

Shakespeare's Visit to Italy

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Did Shakespeare ever visit Italy? His plays contain some evidence that he did, but so far it has not been enough to convince a majority of scholars.

The picture has now become much clearer than it was. This article will give reasons to believe that by the end of 1593 Shakespeare had visited the North Italian town of Bassano del Grappa, some forty miles north-west of Venice, and had probably spent several days there. During his stay he carefully studied a very large external fresco, and possibly made sketches of it.

This new information agrees well with what Shakespeare's plays already suggest about his knowledge of Italy. Bassano was a subject territory of the Venetian Republic, and Venice is the Italian city of which Shakespeare's plays show the most detailed knowledge. Besides Venice and Bassano, he seems to have spent time in Padua, and possibly in Milan, Mantua and Verona.

His geographical knowledge of the Po valley in general is strikingly accurate, and has been seriously underestimated by modern scholars. He knows that nearly all the chief cities, such as Padua, Verona, Bergamo, Mantua and Milan are accessible by water, and are commonly reached in this way by ship. The thirty principal tributaries of the Po were all navigable, and they were linked by an extensive system of canals, of which the surviving remnants can often still be seen.¹ Shakespeare is likely to have

1. There is an early map of the canals in Padua at the end of *Le Cose più Notabili di Padova* (Padova, 1791). Despite some omissions, much the most comprehensive English account of the early waterways is that of Sir Edward Sullivan,

derived his knowledge of these rivers and canals from personal experience, rather than from a few Italian informants in London. His so-called "mistakes" are largely the invention of modern scholars. In *The Tempest*, for example, Prospero and Miranda are sent from Milan to the sea by an inland waterway, and then transferred to an unrigged "butt" when they reach the coast (1.2.144-147).² The distance from Milan ("some leagues to sea") is vague (as Prospero's account might well be), but the actual course of the journey itself is perfectly accurate. Shakespeare knows that Milan is an inland city, but travel to the coast can easily be made by water.

In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Shakespeare implies, quite correctly, that a river (the Adige) which can carry ships flows through Verona (2.3.31-51). The clown Lance is twice told that he will "lose the tide" on this inland river if he delays in boarding his boat. Modern scholars ridicule the reference to "the tide", but there are good reasons for believing that Shakespeare knew perfectly well what he was writing about. We know from the testimony of contemporary travellers that the fast-flowing rivers of North Italy could be much reduced in strength by the opening of canals and irrigation channels. By these means their levels could be made to fall and rise again just like a "tide", or a "flood", as Pantino calls it.³ Lance says that the river in Verona may become "dry" - exactly what might happen if it had been diverted into a canal at a point higher upstream. In *Othello*, the Venetian Brabantio refers to a "flood-gate" (1.3.57) - the obvious means by which the river levels - the "flood" - would be raised or lowered. Here Shakespeare again shows his intimate knowledge of the waterways.

"Shakespeare and the Waterways of North Italy", *The Nineteenth Century* 64 (August, 1908): 215-232. See also A.L.Sells, *The Paradise of Travellers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), 113-15, 143.

2. *The Arden Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (1999). All quotations and line references are from the most recent Arden editions: *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. John Russell Brown (1959); *Othello*, ed. E.A.J. Honigsmann (1997); *The Taming of the Shrew*, ed. Brian Morris (1981); *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, ed. William C. Carroll (2004).
3. The French traveller Jacques de Villamont comments on the river Ticino: "les habitants ont osté la moitié de la force par un tres beau canal". See *Les Voyages du Seigneur de Villamont* (Rouen: 1618, revised edition), 24.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* he mentions "a sailmaker in Bergamo" (5.1.69–70). Modern editors dismiss this as an impossibility, but such a judgment does not take into account the history and geographical situation of the town. Bergamo is indeed an inland town, but it is situated between two large lakes – Lake Como and Lake Iseo. The eastern boundary of its territory was, and still is, the long "coastline" formed by the River Oglio and the western half of Lake Iseo. Until the 1880s these waterways were much the most convenient means of communication between the surrounding towns. They were such a vital resource that for centuries Bergamo and Brescia fought each other for control of them. So for the needs of both warfare and internal trade the Bergamaschi had to build their own ships on Lake Iseo, whether powered by sails, or oars or both. The tradition of boatbuilding still survives on the western shore of the lake. Far from being an anomaly, sailmakers were an essential part of Bergamo's economy. The sails were sewn from cloth, and by the 16th century the town was an important centre for the manufacture of textiles.⁴

It is significant that Shakespeare keeps much of his topographical knowledge to himself. He knows, for instance, that St. Gregory's well is located near Milan, but he does not reveal this piece of local knowledge to the audience of *Two Gentlemen*. In *The Taming of the Shrew* he associates the act of "coming ashore" with the University of Padua. He evidently knew that there was a landing-stage on the canal which ran just behind the university, where newly arrived students such as Lucentio would usually disembark, but again he keeps this information to himself (1.1.42).⁵

Scholarly scepticism about Shakespeare's visit to Italy has always been bolstered by the almost total lack of evidence that he knew Italian. But such evidence is now abundant. We know that between 1592 and 1594 he studied the works of several Italian

4. I owe this information to Laura and Alberto Faccini, and to documents kindly provided by Milena Calzi of the Tourist Office in Iseo (see the guide to Lake Iseo issued by APT del Bergamasco and del Bresciano). I was also given much useful information by Gian Alberto Zanoletti of the Museo della Barca Lariana, Pianello. For superb illustrations of boats on Lake Como, see M. Gozzi, G. Miglio, G. Zanoletti, *Le barche a remi del Lario* (Milan: Leonardo Arte, 1999).

5. Bells, *Paradise* 114–15, cited in the Arden note on this line.

poets in the original, and used them freely as sources for his plays. He borrowed much, for example, from Torquato Tasso's pastoral verse drama, *Aminta*, as he wrote both *Love's Labour's Lost* and (probably in 1593) an early version of *As You Like It*. He also had access to a more complete copy than any that has so far survived.⁶

There may have been good professional reasons why he chose to study Italian at this particular time. In these years the London theatres were closed by an almost continuous epidemic of plague. The acting companies were forced to travel in the provinces, where they would have been welcomed by élite audiences who had also left the plague-ridden city, who needed high quality entertainment, who could pay well and provide accommodation. Shakespeare certainly seems to have been writing for a well-read audience who would appreciate his overt references to Tasso. *Love's Labour's* is often seen as an élite play, and its first performance has been convincingly dated to late 1592 or early 1593.⁷ Besides *Aminta*, it is indebted to three other Italian works: Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, Berni's *rifacimento* of that poem, and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*.⁸ Although English translations of both *Orlando Furioso* and *Aminta* were available, Shakespeare made very little use of them.

It is evident that his Italian borrowings involved him in intensive study of the language, a study which he pursued by close and repeated reading of his chosen extracts from the poems. It would be natural to undertake such a course of self-tuition both before a projected visit to Italy and after his return. Moreover, his easily recognisable allusions to the *Aminta* might serve another purpose – to show an aristocratic patron that his proposed journey to Italy was worth supporting. He could not have afforded such a journey himself without financial support, and he may have had this in mind when he dedicated *Venus and Adonis* to the earl of Southampton.

6. R. Prior, "Shakespeare's debt to Ariosto", *N & Q*, vol. 246 (2001): 289–92; "Shakespeare's debt to Berni", *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, vii (2002): 1–18; "Tasso's *Aminta* in two Shakespearian Comedies", *N & Q* 249 (2004): 269–76. "More complete copy", see Prior, "Tasso" 275.

