

# Shakespeare and Italy\*

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It is a matter of no little surprise when from the average Elizabethan dramatist we turn to Shakespeare, to see how his Italian plays are comparatively free from the usual horrors and thrills. Horrible murders and treasons occur indeed on the Shakespearian stage but, oddly enough, not as a rule in the plays whose action takes place in Italy. Was it because Shakespeare disdained the cheap appeal of Italian criminality? Or because the broadness of his vision made him keep in the background the abject and horrible side of human nature, and stress the pure and noble one? Or because the acquaintance he had with Italian things enabled him to take a more sober view of Italian society than the current one circulated by religious or conservative fanatics and cherished by the thrill-seeking crowd?

From one among the earliest of his plays, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, to the one which is his last finished work, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare frequently brought Italian characters on the stage, and yet the majority of them are exempt from these moral monstrosities over which other dramatists used to gloat. Rather, Shakespeare's Italy is so near to that idyllic Italy which we can picture from Ariosto's and Castiglione's works that some have ventured to suggest that Shakespeare travelled there: how could he otherwise have been able to draw such a true-to-life image, when everybody round him in England was spellbound by the myth of Italian wickedness?

Was Shakespeare ever in Italy? By 1592 he was already a successful actor and playwright, according to a well known passage in Robert Greene's *Groatsworth of Wit* in which this author attacked an impudent young actor who had dared to write plays "and being an absolute *Johannes fac totum* is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in this country". The years 1592-4 marked a critical phase in the history of London players; seasons were short in consequence of the plague, short-lived regroupings of companies took place. It has been suggested that Shakespeare may have travelled to Northern Italy during those years, because when theatrical life was in full swing again after the plague, he

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produced a number of plays with an Italian background, which show a remarkable acquaintance with the local topography of certain northern Italian towns.

William Bliss, in his playful "Counterblast to Commentators" in *The Real Shakespeare* (1947), actually makes Shakespeare travel round the world with Drake (1577-81), and for the period 1586-92, in which we have no records of his whereabouts, maintains by way of paradox that he was shipwrecked on the Illyrian coast, and went to Venice, where he met the Earl of Southampton who succoured him and remained his patron afterwards. Bliss wanted to demonstrate for fun that anything can be plausibly argued about Shakespeare, but there is not the slightest suggestion of leg-pulling in G. Lambin's *Voyages de Shakespeare en France et en Italie* (Geneva, Droz 1962), in which the author has enlarged a series of articles published in *Les Langues Modernes* in 1951-2 ("Sur la trace d'un Shakespeare inconnu").

Lambin's book has found support in such serious scholars as F. L. Schoell and Louis Cazamian, who have been impressed by a certain number of allusions the French critic is supposed to have cleared. Why, then, not to take into serious consideration Lawrence Durrell's hypothesis, in whose *Prospero's Cell* (1945) we hear, in the course of a conversation, Count D., himself a recluse from the world like the duke-magician of *The Tempest*, declare: "Have I never told you that Corcyra is Prospero's island? . . . I cannot think that the scholars would support me, but you, my friend, you would take a little pleasure in the knowledge that Shakespeare was thinking of Corcyra when he wrote *The Tempest*. Who knows? Perhaps he even visited it." Having said this, he traces with a small pencil on the marble table the word Sycorax in block letters. "Look," he says, "Caliban's mother, the mysterious blue-eyed hag who owned the island upon which Prospero was cast—her name is almost too obvious an anagram for Corcyra." And he goes on maintaining that Prospero's island has all the characteristics of Corfù, the modern name of Corcyra, with fresh springs, brine-pits, barren places and fertile.

Lambin, like many other heterodox research students, assumes that Shakespeare was an obscure actor, who could not have access to sources of information which were known only to people versed in the affairs of other states and the geography of other countries, that the plays which go under his name are full of topical allusions which only his contemporaries could

follow; and therefore that these plays yield their true meaning only when seen in the light of contemporary history and geography. The first of these assumptions is baseless; one thing is that little of Shakespeare's personality is revealed by the documents which concern him, and another thing is that he was obscure and little appreciated by his contemporaries. It is enough to read Ben Jonson's *Conversations* with Drummond of Hawthornden to become convinced of the real existence of a playwright called Shakespeare greatly esteemed by his contemporaries.

