

A THEFT, A SCANDAL, A MYSTERY:
WHO WAS SHAKESPEARE'S SECRET LOVE?

Dark Ladies

BY
RHONA SILVERBUSH & SAMI PLOTKIN



A real-life mystery. A betrayal. A scandal.
And Shakespeare was at the heart of it.

GENRE

A One-Hour Historical Drama
Ongoing Series (60x8)



LOGLINE

When William Shakespeare's scandalous private sonnets are published without his consent, his life and the lives of three very different women are thrown into chaos. *Dark Ladies* moves backwards in time in each successive episode to the love affair itself, revealing: Who was Shakespeare's Dark Lady lover? And what fucker stole his Sonnets...and why?

SHOW CROSS



WEIGHTY MATTERS

SHAKESPEARE-CENTRIC



UNIQUE BRAND OF HUMOR



STEAMY RELATED
STANDALONE
SERIES

LINES BLUR ACROSS
SOCIAL STRATA

MARKET

PRIMARY AUDIENCE:

Adults age 25–55, skewing female;
Prestige Drama addicts who crave period authenticity
with a modern narrative edge

SECONDARY AUDIENCE:

Mystery Box fans and viewers who love scandal
and the secret lives behind public personas

ENGINE: A MYSTERY

Will's private and salacious Sonnets are published without his knowledge or consent, and London is ABUZZ.

Gossip rages over the steamy love triangle between Will, a "Fair Youth," and a mystery "Dark Lady."

A black brothel madam in the slums, a crypto-Jew, and a courtier's wife are caught up in the shitstorm of speculation.

Only one is the Dark Lady; all three are suspected.
By the end of the series, we'll know who she is.



JOURNEYING BACK THROUGH TIME

1592

1597

1603

1609

Each successive episode in Series One goes back a bit further in time, unraveling the rich stories of these three fascinating women, and finally reaching the affair itself; the Dark Lady's identity is finally revealed, and we learn how the Sonnets came to be published.

STYLE

The visual style will express the gritty realities of the time, placing in stark relief the rare, exquisite works of beauty created by extraordinary artists and poets of the era.

This is no romanticized revisionist version of Tudor England. Extravagant processions pass through streets rife with the sewage that runs down into the undrinkable waters of the Thames. Londoners go about their days against a backdrop of bear-baiting, heads on spikes, apprentices rioting in the streets.

Dark Ladies captures this environment of extremes without comment. The style is mostly intimate, the camera seeking out small private moments of connection and disaffection.

TONE



In an era when death was ever-present and life was simultaneously beautiful and oh-so-very hard, humor was fuel that kept people warm and kept them going.

Dark Ladies traverses the spectrum of human experience from pain and despair to joy and courage with empathy and with humor that stops just this side of farce.

Frankly, London in that era was such a crazy place that any other tone would be a mismatch.

An aerial, high-angle view of a historical city, likely Tudor London, showing a large body of water in the foreground with a massive wooden sailing ship. The city below is densely packed with buildings, streets, and a large open area that could be a market or a square. The overall tone is historical and atmospheric.

SHAKESPEARE'S WORLD


Unique Setting: Tudor London was a completely wackadoodle place that gave rise to completely wackadoodle beliefs and behaviors; *Dark Ladies* plumbs that for all it's worth.

The series spans the socioeconomic realms of plague-infested, superstitious, science-fearing, xenophobic, monarchical, patriarchal, chilly, damp, and smelly London of 1592-1609, from the courts of Queen Elizabeth and King James to the homes and businesses of the middle class to the theaters and brothels of the slums.



MAIN CHARACTERS

Each of the three “Dark Ladies” – all based on real women – is remarkable in her own right with a fascinating story for us to tell. Taken together, their stories paint a picture of what life was like for women in this very interesting time and place. And the people around them? There’s a reason we are not at a loss for future series of this ongoing drama.



