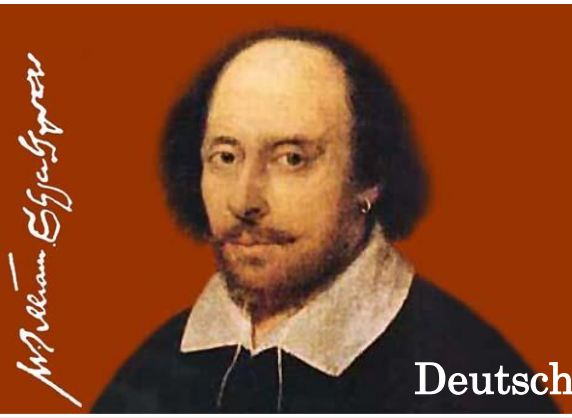
Shakespeare Seminar



Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft

Ausgabe 22 (2025)

Shakespeare and Popular Cultures

https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/publikationen/shakespeare-seminar-online/

Shakespeare Seminar 22 (2025)

EDITORS

The *Shakespeare Seminar* is published under the auspices of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, Weimar, and edited by:

Marlene Dirschauer, Universität Hamburg, Fakultät für Geisteswissenschaften, DFG-Forschungsgruppe 5138 “Geistliche Intermedialität in der Frühen Neuzeit", Sedanstraße 19, D-20146 Hamburg (marlene.dirschauer@uni-hamburg.de)

Jonas Kellermann, Universität Konstanz, Fachbereich Literatur-, Kunst-, und Medienwissenschaften, Fach 161, D-78457 Konstanz (jonas.kellermann@uni-konstanz.de)

PUBLICATIONS FREQUENCY

Shakespeare Seminar is a free annual online journal. It documents papers presented at the Shakespeare Seminar panel of the spring conferences of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. It is intended as a publication platform especially for the younger generation of scholars. For the current Call for Papers, please see our website: www.shakespeare-gesellschaft.de

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER

ISSN1612-8362

CONTENTS

FROM TRAGEDY TO TOURISM: SHAKESPEARE'S VERONA AND THE INTERPLAY OF LITERARY HERITAGE AND CULTURAL COMMODIFICATION

by

LARA STICH

"In fair Verona, where we lay our scene" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Prologue.2).[1] The opening of *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably one of the most recognisable and most frequently quoted passages in world drama. Shakespeare's prologue not only introduces a spatial setting but inaugurates a myth that has come to define the city of Verona itself. What was once a line framing a theatrical fiction has become an urban geography organised around the *Romeo and Juliet* myth, shaped by the movements, practices, and explanations of residents and visitors alike. Verona now performs a recurring role in the mythologised afterlife of the tragedy, transformed from a historical city into a Shakespearean stage. *Romeo and Juliet* survives not only as a dramatic text but as a site-specific cultural experience. Dennis Kennedy, in his broader discussion of Shakespeare and cultural tourism, characterises spectators as "consumers of cultural product" and "visitors to another realm" (181). Applied to Verona, this framework suggests that the city is constructed as the touristic lens through which the play is mediated. When literature migrates from page to place, it reshapes not only imagination but geography, turning fiction into experience and narrative into space.

Few figures exemplify this dynamic more than William Shakespeare, whose reach extends far beyond the theatre. As Robert Ormsby and Valerie Pye observe, "Shakespearean tourism" encompasses festivals, souvenirs, exhibitions, and digital practices, raising questions about how such diverse activities connect and in what ways they are touristic (2). While Shakespeare studies have traditionally focused on performance, adaptation, interpretation, and canonisation, tourism studies turn instead to questions of heritage and authenticity. They examine cross-cultural encounters and the ways in which travellers and operators jointly produce experiences that render destinations meaningful (Ormsby & Pye 3). Bringing these critical perspectives together allows for an exploration of how Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* functions not only as a work of drama but also as a cultural economy that reshapes urban identity. Nowhere is this global phenomenon more visible than in Verona itself, where the play's imaginative power has permanently inscribed itself upon the city. Shakespeare's tragedy has become so culturally potent that it has overwritten the city's identity in both local and global consciousness. Once simply a northern Italian city with a layered Roman and medieval past, Verona has come to stand as a symbol of love, passion, and tragic youth

[1] All following Shakespeare quotes will refer to: Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet.* Ed. Jill L. Levenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1599] 2000.

– qualities not historically endemic to its civic character, but now essential to its touristic brand.

Shakespeare's fascination with Italy, a recurring setting for his plays, is evident in *Romeo and Juliet*. Although he almost certainly never left England to acquire first-hand knowledge, Shakespeare's construction of an Italian imaginary was mediated through Italian literary texts and treatises circulating in early modern London, works whose reception materially informed and conditioned contemporary English writing about Italy (Cartwright 156–57). Through these textually constructed visions of place, his imaginative portrayal of Italian locales nonetheless contributed to shaping global perception of them, none more so than Verona. The city, imbued with history and romance, has become synonymous with the story of Romeo and Juliet, attracting countless visitors seeking to experience the tangible essence of Shakespeare's most famous love story. Literary tourism often functions through mythmaking, allowing travellers to project personal beliefs and identities onto a place. In this sense, *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona influences not only the tourists who engage with the story but the city itself, which has actively reshaped its image around this literary myth (Tessari 299). In contemporary Verona, the legacy of Shakespeare and *Romeo and Juliet* is palpable in numerous facets of the city's life. From the bustling tourism at Juliet's balcony, a site of pilgrimage for those entranced by the love story, to delicious biscotti called *Baci di Giulietta* sold in Veronese bakeries and cafes, Verona has skilfully woven Shakespeare and his play into its urban and cultural fabric.

