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—Sir Derek Jacobi

The Shakespeare Guide *to* Italy

RETRACING the BARD'S UNKNOWN TRAVELS

Richard Paul Roe

Introduction by Professor Daniel Wright

Remnant Sycamores

Adige

see inset

Ponte Navi

St. Peter's Church

Remnant Sycamores

Porta Palio

St. Francis Monastery
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Verona

Romeo and Juliet Locations

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CHAPTER

Romeo and Juliet

"Devoted Love in Verona"

I had not admitted to anyone why I was going to Italy this time. My friends knew that I went there whenever I could, a reputation that gave me the cover that I wanted for my fool's errand in Verona. But was it so foolish? Had I deluded myself in what I had come to suspect? Only by going back to Verona would I ever know. Of that much I was certain.

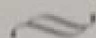
Then I arrived, and stepping outside my hotel, glad I had come, conflicting emotions began to make my blood race. I was half excited with the beginning quest, and half dreading a ridiculous failure, but obsessed with the idea of discovering what no one had discovered — had even looked for — in four hundred years.

My start would be — was planned to be — absurdly simple. I would search for sycamore trees. Not anywhere in Verona but in one place alone, just outside the western wall. Native sycamore trees, remnants of a grove that had flourished in that one place for centuries.

In the first act, the very first scene, of *Romeo and Juliet* the trees are described; and no one has ever thought that the English genius who wrote the play could have been telling the truth: that there were such trees, growing exactly where he said in Verona. In that first scene, Romeo's mother, Lady Montague, encounters her nephew on

the street. His name is Benvolio; he is Romeo's best friend. She asks Benvolio where her son might be. Listen to Benvolio's answer:

> Madam, an hour before the worshipp'd sun
> Peer'd forth the golden window of the East,
> A troubled mind drave me to walk abroad,
> Where, *underneath the grove of sycamore*
> *That westward rooteth from the city's side,*
> So early walking did I see your son. (Emphasis mine)



The author who wrote those lines did not invent the story of this immortal play. Many think that he did, but he didn't. He borrowed it. It was an old Italian tale. The man who recorded it for its first printing in 1535 reported that this was so. He was Luigi da Porto, and he said that he had heard the story told many times. Da Porto did not mention any sycamore trees. But after all, he was not a native of Verona; he was a nobleman of Vicenza.

When da Porto's story was published in 1535, it was soon borrowed and embellished by another Italian, a great storyteller named Matteo Bandello. Bandello did not give us any sycamore trees either. Then a French writer, Pierre Boaistuau, took over Bandello's rendition and put it into French, adding whimsies of his own and some goofy descriptions about Italy; but he did not include any sycamore trees.

Boaistuau's narrative soon arrived in England, where it underwent more transformations. One Englishman, named William Painter (or Paynter), wrote a modest prose version; but another, a lad named Arthur Brooke, got carried away. Brooke wrote the story as a tedious poem that he filled with fantasies, asides, and moralizations. It took him 3,020 lines to finish the job. Brooke claimed that he used Bandello, but he didn't; he really used Boiastuau. You can tell, because his poem has Boiastuau's embellishments. Brooke had plenty of room for some sycamore trees, but there aren't any. No one pays much attention to Painter, but just for the record, there are no sycamores in Painter's prose either.

All of this evolution happened before the *Romeo and Juliet* of the playwright was composed. Shakespeare scholars insist that he got his material for *Romeo and Juliet* from Brooke's enormous poem and that

the celebrated playwright had never been in Italy; therefore, he could be expected to make mistakes about its topographic realities. They say he invented a peculiar Italy of his own, with colorful nonsense about what was there. But (and here is the inexplicable thing) alone in the playwright's *Romeo and Juliet*—there and nowhere else, not in any other Italian or French or English version—has it been set down that at Verona, just outside its western walls, was a grove of sycamore trees.

My driver took me across the city, then to its edge on the Viale Cristoforo Colombo. Turning south onto the Viale Colonnello Galliano, he began to slow. This was the boulevard where, long before and rushing to the airport at Milan, I had glimpsed trees but had no idea what kind.

Creeping along the Viale then coming to a halt, the driver, with a proud sweep of his hand exclaimed: "Ecco, Signore! There they are! It is truly here, outside the western wall that our sycamores grow." And there they were indeed. Holding my breath for fear they might be mere green tricks of the sunlight, I leapt from the car to get a closer look at the broad-lobed leaves and mottled pastel trunks, to make absolutely certain that it was true; that the playwright had known, and had told the truth. Benvolio was right. And I was not a fool.

The Porta Palio, *one of Verona's three western gates. Sycamore trees can be seen through the archway. (Author's photo)*

Sycamore trees outside the Porta Palio. (Author's photo)

Now the trees are in separated stands, the ancient grove cut and hacked away by boulevards and crossings, by building blocks and all the ruthless quirks of urbanization. But the descendants of Romeo's woodland are still growing where they grew in Romeo's day. Rejoined in the mind's eye, erasing the modern incursions, those stands form again the grove that once, four and far more centuries ago, was the great green refuge of a young man sick with love.

The playwright knew this, this unnoted and unimportant but literal truth about the lay of the city. He had deliberately dropped an odd little stone about a real grove of trees into the pool of his powerful drama. But concerned with great concepts, and the crises of a suspenseful love story, no one has noticed this small stone, the author's odd little fact: the westward sycamores of Verona.

This is the playwright who is said to be ignorant of Italy. But truth is revealed in trifles, not in the great words that sweep. Truth hides in the words that are overlooked—the dull words, odd words, the words that are dismissed as cluttering, inconsequential, irrelevant. These are the words, not the soaring ones, that tell what a person knows. But one must listen.

Place names will do it, too. They can give away who the ignorant and who the traveled are. Such is the case with "villafranca."