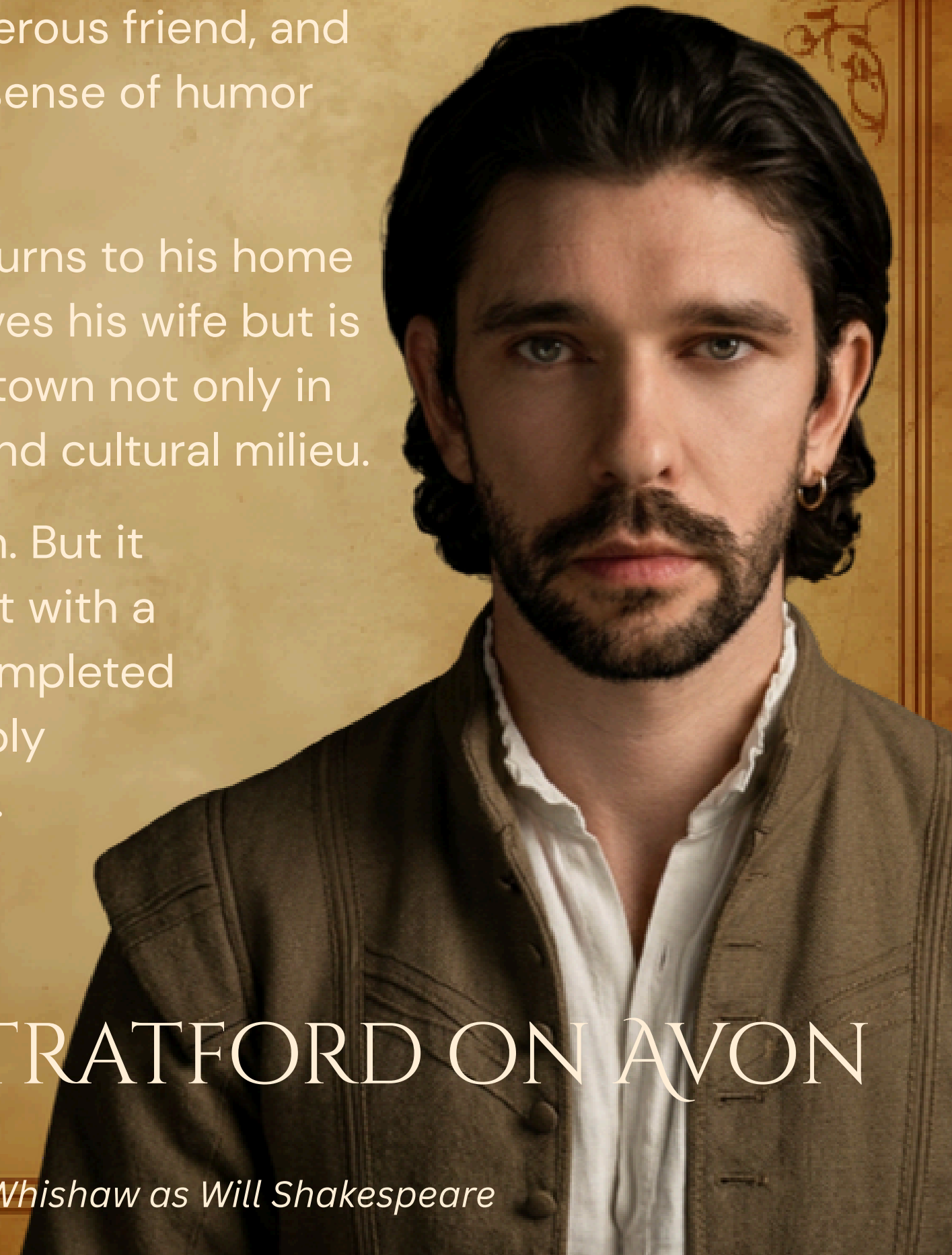
Will's theory of mind and empathy go to 11. No, past 11. A kind and generous friend, and a truly sweet person. Insanely quick-witted, with a highly developed sense of humor that ranges from the dryly clever to the uproariously bawdy.

