

«My Female Evil» The Subversive Nature of the *Dark Lady* Sonnets: a Reading of Sonnets 129 and 144

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Abstract Shakespeare's opposition towards some aspects of Stoic and Neoplatonic doctrines and religious fanaticism, particularly Puritanism, can be found in many of his plays. However, rather than focusing on the dramatic output, this essay will concentrate on Shakespeare's Sonnets. The strongly subversive nature of the *Dark Lady* section is especially notable, although modern critical opinion is generally less inclined to acknowledge its subversive philosophical message because of the supposedly more 'personal' nature of lyrical expression compared to the dramatic. In fact, critics have generally chosen to focus their attention on the Fair Youth section, more or less intentionally ignoring the *Sonnets'* second part, summarily dismissed as an example of parodic inversion of the Petrarchan model, thus avoiding an examination of its profound revolutionary character, that is – an implicit rejection of the Christian and Neo-platonic basis of the sonnet tradition. Through a close reading of two highly meaningful sonnets, this essay will show that, in the poems dedicated to the *Dark Lady*, Shakespeare calls into question, through clear terminological reference, the very foundations of Christian and Neo-platonic thought – such as the dichotomous nature of creation, the supremacy of the soul over the body, the conception of sin et cetera – in order to show their internal inconsistencies, and to propose instead a new ontological paradigm, based on materialistic and Epicurean principles, that proclaims reality to consist of an indissoluble union of spirit and matter. This secular outlook, whilst not atheistic in the contemporary sense of the term, reveals the deep modernity of Shakespeare's position, whilst also highlighting the difficulty that some readers still have with bard's most 'heretical' side.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *Fair Youth vs Dark Lady*. – 3 Sonnet 129. – 4 Sonnet 144. – 5 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

Shakespeare's «most problematic poems», as James Schiffer (2000, p. 3) defined them, the *Sonnets* have always proved complex to investigate, and indeed continue to be highly problematic. This is despite the continuous attention that critics have dedicated to them, approaching the text from a variety of standpoints. These range from the biographical approach popularised by Malone's eighteenth century editions (1780, 1790)

to George Wyndam's anti-biographical, formalist one (1898); from William Empson's New Criticism (1930, 1935) to Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism (1980, 2005); from socio-psychological studies, declined according to the preference accorded to sexual aspects, as in the works by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) and Joseph Pequigney (1985), or to socio-racial issues, as in the works of Margreta de Grazia (1994) and Kim Hall (1995), to the political readings by Marotti (1982) and Kernan (1995); from Joel Fineman's psychoanalytic approach (1986) to Helen Vendler's properly aesthetic one (1999) and Jonathan Bate's intellectual-biographical reading (2009). Without engaging in the perilous discussion on the reciprocal merits of these approaches, I would like to highlight the fact that, though extremely different from one another, they appear to have at least one element in common: they share a general tendency to concentrate on the first section of the sonnet sequence, which is dedicated to the *Fair Youth*, while more or less seriously neglecting the second one.¹ In response to this critical trend, my essay intends to achieve a re-evaluation of what I believe to be the most innovative element of this work, the figure of the *Dark Lady*. In particular, it will focus on the deeply subversive nature of the sonnets dedicated to the *Dark Lady*, especially from a philosophical and religious standpoint.

If it is true that Shakespeare's opposition towards some aspects of Stoic and Neoplatonic doctrines and religious fanaticism, particularly Puritanism, can easily be found in his outright satirical characters and dramatic presentation of the dangerous consequences of such beliefs,² it is also true that such a revolutionary attitude is not less evident in the *Sonnets*. The strongly subversive nature of the second part of this work is especially notable, although critical opinion has always generally been less inclined to acknowledge its highly subversive philosophical message because of the supposedly more 'personal' and 'truthful' nature of lyrical expression

1 Some scholars, such as de Grazia (1991), Stallybrass (2000) and Dubrow (1996), have recently interrogated the assumptions upon which the bipartite structure of the *canzoniere* is based. However, 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, this partition, established by Malone, has rarely been questioned. Not only the gendered pronouns (despite de Grazia's remarks) clearly speak in favour of this division but, as Stephen Booth (1977) writes, sonnet 126 appears to be intended to mark a division between a section dedicated to a male beloved and one dedicated to a woman. Moreover, as John Kerrigan (1986) affirms, the general tone of the two sequences is profoundly different, so that there can be no doubt about the authenticity of the bipartite division and of the sonnets' order. For a reading of the *Sonnets* that highlights its bipartite partition, see also my recent book: *The Dark Lady. La rivoluzione shakespeareiana nei Sonetti alla Dama Bruna* (2013).

