The Sherleys and the Shah

Persia as the Stakes in a Rogue’s Gambit

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The second of the three sons of the Sussex peer Sir Thomas Sherley (ca. 1542–1612), Sir Anthony Sherley (1565–ca. 1638), suffered from—and made others to suffer even more from—a personality disorder of the kind we encounter in con men. He was a keen judge of men who used his insights only to manipulate those who trusted him, in the first place his father, brothers and protectors. During his wide travels, nearly every move he made left others holding large uncovered loans and debts. His twentieth-century biographers Boies Penrose and Edward Denison Ross were unable to contain themselves when it came to describing Anthony’s character: “He was an inveterate and unscrupulous intriguer, a sententious hypocrite devoid of all real sentiment … He had all the natural devotion of a buccaneer, and his cupidity was only equaled by his extravagance.” He was “a self-seeking adventurer pure and simple, a born intriguer, a complete opportunist, a man whose word could never be relied on and whose personal dishonesty leaves us gasping.” These judgments are no different from several testimonies from Anthony’s lifetime. His secretary Tomas Pagliarini wrote to the Spanish ambassador in Venice: “Don Antonio is a man who comes running whenever there is an offer of money. He is fickle and corrupt and … mendacious

1 Ross 1933, p. 86.
2 Penrose 1938, pp. 244–45.
by nature … He lies awake all night devising schemes to extract money from princes. … He is a man who affects an air of mystery in everything,” and it would be well if “such a pestiferous weed” be “expelled from the company of illustrious men surrounding the King.”3 James Wadsworth wrote in 1625: “This Sir Anthony Sherley is a great plotter and projector in matters of state, and undertakes by sea-stratagems to invade and ruinate his native country, a just treatise of whose actions would take up a whole volume.”4 Like other successful intriguers in matters of state, and undertakes by sea-stratagems to invade and ruinate his native country, a just treatise of whose actions would take up a whole volume.4 Like other successful intriguers, he was able to evoke admiration from his victims while robbing them blind or selling them down the river. The English ambassador in Madrid heard in 1606 of his stay in Morocco “by one that attended him in Barbary that he hath there played many parts of mountebankery which I fear some merchant factors in London will bitterly taste of; that those of Lisbon will hardly escape him, who hold him either in the account of a saint or a great sorcerer, so apt is the confused and promiscuous multitude to worship rather in Samaria than in Jerusalem.”5

As the latter testimony reveals, Anthony Sherley enjoyed the full complement of qualities associated with his faults. He spoke several languages, knew how to comport himself with different kinds of people, and although short in stature, was able to command respectful attention in a crowd. He could think swiftly on his feet, he was not afraid of a fight and was able to endure the discomfort of extensive travels. He was particularly skilled in acquiring appointments and offices, and in lesser measure emoluments, from rulers. To those who fell for his act, he came across as a hero, a model of aristocratic pride. That image was immortalized in Samuel Purchas’s 1625 publication of extracts of writings on the Sherleys: “remoter Indi, Moscova, Africa hath felt the Sherelian working, Poland, Spaine, the Emperour and Pope have admired and adored the English name of Sherley …” Who ever since the beginning of things and men, hath beene so often by Royal Employment sent Embassadour to so many princes, so distant in place, so different in rites? Two Emperours Rudolf and Ferdinand, two Popes Clement and Paul, twice the King of Spaine, twice the Polonian, the Muscovite also have given him audience.”6 This is all true, but did it mean anything more than that Anthony knew how to flatter princes? A third biographer, David W. Davies, tends to think not. At the end of his book on the Sherleys, he writes:

One must inevitably ask oneself if the story of the Sherleys is important, and the answer is, of course, that it is not. The Sherelian adventures point no moral, embody no inspiration, have arrived at a less dismissive conclusion.

What, then, could be the reasons for the prominent appearance in the present volume of a self-centered rogue like Anthony Sherley? That story, dear reader, has its beginning in a certain turn of events in Venice in the spring of the year 1598. A mission to the court of Ferrara that Anthony had undertaken for his patron, the earl of Essex, had aborted when the political situation changed. Anthony and his companions, considering it beneath their dignity and that of their lord to return to London empty-handed, took a detour to Venice, where, one of the party wrote, “we did solace ourselves almost three months,”7 while Anthony “cast about for a new enterprise.”8

The choice for a new enterprise was mainly the product of happenstance. The participant we have just quoted, George Manwaring, tells it as he saw it:

