

**THE BLACK AND THE BEAUTIFUL:
FROM THE SONG OF SONGS TO SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS**

David Swartz*

NOVA University of Lisbon

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses Shakespeare's aesthetics of blackness as a radical interpretation and response to a disputed translation of the fifth verse from the Song of Songs, casting light on the Renaissance transition from negative theology to negative capability.

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics of Blackness, Song of Songs 1:5, Negative Capability, Caravaggio, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*

The darkness of light
the ecstasy of despair
the blindness of sight
the carelessness of care;
everything contains its opposite
the beginning is in the end
what's most fragmented is a composite
what's unbendable, the first to bend.
David Swartz, "The darkness of light"

In the King James English Bible, the fifth verse of the Song of Songs reads:

I am black, *but* comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.

Significantly, the black and the beautiful is also a recurring motif in Shakespeare's work. It appears most notably in his *Sonnets*, published as a collection in 1609 by Thomas Thorpe, and in *Love's Labour's Lost*, published in quarto in 1598.¹ It is an important conceit in his other plays as well, and Shakespeare specifically alludes to the fifth verse of the Song of Songs in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1599 and published in 1600), *Antony and Cleopatra* (published in quarto in 1608), and *King Henry VI Part 1*, published in 1623 (Caporicci, 2018). In what follows, I discuss Shakespeare's aesthetics of blackness as a radical interpretation and response to a disputed translation of the fifth verse from the Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon), casting light on the Renaissance transition from negative theology to negative capability. More particularly, I draw a connection between Shakespeare's aesthetics of blackness and his aesthetics of nothingness, highlighting how

* davidmswartz@gmail.com

¹ The word "black" appears 13 times in 9 sonnets, namely in Sonnets 27, 63, 65, 73, 127, 130, 131, 132, and 147. The word "beautiful" appears once in Sonnet 106 and "beauty" appears 52 times in 35 sonnets, namely in Sonnets 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 21, 22, 37, 41, 53, 54, 62, 63, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 79, 83, 93, 95, 101, 104, 106, 115, 127, 132, 134, 137. The words "black" and "beautiful" appear together in four sonnets, namely Sonnets 63, 65, 127, and 132. The conceit of black revolutionizing beauty is best illustrated in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Act 4, Scene 3, lines 228-270).

these two ideas are connected to Shakespeare's tenth muse, alternatively understood as the will to nothing.

The important relationship between *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and the Song of Songs is a neglected subject in our time. That said, the connection has drawn some attention to itself in the past, as noted by Oscar Wilde in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* Within the context of a fictionalized search to discover Shakespeare's mysterious muse (Figure 1), the narrator mentions an "An over-curious scholar (...) [who saw in the Dark Lady] a symbol of the Catholic Church (...) [which is to say] that Bride of Christ who is 'black *but* comely'" (Wilde, 1921, p. 89, emphasis added). I have not been able to track down the scholar Wilde was referring to. Wilde's own theory of the identity of Shakespeare's Mr. W. H. centers around an imaginary boy actor named Willie Hughes. His interpretation is based on a forced reading of lines such as "A man in hue, all 'hues' in his controlling", in Sonnet 20 (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 151), and "Thou art as *fair* in knowledge as in hue" (1997, p. 275, emphasis added), in Sonnet 82. Such allusions suggest a dark and paradoxically black hue that contains all the others. Willie Hughes is a parliament of colors in which the color black is the spokesman for all the others. To be *fair* in *hue* is, I will maintain, for Shakespeare, to be black *and* beautiful.

