



Dark Aemilia: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady

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A TALE OF SORCERY AND PASSION IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON—WHERE WITCHES HAUNT WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND HIS DARK LADY, THE PLAYWRIGHT'S MUSE AND ONE TRUE LOVE

The daughter of a Venetian musician, Aemilia Bassano came of age in Queen Elizabeth's royal court. The Queen's favorite, she develops a love of poetry and learning, maturing into a young woman known not only for her beauty but also her sharp mind and quick tongue. Aemilia becomes the mistress of Lord Hunsdon, but her position is precarious. Then she crosses paths with an impetuous playwright named William Shakespeare and begins an impassioned but ill-fated affair.

A decade later, the Queen is dead, and Aemilia Bassano is now Aemilia Lanyer, fallen from favor and married to a fool. Like the rest of London, she fears the plague. And when her young son Henry takes ill, Aemilia resolves to do anything to save him, even if it means seeking help from her estranged lover, Will—or worse, making a pact with the Devil himself.

In rich, vivid detail, Sally O'Reilly breathes life into England's first female poet, a mysterious woman nearly forgotten by history. Full of passion and devilish schemes, *Dark Aemilia* is a tale worthy of the Bard.

Dark Aemilia: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady Details

Date : Published May 27th 2014 by Picador (first published 2014)

ISBN : 9781250048134

Author : Sally O'Reilly

Format : Hardcover 448 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Romance, European Literature, British Literature

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From Reader Review *Dark Aemilia: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* for online ebook

Leslie says

It's very rare that I come across a book in which there was nothing about it that I can speak kindly of and prevent it from getting a one star rating. I wish there was something positive that I can say about *Dark Aemilia* but when the main emotion you feel when you finished reading the book is relief, it pretty much sums up what you thought about the book.

From the beginning, the book failed to capture and retain my attention. Which is disappointing considering it was a story involving real historical figures, which includes William Shakespeare, in a fictional tale about an illicit and doomed love affair. I can't really pinpoint exactly why I couldn't get into the story. Books that I love had the ability to draw me into what was happening and making me care about the characters. In this book, however, I felt disconnected from the characters and therefore never was able to get invested into their story. The narrative came off flat to me and seemed like it was one big exposition that at times came off jumbled and long. I didn't get the feel of Shakespeare's time period. The writing was such that I personally didn't think it did the job of bringing the Elizabethan period to life. Furthermore, I wasn't sure whether the book was trying for a realistic tone of a historical fiction or it wanted to be a mixture of historical fiction and fantasy. I thought the book could've done without the mention of magic and demons. It seemed like Sally O'Reilly wasn't as committed to including the idea and only went part way with it thus resulting in a disjointed aspect of the tale. It didn't feel like it fit in with the story and made certain scenes seem off.

Being a book about a secret love affair it didn't have the feel of it. I was expecting that aspect of the story to have been more well developed than it was. I thought the affair between Shakespeare and Aemilia began quickly, seemingly out of the blue without any real foundation, and continuing for a few chapters and then ending. I wanted to see their relationship develop in stages to give me time to get to know them and become involved in their affair. Unfortunately, to me it just appeared like they met a few times to sleep together while professing their undying love to each other.

It didn't help that neither Shakespeare nor Aemilia were characters that I liked. There wasn't enough time given to Shakespeare in this book to really get to know him and his character. It was just the basics with him: playwright, husband and Aemilia's lover. So in a sense, there wasn't enough given to me to form a proper opinion and the more appropriate feeling I have towards him is indifference. On the other hand, I wanted to like Aemilia. Considering in real life, she was considered the first female poet of her times, she would be an interesting character to read about. I think O'Reilly tried to do that, but she came off more as an angry female who blames the world for her plight. Even though her arguments and ideas have merit, the way she presents them makes her sound whiny and snobbish. There is a way in which Aemilia can still champion women's ability as writers without coming off as a primadonna. Not even her love for her child, Henry, and her fight to save him from the plague can make me like her.

The book's summary captured my attention and made me want to read the book. In some ways that's the most interesting part of the book. For myself, I never was enraptured with the story. At times it seemed forced and didn't really know what angle it wanted to take (i.e. the demons, witches, and conjuring of said demons within a historical fiction) which made the story seem disjointed to me. My attention often times wandered and I sped read through a lot of the story just so I can get closer to finishing it. When this happens, it doesn't bode well for the book as is the case with *Dark Aemilia*.

