


***The Shakespeare Guide to Italy:
Retracing the Bard's Unknown Travels.***

by Richard Paul Roe

New York, Harper Perennial, 2011

reviewed by Virginia J. Renner

hallenging lovers of Shakespeare and scholars of history and literature, Richard Roe's *Guide to the Bard's Italian travels* persuades us, as we follow his itinerary, to revise our traditional view of Shakespeare, his life, and his world. European travelers as well as Shakespeare scholars will enjoy accompanying the author as he identifies exact sites in Shakespeare's ten Italian plays. Roe's claim, that the many precise locations he reveals attest to the playwright's own travels in Italy and Sicily, has significant implications for Shakespeare studies and the authorship question.

Beautifully produced, this book has over 150 illustrations, including many color photographs, paintings, engravings and 19 maps, ten drawn especially for this work. It is a fascinating travelogue, a genuinely useful guide for tourists and fans of Italy and Sicily. If it gains the audience it deserves, it should probably be made available in electronic form for the convenience of students and travelers. At that point, if not in another edition, the addition of an index would greatly enhance its usefulness. It was also momentarily disappointing that Roe did not include the Induction scene when discussing *Taming of the Shrew*, and that he stopped short of following Othello when the action moves to Cyprus. But this work is the result of Roe's focus on just those plays set in Italy and Sicily, and interested readers can be grateful he traveled as far as he did to report his discoveries.

Richard Roe, who did intensive research in many libraries to supplement his field trips abroad, is careful in his Preface to leave any revolutionary implications for the rest of us to recognize after reading the facts that he presents. When matters of interpretation arise, Roe readily labels them as his own. Certainly, after he shows, with the aid of detailed maps, how two gentlemen could go by waterways from their home in Verona to Milan, how Lucentio in *Taming* did the same from Pisa to Padua, and why they would want to do so, the reader is enlightened and the plays are enlivened. Indeed, after the discoveries presented in just the first few chapters of this book, it seems probable that the playwright knew the Italian landscape from first-hand experience.

Starting with *Romeo and Juliet* and Roe's reminder that no balcony appears in the text, we tour the city with the author, not only to Juliet's house, where a balcony is

tacked onto the front to please the tourists, but to all the places we hear about in the play. Even lifetime readers of the drama may be surprised at new information about Verona that Roe's persistence uncovers. The examples analyzed below represent but a few of those which appear in the *Guide*, demonstrating Roe's stance that the playwright meant what he wrote, particularly about geographical matters, and that there are few mistakes or transcription errors in the original text, despite what modern play editors often decide.

We're given enough background in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to see this Renaissance city as a center for trade, travelers, and shipping and to lead us to definitions employed during the 16th century for such terms as "tide," "flood," and "road." These do not pertain to the sea or land route; rather, they refer to the connecting canals and river systems that took travelers from Verona to Milan, a more convenient and quicker journey than going by land. Talk of being shipped or sailing did not mean on the sea. Yet, Roe cites the editor's note in the second edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, "Shakespeare seems to have supposed that Verona was a seaport" (40). This is only one of many editions that indicate misunderstanding of what these particular words meant. In the first line of Act 2, scene 5, when Speed says to Launce, "Welcome to Padua!" Roe assures us that Speed is joking with Launce, and that there is no need to change the city to Milan, or to give a note that the author made a mistake, forgetting where they were.¹ This *Guide* explains why there is both a Duke and an Emperor of Milan and why the Emperor disappears, which editors note as an authorial mistake. The mystery and the meaning of St. Gregory's Well, the place Proteus sends poor Thurio, is made chillingly clear.

By the time we reach Chapter 4 and *Taming of the Shrew*, the reader is glad to have the five maps immediately at hand showing the waterways from Pisa to Padua, and the approaches to the city, and the fine photographs that place us perfectly in the local geography. The end result is an increased confidence in the original play text.

Discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* begins with explanations of why Antonio's ships certainly can land at the five ports named in the play, though some editions dispute this, and why his "wealthy Andrew" does not refer to a Spanish galleon captured at Cadiz in 1596. This assumption leads the Arden editor to date the play "in its present form not earlier than August 1596."² The background Roe provides on sea commerce and 16th century history leads us to think of it as an earlier play.

Major portions of Chapter 6 concern Portia's journey from Belmont to Venice and back again, revealing where you can find her stunning Villa Foscari that Michael Radford featured in his 2004 film version of the play. There are also directions to and photos of Shylock's still surviving penthouse in the Jewish quarter of Venice.