All of the playwright's predecessors — except Luigi da Porto — invoke the name of a place outside the city of Verona when they recount the story of Romeo and Juliet. The name, "Villafranca," appears in the early versions, such as when Lord Capulet is having his problems with Juliet. She is fussing about getting married, especially about getting married to Count Paris. She has never seen this fellow; how could she possibly be interested in him? And so, at a crucial place in the earlier versions of the story, Juliet is ordered by her father to go to Villafranca. He tells her Paris will come to see her there. When Bandello told the story, he used Villafranca too, but only to say that Paris was there, without further elaboration. It was after Bandello that the storytellers got creative — and wrong — about this place.

A "villafranca" is a "free town," a place where, under the aegis of its ruler, markets, trades, and fairs could be conducted under favorable advantages, with some or perhaps all the transactions free of taxation. Otherwise, there was nothing extraordinary about a villafranca; not a villafranca as such, that is. But there was something significant about the playwright's villafranca in his version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Like the sycamore trees, there was something different the playwright would weave into his play that is not found in any previous version of the story.

When Arthur Brooke finally arrived at the 1,974th line of his poem — that poem that is supposed to be the source of the playwright's material — Brooke introduced his villafranca to his English readers. He put its Italian name into English, "freetown," and had Capulet describe it as his, saying "our castle cald Free towne," which was located outside the city.

The playwright did not copy, did not borrow from Brooke's description, or, for that matter, from any description of freetown as ever written by anyone before him. Brooke's freetown may have been romantic for England, but to any northern Italian, or anyone who had come to Verona to delve into its history and explore its sites, the idea of a Capulet castle at Villafranca (freetown) outside Verona was just silly.

The playwright does not delay for 1,974 lines to invoke his own freetown. In his *Romeo and Juliet*, in that same first scene of the same

first act, almost immediately — even before he tells about the sycamore grove — we hear of freetown. "Old Freetown," it is called. And what we hear from him about this place has nothing to do with an imaginary Capulet castle or noble's country retreat; it has to do with things far more serious: infeudation and the medieval powers of princes.

This first scene of the play begins with dangerous men of hostile allegiances out on a city street looking for a nice chance to spill blood. They are the bravoes of enemy houses, the Montagues and the Capulets. They meet; they draw steel to do murder; and next, their actual lords enter the fray. They are the blustering Capulet and the arrogant Montague, old fools who are not there to put down the brawl, as might be hoped, but to make the encounter still worse. And then there is hell to pay. Here, enraged, comes the great prince of Verona's domains, Escalus, their overlord prince. His fury freezes everyone, and the outrage upon the city's peace is halted.

Escalus' ringing words seize all attention. So much so that they can overshadow the puzzling commands to the lawless nobles that arrive at the end of his speech:

> You, Capulet, shall go along with me;
> And, Montague, come you this afternoon,
> To know our farther pleasure in this case,
> *To old Freetown, our common judgment place.*
> (Emphasis mine)

And there it is: Freetown, only as described in this play. Nothing is said about Juliet, nothing about Paris. Just Freetown. And whatever else Freetown might be, this much we have now learned: it is old, and it is the place where Prince Escalus pronounces his common judgments. "Common" does not mean "ordinary" here; it means "public." We are told nothing else. But why is Freetown mentioned in this early way, and what of those differing commands?

Capulet is to forthwith accompany Escalus down a Verona street; the Prince has no apprehensions about this old scoundrel. But Montague is ordered to appear before the Prince at a public hearing, at some other time and place, at old Freetown. From the Prologue of

the play, we know that these two nobles are heads of houses "both alike in dignity." Yet here these equals are, in the same breath, assigned widely different commands. There is no clue as to why. Not only does the playwright fail to elaborate, he changes the subject abruptly, while almost completely emptying the stage. Escalus exits as suddenly as he appears, and we turn to Benvolio, who tells his aunt about the sycamore grove.

Freetown. And the playwright has called it "old." But old in what way? Old of long-standing practices, or physically old, or venerable otherwise? Or all of these? No other teller of this story had called it old or mentioned anything about public judgments. This town on the banks of the Tartaro River had been there since the Dark Ages, at least. It may well have been a village in Roman times. And here at the beginning of the play its author departs from antecedents: he makes Freetown "old," pointedly so; and the place of princely public judgments.

What's all this about? Is this nonsense? Neither has the question been asked nor does it seem that any curiosity has arisen over the pointed commands of Escalus — or about where, exactly, he directed Montague to go that afternoon or why.

It might seem that the playwright didn't need to write those lines for Escalus at the opening of his play. The other tellers of Romeo and Juliet gave their Villafranca allusion to Capulet, later in the tale. Our author, however, promptly gave the reference to Escalus, in an approach that is his alone. Why had he written these four perplexing lines?

There was only one way to settle the matter: I had to go to Villafranca di Verona in person, to see for myself what no one had taken the trouble to investigate. And this time as I left my hotel in Verona, I had no mixed emotions. I had firmed myself to be detached, to be clinical and objective, to go forward in that resolute and professional way in which surprises are to be expected and complications and blind alleys are normal realities. I had the questions; it was time for the answers. With maps and books and papers and camera, and two "emergency" apples, I drove away from Verona's walls to find this old Freetown, most especially, to find a place there with some singular stature for princely judgments.

Villafranca di Verona is about sixteen kilometers — ten miles — or an easy two- or three-hour ride for Montague — southwest of Verona on the vast and fertile plain of northern Italy. It is a rare tourist that ever goes there, even though it is near the highway to the popular Mantua. It is not a big city but is more than a country town. I drove easily into its center, ready for what I had told myself would be a dispassionate investigation, but what I spied through the windshield straight ahead made all of my resolutions wobble. I was stunned. Rising before me I saw, and knew immediately, what "old Freetown," that "common judgment place," was. It wasn't the city at all, but what was *in* that city. The city's name was just a simple way to identify it for contemporaries and long after. This was sort of an "emergency," so I reached for my apples.

