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## Colonial Beauty in Sidney's "Astrophil and Stella" and Shakespeare's Sonnets

The unique and extraordinary elements of dark beauty translate to an exotic alterity in the poets' eyes. The more obvious, and traditional, methods bestow the woman with godly attributes. Shakespeare first refutes this resemblance by underscoring his mistress' earth-bound properties in Sonnet 130: "I grant I never saw a goddess go,/ My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground" (11-12). Then Shakespeare swears "by heaven" that she does have some goddess-like power through his love (13). Sidney lards his sonnets with divine references; Stella's eyes let her "miraculous power show," and they are also "The windows now through which this heavenly guest/ Looks over the world" ("A&S: 7," 9; "A&S: 9," 9-10). Even though it is the women's dark properties which recall their other-worldliness, traditional fair-haired heroines inspire similar reactions in their documentarists' poetry. Hall contends that there is a relationship between the dark women's alterity and the England's advances in colonization:

"It is the attraction and fear of the possibility of 'otherness' and linguistic polysemy that underlie most of the tropes of blackness in Renaissance poetry, particularly in the black/light dichotomy of the English sonnet cycle?'Dark ladies' of the sonnets are at least in some part the literary cousins of the foreign women encountered in travel narratives and that they share the same subject position. The sonnet form encodes not only erotic, but political, economic, and literary desires as well."

"Astrophil and Stella" epitomizes colonial poetry under the guise of the black/light dichotomy. That Stella's white star inhabits a unknown inky sky pales in comparison to the conceits of exploration in Sonnet 1. Hall argues that the sonnet cycle "is characterized by a studied rejection of foreignness. The sequence opens with Astrophil searching for invention and new language, 'to paint the blackest face of woe' (1.5), but with the caveat that this new language should not be tainted with 'strangeness.'" However, Astrophil contends that his studies of English poetry is what has hindered him "others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way," with a play on metric feet (11). Furthermore, it is Astrophil who has a "sunburned brain"; his tropical mentality contrasts with the pale, blocked language of his countrymen. To escape these impediments, Astrophil takes his "trewand pen" to search out new lands and words, and Stella's

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black eyes are a metaphor for this New World: "Models such be wood-globes of glistening skies" (11). Shakespeare, too, acknowledges this new era that redefines beauty's conception: "In the old age black was not counted fair?/ But now is black beauty's successive heir," which a pun on "hair" (Sonnet 127, 1, 3).

Yet Kim F. Hall, in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, is correct in assuming that neither poet wishes his subject to be tainted; all the poets laud their women's dark beauty so long as it shrouds an interior and superlative fairness. What she fails to account for is that this practice dates back to Alison, whose "heer is fair ynough" despite its being brown (13). To compensate for her black eyes, the poet sings "Hire swire is whittere than the swan,/ And fairest may in town" (28-9). The aforementioned "semlokest" and "light on Alisoun" are subtle compared to the poem's most "interiorized" superlative: "Geinest under gore" (37). Her darkness is but a garment that eroticizes the unrivaled fairness of her soul and body. Rather than offset Stella's dark eyes with separate, superlatively fair body parts (though he does occasionally; Stella's face is of "alabaster pure" and her cheeks are "marble mixed red and white"), Sidney focuses on blending the interior lightness with the exterior darkness ("A&S: 9," 3, 8). Hall remarks that while the superlative Elizabethan dark lady is "lauded for her 'milk hands,' 'yellow hairs,' 'fair ivory brows,' 'ivory cheeks,' and 'snowy brows,'" this beauty is also continually associated with formulations of blackness as she is often 'beamy black' or 'black but in blackness bright.'" "Beamy black" comes from Sidney's Sonnet 7, which also posits that nature, "like painter wise," imbued Stella's eyes with a blackness "mixed of shades and light" (3-4). In Sonnet 9, her eyes are at the same time the black stone "touch" and also "lights," and in Sonnet 91 Hall's reference to "seeing jets, black, but in blackness bright" ("A&S: 9," 11-12; "A&S: 91," 8). Hall critiques those who insist that "blackness means nothing beyond its antithesis to 'whiteness'; that is, in the absolute insistence on a merely aesthetic basis for blackness in the Renaissance, a practice that extends even to reading direct references to Africa as mere signs of physical beauty." Though Hall's conjecture holds much water, she forgets Sidney's interior/exterior lightness/darkness relationship echoes that of "Alison," verse written in an era before widespread exploration and knowledge of the rest of the world.

Along with darkness comes the inevitable comparison to death. Sidney and Shakespeare both consider their women's blackness another garment, namely a funereal veil. Astrophil believes nature subdued Stella's interior radiance with blackness, because "if no veil those brave gleams did disguise,/ They sun-like should more dazzle than delight" (7-8). As Hall points out, "That 'sweete blacke' of Stella's eye which seduces the passenger or traveler into staying becomes for Sidney no more than a removable veil; however, looking beyond the black veil is itself dangerous." This runs contrary to Hall's previous statement, that Astrophil's "new language should not be tainted with 'strangeness,'" the "tainted" veil is what shield the observer from an excess of lightness as that associated with the blinding rays of the sun, nature's and poetry's

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emblem of brightness. The sun is again connected with "absence' veil" in Sonnet 91; the dark lady's vibrant interior fairness must be tempered by some morbidity to diminish the overwhelming beauty (4). Shakespeare refines Sidney's veil his lady's black eyes are "mourners" in his cosmetic conceit in Sonnet 127, but their deathly allusions falsely enhance her misconceived (by others) beauty: "Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,/ That every tongue says beauty should look so" (13-14).

"Every tongue says beauty should look so" is a fitting final statement to the sonnet. Sidney and Shakespeare went far to overturn conventional conceptions of beauty, but as Norton points out, "conventions set up anticonventions that become as rigid as their older antitheses." But the greatest influence on Sidney's and Shakespeare's notions of darkness was the age of colonization, not a willful aesthetic change. They did not even stray far from the interior/exterior dichotomy espoused by the author of "Alison." Their revolution was less an artistic trope than a worldly one. It is interesting to note that the change from the Victorian raven-haired beauty to the modern blonde bombshell came with the over-the-counter introduction of hair dyes in the 1920s, making blonde hair a symbol of female empowerment. Literature and film then reflected the fact; art, it seems, can only capture beauty, and rarely invent it.

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