The Gospel according to Shakespeare
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SHAKESPEARE

PIERO BOITANI

Translated by

VITTORIO MONTEMAGGI AND RACHEL JACOFF

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To

Gordon Teskey

and the memory of

Frank Kermode
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Note on the Texts

Preface to the American Edition

For several years I had been thinking of writing a small book with a title like the present one and had indeed written various pieces that dealt with these themes. Confronting Shakespeare, and his last plays in particular, is almost impossible, and to couple him with the Gospels and with the whole of Scripture is definitely foolhardy. Yet they are challenges one can hardly resist, because the texts involved are among the masterpieces of world literature, and the prospect of saying something new about them is indeed irresistible to a critic, especially to one who, like myself, has dealt with similar canonical texts—the Bible and its rewritings, the Odyssey and its reincarnations, Dante—and who intended to write a book not only for scholars but also for students and the general public.

This aim had two consequences for the shape the book was to take, one in the plot and one in the method. I started with the plot, being convinced that, from the second section of Hamlet onwards, Shakespeare is engaged in developing his own Gospel. Thus, I arranged the plays in a roughly chronological sequence that would constitute my general plot: from Hamlet to King Lear, where Shakespeare’s New Testament is only announced and where faith, salvation, and peace are only glimpsed at from far away, and on to Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest, where the themes of transcendence, immanence, the role of the deity, resurrection, and epiphany are openly, if often obliquely, staged. The Christian Gospels and the Christian Bible represent the signposts, as it were, of this itinerary. Hamlet’s new attitude to life and death after his return from England is signaled by his “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow,” a quotation from Matthew. Lear seems to go one step further when he tells Cordelia that they will “pray, and sing,
and tell old tales,” and “take upon [themselves] the mystery of things as if they were God’s spies.” The “old tales” are in fact the romances, from *Pericles* to *The Tempest*, which Shakespeare will produce in the next few years. All of them, like *King Lear*, will involve a father and a daughter figure; all, like *King Lear*, will stage amazing recognition scenes. More of this in the introduction.

My second problem was the way in which I would narrate this plot. It was clear to me, from experiences in classrooms all over the world (England, the United States, and other English-speaking countries included), and from the lectures I had been giving to general audiences, even in public venues and on television, that today’s public does not know Shakespeare’s plays as well as it did two or three generations ago. One needs, in the first place, to tell the stories, which are by themselves capable of producing endless wonder—tell the stories in detail, because the devil, or God, is hidden in the details. Plot, as Aristotle himself saw (he called it *mythos*), is what gets an audience at a performance. Plot is what keeps up the suspense and eventually produces catharsis, final pain, joy, elation, revelation. Arranging the plot is the supreme trick of the artist and, I think, of today’s critic. If you tell a story well while teaching Homer, Dante, Tolstoy, or Conrad, you already are half of the way with your audience.

Only half of the way, however. The other half is to make your theme, and your argument, emerge from the plot and from the verbal texture of a play or a novel, letting the author speak as much as possible—which obviously needs no justification with the likes of Shakespeare, who terrifies and enchants simply by having his characters pronounce certain words in a certain order. By pointing out the recurrence of themes, images, allusions, one then weaves into the text what would seem to be a running commentary but is in fact a kind of continuous meditation. For what, after the plot, draws the critic’s attention to these particular works is the mystery they conceal at some key points; and the critic, as well as the audience, wants to know more about it—wants, in fact, to think about it and discover its secret. A string of enigmas will produce thoughtfulness, reflection, further reading into the text, and the need to establish comparisons.

At times, the puzzle need only be indicated to stay in the reader’s mind (and heart) and eventually trigger enlightenment. At the
very beginning of *The Tempest*, for instance, Ariel tells Prospero that, apart from Ferdinand, and on the other side the sailors, all the other “shipwrecked” human beings on the island (the King of Naples, the Duke of Milan, and their courtiers) are “in the deep nook, where once / Thou call’dst me up at midnight to fetch dew / From the still-vex’d Bermoothes.” This is a sudden, non-required excess (there is no logical need for this information) as well as an absolutely wonderful leap of the imagination. Why the Bermudas? And why should Prospero have evoked Ariel to fetch dew, of all things, at midnight? One should enjoy or even feel immense surprise and elation at the use of such an image, then store it somewhere in one’s memory, slowly begin to realize that the Bermudas and the New World will construct the other face of *The Tempest*’s Mediterranean island, and just as slowly unravel the mystery of Ariel’s calling and his final song of freedom ("Where the bee sucks").

