

CHAPTER 42

THE TRAGEDIES IN ITALY

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WE begin with a conversation between two actors, the older Gustavo Modena (1803–61) reminiscing with the younger Ernesto Rossi (1827–96) about his early Shakespearean exploit in Milan in 1842:

He took up the manuscript of *Othello*, turned over a few pages and pointed to the first scene. ‘From here to here.’ ‘I don’t understand. Was someone taken ill? Was it necessary to abandon the performance?’ ‘Yes, the public was taken ill and we had to let down the curtain: here is the story. I was anxious to give the public something new, present an Author they might have only heard of by name. I took a translation of *Othello*, I shortened it, adapted it as best as I could to our habits, tastes, customs. I studied the part of the protagonist painstakingly, designed the staging, directed and instructed the actors. But to be frank with you, I had grave doubts as to the result ... Don’t you know that the very word Shakespeare is hard for us to pronounce? ... Those blessed rules of Aristotle are firmly fixed in every head. Try to get outside them ... capers and somersaults ... On the night of the performance we were all seized with stage fright, no one more so than me. When the curtain went up ... at the scene between Iago and Roderigo, when the latter begins to shout from the street outside Brabantio’s house,

What ho, Brabantio! Signior Brabantio, ho!

the audience began to whisper. ‘What is it? A tragedy or a farce?’ And when at last Brabantio appeared on the balcony with his clothes all disordered and half asleep ... they began to laugh and titter. They had read ‘tragedy’ on the bill and thought they must be watching a scene from Goldoni or one of Gozzi’s *Fiabe*. ‘Enough! Enough! Curtain down! Yes! No! Continue! Enough!’”, shouts, hisses, the curtain had to be lowered ... I took Shakespeare under my arm and put him to sleep.¹

Testifying that the cultural translation of Shakespearean tragedy in Italy has been far from a triumphal conquest, this anecdote recapitulates the main aspects of this tortuous process. Modena’s misadventure highlights first of all the leading role played by actors (who were initially actor-directors) in what would later become a reversal of fortune. Even though by then Shakespeare had already become the focus of strenuous literary debates,

¹ Ernesto Rossi, *Studi Drammatici e Lettere Autobiografiche* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1885), 83–5. Partial translation in Lacy Collison-Morley, *Shakespeare in Italy* (Stratford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1916), 153.

the scene shows a nonplussed audience that welcomes *Othello* not as a classic but as an unfamiliar play, merely presumed to be a ‘tragedy’. Impervious to the reverence usually associated with Shakespeare, these Italian spectators quickly appreciate how this tragic text is shot through with comic situations from its very beginning, and according to their purist (neo)classical taste—*those blessed rules of Aristotle*, the unities of time, place, and action—they reject it unconditionally. A minor detail speaks eloquently: the very name Shakespeare remains difficult to pronounce for Italians, from its first occurrence in the notes of Lorenzo Magalotti (1668) as ‘Shakespier’, to the earliest mention in print in Antonio Conti as ‘Sasper’ (1726), down to a string of ‘Sachespar’, ‘Jhakespeare’, ‘Sakespir’, and the unsurpassable ‘Seckpaire’ of Abate Gaetano Golt, emended in the errata to ‘Seckspaire’—Italians can compete only with him and his contemporaries in misspelling Shakespeare.² But these quirky minutiae reflect a much broader phenomenon: in spite of limited pockets of admiration and periods of anglophilia, English language and literature have never been central to Italian culture.

Shakespeare came to Italy initially mediated by translations and critical interpretations made in France and, to a lesser extent, Germany. Shakespearean tragedy in Italy needs to be understood in its European context, the same context where, since Shakespeare’s age, Italy started losing its cultural hegemony and became gradually peripheral. Reworking Shakespeare for Italian culture meant in cases like Modena’s retranslating Italian plots and materials: out of the twelve works listed as tragedies in Shakespeare’s First Folio, four are set in classical Rome, one in medieval Verona, and one in ‘contemporary’ Venice; another, *Cymbeline*, also includes some Italian scenes; and we can add *The Merchant of Venice*, a comedy that European history has tainted with tragedy. At the time of Modena’s setback, Shakespeare was already the godhead of British civilization, but in Italy his works were still read in French, considered unsuitable, and in need of heavy editing, as our actor is well aware.

When Modena failed with his bold experiment in Milan, he was performing in Italy only in geographical terms, since politically the city belonged to the Austrian empire. Any account of Shakespeare’s tragedy in Italy needs to take into consideration the political and cultural fragmentation of a country that became a unified nation only in 1861. That diversity involves different local traditions, a higher or lower proximity to French or German cultural influences, and different degrees of political and religious censorship. Last but not least, a staging of *Othello* that rapidly becomes a laughing matter may suggest that the most elusive and yet decisive factor in the reception of Shakespeare in Italy has less to do with him than with a general cultural attitude towards the *tragic*.

