

Italian Culture in the Drama of Shakespeare & his Contemporaries

Rewriting, Remaking, Refashioning

Edited by
MICHELE MARRAPODI
University of Palermo, Italy

ASHGATE

Chapter 7

'At the cubiculo': Shakespeare's Problems with Italian Language and Culture

Keir Elam

Some time in the 1580's William Shakespeare, as is well known, left Stratford for London. What is probably less well known is that in roughly the same period, during the eighties or early nineties, he left England altogether to visit Italy. He toured all the great cultural centres of the north, especially Milan and Lombardy, and conversed freely, in English, with the great Renaissance Italian authors, notably Guazzo and Castiglione, even though the latter was long dead and even though neither spoke the English tongue. He returned to Italy on several later occasions, indeed whenever his fancy took him, and then, towards the turn of the century, decided finally to immerse himself in the Italian language and its rich vocabulary, which enabled him to make the acquaintance of many other famous and deceased authors, from Ariosto to Guarini.

Some scholars will be sceptical about this claim, but the evidence for Shakespeare's grand tour of Italy is in the plays, especially the comedies, which bear countless traces of the dramatist's journeys. Take, for example, the opening of *The Taming of the Shrew*, with its clearly autobiographical account of a stranger's sojourn in Padua. The newly arrived Lucentio announces to his servant:

Tranio, since for the great desire I had
To see fair Padua, nursery of arts,
I am arrived for fruitful Lombardy,
The pleasant garden of great Italy ...
Here let us breathe, and haply institute
A course of learning and ingenious studies. (1.1.1-9¹)

Now it might be objected that this passage betrays, in reality, Shakespeare's *lack* of direct geographical knowledge of northern Italy, because if Lucentio finds himself, as he says, in 'fair Padua', then he has not arrived, as he believes, in 'fruitful Lombardy', since Padua was and still is in Veneto. Which in turn suggests that Shakespeare never actually came to or saw, let alone conquered, this country. But the term 'Lombardy' was a more inclusive entity in Shakespeare's day than in Umberto Bossi's day, so much so that Ortelius's map of Italy in the *Theatrum Orbis* has "Lombardy" written

¹ *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Brian Morris. The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1981).

Elizabethans a vehicle for discovering Italy, its language and its Renaissance culture without necessarily travelling to the continent'.⁴

Of course the Florio-Shakespeare connection has been long and well known, at least since the 1920's when Italian or perhaps Sicilian nationalism gave rise to the theory that Shakespeare was actually Florio's father, Michael Angelo Florio, born in Messina to Giovanni Florio and Guglielma Crollalanza, and who, on fleeing to England from religious persecution, anglicized his mother's maiden name: Crollalanza, Shake-spear. One version of the theory, advanced in 1955 by Santi Paladino in his *Un italiano autore delle opere shakespeariane*,⁵ has John Florio helping his father Shakespeare-Crollalanza with the English language – rather than the Italian language – in composing his plays. Other somewhat unlikely forms of supposed cultural mediation by Florio have been hypothesized, as in Frances Yates's theory that the Anglo-Italian writer acted as intermediary between the Bard and Giordano Bruno and his neoplatonic hermeticism, in his spare time from working as a spy for Sir Francis Walsingham.⁶ What is certain is that the two writers shared the same patrons in the earls of Southampton and Pembroke, and so very probably knew each other.

We have also long been aware of Florio's mediating influence on Elizabethan 'civility' as teacher and fashioner of gentlemen authors such as John Lyly and Fulke Greville, and later as reader in Italian and private secretary to Queen Anne, and of course as the great translator of Montaigne (Shakespeare notoriously quotes Florio's Montaigne in *The Tempest*) but also of Italian authors such as Ramusio, Traiano Boccalini and probably Boccaccio. What I think has been underestimated, however – except by Mario Praz in his seminal 1954 essay 'Shakespeare's Italy' – is Florio's central role not only as the dramatist's primary Anglo-Italian intertext, through his pedagogical dialogues and through his monumental dictionaries, but also as a crucial transmitter of Italian cultural modes and models.

