

# *Is Lord Prospero Disconti of Milan the Model for Lord Prospero of The Tempest?*

by Katherine Chiljan

Scholars have long considered that Prospero in *The Tempest* represented the great author himself, William Shakespeare, a magus that conjures plays on the “island” of the theater. But they also searched for an historical figure upon whom Prospero may have been based, a deposed Italian duke who sought refuge in the liberal arts—especially since Prospero is a name unique to the Shakespeare canon.

Shakespeare’s Prospero, the Duke of Milan, had great learning and valued his library; “rapt” in his “secret studies,” Prospero entrusted his ruling power to his brother, Antonio.

The Government I cast upon my brother,  
And to my State grew stranger, being transported  
And rapt in secret studies... (I.ii)

Antonio eventually ousted Prospero. As Prospero was loved by his people, Antonio had him secretly exiled, and not “destroyed,” as he explains to his daughter, Miranda:

Dear, they durst not,  
So dear the love my people bore me: nor set  
A mark so bloody on the business... (I.ii)

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Prospero and his daughter, then a young child, were placed in a ramshackle boat without sails and set adrift. The person who carried out Prospero's exile, however, sympathetically filled the boat not only with supplies, but with books from his library. "By Providence divine" (I.ii), the boat landed safely on a deserted island. Prospero's unencumbered study there resulted in his magical powers.

Twelve years after the exile, a shipwreck occurs on the island and all passengers are miraculously saved thanks to Prospero's magic. Among them are the King of Naples, who was complicit in Prospero's exile, and his son, Prince Ferdinand, who falls in love with Miranda; Ferdinand later introduces her to his father as "daughter to this famous Duke of Milan":

She  
Is daughter to this famous Duke of Milan,  
Of whom so often I have heard renown  
But never saw before; (V.i)

An Italian nobleman, Prospero is Duke of Milan, famous and loved by his people, values study and his library, has a brother and a daughter, is a magician, and was deposed and exiled.

## The Real Prospero

One candidate suggested as Prospero's model is Prospero Adorno, a 15<sup>th</sup> Century doge of Genoa who was deposed and years later reinstated by the Duke of Milan, and had dealings with Ferdinando, King of Naples. Another candidate is Prospero Colonna, a 15<sup>th</sup> Century nobleman and military leader also connected with the King of Naples and his son, Ferdinando. Prospero, Ferdinand, and the King of Naples are all character names in *The Tempest*.

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Another candidate, the subject of this paper, was discovered decades ago by Sir Ernst Gombrich (d. 2001), a prominent art historian. Gombrich came across this line in *A Tract containing the Arts of Curious Painting Carving & Building* (1598):

Vicont *Prospero* a Knight of Millan and a great scholar.

A Milanese nobleman named Prospero who was a great scholar caught Gombrich's attention, as Shakespeare's Prospero, a Milanese duke, was reputed

for the liberal Arts  
Without a parallel; those being all my study... (I.ii)

“Vicont Prospero” was named in the book not because he was learned but because he was the owner of a certain painting, one that depicted birds so realistically that, when placed outside, attracted real birds.

the table [i.e., painting] being set abroad in the sun, other birds came flying about them, taking them for live birds. This table is now to be seen with Vicont *Prospero* a Knight of Milan and a great scholar. (Book 3, 94)



*Figure 1: Bronze medal of Prospero Visconti, circa 1582, from Numismatic Collection, State Museums in Berlin, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation.*

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The book was an English translation of *Trattato dell'arte della pittura, scoltura, et architettura* (1584) by Milanese painter Gian Paolo Lomazzo (1538–1600) and was “the first treatise on painting to be published in English” (Bakewell). Translator Richard Haydock (1569/70–c. 1642), a “student of physic” at Oxford University, however, mistranslated the line about “Vicont Prospero.” Lomazzo’s original phrase was

il Sig. Prospero Viscôte cavaliere Milanese ornato di belle lettere.  
(Book 3, 188)

“Visconte” was this fellow’s *surname*, and not, as Haydock had translated it, his title. Haydock also had removed the abbreviated “Signore” or lord. Haydock translated “belle lettere” as “great scholar,” but more specifically, “belles lettres” describes literary studies or the humanities in general, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. So, a closer translation is:

the Lord Prospero Visconte, Milanese knight, adorned with belles  
lettres.

Sir Ernst Gombrich was the first to catch Haydock’s mistranslation of “Visconte” and to identify him as Lord Prospero Visconti (1543/44–1592). In 1950, he reported his new candidate as the basis for Shakespeare’s Prospero to the English professor Frank Kermode, who was then preparing an Arden Shakespeare edition of *The Tempest*, published in 1954. Kermode chose not to include it; at the time, Gombrich thought it a correct decision, as he believed the evidence was “inconclusive.”

Twenty-nine years later, however, the orthodox journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1979) published an article that considered Haydock’s reference to “Vicont Prospero” as “the best source yet suggested for Prospero’s name,” as it associated “Prospero” with Milan and learning (Young 408–10). Author Alan R. Young, then an associate English professor, evidently arrived at this conclusion independently of Gombrich; neither Prospero Visconti nor Haydock’s mistranslation, however, were mentioned.

