

130 as an anti-Petrarchan sonnet

Shakespeare's Sonnet no 130 is a response to the prevailing ideas of English beauty from the medieval to the early modern period. Ideals of beauty demanded that the women should be blonde, blue-eyed, pale of complexion, pink or red of cheek, and red of lips. She should also seem to glow as though illuminated by an inner light. Poets competed with each other to see who had the most beautiful or most beautifully described beloved. In Sonnet no 130 Shakespeare negates the validity of such namby-pamby images and eschews the inane, sugar-coated phraseology. Ingram and Redpath opine, 'This sonnet is not a denigration of the attractions of the poet's mistress, or even an admission that she had not the conventional beauties and graces.'

Petrarchism was the European code of lyrical beauty, as Gary Waller puts it, 'the inevitable language in which the poet and lover alike necessarily had to struggle.' However, Petrarchism, in fact, worked to efface female subjectivity and to reduce the women to little more than the objects to which she was compared. In Sonnet no 130 Shakespeare counters a 14th century Petrarchan tradition that lauded the aristocratic and unavailable mistress in a context that did not give women power despite of its elevation of the feminine ideal. In the Petrarchan blazon, the conventional poetic catalogue extolling the beauty of the beloved's various anatomical features-eye, hand, brow; the lyrical objectives are idealization and praise. In Sonnet no 130, Shakespeare places innovative pressure upon the limits of metaphority. Further, this sonnet interrogates the notion of a causal or necessary relationship between ideal female beauty and male desire and instead presents the radical idea that there may be a disjunction between them.

The three quatrains of Sonnet no 130 focus on what the speaker's mistress is not. According to Beaty and Matchett, this is an instance of what they call anti-sonnet. To them, an anti-sonnet is a sonnet 'which attempts freshness through denying the usual images.' But, nonetheless, it must be admitted that even the anti-sonnet in the end eulogises the beloved, and expresses the fascination of the poet for the beloved. This sonnet is not a denigration of the attractions of the poet's mistress. It is a satirical repudiation of false comparisons current in contemporary poetry. In the first quatrain, we learn that her eyes are 'nothing like the sun'. While women's eyes were ideally blue, it was more important that they shone like the sun. Pope's description of Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* is an instance of such convention:

"Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
And like the sun, they shine on all alike."

Sea coral is 'far more red' than her lips. While a woman's complexion should be fair and as white as snow, the speaker's beloved's breasts are 'dun', a grayish tan colour. While it would be ideal for the woman to have hair like thin, spun golden wire, the speaker's mistress seems to have black wires growing out of her head.

In the second quatrain, the speaker describes beautiful damask roses. This kind of rose has petals that are both red and white. Likening a woman's cheek to damask roses would be flattering because it would suggest that the women's skin is white and her cheeks are red.

Unfortunately, the speaker has seen no such roses in the mistress's cheeks. The Poet further says that the scent of the breath of the Lady that is being exhaled ('reek') from her mouth, is also not as pleasing as the scent of some perfumes.

Women were also expected to be very graceful and soft-spoken. While the speaker loves to hear the mistress speak, her voice must not sound very sweet. And though her walk should be graceful, making her glide softly over the ground as though she were a goddess, the mistress actually 'treads on the ground' probably indicating that she is very heavy-footed and clumps along. Yet while the mistress is clearly not a stereotypical beauty, the speaker presents her unflattering features in a calm, straight-forward way. The speaker is not upset as his mistress fails to live up to the conventional ideals of beauty. She is as rare as any other true love and that she does not admit of any comparison with any other lady.

This sonnet is characterised by its simplicity and frankness of expression. The tone is humorous. Here we find no use of grandiose metaphor or allusion. The ordinary beauty and humanity of his lover are of much importance here. Shakespeare shows real beauty in real life. Shakespeare shows us how love can be honest and beautiful in its own way. He suggests that love and lovers do not need to be as beautiful as these love love sonnets make them to be true to their love.

This sonnet confronts the norms of Petrarchan love which was love at long distance. Distance fosters idealization in a way that familiarity and intimacy do not. Shakespeare in his Sonnet no 130 deliberately disengages with the lyrical tradition, gesturing towards its inability to represent femininity in a way that is not always aestheticized. The unpoetic oath effects a shift from the lyrical to the colloquial in order to demonstrate that even goddesses are overrated.