2 Suffice it to think of Shakespeare's explicit condemnation of Angelo, the precise, in *Measure for Measure*, or the calamitous effects of Hamlet's fanatical attitude and Brutus' Stoic-Puritan nature.

compared to the dramatic. As I said, critics have generally paid most attention to the first part of the *Sonnets*, concentrating their efforts on the attempt to either minimize or, more recently, celebrate, the homoerotic tension between the poetic I and the *Fair Youth*, as if this was the main ground-breaking element of this work. In this way, they have more or less intentionally ignored the second part of the *canzoniere*, summarily dismissing it as an example of parodic inversion of the Petrarchan model, and thus avoiding an examination of its profound revolutionary character: that is, an implicit rejection of the Christian and Neoplatonic basis of the sonnet tradition.

2 *Fair Youth vs Dark Lady*

«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', broadly interpreted» (Duncan-Jones 2006, p. 47). With these words, Katherine Duncan-Jones identifies one of the main elements that, in her opinion, represent «the radical difference between *Shakespeare's Sonnets* and all its Elizabethan and Continental predecessors» (p. 46). The attention paid to the relationship between the poet and the *Fair Youth* has been something of a litmus test throughout time, a particular standpoint from which to observe the evolution of scholarly and public opinion on the issue of homosexuality. Indeed, while the homoerotic nature of these sonnets is acknowledged and sometimes positively highlighted by modern critics – such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), Joseph Pequigney (1985), Bruce R. Smith (1991, 2000), Jonathan Goldberg (1986), Gregory Bredbeck (1991) and Marjorie Garber (1995) – the embarrassment caused by the national bard's presumed homosexuality³ has led other critics, especially in the past, to a variety of defensive explanations aimed at 'justifying' the sonnets devoted to the *Fair Youth* by annihilating their potentially ambiguous eroticism. Besides John Benson's 1640 edition, in which verbal changes were made in order to make the verses apply not to a man but to a woman, innumerable critics have attempted to dissolve the 'peculiarity' of Shakespeare's love by locating it in the Renaissance cult of male friendship. Sir Sidney Lee writes that, «hundreds of sonneteers had celebrated, in the language of love, the charms of young men – mainly

3 This presumption was based on the assumption that Shakespeare's sonnets are «biographical». The biographical approach to Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was first promoted by Malone's 1780 edition of the text, in which Shakespeare and the poetic I were clearly considered as coinciding. Obviously, as James Schiffer writes, «the act of identifying Shakespeare with the 'I' of the Sonnets also created a serious dilemma; it threatened to implicate Shakespeare in transgressive acts and desires» (2000, p. 20).

by way of acknowledging their patronage» (1905, p. 10) and an anxious Boswell Jr. affirms that «male/male friendship was expressed through the rhetoric of amorous love» (as quoted in Stallybrass 2000, p. 77). To discuss the more or less homoerotic nature of the relationship between the poet and the *Fair Youth* is not the intention of this essay. Nevertheless, we might want to pay attention to the fact that both these interpretative trends tend to implicitly identify this relationship as the most problematic and revolutionary aspect of the *canzoniere*, and consequently draw attention to the first section of the sonnet sequence. The section devoted to the *Dark Lady* is instead usually dismissed as a mere parodic inversion of the Petrarchan model, a 'mock praise', concurrent with the misogynistic vein present in the poetry of the period. To put it in Duncan-Jones' words, 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» (2006, p. 48).

This critical approach was congenial, among other things, to an interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* as consistent with Christian and Neoplatonic values. By underlining the ideal and spiritual nature of the poet's relationship with the youth, and minimizing or misreading the relevance of the *Dark Lady* sonnets, the values of spirituality, purity, goodness and so on, could be said to lie at the core of Shakespeare's *canzoniere*. As Lu Emily Pearson (1933) wrote in the thirties:

Constancy he admired, and truth and beauty he considered the realities of life. In the sonnets to the Beauteous Youth, then Shakespeare celebrated rational love; in the Dark Lady sonnets, he protested against sensual love and exalted the friendship motive. Finally he renounced his lady to his friend, but grieved that the friend could not resist physical love. (1933, p. 296)

