

SUMMARY: The document below is a letter dating from c.1584/5 from Sir Walter Raleigh to Sir William More (1520-1600) of Loseley requesting More to extend a lease which the Italian fence-master, Rocco Bonetti (d.1587), had purchased from Oxford's servant, John Lyly.

It is helpful to clarify that Lyly held four different leases in the Blackfriars, all four of which Wallace considers were given to Lyly by Oxford. See Wallace, Charles William, *The Evolution of the English Drama up to Shakespeare*, (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1912), p. 187. The first, and best-known, was the lease of the site of the first Blackfriars theatre, which had originally been granted by Sir William More to Richard Farrant (d. 30 November 1580). Farrant left it in his will to his wife, Anne, who sold it to William Hunnis and John Newman, who sold it to Henry Evans, who sold it to Oxford, who gave it to John Lyly. See Folger MS L.b.350. Sir William More eventually recovered that lease through litigation in 1584, and according to Wallace, *supra*, p. 194:

When the Farrant-Lyly theatre broke up, the lease was forfeited to More, and Lyly could not sell it.

Although he could not sell the Farrant lease, Lyly could and did sell the other three. He sold two leases to Henry Carey (1526-1596), 1st Baron Hunsdon, who used the premises as his residence. See Wallace, *supra*, pp. 186-7.

Lyly's fourth lease, the lease he sold to Bonetti, is the one referred to by Raleigh in the letter below. See Wallace, *supra*, p. 187.

Oxford's brother-in-law, Peregrine Bertie (1555-1601), Lord Willoughby d'Eresby, and Sir John North (c.1550-1597) also wrote to More on Bonetti's behalf. For Lord Willoughby and Sir John North see the *ODNB* articles. For Lord Willoughby's letter to More on behalf of Bonetti, see Surrey History Centre LM/COR/3/372. For Sir John North's letters see SHC LM/COR/3/382, 383, 387 and 388. See also the Loseley manuscripts at:

http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/results/r?_ep=Rocco&_dss=range&_ro=any&_p=1500&Refine+dates=Refine.

Shakespeare alludes to Bonetti's skill as a fencer in *Romeo and Juliet* ('the very butcher of a silk button'). Since a topical allusion of this sort would not have been made after Bonetti's death, the allusion indicates that *Romeo and Juliet* was written prior to 1587.

Rocco Bonetti came to England in 1569, married twice, and died in 1587. See Dasent, John Roche, ed., *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, New Series, Vol. VIII, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1894), p. 395 at:

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=TOpFAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA395&lpg=PA395&dq=%22Rocco+Bonetti%22+%22St+John%22&source=bl&ots=daLiNv1qrU&sig=I7VHqx0mS6>

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XHf2Vmns4YgO21Rw8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=gz7_VJ7cEpHYoAT53YD4Bg&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22Rocco%20Bonetti%22%20%22St%20John%22&f=false.

Theobalds, 6 June 1575. A letter to the Master of the Rolls, Mr Doctor Wilson and Mr Doctor Clerke that whereas one Rocco Bonetti, stranger, being married to Ellen, late wife to Richard St John, esquire, had complained that during the time of his absence in Italy his wife died, being seised of divers goods and movables of value which were come into the hands of one Vavasour, who not only detaineth the same but further molesteth the said Rocco by sundry other actions, for that it seemeth his case deserveth some relief and pity, they should call both the parties before them, and either make some indifferent end between them, or else to advertise their Lordships what they shall find and in whom the default is etc.

See also Dasent, John Roche, ed., *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, New Series, Vol. IX (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1894), p. 41 at:

https://books.google.ca/books?id=Hlc0AQAAMAAJ&pg=PA41&lpg=PA41&dq=%22Rocco%22+%22Burbage%22&source=bl&ots=BsdP1JNKYh&sig=ygXS5vLvZn3pt7Q3MW4mnLovuB4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=72r_VMyWNI7woATwmoLoDw&ved=0CDsQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=%22Rocco%22%20%22Burbage%22&f=false.