In short, this book has little in common with contemporary Shakespeare criticism. I would like it to be rather like a classroom step-by-step *lectura*, somewhere between the medieval or Renaissance commentary and the modern essay, with my introduction and conclusion providing the framework for the stories within by presenting and summing up the general plot. It is, above all, a narration, which, like music (there is so much music in Shakespeare’s last plays), picks up and returns to the motifs of living, generating, dying, and being reborn that form the substance of the unique Gospel according to William Shakespeare.

The American edition of this book would not have been possible without the efforts of Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff, who have collaborated in translating it. An earlier version of chapter 3, by Anita Weston, then revised by Noeleen Hargan, has also been used. However, the impulse to produce a translation that would make the volume available to an English-speaking audience first came from Frank Kermode and Gordon Teskey, to both of whom it is therefore dedicated. As with the Italian edition, Nadia Fusini has been a constant and inspiring friend, and the *dea e sapientia* to whom I owe the De Sanctis Prize for it.

Piero Boitani

*Poggio Mirteto on the Sabine Hills*

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Introduction

yet thou dost look

Like Patience gazing on kings’ graves, and smiling

Extremity out of act.

Shakespeare’s romances bring good news, and they do so in a most immediate sense, as they all have a happy ending. These late plays constitute his good news, his Gospel. Although Shakespeare has constantly in mind the Christian Gospels, he composes, as the supreme and free playwright that he is, a testament (these are his last works) that is truly his: the New Testament of William Shakespeare.

One must take into account the complexity and variety of the themes and forms that inspire Shakespeare (from pastoral drama to the Commedia dell’Arte, from late antique romance to the dumb show and the masque), as well as the unique and ingenious inclusiveness and the mixture displayed in his works: the syncretic juxtaposition of pagan deities and the biblical God, the combination of magic and religion, the intertwining of politics and passion, and the contrast and complementariness of nature and culture, of Nature and Art. But it is striking that the sequence examined in this book—from Hamlet to The Tempest—opens with a citation from the Gospels and ends with another. For
Hamlet declares to Horatio, echoing Matthew and Luke, that “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow”; and Prospero, at the end of *The Tempest*, takes leave from his audience (and so from us) with words that rewrite the Lord’s Prayer: “And my ending is despair, / Unless I be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself and frees all faults. / As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free” (emphasis mine).

From the second part of *Hamlet* onwards, Shakespeare is meditating on providence, on forgiveness, and on goodness and happiness, and is doing so in Christian terms. I am not interested in trying to determine—as in fact many critics today are legitimately doing—whether Shakespeare was, either in his last years or at any other point in his life, Protestant or Catholic (he certainly was not Puritan, for he derides Puritans on more than one occasion); whether he believed in Purgatory and transubstantiation; or whether he regarded himself as faithful to the Church of Rome or to that of England. There is contradictory evidence in favor of either hypothesis. For instance, Hamlet’s “special” providence seems to derive from the ideas of John Calvin; but no trace of this appears in *The Tempest*, which has the action of providence at its heart. Moreover, it is generally held that Shakespeare uses the Geneva Bible, the great English Protestant translation of 1560; but it seems that he sometimes looks to the Douai-Rheims version (1582–1610), that is, the Catholic translation, and sometimes to the Anglican one, namely, the King James Bible, published in its entirety in 1611.

For a Protestant, for an Anglican, Purgatory does not exist, and yet the ghost of Hamlet’s father declares to his son that he is “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / and for the day confined to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / are burnt and purged away” (emphasis mine). However, there is no sign of such possible Purgatory in *The Tempest*, where there is only talk of Hell and (Earthly) Paradise. It is possible to entertain the hypothesis that in the years following the succession to the throne of the Stuart king, James I, Shakespeare was thinking about a rapprochement between London and Rome. The final scene of *Cymbeline*—where the soothsayer announces the fulfillment of the prophecy according to which “our princely eagle, / Th’ imperial Caesar, should again unite / His favour with the radiant
Cymbeline,” and in which the English king has his own troops and the Roman troops march together under flanking banners—could be an allusion to the translatio imperii from Rome to England, but it could also be seen as the veiled hope of a meeting between the papacy and the Crown (that is, the Church) of England.

