

SHAKESPEARE’S MEDITERRANEAN COMEDIES. A FEW CONSIDERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH SOME OF SHAKESPEARE’S COMEDIES THE ACTION OF WHICH TAKES PLACE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN (ITALY). BY PLACING THE COMEDIES IN DISTINCT LOCATIONS ALL OVER EUROPE – MOSTLY ITALIAN – SHAKESPEARE (UN)WILLINGLY ENSURED AN EUROPEAN DIMENSION TO HIS PLAYS. PLAYWRIGHTS BEFORE COPYRIGHT LAWS WERE UNDER NO PRESSURE TO INVENT ORIGINAL STORIES AND INSTEAD VALUED NEW PRESENTATION OF OLD MATERIAL. ITALY WAS THE CONTEMPORARY CRUCIBLE OF DRAMATIC THEORY AND TASSO, FOREMOST AMONG THEORISTS, WROTE THAT ORIGINALITY IN DRAMATIC COMPOSITION SHOULD CONSIST IN FORM RATHER THAN IN MATTER. SHAKESPEARE TOOK HIS PLOTS WHEREVER HE FOUND THEM, AND HE MAKES HAMLET EXPLICIT ABOUT HIS PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY.

KEYWORDS: SHAKESPEARE, COMEDY, MEDITERRANEAN, ITALY.

Shakespeare’s England was a marginal island immersed in Europe’s continental culture (somewhat like today’s Taiwan as a peripheral island immersed in China’s continental culture). Shakespeare’s world was a white-centred world dominated by Christianity. For most Elizabethan Europeans, white Christians were the normal and civilized people living in the centre of the Renaissance world, and Italy was the geographical as well as cultural core of this world. Consequently, white Christians of Shakespeare’s time easily considered those races to be barbarous that lived away from Italy in the outskirts of the Mediterranean sea. It so happened, then, that the Turks, the Arabs, the Moors, etc., were peoples scattered off the Renaissance centre. So, it is no mere accident that all the five Shakespearean plays that we have discussed herein as related to race and racism are all set in the Roman or Italian world extending to lands over the Mediterranean.

Indeed, up to Shakespeare’s time, Western civilization had been a history of interactions and transactions among the peoples living in countries surrounding the Mediterranean sea, and Hellenism with its Greco-Roman tradition combining Hebraism with its Judaic-Christian tradition had been indelible influences Westerners were imbued with. As time went on, it so happened that Westerners began to think of all the non-Greek, non-Roman, or non-Christian peoples as barbarous tribes. And, as a result, the non-white peoples (the Moors, the Egyptians, the Arabs, the Turks, etc.) with their non-Christian beliefs were considered “barbarous,” fit only for racial discrimination, prejudice, and ill-

treatment. Besides this, owing to religious discrepancies and other cultural factors, the Jews were also included in the list that had to face racism not only in imaginary works but also in real life.

I have seen it that the *Palace of Pleasure*, the *Golden Ass*, the *Ethiopian History*, *Amadis of France*, the *Round Table*, bawdy comedies in Latin, French, Italian and Spanish have been thoroughly ransacked to furnish the playhouses in London. [1]

Such a statement testifies to the cosmopolitan nature of the London theatre companies and audiences alike. It also justifies the presence in the plays of Early Modern England of so many references to European locations which also abound in Shakespeare's plays, with a prominent position occupied by the Italian settings.

Ever since Chaucer's Clerk and Franklin told tales from the *Decameron*, English literature has borne traces of Italian stories, though to call them "Italian" is to dismiss their remote origins, in many cases lost in the distance of antiquity and Indo-European folklore. It was the Renaissance versions, however, the "mery bookes of *Italie*" that delighted sixteenth-century English readers and, according to Roger Ascham, undermined their faith and morals.