In an interview given in 2013, the day after a doomed bipartisan Italian coalition government was saved by an unexpected vote of confidence, a run-of-the-mill politician explained: ‘Italy is not a country for Shakespearean drama, it deserves Scarpetta’ (a famous Neapolitan comic author and playwright). Theatrical metaphors are recurrent in portraits and self-portraits of Italy, in *Grand Tour* travellers describing life as a *mise-en-scène* and its inhabitants as actors, as well as in a strong internal vein of national self-deprecation. Italians themselves have no doubt that their political life in particular is a comedy rather

² For this and rich historical overviews of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cf. Collison-Morley, *Shakespeare in Italy* and Attilio Nulli, *Shakespeare in Italia* (Milan: Hoepli, 1918).

than a tragedy: ‘Teatrino’, ‘Parti in commedia’, ‘palcoscenico’, ‘regista’ are recurrent motifs in everyday discourse. The dominant political trope used to show how even seemingly radical changes leave the status quo fundamentally intact is ‘transformism’, the ability of social and political actors to transition into newer configurations without losing their standing—another theatrical metaphor. Against the historians’ warning that the history of Italy is punctuated by tragic events (a regicide, political assassinations, the rise and fall of Mussolini, the Mafia, and terrorist massacres), the lingering stereotype is that of a mellow and amicable place. As we outline the different trajectories of Shakespeare in Italy, touching on both mainstream and marginal case studies, it is important to measure them against the social, political, and even anthropological matrix of a country where the fashioning of a national identity is still a work-in-progress, with all its internal contradictions and dissonances. Between Modena’s *Othello interruptus* and Shakespeare’s widespread presence in theatrical programmes that makes him today the most represented playwright in Italy (above any national author), there lie a rich and vexed history and an equally complex geography.

The meaning of tragedy has fluctuated in time and place since its origins in Greek culture, oscillating from a dramatic, to an aesthetic, and later to an ethical and psychological term (the *tragic*).³ This presents special problems for Italy, a country whose collective identity is based on a shared Catholic religion and a literary canon that has a (Divine) ‘comedy’ as its centrepiece. As Giorgio Agamben writes, Dante Alighieri’s decision to ‘abandon his own “tragic” poetic project for a “comic” poem’ was epochal and is still exerting its influence today: ‘[t]he turn registered by these words is so little a question internal to Dante scholarship that it can even be said that here, for the first time, we find one of the traits that most tenaciously characterizes Italian culture: its essential pertinence to the comic sphere and consequent refutation of tragedy.’⁴

Tragedy is the genre that has most clearly registered the tension between ancient Greek and Roman values and a Christian worldview (that in post-Reformation Italy became a strictly policed cultural code), and it may be argued that Dante’s monumental masterpiece in fact hybridizes tragedy with comedy. Agamben clarifies that for Dante ‘tragedy’ was a matter of style and content rather than of dramatic form, and it entailed a specific theological and anthropological paradigm still underlying Italian culture, even in its contemporary secularized configuration: ‘It is [a] “comic” conception of the human creature, divided into innocent nature and guilty person, that Dante bequeathed to Italian culture.’⁵ This is not to suggest that Italian literature has produced just an endless series of redemptive plots and happy endings, but that tragedy as a theatrical genre and as a vision of cosmic suffering of extraordinary individuals has been relegated to the margins; the Italian literary tradition ‘has remained so obstinately faithful to the antitragic intention of the Divine Comedy.’⁶ While Shakespeare and his contemporaries were filling up theatres in London, in Italy tragedy remained mostly a matter of intellectual debate on Aristotle’s theories and a source of entertainment for an aristocratic elite. There was indeed a revival of the genre after centuries of neglect, but theory held sway. The most famous author was

³ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem. Studies in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

Giambattista Giraldi Cinzio, destined to become one of Shakespeare's sources. The predominance of theory imprisoned the plays in rigid patterns that, among other things, banned everyday speech in favour of 'magniloquent oratory'. Tragedy was too much of a challenge for the small and embattled courts of a politically fragmented country, courts that were the only patrons of theatre and favoured the inside jokes of comedy (which could also convey harsh political satire)⁷ over the foreboding plots of tragedy and its representation of beleaguered rulers.⁸ To quote Marzia Pieri: '[o]n the plane of ideology, the concept of sin, with which the age of counter-reformation tends to identify tragic fault, does not agree with the pagan presuppositions of the genre, and the times do not allow [us] to speculate on stage about the evils of Power.'⁹

Literature is the field where society reflects and constructs an image of itself, addresses its conscious and unconscious contradictions, negotiates with authority and with different cultural and religious traditions. In this light we may better appreciate why the vicissitudes of Shakespeare's tragedies in Italy (as opposed to his comedies, which significantly, are very little represented) are part of, and perhaps play a key role, in a larger struggle between the comic and the tragic in Italian culture. The paradox is that Shakespeare built many of his tragedies on Italian material that the Italians had articulated either in the prose tales of Giraldi Cinzio or in the philosophical speculations of Niccolò Machiavelli and Giordano Bruno, two thinkers who almost certainly influenced Shakespeare. The playwright made Italian tales and ideas into successful plays for the stage; Italians took the plays and adapted them in a variety of forms. Before they were convinced to applaud Shakespeare in his own terms, Italians had already acclaimed Rossini's opera *Otello* (1816) at the same Teatro Re where they later spurned Modena, praised Salvatore Vigano's ballet *Otello* (1820), and celebrated Francesco Hayez's painting of *Romeo's Last Kiss to Juliet* (1823). In short, the history of Shakespeare's tragedy in Italy is one of multiple displacements and dislocations.

Having introduced a critical framework, our account can continue with some chronological coordinates. In the eighteenth century Italy produced a play called *Amblecto* (1705) that drew on Shakespeare's sources while bypassing Shakespeare, a tragedy called *Cesare* (1726) whose preface mentioned Shakespeare as the 'Corneille of the English', and the first fragment of a translation, 'Essere o no, la gran questione è questa' (Hamlet's 'To be or not to be'). The first complete Italian version of a play was made in 1756, *Julius Caesar* by Domenico Valentino, a Roman tragedy that continues to have a special standing in Italy to this day. But what characterizes the dominant approach is a set of responses to Voltaire's influential position on Shakespeare as a violator of the Aristotelian unities, which also became the Italian mainstream position. The rival view was expressed by Giuseppe Baretti's *Discours sur Shakespeare et sur Monsieur de Voltaire* (1778), appropriately considered 'the first serious and extensive critical study of Shakespeare in Italy'.¹⁰ This vigorous defence demonstrates, however, that Shakespeare in Italy was for a long time primarily a

⁷ I thank Kent Cartwright for this observation.

