

**Concepts of woman in Shakespeare's sonnets:
The Dark Lady**

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submitted by

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1. Introduction

When I first heard of the Dark Lady in one of our lessons, I was directly interested in this subject since Shakespeare made fun of various Petrarchan clichés we had talked about before. As I personally also think that the image of woman conveyed in Petrarchan sonnets is completely exaggerated, I want to describe the Dark Lady introduced in Shakespeare's sonnets 126 to 152¹ because she seems to be much more natural.

To examine this subject, I first want to search for any hints whether this lady is real or not (2.), then I have decided to refer to the story told in the sonnets about the Dark Lady (3.1). After that, I would like to take a closer look at the lady herself, on the one hand concerning her and her outer appearance (3.2) and on the other hand at the relationship between her and the poet (3.3).

I hope to find out a few differences to Petrarchan sonnets (which I will not quote explicitly) to be able to say which way of addressing the lady you love is better.

2. The historical background

As I have pointed out before, the term "Dark Lady" is "used to describe the woman allegedly referred to in Sonnets 126 – 152"².

But there are divergent opinions concerning the task whether this lady portrays any real person or if she does not.

Some of those who have been engaged in giving an answer to this question believe that she has been completely invented by the poet to show that "masculine friendship [is superior] to physical passion"³.

But others believe that Shakespeare has been inspired by a real woman. There are a few theories who this woman could have been, here only some examples: Queen Elizabeth, Elizabeth Vernon, Lady Negro, Jane Davenant, Mary Fitton,...⁴ But none of these speculations can actually be proved. We can only describe the woman as Shakespeare presents her to us in his sonnets.

¹ *A Shakespeare Encyclopaedia*, ed. by Oscar James Campbell (London, 1974 [1966]), pp.175 – 176.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

3. The Dark Lady

3.1 The story

In the sonnets written about the Dark Lady Shakespeare tells a certain story showing the development of their relationship:

At the beginning of the sequence, the poet tells about the affection the lady shows towards him⁵; when their affair develops, he gets into a “struggle between sensual and spiritual love”⁶ which shows that he does not really know whether he should stick to the Petrarchan love concept or if he is to give into his lust.

The poet prefers a love relationship including physical love.

But then his mistress gets to know the poet’s friend and decides also to get this man⁷. The poet wants to “save his friend from the Dark Lady”⁸, but as he cannot, he does not want to continue his affair with her⁹. Even the friendship between him and the other man gets a bit broken as he is now under her control¹⁰. So the poet agrees to give up his affair with his mistress for his friend¹¹.

This story appears to be quite realistic, so that “many have believed it revealed [...] an episode in his own life”¹². But actually, it is more reasonable to pay attention to the “protest against sensual love”¹³ and the “protest against Petrarchan idealization of womanhood”¹⁴. So what is important is not really what is told about the lady herself, but which critics this description implies concerning Petrarchan clichés.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pearson, Lu Emily: *Elizabethan love conventions*, repr. (London, 1966), p. 277.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p.278.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p.280.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p.281.

¹² Ibid., p.277.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.276.

3.2 What she is like – her outer appearance

In *Sonnet 130*¹⁵, the poet describes what his lady is not like. Reading this poem is a useful way to be introduced into thoughts about the Dark Lady:

“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,
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:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My 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.”

Obviously, the lady is not described in a way a woman would like to be seen.

“The ladies of the sonnet tradition were idealizations; Shakespeare’s heroine represents neither the traditional ideal nor his.”¹⁶

In conventional Elizabethan thinking, the ideal of a woman was blonde (“My lady’s hair is threads of beaten gold”¹⁷), but Shakespeare stresses the “blackness of her hair and eyes and heart”¹⁸. The point Shakespeare underscores is only her darkness – first “the darkness of her beauty, and later the darkness of her deeds”¹⁹. Shakespeare mocks at the ideals presented by poets like Barnes, Spenser and Sidney²⁰ or Petrarca²¹:

“Es gibt Geschöpfe, die der Sonne Pracht
Mit ihrem stolzen Blick ertragen können”

Petrarca deifies his lady by saying that she is strong enough to resist the sun, which is very powerful and has got the ability to decide about life and death. As the lady seems to be as powerful as the sun is, she has got the same status as a goddess.

But Shakespeare’s mistress is not like that at all: “Black eyes can hardly glorify the lady’s face.”²² This means that the woman is “unlovely in both mind and body”²³; her outer appearance hints at her soul: She has got black eyes, and since

¹⁵ Shakespeare, William: Sonnet 130. In: Wilson, Katharine M.: *Shakespeare’s Sugared Sonnets* (London, 1974), p. 83.

¹⁶ Hubler, Edward: *The sense of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, repr. (Westport, 1976), p. 39.

¹⁷ Griffin, Bartholomew: Sonnet 39. In: Hubler, p. 43.