7. E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: the "lost years"* (Manchester: Manchester UP) 68.

8. Prior, "Berni" 2, note 4, and 13–18; "Ariosto" 291–92.

The town of Bassano del Grappa stands at the point where a bridge crosses the river Brenta, in the foothills of the Trentine Alps, about forty miles north-west of Venice. In the 1590s it was a prosperous market town, a centre for the manufacture of leather and silk and the cultivation of silkworms.⁹ It was the home of a long-established family of painters, led until his death in 1592 by the renowned Jacopo dal Ponte, more usually known as Jacopo Bassano. An equally talented family of musicians, the Pivas, had established themselves in the town in the 15th century, specialising in the playing and manufacture of wind instruments.¹⁰ Despite their obvious success in the town, shortly before 1515 they moved to Venice. From then on they invariably called themselves Bassano, or (more often) Bassani. They owned a house in the town until 1571 when its ownership was transferred to the Venetian branch of the family,¹¹ but there is no evidence that any of them ever lived there after 1515. Following some exploratory visits, in 1540 five of the six Bassano brothers settled permanently in London as members of the King's music and founders of the first recorder consort at the English court. They and their descendants served in the royal music without a break until 1665. The family also had a flourishing business as makers of instruments.

It is clear that Shakespeare took a keen interest in both the Bassano family and their town of origin. To these royal musicians Bassanio owes his name and his status as a citizen of Venice. Since the Bassanos probably had Jewish origins, it is interesting that the only Jews in Shakespeare's plays are, like them, Venetians. Shylock's dislike of music may be deliberately designed to contrast him with the Jewish, but highly musical, Bassanos. In *Titus*

9. *Enciclopedia Italiana* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1949) vi, 339, "Bassano del Grappa".

10. For the early history of the Piva/Bassano family in and around Bassano up to 1582, see Alessio Ruffatti, "La Famiglia Piva-Bassano nei Documenti negli Archivi di Bassano del Grappa", *Musica e Storia*, vol. VI, no. 2 (Dicembre, 1998), 349–67. The period from 1500 to 1665 is covered by David Lasocki with Roger Prior, *The Bassanos: Venetian Musicians and Instrument Makers in England, 1531–1665* (Aldershot and Brookfield: Ashgate, 1995), henceforth Bassanos. Unless otherwise noted, any information on the family can be found in these two sources.

11. *Bassanos* 252.

Andronicus (1593) Shakespeare gives to the character Bassianus the original Roman name of Bassano del Grappa.

We now know that he had acquired an extensive knowledge of Bassano by the time that he wrote his two Venetian plays. He named both his protagonists, Bassanio and Othello, after families who were well known in the town. The Italian form of the name Othello – Otello (also Ottello, or del Tello) has so far been found in Bassano, where it was common, and nowhere else. We know of ten men of this name, covering three generations from 1430 to 1597, all of whom lived in Bassano at some point.¹² Several of the ten were certainly related, and it is possible that they were all members of the same extended family. Among their number they included two “teachers of grammar”, one very prosperous leather handler, several notaries and at least three priests, including a Jesuit. They were clearly men of influence, and it is no surprise to find two Otello brothers, both notaries, ordering important pictures from Jacopo Bassano.¹³ There were still Otellos living in Bassano in the 1590s, when Shakespeare is most likely to have visited the town.

His choice of the name Othello suggests that Shakespeare must either have met or heard of the Otello family, and there are clear signs that he had come across them in Bassano itself. One of his additions to his main source, Cinthio’s story of “the Moor”, is the close connection that he makes between Othello and drugs. Desdemona’s father Brabantio is convinced that Othello must have won the love of his daughter by their use. According to Brabantio, he has “Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals” (1.2.74), and has “corrupted” her “by spells and medicines bought of moun-

12. The names of nine Otellos are included in the account book of the painter Jacopo Bassano, transcribed in Michelangelo Muraro, *Il libro secondo di Francesco e Jacopo dal Ponte* (Bassano del Grappa: Verci, 1992). They are listed, with personal details, on pages 365–6 and 377 of Muraro’s book. See Franco Signori, “Notizie storiche sui personaggi citati nel manoscritto”, in *Libro secondo*, 313–85. For the tenth, see T. Sipahigil, “Othello’s name, once again”, *N&Q* 216 (1971): 147–8.

13 Paola Marini, “Jacopo Bassano Seen Anew”, in Beverly L. Brown and Paola Marini, eds., *Jacopo Bassano c. 1510–1592* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum, 1993) 21. This is the translation of the Italian catalogue of the Jacopo Bassano exhibition held in both Bassano del Grappa and Fort Worth.

tebanks" (1.3.62). He must have "wrought upon her" "with some mixtures.../ Or with some dram conjured to this effect" (1.3.105-7). Brabantio's accusations are not enirely without foundation. Although Othello has not practised magic on Desdemona herself, he does believe in its power. He values the handkerchief which he gives to his wife because, as he says, "there's magic in the web of it", and "it was dyed in mummy, which the skilful/ Conserved of maidens' hearts" (3.4.74-5).

These links between Othello and drugs may have been suggested to Shakespeare by the fact that at least one member of the Otello family, Giovanni, who died in 1591, had been part-owner of what the records call an "apotheca" or "aromateria", that is an apothecary's shop, in Bassano.¹⁴ His shop was in the main square of the town, and was a well-known meeting-place during the sixteenth century. Besides Giovanni Otello, drugs and medicines in Bassano were also associated with a "Moor". A popular apothecary in the same square was actually known as "the Moor", after the sign of a Moor's head which hung outside his shop. This Italian "Moor" may himself have retired from the business by 1585, but it was carried on by his descendants until the 1660s.¹⁵

The Moor's head signified the profound influence that the Arab world was known to have had on the diffusion of medical knowledge. Shakespeare is well aware of this Arabian influence, as he shows both through Brabantio's fear of Othello, and through Othello's own words on medicine. He tells Desdemona that the original owner of the magic handkerchief was "an Egyptian", who was "a charmer" (3.4.58-9). He later refers to "the Arabian trees" which drop "their medicinable gum" (5.2.348-9).

Bassano del Grappa was known for the cultivation of silk-worms. The English Bassanos must have taken part in this trade before they left the town, since their family coat of arms displays three silk-worms and a mulberry bush, the plant on which silk-worms feed. We know that Shakespeare took a particular interest in this subject in the early months of 1594, since he was then

14. Signori, "Notizie" 377, "del Tello Zuanne". See also Appendix xii and xvi (pp. 299-300) and 366, "Pecin Francesco", who was his partner in the *apotheca*.

15. Signori, "Notizie" 365, "Oston Battista, ditto Moro spiciaro".

reading in manuscript a long and detailed study – Thomas Moffet's verse treatise, *The Silkwormes and their Flies*. He used it as a major source for two plays which can be dated to the first half of 1594 – *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – as well as several sonnets.¹⁶ He also refers directly to silkworms in *Othello*, where he links them to magic drugs (3.4.75–76), and in *The Reign of Edward III* (2.1.466). There is evidence that *Edward III* was first performed in May–June, 1594.¹⁷

The Bassanos originally worked as travelling bagpipers in the villages around Bassano. In fact the first family name that we know of, and by which they were always known in Bassano, was "Piva", that is "Bagpipe".¹⁸ Although there is no record of them using that name in Venice or England, Shakespeare clearly knew that they went by it in their town of origin. He mentions *bagpipes* or *bagpiper* on six occasions in the plays, and four of them are in the two Venetian, or Bassano, plays – three in *Merchant* and one in *Othello*.

