

A TIRADE ABOUT A JOUST IN TREBIZOND: HOW WAS EDWARD DE VERE INVOLVED IN THIS EXAMPLE OF COMMEDIA ERUDITA IN 1575?

By Jan Scheffer

This article provides background to the characters, places and political context of a presentation by the author [JS] at the DVS Autumn meeting in 2019, *A Wedding Joust in Tribizond: Commedia Erudita and Sinister Politics in 1575*, and an article (with the same title) by W. Ron Hess (assisted by JS, A. Colin Wright and Concetta Thibideaux), which is now published on the public page of the DVS website: <https://deveresociety.co.uk/public/recommended-reading/dvs-articles-and-papers/> Hess' presentation at the Shakespeare Oxford Fellowship Oakland Conference in 2018 may be seen on the SOF YouTube channel. The *Tirata dell Giostro* (tirade about a joust) is a six-page section of Andrea Petrucci's book *Dell'Arte rappresentativa, premeditata ed all' improvviso*.

The key points of the article of Hess *et al.* are: i) *Tirata dell Giostro* includes a major character, Elmond Milord of Oxford; ii) *Tirata* is an example of Commedia Erudita (not dell'arte, which came later), which was written by noted authors and poets and contained a hidden subtext; iii) this particular *Tirata* referred to an actual event: a challenge by Oxford to the world to engage in a 'joust' in 1575; iv) the hidden subtexts are reflected by those frequently used later by Oxford in the works of Shakespeare. Furthermore, if Oxford was often travelling incognito and acting as a spy it is hardly surprising that evidence is hard to find after 400 years. This is not a summary of that article but aims to be read in its context.

Willard Ron Hess

Ron Hess had been preparing a book essentially about the late-medieval to early-Renaissance nostalgia for chivalry, which was famously lampooned in Miguel Cervantes' 1605 *Don Quixote*. It concerns the faux-medieval knight-errantry fiction, such as for Boiardo's 1498 *Orlando Innamorato* and Ariosto's 1516–32 *Orlando Furioso*, plus the various examples of that genre that were translated by



Anthony Munday in the 1580s to 1620s, many of them dedicated to Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford or his family. It then focuses on two 'knights' of the 1570s, namely Oxford and Don Juan of Austria, the bastard half-brother of Philip II of Spain, 'Victor of Granada' in 1569 where he eliminated and expelled the Moors, 'Victor' of the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 against the Turks, King of Tunis in 1573/4, and Governor of the Lowlands in 1576. He was also named as a possible husband for both Elizabeth and later Mary Stuart. It shows that Oxford and Don Juan, who was three years older, likely met in the summer of 1575 in southern Italy, probably in Don Juan's palace in Naples, where he was Vicar-General of all Italian-Spanish territories for Philip II. There was obvious envy involved in Philip towards his successful half-brother when he did not provide the means for him to finish the job against the Turks after Lepanto. Don Juan was a high-ranking member of the Spanish branch of the 'Order of Knights of The Golden Fleece', Burgundian (continental) counterpart of the Order of the Garter, founded with the express purpose of organizing a crusade to avenge the 1453 sack of Constantinople by the Turks, who subsequently took Trebizond (present day Trabzon) in 1461.

The book, to be called *The Spear-Shaking Knight* would have been part three of Hess' *Dark Side of Shakespeare*: two volumes comprising over 1,200 pages of research, theorizing and discussing with a wealth of reference material. There are few Oxfordian topics that Hess has not addressed or touched upon, as a distillate of his twenty years research in the Folger, much of it historical, political and strategic but also theorizing about the psychology of and dynamics between many protagonists of the 16th century. Sixty pages, for instance, are devoted to dating of the plays. One mention is of Don Juan having been instructed to bribe Burghley, Leicester and Walsingham. Interesting too in these volumes are extensive discussions with Alan Nelson and Peter Dickson (*Bardgate*) around the year 2000. *Dark Side* (Vols. I and II) was published in 2002, a year ahead of *Monstrous Adversary*.

