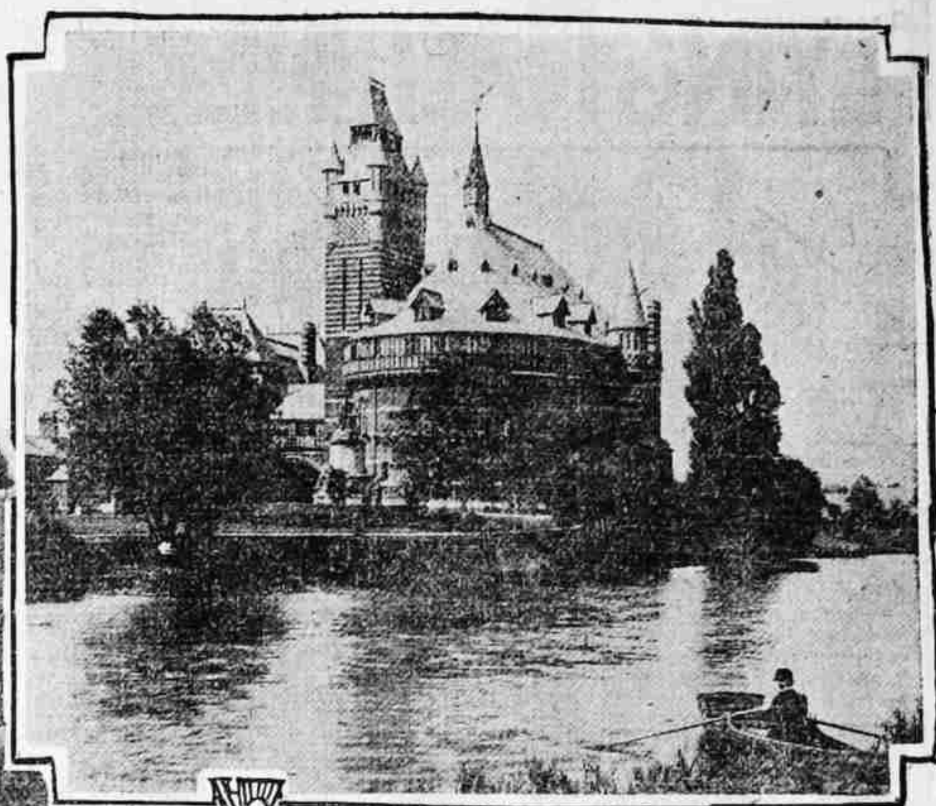
Who Was the Dark Woman Shakespeare Loved?

Investigators Learn Many of Great Play-Writer's Works Were Inspired By Beauty, Who Kept Him in Her Power for Many Years.



Who was "the dark woman" Shakespeare loved?

This mystery has puzzled the literary sleuths and Shakespearean authorities only a little less than the identity of Shakespeare himself. For there has long been the suspicion that Shakespeare's life was scarred by a passion more fierce and inextinguishable than that told in the story of any of his plays.

And now comes forward the rival in wit and penetration of Bernard Shaw, Frank Harris, to announce that in the plays themselves he finds conclusive evidence of Shakespeare's tragic love story. It is not a tale of a young man's fancy lightly turning to a girl that has caught his fancy. Shakespeare fell into the toils of a woman of the court who, for twelve long years, dragged the heart out of him, favored him now, but again ignored him, and roused him to such jealousy as flamed forth in his "Othello" by giving herself to other lovers in the face of her avowals of love for him alone. Truly it is a story that gives much color to the few facts about Shakespeare's life that can be proved historically.

During this present theatrical season when more of our stars are to be seen in Shakespeare's plays than ever before, this tragic love story has still more vivid interest, for in many of the heroines of his plays Shakespeare has pictured the woman who roused him to such ecstacy and plunged him to such depths of despair, even to the point that he quitted the court when in the very prime of his life at 47 or 48 years of age and retired to Stratford, the town of his birth. In those twelve years of his violent passion Shakespeare pictured his love again and again in his work so that as Mr. Harris now identifies her she stands forth as boldly as any lady in history.

Who was the woman that could twist the world's greatest immortal around her fingers?

First it should be known that she was not a woman, only a girl in her teens, when Shakespeare first met and loved her. Mary Fitton was her name, and she was a daughter of the nobility and was so endowed with beauty and charm at 16 years of age she became a maid of honor to Queen Elizabeth. There amid the gaiety of that none too straight laced court she fell under Shakespeare's observation, and even that first glimpse of her made such an impression that it is recorded in the plays.

Taking a hint from a speculation of the Rev. W. A. Harrison it was Mr. Tyler who first claimed that Mary Fitton and "the dark lady," whom the sonnets prove was Shakespeare's mistress, are identical. And now Mr. Harris, scouring the plays with this idea for his touchstone is able to throw such a light on Shakespeare's life and love as the world never expected to see.

