

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The Mask of Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady': Fictional Representations of Aemilia Lanyer in the Twenty-First Century Historical Novel

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Kate: Lord Southampton?! Is he the Fair Youth?! Good goss!

Will: Some might think it be him, but the identity will always remain ambiguous.

And the other 28 I will send to Aemilia Lanyer.

Kate: Aemilia Lanyer? Daughter of the celebrated Venetian court musician? *She's* the Dark Lady?

Will: Again, I have left the matter open, but between you and me it's *definitely* her.

Bottom: As if anyone will give a tosslington about it either way.

Upstart Crow, Ep. 4 'Love is Not Love' (2014)

Both literary and 'popular' renderings of the Shakespeare life-story, so Douglas Lanier reminds us, 'construct scenarios that locate the genesis of Shakespeare's writing in fabricated detail of his personal experience, while never seriously challenging the extraordinary cultural authority of his work'.¹ Such scenarios are a typical feature of Ben Elton's irreverent BBC sitcom *Upstart Crow*, a show that wittily undermines the inclination to read Shakespeare's plays and poems as a reflection of the Bard's own personal affairs. Yet in spite of Bottom's dispassionate aside, readers certainly do seem to give a 'tosslington' over the identities of Shakespeare's twin muses. Renaissance poet and court musician Aemilia Lanyer (née Bassano) has been a key contender for the title

¹ Douglas Lanier, 'ShakespeareTM: myth and biographical fiction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 93-113 (p. 101).

of Shakespeare's 'dark lady' since her discovery by A.L. Rowse in 1973.² Rowse's identification of Lanyer as the real-life inspiration behind sonnets 127-154 – otherwise known as the 'dark lady' sequence – was granted some extra substance through his edition of *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* (1978), the first modern print edition of Lanyer's single known publication – *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* ('Hail, God, King of the Jews') (1611) – which Rowse prefaced with a 37-page introduction re-stating his claim for Lanyer's candidacy as Shakespeare's mysterious female muse. His identification was, however, based on a misread entry in the diary of the court astrologer Simon Forman (with whom Lanyer – according to Rowse's theory – also had an extramarital affair), but led Rowse to conclude that Lanyer's 'deeds' were as 'black' as her features, and that this part-Italian, part-Jewish 'cocotte' could be none other than Shakespeare's 'dark mistress'.³

Giving flesh-and-blood realness to Rowse's theory, the Aemilia Lanyer of *Upstart Crow* is a dark-haired, dark-eyed court musician, played by Spanish-Italian actress Monserrat Lombard; her coquettish nature confirmed through her inability to stay true to a single lover and her preference for the swaggering Kit Marlowe and his knack for 'a proper rhyme' over Will's conceited jests and half-rhymes. At no point are Lanyer's poetic abilities awarded mention, though neither does the episode in which she features ('Love is not Love', 2014) venture to entertain the more sensational proposal that Lanyer was the true mastermind behind Shakespeare's plays.⁴ Instead, the reputation for both artistic and social ambition for which Lanyer is often recognised is transplanted onto the fictional

² A. L. Rowse, 'Revealed At Last, Shakespeare's Dark Lady', *The Times* (29 Jan 1973), p. 12. Rowse expanded on these claims in his biography of Shakespeare, and in a new edition of the Sonnets entitled *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved*, both published in the same year. According to Rowse's conjecture, Lanyer's part-Italian, part-Jewish ancestry would have given her the obligatory dark skin, hair and eyes needed to match the mistress' physical appearance; she would have been sexually voracious, adept at the virginals, and 'a good hater, à l'italienne'. See Rowse, 'Introduction', *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady: 'Salve Deus Rex Judeorum' by Emilia Lanyer* (London: Cape, 1976), p. 21.

³ Ibid., p. 6. Stanley Wells first noted that Rowse's reading of Forman's statement that 'she was very brown in youth'; a misreading of 'she was very brave', meaning handsome. See Stanley Wells, 'Letter to the Editor', *Times Literary Supplement* (11 May 1973), p. 528. For a more thorough debunking of Rowse's reading, see David Bevington, 'A. L. Rowse's Dark Lady' in *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, ed. by Marshall Grossman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), pp. 10-28. The term 'cocotte' appears in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Problems Solved. A Modern Edition, with Prose Versions, Introduction, and Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. xxxvi.

⁴ The proposal was made in John Hudson, *Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Amelia Bassano Lanier: The Woman Behind Shakespeare's Plays?* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2014) and various other related publications. See also his 'Amelia Bassano Lanier: A New Paradigm', *The Oxfordian*, 12 (2009), 65-82, as well as Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, 'New Light on the Dark Lady', *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, 22 September (2000); Martin Green, 'Emilia Lanier IS the Dark Lady', *English Studies*, 87.5 (2006), 544-76.

Kate: a put-upon servant-girl in the Bard's London home, whose creative gifts are ill-suited to the times and consistently dashed by her plummy proprietor.

As Aemilia Lanyer continues to attract interest from across various domains, we would do well to remember Kate Chedgzoy's recognition of a disparity between Lanyer's 'vigorously articulated desire to be remembered as a poet' and the desire within more 'popular' forms and genres – including television drama and the novel – only to confirm or disprove her identity as Shakespeare's dark muse.⁵ Lanyer was the first Englishwoman to print her verse with the explicit aim of obtaining patronage, and her single volume of poems, *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* (1611), represents the work of England's first, professional female poet. Her work has gained particular interest for its religiously-inspired defence of women, as well as its insights into Renaissance court patronage, and the frequent presence of excerpts from *Salve Deus* in early modern literary anthologies has helped reassess a period in English literature often defined by a lack of inclusivity toward women. Yet Lanyer's achievements are frequently eclipsed by Rowse's contentious theory which, as Katherine Duncan-Jones has shown, seems to have been inspired by two ideological motives:

The first is a post-Romantic determination to... attach [*Shakespeare's Sonnets*] to that very courtly love tradition which... Shakespeare was explicitly rejecting and debunking. Once identified, Shakespeare's *femme fatale* could supposedly join the ranks of other such ladies, from Petrarch's Laura to Keats's Fanny Brawne... and as a consequence Shakespeare, as a love poet, could be comfortably assimilated into a great European tradition... The second, and possibly most powerful, driving force behind the quest for 'the Lady' has been its power of *suggestio falsi*. The foregrounding of 'the Lady' strongly implies that the predominant thrust of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* is heterosexual. Devotees of an idealized, domesticated, image of Shakespeare the man may be a little uncomfortable at a suspicion of adultery, but this is nothing like so alarming as a suspicion of pederasty.⁶

From this interpretation, the drift towards identifying the 'dark lady' as an English-born woman of Italian-Jewish ancestry helps to confirm the more comfortable image of Shakespeare as the heterosexual proto-Romantic poet, while also rousing another

⁵ Kate Chedgzoy, 'Remembering Aemilia Lanyer', *Journal of the Northern Renaissance*, 2 (2010), pp. 1-25 (p. 23).

⁶ Katherine Duncan-Jones, 'Introduction' to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: Arden, 1997), pp. 49-50.

‘alarming suspicion’ over the ethnicity of Shakespeare’s female muse.⁷ As Chedgzoy maintains, ‘the work of recollecting [Lanyer], and meditating on how she came to be forgotten, should provoke us to consider not merely the fact of an individual woman writer’s inclusion in or exclusion from the canon, but also the processes by which canons get constructed, and writers are remembered or forgotten’.⁸ Ironical then, that despite Lanyer’s own concerted efforts to be ‘remembered’ in her poetry, the label of Shakespeare’s ‘dark mistress’ has granted her something that history failed to provide: a direct and active role in the English canon.

The tendency to depict Lanyer in the shadow of her canonical male contemporary is also part of a wider trend within modern popular fiction concerning Renaissance female authors.⁹ The historical novel has persisted as ‘one of the major forms of women’s reading and writing’,¹⁰ and continues to dominate the best-seller list, and some of the most insightful and visible reflections on Lanyer’s life and works arrive in works of popular fiction written both by and for women. The reason why Lanyer has become such a prominent subject of interest for female fiction authors of the twenty-first century may be attributable to the boom in the historical fiction and other related genres (such as historical romance), in addition to the cultural cachet of (bio)fictional works inspired by Shakespeare’s life and works, a particularly lucrative industry in the years surrounding the 400-year anniversary of Shakespeare’s death in 2016. As well as earning the dubious title of Shakespeare’s ‘dark mistress’, Lanyer is also – as mentioned above – commonly hailed as England’s first professional female poet. Her attractiveness to female authors today may therefore appear self-evident. Yet Lanyer also offers a particularly rich and insightful model for examining the intersections not only between fiction and history, but also the role of the female author: her sole publication – *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, a female-centred version of the Passion – also provides a deeply self-conscious reminder of history’s narratological, and often masculine, bias. By granting women – not only historical, but also mythological, biblical and contemporary – a central place in the traditions of Western Christianity, *Salve Deus* illustrates yet another point of

⁷ The seminal work on this subject is Margreta de Grazia’s ‘The Scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 46 (1994), 35-49.

