

“Who Slept In His Best Bed?”

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In 1616 William Shakespeare died. Shortly thereafter his Will was read. He had very recently rewritten it. As he understood, it would be widely circulated as one would expect of a major celebrity in his day. Infamously it included the following bequest to his wife, Anne Hathaway. And these were the only words addressed to her in his Will:

“I give to my wife my second best bed...”

What? Wow?

With these words -final words - a wild fire of gossip, rumor, and innuendo has swept nonstop for 500 years. Indeed I venture to guess that not quite 100 years later when Kit Kat members likes of John Dryden (the greatest poet playwright of his day behind Shakespeare and Johnson) or Sir John Van Brugh, after a few quaffs and mutton pies in Christopher Catt’s London Tavern, that they undoubtedly spoke of these lines from Shakespeare’s Will with wry smiles and tilted heads.

(Van Brugh was 1 of the more successful playwrights of the day in London - after Dryden. Van Brugh having taken a short sabbatical to be the architect of Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard- it was Van Brugh who said of the Kit Kat Club that it was “The best club that ever met.”)

TOAST

So gentlemen, tonight-since our forebears probably quaffed a couple over this very issue - let us keep the tradition alive and do so as well I So let’s raise your glasses and give a (2nd) toast to that randy poet , the “Bard of Avon, ”-William Shakespeare!”

I had to do a toast because this essay arises in great measure from my memory of several wonderful essays I spent listening to here in this room from my great Kit Kat friend and mentor, Al Kuhn. He loved Shakespeare and gave great essays about Shakespeare’s poetry and his plays and his insights into the human drama. Shakespeare appeared in several of Al’s essays, and I dare to say, somewhere in most all of his Kit Kat dinner conversations.

He is with us tonight in these petite red and white roses – which stand for passion and virtue. (Speaker’s Boutiniere)

Tonight's essay perhaps will be more about passion than virtue.

In 1582 a young Williams Shakespeare-then 18 - married slightly older Anne Hathaway- then 26. They both came from well-to-do families in the vicinity of the village of Stratford. Many have speculated and felt that the marriage started under pressure and not happily. Six months after their marriage, Anne gave birth to their 1st child a daughter whose name was Susanna. Even back then the gestation period for child was 9 months.

I note this birth, 6 months after marriage, was about the same length of time that Winston Churchill was born after his parents' marriage. From the journals of midwives in Colonial America a very significant number - maybe as high as 50% - of births of young American women also seem to have occurred at the 6 months after marriage marker. Indeed as a young boy visiting family in rural Kentucky, I overheard conversations which led me to believe that shotguns often were used for a purpose other than hunting.

So I think it is safe to surmise that there were pressures in Will and Anne's marriage from the outset. In 1585, 2 years after Susanna's birth, Anne gave birth to twins. One of the twins was Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet who died at age 11 from the Black death-the bubonic plague. (in the vernacular of the day "Hamnet" was interchangeable with "Hamlet").

In the 7 years after the twins birth, Shakespeare spent much of his time in London away from Anne and his children. There is little if anything in any record that tells us what went on in his life during that time period, Hamnet had essentially been raised by his grandparents and Anne. Shortly after Hamnet's death a play titled "Hamlet" was written – later a second and more famous version was written

Shakespeare and Anne were very proud of their daughter Susanna who married well. Shakespeare in his Will named Susanna as his executor. She inherited the bulk of his Estate including his house in Straford named, "New Place", which she and her husband moved into. No doubt it was Susanna who read to her mother the words in her father's will which gave her his "Second best bed". And no doubt Anne would have also lived with her daughter and husband in New House where she slept in his "second best bed".

Well we all know what became of Shakespeare. In London-he wrote the greatest plays of all time. It is no secret that in the late 1500s and early 1600s London was a rowdy and randy place. Love and desire were everywhere in the air.

I think several members have read the biography of Samuel Pepys - who lived through the great fire in London in 1666 and became Lord of the Admiralty.

(Pepys was the great diarist of London in the late 1600's) From Pepys we learn that mistresses were common and so were sonnets.