A hardworking celebrity playwright and actor living in London, Will returns to his home town of Stratford only infrequently to see his wife and children. He loves his wife but is not in love with her. Will's life in the city is far removed from his hometown not only in its physical distance, but, more importantly, in London's intellectual and cultural milieu.

Will is a player in more ways than one...and with both men and women. But it was always light fare, until he surprised himself by falling deeply in lust with a "Fair Youth" – and then desperately in love with a "Dark Lady" who completed their complicated triangle. His Sonnets spell out the triangle in a deeply humiliating, er, personal way, and were never intended for public eyes.

WILL SHAKESPEARE – THE BARD OF STRATFORD ON AVON

#DreamCast: Ben Whishaw as Will Shakespeare



Aemilia's family of royal court woodwind musicians are "crypto-Jews" of Venetian and Moroccan descent, hiding their Judaism in plain sight. Unusually well educated for a girl and a talented musician herself, 18-year-old Aemilia became the mistress of the powerful 45-years-old Lord Chamberlain (eww), who gave her a pension and lavished gifts upon her...until she became pregnant, at which point he married her off to Alfonso Lanier, another court musician and a fellow covert Jew.

Lanier abuses Aemilia and has long since squandered her wealth. They live in a lower-middle class home surrounded by the shabby remnants of her palace lodgings; she constantly mourns the loss of the luxuries she enjoyed there. Despite having no patronage and no apparent avenue to publication, Aemilia perseveres in writing what will eventually become England's first proto-feminist work of poetry while under the constant threat of domestic violence.

WHY SHE'S A CONTENDER:

Since Will and his troupe performed at court regularly, he and Emilia would have encountered one another there. Aemilia was also directly linked to Will through her lover, who was the theatre troupe's patron at that time, and through her family of musicians, whose music has always accompanied his plays at court. In addition, there are multiple references and "signatures" in Will's plays that could refer to Aemilia, that lend credence to the notion that Will had – or has – a more than passing acquaintance with her.

#DreamCast: Houda Echouafni as Aemilia Lanier



Lucy was raised on the estate where her father, an immigrant from West Africa, was a valet. A talented dancer, Lucy caught the attention of the Queen and was brought to court, but she later fell from the Queen's grace and was dismissed. Her father was by then deceased and Lucy was alone in the world. Lucy turned to sex work. Smart and resourceful, she soon became the madam of a notorious brothel.

Lucy is in an uneasy alliance with Gilbert East, a pimp with vicious tendencies. Lucy grapples emotionally with the hard life she has dealt her and hates what she does, but she tells herself that "her girls" would be far worse off with other employers. In constant danger both from within and without her home, she is determined to protect herself and her prostitutes from harm, and to preserve the business she's built.

WHY SHE'S A CONTENDER:

Lucy is a tenant of Philip Henslowe, the owner of one of Shakespeare's chief rival theatre companies. The theaters and brothels are side by side in the Southwark neighborhood of London. Lucy's clientele ranges from immigrants to the nobility, with theatre professionals in the mix. In her heyday as a madam, she was highly celebrated for her beauty and grace and was invited by nobles to holiday revels Will attended. She and Will danced and flirted on more than one occasion—Will even renamed a character in one of his plays for her.

LUCY BAYNHAM – AFRICAN-BRITISH BROTHEL MADAM

#DreamCast: Thandiwe Newton as Lucy Baynham



Avisa is the low-born sister to two famous men, one a well-known poet and dramatist, the other a lauded court composer. As brilliant as her brothers, Avisa had hoped that by marrying their close friend John Florio, an esteemed linguist, translator, and author, she'd have access to his circle. But Florio, a widower, only wanted a trophy wife. As Florio's star rises, he tries to bury hers. She is depressed—she turns to sexual encounters for solace. Surprise! That doesn't work. In fact, it backfires spectacularly, landing her in Bedlam for a time.

