

Chapter 7: Keeping Shakespeare Out of Italy

By Alexander Waugh

“Scholars have found few, mostly dubious connections between the life of the alleged author and the works . . . Why is only one play set in Mr. Shakspeare’s Elizabethan or Jacobean England? Why are so many in Italy? How did he become so familiar with all things Italian that even obscure details in these plays are accurate?”

– Shakespeare Authorship Coalition, Declaration of Reasonable Doubt

“The anti-Stratfordians express astonishment that a man from Stratford could write plays set in Italy as if there were no books to read, no one to talk with, and as if the power of the imagination did not exist.”

– Professor Stanley Wells, CBE (*The Stage*, 27 September 2007)

There was a time when many prominent Stratfordians supported the idea that Shakespeare’s plays were written by a person with first-hand knowledge of Italy. In 1883 the German scholar, Karl Elze, noted that even “English Shakespearean scholars do not regard it with unfavourable eyes.” He was referring (among others) to Charles Knight, who considered it “the most natural supposition,” and to C. A. Brown who wrote that “nothing can uproot my belief of his having been there.” Elze himself showed how precise allusions to Italian places and things in the ten plays that Shakespeare set in Italy attest to his having traveled there in person, and as late as 1932, a leading Stratfordian, Professor Arthur Cooper-Pritchard, confirmed how “the milieu of the time and place with regard to Italy is so intimate that it is difficult to avoid the belief that Shakespeare himself actually visited and lived for some time in that country.” Even that great doyen of Stratfordian scholarship, Edmund K. Chambers, conceded that in certain scenes Shakespeare was “remarkably successful in giving a local colouring and atmosphere,” appearing to demonstrate a “familiarity with some minute points of local topography.”¹

All that has now changed. While the man from Stratford cannot be placed with any certainty outside the narrow bounds of Warwickshire and London, several of the so-called “alternative authorship candidates” have, more recently, been shown to have visited those very cities—Florence, Venice, Verona, Padua, Milan, Mantua, Messina—that served for Shakespeare’s Italian settings. Those who actively speak on behalf of the Stratfordian movement—mainly academics of literary criticism—are now banded together and of one accord. Appalled by the swelling and threatening tide of anti-Stratfordianism, and fearful lest the slightest agreement on Italy be seen as a concession in the wider authorship debate, they chant together a triple versed anthem that goes something like this:

Verse 1: Shakespeare plucked his ideas about Italy from out of his imagination, inventing
as he went along or injecting errant English detail into his Italian settings.

Verse 2: Shakespeare consulted expatriate Italians living in London, or travelers recently returned from abroad, to find out what Italy was really like.

Verse 3: Shakespeare gained his knowledge of Italy by reading lots of books about it.

Each of these arguments is vulnerable and, taken together, they amount to an absurd and contradictory explanation of the playwright's working method—one which assumes both a rigorous, painstaking and precious desire for accuracy while simultaneously admitting of the exact opposite—a reckless disregard for correctness of detail. Over the course of this debate, which now sharply divides literary academics from their non-Stratfordian adversaries, it has become increasingly clear that the standard of scholarship displayed by the former is of a far lower grade than that of the latter, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the Stratfordian insistence upon Verse 1—the argument which proposes an English playwright imagining his Italian settings, or mischievously decking them in English garb. Let us take, for example, the seeming trifle of St. Peter's in Verona, a church mentioned three times by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*. Stratfordian John Doherty has this to say about it:

There has never been a Saint Peter's Church in Verona. There is a San Tomaso's, a San Stefano's, a Santa Anastasia's etc... There is also a San Bernadino's church with an attached Franciscan monastery. This would have been a suitable location for Friar Laurence's cell... However, Saint Peter's was as good a name for a church as any for Shakespeare.²

The difference between this and the method used by non-Stratfordian scholars is both considerable and typical, for where the Stratfordian is content to affect the carefree pose of an armchair pundit, the non-Stratfordian rolls up his sleeves, gets himself to Verona, trawls the streets and minutely examines the local archives—not in order to discover if there is a church in Verona called St. Peter's, but to establish which of the *four* churches of that name—San Pietro in Castello, San Pietro in Archivolto, San Pietro Martine or San Pietro Incarnario—might have been the one that Shakespeare had in mind. By a process of steady elimination—the text requires a building that was used as a parish church and held under Franciscan control in the 14th century—American scholar Richard Paul Roe was able to confirm Shakespeare's precise eye for Italian detail by identifying the place of Juliet's proposed marriage to Paris as *San Pietro Incarnario* in the Via San Pietro Incarnario.³

Doherty may not have known that “Peter” translates into Italian as “Pietro,” but that is not the point. His lapse cannot be considered unique. In *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock asks his friend Tubal to “meet me at our synagogue,” Stratfordian academic Benedikt Höttemann objects, “but there surely was no Synagogue in Venice.”⁴ Again it is left to the non-Stratfordian scholar to ascertain which of the five synagogues built in Venice between 1529 and 1584 Shakespeare intended as the meeting place of Shylock and Tubal.⁵

Insisting that Shakespeare filled his Italian plays with imaginary detail is a risky business as it can often and easily be shown that he didn't. If Stratfordians wish to progress the debate they will need in future to turn away from the key texts they are currently using and find some better examples to fit their claim. A survey of recent literature on Shakespeare and Italy reveals consistent reliance on just two Stratfordian texts—an essay by Professor Mario Praz and a short book by Professor Murray Levith.⁶ Praz, late of Rome University, published his article called “Shakespeare's Italy” in 1954, and reprinted it with some minor amendments in

the influential *Shakespeare Encyclopaedia* of 1966. Levith, a professor at Skidmore College, New York, amplifying most of Praz's remarks, added a few of his own to a treatise entitled *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays*, published in booklet form in 1989. Together Praz and Levith have succeeded in providing the main source for almost everything subsequently penned by Stratfordian academics on this topic. That so many have drawn uncritically (and sometimes verbatim) from these two works is, as we shall see, a matter for considerable vexation and regret.

