

LUCIA NIGRI*

“I have translated from the English”. Shakespeare in Eighteenth-Century Italy

Abstract

In eighteenth-century Italy negative responses to Shakespeare's plays are not to be found exclusively in matters of aesthetics, but in the country's political and cultural subordination to France. It is not surprising, then, that a new strand in the reception of Shakespeare in Italy could only really begin when the death of Voltaire (1778) and the geographical redefinition of part of the central Europe encouraged Italian intellectuals to reconsider France's role as a 'necessary' cultural(-historical) mediator. The robust reappraisal of Shakespeare that took place in the last two decades of the century was indeed deeply involved with the different responses that were prompted by the socio-political context and the gradual shattering of libertarian ideals. In this context, the work of an unconventional translator, Giustina Renier Michiel, definitively hustled the gradual reappraisal of Shakespeare's plays in Italy. Her translations of specific Shakespearean plays are the repositories of ideological, political, and social messages sent by a Venetian woman to her fellow-citizens struggling to position themselves in a new geographical and political panorama.

KEYWORDS: Eighteenth-century Italy; France; Shakespeare; translation; Venice; crisis; politics; Giustina Renier Michiel

Eighteenth-century relations between the Italian States and the national French State were complex and changeable. France represented more than a simple aesthetic model: its influence extended to religious, socio-political, and cultural issues. It provided the leading voice in the European Enlightenment and, after 1789, its Revolution inspired and inflamed political hopes abroad. Even though those hopes gave way to disenchantment with the rise of Napoleon, France proved a catalyst and co-protagonist of cultural and ideological dialogues on national identity and nationhood. Arguably, the French ascendancy provoked the construction (and, equally, de-construction) of a politically-oriented 'Shakespearean narrative' in late eighteenth-century Italy. After mixed fortunes, mostly depending on the Italian

* University of Salford, Manchester – L.Nigri@salford.ac.uk

response to Voltaire, Shakespeare established himself as the symbol of a nation that Italy could eventually oppose to France. It is not coincidental that at the turn of the century, in a cultural milieu torn between a wish both to adhere to and to oppose the Napoleonic project, Giustina Renier Michiel produced a peculiar translation of Shakespeare in which its avowed educational value was, in fact, secondary to its political intentions. At that moment in Italian history, an atmosphere of disillusion provoked by the outcomes of the revolutionary aspirations favoured an interest in Shakespeare precisely in terms of a political and intellectual reaction. Renier Michiel's belonging to an aristocratic and intellectual class internally divided between contrary positions, moreover, is emblematic of this crisis and cannot be separated from her choice of carrying out that translation, even aside from the intrinsic value of this work and its contribution to the affirmation of women in the intellectual panorama.

Why her choice was so daring becomes clear when it is set against the eighteenth-century history of Shakespeare's reception in Italy. As we know, his reputation was generally negative, especially in the first half of the century. In Italy, Shakespeare's work registered an almost unanimous adverse reaction, and even when the atmosphere began to change from the 1770s onwards that unenthusiastic view was hardly eradicated. Scattered examples taken at random across the century confirm this widespread resistance: in 1735, for instance, Francesco Algarotti criticized Shakespeare for the "faults innumerable and thoughts inimitable" contained in his plays (qtd in Graf 1911: 316). Only three years later, in *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les differens théâtres de l'Europe*, Luigi Riccoboni, in what looked like a sociological study of the mental and moral qualities distinctive to the English people, reiterated that

Les Poètes Dramatiques Anglois ont ensanglanté la Scène au-delà de l'imagination, j'en donnerai deux seuls exemples. La Tragédie, qui a pour titre *Hamlet*, a cinq Acteurs principaux, qui pendant l'action meurent tous de mort violente. . . . Dans la Tragédie qu'on appelle *Le More de Venise*, entre autre chose le More transporté de jalousie va trouver la femme qui est dans son lit éveillée, il parle avec elle, & après plusieurs combats entre l'amour & la colere, il prend la résolution de se venger, & l'étrangle aux yeux des Spectateurs. (Riccoboni 1738: 164-5)¹

[The English dramatic poets have covered the stage in blood beyond belief. I will only give you two examples. The tragedy entitled *Hamlet* has five protagonists who all die a violent death during the action. . . . In the tragedy entitled *The Moor of Venice*, among other things, the Moor, seized by jealousy, goes to his wife, who is awake in bed, speaks to her, and, torn be-

¹ All translations are mine.

tween love and anger, resolves to be revenged, and strangles her before the spectators.]

In a letter to the same Algarotti dated 30 January 1760 Agostino Paradisi claimed that in Shakespeare's work "the defects are too great and too numerous" (qtd in Collison-Morley 1916: 24). As late as the 1780s, Shakespeare was even awarded the epithet of "bestial, though sometimes sublime" in Saverio Bettinelli's *Dialoghi sopra il Teatro Moderno* ("quel bestiale talor sublime"; 1788: 8). His inclination for horrors was generally condemned; equally, his disrespect for the so-called Aristotelian units was clearly at odds with neoclassical poetics. Similar critiques were voiced persistently by, among others, Pietro Napoli-Signorelli's *Storia Critica de' Teatri Antichi e Moderni* (1777) and Giovanni de Gamerra's *Osservazioni sullo Spettacolo in generale* (1786) (see Collison-Morley 1916: 25, 68).

And yet the reasons for this negative response were not exclusively aesthetic, nor were they confined only to the Italian taste. As noted above, France's cultural prestige in Europe was largely responsible for this reaction. French intellectuals dictated literary tastes, circulated foreign works, commented upon them, and they included in their transmission a strong critical narrative. Promoter of the ideals of liberty, equality, and humanitarianism – values which would eventually become key rallying cries of the Revolution – France also acquired an intellectual leadership which created consensus abroad and further reinforced its own image of cultural and political power. In this context, Voltaire's treatment of Shakespeare quickly became authoritative and set the standard in criticism for decades. It can even be argued that Shakespeare's reception in Italy was, at least until the turn of the century, largely dependent on one's attitude towards Voltaire.

