

A Short Lecture on
Sonnet 130
by William Shakespeare



Prof. Celeste Conway
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No doubt you smiled a bit as you read William Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, recognizing it as a parody of the conventional over-the-top love sonnet such as those the Italian poet Petrarch tended to write. In Petrarchan sonnets, elaborate metaphors and even mythical allusions are employed to describe adored female subjects.

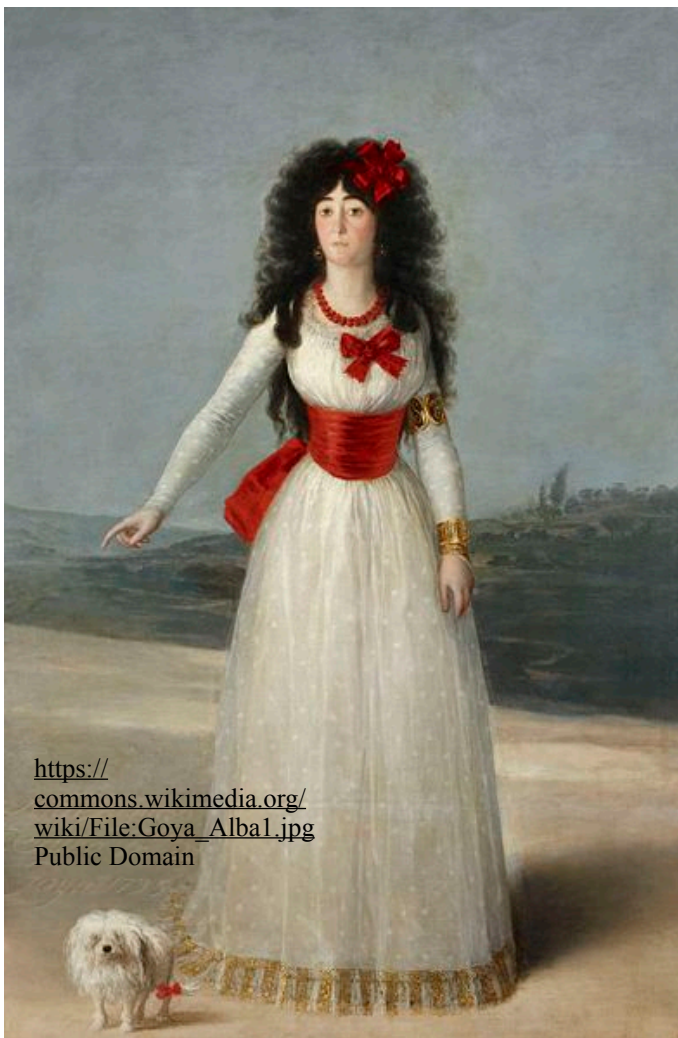
In Shakespeare's sonnet 130, on the contrary, the speaker pays tribute to a mistress, who we quickly glean, is not beautiful, nor elegant., but instead, quite ordinary and perhaps even physically unattractive. Absent are the extravagant comparisons to flowers, jewels, and goddesses.

*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.*

In the first four lines we learn that her eyes do not gleam like sunlight, that her lips are not a vivid and delectable shade of red, and that her skin is a dull dun color, like dust. Her hair does not resemble golden threads but rather "black wires" (By "wires of course, the speaker does not mean modern day electrical wires but perhaps wiry thread used in textiles or jewelry construction.)

The speaker goes on to say that her cheeks are not rosy or even pink, like roses he has seen; furthermore, her breath reeks.

*I have seen roses damasked, 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.*



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The lover does like to hear his mistress talk, but notes bluntly that her voice is not melodious. And although he can't claim to have ever seen a goddess, he knows for certain that his mistress is not one. She is very much a creature of earth, not heaven.

*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.*



In the last two lines, however, the poet makes the sort of reversal that is a hallmark of the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet. After his long list of unflattering remarks, he states clearly that despite all her flaws, he thinks his mistress is rare—at least as rare and special as all the women whose charms have been exaggerated in flowery and sentimental love sonnets like those written by other poets.

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