

Shakespeare's Italy

Functions of Italian locations
in Renaissance drama

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Shakespeare's Italians*

Harry Levin

A question that addresses our subject was posed – in strikingly melodramatic *chiaroscuro* – by an Englishwoman living in Florence, Violet Paget, who wrote a cultivated, opinionated and prolific series of articles and books under the pseudonym Vernon Lee. Her essay, 'The Italy of the Elizabethan dramatists', appears in a volume dedicated to her aesthetic mentor, Walter Pater, under the Faustian title, *Euphorion*. There, while duly acknowledging Italian arts and culture as the source of so much that went on to develop in England and the rest of Europe, she dwelt more heavily and obsessively upon 'the monstrous immorality of the Italian Renaissance'. She expressed surprise that the infamous careers of Sigismondo Malatesta, Lodovico Sforza and Cesare Borgia had prompted no echo among the pastorals and classical exercises of Italian Renaissance drama. On the other hand, she argued, the impact of those villainies had been incisively registered in the plays of John Webster, John Marston, Cyril Tourneur, Thomas Middleton and John Ford. Incidentally, these were Jacobean playwrights (the last one Caroline), and Stuart England had scandals enough of its own. Nor – to cite a single Tudor figure – could Henry VIII be held up as a model of domestic or political innocence. Moreover, it would not be difficult to note some resemblances between the biography of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the scenario of *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Yet Vernon Lee could persist with her paradox: 'And the nation which was chaste and true wrote tales of incest and treachery, while the nation which was foul and false wrote poetry of shepherds and

*This essay is based on a lecture presented at the Villa I Tatti (the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies) in Florence on 7 December 1989. Textual references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. B. Evans *et al.*, Boston, 1974. The reference to Ben Jonson is from The Revels Plays edition of *Volpone* by R. B. Parker, Manchester, 1983.

knights-errant.' Leaving aside this somewhat Podsnappian view of the British so steeped in virtue that they had to import their vice at second hand, there is more to be said on the Italian side of the paradox. Indeed it had already been said by the Jacobean voyager, Fynes Moryson: 'their plays were of Amorous matters, Neuer of historyes, much less of tragedies, which the Italyans nature too much affects to imitate and surpasses.' When nature surpasses art, what need of imitation? The observation seems to have some grounding in cultural history, despite its undertone of blimpish suspicion toward foreigners. After all, the Elizabethans reserved their deepest scorn for their own compatriots who had been corrupted by travel abroad, and this attitude could best be summed up in their Italianized proverb: '*Inglese italianato è un diavolo incarnato*'. The demoralisation of Shakespeare's Richard II, in the opinion of his ducal uncles, had been adversely influenced by

Report of fashions in proud Italy,
Whose manners still our tardy, apish nation
Limps after in base imitation. (II.i.21-3)

Yet, with the widespread vogue of Italian literature among Shakespeare's contemporaries, few works were esteemed so highly or taken so seriously – whether in the original or in Sir Thomas Hoby's translation – as Castiglione's guide to good behaviour, *Il cortegiano*. The object lesson of the incarnate devil might well be offset, in the long run, by the idealized model of the perfect courtier.

When Ben Jonson's Volpone is visited by an English blue-stocking, Lady Would-Be, he tries to fend her off by quoting some poet or other on feminine modesty. Her response is instantaneous and overwhelming:

Which o' your poets? Petrarch? or Tasso? or Dante?
Guarini? Ariosto? Aretine?
Cieco di Hadria? I have read them all. (III.iv.79-81)

It will be recalled that Gonzago's murder, the story of Hamlet's play-within-the-play, was originally 'written in very choice Italian' (III. ii. 263). Academic drama had furnished some helpful precedents and patterns, filtered from the Italian courts through the English Inns of Court, those legal societies which engaged in dramatics: particularly those criteria which distinguished tragedy from comedy, and – most important – *versi sciolti*, which inspired blank verse. But the sensibili-

ties of the Cinquecento, as Francesco De Sanctis intended toward the idyllic and the romantic. The importer of intrigue would not have needed to depict plots. We could think of Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris*, French tragedies, of that perennial favourite, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, of Middleton's major tragedy, *The Changeling*, set in Spain, through such Shakespearean characters as Armado – the very name does battle in *Love's Labour's Lost* – the bastard Don John, so ineffectual a malcontent in *Nothing*. Nor were indigenous crimes to be neglected: *Feversham*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, and a long list of other dramas.

