

## Three Poems to Eleonora Duse (1924)

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**Abstract:** *The famous actress Eleonora Duse died in Pittsburgh on April 21, 1924. She was on tour in the US with her company, and this tragic event was announced in the newspapers around the world. In May 1924, the Italian-American magazine «Il Carroccio» (founded and directed by the journalist Agostino De Biasi, an Italian migrant in New York) published a dossier in homage to Duse with the memories of many intellectuals who had known her. In particular, there are three poems written in English by three women that deserve a special attention: Eleonora Duse. She of the Beautiful Hands by Barbara Young, “Draw the Curtains” by Deborah Beirne, and Duse as Francesca da Rimini by Louise de Forest Shelton. The paper analyzes – for the first time – these poetic texts, considering Duse’s international success and the impact of her acting on the audience.*

**Key-words:** *Eleonora Duse; Agostino De Biasi; Il Carroccio; 1924; theatre; poems*

### 1. Introduction

The death of the Italian actress Eleonora Duse was a tragic event announced in the newspapers around the world<sup>2</sup>. She was on tour in the United States with her company, and died at the Schenley Hotel in Pittsburgh on April 21, 1924. Her departure was particularly significant for the Italian community in America, who paid homage considering her as a migrant who had been forced to leave her homeland to look for work abroad.

Her funeral was celebrated in New York on May 1, 1924, in the Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, in the presence of thousands of people. The body was embarked on the Duilio ship to reach the port of Naples; the solemn State funeral was celebrated in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Rome, and was buried in the cemetery of Asolo on May 12, 1924.

In May 1924, the Italian-American monthly magazine «Il Carroccio» - founded and directed by the journalist Agostino De Biasi (1875 - 1964), an Italian migrant in New York - published a bilingual dossier in homage to Duse with the memories of many intellectuals who had known her<sup>3</sup>. Among them, on the Italian side: the theatre critics Renato Simoni (1875 - 1952) and Silvio D’Amico (1887 - 1955), the playwrights Gino Rocca (1891 - 1941) and Luigi Chiarelli (1880 - 1947), the journalists Matilde Serao (1856 - 1927) and Riccardo Forster (1869 - 1939). On the American side, there are extracts from some articles on Duse published by important weekly magazines («The Outlook», «The Nation») and newspaper («The New York Evening Post»), and an article by the playwright Laurence Stallings (1894 - 1968). In addition, there are three poems written in English by three women that deserve a special attention: *Eleonora Duse. She of the Beautiful Hands* by Barbara Young, “*Draw the Curtains*” by Deborah Beirne, and *Duse as Francesca da Rimini* by Louise de Forest Shelton.

This paper analyzes – for the first time – these poetic texts, considering Duse’s international success and the impact of her acting on the audience. In fact, it is evident that the

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<sup>3</sup> M. P. Pagani. “Il teatro italiano nel mondo: Eleonora Duse nel ricordo di Giannini.” In *Guglielmo Giannini uomo di spettacolo*, ed. by Cambiaghi M. et al. Bari: Edizioni di Pagina, forthcoming.

poems were written by women who knew well Duse's performances and deeply admired her art. After almost a century, it is interesting to re-discover these texts: each author used, in a different and original way, the theatrical metaphor to pay homage to Duse.

## 2. *Eleonora Duse. She of the Beautiful hands* by Barbara Young

Barbara Young (1878 - 1961) is the pen name of Henrietta Breckenridge Boughton. She was an American art and literary critic in the 1920s, and a poet. She was a friend of the famous poet Kahlil Gibran (1883 - 1931) and his secretary from 1925 until his death. Then, she was responsible for his manuscripts and archives and became an advocate of his work using her connections to ensure his legacy. Moreover, she was his official biographer<sup>4</sup>.

In 1927 Barbara Young published the collection of poems *The Keys of Heaven*<sup>5</sup>. Some of her writing was featured in *The Best Poems of 1931*, an anthology by Thomas Moulton (1893 - 1974)<sup>6</sup>. All these elements allow us to understand that she had a deep poetic sensitivity: her homage to Duse, in 1924, was a relevant sign of her artistic temperament.

