



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

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Please note that all opinions are of the individual speaking and do not represent the views of Westminster Abbey.

Follow-up discussion questions

After watching this lecture, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework.

- Helen raised Peter Sherlock's query of whether a female Poets' Corner was intended for the Abbey. In what ways could more recognition be given to female writers of the 16th and 17th centuries?
- What do you think is the significance of the fact that Lady Russell used different languages (English, Latin and Greek) for the inscriptions on her husband's tomb?
- Look up Margaret Cavendish's poem *Of Many Worlds in this World*. How does she use imagery to describe the infinite number of smaller worlds within our own?
- In *A Doubt of Future Foes*, Elizabeth I writes a response to the sonnet by Mary, Queen of Scots. Add your own creative response to these poems, echoing their themes and use of language in your reply.
- Centuries later, these women writers are still inspiring modern works, including plays, films and graphic novels. Choose one of these women, or something they have written, as inspiration for your own short piece of writing.

Transcript

Hello, my name is Helen Hackett and I'm a Professor of English Literature at University College London. And I'm really delighted to have this opportunity from Westminster Abbey to give an A-Level Masterclass because it gives me a chance to talk to you about a subject I feel passionately about, and this is women writers of the 16th and 17th centuries. I'll just share my PowerPoint with you so you can see my title, there it is.

So I'm calling my talk 'Shakespeare's Sisters: Early Women Writers in Westminster Abbey'. And the talk was actually inspired by a visit I was lucky enough to make to Westminster Abbey last summer. Like a lot of visitors, I made a beeline to Poets' Corner, which is one of the main attractions of the Abbey.

There on my next slide you can see from this map where it is. It's an area in the south transept of the Abbey. Since the Middle Ages it's been used for the tombs of great writers and also memorials to authors like Shakespeare, who are buried elsewhere. So it's seen as a national monument commemorating achievements in English Literature.

However, as you can see from this slide, it's slightly chaotic. Authors have been added slightly randomly across the years and what struck me on my visit is just how few women are represented here. So on this slide you can see at the top in the centre there a stone, a memorial stone, for George Eliot. That was the pen name of Mary Ann Evans, the important Victorian woman novelist, who among other works wrote *Middlemarch*. But as you can see, she's surrounded by men.

Now elsewhere in Poets' Corner it's true that we can find more memorials to women. We can find plaques for Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, all of whom are actually buried elsewhere. We can also find the eminent poet, Victorian poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I wonder if you can actually see her and pick her out on this slide? It's quite difficult: she's a footnote, in effect, on the bottom right there, at the foot of her husband Robert Browning's stone.

So, this is pretty much it. Poets' Corner contains very few women among a great crowd of men and so we might wonder, why is this? Well, I think one answer is quite simple: it's just that before the 20th century fewer women than men became authors, and this was because of various social and cultural obstacles that stood in their way. There's a fantastic analysis of this in a work by the great feminist writer Virginia Woolf. In 1929 she published a book called *A Room of One's Own* and in that book Woolf argued that in order to have the time and the mental freedom that you need to write, any author needs to have economic independence and a private space – the room of one's own of her title.

And Woolf points out that these facilities were simply not available to most women until modern times, and she also highlighted how male writers through the ages had often denigrated the intellectual abilities of women. Now Woolf herself was a novelist, so her way of exploring these ideas was to illustrate them through a story, so she offers us a kind of thought experiment. She imagines a fictional sister for William Shakespeare who was called Judith. So this would be a sister who had the same literary talents as Shakespeare, the same ambitions as him to succeed in the theatre, and Woolf wonders what would have happened to Shakespeare's sister if, like him, she had come to London with dreams of making her name

as a playwright. And Woolf concludes that Judith Shakespeare would have ended up derided, destitute, she would have got pregnant, and she would ultimately, Woolf thinks, have committed suicide.

Now, I think that Woolf was both half right and half wrong in her story of Shakespeare's sister. She was right that in Shakespeare's time, in the 16th and 17th centuries, there were many obstacles to a literary career for women. Only a small number of privileged women received education and became literate. Most women were simply illiterate in this period and there were many restrictions on women's financial and legal independence and on their social freedoms. Woolf was right about all of that, and to illustrate that I'm going to go back into my PowerPoint and show you some things that 16th century male writers had to say about women and their minds.

