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Literary Review: Shakespeare's Characterization of Women in the Sonnets

The idea of women and love is one that is prominent throughout several of Shakespeare's plays and is a theme that should be inspected with a serious and intellectual eye. With the respect and stature that Mr. Shakespeare holds in the literary community, it is a theme that holds weight in the theaters of 16th century London and well as modern day culture in the 21st century. With the comparisons of such female figures in poems such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and even Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, I plan to shed some light on the characteristics of the Dark Lady, seen in the last half of Shakespeare's sonnets. She is a mysterious figure, and the aspects of her that most scholars seem to focus on is what role she actually played in Shakespeare's personal life. I however hope to shine a different light on the Dark Lady and take a look at her figurative character and how that reflects, not only the other women in Shakespeare's works, but how the ideas of these women and their sexuality shape our modern impressions of women and how they should and did behave.

The purpose of the following literary review will explore the concepts I have stated previously along side of other's research and suggestions on the topic. Not all of the works found will fully support my ideas, however, that will

give a good jumping off point to refute ideas and develop my own theories and opinions.

Starting first with the "typical" research on the Dark Lady, we can look at a great article by J.A. Fort and his work "The Story Contained in the Second Series of Shakespeare's Sonnets." While this is an older work, that does not hinder its influence on many of the scholars of this subject. I found it helpful because of the "behind the scenes" approach to the true identities of who this lady was and who her other lover, Shakespeare's rival poet was as well. This topic does not relate directly to my search for the characterization of what kind of woman this lady was, it does however portray many parallels in Shakespeare's other works such as Venus and Adonis and their "courtship" and destruction of their relationship. As you know, the sexual relationship that Shakespeare had with this mysterious "dark" woman did not end well, and neither did that of Venus and Adonis or Hero and Leander. The application of the relationship issues seen in both Shakespeare's work and his personal life also sheds light on to the distinctiveness of the Dark Lady. Fort makes a good case of the true identities of these "real life" characters by drawing on the known facts of the lives of Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton and making direct correlations and conclusions based on the parallels in their works; the majority of the works examined are their sonnets, fitting seeing how this is where the Dark Lady appears for both of the poets.

The second work that I will review is Nancy Lindheim and her article "The Shakespearean Venus and Adonis." Lindheim is divided into two sections and the first of the two is the one I will focus on because it deals more directly to the issues and ideas that I am pondering. Lindheim, along with painting a picture of the characters of Venus and Adonis, also makes parallels to Hero and Leander, which is helpful when I address the next article in this review. Lindheim shows that Venus and her strong sexual nature effect Elizabethan and contemporary readings of her female character, being both pro and con. Using these characteristics, I plan to reflect them on to the Dark Lady, showing that the women are similar and therefore should be read and interpreted in a similar way. Although some of Lindheim's terms and phrasing seemed very complex, she draws solid conclusions on the influences of these two poetic works on other plays and poems of Shakespeare. Her high level of intelligence and vocabulary suggests to me that not only is she wise enough to grasp the deeper concept of these characters, but also intelligent enough to portray her ideas in a "higher" fashion.

Moving on to another author who has compared Marlowe and Shakespeare and their noted similarities and differences in female characters, I turn to William P. Walsh and his "Sexual Discovery and Renaissance Morality in Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander.'" Do not let the title fool you; Walsh makes it clear within his first few pages that he plans to draw on both Venus and Hero and their roles as women in order to make a point. Hero is shown as more

virginal and innocent than Venus. These images and concepts that are identified with Hero can be shown as the opposite in Venus, therefore implying characteristics for Venus as well. The main idea of Walsh's work is the idea of sex, its purpose for either procreation or passion and these women's attitudes about the act itself. I feel this article is helpful because it allows for Shakespeare and Marlowe to be seen as companions and reflecting how they have each influenced each other in gender and their roles and how that influence has continued on into the 21st century, something that I hoped to address in my research. Walsh makes a convincing argument by not only drawing on the mastery of Shakespeare's work, but also on the mastery of Marlowe's. I feel this creates a strong argument for the portrayal of women, because he does not base his argument on only one genius, but on two, creating a strong correlation and case.

Moving back to the basics of characterization of Venus and her lover Adonis, I turn to my fourth article written by W. R. Streitberger titled, "Ideal Conduct in Venus and Adonis." The most important contribution this article gives to my argument are the great characterizations for both the "ideal" female and male behavior and how both of these lovers either fit or fall far from the social regulation. This is the basis for my thesis, in comparing other women in other works to the Dark Lady, in order to draw a big picture on Shakespeare's female influence, how well they are received and how they are portrayed in a social context. And while the ideals for "masculine" actions does not directly come into

play in my article, the ideas shown in Streitberger's work helps to give a balance feel for how men and women were supposed to act: strong females were seen in a bad light, as well as weak males. The author makes a strong case relaying his interpretations back to Ovid's original work and sighting many of his interpretations from the actual text of Shakespeare, so there is no ambiguity on what he means; he spells it right on the page for the reader.

Finally, I turn to the article that helped shape my opinion and gave me inspiration to look at how females in Shakespeare's plays are shaping how men of the past and present are forming their ideas of the "ideal" woman. Henri Peyre and his "Shakespeare's Women – A French View," displays a remarkable correlation to the women on both stage and page and how males will identify good and bad characteristics in these women and use them in their own pursuit of the "ideal," "desirable" woman. Some of his influence comes from females on stage, however all of the characteristics can be applied to either the Dark Lady, Hero or Venus in a way to draw conclusions on their character and acceptance by audiences. For example, if a character of the stage is seen as strong sexually, she is seen as weak socially; I feel this is in direct association to my own topic. I did disagree with some of Peyre's statements, however I will find this helpful in being able to sight other opinions in order to refute them and create my own. The quality in his argument comes from his own experiences as a Yale professor and his research in this area, but also draws on past philosophical ideas and other writers' conceptions of females and their influence, such as S. T. Coleridge.

While researching for this paper and for this literary review, I found that there are quite a few opinions on Shakespeare's work, most of which seem to be knowledgeable and stated in a fine fashion. That alone made sifting through the hundreds of articles a difficult task, let alone narrowing down the ones that would most benefit my ideas. I feel the five that I have stated for you in this review give a good starting place for the formation of my paper and will be helpful in both supporting and complementary to my ideas, in order for me to form and create my thesis on the importance of the roles that strong women play and how that is important in our interpretation of the genders, both in the past and the present.

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