

In this article, Dottore Noemi Magri locates the Bohemia coast on the northern Adriatic coast at Slovenia. The Kingdom of Bohemia for a long time had a coast, using the port of Fiume (Rijeka) and later Trieste.

Oxford, Shakespeare and Bohemia

By Noemi Magri

The Winter's Tale is set in Sicily and Bohemia. I would like to stress the importance of the personal experience of the dramatist in writing this play. In *The Winter's Tale*, the King of Sicily is seized by jealousy and imagines his Queen has been having an affair with his friend the King of Bohemia. The Bohemian king is sent packing and the queen is publicly humiliated and rumoured to have died in childbirth. The surviving infant is then sent to be abandoned on the coast of Bohemia. This infant survives and grows to maidenhood when she is seen by the Prince of Bohemia. Eventually, the parties are reconciled.



The extensive lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century. Shakespeare seems to use the term 'Bohemia' to refer to lands of this Empire.

Geoffrey Bullough (followed by most Stratfordian critics) states that the play dates to *c.* 1610 and that its main source was Greene's *Pandosto or The Triumph of Time*, published in 1588.¹ This assumption is reasonable according to the only known performance date of *Winter's Tale*. However, if the date of composition were substantially earlier, both the date and the source would need to be reviewed; and the direction of influence might then be reversed. In *Pandosto*, it is the King of Sicily who sails to the coastline of Bohemia to visit his old friend and companion. The King of Sicily is later accused of adultery with the Queen of Bohemia.

Instead, according to Oxfordian authorship, *Winter's Tale* may be ascribed to an earlier date for the following reasons: (1) it reflects both Oxford's travels in 1575-76 and his suspicions about the paternity of his daughter.² (2) There is a likely source for the jealous husband abandoning a baby in a tale recorded about Siemowit (or Ziemowit), a Polish Duke. (3) Another likely source for *The Winter's Tale* was Angel Day's translation of *Daphnis and Chloe* (1587), a Greek pastoral romance by Longus the Sophist. J. H. P. Pafford, the Arden² editor of *Winter's Tale*, states that Shakespeare drew directly on Day, not on *Pandosto* (introduction p. lxxv). Greene and Day were protégés of Lord Oxford: in 1584 Greene had dedicated to him his novel *Gynonius* and in 1587 Day addressed *The English Secretarie* to him. Oxford is not likely to have drawn any plot from the published work of any of his protégés. He certainly knew the Greek pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe* long before Greene: in fact, in dealing with the sources of *Winter's Tale*, critics have failed to mention a French translation of *Daphnis and Chloe* by Jacques Amyot in 1559. Amyot later translated *Theagenes and Chariclea* (*Aethiopica* or *The Ethiopian Story*) and Plutarch's *Lives* in 1559, both key sources for plays of 'Shakespeare'.

Next, it must be pointed out that a major purpose for an aristocrat when making a continental tour in Renaissance times was reading as much as he could during the stays abroad and to purchase books and manuscripts. And that is exactly what de Vere did. Chronicles of Bohemian-Polish history, written in Latin, circulated at the French court and Lord Oxford may have been able to obtain a MS copy of one of them in Paris. The French prince, Henri Valois, son of Catherine de Medici, was offered the Crown by the Polish nobility had been crowned King of Poland in February 1574. When Henri's older brother, Charles IX died, Henri decided to forsake the Poland and returned to France to be crowned Henri III in February 1575.³ Oxford is likely to have been at the coronation.⁴ In returning from Cracow, Henri and his train brought with them many rare and expensive objects. So Oxford may have been acquired or at least read the Polish tale in Paris. De Vere may have lent the MS copy to Greene so that the result of that shared knowledge was firstly the play of Shakespeare and the romance of Greene.

Coast of Bohemia

However, there has been much criticism of Shakespeare's geography, first made by Ben Jonson in 1619, who said that the dramatist was ignorant 'for in one of his Plays he brought in a Number of Men, saying they had suffered Ship-wrack in Bohemia, where is no Sea near by 100 Miles'.⁵ Bohemia has usually been known as the land-locked region comprising the western part of the modern day Czech Republic; so the 'ports' and 'deserts' of Bohemia, according to Stratfordian critics, can only be the creation of Shakespeare's imagination.

But as Shakespeare was ostensibly following his source material, Jonson's attack might better be directed at Greene. However, both Greene and Shakespeare could be correct, and Jonson wrong, because the Kingdom of Bohemia did have a sea-coast from the time of Ottokar II (1233-1278), as Pafford recognised (Arden 2 edition, 1962, 66). Bohemia regained this foothold in the early sixteenth century under Vladislav II, the King of Bohemia, Dalmatia and Croatia (among other titles).

