

THE DARK LADY: ELIZABETH

SOUTHAMPTON AWAITS EXECUTION

Sonnet 130
My Mistress' Eyes
March 1601

Oxford records his fury at Elizabeth for determining to execute Southampton, their royal son. He declares that the eyes of his sovereign Mistress are nothing like "the Sunne," recalling his account in Sonnet 33 of Southampton's birth: "Even so my Sunne one early morn did shine." Oxford proceeds to slander Elizabeth with one bitter attack after another. He alludes to the aging skin of her breasts, to the black wires of her wigs and to her bad breath. He criticizes the sound of her voice and he concludes by declaring that, in his view, the Queen is not really a goddess, and never was.

Sonnet 130

My Mistress' eyes are nothing like the Sunne
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.

Translation

My Queen's eyes are not like her son's;
Even coral is more royal than her lips.
If snow is white, her breasts are dull gray:
If hairs are wires, she has disgraced hairs.

I have seen Tudor Roses red and white,
But none such do I see in her Tudor Rose,
And in some blood there is more joy
Than in the slander that my Queen speaks.

I love and serve her will, but I know well
That royal harmony is far better.
I now say I never saw her as a goddess.
My Queen walks only on the earth.

And yet by her my royal son is as royal
As any with whom she falsely compares him.

Sonnet 130

The Hekatompathia or Passionate Century of Love, published in 1582, was attributed to Thomas Watson, who dedicated it to Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford. No. VII of the 100 numbered poems of *Passionate Century* was undoubtedly written by Oxford to pay homage to Queen Elizabeth, his sovereign mistress; this verse (Sonnet 130) turns that one inside out in bitter rage against her. (The poem is reprinted below after line 14.)

1 MY MISTRESS' EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUNNE,

MY MISTRESS' EYES = the all-powerful, imperial eyes of Elizabeth, my sovereign Mistress; "But at my *mistress' eye* love's brand new-fired/ ... my *mistress's eye*" – Sonnet 153, lines 9, 14

"The Queen's Majesty *our mistress*" - Oxford to Burghley, September 1572

"I cannot but find a great grief in myself to remember *the mistress* which we have lost"
- Oxford to Robert Cecil, April 25/27, 1603

NOTHING LIKE THE SUNNE = nothing like my royal son; nothing like the royal eye, that sunne, of my royal son; ("Even so my *Sunne* one early morn did shine" – Sonnet 33, line 9); nothing like the golden, kingly eye of the rising son or royal prince; Elizabeth's eyes reflect none of this royalty; "But from *thine eyes* my knowledge I derive,/ And, *constant stars*, in them I read such art" – Sonnet 14, lines 9-10, to Southampton; "And scarcely greet me with *that sunne thine eye*" – Sonnet 49, line 6; **NOTHING** = "none" or the opposite of "one" for Southampton

2 CORAL IS FAR MORE RED THAN HER LIPS' RED;

CORAL, etc. = a light yellowish red; **RED** = scarlet, royal; Tudor Rose; in other words, the lesser red of coral is more red than Elizabeth's lips, a stunning insult to the monarch

3 IF SNOW BE WHITE, WHY THEN HER BREASTS ARE DUN:

An even worse insult: compared to white snow, Elizabeth's breasts are dull gray-brown.

4 IF HAIRS BE WIRES, BLACK WIRES GROW ON HER HEAD:

IF HAIRS, etc. = if hairs were black wires, Elizabeth's hair would be such; the wigs she wore were held in place by wires; **HAIRS** = heirs, i.e., her royal heir, turned black by her "cloud" or negative view; if Elizabeth's royal heir was a wire, then it's a "black" or disgraced heir growing; **GROW** = their son is still growing, in life and in the womb of these sonnets

5 I HAVE SEEN ROSES DAMASKED, RED AND WHITE,

DAMASKED = patterned, dappled; **ROSES DAMASKED, RED AND WHITE** = Elizabeth's Tudor Rose, joining the red and white roses (as damask or pink) under the roof of the House of Tudor; ("With this *there is a red,/ Exceeds the damask rose*" – Oxford poem, signed E. O. in *The Phoenix Nest*, 1593; "The *red rose and the white* are on his face, the fatal colors of our striving houses; the one his purple blood right well resembles, the other his pale *cheeks*, methinks, presenteth" – 3 *Henry VI*, 2.5.97-100)

