

## Emily Fish (English), Travel Report - Italy, Summer 2017

Throughout the canon of English literature, from as early as the Middle Ages, there is one thing that becomes abundantly clear: very rarely is literature isolated in its Englishness. Instead, we most often find these texts and their language inundated with the influence of other countries' society, religion, art, and literature. One country in particular is consistently referenced, praised, and emulated by the authors that my first year of study brought me into contact with: Italy. Therefore, in July of this year, myself and three other Pembroke English undergraduates set out to Italy, to explore the cities of Rome, Florence, and Venice. The aim of our trip was to further our understanding of the cultural setting and influences of many of the texts that we had studied in our first year of English at Pembroke.

Our first destination was Rome, an obvious choice due to its historical significance for Britain as well as its relevance to the arts. It is almost impossible to ignore the cultural heaviness of Rome, and so our visits here were somewhat varied in their nature. We explored some religious landmarks, from the temples of the Vestal Virgins to cathedrals, which helped us to grasp the importance of devotion to the Italian people; the most significant of these being the Vatican, in which much of the art stored there depicted scenes from the time of the Reformation, a crucial subject of many texts of the Renaissance, a period that is essential for all parts of our degree. We also visited the Colosseum, a staple when visiting Rome, but also an interesting landmark for the history of theatre, prompting us to consider the ways in which theatre has changed and developed over the past 2000 years.

Next was Florence. Here one of our main focuses was visiting more cathedrals – as I have stated, much of the literature of the Renaissance (for example, John Milton, John Donne, George Herbert) was tied up with a consideration of religion, writing from a variety of religious standpoints. We also visited some of Florence's museums, as well as sites that are known to be of relevance to Dante, whose *Divine Commedia* is a seminal work, and whose literary authority is evident in how often we can see his work's influence on English literature.

Due to the fact that at the time of organising this trip we were studying a Shakespeare paper, Italy in general was a place of interest as either a setting or focus in much of his work. In particular, his play *The Merchant of Venice* was a text we all enjoyed and one of the students coming on the trip was involved in a production of the play in Cambridge, making it an obvious choice as a destination. Though there is still some debate about whether Shakespeare actually spent any time in Italy, exploring Venice's streets and placing the literary intrigue of *Merchant* in a physical setting added a new level of contemplation for further consideration of that text and his other plays.

Ultimately the trip was an incredible opportunity to expand the ways in which I approach many of the texts that I am studying and revising for my end of Part 1 exams, pushing me to explore the ways in which English and Italian culture are and always have been in conversation, as well as setting me up well to take an additional course this year on Italian literature and its relationship to English literature throughout history.