In a public lecture at the University of Sydney in 1966, Italian scholar Mario Praz – commenting on the scarcity of murders and treasons in Shakespeare's "Italian plays", asks a number of questions addressing the obvious differences between the nature of the Italian characters in the dramas of the age and those of Shakespeare:

Was it because Shakespeare disdained the cheap appeal of Italian criminality? Or because the broadness of his vision made him keep in the background the abject and horrible side of human nature, and stress the pure and noble one? Or because the acquaintance he had with Italian things enabled him to take a more sober view of Italian society than the current one circulated by religious or conservative fanatics and cherished by the thrill-seeking crowd? [2]

Indeed, the Italian characters in Shakespeare's plays are more gentle than those of his contemporaries; his Italy is idealized, and the overall impression is that Shakespeare did travel to that country, and had a first-hand knowledge of it. This is a topic that invited endless speculations over the centuries of Shakespearean scholarship. One interesting theory is that advanced by William Bliss who – almost jokingly – demonstrates that Shakespeare did travel to Italy in the late 1570s, having joined Drake in his round-the-world expedition.

Playwrights in those times before copyright laws were under no pressure to invent original stories and instead valued new presentation of old material. Italy was the contemporary crucible of dramatic theory and Tasso, foremost among theorists, wrote that originality in dramatic composition should consist in form rather than in matter. Shakespeare took his plots wherever he found them, and he makes Hamlet explicit about his play-within-the-play: "The story is extant, and writ in choice Italian" (3.2.240).

As a group, Shakespeare's comedies are in many ways his most complicated plays. Their plots are often convoluted; the multiple identities of many of their characters can be confusing; and the emotions they produce range freely from delight and wonder to anxiety and grief. But the comedies also include many of Shakespeare's most satisfying and most spectacular and popular plays. At one level, there is the sheer humour: the comedies are rife with extravagant characters given to outrageous behaviour. At another, there is

romance galore, although love can be unrequited or frustrated. But audiences also accompany characters into fantastic or seemingly ungoverned realms, where personalities can suddenly change, for better or for worse. Characters and audiences alike also discover that intrepid exploration of new territories, whether out in the world or within themselves, can alter and improve reality with the „inventiveness and curiosity of a child” [3]. It is hardly surprising, then, that Shakespeare’s comedies continue to give new generations good cause for celebration.

It has already been mentioned the European locations of Shakespeare’s comedies. With the exception of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As you Like It*, most of them are set around the Mediterranean: *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is set in Navarre; *Twelfth Night, or What you Will* in Illyria; *All’s Well That Ends Well* in Rossillion, Paris but also in Florence, Italy; *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* in Verona, Padua, Milan; *The Merchant of Venice* in Venice; *Much Ado About Nothing* in Messina, in Sicily; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in ancient Athens; *The Comedy of Errors* in ancient Syracuse and Ephesus; and *Troilus and Cressida* in ancient Troy.

Louise George Clubb, commenting upon Shakespeare’s indebtedness to Italian sources, provides the following list:

- *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has sometimes been connected with Boccaccio’s novella of Tito and Gisippo, *Decameron* (c. 1352), x, 8, through Elyot’s *Boke named the Governour* (1531) and other English versions. The complete *Decameron* was not translated into English until 1620.
- *Romeo and Juliet* is related to a story in Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino* (1476) 33, retold in Luigi Da Porto’s *Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*, “Romeo e Giulietta” (1530), again in Matteo Bandello’s *Novelle* (1554–73), ii, 19, translated by Pierre Boaistuau and appended to Francois de Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques Extraictes des Oeuvres Italiennes de Bandel* (1559), by William Painter, *Palace of Pleasure* (1566–67), ii, 25, and into verse by Arthur Brooke, “The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet” (1562).
- *The Merchant of Venice* fuses several sources, including Masuccio’s *Novellino* 14, and Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, *Il Pecorone* (c. 1390), iv, 1, not translated in Shakespeare’s time.
- *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has been thought to owe something to *Pecorone* ii, 2.
- *Much Ado About Nothing* is indebted to Bandello’s novella i, 22, of Timbreo and Fenicia.
- *Twelfth Night* comes from a plot also used in Bandello ii, 36, and Barnabe Riche, *Farewell to the Militarie Profession*, the tale of Apolonius and Silla (1581).
- *Measure for Measure* is based on Giovanni Battista Giraldi’s *Ecatommiti* 8, 5, the novella of Iuriste and Epitia (1565), the whole collection translated into French by Gabriel Chappuys (1584); the same story was adapted by George Whetstone as a play *Promos and Cassandra* (1578) and in *Heptameron of Civil Discourse* (1582).
- *Othello* also is from the *Ecatommiti* 3, 7, the tale of the Moor of Venice.
- *All’s Well That Ends Well* follows *Decameron* iii, 9, the tale of Giletta, translated by William Painter, *Palace of Pleasure* (1566–67), i, 38.
- *Cymbeline* contains elements suggesting that Shakespeare knew both *Decameron* ii, 9, the tale of Zinevra, and an anonymous English version *Frederyke of Jennen* (1516) [4].

