

Francesco Spiera's “melancholy” (as described by Pier Paolo Vergerio) and Hamlet's “melancholy”

(Ideas for a search).

Abstract: M. O. Nobile, in this study puts forward *a new thesis* about Hamlet's “melancholy”. According to scholars (Prof. Giorgio Melchiori and Paolo Bertinetti), a “source” of Hamlet's “melancholy” is the *Treatise of melancholie* by Timothy Bright (1586). According to Nobile, *a previous source* may have influenced the Dramatist: Francesco Spiera's tragic history (in Cittadella and Padua), as narrated and published by Pier Paolo Vergerio in 1551 in Poschiavo and whose vicissitude spread throughout Europe. Spiera, after having publicly abjured his evangelical faith, *fell into a profound “melancholy” that led him to his death* (1548). Vergerio, deeply impressed by this story (*of which he had been the most important direct witness*), avoided abjuring his faith and fled into exile, *religionis causa*, in Switzerland (1549); in Tübingen, Vergerio was *superintendent of John Florio's education from 9 May 1563 until his death* (4 May 1565).

Summary:

- 1.** The traditional reference (Prof. Giorgio Melchiori and Paolo Bertinetti), as to the “source” of Hamlet's “melancholy”, to the *Treatise of Melancholy* by Timothy Bright (1586) and to Amleth's “melancholy” in Belleforest's *Histoires tragiques* (1570).
- 2.** Our new thesis on a further and *previous source* of Hamlet's “melancholy”: the tragic story of Francesco Spiera, afflicted by “melancholy mood”, which was narrated by Pier Paolo Vergerio (“*La Historia di M. Francesco Spiera ...*”, published in 1551 by the printer Landolfi in Poschiavo) and that had a *great international spread*. Spiera, accused by the Venice Inquisition of Lutheran ideas, “abjured” (in Venice and in Cittadella, near Padua), and, following his abjurations, he fell into a state of depression that led him to melancholy and death. Vergerio was *constantly next to Spiera, in his long agony in Padua until early December 1548* (Spiera died, about twenty days later, in Cittadella on December 27th 1548): *this story was so shocking, in Vergerio's life, that- as he himself tells - just this tragedy convinced him that the best solution was, not to “abjure”*, as Spiera had done, but *to flee* (10 May 1549), first to Basel, then to Vicosoprano and, finally, to Tübingen (where he died on 4 October 1565), following the Gospel (“*When they persecute you in one town, flee to another*”- Matthew, 10, 23).
- 3.** The important study (doctoral thesis 2012) by Elizabeth Hunter (University of Oxford) “*Melancholy and the Doctrine of Reprobation in English Puritan Culture, 1550-1640*”¹ and the

¹ Elizabeth Hunter (University of Oxford) “*Melancholy and the Doctrine of Reprobation in English Puritan Culture, 1550-1640*”, 2012; the study may be read in https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:7adadd9e-17c0-4ebe-837b-0e5183fc8495/download_file?file_format=pdf&safe_filename=THESIS02&type_of_work=Thesis

great spread of Francesco Spiera's story in Europe; *it was just in this context* that the mentioned *Treatise of Melancholy* by Bright (1586) was written. “*In English literature, the number of editions on Spiera's story is greater than the number of editions regarding Petrarch*” (Prof. John Tedeschi)².

4. Jane Gray's letter to Thomas Harding (1554) - reproduced by Michelangelo Florio in his *Historia on the life and death of Jane Gray* - in which Jane (Michelangelo Florio's favorite pupil, who had been sentenced to death by Maria Tudor, the Catholic, and who did not abjure her evangelical faith) warns Harding (her father's chaplain, who had abjured the Protestant faith to join Catholicism), not to abjure his evangelical faith: “*Remember what recently happened to Francesco Spiera, whose lamentable death should scare you*”. Her teacher, Michelangelo Florio (aware of the story, through the Italian exiles who fled to London *religionis causa*) must have particularly sensitized Jane on this shocking affair. Michelangelo, in Soglio, certainly also told John this tragic story. *Vergerio, in turn, told, without doubt, once again, with great emotion, this impressive story (of which he had been a direct witness), to John Florio*, who was student in Tübingen from 9 May 1563 to July / August 1566.

5. A brief comparison between Francesco Spiera's “*melancholy*” and Hamlet's “*melancholy*”. Spiera's story, in some respects “prodigious”, was the starting point for a multiplicity of varied and multiple comments and interpretations, anticipating, *obviously to a lesser extent*, some aspects of the endless debates on *Hamlet*'s drama.

