The Dark Lady of Shakespeare's later Sonnets as Lady Melancholia

An Introduction and Psychological Commentary

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Abstract

The Dark Lady imagined by scholars in Shakespeare's later sonnets (127-154) has never been identified. Neither has *The Fair Youth* of the early sonnets that is viewed here as Shakespeare's more noble self, and which comes to him in periods of profound harmony and creativity as recorded by other great poets. It is proposed here that *The Dark Lady* is not a physical person but a subjective description of depression after his own creative intervals with *The Fair Youth* are ended with the Fair Youth's departure. Applying Adler's psychology of use to the sonnets, that behaviour and emotions have their goals, would suggest that Shakespeare uses his depression to try to protect his self-image which could not include having grief-like anger against his better self. This is given support as the later sonnets show feelings of alienation and speak to the importance of knowing yourself, being true to yourself, and not trying to please others at your own expense, described by Shakespeare as "the uncertain sickly appetite to please," of sonnet 147.

Keywords: Shakespeare's Sonnets, The Dark Lady, The Fair Youth, Adlerian Psychology, Depression, Creativity.

General Introduction to Creativity and Shakespeare

Creative artists have often been viewed as tortured, living on the edge, and pushing the limits of a healthy lifestyle that includes having to deal with tight deadlines, high expectations, fierce criticism, and intense travel (Taylor, 2017). Hence the metaphor that "when you work at the cutting edge, you are likely to bleed."

A well-known example is Vincent van Gogh who sent a letter in 1888 to his brother Theo saying: "I am unable to describe exactly what is the matter with me. Now and then, there are horrible fits of anxiety, apparently without cause, or otherwise a feeling of emptiness and fatigue in the head. At times I have attacks of melancholy and of atrocious remorse." (Nittle, 2021).

Beethoven is another example. He was going deaf when, as a composer, he needed his hearing more than any other sense. Striving to overcome this career-threatening condition and not telling anyone since they would see his career as over, he was often viewed as anti-social by the public. Yet he sounds like a modern-day music therapist as well as a compassionate master artist when he writes: "I wish you music to help with the burdens of life, and to help you release your happiness to others." (Morris, 2005; Eriksson, 2017).

Modern research has suggested a possible link between mood disorders and creativity, although the evidence to date has been described as weak and inconclusive, since the studies have largely focused on writers, and have been reviewed as using inadequate definitions of creativity and mood disorders (Andreasen, 2008).

Csikszentmihalyi (1996, 114) quotes the poet György Faludy as saying that he usually does not start writing until a voice tells him, often in the middle of the night, that it is time to start writing, and adding: "That voice has my number, but I don't have his." This resembles Shakespeare's creative periods and his loss of ***The Fair Youth*** described in the sonnets when the bard would like him back. To the ancient Greeks such an inspiring voice or dream picture was viewed as a muse, one of the goddesses of science, the arts and literature. Shakespeare tells us in sonnet 78 that he owes everything of his art to his muse. By contrast, in his later sonnet 130, he writes, "I grant I never saw a goddess go," referring to the departure of ***The Fair Youth*** and the arrival of this new ***Dark Lady*** who has replaced his muse.

Ed Catmull of Pixar Animation in his book Creativity Inc. writes: "Athletes and musicians often refer to being ***in the zone***, that mystical place where their inner critic is silenced and they completely inhabit the moment, where the thinking is clear, and the motions are precise." Csikszentmihaly (1996) called this ***flow***, which Eriksson (2017) has related to musical resonance, community feeling, and being in harmony with self and others.

Eric Minton, journalist, and long time Shakespeare devotee, cites the evidence that Shakespeare was well familiar with depression or melancholia having created characters who displayed characteristics of the overall condition. He cites Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Ophelia, and King Lear (www.shakespearences.com). Minton however does not conclude that the bard suffered from the condition himself. He rather leaves the question open.

In a psychological study of Shakespeare by R.H. Semple published in 1881, this medical doctor writes that Shakespeare intrudes none of his personal sentiments upon the attention of his readers, with the exception perhaps, of some "obscure and vague allusions in the Sonnets," which are the subject of examination here. He adds that he sees the psychological energies surrounding Shakespeare as transcendent. This concurs with the general thesis presented here that Shakespeare was inspired to create the plays during personal periods of profound harmony, and that the Sonnets may be viewed as commentaries on his feelings and thoughts.