The Baconian theory, which ascribed to Bacon the works of the actor-playwright of Stratford, was hatched by the middle of the eighteenth century and since then people started reading cryptograms, secret allusions, and so on in his works, thus anticipating, in a different field, a kind of ingenuity which some of Freud's disciples were later going to apply to man's soul. In course of time that theory has proliferated in various branches, with various pretenders, usually noblemen, who on account of their position were averse to appearing as authors and on the other hand, thanks to their culture and their acquaintance with foreign countries, were able to achieve what was beyond the reach of an obscure actor.

For Lambin there is no doubt that the author of the plays which go under the name of Shakespeare visited Italy, particularly Florence and Milan. The "Saint Jaques le Grand" to which Helena is supposed to betake herself on a pilgrimage in *All's Well* would not be the well known sanctuary in Spain but San Giacomo d'Altopascio not far from Florence, and the palmers' hostel "at the St Francis here beside the port" (III. v. 37) would stand for the oratory of San Francesco dei Vanchetoni in the neighbourhood of Porta al Prato in Florence. According to Lambin, *All's Well* would teem with allusions comprehensible only to people well acquainted with the affairs of France and, in particular, of the League: actually a *Satire Ménippée* across the Channel. Lambin reads *The Tempest* as a panegyric for Maria de'Medici, in order to conclude that William Stanley, sixth Earl of Derby, and not William Shakespeare, is the author of this as well as the other plays. For Maria de'Medici, Lambin is convinced, is Miranda; and her father Prospero is Francis I, Grand Duke of Tuscany; Sycorax is Bianca Capello; and Caliban is Francesco's spurious son by her, Antonio. Of this last, he says, it will come to light some day whether he was freckled

like Scyorax's son, and whether he suffered from other physical imperfections. As a matter of fact had Lambin consulted Gaetano Pieraccini's standard work on the House of Medici (*La stirpe de' Medici di Cafaggiolo*, Florence 1947) he would have found (Vol. II, Part I, p. 135) a confirmation, since Antonio was described by a contemporary as "of livid complexion, melancholy aspect, turbid eyes, and body small and feeble". Unfortunately he had recourse instead to Mary G. Steegmann's book on *Bianca Capello* (London 1913), a "work of vulgarisation" as he himself admits. Hardly more authoritative is the work which has supplied him the key to the hidden meaning of *The Tempest*, an article on the Grand Duke in the *Dictionnaire général de biographie et d'histoire* by Ch. Dezorry and Th. Bachelet, in which he has read about Francesco's chemical laboratory, the *studiolo* in Palazzo Vecchio. He even goes as far as to suggest that Ariel and the famous line "those are pearls that were his eyes" were inspired by the figures of *amorette* represented in that study as working at precious substances such as coral, crystal, pearls. Even the hackneyed Petrarchan metaphor of the little ship (*navicella*) he finds in the madrigals of Francesco would have suggested to the author of *The Tempest* the episode of Prospero being abandoned in "a rotten carcass of a boat" adrift on the sea. Apart from the inconsistency of this supposed parallel, there is the fact that those madrigals remained in manuscript until 1894. But might not a certain privileged English traveller have seen them? And who could this traveller be but William Stanley, the future Earl of Derby, whom a contemporary notice describes as "busied in penning comedies for the common players"?

Lambin's "discoveries" would point in the direction of A. Lefranc's *Découverte de Shakespeare* (Paris 1945 and 1950): Lambin's "unknown Shakespeare" could have utilized personal recollection of his travels in Italy and France and his contacts with people of importance in those countries. But is this new proliferation of the old Baconian heresy in any way warranted by whatever evidence of actual acquaintance with topography of Italian cities we can safely sift from Lambin's and others' straining of the text of plays? Madame Longworth de Chambrun, about whose hypothesis something will be said further on, writes: "What strikes us above all in Shakespeare's work, is to see how the dramatist has succeeded in giving us a true impression of Italian culture whereas, all things considered, one finds in him

very little real knowledge. Shakespeare, though having a very slight acquaintance with the Italian language, gives to the spectator or the reader a very strong illusion of local colour". On the same theme Professor F. E. Schelling had warned: "Much nonsense has been written about Shakespeare's power of local colouring. This power he undoubtedly possesses in a high degree, but it comes from the suggestions of his sources and only the unimaginative commentator can think it needful to send him to Italy for the colouring of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, or to Denmark for his *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's personages are seldom foreigners" (*Elizabethan Drama*, 1908).

