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 pastoral and classical exercises of Italian Renaissance drama. On the other hand, she argued, the impact of those villanies 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

*The 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 1988. 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 Podsnapian 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 histories, much less of tragedies, which the Italians nature too much affectes to imitate and surpass. When nature surpasses art, what need of imitation? The observation seems to have some grounding in cultural history, despite its undertone of blanphish 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 italiano è un diavolo incarnato.' The demonisation 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, sipsih 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?
Cicco di Hadrie? I have read them all. (II.i.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' (II. ii. 265). 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 scolti,* which inspired blank verse. But the sensibili-

ties of the Cinquecento, as Francesco De Sanctis correctly observed, tend toward the idyllic and the romantic. The importation of intrigue would not have needed to depict plots. We could think of Marlowe's *Massacre at Paris,* a French tragedy of that perennial favourite, Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy,* or *The Changeling,* set in Spain, through such Shakespearean characters as Angelo, Armand - the very name does battle in *Love's Labours Lost,* the bastard Don John, in *Much Ado About Nothing.* Nor were indigenous crimes to be neglected, *Fecesham,* *The Yorkshire Tragedy,* and a long list of other dramas.

Vernon Lee's simplistic views would be that the English, whose critical eye was especially trained to see the manifestations of the sensual, the sinister and the comic, was worth noting that, when he uncovered such an example in a Victorian period, the arresting title of his book, *Dizionario della letteratura romantica,* was neutralised by his translator into *The Romantic Age.* Now it should be noted in all fairness, that Shakespeare had been exempted from generalisations. Thus all too often he has been projected as a purist, as a reliable guide to the Italian period. What is the question? He was not less but more responsive to changes in the currents of his age; and if his achievements on the stage were not as humane, he had achieved them by using the same techniques that he did, and can be most fully understood in the context of conditions they shared. He himself recognised the outlines of his work, the later techniques referred to certain stock characters not unlike Pantaloon, Pedant and Braggart - types, if not as convincingly drawn upon the standard traditions of comedy and the *commedia dell'arte.*

Admittedly, as we are told in *The Taming of the Shrew,* it projected a role for women that was worth contemplating. *And the Fox* of Wyndham-Lewis went so far as to adapt the plot of *The Taming of the Shrew* for his own purposes. This was a frequent procedure for Lewis. Yet it was an English monarch, Richard II, who - while Duke of Gloucester - had vowed to 'set the murderous Machiavel 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. 408). 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 murderous Machiavel 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-damned Italy', damned not for opium or poppy but for its aura of potions and poisons (III. iv. 15); and it is thence that the villain must be recruited, 'some jack of Italy' (III. iv. 49). He is the Duke of Siena's brother,achino, who, in fulfilment of a cosmopolitan wager invidiously comparing Englishwomen with 'the she's of Italy', seeks to seduce the Britannic heroine, Imogen (I. iii. 29). When he fails and finds the evidence, he is caught and denounced as 'Italian fiend' by her husband, Posthumus, and as 'sight 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 dulter Britain operate / Most viley' (V. v. 196-8). Even while admitting the moral impecuniosity, 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 'poet 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 bevvy 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 garbment 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 besaddle his cast of characters in All's Well that Ends Well: 'Osorfabulos vos voscoro' (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 Gianganna 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 rational handbook: ben trovato, me perdonato, basta, for instance. Whether the braggart ensign Pistol is speaking Henry IV - or is he looking forward to Esperanto, himself with the maxim: 'Si fortune me tormente, io dirò tu' (V. v. 181FF). In any case, the meaning is not lost on the audience: his conversation is usually more or less appropriate, and sometimes Benvolio is clearly a man of good will, just as Mercutio is. Servants tend to be indulged, anglicised: even Brighella and Arlecchino, they are named Top English Oatcake and Susan Grindstone. Prince Escalus, representative of the Scala family presiding over Freetown, an anglophone version of Villanova, is in his first theatrical hit with Every Man in His Humor, in Florence and its cast was Italian. Revising the setting of this comedy, transposed the setting to London and rebaptised the local gentry with English names. Shakespeare never understood his own villainy; his single comedy in native dress, The Merry Wives of Windsor, is essentially an appendix to the history plays.

