

THE DARK LADY: ELIZABETH

REBELLION & IMPRISONMENT

Sonnet 127

Beauty's Successive Heir

8 February 1601

This opening sonnet to and about Queen Elizabeth is the start of the separate Dark Lady series, running in parallel with the Fair Youth series from 1601 to 1603. Two verses of this series, Sonnets 138 and 144, were first published in 1599; but Oxford has inserted them with slight but significant revisions into this sequence. The result is a series of twenty-six sonnets (127-152) matching the twenty-six sonnets of the opening series (1-26), each flanking the series of exactly one hundred verses (Sonnets 27-126) forming the center of the one hundred and fifty-two sonnet structure. Sonnet 127 corresponds in time to Sonnet 27 – the night of Southampton's revolt and imprisonment on February 8, 1601 – both introducing "black" into their respective sequences.

In the past the royal son was "fair" but now he is "black" with disgrace, although he remains the Queen's "successive heir" to the throne. Elizabeth's imperial viewpoint determines everything. At a glance, she can turn him from "fair" (royal) to "black" (disgraced). She continues to slander her own "beauty" or royal blood, which is possessed by her son, by viewing him with "a bastard shame" or consigning him to the status of a royal bastard.

Sonnet 127

Translation

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 by a bastard shame,

At first our disgraced son was not deemed royal,
Or if he was, he had not Elizabeth's name:
But now he's the Queen's blood successor,
And blood is disgraced as a royal bastard.

For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,
Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bow'r,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.

Because since all adopt Elizabeth's power,
Gaining royal favor by false art [of the Court],
Royal blood has no name or sacred seat,
But is violated, even if not in disgrace.

Therefore my Mistress' eyes are Raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem,
At such who not born fair no beauty lack,
Sland'ring Creation with a false esteem.

Therefore my Queen's view is darkly negative,
Her eyes like those in mourning for
Him not born a king yet not lacking her blood,
Slandering her son with a false view of him.

Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

Yet so her eyes mourn reflecting her woe,
So that all men say royal blood appears so.

1 IN THE OLD AGE BLACK WAS NOT COUNTED FAIR

OLD AGE = former times; as in Sonnets 1 – 26 up to the year 1600, before the Essex Rebellion, after which everything changed; **OLD** = "Wherefore, not as a stranger but in the *old* style" – Oxford to Robert Cecil, May (?) 1601; "For truth is truth, though never so *old*" – Oxford to Robert Cecil, May 7, 1603; "That I might see what the *old* world could say" – Sonnet 59, line 9; "O him she stores, to show what wealth she had/ In *days long since*, before these last so bad" – Sonnet 67,

lines 13-14, “Robbing no *old* to dress his beauty new” – Sonnet 68, line 12; “For as the Sun is daily new and *old*,/ So is my love still telling what is told” – Sonnet 76, lines 13-14; “Counting no *old* thing *old*, thou mine, I thine” – Sonnet 108, line 7; **AGE** = “A generation of men, a particular period of time; the period of life at which a person has arrived; a stage of life” – Schmidt; “Had my friend’s Muse grown with this growing *age*” – Sonnet 32, line 10; “The rich proud cost of outworn buried *age*” – Sonnet 64, line 2; “Doubting the filching *age* will steal his treasure” – Sonnet 75, line 6; “For fear of which, hear this, thou *age* unbred” – Sonnet 104, line 13; “And peace proclaims Olives of endless *age*” – Sonnet 107, line 8; “The *age* is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe” – *Hamlet*, 5.1.138-140; **BLACK** = Southampton, in disgrace for treason; “It will help me nothing to plead mine innocence, for that dye is on me which makes my whitest part *black*” – *Henry VIII*, 1.1.208-209; also, as royal bastard; “A joyless, dismal, *black and sorrowful issue*” – *Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.68-73; **COUNTED FAIR** = accounted (i.e., his “fair” or royal blood as Elizabeth’s “treasure”) or acknowledged as royal; “From *fairest* creatures we desire increase” – Sonnet 1, line 1

2 OR IF IT WERE IT BORE NOT BEAUTY’S NAME

Or even if he was accounted as royal (by me), he did not bear Elizabeth’s name (Tudor); **BORE** = heraldic, i.e., Southampton never bore his mother’s coat-of-arms; also related to his birth as a bastard; (“Before these bastard signs of fair were borne” – Sonnet 68, line 3); **BEAUTY’S NAME** = Elizabeth’s name, Tudor; i.e., he was never known as Prince Henry Tudor; (“That thereby beauty’s *Rose* might never die” – Sonnet 1, line 2)

