

## Dr. Magri's Bow and Quiver

*Such Fruits Out of Italy: The Italian Renaissance in Shakespeare's Plays and Poems* by Dr. Noemi Magri, PhD. Edited and with introduction by Gary Goldstein. Laugwitz Verlag, Buchholz, Germany, 300 pages, paperback, \$15.

Reviewed by William J. Ray

**G**ears after her death, Noemi Magri continues to riddle the orthodox position that the Shakespearean authorship inquiry is not legitimate scholarship. Within the ivied halls, the reflexive rejection of Oxfordian studies, if verbalized, would cite faulty methodologies, amateurish conclusions, insupportable assumptions, unverified claims. There the skepticism of great minds is at best regarded as unprofessional “celebrity opinion,” and any unsanctioned result constitutes a Scarlet Letter prohibiting the heretic from even second best cocktail parties.

In accord with academic guild requirements, Dr. Magri was educated and accredited in Italy, England, and the United States. She graduated from Ca' Foscari University in Venice, wrote her PhD dissertation on Philip Sidney, was a Fulbright Scholar, taught English at Mantua's Istituto Tecnico Industriale Statale, then supervised training in English there. She was fluent in Italian and Latin and knew Greek. She studied historiography and the arts of the Italian Renaissance. This background prepared her admirably for the first literary question in Western culture, was “Shakespeare” written by a businessman from Stratford, or by a Renaissance Man heretofore unrecognized. It couldn't be both.

Her eighteen essays ply the traditional canon of academic inquiry. Formulate the question; research it; master facts, dates, alignments; assemble supporting material, deductions, and connective logic; seek and deal with inconsistencies; and state a conditional hypothesis. The process of discovery utilized both customary and recondite sources and tested inferences drawn from extant documents. Most importantly, she plumbed data from Italian texts and art, an enormous resource usually neglected in Shakespeare scholarship.

To compare her methodological approach with highly respected Stratfordian peers, here is a reasonably representative statement of the opposing view, quoted from Sir Jonathan Bate, author of the estimable *Shakespeare and Ovid*. Then we will examine a few Magri essays:

One of the most frequently reiterated Anti-Stratfordian claims is that William Shakespeare could not have written the plays because he had never been to Italy, of which the plays supposedly reveal intimate knowledge. Let us set aside the fact that in the first scene of the [play] *Two Gentlemen of Verona* the impression is given that it is possible to travel by sea from Verona to Milan, which makes one suspect that the plays could not have been written by anyone who had ever actually been to Italy. (Milan is a seaport once again in *The Tempest*). The interesting thing about this claim is not its falsity but the conclusion which tends to be drawn from it: the plays must have been written by an English aristocrat who visited Italy....As I remarked in the previous chapter, Shakespeare's knowledge of matters Italian can be attributed to the presence of John Florio in the household of the Earl of Southampton. Because Shakespeare knew Florio and his works, the belief that Shakespeare's works were actually written by Florio is harder to refute than the case for any aristocrat's authorship—but because Florio was not an Englishman, the case for him has never made much headway.

*The Genius of Shakespeare* (1998, 94)

Within this cursory, at times accusatory, statement are eight unsupported notions about the author and the plays:

- That Shakspeare of Stratford was Shakespeare the famous dramatist and poet.
- That Shakspeare/Shakespeare was an imaginative writer and did not have to see Italy to write about it; such familiarity was not germane to the plays.
- That Shakspeare/Shakespeare did not describe Italy accurately.
- That there was no water transport between Verona and Milan.
- That topographies in *TGV* and *The Tempest* are poetic license.
- That Shakspeare/Shakespeare knew Southampton and through him Florio, therefore it is easy to infer how he gained usable details about Italy.
- That attributing Shakespeare's works to Florio is more plausible than doing so to any aristocrat writer.
- And the corollary, only Florio's being Italian, not English, kept him from being yet more plausible as "Shakespeare" than an aristocrat-author.

