

# GIORDANO BRUNO AND THE “CUPID’S BOND”

## *The philosopher and his passion for the “gentle sex”*

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GUIDO DEL GIUDICE

“**H**e told me that he liked very much women and that he hadn’t yet reached the number of those of Solomon; and that the church made a great sin in making a sin what nature served so well, and that he had it for great merit”: these are the words which the traitor Giovanni Mocenigo uttered in the venetian trial. As he faces these disputes, Giordano Bruno does not disguise, as he does for other subjects, judging them less important, but he admits with courage of having supported that “the sin of the flash was the minor among the others” and that “the sin of the simple fornication was so lightweight that it was so close to the venial sin”, though claiming of having said it, with levity, in company, reasoning of idle and worldly things. Bruno disclosed his penchant for the gentle sex since his youth. We can find an evidence of this in *Candelaio*’s pages in which he demonstrates a precise knowledge of the Naples’ squares where prostitutes could be found: “here in Naples we have a small square, the *Fundaco del centrangolo*, the Borough of *Santo Antonio*, a contrada near *Santa Maria del Carmino*.” To



Drawing of Maurizio Di Bona, *the Hand*

excite his erotic fantasies, was also his ideal teacher of the art of memory: “I was still a child when I could draw from the teachings of the Ravennate”. It deals with that Pietro Tomai from Ravenna, who, in 1506, in Cologne, was suspended from teaching and was forced to return to Italy, accused of unseemly behaviour (*scholares itali non poterant vivere sine meretricibus*). In *Phoenix seu de artificiosa memoria*, he suggested: “If you desire soon remember a thing, entrust to the places young and beautiful girls, because memory admirably shakes by placing those maidens. (...) It is true that this useful precept won’t benefit those who hate and despise women: moreover, they will reap with greater difficulty the rewards of this art”. In short, eroticism serving the art of memory as emotional device, useful to fix memories. The Nolan largely used it for the image processing of *De Umbris Idearum*: “the first image of Venus is a maiden crowned with myrtle, naked, with long hair down to her ankles and, ahead of her, a little white female dog jumping”. Fragments that hint a philosopher’s habit with women, are scattered in many of

CANDELAIO  
COMEDIA DEL BRUNO  
NOLANO ACADEMICO  
di nulla Achademia; detto il fa-  
stidito.

IN TRISTITIA HILARIS : in Hilaritate tristis.



IN PARIGGI,  
Appresso Guglielmo Giuliano. Al  
segno de l'Amicitia.  
M. D. LXXXII.

IORDANVS  
BRVNVS NOLANVS  
DE VMBRIS IDEARVM.

Implicantibus artem, Quærendi, In-  
ueniendi, Iudicandi, Ordinandi,  
& Applicandi:

*Ad internam scripturam, & non vulgares  
per memoriam operationes explicatis.*

AD HENRICVM III. SERE-  
nif. Gallor. Polonorumque Regem, &c.

PROTESTATIO.

*Umbra profunda sumus, né nos vexetis inopi.  
Non vos, sed doctos tam grane querit opus.*

PARISIIS,  
Apud Ægidium Gorbinum, sub in-  
signe Spei, è regione gymnasij  
Cameracensis.

M. D. LXXXII.

CVM PRIVILEGIO REGIS.

his works. Particularly in *De Vinculis in genere*, where he analyses the “physiological” aspects of love’s bond, in order to win the favour of the object of the desire: “a girl, absolutely caste and completely devoid of any erotic’s stimulus can not be induced to the sensual passion by any artifice or astral influence, if she isn’t touched in the first place, or better, probed; if - I say- she does not give her cooperation with the hand of the one who throws the bond, combined with the flow that, from the hand of this, runs up to her”. Bruno never concealed his views on the subject, with a frankness, sometimes exaggerated, which prompted him to speak freely even on the most dangerous matters. These externalizations provided a pretext to his detractors, during the fierce political and religious conflict, unleashed at the end of the nineteenth century, following the construction of the monument of *Campo de’ Fiori*, for a

vast campaign based on homilies and sermons, whose aim was to discredit his figure in the eyes of women. Listen to what the Parson Nazareno Cervigni said to his parishioners in 1911, after the inauguration of a gravestone to Bruno in the municipality of *Caldarola*: «But again, again, my dear sisters: Who was Giordano Bruno? Even you ladies, have to make the acquaintance of his personality. Well, you will learn it from what Giordano Bruno said on the Italian woman. According to him, “the Italian women are a thing without trustworthiness, a thing deprived of all constancy, destitute of any talent, vacant of any merit, without acknowledgment or any gratitude, as incapable of sensibility, intelligence or goodness, as a statue or image painted on a wall; a thing containing more haughtiness, arrogance, insolence, contumely, anger, scorn, hypocrisy, licentiousness, avarice, ingratitude

and other ruinous vices, more poisons and instruments of death than could have issued from the box of Pandora". And almost, my dear sisters, as if this was a small thing for the good friar, he also adds: "you are, to say the least, a store-house, an emporium, a market of all the filth, toxins and poisons which our step-mother nature is able to produce". My poor women!».

