

THEATRE

Emilia at the Vaudeville Theatre, London preview

A play inspired by a feminist Tudor poet is coming to the West End. Jonathan Bate separates the facts from the fiction

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Who was Emilia Bassano? Was she really the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets? The playwright Morgan Lloyd Malcolm tells us in the preface to her new play, *Emilia*, that "it isn't an accurate representation of Renaissance England, it isn't a historical representation. It is a memory, a dream, a feeling of her."

That's as it should be for a piece of theatre that uses the past to speak to the present. However, before seeing the Globe production at the Vaudeville Theatre in London, many audience members will want to know how much of it is true and how much is fantasy or speculation.

Baptised Aemilia, she was born in Bishopsgate in 1569, the daughter of an English woman and a Venetian musician called Baptiste Bassano, who held an appointment at the royal court, where Queen Elizabeth demanded a constant diet of musical entertainment.

Baptiste died when Emilia was seven, at which point she had the good fortune to be taken into the household of Susan Bertie, the Countess of Kent, where she received a formidable education in the classics of the kind that was usually available only to boys. She would always be grateful for this, calling the countess "the noble guide" of her youth, and throughout her life she was drawn to all-female communities of learning.

However, she also needed male patronage. By the time she was in her early twenties, Emilia was the mistress of Lord Henry Carey, Baron Hunsdon, the lord chamberlain, master of entertainment in the royal household and patron of William Shakespeare's acting company. The son of Ann Boleyn's sister, Lord Henry was more than 40 years older than Emilia, but he seems to have treated her with affection and respect, maintaining her "in great pomp", giving her money, jewels and, when she was 23, a child. So as not to bring her into the disrepute of being a single mother, he arranged for her to marry her cousin Alfonso Lanyer, another court musician.

Emilia had a daughter, Odillya, by her husband, but she died in infancy. Alfonso, meanwhile, squandered the generous dowry that Emilia had received from Lord Henry before his death. It was in an effort to restore her fortunes that in 1611 she became possibly the first woman in English history to try to make money by publishing a volume of poetry. Entitled *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* ("Hail, God, king of the Jews"), it was dedicated to several patrons or potential patrons, all women.

The bulk of the volume consists of a long religious poem in which Eve gives an “apology in defence of women” and the Crucifixion is seen from the point of view of the women who loved Jesus. It ends with an exquisitely written country house poem called Description of Cookham — written in praise of the rural estate of another aristocratic woman, estranged from her husband, where Emilia was companion and perhaps tutor to the gifted young Lady Anne Clifford. In every respect, then, this was a pioneering work of literary feminism.

Neither patronage nor significant sales were forthcoming. We hear no more of Aemilia Lanyer the writer. After her husband died in 1613, she tried to make a living by running a school for genteel girls, but she was arrested for not paying the rent and the enterprise failed — the artistic licence of the play, directed by Nicole Charles, reimagines Emilia providing educational opportunities for streetwalkers from the seedy theatre district of Southwark, including one who bears the symbolic name of Eve.

Little is known of Emilia’s later years. She died in obscurity in Clerkenwell in 1645 and her poetic talent was all but forgotten for more than 300 years. Typically, her name only came into the consciousness of the modern world because of a man: a certain William Shakespeare.

So it is that Lloyd Malcolm’s play begins with the “modern” Emilia reading from a (real) book called *Sex and Society in Shakespeare’s Age: Simon Forman the Astrologer*. It is by the historian AL Rowse, a cantankerous Cornishman who cashed in on the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth by writing a popular biography of him.

He found an archival goldmine in the diaries of Simon Forman, a kind of Elizabethan sex therapist who came up with a mode of treatment that combined the casting of horoscopes with such attractive remedies as civet taken in poached egg for impotence and “a hot cow turd” applied to aching joints. Forman built up a most impressive clientele of courtiers, merchants and theatre people.

He gained a particular reputation in the area of “women’s problems”. Word went out that, whether you were having difficulty with a pregnancy or in getting pregnant, Dr Forman was the man to visit. He kept detailed case notes that reveal that he never missed the opportunity to sleep with his clients. Each conquest was recorded with the invented word “halek” — Emilia reminds you what it means. Whatever the origin of the word, Forman indulged in a prodigious amount of it. Even in his mid-fifties, we find him haleking with one Hester Sharp at 8am and Anne Wiseman at 3pm, then going home to halek with his wife, who was affectionately known as Tronco.

He was as unscrupulous in taking advantage of his female patients as he was scrupulous in recording his every halek: “On April 12th at 4.10am, on the 14th at 9pm, the 21st at 5.45pm and on the 23rd at 5.30pm.” The precise times were necessary for the calculation of the astrological chart of any child conceived as the result of a particular halek.

Emilia went to visit him in 1597. This time Forman met his match. She allowed him a few fumbles, perhaps to reduce the price of her consultations. However, she was adamant in her refusal to halek. For Emilia, it was a woman’s right to say no. Forman tried again and again,

but without success. He was furious at the strong-willed independence of this highly attractive, part-Italian woman who was, he recorded, “very brave” in her youth.

Unfortunately, Rowse misread “very brave” in Forman’s manuscript as “very brown”. He also got the false impression that her husband was called “Will”. It seemed like a eureka moment: a feisty dark-complexioned exotic daughter of a court musician and therefore musical herself. Doesn’t that sound like the woman in Shakespeare’s sonnets who is nimble at the keyboard, seemingly has two bed partners called Will, and gives as good as she gets in bed — or sometimes refuses to give? Rowse announced to the world that he had definitively identified Shakespeare’s Dark Lady.

A few months later, another scholar noticed the misreading of “brave” as “brown” and the fact that Emilia’s husband was called Alfonso, not Will. Undeterred, Rowse held to his view until his dying day. There is no firm evidence to support it, beyond the circumstantial evidence that she was the mistress of Shakespeare’s theatrical patron and the nice coincidence that his most striking defence of a woman’s right to her own sexuality is voiced in *Othello* by a woman called Emilia (who, like our Emilia, is a companion to an aristocratic lady).

It is not impossible that she really was the Dark Lady. However, it is equally possible that the Dark Lady was someone else. Or indeed that she was no more than a projection of Shakespeare’s capacious imagination. That does not matter; like Shakespeare’s plays, Emilia is a work of the imagination, not a report from the archive. By shunting Shakespeare into the wings and giving centre stage to Emilia Bassano and her female companions — from high society and low, some based on real women of power, others invented out of those erased from historical memory — Lloyd Malcolm gives long overdue recognition to a truly remarkable female genius.

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