



Shakespeare's Sisters: Early Women Writers in Westminster Abbey Q&A – English Masterclass 2024 teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this [five-question survey](#).

Watch the Q&A here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHESjNlbdR0>

Please note that all opinions are of the individual speaking and do not represent the views of Westminster Abbey. Questions in italics were asked by post-16 students.

Questions for discussion

Watch the recording of the question-and-answer session between Professor Helen Hackett and Sophie Holland, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey.

Question 3 – *beginning at [00:15:15]*

In your opinion, do you think that Westminster Abbey should start a female Poets' Corner?

In her response, Helen mentions some campaigns to memorialise women writers around the country, which seem to be generating controversy. Look at images of the statues for Aphra Behn (in Canterbury) and Mary Wollstonecraft (known as *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft*). What do they say about these writers and how they are remembered? What do you think needs to be considered when planning a memorial, and how does the gender of the person affect this?

Question 4 – *beginning at [00:19:23]*

Why do you think it's important for us to explore the work of these female authors whose literary work is so unknown?

Helen talks about the literary canon, describing it as a list of authors considered important and worth studying. The establishment of the literary canon was partly to do with power, and historically it was made up of so-called great men. Considering this, do you agree or disagree with the statement that the literary canon is outdated and should be rewritten to consider different voices?

Question 5 – *beginning at [00:23:07]*

Do you believe had Mary, Queen of Scots not been of royal lineage, that she could've had success as a poet considering the restrictions on women at the time?

How is our view of women writers influenced by class?

Question 6 – beginning at [00:27:11]

How widespread was the practice of devisership for tombs? Was it a predominantly female practice where it did happen, or was Elizabeth Russell an outlier in this respect?

(N.B. Devisership is about taking a leading role in the design of monuments and tombs. For some, this may involve writing the words that appear on the tomb, while for others it may just be suggestions of imagery they would like to see. This would allow them to express their identity and personality through the memorial).

What can we learn about the society of the time that women were allowed to play an active role in tomb devisership?

Question 8 – beginning at [00:36:33]

Did women writers often collaborate with their male counterparts to produce literature?

Before female authorship was accepted, to what extent did successful female writers need to rely on the power and influence of men?

Question 10 – beginning at [00:39:36]

Is the quality of the writing of these 16th and 17th century female writers equal to male writers of this time period, or do we have to redefine what qualifies as good writing to acknowledge the obstacles they faced as women?

Helen explains that because of the social and cultural obstacles faced by women writers, we 'maybe can't expect to find a female Shakespeare'. Is it valuable to compare male and female contemporaries? Explain your reasoning.

Transcript

Speaker:

Professor Helen Hackett

Chair:

Sophie Holland, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey

Sophie Holland:

Hello, I'm Sophie and I work in the Learning team at Westminster Abbey. Thank you so much for joining this question and answer session which follows on from the lecture which we hope you've already watched and enjoyed on early women writers here at the Abbey. Westminster Abbey is a living Christian church and has been a place of worship for over 1,000 years. It's also a place of burial and memorialisation. If we think about Poets' Corner in the south transept of the Abbey, more than 100 poets and writers are buried or remembered here including many who were famous around the world, and others who were popular in their day but are now less well known. So, how did Poets' Corner come to be? The first poet buried here in 1400 was Geoffrey Chaucer, author of *The Canterbury Tales*, not because he was a poet but because he worked at the Abbey as the Clerk of the Works and was responsible for repairs to the building. Nearly 200 years later, the poet Edmund Spenser, who you might know for writing *The Faerie Queene*, asked to be buried near Chaucer and this began a tradition of literary burials and memorials which still continues today. But of course, we've already heard from the lecture how many writers, particularly female writers, can also be found in other corners of the Abbey. So I'm delighted to introduce our guest lecturer today, Helen Hackett, Professor of English Literature at University College London. Helen specialises in the 16th and 17th centuries, with particular interests in Shakespeare, writing by women and the representation of women. She's published seven books and many book chapters and journal articles. Her most recent book, *The Elizabethan Mind*, was published in 2022 by Yale University Press and is a study of the many debates in Shakespeare's time about the nature of the mind and selfhood, and how these informed the literature of the period. It includes a chapter on the female mind which I believe Helen will speak about later in a bit more detail. It's absolutely brilliant to have her here today. Welcome, Helen.

Helen Hackett:

Thanks so much, Sophie. Thanks for that lovely introduction and it's really great to be here.

Sophie Holland:

Fantastic. A massive thank you, Helen, for recording your fascinating lecture and for joining us for this Q&A as well. So, to all the teachers and students who are watching, we have had loads of brilliant questions submitted, so thank you, and I apologise in advance if your particular question isn't put to Helen today. We've assimilated some similar questions, and we'll aim to get through as many as we can in the time that we have. Do also please feel free to add any questions you might have in the chat box, and if we have time, we can hopefully post some of those to Helen as well. So without further ado, on to our first question.