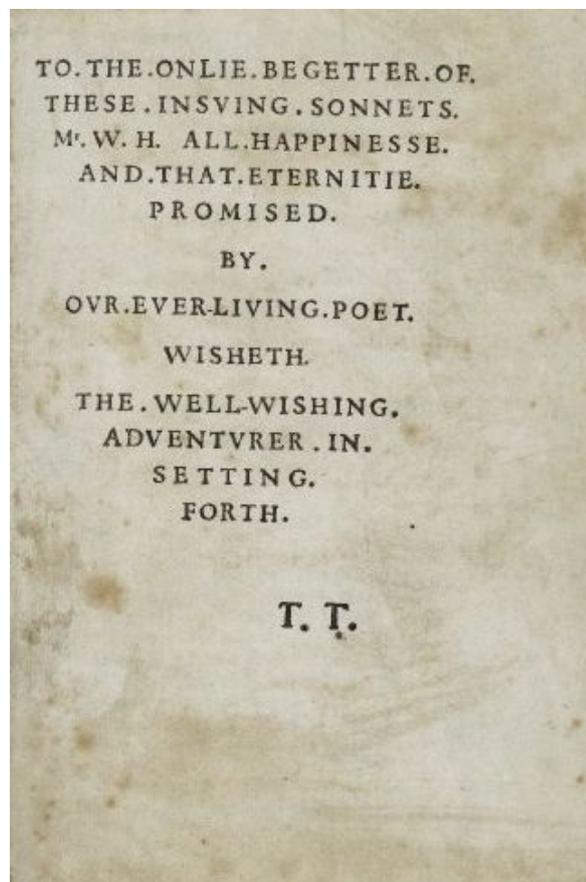


Figure 1. Dedication page of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.²

² Available at: <http://theshakespeareblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/sonnets-dedication.jpg> (Accessed: 20 February 2019).

The connection between the black and the fair is most explicitly drawn out by the poet in Sonnet 127,

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 (...).
(Shakespeare, 1997, p. 369)

as well as in Sonnet 131's "Thy black is fairest in my judgements place" (1997, p. 377) and in Sonnet 147:

For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.
(Shakespeare, 1997, p. 409)

There is something else about Wilde's analysis that I cannot ignore: his insistence that the two words *Will* and *Hughes* open the doors to understanding Shakespeare's muse. "All hues in his controlling" suggests a person able to change colors at will, and hence, to a fluidity of poetic identity, a person who never gets stuck or tired of being the same person, but rather, who willfully becomes multiples, in a similar way as Montaigne's authorial persona willfully contradicts himself:

I may soone change, not onely fortune, but intention. It is a counter-roule of divers and variable accidents, and irresolute imaginations, and sometimes contrary: whether it be that my selfe am other, or that I apprehend subjects, by other circumstances and considerations. Howsoever, I may perhaps gainsay myself, but truth (as *Demades* said) I never gaine-say: were my mind settled, I would not essay, but resolve my selfe. (Montaigne, [1603] 2014, p. 196)

Shakespeare's aesthetics of blackness can be likened to his aesthetics of changeability and nothingness, adopted from the poetic motif behind Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Throughout his works and most explicitly in his *Sonnets*, Shakespeare defies time with his tenth muse: an aesthetic/erotic conjunction of *will* and *nothing* or the *will to nothing* in which authorial nothingness is synchronized with authorial blackness and invisibility.

An example of the synchronizing on nothing and blackness can be found in Sonnet 65, where Shakespeare writes:

Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
O, none, unless this miracle have might,
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.
(Shakespeare, 1997, p. 241)

In this passage not only is the “strong hand” of the poet juxtaposed with the swift foot of Time, but beauty itself is equated with both nothing (alluded to by the letter “O” and the word “none”) and blackness (“black ink”).

The idea of authorial nothingness is famously articulated in John Keats’ description of Shakespeare’s negative capability. The poetical character, according to Keats (cited in Scott, 2005, p. 52),

is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – it has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – it has as much delight in an Iago as an Imogen (Cymbeline). What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the Chameleon Poet.

We need not look outside of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry to see how Shakespeare himself imagined negative capability to work itself out. In *King Richard II* (1597), for instance, the imprisoned King states (Act 5, Scene 5, lines 31-41):

Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented: sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am: then crushing pen-(your-ee)
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king’d again: and by and by
Think that I am unking’d by Bolingbroke,
And straight am *nothing*: but whate’er I be,
Nor I nor any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
With being nothing.
(Shakespeare, 2007, p. 887)

This passage reveals the psychology underlying the poet’s authorial identity: his will to nothing. The connection between Shakespeare’s will to nothing and his will to blackness is paramount. The difference between nothing and blackness is with respect to vision. Blackness implies invisibility and lack of light, whereas nothing implies a complete lack of objectivity. While we normally do not think of nothingness in aesthetic terms, the visual prominence afforded to blackness, its very lack of spatial identity, empowers blackness with the beatitude of immeasurability.