Before coming to the actual question of the way in which Shakespeare may have got acquainted with Italian things, let us make a rapid survey of his Italian plays. The scenes of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* are Verona and Milan. The names of the chief characters are more or less Italianate, but those of the two servants, Speed and Launce, are English. There are several inconsistencies about places (for instance in II. v, which is supposed to take place in Milan, Speed is heard welcoming Launce "to Padua"; elsewhere we find Verona where we would expect Milan) which have led critics to think that Shakespeare had written the whole play before he had settled where the scene was to be laid. At any rate the plot structure of *The Two Gentlemen* is modelled on that of a typical Italian *commedia dell'arte*; and the influence of the *commedia dell'arte* is already evident in Shakespeare's first comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the characters of Armado and Holofernes respectively correspond to the Spanish Captain and the Pedant of the Italian comedy. *Lazzi* and other proceedings familiar to the *commedia dell'arte* are so frequent in Shakespeare that Valentina Capocci (in *Genio e mestiere, Shakespeare e la commedia dell'arte*, Bari 1950) has jumped to the conclusion that most of the prose of the plays must be due to the collaboration of the actors themselves.

In *The Two Gentlemen* Valentine's father "at the road/ expects him coming there to see him shipped" to Milan; in Act II, scene iii, Verona is imagined on a river with tides that ebb and flow, connected to Milan by a waterway. In *The Tempest* (I. i. 144 ff.) Prospero tells how he was put aboard a bark at the gates of Milan together with his little daughter: Milan, therefore, is imagined on a waterway communicating with the sea. Again, in *The Taming of the Shrew* (I. i. 42), where the scene is Padua, we hear Lucio saying: "If, Biondello, thou wert come

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ashore", and later on: "Since I have come ashore". Gremio, a citizen of Padua, boasts (II. i. 376) of being the owner of a large merchant vessel, an argosy. Further on (IV. ii. 81) we hear of Mantuan ships which are stayed at Venice, because of a quarrel between the two towns. Finally, we are told of a sailmaker in Bergamo, another inland town.

Sir Edward Sullivan, in an article published in *The Nineteenth Century* (August 1908) was at great pains to show that these seeming inaccuracies, far from revealing Shakespeare's ignorance of Italian geography, show an intimate acquaintance with it, since it can be proved by quotations of Italian writers of, and prior to, the seventeenth century, and with the aid of a map of Lombardy of the time, that the high road from Milan to Venice was by water, and a journey from Verona to Milan could be performed by water. At a date much nearer to us, in 1755, Winckelmann travelled from Venice to Bologna by water, employing three nights and three days. Lambin has added some further considerations, in order to show that the navigation of the two gentlemen and their servants is not "an ignorant invention of the playwright. It exactly corresponds to what was taking place in his time. A boat was the only comfortable conveyance from Verona to Milan. But one must have made use of it oneself to be so well informed". But even if we agree with Sir Edward Sullivan and Lambin about the advisability of travelling by water from Verona to Milan in Shakespeare's time, so far as the dramatist is concerned their demonstration seems wide of the mark. There are other allusions in these plays which bear on the matter of local colour, but, while some of these allusions point to Italy, most of them point to England, specifically to London. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, (II. ii. 100), Gobbo says to Launcelot: "Thou has got more hair on thy chin than Dobbin my fill-horse has on his tail". Those who maintain that *The Merchant of Venice* shows a strong Venetian local colour will not find it easy to reconcile with the town of the canals and gondolas the fact that Gobbo possesses a horse, and a horse which has such an English name as Dobbin (cf. Samuel Johnson: "A tree might be a show in Scotland as a horse in Venice"), although there are proofs that one found horses in Venice well into the sixteenth century (see Bianca Tamassia Mazzarotto, *Le feste veneziane, i giochi popolari*, etc., Florence 1962, *passim*). But the obvious explanation is that although Shakespeare speaks of gondolas and the Rialto and the "tranect"