Sonnets

In trying to solve the riddle of who slept in Shakespeare's best bed, there are clues, important clues, in his sonnets. While we all have acquaintance with his plays, his sonnets are wonderful.

The word "sonnet" is derived from the Italian word "sonetto" - which means little song. In Shakespeare's time sonnets were in vogue. A gentleman who could not write a decent complete sonnets was thought of as "boorish".

A sonnet is a 14 line poem in iambic pentameter. Shakespeare's sonnets were structured into 3 clusters of 4 lines ending with a 2 line couplet. The couplet could often shift into a surprise thought, surprise ending

In Elizabethan England sonnets traditionally were of love and romance. The Elizabethan sonnet was in the style of the famous 15th century Italian lyric poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). Petrarch used this form of poem to express his longing for his unattainable Laura. The English version of the Petrarchean sonnet used grandiose hyperbolic words and phrases. In Elizabethan England, sonnets were expected to speak of romantic thoughts. In the conceit of an Elizabethan sonnet, young women's eyes were like suns, her lips were coral red. They were

always fair skinned with rosy cheeks and golden hair- which was the fashion of beauty in that day. In sonnets, young women were like “goddesses who walked on air. The hearts of the men who wrote the sonnets were like storm tossed ships, steered by starry love. (Contemporary poets such as Marlowe, Sydney, Spenser, and Herrick)

It is by almost complete chance that we have Shakespeare’s sonnets. We have 154 of his sonnets. Their publication in 1609 was not authorized. It appears that Shakespeare had circulated them among his friends for about 10 years before the publication and an ambitious publisher, knowing of Shakespeare’s fame, somehow acquired them and published them.

I am sure we are all acquainted with a line or two from a Shakespeare sonnet ;

“Shall I compare thee to a summer day” Sonnet 117 (which was written to a male friend);

or Marlowe’s “Come live with me and be by love.” The Passionate Shepard to His Love”

Probably not many of you have tried to read them all, all 154 of them. Probably one of the reasons I am drawn to them is that they are hard work. But mining Shakespeare always yields riches.

Writing sonnets in “cycles” was in vogue. By cycles I mean a poet might write multiple sonnets to the same person. In Shakespeare’s sonnets there is the most famous of all sonnet cycles. Twenty Five sonnets written to a mysterious mistress, his “Dark Lady”.

In the speculation as to who may have slept in Shakespeare’s best bed, perhaps the most likely suspect is the Dark Lady of sonnets, numbers 127-152 .

But first I would note that in London’s theater district of that day it is well known that there were many African prostitutes, named “blackamoors”. There has been speculation that one of the blackamoors was his Dark Lady. Simply put, in my opinion - no way.

(In Washington DC the civil war soldiers of the North named their prostitutes “hookers” after their general.)

Sonnet 127

Let me turn to a few of the Dark Lady sonnets. They begin with number 127. (In the packet I have put on your table) Shakespeare jumps right in. He tells us that while in the past dark complexions were not considered fair, black is now the new beauty. “Fair” was a false face artificially constructed which defaced and hid the true face beneath.

He tells us “my mistress brows and eyes are raven black” that “lack no beauty” to anyone who saw her eyes. “Beauty should look so”. Her eyes mourned the contrived artificiality created by supposedly “fair” faces.

One commentator says:

“What most upsets the poet is not that one definition of beauty supersedes another but that women use cosmetics to enhance their natural appearance. This unnatural practice creates artificiality, ‘Fairing the foul with art’s false borrowed face.’ Even worse cosmetics devalue the ideal, or standard, of what beauty is, for they allow women to change their appearance on a whim according to what is deemed beautiful. Constancy in what is a beautiful is sacrificed for fickle, mercurial notions of how a woman should look.”

Shakespeare’s Dark Lady sonnets assault not only the deeply entrenched but “artificial” fashion of the day. It is also tearing down the way we look at beauty. We should look at each other the way we really are. We should not be “slandering creation with false esteem.”

With Shakespeare begin a new way of looking at the human condition. It is desperate. It is dark. Shakespeare was an existentialist hundreds of years before Camus and Sartre.