The fifth verse of the Song of Songs begins:

I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon.
Look not upon me, because I am black,
because the sun hath looked upon me:
my mother’s children were angry with me;
they made me the keeper of the vineyards;
but mine own vineyard have I not kept.
(Canticles 1:5-11)

הַשְׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֹאֲוָה בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם כְּאַהֲלֵי קִדְרֵי בִירְיָעוֹת שְׁלֵמָה
 וְאַל-תִּרְאַנִי שְׁאֲנִי שְׁחֹרְחֹרֶת שֶׁשָׁזְפָתַנִי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּנִי אֲמִי נְחֹרֵבִי
 שְׁמֵנִי נִטְרָה אֶת-הַכְּרָמִים בְּרַמִּי שְׁלִי לֹא נִטְרָתִי:

Does Solomon’s black and beautiful lover also have to do with negative capability? The speaker describes himself not only as black and beautiful but also as exiled from his brethren and smitten by the sun; above all, he is a guardian of what is not his own. He is exiled from himself, scattered, multiplied, fragmented and ultimately invisible. There is an interesting connection here to a myth found in the second book of Ovid’s (2018) *Metamorphoses*, where Phaëton’s misuse of the Sun’s golden chariot is suggested to be the reason for the Ethiopians having had their skin turned black: “And that was when, or so men think, the people / Of Africa turned black, since the blood was driven / By that fierce heat to the surface of their bodies (...)” (Ovid, 2018, p. 35). The myth is appropriated in an interesting way by Shakespeare’s contemporary and friend Ben Jonson in *The Masque of Blackness* ([1605] 1853), where he describes the river “Niger, in form and color of an Æthiop”, who in turn describes his own once blessed daughters as “the first form’d dames of earth”:

And in whose sparkling and refulgent eyes,
 The glorious sun did still delight to rise;
 Though he, the best judge, and most formal cause
 Of all dames beauties, in their firm hues, draws
 Signs of his fervent’st love; and thereby shows
 That in their black, the perfect’st beauty grows;
 Since the fixt color of their curled hair,
 Which is the highest grace of dames most fair,
 No cares, no age can change; or there display
 The fearful tincture of abhorred gray;
 Since death herself (herself being pale and blue)
 Can never alter their most faithful hue;
 All which are arguments, to prove how far
 Their beauties conquer in great beauty’s war;
 And more, how divinity they be;
 That stand from passion, or decay so free.
 Yet, since that fabulous voices of some few
 Poor brain-sick men, styled poets here with you,
 Have with such envy of their graces, sung
 The painted beauties other empires sprung;
 Letting their loose and winged fictions fly
 To infect all climates, yea, our purity;
 As of one Phaëton, that fired the world,
 And that, before his heedless flames were hurl’d
 About the globe, the Æthiops were as fair
 As other dames; now black, with black despair.
 (Jonson, [1605] 1853, p. 661)

The thematic connection between Jonson’s poem, Shakespeare’s use of blackness in his *Sonnets* and Solomon’s Black Bride is unmistakable. I hesitate to interpret Jonson’s real

meaning of blackness in this context, but only want to point out his awareness of the ambivalence of the Black Bride's beatitude.

In a translation of the Song of Songs known to Shakespeare, the fifth verse reads: "I am blacke but faire, O yea daughters of Jerusalem" (Bishops Bible, Song of Songs 1:5). Both the Bishops Bible and the King James Bible use the conjunction "but" where one might have expected to find the word "and". This is no small matter! Neither translation hides the idea that blackness is spoken of as a consequence of being the keeper of others' vineyards. The Hebrew text reads (Jewish Publication Society, 2000):

הַשְּׁחֹרָה אֲנִי וְנֵאֻמָּה בְּנוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַיִם בְּאֶהְלִי קִדָּר כִּירִיעוֹת שְׁלֵמָה

The letter *vav* (ו), which signifies a hook or nail in Hebrew and old Phoenician, is most often used as the conjunction "and" in Hebrew and placed at the beginning of a word, as it is here. The *vav* is also used to express the disjunctive conjunction "but". One way or another, this particular *vav*, "and" or "but", conjunction or disjunction, is intended to highlight a powerful connection between blackness and beauty. The history of the interpretation of this verse goes back more than two thousand years. Most significantly, blackness was understood as referring to sin by the early rabbis and Church fathers, which is the main reason for the use of the English word "but" instead of "and" in the vast majority of English translations since the publication of the Latin Vulgate.

