



The Shakespeare Guide to Italy: retracing the Bard's unknown travels

by Richard Paul Roe

published by Harper/Perennial, USA, 2011, paperback, 309 pages,
with over 100 colour and b+w photos and engravings

Review by Jan Cole

This is a handsome publication with nineteen maps and many illustrations, including colour

photographs from the author's travels. It lacks an index, which is disappointing and may make its use by writers a little difficult, but it includes chapter notes and a long bibliography. Both literary detective story and travelogue, it will delight lovers of both Shakespeare and Italy. There is one small misprint when the date of the First Folio is given as 1626 instead of 1623.

Several orthodox scholars since the 1930s have suggested that an 'exhaustive knowledge' of Italy lay behind the plays. Roe's book, together with the work of Noemi Magri, shows that the evidence for the playwright's first-hand knowledge is not only considerable but, now, astonishing in its detail.

Roe set out, with only the play texts in hand, to determine the locations of the Italian set plays. He discovered them, and more – he discovered evidence that the playwright not only possessed knowledge of very exact terrain, but employed geographical, historical, political, architectural, literary, artistic and local information about these places in the texts. Roe has found precise locations that match apparently 'throw-away' lines in the plays, and shows that some settings (previously thought to be imaginary) do have a local habitation and a name. For example, he finds good reasons for believing that Prospero's island is Vulcano, a volcanic island off the northwest tip of Sicily. It possesses yellow sands, hot mud pools, springs, sulphurous and acrid smells, habitable caves, pines, naturally produced 'music' and all of the features of the play's magical island.

Roe enlightens the conflict between Leontes and Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale* with a detour on the history of political relations between Sicily and Bohemia in the medieval period. Roe traced the route taken by Cleomenes and Dion to the oracle at Delphi and their journey back to Sicily. He discovered that the temple 'much surpassing / The common praise it bears' [III.i] is the 5th-century BC Doric temple at Segesta on the western slope of Mount Barbaro, southwest of Palermo. It is visible from the road that the pair would have taken after arriving in Sicily. The ostensibly slight phrase 'the common praise it bears'

reveals its significance from the fact that the temple was first written about by Tommaso Fazello in a book published c.1570. The temple soon became a popular tourist destination for Italians and visiting foreigners. The playwright's phrase clearly indicates an awareness of contemporary opinion, if not of Fazello's book. Incidentally, at Segesta there is a large Greek amphitheatre set into a hill – interesting sight-seeing for an English Elizabethan playwright.

Benvolio's grove of sycamores in *Romeo and Juliet* lies on the western side of Verona, and its remnants remain there today. Roe points out that none of the supposed literary sources (Porta, Bandello, Boistreau and Painter) mentions a sycamore grove. Yet the playwright makes Benvolio give its precise location: 'the grove of sycamour / That westward rooteth from the City side' [I.i]. Roe also locates 'old Free-town, / our common judgement place' as the castle of Villafranca. Its huge, towering battlements survive. It was the home of Bartolomeo della Scala, whom the playwright Latinises as 'Prince Escalus'. Escalus demands that the elder Montague (Montecchio) go there, while ordering Capulet (Capuletti) to go along with him. Roe points out that, although the Prologue has stated that the two families are alike in dignity, they are treated differently by Prince Escalus. By showing his public violation of the feudal code, the playwright actualises the reason behind the families' ancient grudge.

Juliet's 14th-century house in the Via Capello is identified, though the balcony now to be seen on it was placed there in the 1930s. As Roe points out, there is no mention of a balcony in the play text; the word does not appear. Romeo leaps over an orchard wall (no longer extant) and sees Juliet not on a balcony but at a window [II.ii], doubtless a window on the first-floor *piano nobile* of an Italian Renaissance house. Reading this, I realised that the familiar 'balcony scene' must have originated in Elizabethan and later staging.

Friar Laurence's Franciscan monastery, with traces of its medieval cells, survives as San Francesco al Corso. Roe also tracks down St Peter's Church (mentioned three times in the text) as San Pietro Incarnario, now possessing a later Palladian façade. There were four churches in Verona dedicated to St

Peter but, by tracing Juliet's journey on foot from her house, Roe finds the church, in the Capulet's parish and directly on the path from Juliet's house to the monastery where she makes her confession to Friar Laurence. With the help of Roe's maps, one can see that the playwright either used a map of Verona when he wrote the play, or knew the city well from personal experience, or both.

