

*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,
 For since each hand hath put on nature's pow'r,
 Fairing the soul with art's false borrowed face,
 Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bow'r,
 But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
 Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
 Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
 As such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
 Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.
 Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
 That every tongue says beauty should look so.*

The clearcut break from Sonnet 126 makes itself known in the first lines, which announce the theme of “black” versus “fair,” almost the equivalent of our modern “brunette” versus “blonde.” The long medieval tradition of the heroine as golden-haired (“fair”) began to break up in the Renaissance, though it has persisted as an archetype up to and beyond *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Shakespeare refers to the speaker’s mistress as “dark” and he is not the first Elizabethan sonneteer to do so. Indeed, from the poem itself we learn that the idea of black as beautiful is the current fashion.

Critics have long referred to the speaker’s mistress as the “Dark Lady,” but this title must be abandoned. She is never referred to as a lady, nor does she act like one. In Sonnet 127, *black* is used three times; *dark* is not used at all. Furthermore, the mood has shifted; the issue of black versus fair is treated lightly – almost satirically. The mistress is not yet a character; she is an appearance. The speaker delights in creating a comic argument: Because old-fashioned beauty (being fair) has been “slandered with a bastard shame” (l. 4), and is “profaned” (not idolized), his mistress must have eyes of “raven black” (l. 9). Whereas the traditional mistress in sonnets was placed on a pedestal and worshipped, this one has no religious dimension. She is a creation of “the world”: “every tongue says beauty should look so.” (l. 14)

The thread of appearance versus reality is joined with that of "the world" by the stress on cosmetics. In the second quatrain the speaker tells us that "each hand" (everyone) has taken over "nature's power" (l. 5) by applying "art" (paint) to ordinary faces. Simple beauty is displaced. Ironically, the speaker does not choose simple beauty (the fair), but takes the "foul" (black) like everyone else. Her eyes are "raven black" (l. 9) and are praised as "mourners" in the speaker's conceit (l. 10).

The whole sonnet smacks of the mock-heroic tradition, which inverts high and low. This tenor is pursued in Sonnets 130 and 131, though it is significantly modified. The steps leading down from euphoria begin.