**Skenè Studies I • 3**

Shakespeare and the Mediterranean • 1

# *Romeo and Juliet*

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi and Emanuel Stelzer

Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*


ISBN 979-12-210-1706-9
ISSN 2464-9295

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138

# Contents

**Part 2 – Recirculating *Romeo and Juliet* in the Mediterranean: the New Millennium**

# Introduction

Silvia Bigliazzi

It has often been claimed that the Mediterranean is at the centre of Shakespeare's imaginary. Except for the history plays, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and comedies such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *As You like It*, all the other plays have a broadly Mediterranean setting, including the France and Italy of *All's Well that Ends Well* and the Vienna of *Measure for Measure*.[1] His Mediterranean scenarios span from Venice to Aleppo, from Athens to Alexandria, from Parthia to Algiers, encompassing Romans, Goths, Moors, Egyptians and Greeks, and raising questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, civilisation and barbarism. In the sixteenth century, the Mediterranean was a place of new frontiers between civilisations and religions, but also of new connections across those frontiers and with the wider world, including northern Europe (DeVivo, 2015). It evoked pictures of imperial power and unstable identities: from the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg-Ottoman antagonism (Brotton 1997, 2002; Jardine and Brotton 2000; Vitkus 2003; Stanivukovic 2007) to the "Turkish-Venetian rivalry in the Mediterranean and the Aegean (Crete, Cyprus, Rhodes, Malta)", at a time when "the discovery of new sea routes caused the Europeans to perceive the world as an exotic island empire, a place of dissension and competition, or a source of extravagant wealth" (Matei-Chesnoiu 2015, 22). The broad space encompassing the coast and mainland areas of Europe, Asia and Africa offered ways to experience the sea at the same time as a place of belongingness and estrangement. The *mare nostrum* was also the "sea of the others",

1 Interestingly, Vienna is included in Preeshl 2021, yet not in de Sousa 2018 (138), suggesting varying conceptions of the Mediterranean within Shakespeare's canon.

*mare illorum* in Pechter's words (2004, 73), a sea which "[b]esides its natural perils of pirates and storms . . . was a supernatural sea, of Cyclopes and sirens, whirlpools and typhoons, ordeals and prodigies, monsters and miracles" (Warner 2004, 308). It was "an arena of interaction, of encounters, and exchanges" (Burke 2002, 136), where the past and the present met and "out of which the richness of Shakespeare's imaginative world grew" (Cantor 2006, 910). That period saw major changes occur in social and political systems, movements of populations, the conflict of the Islamic and Christian worlds, tensions within Christianity, and colonial expansion to the New World. All this offered unprecedented opportunities for cultural exchanges and new encounters. It was the natural setting to explore the centripetal forces of Empire once confronted by the disintegrative clashes of personal desire, sexuality, differences of rank and racial antagonism, cultural integration and disintegration as well as epistemological issues.

But the Mediterranean was also less exotic for an English gaze than this. It was the Italy of Renaissance cities, the cradle of the arts and of the rediscovery of the ancient past as well as the site of political unscrupulousness, Machiavellianism and popery. It was the France of Montaigne and sceptical thinking, the Spain of religious and political antagonisms. It was the Greece of ancient myths and the Rome of the ancient Empire. This variety of perceptions posed possibilities for considering different degrees and types of otherness not identical with alleged barbarism that emphasised ambivalence and cultural differences both geographically and historically. As de Sousa has rightly underlined, the Mediterranean referable to Shakespeare's dramas "ranges from the Trojan War, to different periods of Roman history, up to the Renaissance period" (2018, 139). And as Cantor has pointed out in his attempt to relocate the attention back to the Mediterranean, away from an emerging Atlantic gaze, that area was important in the Renaissance "because it was the nodal point in which all the known continents could interact" (2006, 900). Braudel's famous vision of the Mediterranean as part of World History, inclusive of the great civilizations of Africa, the Middle East as well as Central and Northern Europe, was a space of movement and exchange not confined to the countries overlooking "our sea", but extending inland, which "was

from the very dawn of its protohistory a witness to . . . imbalances productive of change" (2001, 46). This implied no unified vision, but "ten, twenty or a hundred Mediterraneans, each-one subdivided in turn" because localities made a difference (14).[2]