Voltaire's vehement devaluation of Shakespeare's work marked his critical statements (Willems 2010: especially 455-65). The most famous attacks were contained in the eighteenth of his *Lettres Philosophiques* (1734; *Sur la tragédie*), a work which was otherwise inclined to cast a positive light on many aspects of English culture. Voltaire resided in England from 1726 to 1729, and his writings soon met with success on British soil, which he repaid with an equal show of appreciation. As Gustave Lanson details in his commentary on Letter Eighteen, Voltaire's negative judgment on Shakespeare built on a vocal opinion in England supported by eminent figures such as Thomas Rymer and John Dryden. Indeed, their negative commentaries might have been the direct source for Voltaire's own virulent critique, including the definition of Shakespeare's tragedies as "monstrous farces" – a possible borrowing from Rhymer (Voltaire 1917: 79; 91n6; see also Lombardo 1997: 455). Famously in that same letter, Voltaire tolled the bell for Shakespeare's reputation, contemptuously pegging him as "un génie

plein de force et de fécondité, de naturel et de sublime, sans la moindre étincelle de bon goût, et sans la moindre connaissance des règles” (“a genius full of strength and fertility, of the natural and the sublime, without one slightest inkling of good taste, and without the least knowledge of rules”; Voltaire 1917: 79).

During the September 1726-February 1729 theatre seasons, when Voltaire resided in London, *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar* were staged once and three times, respectively, while *Othello* was acted five times (Voltaire 1917: 92-5). Socially active, he might have had occasion to see them performed. Certainly, he both commented and worked on them. In his *Letter Eighteen*, he ironically pointed out the unbearable incongruity and unlikelihood of those plays: “dans la Tragédie du More de Venise”, which he conceded to be a “pièce très-touchante”, he observed that “un mari étangle sa femme sur le théâtre, & quand la pauvre femme est étanglée elle s’écries qu’elle meurt très-injustement” (“in the tragedy of the Moor of Venice, a very touching piece, a husband strangles his wife on stage, and when the poor woman has been strangled she cries that she is dying very unjustly”; Voltaire 1917: 80). “[I]n *Hamlet*”, instead, “dans *Hamlet*, des Fossoyeurs creusent une fosse en bûvant, en chantant des vaudevilles, & en faisant sur les têtes de mort qu’ils rencontrent, des plaisanteries convenables à gens de leur métier” (“some gravediggers dig a pit while drinking and singing vaudevilles, and cracking jokes, appropriate to those doing their job, on the skulls of the dead they come across”; *ibid.*). Similarly, in *Julius Caesar* he found fault with “les plaisanteries des cordonniers et des savetiers Romains introduits sur la scène avec Brutus & Cassius” (“the Roman cobblers’ and showmakers’ jokes introduced on stage with Brutus and Cassius”; *ibid.*: 80-1).

To these critical comments the Italian literati generally responded so deferentially that occasional opposition proved courageous. In the late 1780s, in fact, not only did France continue to exert a leading role (Calvani 2009: 16, and Collison-Morley 1916: 35) as Carlo Goldoni confirmed in his *Mémoires* (1787) – significantly written in French, but in 1786, a Shakespearean enthusiast, Reverend Martin Sherlock, did not fail to point out Voltaire’s fundamental role in blotting Shakespeare’s reputation over Europe:

I should not have said so much upon Shakespeare, if from Paris to Berlin, and from Berlin to Naples, I had not heard his name profaned. The words *monstrous farces* and *grave-diggers* have been repeated to me in every town; and for a long time I could not conceive why everyone uttered precisely these two words, and not a third. One day happening to open a volume of Voltaire, the mystery disappeared; the two words in question were found in that volume, and all the critics had learned them by heart. (1786: 33; also discussed in Collison-Morley 1916: 17-18)

What is surprising is that such a comment came at a time when new

pre-Romantic stances were already about to reverse the negative reception of Shakespeare's savage genius into utter praise, thus still witnessing Voltaire's vital influence. It is also noteworthy that Sherlock, while acknowledging it, ironically pretended to have come across his criticism by mere coincidence.

Despite the dominance of the Voltaire critical paradigm, towards the end of the century Italian critical attitudes towards Shakespeare were no longer ruled by Voltaire's judgments. In fact, this reappraisal did not come entirely unprepared. Attempts to defend his work occurred sometime before Voltaire's destructive intervention: Antonio Conti (1726) and Paolo Rolli (1739) – the latter Accademico degli Intronati in Siena and Pastore Arcade in Roma, but also Italian tutor to the Prince of Wales and the Royal Princess – published the first printed comment on Shakespeare as well as the first translation of a Shakespearean piece (Hamlet's "to be or not to be" monologue) (see Collison-Morley 1916: 6-10; Nulli 1918: 10-11; Rebora 1949: 213; Petrone Fresco 1992: 111; Calvani 2012: 123). In 1726, Conti wrote in his *Answer to Mr Jacopo Martelli (Risposta al Sig. Jacopo Martelli)* prefixed to his tragedy *Il Cesare* that "Sasper è il Cornelio [Corneille] degli Inglesi ma molto più irregolare del Cornelio, sebbene al pari di lui ripieno di grandi idee e di nobili sentimenti" ("Sasper [sic] was the Corneille of the English, but much more irregular than Corneille, albeit like him in being full of great ideas and noble sentiments"; qtd in Crinò 1950: 33). Interestingly, Voltaire also referred to Shakespeare in his *Letter Eighteen* as "le Corneille des Anglais" (1917: 79), though Shakespeare clearly received that nickname earlier. In any case, from then on he came to be addressed as such, as if, till largely unknown in Italy, he needed the French imprimatur.