Vernon Lee's simplistic views would be questioned by Mario Praz, whose critical eye was especially sensitive to the manifestations of the sensual, the sinister and the grotesque. It is worth noting that, when he uncovered such elements in the Victorian period, the arresting title of his book, *Il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, was neutralized by its translator into *The Romantic Agony*. Now it should be said in all fairness, that Shakespeare had been exempted from such generalisations. Thus all too often he has been put to the test himself, and thereby rendered unapproachable, with the question 'He was not less but more responsive to the currents of his age; and if his achievements turned out to be humane, he had achieved them by using the same techniques that they did, and can be most fully understood in the conditions they shared. He himself recognised the directions referred to certain stock characters in *Il Pantaloon*, *Pedant* and *Braggart* – types, if not so rarely, scarcely been novel with Aristophanes and were the *commedia dell'arte*.

Admittedly, as we are told in *The Taming of the Shrew* to outdo 'an old Italian fox' in craftiness (I. i. 403). *and the Fox* Wyndham-Lewis went so far as to trace the pattern throughout Shakespeare's works. This was a frequent procedure for Lewis. Yet it was an English monarch, Richard III, who – while Duke of Gloucester – had vowed to 'set the murderous Machevil to s

ties of the Cinquecento, as Francesco De Sanctis would confirm, tended toward the idyllic and the romantic. Actually a foreign importer of intrigue would not have needed to depend on Italy for his plots. We could think of Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris* or Chapman's French tragedies, of that perennial favourite, Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, or of Middleton's major tragedy, *The Changeling*, set at Alicante, not far from Gibraltar. Xenophobia could be focused upon the national enemy, Spain, through such Shakespearean characters as the fantastical Don Armado – the very name does battle in *Love's Labour's Lost* – or the bastard Don John, so ineffectual a malcontent in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Nor were indigenous crimes to be neglected: witness *Arden of Feversham*, *The Yorkshire Tragedy*, and a long line of gory domestic dramas.

Vernon Lee's simplistic views would be questioned – notably by Mario Praz, whose critical eye was especially sensitive to literary manifestations of the sensual, the sinister and the macabre. Perhaps it is worth noting that, when he uncovered such elements even in the Victorian period, the arresting title of his book, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, was neutralised by its English translator into *The Romantic Agony*. Now it should be acknowledged, in all fairness, that Shakespeare had been exempted from Vernon Lee's generalisations. Thus all too often he has been placed in a class by himself, and thereby rendered unapproachable, while 'others abide our question'. He was not less but more responsive than others to the currents of his age; and if his achievements turned out to be uniquely humane, he had achieved them by using the same materials and techniques that they did, and can be most fully understood in the light of conditions they shared. He himself recognised that he had been drawing upon the standard traditions of comedy when his stage directions referred to certain stock characters not by name but as Pantaloon, Pedant and Braggart – types, if not stereotypes, that had scarcely been novel with Aristophanes and were currently animating the *commedia dell'arte*.

Admittedly, as we are told in *The Taming of the Shrew*, it is hard to outdo 'an old Italian fox' in craftiness (I. i. 403). In his book *The Lion and the Fox* Wyndham-Lewis went so far as to trace a Machiavellian pattern throughout Shakespeare's works. This was going too far – a frequent procedure for Lewis. Yet it was an English Shakespearean monarch, Richard III, who – while Duke of Gloucester in *3 Henry VI* – had vowed to 'set the murtherous Machevil to school', to give a few

lessons in villainy to Machiavelli himself (III. ii. 193). It should be conceded that *Cymbeline* – Shakespeare's belated, long-drawn-out and overly conventionalised romance – does indeed present a stereotypic contrast between the ingenuous natives of Roman Britain, with side-trips to an even more primitive Wales, and 'that drug-damn'd Italy', damned not for opium or crack but for its aura of potions and poisons (III. iv. 15); and it is thence that the villain must be recruited, 'some jay of Italy' (III. iv. 49). He is the Duke of Siena's brother, Jachimo, who, in fulfilment of a cosmopolitan wager invidiously comparing English-women with 'the shes of Italy', seeks to seduce the Britannic heroine, Imogen (I. iii. 29). When he fails and fakes the evidence, he is caught and denounced as 'Italian fiend' by her husband, Posthumus, and as 'slight thing of Italy' by a masque of ancestral ghosts (V. v. 210; V. iv. 54). Handily he confesses his guilt, but with an innuendo touching British intelligence: 'mine Italian brain / Gan in your duller Britain operate / Most vilely' (V. v. 196–8). Even while admitting the moral impeachment, he still takes for granted an intellectual superiority.