These are intriguing questions that, however, I leave to historians, and to historians of culture and of ideas in particular. For I find it just as fascinating to note that that speech by Hamlet, and indeed his life, ends with an amen, and that the performance of The Tempest should end in the same way, with two amens. And to note that from Hamlet and King Lear onwards Shakespeare’s imagination is dominated by tempests, shipwrecks, pirates, and death by water; by flowers and nature in bloom; by relationships between fathers and daughters and between husbands and wives; by recognitions, revelations, epiphanies, and apocalypses. Interpreted retrospectively, the recognition scene between Lear and Cordelia constitutes an archetype for those between Pericles and Marina, between Imogen and Cymbeline, and between Leontes and Perdita; just as the recognition between Pericles and Thaisa returns in that between Imogen and Posthumus, and between Leontes and Hermione. In The Tempest, recognitions are replaced by revelations, but even here a crucial relationship remains, that between a father, Prospero, and his daughter, Miranda.

There are, therefore, profound links between these plays. To follow the development of such links is the task I have set myself in this book. It is, of course, the case that biblical allusions constantly appear throughout Shakespeare’s work, and that tempest, shipwreck, and recognition are already all present, for instance, in the enchanting comedy that is Twelfth Night. But in the sequence I address, such elements find their place within an overall, “providential” understanding of human affairs and are inserted within a larger vision that I can only define as “theological.” They form part of an overall discourse addressing the relationship between human beings and God, and in particular the question of divine justice. Hamlet speaks of “a divinity that shapes our ends” and says that “heaven” helped him. Lear prefigures a future, in prison with Cordelia, as a “spy” of God, and the last part of the play is a pressing discussion of divine behavior within human affairs. Pericles contests the
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gods, rebukes them, accuses them—and then he invokes them, thanks them, is overwhelmed by their grace, and hears the music of the spheres. In Cymbeline, Imogen, disguised as a boy, appears as “divineness,” there is a revolt against the gods on the part of Posthumus’ ancestors, and to them Jupiter himself responds in a theophany. In The Winter’s Tale we see the resurrection of Hermione. The Tempest presents Prospero as God, Miranda as a goddess, and Ferdinand as a god, with Caliban as the devil. Setebos, a Patagonian god, is invoked in the play, in which the pagan goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno had appeared earlier.

Rather than abstract or academic discussions on theodicy (Hamlet is the only one who approaches scholastic disputation), we are presented with life experiences: that is, with discussions that Shakespeare brings to life through what his characters suffer and enjoy in their own lives. In particular, the feeling of the presence of divinity is born initially, in Shakespeare’s characters, from pain, from suffering that which is obscure and tragic, and from the experience of death. This is the case for Hamlet, but especially for Lear and Gloucester, and again for Pericles and Leontes. The term patientia captures well the meaning of such experiences: the term often means “Passion” (as in the Passion of Christ) and at the same time “patience,” the ability to endure. The Passion of Job and of Christ are Lear’s, who sometimes recommends patience to himself. Pericles is infinitely patient, and Patience appears as a statue in the recognition between Pericles and Marina: able to contemplate “kings’ graves, and smiling / Extremity out of act.” Edgar recommends patience in one of the most elevated moments of King Lear: the patience of being born and of dying. Endurance emerges as the only possible attitude in Cymbeline. Even Paulina, in the last scene of The Winter’s Tale, continually suggests patience to Leontes, patience in waiting for the miraculous. Moreover, Prospero in The Tempest does nothing but command patience: to Ariel, to Ferdinand and Miranda, to Gonzalo and Alonso.

Waiting. Shakespeare imposes this on us, delaying and postponing with the most skillful suspense the happy ending of the romances. But another meaning of waiting is found between the “readiness” for death that comes to Hamlet from the Gospels, and the “ripeness” that Edgar proclaims in King Lear: between potency and act, between announcement and fulfillment. The “consummation” Hamlet contemplates be-
fore leaving for England, which would be provided by suicide’s freeing him (and us) from the evil of living, becomes in *Cymbeline* the “consummation” of the peace that Guiderius and Arviragus wish for Fidele, who, they believe, is dead. But another consummation—that is, fulfillment—is what Lear prefigures in going to prison with Cordelia: together to sing like caged birds, to exchange blessings, to ask each other for forgiveness, to pray, to tell each other old tales, to laugh at gilded butterflies, to take upon themselves the mystery of things and be spies of God.

