Breaking the Rules. The Subversive Nature of Shakespeare's Sonnets to the Dark Lady

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In the introduction to her edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, Katherine Duncan-Jones states that there is a "radical difference between *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and all its Elizabethan and Continental predecessors".[1] I could not agree more. However, the identification of Shakespeare's choice of a male beloved as one of the main reasons for this radical difference, the disruptive element that makes the collection anti-Petrarchan and anti-Sidneian, appears to me as slightly reductive.[2] With this, I do not mean to revive those arguments of eighteenth-century origin that, intended at justifying a homo-eroticism perceived as embarrassing in the national bard, tried to dissolve the "peculiarity" of Shakespeare's love by locating it in the Renaissance cult of male friendship and patronage. Without denying the distinctive character inherent in the choice of a male love object – a choice that, nonetheless, cannot be considered as utterly innovative, when we think for instance of so many Italian poems dedicated to patrons,[3] or to Barnfield's lyrics to the *youth* – I

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[1] K. Duncan-Jones, "Introduction" to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones (London: Arden, 2006), p. 46.

[2] "In making a young man's beauty and worth his central focus, Shakespeare may be seen as overturning the conventions of more than two hundred years of Petrarchanism". Duncan-Jones, "Introduction", p. 47.

[3] Sonnets celebrating patrons through an amorous form of language were fairly frequent in Renaissance Italian poetry, and written by renowned poets such as Bembo, Della Casa, Annibal Caro, Angelo da Costagno and, most famously, by Michelangelo, whose poems to Tommaso de' Cavalieri have been compared with Shakespeare's sonnets to the youth by Melchiori – G. Melchiori, *Shakespeare* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2005) – and Wilson Knight – G. Wilson Knight, *The*

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maintain that this choice does not represent the most "unorthodox" element in Shakespeare's poetry. On the contrary, despite the deep originality, exceptional artistic merit and undeniably problematic nature of Shakespeare's sonnets to the *Fair Youth*, these poems remain mostly faithful to the courtly and celebrative conventions of the period, close in style and meaning to the Petrarchan and neo-Platonic poetic model, and based on similar philosophic axioms. The truly subversive element in Shakespeare's collection, I believe, is found not in the celebration of the noble and fair youth, but in the *Sonnets*' second section, dedicated to the *Dark Lady*[4] – or, as some prefer, *Black Mistress*.[5]

1. What she is not

Despite the deeply innovative character of the section dedicated to the *Dark Lady*, critics have not often dwelt on its importance, nor made these sonnets the object of particular admiration. In Duncan-Jones's opinion, "Sonnets 127-52 offer backhanded praise of a manifestly non-aristocratic woman who is neither young, beautiful, intelligent nor chaste [with] muddy complexion, bad breath and a clumsy walk […] celebrating her in swaggering terms which are ingeniously offensive both to her and to women in general".[6] This is not an isolated judgment. Not only has the *Sonnets*' second section often been disregarded, subordinated as a "subsequence"

Mutual Flame: On Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Phoenix and the Turtle (London: Methuen, 1955).

[4] In my opinion, there is no serious reason to call into question the order of Shakespeare's sonnets as it appears in Thorpe's 1609 edition, nor their division, at sonnet 126, into the *Fair Youth* and *Dark Lady* sections. In fact, the majority of recent editors, including Duncan-Jones, Burrow, Kerrigan and Vendler, have argued in favour of the volume being organized by Shakespeare prior to publication.

[5] Some scholars, such as Paul Edmondson and Robert Matz, have questioned the epithet of "dark lady", highlighting the fact that the poet never calls his addressee a lady and describes her as dark only once. Matz proposes instead "black mistress", as Shakespeare describes her as black and refers to her as his mistress several times. P. Edmondson and S. Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 42; R. Matz, *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets. An Introduction* (Jefferson-London: McFarland & Company, 2004), p. 6.

[6] Duncan-Jones, "Introduction", p. 48.

and disparaged as disparate and disjunctive,[7] but it has also been summarily dismissed as an example of parodic inversion of the Petrarchan model, an elaborate "mock praise" of a woman who is a mere sexual convenience, concurrent with the misogynistic vein present in the poetry of the period. A critical opinion that has often been accompanied by a value judgment.