Often cited by Stratfordian academics as the single most important proof of Shakespeare's ignorance of Italy is the suggestion that he transformed the inland cities of Milan and Verona (to which some add Padua and Mantua) into seaports. This, according to the great architect of modern Stratfordian scholarship, Sir Sidney Lee, "renders it almost impossible that he could have gathered his knowledge of northern Italy from personal observation."⁷ Lee's point was seized upon by Praz, and has since been passed like a relay baton to Levith, Bate, Schoenbaum, Höttemann, McCrea, Doherty, Foakes, Matus and countless others.⁸ You only have to Google the phrase "Verona to Milan by Sea" to discover how far the infection has spread. But Shakespeare never described any of those cities as seaports. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* he sent Valentine from Verona to Milan *by boat*, that is all, but in support of their claim, the academics seize upon the word "road" (meaning a place where a boat may lie safely at anchor) and Panthino's lines: "Launce, away, away, aboard! thy master is shipped, and thou art to post after with oars... Away ass! You'll lose the tide if you tarry any longer." One has only to check the definitions of "road," "tide" and "shipped" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* to see that none of them applies exclusively to the sea. Shakespeare, moreover, signals to his audience that Valentine's journey is not to be taken by sea, but by river and, just in case of any lingering doubt, he has Panthino explain that by *lose the tide*... "I mean thou'lt lose the flood, and in losing the flood, lose thy voyage." The "flood" thereby refers to the frequent filling of the navigable *fossions* after the rains. These *fossions* were deep man-made dykes (*fossi navicabile*) – navigable during periods of frequent flooding – that connected the rivers Po, Tartaro and Adige and were controlled by locks (*barricate a chiave*). Mercator in his *Historia Mundi* (1589) explains that the river Adige was navigable "from Verona even unto the *Fossions*," and both Fougasses in his *History of Venice* (1612) and Briani in his *History of Italy* (1624) describe how Gonzaga sailed several dozen ships through a "deepe dike" from Ostilia on the Po to Legnago on the Adige in 1439. Some of these ancient *fossions* and river-linking canals are still in use today. All are well documented. Only in the rarefied world of Stratfordian academia is their existence still petulantly denied.

Could the playwright himself have traveled the river-canal route from Verona to Milan? That is what we should be asking ourselves, but the academics can't catch up and are still stuck with their claim that there is no such route. This is peculiar because over one hundred years ago the literary scholar Sir Edward Sullivan published a whole raft of quotations from the pens of Strabo and Pliny to the public histories and private letters of Renaissance merchants and travelers, all confirming the common and frequent use of the rivers and interconnecting canals of Northern Italy for travel, commerce and even naval warfare.⁹ The vast river Po, running 400 miles from west to east, served as the main artery, and the Milanese had not just one, but two navigable canals linking their city to it. The first, called Naviglio Grande, was fully operational by 1258, and the second, Naviglio Martesana, was inaugurated in 1465, a century before Shakespeare. As to Verona, there are paintings and prints showing the boats that sailed to and from that city. In 1581 Montaigne wrote of Verona's "huge quay beside the Adige" being, evidently, the same quay from which the English Ambassador, Sir Henry Wotton, sailed on his way from Verona to Venice via Legnano in 1607. Sullivan's references established, beyond question, that the

rivers Po and Adige were connected by navigable canals at least as early as 1506, if not before, and that the journey by river, though slower, was often regarded by Renaissance travelers as more comfortable, more secure and more convenient than the over-land alternative. As French traveler Seigneur de Villamont wrote in 1598, “One can, if one wishes, go by coach to Padua but the journey by river is nicer due to the beautiful palaces built along its banks.”¹⁰

The academics have responded to Sullivan’s findings either by ignoring them completely or by peremptorily dismissing them. Praz, for example, states “so far as Shakespeare is concerned it seems wide of the mark,” and Levith that “Sullivan’s findings have always seemed strained and unconvincing to all but the most willing to believe.” Höttemann, while conceding that a river journey from Verona to Milan “might have well been possible in Shakespeare’s lifetime,” mysteriously leaps to the conclusion that “Sullivan is clearly wrong.” None of them presents any reason for rejecting his evidence. Professor Scott McCrea, a Stratfordian academic from Purchase College, State University of New York, in a book claiming to end the authorship question once and for all, bullishly assesses Sullivan’s essay thus:

He claimed to discover waterways that connected the cities during the 1500s. Probably he was looking at German maps of the period that view Italy from the Alps and inaccurately show a maze of rivers... There is no archaeological evidence these waterways existed. Surely after only 400 years there would be some trace of them...such canals are absurd.¹¹

While advertizing (unintentionally) to the international importance of 16th century Northern Italian waterways, McCrea lets slip that he has not actually read the article upon which he is commenting, for Sullivan made no such claim and the phrase, “probably looking at German maps,” would not have been necessary if he had known precisely what he was talking about. Nor, on his previous page, would McCrea have seen fit to counter Prospero’s line from *The Tempest*— “[at Milan] they hurried us aboard a bark,”—with “But Milan is not near any river that can carry a bark”—if he had really read Sullivan, and seen quoted there a line from Montaigne’s *Travels in Italy* of 1581: “We crossed the river Naviglio, which was narrow, but still deep enough to carry great barks to Milan.”

As to there being no archaeological evidence that these canals ever existed, this is so wide of the mark that it need not be dignified with a response: but if Professor McCrea and his fellow academics are really determined not to read any of the multitude of serious books and studies on this matter, perhaps they can at least check out “Google Earth,” an online resource, where most of these “absurd canals” can be still viewed on recently taken satellite photographs.

It is a poor show when a fellow picks up his cudgels to thump a book he hasn’t read, but Stratfordians are not ashamed of doing this. Oliver Kamm, a British commentator who believes non-Stratfordianism to be some sort of conspiracy of democracy-hating anti-Semites¹², wrote that although he had not read Richard Roe’s *Shakespeare Guide to Italy*:

I will make an educated guess that [he] will nowhere in his research deal with the conundrum that Old Gobbo, in *The Merchant of Venice*, has a horse—in Venice—and that Milan is described in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* as a port city.¹³

It was foolhardy of Kamm to vaunt his “educated guess” from a standing position of ignorance, and, needless to say, he was wrong. Roe, referencing old maps, Italian books and his own on-site research, provided ample proof of horses in Venice and was able to identify the precise river and canal links that would have taken Valentine by boat from Verona to Milan in the late 16th Century.