## Who was Lord Prospero Visconti?

Starting in 1277, the Visconti family ruled as lords of Milan and, by the late 1300s, as *Dukes of Milan*, the title of Shakespeare’s character. In 1450, however, the title and the power passed to another family, the Sforzas. Prospero Visconti, who lived in Milan, was a collateral descendant of the first lords of Milan and was alive when Lomazzo’s book was published.

Visconti, the Lord of Breme (Morigia 593), was a scholar, orator, historian, poet, musician and even amateur sculptor. His learning was extensive,

knowing mathematics, architecture, astronomy, and ancient and modern languages (including Aramaic, Greek, Latin and the Tuscan dialect). Paolo Morigia noted in his book, *La Nobiltà di Milano* (1595), that Visconti was a bibliophile, owning a

precious and most copious library that contained books on every science and profession, among them books in the Longobardic language<sup>1</sup> written on the bark of trees or fibres. (Gombrich 188)

Visconti's library was likely built upon that of his great-grandfather, Gaspar Ambrogio Visconti (1461–99), a scholar, poet and courtier; this Visconti was a patron of painter/architect Donato Bramante, and edited the poetry of Francesco Petrarca, i.e., Petrarch (Pyle 576–7).

Prospero Visconti possessed an extensive art collection, including drawings, paintings and sculptures, as well as collections of classical antiquities, musical instruments, coins, and medals—two 16<sup>th</sup> Century medals featuring his portrait are in existence.<sup>2</sup> Visconti also held manuscripts by Leonardo da Vinci and those of his disciples, according to his contemporary, Giovanni Ambrogio Mazzetta (Uzielli 233).

Besides his many interests in the arts and scholarship, Visconti was a merchant. He dealt in art, sculpture, textiles, precious gems and jewelry, musical scores, crystal ware, and other fine goods, and supplied these items for the dukes of Bavaria. He also supplied the dukes with armor and “inventions for jousts and tournaments” (Southorn), as well as rare plants, including tobacco (Volpi 147).

Visconti held public offices in Milan and was “universally loved, & highly esteemed” (Morigia 549 and Google Translate). In addition, Visconti was a patron, friend, and protector of painters, musicians, poets and scientists, according to Mauro Pavesi, who wrote a dissertation on Visconti. Pavesi, however, noted that Visconti was little known to scholars outside of Milan (Pavesi 797).

## Striking Parallels

Lord Prospero Visconti and Lord Prospero in *The Tempest* were Italian noblemen of extensive learning who possessed libraries. In addition, Prospero Visconti was a collateral descendant of the lords of Milan whose descendants became the first three dukes of Milan, and the character Prospero *was* the Duke of Milan—the rightful duke of Milan. Prospero Visconti had one sibling, his brother Giovanni Paolo, and the character Prospero had one sibling, his brother, Antonio. Both Prosperos were famous in Milan and beloved by their countrymen.

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Forty years after his initial discovery, Sir Ernest Gombrich published evidence even more suggestive that Prospero Visconti inspired Shakespeare's Prospero—a Latin poem addressed to Visconti by Giovanni Matteo Toscano in 1576.<sup>3</sup> In Gombrich's translation, Toscano described the Visconti Dukes of Milan as “no dynasty more renowned for the martial arts” when “Fortuna smiled on” them; then the wheel of fortune turned, and “villainy” carried “their realm into the abyss.”

Now since the wheel of the same fortuna has turned, it carried—Oh villainy!—their realm into the abyss. You, Prospero of the noble blood of the Dukes, serve the Muses, the most noble of activities. So, despite the constant turning and changing of the wheel of impious Fortuna she was not able to deprive you of your dignity. (Gombrich 188)

Evidently, “villainy” or a crime was perpetrated on the noble ancestors of Lord Prospero Visconti which ended their “realm” in Milan; Visconti's personal dignity, however, was maintained and compensated for by serving the Muses. Shakespeare's Lord Prospero, “The wronged Duke of Milan” (V.i), was deposed by the “foul play” of his “perfidious” and “false” brother, Antonio, and took refuge in study during his exile.

Although stopping short of calling Toscano's revelation about Visconti as the “clinching clue,” Gombrich believed it gave him “an edge over his competitors” as Shakespeare's inspiration.

