

Selected Publications in Shakespeare Studies

Bigliuzzi, Silvia, ed., *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2020, 282 pp.

Ciliberto, Michele, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Incipit, Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, 2022, 256 pp.

“The time is out of joint”, Shakespeare’s Hamlet famously exclaims in I.v, “O cursed spite! / That ever I was born to set it right!” (189-90). Shocked by the horrific news of Claudius’ crime, Hamlet perceives the task that the ghost of his father has laid upon him – at the same time a private duty (to avenge the murder) and political obligation (to set his time right) – as both inevitable and intolerable. To act or not to act is his plight. Hamlet’s inner conflict was rooted in the religious, political, and cultural ‘earthquake’ that shook early modern Europe, leading to what Alessandro Serpieri aptly put as “the great structural and epistemological *crisis* that occurred between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a *crisis* that can be summarized as the conflict between a symbolic model of the world (a classical-medieval-Renaissance heritage) and a syntagmatic one, inaugurating the relativism of the modern age” (1985, p. 125, emphasis mine).

‘Crisis’ is a revealing word. This term, although somewhat abused in contemporary discourse, carries a profound significance rooted in its Greek etymology, evoking the idea of a judgement, or a decision to be made at a particular point in time when conflicts arise to threaten “a given structure of relations” (Berghaus 1996, p. 44). The early modern age was undoubtedly one of such “particular point[s]

in time". No wonder then that an author such as Shakespeare would give voice to the manifold crises of his age. In this regard, recent contributions to Shakespearean Studies, such as Michele Ciliberto's *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* (2022) and Silvia Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* (2020), share a ground-breaking reflection on Shakespeare and 'crisis'. If the former aims at shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which Shakespeare responded to a phase of transition and conflict, the latter focuses on how the various translations, adaptations, and appropriations of Shakespeare have been exploited to respond to similar moments in more recent years.

In his *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia*, Michele Ciliberto discusses some of Shakespeare's major dramatic works from the early 17th century, and highlights the playwright's acknowledgement of the universal crisis already exploited by illustrious intellectuals of Italian Humanism, ranging from Leon Battista Alberti to Giordano Bruno, from Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini to Pietro Pomponazzi and Tommaso Campanella. All of them, as recently pinpointed in Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta* (2019), were far from being enthusiastic supporters of the Neoplatonic celebration of anthropocentrism. In fact, living through the religious and political turmoil that characterised early modern Europe, they highlighted the servile and beastly nature of men and women, mere 'toys' in the hands of gods, and subject to a destiny which, in most cases, escaped their control. According to Ciliberto, it is on this 'tragic' ground that Shakespeare engaged with these agents of the Italian Renaissance culture: "Quello che accomuna Shakespeare ai grandi esponenti dell'Umanesimo italiano è la persuasione di vivere un'epoca di crisi del mondo, nella quale [...] è venuto meno ogni principio di ordine, di gerarchia e di responsabilità individuale, e con essi tutti i vincoli di ordine etico e anche religioso [...]" (p. 26). [Shakespeare shares with the great protagonists of Italian Humanism the conviction of living in a time of world crisis, wherein [...] every principle of order, hierarchy, and individual responsibility has dissolved, along with all ethical and even religious bonds"].

In eight chapters Ciliberto's volume focuses on a cluster of concepts crucial to the above-mentioned Italian humanists, and highlights Shakespeare's engagement with the same ideas in plays as di-

verse as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or *The Tempest*. Besides the three topics featured in the title – “evil”, “power”, and “magic” – Ciliberto touches upon seminal topics as “justice”, “memory”, “revenge”, or “*ludus deorum*”, among others. In so doing, he considers the universal crisis endorsed by the humanists of Quattrocento and Cinquecento Italy from a variety of points of view; a crisis that Shakespeare seems to have handled, somewhat directly, and then refashioned, more or less explicitly.