Upon inspection these are suppositions lacking foundation. Without foundation, the character of the paragraph is no more than impatient polemic. Had Dr. Magri advanced as mediocre a methodology in her professional work, her book would never get published.

Instead, the essays comprising *Such Fruits Out of Italy* illuminate the historical and artistic evidence for the Shakespearean sojourn in Italy, set out in more detail and from a broader bibliography than any previous work.

Regrettably, the book's publication occurs under adverse conditions. It is reprehensible that modern English studies doctrinally suppress the biographical aspect current to all other literary studies for its supreme example of the Artist in Western culture. The *de facto* policy will obstruct the book's plenary recognition. Double standards in the field also come into play. As long as paragraphs on the authorship issue such as Bate's find a passive audience, serious inquiry will continue to be shamed, defiled and tabooed.

There is a recent harbinger of change. Due indirectly to Dr. Magri and to Richard Roe's *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*, Shakespeare-in-Italy tours are increasingly popular. Viewer-citizens sense a story. It may be in the air.

By contrast, *a priori* denials of "Shakespeare" in Italy, like tar patches on a derelict highway, last only the time it takes to test them. This state of chronic rationalization is the direct result of 1) ignoring geography effortlessly presented in the play texts; 2) overlooking the text's implied surroundings; necessitating 3) a "great" author who didn't know either geography or surrounds.

The ignorant author notion symptomatically represses the plays' geographical realism in the defense of the industry's mythic belief that the Italian canon issued from an untraveled mind happily spinning out masterpieces in London and Warwickshire. That the critics themselves by and large do not know Italy and judge that their subject couldn't, complicates the tortured logic.

This forms our entrée to Dr. Magri's contrasting thesis. She broadsides the Stratford ship of state, though employing the usual academic methods of pictorial and linguistic analysis. If she shows in the end that the plays depict Italy as a resident might have known it in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a major tenet of the Stratford narrative will wither for lack of plausibility and the paradigm will fragment.

The essays are gathered by editor Gary Goldstein into four sections: Italian Renaissance Art in Shakespeare, the book's tour de force; Italian Geography in Shakespeare, the most extensive group; Oxford in Italy; and a miscellany that includes for example extensive evidence that the Italian legal system was unerringly depicted in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The first essay argues that Titian's Barberini version of "Venus and Adonis" must have been the source for a critical scene of "Shakespeare's" first work of poetry of the same title. The painting's bonnet covers Adonis's eyes. He looks askance at Venus, who is prostrate and pleading. Her arms enfold him like a band. His countenance and body language say, "let me go." Cytherea, the equivalent of Aphrodite, hides in the foliage. Tears of anguish trickle down Venus's cheek. All these details of the painting reappear in the graphically descriptive poetry of Shakespeare. They were not in Ovid, nor in Golding's translation.

Another passage of the poem describes Adonis's horse:

Look when a painter would surpass the life  
In limning out [painting] a well-proportioned steed,  
His art with nature's workmanship at strife,  
As if the dead [painting] the living should exceed:  
So did this horse excel a common one  
In shape, in courage, colour, pace and bone  
(289-294)

The lifelike aspect of the horse, the skillful painting for effect, Dr. Magri traces to another Shakespeare icon, Giulio Romano, the only contemporary artist specifically named in the canon. Incidentally, the phrases "surpass the life" and "workmanship at strife" with Nature, it can be argued, are sources of Jonson's sly First Folio allusions back to an observer's similar remarks, one who had to have seen works of this sort to speak of them as he did.

The *coup de grace* of the essay is the meticulous way it tracks down the provenance and location of the Barberini version of Titian's work. First, Dr. Magri eliminated the other four known versions as differing in their depictions of the conjugal scene. She also excluded the possibility that Edward de Vere, her identified "Shakespeare," could have seen them. This left the copy in Titian's house in Venice. How could de Vere have seen that one?