And in that time we lay in Venice Sir Anthony did fall into some conversation with a Persian merchant, which did traffic in Venice for the King of Persia, for which commodities as were wanting in his own country, which was English cloth, both woollen and linen. This merchant told Sir Anthony of the royalty of the Sophi, his king, which pleased Sir Anthony very well; yet not resolved to go thither, but to take his voyage another way: but in the same city of Venice it was his fortune to hear of a great traveller, newly come to Venice from the Sophi’s court, whose name was Angelo, born in Turkey, but a good Christian, who had travelled sixteen years, and did speak twenty-four kind of languages. This Angelo did likewise acquaint Sir Anthony of the worthiness of the King of Persia, that he was a gallant soldier, very bountiful and liberal to strangers, and what entertainment he had at his court; assuring Sir, Anthony that, if he would go thither, it would be greatly for his advancement; and moreover that he would be his guide, and attend on him thither, which Sir Anthony did consent unto, yet kept it very close, for fear it should be known in Turkey, because we must pass through that country, and the Great Turk and the King of Persia being not great

3 Quoted in Davies 1967, pp. 211–12.
4 Quoted in Ross 1933, p. 85 and Savory 1967, p. 80, in slightly different transcriptions.
5 Quoted in Davies 1967, p. 203. Writing in the early years of the twenty-first century, I cannot help thinking of Bernard Madoff, a man of the same mold, who also commanded the fanatic admiration of his prey.
6 Quoted in Savory 1967, p. 77.
8 Savory 1967, p. 81. The myth Savory debunks with some degree of overkill is that the Sherleys taught the Persians to manufacture and employ artillery. In the early seventeenth century this garnered Anthony and Robert much unmerited acclaim.
9 George Manwaring, A True Discourse of Sir Anthony Sherley’s Travels into Persia, 1607, first published in 1625, quoted in Ross 1933, pp. 176–77.
10 Davies 1967, p. 81.
friends, but only for a league of three years, which was all expired.11

There might have been more to it all than the rumor that the shah of Persia—in Western writings mostly called the Sophi, after the grandfather of the Safavid dynasty, Safi al-din (d. 1334)—was bountiful and liberal to strangers. There is also evidence that the Venetians urged Anthony to travel to Persia in order to organize attacks against the Portuguese and divert Persian trade from Portugal to “all Christendom and in particular to Venice.”12 On that basis, Davies suggests that Sherley’s “conversation with a Persian merchant” might have been arranged by the Serenissima. However that may be, on May 24 or 25, 1598, Sherley took a party of twenty-six or twenty-seven, “six of whom were classed as gentlemen,” off to the east. Among his companions was his younger brother Robert (probably 1581–1628).

Exactly one year later, the Sherley band departed from Isfahan in completely remade guise. The anti-Portuguese sabotage and fortune-hunting expedition had morphed into a fully credited embassy of Persia to eight European courts, with a grand historical mission. Fifteen Englishmen (fifteen others and Robert were left behind as hostages), the Persian ambassador Husain ‘Ali Beg, four secretaries, fifteen servants, five interpreters, and a Franciscan and a Dominican monk were accompanied for two days by the shah himself on the beginning of their long trek to Europe.13 In addition to the pack animals and horses for the travelers, the caravan was augmented by thirty-two camels bearing presents for the European heads of state and courts to be visited. (The camels did not make it past Archangel, where Sherley seems to have sold them to “an English friend” and lied about them for the rest of the stressful journey.)14 Sherley’s own publication on his venture was not published until 1613, but its title could have been written, and perhaps was, as early as mid-1599.

Sir Antony Sherley his relation of his trauels into Persia. The danger, and distresses, which befell him in his passage, both by sea and land, and his strange and unexpected deliverances. His magnificent entertainment in Persia, his honourable employment there-hence, as ambassador to the princes of Christendome, the cause of his disappoint-ment therein, with his advice to his brother, Sir Robert Sherley, also, a true relation of the great magnificence, value, prudence, sustinance, temper-ance, and other manifold virtues of Abbas, now king of Persia, with his great conquests, whereby he hath enlarged his dominions. Penned by Sr. Anthony Sherley, and recommended to his brother, Sr. Robert Sherley, being now in prosecution of the like Honourable employment.

