

# Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and Their European Dissemination (SENS) PRIN PNR 2022 Final Conference

## Book of abstracts



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### Keynote 1

(chair: Silvia Bigliuzzi)

*Jason Lawrence (University of Hull)*

#### **'Written first in Italian by Bandell, and nowe in Englishe': Shakespeare and Bandello's Novelle, a Brief History**

This lecture will examine the arrival and reception of the novellas of Matteo Bandello in Early Modern England, spanning the Elizabethan to the early Jacobean periods, with a particular focus on the matter of Shakespeare's dramatic engagement with tales from the Italian prose collection, whether in the original language and / or mediated through French and English translations and adaptations by writers such as Boiastuau, Belleforest, Brooke, Fenton and Painter, in several of his most popular plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Twelfth Night* and *Othello*. It will also briefly investigate the critical history exploring the exact nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and Bandello, from the earliest remarks by Gerard Langbaine in the 1690s, through the pioneering investigations of Charlotte Lennox in *Shakespear Illustrated* in the 1750s, up to the present day with the imminent completion of the *Shakespeare's Narrative Sources: Italian Novellas and Their European Dissemination* archive.

## Panel 1: *In and around texts and motifs*

(chair: Andrea Peghinelli)

*Alessandra Squeo (University of Bari Aldo Moro)*

### **Shylock's Italian Precursors:**

#### **Intertextual and Interdiscursive Engagement with *Il Pecorone* and *Il Novellino***

This paper examines *The Merchant of Venice's* intertextual and interdiscursive engagement with two Italian novellas by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino and Masuccio Salernitano within the framework of recent Shakespeare source studies that foreground complex processes of dissemination, appropriation, and the reuse of shared cultural memory (Britton-Walter 2018; Drakakis 2021; Bigliuzzi 2025). Building on the premise that Shakespeare's "participation in novelesque discourse" extends far "beyond the plots that have traditionally been seen as sources for his plays" (Walter 2019: 3), the paper focuses more specifically on Shylock's precursors in these Italian narratives. A comparison with "il giudeo di Mestri" from *Il Pecorone* and Carmosina's father from *Il Novellino* offers, as I argue, a productive framework for reassessing the dramatic construction of one of Shakespeare's most controversial figures. By tracing how Shakespeare departs from, complicates, and reconfigures his Italian models, the paper illuminates the playwright's engagement with, and negotiation of key Elizabethan anxieties surrounding moneylending, usury, and the moral and social tensions generated by the rise of mercantile capitalism in late sixteenth-century England.

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*Bianca Del Villano (University of Naples L'Orientale)*

### **Shakespeare and Italian Folktales: Textual Dis/Connections**

The textual network connecting the Italian novella tradition to Shakespeare has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion within the field of source studies. Yet, interest in the relationship between genres and text types – including both oral and written forms of Italian and European folktales – can hardly be considered exhausted. Drawing on a methodological framework developed within the SENS project, this paper focuses on a cluster of motifs centred on the figure of the "wife" (shrewish, wise, and others) and examines their function and development in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *All's Well that Ends Well*.

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*Franca Dellarosa (University of Bari Aldo Moro)*

**"[Un] uomo cui la Natura e il Cielo e il modo della vita disgiunge da noi".**

### **Erring Barbarians and the Articulation of Otherness: Cinzio 3.7 to *Othello***

There is a recognisable line, across *Othello*, a recurring motif marking out the terms of the indiscretion – literally, the *colour line* the black General has trespassed on by marrying the Venetian lady, Desdemona (Douglass 1881; Cohen 2011; Novy 2013; Sterling Brown 2016, 2023). This is the transgression of the

assumed rule of nature, the “gross revolt” first conjured up in Roderigo’s acrid warning to Desdemona’s father (1.1.132-136), then restyled by Brabantio as the (unnatural) consequence of the “foul charms” (1.2.73) performed on her by one who should have been the object of “fear”, and not “delight” (1.2.71): an *error of nature* that can only be rationalized by recurring to the irrational – “sans witchcraft could not”. In *Hecatommithi* 3.7, one of the two key Italian narrative sources for *Othello*, the opposition of the woman’s family is only concisely referred to at the beginning, and the ‘error-of-nature’ imagery finds no development, with the exception of the character of Desdemona herself (Cinzio 2012, vol. 1: 621; cf. Attar 2011). This paper aims to explore the diverse inflections and the relevance of the shift in terms of the gendered perspective the Shakespeare text enacts in representing racialised otherness with respect to its source text, as embodied in the Capitano Moro/Othello dyad, and projected upon his union with Dis/Desdemona as an error of nature.