Speaking in *Othello* from pretty much the same viewpoint, Iago says: 'I know our country disposition well' (III. iii. 201). Iago too has been in England, where he seems to have picked up his drinking songs; it was the right place, since its country disposition is more 'potent in potting' than that of the Danes, the Germans, the Hollanders, or other hard-drinking nationalities (II. iii. 77). Shakespeare did not spare the satire in dealing with his fellow countrymen. When Portia jests about her international bevy of suitors, putting each of them down with an ethnic remark, the English baron is dumb, since he has no languages; nor has he any style, since he mixes up his garments as well as his manners. But, although Shakespeare could easily spin off such caricatures, his fundamental concern was with human beings. As consummate master of the English language, he was much interested in other languages. He even invented one, to bedazzle his cast of characters in *All's Well that Ends Well*: '*Oscorbidulchos volivorco*' (IV. i. 79). Though that is not intended to have any meaning, it sounds impressive. He knew French well enough to have some fun with it, even to risk some ribald puns in *Henry V*, where he goes on to differentiate between Anglo-Welsh, Anglo-Scottish, and Anglo-Irish dialects. He cannot have known much Italian, but he seems to have made use of a few untranslated sources: specifically, the old play *Gl'Ingannati* for *Twelfth Night* and a *novella* by Giraldi Cinthio for *Othello* – which also confirmed him in using modern rather than mythological subject-matter.

The dialogue of *The Taming of the Shrew* is sprinkled here and there with Italian words and phrases which might well have been acquired from a Renaissance handbook: *ben trovato, mi perdonato, basta*. Whether the braggart ensign Pistol is speaking in *Henry IV* – or is he looking forward to Esperanto – himself with the maxim: '*Si fortune me tormente*' (IV. iv. 181ff.). In any case, the meaning is all too obvious. Italian is usually more or less appropriate, and sometimes necessary. Benvolio is clearly a man of good will, just as Montano is a man of good will. Servants tend to be indelibly anglicised; even Brighella and Arlecchino, they are named Potpan and Oatcake and Susan Grindstone. Prince Escalus is a representative of the Scala family presiding over Verona. Freetown, an anglophone version of Villafranca, is the site of his first theatrical hit with *Every Man in His Humour*, which was first performed in Florence and its cast was Italian. Revising the setting, Shakespeare transposed the setting to London and rebaptised the characters with English names. Shakespeare never undertook a full-scale translation; his single comedy in native dress, *The Merchant of Venice*, is essentially an appendage to the history plays.

Charles Lamb once remarked: 'I am so fond of Italy that I am sure Shakespeare laid so few of his scenes at home that he was temporarily forgotten that Italy, so near and yet so distant, was itself as the ideal playground for comedy: a federation of principalities – or so it must seem at this aesthetic distance – with comparably operatic personalities, attractive and slightly larger than life. It could represent what we call 'fustian country', a histrionic perspective, a terra incognita. Nine of Shakespeare's comedies, including three of his romances, are located – or at least have scenes – in Italy. Five of the tragedies belong in that category. We have also the Roman tragedies, which take place in a Plutarchan Rome, a model realm for reconsidering the universal principles of human nature. As for *Cymbeline*, though its date is that of Caesar, it is the non-Britons come closer to Renaissance Italian Rome. Out of the thirty-eight plays in the canon, eleven, then, these eleven constitute a significant proportion. It is worth the trouble to walk through them briefly. In the commonplaces poetised, the conventional figures

The dialogue of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in particular, is sprinkled here and there with Italian words and phrases, polite clichés which might well have been acquired from John Florio's conversational handbook: *ben trovato, mi perdonato, basta*. It would be hard to say whether the braggart ensign Pistol is speaking Italian or Spanish in *2 Henry IV* – or is he looking forward to Esperanto? – when he consoles himself with the maxim: '*Si fortune me tormente, sperato me contento*' (II. iv. 181ff.). In any case, the meaning is all too obvious. Choice of names is usually more or less appropriate, and sometimes quite meaningful. Benvolio is clearly a man of good will, just as Malvolio is a man of ill will. Servants tend to be indelibly anglicised; even in the homeland of Brighella and Arlecchino, they are named Potpan and Sugarsop, Hugh Oatcake and Susan Grindstone. Prince Escalus, the Latinised representative of the Scala family presiding over Verona, dwells in Freetown, an anglophone version of Villafranca. When Jonson made his first theatrical hit with *Every Man in His Humour*, its scene was set in Florence and its cast was Italian. Revising the play for his Folio, he transposed the setting to London and rebaptised the *dramatis personae* with English names. Shakespeare never undertook such vernacularisation; his single comedy in native dress, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, is essentially an appendage to the history plays.

