

All great truths begin as blasphemies

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW



Frederic Leighton, *Desdemona*, 1888.

MICHAEL POSNER

Rethinking Shakespeare

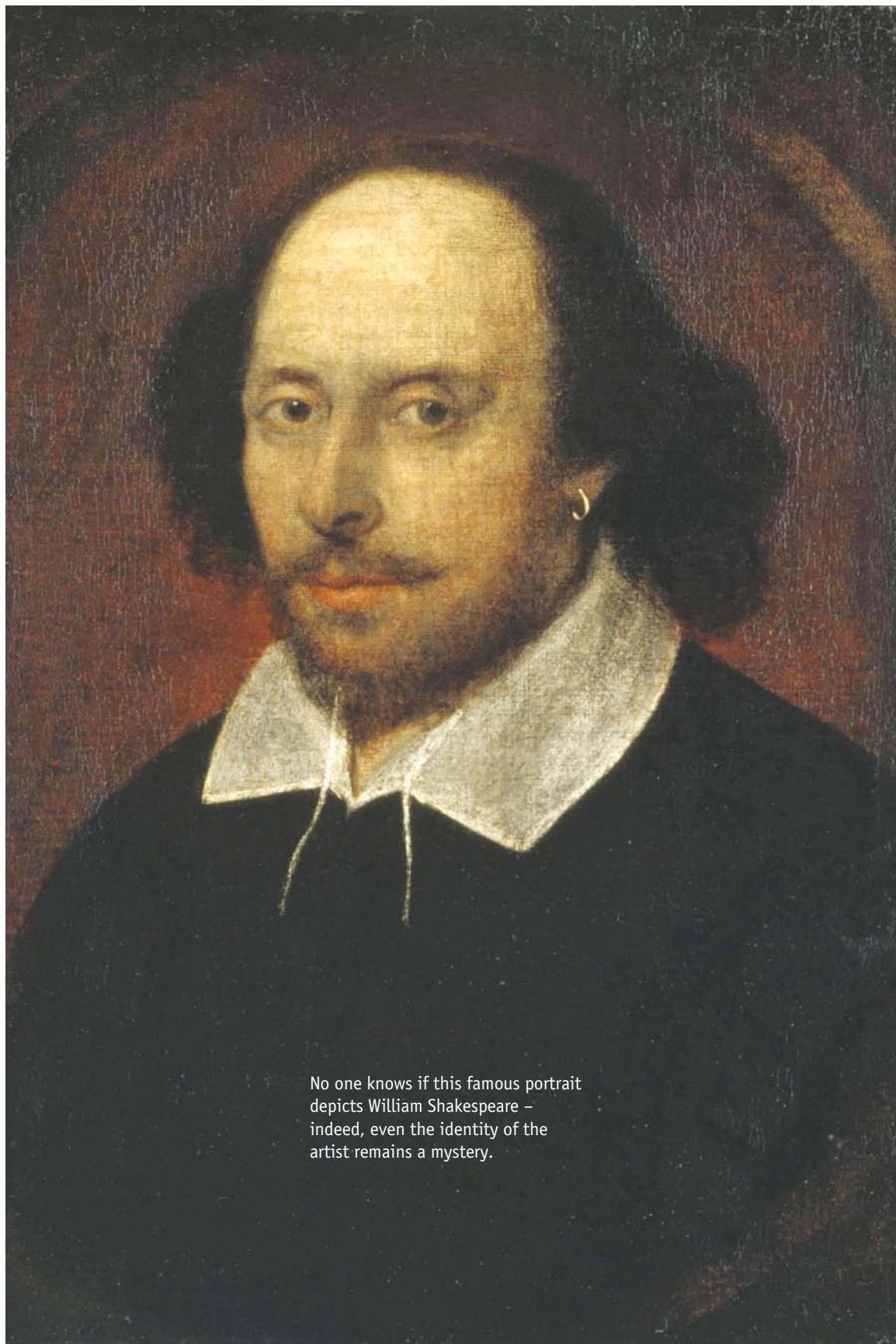
Let's start with a not-so-trivial trivia question: apart from the fact that they were all venerable, intelligent men, what did Sigmund Freud, Charles Dickens, Henry and William James, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Galsworthy, Sir Tyrone Guthrie, Mark Twain, Orson Welles, and Walt Whitman have in common? The answer may surprise: not one of them believed that William Shakespeare, a mere country boy from Stratford-upon-Avon, could possibly have written the works attributed to him.