Question 1 [00:02:41]

So Helen: When did your interest in early women writers begin and what or who inspired it?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, I also just want to say a general thank you for all the questions, which were fantastic, and gave me a lot to think about and it was really obvious that people had really watched and listened to the talk really attentively so that was really great to know. In answer to the question, I think I was a feminist from a really early age because my mother and my teachers brought me up to be a feminist and so I was very interested in the representation of women in literature, but I didn't encounter many female writers. I was thinking back, I didn't do any female writers at O-Level - I'm old enough to have done O-Levels. At A-Level the only female writer I did was Jane Austen and then at university I encountered some 19th and 20th century female writers, but they were still very much outnumbered by men. And then I was doing a PhD which was on images of Elizabeth I in literature, and through that I was starting to find out more about her writing. And I had a fantastic PhD supervisor called Katherine Duncan-Jones, who was a very notable scholar of Shakespeare and other 16th century literature, and I said to her: you know, I'm a bit puzzled because I know Elizabeth was really highly educated, I'm beginning to learn that she wrote some things, surely there were other privileged women in the period, royal women and aristocratic women, who also had a good education. Did they not write anything? You know, were there, why have I never heard of any female authors in the 16th and 17th centuries and why don't we study them? And she was really helpful, and she said: well, it's funny you should ask that. Because she subscribed to an academic journal called *English Literary Renaissance* and they'd actually just done a special issue on women writers, so she lent that to me and it just opened my eyes, because it had articles on about eight or ten women writers of the 16th and 17th centuries I'd never heard of. One of them was Mary Wroth {which is spelled W-r-o-t-h} and she wrote the first work of prose fiction by a woman in English, which was called the *Urania* and was published in 1621. It's what we call a romance, it's like a long fantastical story. So I went away and read that; it was like kind of delinquency or a digression from doing my PhD, so when I was getting fed up with my PhD I would go and read Mary Wroth's *Urania*, which I loved, and then I started doing work on that and then ever since then it's just been something I've been really fascinated by. Just all the early modern – I should explain the phrase 'early modern'. So people might know the expression Renaissance for the 16th and 17th centuries but increasingly we also use the expression early modern, which is an expression that historians use for that period. So when I talk about early modern women that's what I mean, I don't mean early 20th century which is what people sometimes think it means, I mean 16th and 17th century. And I just got really passionate about 16th and 17th century women writers and just wanted to tell everyone about them, so I've been researching them and teaching them ever since.

Sophie Holland:

Brilliant, it sounds like that was a really good timing for that magazine article as well. That's brilliant.

Helen Hackett:

Yeah. Yeah, I think it was quite sort of turning point in scholarship really when a lot of people were beginning to ask this question about, what about women in that period?

Question 2 [00:05:56]

Sophie Holland:

Fantastic, so: Do you think that you've missed any of the female authors in Westminster Abbey? {This is a two-parter I should say.} And are there any female writers from the 16th century that you think should be memorialised in the Abbey but currently aren't? And I'll just say that this question came through from a couple of students, including Josh.

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, thank you, I mean that's a great question. I mean I should confess at the outset to people watching that Sophie and her colleagues provided me with two lists of women buried or commemorated in the Abbey so I was able to use those as checklists. Now we think they're reasonably comprehensive and reliable. I did spot that actually they did miss one woman writer I know of – so Dorothy Osborne, who I talked about in my talk, she's actually not on the list, so there might be other women who weren't on the list that so far we've missed. Sophie also kindly pointed out to me that in Poets' Corner there are two female authors commemorated that I didn't mention, and they're commemorated by windows, stained-glass windows. So there's Fanny Burney, who was an 18th century novelist, and Elizabeth Gaskell, who was a 19th century novelist and biographer. But of course, I'm mainly interested in 16th and 17th century women writers and there are a couple that I realised I could have mentioned if I'd had a bit more time. They're both members of the Stuart family, so the royal dynasty of the Stuarts. In the Lady Chapel there's a Stuart family vault and it has a stone over it with many, many names inscribed on it, it's quite a long list, and two of them are worth mentioning as writers. So one is Arbella Stuart, who lived in the late 16th, early 17th century. She was actually a cousin of Elizabeth I and she has a fascinating life story. Because she was a cousin of the queen, she had a claim to the throne. Her grandmother was Bess of Hardwick, who was a formidable woman herself, who built Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, and recognising that her granddaughter Arbella as a claimant to the throne was a fantastic asset, she more or less held her prisoner at Hardwick while she kind of worked out how to deploy her as a kind of political bargaining counter. Arbella, meanwhile, tried to elope, she tried to get away with Edward Seymour, who was another claimant to the throne and the result was that Bess just locked her up even more tightly. And a government agent called Sir Henry Brouncker was sent to investigate the situation and Arbella wrote an extraordinary series of letters to him. So a bit like Dorothy Osborne, this is another example of women's writing in the form of letter writing. But Arbella Stuart, she just kind of, she pours out her state of mind, she was evidently very frustrated, very angry, increasingly distressed and at the same time she's very, she was obviously clearly highly intelligent, really self-aware about her own disturbed state of mind. And she writes about it really eloquently, she writes about 'my travelling mind and my scribbling melancholy'. So I find those letters really expressive and really fascinating. And then the other woman who's in the Stuart vault who's worth mentioning is Elizabeth of Bohemia, who's a couple of generations later. She's a daughter of James I, she becomes Queen of Bohemia, and she actually kept up a correspondence – well, she was part of actually quite a widespread intellectual network across Europe, and she had correspondence in letters with a lot

of the leading thinkers of the day but in particular she had a long correspondence over a number of years with the French philosopher René Descartes. He's very famous because he gives us the saying, 'I think, therefore I am'. He's often seen as someone really important in changing our thinking about selfhood and about the mind in relation to the body. He was thinking that through with Elizabeth of Bohemia because they were doing it in this exchange of letters, and she is increasingly being recognised as a philosopher herself. Now she didn't write a book of philosophy, she was doing it all in these letters, but collected together, in effect, they make a body of really significant philosophical work by her, thinking through again this question of mind-body relations which was so important in the 17th century. So there are two others that I could have mentioned.