Jane says

Aemilia Bassano was born in 1569, the illegitimate child of a musician in the court of Queen Elizabeth. She was raised - and educated – in the household of the Countess of Kent. When she grew up she became part of the Queen’s household, and the mistress of Henry Carey, the Lord Chamberlain. Aemilia kept those positions for many years, but she lost them when she fell pregnant; she was cast off and married off – to the lowliest of court musicians. He – Alfonso Lanyer- was quick to spend the dowry that his bride brought him, and within a year the couple were poor and struggling

.... and yet - somehow - Aemilia Lanyer became the first woman have a volume of poetry published

*But surely Adam can not be excused,
Her fault though great, yet he was most to blame;
What Weakness offered, Strength might have refused,
Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame:
Although the Serpent’s craft had her abused,
God’s holy word ought all his actions frame,
For he was Lord and King of all the earth,
Before poore Eve had either life or breath.*

*Who being framed by God’s eternal hand,
The perfectest man that ever breathed on earth;
And from God’s mouth received that straight command,
The breach whereof he knew was present death:
Yea having power to rule both Sea and Land,
Yet with one Apple won to loose that breath
Which God had breathed in his beauteous face,
Bringing us all in danger and disgrace.*

(From ‘Eve’s Apology in Defense of Women’ by Amelia Lanyer)

Such a woman, such a life and such a gift to a historical novelist.

Sally O’Reilly has spun a story around the known facts of Aemilia’s life wonderfully well. And she adds in a hypothesis of her own which, though unlikely, she makes so very believable. What if Aemilia was the ‘Dark Lady’ of William Shakespeare’s sonnets?

The sixteenth century lives and breather from the first word, with a wealth of details and such colour in the rich, lush prose. The Elizabeth’s court is painted with such bright colours, and I was utterly captivated, but it was when the story moved to the dark and dirty streets, and the gaudy world of the theatre, that the story took flight.

It was easy to see that Aemilia’s beauty, charm, wit and intelligence made her a favourite at court – and a particular favourite of the Queen; and it was equally easy to see that in a male dominated society, with little

limited means to determine her own fate, even those qualities would not make her life secure.

It was Aemilia herself who pulled me through the story. She was fascinating, she was infuriating, and she was a real, fallible woman who was prepared to fight for the things she wanted. And most of all she fought for the son she loved so dearly.

That took her to some very dark places – and at time it veered dangerously close to melodrama, but the stark reality of Aemilia’s situation and the choices she had to make, and the cleverness of the plotting, saved it.

And that brings me to William Shakespeare. Sally O’Reilly painted his character so well, giving him the intelligence and wit he needed to write as he did, the charm to court Aemilia, and also making him vulnerable and fallible. The doubts about whether he wrote all of the work attributed to him are used very cleverly in the plot, and there’s a very nice explanation of the matter of the ‘second best bed’.

The portrayal of the dying Elizabeth I is very done too, balancing queenly regality and human vulnerability; and though I doubted that she would have summoned Aemilia, who had been assent from court for some years to her side, I was captivated by their dialogue and by the vivid storytelling.

The twists and turns of the plot – many of them so very clever – held me from start to finish.

There are one or two liberties taken – and a few times when the story was a little darker, a little more explicit than it needed to be. But in the end that didn’t matter.

I was pulled right into Elizabethan England.

I met a fascinating woman. I am so, so pleased that we met.

And I do believe that she might have inspired a poet

*“Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madman’s are
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night”*

(William Shakespeare – sonnet 147)

The Irregular Reader says

Dark Aemilia is rich in historical detail, drawing liberally from the history of the people involved and London itself. The blending of science and magic is nicely done, and fits in well with the nascent scientific process of the era. Ultimately, however, I found the book was unable to keep my attention. Aemilia is an intelligent, educated woman, and historically regarded as Shakespeare's muse. Yet here she is portrayed as some sort of sex-starved, unable to control herself, intellect out the window character. I feel like we are given little reason for Aemilia and Shakespeare to be in love, aside from the historical fact that they were lovers. The Author missed a great opportunity to take the little we know about both Aemilia and Shakespeare and

bring us something more than basic romance.

Amanda says

A well researched Shakespearean era tale that has as much tragedy, revenge, love and lust as can be found in any play by the Bard himself. Wonderful descriptive passages made the scenes come alive to the point that you could almost smell the festering bile that filled the streets. Sadly, for me, this was a story that had so much potential but felt too choppy and underdeveloped in many places. Story arcs would be initiated and then abandoned for chapters at a time only to be taken up again briefly but not explained. I found myself frustrated to tears near the end (I can't say why as I don't want to mention any spoilers) as a story line simply ended with no explanation at all. I think that the author has a wonderful turn of phrase and fabulous imagination and it was in no way a terrible book but I just found the stop-start story to be too frustrating. On a side note, I didn't find the language too off putting even though the use of a word that I loathe was more frequent than I liked.