Across the head of the Adriatic from Venice lies the port of Trieste, a possession of the Hapsburg Empire from 1382 and its principal seaport. Trieste lies at the bottom of an imposing limestone karst plateau. Despite its rivalry with Venice, Trieste retained its semi-autonomous position within the Holy Roman Empire until 1918. On the other side of the Istrian peninsula, lies Fiume (now called Rijeka in Croatia), in the region of Carniola. Fiume, which means 'river' in Italian, had been founded by the Romans at the mouth of the River Eneo (now called Rječina), a short river which is dry for much of the year. The main reasons why merchants in a Venetian galley would stop at Fiume was to buy larch timber that was sent to Fiume from Austrian territories. Larch was used in Venetian arsenals to make oars. Fiume retained its Italian majority of residents until the end of the First World War. The name Rijeka was only adopted officially after it was transferred to Croatia within the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945.

Ottokar II, King of Bohemia



(b) The expansion of Bohemia under Ottokar II

In the earlier part of the 13th century Fiume had sworn allegiance to the German emperor. In 1251 the King of Bohemia, Ottokar II Premysl, enlarged his dominions on becoming Duke of Austria and occupied many areas including the region of Carniola.⁶ He made the city of Fiume the principal seaport of Bohemia for the next two centuries. Thus from 1269 to Ottokar's death in 1278, the Kingdom of Bohemia extended as far as the coast of the Adriatic, with Fiume (Rijeka) and to a lesser extent Trieste its major ports.⁷

A wife accused of infidelity and a baby abandoned

The episode of abandoning a baby as a result of jealousy in *Winter's Tale* is often taken by Oxfordians as an allusion to his own experience. For a number of years, Oxford rejected his wife Anne and the daughter Elizabeth she bore in July 1575 while he was away in Italy, possibly even when he was sailing along the Istrian coast. Besides the play having autobiographical elements, there is also a Bohemian-Polish historical event that took place about a century after Ottokar's death, coincidentally involving false accusations against a noble-woman called Anne.

In the records of the life of King Casimir III the Great, King of Poland, the contemporary chronicler records how Siemowit III, Duke of Masovia (c. 1310-1381) had five children by his first wife Euphemia who died c. 1356. The Duke married for the second time; his new bride was called Anna, the daughter of Duke Wladyslaw of Münsterberg, a princess of rare beauty. Anna gave birth to two sons, who died. When Anna fell pregnant again, she was suspected of associating with some disreputable Masovian fellow. No one dared reveal anything to the Duke because he was so much in love with his wife. A neighbouring duke accompanied by some gentlewomen paid a visit to Siemowit. On that occasion, Siemowit was told the rumour about his wife's unfaithfulness, so he immediately threw her into prison, even though she was innocent. The princess was pregnant, and in prison she gave birth to a son. Some weeks later, the husband ordered her to be stabbed to death, and the 'adulterer' to be arrested and hanged. (Some versions say she was strangled first.) The baby boy was brought up by a poor woman in the neighbourhood, and three years later, he was found by his half-sister Margaretha Duchess of Stettin who took care of him. The child grew up and was so similar in appearance to his ruthless father that when he saw his boy, Duke Siemowit bitterly repented his insane action, became very fond of him, and gave him a good education. The child's name was Heinrich (c.1368-1393), who was later appointed Bishop of Plock.⁸

Deserts of Bohemia

The 'deserts of Bohemia' (*The Winter's Tale* III, iii, 2) have been criticised as an 'odd, fanciful invention', yet these deserts are depicted in exact detail. The word 'desert' means 'an uninhabited and uncultivated tract of country, a wilderness, a desolate and barren region, waterless and treeless, with but scanty herbage' (OED). These definitions do not refer to the presence of sand. They perfectly fit the range of the Dinaric Alps, which stretch from above the city of Trieste along the Dalmatian coast and into modern day Greece. Rivers only flow rafter heavy rainfall. Bare karst mountains (called *carsos* in Italian, Karst in German), rise all round the cities of Fiume and Trieste. *Carsos* are formed of calcareous rock on which little grows but tall pine trees and wisps of grass. On the north side of the Istrian peninsula, the Karst mountains fall very steeply to the sea. The areas of Carniola (in modern day Slovenia) and Istria (mainly now in Croatia) were then part of Bohemia; they were rugged, under-populated and with little or no arable land. In his allusion to 'the deserts of Bohemia', Shakespeare shows direct knowledge of that barren region.⁹

Oxford, Bohemia and Carniola

Oxford had spent several months in Venetian territories in 1575–76, and the region would have been known to him. Travelling locally in a Venetian galley, he might have called at Trieste or any of the Venetian ports along the coast of the Istrian peninsula: Capodistria (Venetian since 1267, now called Koper in Slovenia); Parenzo, with many Byzantine remains (now called Poreč in Croatia); Rovigno also with attractive Venetian buildings (now called Rovinj in Croatia); Pula with its well preserved Roman amphitheatre (Venetian from 1313). De Vere's galley might have called in at Fiume in Carniola (Rijeka in present day Croatia). Fiume had been a Venetian port, but by the second half of the 16th century became another independent city-port under the influence of the Habsburgs.