It may be easily contended that Shakespeare was a major catalyst of such geopolitical views and cultural phenomena. And it may also be argued that "the Mediterranean is not where Shakespeare happens, but what happens in Shakespeare" (Pechter 2004, 73), in the sense that "the Mediterranean is not a neutral setting but an ideologically saturated *topos*, transforming (or even constituting) Shakespeare's various engagements with (or within) it" (ibid.). But even considering a broad interpretation of the Mediterranean, inclusive of not strictly coastal areas, Shakespeare's engagement with it is to be viewed as belonging to a lateral standpoint, close to the Atlantic and separated from the Mediterranean area by the European continent. His Mediterranean is a place seen from afar by an outsider looking at it through non-Mediterranean cultural frames. But precisely because of this distance, his gaze offers a critical perception both external and not disengaged. It is this distance and, at the same time, its closeness that makes Shakespeare a catalyst of Mediterranean cultures for us, while not strictly belonging to them.

***

This volume moves from this premise to consider Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as an opportunity for looking at Shakespeare and the Mediterranean from the less common point of view of a play not immediately identifiable as a representative of cultural dynamics referable to the West/East or the North/South frontiers, and yet belonging to that plurality of Mediterraneans. It does not focus on the Italian setting as a tacitly Mediterranean place, nor does it explore the many Italian literary and cultural traditions naturally associated with this play – from its pervasive lyrical dimension and the sonnet convention to the topic of duelling and the Catholic inflections of religion, to name but a few popular

2 For a reassessment of Braudel's famous positions, see e.g. Marino 2002. For questions about how to define the Mediterranean, see Abulaifa 2003. See also Fuchs 2001.

issues.[3] Inspired by the 2021 Shakespeare and the Mediterranean Summer School held at the University of Verona,[4] this volume does not wish to provide a history of the reception of Italian cultural features as incorporated in this drama.[5] It wishes instead to move along dynamic trajectories traversing Mediterranean cultures and eventually reaching Shakespeare, and then through Shakespeare to cast light on their Mediterranean circulation then and now. It will therefore study examples of how mythemes, themes, narremes, theatergrams and more generally allusions to both contemporary and past Mediterranean aspects of this particular story and mythic archetypes circulated and still circulate in the circum-Mediterranean area. It will explore the transformations they underwent in the translation and re-elaboration of the Romeo and Juliet story in Renaissance Italy, France, and Spain, with a comparative view to what happened in Shakespeare's play. It will ask which Mediterranean qualities these versions retained or revised from their individual cultural standpoints. In this sense, a few myths and texts related to this drama will be examined from the perspective of their transformative potential and what this may tell us about their specific Mediterranean dimension. Therefore, focusing on Shakespeare will entail considering source study as a process, and his play as the starting point for the recirculation of its story through new takes today.

Although Shakespeare made personal choices, "virtually all of Shakespeare's revisionary strategies were shaped and influenced by multiple forces beyond authorial control – not only the historical, political, and religious contexts of early modern England, but also the more particular forces that would bear upon a professional playwright" (Lynch 1998, 2). What can be said about Shakespeare

3 On the Italian setting and the local cultural connotations of *Romeo and Juliet*, see Locatelli 1993. For studies of Shakespeare and Italy beyond this particular play, see the AIRS Routledge series (general editor Michele Marrapodi).

4 This book collects some of the contributions to the first edition of the international Summer School (27 July–3 August 2021) organised by the Skenè Research Centre (https://skene.dlls.univr.it/en/sam-shakespeare-summer-school-in-verona/), and a few additional articles related to its activities.

