Oxford and *The Three Systers of Mantua*

A Known History and an Unknown Play

*By Dott Noemi Magri*

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Fig. 1. Ludovico reads Bianca Maria’s letter.

Wall Painting by Mantenga, Palazzo Ducale, Mantova, c. 1470

The Revel Accounts in the time of Queen Elizabeth record a play performed at court in December 1578 as:

> An Inventyon or playe of the three Systers of Mantua shewen at Richmond on St. Stephens daie at night enacted by thearle of warwick his servauntes furnished in this office with sondrey thinges as was requisite for the same.¹

Nothing else is known about this lost play, so, in the absence of any documentary evidence, anything that could be written about that, including the present article, would be conjectural. However, a play so entitled may well deal with known personages of the history of Mantua. The only candidate as author is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford, who spent time in Padua² and almost certainly visited
Mantua, where he would have been received at the Palazzo Ducale. Upon his return, Oxford had become a court dramatist by 1578. It is true that another courtier or dramatist might fit these criteria, but no other name has ever been suggested so far. The play was performed by Warwick’s Men, who were taken over by Oxford within a year or so (Nelson 239-41).

This article purposes to give reasons for a possible identification of the author as Lord Oxford, and for his choice of that subject, and to outline a likely plot based on the life of real personages. However conjectural it may be owing to the lack of evidence, the identification of Lord Oxford may be supported by his knowledge of the cultural and artistic life of that city, as evidenced in Shakespeare’s works. Some of the action in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* is set in the environs of Mantua: in V.i. the outlaws befriend Valentine, who is heading for sanctuary in that city, closely followed by Silvia in V. ii. Another exiled person, Romeo, heads for safety in Mantua. This city is the home of the impoverished apothecary who sells Romeo his concoction. The Friar’s letters to Romeo in Mantua were returned due to the plague, with fatal consequences for the star-crossed lovers. The city is also mentioned in *Taming of the Shrew*, when the Pedant states that he is from Mantua; he is misled by Tranio, who claims: ‘Tis death for anyone in Mantua to come to Padua’ (IV. ii. 82). (See afterword for many more connections between the works, Oxford and Mantua.)

The record of the Revel Accounts starts in January 1557. From then onwards, it appears that performances consisted of masks, moralities, or plays drawn on classical literature, or ancient or Scottish history. In 1577, two plays of relevance to the Shakespeare authorship problem were performed at court: *The historie of Error*, a possible early version of *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Historye of Titus and Gisippus*, perhaps an early version of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Both these ‘histories’ were performed by ‘the Children of Paul’s’, Lord Oxford’s company.

The *Three Systers of Mantua* is the first play recorded in 1578. No literary work dealing with that subject is known. It is here argued that the source of that play is oral and pictorial, as will be shown. The title gives very precise details: the main characters are sisters, there are three of them, they are from Mantua. It does not appear to be a random choice of people and places. Who could these sisters be and what do they have in common? Their life must have been involved in somewhat similar events if they, together, are the protagonists of a play. Considering that the titles of the Court plays of the period tell us that the plots deal with literary or historical personages, or kings, knights and ladies, though unidentified, one concludes that these three sisters from Mantua must be of some status. And the story of their life must have been of some interest to have appealed to the English court if a dramatist, no matter who he was, chose to dramatize it.

**Mantua**

In order to find out what the play may have been about, investigation must turn to Mantua, about 30 miles south of Verona and 100 miles east of Milan and 100 miles west of Venice. Although it was a small city-state, it was also one of the most important centres of learning in the Italian Renaissance. Its rulers, the Gonzaga, were military men and patrons of artists. Not long before, they had increased their power through marriage relations with the Holy Roman Emperor. By referring to that Italian state, the content of a lost English court play may at once come to light as a fully documented episode of Mantuan history. The source of the play, as hypothesized here, is the actual story of three Gonzaga sisters, the daughters of Ludovico II, second marquis of Mantua (1412-78). The story of their life is set against the historical and political background of the Italian Wars in the 15th century. All the Italian rulers had expansionist aims: when they did not succeed in extending their territories through marriages, they made alliances with, or fought against, one or the other state, so standing on the side of one or the other of their enemies or allies.
Fig. 2 Braun and Hogenberg’s view of Mantua (1575).

The Palazzo Ducale lies to the right of the Ponte Iorgio.

