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## A journey through the night with a verbal Prospero

by John Olinger



### THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SHAKESPEARE

By Piero Boitani, translated by Vittorio Montemaggi and Rachel Jacoff

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The night is cold. The storm that stranded you in this Holiday Inn off the interstate rages. You sit at the deserted bar. A distinguished-looking man enters, sits beside you. Like you, he says, I am a traveler, a professor of comparative literature on my way to deliver a lecture. On what, you ask. On my book, *The Gospel According to Shakespeare*, Piero Boitani replies. So begins a long night of tale-telling, of stories whose complexity strains the bounds of belief. Invoking Paul, he advises you to have faith, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

You embark on Boitani's journey in the second half of "Hamlet," in a mood of dread, not dread of death but of what lies beyond, the unknown. "There is no effulgence of faith in the closing scenes of Hamlet: there is rather the appearance of distant light." Boitani pursues the light through the bleak story of Lear, a 17th-century Job. Like the Book of Job, "King Lear" is a "radical exploration of the total gratuitousness of human suffering or of the existence of evil in the world." It is a tale of betrayal, blindness, exile,

recognition, restoration and reunion that ends in death but a death in a revelation of the nature of love.

On now to the realm of fantastic tales: storms, shipwrecks, births at sea, deaths at sea, and islands that appear as if from nowhere.

As Boitani recounts tales of Pericles, Thaisa and Marina, of Imogen and Cymbeline, of Leontes, Hermione and Perdita, of Prospero and Miranda, not to mention the ever mysterious Ariel and Caliban, you grow impatient. Boitani reminds you that patience is the essence of these tales. The patience of endurance, of suffering, of the passion of each of these characters as a reflection of the passion of Christ.

At the end of "Pericles, Prince of Tyre," the eponymous hero, who believes his wife and daughter dead, meets the resurrected pair in a recognition scene, where all are reunited in love, reunited in life, unlike Lear and Cordelia.

Boitani travels on. Shakespeare, he tells you, embellishes his idea of resurrection as recognition by introducing forgiveness. In "Cymbeline," there is much to be forgiven. In the final recognition scene, father and daughter, husband and wife are reunited, joined by the reappearance of two once-disappeared sons of Cymbeline who have rescued his kingdom from Rome. At this moment of rebirth, Cymbeline forgives all, including the invading Romans.

"The Winter's Tale" brings more bewilderment. Yet it is as basic a tale as can be told, for it begins with jealousy, Othello's green-eyed monster. Here, too, at the end, all are recognized and united.

In the resolution of these tales, resurrection is "announced on the basis of the most human kinds of affection," love between husbands and wives, parents and children, and among siblings.

Now, as the storm outside rages on and you wonder whether the deluge of tales will ever end, Boitani arrives, once again by shipwreck, on the shores of "The Tempest." You are back on familiar ground. You confess that you never really did understand what "The Tempest" was all about. Though you did see the movie.

"The Tempest" raises the familiar themes of betrayal and exile, of loss and innocence, of justice sought and justice delivered. Above it all, directing the action, towers Prospero, who, having lost his dukedom of Milan, has found refuge on an island to which are delivered those who connived to deprive him of his realm. Boitani relates the misadventures of this motley crew during which, inevitably, Prospero's daughter, Miranda, falls in love with the son of the King of Naples, the king who plotted with Prospero's brother to deprive Prospero of Milan. Through many trials and tribulations, all is revealed in a final epiphany in which Prospero renounces his magic, reconciles with all and reconciles himself with age and death.

Miranda is granted the opportunity to reveal the distant light that Boitani perceived at the end of "Hamlet." She was raised only in the company of her father, the sprite Ariel and the monster Caliban until the shipwrecked are cast upon the shore. Now at tale's end she revels in these newly found fellow humans.

O, wonder!  
How many goodly creatures are  
    there here!  
How beauteous mankind is! O  
    brave new world,

That has such people in?!

?The Tempest,? begun in the chaos of Genesis, ends in the epiphany of Revelation, the new earth envisioned by Miranda.

Outside, the storm is over. The master tale-teller Boitani ends his tale of tales as dawn beckons. You have been privileged to spend a night in the company of a verbal Prospero. You walk into the daylight with Boitani?s words as your companion on your interrupted journey. ?Where beauty reaches, there lie redemption and salvation.?

[John Olinger, a frequent *NCR* reviewer, lives in Washington, D.C.]

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