

Dark beauties in
shakespeare's
sonnets and sidney's
"astrophil and stella"



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Germinating in anonymous Middle English lyrics, the subversion of the classical poetic representation of feminine beauty as fair-haired and blue-eyed took on new meaning in the age of exploration under sonneteers Sidney and Shakespeare. No longer did the brown hair of "Alison" only serve to distinguish her from the pack; the features of the new "Dark Lady" became more pronounced and sullied, and her eroticized associations with the foreignness of the New World grew more explicit through conceits of colonization. However, the evolving dichotomy between fairness and darkness was not quite so revolutionary; in fact, Sidney and Shakespeare lauded the virtues of fairness with the same degree of passion as their predecessors, albeit in a cloaked form. To counter their mistresses' exterior darkness, the poets locate an interior lightness that radiates beyond the funereal veil of hair or eyes. ~~✗~~ Raven-hair or jet-eyes is acceptable only if there is an innate brightness that illuminates the sensuality of the superficial. Most of the poems addressing the light/dark antithesis choose at some point to make an open declaration that embraces or undermines the dichotomy and lays the groundwork for the rest of the poem. The dichotomous lines tend not to be as straightforward as they suggest. "I can love both fair and brown," from John Donne's "The Indifferent," seems to blur the line between the colors, but by revealing the gracious equanimity of his desire, Donne implicitly reinforces brown's aesthetic inferiority. Shakespeare parodies the antiquated contrarities, which he acknowledges in Sonnet 127: "In the old age, black was not counted fair" (1). In Sonnet 130, he mocks the blazon which for so long relied upon parallels between the poet's object of affection and the fairness or brightness of nature: "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;/ Coral is far more red than her lips' red;/ If snow be white, why then <https://assignbuster.com/dark-beauties-in-shakespeares-sonnets-and-sidneys-astrophil-and-stella/>

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” (1-6). The range of environment ~~the~~ sky, sea, land, garden ~~the~~ illustrates the variety of sources a poet can look to for fairness analogies, and the “if...then” structure of comparison, often punctuated in the middle of a line by a comma, physically divides the sonnet into a set of textual oppositions that expose the facile nature of the light/dark dichotomy. Kim Hall, in “ Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England,” accounts for the blazon as a device to bolster male superiority: “ Sonneteers establish their power over female matter and their poetic prowess by drawing on the dismembering power of the blazon” . Shakespeare’s unabashed manipulation of the dismemberment reverses the power struggle, as he still is captivated by his mistress’ irregular beauty. This may ridicule the dichotomy, but it does little to topple it; Shakespeare concedes that her darkness is as visually unappealing as the “ breath that from my mistress reeks” (8). Shakespeare endorses the dichotomy in Sonnet 147, applying his male friend’s immorality to the time-tested analogies of hell and night: “ For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,/ Who art as black as hell, as dark as night” (13-14). That the poet has “ sworn” his friend’s fairness not only describes his confidence, but that the betrayal unveils the blasphemy of darkness. Sidney, in his sonnet cycle “ Astrophil and Stella,” also uses the division between day and night, but alters Shakespeare’s conception. In Sonnet 89, the modified Petrarchan arrangement acts as the perfect rhyme scheme in which to confuse the dichotomy. Ending each line with “ night” or “ day,” the “ abba abba” scheme of the first two quatrains capture the cyclical demarcations of dark and light. The final sestet, <https://assignbuster.com/dark-beauties-in-shakespeares-sonnets-and-sidneys-astrophil-and-stella/>

however, alternates the rhyme scheme with “ ababab,” and merges the two. For Astrophil, Stella’s absence has made day and night indistinguishable, as one seeps into another: “...the most irksome night/ With darkest shade doth overcome my day” (1-2). The zeugma in “ Each day seems long, and longs for long-stayed night” affirms the connection between Astrophil’s daytime bored yearnings and “ The night, as tedious, [which] woos th’approach of day” (5-6). The amalgam becomes most obvious in the sestet, in which one side has taken and magnified the unattractive qualities of the other: “(While no night is more dark than is my day,/ Nor no day hath less quiet than my night)” (10-11). The dichotomy is conflated, notwithstanding the uninviting nature of its metamorphosis: “ With such bad mixture of my night and day/ That, living thus in blackest winter night,/ I feel the flames of hottest summer day” (12-14). “ Blackest winter night” is still condemned, but Sidney skewers the traditional dichotomy in his unflattering depiction of bright summer days. Sidney recants his dissolution of the night/day dichotomy in Sonnet 91: “...fair you, my Sun, thus overspread/ With absence’ veil, I live in Sorrow’s night” (4-5). Stella’s glowing sun-like presence iterates the traditional relationship of women’s beauty to nature that Shakespeare lampooned in Sonnet 130. Shakespeare may have, in fact, wallowed in a bit of self-parody with his anti-blazon, as he often used the sun to illumine his male friend’s beauty. In Sonnet 18, he maps a direct link between the sun’s brightness and his subject’s constant fairness of the skin: “ Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines/ And often is his gold complexion dimmed/ And every fair from fair sometimes declines” (5-6). As with Sonnet 15, in which time decays the “ day of youth to sullied night” (12), darkness takes on a polluted connotation, Sonnet 20 highlights the male friend’s purity of lightness and

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self-restraint in opposition to women's wanton passions: "An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling/ A man in hue all hues in his controlling" (5, 7). Shakespeare also probes the false surface of cosmetic beauty in Sonnet 127. He laments that fair beauty is now "slandered with a bastard shame," again condemning the illegitimate sexuality of darkness (4). Make-up, which usurps "nature's power,/ Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face," commits sacrilege against natural beauty: "Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,/ But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace" (5-8). The lost piety of fair beauty is a pun; "disgrace" means shame, detachment from God's good graces, and a lack of aesthetic grace. Still, Shakespeare cannot deny a certain psychological attraction to this sinful model that upsets the fair archetype. In Sonnet 144, he furthers the light and dark sides of the spiritual psyche, metamorphosing his male friend, "a man right fair," and the Dark Lady, "a woman, colored ill," into his good and bad consciences (3-4). Though Norton defines the line "But being both from me" as the couple's being "away from" the speaker, the line can also imply that the two inhabit his mind (11). With this reading, "To win me soon to hell, my female evil/ Tempteth my better angel from my side" means not that the Dark Lady will cast Shakespeare into misery through her upsetting the triangle, but that her power will shift Shakespeare's mind to the dark side. Her temptation is filled with reference to dirtiness of sin: "And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,/ Wooing his purity with her foul pride" (7-8). "Proud flesh" is the swollen flesh surrounding a wound; thus her "foul pride" may be a pun on her genitalia. The eroticization of her darkness is a salient pointer towards the fascination the poets hold toward darkness; beneath that

impure exterior lies a devilish promiscuity unlike that of all the other fair-haired maidens.