

Twelfth Night:

How Much Did De Vere Know of Dubrovnik?

by Richard Malim

We know that Oxford incurred an injury to his knee on a Venetian galley in 1575 during his stay in Italy (Anderson 87, 93).¹ On the 23rd of September 1575 an Italian banker wrote from Venice: “God be thanked, for now last [lately] coming from Genoa his lordship found himself somewhat altered by reason of the extreme heats: and before [earlier] his Lordship hurt his knee in one of the Venetian galleys, but all is past without further harm” (Nelson 128). A Venetian galley would only be used on a sea voyage as opposed to a canal or river journey. This might tie in with de Vere possibly making a trip to the free city state of Ragusa (its Italian name) or Dubrovnik (its Croatian name). If so, he could have seen for himself a culture and location that he would later use as background for *Twelfth Night*.

Here we will try to discover how much Oxford knew of Dubrovnik and its politics. Illyria is the classical name for the territories on the Eastern side of the Adriatic Sea, covering a large part of twentieth-century Yugoslavia, and is the name of the Duchy employed by Oxford for the play.

In the 16th century the title of Duke of Illyria was used by the Hapsburgs in Vienna and in 1575 it was one of the subsidiary titles of Archduke Charles (1540-90) the Emperor Ferdinand’s third son. Oxford’s reference in *Twelfth Night* is to a specific city and its home-grown ruler. For the reasons below I think it can be identified only with Dubrovnik. In the first place, in 1575 it was a small city with a little hinterland and outlying islands with its own government, entirely surrounded by territories recently conquered by the Ottoman Turks but peopled by Christian Croats.

Dubrovnik paid tribute to the Ottomans, an arrangement which was supposed to suit both parties – the Turks interfered as little as possible and benefited from Dubrovnik’s position as a trading post, and the inhabitants could carry on with their trade and life-style unhindered. The city was very rich as a result, but its status was always precarious as it had to placate the Hapsburgs, the Venetians, and the Ottomans, each with their separate interests.

After the Ottoman conquests in the 1520s and 1530s, the ancient kingdom of Croatia was reduced to a small strip of coastline and some inland territory, and as a result

of the rulers' various matrimonial arrangements, it became virtually a part of Hungary and then of the Hapsburg Empire. The Hapsburgs thus became responsible for the defense of the frontier between the Muslim Ottomans and the Catholic Austrians with Dubrovnik now far to the south. The Hapsburgs did not take much interest in their responsibilities until new wars threatened. They failed repeatedly to finance the defenses and pay the defending troops, notwithstanding that they were the Christian power in the area. The result was that the garrisons each took on independent lives. By 1550 the Ottomans had reduced the number of garrisons to just one, namely that at Senj (*Segna* in Italian). Senj became the destination of persecuted Christians from the Christian interior of the new Muslim empire, as well as dispossessed and criminal types from Venice and the Austrian Hungarian Croatian Christian interior. While it could be and was attacked by sea, from land it was virtually impregnable because of the thick forest around it.

The other player in the game was Venice which was the sovereign power over a number of islands and parts of the coast of the North Adriatic. While they fought small wars with the Turks, their principal interest was trade and for the most part they had no desire to provoke the Turks into any action any more than their co-religionists in Dubrovnik had.

The problem with Senj was that its trade and hinterland, let alone the non-existent or haphazard Hapsburg financial support, gave its independent-minded inhabitants insufficient resources to live on, so they became in effect professional looters, rather than part of the frontier garrison. Always under cover of their elastic Christian consciences, these looters or *uskoks* survived on the raids they made on the Ottoman interior, sometimes with the support of the Christian peasants, except when they 'collected' from them as well. To get to the interior they had to cross the Venetian and Dubrovnik lands. The uskoks were also redoubtable seamen who conducted piracies against Venetian and Dubrovnik trade, stopping ships ostensibly only to remove Turkish goods and citizens, but in practice kidnapping, and purloining much else. Diplomats from Venice and Dubrovnik were fully exercised trying to convince the Ottomans that they were not supporting their fellow Christians or approving of their actions. Meanwhile the looters sold their loot where they could, which frequent-

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ly meant in markets controlled by the Venetians. (This is a broad-brush sketch of the political background in 1575.)



The principal historical event affecting Dubrovnik in the 1570s occurred when a band of uskoks led by one of their senior men tried to come back through Dubrovnik territory and their leader was murdered by the Dubrovnik defense force. This resulted in a classic vendetta which began in 1571 and was still flourishing in 1575 (Bracewell 135).