I was intrigued by the implications that this translational ambiguity has for the meaning of blackness. Eventually, Shakespeare's poetics of blackness led me back to Solomon. To uncover something here would be no simple matter. The Song of Songs refers to itself as "a secret close locked".

The Hebrew word for blackness, *shachorah* (שְׁחֹרָה), is based on the root *shachor* (שָׁחַר), which means "morning" or "dawn", as in the tenth verse of the sixth chapter of the Song of Songs:

מִי-זֹאת הַנִּשְׁקָפָה, בְּמוֹ-שָׁחַר: יָפָה כְּלַבְבָּהּ, בְּרָה כַחֲמָה--אֵימָה בַּנְּדָגָלוֹת

Who is she that looketh forth as the *morning*, fair as the moon,
clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners.
(Song of Songs 6:10)

Another meaning of *shachar* (שָׁחַר) is to look early or diligently for something (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1952, p. 1007). Undoubtedly, if we are to pay any attention to the close connection between these two words in the Song of Songs – that is to say, *shachar* (שָׁחַר) as dawn and *shachorah* (שְׁחֹרָה) as blackness –, we will come away with the idea that blackness suggests the origin or source of light. In other words, that blackness contains its very opposite. The emphasis on the conjunction *vav* in the verse "I am black and beautiful", when understood as "and" rather than "but", provides this clue about the paradoxical nature of authorial blackness.

The Septuagint, believed to have been completed by the year 100 BCE, uses the Greek word *καί* (“and”) to translate *vav* in the Song of Songs 1:5. Between the completion of the Septuagint and the Vulgate in the late fourth century, the world saw the birth and flourishing of Christianity.

Both Origen of Alexandria (ca. 184-ca. 253) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-ca. 395) interpreted the black imagery in this verse allegorically. They were concerned with the doctrine of salvation and saw it as involving a transformation from blackness to fairness or whiteness (Scott, 2006, p. 67). Origen wrote: “Once she [the Bride or soul] begins to (...) cleave to Him [the Bridegroom or Christ] and suffer nothing whatever to separate her from Him, then she will be made white and fair (*dealbata et candida*)” (p. 69). In his Commentary on the Song of Songs, instead of appealing to genealogy as a form of beautification, Origen attributed her beauty to an internal state rather than an external one, while Gregory of Nyssa depicted the Black Bride’s “black and beautiful” self-description as the disclosing of divine love: the Bride representing the soul, and blackness denoting its sinfulness – maintaining the process of salvation as the process of “becoming light” or whitened (Lowe, 2012, p. 546).

Jerome, in his translation of the Bible into Latin commissioned by Pope Damasus I in the year 382, used the Latin word *sed* (meaning “but”) to translate *vav* or *kai*, in effect crystalizing the religious interpretations of the rabbis and Church fathers. Jerome translated the Song of Songs in the year 398 and finished his translation of the Vulgate in 405, after more than twenty years. There had been previous Latin translations of the Bible (the *Vetus Latina*), in which the translators had translated *vav* as *et* (“and”) rather than *sed*, or “but” (Lowe, 2012, p. 546). In making his new translation, Jerome rendered the allegorical meaning of the biblical verses, setting up a sharp contrast between blackness and beauty.³ Martin Luther’s German translation followed the Vulgate in its rendition of the fifth verse of the Song of Songs as “Ich bin Schwarz, aber gar lieblich” (Lowe, 2012, p. 547) – the German *aber* being equivalent to the English “but”. There were several translations of the Vulgate into English before the King James version of 1611. Suggestively, the verse “I am black, but comely” (in the King James version) includes the main points of the chapter at the top of the page, where it reads: “1. The church’s love unto Christ: (and referring specifically to the fifth verse) ‘She confesseth her deformity’”. In *Saint Jerome Writing* (1605-1606), painted a couple of years before the publication of the King James Bible, Caravaggio electrified the art world of Europe with the making of his paintings from within blackness. With Caravaggio, blackness is the thing that gives light to the writer’s muse and art. The invisible visibility of the artist’s subject matter (Figure 2), coupled with his intense awareness of the importance of this verse in the history of translation, makes this painting particularly enchanting. What is clear is that blackness is central to Caravaggio’s idea of beauty.

³ Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible, used throughout the Middle Ages, was the first book to be printed in Europe as The Gutenberg Bible (1456-1457).

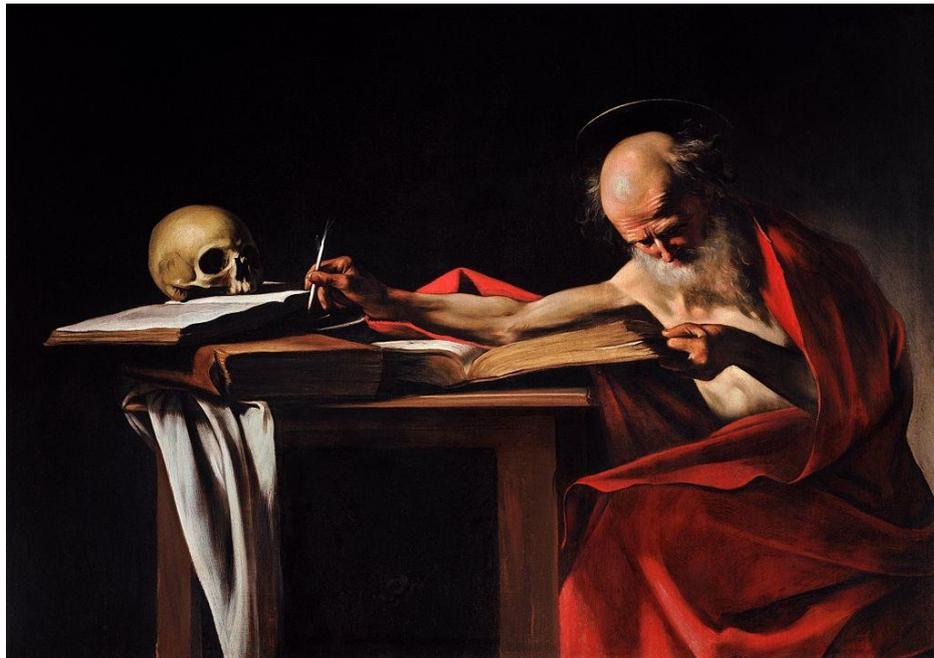


Figure 2. Caravaggio, *Saint Jerome Writing* (1605-1606), oil on canvas, 112 cm x 157 cm, Galleria Borghese.⁴

It is intriguing to imagine what Caravaggio is thinking about while working on this painting and equally intriguing, if not more so, to imagine Saint Jerome himself translating the fifth verse of the Song of Songs as he sits at his writing table, surrounded by thick folds of blackness. Jerome's exegetical sources were allegorical, as noted, pointing to blackness as sin. Indeed, the translation would cast doubt on the beauty of blackness itself. And yet, here in this painting, blackness is the very thing that gives light to the imagined writer and certainly to the painting itself.

In this case, the primary subject of the painting appears to be the Biblical translator Jerome. In fact, the true subject of the painting is the blackness within the artist's self-reflective vision. The beauty of this kind of blackness is in its invisibility: its negative capability. And so blackness as an aesthetic concept is indeed beautiful for Caravaggio, not only for its containment of all the other colors, for its universality, its secret hiddenness, its lack of ego, its complicity with the night and with the human and natural world's unconscious mind, but also for its ability to give birth to light.

Throughout his career, Caravaggio uses blackness to cast light on his subject. More specifically, Caravaggio's blackness draws attention to the artist's hands' self-reflective vision in action as the subject of art itself. In brief, blackness is where the artist is not.

Whereas Jerome and translators to follow had referred to blackness as sin or defilement by translating the Hebrew *vav* in the Song of Song 1:5 as "but", in the early seventeenth century, Shakespeare and Caravaggio began thinking about blackness in an entirely new way: as the self-reflective vision of the mysteriously absent author's hands.

