

THE SHAKESPEARE SECRET

Book Club Guide

OVERVIEW

This document offers historical context and proposes questions for book club conversation.

Historical Context

Did Shakespeare write Shakespeare?

In a word, yes. This is not perhaps the answer you expected from me. However, the evidence in favor of his authorship is mountainous. More importantly, evidence against his authorship simply doesn't exist. A rule of thumb among historians is that the longer after a contemporary event a new narrative appears, the less likely it is to be true. Questions about Shakespeare's authorship of the plays that bear his name appear no earlier than 1785 (though this date is in question), and did not become widespread until the mid-1800s – more than two centuries after his death.

The corollary to the historical rule of thumb is that sources contemporary with an event are typically the most trusted, especially if there are many contemporary sources that agree on the details. Shakespeare was a well-known actor and playwright who lived in London for more than two decades, often collaborating with other playwrights. No one of his time – playwrights, actors, theater owners, friends, and even rivals – disputed his authorship. Some accused him of plagiarism, yes, but it was common practice for playwrights of the day to borrow liberally from other works. Playwrighting at the time was more akin to television media today. There was an intense demand for new plays, so playwrights wrote with furious speed. Borrowing ideas and even passages from other works was a way to meet the demand.

If Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare, then why this story? My answer is simple. This is a tale of “what-if” history. During the age of Elizabethan London – and for another three centuries – the vast majority of women were denied even a rudimentary education. A tiny fraction could read or write. Fewer still possessed a classical education that was even remotely equivalent to what a male from a good family would receive. Despite the fact that the pool of women with the education to write plays was miniscule, and despite the social pressures against women operating in art, science, and literature, women produced remarkable works during this era. Imagine, then, how much richer our literary history would be if the half of the population that was sidelined had been given the opportunity to participate. In essence, the “what-if” of this story is not “what if Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare”, but instead “what-if women throughout history had more access to education and opportunity.” This story explores that question.

Two of the remarkable women of the Elizabethan era appear in this story: Mary Herbert and Emilia Bassano Lanier. Mary Herbert, the Countess of Pembroke, was the younger sister of the famed poet Sir Philip Sydney. One of Sydney's ongoing projects was the paraphrasing of the biblical book of Psalms into poetic verse. When he died tragically young, he had completed only 43 of the 150 individual Psalms. Mary Herbert took up the project and saw it to completion. The result was the Sydney Psalter. It was described as metrically inventive – a literary union of Renaissance and Reformation forms – and went on to influence English poetry for centuries. It predated even the King James translation of the Bible. A speaker of seven languages, Mary Herbert also finished several translations of French works. One – *Antonius* – appeared to have been a primary source used by Shakespeare for the play *Antony and Cleopatra*. She was a famed sponsor of poets, a group that gained the name *The Wilton Circle* after one of her homes – Wilton. Not satisfied with mere sponsorship, Mary became the first English woman to publish a play – a so-called “closet” play meant for staging at home for guests. She was also one of the first English women to not apologize for daring to put her writing into the world.

Emilia Bassano Lanier was a lute-playing member of a court musician family that had originally come from Italy at the invitation of Queen Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII. The Bassano family may have been crypto Jews – Jewish people masquerading as Christians to avoid persecution. When Emilia's father died, she received a classical education from her ward from the age of seven – the Countess of Kent. Sometime during her teen years, she ended up back at Court and became a favorite of Queen Elizabeth. More importantly, she became the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain, Baron Hunsdon. Hunsdon was first cousin to the queen by a Boleyn sister and was in charge of Court logistics. He was a very important man. When Emilia became pregnant in her early twenties, Hunsdon sent her away from Court with a payoff, and married her to Alfonso Lanier, Emilia's cousin by marriage. At the age of 42, she published the first book of substantial, original poetry written by an Englishwoman – *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*. It is also one of the first feminist works, with all dedications given to women and the crucifixion of Christ in the title poem being told from the point of view of the women who saw it. She ends the work with "Description of Cookham", which pays homage to the great house of Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland where Emilia was a tutor and companion to Clifford's daughter. It is the first published "country house poem" in English – a form imitated by many other poets during the first half of the 1600s.

Jane Daggett represents the vast remainder of Englishwomen – those with bright minds who never received the opportunity to plumb the depths of their intellectual possibilities. As a conceit, I drew her name and place of origin, the Daggett family of Tisbury, Wiltshire, from my own family lineage. However, she could have been any one of the millions of commoner women who lived and died without a voice because they could not write.