or *traghetto*, when he mentions the fill-horse Dobbin he is thinking of England and of his characters as English characters. And so when he speaks of alehouses and of festivals and ballads peculiar, not to Italy, but to England, in *The Two Gentlemen* and in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Therefore the only reasonable conclusion we can draw about Shakespeare's conception of the town in which the play takes place as of a town on a river with a tide, connected with the sea, is that he was thinking of London, and using Milan and Verona as mere labels.

However, the second of Shakespeare's Italian dramas, *Romeo and Juliet*, displays a much stronger local colour than *The Two Gentlemen*. Romeo's love expresses itself in the metaphors of the school of Serafino Aquilano, that school of sonneteering which anticipated the *concetti* of the seventeenth century. In fact Shakespeare succeeds so well in imitating the language of the Italian Petrarchists, that in two passages his similes coincide with those used by Romeo's counterpart, Latino, in a tragedy by Luigi Groto, the *Adriana* (publ. 1578), which is also inspired by the story of Romeo and Juliet. The resemblance between these passages, and the mention of the nightingale in the parting scene between the lovers, led some critics to conclude that Shakespeare knew Groto's tragedy, though the two plays are as different as they could be in the treatment of the story and in the study of the characters. The resemblances prove only that Shakespeare succeeded so well in depicting an Italian lover that the language he puts into his mouth may occasionally appear derived from that extremely artificial poet of the Petrarchan school, Luigi Groto.

The local colour of *The Merchant of Venice* has been declared well-nigh astonishing. Accurate sailors' expressions are put into the mouths of Salanio and Salerio, mention is made of the "tranect" or *traghetto* which connects Venice to the mainland, and of the correct distance that Portia and Nerissa would have to travel from Belmont, i.e., Montebello, to Padua. Against the considerable amount of accurate information (Shakespeare knows about the "liberty of strangers" which formed one of the points of the Venetian constitution, and in *Othello*, I. i. 183, mentions the "special officers of the night", i.e., the *signori di notte*), we may record as mere slips Gobbo's mention of his horse Dobbin, and Launcelot's objection to the conversion of the Jews: "If we grow all to be pork-eaters, we shall not shortly have a rasher on the coals for money", which alludes to that

peculiarly English dish, a fried slice of bacon. As for the characters themselves, we cannot say that they are more Venetian than anything else. They seem to fit the setting so well because they are life-like in the broadest sense of the word; their type is universal, whereas the Italian characters of the blood-and-thunder school of Elizabethan drama are generally caricatures of the seamy side of Italian life. But what about the sinister Italian knave, Iago? This seemingly accomplished Machiavellian, a refinement of the *alfiero* in the seventh *novella* of the third Decade of Giraldo Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, utters words (IV. i. 46-8) which echo almost literally the moral of Cinthio's story ("Thus credulous fools are caught:/and many worthy and chaste dames even thus,/all guiltless, meet reproach": "Aviene talhora che senza colpa, fedele et amorevole donna per insidie tesele da animo malvagio, et per leggierezza di chi più crede che non bisognerebbe, da fedel marito riceve morte"), but the ostensible plot of the play would make him appear actually incensed by the public report that Othello has cuckolded him: if so, Iago's story, as told by Shakespeare, would find parallels in many cases of retaliation instanced by Italian *novelle*. Needless to say, the character of Iago does not imply any direct acquaintance with Machiavelli's writings. What Machiavellism is displayed in Shakespeare's dramas seems either to be already present in the historical sources (as in the case of *Richard III*), or to be derived from the current popular legend.

Finally, an unusual case among Shakespeare's plays, *The Tempest*, whose Italian inspiration has been convincingly traced by Ferdinando Neri (*Scenari delle maschere in Arcadia*, Città di Castello 1913) introduces two clowns who, instead of being portrayed as Elizabethan Londoners as in Shakespeare's other plays, seem to have been borrowed from a Neapolitan farce. (B. Croce, "Shakespeare, Napoli, e la commedia napoletana dell'arte", in *La Critica* for May-July, 1919).