⁸ Marzia Pieri, *La nascita del teatro moderno in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989), 155.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁰ Agostino Lombardo, 'Shakespeare in Italy', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 141 n. 4 (December 1997), 455.

crux of literary debates, a weapon in the battle between ancients and moderns, classics and Romantics, a critical means rather than a theatrical end. And if Shakespeare is referenced by the main neoclassical authors, such as Vittorio Alfieri, Ippolito Pindemonte, Vincenzo Monti, and Ugo Foscolo, he is not contemplated by Giacomo Leopardi, the most tragic and radical poet and thinker of Italian Romanticism. This is a literary encounter that regrettably failed to occur.

The first translation of the tragedies was the work of one of the few women we can mention in a predominantly male narrative, Giustina Renier Michiel (1755–1832).¹¹ A Venetian noblewoman working in the years of the downfall of the millenary Republic swept away by Napoleon, Renier Michiel hosted a literary salon welcoming the likes of Foscolo, Madame de Stael, and Byron. She translated in prose *Ottello*, *Macbet* and *Coriolano*, published between 1798 and 1800, at the dawn of Venice's new era. Renier Michiel's translations were read primarily by high-ranking aristocrats of her circle and never staged, at least in Venice, thwarting her ambition to produce more versions. Her prose translation was guided by a clarifying impulse that led her to paraphrase and oversimplify some of the most pregnant passages. For a single, telling example, Iago's 'I am not what I am' was rendered as 'assicuratevi che non sono qual sembro essere' (be sure I am not what I appear to be).¹² Her pioneering effort was made more innovative by her pugnacious preface, where her approach is consciously associated with her gender. Asserting a privileged relationship between Shakespeare and women (on the grounds of 'tenderness' and 'admiration'), Renier Michiel explained that she had intended to describe the 'sensations' provoked by drama and, in detail, 'the dominant feeling in each tragedy', seen as 'possibly the only subject a woman could reflect upon without fearing men's accusations'. On the other hand, she felt she had first to relate the authoritative positions of leading critics (notably Samuel Johnson), whose omission by a woman would not have been forgiven.¹³

Wavering between eighteenth-century ideals of decorum and new Romantic impulses, Renier Michiel states that 'Shakespeare takes possession of us, it moves us, it interests us even in spite of us'. She portrays a democratic Shakespeare, 'a painter of humanity' who 'extended his look at the whole humankind' and saw the 'lowest classes of Society at the same level of the most eminent were able to provide a crowd of interesting characters Everything human was sacred to him, and every man of whatever condition was worthy of being admitted with the Kings'.¹⁴ In that sense Shakespeare's violation of the Aristotelian unities was necessary to imitate nature and truth through the mediation of art. Her polemical conclusion was that in Italy motherhood had been reduced to little more than a 'sweet title', since women were deprived of the prerogative of educating their daughters. As the only available alternative, she offered Shakespeare to young women as reading that could entertain, educate and 'contribute to their happiness by regulating their budding passions'.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, this matrilinear Shakespeare had no success.

¹¹ Andrea Molesini, Anjusca Zoggia, 'Giustina Renier Michiel traduttrice di Shakespeare', in Antonia Arslan et al., *Gentildonne, Artiste, Intellettuali al tramonto della Serenissima* (Mirano Venice: Eidos, 1998), 17–27.

¹² Giustina Renier Michiel, *Opere drammatiche di Shakespeare volgarizzate da una dama veneta*, vol. 1 (Venice: eredi Costantini, 1798), 89.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

Between 1819 and 1822 Italian readers were presented with fourteen volumes of *Le Tragedie di Shakespeare* translated by Michele Leoni and the first prose translation of the complete works, by Carlo Rusconi, followed in 1839; the same year Giulio Carcano began a verse translation, a magnum opus that was completed in 1882.¹⁶ The gradual rise of Shakespeare's fortune in the second half of the nineteenth century is interwoven with the rising influence of French and German Romanticism and with the Risorgimento, the movement for Italian independence. Not coincidentally, some of the most prominent political and cultural protagonists of this watershed age were passionate Shakespearians. The critic Francesco De Santis gave seminal lectures on Shakespeare in Naples; the theorist of Italian republicanism, Giuseppe Mazzini, paid tribute to his literary genius but deemed he was not an innovator and lacked a moral message; Alessandro Manzoni, the father of modern Italian prose and himself a tragedian, used a discussion of *Othello* in his *Letter to M. Chauvet* (1820) to mount a polemic that resolved the debate on the unities once and for all. Two outstanding examples of the growing interest in Shakespeare were the actor Tommaso Salvini and the composer Giuseppe Verdi, who made the Italian approach to Shakespeare's tragedies a global affair.

Tommaso Salvini, born in Milan in 1829 from a family of actors, first trod the stage in 1842. In 1849 he fought under Garibaldi against the French army, allied to the Pope; the defeat cost him imprisonment. Art, by his own admission, became a refuge from the frustrations of politics. After his release, Salvini rapidly became an international celebrity, reaping laurels throughout Europe and North and South America, and expressing a novel approach to tragic characters. In 1853, he left the stage for one year and retired to Florence to study. Salvini resisted the idea of skipping from one role to the next without reflection and psychological and philosophical understanding: 'I studied their characters, passions, costumes, leanings ... I studied [each] in his environment, I tried to live with him and expound him as my imagination envisioned him.'¹⁷ Where the English theatre privileged a representation of the social aspirations of its bourgeois audience, the Italian stage offered what its spectators were deprived of in real life. Salvini found on stage the heroic resolution that was lacking in Italian politics. While unable to read Shakespeare in the original, Salvini spared no effort to research the background he imagined for the character that made him a worldwide star, *Othello*:

I read the history of the Venetian republic, the invasion of Spain by the Moors, their passions, their warfare science and their religious beliefs; nor did I neglect the novella of Cinthio Giraldi [sic] in order to better master that sublime character. It was no longer the superficial study of words or of some scenic effect, or [the use of] more or less stressed sentences to obtain a fleeting applause; it was a vaster horizon that was opening to my sight, an infinite sea where my ship navigated safely, with no fear of finding rocks.¹⁸

If his Italian debut of 1856 was only slightly more encouraging than that of his mentor Modena, the next year Salvini was galvanizing audiences in Paris. Many years later, when Salvini was already a fixed star of the theatrical firmament, he was invited for a *tourn e*

¹⁶ Lombardo, 'Shakespeare in Italy', 458.

¹⁷ Tommaso Salvini, *Aneddoti, ricordi, impressioni* (Milan: Fratelli Dumolard, 1895), 104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

in South America. The company was forced by a violent storm into an unscheduled call at Gibraltar, where Salvini had an eventful meeting:

I was struck by a most beautiful figure of majestic gait, with a Roman physiognomy, save a slight protrusion of the lower lip. The hue of the flesh was between copper and coffee, very strong, and he wore light moustache and his chin was covered with sparse and curly hair. Up until then I had always represented Othello with my moustache only, but since I saw that proud moor I adopted also the hair on the chin and tried to imitate his gestures, motion, deportment, and, had it been possible, I would have imitated his voice too, so much did that splendid moor represent to me the true type of the Shakespearean hero.¹⁹

Salvini conceived Othello through a poetics of great heroes (with a possible identification of the frustrated patriot soldier with the aged warring Moor), but also through an unprecedented ethnographic approach to the character.

Salvini played in London in 1875 and in 1884, when he was reviewed by Henry James. His success was such that a legion of local actors addressed a petition to him for an extra show, and his performances are among the most documented of the pre-film era thanks to the richly detailed reports and to an American devotee who faithfully recorded the exact development of the *mise-en-scène*.²⁰ The English audience was especially struck by the interpretation of Othello's ethnicity, as if an Italian actor would constitute a sort of privileged intermediary to Shakespeare's moor. A sense of uncanniness must have come across from the bilingualism of the performance, in which Salvini played in Italian against an English-speaking company:

DESDEMONA Alas! He is betrayed and I undone!
 OTHELLO ed ora il piangi | In faccia a me?
 DESDEMONA O, banish me, my lord but kill me not:
 OTHELLO Giù vil prostituta!
 DESDEMONA Kill me tomorrow: let me live tonight.
 OTHELLO No! se pensi | Resister ...²¹

The spectators probably knew the lines by heart, but the linguistic contrast would make Salvini's Othello that much more of an outsider.²² One of the scenes that shocked the spectators was vividly described by G. H. Lewes:

the whole house was swept along by the intense and finely graduated culmination of passion in the outburst, 'Villain, be sure you prove,' etc., when, seizing Iago and shaking him as lion might shake a wolf, he finishes by flinging him on the ground, raises his foot to trample on the wretch—and then a sudden revulsion of feeling checks the brutality of the act, the *gentleman* masters the *animal*, and with mingled remorse and disgust he stretches a hand to raise him up. I remember nothing so musically perfect in its tempo and intonation, so emotionally perfect in its expression, as his delivery in this passage—the fury

¹⁹ Ibid., 260.

²⁰ Edward Tuckerman Mason, *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini* (New York: Putnam, 1890).

²¹ *Othello. Tragedy in Five Acts by William Shakespeare with the English and Italian Words, as performed by Signor Salvini* (New York: Charles D. Koppel: 1889), 80.

²² Marvin A. Carlson, *The Italian Shakespearians* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), 63–4.

visibly growing with every word, his whole being vibrating, his face aflame, the voice becoming more and more terrible, and yet so completely under musical control that it never approached a scream.²³

The passage represents a standard Victorian approach to Othello, the perception of a dual personality in precarious balance between its civilized and its animal part. Unlike his contemporary British actors, Salvini was seen to do justice to both parts, to represent well the transition between them: the rage remains within the limits of a ‘civilized’ music without degenerating into a ‘wild’ scream.

An even more controversial scene was that of Othello’s suicide, which Salvini performed by drawing his blade ‘violently across his throat, sawing backward and forward. His head falls back, as if more than half-severed from his body ... before he can reach the bed, he falls backward, and dies, in strong convulsions of the body and the legs’.²⁴ Salvini responded to the repeated objections that ‘it is the custom among the Africans to cut the abdomen of their enemies only’ and that the line ‘I took by the throat the circumcised dog | And smote him, thus’ made it seem ‘natural that the action should suit the word’.²⁵ This form of suicide was for Salvini a matter of historical and ethnographical fidelity and wholly coherent, in its unpalatable goriness, with his poetics of grand heroic gestures. Yet it collided inevitably with the noble, civilized Moor desired by an English public haunted by colonial nightmares. As Great Britain was building its empire, the English Othello depended on the containment of energy, sexuality, and violence; Salvini responded with a perpetual *crescendo*. Finally, the way in which Salvini turned himself into Othello left a lasting impression on Konstantin Stanislavski, the actor and director who laid the grounds for a modern psychological approach to acting, in turn foundational for contemporary method acting and its aspiration to total emotional identification with a role.

