

Critical thinking on an analysis of shakespeares sonnet my mistress eyes are like...

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



For many centuries, this sonnet divided scholars in their responses to it. Many felt that Shakespeare was being deliberately critical of his lover and, therefore, were inclined to dismiss it as a rather cynical poem disparaging his mistress – unconventional for its time, but still straightforward. (Matz, 47). However, there is now a wider critical consensus that this poem is a comic parody of the type of exaggerated love poems written by some of Shakespeare's contemporaries. (Matz, 48). Crutwell writes:

Vendler says, “ this sonnet is a reply poem to a poet who has just written a sonnet to his mistress.... Shakespeare's speaker retorts, I don't know about your mistress, but my mistress is nothing like that; she's a real woman and doesn't need any false compare to distort her attractions.” [Crutwell's italics.] (323)

In the Petrarchan tradition of courtly love poetry, poems of praise and admiration addressed to a female lover were full of hyperbolic images which compared the lover's eyes to the sun or the stars; her voice to the music of the spheres; her teeth to pearls; her hair to gold.

Shakespeare sonnets is about a real woman and he eschews these exaggerated images of his lover in order, in the first twelve lines of the poem, to present her as she really is, by rejecting the hyperbolic images and figurative language of the Petrarchan tradition. Shakespeare also writes originally because in the 16th and 17th centuries the ideal of feminine beauty was always fair haired, blue-eyed and blonde, but Shakespeare's mistress is dark-haired – “ black wires grow from her head.” (line 4). Matz summarizes Shakespeare's intention thus:

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This sonnet pokes fun at Renaissance rhetoric, particularly the figures of speech that impossibly idealize the courtly beloved. All [the] similes are literally untrue, as Sonnet 130, sceptical of Petrarchan idealism, declares. Shakespeare takes his mistress down to earth: she treads on the ground. (141)

The effect of all this rebellion against Petrarchan idealism produces a sonnet in which the first twelve lines are slightly shocking and also comic (because of the element of parody), but which are then re-interpreted almost in the light of the touching tenderness and sincerity of Shakespeare's final couplet.

The sonnet begins with a bold and striking statement which confounds our normal expectations of how a love poem addressed to your lover might start.: “ My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” (line 1). Conventional, traditional sonnets, we imagine, go to great lengths to praise and extol the beauty of their lovers and make use of extravagant, hyperbolic similes or metaphors to exaggerate the beauty of their lovers and to flatter them by idealistic and highly romanticized imagery. By contrast, Shakespeare's writing is very down-to-earth in the whole poem, but particularly in the first very unexpected line. The first quatrain carries on in this mood with Shakespeare gently mocking, not his lover, but other, more conventional writers who use unrealistic similes and metaphors to flatter and to praise their lovers. We learn that “ coral is far more red” than his lover's lips; that her skin is white, but not the pure, flawless white that poets very often attribute to their lovers; and we learn that her hair is – amazingly! - black! Even the word “ wires” (line 4) to describe her hair is unusual, unexpected

and fresh. In Shakespeare's time (and in our own era to a very large extent) the ideal of female beauty had blonde, fair hair. In our own world we are used to everyday clichés such as 'Blondes have more fun' and 'Gentlemen prefer blondes'; until relatively recently most Barbie dolls had fair hair. These lines are provocative and they show that appearance is not really very important when you truly love another person.

The second quatrain continues in the same mood: Shakespeare admits that roses are more beautiful than his lover's complexion and that in some perfumes there is more delight than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. (lines 7-8)

That word "reeks" is superbly chosen and positioned. It is given prominence and foregrounded by the fact that it rhymes with "cheeks" and ends line eight and the quatrain; it also sounds very unpleasant. This is a highly unconventional love poem in that Shakespeare is admitting his lover sometimes has halitosis! Some readers argue that "'reek" did not have all the unpleasant associations that the word now has, meaning to "give out an unwholesome or unpleasant vapour, smell strongly and unpleasantly, stink." (OED, 2518). But the Oxford English Dictionary records earlier sources than Shakespeare with that meaning, so it really does have the force that its sound suggests.

Traditionally sonnets have a 'turn' or volta in line 9 – a change of thought and direction, or a slight change of subject matter. The turn in this sonnet is not especially strong, but Line 9 is the first line in the sonnet that displays

genuine love and affection - " I love to hear her speak" (line 9), but Shakespeare goes on to confess that music is " a far more pleasing sound" (line 10). In line 11 Shakespeare states he has never seen a goddess (thereby denying that his mistress is a goddess and once again satirizing and poking fun at the imagery other, less original poets might use of their lovers), but in line 12 he clearly expresses great pride in the very ordinary and down-to-earth nature of his lover:

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground (line 12).

The sense of pride comes from the fact that his lover is such an ordinary woman, not some idealized, exaggerated and unattainable beauty:

Shakespeare seems proud that " she treads on the ground" - she is real, sincere and genuine, even if she is not compared to a goddess.

In the final couplet Shakespeare throws everything he has previously written by claiming that despite the fact that his lover is so ordinary, his love for her is special and " rare" (line 13) and the final line criticizes and satirizes poets who exaggerate their lovers' qualities with " false compare" - idealistic and grandiose imagery. Having been so honest about his mistress and so critical of her (" black wires", " reeks"), Shakespeare ends the poem by convincing the reader that his love is absolutely genuine and grounded in reality - just as his mistress is. In fact, one could argue that Shakespeare's complete honesty in the first twelve lines of the poem is so brutally frank that we are more inclined to believe him in the final couplet when he simply asserts that his love for her is very special.

This sonnet is designed to make readers laugh and to take them by surprise. It is a poem about love, but also about poetry. The language is deliberately provocative and thought-provoking, but the poem as a whole ends on a beautiful note of sincerity and tenderness.

Work Cited

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