⁴ Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Jerome_Writing#/media/File:Saint_Jerome_Writing-Caravaggio_\(1605-6\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Jerome_Writing#/media/File:Saint_Jerome_Writing-Caravaggio_(1605-6).jpg) (Accessed: 20 February 2019).

Before Shakespeare and Caravaggio, mystics, kabbalists and Neoplatonists had looked upon the idea of God's absence, unnameability, self-exile, impossibility, unknowability, ineffability as the road to understanding God's negative capability. In a short essay entitled "The Mystical Theology", Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite describes the divine darkness that leads to the knowledge of God (Luibheid, 1987, p. 137):

Only to those who travel through foul and fair (...) who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One which is beyond all things (...) [will they, like Moses] break away from what sees and is seen, and (...) plunge into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.

At the beginning of this essay, I spoke of the transition from negative theology to negative capability. The latter we find in Shakespeare and Caravaggio, whilst the former we find here and in other mystics of the Middle Ages, inspired by various strands of Neoplatonism. The most important thing to note here is that whereas negative theology is concerned with the knowledge of God through unknowing, negative capability is the authorial desire to spread out into many without being any. Authorial nothingness is infinite plurality, expanding in every direction, while ever refusing to be oneself.

If black is beautiful, it is not what is revealed (or seen) but what is unrevealed (unseen) that is beautiful. Blackness states: "I stand unrevealed. I am not". Thus, blackness is the unrevealed part of creation: the beforehand invisible non-substance that gives birth to everything.

The references to blackness throughout Shakespeare's works are numerous and powerful. No other color is mentioned as often. For example, in the first line of *King Henry VI Part 1*, Act 1, Scene 1, reputed to have been Shakespeare's first performed play, the Duke of Bedford exclaims:

Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
Comets, importing change of times and states,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars.
(Shakespeare, 2007, pp. 1108-1109)

The significance of these lines is tremendous, especially considering Shakespeare's allusion to the fifth verse of the Song of Songs a little further on in the play, when Joan of Arc says about herself, "I was black and swart before", referring to her transformation from blackness to spiritual chosenness.⁵ This passage reveals Joan's ambition to present herself

⁵ In *King Henry VI Part 1*, Joan la Pucelle's most notable speech includes the following declaration:

Lo, whilst I waited on my tender lambs,
And to sun's parching heat display'd my cheeks,
God's mother deigned to appear to me
And in a vision full of majesty
Will'd me to leave my base vocation
And free my country from calamity: (continues)

as a reincarnation of the Black Bride from the Song of Songs. It also reveals Shakespeare's familiarity with the interpretative tradition of this text. These first two references to blackness in *King Henry VI Part 1* tell us something else about Shakespeare's parsing of this critical verse. It intimates how he will develop the aesthetic dimension of blackness throughout his work.

In response to Bedform's opening line "Hung be the heavens with black" (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 1109), his companion Exeter responds, "We mourn in black: why mourn we not in blood?" (p. 1109), emphasizing that what will be given birth to as poetry and especially what will endure as poetry derives from blackness and the authorial will to nothing, rather than from the red blood of the living writer. Other important references to the primacy of black over red can be found in the companion piece to *Shakespeare's Sonnets, A Lover's Complaint*, where a forsaken lover says about the love letters written in blood by her careless suitor, as she tears them up into fragments: "Ink would have seem'd more black and damned here!" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 63). Blackness outlives the living and for this it is more damned. Needless to say, its damnation is everlasting, like eternity itself.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, love is described as black due to its all-encompassing ability to transform absence into presence. "Fairing the foul" concerns the process of turning absence into presence. In a well-known passage (Act 4, Scene 3, lines 261-265), Berowne remarks to the King (referring to Rosaline's dark colouring): "Her favour turns the fashion of the day, / (...) And (...) red, paints itself black, to imitate her brow" (Shakespeare, 2007, pp. 338-339). This passage reveals that, despite Rosaline's name normally being associated with red, owing to her rejection of being associated with the false praises of bright colors, her suitor Berowne has been reduced to lavishing praises on her likeness to black.