Before setting down the few bold and none too lovely facts that are known about the "maid of honor," who was no maid and apparently knew little or nothing of the meaning of honor, it should be borne in the mind that she lived in an age when men toyed with life as they toyed with death and women were often mere counters in the game. That Mary Fitton could play the game and held a winning hand is written down for all eternity in the great tragedies her lover built around her.

A GIRL IN HER TEENS ENTERS LIFE.

Their story begins in 1595 when she came to Queen Elizabeth's court a girl of 17. Shakespeare was then 31 years old. From the story of "Romeo and Juliet," which Shakespeare wrote at this time, it would seem that he fell in love at first sight, though Mr. Harris does not identify Mary Fitton directly with Juliet, but with Rosalinde, to whom Romeo is inditing his love poems until Juliet takes him by storm. It is seldom that Shakespeare gives a photographic picture of a character, but this Rosalinde who never comes on the scene, is described minutely. She "torments" Romeo; she is "hard-hearted;" a "white wench with black eyes;" she is mentioned twice in four lines as now "pale," now "white." Plainly her complexion had no red in it save "her scarlet lip" and was in startling contrast to her black eyes and hair. "Manifestly this picture is taken from life," as Harris declares, "and it is just as manifestly the dark lady of the sonnets."

This, then, is the girl who changed Shakespeare's life. But she was a girl of noble birth. Although Shakespeare had undoubtedly been recognized at that time as a man of extraordinary talent, he was still a playwriter and an actor in the eyes of the world and indeed could never be anything else so long as he lived.

And yet Shakespeare had won friends of great influence and high position at court. To one young lord he was particularly attached, Lord William Herbert. And when he wished to win the attention of Mary Fitton it was Lord Herbert whom he asked to intercede for him with the lady. But once Lord Herbert found himself within the range of the battery of those dark eyes and felt the lure of her scarlet smile, he remembered only that he was a man and forgot the claims of Shakespeare.

In Herbert's defence the plea as old as Adam may be urged: "the woman tempted him." This is plain from the sonnets, for the story is reiterated of how he sent his friend to the lady to plead his cause, but she wooed the friend and gave herself to him. "The more fool Shakespeare," we would say today; but it must be remembered that his position at court did not warrant him in paying addresses to the Queen's maid of honor. Therefore to have a leading young nobleman of the realm speak in his behalf was argument enough for his course.

Judged by the strictest modern standards both Shakespeare and his fair but false lady love were much to blame. He had a wife and three children back in Stratford.

If "Venus and Adonis," Shakespeare's first poetical effort to be published, throws any light on the subject of this early love, his was also a case of "the woman tempted me." At any rate, he was only 18 and his wife was nearly eight years older. Also she was reported to possess a shrewish tongue. No wonder the young man felt he was hustled into his marriage, and possibly unfairly, for his bitterness against Anne Hathway grew with the years. When 22 he left Stratford for London and returned ten years later when his little son Hamnet died and was buried in the village churchyard. Even at the time of his death he was relentless toward his wife and cut her off in his will with the ironic bequest of "his second-best bed," though by the standards of the times he was a fairly well-to-do man and left each of his daughters good dowries.

WAS WOMAN WHO COULD BEWITCH MEN.

So it is plain both Shakespeare and Mary Fitton confronted each other in their love duel without any conscientious scruples to handicap them. In this combat it was inevitable that his higher nature was bound to make him suffer defeat; but that she should have held him in leash for a dozen years, flaunted him at times, then begged forgiveness and always won him back, all goes to prove that she was a girl and woman of such witchery and force of personality worthy to be immortalized in the world's greatest tragedies.

There is evidence enough in the plays that he wrote from 1596 to 1608 and even afterward that Shakespeare was struggling all that time with his infatuation.

"Shakespeare has painted his love for us in these plays," says Harris, "as a most extraordinary woman; in person she is tall, with pallid complexion and black eyes and black brows, 'a gypsy,' he calls her; in nature imperious, lawless, witty, passionate—a 'wanton'; moreover, a person of birth and position. That a girl of the time has been discovered who united all these qualities in herself would bring conviction to almost any mind; but belief passes into certitude when we reflect that this portrait of his mistress is given with greatest particularity in the plays, where in fact it is out of place and a fault in art. When studying the plays we find this gypsy wanton again and again; she made the deepest impression on Shakespeare; was, indeed, the one love of his life. It was her falseness that brought him to self-knowledge and knowledge of life, and turned him from a light-hearted writer of comedies and histories into the author of the greatest tragedies that have ever been conceived. Shakespeare owes the greater part of his renown to Mary Fitton."