6 BUT NO SUCH ROSES SEE I IN HER CHEEKS

A treasonous statement that Elizabeth no longer displays any of the Tudor Rose royalty that she inherited from her grandfather Henry VII and her father Henry VIII; ("From fairest creatures we desire increase./ That *thereby beauty's Rose might never die*" – Sonnet 1, lines 1-2; "Why should poor beauty indirectly seek/ *Roses of shadow, since his Rose is true*" – Sonnet 67, lines 7-8);

“Thus is his *cheek* the map of days outworn,/ When beauty lived and died as flowers do now,/ Before these bastard signs of fair were borne” – Sonnet 68, lines 1-3

7 AND IN SOME PERFUMES IS THERE MORE DELIGHT

Setting up the next insult, albeit with a carefully qualifying “some” – but not all – perfumes

8 THAN IN THE BREATH THAT FROM MY MISTRESS REEKS

Than in Elizabeth’s breath, which literally reeked because of her bad teeth and gums; (“She aged quickly and was a sad figure during her sixties. Her teeth became black from eating sugar and her breath was notorious” – Dickinson, p. 125)

9 I LOVE TO HEAR HER SPEAK, YET WELL I KNOW

A true statement from Oxford, but setting up another insult in the next line

10 THAT MUSIC HATH A FAR MORE PLEASING SOUND:

That music is far more pleasant than her speaking voice; (one accusation against Oxford in 1580-81, by his erstwhile Catholic friends, was that he had said he despised Elizabeth’s singing voice)

11 I GRANT I NEVER SAW A GODDESS GO;

I never saw a goddess when I saw Elizabeth, who was “the goddess of Love and Beauty,” etc; (“The *guilty goddess* of my harmful deeds” – Sonnet 111, line 2); “Continue to please the goddess” – Francis Davison, referring to Queen Elizabeth in his one-page broadside *Anagrammata* of 1603; **GO** = walk, as in her walks in the palace garden, which she often had taken with Oxford, i.e., Elizabeth is not the goddess that she pretends to be

12 MY MISTRESS WHEN SHE WALKS TREADS ON THE GROUND

When my sovereign Mistress, Elizabeth, takes her walks, she does not fly on a chariot like Venus, but is mortal; she is no goddess, like Venus or Diana, after all

13 AND YET BY HEAVEN I THINK MY LOVE AS RARE

BY HEAVEN = created by Elizabeth, who gave birth to Oxford’s “love” or royal son; **MY LOVE**, i.e., my royal son; **I THINK MY LOVE AS RARE** = I think my royal son is as royal; (“Beauty, Truth and *Rarity*” – *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, 1601, signifying Elizabeth, Oxford and Southampton); **RARE** = royal, as in “fair”; “Beauty, Truth and *Rarity*,/Grace in all simplicity,/ Here enclosed in cinders lie” – *The Phoenix and Turtle*, 1601

14 AS ANY SHE BELIED WITH FALSE COMPARE.

As any “she” (Elizabeth) who is falsely or erroneously compared with him; in other words, she cannot be likened to him; any such comparison is false; **SHE** = (“Lady, you are the cruelest *she* alive if you will lead these graces to the grave” – *Twelfth Night*, 1.5.235-236); **BELIED** = full of lies; to be misrepresented by lies; “That I may not be so, nor *thou belied*,/ Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide” – Sonnet 140, lines 13-14; “Such signs of truth in his plain face she spied,/ That she concludes the picture was belied” – *Lucrece*, 1532-1533; **COMPARE** = “Authorizing thy trespass *with compare*” – Sonnet 35, line 6, i.e., sanctioning your treason by showing comparable crimes in my plays, such as *Richard II*, about the deposition of a monarch, which you (Southampton) caused to be performed to help ignite the Rebellion