Captain Dansby and John Harwood are fictions. The rest of the characters are drawn from real people, and their personalities are based on what history remembers of them – including extensive writings about Robert Cecil and Lady and Lord Southampton. The various players mentioned actually existed, and their personalities have been drawn to match what we know about them. The character of Queen Elizabeth is based on a Court records and a trove of letters from those closest to her that talk about her. Based on what I learned, I would love to have met her. Elizabeth was a remarkable intellect maneuvering in impossible circumstances who, nevertheless, elevated her country from a debt-ridden regional player to a wealthy global power.

The events that tie together the timeline actually happened. This includes the staging of the plays at Court by the Queen's Men on Christmas Day, 1591 and by Lord Pembroke's Men on December 26, 1592. Events in between include the likely staging dates of *The Shrew* and the Henry the Sixth trilogy, Lord Strange's Men moving to The Rose theater, the London riot and closing of the playhouses, the formation of Lord Pembroke's Men, the queen's visit to Mary Herbert at Ramsbury, the plague in London, and the casting out from Court of Emilia Bassano and her subsequent marriage to Alfonso Lanier. The locations are real and described as accurately as possible: Whitehall Palace, Baynard's Castle, Ramsbury, the various theaters, and so on.

If you want to read a good, crisp treatment of William Shakespeare, I recommend *Shakespeare: The World as Stage* by Bill Bryson. Sadly, I am not aware of a good biography of Mary Herbert or Emilia Bassano Lanier. Perhaps this story might begin to rectify that, even if in fiction. If you want to explore the possibility that any of this could be true, I recommend Elizabeth Winkler's article in *The Atlantic*, June 2019, called "Was Shakespeare a Woman?" It has generated substantial controversy. However,

Winkler's main claim is this: if you are going to speculate about someone other than Shakespeare writing Shakespeare, then your most plausible candidates are all women.

Places

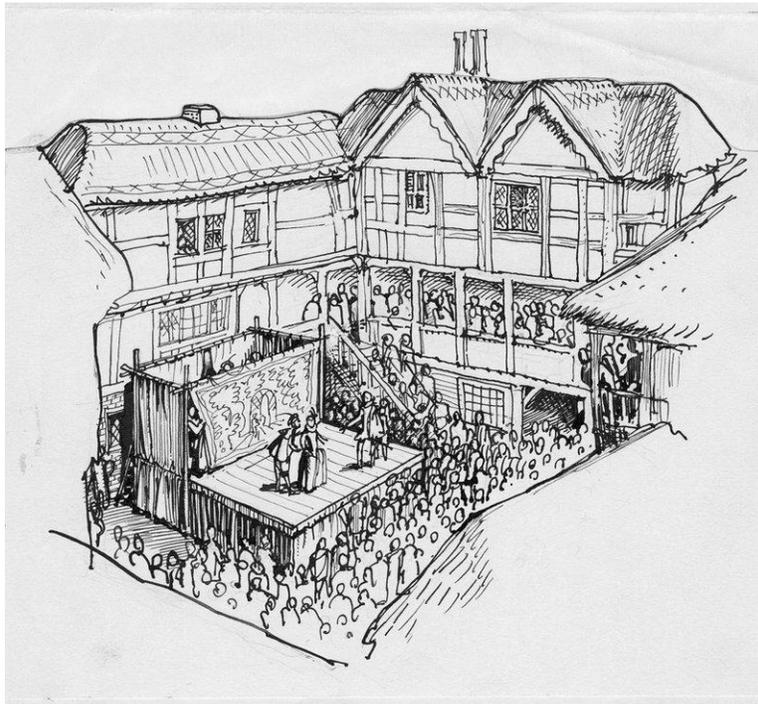
Baynard's Castle, London

Baynard's Castle was the residence of the Pembroke family when they stayed in London, a gift from the Crown. It burnt to the ground during the Great London Fire of 1666.



Cross Keys Inn

The location of a play staged by Lord Strange's Men and a clandestine meeting involving Jane.



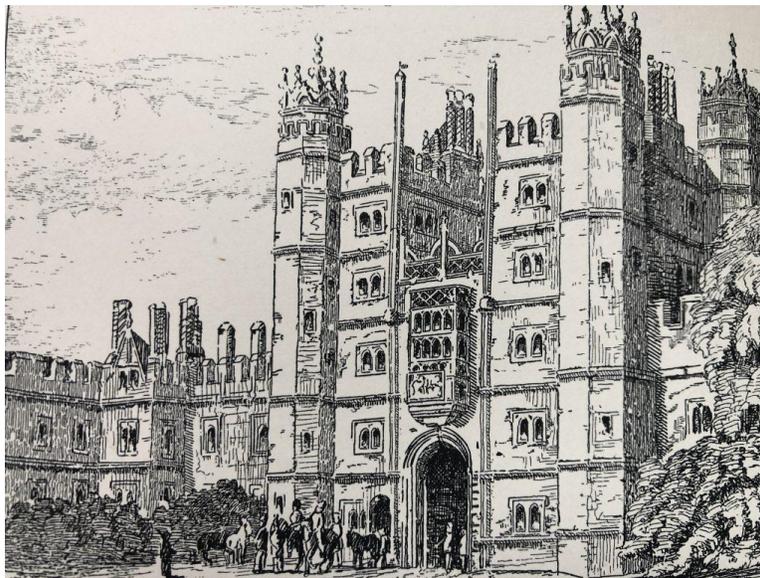
Whitehall Palace

Location of the first play in the story, and where the sisterhood forms.



