

Race, Gender and Class in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

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Abstract: *The most direct of the so-called "Dark Lady" sonnets, (127), (130), (131), and (132), contain such a powerful indictment of racism and sexism that they transcend their age and continue to retain their anti-racist, anti-sexist, impact and relevance until today. Shakespeare's strong feminine figures of Rosalind, Portia, Cleopatra and Juliet, to name the most prominent, as well as his positive, sympathetic portrayal of the "weaker" feminine characters of Ophelia, Cordelia, and Desdemona, for example, should clear him of any charges of misogyny. The choice of the pair of lovers, whose seeming incompatibility enables them to overcome social and cultural prejudices, which establishes the framework for so many of Shakespeare's plays, most prominently Romeo and Juliet, Antony and Cleopatra, Much Ado about Nothing, and The Taming of the Shrew, clearly also determines the poet's relationship with the "Dark Lady" in The Sonnets. The group of sonnets, (25), (29), and (30), that achieve their strongest poetic impact in sonnet (29) ("When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes"), and the group of sonnets, (55), (64), (65), and (66), that reach the height of their poetic force in sonnet (66) ("Tired with all these for restful death I cry"), express a dissatisfaction with the human condition and a rejection of contemporary society that are central to our understanding of Shakespeare. Significantly, what seems to begin as an expression of the poet's personal grievance and as a case of individual protest against life's unfairness, and what seems to be a succession of poetic attempts at explaining the common theme of universal mortality and the inevitable effects of time, become a distinct and powerful expression of political protest and a deep rejection of the society of his time.*

With this key [*The Sonnets*]
Shakespeare unlocked his heart
William Wordsworth, 1827

It seems to me that the sonnets could only have
come from a man deeply in love, and in love with a woman.
S. T. Coleridge, 1833

The most direct of the so-called "Dark Lady" sonnets, (127), (130), (131), and (132), contain such a powerful indictment of racism and sexism that they transcend their age and continue to retain their anti-racist, anti-sexist impact and relevance until today. Shakespeare's ability to sympathize and identify with the (male or female) "Other" lies behind his main dramatic strategy of reversing stereotypes and subverting prejudices, in his two central love tragedies of *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. The same strategy is the key to the understanding of *The Merchant of Venice*. The anti-racism of these sonnets is

best understood when linked to the pervasive anti-racist dramatic strategy and “message” of those plays, particularly that of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

First of all, “Dark Lady” as a label for this group of sonnets is something of a misnomer, and may even be regarded as insulting. It has connotations similar to those of the racist epithet “Darkie” that was used for African-Americans in times gone by. It may even be said to hide or gloss over the real issue of the “Blackness” of the lady by making the mysteriousness of her identity the focus. One is tempted, in fact, to declare the title “Dark Lady Sonnets” politically incorrect and replace it with the “Black Lady Sonnets.”

These sonnets, especially (127), (130), (131), and (132), make it quite clear that it is the intention of the poet to describe the lady as black—and not only as black, but as black and beautiful. The evidence is all-too-clear in lines like:

In 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
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black (127)

If hair be wires, black wires grow on her head (130)
Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place (131)

Then will I swear beauty herself is black
And all they foul that thy complexion lack (132)

As in *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare, in the *Sonnets*, is deliberately, and forcefully, challenging the stereotyping prejudices of his readers, with regard to blackness. These two plays provide the necessary context for the correct understanding of the so-called “Dark Lady” sonnets through the reversal of the racist stereotyping of blacks, both male (*Othello*) and female (*Cleopatra*).

I have argued elsewhere (Al-Dabbagh: 2010, 16-18) that the failure of modern criticism with *Othello* stems ultimately from racial prejudice. It is only in recent criticism that this crucial aspect of *Othello* is beginning to be discussed—and that only sporadically.⁽¹⁾ Shakespeare clearly sympathizes and identifies with the hero, Othello, and portrays Iago as the representative of racist prejudice. He deliberately reverses the central roles of the play so that Iago, the white Venetian, becomes the villain, and Othello, the Moor and stereotyped villain, becomes the noble hero, thus throwing a challenge to the common prejudices of his audience and readers—both in his time and in ours. This dramatic refutation of racism lies at the heart of the play and provides it with the philosophic and social dimensions that most critics have revealingly regarded as absent.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare places the figure of Cleopatra right at the center of play, intending her, *from the beginning*, to be nothing less than its true heroine. The whole dramatic fabric and force of the play is to dissociate

the audience from the prevailing Roman and sexist view of her as nothing but an oriental whore. In the final act of the play, this pervasive strategy of reversing the received conception of Cleopatra and subverting the stereotypes of both female and oriental in the prejudiced mind, reaches its explicit dramatic climax. (Al-Dabbagh: 2010, 34)