In 1918, a decade after publication of his first essay, Sullivan produced another in which he wrote: “It is comforting to think that the old stream of misrepresentation is beginning to dry up, and that the worn out insistence on Shakespeare’s having made seaport towns of Milan and Verona and other cities is breaking down.”¹⁴ How ridiculous he would have found Kamm, Bate, Doherty and their Stratfordian allies harping on about Veronese and Milanese seaports a hundred years on!

The same absurd remonstrance returns in relation to Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*. Here Lucentio and Biondello are represented as traveling by boat to Padua and, once again, Levith, Praz, Höttemann, Schoenbaum, Doherty, McCrea and others appeal: “But Shakespeare must have imagined this because Padua is not a seaport!” Their evidence is taken from Lucentio’s line in Act I, scene 1: “If, Biondello, thou wert come ashore, we could at once put us in readiness.” Professor McCrea tells his readers that “these lines make no sense unless the author envisions inland Padua with a seacoast.” But why? Are we to suppose that Shakespeare—with the richest vocabulary of any writer dead or alive—understood the word “shore” only to mean a “sea-shore”? Is that it? Never mind that *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines “shore” as “the land bordering on the sea or a large lake or river;” or that old maps clearly label and display a river port at Padua; or that in 1511 Sir Richard Guylforde “wente by water to Padua by river of Brente;” or that Fynes Moryson, in 1594, wrote of “taking boate at the east gate of Padua;” or that Coryat, in 1611, described the “Barkes that go forth and backe betwixt Padua and Venice”—only the Stratfordian academic is prepared to ignore all this, so desperate is he to keep Shakespeare out of Italy.

Not satisfied that “Padua the seaport” is quite enough of itself to confirm Shakespeare’s total ignorance of Italy, many go on to assert that he mistakenly placed the city within the Duchy of Lombardy. Evidence in support of this claim is drawn from a speech delivered by Lucentio in *Taming of the Shrew*:

Tranio, since for the great desire I had
To see fair Padua, nursery of arts,
I am arrived for fruitful Lombardy,
The pleasant garden of great Italy.¹⁵

Here many footnoted editions take issue, some stating that Shakespeare wrongly supposed Padua to be in Lombardy, others that he mistakenly believed Lombardy to cover the whole of Northern Italy, but look carefully at the text. Lucentio says he has arrived “*for* Lombardy” (whatever that is supposed to mean) and not *in* Lombardy. Some 350 typographical errors have been identified in the First Folio edition of *Taming of the Shrew*—more than any other play in that folio. Several modern editions change “for” to “in,” thus canonizing the error, but clearly the line should read: “I am arrived *from* fruitful Lombardy.” We know this, not just because “*for* Lombardy” makes no sense and “*from* Lombardy” does, but because Lucentio has journeyed by road from Pisa and arrived by boat at Padua. This means that his journey must have taken him through Lucca, Pavullo and Modena, arriving at Revere in Lombardy where he would have boarded a boat on the Po to Ostiglia and thence (by rivers Adige and Brenta) to Padua. But then Padua, we are told, is to Shakespeare a seaport, so how would he have known all that?

With the same captious half-think that accuses the playwright of imagining coastal ports at Verona and Milan, we are asked to believe that he took a reckless guess about Bergamo too.¹⁶ “Shakespeare cannot have visited Italy,” they say, “because, if he had, he would not have

mentioned a sail maker from Bergamo, since Bergamo is nowhere near the sea.” How difficult would it have been for any one of these academics to check this out before blindly copying from Levith and Praz? In less than half an hour (using only books—not the internet) I was able to establish that Bergamo was a leading city of textile manufacture in the 16th century, that silk, hemp, flax, linen, bergamot (note the name—“a tapestry fabric made of ox and goats’ hair woven with cotton or hemp”), as well as wax-cloth (out of which sails have been made since the 14th century), were all produced there. A few minutes of extra research brought me a list of towns situated far from the sea where sails have been historically manufactured. Bologna, for instance, supplied sails to the Arsenale in Venice, there was Retford in England, Anhalt in landlocked Silesia and the city of Arzamas, right in the middle of Russia, which for centuries was the principal manufactory of sails for St. Petersburg, 750 miles away on the Baltic.¹⁷

With Shakespeare’s Bergamo, we find an apparently insignificant detail about a Lombard city revealing a precise topographical knowledge of Italy. Shakespeare was right, the academics are once again wrong. Shakespeare uses this technique time and again. Consider, for instance, the following few lines from a scene set in Florence from Act III of *All’s Well that Ends Well*:

WIDOW: God save you, pilgrim! Whither are you bound?
HELENA: To Saint Jacques le Grand.
 Where do the palmers lodge, I do beseech you?
WIDOW: At the Saint Francis here beside the port.¹⁸

Shakespeare gives three distinct references here—one to a pilgrimage site called Saint Jacques le Grand, one to a lodging house called Saint Francis that caters to “palmers” (pilgrims), and one to a nearby port. Great efforts have been made by Stratfordians to convince their readers that he invented all three while sitting at his desk in England, that Florence has no port, that “Saint Jacques le Grand” is a muddled allusion to Santiago de Compostella in Spain, and that there is no Saint Francis lodging house for pilgrims in Florence. Doherty, who complains of Helena’s using the French name Saint Jacques when in Italy, states that Shakespeare was confusing Italy with Spain and insists that “lack of precision regarding this shrine points to a writer who had heard the name but was unsure of the shrine’s location...as he had often done, he took the name without regard to any precise detail.”¹⁹

Professor Praz, however, disagrees, reluctantly conceding that Shakespeare *did* have a precise location in mind, and that was a church called *San Giacomo d’Altopasco* just outside Florence, which Shakespeare might have learned about from expatriate Italians in London or from some now lost manuscript source. Needless to say both Praz and Doherty were wrong. Again, if either had taken the trouble to investigate Florence past and present he would have soon discovered that there was once a Florentine port on the Arno, which flourished from Roman times until the mid-18th century, and beside it, on the Piazza Ognissanti, may be found, to this day, the St. Francis pilgrim’s hostel with its original stone-carved sign of the crossed hands of Christ and St. Francis still projecting proud above the door. Just across the river, in plain view and bold to the skyline, is the church of San Jacopo Sopr’Arno, dedicated to, and named after, the apostle San Giacomo Maggiore (French: *Saint Jacques le Grand*), whom the Florentines believed to have been the first prior there. Since the 13th century this shrine has featured on the pilgrim route to Spain. Its windows are in the shape of the *coquilles St. Jacques*, the scallop shell symbol of St. James. The reason Helena called it “Saint Jacques le Grand,” instead of “San Giacomo Maggiore,” is because she was a French woman, recently arrived from Rousillon.