Or, to mention an even more explicit example of a Christian interpretation of the *Sonnets*, at the end of the nineteenth century Gertrude Garrigues (1887) affirmed that writing the sonnets must have been what God wanted from Shakespeare, and that is why we cannot consider the lyrics as expressing anything other than Christian virtue. For this reason, by no means can we accept the idea that Shakespeare was entangled in a sexually illicit behaviour with a promiscuous woman:

Indeed, we consider it inadmissible, and a gratuitous insult to the memory of a man the whole course of whose life, so far as we know it, was bound up in duty and high thoughts. The glory of Shakespeare, the crowning quality which distinguishes his genius, which separates him

immeasurably from his contemporaries, is the estimate which he placed upon woman. [...] That matchless hand that could paint an Imogen, a Portia or even a simple Hero, that man a slave of the senses? Perish the thought! (1887, p. 243)

But is all of this true? Are the *Sonnets* mainly an expression of Christian and Neoplatonic values? And is the relationship between the poet and the *Fair Youth* – be it spiritual friendship or homosexual desire – the central and most original element in the *canzoniere*? I believe not. The first section of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, beautiful as it is, appears to not be radically original. On the contrary, it proves to be close to the Petrarchan model in many respects both in terms of poetic language and philosophical basis. It is even possible to argue that a male love object is not intrinsically incompatible with the Petrarchan and Neoplatonic tradition, and could be said to represent its most sublimated essence and a return to its properly Platonic origin. The sonnets insist, from the very beginning, that the love between the youth and the poet is essentially superior and transcendent, denying any mere material and sexual element. As the poet tells his friend, Nature «by addition me of thee defeated, | By adding one thing to my purpose nothing: | But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure, | Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure» (Duncan-Jones 2006, 20, vv. 13-14). As for the *Fair Youth's* other features, we cannot avoid noticing that much of his characterization answers to a specific kind of celebrative courtly-Petrarchan convention: he is physically perfect, an «incarnate miracle», as Wilson Knight (1955) defines him; he is chaste and noble, absolutely superior to the poet, who looks at him from a position of axiomatic submission. Moreover, he is often presented as «divine», an incarnation of the eternal archetypal Idea of absolute Beauty⁴, upon which a Christian kind of sacredness often converges. This syncretic fusion of religious spirituality and Platonism, customary in fifteenth and sixteenth century European love poetry, characterizes the idea of beauty in the *Sonnets'* first section, and finds its supreme expression in sonnet 105, where the young man is celebrated as manifestation of the Platonic triad of Truth, Beauty and Goodness, summed up in the immutable divinity of the One:

Let not my love be called idolatry,
Nor my beloved as an idol show,
Since all alike my songs and praises be,
To one, of one, still such, and ever so.

4 As George Wilson Knight affirms, the youth remains essentially «an archetypal, eternal, image» (1955, p. 39).

Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,
 Still constant in a wondrous excellence;
 Therefore my verse, to constancy confined,
 One thing expressing, leaves out difference.
 Fair, kind and true is all my argument;
 Fair kind and true, varying to other words,
 And in this change is my invention spent,
 Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords.
 Fair, kind and true have often lived alone,
 Which three, till now, never kept seat in one.
 (Duncan-Jones 2006, 105)

By this, I do not mean to imply that nothing significantly original is found in the *Fair Youth* section, nor do I intend to affirm that the poet never challenges the canonical perfection of the youth and his adherence to the Petrarchan tradition. However, if it is true that, as Lisa Freinkel writes, Shakespeare «imagines a young man who is simultaneously idealized and nonideal» (2000, p. 250), we should notice that the idealization represents the poet's explicit aim in the first section. On the other hand, the 'nonideal' aspect emerges as symptom of a secret displeasure towards Petrarchan rules, which appears now and then throughout the text only to be immediately silenced. The reason why Shakespeare cannot give full manifestation to his impatience towards a poetic model that limits the expression of his deepest meditation might be found in the fact that the celebrative nature of Petrarchan poetry could not be openly opposed in sonnets that were dedicated to a noble and influential patron. Both Pembroke and Southampton – the two most likely addressees identified by the critics – undoubtedly were such patrons. It is only in the *Dark Lady's* section that the poet finally appears to be able to freely express his profound reflection on the true nature of man and universe, along with his criticism of both the rhetorical character of Petrarchan poetry and its philosophical foundation. In this sense, I agree with Joel Fineman when he writes that «much of what the young man sonnets do implicitly is preparation for what the dark lady sonnets subsequently say explicitly, the latter thus articulating directly in their matter what is indirectly present in the manner of the former» (1986, p. 160).