The very same strategy is followed in the “Dark Lady” sonnets. By declaring his love for a Black woman and defiantly defending the beauty of blackness, Shakespeare is deliberately challenging the racist prejudices of his time, and prophetically sending out a challenge to subsequent generations.⁽²⁾ The first recognition of this challenge by the critics, surprisingly enough however, had to wait many centuries, until it was announced, and then still rather timidly, in the article titled “The scandal of Shakespeare’s Sonnets” (1994), by Margretta de Grazia, where she concludes that:

Tradition has been ever slower to entertain the possibility that these poems express desire for a black woman rather than desire for a boy . . . the scandal in the sonnets has been misidentified. It is not Shakespeare’s desire for a boy; for in upholding social distinctions, that desire proves quite conservative and safe. It is Shakespeare’s gynerastic longing for a black mistress that is perverse and menacing because they threaten to raze the very distinctions his poems to the fair boy strain to preserve.⁽³⁾

Even when elaborated upon in more detail subsequently, this recognition, however, remains sporadic and far from complete or comprehensive. A recent landmark in the course of the development of this recognition is Marvin Hunt’s essay, “Be dark but not too dark: Shakespeare’s Dark Lady as a sign of color,” (Schiffer: 1999, 369-389), which concludes by pointing to the importance of this “motif” throughout Shakespeare’s works:

Historical circumstances thus doubtless played some part in shaping interest in interracial relationships, an interest that appears in Shakespeare’s playwriting career both early (*Titus Andronicus*) and late (*Othello*). If to the list of plays that evince an interest in interracial desire we add the discussion of Rosalind’s darkness in 4.3 of *Love’s Labour Lost*, noting its striking resemblance to the treatment of the dark lady of the Sonnets, and the less certain miscegenation of *Antony and Cleopatra*, then we have a widespread interest in interracial dynamics among major characters in the Shakespeare canon (p. 379).

With regard to *Titus Andronicus*, the following remarks from an earlier study are very pertinent:

When Tamora’s sons urge Aaron to kill the black child he has fathered, the fact that these two rapist-mutilators blush at the ignominy of this child’s color and their mother’s shame shows Aaron their weakness. Western society considers the fair face beautiful, the black ugly, expects the fair to be touched with the blush of conscience, the black to be naturally brazen. . . . As Aaron shifts his attention from their inconstant faces to the child’s, he sees a creature “fram’d of another leer,” shaped by nature to be free of the treacherous blush. Here blackness begins to shift in meaning from the negative lack of something fair, be it conscience or a soul, to the positive virtue of constancy and consanguinity.

This blackness draws father and son together . . . The stamp and seal of color that identifies the child as Aaron's produces an unexpected shift in the give-and-take of opinion within the play. Instead of following Tamora, who, as the Nurse says, "bids thee to christen it with thy dagger's point", Aaron consecrates his son to the one thing he can believe in, his adherence to his own race . . . Hence the stamp and seal of color becomes a sign of unadulterated constancy. When viewed from this perspective, Tamora's sons are inconstant, changeable, and cowardly because of their whiteness. If only for a single moment in the play, Aaron seems in possession of some alternative to mere anarchy. An aristocracy of blackness transforms the stigma of slavery, even as the child's face blossoms in the eyes of its father. (D'Amico: 1991, 137-9).

Unfortunately, these early insights are not followed up in such promisingly titled essays as Ilona Bell's "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady" (293-313) and Elizabeth D. Harvey's "Flesh Colors and Shakespeare's Sonnets" (314-328), both printed in Michael Schoenfeldt's, *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Wiley-Blackwell—UK, 2010), which declares, revealingly in its introduction, that "issues to which earlier readers and cultures were largely deaf—the implicit racism in a hierarchy of light and dark, the myriad ways that social class can distort human interaction, and the subjugation of women in an economy of erotic energy—have been the subject of rigorous critical scrutiny for at least thirty years." (P. 1) Even though this "rigorous critical scrutiny" claimed here is yet to be fully achieved, there is at least the recognition that race is a key issue that must be confronted in the *Sonnets*.

