

## التعاريف الحديثة و الثورية للجمال و الأنوثة

### في سونيات شكسبير

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إشراف الدكتورة: باسمة محفوض

#### ملخص

يوضح البحث كيف أصبحت النساء ذوات البشرة السوداء يعبرن عن الجمال و الأنوثة في سونيات شكسبير و في العصر الحديث أيضاً. نكتشف بالمقارنة بين سونيات شكسبير و مفهوم الجمال في العصر الحديث إدراك شكسبير و عصرنا هذا للتمييز العرقي الواضح في الأدب عند تقديم المرأة ذات البشرة السوداء. نلاحظ أيضاً كيف أن السونيات و أصحاب النظريات في عصرنا يعارضون تنميط جمال و أنوثة النساء السود بأنهن أقل مرتبة، و بالتالي نكتشف شكسبير في ضوء مفاهيم أواخر القرن العشرين و القرن الواحد و العشرين كمبشر بالثورة الحاصلة في مجالات التمييز العرقي، و تنميط الجمال، و الأنوثة، تلك المجالات التي أثرت على المرأة و خصوصاً ذات البشرة السوداء.

*الكلمات المفتاحية:* سونيات شكسبير، النساء ذوات البشرة السوداء، العصر

الحديث، الأنوثة، الأنماط، ثورة

## Modern Revolutionized Understandings of Beauty and Femininity in Shakespeare's Sonnets

### Abstract

This article explores how black-skinned women have come to signify beauty and femininity in both Shakespeare's sonnets and the modern world. Comparing the two, we discover both Shakespeare's and today's consciousness of a biased presentation of black women in literature and society. We also notice how the sonnets and modern theorists both fight back the stereotyping of black beauty as less beautiful and less feminine. Thus, Shakespeare is, finally, seen in light of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries as a precursor to a revolution in the issues of racism, beauty stereotypes and femininity that have affected women, especially those of the black race.

*Keywords:* Shakespeare's sonnets, black women, modern world, femininity, stereotypes, revolution

The obsession with beauty is universal and timeless, and as we look around us, we tend to appreciate it and aspire to attain it in every way possible. However, women's beauty and its relation to skin colour and body shape have stirred so many discussions because "black, brown, and white women—women who looked like fashion models—admitted to knowing, from the time they could first consciously think, that the ideal was someone tall, thin, white, and blond, a face without pores, asymmetry, or flaws, someone wholly “perfect,” and someone whom they felt, in one way or another, they were not.”<sup>1</sup> The racial distinction between white and black women led to questioning the ideals that are considered beautiful.

Therefore, theorists began to ask what exactly is beauty? What are the criteria by which we decide what is beautiful and what is not? The answer that is often given is: Beauty is relative and subjective. Kathy Davis asserts that , "Beauty is, as the saying goes, in the eye of the beholder. If the norms for feminine beauty are subject to individual caprice, how would it ever be possible to decide which bodies require surgical alteration (and which do not)?"<sup>2</sup> In this quote, Davis touches upon the issue of female

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Wolf. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*: with an Introduction by the Author. New York: Vintage Books, 2015. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Kathy Davis. “Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty.” *Hypatia* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1991, pp. 21–43., p. 36.

beauty and how women suffered the pressure of society that always expected them to be beautiful according to certain standards. Davis also hints to surgical interventions that tied women to a specific ideal, but she notices the problematic nature of this issue since beauty is not a static concept.

The importance arises, then, to unravel the truth behind the standards by which society controls beauty, especially when it comes to black women and how their skin colour was discarded as less beautiful. Many people of all backgrounds link blackness with evil. This colour seldom signifies anything positive to them, and it seems to connote negativity and danger. However, this repugnance does not spring from an inherent repugnant essence. It is because, throughout history, black has always been linked to ambiguity, vagueness, uncertainty and death. When thinking of skin color, we find that those black-skinned people brought for servitude in America were called "Negros". Tracing this word's roots, we find that it was used in Greek as "Nekro", i.e. death<sup>3</sup>. Thus, to be a Negro, is to be the opposite of life. This division between the two colors as polar opposites structured the thought, labelling each world event, experience, culture, literature or perspective as only either good or bad, and this was most importantly applied to how

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<sup>3</sup> David R. Burgest, "The Racist Use of the English Language," *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 5 No. 1, 1973, pp. 37-45, P. 40.

people were stereotyped: black and by nature evil, white and by nature good.