The idea that the noble service of the Muses is equivalent in dignity to the exercise of ducal power seems to me more than a general *topos*. It is, of course, precisely what Shakespeare's Prospero says twice: ‘Me, poor man, my library was dukedom large enough’ and ‘volumes that I prize above my dukedom’. (Gombrich 187)

The specific “villainy” done to the Visconti dynasty and when it had occurred is unknown. When Toscano's poem was printed, over 125 years had passed since the last Visconti duke of Milan, Filippo Maria, had died. Many factions fought to succeed him since he had no male heir; what eventually transpired was a return to a republic. After three years, however, it collapsed, and Francesco Sforza, a successful military commander of mercenary armies (a “condottiero”) and the late duke's son-in-law, took power. In 1450, the city bestowed on Sforza the title, Duke of Milan, as his wife, Bianca Maria Visconti, was the late duke's only living child. It was very unusual—if not unprecedented—for the city to do this. The Holy Roman Emperor did not recognize the title for Sforza, but that came later with his son, Ludovico Sforza, nicknamed “The Moor.” The French king, Louis XII, later threw out the Moor, and claimed the duchy for France as he was the great-grandson of the first duke (Gian Galeazzo Visconti). For decades thereafter, power

<u>Prospero in <i>The Tempest</i></u>	<u>Prospero Visconti (1543/44–1592)</u>
first name Prospero	first name Prospero
Duke of Milan	Visconti family—former dukes of Milan
nobleman	Lord of Breme
Italian	Italian
values library	owned large library
studies liberal arts	studies liberal arts
famous in Milan	famous in Milan
universally loved	universally loved
one brother	one brother
deposed by villainy	Visconti dukedom lost by villainy

*Figure 2: Comparison of Lord Prospero in *The Tempest* with Lord Prospero Visconti of Milan.*

alternated between the Sforzas and the French, ending in 1535, when Milan was annexed into the Holy Roman Empire. During Prospero Visconti’s lifetime, Philip II of Spain held the title Duke of Milan.

## Did Shakespeare Visit Milan?

If Lord Prospero in *The Tempest* was based on Lord Prospero Visconti, then the great author must have visited Milan since Visconti was relatively unknown outside the city. Literary evidence suggests that he did.

Shakespeare’s comedy, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, opens with Valentine in Verona about to take a journey by water to Milan, yet they are supposedly landlocked cities. Shakespeare orthodoxy often note that this displayed Shakespeare’s ignorance of contemporary Italy. Richard Roe, however, in *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* (2011), proved Shakespeare correct. Old maps demonstrate that the Adige River, which flows through Verona, was interconnected with the Po and Adda rivers via manmade canals and locks that reached the city of Milan (Roe 46–7). In addition, Catherine Hatinguais, who also researched the topic, concluded “that river traffic in Northern Italy, notably between Verona and Milan, was not only possible but intense, well organized and highly regulated” (Hatinguais 128). River travel was comfortable and safer than by land, as bandits roamed for prey on roads outside city walls (Shakespeare knew this too—when Valentine was banished from Milan, he was recruited as chief for a group of outlaws). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, most of these canals had been filled in.

While in Milan, Valentine “Attends the emperor in his royal court” (I.iii), another “mistake” that orthodoxy accuses of Shakespeare, as Milan was ruled by a duke, not an emperor. The Duke of Milan, in fact, is a character in the play (Valentine falls in love with his daughter), yet “emperor” was mentioned

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six times. There was a time, however, when an emperor's court was in Milan, as explained by Roe (Roe 68–9). In 1529 most of Italy came under Spanish protection with the Treaty of Cambrai. In 1533 Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Spain, was invited by the Duke of Milan to visit his city and to swear an oath of fealty to him. Great preparations were made weeks in advance for the emperor's visit. Traveling to “nearby” Milan at this time could be a singular opportunity of advancement for a young Veronese gentleman “to salute the Emperor” and to commend his “service to his will” (I.iii). Although Charles V's visit ended up lasting only a few days, Shakespeare knew this decades-old footnote of Milanese history, and incorporated it into his play.

Shakespeare also knew about “St. Gregory's Well” (IV.ii) in Milan, although it does not appear on maps of the era. Located just outside the city walls was a large open compound for quarantine called the Lazzaretto, which was enclosed by four walls. One wall faced the church of San Gregorio, as shown on a 1629 map (Roe 77). Roe deduced that “well” alluded to the churchyard's ever-expanding pits to bury those who had died in the Lazzaretto across the way during the 1575–76 plague. For this, it came to be known as “il Pozzo di San Gregorio”—“Pozzo” meaning “well.”

These three details of geography, local history, and a landmark known only to residents demonstrate Shakespeare's familiarity with Milan. Roe's book details more Italian knowledge displayed in other Shakespeare plays—yet no evidence exists that the presumed author, William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, ever left England. One wonders if Prof. Kermode rejected Gomblich's discovery about Prospero Visconti for this very reason.

## Did Oxford Visit Milan?

William Shakespeare was the pseudonym of Edward de Vere, 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, the true Shakespeare—and Oxford spent about a year traveling throughout Italy. Did he visit Milan, hometown of Lord Prospero Visconti? Oxford wrote to Lord Burghley, “For fear of the Inquisition I dare not pass by Milan,” in a March 17, 1575 letter (Chiljan, *Letters and Poems* 17). Mark Anderson, however, noted in his biography of the Earl that an “English noble would have had no problem passing through the greater duchy; he wanted only to avoid entering the city gates” (Anderson 80). Later that year, on October 6, 1575, one of Oxford's bankers, Pasquino Spinola, reported to Lord Burghley that Oxford had arrived safely in Venice from Milan (Nelson 130). Another letter to Burghley from Francis Peyto, dated March 31, 1576, mentioned that Oxford had passed through Milan on his journey back to England (Nelson 134). These two contemporary reports prove that Oxford indeed visited the city of Milan. But did Oxford and Visconti meet?