An exploration of Shakespeare in the light of the six eminent Italians who constitute the core of Ciliberto’s research interests is indeed among the merits of the volume, which confirms the fruitful circulation of ideas between Italy and England in the Renaissance. While the presence of Machiavelli and Bruno in early modern English culture has been variously investigated in several contexts, *Shakespeare. Il male, il potere, la magia* offers a novel perspective and invites readers to approach Anglo-Italian relations with fresh eyes. However, there is much yet to uncover when it comes to authors such as Campanella or Pomponazzi, suggesting that a more in-depth analysis of their ideas may contribute to broadening our understanding of the English poets and playwrights that addressed the same issues. In this regard, the attention that Ciliberto pays to Leon Battista Alberti is particularly relevant, revealing the resonance of his ideas in *Hamlet* (Chapter 1) and *Othello* (Chapter 2). For instance, in Hamlet’s poignant speech in II.ii, where he celebrates “man” as a “piece of work” (305), only to conclude that he is nothing but “quintessence of dust” (310), Ciliberto detects Alberti’s doubts on the fact that the creature he had defined in Book II of his *Theogenius* as “umbra d’un sogno” (Alberti 1966, p. 89) and considered subject to “perpetua servitù” (p. 90) could indeed represent the centre of the cosmos. Moreover, in his discussion of *Othello*, Ciliberto puts forward evidence of the similarities between Iago and Alberti’s Momus. He argues that both characters believe they have suffered some injustice and therefore use similar forms of ‘chameleonic’ dissimulation to seek revenge, although ultimately to no avail, and in ways that rather confirm the meaninglessness of the world in which they live: “La dimensione camaleontica si manifesta nell’uno e nell’altro come capacità di mascherarsi per ottenere vendetta: motivo [...] presente anche nell’ultimo capitolo del *Momus*, nel quale

diventa chiara l'ontologia alla base del discorso di Alberti, e il confluire di essa, come quella di Shakespeare, nella morte, nel nulla" (p. 68). ["This chameleonic dimension reveals itself in both characters as the ability to disguise oneself in order to seek revenge, a motif also resonating in the final chapter of *Momus*, where Alberti's underlying ontology emerges from and merges with Shakespeare's perspective on the themes of death and nothingness"].

While underlining how this 'sense' of a universal crisis is dealt with by the Italian humanists and Shakespeare along similar lines, Ciliberto also highlights one significant difference. The humanist idea that crises can be overcome by means of well-targeted actions, implying moral and political reforms ("la funzione salvifica della prassi" "the salvific function of praxis"; p. 15), seems absent from Shakespeare's tragedies. It is only in his romances, such as *The Winter's Tale* and, most of all, *The Tempest*, Ciliberto argues, that an alternative perspective is envisaged. In these plays, what Shakespeare presents is a highly peculiar kind of *praxis*, one that requires the acceptance of a 'leap of faith' on the part of his audience. It is indeed the recourse to magic that glimpses the exceptional possibility to enter a parallel universe, a dream-like world, in which humankind can eventually enjoy their life and try to be happy... until magic lasts. Of course, this cannot but be a temporary situation: "La magia è una *chance*, per una volta, non per sempre [...]" (p. 188) ["Magic is a chance, for once, not forever"]. The truth is – Ciliberto concludes – that in Shakespeare's plays both the real world and the fundamentally tragic destiny of humankind are impossible to escape.

In the light of Shakespeare's influence on European culture at large, it is no surprise that his engagement in the theme of crisis both at individual and collective levels ended up providing other countries with useful narrative threads. Focusing on the Italian context between 1916 and 2016, Shakespeare's third and fourth centenary of his death respectively, Bigliuzzi's *Shakespeare and Crisis. One Hundred Years of Italian Narratives* explores "the cultural discourses that, through Shakespeare, supplied responses to periods of cultural and political crisis in the course of a century, and [...] how those narrative events were forged, used, and endowed with cultural and political agency" (p. 2). Bigliuzzi and the other contributors to this intelligent collection of essays approach such narratives from a variety of crit-

ical standpoints, which allow them to show the multifaceted commitment to Shakespeare by people as diverse as writers, directors, intellectuals, and critics, as well as the relevance of his work during critical moments in Italian history.