In *Taming of the Shrew*, which is set in Padua, the playwright's *mise en scène* requires a rich man's house to be situated next to a quay where boats may be moored. The house and the quay must be located in a parish of St. Luke's and in sight of a large lodging house where Lucentio can stay while he takes courses in rhetoric, music, poesy and metaphysics at a nearby university. Shakespeare is correct in describing the city as "nursery of the arts." Padua's *Universitas Artistarum*, founded in 1373, was at that time one of the best universities for the arts in Europe. He was also correct in placing the lodging house, the merchants' houses and the parish church of St. Luke's near to one another by the port.²⁰ This precise alignment of topographical detail cannot be found in any Renaissance city other than Padua. In London there was no church of St. Luke's until 1733, nor any university until 1826. Undeterred, Stratfordian Benedikt Höttemann, writing of Shakespeare's Padua, declares that "England is never out of sight... Shakespeare was thinking of London when he composed the play."²¹

Very rarely will the modern academic cede to any fact of Shakespeare's accuracy about Italy. Professor Praz was "puzzled" in 1954, Professor Levith "surprised" in 1989 and Benedikt Höttemann "astonished" in 2010, to learn that Shakespeare appeared to know of a St. Gregory's Well in Milan.²² Only Professor McCrea held against the tide, insisting that "Milan's St Gregory's Well was regularly mentioned by other Elizabethan writers."²³ Nonsense! No single "other Elizabethan writer" has ever mentioned it, and McCrea knows this perfectly well. Levith and Höttemann believed that Shakespeare "might have found out about this well" from a famous 1582 map of Milan by Braun, but they did not go to the length of checking it out themselves; nor did J. Madison Davis or Daniel Frankforter, who stated in their *Shakespeare Name and Place Dictionary* (1995) that "a print of the city showing the well appeared in Braun's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1582)." No, it did not. If any of them had stirred themselves to look at this map, they would have noticed that St. Gregory's Well is not depicted upon it.²⁴

The superficiality of Stratfordian scholarship is nowhere more in evidence than when it is considering the question of Shakespeare and Venice. Höttemann admits that in *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare incorporates "extraordinarily accurate details of Venice," but then goes on to insist that the plays were "composed in London, far away from Venice." The most frequent reason given for this "fact" is that the playwright failed to mention the city's most famous sites—the Grand Canal, the Doge's Palace, the Piazza San Marco, the Arsenale etc. A more fatuous argument can hardly be imagined. That Dickens' London does not mention Trafalgar Square and Buckingham Palace, or that Tom Wolfe's New York does not incorporate the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building, tells us nothing about those writers' relationships to those cities. Shakespeare was not a travel writer in the manner of his contemporaries, Coryat and Fynes Morrison, nor, like Ben Jonson (who set *Volpone* in Venice without ever having been there), did he need to overstate his claim by listing all the most obvious and celebrated features of those places where he set his plays. Shakespeare's method, which we see repeated time and again, was to pepper his plays with frequent, minor and precise touches of local color. In both of his Venetian plays he presents many little facts about the city that can be traced neither to the original sources from which he drew his plots, nor to any known travel books of the time. In *Othello*, for instance, he mentions the "Sagittary," a dark, narrow street where the arrow makers lived (now called the Frezzaria); he mentions the "penthouse" in the *Ghetto Nuovo* (still standing on the square today); the Venetian clogs, or *zoccoli*; the "tranect" at Liza Fusina²⁵; he shows knowledge of the "common

ferry,” (the *traghetto* which brought passengers from the “tranect” to Venice); he is precise in his measurement of distance between his Belmont (The Villa Foscari), Liza Fusina and Venice; he refers to the gondola and the gondolier, to Magnificos and Signiors, to the merchants’ Rialto district, and the Venetian custom of presenting “a dish of doves” as a gift or peace offering.

Before passing from the argument of “imagination” to that based upon the books Shakespeare may or may not have read, and the people he may or may not have met, I should like to give brief consideration to that related contention (incorporated into Verse 1 of the Stratfordian anthem)—that he took details from England and placed them willy-nilly into his Italian scenes. Here again one can fairly say that the modern Stratfordian performance has been lackluster. A few points have been raised, most of them, as we have come to expect, lifted directly from Levith and Praz. It was Praz, for instance, who first promoted the idea that Shakespeare was thinking of Staffordshire when he described the Italian custom of begging for soul-cakes at Halloween.²⁶ But when informed by his Italian friends and cousins that begging for soul-cakes (known in Italy as *pani dei morti*) was a well-known Italian custom dating back to the 9th Century, Professor Praz cut this observation from the 1966 and 1978 reprints of his essay.²⁷ Professor Levith, however, failing to notice the correction, copied the inaccuracy from Praz’s 1954 draft into his booklet of 1989.

It is also from the Levith-Praz stable that we learn how Shakespeare was thinking of England when he mentioned an Italian “ale-house” in *Two Gentleman of Verona*. “Italy,” they point out, “is primarily a nation of wine drinkers.” That may be so, but neither acknowledges that in Shakespeare’s day ale was the most popular alcoholic drink among the poorer classes throughout Europe; that the first Italian alehouse was opened in the days of Agricola in the 1st century AD; that the world’s first abbey brewery was at the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino, near Rome, and that John Florio gave two perfectly good Italian words for “alehouse” (*hostaria* and *hosterietta*) in his *Italian Dictionary* of 1598. It is most unlikely that Shakespeare’s characters Speed and Lance would have been unable to find any place serving beer in a Renaissance city of the size and international importance of Milan.