Shakespeare's strong feminine figures of Rosalind, Portia, Cleopatra and Juliet, to name the most prominent, as well as his positive, sympathetic portrayal of the "weaker" feminine characters of Ophelia, Cordelia, and Desdemona, for example, should clear him of any charges of misogyny. In fact, in several of these plays the female roles are so prominent and primary that they could provide more appropriate titles as Rosalind (for *As You Like It*), Juliet and Romeo, as a better reflection of the roles of the two lovers, and simply Cleopatra, who so dominates that play, rather than *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The choice of the pair of lovers, whose seeming incompatibility enables them to overcome social and cultural prejudices, which establishes the framework for so many of Shakespeare's plays, in the three love tragedies of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, as well as in comedies like *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, clearly also determines the poet's relationship with the "Dark Lady" in *The Sonnets*. In all these cases, the lovers transcend conventions and present new and genuinely human alternatives to social and cultural prejudices.

This is not unrelated to the key Shakespearean strategy of subverting received notions and conventions and reversing stereotypes, for example of the Black in *Othello*, of the Orient and the Oriental in *Antony and Cleopatra*, of the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*, of the courtly love conventions in the sonnets, of the revenge genre in *Hamlet*, and so on.⁽⁴⁾ It seems that this is also what he is doing in *The Taming of the Shrew*, perhaps through *seeming* to endorse what can

only be a platitude (of the ordained submission of wives to husbands in Kate's famous last speech). In fact, the play is clearly a challenge to the whole traditional, conventional understanding of male/female relations as a simple question of domination. The play would seem to imply that a more complete form of femininity is achieved in uniting with (though not submitting to) a man, and Katherine here is a variation of a type and condition represented by Juliet, Rosalind, Portia, and Cleopatra.

This is the context within which the so-called "Dark Lady" sonnets, and the whole issue of Shakespeare's presumed misogyny, endlessly repeated by the critics, must be approached. For a similar love story, it seems, permeates these sonnets. In defiant rejection of conventions and racist stereotyping, the poet celebrates his love for his "mistress" in these sonnets, in its rich and diverse dimensions, using outward incompatibility, as in many of the plays, as a vehicle and a motif to transcend and overcome cultural conventions and social prejudices. Going over the variety of dramatic moods that run through these poems, one cannot but agree, in the end, with Coleridge's balanced, final judgment that "they could only have come from a man deeply in love, and in love with a woman."

The group of sonnets, (25), (29), and (30), that reach their strongest poetic impact in sonnet (29) ("When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes"), and the group of sonnets, (55), (64), (65), and (66), that reach the height of their poetic force in sonnet (66) ("Tired with all these for restful death I cry"), express a dissatisfaction with the human condition and a rejection of contemporary society that are central to our understanding of Shakespeare. These two groups of sonnets are among Shakespeare's greatest and best known. Significantly, what seems to begin as an expression of the poet's personal grievance and as a case of individual protest against life's unfairness, and what seems to be a succession of poetic attempts at explaining the common theme of universal mortality and the inevitable effects of time, become distinct and powerful expressions of political protest and a deep rejection of the society of his time.

The first group, particularly sonnets (29) and (30), convey a sense of intense personal sadness and dissatisfaction. This dominant melancholy, however, is overcome in the course of each poem and turned, in fact, into its opposite, into a source of joy and even spiritual uplift. Later in the sequence, in sonnet (91), the poet returns to the same theme. The most powerful sonnet of the group, however, is sonnet (29), which is one of Shakespeare's greatest and deserves a closer look as the exemplary embodiment of this pattern.

