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ANGELS AND DEVILS  
IN SHAKESPEARE'S  
SONNET 144





*he most anomalous of the Sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan period, Shakespeare's Sonnets were published in 1609 by the printer Thomas Thorpe. They were not authorized. Ever since their publication, however, the mysterious editorial circumstances – why were they not authorized, whose identity is hidden under the initials «H.W.» appearing on the frontispiece to whom the work is addressed, what is the temporal sequence of the sonnets, the dates of their composition – have diverted the critics' attention from the meaning of the unusual – to say the least – presence of two rather different beloved to whom the poet addresses his sonnets: a fair youth and a dark lady. For a long time, critics have focused their investigations upon the identity of the fair youth, trying to make it overlap with those enigmatic initials of the frontispiece – Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton or William Herbert, earl of Pembroke – while looking for the exact nature of the relationship of a talented and popular dramatist and an aristocratic patron. The hypothetical biographical background of the remaining sonnets, 127-154, addressed to the dark lady, was to be found instead in an unhappy affair with one Mary Fitton, presumably the earl of Pembroke's mistress, which could explain the aggressive, misogynous style of a love story that seemed to challenge the canons of love poetry of all ages. In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's dark lady was easily transformed into a femme fatale, the heir of a long line of cruel ladies that had populated the scene of European love poetry ever since Petrarca's Canzoniere.<sup>1</sup> As long as the biographical reference has been the critics' main issue, the sonnets addressed to the dark lady, however unusual, were still considered as less scandalous than those directed to the fair youth. On the other hand, the sixteenth-century widespread neo-platonic idea about the moral superiority of male friendship over heterosexual desire could well explain the representation of a powerful, «frantic», even violent sexual relationship with a woman as the realistic face of the ideal love for a man. And yet, the two subsequences have more in common than it is usually thought. Sonnet 144 belongs to the sequence addressed to the Dark Lady.*

*The sequence starts at number 127, changing abruptly the narrative, the gender, and the colour of the previous 126 sonnets that Shakespeare addresses to the fair youth. The discontinuity between the two sequences has been unanimously recognized and variously explained. Although the two addressees appear in several sonnets of both sequences in sentimental and erotic triangles respectively, as we shall see, the break is obvious, and signalled by the solemn entry of sonnet 127:*

In the old age black was not counted fair,  
 or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;  
 But now is black beauty's successive heir (127, 1-3)<sup>2</sup>

*The transition from the youth's fairness to the darkness of the lady is not just a chromatic matter. 126 sonnets have been telling the sentimental story between the poet and a fair, aristocratic «lovely boy». The story articulates in wonderful variations and unexpected turns of the Petrarchan, courtly and neo-platonic code. This subsequence aims at building the perfect portrait of the «composed wonder» of the youth's «frame». The boy is compared to a jewel, a sun, a king, gold, he is a god in love, superior, perfect, powerful. The lines of the poet, therefore must mirror the fair, kind and true constancy of the boy's virtues emanating from such luminous beauty:*

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.

*«At their greatest moments, writes Wilson Knight, the Sonnets are, indeed, less love-poetry than an almost religious adoration before one of 'the rarities of Nature's truth'»,<sup>3</sup>*

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

(105, 1-4)

*More than a sonnet, this 105 resembles a declaration of faith, a sacred Trinitarian litany bowing to the image of an immutable perfection.*

*Praise and religious adoration mingle. What strikes in the subsequence addressed to the fair youth is not so much his gender – on Shakespeare's sexual proclivities may be too much has been written. A young aristocratic boy could, after all, serve as the ideal love-object of a Petrarchan and Neo-platonic sonnet-sequence better than any woman: the intrinsic chastity of a Platonic male friendship, the social distance that separates the poet from the youth could guarantee the absolute exclusion of the body and the censure of any carnal desire required by that religion of love. The choice of a boy, in other words, facilitates that «marriage of true minds» – proudly proclaimed in 116 – that the body of a woman, however evanescent, could undermine. In the first subsequence, Shakespeare's poetry compete with the natural frame of the boy and with Time that that frame will waste. The distilled beauty of the boy – frozen in the splendid portrait built by the poet's art – will survive, like an immortal soul, the death of the youth's body.*

