

Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays

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lessons learned in Italy. When Diana confronts him publicly, he dismisses her as a courtesan, 'a common gamester to the camp' (V,iii,188). It is not, however, until his lies about his family ring, the symbol of his old world honour, are uncovered that Bertram finally confesses all. He was, alas, willing to pawn his noble name and lineage for present gratification. In the end, presumably Shakespeare now wishes his audience to feel that Bertram has learned his lesson, and that his experience in Italy has shown him the way to maturity, virtue, and wisdom. The lesson for English youth is clear: Italy's fashionable temptations can compromise the most basic virtues and teachings of home.

In *The History of Italy*, Thomas writes of three things which characterize a gentleman: 'the first is arms, to maintain withal his honor; the second love, to show himself gentle and not cruel of nature; and the third is learning, to be able to know, to understand and to utter his opinion in matters of weight'.³² Bertram's experience seems to be measured in these terms. He has distinguished himself in 'arms', but must 'show himself gentle and not cruel of nature' in love, and ultimately reflect his 'learning'. While there may be some debate concerning the ultimate tone of *All's Well That Ends Well*, it seems clear that whether or not Bertram has learned by the end of the action, the opportunity for the education of this young man is in part what has been centrally presented. Though of noble birth and great promise, Bertram requires the nurture of war, love, and learning to educate him to the wisdom necessary to compliment the fortune of his birth. Virtue growing out of experience is needed to ennoble him fully.

B MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

The Claudio and Hero plot of *Much Ado About Nothing* harkens back to Italian sources.³³ The fifth canto of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) in its English poetic elaboration by Peter Beverley (c. 1566) and/or rendering by Sir John Harington (1591) may have stimulated Shakespeare's retelling of the classic story of a lover betrayed into believing his mistress false. Shakespeare's most direct source, however, is thought to be Matteo Bandello's *La Prima de le Novelle* (1554), perhaps in François Belleforest's French version or in some English version now lost. Bandello seems to have been the origin for several of the names in Shakespeare's play, though Lionati to

Leonato is easier to see than Piero to Pedro. Shakespeare also takes its cue from Bandello, but, as we have seen, another more special reason that the play is Italian.

A. R. Humphreys, the New Arden editor of *Much Ado About Nothing*, is 'essentially good natured': 'it is a lively, social scene through its etiquettes and enjoyments, . . . a scene for the cheerful manoeuvres of a social life'.³⁴ He continues, 'it is a scene of social engagement and festive pleasure, a cheerful world of sophisticated foreigners, Messina entertains the Italian nobles from the north.'

Claudio (whose name, by the way, is traditionally that of a *dell'arte* lover) is Florentine (I,i,11), and shares a scene with his fellow native Cassio in *Othello*. Claudio's repudiation of Hero is so overwhelming later that we almost forget that Claudio is modest, graceful, and sensitive. Claudio is clearly young and inexperienced. Claudio's wooing of his lady into Don Pedro's hands, a decision he is resigned when he thinks the prince has won, is a lie. When the real truth discovered, he is so meek and respectful that he is prompted to kiss his love. J. W. Draper finds Claudio's Hero's dowry consistent with the Florentine reputation for shrewdness.³⁶ However, as we have noticed, Claudio in Shakespeare's Italian plays, no matter where he is, is interested in such matters.

Benedick is from the university city of Padua, where wit and learning are everywhere in evidence.³⁷ He is a well-read man. He alludes learnedly to 'Cupid' (I,i,25) and 'Troilus' (V,ii,31). His reasoning is witty and sophisticated. He soliloquy at the start of II,iii (7-36). He knows that 'he hath the tongues' (V,i,166) – and not, one might think, or two of them like Sir Andrew Aguecheek. He is still the student open to new information and learning. A characteristic but comic logic he declares: 'I am a man of many soiled people. When I said I would die a bachelor, I should have said I should live till I were married' (II,iii,242-4).