Charles Lamb once remarked: 'I am sometimes jealous that Shakespeare laid so few of his scenes at home.' Lamb may have temporarily forgotten that Italy, so near and yet so far, had established itself as the ideal playground for comedy: a federation of comic-opera principalities – or so it must seem at this aesthetic distance – and of comparably operatic personalities, attractive, sophisticated and slightly larger than life. It could represent what Jonson termed a 'fustian country', a histrionic perspective, a terrain for make-believe. Nine of Shakespeare's comedies, including three we now classify as romances, are located – or at least have scenes – in greater Italy. Two of the tragedies belong in that category. We need not count the Roman tragedies, which take place in a Plutarchan sphere of their own, a model realm for reconsidering the universal problems of citizenship. As for *Cymbeline*, though its date is that of Caesar Augustus, its two non-Britons come closer to Renaissance Italians than to the ancient Romans. Out of the thirty-eight plays in the Shakespearean canon, then, these eleven constitute a significant proportion. It should be worth the trouble to walk through them briefly, watching for the commonplaces poetised, the conventional figures vitalised, and the

distant regions brought home to the English repertory.

Shakespeare delighted in the diversity of the Italian city-states, the movement and interaction from one community to another, often subject to the quasi-epical intervention of their civic dynasties. *The Taming of the Shrew* is set into bold relief by its induction, which frames the play itself within a practical joke at an English alehouse. Padua, seat of learning, is saluted as 'nursery of arts' by Lucentio, arriving from Pisa – *en route* to Lombardy – at the outset (I. i. 2); later on the witty Benedick will happen to have been a local boy; and Portia, as a lawyer, will claim Paduan connections. But if Lucentio is there to study philosophy at the renowned university, emulating the student Erastrato at Ferrara in *The Supposes* (his prototype in George Gascoigne's adaptation of Ariosto's play), he is soon deflected from scholarship to courtship. And courtship is the frank intention of the mercenary Petruccio: 'I come to wive it wealthily in Padua; / If wealthily, then happily in Padua' (I. ii. 75ff.). This unromantic fortune-hunter accounts himself 'a gentleman of Verona', and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is not really a very romantic play (II. i. 47). Possibly the thinnest of Shakespeare's comedies, it is barely redeemed by the animal act of the clown Launce and his live dog Crab, who seem livelier than the other personages. Friendship so predominates over love that the well-named Proteus can suddenly desert his Julia for Silvia, while her gentleman, Valentine, can be perfectly willing to swing her over. In so far as true lovers should find each other unique, rather than interchangeable, Shakespeare will be doing better by them when he returns to Verona for a tragedy.

Meanwhile his landscape has extended to Sicily – or rather, to the Two Sicilies under Spain – in *Much Ado about Nothing*: a homecoming from the Spanish wars led by Prince Pedro of Aragon and an ill-fated house-party at Messina. Claudio, the misguided lover, hails from Florence. The Paduan Benedick, albeit 'the prop'rest man in Italy', is welcomed as 'Signior Mountanto' (the upward thrust in a duel) because of the verbal parries that he will exchange with the even wittier Beatrice (V. i. 172f; I. i. 30). *Twelfth Night* takes us farther afield and to sea. 'This is Illyria, lady', Viola is informed, and so are we, as the Adriatic vista opens up (I. ii. 2). This Illyrian seaport – it could well be Dubrovnick, formerly Ragusa in its more Italian days – seems to suit these Italian visitors who came from Messaline, wherever that may have been. Offhand it sounds like a dissolute Roman empress, but it is more likely a variant of Messina. If Sir Toby Belch seems virtually

too English, a lesser Falstaff, Malvolio aspires toward a similar role, when he resolves to improve his mind by the study of authors' (II.v.161). The sea-captain Antonio, setting out on his peril, reminds us that these neighbouring states are often at war, which jeopardised the safety of any traveller from England. In this respect, he resembles the Pedant, alternate name for Mercantant, from Mantua in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Italianism for 'merchant' better fits the Shakespearean context.