Villafranca, old Freetown, is a brick colossus resting on massive earthworks. The whole is a formidable medieval castle with tall towers, gates around of every size, forbidding walls and ramparts, and high planes and harsh edges set in stern terra cotta masonry. Now, separated by centuries of intervening strife, old Freetown's strategic walls are rent and its interior keep and halls razed, but there the great stronghold endures, no longer in fact but forever in symbol, the unmistakable seat, just here, of the della Scala power in the Italian feudal world.

Spread out before its commanding gate that faces toward the modern town, there still remains, these centuries later, an open quarter of wide, flat acres. It was even wider at one time, though it's still there, ready to receive again the stalls and tents and booths and stacks of merchandise that were once displayed for sale, age after age under the brooding walls and venerated and venerable assurances — the old assurances, the old decencies — that were at the heart of that castle's honorable rulers. And who were those rulers? Was there such a man in history as the play's Prince Escalus?

When Luigi da Porto wrote the story of Romeo Montecchio and Giulietta Cappelletti, he quoted a man he called Peregrino, a man from Verona, whose version of the story was the one he chose to set down. Peregrino informed da Porto that the sad events had happened

"during the time when the amiable and humane Prince Bartolomeo della Scala reigned over my most beautiful country." Della Scala. Escalus. The same Italian family. Escalus is a sort of Latin form for della Scala, a form that has been used for a very long time, and which has been used by other tellers of this tale. There are other forms of this family name as well. Perhaps the one most widely used in Italy is Scaligero, whose englished form is Scaliger.

The power of this della Scala–Scaliger family reached its first great expanse in the thirteenth century, with conquests of the wide territories all about Verona. Many of the conquests were carried out by Mastino I della Scala, whose domains eventually came to include Verona itself in 1260. This Mastino, of long life and high honor, died in 1301; and the next della Scala in line was his nephew, Bartolomeo. So popular was his succession that it was ratified by public acclaim. But Bartolomeo would not endure. He died in 1304; and thus Peregrino had not only identified Bartolomeo as the storied Escalus, he had narrowed the time for the story of Romeo and Juliet to one of three medieval years. But the Veronese—ask anyone there even now—are more precise: "It happened in 1302"; and it is always said without hesitation. This exact year is an important part of the Veronese unwavering tradition.

Italian road maps that show Villafranca di Verona usually carry an added notation: "Castello Scaligero." It means only that there is a castle at that spot on the map that was a Scaliger property. The Scaligers built many castles; and such maps will note many of their locations by that same undiscriminating label. Cartographers do not write history. They draw the maps and leave the history to others. The castle at Villafranca di Verona was not just another Castello Scaligero: only this one was the site of their princely court, the seat of Scaliger authority, and the venue for their public judgments.

It was built in 1202 and endured as the central Scaliger seat until 1354, when Cangrande II della Scala had the great Castelvecchio built inside Verona's walls. It was Cangrande who moved the Scaliger court away from "Old Freetown." But when Bartolomeo ruled in 1302, the Castello Scaligero was already a century old: old in tradition, old in family, old in power, and old in medieval protocol. Montague had no doubt where to present himself on that designated afternoon. And

"Old Freetown," *the great medieval Scaliger castle at Villafranca di Verona. The market area is in the foreground of the photo above. (Author's photos)*

if the Montague in *Romeo and Juliet* knew, then its playwright knew, and knew as well that Escalus could properly call Freetown "old."

But there is more that the playwright indicated in Escalus' command. It was something that would be of concern to every Englishman—indeed every European—not only in the medieval ages but into the Renaissance, and well beyond. A feudal code should have been honored by Escalus when he separated the bloodthirsty

Capulets and Montagues. But he violates that code, and worse, he does it on a public street. He does not tender "equal dignity" to the noblemen. His commands to them are radically different.

At the start of the twenty-first century, I could only guess why, but for a sixteenth-century audience, Escalus clearly established the state of affairs in this opening scene. Through his ruling, Escalus disclosed — whether true in real life or not — that here was a ruling prince who was not just, and who was about to violate the ancient protocols between a ruler and nobles who were of "equal dignity." This injustice would signal to the audience that doom was on the way. We will see the Capulets favored again and witness Romeo Montague banished without a hearing. We will witness for ourselves the tragic result of bias, hatred, and injustice.

What else might the playwright have told us about Verona in the pages of his play that was an unknown truth rather than the invention of an untraveled writer? There was one more pointed allusion that kept bothering me, more complex than the sycamore grove, and more hidden than the meaning of "old Freetown." It was an allusion to a minor place name that is always skipped over, ever-considered to be yet another of the playwright's fanciful inventions. It is "Saint Peter's Church," mentioned late in Act III. To discover whatever truth it might involve, I would need to explore Verona again. I would need to investigate its ancient parish patterns and fix firmly in mind the locations of the places in their city where the Veronese still say the story happened: the streets, the squares, the churches, and the important secular buildings that existed in 1302. Though I had not yet understood why, the arrangement of those places would become far more important than I expected when I began my exploratory walks.

The story of Romeo and Juliet is known intimately to the Veronese. It is their story and a proud local tradition that has been handed from generation to generation. Their story is a true story, and far older than all the written versions of the tragic tale. Even today, the Veronese can point to the places in Verona where the events took place,

many of which have been described in guidebooks, in every possible language, for visitors on a pilgrimage to the city of mortal love.

I knew from the words of the play's Prince Escalus, when he spoke of "old Freetown," that the playwright knew the truth of the Veronese tradition; and I suspected from his sycamore grove — though it's not part of the local recounting of the tale — that the author had been here, in Verona, himself.

I was intrigued. I needed to compare, with my own eyes, the Veronese tradition with the words of the playwright; but knowing what I knew about his methods, I felt almost certain that everything the author "sneaks into" his Italian Plays can be found on the ground.