Sovereigns, princes, ambassadors, cardinals never failed to pay Titian a visit when they were in Venice....Titian was not only much loved by his countrymen but he also aroused admiration owing to his age: in 1575 he was about one hundred years old and still active. Considering de Vere's desire for learning and his love for Italian culture, he must have wished to meet Titian and admire his collection. Thus, he may have seen V&A in Titian's house, where the artist preserved originals and autograph copies. (29)

From her Greek education Dr. Magri also related the matched arts of poetry and painting, essential to understanding Shakespeare's "first heir of my invention," the revolutionary Venus and Adonis poem itself. Aristotle said that poetry and painting are twinned forms of art with the same nature. One is dumb poetry, the other speaking painting, two sides of human perceptual comprehension. The essay suggests a fascinating point, that de Vere/Shakespeare was so struck with the new Renaissance artistic realism that he introduced its frank descriptiveness into English prose and poetry, transforming English into an instrument of new Consciousness. We continue to use his expanded insight and higher vocabulary as the language of our modern consciousness.

The following essay, on the "Wanton" paintings, is of a piece with these several insights. Even the gods suffer human consciousness and passions. The induction scene of *The Taming of the Shrew* also convinced Dr. Magri that the author must have gone to Italy, to have so closely described the three "wanton" works. She systematically compared the "Cytherea" description in the play to Penni's "Venus

and the Rose,” the “Io” description to Correggio’s “Io,” and the “Apollo and Daphne” narrative to the anonymous “Apollo and Daphne” now in Casa Vasari, Arezzo. In addition to showing unmistakable points of similarity between the respective paintings and the author’s lines, she established that all three paintings were available to Oxford during his travels. Considering she was working at a remove of hundreds of years, this is Aesthetics history on a high level.

The three works dealt, in de Vere’s language, with “fond desire.” The sexual dynamic as metaphor for the inner spiritual struggle was to be a theme of the Sonnets, under the changed rubric of head versus heart, or Mind versus Desire.

## II

The controversy that persists to this day concerning Shakespeare’s depiction of water travel in Northern Italy receives extended study in the essay, “No Errors in Shakespeare: Historical Truth and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.” Dr. Magri’s early contribution emphasized that the physical descriptions of water use were not creative fancy, but historical fact. For example, when traveling from state to state, people showed a form of passport at the dock. Travel talk in the play is in the terms of “being shipped” and “embarking.” The Adige is “the river” inferred by Launce’s line. An intricate water transport system had existed since Roman rule, both for war and commerce. A landing spot was a *porto*, a port, albeit inland: *Portiolo*, *Portomaggiore*, *Portobuffole*, *Portonovo*, *Porto di Gaizignano*: small, major, canal, new, or in this case Padua.

“In 1572 the Boatmen’s Guild counted 49 *burchieri*, boatmen who transported passengers and merchandise.” Footnoted to a contemporary Veronan archive, this one sentence refutes the obsessive argument advanced by Oxfraud.com (an anti-Oxfordian website) that it was absurd to propose, as Oxfordian Richard Roe had, that canals were used for Northern Italian passenger travel. Dr. Magri first published the article in the *De Vere Society Newsletter* long before, in May 1998.

On the issue of realism in *The Merchant of Venice*, specifically transport to Belmont, another essay has a very good engraving of Villa Foscari, showing a small vessel gliding past the building and outfitted with a mast for river travel. In discussing the villa’s history she shows from the text that the playwright was likewise familiar with the history. Villa Foscari was precisely ten miles from Venice, just as described in the play. Besides the landing by the Brenta there was a road accessible to the back hall. Portia says, “The light we see is burning in my hall.” The hall window is visible from the road.