Professor Levith similarly opines that the Venetian Gobbo would be more likely to dream of “a plate of pasta than a ‘rasher on the coals.’” Once again he takes his idea from Praz, who had earlier maintained that Shakespeare’s “‘rasher on the coals’ alludes to that peculiarly English dish, a fried slice of bacon.” It does not. A rasher could be a thin cut of any meat, and besides Renaissance Italians *did* eat bacon, which they called *porciuto*. A popular Northern Italian dish of Shakespeare’s day was called *carbonata*. This word may be found in Florio’s *Italian Dictionary* of 1598 where it is defined as “meate broiled upon the coles, a rasher.”

Doherty briefly departs from the Levith-Praz script to pick a few of his own examples of Shakespeare’s Englishing. In response to a detail from *Romeo & Juliet* about flint streets in Verona, he argues that “flint paving was common in England at least since Roman times... and can still be seen in places as far apart as Lewes in Sussex and Stirling in Scotland.” To reinforce his point Doherty cites three modern pamphlets about conservation of flint walls in Hertford, Sussex and Scotland. Of what relevance are these? The debate is not about Hertford, Sussex or Scotland, it is about Verona and whether or not Shakespeare ever went there. Needless to say, he ignores the highly relevant fact of Veronese flint (recently in the news for turning blue), which has been mined at Verona since prehistoric times, was exported as flintlocks in the 17th and 18th centuries and may still be bought as paving slabs in Verona today.²⁸ Is it not more likely that Shakespeare was thinking of Verona’s flint paving when he wrote about it in *Romeo and Juliet* than of some random flint walls in Hertford, Sussex and Scotland?

Moving from mineral to vegetable, Doherty proposes that Shakespeare only mentioned a sycamore grove in Verona because this tree was “introduced into England toward the end of the sixteenth century.” Here again he misses the point. With a little more research he might have discovered that in Shakespeare’s day the name “sycomore” (note, with two *o*’s) properly applied to a species of fig tree from the Middle East that could not grow as far north as England or Verona. The tree that was introduced into the gardens and parks of the English nobility in the 1580s was in fact the “Great Maple”—which English noblemen (and the playwright) wrongly called “sycomore.”²⁹ Now we need some explanation as to why Shakespeare placed this specific type of maple, mistakenly labeling it “sycomore,” along Verona’s western wall precisely where a grove of that same species may still be found today.³⁰

Each and every example of Shakespeare’s imagining or Englishing his Italian settings has been thoroughly refuted by scholars Sullivan, Grillo, Jeffery, Magri, Roe and others, using hard evidence to the contrary, so that it is no longer possible for the Stratfordian to sing the first verse of his anthem without knowing that it is wrong. Let us then pass to Verse 2—that which envisages a playwright gleaning facts about the geography, topography, language and literature of Italy from Italians resident in London.

Professor of English at Columbia University, James Shapiro, in a derisive history of the non-Stratfordian movement, writes that “a curious Shakespeare could have learned everything he needed to know about the Italian settings of his plays from a few choice conversations.”³¹ Could he? Shakespeare set 106 scenes in Italy in which may be found over 800 references to Italy in general; 400 references to Rome; 52 to Venice; 34 to Naples; 25 to Milan; 23 to Florence; 22 to Padua and 20 to Verona. Beyond these may be found incidental but precise references to Genoa, Mantua, Pisa, Ferrara, Liza Fusina, Villafranca di Verona, Messina in Sicily and many others.³² In light of this, Shapiro’s “few choice conversations” seem grossly inadequate. If all these details were really gleaned in such a casual way, with whom, we may ask, did Shakespeare have these conversations? It is in answer to this question that the academics show themselves, once again, to be thoroughly inexperienced and corrupted. To support their claim they have sought names of Italians—any Italians—who might have lived in or near London during Will Shakspeare’s lifetime and who could have taught him all he needed to know about Italy. Professor McCrea produces a directory of Italian names that includes a restaurateur called Paolo Lucchese; a bookseller, Acanio de Renialme; a merchant, Nicolo De Gozi, and a physician Theodore Diodati; but with no evidence that Will Shakspeare ever met any of them, let alone drew from their unlikely topographical knowledge of fifteen Northern Italian cities and interconnecting waterways, his proposition immediately collapses upon itself in a gross exhibition of teenage fatigue. So he changes tack: Robert Armin (the actor-clown who replaced William Kempe around 1600 as an important figure in Shakspeare’s acting troupe) “was, believe it or not, a good Italian scholar.”³³ It was generous of McCrea to offer the “believe-it-or-not” get-out clause, for as he well knows, anyone investigating his claim will go, without hesitation, straight for the “not” option. McCrea took the idea from Levith, who had previously stated it like this: “Another likely source for detail may have been Shakespeare’s fellow actor Robert Armin who was, by all reports, a good Italian scholar.” By what reports? Can he name one? The closest Robert Armin came to being an Italian scholar was when he himself suggested that a naïve English ballad he had written was a translation of an Italian fairy-tale. This is now known to be false.³⁴ There is no other evidence that Armin learned Italian, read or spoke it, visited Italy, or was a scholar of any sort.

