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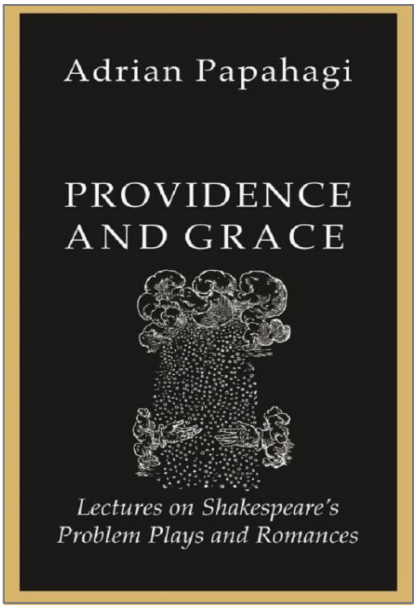
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Adrian Papahagi, *Providence and Grace: Lectures on Shakespeare's Problem Plays and Romances*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2020, 221 p.

On the bright side of the notorious pandemic, passionate scholars may feel that now is the time to focus or rearrange one's efforts onto the subjects which are closer to their heart or have long been postponed. Such is the case with Adrian Papahagi's Shakespearean hat-trick of 2020, spread over two different editorial projects, in two distinct languages, reunited by the same research focus.



Out of the three books on Shakespeare published by the professor thus far, *Providence and Grace* is the most voluminous one. It is a series of lectures, most of which can also be found online as they were read on camera, concerning the bard's three problem plays and four of his late romances. The central theme of the volume and that which provides the conceptual focus of Papahagi's lectures are Grace and Providence, which point toward a Christian cropping. However, the scholar is careful not to exaggerate the role of the Christian meditation in the works of Shakespeare, nor does he ever call the playwright a Christian writer.

The reader is faced with a serious and involved researcher who is trying to enter a line of critics that spans from the likes of Samuel Johnson to W.H. Auden, Northrop Frye, Giorgio Melchiori or Harold Bloom (to name only a few). As expected from a professor who has mastered the subject of Shakespeare for many years now, the lectures are a fine display of erudition, leaving the impression that Papahagi possesses a zoomed-out view on all who wrote on Shakespeare. This enables him to compare critics against each other in order to find answers when controversy arrives. Romanian critics are invited to the Saraband as well, although the author of this book naturally reads Shakespeare only in original and his attention to the smallest details and differences between folios, editions and manuscripts pays off when engaging with other exegetes.

For those unfamiliar, the "problem plays," first called so by Frederick Boas in 1896, are the three peculiar texts written

in the years between *Hamlet* (1600/1601) and the other mature tragedies, such as *Othello, King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* (1604-1608). The problem plays "are neither tragedies nor comedies, neither histories nor romances" (13) as if the nihilism, fascination with death and "sex-nausea" (a term borrowed from John Dover Wilson) of *Hamlet* still fester in the world of Shakespeare. However, Adrian Papahagi labels them *dark comedies*, and he observes a *crescendo*, as the three plays have increasingly happier endings, due to the acts of providence and grace. These three dark comedies are the following: *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, each play being given its own chapter before diving into the late Shakespearean romances.

Before being able to observe the touch of grace, however, one has to start from the absolute lowest (not qualitatively, of course), as *Troilus and Cressida* proves to be a smaller and more grotesque *Iliad*, a story of "a whore and a cuckold," quoting Thersites, worst of the Achaeans. Adrian Papahagi retraces the historical biography of the story of *Troilus and Cressida*, one of the most famous stories of the West, first told by Benoît de Sainte-Maure, translated into Latin by Guido delle Colonne and then adapted into Italian by Giovanni Boccaccio, from where it is intercepted by Chaucer. Meanwhile, after 1598, installments of Chapman's famous translation of *The Iliad* are being published. "Shakespeare was thus able to […] toy with two immense yet already decrepit traditions: Homer's ancient heroic epic, and Chaucer's medieval courtly love romance" (16). In Shakespeare's Trojan War, nobility dies and disgrace survives. There is no marriage and no tragic *catharsis*, as Auden puts it, not *a* world but *the* world.

Compared to Cressida, the heroines of *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* are increasingly pure. Whereas, compared to Troilus, their lovers are increasingly vile. However, when reading Adrian Papahagi's lecture on *All's Well That Ends Well*, one cannot help but notice a combative touch of irony. When comparing Helena obtaining Bertram with Richard the III's wooing of Lady Anne, the scholar writes: "Helena is not wooed, but wooing, not won, but winning, not the object of masculine desire, but devoured by masculine ambition and desire. But I leave this argument to my feminist friends" (49). Here and in other passages of *Providence and Grace* a certain kinship is to be noticed between Adrian Papahagi and Harold Bloom. The Romanian author clearly shares some of the feeling Bloom has towards what he coined as "the School of Resentment".

However, that does not imply that a master-apprentice relationship is to be found between the two. The lectures do not fear to disagree with the author of *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* whenever necessary. For instance, one of the main points of the lecture on *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare's most explicitly religious play, is proving Bloom wrong for calling Vincentio "half-crazed": "This is what Harold Bloom misses. The ways of providence are inscrutable, and sometimes they look like madness" (68-69). There are no angels and demons in Shakespeare, Professor Papahagi writes at some point. *Measure for Measure* is a play which pleads for the shift from the Leviticus kind of justice to the New Testament one. But most of all it pleads for life: "This is the Christian backdrop of *Measure for Measure* a play about justice, grace, mercy, love, and atonement" (86). Moreover, Papahagi discerns a resemblance between Vincentio and

Prospero, between Shakespeare's "farewell to comedy" and Shakespeare's "farewell to theatre".

The author believes that the providence and grace that emerged from Vincentio, the rejuvenated omniscient, "set the trend" for the romances, written between 1608 and 1611, a period considered Shakespeare's creative peak. The late romances that Adrian Papahagi discusses are *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* and there is no point in summarizing all of them here. The scholar makes an interesting case, however, regarding the underrated *Pericles*, which, due to its being written in collaboration with George Wilkins and having the least memorable lines in the Shakespeare canon, is often brushed aside easily. In Papahagi's analysis, *Pericles* is a preparatory work for *The Tempest*. Quoting Northrop Frye, Papahagi agrees "there is no break in structure corresponding to the break in style," the craftsmanship of *Pericles* remaining Shakespearean. Providence functions as an *ex machina* in the "mouldly medieval" tale of *Pericles*: "The fateful tempest that destroys Pericles' ship and washes him ashore is the way in which providence leads him to his future wife" (121). In the other romances, grace arrives via humans.

The book presents plenty of polemical appetite, especially towards the types of reading that Bloom would have a problem with too. Even so, Adrian Papahagi chooses his attacks carefully and, most of all, he seems to despise reductions. Such is the case with the chapter on *The Tempest*, where Papahagi stands his ground, defending Shakespeare's farewell to theatre against those who find examples of colonial discourse in the play. Papahagi's main weapon here is Caliban, "a savage and deformed slave," the last decades of criticism having focused on the monster's last attribute. Papahagi's analysis of Caliban is rich and impressive, spreading over many moving pages. "Critics who reduce Caliban to the lame ideological cliché of the native oppressed in a colonial world fail to understand the concomitant dignity and abjection of the monster's character, his irreducible complexity and his ambiguity. […] In the confrontation between ideology and irony, irony invariably carries the day" (207).

Scholars interested in Renaissance studies will find in *Providence and Grace* a pleasant and well documented, even revelatory dive into the work of Shakespeare.

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