Transformation: 'Gallants, I am not as I have been'. Yet despite their stated places of origin, Claudio and Benedick seem as much English as specifically Italian. Claudio's courtesy of Claudio and the wit of Benedick are many a nubile romantic hero, no matter where he is.

Leonato is easier to see than Piero to Pedro. Shakespeare's Messina also takes its cue from Bandello, but, as we shall observe, there is another more special reason that the play is set in this seaport city.

A. R. Humphreys, the New Arden editor, describes Messina as 'essentially good natured': 'it is a lively, sociable world presented through its etiquettes and enjoyments, . . . creating a close-knit scene for the cheerful manoeuvres of affluent leisure'.³⁴ He continues, 'it is a scene of social engagement, courtly diplomacies and festive pleasure, a cheerful world of carnival'.³⁵ A city of sophisticated foreigners, Messina entertains not only Spaniards but Italians from the north.

Claudio (whose name, by the way, is traditional for a *Commedia dell'arte* lover) is Florentine (I,i,11), and shares qualities of courtesy with his fellow native Cassio in *Othello*. Because his heartless repudiation of Hero is so overwhelming later in the play, one might forget that Claudio is modest, graceful, and sympathetic earlier on. Claudio is clearly young and inexperienced. He willingly puts the wooing of his lady into Don Pedro's hands, and is disappointed but resigned when he thinks the prince has won Hero for himself. The real truth discovered, he is so meek and retiring that he must be prompted to kiss his love. J. W. Draper finds Claudio's interest in Hero's dowry consistent with the Florentine reputation for financial shrewdness.³⁶ However, as we have noticed, most young suitors in Shakespeare's Italian plays, no matter where they are from, are interested in such matters.

Benedick is from the university city of Padua (I,i,35-6), and his wit and learning are everywhere in evidence.³⁷ He is obviously widely read. He alludes learnedly to 'Cupid' (I,i,254), 'Leander' (V,ii,30), and 'Troilus' (V,ii,31). His reasoning is wittily balanced, as in his soliloquy at the start of II,iii (7-36). He knows foreign languages - 'he hath the tongues' (V,i,166) - and not, one suspects, just a word or two of them like Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Moreover, Benedick is still the student open to new information and to change. With characteristic but comic logic he declares: 'the world must be peopled. When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married' (II,iii,242-4). He acknowledges his transformation: 'Gallants, I am not as I have been' (III,ii,15).

Yet despite their stated places of origin, Claudio and Benedick seem as much English as specifically Italian young men. The courtesy of Claudio and the wit of Benedick are characteristic of many a nubile romantic hero, no matter where he is from. There are

also a number of clearly English touches in the play: references to 'a Scotch jig' (II,i,74, 75), the 'Hundred Merry Tales' jest book (II,i,130), the song 'Light a' love' (III,iv,44), and 'swords' and 'bucklers' (V,ii,17–18). Messina would have wine cellars not the alluded to 'alehouses' (III,iii,42) as in Shakespeare's play. Margaret and Ursula, 'Meg' (III,iv,8, 98) and 'Ursley' (III,i,4), have English sounding names. Dogberry and his watch, 'Verges', 'Oatcake', and 'Sea-coal', are certainly English types with English names, despite Dogberry's '*palabras*' (III,iv,16) and other 'fine' words.

Messina in *Much Ado About Nothing* has no specific geographical details of place, but there are some light touches in the play that evoke a vaguely Italian atmosphere. When inspired to poetry Benedick and Beatrice are prone to the sonnet form (see III,i,107–16; V,iv,87), Leonato has a family tomb like the Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*, and Beatrice refers to Benedick as 'Signior Mountanto' (I,i,30) – using an Italian fencing term. Venice is mentioned as a place associated with love (I,i,271–2). In the manner of the stereotypical Italian spy in a drama of palace intrigue, Borachio 'whipt me behind the arras' (I,iii,60–1). (The baitings of Beatrice and Benedick, and the watch's fortunate overhearing of Don John's plot against Hero are other examples of the play's prominent eavesdropping motif.) 'Would the cook were a' my mind!' (I,iii,72–3), exclaims Don John, who wishes to poison more than good humour. Specific references to 'poison' are to be found at II,ii,21 and V,i,246.

