REVIEWS

Domenico Lovascio,

John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the Classics. Manchester: Manchester University Press, The Revels Plays Companion Library 2022.

"How often do you think about the Roman empire?" Should it be possible to ask this question – at the origin of a 2023 storm of viral videos on social media app TikTok – to early modern English playwrights, I suspect some of them would give not too dissimilar an answer from those that flabbergasted the female partners of the TikTok interviewees: "several times a week", or even "every day". Pervasively informing the imagination of the English early moderns, the history of ancient Rome was to them "not simply a past but the past"[1], a model and touchstone for the present, linked by the English chronicles to the founding of Britain itself, and, as such, "a discourse that one could not afford to ignore"[2]. Long acknowledged by critics, the relevance of the Roman

[1]George Kirkpatrick Hunter, "A Roman Thought: Renaissance Attitudes to History Exemplified in Shakespeare and Jonson", in Brian S. Lee (ed.), *An English Miscellany: Presented to W.S. Mackie*, Cape Town, O.U.P., 1977, pp. 93-115 (p. 95).

[2]Richard Burt, "'A dangerous Rome': Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and the Discursive Determinism of Cultural Politics", in Marie-Rose Logan and Peter L. Rudnytsky (eds), *Contending Kingdoms: Historical, Psychological, and Feminist Approaches to the Literature of Sixteenth-Century England and France*, Detroit, Wayne State U.P., 1991, pp. 109-27 (p. 111).

past to early modern literary – and more specifically dramatic – output has been the object of many studies, whose number has dramatically increased in recent decades. These studies have revealed much of the early modern reception of Roman history and culture, but they have also, as always happens, somewhat construed it, shaping its outlines in accordance with their critical perspectives, aims, and interests. As Domenico Lovascio writes, "the most immediate association that the phrase 'Roman plays' would arouse at a gathering of early modernists would be with Shakespeare and his *Titus Andronicus* (1584-94), *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07), *Coriolanus* (1607-09), and *Cymbeline* (1609-11). Then, someone would be likely to think of Johnson and his *Poetaster, or His Arraignment* (1601), *Sejanus His Fall* (1603), and *Catiline His Conspiracy* (1611). Very few people, if any, would think of Fletcher" (pp. 1-2). Lovascio's observation would hardly find any opposition among those who have, in fact, taken part in a gathering of early modernists. This has of course something to do with the vast shadow cast by Shakespeare's figure upon so many – if not all – of his contemporaries; a shadow whose thickness has increased with time, leading to what could be considered a disproportion between the attention devoted to the Bard and that dedicated to his fellow dramatists, whose fame and popularity was, in their own time, often comparable to his. This is in fact the case with John Fletcher, whose success as a dramatist was equal, if not superior, to Shakespeare's, and who, though usually not considered an author keen on revering the classics, wrote four plays classifiable as Roman – only one less than Shakespeare, and more than were written by Johnson. These four plays, *Bonduca* (1613-14), *Valentinian* (1610-14), *The False One* (1619-23, with Massinger), and *The Prophetess* (1622, with Massinger), represent the object of Domenico Lovascio's *John Fletcher's Rome: Questioning the classics*, the first study to analyse them as a group and, as such, the first to attempt a comprehensive and consistent outlining of Fletcher's vision of Rome.

Clear in its premises and aims, John Fletcher's Rome embraces a variety of perspectives in order to delineate and explain Fletcher's distinctive construction of a grim and unheroic Rome, related to and yet essentially different from Shakespeare's: a decadent city far from its glorious past, confronted with a crisis of values that affects its every aspect. At the same time, Lovascio casts new light on such seldom-explored aspects of Fletcher's intellectual life as his

conception of classical antiquity and history, giving us a portrait of the author as "a much sharper observer of reality than is usually recognized, not only in the immediacy of the here and now but also in terms of the larger changes and tendencies that are continually at work in history and politics" (p. 17).