3 BUT NOW IS BLACK BEAUTY’S SUCCESSIVE HEIR

But now Southampton is Elizabeth’s immediate heir to the throne; **BLACK** = Southampton; **BEAUTY’S** = Elizabeth’s; **SUCCESSIVE HEIR** = one who deserves to succeed by virtue of inheritance; rightful claimant to a title; “Yet, by repute of his high descent, as next the King he was *successive heir*” – *2 Henry VI*, 3.148-49 (the only other Shakespeare usage of the phrase); “Plead my *successive* title with your swords; I am his first-born son that was the last that wore the diadem of Rome: then let my father’s honor live in me, nor wrong mine age with this indignity” – *Titus Andronicus*, 1.1.4-8; “To God, my king, and my *succeeding issue*” – *Richard II*, 1.3.20; “rightful *heir* to the crown” – *2 Henry VI*, 1.3.26; “But as *successively* from blood to blood, your right of birth” – *Richard III*, 3.7.134-135; “O now let Richmond and Elizabeth, the true *succeeders* of each royal House, by God’s fair ordinance conjoin together, and let their *heirs*, God, if Thy will be so, enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace” – *Richard III*, 5.5.29-33; “Richer than that which four *successive kings* in Denmark’s crown have worn” – *Hamlet*, 5.2.273-274; “No son of mine *succeeding*” – *Macbeth*, 3.1.63; “They labored to plant the rightful *heir*” – *1 Henry VI*, 2.5.80

4 AND BEAUTY SLANDERED WITH A BASTARD SHAME

BEAUTY = Elizabeth; also, her blood that Southampton possesses by inheritance of it as a “natural issue of her Majesty’s body”; **SLANDERED** = brought into “discredit, disgrace, or disrepute” – *OED*; “But once he *slandered* me with bastardy” – *King John*, 1.1.74; “With the attainder of his *slandorous lips*” – *Richard II*, 4.1.24; **SLANDERED BY A BASTARD SHAME** = shame or disgrace because of royal-bastard status; (“Thy *issue* blurred with *needless bastardy*” – *Lucrece*, 522; also “slander” as “to charge with, accuse of, a crime or offence” = *OED*., citing Scotland Council of 1579: “Persons *slandered* or *suspect* of treason”); same as “The *region cloud hath masked him* from me now” – Sonnet 33, line 12, i.e., Elizabeth Regina’s dark cloud of shame has covered and hidden her son; “For *slander’s mark* was ever yet the *fair*,/ The ornament of beauty is *suspect*,/ A crow that flies in *heaven’s sweetest air*” – Sonnet 70, lines 2-4; “this *slander* of his blood” – *Richard II*, 1.1.113; “And that he is a *bastard*, not thy son” – *Richard II*, 5.2.106; “Out, insolent! Thy bastard shall be king ... My boy a bastard!” – *King John*, 2.1.122-129)

“I am a bastard, too: I love bastards. I am bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind, bastard in valour, in everything illegitimate. One bear will not bite another, and where should one bastard? Take heed: the quarrel’s most ominous to us – if the son of a whore fight for a whore, he tempts judgment. Farewell, bastard” – *Troilus & Cressida*, 5.7.18-32

5 FOR SINCE EACH HAND HATH PUT ON NATURE'S POWER

HAND = the powerful hand of Elizabeth, the absolute monarch; "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown, and put a barren scepter in my gripe, thence to be *wrenched* by an unlineal *hand*, no son of mine *succeeding*" – *Macbeth*, 3.1.59-63; "I'll claim that promise at your Grace's hand" – to the King in *Richard III*, 3.1.197; **EACH HAND** = others who have sought Elizabeth's favor; both of the Queen's royal hands; "If Heaven will take the present *at our hands*" – the King in *Richard III*, 1.1.120; "A Woman's face with *nature's own hand* painted/ Hast thou, the Master Mistress of my passion" – Sonnet 20, lines 1-2; Southampton at birth was "sleeping *by a Virgin hand disarmed*" – Sonnet 154, line 8; "From *hands of falsehood*" – Sonnet 48, line 4; "With *time's injurious hand* crushed and o'er-worn" – Sonnet 63, line 2; "Or what *strong hand* can hold his swift foot back?" – Sonnet 65, line 11; **PUT ON** = assumed the royal power of the monarch and acted with that power; "For he was likely, had he been *put on*, to have proved most royal" – Horatio, saying that Prince Hamlet would have been a superb king, in *Hamlet*, 5.2.404-405; "deaths *put on by cunning and forced causes*" – *Hamlet*, 5.2.394; **NATURE'S POWER** = Elizabeth's royal power as absolute monarch, whose imperial viewpoint can turn *fair to black* or vice versa; "O Thou my lovely Boy, who in thy *power* ... If *Nature*, sovereign *mistress* over wrack" – Sonnet 126, lines 1, 5

6 **FAIRING THE FOUL WITH ART'S FALSE BORROWED FACE** = giving royal favor to foul persons by her false estimation; turning truth into falsity; "To make me *give the lie to my true sight*/ And swear that brightness doth not grace the day?/ Whence hast thou *this becoming of things ill*" – Sonnet 150, lines 3-4

