

SHADY LADY

There've been many attempts to find someone fitting the profile of Shakespeare's *Dark Lady* - so called because many of the images used to describe her, from sonnet 127 onwards, aren't what you might call 'light'. These range from literal descriptions of her (black) hair and eyes, to intimations about her dodgy character. At best they are earthy and sultry - at worst, blunt and downright offensive (verging on the misogynist even). What characterises them mainly though, is how sexually charged they are.

Some Orthodox scholars have floated the suggestion that the DL is a mere figment of the author's fantasy. It's even been suggested that any attempts to identify her are 'fruitless', 'pointless' even. Once again I feel obliged to counter that if people *will* insist on scrabbling around at the bottom of the Stratford-Upon-Avon barrel looking for connections, it's no wonder it seems pointless (because no doubt, it is!). And yet again, if you look through the portal of other contenders, possibilities are readily forthcoming.

Suggestions include the marvellously named Black Luce - a Clerkenwell madam and courtesan-made-good - well known to those at the Inns of Court (where De Vere studied for a time and Marlowe frequented).

Another more recent suggestion has been Emilia Bassano. The discovery of this Jewish, highly cultured and musical woman created such a flurry of activity that she rapidly went from being suggested as having a hand in *The Merchant of Venice*, to sky-rocketing as author of the entire canon. Sensational as it might sound, evidence has not been what you might call fulsome - though she certainly fits the physical profile of the lady described, as well as the bill of the virginal player from sonnet 128 over whom the poet has a voyeuristic, fetishistic fantasy.

Then there's Mary Fitton - the mistress of that potential Mr W H, William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. This suggestion might certainly explain the liaison hinted at in the sonnets, between the Dark Lady and the poet's own Fair Youth - causing a fierce rivalry, extraordinarily generous forgiveness (for the Fair Youth at least) and the onset of a deep depression and obsession with ageing..

Some say the Dark Lady sonnets are addressed to several women. First and foremost, Queen Elizabeth herself - which carries credibility, given there are some references to the poet being both her 'slave' and 'servant', and they a 'sovereign'. There is also the opening line of sonnet 125, with its reference to 'bearing the canopy' - a duty De Vere and several other high ranking nobles were known to have performed for Elizabeth; holding up the cloths above her throne, on ceremonial processions (and if it doesn't mean this, the line's meaning is unfathomable).

A contender gaining some traction of late is Lady Penelope Rich. Golden haired but black eyed, a celebrated court beauty, she was also centrepiece of a number of sex scandals at court. Serially unfaithful wife to several Barons, she was muse to the poet Sir Philip Sydney. The increasing amount of shady suggestions in various, salacious publications of the period suggest tantalising connections to some of the DL sonnets.

Personally though, the most obvious contender for the Dark Lady seems to be Ann Vavasour, one of the Queen's ladies in waiting. Edward de Vere had a secret affair with her, when still married (to his long suffering wife Anne, surely the inspiration for Hermione in *The Winters Tale*). The passionate affair resulted in Ann Vavasour falling pregnant,

prompting a sensational scandal at court that saw DV, AV and their new born son all being thrown into the tower by an enraged and jealous Regina.

So many of the sonnets seem to come into an undeniable clarity in this scenario (the references to shame, scandal, regret and charges of being treated pitilessly and harshly). The poet does indeed seem angry with the Dark Lady for luring him into a sexual union in the first place, because of the consequences that have befallen him - even furious at fate / God / his genitalia for the frenzied pursuit of pleasures that led him to momentary ecstasies, compromised morals and lots of trouble further down the line. De Vere never really recovered his position at court after the Vavasour scandal - and was hitherto estranged from his son (with her), and guilt ridden about the way he'd treated both his faithful wife and his Sovereign.

There are allusions to cosmetics in the Dark Lady sonnets - something which some have seen leaning towards the suggestion that the Dark Lady might have been a lady of the night. However, it's interesting to consider both the amount of make up worn by the ageing Elizabeth (to cover smallpox scars it's been suggested) and also the amount of slap on the face of the most notable remaining portrait of Ann Vavasour - in which she appears in such obvious make up that one might assume either the painter disliked her intensely, was colour blind or amateur, or making a none too subtle point that any blushes she had were but artificial. What's certain though, is that her hair and eyes are undeniably black.

Whoever the lady was though, the relationship with the poet was clearly physical. Unlike those written to the Fair Youth, who is pedestalsed as an untouchable, the DL is shown not as a courtly romantic maiden, but a siren who lures our spear bearer with her irresistible charms.