Sister 1: Susanna

At the time of the hostilities between Milan and Venice, Marquis Ludovico II was alternately a commander of the Venetian-Florentine army (Florence had allied itself with Venice), or the Milanese army. At the end of the war of succession to the Duchy of Milan, he became the Duke of that state (1450). Francesco Sforza made every effort to enter into an alliance with the Gonzaga, so a contract was signed to confirm Ludovico II in his office of commander at the service of the Duke and to establish kinship relationships with him: one of the clauses stated that, in due time, Galeazzo (also called Galeazzo Maria, 1444-76), the Duke’s six-year-old son, should marry Susanna (1447-81), one of Ludovico II’s daughters. Susanna was three years old at the time and a condition in the pre-nuptial agreement was that she grew up healthy. Susanna’s physical condition was a requirement of the Sforza, who were determined to have an heir and in this way ensure the Sforza succession.

It soon became evident when Susanna was aged 13 that she was suffering from a deformity of the back, which she had inherited from her grandmother Paola Malatesta, Ludovico II’s mother. So, in 1457, to great distress of the Gonzaga, the Sforza cited the clause and annulled the engagement. Susanna, refused by the young prince, had no other future ahead of her but to enter a convent. She
became a nun under the name of Suor Angelica in the Monastery of Santa Paola in Mantua. She died there in 1481 at the age of thirty-four.

Sister 2: Dorotea

Being determined to consolidate the alliance, the Sforza amended the contract and agreed to Galeazzo’s marriage to Dorotea (1449-1467), Susanna’s younger sister, on the same condition that, when fourteen, she would prove to be physically perfect. Dorotea was, then, eight years of age, so in the interval the concern of the two ruling families was diverted to other worrying political problems: the Fall of Constantinople (1453) and the Turkish invasion of the Balkans had the effect that the Italian States brought about a rapprochement in the attempt to defend and guarantee the security of their territories. In 1459, Pope Pius II (the great humanist Enea Silvio Piccolomini) summoned a Council of bishops, princes, and ambassadors in order to organize a common defence. It was held in Mantua, which was already famous as a cradle of humanism. The Council, an event of great splendour for that city, increased the political importance of the Marquisate.

Ludovico II guaranteed to equip an army. His diplomatic actions and the support of the Duke of Milan meant that in December 1461 the Marquis obtained the sought-for office of cardinal for his second-born son. Then, a few days later, another great event took place at the court of Mantua, an event that, according to the wishes of Ludovico II, was commemorated by the famous artist Andrea Mantegna. On the early morning of January 1st, 1462, while the Marquis was getting ready to go to church, there arrived at Palazzo Ducale a messenger from Milan, with a letter from Duchess Bianca Maria, Francesco Sforza’s wife: she was asking Ludovico II to become the Regent of the Duchy of Milan.

Fig. 3. Ludovico meets his son, the Cardinal.

Wall Painting by Mantenga, Palazzo Ducale, Mantova.

Bedridden for a long time, Duke Francesco Sforza was dying, and Galeazzo was still under age, so the future of the Duchy was at stake: Venice was ready to send an invading army, Savoy and France claimed a right to the succession on kinship grounds, the Milanese Republicans
were threatening an insurrection to seize power again. The Vatican was in alarm: the Pope, fearing that a new conflict would break out, sent out legates to France and the Italian States in support of ‘the State of Lombardy’.

That morning of January 1st, Ludovico II immediately left for Milan. On the way he met his son - the newly elected cardinal - who was coming back to Mantua from Milan in order to take part in the celebration in his honour. These two events - the delivery of Bianca Maria’s letter and the meeting of father and son outside Mantua - are celebrated in the famous fresco by Mantegna in the room called Camera Picta in the Castello di San Giorgio next to Palazzo Ducale. That fresco is here taken as the pictorial source of the play.\textsuperscript{13}

Though still bedridden, Francesco Sforza recovered slightly and in 1463 resumed marriage talks. Galeazzo made several journeys to Mantua to meet Dorotea. The 14-year-old Marchesina soon fell in love with him. But a strong refusal to marry her came from the young prince: he is reported to have expressed himself in rather cruel words each time he mentioned the proposed marriage to Dorotea: ‘I expect to have a line of hunchbacked children!’\textsuperscript{14}

When the wedding was about to take place, the Sforza asked Ludovico II to allow two Milanese doctors to examine the fiancée to make sure that no deformity had meanwhile grown. Great was the indignation of the Gonzaga: Ludovico II refused to subject his frail daughter to such humiliating treatment. The Sforza insisted, but the Gonzaga were resolute in their denial.