In answer to the second part of the question, about women who should be memorialised in Westminster Abbey but currently aren't – I mean, I'm going to have to contain myself here because I actually have lots of them but I'm going to pick out a few and just mention them to you really briefly. Really what's happened is since that period in the 1980s when I was beginning to find out more about early modern women writers, many, many of them have been discovered, many are significant, and I think would deserve commemoration in the Abbey. So the first one I'm going to mention is called Isabella Whitney and she was writing in the 1560s and 70s. You may remember in the talk I described Aphra Behn and I said that many people, including Virginia Woolf, have thought of her as the first professional woman writer. Well really Isabella Whitney has a claim to that title because she was publishing works in print, and she was publishing them for money. They're poems, some of them are about the way that men treat women, some of them are about life as a servant in a household, some of them are about how difficult it is to live in London with not enough money, how you're surrounded by lots of kind of wonderful merchandise and wonderful things you want to do but you can't afford it. So she has a kind of, she's got a bit of a bite to her writing, it's got a bit of a satirical edge to it, and I think it's really enjoyable. Then there's Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke. Now she's an aristocrat, she's the sister of Philip Sidney who's a very important Elizabethan author and a lot of her writing actually was sort of generated by his death because he died young of battle wounds and after that she did a lot of writing in commemoration of him. So his death kind of empowered her to write, it legitimised her writing. She also, she completed a translation of the Psalms that he had begun, and she saw his work the *Arcadia*, which was a long work of prose fiction, she saw that through publication. But she also wrote original poetry, she did lots of translations, lots of different kinds of writing, very notable writer. Emilia Lanier, some people might have heard of. She's a candidate for Shakespeare's Dark Lady, possibly Shakespeare's mistress, but you know the evidence for that is a bit circumstantial. She's really of more interest to me because she's a very skilful poet in her own right and one of her notable poems is a long religious poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, which revisits the Bible and rewrites important Bible episodes from the point of view of women and kind of is a defence of women; she defends Eve against blame for the Fall and says Adam was more to blame. People might have come across her because in recent years a play has been written about her called *Emilia* by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, which has been very successful. It was put on first of all at Shakespeare's Globe, but I know, I've been hearing recently that various schools have been putting it on as a school production, so some of our viewers might be aware of that. A few more to mention briefly: Elizabeth Cary, she wrote the first original tragedy in English by a woman which is called *The Tragedy of Mariam*, really interesting play. Mary Wroth, I mentioned a moment ago, my favourite. {Wroth is spelled W-r-o-t-h.} She was actually the niece of Mary

Sidney and Philip Sidney. As I mentioned, she wrote this pioneering work of prose fiction, the first work of prose fiction by a woman in English, called the *Urania*. She also wrote the first sequence of love sonnets in English by a woman and she wrote an original play, a tragicomedy. And finally, I just want to mention Katherine Philips, who's a mid-17th century poet. She's really fascinating because she wrote poems celebrating female friendship and she celebrates it in very intimate, very rapturous terms, so some modern critics have felt we can describe her as a lesbian poet. Now that's not a term she would have used herself and it's probably not how she would have thought of herself. In fact, she writes a lot about how her love transcends the body but nevertheless the kind of passion with which she writes about her love for other women has led people to think about whether we can think of her as a lesbian poet. She was very celebrated in her own time, she's one of the female authors who is famous in her own time then became rather forgotten, and she was known by her pseudonym which was 'The Matchless Orinda'. So I've got crowds of women that I would like to get into Westminster Abbey, and I hope that just gives you some idea of how many really interesting and accomplished female writers there are in Shakespeare's time and soon afterwards.

Sophie Holland:

Yes, fascinating. I've written some of those down because I feel like it's, there's so many people buried and remembered here at the Abbey already it's nice to highlight some that we might not know but we'll get to know, and to think about who could be here too. So actually that leads really nicely onto our third question, which came through from quite a few different people – they're obviously interested in your opinion, Helen – including Ruby and Asmaa.

Question 3 [00:15:15]

So, what they've asked is: In your opinion, do you think that Westminster Abbey should start a female Poets' Corner?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, I think that's a really great question. I don't know how many of you have had the chance to visit the Abbey, but if you do you'll find it's absolutely crammed with tombs and monuments already. Poets' Corner itself is very full, and in the Abbey in general. You know, it feels to me when I go to the Abbey, it feels like everything's kind of piled in on top of each other, it doesn't feel like there's much room. I would like to see some kind of hall of fame of women writers; I don't know whether that would be at the Abbey or in some other location. We're doing a lot better now at recognising women artists, women in the visual arts, in earlier periods. So for instance, the Royal Academy currently has an exhibition of Angela Kauffman, Angelica Kauffmann I should say, who was an important 18th century painter. Tate Britain is about to have an exhibition of women artists, 1520 to 1820. So in the visual arts, you know, we're giving a much higher profile to women. I think we should be doing the same for writers as well. I should mention there are some women's libraries and women's archives in cities including London, Glasgow, Leeds and Bristol and

they're obviously doing fantastic work, but often their collections don't go back much earlier than the suffragettes and the campaign for the vote. There are also more public memorials generally around the country being put up to women writers. In 2020, a sculpture commemorating Mary Wollstonecraft was put up on Newington Green in London, which was designed by the sculptor Maggi Hambling, and actually was very controversial because some people didn't like it or didn't think it was appropriate. There's also a campaign on at the moment for a statue of Aphra Behn in Canterbury, which is probably where she came from, and there's a campaign afoot to have a statue of Jane Austen in Winchester. All of these campaigns seem to be generating controversy, but you know there are steps being taken to commemorate women. But I think we still have a lot of work to do to give more public recognition to the contributions of women to literature. So I think, yeah we need more, and the more commemorations the better, whether that's at Westminster Abbey – Sophie perhaps can tell us in a moment whether there's any room to do that there – or whether we had a specific place elsewhere that was a kind of hall of fame for women writers. I think it could be both a successful visitor attraction but also a place of learning, but Sophie, perhaps you can tell us more about the Abbey's view on this?