Opposed to the somewhat conventional character of the first section, the sonnets dedicated to the *Dark Lady* prove to be truly and deeply revolutionary, both on an aesthetic and philosophical level: they appear to overturn all the Christian and Neoplatonic values that had always stood at the base of the sonnet tradition. In fact, the *Dark Lady's* subversive figure challenges all the axioms upon which the Petrarchan ideal was based. Dark as night, she is physically and morally imperfect, endowed with a wild sexual appetite and more than willing to satisfy it. Because of this, the relationship between her and the poet is no longer based on

a principle of disparity. Instead, it is grounded in the idea that they are both guilty of those weaknesses inherent in human nature, and therefore essentially equal. From this new balance, a totally novel concept of pity and love emerges, one that contemplates materiality and imperfection as humanity's characterizing features, and can therefore not only accept them, but also celebrate them. All these elements contribute to the formulation and expression of a new concept of man and universe, quite different from the dominant 'orthodox' one conveyed by the canonical sonnet tradition. In fact, in the *Dark Lady* sonnets, Shakespeare, through clear terminological references, calls into question the very foundations of Christian and Neoplatonic thought, such as the dichotomous nature of creation, the supremacy of the soul over the body, the conception of sin (especially in its sexual connotation) etc.. This allows him to show their internal inconsistencies, and offers instead a new ontological paradigm, one based on materialistic and Epicurean principles that proclaims reality to consist of an indissoluble union of spirit and matter.

Rather than discuss Shakespeare's revolutionary operation in general terms, I believe that the best way to appreciate the poet's subtle strategy to subvert the orthodox philosophical and religious axioms is through a close reading of a few highly meaningful sonnets. In particular, I will analyse sonnets 129 and 144, two especially complex texts that may appear to be initially consistent with the traditional paradigm, which instead hide a deeply revolutionary meaning. I will show how Shakespeare explicitly calls into question the Puritan accusation of lust and the dichotomous concept of man and universe proper to the Christian and Neoplatonic worldview, in order to gradually destroy and overturn these religious cornerstones while presenting a new attitude towards sexual desire and a novel idea of reality and of man.

3 Sonnet 129

It is a matter of common knowledge that one of the main principles of the philosophy of love at the foundation of Petrarchan poetry is chastity. The Petrarchan lady is ontologically unattainable and absolutely pure; an ideal consistent with the strong Christian basis of Petrarchan tradition, that, especially after St. Augustine's theorization, has always identified lust with sin. As I have said, in the sonnets dedicated to the *Fair Youth* the possibility of a sexual intercourse between the poet and his friend is clearly denied, while the second section, as Steve Clark writes, is of an «emphatically post-consummation nature» (1994, p. 41). The *Dark Lady*, by giving in not only to the poet's requests but also, even more revolutionarily, to her own physical desires, opens up new possibilities to poetry, which is now able, for the first time, to describe 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)

According to Alessandro Serpieri, Shakespeare describes and at the same time judges the entire process of lust: «the negative judgment», he writes, «is that 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» (1991, p. 740, transl. mine). Indeed, the sonnet's first part seems to confirm this statement, with its frenetic list of ferocious adjectives – so similar to those 'catalogues' with which the adversaries of sexual desire used to describe lust⁵ – that appear to locate in human passions and earthly desires the brutal and animal part of man's nature. In this sense, the term «extreme», which we find among the adjectives in the first quatrain and as the main characteristic of lust in all its phases – «Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme» (v. 10) – could appear to refer to reason's loss of control over the senses, and to the breakage of the balance between passions and intellect. Not accidentally, Helen Vendler affirms that this term pertains to a strictly philosophical discourse⁶ – «philosophi-

5 We can think, for instance, of Giles Fletcher's description of sensual love: «the love wherewith Venus sonne hath injuriously made spoile of thousandes, is a cruell tyrant: occasion of sighes: oracle of lies: enemy of pittie, way of error: shape of inconstancie: temple of treason: faith without assurance: monarch of tears, murderer of ease: prison of hearts: monster of nature, poisoned honey: impudent courtizan: furious bastard: and in a word, not Love» (Berry 1964, p. 79). Or, we can think of Robert Burton's definition of lust: «burning lust, a disease, Phrensies, Madnesse, Hell [...] Besides those daily monomachies, murders, effusion of blood, rapes, riot and immoderate expence, to satisfie their lusts, beggary, shame, losse, torture, punishment, disgrace, loathsome disease that proceed from thence, worse then calentures and pestilent feavers, those often Gouts, Pox, *Artheritis*, palsies, crampes, *Sciatica*, convulsions, aches, combustions, &c. which torment the body, that feral melancholy, which crucifies the Soule in this life, and everlasting torments in the world to come» (Faulkner, Kiessling, Blair, vol. 3. pp. 48-49).