Shakespeare also believed that the Bassanos were of Jewish origin, and he knew that a sign of their origins was the name that they went under in Bassano, but nowhere else – the name Piva. As well as "bagpipe", the word *piva* had two other, more colloquial meanings, both of which were well-known antisemitic markers – "big nose" and "penis". It therefore seems likely that their name had insulting connotations. It was not chosen by the Bassanos themselves, but was given to them by their Christian neighbours. We know that overt antisemitism flourished in Bassano del Grappa, from the published statements of the town council which after 1510 regularly voted to expel its Jewish residents, and by 1524 had

16. Kenneth Muir first pointed out that Moffet's *Silkwormes* was a major source for *Dream*, in *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977), 73. For supporting evidence on *Dream* and *Romeo*, see Prior, "'Runnawayes Eyes': A Genuine Crux", *SQ* 40 (1989): 191–195. Sonnets 54, 94, 98 and 128, among others, seem to be influenced by Moffet's poem.

17. Roger Prior, "The date of *Edward III*", *N&Q* 235 (1990): 178–80, and "Was *The Raigne of King Edward III* a Compliment to Lord Hunsdon?", *Connotations* 3 (1993/94): 243–64.

18. The family name, but not its sense of "bagpipe", was pointed out by Ruffatti, *Musica e Storia*.

succeeded in doing so.¹⁹ The musical Bassanos had left the town by 1515, and never lived there again. They also never called themselves Piva.

Shakespeare must have heard of these events from the Bassanos themselves, and his knowledge of them is apparent in both his Venetian plays. In both he associa *tes bagpipe* with *nose* and *penis*, and in *Merchant* he associates all three concepts with Shylock himself, to whom he gives the following words:

And others when the *bagpipe* sings i' th' *nose*
Cannot contain their *urine*:

(4.1.48-9; my italics)

In *Othello* the musicians are told to "put up your *pipes* in your *bag*" (3.1.19). They are asked if their "instruments", from which there "hangs a *tail*", or penis, have "been in Naples", that is, have caught a venereal disease, so that "they speak i' th' *nose*" (3.1.3-9).

All the evidence that we have seen suggests that Shakespeare knew the Bassano family extremely well by the time that he wrote his Venetian plays. He knows of their early history as Jews, as bagpipe players and silkworm farmers in Bassano del Grappa. Of the northern Italian towns he knows most about Venice, where the five original émigrés had lived for over twenty years, and where in the 1590s the present generation owned a house²⁰ and still had living relatives. As we have seen, he also has a detailed knowledge of their town of origin, and his knowledge of the Otello family (and possibly of the apothecary known as "the Moor") – suggests that he himself had spent some days there. We shall now examine further evidence which leads to the same conclusion.

If he did visit Bassano for any length of time, there was one object which he could not have missed seeing. This was a very large and remarkable fresco, which from the first floor upwards covered the whole street-facing wall of a private house in the

19. Giovanni Chiuppani, *Gli Ebrei a Bassano* (Bassano: Sante Pozzato, 1907) especially 109-17. See also "The Bassanos' Jewish Identity", *Bassanos* 92-98.

20. *Bassanos* 26; 44.

centre of the town.²¹ It was painted in 1539 by Bassano's most famous painter, Jacopo dal Ponte, usually known as Jacopo Bassano, probably with the help of his brother Giambattista. The house was the home of the Dal Corno family, and the fresco was commissioned and paid for by its senior member, Zuanne or Zanetto dal Corno, a nobleman from Treviso. It is likely that Zuanne's son-in-law Lazzaro (who may also have been his nephew) had an important influence on the symbolism and overall design of the fresco. He had taken his wife's noble surname as his own, and his Dal Corno coat of arms was commemorated in the form of a wooden carving on the fresco. Born not long before 1500, he had a distinguished career as an official representative of Venice, a legal scholar, poet and public speaker. For his recital of a Latin eulogy before the emperor Charles V, he was rewarded with the title of Count Palatine. One of Portia's suitors in *Merchant* is "the County Palatine" (I.2.44,56), whose title suggests the Italian pronunciation of "Conte Palatino". Conte Lazzaro was an ambassador to the Venetian senate on several occasions before his death in 1583.

The fresco was restored *in situ* in 1922 and 1959. It was finally detached from the wall in 1975, removed to permanent keeping in the Museo Civico of Bassano, and put on public view in 1982.

Shakespeare shows a detailed knowledge of it in both his Venetian plays. So specific and accurate are his references to it that it is reasonable to assume that he had seen it himself. It is divided into four horizontal bands, the second highest of which is a frieze depicting animals and musical instruments. Two juxtaposed animals in particular seem to have caught his eye – a goat which stands over a seated monkey. This pair stands out partly

21. For extensive information on the fresco and the Dal Corno family, see Brown and Marini 530 (incomplete colour plate on 531), 223–26 (from Giuliana Ericani, "Jacopo and Fresco Painting", 205–32). The transfer of the fresco to the museum is described, with many plates, in the report of an exhibition in Bassano: *Il restauro ed il recupero degli affreschi di Jacopo Bassano di Piazzotto Montevercchio*, ed. Fernando Rigon (Bassano del Grappa: Museo Civico, 1983). This booklet describes the fresco and comments on the Dal Cornos (Paola Marini, "Gli affreschi di Jacopo Bassano", 20–7). The two Dal Cornos are discussed at length in Signori, "Notizie", 334–35. The fresco is also reproduced in Alessandro Ballarin, *Jacopo Bassano: Tavole, Parte Prima 1531–1568* (Padova: Università di Padova, 1996), Tomo terzo, plates 83–86.

because the goat is large – the same size, in fact, as some of the human figures on the band beneath – and partly because the monkey is differentiated from the other animals: it is the only seated figure, and the only one which faces from right to left.

Shakespeare seems to have associated the Dal Corno fresco with sexual desire. He may have been influenced both by the family name, *Corno*, meaning *horn*, and by the family trade. They were the official sellers of salt in Bassano, and their house was located in the "Piazzotto del Sale" – "the little square of salt". Shakespeare regularly uses "salt" as an adjective to mean "lustful", and in *Othello* he links it to the goat and monkey on the fresco. In *Othello*, and in no other work, Shakespeare brings together goats and monkeys as twin examples of lechery. He also associates them with the act of seeing. It is impossible, says Iago, to show Desdemona and Cassio actually making love, however lecherous *they may be*.

(Iago:) It is impossible you should see this
 Were *they* as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
 As salt as wolves in pride,...

(3.3.405–7: my italics)

Two scenes later, Othello remembers Iago's words. Desdemona has referred to "the love I bear to Cassio" (4.1.232), and Othello takes this as a sexual boast. In their subsequent exchanges he strikes her, insults her and orders her to leave. "Cassio shall have my place", he says to Lodovico, with a sexual double meaning on *place*, and immediately exits on the cry: "Goats and monkeys!" (4.1.261,263).

Besides the word "salt", other clues suggest that in both scenes Shakespeare has in mind the goat and monkey of the Dal Corno fresco. In 4.1, for example, the phrase "well-painted passion", six lines before Othello's exit, recalls the painted fresco.

In the earlier scene the goats and monkeys of Iago's speech are immediately followed by other visual memories of the fresco:

Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,
 As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross
 As ignorance made drunk. But yet, I say,
 If imputation and strong circumstances
 Which lead directly to the door of truth...

