

Camilla Caporicci. 2013
The Dark Lady. La rivoluzione Shakespeariana nei
Sonetti alla Dama Bruna
Passignano Sul Trasimeno: Aguaplano

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Shakespeare's Dark Lady is undoubtedly one of the most famous characters in world literature. However, among the series of pale and haughty ladies praised by poets throughout the centuries, she stands out for her uniqueness. And the main reason is not only that she is always referred to as "dark," but also that as such she is praised by the Bard: "Then will I swear beauty herself is black, | and all they foul that thy complexion lack" (132). This alone, in the Renaissance world where "black" was usually associated with evil, should have sounded revolutionary. However, as Camilla Caporicci underlines in this gripping monograph, despite her patent difference with the ladies of the previous European poetic tradition, the Dark Lady has often been treated superficially by critics. What this book conversely tries to reassess is how Shakespeare's Lady is not only a paradoxical inversion of the Petrarchan model, but, most importantly, a way of engaging in a deeper analysis of the ontological truth underlying human nature as a whole.

The book is structured in three parts. In the first part, the author analyses the Dark Lady as the last representative of a series of literary women praised by poets. In order to do so, Caporicci starts with a comparative analysis of the several female figures found in Early Modern European poetry, from the Occitan tradition to the Italian, French, and English poetry of the Renaissance. Born from the convergence of Petrarchism, Christianity, and Neoplatonism, those ladies are represented as cold and unattainable lovers, similar to some extent to the aery "Fair Youth" praised by Shakespeare in the first 127 sonnets of his *canzoniere*. The Dark Lady, instead, stands out as the earthly counterpart of those spiritual ladies. She is the

expression, as the author brilliantly explains, of Nature claiming its own status: that is, within the traditional, cultural clash between spirit and matter, the Dark Lady seems to stand for a reevaluation of the importance of the latter, and of natural instincts in particular. Indeed, as Shakespeare wants us to understand, man is not only spirit, but body too. Man actually is "something rich and strange" and the author demonstrates how repressing physical instincts is always shown by Shakespeare as an unnatural and ultimately destructive behaviour, as also emerges from works such as *Venus and Adonis*, *Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet*.

In the second part, the author focuses instead on the main feature of this revolutionary Lady: her darkness. In order to explain the novelty of Shakespeare's approach, Caporicci first highlights how the whole Renaissance chromatic ideal revolves around the ancient dichotomy between white and black, perceived as the symbol par excellence of the hierarchy of traditional values. The subversion of this very hierarchy in the Dark Lady sequence, however, is not unique. As the author shows, Shakespeare's impulse to subvert the traditional vision of the world is something which also other European intellectuals and artists felt and tried to give shape to. Even though one cannot claim a direct acquaintance, both Giordano Bruno's philosophical thought and Caravaggio's extravagant luminism share the same anti-conventionality underlying Shakespeare's sonnets to the Dark Lady. What emerges from their works is indeed the willingness to demolish the ancient division between the aery world of ideals and the "lower" world of earthly desires. In such a way, all that was black, once taken as ugly and the colour of the Devil, could instead be considered praiseworthy: "But now is black beauty's successive heir" (127). Such a new idea can indeed be seen, as Caporicci shows, in many other black characters created by Shakespeare, from Aaron to Othello, from Rosaline to Cleopatra. By reading Caporicci's monograph, we thus enter a world where the traditional chromatic hierarchy crumbles and we are convinced that Shakespeare's age was truly the beginning of a new era, where all hierarchy "melts into thin air" and what was once considered low and unworthy could finally start to be raised to the same dignity of what was understood as high and worthy. What eventually emerges from such an analysis of Shakespeare's works is thus no more a negative clash of contraries, but rather the eruption of the dynamic energy of the universe, the latter being alive precisely

due to this regenerating mixture of high and low, heaven and earth, light and dark.

In the third and last part, Caporicci broadens the scope of her research and questions the nature of Shakespeare's art itself. According to the author, there are many instances where Shakespeare showed his awareness of the inadequacy of the traditional poetic system when it came to effectively representing reality. Caporicci demonstrates how Shakespeare eventually admits, in the sonnets to the Fair Youth, the defeat of an art trying to distil the essence of life in eternal lines. While the "aery monuments" erected for the Youth turn out to be his tomb, the sonnets to the Dark Lady reveal instead the liveliness of the earthly dimension and are the final, and most straightforward admission, of the superiority of Nature over Art.

Among the strengths of this book are the numerous close readings of the primary texts, as well as the extensive secondary literature used by Caporicci, who has thoroughly studied the cultural context in which Shakespeare lived so as to confer additional strength to her theories. All this demonstrates the seriousness of the author, and finally convinces the reader of the depth of her study. The only weakness could be the fact that the third part is relatively shorter than the first two. This part is, nonetheless, very well documented and convincing and also contemplates the possibility of further investigating this particular aspect of her study.

In conclusion, the work has many merits, and marks a significant contribution to the body of critical studies on the *Sonnets*. In particular, it shifts the focus of attention from the somewhat fruitless search for the identity of the addressees, or the supposed sexual orientation of the poet, to what these poems actually represent within Shakespeare's philosophical, anthropological, and gnoseological thought.

How to cite this review:

Ragni, Cristiano. Review of Camilla Caporicci. 2013. *The Dark Lady. La rivoluzione Shakespeariana nei Sonetti alla Dama Bruna*. SEDERI 25 (2015): 171-73.

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