Professor Bate (among others) speculates that John Florio (the above mentioned dictionary compiler, Italian scholar and mentor to Queen Anne) was “the obvious person” to have introduced Shakespeare to his Italian sources, but realizing that Florio’s known connections to the Earl of Southampton and to Ben Jonson are insufficient of themselves to link him in any way to the man from Stratford, Bate further urges his readers to suppose that Shakspeare took Florio’s wife for a mistress. This follows the method of Professor A. L. Rowse who, several years earlier, had proposed an Italian lover for Shakspeare in the shape of Emilia Bassano-Lanier. Knowing there to be no foundation to any of these assertions, the majority of Stratfordians settle for a more generalized explanation involving a helpful crowd of unknown, unnamed Italians squished into a pub near the Globe Theatre on Bankside. Of the many who have repeated this improbable claim I shall quote one as typical of them all:

[Shakespeare] might have acquired all the geography necessary for his “Italian” plays in his own back yard. The Oliphant, a Bankside inn, sat close by the Globe and largely catered to Italian customers. Shakespeare must have passed it every day on his way to work and perhaps he knew it well.³⁵

So let us look carefully at the origin of this yarn and try to establish how much genuine scholarship has gone into formulating it. All that is known about the “Oliphant” pub on Bankside is contained in the vestry records of the Parish of St. Saviour, Southwark. There it is confirmed that by late 1598 there was an inn at this location “sometime called the Red Harte and now called the Oliphant.” Nothing about Italians there. Skip forward to 1923 when an Italian writer named G. S. Gargano publishes, in Florence, a book containing a partial quotation from a letter of 1591. This letter was written in Italian, by a merchant from Dubrovnik (who happened to be staying in London), addressed to his business partner in Italy. The merchant writes (concerning an acquaintance called Vanni), that “he [Vanni] may be found either in his *Piero del Giardino*, or in the house of the Elefante.”³⁶ It is not entirely clear what this means as Gargano denies his readers the luxury of full context. However, one thing is certain—that the Dubrovnik merchant was not referring to a pub in London, which was anyway at that time called the “Red Harte.” His original Italian gives *casa dell’ Elefante*—back to Florio’s 1598 Italian Dictionary where *casa* is defined as “a house, a manor or dwelling place. Also a family, a blood name, or stocke. Also a mans owne home or native country.” *Casa* does *not* mean an inn, a pub, a tavern, or an alehouse. “Elefante” is the surname of an old and well-respected mercantile family from Barletta (the nearest Italian port to Dubrovnik) where there is both a Casa Elefante and a church of St. Peter.³⁷ It was Gargano who first tried to link the “house of Elefante” to Shakspeare’s Globe, Praz who mischievously fueled the flames among gullible Stratfordians by suggesting that one man, Vanni, constituted an “Italian clientele,” and Levith who finally transformed the Red Harte/Oliphant into “*The Elephant*, a bankside London inn near the Globe Theatre frequented by Italians.”

With no evidence to support the Stratford man’s connection to a single Italian, or to any traveler willing or able to teach him about the byways of Florence or the “sycamore” groves of Verona, those who insist that he was the playwright and that he never went to Italy, need to look for other ways to puff the sails of their claim.

Let us turn then to Verse 3 in which Shakespeare gains his knowledge of Italy by reading lots of books about it:

In the Stratfordian book *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* the whole subject of Shakespeare's remarkable Italian knowledge is blithely glossed in a single sentence:

There was plenty he got from books, not from experience: travel in Italy, the geography and customs of Venice; Mediterranean shipwrecks; Cleopatra's arrival at Cydnus; fratricide; witchcraft; men turned into asses.³⁸

So what are these books from which the playwright is supposed to have drawn all of his precise details of Italian routes, cities and customs? Since none has so far come to light, the beleaguered Stratfordian is forced to rely on attenuating reiterations of the unfortunate phrase "he may have found it in some now lost source." If it were known that Stratford Shakspeare had owned a single book or manuscript, that might help; but the absence of any bibliographic or literary bequest in his will suggests otherwise. An Italian proverb from *Love's Labours Lost* (*Venechia, Venechia, Che non te vede, che non te prechia*) is said to have been lifted from John Florio's book *First Fruites*, but since Shakespeare's two versions differ significantly from Florio's, the link must be ruled out.³⁹ Elsewhere Shakespeare refers to the nasal accents of the Neopolitans, the gravity of the Pisans, and uses Italian proverbs with no connection to Florio or to any other written source.⁴⁰

There is not unfortunately enough space here to itemize every example of Stratfordian error. My intention is simply to provide an introduction to the poor standard of scholarship among "professional academics" and to encourage them, where possible, toward a less emotional and more rigorous reaction to the many outstanding questions. They need to answer, for instance, how Shakespeare came to know about the churches of Florence, Padua and Verona, about the streets of Venice, the distances between unmapped Italian sites, Venetian customs, Italian monasteries and country estates, and the navigable canals and river routes of northern Italy? Where did he find copies of books in Italian by Giovanni Fiorentino, Cinthio, Ariosto and Luigi da Porto? How did he learn to read and write the language? How was he able to describe specific works of art by Luca Penni, Correggio and Titian that had never left Italy? How did he gain his detailed knowledge of spoken Italian dramatic forms—*Commedia dell'Arte* and *Commedia Erudita*? How was it possible, in 1965, to publish a 100-page glossary of Shakespeare's seafaring and naval terms (not otherwise defined in print until Mainwaring's nautical dictionary of 1644) if the playwright never boarded a ship or sailed out of England?⁴¹

These are the sorts of questions that Stratfordians need to think about, but so long as they continue to evade the central issues and to prop themselves against the faltering scaffolds of Levith and Praz we shall have to submit—over and over—to the same stuck record with all its familiar moans and concomitant insistencies: to be told that the Mantuans and Veronese had no ships; that departing from Milan by the north gate and along the Alpine foothills would be the wrong way to Mantua; that Gobbo could not have had a horse in Venice; that Florence had no port; that the Bentivoglieri were from Bologna, not from Florence or Pisa; that Giulio Romano was not a sculptor; and that Shakespeare wrongly called the Venetian "Doge" a "Duke," and wrongly believed him to preside over civil cases. In all these points Shakespeare has now been conclusively vindicated and the Stratfordian academics shown to be in error, but that will not stop them from repeating these points again and again, in the hope perhaps that their readers, bored to death, might not seek to check the veracity of their claims.⁴²

Shakespeare's knowledge of Italy is a fascinating and rewarding subject worthy of serious attention, but one, sadly, with which the modern literary academic is reluctant to engage—not

(as he would have us believe) because he is a “professional” whose unique “methodology” allows him to know best about Shakespeare, but because he is bounded and compromised by the internal politics of his profession. Academics draw their salaries from the public purse, but their advancement is dependent not upon the good opinion of governments or taxpayers, but on mutual approval according to the system of peer review. As I have explained, the Italian question touches a raw nerve in the authorship debate, and so long as this remains the case, no ambitious Shakespearean academic should expect to advance his career by submitting authorship doubt to the scrutiny of his colleagues.