However, the commercialisation of this Shakespearean legacy raises critical questions about authenticity and the commodification of literary heritage. Verona's transformation into a 'Shakespearean city' underscores the delicate balance between preserving cultural memory and exploiting it for economic gain. This tension between claims of authenticity and the logics of commodification constitutes the central concern of this article. Under such conditions, authenticity becomes largely irrelevant. The lovers' story is received not as a document of the past but as a flexible mythic script that can be mapped onto contemporary desires. This process is governed by a logic of selective adaptation: from the complexity of Shakespeare's tragedy, those elements that support a marketable narrative of romantic fulfilment are amplified, while more disruptive dimensions, such as its critique of patriarchy, generational conflict, and systemic violence, fade into the background. At the centre is the narrative's symbolic utility within twenty-first-century consumer culture. These developments demonstrate how literature can influence and even redefine real-world spaces, highlighting the perennial power of storytelling to bridge past and present. Verona's reinvention as 'Shakespeare's Verona' thus exemplifies both the cultural potency of literature and the ethical dilemmas of its commodification.

In this paper, I argue that Verona's transformation reflects a complex interplay between literature, urban space, and cultural practice. The city's geography, monuments, and rituals are not merely shaped by Shakespeare's tragedy but actively appropriate and continue to reshape it, producing a form of spatial storytelling that enables visitors to inhabit, perform, and continually renegotiate the *Romeo and Juliet* myth within the material fabric of the city. At the same time, the analysis considers how participatory culture – through interaction, tourism, and media engagement – enables audiences to

co-produce the ongoing cultural life of the play. Drawing on adaptation studies, cultural heritage theory, and literary analysis, I trace how a work of fiction can become a lived, material, and commercial reality, while I also reflect on the ethical and interpretive questions this transformation raises.

Shakespearean Branding, Urban Identity and the Juliet Industry

Shakespeare's works, and the long history of their translation, adaptation, and circulation, position him not simply as a playwright but as a global cultural phenomenon. His plays function as a form of cultural capital, conferring status and economic value wherever they are invoked. Verona's city officials and business community have readily recognised this and adopted a strategy that aligns Shakespearean heritage with urban branding. According to Eleonora Oggiano, Verona has explicitly developed the "Shakespeare brand", a symbolic and commercial resource that merges cultural heritage with tourism economies (110). Through this strategy, Shakespeare is not only preserved as cultural memory but also transformed into a marketing tool that secures Verona's place in global circuits of cultural consumption. Official tourism websites, municipal signage, and commercial enterprises repeatedly invoke the language of love while Verona's spatial semiotics are saturated with Shakespearean symbolism, from the naming of streets such as Via Shakespeare to the proliferation of heart-shaped merchandise. Tourists are encouraged not simply to observe but to perform their own role in the myth of the "star-crossed lovers" (Prologue.6). The city becomes a living stage for the tragedy, hence "it can be safely argued that Verona itself is the most successful adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*" (Bassi 145).

As Shaul Bassi further observes, this reciprocal process – Shakespeare's appropriation of Italian settings mirrored by Verona's appropriation of Shakespeare – creates a dynamic cultural exchange (140). It is most visible in the way *Romeo and Juliet* permeates the city's tourist industry. The myth has been elaborated into a variety of formats catering to tourism, thereby amplifying the story far beyond its literary origins (Oggiano 109). These adaptations range from guided tours and museum displays to food, merchandise, and festivals, demonstrating how Shakespeare's text has been continuously reimagined for new audiences and consumers. In this way, Shakespeare shifts from a figure of high art to a commodified icon, whose symbolic capital enhances Verona's allure and whose myth underwrites the city's fortune (Oggiano 111). What was originally a fictional tale set in Verona has been transformed into a site of cultural imagination that now extends into transnational tourism networks, where visitors expect to encounter Shakespeare and his play not only in theatres but also in streets, shops, and souvenirs. *Romeo and Juliet* thus circulates less as a complex dramatic text than as a reservoir of images and emotions that can be endlessly repackaged. The famous lovers' presence is ubiquitous, underscoring how Juliet and Romeo have become inseparable from Verona's urban landscape. In this process, early modern popular culture is reconfigured as twenty-first-century popular culture, with Shakespeare's tragedy functioning as a renewable resource for contemporary touristic and media economies.

Central to this civic narrative is the figure of Juliet, who emerges not only as a literary heroine but also as a symbolic persona functioning in multiple registers: muse,

counsellor, icon, and brand. Her image, detached from Shakespeare's text, circulates across various media, from bronze statues and souvenir items to Hollywood films and Instagram posts. Alessandra Tessari notes that in recent decades, Juliet has become "a mass media phenomenon" and that "the cult of Juliet has never been stronger" (303). As a brand representative for the city, Juliet is both an object and a medium: she is the figure visitors come to see and the one through whom they perform their own romantic aspirations. Strikingly, this intense visual and commercial circulation attaches almost exclusively to Juliet; Romeo, by contrast, rarely appears as an equivalent icon of Veronese heritage. This asymmetry suggests that it is the female lover who is rendered most available for commodification, her body and affect functioning as the primary surface for touristic projection. Juliet is celebrated as a muse of love and longing, while her function as a figure of resistance to parental control and to the violence of arranged marriage is sidelined. Such selective adaptation enables the tourist economy to privilege a feminised ideal of romantic availability over the play's more disruptive politics of limited female agency.

