ქართველოლოგიური ქრონიკა
CHRONICLE OF EVENTS

Medieval Georgian Romance "The Man in the Panther Skin" and Shakespeare's Late Plays by Professor Elguja Khintibidze

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Professor Elguja Khintibidze's new book*: Medieval Georgian Romance: "The Man in the Panther Skin" and Shakespeare's Late Plays* has just been translated into English (November 2018).

It's an amazing story and an extraordinary piece of research by the Professor who has spent the last 10 years or so working on it. His studies establish, for the first time, a fascinating connection between Elizabethan theatre and the great Georgian national 12th century epic. Based on the most rigorous textual analysis, he shows how remarkable similarities in theme, setting, plot, action and character – way beyond any mere coincidence of archetypes – demonstrate the clear influence of the Georgian epic upon both Shakespeare and Beaumont & Fletcher, particularly in *Cymbeline*, *A King and No King* and *Philaster.*

The most intriguing question is: how did this happen? How could it have happened?

When discussing Professor Khintibidze's theories with others, their usual reaction has been one of amazement, not to say scepticism.

So, I want to suggest an approach – not to discuss the intricate details and correspondences in the works themselves (I leave that to the Professor) but to talk about wider connections, to set the scene a bit so that such a thing no longer appears quite so extraordinary.

Firstly, I'd just like to fleetingly mention the incredible persistence of popular stories, poems, tales in the literatures of the world & the way in which they pop up in extraordinary, unexpected places. For example, we can think about the power & persistence of the stories from The Arabian Nights, their ancient origins & incredible proliferation.

We can think of Aesop's Fables & their fantastic popularity in mediaeval Europe, coming from Greece in 5th century BC, drawing upon far older tales from Asia, India & the East. We can think of the Alexander Romance appearing in hundreds of versions and guises from middle Mongolian, Ancient Ethiopian, Irish, Arabic, Georgian, Armenian, Persian, Latin, early Scots, Slavonic, Hungarian, Romanian, Turkish and so on. Just about everything. Our first text of the Alexander Romance in Anglo-Saxon is in the same codex as Beowulf, now in the Bodleian.

So, the way that stories have moved about the world should not at all surprise us. That's something to keep in mind.

Next, we can think about Georgia and its place in the world at various times in its history, especially at the time of its greatest power and influence, roughly when Shota Rustaveli was writing, 800 years ago and 400 years before Shakespeare, during the reign of great Queen Tamara, Tamar mepe.

We must remember the presence & influence of Georgians in Europe, Syria, Sinai and the Holy Land where Rustaveli almost certainly ended his days as treasurer in the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. There were some 20 Georgian Monasteries there, others in countries like Bulgaria and Greece – above all per-

haps on Mount Athos: the great Iviron Monastery was founded and staffed by Georgian monks (as might be deduced from its name) and the Great Lavra, perhaps the most important centre in the whole Orthodox World, was founded by St. Athenasios who came from Trebizond (a client state of Georgia) and who had a Georgian mother. These monasteries possessed vast wealth and power and huge tracts of land & enormous cultural influence – and many of the monks were engaged in work translating to and from Georgian.

And what about a specifically English consciousness of Georgia, apart from well-known classical references to Colchis and Iberia, the Land of the Golden Fleece, the mountain where Prometheus was chained, the famous – and famously misnamed – Alexander's Gates across the Daryal, keeping out Gog and Magog and all the chaos beyond.

Well, there are intriguing possibilities of connections between English and Georgians, certainly of an English consciousness of Georgia, through the Crusades, the Byzantine Court, trade, Constantinople, and various monks, soldiers and diplomats.

But it is really in the Elizabethan age - with the fantastic explorations of the great sailors, travellers and merchants – that the wide world floods in and we see a staggering explosion of interest in, and information about, the outside world and the equally astonishing enlargement of the English imagination. It is plain to see in much of the great literature of the time, from *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta* to *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*. In fact, in *Tamburlaine* we find one of the earliest reference to Georgia in English, rather than to Iberia or Colchis, names long familiar through the classics. Even earlier, in 1356, John Mandeville writes about Georgia in his *Travels*, a book translated into every European language by 1400 and used, quite astonishingly, as a guide for future exploration. Marco Polo's *Travels*, too, were incredibly popular & had long been read (in French) in England before being translated into English in Elizabethan times. And he mentions Georgia.

But it's the Elizabethan voyages of Anthony Jenkinson and The Muscovy Company (1558-1571), of Anthony Sherley and his adventures in Persia (1599), that brought Georgia much nearer to home. Both their accounts fed into the literature of the day and the huge and growing appetite for the exotic. The setting for many books and plays of the time were based upon well-known texts, popular tales, travels and histories. There were, in fact, over 60 plays set just in the Islamic World in Elizabethan times. It was something of a craze.

All this provided just the right environment for Professor Khintibidze's wonderful theory. His suggestions of the link that draws Shakespeare and Rustaveli together is enthralling: probably through Muscovy or Persia, or perhaps through Spain, England's arch-enemies at the time. Georgian embassies arrived there in 1495 and 1598, bearing lavish gifts and, of course, all their culture and learning. A great deal of correspondence flowed between the two courts in the intervening years. Fletcher, we know, spoke Spanish and there are interesting indications of considerable cultural exchange, largely through diplomats, monks and priests, between England and Spain. And, perhaps surprisingly, there were also very strong trading links between the two countries before the Armada.

Whether through Spain or through Persia, Fletcher & Beaumont, particularly, seem to have lifted the plots for *Philaster* and *A king & no King* entirely from Rustaveli. *A King & No King* is actually set in Iberia (the classical name for Georgia) – and we know it's not supposed to be Spain because the Georgians are fighting Armenians. We know that Fletcher and Shakespeare were good friends and collaborated on The Two Noble Kinsmen and Henry VIIIth – and that Fletcher, 15 years the Bard's junior, influenced Shakespeare's late plays. Shakespeare, of course, pillaged everything he could get his hands on.

My favourite – and I think I'm right in saying Prof. Khintibidze's preferred – possibility is that a copy of a version, in a translation into some language intelligible to the English, of Rustaveli's poem found its way into Antony Sherley's back pocket. Sherley was

a very dodgy character – a sort of pirate really – and he was at one time exiled from England for his misdeeds.

He managed somehow to "lose" 30 boxes of fabulous gifts intended for King James, from the Persian Court, a court dominated by Georgians like Alaverdi Khan Undiladze who had close connections to the Georgian court. Sherley was actually commissioned as an envoy of the Sha and sent back to Europe to act on his behalf. The 2 favourite wives of the Sha were Christian Georgians and were very friendly to Sherley and his gang of adventurers. Was there a copy of Rustaveli's poem – Georgia's greatest cultural treasure – in these boxes? Translated into Persian or Turkish or Arabic? And then kept by Sherley & his gang?

Even more intriguing is a well attested meeting between Sherley and the great actor Will Kempe, Shakespeare's great friend and principal actor, famous for his Falstaff. They met in Rome after Sherley had left Persia and we know that Kempe talked of this with Shakespeare and this fed into Shakespeare's references to the Sophy, the Shah of Persia, in Twelfth Night. Sir Anthony's younger brother, Robert, spent even more time in Persia, working for the Shah and reorganising his army. He married a Circassian lady and died there, in Qazvin. There are so many fascinating possibilities here.

All this is wonderfully teased out, explained and elucidated in Professor Khintibidze's seminal book. It's a tremendous example of the astonishing inter-connectedness of cultures, of stories, of interests, many centuries before such things were possible at the click of a button, and a marvellous tribute to the power and the poetry of Shota Rustaveli's fabulous epic.