What occurred, we must ask, before May 1599 that allowed for this astonishing metamorphosis of a buccaneer into an ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor, the Pope, the kings of Poland, Spain, France, England and Scotland, the republic of Venice (to which other sources add the grand duke of Tuscany as well as the earl of Essex)?15 The short answer to this question has three parts. One is that Sherley lied to the shah about his status. As the court secretary Uruch Beg later wrote, Anthony introduced himself to the shah “as cousin of the Scottish king James, saying that all the kings of Chris-tendom had recognized him as such, and had now empowered him as their ambassador to treat with the king of Persia, who should make a confederacy with them in order to wage war against the Turk, who was indeed the common enemy of all of them.”16 Second, the same source tells us, “this Christian gentle- man had by chance arrived in the very nick of time, for the king of Persia was them himself preparing to send an ambas-sador with many gifts to the king of Spain.” Anthony’s lie fit perfectly into a pre-written role. Not only Shah Abbas (1571– 1629, r. 1587–1629), but his predecessors Tahmasp (1514–1576, r. 1525–1576) and Isma’il (1487–1524, r. 1501–1524) as well had been in intensive contact with various European powers concerning joint operations against the Turks.

In 1592, seven years before the arrival of Sherleys, Pope Clement VII sent a proposal to Shah Abbas that he and the Christian princes should combine in a league against the Turk, but Abbas was still occupied with the Uzbegs and was not yet ready to deal with the enemy in the west. In his campaign against the Uzbegs he was at first unsuccessful, but at the time the Sherleys arrived in Qazvin he had finally tri-umphed over the Tartar horde; he was also contemplating sending an envoy to the Emperor, the Pope and other Chris-tian princes as his grandfather and great-grandfather had done, with a proposal such as the Pope had made to him, that Persians and Christians should form an alliance against the Turks … In his account of his stay in Persia Sir Anthony appropriated the idea of a Perso-Christian league, and he was apparently happily oblivious of the long history of the efforts to form such an alliance.17

The third part of the explanation is that Anthony was forced by circumstances to extract maximum credit from this happenstance. Credit is here to be understood literally as well as metaphorically, Julia Schleck, in her recent book Telling True Tales of Islamic Lands, convincingly relates the books and pamphlets on Anthony and Robert Sherley—and Thomas as well, whose life as a pirate marqué we cannot deal with here—to the financial and political fall of the family, brought about in the first place by the older Sir Thomas. In 1597, following a fat decade in which, as Treasurer at War, he systematically mis-appropriated funds entrusted to him by the Crown for the war in the Low Countries, he was found out and imprisoned. As an informant put it in a letter of March 8, 1597: “Now I may boldly write unto you that he is fallen.” The queen had declared “Sir Thomas and his heirs—Thomas, Anthony, and Robert Sherley—both ‘fallen’ and deeply in debt to the Crown.”
One of the central problems of the “fallen” courtier was the completeness of his collapse. Once it was clear that a previously powerful and wealthy gentleman had incurred the wrath of his sovereign, no one could risk being associated with that person in any way ... A fallen courtier like Sherley, who had just lost his reputation and all of his support at court ... was not likely to be extended much credit either by local tradesmen or the unofficial moneylenders of Elizabethan England ... In order to change this situation, the Sherleys would have to regain their reputation for honor and for favor among the nation’s great. To gain financial credit, they would need reputational credit. The search for credit led all three of Sir Thomas’s sons—Thomas, Anthony, and Robert—to take to the seas ... Each of them sponsored a series of publications detailing their exploits in Islamic lands, seeking to turn their travels abroad into credit at home.18

This background helps us to understand what was going through Anthony’s mind fourteen months after his father’s fall. He was out for all or nothing, and the Persian ploy being dangled before him in the taverns of Venice, whether engineered by the Signoria or not, looked like just the thing. Upon his return, he was not slow in attempting to cash in on his credit. Why the Relation of his travels was not published until 1613 is unclear. But in 1600, in the first months of his presence in Europe, a London printer brought out a pamphlet entitled "A true report of Sir Anthony Sherleys iourney ouerland to Venice: fro[n] thence by sea to Antioch, Aleppo, and Babilom, and soo to Casbine in Persia: his entertainment there by the great Sophie: his oration: his letters of credence to the Christian princes: and the priuiledg obtained of the great Sophie, for the quiet passage and trafique of all Christian marchants, throughout his whole dominions"

Acceptance at a major court, credentials at the courts of the princes of Christendom, privileged status for Christian merchants—that was worth a lot, was it not?