Now France, the principal locale for *All's Well that Ends Well*, is at peace. But Tuscany can always play its traditional role, 'welcome to our gentry' (I. ii. 16). At this moment 'the Florentines [Sienese] are by the ears' (I. ii. 1); and the rivalry of these young Frenchmen are off to those wars, warring against 'those girls of Italy' (II. i. 19). That warning against femininity would repeat itself in *Cymbeline*, where it is more heeded. The royal patient has awarded Helena, who cured him, to her admired Count Bertram, who has fled, saying: 'I'll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed' (I. iii. 110). It is a tortuous story from *The Decameron* and the play offers reassurance along the way. Hence the title keeps up flagging spirits with the promise of a happy ending: '... if only we are patient. Bertram's Florentine lady-love, who fled with Helena in what has come to be known as 'the bed-trick', a professional term for an old motif, an arrangement of substitution under the cover of night (as in *Measure for Measure*) might we end by asking, with the boastful spy Parolles: '... might we end by asking, with the boastful spy Parolles: '... be crush'd with a plot?' (IV. iii. 325).

We seem to be moving in a more problematic direction. In *The Merchant of Venice*, though not altogether towards romance, too is out to wive it wealthily, and his romance will be the rescue of Antonio's muddled business. The Venetian setting, in height, the mercantile metropolis itself, the centralising Rialto forms a busy background for sharp practicalities, further sharpened by – and sharpened against – the presence of Shylock. The thwarting of his revenge, the transcendent sympathetic plea for mercy over his harsh clamour for justice emanate from the more leisurely region of music and romance. Belmont across the water, half-way to Illyria. With this comedy, a successful resolution often entails an incident, normally from court to countryside, but in

too English, a lesser Falstaff, Malvolio aspires towards a Machiavelian role, when he resolves to improve his mind by reading 'politic authors' (II.v.161). The sea-captain Antonio, setting foot in Illyria at his peril, reminds us that these neighbouring states were continually at war, which jeopardised the safety of any traveller from a hostile city. In this respect, he resembles the Pedant, alternately described as a Mercantant, from Mantua in *The Taming of the Shrew* (and this Italianism for 'merchant' better fits the Shakespearean metre).

Now France, the principal locale for *All's Well that Ends Well*, is at peace. But Tuscany can always play its traditional part as 'a nursery to our gentry' (I. ii. 16). At this moment 'the Florentines and the Sennoys [Sienese] are by the ears' (I. ii. 1); and the most adventurous of these young Frenchmen are off to those wars, warned by their King against 'those girls of Italy' (II. i. 19). That warning against seductive femininity would repeat itself in *Cymbeline*, where it is less needed but more heeded. The royal patient has awarded Helena, the medical lady who cured him, to her admired Count Bertram, who in his turn has fled, saying: 'I'll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed her' (II. iii. 173). It is a tortuous story from *The Decameron* and we need some reassurance along the way. Hence the title keeps up our occasionally flagging spirits with the promise of a happy ending: all will end well, if only we are patient. Bertram's Florentine lady-love will connive with Helena in what has come to be known as 'the bed-trick', a crude professional term for an old motif, an arrangement for connubial substitution under the cover of night (as in *Measure for Measure*). Well might we end by asking, with the boastful spy Parolles, 'Who cannot be crush'd with a plot?' (IV. iii. 325).

We seem to be moving in a more problematic direction with *The Merchant of Venice*, though not altogether towards romance; Bassanio too is out to wive it wealthily, and his romance will be called to the rescue of Antonio's muddled business. The Venetian empire at its height, the mercantile metropolis itself, the centralising span of the Rialto forms a busy background for sharp practice as in *Volpone*, further sharpened by – and sharpened against – the Jewish usurer Shylock. The thwarting of his revenge, the transcendence of Portia's sympathetic plea for mercy over his harsh clamour for justice, must emanate from the more leisurely region of music and moonlight, from Belmont across the water, half-way to Illyria. With Shakespearean comedy, a successful resolution often entails an incidental displacement, normally from court to countryside, but in this case from

contentious lawcourt to restorative suburb. The two gentlemen of Verona – after a sylvan interlude – disentangle their misunderstandings at the court of Milan, though Shakespeare never seems quite sure whether its ruling figure is a duke or an emperor. More auspiciously, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*, the alleviating environment is that of a forest, where the ills of society are remedied by turning back to nature and roaming from one 'part of the wood' to another.