It was widely believed in Shakespeare's time that women were intellectually inferior to men. A Spanish author, Juan Huarte – I've got a quote from him at the top of this slide – I'll just pick out a few words. He wrote that women had, 'an impairment in the reasonable part'. In other words, they were lacking in reason. And I've also got a quote here from another late 16th century book – it's a work called *The Haven of Pleasure* – it describes women's 'weakness of their minds' and the 'imbecility of their understandings'.

There was also widespread disapproval of authorship by women as something that was transgressive, something thought of as improper for women to do. So this author, Thomas Salter, he advised that a woman's education should be 'wholly confined to', he says, 'the government of her household and family'. And he goes on to explain this is because, this is about halfway through the quote, 'there is no less danger that they will as well learn to be subtle and shameless lovers, as cunning and skilful writers of ditties, sonnets, epigrams, and ballads; let them be restrained to the care and government of a family'. So, teach a woman to write, he thinks, and she'll soon be getting up to no good and seeking various kinds of sexual freedom.

Even so, there were some bold and accomplished women who dared to write in Shakespeare's time and in the century that followed. They defied objections, they overcame obstacles, and I strongly feel that we should celebrate them. We may not find them in Poets' Corner, but we can in fact find some of them in other locations in Westminster Abbey.

So what I want to do in this talk is to take you on a kind of virtual tour. I want to tell you about these extraordinary women of the 16th and 17th centuries; I'll talk about their lives, their literary talents, their achievements. I'll also give you a brief flavour of some of their works and I'll tell you where you can find them in the Abbey, if you have the opportunity to visit. And the message I want to put across through all of this is that Shakespeare did have sisters in the sense of female colleagues in authorship and we can find them memorialised in Westminster Abbey, if we look beyond Poets' Corner and if we explore other corners.

So let's set out and do that, and we're going to begin by strolling... {I'll just see if I can get my cursor to appear, there it is.} So if we start in Poets' Corner here, we're just going to stroll up to the Lady Chapel and into a side chapel across here, and what we'll find there is this magnificent tomb for Mary, Queen of Scots which was erected by her son, King James I. Now Mary was the cousin of Elizabeth I. Mary was unpopular with her subjects in Scotland because she was a Catholic; most of them were Protestants. Also,

there was a lot of turbulence, a lot of scandal in her personal life and so the Scots rebelled against Mary and she fled to England to seek sanctuary from Elizabeth.

However, from Elizabeth's point of view Mary was a threat. She was a rival claimant to the English throne and so she was held under house arrest for 19 years – very long period. Even so, during that period she became the centre of various plots and conspiracies against Elizabeth. So finally, in 1587, Mary was found guilty of treason, and she was executed.

Now this is a famous story, this has inspired many novels, many films. Mary, Queen of Scots is a very famous figure and yet she hasn't often been thought of as an author, even though she was an accomplished poet. And she wrote mainly in French because she grew up in France, that was actually her first language. One of Mary's most notable poems is a sonnet addressed to Elizabeth I in the year 1568, the year when Mary fled from Scotland to England. And in this poem Mary is pleading for sanctuary, she's pleading also for a meeting with Elizabeth, and she does this in a sonnet.

Now that's really interesting because sonnets in the 16th century were a poetic form usually associated with love. It would usually be a male lover writing to a female beloved, and here we have Mary addressing Elizabeth almost as if she's wooing a lover. She says, 'A longing haunts my spirit, day and night, / Bitter and sweet, torments my aching heart'. And she goes on to call Elizabeth her 'Dear sister'. Now they weren't literally sisters, they were actually cousins, but she's claiming special intimacy with Elizabeth as a sister queen. Mary also compares herself with a ship that has been cast adrift. Now this was an image frequently used in love poetry by men at the time. Mary writes, 'Ah! I have seen a ship freed from control / On the high seas, outside a friendly port'. So she's expressing her desire for protection from Elizabeth in the same terms that were often used by male poets trying to persuade a woman to grant him her love.

Now in fact Elizabeth never yielded to these attempts by Mary to woo her; she never granted her a meeting, even though in many fictional works about the two of them, many makers of novels and films like to imagine a meeting between them that never, in fact, took place. But if we go back to the Abbey, we find Elizabeth not far away from Mary, there she is. We were with Mary here in this side chapel on the right. If we just take the short walk across to the side chapel on the left of the Lady Chapel, this is where we find this tomb of Elizabeth I.

