

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

Emilia

I hope you forget this night. Let me explain.

Emilia was commissioned by Shakespeare's Globe, first performing there in 2018 under the artistic direction of Michelle Terry. A close collaboration between the playwright, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, and the director, Nicole Charles, the production was praised for being a "meditation on the silencing of women", that spoke more as a piece of imagination than of history. Hailey Bachrach summarizes, "*Emilia* aimed to restore the spotlight to Aemilia Lanyer, a poet who has been proposed as the true 'Dark Lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets. In so doing, Morgan Lloyd Malcolm proposed that only fiction, not history, can free women of the past from the dismissal and neglect perpetuated by patriarchal historians."

Virginia Woolf anticipated the feminist function of *Emilia* in the "Shakespeare's Sister" passage from her 1929 extended essay *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf argued that a hypothetical sister of William Shakespeare, one Judith Shakespeare who possessed the same writing talent, would face so many psychological and societal impediments that her genius would never see the light of day. By contrast, Woolf drew attention to the heroines of Shakespeare's plays, as representations of women. Think of the sexual agency of Cleopatra, the ruthless ambition of Lady Macbeth, the gender-nonconformity of Rosalind. Women have been allowed to exist more authentically in Shakespearean fiction than in reality.

Theatre is an ephemeral art, a culture of revival, where older works are continuously reproduced for contemporary audiences. We often reach for the universality of stories, how they appeal to us across time and place. But instead of championing the timelessness of this modern play, I suggest that our *Emilia* defines the past and present of women and nonbinary experience, but it should not define the future. Let the experience of this performance move us all to listen to unheard voices so that, in a couple years from now, we find the message of this play antiquated, outdated. Let this play be timely, not timeless. Let not *Emilia* become a modern classic. Let our listening to unheard voices not be extraordinary.

The ghost of Hamlet's father patriarchally said, "Remember me" (1.5.91). I hope you don't. I challenge you, on behalf of the play: forget me.

Arushi Grover, Production Dramaturg

SOURCES

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