It has often been contended that Conti's *Giulio Cesare* was fundamentally unconnected with Shakespeare's play; yet, as Sestito points out, when considered in conjunction with his other three Roman plays (*Giunio Bruto*, *Marco Bruto*, *Ottaviano*, 1743-1748), Conti's *Giulio Cesare* reveals the extent to which the English play affected its design, as well as the extent to which its complexities were emptied out (Sestito 1978: 11-25). In turn, in 1729 Paolo Rolli included an extraordinary eulogy of Shakespeare in his *Life of John Milton (Vita di Giovanni Milton)* which he prefaced to his translation of *Paradise Lost*, an edition published in London in 1735 and again in 1736 by the printer Bennet. The praise, albeit proudly tinged with an awareness of the superiority of Dante's language, cast Shakespeare as the English dramatist who "elevò il teatro inglese a insuperabile sublimità" ("raised English theatre at its most sublime and unsurpassable heights"; Rolli 1736: 11-12) and produced the most profitable tragic histories for the education of Princes.

If such testimonies of a positive reception of Shakespeare remained sporadic, another moderate change was registered in 1756 with the first trans-

lation of *Julius Caesar* into the Tuscan tongue by Domenico Valentini. To call it a translation, in fact, does not do justice to what should rather be considered as a rewriting of a 'literal translation' provided by somebody else. By his own avowal in the *Preface*, Valentini was indeed ignorant of the English language and had to rely upon the help of some English gentlemen, who presumably 'explained' the play to him (Valentini 1756: <D4v>). No matter if this procedure belied the author's good intentions to devote the initial pages of his *Preface* to a demonstration of the absolute relevance of linguistic competence; what emerges from that *Preface* is Valentini's defence of Shakespeare's irregularity in the name of his "strong, rapid, and vivacious imagination" ("una Immaginazione così forte, così rapida, così vivace"; *ibid.*: D2-<2v>), a statement that implicitly set him against Voltaire's verdict of barbarity. Thus, his choice of a play on whose subject Voltaire too had tried his hand may not have been a coincidence. In a relatively short time span, from 1726 to 1756, the story of Julius Caesar had been recast twice in Italian, and in either case it either derived from or bore a closer relationship to Shakespeare's play. True, both versions were connected to Voltaire's own play, which followed by five years Conti's drama (it was composed in 1731 and first staged in 1735) and anticipated Valentini's by two decades. In turn, Voltaire's own position proved in this case ambiguous. In a letter to Abate Franchini, Algarotti commented on Voltaire's adoption of Shakespeare's manner (Voltaire 1773: 410-11), while Voltaire himself, in the preface to his 1736 edition, admitted, under the disguise of anonymity, that the play had been inspired by Shakespeare: "a great genius" who "lived in a crude century". Because of the roughness of Shakespeare's "monstrous work", the author had composed this new play "in the English taste", translating only "Antony's scene" from the original. On the whole, Voltaire claimed to have captured the "dominant love of freedom" of the English people ("un grand génie, mais il vivait dans un siècle grossier . . . au lieu de traduire l'ouvrage monstrueux de Shakspeare [*sic!*], [Voltaire] composa, dans le gout anglais, ce *Jules César*. . . On y voit cet amour dominant de la liberté"; Voltaire 1854: 261-2), thus offering a significant tribute to a country which he would soon attack in the name of Shakespeare. But that is an episode which was to occur a few decades later.

The importance of this triangulation between Italy, France, and England over *Julius Caesar* is testament to a mutability of opinions (see Griffin 2009; Biskup 2009). Conti praised Shakespeare only a few years before Voltaire's criticism appeared in his *Lettres Philosophiques*, where Conti's work had been acknowledged (Voltaire 1854: 262). Conti smoothed his position by both recognizing Shakespeare's greatness despite his shortcomings and praising the English sense of freedom and "taste" (on this see Agarze Medeiros 2013). In turn, twenty years later, deviating from Voltaire, Valentini

justified Shakespeare's violation of rules, yet offered a 'translation' proving in many respects far more classical than his theoretical premises had suggested (see Sestito 1978: 21-8).

This wavering between disdain for and appreciation of a typically English (and peculiarly Shakespearean) untamed energy, unbridled and unbridgeable, was politically perceived as standing on the side of liberty, and it continued to be voiced in those years in ways that resounded with Voltaire's critical jargon. For instance, in his 1739-52 *Della storia e della ragione d'ogni poesia*, Francesco Saverio Quadrio wrote that

il Cornelio di quella Nazione . . . nonostante che un genio avesse pieno di fecondità, e di forza; e d'uno spirito fosse dotato, che univa alla naturalezza la sublimità; non aveva a ogni modo, come scrive il Signor di Voltaire, veruna cognizione delle buone regole; e niun lume di buon gusto si vedeva nelle sue Poesie apparire . . . sue Farse mostruose, che si chiaman Tragedie. (Quadrio 1743: 149; see also Dionisotti 1998: 30-1)

[the Corneille of that Nation . . . despite being endowed with a genius full of productiveness and force, and with a spirit that combined naturalness with sublimity, did not have, as Monsieur Voltaire wrote, any knowledge of the good rules, nor any glimmer of good taste could be seen in his Poems". His Tragedies were, again, but monstrous farces.]

Later Italian critics also claimed to prefer Voltaire's and Conti's dramas to Shakespeare's (Sestito 1978: 20), and the same Melchiorre Cesarotti did not expunge from the 1808 edition of his Works a piece he had written in 1762, at the age of thirty-two, in which he had declared preference for Voltaire's own *César* (Cesarotti 1801: 229).