Sophie Holland:

Oh yeah, of course. Well, I thought because lots of people were interested in thinking: should we have a female Poets' Corner? that it might be useful just to explain the process of memorialisation at the Abbey. So we do have over 3,000 people buried here, and there are many, many more remembered as well. So just to explain at first that people are still being memorialised which actually might be surprising, you might not realise that, that we do still have memorials, they're still being added. Some have been added this year for example, so that is something that does still happen. Until the 18th century you could pay for a memorial at Westminster Abbey which is quite, just interesting to consider. That's not how it works now but it was until the 18th century. And just to explain how it works now is that essentially, the ultimate decision is taken by the Dean of Westminster. So he's the priest in charge, he's the head of Westminster Abbey and suggestions for memorialisation, they can be, and they are sent to him. So people can write in and make suggestions to him, and then what he... it's his decision in the end where a memorial is placed in the Abbey, but he will always consult very widely during that process with lots of experts essentially, and he will very carefully consider decisions. So that's just something that might be interesting to people to know that these are things, memorials still happen, and it is a process actually people can be part of as well.

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, that's fascinating.

Question 4 [00:19:23]

Sophie Holland:

Fantastic, thank you Helen. So, the next question is from Lily. So: Why do you think it's important for us to explore the work of these female authors whose literary work is so unknown?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, fantastic question. I mean I think there are several reasons for it. I think one is just simply historical justice because many of these are really good writers, and some of them were ignored or suppressed in their own time because of their gender. Others like Katherine Philips, who I mentioned a moment ago, or they were famous in their own time, but then they became forgotten as the whole idea of a literary canon took shape. And when I talk about the literary canon, what I mean by that is it's like the kind of register, the list of authors that we consider important, authors that we consider worth studying, and historically through the 19th and 20th centuries that was mainly made up of so-called great men. So, we need to rebalance that I think. I think another reason for looking back at these earlier women writers is to give us a female point of view. This is one thing I particularly enjoy about them, because as I mentioned, I grew up mainly studying male authors, many of whom I very much enjoyed. You know I loved reading John Donne, I loved reading Andrew Marvell, but they're telling me all about how men want to seduce women, to put it very, very crudely. You know, and in other ways they're very much writing from a male point of view about male experiences, and I just think reading female authors from the past gives us a much fuller insight into what those earlier periods were like – what it was like to live as a woman, to be treated as a woman in those periods. And thirdly, I think it's really important to rediscover these earlier women writers, because of how that affects us still today. Representation, I think, is really important. You've probably heard the saying, 'if you can't see it, you can't be it'. And OK, we know about a number of female writers from the 19th and 20th century, but if we kind of go through life thinking that there were no female writers before that, I think that does leave us thinking that women haven't made much contribution to literary life, they haven't made much contribution to national life, maybe they weren't all that capable. I think if we know of female writers reaching back to Shakespeare's time, it helps us to feel more powerful, more capable, more able to write in the here and now, I think it helps us to realise our potential and make a contribution. And Virginia Woolf actually, you might remember in the talk, I began by mentioning Virginia Woolf and her book, which I think is really important called *A Room of One's Own*. You know, she was the first person in many ways in the 1920s to think about many of these questions, and to challenge the status quo of the literary canon. And she describes how male writers, anyone male embarking on a career as a writer, was always through history able to feel that he was joining a tradition, you know, that he had role models to follow and examples to learn from. Whereas a female writer was likely to feel that she was striking out on her own, that she was doing something unprecedented, maybe something that she shouldn't really be doing, that women before her hadn't done. Woolf has a famous quote about this, she says, 'we think back through our women if we are mothers' (sic: 'we think back through our mothers if we are women'). So having that sense of tradition, you know having that sense of standing on the shoulders of those who've gone before, makes us more able to do great things and to fulfil our potential. So, it's empowering, I think, to be able to trace a female tradition, to trace that back as far as possible, so there are many reasons why I think that's important.

Sophie Holland:

Fantastic, I love that idea of empowerment, yeah, fantastic.

Question 5 – [00:23:07]

Actually, lots of the questions that came through, Helen, were looking at class and we've got one from Deborah and she's asked: Do you believe had Mary, Queen of Scots not been of royal lineage, that she could have had success as a poet considering the restrictions on women at the time?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah, that's an extremely interesting question. I think first of all we have to think about that word 'success', and think about what we mean by literary success, because that was perhaps a bit different in the 16th century – and particularly for someone like Mary, Queen of Scots – than it would be for us today. You know today if we talk about someone having literary success, we mean that they become famous, they get a wide readership, they probably make lots of money from their writing. That wasn't the kind of writing that Mary was doing. Mary, like a lot of elite women of her time, was writing in manuscripts, so just writing by hand, not for print. She wasn't seeking fame, she was writing poems partly to show how educated she was, how accomplished she was, her literary skill, but also very often as part of specific social transactions. You know, writing a poem directed to a specific person, as in the one that I discussed in the talk, where she's writing a poem to send to Elizabeth I to persuade her to be merciful to her, to give her sanctuary and ideally to have a meeting with her. So she's not really thinking about literary success in the way that we think about it now. But I think one thing that's contained in Deborah's question, which is absolutely true, is that in the 16th century royal women, aristocratic women, it was much easier for them to find a pathway into writing and into literature than it was for less privileged women. And that was partly because they were more likely to have a good education, partly because their status, I think, gave them a kind of permission to write and sometimes they would even be held up as examples to other women, they would be sort of treated as exceptional. The assumption would be that, you know, women in general are a bit rubbish and can't think straight and can't write and so on, but we have got these few exceptional women who've kind of shown what women can do, who are like beacons to them or like examples to them. So there was an author called Thomas Bentley who, in 1582, put together an anthology called *The Monument of Matrones*, and it was a collection of writings by women on religious themes, many of them were translations and they were directed at women as well. And many of the works in that volume, they were by royal women; so there was work in there by Catherine Parr (the last queen of Henry VIII), work by Elizabeth I herself, work by Lady Jane Grey who'd briefly been queen in the mid-16th century. So yeah, sometimes queens were sort of held up as exemplary authors and there's a really fascinating example of that in a book published in 1589 by a man called George Puttenham. He published a manual of how to write, of what we might call literary theory, and it was called *The Arte of English Poesie*, and he gave examples of good kinds of writing. And there's one chapter where he's writing about a style of writing which he calls 'the gorgeous' – which I rather like. And his example of the gorgeous style is actually that poem by Elizabeth I that I discussed in my talk, *The Doubt of Future Foes*. He gives that as the prime example of the gorgeous, and actually right at the front of *The Arte of English Poesie* he dedicates the whole volume to Elizabeth I and he says he's dedicating it to her because she's the most excellent poet of her time. Now, you know, it's hard to know how to read that because obviously he's