As for the knowledge of Italian, beside the passage of *Othello* just quoted, which seems to go back directly to the Italian source, it appears that in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare must have taken the idea of the substitution of the bodies from Cinthio's drama *Epitia*, since the substitution does not occur in the story of the *Hecatommithi* (Deca VIII, novella 5), of which *Epitia* is a dramatic version. Neither does it occur in Whetstone's rehandling of Cinthio's story. Since Italian books were widely read in the society in whose midst Shakespeare lived, there is nothing



extraordinary in his acquaintance with Italian literature; rather, the contrary would be surprising. What seems to be more puzzling is Shakespeare's accuracy in certain local allusions. Some of them have already been mentioned, and even if Lambin has overstated the cast of the dramatist's knowledge of the topography of Milan, the mention of St Gregory's well near that town, in *The Two Gentlemen*, seems definite enough; we find moreover Bellario as a Paduan name in *The Merchant of Venice*, which in fact it is, and, in *Romeo and Juliet*, details about Juliet's funeral (found, however, already in Brooke's poem) and about the evening mass in Verona.

These allusions are confined to a definite part of Italy: Venice, and the neighbouring towns of Verona, Padua, Mantua; and Milan. There are two possible alternative explanations: either Shakespeare travelled to the north of Italy, or he got this information from intercourse with some Italian in London. There is no evidence for the first alternative. As for the second, Shakespeare may have had frequent occasions to meet Italian merchants; the Elephant Inn, which he mentions with praise as being the one where it was "best to lodge" in the unknown Illyrian town of *Twelfth Night*, and being of course nothing else but the inn called "the Oliphant" on Bankside, was patronized by Italians (see G. S. Gargano, *Scapigliatura italiana a Londra sotto Elisabetta e Giacomo I*, Florence 1923). But whatever his relations may have been with those Italian tradesmen and adventurers (many of whom were northern Italians, chiefly, as is natural, from the commercial town of Venice), it is today well established that Shakespeare must have come across, at least, John Florio, the apostle of Italian culture in England (Madame Clara Longworth de Chambrun was the first to point out this connection in *Giovanni Florio, Un Apôtre de la Renaissance en Angleterre*, Paris 1921). Florio and Shakespeare moved in the same circle: they were fellow-members of Southampton's household. Florio supplied Ben Jonson with whatever information the dramatist shows about Venice in *Volpone*. A copy of this play in the British Museum has the autograph dedication: "To his louing Father, & worthy Freind Mr. John Florio: The ayde of his Muses. Ben: Jonson seals this testemony of Freindship, & Loue". Florio's vocabulary has a prevailing Lombardo-Venetian character, Venice is for him the foremost Italian town, as can be seen in the eighth chapter of the *First Fruites*: this may help us to understand why the local allusions in Shakespeare's Italian plays

are limited to Venice and the neighbouring towns. Florio had also made a translation of Montaigne, which, plethoric as it is with pretended elegances, has become a classic, and was a source for Elizabethan dramatists (first of all Shakespeare, who bred his Hamlet on it); his manuals of conversation and his Italian dictionary were responsible for most of the knowledge of Italian of Shakespeare's contemporaries; he was called "the aid of his Muses" by Ben Jonson, and probably would have deserved a similar appreciation from Shakespeare.

One of the pioneers of English studies in Italy, Professor Aldo Ricci, used to say what a pity it was that Florio's *World of Words* was confined to the Italian-English part, because, he thought, if that dictionary had contained an English-Italian part, the problem of how to translate Shakespeare into Italian would have been solved. This may seem to simplify things too much, but the fact remains that the problem of how to translate Shakespeare into Italian has hardly been solved at all until today.

