Sonnet No. 130(My mistress' eyes…)

Source: 1. Cliff Notes, Arden Shakespeare & Bloom's Shakespeare through the Ages

As in the sestet of 127, the speaker boasts defiantly of his mistress's dark colouring and lack of the conventional attributes of female beauty. Following immediately on his analysis of the driving force of male lust, this may suggest that the traditional forms of beauty celebrated in love poetry are unnecessary to provoke desire: all that is necessary is that the object of desire is female and available. This strongly parallels Touchstone's wooing of the honestly ugly and wanton Audrey, in AS YOU LIKE IT 3.3.1-57.

Sonnet no. 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head;

I have seen roses damasked, red and white, 5

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound; 10

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

M y mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

Commentary:

1 My Both here and in 1. 12, it seems that My should receive strong emphasis: the speaker is distinguishing himself from the majority of other love poets: contrast, for instance Sidney's Astrophel and Stella, 8.9, praising Stella's 'faire skin, beamy eyes, like morning sun on snow'. Rollins compares Poems, Written by the . . . Earl of Pembroke (1660), sig. D4: 'One Sun alone moves in the skye, / Two Suns thou hast, one in each eye; / Onely by day that sun gives light, / Where thine doth

rise, there is no night'. nothing like the sun in no way resembling the sun: cf. the similarly adverbial nothing in 123.3.

2 Cf. TS 1.1.129, 'I saw her coral lips to move'; VA 542, 'That sweet coral mouth'; Luc 420, 'her coral lips, her snow-white dimpled chin'; also Richard Barn field, Cynthia, With Certaine Sonnets (1595), sonnet 17.12, 'His teeth pure Pearle in blushing Correll set'. Q's 'lips' could alternatively be modernized as iips" or 'lip's'.

3 If snow is used as the standard by which to judge whiteness, her breasts, in comparison with it, are a dull grey-brown: though Booth (454) argues that 'the thrust of the line is at least as much toward mocking inexact hyperbolic metaphor .. . as toward depreciating the lady's complexion', some readers may judge otherwise.

4 If . . . wires Hairs and wires must have been readily compared because of the lavish use of gold wires in 'tires' and hair ornaments, so it may be that (gold) wires might be implied: 'Whereas (poets' mistresses') hairs are normally compared with (gold) wires, mine possesses black ones.'

5 damasked ornamented with variegated colours; or, having the hue of the damask rose (OED damask v. 3; damasked 4, with this example) red and white The 'damask' rose was red, but the suggestion here is both that he has seen variegated roses, and that he has seen red roses and white roses.

7 some perfumes suggests, sarcastically, that not all aromas classified as perfumes are delightful; cf. Hotspur's disgust with a fop's perfumes, 1H4 1.3.36.

8 reeks exhales or emits steam or smoke (OED 2a, b): the word does not seem to have had quite such unpleasant associations for the Elizabethans as it was later to acquire, but was frequently linked with sweat, blood and bad breath; cf. Cor 3.3.120-1: 'You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate /As reek o'th'rotten fens'; and Cym 1.2.2.

11 a goddess go goddesses were supposedly recognized by their gait; go = walk.

13 rare choice, special

14 any . . . compare any woman misrepresented through deceptive similes: for she as 'woman' cf. AYL 3.2.10, in which Orlando prepares to write bad verses celebrating 'The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she'.

Summary

Sonnet 130 is a parody of the Dark Lady, who falls too obviously short of fashionable beauty to be extolled in print. The poet, openly contemptuous of his weakness for the woman, expresses his infatuation for her in negative comparisons. For example, comparing her to natural objects, he notes that her eyes are "nothing like the sun," and the colors of her lips and breasts dull when compared to the red of coral and the whiteness of snow.

Whereas conventional love sonnets by other poets make their women into goddesses, in Sonnet 130 the poet is merely amused by his own attempt to deify his dark mistress. Cynically he states, "I grant I never saw a goddess go; / My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground." We learn that her

hair is black, but note the derogatory way the poet describes it: “black wires grow on her head.” Also, his comment “And in some perfumes is there more delight / Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks” borders on crassness, no matter how satirical he is trying to be. The poet must be very secure in his love for his mistress—and hers for him—for him to be as disparaging as he is, even in jest—a security he did not enjoy with the young man. Although the turn “And yet” in the concluding couplet signals the negation of all the disparaging comments the poet has made about the Dark Lady, the sonnet’s last two lines arguably do not erase the horrendous comparisons in the three quatrains.