5 On which see, for instance, Callaghan 2003 and Stelzer 2022.

can also be applied to the other authors involved in the processes of transmission of that story in a Mediterranean context. In this sense, Belsey's comment that what makes him Shakespeare is differences and not similarities (2015, 63) implies a transformative power of intertextual filiation that, *mutatis mutandis*, suggests that "the sources themselves can be reexamined as products of intertextuality – endlessly complex, multilayered fields of interpretation that Shakespeare refashioned and reconfigured into alternative fields of interpretations" (Lynch 1998, 1). In other words, we should consider them as palimpsestic readings derived from stratified processes of selection, inclusion and exclusion of materials belonging to each immediate source, but also drawn from contemporary cultural models and discourses (Bigliazzi 2018). The articles collected in this book will move from this assumption. They will examine the circulation of the Romeo and Juliet story against this methodological backdrop, which at the same time looks at Shakespeare's play as an endpoint and a comment on the Veronese story, but also as the lens through which we can perceive the successive re-articulations of some of its features in their different Mediterranean appropriations on their way to England.

***

The book opens with Emanuel Stelzer's "Prologue: *Romeo and Juliet* from a Mediterranean Perspective", which sets out to present why Verona was, and still is, perceived as a Mediterranean place, and why this Mediterranean quality adds to the Italianness of this particular city. Stelzer lays the ground to argue that the choice of place was itself ideologically imbued with cultural discourses and stereotypes erasing any sense of neutrality. These discourses made up the horizon of expectations of English audiences for the reception of a story born in Italy from the novella tradition originating in Da Porto, but in fact going back to older, Mediterranean models, besides the more clearly Mediterranean narrative of Masuccio Salernitano's Mariotto and Ganozza, which has both lovers cross the sea in their travels to Alexandria of Egypt. "And yet", Guido Avezzù pinpoints in this volume, "the sense of a wild area as the locus of tragedy in the texts derived from Da Porto lingers in the memory of authors

and audiences alike as a potential antimodel in respect to the choice of a town as the setting of the *peripeteia* of the two lovers" (59). In "River, Town, and Wilderness: Notes on Some Hellenistic Narrative Motifs Behind 'Pyramus and Thisbe'", Avezzù discusses the ancient aspects of a narrative whose main topics and sequences of actions, from the contested love of the two youths to the apparent death and the fatal error, are rooted in a Hellenistic tradition behind the Pyramus and Thisbe myth and its Ovidian rendition. Interestingly, in the passage from the Mesopotamian locale of Babylon to Da Porto's novella, the "liquid" quality of the story, typical of the Mediterranean setting, is replaced by a closed civic environment testifying to a new Renaissance imaginary connected with a realistic narrative set in a relatively inland place in the peninsula.

The following three articles select three main topics in Shakespeare's play: the friar, the nurse, and the dance. All of them examine how their Mediterranean circulation connected with the story of Romeo and Juliet at times undergoes significant changes producing different cultural inflections. Silvia Silvestri, in "Reimagining Friar Laurence: from Circum-Mediterranean Novellas to the Shakespearean Stage", explores the stages of transformation of the friar figure in the novellas, weighing the reasons why his ambivalence becomes especially prominent in Brooke and Shakespeare, while it is downplayed in Boaistuau, thus bearing on the overall interpretation of the story in the light of the contemporary political and religious discourses in Italy, France and England. Beatrice Righetti's analysis of the Nurse in "Juliet's Nurse and the Italian *Balia* in the *Novella* and the *Commedia dell'Arte* Traditions" explores so-far understudied theatrical models of nurses as bawds from the Italian *commedia* tradition, positing their contribution to the discursive construction of this figure in a Mediterranean setting as a typically loquacious go-between character, distancing her from the classical *nutrix* as well as the *balia* in the contemporary Italian narrative tradition. Finally, Fabio Ciambella, in "Italian Dance Tradition and Translation in *Romeo and Juliet*: from Narrative Sources to Shakespeare", offers an ingenious reading of the ball scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by connecting it with the tradition of the carnival. He also explores the ways in which this play creatively de-Mediterranises this scene and