As Visconti's learning, library, connoisseurship, and various collections were known in the environs of Milan, Oxford likely heard about him and possibly initiated a meeting. It is on record that Oxford visited the renowned German intellectual and educator, Johannes Sturm (1507–1589), known as Sturmius, in Strasbourg early in his grand tour. Visconti may also have wished to meet Oxford, as he had acquired a high reputation during his tour, especially when he issued an open challenge "to fight and combat with any whatsoever" at tournament sports "in the defense of his Prince and country" (Webbe).<sup>4</sup> In late March 1576, Duke Casimir offered Oxford a viewing of his 4,000-soldier army, an honor Oxford refused because he could not repay it.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Prospero Visconti's esteem during his lifetime, and his rich archives, historians have not paid much attention to him. His letters in the Munich archives were first transcribed and published in a German journal in 1902. Oxford is not named in them, but they do show that Oxford and Visconti's paths crossed. One Visconti letter from Milan is dated September 28, 1575; Oxford was there in late September/early October 1575 (Spinola's letter to



*Figure 3: Portrait of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, English School, 1581. Courtesy of Katherine Chiljan.*

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Burghley). Visconti's letters from Milan dated January 31, 1576 and March 31, 1576 (Simonsfeld 355, 360–1) also indicate he was probably in town when Oxford passed through in late March 1576 (Peyto letter). But Oxford did not need to penetrate Milan's city gates to have visited Visconti, who had a residence in Brema, 37 miles southwest of Milan (Pavia province), and a villa in Ravello, on the Amalfi coast (Simonsfeld 434). Interestingly, Visconti built a palace at the site of his ancestral home in central Milan which was completed shortly before his death; although the interior was mostly destroyed during World War II (Giacomini 80), the façade still exists, on Via Lanzzone.

The State Archive of Florence holds unpublished letters of Visconti, according to Mauro Pavesi. In a private email, Pavesi said he did not recall seeing Oxford's name during his Visconti research. In an article, Pavesi referred to a manuscript containing Visconti's letters to the Bavarian dukes which included his accounts of "parties, dances and receptions of the Lombard nobility" from 1569 to 1579 (Pavesi 801 and Google Translate); once in the Trivulzio Library in Milan, Manuscript 168 is now untraceable (it was missing in 1902). A concerted effort to find it could reveal new information about Oxford's 1575–76 Italian visit. The Bibliothèque Nationale also holds Visconti's letters, dated 1587–89, according to a 1905 publication.<sup>6</sup> Researchers with expertise in Italian, Latin and German (Visconti's correspondence with the Bavarian dukes) who wish to seek proof of an Oxford-Visconti meeting could discover direct evidence that they did meet in Italy.

## Was Prospero Modeled on Oxford?

If, as some orthodox scholars believe, Shakespeare's Prospero represented the great author, then why did he depict himself as a nobleman, an exile, a magician, and one obsessed with the liberal arts? Mr. Shakspeare was definitely not a nobleman, not an exile, not interested in education or magic, and there is no evidence he visited Italy. Shakespeare's Lord Prospero could have been depicted as a simple wizard.

But these characteristics perfectly fit the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, a nobleman steeped in the liberal arts who did visit Italy; furthermore, he was "exiled" from the court of Queen Elizabeth I for two years (from 1581 to 1583) due to his extramarital love affair with one of her attendants, Anne Vavasour. As the additional characteristic of exile did not apply to Prospero Visconti, it appears that Oxford also infused himself into the character of Prospero. For affirmation, the Ogburns (Ogburn 548–50) cited this *Tempest* line:

PROSPERO  
know for certain  
That I am *Prospero*, and that very Duke  
Which was thrust forth of *Milan*... (V.i)

Prospero is “that very duke”—“very” a likely pun upon Oxford’s surname, Vere. Another *Tempest* line has Lord Prospero removing his “mantle” and saying, “Lie there, my art” (I.ii). This parallels an anecdote about William Cecil, Lord Burghley:

At night when he put off his gown, he used to say, *Lie there, Lord Treasurer*, and bidding adieu to all State-affairs, disposed himself to his quiet rest. (Fuller 269)

William Shakspeare, who died in 1616, would not know this as the anecdote was first published in 1642. Oxford, however, knew Burghley intimately, living in his London house as a minor from the age of 12, and later became his son-in-law at the age of 21.

