

Light into Dark Lady Sonnets: Beauty and Perception

Beauty has always played a big part in how people are perceived by others. The Renaissance was a time when beauty norms were changing; natural beauty was ideal, but a woman could also use artificial means, like makeup, to make herself look a certain way. William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" as well as other Dark Lady sonnets challenge the role beauty plays in how a woman is perceived by her lover. Shakespeare seems to have thought his "mistress" was beautiful even though she did not fit the mold for the beauty standard. He instead chose to focus on love and desire instead of glorifying her looks and doubles the falsity of loving someone for their appearance. The downfall of this is that the woman herself is given no voice; the male speaker retains control.

Beauty standards during the Renaissance were quite complicated. Shakespeare may have actually thought that his "mistress" was beautiful, but was honest about her description. She did not fit the ideal of pale skin with a natural blush, blonde hair, and gray eyes. These standards may have been influenced by the Greeks, who developed physiognomy, the "science" of judging a person's character traits by physical appearance. This idea became especially problematic when poets of the Renaissance portrayed women as goddess-like. Shakespeare did the opposite of this in his poem and made his "mistress" a human.

Though Shakespeare's entire poem is composed of the description of his mistress, the meaning of the poem is found in the line "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare" (line 13). Shakespeare turned the audience's focus away from his mistress' outward beauty and instead points to his love and desire for her love. He reversed the standard so that critics would see love as more important than outward appearance. This goes to show that the cliché line "beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is true. The "beholder," however, is only characterized by men.

It was not women who chose for themselves what was beautiful, but rather the men who decided for them. An article written by Geri Walton states “André Félibien, a French chronicler of the arts and the official court historian to Louis XIV of France in the 1600s, provided the following classical description of beauty often using Venus as the ideal image.” Félibien listed numerous aspects of a woman’s outward appearance and what it should look like. One of the things mentioned in his list is the lips. According to Walton, he said that “A truly pretty Mouth is like a Rose-bud that is beginning to blow.” Shakespeare’s poem reads “Coral is far more red than her lips’ red” (line 2), which he does in every other line, describing his lover, literally from head to toe.

Félibien said that the cheeks should contain a blending of red and white (Walton), so Shakespeare responded with “I have seen roses damasked, red and white, / But no such roses see I in her cheeks” (lines 5-6). Similarly, the Greeks considered blonde to be the prettiest color for hair, so Shakespeare wrote “If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head” (line 4). Shakespeare completely rejects everything that was considered beautiful or desirable for a woman to have. This was to introduce new ideas about the beauty standards of women, which made him quite advanced in his ideas. It was, however, the “mistress” herself who inspired this outlook since she had dark hair and eyes, indicating that she chose to embrace her natural beauty. Since her identity is not known, she is referred to as the “Dark Lady.”

The “mistress” being referred to in “Sonnet 130” is thought to be the Dark Lady, who Shakespeare wrote many sonnets about. An article by Kate Braithwaite, regarding who the Dark Lady was, states, “At a time when “fairness” was synonymous with beauty, the dark appearance of the poet’s lover—assuming it is a literal rather than symbolic description—is intriguing” (Braithwaite). Since “fairness” was considered beautiful at the time, Shakespeare was actively

relaying to his audience that his “mistress” was not beautiful due to the standard that everyone took part in building. So, what happens when you think someone is pretty and others don’t? The speaker in “Sonnet 130” argues that his love is “as rare / As any she belied with false compare” (lines 13-14). He loved her despite her wiry, black hair and her dun-colored skin, neither of which were considered something that women should strive for. There seems to be a doubling of what is false.

A woman’s beauty is false if she wears makeup because she is covering up what is natural. The love between the speaker and his mistress would also be false if the mistress were to present herself differently from what she really was. The speaker is glad that he does not imagine who his mistress is based on his own ideals of love, but rather knows and understands who the woman really is and loves her for that. She is a human woman who has imperfections and faults, but that does not mean she has to cover them up since that would risk someone falling in love with the idea of her rather than who she truly is. Shakespeare's thoughts on her beauty are made clear in other Dark Lady sonnets.