J. Else says

Overview – “Dark Aemilia” is a story about a strong and passionate woman, is extremely well researched, and proposes that perhaps Aemilia Bassano was the woman behind Shakespeare’s musings. However, I found few good character moments in the storyline and felt that more detail should have been given to the process of Aemilia’s writing craft. I was so excited to read this story but was sadly let down.

Part 1: Passion – There is no depth or emotion. The characters continually jump into bed together and make stupid choices. When did Amelia fall in love with Will Shakespeare? The only “out of bed” moment was when he was criticizing her poetry. And they never really talked nicely or lovey-dovey to each other. Aemilia is supposedly learned, and I thought this would come out with her moments with Shakespeare (especially as he fleshes out plays – I wanted some of this as I used to study Shakespeare in college!), but she ends up being more of a bragger and insulter than a doer.

Additionally, there were lots of lewd comments and name calling. The main character makes stupid choices ("this guy seems to want to rape me, but I'm going to stay and have a glass of wine and read him my poems"). And I really got frustrated with the overuse of the word "cunt," which I'm not a fan of.

The preview of the book states: The daughter of a Venetian musician, Aemilia Bassano came of age in Queen Elizabeth’s royal court. The Queen’s favorite, she develops a love of poetry and learning, maturing into a young woman known not only for her beauty but also her sharp mind and quick tongue. None of this was in the book! This is the stuff I wanted and expected to read about! How did she become the queen’s favorite? What does it feel like to play a virginal instrument for the queen? What books of learning were her favorite and where did she study them? Nothing. So this book does not give the reader a chance to get to know the character. It portrays her only as a prostitute and never rises above this, which is extremely disappointing if you’re trying to build an interesting and strong female protagonist. Aemilia even refers to herself often in derogatory and condescending terms.

I will state that the verbiage feels very authentic and helps to set the historical stage. I appreciate the terms and vernacular use in Aemilia’s thoughts, metaphors, and phrases (at the same time, less use of the “f” word

and other fornication terms would be welcome). However, the vocab list at the back of the book should be expanded. A lot of words are missed. And while it states around the title pages that there are maps, no such maps are in the advanced reader copies sadly (I really like historical maps).

Part 2: Prophecy & Part 3: Petulance - I'm glad to be past the "passion" part of the story where love and sex seems to be the same thing. In these new chapters, Aemilia's son is 10 years old, and he's a manipulative hellion. He calls his mom a whore and says to her that he needs to climb trees, play with dead frogs like footballs, and blind cats "like all normal boys do." I was disgusted. He wants to participate in the bawdy and lewd entertainment including following plague carts? I know motherly love knows no bounds, but Henry makes it hard for the audience to connect with. This boy seems much older than 10 and extremely ill-witted.

I feel like the author knows a great deal about this time period but does not respect it. Every character is a stereotype. Priests, papists, players, and common people are all lacking manners and morals. Almost every interaction is vulgar. And the word "dugs" is grating on my nerves.

Aemilia's servant, Joan, is the only appealing character in these chapters. She's made mistakes in the past, has learned from them, and lives her life to help others. Her sacrifice is very heartrending, though I would have been fine with less gore. While its brief, the author chosers her words carefully to make the action very succinct and easy to picture.

Part 3: Philosophy – It amazes me how Aemilia continues to be rather brash, stubborn, and does not listen to others. She never learns. She prays to God when it's convenient but expects instant results. I understand how she does not want to be tamed by the world, but her personality is rather frustrating.

The story itself has a rather stunted flow to it. I'm glad the author included a brief history of events by date; otherwise, I would not have known certain things which happened including Alfonso's first sailing expedition. When I read their discussion of this venture, I had no idea when it had happened and had to stop and review the author's timeline. These timelines are usually reserved for events outside of the character's lives, so I'm not sure if the author intended to use the timeline as a substitute for writing about certain events? The second expedition was mentioned prior to it occurring, but many events never seem to happen during the chapters though were mentioned afterwards. The only event experienced firsthand was Elizabeth's death and funeral. This makes the storyline come across as piecemeal.

At one point, it seems like Aemilia is finally learning something about forgiveness and humbling her anger. But then, after knowing she missed a meeting with Will, she reads a spiteful letter to her about how hurt he by what happened, and she goes back to her old pride-filled ways again. Thus, she calls upon a demon to exact revenge... including on her neighbor's son who's always been a loyal friend!!! She has just seen Tom Flood ask for forgiveness for his ways, blames himself for his children's deformity, and commits himself to the woman he loves and the conjoined twins she birthed. Yet she gives the demon HIS name for revenge? I really lost all respect for her when she let his name slip. He did not intentionally steal her play! His fate would have had more of an emotional punch if he had not been mentioned to Lilith.