This transformation of Juliet into a mythical figure resonates globally, blurring the lines between fiction and perceived historical reality. By the late 1980s, Juliet had been reimagined as the symbolic ambassador of Verona and firmly integrated into the city's branding. At the same time, Verona's identity as the 'City of Love' was consolidated as a central pillar of its tourism strategy (Tessari 302). The city's promotion of Juliet thus marks a decisive shift: from a Shakespearean character embedded in a sixteenth-century tragedy to an enduring cultural asset whose symbolic, romantic capital fuels Verona's global visibility and tourist economy. Through such engagement, Verona not only honours this legendary character but also reinforces her place within the urban and cultural landscape, inviting a worldwide audience to partake in the lore of her fictional life and love story.

Juliet's House: Fabricating Authenticity

The exemplification of Verona's strategic utilisation of Shakespeare's legacy is best seen in Juliet's House, known locally as *Casa di Giulietta*. Transformed into a significant tourist attraction, this site was crafted by the city to capitalise on the play's romantic allure, showcasing the city's adeptness at blending historical myth with actual experience. Within this configuration, questions of historical authenticity are largely displaced: the site's function is less to document a verifiable past than to generate a recognisably Shakespearean affective and visual experience for visitors. The house greets visitors with the Italian inscription: "Queste furono le case dei Capuleti d'onde uscì la Giulietta per cui tanto piansero i cuori e i poeti cantarono"[2] (Municipality of Verona). This framing immediately blurs the line between history and fiction. By presenting Juliet's residence as a historical fact, it constructs a narrative that elevates a literary character into the realm of cultural memory. The wording invites visitors to suspend critical awareness and to accept the conflation of Shakespeare's fiction with

[2] "This was the house of the Capulets from which Juliet emerged for whom many hearts wept and the poets sang" (own translation)

Verona's material heritage, setting the tone for the hybrid experience that follows within the site. Ironically, while the entrance enshrines this narrative, the municipality's own website reveals the building's actual historical background. This information, however, is presented separately from the interactive tourist experience and requires deliberate inquiry, reinforcing a marketing strategy that emphasises the myth, while the historical reality occupies a more peripheral role.

The iconic location of Juliet's House has a multifaceted history that can be traced back to the medieval period, with documents dating its existence to as early as 1351. Originally functioning as an inn named *del Cappello*, it was owned by the heirs of Antonio Cappello. Despite popular lore and the similarity of their name, there is no historical link between the Veronese Cappello family and the Capulets of Shakespeare's play (Oggiano 111). However, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a romantic and cultural transformation began to take shape. The building was increasingly identified as Juliet's House, drawing European travellers who embarked on a romantic pilgrimage inspired by Shakespeare's tragic tale. As Keir Elam highlights, "one of the more familiar tropes in Shakespeare's plays is the fiction of tourism in Italy", a trope that became reality when Grand Tourists and Romantic travellers folded Verona into their itineraries, seeking the city not only for its Roman past but as the stage of *Romeo and Juliet* (59). Travel diaries from this period, including those of notable figures like Charles Dickens, provide vivid descriptions of the site. In his work *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens noted the stark contrast between the idyllic love story and the site he encountered, describing it as "degenerated into a most miserable little inn", animated by daily commerce and far removed from romance (57).

Although Dickens appeared unimpressed, the house's appeal continues to be profoundly evident in the present day. Today, Juliet's House, a fourteenth-century townhouse with its enclosed courtyard, protruding balcony, and walls densely covered in graffiti, love notes, and padlocks, continues to function as a testament to the lasting power of literature to shape physical spaces and cultural narratives. It embodies the unique phenomenon in which a fictional narrative profoundly shapes the perception and reality of a physical location. In this case, a former inn has been transformed into a pilgrimage site for those drawn to the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. The residence transitioned into her family home in the collective imagination, thereby significantly enhancing Verona's tourism sector. Visitor statistics underline the site's prominence: Juliet's House is now "the most visited site in Verona after the Arena. More than 300,000 paying visitors materialise yearly and some 2 million stop in the courtyard to catch a glimpse of the famous lovers' balcony" (Tessari 300).