My ultimate goal was to find that very Saint Peter's Church clearly named by the playwright. Although none of his scenes would be set there (only its name used to threaten Juliet), it had to be the Capulet parish church, and it would have to fit seamlessly into the Veronese version of the heartbreaking tale. Why our author would insist on such accuracy demonstrates not just respect for that Veronese tradition but, more important, a keen knowledge of the layout of Verona itself.

Before setting out on my comparative investigations, I sat in the lobby of my hotel with my paperback copy of *Romeo and Juliet* and systematically crossed off the headnote descriptions editors have provided for the play. I wanted a completely fresh approach. I didn't want to be influenced by what had been added later by someone who, very likely, had never been in Italy. I underlined *only* what I could glean about the settings from the words spoken by the playwright's characters — as Benvolio had done with the sycamore trees.

I kept firmly in mind the admonition in *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*:

> Modern editions of Elizabethan plays are generally misleading in their indications of act and scene divisions and in their identification of location.

With underlined paperback in one pocket, and dog-eared Verona guide in the other — and an opened umbrella above my head — I set out on the streets of the city under a drizzling rain, convinced I was about to confirm what I already suspected to be true.

In *Romeo and Juliet* there are several scenes that take place in "public places" because the dialogue of the characters makes the identifications clear. Two of these public places are especially famous, and both make tempting identification traps.

Bartolomeo had his great palazzo in Piazza dei Signori; the building is still there. The other of these two prominent places is Piazza Erbe, just through a broad archway from Piazza dei Signori. While the former is where herbs—and fruits and vegetables—were sold, the other was and, in many ways still is, a place of municipal government. The challenge these squares offer can be in guessing whether either of them might have been the place for a scene or two, or maybe more, in *Romeo and Juliet*.

In one of my earlier sojourns to Verona, when I asked a native of the city whether one of these public squares might have been the site of the confrontations between the enemy families, I was promptly given an education in words much like these:

"*The Capulet and Montague ruffians may have been ignorant, but they were not stupid. They would never have chosen a place to fight that was under the nose of Bartolomeo and the municipal authorities. The places where they fought were out at the end of Via Cappello, at Stradone San Fermo, when the Stradone was called 'il Corso.'*"

When I asked how this was known, without hesitation, the response was: "We have always known." The Veronese tradition.

By walking from one place to the next accompanied by my paperback and guide, I saw that every site the Veronese identify in their own story lies easterly and southerly of those adjacent piazze. The area is contained on the east side by the southbound course of the Adige River. I could perceive no contradictions between the play's scenes and the specific sites described in my guidebook. The single oddity was the playwright's inclusion of that sycamore grove, far to the west of everything else.

Although I was now satisfied that no brawl had taken place between the Capulets and Montagues beneath a window of Bartolomeo della Scala—in either the Piazza dei Signori or the Piazza Erbe—I loitered for a time in dei Signori to admire once more the statue of Dante Alighieri that has been placed there. Verona memories are very long; it was not set up in that spot until 1865, but it commemorates an event of civic pride that happened in that same memorable year in

Piazza dei Signori. *The brick building is still the seat of Verona's government and police headquarters. Through the arch one can make out the "Arche Scaligeri" where the tombs and family church of the Scaliger family are located. (Postcard: Author's collection)*

which Romeo discovered Juliet: 1302. When Dante was sentenced to death in his native Florence, he was given his first refuge in Verona by Bartolomeo della Scala, our "Prince Escalus," and Verona became his home for a number of years. This may be why da Porto's friend Peregrino said that the prince was "amiable and humane," although the playwright makes him less so.

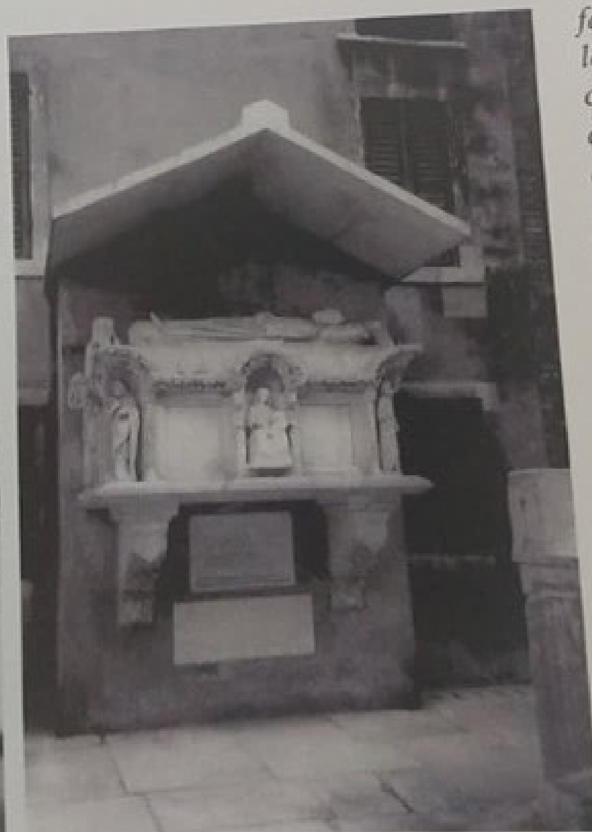
We wouldn't know from any tales about the Capulets and Montagues about the coincidence of Dante's presence in the city. He would have been there — despite the academic fussing about dates — at the very time that the events between the Montagues and the Capulets had reached their climax. Indeed, it seems as though he might even have witnessed some of the story in person. In his *Purgatorio*, when he came to Canto VI, Dante wrote this admonition to the ruling German king, Albrecht I (1298–1308):

> Vieni a veder Montecchi e Cappelletti,
> ... uom sanza cura ...
>
> Come — you who pay no heed — do come and see
> Montecchi, Cappelletti, sad already ...
>
> (Allen Mandelbaum, trans.)