The Dark Lady

The Dark Lady The Dark Lady is the woman (presumably just one, but no one can say for sure) to whom Shakespeare’s speaker turns after the sonnets to the Young Man. This new addressee surfaces in sonnet 127 and remains through the end of the sequence (again, presumably) or at least till sonnet 152 if the less personal, more derivative sonnets 153 and 154 are judged to be separate—either emblematic epilogues following the Dark Lady poems or an envoi that turns from the sonnets as a whole to A Lover’s Complaint, the long concluding poem in the 1609 quarto edition of The Sonnets. Although Shakespeare provides no explicit clues, it is just possible that the Dark Lady enters the sequence in sonnets 40–42, which dramatize a crisis in the speaker’s and Young Man’s relationship because of the latter’s affair with a woman. Is the Dark Lady the object of the “robbery” by the “gentle thief” that is the Young Man? This woman more aggressively “woos” in sonnet 41, and some editors have emended the pronoun in “he hath prevailed” to “she”—that is, the woman becomes the temptress of the Young Man’s “straying youth,” a role made explicit in line 13. Sonnet 42 resolves this triangle or, more precisely, dissolves it. The speaker admits he loved the woman “dearly” but also admits that he laments the Young Man’s unfaithfulness far more. He accuses both of abusing him. In an ending more clever than satisfying, he declares his friend and he are one, and thus, despite the affair, still “she loves but me alone.”

When the Dark Lady more formally appears or reappears, toward the end of the sequence, the speaker quickly supplies some of the physical details and characteristics lacking earlier. Having arrived at a kind of closure with “my lovely boy” in sonnet 126, the speaker turns in sonnet 127 to a meditation on the changing measures for beauty. Once things “fair” or light were considered beauty, “But now is black beauty’s successive heir / And beauty slandered with a bastard shame.” We next hear about his mistress having eyes that are “raven black,” and subsequent sonnets speak of her “dun” breasts, the “black wires” of her hair, and her black beauty in general. Usually critics have taken these details as signs of the Dark Lady’s dark complexion. Notice that in sonnet 127 the speaker does not admit that blackness is beautiful but only that the present age thinks it so and thus slanders true beauty. It is the first sign of a growing misogyny toward the mistress, and A. D. Cousins nicely points out that the speaker’s relationship with the Young Man sometimes celebrates a continuity between past and present see sonnet 106), but here the Dark Lady presides over a world in decline. The speaker may be decrying cosmetics, which prevented others from knowing if a woman were dark or fair, and he equates that duplicity with the false-seeming eyes of the mistress—“they mourners seem” (a comparison revisited in sonnet 132). Sonnets 128–30 display a breathless range of tone and expression in the span of three short sonnets. The first is a charming poem of physical desire, based on the popular Renaissance tableau of a woman playing the virginal,

a piano-like instrument that in the context of the Dark Lady is likely meant with heavy irony. Sonnet 129, one of the most famous of the sequence, reacts to the bodily lightheartedness of the previous poem with a fierce revulsion against the irrational enslavement that is sexual appetite. The tormented speaker frames the woman's sexual attractions paradoxically, as a "heaven that leads men to this hell." This harsh language, and the bitter enchantment behind it, will appear increasingly in the remaining sonnets to the Dark Lady. Yet the Petrarchan parody of sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," restores some of the jauntiness that sonnet 129 had dashed. Many have taken the couplet, which sets off "my love" from "any she belied with false compare," but this final phrase reintroduces the themes of duplicity, misleading desire, and false representation (whether by cosmetics or by Petrarchan imagery in sonnets) that haunt the speaker in this subsequence.