Of the many passages explored and their meanings revised, perhaps the most interesting one that Roe's research finally cleared from the muddle scholars have made of it, comes in *Merchant*:

Bring them I pray thee with imagin'd speed
Vnto the Tranect, to the common Ferrie
Which trades to Venice; waste no time in words....
(3.4.53)

What is or was “the Tranect”? The Quarto (1600) and First Folio spelling given above is usually in the footnotes and editors change the text to “traject,” the meaning given as ferry from the Italian, “traghetto.” By now, halfway through the volume, we have learned to pay attention to capital letters and to suspect they refer to something specific, not general. It is fascinating to read the description from Montaigne’s travel journal dated November 3, 1580, telling us what the Tranect is and how it works. A boat is transported across the narrow spit of land from the canal to the Venetian Lagoon “...with wheels that they put underneath, over a wooden flooring, and launch them into the canal that goes into the sea [Lagoon] in which Venice is situated.” Montaigne’s journey, as well as Portia’s journey, put them both in Fusina, the location of the Tranect. Even more startling, editors might have found the answer in a book by Fynes Moryson, *Itinerary*, published in 1617 (STC18205), or in *Coryat’s Crudities* of 1611 (STC5808). Roe found it all in the *Modern Language Review* of January, 1932, in Violet M. Jeffery’s work which describes “the ingenious contrivance for transferring boats from the canal to lagoon” (146-51). Because modern editors typically assume they know more about Italy than Shakespeare did, they change the spelling and leave the original Tranect in the notes, never bothering to search for the correct explanation.³

Only the first act of *Othello* takes place in Venice, which the author must have known well as the text includes local details, such as the gown Senators wore in public and the location and meaning of the Sagittary. The sources for the story, by Bandello and Cinthio, were not set in Venice, had no such details, and were not translated into English until much later. By walking to the area known in Venice as the Sagittaria, the street of the arrow makers, Roe was able to find the canal landing, or *Fondamento Orseolo*, where Othello met Desdemona before escorting her to a nearby house for their first night together in the Sagittary. Roe’s close reading of the playwright’s text and investigation on the ground together prove important. Until the 2010 Oxfordian Shakespeare edition of *Othello* by Ren Draya and Richard F. Whalen, editors have never pictured exactly where it is and what it was. M. R. Ridley in the Arden 1958 edition came close, but backed away. In most editions, including the Oxford and RSC editions, the notes often emphasize the sign of the Centaur, associate it with lust and Iago’s slurs, slanting future critical interpretations away from the topical and empirical cues of the original text.

The chapter on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is relatively short, but a delightful surprise, taking us to Sabbioneta, or “Little Athens,” the city that Roe asserts is the inspiration for the setting of *Dream*. This ideal city, still tiny, evokes an enlarged stage set. The brainchild of Vespasiano Gonzaga, its construction continued even as this duke invited cultured guests there for learned discussions and arranged displays of his “rich collections” to show the “nobility and intelligentsia.” Its traditional name, “La Piccola Athene,” was given for these erudite meetings, not for its architecture. Roe found, unlike most continental palaces, that “the city itself was largely the palace of the duke”(182). The Duke’s Oak and the Temple, referred to in the play, are there. Today nature preserves protect what little remains of the marshy lands outside its walls. The news that the setting of this play, full of fairy magic, was inspired by a real

place, that it started as another man's dream and ended with his death in 1591, may be disturbing for some. Does it change what we hear in the familiar text?

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

(5.1.15-17)

Perhaps the discoveries in *All's Well that Ends Well* are the most concrete of all in their exactitude and in providing fine opportunities for Florentine tourists. Roe acknowledges this himself when he says, "It is in this scene, especially, where the playwright displays his most precise knowledge of that city. His descriptions are a first-person testament to his having walked the streets, visited its sites and learned of its colloquialisms..." (199). Beginning with the stage directions of Act 3, scene 5, Roe corrects the OED about the definition of "tuckets." Then he reconstructs the action, where the Widow of Florence and others are gathered as Helen joins them, where Bertram and the men enter the City walls, where they are headed and their route—and he includes photos of all the places in the scene. This detailed explanation will be instructive for actors, editors, and audiences alike. The sight lines are still there and we can see it now, just as the author conceived it then from his visit there.