THEIR REASONS were diverse, but Freud, Dickens, and a great many others were united in their conviction that whatever else he might have been – grain merchant, moneylender, landowner, actor – the glove-maker's son from Warwickshire was incapable of producing 38 transcendent histories, comedies, and tragedies, as well the famous 154 sonnets. In their judgment, the likelihood that the single greatest canon of Western literature was written by a man with a grade six education, a man who signed his surname six different ways, all illegibly, is precisely nil. For them, the Shakespeare legacy is therefore a colossal hoax, and the estimated 100,000 pilgrims who annually trek to his gravesite, and the millions more who pay homage to his memory, are its unwitting victims. As Henry James put it in his Letters: "I am ... haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practised on a patient world."

The empirical, verifiable facts of Shakespeare's life would not fill more than a few pages. In its lack of relevance to the life he is presumed to have led, the nature of what we do know is almost embar-

MICHAEL POSNER

updated bio for here, please



No one knows if this famous portrait depicts William Shakespeare – indeed, even the identity of the artist remains a mystery.

rasing. We know, for example, that he sold a load of stone to one Mr Chamberlin on 1 December 1598 for ten pence. We know that he acted in two of Ben Jonson's plays (and was booed off the stage in one of them), owned shares of the Globe Theatre and the Blackfriars Gatehouse, sued various people for petty sums, and bought land in Stratford. Could "what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties" have sprung from such a crass, mercantilist mind?

BUT IF "Shaksper" (as he was known in Stratford) was not Shakespeare (as we know him in print), and if he did not write the plays, then who, precisely, did? That question may well encapsulate the literary mystery of all time. Although a billion-dollar industry is now predicated on the assumption that the Bard of Avon is deserving of the title, a subsidiary enterprise has sprouted up, dedicated to finding the genuine author.

In November 1922, a group of sceptics gathered in the London borough of Hackney to hold the inaugural meeting of the Shakespeare Fellowship. That organization has since evolved into the Shakespeare Authorship Trust, but its mission remains unchanged: "To seek, and if possible establish, the truth concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's plays and poems." The debate has percolated through the years, pitting resolute Stratfordians – convinced that Shakespeare is the one true Bard, responsible in critic Harold Bloom's memorable phrase for nothing less than "the invention of the human" – against the determined naysayers.

Controversy continues to rage. Only a year ago, two distinguished British actors, Derek Jacobi and Mark Rylance, issued a "declaration of reasonable doubt," again questioning why a man Samuel Johnson called "the poet of nature" would leave a last will and testament that made not a single mention of anything he wrote or book that he owned – books being valuable commodities in seventeenth-century England. Since its promulgation, their declaration has been signed online by more than 1,300 people, including 200 academics.

How, they ask, did Shakespeare acquire his knowledge of foreign languages, which the plays' author clearly demonstrates? Where did he develop, seemingly overnight, a mastery of the Elizabethan worlds of law, the court, mathematics, heraldry, medicine, horticulture, astronomy, and the military – to which he had no known exposure? Why did a dramatist revered as the greatest wordsmith in the history of Western civilization not receive a single eulogy when he died? Nor

any commemorative editions of his work? And why is there no contemporaneous evidence of his actual authorship? As Jacobi and Rylance note in their declaration: “Not one play, not one poem, not one letter in Mr. Shakspeare’s [their spelling] own hand has ever been found.... He is the only presumed writer of his time for whom there is no contemporary evidence of a writing career.” True, Ben Jonson and others did praise a William Shakespeare after his death, but no one specifically linked *that* Shakespeare to Shaksper, the gentleman actor from Stratford.

