works across the canon. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, a lowborn girl lives with a dowager countess and a general named Bertram. When Bassano's father, Baptista, died in 1576, Emilia, then 7, was taken in by Susan Bertie, the dowager countess of Kent.

The countess's brother, Peregrine Bertie, was—like the fictional Bertram—a celebrated general. In the play, the countess tells how a father “famous ... in his profession” left “his sole child ... bequeathed to my overlooking. I have those hopes of her good that her education promises.” Bassano received a remarkable humanist education with the countess. In her book of poetry, she praised her guardian as “the Mistris of my youth, / The noble guide of my ungovern'd dayes.”

Bassano's life sheds possible light on the plays' preoccupation with women caught in forced or loveless marriages. As for the celebrated general, Hudson seizes on the possibility that Bassano's ears, and perhaps eyes, were opened by Peregrine Bertie as well. In 1582, Bertie was named ambassador to Denmark by the queen and sent to the court at Elsinore—the setting of Hamlet. Records show that the trip included state dinners with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whose names appear in the play. Because emissaries from the same two families later visited the English court, the trip isn't decisive, but another encounter is telling: Bertie met with the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, whose astronomical theories influenced the play. Was Bassano (then just entering her teens) on the trip? Bertie was accompanied by a “whole traine,” but only the names of important gentlemen are recorded. In any case, Hudson argues, she would have heard tales on his return.

Later, as the mistress of Henry Carey (43 years her senior), Bassano gained access to more than the theater world. Carey, the queen's cousin, held various legal and military positions. Bassano was “favoured much of her Majesty and of many noblemen,” the physician Forman noted, indicating the kind of extensive aristocratic associations that only vague guesswork can accord to Shakespeare. His company didn't perform at court until Christmas of 1594, after several of the plays informed by courtly life had already been written. Shakespeare's history plays, concerned as they are with the interactions of the governing class, presume an insider perspective on aristocratic life. Yet mere court performances wouldn't have enabled such familiarity, and no trace exists of Shakespeare's presence in any upper-class household.

And then, in late 1592, Bassano (now 23) was expelled from court. She was pregnant. Carey gave her money and jewels and, for appearance's sake, married her off to Alphonso Lanier, a court musician. A few months later, she had a son. Despite the glittering dowry, Lanier must not have been pleased. “Her husband hath dealt hardly with her,” Forman wrote, “and spent and consumed her goods.”

Bassano was later employed in a noble household, probably as a music tutor, and roughly a decade after that opened a school. Whether she accompanied her male relatives—whose consort of recorder players at the English court lasted 90 years—on their trips back to northern Italy isn't known. But the family link to the home country offers support for the fine-grained familiarity with the region that (along with in-depth musical knowledge) any plausible candidate for authorship would seem to need—just what scholars have had to strain to establish for Shakespeare. (Perhaps, theories go, he chatted with travelers or consulted books.) In Othello, for example, Iago gives a speech that precisely describes a fresco in Bassano del Grappa—also the location of a shop owned by Giovanni Otello, a likely source of the title character's name.

Her Bassano lineage—some scholars suggest the family were conversos, converted or hidden Jews presenting as Christians—could also help account for the Jewish references that scholars of the plays have noted.** The plea in The Merchant of Venice for the equality and humanity of Jews, a radical departure from typical anti-Semitic portrayals of the period, is well known. “Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” Shylock asks. “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” A Midsummer Night's Dream draws from a passage in the Talmud about marriage vows; spoken Hebrew is mixed into the nonsense language of All's Well That Ends Well.

Stephen Doyle

What's more, the Bassano family's background suggests a source close to home for the particular interest in dark figures in the sonnets, Othello, and elsewhere. A 1584 document about the arrest of two Bassano men records them as “black”—among Elizabethans, the term could apply to anyone darker than the fair-skinned English, including those with a Mediterranean complexion. (The fellows uttered lines that could come straight from a comic interlude in the plays: “We have as good friends in the court as thou hast and better too ... Send us to ward? Thou wert as good kiss our arse.”) In Love's Labour's Lost, the noblemen derisively compare Rosaline, the princess's attendant, to “chimney-sweepers” and “colliers” (coal miners). The king joins in, telling Berowne, who is infatuated with her, “Thy love is black as ebony,” to which the young lord responds, “O wood divine!”

Bassano's life sheds possible light, too, on another outsider theme: the plays' preoccupation with women caught in forced or loveless marriages. Hudson sees her misery reflected in the sonnets, thought to have been written from the early 1590s to the early 1600s. “When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, / I all alone beweepe my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, / And look upon myself and curse my fate,” reads sonnet 29. (When Maya Angelou first encountered the poem as a child, she thought Shakespeare must have been a black girl who had

been sexually abused: “How else could he know what I know?”) For Shakespeare, those years brought a rise in status: In 1596, he was granted a coat of arms, and by 1597, he was rich enough to buy the second-largest house in Stratford.

Read: What Maya Angelou meant when she said ‘Shakespeare must be a black girl’

In what is considered an early or muddled version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, a man named Alphonso (as was Bassano's husband) tries to marry off his three daughters, Emilia, Kate, and Philema. Emilia drops out in the later version, and the father is now called Baptista (the name of Bassano's father). As a portrait of a husband dealing “hardly” with a wife, the play is horrifying. Yet Kate's speech of submission, with its allusions to the Letters of Paul, is slippery: Even as she exaggeratedly parrots the Christian doctrine of womanly subjection, she is anything but dutifully silent.