There are two sides to the Italian character revealed in *Much Ado About Nothing*. First of all, there is the volatile 'temperament' demonstrated by the emotionally wounded Claudio; he lashes out extravagantly against the innocent Hero. A recent editor of *The Prince* describes Machiavelli's character in terms precisely appropriate to Claudio: 'Like a great many Tuscans, he had a horror of being taken for a dupe, and to avoid that appearance did not mind sometimes being considered a monster.'³⁸ Beatrice's command to 'Kill Claudio' as a way for Benedick to prove his love is another example of what the English considered stereotypical Italian temperament.

The other side of the Italian coin is the courtliness of the wit, friendship, and most actions of the central characters. Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* may well have provided the model for the wit combats of Beatrice and Benedick in the exchanges between Lady Emilia and Lord Gaspare Pallavicino, and have also suggested the genteel behaviour of the aristocratic characters in Shakespeare's play.³⁹

Barbara Lewalski has noticed that the phrase 'the Christian west' appears in Book IV of Sir Thomas Hoby's translation.⁴⁰ The playwright gives to Don Pedro's music course, Castiglione's Christian name *Baldassare*, associated with courtesy in the Renaissance.⁴¹

Italy, and to a lesser extent Spain and France, were the fashion for Shakespeare's age. A Venetian ambassador, Jacopo Soranzo, noted in correspondence that he was 'the Italian.'⁴² Portia remarks on the strangeness of the English wooer Falconbridge: 'How oddly he is apparel'd, he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his ruff in Germany, and his behavior every where' (I,ii,17–18). *Edward II*, Gaveston 'wears a short Italian hose with pearl, and in his Tuscan cap / A jewel of great price in crown' (I,iv,415–17). When 'contrary to nature' [Webster's Duchess of Malfi] wears a loose-bodiced gown, she is suspected of being pregnant. Thomas More's *Utopia* describes fashion: 'the gentlewomen generally for gowns and jewells exceed, I think, all other women of the world.'

Fashion is a key word in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Claudio uses it with it in a number of lines as he describes his love to Hero to his friend Conrade (III,iii,118, 121, 122). His point is that clothes can deceive. Benedick describes Claudio lying 'ten nights awake carving the image of his doublet' (II,iii,17–18). There is a reference to 'the fashion of the gown' (III,iv,15–16), and to the 'rebato' (III,iv,17–18) repudiation, Antonio challenges Claudio and Claudio's friends 'fashion-monging boys, / That lie and counterfeit with oaths and slander, / Go anticly, and show outwardly' (III,iv,6). Early in the play, Beatrice wishes to know Hero's friend, since 'He wears his faith but as the fashion of the gown' (I,i,75–6). Leonato will disdain 'the fashion of the gown' (I,i,97–8), and entertain Don Pedro and Claudio in an extravagant manner.

Much Ado About Nothing is Shakespeare's only play set in Italy, and the question may be asked why here of all places. Other locales might have served the playwright's purpose of gathering of courtship and deceit. Why this choice of setting seems some buried allusion to be discovered.

In Shakespeare's day, Messina had quite a reputation in the Christian west. It was the launching point for the

Barbara Lewalski has noticed that the phrase 'much ado' recurs in Book IV of Sir Thomas Hoby's translation.⁴⁰ 'Balthazar', the name the playwright gives to Don Pedro's musical attendant, was, of course, Castiglione's Christian name *Baldassare*; it was a name associated with courtesy in the Renaissance.⁴¹