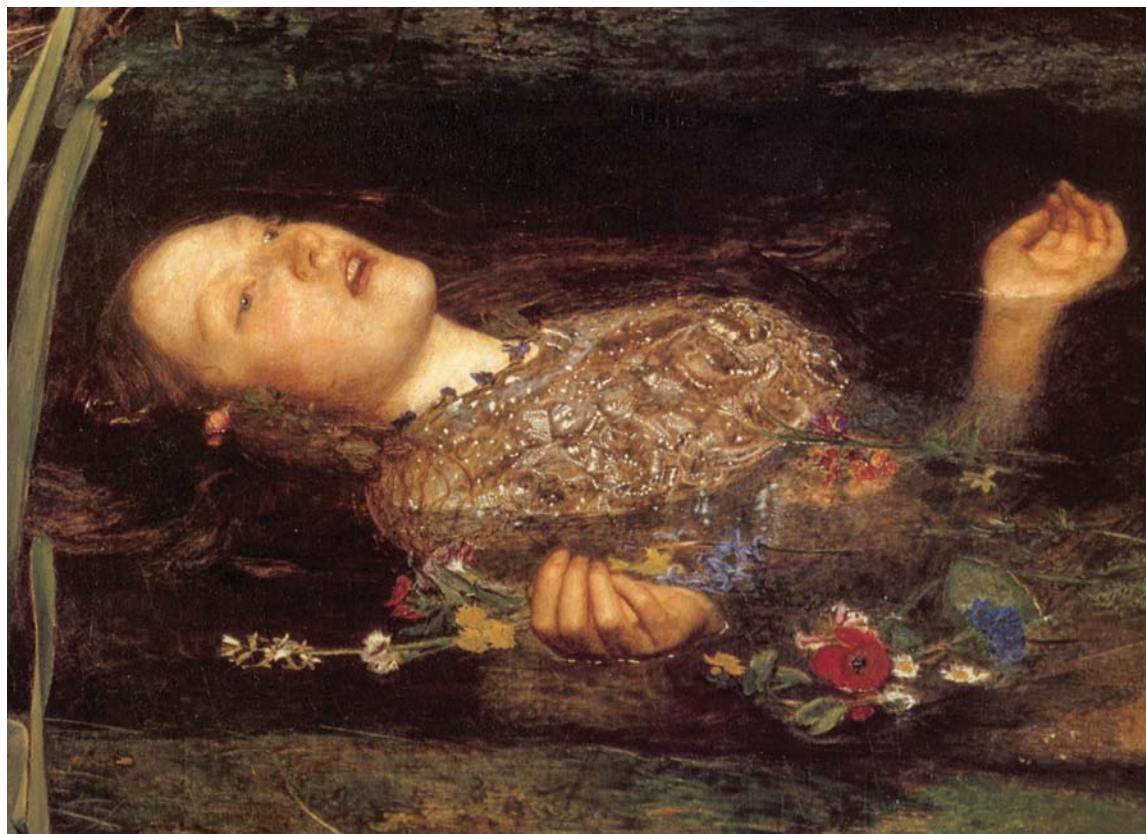
In the eight decades since its establishment, the Shakespeare Authorship Trust has endorsed the alternate candidacies of almost a dozen other Elizabethans, including statesman and essayist Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere (the Earl of Oxford), playwright Christopher Marlowe, the writer Mary Sidney, Roger Manners (the Earl of Rutherford) and Henry Neville, a diplomat and courtier. There’s also a group theory, suggesting that many backstage hands were complicit, and Shakespeare a mere cardboard prop.



Query:
“Earl of
Rutland?”

THE TRUST has recently added a new name to the list, and it is, at first blush, a complete shocker: Amelia Bassano Lanier, the dark-skinned, illegitimate daughter of an Elizabethan court musician, a *Marrano* (i.e. clandestine) Jew from Venice, via Morocco. For now, the principal proponent of this theory is one John Hudson, a 54-year-old British cognitive scientist and marketing strategist turned Shakespeare scholar. Hudson has spent the last five years researching his case, most of them at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, affiliated with the University of Birmingham, and he’s convinced that if Amelia Bassano (Lanier was her married name) did not write all of the plays, she was a major collaborator, influenced them all, and contributed allegorical plot devices. Indeed, it is on the strength of the deeply layered allegories embedded in *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and other plays – fiercely and heretically anti-Christian – that Hudson builds much of his case.