*The Tempest* also shows influence of Oxford’s uncle, Arthur Golding, in his translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, one of Shakespeare’s favorite classical works. In *The Tempest* (V.i), Prospero addresses Nature:

PROSPERO

Ye Elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes & groves,  
 And ye, that on the sands with printless foot  
 Do chase the ebbing-*Neptune*, and do fly him  
 When he comes back: (my emphasis)

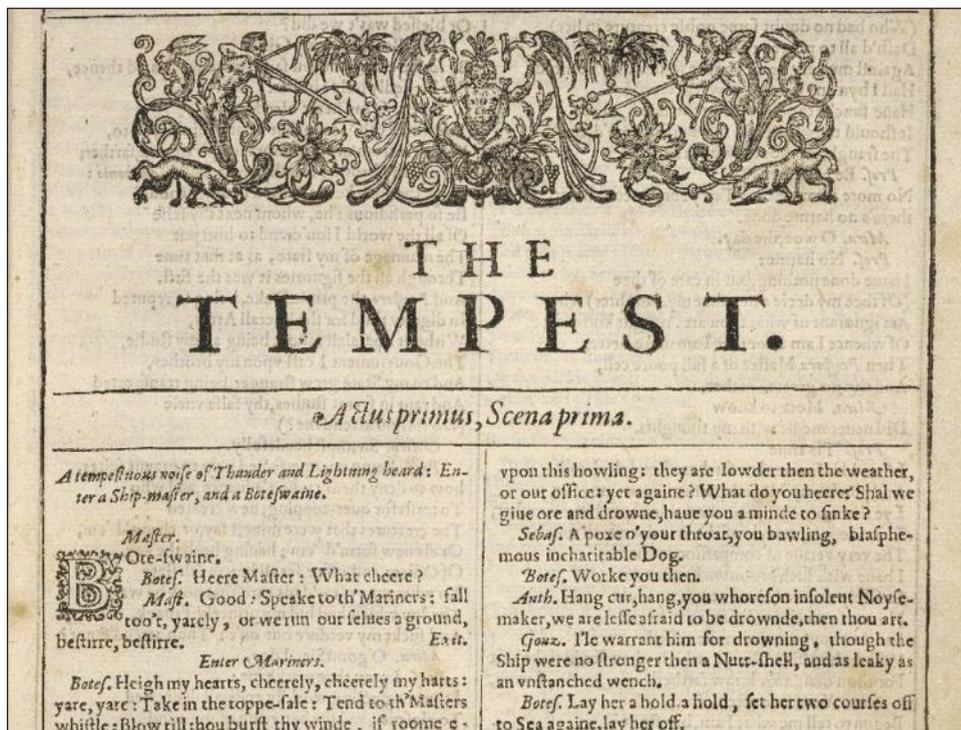


Figure 4: The *Tempest* title page, I.i, from the First Folio, 1623.

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In Golding's translation of *Metamorphosis* (Book 7), a nearly exact phrase is used by Medea as she calls upon the elements to provide her with herbs for a magic potion to lengthen her father-in-law's life:

Ye Charms and Witchcrafts, & thou Earth which both with herb & weed  
Of mighty working furnishest the Wizards at their need:  
Ye Airs and winds: ye Elves of Hills, of Brooks, of Woods alone,  
Of standing Lakes, and of the Night approach ye every chone [crack].  
(my emphasis)

Golding worked on the translation when both he and Oxford resided at Lord Burghley's home, likely serving as young Oxford's Latin tutor. Many Oxfordian scholars believe that Oxford either assisted with Golding's translation or was the actual translator/versifier of the work (see Richard Waugaman, *The Oxfordian* 20). Shakespeare knew Medea's story, alluding to her in *The Merchant of Venice* (V.i):

JESSICA  
In such a night  
Medea gather'd the enchanted herbs  
That did renew old Aeson.

Besides their nobility, Lord Oxford and the character Lord Prospero were showmen. Oxford was a recognized playwright cited as "best for Comedy" (Meres 283 verso), sponsored two acting companies (Oxford's Boys and Oxford's Men), and held the lease to the Blackfriars theater. Character Prospero provided "revels" for his daughter and Prince Ferdinand in Act 4 of *The Tempest*. Through his creative spirit Ariel, the goddesses Iris, Ceres and Juno and various nymphs magically appear before them, speaking, singing and dancing—another Shakespearean "play within a play."

A bit of Dr. John Dee can also be found in Prospero, which even orthodox scholars such as Emma Smith, Professor of Shakespeare Studies at Oxford University, acknowledge, citing his interest in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, alchemy, and conversing with spirits through a medium (Smith); Shakespeare's Prospero was a deep scholar and magus who conversed with a spirit. Dee communicated with Oxford, having "his favorable letters" dated 1570, when Oxford was 20.<sup>7</sup> Their acquaintanceship may have inspired Oxford's enemies, Henry Howard and Charles Arundel, to accuse him of "conjuring" spirits (Nelson 58). A spirit mirror made of obsidian, believed to be Dr. Dee's, is on display at the British Library.

Like Shakespeare's Prospero, Dr. Dee valued his library, one of the largest private libraries in England, with over 3,000 printed books and 1,000 manuscripts. Interestingly, Dee was a showman himself: circa 1547, he staged a

comedy by Aristophanes at Trinity College, Cambridge; his special effects of a character riding on a gargantuan flying beetle were so believable that he was accused of sorcery.<sup>8</sup>

In summary, it appears that Shakespeare's character Lord Prospero was initially inspired by Lord Prospero Visconti, whose ancestors, through treachery, lost the dukedom of Milan; his foray into learning of every kind was compensation for this indignity. Both Prosperos maintained libraries, had one brother, were famous and beloved by their countrymen. The traits of learning and nobility in Shakespeare's Prospero, and being a magus, were also shared with Oxford—a learned patron of the arts and magus of the theater. And both the character and his creator experienced exile. A touch of the famous polymath, astrologer and advisor to Queen Elizabeth, Dr. John Dee, is also apparent. In contrast, William Shakspere has no known acquaintance with Visconti, Oxford or Dee.