According to my view, this interpretation of the *Dark Lady* sonnets misses the point. Of course, it is quite evident that these sonnets challenge the principles at the base of the Petrarchan model. However, to define them as a mere parodic inversion of this model – with no other meaning than the one they find in their humorously satirical spirit – is a mistake, and one evident through a comparison with exemplary parodic anti-Petrarchan poems such as those by the Italians Berni, Grazzini, Coppetta, Firenzuola, Sgruttendio or Doni. In the four madrigals dedicated to Crezia, Doni claims that he has never beheld anything uglier than his beloved, offering us a comically hyperbolic figure that, as he himself implies in a letter to Tiberio Pandola, is the outcome of a direct and exclusively parodic intention.[8] Sgruttendio's and Firenzuola's women are similar, while Berni's "beloved" provides a particularly keen example, being endowed with silver hair, wrinkled forehead, pearly-white crossed eyes, fat hands, white lips and black, rare teeth.[9]

In England, on the other hand, the anti-Petrarchan vein was mostly concerned with the innovation of the sonnet's form rather than its content. Even when the poets' criticism focuses on the object of Petrarchan poetry, namely, on its ideal lady, their reaction is reminiscent of that of the above-mentioned Italian authors. Explicitly parodic and satiric, the poems of Everard Guilpin present us for instance with a woman whose breath is an "infection, / able to turne my stomack upside downe",[10] and who, reversing the Petrarchan obsession for chastity, knows perfectly well how to use the "instrument" she has

[7] Cf. I. Bell, "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady", in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. M. Schoenfeldt (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 293-313.

[8] F. Doni, *Lettera all'ingegnoso M. Toberio Pandola*, in *Pistolotti Amorosi de Doni* (Venezia: Giolito, 1552), p. 53.

[9] F. Berni, *Chiome d'argento fino, irte e attorte*, in *Rime*, ed. G. Bàrberi Squarotti (Torino: Einaudi, 1969).

[10] E. Guilpin, *To Livia (4)*, in *Skialetheia*, ed. D. Allen Carrol (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1974), 3-4.

"twixt her legs",[11] drooling at the very thought of luxurious acts.[12] Similarly, John Davies gives us this portrait of Gella's "beauty":

> If Gella's beauty be examined,
> She hath a dull, dead eye, a saddle nose,
> And ill shapte face, with morpheu overspread,
> And rotten Teeth, which she in laughing showes,
> Brieflie she is the filthyest wench in Towne,
> Of all that doe the art of whooring use.[13]

This form of anti-Petrarchism does not seriously challenge the dominant model, precisely because of its evident parodic nature. These poets confirm rather than demolish the norm that they so gleefully overturn, by implicitly acknowledging it as their model in the moment in which they turn the stereotyped and idealized beauty of the sonnet tradition into a likewise unreal "anti-beauty"; a comical and grotesque caricature devoid of any serious implication.

I do not believe Shakespeare's sonnets to the *Dark Lady* to be in any way comparable with these explicitly humorous anti-Petrarchan verses, nor do I think that they can be assimilated to a precise misogynistic vein. On the one hand, the poet's *mise en question* of the axioms upon which the Petrarchan paradigm was based does not resolve itself in a punctilious overturn of the model in a parodic key; nor does it seem to me that we can truly detect in these sonnets the humoristic vein that, according to Duncan-Jones and other critics, should be at the base of the poet's mock-praise of a woman "neither young, beautiful, intelligent nor chaste [with] muddy complexion, bad breath and a clumsy walk".[14] In fact, not even Sonnet 130, the only one that could be read as a direct answer to the Petrarchan model and the one upon which Duncan-Jones's description of the *Dark Lady* seems to be founded, can be defined as strictly anti-Petrarchan. Of course, we notice the smiling irony with which Shakespeare treats the most common Petrarchist metaphors, found in the works of poets such as Watson, Daniel, Barnfield, Spenser, Linche, Drayton and Sidney.[15] However, not only is the poem not to be read as a

[11] Guilpin, *Of Gellia (46)*, in *Skialetheia*, 6-7.

[12] Guilpin, *Of Chrestina (51)*, in *Skialetheia*, 4-5.

[13] J. Davies, *Epigrammes*, in *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. R. Krueger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 26.1-6.

[14] Duncan-Jones, "Introduction", p. 48.

[15] For specific references to these authors' texts, see the notes in Booth's and Kerrigan's editions.

denigration of the mistress,[16] but, as Kerrigan magisterially writes, it "is not, as the critics seem to think, an anti-Petrarchan exercise. It refuses to submit the mistress to a convention, even by inversion. Although it also shadows *Hekatompathia* 7, it does not resemble […] any of the many loathly lady sonnets written in the renaissance, because it refuses to endorse praise by mispraising".[17] The gentle stultification of Petrarchan conventions is not obtained through the inversion of the conventional idealized beauty, but by comparing this ideal beauty with the material concreteness of a not-idealized love object, thus revealing its intrinsic falseness.