Such numbers reflect not only spontaneous tourist interest but also careful planning. This immense popularity has not been accidental but deliberately cultivated, as Verona has consciously fashioned the Shakespeare brand, turning Juliet into a symbolic and commercial resource that fuses cultural heritage with tourism economies (Oggiano 111). The city has capitalised on this brand, making intentional changes to its infrastructure to align with the expectations and desires of *Romeo and Juliet* enthusiasts and aspirants. In 1905, Antonio Avena, the director of the Verona Museums, installed a balcony within the courtyard of the tower-house to create a physical space that resonates with the iconic scene from the play where Juliet "enter[s] above" (2.1.44sd) and professes her love for

Romeo. Yet the romantic emblem is steeped in irony, for as Bassi notes, it is "a medieval sarcophagus repurposed […] to meet the expectations of literary pilgrims" (146). What now functions as a symbol of love was once a tomb, an inversion that exposes how Verona manufactures an aura of authenticity, even at the cost of morbid incongruity. By recoding a funerary object as a romantic shrine, the city stages a simulacrum of loss for lovers who never existed, allowing visitors to consume the frisson of tragedy within an apparently affirmative cult of love. Through such interventions, the imaginative demands of Shakespearean tourism are met through a mode of heritage that is performative and constructed, underscoring that what passes as Shakespearean authenticity in Verona is fundamentally the outcome of curatorial labour.

In the same spirit of shaping the site for visitors, the municipal council subsequently resolved to convert the building into a museum (Oggiano 111). Even director Franco Zeffirelli recognised this dynamic, proposing to turn Juliet's "fake house" into a "museum of feelings" that could guide tourists into the "magic world of enduring love" (Tessari 312). Although his 1968 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was filmed mostly in other Italian locations, its material traces have been strategically anchored in Verona: costumes and set pieces from the production are exhibited in Juliet's House, where they function as quasi-relics that confer an aura of authenticity by visually aligning the site with a globally familiar cinematic imaginary. This interweaving of cinema and heritage continues inside the house, where the fusion of fact and fiction is sustained through carefully curated exhibits that blend theatrical props with vaguely Renaissance-style furnishings.

Yet the house does not confine itself to curated display; it actively scripts visitor participation. They may leave letters, purchase themed merchandise, or take photos re-enacting the balcony scene, a strikingly modern label, since *Romeo and Juliet* never actually uses the word balcony, even as Verona's tourism economy treats it as the play's signature object. As Kennedy argues in his discussion of the reconstructed Globe, such practices align heritage sites with the logic of interactive museums, where audiences are invited to participate actively and to carry away narratives of their experience (185). The tourist encounter at Juliet's House functions in much the same way, generating stories, photographs, and souvenirs that circulate well beyond the site itself. These practices embody a form of playful spectatorship in which visitors willingly suspend disbelief, "perfectly aware that the enterprise is not strictly genuine but willing to comport themselves as if it were" (Kennedy 186). In this sense, the *Casa di Giulietta* can neither claim to preserve a verifiable past – for a story that is itself fictional – nor to offer a faithful engagement with Shakespeare's text. Instead, it operates as an interactive stage on which visitors are invited to enact a simplified, touristic version of Verona's most marketable fiction.

Each photograph or letter thus adds a layer to the ever-evolving cultural script of Juliet, a script that no longer resides solely in Shakespeare's playtext, but circulates through what Douglas Lanier terms a 'Shakespearean rhizome': a sprawling, non-hierarchical network of reproductions, appropriations, and practices that continually remake Shakespeare in new sites and media (29). In this rhizomatic economy, visitor rituals and urban branding do not merely respond to the drama; they become generative nodes within it. Juliet's house makes the love myth tangible: walking the balcony,

inscribing messages on the courtyard wall, or simply gazing up at the façade become essential gestures that ensure visitors feel they have stepped into the world of Shakespearean drama (Tessari 305).

This sense of participation begins the moment one enters the site, with the open courtyard, accessible to all and free of charge, serving as the initial threshold into Shakespeare's Verona. Strategically positioned within this space, the gift shop efficiently channels the site's emotional resonance into consumable form. Souvenirs ranging from trinkets to books allow visitors to carry away tangible fragments of their encounter, reinforcing the Shakespeare brand (Oggiano 112). These commodities are not mere keepsakes but tokens of engagement, objects that transform a brief encounter with the site into lasting memory.

Standing in the courtyard alongside the fabricated balcony is another focal point of tourist ritual: the bronze statue of Juliet, installed in 1969 by sculptor Nereo Costantini. Today, visitors encounter a replica in the courtyard, while the original statue has been moved inside the museum for preservation (Municipality of Verona). This display echoes the play itself, where Montague vows at the end of the tragedy:

> MONTAGUE. For I will ray her statue in pure gold,
> That whiles Verona by that name is known,
> There shall no figure at such rate be set
> As that of true and faithful Juliet. (5.3.299–302)

What Shakespeare imagined as a noble act of commemoration has here been transformed into a ritualised, commodified, and questionable gesture of tourist affection, converting his literary gold into physical bronze and rendering it available for mass consumption. Over time, the statue has become the object of a tactile ritual in which visitors touch Juliet's right breast for luck in love, leaving the surface visibly worn by countless hands. That this ritual centres on the breast of a statue representing a young woman renders the practice particularly troubling: it normalises intimate contact with a feminised body as harmless touristic play and evacuates the gesture of moral complexity. The gendered asymmetry is telling: it is Juliet's body, not Romeo's, that is made available for tactile appropriation, as if the materialisation of the myth of romantic love necessarily requires the eroticised exposure of the female lover.

In participating in this ritual, each visitor stages a symbolic re-enactment of the lovers' anticipated intimacy: the courtyard, the balcony, and the statue together create a space where narrative, object, and audience intersect. The statue exemplifies the logic of kitsch, collapsing the critical distance between art and audience, while simultaneously feeding into the broader circuits of tourism, social media, and merchandise that sustain the city's Shakespearean brand (Bassi 147).