Part 4: Poetry – The last two scenes in this section were beautiful. I think I felt this because the gruesome and graphic elements were avoided. It was focused on Aemilia and her emotions. However, the publication of her first poetry book was rather rushed. I thought the point of the book was for her to accomplish her dream of getting published, and we never got the payoff when it finally happened after much persecution and doubt. Men would laugh at her when she mentioned writing, yet when it happens, there was no written emotional reaction. It just sort of happened one day without a hitch. I was disappointed that the process which brought to fruition her historic poems, making her the first published female poet, were not fleshed

out. And I wanted more of them included.

To my surprise, I was left completely breathless by a couple heartfelt moments. The last pages at the re-built Globe were illustrated with care and love. I enjoyed Aemilia's observations before Burbage walked out. I think this was a great ending. However, it made it feel more like Shakespeare's story than hers as it ended as a tribute to him.

But the moment that made this book for me was when the shades were opened. Aemilia comes to say her goodbyes to a dying Shakespeare. Sadly, since their parting, he has become badly burned from the fire at the Globe. When she walks into the room where he is dying, the shades are drawn, so she cannot see his face. At the end of their dialogue, he asks her to draw the shades. But instead of detailing how he looks now, the author substitutes this for a memory of Aemilia's. It was a moment from when they were newly in love. So rather than seeing a burned face, the author gives us a tanned and youthful face full of love for the title character. It illustrates how Aemilia finally looks at him with her heart. I teared up when I read this and sometimes tear up just thinking about how tender this moment was. Finally, we see true love. I never got the impression Aemilia understood this until that point. Very, very well written. A truly poetic and emotionally-charged sequence. This memory is our last encounter of Shakespeare, and it's the best part of the story.

Summary - So much more of this book could have been like these last chapters. The vulgarity was not necessary at all. It would have been nice to focus more on the craft of writing than the sex. Shakespeare and Aemilia had in common a love of the written word. Molding them together through this art would have really shown depth to their characters and relationships. I never felt their connection. But we do not get the development of this. We only get their lusty moments. This book could have been great, but I think the author focused on the wrong aspects. I do not want to read about Aemilia's dirty thoughts or her bed habits. I want to read about her love of poetry and how this relates to her everyday life. Do certain places inspire her? What barriers does she overcome to bring the words to life (as this was a problem for her at the beginning of the story)?

The author did a great bit of research, but most of the story is fabricated (and she admits this). I appreciated her details to the small elements of life from that time period. I loved the rich vernacular that felt authentic to the period. I liked seeing Shakespeare's plays come to life. But overall, Aemilia's character did not show much growth. She was the same stubborn, headstrong, crass person from start to finish.

A lot of aspects are hit upon the book, but nothing is ever really focused on for long. There are the monarchs, there's the religious bigotry, the plagues, MacBeth forgery, witchcraft, scientifically-created humans, demons, etc. It's like O'Reilly wants to do a lot of things but does not give time enough to give these elements meaning. So I was not sure what the author was trying to get across by including such a vast array of plot elements. None of them ever get a resolution.

I remember when I was in "Romeo and Juliet" in college, and some of the other actors were extremely serious about NOT mentioning "MacBeth" behind the scenes. You could not say the word without fear of cursing the production. I thought it was interesting how the author brought this to life and never really answered if it was supernatural or natural causes to the curse upon "MacBeth." Either way, I liked the exploration.

I would probably read another story by this author. Her attention to detail is superb. However, I hope there is more focus on other emotions besides lust and other actions than nighttime rendezvouses.

Barb says

Aemilia Bassano, enjoyed the advantages of being mistress to Lord Hunsdon for years, he was an excellent protector and provider. During their relationship she had an affair with William Shakespeare. Later she marries her cousin Alfonso Lanyer, a poor life partner, and raises her son far from the glitter and prosperity of court.

I'm trying to figure out why this novel didn't work for me. I love fiction set during the Elizabethan period especially if it includes the plague, which this novel does. The period details are well done, including details about clothing, marketing, food, music and the customs of the Queen's court. The backdrop created for this story is rich and lush and alive with the sights and smells of London.

I did enjoyed the beginning of the story where Aemilia and Shakespeare were involved but looking back, even that portion of the book left me wanting. I guess what was missing was a depth of emotion on Aemilia's part, I just didn't feel the passion or the disappointment for the turn of events that cause Aemilia and William to part ways. I also didn't care for the timing of the critical plot element which created the tension and conflict between them, it felt somewhat contrived.