Relationships between the two families were on the verge of breakdown at the time when Ludovico II, disappointed with the Sforza’s distrustful behaviour, resigned the command of the Milanese troops. In search of allies against Venice - the problem of the succession was still crucial and far from being solved - and still needing the support of the Gonzaga, the Duke of Milan proposed that Dorotea should be examined by Duchess Bianca Maria on the supposition that the young lady would feel more comfortable with her future mother-in-law.\textsuperscript{15} The suspicion of the Sforza worried the Mantuan court, while Ludovico II became aware that the marriage with the Duke's son would never take place. Although she had a pretty face, Dorotea was hunchbacked and, besides that, she was suffering from fevers. A loving mother is always ready to protect her children. Barbara von Brandenburg, Dorotea's mother, wrote in distress to her home in Germany that her daughter, ‘absolutely healthy and of a strong and good-looking appearance and body’, would be exposed to ‘a shameful spectacle and infamy which would have offended her family.’\textsuperscript{16}

The news that the Duke of Savoy had offered one of his daughters in marriage to Galeazzo arrived at the Mantuan court: a sad blow to sickly Dorotea, whose health was becoming weaker. Savoy’s proposition was attractive to the Sforza inasmuch as it was supported by the King of France. Ludovico II understood that all hope was lost and in compliance with the stipulated clause, he freed the Sforza from the promise: for some time, in Milan, the Mantuan marriage was forgotten.

A new political alliance brought the two families together again and Ludovico II was still hoping for the marriage of his unhappy daughter. But this time all expectations were dashed by an event not depending on man’s will and projects: Dorotea died in 1467 at the age of 18: death had taken her away from her likely future, the convent.

**Sister 3: Barbara**

Galeazzo, now Duke of Milan, (his father had died in 1466) heard that Ludovico II had another daughter, Barbara (also called Barbarina, 1455-1505). This daughter was now 12 and becoming a very attractive young lady. A painter who was working for him ‘had spoken so well of her beauties’ that, having seen a portrait of her, Galeazzo at once became infatuated.\textsuperscript{17} A possible marriage between
Barbara and Galeazzo was considered, even though the young duke had grown into a most cruel and arrogant man. Contemporary chronicler Bernardino Corio describes him as a lascivious, inhuman, brutal man who took pleasure in having people tortured. It is not surprising that now, after two marriage contracts had been annulled, the Gonzaga were hesitating: in fact, they chose to engage their daughter Barbara to marry a German prince.

Dorotea’s death gave rise to contemporary local legends and fantasy narrations. It was said that she had become a nun and died in a convent; that she had married Galeazzo and had been poisoned by her barbaric husband. This is all the creation of popular imagination: there is no documentary evidence of it. What has been outlined here regarding three sisters of the Gonzaga family is accurate: history offered abundant material to stimulate the mind of a dramatist.

Lord Oxford almost certainly visited Mantua: various Shakespeare works show that he did. He would therefore have visited the Camera Picta, where the Mantegna fresco shows the moment when Ludovico II, surrounded by his family and courtiers, reads Bianca Maria’s letter. Mantegna’s fresco may have been the pictorial work that gave the author the inspiration to write a play about some important, and at the same time sad, events of the Gonzaga history. Once in Mantua, Lord Oxford had the opportunity to learn the story of the people portrayed in the fresco: Ludovico II, his wife Barbara, and their sons and daughters: the drama of the three sisters belongs to the history of the Gonzaga.

It may be asked whether there existed three other sisters from Mantua. The answer is there were, but they had nothing in common with each other: they lived their own life of ladies in separate courts: only Susanna, Dorotea and Barbara were joined together by their love for the same prince.

To conclude, it is true that any connection between The Three Systers of Mantua, Lord Oxford and Mantuan history is purely conjectural. However, it is also true that the three sisters from Mantua did exist: they belonged to the ruling family of that city: in Shakespeare’s time they were known in Mantua, as they are now, for their unfortunate lives, most afflicted by their unattractive physical appearance and unhappy love stories. The history of those two Italian states may have inspired the author (Lord Oxford) to write another lost court play: The history of the Duke of Millayn and the Marquis of Mantua, performed at Whitehall in 1579 by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. This play might have dramatised the historic episode portrayed in the Mantegna fresco in addition to previous events and subsequent outcome - obviously the historical period when the Gonzaga held the title of Marquises, that is the time between 1433 when the Lord of Mantua, Gianfrancesco Gonzaga, was granted the title of Marquis by the German Emperor Sigismund, and 1530 when the Marquisate, held by Federico II, was raised to the Dukedom by Charles V.