Thus, despite the fact that 1756 cannot be considered as a turning point in the reappraisal of Shakespeare in Italy, it is the year when Domenico Valentini proved to be "one of the very few Italian men of letters totally immune to Voltairean ideas" (Petroni Fresco 1992: 117; see also Rebori 1949: 217). Even so, his preference for the same play on which Voltaire had worked before him and his continuous allusions in his preface to the tragedy to the Voltairean accusations of Shakespeare's unconcern about the Aristotelian units – "difetti provenienti dal vizio del Secolo, in cui viveva" ("imperfections originated from the vice of the century in which he lived"; Valentini 1756: <D2r-v>) – raised doubts about his 'immunity'. Hardly any eighteenth-century thinker was 'totally immune' to the French philosopher's influence, even when, as in Alessandro Verri's case, their intellectual efforts forcefully – and directly – raised objections to Voltaire's judgment.

Verri was the author of the first two Italian close translations of *Hamlet* (1769) and *Othello* (1777), although he never published them (Colognesi 1963; Petroni Fresco 1992). Other translations carried out in France and It-

ally slightly earlier or concomitantly offered very free renderings of Shakespeare's plays, as in the cases of Pierre-Antoine de La Place's 1745-48 *Théâtre Anglais* and Francesco Gritti's 1774 Italian rendition of Ducis' *Hamlet* (1769). Pierre Le Tourneur's translation of *Hamlet*, instead, was published in 1779, two years later. The reason why Verri never published this translation has been traced to "an almost pathological lack of self-confidence when it came to making his work known to the public, coupled with the radical change in his political and literary opinions away from the revolutionary extremism of his youth" (Petrone Fresco 1992: 114). Yet, regardless of the reason, Verri's three prose versions of *Hamlet* demonstrated unusual textual accuracy, as he himself acknowledged in a letter to his brother, Pietro, dated 9 August 1769: "Io sono stato alla lettera precisa, per dare una giusta idea della lingua e dell'autore" ("I have been translating word by word to give a faithful idea of the language and the author"; Novati and Greppi 1911: 17; see also Reborà 1949: 214, 217; Petrone Fresco 1992: 118 and ff.). Free from any specific political message or social observation on contemporary reality, Verri's translation may well be the result of the author's disillusionment with the current political climate and of an urgency to "seek", as Petrone Fresco points out, "consolation in that world of fantasy and sentiment that was to lead to the romantic era" (1992: 114). In this same letter, though, Verri harshly commented on Voltaire's prejudice against Shakespeare, accusing the French philosopher of misunderstanding the English poet and, indeed, the English language too:

Quest'autore è tanto difficile, che neppure la metà degl'inglesi lo intendono bene, come pochi italiani intendono Dante . . . Ho veduto che Voltaire o non sa bene questa lingua, o ha voluto, a tutt'i conti, mettere in ridicolo Shakespeare. Ma a torto, perché con tutte le sue stravaganze è un grand'uomo. (Novati and Greppi 1911: 16-17)

[This writer is so difficult that not even half of the English people understand him properly, as few Italians understand Dante . . . I have realized that either Voltaire doesn't know this language very well or wanted to ridicule Shakespeare at all costs. But he is wrong because, with all his extravagances, he is a great man.]

The same charges against Voltaire's (mis)understandings appeared a few years later in Giuseppe Baretti's *Discours sur Shakespeare et sur Monsieur de Voltaire* (written in French and published in London and Paris in 1777), probably the most important literary dispute between an Italian-born critic and the French colossus of the eighteenth century. The occasion was provided by Voltaire's attack on Le Tourneur's translation of Shakespeare's plays, which Voltaire perceived as the last effect of a crisis in the cultural prestige of France already beginning in 1760 (see Willems 2010: 455-62). Its

account by Neil Rhodes deserves to be cited in full:

The last scene in Voltaire's struggle against British bardolatry took place in 1776. This was the year that saw the complete translation of Shakespeare into French, by Pierre Le Tourneur. Published in twenty volumes by subscription, Voltaire was appalled to see the king, Louis XVI, at the head of the list of sponsors. . . . In France a notable example of treachery was Diderot, who put himself down for six copies. So now the barbarian was no longer at the gates, but inside the citadel, and Voltaire decided to address the French Academy on the subject of this almost apocalyptic threat. What particularly incensed him was the nagging awareness that he had himself been responsible for letting the genie out of the bottle . . . The letter to the French Academy was read out on 25 August 1776 in the presence of the British ambassador and Elizabeth Montague, who had specifically attacked Voltaire in her *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769). (2004: 217-28)

Infuriated by Voltaire's letter, Baretti responded violently, claiming that Voltaire only knew little or no English ("ne sait que peu ou point d'Anglois"; 1777: 9) and that Shakespeare could not be translated in any of the Romance languages, even less into French, because it was "trop châtiée, trop scrupuleuse, trop dédaigneuse, pour rendre Shakespeare" ("too refined, too scrupulous, too snobbish [a language] to translate Shakespeare in" (23). He also criticized his ridiculous translations of Shakespeare's individual piece which "sinon qu'en les retraduisant de son François en Anglois, ou ne le reconnoitait pas plus pour des morceaux des Shakespeare, que s'ils étoient tirés des livres de Zoroastre" ("if translated back into English . . . would resemble Shakespeare no more than Zoroaster" (110). This included Hamlet's famous monologue, which, after a prose translation, Voltaire "le retraduit en vers avec un tapage d'éloquence e de sentiments à la Scuderi, qui s'éloigne beaucoup trop de l'original" ("recast it in verses with an excess of eloquence and sentiments in the manner of la Scudéri, by a long shot far from the original" (12). Finally, he noted ironically Voltaire's daring falsehood in saying "à ses Confrères Académiciens, qu'il a traduit une pièce toute entière de Shakespeare d'une manière à leur donner une idée véritable de l'Original" ("to his Fellows Academicians that he had translated an entire play by Shakespeare so as to give them a true idea of the Original"). "En vérité", he continued,

cet homme se moque de nous, et s'imagine pouvoir nous conduire par le nés comme des buffles! Il n'a point traduit le *Jules César* de Shakespeare: il l'a assassiné. Le *Jules César* de Shakespeare plait à tous ceus qui entendent l'Anglois. La Traduction de Monsieur De Voltaire fait rendre les boyaux à quiconque entend le François. (89)

[Truly, this man laughs at us, and thinks that he can lead us by the nose as

buffalos! He did not translate Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at all: he murdered it. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is liked by all those who understand English. Mr Voltaire's translation makes anyone who understands French puke.]