After an essential Introduction, in which the role of the Roman plays in the Fletcher canon is discussed with lucidity and method, the study is structured in four chapters, all of which are endowed with a clever two-part title, combining the directness of the informative second part with the evocative power of a well-chosen quotation. Dealing with Fletcher's choice and use of sources, and offering an unprecedented survey of the author's relationship with classical texts, the first chapter, "'Take your lily / and get your part ready': Fletcher and the Classics", defines a characteristic modus operandi which is both symptomatic of Fletcher's intention in approaching the Roman past and responsible for the vision of this past emerging in the plays. Mixing classical and early modern accounts, well-known materials and recently published works, Fletcher's choice of the sources for his Roman plays reflects, as Lovascio convincingly shows, a will to select texts that deviated from the celebratory representation of Rome usually offered by golden-age authors, favouring instead historians belonging to Late Antiquity, not usually part of the grammar school curriculum, and of Greek origin.

The second chapter, "'I am no Roman, / nor what I am do I know': Fletcher's Roman Plays as *Trauerspiele*", focuses on the vision of Rome emerging from the four Roman plays: an essentially pessimistic depiction of a corrupt and degraded world, ignored by the Gods and lacking suitable political leaders, disoriented and disorienting. Through a masterful reading of *Valentinian*, *Bonduca*, *The False One*, and *The Prophetess*, Lovascio shows how Fletcher's representation of the Roman past reflects the author's pessimistic view of history, debunking the myth of an exemplary Rome so often found in early modern literature. Lovascio traces a most original and revealing parallel between Fletcher's plays and the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel* as discussed by Walter Benjamin in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), highlighting a series of similarities between the two sets of plays, especially for what concerns the perception of history as an eternal return of the same, devoid of any religious perspective as well as any eschatological sense. The

work of an actual philosopher of history, Fletcher's Roman plays appear as loci for the playwright's deep reflection on the disorder and opacity of history, affecting the classical past just as much as the Jacobean era.

The third chapter, "'Had Lucrece e'er been thought of but for Tarquin?' The Inadequacy of Roman Female Exempla", explores Fletcher's depiction of female characters in the Roman plays. Here, the non-Roman women, particularly the Egyptian queen Cleopatra and the Icenian queen Bonduca, along with the Celtic druidess Delphia, emerge as more powerful and dynamic characters than the Roman ones, the latter passively entrapped in the roles assigned to them by an essentially patriarchal system. Indeed, even such a positive character as Lucina in *Valentinian*, a touchstone of integrity and chastity, appears essentially dominated by a passivity that deprives her even of the chance to actively procure her own death, thus falling short of her archetype's example, that of Lucrezia. This, combined with the way in which Fletcher challenges the untouchability of such Republican paragons as Portia and Lucrezia (the quotation in the chapter's title, from *A Wife for a Month* (1624), being a clear example of this), indicates, Lovascio argues, the author's scepticism about the viability of the Roman female exempla, perceived as no longer adequate for the development of a valid female ideal.

The fourth chapter, "'To do thus / I learned of thee': Shakespeare's Exemplary Roman Plays", focuses on the role of Shakespeare's Roman plays in Fletcher's imagination and in his construction of the Roman world. Through a subtle analysis that reveals Lovascio as no less refined and penetrating a reader of Shakespeare than of Fletcher, the author shows how not only are Shakespeare's plays considered by Fletcher on the same level as classical sources, but how some of the latter's characters appear deeply related to Shakespeare's, and are even endowed by the Shakespearean example with a heightened awareness of themselves and a kind of prescience of future events. Thus, for instance, Fletcher and Massinger's Diocletian appears modelled more after Shakespeare's Antony than the historical figure of the emperor, while the death of Shakespeare's Cleopatra reverberates in the suicide of Bonduca, who shares the Queen of Egypt's terror of being taken and led in triumph by the Roman enemy, and appears to have learnt from her the only way to avoid it. At the same time, the young and fair Cleopatra of *The False One*, the prologue of

which openly presents the play as a kind of prequel to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, is markedly different from her Shakespearean antecedent and yet gains depth from her relationship with it. And how clever Fletcher is to play with his audience's expectations, as when, possibly imagining the unsatisfied curiosity raised by the Shakespearean Enobarbus's hurriedly cut short mention of Cleopatra's being brought to Caesar in a mattress (*Antony and Cleopatra* 2.4.68-70), makes of this episode a pivotal scene of his play. As if to say: Shakespeare just alluded to it, but I will show it to you.