Across the Piazza dei Signori to its far corner, the little medieval church of Santa Maria Antica, the family church of the Scaligers, still stands. It is a place where it might be guessed that Dante would have also heard mass recited. There, rarely noticed because it is inside the high wrought iron enclosure of the Scaliger monuments, is the sarcophagus of Bartolomeo della Scala resting in its indentation, as it has been since the time of Romeo and Juliet, in the exterior of the church's wall.

Turning down the corner street, and eastward for just a few steps, is the documented townhouse of the Montecchi, the Montagues, hence the city home of Romeo. Everything about it fits the story: the date of its age, the medieval design, the whole arrangement.

Returning back through the Piazza dei Signori, through the arch and into Piazza Erbe, then a turn to the left, the space of the piazza narrows to form the beginning of two different streets. The one on the right, Via Mazzini, has been an important street of shops since Roman times and leads south to the Roman arena. But the one on the left,



Left: ***The statue of Dante*** *was erected in the Piazza dei Signori in 1865.*

Right: ***Tomb of Bartolomeo della Scala,*** *"Prince Escalus." The tomb is on the exterior wall of Santa Maria Antica, the Scaliger family church, located in one corner of the Piazza dei Signori. (To gain entrance, apply to the rector, since this sarcophagus is well inside the outdoor wrought iron enclosure of the famous elevated della Scala tombs known as the "Arche Scaligeri." The iron fence decoration incorporates the ladder emblem of the family name — "of the steps" — della Scala.) (Author's photos)*

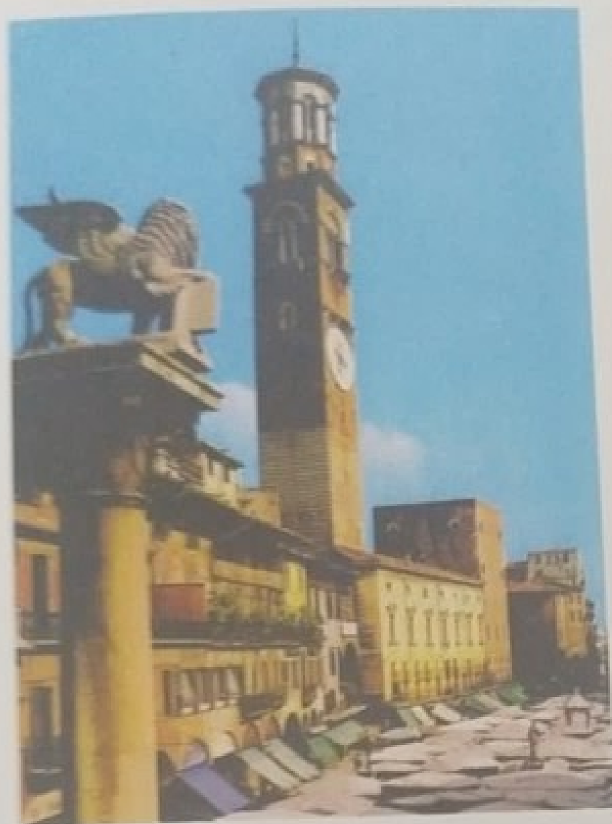
which runs eastward toward the Adige River, is Via Cappello. Down that street, not far from the piazza at No. 23, is the most important place of pilgrimage in Verona: the home of legendary Juliet.

Scaliger Palace *in the Piazza dei Signori with the soaring Lamberti Tower.* (Verona: Inside & Out, *Storti Edizioni, 1966, p. 67)*

Seldom is there a time when there isn't a crowd of visitors at Juliet's house, and this is to be expected, for it is one of the world's great shrines to mortal love. There is nothing quite like it anywhere, and the timid will cheat themselves if they do not make their way through the courtyard, enter, and mount the stairs.

Romeo's house. *The townhouse of the Montague-Montecchi family in Verona. (Postcard: Author's collection)*

This house, unlike the Montague-Montecchi house, has no documented history as the Capulet house. It depends on Veronese tradition for its authenticity. Some point to the ancient name of its street, Via Cappello, a variant of the family name, which is variable itself, such as Cappelletti, Capuletti, Capelletto, Cappello,



Piazza Erbe showing the southern side of the Scaliger Palace. (Postcard: Author's collection)

and so on, since streets were often named—or re-named—for important residents; but that alone is not proof that a young beauty named Giulietta Cappello, or Capuletti, ever lived here in 1302, even though the house is medieval and seems remarkably suited for the story.

Spoofers say this house was only an inn merely named for the street, but the response to this is swift: many a great old house became a "bed-and-breakfast" at one time or another in its history, and this house has undergone seven centuries of changing uses. One hundred years ago it was a tenement slum, its rooms divided with

Juliet's house at 23 Via Cappello. The balcony was added in the 1930s. (Postcard: Author's collection)

wretched partitions, its courtyard jammed with rubbish; and this, too, is proof of nothing.

But there are some things that can be learned here. The house was rescued from deterioration in the early twentieth century by the Italian government. It has a perfect main room—or Great Room, call it what you will—on its "first floor," the floor which Americans call the second floor and Italians call the *piano nobile*—exactly right for the festive event where Romeo first sets eyes on Juliet. The room has been delightfully restored. But there is one glaring feature of the house that is a direct contradiction of the playwright's dialogue, a contradiction rarely noticed.

The celebrated balcony of Juliet that everyone admires is on the façade of the Capulet house above the entry door, overlooking the entry court. But inside the house, and strangely so, the balcony is an adjunct to the Great Room. In performances of *Romeo and Juliet* we are accustomed to a balcony that overlooks an orchard. From the lines of Act II Scene 2, it is clear that Romeo climbed over a wall into the Capulet *orchard*—not into an entry court—to woo Juliet up above. Where was the orchard overlooked by a balcony here at Juliet's house? Did the playwright make a mistake? Did he depart from reality for convenience?

Orchard? Balcony? There was something wrong here, but the entry court of Juliet's house was too noisy and crowded for me to concentrate. I needed to go over the play in quiet and with care.