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## Keynote 2

(chair: Nadia Cannata)

*Melissa Walter (University of the Fraser Valley)*

### **Against Xenophobia: Remembering Narrative across Borders and Texts**

By retelling Shakespeare’s narrative resources we both keep them in memory and keep them connected. Attending to these stories as themselves, as the SENS project does, reveals assumptions of English-monocultural criticism, and sometimes in the Shakespearean text itself. One set of examples concerns early modern English anti-Italian stereotypes of jealousy and patriarchal control of daughters. Of course, novellas provide a range of plots and attitudes related to this topic, but as Emanuel Stelzer points out in the recent SENS volume, in the Bandello and Belleforest sources of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the father believes his daughter immediately, whereas in Shakespeare Leonato initially doubts his daughter and wishes her dead, enacting an English stereotype of one kind of Italian father in a way that the Italian story does not substantiate. A second set of examples relates to the portrayal of racial prejudice, for instance in Cinthio’s novella on which *Othello* is based (Britton, 2018). My own example in this talk will be from *Diana Enamorada* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In the *Diana*, Felismena, the Julia figure, is a storyteller who participates in the pastoral world of empathetic witnessing, telling not only her own story but also an embedded novella featuring a friendship between a Spanish governor and a Moor that he defeats in battle. Felismena’s stories read in conversation with the *Two Gentlemen of Verona* provide perspectives on female character, intercultural relations, and theatre that are not available by reading either text alone.

## Panel 2: *Spaces and objects*

(chair: Annalisa Perrotta)

*Beatrice Righetti (University of Verona)*

### **Poison or Blades? The Anatomy of Slander in Shakespeare's *Much Ado*, Its Narrative Sources and Dramatic Analogues**

This contribution examines the semantic anatomy of slander across the sources and analogues of Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, through a cross-linguistic and intertextual analysis of two emblematic imageries of calumny – poison and blades. By tracing their circulation and transformation in a broad corpus encompassing works by Ariosto, Bandello, Belleforest, Beverley, Della Porta, Harington, Munday, Pasqualigo, Spenser, and Whetstone, and by reading these against contemporary legal and theological discourses on defamation, the study identifies a crucial semantic shift in early modern representations of slander, with particular attention to the *poison* motif. The findings are integrated into the SENS digital archive – most notably within its “Intertextualities” and “Shared Imagery” environments – which render intricate cross-textual and cross-linguistic relationships visible through an intuitive, research-oriented interface.

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*Roberta Zanoni (University of Verona)*

### **From Bed to Courtroom: Bandello's Novella 1.15 and *Measure for Measure***

This paper investigates the potential intertextual connections between Matteo Bandello's novella 1.15 *Due gentiluomini veneziani onoratamente dalle mogli sono ingannati* (1554) – translated into English by William Painter as story 2.26 of his *Palace of Pleasure* (1567) – and Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Bandello's story has traditionally been cited in relation to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, given its depiction of two Venetian husbands who, infatuated with each other's wives, compose amorous letters that are intercepted by the women, who are friends and plot a clever revenge. Yet, alongside this comic framework, two narrative features of the novella resonate more closely with *Measure for Measure*: the motif of substitution in bed, enacted without the men's knowledge, and the judicial process in which the erring husbands face trial, only to be spared through the intercession of the very women they sought to deceive. By examining Painter's translation as a likely point of transmission, this paper argues that elements of Bandello's novella anticipate significant thematic concerns of *Measure for Measure*, particularly those involving deception, authority, and female agency.