To the litany of doubts about Shakespeare raised by other sceptics, Hudson adds some striking new ones. Would a man whose works portray strong, well-educated, proto-feminist women raise his own daughters as illiterates? Why do the works contain some 2,000 musical references (110 in *Taming of the Shrew* alone) – three times more than other plays of the period? For Shakespeare, there is no obvious



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852.

answer, but for Amelia Bassano, there is; her 15 closest relatives – father, husband, uncles, brothers-in-law – were professional court musicians, members of the Queen’s recorder troupe, and performed regularly at plays and masques. Her maternal cousin, lutenist Robert Johnson, was the most popular composer of music for Shakespeare’s plays.

More than allusions, the plays display a firm grasp of musical intricacies. In *Hamlet*, for example, the melancholy Dane addresses the players ...

→
Query:
Isn't Hamlet
addressing
Guidenstern
here?

Govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops.... You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops ... you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ.... Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me

Act III, Scene 2

This passage, faithfully echoing a fifth-century Latin poem on how to play a recorder by Bishop St Paulinus of Nola, even includes a pun on “excellent” – excellent being the smallest kind of recorder.

Shakespeare’s plays also display a sure knowledge of the sport of falconry, with some 50 references to hawking. None of the Bard’s contemporaries – not Kyd, not Marlowe, not Greene – came close to that number. Falconry, of course, was a rich man’s preserve, not generally available to commoners like Shakespeare. Amelia Bassano lived for ten years as the mistress of the Queen’s master falconer, Lord Henry Hunsdon.

In *Taming of the Shrew*, Petruccio famously tames his truculent wife, Kate (like kite, a falcon) with exactly the methods used in falconry, starvation and sleep deprivation.

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty. And till she stoop she must not be full-gorg’d, for then she never looks up her lure. Another way I have to man my haggard, To make her come, and know her keeper’s call, That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites That bate and beat, and will not be obedient. She eats no meat to-day, nor none shall eat; Last night she slept not, nor to-night she shall not.

Act IV, Scene 1

And is it just a coincidence that an earlier version of the play, called *Taming of a Shrew*, was written just after she was married to Alfonso Lanier, whose name means falcon in French, and that it features characters named Emelia, Alfonso (her husband’s name) and Baptista (her late father’s name)?

Shakespeare stopped writing in 1612 and died in April 1616. How, then, did a specific reference to William Harvey’s theory of blood circulation – not actually made public until 1619 – end up in *Coriolanus*, a play written, critics concur, between 1605–1610?

I send it through the rivers of your blood,
Even to the court the heart – to th’ seat o’ th’ braine;
And, through the cranks and offices of man,
The strongest nerves, and small inferior veines,
From me receive that natural competencie
Whereby they live

Act I, Scene 1

Hudson believes that Bassano derived the information from sources in Padua, home to the continent’s most advanced medical school. There, in 1603, Gerolamo Fabrizio d’Acquapendente, better known as



Henry Fuseli, *Macbeth Consulting the Vision of the Armed Head*, 1793.

Fabricius – Harvey was his student – would publish an early work on blood circulation and valves, *De Venarum Ostioliis*.

But even if we concede that Shakespeare's authorship is in serious doubt, is it not an Olympian leap to believe that he was simply an amanuensis for an Elizabethan courtesan and a Jew in deeply anti-Semitic England? Less than one might think. About the life of Amelia Bassano we actually know far more than we do of Shakespeare's. She was born in 1569, a bastard. Her Jewish father, Baptisma Bassano, was among a group of court musicians from Venice, brought to England by Henry VIII (most of the estimated 200 British Jews then living as *Marranos* or *Conversos* were connected to the court, including the



Impersonating a male lawyer, a woman uses her intelligence and magnificent oratory to save the day in *The Merchant of Venice*.
Portia by Henry Woods, 1888.

queen's physician, Roderigo Lopez, later hanged for treason). Her Christian mother, Margaret Johnson, was an aristocrat. The family lived in London's Spitalfields district, a short walk from the theatres. When her father died in 1576, young Amelia was sent to live with English feminist Catherine Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk, and her daughter Susan Bertie, the Countess Dowager of Kent, and educated in Greek, Latin, and the Bible.

