

# The Cross Plainsman

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## The Women of the Sonnets of Robert E. Howard

"Assist me some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonneteer .  
Devise, wit, write, pen; for I am for whole volumes in folio."  
Shakespeare —from *Love's Labour's Lost*

My love is as a fever, longing still  
For that which longer nurseth the disease,  
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,  
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please.

.....  
For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,  
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

—Shakespeare, "Sonnet 147" (on "The Dark Lady of the Sonnets," as she has been called)

Not only did Robert E. Howard display great virtuosity and enthusiasm for the sonnet form, but his extant sonnets (sadly, there is evidence that several to many have been lost) are reasonably divided into functional, thematic, or topical groups.

Regarding function, as has been noted in a previous article in this series, his sonnets are of three distinct types: narrative, lyrical (self-expressive), and, perhaps a few, essentially didactic. Differentiated by theme, the sonnets might be viewed according to such groupings as Transience (the notion that all things pass with time), Disillusionment (with the human condition and visions of the potential toward human depravity), Fame as a Fleeting Thing, Fantastic Vision and Imagination—and likely others. Regarding topic, such topical groupings as "Exotic Places," "Historical Events," and "Women" can easily be made.

It is with this last topical area that I wish to focus the present essay: "The Women of the Sonnets of Robert E. Howard." This topic is especially a useful one in some respects, especially since the women in the *life* of Robert E. Howard have been the subject of much critical attention and dispute. Much attention has been paid to Robert E. Howard's mother (including the several Oedipal theories that have been propounded [deCamp, et al.]), and, of late, to his relationship with Novalyne Price [later Ellis]. There is good evidence in Howard's sonnets regarding women

and in others of Howard's poems that more women than these two are worthy of consideration — unidentified though they will likely remain.

The present discussion will examine four of REH's sonnets about women:

### Flaming Marble (*Shadows of Dreams* p. 16)

I carved a woman out of marble when  
The walls of Athens echoed to my fame,  
And in the myrtle crown was shrined my name.  
I wrought with skill beyond all human ken.  
And into cold inhuman beauty then  
I breathed a touch of white and living flame —  
And from her pedestal she rose and came  
To snare the souls and rend the hearts of men.

Without a soul, without a human heart  
She shattered mortal love and mortal pride  
And even I fell victim to my art,  
With bitter joyless love I took my bride.  
And still with frozen hate that never dies  
She sits and stares at me with icy eyes.

(first published in *The Poet's Scroll*, 1929)

Pretty clearly this poem has, as its antecedent (and almost certain inspiration) the Greek myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, the story of a misogynistic sculptor so gifted that, after fashioning the likeness of a woman so beautiful even he falls in love with his

creation, he prays to Aphrodite to make her a living woman to be his wife. The wish is granted, but different versions of the continuation of the myth show various “outcomes” of that marriage. Of course G. B. Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion* (1913), could quite possibly have been influential in Howard’s decision to reduce this ancient plot to a 14-line modern narrative.

Since published in 1929 when Howard was only 23, the human inspiration for this sonnet (if any specific inspiration may have existed) must likely remain conjectural. Just as possible (and maybe more likely, since the young REH’s own attitude toward women — if not misogyny, then certainly distrust—is documented in many of the early *Selected Letters* and other writings) the theme of the myth may have influenced Howard to try his hand at retelling the story in capsulized form, asserting a starker ending than most versions of the myth — some of which have a happy-ever-after mood.

In this same harsh mood, the poem “Love” is interesting both structurally and topically. It is one of the type that I have referred to in my article on the “Experimental Sonnets” (see the last mailing) as a “ballad sonnet,” seeming to blend the narrative compression of the ballad’s four-line stanzas and 3 or 4 beat lines with the 14-lines of the sonnet. Actually, this sonnet seems based upon the “short ballad” stanza (3343 accents, rather than the standard ballad of 4343 or the long ballad of 4444). The poem starts with the alternating rhymes of the English or Shakespearean sonnet, but shifts to the efefef rhyme in the last six (sestet) which is typical of the Italian or Petrarchan. Topically, it implies a woman who is a definite “you” — tangible and present in the poem, if not inspired by a woman in Howard’s life.

#### Love

(*Shadows of Dreams* p. 84)

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| I have felt your lips on mine                | a 3 |
| Your hair has veiled my eyes                 | b 3 |
| When my blood was wild as singing wine       | a 4 |
| And star-gold flecked the skies.             | b 3 |
|  |     |
| We have watched the moonlight dance          | c 3 |
| On the breast of the still lagoon            | d 3 |
| But now I am tired of your changeless glance | c 4 |
| In the eye of the wrinkled moon.             | d 3 |
|  |     |
| What have you given me                       | e 3 |
| To name as an ultimate bliss?                | f 3 |
| Am I more strong, more free?                 | e 3 |
| What slavery is this?                        | f 3 |
| For a single star on a dusky sea             | e 4 |
| I would barter your hottest kiss.            | f 3 |

[NOTE: Any help on the date of this poem would be appreciated. There is no specific reference to its composition in Glenn Lord’s “Introduction” to *Shadows of Dreams*]

The erotic tone and symbolisms of the octave prove, of course, nothing specific about a possible real liaison in the life of Robert E. Howard. Yet here and in other poems (specifically ones like “Love’s Young Dream” with its specific setting of a brothel, and possibly in such evidently lost poems [alas!] with suggestive titles like “A Negro Girl,” “A Mexican Girl,” “A Harlot,” and “To An Angry Woman”), the implication is certainly strong that at least some of REH’s poems were written either inspired by or written to a woman or women he knew in life and not merely in imagination—vivid though all acknowledge that imagination to be.

