

Edward de Vere did not Build Himself a House in Venice

The Interpretation of a Document of the Doge's Secretarial Office

by Dr Noemi Magri

A passage in a document of the Venetian *Cancellaria secreta* (the secretarial office and archives in the Palazzo Ducale regarding foreign affairs), where Edward de Vere 17th Earl of Oxford is mentioned, was published in an English version in *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton* written by Logan Pearsall Smith. Smith gives an abridged translation of parts of the minutes of an audience that Sir Henry, English Ambassador in Venice, had with the *Doge*¹ and the *Collegio* (Cabinet)² on April 27th, 1617. The audience was carried out in Italian, a language known to Sir Henry.³

The translation in Smith says '[...] when he arrived in Venice, [Edward de Vere] took no trouble to see the rest of the country, but stopped here, and even built himself a house' (Vol.II p.113, n.3).⁴ Those lines were recorded in Ogburn (p.549: 1627 is a misprint for 1617), and quoted in biographies of Oxford.

Because of the incongruous reference to de Vere's lack of interest in the Venetian country and the building of a house in Venice, the passage, as it is in English, is not convincing; moreover, it has caused a misunderstanding of the actual facts regarding de Vere in Venice for the reason that it was taken in isolation, completely detached from the rest of the document.

The only way to establish the true meaning was the examination of the Italian original.

The present article purposes to analyse and interpret the passage in the context of the whole document, and give a transcription and a translation of the minutes.

Englishman in Venice

Sir Henry Wotton, English Ambassador to various states on the continent, was in Venice on his second mission to that city from 1616 to 1619. They were troublesome times: the serious political and religious controversies, and the dynastic crises and rivalries between the many princes and the Great Electors of the German Empire had brought the European states to the verge of a conflict that appeared to be inevitable.

The 1617 document, with its allusions to military preparations and Princes' diplomatic talks, must be seen against the background of the historical events preceding the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), – a war that at the beginning was considered as a religious conflict but that soon revealed itself to be a struggle against, or in favour of, the power that the



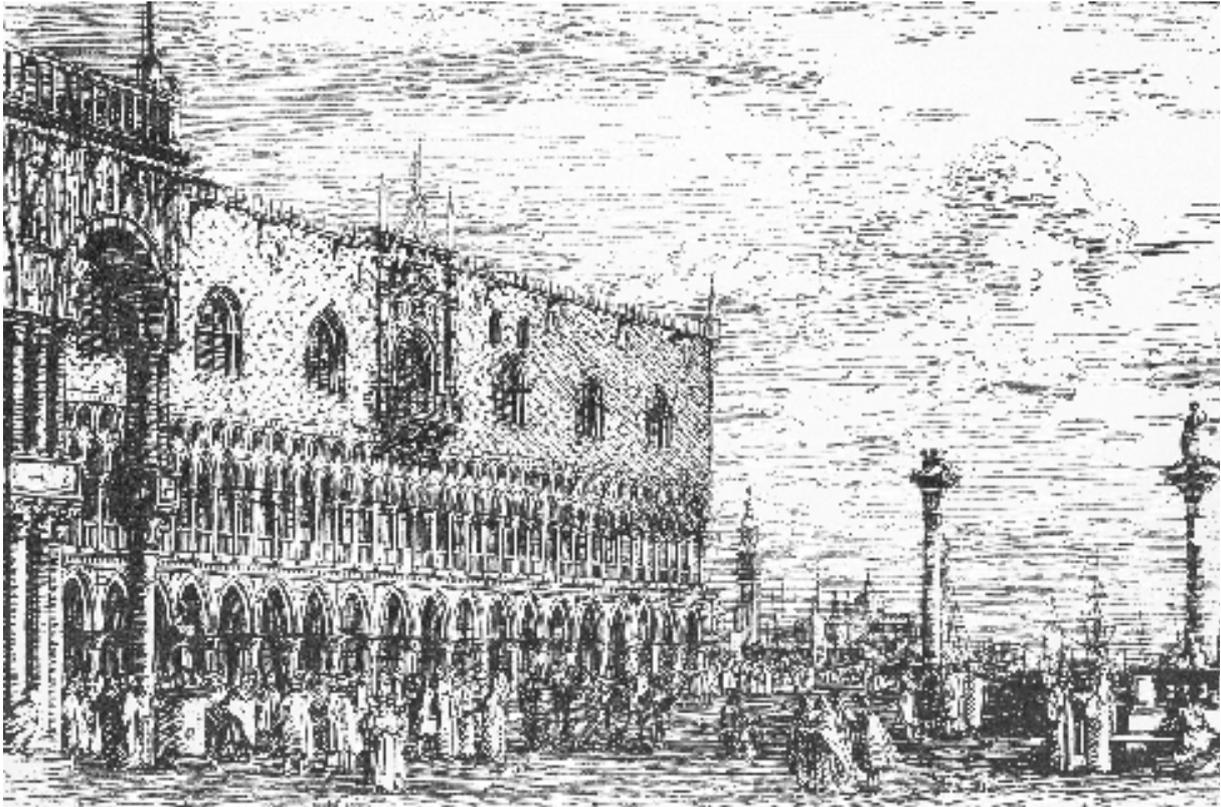
House of Habsburg had attained, through inheritance and marriage, over the greater part of Europe.