Italy, and to a lesser extent Spain and France, set the English fashion for Shakespeare's age. A Venetian ambassador to England, Jacopo Soranzo, noted in correspondence that English styles copied the Italian.⁴² Portia remarks on the strangeness of clothing of her English wooer Falconbridge: 'How oddly he is suited! I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany, and his behavior every where' (I,ii,73-6). In Marlowe's *Edward II*, Gaveston 'wears a short Italian hooded cloak, / Larded with pearl, and in his Tuscan cap / A jewel of more value than the crown' (I,iv,415-17). When 'contrary to . . . Italian fashion [Webster's Duchess of Malfi] wears a loose-bodied gown' (II,i,78), she is suspected of being pregnant. Thomas seems awed by Italian fashion: 'the gentlewomen generally for gorgeous attire, apparel, and Jewells exceed, I think, all other women of our known world'.⁴³

Fashion is a key word in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Borachio plays with it in a number of lines as he describes his wooing of Margaret as Hero to his friend Conrade (III,iii,118, 121, 122, 124, 139, 141, 143). His point is that clothes can deceive. Benedick finds the love-smitten Claudio lying 'ten nights awake carving the fashion of a new doublet' (II,iii,17-18). There is a reference to 'the Duchess of Milan's gown' (III,iv,15-16), and to the 'rebato' (III,iv,6) ruff. After Hero's repudiation, Antonio challenges Claudio and Don Pedro calling them 'fashion-monging boys, / That lie and cog and flout, deprave and slander, / Go anticly, and show outward hideousness' (V,i,94-6). Early in the play, Beatrice wishes to know Benedick's current friend, since 'He wears his faith but as the fashion of his hat' (I,i,75-6). Leonato will disdain 'the fashion of the world . . . to avoid cost' (I,i,97-8), and entertain Don Pedro and his friends in an extravagant manner.

Much Ado About Nothing is Shakespeare's only play set in Messina, and the question may be asked why here of all places. Any number of other locales might have served the playwright for his *après-war* gathering of courtship and deceit. Why this one specifically? There seems some buried allusion to be discovered in the play.

In Shakespeare's day, Messina had quite specific associations for the Christian west. It was the launching point for the last galleys war

in naval history. The Battle of Lepanto, fought on 7 October 1571, some twenty-seven or so years before *Much Ado About Nothing*, resulted in a great Christian victory against the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁴

Pope Pius V had managed somehow to get Spain and Venice, among others, to cooperate with him and form a 'Holy League' alliance for waging war against Islam – the Turks and their allies. Don John of Austria, the 'bastard' brother of Philip II of Spain, was the Captain General of the Holy League fleet. Thus, there is an association of setting, character name, and Don John's circumstances of birth recalled in Shakespeare's play.

The Christian victory at Lepanto is historically noteworthy not only as the last great galley action in the history of naval warfare, but also for putting to rest the western notion of Turkish invincibility. Lepanto was the battle in which Cervantes (born the same year as Shakespeare) lost the use of his left hand. Ultimately, however, Lepanto turned out to be 'much ado about nothing': the victory was never followed up by the Christians. Pius V's death and the Holy League's continual bickering about selfish interests saw to that. As one scholar writes: 'It is generally considered that the battle of Lepanto was one of the great turning points of history, but modern historians have been hard pressed to explain why. Militarily the Holy League derived little immediate advantage from the victory. No territory changed hands in the wake of the battle. . . . It is apparent that in the short-term military sense Lepanto accomplished little or nothing.'⁴⁵

But for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Lepanto fired the Christian imagination. To commemorate the wonderful victory, 7 October was declared a perpetual holiday throughout most of Europe. On the heels of the Ottoman defeat celebrations abounded, with a special one at Messina to honour Don John's return to the city. A statue by Andrea Calamech was erected there as a memorial to the great general. Many songs, poems, and paintings were offered throughout the Christian world. Among these were a number of English works. George Gascoigne devoted part of his 1572 wedding masque, in honour of the English Montague's weddings, to Lepanto.⁴⁶ Abraham Holland wrote *Naumachia. or, A Poeticall Description of the cruell and bloudie Sea-fight or Battaile of Lepanto*.⁴⁷ The 'Epistle to the Reader', included with the revision of this work (1626; STC 13579), details Queen Elizabeth's response to news of the victory: 'Shee commanded the Citizens of London, to give Almightye GOD humble and heartie thankes, Her

Sacred selfe performing the same: The *Londoners* and showed other pleasant signes of rejoycing James VI of Scotland, who would become Shakespeare's father, published his poem about the great victory.⁴⁸ 'Epistle to the Reader' indicates that James was about 11 years old when he penned his more than 1100 lines (including choruses). In *Lepanto* he writes of 'Messena', 'armies conuened', and 'There Don Ioan d'Almeida Generall great . . .' (l. 205).