- (i) Spiera's “*melancholy*” (in the story by Vergerio) and Hamlet's “*melancholy*” (end of Act II) are connected to a *demonic possession*.
- (ii) Spiera (in the story by Vergerio), because of melancholy, *does not eat and is sleepless*, similar to Hamlet (Act II, Scene ii, 147-151).
- (iii) *A lucid madness, in both cases*: Spiera (in the story by Vergerio and Gelous) in some moments, *reasons in a very lucid way, more lucid than when he was not sick* (“he had *happily ready* in his mind all the arguments of his defense”); even Hamlet provides *such lucid answers* that *not even a sane man could give birth* (“*pregnant ... replies ... a happiness*” - Act II, Scene ii, 205-211).
- (iv) The very *controversial and ambiguous* theme of the “*fiction*” of madness in Spiera and in Hamlet. Both Spiera and Hamlet, have a “*deseased wit*” (even a “*removed mind*” from God, as *punishment* for his abjuration, in the case of Spiera; also for Hamlet, it is a *punishment* - Act V, Scene ii, 225); both Spiera and Hamlet (Act III, Scene ii, 312-313, 328-331), *have no prospects of recovery!* Both meditate even suicide (Act III, Scene i, 75-76).

² John Tedeschi, *I contributi culturali dei riformatori protestanti italiani nel tardo rinascimento*, Italica, 1987, p. 37, in http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/478509?uid=3738296&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=2110684209539_3

(v) Vergerio states that the spectacle of Spiera's behavior has something *astonishing* and it is such "that, if you had seen it, you would have been enchanted, as we were"; it is a completely *unusual and extraordinary story*, from which Vergerio learned a lot! Also Hamlet's "behavior" raises "*amazement and admiration*" (Act III, Scene ii, 306-307); it is a feeling very difficult to be defined, but very similar to the "*enchantment*" of which Vergerio speaks, with regard to Spiera's behavior.

6. First conclusions.

These first conclusions consist, in reality, in a complex series of questions, in the light of the "*Floriana thesis*" by Santi Paladino (1955), according to which the works attributed to Shakespeare would have been written by John Florio, also benefiting from paternal teachings and materials:

- 1) Is it a mere coincidence that Vergerio (Michelangelo Florio's great friend and who was superintendent of John Florio's education, in Tübingen, from May 9th 1563 until his death, on May 4th 1565³) *was a direct witness* of Francesco Spiera's tragic story?
- 2) Is it a mere coincidence that this affair *had a fundamental importance in Vergerio's life*, who, after it, decided not to go to Rome to abjure, but to renounce the honors of his episcopal ministry, friends, possessions, homeland, preferring the *religionis causa* exile (it was the first Catholic bishop to go to the Reformation!)?
- 3) Is it a mere coincidence that Michelangelo Florio told this tragic story, *with particular emotion*, to his favorite pupil, *Lady Jane Gray*, Queen of England for 9 days?
- 4) Is it a mere coincidence that Jane Gray *pointed out to the apostate Thomas Harding*, "*Francesco Spiera's lamentable death*" in a famous letter she sent a few days before being beheaded (on February 12, 1554) in the Tower of London?
- 5) Is it a mere coincidence that this letter was reproduced, *translated into Italian*, by Michelangelo Florio, in *his History on Life and Death of Lady Jane Gray*?
- 6) Is it a mere coincidence that Michelangelo Florio, in Soglio, *had to tell, in great detail, to his son John*, this dramatic story?
- 7) Finally, last but not least, is it a mere coincidence that Vergerio himself (who, as mentioned, was *superintendent of John Florio's education*, in Tübingen, from 9 May 1563 until his death, on 4 May 1565) *had certainly the opportunity to personally tell John that terrible story, which had literally upset his life*?

³ Carla Rossi, *Italus ore, Anglus pectore, Studi su John Florio* (Vol.1), Thecla Academic Press Ltd. London, 4 June 2018, pp. 155 e 159.

Both the two Florios had to be really emotionally upset by this extraordinary dramatic story of which Vergerio had been a direct witness!

According to such a thesis, *Padua and the nearby Cittadella* (the places where Spiera's drama was consummated) should, from now on, be counted as *further Shakespearean Italian "loci"*! And, moreover, in Padua, even Michelangelo Florio preached with certainty, as he himself tells us in his *Apologia*, published in 1557 (p. 72 v and 73 v) and in his "*Historia De la vita e de la morte de l'ILLUSTRIS . Signora Giovanna Graia ...*" written in 1561/1562 and published in 1607 (pp.27-28).

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THE ENTIRE TEXT OF THE STUDY IS AVAILABLE IN ITALIAN

"La 'malinconia' di Francesco Spiera (descritta da Pier Paolo Vergerio) e la 'malinconia' di Amleto (Spunti per una ricerca)"

in www.shakespeareandflorio.net

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