No such consummation is allowed either to Hamlet or to Lear and Cordelia. But Lear’s speech prefigures with great precision what will happen in the romances, which are in fact the “old tales” of which he talks. “Consummatum est” can be exclaimed, as by the Gospel of John’s dying but victorious Jesus, only by Pericles, Leontes, Cymbeline, Prospero; and by Marina and Thaisa, Perdita and Hermione, Imogen and Posthumus, Miranda and Ferdinand and Gonzalo. There is, in the final scenes of Shakespeare’s romances, a plenitude—a grace—that is found only in the Gospels (and particularly in those of John and Luke) within the post-Resurrection scenes.

“Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia / The Gods themselves throw incense,” announces Lear. Such “sacrifices” are the events of suffering and purification that transform the romances into rituals. For this to happen, four other attitudes are needed alongside patience: repentance, forgiveness, and the reaching both towards one’s true self and towards others.

These attitudes appear uncertain at the beginning of our sequence. It is unclear whether Hamlet and Laertes truly forgive each other, if not in dying, and it is certain that Hamlet neither repents of anything nor forgives his uncle. Lear does not forgive his two wicked daughters and, in a process already detailed by the apostle Paul, has to go through folly to reach knowledge of himself; but, during the storm, he shows sudden and intense compassion towards the poor, and he confesses and seeks forgiveness before Cordelia: “Pray, do not mock me: / I am a very foolish fond old man.” Pericles needs neither repentance nor forgiveness: he is an innocent and meek Job. But both are necessary in *Cymbeline*: for Iachimo as for Posthumus, the former—an Iago-like figure—guilty of provoking the jealousy of the latter, the latter guilty of having wanted to have Imogen killed. Repentance is also required of Leontes, who is
jealous to the point of sending his son and his wife to die and of wishing to eliminate his infant daughter. In the final scenes of *The Tempest*, moreover, repentance and forgiveness dominate, where the latter is inspired in Prospero by his servant, the spirit Ariel, and the former in the end is lacking only in Antonio and Sebastian. In *The Tempest*, however, a further, final step is taken when Prospero brings upon himself evil and sin by recognizing Caliban, “this thing of darkness,” as his own.

*King Lear* and *The Tempest* are tied together by a long thread: the father’s request for forgiveness before his child. As Lear and Cordelia are going to prison, the old king tells his daughter: “When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down; / and ask of thee forgiveness.” At the end of *The Tempest*, it is Alonso who turns to his son Ferdinand: “But O, how oddly will it sound, that I / must ask my child forgiveness!” This ability to forget oneself and kneel, offering oneself in humility before others—all the more striking if it is manifest in fathers before their children—is one of the most elevated and valuable features of the good news of the romances.

I attempt, in the following chapters, to follow these movements and their ramifications in the individual plays. But even from our present-day perspective it seems apparent that they delineate a path towards love of God and neighbor that, while uncertain and never fully followed (but then who, apart from the saints, can do so fully?), is nonetheless consonant with evangelical proclamations. Shakespeare’s romances are not allegories; they are “old tales,” perhaps parables. Shakespeare never explicitly says and never suggests with any clarity that, for example, the negated phantom banquet of *The Tempest* is the wedding feast or the Last Supper of the Gospels. He tells stories, in which Lear and Pericles occasionally appear, indirectly or *in aenigmatis*, as Job or Christ; in which Marina takes on the semblance of the Way, the Truth, and the Life; in which Hermione comes back to life, like Lazarus, by virtue of the music that strikes her, *if* those present reawaken their faith; in which Ferdinand and Miranda appear like Adam and Eve. Shakespeare leaves it to his audience and his readers to capture the similarities, the affinities, and the differences.