In the next series of sonnets, the speaker further explores his ambivalent desire for the Dark Lady and reveals the extent of the division within himself. "Thy black is fairest in my judgement's place," he confesses in sonnet 131, but only after he clinically considers how others would not consider the Dark Lady's face worthy of making her the proud, cruel mistress of poetic convention. The speaker, however, feels otherwise, but even he, when alone and speaking to himself, is terribly aware of the "slander" that is his "doting" on this woman, as if she were the ideal mistress. Having sketched his own inconsistent and contradictory desire, the speaker introduces the "friend" in sonnet 133 and thus reintroduces a triangle of characters. He and the Young Man are fretfully alike—both, it seems, are romantically enraptured with the Dark Lady. The speaker, by seeing the effects of his desire in another, grows angrier with this harmful woman and her "steel bosom." Moreover, the speaker identifies closely in these sonnets with the Young Man, who is "my next self" and "that other mine" and so forth. The speaker seeks to be a sacrificial stand-in for his friend in 133 but has been manipulated in 134—he has indeed enthralled himself to the Dark Lady, but she has not set free the Young Man from his passion, or vice-versa for that matter: "Him have I lost, thou hast both him and me; / He pays the whole, and yet am I not free." The woman stands accused of doublecrossing the male lovers, at both of their expenses. Sonnets 135–137 are some of the bawdiest in all of The Sonnets, and by employing so freely the slang meaning for "will" (signifying male or female genitalia, as well as carnal desire generally),

the speaker places the Dark Lady and himself in a highly sexualized, brazenly analytical discourse. Apparently the woman can have any guy she wants, and thus "Will in overplus," which perhaps is no big surprise since we're told that her "will is large and spacious." Considering how promiscuous she is, why can't the speaker hide his will in hers, too? Sonnet 136 makes clear the ultimate foundation of the speaker's and Dark Lady's relationship and what is most desired. Neither heart nor soul of ideal lovers, but "Will will fulfil the treasure of thy love, / Ay, fill it full with wills," adds the speaker coarsely. Sonnet 137 continues this tone, speaking of the woman's sex as the "bay where all men ride," and yet the speaker admits this scene fascinates him, falsifies his eyes, and, through them, hooks his judgment. This frustrating sense of hypocrisy is further analyzed in sonnets 139–142, where the speaker justifies and denounces the Dark Lady's unkindness and broods on his eyes and heart. The plateau of his discontent, however, is found in sonnet 138, "When my love swears that she is made of truth." Its catalog of mutual lies, and mutual gratitude for these lies, has been described "as merry as it is vicious," but an altogether different feeling seems primary here—deep resignation at the couple's sexual delusion and their shared need for it Driven by an extended simile of mother and child, sonnet 143 implies a situation in which the Dark Lady is now interested in

another, who is not so interested in her, all of which leaves the speaker, “thy babe,” to chase the woman and beg her to turn back and receive him again. Sonnet 144 clearly reestablishes the triangle the speaker finds himself in with the Dark Lady and Young Man. With no ambiguity he shows his favor to his friend, the love of comfort that is the “better angel,” while the woman, “a worser spirit” who is “coloured ill,” is the love of despair, tempting the Young Man sexually and thus the speaker to hell. Believing that her “foul pride” will overcome the Young Man’s “purity,” the speaker ends the poem on a defeated note and one perhaps suggestive of venereal disease. Sonnet 146, a rather exceptional one in the sequence, is a rare example of Shakespeare writing in the vein of religious poetry. Here he wishes to move beyond the confines of the body and its desires and look toward the eternal peace of the soul, beyond Death. Yet this spiritual longing is fleeting. The next four sonnets brood further on the speaker’s increasingly infuriating inconsistency and servitude. Sonnet 147 returns to the “irrational” theme of sonnet 129 with a renewed urgency, while the others turn on the “blind lover” motif familiar in sonnets. He accuses his “cunning love” of keeping him in tears, since it prevents his eyes from being “well seeing” and finding her “foul faults.” Sonnet 149 is a painful poem, because it acknowledges both the Dark Lady’s rejection of him and his nevertheless continuing love for her, however unhealthy and unmerited—“all my best doth worship thy defect,” the speaker says. He issues a bitter invitation in his state of blindness: “love, hate on” when it comes to him, and love instead those who see well. Sonnet 150 intensely explores one terrible paradox: why the speaker is increasingly devoted to the woman “the more I hear and see just cause of hate?” It is as if the scale of affection has been completely inverted in the emotionally delusional speaker, who unfortunately retains a dreadful, clinical clarity as to his own ridiculous situation. Sonnet 151 returns to the body-soul concerns of sonnet 146, but in a listless, deflated way. Here the speaker admits his enslavement to his flesh—“I do betray / My nobler part to my gross body’s treason”—but quickly the sonnet devolves into a series of erection jokes. The Dark Lady’s very name makes the speaker “rise and fall,” as if at least one body part were a servant or lieutenant to the sexual captain that is the woman. The last of the Dark Lady poems, sonnet 152, informs us that the Dark Lady is in fact an adulterer. By loving and then rejecting the speaker, she broke a “bed-vow,” taken to mean her oath in marriage, and she has also broken her vow of love to the speaker by now “vowing new hate” to him. Yet the subsequence ends on a note of self-recrimination. He has broken twenty oaths to her two, for repeatedly he has perjured his eye (and his own person, his “I” in these tormented sonnets) because “I have sworn thee fair.” The concluding image frames the speaker as a victim of blind Cupid, and so fittingly the final two, more impersonal sonnets of the entire sequence are emblematic poems about the “little Love-god.”