⁸ Chedgzoy, p. 23.

⁹ Naomi J. Miller, ‘Fictionalizing Shakespeare’s Sisters: Mary Sidney Herbert’, *Early Modern Women* 12.2 (2018), 117-26.

¹⁰ Alison Light, “‘Young Bess’: Historical Novels and Growing Up”, *Feminist Review* 33.1 (1989), 57-71 (p. 60). See also the introductions to Diana Wallace’s *The Woman’s Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900-2000* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Katherine Cooper and Emma Short (eds.), *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2009).

correspondence with the historical novelists of recent decades, whose works have sought to rewrite or reject historical narratives and rehabilitate what more ‘traditional’ forms of history tend to excise. To take one example, Lanyer’s dedicatory epistle to *Salve Deus* (‘To the Vertuous Reader’) asks readers to consider the ‘favourable and best interpretations’ of famous biblical women – including the ‘noble Deborah, Judge and Prophetesse of Israel’, the apocryphal ‘chast Susanna’ and ‘infinite others’, which they should consult over ‘wrong constructions’ of female virtue and fame (emphasis added).¹¹ Lanyer’s acts of what might be defined as ‘recovering and re-symbolising the feminine’¹² thus suggest strongly that women might start to undo the injury caused by the male writers of history, but also reflect tellingly on the ways that she herself has been constructed through acts of historical and fictional mediation, particularly since her discovery in the 1970s.

In what follows, I aim to discuss how *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* can allow us to think more deeply about the ways in which the historical Aemilia Lanyer has been fashioned and remembered through historical fiction. Focusing on a selection of novels published in the last decade (namely, Alexa Schnee, *Shakespeare’s Lady* (2012), Grace Tiffany’s *Paint: A Novel of Shakespeare’s Dark Lady* (2013), Sally O’Reilly’s *Dark Aemilia* (2015), Mary Sharratt’s *The Dark Lady’s Mask* (2016), Elizabeth Fremantle’s *The Girl in the Glass Tower* (2016) and Charlene Ball’s *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer* (2017)),¹³ I consider the extent to which, and to what ends, authors of contemporary historical fiction have sought to revise, re-create, challenge or transform the myths associated with Lanyer’s name and biography. Although this article also recognises that all versions of Aemilia Bassano Lanyer – be they literary or historical – are fabricated to a certain degree, I refer to the historical person and author as ‘Lanyer’ and to her fictional counterparts as ‘Aemilia.’

¹¹ All references from *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* are taken from *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. by Susanne Woods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹² Wallace, p. 184. For more on this see Lewalski, ‘Seizing Discourses and Reinventing Genres’ in Grossman (ed.), pp 49-59.

¹³ *The Heavens* by Sandra Newman (2020) is the most up to date example, but was published while this article was under review. Other books published in the last two decades to feature Lanyer as a title character, but which I have not included here, include Michael Baldwin, *Dark Lady* (1999); Jinny Webber, *Dark Venus* (2013), Steve Weitzenkorn, *Shakespeare’s Conspirator: The Woman, The Writer, The Clues* (2015), Richard Chandler, *Shakespeare and the Dark Lady* (2019) and Ian Wilson, *Shakespeare’s Dark Lady* <<http://www.shakespearesdarklady.com>>.

Before the turn of the century, Aemilia Lanyer usually appeared as a minor character in works of historical fiction, be she the ‘dark, predatory and sensationally attractive’ woman referred to in Judith Cook’s *Blood on the Borders: The Casebook of Simon Forman* (1999), or the ‘swarthy and untruthful’ Italian girl in Stephanie Cowell’s *The Players: A Novel of Young Shakespeare* (1997).¹⁴ Presenting Lanyer primarily as a romantic love-interest, these works show little sense of the social and literary ambition stressed so vigorously and consistently in Lanyer’s verse, preferring her reputation instead as the promiscuous temptress fashioned by Rowse. Lanyer furnishes the backdrop of several modern Shakespeare fictions, including Christopher Rush’s *Will* (2007) (in which she is the ‘Jewish-Italian whore’) and *The Shakespeare Diaries: A Fictional Autobiography* (2007) by John Peter Wearing, amongst many more,¹⁵ but only in the last ten years has Lanyer become the central subject of works by female authors. Grace Tiffany’s *Paint: A Novel of Shakespeare’s Dark Lady* (2013), to offer one example, follows the success of her debut novel, *My Father Had A Daughter: Judith Shakespeare’s Tale* (2004), and the highly-acclaimed *Will*, published in 2005; *Paint* thus constitutes a third instalment in Tiffany’s fictional Shakespeare series, and a strong testament to Lanyer’s growing visibility as part of the Shakespeare story.

Like *Paint*, the novels examined here all seem to have emerged as part of the vast and growing field of Shakespeare ‘biofiction’. Most novels of this type share a common goal of interrogating the intersections between ‘the life’ and ‘the works’, using fictional techniques in order to settle a number of scholarly and commonplace queries and assertions surrounding Shakespeare’s personal life, particularly his sexuality and the authorship debate.¹⁶ While there have been several efforts within fiction to de-romanticise Shakespeare’s reputation as the proto-Romantic ‘lover-poet’, modern historical fiction

¹⁴ Judith Cook, *Blood on the Borders: The Casebook of Dr Simon Forman* (Tuckwell Press Ltd, 2003), p. 41; Stephanie Cowell, *The Players: A Novel of Young Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997), p. 200.

¹⁵ Some other examples include Peter W. Hassinger’s *Shakespeare’s Daughter* (2004), S. Lynn Scott, *Elizabeth, William... and Me* (2017) and the more recent *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: The Dark Lady Reflections* (2016) by Stuart Diamond.

¹⁶ For more in this area, see Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Martha Tuck Rozett, *Constructing a World: Shakespeare’s England and the New Historical Fiction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003); Maurice J. O. Sullivan, Jr. (ed.), *Shakespeare’s Other Lives: An Anthology of Fictional Depictions of the Bard* (London: McFarland, 2005); Graham Holderness, *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (London: Continuum, 2001); Paul Franssen, *Shakespeare’s Literary Lives: The Author as Character in Fiction and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Andrew James Hartley (ed.) *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Katherine West Scheil, *Imagining Shakespeare’s Wife: The Afterlife of Anne Hathaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

shows a recurrent tendency to cast Shakespeare in one or more of his dramatic roles, and thus portray his real-life love-affairs as the stimulus for some of his most passionate and heartfelt literary outpourings.¹⁷ Interestingly, more recent Shakespeare fictionalisations have shown a tendency to explore and confirm the identity of Shakespeare's Mistress in heterosexual – and rarely interracial – terms; a crucial indication, therefore, of the 'specifiable ideological implications' of the choices made by authors choosing to work with history.¹⁸ While implying a correlation between the depiction of Shakespeare's women with 'current ideas about women, sexuality and marriage', these representations are often conservative in their aims.¹⁹ The nature of these aims is often suggested by the novels' cover images: typically depicting a dark-haired woman in Renaissance dress with her head just out of the frame (**Fig. 1**), or with her face partially obscured (as in **Fig. 2.**), it becomes the reader's task to uncover the name and identity of the lady in question. Recalling the imagery of several other works of historical romance and Shakespeare biofiction,²⁰ these works thus advertise to their readers a colourful costume drama full of intrigue and scandal with a clear sexual component. The ways in which novels of the last decade have sought to incorporate Lanyer into this familiar textual and visual apparatus thus offer a crucial indication of how she has been mediated by and assimilated into the popular domain; confirmation too of her continuing erotic appeal.

¹⁷ Beyond the plays, Shakespeare's most 'autobiographical' poems – the Sonnets – have become a prominent feature of Shakespeare biofiction, a phenomenon originating in Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889) and Anthony Burgess' 1964 novel, *Nothing Like The Sun*, as well as George Bernard Shaw's 1910 National Theatre playlet, *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*. Where Wilde and Burgess both use fiction to explore the homoerotic potentials of the Bard's male muse, the role of the 'dark lady', first explored in Shaw's play, came to prominence in fiction only in the late-twentieth century.

¹⁸ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 69. See also Lanier, 'ShakespeareTM', pp. 101-3.

¹⁹ See Scheil, *Imagining Shakespeare's Wife*, p. 139; Lanier, 'ShakespeareTM', p. 103.

²⁰ Such as Warwick Collins' *The Sonnets*, 2009, or the novels in Victoria Lamb's 'Lucy Morgan' Series, to name but a few. Although there are no known images of Aemilia Lanyer, a miniature portrait of an 'Unknown Lady' (c. 1593) by Nicholas Hilliard is often believed to be her likeness.