Duse's beautiful hands were celebrated by the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863 - 1938) in the tragedy *La Gioconda* (1899), and this image became strongly connotative of the charm of the great actress. For instance, a proof is the fictional biography *Duse of the Beautiful Hands: an Imaginative Life* (1932) by Vahdah Jeanne Bordeaux (pen name of the writer and dramatist Sofia McQuaide De Bonis, born in Italy in 1885)<sup>7</sup>.

In her poem, Barbara Young evokes the beauty and the expressiveness of Duse's hands: probably, she had seen her performances several times in America. But perhaps she had also attended her funeral and the embarkation of the body on the Duilio ship: there are some vintage photographs that portray these solemn moments. In the port of New York, before her last voyage, Duse was greeted by thousands of people: among them, with this poem, there was also her admirer Barbara Young.

### *Eleonora Duse. She of the Beautiful Hands* by Barbara Young<sup>8</sup>

If I could have my will  
I would live in a ship, on the sea,  
And never come nearer than that  
To humanity.

Woman of silence,  
She of the beautiful hands  
With the treacherous nails thrust through!  
Nails, and a sword, and thorns,  
And the cruel ultimate cross.

How still are the hands! How still!  
Never again will they reach  
With their mute, white message of pain.

<sup>4</sup> B. Young. 1945. *This Man from Lebanon. A Study of Kahlil Gibran*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

<sup>5</sup> B. Young. 1927. *The Keys of Heaven. A Book Poems*. New York: Fleming H. Revell.

<sup>6</sup> T. Moulton. 1931 (ed.). *The Best Poems of 1931*. New York: Harcourt Brace & C.

<sup>7</sup> V. J. Bordeaux. 1932. *Duse of the Beautiful Hands: an Imaginative Life*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart.

<sup>8</sup> B. Young. 1924. "Eleonora Duse. She of the Beautiful Hands." In *Il Carroccio* 5, p. 525.

See, they are folded now,  
Folded, and quite, and dead.

Dead? Those beautiful hands?  
Well, that is the word we use  
In our pitiful, impotent tongue.  
But who shall extinguish the Flame,  
The Torch, that those fingers of clay

Have lighted and carried and set  
So high at the white, still shrine  
Of the finished, unspeakable years?  
Never the breathe of Time,  
Never the hand of man,  
Shall quench it or tear it down.

Who are we that today we shall weep  
And whisper that she is dead?  
She lived in the silence apart,  
A Spirit as lonely as God.  
And now she has had her will.  
She is out in a ship on the sea.  
She will never come nearer than that.

I can see her stand at the prow,  
Wrapped in the light of her stars.  
The sword, as the thorns, and the cross  
Were cast away at the dawn.  
I can see her beautiful hands.  
An the wounds of the nails are healed.

### 3. “*Draw the Curtains*” by Deborah Beirne

Actually, there is little biographical information on Deborah Beirne. In the 1920s she wrote some plays, which were staged in New York (ex. *Beyond Egypt, Monna Lisa's Last Conquest*). She founded the New York National Irish Theatre Company<sup>9</sup>. She was also a producer, and her name conquered a certain prestige in the New York Theatre in the 1930s (*Park Avenue, Ltd.*)<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, she worked as a journalist («The New York Times Book Review», «Success Magazine»)<sup>11</sup>.

Considering her frequentation of the theatres in New York, probably, also Deborah Beirne had seen Duse's performances several times. The last one was held in Pittsburgh on April 5, 1921,

<sup>9</sup> B. Mantle. 1932 (ed.). *The Best Plays in 1931-32 and the Year Book of the Drama in America*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, p. 488.

<sup>10</sup> G. M. Bordman. 1996. *American Theatre. A Chronicle of Comedy and Drama 1930-1969*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> O. L. Guernsey. 1971. *Directory of the American Theater 1894-1971*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, pp. 31 - 32.

and she died two weeks later, on April 21. The newspapers had reported her illness and its progressive worsening. Deborah Beirne based the title of her poem on an anecdote (later transcribed by several biographers) linked to that difficult moment, and explained it in a note: «When Eleonora Duse realized that she was dying, she looked towards the windows, and then to those standing about her, said: “*Draw the Curtains*”»<sup>12</sup>.