While enjoying most of what I was reading I disliked the heavy-handedness of the theme of male domination and female submission, I found it and the claim of Aemilia's cleverness somewhat redundant. I wanted to see her cleverness in action and not just be told repeatedly that she was 'as clever as a man'. I also didn't care for the supernatural thread that ran through the story, it felt underdeveloped. Other events also seem contrived. Aemilia's being summons to the Queen's death bed seemed very unlikely and the subsequent conversation the two women have even less likely. When the queen dies soon after, Aemilia decides to risk contagion from the plague to go see the Queen's funeral procession and offers us her reason as wishing to see the queen one more time, despite having just seen her. As I'm reading all of these things are niggling at me.

Other things bothered me, I was disappointed by the impromptu reunion between Aemilia and William as well as his lack of reaction to seeing a certain family member. And I realized I disliked Aemilia when she was cruel to her neighbor and supposed friend, Anne for the way she makes ends meet. This is the woman Aemilia confesses to thinking of another man while bedding her husband, Alfonso. Aemilia then tells us that Will is this other man, which was rather obvious to anyone reading the book. Aemilia was a writer but we hear very little about her writing and what she has written. I confess to throwing in the towel when the carter collecting the corpses of the plague victims begins to sexually assault one of the corpses. Calling out "Who wants a lick of these fine dugs?" Dugs being slang for breasts and used six times prior to this occasion.

I'm sorry, this just wasn't for me and I didn't think the things I disliked were going to improve. Other readers might not be bothered by the issues I had with the story but I couldn't get past them.

Thank you to Picador Publishers and the Amazon Vine program for making this book available to me in exchange for an honest review.

Lucinda says

A boldly imaginative romp through Shakespearian past that's richly evocative

An exquisitely sumptuous story that's as acutely imagined as *Shakespeare in Love* and *Elizabeth*. Seeped in authenticity and delicious detail, this spellbinding novel of Witchcraft and poetry takes you on an unforgettable journey. The intensely passionate and compelling saga of Aemilia Lanyer {the 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's Sonnets} is a romantic tragedy, underpinned by extensive historical research and depth. This story of the most famous playwright's muse and his one true love is a heartrending account that tugs and the heartstrings, by leaving you inwardly drained by its impacting resonance. *Dark Aemilia* will make you gasp in shock and nostalgia for a world one never knew and the erotica within. Profoundly intelligent and effortlessly classy this highly believable work of fiction is a dazzling tale; so darkly magnetic and mysterious!

An assured writer brings Elizabethan London vividly to life on the page, by evoking all the senses and sensuality of the times so acutely. Aemilia is a true heroine whose passionate, fiery nature and drive is so courageous that she faces such dark times headlong with admirable gusto. Theatrical life at the Globe Theatre to the dead-carts and plague-pits of the streets are encapsulated within beautiful descriptions and engaging prose. I was enchanted by this historical read that was intriguing, beguiling and deeply enriching by an author who has shocked and surprised.

The tale of the woman in the shadows is one that will open your mind to Shakespeare's world, and what it really was like during hard times full of tribulations and strife. O'Reilly's sharp writing style has a deft, light touch and is full of wit and frivolity despite the serious nature of the subject.

*"Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madman's are
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night"*

William Shakespeare – sonnet 147

Anyone seeking a sensational read with an engaging protagonist and thoughtful storyline will find this tale a truly enviable edition, which you'll be desperate to delve into!

* I won a copy of *Dark Aemilia* by Sally O'Reilly through a Goodreads, first-read book giveaway *

Erin says

Find this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot...>

Sally O'Reilly's *Dark Aemilia* is unlike any Shakespeare inspired piece I've ever encountered. Offering a unique twist on the Bard's Dark Lady, I found the tale bold and imaginative. It is rough in several places and ultimately fell into the 'not for me' category, but that does not mean it was entirely without merit.

Though they share remarkably few scenes, the tortured relationship O'Reilly crafted between Will and Aemilia held a lot of appeal for me. Spanning Will's career, it was easy to imagine his conflict of emotions and how they might have influenced his writing over time. I also appreciated how their mutual interests served as a double edged sword.

I also appreciated the atmospheric quality of the narrative. Taking place in the streets of London, O'Reilly is faithful to history and gives her readers an appropriately grim illustration of life under both Elizabeth and James. The night Marie goes into labor and the plague scenes are shocking, but I felt such moment brought authenticity to the narrative and emphasized the realities of the period.

That said, there are several instances in which I feel the author's explicitness crude, vulgar, and entirely unnecessary...

I wonder how many times she's sucked off Inchbald to earn enough to buy such an extravagant gewgaw. Or perhaps he gave it to her in fair exchange, for services rendered. Oh, Lord, now I can see her lips, pulsing away at his groin! And the white crumbs of her face powder, dusting his curly pubes.

Yeah... I really didn't need that mental image and I don't think it really added much to Aemilia's story.