(3.3.406–10: my italics)

The last two italicised phrases both describe scenes from the Dal Corno fresco. On its lowest band are painted four scenes from the Old Testament, each in a separate oval "frame". Scanning from left to right, the third of these, which is vertically below the goat and monkey, depicts *The Drunkenness of Noah*. Here is Shakespeare's "ignorance made drunk". Since the drunken Noah is shown naked, lying on his back with his legs apart, he might well be called a "fool as gross/ As ignorance made drunk", where "gross" has its common Shakespearean meaning of "sexually shameless". Shakespeare may have had in mind the description of Noah in the Geneva Bible: "And he drunk of t^e wine and was drunken".²²

In Iago's lines Shakespeare's visual memory travels vertically down the fresco from the goat and monkey to the drunken Noah. On this trajectory his eyes would take in another figure in the third band, one which is even larger than the Noah below it. This is the figure of a woman, entirely naked, who stands by herself, flanked by the two tall arched windows of the *piano nobile*. She has raised her right arm above her head, and in that hand she holds what is either a torch or a branch. She is one of three large female figures who stand between the windows and who were "traditionally identified as Prudence, Rhetoric and Industry"²³ This identification was first recorded more than a century after the painting of the fresco, and is unlikely to be wholly correct. According to one recent theory the naked woman represents "Strength" ("Fortezza").²⁴ But she more closely resembles the figure of "Truth", who in emblems often appears as a naked woman holding a flaming torch above her head in her right hand. Truth also often stands beneath a large image of the burning sun, and this seems to be the case here, to judge from a copy of the fresco made in 1908.²⁵ It

22. *Genesis*, 9.21, modernised. The Bishop's Bible has only "was drunken".

23. Brown and Marini 530.

24. Ericani in Brown and Marini 225 and 230 (note 95).

25. Rigon, "Il Restauro" 10. To support her identification of this woman as "Fortezza", in note 95 Ericani refers to Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. But in fact Ripa's "Fortezza" is not at all like the woman of the fresco. Far from being naked, she is fully clothed, and wears armour and a helmet. Ripa's "Verita", however, is naked and has her right arm raised, as in the fresco. See Cesare Ripa, *Della novissima iconologia* (Padova, 2 vols, 1630,,), vol. 1, 269-70 and vol. 2, part 3, 168-70.

would therefore not be surprising if Shakespeare had identified the naked woman as "Truth". He uses the phrase "the naked truth" in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2.699) in a passage which may be a 1594 revision.

In the fresco the images of the goat, monkey and Noah could be said to "lead directly" to the naked figure of Truth which physically unites them. But why does Shakespeare refer to "the doore of Truth" (so capitalised in the Quarto)? The reason may be that the naked Dal Corno figure had "doors" on each side of her – the vertical wooden shutters of the two windows. When opened outwards during the day these shutters would enclose the figure of Truth, and might well be called "the door[s] of Truth". We know from Jacopo Bassano's account book that these shutters on the Dal Corno façade were called "gelosie" (literally "jealousies"). A wooden "gelosia" has downward facing slats from which a watcher can see but not be seen.

The Dal Corno "gelosie" thus have an obvious relevance to *Othello*, and Shakespeare seems to have been well aware of their double meaning. In the early section of 3.3 Iago and Othello have a long exchange on the subject of jealousy, and the reasons for suspecting Desdemona's honesty. The words *jealousy* and *jealous* occur seven times within fifty lines (3.3.150–201), and are associated with *cuckold* (169) and *goat* (183). The owner of these "gelosie" was a Dal Corno, whose name in itself made him what Othello calls "A Horned man", or cuckold (4.1.62: capitals as in Q).

With so many references to *gelosia* (jealousy) in his mind, Shakespeare also seems to recall the closed wooden *gelosie* (shutters). Iago points out that Desdemona "did deceive her father, marrying you" (3.3.204). To do this, she was able "To seel her father's eyes up, close as oak" (213). The obscure phrase "close as oak" is easier to understand if Shakespeare is comparing her father's sealed eyes to closed wooden shutters.

The fresco's second scene from the Old Testament, which is placed next to *The Drunkenness of Noah*, is described as showing *Lot and his Daughters*, and it too seems to have influenced this passage of *Othello*. In *Genesis*, chapter 19, Lot's two daughters gave him wine and "lay with [their] father" while he was asleep. Both became pregnant by him. In the lines which follow "the door of

Truth", Iago describes how he "*lay with Cassio lately*" (416: my italics). According to Iago's fiction, the sleeping Cassio makes sexual advances to him, dreaming that he is making love to the naked Desdemona. Both Lot and the Cassio invented by Iago make love while they are asleep, and neither knows what he is doing.

The parallels between the two tales go even further than this. Cassio's sexual approaches to Iago are acts of sodomy. Lot and his daughters were originally citizens of Sodom.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, as in *Othello*, Shakespeare shows some local knowledge of the city. He knows of its gondoliers, the *traghetto* or ferries, the *magnifici* (also mentioned in *Othello*), the Rialto as the centre of business, and the Jewish synagogues. He knows that Padua is near Venice, and that it has a famous law school. The antisemitism that we see among the Christians had plenty of parallels in sixteenth-century Venice and Bassano. Shakespeare could have heard about it from the English Bassanos, whose parents had had to put up with the insulting name Piva, and then had had to leave their home town when it expelled its Jews.

Through the name Bassanio, both the Bassani family and Bassano del Grappa are constant presences throughout the *Merchant*. But their earlier name of "Piva" ("bagpipes") together with its secondary senses of "big nose" and "penis" (as "urine") is also present. *Bagpipe* occurs twice, and *bagpiper* once. Shakespeare uses the latter word four lines before Bassanio's first entrance (1.1.53) in a speech which also contains a memory of the Dal Corno frieze. Commenting on Antonio's changeable nature, Solanio invokes the Roman god Janus: "Now by two-headed Janus" (1.1.50). Shakespeare could have seen such a two-headed figure on the Dal Corno frieze, where the central woman of three, now identified as "Prudence", has two heads which face in opposite directions.²⁶

In this play Shakespeare shows a particular interest in the two men who had commissioned the Dal Corno fresco in 1539 – the jurist Lazzaro dal Corno and his father-in-law Zanetto, both of whom lived in the house. As we have seen, in 1532 Lazzaro recited a Latin eulogy in Bassano on the occasion of the visit of the emperor Charles V, and in return was honoured by him with the title of

26. Ericani in Brown and Marini 225, and note 94.

"Conte Palatino". This title, "the County Palatine", occurs twice in *The Merchant* (1.2.64,86), where it belongs to one of Portia's suitors. It is found nowhere else in Shakespeare's work. The County is the only suitor whose place of origin is not identified – perhaps a sign that his Venetian identity is well known to Portia and Nerissa. Portia judges him to be so gloomy that "he will prove the weeping philosopher when he grows old". The real-life Conte Lazzaro has also been described as a philosopher, and he wrote at least one very gloomy or "weeping" sonnet which Shakespeare could have seen in print.²⁷ It begins "Piangete Muse, e 'n dolorosi accenti" ("Weep, Muses, and in sad tones"). Shakespeare may also have in mind the fresco's most melancholy scene, in which a dead cherub lies naked on top of two crossed bones with an hourglass next to them and the inscription "Mors omnia aequat" ("Death makes all things equal"). As late as 1648 an eye-witness reported that this cherub was accompanied by death's-heads ("fra teschi di cadaveri").²⁸ At some time these death's-heads were either removed or painted over, since they are no longer visible. But Shakespeare seems to have seen them, since Portia comments on her two Italian suitors: "I had rather be married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth, than to either of these" (1.2.49-51, my italics).

The other male occupant of the Dal Corno house was Lazzaro's father-in-law, Zanetto dal Corno. He was a salt merchant – in fact he was "the authorised seller of salt in Bassano".²⁹ Among his fellow citizens he was known as "Ser Zanetto Salarol", that is, "Zanetto the salt merchant".³⁰ Some of his payments for the fresco were made in the form of salt, and in Jacopo's account book he is described as "S alarolo in Bassan".³¹ The archaic word *salaro*, of which *salaròl* and *salàrio* are alternative forms, means both "a shop

27. "Lazzaro...a philosopher": Ericani as in note 27. "Seen in print": Giambattista Verci, *Rime scelte d'alcuni poeti bassanesi...e delle loro vite arricchite* (Venezia: 1769), 134–41, p.140. Verci probably took the poems from Lorenzo Marucini, *Il Bassano* (Venetia: 1577), where Shakespeare could have read them.

