

Identifying John Doleta

by Robert R. Prechter

Context

From 1587 to 1596, the Earl of Oxford engaged in a pamphlet war with the Harvey brothers—Gabriel, Richard and John.¹ Gabriel and Richard published under their own names and at least one pseudonym (discussed below). John did not join the fight, but he was included among Oxford’s targets. By my estimation, Oxford attacked the Harveys through a dozen pseudonyms and allonyms,² some of which are listed at the end of this article.

Oxford’s tactic made it appear as if numerous writers held the same low opinion of the Harveys, but such was not the case. Through his pen names, Oxford entreated two fellow writers, Edmund Spenser and Thomas Watson, respectively, to reconsider amity towards Gabriel Harvey and to join the fight on his side.³ But Spenser did not respond (at least, not publicly), and Watson died shortly after the entreaty, leaving Oxford with no allies in the fight.

Evidence of animosity between Gabriel Harvey and Oxford dates from 1577, when Oxford passed over Harvey for the position of personal secretary, and 1578, when Harvey presumptuously tutored Oxford on a course of life in a speech before the queen and courtiers at Audley End. Oxford’s takedowns of Harvey seem to have begun immediately thereafter. Nicholl proposed that Shakespeare mocked Harvey in *Love’s Labor’s Lost*, where in “the ridiculous Armado... we find Harvey drawn to a ‘T’” and where “Armado’s greeting of ‘Chirrah!’... refers to the opening title of Harvey’s Audley End panegyric....”⁴ Fitting our timeline, Oxfordians have dated the genesis of the play to 1578,⁵ and in 1579 Harvey complained to Spenser that he was being lampooned on stage.⁶

In 1580, Harvey’s Latin poem, “*Speculum Tuscanismi*,” to which Oxford took offense, escalated the conflict, yet Harvey vigorously denied any ill will. For the next few years, the two men fell into an uneasy truce. But in 1587, Oxford decisively escalated matters.

Enter John Doleta

In 1587, a pamphlet titled *Straunge Newes out of Calabria: Prognosticated in the yere 1586. upon the yere 1587. and what shall happen in the said yere: Praying*

the Lord to be mercifull unto us, was published. Numerous sources state that this pamphlet is by John Doleta, but it is not. The tract was published anonymously. It purports to recount ten prophecies made in 1586 by someone named John Doleta.

Mr. Doleta has no known existence. The very surname is mysterious, with Forebears.io showing only four people in the world carrying that surname as of 2014, one each in England, Ukraine, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands.⁷



The drawing on this book’s cover features a vision of a fire-breathing dragon in the sky and three fearful, penitent witnesses. “The Preface to the Reader” speaks of many strange Signes and tokens, forewarning us unto repentance...tokens in the Heavens...Lightnings, Earthquakes, Ground-openings, Fluddes, Tempestes of the Sea, great Windes, Infections, Ayre, Warres, Mortalities, Plagues, straunge diseases and such like, which things, Commets doth commonly Prognosticate to ensue...threatning unto us calamities for our unthankfulness...the

feare of Gods heavy displeasure...cause speedie repentaunce, and amendment of life....

The body of the pamphlet, amounting to just three pages, declares that in 1586, “a learned man, named maister John Doleta, who is very well seene in Astronomie,” issued ten prophecies of events to come in 1587, and it proceeds to review them.

The first prophecy, reflecting the cover drawing, is, “the Sunne shall be covered with the Dragon, in the morning from five a clocke until nine, and will appear like fire.” Exactly which morning the author does not say. The remaining predictions are for floods, winds, pestilence, earthquakes and two special events: a “great change and alteration in Religion” and the undoing of the Turks and Islam, all due in the coming year.

A bit of investigation reveals that Doleta’s prophecies are not in earnest. Rather, they parody the astrological predictions of Richard Harvey’s 1583 book, *Astrological Predictions*—which similarly foresaw “many fierce and boysterous winds” and a “great abundance of waters”—and John Harvey’s supplement of the same year, *An Astrologicall Addition*, which contains similar prognostications. Both brothers mention Turks and predict changes in religion, and so does Doleta.