By printing his “verbatim” speech, the pamphlet evoked the classical histories that sought to glorify the deeds of great men; by printing the letters of credence, the pamphlet used the formal features of a letter to bolster Anthony’s credibility … The True Report thus employed the conventions of both history writing and foreign newsprint in its efforts proactively to legitimate Anthony’s status as ambassador.19

Whatever Anthony’s intentions may have been, he failed to achieve them. It is actually doubtful whether the pamphlet reached its audience at all. Schleck seems not to have noticed that publication of the True Report was suppressed not once but twice, on October 2, 1600 and September 7, 1601. Having failed to place this weighty instrument where he wanted it, Anthony, aided by his brother Thomas, resorted to lighter forms of literature. In 1601, a more conventional travel account written by one of Anthony’s companions, William Parry, saw the light of day: "A new and large discourse of the trauels of sir Anthony Sherley Knight, by sea, and ouer land, to the Persian Empire, wherein are related many straunge and wonderfull accidents. It was followed in 1607 by three pieces of Sherleian propaganda: two different editions of Anthony Nixon’s The three English

...............18 Schleck 2011, pp. 64–66.
19 Ibid., p. 68.
brothers Sir Thomas Sherley his travels, with his three years imprison-
ment in Turkey; his enlargement by his majesties letters to the great
Turke: and lastly, his safe returne into England this present year, 1607.
Sir Anthony Sherley his embassage to the Christian princes. Master
Robert Sherley his wars against the Turkes, with his marriage to the
Emperor of Persia his niece, and a stage play; John Day, William
Rowley and George Wilkins, _The trauailes of the three English
brothers Sir Thomas Shirley Sir Anthony Mr. Robert. As it is now
play’d by her Maiesties Servants_. In 1609 and 1611 three more publica-
tions, by Thomas Middleton, Robert Chambers and John Cartwright, featured Sir Anthony in the titles and in the limelight of various writings. Anthony or Robert even has a walk-on role in Shakespeare’s _Twelfth Night_, staged in 1601 or 1602, as “fencer to the Soply.”

_Twelfth Night_ aside, none of these publications is distin-
guished by literary merit, and although they do not depart substantively from the known facts, they all display one ten-
denious feature that misrepresents Sir Anthony’s stature: the emphasis which they place on his ambassadorship, the very crux of the matter.

The story of the embassage which Shah Abbas sent to Europe is sometimes befogged because readers have certain preconceptions of the dignity of an ambassador which the Persian monarch never had. The word “ambassador” suggests a prestigious person to whom all members of the party or embassage are subordinate. In the view of Shah Abbas the honors attached to an embassy were scanty and he was inclined to distribute them among the participants. In the group which left Persia for the courts of Europe there was a venerable Persian, Husein Ali Beg, and a Dominican friar, Nicolao de Melo, both of whom, in addition to Sir Anthony, may have had ambassadorial status.

The truth of this observation is borne out by the unceasing bickering over precedence during the campaign, especially between Husain ‘Ali Beg and Anthony. There was more at stake than one’s place on the dais or at the dinner table. By contemporaneous custom, the host nation that received a for-
23 Their altercation in Rome, at a papal reception on April 5, 1601, was noted
25 _Ibid._, p. 262.
26 Quoted at greater length in _ibid._, p. 263.

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of Jangiz Beg, who had returned to Shah ‘Abbas fifteen years earlier, and who was beheaded on charges of swindling the shah and maligning his ambassador. \textsuperscript{27} Indeed, when the subject arose, the shah was heard to remark of Nuqd that “had he come, and been found faulty, by my head [an oath of no small force] he should have been cut in as many pieces as there are days in the year and burnt in the open market with dog’s turds.” \textsuperscript{28} A considerably less attractive way to die than an overdose of opium on the waves, Nuqd must have thought.

Whatever western misconceptions concerning the dignity of the ambassador Anthony Sherley may have harbored in the early days of his Persian adventures would have been reinforced by certain Persian court usages. The way George Man-waring describes the first official reception of the Sherleys comes closer to a Hollywood fantasy than anything a European of any period would ever have experienced. The shah took Anthony by the hand and insisted that he sit beside him on his throne, kissing him and calling him his brother. Any Persian who objected, he said, however high and mighty he might be, would have his head cut off. \textsuperscript{29} As the object of these and other over-the-top displays of imperial favor, Sherley might be forgiven for assuming that he and no one else was the shah’s representative to Europe.