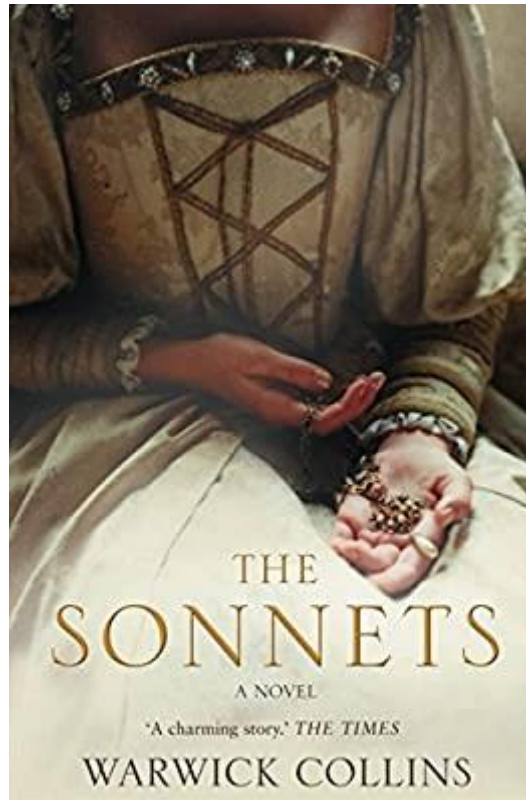


Fig. 1: Cover image to Warwick Collins, *The Sonnets*. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd. © Warwick Collins 2008. This image is not covered by the terms of the Creative Commons licence of this publication. For permission to reuse, please contact the rights holder.

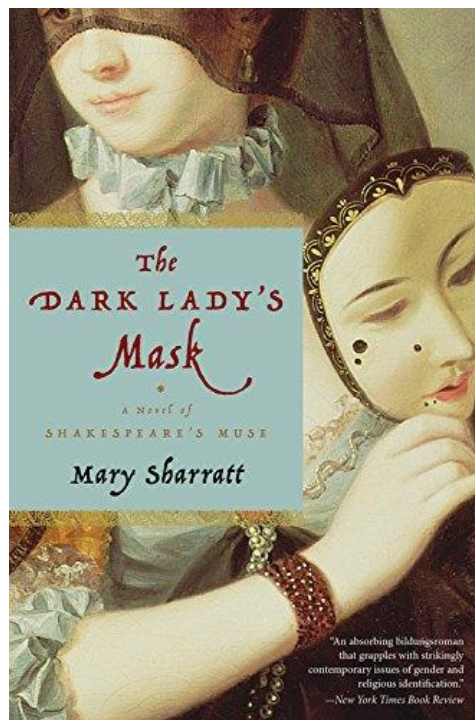


Fig. 2: Cover image to Mary Sharratt, *The Dark Lady's Mask*. Reproduced with permission (<https://marysharratt.com/main/books/the-dark-ladys-mask/>). This image is not covered by the terms of the Creative Commons licence of this publication. For permission to reuse, please contact the rights holder.

While Rowse cannot be condemned for making Lanyer more visible and her poetry more accessible than it was before his 1978 edition of *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*, the Lanyer fictions published within the last ten years illustrate the extent to which the 'dark lady' moniker has affixed itself to the name of Aemilia Lanyer within the public consciousness. From Alexa Schnee's tender tale of love and diverging loyalties in *Shakespeare's Lady* (2012), to Charlene Ball's more virulent portrayal in *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer* (2017), Lanyer's alleged love-affair with Shakespeare acts as a narrative centrepiece. Out of the six examples of Lanyer fiction to have emerged over the last twenty years, *The Girl in the Glass Tower* (2016) by British novelist Elizabeth Fremantle is the first and only attempt to forgo Rowse's tag and sidestep all suggestions of the 'dark lady' theory. Published in the 400-year anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and situating the novel's central events in the year 1616, Fremantle takes the ironic step of demoting the Bard's role in the Lanyer story, consigning his cultural pre-eminence to a playful footnote:

No one knew of him back then but everyone believed he would make something of himself... His death is a great loss to that world but it is a world she is no longer a part of.²¹

Evoking the titles of several contemporary bestsellers with strong female leads, *The Girl in the Glass Tower* seems directed towards the more 'popular' end of the market, blending genres in order to redeem or to wholly reinvent the lives of the silent, invisible and marginalised, 'giving femininity, which usually has a walk-on part in the official history of our times, the lead role in the national drama'.²² The novel utilises the Byattian metafictional trope of the lost manuscript (in this case, a whole cache of diaries, letters and a play by Lady Arbella Stuart, who, due to her claim to the English throne, was kept out of the public eye and died a prisoner in the Tower of London in 1615) to present readers with a 'true' version of events from a female perspective. In Fremantle's story, the lives of Stuart and 'Ami' (as she is named in this account) sit 'side by side',²³ illustrating that there is always more than one version of the past, and that Lanyer's is in fact just one of several women's stories that history has mistold. Fremantle is open about her take on English history, and notes in her Afterword that 'the passages in which [Lanyer] helps William Seymour' (the man whom Stuart married in 1610 in order to strengthen her royal claim) take their flight from the Tower are 'entirely imagined'.²⁴

²¹ Elizabeth Fremantle, *The Girl in the Glass Tower* (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 107.

²² Light, p. 68.

²³ Ibid, p. 453.

²⁴ Fremantle, *The Girl in the Glass Tower*, p. 453.

Fremantle's approach to historical reinvention reflects the recent observation that historical settings may serve as mere 'pretexts' for the 'imagination to rove', but that they also offer subversive potential, allowing authors and readers to engage in a 'political protest against the ways in which women have been excluded from history'.²⁵ As Katherine West Scheil also notes in her work on Anne Hathaway's fictional afterlives, the depiction of marginalised historical women's lives must inevitably employ 'fictional techniques to fill in the gaps'.²⁶ Unlike the more conventional forms of biography and historiography, however, modern historical fiction is often unashamedly aware of its fictional status, deploying a range of experimental, often metafictional, techniques to draw attention the way that history itself is narrated – or what Hayden White terms 'emplotted' – so as to 'make a "story" out of what would otherwise be only a "chronicle"'.²⁷ To perform these interrogations, historical fiction frequently engages a cross-fertilization with other literary genres, including romance, fantasy, crime and paranormal fiction, in order to proffer 'counter-factual' alternatives to the past that, in Naomi Jacobs' words, bespeak 'a more legitimate truth'. As Jacobs explains,

[s]keptical about historical or biographical objectivity and generally distrustful of facts, all [such genres] make large claims for fiction, both as a way of approaching truth and as an endeavour worthy in itself... The resulting works retain both the fascinations of fiction and the fascinations of biography.²⁸

Though writing real historical characters such as Lanyer into elaborate escape plots or stories of witchcraft and murder may stretch the bounds of plausibility, these are just some of several techniques used by authors of historical fiction to speculate in more inventive ways about past people's lives. The Aemilia Lanyer stories of the twenty-first century are no exception in their ability to draw on the vast resources of fiction as a means of addressing the silences and supposed misconceptions in her story.

Separating the 'facts' from the myths, however, becomes a particularly complex endeavour in the case of Lanyer, since most of what we know about her comes from the diaries and casebooks of the court physician and astrologer, Simon Forman (1552-1611), whom Lanyer visited on several occasions in 1597 for astrological predictions concerning

²⁵ Wallace, p. 20.

²⁶ Scheil, p. 91.

²⁷ Hayden White, 'The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory', *History and Theory* 23.1 (1984), 1-33 (p. 18). See also Rozett, p 13.

²⁸ Naomi Jacobs, *The Character of Truth: Historical Figures in Contemporary Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 29.

her fertility and her husband's request for preferment. Forman's diaries – partial as they are – were Rowse's primary source, though a number of errors in Rowse's reading of them have since been identified.²⁹ We do, however, learn much from Forman that can be confirmed: that Lanyer's father, Baptiste Bassano (d. 1576), was a musician of Venetian, possibly exiled Jewish, descent, and was employed as a flautist in the court of Elizabeth I; that Lanyer's parents died when she was young, and that her mother, Margaret Johnson (d. 1587) and father were never officially married.³⁰ We also learn that before her own marriage in 1592, Lanyer was for a time official mistress to the Queen's first cousin, Henry Carey, 1st Baron Hunsdon, then Lord Chamberlain (1526-1596) – who was forty-five years her senior – and that she was forced into marriage to her cousin, the musician Alphonso Lanyer (d.1613), after falling pregnant with a child whom she named Henry; his name suggesting that Hunsdon was the child's biological father. In 1598, Lanyer gave birth to a daughter, Odillya ('a rather stuck-up name', according to Rowse),³¹ who died when she was ten months old. That Forman's diaries also reveal his own sexual interest in Lanyer gave occasion for Rowse to suggest that the two were also lovers, though Forman records in one entry that he 'never obteyned his purpose' and that after calling her a 'hore' she 'delt evill with him after'.³² Little more is recorded of Lanyer until the publication of *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* in 1611 by Valentine Simmes, though Lanyer may have remained in contact with Forman until his death in the same year. Records beyond Forman's diaries show that Lanyer was widowed in 1613, and that she experienced enormous financial hardship as a result. Four years after the death of her husband, Lanyer went on to establish a school in St. Giles-in-the-Fields,³³ though this was also stymied by legal challenges. She died in Clerkenwell in 1645 at the respectable age of 76.

Such are the known facts about Aemilia Lanyer: almost everything else has been gleaned from her verse, allowing scholars to speculate on other key aspects of her life, for which Lanyer's sole publication – *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* – is the single primary source. The poem is a long meditation on the death and resurrection of Christ, with Lanyer's principal

²⁹ Bevington, pp. 10-28.

