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COLOURED ILL: BRINGING DARK LADIES INTO THE LIGHT

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Abstract. Shakespeare's Dark Lady has generated not only a great deal of speculation as to her identity, but also a number of literary treatments in fiction, drama and even poetry. This paper will provide an overview of these depictions, only to focus on two of the most recent and most prominent examples, these being the theatre play *Emilia* by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm from 2018 and the ballet/spoken word production *Lucy Negro Redux* from 2019 based on a collection of poems of the same name by Caroline Randall Williams.

Malcolm's play focuses on the historical figure of Emilia Bassano Lanier, one of the traditional Dark Lady candidates. Malcolm portrays her, with an all female cast, as a woman of colour in three stages of her life. Williams' poetry collection and the ballet/spoken word adaptation, with original music by Rhiannon Giddens, explore the personage of Lucy Negro or Black Luce who has also been granted the status of Shakespeare's erotic muse.

Both productions focus on women of colour and attempt to provide a voice and agency for these intriguing women whose value has been traditionally only due to their connection to Shakespeare the man. Both productions have not only popularized Shakespeare with a contemporary audience but have also attempted to reach new viewers and readers. They have additionally involved media crossings into musical theatre, dance and spoken word.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptations, theatre, feminism, ballet.

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ЗАТЬМАРЕНІ КОЛЬОРОМ: ПОЧУТИ ГОЛОС ТЕМНОШКІРИХ ЖІНОК

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Анотація. Шекспірівська «Темна леді» породила не лише безліч спекуляцій щодо її особистості, а й низку літературних інтерпретацій у художній, драматичній і навіть поетичній літературі. У цій статті ми зробимо огляд цих зображень, зосередившись лише на двох найсвіжіших і найяскравіших прикладах: театральній п'єсі «Емілія» Моргана Ллойда Малкольма 2018 року та балетно-розмовній постановці «Люсі Негро Редукс» 2019 року, заснованій на однойменній збірці віршів Керолайн Рендалл Вільямс.

П'єса Малькольма зосереджена на історичній постаті Емілії Бассано Ланьє, однієї з традиційних кандидаток на роль Темної Леді. Малкольм зображує її, за участю виключно жіночого акторського складу, як кольорову жінку на трьох етапах її життя. Поетична збірка Вільямса та балетно-розмовна адаптація з оригінальною музикою Ріаннон Гідденс досліджують образ Люсі Негро або Чорної Люсі, якій також надано статус еротичної музи Шекспіра.

Обидві постановки зосереджені на кольорових жінках і намагаються надати голос і свободу дій цим інтригуючим жінкам, чия цінність традиційно зумовлена лише їхнім зв'язком із Шекспіром-чоловіком. Обидві постановки не лише популяризують Шекспіра серед сучасної аудиторії, але й намагаються достукатися до нових глядачів і читачів. Вони також залучили медіа-перетини з музичним театром, танцем і розмовним мистецтвом.

Ключові слова: Шекспір, адаптації, театр, фемінізм, балет.

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Introduction

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* have generated a great deal of speculation as to connections between the poems and personages and incidents in his own life. The greatest focus has traditionally been on the so-called Fair Youth referenced in the *Sonnets* and the mysterious Mr. W. H. who the collection is dedicated to. The *Sonnets* also make frequent reference, however, to a Dark Lady whose identity has also encouraged numerous theories. A number of novels, plays, short stories and even television series have portrayed various candidates for the Dark Lady. Most of them, however, inevitably emphasise her hypersexuality and employ the male gaze with the focus on Shakespeare as her lover. More recent works, focused on the mystery of the identity of the Dark Lady, have been imagined particularly among women writers of biofiction, providing a feminist take and reading about the various candidates.