The first of these modes or models is the 'civilized' dialogue form itself. Florio borrows not only many sayings, but also and above all the courteous conversational

⁴ Desmond O'Connor, 'John Florio', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Vol. 20, 165–8, p. 167; see also Desmond O'Connor, *A History of Italian and English bilingual Dictionaries* (Florence: Olschki 1990); Giordano Orsini, *L'Inghilterra di Shakespeare descritta da G. Florio* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1932); Silvio Policardi, *John Florio e le relazioni culturali fra l'Inghilterra e l'Italia nel XVI secolo* (Venezia: Montuoso 1947); D. T. Starnes, 'Bilingual dictionaries of Shakespeare's day', *PMLA*, 52 (1937), 1005–18; Giuliano Pellegrini, 'Le regole della lingua toscana di Michelangelo Florio', *Studi di Filologia Italiana*, 12 (1954), 77–184; John Florio reconsidered', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 6 (1965), 407–22; Carlo Maria Fransero, *John Florio a Londra ai tempi di Shakespeare* (Parma: Guanda, 1969); Sergio Rossi, *Ricerche sull'umanesimo e sul rinascimento in Inghilterra* (Milano: Società Editrice Vita e Pensiero 1969); Spartaco Gamberini, *Lo studio dell'italiano in Inghilterra nel '500 e nel '600* (Messina-Firenze: D'Anna, 1970).

⁵ Santi Paladino, *Un italiano autore delle opere shakespeariane* (Milano, 1955).

⁶ Frances A. Yates, *John Florio: the Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934).

⁷ Mario Praz, 'Shakespeare's Italy', *Shakespeare Survey* 7 (1954), 95–106.

exchange as a mode of imparting know
Guazzo, both of whom he cites as sour
Second Fruits:

how naturally the Italians please themsel
(which when they themselves are out of It
learnt a little Italian out of Castilians cour
or forget or neglect to speake bookish) (A

Florio's *Fruits* represent Castiglione-
Anglo-Italian gentlemen on all possible
primary purpose of teaching the Italian la
rather than grammar. This entails bringi
especially proverbs – those highly priz
oral as well as prestigious literary wisdo
textual discourse – as a means of initiati
into the Italian mentality.

This dialogic approach to the teach
substantial distinction between know
of behavioural modes or *civiltà*. The
epistemological vehicle is best exp
Magnacavalli's eloquent defence of *con*
The civile conversation:

neither can a learned man assure himsel
men, and by discoursing and reasonin
Whereby it seemeth to me verie cleer
knowledge.⁸

Behind this Italian, and later Anglo-It
its extended sense lay a renewed faith
and cultural centrality of the spoken w
Magnacavalli, 'That a man, being a
conuersation of other men, and doing t
Not by chance, Castiglione depicts his
ideal *discursive* city or, as it were, c
never so tasted in other place, what m
is occasioned of an amyable and louy
Aiii').

There is no contradiction in the fa
thus in theory 'oral' – cultural model
through texts. In the first place Casti
idealized fictions representing verbal

⁸ Stefano Guazzo, *The Civile Con*
(London, 1581), 14^r.

⁹ Guazzo, Aiv^r

exchange as a mode of imparting knowledge and civility, from Castiglione and Guazzo, both of whom he cites as sources in his Epistle Dedicatory to *Florio's Second Fruits*:

how naturally the Italians please themselves with such materyall, short and witty speches (which when they themselves are out of Italy and amongst strangers, who think they haue learnt a little Italian out of Castilions courtier, or Guazzo his dialogues, they will endeour or forget or neglect to speake bookish) (A3v).

Florio's *Fruits* represent Castiglione- or Guazzo-like dialogues between learned Anglo-Italian gentlemen on all possible topics of contemporary life, which have the primary purpose of teaching the Italian language, but in the form of Italian discourse rather than grammar. This entails bringing together idioms, modes of address, and especially proverbs – those highly prized rhetorical arms that distilled traditional oral as well as prestigious literary wisdom, the *vox populi* but also highly cultivated textual discourse – as a means of initiation not only into Italian phraseology but also into the Italian mentality.

This dialogic approach to the teaching of language and culture abolishes any substantial distinction between knowledge of linguistic forms and knowledge of behavioural modes or *civiltà*. The notion of the dialogue as a privileged epistemological vehicle is best expressed by Guazzo himself, in Annibale Magnacavalli's eloquent defence of *conversazione* as the main road to knowledge in *The civile conversation*:

neither can a learned man assure himselfe of his learning, until he meet with other learned men, and by discoursing and reasoning with them bee accertained of his sufficiencie. Whereby it seemeth to me verie cleere, that Conuersation is the beginning and end of knowledge.⁸

Behind this Italian, and later Anglo-Italian, humanistic belief in *conversazione* in its extended sense lay a renewed faith – in part inspired by Plato – in the vitality and cultural centrality of the spoken word: the conviction, in the words of Guazzo's Magnacavalli, 'That a man, being a compaignable creature, loueth naturallie the conuersation of other men, and doing the contrarie, he dothe offend Nature herselfe'.⁹ Not by chance, Castiglione depicts his nostalgically recalled Urbino primarily as an ideal *discursive* city or, as it were, conversational utopia: 'And I beleave it was never so tasted in other place, what maner a thyng the sweete conuersatyon is that is occasioned of an amyable and louynge companye, as it was once there' (Book I, Aiii').

