

## George Eliot's heroines and the Dark Lady in Shakespeare's *The Sonnets*

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### I . Introduction

In most of George Eliot's (1819–1880) novels, the “dark heroines” are the main characters. They usually have dark hair and dark (black) eyes; furthermore, “they struggle with evil, not just in the world but in themselves” (Williams 140). Generally, compared with the “dark heroine,” the “fair heroine” who has blond hair and blue eyes dominates Victorian novels and represents the societal ideal of female beauty. However, Eliot attempted to upset the dominance of the “fair heroine” through her novels. Parts of William Shakespeare's (1564–1616) works are quoted in her novels,<sup>1)</sup> and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) called Eliot “a female Shakespeare.” Similarly, Alexander Main commented that “she had done for the novel what Shakespeare did for the Drama. The very breadth of her sympathy was frequently described as Shakespearean.”<sup>2)</sup> Eliot hoped to arouse the reader's sympathy in response to her characters' sorrow and pleasure. She also wanted to gain dramatic power in her novels. To this end, Eliot learned Greek tragedies and classical dramas and was definitively inspired by Shakespeare.

The relationship between Eliot's heroines and the tragic heroines of Shakespeare's dramas has been taken up in some research papers. For example, John Rignall indicates Maggie and Ophelia's resemblance and perceives “an Ophelia-like end for Maggie—‘wanderin' up an' down by the water like a wild thing” (Poole 113). Also, U.C. Knoepfmacher points out, “Although *Middlemarch* might be termed Shakespearean in its breadth and complexity, it is *Daniel Deronda* that has been fairly described as ‘the most consciously Shakespearean’ of all George Eliot's novels.” (27) He therefore considers the character of

Gwendolen (the “dark heroine”) in relation to Shakespeare’s dramas. While there are previous papers that compare Eliot’s novels and Shakespeare’s dramas, however, *The Sonnets* (1609) has never been discussed.

In *The Sonnets*, a woman called the Dark Lady appears but is not given a name. The Dark Lady is a woman who possesses an enchanting devilishness and is an enigmatic presence. In *The Sonnets*, a poet loves a young man, but the Dark Lady disturbs and intervenes in the relationship. The poet consequently suffers from a “love triangle.” There are some commonalities between Shakespeare’s Dark Lady and Eliot’s “dark heroines.” By looking at these commonalities, it is possible to highlight Shakespearean qualities in Eliot’s work and consider the worldview that Eliot inherited as a successor. Also, the present article reaffirms that *The Sonnets* contains elements that are present in Shakespeare’s plays and emphasizes that the Dark Lady has the same influence as other tragic heroines in Shakespeare’s dramas.

## II.

From the olden age, a traditional beauty has been represented as “fair.” However, in *The Sonnet* No.127, a poet insists that “black” has become the successor of beauty and that “fair” and “foul” cannot be identified by appearance. Every woman cheats the natural figure and conceals her true face, yet, even though there is a beauty in the real natural face, “black beauty” is still not admired. The speaker asserts that this trend is over however and that beautiful things are beautiful without being born “fair.” It seems that the dark lady’s black features lament women who try to decorate themselves with fakery, and now black is the rightful heir of beauty.

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,  
 And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:  
 For since each hand hath put on nature’s power,  
 Fairing the foul with art’s false borrowed face,  
 Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,  
 But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.  
 Therefore my mistress’ eyes are raven black,  
 Her brows so suited, and they mourners seem  
 At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,

Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.

Yet so they mourn, becoming of their woe,

That every tongue says beauty should look so. (*The Sonnet*, No.127)

This sonnet conveys that various aspects of life contain contradictions. It has been noted that there are parts in common with the message of the three witches that predicts the fate of Macbeth in the opening scene of *Macbeth* (1606).<sup>3)</sup> The message is, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (15). It can be interpreted that these elements are opposites, but there is no difference between the two. The witches try to reverse the fixed values, and such binary conflict resolution often appears in Eliot's view of literature as well.