To judge from the number of performances and the ever increasing number of translations, one would draw the conclusion that Shakespeare is extremely popular in Italy, but a surprising fact is that the translations which are adopted on the Italian stage are as a rule of a poor, and frequently of a wretched quality, so that one could repeat about him what was said once about the Church of Rome, that he must really rest on divine foundation if he has been able to outlive the corruption of the interpreters. One may share Giuseppe Baretta's view, that "Shakespeare's poetry cannot be translated even moderately well into any of the languages derived from Latin, because its beauties have no resemblance to the poetical beauties of those languages which are generally moulded on Latin beauties." One may think that one of the chief difficulties lies in the rendering of word-play. Admittedly Shakespeare's puns and *double entendres* (even before the more powerful microscope of J. Dover Wilson and other modern critics increased their number) were always a stumbling-block for translators: hence the frequent recourse of these latter to the footnote: "gioco di parole intraducibile". Take for instance Carlo Rusconi's translation, which was very popular until the Second World War, thanks to the widespread belief that this translator followed the text closely and rendered it in a language comparatively free from affectations. While Rusconi deliberately shuts his eyes to Shakespeare's bold imagery, he is

utterly blind to his frequent use of innuendo and *double entendre*. Or, if he is aware of it, he prefers to omit the passage; thus in *Troilus and Cressida*, IV. 5, Rusconi suppresses the exchange between Cressida and the Greek chieftains, which shows her for what she is, a frivolous hussy, and has this grammar-book patter instead:

*Menelao:* Donzella, vi saluto.

*Ulisse:* Io pure.

*Patroclo:* Ed io anche.

But after all the problem of rendering word-play is a secondary one: this mirrors the taste of Shakespeare's period and needs a commentary to be understood even by a British audience; the major problem is another. Shakespeare's language is not of the easiest, even if Bernard Berenson overstated the case when once he said that "out of three of his sentences, one cannot possibly be understood, I challenge any Englishman to understand it, but the other two astonish me". Now, these difficult phrases have become a patrimony of the English language no less than those, frequently no better comprehensible, which one finds in the Bible: their strangeness sounds familiar, natural. To keep the originality of Shakespeare's expressions, with their bold transitions from the imaginative to the prosy, though even this latter is tinged with a touching human accent: here is the aim that a translator worthy of the name ought to keep before his eyes. Raffaello Piccoli, who was professor of Italian in Cambridge about 1930, strove to achieve this through a literal translation, with the result that the passage in *Hamlet* (III. ii. 65): "let the candied tongue lick absurd pomp,/and crook the pregnant hinges of the knee/where thrift may follow fawning" sounded in Italian: "Che la lingua candita lecchi la stravagante pompa e curvi i pregnanti cardini del ginocchio dove il profitto possa seguire la piaggeria". No Italian would refrain from laughing at such preposterous assemblage of words, but if this Italian was a man of culture, he would immediately detect a resemblance between such language and the language of the Italian baroque story-teller Giambattista Basile. Only Basile's imaginative language (Neopolitan dialect, beautifully done into Italian by Benedette Croce, and done into English by Norman M. Penzer in 1932) was meant to be funny, and the possible aim of a translator of Shakespeare into Italian would be to master Basile's language and adapt it to the field of tragedy; but there again, had such a task been undertaken during the seventeenth century (when no one had heard of Shakespeare in Italy), the process of time would have intervened with its patina

to give a stamp of classicality to such language: a thing manifestly impossible today.

Modern translators as a rule are worried about getting their versions adopted by the theatrical companies. The point of view of these is very simple, and reminds me of an experience I had one of the few times in which I appeared on television. I was asked to hide a leather strap which from a button of my waistcoat led to a pocket where the depending watch was placed. That mysterious piece of leather would have puzzled the on-lookers and distracted their attention. Therefore a translator who wants his translation to be accepted for the stage invariably substitutes the familiar for the unfamiliar, and gives small change for Shakespeare's gold coins. Even to the point of supererogation, as when for instance Gerardo Guerrieri, in a recent version of *Hamlet* for a Zeffirelli production, which has been seen also on the English stage, makes the famous monologue begin thus: "Essere o non essere: è tutto qui", or when another translator causes one the characters of *The Taming of the Shrew* to say that Sly is overcome by a "complesso d'inferiorità". Of course Shakespeare had not read Freud and knew nothing of inferiority complexes, he only said: "Oh, that a mighty man . . . should be infused with so foul a spirit!"