There is no contradiction in the fact that this dialogical or conversational – and thus in theory 'oral' – cultural model should have been entrusted to and transmitted through texts. In the first place Castiglione's and Guazzo's dialogues are of course idealized fictions representing verbal exchange as a pedagogical and cognitive force

⁸ Stefano Guazzo, *The Civile Conversation of M. Steeven Guazzo*, tr. George Pettie (London, 1581), 14.

⁹ Guazzo, Aiv.

rather than as a mere transcription of a past speech event. Moreover, the reception of texts – including Castiglione's and Guazzo's own texts – is itself a conversational phenomenon, in the sense that the formation of the courtier or gentleman requires that he be literally *conversant* with ancient and modern letters, i.e. that he engages actively or dialogically with their discourse: in the words of Castiglione's Count Lewis of Canossa:

in letters I will haue [oure Courtier] to bee more then indyfferentlye well seene. at the leaste in those studyes. which they call *Humanitie* [...] Let him much exercise hym selfe in poets. and no lesse in Oratours and Historiographers. and also in writinge bothe rime and prose, and especiallye in this our vulgar tunge.¹⁰

Translated, some decades later, into the cultural context of Elizabethan England, this notion of an active dialogue with formative texts becomes, in the theory and practice of Florio, the educational and 'civilizing' value of conversing – i.e. being fully conversant – with Italian letters and thence with the Italian language. The formative importance of Italian *conversazione* is underlined in another early Shakespearean comedy. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Panthino advises his master Antonio to send his son Proteus to the Duke's court in Milan – fruitful Lombardy again – in order to fashion him through full immersion in polite conversational exchange:

'Twere good, I think, your lordship sent him thither.
There shall he practise tilts and tournaments.
Hear sweet discourse, converse with noblemen
And be in eye of every exercise
Worthy his youth and nobleness of birth (1.3.29–33)¹¹

How Proteus actually behaves in Milan under the influence of such discursive delicacies is another matter: his moral waywardness is a less appealing aspect of the 'Italian' behavioural model, just as the disguises, deceptions, and verbal excesses on display in *The Shrew* do not necessarily make up a flattering depiction of 'Lombardian' civility.

The Italian discursive heritage of Renaissance England, therefore, represents a passing on not only of literary forms, narrative or poetic *topoi* and rhetorical strategies but of dialogical and dialectical modes of thought. What takes place between the two cultures, thanks in good measure to Florio's intermediary role, is a dialogue between dialogues. At a distance in space and time English culture renews and re-invents the dialogism of Italian culture through a process that according to Bakhtin is synonymous with cultural history itself:

The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, and they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present

¹⁰ Baldassare Castiglione [1518], *The Courtier of Count Baldessar Castilio*, tr. Thomas Hoby (London, 1561), Book I. Hiii^v–Hiv^r.

¹¹ *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William C. Carroll, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 2004).

moment of the dialogue there are great moments recalled again at a given moment in the life.¹²

At the heart of 'civilized' modern culture and as a means of persuasion, and it is this endeavour to embody. In *The Shrew* Shakespeare Italianate conversational mode as a direct Lucentio has gone to learn in Padua, now and his servant Tranio can discourse civil logic, rhetoric, Ovid's poetry, Aristotelian topics such as food and drink, precisely because conversational space known as Lombardy and Guazzo). Their dialogue itself – like – embodies a recognizably Italian model.

Except that in Shakespearean comedy, the model comes adrift. What distinguishes Florio's comic crops is that in the plays Italianate roughness. The induction of *The Shrew* between Christopher Sly's world of rough world of Paduan humanistic arts. But even be other than the promised world of civil Verona to stage a carnivalesque overturn courtship.