seeking her patronage, you know, he's seeking her favour, she's the queen, he's flattering her, so of course he's going to say she's the most excellent poet of her time. But I think it also reflects a bit of a belief in the time that if you were higher class you were cleverer and more accomplished, you would write better poetry, that sort of class and literary skill would go together, and that was true for both women and men. So yeah, we see that reflected in what Puttenham does there.

Question 6 – [00:27:11]

Sophie Holland:

Fascinating, thank you. So our next question – we've got a couple that have been combined again. So this is from Samuel and Hafsa, so they've asked: How widespread was the practice of devisership for tombs? Was it a predominantly female practice where it did happen, or was Elizabeth Russell an outlier in this respect?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yeah it's actually a very widespread cultural activity. Many families are putting up monuments and tombs in this period, and I think it's actually fairly equally practiced by men and women. There are certainly men doing it too. I mentioned in my talk the tomb for William and Margaret Cavendish which may have been devised, designed by the two of them together or possibly by William after Margaret's death. Also in the Abbey there's a magnificent tomb erected by William Cecil, Lord Burghley, for his wife Mildred and his daughter Anne. And in some ways it's very similar to the tomb to Lord John Russell that I talked about in the talk, but with the genders reversed, so this is a man putting up a monument to his female loved ones. But it's very similar, it's got statues on it, it's got inscriptions all over it, probably composed by Burghley himself. So yeah, it's something that both men and women are doing, but I think it's important if we're thinking about women's writing because it is one of the venues, one of the arenas, where they could practice writing and it was seen as an appropriate, suitable thing to do; it wasn't a controversial thing for them to do as it was in some other settings, particularly women who were writing in print. Another woman that's worth mentioning (not commemorated in Westminster Abbey but she's very active in tomb devisership) and this is Lady Anne Clifford. She's another early modern woman who absolutely fascinates me, she's a really formidable character. So, her father was George Clifford, the Earl of Cumberland, and when he died she was his only child but she was disinherited because there were legal clauses in place that meant all the property, which was most of the North of England, (her father owned most of the North of England), but it went down the male line. It went to his brother and then his brother's sons, and she couldn't inherit it and she and her mother fought this for years, unsuccessfully, and eventually she simply outlived all her male relatives, she just kind of stuck around and eventually inherited at the age of 53. And then she made the most of it because she just spent the rest of her life – she lived on into her eighties – and she spent the rest of her life just kind of going in progress, like a bit like a royal progress, just kind of going around between all of her northern properties, rebuilding; rebuilding castles, building churches, building charitable buildings. And she covered them all with coats of arms showing her family history,

inscriptions about her family history and about her own life and her building projects and so on. So she's doing a lot of... you know it's not writing in a book, but it's a kind of written expression and also visual expression of her personality and her identity and what was important to her. One of her most moving projects actually, is that she put up a pillar at the place where she last saw her mother alive. It's known as the Countess Pillar and it's near Brougham Castle, which was one of her castles and it's now, it's by a dual carriageway now, you can actually go and visit it, I've been. It's this pillar which is almost, it's not a statue of her mother but it's almost as if it stands in place of her mother. It's at the bend in the road where they last said goodbye before her mother died, and it has a sundial on it, you know kind of representing the passage of time and mortality and again, lots of heraldic family coats of arms representing her family identity. She also put up magnificent heraldic tombs for herself and her mother, which she designed in the church in Appleby, so she's another notable example of female devisership particularly involving tombs and commemoration.

Sophie Holland:

Perfect, thank you. I have to say when we walked around the Abbey together, it was so enlightening, I had no idea, so interesting that that's been picked up on as well.

Question 7 – beginning at [00:31:14]

And talking of genre, we've got a question next from Elodie and they have asked: A lot of the women talked about also created translations. How do you think that process, with the challenges of translating works "faithfully", might have informed their own writing?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Yes, now that's a really interesting question. Yes, as I mentioned in the talk, translation is a very prevalent activity for 16th and 17th century women because it was seen as a proper thing for them to do, it was a way of just acting as a kind of servant to a male author. Often female translators are referred to by terms like 'handmaiden'; and also it was often religious translation so it had a purpose of kind of spreading the faith, so it seemed like a virtuous thing to do. And I think, you know, all of that implies that translation was thought of as a kind of secondary sort of literary activity and not somewhere where you expressed yourself in the same way that you would in original writing. But I think nevertheless, many of the women who did translations in the early modern period found ways of using it as a form of self-expression, and I think they did that in several ways. One is that in these religious translations, they didn't necessarily always comply with the official church position or the official state position. So we've got in the Elizabeth, Jacobean periods we've got the Church of England, which is a Protestant church, but many Protestants kind of veer to more radical positions than the one that the church represents. And sometimes women would do that kind of religious translation, critiquing the Orthodox line, or they might be Catholics and from that angle they would do translations critiquing the established church. Or another kind of translation that a lot of women did, you know they're kind of expressing themselves through their choice