The depiction of a sky dragon on the cover of the Doleta pamphlet was inspired by a mention of dragons in Richard’s book and a comment in John’s book: “the amiable Planet Venus...is associated with the Dragons tayle.” This very image annoyed Shakespeare. In *King Lear* (I.ii), he has Edmund scoff, “My father compounded with my mother under the dragon’s tail; and my nativity was under Ursa major; so that it follows, I am rough and lecherous.”

The drawing on the cover features three trembling witnesses to the sky dragon. Now we can surmise whom they represent: the three Harvey brothers. John and Richard, in astrologers’ garb, are standing, and Gabriel is prostrate before their visions.

Understanding this context prompted a closer look at the name DOLETA. It happens to be an anagram for A DOLTE. Thus, the faux prognosticator’s implied name is “John a Dolte,” a construction that indicates just what the hidden author thought of John Harvey and his predictions.

It seems we may have found another item written by the Earl of Oxford for the purpose of embarrassing the Harveys. The project is abundantly clever, from the

mocking anagram to the visual depiction of the trembling trio to the blithering language parodying John and Richard’s prognostications.

A Harvey Replies in Print

Straunge Newes out of Calabria prompted a swift reply titled *A Confutation Of the tenne great plagues, Prognosticated by John Doleta from the Countrey of Calabria, to happen in the yeare of our Lorde, 1587*. In it, an astrologer designated only as “T.R.” spends fifteen pages (five times the length of the Doleta text) applying logic to expose the predecessor pamphlet’s lack of astrological validity. T.R.’s reference to “the late *jest* of Doleta” shows that he knew the tract was a lampoon. Yet his reply is earnest throughout, implying that T.R. took the Doleta pamphlet seriously and was annoyed by it.

Richard and John Harvey’s writing styles are similar in some ways. For instance, they both employ lengthy Latin passages, brief Greek passages and quotations from Moses. Yet certain aspects of composition indicate that T.R. is Richard.

John does not mention Queen Elizabeth in his works, but Richard does, and so does T.R. Their language is similar, as you can see in these passages:

I trust Inland is still to continue in Gods favour, who may...mightily preserve our gracious Queene, as hitherto he hath done: who graunt hir most excellent Majestie, a long and prosperous raigne over us...and continually blesse hir soveraigne Highnesse....

— Richard Harvey, *An Astrological Discourse* (1583)

I pray God almighty at his pleasure to amende and long to continue the happy and prosperous estate of our dread & soveraign Lady the Queenes Majestie, graunting her to have such loyall, and obedient subjectes....

— T.R., *A Confutation* (1587)

Both John and Richard include religious passages in their works, but Richard’s expressions are closer to T.R.’s. Richard and T.R. both speak of “tokens” of God’s wrath, list various sins, call readers to repentance and say “Amen.”

Three years later, in 1590, a pseudonymous author named Plaine Percevall inserted himself into the Martin Mar-prelate battle with a book titled *Plaine Percevall*

the Peace-Maker of England. Scholars have attributed it to Richard Harvey, substantially because his book, *A Theological Discourse*, which came out the same year, is likewise “disposed to take a middle line between the bishops and their opponents....”⁸ Richard Harvey’s use of a pseudonym in 1590 fits his use of the earlier one in 1587.

T.R., then, is Richard Harvey. He replied to the Doleta pamphlet because he was personally embarrassed by it.

Wrapping Up the Story

That summer, Thomas Nashe—whom I propose is one of Oxford’s pen names⁹—began working on *Anatomic of Absurditie*, in which he complains,

yea, the Country Plowman feareth a Calabrian floodde in the midst of a furrowe, and the sillie Sheehearde...in his field naps dreameth of flying Dragons...no star he seeth in the night but seemeth a Comet; hee lighteth no sooner on a quagmyre, but he thinketh this is the foretold Earthquake, whereof his boy hath the Ballet.... Who made them so privie to the secrets of the Almightye, that they should foretell the tokens of his wrath, or terminate the time of his vengeance?