### *The Tempest's* Composition Date

When was *The Tempest* written? As with every Shakespeare play, orthodox scholars have no firm dating, but circa 1611 is usually cited, based upon a letter that discussed a 1609 shipwreck in Bermuda. *The Tempest* opens with a shipwreck, and “Bermoothes” is mentioned. Orthodoxy is fond of citing this letter, written by William Strachey in 1610, as Shakespeare's inspiration for the play perhaps because it postdates Oxford's 1604 death. The letter, however, was privately written and unknown until it was published in 1625, as noted by Prof. Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky—they refuted the theory that it influenced the play in *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest* (2013).

Literary evidence dates *The Tempest* far earlier than circa 1611. A direct allusion can be found in Sir Philip Sidney's literary treatise, *An Apology for Poetry* (a.k.a. *The Defense of Poesy*), which scholars maintain was written before 1583 (Sidney died in 1586). Sidney describes the play in a passage mocking the inadequacies of the theater for realistic scenery:

Now ye shall have three Ladies, walk to gather flowers, & then we must believe the stage to be a Garden. By & by, we hear news of shipwrack in the same place, and then we are to blame, if we accept it not for a Rock. Upon the back of that...

A shipwreck on Prospero's island opens *The Tempest*. Sidney continues:

Upon the back of that, comes out a hideous Monster, with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders [i.e., the audience], are bound to take it for a Cave.... (STC 22534, sig. K1, my emphases)

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Who is the “hideous Monster with fire and smoke” who came out of a “Rock” or a “Cave” after a shipwreck? Who else but Caliban, who was called “monster” more than 40 times in *The Tempest*? Caliban is responsible for laying the fire for Prospero’s cell, thus explaining his appearance “with fire and smoke,” precisely as Sidney had described. Caliban’s abode is twice called a rock in the play: Caliban complains he is kept “In this hard rock” (I.ii), and Miranda says Caliban was “Deservedly confined into this rock” (I.ii). Living in a rock describes a cave.

## Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* and other *Tempest* Allusions

About five years after Sidney’s comment appeared Christopher Marlowe’s play, *Dr. Faustus* (circa 1588), which contains numerous parallels with *The Tempest*. The title character is a magician, like Prospero; unlike Prospero, who uses magic to reconcile with his enemies, Dr. Faustus uses magic to invoke the devil, and then makes a deal with him. At the end of the play, when devils come to escort Faustus to hell, Faustus renounces his magic and exclaims, “I’ll burn my books!” At the end of *The Tempest*, Prospero similarly exclaims that he will “abjure” his “rough magic,” break his staff, and “drown my book” (Forker 65). The two magi also conjure spirits to enact their wills, such as creating spectacles for others, and command them to be invisible to all but their masters (Lucking 158).

The illustration on the 1620 title page to *Dr. Faustus* shows how a magus was shown on stage: draped in a long robe, he holds a book in one hand, a staff in another, and stands in a magic circle. Similarly, stage directions in *The Tempest* note Prospero’s “magic robes” (V.i), and that six characters “all enter the circle which Prospero had made, and there stand charm’d” (V.i); Prospero’s books were mentioned several times, and his staff once.

The unusual *Tempest* phrase “foot it featly” (I.ii) was used in a song sung by Ariel to conjured “sprites” dancing on the beach; in 1589, “Footing it featly” (sig. A2 verso) described nymphs dancing near a stream in Thomas Lodge’s *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (Furness 170). Another *Tempest* phrase, “The mariners all under hatches stowed” (I.ii) was echoed in the anonymous fiction, *The Cobbler of Canterbury* (53)—“bestowed the Mariners under hatches”—published in 1590 (Cawley 693).

In April 1598 theater producer Philip Henslowe purchased a “robe for to go invisible” for the Lord Admiral’s Men (Greg 123). The New Variorum Edition of *The Tempest* noted this fact for the stage direction, “Ariel invisible playing and singing” (I.ii) (Furness 77); the editor evidently thought they were linked. Also in 1598 Ben Jonson’s comedy *Every Man in His Humor* was first staged, which included characters Prospero and Stephano, just as in *The Tempest* (these names were changed in the 1616 printed version); and in both plays, Stephano steals clothing.