6 «Socially, lust is of course savage in its pursuit of its object, perjuring itself, untrustworthy, and so on; religiously, it may be an expense of spirit on a base matter; psychologically,

cally it is *extreme*, going past the mean of reason in all directions» (1999, p. 552) – and Hilton Landry deems it particularly meaningful, «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. It does this, of course, by subjecting man's highest soul, the rational, to his sensitive soul, by subjecting reason to passion» (1963, pp. 99-100). This discourse could remind us of what we call a 'Pichian paradigm',⁷ according to which men must repress their most animalistic part in order to elevate themselves to their true and divine nature. Moreover, in the violent tone of the description we can even perceive Augustine's disdain towards lust, defined by him as an infernal darkness, «la tenebra infernale della libidine» (Sgargi 2007, p. 63), the first cause of man's fall.

However, Shakespeare's discourse does not culminate in these solutions: the poet takes into account these paradigms – Puritan, Neoplatonic and Augustinian – but then moves past them. In the eleventh line, we begin to perceive a change: the verse opens with a term in complete opposition to the semantic field of absolute and sinful negativity that has characterized the sonnet so far: «bliss». Certainly, sexual passion can lead to «a very woe» (Shakespeare is not a hedonistic idealist whose intention is to deny that dangers and pain can derive from lust), but the poet, through a clearly provocative use of a term endowed with specifically religious nuances, acknowledges that it is also «a bliss in proof».⁸ In the following verse, we find another word we would not expect: lust is not only a bliss in the moment of actual sexual consummation, but it is also sought after as a «joy». Something is changing. Then we have the final couplet, which is often, in Shakespeare, a key to the interpretation of the entire sonnet. Gordon Braden – another critic who claims that Shakespeare's treatment

it may be the occasion of shame and madness. But philosophically, it is extreme, going past the mean of reason in all directions. I call this totalizing judgment philosophical rather than ethical because the vocabulary of purely ethical judgment includes words far less neutral than Shakespeare's carefully chosen word *extreme*» (Vendler 1999, p. 552).

7 «Tu potrai degenerare nelle cose inferiori che sono i bruti; tu potrai, secondo il tuo volere, rigenerarti nelle cose superiori, che sono divine. [i semi che avrai coltivato] se saranno vegetali, sarà pianta; se sensibili, sarà bestia; se razionali, diventerà animale celeste; se intellettuali, sarà angelo e figlio di Dio»; «se alcuno, acciecatto, come da Calipso, dai vani miraggi della fantasia, afferrato da torbidi allettamenti, servo dei sensi, è un brutto quello che vedi, non un uomo» (Garin 2004, pp. 107-109).

8 Giorgio Melchiori's opinion on this verse is particularly interesting: in fact, he believes that the amendment usually applied to this verse, moving the metric pause before «and proved», is wrong, and that its original position was to be maintained: «A bliss in proof and proved | a very woe». In this way we should no longer have a repetition of the proverbial *sententia* (the traditional allusion to the *post coitum triste*) but a statement that shows lust's ambiguity in all its phases: always sufferance and, at the same time, always a bliss (1973, p. 152).

of lust is consistent with its Christian interpretation – affirms that the poet's anguish is perceivable in the sonnet's final couplet, where, the critic writes, he discovers that «disillusion is not a cure: «All this the world well knows yet none knows well, | To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell». The sequence ends with no clear sense of where we go from here» (2000, p. 178). I believe instead that we can guess where we are going from here. In this couplet, we feel the poet's tone changing: after the frenetic rhythm pervading the entire body of the poem, here finally comes the full stop⁹. Shakespeare breathes, and we breathe with him. And as if he had re-read and considered, perhaps with a smile, 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, bringing him back from the final couplet to the sonnet's beginning, Shakespeare tells us that, no matter how conscious of lust's nature we might be, we will always be ready to give in to it again. As Joseph Pequigney writes: «He 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» (1985, p. 161). There is no particular desperation in this couplet, which sounds somehow proverbial, older and wiser than Puritan rigour. The sonnet does not close, as we might have expected, with a definitive condemnation of lust, but with a conscious, almost benevolent, acceptance of it.

