

William Shakespeare's Italy: Places and People

A fairly brisk breeze blew through Piazza Brà and I was suddenly awakened. A little bit disoriented, I squinted at the bustling town center where (much to my horror) I had fallen asleep on a bench. Other than quick power naps like this one, excitement at walking the streets of “fair Verona” had largely overcome my jetlag. The city was as beautiful as Shakespeare depicts it to be in *Romeo and Juliet*. Narrow streets interweave grassy squares with large sycamore trees. Jasmine and bougainvillea crawl up nearly every wall. There are few cars in the city center, as the streets are too narrow to accommodate them. Even though Shakespeare wrote the classic play at the turn of the 17th century, there are attributes about Verona emphasized in the script that are still evident to this day. Walking through the streets felt oddly like walking across a stage; I kept wondering when I would first lay eyes on Romeo.

Setting foot in Verona allowed me to access the play in a way I had never before. My three days in the peaceful town were busy; I wrote a critical essay about how Verona the city interacts with Shakespeare's Verona, and a “persona poem” from Juliet's perspective after seeing her balcony and infamous statue. The balcony was attached to a seemingly random house in 1939, (the resident family had a name vaguely sounding like “Capulet”). Her tomb feels oddly somber and commemorative, until you realize that there is no one in it. The fabricated historical sites somehow weave narrative into geography in a way that doesn't feel fabricated – it feels real. It feels like a little riverside city worth flying across the world to experience. And I think part of the reason is that *Romeo and Juliet* is inextricably linked to its setting in a way that other narratives are not. Verona's memorable attributes make the events of the story come alive, attributes that are still observable to this day.



Touching Juliet's "lucky breast" in Verona.

I experienced this surreal influence of geography on the plays (and vice versa) throughout my expedition of Italy. Padua has an alluring quality that attracts young students just like in *Taming of the Shrew*, and it attracted me too. Venice – although bustling with tourists during the day – becomes eerily quiet at night. It's a perfect scene for a tragedy like *Othello's*. A trip to Sicily finished off my Italian tour; Messina and Palermo were as beautifully foreign, whimsical, and glamorous as their respective plays suggest. This expedition through Shakespeare's Italy not only allowed me to complete an ambitious academic project, but also brought about profound personal growth as I learned to navigate the world of solo traveling with only a backpack to my name. I am immensely thankful to the Amici di Via Gabina Traveling Fellowship donors for their faith in my project and their financial support. This trip truly marked a watershed in my academic studies and emotional maturity. Thanks to the incredibly generous donors, I now count myself luckier than Shakespeare in at least one way: I have seen the beauty of Italy with my own eyes.