A speech in *The Tragedy of Darius*, by William Alexander (later Earl of Stirling), is about “palaces” and “gorgeous halls” that fade away “in the air,” and all “scarcely leaves behind a token”:

KING DARIUS

...And let this worldly pomp our wits enchant.  
 All fades, and scarcely leaves behind a token.  
 Those golden Palaces, those gorgeous halls,  
 With furniture superfluously fair:  
 Those stately Courts, those sky-encount'ring walls  
 Evanish [dissipate] all like vapors in the air.  
 (IV.ii, my emphases)

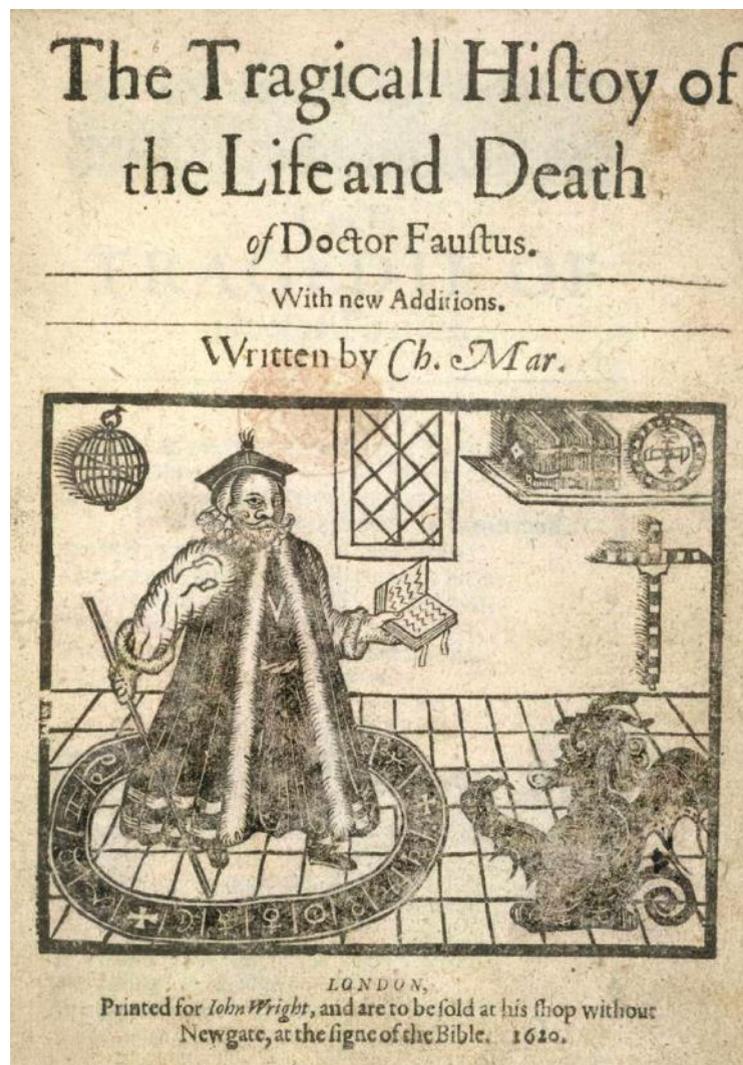


Figure 5: Dr. Faustus title page, by Christopher Marlowe.

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Similarly, Prospero's "Revels" for Miranda and Ferdinand, which included "gorgeous palaces," melt "into thin air," leaving "not a rack behind" (Anders 139):

Our Revels now are ended: These our actors,  
(As I foretold you) were all Spirits and  
Are melted into Air, into thin Air,  
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The Cloud-capp'd Towers, the gorgeous Palaces,  
The solemn Temples, the great Globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And like this insubstantial Pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind: (4.1, my emphases)

*Darius* can be dated to no later than 1601, as Ben Jonson alluded to it in his comedy *Poetaster*, which was probably performed in spring of that year (Donaldson). Character Captain Tucca ordered his servants to "speak in King Darius's doleful strain" (III.i) in front of the actor, Histrio. Other Shakespeare phrases found in *Darius* include "the shadow of a dream" (IV. iii) from *Hamlet* (II.ii) (Stritmatter, Kositsky 106), and "sovereign salve" (III.i) from *Venus and Adonis* (line 45).

*Westward Ho*, a play first performed in late 1604, also alludes to the *Tempest*. The subplot is about a lord, only referred to as "Earl." Like Shakespeare's Lord Prospero, Earl summons spirits within a circle, which his servants gossip about:

SERVANT 1:

Does my Lord [i.e., Earl] mean to Conjure that he draws these  
strange Characters [?]

SERVANT 2:

He does: but we shall see neither the Spirit that rises, nor the  
Circle it rises in.

SERVANT 3:

'Twould make our hair stand up on end if we should, come fools  
come, meddle not with his matters, Lords may do anything. (IV.ii)

Stage directions in *The Tempest* mentioned Prospero's magic circle, into which the conjured spirit Ariel leads the shipwrecked characters; Ariel is invisible to them, accounting for Servant 2's comment in *Westward Ho* that he shall not see Earl's invoked spirit. Dramatists Thomas Dekker and John Webster

incorporated several clues that Earl was the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford (Chiljan, *The Oxfordian* 21), thereby hinting at an association between him and the character Prospero.

These eight “too early” allusions to *The Tempest*, dating from circa 1583 to 1604, demonstrate the literary world’s familiarity with Shakespeare’s play many years or decades before orthodox scholarship believes it was written; William Shakspeare’s confining vital statistics make such recognition impossible.