On the other hand, the definition of the sequence as simply an expression of the misogynistic vein present in the poetry of the period does not appear to do justice to its artistic and philosophical complexity. As Robert Matz writes, the Renaissance "produced a strong countercurrent of bawdy poetry that combined frank and rebellious sexuality with a related satiric drive to 'lay bare', literally and figuratively, all sorts of euphemizing ideals"[18] – a perfect example of which is Nashe's *The Choice of Valentine*, where the woman, unsatisfied by her lover, turns to a dildo. Now, far from denying the explicitly erotic nature of most of the *Dark Lady* sonnets, I do not see how the deep and often tormented ontological reflection on sex and lust we find in these poems could be assimilated to the bawdy and satiric vein described above. The tone is utterly different, and the complexity of the figure of the *Dark Lady* – who, as Margaret Healy rightly affirms, seems to defy any attempt to stabilize her[19] – denies any chance of being reduced to a "compendium of misogynist commonplaces".[20] But if she is not an anti-Petrarchan exercise, nor a bawdy lass playing with a dildo, then what is she?

2. What she is

The mysterious addressee of the *Sonnets*' second section strikes the reader with her untraditional "materiality" and "concreteness",

[16] Cf. H. Vendler, "Formal Pleasure in the Sonnets", in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 37.

[17] J. Kerrigan, "Introduction" to *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. J. Kerrigan (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 22.

[18] Matz, *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 139.

[19] M. Healy, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination. The Sonnets and* A Lover's Complaint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 115.

[20] Matz, *The World of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 126.

which drastically distance her from a feminine ideal that had long lost contact with reality. By emphasizing the lady's "concreteness", I do not mean to refer to a particular extra-literary presence. The biographical approach has not given any definite answer to the question of the *Dark Lady*'s identity, and it has driven critics far from the textual evidence towards the formulation of more or less serious hypotheses which, even if proved right, would not be of much help in the understanding of the *Dark Lady*'s deep essence, which appears to lie elsewhere than in the occasion that generated it. In what, then, do the materiality and novelty of the *Dark Lady* consist? To answer this question, we shall briefly analyze her main characteristics by contrasting them with the axioms upon which the "orthodox" figure of the sonnet lady was founded. The opposition that will emerge from this comparison will reveal the deeply philosophical implications of Shakespeare's discourse in the *Dark Lady* sonnets: a reflection that aims at exploring the complex truth of human nature, and that will lead to the formulation of a novel ontological and aesthetic paradigm.

We shall start from the most immediately noticeable and seemingly superficial aspect of the *Dark Lady*: her physical aspect. We have already seen how Sonnet 130 presents us with a woman decidedly different from the traditional standard of poetic beauty, but who does not embody a parodic "anti-beauty". Instead, she appears as a concrete figure, human in her imperfections, towards whom the poet shows an appreciation and attraction that sound utterly sincere. Whether this "sincerity" is the reflection of an actual feeling of Shakespeare the man, or a poetic strategy of Shakespeare the artist, we do not need to know; we are moving within a poetic universe, and the important is what the poet wants us to feel and believe within this universe. In this sense, we clearly perceive the poet's effort to make us feel his sincerity when, in a tender tone, he writes that, despite his beloved's voice being no music, "I love to hear her speak"[21] (130.9), and again in the final couplet, where his voice proudly rises in defense of his beloved: "And yet by heaven I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare" (130.13-14). We are reminded thus of the fundamental quality of the *Dark Lady*'s figure, which distinguishes her from the other poetic ladies: her authenticity. "Aware of the ideal", Hubler writes,

[21] All quotations from the *Sonnets* will be taken from this edition: W. Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones (London: Arden, 2006).

Shakespeare "here declares himself in favour of alloyed reality. He does not say that he loves her in spite of her faults; he loves her faults and all".[22] In this apparently "easy" poem we discover already, as Jonathan Bate affirms, one of the main purposes of Shakespeare's sonnets: "to express a love that is rare while also belying the 'false compare' of conventional love-poetry".[23]