³⁰ It has been strongly argued that Lanyer came from a family of converted Jews (known as 'Marranos'). Lanyer's racial background has also been discussed at length in Barbara Bowen, 'Aemilia Lanyer and the Invention of White Womanhood', in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, ed. by Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 274-303.

³¹ Rowse, *Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*, p. 15.

³² Susanne Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xxiii. For a survey of Forman's notes on Lanyer, see Woods, ed. *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, pp. xv-xxiv.

³³ The details of Lanyer's life are addressed in detail in Woods (ed.), pp. xv-xli.

patron, Margaret Clifford (née Russell), Countess of Cumberland (1560-1616) as central witness to the event. The nature of Lanyer's relationship with the Countess is suggested by a concluding country-house poem, 'A Description of Cooke-ham' in which Lanyer rebuilds her memories of the Cumberland estate as a place of female community and learning untarnished by male presence.³⁴ The volume is framed by a number of dedicatory poems to several influential women, including Queen Anne of Denmark, Princess Elizabeth and Lady Arbella Stuart, as well as the Countesses of Pembroke, Bedford, Cumberland, Suffolk, Dorset and Kent. The volume is prefaced with prose addresses 'To all vertuous Ladies in generall' and 'To the Vertuous Reader', and Lanyer concludes her account of the Passion with a description of the poem's inception via a dream.³⁵ Lanyer's prophetic stance underscores the poem's biblical foundations, and brings her into line with Pilate's wife, the central female spokesperson in *Salve Deus*, and several other female poets of the time, including Elizabeth Melville (c.1578-1640) and Rachel Speght (b. 1597), whose verse also appeals to the religious and gendered authority of the dream.³⁶

Despite the necessary advantages of using Lanyer's fictional writings as 'surrogates for documentary evidence',³⁷ there are also some basic caveats to conflating aspects of the author's life with the works. As Chedgzoy notes, 'a fascination with certain aspects of [Lanyer's] life may overdetermine critical agendas, leading to an overly confessional and personalized reading of texts whose literary aspirations were not in fact determined by an autobiographical impulse'.³⁸ In particular, the 'autobiographical' approach to Lanyer's verse has been met with doubt over how and to what extent Lanyer was in touch with the patrons with whom she claims to have a close relationship. Rather than presenting the 'community of good women' defined by Barbara Lewalski,³⁹ *Salve Deus* has been said to show an inadvertent disregard for court factionalism, and some ill-judged privileging of key patrons over others; measures that were met with little to no reward.⁴⁰ The questions surrounding Lanyer's several bids for female patronage have also led to questions over her choice of genre: her use of the dream vision in her dedication to Mary

³⁴ Ibid., p. xxxix.

³⁵ Lanyer, 'To the Doubtful Reader', p. 139.

³⁶ Elizabeth Melville, *Ane Godlie Dreame* (1604); Rachel Speght, *Mortalities Memorandum with a Dreame Prefixed* (1621).

³⁷ Chedgzoy, p. 21.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, 'Of God and Good Women: The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer' in *Silent but for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. by Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 203-24.

⁴⁰ See especially Su Fang Ng, 'Aemilia Lanyer and the Politics of Praise', *ELH* 67.2 (2000), 433-451.

Sidney, Countess of Pembroke (1561-1621), and the distinctive country-house poem to the Countess of Cumberland ('A Description of Cooke-ham') are not only indiscreet, but also illuminate the fragility of female patronage relations, presenting not a reality, but a vision of female community grounded on aspirations that it would appear were left wanting in the material world.⁴¹

These are just some of the setbacks to reading *Salve Deus* as autobiography, and Lanyer's self-conscious handling of biblical history across an array of literary genres also draws attention to the text's status as a work of fiction: the dream is one of several measures adopted by Lanyer in order to illustrate the subjective nature of her narrative and to thus call the divisions between forms of history, fiction and biblical writing into question. This is also where *Salve Deus* demonstrates some of its closest affinity with the work of modern historical fiction, and for which Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' is particularly instructive. As Hutcheon explains,

Historiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and lies of the historical records... certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error.⁴²

The self-consciousness of historical fiction is also often revealed in its paratextual materials. As Alexa Schnee writes in her Author's Note to *Shakespeare's Lady* (2012), 'We know that [Lanyer] was a favourite of Queen Elizabeth. No one seems to know why she disappeared from the scene at court, so I have created my own reasons for her departure'.⁴³ Mary Sharratt (*The Dark Lady's Mask*) also uses the space of the Historical Afterword to explain how she has taken 'liberties with dates and chronology', and notes the creative and narrative advantages offered by aligning the death of Odillya with that of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet.⁴⁴

The dangers of making too direct a connection between the strategies of modern female novelists and Lanyer are obvious, and yet, much like the historical novels of recent decades, *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum* has been deemed a self-conscious 'revision or

⁴¹ Colleen Shea, 'Literary Authority as Cultural Criticism in Aemilia Lanyer's *The Authors Dreame*', *English Literary Renaissance* 32.3 (2002), 386-407.

⁴² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 114.

⁴³ Alexa Schnee, *Shakespeare's Lady* (New York: Guideposts, 2012), p. 327.

⁴⁴ Mary Sharratt, *The Dark Lady's Mask* (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2016), p. 395.

reconstruction of the familiar'.⁴⁵ Religious verse was one of the only feasible forms available for women writers to publish their work,⁴⁶ but Lanyer takes the form to its limit by reframing the Old and New Testament narratives and presenting them from an unambiguously female standpoint. Alongside Lanyer's revisions to the Gospel narratives, her 'gendering' of several other literary tropes and genres – including patronage poem, dream vision and country-house poem – thus contributes to a wider effort to reconfigure and re-present history as a whole in distinctly feminine terms. The female-centric nature of *Salve Deus* is confirmed by her decision to dedicate her verse almost exclusively to female patrons and by the title page's list of contents:

- 1 The Passion of Christ.
- 2 Eves Apologie in defence of Women.
- 3 The Teares of the Daughters of Jerusalem.
- 4 The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie.

Though Lanyer does not overturn the Gospel narratives, she foregrounds the role of exegesis, reminding her audience within her preface of the acts performed by women within Christian history as a whole, which the authors and contemporary interpreters of the Passion have elected to obscure or forget:

As also in respect it pleased our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, without the assistance of man, beeing free from originall and all other sinnes, from the time of his conception, till the houre of his death, to be begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman; and that he healed woman, pardoned women, comforted women... and also in the last houre of his death, tooke care to dispose of a woman... Many other examples I could alleadge of divers faithfull and virtuous women, who have in all ages, not onely beene Confessors, but also indured most cruel martyrdom for their faith in Jesus Christ. All which is sufficient to inforce all good Christians and honourable minded men to speake reverently of our sexe, and especially of all virtuous and good women. ('To the Vertuous Reader', ll. 40-66)

The section labelled 'Eves Apologie in defence of Women' offers another powerful vindication of the moral and spiritual superiority of women, in which Lanyer proposes that the nature of Eve's fault has been subject to gross misinterpretation. Voiced by Pilate's wife (a figure mentioned only in Matthew 27:19), the 'Apologie' calls on the

⁴⁵ Grossman, p. 129.

⁴⁶ Lewalski, 'Re-writing Patriarchy', p. 98.

evidence of biology and moral reasoning to cut through the masculine assumptions underlying the Western religious tradition with the aim of redeeming womankind from the shameful burden of original sin:

Then let us have our Libertie againe,
And challendge to your selves no Sov'raintie;
You came not in the world without our paine,
Make that a barre against your crueltie;
Your fault beeing greater, why should you disdain
Our beeing your equals, free from tyranny? (*Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*, ll. 825-30)

Salve Deus continues to uphold its proto-feminist position in the paratextual materials, in which Lanyer alludes to exemplary good women in order to support her defence of women's moral, spiritual and intellectual capabilities. As noted above, the prose preface addressed 'To the Vertuous Reader' alludes to the authorities of the Old Testament women Deborah, Judith, Esther and Susanna (ll. 1465-1544), figures on whom Lanyer will again call in her dedication to her principal patron The Countess of Cumberland, and in the Passion story itself. The religious material is also complemented by a roll-call of famously-maligned women from the Greek and Roman classics, as well as medieval English history, including Helen of Troy, Lucrece, the Scythian women, Matilda (wife of King John), Rosamund (mistress of King Henry II), and the 'blacke Egyptian' Cleopatra (l. 1431).⁴⁷ 'Eves Apologie' has thus been described as a 'synecdoche' for Lanyer's feminist logic, with 'one challenge to the way in which women's place in history is recorded... nested inside another'.⁴⁸ Deborah, Judith and the Queen of Sheba are also included in a list of biblical heroines 'whose glorious actions did appeare so bright, / That powrefull men by them were overthrowne' (ll. 1466-7); Lanyer here draws overt attention to the roles played by women in Western religious history. Stretching across all of history, from Eve to the present day, *Salve Deus* thus draws direct and repeated attention to an

⁴⁷ Though some scholars have experienced some difficulty with this inclusion, the poem does not redeem Cleopatra as readers might hope. Instead, Lanyer attributes her infamy to her 'outward beuty' (see ll. 213-24), which she failed to use wisely. Later in the poem, Lanyer returns to Cleopatra in a direct address to the Countess of Cumberland, weighing the former's love for Mark Anthony against the Countess's love of Christ. Although the poem confirms the difficulties of detaching the old stereotype of the 'wicked woman' from the historical persona, by balancing the Countess's chaste and divine love against the wounding fickleness, infidelity and neglect committed by the 'blacke Egyptian' (l. 1431), it also strives to fashion a new and inclusive model of female virtue from such examples.