Adler clearly understood such profound feelings when he wrote about *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* as:

> *The innate feeling is actually a cosmic feeling, a reflection of the coherence of everything cosmic, which lives in us, which we cannot dismiss entirely, and which gives us the ability to empathize with things which lie outside our body. (Ansbacher, 1968, p.134)*

The purpose of this article with the help of modern Adlerian psychology is to examine Shakespeare's Sonnets, and particularly the later Sonnets regarding the personality generally referred to by scholars as ***The Dark Lady***, along with the bard's comments on love and lies in the same sonnets.

Semple states that whilst Shakespeare himself had the utmost reverence for female purity and virtue as is evident in all his writings, yet the bard drew a broad distinction between pure and ideal love on the one hand that is founded on esteem and affection; and the development of the passions and emotions of the human condition on the other. The latter is interpreted here to include a psychological need to please one's partner at one's own expense since this can lead to

resentment. Shakespeare speaks to this in Sonnet 147 when he writes: "*Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, The uncertain sickly appetite to please* (Sonnet 147). In Sonnet 129 he describes lust as: "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action… Enjoyed, no sooner but despised straight; …"

This contrasts with ***Love's Labours Lost,*** where *S*hakespeare speaks to the power of Ideal Love to rejuvenate the human spirit and body:

"But love, first learned in a lady's eyes, lives not alone immured in the brain, But, with the motion of all elements, Courses as swift as thought in every power, And gives to every power a double power, Above their functions and their offices."

Shakespeare, recognized as the universal psychologist (Bloom, 1998), emphasizes the importance of knowing oneself and being true to one's own nature, the ideal of which he calls ***a true mind*** and relates this to marriage. Sonnet 116 opens with: "*Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments…* " . Sonnet 152 opens with "*In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn."* He knows he has not been true to his own nature.

An Examination of Individual Sonnets

Sonnet 126 is recognized by scholars as the last sonnet that Shakespeare addresses to ***the fair youth,*** portrayed in his Sonnet 39 as ***the better part of me***, and which Eriksson (2021), like Bucke (1901, 2011) has described as the inspiration for the great plays. In sonnet 78 Shakespeare says that he owes everything of his art to this muse. He states that all his art is the muse's art, and that the muse advances 'his rude ignorance.' This ***fair youth*** is viewed here as Shakespeare's more noble self which comes to him in periods of profound harmony, and which functions as he says, as his muse.

Shakespeare is not alone in having such uplifting personal experiences where he feels honoured. Other great modern poets including William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and William Blake, have likewise made reference in their poetry to such experiences. Plotinus, the renowned Neo-Platonist of the 3rd century C.E called them his "happy intervals," and named "the love of beauty which exalts the poet" as a way to experiencing such creative intervals. (Bucke, 2011; Eriksson, 2021).

In Sonnet 36 when addressing ***the fair youth,*** Shakespeare writes "***we two must be twain,"*** meaning the two of them must stay as separate personalities, since he *does not want to give his blots of character to this better part of himself lest "****my bewailed guilt should do thee shame***." Accordingly, when the uplifting periods of creativity portrayed by him as **the fair youth** are over, and more can no longer be expected, does Shakespeare see himself feeling abandoned and left with his character blots, loss, and guilt? Shakespeare seems to describe in Sonnets 127 and 130 what this was like for him. He tells us it was horrible. He sees nothing good in this dark ***mistress*** who is referred to by scholars as ***the dark lady.***

It is proposed here that what scholars have called ***the dark lady*** refers not to a physical woman, but to his new, depressed state of mind, his melancholia. The contrast with his recent ***fair youth*** periods is stark and bleak, as he tries to put a human face on this new state of mind of his that is becoming depressingly real. He addresses her in the closing sonnets, and he says she speaks back with her lies.

His guilt feelings mentioned in the early sonnets tell us that he has not been as noble in his actions as he would wish. In sonnet 29 Shakespeare tells us he came close to becoming envious of others and to despising himself, but then he remembers how much love his more noble self shows him, and so he does not give in.