The poet refers more than once to the woman's physical defects, intentionally highlighting those imperfections that signal her authenticity and uniqueness. In so doing, he distances himself from the neo-Platonic concept of love as a passion for Beauty itself, understood in abstract terms as a Platonic Idea, inverting thus the process of "depersonalization" proper to Petrarchan and neo-Platonic love poetry. In fact, the beloved's physical imperfection implies a novel kind of love on the part of the poet. Within the traditional paradigm, love cannot be defined as the outcome of a personal choice because it is addressed to an archetypically faultless love object, whose absolute excellence is the source of a necessary and universal adoration. To love an imperfect beloved, despised by many – "I love what others do abhor" (150.11) – is an entirely different matter. This love implies a clear and unconventional stand *against* the general opinion. It is precisely because of this that the poet's feeling appears as endowed with unprecedented "truthfulness", expressed through a humble and yet firm declaration of the individuality of his choice: "In good faith some say, that thee behold, / Thy face hath not the power to make love groan / To say they err, I dare not be so bold, / Although I swear it to myself alone […] Thy black is fairest in my judgement's place" (131.5-12).

Shakespeare offers an even greater subversion of the norms in the moment in which, within serious and non-satiric poetry, he presents us with a morally guilty beloved. In Petrarchan poetry, the lady is defined as "cruel" because she refuses to give in to the poet's requests, but this "fault" is in fact a virtue, and one of the highest that the lady should possess: the virtue of chastity. The accusations that the poet addresses to her are then essentially rhetorical *formulae* inscribed within the courtly and Petrarchan code, intended to express the poet's ontological frustration and not the beloved's actual

[22] E. Hubler, *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 40.

[23] J. Bate, *Soul of the Age. The Life, Mind and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 205.

unworthiness. With the *Dark Lady* we face an entirely different problem. Her fault is real and deep, and it originates precisely where the other ladies' "fault" dissolved into virtue: in lust. Endowed with a boundless sexual appetite, she lies not only with the poet –"I lie with her, and she with me" (138.13) – but with many other men (including, perhaps, the *Fair Youth*), so that the poet eventually defines her as "a bay where all men ride" (137.6), "the wide world's common place" (137.10).

Margreta de Grazia, who shares our opinion that the true scandal in the sonnets is found in the second section, interprets this scandalous aspect in social terms, affirming that the lady's "promiscuous womb" threatened the Elizabethan patriarchal social order.[24] This aspect is certainly present; however, the complexity of this lustful and "guilty" woman goes further. By showing us a beloved no longer candid but "stained", wrapped in flesh and sin as much as the poet, Shakespeare is also challenging the dream of ethereal purity through which poets sublimated the truth of human nature. He is revealing the falsity implicit in an ideal based on the negation of flesh and sin, and on the presumption of a possibility of human perfection. He is speaking of the human frailty that Petrarchan and neo-Platonic poetry preferred to attribute to the poet alone, exempting the beloved from the flaws inherent in the human condition.

Shakespeare's desacralization of the love object gives us a woman who shares with the rest of humanity the weight of human frailty, and presents us with another element that breaks with the traditional model. One of the unquestionable axioms of Petrarchan and courtly poetry was the beloved's ontological superiority over the poet. This superiority could originate on a primarily social plane, as in Provençal lyric and in many successive courtly poems, or on an essentially moral one, as in the greatest part of Petrarchist poetry, which, by christianizing Platonism, had caused the beloved's beauty to coincide with the purity of her beatifying soul. Following this trend, poets could easily arrive at an actual veneration of the beloved: a divine object, whose superiority over the poet is incontestable. As Francesco Coccio exemplarily affirms: "la donna de l'uom più nobil sia, / poi che convien che a lei soggetto stia".[25] She is noble and he is

[24] M. de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets", in *Shakespeare's Sonnets. Critical Essays*, ed. J. Schiffer (London: Garland, 2000), pp. 89-112.

[25] F. Coccio, *L'eterno alto Motore*, in *Rime diverse di molti eccellentissimi autori. (Giolito 1545)*, ed. F. Tomasi and P. Zaja (Torino: RES, 2001), 22-23.

humble; she is the mistress and he is the servant; she is pure and he is a sinner; she is divine and he is all too human. The unattainability of the lady is intrinsic in the ontological disparity between her and all other human beings, the poet *in primis*. As Spenser writes: "For being as she is divinely wrought, / […] / what reason is it then but she should scorne / base things that to her love too bold aspire? / Such heavenly formes ought rather worshipt be, / then dare be lov'd by men of meane degree".[26]

Once again, Shakespeare changes everything: he takes the woman down from the sky until he can look at her as an equal. On a social level, the distance between her and the poet appears to be abolished, as nothing in the sonnets leads us to suppose that she is nobler than he. Most importantly, on an ontological level, the *Dark Lady*, who surely is neither an angel nor a sublimated Idea of perfection, fully shares the poet's nature; the same is evident on the moral plane, as she is more than able to commit "black deeds". At the same time, however (and here lies Shakespeare's true innovation), this lady is not to be considered as a socially and morally despicable being, a grotesque incarnation of Vice or Satan (I do not think that the term "devil" in Sonnet 144 should be taken literally, since the poem's terminology, as we shall see, is founded on a polemical use of medieval *psychomachia*). She is not a "devil-woman" in answer to the traditional "angel-woman". The relationship between poet and beloved is not founded on a principle of alterity, but rather on one of sameness and equality, as they both appear to share a common nature.