However vast the success of Italian *mattatori* such as Modena, Salvini, Rossi, Adelaide Ristori, Ermete Zacconi, however, the credit must go to Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901) if in Italy you can still find people whose first name is Otello or Ofelia. What truly popularized Shakespearean tragic plots was opera, the quintessential Italian genre. The first adaptations came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with at least five musical versions of *Romeo and Juliet* culminating in Vincenzo Bellini’s *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830). Gioacchino Rossini’s *Otello* (1816) is emblematic insofar as its libretto by Francesco Berio di Salsa is based on J. F. Ducis’s French translation, making the work a third-degree adaptation and transmediation of Shakespeare.²⁶ In the second half of the century Shakespeare became the main source for Italy’s major composer, Verdi, who authored *Macbeth* (1847) early in his career (preceding any notable staging of the Scottish tragedy itself), and closed it with *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). He turned down a proposal for a *Hamlet* and left plans for a *King Lear*. Verdi’s Shakespeare is inextricably linked with his main librettist Arrigo Boito, who wrote the texts for *Otello* and *Falstaff*. In *Otello* the

²³ George Henry Lewes, *On Actors and the Art of Acting* (1875; New York: Grove Press, 1957), 226.

²⁴ Tuckerman, *The Othello of Tommaso Salvini*, 107.

²⁵ Tommaso Salvini, ‘Interpretazioni e ragionamenti su talune opere e personaggi di G. Shakespeare. Otello’, in *Fanfulla della Domenica*, 28 October 1883. English translation in ‘*Othello*’, *Putnam’s Monthly*, October 1907, 24.

²⁶ William Shakespeare, Arrigo Boito, Francesco Berio di Salsa, Jean-François Ducis, *Quattro volti di Otello*, ed. Marco Grondona and Guido Paduano (Milan: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 1996).

first act is expunged and the scene begins with the arrival of Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus. The classic point of friction between the verbal subtleties and psychological innuendos of Shakespearean drama, and a musical genre where broad brushstrokes are indispensable to convey strong passions, is Iago's famous aria 'Credo in un Dio crudel' ('I believe in a cruel God'). This parodic reversal of the Creed has been labelled by custodians of Shakespeare's integrity as one of the 'massive intrusions of alien material, or non-Shakespearean, material from other traditions' and 'a piece of high-flown nonsense'.²⁷ The crux of the matter is the transformation of Iago's enigmatic 'motiveless malignity', as famously defined by Coleridge, into an aria where the ensign spells out all the reasons for his evil acts. However this blasphemous invocation echoes Iago's 'I am not what I am', another mirror-like definition of God. Opera's musical idiom, on the other hand, brings its own expressive qualities and new connotations to the Shakespearean plot: in this 'symphonic' work with the orchestra 'capable of unleashing the energy of enormous phonic weights',²⁸ when Othello enters Desdemona's room to kill her, accompanied by a gloomy music of muted double basses, the theme associated since act I with the kiss suddenly irrupts, beautifully interweaving the murderous intentions with the memory of their passionate love.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Shakespeare's success was undisputed, and Modena's alien playwright was now recognized as an author who had penetrated the essence of Italian civilization. Nowhere is this clearer than in the symbiosis of actor, character and place in Eleonora Duse's *Romeo and Juliet*. Duse (1858–1924) was the major Italian actress of all time (her name is still synonymous with 'great actress') and an international diva rivalling Sarah Bernhardt. From anecdotes disseminated during her lifetime (and probably cultivated by Duse herself) to more recent biographies, there is a peculiar, epiphanic moment connected to her interpretation of the young lover in Verona. Even though she affirmed her naturalistic style of acting in Ibsen and D'Annunzio, her legendary status is still linked to her debut as Juliet when she was 14 (ironically in a non-Shakespearean version). The harsh conditions and the physical and psychological exploitation that she and many child actors probably suffered was far less touching than the drama of a young Italian actress destined to international fame, impersonating the young Italian character in the city where it all began.²⁹ The various anecdotes were given canonical form by Duse's lover Gabriele D'Annunzio in his novel *The Flame of Life*:

We entered Verona one evening in the month of May through the gate of the Palio, anxiety suffocated me. I held the copy-book, where I had copied out the part of Juliet with my own hand, tightly against my heart, and constantly repeated to myself the words of my first entrance: 'How now! Who calls? I am here. What is your will?' A strange coincidence had excited my imagination: I was fourteen years old on that very day,—the age of Juliet! The gossip of the Nurse buzzed in my ears; little by little my destiny seemed to be getting mixed up with the destiny of the Veronese maiden. At the corner of every street I thought I saw a

²⁷ Gary Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 240–50.

²⁸ Guido Salvetti, 'Dal Verdi della maturità a Giacomo Puccini', in Alberto Basso, ed., *Musica in scena: storia dello spettacolo musicale. 2: Gli italiani all'estero; l'opera in Italia e in Francia* (Turin: UTET, 1996), 392.

²⁹ Roberto Cuppone, "'Io fui Giulietta". La prima volta di Eleonora', in Maria Ida Biggi and Paolo Puppa, eds., *Voci e Anime, Corpi e Scritture. Atti del convegno internazionale su Eleonora Duse* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2009), 21–38.

crowd coming towards me and accompanying a coffin covered with white roses. As soon as I saw the Arche degli Scaligeri, closed with iron nails, I cried out to my mother, 'Here is the tomb of Juliet.' And I began to weep bitterly with a desperate desire of love and death ... One Sunday in May, in the immense arena in the ancient amphitheatre under the open sky, I have been Juliet before a popular multitude that had breathed in the legend of love and death. No quiver from the most vibrating audiences, no applause, no triumph has ever meant the same to me as the fulness and the intoxication of that great hour.³⁰

If Salvini was the manly master of character construction, Duse is here transfigured into the woman who literally abandons herself to the role, fusing with it. As with Salvini, the implication is that Shakespeare had captured some anthropological truth about his Italian characters, so who better than Italian actors to embody them? The fortunes of Salvini and Duse are a powerful reminder that throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Shakespeare and his works were often interpreted through stereotypes of race and gender used to classify both characters and actors.