The contrast of "fair" and "dark" is a traditional motif. Usually, the "fair woman" has been seen as gentle and homely and the "dark woman" as passionate and proud. Eliot learned this contrast from Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), and in her early works, she used the traditional motif in character depictions. Even so, Eliot had doubts about the simplistic view that appearance represents the human mind. She focused on the complicated human mind instead and began to create heroines whose inner and outer lives did not match. Therefore, although the heroine is outwardly fair, she has darkness in her mind. For example, in *Romola* (1863) (hereafter *R*), the title character's hair is "a reddish gold colour" and her appearance is fair. Nevertheless, she wears a black veil and creates a dark atmosphere. In addition, she has trouble and her heart is in the dark. Hence, Romola is regarded as a "dark heroine" in Eliot's novels.<sup>4)</sup>

The hair was of a reddish gold colour, enriched by an unbroken small ripple, such as may be seen in the sunset clouds on grandest autumnal evenings. It was confined by a black fillet above her small ears, from which it rippled forward again, and made a natural veil for her neck above her square-cut gown of black rascia, or serge. (*R* 48)

Eliot focuses on humans' inner complexity and contradicting nature in *R*. Florence, which is expressed as "a web of inconsistencies" (*R* 651), is the novel's setting, and Romola is depicted as a heroine who embodies Florence. Before she gets married to Tito, she is aware of her brother's warning and tells Tito about the concerns regarding their marriage. He gives her words of encouragement:

"My Romola, promise me to resist such thoughts; they are fit for sickly nuns, not for my golden-tressed Aurora, who looks made to scatter all such twilight fantasies. Try

not to think of them now." (*R* 177)

Tito wants Romola to serve as the presence of a light that illuminates the home as a homely blond-haired "fair" woman. Romola's heart is in the dark, however, and she seeks the presence of light to illuminate herself. She does not embody the source of light as Tito wishes, and his words of encouragement do not truly encourage her. For this reason, their spiritual gap increases after their marriage. Tito is often out of their home and eventually starts another family in secret. Romola shuts herself in the home and puts on "black veil and mantle" (*R* 253) when she goes out. She literally has a "dark" married life. However, the story does not end with the defeat of Romola's life. Again, it is prudent to focus on her psychological state when she goes out wearing black clothes:

Under these circumstances the streets were not altogether a pleasant promenade for well-born women; but Romola, shrouded in her black veil and mantle, and with old Maso by her side, felt secure enough from impertinent observation. (*R* 253)

Romola thus attains a sense of security by clothing herself in black, and she extends her freedom of action following this behavior. Hence, the "black veil and mantle" do not simply express her inner darkness; they also express positive attributes that broaden her range of action. Romola repeats her obedience and rebellion against her father, her husband, and the zealous religious reformer Savonarola who influences Romola's later life. Gradually, she gains independence like a man and exhibits new behavioral patterns. In the end, she leaves her husband:

"... the law that should make us one can never be obeyed. I too am a human being. I have a soul of my own that abhors your actions. Our union is a pretence — as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage." ... "I desire to quit you," said Romola, impetuously. (*R* 482)

Romola tries to break her master-slave relationship with her husband and attempts to be free. Before long, Tito drowns, and Romola takes over Tito's lover and children. The novel ends with her living a happy, shared life with them. In this way, Romola turns a "dark" married life into a positive one by using black (dark) clothes. The character is in this way similar to the Dark Lady in *The Sonnet* who overturns the fixed, traditional concept. Likewise, the "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (15) message in *Macbeth* applies to Romola's life.

In her mid-term novels, Eliot tried to move away from traditional motifs in character depictions and focused on the complicated human mind that cannot be categorized. She succeeded in depicting Romola as a heroine who embodies “a web of inconsistencies.”

### III.

The poet who loves the Dark Lady is particularly attracted to his beloved's eyes. He says that sad black eyes suit the Dark Lady more than “the morning sun of heaven” and “full star that ushers in the even.” He praises black and regards colors other than black as “foul.” Again, *Macbeth's* line “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (15) also appears here.

Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me,  
 Knowing thy heart torments me with disdain,  
 Have put on black and loving mourners be,  
 Looking with pretty ruth upon my pain.  
 And truly not the morning sun of heaven  
 Better becomes the grey cheeks of the east,  
 Nor that full star that ushers in the even  
 Doth half that glory to the sober west,  
 As those two mourning eyes become thy face:  
 O, let it then as well beseem thy heart  
 To mourn for me, since mourning doth thee grace,  
 And suit thy pity like in every part.  
 Then will I swear beauty herself is black  
 And all they foul that thy complexion lack. (*The Sonnet*, No.132)

It is evident, though, that the poet suffers from the Dark Lady looking at other men with her eyes. It seems that the poet is hurt because he is told “I love another man.” However, he is hurt more from her dubious look toward other men. Readers can understand how powerful the Dark Lady's eyes are from the expression “Kill me outright with looks and rid my pain.” The poet is deeply fascinated with her eyes. Moreover, he is captivated by the Dark Lady who evokes such negative words as “two mourning eyes” and “unkindness.” *The Sonnet* suggests that, when a person loves another person to death, deep affection is not always based on a fascination with positive elements. Negative factors also lead to obsessive love and can intensify lovesickness such as in the poet.

O, call not me to justify the wrong  
 That thy unkindness lays upon my heart;  
 Wound me not with thine eye but with thy tongue;  
 Use power with power and slay me not by art.  
 Tell me thou lov'st elsewhere; but in my sight,  
 Dear heart, forbear to glance thine eye aside;  
 What need'st thou wound with cunning when thy might  
 Is more than my o'erpressed defence can bide?  
 Let me excuse thee: Ah! my love well knows  
 Her pretty looks have been mine enemies,  
 And therefore from my face she turns my foes,  
 That they elsewhere might dart their injuries.  
 Yet do not so; but since I am near slain,  
 Kill me outright with looks and rid my pain. (*The Sonnet*, No.139)

“Mr. Gilfill's Love-Story” is the second work of Eliot's first novel, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) (hereafter *S*). The heroine is Caterina whose nickname is “black-eyed monkey” (*S* 94). As this nickname indicates, her “large dark eyes” (*S* 83) are her greatest feature. She is a “dark woman” who has black hair and black eyes. Caterina is always quiet because she is an orphan brought from Italy and has not received higher education. She is treated akin to a cute pet by Sir and Lady Cheverel. Caterina's educational limitations ultimately lead to tragedy. As Marianne Novy points out, “Eliot's narrator modulates a comment on educational limitations into a claim that puts her explicitly in the tradition of Shakespeare's tragic heroines” (92). Caterina's educational limitations are similar to those of Shakespeare's heroines. The following quotation references Desdemona in *Othello* (1604) and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1595–6).

But, for a long time, there was no thought of giving her any more elaborate education. It is very likely that to her dying day Caterina thought the earth stood still, and that the sun and stars moved round it; but so, for the matter of that, did Helen, and Dido, and Desdemona, and Juliet; whence I hope you will not think my Caterina less worthy to be a heroine on that account. (*S* 110)

Like Shakespeare's tragic heroines, Caterina's ignorance is a problem, as is her reticence. Her true intention is not well-understood by people around her. However, she has an intense inner

passion that readers cannot imagine from her discreet appearance. As if to emphasize her intense passion, the expression "large dark eyes" is repeated many times. Caterina's dark eyes are therefore important as they provide a way for her to assert herself. In addition, she sings as a means of self-expression. She makes use of the musical talent she inherited from her father and becomes a songstress at Sir Cheverel's house. She entrusts the powerful emotions hidden in her heart to the creation of music. Sometimes, she expresses suppressed emotions by singing.