How Are These Events Reflected in *Twelfth Night*?

From the perspective of history, the really interesting character in *Twelfth Night* is Antonio, who is shown as an uskoko leader. Antun seems a reasonably common uskoko name. He appears with Sebastian, the romantic young hero he has rescued from a shipwreck in Act 2, Scene 1. Sebastian, as the lost brother, would immediately recall to mind the 'lost' king of Portugal who disappeared after the total defeat of his army in Morocco in 1578. At first, the depressed Sebastian wants to leave Antonio even though Antonio wants him to remain (2.1.1-6). He will not tell Antonio where he is going (2, 1, 10) and then says "I perceive that you will not *extort* from me what I am

willing to keep in” (2.1.11-13). Then there is this curious passage at 2.1.34-35, where Antonio is still anxious to stay and look after Sebastian, so he says, “If you will not murder me for my love, let me be your servant.” Antonio, while recognizing Sebastian’s superior social status, is a man expecting violence wherever there is disagreement.

Sebastian recognizes this and says “If you will not undo what thou hast done, that is, kill him whom you have recovered, desire it not.” Then he reveals: “I am bound to the Count Orsino’s court.” This shocks Antonio, who says, after Sebastian has left the stage:

The gentleness of all the gods go with thee!
I have many enemies in Orsino’s Court.
(2, 1, 43-44)

Nevertheless, he concludes:

The danger shall seem sport, and I shall go. (47)

It is interesting that in *Twelfth Night*, Antonio is even more obviously a homosexual infatuated with Sebastian than is Antonio with Bassanio in *Merchant of Venice*. This connection is made more pointed with multiple references in *Merchant of Venice* to ‘argosies,’ whose original meaning covers the large cargo boats of Ragusa in which Venetians sought to get round the city’s laws for the carriage of trade goods (Roe 116). Both Bassanio and Sebastian are young male characters beloved by a character named Antonio. In *Twelfth Night*’s next act, Antonio and Sebastian appear together in the streets of the city, and Antonio confesses to Sebastian:

I could not stay behind you. My desire,
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth:
And not all love to see you (though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage)
But jealousy what might befall your travel,
Being skill-less in these parts.
(3, 3, 4-9)

Sebastian puts Antonio off from going to lodgings as he wants to see “the relics of this town” (19), but Antonio says:

I do not without danger walk these streets.
Once in a sea-fight ’gainst the Count his galleys
I did some service, of such note indeed,
That were I taken here, it would scarce be answer’d.
...I shall pay dear.
(3, 3, 25-28, 37)

Sebastian asks him if he slew “a great number of his [Orsino’s] people,” and he

replies:

Th' offence . . .
 . . . might have since been answered in repaying
 What we took from them, which for traffic's sake,
 Most of our city did.
 (3, 3, 30-35)

This reference to the city seems a precise allusion to the business of the citizens of Senj, especially as:

Th' offence is not of such a bloody nature
 Albeit the quality of the time and quarrel
 Might well have given us bloody argument.
 (3, 3, 30-32)

This may well be linked as a reference to the 1571 vendetta referred to above. So they part, but not before Sebastian advises Antonio: "Do not walk then too open," to which Antonio replies:

It doth not fit me. Hold, sir, my purse,
 In the South suburbs, at the Elephant,
 Is best to lodge.
 (3, 3, 38-40)

Suburbs means outside the city or underneath the walls, and yet there are only rocks and sea immediately south of the walls of Dubrovnik. If, as we think, the play could have been conceived before 1587, when the first theatre south of the Thames was opened – before the writer was concerned with, or had a play put on at any Thames south bank theatre – then *south* is a subsequent editor's post-1587 interpretation or a concession to the London groundlings. (No doubt some of them were customers of the Elephant Inn at Southwark.) If we look west, we come to the *Elephant* Islands, part of the Dubrovnik Republic but out of the immediate reach of the ruler, where Antonio would be much safer.

Then by mischance Antonio gets himself arrested while defending Viola, whom he mistakes for Sebastian, and is hauled off in Act 5 to appear before Orsino, who well remembers him. I have not found any references to the sort of ships used by the uskoks but they do appear in an engraving of 1617 (see following page) to be quite small, and thus suitable for inshore activities where the great galleons of Venice and Dubrovnik would be less maneuverable.