These allegations led to the debasement of black or dark-skinned people. Black women suffered from double debasement because of their gender and color, and they were subjected to a belief system where white is an ideal they should never stop aspiring to. Therefore, the market was stuffed with advertising campaigns, booklets, recipes, products and surgical “solutions” that both targeted those women’s insecurities about their blackness and body shape, rendering the white slim female as the prototype for femininity. Margaret Hunter, for example, comments on this idea and says that “Beauty is highly racialized, and informed by ideals of white supremacy established during slavery and colonialism.”<sup>4</sup>

Art, especially literature, when depicting women, generally reflected this ideal except for some attempts here and there to overthrow this false privileging of it. Shakespeare in these sonnets shows that black beauty is not less valuable than white because the lady he depicted in his last 26 sonnets “is the complete opposite to the Petrarchan ideal. Dark rather than fair, she is also lustful rather than chaste,”<sup>5</sup> whereas “the Petrarchan lady had to be compounded

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<sup>4</sup>Margaret LHunter, “‘If You’re Light You’re Alright’: Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color.” *Gender & Society*, Vol. 16, No. 2, (2002) pp. 175–193, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup>Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 100.

of sweet flowers, precious jewels, and bright, remote heavenly bodies."<sup>6</sup>

Sprung from a literary tradition that took the white lady as the subject of praise, the sonnets, by extolling a dark-skinned woman, revolutionize both this tradition and more importantly, the concept of beauty itself. This diversion from the ideal was reiterated, and still, by a modern movement towards an all-encompassing notion of beauty where color does not play a role. The affinity between Shakespeare's and the modern world's awareness of the bias against black women is evident. Both bring femininity, blackness, and the female body into a new light. While femininity has always been generally secured for the white ideal and "most preceding sonneteers held the ideal mistress to be fair (blonde)"<sup>7</sup>, Shakespeare and Feminists oppose this idea. In the search for a pure femininity, stripped of prerequisites of color or body shape, Shakespeare predicts the modern obsession with make-up and plastic surgeries, and at the same time, its growing consciousness of those mutilating factors that affect women's bodies directly, primarily black ones. In his sonnets, he depicts a dark lady and asserts her femininity despite the world's negative take on black women.

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<sup>6</sup>Rackin, 106.

<sup>7</sup>Kenneth C. Bennett, *Threading Shakespeare's Sonnets*, (Illinois: Lake Forest College, 2007), p. 219.

## 1- The Dark-Skinned Lady as a Modern Model for Beauty:

The Elizabethan age, the time Shakespeare lived and wrote, is no exception to the deep belief in the superiority of white people, a belief that lived till the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Looking specifically at literary presentation of color, we find out that Shakespeare seems to be aware of the social and artistic order that expelled black as unworthy of praise. Prior to Shakespeare, the sonnet tradition had been linked to fair “blonde” ladies. Shakespeare, however, used this tradition just to convey his infatuation with a dark-skinned lady, with all the connotation that accompanied this color. He describes her color saying: “If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;/If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.”<sup>8</sup> Dympna Callaghan confirms that

The standard of female beauty in Renaissance Europe was influenced by classical philosophy as well as treatises on beauty and love poetry, specifically the literary blazons in which the speaker fragments the female body in order to praise each part through elaborately constructed similes. Italian treatises on manners and beauty...describe the perfect woman as a delicate creature with pale, luminous skin, beautiful golden hair that cascades on to her shoulders; she has

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<sup>8</sup>William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 130" in *Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 641, lines 3-4.

a slender, long, white neck; a modest blush in the cheek; eyes that are dark and wide; and lips that are delicate, small and usually the color of rubies or coral.<sup>9</sup>

However, Shakespeare dedicates 26 sonnets to explore the beauty of a black lady. Shakespeare, in doing so, created a new world where black is beautiful and not just “not white”, or at least where black is not counted ugly. To quote Callaghan, “Shakespeare’s “Dark Lady” sonnets exhibit true virtuosity in their reversal of the figure’s more usual association of fairness with feminine beauty, so that in them black becomes irresistibly and paradoxically beautiful.”<sup>10</sup> The speaker seems to put race and color aside as unimportant assets when dealing with a fully-grown lady. While the lady is black and of a different race, the speaker embraces those differences and shares the modern world’s view of beauty that is not tainted by society’s definitions and expectations. According to Callaghan, there is “an emerging counter-discourse of beauty focusing on the imagined opposite of the established norm: beauty that resides in darker tones.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Dympna Callaghan, *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, (Blackwell Publishers, 2006), P. 470.