At the time of the pilot, Avisa and Florio live at the palace, where Florio is Italian tutor and personal secretary to Queen Anna. Keenly interested in the natural world, Avisa desperately wishes to participate in the scientific discourse enjoyed by her male peers but continues to be sidelined by her gatekeeping husband.

WHY SHE'S A CONTENDER:

Before she lived at court, Avisa found ways to indulge her two great passions—discourse and intercourse.

Avisa may have collected among her lovers Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, the possible "Fair Youth" of Will's Sonnets. Wriothesley was patron both to the Bard and to Florio. Avisa's desire to feed both body and mind may have enticed Will into a dangerous triangle with the patron he and her husband shared.

AVISA FLORIO - UNRECOGNIZED SCIENTIFIC PRODIGY

#DreamCast: Phoebe Waller-Bridge as Avisa Florio





KING JAMES I
Openly bisexual monarch

JOHN TAYLOR
"THE WATER POET"
Ferryman, slam-poet.
Adored by his passengers,
reviled by "real" poets

KIT MARLOWE
Playwright by day;
spy for the Crown by night

INIGO JONES
Artist and architect
for whom the term "fabulous"
may as well have been coined

QUEEN ELIZABETH I
"The Virgin Queen"
(spoiler—not a virgin)

CORNELIS DREBBLE
Inventor of
the first working submarine
(it was made of leather!)

EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON
Irresistibly charismatic charmer,
rake, and troublemaker

MARY FRITH
a.k.a. Moll Cutpurse
Cross-dressing female
criminal

SIMON FORMAN
Sex-addicted astrologer/doctor
who predicted the exact day
of his own death

QUEEN ANNA
Queen, Renovations Addict,
Producer of Court Entertainments
who "wants to direct"

JUST A FEW OF THE ADDITIONAL FASCINATING
REAL-LIFE CHARACTERS WE'LL MEET

ARC OF SERIES 1

THE PILOT: JUNE, 1609

William Shakespeare's private Sonnets have just been published without his consent, setting off a bombshell of gossip and conjecture. Will takes off from London, determined to reach his home-town before the Sonnets do, to get ahead of the story with his wife.

The scandal affects not only Will, but also Lucy, Aemilia and Avis. Lucy's partner wants to pimp her out to capitalize on the sensation the sonnets are causing. Aemilia's violent husband attacks her and destroys her manuscript. And Avis is in danger of being committed to Bedlam.

Oh – and after what proves a miserable journey, Shakespeare arrives in Stratford just too late.

Our episodes are fictionalizations based on the historical records of our characters' lives.
The principal characters rotate in and out of the A character position.

EPISODE TWO: MARCH, 1604

King James I's coronation procession is upon us! The poet Samuel Daniel provides Aemilia a much-needed antidote to Alfonso's menace. Avisa finds herself sleeping at the notorious "Bedlam" insane asylum one night and the royal palace the next. All three women watch the procession as Will and his troupe march by...

EPISODE THREE: FEBRUARY, 1601

Lucy's lover, Frances Hudson, is jailed at Bridewell prison, where unscrupulous wardens abuse and pimp out the female prisoners; Lucy attempts to free her. Avisa has been serially cheating on Florio, who catches her in the act. Aemilia finds a potential avenue of escape from Alfonso. And Will gets caught up inadvertently in the Essex Rebellion, with life-threatening consequences.

EPISODE FOUR: DECEMBER, 1598

While a gang of thugs menaces all of London, Avisa visits sex-addicted astrologer/doctor Simon Forman to help with her depression. Lucy develops a love relationship. And through a snowstorm in the dead of night, Will and his troupe dismantle and sneak away with the timbers of their theater. Meanwhile, isolated in her home, Aemilia desperately battles to save her baby from the plague.

EPISODE FIVE: SEPTEMBER, 1597

Lucy rescues a woman who has been abandoned by her lover and beaten for being a vagrant. As Florio rages over Will's humiliating depiction of him in a play, Avisia sneaks out to Margaret Clifford's salon of educated women. Aemilia seeks out Simon Forman, and finds more than just answers to her questions.