If the literary academics are really so barren of ideas, we should ask them to leave the stage to make way for the more considered presentations of historians, paleographers, scholarly “amateurs” and those with greater knowledge of Italian custom, language and topography than they themselves possess. If they cannot do this, but insist on hogging the limelight with their same flawed and feeble “methodologies,” then they must learn to accept, with some grace, all the eggs and rotten tomatoes that are showered upon them.

In the meantime, let us look forward to the day when some plucky Stratfordian mainstreamer breaks from the citadel, stiffens the sinew, and signals to his colleagues that the time is come at last to do some proper work, to lay aside his prejudice, to examine the facts, and in calm and contemplative fashion to begin to justify the existence of that most fortunate among all professional classes—the salaried scholar of the State.

Endnotes

- 1 Charles Armitage Brown: *Shakespeare's Autobiographical Poems*, (1838), p. 100; Charles Knight (Ed.): *Pictorial Edition of the Works of Shakspeare*, (1839), vol. 1, p. 433; Karl Elze: *Essays on Shakespeare* (1874), p. 315; A. H. Cooper-Pritchard: *The Shakespeare Pictorial*, (Feb. 1932), cited in C. Clark: *Shakespeare and National Character* (1932), p. 106; E. K. Chambers: *Shakespeare—A Study of Facts and Problems*, (1930), vol. 1, p. 61.
- 2 John Doherty, *The Ignorance of Shakespeare*, (2009), p. 198.
- 3 Richard Paul Roe, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, (2011) pp. 28-33.
- 4 Benedikt Höttemann, *Shakespeare and Italy* (2011) p. 260.
- 5 Tubal is an Ashkenazi name; 16th century Ashkenazi are depicted in the “Jewish gabardine” (*Merchant of Venice* I, 3), and wore them long after other Jewish groups ceased to do so; the word *ashkenazi* was used in Hebrew to mean German, hence Roe’s suggestion of the German synagogues, *Grande Tedescha* and *Scola Canton*. See Roe pp. 132-140.
- 6 Mario Praz: “Shakespeare’s Italy” in *Shakespeare Survey* 7 (1954), pp. 95-106; *Murray Levith: Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (1989). In “Ben Jonson’s Italy” from *The Flaming Heart* (1958) pp. 168-185, Praz suggests that Shakespeare may have visited Italy with the Earl of Southampton in 1593, but appears to withdraw from this position in the reprint of “Shakespeare’s Italy” for *A Shakespeare Encyclopaedia* (1966) *sub* Italy.
- 7 The phrase was used by Lee in his *Great Englishmen of the Sixteenth Century* (1904), p. 299, and repeated in his entry “Shakespeare” for the DNB (1917), Vol 17, p. 1294.
- 8 Chambers, vol 1, p. 330; Praz, p. 98; Levith, p. 89; Bate, p. 94, Schoenbaum p. 170, Höttemann, pp. 353 & 189; Doherty, p. 191, Foakes Introduction to *Comedy of Errors*, (1962) p. xxx; Matus: *Shakespeare in Fact* (2012), p. 249.
- 9 Edward Sullivan: “Shakespeare and the Waterways of North Italy” in *The Nineteenth Century*, (February 1908), pp.215-232.

- 10 “*De Lizafousina on peut aller si on veut par carrosse à Padouë. Toutefois le cours de l’eau est plus plaisant à cause des beaux palais qui sont edifies à ses rives.*” Cited in Violet Jeffrey: “Shakespeare’s Venice”, *The Modern Language Review*, vol 27, No. 1 (Jan 1932), p. 32.
- 11 Scott McCrea: *The Case for Shakespeare—The End of the Authorship Question* (2005), p. 76.
- 12 For Kamm’s anxieties concerning anti-Semitic and anti-democratic conspiracies among non-Stratfordians, see “From Nonsense to Indecency” *Jewish Chronicle Online* (4 January, 2013); also his unsigned *Times* leader column (9 February, 2013).
- 13 Quoted from Oliver Kamm, Shakespeare Fallacies (16 November 2006), online at: http://oliverkamm.typepad.com/blog/2006/11/shakespeare_fal.html. (as of 9 December 2014).
- 14 Edward Sullivan: “Shakespeare and Italy” in *The Nineteenth Century* (Jan 1918), pp. 138-153.
- 15 *The Taming of the Shrew* (I, i).
- 16 Vincentio: “O villain! He is a sailmaker in Bergamo” *The Taming of the Shrew* (V, i, 77).
- 17 Information gleaned from *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (9th Ed.), sub “Bergamo”; *OED*, sub “Bergamot”; *Edinburgh Gazetteer* (1822), sub “Bologna,” “Retford,” “Anhalt” and “Arzamas.” See also Paolo Malanimiti, *Pre-Modern European Economy: 10th – 19th Centuries*, p. 162.
- 18 *All’s Well That Ends Well* (III.v.32-4).
- 19 Doherty, p. 199.
- 20 Roe (pp. 96-105), reproduces a 1718 map of Padua by Lorenzo Mazzi from the *Museo Civico di Padova* (F. 6330) that clearly identifies the port, nearby church of St. Luke’s and the *Ostaria*. The University of Padua is situated a couple of blocks north.
- 21 Höttemann, pp. 211-2.
- 22 *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (IV, ii, 77).
- 23 Scott McCrea, p. 77.
- 24 For “St. Gregory’s Well” see: Praz, 104; Höttemann, 187; Levith, 62; Davis and Frankforter *et al.* For a more considered account of what and where St. Gregory’s Well was, see Roe, 72-77.
- 25 The word *tranect* appears only once and only in Shakespeare. It was once thought to apply to the Venetian *traghetto* that Shakespeare describes as the “common ferry,” but is now known to refer to the dam at Liza Fusina which separates the fresh water of the river Brenta from the salt-water lagoon (possibly from “transect”), and/or the hoist, built in 1448, which pulled boats over this dam, known as the *transit* (possibly from an early spelling *trancet*). For further details of this and discussion of Shakespeare’s “Sagittary” see Jeffrey (1932).
- 26 *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (II, i, 24) and Praz, p. 99.
- 27 For ancient history and tradition of soul-cakes in Italy see *Venezia—Guide Rosse Italia*, p. 110.
- 28 See: *Le Pietre de Fuoco—Veronese Flintstones & the Flints of Europe* (1988) exhibition catalogue online.
- 29 John Gerard in his book *Herball* (1597) sub. “Fig Tree” (p. 1327) writes: “*Acer maior*—The great Maple, not rightly called the Sycomore tree... The great Maple is a stranger to England, only it groweth in the walkes and places of pleasure of noble men, where it especially is planted for the shadowe sake, and under the name of Sycomore tree.”
- 30 Benvolio (*Romeo and Juliet*. I, i) says he had walked with troubled mind “underneath the grove of sycamore that westward rooteth from the city’s side.” In 2009 Roe found and photographed what he took to be remnants of that same grove. See Roe, pp. 8-10.
- 31 James Shapiro: *Contested Will* (2010), p. 311.
- 32 See Ernesto Grillo: *Shakespeare and Italy* (1949), p. 98. (This list unchecked by the present author); John Hamill identifies 10 further allusions to Mantua in “The Ten Restless Ghosts of Mantua” in *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, Vol 39, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer & Autumn 2003).