⁴⁸ Chedgzoy, p. 11.

all-pervasive and erroneous practice of commending male achievement via the explicit opprobrium of women.

Though it is tricky to assume that Lanyer's strategies in *Salve Deus* directly anticipate those employed by writers of postmodern historical fiction, it is nevertheless rewarding to conceive of *Salve Deus* as another 'synecdoche' or metanarrative for the practices engaged by modern historical novelists in their rehabilitation of the female figure within history. As has been mentioned before, contemporary historical fiction by women can offer more enabling conceptions of the past than conventional historiography. The historical novel as a whole allows authors to reinvent the lives of the silent and marginalised, 'those left out of traditional histories written by the (male) victors'.⁴⁹ That so many twenty-first century female novelists have chosen to give a new voice to Lanyer illustrates at one level the 'fantasy of a female Shakespeare' first proposed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, as well as what Chedgzoy identifies as 'the anxieties about difference that haunt canonical Renaissance literature'.⁵⁰ Although Woolf was not aware of Lanyer's verse, both Lanyer and contemporary writers echo Woolf's claim in *A Room of One's Own* that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers'.⁵¹ In the case of Lanyer, *Salve Deus* and its supporting materials descend down a distinctly female lineage; beginning with addresses to Queen Anne and her daughter Elizabeth, Lanyer pays tribute to Arbella Stuart and several noted Countesses (including the poet and translator Mary Sidney), and concludes with 'A Description of Cooke-ham'; a 200-line paean to Margaret Clifford, Countess of Cumberland, and her daughter Anne, which highlights the women's attempts to reclaim their rightful inheritance the Cookham estate. More specific to novels centred around the historical figure of Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus* has been said to offer one of the first 'witnesses to a self-conscious women's literary tradition in English',⁵² positioning Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, as Lanyer's poetic forbear and Lanyer herself as the principal architect of a female literary canon. Lanyer's vision of a matrilineal literary tradition achieves a degree of fulfilment through the proliferation of stories by women writers of the twenty-first century, not merely as a commercial venture, but also as a meaningful way to inaugurate their own literary careers.⁵³ The decision to focus on a female contemporary of Shakespeare is therefore a

⁴⁹ Wallace, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Chedgzoy, p. 22.

⁵¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Anna Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 73.

⁵² See Gillian Wright, *Producing Women's Poetry, 1600–1730: Text and Paratext, Manuscript and Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 240.

⁵³ Both Sally O'Reilly (*Dark Aemilia*, 2014) and Alexa Schnee (*Shakespeare's Lady*, 2012) wrote their books while graduate students. O'Reilly's sole publication before *Dark Aemilia* was also published under

clear indication of the basic limitations of the Bard's 'touchstone' status, particularly for female novelists wishing to carve their own literary identity.⁵⁴ The 'fantasy of a female Shakespeare' is also realised in the ways that at least four of the novels take up the suggestion made by John Hudson that Lanyer was the mastermind behind several, if not all, of Shakespeare's plays. Lanyer's own authorial status is therefore of paramount importance to the novels' articulation of a female speaking voice or subjective position, allowing Lanyer to engineer her own story. Nonetheless, despite the many rewards offered by Lanyer's story, in their adoption of the 'dark lady' moniker, several of these novels also realise historical fiction's tendency to 'reinforce popular myths' about historical figures, even as it may hope to 'intervene in these misrepresentations'.⁵⁵ As demonstrated above, the large majority of these fictionalisations draw extensively from Rowse's depiction of Lanyer as the seductive *femme fatale* of the 'dark lady' sequence, re-inscribing what much Lanyer scholarship has sought to challenge, while also exploiting the imaginative possibilities of fictional writing in order to explode those myths.

So far, this article has considered the possible links between modern historical fiction by women and Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judæorum*; both of which share a common goal in challenging the (largely masculine) aims and assumptions governing conventional historiography. By placing women at the centre of their works, both Lanyer and her modern successors seek to rehabilitate the female figure within wider history, proffering gendered 'counter-narratives' that have the potential to undermine the 'received' version of the past. This article has also proposed why Lanyer might be a particularly attractive subject for twenty-first century female authors, suggesting that, in Lanyer, there resides an alternative model of female authorial agency to rival that of Shakespeare: the white, English, male Bard. In what follows, I will turn more specifically to the novels themselves. Attention will focus here on the novels' knowing exploitation of Rowse's 'dark lady' tag in order to assess whether modern fiction writers seek to confirm, challenge or even reclaim some of the more stigmatizing labels and images that have

a male pen-name, while Charlene Ball's *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer* (2017), published by She Writes Press was funded through crowd-sourcing.

⁵⁴ For more on the limitations of Shakespeare's example, see Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare's Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), pp. viii-ix. Roger Chartier likewise notes how biography 'projects onto Shakespeare's imaginary life' the biographer's 'own obsessions or nostalgia': 'Everything and Nothing: The Many Lives of William Shakespeare', *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 5 (2016), 17-26 (pp. 23-4).

⁵⁵ Cooper and Short, pp. 4, 6.

attached themselves to Lanyer's name. In particular, I show how the 'dark lady' persona is aligned with other figures of erotic transgression, namely the female cross-dresser and the witch. I hope to show that in these novels Lanyer becomes a means through which Shakespeare's canonical identity can be either confirmed or deconstructed, but also provides an indication of how authorial differences may be measured and explained in terms of gender.

The source of the 'dark lady' label is explored in these novels in a variety of ways, though it is usually impressed upon them by male characters (typically Shakespeare) who struggle to fathom or fix Aemilia's personality: 'I fear I may have conjured you from my febrile imaginings... temptress... angel... witch' says Will in *Dark Aemilia*,⁵⁶ while in Charlene Ball's version of the tale, Will gives her a far more severe branding after Aemilia unearths his own dark duplicity: "'You black Jewess she-devil!" he spluttered'.⁵⁷ Each example casts Rowse's 'dark lady' hypothesis in a different light, opening the theory that Lanyer's deeds were intrinsically and unjustifiably 'black' (as Rowse would have it) to new interrogations.⁵⁸ However, Lanyer's assumed 'darkness' in these novels becomes a sign of cultural, racial, and often sexual empowerment: 'What a striking child, you are' says Mary Sidney in *The Dark Lady's Mask*: 'I can just picture you in a masque as a Moorish princess. May all the Muses bless you, my little poet';⁵⁹ 'I was the only dark lady in the court... William loved it, calling me a Moor'.⁶⁰ This 'racialized language' (as Barbara Bowen describes it) suggests a literalised reading of Lanyer's methods within *Salve Deus* of defining herself as 'outside of normative womanhood', which Bowen aligns with Lanyer's Jewish heritage.⁶¹ One of the most innovative takes on this trope is offered by Grace Tiffany in her 2013 novel *Paint: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* (2013). Although the novel's subtitle alludes to Rowse's label, *Paint* also radically subverts the 'dark lady' image in order to challenge modern preconceptions of race, beauty, and self-fashioning. In the novel, Aemilia crafts an exotic Italian backstory for herself and darkens her hair, skin and eyes in order to pass as 'a dark beauty of Southern climes'.⁶² Aemilia catches not only the interest of Will, but also Lord Hunsdon, Henry Wriothesley and – in a new twist in the tale – Sir Walter Raleigh. Encouraging her to put on such an elaborate disguise is the 'English Laura' Penelope Devereux, the real-life muse

⁵⁶ Sally O'Reilly, *Dark Aemilia* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 30.

⁵⁷ Charlene Ball, *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer* (Tempe, AZ.: She Writes Press, 2017), p. 292.

⁵⁸ Rowse, *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *The Dark Lady's Mask*, p. 13.

⁶⁰ Ball, *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer*, p. 261.

⁶¹ Bowen, p. 281.

⁶² Grace Tiffany, *Paint: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* (Tempe: Bagwyn Books, 2013), p. 26.

who inspired Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, who assures her young protégée that the 'un-blue eye' will drive 'Englishmen mad for possession'.⁶³ Through figuring the 'dark lady' identity as a fashionable affectation, *Paint* also grants Aemilia direct agency in becoming the art that has long defined her.