*Silvia Silvestri (University of Bari Aldo Moro)*

**“Stuffed with epithets of war”:  
Narrative Contaminations, Cultural Hybridity and Othello’s Military Rank**

This paper reopens the question of Othello’s military rank by situating it within Shakespeare’s broader practice of collating and transforming Italian narrative materials through multiple linguistic and cultural mediations. Focusing on the dramatisation of Giraldi Cinzio’s *Ecatommiti* alongside Matteo Bandello’s *Novelle* and its French and English translations, it argues that Othello’s characterisation as a Venetian general emerges from the synthesis of distinct yet intersecting narrative models. While Cinzio’s novella provides, inter alia, the framework for the Moor’s ethnicity and Venetian service, the Bandellian line offers neglected precedents for the Moor’s ambiguous military office through the characters of Spada and Barza, two displaced soldiers enrolled in the ranks of the Mantuan army. Across the story’s French and English translation, both figures are progressively ennobled and promoted, a process that reconfigures historically plausible mercenary roles into examples of social mobility and precarious cultural assimilation. By tracing these characters’ cross-cultural transmission, the paper contends that Othello’s ‘confusing’ military rank reflects less a terminological inaccuracy than an imaginative construct shaped by Shakespeare’s engagement with layered novella traditions.

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*Fabio Ciambella (Sapienza University of Rome)*

**“[A]s Juno had been sick / And he her dieter”:  
Food Discourse in *Cymbeline* and Its Italian Resources**

This paper examines the rich and complex food discourse in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, arguing that culinary imagery functions as a powerful symbolic system to critique courtly corruption and valorise natural virtue. It establishes the play’s engagement with early modern dietary theories and contrasts the poisoned, deceptive consumption at court with the simple, honest sustenance of the Welsh wilderness. The analysis then traces this motif to its Italian intertexts, demonstrating how Shakespeare synthesises the stark primitivism of Bandello’s *Novelle* (1.27) and the idealised pastoral of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (book 7). The paper culminates in a close reading of Innogen’s culinary artistry in the cave, positing that this moment transcends its sources to show innate nobility transforming rustic fare into a symbol of sincere care, thereby proposing a synthesis of natural integrity and cultivated grace as the recipe for political and ethical health.

## Keynote 3

(chair: Carmen Gallo)

*Robert Henke (Washington University)*

### **Shakespeare and the Italian Novella: Some Intertextual Reflections**

This paper provides several intertextual reflections on the resonance of the Italian novella in Shakespeare's work. It distinguishes between different intertextual relationships that can obtain between the novella and Shakespeare, from the text-to-text transmission from Cinthio's Moor story to *Othello*, to the resonance of novella families in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, to the import of general novella traits in Shakespeare, such as the strong heroine or the powerful merchant operating in a circum-Mediterranean world, such as characterizes many Boccaccio stories. Even in cases, such as with *Romeo and Juliet*, when Shakespeare's debt to the English intermediary (Arthur Brooke) is incontestable, the importance of also reading the earlier Italian versions is stressed, as one can detect Italian "roads not taken" that can surface in later interpretations of Shakespeare. And in uncertain cases, such as with the Boccaccio intertext for *All's Well that Ends Well* translated by Painter, a comparison of the Shakespeare text with both the Italian original and the English translation suggests Shakespeare's greater affinity with the former. The novella is examined as the perfect theatrical machine, compact of modular units easily transferable to the stage, and providing to Shakespeare much more than the external elements of plot and character to which source study normally limits itself. Finally, the paper examines the process of extending the novella, with its typically small character system, to what a *commedia dell'arte* or Shakespeare company would enact on stage.

## ***Seminar: Gamifying Shakespeare and his sources***

(chair: Gaia Tomazzoli)

*Maristella Gatto (University of Bari Aldo Moro)*

### **SENSible Games. Shakespeare's Narrative Sources and Gamification**

This paper examines the potential interactions between pedagogical gamification and Shakespearean source studies, focusing on the experimental framework developed within the *SENS – Shakespeare's Narrative Sources* project. Whether through transcription games, puzzle games based on the reconstruction and rewriting of a text's narrative flow, or through philologically-oriented narrative investigations and detective stories, games constitute a meaningful component of the SENS platform. Against this background, the example of *WikiSENS*—a collaborative transcription game specifically designed within the Wikimedia ecosystem— is a case in point to illustrate the role that gamified and crowdsourced transcription environments can play in transforming scholarly engagement with early modern narrative sources into an active, collaborative learning practice, reconfiguring the student from passive recipient to active participant and co-producer of textual outputs. The case study centred on transcriptions from *Ecatommiti*, on of the narrative sources of *Othello*, demonstrates how such practices foster renewed attention to the material dimensions of textual transmission, while simultaneously redefining the boundaries between research, teaching, and public humanities.

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### **Roundtable by**

*Stefano Dei Rossi, Giovanni Raffa, Beatrice Righetti, Silvia Silvestri, and Roberta Zanoni*