

FONTE: NEW YORK TIMESDATA: 15.3.1993Verona Journal*Dear Juliet: Let Me Tell You About My Problem*

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VERONA, Italy — O Romeo, Romeo. Wherefore art thou Romeo? Or Omer, or Tony? Juliet's not the only person who'd like to know.

Last year, some 2,000 letters from the lovelorn across the globe arrived in this northern Italian city that Shakespeare endowed with fame beyond its Roman antiquities, addressed either to Juliet Capulet or, since she was secretly wed by the time she died, to Juliet Montague.

And many of them ask the same question, albeit modified for different loves, that Juliet posed four centuries ago in Shakespeare's romantic tragedy set in this same town: Wherefore, or why, does love's faithful vow so often bind together couples whose families do not want them bound? Why is romance so tricky?

To scholarly purists, the Club of Juliet — a private organization that receives, translates and answers Ms. Capulet's mail — may simply be per-



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Verona gets letters from the lovelorn to its star-crossed heroine.

vulgar, and the nature of their ardor reflects cultural influences, Mr. Tomassia said.

Capulet's mail — may simply be perpetuating a myth that Verona has promoted since the late 19th century in the interest of drawing visitors to spend their money here.

Juliet's Recent Residence

First, there is what the official city guidebook assures the visitor is Juliet's villa in Via Cappello: "Tradition has it that this was the house of the Capulets, the powerful Veronese family to which Juliet belonged."

But according to Giulio Tamassia, the president of the Club of Juliet, the 13th-century edifice was deemed to be Juliet's place only in the 1880's or the 1890's when a group of notables decided to purchase it.

"They wanted it to become the house of Juliet," said Mr. Tamassia, the retired head of a confectionery business, "because the myth of Juliet seemed threatened."

Even the street name seems to have been a bit of a guess. "Via Cappello is similar to Capuleti," Mr. Tamassia said, using the Italian name for the Capulets, Juliet's family, which was locked in a feud with Romeo's Montagues. Since the Italian word cappello means hat, and since the building on Via Cappello is marked by a hatter's emblem, he reasoned, "It could be the house of the Capulets — they could have been a family of hat merchants."

The Balcony Question

Then came the vexing question of the balcony. "Romeo and Juliet" simply would not be "Romeo and Juliet" without the balcony, even though Shakespeare's text refers only to "Juliet at a window above" after Romeo vaults over a wall into the Capulets' orchard.

The only problem was that the house on Via Cappello did not have a balcony until the 1920's, when, according to Mr. Tamassia, one was



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Shakespeare mentioned a window. But tradition has it that a balcony separated Romeo and Juliet in Verona. So in the 1920's a balcony was taken from a building of the same period and affixed to "Juliet's villa."

taken from another building of the same period and affixed to "Juliet's villa." Even Juliet's tomb is said by some to have been constructed from a horse trough.

But the municipal legerdemain seems to have worked. In 1937, the first of 10,000 letters sent over the years to "Juliet, Verona" arrived from an Englishman.

At first, various Veronese took it upon themselves to answer the mail. Then, a couple of years ago, Mr. Tamassia conceived the idea of the Club of Juliet, and enlisted students from the university here to help with translation and replies.

"The writers are often lonely people," said Laura Zanitti, one of two Italians who along with students from Mexico, Japan, China and Georgia read the heroine's mail and sign their

replies as "Juliet's Secretary."

"We ask ourselves: What do they need?" Miss Zanitti said. "We try to give a personal answer and try to understand the sender." Sometimes they consult a local psychologist.

They also organized an annual competition for the best letter. The first prize was awarded in February to Chiara Cabassi, a 20-year-old Italian university student from Parma. Her letter described a more diffident Romeo than Shakespeare's who "does not know how to speak to me of love" and whose "dark eyes" leave her almost speechless.

Of the 2,000 letters the club received last year, 600 were from Italy, and the rest from all around the world. Four-fifths are from women troubled by a Romeo they have already met. None, so far, have been

massia said.

"The Turks are very serious," Miss Zanitti said. "The Latin Americans are the most passionate. The letters from the Arab world are playful and superficial. They invite Juliet to big palaces where luxury solves every problem. They invite her to come and play their new Nintendo."

Some letters recount stories reminiscent of the medieval Italian sagas that scholars believe inspired Shakespeare.

"We seem to have something in common; we have fallen in love with men our fathers do not approve of us even to speak with," a 15-year-old high school student wrote from Chicago. Her tale was grim: she was two months pregnant, she said, and her boyfriend, Tony, "the leader of a big gang," is in jail.

"The reason he is in jail is stupid," she said. "One day when his head was full of thoughts of him and me, he sold some drugs to an undercover police officer."

A Pakistani Feud

A Pakistani woman living in Saudi Arabia wrote of her love for Omer, a man whose family had been locked in a feud with hers for two generations. "What should I do?" she asked.

The reply, Mr. Tamassia said, was simple: She and Omer should emigrate to the West, and be married.

Of all the letters, Mr. Tamassia said, only around 5 percent are addressed to Romeo, and they do not always have the silver-sweet sound of lovers' voices.

"Why are you going to kill yourself for a Capulet?" an 18-year-old university student from Amman, Jordan wrote to Romeo from a region steeped in intractable divisions. "She is your enemy. Remember, you are a Montague, and Montagues hate Capulets. So that even shows that you are a lot sillier than I thought."