But why then, if all Christendom was singing Don John – indeed, if the present Queen and future King had joined the chorus – would Shakespeare have named his villainous namesake in his *Much Ado About Nothing*? We must consider the historical Don John's relationship to the play.

First and foremost, Don John was a prominent figure, brother to Philip II who was the Spanish King and a champion of the Roman religion. Philip, we recall, had married the English Catholic Queen Mary I in 1554 (his father, Charles V, gave him Milan and Naples as a dowry). When Mary died in 1558, Philip offered his hand to her Protestant daughter Elizabeth I, but she was refused. Following this, as we might expect, Elizabeth's queenship and her sister Mary Queen of Scots were not viewed kindly by the Spanish King. After Elizabeth's refusal and Lepanto, Philip II together with his ambassador suggested Mary Stuart as a bride for Don John, in reasserting Catholicism in England. Don John's involvement in attempting to free Mary from prison seemed to be in favour of this match, for if Don John had married Mary Queen of Scots he would, through her, have been Catholic England.⁵⁰

It also appears that Queen Elizabeth herself was aware of the affection of Don John. She let it be known that he might aspire to her hand.⁵¹ Whether Elizabeth's personal or political cannot be determined, but Don John rebuffed her overtures despite the prodding of his father. He saw in such a marriage another way to restore England to the fold. In the words of Don John's nineteenth-century biographer: 'Although it is impossible to believe that she had thought of marrying him, it is not the less probable that she was much displeased by his refusal even to woo her. . . . He said, great indignation at the slight put upon

Sacred selfe performing the same: The *Londoners* also made Bonfires, and showed other pleasant signes of rejoycing.' In 1576, the future James VI of Scotland, who would become Shakespeare's James I, published his poem about the great victory.⁴⁸ The 'Authors Preface to the Reader' indicates that James was about twelve or thirteen when he penned his more than 1100 lines (including epilogue choruses). In *Lepanto* he writes of 'Messena', where the Christian armies convened, and 'There Don Ioan d'Austria came, / Their Generall great . . .' (l. 205).

But why then, if all Christendom was singing in praise of Don John – indeed, if the present Queen and future King of England joined the chorus – would Shakespeare have created such a villainous namesake in his *Much Ado About Nothing*? To find reasons, we must consider the historical Don John's relations with England.

First and foremost, Don John was a prominent Catholic, step-brother to Philip II who was the Spanish King and muscular military arm of the Roman religion. Philip, we recall, had married the English Catholic Queen Mary I in 1554 (his father, the Emperor Charles V, gave him Milan and Naples as a wedding present). When Mary died in 1558, Philip offered his hand to Elizabeth but was refused. Following this, as we might imagine, Elizabeth's queenship and her sister Mary Queen of Scots' imprisonment were not viewed kindly by the Spanish King. After Elizabeth's marriage refusal and Lepanto, Philip II together with Pope Gregory XIII suggested Mary Stuart as a bride for Don John, as the way of reasserting Catholicism in England. Don John himself was actively involved in attempting to free Mary from prison.⁴⁹ English Catholics seemed to be in favour of this match, for if Don John were to marry Mary Queen of Scots he would, through her, be the ruler of a Catholic England.⁵⁰