Mary Fitton, a maid of honour to Queen Elizabeth, was the most popular candidate for the Dark Lady in many of the biofictional treatments of the early twentieth century: G.B. Shaw, Frank Harris, etc. The wife of the celebrated humanist John Florio is yet another candidate, as is the innkeeper's wife Jennet Davenant, with this being by no means an exhaustive list. In an episode *The Shakespeare Code* of the third season of the science fiction classic series *Doctor Who*, the Time Lord travels with his companion Martha Jones, a woman of colour, back to Shakespeare's day and thereby inspires the Bard to write of her in the *Sonnets*. The delightful recent television series *Upstart Crow* includes, as minor characters, the two Dark Lady candidates, Emilia Bassano and Lucy Negro the Tavern Keeper, who will be the focus of this paper.

One of the most popular Dark Lady candidates is known by a number of variants: Lucy or Luce Morgan, Dark Lucy or Lucy Negro. Samuel Schoenbaum in his classic *William Shakespeare A Compact Documentary Life* outlines the main details concerning the origin of the theories. (Schoenbaum, 125). A more recent work by Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans*, provides a new scholarly take on her identity. The candidacy of Lucy is also a popular theme in the Shakespeare themed books of Anthony Burgess. His non-fiction book on the subject, entitled simply *Shakespeare*, consists mostly of speculation, not only on her identity, but on a range of other themes.

Burgess' fictional treatments include *Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love Life*, where a young Shakespeare, before finding fame and fortune, meets a Mistress Lucy or Fatimah, who is originally from Malaysia: "She is brown, not negro." (Burgess, *Nothing*, 252). She teaches him the mysteries of love and how to say goodbye in Malay 'selamat jalan' and they eventually become lovers. Burgess introduces yet another version of the Dark Lady in his hilarious book *Enderby's Dark Lady or No End to Enderby*. Enderby is an ageing English poet who meets and develops an infatuation with an African-American actress, playing the role of Lucy, while working together on a biofictional musical about Shakespeare's life. Burgess describes the first impression she makes on the lovestruck Enderby: "This April Elgar was a revelation to his awed eyes, and would be even more so when he got his glasses on." (Burgess, Enderby, 578).

Robert Nye wrote two celebrated Shakespeare books, one of which *The Late Mr. Shakespeare*, makes several references to possible candidates for the Dark Lady, and mentions Lucy in some detail: "Finally, we have candidate number five: Lucy Negro, alias Lucy Morgan, kept a brothel in St John Street, Clerkenwell. She was known as the Abbess of Clerkenwell, head of the infamous sisterhood of the Black Nuns." (Nye, 292). Nye describes her appearance with great enthusiasm, obviously drawing inspiration from sonnet 130: "Dark-skinned, with eyes as black and shining as the wings of a raven, her breasts were dun, and her hair was like black wires – it was thick and twisting, curly in the extreme. By no means conventionally beautiful, she on my oath a woman of rare beauty." (Nye, 292).

The novel *Will* by Christopher Rush contains a reference to a prostitute Lucy Negro who seems to specialize in S&M and Lucy is the subject of another borderline Harlequin romance treatment *His Dark Lady* from 2013 by Victoria Lamb. Shakespeare appears here, intermittently bedding and discussing theatre with the black lady-in-waiting Lucy Morgan.

The multi-faceted and multi-genre ballet *Lucy Negro Redux*, which had its premiere in 2019, arose out of a poetry collection of the same name from 2015 by the African-American writer Caroline Randall Williams. The ballet included not only dance, choreographed by Paul Vasterling, but also original live music composed and played by Grammy awarded and Pulitzer Prize winner Rhiannon Giddens. The ballet also contains spoken word segments with the author herself reading her poems, serving as the narrator in a sense. Williams developed an interest in the topic after reading a scholarly article about Lucy Redux by the afore-mentioned Duncan Salkeld. This led to a visit to England (chronicled in prose sections of the book) and culminated in the publication of her linked collection of poems. The following analysis will focus on a selection from the poems.

The first poem in the collection is entitled "BlackLucyNegro I" and seems to be making reference to Shakespeare having sexual intercourse with Lucy, a prostitute of African descent.