That Howard saw, ultimately, deception and a servitude of sorts in a relationships with women [and rather duty than servitude, quite possibly in his relationship with his ailing mother — but that consideration for other investigations than this], is suggested strongly in this poem. The lure of the woman in the poem is like an intoxicant, but, with the waning of passion — symbolized by the waning of the moon (“wrinkled” suggestive of several possibilities, but one, I think, that phase known as “gibbous” between full and half— almost like a fruit withering and drying). The sestet is a direct address to the woman (perhaps to womankind?).

Two common REH themes are here: First, that he did not see the affections of and for a woman as “ultimate bliss,” but, rather, as an entrance unto a form of slavery. Second that he imaginatively — and genuinely — yearned for the “dusky seas” far from the Central Texas that confined him, in body and, to some degree at least, in spirit if not in imagination.

Perhaps the two linked sonnets that are most intriguing for the investigator of Howard’s life are those under the common title: “To a Nameless Woman” (1 and 2). Structurally, they are in the older Italian/Petrarchan mode that REH favored as the form for his sonnet work. Thematically, they are as close as Howard comes to the typical theme of the sonnet of the original tradition — romantic love. This is at least true to the degree that the poems are tributary to the woman addressed, there being several sub-varieties of the romantic sonnet: the poem of praise of beauty or other attributes of the loved one, the lover’s complaint about being rejected, the definition of love, the declaration of how boundless is the love of the poet. etc. These two poems seem a blend of awe and praise and ultimate loss or even futility.

To A Nameless Woman  
(Shadows of Dreams p. 74)

1  
Hard shadows break along the smoky hills,  
Clear etched against a cold blue marble sky.  
Along the north the purple lances lie,  
To hint the gems that hoard of winters spills,  
Glimmering treasures from some earth-troll's tills.  
A thin and bitter wind is whispering by;  
And in my heart a dream that will not die,  
Shatters my crystal soul with tremored thrills.

Scarcely a breath divides us, yet apart  
We stand as though an ocean lay between.  
A silence falls — and you seem strange and cold.  
Perish, my dream, and die, my empty heart.  
For in your eyes I see a mystic sheen  
Inhuman wondrous and inhuman old.

2  
I am a breath upon a summer sea,  
My feet have never trod these ways before.  
Forgotten, I shall tread these roads no more.  
But in your heart pulse throbs Eternity.  
You were, you are, and evermore shall be;  
And you have heard the emerald oceans roar  
On many a dim and naiad-haunted shore,  
And ghostly kings have worshipped at your knee.

A am an infant wailing in the night,  
Trembling before the knowledge that is yours.  
Under your heart unborn Tomorrow sings.  
And not for me your eon-lent allures,  
Since I have seen your dusky eyes alight  
With sudden memory of forgotten things.

In both of these sonnets, the tone is less strident than in almost all of Howard's other verse. There is a physical closeness declared, yet the fear of unrequital and a perceived impossible, impassible distance between the poetic voice and the "nameless woman" who holds the poet in awe.

The first six lines of the octave of the first poem are a nice descriptive lead-in to the atmosphere and symbolism of the coming winter. The words are wintery: "hard," "break," "cold," "blue marble," "north," gems [cold stones]," and the word "winter" itself.

That the poet's heart contains "a dream that will not die," is important, because it is not in keeping with the harsher and darker angels speaking through much of the rest of Howard's poetry. This sonnet is from the heart much more than from the head.

The sestet is sensuous and amorous, helping to place this sonnet more squarely with the sonnets of tradition: of those of Dante to Beatrice, Petrarch to Laura, Shakespeare to his "Dark Lady." The lament of the hopeless lover is here, the admiration for the

mystery of the woman. If the poets "dream" is perishing, at least it is alive here to perish. The perceived distance is compared to the ocean, the shores of which demarked Howard's greatest physical excursion, even though his imagination travelled far and wide through the "realms of gold" as Keats called them.

Touched upon once again in the last three lines of the sestet is the Howardian notion of the ageless, which becomes reaffirmed in the second poem as a quality carried on by a seeming reincarnation, making this woman eternal.

There are lovely connections between the first and second poem. In the second, the poet tries to cross that "ocean" that seems to "lay between" them, and we have at least the poet's "breath upon the summer sea" [breath — Latin: *spiritus* as in both "spirit" and "inspiration"]. There is much in the declaration that "My feet have never trod these ways before." The ways of Love? The discovery of a deep and mystical respect to the point of awe of a woman? But again, the statement — "I shall tread these roads no more" — speaks both of a perceived ultimate futility in this relationship, and also, perhaps, a belief, a promise? perhaps to himself? that the ways of this kind of love will never be found again, perhaps never be sought for.

This woman who was and who is, who has memory of forgotten things and can somehow also feel the singing of Tomorrow has had an great effect upon the poet. One may conjecture that she is an idealized woman, never a reality, a vision like Poe's in "To Helen" [of Troy]. But I think not. With another wonderful thread of connection between the two sonnets, both are finished with a reference to the eyes of the nameless woman: "inhuman wondrous and inhuman old," "dusky," and "alight with . . . memory of forgotten things." She is, I believe, the "Dark Lady" of Howard's sonnets. Perhaps we may one day see more clearly whose eyes they were. ❧

