

8. From *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, by Richard Paul Roe

2011



Richard Paul Roe 1922-2010

captioned with witty and often illuminating comments.

Richard Paul Roe, who died soon after publishing *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*,¹ exemplifies the best of the Oxfordian mind. A retired attorney and Shakespeare enthusiast, Roe meticulously followed up every possible reference to Italy in the Works, and over 20 years visited each one. His discoveries show that “the playwright,” as Roe tactfully calls him, knew Italy at first hand and in detail. This single fact alone calls the traditional authorship account into question, since the Stratford grain dealer never left England. The earl of Oxford, on the other hand, extensively visited Italy, including all the towns, cities and regions featured in the plays and poems.

The following extract from Chapter 8, “Midsummer in Sabbioneta” describes Roe’s exciting discovery of renaissance Italy’s “little Athens,” the true location of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Roe’s book is illustrated with his and Stephanie Hopkins Hughes’s eloquent photographs

On my way from Verona to Florence, I made a stop-over for a few days in Mantua, to see the many great works of Giulio Romano (c. 1499-1546). It was a kind of pilgrimage: Giulio Romano is the only Renaissance artist ever named by the playwright. His name is spoken by the Third Gentleman in *The Winter’s Tale*, V.ii:

No: the princess hearing of her mother’s
Statue, which is in the keeping of Paulina—
A piece many years in doing and now newly
Performed 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 he is her ape ...

On a Sunday morning, a few days later, when ready to continue on to Florence, I was chatting at breakfast with another traveler. He asked me if I had yet visited the unusual small city near Mantua called Sabbioneta. I had never heard of it. He said it was well worth a visit, being a showcase

¹ *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy: Retracing the Bard’s Unknown Travels*, by Richard Paul Roe (Harper Perennial, 2011).

of idealistic architecture, and completely constructed in only one architectural style, the late-sixteenth-century style called “Mannerist.” Moreover it was entirely built during the reign, and under the personal supervision, of its sixteenth-century duke, Vespasiano Gonzaga, a man of singular erudition.

He mentioned this to me, he said, because on Sundays, this very day, escorted tours were offered to the visiting public, since Sabbioneta had recently been restored to be almost as it was when originally built in the sixteenth century. I was intrigued. It would be only a bit of a detour, and though I assumed Sabbioneta wouldn’t have anything to do with the Italian Plays, I realized it would have been under construction, with some of it completed, at the very same time—around 1573 or 1574—when many events described or alluded to in the Italian Plays were happening. In any case, I thought, no matter what, I could experience being in a perfect chunk of what had become my favorite Italian century. So I went there.

Sabbioneta is about forty-five kilometers—only twenty-five miles—southwest of Mantua, on Highway 420, and is still surrounded by its massive walls. I easily drove through the handsome fortified gate, Porta Vittoria, which stood welcoming on its western flank, noting the attractively paved interior streets, as I entered the little city. Straight ahead, I saw a small crowd of people standing in front of a building. I parked nearby. From the sign on the front of the building, I knew it was the local tourist office, and a smaller placard said this was the very hour for which a city tour was scheduled. I bought a tour ticket and was given a brochure entitled *La Piccola Atena*—“Little Athens.” I also purchased a tourist guide in English, with full color pictures and a descriptive text of more than seventy pages.

Our guide explained the carefully planned layout of the city’s streets and plazas, and she told us about the wealthy, enlightened duke who had built the city. He was Vespasiano Gonzaga Colonna (1531-1591), a member of the cadet branch of the powerful Gonzaga of Mantua. Vespasiano was born on 6 December 1531, in Forlì, in the Papal State of Romagna. His father, Luigi Gonzaga, was an illustrious condottiere in the service of Emperor Charles V. Luigi, usually called “Rodomonte,” died when Vespasiano was only one year old.

As a teenager, Vespasiano was sent to the Royal Court of Spain, there to acquire an education in both academics and military disciplines. In service to Philip II, he rose in rank to become experienced in warfare, then a commanding general, a viceroy, and builder in both Europe and North Africa. Vespasiano was an avid student of Vitruvius, the Roman architect and engineer who wrote *De Architectura*—the only surviving Roman treatise on the subject—which he carried with him at all times, even during battle.

Along our guided way, we visited the interiors of a number of impressive buildings, including the once-elegant ducal palazzo, the summer palace, and other structures housing the duke’s galleries, museum, personal church and ducal mausoleum, an elegant small theater, and even his long gallery for exercise, traditional for noblemen of his day. I remembered that in other ducal palaces I had visited, such facilities were included as *part* of the palace. Here, however, the *city itself* was largely the palace of the duke. Indeed, his guards, physician, aides, and servants were accommodated in various edifices *within* the city. In every case, all designs, materials, and the details

of their execution had been subject to the approval of Vespasiano Gonzaga. His walled town was his brainchild and a one-of-a-kind masterpiece.

Some of the buildings in Sabbioneta were originally commodious quarters for the duke's invited guests, his pleasure having been in inviting the erudite among both Italy's, and other western Europe's, nobility and intelligentsia for a visit to his model city. While there, they would admire his rich collections of paintings and sculpture and take part in the festivities, salons, and scholarly lectures that he sponsored during his lifetime. Thus, in addition to the name "Sabbioneta," Vespasiano Gonzaga's guests—and then its steadily increasing numbers of visitors—gave it a second name, *La Piccola Atena*—"Little Athens"—not because of its architecture but because of its immediate reputation as a hospitable gathering place for scholars and intellectuals.