> The idea of her
> warm brown
> body long stretching
> under his hands
> is a righteous want--
> she's become an Other
> way to talk about skin,
> the world-heavy mule
> of her, borne line by line
> down the page
> run and tell everything
> every truth you ever knew
> about BlackLucyNegro.
> Say she is the loose light.
> Say she is the root.

Say she ate at his table.
Say she ate at all. Say she.
Say she. Say she. (Williams, 2)

The poem begins to provide Lucy with not only a body, but a voice. The poem is followed by a prose passage which mentions the author's original interest in the subject of the sonnets and how she eventually contacted Salkeld and began her research and writing. Williams obviously identifies with the Dark Lady, being a woman of colour, but also a person who has been sexually objectified and stereotyped and finally as someone who has had to face significant obstacles in order to achieve her dreams as a writer.

The second poem in the collection "BlackLucyNegro II" provides a backstory to the protagonist of the poems and argues that she has achieved some level of empowerment over her own body, despite her profession.

Let me tell you about Black Lucy
Lucy run a brothel
Lucy got a lover
Lucy own her body (Williams, 4)

Although there is some biographical basis for this characterization of Lucy, Williams is obviously interpreting her through the lens and perspective of a twenty-first century African-American woman.

The poem "BlackLucyNegro III" makes the connection between the author and the protagonist even more explicit.

Lucy Negro
I am you
Lucy Negro
You can become anything I say
From page to clenched thigh
From that day to his
Lucy Negro
(Varieties of Other-ness be damned)
There is beauty in the dark
Lucy (Williams, 9)

The poem shows affinities with the Black is Beautiful movement, originating back in the 1960s, and with feminist notions of body positivity.

The second Dark Lady candidate, who will be discussed below, is the subject of yet another poem "Aemelia Lanyer was a White Girl".

And how could it be Amelia,
Amelia what's her name,
what with Rose Flower herself--
yes Black Lucy herself,

IN COG NEGRO--
and her black wires all up in his word?
The dark lady is black! Black wires Black.
Colored ill black. More black. Blacker.
Blackamoor black. (Williams, 10)

The poem once again makes reference to Sonnet 130 with its seeming description of a woman who does not fit in with the standards of beauty of the day, but is nevertheless desirable in the eyes of the poet.

The poem "Black Luce" lays out Williams' desire to provide Lucy, and silenced women of the past in general, with not only a voice, but with "a seat at the table". (Williams, 14) The poem contains the most explicit explanation of Williams' agenda with not only the poems, but the ballet: "I will dig and root about and trawl and query and widely surmise until there is a place for you, Lucy. And it will be my place for having carved yours out, and altogether earned by you for us, and proved by me for us. Yes, I declare that beauty herself is black after all." (Williams, 14). Lucy thus becomes a kind of 'everywoman' whose story needs to be told and brought to life.

Another leading candidate for the identity of Shakespeare's Dark Lady is Emilia/Aemilia Bassano/Lanier/Lanyer who we know a great deal more about. There is no doubt as to the existence, in contrast to Lucy, of this historical personage. She was a published writer (the volume *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*), this being one of the reasons for Shakespeare's interest in her in many of the treatments, and a member of a musical family connected with the royal court. John Hudson, among others, outlines the origin of the rumours concerning her relationship with Shakespeare (Hudson).

Sally O'Reilly's *Dark Aemilia: A Novel of Shakespeare's Dark Lady* from 2014 is a feminist treatment, introducing Shakespeare's lost female collaborator and the lover and mother to his son, Aemilia Bassano (Lanyer). The book displays a number of parallels with Malcolm's play, including her possible contribution to Shakespeare's plays and his failure to acknowledge her authorship. This causes a rift in their relationship, only for them to be reconciled near his death. Shakespeare finally acknowledges her importance in his life: "'Didn't you see how it was? That all my heroines are versions of my Dark Aemilia? Black-eyed Rosaline, clever Portia, the Egyptian Queen who drove poor Anthony to madness -- all you. Each one." (O'Reilly, 387).