Sir Henry's audience of April 27th, 1617, had the purpose of introducing Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford, then in Venice on his Italian tour, and of informing the *Doge* and the *Collegio* that the Earl, 'Great Chamberlain and heir of one of the most illustrious families of his country' was ready to help the Republic in the Uskocs war.

Truces and treaties ignored

The fact was that Venice and Austria were in conflict over the control of the Adriatic even more after Archduke Ferdinand, the cousin of Emperor Rudolph II, had started to protect the Uskocs, – the Slav aggressors against Venetian ships – and had allowed them to settle in the coastal city of Segna. Because the various truces and treaties of peace had been ignored, the European states were arming and were hiring mercenary soldiers.

Venice resolved to ask the Dutch United Provinces for help in return for the promise of her support in the Protestant cause; so, in the



This 1742 print by Canaletto shows the Venetian *Palazzo Ducale*

early spring of 1617, Count Johann Ernst of Nassau⁵ was sent to her defence at the head of 3000 Dutch soldiers.

In presenting Henry de Vere, Wotton praises the bravery of the Earl's ancestors and is very pleased to say that 'today the General of the English troops in the Low Countries is of the same family, and so is a Colonel of Count Ernst'.

The General Sir Henry was referring to was Sir Horace Vere and the Colonel Sir John Vere, son of John Vere of Kirby Hall, the eldest brother of Horace Vere. Sir Henry's praise of the Veres as valiant men-at-arms was not casual: it was aimed at gaining the *Doge's* confidence and obtaining a military appointment for the 18th Earl.

He also expresses great satisfaction with the fact that in Venice there were 600 English soldiers under the command of that Colonel, and, at the same time, he apologizes for the disorders they made as a consequence of heavy drinking of wine.

The sending of English troops to the Venetian state was determined by James I's disappointment at the failure of the Spanish marriage and his subsequent agreement to help Venice against the Habsburgs of Austria.

Now, Sir Henry's speech becomes vague and evasive when he says that he had advice from the Court of the Elector Palatine and that at a meet-

ing of 'those princes' – i.e. the German Protestant princes – it seemed that 'they may have considered the interests of some Prince and the common service with very good disposition': he does not say who that Prince was.

Sir Henry was in contact with the Palatine Court, for his nephew Albertus Morton had been appointed English agent to the Protestant princes and secretary to the Palatine Electress, and was living in Heidelberg, the capital of the Rhine-Palatinate and the Count's city of residence.⁶

The Count Palatine was one of the Great Electors, the more powerful princes in Germany. The then Count was Frederick V of Wittelsbach-Simmern (1596-1632) called *der Winterkönig*, James I's son-in-law, for he had married Elizabeth, the King's daughter, now the Palatine Electress.