The two sister sonnets, (29) and (30), are sandwiched then between sonnet (25), which first announces the common theme (of, if one is to paraphrase, "let others enjoy their fame and fortune, which I don't have, but do not ultimately regret or envy, because I have you and your love that is worth much more, because it is more permanent than their transient worldly glory"), and sonnet (91), which goes back to this theme later in the cycle:

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,

...
 All these I better in one general best,
 Thy love is better than high birth to me,
 ...
 And having thee, of all men's pride I boast

The outstanding sonnet of the group, and one of Shakespeare's greatest, sonnet (29), makes the social and political message of this sequence quite clear, as embodied, for example, in the two meanings of the key, recurrent word, "state" (in lines 2, 9, and 14), containing both the personal grief of the poet and his dissatisfaction with the whole social system. The melancholic, downward movement of the sonnet that hits rock bottom in line 9, "Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising", and in the crucial experience of self-contempt (almost), only to rise steadily from this point on until the last line that ends with "That then I scorn to change my state with kings", stopping forcefully at the crucial words of "state" and "kings", with all their socio-political connotations. The sonnet also builds up a *Hamlet*-like situation in:

I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
 And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
 And look upon myself and curse my fate

That prefigure "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90) and "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right." (1.5.188-9).

Sonnet (30), although seemingly unrelated thematically to this group, is actually the most fitting conclusion to it. For love, as a concluding consolation, which had sustained the poet against life's injustice that had dominated most of the body of those sonnets, here occupies center stage. And although the poet still does declare, "I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought", it is the loss of loved ones that is the source of his greatest sorrow ("Precious friends hid in death's dateless night"), just as it is present love that helps him to overcome his losses and his sorrows.

The second group of sonnets (55), (64), (65), and (66), are also tied together by a common theme—that of mortality and the transience of worldly power pitted against the powerful (and eternal) force of love and poetic creation. Again, these sonnets can only be fully understood against the background of the similar "rejection" of the world and of worldly attachments (power and possessions), and the affirmation of spiritual values that transcend such worldliness in Shakespeare's two central plays—*Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

The strong socio-political message of sonnet (55) is clearly announced in its very opening lines: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow'ful rhyme." As in sonnet (29), which concludes with the poet's triumph over kings, "That then I scorn to change my state with kings", here we witness his victory, through his poetry, over the princes with their "wasteful

war” that will inevitably destroy their “statues”, “gilded monuments”, and “marble” and “masonry.”

Similarly, sonnet (64) makes it quite clear that it is the fall of the socio-political system that is at the center of the poet’s attention, as the victim of the inevitable passage of time: The “lofty towers” he sees destroyed, the “Kingdom of the shore” he sees swept away, and, in a nutshell, “state itself confounded to decay.”

Even sonnet (65), which seems to discuss Time in its universal, and not its socio-political, dimension, evokes the same preoccupation with those very issues in lines based on metaphors of war, like “the rackful siege of batt’ring days”, “gates of steel”, and “spoils of beauty.”

The climactic sonnet of this group, the famous sonnet (66), has long been recognized as identical in its ideas with Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy, which is rightly regarded as the philosophic heart of the play. The list of social and political ills and injustices on which this sonnet is based, containing poverty, betrayal of trust, censorship, and general and pervasive corruption that destroys all standards and rewards the powerful, the evil, and the incompetent, while it punishes the weak, the virtuous, and the talented, is very similar to that outlined by Hamlet in that famous soliloquy:

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,
As to behold Desert a beggar born.
And needy Nothing trimm’d in jollity.
And purest Faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded Honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden Virtue rudely trumpeted,
And right Perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And Strength by limping Sway disabled,
And Art made tongue-tied by Authority
And Folly, doctor like, controlling Skill,
And simple Truth miscall’d Simplicity,
And captive Good attending captain Ill.
Tired with all these, from these I would be gone.
Save that, to die. I leave my love alone.

Shakespeare may well still be one of the greatest anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist English writers. Racism, sexism, and capitalism have taken a variety of forms in the centuries since Shakespeare’s death. In their modern forms, these three “plagues” have roots in the nineteenth century, as embodied in the beginnings of racial theory and the division of mankind in accordance to race; in the new form of the oppression and exploitation of women; and in the rise of the European colonial powers that laid the foundation for twentieth century imperialism and imperialist wars.

In the contemporary era, modern racism, although presumed to have become a relic of the past, and is, in fact, made punishable by law in many

countries, is rampant and openly expressed. Racist utterances and practices against African-Americans and against Third World nations continue to re-surface from time to time, and Islamophobia, in the last two decades or so, has remained a major trend in contemporary racism. Anti-feminism also remains an important aspect of ruling ideology, in spite of its pretenses to the contrary in posing as the guardian and protector of women and women's rights. Finally, and most importantly, imperialism remains the foundation of the globalist system that leads to continuous wars and increasing misery and oppression for the majority of the world's population—a foundation that remains weak and contradictory in its essence and that undergoes a succession of partial break-downs that will ultimately lead to its complete collapse as a viable world system.