Shakespeare Sonnet 127 – First Address to a Dark Lady – Lady Melancholia

"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 with a bastard shame:
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 bower,
But is profaned, if not lives 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:
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so."

So the question is, when Shakespeare realizes that there will be no more of these periods of creativity when he was inspired to pen the glorious plays, how does he respond and experience it? Did he likely ask, as many would: "Have all the plays really been written down, can I not write more? Is there nothing I can do?"

Does a dark malaise come over him that we recognize now as depression, where he cannot see anything creative in his future in comparison to those wonderful periods with ***the fair youth***? This would not be abnormal; it would be human. Ideally, he might eventually just let go of his grief and passively move on and be thankful for these periods of creativity!

What do his sonnets tell us?

In Sonnet 127, just one sonnet on after saying farewell to the fair youth in sonnet 126 (if the numbering is correct here), Shakespeare can be seen trying to put a face on this new dark lady that drops in with a heavy hand to take charge.

He grieves for what he had and finds the loss dreadful. It is no wonder Shakespeare says: ***my mistress' eyes are raven black*** if he now sees and feels through a dark cloud. The whole sonnet is that he used to experience uplifting ideas and feelings of beauty and harmony and being connected to an intelligent all-seeing eye of human nature, as the plays tell us. Now a black mood comes to sit on him, and he tells us that this blackness is ***beauty's successive heir,*** meaning his future, which he may think he should accept as the successor to ***the fair youth*** and that it will all turn around**.** Remembering that Shakespeare has been viewed as the literary equivalent of the scriptures (Bloom, 1998), he may be thinking here that the eyes are windows to the soul and therefore that he has no choice. It is all-embracing for him, so he refers to it as his new mistress, as she acts as though she is in charge of him, like a new dark muse. This is in sharp contrast to sonnet 17 in praise of ***the fair youth*** where he writes: "If I could write the beauty of your eyes, and in fresh numbers number all your graces, the age to come would say 'this poet lies'! To say he strongly dislikes this dark lady is an understatement.

His first lines of Sonnet 127 may be interpreted to read along the lines of:

back in the old days, black or darkness was not counted as fair or good, or if it were, it was not labelled beautiful or fair. But now blackness is my new beauty. Beauty is thus slandered and called something that is untrue and unnatural. This is shameful.

"For since each hand hath put on Nature's power, Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face."

In these two lines Shakespeare tells us that both hands or sides of him have put on nature's power, whether it be happiness or depression; and that what was fair and joyful has been taken over by this horrible, all-embracing malaise, making this foul dark mood seem like it's really the old beauty and the new norm.

He struggles on with intended meaning something like:

Sweet beauty has no holy bower or alcove with a name above it where dark depression cannot enter. Beauty has been profaned. It's as though this dark feeling has become my new beauty. This new mistress of mine has black eyes that are so suited to her affect. They seem to me to mourn, to say that being born, although not born fair or loving, there cannot be any lack of beauty and therefore I must just accept them. But they slander creation with their false sense of worth and false self-esteem. So convincing are they in their "woe is me", that we are all supposed to feel sorry for them and accept that this is how beauty should look, in effect a new norm of beauty, for me!

Shakespeare 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 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.
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.

In Sonnet 130, by contrasting ***this dark lady*** with what he knows of love and honour received from ***the fair youth*** experiences, Shakespeare continues to describe and put a human face on her in his own poetic language. He can find nothing good to say:

His meaning is surely along the lines of:

Her eyes are not bright like the sun, her lips are not as red as coral. If we say snow is white, then her breasts are dark and gloomy. If hairs are wires, then black wires grow on her head. I have seen roses that are streaked with a pattern of red and white, but there are no such roses in her cheeks. And basically, all perfumes smell better than my mistress' breath which reeks. I love to hear her speak, yet I know full well that music has a far more pleasing sound. I must admit I have never seen how a goddess (referring to a muse) carries herself, but when this mistress arrives or comes over me, she treads heavily on my ground as though she is me.

"And yet, by heaven, I think my love and honour as rare, as rare as any false comparisons she tries to get me to believe in."

Adlerian Comments on Guilt Feelings

"Guilt feelings are the good intentions one doesn't have." **Rudolf Dreikurs**.