The Istrian Peninsula

In conclusion, the twin settings of Sicily and Bohemia *The Winter's Tale* seem to derive from personal experience in travelling through the Adriatic to the island of Sicily. Lord Oxford was familiar with places along the Adriatic coast, including places that had once belonged to Bohemia. This may well explain why he chose to set the story of *Winter's Tale* in these two regions.

AFTERWORD Oxford in Sicily

[Dott. Noemi Magri intended to explain why she was sure that Lord Oxford had visited Sicily, but was prevented from doing so by her untimely death in 2011. This afterword has been added by the Editor.]

The Kingdom of Sicily was established in 1130 by rulers of Norman descent. It remained independent until it came under the King of Aragon in 1443. The capital was developed at Palermo where the Norman rulers constructed an imposing Palazzo dei Normanni or Palazzo Reale (Royal Palace). Following the union of Aragon and Castile by 1516, the Kingdom of Sicily was controlled by a Spanish viceroy. In 1575, the viceroy was Carlo d'Aragona Tagliavia, Duke of Terranova. When Shakespeare set *The Winter's Tale* in Sicily, he portrays Leontes as an absolute king (not as a viceroy). Although Shakespeare does not mention Palermo, Leontes' palace can only be the Palazzo Reale. The historical and geographical background is described in detail by Richard Roe, who finds many points of correlation between the geography of Sicily and casual descriptions in the play. In particular, Roe

describes the sumptuous decoration of the Royal Palace. Among the famous Renaissance sculptors whose fine statues adorn Palermo were Domenico Gagini (d. 1492) and Francesco Laurana (d. 1502).

While William of Stratford is not known to have travelled abroad, let alone to Sicily, Edward de Vere famously issued a challenge to combat when he was in the city of Palermo. His challenge is described in a 32-page pamphlet entitled *The Rare and Most Wonderful Things Which Edward Webbe, an Englishman born, hath seen and passed in his troublesome travels in the cities of Jerusalem, Damascus, Bethelem and Galilee, and in the lands of Jewry, Egypt, Grecia, Russia, and in the land or Prester John*. The was published in London in 1590 and covers his adventures over the preceding twenty-five years. In his Epistle to the Reader, Edward Webbe, a master-gunner, affirms the truth of his account and invites any 'foolish persons' who might be doubtful to confer with him or other travellers and they 'shall be resolved that this is true'. The work has been accepted as genuine by Edward Arber and most scholars since.¹⁰

In *Troublesome Travels*, Webbe describes how Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, issued his challenge at a tournament in Palermo. The date is not given, but if the event were true, it could only have been in the summer of 1575:

Many things I have omitted to speak of, which I have seen and noted in the time of my troublesome travel. One thing did greatly comfort me which I saw long since in Sicilia, in the city of Palermo, a thing worthy of memory, where the right honourable the Earl of Oxenford, a famous man for chivalry at what time he travelled into foreign countries, being then personally present made there a challenge against all manner of persons whatsoever and at all manner of weapons, as tournaments, barriers with horse and armour, to fight a combat with any whatsoever in the defence of his prince and country, for which he was very highly commended, and yet no man durst be so hardy to encounter with him, so that all Italy over he is acknowledged the only chevalier and nobleman of England. This title they give unto him as worthily deserved.

Webbe's account of Oxford in Palermo has been accepted by Ward (111-12) and Anderson (89-91).

Despite the fact that Webbe insists that this was a thing 'worthy of memory' which he had personally 'seen and noted' on his travels, Alan Nelson casts doubt on his testimony (pages 131; 137): 'Webbe apparently saw Palermo and Sicily, but not Oxford in person.' Nelson should re-read Webbe's Epistle to the Reader in which he states that his purpose is 'to utter most part of such things as I saw and passed in my troublesome travel...in this booke there is nothing mentioned or expressed, but that which is of truth: and what mine own Eies have perfectly seene.' Another doubter was Connie Beane, who presents an alternative view of the *Trauiles* as 'a parody, not a genuine travel narrative' probably indebted to, perhaps also by, the Earl of Oxford.¹¹ She describes how the account blends report and legend in the the captivity-tale. She concludes that biographers of Oxford should ignore the story as 'no great loss' but that we have a 'prose work by the author of the Shakespeare plays and poems'.