If the statue ritual demonstrates how tourists physically inscribe themselves into Verona's Shakespearean myth, the house itself reflects the broader cultural logic that sustains these practices. It embodies a quintessentially postmodern representation of Shakespeare's play, characterised by a fluid juxtaposition of artefacts from varying epochs and genres. Rather than offering a linear or historically coherent narrative, the site assembles fragments from different temporal and cultural registers into a deliberately stylised environment that privileges recognisability and affect over

historical continuity. The result is a hybrid space where history and myth overlap, and where objects function less as authentic remnants than as symbolic tokens circulating within global consumer culture. The signs and symbols associated with *Romeo and Juliet* have become detached from their original contexts, taking on new, often commercialised meanings within the tourist economy (Bassi 149). This impression of a fragmented, almost theatrical assemblage, combining Renaissance-style décor, Shakespearean references, and marketing displays, underscores the tension between preservation and commodification. Verona has deliberately leaned into this dynamic, a strategy that is central to the construction of the Verona brand, in which Juliet's story is mobilised as both heritage and a promotional asset. Much as Dickens once observed, the residence, far from preserving any idyllic allure, appears instead as a site overwhelmed by tourism and marketing, its romance mediated as much – perhaps even more – by commerce as by Shakespeare's text.

Juliet's Tomb: Invented Memorials and Tourist Rituals

Dickens not only commented on Juliet's house but also on the next stage of the Shakespearean itinerary, the so-called *Tomba di Giulietta*. As he observed: "From Juliet's home to Juliet's tomb, is a transition as natural to the visitor, as to fair Juliet herself" (Dickens 57). His comment highlights the perceived continuity between the two locations, a link that Verona continues to reinforce through the sale of a combination ticket issued by the Municipality of Verona (Municipality of Verona). Sold at a discount, this combined ticket symbolically unites Juliet's imagined home with her final resting place, inviting visitors to follow the arc of the tragic narrative across the city's geography. This blending of literary journey and marketing strategy underscores the commodification of cultural heritage, turning Shakespeare's play into both an imaginative and an economic itinerary.

The physical site standing in for Juliet's fictional tomb is conveniently located just a short walk from her legendary residence, outside the historical city walls. Directly outside the crypt, a marble plaque displays the contemplative words of Romeo:

> ROMEO. A grave? O, no; a lantern […]
> For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
> This vault a feasting presence full of light. (5.3.84–86)

This inscription effectively bridges Shakespeare's textual world with the physical environment, inviting visitors into a more interactive engagement with the play. The tomb itself, a plain marble sarcophagus, lies in the crypt of a former Franciscan monastery. In the late nineteenth century, the site was converted into a museum, showcasing Renaissance frescoes and other works of art alongside the supposed resting place of Juliet (Oggiano 112). As a consequence of the damage caused by the former tourist custom of removing fragments as keepsakes, the sarcophagus is today exhibited under protective conditions, allowing it to be seen but no longer touched. Among the most famous to engage in this ritual was Lord Byron, who simultaneously mocked the tomb's claim to authenticity while boasting of having pocketed pieces of stone for his daughter. Paola Pugliatti thus characterised him as "infected by Veronese idolatry"

(396), her phrase suggests a localised, Verona-specific variant of what later critics have termed Bardolatry. Byron's contradictory behaviour illustrates a form of secular relic worship, reflecting the tension between irony and sentiment that often characterises literary tourism. In this sense, the tomb functions less as a historical site than as a space of narrative desire. If Juliet's house provides an entry into the story of youthful passion, the tomb offers the counterpoint of mourning and loss. Both sites together extend the emotional arc of *Romeo and Juliet* into the physical city and allow visitors to participate in a performative geography where text, space, and ritual converge.

The Epistolatory Juliet: Letters and Participation

Just as the tomb promoted physical rituals of remembrance, a practice of epistolary devotion emerged in the 1930s, allowing visitors to engage with Juliet not through stone but through words. Ettore Solimani, then guardian of the tomb, encouraged couples to inscribe their feelings and even to leave letters addressed to Shakespeare's heroine. What began as a spontaneous gesture of devotion soon developed into a ritual practice, with visitors sending letters not only in person but also by post, often addressed simply to 'Juliet, Verona' (Oggiano 114–15). This epistolary tradition demonstrates the enduring power of the Shakespearean tale to inspire affective participation, which transforms a fictional heroine into a confidante for real-world longings. Since 1985, the responsibility for answering these letters has been assumed by the Juliet Club, an association founded by Giulio Tamassia and sustained by volunteers from around the world. The Club meticulously replies to each letter, maintaining an archive of thousands of personal stories in dozens of languages (Juliet Club). In this way, Juliet transforms from a tragic heroine into a supposedly therapeutic icon, embodying a symbolic role for those in search of emotional counsel. The Juliet Club enables visitors and correspondents alike to co-author the ongoing narrative of Shakespeare's heroine. At the same time, the practice is ethically fraught: letter-writers from around the world assume the authority to address – and to ventriloquise – a fictional thirteen-year-old girl, thereby reinscribing asymmetrical dynamics of age and gendered address.