Gillian Beer indicates that the connection between revenge and singing appears repeatedly in Eliot's works (207). Sometimes, revenge is expressed in songs. Caterina loves Captain Wybrow, but he does not take her feelings seriously. Before long, Captain Wybrow applies for marriage to another woman, Lady Assher. When Caterina finds out, she experiences fierce "jealousy," "pride," and "rebellion," and her songs convey this explosion. The songs and her feelings are united as follows.

It happened this evening that the sentiment of these airs, "*Che faro senza Eurydice?*" and "*Ho perduto il bel semiante,*" in both of which the singer pours out his yearning after his lost love, came very close to Caterina's own feeling. But her emotion, instead of being a hindrance to her singing, gave her additional power. Her singing was what she could do best; it was her one point of superiority, in which it was probable she would excel the highborn beauty whom Anthony was to woo; and her love, her jealousy, her pride, her rebellion against destiny, made one stream of passion which welled forth in the deep rich tones of her voice. (S 95)

Caterina's madness of passion for Captain Wybrow increases each day, and she is exhausted mentally. At last, she loses her mind and feels murderous toward him. She tries to plunge a dagger into his heart and loses control of herself, showing a terrible appearance. Eliot frequently emphasizes Caterina's black eyes and the hidden passion lurking behind them. The fear and evil that are likely to incite something unforeseeable are also hidden in her eyes. Finally, her identity is shown.

See how she rushes noiselessly, like a pale meteor, along the passages and up the gallery stairs! Those gleaming eyes, those bloodless lips, that swift, silent tread, make her look like the incarnation of a fierce purpose, rather than a woman. (S 156)

Captain Wybrow dies of heart disease before being killed by Caterina. Thus, she avoids

becoming a murderer. Mr. Gilfill, who watches and loves her for many years, comforts her; before long, the two get married. Caterina's wounded heart is healed through married life, but she dies soon after. Mr. Gilfill keeps loving her in his memories. Although he knew that Caterina tried to commit sin, he loves her regardless. Both Caterina and the Dark Lady are women with negative elements. However, Mr. Gilfill and the poet still love them deeply.

Just like Caterina, the Dark Lady fascinates men with music. Caterina sings along with a harpsichord (S 95), and the Dark Lady plays the virginal. Both are keyboard instruments. The poet envies the keyboard and is fascinated by the music. He wishes to change the position of his lips and the keyboard. He expresses a sense of envy, as if the Dark Lady's fingers kiss the keys. Then he honestly asks his lover for her lips.

How oft, when thou, my music, music play'st  
 Upon that blessed wood whose motion sounds  
 With thy sweet fingers when thou gently sway'st  
 The wiry concord that mine ear confounds,  
 Do I envy those jacks that nimble leap  
 To kiss the tender inward of thy hand,  
 Whilst my poor lips, which should that harvest reap,  
 At the wood's boldness by thee blushing stand.  
 To be so tickled, they would change their state  
 And situation with those dancing chips  
 O'er whom thy fingers walk with gentle gait,  
 Making dead wood more blest than living lips.  
     Since saucy jacks so happy are in this,  
     Give them thy fingers, me thy lips to kiss. (*The Sonnet*, No.128)

The poet's and Mr. Gilfill's love further increase through music, and the Dark Lady's and Caterina's mysterious black eyes invite dangerous love. Also, these "mysterious" eyes have related factors such as rapid development and extreme changes that cause dramatic power. Alicia Carroll mentions that "Caterina violently disrupts the Victorian cult of womanly virtue" (39) as she deviates from the ideal figure of the woman who provides healing and comfort in a Victorian-era home. Caterina remains ignorant and has no spiritual growth, but she is a heroine in the process of evolving into a new female image shown in Eliot's later works. Her impressive black eyes and emotional songs seem to show the same traits.



## IV.

The reference to "two loves" in *The Sonnet* No.144 indicates the young man and the Dark Lady. One love brings "comfort" and the other "despair." "The better angel" is the young man, and "the worser spirit" is the Dark Lady. The poet experiences a desire for heaven and an invitation to hell at the same time, and he is agonized. The poet suffers because the young man and the Dark Lady are intimate with each other through him. Now the poet is left behind, and their triangular relationship occurs. There is good and evil in him, and he suffers from this antinomy.