of words to translate, is often they translated what we call 'neostoic' works. So stoicism was an ancient philosophy which was all about suppressing your emotions and governing yourself with self-discipline and reason, and it has a revival in this period which is why it's known as neostoicism, meaning 'new stoicism'. And women like Elizabeth I and Mary Sidney, they chose to translate neostoic work, so I think that was a way of saying, you know, we're not just women who have no control over our emotions and who can't govern ourselves, we have minds, we have rational minds, we are rational beings. You know that's there's a statement of that just in the choice of work to translate and of course as translators of works by men; I often think this when I'm reading their translations, they get to speak in a male voice, you know they get to use a male pronoun about themselves, they get to speak with the authority of the male author that they're translating, so I think all of that was quite empowering to them. But I think one of the women who expresses herself most actually through translation is Mary Sidney, in another way. I mentioned earlier that she was the sister of Philip Sidney, a notable Elizabethan writer, and he had begun a poetic translation of the Psalms and he died when he'd done less than a third of them. And she took over the project, she completed it, she very much made it her own. And in it, partly she shows fantastic poetic skill – it includes lots of experimentation with poetic form, she devises and uses lots of varied poetic forms – but also she often expands on the original biblical text of the Psalms, and so this becomes a way for her to put her own stamp on them. I've just got an example that I'll quote to you briefly, it's from Psalm 139. So there's a verse in Psalm 139 where the speaker describes how God has known them right back since when they were in the womb, when they were an embryo, and this is how it goes in the Geneva Bible, which was the most used English translation of the Bible in 16th century England. It's addressing God, it says: 'My bones are not hid from thee though I was made in a secret place and fashioned beneath in the earth'. OK so that's the Bible verse. Here's Mary Sidney's version, just going to read it to you. So addressing God again: 'Thou, how my back was beam-wise laid, / And raft'ring of my ribs, dost know; Know'st every point / Of bone and joint, / How to this whole these parts did grow, / In brave embroid'ry fair arrayed, / Though wrought in shop both dark and low'. I absolutely love this, you see how she expands on it and she really kind of brings it to life. So she has that image of kind of carpentry or joinery, how the bits of her body are being put together in the womb by God. And then she adds to that this image of embroidery, that then it's embroidered – which of course is a distinctively female skill – and this is all going on in a workshop, the womb is a workshop where all this kind of really active crafting is going on, just as she's crafting her poetry. You know she's joining together, embroidering words in her poetry, so her poetry itself becomes a bit like a sort of emulation of God as Creator, using that crafting skill that he's used in making her. I think that's just brilliant and that is an example of a rather bald text that she's translating and she turns it into something very much her own.

Question 8 – beginning at [00:36:33]

Sophie Holland:

Fantastic, thank you. So the next question is: Did women writers often collaborate with their male counterparts to produce literature?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

I would say not exactly often, but sometimes. There are various forms of collaboration that women engaged in. I think, you know, just continuing from the last question we can perhaps think of translation as often a form of collaboration where the translator is working with the original author to create something new. Mary Sidney's Psalms that I've just mentioned, we can think of them as a form of collaboration because she took over this project that her brother Philip had begun, and she completed it, so in many ways that has almost sort of two voices or two hands going on in it. She also had a really important role, that I think we can call collaboration, in relation to another work by her brother, Philip, and that was his work of prose fiction called the *Arcadia*. He wrote a preface to it where he described how he actually wrote it at Mary's house, which was Wilton House in Wiltshire, and he says in this preface, 'you desired me to do it'. So he sees her as the kind of muse or patron of this work; he says it was done 'only for you, only to you', and she very much seems to have been the kind of imagined reader, or the intended reader of it. He says he wrote 'most of it in your presence; the rest by sheets sent unto you, as fast as they were done' and it's even been suggested that, you know, they would have had conversations about these pages he was sending to her, that she had quite a lot of influence over how the text was written, and then certainly after he died she had a really important role in relation to the *Arcadia* because she saw it through print publication. She edited it, she got it into print, she also – because again it was unfinished because of Philip's death – she had an ending written for it, she commissioned that and in fact the published book was known as *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. So, the Countess of Pembroke was Mary Sidney's aristocratic title, so it actually has her name on it, you know it's seen as hers as much as his, so in many ways I think we can see that as an act of collaboration, definitely.

Question 9 – beginning at [00:38:50]

Sophie Holland:

And perhaps on a similar vein: Did more female writers not take on a male pen name to achieve success?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

That is actually something that happens more in later centuries. So obviously we're familiar with that happening in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 19th century we would think about the Brontë sisters calling themselves Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell; George Eliot, whose real name was Mary Ann Evans. It doesn't really happen in the 16th and 17th centuries. I think it would have been thought possibly in that period as rather an unfitting thing for a man (sic: woman) to do, a bit like a woman wearing male dress, you know it just wouldn't be what a woman should do. So, it's not really something that happens in the period that I'm talking about.