It is good at this juncture to point out one striking circumstance concerning the mutual relations between the Persians and their European visitors: all the quite extensive and detailed information that has come down to us concerning the Sherley missions, which ran from 1599 to 1628 and marked the lives of many Europeans, have left no trace whatsoever in Persian historiography. (The Safavid archives are no more; they were dumped into the Zayandeh River in Isfahan by Afghan invaders in 1722.) Since 1933, no one seems to have expanded on the evidence then culled by Edward Denison Ross:

As a result of careful search I have only discovered one passage which could refer to Anthony and his party … Among the events of A. H. 1007 (1598–9) he [Jalāl ud-Din Muhammad Munajjim Yazdī, author of a history of Persia from 1524 to 1611] records that “after the conquest of Khorāsān, envoys came from Europe saying ‘We have done much harm to the Turks, and have defeated them. You must now endeavour to regain your own territory so that the aspirations of us both may be realized.’” \textsuperscript{30}

This unnerving situation presents us with a cultural gap as significant as it is difficult to fathom. A border-crossing phenomenon that took on nearly legendary status in the writings of one of the partner cultures did not even merit mention by the other. \textsuperscript{31} This particular form of asymmetry is undoubtedly related to the world view underlying history writing in Persia in general. As David Morgan has written,

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., pp. 140 (Husein ‘Ali Beg), 273 (Nuqd ‘Ali Beg) and 234 (Jangiz Beg).

\textsuperscript{28} Quoted in ibid., p. 276.

\textsuperscript{29} Manwaring, quoted in Ross 1933, pp. 209–10.

\textsuperscript{30} Ross 1933, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{31} Yet Anthony’s grand procession through Europe, being received royally from court to court, is not always traceable in the archives. This is commented on “with astonishment” with regard to Augsburg and Munich by Franz Babinger. Babinger 1932, p. 23.
For most of the Middle Ages, writers in the Islamic world did not rate western Europe very highly, if indeed they thought about that part of the world at all. For Islam, Europe was a remote and barbarous backwater. Civilization ended at the Pyrenees. Muslim geographers sometimes made an attempt to describe the area, but historians largely ignored it.32 Rashid ad-Din’s History of the Franks [1305/06; for centuries after the Crusades, all Europeans in the east were called Franks] is then of rather considerable historiographical interest. Yet even here there is a very significant contrast between his treatment of the Franks and what he has to say about the other peoples in his world history. For one thing, other areas—notably China and India—are incorporated into the text of his main history: the lands of the Franks, never. For another, he generally gives us details about the identity of his informants—a Buddhist monk in the case of the history of India, for example. He tells us nothing about his informants on the Franks … One would never guess from reading this History that there were extensive contacts between Europe and Mongol Persia during Rashid al-Din’s time. Yet there were.33

This was still the prevailing attitude in Safavid historiography, from which one would also never guess that European contacts, including those with the Sherleys, formed an increasingly important part of Persian statecraft and commerce. Eerily, it was also the prevailing attitude two thousand years before the time of the Sherleys. As much as one would like to avoid stereotypes in attributing characteristics to nations, and as universal as self-importance may be in the formation of national identities, it would be all too cavalier to ignore the correspondences between what David Morgan wrote in 1994 of the Persians and what Herodotus wrote in 430 BC:

Of nations, they honor most their nearest neighbors, whom they esteem next to themselves; those who live beyond these they honor in the second degree; and so with the remainder, the further they are removed, the less the esteem in which they hold them. The reason is that they look upon themselves as very greatly superior in all respects to the rest of mankind, regarding others as approaching to excellence in proportion as they dwell nearer to them; whence it comes to pass that those who are the farthest off must be the most degraded of mankind.34

An exception that proves the rule is provided by the only piece of writing by a Persian concerning the events and persons here covered. That is a 345-page Spanish book, published in Valladolid in 1604, by one of the four secretaries of the mission, Husain ‘Ali Beg’s cousin Uruch Beg. In Europe Uruch Beg, like five other Persian members of the mission, was converted to Catholicism, changing his name to Don Juan. The passages in Don Juan’s book on the Christian faith and his praise for Charles V and the Pope are reflections of his post-Persian attitudes, put into words under his name by his coach and translator, Licentiate Don Alfonso Rémen.35