28. Ericani in Brown and Marini 206, note 2. The quotation is from C. Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell'arte* (Venezia, 1648), and may have been copied by Verci (Brown and Marini 206, note 3).

29. Brown and Marini 530.

30. Signori, "Notizie" 335.

31. Muraro, *Libro Secondo* 272–73.

which trades in salt" and "a table salt cellar". Zanetto probably sold salt from the frescoed house in which he lived. Hence the small square in which it stood was known as the *Piazza*, or *Piazzotto, del Sale*. Both Zanetto's name, "Corno" ("horn"), and the merchandise that he sold, salt, would have had sexual connotations for Shakespeare. The word *salt* occurs four times in *Othello*, more often than in any other of his plays.

As well as bringing the "Conte Palatino" into the *Merchant*, Shakespeare also alludes to his father-in-law, Zanetto. Three Venetian men in the play clearly owe their names to his trading title of "Salaròl". They are Salarino, Salanio (also Solanio) and Salerio. Salarino's name is the same as the archaic word for "salt cellar", and is a diminutive form of Zanetto's trade name, "Salaròl". Salarino's name thus refers directly to Zanetto, the former salt merchant of Bassano. The name Salerio is also reminiscent of *salàrio*, an alternative form of *salario*.

In *Merchant* 2.6, as in *Othello* 3.3, Shakespeare again recalls the façade of the Dal Corno house, with its seven tall windows on the first floor. They looked down on the square below, and could be closed by their vertical wooden shutters (or "doors" in *Othello*). As in *Othello*, Shakespeare remembers the naked figure of Truth who stands between two windows and holds a torch above her head.

In this scene Jessica is preparing to elope with her lover, Lorenzo. Dressed as a boy, she stands at an open window "above", that is, on the first floor, or *piano nobile*, of her father's house, and speaks to Lorenzo below. As in the *Othello* lines which allude to the fresco (3.3.200-13, 398-405), Shakespeare places great emphasis on the act of seeing ("look on me", "blind", "cannot see"). Like the figure of Truth in the fresco, which Shakespeare clearly has in mind, Jessica already thinks of herself as a "torchbearer", and may already be "hold[ing] a candle" (41) up to her face.

Lorenzo *Descend, for you must be my torchbearer.*

Jessica *What, must I hold a candle to my shames?*

They in themselves, good sooth, are too too light.

Why, 'tis an office of discovery, love,

And I should be obscured.

(2.6.40-44: my italics)

Jessica fears that her torch will reveal her "shames", and that she is "too too light", or "immodest". In her torch-bearing, her fear that she is immodest, and her position on the first floor, she recalls the naked figure of Truth on the fresco. Moreover she herself appeals directly to the truth, with the words "good sooth". Lorenzo later reinforces her identification with "Truth":

And true she is, as she hath proved herself;
And therefore, like herself, wise, fair and true,
(2.6.55-6)

We know that Shylock's windows can be closed with shutters, since he has told Jessica to "stop my house's ears – I mean my casements" (2.5.34), and to "shut doors after you" (52). Shakespeare may also allude indirectly to Venetian shutters when Jessica, standing in the window, says "I should be *obscured*". *Scurio* is an Italian word for shutter.³² In discussing *Othello* I suggested that Shakespeare referred to a shutter on the Dal Corno house as the "door of Truth". Jessica may include such *piano nobile* shutters when she says "I will make fast the doors" (49).

It seems unlikely that in this Jessica-Lorenzo scene, and in *Othello* 3.3, Shakespeare's allusions to the Dal Corno fresco were derived from an account which he had heard from an Italian in London. Why would he copy down a flood of details about Bassano, when he was writing plays set in Venice? On the contrary, he seems to be re-creating something that he himself has seen and now vividly remembers. He is, as it were, reminding himself of what the fresco, or a section of it, looked like. Since it is a private memory he does not use it as local colour, nor even describe it to the audience. In the same way, his allusions to Janus, death's-heads, Salarino and Salerio may mean a great deal to him, but they have no special resonance for his audience.

Nor do his allusions to the fresco in *Othello* 3.3.406-10 have the haphazard arrangement that one might expect if he was recalling a second-hand account derived from an Italian contact. On the contrary, they have a visual unity, since he chooses elements which

32. *Scurio* was in use by 1640 at the latest, according to *Dizionario Italiano*, ed. Tullio de Mauro (Verona: Mondadori, 2000).

come from the same area of the fresco and which form a coherent vertical sequence. In Shakespeare's visual order, his eye starts at the top (goat/monkey), moves vertically downward to the lowest band (Noah's drunkenness), up to the band above (Truth and the "door"), and finally down again to Lot's incest. All four elements are adjacent.

Besides his visual memories of the fresco, he also knows much about the men who devised and commissioned it. He knows that Lazzaro was a Conte Palatino, and that Zanetto was a "Salarol" who sold salt from this very house. He is interested in their history because he has seen the house himself. We can also conclude that he has spoken to men who know Bassano well, who know the history of the Dal Corno house, and who probably know the Otello family. Such knowledgeable contacts were easily available in Bassano, but not in London.

All the evidence suggests that Shakespeare had first-hand experience of Bassano del Grappa. His knowledge of the fresco alone is far more detailed and vivid than anything that he is likely to have heard from an informant. It must be borne in mind that by 1590 very few Italians in London would have known Bassano well. The original five Bassano brothers who had travelled from Venice to England in 1540 were all dead. Their sons still spoke Italian³³, and some of them had visited Venice, but none of them had been born in Bassano, or had ever lived there for more than a short time. We know of no surviving relatives in the town. It is therefore unlikely that any member of the family would have been able to describe the Dal Corno fresco in detail.

Moreover, why would any informant focus on one particular area of the frieze, especially on an area which just happened to suit Shakespeare's creative purposes? Much of the detail that Shakespeare includes has no obvious dramatic or topical point. If he was confined to London, why would he bother to record it?

The Dates of Shakespeare's Visit

When is Shakespeare likely to have visited Italy? A convenient opportunity may have presented itself during the long outbreak

33. Bassanos 35.

of plague which lasted from August, 1592, to May, 1594. Plays had also been banned for other reasons from 23 June, 1592. For most of this time the London theatres were closed, and the actors were forced to travel in the provinces. But, exceptionally, Shakespeare now seems to have been freed from his usual acting duties. He is not named in the list of Strange's Men who went on tour in May, 1593, and he had enough free time to be able to write *Venus and Adonis* by 18 April. He also seems to have begun writing sonnets at this time. In late 1592 he was able to study Tasso's play *Aminta* in the original Italian, and he used it as a major source for *Love's Labour's Lost*, which was first performed by Strange's Men in either December, 1592, or (more probably) early 1593. By then he had begun to take a keen interest in the Italian language, and he may have had in mind the possibility of travelling to Italy.

However, none of the plays that he wrote in 1593 reveals any personal knowledge of Italian towns or conditions of travel. This is true of *Love's Labour's Lost*, and of *As You Like It*, which also borrows heavily from the *Aminta*. *As You Like It* shares at least one other source with *Love's Labour's*,³⁴ and an early version may have been performed in June or July 1593. It contains two references to the death of Marlowe, and these must post-date 30 May. Topical allusions and source material indicate that *Titus Andronicus* was written for Strange's Men not long after July, 1593.³⁵ Although the name of the character Bassianus could refer to Bassano del Grappa, nothing in the play suggests that Shakespeare had first-hand knowledge of Italy.