*Such attempt not only belies Shakespeare's repeatedly declared aversion for the Neo-platonic and Petrarchist code within which such a portrait is possible – as he does in all of his comedies –, but it turns out to show the failure of re-founding it. Iced-up in that portrait, the boy remains not different from the frigid ladies praised by Petrarchist poets. It is exactly what sonnet 127 denounces when it proclaims the death of the poetry of praise as «painted rhetoric»;*

And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame:  
 For since each hand hath put on nature's power,  
 Fairing the foul with art's false borrow'd face,  
 Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,  
 Therefore my mistress' brows are raven black,  
 Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem  
 At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,  
 Slandering creation with a false esteem:  
 Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,  
 That every tongue says beauty should look so.

*The narrative movement, the use of mythic and religious terms like holy bower, profaned, creation make of sonnet 127 a «myth of origin», writes Helen Vendler, that announces the birth a new philosophical and poetic «era» where darkness is the legitimate heir to the fair. Here a dark-eyed woman mourns the disappearance of true beauty*

*which has been profaned by art's borrowed face. Therefore, the sonnet continues, my mistress' eyes are raven black. The attack on the Petrarchist imagery becomes explicit in sonnet 130: My mistress eyes are nothing like the sun. My mistress, it is strongly affirmed in every line of this sonnet, is not a Petrarchist lady. «And yet» the poet ends proudly claiming that «by heaven I think my love as rare/ As any she belied with false compare» (130, 13-14). If the lady cannot be compared to any of the exhausted repertory of images of petrarchan memory, what follows, however is not the portrait of the dark lady's black beauty. Or, for that matter, any kind of religious adoration of that portrait as we find in the sequence to the fair youth. For the lady turns out to be a promiscuous, adulterous, sexually voracious woman: black are her eyes, her hair, her skin, and of course her deeds. Impossible to represent, even less to praise, the lady, however is not simply a spiteful joke at the expense of the Petrarchist code. This is not an anti-beauty, as it is typical of the many anti-petrarchist satyres spread all over Europe. What is at stake in this subsequence is not the lady, but the poet's desire for a lady who does not correspond to the old sacred aesthetic, and of course, moral standard. The divorce between desire and judgement is constantly declared: as in sonnet 141: «I do not love thee with mine eyes,/ For they in thee a thousand errors note» (141, 1-2). Nevertheless, she is the «fairest and most precious jewel», but only to the poet's «dear doting heart». The eyes of «some», instead, still think that «thy face hath not the power to make love groan». Where sight and judgement were indispensable to build the fair kind and true portrait of the boy that everybody could approve, here eyes are no longer a reliable meter to measure the lady's merit. The poet, therefore, must «swear» to himself «alone» that her «black is fairest in» his «judgement's place» (131, 6, 12).*

*«A very disparate group», «disjunctive, wildly various», «murky and messy, fraught with unexplained complications, unforeseen conflicts, and unresolved contradictions»,<sup>4</sup> «fragmentary, juxtaposed, oddly modernist in effect»,<sup>5</sup> the narrative of the sonnets to the Dark Lady while stating the impossibility of building the visionary portrait designed for the fair youth, rather mirrors the unstable, contradictory, untrustworthy, extreme nature of earthly desire: appetite and disgust, a bliss in proof and at the same time a very woe, simultaneously heaven and hell, as the famous sonnet 129 meticulously registers:*

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
 Is lust in action; and till action, lust  
 Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,  
 Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,  
 Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight,  
 Past reason hunted, and no sooner had  
 Past reason hated, as swallow'd 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.