Overall, Ron Hess shows that both Oxford and Don Juan patterned their lives – and may have been encouraged to do so during their childhood – to be in sync with the *Orlando* fictions, particularly with the character of 'Astolfo' for Oxford and 'Roland/Orlando' for Don Juan. Sections of *Dark Side* cover their



two biographies: Astolfo, a fictional character of the Matter of France, one of Charlemagne's paladins; Roland, hailing from the 11th century *Chanson de Roland* about Charlemagne's wars against the Moors in Spain. (It is said that William the Conqueror's soldiers sang this song before the Battle of Hastings in 1066.)



Miguel Cervantes

Also involved is Miguel Cervantes, who served under Don Juan in various campaigns and at Lepanto where he lost the function of his left hand. Cervantes was in Palermo and at Don Juan's headquarters in Naples in the Summer of 1575. He seems to have patterned aspects of *Don Quixote* on Don Juan's foster father, Don Luis Quesada, and aspects of Sancho Panza on Don Juan himself. That is at the end of *Don Quixote*: Sancho ends up in a thankless position as Governor of Batavia, the ancient Roman name for the Netherlands, just as Don Juan was when he died in 1578 – probably murdered. If we look at Cervantes' complicated and eventful life we see that immediately after his stay in Naples, on his return to Barcelona in September 1575, his ship was captured by Barbarian pirates and he was held for ransom for a period of five years, which bankrupted his family. We may imagine what would have gone through Oxford's mind when he heard of this, having been captured himself by Dutch Watergeuzen in April 1576. After his release, Cervantes withdrew from military life and dedicated himself to writing. *Don Quixote* arrived in two parts: 1605 and 1615, imagining himself for the valour of his arm already crowned as 'Emperor of Trebizond'; a coincidence?

Hess pointed out that it was *Commedia Erudita*, or Palace Comedy, based on scholarly works of earlier Italian and ancient Roman authors, rather than *Commedia dell'Arte* (a term first coined by a French critic in 1670, which relied heavily on improvisation). Themes, motifs, situations and the use of stock characters by the *Commedia Erudita*, however, greatly influenced *Commedia dell'Arte*, especially in Northern Italy where repertoires resembled the *Commedia Erudita* in their tight structures based on the three dramatic unities

of time, place and action. Kevin Gilvary in *Great Oxford* provides a list of authors from the 14th and 15th centuries: Ariosto, Paschaliquo, Bandello – and classical ones: Plautus, Terence, Apuleios. Hess adds to these Macchiavelli, Baldassar Castaglione, Pietro Aretino, Giordano Bruno and a few more.

Why Trebizond? There is no specific connection of Oxford's to Trebizond but there was for Don Juan: after the fall of Constantinople the Empire of Trebizond was the last stronghold of the former East Roman Empire, and being a Knight of the Golden Fleece, in the fantasy of the Tirata he would have defended Trebizond to his last breath.

Don Juan of Austria

Is it possible that Oxford was on a covert mission on his 1575/6 journey to Italy? The general idea has always been that he was mainly on his grand tour. Still, in 1573/4 he reportedly met with Antonio De Guaras, a Spanish diplomat and spy and known as a go-between for Mary Stuart and Don Juan – and the Marianists. In 1574 Oxford went to Brussels with permission of the Privy Council: Burghley, Sussex and Bacon were likely in favour of what Hess describes. The Queen was – presumably acting – enraged. Almost as soon as Oxford returned he was followed by Bernardino Mendosa, perhaps even on the same ship, as a representative of the Spanish Government. In England Mendosa negotiated a three-year truce (1574–1577) with Spain, the purpose of which was to subject the rebellious and heretical Dutch. Subsequently, Mendosa became ambassador. Don Juan had known him since boyhood and they were cronies. He had even once betrayed Don Juan – a perfect model for Iago, since he was also a leader of the Order of Santiago. In August 1574 Don Juan was in Piacenza, which was run by his half sister Margarethe van Parma. She organized a big jousting tournament of which Don Juan became the winner. Immediately upon receiving the prize a messenger informed him that his forces in Tunis had just been captured by the Turks. This loss of Tunis deprived Don Juan of the title 'King', which the Pope had