When Ferdinand the King of Navarre remarks to Berowne, "By heaven, thy love is black as ebony" (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 338), after Berowne reveals his undying love for Rosaline to his companions, the meaning is that Berowne's love is untenable. It is as if he were being accused of giving all of himself away, with nothing left over. Ultimately, Shakespeare's black love, though it contains every color and possible formation, is the love for everything that he is not, which is how he ultimately returns willingly to nothingness, or blackness. The inversion alludes to black's presence in absence.

Evidently, Shakespeare's aesthetics of blackness, exemplified in his *Sonnets* by such lines as "Then will I swear beauty herself is black" (1997, p. 379) in Sonnet 132, was in vogue by the time he started writing sonnets in the 1590s. For instance, we find references to blackness throughout Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, published posthumously in 1591, e.g. "As that sweet black which veils the heav'nly eye" (Sidney, [1594] 1905, p. 22); in George Chapman's (1904) "pitchy vapours, and (...) ebon boughs",

Her aid she promised and assured success:
In complete glory she reveal'd herself;
And, whereas I was black and swart before,
With those clear rays which she infused on me
That beauty am I bless'd with which you see.
(Act 1, Scene 2, lines 273-283)

from his memorable ode to darkness “The Shadow of Night” (1594); in Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness*, first performed in 1605, in which ladies arriving at the English Court talk amongst themselves about how black complexions used to be beautiful, “that in their black, the perfect’st beauty grows” (Jonson, [1605] 1853, p. 661); and most emphatically in Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s (1583-1648) “Sonnet of black beauty”, “Another Sonnet to Black itself”, and “To her hair”, where he writes, “Thou Black, wherein all colours are compos’d, / And unto which they all at last return” (Herbert of Cherbury, 1881).

Whereas for these writers, blackness had already been linked to the “black ink” of poetry, as well as to metaphysical speculations about nature and creation, for Shakespeare in particular, blackness was about poetic process and overcoming time. It was also a way of linking color to authorial nothingness. While all the colors come out of black, all the possible numbers come out of nothing. Consider, for example, lines such as “That in black ink my love may still shine bright” in Sonnet 65 (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 241) or, in Sonnet 63, facing time’s injurious hand, how Shakespeare shows he will remain perpetually both “now” and hence “still green” through the legacy of his poetry, despite “(h)is brow” furrowed “[w]ith lines and wrinkles” (punning on the word “ink” in “wrinkles”). But at the end of growing old, when “those beauties whereof now he’s king / Are vanishing or vanished out of sight (...) His beauty shall in these black lines be seen / And they shall live, and he in them still green” (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 237). Most significantly, such black lines refer to the promise of his poetry’s lasting presence, his eternal youth and newness. It is in this way that Shakespeare conceives black as beautiful.

Moreover, in Sonnet 127’s “Therefore my mistress’ eyes are raven black” (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 369), we might understand the reference to eyes as referring to the personified I’s of the poets’ invented characters as they appear on paper (in ink), and also to the reader’s eyes insofar as they enlighten his words and bring them to life. But most of all, Shakespeare’s blackness refers to authorial nothingness in the sense that nothingness alludes to absence, the unknown, and the invisible.

In *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, blackness and nothingness go hand in hand on route to overcoming Time, as in Sonnet 12: “And nothing ’gainst Time’s scythe can make defense” (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 135). Again, in Sonnet 20, Shakespeare includes the line “By adding one thing to my purpose nothing” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 151), reinforcing the importance of nothing and its interchangeability with oneness. Other sonnets in which Shakespeare empowers nothing with positive force include Sonnet 108’s “Nothing, sweet boy; but yet, like prayers divine” (2007, p. 327), identifying the “sweet boy” or fair youth with nothing; and most forcefully in Sonnet 109, “For nothing this wide world I call” (2007, p. 329). Most famously, in Sonnet 130 we find “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” (2007, p. 337), which alludes to a parallel between the round shape of the reader’s eyes, the sun or sonnet and nothing. And finally, in Sonnet 131, we find “In nothing art thou black” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 377), suggesting the parallel between ontological authorial blackness and nothingness.