4th November: Read and taken notes on Shakespeare. Italians have entered Trent and Trieste! 5th November: The armistice and the end of the war against Austria have been announced ... I have been reading Shakespeare.³¹ Those diary entries from 1918 situate the most significant critical engagement with Shakespeare by an Italian philosopher in the midst of the atrocities of the Great War. Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), an eminent public intellectual and former liberal senator who had opposed the military enterprise, had isolated himself from the conflict and concentrated on a humanistic world-view that could reconcile in the realm of literature the European countries that were killing each other in the trenches. Croce published *Shakespeare, Ariosto and Corneille* in 1920, and his publisher testified to a new attention paid to Shakespeare in schools by excerpting its chapter for a monographic volume that came out in 1925, the year Croce signed the Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals. Croce based his reading on his long-established aesthetic theory of the autonomy of poetry defined as pure 'intuition' devoid of any moral and intellectual—let alone political—aims. 'Shakespeare did not toy with ideals of any kind and least of all with political ones; and although he represents magnificently political struggles too, he always supersedes them in their specific character and objective, always reaching, through them, the only thing that profoundly attracts him: life.'³² His negative models were German critics and their use of *Richard II* as a doctrinaire assertion of the divine right of kings, of *The Tempest* as an apology for European colonialism and particularly of *Othello* as a warning against mixed marriages. The truth of the matter was that Shakespeare could neither agree nor disagree with 'external reality' because he is intent to 'create his own spiritual reality'.³³

While Croce was trying to rescue Shakespeare by placing him in an abstract realm of pure art (a still lingering temptation in Italian culture), Fascist critics were trying to enact a celebration of his Italian characters and plots functional to the creation of racial and national pride (a collective effort that included a rewrite of *Julius Caesar* by Mussolini

³⁰ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Flame of Life*, trans. Cassandra Vivaria (Boston: Page Company, 1900), 319.

³¹ Cit. in Luigi Trenti, "'I know you what you are': Croce e Shakespeare", *Memoria di Shakespeare* 6 (2008), 125.

³² (IBT) Benedetto Croce, *Shakespeare* (Bari: Laterza, 1925), 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 163.

himself, helped by Giovacchino Forzano), even though, precisely in the case of the Roman play, some characters and plots proved recalcitrant to such militant interpretations. Piero Rebora polemicized against Croce's notion of an apolitical Shakespeare and attacked the notion that Shakespeare had belittled the figure of the greatest Roman hero, expressing his republican sympathies through Brutus: 'Shakespeare is politically "Caesarean", certain of the greatness of that genius that was Caesar ... Nobody more than Shakespeare was repelled by the humanistic and republican exaltation of regicide.'³⁴ In 1935 *Julius Caesar* was also staged in Rome by the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro, the institution created by the regime to organize and discipline the leisure activities of the masses. The chosen backdrop for this grandiose staging was the Basilica of Maxentius, one of the sites capable of evoking ancient Rome's imperial greatness. Reviewers were less interested in the acting than in disparaging the republican reading attributed to Victor Hugo and Mazzini: the supreme intuition of Shakespeare was to eliminate Caesar physically in the middle of the play in order to represent 'the gloriously invincible immanence of [his] spirit, ... that invests the whole tragedy with a powerful and suggestive aura'. So at the end of the play 'the effect is one and only: the soul of the spectator is in awe of the founder of the Roman empire'.³⁵ Two years later, an American director took this interpretation to its logical conclusion: in Orson Welles's New York production of *Julius Caesar* the Roman soldiers were dressed in brown shirts.

In 1938 Mario Praz, the greatest Italian anglicist of the century, wrote an essay called 'Come Shakespeare è letto in Italia' ('How Shakespeare is read in Italy').³⁶ He criticized Croce for his abstract and unproductive reading of Shakespeare and offered an impeccable philological reading of several plays to demonstrate how current Italian translations had mangled the originals. There was nothing overtly political in his intervention, but his professional correctness could be read as a response to the many contemporary ideological misreadings and appropriations of Shakespeare.

The post-war era has witnessed a steady rise of Shakespeare performances, scholarship, and translations. Michele Marrapodi usefully mapped the state of Shakespeare criticism in Italy at the end of the twentieth century, with a genealogy connecting Mario Praz with his two former students Agostino Lombardo and Giorgio Melchiori.³⁷ He then singles out three major schools of criticism, the structuralist-semiotic school, historical Marxism, and a last group that devotes a closer attention to formal structures and to the rhetorical and ideological uses of language. In most of these studies one can find the more or less explicit presence of the dominant Marxist matrix of post-war Italian culture. Philosophers have also addressed Shakespeare, as the disparate readings of *Hamlet* offered by feminist Adriana Cavarero and the 'unpolitical' Massimo Cacciari testify.³⁸ Yet we may regret that Shakespeare is hardly ever discussed by Italian thinkers (Giorgio Agamben, Antonio

³⁴ Piero Rebora, *Civiltà italiana e civiltà inglese. Studi e ricerche* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1936), 31.

³⁵ Osvaldo, Gibertini, 'Giulio Cesare alla Basilica di Massenzio', *La Tribuna*, 3 August 1935.

³⁶ Mario Praz, *Caleidoscopio Shakespeariano* (Bari: Adriatica Editrice 1969), 133–55.

³⁷ Michele Marrapodi, 'Introduction: Shakespeare Studies in Italy Since 1964', *Italian Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Newark: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 7–18.

³⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Massimo Cacciari, *Hamletica* (Milan: Adelphi, 2009).