Two chapters deal with the terrain in *Two Gentleman of Verona* (Oxfordian date ?1577-82). Orthodox scholars have assumed that the playwright didn't know what he was talking about and confused land journeys with sea journeys. Roe shows (with close reference to the text's diction) how the long journey from Verona to Milan was made by ship on the river Adigo via a canal linking with the river Po (which further west becomes the river Adda) and another canal connecting Cassano with Milan.

The latter canal allowed one to sail directly into the city. It was called Naviglio Martesana and was deepened and widened and given locks in 1573, an engineering marvel that brought visitors from far and wide. In 1928 the canal was filled in and the waters diverted outside the city walls, where they can still be seen.

Freshwater travel was reasonably safe, whereas land travel was precarious, a fact shown by Julia's devotion in proposing to make a pastime of each weary step (II.vii) on foot. Besides, one could carry baggage more easily and less expensively by boat. So good was the canal system that until 1958 Milan was classed as one of Italy's *Principali Porti Maritimi* - hardly a landlocked place. The tide and the flood that Panthino insists Launce might 'lose' refers to the infilling of water when the locks were raised and lowered. It's nothing to do with the sea or authorial error - and besides Launce says if the river were dry he'd be able to fill it with his tears (II.vii), making it clear the journey is by barge or boat on river and canal.

The second chapter on *TGV* includes a resolution of the apparent discord in the play text between an Emperor and a Duke (of Milan). The Emperor referred to was Charles V who entered Milan in 1533 to arrange a marriage between his niece (the 12-year-old Christina of Denmark) and the Duke (Ludovico Sforza). For the festive entry into the city, the Duke of Mantua (Federico Gonzaga) sent his court painter, Giulio Romano, to construct an elaborate triumphal arch. Charles V stayed for two days and then (ostensibly going hunting) defected to Genoa and took ship to Spain, never to return. All the city's decorations were taken down.

Roe suggests that the playwright referred to this embarrassing episode in Milanese history as a re-

minder to his audience that the Emperor's son, Philip II of Spain, was nursing a grudge against England for a) Henry VIII's treatment of Catherine of Aragon, b) the failure of his own marriage to Mary Tudor and c) Elizabeth's refusal of his marriage proposal to her.

In the play, the nameless Duke of Milan is not Sforza but a fictional duke. Thus Italian history is used to point up current English political concerns, and history and imagination come together for the sake of the play.

Roe also tracks down the play's meeting places, e.g. the rising of the mountain foot that leads toward Mantua (V.ii), the postern gate by the abbey wall and the forest or wilderness (IV, I; V.i) beyond. He concludes that the playwright 'knew exactly how the road went' and was 'personally familiar with the lay [*sic.*] of the land beyond the walls of Milan'.

Furthermore, Roe discovers and relates for us the tragic history behind Saint Gregory's Well and the plagues of 1575-77, which I leave the reader to consider, as it may throw light on Oxford's stated avoidance of Milan in his itinerary letter of March 1575. If he did enter the city (see Spinola's letter to Cecil of October 1575 saying he has gone from Milan to Venice), he was taking a health risk as well as a political one.

The Taming of the Shrew turns out to be a hidden 'Baedeker' to the towns of northern Italy and how 16th-century Italians travelled between them. Using the text, Italian language, city history, 16th and 18th-century maps, and first-hand experience of tracing the routes, Roe explains many features and crushes some orthodox 'chestnuts'. By "road" the playwright meant a landing-stage or wharf (which would directly connect with the road or street); the journey from Pisa to Padua was by land to Ostiglia on the river Po, then by canal to Legnano, then by river on the Adige and Brenta to Padua (the last part from Legnano to Padua could also be done on land). In Padua, Lucentio and Tranio jump out of their barge and suggest that if Biondello comes ashore they could at once prepare to take a lodging fit to entertain the friends they will make.