Beside geographical proximity, essential features such as language had heavy impact on the Persian weltanschauung. The court language of Safavid Persia was Azerbaijani Turkish, while Persian was spoken in the Mogul court of India. This farthered a Persian self-image as a people at the center of a world stretching from the Bosporus to the eastern shore of the Indian subcontinent. Who could take account of the doings, further to the west, of peoples who spoke a bewildering variety of languages that no one in Persia understood? A year after leaving Venice on the sly, calling himself a merchant to mask his real purpose, Anthony was escorted out of Isfahan by the shah of shahs himself, who accompanied him for two days on the road. “So the king kissed Sir Anthony three or four times,” wrote Manwaring, “and kissed us all, and said that if we did return again we should receive great honour.”36 For all his demonstrations of confidence in his great Frankish friend, ‘Abbas nonetheless felt it wise to assure himself of Anthony’s return or at least allegiance by keeping the nineteen-year-old Robert as a hostage. Anthony never did return. The shah kept Robert in Persia for nine years, alternately as a palace favorite and a detainee, before sending him to Europe to see what had happened to his brother and perform the same mission which Anthony had failed to accomplish.

The disappointing outcome of Anthony Sherley’s mission, with colorful incidents that “leave us gasping,” has been described in detail in contemporaneous and later writings, and will not be rehearsed here.37 One small sample of its flavor will have to suffice: no sooner had Anthony’s emissary hit the road than all hell broke loose. The rivalry between the English Protestant, the Persian Muslim, and the Spanish Catholic (a common friar pretending to be the Procurator General of all the East Indies) erupted regularly not only in arguments concerning protocol, but in fistfights and one instance of attempted murder. At Astrakhan, the two having completely fallen out, Sherley made de Melo a prisoner, which he did, he explained, “with good confidence because I was in a country [Russia] in league with my Mistress [Queen Elizabeth; in fact Sherley was under a ban from his Mistress, who forbade him from ever returning to England].” Later it was said that Sherley tried to drown de Melo. The Persian members of the party declared that Sherley threatened to kill the friar simply because the latter had asked for the repayment of a thousand crowns he had loaned Sir Anthony and for the…

34 Le Strange 1926, p. 10. This presentation of the facts would be disputed by Jonathan Burton, who writes, “Taking the case of the Shah’s two ambassadors as a working example, this essay will consider the significance of Safavid histories and institutions in order to indicate how non-English sources can inform, and even modify, our accounts of early modern English literature…” Burton’s book, a thousand crowns he had loaned Sir Anthony and for the


return of ninety diamonds he had entrusted to Sherley for safekeeping. The English also quarreled with the Persians, “insomuch that had we not had a guard in our company, one of us had killed another.”

In and out of jail and favor, now claiming to represent the shah, then (or at the same time) the emperor, the Pope, the king of Spain or various English or Scottish protectors, at different times a Catholic, a Protestant—and, who knows, perhaps a Muslim, too—Anthony made his picaresque way to Moscow, Prague (1600), Florence, Rome, Venice (1601), Prague (1604), Sicily, Prague, Morocco, Genoa, Alicante, Cadiz, Morocco (1605), Lisbon, Madrid (1606), Naples, Livorno, Florence, Ferrara, Prague (1607), Ferrara, Madrid, Valladolid (1608), Alicante, Palermo, Trapani, Messina, Syracuse, Palermo, Naples, and finally back to Spain (1610), where he was stranded for life, having exhausted all possibilities for cover elsewhere. One chance that presented itself a year later, when his widely respected brother Robert arrived in Madrid and put Anthony up in his lodgings, was spoiled by Anthony himself. Their brotherly arrangement had been in effect only a few months before Robert found out that Anthony had betrayed him behind his back in a move that could have put Robert in jail. It is fitting that Anthony, under the assumed title El Conde de Leste (which, to modern ears, sounds for all the world like a Wizard of Oz-like Count of the East), spent the last, obscure two or three decades of his life in Granada, the burial place of many a myth. I see him at one tapas bar after another, dining off stories so unbelievable that his interlocutors will have laughed at their own incredulity. How could they have known that those bizarre tales were true, albeit embroidered, and that the man telling them had been certified in his noble standing by more than half a dozen rulers?