<sup>10</sup>ibid, 270.

<sup>11</sup>ibid, 472.



• **Sonnet 130: Rejecting Stereotypes**

In sonnet 130 the speaker deliberately points out the woman's blackness, stressing her being "not white", in a deliberate listing of her bodily attractions similar to that in a blazon. This conscious parody of the sonnet tradition and the blazon is a well-played move by the speaker to counterpart what was the "norm" of beauty. He confesses:

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 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 heav'n I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.<sup>12</sup>

This description must have tortured any Elizabethan adherent to the ideal of Petrarchan beauty because it is a stark "violation" of contemporary beauty standards, and again this description, being an apparent reversal of what people thought

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<sup>12</sup> Sonnet 130, p. 641, lines 1-4, 9-14

beautiful, is yet another emphasis on the speaker's infatuation with a "she" before being infatuated with a black "she". To Callaghan,

what Shakespeare suggests is that beauty is entirely subjective and that desire might be provoked by sensuality and femininity itself rather than the cold luster of chastity...his female characters mock, bewail or debate the conventions of beauty and the fashion for praising it through overblown poetic phrases."<sup>13</sup>

The unprecedented praise of a black lady in a time when the white ideal was considered the only sign of female beauty is a clear parody of the Petrarchan tradition and how it depicted women: the speaker praised a woman despite her many shocking inadequacies to society back then when it comes to her black appearance that people considered exotic compared to the mainstream "lighter" beauty. The racialization and stereotyping of beauty has been a present in societies in literatures alike.

Race has always been a point where people seemed to diverge and be ranked and "hierarchies of skin color that systematically privilege lightness persist in their effect on women of color."<sup>14</sup> Read from a feminist perspective, this sonnet is an example of how modernist thought came to suspect every inherited and normalized conviction—convictions that deeply affect our

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<sup>13</sup> Callaghan, 472

<sup>14</sup> Hunter, 175

daily experience of perceiving the world and ourselves and our sense of judgment. It also sums up the spirit that began to emerge in the 60s, a spirit of tolerance and acceptance of diversity since "the fashion-beauty sector has become more heterogeneous... in respect of skin color."<sup>15</sup>

By the deliberate reversal of the taken-for-granted beauty ideal, Shakespeare opens up a new horizon for thought where black can enjoy superiority and be just beautiful—naturally and innately. Thus, whiteness and darkness stop being opposites and start a relation of contrast that is positive and free of racial tones. Blackness as a racial concept is made by this process. Race thus has a socially constructed existence that is always present, and "racism is ... in fact... a social construction whose meaning changes over time, history, and place."<sup>16</sup>

- **Sonnet 28: The Universality of Femininity**

In sonnet 128, however, the speaker uses the traditional metaphor of music to describe his lady. The sonnet is stripped of any racial or color references, stressing the speaker's stance in considering his lady nothing less than a woman:

How oft when thou, my music, music play'st  
Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds

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<sup>15</sup>Claudia Liebelt. *Manufacturing Beauty, Grooming Selves: the Creation of Femininities in the Global Economy* (Duncker Et Humblot, 2016), p. 13.

<sup>16</sup>Hunter, 175.

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.

...

Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,  
Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss.<sup>17</sup>

This sonnet shows how race loses significance when contrasted with the femininity of a lady. By being able to depict the beauty he sees and the lady, by admiring her lips, fingers, and agility in playing music, the speaker lets this sonnet and the other sonnets be subsumed under the tradition of sonneteering, thus signifying a movement towards laxity in beauty standards that governed women back then. What is clear is that her femininity, her essence of womanhood, her being merely a woman is what first makes her desirable to the speaker. She is to him a "she" before being black, and thus she as a woman is what the speaker actually praises. In doing so, her color means a little, if any, to a speaker whose lust crosses racial boundaries. If read separately, nothing comes to the reader's mind regarding the woman's color. This allows the speaker to stress the femininity of the lady, to defend her

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<sup>17</sup>Sonnet 128, p. 637, lines 1-8 and 13-14

existence, and defy the stereotypes defining women. Here, the woman is beautifully linked to music- no more no less.