7 SWEET BEAUTY HATH NO NAME NO HOLY BOW'R

BEAUTY HATH NO NAME = Southampton's royal blood from his mother, Elizabeth, is not acknowledged; **NO HOLY BOW'R** = no sacrosanct dwelling place, i.e., no right to sit on the throne as a god on earth

8 **BUT IS PROFANED, IF NOT LIVES IN DISGRACE** = Instead, our son is now disgraced and imprisoned because of his role in the Rebellion; (Booth refers to "false identities that pass for real and real ones that seem false"); Southampton's real identity as royal prince is hidden, so it seems false; **PROFANED** = defiled, usurped; "Question your royal thoughts, make the case yours, be now the father, and propose a son, hear your own dignity *profaned*" – Chief Justice to the newly crowned King Henry Fifth in *2 Henry IV*, 5.3.91-93; **IF NOT** = or even; **LIVES IN DISGRACE** = lives in disgrace as a prisoner in the Tower of London

9 THEREFORE MY MISTRESS' EYES ARE RAVEN BLACK

THEREFORE = "Therefore" is the key word, i.e., the Queen's eyes are not black in color, but rather reflect her dark point of view as absolute monarch; "therefore" the *viewpoint* of Elizabeth, my sovereign mistress, is black; **ARE RAVEN BLACK** = they are "therefore" black, because the Queen's own viewpoint, casting its shadow, has turned Southampton from *fair to black*; her negative attitude has turned her into the so-called Dark Lady; "By heaven, thy love is *black* as ebony ... O paradox! *Black* is the badge of hell" – the king in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 4.3.243, 250; **RAVEN** = "*Legend has it that should the ravens ever leave the Tower of London the White Tower will crumble and a great disaster shall befall England. For many centuries ravens have been known to be residents of the Tower of London*" – www.tower-of-london.com; (Southampton is in the White Tower); "For he's disposed as the hateful *raven* ... For he's inclined as is the *ravenous* wolf" – *2 Henry VI*, 3.1.76-78; "Come, the croaking *raven* doth bellow for revenge" – *Hamlet*, 3.2.255-256; **MISTRESS**: "To be her *mistress' mistress*? The *queen's queen*?" – *Henry VIII*, 3.2.95; same as the sovereign mistress, Elizabeth, of "*my mistress' eye*" in Sonnet 153, line 14, and "*my mistress' thrall*" of Sonnet 154, line 12; "I cannot but find a great grief in myself to remember the Mistress we have lost" – Oxford to Robert Cecil, April 25/27, 1603, referring to the Queen on the eve of her funeral

10 HER EYES SO SUITED, AND THEY MOURNERS SEEM

MOURNERS = at a funeral, as in *The Phoenix and the Turtle* (published this year, 1601); the funeral of their son, Southampton, if he is executed; and the funeral of Oxford's and Elizabeth's royal hopes for him to succeed to the throne: "Thy end is Truth's (Oxford's) and Beauty's (Elizabeth's) doom and date" – Sonnet 14, line 14; dovetailing with Sonnet 31, line 5: "How many a *holy and obsequious tear*/ Hath religious love stolen from mine eye."

11 AT SUCH WHO, NOT BORN FAIR, NO BEAUTY LACK

AT SUCH = at her royal son; **NOT BORN FAIR** = not born with acknowledged royal blood; **NO BEAUTY LACK** = but still lacks none of his royal blood from "beauty" or Elizabeth

12 SLAND'RING CREATION WITH A FALSE ESTEEM

SLAND'RING = Disgracing your own child and accusing him of treason; echoing "beauty *slandered* with a bastard shame" of line 4; ("For *slander's* mark was ever yet the fair" – Sonnet 70, line 2; **CREATION** = created being, child; "From fairest *creatures* we desire increase" – Sonnet 1, line 1; "But heaven in thy *creation* did decree" – Sonnet 93, line 9, Oxford to Southampton about Elizabeth (heaven), who gave birth to him; **FALSE ESTEEM** = false view or estimation of him; ("*false women's fashion*" – Sonnet 20, line 4, about Elizabeth); esteeming her son as a "false traitor" as in "To warn *false traitors* from the like attempts" – *Richard III*, 3.5.48

13 YET SO THEY MOURN BECOMING OF THEIR WOE

So Elizabeth's eyes mourn for her son and for the fate of her royal blood that he possesses; and therefore they are "black" in these verses of the Sonnets; **WOE** = ("O that our *night of woe* might have rememb' red/ My deepest sense, how hard true sorrow hits" – Sonnet 120, lines 9-10)

14 THAT EVERY TONGUE SAYS BEAUTY SHOULD LOOK SO

EVERY = Edward de Vere, E. Ver, *Ever or Never*; **EVERY TONGUE** = the voices of others, alluding to "my tongue" or "my voice"; "And art made *tongue-tied* by authority" – Sonnet 66, line 9; **SAYS BEAUTY SHOULD LOOK SO** = says that Elizabeth (or more specifically, her blood within Southampton) appears to be in such disgrace