Although isolated, Baretti's critique of "Monsieur de Voltaire" (as he addressed him throughout his essay) made the year 1777 into a sort of *annus mirabilis* for the Italian emancipation from French classicism. Only two years later, in 1779, the name of Shakespeare was being hailed triumphantly in Lorenzo Pignotti's *Tomba di Shakespeare (Shakespeare's Tomb)*, which he dedicated to Mrs Elizabeth Montagu "in occasione della di lei applauditissima opera in difesa di quel poeta" ("on the occasion of her much acclaimed work in defense of that poet"; Pignotti 1823: 45). Pignotti described him as a "Sofocle britannico" ("British Sophocles"; 51) whose works will only be misunderstood by the many "miseri umani ingegni" ("wretched human minds") who are driven by "l'error de' ciechi che si fanno duci!" ("the mistake of the blind who make themselves into leaders"; 70). The allusion to Voltaire as that "blind leader" of the ungifted whose "malignant rage / In vain barks against" the "exultant Ghost" of Shakespeare – nobly defended by "The great Woman" (Lady Montague) – is unequivocal ("Dunque invan contra te, Spirto felice, / Il maligno furor de' bassi ingegni / Latrando va, che a te sicura e salda / La gran Donna approntò nobil difesa"; 72).

At the same time, departing from Baretti, Pignotti did not hesitate to comment on the beauty of certain passages in Voltaire's *La Mort de César* and in the main plan of his *Semiramis*, although the praise was clearly, and mainly, addressed to their Shakespearean sources (54-7). The poem continued with mention of the greatest characters and finest scenes invented by Shakespeare, including *Julius Caesar* (54-5), *Othello* (55), *Hamlet* (ibid.: 56-7) and all of the plays where "alate portentose forme" ("winged, extraordinary shapes"; 58) appeared alongside *The Tempest* (58-9), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (60), and the historical plays. Reference to tyranny in *Richard III* drove him to compose passionate lines on the future overthrow of tyrants – a comment which may sound strangely evocative of a not too distant future (62-3).

In the 1780s, in fact, criticism upon Shakespeare's works was rarely free from reflections upon their social, historical, and political dimension. In 1782, Ranieri de' Calzabigi's remarks on Shakespeare's *modus operandi* conveyed more than a purely aesthetic analysis of his plays. He still echoed disapprovals of their imperfections which rendered his tragedies "assai più difettose delle nostre" ("far more defective than ours"; 1801: 3), but he acknowledged the originality of his 'monstrosities' ("produsse de' mostri, ma degli originali"; 20). Even if Shakespeare wrote in "una maniera stra-

vagante, rozza, selvaggia” (“an extravagant, unpolished, undisciplined manner”; 63), he continued, as well as with a “sregolata fantasia” (“unruly fantasy”; 68), these ‘faults’ did not undermine his fervent admiration for the “Eschilo inglese” (“English Aeschylus”; 21). He was the architect of “sublimi pezzi” (“sublime passages”; 3), a prodigy who “dipingere al vivo, al vivo rende i caratteri e le passioni de’ personaggi” (“portrays life, make the characters and the passions of the characters alive”; 63). In essence, de Calzabigi’s words of appraisal were only more emphatic than Conti’s, Rolli’s, or Valentini’s; and, following Voltaire before he turned Anglophobic, de Calzabigi did not miss the occasion to praise the English peoples’ noble aspirations for freedom. He also established a direct link between the English intolerance of slavery and Shakespeare’s own rejection of poetic fetters, judgments which indicate a stronger intent than his predecessors’ to connect national politics, culture, and art:

This illustrious nation, which affects a manner and system of thought different from all others, a nation free and proud, has been eager to prove its independence, even in tragedy. As with its government, it has adopted a special tragic constitution of its own for its theatre. It is satisfied with it, nay, proud of it, in spite of the outcries of all the others. For the famous Shakespeare, author of this new constitution, the unities are fetters fitted for slaves. (translated by Collison Morley 1916: 44)

In de’ Calzabigi’s words, England became an ideal place: it hosted neither persecutors nor persecuted; it was as “free and proud” as its theatre; and it was extremely dissimilar from all other countries, especially France, whose drama, in spite of being ‘the best’, was characterized by “molta narrativa, molta declamazione, poco movimento, pochissima azione” (“much narrative, much declamation, little movement, very little action”). Besides, “[d]i rado vi si trovano i gran pensieri di quell’anime libere [dei greci, dei romani, degli sciti, degli africani, degli asiatici], di quelle costituzioni virtuose, di quelle politiche d’allora: tutto è del nostro tempo” (“[v]ery rarely one can find in it the great thoughts of those free spirits [of the Greeks, the Romans, the Scythians, the Africans, the Asians], of those virtuous constitutions, of the politics of those times: everything is of our time”; de’ Calzabigi 1801: 22-3). The implicit message of this assessment of the weakness of French drama was an appeal for renewal in both Italian theatre and society. Shakespeare’s disrespect of the unities and the combination of comedy and tragedy were no longer reasons for scandal. As Luigi Lamberti was to write in his 1796 dedicatory letter to Augustus Frederic of England of his *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Shakespeare ranked with Sophocles “who, the further he departs from the too studied regularity of modern tragic poets, the nearer does he approach the strength and vividness of the ancients” (qtd in Colli-