bestowed on him after his conquest of Tunis in 1573. Since Elizabeth was excommunicated and deposed as Queen by two successive popes in 1571 and 1573 respectively, the second one – Gregory XIII, naming Mary Stuart as her successor – declared Don Juan married to her and advocated various schemes for him to conquer the British Isles, free Mary and take the throne. *Dark Side* Vol. I has forty references to Don Juan and Vol. II forty-eight.



Oxford's Grand Tour

Oxford, after visiting the French Court in February 1575, travelled to Strasbourg and met with Sturmius, Burghley's paymaster for the protestant cause. He also encountered Casimir from the Palatinate with a band of German mercenaries en route to Paris. He wrote that he wanted to avoid Milan, although we cannot be sure that he did, and he may have dissembled and proceeded to Venice. We may look at Richard Paul Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* for

his possible itinerary after that. Roe also makes extensive references to Don Juan, especially in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

If Oxford visited Naples, and we will illustrate the probability that he did, it is very well possible that he had boarded a galley when Don Juan was ordered by Philip II to take forty ships, mainly Venetian, to Genoa, in order to quell a civil war between so-called New Nobles, backed by Huguenots from France, and the Old Catholic Nobles who had lent Philip a substantial sum of money for his military campaigns. The New Nobles were intimidated by Don Juan's force, surrendered and left town. Oxford mentions in a letter in September that he has hurt his knee in a galley and is intent on returning to Venice. However, he is said to have made an excursion to Milan first, which was also under Don Juan's jurisdiction. On the 8th of October Oxford wrote from Venice; on the 27th he is in Padua; and in a letter of the 12th December he tells us he is wanting to see the rest of Italy. On the 3rd of January 1576 there is a letter from Siena.

History of the *Tirata*

In 1956 in the Bibliotheca Marciana in Venice, Oxfordian Julia Cooley Altrocci came upon a book called *Dell' Arte Rappresentativa, premeditata ed all' improvviso, A Treatise on Acting from Memory and Improvisation*, written by Andrea Perrucci and published in 1699. In this book a stock character, Dr Graziano, relates a jousting contest in the court of the 'Emperor of Trebizond': the *Tirata della Giostra. A Wedding joust on the occasion of the matrimony of Polidor, Emperor of Trebizond with Irene Empress of Constantinople*. Altrocci was the first to recognise Oxford in the *Tirata*. Some of Oxford's biographers – Ogburn, Miller, Anderson, Malim – later also mention it. In *Reason 46*, Whittemore describes the tirade at the tournament as: 'in which the actor rattles off the names of about thirty knights and ladies, titles, countries of origin, colors and trappings of the horses, of their devices and shields and the events that befell each one on the field of the tourney. Even the ladies took part in this hypothetical tournament'. Noemi Magri, who had collaborated with Ron Hess in translating seventeen letters of Don Juan to his cousin the Duke of Savoy, sent the untranslated text to Ron Hess in 2002. In 2008 Francesco Cotticelli, Anne Goodrich Heck and Thomas Heck translated *Tirata* into English. Their book is bilingual so it is easy for reference. However, Cotticelli *et al.* had not tried to interpret what is, or rather may be, below the surface of *Tirata*. Hess studied the text with Colin Wright and Concetta Thibedeaux and came to the conclusion that there was a hidden subtext in *Tirata*; his notes run up to sixty pages. He also explored the possible provenance: one from Donna Aurora Sanseverini and a series of Princes and Dukes of Sambionetta; the other through the Knights of the Golden Fleece. Thibideaux believed *Tirata* to have been written principally in her native Neapolitan dialect and, because it contains some English jokes, Hess wondered whether an Englishman was involved.