Finally, the conclusions do what conclusions should always do, that is, clearly summing up and reaffirming the book's main claims, while also adding new material to confirm the study's general tenets. This new material is an interesting analysis of the allusions to the Roman legend of Marcus Curtius – the brave horseman who saved Rome by jumping into the chasm opened on the Forum – found across the whole Fletcher canon, which, as Lovascio argues, perfectly exemplify Fletcher's general approach to classical history and exempla.

Dense with information yet remarkably fluid and engaging to read, in dialogue with a vast and well selected panorama of critical voices yet never in danger of being suffocated by them, Lovascio's study shines for its originality, clarity, and insight. It fills a genuine gap in the field of study concerned with the reception of classical antiquity in early modern England, and has many merits. By spotlighting a playwright whose relevance in his own time has long been inadequately recognized, Lovascio joins a recent scholarly trend aimed at reassessing Fletcher's work, and does so in a significant way. Through an approach that combines unexceptionable scientific rigour with an intellectual vivacity manifest in the evident gusto with which the author not only explores the plays, but brilliantly speculates about such issues as the theatrical dynamics possibly activated by the King's Men's staging of them, or the relationship between Fletcher's biographic experience and his creative mechanisms, Lovascio offers us a work that, without being limited to a close reading of the Roman plays – which would be a remarkable achievement by itself – enlightens several aspects of Fletcher's personality, thought, and art. This appears particularly true when one considers that Lovascio's exceptional grasp of the entire Fletcher canon allows him to make his discussion of the Roman plays relevant to a deeper understanding of Fletcher's output at large, contributing to

its overall reappraisal. On the other hand, *John Fletcher's Rome* represents a timely and much-needed corrective to the widespread notion of a perfect overlap between Shakespeare' vision of Rome and that of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre in general. In fact, Lovascio's treatment of Shakespeare appears exemplary of the author's intelligent approach to the question. Without downplaying the relevance of Shakespeare's Roman plays, the author manages to restore to its right proportions the interplay between Fletcher's works and the Bard's, highlighting a series of dynamics in the reception of the Shakespearean texts which makes his study no less appealing to Shakespeare scholars than to scholars of Fletcher. At the same time, the differences between the two authors' representation of the Roman past emerge clearly from Lovascio's analysis, debunking the idea of a univocal and monolithic vision of Rome in early modern theatre and imagination, and replacing it with a more complex and multifaceted view. It is this new vision that represents, in my opinion, the ultimate gift that *John Fletcher's Rome* offers its readers, together with a renewed awareness of the plurality of perspectives that characterize early modern thought.

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Mary-Jane Rubenstein,

Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2022.

I confess I am a member of the Mars society. I have been attending their international meetings for a few years – *From simulation to reality* 2016, *Rising together* 2020, *Taking Flight* 2021, *Searching for Life with Heavy Lift* 2022 and *Mars for All* 2023. In my defense I can only add that my friend Simonetta Badioli and I feel we have a mission, that is the dissemination of a Martian literary Canon which was totally different from the sci fi corpus of invasions of the mainstream, but which, on the contrary, spoke of utopian societies based on justice, gender equality, and environmental awareness. Our first three cases concerned *Unveiling a Parallel* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sara Weiss (1903), and *The Man from Mars* by William Simpson (1891 and 1900). Why the Society accepts our papers is a mystery (of which I am grateful), since we usually find ourselves surrounded by eager space colonialists who do not really care about utopian literature or anti-colonial claims, and can only think of space economy, resources, and profit. Yet we persist.

This introduction was necessary in order for the reader to understand my surprise in meeting this wonderful book by Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Professor of Religion and Science in Society at Wesleyan University, who expresses – far better than I was and will ever be able to do – the same worries, complaints, and claims I have been writing in my essays in the recent years (e.g. "An Eco-Critical Cultural Approach to Mars Colonization" with A. Farina, R. Barbanti 2017; "Green Studies for the Red Planet? A lesson from the past" 2018; "Eco-men from the Outer Space? Mars and Utopian Masculinities in the *fin-de-siècle*" 2018; "An Interplanetary Transplantation, Or, Reloading the Anthropocene on the Red Planet" 2021).