Shakespeare's women repeatedly subvert such teachings, perhaps most radically in *The Winter's Tale*, another drama of male cruelty. There the noblewoman Paulina, scorned by King Leontes as “a most intelligencing bawd” with a “boundless tongue,” bears fierce witness against him (no man dares to) when he wrongly accuses Queen Hermione of adultery and imprisons her. As in so many of the comedies, a more enlightened society emerges in the end because the women's values triumph.

I was stunned to realize that the year *The Winter's Tale* was likely completed, 1611, was the same year Bassano published her book of poetry, *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*. Her writing style bears no obvious resemblance to Shakespeare's in his plays, though Hudson strains to suggest similarities. The overlap lies in the feminist content. Bassano's poetry registers as more than conventional religious verse designed to win patronage (she dedicates it to nine women, Mary Sidney included, fashioning a female literary community). Scholars have observed that it reads as a “transgressive” defense of Eve and womankind. Like a cross-dressing Shakespearean heroine, Bassano refuses to play by the rules, heretically reinterpreting scripture. “If Eve did err, it was for knowledge sake,” she writes. Arguing that the crucifixion, a crime committed by men, was a greater crime than Eve's, she challenges the basis of men's “tyranny” over women.

“I always feel something Italian, something Jewish about Shakespeare,” Jorge Luis Borges told *The Paris Review* in 1966. “Perhaps Englishmen admire him because of that, because it's so unlike them.” Borges didn't mention feeling “something female” about the bard, yet that response has never ceased to be part of Shakespeare's allure—embodiment though he is of the patriarchal authority of the Western canon. What would the revelation of a woman's hand at work mean, aside from the loss of a prime tourist attraction in Stratford-upon-Avon? Would the effect be a blow to the cultural patriarchy, or the erosion of the canon's status? Would (male) myths of inexplicable genius take a hit? Would women at last claim their rightful authority as historical and intellectual forces?

I was curious to take the temperature of the combative authorship debate as women edge their way into it. Over more tea, I tested Hudson's room for flexibility. Could the plays' many connections to Bassano be explained by simply assuming the playwright knew her well? “Shakespeare would have had to run to her every few minutes for a musical reference or an Italian pun,” he said. I caught up with Mark Rylance, the actor and former artistic director of the Globe, in the midst of rehearsals for *Othello* (whose plot, he noted, comes from an Italian text that didn't exist in English). A latitudinarian doubter—embracing the inquiry, not any single candidate—Rylance has lately observed that the once heretical notion of collaboration between Shakespeare and other writers “is now accepted, pursued and published by leading orthodox scholars.” He told me that “Emilia should be studied by anyone interested in the creation of the plays.” David Scott Kastan, a well-known Shakespeare scholar at Yale, urged further exploration too, though he wasn't ready to anoint her bard. “What's clear is that it's important to know more about her,” he said, and even got playful with pronouns: “The more we know about her and the world she lived in, the more we'll know about Shakespeare, whoever she was.”

Related Stories

Such Ado: The Fight for Shakespeare's Puns
Shakespeare in Love, or in Context

In the fall, I joined the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Authorship Trust—a gathering of skeptics at the Globe—feeling excited that gender would be at the top of the agenda. Some eyebrows were raised even in this company, but

enthusiasm ran high. "People have been totally frustrated with authorship debates that go nowhere, but that's because there have been 200 years of bad candidates," one participant from the University of Toronto exclaimed. "They didn't want to see women in this," he reflected. "It's a tragedy of history."

He favored Sidney. Others were eager to learn about Bassano, and with collaboration in mind, I wondered whether the two women had perhaps worked together, or as part of a group. I thought of Bassano's *Salve Deus*, in which she writes that men have wrongly taken credit for knowledge: "Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he tooke / From Eve's faire hand, as from a learned Booke."

The night after the meeting, I went to a performance of Antony and Cleopatra at the National Theatre. I sat enthralled, still listening for the poet in her words, trying to catch her reflection in some forgotten bit of verse. "Give me my robe, put on my crown," cried the queen, "I have / Immortal longings in me." There she was, kissing her ladies goodbye, raising the serpent to her breast. "I am fire and air."

* This article originally stated that doubts about whether Shakespeare really wrote the works attributed to him are almost as old as the writing itself, and then went on to list alternative contenders who have been put forward over the years. We have amended the sentences to clarify the chronology. Some contemporaries' comments can be read as complaints that Shakespeare put his name on others' work. But as the piece now notes, theories that he was not the true author, and the promotion of other claimants, emerged in the mid-19th century.

** This article originally stated that scholars suggest the family were conversos. Some do, but archival documents have led others to dismiss the possibility that the Bassanos were ever Jews. Given the reliance on circumstantial evidence by researchers on both sides, we have updated the relevant phrases to make clear that this issue is more contested than the article originally indicated.

*** This article originally stated that Shakespeare was the only English playwright to use the name Emilia in the 16th century.

Elizabeth Winkler is a reporter for The Wall Street Journal.