Now of course, like Mary, Elizabeth is very well known – more than well known – from Tudor history, from many novels, films, television dramas and so on. But until recently, no one really thought about Elizabeth I as an author. Now this changed in the year 2000 because Chicago University Press published an edition of Elizabeth's collected works and it's a very substantial volume, it has 450 pages, so it just shows what a prolific author she was. It contains speeches, letters, poems and prayers, so versatility across a range of genres and fascinatingly it includes a poem which looks very like a response to the poem by Mary which we were just looking at.

Elizabeth's poem is a meditation on the insecurity that she and her subjects were feeling following the arrival of Mary in England, which brought with it lots of fears of plots and rebellions. So Elizabeth writes, 'The doubt of future foes / Exiles my present joy / And wit me warns to shun such snares / As threatens mine annoy. / For falsehood now doth flow / And subjects' faith doth ebb, / Which should not be if reason ruled / Or wisdom weaved the web'. So in that first stanza we've got that use of the word 'exile'. Mary is

the actual exile in this situation, but Elizabeth represents herself as an exile from joy, from peace of mind. The poem, I hope you got it from my reading, it has a very unsettled back and forth rhythm conveying a sense of unease but also running through it there's a sense of resolution, there's a sense of determination. Elizabeth will use her 'wit' in the third line – that is her intellect – to meet the challenges.

As she goes on into the second stanza it continues that sense of volatility, insecurity, in its rhythm and in its images. So 'subject's faith doth ebb': public support is shifting like a tide. But Elizabeth allies herself with the personifications of reason and wisdom, who must take control – 'Which should not be if reason ruled / Or wisdom weaved the web' – they must weave the web of fate. And I think it's striking that that's an image drawn from a traditionally female skill.

Elizabeth goes on to refer to 'the daughter of debate / That discord aye doth sow'. Now that's clearly Mary, so she's being presented as the personification of debate and discord, and this is where it gets really close to Mary's poem because Elizabeth rebuffs Mary's image of the ship seeking port. She says, 'No foreign banished wight', and a wight is just an old-fashioned word for a person, so no foreign banished person 'shall anchor in this port'. And she ends the poem by saying that she will pull the tops of those who seek change, in other words she'll chop their heads off, exactly what would happen eventually to Mary two decades later.

So one place where we can find writing by women in Shakespeare's time is if we look again at famous queens, if we look at them in a new light and think of them as authors.

We can also find writing by a 16th century woman if we simply read one of the tombs in Westminster Abbey. So we're going to leave Elizabeth's tomb up by the Lady Chapel there. {I'm just trying to get my cursor to show which it doesn't want to do, here it is.} We're up here at Elizabeth's tomb, we're going to stroll back past Mary's tomb towards Poets' Corner but not all the way, we're going to stop in this side chapel here. And what we'll find here is the magnificent tomb of an Elizabethan aristocrat, John Lord Russell.

Now obviously this is the tomb of a man, not a woman – you might wonder why I'm showing you this in this talk. What I want to point out is the various panels of writing all over it, all the ones I've magnified here were composed by Lord Russell's widow, Elizabeth, and she probably also took a leading role in the overall design of the tomb. She had some experience of this kind of cultural activity because Elizabeth had already commissioned a magnificent tomb at Bisham in Berkshire for her first husband, Sir Thomas Hoby and his brother Philip, and again she covered that with multiple inscriptions.

Two scholars, called Peter Davidson and Jane Stevenson, have coined a really useful term, 'devisership', for this kind of cultural activity by early modern women. Elizabeth Russell didn't actually build her family tomb, she didn't make the statues, but she probably played a leading role in their design as well as the inscriptions on the tombs. And in this way the tombs are expressions of her identity, her personality. She is the deviser, they show what matter to her, they show the feelings that she wanted to express.

Elizabeth Russell had notable linguistic and literary skills; her father was Sir Anthony Cooke and he had very enlightened views on women's education. He made sure his daughters got the same high level of education as his sons. So one contemporary commentator on the family described the Cooke household

as, 'a small university where the industry of the females was in full vigour'. And from this foundation all the Cooke sisters went on to do remarkable things. So for example, Elizabeth had a sister called Anne, who became Anne Cooke Bacon by marriage; she produced the official translation from Latin of John Jewel's *Apology of the Church of England*, which was a founding text of the Elizabethan Protestant church.