Messina, the setting for *Much Ado About Nothing*, is not like other cities explored in the book, as a large earthquake nearly leveled it in 1908. Undeterred, Roe identifies places in the play and assures us "...their actual sixteenth-century locations, nonetheless, have been fully verified" (220). We learn that the Royal Palace, the Temple and the family's "old Monument" in the Monumental (or Great) Cemetery were actual landmarks when the playwright was there. The Cemetery does still exist. The usual date given for *Much Ado* is 1598 and the author examines this assumption. Roe calls attention to the special gift Count Claudio sent to Hero, a pair of perfumed gloves. He notes that Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, famously presented Queen Elizabeth with a gift of perfumed gloves when he returned from his year in Italy in 1576 and questions a reference to it twenty years later, when such gloves were then a commonplace possession for noble ladies. The "gloves" incident and echoes in the play of recent exploits of Don John (Juan) of Austria, who died in 1578, make the play's orthodox date of composition look doubtful to Roe.

Bohemia did have a coastline, we learn, when the king was Ottakar II. He inherited the throne of Bohemia in 1253, and later inherited its coastline of sandy beaches in 1269. Therefore, for Roe, the play takes place in the thirteenth century when Palermo and its Palazzo Reale (or Normani) was a famous cultural center, and Bohemia's Prague castle was an austere fortress. This setting works until Leontes sends messengers off to consult the oracle at Delphos, long gone by the Middle Ages. As a result, modern play productions are now usually set in classical times. Roe concentrates on the journey by sea to Greece and back, demonstrating how it depicts 16th century travel time accurately, the precise route taken, and the specific sites that it features. Meanwhile, most editors are still talking of landlocked Bohemia and a landlocked

author. However, John Pitcher, editor of the 2010 Arden edition text, writes: “This clearly wasn’t Shakespeare’s mistake, but a joke. ... A shipwreck off Bohemia in Act 3 would alert early audiences to the unreality and make-believe that was to follow in the remainder of *The Winter’s Tale*. But if the joke was familiar why didn’t Jonson get it? Was he out of humour, or was there something that for once he simply didn’t know he ought to laugh at?”⁴ Or was Ben Jonson being his usual disingenuous self?

Knowing Roe had become an expert on the realities of Mediterranean voyages during the 16th century, we accept his explanation of how Prospero and Miranda, adrift in a small boat, could arrive safely on that incredible island in *The Tempest*. This enchanted setting, complete with its exotic sounds and smells, muddy pools and yellow sands, according to Roe, is real; the book includes photos of it. Critics think of it as an imagined construct, though Sicilians must have long known it. In his book *Shakespeare and Italy: The City and the Stage*, Jack D’Amico writes: “The island, like the version of the ideal city, exists in the imagination. It is the quality of the isle that makes it, among other things, more like a theater in a city than a geographical place fixed solidly on God’s globe.”⁵ Nevertheless, that we can find this magical place and visit it is a major thrill of this book, a surprise best left for each reader to enjoy.

Despite the traditional editorial notes about the Bermuda Islands in Act 1, scene 2, explaining the “still-vexed Bermoothes,” Roe insists this is a local joke that Londoners enjoyed. The 1999 Arden edition now includes, after its note on the Bermuda Islands, a second explanation about a section of London where illegal distilleries, thieves and fugitives were found, which is called the Bermoothes or the Bermudas. As Roe points out, why go to the Bermuda Islands to get “dew” when this kind of “dew” is plentiful close at hand.

One last revelation, dependant on learning that Catalan, with good reason, was the official language in Sicily until 1609 and how this word-sensitive author used it effectively in naming Caliban and Ariel, provides a satisfying ending to this astonishing achievement.

Endnotes

¹ In addition to the 3 mentioned in Roe, of 5 additional editions checked, only the RSC admits it might “conceivably” be a joke.

² John Russell Brown, ed., *The Merchant of Venice* (London, Methuen, 1955). The Arden Shakespeare (Third series) Introd., xxvii.

³ In addition to the Arden edition Roe mentioned, of the 6 editions checked, none understood what the Tranect truly was.

⁴ John Pitcher, ed., *The Winter’s Tale* (London, Methuen, 2010). The Arden Shakespeare (Third series) Introd., 100.

⁵ Jack D’Amico, *Shakespeare and Italy: The City and the Stage* (Gainesville:University Press of Florida, 2001), 172.