Shakespeare of course features a famous jousting in one of his plays (*Pericles, Prince of Tyre*), sets most of *The Winter's Tale* in Palermo and all of *Much Ado about Nothing* in Messina, and mentions Sicily in diverse other plays (*2 Henry VI*, *Cymbeline* and *Titus Andronicus*).¹²

Edited by Kevin Gilvary, 2021

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ENDNOTES

This article was published by Noemi Magri in the *De Vere Newsletter* in March 2008 and republished in *Such Fruits out of Italy* (2014). It has been brought up to date with reference to recent publications and with further explanations about places have been added so as to clarify the argument. *Ed.*

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- ¹ Robert Greene, *Pandosto the triumph of time. VVherein is discovered by a pleasant historie, that although by the meanes of sinister fortune truth may be concealed, yet by time in spight of fortune it is most manifestlie reuealed. Pleasant for age to auoyde drowsie thoughtes, profitable for youth to eschue other wanton pastimes, and bringing to both a desired content. Temporis filia veritas.* reprinted in 1607 as *Dorastus and Fawnia*.
 - ² The parallels between Oxford's suspicions and Pandosto's were recognised by Edward Chaney in *The Evolution of the Grand Tour: Anglo-Italian Cultural Relations since the Renaissance*, Routledge, 2000, 12-13.
 - ³ Edouarde-Alexandre was born in 1551, the fourth son of Henri II of France and Catherine de Medici. He became Duc d'Anjou in 1566, King of Poland in 1574 and was crowned Henri III King of France in February 1575. Leonie Frieda in *Catherine de Medici* (2003) describes Henri's escape from Wawel Castle in Cracov, his return via Catholic territories such as Vienna and Venice, and his arrival in France (306-12).
 - ⁴ There is an intriguing further connection. Late in 1574, when Prince Henri was returning to France, his next stop after Venice was ten miles away at the Villa Foscari. This villa corresponds exactly with the description of Portia's Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*. Ten months later Oxford almost certainly visited this villa on his way to Venice. See N. Magri, 'Places in Shakespeare: Belmont and thereabouts' in *Great Oxford*, ed. R. Malim (2004, 91-106). Reprinted in *Such Fruits out of Italy*.
 - ⁵ See R.F. Patterson, *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (1923, 20).
 - ⁶ Ottokar II, born c. 1233, known as the Iron and Golden King of Bohemia (1253-1278), was also Margrave of Moravia,, Duke of Austria, Duke of Styria, and Duke of Carinthia. He was also Landgrave of Carniola from 1269, the karst limestone plateau above Triests and Rijeka.
 - ⁷ Sedlar, Jean W. *East Central Europe in the Middle Ages, 1000-1500* (1994).
 - ⁸ See Jacob Caro, 'Ueber die eigentliche Quelle des "Wintermärchens" von Shakspeare' in the *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes*. 1863, No.33, pp. 392-4. Reported by A. B. Grosart: *The life and complete works in prose and verse of Robert Greene* (1881, reprint 1964), vol. i., pp.94-5.
 - ⁹ Ellen Churchill Semple, in *The Barrier Boundary of the Mediterranean Basin and Its Northern Breaches as Factors in History* (1915), writes: 'The Julian Alps are a slender southeastern offshoot of the main system. They attain in the north an altitude of 9,394 feet (2,864 meters) in the three-cornered peak of Terglon, but from this they shelve off southward into a rugged limestone platform of low altitude. Presenting toward the west a steep and forbidding escarpment, crossed by narrow ridges, pock-marked by numerous funnel-shaped cavities, and guiltless of visible drainage streams, this Karst Plateau extends along the base of the Istrian Peninsula as far as the Gulf of Fiume and the eastward flowing Kulpa [Kolpa] River.'
 - ¹⁰ The factual basis of the account has been accepted by most modern historians, including Kenneth Parker (ed. *Early Modern Tales of Orient: A Critical Anthology*. London: Routledge, 1999) and Richard Raiswell ('Webbe, Edward (b. 1553/4), soldier and adventurer' *ODNB* 2004).
 - ¹¹ Connie Beane, 'The True Story of Edward Webbe and Troublesome Travailes' *The Oxfordian* (2018), 105-130.
 - ¹² Based on such observations, a Sicilian historian, Martino Iuvara, argued that "Shakespeare" must have been Italian. He certainly believes that the writer had specialised knowledge about the Italian states of the sixteenth century. See Martino Iuvara, *Shakespeare era italiano: saggio*, Ragusa (Sicilia), 2002.