So that was Anne. Elizabeth Russell herself also translated a religious work from French and she seems to have had a hand in preparing scripts for court entertainment, so very educated, very talented woman. She also clearly had a formidable personality. In 1596 she clashed with Shakespeare and his theatre company because they wanted to start using a theatre in the Blackfriars district of London. Elizabeth Russell had a house in that district, and she led and organised a campaign to prevent the theatre company performing there, arguing that it would be disruptive to a residential area. And her campaign was successful; she blocked Shakespeare and his company, who didn't manage to use the Blackfriars playhouse until some years afterwards.

Now going back to the tomb... On these inscriptions, Elizabeth displays her linguistic skills. So she composed, we think, five inscriptions for this tomb; one is in English, three are in Latin and one is in Greek. Here's the Greek poem, here's a translation of part of it: 'The once bright glory of his house, the pride / Of all his country, dusty ruins hide: / Mourn, hapless orphans, mourn, once happy wife, For when he died, died all the joys of life'. And here's an extract from a translation of one of the Latin panels: 'How was I startled at the cruel feast, / By death's rude hands, in horrid manner dressed; / Such grief as sure no hapless woman knew, / When thy pale image lay before my view'. Very moving poems, I think.

Lady Russell was probably also responsible for giving statues of her two daughters a prominent position on their father's tomb. She was anxious after his death to protect their status, to protect their property rights. So on the left we see the statues of her daughters, Anne and Elizabeth, which stand above their father's effigy on the tomb. After that, in later years, sadly the daughter named Elizabeth predeceased her mother Elizabeth, and again we can be confident that Lady Russell had a hand in designing this endearing statue for her that we see on the right, which sits beside Lord Russell's tomb in the Abbey.

Taken all together, this whole assemblage of statues and inscriptions on and around Lord Russell's tomb demonstrates how commemorating the dead could create opportunities for artistic and literary expression by women. This was an acceptable forum in which for them to express themselves, to take part in artistic and literary activities, because it was within the family, it was about commemorating family members. There was another place within family life and social life where women's writing was felt to be acceptable, and this was letter writing.

So I'm now going to lead you back past Poets' Corner... {Again, I'm just trying to get my cursor up, doesn't want to come, at any rate if you look at them, here we are I've got it now.} Here's Elizabeth Russell, or rather Lord John Russell's tomb here with Elizabeth Russell's inscriptions. We're coming back past Poets' Corner and down the aisle, the south aisle of the nave here to find Dorothy Osborne's tomb.

So Dorothy Osborne is buried here; she's also commemorated on a family monument that you see here associated with her husband, Sir William Temple, and she was one of the most notable letter writers of the 17th century. Now, letter writing was seen as appropriate for women because it was part of private life, unlike the public exposure of publishing works in print. It was concerned with intimacy, with

maintaining social bonds and with a spontaneous expression of feeling and these were all practices associated with women. There was a particular reason why Dorothy Osborne wrote many letters and that is that she and William Temple had a courtship of six years before they were able to marry. Her father and her brother objected to William's political views and they hoped to gain a richer husband for Dorothy. For most of their long courtship, William was abroad in Paris, then the Netherlands, while Dorothy was stuck in the family home at Chicksands Abbey (sic: Priory) in Bedfordshire, where her family kept her under close surveillance.

Even so, she and William kept up a secret correspondence, and it's actually a very romantic story because their love endured despite all these obstacles, and eventually after those six years apart they married in 1654. They had a long and happy marriage until Dorothy's death in 1695, so they were married for 41 years. Nearly two centuries after Dorothy's death, in 1888, an edition of her letters was published and she became a celebrated author because the letters are so witty, so entertaining; they give a very vivid sense of Dorothy's personality and also of 17th century domestic life.

Here's a letter where she recounts to William how she'd been waiting so desperately for a letter from him that when it finally arrived it was 'like a pardon,' she says, 'to one upon the block' (one about to be executed) and she talks about how it arrived in the middle of a visit by a neighbour who was a widow. Dorothy hid the letter in her pocket and suggested playing cards – she then deliberately lost all her money as quickly as possible so she had an excuse to leave the room, supposedly to get more money but really to read the letter in private. And she says she took her time before returning, she says, 'I took time enough to have coined myself some money if I had had the art on't'.