There are three scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* that have the same arrangement, with Romeo in the orchard and Juliet above. If there had once been an orchard at Juliet's house in centuries past, the crowding of city buildings and walls have since erased it. Intense urbanization over the years would easily have removed whatever orchard there might have been in 1302. A small orchard, however, had always been an important adjunct to the townhouse of a wealthy family in Italy. Presently there is only a small paved courtyard between the street gate and its front door. I was forced to let go of the orchard.

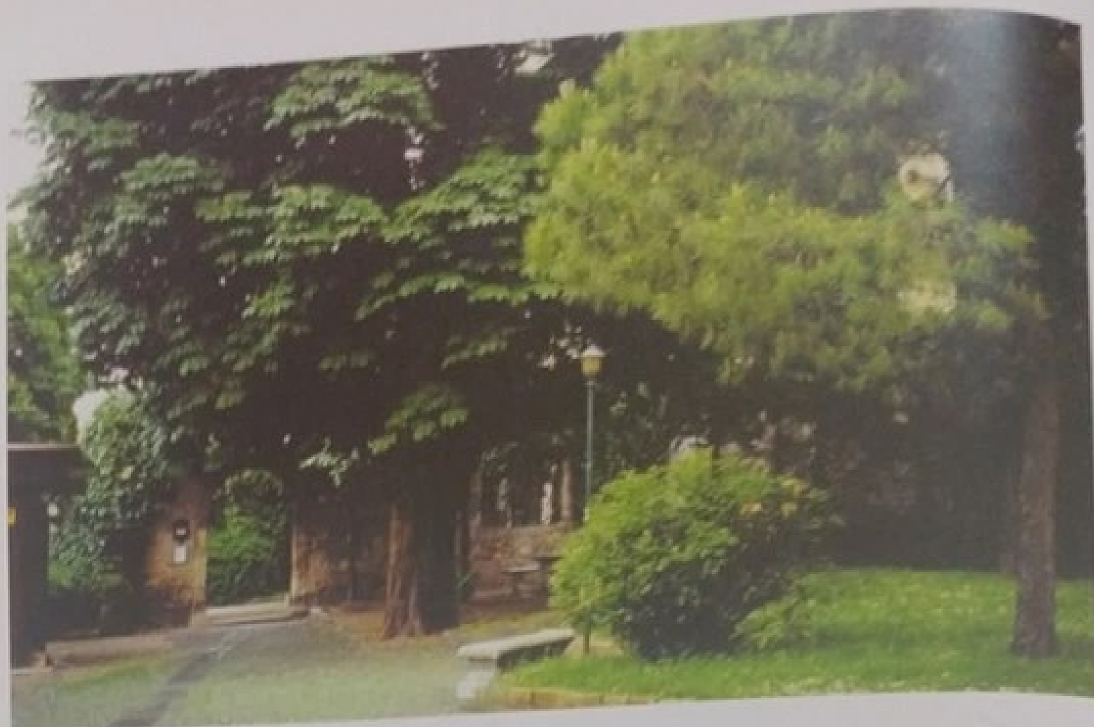
But the balcony? Far more disturbing is that balcony above the door. There is no "balcony" in *Romeo and Juliet*. None whatsoever. Not only is the word absent from the play, it isn't a word to be found

The Great Room in the Capulets' house where Romeo would have seen Juliet for the first time. (Photo courtesy of Sylvia Holmes)

in any other play, Italian or not, by the same playwright. For that matter, the word "balcony" is not found in any of the poetry ascribed to the playwright either.

The playwright's descriptions in *Romeo and Juliet* are clear: Juliet appears in every case, by the author's own words, at her "window." The playwright did not give Juliet a balcony, and it seemed to me that it would have been a careless father who would give his pretty daughter a bedroom that had a convenient balcony. While the existing balcony is indeed an authentic relic of medieval times, it was taken from some other building somewhere and attached to its present location at 23 Via Cappello in a spasm of touristic promotion in the 1930s. Juliet's balcony, admired by tourists the world over today, was not there originally; not in that spot, anyway.

Two more quests remained. One of them was to revisit Juliet's revered resting place at the ancient former Monastery of Saint Francis—San Francesco al Corso—just beyond Verona's southerly medieval wall and near the Adige on the Via del Pontiere. The other was to look for a medieval church called "Saint Peter," another place name, like villafranca, that the playwright inserted into his story.



The St. Francis Monastery *(San Francesco al Corso). This is where Friar Laurence married Romeo and Juliet. (Author's photo)*

When I left Juliet's house at 23 Via Cappello, I made my way to the Monastery by walking to the end of the street and turning to the right onto Stradone San Fermo. In the medieval period this street led to the old southern city wall, where it ended. That wall is now broken open, and the street continues beyond the line of the former protective barrier. As it continues, its path takes it progressively further away from my objective, the Monastery where Juliet's confessor, Friar Laurence — Fra Lorenzo — had his cell.

When preparing for this walk, I had learned at the police office in Piazza dei Signori that the easiest way to reach the Monastery on foot was to leave Via Stradone after a short distance, at any convenient corner, and turn left until coming to the river's edge, then turn right along the river and follow my nose along the embankment to the Monastery. I followed the officer's instructions. He had said that if I wanted to go on foot from Juliet's house to the Monastery, just as she did when she went to see her confessor, Friar Laurence, this would duplicate the shortest and safest route that a woman would have taken in 1302.

The former Franciscan Monastery, San Francesco al Corso, is just where it might be for a plausible story, outside the ancient city wall but not too far, and within the walking reach of a proper noble

maiden wanting to make her confession. It has not been a monastery for a long time. Disused and idle, it was taken over in the nineteenth century as a base for the Italian cavalry. The cloister at the Monastery had been filled with graves and gravestones—all of which were removed. The cells and halls became quarters and barracks and the Monastery grounds put to use for drills and parades. But these changes have not deterred the more determined visitors wanting to see where Juliet and Count Paris and Romeo died, near the vault which is still there, reached from steps down in the arcaded cloister. If it can be granted that an Englishman who wrote for a country where monasteries had long since been disestablished might call a cloister a "churchyard," then the dialogue in the play closely fits both the cloister and its large adjacent burial vault at San Francesco al Corso.