Hess considered the possibility that *Tirata* was written in the summer of 1575. Oxford and Edward Webbe, a mercenary gunner for Don Juan, were the only Englishmen known to have been in Southern Italy at that time – but only Oxford would have had the linguistic and literary qualities to contribute to *Tirata*. The star of *Tirata*, Elmond Milord of Oxford, is the only character who has a real name as well as a fantasy name and title, which makes Oxford a likely author and also explains the presence of jokes. Since it also contained some

Spanish words, Hess supposed that the other writer might have been Miguel Cervantes. Cervantes was in Don Juan's service as an officer in 1574 after the Battle of Lepanto, where his left hand was injured. He was reassigned first to Sardinia and then to Palermo. Cervantes was proud of his knowledge of English; Don Juan in 1578 was also recorded as speaking flawless English. Did Oxford and Cervantes co-write *Tirata dell Giostra*? Did the idea come up while at sea from Palermo to Naples? May they also have collaborated on other works during their short time together in July and August 1575, such as the 'Cardenio' scenario that first appears in *Don Quixote* and happens to have been the title of a 'lost' Shakespeare play? Taking the fact that Oxford, stimulated by his knowledge of Don Juan's tournament victory, possibly refreshed by Cervantes mentioning this and their heading towards Don Juan's court, this is certainly possible. Combined with Oxford having just challenged the Italian world to a joust and other forms of duel in Palermo, the two men would have had much pleasure on board; particularly when Oxford was not without self-mockery, inventing names and circumstances and fantasizing *ad libitum* with no fear of being held accountable for possible offending. A literary joust?

The *Tirata*

If we look at the *Tirata*, or tirade, the comic effect is undoubtedly the rattling off of names, as in a rant. There are nine sections called rosters, in chronological order, beginning with the introduction of the participants. Significant is that only Oxford and Alvilda appear as a mixed pair. The text is hilarious, full of contractions, misspellings, truncations and homonyms, indicating that it was to be read aloud:

'I found myself ambassador of my illustrious country of Bologna at the court of the Emperor Polidor of Trebizond and attending the great tournament celebrating his marriage to Irene, Empress of Constantinople. Present were many great worthies: Basil, King of Zelconda; Doralba, Princess of Dacia; Arcont, Vaivode of Moldavia; Arileus heir of Denmark; Isuf, Pasha of Aleppo; Fatima, Sultan of Persia; Elmont ...'

Elmond, Milord d'Oxford. In each roster Oxford is in the middle, or in the last few at the end for maximum dramatic effect.



Alvilda: Mary Stuart, reigned from Edinburgh.

Ermelinda: Great Czarina of Muscovy: Queen Elizabeth had been wooed by Ivan the Terrible (1575). Ivan wed and murdered three of his tsarinas in 1573.

Arfileo: Prince of Denmark. Christian II was deposed by his uncle Frederick in 1521, his son Hans/John was seven years old when that happened and nine when his father was imprisoned. He was 18 when he died in the Netherlands, while being nursed by his uncle, Charles V. Hess suggests that after Charles' death in 1558 it may have been through his chamberlain he left instructions that his bastard son Don Juan be raised with a mission to avenge the loss of Denmark from Catholicism. Is this another contemporary source for Hamlet?

All of the *Tirata* jousting characters were versions of *Miles Gloriosus*. In Shakespeare's plays Falstaff, Pistol, Bardolf, Fluellen, Parolles – and boasting as lords in the histories and tragedies – all qualify.

Manlius Torquatus: La Colona de Manli Torquat. Manli does not exist in Italian, but manly is an English adjective. The sweat (cologne?) from a male contortionist? This heroic gift to Oxford symbolizes his becoming Don Juan's representative in England.