In "Romeo and Juliet" he began to pay court to her through the character of Rosaline, if we read the lines with Mr. Harris' interpretation, such as Mercutio's speech:

"I conjure thee, by Rosaline's bright eyes.
By her high forehead and her scarlet lip—"

But in the next play comes Rosaline again, described so minutely that she is identical with the Rosaline mentioned, but never seen in "Romeo and Juliet." This is "Love's Labor's Lost" and by this time Shakespeare has learned that his love is no angel, unless she be an angel of another world than heaven.

Now the black eyes that have stabbed him through are become "pitch-balls" and his hero says: "I am toiling in pitch—pitch that defiles!" It was Mary Fitton's black eyes that held him then. Here are the lines that show the torment he is in—lines, it should be noted, that are at cross-purposes with the story of the play and are bound to confuse the spectator. Why did he write them? Because Mary Fitton would be present attending Queen Elizabeth at the first performance of the play at court, and she would know for whom they were intended. Here Rosaline is:

"A whitely wanton with a velvet brow
With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes;
Ay, and by heaven, one that will do the deed
Though Argus were her enuch and her guard;
And I to sigh for her! to watch for her!
To pray for her! Go to! It is a plague."

TELLS OF HER IN "ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA."

It is in "Antony and Cleopatra," the climax of Shakespeare's dramatic labors, that he gives his fairest and fullest portrait of his love. It shows how he had studied every fold and foible of Mary Fitton's soul. We see and know her, her wiles, her passion, her quick temper, her chameleon-like changes, her subtle charms of person and of word, and yet we have not reached the end of the first act. Next to Falstaff and to Hamlet, Cleopatra is the most astonishing piece of portraiture in all Shakespeare. Snobarbus gives the soul of her:

Ant. She is cunning past man's thought.

Eno. Alack, sir, no; her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love * * *

Ant. Would I had never seen her!

Eno. O, sir, you had then left unseen a wonderful piece of work; which not to have been blest withal would have discredited your travel.

Here Shakespeare gives his true opinion of Mary Fitton; then comes the miraculous expression:

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety. Other women
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies."

Cleopatra is cunning, wily, faithless, passionately unrestrained in speech and so is the heroine of Shakespeare's sonnets. The scolding and mad vanity of his mistress were defects in his eyes as in ours; these were the "things ill" which nevertheless became her. What Shakespeare loved in her was what he himself lacked or possessed in lesser degree—the demoniac power of personality. He says of Cleopatra:

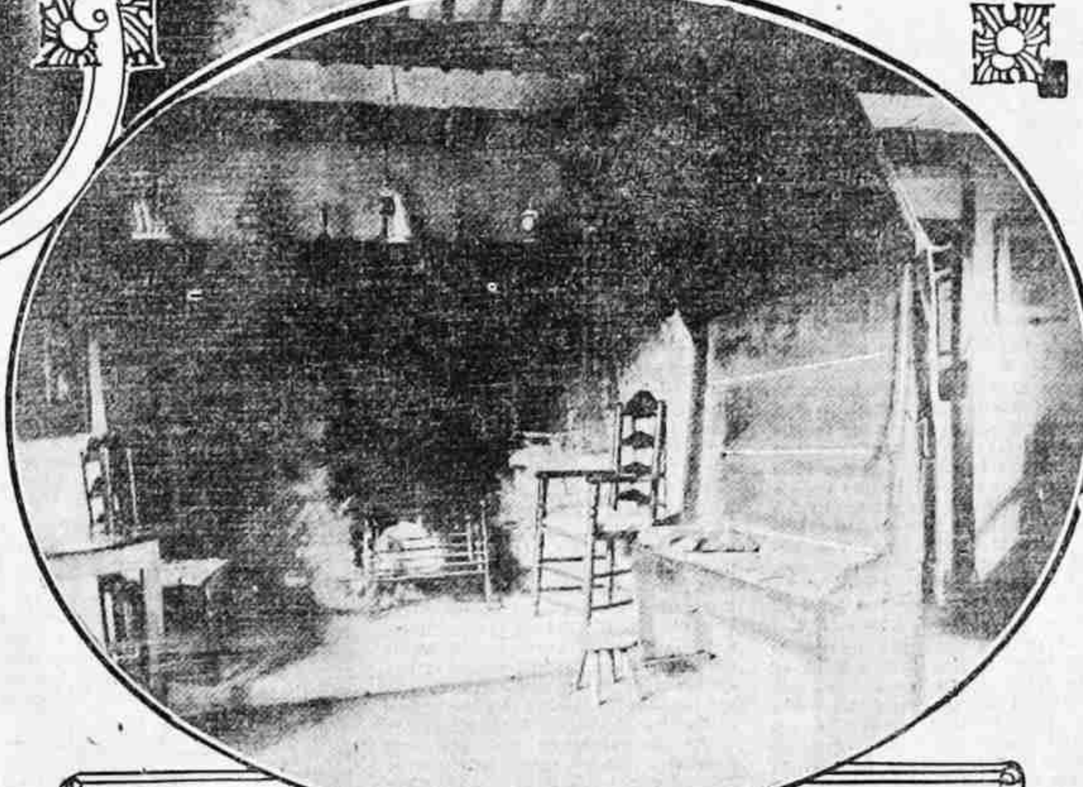
"I saw her once
Hop forty paces through the public street,
And having lost her breath, she spoke and panted,
That she did make defect perfection,
And, breathless, power breathe forth."