In *The Winter's Tale*, across the long temporal break, we switch countries. Shakespeare had already switched them from the alignment of his narrative source, thereby making his lost-and-found princess Perdita a Sicilian, whose mythical archetype is the home-bred goddess, the abducted Proserpina. Sicily had been the classical soil of the pastoral; yet here it is the scene of tragicomic events, which precipitate the characters into a Bohemian retreat, a purlieu for reversal and renewal. This Bohemia may have a seacoast, as well as deserts, though not as yet the special associations – gypsy or artistic – that would accrue to it in later centuries. Still it offers a sheepcote for pastoral antics, 'a gallimaufry of gambols' celebrating the betrothal of the erstwhile shepherdess to her princely swain (IV. iv. 328). The recognition scene must be staged again in Sicily, where her mother, the supposedly defunct Queen Hermione, will come to life before our very eyes. After some sixteen years of concealment, she makes her reappearance as a statue.

– a piece many years in doing and now newly perform'd by that rare Italian master, Julio Romano, who, had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly is he her ape. He so near to Hermione hath done Hermione that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer. (V. ii. 95–102)

This sculptural attribution, Shakespeare's only direct reference to an existent artist, bypasses Giulio Romano's chief pursuits in painting and architecture, not to mention his underground illustrations for Aretino's *Sonetti lussuriosi*, a pornographic sequence that had provoked some Jonsonian snickers. But as a master – in Vasari's terms – of both *disegno* and *grazia*, Giulio was well qualified to exemplify the dialectic between Art and Nature that runs through the play. It is resolved in favour of Nature, and hopes are answered, when the living Hermione steps down from her pedestal and embraces her daughter at last.

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Where do we go from here? Where is *The Tempest* to be situated? The storm itself is magically conjured up by a pinch of dew from 'the still-vex'd Bermoothes' on the opposite side of the Atlantic (I. ii. 229). The 'uninhabited island' itself must strategically be placed in the Mediterranean, somewhere between Tunis, where his daughter has just been wedded, and Naples, whither the King and his courtiers are now returning. Pantelleria has been suggested; but we should not be all that specific; it should remain a mysterious isle, not easily spotted on any workaday map. Here conspiracy, which has previously dethroned Prospero from his dukedom of Milan, twice raises its head again and is twice put down: with the courtiers and with the clowns. It is interesting to notice – perhaps another invidious comparison – that when the drunken Stephano first sees the bestial Caliban, he wants to bring him back to Naples as a present for an emperor, whereas the jester Trinculo wants to take the servant-monster to England and make a fortune by exhibiting him there. 'Any strange beast there makes a man', he wryly comments (II. ii. 28). Banishment once more leads to restoration. The old magician will recover his duchy; but ultimately its 'gorgeous palaces' and 'solemn temples' will prove as delusive as Miranda's 'brave new world', as utopian as Gonzalo's ideal commonwealth, and as visionary as Shakespeare's world and theatre – 'the great globe itself' (IV. i. 152f.; V. i. 183).

When Shakespeare turns from comedy to tragedy, the transition is not abrupt, since love, the theme of *Romeo and Juliet*, had heretofore been mainly relegated to the comic domain. Hence the tragic treatment had to be an experiment, and it was mainly Shakespeare's innovation, though it had been preceded by *Gismond of Salerne*, an Italianate tragedy at the Inns of Court. Ever since the generation of Wyatt and Surrey, English poets had been rehearsing – as Sir Philip Sidney would put it – 'poor Petrarch's long deceased woes'. Francesco Petrarca had lived his full career as an encyclopedic scholar, an all-round humanist, a versatile innovator in many genres, and a stylist in Latin as well as a pioneer in the vernacular. But it was his intimate experience, his most personal vein as a sonneteer, his lyrical formulations of amorous feeling, the moods and phases of his transcendent passion for Madonna Laura through her life and death, that cast so far-reaching a spell over his Renaissance successors. It was, above all, his celebration of womanhood that contributed so much to the modern outlook, and that must have made it easier for Shakespeare to proceed from his own early lyricism to actual drama. Romeo is 'for the numbers

that Petrarch flow'd in', according to the satirical Mercutio, who contrasts Laura unfavourably with Juliet: 'marry, she had a better love to berhyme her' (II. iv. 38-41). Sonnets are embedded in the text, most poignantly in the lovers' first encounter, and rhyme is more abundant than blank verse in the earliest scene of the play.