After *Titus*, the record for 1593 goes blank. Our next piece of reliable information dates from early May of the following year, when *A Midsummer Night's Dream* must have been performed to celebrate the marriage of Sir Thomas Heneage and the countess of Southampton, which took place on 2 May.³⁶ At the same time, on 8 May, *The Rape of Lucrece*, dedicated to the countess's son Henry,

34. Both borrow from Nashe, *Pierce Pennilesse* (1592). For LLL, see most editions of the play. For AYLI, see J.J.M. Tobin, "Nashe and *As You Like It*", *N&Q*, 223 (1978): 138-9.

35. *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Bate (1995), 77-9.

36. Roger Prior, "The occasion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *The Bodleian Library Record* 17 (2000): 56-64.

was entered in the Stationers' Register. It seems likely that the two events were closely connected.

To these two Southampton-inspired works we can add a third, that is *Romeo and Juliet*. It is now generally accepted that *Romeo* and the *Dream* were written at about the same time. Both have several sources in common, together with many verbal parallels. We now know that Shakespeare wrote the *Dream* to honour the countess, using as a major source a private manuscript which she must have owned, since the poem was written for a masque which was performed at her wedding to the second earl of Southampton. He used the same manuscript source when writing *Romeo*.³⁷ In addition, the countess had a strong personal interest in the rivalry of the Montagues and Capulets, since her father, Anthony Browne, had chosen for himself the title of Viscount Montague, and the family claimed to be descended from the Montagues of Verona. In 1572 they celebrated this Veronese ancestry in a wedding masque which was devised by the poet George Gascoigne, and published in 1573. In this wedding masque eight supposed "Mountacutes" from Venice attended the double wedding of their English kin. Shakespeare used it as a source for both *Romeo* and the *Dream*, just as he used the manuscript of the countess's own wedding masque.³⁸ It therefore seems certain that both plays were written to celebrate the Heneage-Southampton marriage, and that both were ready for performance by 2 May. Both must have been written, at the latest, between February and early April, 1594.

This conclusion provides us with a reasonable *terminus ad quem* for Shakespeare's visit to Italy. It suggests that he had returned to London from Venice before February, 1594. The importance of dating *Romeo* to February-March, 1594, is that it is, so far as we know, the first play that Shakespeare set in Northern Italy, and therefore the first which reflects his recent visit. In its setting *Romeo* is a new venture, and unlike anything that he has written before. Part of his purpose is to show the sheer "foreignness" of Italian society in Verona. He takes a new interest in the practice of

37. Prior, "The occasion", 63.

38. Roger Prior, "Gascoigne's *Posies* as a Shakespearian source", *N&Q* 245 (2000): 444-49.

street duelling, and in the appearance of an apothecary's shop, for which he was probably indebted to the shops that he saw in the main square of Bassano.

Romeo also has several notable links with the Casa dal Corno. First, the title "County" (for Italian *Conte*) is found only in *Merchant* ("County Palatine") and *Romeo*, where "County Paris" is frequent. Secondly, *Romeo* has two scenes in which a first-floor window plays an important part. In this it resembles both *Merchant* and *Othello*, as well as *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Shakespeare has no window scenes before 1594, but he then uses them in all five of his North Italian plays. Moreover, he uses them in no other plays, until the two late works of combined authorship, *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*. It looks as if the tall *piano nobile* window, with its absence of glass and its convenient shutters, was for him a new theatrical device which he discovered in Italy and brought back to use on the London stage.

Thirdly, the first window scene in *Romeo*, in which Juliet speaks to her lover below (2.2.85-141), has obvious similarities with the Jessica-Lorenzo window scene in *Merchant* 2.6. There are several word-cluster parallels between the two scenes.³⁹ The second window scene in *Romeo* (3.5) also has verbal parallels with *Merchant* 2.6, including the word "torch-bearer", which only occurs in these two plays, and which recalls the figure of Truth on the fresco.

Romeo thus seems to be an early example of a play which was, like *Merchant* and *Othello*, influenced by Shakespeare's visit to Bassano del Grappa. Its dating within the period February-March, 1594, suggests that Shakespeare must have visited Italy in the last months of 1593, perhaps leaving England in September, and probably returning by December, or January at the latest. If the return date is correct, all five North Italian plays must post-date December, 1593, and in their earliest versions were all probably written during the first half of 1594, while Shakespeare's impressions of the country were still fresh in his mind. This dating is supported by *Romeo*, and by *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which is often assigned to this year.

39. For example: truth, too too light, discovered; and sweet, night, stay, come.

Travelling Companions

Before we consider the dates of the three remaining North Italian plays, it will be helpful to see if there is any other evidence which supports the hypothesis of an Italian visit during the period September-December, 1593. We can reasonably assume that Shakespeare did not travel to Italy alone. Who were his companions on the journey? There is a strong possibility that three Bassano brothers, Arthur, Edward and Andrea, all royal musicians and sons of the late Anthony, travelled to Venice at about this time, and it seems very likely that Shakespeare accompanied them.

From the payment records of the Royal Music we know that these three brothers did not collect their pay in person during the crucial period. The records for the first half of 1593 are unfortunately missing, but the immediately following records survive. They show that the three Bassanos were absent from London for three quarterly payments, from 29 September (Michaelmas Day), 1593, to 25 March (Lady Day), 1594.⁴⁰ Such prolonged absences were not common, and they usually mean that the musicians concerned are travelling abroad.

Venice was the obvious destination for the three brothers. For many years the Bassanos had kept in touch and done business with the family members who still lived there. In August 1577 Arthur and Andrea, accompanied by their manservants, had visited the city, probably in order to settle the financial affairs of their uncle Jasper Bassano, who had recently died in London. By then Anthony's five sons had jointly inherited a house which he owned in Venice and which was still in the family's possession in 1635.⁴¹

In late 1593 they would have been ideal travelling companions for Shakespeare, especially if they again brought their servants with them. Their familiarity with Venice and Bassano del Grappa, together with their command of spoken Italian, would have made them invaluable guides. With such support Shakespeare's detailed knowledge of Bassano and the Dal Corno frieze becomes much easier to understand.

40. Andrew Ashbee, *Records of English Court Music, VI (1558-1603)* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 222.

41. *Bassanos* 36-7; 26, 44.

Travel abroad was expensive, time-consuming and unsafe. What did the three brothers have to gain from a visit to Venice and Bassano at this time? We do not know for certain, but we can make an informed guess. In late August 1593 Arthur, Andrea and their youngest brother Jeronimo received from the Crown an unusual and potentially very valuable grant. This was a licence to export 6,000 dickers of calfskins within a period of seven years (a dicker comprised ten dozen skins). The family held this licence until 1621, and in 1607 Edward was included in it.⁴²

It is unlikely that the Bassanos received this grant by mere chance, or for arbitrary reasons. It was almost certainly something that they already wanted, and that they knew how to put to good use. The working of leather was one of the most important industries in Bassano – possibly the most important. The ledger of Jacopo Bassano, the painter of the fresco contains a wide cross-section of the different tradesmen who worked in the town in the 16th century. Of all these trades the leather workers were much the largest group. More than thirty of them are identified by name.⁴³ Thus the brothers could be sure that there would be plenty of buyers for their high quality English calfskins. They also had the advantage of local connections and of the fact that they were selling the skins themselves, without using an intermediary. On this visit they probably brought with them no more than a few samples.

But it is noteworthy that they also brought with them a man who was the son of a glover and who had been brought up from birth with an intimate knowledge of how to use animal skins. His presence is not likely to be due to coincidence. The Bassano brothers were hoping to export a very large quantity of calfskins over a long period of time – more than twenty eight years, as it turned out. Shakespeare and his father would know where to obtain the best quality skins, and may have acted as middlemen or partners in the business from its very beginning. If so, it may have proved to be a source of considerable profit to them, as well as to the Bassanos.