To this point, Orsino says:

A baubling [contemptible] vessel was he captain of,
 For shallow draft and bulk unprizeable;

With which, such scatheful grapple did he make
 With the most noble bottom of our fleet,
 That very envy and the tongue of loss
 Cried fame and honour on him.

(5, 1, 52-57)



1. "Abriss der Festung Zeng" (Sketch of the Senj Fortress) (1617). A fanciful view of Senj and the Nehaj fortress by Georg Keller. In the foreground, uskoks plunder bales of merchandise from a trading vessel. (Reproduced from *Senj*, Hrvatski kulturni spomenici, vol. 1, ed. Artur Schneider [Zagreb: JAZU, 1940].)

The arresting officer recounts Antonio's triumphs/crimes, and Orsino says: "Notable pirate, thou salt-water thief (5, 1, 67).

But Antonio denies it:

Orsino, noble sir,
 Be pleased that I shake off these names you give me.
 Antonio never yet was thief or pirate,

Though I confess, on base and ground enough,
Orsino's enemy.

(5, 1, 70-74)

This a clear representation of the Venetian / Dubrovnik attitude to the uskoc ("thieves and pirates") and equally the uskoc attitude to their own activities as Christians. Antonio as a sea fighter has clearly played some leading role. Noticeably there is no pardon in the play for Antonio, so the play's political aspect is maintained. The pardoning or ransoming of a distinguished leader, as Orsino clearly regards him, would immediately have brought down the wrath of the Ottomans on the citizens of Dubrovnik, and the Venetians would have not been far behind. Oxford has deliberately left a very important point of the plot unresolved as a sign of his background knowledge (and as a covert signal of his authorship). He does a similar thing at the end of *Taming of the Shrew* where Sly the drunken peasant is left on stage asleep but in charge of all the lord's riches, which can be read as an allegory for Shakespeare's title to Oxford's literary masterpieces. In *Twelfth Night* he is giving us a clear signal of his specialized knowledge of local politics.

So far we have a political and historical picture of Dubrovnik in 1575. If the play was post 1588 (i.e., after the Spanish Armada) one might have expected mention of the three Ragusan ships supplied to Spain for the Armada in 1588. There is no such mention. In addition there is one cast-iron English reference for dating the play.² The Oxford pioneer and scholar Admiral Holland pointed out the following:

Feste: *Primo, secundo, tertio* is a good play; and the old saying is, 'The third pays for all'; the triplex, sir, is a good tripping measure; or the bells of St. Bennet sir, may put you in mind – one, two, three.

(5, 1, 33-6)

The bells of the three churches of St. Bennet in London would ring out at the same time for Sunday afternoon prayers and sermon, precisely at the same time a trumpet would sound at the Theatre at Shoreditch, north of the Thames, to advertise the plays on a Sunday and with them, the dancing on stage. Sunday performances were banned beginning in 1581, so *Twelfth Night* must have been written earlier. By leaving Antonio's fate hanging, I think Oxford is signaling his political knowledge.

Other connections could be the identification of Malvolio with Sir Christopher Hatton and Count Orsini with the visit of a senior Orsini to Queen Elizabeth in 1601. Two hundred years earlier an Orsino had ruled in Dubrovnik and the Orsini family had recently been rulers of Epirus in northwest Greece, as well as being a very prominent family in northern Italy. I think the name was inserted as a compliment to the Italian visitor in 1601, and the character in earlier versions of the play probably had a different name.

The Constitution of Dubrovnik specified that one from the qualified noble families became sole ruler, rector of Dubrovnik for one month and that person was not personally allowed to act again for two years (quoted from Harris throughout). The qualified nobles were called Counts or Grofs (or Grafes). In English, they would be called Earls. The term Duke (or Doge) was not used but it would be clear to an English audience who was intended. Curiously, the title “Duke” is used in the earliest scenes of *Twelfth Night*, up to Act 1, Sc. 4, line 1. However, beginning with line 9, Orsino is referred to and addressed as “Count.” During that one month the ruler was not allowed to leave the Rectory Palace without permission and was expected to attend to the State’s business completely. In scene 1 he does not want to (be let out to) hunt the hart, presumably on the Elephant Islands (*elaphos* is Greek for deer). The change of title is a bit of a mystery as Oxford is so particular about titles in his other plays but it may reflect the situation under the Dubrovnik Constitution.