Nonetheless, those who read the whole dialogue, and not just the passages artfully extrapolated from the context, will notice that the object of the philosopher's invective is actually "that zealous and disordered venereal love which some are accustomed to expend for it, so that they come to the point of making their wit the slave of woman, and of degrading the noblest powers and actions of the intellectual soul. "

Also in other parts Bruno makes his characters, like *Poliinnio*, the "sacrilegious pedantic ... perpetual enemy of the feminine sex" of *De la causa*, say derogatory judgments which are then contradicted by *Filoteo*, his *alter ego*: "all vices, failings and offenses are male; and all the virtues, excellence and goodness are female". As usual, the Nolan wants "what belongs to Caesar be rendered unto Caesar and what belongs to God be rendered unto God. I mean that although there are cases when not even divine honors and adoration suffice for women, yet this does not mean that we owe them divine honors and worship. I desire that women should be honored and loved as women ought to be loved and honored". If women have no other virtue than the natural one "they must be esteemed as been born in this world more vainly than a

poisonous fungus". The two roles, that of parent and perpetrator of the species and that of revelatory Diana, should never be confused. For the same reason Bruno castigates the softness of the Petrarchists, who in their languid verses emphasize profane details of the vulgar love rather than elevating the spirits to the sublime heights of spiritual love. Of course any consideration about it has to be historicized, by framing it in an age where the condition of the majority of the feminine population was subjugated and exploited, but on several occasions the Nolan testified his esteem for the gentle sex. Diana, Minerva, Sophia, Mnemosyne: all of the great *Brunian's* myths, in their sublimation, assume a feminine aspect. Not surprisingly, when in *De la causa* he had to be forgiven for the invective, against the rude English plebs, uttered in *Cena de le Ceneri*, which of course was not appreciated by the London environment, he wrote an enthusiastic elegy of the "Muse of England", whose virtues appeared sublimated in Diva Elizabeth. "To all others, I say, nice, gentle, mellow, soft, young, beautiful, delicate, fair-haired, white cheeks, rubicund cheeks, syrupy lips, divine eyes, glazed breasts and hearts of diamond; for which I do so many thoughts in my mind, I welcome so many affections in the spirit, I conceive so many passions in the life, so many tears flow from my eyes, so many sighs leave my chest and from the heart, so many flames, sparkle." It may have been the habits of the Anglican clergy to reinforce him in the opinion, referred during the trial by his cellmates, that there would be no harm in allowing the joys of the family even to religious,





George Gower (1540-1596), *Elisabetta I Tudor* (1588), Woburn Abbey.

"since they want to retain these priests ignorant, it must be ordered, at least, that everyone will have his woman". Accents of delicate regret, in this regard, are felt in the affectionate tones with whom he describes Maria Bochetel de la Forest, wife of the ambassador Michel de Castelneau, in whose house he lived in London, in which he highlights her qualities of wife and mother: "not only she has a moderate physical beauty, that surrounds and envelops the soul, but beyond that, with the triumvirate of a very discreet judgment, shrewd modesty and honorable courtesy, she keeps the heart of her husband with an indissoluble bond and she is powerful to captivate anyone who knows her". Bruno clearly differentiates profane love and heroic love; the impulse of passion coincide to the spiritual one as the shadow to the light: "no matter how much one remains attached to corporeal beauty and to external veneration of it, he may still conduct himself honorably and worthily; for from material beauty, which reflects the splendor of the spiritual form and act and is its vestige and shadow, he will arrive at the contemplation and worship of divine beauty, light, and

majesty." This double reading of Cupid's bond constitutes the subject of the *Heroic Frenzies*. No coincidence that the work should have been called *Cantica*, said with a clear reference to *Cantico dei Cantici*, that "under the guise of lovers and ordinary passions contains similarly divine and heroic frenzies". His ideal woman is therefore the one who, embodying the two, is able to raise her lover to his highest thoughts: "The beauty of the body, then, has the power to enflame, but certainly does not have the power to bind the lover and keep him from fleeing from it, if that body is not assisted by the grace of spirit he desires or by chastity, courtesy, and sagacity. So I said that the fire which lit me was beautiful, because still noble was the snare that bound me". This fire, this snare have a face and a name: that of the mysterious Morgana B. (probably a cousin that he loved in his youth), invoked in the brief dedication of the *Candelaio*, at the same time, as sensual woman and as a Beatrice, who accompanies his lover towards a superior knowledge: "In my faith, there is no prince, cardinal, king, emperor or pope that will remove this candle from my hands in this solemn offertory. It

belongs to you, I give it to you, and you will place it in your cabinet or on your candlestick: my superlatively beautiful, generous, erudite and wise lady Morgana." Bruno reveals himself, also in this, as a man with a profoundly Mediterranean temperament, proud of his manhood: "... for all those kingdoms and blessings that proposed and nominated to me, I have never been so wise and good to make me come the fancy of being castrated or become an eunuch. .... Nor do I believe of being cold, if to refrigerate my warmth I do not think that would be enough the snows of Mount Caucasus or Ripheus".

Nevertheless there was no lack of some fictional interpretations that identify, in the relationship with the young disciple Jean Hennequin, an homosexual liaison, as if, at that time, this was an inevitable consequence in a teacher-student relationship. In order to deny it, one should pay attention to the mocking tone used to treat the "Candelaio" of his play or "that other Candelaio of flesh and bones," his enemy Friar Bonifacio from Naples, to which he promises revenge "if not in a life in another".

To dispel any suspicion, provides the same philosopher in *De immenso*, a work full of autobiographical references, in which his sexual tastes are expressed in unequivocal terms: "because nature created me hirsute, I'll never learn to adapt emeralds to my rough fingers, to curl my hair, to paint my face with a rosy colour, to adorn my head with fragrant hyacinths, to limply pose, to dance sweetly, to distort my voice, as if it came from a tender throat, for not act like a boy, man as I am, and not to become male, female. If they made me so, thanks to the gods, I will preserve what I am, severe, manly strong in the limbs, fearless, indomitable and with a male voice I will say to Narcissus: the nymphs have loved me too."



Figure from *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione*.

GIORDA  
NO BRVNO  
*Nolano.*  
DE GL' HEROICI  
FVRORI.

*Al molto illustre et eccellente Ca-  
ualliero, Signor Phillippo  
Sidneo.*

PARIGI,  
Appresso Antonio Baio.  
*l' Anno. 1585.*