¹⁸ Hubler, p. 39.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wilson, pp. 86ff.

²¹ Petrarca, Francesco: Canzoniere, ll. 1f (taken from reader, p.7).

²² Winny, James: *The Master – Mistress: A Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London, 1968), p.94.

²³ Pearson, p. 274.

black is the colour of evil, her soul must also be evil since the eyes are said to be the windows to one's soul.

This shows that the Dark Lady is not at all like the women the sonneteers have praised in their sonnets before, “now rose a perfect storm of sonnets about women not beautiful, not good, not fair, not anything at all that Petrarch and the Petrarchans had declared them to be”²⁴.

As beautiful, mild and godlike the Petrarchan sonnet ladies have been, as ugly (“not fair in complexion”²⁵), and “diabolical”²⁶ is the Dark Lady.

3.2 The relationship

This difference between the old and the new concept of woman comes out quite obviously taking a closer look at the relationship the poet and the lady have, too.

In older sonnets, the lady has been deified. This means that she has been untouchable – “her chief characteristic is her indomitable chastity”²⁷. “With Shakespeare, however, the essence of love is mutuality.”²⁸ This means that the lady is no longer unreachable, since they have got a real love affair. But this relationship is characterized by “sex without romance”²⁹. Indeed, the lady seems to have a few affairs with different men, since she is called “the bay where all men ride”³⁰ (*Sonnet 137*). In the same context, she is called a “false plague”³¹, which highlights that their relationship also lacks honesty. This comes out very clearly in *Sonnet 138*³²:

*When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her, though I know she lies,
That she may think me some untutored youth,
Unlearnéd in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although I know my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false – speaking tongue;
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
Oh, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not t'have years told.
Therefore I lie with her, and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flattered be.*

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Winny, p. 94.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 117.

²⁷ Hubler, p. 42.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 41 and Wilson, p. 99.

³¹ Wilson, p.99.

³² Shakespeare, William: *Sonnet 138* (taken from reader, p.26).

The key word of this sonnet is “lie”. It can either mean “not to say the truth” or “to sleep with someone”.

Taking the first version into account, this poem tells us that the mistress must be younger than the poet³³ as he seems to have a crisis concerning his age. He does not understand why she does not tell him that he is old, but lies. At the same moment, he also does not want to talk about it; maybe he does not want to be reminded of his age since he does not want to be aware of it.

What the second version of interpreting the meaning of “to lie” reveals is far more interesting: The poet knows that, although she tells him her love, she sleeps with other men (ll. 1f). There is obviously not any “loyalty in her”³⁴, and they “disguise their awareness of truth in love – making”³⁵. What is important for them in that particular moment is only what they have in common in bed, “the poet’s relationship with the dark lady is neither dignified nor prettified; there is not a glimmer of romance”³⁶.

In contrast to Petrarch, Shakespeare describes love as “achievable, and partly because of the very human characteristics of his women in love”³⁷. His “love is not idealized to the point of irrelevance to actual life. It does not deny the body.”³⁸

One can see that what is described in Shakespeare’s sonnets about the Dark Lady does not aim at deifying a woman like the Petrarchans did. They only concentrated on “spiritual love”³⁹. But Shakespeare brings in the power of “sensual love”⁴⁰ to present a more realistic view of affairs.

4. Conclusion

Reading the two poems I have quoted in this term paper, one can hardly believe that they might be dedicated to any real woman. But when one takes a closer look, for example, at the last two lines of *Sonnet 130*, one sees that the poet says “he loves her faults and all”⁴¹. What is important is not his claim that she is so ugly and tyrannous, but that, with his sonnets, “Shakespeare assumes a mocking naive-

³³ Hubler, p.51.

³⁴ Ibid., p.41.

³⁵ Winny, p. 101.

³⁶ Hubler, p.45.

³⁷ Ibid., p.41.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pearson, p.277.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

ty in which he says his lady has none of the wonderful qualities common to the ladies of other poets and yet he thinks her as good as any woman about whom such lies are invented”⁴². Shakespeare “make[s] fun of prevailing fashion”⁴³, for example, he mocks at commonplaces Spenser writes in⁴⁴.

I think that Shakespeare is very honest to the lady he dedicates these sonnets to; but he ought to know if the woman understands it in the right way. At first sight, the sonnets appear to be very insulting, but if one reads them in the right way, they are more a declaration of love than these other sonnets. The Petrarchans only loved their ideal, a perfect woman with no realistic reference. The poet in Shakespeare’s sonnets tells the woman that she has got a lot of faults – and no woman will like to hear this. But then he says that he loves her with all her faults, that he loves her imperfection and this is, to my mind, worth more than praising an omnious ideal.

⁴¹ Hubler, p.40.

⁴² Wilson, p.83.

⁴³ Ibid., p.85.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.86.

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