Two main truths are contained in the couplet, one for each line. The first is that all humankind, without exception, are prone to 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 and all the desires connected to it. The second truth, expressed in the final verse, is strictly connected to the first one: as man is a rightful mix of reason and passion, so the world is an indissoluble union of heaven and hell. With the term «hell», Shakespeare is here referring not to the Christian hell, the damnation that necessarily follows the sin of lust, nor with the term «heaven» does he refer to the disincarnated ideal of Christian tradition. The coexistence of the two terms expresses instead 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.

On the other hand, this idea of man as the union of spirit and matter should not be misread. In fact, what makes it different from the Christian and Neoplatonic concept of man is that the poet considers this 'mix' to be essentially rightful, and therefore does not imply a redemptive logic ac-

9 Stephen Booth (1969) has also underlined this rhythmical aspect of the sonnet.

ording to which the imperfection of the flesh will be transfigured through death into the purity of the spirit. The Pauline distinction is lacking in Shakespeare. Lisa Freinkel interprets this lack by linking it to the Lutheran doctrine: «Shakespeare's sonnets investigate the poetic stakes of the absolute, Lutheran strife between flesh and spirit [...] No redemptive logic enriches Shakespearean temporality, ensuring the fulfilment of before in after, or flesh in spirit» (2000, p. 246). However, to associate Luther and Shakespeare's treatment of flesh would be misleading. Even though Luther acknowledges the fact that the flesh is actually not eradicable,¹⁰ he nonetheless considers bodily desires, and particularly lust, as a terrible sin: «who is enslaved by impurity, that is, by lust and the body's dirtiness, becomes more and more unjust, as he is pervaded by sin» (Buzzi 1991, p. 462, transl. mine). The body is naturally inclined towards evil, and for this reason, Luther writes, God commands us to «hate it, destroy it, and mortify it» (p. 443). On the contrary, in Shakespeare's sonnet 129, as Clark writes, «despite the final hell, there is no direct equation of lust and sin» (1994, p. 73), and sexual pleasure is not denied but acknowledged as a legitimate part of men, who neither want nor are able to renounce the «bliss» of sexual consummation.

4 Sonnet 144

In sonnet 144, we discover a similar movement to the one found in sonnet 129. The poem's first lines, which appear to reaffirm the Christian and Neoplatonic worldview, are followed by a gradual *mise en question* and a final subversion of the concepts expressed in the first quatrain.

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,
Woing 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.

¹⁰ «For you cannot deny your father and mother, even if you are alone and locked in, nor can you throw away your flesh and blood and leave it there» (Karant-Nunn, Wiesner-Hanks 2003, p. 143).

Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out. (144)

This sonnet again makes use of a clearly Christian and Neoplatonic terminology: the «better angel» at the side of the poet refers to the guardian angel, an association strengthened by the elements of luminosity and sanctity attributed to him («right fair», «my saint», «his purity»). This figure is opposed to a «worser spirit» that resembles the traditional image of a demon: a «devil», a «female evil» that is distinctly characterized as «coloured ill» and endowed with a «fould pride», which reminds us of both Lucifer and Eve's fall. Moreover, the situation in the first quatrain is clearly reminiscent of the medieval *psychomachia*, where a good angel and a demon fought for a man's soul. On the other hand, the reference to the «two loves» is very significant as it refers to both the Augustinian and Petrarchan distinction between love for the Creator and love for the creature, and to the Neoplatonic 'two Venuses', the one celestial and spiritual, the other earthly, representing sexual desire. An opposition that Robert Burton, following Ficino, expresses in very similar terms in his famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*: «two loves, two Divells, or good and bad Angels according to us, which are still hovering about our soules. The one reares to heaven, the other depresseth us to hell» (1989, vol. 3, p. 12). This sharp opposition appears to confirm the Christian and Neoplatonic antithesis between good and evil, spirit and matter, thus affirming a dichotomous and hierarchical concept of creation. In this way, Shakespeare immediately makes clear his religious and philosophical starting point.