More Italian stories than these were known and adapted in England, but the best known were the complete *novelle* collections available in French: Boccaccio’s, Bandello’s and Giraldi’s; and the chivalric romance cycles, of which the crown jewel, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, was translated by John Harington in 1591. All of these narratives were outgrowths of longer traditions, with roots in the classics – Homer, Ovid, Apuleius, Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius – and in folktales from as far away as India, transmitted in the *Gesta Romanorum*, hagiographies, and various other forms.

It fully explains and justifies what I would call “the Mediterranean dimension” of most of Shakespeare’s comedies. In *All’s Well That Ends Well* – a comedy which takes us from Roussillon to Paris, and from Paris to Florence – we find a surprising linguistic joke played against Paroles, a Frenchman, by his co-nationals, which is meant to demonstrate his inability to speak any foreign languages. This braggart soldier directly descended from the *commedia dell’arte* does not understand the invented words of his captors, who – by such gobbledegook – simply stress that he has nothing to do with military action:

2 LORD Throca movousus, cargo, cargo, cargo.
ALL Cargo, cargo, cargo, villiando par corbo, cargo.
PAROLLES O, ransom, ransom! do not hide mine eyes. [*They seize him.*]
1 SOLDIER Boskos thromuldo boskos.
PAROLLES I know you are the Muskos’ regiment:
 *And I shall lose my life for want of language;
 If there be here German, or Dane, low Dutch,
 Italian, or French, let him speak to me; I’ll
 discover that which shall undo the Florentine.*
1 SOLDIER Boskos vauvado: I understand thee, and can speak
 thy tongue. Kerely bonto, sir, betake thee to thy
 faith, for seventeen poniards are at thy bosom.
 (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, 4.1.64-76, emphasis
 added)

In an earlier play, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare had specifically addressed this kind of problematic innocence among young men who had no firsthand experience of other countries. “Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits,” Valentine advises Proteus, as he dreams of seeing the wonders of the world rather than staying at home:

VALENTINE
Cease to persuade, my loving Proteus:
Home-keeping youth have ever homely wits.
Were’t not affection chains thy tender days
To the sweet glances of thy honour’d love,
I rather would entreat thy company
To see the wonders of the world abroad,
Than, living dully sluggardized at home,
Wear out thy youth with shapeless idleness.
But since thou lovest, love still and thrive therein,
Even as I would when I to love begin.
 (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1.1.1-11)

It is no longer a surprise that geographical precision was not Shakespeare’s strongest point. The play abounds in geographical confusions but, according to Brennan,

“...Shakespeare’s purpose on stage was not to create a tangible Verona and Milan but rather to utilize their nominal allure to position his play within the current orbit of continental literary fashion” [5].

By placing the comedies in distinct locations all over Europe – mostly Italian – Shakespeare (un)willingly ensured an European dimension to his plays. The underlying opposition of England and Italy ensures “a spatialized model for basic and culture-specific value oppositions constructed across (border) lines such as northern versus Mediterranean, Protestant versus Catholic, nature versus artifice, authenticity versus sophistication, plebeian versus middle class versus aristocratic, land versus trade, country versus city, male versus female...”[6].

Shakespeare was well aware that the British plays of his time were a mixture of styles, addressing all social classes, ancient and Biblical stories, and everyday life. These are the plays which he read, wrote and acted in. His plays are defined by his creativity, and sensitivity to the human condition. He had a keen sense of fun, which allowed him to polish his skills, as he learned to recognize human nature, and command plot, language and poetry.

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