There are a number of similar books, not always of the same quality, in this vein. These include an older treatment by Ursula Bloom, *How Dark My Lady* from 1951. Alexa Schnee's *Shakespeare's Dark Lady* from 2012 again deals with Emilia Bassano in a love affair with Shakespeare, and once again she has her work stolen, this time *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by her male lover. Michael Baldwin's novel *Dark Lady* from 1999 relates more or less the same story. *The Dark Lady's Mask* from 2016 by Mary Sharratt again focuses on Bassano as does Grace Tiffany's *Paint* from 2013 with Shakespeare as a minor character. Most recently, Steve Weltzenkorn has published a work along the same lines, *Shakespeare's Conspirator: The Woman, The Writer, The Clues* from 2015. Finally, there is a play on the same subject, *Dark Lady* by Karen Sunde, from 1988.

Emilia is a play written by the playwright and screenwriter Morgan Lloyd Malcolm. It was commissioned by the Globe Theatre and premiered in 2018. In the introduction to the printed text, Malcolm makes it clear that she has not attempted to portray the historical period accurately, but taken ample poetic liberties: "It isn't an accurate representation of Renaissance England, it isn't a historical representation. It is a memory, a dream, a feeling of her." (Malcolm, A Note on the Text). The play contains three versions of Emilia Bassano of different ages in varying stages of her life. A number of the performances have been with all female casts. The play is not particularly subtle in its message and intentions, beginning with the following statement in the Prologue by all three Emilias and other women in the cast: "We are only as powerful as the stories we tell. We have not always been able to tell them. Time to listen!" (Malcolm, Prologue).

The Emilia of the play is from an immigrant family and faces prejudice while being brought up in a upper class household. Her education as a 'lady' goes against everything she holds dear, as exemplified by the following passage where she discusses a future husband with her fellow future debutantes: "Don't you want a man who will see you for how brilliant your mind is and ask you how you wish to live your life instead of telling you how your life will be lived?" (Malcolm, 1.2). See meets, unsurprisingly, with complete

misunderstanding and scorn. Despite obstacles from her surroundings, she remains committed to her first love, poetry: “If you do seek love, and I know that I do, then seek it in poetry. Seek it in verse. In words written and spoken. Seek it in the pursuit of beauty. In art. For that, is the only place that will ever hold true love for me.” (Malcolm, 1.2)

Her interest in literature eventually leads her to a friendship with William Shakespeare. As is often the case with Shakespearian biofiction, the characters insert lines from the plays and the sonnets in their exchanges. The flirtation between Shakespeare and Emilia contains, for example, some of the banter from *The Taming of the Shrew*, from sonnet 130 and from *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the ongoing themes in the play is the importance of righteous anger on the part of women at the way they have been treated: “Anger serves me just fine! Anger will fuel me. Anger will turn hope into action. Do not take my anger from me.” (Malcolm, 1.7). Emilia refuses to keep silent and demur, even when this leads her into dangers. Shakespeare is the only man in her life who takes her seriously and who she can confide in: “That we must instead sit quietly and patiently watch as you enjoy the fruits of your labours. Imagine it so for you. Then see how my own desires languish in the dark. And still your sex thinks we are less? Well I would that you use your privileged position in that wooden O of words to let husbands know, their wives have sense like them.” (Malcolm, 1.9). She goes on to paraphrase Shylock’s soliloquy, Hath Not a Jew Eyes?, from *The Merchant of Venice*. Her relationship with the Bard turns sour, however, when he uses, or better said steals, her plot ideas and lines of verse in *Othello*: “My words! You’ve used my words and stories is so many of your plays and yet only your name is known.” (Malcolm, 1.11).