Thanks to this new relationship, the poet abandons the Petrarchan "love service" and recognizes himself as "sinner" in a new way, not only "ontologically" but "circumstantially", discovering in the specific and concrete character of his frailties the point of contact with his equally guilty beloved. This is quite evident in Sonnet 152 and, most exemplarily, in Sonnet 142:

> Love is my sin, and thy dear virtue hate,
> Hate of my sin, grounded on sinful loving;
> O but with mine compare thou thine own state,
> And thou shalt find it merits not reproving;

[26] E. Spenser, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, in *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, Vol. II, ed. E. Greenlaw, C. Grosvenor Osgood, F. Morgan Padelford and R. Heffner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1947), LXI.5-14.

Or if it do, not from those lips of thine,
That have profaned their scarlet ornaments,
And sealed false bonds of love as oft as mine,
Robbed others' beds' revenues of their rents.
Be it lawful I love thee as thou lov'st those
Whom thine eyes woo, as mine importune thee,
Root pity in thy heart, that when it grows,
Thy pity may deserve to pitied be.
If thou dost seek to have what thou dost hide,
By self-example mayst thou be denied (142).

The poet's initial *mea culpa* is immediately followed by his indignant twisting of the accusation around onto the woman, as if to justify himself by rejecting the Petrarchan paradigm that wanted the poet alone to be guilty in front of a pure, sinless lady. We feel a fierce anxiety in this accusation; the anxiety of one who seeks not to be judged, or at least not by her – "or if it do, not from those lips of thine" – by reminding her, with a sort of violent desperation, how they both share the same guilt. After the accusation, the tone becomes calmer: the poet eventually acknowledges the absolute parity of their situation, which leads to his appeal for pity.

Certainly, this pity implies the traditional reference to sexual compliance, as both Duncan-Jones and Kerrigan point out. Yet, there is something new in it, a particular connotation strictly related to the untraditional nature of the lady to whom the poet is appealing. In fact, this pity is not begged as an act of grace granted by a superior being to a vile sinner, but it is instead invoked in the name of that equality which unites poet and woman through their common frailty. Unlike Petrarch's Laura, who "de' lacci d'Amor leggiera e sciolta / vola dinanzi al lento correr" of the poet,[27] the *Dark Lady*, tormented by sensual desire as much as the poet and equally slow to run "after that which flies from thee" (143.9), knows well the struggle and the pain with which pity is sought in the person desired. It is precisely in the name of this awareness that her pity is invoked: "Root pity in thy heart, that when it grows, / Thy pity may deserve to pitied be" (142.11-12). In this sense, the sexual characterization of this pity strengthens this interpretation: the fact that this earthly *com-passion* leads to a very human sexual enjoyment confirms the innovative character of the *Dark Lady* figure, revealing her nature as utterly defiant of any sublimation.

[27] F. Petrarca, *Canzoniere*, ed. M. Santagata (Milano: Mondadori, 2006), 6.3-4.

The *Dark Lady* gives in to the poet's desire not because she is deceived by his praise, but because she knows and accepts her and his human nature, without denying its most earthly and seemingly less noble aspects. It is not by chance, then, that the pun that reveals the sexual consummation appears at the end of Sonnet 138, a poem centered on the reciprocal and conscious acceptance of the beloved, and of love itself, in all their imperfection. Once the *Dark Lady* lies with the poet, poetry will no longer be limited to the expression of a frustrated desire and of a tension towards an unattainable object, but will become instead a deep reflection on satisfied lust, presented as an ineradicable part of human nature. This, *ça va sans dire*, represents one of the most striking violations of the Petrarchan code.