- **Sonnets 131 and 132: Black as the Ideal of Beauty**

These modern ideas regarding race appear in sonnets 131 and 132. In both poems, the dichotomy of color and the boundaries that are defined and made by society to refer to races, fade and dissolve. Thinking of his black beloved, the speaker in sonnet 131 confesses that he lets out:

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.<sup>18</sup>

“Fair” in this sonnet loses its classical reference to blondness and is rather related to the dark lady. The speaker unconsciously bends language, giving new meanings to a word that, back then, meant “blonde”.<sup>19</sup> In utilizing language against its ideological programming, the speaker succeeds in creating spheres of significance where any word with racial connotation is stripped of this connotation in favor of a more neutral meaning. The speaker confesses: “Black is fairest in my judgement's place,/Thou art the

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<sup>18</sup> Sonnet 131,p. 643, lines 10-14.

<sup>19</sup> Burrow, p. 634.

fairest and most precious jewel,"<sup>20</sup> and in sonnet 132 he declares "Then will I swear beauty herself is black And all they foul that thy complexion lack."<sup>21</sup> Black, to the speaker, has turned into the ideal.

## **2- Femininity and its Relation to the Body and the Market as Seen in the Sonnets:**

Not every female was given the description "feminine". Women, and dark-skinned ones in particular, suffered, and still suffer the pressure gender roles put on them because "for those who wish to be recognized as women, norms of outer appearance and standards of feminine beauty play a crucial role in accomplishing this task."<sup>22</sup> To be a woman in the first place, is to take care of yourself and tend to your beauty routine day and night. For black woman it is this, and it further entails being as lighter in skin colour as possible.

- **Sonnet 130: Against a Constructed and Prescribed Femininity**

So the attribution of femininity appears to be manufactured, styled and tailored based on standards society approves of. And for a female, to be called feminine, is to expect her to meet such standards. Thus, femininity is not an inherent, inborn co-existence with female body, it is not something that a female develops

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<sup>20</sup>Sonnet 131, lines 12 and line 4.

<sup>21</sup> Sonnet 132, line 13-14.

<sup>22</sup>Liebelt, p. 15.

naturally—though it appears so. On the contrary, femininity affects how a mature female views herself, how she treats/considers her body, and it alters the body in ways that are subtle, unnoticed and naturalized.

Shakespeare's sonnets in a way testify to this suggestion. Gender roles and expectations have always presented themselves as fetters to the female body. These constraints are apparent in literature and in the depiction and treatment of female characters in texts. Only certain shapes, characteristics, body movements and voices were considered womanly or feminine and were celebrated in arts, while others were cast off as less feminine. Shakespeare draws on the traditional ideal to show what his lady looks like--the exact opposite. In doing so, he exposes the fragile concept of femininity in the presence of totally different body types and features of women. The femininity he praises in his mistress does not exist to Elizabethan people for her bodily features stand as an anti-ideal. They wouldn't consider her feminine. Notwithstanding, the speaker presents us with his opinion of what the feminine is:

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.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sonnet 130, lines 5-8.

Here the speaker undermines womanhood that is solely decided by patriarchal society and is aware of a more universal, diverse existence of femininity that doesn't confine a female to certain body alteration, or beautification. If a society imposes a definition of beauty that itself alters the subjectivity (both body and character) of a female, then the sonnet shakes the grounds of every assumption regarding femininity. The relationship between femininity and the female body is not stable: what is feminine is socially and economically decided by a society. As Kathy Davis thinks, "the boundaries between beauty and ugliness, between the ordinary and the deviant, are collectively reproduced within the everyday "maintenance" work of femininity and the fashion beauty complex."<sup>24</sup>

In this sonnet, Shakespeare unwittingly positions himself in the never-ending process of defining femininity and though unaware of it, he echoes, retrospectively, the feminist revolution today regarding issues related to the alteration of female bodies to fit in. The female body in the Elizabethan period was epitomized in the white ideal. Closely read, sonnets 130 and 131 expose a society that secures the title "feminine" to only type of bodies. In sonnet 130, the speaker's mistress is nothing like the accepted standard of femininity back then; she is "nothing like the sun"<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Kathy Davis. "Remaking the She-Devil: A Critical Look at Feminist Approaches to Beauty." *Hypatia*, Vol. 6 No. 2, 1991, pp. 21-43, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Sonnet 130, line 1.



The sonnets, thus, establish a counter-standard, and they, written in this lyrical style associated with the Petrarchan white ideal, make poetry and art tools to achieve this goal. Femininity in these sonnets moved from being defined and imposed on the female body to being a shared quality that all female bodies have. Femininity in those sonnets crosses the borders of color, bodily and facial characteristics to reach a more overarching level of categorization that binds all women in its conceptual existence.