With Vespasiano's passing in 1591, all this ended. Only since the latter half of the twentieth century—a hiatus of some 400 years—have many of these same kinds of events been offered again, with prominent Italian scholars of relevant arts, histories, and literature participating.

Toward the end of the tour, as we stood in the shade of the arched Porta della Vittoria, the architectural main gate of Sabbioneta, our guide explained that this passageway was also known as "*il Quercia dei Duca*." Not understanding the word *Quercia* I questioned one of our group. "Oak," he said, "the Duke's Oak."

I gasped in disbelief. Thinking I had misunderstood, he repeated, "The guide said, 'the Duke's Oak.'" My breath nearly left me, and I steadied myself against the wall. The Duke's Oak? Could this be true?

A Midsummer Night's Dream! The playwright had been in Sabbioneta! A world of understanding burst in my brain. Of course. It made so much sense. I reached my parked car and collapsed. I grabbed my dog-eared paperback of *Dream* and quickly leafed through it. Indeed, the play was set in Athens. It was so designated, not only at the beginning of Act I, but I counted more than thirty references throughout the play to "Athens" or "Athenian"—though tellingly, no references to Greeks, Greece, Grecians, Attica, or Atticans: only "Athens" and "Athenians." It was no accident. The playwright had wanted his *Dream* to take place only there, in "Athens." But it was increasingly clear that there was actually here—in Sabbioneta, *La Piccola Atena*—"Little Athens." Here in Italy.

And the Duke's Oak? Gears clicked into place.

In Act I Scene 2 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in admiration of its own Duke Theseus and his beautiful bride, Hippolyta, six of its rustic characters—Quince, the carpenter, Snug, the joiner, Bottom, the weaver, Flute, the bellows-mender, Snout, the tinker and Starveling, the tailor—decide to put on a play. It is to be their rendition of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, an ancient love story. They meet to discuss their preparations and to be assigned their roles:

Bottom: We will meet, and there we may rehearse most obscenely, and courageously.

Take pains, be perfitt: adieu.

Quince: At the Duke's Oak we meet.

It has been assumed over the years, that the Duke's Oak, as mentioned in *Dream*, is some mighty oak tree on the outskirts of Athens, in Greece. What little commentary there has been merely suggest it is an oak tree in the wood close to a town of such characteristics as to merit being name for the Duke. But by now, having seen in preceding chapters the playwright's allusions to unusual things in Italy, this reference to the Duke's Oak should, especially since it is a proper name, give thoughtful pause. It should never have been dismissed in such an offhanded way. Indeed, the playwright has gone a bit out of his way to bring attention to it.

No ransacking of the legend-history of the hero Theseus reveals such a place or name. Nor were there any dukes, per se, in ancient Athens, Chaucer notwithstanding. "Duke" (*duc* in French; *duca* in Italian; Herzog in German) is a Western European title. In French and Italian "Duke" is derived from the Latin word *dux*, and while there were none in Greece, there were plenty of them in Renaissance Italy.

The second and only other allusion to something that is unique in *Dream* (and located in "Little Athens") is not recognized as noteworthy in modern editions of the play, due in large part to the zeal of modern editors. But it is significant, and one further piece that fits perfectly into the puzzle for *Dream*.

The unique reference—the word "temple" with a lower-case "t"—appears in Act IV Scene 1 of *Dream*, in the wood. Near the end of this scene "temple" appears in typical modern editions, in the following lines:

Theseus: Fair lovers, you are fortunately met.
Of this discourse we more will hear anon.
Egeus, I will overbear your will,
For in the temple, by and by, with us these couples shall eternally be knit ...

Shortly afterward, the following exchange occurs:

Demetrius: Are you sure
That we awake? It seems to me
That yet we sleep, we dream. Do not you think
The Duke was here, and bid us follow him?
Hermia: Yea, and my father.
Helena: And Hippolyta.
Lysander: And bid us follow to the temple.

In both the Quarto and First Folio editions, the word "temple" is capitalized. There it is spelled accurately, "Temple." It is a small matter, to be sure, but as was demonstrated in Chapter 3 and will be demonstrated again in Chapter 9, it is a matter of no small significance when seeking to confirm the true location of the playwright's "Athens." In Sabbioneta, "Little Athens," there exists a "Temple." It is the church abutting Vespasiano Gonzaga's mausoleum, known as *La Chiesa dell' Incoronata* (The Church of the Crowned Virgin). More simply, however, that little church was referred to only as "the Temple." With a capital "T."

It would come as no surprise if, during his travels, the [playwright was captivated by this perfectly designed little town, Sabbioneta. He may well have been invited here. Giving free reign to his imagination, it would have been a short leap to create a dream sequence with a title describing what he had written.

Moreover, it is commonly acknowledged that the playwright's education included Greek language and history, so perhaps he was remembering the ancient Greek love story of Pyramus and Thisbe, and the legendary hero of ancient Greece, a king named Theseus who captured the queen of the Amazons, Hippolyta, and made her his wife. Perhaps. But it is abundantly clear that the romance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a romance between two people who are very different from heroes who are Greek.

By "cracking the codes" of three small elements - Little Athens, the Duke's Oak, and the Temple - it is certain that the playwright visited Sabbioneta. Through complete serendipity, I had come upon yet another Italian setting for a Shakespearean play; and it was in Italy, not Greece, as the world has supposed