EPISODE SIX: JULY, 1595

Hunger pervades London and an uprising over the price of fish catches steam. Aemilia, financially struggling, flashes back to her days as the Lord Chamberlain's mistress, her pregnancy by him, her forced marriage to Alfonso, and her abrupt departure from the royal palace. Will's star continues to rise. Avisia is bedridden with depression. Lucy supports one of her sex workers through pregnancy and is horrified when Gilbert kills the infant upon its birth.

EPISODE SEVEN: JUNE THROUGH DECEMBER, 1594

Summer: Roderigo Lopez is executed at Tyburn to shouts of “Kill the Jew,” striking terror throughout Aemilia’s community. **Autumn:** Florio’s intellectual circle slams the door on Avisa’s hopes. **Winter:** During the wild Christmas revels at Gray’s Inn, Lucy, at the top of her game as “the Abbess of Clerkenwell,” brings her “nuns” to entertain the crowd and flashes back to her fall from grace as a court dancer for Elizabeth I. The stunning and charismatic Earl of Southampton sponsors a revival of *The Comedy of Errors* at the revels, prompting Will to recall the intimate relationship they once shared.

EPISODE EIGHT (FINALE): SUMMERS OF 1592 AND 1609

1592: Interactions with Will plant the seeds for the deep and abiding feelings two of the women have for him. Will’s love affair with the third—his true Dark Lady—unfolds and becomes a love triangle with Southampton. Southampton pursues the Dark Lady and they take up with one another, shutting Will out. **1609:** The Sonnets’ thief is revealed, as are the thief’s method and motive. We see the aftermath of the Sonnets’ publication for the Dark Lady.

FUTURE SERIES IN OUR EARLY MODERN UNIVERSE

INTRIGUE: HENRY WRIOTHESLEY,
3RD EARL OF SOUTHAMPTON

The irresistibly beautiful and irrepressibly charismatic Earl of Southampton never met a rule he wasn't delighted to break. From an audacious caper smuggling his murder-suspect besties beyond the reach of the Crown, to thumbing his nose at the Queen's politically-motivated matchmaking demands, to sneaking abroad and dueling his enemy in direct disobedience of the Queen, Southampton thought he could always charm his way back into Queen Elizabeth's good graces. But when he conspires with the Earl of Essex against the monarchy, he's gone a bridge too far. Will his charm offensive be enough to let him keep his head?



#DreamCast: Nicholas Hoult as the Earl of Southampton



CRIME: MARY FRITH

“Moll Cutpurse,” the “Roaring Girl”—a cross-dressing, cigar-smoking drag king, thief, fence, and procurer of gigolos for middle class women—outwits and outmaneuvers the law at every turn, until the day she robs the notorious General Fairfax and shoots him in the arm. Can she outfox her jailers and escape the gallows?

#DreamCast: Bethany Black as Moll Cutpurse



THE OCCULT: SIMON FORMAN

His mysterious escape from a pirate kidnapping and his unlikely survival of a bout of the plague raise a mystique around London newcomer Simon Forman, sex-addicted doctor, astrologer, and student of the occult arts. Forman predicts the exact date of his own death, dropping dead on a boat in the middle of the Thames. His guilt in a famous homicide is conveniently decided after his death...or has he made an ingenious Keyser Söze-style escape?

#DreamCast: Tom Hardy as Simon Forman

DOCTORS JOHN DEE AND EDWARD KELLEY

The Queen's physician and occultist/scryer who believed angels told them to share everything—including their wives—"as a spiritual sacrifice"

...AND MANY MORE, INCLUDING:

AURELIA MOLINS

Respected midwife and surgeon's assistant called upon to examine the suspects in a witch trial, whose testimony would determine their fates