In neo-Platonic philosophy, the gratification of the senses through sexual intercourse is invariably stigmatized as vile and bestial. Ficino defines sexual desire as a loathsome and bestial impulse contrary to true love, in that it diverts man's soul from its research of Divine Beauty, the enjoyment of which pertains to the Mind, and to the senses of vision and hearing only. This idea is energetically reasserted by Bembo, the renowned codifier of Petrarchism, and by Castiglione – whose *Cortegiano* was to become one of the most influential books of the Renaissance. This philosophical concept of love appears as essentially based on the refusal of sensual, sinful passion, in favour of an intellectual and spiritual experience of Beauty. These two conflicting forces, symbolized by the neo-Platonic two Venuses, are a perfect expression of the dichotomous system according to which the Renaissance universe was structured: a universe split between a higher, spiritual and morally good reality, and a low, material and degraded one (the Augustinian *Civitas Hominis* vs *Civitas Dei*, we might say), and in which good and evil, body and spirit, are clearly separated and hierarchically organized according to an ethical principle. This dichotomy characterized also the Renaissance anthropological paradigm. Finding its *raison d'être* both in the philosophical and the theological systems of the period – a deeply Christianized combination of self-restrictive Stoicism and transcendental neo-Platonism, united to the Protestant conviction of the depravity inherent in humanity, and especially in its flesh[28] – this anthropology

[28] From a philosophical standpoint, the Renaissance anthropological paradigm presented a dualistic idea of man, as Stoicism preached an ideal of virtue founded on the absolute control of passions and bodily desires, while neo-Platonism considered human beings as "great miracles", but only insofar as they choose to transcend their

was in fact characterized by an essentially dualistic concept of man, founded on the perpetual struggle between (unworthy) body and (divine) soul. These ideas exerted great influence throughout Europe, forming one of the basis of Renaissance love poetry.

With regards to the treatment of sensual passion, the *Dark Lady* sonnets, being of an "emphatically post-consummation nature",[29] represent a deep subversion of the orthodox paradigm, shattering the boundary between "licit" and "illicit" love. Not surprisingly, this is also one of the most controversial aspects of her figure, and one that has attracted much critical attention. Without attempting to relate the many different interpretations of the *Dark Lady*'s sexuality, it is quite remarkable that, as Melissa E. Sanchez points out, "Shakespeareans have found one point of consensus, a point so ingrained in our reading of the Sonnets that it appears to need no defence. This consensus is that sex without love and commitment is immoral, dangerous, degrading, indefensible – especially for women".[30] In fact, this implicitly negative view of the *Dark Lady*'s sexual behavior can be seen as one of the deep causes of the critics' tendency to dismiss (and sometimes even openly dislike) the figure of Shakespeare's mistress as an expression of the misogynistic spirit of the time and, supposedly, of the poet himself. A misogyny that is, perhaps, more their own than the bard's. Moreover, even those critics who have explicitly "defended" the *Dark Lady*, like Ilona Bell,[31] have often done so by questioning the charge that she is sexually promiscuous, thus reinforcing the general assumption that such behaviour, if true, would indeed be blameworthy. I want to argue that both these judgments, based on the same assumption, appear to miss the point, as they forget to focus on what the poet really tells us about the lady's sexuality. On the one hand, the attempt to deny the woman's promiscuity, constantly reaffirmed throughout the sequence,

most corporeal selves and follow their pure intellect to become angelic minds. On the other hand, from a strictly religious standpoint, the Christian and specifically Protestant anthropological pessimism, based on the conviction that human nature is inherently depraved, individuated the mark of the original sin in the flesh, reinforcing the dichotomous concept of man and fostering a body-denying attitude in both theory and practice.

[29] S. Clark, *Sordid Images: The Poetry of Masculine Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 41.

[30] M. Sanchez, "The Poetics of Feminine Subjectivity in Shakespeare's Sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint*", in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. J. F. S. Post (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 506.

[31] Cf. Bell, "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady".

is almost ridiculous, as nothing in the text appears to foster such a reading. On the other hand, however, the acknowledgement of this sexual promiscuity should not automatically lead us to interpret Shakespeare's attitude towards it as essentially and exclusively negative. In fact, and here lies one of these sonnets' most subversive aspects, sexual pleasure – both the poet's and his beloved's – is presented in this section in a complex and ambivalent way. If it is true that, as we shall see, the poet hides nothing of the violence and the pain inherent in lust, sexual pleasure emerges also as an essential part of human nature, and one that the poet has no intention to renounce.

By giving in to the poet's and (even more scandalously) her own desire, the *Dark Lady* allows sexual passion to become the object of a deep and somewhat brutal reflection, which, for the first time, explores the abyss of lust "in action":

> Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
> Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
> Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight;
> Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
> Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
> On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
> Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
> Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
> A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
> Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
> All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
> To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell (129).