This scenario would explain Shakespeare's presence in Bassano, and the fact that he seems to have spent enough time in

42. *Bassanos* 73–4.

43. Paola Marini in Brown and Marini 20–1.

the town to get to know it well. It would also explain how he acquired so much knowledge of its recent history. Some of this information no doubt came originally from the brothers' father, Anthony, but much of it probably reflected their own experience. The oldest of the three, Arthur, had been aged thirty when he and Andrea visited Venice in 1577. If they had also visited Bassano at that time, they could have met the original "Moor", who then ran his apothecary's business in the central square. They could have known Lazzaro, the "Conte Palatino", who was still living in the Dal Corno house, which would later become of so much interest to Shakespeare.

The Bassanos may also have drawn Shakespeare's attention to the name Othello. The Othello family had been prominent among the leather handlers with whom the Bassanos would have to deal, and they may still have been so in 1593.⁴⁴

Travel with the Bassanos would fit Shakespeare's suggested return date of December 1593–January, 1594. On 17 January Edward was certainly back in London, since he then bought three acres of land and pasture in Hoxton. As this was an important transaction, he is likely to have come back some weeks earlier, probably during December. Arthur too is likely to have returned by January, since his daughter Elizabeth was born on 14 October, 1594.⁴⁵

The Dates of the North Italian Plays

If Shakespeare visited North Italy in late 1593, we might expect him to make use of this new experience soon after his return to London, while his memory of it was still fresh. His patrons too would be eager to see some fruits of his recent travels without too much delay. The writing of *Romeo* fits well into this scheme, since it must have been performed by 2 May, 1594. *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, another North Italian play of interest to the Southampton family, is also often dated to this year.

What of the remaining three North Italian plays, all of which contain evidence that Shakespeare had personal knowledge of Italy? *The Taming of the Shrew* was certainly on Shakespeare's mind during

44. See note 44.

45. *Bassanos* 37; 59.

1594, and it is now widely accepted that it was performed on 13 June by the Chamberlain's Men at Newington Butts, even though Henslowe recorded its name as *The Taming of A Shrew*. A play with this name had previously been acted by Pembroke's Men. It was entered in the Stationers' Register on 2 May, and was published some time during the year. There is now little doubt that it is a memorial reconstruction of an earlier version of *The Shrew*. But this earlier version, though generally accepted as Shakespeare's, cannot have been identical to *The Shrew* which we now have. We can deduce this from the existence of a major difference between *A Shrew* and *The Shrew*. The former is set entirely in Greece, the latter in Northern Italy, and specifically in Padua. The Italian influence on *The Shrew* is extremely strong: there are many scraps of spoken Italian; the principal characters have Italian names; the location is wholly Italian; inland travel by water is normal; Padua, Mantua, Venice and Pisa are all frequently mentioned and have their own individual functions in the play; the University of Padua is described in detail. No sign of this elaborate Italian setting survives in *A Shrew*, which could not be more consistently Greek. In the light of this overwhelming evidence, we have to assume that the Italian setting was not available to the authors of *A Shrew*. The play from which they copied was not set in Italy, but in Greece. The same was also true for Shakespeare, of course, during his process of revision. It is possible to find lines where he seems to be deliberately cutting back the more elaborate Greek allusions of *A Shrew* (that is, of the original *Shrew*).⁴⁶ There is no trace of a North Italian *Shrew* before June 1594, when we assume that it was the play performed by the Lord Chamberlain's company at Newington Butts. By then Shakespeare had revised his earlier Greek *Shrew* to give it a new, North Italian setting.⁴⁷

46. See the Arden *Shrew* 29, which shows how a long allusion to "Grecian Helena" in *A Shrew* is reduced to one line in *The Shrew*.

47. The theory that in *The Shrew* Shakespeare is revising his own earlier play, now lost, has been proposed by R.A. Houk, "The Evolution of *The Taming of the Shrew*", PMLA (1942): 1009-38 and G.I. Duthie, "The Taming of *A Shrew* and *The Taming of The Shrew*", RES 19 (1943): 337-56. It is supported by H.J. Oliver in his Oxford edition of *The Shrew*, especially at pp. 22-3. He also suggests 1594 as a possible revision date (p. 34). None of these writers argues that Shakespeare changed Greece into Italy as part of the revision. But, as I

The strongest evidence for Shakespeare's visit to Italy is to be found in the references to Bassano del Grappa in his two Venetian plays. At present neither of these is usually dated to 1594. The usual date for *The Merchant*, though based on very flimsy evidence, is 1597, and for *Othello* is 1601-03. These dates do not agree at all well with the detailed knowledge of Bassano that Shakespeare shows in both plays and which, on the evidence of *Romeo* and *The Shrew*, he must have acquired by early 1594. His vivid observations of the Veneto in *Othello* and *Merchant* suggest that he wrote early versions of these plays soon after his return from Italy, that is, during the first half of 1594. If so, they were not meant for public performance. The theatres were closed during February and March, and did not resume regular playing until June. Private performances, therefore, before élite audiences, would assume much greater economic importance for the acting companies. We know that Shakespeare wrote *Romeo* and the *Dream* for such audiences at this time, as well as *Lucrece* for the young earl. There is evidence too that he wrote some or all of *The Reign of Edward III* as a compliment to his new patron, Lord Hunsdon, probably to be performed privately for him in May or June.⁴⁸ All three plays, like *Love's Labour's Lost*, were full of topical and personal allusions.

The same is true of *The Merchant*. With our new knowledge of Shakespeare in Italy we can now see that in early 1594 it was a highly topical play. He had recently spent several weeks in the company of the three Anglo-Venetian Bassanos, much of it probably in their home city of Venice. Everyone who knew him or his three travelling companions – their aristocratic patrons, their colleagues in the theatre or the Royal Music, the numerous members of the Bassano family – all would be keenly aware of their recent visits to Venice and Bassano, and would expect that before long Shakespeare would write about them for the stage.

The Merchant fulfils these expectations. It is, in the first place, a portrait of Venice. Shakespeare shows his élite audience a city

show, there is no sign that the authors of *A Shrew* had ever known or acted in an Italian version of the play. It is a sign of their ignorance of *The Shrew* that Kate is "Kate" throughout, never Katerina, Katherina or Katherine, although all three names occur frequently in *The Shrew*.

48. See note 18.

which is both reassuringly familiar and disturbingly foreign. It is, like London, a great sea-port where fortunes are won and lost through the vicissitudes of sea voyages. But it is also wholly unlike London, since it includes, and financially depends on, a very visible Jewish community, an element which was entirely unknown to most English spectators. They would, however, recognise Bassanio's name as an obvious allusion to the Bassanos of the Royal Music. Shylock, Jessica and Tubal are reminders of their Jewish origins, and their former metier as bagpipers is also mentioned. The long eulogy on "the sweet power of music", spoken while Æ Venetian musicians play on stage, was easily recognisable as a compliment to them (5.1.79). With so many topical allusions the play must have been performed soon after the Venetian visit, while interest in it was at its height. It is inconceivable that Shakespeare and his fellow actors would have delayed much longer. Their private audiences would have been both amazed and insulted if they had had to wait until 1597. Even by late 1594 the topical allusions in *The Merchant* would have been absurdly out of date for well-informed spectators.