It also appears that Queen Elizabeth herself sought the attention and affection of Don John. She let it be known in appropriate circles that he might aspire to her hand.⁵¹ Whether Elizabeth's coquetry was personal or political cannot be determined, but, in any event, Don John rebuffed her overtures despite the proddings of the Pope who saw in such a marriage another way to restore England to the Roman fold. In the words of Don John's nineteenth-century biographer, 'Although it is impossible to believe that she had ever seriously thought of marrying him, it is not the less probable that she was much displeased by his refusal even to woo her. She expressed, it is said, great indignation at the slight put upon her by a bastard, and

the Spaniards believed that she set on foot plots for his assassination.⁵²

King James' preface to his youthful account of Lepanto is an elaborate apology attempting to excuse his writing 'in praise of a forraine Papist bastard'.⁵³ Contends James, 'I name not Don-loan, neither literally nor any waies by description', and 'my invocation [is] to the true God only, and not to all the He and She Saints, for whose vaine honors, Don-loan fought in all his wars'.⁵⁴ One can see by the rigour of James' disclaimers that Don John was not a hero to the English.

Fynes Moryson also describes the negative side of Don John's character from the English point of view when he reports a cruel episode concerning a cave filled with 'ill vapour': 'don John, base sonne of the Emperour Charles the fifth, forced a Gally-slave to goe into this cave, and he falling dead, forced another slave to fetch him out, who likewise fell dead, and that hee killed a third slave with his own hand, because hee refused to fetch out his two dead fellowes'.⁵⁵ Shakespeare's Don John, like Iago resenting the 'daily beauty' in Cassio's life, hates 'the most exquisite Claudio' (I,iii,50), and, with bristling jealousy, labels him 'A proper squire!' (I,iii,52). Hero notes that Don John 'is of a very melancholy disposition' (II,i,5). 'How tartly that gentleman looks!' affirms Beatrice, 'I never can see him but I am heart-burn'd an hour after' (II,i,3-4). The real Don John apparently also had a melancholic temperament.⁵⁶

Though several of Shakespeare's likely sources for *Much Ado About Nothing* are Italian, and an important historical episode involving Italy is in the play's background, the playwright does not call particular attention to his Italian setting except in a most general way. Skirting opportunities to exploit some lurid recent Sicilian family history, as do Beaumont and Fletcher in *Philaster*, or heavy-handed ridicule of Spain, Italy, and Catholicism, as do many a Renaissance English dramatist, Shakespeare is content in *Much Ado About Nothing* to poke at the historical Don John of Austria, and make of Italy a believable comic backdrop.

C THE TEMPEST

The first scene of *The Tempest* is at sea, and the rest of the action takes place on an island – not, that is, in Italy. However, all of the

non-fabulous characters in Shakespeare's play have allegiances to either Milan or Naples. As in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Verona*, Shakespeare again makes Milan a power. In *The Tempest*, Antonio banishes Prospero and Miranda 'to some remote and desolate isle'.

Florio's translation of Montaigne's essay 'Utopia' has long been recognized as a source for *The Tempest*. The counsellor states that in his

. . . commonwealth I would by contrivance
Execute all things; for no kind of trade
Would I admit; no name of magistrature,
Letters should not be known; riches and poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation, all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty –

Edward Capell, in the eighteenth century, identified Shakespeare's passage about Utopia as resembling Florio's *Montaigne*: 'It is a nation . . . that hath no knowledge of Letters, no intelligence of magistrature, nor of politike superioritie; no use of contracts, nor of povertie; no succession, nor of occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but of naturall, no manuring of landes, no use of mettles.'⁵⁷ The British Museum copy of Florio's *Montaigne* has a disputed signature of Shakespeare, but even without this evidence it seems clear that the playwright reworked the Italian's version.

Another possible source for *The Tempest* is *The Utopia of Italy*.⁵⁸ This work recounts the story of a fifteenth-century Genoese, Prospero Adorno, with a relevant first Milanese and Neapolitan connections. Adorno was in power in Milan from 1460, then returned to power seventeen years later in Milan. The Genoese Duke subsequently came to an agreement with the King of Naples, Ferdinando, another source of the context of Shakespeare's play. Tired of