CORNELIS DREBBEL

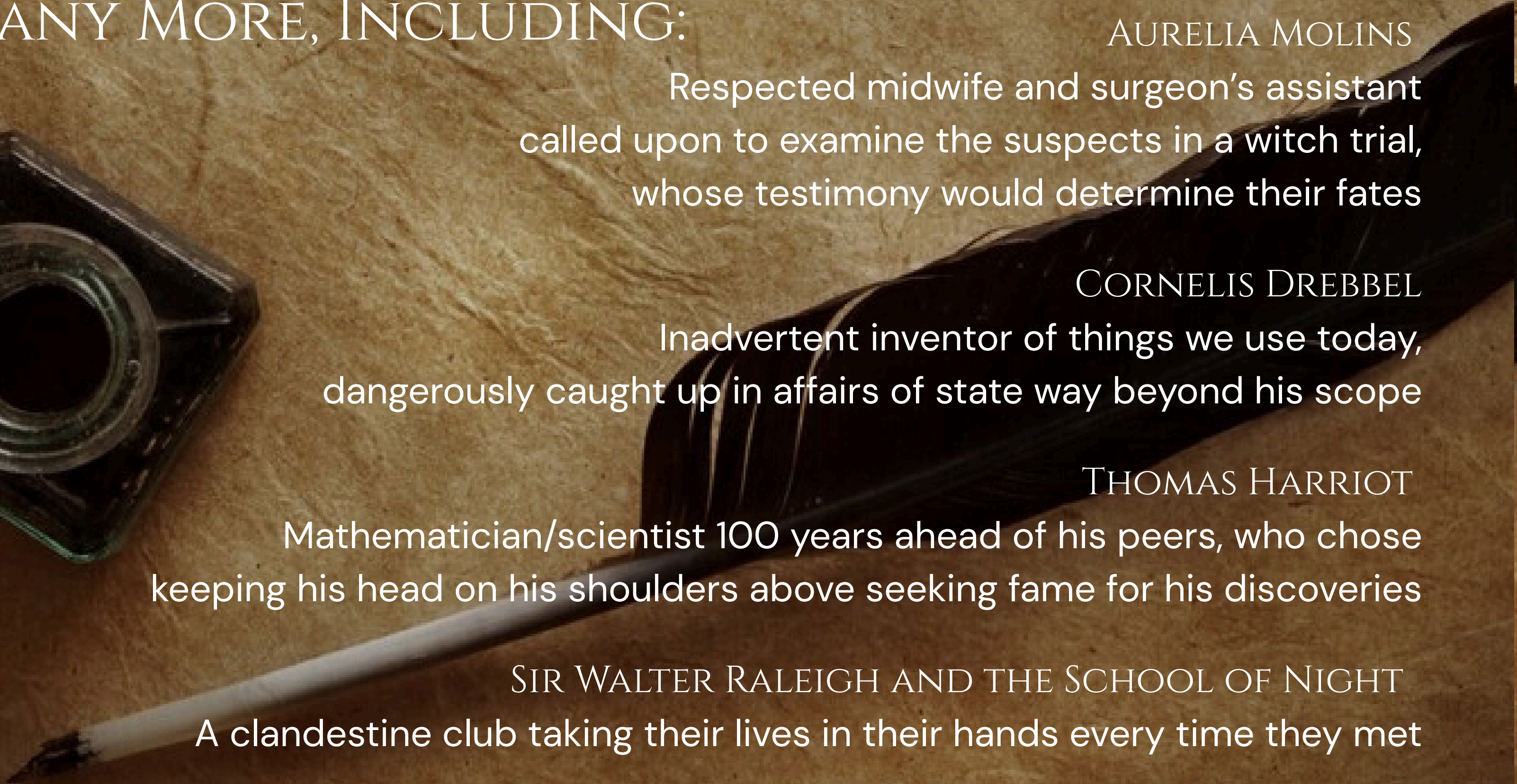
Inadvertent inventor of things we use today, dangerously caught up in affairs of state way beyond his scope

THOMAS HARRIOT

Mathematician/scientist 100 years ahead of his peers, who chose keeping his head on his shoulders above seeking fame for his discoveries

SIR WALTER RALEIGH AND THE SCHOOL OF NIGHT

A clandestine club taking their lives in their hands every time they met



WHY US, WHY NOW?