The little throwaway phrase immediately points to the fact that the lodging must be very close by. It was and it is - still there, just a few steps from the landing-place. A 13th-century map of Padua (p.103) shows it clearly, and an 18th-century map (p.105) shows it still marked as an *osteria* (Italian for hostelry or inn). He locates St Luke's Church (IV.iv) as present-day San Luca and even gives its address at 22 Via Venti Settembre, formerly Via San Luca.

When Gremio (the *pantalone*) boasts of his wealth he mentions an argosy. Tranio (servant to Lu-

centio) trumps this by saying his father has three great argosies, two galliases and twelve tight galleys. Roe elucidates. An argosy was a type of vessel owned by Ragusans from Sicily. Gremio and Tranio are both lying, of course, to boost their suit for Bianca, and Elizabethan audiences would have found this an amusing 'hit' at those bragging foreigners. Roe points out the playwright's knowledge of Italian banking practices and that *mercantant* is not just any 'merchant' but a 'foreign trader' (*marcantante* in Italian).

Many topographical and cultural details that Roe finds in *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* will be familiar to Oxfordians from Noemi Magri's scholarship, so I will not say more about them here.

The setting for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears to be Sabbioneta, about twenty-five miles from Mantua, where Vespasio Gonzaga Colonna, the first Duke of Mantua, had a palace which still retains some of its original appearance.



Theatre, Sabbioneta

Roe traces the giveaway details in the text, discovering that the nickname for Sabbioneta was, and is, *Piccolo Atena* (Little Athens). The playwright, it seems, had a cunning sense of humour. Moreover, he was able to combine contemporary Italian topography and history with Greek nomenclature, and combine Greek pastoral tradition with English folklore, and mix them both together to produce this quintessential comedy/fantasy. Well, of course he was.

For years orthodox Shakespeare scholars have put their collective feet in their mouths by suggesting that the world's greatest dramatist sometimes didn't know what he was talking about. Roe proves that they have failed to research adequately on text, sub-text and context, and have simply leapt to conclusions.

My first thought on closing this exciting book was: how remarkable that the Italian plays - evidently written with intimate knowledge - were nevertheless performed in London on a minimal stage, or at court, with just a few exits and entrances. Why would the playwright go to such extraordinary lengths to include hundreds of intricate geographical and cultural details in the text? One reason may be that the creative impulse for these plays originated not solely in books, but in memories gathered from actual experience. My second thought was that, wherever the spirit of truth resides, the late Noemi Magri and the late Richard Roe are enjoying an infinitely rewarding conversation over an infinitely refreshing glass of Italian wine...

J.C.

LETTERS



Letter from Richard Malim to the *Daily Telegraph* (unpublished)

Sir,

I was amused at the puzzlement of Sir Patrick Stewart at William Shakespeare's enclosure and eviction from his lands of his poor tenants contrasted with King Lear's sympathy for his poor subjects. Likewise he might wonder how he allowed his two daughters to be virtual illiterates instead of teaching them to be Cordelias, or any of the other full blooded female characters the playwright created.

To anybody other than literary critics and (a declining number of) actors, logic and common sense tells that the difference in attitudes inside one person is irreconcilable.

Richard Malim

Letter from Robert Detobel

Dear Lizzie,

I've received the DVS newsletter. Below some remarks.

Jan Cole. "Edward de Vere in France"

1) It is probably known that Robert Greene's *A Card of Fancy*, dedicated to Oxford, contains an appendix, 'The debate between Love and Folly', which is a translation of Louise Labé's (though likely to be a fictitious author as Mireille Huchon has shown) *Débat entre Amour et Folie*.

2) Probably much less known is that Oxford's poem 'Love is a Discord' (also published within Greene's *Menaphon* but attributed to the Earl of Oxford in *England's Parnassus*) is a free translation of a poem by the French court poet Mellin de Saint-Gelais mentioned on page 9, column 2, par. 4. Here is the original French poem with (in bold) a rough translation by me, while alongside is Oxford's free translation (in my view superior to the original).

What is more, however, lines I.i.188-193 of *Romeo and Juliet* are a continuation of 'Love is a Discord' (these lines are also quoted in italic font). The lines read like another stanza of that poem.

Best Regards
Robert

The poems are printed opposite.

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