Curiously, the occasion to read this book was offered to me by Robert Zubrin, the president of the Mars Society, who feeling under attack responded with vehemence and belligerent tones to Rubenstein's book. The author does actually mention him, but she also cites Musk, Bezos, and many others, so I

think Zubrin ought not to take it as a personal offence. I am embarrassed to admit that many things she says are very similar to what I myself wrote in a book (*Alieni a stelle e strisce* 2015) of which I unwisely gave him a copy when we met in 2016, but probably I got away with it because I suppose he cannot read Italian. Better that way.

In his "Declaration of Decadence" (30 May 2023), which was published in the website and sent to all members worldwide, Zubrin accuses Rubenstein of rejecting "everything that Western humanist civilization stands for or has ever stood for. If you think that the world has had quite enough of freedom, progress, science, and reason, this is the book for you." Even worse, "Rubinstein insists we need to not only avoid harming other living creatures but also inanimate matter as well" and she wonders "whether rock themselves have rights". Of course, this is too much for Zubrin, who takes Rubinstein literally instead of understanding the big picture. He reports her saying that "the personhood of the Moon is demonstrated by the fact that its rocks contain records of past events, and its dust can harm astronauts. Therefore, the Moon has both memory and agency. In fact, the Moon might even desire things."

What he omits (among other things) is how and why she gets to this. The fact is that men are doing what they want in space with no regard and respect for places, as they have always done on planet Earth. The history Rubinstein recounts is a history of wars, invasions, colonization, slavery, and fight for supremacy. She speaks of the Moon in regard to a project called "Preserving Outer Space Heritage", since she is scandalized in learning that "they consider to comprise historically significant human or robotic landing sites, artefacts, spacecraft […] The Moon has no heritage of its own" (p. 146).

To Rubinstein's accusation of social injustice, Zubrin responds by reminding readers that (race has two meanings which is not irrelevant) "America achieved its greatest advances in racial equality since the Civil War precisely during the period of its reach for the Moon". If we substitute reach with race (space race, race to the Moon, etc.) we'll see very clearly the two different but intertwined meanings of 'race'. Basing himself on the wonders of the "space frontier", the president of the Mars Society thinks he is walking on the path of the Founding Fathers and defending the fundamental human rights. However, this vision of history has no objectivity and simply echoes the

rhetoric (and violence) of expansion, invasion, and colonization. Something we know very well, which is being planned or already performed, again and again, on Earth as well as in space. And when Zubrin accuses her of falsehood because she says that humans have destroyed the Earth he is so naif as to counteract by declaring that he is 71 and alive. But I want to quote her words from the Preface: "Earth is becoming inhabitable, so a wealthy fraction of humanity hitches a ride off world to live in a shopping mall under the dominion of the corporation that wrecked the planet in the first place […] and the oligarchic control of information, water, and air" (p. ix).

True, the conditions of life on Earth have improved in time. Yet not everywhere, and not for everyone. This, Zubrin should know. As well as it is unreasonable to deny that social justice has *never* been in the global political agenda; that wars *are* worldwide and under everybody's eyes; and that the catastrophic events caused by climate change are *not* natural but have been mostly provoked by man. Anthropocene (or better, Capitalocene as it has been renamed) is quickly leading to a deep crisis, if not to the extinction, of the human species, and I cannot but agreeing with Rubenstein that there should be actions to be taken rather than falling into the "dangerous religion" of looking away and imagine salvation in space settlements.

In her book, Rubinstein refers to historians (Lynn White) philosophers (Nietzsche), writers (Isaac Asimov, Octavia Butler), pop singers (David Bowie) film directors (George Lucas), presidents (J. F. Kennedy) and so on to substantiate her thought, but she essentially wants to express her thesis which can be resumed like this: "the intensifying 'NewSpace race' is much a mythological project as it is political, economic, or scientific […] the escalating effort to colonize the cosmos is a renewal of the religious, political, economic, and scientific maelstrom that globalized Earth beginning in the fifteenth century" (p. x). Mythology and religion are not usually to be found in conventions regarding space race, and yet Rubinstein's arguments sound strong and agreeable. Western monotheism and Greek philosophy are the pillars of the missions of today as it were in the past. The Manifest Destiny, the Frontier, colonization – and I should add Crèvecoeur's "transplantation" – have always implied "Salvation through imperialism" (p. 3). Rubinstein is worried about NewSpace since "In their promises to get a few humans off this doomed