- 33 McCrea, 79.
- 34 Armin's naïve ballad, *The Italian Tailor and his Boy* (1609) was written in imitation of a fairy tale from *Nights of Straparola* (c. 1552) but Armin's version cannot, by any stretch, be considered a translation.
- 35 Frederick A. Keller: *Spearing the Wild Blue Boar* (2009), p. 76; variants of this claim may be found in Praz, 104; Schoenbaum, 169; McCrea 72; Höttemann, 167; and others.
- 36 G. S. Gargano: *Scapigliatura Italiana a Londra* (1923) p. 41: "...a proposito del Vanni 'che va piu che mai al suo Piero del Giardino' aggiunge che 'se homo lo vol trovare bisogna che vadi là o in casa dell'Elefante.'"
- 37 Many Stratfordian commentators further insist that the "Elephant Inn," mentioned as being in the "south suburbs" of some Illyrian city in *Twelfth Night*, is also a reference to the same Oliphant at Bankside. "The Elephant" was however a common name for an inn throughout Europe. There was an Elephant Inn on the via del Lupenare in ancient Pompeii; an Elephant Inn in the Piazza del Duomo at Catania; in 1516 a tavern in Rome was named *Hostaria del Leonfante* after the Pope's elephant, Hanno; Walsingham was asked to subscribe letters "at the sign of the Elephant, Rue St. Jacques, Paris" in June 1586. When in 1551 Emperor Maximilian II's elephant, Solomon, traveled through Genoa, Piacenza, Verona, Mantua, Venice, Bressanone and Trento several inns on the journey were renamed "at the sign of the Elephant." The "Elephant Inn" at Bressanone on the Adige was one of these. Mary Shelley stayed there in 1842 and it is still in business today.
- 38 Carol Chillington Rutter: "Shakespeare and School" in *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* (ed. Edmondson and Wells, 2013), p. 143.
- 39 *Love's Labour's Lost* IV, ii, 97-8. Florio *First Fruites* (chapter 19) gives "Venetia, chi it vede, no ti pretia." Which he translates as "Venise, woo seeth thee not, praiseth thee not." See Catherine Alexander (ed.) *Cambridge Shakespeare Library*, vol 1, p. 67.
- 40 See Grillo, p. 32, for Shakespeare's use of *La Signora degli Stracci* in *Twelfth Night* and p. 126 for further examples of Shakespeare's Italian proverbs.
- 41 A.F. Falconer: *A Glossary of Shakespeare's Sea and Naval Terms* (1965); see introduction, p. vii.
- 42 Many published sources refute these statements: for Mantuan ships see Roe, 110; for Veronese ships see Magri: *Shakespeare and the Ships of the Venetian Republic*, DVSN (Mar 2011), p. 5; for the gate set in the north wall at Milan through which travelers passed to eastern destinations, see Roe 78; horse racing was banned in Venice in 1392 and Stratfordians report this as a permanent city-wide ban on all horses, but, for non-racing horses in 16th century Venice see David McPherson: *Shakespeare Jonson and the Myth of Venice* (1990), p. 123, Peter Ackroyd: *Venice—Pure City* (2010), p. 63, and Roe, 132; for the port at Florence see Roberto di Ferdinando: *I porti di Firenze*, <http://curiositadifirenze.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/i-porti-di-firenze.html>; the Bentivoglii were banished from Bologna in 1506, but Stratfordians insist that Shakespeare's placing any of them outside Bologna is ignorant; Giulio Romano's tomb in Mantua praises him as a sculptor, but Stratfordians insist he wasn't one and that Shakespeare wrongly described him as such. For evidence supporting Shakespeare's view see Myron Laskin: "Guilio Romano and Baldassare Castiglione," *Burlington Magazine* Vol. 109, no 770, 1967, pp 300-303; *doge* means "duke" in Venetian dialect, for the Doge's influence over Venetian courts and Shakespeare's extraordinary precision in matters of Venetian law, see Magri: *Italian Legal System in Merchant of Venice*, DVSN (Feb 2009), p. 5.

“In Shakespeare’s time, Italy was a place where anything could happen”, he says. “It contained both warring city-states and sophisticated political entities like the Venetian Republic. By setting his plays in Italy, Shakespeare could deal with issues including political assassinations such as the one in Julius Caesar that would have landed him in trouble if he’d set them in England. Shakespeare wasn’t averse to pinching a few ideas from Italian writers, either – some people have made claims that he might have been Italian himself. Some argue that he could have found out about life in Italy by talking to merchants who arrived at the River Thames. There were no political relations between Venice and England during Queen Elizabeth I’s reign, so that’s doubtful.”