Shakespeare's latest Italian translator, Professor Gabriele Baldini, has tried a compromise: he has avoided both the current language, and the language of Shakespeare's or Basile's time; he has found a temperate zone in the language of the time of Manzoni and Leopardi, which allows for simplicity and clearness, and at the same time has a not too remote classical ring. He says he has followed this principle as far as the "impostazione barocca di questi drammi" permitted it. In fact what he does may be best illustrated through a parallel from the field of art history: he treats a baroque surface in a neoclassical way. He frequently replaces Shakespeare's phrase with its reduction into plain language, as when for instance Laertes's sentence: "A sister . . . whose worth, if praises may go back again, / stood challenger on mount of all the ages for her perfections" becomes in Italian "Una mia sorella, i cui pregi — se la lode può applicarsi al passato — esaltati al di sopra di tutti quelli del suo tempo, sfidavano chiunque ad eguagliare la sua perfezione". Nevertheless Baldini's translation is the nearest approach to a text which actors could successfully adopt without betraying the spirit of the original and at the same time without burdening

their memory with turns of phrase and flights of imagery which would not get across to the public. The other complete translation in prose due to a single hand, Cesaro Vico Lodovici's, though remarkable for its concision (contrary to Baldini's occasional verbosity), indulges too much in modern colloquialisms with the intent of making the text alive for the audience.

On the whole the record of the Italian translations of Shakespeare is more impressive for its quantity than for its quality. Hamlet's famous soliloquy was done into Italian as early as 1739, by Paolo Rolli, a distinguished poet, who for nearly thirty years (1715-44) earned his living in London by writing *libretti* for operas and teaching Italian to the members of the royal family and the aristocracy, but the first complete version of a Shakespearean drama into Italian was Domenico Valentini's *Giulio Cesare* (Sienna 1756). Canon Valentini did not know English, but enlisted the service of a few English gentlemen of his acquaintance who knew Italian, and confined his work of semi-translator to the polishing of what must obviously have been a very crude crib: he omitted most of Shakespeare's images, which seemed unsuitable to his plain Tuscan discourse. Shakespeare's imagery, on which so much stress has been laid nowadays, was always a stumbling-block for Italian translators, particularly during the Age of Reason. Alessandro Verri, whom a two months' sojourn in England in 1767 had taught to admire English ways, in translating *Hamlet* and *Othello* did not try to disrobe Shakespeare of his imagery, like Valentini, but only made it lighter as it seemed to him thus more suitable to the prose medium.

Leaving aside some wretched adaptations of Ducis's French travesties of Shakespeare, we come across a much more ambitious enterprise in 1798, when a Venetian publisher brought out the first volume of the *Opere drammatiche di Shakespeare volgarizzate da una Dama Veneta*: it contained a life of Shakespeare and a prose translation of *Othello* by Giustina Renier Michiel, whose salon was frequented by the best Venetian society and by many foreigners, especially English, before the treaty of Campoformio put an end to Venetian independence. When Napoleon visited Venice in 1807, a Venetian nobleman pointed the lady out to him among the spectators of a parade; he sent for her and asked her why she was distinguished. She answered that she had made some translations of tragedies. "Racine, I suppose?" "Pardon me, Your Majesty, I have translated from the English". Whereupon Napoleon turned his back upon her.

The first of Michele Leoni's verse translations of Shakespeare, *Giulio Cesare*, was published in Milan in 1811, a few years later (between 1819 and 1822) this "Hercules of translators", as a contemporary review called him (he translated also Milton, Thomson, Pope, Ossian, Sheridan, Hume, and Byron) brought out his version of the *Tragedie di Shakespeare* in fourteen volumes dedicated to Ferdinand I, King of the Two Sicilies: the translations were in verse throughout, because Leoni thought that the mixture of prose and verse was unfamiliar to Italian ears. Only *King Lear*, *Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV* were in prose, partly for the reason that Leoni found that English historical names were unmanageable in Italian verse. The only thing Leoni as a verse translator had in common with Shakespeare was that, to quote Ben Jonson's opinion of Shakespeare, he "flowed with ease", but unlike Shakespeare's, his facility lacked pith.