Much of Dubrovnik was destroyed in an earthquake in 1667. The area within the walls is small, barely five hundred square yards. It includes The Rectory, the Ruler’s palace unaltered after major rebuilding after 1667. This building could be identified with Orsino’s palace in the play to which the characters return in Act 5. Antonio is taken as a prisoner to Orsino (in his palace) and the situations of the characters in the plot are resolved. Much more difficult is the placing of Olivia’s palace. There is only one building in Dubrovnik with a decent-sized garden and that is the Franciscan Monastery at the West end of the Placa – Stradun (these are Croatian terms for a main street). The solution may be that Oxford apparently remembered this very substantial building and adopted it into the play. Characters wait for admittance at its gateway but it would be impossible to build a lover’s bower at the gateway of this monastery as Viola/Cesario suggests to Olivia in Act I Scene 5. (So this is presumably a poetic fiction on the part of Viola/Cesario.) The garden at the rear is certainly big enough for the deception scene (2, 5). Olivia herself walks “like a cloistress” (1, 1, 29) as if she was in a religious house; this is possibly a hint. Malvolio, in his madness, could be readily kept in darkness in an interior room of a monastic building (4, 2), and there is evidence that the pre-earthquake buildings did remind Oxford of England with Feste jeering at Malvolio on his complaint of the dark: “Why it has bay windows as transparent as barricadoes, and the clerestories toward the south-north are as lustrous as ebony” (4, 2, 37-39). The Monastery is on the north side of the main street and runs “south-north.” On the Sponza Palace on the eastern end of the road and almost opposite the Rectory, the clerestory has survived the earthquake on the south side.³

The Dubrovnik nobility were anxious to secure its continued dominance by making good marriages with the nobility from other towns. Presumably Sebastian’s family from ‘Messaline’ would qualify. There is no doubt that Viola and Sebastian are good catches and Olivia is impressed when Viola / Cesario tells her that his parentage is “above my fortunes, yet my state is well. I am a gentleman.” (1, 5, 279). The play

notes the Dubrovnik custom of allowing the unmarried sons like Sir Toby, Olivia's uncle, to live in the family palace while unmarried girls as a general rule were not allowed out of the palace at all (Harris 257).

While I have tried to adduce all the evidence which points to a visit to Dubrovnik by the author of *Twelfth Night*, and I think certainly on the balance of probability that he did, I cannot prove beyond reasonable doubt that Oxford visited. There is nothing in theory that Oxford might not have learned from his visit in Venice, but by the 1570s the Croatian community in London was much reduced. In any case, I do not believe that the Croatians of London in 1570 should be relied on as a source of the Ragusa color in the play, let alone at the time of orthodox dating, approximately in 1600. The general volume of evidence, particularly the political flavour, gives the impression that Oxford's deep and specialized knowledge went beyond book learning and notes from conversations during his stay in Italy. Rather, it favours that he learned about Dubrovnik from an actual visit there, and took his inspiration from being there. He seems to capture the claustrophobic atmosphere of the tiny walled city hemmed in by formidable mountains and by hostile powers, which would seem to mirror recent history when it was besieged and shelled by Serbian and Montenegrin forces in 1991.

Author's Note

Before developing this article, I consulted Croatia's leading authorities on Shakespeare and was directed to Ogledi Naslovanica's paper (with Mladen Engelsfeld) "Shakespeare's Illyria: Facts and Speculations," *Zagreb University Kolo* 3-4, 2013. There, with the help of the Google's computerized translations, I read the gist of it. It was clear that the authors had conducted a survey of all of Shakespeare's plays that were relevant to them, including the unlikely possibility that any other Illyrian city might provide source material. Of course, since they were not challenging the 'orthodox' school of Shakespeare authorship and its c. 1600 dating for *Twelfth Night*, their conclusions were not particularly helpful. Their contentions and ideas did however produce slants on the problems this essay identifies, and my thanks is now recorded.

Additionally, my account of the history and constitutional arrangements owes a great deal to Catherine Wendy Bracewell, Robin Harris, and Noemi Magri.

Notes

- 1 See Richard Roe, *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy* for information about Oxford's visit to Italy in 1575/6. Noemi Magri also deals with the history of Illyria and the knee injury in her two essays "Shakespeare in Illyria and Bohemia" and "Shakespeare's Knowledge of Illyrian History in *Twelfth Night*" both of which are printed in *Such Fruits Out of Italy* (Laugwitz Verlag, Buchholz 2014).
- 2 Clark, Eva Turner. *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare's Plays 3rd edition*. Page 383. From an essay by Loyd Miller based on Holland. *British Shakespeare Fellowship Newsletter*, Autumn 1958.
- 3 Personal visit by the author. September 2015.

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