With her poem, Deborah Beirne pays homage to Duse by quoting an emblematic phrase pronounced on her deathbed. At the same time, she uses the theatrical metaphor of the curtain for the end of the spectacle of the actress’s human life. Furthermore, the poem contains a dialogue like a theatrical text. This stylistic choice is linked to the author’s experience as a playwright: in her condition, this was the best way to celebrate Duse’s extraordinary art.

The dialogue between the artist and the Creator contains deep reflections on the meaning of suffering in human life. At the end of her earthly performance, Duse understands that her existence has always been crossed by the love of God<sup>13</sup>.

“*Draw the Curtains*” by Deborah Beirne<sup>14</sup>

“Draw the curtains” –  
Slowly the ends begins to meet,  
The audience, those who best know  
The exit from here to – where?  
Stand waiting for the end of the Prologue –  
For the last curtain call.

“Draw the curtains” –  
The two ends have met.  
There is silence – the interim between the Prologue and the Play.  
The wait is short, for the Mechanic knows his business.  
The scene is shifted – the stage is set  
For the drama of the Beyond.

(A meeting between the artist and the Creator of the mysterious baffling Prologue)

THE ARTIST:

“Your Prologue is so hard to understand –  
Why discord, complexities – why so little joy –  
Why disillusionment? And the Play –  
Is that too a pleading, aching ,why’,  
As poignant as the soul cry of the Prologue?”

THE CREATOR:

“The Prologue too, I one day tried,  
And people sneered and jeered and laughed,  
Although I played My part – with love –  
With everything I had to give – and yet –  
My audience? They went their way.

<sup>12</sup> D. Beirne. 1924. “Draw the Curtains.” In *Il Carroccio* 5, p. 527.

<sup>13</sup> M. P. Pagani. 2011. “The Spiritual Lesson of Eleonora Duse.” In *World Literary Review* 1, pp. 84-93.

<sup>14</sup> D. Beirne. 1924. “Draw the Curtains.” In *Il Carroccio* 5, p. 527.

Not yours – you held them to the last!  
While I, Creator of the whole,  
Alone, bowed farewell upon a Cross”.

Slowly, softly the curtains part  
Upon the drama of the great Unknown  
And the artist takes up her role  
While the Creator of the Prologue and the Play smiles –  
For the artist now understands  
The strange technique of the Prologue –  
The genius of the Play.

#### 4. *Duse as Francesca da Rimini* by Louise de Forest Shelton

Actually, there is little biographical information on Louise de Forest Shelton. She was a traveller and in the 1920s wrote interesting articles about her experience in many foreign countries and lands (France, Great Britain, Caribbean, Orient, Tunisia, Sahara)<sup>15</sup>. She was a collaborator of the journals «Our World», founded in 1921 by Herbert Sherman Houston (1866-1955)<sup>16</sup>, and «The New Orient».

On May 4, 1924, Louise de Forest Shelton published the poem *Duse as Francesca da Rimini* in «The New York Times Magazine»<sup>17</sup>. In the same month, «Il Carroccio» reissued it in the bilingual dossier dedicated to Duse. We don't know if the author was in America or traveling when the actress died: in fact, the poem does not allude directly on Duse's death, and it was not specifically written - unlike the other two by Barbara Young and Deborah Beirne - for this sad occasion.

In her poem *Duse as Francesca da Rimini*, Louise de Forest Shelton reveals that she had admired the artist many years ago, when she went on tour in America in 1902-03. In fact, in that occasion was staged the tragedy *Francesca da Rimini* by Gabriele d'Annunzio. Also Sara Teasdale (1884 - 1933) wrote on this topic in the collection *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems* (1907)<sup>18</sup>. And in 1902, attending a performance by Duse, Amy Lowell (1874 - 1925) understood her poetic vocation<sup>19</sup>.