This powerful sonnet, whose "dangerous dark energy", as Brian Boyd writes, "radiates out – perhaps contamining even the sonnets before, and almost inevitably disturbing those still to come",[32] is a furious description of a likewise furious action. The infinite linguistic and semantic potential of this most difficult sonnet has been accurately analyzed by many critics,[33] and I will not try to equate their efforts. Instead, I shall consider the philosophical base of this sonnet, in order

[32] B. Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition and Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 76.

[33] Suffice it to think of the twelve pages of notes Stephen Booth dedicates to it in his edition of the *Sonnets*, or Giorgio Melchiori's acute analysis of the text's structure in *L'uomo e il potere* (Torino: Einaudi, 1973), pp. 137-77.

to show the revolutionary character of Shakespeare's treatment of sensual love. According to Serpieri, Shakespeare's negative judgment of lust is suggested by "the Christian, and particularly Puritan, paradigm of the time; that paradigm that considers sex as hell, lust as the stigma of human bestiality".[34] Indeed, the sonnet's first part seems to confirm this statement, with its frenetic list of ferocious adjectives that appear to locate the brutal and animal part of man's nature in earthly desires. In this sense, the term "extreme", as Vendler points out, pertains to a strictly philosophical discourse,[35] referring to reason's loss of control over the senses. This is particularly meaningful in Landry's interpretation, "for lust is not only the extreme or highest degree of desire, and hence excessive, totally unrestrained, but it also pushes man to one extreme or limit of his nature, making him pure animal".[36]

However, Shakespeare's discourse does not culminate in these solutions. Through a provocative use of a term endowed with specifically religious nuances, the poet starts to crack the uniform semantic field of sinful negativity when, at line 11, he tells us that lust is also "a bliss in proof". This terminological operation is reinforced by a similar use of the term "joy" in the following line. Then, in the final couplet, we feel the poet's tone changing: after the frenetic rhythm that pervades the entire body of the poem, here finally comes the full stop. There is a pause. And as if the poet had re-read and considered what he has written so far, he gives us his truth: despite the cruel and dangerous nature of lust, sexual pleasure is part of our lives and therefore it cannot, and should not, be denied. Generating a circular movement in the reader's mind, Shakespeare, as Pequigney writes, "recollects, finally, the erotic 'heaven' consisting of 'a joy propos'd' and a 'bliss in proof'. This recollection, representing a marked change in attitude, also foreshadows the revival of carnal desire".[37] The sonnet does not close, as we might have expected, with a definitive condemnation of lust, but with a conscious, almost smiling, acceptance of it.

On a philosophical plane, the couplet contains two main truths. The first is that all of humankind, without exception, is prone to

[34] (Trans. mine). A. Serpieri (ed.), *Sonetti* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 740.

[35] H. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 552.

[36] H. Landry, *Interpretations in Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Berkeley: California University Press, 1963), p. 99.

[37] J. Pequigney, *Such Is My Love. A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Chicago-London: Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 161.

sexual desire. By affirming this, Shakespeare is taking a stand against the Puritan fanatic presumption of absolute purity, against the idea that some people are able to renounce entirely their 'sinful' flesh. The second truth is strictly connected to the first one: as man is a rightful mix of reason and passion, so the universe is an indissoluble union of heaven and hell. The coexistence of the two terms expresses the complexity of a world that emerges as the only existing reality, a reality in which spirit and matter, good and evil, joy and sorrow, continually blossom one from the other.

A movement similar to the one we found in Sonnet 129, and perfectly in line with what Helen Vendler describes as the sonnets' usual structure,[38] can be seen in the famous Sonnet 144.

> Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
> Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still:
> The better angel is a man right fair,
> The worser spirit is a woman coloured ill.
> To win me soon to hell my female evil
> Tempteth my better angel from my side,
> And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
> Wooing his purity with her foul pride;
> And whether that my angel be turned fiend
> Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
> But being both from me both to each friend,
> I guess one angel in another's hell.
> Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
> Till my bad angel fire my good one out (144).

The sonnet's first lines appear to reaffirm, through a clear terminological choice, the Christian and Neoplatonic worldview: the "better angel" at the side of the poet, referring to the figure of the guardian angel, is opposed to a "worser spirit", reminding us of the medieval *psychomachia*, where a good angel and a demon fought for a man's soul. At the same time, the reference to the "two loves" is very meaningful, as it might suggest both the Augustinian and Petrarchan distinction between love for the Creator and love for the creature, and

[38] Vendler argues that Shakespeare's speaker often considers various intellectual or ideological positions in the same sonnet, expressing them in the different quatrains. Most importantly, the critic mantains that these positions are ranked hierarchically and climactically with respect to their "truth-value", as successive quatrains correct each other and, especially in the philosophical sonnets, the third quatrain generally offers a subtler or truer view of the problem than those voiced in the first and second ones. Cf. Vendler, "Formal Pleasure in the Sonnets".

the neo-Platonic 'two Venuses', the one celestial and the other earthly, representing sexual desire. This sharp opposition appears to confirm the orthodox antithesis between good and evil, spirit and matter, affirming a dichotomous and hierarchical concept of creation.