Eight years after the advent of #MeToo, we find ourselves in an unthinkable moment, when women's autonomy has been set back decades.

While our show takes place 400 years ago, the struggles of our women are shockingly—and yet not surprisingly—recognizable and relatable, especially to this mid-50s writing duo. The struggles and triumphs of the compelling women in *Dark Ladies* will hold a mirror to our viewers, revealing how little true progress has been made in four centuries. The series brings into focus the universal challenges of classism, sexism and other “isms” as characters find in themselves the resourcefulness, creativity and resilience to survive constriction. As for the two of us? Our survival techniques have made us life-long storytellers in various media.

But it's not only our experiences as women that inspire us to tell these stories. As co-authors of *Speak the Speech! Shakespeare's Monologues Illuminated*, a compendium for understanding and acting Shakespeare that comprises years of research, we have a deep and intimate knowledge of Shakespeare and his world. And as actors and acting coaches of his work, we've been in love with the guy for decades.



BIOS

Rhona and Sami are still paying off the New York Public Library late fees they racked up researching and writing *Speak the Speech! Shakespeare's Monologues Illuminated* (FSG), a comprehensive guide to acting Shakespeare. If you hear they went undercover as school children while doing research for *School Happens!*—a guide for parents of school-age children, written for educational data expert Michelle Robinson—be assured it's fake news.

Rhona is the co-author of a series of picture books for toddlers (Magination Press) and has written a cookbook with her celeb-chef brother-in-law (Random House). She coaches actors and is a source of guidance and support to families with new autism diagnoses.

Sami is a writer in multiple genres, including screenwriting, fiction, and stage plays. She edits for and counsels other writers. Despite the 30-year yoga practice that keeps her sane, she still cannot do a handstand.

Rhona and Sami are also both the proud parents of heart-centered, feminist young men.

"A FABULOUS BOOK, GLORIOUSLY PACKED WITH INFORMATION." —SIR DEREK JACOBI

"DARK LADIES is a highly engaging, conceptually fascinating and admirably original one hour pilot, and features a great premise."

—Big Break Screenwriting Contest

THE INDUSTRY'S SAYING...

"Although this is Plague-afflicted England in the grimy 17th century, the authors keep their tone fairly light, pulling up just short of farce, and it works well."

—Drew Hilton, The Screenplay Mechanic

"It's easy to see the attractiveness of this premise, especially for a streamer or pay network. There's sex and comedy and literature, a wide variety of impressive settings, and a legendary character at its center. The mystery is a solid hook."

—Page International Screenwriting Award

"a very vivid portrait of the epoch, so much so we can almost smell it"—Drew Hilton, The Screenplay Mechanic

"The dialogue enjoyably feels very witty, naturalistic and expressive, and provides keen insight into each character's inner life"

—Big Break Screenwriting Contest



"You've caught a clever idea by the tail with the way you've conceived the plot as not just a character portrait, but a mystery that has a clear effect on each of the main characters' lives. I was hooked from the beginning."

—Page International Screenwriting Award

ALSO...

"The pilot feels enjoyably similar to period drama series that explore their stories with a sophisticated, contemporary twist, such as THE TUDORS, THE GREAT and THE SERPENT QUEEN, and feature films like SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE."

—Big Break Screenwriting Contest

"Nuanced, elevated and highly compelling storytelling" —Big Break Screenwriting Contest

"This produced series would be an excellent fit for a prestige cable network like HBO, Showtime, FX or AMC, or a major streamer like Netflix, Hulu, Prime Video or Apple TV+"

—Big Break Screenwriting Contest

"The dialogue is deftly crafted and authentic"

—Drew Hilton,
The Screenplay Mechanic

"The script admirably brings 1609 London to vivid life on the page, and the reader feels fully transported to the world of the story." —Big Break Screenwriting Contest





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AND MORE!

Thank You for your Time