We thus have to pay careful attention to all intertextual allusions, to both sacred and nonsacred texts. For Shakespeare is too consummate an artist to construct mere equivalences or simple “moralities”; he loves
obliquity, stratifying shadows, the juxtaposition of myths, times, and places. Bohemia, let us recall, is placed by him on the sea. The enchanted island of *The Tempest* should be found somewhere between Tunis and Naples but is also, clearly, a shadow of Africa and of the New World. It is the Earthly Paradise and a labyrinth, the Golden Age in the middle of the Mediterranean of the Renaissance, and an Ogygia at the confines of the world. The statue of Hermione was carved by Giulio Romano, a pupil of Raphael who designed and frescoed the Palazzo Te in Mantua, but who, as far as we know, was not a sculptor. Perdita is Perfection, Spring, Nature. The tempests that shatter the ships of the protagonists of the romances are those of Homer and Virgil, and those that threaten the caravels precariously finding their way towards America; and they are also the storm that sinks the vessel on which the apostle Paul attempts to reach Rome, or they are even the primordial chaos of Genesis and the *seara*, the whirlwind, out of which God speaks to Job.

One will not find in the romances Matthew's Beatitudes, the wedding at Cana, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Crucifixion, or the Ascension. There will emerge, however, in allusive but relevant fashion, the affliction, the meekness, and the purity of heart of Pericles; the weddings of Marina, Perdita, and Miranda; the growth and multiplication of humankind in *The Tempest*; Lear bound to a wheel of fire; Horatio's wish for the dying Hamlet, that “flights of angels sing [him] to [his] rest”; the grace that infuses everything in the final scene of *Cymbeline*; Hermione's resurrection; Prospero, the god who makes himself man.

Shakespeare's overall design, however, becomes clear. Hamlet faintly sees an uncertain and distant light and reflects on the fate of a sparrow, of human beings, and of himself, as if he were on the threshold of the Scriptures. Lear suffers a Passion, shows compassion towards the poor, comes back to life, imagines a beatific future of prayer, forgiveness, and mutual blessing, and then of song and storytelling and smiling: of simplicity, humility, and taking to himself the mystery of things. Lear, who will shortly see the dead Cordelia and who will himself soon die, prefigures a priest at a divine sacrifice, a prophet of God. Pericles becomes such a figure. Finding Marina again discloses to him the harmony of the cosmos, that which is produced by the movement of the heavenly spheres, singing like angels. Pericles, his wife, and his daughter experience beatitude and the consummation on earth of the kingdom of
heaven. The same thing happens with the return to life of Hermione’s statue and with the encounter between Ferdinand and Miranda. We find, in other words, Gospels founded on immanence, on earthly realization; we find a foreshadowing of heavenly plenitude, the last word of which is the return of God (of Prospero) to history, to earth, after having taken upon himself, if not the mystery of things, then the responsibility for “this thing of darkness,” for the evil of the world.

An integral part of such an overall design is the role played by women. The Gospel according to Shakespeare is wonderfully inflected and proclaimed in feminine form. Even in this case we have a precise trajectory. Ophelia, who could perhaps save Hamlet, is rejected by him and dies. Cordelia, who had actually saved Lear, if only for a few hours, also dies. This is followed by an extraordinary progression in which Marina and Thaisa, Imogen, Perdita, Hermione, and finally Miranda appear as true bearers of grace. Marina, the virgin who is not “of any shores” but is mortal, generates him who generated her, and Pericles becomes the son of his daughter; Marina seems to be a shadow of Mary. Thaisa is she whose lips, when touched by Pericles, make him feel on the verge of dissolving and of disappearing forever. Imogen is the mullier, the “mollis aer,” the air and “sweet” aura that surrounds with its constancy and faithfulness the whole of Cymbeline. Hermione, who redeemed life from death, returns love back to Leontes and blesses their daughter. Miranda gives her love to Ferdinand and discovers a new and beautiful world in the men whom she sees at the play’s end.

The Good News that Shakespeare’s last plays bring to us—I end here these introductory reflections, and point to their fulfillment in the conclusion of this book—is that we can reach happiness on earth, and that this can be true “eternal life.” To be reunited with one’s loved ones, to rediscover them and recognize them, constitutes happiness: nothing more than this, but equally nothing less. “To recognize those we love is a god,” Euripides’ Helen had already said. But to be reunited with one’s daughter or to one’s wife, after having believed her dead, can make us hear the music of the spheres, can make us dissolve and vanish forever in the nothingness that is everything: it is thus a shadow of beatitude.