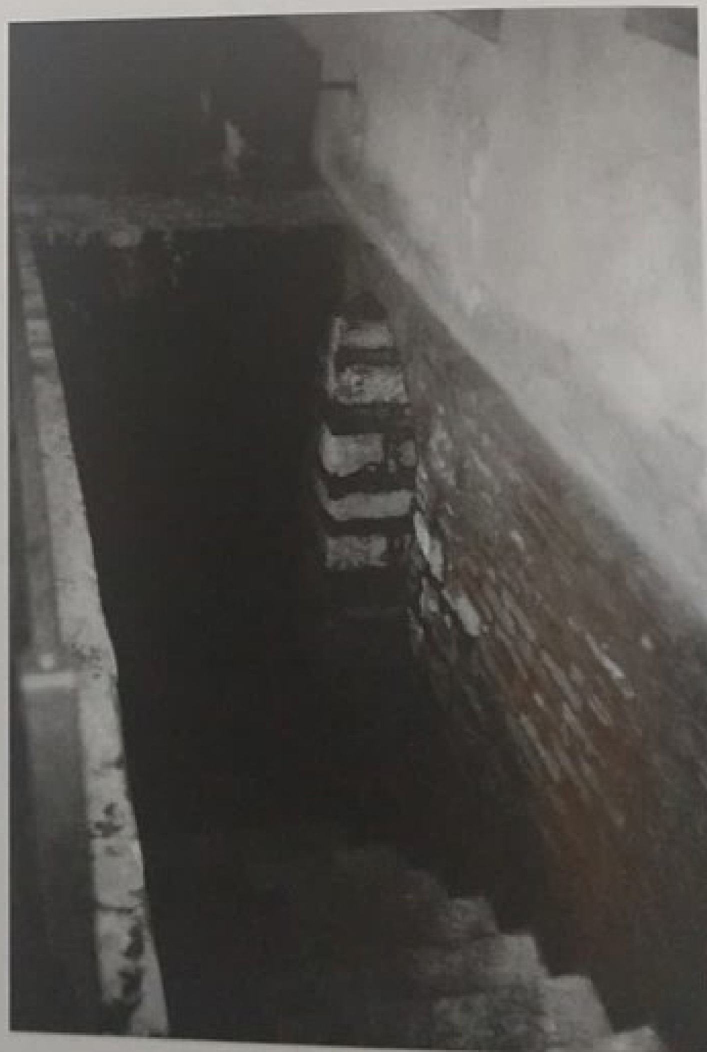
The place the playwright calls "Capel's monument" is large enough to be "pack'd" with the bones of any number of Juliet's ancestors. It is below ground level, and consists of two vacant connected chambers with only a heavy pink marble sarcophagus in one of them, open and empty, with its edges and corners chipped by centuries of souvenir seekers. This artifact is the legendary place of Juliet's final rest, although there is no such pink remnant mentioned in the play. Nor should there be. Even in Verona, there is disagreement about the age of that marble artifact, whose it was, and how it got there.

Whatever the case, the sarcophagus was really not my concern. If a real Juliet was ever laid inside it, it would have been after all had been said, and a stonecutter had been engaged to make the stone coffin, if that is what it is. To be honest, I was vaguely uncomfortable with the Tomb of Juliet; quite empty, with added tourist entry and exit stairs, and its quasi-Gothic stone window frames which make no sense. My quest began, and ended, with the playwright's final lines, with lovely Juliet lying lifeless on her bier.

***The cloister** at Friar Laurence's Monastery. In the corner, beyond the arch, are the steps down to the Capulet crypt where Juliet would have been interred. (Author's photo)*

I had reduced my adventure with *Romeo and Juliet* to one final step, a step that required a fresh examination of a city map of Verona, a visit to the office of the diocese, a bit of reading, and a brief visit to what had become my favorite police station. Here was one final puzzle to solve, and like that unique reference to the sycamores, here was another reference that can be found only in the playwright's version of *Romeo and Juliet*; it is not to be found in any other literature. As with the sycamore trees, no one has noticed it; after all, wouldn't it be yet one more of the author's inventions? Never mind that its name is repeated in the play—indeed *three times*—with the actors probably shouting. It is "Saint Peter's Church," and named in the play at a place editors later labeled "Scene 5" for "Act III."

In that editorially designated scene we first hear about this church. I had to find it; I had to believe it was not a fiction conjured at a London writing table—certainly not after discovering the accuracy of the play's sycamores, its old Freetown, and the uncanny ambience of the Verona neighborhood which is reflected in the play. An "uncanny ambience" is hardly proof of anything, however, and I wanted one more solid landmark that the playwright alone gave us—one that was unique to him, was exact, and was also in the right place in Verona. The test would be not



Capulet family crypt. *These are the steps leading down to the crypt from the St. Francis Monastery cloister. (Author's photo)*

only to find a Saint Peter's Church in the city, but a Saint Peter's Church that exactly fit the lines in the play.

I was beginning to suspect that this playwright had a peculiar practice in writing his Italian Plays, and as I discovered throughout my adventures in Italy, my suspicions were confirmed. It was his method, his "trick" of pointedly naming or describing some obscure or unique place that might look like an invention or mistake but which turns out to be actual. It would be one that is not necessarily a place for a scene, but somewhere that today we might say is "off-camera," and with an identity that has little (or nothing) to do with the plot: a one-of-a-kind place which reveals an unusual, intimate, knowledge of Italy. I promised myself that as I continued my explorations the length of Italy with the Italian Plays in hand, I would exercise special alertness to verify that my suspicions were correct. Meanwhile, here in Verona, I would search for the playwright's Saint Peter's Church.