Charles Lamb once remarked: 'I am so old', which means that Shakespeare laid so few of his scenes at home in Fear of the English, he has so many dates of historical personalities, or so it must seem at this aesthetic level. Shakespeare, a robber of all possible personalities, is抵挡ed - or at least have scenes analogous to - the deities of the tragedies belong in that category. We have the Roman tragedies, which take place in a Ptolemaic court, a model realm for reconsidering the universal principles. As for Cymbeline, though its date is that of Cæsar, it is closer to the Renaissance Italian Romans. Out of the thirty-eight plays in the Folio, and more, we have to count the eleven constituting a significant proportion, worth the trouble to walk through them briefly: the commonplaces poetically, the conventional figur...
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 fortunae me tormentum spero me contentus*’ (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 Brigella and Arlecchino, they are named Potpan and Sugarsop. Hugh Oatcake and Susan Grindstone. Prince Escalus, the Latinised representative of the Scaliger 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 Plutarchian 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 Erasistrate 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 Petruchio: '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 amoral act of the clown Launce and his love dog Crab, who seem livelier than the other characters. 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. 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, sails from Florence. The Paduan Benedick, albeit 'the proper youth in Italy', is welcomed as 'Signior Montanto' (the upward thrust in a duel) because of the verbal parries that he will exchange with the even wittier Beatrice (V. i. 120; 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 Dubrovnik, formerly Ragusa in its more Italian days — seems to suit these Italian visitors who came from Messaline, wherever that may have been. Oh, and 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 to Italian role when he resolves to improve his mind by authors (H.v.161). The sea-captain Antonio, setting his peril, reminds us that these neighbouring states at war, which jeopardised the safety of any traveller. In this respect, he resembles the Pedant, alternate Mercellant, from Mantua in The Taming of the Italianism for 'merchant' better fits the Shakespeare Now France, the principal locale for All's Well at peace. But Tuscany can always play its traditional to our geometry' (I. ii. 16). At this moment 'the Flo Sennys' Siene are by the ears' (I. ii. 1); and the of these young Frenchmen are off to those wars, warr against 'those girls of Italy' (II. i. 19). That warning the femininity would repeat itself in Cymbeline, where it is more heeded. The royal patient has awarded Helena, who cured him, to her admirer Count Bertram, who fled, saying: 'T'll to the Tuscan wars, and never bed'. It is a tortuous story from The Decameron and reassurance along the way. Hence the tide keeps up flagging spirits with the promise of a happy ending; if only we are patient. Bertram's Florentine lady-love with Helena in what has come to be known as the be professional term for an old motif, an arrangement substitution under the cover of night (as in Measure for might we end by asking, with the boastful spy Parolli he crushed with a plot?' (IV. iii. 225).

We seem to be moving in a more problematic direction, Merchant of Venice, though not altogether towards that too is out to wive it wealthily, and his romance will rescue of Antonio's muddled business. The Venetian height, the mercantile metropolis itself, the central in Rialto forms a busy backyard for sharp practice further sharpened by — and sharpened against — the Shylock. The thwarting of his revenge, the transcendent sympathetic plea for mercy over his harsh treatment emanate from the more leisurely region of Ciusi and Belmont across the water, half-way to Illyria. With comedy, a successful resolution often entails an incision, normally from court to countryside, but in
too English, a lesser Falstaff, Malvolio aspires towards a Machiavellian role, when he resolves to improve his mind by reading 'politic authors' (II.i.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 Merchantant, 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 Sienoys [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 needed. 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. 175). It is a toruous 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 conspire with Helena in what has come to be known as 'the bed-trick', a crude professional term for an old motif, an arrangement for cohabitation 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 win it wealthy, 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
The storm itself is magically conjured up by Shakespeare, whose device is more imaginative than he is given credit for. The 'uninhabited island' itself must have been inspired by ancient Mediterranean, somewhere between Tunis, Sicily, Italy, and Naples, with the wind of external influence blowing. Prospero's isolation is a metaphor for the inner man, and his return to the stage is a symbolic act of reconciliation. 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 purgatory 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 sheepece for pastoral antics, 'a gallimaufry of gambols' celebrating the betrothal of the erstwhile shepherdess to her princely swain (IV. iv. 928). 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 not newly performed by that rare Italian master, Giulio Romano, who had the gift of eternity and could put breath into his work, would best define 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. 85–102)

