The legend of Lucy Negro

Joyce Green MacDonald

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The historical Lucy Negro – also known as Black Luce, or Luce Baynam – was a notorious madam who ran a series of floating brothels in Clerkenwell, to the northwest of Renaissance London, from the mid-1570s through about the end of the sixteenth century. With a clientele that included aristocrats, court figures, and wealthy city merchants, she was well enough known to be invited, along with some of her girls, to serve as entertainment at the Christmas festivities staged by the law students of Gray’s Inn on December 28, 1594.1 Another part of the revels that evening was a performance of a play called “a Comedy of Errors,” whose description as being “like to Plautus his Menechmus” indicates that it was Shakespeare’s very early The Comedy of Errors.2

No irrefutable evidence survives that reveals Shakespeare was at Gray’s Inn that night or that he and Lucy Negro actually knew each other, although sex workers and theatre people freely crossed paths in Clerkenwell and other city neighborhoods. The lives of most Renaissance Londoners, including Shakespeare himself, seem shockingly under-documented by modern standards. Lucy Negro left no papers of her own; we don’t know where she was born or to whom, when she entered her trade, what she thought about it, or when she died. This lack of rich life records for her, combined with the fact that she and Shakespeare may have been in the same place at the same time for at least one night, fuels the claim this chapter studies: that she was the life model for the so-called “Dark Lady” of his last 28 sonnets. I’ll be arguing here that we should treat this assumption with suspicion. Appropriating the historical Lucy Negro to the legend of Shakespeare, the national poet, by identifying her as the Dark Lady is an early example of the erasure of Black women and of how their stories, their bodies, their sexualities come to figure in the narratives that white society constructs and imposes on them. Critical speculation that Shakespeare fell catastrophically in love with her, was emotionally destroyed when their affair ended, and turned his pain into powerful art is actually a story about him and not her.

I should probably say here that I’m not particularly interested in whether Lucy Negro or any other real woman was actually the life model for the Dark Lady, or whether she and Shakespeare were lovers. I don’t know that such claims can actually be proved one way or the other from the materials now available to us. More importantly, remembering a woman only because of the most famous man she might have slept with memorializes patriarchal readings of history more than it memorializes her. Rather, in what follows, I want to revive the notion of her blackness
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(none of the 28 poems describes her as “dark,” and none calls her a “lady”), to think about what and how it meant in its Renaissance moment, and how it entered into the cultural legends of her time in ways that reverberate into our own.

Black women in the early modern imagination

Lucy Negro’s name itself suggests that she was indeed one of the several hundred African-descended people living in England in the last decades of the sixteenth century. She and William Shakespeare lived and worked in a city that was well on its way to becoming a capital of global empire, and virtually from the beginning, England’s global might was intimately bound up with the Atlantic slave trade. In 1564, the year Shakespeare was born, Sir John Hawkins mounted the first English slaving voyage when he sailed to the Guinea coast to capture hundreds of Africans and then crossed the Atlantic to sell them in Venezuela. (The Crown furnished his ship and received a cut of the profits.)

Part of the discourse that represented colonial enterprise to its English consumers deeply relied on tropes of gender and gendered sexuality. Soliciting investors to support a planned return voyage to the Guyana region on the cost of Venezuela, Sir Walter Raleigh assured readers that the country was full of wonders: fabulous beasts, tribes of Amazons, great stores of gold, whole nations of people who “have their eies in their shoulders, and their mouthes in the middle of their breastes.” He strikingly concluded that “Guiana is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not been torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance.” The fact that the country had never been conquered by Europeans rendered it virginal and implicitly cast the adventurers who would heed his call as that virgin’s first lover, the one who would tear her and use her until they exhausted her fertility – the “vertue and salt” of her “soyle.” Raleigh’s invitation invokes a predatory, aggressive relationship to the foreign landscape, which in a colonial order, he seems to assume is inevitable. He narrates his invitation to colonial plunder in terms of the plunder of women’s passively available bodies.