The seven chapters of this book are organised chronologically, tracing how Shakespeare either provided or joined different types of discourse at times of crisis for Italy, including the aftermath of World War One and the multi-level crises of the 1970s and the first decades of the 21st century. Significantly titled “Identity crises”, Part 1 is made up of three chapters investigating the reasons why Shakespeare was both included in and excluded from Italian public debates on his 1916 Tercentenary and especially during the years of Mussolini’s Fascist regime, with analyses considering the propagandistic uses of *Julius Caesar*. If Shakespeare’s Tercentenary, which followed Italy’s controversial entry into WW1, occurred at a time of fierce opposition between nationalist and internationalist factions that contributed to Italy’s apparent “forgetfulness” (p. 29) of the event, the ways in which Shakespeare was later absorbed into Fascist propaganda demonstrates instead that Mussolini and his *entourage* capitalised on Shakespeare’s work when it suited them, turning his Julius Caesar, for example, into “the champion of nationalist law-and-order Caesarism in a State of exception requiring the rule of the strong man” (p. 139). Right before the invasion of Ethiopia, two events such as the productions of *Julius Caesar* at the Basilica of Maxentius (1935) and Gian Francesco Malipiero’s opera drawn from the same play (1936) did indeed prove, as Bigliuzzi argues, “how the Fascist regime, in the short span of time between 1 August 1935 and 7 February 1936, could use Shakespeare to pave the way towards the Empire and, once proclaimed, provide its apologia” (p. 139).

Part 2 (“Power games and the crisis of history”) leads readers to the 1970s, the so-called ‘Anni di Piombo’ [leaden years], and examines how Italian adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in those years became a means for a new generation of directors and actors to confront the anxieties originated in their country’s troubled past, as well as to reflect on what was perceived as a crisis of the very category of history. Such crucial issues are tackled through fresh insights into Giorgio Strehler’s and Carmelo Bene’s engagement with Shakespeare. As Lucia Nigri explains in Chapter 4, the encounter

with Shakespeare offered Strehler the possibility to answer “his own painful questions about the recent past as well as the contemporary generational crisis” (p. 165), and to make sense, albeit pessimistically, of “the narrative of the game of the powerful as a circle in history that man could not escape” (p. 166). In Chapter 5, Bigliuzzi instead underscores how Carmelo Bene’s ‘minoritising’ (sic) approach to Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, by means of subversive alterations of the seduction scene and prosthetic transformations, not only allowed him to “evade [the] allegories of authoritarian power” which were common at the time, but also to probe “into the nature of political action as seduction, displaying the falsity of official history as opposed to lived history” (p. 177).

The last section of the volume analyses how Shakespeare provided material to inquire into the crisis of representation, entailing a crisis of the subject, which characterised the period comprised between the 1980s and 2016. In this regard, Bigliuzzi’s Chapter 6 explores various uses of Shakespeare, by considering “strategies of intermedial appropriation as critiques of a culture of simulacra” as well as “allegorical forms of ‘hyperreal’ adaptations that by recuperating ideas of ‘transparent representation’ sidestep preoccupations about the hyperreal” (p. 216). Finally, Maria Elisa Montironi’s Chapter 7 shows how Shakespeare has often been used to thematise the manifold crises plaguing contemporary Italy, including issues of political and social identity against the backdrop of migratory phenomena and the new generations’ disenchantment with history and politics. At the same time, in this context of socio-political discontent, Montironi concludes on a more positive note in reminding readers that Shakespeare has nonetheless become a precious ‘cultural capital’; “a powerful marketing tool”, as she writes, which has helped several Italian companies “to cope with the ongoing economic and also cultural crisis” (p. 249).

In their exploration of how ideas of crisis have been interpreted by and through Shakespeare, Ciliberto’s and Bigliuzzi’s scholarly contributions set themselves at the crossroads between European Shakespeare Studies and studies of Shakespeare and Italy. These areas of research have witnessed a significant growth over the years by providing evidence of the “[profitable] exchange”, to put it in Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis’ words, “between languages and

literary cultures" (2017, p. 2), which is to be understood "in the sense of both a reciprocal transaction (a mercantile trade, an exchange *between* equivalents) and a displacement (a substitution, an exchange of one thing *for* another)" (p. 3, emphasis in the original). Building on this wide-ranging wealth of scholarship, both books reviewed here are welcome additions to our understanding of Shakespeare and his legacy. Particularly, they offer insights into the ways in which the uncertainty as well as the necessity to make decisions when 'crisis' is the issue permeate Shakespeare's works, together with the 'Shakespearean discourses' subsequently developed in the context of specific critical moments.

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