By the time Shah ‘Abbas released Robert from his house confinement in 1609 and dispatched him to Europe with the same brief as his brother—create a military alliance against the Turks and expand trade—the young man had been through a lot. Anthony had spent only half a year in Persia; Robert had stayed for nine, during which he learned Persian and distinguished himself in military campaigns. His treatment by the shah was largely determined by events beyond his control, such as dips in Perso-European relations or nasty tidings about Anthony, when the shah would cold-shoulder his hostage for a while. Those who knew Robert as well as Anthony were unanimous in their judgment of the two: Robert was a true gentleman, Anthony a low scoundrel pretending to be a gentleman. Francis Cottington, English ambassador in Madrid, wrote in 1610: “Mr. [Robert] Sherley hath here gotten very great reputation through his wise and discreet carriage, he is judged both modest and moreover brave in his speech, diet and expenses, and in my poor opinion to those vices which in Sir Anthony do so abound, in this many may be found the contraries.” In eloquent fulfillment of his superior dignity, Robert saw it as his duty, during his visit to one European city after another, to settle the debts and unpaid loans

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37 Quoted in Davies 1967, p. 119.
38 Quoted in ibid., p. 232.
that Anthony had strewn across the continent. Another turn in life that takes us in for Robert is his marriage. Shortly before leaving Isfahan, Robert married a woman who, sixty years later, inscribed her name on the gravestone for herself and Robert as *Theresia Sampsonia Amazontes Samph'ffii Circassiae Principis Filia*, translated by David W. Davies as “Theresia Sampsonia, native of the region of the Amazons, daughter of Samphuffus, prince of Circassia.” The two were deeply attached to each other. On his way to the Christian courts, following the same northern route as Anthony, Robert spent the winter of 1608/09 in Kraków, where he and his party were entertained sumptuously. Leaving Terezia at a convent in the former Polish capital, he went on to Prague, where like Anthony he was appointed Knight of the Golden Spur, Milan, Florence, Rome, Spain and Lisbon. There Terezia rejoined him in December 1609, and with only a few interruptions they spent the remaining years of Robert’s life together.

That life, too, like Anthony’s, cannot here be recounted in other than abbreviated form. From Lisbon, Robert and Terezia sailed on to the Netherlands in a futile attempt to obtain an import license for Persian silk from the States General, and then to England, where they remained for a little over a year. In 1612 they set sail from Gravesend for Persia, which they reached only after a harrowing two-and-a-half year voyage via India on which they were nearly killed both at sea and by the Portuguese. None of their English companions on the journey made it alive to Persia. Shah ‘Abbas showed his gratitude by commissioning a new ambassadorship, to commence within a month. Robert managed to wrest three months out of his master before sailing to Goa and Lisbon. He, Terezia, and their entourage arrived on September 27, 1617, having shared their water and food with the Portuguese when provisions ran low at sea. There followed a long sojourn in Madrid until March 22, 1622. In diplomatic terms, nothing was achieved before the Sherleys set out eastwards once more, to Florence, where they were received by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, to Rome for a papal audience, Warsaw, and perhaps Moscow. December 1623 saw them back in England for the last time, where some progress on a Persian accord was being made with James I until his death in March 1625. Talks with the new court of Charles I were so spooked by the démarche made with James I until his death in March 1625. Talks with the new court of Charles I were so spooked by the démarches of both Charles and many of his contemporaries that Robert was acting on orders of the shah or not.

Robert’s third arrival in Isfahan, via Surat, India, and Gomro on the Persian Gulf, was the prelude to a tragic betrayal. After spending thirty years of his life in the faithful service of Shah ‘Abbas, at a juncture when he stood in desperate need of recognition and confirmation of his status, the shah turned his back on him. For whatever reason—Davies refers to disappointments in Perso-English relations over the last years—the shah allowed his chief minister Muhammad ‘Ali Beg to tell Cotton he was sure that the Shah had not authorized Count Robert to make the proposals for trade which he had made in England. The English were welcome as were all other nations to trade in Persia, and when they no longer desired to trade they were free to depart. Mahomet Ali Beg declared that Sherley’s letters of credence were not genuine, and that when he had showed them to Shah Abbas, the latter had destroyed them in a rage. Exhausted and weakened by his travels and travails, Robert died in Qazvin on July 13, 1628.