Raleigh’s account has a surprising amount to say about the women of Guiana – not only the Amazons he claimed lived in the interior, who “do accompanye with men but once in a yeare,” (p. 23) but the beautiful wife of a local chieftain with her hair “tied up … in prittie knots.” Except “for the difference of colour,” he would have sworn she could have been the twin of “a Lady in England” he’d seen (p. 55). Raleigh’s Discoverie is very conscious of its rhetorical obligation to incite appetite and wonder in an audience of English readers and potential supporters; we can see this in the language he uses to describe the richness of Guiana’s territory and the limitless bounty it contains, free for the taking by the sufficiently enterprising. But that appetite does not extend so clearly to the women he says he finds there. His text is content to leave them in the realm of fantasy, as in the case of the Amazons, or to assure his audience that they are fundamentally not really foreign at all and that they – and the land he associated with their bodies – can be easily known and possessed.

Colonial writing about African women, however, focused much more closely on bodily and behavioral difference. The new travel narratives of the last decades of the sixteenth century inherited earlier decades’ penchant for mostly fact-free tales of wonder deriving from earlier chroniclers like Sir John Mandeville, repeating familiar stories about Africans’ blackness, nakedness, and savagery. For Andrew Thevet, Ethiopia’s hot climate was not only responsible for the white teeth and curly hair of the “Neigers” who lived there but also made the women “unconstant, with many other vices.” Pieter de Marees insisted that women of the Guinea coast were “given to Lust and uncleannesse” from their youth, and when they grew old enough to
begin covering their nudity, they “then begin to be lecherous.” In his account, they were thus inevitably eager “to have carnal copulation” with the Dutch traders who began arriving in West Africa in the seventeenth century, and tried their best to attract them.8 Without modesty – give a woman from Zaire or Angola “a piece of bread,” and “she will immediately discover her pudenda” in thanks – their bodies were as distorted as their morals: “The women give their infants suck as they hang at their backs, the uberous dug stretched over her shoulder.”9

But recirculating during a period when the economic potential of a transatlantic slave trade was becoming apparent, and when actual Africans were beginning to arrive in greater numbers at least in England’s largest cities, travelers’ tales about African women took on new ideological force.10 Jennifer L. Morgan writes that sixteenth-century “racialist discourse was deeply imbued with ideas about gender and sexual difference that, indeed, became manifest only in contact with each other.”11 Such mutually reinforcing notions of blackness and womanhood would become deeply useful in producing and justifying notions of Europeans’ right to exploit the physical and reproductive labor of African women.

In early modern literature, we can see emerging notions of links between blackness and womanhood being laid over existing English cultural connections of femininity with color, so that white English femininity was increasingly understood as existing in opposition to blackness. Elizabeth Cary’s The Tragedy of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Jewry (1613) is a useful example here.12 Cary’s play tells the story of Mariam, last heiress of Judaea’s royal family, who had been displaced when the Romans took over the territory and installed Herod as their client king. Herod married Mariam, but Mariam’s mother Alexandra is still angry that the Romans killed her own father as well as Mariam’s brother in order to settle Herod’s claim. Alexandra believes that if she had only succeeded in getting the Roman triumvir Mark Antony interested enough in Mariam to marry her instead of Cleopatra, their family’s position would now be secure; Antony would have killed Herod “and left the browne Egyptian cleane forsaken.”13 Herod – desperately in love with Mariam but also wildly suspicious that she doesn’t love him back – rejects the doubt his sister Salome tries to cast on Mariam’s trustworthiness, castigating Salome in deeply racialized terms. She has no right to criticize his wife, since when she stands next to her, he has “often tane [her] for an Ape … You are to her a Sun burnt Blackamore” (G2v). After having Mariam executed, Herod immediately regrets it, implying that her moral and physical fairness made her too delicate to survive in a corrupt world: “If she had bene like an Egyptian blacke, / And not so faire, she had bene longer livde” (Ii).