Yet through this ambivalent epistolary tradition and the work of the Juliet Club, visitors are transformed from passive spectators into active participants in Verona's Shakespearean myth. As Tessari observes, such initiatives deliberately offer the myth not merely to be observed but to be enacted (312–13). Beyond its epistolary function, the Club also serves as an archive of affect, safeguarding thousands of letters as a form of intangible heritage. The archive itself adds another dimension to this phenomenon. Unlike Shakespeare's fixed text, the collection of letters is open-ended, continually expanding with each new message. It functions as a living repository of global affect, where the myth of Juliet is rewritten daily by correspondents across cultures and generations. In this way, the Club not only sustains Juliet's symbolic life but also transforms her into the centre of a collective narrative, a cultural script co-authored by thousands of voices worldwide. The romantic allure of the letter-writing tradition has not gone unnoticed by popular media. Gary Winick's *Letters to Juliet* (2010) dramatises the practice and weaves it into a narrative that reimagines Verona as a space where personal longing and Shakespearean heritage unite. The film amplifies the epistolary

ritual while projecting it to global audiences, feeding back into the tourist imaginary that sustains the city's brand as the 'City of Love'.

The Role of Media in Shaping Tourist Expectations

Film and television adaptations have played a decisive role in shaping popular perceptions of Shakespeare's Verona. Romantic comedies such as *Letters to Juliet* (2010) and *Love in the Villa* (2022) have not only updated the narrative but also cast Verona itself as an active character. These visual texts provide audiences with concrete, consumable images of love in an Italian setting, reinforcing the city's romantic brand. Unlike earlier adaptations that often detached the story from its Italian geography, such as *West Side Story* (1961) or Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), these modern films incorporate Verona as a central figure in the drama. *Letters to Juliet* is especially revealing because it frames Verona's tourist economy within its central plot: the protagonist discovers one of the letters left at Juliet's House and embarks on a quest structured by the city's emotional and spatial geography (*Letters to Juliet*). As Charles Forker argues, the film functions as a Shakespearean adaptation "in a more radical sense" since, while borrowing motifs of characterisation, emotional resonance, and setting, it reverses the tragic trajectory of *Romeo and Juliet* into a "sentimentalised, feel-good comedy" (105). This reconfiguration softens the tragedy into consumable romance, perfectly suited to Verona's branding. At the same time, the film embeds Shakespearean consciousness throughout its settings, visual details, and tone so pervasively that it seems almost steeped in the memory of the tragedy. It draws on its substance in subtle and half-remembered ways, for instance, in the recurrent balcony framings, the verbal echoes of "star-crossed" lovers, and the staging of chance encounters as faintly comic reworkings of fatal coincidence (Forker 106). The result is a cinematic itinerary in which Verona itself functions as a performative setting, inviting viewers to experience the city as both stage and story.

The cinematic Verona provides templates of action that visitors then enact in their own performances, posing on the balcony, retracing filmic camera movements, or seeking out locations that appear to match the play's imagined spaces. Oggiano extends this perspective by showing how media and tourism can mutually reinforce each other: Films such as *Letters to Juliet* not only represent Verona but also sustain its consumption, perpetuating the circular relationship between cultural narrative and economic practice (113). In other words, the cinematic itineraries imagined on screen are the very ones that visitors reproduce in practice, collapsing the boundary between fiction and lived experience.

Social media has further democratised this process. With the rise of Instagram, TikTok, and travel vlogs, tourists themselves become both performers and documentarians of the Shakespearean stage, active participants in the 'Shakespearean rhizome', the proliferating network through which Shakespearean meaning is continuously redistributed across media, sites, and practices. The internet's distributed, non-hierarchical configuration exemplifies the dynamics of a rhizomatic structure. (Lanier 29). Hashtags such as #JulietsHouse or #VeronaLoveStory compile thousands of user-generated images, creating a collective narrative in which visitors continually

re-enact, reproduce and appropriate the spatial story of *Romeo and Juliet*. Each image is not simply a record but a re-performance. In Kennedy's terms, the value of a touristic site lies less in the physical object than in the imaginative response it provokes in the visitor, much like theatrical meaning arises in the spectator's mind (175). Social media amplifies this dynamic: the balcony or tomb becomes not just a backdrop but a catalyst for personal storytelling, with users' images and captions transforming private imaginings into public performances. The accessibility of these practices lowers the threshold for engaging with Shakespeare: tourists need not read the play or attend a performance in order to take part. A photograph, hashtag, or short video suffices to insert them into the Shakespearean narrative. These visual citations feed back into the city's narrative economy and ensure that Shakespeare's Verona remains perpetually staged for a global audience.

The Ethics of Commodification and the Loss of Tragedy

This cinematic and touristic staging of *Romeo and Juliet* demonstrates how Shakespeare's Verona is continuously repackaged for global consumption. Yet this very success raises pressing ethical questions. At its core, *Romeo and Juliet* is not simply a celebration of youthful passion but a drama of systemic failure. It critiques entrenched social structures, patriarchy, honour codes, and generational authority that conspire to destroy the lovers. When these complexities are reduced to a generic tale of true love, the play's tragic weight risks being displaced by sentimental spectacle. The tourist encounter often ends up aestheticising love, turning it into a surface spectacle that obscures the play's darker political and social dimensions (Bassi 147).