son Morley 1916: 68). In the previous year, 1795, Pierantonio Meneghelli, albeit not a Shakespeare enthusiast, suggested yet another comparison with a Greek playwright – Aeschylus: “for the fire, concentration and energy of his style, and the strong, virile, concise nobility of his thoughts” (*Dissertazione sopra la Tragedia Cittadinesca*, qtd in Collison Morley 1916: 66). That Shakespeare overlooked “the rules” at that point was tacitly ignored, by simple mention that he paid “no heed to Aristotle” (ibid.). On the contrary, Meneghelli praised Shakespeare as being a close follower of Nature, drawing attention to the mixing of comedy and tragedy, as well as being capable of “inspir[ing] terror by cleverly-contrived pauses – an art now most successfully imitated by the Germans”, thus filling “our minds with forebodings of what is about to happen by holding the action in suspense” (ibid.). Shakespeare’s loss of his French nickname in favour of the Greek ones of Sophocles and Aeschylus (already proposed by Pignotti and de’ Calzabigi) bespeaks a new attitude clearly in opposition to the previous French tradition that had turned him into an English Corneille. The years 1796-1797, not coincidentally, also registered Napoleon’s campaigns in Italy.

The change of attitude towards Voltaire’s cultural monopoly, which began in the 1770s, with Baretti’s, Pignotti’s, and de’ Calzabigi’s critiques and, later, in the 1790s with overtly anti-French voices should be considered in the context of diverse intellectual and ideological drives. In this respect, it may be observed that the initial response to an idea of ‘liberty’ of French derivation, embodied by Voltaire, rested upon a conception of rationality advocated by the Enlightenment which was entirely different from the type of liberty that would gradually take shape in terms of closeness to Nature and power of the imagination. Yet another different attitude was elicited after the Revolution by Napoleon’s increasingly clear anti-libertarian politics and military campaigns. At that point, in Italy, Shakespeare came to represent an anti-France symbol, rather than an anti-Voltaire one: in this respect, his plays pointed to the moral and political supremacy of England. Thus, the robust reappraisal of Shakespeare that took place in the last two decades of the century cannot be reduced to a generic change of taste; rather it was deeply involved with the different responses that were prompted by the socio-political context and the gradual shattering of libertarian ideals.

As suggested above, in the 1780s allusions to Shakespeare’s works began to appear more frequently. They can be found in Vincenzo Monti’s *Aristodemo* (1786) and Galeotto Manfredi (1788), in Vittorio Alfieri’s *Virginia*, *La Congiura de’ Pazzi*, and *Bruto secondo* (1789) (see Sestito 1978: 34-42), as well as in works published in the 1790s: for instance, in Ippolito Pindemonte’s *Arminio* (1797) and in Giovanni Pindemonte’s *Orso Ipato* (1797), to name but a few (see Scherillo 1920: 49; Thorne 1967; Carlson 1993; Hargreaves-Mawdsley 1967: 1-28). A new impetus for his re-evaluation came

also from the translation carried out by two Venetian women: Elisabetta Caminer-Turra and Giustina Renier Michiel. In 1794, Caminer-Turra translated Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Les Tombeaux de Vérone* (1782), a play loosely echoing Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and, as Minutella claims, rewritten to include "a happy ending [which] brought Shakespeare's tragedy into conformity with the rules of contemporary theatre" (2013: 77). Only a few years later, in 1798-1800, Renier Michiel published what is the first "systematic translation" in prose of Shakespeare's plays: namely, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus* (Collison-Morley 1916: 76). Belonging to the family of the last two Dogi of Venice (her grandfather was Paolo Renier and her uncle Lodovico Manin), she married the nobleman Marcantonio Michiel. Aristocratic and well-versed in studies of botany, physics, and chemistry, as well as in the humanities, she published a historical study of Venetian feasts (*L'origine delle Feste veneziane* 1817, re-edited and augmented in 1827). Significantly, she hosted a cultural salon in Venice frequented by intellectuals and artists such as Ugo Foscolo, Antonio Canova, Ippolito Pindemonte, Mme de Stael, Melchiorre Cesarotti, Lord Byron, and Vincenzo Monti, whom she first met in Rome when residing for a year at Palazzo Venezia as daughter of the Venetian ambassador. Her *Opere Drammatiche di Shakespeare Volgarezzate da una Cittadina Veneta* were inspired by Pierre Le Tourneur, whose translation she used alongside the original in Pope's edition (see Crinò 1950: 95-8; Calvani 2009: 17; 2010: 3-4; 2012: 125ff.). According to Cesarotti's biographer, Vittorio Malamani (1890: 49), her versions of *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Coriolanus* were greatly improved by "Cesarotti's hand" (himself a translator of Homer and Ossian), who also added details in the commentary and notes (Crinò 1950: 93; for a revision of this position see Calvani 2009: 17; 101).