*The group of sonnets devoted to the Dark Lady constantly affirms that desire is fully capable of surviving the death of praise, that desire is «a fever», past reason hunted. But never in this subsequence the frantic and unreasonable desire for an ugly, sinful lady is, as it should, escaped or censured. For the poet's is equally «sinful».*

*This is the reason why, as Helen Vendler maintains in commenting sonnet 146 Poor soul, the center of my sinful earth – a deep meditation on the relationship between body and soul – «In Christian terms, the speaker shows no firm purpose of amendment for sexual sin». <sup>6</sup> For, in the sonnets to the Dark Lady there is no sexual sin. From that Petrarchan sin, the poet has no intention to flee. «Love is my sin», declares the poet in sonnet 142 while accusing his lady of being equally sinful. The issue here is reciprocity, not accusation. The lady's «black deeds» are never condemned, nor is lust ever rejected. Promiscuity, the «black deeds» that correspond, in neo-platonic terms, to the lady's black beauty, are rather a source of sexual arousal and never condemned.*

*When, in sonnet 129, Shakespeare describes the inward movement and the phases of a wild lust as «perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust», no external eye is there to judge. Lust is inherently and inevitably extreme. Helen Vendler writes: «Socially, lust is of course savage in its pursuit of its object [...] religiously it may be an expense of spirit on a base matter; psychologically, 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 judgement philosophical rather than ethical because the vocabulary of purely ethical judgment includes words far less neutral than Shakespeare's carefully word extreme».<sup>7</sup> No longer socially condemned, lust now becomes a philosophical concept: it is a «frantic pursuit» of truth. No longer exposed to the others' look – as in sonnet 121, where the poet must defend his «sportive blood» in the face of those who hypocritically deny their own lust – carnal desire does not need an ideal itinerary shared and approved by others. In the sonnets to the Dark Lady, Shakespeare overturns the Pauline hierarchy of the opposition flesh/spirit. It is no longer, or not only, the fair, airy, «better self» of the poet to deserve dignity of love. Equally dignified is his vile, opaque part: the body. And yet, the generative desire of these sonnets is not merely «a kind of brute energy, given now by Nature rather than by God»,<sup>8</sup> as Joel Finneman maintains. What generates the desire of the poet in the sonnets addressed to the dark lady is rather a conflicting, tempestuous nature where contrary and extreme forces fight and cohabit in the same place. This nature is celebrated in Lucretius's *De rerum Natura*, the poem that inspired the most revolutionary and anticristian thinking of the time.<sup>9</sup>*

*In sonnet 144 black and fair mingle:*

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 a woman colour'd 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 turn'd fiend  
Suspect I may, but 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.

*The two neo-platonic loves, the profane and spiritual Venuses, apparently the fair youth and the dark lady, are the actors of a story told in strictly Christian language and concepts. The tale here wittingly*



*re-written is the common medieval drama of the good and the evil angels contending for a man's soul at the end of which Everyman chooses either to go off to heaven or to hell with either angels. The effect they produce on the speaker, Comfort (salvation) and despair (unforgivable sin), strengthens the theological framework of the story. The two loves are sharply opposed one to the other in the octave: right fair, my saint, his purity, better angel on the one hand and the worsen spirit, female evil, coloured ill, foul pride, devil on the other. But soon in the second quatrain something starts to change. The semantic dichotomy begins to crumble as the story continues. The «female evil», whose «foul pride» suggests an attitude to sexual challenge, turns her interest away from the speaker and leans towards the better angel. In the sestet the story has an unexpected turn. Here the poet starts to «suspect» that the «female evil» «tempteth» his better angel to become a devil. The clear-cut antithesis definitely collapses at line 9, leaving place to the poet's doubt on whether the «temptation» of the devil has actually succeeded and has corrupted the «purity» of his better angel. The speaker is not sure. He may be led to think so because the two loves are out of his company and have now become friends. As long as the traditional antithesis of flesh and spirit of Pauline memory keeps the two loves separated, the poet is safe, standing as the sole object of their «suggestion». But now the actors of the traditional triangle have changed position, and from being the centre of the better angel and worsen spirit's attention, the poet is now excluded, abandoned by both, and left alone.*