The similarities which in the past were pointed out between Shylock and the Jewish Dr Roderigo Lopez have in recent years been dismissed as mere coincidence. But *The Merchant's* new-found topicality, and its dating to 1594, now make it probable that these allusions were intentional. Lopez was certainly in the news. He was arrested on 21 January, 1594, on suspicion of trying to poison the Queen and Don Antonio, and his trial opened on 28 February.⁴⁹

Othello is closely linked both to *The Merchant* and to the year 1594. Both plays have many connections to Bassano del Grappa, including, most notably, Shakespeare's accurate and extensive recollection of the fresco on the Casa dal Corno. Both plays juxtapose "Truth" and "door(s)"; both refer to "Janus", and have window scenes which focus on a daughter who absconds with her lover. Both mention bagpipes, and play on the two antisemitic meanings of *piva* – "nose" and "penis". Shakespeare was clearly interested in Moors in July-September, 1593, and he carries his interest over into the first half of 1594. There are two Moors in *Titus Andronicus*

49. David S. Katz, *The Jews in the history of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 86, 89.

and two in *The Merchant*. Both Venetian plays have many parallels with the sonnets to the "black" mistress, whom Shakespeare calls "the moor" in sonnets 40 and 150.

Shakespeare's use of two Italian sources in *Othello* also points to an early date, since he used the same sources, poems by Berni and Ariosto, in a revision of *Love's Labour's Lost*, which was probably made in 1594. A major source for *Othello* is a passage of sixteen stanzas which he took from Francesco Berni's re-working of Boiardo's epic poem, *Orlando Innamorato*. Besides Berni, Shakespeare also seems to have had by him a copy of Boiardo's original, and he read both in the original Italian.⁵⁰

What attracted Shakespeare to this passage from Berni was its obvious usefulness for *Othello*: it begins, for example, with five stanzas on the theft of a soldier's reputation, and two later stanzas (8-9) describe two black military commanders who obviously parallel Othello. But Shakespeare also used the excerpt, to a much lesser extent, as a source for a few scenes in *Love's Labour's*, particularly some sections of the pageant of the Worthies (5.2.543-706). It was easy to change the identities of the Worthies in order to create new topical allusions, and Shakespeare turns to Berni for this purpose. But the point is that his chief interest in Berni's stanzas was as a source for *Othello*. Shakespeare must have first used them as such, and only then (probably not long after) as a source for the revised *Love's Labour's*. He is most likely to have done this in early 1594, when his company still needed to adapt their earlier topical plays for elite audiences, and when Bassano del Grappa was still very much in his mind.

This sequence of events is the more likely, since it occurred twice.⁵¹ As well as borrowing from Berni, Shakespeare took some stanzas from Ariosto's poem *Orlando Furioso* and used them as a source for *Othello* 3.4. In this scene Othello describes the sewing of the enchanted handkerchief by "a sibyl". Ariosto's stanzas (canto 46, stanzas 76-84) fitted well with the description of the handkerchief that Shakespeare had found in Cinthio's story. They also

50. Prior, "Shakespeare's debt to Berni"; canto 51, stanzas 1-16. For his use of Boiardo, see "Shakespeare's debt to Berni", 2, 5, 17.

51. Prior, "Shakespeare's debt to Ariosto".

added a new element – the ownership of the magic cloth by two sorceresses – and Shakespeare took over this concept from them.

As he had done with Berni, Shakespeare also used these stanzas as a source for the Worthies pageant in *Love's Labour's* 5.2, and in particular for the description of Hector. But he originally chose the whole passage because its embroidered cloth reminded him of the handkerchief in Cinthio. Hence his use of it in *Othello* is likely to have preceded his use in *Love's Labour's Lost*, as was the case with Berni's poem.

Finally, there is evidence that Shakespeare used Cinthio's story of the Moor, his main source for *Othello*, as a source for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he wrote in early 1594. He is therefore likely to have been writing *Othello* at about the same time.⁵²

To sum up, the evidence of the five North Italian plays supports the theory that Shakespeare visited the Veneto in late 1593. There are clear signs that four of these plays – *Romeo*, *Merchant*, *Othello* and *Shrew* – were written in the first half of 1594. The date of *Two Gentlemen* is uncertain, but 1594 is a likely option. All five plays, and no others before 1613, have window scenes.

Summary: Shakespeare and Strange's Men, 1592–94

If Shakespeare visited Italy in 1593, there is a strong possibility that he rarely worked as an actor during the plague years. Hence he would have needed the financial support of one or more patrons both in order to travel abroad and to cover his usual expenses in London and Stratford. By May 1594 he had written two plays to celebrate the marriage of the countess of Southampton, and she had previously entrusted him with a manuscript that she valued highly; he had dedicated two long poems to her son, the earl, and (as now seems certain) written sonnets in his praise. It would not therefore be surprising if they had given him some financial support before he left England. In 1710 Nicholas Rowe reported a tradition that the earl had given Shakespeare the sum of £1,000 "to enable him to go through with a Purchase which he heard he had

52. "Evidence for an early *Othello*": paper given in 1996 by the author to a research seminar in the School of English, Queen's University, Belfast.

a mind to".⁵³ Further help would surely have been provided by Ferdinando, Lord Strange, for whose actors Shakespeare seems to have been working as the acknowledged company dramatist during the entire period of the plague. He was in effect still Strange's servant. The company themselves may also have paid him for the plays that they received from him.

Shakespeare was a member of Strange's when the plague began, and almost certainly a Chamberlain's Man in June 1594, when it ended and the revised *Shrew* was performed. Between these dates he must have written *Titus* for Derby's Men (previously Strange's) and three élite plays for the same company – *Love's Labour's*, *Romeo* and *Dream*. All three of these plays belonged to the Chamberlain's Men, and are not linked to any other company. They must therefore have been owned by Derby's Men when the latter transferred their services to the Lord Chamberlain, bringing Shakespeare's plays with them.

We know that Shakespeare did not go on tour with his fellow actors in May, 1593. But he evidently continued to write plays for them during the plague years, and they had probably arranged in advance that he should. They could not expect him to combine writing, acting and travelling, and they may have judged that his chief value to the company was as a provider of new plays. The exceptional circumstances of the time demanded that they adopt a new strategy. Despite the severe limitations of touring, the plague opened up one valuable opportunity – the availability of élite audiences who were confined to the country and starved of professional entertainment. Such audiences would not be satisfied with old plays from the stock repertoire. They would most enjoy something entirely new, especially if it appealed to their personal tastes and had allusions that they alone would recognise.

For such plays they would pay well, and ask for repeat performances. *Love's Labour's* and *As You Like It* are both plays of this kind. Both are full of topical and personal allusions, and both refer openly to Tasso's *Aminta*, a play then much admired by the aristocracy. *Romeo* too was written specifically to flatter the

53. Quoted in S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 178–9.

Montague family of Cowdray. We know that the events of *The Reign of Edward III* had a strong personal interest for Lord Hunsdon.

Shakespeare's ability to please such audiences would have increased both the prestige of his patron and his company's income. It also enabled them to build up a valuable reputation. A stock of successful new plays, not yet seen by the general public, was a possession well worth having. Their dramatist's increasing fame, helped by the instant success of *Venus and Adonis*, would reflect well on them, and his membership of the company would benefit them all. Their connection with him, and their ownership of his new plays, may have given them real advantages in the uncertain theatrical climate of early 1594. When Lord Derby died, possibly by poison, on 16 April, they must have already rehearsed *Romeo* and the *Dream* for the wedding of the countess of Southampton and Sir Thomas Heneage, which took place on 2 May. We know that Shakespeare had already been in touch with the countess, since she had lent him her own copy of the masque which was performed at her first wedding. He had also been writing *Lucrece* to present to her son. These contacts, and especially the company's work for Heneage, the Vice-Chamberlain, would have been valuable investments for the future. When the companies were reorganised in June, Shakespeare's reputation helped to ensure that Derby's Men were in demand, and were quickly taken into service by the Lord Chamberlain.⁵⁴

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