Shakespeare spent a lot of lines writing about how black is beautiful. The Dark Lady’s hair was black, and in some of the sonnets, so were her eyes. “Sonnet 127” reads “In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name; / But now is black beauty's successive heir, / And beauty slandered with a bastard shame” (lines 1-4). In this poem, Shakespeare suggests women are shamed for not fitting the mold for what beauty looked like. This was the case for the Dark Lady, so Shakespeare took matters into his own hands to stand up for her. Later in “Sonnet 132,” Shakespeare wrote “Then will I swear beauty herself is black, / And all they foul that thy complexion lack” (lines 13-14). While it is unclear who “they” are, the reader can assume it is other people who follow the beauty norms. The speaker of this poem

claims that “they” are wrong and that the Dark Lady is beautiful *because* of her black hair and dark eyes. Shakespeare was distinguishing his own standard of beauty from that of the time period; he was saying that just because a woman did not have rosy cheeks, red lips, and flowing blonde hair did not mean she was not beautiful.

Some critics believe that “Sonnet 130” was merely another man’s perspective on women’s appearance, but others do not think that to be the case. It is up to the reader to distinguish for him/herself what the author is trying to say. An article by Sean French states “It’s not just his mistress’ eyes. Nobody’s eyes are anything like the sun. Muddy complexion? The only people who have snow-white skin are corpses. Bad breath? People’s breath can smell sweet, especially if you love them, but would a neutral sniffer prefer it to Chanel No 5?” (French). He is saying that Shakespeare did not write the sonnet to denounce his mistress’ imperfections, but rather to show that women don’t have to look, walk, and talk like goddesses to be loved. Readers can tell from other Dark Lady sonnets that Shakespeare had a passionate love for her and that her beauty went beyond her appearance, though Shakespeare himself thought she *was* outwardly pretty. Shakespeare may have been deeply in love with his “mistress,” a term which had a different meaning during the Renaissance than it does today.

During the time that Shakespeare wrote “Sonnet 130,” a mistress was not necessarily a sexual partner (as opposed to a wife). The speaker in the poem makes it very clear that he loves his mistress, so it seems as though she is more to him than just an object for sex. The last two lines of “Sonnet 130” show the turn of attitude toward the mistress. The poem concludes with “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare” (lines 13-14). He waits until the final lines to say that he is glad he loves the Dark Lady for her natural beauty instead of loving some unnatural version of her that she could have portrayed with

makeup and hair dye. However, even Shakespeare's encouragement of a broader spectrum of beauty can be seen as problematic when the reader has no idea what the woman described in the poem thinks of her own beauty.

Even though Shakespeare wrote a poem that focused on love over looks, he was still a man who commented on beauty standards for women. Shakespeare may not have been calling his mistress ugly, but was rather poking fun at the rules that men created for women to follow so that they could be beautiful. Hugh Richmond of *The Canyon Review* wrote, "Shakespeare candidly avows his mistress's limitations—from bad breath to promiscuity. It is my contention that this is not a sign of hostility or even ambivalence on his part, but an important step toward a modern, realistic acceptance of women as fallible human beings (92)." Still, Shakespeare was a man who decided that he had something to say about women's beauty norms without actually giving his mistress a voice in his poem.

"Sonnet 130" consists of a male speaker describing his lover. He is the one relaying to the audience what her outward appearance is without giving her a voice. An article by Phyllis Rackin says "Renaissance gender role definitions prescribed silence as a feminine virtue, and Renaissance sexual mythology associated the feminine with body and matter as opposed to masculine intellect and spirit" (Rackin 329). Despite his different outlook on beauty, Shakespeare actually oppressed his "mistress" by writing the entire poem from the perspective of the male speaker. Since most of the poem is comprised of the Dark Lady's physical description, she is not only the speaker's lover, but also an object of desire. Shakespeare proved that male dominance was still prevalent with the writing of "Sonnet 130."

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" brings to question what can be said about women's beauty standards, what poets are writing about those beauty standards, and who the woman was that

shaped Shakespeare's experience of a woman's beauty. The sonnets also caused critics to wonder who the Dark Lady was. Either way, her influence on Shakespeare helped him to produce the sonnets which claimed that her black hair, dark eyes, and dun-colored skin did not stop her loving relationship with the speaker of the poem. Her "imperfections" also did not keep Shakespeare from calling her beautiful in some of the other "Dark Lady" sonnets. "Sonnet 130: My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." However, women should have a voice about their own beauty instead of being othered by those who rate them.

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