displaces the symbolism of the torch, elaborately derived from the original *ballo del torchio* here omitted, to other levels of signification concerning the two lovers. This first Part of this volume devoted to "Mediterranean Circulations: from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period" is closed by Felice Gambin's article on three seventeenth-century Spanish theatrical versions of the Romeo and Juliet story ("Romeo and Juliet in Seventeenth-Century Spain: Between Comedy and Tragedy"). Gambin does not advocate knowledge or derivation from Shakespeare but rather explores the relevance of this story in Spain, and how its circulation prompted mainly comedic takes, offering an alternative view to the tragic approach of all the ancient and contemporary Mediterranean novellas as well as Shakespeare's.

In the second part of this volume ("Recirculating *Romeo and Juliet* in the Mediterranean: the New Millennium"), the Renaissance perspective gives way to a discussion of a few contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's play, which from being the end-point of circulating narratives and mythemes in the Mediterranean, as in the previous articles, becomes the starting point for productions aimed at present-day Mediterranean audiences. This section raises questions on how and in which forms Mediterranean ideas, tensions and impulses of integration/disintegration as well as cultural and gender conflicts readable in Shakespeare's play continue to signify current tensions, offering new performance possibilities, culturally, theatrically and intermedially.

Part 2 opens with Maria Elisa Montironi's feminist discussion of Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Stori*, a 2000 film offering a Sicilian setting and a mafia-like veneer, emphasising the North/South axis with an implied innuendo to the 1961 Hollywood *West Side Story* hit musical film ("A Mediterranean, Women-Centred Rewriting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Stori*"). Montironi engages with contemporary racial and migration issues sparked off by the recent massive arrivals in Italy of African migrants, while also discussing typically Sicilian traditions and the role of women in local Sicilian culture. The film relocates the story to a typically Palermitan context and raises compelling ethnocentric and misogynistic questions in the contemporary culture of Southern Italy. The following two articles, Petra Bjelica's "'These violent delights have violent ends': Shakespearising the Balkans

or Balkanising Shakespeare?", and Eric Nicholson's "*Romeo and Juliet* as Mediterranean Political Tragedy, On Stage and Beyond", offer two distinctly complementary views of some contemporary politically-inflected productions of this play. Both focus on the 2015 *Romeo and Juliet* Serbian-Kosovar bilingual production to interrogate the uses of Shakespeare to signify and possibly demonstrate political appeasement in conflictual contexts. But while Bjelica convincingly argues that eventually this production failed to erase the dualism implied in a Mediterranean conception of the civilised West and the Balkan 'barbaric other' and that war conflicts require responsibility in exploiting the cultural capital of this play and its author, Nicholson offers a more positive view appraising the collaboration between the two conflicting parties. Nicholson's comments are framed by a broader discussion about the uses of this play in factious Mediterranean contexts. He demonstrates how Shakespeare continues to speak to us as a catalyst of current geopolitical and cultural phenomena that invest the redefinition of intra- and extra-European boundaries to be understood in the light of complex processes rooted in the Renaissance.

Although research in this area has recently shed new light on such phenomena (see esp. Clayton et al. 2004), yet much remains to be done. Work may still be carried out with regard to an integrated approach to Shakespeare source study with a view to illuminating complex processes of transmission, transformation, absorption, inclusion and exclusion in theatrical and cultural performance practices. Further research is also needed to illuminate Shakespeare's Mediterranean imaginary in the face of his 'global' dissemination and appropriations, as well as to his relation to, and impact on, ideas of Mediterranean and 'European' identity. Fresh insights into the phenomena mentioned above may profit from an approach bringing together source and reception studies,[6] as well as adaptation and performance approaches to Shakespeare's Mediterranean imaginative world, the processes of its construction and the possibilities for Shakespeare to speak to, and about, the Mediterranean countries today. This book wishes to offer a

6 Critical research is vast. For two very recent reappraisals see Drakakis 2021 and Wood 2022.

contribution to this investigation, helping us reflect on present-day Mediterranean phenomena of cultural hybridisation and on how our Mediterranean belongingness is rooted in an awareness of increasingly mobile boundaries.