Windsor, 1 November 1575. A letter to the Master of the Rolls and Mr Doctor Wilson, whereas heretofore they have been written unto in the behalf of one Rocco Bonetti, who complaining that after the death of his wife his house and goods were seised and possessed by one Robert Burbage and John Vavasour, they, examining the matter, caused the said Vavasour to compound with the said Rocco, and giving respite to the said Burbage until some other time, they be required, forasmuch as the said Burbage died without making him any recompense, and that his goods came to the hands of one Mr Goring of Sussex who married the daughter of the said Burbage, to call the said Goring before them and to understand the state of the controversy touching the said goods, and to make such end between them, if they can, as may be agreeable to right, or else to inform their Lordships in whom they shall find default, that if further complaint be made they may proceed as the cause shall require.

For Bonetti see also Turner, Craig and Tony Soper, *Methods and Practice of Elizabethan Swordplay*, (Southern Illinois University, 1990), pp. 14-17 at:

https://books.google.ca/books?id=3_9Wxi0d0cIC&pg=PA17&lpg=PA17&dq=%22Bonetti+died%22+%221587%22&source=bl&ots=T3rANV3yRi&sig=szbUONjDo9QqMX_n7t_NrIUyyUk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=h0L_VNlc1emgBMuZgsAF&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22Bonetti%20died%22%20%221587%22&f=false.

Aylward tells us that Bonetti was a soldier of fortune and a secret emissary from Catherine de Medici Bonetti married an Englishwoman (complicating his citizenship status) in 1571, but he left shortly for further adventures, including a

campaign in Antwerp in 1574. He returned in 1575 to find his wife dead (we do not know the cause) and his English property appropriated by his wife's relatives, Robert Burbage and John Vavasour.

In 1587 . . . Bonetti died.

For Bonetti's marriage to Ellen Burbage see Armytage, George J., ed., *Allegations for Marriage Licences Issued by the Bishop of London 1520-1610, Vol. I*, (London: Harleian Society, 1887), Vol. XXI, p. 51 at:

<https://archive.org/stream/allegationsforma25ches#page/50/mode/2up>

31 December 1571 "Rochoum Bonettum, Italianum," of St Peter's, Paul's Wharf, Gent., & Eleonor Sent Johnes, of same, Widow; Gen. Lic.

See also the pedigree of Burbage of the manor of Hayes Park Hall in Armytage, George John, ed., *Middlesex Pedigrees as Collected by Richard Mundy*, (London: Harleian Society, 1914), Vol. LXV, p. 80:

<https://archive.org/stream/middlesexpedigre65mund#page/80/mode/2up>

It is significant that the crest and coat of arms in the pedigree of Burbage of Parke Hall referenced above are identical to those in the pedigree of James Burbage and his son Cuthbert Burbage in Howard, Joseph Jackson and Joseph Lemuel Chester, eds., *The Visitation of London*, (London: Harleian Society, 1880), Vol. XV, p. 121 at:

<https://archive.org/stream/visitationoflond01stge#page/120/mode/2up>

See also the more detailed pedigree of Burbage of Hayes Park Hall in Cass, Frederick Charles, *Monken Hadley*, (Westminster: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1880), p. 128 at:

https://books.google.ca/books?id=OfTfAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA129&lpg=PA129&dq=%22Burbage%22+%22Hayes%22&source=bl&ots=tHF6tDp6Nb&sig=XC_Y6oRVJjRV3o_6oBE0B6R8ShE&hl=en&sa=X&ei=9XsAVdXhNM3ToATzy4LIDA&ved=0CCEQ6AEwATgK#v=onepage&q=%22Burbage%22%20%22Hayes%22&f=false

It thus appears that Bonetti's first wife, Ellen Burbage, was a member of the same family as the builder of the first London theatre, James Burbage, and his sons Cuthbert and Richard Burbage. See also the will of Bonetti's brother-in-law, Robert Burbage (d.1575), TNA PROB 11/57/448.

For Bonetti see also Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* (1599), in Matthey, Cyril G.R., ed., *The Works of George Silver*, (London: George Bell and Sons, 1898), p. 16 at:

<https://archive.org/stream/worksgeorgesilv00mattgoog#page/n57/mode/2up>.

There was an Italian teacher of defence in my time who was so excellent in his fight that he would have hit any Englishman with a thrust just upon any button in his doublet, and this was much spoken of.

See also pp. 64-5 in which Silver describes Bonetti's fence-school:

<https://archive.org/stream/worksgeorgesilv00mattgoog#page/n105/mode/2up>.

Marginal note: *I write not this to disgrace the dead, but to show their impudent boldness and insufficiency in performance of their profession when they were living, that from henceforth this brief note may be a remembrance and warning to beware of 'had I wist'.*

There were three Italian teachers of offence in my time. The first was Signior Rocko; the second was Jeronimo that was Signor Rocko his boy that taught gentlemen in the Blackfriars as usher for his master instead of a man. The third was Vincentio.