planet, billionaire utopians are selling the same old story of domination hidden under lofty religious language" (p. 4). In her vision, the astropreneurs' project of making humanity a multiplanetary species does not regard humanity but just a few lucky ones. And I do like her definition of Terraforming: "having trashed one world, we're storming off to ransack another" (p. 6). And later continues: "Do you really expect that the billionaires who can't find any cause worth supporting on Earth will finally redistribute their wealth once they get deeper into the final frontier? […] And what about all the ecological damage they're doing in the meantime to Earth?" (p. 157).

Rubinstein is worried about the majority of humanity as the first thing, but she is also about the land – territory, stones, place, whatever we can call it. She reminds the reader that the story of the American frontier was violent, genocidal, and ultimately ecocidal" even though rhetorically justified with the lexicon of "destiny, freedom, salvation, and even divine will" (pp. 7-8). While Musk projects of establishing a "self-sustaining city" on Mars, thinking that *Earth is done*, Rubinstein wonders "how we can hope to make a habitat out of Mars when we can't even preserve the habitability of Earth" (p. 16). The answer was suggested by Marx many years ago: "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (p. 19).

There is also, of course, an "eco-destructive legacy of Christianity", as Rubinstein calls it: though contemporary theology is deeply concerned about the environment and the Pope himself has admitted that sometimes the Scriptures have been interpreted as justifying "the unbridled exploitation of nature" Western religions have strong political responsibilities (p. 39). As she underlines, "the theme is constant: 'America has been elected by God for a special destiny in the world'" (p. 51). In the Old Testament, God tells that humans will have dominion over all other creatures and things. America easily became a new version of the Promised Land (after Canaan) and did not hesitate in removing and destroying in order to occupy the territories that appeared (but were not) empty: "Of course, the colonizers didn't really think the land was empty. It clearly contained both human and animal inhabitants along with seemingly infinite quantities of what the modern world calls 'resources'" (p. 60).

After polluting earth and seas, now we have started to direct our folly, not only our dreams, to space. The fact that "US space travel is a vertical extension of the Manifest destiny […] [an] extension of earthly imperialism […] [an act of] Requisition" (pp. 76, 81-82) is not news. Neither is recollecting Ronald Reagan's dream of a "cosmic gold rush" (p. 106). Rather, it is puzzling that in the words of NASA's 2020 Artemis Plan, "the Moon to Mars approach will assure that America remains at the forefront of exploration and discovery […] The NASA authors seem to assume it's self-evident: we've got to get to Mars, and fast" (p. 110). *Self-evident* reminds us of the glorious incipit of the *Declaration of Independence* and since I started by quoting Zubrin's "Declaration of Decadence" I want to make things clear. Going to Mars is not self-evident. To rebel to a tyrant is (or ought to be) self-evident. To follow a dream of liberty. To work for the good of all humanity. And – maybe – to explore space *without* sending up "the growing pile of garbage around us" is self-evident (p. 113). According to the ESA (European Space Agency), "the skies are riddled with thirty-four thousand objects greater than ten centimeters, nine hundred thousand objects between one and ten centimeters, and 128 million objects between one millimeter and one centimeter. And 95 percent of it is garbage" (p. 114).

In the words of astrobiologist Lucianne Walkowicz, "If we truly believe in our ability to bend the hostile environments of Mars for human habitation, […] Why not put all that money, energy, and manly frontierism into bringing our own ecosystem back to life?" (p. 137). Some philosophers have joined the discusison: as Holmes Rolston III puts it, we should assure space a respectful treatment, while Robert Sparrow states that terraforming Mars would reduce us into cosmic vandals (pp. 140-42). And Rubinstein mentions the "anticolonial spacewave" which in 2020 finally led to the publication of a paper written by the Equity, Divesrsty, and Inclusion Working Group of the Planetary Science and Astrobiology Decadal Survey for 2023-2032 (p. 177). That's good news. We are not alone.