Frederick was a true Calvinist, a supporter of the Protestants of Bohemia and an ally of the Duke of Savoy, Carlo Emanuele I, against the Habsburgs. At the head of the Evangelic Union, Frederick was organizing an army with the aim of occupying Bohemia and becoming the king of that country. (He became king for a few months only, during the winter of 1619, hence the name.) He needed troops so he asked James I for military support, but the English King, rather reluctant to

have to take sides in religious conflicts, kept delaying the sending of soldiers to his son-in-law.⁷

When Wotton's interview was over, Henry de Vere, who in the meantime had been waiting outside the audience room in *Palazzo Ducale*, was shown in, formal greetings and respects were exchanged, and, after that, Sir Henry and the Earl left the place.⁸

The passage in the minutes that mentions Edward de Vere in Venice is the one where Sir Henry Wotton presents the 18th Earl. The Italian passage is the following: *'il quale [...] non si curò di veder altra parte della ditta Provincia: et vi si fermò et vi fabricò anch'una casa'*

The translation as given in L.P. Smith is misleading because it fails to interpret the passage in its context. It is true that it is not always possible to find the exact equivalent word to a colloquial one in another language, and it is sometimes necessary to use a circumlocution. But here the translator misses the point because he took the passage at its literal meaning.

In order to understand the communicative value of the passage, we must consider the importance of the audience of April 27th to the 18th Earl: Henry had strong aspirations to a military career, as was a tradition of the 'fighting Veres', and a command of troops at the service of the Republic would have meant the fulfilment of his ambitions. A clever diplomat, Wotton makes use of most laudatory expressions in extolling the virtues of the Earl in order to win the Doge's goodwill and have his request satisfied.

In praising the 18th Earl, Wotton mentions his father Edward and says that the son has the same desire to see the beauties of Venice as his father had when, a long time ago, he came to Italy; further on, the translation seems to distort the real facts regarding the 17th Earl: actually, 'he [Edward] took no trouble to see the rest of the country' does contradict the truth: it is known that, instead, Edward was impatient to visit Italy and travelled in and to the Venetian state several times. But Sir Henry had an assignment to carry out.

Father and son in a favourable light

Aiming to throw a favourable light on both Earls, father and son, he emphasizes Edward de Vere's love of Venice to the point of exaggeration: by *'non si curò di veder altra parte della ditta Provincia'* he does not mean to say that Edward did not wish to see the rest of the Venetian territory, which, after all, would not have been pleasant for the Doge to hear, given the importance of such cities as Padua and Verona: he intends to stress the idea that the 17th

Earl's main concern and interest was the visit to the splendours of the city. Sir Henry aims to persuade the Doge that if the son feels the same love for Venice as his father did, then he will be ready to defend the Republic with all his courage.

The more far-reaching misinterpretation is given by 'he built himself a house'. The minutes read, *'vi fabricò anch'una casa'* (Italian spelling: *'fabbricò'*). Although 'built' is one of the literal translations of *'fabricò'*, here the word has a figurative, not a literal sense. (Literally, it would be: 'he even built a house there', not 'he built himself a house'. However, both translations are unacceptable, as explained below.)

The phrase *'vi fabricò anch'una casa'* must be interpreted in the context of the whole passage, not in isolation; in particular, we must take into account the purpose of Henry's visit to the Doge, and, consequently, the ingenious speech of the Ambassador aiming to impress the Collegio.

Sir Henry did not mean it literally: he meant to say that Edward 'provided himself with a comfortable home' (Italian *'casa'* is both English 'house' and 'home'), so enthusiastic was he about the city: a circumlocution better renders the Italian word.

Colloquial *'fabricò'*, with its emotional quality, has no equivalent form in English: the word stresses the idea that, throughout the time he was in Venice, Edward stayed in a place that he had chosen and liked: he was happy with it. What Wotton says also implies that Edward did not stay at an inn nor at some acquaintance's, – the usual accommodation of most travellers when they sojourned in a place for a short period.⁹ To find an English equivalent word is practically impossible: most probably, the translator used 'built' as it was a more immediate form.