Camouflage and disguise perform important roles in several other versions of the Lanyer story. Where *Paint* presents Aemilia's Italian façade as a means of yielding to the fashionable whimsies of the court, other interpretations of the story present disguise – and particularly crossdressing – as a means of liberation from prescribed gender stereotypes and roles. A recurrent character in these novels is the figure of the crossdressing pickpocket Mary Frith or 'Moll Cutpurse', a woman who – like Lanyer – has undergone extensive fictional rendering.⁶⁴ In O'Reilly's interpretation, Aemilia is brought into the company of the 'freak' Moll Cutpurse and branded a criminal and a witch for her transgressions.⁶⁵ In Charlene Ball's *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer* (2017), Mary Frith is a more enduring presence, and informs the protagonist's trajectory in more positive ways by encouraging Aemilia to pursue her own romantic fantasies through a masculine persona.⁶⁶ The motif of crossdressing is also central in Sharratt's *The Dark Lady's Mask*, where male clothing becomes increasingly vital to Aemilia's agency and survival:

Sometimes Aemilia dreamt of remaining in this guise permanently, of making her way in the great world as a man. Let Aemilia die. Become Emilio. Such a thrill it gave her to swagger in boots and breeches instead of mincing along under heavy skirts. To boldly shoulder past the men who would otherwise leer at her.⁶⁷

Aemilia's metamorphosis into the swaggering 'Emilio' is a prime example of 'transversal power',⁶⁸ conferring upon her a new identity beyond that of mistress, wife or mother, and transporting Aemilia from the domestic realm into a male-dominated artistic subculture. Both the 'Robin' and 'Emilio' personae in these two novels carry strong homoerotic

⁶³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁴ In particular, see Bryan Reynolds and Janna Segal, 'The Reckoning of Moll Cutpurse: A Transversal Enterprise' in *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*, ed. by Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 62-97.

⁶⁵ *Dark Aemilia*, p. 137.

⁶⁶ *Dark Lady*, p. 120.

⁶⁷ *The Dark Lady's Mask*, p. 97.

⁶⁸ 'Transversal power', according to Reynolds and Segal, enables the movement into 'transversal territory, a chaotic, boundless and transformative space people traverse when they violate the conceptual and/or emotional boundaries of their prescribed subjective addresses: 'The Reckoning of Moll Cutpurse' (p. 72).

potential, and in both stories, male disguise is also a crucial means of Aemilia endearing herself to a sexually equivocal Will Shakespeare: ‘It becomes you, the lovely garnish of a boy’; ‘Is Master-Mistress Aemilia not a marvel?’.⁶⁹ While the crossdressing trope also harbours much subversive potential, the plots often veer toward those found in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies, and Aemilia’s masculine identity is always provisional, ensuring her inevitable retreat into the more familiar, heterosexual ‘dark lady’ role. Through the tropes of male-crossdressing and homoerotic desire, the novels thus bring into play the wider question of Shakespeare’s sexuality, rendering it more wholesome and more palatable than the ‘shameful’ secret buried deep within the early sonnets.⁷⁰

Diana Wallace astutely notes that the trope of the girl masquerading as a boy in historical fiction is also a symbol of ‘the [female] historical novelist herself, aware that “history” is a “fiction” but also aware that this gives her the freedom to write herself out of the “recess” and into the mainstream’.⁷¹ The act of female ‘cross-writing’ provides a vital lens into the relationships between contemporary and Renaissance authorship, and the obstacles faced by women of all historical ages to becoming an established author. Scholarly discussions of Lanyer are often centred around her aspirations and failures as a professional female poet, and her solicitations for patronage from aristocratic women were highly audacious and fraught with gendered and social tension. Giving fictional colouring to the scholarly dimension of Lanyer’s reception, the historical novel locates many of Lanyer’s professional and social hardships within and against the backdrop of the more pressing demands of marriage, of giving birth and taking care of children, as well as the pains of child-loss, combined with the overall lack of economic independence faced by women across the social spectrum. Sharratt’s ‘Authorial Afterword’ also highlights how the obstacles faced by Aemilia in her version of the story (*The Dark Lady’s Mask*) have been devised to allow readers to understand how an ‘educated and gifted Renaissance woman poet’ fared against her ‘ambitious male counterparts’.⁷² Unlike the protagonists of *Dark Aemilia* and *Dark Lady*, Aemilia in this version enjoys some support and encouragement from her noble elders, but it is the death of her daughter, Odillya, which allows the novelist to highlight the disparity between men and women who write. In this version, Odillya’s death is brought into line with the death

⁶⁹ Ball, *Dark Lady: A Novel of Emilia Bassano Lanyer*, p. 120; *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, p. 101.

⁷⁰ De Grazia, ‘The scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets’, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. by James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 89-112 (p. 36); see also Elizabeth Klett, ‘Shakespeare in Love and the End(s) of History’, *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001), pp. 25-40.

⁷¹ Wallace, *The Woman’s Historical Novel*, p. 23.

⁷² *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, p. 394.

of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, which leads Will to abandon his brief love-affair with Emilia and resume his duties as father and playwright:

'I shall visit Stratford to visit my son's grave and see my daughters before death snatches them away.' His voice rang cold and distant. 'But then I must return to London. God willing, I might see my work performed on the Southwark stage... I'm wasting my life here'.⁷³

Parsimonious as they are, Will's paternal obligations are not wholly incompatible with those of a professional nature. Only in Schnee's *Shakespeare's Lady* do we witness Aemilia wholly abandon her vocation as mother and leave her son Henry in the care of her husband Alphonse, but only to carry out the same, famed love-affair with Will. Interestingly, little to no attention is paid in this version to Lanyer's literary standing and ambition. Similarly, in Grace Tiffany's *Paint*, Aemilia's son Henry is taken away from her (seemingly stillborn) at birth, giving Tiffany licence to allow Aemilia to continue her existence as prolific court mistress. The inability to reconcile the roles of wife and mother with a sense of female authorial agency and independence is further confirmed in *The Dark Lady's Mask*, where it is only Alphonse Lanyer's departure overseas that allows Aemilia to be 'her own mistress again. A woman of slender means, to be sure, but she had her privacy and independence. *Now I might be a poet*'.⁷⁴

Setting events in 1616, Fremantle's *The Girl in the Glass Tower* represents the only attempt to explore probably the biggest gap in Lanyer's life: the years following the publication of *Salve Deus*, in which Fremantle imagines Lanyer to have taken up a position in a laundry in order to subsidise her diminutive pension. In this account, Aemilia (here known as 'Ami') is a woman in her late forties, whose 'muse has deserted her irretrievably'.⁷⁵ Aemilia in this account acts as the lens through which the 'true' circumstances surrounding the captivity and death of Lady Arbella Stuart (1575-1615) are progressively revealed. As their two stories converge, Aemilia becomes more and more inspired to finish Arbella's story 'because in some way it is her story too, and all women's – and so it must be heard'. The omniscient, third-person narrator continues to explain that 'Ami has been many things – mistress, wife, mother, laundress... – but she is above all a writer and that gives her the power to breathe life into her friend's story',⁷⁶ and she is encouraged by her son to accept her authorial calling.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 229.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 306.

⁷⁵ *Girl in the Glass Tower*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 274.

Set between Lanyer's home in Clerkenwell and the stifling laundry-rooms of Bishopsgate, the frame story of *The Girl in the Glass Tower* also reflects the tendency for women's historical fiction to favour a 'women-centred culture', which extends to cover 'herbal lore, midwifery, and healing arts and the accusations of witchcraft that accompanied these skills'.⁷⁷ Witches are a recurring feature of these stories, giving further meaning to the 'dark lady' identity: in *The Dark Lady's Mask* the cunningly-named 'Weir Sisters' concoct a spell to turn Will's affections away from Henry Wriothesley, whereas in *Dark Aemilia* the heroine is pursued by far less benevolent characters who subject her and her household to a series of arduous trials, including plague, poverty and a monstrous birth. The biggest injustice faced by the protagonist of *Dark Aemilia*, however, is the theft of her play of *Ladie Macbeth* by the King's Men, leading Aemilia to place a curse on the Scottish play and face public execution for dabbling in the occult. Aemilia's radicalized interpretations of scripture lead her toward a similar destiny in the latter parts of *Paint*,⁷⁸ and witchcraft is also a major feature of *Dark Lady* by way of Simon Forman's interventions. The fascinations of witchcraft and magic do much to underscore the novels' fictional statuses, while still retaining a degree of historical validity. *Dark Aemilia* likewise makes its fictional qualities clear from the outset: the novel is preceded with a list of 'Dramatis Personae' and the chapters divided into acts and scenes, with the story opening with a Senecan-style Prologue proclaiming Aemilia as a 'witch for the modern age'.⁷⁹ The allegations of witchcraft explored in these stories also points towards the perceived connection between female sexual agency, authorship and transgression, positioning Lanyer's story within a larger historical narrative of female victimisation and underscoring the limited range of feminine archetypes through which she has been constructed and identified.

As well as exploring the rifts between male and female authorship and archetypes, the novels rehearse a key strain of Shakespeare biofiction first inspired by Alexandre Duval's much-celebrated play *Shakespeare Amoreaux* (1804) and reworked by Tom Stoppard and Marc Norman for the 1998 Oscar-winning film, *Shakespeare in Love*.⁸⁰ Several accounts of the story depict Aemilia and Will Shakespeare collaborating together in bed on the Bard's most famous love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, a play described as the embodiment of 'a socially prescribed ideal form, or perfect incarnation of "true love"'.⁸¹ In *Shakespeare's*

⁷⁷ Rozett, p. 135.