Sonnet 128

The Dark Lady sonnets are full of passion. Sonnet 128 describes the Dark Lady playing a piano precursor which his audience and he would have known as

the “Virginal”. He describes the instrument’s response to her fingers. The keys leap at her touch. He is jealous that her fingers touch and are kissing the dead keys and not his very much alive lips. This sonnet is extremely sensual without his ever touching her.

It is reminiscent of the masked ball scene in which Romeo sees Juliet putting her cheek into her hand. He says

“O that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek”

Sonnet 129

Sonnet 129 does not mention the Dark Lady. It deals with the tension between the profound excitement of the poet's lust and desire for her and his fear of losing control. He looks at the realness of who she is and there is no doubt that she has an erotic magnetism and that he is in her is fully in her force field. A panic like attack occurs as he realizes how vulnerable he was to having his emotions overcome his ability to control them. There is danger in such love which excites - because it could cause his life to be totally overthrown. He sees his desire as his own moral weakness. In losing control he loses himself. But he cannot escape his desire despite his better self.

Sonnet 130

Sonnet 130 is my favorite of the Dark Lady sonnets. I think it is one of the greatest of all sonnets. A moment ago I told you that Elizabethan sonnets were over-the-top, grandiose exultation's of fair skin goddesses. Well look at this one. (packet)

This sonnet breaks every tradition known at the time. Readers of his day would have been astounded by these sonnets. It stood the sonnet form as it was then known completely on its head. No one could have done this but Shakespeare. You are looking at raw genius creating a wholly new genre for sonnet. Life is not all about light. And beauty is not all about golden hair. Sonnets henceforth should be about people as we really are.

The Dark Lady's eyes "are not like the sun". The color of her lips are not "red coral" and her breasts are not the whiteness of snow. Her color is "dun", a brownish or olive color. Her hair is not merely black, he writes "black wires" grow on her head. His dark Lady is not a goddess.

"I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground."

And her smell. He writes:

"and in some perfumes is there more delight than in the
breath that from my mistress reeks."

Try that quote at home tonight guys. It's Shakespeare.

Even in these satirical jests, his comparisons are deeply disparaging and horrendous. Reading these lines I thought, this relationship is not going to last. But he ends,

“And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.”

Sonnet 131

In sonnet 131, he worries that others who see her will not think her lovely. But to him she is the “fairest and most precious jewel”. But he detects that she may not be “into him.”

While he uses unflattering words, she uses actions and deeds to hurt him. In the sonnets that follow some malevolence is suggested. It becomes clear in the following sonnets that her moral character is not just suspect.

He ends with the line:

Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
In nothing are thou black save in thy deeds,
And hence this slanderous thing proceeds.

Sonnet 132

In sonnet 132 her eyes pity him. She looks at him with disdain. The poet describes nature as gray and dull. She is alive. It is us that brings life to the world not the other way. But we are deeply flawed. And we are desperate in our flaws.

Recall the famous quote from Macbeth, "Fair is foul and foul is fair".

Here the sonnet ends:

"Then will I swear beauty herself is black,
And all they foul that thy complexion lack."

Sonnet 134

In sonnet 134 he sends one of his friends to take a note, a message to her. But she sees this as a chance to seduce his friend and make him her lover. His friend responds wholeheartedly. Shakespeare realizes that she has been using him to get to his friend the whole time perhaps.

So who was this Dark Lady that dumped him, but whom he never forgot? Beyond the "blackamoors", (who may have inspired plots and characters of many plays) there are the following suspects:

There is Jacqueline Vautrollier the printer's widow who remarried Shakespeare's former Stratford neighbor who had published earlier of his poems. She was a writer who lived in the fashionable Blackfriars neighborhood where Queen

Elizabeth's cousin and Shakespeare's friend Lord Hundson lived. Lord Hundson was Shakespeare's theater company's patron.

There is Mary Fitton, who had been one of Queen Elizabeth's maid of honor. She had born an out of wedlock child to Lord Pembroke - a close friend of Shakespeare. Shakespeare wrote sonnets to Pembroke.