Sir Henry did know that building a house in Venice would have required considerable time for carrying out the necessary procedures, such as the location of the available land on which to build the house, the negotiations of the possible purchase of the land and/or consent to build, the planning and building of the house itself, – including the construction of the foundations – the drying of the walls, the decoration, and, finally, the furnishing. No house would have been ready in time for de Vere to live in it before he definitely left Italy. And there is no evidence that someone had in advance carried out those procedures on his behalf.

Hiring furniture

In practice, what Edward de Vere did was to rent a house. He may have also rented the furniture, as the intrinsic meaning of *'fabricò'* may suggest. It

is interesting to note that Sir Henry himself had hired large pieces of furniture from the Jews of Venice.¹⁰

That de Vere did not build himself nor buy a house in Venice is definitely established by the examination of the records in the Venice State Archives relative to house owners in that city. If he had owned one, his name would have been recorded in the registers of the tax payers and/or of the parties in a contract. Instead, the registers drawn up for fiscal purposes and containing the names of Venetian and foreign owners of real estates in Venice in the years 1575-76 do not record de Vere's name as a tax-payer on property.¹¹

The same can be said of the entries in the series *Notificazioni* in the fund *Giudici dell'esaminador*¹² where are recorded the 'notifications to the office of contracts, obligations and credits in Venice and the Dogado (Dogedom) in favour of Venetians of the State': that is to say, no sum of money was paid by Edward de Vere for any contract or any other legal agreement made. Besides that, even supposing that he had owned a house, the question of what became of it would inevitably arise. The records also rule out that, at the end of his stay in Italy, de Vere might have sold or donated any property.¹³

What the ambassador really meant

The translation in Smith fails to notice the communicative value of Sir Henry Wotton's speech, so the phrases 'took no trouble to see the rest of the country' and 'even built himself a house' do not render what the Ambassador really meant to express. The following circumlocution is closer to the original: 'he was not very interested in seeing other parts of this Province, and stopped here and even provided himself with a comfortable home'.

However, the phrase '*non si curò di veder altra parte della ditta Provincia*', whether in the Italian original or in Smith or in the translation above, should not be taken as true for the reasons given above; the phrase in Smith 'even built himself a house' cannot be accepted either, because it does not correspond to the historical facts regarding de Vere's life in Venice: 'provided himself with a comfortable home' is what happened in reality.

In conclusion, on the basis of what is recorded in the minutes, and after inspection of the registers in Venice State Archives, it can be affirmed that, when he was in Venice, Edward de Vere lived in a house that he had rented: he did not buy one nor did he have one built.¹⁴

Sir Henry Wotton's speech highlights

that the Earls of Oxford were of the highest rank and that Edward de Vere's fondness for Venice was still a present subject, if more than 40 years later the English ambassador recalls it, though, in praising the beauty of the city, Sir Henry was merely displaying the art of a tactful diplomat: in fact, his actual aim was to get the Doge and the Collegio to grant the 18th Earl a military command.¹⁵

NOTES

1. The Doge was Giovanni Bembo (1543-1618). A brave sea-captain, he belonged to one of the more illustrious families in Venice. His short Dogedom was plagued by the struggle against the Uskocs. He was elected Doge in 1615 at the age of seventy-two.

2. The *Collegio* consisted of 16 senators (the 6 *Savi Grandi*, the 5 *Savi di Terraferma*, the 5 *Savi agli Ordini*) and was presided over by the Doge. L.P. Smith says that it was 'composed of the Doge and twenty-five principal senators' (Vol.I, p.53). But the Government Board which Smith describes is not the *Collegio* but the *Pien Collegio* (Full Cabinet) called so because it included the 9 senators of the *Signoria* (the 6 Ducal Counsellors and the 3 Chief Senators of the *Quarantia al Criminali*). The *Pien Collegio* was also presided over by the Doge. The *Collegio* and the *Pien Collegio* have always been two distinct separate councils. It is not possible to establish which and how many senators of the Collegio were present at the audience of 27th April, 1617. However, in conformity with the laws of Venice, the Doge received the ambassadors of foreign countries in the presence of 4 Ducal Counsellors and 2 chief senators of the *Quarantia*, besides the 6 *Savi Grandi* and the 3 *Avogadori de Comun* (magistrates).