Negri, Roberto Esposito) whose theories—often based on analyses of early modern culture—have become influential in recent critical theory and in Shakespeare criticism. On the religious spectrum, it is interesting to find diametrically opposed readings of a textually Catholic Shakespeare set against a radical atheist who writes into his works the heretical ideas of Giordano Bruno.³⁹ With English gradually replacing French as the most studied second language in Italy, and with the study of English literature becoming virtually obligatory in most English language academic programmes, Shakespeare has become a basic subject in both Italian high schools and universities, with an overwhelming role given to the tragedies over the comedies and the histories, a situation that has started to alter again in the new millenium with the crisis of the humanities.

‘In the post-war years, the emphasis shifted from actor to production’, Paola Pugliatti reminds us, with the charismatic director replacing the lead player as the trademark of the work; ‘a closer connection between the theater and Shakespeare criticism is probably the most interesting aspect of the present situation’, adds Agostino Lombardo.⁴⁰ Our necessarily limited case studies must include examples of a more classical approach, where innovation is steeped in a respect for the text, as well as two radically experimental Italian Shakespeares. A colleague, friend, and political ally of Bertolt Brecht, Giorgio Strehler (1921–97) represented a new method based on a strong identification with a permanent company and a specific playhouse, the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, as well as a powerful belief in the theatre’s ability to convey a political message. Strehler pursued an ideal of a ‘teatro umano’, with ‘all the implications of human, humane and humanitarian with all their concomitant social and political overtones.’⁴¹ If *The Tempest* was the Shakespearean play that framed his career, Strehler also directed landmark productions of *Coriolanus* (1957) and *King Lear* (1972), not to mention his versions of Verdi’s *Macbeth* and *Falstaff*. *King Lear* is recognized as a point of arrival where for the first time on a mainstream stage the titular protagonist was not the centrepiece of the production.⁴² Created at a tense political moment, when a new generation born after the war was calling into question the foundations of Italian society and often championing extreme and revolutionary political alternatives, Strehler described his *Lear* as a ‘a crystal clear generational drama’, where the director (himself contested by some young protesters) identified with the aging king. Within a desolate, cosmic scenario reminiscent of Beckett, Strehler still modified the close, ‘we that are young | Shall never see so much, nor live so long’ into ‘we that are young will not allow suchlike adversities, nor claim to be eternal.’⁴³ The existentialist director did not renounce a progressive political message.

Against this militant but ultimately conventional theatre, the anarchist, *enfant terrible* Carmelo Bene (1937–2002) reverted to the tradition of the *mattatore*, and turned it inside

³⁹ Pietro Boitani, *The Gospel According to Shakespeare* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Gilberto Sacerdoti, *Nuovo cielo, nuova terra. La rivelazione copernicana di ‘Antonio e Cleopatra’ di Shakespeare* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2008).

⁴⁰ Paola Pugliatti, ‘Italy’, in Michael Dobson and Stanley Wells, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 218. Lombardo, ‘Shakespeare in Italy’, 462.

⁴¹ David L. Hirst, *Giorgio Strehler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2.

⁴² Sonia Bellavia, *L’ombra di Lear: il Re Lear di Shakespeare e il teatro Italiano (1858–1995)* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004), 261.

⁴³ Ibid. Bellavia, *L’ombra di Lear*, 269.

out. He worked with the same text and ‘character’ for a lifetime as Salvini had done, but in overt polemic against contemporary practitioners, he unsettled all the tenets of tradition, producing an anti-naturalistic, anti-mimetic, anti-narrative style that resembled a ‘negative mould’ for traditional theatre companies.⁴⁴ Bene combined the high canon of Western literature with poststructuralist theory, and tirelessly experimented with multiple media and all the new audiovisual technologies.

From *Hamlet, Hommelette*, to *Hamlet Suite* ... the operetta of the artsy-fartsy prince is the refrain of the lives I have un-lived [*svissuto*]. The assiduous, persecutory frequentation of this fine subject (five, ever changing, stage productions—’61, ’67, ’74, ’87, ’94 ... a film (’72), two widely different tv versions and radio recordings, audiotapes and compact-disc) ‘defines’ me as *Twentieth-Century Hamlet*.⁴⁵

Bene’s own words summarize the lifelong engagement of this idiosyncratic performer, the most intellectual among Italian actors, with the Shakespearean prince. For him Hamlet represented the quintessential artist, facing his impossible existence in modern bourgeois art, a condition that led Bene to theorize a ‘suspension of the tragic’, where by subverting the text, the plot, and the character(s) he countered the assumption that theatre can provide the fiction of a replenished subject, radically denying any sort of catharsis to the audience. Commenting on Bene’s rewrite of *Richard III*, Gilles Deleuze writes: ‘The elements of power in the theatre are what ensure both the coherence of the subject in question and the coherence of the representation on stage. It is both the power of what is represented and the power of the theatre itself.’⁴⁶ Bene responds with a strategy of ‘amputation and subtraction’, that, as his many Hamlets demonstrate, violently manipulates the Shakespearean pre-text. Influenced by Joyce, Bene disassembled and reassembled scenes in ever more original montages, interpolated a wide variety of literary, acoustic, and visual materials, in a metatheatrical and antitheatrical postmodern gesture that has been linked to other experimentalists such as Artaud, Robert Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski. The resulting playtext aimed at a ‘theatre without spectacle’, a performance where, with Bene as a charismatic performer at the centre, all the conventional elements of classical Western drama were destabilized to deny audiences the comfortable bourgeois experience of attending a performance in a playhouse (or movie theatre) and receiving a unified and coherent message from it. As part of this strategy, Bene’s tragic personages refuse to die, because death would offer that relief and release that the classical representation promises to jaded audiences. Instead, they agonize or repeat themselves in a sort of endless parodic cycle: ‘Where there is no parody, there is no tragedy.’⁴⁷

The lesson of Carmelo Bene has been taken to further extremes by his admirer Romeo Castellucci (1960–), whose unsettling approach is markedly different from the bland Shakespeare that is pervasive in mainstream theatres. ‘Our times and our lives are completely detached from any concept of the tragic ... Disasters and slaughters of innocents

⁴⁴ Armando Petrini, *Amleto da Shakespeare a Laforgue per Carmelo Bene* (Pisa: ETS, 2004), 40.