Parenthetically, it might be observed that there is no textual provision for a balcony scene. The word itself was never employed by Elizabethans, though the relevant function might have been served by the upper space of their formalised stage. Juliet would seem to have been standing at her window, while Romeo stood in the Capulets' garden outside. Balconies, to be sure, were more endemic to the Italian than to the English climate. Any land might have provided surroundings for an erotic rendezvous, but Italy helped to warrant the extreme youthfulness of the lovers. Conflict is inherent in dramaturgy of any kind; but in this context '*Alla stoccata* carries it away', with the stylised thrust of duelling swords at the opening, the climax, and the dénouement (III. i. 74). And, as the prologue announces in its preliminary sonnet, 'fair Verona, where we lay our scene', is notorious for its municipal blood-feuds: 'civil blood makes civil hands unclean' (2, 4). The rival families condemned by Dante to Purgatory, the Montecchi and Cappelletti, had been morally reconciled by the succession of previous storytellers, but not until their tale of faction crossed by affection had resolved itself through potion, poison and dagger. That all this had happened within a self-consciously Roman Catholic framework had a further distancing effect for Shakespeare, who had confronted and sharply defied the 'Italian priest' through *King John* (III.i.153). Yet in *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Lawrence can act as a moralistic yet sympathetic *raisonneur*.

Turning from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Othello*, Shakespeare's other Italianate tragedy, we do not leave the theme of love behind; we watch it being overpowered by an accumulation of other motives. Where Petrarchism fostered the paradigms for the earlier play, Machiavellianism preconditioned those of the later one. The spirit of Machiavelli had 'crossed the Alps' and delivered Marlowe's prologue to *The Jew of Malta*. The key-word of his statecraft, 'policy', had taken on a cynical intonation, never neutral, 'base and rotten' for Shakespeare in *1 Henry IV* (I. iii. 108). But exaggerated apprehensions of plotting and Protestant suspicions of Popery had merely prepared the way. Shakespeare was less concerned with literal poisons than with the fears that could envenom men's minds. Now Iago is not an archetypal

villain, any more than Romeo is an archetypal lover. Iago, a major Shakespearean characterisation, is highly typical. Iago is a typical Venetian, any more than that great Venetian, Antonio. Cassio, Iago's incidental victim, never knew a Florentine more kind and honest. Ironically, he trusts him as he would a compatriot; a compatriot who is so far from being a compatriot. 'This is Venice, one of its magnificos – confidently affirms, awake to the hue and cry of the citizens when his daughter is carried off by a gondolier to Othello (I. i. 105). How could that be?

The peculiar topography of Venice, which is so colourful of all cityscapes, made it a high point on the tourist tour. Bantering with the melancholy Jacques, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind describes such tourists as having 'swam in the sea' (38). More sadly, it is reported that the Duke of Norfolk, in lifelong exile by Richard II, after having fought in the Crusades, retired to Italy, died and was buried at Venice. Of course, it is that city in order to prize it – not that Holoferns, in *King Lear*, shows off his pedantry by reciting a proverbial jingle: '*Venechia, Venechia, / Che non te vede, che non te*'. From this commanding city-state-empire, so well served by its duke and senators, Othello the Moor – like Shylock the outsider. Yet, far more acculturated than Shylock, Othello's conversion and now through marriage, he has become one of the Venetians with their naval leadership and has led his army against the infidel Turks. Venice functions as a power base in the receding perspective of Act I. The subsequent flight to the Levantine colony, swerving centrifugally with the island, this is Cyprus, not Venice. If Iago is reductive when he calls Desdemona 'an erring barbarian', he is even more mischievous when he calls Desdemona as 'a super-subtle Venetian' (I. iii. 38). Iago benefits not her but himself; for she is truly simple and innocent only through the madness of Othello's psychic instability. She is led to mistreat her – as if she were one of those courtesans – in the so-called 'brothel scene'. After the flight itself, with the reinforced presence of the Venetian ambassador, Desdemona avenges his own crime by suicide, even while recalling the state. And the self he kills becomes identified with the Turkish infidel, once again and finally the outsider.

villain, any more than Romeo is an archetypal lover; each of them, as a major Shakespearean characterisation, is highly individualised. Nor is Iago a typical Venetian, any more than that generous merchant of Venice, Antonio. Cassio, Iago's incidental victim, attests of him: 'I never knew a Florentine more kind and honest' (III. i. 40). Accordingly, he trusts him as he would a compatriot; and so does Othello, who is so far from being a compatriot. 'This is Venice', so Brabantio – one of its magnificos – confidently affirms, awakened by an unseemly hue and cry of the citizens when his daughter is carried off by a gondolier to Othello (I. i. 105). How could that ever happen here?