"Guilt feelings make you look so noble. (Adler, 1956, p.307). People give themselves guilt feelings, they don't drop down from heaven!" **Kurt Adler**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN6Q2xXQXyc

The philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** adds: "Guilt feelings are sheer wickedness."(Adler, 1956, p.272).

This suggests that Shakespeare has not always meant as well as he should have, and that his stated guilt feelings are to make his actions look more noble in his own eyes than they are. This creates a good guy who judges, and a not so good guy who carries out the actions. Neither is really him as Kurt Adler has pointed out. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN6Q2xXQXy

Depression in Adlerian Psychology

In Melancholia as Aggression, Adler writes:

Melancholia develops in individuals whose method of living has from early childhood been dependent upon the achievements and the support of others. Such individuals will always try to lean on others and will not scorn the use of exaggerated hints at their own inadequacy to force the support, adjustment, and submission of others.

The categorical imperative of melancholia becomes: "Act, think, and feel if the horrible fate that you paint on the wall had already befallen you or were inevitable." The main prerequisite of melancholia is the godlike, prophetic look. (Adler, 1956, p. 319-321).

So, who has Shakespeare depended on here? In sonnet 78, he ends with: *But thou art all my art and dost advance as high as learning my rude ignorance*. Shakespeare acknowledges his great dependency on his muse for his art. He says it really is his muse's art, not his own!

Stendhal's Description of Depression and its Anger
in his famous 19th century book **"La Chartreuse de Parme"**

(quoted by Kurt Adler in his 1977 talk on depression at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN6Q2xXQXyc

"The mountain air, the majestic and tranquil aspect of this superb lake which recalled to him that other of the shores of which he has spent his childhood all helped to transform into a tender depression Fabrizio's grief that was akin to anger."

Applied to Shakespeare and in the context of Sonnets 127 and 130 this would suggest that Shakespeare uses his depression to serve his goal of not wanting to face his grief-like anger since any anger against his better side, ***the fair youth,*** would be unacceptable in his own eyes, since he owes all his creativity to ***the fair youth***. The only one being deceived is of course himself. The downside and the price to pay is that he must "get into bed" and try to please this new Muse substitute, Lady Melancholia to achieve his goal. This is likely what the love and lies of the closing sonnets are about.

What do the closing sonnets say?

Shakespeare Sonnet 147

My love is as a fever longing still,
For that which longer nurseth the disease;
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
The uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now Reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen's are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed;
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

This says something along the lines of:

My love is like a fever that is still nursing the disease. My need to please is like a sickly appetite that feeds on keeping the malaise alive. My reasoning power like a physician to this feverish love has gone, angry that his recommendations have not been followed. And I am desperate, I now see death as desirable. I am past being cured, I don't care anymore and am getting frantic at my loss of sanity. My thoughts and ideas don't make sense, being anything random expressed to my vanity. The real problem is, I have sworn an untruth saying you are like the light, when in reality you are just like hell, and as dark as night.

Shakespeare Sonnet 152

In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn,
But thou art twice forsworn, to me love swearing,
In act thy bed-vow broke and new faith torn,
In vowing new hate after new love bearing.
But why of two oaths' breach do I accuse thee,
When I break twenty? I am perjured most;
For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee
And all my honest faith in thee is lost,
For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
And, to enlighten thee, gave eyes to blindness,
Or made them swear against the thing they see;
For I have sworn thee fair; more perjured I,
To swear against the truth so foul a lie!

A modern interpretation would be along the lines of:

I know am perjuring myself in loving you, but you are twice forsworn having sworn your love to me, having broken your vows by your actions in swearing hate after bringing new love. But why do I accuse you twice when I have broken twenty oaths and am the most perjured of the two of us. All my oaths have been to abuse and use you, and honestly my faith in you is gone. I swore deep oaths extolling your kindness, love, constancy, so as to understand you and please you. I became blind, or made my eyes swear against what they saw. For I have sworn that you are noble. More perjured am I in swearing an untruth to make such a foul lie.