One of the most crucial points in Rubinstein's argumentation is the respect we owe to the "inanimate world" (my inverted commas). Her vision being holistic, she mentions many cultures: for some of them the Sky is full of spiritual entities; others place God in the Heavens; and others consider animals,

trees and stones legitimate *beings*. Rubinstein provocatively defends sacred spaces and even the "right of rocks" not to be converted in resources and commodities against the dangerous religion of salvation promoted by the sponsors of space colonization.

Allow me to add a couple of final, small suggestions for Rubinstein and for the readers. Firstly, as an advocate of utopia, I refuse to apply this category to contemporary billionaires who project to destroy space after leaving an inhabitable planet. Utopia has a strong tradition even in the United States (e.g. Edward Bellamy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ursula LeGuin) and not many people know about a corpus of romances which were published in the *fin-de-siècle*. According to these stories, all based on utopian thought, travelers to Mars found (in different ways and measure) social justice, gender equality, sustainable economy, and liberty of expression and religion. No wars existed. People were vegan. These novels have been forgotten but they deserve to be known and here is a partial list of them: *Unveiling a Parallel: A Romance by Two Women of the West* by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (1893), *Journey to Mars the Wonderful World* by Gustavus W. Pope (1894), *The Certainty of a Future Life in Mars. Being the Posthumous Papers of Bradford Torrey Todd* by Louis Pope Gratacap (1903), *Journeys to the Planet Mars* by Sarah Weiss (1903), *Through Space to Mars, or The Longer Journey on Record* by Roy Rockwood (1910). Secondly, I recommend three books which were published in the same years by astronomer Percival Lowell. In his latest one (*Mars as the Abode of Life*, 1908), written half a century before Rachel Carson's and Lynn White's works, he explicitly accused man of wrecking the planet: "He has enslaved all that he could; he is busy exterminating the rest […] Already man has begun to leave his mark on his globe in deforestation, in canalization, in communication".[1]

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[1] https://www.loc.gov/item/08036795/ (01/12/2023).

Giancarlo Petrella,

Scrivere sui libri. Breve guida al libro a stampa postillato. Salerno Editrice, Roma 2022.

Chi potrebbe affermare di non aver mai scritto su un libro? A matita, magari, per un senso di rispetto verso l'oggetto su cui si scrive, o a penna o addirittura passando un evidenziatore sulle righe che, alla lettura, appaiono le più interessanti o da memorizzare. E se il libro è di chi lo sta leggendo, forse non ci sono sensi di colpa legati all'operazione di scarabocchiarlo, chiosarlo, sottolinearlo, mentre – se è di qualcuno che ce l'ha prestato (o addirittura di una biblioteca da cui l'abbiamo preso a prestito) – ecco che scatta l'autocensura che ci trattiene la mano ogni volta che vorremmo sottolineare una parola o segnalare con righe a lato la rilevanza di specifici termini, di un passaggio o di un paragrafo.

Quello che si prova oggi di fronte a un libro non è certo qualcosa di nuovo, come dimostra Petrella nel suo volume che, dal solo titolo senza prendere in considerazione il sottotitolo, appare persino giocosamente ambiguo, perché "scrivere sui libri" potrebbe significare fare recensioni e rassegne da pubblicare. Invece no: il sottotitolo ci rivela che il titolo va preso nella sua spiazzante materialità, dove "scrivere sui libri" significa semplicemente quanto dice, cioè prendere carta e penna e scrivere: la 'carta' che abbiamo davanti, cioè il libro che si sta leggendo, e una 'penna' (meglio una matita) e usarla. E Petrella ci mostra che è stato sempre così (e non solo da quando esiste la stampa, perché anche su certi manoscritti medioevali si trovano testimonianze di appunti, commenti e note), in particolare, comunque, da Gutenberg in poi grazie alla carta di supporto.