In the first quatrain, the dichotomy is asserted and strengthened by the antithetical separation that isolates the godness of the «better angel» in the third verse, and the negativity of the «worser spirit» in the fourth one. In the second quatrain, something begins to change. The traditional *psychomachia* deviates from its proper course with the appearance of a new element: the angel's interest moves away from the poet as the evil spirit catches it. It is a movement that appears to find its motor in lust, as the terms «tempteth», «corrupt», and the entire verse 8 - «wooing his purity with her foul pride» - suggests. However, the dichotomy is not yet directly challenged: the poet does not explicitly undermine the positivity of his «man right fair», who is still identified as «my better angel» (v. 6) and «my saint» (v. 7). It is in the third quatrain that the initial dichotomy finally crashes, insinuating the doubt that the angel could have transformed into a «fiend» (v. 9) - not incidentally rhyming with «friend». Then in verse 12, the real turning point in this sonnet, we read: «I guess one angel in another's hell». Through the image of an angel in hell we find ourselves to face again a movement similar to the one we found in sonnet 129 - «To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell» (v. 14) - one that unlocks the sonnet's deepest meaning. Through a sharp terminological choice,

Shakespeare eventually destroys the dichotomy that opened the poem: the «angel» is represented «in another's hell», implying an interchangeability between bad and good spirits that is strengthened by the final verse, which defines both good and bad spirit as angels. The initial distinction is now completely lost.

This lexical and semantic mix is extremely significant as it implies on a philosophical level that there is an indissoluble union of good and evil and heaven and hell in both men and the universe. And, with a supreme blow to the Christian paradigm, it is precisely lust which 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. In fact, the last verse confirms through a clearly erotic allusion the carnal nature of the angel's yielding: «Till my bad angel fire my good one out» (v. 14). The expression refers not only to the *coitus*, when the man's sexual fire is quenched by the woman 'liquid' body, but also, as Booth and Duncan-Jones highlight¹¹, to the inflammation that this *coitus* might cause the good angel if he becomes infected by a venereal disease. This allusion is expressed through a language not uncommon in the erotic poetry of the time – suffice it to think of Everard Gulpin's ambiguous satirical verses: «I told Chrestina I would lie with her, | When she with an old phrase doth me advise, | To keepe myselfe from water and from fier, | And she would keepe me from betwixt her thighs, | That there is water I doe make no doubt, | But I'le be loth (wench) to be fired out.» (Allen Carroll 1974) – and is concordant with the allusively erotic imagery of the two Anacreontic poems that close the *canzoniere*.¹²

The sonnet's movement from orthodoxy to subversion is also expressed in terms of colours. The chromatic imagery of the first quatrain appears to be consistent with the canonical Renaissance colour paradigm, which was essentially based on the symbolism of Christian theology. According to this paradigm, as Michel Pastoureau writes, «white and black formed a pair of opposites and often represented the colored expression of Good and Evil» (2009, p. 39). This strong chromatic basis acquired even more importance during the Renaissance. The moral and mystical values attributed to white

11 Booth, quoting from Rollins, paraphrases the verse as: «Until she gets tired of him and kicks him out» and «Until he shows symptoms of venereal disease» (Booth 2000, p. 500), highlighting the fact that both senses are enhanced by incidentally bawdy suggestions of «smoking a fox» from its hole. Similarly, Duncan-Jones writes that in this verse «there is both an analogy with animals being smoked out of their holes or lairs and a suggestion that the man will sooner or later be venereally infected by the woman» (2006, p. 144).

12 The image of erotic desire as a «fire» (Duncan-Jones 2006, 154, v. 5), or even more allusively as a «heart-inflaming brand» (154, v. 2), to be quenched by immersing it in «a cool well» (154, v. 9), «a cold valley-fountain» (153, v. 4) – clearly reminiscent of the feminine sexual organ – is present in both Anacreontic sonnets, along with the probable allusion to the inflammation deriving from venereal diseases.

and black, light and darkness, were strengthened by Platonism's rebirth in the Christianized form elaborated by Ficino's Florentine Academia, according to which light is the main element of true Beauty and the most perfect expression of the Good.¹³ The «two loves», *amore celeste* and *amore volgare*, were thus particularly inclined to assume the colours of white and black, not only in regard to the loved object (one spiritual and the other earthly), but also because of their different natures. Neoplatonic true love is always guided by the intellect's light, which permits man to climb the Neoplatonic scale, the lowest level of which is occupied by the shadow of sensual beauty¹⁴ up to divine beauty's light. On the contrary, sensual desire proceeds from complete blindness, which destroys reason and intellect (the human being's noblest parts), and plunges man into the darkness of irrational and immoral passions. In brief: the Christian and Neoplatonic ontological paradigm, based on the hierarchically structured opposition of spiritual and material planes and the consequent dichotomous concept of man and cosmos, matched a universe equally contrasted with colour: based on the antagonism of white and black and on the Neo-Platonic scale of light.