I was also irked that the flow of the narrative often came across as forced, awkward, and irrational. Take for example the scene where Elizabeth calls Aemilia to her deathbed after a ten year absence. Maybe it is just me, but I felt the moment far-fetched within the context of the story. It struck me as an unnatural choice, a scene fueled by the author's desire to write Elizabeth's character rather than plausible context.

Finally, I really didn't like O'Reilly characterization of Lilith. Conceptually I felt the cult of women made great reading material, but I feel very strongly that O'Reilly took the idea too far in allowing the supernatural to materialize as a tangible force in Aemilia's world. The end result is less historic fiction than it is historic fantasy and undermined her own ambition to 'tell a story that was [both] authentic and historically accurate.'

In sum, Dark Aemilia is an intriguing tale, but one I feel best appreciated by those who approach it with an open mind and strong stomach.

Karen says

This could have been a really fascinating subject for a historical fiction novel in the right hands, but unfortunately the author chose to go the sensationalist route.

This novel is about an actual woman, Aemilia Bassano Lanyer, who was the mistress of Lord Hunsdon at Queen Elizabeth I's court. She was married off when she became pregnant (which was usually what happened with royal or aristocratic mistresses then); and later became the first professional woman poet in England. This much is known about her from written historical sources.

There is also speculation that she might have been the inspiration for Shakespeare's sonnets about "The Dark Lady," usually on the rather slim evidence that she was one of the few women he would have known at court who had dark hair, complexion, and eyes because of her Italian heritage.

There is no actual evidence that she and Shakespeare were lovers, and certainly no evidence that she wrote the play "Macbeth" as the author Sally O'Reilly has her doing, but of course anything is possible. It also helps O'Reilly's story-line that the timing and provenance of many of Shakespeare's plays are so mysterious, and that it was customary for authors to do a good deal of "borrowing" from other sources back then.

It's an interesting premise for a historical fiction novel, so I can see why O'Reilly wanted to write about it.

And she does do a good job of portraying what every-day life was like in Elizabethan England. In particular, she details the difficulties, prejudices, and downright sexual predation that women had to deal with then, especially any woman who was ambitious to make a name for herself in her own right. I gave the novel an extra star for this very authentic treatment.

But O'Reilly ruined it for me when (view spoiler)

It was like she wanted to write both a historical fiction and a fantasy story, but few authors can make these two styles mesh well together.

I was also disappointed, but not really surprised, that O'Reilly chose to (view spoiler) This is a common speculation that many historians and scholars have made. Of course anything is possible, as I said before. However, rumors of secret lovers and illegitimate children were also common slanders that many single or widowed female rulers were subjected to back then.

It is extremely unlikely that Queen Elizabeth – a ruling monarch who lived every aspect of her life in public -- could have had illegitimate children without a lot of people knowing about it. I wish O'Reilly had resisted this easy method of titillation.

I'm sure there are many readers who will like this type of novel, but I prefer even my historical fiction to have a more realistic tone, so this book just didn't do it for me. Which is too bad, because I think this novel could have been so much more.

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

3.5 stars. Aemilia Bassano was a published poet, a major feat for a woman of her time (this story takes place during the height of the Elizabethan era). She also may have been one of the muses for the one and only William Shakespeare. The operative phrase here is "may have been." In this book, O'Reilly explores who Aemilia was and makes a conjecture as to what her relationship may have been with Shakespeare. It is a fascinating look, which will interest my fellow historical fiction readers.

Aemilia is a very fascinating figure. Although she had many achievements for a woman of her time, her fate is still very much tied up with the men that she marries or loves. Although Aemilia may have been Shakespeare's muse, they do not share many scenes in this book. The book really focuses on Aemilia's life and Will almost plays a sub-role throughout the book. I wish that Will had been in the book more as I really love reading about him! I wish that there had been more of a focus on some parts of her life (maybe more about how her and Will's relationship started) than others but overall, you get a really nice overview of her story.

There was some really good writing here. O'Reilly tries and succeeds in capturing the sort of bawdy language that might have been bandied about during Shakespeare's time. It really added a nice air to the book!

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

This bawdy, dramatic, and atmospheric historical novel brings to life Aemilia Bassano Lanyer, a nearly forgotten Elizabethan poet -- the first woman in England to be published -- who, in O'Reilly's hands, becomes a lover and muse to William Shakespeare -- the inspiration of his Dark Lady sonnets.

Set between 1592 and 1616 in London, the novel is narrated by Aemilia. The young mistress of an older courtier, Aemilia is renowned at court for her wit and beauty, and she catches the attentions of playwright Shakespeare. But their affair leads her to a forced marriage with her cousin and she's removed from court, where she stewes over improving her fortunes, pursuing her passion for poetry, and raising her son. As the plague strikes London, Aemilia's focus shifts toward more dangerous territory as she explores black magic to save all that she loves.