La realtà analizzata dall'autore è costituita soprattutto da incunaboli e cinquecentine reperiti nelle più svariate biblioteche italiane, volumi che presentino interventi manoscritti di lettori coevi o successivi alle date di stampa. E qui sta uno degli aspetti più interessanti del libro perché lo sguardo è rivolto non alla particolare edizione in sé, non ai testi stampati, ma al lettore, vale a dire alle tracce di ricezione di quel determinato testo presso autori molto spesso rintracciabili – e rintracciati – tra personalità più o meno illustri del mondo

culturale italiano dei secoli XV e XVI (con percorsi che, tuttavia, possono arrivare oltre e più vicino a noi nel tempo). Petrella, in altre parole, studia il libro come oggetto materiale, acquistato, letto, postillato appunto, come dichiara il sottotitolo, prestato, venduto ad altro lettore e così via. Si delinea, in questo modo non solo un vivace mercato tra bibliofili, ma una mappa molto interessante dei movimenti fisici, che poi stanno a indicare anche movimenti socio-culturali, dei volumi presi in considerazione.

L'abbastanza recente ricerca e la valorizzazione di testi postillati ha influenzato anche il mercato librario indirizzato a bibliofili e biblioteche. Se, infatti, sino a pochi decenni fa si reclamizzava un esemplare "immacolato, ricondotto a colpi di sbiancamento a una pretesa verginità astorica" (p. 13), ora la presenza di annotazioni, in particolare se di lettore illustre, conferisce valore aggiunto a un volume, così che la traccia socioculturale diviene valore merceologico.

L'autore, docente di Bibliografia e Biblioteconomia presso l'Università "Federico II" di Napoli, deve aver vissuto entro le biblioteche storiche per parecchio tempo, alla ricerca dei volumi postillati, i cui *marginalia* possono davvero raccontare molto sul processo di lettura e comprensione di quanto i vari lettori stavano sfogliando. Così le pagine annotate possono rivelare interventi di censura di quanto si legge, o segni di apprezzamento, o rimandi intertestuali che notificano ai lettori contemporanei l'ampiezza delle conoscenze degli antichi lettori/possessori. Petrella fornisce una ricca tipologia di *marginalia*, dalle indicazioni di proprietà alla apposizione vera e propria di "ex libris", alla correzione di refusi, ai commenti veri e propri, e a schizzi e disegni, sino all'utilizzo delle carte di guardia in genere in fondo ai volumi per "aggiornare la contabilità di casa" di un certo possessore (p. 235), mostrandone esempi nelle trentatré illustrazioni raggruppate a fine volume.

Quanto possa essere rilevante uno studio come questo trova riscontro anche in altre culture. Ad esempio, una copia del primo Folio dei drammi di William Shakespeare (1623), ora nella Free Library di Philadelphia, è oggetto di studio recentissimo nel mondo anglosassone perché si è dimostrato, dalle postille in esso presenti, che sia appartenuto a John Milton, ben prima che si desse alla composizione di *Paradise Lost*. Questo getta luce sia sulla ricezione di Shakespeare nella prima metà del Seicento, sia sulla sensibilità letteraria e

poetica di Milton stesso. Come si può immaginare, in ogni biblioteca storica potrebbero esserci 'tesori' di questo tipo in attesa di essere scoperti. Ma come fanno i lettori, anche esperti, a scoprire copie annotate di incunaboli e cinquecentine senza dover passare molto tempo dentro una biblioteca? Petrella afferma che alcune biblioteche e librerie antiquarie stanno cominciando a integrare i propri cataloghi con informazioni sulla presenza di postille negli esemplari in loro possesso, così da facilitare i ricercatori con collegamenti ipertestuali, aumentando la multi-dimensionalità delle raccolte. Un lungo e complesso lavoro che può veramente rivelarci aspetti ignoti della cultura del passato, della sua trasmissione e della storia del libro.

Nel libro di Petrella non mancano annotazioni curiose e anche buffe, come quando riporta postille secondo cui, ad esempio, "[a] metà Cinquecento rischiava la scomunica chi non avesse restituito entro trenta giorni i libri presi in prestito dalla biblioteca di S. Domenico di Bologna" (p. 79). Ancora: chi osasse rubare il *Compendium grammaticae* di Juan de Pastrana (incunabolo del 1490) "subirà la pena delle fiamme ardenti dell'inferno" (p. 81). Forse, traducendo queste minacce in termini adeguati alla nostra contemporaneità, si potrebbe limitare il fenomeno delle appropriazioni indebite, dell'apposizione di segni deturpanti (che non sono certo suggeriti da *Scrivere sui libri*) o dei ritardi cronici nella riconsegna dei libri presi a prestito!

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