

Literary games The duo Monaldi&Sorti imagines for Solferino a biographical work on the Florentine poet written by the English playwright

Now I tell you about Dante's life Signed: William Shakespeare

by **Roberta Scorrane**

Vertigo. You can get lost in Dante's visions, in the moral labyrinth of the Divine Comedy, in the tangle of symbols and allusions which is the architecture of Middle Ages. Hence, all compass abandon, ye that enter here. To get lost in Dante's world is the only right way, seem to suggest Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti, while they venture on a literary project, which is ambitious right from the title: *Dante di Shakespeare*, recently released by Solferino. And yes, the most eccentric couple (also in life) of Italian literature imagined a biographical drama about the poet written by the most famous playwright of all time. Vertigo.

Masters at weaving plots veined with mystery but supported by historical research bordering on literary punctiliousness, Monaldi&Sorti reappear four years after *The Doubts of Salai*, hinged on the young apprentice painter, with a work that is not really a tribute to either Dante or Shakespeare. It is rather a homage to literature and it's visionary power, able to withstand centuries of history to become canonical, as in the classification drawn up by Harold Bloom.

However, get lost means first of all immersing yourself in the Florence between the thirteenth and fourteenth century, follow Dante and his life like it would have dramatized Shakespeare according to the fiction of Monaldi&Sorti in this first part of a trilogy evidently inspired by the division (700 years after the death of the poet) in Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Since his appearance, infant ready to be immersed in the baptismal font on 27 March 1266, Dante appears to us as a soul chased by a challenging family, by the political tensions flaming Florence, even by the shadow of a mother as attractive as she is sickly. Bella degli Abati. She walks into the church, with the baby in her arms, at the side of Alighiero Alighieri, father of the future poet, as well as one, who "has a florin instead of a heart", how hisses the venomous Gabriello Sacchetti, in the shadow of the Florentine baptistery.

And here the cultured reader can start having fun: does the dramaturgical expedient of surrounding a beautiful soul with ambiguous characters in order to bring out its purity not look familiar? Do not we hear the echo of the fair Ophelia, assailed by the "rotten in the state of Denmark"? Those who are familiar with Monaldi&Sorti's books knows that the reader is called upon to play an active role by grafting memories and references, by having fun with little enigmas or, as in this case, by playing at recognizing shakespearean traces in the biography in form of play. And the authors move dancing on a difficult ridge: they narrate Dante as the Bard would have narrated it, with his sensitivity and, of course, the moral and cultural rules of his time.

And at this point you could ask: how to conciliate Alighieri's catholic vision with the shakespearean era, that of the protestant rift? A quick look at the appendix shows us, that the English playwright didn't remain untouched by "papist" suggestions. But, most importantly, religion here becomes moral tension, travail for committed sins, faults that resurface. And Dante's ethical horizon ends up looking surprisingly similar to that of the author of *Macbeth*, two eras assimilated by a feeling that transcends the centuries. In fact, historian Derek Brewer ironically defined Shakespeare as our "greatest medieval writer". The two authors note, that "triumphs and ruins of the English kings in Shakespeare follow a key concept of medieval times: the eternal wheel of Fortune" with the ups and downs of human life. Also, it is not blind destiny that leads to ruin men and reigns, but the sins and vices to which they abandon themselves."

The treasure hunt in the text continues as the poet becomes an adult. And thus, in the fencing between men and women on the day of his wedding there is the echo of comedies like *Measure for Measure*. Dante's fragility will recur multiple times in this book. Physical fragility firstly: according to numerous reconstructions, the origin of Dante's visionary writing is said to be, among other things, epilepsy, source of

fainting and distortions of reality. Also Marco Santagata, in his researches, talked about a disorder that would affect Alighieri even in childhood. So, we are going to follow a young man that gets emotional, who ends up crying, passing out, being stunned when he sees Beatrice. Would Shakespeare have told us a Dante like that? We will never know (unless sensational discoveries of works and papers are made), but in this book the Florentine poet acquires vitality, energy, passion. In short, he is more human.

For if it is Shakespeare that can narrate Alighieri and not vice versa, for historical reasons, it is also true that these two figures end up compensating each other. There is a vein of medieval theology in Shakespeare's plays, but it also a theatrical one does exist in Dante's verses, for instance. There are still debates today about the oral diffusion of the Divine Comedy at the poet's times, and there is also the famous anecdote embedded in one Sacchetti's novels: Dante comes across a smith who is singing his verses by heart, but since he cripples some, the "most excellent vernacular poet" rages and throws all the poor man's tools to the ground. Therefore, the masterpiece was very diffused by voice, and in addition its very structure seems to be made for this, not counting frequently recurring appeals to the reader.

And love? It has a far greater importance than one might imagine. Exactly like in Shakespeare's plays. However, you have to get to the end, at page 539, to get its political significance, that theology of love intertwined with Aristotle, the Song of Songs, Matelda of Brandenburg (sic!)¹ and Beatrice. Not surprising, just as it is not a wonder that such complex subjects are finally so familiar to us. In fact, Harold Bloom had written it: "Dante or Shakespeare? We need not choose. (...) They choose us or pass us by."

¹ correct: Magdeburg