

Summary: Sonnet 130

(My Mistress' Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun)

This sonnet compares the speaker's lover to a number of other beauties—and never in the lover's favor. Her eyes are “nothing like the sun,” her lips are less red than coral; compared to white snow, her breasts are dun-colored, and her hairs are like black wires on her head. In the second quatrain, the speaker says he has seen roses separated by color (“damasked”) into red and white, but he sees no such roses in his mistress's cheeks; and he says the breath that “reeks” from his mistress is less delightful than perfume. In the third quatrain, he admits that, though he loves her voice, music “hath a far more pleasing sound,” and that, though he has never seen a goddess, his mistress—unlike goddesses—walks on the ground. In the couplet, however, the speaker declares that, “by heav'n,” he thinks his love as rare and valuable “As any she belied with false compare”—that is, any love in which false comparisons were invoked to describe the loved one's beauty.

Analysis

This sonnet, one of Shakespeare's most famous, plays an elaborate joke on the conventions of love poetry common to Shakespeare's day, and it is so well-conceived that the joke remains funny today. Most sonnet sequences in Elizabethan England were modeled after that of Petrarch. Petrarch's famous sonnet sequence was written as a series of love poems to an idealized and idolized mistress named Laura. In the sonnets, Petrarch praises her beauty, her worth, and her perfection using an extraordinary variety of metaphors based largely on natural beauties. In Shakespeare's day, these metaphors had already become cliché (as, indeed, they still are today), but they were still the accepted technique for writing love poetry. The result was that poems tended to make highly idealizing

comparisons between nature and the poets' lover that were, if taken literally, completely ridiculous. My mistress' eyes are like the sun; her lips are red as coral; her cheeks are like roses, her breasts are white as snow, her voice is like music, she is a goddess.

In many ways, Shakespeare's sonnets subvert and reverse the conventions of the Petrarchan love sequence: the idealizing love poems, for instance, are written not to a perfect woman but to an admittedly imperfect man, and the love poems to the dark lady are anything but idealizing ("My love is as a fever, longing still / For that which longer nurseth the disease" is hardly a Petrarchan conceit.) Sonnet 130 mocks the typical Petrarchan metaphors by presenting a speaker who seems to take them at face value, and somewhat bemusedly, decides to tell the truth. Your mistress' eyes are like the sun? That's strange—my mistress' eyes aren't at all like the sun. Your mistress' breath smells like perfume? My mistress' breath reeks compared to perfume. In the couplet, then, the speaker shows his full intent, which is to insist that love does not need these conceits in order to be real; and women do not need to look like flowers or the sun in order to be beautiful.

The rhetorical structure of Sonnet 130 is important to its effect. In the first quatrain, the speaker spends one line on each comparison between his mistress and something else (the sun, coral, snow, and wires—the one positive thing in the whole poem some part of his mistress *is* like. In the second and third quatrains, he expands the descriptions to occupy two lines each, so that roses/cheeks, perfume/breath, music/voice, and goddess/mistress each receive a pair of unrhymed lines. This creates the effect of an expanding and developing argument, and neatly prevents the poem—which does, after all, rely on a single kind of joke for its first twelve lines—from becoming stagnant.