Although in Shakespeare's time plastic surgeries were not yet invented, society kept promoting the white ideal of femininity, a false ideal that constantly pushed women to buy certain products, get on diet, even use bleaching products. This attitude towards considering the female body a "consumer" for economical businesses and beautification industry is derived from the eternal conviction that, in Wolf's words, "women are mere "beauties" in men's culture so that culture can be kept male."<sup>26</sup> Read in a socio-economic context, the sonnets can be seen as precursors to Feminists' efforts towards an all-embracing femininity, and towards femininity that is not pre-defined or idealized.

- **Sonnet 127: Femininity and the industry of Cosmetics**

The sonnets, in focusing on reversing the unquestionable standards, by extolling the opposite, appear to go against an

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<sup>26</sup>NaomiWolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women: With an Introduction by the Author* (Vintage Books, 2015), p. 59.

economy that since early modern days has been taking pains to mold women into a certain “applaudable” shape, promoting products and surgeries as secure ways to attain The prescribed femininity. Read in the mid- and late-20<sup>th</sup> century context, the dark lady, with all her characteristics, stands as a universal figure that witnesses and abhors the “rise of a global beauty industry, with profound effects on people’s body images, ideals of beauty and beauty practices worldwide.”<sup>27</sup>

The problem of make-up and its close relation to the gendered body of a female is not a modern one. Since Shakespeare’s time, and before, make-up was a marker of the feminine, an artificial means by which females attained femininity. It is one of the most obvious ways in which economy affects, even manufactures, femininity. By being at the center of a profitable industry, the female skin, especially her face, suffered throughout the ages the mutilations and oppression of this industry.

Beautification and cosmetics products dominated the lives of females, turning them into women accepted by society and its trends. These trends were naturalized as the only way to being *feminine*, thus the industry flourished at the expense of the uniqueness of each female’s face. As seen by Wendy Chapkis, “Beauty [is] a central feature of women’s oppression,” and “is reinforced by the cosmetic industry, the media, and other structures

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<sup>27</sup>Liebelt, p 1.

of domination such as racism, classism, ageism, ableism, and homophobia.”<sup>28</sup> The make-up industry defined femininity by whiteness, and “initially, feminist saw women, primarily as the victims of oppressive masculinist ideologies of feminine beauty that demanded... an irrevocably white and upper class appearance,”<sup>29</sup> This white ideal led every single woman, and still leads them into being victims of the cosmetic industry that objectifies them.

While, as seen before, literature has advocated the existence of a female object that is white, slender and graceful. By doing so it appears as a product of the socioeconomic conditions that led to the emergence of a beauty ideal and as a proponent of them. However, In Shakespeare’s sonnets, especially in 127, this ideal is criticized by the poet as fake, condemning the cosmetic industry just like modern critics do, as an oppressive means by which women are turned blind to their unique beauty. Make-up for the speaker alters the truth:

And beauty [is] slandered with a bastard shame,  
For since each hand hath put on nature’s pow’r,  
Fairing the soul with art’s false borrowed face,

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<sup>28</sup> Davis, 26

<sup>29</sup> Davis, 25

Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bow'r,  
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.<sup>30</sup>

The words “art” and “borrowed” refer to the application of cosmetics; “false” is used here to draw attention to the fake looks make-up can give women. Shakespeare appears to share modern Feminist ideas that every female has beauty of her own, and make-up slanders this beauty “with a bastard shame”. Although he is referring here to white beauty, his claim is correct when focusing on the role of cosmetics in imposing a unified feminine ideal on all women, black or white. The speaker continues to say that his mistress's black eyes are mourners “As such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,/Sland’ring creation with a false esteem.”<sup>31</sup>In these lines the speaker emphasizes the ability of make-up in turning normal, average women into beauties.

Thus, in their negative stance regarding the cosmetics and beautification industry, and in their depiction of a speaker in love with a black woman, the sonnets reverberate in our modern world's inclination towards changing the biased and racial concepts of beauty and femininity. In their reversal of the white ideal, the sonnets promote revolutionary ideas that help women all around the world, whatever skin color or body shape they have, to embrace their own uniqueness and celebrate a world of diversity.

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<sup>30</sup> Sonnet 127, p. 635, lines 4-8

<sup>31</sup> Sonnet 127, lines 11-12

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