This tension between heritage and consumption is particularly visible in Verona. By branding itself as the 'City of Love', the municipality has ensured its place in global tourist circuits, but often at the cost of literary nuance. The Shakespeare brand has been consciously developed as a strategic tool to merge culture and commerce, shaping the city's global image (Oggiano 111). What emerges is a form of selective adaptation: Juliet is elevated as a romantic muse while her defiance of patriarchal control, her critique of forced marriage, and her resistance to familial authority are silenced. In the tourist economy, her image has shifted from a figure of tragedy and resistance into an emblem of romance, marketed as an accessible icon of love and longing that supports Verona's cultural brand. As Kennedy puts it, tourism often creates "history as theme park" (178), privileging spectacle over depth. Theatricality becomes part of the attraction: Verona's Shakespearean sites are curated to deliver immediate emotional recognition rather than sustained engagement with the play's tragic critique. The illusion of authenticity is crucial here. Visitors "seek certified sites, verified objects, confirmed auras" (Kennedy 180), even when these are fabrications designed to simulate Shakespeare's world. This interplay of desire and illusion shows how heritage industries cultivate a hunger for the 'genuine' experience, even in contexts where the original never existed.

The paradox here is that the promise of authenticity offered by sites such as Juliet's House or Tomb rests precisely on a consciously fabricated fiction. From a postmodern, poststructuralist perspective, however, this is not an aberration but an exemplary case: authenticity appears less as access to an originary past than as an effect of discourse and

staging, and Verona's Shakespearean heritage lays bare the extent to which the past is produced rather than simply preserved. The fake balcony, the curated interiors, and the reimagined tomb all demonstrate how Verona has long blurred the line between historical reality and narrative invention. Verona has become "a city where fact and fiction […] blend most interestingly" (Bassi 140), a quality that underpins both the appeal and the artificiality of its Shakespearean heritage. What is offered is less an encounter with a recoverable past than a mediated performance of it, tailored not only to the expectations of literary pilgrims but also to a contemporary culture of digital self-staging. In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, this past is inherently fictional, yet it is staged under the guise of pseudo-historicity, inviting visitors to experience the play's invented world as if it were part of Verona's historical memory. This dynamic illustrates a broader cultural tendency: in an age of global consumerism, heritage sites are increasingly designed to provide immediate affective accessibility rather than sustained textual or historical engagement. As Ormsby and Pye observe, both Shakespearean tourism and theatre rely on the imaginative participation of audiences, who move between fiction and reality in ways that transport them beyond everyday life (15). This interplay between invention and experience is precisely what sustains the Shakespeare industry in Verona, where the appeal depends on the productive tension between artifice and authenticity.

According to Elam, Shakespeare's Italian settings "are utopian 'emplacements', idealised sites of Renaissance culture, rather than real places" (72). The term utopian is crucial here: etymologically a 'no-place', it denotes a location that does not and cannot exist in empirical terms. Read in this light, Shakespeare's Verona is structurally imaginary, a textual elsewhere rather than a mappable somewhere. Any attempt to stabilise it as a historically authentic site in the present is therefore inevitably fallible, producing staged surrogates that simulate, rather than recover, a verifiable past. This stylisation finds a striking parallel in today's Shakespearean heritage industry: sites such as Juliet's House or Tomb similarly present idealised versions of Verona, shaped less by historical accuracy than by the imperatives of storytelling and tourist expectation. Just as Shakespeare's Verona functioned as a symbolic landscape rather than a faithful geography, the modern city continues to blur fact and fiction in ways that sustain its cultural allure.

This blurring of fact and fiction has long sustained the Veronese cult: a "common confusion between historical fact and fiction where the Romeo and Juliet tale is concerned" (Pugliatti 395) explains why tourists continue to visit Juliet's balcony and tomb as if they were authentic historical sites. Significantly, this confusion is not limited to visitors from abroad; even some locals have internalised the myth, treating these invented spaces as part of Verona's historical reality (Pugliatti 395). In this context, authenticity itself becomes irrelevant. Romeo and Juliet now function as myths representing ideals and dreams, while questions of historical accuracy have little impact on their appeal (Tessari 299). This shift from history to myth is not unique to Verona but mirrors a wider pattern in heritage tourism. As Ormsby and Pye remark, marketability often outweighs historical precision (3). The house, tomb, and letters function not as prompts for critical reflection but as icons of a romantic narrative distilled to its most marketable form. The resulting experience risks trivialising Shakespeare's legacy by privileging surface over substance, sentiment over critique. Yet it also demonstrates how

literature, once absorbed into cultural heritage, becomes a living force that exceeds the text itself. Verona's Shakespearean spaces are both commodified and sacralised, simultaneously trivial and profound. Ultimately, the ethical question is not whether Shakespeare should be appropriated for tourism – that process is irreversible – but how such appropriations frame, simplify, or silence the play's themes. The ease with which tragedy is converted into romance, critique into commodity, demonstrates the malleability of cultural memory.