In the second quatrain, something begins to change. The traditional *psychomachia* deviates from its proper course when the angel's interest moves away from the poet and is caught by the evil spirit. However, it is only in the third quatrain that the initial dichotomy starts to shake badly, when the poet insinuates the concrete doubt that the angel has transformed into a "fiend" – not incidentally rhyming with "friend". Finally, at line 12, Shakespeare crashes the opening dichotomy when, through a sharp terminological choice, he imagines the "angel in another's hell", thus implying a sort of interchangeability between bad and good spirits, which is strengthened by the final verse, where both are defined as "angels". And, with a supreme blow to the Christian paradigm with which the sonnet had opened, it is lust that functions as the motor of the sonnet's semantic slip, activated by the bad spirit's sexual temptation of an angel who is not able to resist it.

Despite the sometimes painful nature of sexual desire and action, the poet never shows any intention to make amends for his sensual pleasure, nor does he intend to renounce the earthy passion and the body that, though "gross", gives him the most proud and vital joy. This is evident in Sonnet 151, a poem clearly permeated by erotic innuendo, where the sensual "guilt" of the first lines gradually loses its negativity and, accompanied and exalted by the triumphal (orgasmic, we might say) rhythm of the poem, emerges as a vital and sovereign power, independent and superior to a value system based on moralistic principles. The entire sonnet seems in this sense to be a reaction to a previous reproach, and the final couplet in particular, no longer addressed to the woman but to a generic second person, sounds like an answer to a specific accusation: "No want of conscience hold it that I call / Her 'love', for whose dear love I rise and fall" (151.13-14). The poet proudly insists that it is not for a moral defect that he loves his lady, and claims the rightful nature of his desire. He vindicates thus a concept of love that no longer separates feeling and sensual appetite but, being based on an idea of man as rightful union of body and spirit, considers sexual satisfaction as an essential element of love, thus replacing the moral horizon of the sonnet tradition with a somewhat naturalistic and vital one.

3. Conclusion

Far from being a mere example of satiric inversion of the Petrarchan model, and equally different from the loathed mistresses of the most misogynistic poetry of the time, Shakespeare's *Dark Lady* proves to be a deeply complex figure whose importance within the *Sonnets* should not be underestimated. In fact, it is through this subversive figure that all the axioms at the base of the traditional poetic and philosophic model are made to collapse, giving way to a new ontological paradigm. She is physically and morally imperfect, and as a consequence not only does she reveal the falseness implicit in the Petrarchan idealization process, but introduces us to a novel concept of love, sanctioning the divorce between the neo-Platonic "generalized" desire for archetypal Beauty, and an authentic, individual feeling. As she is ontologically equal to the poet, the relationship between them is also innovative, based on the awareness of a shared, common nature. From this new balance, a novel concept of pity and love emerges: one that contemplates materiality and imperfection as humanity's characterizing features, and can therefore not only accept but also celebrate them. As for the properly sexual aspect, the poet, enflamed by his mistress's powerful desire and by the "pleasure" that she finally grants him, acknowledges sexual satisfaction as crucial to the new idea of love, transcending the moral horizon of the sonnet tradition with a more natural and vital one. All these elements contribute to the formulation and expression of a novel concept of man that challenges the dichotomous principle at the base of the Renaissance anthropological paradigm. Shakespeare does not refuse to confront the main philosophic and religious positions of his time: he takes them into consideration, but then re-elaborates and transcends them. The human being that emerges from this poetry is certainly no angelic creature; on the contrary, he is frail, often tormented by the fever of passions, and he is also made of "sinful earth" (146.1). But this earth, these irrational and sensual desires, do not make him a miserable creature, as Puritan morals would have it. At the same time, the poet refuses neo-Platonic optimism because it originates from the hope that man could transcend his corporeal nature and, in so doing, become a superior, purely spiritual being. Shakespeare's man claims instead the dignity of his authentic human nature, which is a rightful, worthy union of pleasure and pain, spirit and body, good and evil. The radical difference between *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and its Elizabethan and Continental predecessors could not be more clearly defined.

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