**Works Cited**

Abulaifa, David. 2003. "Introduction: What is the Mediterranean?". In *The Mediterranean in History*, edited by David Abulaifa, 11-32. London: Thames & Hudson.

Belsey, Catherine. 2015. "The Elephant's Graveyards Revisited: Shakespeare at Work in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *All's Well That Ends Well*". *Shakespeare Survey* 68: 62-72.

Bigliazzi, Silvia. 2018. "Romeo before Romeo: Notes on Shakespeare Source Study". *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* 5: 13-39.

Braudel, Fernand. 2001. *Memory and the Mediterranean*. Trans. by S. Reynolds, Alfred A. Knopf. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

Brotton, Jerry. 2002. *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo*. Oxford University Press.

—1997. *Trading Territories: Mapping the Early Modern World*. London: Reaktion Books.

Burke, Peter. 2002. "Civilizations and Frontiers. Anthropology of the Early Modern Mediterranean". In *History and Social Sciences. Testing the Limits of Braudel's Mediterranean*, edited by John A. Marino, 123-41. Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press.

Callaghan, Dympna, ed. 2003. *William Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet. Texts and Contexts*. Boston – New York: Bedford/St Martin's.

Cantor, Paul A. 2006. "The Shores of Hybridity: Shakespeare and the Mediterranean". *Literature Compass* 3-4: 896-913.

Clayton, Tom, Susan Brock, and Vicente Forés, eds. 2004. *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

de Sousa, Geraldo U. 2018. "Introduction: Shakespeare's Mediterranean". *Mediterranean Studies* 26 (2): 137-44.

De Vivo, Filippo. 2015. "Crossroads Region: the Mediterranean". In *The Cambridge World History*, vol. 6, edited by Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, 415-46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Drakakis, John. 2021. *Shakespeare's Resources*. Manchester-London: Manchester University Press.

Fuchs, Barbara. 2001. *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jardine, Lisa, and Jerry Brotton. 2000. *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East & West*. London: Reaktion books.

Locatelli, Angela. 1993. "The Fictional World of *Romeo and Juliet*. Cultural Connotations of an Italian Setting". In *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, edited by Michele Marrapodi et al., 69-86. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Lynch, Stephen. 1998. *Shakespearean Intertextuality: Studies in Select Sources and Play*s. Westport CT: Greenland.

Marino, John A. ed. 2002. *History and Social Sciences. Testing the Limits of Braudel's Mediterranean*. Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press.

Matei-Chesnoiu, Monica. 2015. *Geoparsing Early Modern English Drama*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Pechter, Edward. 2004. "Mare Nostrum, Mare Illorum: Shakespeare and the Mediterranean". *The Shakespeare Newsletter* Summer/Fall: 73-5.

Preeshl, Artemis. 2021. *Consent in Shakespeare: What Women Do and Don't in Shakespeare's Mediterranean Comedies and Origin Stories*. London: Routledge.

Stanivukovic, Goran V., ed. 2007. *Remapping the Mediterranean World in Early Modern English Writings*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Stelzer, Emanuel, ed. 2022. "Paralogues". In *SENS: Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and their European Dissemination*: https://sens.skene.univr.it/shakespeares-works/romeo-and-juliet/paralogues/ (Accessed 20 July 2022).

Vitkus, Daniel. 2003. *English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570-1630*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Wood, Nigel. 2020. *Shakespeare and Reception Theory*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare).

Warner, Marina. 2004. "Painted Devils and Airy Nothings: Metamorphoses and Magic Art". In *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean*, edited by Tom Clayton, Susan Brock, and Vicente Forés, 308-31. Newark: University of Delaware Press.