Far too much emphasis has recently been laid on Renier Michiel's wish to engage in these translations mainly for the educational purpose of offering her daughters instructive examples of how to control one's passions (Renier Michiel 1798: 1, 24). Of course, in a context where female agency was 'regulated' by male authority, Renier Michiel's plan may have sounded revolutionary (Calvani 2009, 2012; Bassi 2016: 18). Yet the same collocation of her remark at the end of the first section simply as a brief, occasional mention underplays its role while reinforcing the initial presentation of her work as a 'course of theatre' addressed to the Nation (1798: 9). It is especially Cesarotti's letter to her of 1 September 1799, though, that suggests that her interests might have resided elsewhere. In that letter, he praised her accurate preface to *Coriolanus*, but at the same time condemned her excessive attention to the historical events leading to the extinction of the Republic:

La *Prefazione*, come già le scrissi, è sensata e mostra ingegno e sagacità: ma temo che sembri intrusa ed estranea. Parea che dovesse bastare l'espore brevemente il corso degli affari di Roma dall'espulsione dei Tarquinij fino al tempo di Coriolano, servendosi di questo compendio ragionato come d'una introduzione alla storia di questo eroe dell'aristocrazia. Ma il diffondersi sulle cose precedenti, e specialmente sulle posteriori fino all'estinzione della Repubblica, può parer alieno dal soggetto, e far perdere alla *Prefazione* quel pregio che sogliono dar agli scritti d'ogni spezie due gran ministri dell'eloquenza: l'aproposito e il quanto basta. Quindi è ch'io crederei opportuno di accorciar lo scritto della metà in circa. (Cesarotti 1885: 4)

[The *Preface*, as I wrote to you, is reasonable and shows intelligence and ingeniousness: but it may look intrusive and extraneous, I'm afraid. It seems enough to draw the course of the events in Rome from the expulsion of the Tarquini to the times of Coriolanus by using this reasoned companion as an introduction to the history of this hero of aristocracy. But writing at great length about previous things, and especially the following ones until the extinction of the Republic, may appear alien to the subject and deprive the *Preface* of that merit which is afforded to any piece of writing by the two great ministers of eloquence: appropriateness and as much as necessary. Therefore I believe it appropriate to shorten your writing by about a half.]

As a matter of fact, Cesarotti also sent Renier Michiel the outline of a new preface, but she declined to use it (Cesarotti 1885: 4n1). The only reason why she should have written profusely about the history of the Roman Republic and its ending may be that she was also concerned with the fate of another Republic: Venice. Renier Michiel was no remittent housewife entirely dedicated to family care, but an intelligent and active intellectual whose interest in her daughters' education, and fulfilment of the obligations towards her family, complemented her political and cultural commitments (she also acted as *dogressa*), while not suffocating them (see Dalton 2003: 79ff.). Her social and political engagements often led away from home and contributed to harshening her relationship with her husband, from whom she eventually separated in 1784 mainly because of gender tensions deriving from Marcantonio's ambivalence "about women's intellectual abilities [and] his wife's extravagant socializing" (Dalton 2003: 92).

Thus, to argue that her choice of these three plays among those ones made available by Le Tourneur in his 1776-1778 volumes (including *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Macbeth*) was dictated by Shakespeare's emphasis on three strong women – Desdemona, Lady Macbeth, and Volumnia – would mean to misrepresent both their roles in those plays, and Renier Michiel's own more complex position. In her *Preface* to *Othello*, her focus indisputably was on the Moor's delicate and passionate nature, as well as on Iago's devious mind, while no major space was re-

served to Desdemona. She was mentioned cursorily with reference to Cassio's amiability – a trait which made for the verisimilitude of Desdemona's possible love for him (1798: 47) – and as the object of Othello's cruelty (48); she was also called "virtuous" (44) and "full of sweetness and naïve simplicity" (45), qualities which were further highlighted in the notes on the text. On the first page of the *Preface to Macbeth*, Renier Michiel made clear that the hero was not Lady Macbeth who, compared to her "sweet and amiable" husband, appeared "inflexible and vain" as she "meditate[d] and propose[d] the most atrocious murder without the least internal conflict, without the least pain" ("il carattere di Macbet è dolce ed amabile: quello di sua moglie è inflessibile, e vano; ella medita, e propone il delitto più atroce senza minimo contrasto interno, senza minima pena"; Renier Michiel 1798: 5). Lady Macbeth's impassionate nature was entirely responsible for his tormented resolution to commit the murder. The rest of the *Preface* was devoted to a discussion of Macbeth's own conflicts and the role of the witches and the supernatural. Similarly, Volumnia in *Coriolanus* was afforded the same space as Virginia, both appearing only in a comment from Le Tourneur where "Volumnia accoppia la tenerezza di una donna, ad una certa dignità qual si conviene alla madre di un Eroe", and "Virginia ha tutta la soavità, la decenza, che rendono seducente una Sposa" ("Volumnia combines the tenderness of a woman with the dignity appropriate to the mother of a Hero" and "Virginia has all the suavity, the decency, that render a Bride seductive"; Renier Michiel 1800: 22-3). The main focus of the *Preface* was, again, on the male hero: an inflexible, unrepachable, and proud aristocrat who, eventually, was not ruined by his own despicable betrayal of Rome and league with the Volsci, but by his compassion for his mother. Coriolanus was sacrificed on the altar of his own pity (15) and, similar to Achilles, who felt tenderness for his friend, he felt a fatal tenderness for his mother so that "both [were] punished for their previous hardness" ("Ambedue sentono un solo affetto umano, la tenerezza; quello per l'Amico, questo per la Madre; e questa tenerezza appunto è la cagione ond'entrambi incontrano la punizione della loro precedente durezza. Achille è punito colla morte di Patroclo, e Coriolano colla propria"; *ibid.*: 19). As can be seen, Renier Michiel placed limited attention on women and gender issues; rather, she explored the representation of passions in the dominant male figures.

In fact, comments on women were contained elsewhere. They occur right at the beginning of the general preface to the first volume, where Renier Michiel vindicated a privileged relation between Shakespeare and the fair sex on account of their closeness to Nature. Hence, Shakespeare's beautiful portraits of "sweet" Desdemona, "tender" Juliet, "brilliant" Rosalind, "unfortunate" Ophelia, "naïve" Miranda, "lively" Beatrice, "constant" Helena, "tender" Cordelia, and the many constant mothers and faithful brides

(1798: 6). Nature, after all, was Shakespeare's own model, which he depicted in order to achieve truth and to instruct us by the surprising "magnificence and fecundity of his Poetry", as well as by his extraordinary capacity to offer a "faithful mirror to life" ("sorprende per la magnificenza e fecondità della sua Poesia: egli istruisce, perché offre al Lettore uno specchio fedele della vita"; 11).