Cary’s Salome is so far from Mariam’s womanly ideal that she is not only Black but virtually subhuman. The play’s characters routinely draw the line between “fair” women and bad ones in terms of color, extracting moral qualities from Mariam’s fairness as well as from Cleopatra’s darkness. Mariam’s example suggests some of the ways in which skin color as a racial marker was gendered in the Renaissance, working to produce white womanhood as rigorously as it defined what was Black and unworthy in other women.

**Literary histories of blackness and beauty**

Early modern literature offers its most extensive archive of the literary links it established between color and womanhood in the Petrarchan color vocabularies of Renaissance lyric. Kim Hall’s seminal discussion has analyzed the degree to which these poems’ traditional anatomization of feminine beauty – alabaster skin, golden hair, lips like rubies, teeth like ivory or pearls – reads racially in their colonial moment.14 As Petrarchan lyric participated in the large-scale cultural production of feminine beauty in terms of whiteness, it also indirectly invoked the
Black female object of early modern racial discourse, an object against which values of white female beauty and virtue could become more visible.

Typical of this style is Sonnet 9 from Sir Philip Sidney’s sequence *Astrophel and Stella*:

Queen Vertues Court, which some call *Stellas* face,
Prepar’d by Natures cheefest furniture:
Hath his front built of Alabaster pure,
Gold is the couering of that statelie place.
The doore, by which sometimes runnes forth her grace,
Red Porphire is, which locke of Pearle makes sure:
Whose Porches rich, with name of chekes indure,
Marble mixt red and white, doe interlace.15

Here, Stella’s features are compared to the colors of various inanimate objects, as fixed in their value as is the “Virtue” which shines forth in her face.16 Colonial expansion, with the influx of luxury trade goods it introduced into the country, amplified and materialized the range of meanings readers could attach to the things that offered corollaries to a sonnet lady’s beauty. For Hall, reading Petrarchan poems in a colonial moment also amplified the field of meanings readers could attach to the poems’ invocation of color and morality – drawing on and responding to the ways travelers’ writings and explorers’ exhortations talked about the blackness and degraded moral status of African women, as we’ve already seen in motion on the dramatic side in Cary’s *Mariam*.

More than merely racial identity, then, Renaissance vocabularies of blackness and whiteness also indicated moral quality. The body was an index to ethical standing, to a person’s probity and virtue. That color indicates race, and that race implies moral standing, are ideas that survived long after the premodern moments in which they were generated, as is the Renaissance linkage between race and a specifically sexual morality.17 Hyder Rollins, the editor of the volumes on the sonnets in the Modern Language Association’s *New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, noted that in 1861, a German scholar speculated that the “Dark Lady” was actually West Indian, a creole with “an admixture of African blood. Was she not a mulatto or a quadroon?” (This German scholar apparently also read Shakespeare’s sonnets colonially.) Rollins responded to this speculation in a footnote: “No doubt this would explain why Sh.’s eyes didn’t love the dark woman, and why … they in her ‘a thousand errors’ noted.”18

To be sure, Rollins is impatient with all critical speculation about the real identity of the Dark Lady, since he didn’t believe any such identification could be made beyond the shadow of a doubt. But his distaste for the idea that the “real” Dark Lady may have been Black is palpable. In 1933, only 11 years before the publication of Rollins’ work, British scholar G. B. Harrison was the first to advance Lucy Negro as the model for the Dark Lady, citing the account of her presence at the 1594 Gray’s Inn Christmas revels noted at the beginning of this chapter.19 Rollins notes that a second scholar, E. I. Fripp, repeated Harrison’s claim in 1938, “calmly … as if the matter was proved.” “Thus, seventy-seven years after the German translator … had provided a negro mistress for Sh., two distinguished Englishmen, adopting and expanding his ideas, assigned her a name and an excessively squalid locale” (p. 272). Twenty years after Rollins, Leslie Hotson is even more explicit in his rejection of the possibility that the Dark Lady was actually a Black woman. For him, Harrison’s conjecture had permanently earned him “the discredit of believing Shakespeare’s fair enslaver a blackamoor.”20