Question 10 – beginning at [00:39:36]

Sophie Holland:

Perfect. The next question is from Elizabeth, who has asked: Is the quality of the writing of these 16th and 17th century female writers equal to male writers of this time period or do we have to redefine what qualifies as good writing to acknowledge the obstacles they faced as women?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

I think this is a really important question and it is one that was asked a lot in the 1980s and 1990s, when scholarly research was getting underway to rediscover women writers from the 16th and 17th centuries. And often it would be asked: but are they any good? And often that was asked in a rather hostile or suspicious vein, you know kind of with the assumption, well of course they're not any good or, you know, why don't we know about them? So, it was really a way of avoiding having to confront the fact that these women had been neglected and suppressed unfairly for many centuries. And that prompted a lot of reflection, a lot of discussion on the processes of canon formation. I said a little bit earlier about the canon and what we mean by the canon, the list of writers that we consider important and worthy of study. And increasingly questions were asked, you know, a couple of decades ago, about how do writers get to be included in the canon, how do we define good writing? And of course there's a strongly subjective element to that, it's not a fixed category, good writing, it's not absolute, and also it's not timeless; our idea of what's good writing can change over time and I think as we became increasingly aware of that we realise that the canon is not a fixed thing and we can bring other writers into the canon. Now it's true that undoubtedly many scholars like me who've wanted to add women to the canon, there is to some extent an ideology behind that, there's definitely a feminist politics behind that, we want to make the canon more balanced and more representative, we want to include in it people like us. I think also an argument can be made as Virginia Woolf does in *A Room of One's Own*, that we have to have perhaps more flexible standards for early modern female writers because they had less access to education, because of all the many social and cultural obstacles that they faced. They faced discouragement and opposition so we maybe can't expect to find a female Shakespeare, but at the same time I would definitely argue that the women that I study and teach are very good writers. I can give a couple of examples from among the female writers who are commemorated in the Abbey. Elizabeth I, a lot of her writing is very witty, it's very skilful, some of it is also very moving. One that I would pick out is a poem that she wrote on the departure of her last suitor, the Duke of Anjou, who was a member of the French royal family. This was the last marriage negotiation of Elizabeth's reign and it happened when she was in her early forties so when he left that was really saying goodbye, not just to him but to her last opportunity for marriage and she writes, 'I grieve and dare not show my discontent [...] Since from myself another self I turned. / My care is like my shadow in the sun'. I think it's a really evocative poem and I'm always fascinated by that line, 'from myself another self I turned'. Does she mean him, you know that they felt so close that it's like she's turned another self away, a potential partner? Or has she turned away another self that she could have become, another Elizabeth who could have been a wife and mother? Is she even thinking about another self in the sense that I'm never going to have a child now? You know, since 'from myself another self I turned', her life is at a turning point. I find that a really moving and impressive poem. And I would certainly make the case for Margaret Cavendish, who I talked about in my video talk. I'd really definitely make a case for her

as a great writer; she's so experimental, she's so innovative, she's so uninhibited in her use of her imagination, which is really different from many other writers of the time, I think she's very much ahead of her time in all those ways. And if there's time, can I also just say a bit more about some other writers who are not in the Abbey, who I think are good writers and we don't need to kind of shift our standards of evaluation to say that they're good. I want to come back to Mary Wroth again, to the *Urania*, first English work of prose fiction by a woman, but it's so sophisticated because what she does... She also has a really interesting life story because she had an unhappy love affair with her cousin, who was called William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, actually the son of Mary Sidney who I've been talking about. They were both married to other people, they had an affair, he was very promiscuous, he was always abandoning her, but she remained constant to him throughout. And in the *Urania* – it's in the form of a romance, so when we talk about a romance in this period, we mean a fantastical story, a story that involves knights and ladies, it's that long ago and far away, there are monsters and enchantments and giants and so on. So it's that kind of story which seems very unreal, but she uses it to retell her own life experiences in this unhappy love affair through her two central characters, and she does that not just through that central thread of narrative but then other characters tell each other stories, stories within stories, and they tend to revisit her own story but always in slightly different terms. It's like she's kind of processing the emotional pain of her life experiences in almost an obsessive way, but also, she has many scenes of women telling each other stories of unhappiness in love and it's almost like female storytelling as therapy – I find that really fascinating. And also, her sonnets. So at the end of her romance, at the end of the *Urania*, there's a sonnet sequence called *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, two very elaborate, very romance-style names. They're actually based on herself and William Herbert, and again it's a place to kind of voice her emotional distress at the unhappiness that she's experienced in love. They're very skilful sonnets, very skilfully constructed. At the same time psychologically intense, you know she goes right down into her state of mind, they're unlike sonnets written by men in the period where the men are always going on about this mistress that they desire. She hardly talks about the man that she's in love with at all, she talks much more – she talks to night, she talks to sleep, she talks to grief, all these kind of personified female entities. Or she talks about how she holds the image of her beloved in her heart, and there's often a sense of that image that she's fashioned for herself is rather more satisfactory than the real man. So, she's a great writer I think; you know I could go on about her at great length as you can tell but I'll stop there.

Question 11 – beginning at [00:46:36]

Sophie Holland:

Well actually, just because I'm aware of time, this might be a good question, talking about other women you can mention. So, this question is from Miss Dawson who has asked: For our A-Level literature coursework, our students write a comparative critical study of two texts, one of which must be pre-1900. Do you have any suggestions for modern writers with whom they could compare any of the writers that you discussed in your lecture? So, an example is the fantasy/sci-fi work of Margaret Atwood could be compared to Margaret Cavendish possibly?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