It is worth mentioning the record in Henslowe’s Diary of a play performed at Newington Butts on 26 June 1594 entitled Galliaso. Nine performances were recorded up to 25 October of the same year. The play has been left unidentified so far. Galliaso, also spelt Galleaso or Galliaso in the Diary, is here taken as ‘Galeazzo’, the name of the Italian ruler of Milan. Although several lords of that city were called so, this lost play may be the dramatization (again, Lord Oxford as the author) of the villainous life of lustful, cruel and tyrannical Galeazzo Sforza, Duke of Milan (1444-76).

Editor's Afterword

There were many other allusions to Mantua in the works of Shakespeare. Noemi Magri was unaware of important research by John Hamill in ‘The Ten Restless Ghosts of Mantua’ which was republished in 2007 in the fiftieth anniversary anthology of the Shakespeare Oxford Society. In the first part, Hamill revealed Shakespeare's knowledge of the works of Giulio Romano and Pietro Aretino that were specific to Mantua:
(1) The sculptures of Giulio and the Postures of Aretino in *The Winter's Tale*.

(2) Giulio's Trojan Mural described in *The Rape of Lucrece*.

(3) Giulio's Hall of the Horses and Aretino's tragedy *Orazia* in *Venus and Adonis*.

(4) Giulio's Hall of the Giants in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

(5) Influence on *Twelfth Night* of Aretino's play *Il Marescalco* (1533), in which the protagonist joyfully realises that the 'woman' he has been forced to marry is actually a boy in disguise.

In part two, Hamill revealed five further ghosts that make indirect allusions to Mantua:

(6) Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (1528) influenced Shakespeare, and was reflected in *Love's Labour's Lost* and in *Hamlet*. Castiglione was buried in a tomb designed and built by his friend Giulio Romano in Santa Maria delle Grazie. This church was filled with polychrome statues (Ghost 1).

(7) In Act II, Scene 2 of *Hamlet*, while arranging a performance with the players, Hamlet asks them, ‘Can you play *The Murder of Gonzaga*?’ The play is ‘the Image of a murther done in Vienna, Gonzaga is the Duke's name, his wife Baptista, you shall see anon, 'tis a knavish piece of work.’ The story of the play is certainly taken from the murder of the Duke of Urbino by Luigi Gonzaga in 1538, who was poisoned by means of a lotion poured into his ears. (See Noemi Magri, in *Great Oxford II* (ed. E. M. Jolly, forthcoming).

(8) In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare describes the ghost of the old warrior Hamlet in great detail: he manifests himself. This description seems to have been taken from the Portrait of Francesco Maria della Rovere c. 1536 by Titian.

(9) In *Measure for Measure*, the protagonist is named ‘Vincenzo, the Duke.’ No Duke of Vienna was called Vincenzo, but there was a Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua (1562-1612), notorious for a sexual scandal that lasted several years.

(10) In *The Merchant of Venice* Nerissa makes a passing reference to Bassanio, ‘a Venetian, a scholar and a soldier, that came hither in the company of the Marquis of Montferrat’ (I. ii. 120). The Marquis was never mentioned again in the play, but did exist historically. When Prince Henri visited the Villa Foscarì at Belmont near Venice in 1574, he was entertained along with Guglielmo Gonzaga (1538-1587), Duke of Mantua, the father of Vincenzo Gonzaga. Vincenzo was at the time allowed to use one of his father's subsidiary titles: Marquis of Montferrat.

References


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**Endnotes**

This article was published by the late Noemi Magri in the De Vere Newsletter in December 2005 and republished in *Such Fruits out of Italy* (2014). It has been brought up to date with mention of some more recent studies.

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Oxford sent a letter to Burghley from Padua on 27 November 1575. Other letters mention his stay in Venice and visits to Genoa, Milan, Siena and Florence. It would have been hard to avoid Mantua, especially for a ‘culture vulture’ whose visit was intended to appreciate European literature and art. Mantua was also a place of literacy pilgrimage, being the birthplace of Virgil, a Roman poet much emulated in the works of Shakespeare. Many other letters between Burghley and Oxford (or concerning him) were not delivered due to the plague in Trento, through which the postal service passed (Anderson ‘Shakespeare’ by Another Name 96-105; Nelson Monstrous Adversary 130-37).