Emilia is also pained to realise that her former lover has used her lines and thoughts in his Sonnets: “I remember him writing them. They were for us. Not for the world to see. He published them? (Malcolm, 2.5). At the encouragement on one her benefactors, Lady Anne, she finally publishes her own independent work, although still having to face certain restrictions and expectations related to her gender. Lady Anne advises her as follows: “Write a religious text but inside it, deep inside what you write, place your messages for us. We who have read your poems will know what you are saying to us. The censor won’t suspect a thing.” (Malcolm, 2.7). Near the end of the play, Shakespeare finally acknowledges her contribution and intellectual clout: “That you spoke for many who could not speak. That you must have been so brave to have done what you did. That you deserve all of this right now.” (Malcolm, 2.9). This serves as some solace, but much of the damage has already been done.

In the final scene of the play , Emilia 3 (the oldest version) provides a powerful closing statement and feminist manifesto:

I am 76 years old and I hold in me a muscle memory of every woman who came before me and I will send more for those that will come after. For Eve. For every Eve. I don’t know if you can feel it? Inside of you. You don’t need to be a woman to know what is coming. Because why have our stories been ignored? For so long? Ask yourself why.

Listen to us. Listen to every woman who came before you. Listen to every woman with you now. And listen when I say to you to take the fire as your own. That anger that you feel it is yours and you can use it. We want you to. We need you to. Look how far we’ve come already. Don’t stop now. The house that has been built around you is not made of stone. The stakes we have been tied to will not survive if our flames burn bright. And if they try to burn you, may your fire be stronger than theirs so you can burn the whole fucking house down.” (Malcolm, 2.10)

Sonia Nair in a review of the play points out the relevancy of the work to current societal issues: “In Lloyd Malcom’s script, women’s confinement to the margins of history and their ostracisation from any pursuits which weren’t connected to motherhood find contemporary resonances in questions around representation, double standards and mansplaining.” (Nair). She goes on to lightly criticise the play for a certain preachiness and didactic tone, an opinion the present author would share. The play and its subject, however, consciously adopt an informative, educational approach with the printed play also including

the original poems of Emilia Bassano with Malcolm's Introduction which summarise the remarkable legacy of this pioneering woman writer.

Our Emilia was fiercely intelligent, a writer, a survivor, a fighter, a mother and an educator. We know from court records that she set up a school for girls, that she fought for inheritance owed, that she lived to the ripe old age of seventy-six, that she birthed two children, lost one as a baby and many others as miscarriages. That she was the daughter of migrants from Italy and would have suffered prejudice and injustice. That she wrote may poems that she published and no doubt wrote many more. That she knew that to be published as a woman she needed to get past the censor and write religious poetry and within it she hid messages for her fellow women. (Malcolm, Introduction to Poems)

Malcolm throws down the gauntlet and challenges her readers and viewers to take the message of the play to heart and seek out other silenced female voices of the past: "For every Emilia there are hundreds of other talents and voices lost to history. We must seek them out and amplify them. Let's stop rereading the same old narratives ... there are so many more out there we haven't heard yet." (Malcolm, Introduction to the Poems). Morgan Lloyd Malcolm has certainly succeeded when it comes to the voice and narrative of Emilia Bassano.

Conclusion

Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's play was commissioned by the Globe Theatre, while Caroline Randall Williams' work was a poetry collection and only later turned into a ballet with live music, song and spoken word. Although the two creative works examined herein came about quite differently and in two parts of the English-speaking world, they do share a number of themes. In contrast to most of the previous depictions of the Dark Lady, which highly sexualize her and only portray her as an accessory to the great Shakespeare, these two treatments place the focus squarely on her. Both productions not only humanize the female lead, but also empower and give agency to the respective Dark Lady. They also celebrate female sexuality, body positivity and righteous anger. They consciously focus on women of colour, empowering and providing agency to women of the past and present; this is very much linked with the MeToo and BLM movements. The two pieces are not particularly interested in historical accuracy, but instead explore their protagonists along the lines of Virginia Woolf's imaginary Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own*. They flesh out the characters, employ the female gaze, and empower and give a voice and agency to these women who were previously overshadowed by Shakespeare. *Emilia* and *Lucy Negro Redux* provide a place and home for their respective protagonists, shining light on the Dark Lady and putting her centre stage for a welcome change.

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