There was Jane Dagenhart who was a tavern landlady in London near the London's play houses and who had a son named William, who decades after Shakespeare's death claims to be his secret love child.

There was Aline Florio the wife of a translator who worked for the Earl of Southampton (Henry Wriothesley), also a patron of Shakespeare. Aline's husband John Florio is sometimes rumored to be the person who really wrote Shakespeare's works – (A wild ass unfounded rumor. By the way-Shakespeare is Shakespeare and I am me- just saying.)

Or

Could it be that the lovely dark haired, olive skinned, brilliant Emillia Bossano Lanier was the Dark Lady? She had music in her blood. She was the secret love child of one of Henry VIII's musicians. She became mistress of Lord Hundson. She was educated and ran in Shakespeare's circles in Queen Elizabeth's Court and other of his circles. She was a writer and poet. She knew several friends

of Shakespeare. Her poetry book (Hail God King of the Jews) was the first book of poetry ever published by an Englishwoman. I think she could have been an inspiration for several of Shakespeare's women characters - Viola of the Twelfth Night; or Rosilyn of As You Like It; ; or even for Juliet. All of these women characters were smarter and more literate than their male counterparts. Emillia is by and away the more probable Dark Lady.

His dark lady was in no way fantasy on a pedestal. She was real. She exudes life. He loves her deeply until she leaves and even then he never forgets her. She was with him than and now she is with us tonight. Hopefully we can understand a little deeper that in the power and intense passion of love there is real danger and sometimes destruction.

Transition to Romeo and Juliet

Another of my favorite Shakespeare's sonnets is the Prologue to Romeo and Juliet.

“Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny...
From forth the fatal loins of these 2 foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life; ...”

Romeo and Juliet is Shakespeare's first tragedy. He did not think tragedy was his strength. I believe that Romeo and Juliet started out as a romantic comedy. Somewhere it became something more. This play as much as anything written in any language in the world begins Shakespeare's transformation of the very way all of us see ourselves and our world.

One of my favorite contemporary scholars of Shakespeare is Yale professor Emeritus, Harold Bloom. In his book, "Shakespeare - the Invention of the Human", he discusses that Shakespeare's eminence and continued supremacy in Western culture comes from the fact that he has been unusually gifted to be a more adequate representer of the universe of fact and anyone else before him or since. Prof. Bloom states,

"we returned to Shakespeare because we need him... Our idea as to what makes the self authentically human we owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible." ... "Shakespeare extremely informs the language we speak, his principal characters have become our mythology, and he, rather than his involuntary follower Freud, is our psychologist."

I will tell you that in my many conversations in this room with Al Kuhn, he believed this. I personally believe that Shakespeare is the Canon of Western literature.

Destructive power of love-Romeo and Juliet

The concept of love is immense. Shakespeare's poetry and plays explore new ways to capture the essence of love's passion. Romeo and Juliet is the great love story. Indeed it is the archetype story of young love. Isn't it odd that when we step back we see that at its essence it is the story of the destructive power of love. Young love is intense, it leaves rational thought behind. Indeed the love of Romeo and Juliet is shocking. Some common commentators have called their love violent. Let's start with the fact that Juliet is 13 years old. They meet at a masked ball in the house of the Capulet's-the sworn enemies of Romeo's family. (the Montague's) Romeo and his friends have crashed the party. When he sees and meets Juliet the passion is immediate and intense. But their danger is immediate. Her brother Tybalt recognizes Romeo. He's swears that he will kill Romeo. Within days Romeo accidentally kills Tybalt. He is banned from Verona under penalty of death. But without hesitation he risks his life and returns to Verona for his life has no value without Juliet. We know the end of the story, they both are dead.

There is the intense passion of young love which defies circumstance and reason. As in the Dark Lady sonnets, in Romeo and Juliet Shakespeare portrays the dangers and destructiveness of passion that overcomes our own will.

This play is about the destructive power of love, young love.

