

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Boitani, Piero. The Gospel According to Shakespeare. Trans. Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 38, Number 2, Spring 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087517ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i2.25627>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2015). Review of [Boitani, Piero. The Gospel According to Shakespeare. Trans. Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(2), 160–162.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i2.25627>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2015

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Boitani, Piero.

***The Gospel According to Shakespeare.* Trans. Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff.**

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 156. ISBN 978-0-268-02235-8 (paperback) \$27.

With so much criticism on Shakespeare in general and on religion in his work in particular currently available, the publication of Piero Boitani's *The Gospel According to Shakespeare* (orig. *Il Vangelo secondo Shakespeare*) comes as the breath of fresh air to give us a brief respite from thick historicist contextualization, emphasis on empiricism in new textual scholarship, and theoretical experimentation with Shakespeare's text. Despite the "Selected Bibliography" that covers several pages, the book was written as if very little had happened in Shakespeare criticism for some time. Even the Bible, which informs this book, is invoked in occasional brief references only. The book reads like an extended essay rather than a densely researched monograph. It is conceptualized more as a critical appreciation than an exploration of a sustained argument. According to Boitani, the gospel according to Shakespeare is his dramatic poetry.

This book presents not an *early modern* but a *Renaissance* Shakespeare. Boitani connects Shakespeare to the glory of the Italian Renaissance by drawing attention to parallels between Shakespeare's drama and the aesthetic and intellectual achievements in Italian Renaissance art, philosophy, and poetry, and by highlighting connections between Shakespeare and Greek and Roman cultures as well as Hebrew religion. For example, when Boitani compares the opening scene of the fourth act of *The Winter's Tale* to an "'actual' gallery full of 'singularities,'" and "a private Cinquecento museum" (82), it is hard not to wish for this line of argument to have been followed in more depth. Boitani's point—that repentance, forgiveness, and beauty as aesthetic, philosophical, and spiritual concepts are fundamental to the Scriptures and to Shakespeare's drama—has the critical force to open many new critical doors. One of those would be to explore beauty as a content, style, and spirit derived from the Bible, via the glory of the Italian Renaissance and baroque.

The book illuminates how Shakespeare turns life's redemption embodied in resurrection into the subject of his drama. Redemption speaks most powerfully through the dramatic motif of recognition, understood by Boitani to be not the Aristotelian form of *anagnorisis* but a blend of consciousness, or a

new awareness, transformed by a new wisdom, knowledge, and sensibility, and produced by powerful experiences that characters undergo at the moment of high events in drama. Curiously, perhaps, the book's thesis is crisply and clearly articulated on its last page and in the closing sentences:

Wonder also pervades the Gospels, in which Jesus' birth (with the epiphany to the shepherds) and miracles (from the calming of the storm to the barren fig tree, from the empty tomb to the resurrection), generate infinite wonder in those who witness them. As we have seen, the Shakespeare of the late plays speaks precisely of such phenomena. Is he not, after all, writing *his* own Gospel? (132, emphasis in original)

This sentence gives the flavour of Boitani's mellifluous critical prose. But it also draws our attention to the fact that this book throughout is about wonder as recognition of a new life. Boitani points to many examples where wonder produced by the religious and biblical themes in Shakespeare's works engenders a fascination with the fables and mysteries beyond the known and perishable life, and he shows how wonder is connected with the effect of "the divine in the cosmos and in individual destinies" (120) on Renaissance people.

The book is composed of six chapters, starting with an exploration of two tragedies, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, in the opening two chapters, and moving to romances, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, examined individually in the remaining four chapters. All chapters have in common the themes of suffering, purification, and transformation—concepts through which the Gospel of Shakespeare's writing, his own New Testament, speaks in the language of humanist poetry. Each chapter considers a play in relation to an idea that captures Shakespeare's "oblique" (29) use of the Bible. *Hamlet* is about the Fall; *King Lear* is framed by the messengers who console Job; *Pericles* resonates with heavenly harmony; *Cymbeline* is imbued with divineness; *The Winter's Tale* is inspired by resurrection and *The Tempest* by epiphany. Plot summaries of the plays, even of the less familiar ones, are not something one expects to find in modern scholarly books on Shakespeare.

Chapter 1, "Amen for the Fall of a Sparrow," is devoted to the sources of the "Christian theologizing" (21) poeticized in several key speeches of that tragedy, including "To be, or not to be," whose conceptual and formalist origin Boitani rightly traces to university instruction in dialectics. In chapter 2, "God's

Spies,” the subject is “the less radical [than *Hamlet*] but [...] more extreme” (26) tragedy of *King Lear*. Focusing on redemption and transcendence as promises for a future after the unravelling of tragedy, this chapter examines how these states are reached through a new consciousness and feelings experienced by Lear and Cordelia.

Moving from tragedies to romances—as plays generically more suited to the poetic music of the gospels—the book examines a series of losses, recoveries, endurance, and resurrections that engulf Pericles, Marina, and Thaisa; Cymbeline and Imogen; Leontes, Perdita, and Hermione; and Prospero and Miranda. The book devotes individual paragraphs to *Pericles* (ch. 3), *Cymbeline* (ch. 4), *The Winter’s Tale* (ch. 5), and *The Tempest* (epilogue). Each of these romances dramatizes the force of destiny whose outcome depends on a series of experimentations with sources, and on transformations and adaptations of literary traditions, as these resources are reshaped by the spirit and words of the gospels.

This is an engaging book, written in an accessible style that will appeal to general readers, students, and scholars. Shakespeareans will find many exciting, if underdeveloped, and occasionally well-known points in this book. They will also find much more to build on when they finish reading it.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary’s University, Nova Scotia

Casas, Bartolomé de las.

***Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*. Ed. José Miguel Martínez Torrejón.**

Biblioteca clásica de la Real Academia Española 28. Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores / Galaxia Gutenberg, 2013. Pp. xii, 366. ISBN 978-84-15863-01-4 (hardcover) €23.65.

The Spanish scholar José Miguel Martínez Torrejón has presented readers with a definitive, exhaustive, and rigorous edition of a text that has long been considered one of the classics of Castilian prose of the sixteenth century: the *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas (1474–1566). It is a text Martínez Torrejón knows thoroughly, having