At 13, Amelia became mistress to Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, a mere 45 years older. Hunsdon, son of Mary Boleyn and a cousin of Queen Elizabeth (and quite possibly her half-brother, as the son of Henry VIII), wore many hats besides falconry, among them one that put him in charge of the English theatre and made him patron of the Lord Chamberlain's Men – the very company that mounted Shakespeare's works. If she did write the plays, she had direct access. If she needed to obscure her identity because women did not write for the stage or because, as Hudson believes, the plays encrypt a deeply subversive allegorical message that would never have withstood censorial scrutiny, then Shakespeare was at hand. He may even have been her lover, as may Christopher Marlowe. In any event, she became pregnant, ostensibly by Hunsdon, in 1592, later giving birth to a son, Henry. It was then, to avoid scandal – Hunsdon had twelve other children by his wife Elizabeth Spencer – that Amelia was married off to another musician, her cousin Lanier.

Nobody, Hudson notes, has explained why Shakespeare should have started writing Italian comedies in 1592, just as he arrives in London, but it's a perfect fit for Amelia's biography. She has lost her close connection to the court, through Hunsdon, and returned to the world her family came from and knew – Italy, where almost half of the entire non-historical canon is set. Certainly, whoever wrote the plays knew Italian well enough to make elaborate puns, and had read Dante, Tasso, Cinthio, Bandello, and others in the original language. Shakespeare? Possibly, if he spent his so-called missing years (1586–92) in Italy, but unlikely. Whereas the Bassanos, as their surviving letters indicate, spoke and wrote fluent Italian. To escape an outbreak of the Plague, Amelia may well have taken her newborn son to Italy in 1593, visiting Venice, Verona, Mantua, and Padua, the very cities that dot the landscape of the later plays.

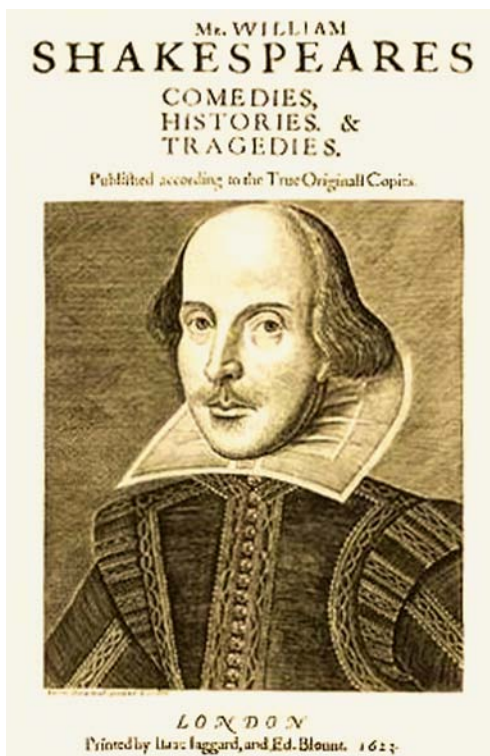
And this fact is indisputable: Bassano is recognized as the first woman to produce a book of original poetry in the English language – the 3,000-line *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (Hail God, King of the Jews), a critique of the Christian gospels, published in 1611. Hudson has

found several intriguing connections between the book and the plays, among them the use of the Gospel of Matthew, Shakespeare's most frequently referenced biblical work, as source material, as well as the late medieval writings of French lawyer Christine de Pisan. Her thinking is referenced in only three other Renaissance works – *Henry VI, Part 1*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It*.

Read superficially, *Salve Deus* is a traditional piece of religious poetry. But in it, Bassano adopts the role of a priest interpreting scripture – tantamount to heresy. Indeed, the work constitutes a radical rewriting of the Gospels, which were considered sacred and inviolable. It amounts to a gospel by Amelia, effectively equating herself with Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. In terms of Elizabethan Church of England Christology, he argues, it's hardly possible to imagine a more blasphemous concept. *Salve Deus* is a feminist, anti-Christian satire that questions the fundamental premises of the church.

In 1979, the British historian A.L. Rowse advanced the then controversial theory that Bassano, with her Mediterranean skin colouring, was also the famous “dark lady of the sonnets,” and Shakespeare's mistress. Ridiculed at the time, that view has since become the consensus opinion among scholars. Hudson, however, goes further: he maintains that Bassano wrote the sonnets about herself. He sees Shakespeare, both in the poetry and the plays, as simply a convenient front man, used to hide the author's true identity.