Hamlet

Another pair of young lovers die in Hamlet. Ophelia is in the throes of young infatuation for Hamlet. Coldly, without explanation Hamlet abandons Ophelia. He feigns loss of any interest. He is a great but cruel player. He says the famous line to her, "get thee to a nunnery". Presumably so that she can absolve her sins of passion for him. When he says he does not love her, I believe him. But Ophelia is left bereft and confused and when Hamlet's recklessness results in the killing of her father, Polonius, she loses all emotional stability. This is what Shakespeare feared in his Dark Lady sonnets. Rather than going to the nunnery, draped in flowers and a beautiful dress, she is washed clean of her confused love. She is found drowned. Hamlet and his complete family follow in death.

Othello

In Othello, Othello and his new bride Desdemona are just married and in the throes of intense new passion. Though the passion has not had time to evolve, yet it has survived the obstacles of racial differences of rejection by his wife's family for having broken the interracial norms of his day. - Othello is a Moor. But their passion has not had time to build trust and stability. And it is the intensity of Othello's passion which renders him vulnerable to Iago's lies and innuendos. Shakespeare shows us how when a passionate young love can be

abused by lies and innuendo it can be replaced by hate and jealousy just as powerful. Othello loses control and murders Desdemona.

Going into my conclusion

Of real interest to me personally were sonnets 110, 111 and 112. In those Shakespeare says his fortune led him to earn his living in public. He says the masses do not live elevated lives. He says that having lived in a public way, he has been vulgarized. His conscience tells him that he has sold cheap what is most dear. To me there is no doubt that he is hounded by having spent so much of his life in London away from his wife and children and that he has let them down. He reflects that he is given his best to those that never really cared about him. But I dispute that lament in the sense that my life and yours have grown in the way we look at and understand our own lives. Our lives have greater depth and understanding as a result of his work.

So I think we can conclude our quest this evening. Whoever slept in his best bed was not a makeup artist, it wasn't an artificially made up beauty of the day, not an artificial fair golden hair goddess.

Importantly, I am certain that it wasn't the Dark Lady who occupied his best bed. She dumped him. Neither was it the blackamoors.

But, as a displaced Southerner I do know this is. I have taken my four daughters to many of the old homes in the South, dating from the 1600s. As planters built their wealth, they expanded their homes. Whenever they did so, there was always a special room for guests. In that room they put their finest decorations and furniture. This was an English custom and tradition. They gave their best bed to their guests.

And so the answer to the question posed by the title of this essay is this: that all of us here tonight and many others before us and after us are his honored guests. It is we that sleep in his best bed. By his Will, Shakespeare intended us to know this.

SONNET 127

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 slander'd with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profan'd, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' brows are raven black,
Her eyes so suited; and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Slandering creation with a false esteem:
Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says, beauty should look so.

SONNET 128

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st,
Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds
With thy sweet fingers, when thou gently sway'st
The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,
Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap
To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,
Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,
At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand!
To be so tickled, they would change their state
And situation with those dancing chips,
O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,
Making dead wood more blest than living lips.
Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,
Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.

SONNET 129

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

SONNET 130

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
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 damask'd, 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.

SONNET 131

Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art,
As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel;
For well thou know'st to my dear dotting heart
Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel.
Yet, in good faith, some say that thee behold
Thy face hath not the power to make love groan:
To say they err, I dare not be so bold,
Although I swear it to myself alone.
And, to be sure that is not false I swear,
A thousand groans, but thinking on thy face,
One on another's neck, do witness bear
Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds,
And thence this slander, as I think, proceeds.

SONNET 132

Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me,
Knowing thy heart torments me with disdain,
Have put on black and loving mourners be,
Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain.
And truly not the morning sun of heaven
Better becomes the grey cheeks of the east,
Nor that full star that ushers in the even,
Doth half that glory to the sober west,
As those two mourning eyes become thy face:
O, let it then as well beseem thy heart
To mourn for me, since mourning doth thee grace,
And suit thy pity like in every part.
Then will I swear beauty herself is black
And all they foul that thy complexion lack.

SONNET 134

So, now I have confess'd that he is thine,
And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,
Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
Thou wilt restore, to be my comfort still:
But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
For thou art covetous and he is kind;
He learn'd but surety-like to write for me
Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
Thou usurer, that put'st forth all to use,
And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me:
He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.