*The doubt obviously introduces the disquieting element of jealousy. Something that resembles the psychology and the position of Othello doubting and no «ocular proof». The ending of the sonnet, however, is not tragic. The poet will «live in doubt»: Till my bad angel fire my good one out; until, that is, the «man right fair» is expelled from the bad angel's bell – which stands for the woman's sexual organ. The poet, that is to say, will have to wait until the sexual affair between the two is over, and he will be able to see the mark of a venereal disease – this is the second meaning of «fire out» – left on his now corrupted angel. The last line condenses a painful prophesy of ocular proof and a spiteful feeling of revenge.*

*The active angel is here the bad one. It is the woman «coloured ill» that both seduces (corrupt) and expels the good angel in the final line. The*

*story starts and ends at the devil's will, making it clear which of the two angels is the most powerful, and how impossible is even for a pure, saint to resist the irresistible power emanating from the Dark Lady. This witty sonnet may seem mocking the medieval Christian pshycomachia, or, otherwise, Shakespeare's own two subsequences. Or both. And yet the theological framework of the narrative, the presence of words like truth and swear all along the second subsequence lead to take the sonnet seriously. Especially if one consider that, as I briefly hinted before, the sequence addressed to the Dark Lady starts with a program and with the intention of replacing the neoplatonic religion of love and its ascent to heaven with a new one whose centre is the light dwelling in the dark opacity of the matter.*

*What matters here however is concentrated in line 12: I guess one angel in another's hell. The image of an angel slid into hell reminds the inward movement of lust in the famous last line of 129: To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell where the canonical separation of heaven from hell, of bliss from woe finally falls down. Here, however, the philosophical and existential meaning of sonnet 129 becomes a rather explicit image of sexual intercourse: «I guess my friend lies in the sexual organ of the dark lady». In sonnet 144, however, it is not a «spirit» that dwells in that hell, but an angel: I guess one angel in another's hell. The «better angel» is not in the «worser spirit's» hell, but in that of another angel. Not only has the female devil now become one angel; the rhyme of friend and fiend suggests that also the better angel went through a symmetrical transformation. The angels are now two, interchangeable and equal, ending in an inextricably libidinous linkage. The «marriage of true minds» of the first subsequence has turned, in this, as in the other sonnets to the dark lady, into a marriage of hell and heaven, body and soul, fair and dark. This marriage occurs not between two subjects in an ideal Neoplatonic world, but in the speaker's inwardness. The better angel – nothing else, evidently, than «the better part of me» – as the poet addresses the fair youth in the first subsequence – finally meets a worser spirit. The meeting results in an infection. Shakespeare could not find a better image than a venereal disease to seal the fusion of two parts of the self: inevitable, painful, blissful.*

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1. For a synthetic account of the critical judgments on the *Sonnets*, see Katherine Duncan-Jones's *Introduction* to the Arden Shakespeare, *SHAKESPEARE'S Sonnets* (1997), 2007, pp. 69-85.
2. All citations from Shakespeare's *Sonnets* refer to Helen Vendler ed., *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Cambridge, MA 1999.
3. G. W. Knight, *The Mutual Flame. On Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Phoenix and the Turtle*, London 1955, p. 59.
4. I. Bell, *Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady*, in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by M. Shoenfeldt, New York 2007, pp. 293-313, p. 294.
5. J. Kerrigan, *Introduction*, W. SHAKESPEARE *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 34.
6. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, cit., p. 614.
7. Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* cit., p. 552.
8. J. Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye. The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*, Berkeley 1986., p. 19. Fineman's interesting book tends to show the stylistic and psychological break between the two subsequence. The first visionary and narcissistic, the other engaged in looking for a new erotic ways for heterosexual relationships.
9. For a detailed account of the relationship between the sonnets addressed to the dark lady and Bruno's materialistic philosophy as it is articulated in the *Eroici Furori*, see my «Dark ladies: natura e poesia nei *Sonetti* di Shakespeare e negli *Eroici Furori* di Bruno», forthcoming.