Tomb of Juliet *(alleged). (Author's photo)*

It all happens in that "Act III Scene 5." Juliet's father is furious with her. He has arranged her marriage to Count Paris, and she is holding back. *Not once, but three times in succession*, Saint Peter's Church is invoked as the place where the marriage to Paris is to take place. It seemed to me that said three times is the playwright's demand for our attention; it is his call.

Juliet's mother is first to say that it

will happen at "Saint Peter's Church." Then Juliet repeats the name. And third, Capulet names it, threatening Juliet to be dragged there if she won't go willingly. No one but the playwright, not even the Veronese, has ever mentioned this Saint Peter's Church to embellish their story.

Because no wedding will really happen there, nor will any scene of the play, this threefold repetition of the name of the church is passed over or regarded as a fabrication. What characteristics would such a church need to have to be consistent with the complexities of *Romeo and Juliet*? What elements would give it the ring of reality, be beyond the pale of untraveled contrivance?

It would need to be a Franciscan church. Religious orders were—still are—proprietary, jealous of their jurisdictions and prerogatives; and Friar Laurence, who would officiate at the marriage, was a Franciscan. Young women of any social level, especially with protective parents, would customarily marry in their own parish church, not so much out of sentiment but because that is where necessary family records were maintained, where a favoring priest would preside, and where the local community would gather to look on, all these factors forming a body of verification of a lawful and binding marriage in a lasting form. The party most needing such verification for her protection was the bride; and it would be the bride's parish church, not the groom's.

Is or was there a church called Saint Peter's in medieval Verona? Now I had a problem. There are four: *San Pietro in Castello*; *San Pietro in Archivolto*; *San Pietro Martire*; and *San Pietro Incarnario*. And every one of them was there during the fourteenth century; three of them there before that. Each had to be seen, its records found, its function learned. And so I began, and this is what I found:

San Pietro in Castello is inside the Castelvecchio, the vast city fortress of the Scaligers. It was never a parish church. It was a military church for soldiers who needed convenient confession and the healing mystery of the mass. It did not exist when Bartolomeo della Scala, Prince Escalus, was the ruler of Verona. The construction of Castelvecchio began fifty years after Bartolomeo's death, about 1354. And it looked to be too far to the west of Juliet's house, away from the pattern of the traditional scenes of the story which I had adduced.

San Pietro in Archivolto was built in the thirteenth century, well before the time of *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a small and charming sanctuary with a seated figure of Saint Peter, "Keeper of the Keys," above its door. This medieval building served, and still serves though infrequently, as a subsidiary of Santa Maria Matricolare, the magnificent cathedral of Verona, and stands just across a narrow street from the south door of the cathedral. It was never a parish church; and it is even farther to the west of Juliet's neighborhood.

San Pietro Martire is a medieval church of a different kind. It is adjacent to the great Dominican basilica built about 1290 and dedicated to Saint Anastasia. This lesser church, or chapel, stands on the left side of Piazza Sant'Anastasia as an adjunct to their monastery, and was originally called San Giorgio dei Dominicani. The man called "San Pietro Martire," sometimes called "Peter of Verona," was a Dominican friar, not a Franciscan; and Piazza Sant'Anastasia is also to the west, not the east, of Juliet's house.

San Pietro Incarnario, the last of the four, seemed impossible to find, nor would I have found it without the pencil sketch that a kind *carabiniere* made for me at the police station in the Piazza dei Signori. It wasn't a great sketch, but was good enough, although he warned me that I might not recognize the building for the medieval church it once had been.

With sketch in hand, I left the police station, went through Piazza Erbe, entered Via Cappello, walked past Juliet's house toward the river, turned right on Stradone San Fermo and continued walking. This seemed like déjà vu: this was the first part of Juliet's route to Friar Laurence's Monastery, where both Juliet and her Romeo had paid their visits and where they had been secretly married by the Friar in the Monastery's church.

But the sketch I was given didn't go that far. In only a few blocks I had arrived at my destination, and it was as the *carabiniere* had said: before me stood a small church building, now with a white plaster exterior.

"Saint Peter's Church," San Pietro Incarnario. The church was founded in 955 A.D. and has been renovated over the centuries. (Author's photos)

It was located at the corner of Stradone Scipione Maffei (a renamed segment of Stradone San Fermo) and, to my great surprise, a street named "Via San Pietro Incarnario." I was stunned. This was the very corner where I had turned toward the river on my earlier search to find the Monastery! In my haste at the time, I had not noticed the church, whose street still bears its name. Unmistakably, however, here was the Capulet parish—and the play's—thrice-named Saint Peter's Church.

In 1302, this Saint Peter's was not a white-plastered building. Over the centuries, its original appearance has been altered significantly, resulting in the mixture of architectural styles seen today. The church hardly merits a second glance by a weary traveler, especially one focused on a quest—neither is it especially attractive, nor does it appear old. But by craning my neck, I could make out its early medieval origins: the original bell tower still exists.

For a long time, this Saint Peter's has not actually served as a church, and it is the only one of the four San Pietros to have undergone extensive modifications. These were done in the second half of

the nineteenth, and again in the twentieth, centuries. In 1882, the church suffered heavy flood damage and during World War II was partially destroyed. It has suffered mightily over the centuries, but there it is: shortened by flood, altered by violence, no longer needed for any parish — now used only as a simple meeting hall.

But both in the sixteenth century, and in the days of the story of Romeo and Juliet, the diocesan records reveal that this was, indeed, a parish church. Founded in 955, in the thirteenth century it came under Franciscan jurisdiction and remained so for the next six hundred years. I had, indeed, located Saint Peter's Church. It fit every ingredient given for it in the play, and was yet one more of the playwright's very own, almost secret touches to his *Romeo and Juliet*.

True to the pattern of the story's places in the city, this Saint Peter's Church not only was in Juliet's parish, but directly on the path between lovely Juliet's house and the monastic cell of her confessor.