



About
THE DARK LADY'S MASK
by Mary Sharratt

Poet, playwright, courtesan, mother, mentor, and Shakespeare's muse

London, 1593. Aemilia Bassano Lanier is beautiful and accomplished, but her societal conformity ends there. She frequently cross dresses to escape her loveless marriage and to gain freedoms only men enjoy—and then a chance encounter with a ragged, little known poet named Shakespeare changes everything.

Aemilia grabs at the chance to pursue her long held dream of writing. The two outsiders strike up a literary bargain: They leave plague-ridden London for Italy, where they begin secretly writing comedies together and where Will falls in love with the beautiful country—and with Aemilia, his Dark Lady. Their Italian idyll, though, cannot last and their collaborative affair comes to a devastating end. Will gains fame and fortune for their plays back in London and years later publishes the sonnets mocking his former muse.

Not one to stand by in humiliation, Aemilia takes up her own pen in her defense and in defense of all women.

The Dark Lady's Mask gives voice to a real Renaissance woman in every sense of the word.

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Discussion Questions

1. Aemilia Bassano Lanier was the first English woman to aspire to a career as a professional poet by actively seeking a circle of female patrons to support her. She praises these women in the dedicatory verses to her epic poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, a vindication of women couched in religious verse. Her elegiac poem “The Description of Cookham” might be the first country house poem in the English language. Had you ever heard of Aemilia Bassano Lanier before reading this novel? What do you think of her poetry and why do you think she has remained so obscure? What did you learn about women poets in Elizabethan and Jacobean England?
2. When Aemilia travels to Italy, she is astonished that the commedia dell’arte features not only female stage actresses (in England, the female parts are played by male actors) but also female playwrights, such as the accomplished and successful Isabella Andreini whose sparkling comedies feature strong and resourceful heroines. How does this reflect the position of women in Italy versus England during this time period? What do you think of the Venetian courtesan’s remark that England is a nation that hates women? What role does Aemilia’s Italian background play in her literary aspirations?
3. What do you think of Aemilia as a character? How was her life shaped by the choices her father was forced to make? And how did her sister Angela’s tragedy influence Aemilia’s later decisions?
4. Despite being educated by high-minded Puritans, Aemilia, as a very young woman, embarks on an affair with the wealthy, powerful Lord Hunsdon, a man old enough to be her grandfather. Do you see Aemilia, orphaned and without money yet highly educated, as a victim of circumstance, a pragmatist, or an ambitious opportunist? What other choices existed for her?
5. In the novel, Aemilia’s changing fortunes are mirrored in her relationships with three different men: her affair with Lord Hunsdon; her arranged marriage to Alfonse Lanier; and her passionate, star-crossed affair with Will Shakespeare. Which of these men ultimately loves her the most and who has most deeply betrayed her? Which man does she most deeply love and whom does she most betray?
6. Aemilia’s life is also profoundly shaped by her relationships with other women as mentors, patrons, and friends. Discuss what impact Anne Locke, Susan Bertie, and Margaret and Anne Clifford have on her life. How would have Aemilia’s life played out without the support of other women?
7. Masks are a recurring theme in the novel. What different masks does Aemilia wear in the course of the story? What masks do the other characters wear?
8. Female cross-dressing is another major theme in *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, as well as in Shakespeare’s comedies and the work of other dramatists of the period. The notorious cross-dressing Mary Frith was the real life inspiration for Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s comedy, *The Roaring Girl*. Spanish playwright Tirso de Molina’s 1615 play *Don Gil of the Green Breeches* features the cross-dressing Donna Juana who constantly switches gender identities as she pursues her absconding lover. What do you think explains this popular fascination with women masquerading as men? In taking on the guise of Emilio, is Aemilia ultimately liberated or self-alienated? How does this relate to our postmodern notions of gender identity?

Discussion Questions (cont.)

9. Aemilia is born in an era marked by religious warfare and intolerance, with Christians pitted against Jews and Muslims, and Protestants and Catholics against each other. When Aemilia finds her voice as a poet, she writes religious verse, the only genre considered acceptable for women in England at that time. The daughter of a Marrano, or secret Jew, she is raised by Puritans, and later befriended and supported by Margaret Clifford, a devout Anglican. Where do you think Aemilia's spiritual loyalties lie? What does she truly believe in? Or do you think the religious poetry is just one more mask?
10. The novel opens with Aemilia seeking the advice of astrologer Simon Forman. Her servants practice folk magic and one of them is later accused of witchcraft. Later Aemilia's beloved friend and patron Margaret Clifford reveals herself as an alchemist and prophet. Why do you think magic, divination, and visionary powers seemed so important, particularly to women in this time, even as the witch persecutions raged across Britain and Europe? Do you find it significant that the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* represent the first portrayal of a witches' coven in English literature? Why do you think the idea of women convening in secret to work magic seemed so terrifying to people in this era?
11. What do you think of this novel's portrayal of William Shakespeare—his character, his motivations, his sexuality, and his feelings and behavior toward women? How do you interpret the deep gulf between the spirited heroines of his early comedies versus the much weaker and more poorly developed heroines who appear in his great tragedies, such as *Hamlet*? What do you think of the Dark Lady mythos—do you think the historical Shakespeare actually had a bittersweet affair with a mysterious, unknown woman that cast a shadow on his later life and work?
12. As a historical figure, William Shakespeare remains a cipher to a large degree because, despite his prolific output as a poet and playwright, we have so few documented facts about his life and about him as a man. Some of the facts we do have seem unflattering: he hoarded grain during a famine, neglected his wife in his last will and testament, and his daughters, Susanna and Judith, were probably illiterate. How does his status as a literary icon, arguably the greatest and most enduring writer in the English language, affect the way we want to interpret his character? Why do you think there are so many theories and debates concerning Shakespeare and the authorship of the plays? Do you think that cultural icons like Shakespeare are fair game for historical novelists, or should Shakespeare be left alone?

About the Author

MARY SHARRATT is an American writer who has lived in the Pendle region of Lancashire, England, for the past seven years. The author of the critically acclaimed novels *The Daughters of the Witching Hill*, *Illuminations*, *Summit Avenue*, *The Real Minerva*, and *The Vanishing Point*, Sharratt is also the coeditor of the subversive fiction anthology *Bitch Lit*, a celebration of female antiheroes, strong women who break all the rules. To learn more, visit marysharratt.com.