This sculptural attribution, Shakespeare's only direct reference to an existing artist, bypasses Giulio Romano's chief pursuits in painting and architecture, not to mention his underground illustrations for Aretino's Sonetti lasciviosi, 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.

Where do we go from here? Where is that familiar atmosphere lost? The storm itself is magically conjured up by Shakespeare, whose device is more imaginative than he is given credit for. The 'uninhabited island' itself must have been inspired by ancient Mediterranean, somewhere between Tunis, Sicily, Italy, and Naples, with the wind of external influence blowing. Prospero's isolation is a metaphor for the inner man, and his return to the stage is a symbolic act of reconciliation. 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 purgatory 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 sheepece for pastoral antics, 'a gallimaufry of gambols' celebrating the betrothal of the erstwhile shepherdess to her princely swain (IV. iv. 928). 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.

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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-vox'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 de-throned 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 Gismondo of Salerno, 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 herhexme here' (II, 11, 98–101). 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.

Aesthetically, 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 locale 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 carrie it away, with the stylised thrust of duelling swords at the opening, the climax, and the dénouement (III, i, 73). 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 deified the 'Italian priest' through King John (III, i, 153). Yet in Romeo and Juliet Friar Lawrence can act as a moralistic yet sympathetic rassonneur.

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, ii, 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 venemom men's minds. Now Iago is not an archetypal

villain, any more than Romeo is an archetypal hero: a major Shakespearean characterisation is highly individualistic; is Iago a typical Venetian, any more than that group of men in Venice, Antonio, Cassio, Iago's incidentally victimised wife never knew a Florentine more kind and honest?

Incidentally, he trusts him as he would a compatriot, and those who are so far from being a compatriot. This is Venice, one of its magnificos—confidently affirms, awakes the hue and cry of the citizens when his daughter, gondoliere to Othello (I, i, 105). How could that be?

The peculiar topography of Venice, which colourful of all citiescapes, made it a high point of interest. Bantering with the melancholy Jacques in 2 Rosalind describes such tourists as having swam as she be. More sadly, it is reported that the Duke of Norfolk's exile by Richard II, after having fought in France, retired to Italy, died and was buried at Venice. Of course, that city in order to prize it—no, that Holof螃re shows off his pedantry by reciting a proverbial jingle, Lost Venice, Venice, / Chie mon te vode, che mon te / From this commanding city-state-empire, so well staffed with dukes and senators, Othello the Moor—like Styx, outsider. Yet, far more acculturated than Shylock, conversion now through marriage, he has been a Venetian with their naval leadership and has led against the infidel Turks. Venice functions as a point of the receding perspective of Act I. The subsequent Levantine colony, swerving centrifugally with the tide, if not in Cyprus, not Venice. If Iago is reductive what is an erring barbarian, he is even more mischievous Desdemona as a 'super-subtle Venetian' (I, iii, 201) befits not her but himself, for she is truly simple and only through the madness of Othello's psyche is he led to mistreat her—as if she were one of those courteous—re the so-called brothel scene.' After all, itself, with the reinforced presence of the Venetians, avenges his own crime by suicide, even while realising the state. And the self he kills becomes identified with Turkish infidel, once again and finally the outside.
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. 10). 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 'swung in a gondello' (IV. i. 38). More sally, 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, Venezie, / Che non te vide, che non te prequis' (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. 335ff). That epithet befits not her but himself; for she is truly simple and loyal, and it is only through the madness of Othello's psychical 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. 133). 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 Ghibelines fighting. SAV._Savonarola_ and LUC._Lucrezia Borgia_ are arrested by papal officers. Enter MICHÉLANGELO, 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 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.