For the speaker to be enslaved by their love for a distant and indifferent beloved is a common idiom in Renaissance sonnets. Shakespeare’s Sonnet 133, for example, laments that his cruel and
promiscuous mistress, finding it “not enough to torture me alone,” must also make a “slave to slavery” (i.e., helpless love) out of his “sweet’st friend.”21 The speaker goes on to eroticize his double torment; since he is “pent in” her, he “and all that is in me” are irretrievably hers (lines 13, 14). To be “pent” is to be confined, whether in a slave’s chains or in his dark mistress’ body. That she is “black,” as this subgroup of sonnets repeat (see 127, 131, 132, and 144), re-racializes both the conventional trope of the lover’s enslavement to a fair cruel beauty and the position of master and slave beginning to unfold in the New World during Shakespeare’s lifetime.

It’s possible, but not certain, that Shakespeare was at Gray’s Inn with Lucy Negro that December night, possible even that he knew her more intimately. But Rollins’ flat rejection of the notion that Shakespeare had “a negro mistress,” and Hotson’s disgust at the idea that he’d been sexually obsessed with “a blackamoor,” seem to me to be more about race than about the status of the evidence. Hotson even advances an alternative candidate for the Dark Lady – a former Maid of Honor to Queen Elizabeth named Lucy Morgan, who he believed was dismissed from court under mysterious circumstances in the early 1580s, apparently ended up running a brothel, and was eventually imprisoned in Bridewell (Duncan Salkeld skeptically reviews Hotson’s findings; p. 134). But at least she was white.

### The implications of counting blackness fair

I do not believe that establishing correlation between what happens in a work of art and what happens in the artist’s real life really gets us any closer to fully grasping what the art is about. Art is refracted through an artist’s lived experience, but a poem isn’t the same kind of thing as a journal entry. I think that the impulse to make the Dark Lady sonnets tell us a coherent, factually based story derives from the compelling emotional power of the poems themselves. They feel true. Whatever was going on in Shakespeare’s life during the composition of these poems, they participate fully in their period’s recognition of the links between color, race, gender, and sexuality, and this contemporary recognition is heightened through his masterful exploitation of the features of Petrarchan style. We can’t prove that the real Lucy Negro has anything to do with these poems, but in the next section of this chapter, I would like to discuss the possibility that the symbolic value of Lucy Negro – “blackamoor,” madam, “negro mistress” – reverberates through them, shaping their meanings and directing their impact.

Consider Shakespeare’s Sonnet 127, where the Dark Lady first enters the sequence:

> 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 brows 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.
The poem opens by directly acknowledging the color conventions embedded in the Petrarchan style, conventions that valorized whiteness as the sign of female beauty and at least implicitly, therefore, devalued its dark opposite. It also invites us into what feels like the imminent demonstration of another of that style’s common features, its love of paradox. “People used to think that black wasn’t beautiful,” it says, “but wait until you see what I’m going to do next.”

Almost immediately, though, the sonnet switches into a new register that refers back to earlier poems in the sequence and not to the rules of its style. The first 17 poems in the whole group encourage a young man who is the object of the poet’s affection to marry and reproduce so that his beauty will not disappear from the world when he is gone: “From fairest creatures we desire increase, / That thereby beauty’s rose might never die” (1: 1–2). “[U]nless thou get a son,” the poet warns, “thou … [u]nlooked on diest” (7: 14, 13). But Sonnet 127 heightens the reproductive mood of the sequence’s opening by splicing it to its new subject of the desirability and erotic power of blackness (“every tongue says beauty should look so”). In this new age of poetic possibility, blackness “is … beauty’s successive heir.”