For centuries scholars have attempted to identify the Dark Lady of Shakespeare’s final sonnets with a historical counterpart. Early critics defensive of Shakespeare’s honor (and fully assuming the “I” of The Sonnets was always he) were quick to associate the woman with the poet’s wife, Anne Hathaway. Imagining the woman as a wife in this sequence—fraught with sexual enslavement, betrayal, and love-corrupting hate—hardly provides the social respectability so dear to these critics, and furthermore, the speaker’s comment about the broken “bed-vow” makes it fairly clear that his relationship with the Dark Lady was extramarital. Other historical candidates put forward include Elizabeth Vernon, the bride of the earl of Southampton, often thought to be the historical Young Man; Elizabeth I’s maid of honor Mary Fitton, who was a popular candidate in the late nineteenth century, until portraits of her surfaced and showed her to be quite light of complexion and lacking the “raven black” eyes of The Sonnets’ mistress; Queen Elizabeth herself (!); Jane Davenant, whose

son William (likely in a case of pathologically deep literary emulation) indeed hinted that he was the illegitimate son of Shakespeare; an African prostitute named Lucy Morgan; and Emilia Lanier, a writer herself and the mistress of the Lord Chamberlain, who sponsored Shakespeare's acting company. As one refreshingly honest and rarely humble critic puts it, "There have been many guesses, but nobody really knows who she was."

Although too old to be even a remote candidate, Penelope Rich has also been mentioned—the inspiration behind Philip Sidney's 1580s sonnet sequence Astrophil and Stella, an influential source for Shakespeare. Rich raises another important point: literary convention also influenced Shakespeare's choice of characteristics for his mistress. For example, Sidney describes Stella in the seventh sonnet of his sequence in strikingly similar terms:

When Nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes,

In colour black, why wrapped she beams so bright?

. . .

That whereas black seems Beauty's contrary,

She even in black doth make all beauties flow?

The presence of this literary tradition should give pause to all historical detectives bent on identifying the characters in The Sonnets. Interest in the Dark Lady's presence in Shakespeare's poetry and her various realities—historical, cultural, or lyrical—have often shifted in step with changes of approach in literary criticism. Thus efforts to identify her historical source have waned, while critics interested in more recent New Historicist topics seek different kinds of evidence in the representation of The Sonnets' mistress. What did Shakespeare and his early readers envision when imagining the Dark Lady's blackness? Was she African, Mediterranean? Non-English in a general sense, or fully English and simply with dark complexion? What moral qualities did this darkness presuppose? Studies of race and climate theories during the Renaissance have indirectly shown to scholars of The Sonnets that Shakespeare's mere choice of color to identify his mistress introduced into his sequence rather complex issues about culture, nationhood, and the other. Recent scholars such as Marvin Hunt and Ilona Bell have shifted their assessment of the Dark Lady into a more consciously literary, theoretical mode, worrying less about questions of history and race and instead considering her role, in Hunt's words, "as a literary sign to which color values have inevitably been attached."