3. The minutes, based on notes taken by the Doge's secretary during the audience, were presumably drawn up some time later as it can be inferred from '*non data in tempo*' ('not passed on in time') written in the margin of the audiences' register which, however, bears the same date, April 27th, 1617.

4. In Dr. Verily Anderson's *The de Veres of Castle Hedingham* (p.241), the building of 'a palace in Venice' is claimed to refer to Henry de Vere, 18th Earl of Oxford: it is a misreading of Smith's book.

5. Johann Ernst von Nassau (1582-1617), first-born son of Count Johann VII of Nassau-Siegen, was at the service of the Duke of Savoy first, and then of the Venetian Republic. He was killed in Udine in September 1617.

6. See L.P. Smith Vol.I p.145.

7. Finally, after long temporizing, in 1620 the King took the decision to support Frederick, and sent soldiers to the Palatinate under the command of Sir Horace Vere. On that occasion, Henry de Vere was appointed to serve his relative in the campaign.

8. The visitors, even though distinguished ones, who attained the privilege of being presented to the Doge and the Collegio by the ambassadors, did not usually deliver



The Sala del Collegio in Palazzo Ducale, where Henry de Vere was presented to the Doge. It has not been modified since 1577.

any speech but only said words of courtesy. Those audiences were rigidly formal, ‘*di complimento*’, that is, not being concerned with political matters, they were mainly granted to render respects. In those cases, the minutes would not report the speeches in full. 9. The location of de Vere’s house in Venice will be dealt with separately as it is not relevant to the present subject.

10. L.P. Smith, Vol.I, p.57. It is possible that, having to rent a house, De Vere, like Wotton, turned to a Jew.

11. *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* (AS.VE). *Dieci Savi alle decime in Rialto* (1566-1581)

12. AS.VE. *Giudici dell’esaminador. Notificazioni* (reg.3. 1571 giugno 23 – 1578 dicembre 12)

13. Unfortunately, the ‘registrations of the deeds of tenancy, assignment of a credit on real estates in Venice’ for the years 1575-1576, that were once also contained in the fund *Giudici dell’esaminador*, are lost.

14. In *Monstrous Adversary* Alan Nelson, without checking the minutes or the documents mentioned above, or the exactness of the translation in L.P. Smith, affirms that ‘The construction of a house – or apartment – would account for Oxford’s huge expenditure during his year abroad’ (p.138). It is clear

that Nelson, failing to understand that the building of a house was not a matter of prompt realization, erroneously maintains that Oxford ‘did have a house built’.

15. Henry de Vere tried to obtain from James I leave to raise English troops in support of Venice. However, the Government of the Republic did not accept Henry’s offer, on the grounds that a large number of troops – the Dutch ones – were already present in the Venetian territory.

TRANSCRIPT

[*Archivio di Stato di Venezia. Collegio. Secreta. Esposizioni Principi, f. 25. Sir Henry Wotton. 27 aprile 1617.*]

Registrato 1617 27 Aprile.

Venuto nell’eccellentissimo Collegio il Signor Ambasciator d’Inghilterra: disse:

‘Serenissimo Principe: mentre non tengo alcun negotio da portare à Vostra Serenità, ogn’altra occasione di venir à farle riverenza che mi s’appresenti m’è carissima. Ho condotto qui à Palazzo un cavalier di condizioni degne et delle più principali della nostra Patria; questo è il conte d’osfort, herede di sua casa, et col titolo di Gran Ciambelano

che già molt'anni è stato nella discendenza di questa famiglia. In altri tempi hanno reso gran servizio li suoi maggiori. Hogi di il Generale delle genti Inglesi ne li paesi Bassi è dell' istessa casa, et parimente: un colonello del Conte Ernesto.