This was the kind of book I dove into one morning and couldn't put down until I finished. Aemilia's voice is knowing, brash, and unapologetic. She's hungry for her independence, frustrated with her useless husband and her writing, which doesn't match her aspiration. (How I can relate to that!)

Although Aemilia reads vibrant, real, and realized, sadly, the grand love affair between Aemilia and Shakespeare felt flat to me. Thankfully, their affair is only a brief interlude in Aemilia's long and eventful life (despite the importance implied by the book jacket), and I was more caught up in her relationship with her son (especially as I had just found out I was having a boy) and her struggles as a writer.

I found the setting, while not specifically articulated in any detail, was well evoked -- I felt like I was in Elizabethan London, all the glittery and grimy parts of it. There are some supernatural elements, especially toward the end of the story, which I quite liked; the hints of magic reminded me of those magical moments in Elizabethan works and touch upon the historical Lanyer's own writing.

The book is filled with marvelous extras: about ten pages of historical notes, a timeline, glossary of Elizabethan terms, and a list of suggested reading.

A delicious read of a long-forgotten writer, this is a fun historical novel for those who like fierce heroines, some vulgar language (Aemilia doesn't mince words!), fabulous sense of place, and plenty of drama.

The Lit Bitch says

I was expecting something entirely different with this novel than what I actually read. I thought this was going to be a novel about love and magic in Queen Elizabeth's court.

Yes it was that....sort of, but it seemed more like an erotic historic novel. Aemilia could have been interesting if she wasn't so crass. I normally don't shy away from graphic erotica or colorful language when it adds something to the story or character, but in this novel I just didn't think it was necessary and didn't really add anything. It seemed more like it was being used for shock value instead.

I liked that Aemilia was a very spirited character and didn't want to be tamed or tempered by society, but at the same time she was so stubborn and unforgiving that it made it hard for me to like her or see any of her other redeeming qualities. She was very clever and sassy which I liked but I was so put off by her head

strong attitude that I struggled to identify with her.

For someone who was so self sufficient and independent I often felt that she made poor choices.

I thought many of her descriptions were historically accurate and I loved the use of period language in many parts of the story. That was the only thing that saved this novel for me.

This novel seems like the kind of book either readers liked it or they didn't. I was expecting something entirely different, especially from the description of the novel.

This book needs to be read with an open mind, for the right person it was probably a wonderful read, for me it fell short in too many areas unfortunately. I've read plenty of other reviews where people loved this book so if you have this on your TBR list, you might want to give it a go with an open mind and you might like it.

See my full review [here](#)

Beth says

In language that has the feel of Elizabethan times, O'Reilly portrays Aemilia as a whore that has a short time period with Shakespeare and the effects this has on her life. Effects? She has his child Henry to raise, she pines for him and hates what he lets happen to her. Aemilia is not only a whore but aspires to be a poet and writer. Her life is miserable because during the time of the book, 1592-1616, women don't count. She is a feminist before they were acknowledged. She thinks and knows that she has the smarts and education of a man. When she writes men call it doggerel. When she writes the Macbeth play, she doesn't get the credit, Shakespeare does. Men play the parts of women in Shakespeare's time, women don't get to do that.

The book seems like froth at first but it continually proposes: 1. not keeping women from fulfillment
2. the need for education to be put to use.

The book is filled with darkness and gore, the plague, death, primitive beliefs and witching. It is a book that can make one think how lucky we are that we did not live in that hectic time when Catholics and Protestants were in turns reaching ascendancy.

Sometimes I thought there were too many words and I skipped lots of them. At other times, I enjoyed the flow of words which went on to make long sentences describing a scene. An example on p 415 is typical of what I mean: "The seething crowd is chatting, munching, singing, dining, gaming, smoking and swigging small beer."

Although the feel of the times is true and Aemilia actually lived, the author says she could find no such connection between Shakespeare and Aemilia.

Tracey Allen at Carpe Librum says

Little does she know it, but author Sally O'Reilly wrote this book just for me. Set in London during the late 1500s and the time of Queen Elizabeth I, *Dark Aemilia* has it all: Shakespeare, plague, sorcery, witchcraft,

witty dialogue, great writing and hot sex scenes. I mean come on! Sally O'Reilly, I love you!

And the cover, oh the cover, simply stunning.

Based on a real person, Aemilia is an inspirational woman born before her time, thought to be Shakespeare's dark muse, struggling with the role of women in society and how little power they had over their destiny. She was England's first female poet, and in O'Reilly's hands she's intelligent, proud, headstrong and passionate.