And this is typical of Dorothy's letters; it's lively, it's gossipy, it's funny, it shows her as a good storyteller. She could also slip easily into a more serious tone to express her unshakable love for William. This is the very next paragraph of the same letter, she says, 'You ask my thoughts but at one hour' – I think she means just once a day, he's asked her to think of him once a day. She goes on, 'you will think me bountiful, I hope, when I shall tell you that I know no hour when you have them not. No, in earnest, my very dreams are yours, and I have got such a habit of thinking of you that any other thought intrudes and proves uneasy to me'. So, Dorothy was a prolific, skilful and expressive writer, but in the private form of letters which didn't see publication for two centuries.

But if we make our way from her tomb across the Abbey towards the Great North Door, we find another woman who was writing at the same time but had very different ideas about what kinds of writing a woman could do. And this was Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, one of the most prolific and innovative writers of the 17th century.

Cavendish wrote poems, plays, scientific treatises, works of fiction, biography, autobiography and more. I'm not expecting you to read everything on this slide, I'm just putting it in front of you to give an impression of her productivity and her range, so it's just a list of some modern editions of her various works. Cavendish was determined to be famous as an author. When she published her first book, *Poems and Fancies*, in 1653 she wrote in a preface, '[A]ll I desire is fame. And fame is nothing but a great noise, and noise lives most in a multitude. Wherefore, I wish my book may set awork every tongue'. But she was also conscious that for a woman to seek fame as an author was extremely unconventional, so she went on, 'I imagine I shall be censured by my own sex; and men will cast a smile of scorn upon my book because

they think thereby women encroach too much upon men's prerogatives; for they hold books as their crown, and the sword as their scepter, by which they rule and govern'.

And indeed her expectations were proved correct. She was widely criticised and even ridiculed for writing books, and that criticism even came from her own sex, from our old friend in fact, Dorothy Osborne. As we've seen, Osborne practiced her considerable writing skills only by writing letters in private and she was deeply scornful of Cavendish. She writes, 'Sure, the poor woman is a little distracted, she could never be so ridiculous else as to venture at writing books, and in verse too. If I should not sleep this fortnight I should not come to that'.

And for three centuries this reputation stuck. If anyone had heard of Cavendish at all, they had heard her nickname of 'Mad Madge' – they thought she was wildly eccentric and ridiculous. But in the 1980s feminist scholars began to research forgotten or undervalued women writers of earlier centuries and since then Cavendish's reputation has grown and grown. She's now regarded as one of the most important writers of the 17th century. Cavendish was unusual and groundbreaking, not only as a published female writer but also because of her participation in the emergence of modern science.

The 17th century is often described as the period of the Scientific Revolution, a shift away from traditional intellectual frameworks based on ancient authorities and into a quest for knowledge based on observation and experiments. Cavendish's avid interest in this is reflected in the opening section of *Poems and Fancies*, her first published book. It consists of poems on atomic theory, in other words the theory we accept today that all matter is made up of tiny particles. Cavendish thought of these atoms as constantly in motion. She writes, 'Atoms will in just measures dance, and join / All one by one, in a round circle–line, / Run in and out as we do dance the Hay' – (the Hay was an intricate country dance where the dancers wove in and out) – 'Crossing about, yet keep just time and way, / While Motion doth direct; and thus they dance / And meet all by consent, not by mere chance'.

So there's pattern, there's order in this, but also incessant movement and flux of a kind that's very characteristic of Cavendish's writing. Thinking about atoms also led Cavendish to think about the possibility of tiny worlds within the world, too minute for us to see. She writes, 'Just like as in a nest of boxes round, / Degrees of sizes in each box are found; / So in this world, may many others be / Thinner and less, and less still by degree. / If atoms for a world can make, then see / What several worlds might in an earring be. / For millions of those atoms may be in / The head of one small, little, single pin. / And if thus small, then ladies may well wear / A world of worlds, as pendants in each ear'.

It's a poem where we can see Cavendish's fantastical and wonderfully inventive imagination at work. We can see that too in one of her prose works, *The Blazing World*, an early work of science fiction. This work begins when a woman travels to the North Pole. She finds a portal there into an alternative world, this is The Blazing World, and she becomes its Empress. Her subjects are bizarre semi-human hybrids; they include bear men, fox men and bird men, and the Empress forms them into scientific societies.