Conclusion: Literature as Living Space

In Verona, the exploration of spaces that promise the most authentic encounters with Romeo and Juliet unveils a paradox: the most genuine experience is often the most consciously crafted fiction. The allure of passing into Shakespeare's play rests precisely in this fabricated essence. These sites aim to offer visitors an immediate passage into the lovers' constructed world, granting the illusion of having lived their romance without engaging with the play itself. This reflects a wider cultural tendency to interact with classical literature through simplified, sensorially rich experiences that privilege emotional immediacy over sustained textual engagement (Bassi 147). The fact that many visitors have never read the play underscores how these spaces function less as gateways to literary engagement than as symbolic embodiments of the narrative, through which visitors are invited to read *Romeo and Juliet* in spatial and experiential terms that can be highly selective, if not actively misleading. A visit to Juliet's house or tomb becomes more than a journey to a fictional site: it is a layered encounter with a cultural artefact situated at the intersection of history, invention, and commerce. Through strategic urban planning, cultural storytelling, media amplification, and participatory performance, Verona has evolved from Shakespeare's setting into a tourist reality. In Verona, *Romeo and Juliet* is embedded not only in monuments but also in everyday consumption, turning the myth into a lived presence frequently confused with historical reality.

What emerges is a city that is simultaneously stage and text, a hybrid of fiction and commerce, narrative and spectacle, mourning and marketing. Verona demonstrates that storytelling does not end at the last sentence, a play does not conclude at the curtain call: it continues in architecture, rituals, selfies, and souvenirs. Taken together, these dynamics reveal how literature transcends the boundaries of the page to become a living, breathing entity – embodied, performed, and monetised in the spaces people inhabit. Elam highlights that even in *Romeo and Juliet*, the city appears as a bounded utopia, enclosed by its walls and imagined by Romeo as an entire world beyond which nothing of value exists (69). That textual vision now reverberates in the tourist city, where Juliet's house, tomb, and associated rituals form a similarly self-contained world of romance, detached from wider historical realities. It confirms the enduring significance of Shakespeare's contributions to cultural imagination and the environments through which that imagination is staged. As Romeo himself declares, "There is no world without Verona walls" (3.3.17). Within those walls, the world of *Romeo and Juliet* continually unfolds as an ever-evolving monument to literature and a mirror of cultural desire.

Works Cited

Bassi, Shaul. *Shakespeare's Italy and Italy's Shakespeare: Place, 'Race', and Politics.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Cartwright, Kent. "Place and Being in Shakespearean Comedy." *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy.* Ed. Heather Hirschfeld. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 152–71.

Dickens, Charles. *Pictures from Italy.* Ed. Kate Flint. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1864] 1996.

Elam, Keir. "Shakespeare's Italian Place-Myths: The Padua-Verona-Mantua Nexus." *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 112.1 (2023): 58–76.

Forker, Charles. "From *Romeo and Juliet* to *Letters to Juliet*: Elizabethan Tragedy Re-Envisioned as Romantic Comedy." *Shakespeare Newsletter* 60.3 (2010): 105–12.

Juliet Club. "About Us." *Club di Giulietta.* Club di Giulietta, 2024. 19 Aug. 2024.

Kennedy, Dennis. "Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism." *Theatre Journal* 50.2 (1998): 175–88.

Lanier, Douglas. "Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value." *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*. Ed. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 21–40.

Letters to Juliet. Dir. Gary Winick. Perf. Amanda Seyfried, Vanessa Redgrave, Gael García Bernal, and Christopher Egan. Summit Entertainment, 2010. Film.

Municipality of Verona. *"Juliet House Between the Fourteenth and Nineteenth Centuries."* Casa di Giulietta. Comune di Verona, 2025. 18 Aug. 2025.

——. *"Visiting the House Museum."* Casa di Giulietta. Comune di Verona, 2025. 18 Aug. 2025.

——. *"Sculptures."* Casa di Giulietta. Comune di Verona, 2025. 20 Aug. 2025.

Oggiano, Eleonora. "The Shakespeare Brand in Contemporary 'Fair Verona'." *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 23.38 (2021): 109–25.

Ormsby, Robert, and Valerie Clay Man Pye. "'A Space for Farther Travel': Introducing Shakespeare Tourism." *Shakespeare and Tourism.* Eds. Robert Ormsby and Valerie Clay Man Pye. Abingdon: Routledge, 2022. 1–18.

Pugliatti, Paola. "The True History of Romeo and Juliet: A Veronese Plot of the 1830s." *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean.* Eds. Tom Clayton, Susan Brock, and Vicente Forés. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. 388–99.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet.* Ed. Jill L. Levenson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1599] 2000.

Tessari, Alessandra. "Verona and the Myth of Romeo and Juliet: Love Affair or Merely Affairs?" *Journal of Tourism History* 12.3 (2020): 298–316.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag untersucht die Verflechtung von Literatur, kulturellem Gedächtnis und touristischer Praxis anhand der Art und Weise, in der William Shakespeares *Romeo and Juliet* die Stadt Verona kulturell und urban prägt. An ausgewählten Schauplätzen wird aufgezeigt, wie aus einem fiktionalen Stoff ein urbanes Narrativ entsteht, das durch Rituale, Medienrepräsentationen und kommerzielle Strategien stetig neu belebt wird. Filmische Adaptionen und soziale Medien verstärken diese Dynamik und ermöglichen eine partizipative Kultur, in der Touristen zu Mitautor*innen des Shakespeare-Mythos werden. Zugleich wirft die Kommerzialisierung ethische Fragen auf, da die tragischen Dimensionen des Dramas häufig zugunsten einer konsumierbaren Romantik ausgeblendet werden.