Shakespeare’s sonnets were first published in 1609, by which date the circulation of travelers’ tales detailing Black women’s social and sexual deviance, and their biological difference from European women, was well underway. The first of England’s mid-Atlantic colonies was permanently established at Jamestown in 1607, and Virginia’s history shows how this sense of deviance gradually became embedded in the colony’s laws. The colonies followed English common law by condemning fornication for all and by tending to punish guilty women more harshly than their male partners. But early on, race as well as gender came to mark the colony’s reaction to crimes of sexual behavior. In 1640, a white man named Robert Sweatt was forced to apologize before his local parish for the crime of fornicating with a Black woman; his unnamed pregnant partner was publicly whipped. The Virginia House of Burgesses passed a law in 1662 that fined interracial couples guilty of fornication twice the amount that would be due from unmarried couples of the same race, and any white female servant who gave birth to a child by a Black or mixed-race man would either have five years added to her period of indenture or pay a 15-pound fine to the churchwardens. (No servant would have ready access to that kind of money.) When Maryland made interracial marriage illegal in 1664, it expanded existing assumptions that intimate behaviors mattered to public order by racializing the sexual domain over which it already exercised civic control.

In the early colonies, interracial sex was regarded as an economic and legal problem as well as a social one. Many of the white women who participated in such unions were largely indentured servants, and some historians have read legal prohibitions against these women’s intermarriage with Black men – who may have been indentured or enslaved themselves – as a response to the problems created by the children born to them. Would the women’s masters have to support these minor children? Who would have the right to the children’s labor when they became old enough to work, the women’s masters or the men’s? In another marked departure from English common law, Virginia settled such vexed labor and economic issues in 1662 by declaring that all children born in the colony would henceforth hold the condition of their mother instead of their father; any child born to an enslaved woman would also be a slave. Slavery’s social hold over the colony and the racialization of its public order was such that when Virginia finally outlawed interracial marriage in 1691, nearly 30 years after Maryland, economic considerations were absent from the statute. Rather, its language cited the colony’s desire to prevent the spread of “that abominable mixture and spurious issue” which miscegenous relationships inevitably caused. Any Virginians who married interracially would have to leave the colony within three weeks of the ceremony. The racially mixed offspring of such unions would provide living evidence of a sexual crime against the colony’s regulation of contact between the races.
Such colonial changes lay in the future, beyond the date of the sonnets’ publication in 1609. But what we do see in them, beginning with number 127, is a similar sense of concern with interracial sex and its reproductive and social consequences. The speaker in the first group of sonnets urges the young man to marry and have legitimate children who will replicate and preserve his beauty in the world. In Sonnet 127, however, blackness has become beauty’s “successive heir” – its child, its beneficiary. As a result, beauty has been “slandered with a bastard shame,” since the only way beauty – poetically and socially denominated as white – could give birth to a Black heir is through an act of miscegenous infidelity. One scholar characterizes the Dark Lady sonnets’ embrace of a cross-racial attraction as their true “scandal,” perhaps even more so than the earlier poems’ matter-of-fact proposal that the young man the poet loves should marry and have children.23

The poet’s love for the Dark Lady cannot be accommodated by existing social custom; there is no way it can be made to fit within received rules of inheritance, as Sonnet 142 acknowledges. There, the poet knows that “[l]ove is my sin” (line 1) but declares that any sin he has committed in desiring her “merits not reproving” (line 4) in comparison with her own corrupt deeds. She is the one who has “sealed false bonds of love”; she is the one who has “[r]obbed others’ beds’ revenues of their rents” (lines 7, 8). Putting a wax seal to a legal document formalized its status, but her “bonds of love” are false, because she loves no one. If others’ beds are “revenues,” or the income from landed estates, she has “robbed” the owners of those beds of the sexual energy that should have been reserved to pay the marital debt they legally owed.24

Lines 5–8 of Sonnet 127 expand on this idea of legitimacy through a discussion of face-painting and its attempt to counterfeit true beauty. The white complexion prized by Renaissance beauty standards, often secured through the use of cosmetic pastes containing lead or mercury, was derided as a foreign affectation more suited to whores than to honest women.25 Moralists condemned face-painting as women’s arrogant attempt to improve on God’s creation: “Sure there is a wrong done to God, whose workmanship they would seeme to mend, being discontented with it.”26 In Sonnet 127, the eyes of the speaker’s “mistress” are black as though in mourning, because she grieves that God’s “creation” has been slandered by a cosmetic application of unguents designed to elicit a “false esteem.”