Shakespeare Sonnet 153

Cupid laid by his brand and fell asleep:
A maid of Dian's this advantage found,
And his love-kindling fire did quickly steep
In a cold valley-fountain of that ground;
Which borrowed from this holy fire of Love,
A dateless lively heat, still to endure,
And grew a seething bath, which yet men prove
Against strange maladies a sovereign cure.
But at my mistress' eye Love's brand new-fired,
The boy for trial needs would touch my breast;
I, sick withal, the help of bath desired,
And thither hied, a sad distempered guest,
But found no cure, the bath for my help lies
Where Cupid got new fire; my mistress' eyes.

A Modern Interpretation would be along the lines of:

Cupid (passionate sexual desire) put down his fiery torch and fell asleep. A servant of the Goddess Diana took advantage of this and quenched his love-kindling passion in a cold fountain nearby, which borrowed a timeless lively heat from the Fire of HOLY LOVE, to grow a bubbling bath that men still use as a supreme cure for uncommon illnesses. But with one look from my mistress Lady Melancholia, the boy who was to test it out touched my heart. I, being thoroughly sick wanted the bath and ran there, as a sad, aggravated guest, but found no cure. The bath that will help me is to be found where my Passionate Desire got new fire, i.e in my mistress Lady Melancholia's eyes.

MEANING. Since I am using my depression to avoid having to face my grief-like anger against my better self, my cure is to recognize this and face my real anger which can be seen just behind my mistress' eyes of Depression.

Shakespeare's Last Sonnet - 154

The little Love-god lying once asleep,
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,
Whilst many nymphs that vowed chaste life to keep
Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand
The fairest votary took up that fire
Which many legions of true hearts had warmed;
And so the General of hot desire
Was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarmed.
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy,
For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure and this by that I prove,
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.

A Modern Interpretation is along the lines of:

The little love-god (passionate desire) lying once asleep (not sexually stirred up, i.e conscious attention is elsewhere), laid by his side his heart-stirring fire whilst many nature spirits sworn to chastity came visiting. The noblest took up that fire which had been warmed by many legions of True Love-filled hearts. And so the General of hot passionate desire was disarmed by a virgin hand. She quenched this fire in a cool well nearby, which from the fire of True Love created a bath capable of curing diseased men. But I, a thrall or slave to my mistress' power, came there for the cure of my slave state, and by this I prove. True love's fire heats water, but this living water cools not the warmth of True Love.

MEANING: "Passionate desire which I used to try and charm Lady Melancholia was transformed by many noble and chaste thoughts of goodness and love, so disarming the judging General I created to not look at my anger and resentment. This has freed up True Love to make a bath of positive healthy emotions and thoughts for me to wash myself in, and so be cured. By this I state to prove: Ideal Love warms the waters of life which flow naturally, yet the waters of life do not cool down Ideal Love.

The Closing Sonnets and Their Interpretation - Shakespeare prepares to face his grief-like anger. He decides that the price of alienation from himself is too great and prepares to be cured.

Concluding Remarks

If Shakespeare experienced depression himself after his creative periods were over, as proposed here, this could have proved useful to him in enhancing the dramatic characters in his plays, some of whom display characteristic symptoms and who have proved popular across different cultures and languages worldwide. Hamlet is just one example, but perhaps the most famous. (Bloom, 1998)

Shakespeare's own creative psychology of use in handling his depression, as suggested here, might also have helped him to create the witty but roguish Sir John Falstaff who, when speaking of resourcefulness and resilience in the face of adversity in Henry IV Part 2 says:

"A good wit will make use of anything. I will turn diseases to commodity."

Shienko (JIP, 2021, 77(4), 427- 445) asks what it is that differentiates an individual with mental illness from one without, given that both individuals will undergo a stressful environment, and for example will mourn a loss and become depressed. The author quotes Winnicott (1988) saying that there is no difference; but then adds that the difference may lie in the strength and ability to mentally withdraw from maladaptive thinking and consistent preoccupation with negative stimuli, in other words, **resilience**. The depth of Falstaff's resilience is evident from his comment above, as therefore must be that of Shakespeare who imagined him.

So the creativity metaphor *"when you work at the cutting edge, you are likely to bleed,"* likely applies to Shakespeare. Mercifully for him, or more likely through his resilience and mindfulness, the bleeding is more of a metaphor for ***creative flow*** rather than the physical bleeding that took place for Vincent van Gogh.

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