

# ANOTHER SHAKESPEAREAN MYSTERY UNRAVELED

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 10 August 2012

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Who better qualified than Pilikian-scholar, social scientist, author, film producer/theatre director, classical music composer, fluent in at least six languages, etymologist-to guide us through the maze the Bard created in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in the process, became not only England's greatest writer but probably the greatest writer ever.

Pilikian is an avid puzzle solver. Just a few months ago he published a stunning interpretation of the word "**HAI**" (it means 'Armenian' in Armenian) in a scholarly work titled "[\*A Study of the Origins of the Hai-the First People\*](#)" (reviewed in *Keghart.com* March 26, 2012).

This time around, the professor zeroes his acute eye on the last 28 of Shakespeare's 154 Sonnets and comes up with the stunning conclusion that the so-called "**Dark Lady**" poems are actually about an African slave-prostitute whom Shakespeare loved unreservedly.

But before analyzing the poem word by word, the professor makes a strong case that to appreciate his recent discovery, the reader has to be familiar with the Elizabethan Era-the time Shakespeare lived. Contextualizing the socioeconomic times is one of the keys to understanding Shakespeare and

his work, says Pilikian.

England was mostly a rural country then. The cities--there were a few--were teeming, packed, unhygienic and often plague-ridden sprawls. People didn't bathe and bath-houses were often secret brothels. If Los Angeles is the Big Smog, Shakespeare's London was The Big Stink. Medicine was of dubious quality; venereal disease was widespread, especially among the nobility, intellectuals and creative people such as Shakespeare. People died before reaching their mid-forties. It's no wonder that 12- or 13-year-old Romeo and Juliet could contemplate marriage--life was "**nasty, brutal and short**", according to Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher. People had to make do with what they were allotted. (Although the tragedy takes place in Verona, Italy, most scholars agree that no matter the locale of his plays, Shakespeare was writing about England and the English, whether the characters were in togas, helmets or wide-brimmed hats.)

Slavery--meaning the bondage of Africans--was widespread. Some noblemen had slaves, others had African servants. Some slaves were street entertainers while others were unwilling prostitutes.

Theatre--Shakespeare's profession--was looked down by society. When noblemen attended the theatre, they were thought to be slumming. Actors and writers, perennially hard up, lived cheek by jowl with the "undergrowth" of society, such as thieves, drunkards, con men and prostitutes. The language of the theatre people was impregnated with hidden obscenities, vulgar slang, and salacious puns. Many words had dual meanings: the great dramatist's first name was slang for male genitals, while his last name could mean masturbation in the London underworld. No wonder then, as Pilikian points out, some of the most probing and illuminating Shakespearean scholarship has been accomplished by linguists and lexicographers, such as the legendary Eric Partridge.

Although Shakespeare declared the pun to be the lowest form of wit, he nonetheless indulged in rampant punning. As a commercial artist, he knew too well his audience's delight in untangling puns. Punning was so widespread that it was almost like a second language--like the Cockney of today's London.

Considering the desperate and rowdy life--especially the milieu in which Shakespeare flourished--it would come as no surprise that Shakespeare might have had a black slave-prostitute as a lover: he was far away from his wife and the conjugal bed in Stratford. In his theatrical world romance, casual or illicit love affairs were part of the quotidian parade.

While Shakespeare's profession, his milieu, and the times he lived might make a romance between the dramatist and the slave woman not far-fetched, the clincher in Pilikian's thesis is his word-by-word parsing of the Sonnets.

Thus, in the Sonnets, the object of Shakespeare's love is described as:

" ..... **black wires grow on her head**"

**"Who art as black as hell, as dark as night"**.

Pilikian insists that Shakespeare's lover was not "dark or olive skinned," as traditional, if not racist, scholars have maintained for several centuries. In a memorable statement, Professor Pilikian confirms: "Shakespeare is screaming down the centuries across the ugly face of all the racists that the woman he loved passionately was not mildly dark, olive-skin colored, but **African-black**, like the Night - you cannot get blacker than Night itself!"

Elsewhere (e.g. Sonnet No. 128), when Shakespeare sings about his black lover, he subtly refers to her banging on the jacks of a wooden musical instrument, in the style of African percussive instruments, rather than strumming on the strings of the instrument, (or playing on a *Virginal*, as traditionally misunderstood), says Prof. Pilikian.

As Pilikian says, over time Shakespeare has been cloaked, by the British establishment and scholars, in sacred vestments. Shakespeare has been emasculated and depicted as an ideal man, a generous man, a good Christian, a man with solid middle-class values. A Victorian gent, in other words. The British have turned Old Will to Saint Shakespeare.

The dramatist and poet was a disillusioned and a disappointed man, Pilikian says. He might even have been a crypto-Catholic at a time when English Catholics were persecuted. And as soon as he saved enough money (he speed-wrote his 38 plays and poems in under two decades), he fled rowdy London to retire in his somnolent hometown of Stratford.

Over the centuries the reputation of Shakespeare and that of his work have survived endless controversies. Some scholars-many of them French--maintain the plays were written by a nobleman; a group of writers; by a woman. Voltaire and Tolstoy thought he was a vulgarian. He has been tagged mostly by non-English scholars, of being a plagiarist, bisexual, obscene writer, snob, sycophant and an upstart. He might have been all of these, but above all, Shakespeare was the first humanist. Some say he invented the modern times and our contemporary sensibilities. Pilikian's thesis reinforces the profile of a humanist with modern sensibilities: a man who had no reservations--not only about having an affair with a black slave-prostitute--but dared to write about his ravishing amour, albeit in covert terms.

As soon as the Armenian public discovered Shakespeare, the English dramatist-poet became a favorite of Armenian theatergoers from Constantinople to Tbilisi to Yerevan and Baku. Armenians have given the world a number of remarkable interpreters of Shakespeare. from *Vahram Papazian* to *Kevork Chmshkian* and the *Gabriel Soundoukian National Academic Theatre* to the opera singer *Pavel Lisitsian*. With his exposé of the identity of Shakespeare's "Black Mistress", Prof. Pilikian has joined the pantheon of great Armenian interpreters of the Bard of Avon.

We eagerly wait for the prolific professor's next scholarly peregrinations in literature, history, etymology, art, and the social sciences.