The notion of women currying “false esteem” through face-painting also carries a racial charge. In Cary’s Mariam, Herod tells his sister Salome that even with all her “paintings,” she “can never equall Mariam’s praise” (Giii) – never, that is, achieve true beauty or hide her true corruption. Awaiting execution, Mariam comforts herself by boasting that despite all the artifice at the command of “the browne Egyptian,” Cleopatra could not seduce Herod away from her side. The moral economy that inveighed against women’s face-painting held that it was trying to hide the truth of what women actually looked like by counterfeiting whiteness with all of its implied beauty and moral probity. Beginning with Sonnet 127, the Dark Lady sonnets simply refuse the equation between whiteness, beauty, and virtue. The truth embodied in the mistress’s black beauty, a beauty that cannot be disguised or misrepresented, challenges both the period’s aesthetic and moral judgments and the racial language used to express them. Simply, the speaker tells us, his lady’s black “is fairest in my judgment’s place” (131: 12).

Conclusion: racial hauntings

The beauty and integrity of blackness remains a subject elsewhere in Shakespeare’s early works.27 And yet it must also be said that with the possible exception of his Cleopatra, there are no non-white female characters in his plays. His characters talk about Black women: they mention a dark-skinned maid named Susan in The Comedy of Errors; the clown Lancelot Gobbo in The
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*Merchant of Venice* is accused of having got the heroine’s Black maidservant pregnant; the maid of Desdemona’s mother was named Barbary. But none of these women come onstage. Rather, they exist in the background, as subordinates and sex partners, part of the main characters’ histories but never as characters in their own right. We don’t know the stories they would have told about themselves or what would have happened to them next.

Lucy Negro occupies this same shadowy space, instrumental to a story that others want to tell, or want to refute, about Shakespeare. The scattered mentions of her name – Lucy Negro, Black Luce – that survive in the testimonies collected in the Bridewell minute books provide one kind of record about her. But entering legend as the Dark Lady, if indeed Shakespeare had her in mind as he wrote (and if he knew her, and if he’d loved her), she survives more surely in others’ stories than in the records we have that mention her name.

Notes

1 Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution, Literature, and Drama, 1500–1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), describes Black Luce’s business, 135–41. His book is largely based on his research in the sixteenth-century Minute Books of London’s Bridewell Hospital, which was actually a combined court and prison rather than a hospital in the modern sense.
2 *Gesta Grayorum: Or, the History of the High and Mighty Prince, Henry Prince of Purpoole* (London, 1688), 22.
3 Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), notes the “racial etymology” (p. 12) behind the names in early modern parish registers and other archival sources assigned to people he believes were Black, pointing to records of people called “Thomas Blackmore,” “George Blackmore,” “Peter Negro,” “Dinah the Black,” and “Christen Ethiopia.”
6 *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Bewtiful Empire of Guiana* (London, 1596), 70, 96.
8 De Marees’ *A Description and Historicall Declaration of the Golden Kingdome of Guinea, Otherwise Called the Golden Coast of Myna* is included in Samuel Purchas’ compilation *Purchas His Pilgrimes In Five Bookes* (London, 1625), 927.
12 This section draws on Joyce Green MacDonald, “Reading Race in *Women Writers Online*: Thirty Years On,” https://www.northeastern.edu/context/#macdonald.30race.xml, pars. 9–19.
13 *The Tragedie of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Jewry* (London, 1613), B1v. I’ll include subsequent references parenthetically in my text.
15 Syr P. S. his *Astrophel and Stella* (London, 1591), 4.
16 “Virtue” is a rich term here; its sixteenth-century meanings include an object’s essential nature or identity as well as a person’s moral quality.
19 *Shakespeare at Work, 1592–1603* (London: Routledge, 1933), 64, 310–11.
20 *Mr. W. H.* (New York: Knopf, 1964), 244.
21 I cite *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); here, lines 3 and 4. I will provide future citations parenthetically in my text.


24 This financial and legal language is also visible in sonnets 134, 135, 136, 142, and 146.


27 See Karim-Cooper, 142–7.