Contemporary humanism entails, in essence, the fight against racism, sexism, and imperialism, and the struggle to bring about the end of these three “plagues”, politically, culturally, and economically, while current anti-humanist perspectives, as embodied in an important trend in modern western thinking, are ultimately a defense of the status quo and, whether expressed directly or assumed implicitly, are a defense of racism, sexism, and imperialism. Going back more than four centuries, Shakespeare's humanism is embodied in his anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-capitalism. Contemporary discussions of Shakespeare's humanism, however, have suffered from the open anti-humanist perspective of critical schools like New Historicism and Cultural Materialism which, under the pretext of fighting so-called essentialist humanism, and what they have described as the “humanist trivialization of history” (Greenblatt, 8), have effectively censored all such discussions in Shakespeare studies.

In connection with the topic of this essay, any comprehensive study of Shakespeare's humanism would be expected to discuss such elements, expressed in his greatest works, as his indictment of racism (*Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*), and his positive feminism (*Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Antony and Cleopatra*). It must also explain how Shakespeare's humanist indictment of money and of capitalist relations goes beyond *The Merchant of Venice*, and reverberates not only in *Timon of Athens*, but also in those crucial utopian passages in plays that are as different as *2 Henry VI* (The Jack Cade episodes: “And henceforward all things shall be in common” (4.7.15), *King Lear*:

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.33-6)

Heavens, deal so still!
Let the superfluous and lust-dieted man,
That slaves your ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly;
So distribution should undo excess
And each man have enough. (4.1.66-71)

and the *Tempest*:

All things in common Nature should produce
 Without sweat or endeavour; treason, felony,
 Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
 Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth,
 Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
 To feed my innocent people. (2.1.151-156)

And, finally, it must discuss the humanist/populist indictment of the crimes and corruption of political power, already seen in central tragedies like *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, as well as the rejection of war and imperialism that may best be examined in Shakespeare's mature Roman plays, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*.

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Notes

- (1) See this revealing conflict of views on this very issue between two contemporary Shakespeare scholars: "Significantly, Bartels begins this essay by lamenting that her students always want to read *Othello* in terms of the blackness of the central figure. In persuading them otherwise, the key concept for Bartels is that of hybridity: for her Othello is not a victim of racial prejudice because 'Shakespeare . . . denotes Othello flexibly, particularly along ethnic lines, as a Moor who is simultaneously of Venice'. Othello is a figure whose ethnicity occupies one slot, professional interests another, compatibly' (*ibid*: 61; both emphases added). This is clearly a different play from the one I read, in which Othello's painful split between his Moorishness and his status in Venice is graphically enacted on stage in his suicide. The very incompatibility of these two aspects of his position in Venice are the motor of the entire action. Not just Iago and Barbantio, but Othello himself make many references to his blackness and status as outsider . . . I cite this essay at some length because, in the name of historical accuracy it invokes Othello's hybridity to deny our urgent contemporary need to discuss racism." Ania Loomba "'Local-manufacture made-in-India Othello fellows': Issues of race, hybridity and location in post-colonial Shakespeare", in *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, (London—Routledge, 1998), p. 150.
- (2) An interesting challenge to conventional critical discussions of the arrangement of the *Sonnets* (and consequently of their very meaning) is Heather Dubrow's "'Uncertainties now crown themselves assur'd: The Politics of Plotting

Shakespeare's sonnets," in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 47, No. 3, Fall, 1996, pp. 291-305. The essay argues that the conventional two-part structure and the linear plot ascribed to the *Sonnets* by most critics serves ultimately to propagate sexism by associating positive values with the sonnets addressed to the Friend and negative ones with the so-called "Dark Lady" sonnets.

(3) *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1994), p. 48.

(4) For a specific discussion of the "ways in which the prevailing cultural conventions were subverted, modified, or simply ignored," see Robert Ellrodt, "The Inversion of Cultural Traditions in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*," *Shakespearean Criticism Yearbook*, 1994, Vol. 28, pp. 380-384.

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