Shakespeare's triumph in consequence of the romantic movement culminated in Italy in the early thirties of the nineteenth century, when new versions appeared by Giuseppe Niccolini, Gaetano Barbieri and others. What the Italians needed was a reliable prose translation. The immense fortune enjoyed by Carlo Rusconi's complete prose translation published in Padua in 1830 and frequently reprinted until not long ago (when Shakespeare's *Teatro*, in three volumes, translated by various hands under my general editorship, seems to have taken its place), is merely due, as I have said, to the fact that Rusconi was credited with a literal rendering of the English text, whereas his translation actually smooths down, paraphrases, adapts, in a word takes the edge off Shakespeare's text: thus, by making it sound easier at the expense of its pungency, it certainly achieved the popular aim of appealing to the general reader.

If ever a man's life was entirely dedicated to Shakespeare, it was Giulio Carcano's who in 1843 brought out his *Teatro scelto di Shakespeare*, and in 1857 an edition in three volumes containing *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Henry VIII*. Between 1875 and 1882 the complete edition in twelve volumes was published by Hoepli in Milan. Carcano's verse translation is not without merit, but bears the stamp of the taste of the period in which it was done. Verse translations have a feature in common with fakes: they embody a point of view which, imperceptible to a contemporary, becomes a sign manual

of their time and taste to the eyes of subsequent generations. We would not certainly repeat today what Collison-Morley wrote in 1916 in his book on *Shakespeare in Italy*: "Giulio Carcano's translation has now become the standard work in Italy". By the time he wrote these words, Diego Angeli's boneless, slipshod *endecasillabo* was better suited to the taste of the day. Angeli's idea, of a verse as near as possible to prose (in view of a likely adoption of his translation for the stage) was not very different from what was to become the leading principle of T. S. Eliot's plays. There was however nothing of Eliot's deftness in Angeli's practice: he worked in a hurry, in spare moments, in odd places (frequently at the Caffè Aragno in Rome) with the result that his *Teatro di Shakespeare*, though published over a number of years (from 1911 to 1933) bears every mark of haste and carelessness. It is famous for its ridiculous blunders. Thus for instance, through confusing *to mew* and *to mow*, the line at the beginning of the Fourth Act of *Macbeth*: "Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd", is rendered: "Il gatto tigre tre volte ha falciato", a surrealist cat that would have staggered even Shakespeare's witches and would have been more in her place in Alice's Wonderland. Another translator, Alessandro Muccioli, whose translations of a few dramas were published in Florence in the twenties of the present century, also cultivated the idea of a verse with a subdued rhythm, akin to prose, taking as a model the plays of the sixteenth-century playwright Giovan Maria Cecchi: but his attempt was hardly more successful than Angeli's.

The last remarkable attempt at a verse translation has been Vincenzo Errante's. This German scholar, who translated Goethe, Hölderlin, Hofmannsthal, and Rilke, had the happy facility of an improvisatore and the incurable habit of writing always in the same key, so that all the poets translated by him ended by catching the same flavour, which was Errante's peculiar form of Dannunzianism. His use of the loud pedal was occasionally outrageous. Thus Othello's: "I took by the throat the circumcised dog/And smote him, thus —" is turned into the emphatic: "Per la gola io ghermii gagliardamante/quel cane circonciso;/e lo colpì, così." Errante's verse, for all its smoothness, still belongs to the aureate tradition, and would not admit too close a contact with realities. Thus Lear's "Pray you, undo this button", had to be ennobled into "Vi prego, liberatemi!"

The only verse translation of recent times which achieved a high standard was Giulia Celenza's of *A Midsummer Night's*

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*Dream*; therefore it has been included as an exception in the corpus of prose translations, partly already existing, partly made for the occasion, which I edited for the publisher Sansoni of Florence in the years 1943-7. The aim of this version was double: to offer a text closely following the original and philologically reliable, and at the same time fit to be adopted by those theatrical companies which were not satisfied with the current garbled versions. There have been many more or less satisfactory prose translations of single dramas in the last few years, by Eugenio Montale, Salvatore Quasimodo, Alfredo Obertello and others, but on the whole it is sad to conclude that there does not exist so far a complete version of Shakespeare which may rank as an Italian classic.