Accordingly, Renier Michiel's *Preface to Coriolanus* confirms her political preoccupations with the history of the Republic: it is no surprise that she chose a play which was concerned with both domestic and foreign politics. In 1796, Napoleon Bonaparte had started his long-advocated invasion of Italy, winning over Piemonte, Genoa, and Milan, to name but a few of his successes in the North and Central Italy. His presence on the peninsula was first greeted with enthusiasm by those revolutionary spirits who saw in him a liberator. Of course, not everybody shared the same excitement for this foreigner who, as it was soon made clear, was driven by dreams of power rather than of freedom. The Serenissima – the now worn-out Republic of Venice – showed scepticism (or, more accurately, fears) about the successes of this commander: it hoped that a neutral approach to the last chaotic events would suffice to grant its survival throughout this difficult time. But weakness is punished in times of war, and the ancient Republic soon realized – and paid for – its poor judgment. In 1797, with the excuse of vindicating an act of rebellion against the French authority, Bonaparte challenged the Serenissima to war. The Senate, summoned for a special meeting by the Doge, Ludovico Manin, rejected Marcantonio Michiel's argument in favour of war and voted instead for the approval of all the abusive requests tabled by Bonaparte. Marcantonio Michiel, by then separated from Giustina, was one of the few politically forward-thinking figures who directly expressed their desire to defend Venice and its Republic from the unavoidable tyranny of Napoleon. Marcantonio was indeed a strong supporter of the rearmament of the mainland, believing that a more moderate position would not secure the peace (and the survival) of the Republic (see Francesco Lippomano 2008; Boni and Calbo Crotta 1798). He was right. The French supreme commander urged the old Republic to expel the English minister from Venice and finally to declare their alliance either with Great Britain or with France. The outburst of the 'Pasque Veronesi' (which occurred during the Veronese Easter when the enraged inhabitants of Verona rebelled against the French abuse of power) and the attack on the French ship named *Liberatore d'Italia* (*Liberator of Italy*) served Bonaparte's plan. Unable to resist the French invasion, the thousand-year old Republic had to accept the establishment of a provisional municipal government, ending the Serenissima's leadership and ideals. The new government, as Mad-den sums up,

ordered that every image of the winged lion of St. Mark was to be destroyed, including even those on the exterior of the Ducal Palace depicting Doge Andrea Gritti and Doge Francesco Foscari kneeling before the lion . . . Merely to utter “Viva San Marco” was punishable by death. The new government outlawed the famous Venetian festival, Carnevale and Sensa. A Liberty Tree – the symbol of the French Revolution – was placed in the center of the Piazza San Marco, where a relatively small group of French supporters danced and celebrated the “liberation” of the Venetian people. Not far away a bonfire consumed the Book of Gold, which for four centuries had recorded the names of Venetian patrician families, as well as the doge’s corno and vestments. Most Venetians watched the ceremony with disdain. For more than a millennium they had been the freest people in the world. They had no need of liberation. Still, given the circumstances, it was much better to let the French have their party and say nothing. (2012, Chapter 18, n. p.)

The French occupation of Venice was only temporary, though, because Bonaparte had other plans. When Napoleon signed the Treaty of Campoformio, on 17 October 1797, thus selling Venice to the Austrians, the dreams of all those Italians who still supported Bonaparte and his politics died. According to Madden, the Venetian French supporters believed that Venice would play an active role in the new remapping of Italy “as nationalism spread out across Europe, [thus] kindl[ing] the dream of a united Italy across the shattered peninsula” (ibid.). The Treaty of Campoformio killed that dream. The proud Serenissima was not only destroyed by foreign powers but, even worse, was now sold to the old regime of the Habsburgs. In a few months, Napoleon had betrayed everybody: first and foremost, the ‘negotiators’ of the old Republic who thought that a dialogue with the general was possible; then, his Venetian supporters. Apart from recognizing Venice as part of the Archduchy of Austria, the Treaty also recognized France’s rights to annex Belgium (former Austrian Netherlands) and acknowledged the existence of two newly created republics: The Cisalpine Republic (also absorbing Verona and part of the Veneto), and the Ligurian Republic. This Treaty, in other words, sealed the end of a great Republic and of a democratic vision.

Renier Michiel did not sympathize with the French cause for obvious political reasons linked to her public role and prominent patrician position. Her attachment to the Republic also emerges from her *Origine delle feste veneziane* whose “goal”, as Dalton points out, “was to show her patriotism and to express a sense of loss over the fall of the Venetian Republic” (2003: 76). Nor, moreover, was she left untouched by the French, who ordered the closure of her literary salon, one of the best-frequented in Venice. Thus, her choice of translating Shakespeare is her declaration of alliance with Great Britain, a country which, in a letter to the Abate Bianchi of January 1802,

she was to hail in the name of Shakespeare's genius: "Viva la Gran Bretagna nella quale il Genio d'un uomo forma l'ebbrezza e la delizia di un popolo" ("Hail to Great Britain where the Genius of a man fashions the euphoria and the delight of the people"; Cesarotti 1801: 29). To make such a public stance in favour of Englishness in these crucial years, which saw a French general determine the destiny of the Republic of Venice, was not devoid of momentum. As Collison Morrey recalls, when Napoleon visited Venice in 1807, he was not pleased with Renier Michiel's translations:

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, with his usual good breeding, Napoleon turned his back upon her and she was armed back to her place among the spectators by her Venetian friend. (1916: 78)

By appropriating Shakespeare's plays to develop her narrative about the current socio-political crisis, Renier Michiel contributed to the shaping of a new cultural milieu and, by doing so, she eventually accomplished her political duty.

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