When one observes the expressions of the Dark Lady with a focus, there is a remarkable change. At first, she is expressed as "the worser spirit" and "my female evil," but later she is described as "my bad angel." Even when she is described as bad, she is still an angel. The young man has been presented as an "angel" from the beginning. In the last line however, both are "angels" of some kind. There is a possibility that the young man is turned into a "fiend." Thus, it is difficult to distinguish between good and evil, and the collapse of the binary conflict occurs.

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 coloured ill.  
 To win me soon to hell, my female evil  
 Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
 And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
 Wooing his purity with her foul pride.  
 And whether that my angel be turned fiend  
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;  
 But being both from me, both to each friend,  
 I guess one angel in another's hell.  
 Yet this shall I ne'er know, but live in doubt  
 Till my bad angel fire my good one out. (*The Sonnet*, No.144)

The collapse of the binary conflict also occurs in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) (hereafter *MF*). This novel's female protagonist is Maggie who a "dark" heroine with dark hair and eyes. She is described as a heretic by her relatives and community. Maggie's maternal family, the Dodsons, all have "fair" appearances. Therefore, they are strongly

prejudiced against her “dark” appearance. Maggie’s mother mourns not only her appearance but also her temperament of intensity, impulsiveness, and quirkiness. Maggie’s mother always praises Maggie’s cousin, Lucy, who is “fair.” Also, Maggie’s aunt, Mrs. Pullet, laments her darkness and says that it will be an obstacle in her future. She comments that “it’s very bad luck, sister, as the gell should be so brown – the boy’s fair enough. I doubt it’ll stand in her way i’ life to be so brown” (*MF* 68). Mr. Pullet, meanwhile, talks about the relationship between dark skin and craziness. He remarks that “there was a song about the ‘Nut-brown Maid’, too; I think she was crazy – crazy Kate – but I can’t justly remember” (*MF* 384). As these examples show, Maggie’s darkness is condemned.

Due to the conventional and narrow-minded environment in which she is situated, Maggie always expresses anger and resistance. Sometimes she takes intense action to suppress these feelings. For example, she gets angry when she is not allowed to go to school to pick up her brother with her father. She subsequently rushes into the attic in order to suppress her anger and stamps the head of a doll (*MF*, chapter 4). Her relatives’ comments about her hair annoy her, leading her to cut it impulsively herself (*MF*, chapter 7). Maggie’s temperament of intensity, impulsiveness, and quirkiness is the cause of her relatives’ accusations. She is not bad, just a young woman with a keen sensibility and rich intellect.

A few years later, a noticeable change in the description of Maggie’s appearance occurs among those relatives who previously condemned her features. She turns into a dark beauty. When Stephen meets Maggie for the first time, he cannot hide his surprise at “the sight of this tall dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair” (*MF* 376). When Philip sees her, he also admires her figure. The narrator recounts, “The full lustrous face, with the bright black coronet, looked down like that of a divinity well pleased to be worshipped” (*MF* 326). In a conventional and narrow-minded family, Maggie’s appearance is linked to the negative image of misfortune and madness. However, Stephen and Philip see her completely differently, as evidenced by their use of terms such as “nymph” and “divinity.” This difference emphasizes the unfortunate environment of the Dodson family, which is dominated by a fixed idea that black (dark) is indicative of heresy. Maggie is an unfortunate victim. Her anger toward the prejudice against “dark” hair is emphasized clearly:

“As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I’m determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where

the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. Since you are my tutor, you ought to preserve my mind from prejudices." . . . But it isn't for that that I'm jealous for the dark women,—not because I'm dark myself; it's because I always care the most about the unhappy people. If the blond girl were forsaken, I should like *her* best. I always take the side of the rejected lover in the stories."