Hampton Court

Location of the finale.



People



Mary Sydney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke



Emilia Bassano Lanier



Robert Cecil



Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon



Queen Elizabeth I



Lady Southampton

Chapter by Chapter Questions

Chapter 1

What is Mary's primary goal when having an audience with the queen? How does this appear to affect her?

How would you describe Mary's marriage when we first meet her?

Chapter 2

What is Jane's view of herself and her place in the world when we first meet her?

Chapter 3

How might Emilia's "rules of war" help her? How might they hurt?

Emilia's relationship with Lord Hunsdon was typical of the day – known to everyone but overlooked. Although it benefits Emilia financially, how might the imbalanced power dynamic be a problem for her?

Chapter 4

Who has the most to lose during the forming of the sisterhood – the agreement to write plays in secret?

Chapter 5

What self-talk does Jane engage in that keeps her from accepting that Mary, Emilia, and Dansby might like her? How does her negative self-talk manifest in society today?

Chapter 6

What is your first impression of Will Shakespeare as presented in the story? What are his motivations and ambitions?

Chapter 8

What is your first impression of Robert Cecil? What are his motivations?

John Harwood is motivated by vengeance. Is his desire for retribution justified? Why or why not?

Chapter 9

Critics to this day debate whether the last soliloquy of *The Shrew* is meant to be submissive or sarcastic. There is no evidence either way of what the author meant to do. Based on what you know of the play and of Shakespeare's works, what is your opinion?

Chapter 11

Jane's atypical way of approaching the world gets her branded as odd at best and a witch at worst. How are such people treated by our modern society? Has our society improved in this area?

Chapter 12

How would you characterize Will's conflict over claiming the plays as his own and maintaining a lie? What rationale might he use to accept his behavior?

Chapter 14

How would you characterize the relationship between Emilia and Alfonso?

Historically, when the riot and plague shut down the London Theater, the Pembroke's restarted a theater company that traveled until the plague abated. We don't know whether this was Mary's idea or her husbands. What is your guess?

Chapter 15

Lord Hunsdon cuts off Emilia when she gets pregnant, ostensibly with his child, because he has all the power in the relationship. How does this kind of imbalanced power dynamic manifest in modern relationships?

The men in the story conspire to place the three women into a lose-lose situation. How does this same dynamic happen to women even in our modern society? In what ways does it manifest?

Chapter 16

Having experienced a pandemic in 2020, how did reading about the plague and an empty London impact you?

Chapter 18

Does Emilia seem happy with her new life with Alfonso? Why or why not?

How has learning to read and write changed Jane's perspective of the world?

Chapter 20

Do you think Emilia's final meeting with Hunsdon will let her move on in peace? Why or why not?

Does Jane come to believe that she is worthy of Dansby's affections? Why or why not?

By the last scene, has the marriage dynamic shifted between Mary and her husband? If so, how? If not, why?

Genre-Specific Questions

How does the historical setting play a part in the novel's plot?

Did you know anything about the historical figures that turn up in this book?

Was there a historical figure from that time period that you wanted to turn up in the plot?

What did you think about the romantic chemistry between characters?

What did you think about the portrayal of William Shakespeare, given his fame?

General Questions

What are your overall opinions of the book? Did you like it?

Did your opinion of the book change as you progressed through the story?

Which character did you like the best, and whose story did you find the most compelling?

What would you do if you were thrown into the world of this novel?

Which scene was the most memorable for you? What did you feel when reading this scene?

Did any themes or messages in the book change the way you look at the world, either of today or of the past?

Did you learn anything new while reading the book?

How did you feel about the ending? Do you think it was satisfying or did it leave you wanting more?

Were you able to read the book quickly or did it take you longer than expected? What do you think impacted that?

If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?

Questions About the Writing

Did you enjoy the writing in the book? What did you enjoy or dislike about it?

Are there any written sections of the book that have stuck with you?

Did you enjoy the dialogue scenes? Did the author write unique voices for each of the characters?

Overall, did any metaphors, symbols or allegories stand out to you in the story?

Questions About the Author

Did you know anything about the author before reading this book?

Is there anything in the author's life that you think has had an influence on the book?

Would you read anything by this author again after this book?