One would be willing to wager that Shakespeare was here recalling a performance of his mistress. In the sonnets he dwells upon her "strength;" she was bold, too, to unreason, and of unbridled tongue, for, "twice forsworn herself," she had yet urged his "amiss," though guilty of the same fault. What he admired most in her was force of character. Perhaps her confident strength had abandonments more flattering and complete than those of weaker women; perhaps in those moments her forceful dark face took on a soulful beauty that entranced his exquisite sensibility; perhaps—but the suppositions are infinite.

BARD OF AVON DESERTED FOR FRIEND.

It is plain that Mistress Fitton drew away from Shakespeare after she had given herself to his friend, and this fact throws some doubt upon his accusations of utter wantonness. It must be reckoned to the credit of of Mary Fitton, or to her pride, that she appears to have been faithful to her lover for the time being, and able to resist even the solicitings of Shakespeare. But her desires seem to have been her sole restraint, and therefore we must add an extraordinary looseness to that strength, pride and passionate temper which Shakespeare again and again attributes to her. Her boldness is so reckless that she shows her love for his friend even before Shakespeare's face; she knows no pity in her passion, and always defends herself by attacking her accuser. But she is cunning in love's ways and dulls Shakespeare's resentment with "I don't hate you." Unwilling, perhaps, to lose her empire over him and to forego the sweetness of his honeyed flatteries, she blinded him to her faults by occasional caresses. Yet this creature, with the soul of a strumpet, the tongue of a fishwife and the "proud heart" of a queen, was the crown and flower of womanhood to Shakespeare, his counterpart and ideal. Hamlet in love with Cleopatra, the poet lost in desire of the wanton—that is the tragedy of Shakespeare's life.

And yet Mary Fitton did not beguile Shakespeare to "the very heart of loss," as he cried; but to the innermost shrine of the Temple of Fame. It was this absolute abandonment to his passion which made Shakespeare the supreme poet. If it had not been for his mad love for his "gypsy," we should never have had from his "Hamlet," "Macbeth," "Othello," "Anthony and Cleopatra," or "Lear." He would still have been a poet and dramatic writer of the first rank, but he would not have stood alone above all others; he would not have been Shakespeare.



MISS DOROTHY GREEN of the Shakespeare-upon-Avon-Players, as Mary Fritton, Shakespeare's sweetheart. Upper left: Anne Hathaway's cottage. Upper right: Shakespeare Memorial Theater at Stratford-upon-Avon. Below: Anne Hathaway's cottage, showing settee where Shakespeare did his courting.

A Bird Protector.

Benjamin L. Dulaney owns a forest and bird preserve within the limits of Bristol, Tenn., which is said to contain more songbirds than any other space of woodland of the same size on the American continent. There are 160 acres in the reservation, and caring for the feathered songsters and studying them is Mr. Dulaney's hobby.

"I have come to the conclusion," said Mr. Dulaney, "that the disappearance of certain of our trees, notably the chestnut, is due to the neglect to preserve one species of bird, the woodpecker. I understand there are few woodpeckers left in the northern part of the country, and that the chestnut tree is almost extinct. Owing to this dearth of their enemies, the borers, on which woodpeckers prey, and other destructive insects, have come in force.

"There are many varieties of the woodpecker, each of which takes care of a particular form of tree pest. As for the harm the bird does to a tree, that is nil. He siply digs out a hole for the family nest in the spring. When you hear him tapping the tree at other times he has only located a borer, and is going after it and he has a way of finding it. I am positive that if we had protected our birds in time we would have saved many of our forest trees.

"I am keeping my forest wild because I love songbirds. They have come to know that they are safe. The boys of the neighborhood have been taught to become friends of the birds. Why, in my own yard I have seen as many as thirty or thirty-five nests" at one time.

The Only Way.

"Is there any way to let these city hunters kill a deer without hurting each other?" asked one guide.

"Not as I know of," answered the other, "unless you turn 'em loose with blank cartridges and give the deer a chance to laugh himself to death."—Washington Star.