I think that's a really exciting question, thank you so much Miss Dawson. I would love to think that more of these writers could be taught in school, and I think there are lots of really productive comparisons and connections that you could make between these writers and later female writers. I think that suggestion that you've made of comparing Cavendish and Atwood, that would really work well. I think it would be particularly interesting because of course if you took something like *The Handmaid's Tale*, it's very much a dystopia for women, whereas Margaret Cavendish in *The Blazing World*, she's imagining kind of utopia for women, you know a world governed by women on women's terms and women making a world of their own that is from their own imaginations and is governed in the way they want it to be and is the world as they want it. So, you know, that would be a really interesting compare and contrast I think, and also just the general technique of imagining another world as a way of reflecting back on the world that you actually live in. Other possible pairs I could suggest: Aphra Behn, her work *Oroonoko* that I spoke about in my talk, that's her take on slavery. I think it would be really interesting to compare that with something like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Not only are they both women writing about the experience of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade and the horror, the violence, that ensues from that – they both have a lot of graphic violence in their works – that would be something to explore. I think. Why is the violence there, what are the effects of it, what are they doing with it? But they're also both, they take this very serious, painful subject and they deal with it by playing on the borderland between fact and fiction. So, *Oroonoko* again, is using the genre of romance that I talked about in relation to Mary Wroth and is blending that with what seems like kind of realistic reportage from a life experience that was witnessed by Behn. You know, she puts herself in the text as narrator, so it's kind of on the boundary between fact and fantasy, and of course at the same time *Beloved* is written in the vein of magic realism so there are comparisons to be drawn there. In terms of love poetry, I think Mary Wroth's sonnets that I've just been talking about, you could compare really well with sonnets by later women like Edna St. Vincent Millay in the 20th century, or if you could use a 19th century woman, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Or you could take Katherine Philips; her poems to women which are arguably, debatably lesbian, certainly very passionate, could work well with something like the *Rapture* by Carol Ann Duffy, which I know is quite often taught at A-Level. So I think there are lots of combinations that one could explore and if anyone wants to get in touch with me to discuss any ideas for teaching and any, you know, you might have issues with getting hold of editions, getting hold of texts, that kind of thing, I'd be very happy to have further communications with people about that.

Question 12 – beginning at [00:49:54]

Sophie Holland:

Brilliant. Very quickly, Helen, are you happy to, because we've got viewers that hopefully might be interested in studying English Literature, maybe at university and maybe beyond, do you have a quick message for any of these students?

Answer

Helen Hackett:

Definitely. I mean, I hope that many of you are finding your experience of studying English as I did at A-Level, which is I so enjoyed it and was so excited by it, you know, I just absolutely loved it. But my parents didn't want me to study English at university, in fact they didn't want me to do it at A-Level at all. They really disapproved of it because they just thought it wasn't a useful subject, and I know that is something that often bothers people, you know, people worry about that, they think what kind of career, what kind of job can a degree in English lead to? And I can definitely reassure you that my students go on to all kinds of careers, you know, they go into law, they go into publishing, they go into journalism, they go into finance, they go into the Civil Service. Basically, there's a huge range of careers which you can go into with any Arts and Humanities degree, and English is very much valued by employers because it gives you lots of transferable skills. It trains you in critical thinking, it trains you in the ability to make an argument and support it with evidence, it trains you of course, in the ability to understand all kinds of different uses of language and the ability to express yourself well in writing and in speech. So, for all those reasons it's fantastic training for a wide range of careers. It's also just, I have to say, a fantastic pleasure and a privilege to immerse yourself in English Literature for three years. I know people sometimes think, well I can just carry on reading on my own, but I would just say to you, how confident do you feel about reading old English on your own? How confident do you feel about reading postmodern novels on your own? You know, you'll get a lot more out of your reading if you're being taken through it by experts who are specialists in the literature that they're teaching you. And it'll be a really kind of extending and deepening experience; I think studying English Literature expands your mind, it extends you as a person, it's a wonderful subject to study at degree level, you'll get a huge amount out of it and it will open many doors to you, so I just really strongly encourage you to do it.

Sophie Holland:

And I agree entirely with you, having studied English Literature at university as well. So unfortunately, our time with Helen has come to an end. I'd just like to say on behalf of Westminster Abbey how grateful we are to you, Helen, for giving us your time, for your brilliant lecture and all the insights you've given us today. And thank you for giving the students the opportunity to ask their own questions in their own voices, which I think is really important and obviously they really found some things very interesting about your research, which is brilliant. If people are interested in finding out a bit more about your work, are you happy to share quickly some of your publications?

Helen Hackett:

Yes, just very quickly I'll just mention a few. So, I contributed a chapter to this book, *Women in Literature in Britain 1500-1700*, edited by Helen Wilcox. My chapter in this is on courtly writing by women. so that discusses some of the writers that I discussed in the talk. This book, *English Renaissance Drama* {it actually has a slightly different cover now} that has a chapter called *Gender in Play* which includes discussion of some female playwrights. And finally, as Sophie kindly mentioned at the beginning of the talk, my most recent book. {Sorry, I'll hold it up in front of myself if you can see, oh is it working, it's kind of shimmering, isn't it? It's shimmering against the background, yeah.} *The Elizabethan Mind*, so that has a chapter on the

female mind and that discusses both how the minds of women were thought about in the period, which was generally fairly negative unfortunately, but also how women themselves navigated that, so that includes discussion of female writers as well. So thanks for the opportunity, Sophie, to mention those.

Sophie Holland:

Brilliant, fantastic, thank you and hopefully those works might inspire our teachers and students to find out more. Thank you to everyone who has taken part, for your fantastic, insightful questions. As we said, we had so many, so many fantastic questions, and I'm sure Helen and I would both like to wish you the very best in your studies going forward and if you can, we encourage you to come and visit Westminster Abbey in person and see what you can find as well. So, thank you very much everyone and goodbye.

Biography of the speaker

Helen Hackett is a Professor of English Literature at UCL. She has been active since the 1980s in researching and teaching works by 16th and 17th century women. Her latest book is *The Elizabethan Mind* (Yale University Press, 2022).

Context of the event

Westminster Abbey's Learning Department hosted the online event 'Shakespeare's Sisters: Early Women Writers in Westminster Abbey' on 20th March 2024. Professor Helen Hackett discussed female authors memorialised, not in Poets' Corner, but in other parts of the Abbey in a pre-recorded lecture that students were able to watch and submit questions before the live event. Sophie Holland, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey, chaired a live question and answer session with Helen, during which students' questions were answered.

Links to exam board specifications:

To hear more about attending events like this with your students, please sign up to our [schools mailing list](#).

You can also find related resources on our [teaching resources](#) page.