⁷⁸ *Paint*, pp. 110, 245-6.

⁷⁹ *Dark Aemilia*, p. 1.

⁸⁰ See Lanier, 'Shakespeare™', p. 102.

⁸¹ Reynolds and Segal, p. 69.

Lady, Will struggles to write a play ‘about two forbidden lovers from two very different worlds’ until Aemilia embraces her roles as Muse and lover: ‘The scratch of his pen became the rhythm of my life. He sat at that old desk, head bent over delicious words’.⁸² The words conjure a heavily-Romanticised image of Renaissance authorship that, as Jonathan Bate reminds us, ‘locates the essence of genius in the scene of writing’.⁸³ The Romantic image resurfaces in Sharratt’s version of the tale, with Aemilia and Will departing England for a grand tour of Italy, in which they travel to Venice and Verona: appropriate backdrops for a clandestine love-affair. In both interpretations, Aemilia’s erotic interventions also allow Will to overcome his creative inertia and complete the task of penning his fêted love story. As well as closing the gap between the life and the Works, by interweaving the story of *Romeo and Juliet* with that of Will and Aemilia, these novels present literary collaboration as both the bedfellow and corollary of heterosexual union. This, together with a recurrent use of the cross-dressing motif, also demonstrates the stories’ debts to *Shakespeare in Love*, which Sharratt cites as one of the main inspirations for her novel.⁸⁴ In both *Shakespeare’s Lady* and *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, Lanyer’s erotic intervention also reinforces a highly conservative model of authorship that accords Shakespeare’s most productive period of literary activity with his sexual conquests. O’Reilly’s *Dark Aemilia* is likewise engaged in establishing a model of male authorship that is predicated on Shakespeare’s heterosexual identity, and her version of the story similarly ‘rescues’ Will from ‘Wriothesley’s peculiar sodomy’.⁸⁵ Though portraying these events from the woman’s perspective gives the novelist scope to challenge previous biofictional hypotheses surrounding Shakespeare’s sexuality and love life, history also dictates that the love story cannot end well, and so the key challenge that the novelist must face is how to tackle the dark lady’s betrayal (as scripted by the 1609 Sonnets), and the inevitable separation of the two lovers.

Like many Shakespeare novels inspired by the hidden details of the plays and poems, Lanyer fictions published within the last decade locate the cause and aftermath of the inevitable break-up within the Works. Several of Shakespeare’s plays have been mined for details of Lanyer’s potential inspiration and involvement, for which the work of John Hudson has been particularly influential. Drawing on Hudson’s speculative theories that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* contain some of the clearest evidence of Lanyer’s authorial involvement, these novels partake in the ongoing debate over (co-)authorship and attribution. In *Shakespeare’s Lady*, for example, Aemilia

⁸² *Shakespeare’s Lady*, p. 193; 259.

⁸³ Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London: Picador, 1997), p. 82.

⁸⁴ *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, p. 394.

⁸⁵ *Dark Aemilia*, p. 53.

is encouraged by Will to finish her ‘little book’, though her project is revealed never to have been *Salve Deus* at all, but a children’s fairy tale, the source of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In *Paint*, Aemilia similarly regales Will with made-up stories of her childhood in the Venetian Ghetto, sparking inspiration for another play: *The Merchant of Venice*. Aemilia’s role in the two plays’ inception presents opportunities to challenge and simultaneously preserve Shakespeare’s creative authority, which also extends to speculations over his moral uprightness and integrity. In Tiffany’s *Paint* (for example) Will appears early in the novel as an unsuccessful hack who, ‘like a spy or a profiteer... collected speech-scrap’, ‘pouncing on any phrase that can be played with’,⁸⁶ while in *Dark Lady* he is a mere copy editor who forsakes all trace of artistic integrity for steady patronage. *Dark Aemilia* also interrogates the true complexion of Renaissance authorship and rivalry after Aemilia’s manuscript of ‘The Tragedie of Ladie Macbeth’ is stolen by Shakespeare’s company and rewritten with a male protagonist at the centre: ‘No play is made by one man alone’, Will reveals, ‘Plays are adapted, from many, many sources’.⁸⁷ Aemilia is guilty of similar miscalculations in *Paint* and *Dark Lady*, both of which set up a confrontation between Aemilia and Will in order to establish the truth behind the Sonnets’ ‘dark lady’ sequence, but which, in both instances, shatters the illusion of factual transparency:

She drew a deep breath. ‘Will, who was she?... The woman in your sonnets...’
 ‘Emilia, no one in those poems is anybody. I made it up.’
 ‘I don’t believe you. It’s too real.’
 ‘Some of it did happen... She’s partly you – mostly the dark eyes and the music – and partly a lady in Oxford, a certain Court lady, a bawdyhouse madam, and oh, let’s see, that girl in Southwark... And one poem was to my wife. One of my youthful efforts’.⁸⁸

Dark Lady substantially rewrites the Sonnets’ backstory, pushing Will’s sexual dalliances into the murkiest of territories when he is exposed by Aemilia as a rapist. These moments recall a less injurious episode in Tiffany’s *Paint*: ‘You thought I wrote of *you*... There was no name in any poem I wrote. These were games, the sonnets, you should understand. I cannot remember those days’.⁸⁹ These revelations become what Sophia Lee describes in a comparable context as a ‘satirical attack upon the reader for coming already prepared

⁸⁶ *Paint*, p. 57.

⁸⁷ *Dark Aemilia*, p. 331, p. 329.

⁸⁸ *Dark Lady*, pp. 314-5.

⁸⁹ *Paint*, p. 195.

for and with a set of automatic feelings',⁹⁰ and transfers those feelings and assumptions onto Aemilia herself. Readers' expectations are further challenged through the ways in which Aemilia's 'hidden' portraits within the plays are also revealed to be merely accidental; an affirmation of the Sonnets' power of *suggestio falsi*: '[D]o you fancy that everything was about you? You are quite the egoist'.⁹¹ In making her guilty of the same mistakes made by two centuries of readers, the novelists also allow Aemilia to learn from her more urbane and male contemporary how plays and poems *actually* come to be.

Aemilia's uncited and unrewarded contributions to the Shakespeare canon are also explored through various forms of intertextuality. Though all texts, to some degree, are a 'tissue of quotations', the techniques used in these fictionalised accounts recall strategies employed in other works of Shakespeare biofiction, which see Will appropriate the words of his peers and recycle them as his own. In many instances, Aemilia is the first to utter words and phrases that have since been refined and attributed to the Bard: 'All the world is a stage, and we are but the players'; 'Come you spirits that tend upon mortal thoughts... Unsex me now'; 'My lord is like a damask rose / He smiles at me where'er he goes'.⁹² Stripped from their more familiar contexts, these phrases sound uncomfortably absurd, yet their presence in these works also queries Shakespeare's reputation for 'quotable sayings that can be extracted from or inserted into a text at will'.⁹³ The idea is explored further in *Paint*, with Aemilia 'parroting' lines from Shakespeare in a game of witty one-upmanship.⁹⁴ Aemilia, by direct contrast, is seldom (if at all) heard to utter lines and phrases from her published work, and the novelists who have chosen to incorporate sections of *Salve Deus* into their novels often quote at length, or reserve excerpts from the poem for the Appendix. Such decisions widen the disparity between Lanyer and Shakespeare even further, juxtaposing the plain, quotable and malleable wisdom of the Bard with the unfamiliarity and difficultness of *Salve Deus*. The contrast is indicative of a wider interest in how Shakespeare's cultural authority may be both secured and challenged through acts of 'borrowing', and presses the point recently raised by Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold of 'how actively Shakespeare himself contributed to the memorability of his words'.⁹⁵ Though the remediation of the Works in popular fiction

⁹⁰ Sophia Lee, *The Recess or A Tale of Other Times* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 350. Lee's work is discussed at length by Jacobs in *The Character of Truth*.

⁹¹ *Dark Lady*, p. 317. On the former point, see Duncan-Jones, p. 50.

⁹² *Shakespeare's Lady*, p. 262; *The Dark Lady's Mask*, p. 124; *Dark Aemilia* p. 15.

⁹³ Ken Jacobsen, 'Shakespeare's Novel Life: Speech, Text and Dialogue in Recent Shakespearean Fictions' in *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction*, pp. 46-63 (p. 52).

⁹⁴ *Paint*, pp. 190-1.