But if Bassano was Shakespeare's paramour, or knew her through Hunsdon, might he not have simply exploited her knowledge of Italian, the royal court, gardening, falconry, and so forth? Hudson insists otherwise. “So much of the material – the musical references, falconry, complex Hebrew transliterations in the texts, allegorical subplots – is hers that he would have been running to her every minute. The simplest explanation is that all the intellectual content came from



her, [but she] needed a collaborator to provide the odd Warwickshire word and to [serve as] a play broker.”

Still, he maintains that Amelia went to some lengths to signal her authorial claim. In the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays, published in 1623, 163 lines were added to *Othello*. They don’t appear in the quarto, published a year earlier. Many of these lines are given to Desdemona’s lady, whose name is Emilia. Her speech ends by evoking a classic Renaissance trope, derived from Ovid, of the great poet as a swan that dies to music.

Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan. And die in music.
[Singing] Willow, willow, willow

Act V, Scene 2

Notably, in the First Folio edition willow is spelled “willough.” The same swan analogy is used in two other plays – in *King John*, where it is associated with John’s son, and in *The Merchant of Venice*, associated with a character named Bassanio, another version of her name.

In *Twelfth Night*, a brilliant, eloquent woman masquerades as a man, unintentionally causing the beautiful Olivia to fall in love with the captivating speaker.

Below: *Olivia*, by Edmund Blair Leighton, 1888.





Study for *The Quarrel of Oberon and Titania* by Joseph Noel Paton, 1849.

Portia: Let music sound while he doth make his choice;
Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end,
Fading in music

Act III, Scene 2

Thus, these four names – Emilia, Willough (by), Johnson (John’s son), and Bassanio allude to all of her names: her baptismal name (Amelia), her mother’s name (Johnson), her adopted name (Willoughby), and her family name (Bassano). This, Hudson contends, is surely no coincidence. She was alive and able to edit the text. William Shakespeare had been dead seven years. Echoes of her names, Aemilius and Bassanius, also appear in *Titus Andronicus*, while in *As You Like It*, there’s a character named Touchstone – *Bassanos* in Greek.

←
Query:
“Aemilius”?

Hudson is not alone in reading some of the plays as anti-Christian parables. The underlying premise is that the gospels were entirely a creation of the Roman rulers, conceived by the emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian (Vespasian’s sons) in the wake of the Roman-Jewish wars (AD 66–70) to counter the appeal of Messianic Judaism

and to legitimize their rule. The Gospel of Matthew and the others that followed are thus history written by the winners, and the Jesus we know simply a literary construct.

Stanford professor Patricia Parker has limned an anti-Christian allegory in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; an allegorical Wall between heaven and earth falls down, precipitating the Apocalypse; Peter Quince's playlet ends with the mock crucifixion of Bottom/Pyramus, followed by the spirits escaping from their graves, as in the gospels. Hudson extends the thesis, depicting Yahweh, God of the Jews (Oberon), as embroiled in a war against Titus Caesar (Titania) over the abduction of the true Jewish Messiah (the Judean or "Indian" boy). The play ends with the distribution of dew, an echo of the mystical Zohar, where souls are bathed in dew after immersion in the river of fire. The allegory is even more transparent in *Titus Andronicus*, says Hudson, where the Roman characters represent the three Flavian Emperors – Titus, Vespasian, and Domitian. He reads the canon as a cohesive body of Jewish revenge literature – Amelia Bassano's attempt to avenge the crimes committed against her people, fuelled by the anger of persecution and the constant charade of believing the fiction of the deeply anti-Semitic New Testament.

If such subversive allegories were coded in the text, "whoever was responsible would have had very good reason indeed to conceal their identity," Hudson argues. "This allegory would have been almost impossible to detect from merely attending one or two performances – but only by extensive comparative study of the printed text – precisely what the First Folio would make available to a great variety of readers."

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IT IS no small matter to violate a cultural shibboleth of Shakespearean stature. The Bard's battalions – in the academies, in the theatres – are deeply entrenched, with a vast arsenal of weapons, ridicule, insult, and invective. But John Hudson's still unpublished 800-page tome is a work of enormous, albeit speculative scholarship, and one finishes it convinced at a minimum that the case for Amelia Bassano Lanier is as plausible as Shakespeare's and more plausible than many others. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, another Shakespeare sceptic, said, "rough work, iconoclasm, but the only way to get at the truth."