Another seemingly throwaway line concerns the visit of the Marquis of Montferrat to Belmont/ Villa Foscari. That was a real event brought about by the simultaneous visit of Henry of Valois, King of Poland, to Villa Foscari. It would not have been known in England, but it was part of the prestige of the monumental building. Henry of Valois spent ten days in Venice and stayed a night at the estate that would be immortalized as Belmont in the play. So did the Marquis of Montferrat. It is recorded as part of Mantuan history. The change for art’s sake to

Belmont is underlaid by great familiarity about contemporary Venetian history and great respect for the villa itself. Any scholar is hard put to explain how a stay-at-home playwright would know these minute details. But Dr. Magri made it easy to understand how the Earl of Oxford would know. As English nobility, he was an honored guest of—and peer among—the class that participated in the historic event, which happened only the year before he visited Venice.

The cumulative results of these studies are quite enlightening. De Vere's fidelity to the truth was so thorough that he would not cheapen a work of literary art with imaginary geography or topography. He was temperamentally faithful to Nature and the eternal Past. The accuracy of the physical and cultural descriptions should therefore not be surprising, once we have the right face in the frame.

By associating art, author, and specific sense of place, Dr. Magri also gives insight into the author's soul, that we find so pitiable a vacuum in the received narrative. I do not believe this particular aspect has ever been appreciated before. "Shakespeare"/ de Vere wrote not just as an imaginative artist plumbing the human condition, but as an enthusiastic candid explorer of Earth. Geography was the educational and spiritual theme of the Age of Exploration—the material metaphor for the Renaissance's New World of Knowledge. Travel, pilgrimage, exploration revealed unseen glories of God to the eyes of men, those fortunate enough to journey far and return home.

"Shakespeare" joined both forms of knowing, earthly and fictional, into his plays about Italy and France, the Mediterranean generally. Readers of this book thus have a treat in store, a variety of contextual information never before realized. The plays and poetry, in addition to conveying universal art, become historical documents that capture 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy in amber.

### III

Scholarship comes down to specificity. Her voluminous proofs of authenticity set Dr. Magri's work apart from any other, even in the Oxfordian-Shakespeare field. In the particular subset of aesthetic, linguistic, and architectural study, *Such Fruits Out of Italy* is the most compelling monograph on "Shakespeare" in print. I would add that the essays are richly footnoted. In themselves they provide material for further study. The essays were done over a period of years. Consequently, they do not share a single theme other than veracity and need not be read consecutively.

Finally, in the course of one essay, Dr. Magri takes on Alan Nelson, whose account of Oxford, *Monstrous Adversary*, was rated by critic William S. Niederkorn as "one of the most bilious biographies ever written." Contrary to the decorous custom among Oxfordians in conferences, Dr. Magri proves Nelson an incompetent historian and dishonest arguer. This was most clearly illustrated in her reprise of Nelson's work regarding the Cuoco hearing (the Venetian Inquisition). According to the 1581 Arundel-Howard libels, immoral relations had occurred between Oxford and the young countertenor, whom he had brought back from Italy.

Nelson considered Oxford's enemies' testimony wholly correct, and he committed numerous errors about, and egregiously self-serving mistranslations of, the Inquisition texts, written in Latin and Venetian-Italian. Cuoco's testimony did not in any way corroborate the Arundel-Howard charges. But Nelson never dealt with the matter of their credibility, he merely accepted it at face value. The libels came about because Oxford had exposed their treasonous designs to Queen Elizabeth. Being suspect themselves, their testimony about Oxford had no weight at the time, nor should it since. The outlandishness of their other libels about Oxford constituted further grounds for doubt. None of this affected *Monstrous Adversary*.

Her critique pointed out Nelson even spelled the youth's name wrong. Dr. Magri, fluent in the languages, corrected additional errors. She did not make a general comment obvious from the data, that it is utterly irresponsible for an historian to assert the worst about his subject on dubious grounds, then ignore contrary evidence from a primary character witness.

I mention this essay to contrast her meticulous, cumulative, painstaking approach to knowledge, with the biased results she felt obligated to analyze in Nelson's book. By holding to verifiable fact, always a clue to personal integrity, by professional skills of a high order, she opened the path for truth, one neither questioned nor countered since. Nelson's biography is out of print.

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