*The Tempest* being first composed by 1583 fits the Earl of Oxford’s life as it relates to the character Prospero: at that time, Oxford was exiled from Queen Elizabeth’s court, had only one daughter (his second daughter, Bridget, was born in 1584), and he had known Dr. Dee for over a decade.

## Conclusions

Literary and documentary evidence strongly suggest that the great author, Shakespeare, who was the 17<sup>th</sup> Earl of Oxford, visited Milan. If so, then he would have certainly heard of Lord Prospero Visconti, a nobleman renowned in that city for his vast scholarship, his public service, his artistry in poetry and music, his library, and his varied collections. Shakespeare’s apparent knowledge of the Visconti family’s misfortune in losing the dukedom of Milan through villainy, and Lord Prospero Visconti’s compensation by immersing himself in the arts and sciences, likely inspired *The Tempest* character Lord Prospero, Duke of Milan, who had similar experiences. If Oxford met Visconti, then this knowledge would have been firsthand.

Perhaps Oxford even viewed at Visconti’s house the famous painting of birds that deceived real ones, as noted in Lomazzo’s book.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Oxford/Shakespeare wrote lines about real birds pecking at a painting of grapes in *Venus and Adonis*:<sup>10</sup>

Even as poor birds, deceived with painted grapes,  
Do surfeit by the eye and pine the maw... (lines 601–2)

Among the numerous fine goods that Visconti supplied the nobility were perfumed gloves (Verga 134); maybe Oxford acquired from him the pair he presented to a delighted Queen Elizabeth (Ward 129).

Besides Visconti, Oxford portrayed himself in the character Prospero, dropping a “very” name clue and including biographical details, especially his two-year exile from Queen Elizabeth’s court. And he was certainly a magician of

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the theater. These two points were not applicable to Lord Prospero Visconti. The magical elements of robes, staff, books, and magic circle used by the character Prospero could have been knowledge that Oxford had acquired from Dr. John Dee, who delved into the supernatural, and with whom he was acquainted as early as 1570. Lord Prospero Visconti as the inspiration for Shakespeare's Lord Prospero adds to other instances of Shakespeare characters modeled upon real people, including Malvolio as Sir Christopher Hatton (*Twelfth Night*), Polonius as Lord Burghley (*Hamlet*), Dr. Caius as Dr. John Caius of Cambridge University (*Merry Wives of Windsor*), and Oxford himself as Prince Hamlet in *Hamlet*.

## Endnotes

1. The Langobards or Lombards were originally a Germanic people who ruled most of Italy from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries.
2. The medals are located in Berlin (Münzkabinett [Numismatic Collection], Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz), and in Milan (Gabinetto Numismatico e Medagliere, Castello Sforzesco).
3. See the Latin poem by Jo. Matthaëus Toscanus in *Carmina illustrium poetarum Italorum*, Paris, 1576, Book 2, 272.
4. Below is the full quote from Webbe’s book, which was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I.

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 honorable the Earl of Oxenford a famous man for Chivalry, at what time he tra-vailed 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 armor, to fight and combat with any whatsoever, in the defense 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 ever since for the same, the only Chevalier and Noble man of England. This title they give unto him as worthily deserved.

5. This incident was mentioned in George Chapman’s tragedy, *The Revenge of Bussy d’Ambois* (3.4), composed circa 1607 and published in 1613. Johan Casimir (1543–1592) was a German prince (son of Frederick III, Elector Palatine), and the Count Palatine of Simmern. The title duc d’Étampes was given to him by Henri III of France in 1576.
6. *Bibliothèque Nationale, Collections Manuscrites sur l’Histoire des Provinces de France*, ed. Philippe Lauer, vol. 1 (Bourgogne-Lorraine), Paris, 1905, 393. Visconti’s letters are not reproduced in this book.

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7. “The honorable Earl of Oxford, his favorable letters, anno 1570,” as quoted from Dee’s manuscript, *The Compendious Rehearsal of John Dee*. Oxford was named along with Queen Elizabeth I, King Edward VI, Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham, the Earl of Leicester, and Sir Christopher Hatton as evidence of Dee’s “credit and estimation in England.” The manuscript was “exhibited” to the queen on November 9, 1592, and first published in 1726 by Thomas Hearne in the appendix of *Johannis contratris & monachi Glastoniensis, Chronica*, vol. 2 (1726). See *Autobiographical Tracts of Dr. John Dee*, ed. James Crossley, 1851.
8. [www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-dee-is-accused-of-sorcery-after-staging-a-greek-play](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/john-dee-is-accused-of-sorcery-after-staging-a-greek-play).
9. “The Baptism of Christ” by Cesare da Sesto, private collection, Palazzo Gallarati Scotti, Milan.
10. Most editors view these lines as an allusion to Zeuxis, an ancient Greek artist whose lifelike painting of grapes attracted real birds to it, as related in Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia*.

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Bronze medal of Prospero Visconti, circa 1582, Numismatic Collection, State Museums in Berlin, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, 18225949. <https://nat.museum-digital.de/index.php?t=objekt&oges=553508>. Photo credit: Reinhard Saczewski, Creative Commons, [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

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