The peculiar topography of Venice, which gave it the most colourful of all cityscapes, made it a high point on the European grand tour. Bantering with the melancholy Jacques in *As You Like It*, Rosalind describes such tourists as having 'swam in a gundello' (IV. i. 38). More sadly, it is reported that the Duke of Norfolk, condemned to lifelong exile by Richard II, after having fought in the Crusades and retired to Italy, died and was buried at Venice. Of course, one must see that city in order to prize it – not that Holofernes ever has, but he shows off his pedantry by reciting a proverbial jingle in *Love's Labour's Lost*: '*Venechia, Venechia, / Che non te vede, che non te prechia*' (IV. ii. 97ff). From this commanding city-state-empire, so well organised under its duke and senators, Othello the Moor – like Shylock the Jew – is an outsider. Yet, far more acculturated than Shylock, through religious conversion and now through marriage, he has been entrusted by the Venetians with their naval leadership and has led them to victory against the infidel Turks. Venice functions as a point of departure, in the receding perspective of Act I. The subsequent four acts occur in its Levantine colony, swerving centrifugally with the dramatic action: this is Cyprus, not Venice. If Iago is reductive when he calls Othello 'an erring barbarian', he is even more mischievous when he invokes Desdemona as 'a super-subtle Venetian' (I. iii. 355ff.). That epithet befits not her but himself; for she is truly simple and loyal; and it is only through the madness of Othello's psychic insecurity that he can be led to mistreat her – as if she were one of those ill-famed Venetian courtesans – in the so-called 'brothel scene'. After civic order reasserts itself, with the reinforced presence of the Venetians, it is Othello who avenges his own crime by suicide, even while recalling his services to the state. And the self he kills becomes identified with the enemy, the Turkish infidel, once again and finally the outsider:

And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduc'd the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog,
And smote him – thus. (V. ii. 352–6).

Regional commitments would be neutralised by the admonition of Coriolanus, when he departs from Rome to take command with its Volscian enemies: 'There is a world elsewhere' (III. iii. 135). Yet in so far as Shakespeare's creative world had a centre, Italy and the Italians were very near it, not because he had travelled there – he hadn't, and his sketchy geographical patchwork is evident when his gentlemen of Verona travel by water to Milan – but because it had animated the mainstream of humanistic civilisation as he knew it. Later English poets, settling in Italy, vainly tried to reanimate its past with their self-conscious, worked-up closet dramas, such as Byron's *Marino Faliero* or Shelley's *Cenci*. Let me quote a stage direction, not from one of them but from the pastiche that exposed them, by a playwright whom Max Beerbohm invented, known from his play as 'Savonarola' Brown:

Re-enter Guelphs and Ghibellines fighting. SAV. [Savonarola] and LUC. [Lucrezia Borgia] are arrested by papal officers. Enter MICHELANGELO. ANDREA DEL SARTO appears for a moment at a window. PIPPA passes. Brothers of the Misericordia go by, singing a requiem for FRANCESCA DA RIMINI. Enter BOCCACCIO, BENVENUTO CELLINI, and many others, making remarks highly characteristic of themselves but scarcely audible through the terrific thunderstorm which now burst over Florence and is at its loudest and darkest crisis as the curtain falls.

What is lacking amid all this allusion and profusion? Synthesis, imagination, insight. Beerbohm's wit brings out the truth that nothing fits together, everything sticks out in different directions, depending more on historical repute than artistic recreation; and everyone, with some divergence in centuries, has been dead for several hundred years. What we miss is that organic conception which brings Romeo and Juliet or Beatrice and Benedick or Prospero and Miranda or Othello, Iago, and Desdemona to life. To life, but not necessarily to *la dolce vita*, Vernon Lee to the contrary notwithstanding. It could be accepted as a measure of Shakespeare's sustained authority, of his acceptance by Italian readers and writers, and of his continuing inter-cultural vitality

that his plays engendered the *libretti* for three of the greatest of them among the very greatest, one of these a more recent one over its Shakespearean antecedent, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. True that Falstaff started out as a thoroughly British character at the stage where Verdi took him up, he had no ethnic specificity; ethnicity is outdistanced by universality.

that his plays engendered the *libretti* for three of Verdi's operas – two of them among the very greatest, one of these a marked improvement over its Shakespearean antecedent, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. It is true that Falstaff started out as a thoroughly British Englishman; but, at the stage where Verdi took him up, he had reached a plane where ethnicity is outdistanced by universality.