The “Country Plowman” and the “sillie Sheehearde” stand for John and Richard Harvey, fretting once again over “Calabrian” floods, sky Dragons, comets and earthquakes.

Yet Oxford was not quite done confounding the Harvey brothers. In a brilliant stroke, a new pamphlet came out in the name of Thomas Nashe, titled in the same manner as the Doleta pamphlet: *Strange Newes, Of the intercepting certaine Letters, and a Convoy of Verses, as they were going Privilie to victual the Low Countries* (1593). In it, a passage aimed at Gabriel lays the authorship of the Doleta book on one of his brothers:

The next weeke Maister Bird (if his inke-pot have a cleare current) hee will have at you with a cap-case full of French occurrences, that is, shape you a messe of newes out of the second course of his conceit, as his brother is said out of the fabulous abundance of his braine to have invented the newes out of Calabria, (John Doletas prophesie of flying dragons, commets, Earthquakes, and inundations.) I am sure it is not yet worne out of mens scorn, for every Miller made a comment of it, and not an oyster wife but mockt it.

So, here is what happened: First, Oxford anonymously penned a throwaway piece parodying the prognostications of John and Richard Harvey. Then, perceiving Richard’s pique over the tract, he had Thomas Nashe tell the world that one of the Harvey brothers wrote the anonymous pamphlet! That false assignation is akin to many “of Nashe’s misrepresentations of [Gabriel] Harvey, [which] must not be taken accurately to represent what Harvey wrote....”¹⁰

As an aside, if you prefer to believe that Thomas Nashe was a real writer working for or with Oxford, you can see that the result was the same: In pamphlets not bearing his name, Oxford embarrassed and confounded the hapless Harveys.

By my lights, Oxford’s mockery of astrology and the Harveys appeared in numerous other contemporaneous publications published under pseudonyms, including Double V’s *Pappe with an Hatchet* (1589), Adam Fouleweather’s *A Wonderfull Strange and miraculous, Astrological Prognostication* (1591), Simon Smel-knave’s *Fearefull and lamentable effects of two dangerous Comets* (1591), the first edition of Robert Greene’s *Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), Cuthbert Conny-catcher’s *Defence of Conny-Catching* (1592) and Thomas Nashe’s *Have with you to Saffron-walden* (1596). The anonymous report on Doleta in 1587 and Nashe’s attachment of it to a Harvey brother in 1593 were two additional campaigns launched in the Pamphlet War, and very funny ones at that.

This article is condensed from the John Doleta and T.R. chapters of *Oxford’s Voices*, an online bookset by Robert R. Prechter (oxfordvoices.com).

Endnotes

1. Prechter, Robert. “The Pamphlet War Between Gabriel Harvey and Oxford’s Voices,” *Oxford’s Voices*, 2021–2024, oxfordvoices.com.
2. See the Thomas Nashe chapter of *Oxford’s Voices*.
3. Ibid.
4. Nicholl, Charles. *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984, 213, 217.
5. Miller, Ruth Loyd. “Introduction to Eva Turner Clark’s *The Satirical Comedy of Love’s Labour’s Lost*” within Eva Turner Clark, *Hidden Allusions in Shakespeare’s Plays*, 1974, Kennikat Press Corp., Port Washington NY, 136. Also, Ruth Loyd Miller, “Oaths Foresworn in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*,” *The Oxfordian*, Vol. IX, 2006, 41. See

- also Felicia Londré, “Elizabethan Views of ‘The Other’: French, Spanish, and Russians in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*,” *The Elizabethan Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring/Summer 1995, 5,7.
6. “Robert Wilson,” *Dictionary of National Biography*.
 7. <https://forebears.io/surnames/doleta>.
 8. “Richard Harvey,” *Dictionary of National Biography*.
 9. Prechter, Robert. “Was ‘Thomas Nashe’ a Pen Name of the Earl of Oxford?” *The Oxfordian*, Vol. 26, 2024.
 10. McKerrow, Ronald B. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1910, Vol. IV, 161.
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