Indeed, a great deal of the comic energy from the grotesque failure to assimilate language itself, and the primary victim of John Florio', as he signed himself. Florio's discourse and on Shakespeare's imaginative great dictionaries, which the dramatist de Florio's choice of title for the 1598 first and strategic, since the dictionary, was precisely to be a totalizing world in its representation of Italian cultural and Florio quotes Pliny's anecdote about a mother of her child: 'So she cal'd him, A world of all things, digested in best equipaged order by the vniversall creator' (p. 17). Florio's universe of discourse in which the whole in accordance with the author's version of a direct and motivated resemblance to things to represent things of the world: as would himselfe a little world in some resemblance

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Estetik*, Moscow, (second edition) (London: Routledge, 2002).

moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life.¹²

At the heart of 'civilized' modern culture lay the dialogue itself as a mode of thought and as a means of persuasion, and it is this, as much as Italian idioms, that Florio endeavours to embody. In *The Shrew* Shakespeare in turn appropriates the courteous Italianate conversational mode as a direct representation of the very *civitas* that Lucentio has gone to learn in Padua, nursery of the arts. In other words, Lucentio and his servant Tranio can discourse civilly and knowledgeably on such matters as logic, rhetoric, Ovid's poetry, Aristotelian ethics, as well as more material 'Florian' topics such as food and drink, precisely because they find themselves in that civilized conversational space known as Lombardy (precisely the Lombardy of Castiglione and Guazzo). Their dialogue itself – like the comedy's Ariostean secondary plot – embodies a recognizably Italian model.

Except that in Shakespearean comedy, unlike Florian dialogue, the conversational model comes adrift. What distinguishes Florio's courteous 'fruits' from Shakespeare's comic crops is that in the plays Italianate civility is tempered by good old English roughness. The induction of *The Shrew* reminds us of the unbreachable distance between Christopher Sly's world of rough-hewn hempen Englishness and the fictional world of Paduan humanistic arts. But even Padua, on closer inspection, turns out to be other than the promised world of civilized *cortesía* when Petruccio arrives from Verona to stage a carnivalesque overturning of Castiglione in his farcical parody of courtship.

Indeed, a great deal of the comic energy in Shakespeare's plays derives precisely from the grotesque failure to assimilate Italianate culture as well as the Italian language itself, and the primary victim of this farcical debacle is precisely 'resolute John Florio', as he signed himself. Florio's most powerful impact on Shakespearean discourse and on Shakespeare's imagination was undoubtedly exercised through his great dictionaries, which the dramatist demonstrably turns to on numerous occasions. Florio's choice of title for the 1598 first edition, *A World of Words* is ambitious and strategic, since the dictionary, with its 44,000 Italian entries, is designed precisely to be a totalizing world in itself or, as it were, a world of difference in its representation of Italian cultural and lexical otherness. In his epistle dedicatory, Florio quotes Pliny's anecdote about a mother choosing a name befitting the nature of her child: 'So she cal'd him, A worlde of wordes: since as the Vnivers contains all things, digested in best equipaged order, embellisht with innumerable ornaments by the vniversall creator' (p. 17). Florio is the creator of his own world of words or universe of discourse in which the whole of Italian culture is magically 'digested', in accordance with the author's version of the Platonic theory of the sign as bearing a direct and motivated resemblance to the referent: I intend, he affirms, 'in words to represent things of the world: as words are types of things, and euerie man by himselfe a little world in some resemblance'. His created world of motivated and

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Estetik*, Moscow, 1979, quoted in Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (second edition) (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 39.

magical Italian words is also a digestion or distillation of the best of Italian literature, to which it is intended as a guide, being addressed, among others, 'to well-forward students, that haue turned ouer *Guazzo* and *Castiglione*, yea runne through *Guarini*, *Ariosto*, *Boccace*, and *Petrarche*' (p. 10). In the second, 1611, edition, Florio lists all the dozens of authors, from Aretino to Sannazzaro, from whose work he mined his vocabulary.

In another of his comedies, Shakespeare seems to take seriously, if not literally, Florio's claims regarding the all-inclusiveness of his world of words. The language of *Twelfth Night* is veritably steeped in the vocabulary of the dictionary, beginning with the names of the Dramatis Personae, which look like an abbreviated and somewhat deformed version of Florio's lexicon, with its Festa, Malevolo, Oliva, Orsino, Viola, etc. Shakespeare's nominal Illyria looks suspiciously like Florio's lexical Italia.

