

SHAKESPEARE'S DARK LADY



Shakespeare's Dark Lady by John Hudson

Review by James Alexander:

Hed: Another Dark Lady rises from the Shadows

Dek: Emilia Bassano emerges as the favorite given the focus on race in recent years

To help reduce the tension of all these recent elections, I decided to finish reading both John Hudson's *Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Amelia Bassano Lanier the woman behind Shakespeare's plays?* and it's main source, David Lasocki's (with Roger Prior) book,

The Bassanos, as well as the A.L. Rowse edition of Emilia Bassano Lanier's (EBL) "Salve Deus".

Working backwards, the "Salve Deus" is fascinating historically for being the first published work of poetry by a woman, and a highly feminist one at that. The group of noble ladies she seems to have mixed with must also have been similarly-minded for EBL to think they would have appreciated her dedications to them and the work itself. However, the poetry is merely OK; as Rowse says, it's not doggerel, but not remotely Shakespearean either.

The dedication to the Countess of Suffolk, p.70 of the Rowse edition:

Yea, let those Ladies which do represent
All beauty, wisdom, zeale, and love,
Receive this jewell from Jehova sent,



This spotless Lambe, this perfit patient Dove :
Of whom faire Gabriel, Gods bright Mercury,
Brought downe a message from the Deitie.

A number of more mainstream Shakespeare experts now agree, for example, in *Reading Shakespeare's Mind* (Manchester University Press, 2017), Steve Sohmer writes, “If we could confirm that Emilia Bassano Lanier had mastered the virginals while in the household of the Countess of Kent — as privileged young women were likely to do, particularly a musician’s daughter — I imagine some would consider Emilia’s identity as the Dark Lady settled. I already do.”

Hudson though takes the circumstantial evidence and goes mad. EBL was undoubtedly in the thick of things, and must have known the truth, but she has zero documented links to the works other than [perhaps] being the object of some. She’s not unusual, of course, as no one has documented links either to the author or as the author of the works. And, most importantly, her published poetry just isn’t good enough – something Hudson just can’t seem to see. Embarrassingly.

It is helpful that Hudson can see the Stratfordian problem and thus endorses the SAQ, but his scholarship is poor. Footnotes are very sparse despite the desperate need to support or link to some of his more extravagant claims, such as that Marlowe was also EBL’s lover (which also ignores the many surmises that Marlowe was homosexual). Her relationship with the Bassano family, a family so well and carefully documented by musical historian Lasocki, is full of suggestive links to the canon: Italy, Judaism, music. Her upbringing from age 7 with Countess Susan Bertie certainly would have broadened her horizons enormously and perhaps also included a very good education. Her time as "paramour" to Roger Carey, Lord Hundson, would have obviously put her in the thick of state and theatrical affairs. The visit to the court of Denmark, to Berwick Castle, to Scotland, to the Queen, to the Revels –

all links carefully researched by Hudson. She certainly was there, and far closer to the genesis of the canon than most others, but we still need direct evidence. There is none, despite Hudson's wide reading indicated by his immense bibliography.

That she was a courtesan seems agreed, and only called a whore by Simon Forman when she turned down Forman's business. We might call her a high-quality prostitute these days. Such is life. She seemed to be quite selective in her clientele. So selective that both Forman and the author of the sonnets (if she was their subject) agreed she was "proud" and as she shows herself to be in "Salve Deus". Or was that "haughty", or did that mean merely status-conscious?

Of course, being accused of being "proud" as a woman means little in an overwhelmingly male world. You could just as easily say that EBL simply took herself seriously and demanded respect. Good for her. Her male cousins certainly did just that, as Lasocki relates, and they sometimes got into trouble for it too.

That EBL survived into her 70s tells us she must have been physically very careful indeed in her affairs given the health risks of her so-called prostitution. That she seems to have published her book and run a high-class school of some sort also indicates that she was not very reputationally damaged by her lifestyle. In fact, her reputation might have been enhanced. The publisher of her 1611 book may have (the dreadful "may have" — apologies!) hoped to cash in on her reputation, assuming she was the Dark Lady of those 1609 sonnets. But perhaps no one was much interested as neither book got a reprint.

She died "a pensioner" of someone or other according to the records. Good for her. Was her silence the ultimate thing she sold? Maybe.