Now this was partly inspired by the Royal Society, an organisation recently founded in London to conduct scientific investigations. Cavendish was very interested in the activities of the Royal Society but also rather hostile and sceptical towards them, not least because women were not permitted to join. But in her alternative reality, in *The Blazing World*, the Empress is in command of the scientists, and she orders them to conduct various experiments. She also puts challenging questions to them, often expressing scepticism.

The Empress is also advised by disembodied spirits, and she tells them she needs a spiritual scribe to help with her intellectual endeavours and the person they recommend is none other than the Duchess of Newcastle. So Margaret Cavendish's own soul comes to *The Blazing World* to join the soul of the Empress in a relationship of platonic love.

Everything at this point becomes very self-referential, very metatextual. Cavendish is writing about herself as a fictional character and her fictional persona is melancholy because of her thwarted ambitions, so the spirits advise her to create her own world in her mind where she too can be an Empress. This is what they say: 'Every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures, and populous of immaterial subjects, such as we are, and all this within the compass of the head or skull [...] At last, when the Duchess saw that no patterns would do her any good in the framing of her world; she resolved to make a world of her own invention [...] which world after it was made, appeared so curious and full of variety, so well ordered and wisely governed, that it cannot possibly be expressed by words, nor the delight and pleasure which the Duchess took in making this world of her own'.

So this takes that metatextual effect to another level again because of course creating an imaginary world of her own is exactly what the Duchess has done in writing *The Blazing World*. The whole work becomes a rather mind-blowing allegory of its own creation. At the same time, it's a manifesto for the creative imagination in general, celebrating its powers and asserting its availability to everyone.

Although Osborne and other contemporaries of Cavendish thought she was mad, she received loving and steadfast support for her writing from her husband, William Cavendish, the Duke of Newcastle. He was 30 years older than her, but she died first at the age of 50. William commissioned this magnificent tomb for the two of them in Westminster Abbey, where he joined her three years later. Now as you can see, Margaret is on the far side of the tomb, she's slightly raised above William, that was unusual for the time. Even so, when you're actually in the Abbey you have to stand on tiptoes and peer over William to see Margaret, which is slightly frustrating. But there are some very pleasing details to the tomb. Margaret is shown holding an open book, an ink horn and a pen case as if death won't stop her writing, and beneath her feet there's a carving of a shelf stacked with books.

Peter Sherlock has made a study of this tomb. He points out that this is the first time that literary instruments were displayed on the tomb of a woman in England, and the front of the tomb bears a touching inscription, probably composed by William, which states, 'This Duchess was a wise, witty, and learned lady, which her many books do well testify'. Sherlock points out the position of the Cavendish tomb, it's the oval on the left of this map, it's exactly opposite the oval on the right which marks the tomb of Geoffrey Chaucer. Now that was the first tomb in Poets' Corner which started the whole thing. Sherlock asks the intriguing question, could it be that this tomb (meaning the Cavendish tomb), valorising Margaret's literary achievements in word and image, was intended as the centre of a new feminine Poets' Corner?

It's a really intriguing idea but of course just speculative because sadly that female Poets' Corner never happened. Instead, to find the most significant woman writer of the generation after Cavendish, we have to go back across Westminster Abbey, back past Poets' Corner and actually out of the main building into the east cloister, and here we find the tomb of Aphra Behn.

As you can see it's a much simpler, plainer tomb than the ones we've looked at previously and that reflects Behn's lower social status. So far all the writers I've discussed were either royal or aristocrats, but Behn was a commoner. She was hailed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, the work I mentioned earlier, as the first professional woman writer, in other words the first woman to become famous by writing for money. Woolf wrote, 'All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn [...] for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds'.

Behn's life story is intriguing; it's quite shady, quite racy, she liked to cultivate an air of mystery around herself so there's uncertainty about her date of birth and her parentage. She called herself Mrs Behn but it's unclear if there was a Mr Behn. We do know that as a young woman she spent some time in continental Europe spying for the English government and then she returned to London where, in 1670, she began writing plays.

Now she wasn't the first English female playwright because some aristocratic women, including Cavendish, had previously written plays but those had been for private performance or for solitary reading. Behn was the first woman to write for the public stage and she became hugely successful.