The story of the close friendship of Titus and Gisippus was told by Bocaccio in the Decameron (X. 8) and related by Thomas Elyot in the Boke of the Governour (1531). It was retold as The Most Wonderful and Pleasaunt History of Titus and Gisippus Whereby is Fully Declared the Figure of Perfect Frendship, Drawen Into English Metre. By Edwarde Lewicke (1562). A play called The History of Titus and Gisippus was performed at Whitehall in February 1577. (See Chambers E5 iv 152; Anderson, 126.)

Guglielmo Gonzago (1538-1587) was Duke of Mantua from 1550 until his death. He married Eleonora, daughter of Ferdinand I, Holy Roman Emperor (1556-1564).

This man is called Ludovico II as he inherited the title from his father Gianfrancesco (d. 1444), who had been created first marquis of Mantua. Ludovico the second marquis is sometimes referred to as Ludovico III Gonzago (the third member of the family to bear the name, as a previous Ludovico had died in 1382 and before that an earlier Ludovico in 1369).

In total, Ludovico II had ten legitimate children (five sons and five daughters) who survived infancy.


Andrea Mantegna (c. 1431-1506), a foremost painter of his time, was commissioned by Ludovico II in 1466 to decorate the Ducal Palace in Mantua with illusionistic frescoes, especially the Camera degli Sposi (bridal chamber) also known as the Camera picta (painted chamber).

As contemporary historian Andrea da Schivenoglia recorded in his Cronaca di Mantova, the messenger covered the distance of 100 miles between Milan and Mantua in fourteen hours, riding throughout the night. He would have delivered the letter earlier if he had not been held at the gates of Curtatone, (outside Mantua) for inspection.

Archivio di Stato di Mantova (AS.MN), Archivio Gonzaga (AG), b.1607, cc.1592-v. Letter of Bianca Maria to Ludovico II dated 30th December 1461.

In the Court Scene, Ludovico II is portrayed in his nightgown: it was still early morning when he received the letter from Milan.

The copious correspondence exchanged on this matter between the two families and their envoys is held in the AS.MN, AG, b.217, reg. 101.


Hoffmann (1881) p.44. Letter in Latin.

Signorini (1985) p.286 and AS.MN, AG, b.1623.

Coniglio (1967) p.75.

Signorini (1985) pp. 50-1.
20 In 1474, 19-year-old Barbara married Eberhard Duke of Württemberg. By that time she had become very fat. Galeazzo married Bona of Savoy in 1468. He ruled as a savage tyrant and was stabbed to death in front of St. Stephen’s church in Milan in 1478.


22 On another wall in the room, Mantegna has painted the scene of the meeting of Ludovico II and his son, the newly elected cardinal.

23 Details in the narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* were influenced by a Titian painting of the same subject, now held in the Galleria Nazionale of Palazzo Barberini in Rome. See Noemi Magri, ‘The Influence of Italian Art on Shakespeare’s Works. Titian’s Barberini Painting: the pictorial Source for *Venus and Adonis*.’ In *Great Oxford* (ed. R. Malim, 2004, 79–90).

Coincidentally, Titian also finished painted a dramatic picture of the Rape of Lucrece in 1571. It is possible that Oxford visited saw it, or a sketch, in the artist’s studio in Venice in 1575, the year before Titian died. The painting was one of many commissioned by Phillip II and taken to Spain. This painting is now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Elsewhere in the works of Shakespeare, it is clear that the author directly observed and was profoundly affected by Italian painting and sculpture. He used several specific works—murals, sculptures, and paintings—as the bases for incidents, characters, and imagery in his plays and poems. Allusions in *The Winter’s Tale*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Venus and Adonis*, and *Lucrece* have been traced to the sculpture and murals of Giulio Romano in Mantua’s Ducal Palace and Palazzo Te (Hamill, ‘Ghosts’ 86–92).

24 They were the granddaughters of Ludovico II and daughters of Federico, 3rd Marquis of Mantua (d.1484): Chiara who married Gilbert of Bourbon, Count of Montpensier, France; Maddalena who married Giovanni Sforza of Aragon, Count of Cotignola, Lord of Pesaro; Elisabetta, the most renowned, who married Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino: at their court, Baldassarre Castiglione wrote *Il Cortegiano* in Urbino c. 1507. This book was translated into Latin by Bartholomew Clerke and published in 1572, with a dedicatory epistle in Latin written by the Earl of Oxford.


26 Foakes, *Henslowe’s Diary*. 212.