(Emphasis original, *MF* 332-3)

When two "fair" and "dark" heroines appeared, the "fair" one often took all the happiness. It is no exaggeration to say that "fairness" was indispensable to the image of idealized women at that time. Maggie wants to read a book in which "dark" women are the victors. Also, she wants revenge for unhappy women with dark hair, including the unhappy "dark" women that appear in Walter Scott's novels. Rebecca, Flora MacIvor, and Minna are all "dark" women in these novels. However, the problem is not simply whether the heroine is "fair" or "dark"; the problem is "prejudice" and "rejection." Maggie's anger expresses Eliot's criticism of conventions in the nineteenth-century novel. Since Eliot herself had experience of being a heretic in society, she wanted to correct societal trends. Therefore, through Maggie and other "dark" heroines, she may have attempted to alter the focus on blond hair and fair women. Maggie's concluding argument represents Eliot's binary conflict resolution between women's image as "angels" (fair) and "demons" (dark).

The poet in *The Sonnets* sings that the Dark Lady's inner evil brings "despair" to him while admiring her dark appearance. Although her existence transforms the young man from a "saint" to a "devil," she is an angel who incites love in the poet. This is exactly what her inconsistent figure represents, and the poet accepts her inconsistencies. Moreover, he loves both her good and evil features. Maggie in *MF* is regarded as a heretic and despised when she is young. When she grows up, she attracts two men with her dark beauty. Changing the angle of view or removing "prejudices" can turn features into good or evil, beauty or ugliness. Maggie is similar to the Dark Lady, and Maggie's case also applies to the phrase in *Macbeth*, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (15). Finally, the characteristics of heroines who have both evil and good traits lead to dramatic content that brings about rapid development and extreme changes.

## V. Conclusion

With the death of Elizabeth I (1533–1603), an era came to an end. The end of “the spacious times of great Elizabeth” (Tennyson 53) indicates the change of worldview of the time. Shakespeare wrote tragedies during this period, and the theme was the internal conflict of each human being, including their contradictions. The recognition of humanity’s contradictions takes on various forms and unfolds in his later plays. This theme is included in *The Sonnets*, and the Dark Lady has the same influence as other tragic heroines in his dramas.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, a common view dictated that men should engage in the public sphere and women remain in the private sphere. The role of women was to support men by providing healing at home while men survived a severe capitalist society. Women were thus confined to the home, yet in the late nineteenth century, a movement addressing prejudice against women and examining women’s lifestyles began to gain traction. Some women consequently attempted to step into what was perceived as men’s public territory. During this transition period when times greatly changed, the two values of convention and innovation were mixed. Eliot struggled between these values and explored women’s new ways of life through her works.

Even if the times are different, “dark heroines” and the Dark Lady are common characters created in a period of change. They express doubts about traditions and represent the challenge of a new era. Shakespeare presents the truth by showing two sides of elements with conflicting themes. This attitude is also displayed in Eliot’s work dramatically. Shakespeare and Eliot are thus pioneers in their respective eras of breaking conventions and creating new ones through the Dark Lady and “dark heroines.”

## Notes

1. For example, in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), lines from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1611) are used. Camillo's line "a Wild dedication of yourselves to unpath'd waters, undream'd shores" (353) illustrates the characteristics of Gwendolen's marriage.
2. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by G. S. Haight, 9 vols (Yale University Press, 1954-78), VI, 207, 465.
3. Toshiko Muramatsu points out this commonality in 『奇想の詩学—シェイクスピア『ソネット集』論』 81.
4. Merryn Williams indicates Romola's role as a "dark heroine" as follows:  
 The only "fair heroine" in George Eliot is Eppie, a conventional golden haired girl who has a happy life and no inner conflicts. In most of her novels the "dark heroine" who tastes rejection and conflict dominates the scene. . . . Janet, Maggie, Romola, Dorothea, and Gwendolen are all "dark" heroines because they struggle with evil, not just in the world but in themselves. (140)

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