If *Tirata* had been acted in Don Juan's court all roles, apart from the non-European visitors, might have been acted by Don Juan as the emperor, his mistress Diana Fallanga as the Empress and the officers and their wives as significant others. Oxford's role would likely have been played by himself.

What have other authors said about *Tirata*?

Anderson: 'Tempting as it may be to wring meaning out of this farcical scenario, one must also remember that it is told by an idiot – the Dottore. Ultimately, this anecdote reveals more about the Neapolitan comedy than it does about de Vere's travels in Italy.' Anderson is, however, of the opinion that *Tirata* illustrates the impression Oxford must have made at the time, given the date of the publication: 1699, more than a century after he left Italy.

Malim, 2012, mentions the stock character Dr Graziano and the final contest between Elmond and Alvilda.

Miller, 1975, quotes Perruci about Oxford and Alvilda throwing each other down simultaneously, both landing face down in the dust. Elmond gets a prize anyway: Astolf's magic horn to rout armies. Miller stresses Oxford's sportsmanship, both in a joust and in his sense of humour – in the theatre.

Ogburn, 1984 (p. 615) states: 'On 11 January 1579 *A Double Mask* was shown before her Majesty, The French Ambassador being present.' It is recorded as 'an entertainment in imitation of a tournament between six ladies and a like number of gentlemen who surrendered to them. One thinks of the parody joust between Oxford and the Countess Alvilda ... where Oxford is unhorsed – and the last act in *Love's Labour's Lost* in which the King and his three attendant courtiers, garbed as Russians and masked, engage in amorous overtures with the visiting Princess and her suite of three ladies, also masked'. Thus Ogburn identifies a court play for Elizabeth as similar to *Tirata*.

Ogburn mentions the gift in 1578 by Elizabeth of Castle Rysing to Oxford: 'We as well in consideration of the good, true and faithful service done and given to us before this time by Our most dear cousin Edward Earl of Oxford, Great Chamberlain of England, as for divers other causes and considerations (...), and out of Our certain knowledge and mere motion, We gave (...) the Manor of Rysing.' Ogburn continues: 'Unlike other recipients of such grants, Oxford had been appointed to no office under the Crown. It is possible that he had been carrying out some kind of secret political assignment for the Government, but nothing has ever come to light. A reasonable alternative (...) is the theatre.'

SOF members **Michael Delahoyde** and **Coleen Moriarty** investigating possible traces of Oxford in Venice, Mantua, Verona, Rome, Naples, Bologna, Siena, Palermo and Messina, the Vatican Secret Archives and the Venerable English College in Rome reported at the 2019 SOF Conference in Hartford: 'The importance of the 16th and 18th Earls of Oxford in the Italian records with oblique recollections of the 17th Earl in later years, combined with the latter's elusiveness in 1575–76, indicates that Edward de Vere had a sensitive diplomatic mission involving the establishment of ambassadorial relations with England, and that he subsequently sought to and succeeded in travelling through Italy incognito.'



Discussion

His extensive search and thinking led Ron Hess towards the idea that there was a dark side to Oxford, who had a probable secret mission of which we only indirectly become aware.

Tom Regnier, Appeals Court lawyer and former president of the SOF, gave a paper in 2018 about the legal aspects of evidence. He stated that in a court of law, in the absence of direct evidence, circumstantial evidence is very often considered decisive in many cases and may lead to a conviction. The absence of so many documents missing from the Elizabethan era – Burghley’s letters to Oxford for instance – may in this light be considered circumstantial evidence. But more may have come to light in the case of *Tirata*. According to Hess, diligent examination, deduction and interpretation of the text has provided a new insight in Oxford’s Italian journey with a possible assignment: to try to meet up with Don Juan, establish a relationship with him, and find out about his ambitions and Spanish plans against England and protestantism – at the same time providing him with much material and inspiration for his plays and poems.

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