Shakespeare first uses the word “black” in Sonnet 127:

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty’s name.
(Shakespeare, 1997, p. 369)

The old age that Shakespeare is alluding to is one where blackness was not tied to the name of beauty. The significant dramatic moment is black’s beautification of presence through absence. In the verse “But *now* is black’s successive *heir*” (1997, p. 369, italics added), Shakespeare alludes to black’s involvement with the perpetual presence of nowhere. In other words, authorial blackness, like authorial nothingness, leads to authorial nowhere. Most of all, authorial nothingness describes the poet going to sleep while “looking on (that) darkness” that gives his imagination sight. It also addresses his muse. In Sonnet 127, when he writes, “thy shadow to my sightless view (...) makes black night beauteous (...) and her old face new” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 369), we find a clear separation between mind and body. The body is for the day and the mind for the night. For the poet, seeing occurs at night, due to the lack of form that allows the poet to become and unbecome what he wills. Within blackness, the poet is free from confirmations. The poet’s journey to nowhere, marked by absence, takes him far beyond his station – “then my thoughts, from far where I abide (...)” (1997, p. 369) –, only to land him in the now-here universe of the living reader. Indeed, the verse “Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee” (1997, p. 369) is a clue that Shakespeare’s muse is none other than his future reader. The journey describes the ink black passage through time made possible by the reader’s resurrection of the poet’s verses.

Sonnets 63 and 65 mention blackness in connection to the art of writing. In Sonnet 63, Shakespeare writes, “His beauty shall in these black lines” (Shakespeare, 2007, p. 237), and in Sonnet 65, “that in black ink my love may still shine bright” (2007, p. 240). Both poems reveal blackness as the source of light, beauty and lasting presence.

In the *Sonnets*, Shakespeare transforms the place of the great invisible hidden *I am* with the beauty of authorial man’s *I am not*. Blackness is Shakespeare’s ontological aesthetic nothingness. What is clear is that blackness is no longer a moral category in Shakespeare, but an ontological aesthetic one. In Sonnet 131, to help bring out the implications of this premise, Shakespeare writes, “In nothing art thou black” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 377), suggesting the unmistakable parallel between ontological authorial blackness and nothingness.

The source of light is what is not there: invisibility. Invisibility means being visible through one’s art. The poets’ hands are invisible to the viewer, yet everything that one reads or sees is a projection of their self-reflective initiatives. The beauty of authorial blackness is the invisibility of the author’s self-reflective hands in action, and the self-effacing love of the author for his future reader.

The verses we have looked at in the Song of Songs define blackness as the consequence of doing other people’s work, our brother’s work, the other’s work, while

disregarding our own. The true alienation of labor has to do with this notion. This “and” that we pointed out at the crux of the Song of Song 1:5 (“I am black *and* beautiful”) is certainly not a “but”, rather, mysteriously, it is the very subject that links blackness to its liberation. *And* itself ought to be celebrated for its primacy in this respect, as it is in Sonnet 63, where it begins ten consecutive verses.

Blackness and nothingness as aesthetic concepts have to do with the undetermined state of the author. The color black contains all the others. The undetermined state is what makes the multiplicity of identities possible. Blackness is the unrevealed part of creation. Shakespeare’s inversion of black brings us back to the blackness of the speaker in the Song of Songs (often referred to as the beloved bride or Shulamite woman) from an aesthetic angle: suggesting the idea that blackness is the result of having overspent oneself on others, the way an author invests himself in his characters, or the way a star burns itself out only to reemerge as a black hole. The vacuum created by the black hole is far from meaningless. Its complete absence of space may be the very non-thing responsible for space and time themselves to exist. Pure ontological aesthetic blackness might be thought of as pure absence, the non-place from which presence emanates or is made possible. The beauty of blackness is about the creation of the visible through the invisible. Black is fair because it represents the overcoming of time – to will blackness is to discover what is not (yet) visible or perceptible, through art or writing. The hidden fairness in blackness is the wisdom of folly, the spatial nothingness responsible for authorial invisibility.

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About the author: David Swartz has a Master's degree in Comparative Literature (University of Toronto) and in Painting (University of Lisbon) and is currently writing a PhD thesis on *Shakespeare's Sonnets* at NOVA University of Lisbon. His recent translations include *The Religious Mantle* (New Meridian Arts, 2020) and *And Painting?: Questioning Contemporary Painting* (CIEBA-FBAUL, 2016).