This Signior Rocko came into England about some thirty years past [=1569]. He taught the noblemen & gentlemen of the court. He caused some of them to wear leaden soles in their shoes, the better to bring them to nimbleness of feet in their fight. He disbursed a great sum of money for the lease of a fair house in Warwick Lane which he called his college, for the thought it great disgrace for him to keep a fence-school, he being then thought to be the only famous master of the art of arms in the whole world. He caused to be fairly drawn and set round about his school all the noblemen's and gentlemen's arms that were his scholars, and hanging right under their arms their rapiers, daggers, gloves of mail and gauntlets. Also he had benches and stools, the room being very large, for gentlemen to sit round about his school to behold his teaching. He taught none commonly under twenty, forty, fifty or an hundred pounds. And because all things should be very necessary for the noblemen & gentlemen, he had in his school a large square table, with a green carpet done round with a very broad rich fringe of gold always standing upon it, a very fair standish covered with crimson velvet, with ink, pens, pin-dust and sealing-wax and quires of very excellent fine paper gilded, ready for the noblemen & gentleman (upon occasion) to write their letters, being then desirous to follow their fight, to send their men to dispatch their business. And to know how the time passed, he had in one corner of his school a clock with a very fair large dial. He had within that school a room the which was called his privy school with many weapons therein, where he did teach his scholars his secret fight after he had perfectly taught them their rules. He was very much beloved in the court.

See also pp. 65-6, in which Silver describes a sword-fight between Austen Bagger and Bonetti, and an altercation between Bonetti and the watermen:

<https://archive.org/stream/worksgeorgesilv00mattgoog#page/n105/mode/2up>.

There was one Austen Bagger, a very tall gentleman of his hands, not standing much upon his skill, but carrying the valiant heart of an Englishman, upon a time being merry amongst his friends said he would go fight with Signior Rocco, presently went to Signior

Rocco his house in the Blackfriars and called to him in this manner: 'Signior Rocco, thou that art thought to be the only cunning man in the world with thy weapon, thou that takest upon thee to hit any Englishman with a thrust upon any button, thou that takest upon thee to come over the seas to teach the valiant noblemen and gentlemen of England to fight, thou cowardly fellow come out of thy house if thou dare for thy life. I am come to fight with thee, Signior Rocco'. Signior Rocco looking out at a window, perceiving him in the street to stand ready with his sword and buckler, with his two-hand sword drawn, with all speed ran into the street and manfully let fly at Austen Bagger, who most bravely defended himself, and presently closed with him and struck up his heels and cut him over the breech and trod upon him and most grievously hurt him under his feet, yet in the end Austen of his good nature gave him his life, and there left hin [sic]. That was the first and last fight that ever Signior Rocco made, saving once at Queenhithe he drew his rapier upon a waterman, where he was thoroughly beaten with oars and stretchers, but the odds of their weapons were as great against his rapier as was his two-hand sword against Austen Bagger's sword and buckler; therefore for that fray he was to be excused.

The transcript below is taken from Latham, Agnes and Joyce Youings, eds., *The Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999) pp. 34-5.

Sir, my hearty commendations remembered, understanding by the bearer hereof, Signior Rocco, that he hath bestowed all his wealth in building certain houses upon your ground without your consent, and thereby is indebted unto divers and sundry persons in the sum of two hundred pounds, by reason whereof he hath been constrained by the space of one half year heretofore, as well as at this present is to keep his house as prisoner, to his utter undoing, and farther understanding the matter hath been laboured by certain honest gentlemen to desire you to grant him some reasonable time to countervail his charges, at whose entreaty of your own free will you granted him seven years more to the small number which he hath already, these are in his behalf to desire you the rather at my request to consider his poor estate, to bestow four or five years more to those seven years already granted, and in so doing you shall not only request the like at my hands but I take it shall do God good service, being not desirous to be enriched with the utter undoing of a poor stranger, and he thereby shall be relieved, and according to his true and honest meaning discharge those creditors to whom he is indebted by reason of the same.

Thus much being bold to trouble you for that I have a very good opinion of the poor gentleman, whose honest behaviour and singular good qualities deserveth great commendation.

I commit you to the Almighty,

Your very loving friend,

Walter Raleigh