⁴⁵ Carmelo Bene, *Opere. Con l'autografia di un ritratto* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 1351.

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, ‘One Less Manifesto’, in Timothy Murray, ed., *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 241.

⁴⁷ Petrini, *Amleto*, 48.

are everywhere referred to as “tragedies”, but this is an idea of tragedy that does not know how to distinguish these things from the spectacle.⁴⁸ To such bleak diagnosis of the present Castellucci responds by repudiating the communicative and cognitive function of language in favour of the power of affects and new forms of subjectivity. He attacks the organic unity of the body, and his most problematic choice is to work with physically disabled actors, where ‘the handicapped or sick, deformed body not only is not seen from a pathological predicament, it is treated as material of dramaturgy in itself’.⁴⁹ Writing a new, distressing chapter in the rich afterlife of *Julius Caesar* in Italy, Castellucci has Brutus and Cassius played by anorexic women and Mark Antony by a tracheotomized actor who addresses his ‘Friends, Romans, countrymen’ through his open blowhole.

Both acclaimed as avant-garde visionaries and lambasted as self-serving provocateurs, Bene and Castellucci hail from provincial and traditional areas of Italy. If one remembers the New Historicist argument that Elizabethan theatre absorbed and supplanted the dramatic energies of the depleted Catholic ritual, it is interesting to note how the two actors self-consciously ascribe to their strict Catholic upbringing much of the imagery of their modern, ‘secular’ performances. Ironically, their iconoclastic approach participates in a dialectic of transgression and reaffirmation of all establishments and rules that confirms a general pattern and somehow contradicts their intents: in a politically unstable country with very weak secular institutions and a society increasingly dominated by the logic of spectacle, the only symbolically dominant organization remains the Catholic Church (regardless of the percentages of actual observance).

No survey would be complete without a mention of cinema, an art in which Italy has received international recognition and that has paid an important tribute to Shakespearean tragedy. The best known are the spectacular, glamorous, Hollywood-style productions of Franco Zeffirelli (1923–), from *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) to *Hamlet* (1990). Besides Bene’s experiments, ‘minor’ Shakespeare include Pier Paolo Pasolini’s short and idiosyncratic adaptation of *Othello* in his *Cosa sono le nuvole?* (one of six episodes of collective film *Capriccio all’italiana*, 1967) and the more recent version of *Julius Caesar* by Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, *Cesare deve morire* (2011), chronicling a staging of the play inside a Rome prison with non-professional actors speaking in their respective dialects.

The adaptations of Shakespeare to regional languages, many of which have rich literary traditions, is another distinctive phenomenon. Luigi Meneghello (1922–2007), a novelist whose cosmopolitanism is linked to his long tenure as a professor of Italian in England, was always fuelled by his intimate memories of his provincial childhood; it also inspired a set of translations of English poetry into his native dialect, including long segments of *Hamlet* that create a fascinating dissonance between the most canonical tragedy and the intimate idiom of his small village. Playwright Giovanni Testori (1923–93) rewrote both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in Milanese and infused them with comedy. A rewrite of *Hamlet* had also been planned by Eduardo De Filippo (1900–84), the greatest playwright and actor in Neapolitan, who translated *The Tempest* and adapted *The Merchant of Venice*, which gave

⁴⁸ Audronė Žukauskaitė, ‘The Post-Subjective Body, or Deleuze and Guattari Meet Romeo Castellucci’, in Fintan Walsh and Matthew Causey, eds., *Performance, Identity and the Neo-Political Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 111.

⁴⁹ Eleni Papalexidou, ‘The Body as Dramatic Material in the Theatre of Romeo Castellucci’, *Prospero. European Review. Theatre and Research* 2 (2011), 75–87.

him the opportunity to highlight the tragic potential of this comedy: ‘I accuse the society in which Shakespeare lived. What was he supposed to do? What was I supposed to do during Fascism, other than make people laugh and, in the end, overturn the action and show them the tragedy?’⁵⁰

Today Shakespeare’s success in Italy appears to be unconditional. There is a Globe Theatre in Rome; a musical version of *Romeo and Juliet* attracts thousands of people, matching the thriving Shakespearean tourism in Verona at the feet of Juliet’s (fake) balcony; almost every permanent company features a Shakespearean play in their season, typically a tragedy, often a bland staging; theatrical experiments continue on the fringes, while the state of Shakespeare studies reflects the shrinking role of the humanities in the educational system. We may return in conclusion to the subordinate position of tragedy in Italian culture. On the one hand, Shakespeare may have performed a compensatory function, providing iconic tragic plots to a tradition recalcitrant to the genre; on the other hand, it may be argued that the prevailing comic disposition has often been able to subdue the unsettling energies of tragedy, as the many parodies, adaptations, and deconstructions of the plays seem to indicate. If the more traditional representations in mainstream theatres fail to be tragic because they simply reiterate the canonical status of Shakespeare for middle class audiences, the more radical, anti-representational approaches exemplified by Bene and Castellucci are programmatically anti-tragic. One hopes for new responses to this old cultural dilemma.

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⁵⁰ Cit. in Agostino Lombardo, ‘Eduardo e Shakespeare’, *Memoria di Shakespeare* 6 (2008), 228.