⁹⁵ Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold, 'General Introduction' to *Shakespeare and Quotation*, ed. by Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1-24 (p. 3).

and other forms has done much to secure the Bard's wider prestige, *Salve Deus* is yet to achieve the same degree of coverage within the mainstream, and seldom without the Sonnets as its supporting apparatus.⁹⁶

Just as Shakespearean fiction relies on a perceived continuity between the art and the life, so Lanyer's own literary efforts are constructed not merely as scholarship has seen them – as a religiously-endorsed defence of women in the pursuit of financial patronage – but as a personal and poetic vendetta. This is certainly one of the most recurrent features of Lanyer as she appears in historical fiction, echoing other attempts to construct a 'dark lady' rejoinder,⁹⁷ for which 'Eves Apologie in Defence of Women' has proven especially advantageous. Pointing to what Jerome de Groot describes as 'the partiality of historical evidence',⁹⁸ the *Salve Deus* intertext offers an authentic female counter-narrative that extends the story far beyond the script of the 1609 Sonnets. Aemilia's writing in these novels is compelled by a mix of venom and decorum directed at Will: the text – unnamed in O'Reilly's account – is figured as a 'sweet redemption',⁹⁹ while in Sharratt's account, *Salve Deus* is presented as a form of 'retaliation' that succeeds in 'transform[ing] her into a published poet'.¹⁰⁰ The use of literary compositions as 'surrogates for documentary evidence',¹⁰¹ is most noticeable in the way that the pastoral community of Lanyer's country-house poem 'A Description of Cooke-ham' furnishes the novels' portrayal of female creativity as an alternative to the creative co-dependence witnessed in the bedroom composition scenes, and independent of other male-dominated institutions, namely the court. Though the reality of Lanyer's Edenic vision has been subject to immense speculation,¹⁰² in fiction, Lanyer's poetic memory of Cookham is revived and given material substance. In *The Dark Lady's Mask*, the Cookham estate is Aemilia's 'fountain of delight'; an 'idyll more priceless' than her Italian sojourn.¹⁰³ *Paint* develops these ideas even further to present a more inclusive coterie – an 'acorn court' – of patrons and poets, which includes the playwright Elizabeth Carey and 'Jack' Donne.¹⁰⁴ In *Dark Lady*, Aemilia is encouraged to write on 'woman's lot' by her two fictional companions, the

⁹⁶ See Stuart Diamond, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: The Dark Lady Reflections* (2016).

⁹⁷ Other examples include S.C. Campbell, *Only Begotten Sonnets: A Reconstruction of Shakespeare's Sonnet Sequence* (1978); Jennifer Reeser, *Sonnets from the Dark Lady* (2012). For a survey of contemporary and modern-day Sonnet rejoinders, see Matthew Zarnowiecki, 'Responses to Responses to Shakespeare's Sonnets: More Sonnets', *Critical Survey* 28.2 (2016), 10-26.

⁹⁸ De Groot, p. 127.

⁹⁹ *Dark Aemilia*, p. 393.

¹⁰⁰ *The Dark Lady's Mask*, p. 365, p. 369. See also *Dark Lady*, pp. 320-1.

¹⁰¹ Chedgzoy, p. 21.

¹⁰² See note 40, above.

¹⁰³ *The Dark Lady's Mask*, p. 330.

¹⁰⁴ *Paint*, p. 251.

aply-named Lucretia and Marcella,¹⁰⁵ where in *The Girl in the Glass Tower* Aemilia and Arbella Stuart are portrayed as ‘scrutiniz[ing] all the biblical stories about wicked women to tease new truths out of them’.¹⁰⁶ Recalling Jacobs’ observations that authors of historical fiction ‘aspire not to fill the gaps in the biographical record but to overwhelm the biographical facts with the flow of imagined facts to which the former give rise’,¹⁰⁷ these novels build their vision of female creativity from the embellished and speculative details of Lanyer’s own verse.

Yet in spite of the pleasure and autonomy offered by these various retreats, the potency of Aemilia’s creative vision is often undercut in these novels by a final scene of reconciliation with the Bard; a decision which owes a great deal to the demands of the romance fiction genre. These scenes appear, each with its own subtle variation, in at least three of the novels, illustrating a collective desire to grant *Salve Deus* additional status and validity through Shakespeare’s seal of approval. The closing chapter of *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, for instance, offers a striking insight into the potential reception of *Salve Deus*, which is gladly-received and rewarded by Aemilia’s female patrons, though it continues to ‘haunt’ Aemilia that one particular recipient fails to respond to her publication: ‘Did Will think this, her reply to his sonnets, unworthy of his notice?’.¹⁰⁸ It takes Aemilia five more years to visit her former lover and poetic rival, travelling to Will’s home in Stratford-upon-Avon in the aftermath of his death, only to find her name hidden amongst the unpublished papers and plays.¹⁰⁹ In presenting Aemilia as a silent partner in the First Folio’s publication, the story ends on a question of continued relevance to Lanyer’s verse, signalling the potential parts played by women in the creation of the English literary canon.

Though all versions of Lanyer’s story are told differently and with different purposes in mind, readers may have already begun to detect several parallels with Lanyer’s most recent excursion into fictional biography. Performed by an all-female cast during the 2018 summer season at Shakespeare’s Globe, and moving several months later to London’s West End, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm’s *Emilia* follows Lanyer through her life, from the perspectives of adolescence, middle and old age. The multiplication of parts and other

¹⁰⁵ *Dark Lady*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁶ *The Girl in the Glass Tower*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁷ Jacobs, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸ *The Dark Lady’s Mask*, p. 373.

¹⁰⁹ See also *Dark Aemilia*, which concludes with a similar scene of Aemilia’s visit to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1616. The scene in *Paint* is condensed into a letter from Anne Hathaway.

forms of tripling in this play expose some of the underlying precepts of postmodern historical fiction, which rejects the objective and singular in favour of pluralistic, contradictory and contested forms of inquiry. The play makes other bold casting moves, using a trio of black female actors to take the three Emilia roles, and transforming Lanyer into a symbol of silent, marginalised groups across the ages. While the play also, naturally, opts for other elaborate and somewhat anachronistic methods to undercut its claims to historical authenticity, *Emilia* is also bound by the same burden experienced by the female novelists of the past decade, reproducing for Shakespeare's Globe a mythological past for Lanyer that is disturbingly familiar and repeats a number of clichés about her role as Shakespeare's dark mistress and muse. Probably the most inventive interpretation of the Lanyer story to have emerged in the last ten years is Fremantle's *The Girl in The Glass Tower*, signifying an important new stage in the adaptation and remediation of the Lanyer story. Fremantle is highly aware of the liberties she takes, presenting her version of Aemilia reflecting on her own fictional portrayal: 'whether she will... be there substantially, at the heart of the story, or as a ghost in the margins'.¹¹⁰ In *The Girl in The Glass Tower*, she is both. Fremantle's story also takes readers even deeper into the world of fiction than perhaps realised. One reviewer of the novel noted that, 'After reading *The Girl in the Glass Tower*, I was keen to learn more... and so was thrilled when I was offered [Charlene Ball's *Dark Lady*] to review'.¹¹¹ A reader of *Dark Aemilia* also noted that 'the source material left a certain impression and inspired a natural curiosity regarding the woman who inspired it which is what led me to Sharratt's latest release': *The Dark Lady's Mask*.¹¹² The directions taken by actual readers of these stories may satisfy Jacob's view that fiction can provide a 'more legitimate truth', a version of the past inaccessible through more conventional forms of historiography.

While my intention here has never been to test the accuracy of contemporary fictional representations of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century historical figures, nor to extrapolate the 'truth' from the 'myth', what has become clear throughout this analysis is the ways in which these novels are all seen to respond to, adapt and reconfigure Lanyer's own practices of historical and authorial self-fashioning. The portraits of Lanyer offered by this new generation of female authors thus re-open the questions posed by Lanyer herself, of whether it is possible to salvage women's (hi)story from male-authored myths and narratives, as well as the question, pertinent to Shakespeare too, of whether history and myth can ever be disengaged. Despite the significant steps that have been made to

¹¹⁰ *The Girl in the Glass Tower*, p. 234).

¹¹¹ <https://theidlewoman.net/2017/05/01/dark-lady-charlene-ball/> [consulted 30 April 2019]

¹¹² <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot.com/2016/05/the-dark-ladys-mask-by-mary-sharratt.html> [consulted 30 April 2019]

move Lanyer out of the shadow of her better-known, male contemporary, there remains within the fictional domain a very clear, and almost persistent desire to confirm and embellish her affiliations with the 'dark lady' myth. Although presenting Lanyer through the lens of Shakespeare's Works and the narratives that have sustained her identity as the 'dark lady' largely re-inscribe what much Lanyer scholarship has fought hard to eradicate, these novels also interrogate a range of historical and literary-critical assumptions in order to propose new, often inventive, and certainly more complex conceptions of gender, authorship, rivalry and competition; conceptions not always fully possible via more conventional means. Collectively, these fictional re-imaginings serve to question the enduring centrality of the male author by redefining and reclaiming the many potential roles played by women within English history and, more specifically, the literary canon. Where women's historical fiction as a whole looks to achieve similar aims, Lanyer's role and reputation as England's first professional female poet, and the canonising impulse of *Salve Deus* as a whole, manage to advance those aims in particular ways. Though the historical novel continues to be subject to some unfavourable assessments, these texts offer a vital chance to rethink the specific contribution and potential interventions that individual and 'hybrid' literary forms might make towards creating a more diverse and inclusive canon, as well as reminding us of the many decisions, efforts and sacrifices writers continue make in order to be recognised by and assimilated into the mainstream.