Agostino De Biasi, director of the monthly magazine «Il Carroccio», chose to reprint this poem by Louise de Forest Shelton because it contains a reference to the Italian language on stage. In fact, Duse's performances were always in Italian and she was considered an ambassador of Italian culture in the world<sup>20</sup>. The impression of this American admirer is similar to that of all the foreign spectators who saw Duse on stage: they did not know the Italian language, but her performance was so perfect that they had the impression of knowing it anyway.

<sup>15</sup> In the McGill University Archives is held the typescript “An archaeological expedition to the ruins of Southern Tunisia and the Sahara” (1924), with articles by Louise de Forest Shelton, Arnold Mackay Duff and Byron Kuhn de Prorok (1896 - 1954).

<sup>16</sup> L. De Forest Shelton. 1924. “A Polyglot Archipelago. An American Observer in the Picturesque Islands in the Caribbean.” In *Our World* 5-6, pp. 33-40.

<sup>17</sup> L. De Forest Shelton. 1924. “Duse as Francesca da Rimini.” In *The New York Times Magazine* May 4, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> S. Teasdale. 1907. *Sonnets to Duse and Other Poems*. Boston: The Poet Lore Company Publishers.

<sup>19</sup> A. Lowell. 1923. “Eleanora Duse.” In *Poetry A Magazine of Verse* 8, pp. 234-236.

<sup>20</sup> M. I. Biggi. 2010 (ed.). *Eleonora Duse. Viaggio intorno al mondo*. Milan: Skira.

*Duse as Francesca da Rimini* by Louise de Forest Shelton<sup>21</sup>

She stands in quietitude,  
 And one is spellbound by  
 A grace so motionless.  
 She moves, and round her path  
 The breath of poetry stirs,  
 Making the silence sweet.  
 The stillness clings like mist  
 About her as she comes,  
 Her body bending grass  
 Before the mighty winds  
 Of passion and woe: woe  
 Hands eloquent and mute –  
 (O, flower-like, fragile hands!)  
 And then, at last, her voice –  
 Swift words in a strange tongue  
 Fast-flowing cadences  
 Of harmony – a voice  
 That stirs deep passions, or,  
 Like music, lulls the senses  
 In a delicious joy...  
 The sweet Italian speech  
 Familiar seems: we know  
 Wild, secret things – love, fear,  
 And all the trembling of  
 A young maid's heart, long  
 Long ago, in Rimini!  
 Her beauty lights the gloom  
 Of tyranny and wars –  
 Giovanni's bride looks in  
 Paolo's eyes... She loves  
 With fearful, beating heart  
 Stoops to the secret sin...  
 Then lifts her face to Death,  
 Still holding Love.

## 5. Conclusions

Thanks to the work of Agostino De Biasi, the Italian-American monthly magazine «Il Carroccio» was published from 1914 to 1935. It had a large circulation and many subscribers both in the United States and in Italy; the numerous advertisements had made her the voice of the Italians of America and the mirror of Italy abroad. The office was at 150 Nassau Street in New York. Among the correspondents, there were many people deeply connected to Duse's life, such as Gabriele d'Annunzio and Matilde Serao. But also Enrico Corradini (1865 - 1931), Paolo Orano (1875 - 1945), Father Giovanni Semeria (1867 - 1931) and others.

<sup>21</sup> L. De Forest Shelton. 1924. "Duse as Francesca da Rimini." In *Il Carroccio* 5, p. 530.

Barbara Young, Deborah Beirne and Louise de Forest Shelton are three completely unknown authors in Italy. Through «Il Carroccio», they also reached Italian readers, creating a cultural link with the readers of Italian emigration in America. They are three women with different public notoriety, but united by the admiration for Duse and a passion for the theatre. In 1924 they paid tribute to her through the difficult art of poetry, demonstrating their admiration for the actress and the woman.

We know that Duse has inspired some of the most beautiful and famous poems of d'Annunzio, but the impact of her figure on the so-called “minor poets” has yet to be studied. And, in particular, on female writing. These three cases open an original and new field of research, which I now have the honor and pleasure of presenting at the Symposium of Ovidius University in Constanta.

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