Her best known play is *The Rover*, which was staged in 1677. It's set in Naples in carnival time. The title character, the rover himself, is a roaming adventurer called Willmore. He's handsome, he's charismatic, but he's also selfish and irresponsible. Behn matches him with two strong female characters, and they compete for his affections. The first of these is Hellena; she's a young woman whose father and brother want to put her in a convent, but Helena wants to experience life and love, so she sneaks out into the carnival in disguise. She's witty, she's resourceful, she's bold, she flirts with Willmore but she resolutely does not yield her virginity to him, which he's desperate to take. Over time he falls in love with her and is persuaded into marriage. They agree to marry, and they seem well matched; they're two free spirits, it seems they will respect one another's independence.

The other heroine is a more complicated figure. She's called Angellica Bianca; she's a courtesan or high-class prostitute and she's come to Naples seeking a wealthy lover to support her. To this end she hangs a portrait of herself outside her chambers, in effect putting herself up for sale. Willmore criticises her for this, but Angellica retorts that it's men in fact who reduce women to commodities. She says, 'Pray tell me, sir, are not you guilty of the same mercenary crime, when a lady is proposed to you for a wife, you never ask, how fair – discreet – or virtuous she is; but what's her fortune'.

She falls in love with Willmore. She speaks of this as having lost her 'virgin heart' which is an interesting expression, the implication is she's lost her sexual virginity long ago but she's now feeling love for the first time and finds that to be a much more transformative experience. She's no longer cynical about love and so she wants to possess Willmore exclusively but he refuses to be tied down. So Behn here is creating an ironic situation: we have a prostitute, a woman associated with sexual promiscuity, who finds herself trying to confine her hero in monogamy.

Angellica herself feels this irony bitterly. When Willmore abandons her, Behn gives her a moving soliloquy and here's an extract from it: 'He's gone, and in this age of my soul / The shivering fit returns; / Oh with what willing haste, he took his leave, / As if the longed-for minute were arrived / Of some blessed assignation'. Now this is radical in terms of the culture of the time because a so-called fallen woman would

usually be a figure of contempt, but Behn presents her as a sympathetic heroine with profound emotions and with tragic stature. In fact, she makes Angellica the most heroic figure in the play.

Behn also wrote poems. These were often on sexual themes, which they were very frank about, and later in life she turned to writing prose fiction. Her most famous work in this genre is called *Oroonoko: or the History of the Royal Slave*, published in 1688. The title character, Oroonoko, is an African prince. He's captured, he's brought to Suriname in South America as a slave. All of this is told by a first person authorial narrator and she presents herself as a resident in Suriname at the time, as an eyewitness to all of this. Now, it's been debated by scholars whether Behn actually did spend time in Suriname as a young woman or whether she made this up. The balance of consensus now is that she probably did live in Suriname for a while.

In the story, her persona develops a close friendship with Oroonoko. She celebrates his handsome appearance and his noble qualities; she says he has a 'great and just character' and she goes on to assert that 'the most illustrious courts could not have produced a braver man, both for greatness of courage and mind, a judgement more solid, a wit more quick, and a conversation more sweet and diverting'. Because of this greatness of mind, Oroonoko chafes against the conditions of slavery and he leads a rebellion. The story actually ends in extreme violence with his torture and his death.

So the work is a thought-provoking response to early colonialism and the slave trade. In some ways it seems enlightened in its celebration of its African hero and in deploring his enslavement, but Jennifer Donald points out that Behn is more interested in the politics of class than race and actually takes quite a conservative line on this. Donald writes, 'her narrative is a protest against the enslavement of a prince, whose noble birth, heroic character and exemplary understanding set him apart from other men. It is Oroonoko's class or rank that makes his position as a slave so deplorable in Behn's narrative, rather than his race'. So it's a complex and in many ways troubling work and it offers us much to debate.

This is where I'll end my tour of alternative female Poets' Corners plural in Westminster Abbey. I'll just sum up: I've invited you to look at Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I in a different light, as authors as well as queens. I've shown how you can sometimes find examples of female authorship in inscriptions on tombs, as in the case of Elizabeth Russell. I've also introduced you to Dorothy Osborne, a vivacious and talented letter writer, and to Margaret Cavendish, remarkable for her creative imagination and for her fusion of science and literature. Finally, I've discussed Aphra Behn, one of the most successful writers of either sex in the late 17th century.

So I hope this may have inspired you to make your own tour of tombs of women writers in Westminster Abbey, and also to look further into the writings of these extraordinary women who deserve the title of 'Shakespeare's Sisters'.

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.

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