Terms from the dictionary appear throughout, but especially in the play's more intensely farcical moments, as in Sir Toby's attempts to get Sir Andrew to dance, urging him to 'come home in a coranto' (1.3.117¹³), or his more successful attempts to frighten Aguecheek regarding Cesario's fencing prowess in 3.4, the scene of the aborted duello, which represents a veritable Florian feast. Sir Toby turns to Florio's Dictionary in order to petrify his reluctant fencer with the technical niceties and sinister behavioural sophistication of prestigious Italianate terms:

That defence thou hast, betake thee to't. Of what nature the wrongs are thou hast done him, I know not, but thy interceptor, full of despite, bloody as the hunter, attends thee at the orchard end. . . . Why, man, he's a very devil. I have not seen such a firago. I had a pass with him, rapier, scabbard and all, and he gives me the stuck in with such a mortal motion that it is inevitable. . . . Come, Sir Andrew, there's no remedy. The gentleman will for his honour's sake have one bout with you; he cannot by the duello avoid it. (3.4.199-279)

This masterpiece of linguistic terrorism sets up a series of precise intertextual, or more properly, to adopt Cesare Segre's term, interdiscursive relations, namely that domain of intertextuality regarding the exchange of modes, genres, topics or fragments of discourse, beyond the bounds of immediate derivation or citation.¹⁴ This is a highly suggestive category, because it opens up the study of intertexts not only to the circulation of cultural energy, to paraphrase Stephen Greenblatt. More particularly, the rapport between Shakespearean comedy and Florio's dictionary regards what we might term interlexical relations. Interlexicality can be defined as a form of micro-intertextuality where a dialogic relationship is set up within a single word, due to competing meanings or competing cultural connotations deriving from two languages and two texts that engage with each other within the space of a given lexical item, allowing it to participate in that endless dialogism that for Bakhtin constitutes both language and cultural history itself: 'Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom. . . . The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape,

¹³ Line numbers refer to the forthcoming Arden Shakespeare edition of *Twelfth Night* (Third Series), ed. Keir Elam.

¹⁴ See Cesare Segre, *Teatro e romanzo: Due tipi di comunicazione letteraria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984), p. 111.

is dialogized *heteroglossia*, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accentuated as an individual utterance."¹⁵

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare dialogues not only with Florio's Italian lemmas but also with his English definitions, a reminder of the fact that the Anglo-Italian lexicographer contributed considerably, thanks to his creative neologistic verve, to the enrichment of early modern English vocabulary. The term 'interceptor', for example, which Florio introduced into the language, is an Englishing of 'intercettore', otherwise defined as 'preuenter' or 'forestaller', implying the precocious death awaiting poor Sir Andrew. 'Firago', Sir Toby's expressive deformation of 'virago' (suggesting fire or fierceness), comes dangerously close to unmasking Cesario as the cross-dressed Viola: see Florio's definition 'a manly or mankind woman'.

But the real point of the exercise is that Sir Toby is able to mystify and petrify the aspiring aristocrat Aguecheek precisely because of the latter's undiluted inability to adapt his strictly anglophone tongue and ear to the mysteries of the Italian language, just as he is unable to adapt his awkward English (or perhaps Scottish) body to gentlemanly Italianate arts such as fencing or dancing. Indeed, Sir Andrew's gauche and incompetent body is a favourite object of Toby's interlexical borrowings from Florio's Italian, as when, in another grotesque verbal deformation, he falsely claims that the knight 'plays o'th' viol-de-gamboys', with an emphasis on *boys*, perhaps hinting at homosexuality. Perhaps the most exhilarating moment in the abusing of Sir Andrew and his body is Sir Toby's promise or threat to visit him later in his chamber: 'We'll call thee at the cubiculo. Go' (3.2.45). The joke is, of course, that while Aguecheek is sublimely innocent of where his cubiculo might be located, the more erudite members of the audience knew well and possibly detected a pun on another of Florio's Italian lemmas, *culo* (as in *cubi-culo*), which he defines as 'the arse, taile, fundament or bum'. Sir Andrew is to be called or visited at his fundament, with evident further sexual innuendo.

In *Twelfth Night*, therefore, the relationship between Shakespeare and Florio is one of linguistic and cultural indebtedness but of dramaturgic irreverence. If Florio upholds the acquisition of Italian language and culture as the key to social accomplishment – 'Well to know Italian is a grace of all graces, without exception, which I ever exemplify in her gracious Highness'¹⁶ – Shakespeare makes rich comic capital out of the opposite phenomenon, namely the graceless monolingualistic and monocultural obduracy of the English. One is reminded of the ineffable scorn of Portia in another comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, towards her aristocratic English suitor:

NERISSA What say you then to Falconbridge, the young baron of England?

PORTIA You know I say nothing to him, for he understands not me, nor I him: he hath neither Latin, French, nor Italian, and you will come into the court and swear that I have a

¹⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, quoted in Michael Holquist, p. 39.

¹⁶ John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words, or Dictionarie of the Italian and English Tongues* (London 1611), p. 17.