Ha questo cavaliere fermato qualche tempo à Fiorenza per aprender la lingua et li essercitii della cavalleria et in queste occasioni de rumori è concorso in questa città per passar à vedere il campo, et poner anche la spada alla mano per servizio di Vostre Eccellenze. La Serenità Vostra mi farà la gratia che possi egli entrare à >far<¹ basciarle le mani, et possa poi vedere le bellezze di questa città, alle quali oltre al nome universale che ne invita ogn'uno, ha egli l'eccitamento del Padre il quale passato in Italia in altri tempi, gionto che fu in Venetia: non si curò di veder altra parte della ditta Provincia: et vi si fermò et vi fabricò anch'una casa'.

Continuò poi à dire, 'mi sono allegrato grandemente, in me medesimo, che nel collonelato delle genti olandesi si trovino ben 600 soldati della nostra natione; li suprascritti sono venuti à trovarmi, et m'affermano che sono tutti veterani, et spero che nelle occasioni di valersene si porteranno in modo, che la Serenità Vostra mi farà la giustezza di numerarli per 6 mila: iscusando intanto qualche picciol disordine in questo principio et dimora otiosa, essendo stato gran passaggio, quello che han fatto dalla picciola birra bevuta sin >qui<¹ al sbarco al vino che doppo hanno avuto.

Non lasciero di dire d'esser avisato dalla Corte dell'Elettor Palatino che nella riduzione di quei Principi dovendo trovarsi un Ambasciator di Savoia, onde si sarebbe posto in consideratione gli interessi di qualche Principe et del commune servizio con ottima dispositione'.

Con che fatto introdur il Gentill'huomo sopradetto, et accolto da Sua Serenità levandosi anco l'Ambasciator nel accompagnar le parole d'ufitio, supplito dal Serenissimo Signore nella risposta con l'uno e l'altro senza maggiormente fermarsi, partirono.

NOTE 1. Crossed out in the manuscript.

TRANSLATION

[This version strictly follows the original text. Some repetitions may sound redundant in English.]

Registered on April 27th, 1617.

Having come to the Most Honourable Collegio, the Signor Ambassador of England said, 'Most Serene Prince, though I have no affairs to deal with Your Serenity, every other occasion that may present itself to me to come and render you my respects, is most dear to me.

I have brought here to the Palace a knight of the worthiest and highest rank of our country; he is

the Earl of Oxford, the heir of his house; he bears the title of Great Chamberlain, which has been held by the ancestors of his family for many years. In past times, his forefathers have rendered great service. Today the General of the English troops in the Low Countries is of the same house, and so is a Colonel of Count Ernst.

This knight [i.e. Henry] has sojourned in Florence for some time to learn the language and [practise] the exercises of cavalry, and on these occasions of rumours [of an imminent conflict] he has come to this city to go and see the camp, and also to take his sword in hand for the service of Your Excellencies.

Your Serenity will do me a favour if he is allowed to enter and kiss your hands; then, he will visit the beauties of this city: to see those, apart from their universal name which attracts everyone here, he has the same desire as his father, who, having come to Italy long ago, once he arrived in Venice, was not very interested in seeing other parts of this Province, and stopped here and even provided himself with a comfortable home'.

Then, he continued, 'I was greatly pleased at heart [to hear] that in the colonelcy of the Dutch troops there are 600 soldiers of our nation; the above-mentioned ones [i.e. the English soldiers] have come to see me and assure me that they are all veterans. I hope that on the occasion of making use of them, they will behave in such a way that Your Serenity will do me justice and count them 6,000, excusing in the meantime some small disorder [they made] at the beginning and during this idle stay, it having been a great change they have made from the small beer they drank until they disembarked, to the wine that they have had later.

'I will not fail to say that I received advice from the Court of the Elector Palatine that at a conference of those princes where also an Ambassador of Savoy must have been present they may have considered the interests of some Prince and the common service with very good disposition'.

This being said, the Gentleman mentioned above was shown in and was welcomed by His Serenity; also the Ambassador stood up in exchanging the customary greetings and respects given by the Most Serene Lord in response to the one and the other. Without staying any longer, they left.

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