Here's a great quote from Page 129:

"...all my other little aches and torments have gone. Those besetting symptoms that all of us in London must put up with: soot-wheeze, ale-runs, head-gripe, back-ache, lassitude and dread-belly - not to mention sundry scabs, carbuncles and lesions of the skin - all such ailments have vanished."

And this from Page 270:

" 'Leave this house', I say. 'Get out, you scripture-spouting, fish-cold arse-wart. Or I'll call down a curse which'll curdle the guts in your belly'. "

Brilliant writing, richly evocative and an intelligent story, I loved and adored this novel and didn't want it to end.

Dark Aemilia is for lovers of historical fiction, witty dialogue, Shakespeare and the darker side of London in the 16th Century. Yes please! I can't wait to see what talented author Sally O'Reilly writes for me next. A tale worthy of the Bard I'm sure.

And another quote from Page 270, because I just have to:

"I'll broil your brain in its shallow skull! Mangle your preachifying words into Bedlam babble, and corrupt your skin into a thousand worm-infested sores! I'll make you pray for Hades as a respite from your pain! And I'll twist your mind to such distraction that you'll tear off all your limbs to find relief and sanity! Do you hear me, you pox-groined, foul-nosed turd-stain?"

Helen says

Dark Aemilia is a fictional account of the life of Aemilia Lanyer, one of several women whose names have been suggested as possible candidates for the 'Dark Lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets. She was also one of the first women in England to have a book of poetry published.

Born Aemilia Bassano, the illegitimate daughter of a Venetian musician at the court of Elizabeth I, Aemilia becomes the mistress of the much older nobleman Lord Hunsdon. When she discovers that she is pregnant, she is forced to leave court and is married off to another court musician, Alfonso Lanyer. However, the father of her child (according to Sally O'Reilly) is probably not Hunsdon, but a young playwright by the name of William Shakespeare.

Aemilia first meets Shakespeare at a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* where she confronts him over his negative portrayal of women in the play. Not the best of starts to their relationship, but a brief affair follows – despite the fact that Shakespeare is already married. Aemilia finds a kindred spirit in William, a man who shares her love of poetry, literature and the theatre, before their affair comes to an end after a

misunderstanding. Aemilia resigns herself to life away from court with Alfonso Lanyer and her beloved baby boy, Henry, but she is reunited with Shakespeare during an outbreak of plague in London. And when Henry becomes seriously ill, Aemilia is prepared to do anything to save his life.

My feelings about *Dark Aemilia* are very mixed. I would like to be able to say that I loved it, but that wouldn't be true; in fact I came very close to abandoning it several times during the first half of the book. I felt that I was reading about nothing but Aemilia's love affairs and at the risk of sounding like a prude, I thought the language was unnecessarily vulgar. I don't always have a problem with that sort of thing, but in this case I didn't feel that it was adding anything to the story. I kept reading, though, and somewhere in the middle of the book I found that I was finally being drawn in. The language remained bold and lively (and appropriate to the Elizabethan setting) but not as explicit as it was earlier on in the novel and the plot moved away from Aemilia's love life to focus on other storylines.

As Sally O'Reilly states in her author's note, the real Aemilia would not have been a feminist in the modern sense of the word, but her surviving poetry (such as the poem *Eve's Apology in Defense of Women*) shows that she felt strongly about the roles of men and women. The fictional Aemilia speaks up on behalf of the female sex whenever she can, challenging the views of the men around her. As an intelligent and talented woman, she doesn't have the opportunities that would have been open to her if she had lived today and she finds it very difficult to gain any recognition for her work. This leads to an interesting interpretation of the question of who actually wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare – there's no evidence that Aemilia had any involvement in them, but Sally O'Reilly's theories work in the context of this novel.

Aemilia is a fascinating character and I was left wanting to know more about the real woman. William Shakespeare, though, is not really shown in a very good light and the portrayal of his romance with Aemilia didn't feel completely convincing to me. They didn't actually have many scenes together and when they did meet I didn't sense much love or passion between the two of them – not until very near the end. There were other characters in the book who interested me more than Shakespeare did; I was particularly intrigued by Simon Forman, the astrologer who was said to have cured himself of the plague. And this is where I need to mention another aspect of *Dark Aemilia*: black magic and the occult. I won't spoil the story by telling you exactly how this is woven into the plot, but I think this will be something you'll either love or hate!

While I did have my problems with *Dark Aemilia*, in the end my lasting impression of the book is of the wonderfully vivid portrayal of Elizabethan England. The writing is very atmospheric and there are some great descriptions of dark, dirty streets, crowded marketplaces, the sights and sounds of the Globe Theatre, the frozen River Thames in winter and a London ravaged by plague. I'm pleased I persevered and followed Aemilia's story through to the end and I would happily read more books by Sally O'Reilly.