Sonnet 144 opens by presenting the orthodox dichotomy of the white and spiritual *Amore celeste* - «a man right fair», «the better angel», «my saint» - and the dark, carnal and infernal *Amore volgare* - «a woman coloured ill», «the worser spirit», «a devil». However, the failure of this rigid opposition is soon revealed when the woman begins to seduce the youth. As a result, his fairness starts blending with lust's blackness, his white purity stained by the woman's «foul pride» (the words «purity» and «foul» are clearly characterized also in chromatic terms). The two colours, initially arranged according to a precise oppositional schema, each eventually invade the space of the other. Once again, through the collapse of the

13 Marsilio Ficino, who dedicates more than one work to the nature and value of light, is clear about the opposition of light and darkness. He writes: «Odi maxime omnium tenebras, quarum culpa displicent mihi quaecumque displicent, vel quod cum illis sint, vel quod ab illis labentia relabantur, deprimantque ab illas. Amo ante omnia lumen, cujus gratia et cetera diligo, vel quod cum illo sint, vel quod ab illo fluentia refluant, reducantque ad illud» (I hate the darkness above all things, and because of it I dislike all the things I dislike, whether they mix themselves with darkness, or, after having detached themselves from it, they fall in it again. I love the light more than anything, whose grace makes me love all the other things, whether they mix themselves with light, or, deriving from it, return to it.) (Ficino [1576] 1962, p. 1006). According to him, nothing represents the nature of the Good better than light - «Res nulla magis quam lumen refert natura boni» (Ficino [1576] 1962, p. 996). Light is the chain of the Universe - «vinculum universi» (Ficino [1576] 1962, p. 1010) -, a visible divine power, that leads us towards God, and, gradually, to the moral laws, and the divine things - «Lumen est quasi visibile numen, et Deum referens, et nos gradatim ad mores, et divina perducens» (Ficino [1576] 1962, p. 1014). Beauty itself, according to Ficino and Leone Ebreo, is God's manifestation and a ray of incorporeal light.

14 As Baldassare Castiglione defines it: «la scala che nell'infimo grado tiene l'ombra di bellezza sensuale» (Cordié 1960, p. 357).

boundary between light and darkness, the complexity of a universe in which black and white – good and evil – perpetually spring one from the other is expressed. After having called traditional Christian thought into question, Shakespeare tears down its fundamental dichotomous postulate, presenting the reader with a novel, revolutionary worldview.

5 Conclusion

Published in 1609, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* appear as part of a long and rich tradition of sonnet sequences, which had reached its peak in England in the nineties of the sixteenth century. The poet necessarily places himself within this tradition but, far from subjecting himself to a passive imitation of the established model, achieves a radically original result. Indeed, in these sonnets there is no aesthetic, philosophical or theological paradigm that is not critically taken into account, evaluated, re-elaborated, and somehow transcended. However, this innovative impetus does not indistinctly animate every part of the text. The first section, dedicated to the *Fair Youth*, is very close in style and meaning to the Petrarchan and Neoplatonic poetic model – though in a quite problematic way – and appears to share the philosophical and religious ideas upon which this model was founded. On the other hand, the second section of the *canzoniere*, devoted to the *Dark Lady*, emerges as a drastic opposition to this poetic paradigm. This opposition, however, does not resolve itself in an explicit and punctilious overturn of the model in a parodic key, but rather gives birth to a deep reflection on the ontological nature of men and the universe, leading to the expression of a novel philosophical paradigm.

Through a close reading of sonnet 129 and 144, considered with reference to the religious and philosophical paradigms of the time, this essay shows the poet's subtle strategy to challenge and eventually subvert some of the Christian and Neoplatonic postulates at the base of the sonnet tradition. We have seen how the poet, through an accurate terminological choice, calls into question the traditional identification of lust with sin and the dichotomy between good and evil, in order to reveal their inconsistency in the moment in which he shows the nature of man and universe to be an indissoluble union of spirit and matter. By fostering a rediscovery of the most compelling aspects of the *Sonnets'* second section, this approach helps demonstrate that the value of Shakespeare's *Dark Lady* is by no means inferior to that usually attributed to the sonnets' other addressee, and that the discourse that the poet conveys through her is truly and deeply revolutionary. Based on a somewhat secular outlook, this discourse reveals the deep modernity of Shakespeare's position and, while highlighting the difficulty that some readers still have with the bard's most subversive side, proves once again the relevance of a contemporary return to it.

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