What happened next was equally ugly. The Sherleys had a rival for the favor of Shah ‘Abbas in the person of the Dutch painter Jan Lukas van Hasselt (b. before 1600, d. after 1653). Although he did not come to Isfahan until 1618, in the following of the intrepid Italian traveler Pietro della Valle (1586–1652), Van Hasselt established a remarkably successful relationship to Abbas. Thanks to his appointment as painter to the shah and his status as a free man, bolstered by his usefulness to the Dutch East India Company when it shouldered its way into Persia in 1623, Van Hasselt enjoyed far superior access to the ruler than the hostage Robert Sherley. Somehow, the Dutchman and the Englishman are largely lacking in the literature on one of them or the other, although they belong in each other’s story. Van Hasselt was a nasty piece of work who was to bring about his own downfall within three years of an incident reported by a close observer of the scene, Thomas Herbert (1606–1682). A member of the Dodmore Cotton embassage, the young Herbert wrote an outstanding book on the mission, published in London in 1634: *A relation of some yeares travaile, begunne anno 1626. Into Afrique and the greater Asia, especially the territories of the Persian monarchie: … Together with the proceedings and death of the three late ambassadors: Sir D. C., Sir R. S. and the Persian Nugl-beg: as also the two great monarchs, the king of Persia and the great mogul. As he tells it, a Dutch Painter (who had served the King of Persia twenty yeares) complies with Mahomet-Ally-Beg, and pretending an Ingagement he was in, to one Crole Flemming (for some monies Sir Robert Sherley had long since borrowed of him) he is beleued, and got a Warrant from the Cawowe or Justice to seize upon the Ladies goods, which wicked plot could not be so private, but was knowne by a faithfull honest Gentleman Master Hedges, a Follower of our Ambassador, who straight-way acquaints the Lady with it.*

Terezia hastily tore out a piece of satin into which she threw her most valuable jewels and gave them to Hedges, who ran off just before the Pagans Serjants, with John the Flemming, entred her Chamber, carried away what was valuable or vendible, his Horses, Camels, Vests, Turbants, a rich Persian Dagger, and some other things, but after narrow search finding no Jewels (for they had seen him weare many and twas them, hee had worrried in his Ostrich appetite [he would have liked to swallow in his intemperate appetite] made, angry and ashamed, they departed unsatisfied.

40 Quoted in ibid., pp. 276–77.
41 Quoted in Schwartz 2009, pp. 133–34.
42 Quoted in ibid.
eight in crimson velvet gowns, with damask undercoats; four in blue damask gowns, with taffety undercoats; four in yellow damask, with their undercoats of a Persian stuff; his page in cloth of gold; his four footmen in carnation taffety. 43

Details of this kind are not reported at every stage, but whenever they are, the writers are impressed, sometimes overwhelmed, by the appearance of the Sherley parties and the value of their costumes and accessories. The brothers stage-crafted their public appearances, which were often accompanied by conspicuous acts of gift-giving. In 1606 Anthony “stayed five months in Safi and became the sensation of Morocco. He dressed magnificently, wearing not only the order of Saint Michael which Henry IV had given him, but the regalia of the orders of the Holy Ghost and of the Golden Fleece which no one had given him.” When Moulay Abou Fares sent 500 soldiers to conduct him and his party to court, “Count Anthony presented each man with a new turban, and after his arrival in Marrakesh he continued to be fabulously generous.” His largesse was paid for by others. “Such was his charm and generosity that two Spanish merchants vied with one another in lending him money.” Left holding the bag when he took his indecorous leave were a group of Jewish merchants, who were fleeced for 250,000 florins, and Christians, for 60,000 or 70,000. The Christians he denounced “as persons who were defrauding Abou Fares of customs duties, a charge that ruined many of them.”44

43 Quoted in Ross 1933, p. 204.

Terezia was able to save that much of the situation, but she was then incarcerated for three years for having converted to Christianity from Islam as a child. Upon her release she made her way to Constantinople, where she remained for another three years. In December 1634 she moved to Rome, where she bought a house in Trastevere near the church of S. Maria della Scala, staying there until her death in 1668. Having brought Robert’s remains to Rome, she had him buried in that church in advance of herself, beneath a plaque commemorating them both (fig. 41).

“Turbans, a rich Persian Dagger”: Anthony and Robert Sherley would not have gone down in the history books were it not for Robert’s wardrobe, which, from the beginning, was remarkable and remarked upon. When in 1599 the brothers rode out for their first meeting with the shah, on his way back from the Uzbek wars, with the heads of hundreds (according to Don Juan no less than 24,000) of enemy soldiers on pikes, they were dressed to the nines. George Manwaring, in a first-person report:

“In this sort was Sir Anthony and we of his company appointed: first, Sir Anthony himself in rich cloth of gold, his gown and his undercoat, his sword hanging in a rich scarf to the worth of a thousand crowns, being set with pearl and diamonds, and on his head a turban according, to the worth of two thousand dollars, his boots embroidered with pearl and rubies; his brother, Mr Robert Sherley, likewise in cloth of gold, his gown and undercoat, with a rich turban on his head; his interpreter, Angelo, in cloth of silver, gown and undercoat; four in cloth of silver gowns, with undercoats of silk damask; four in crimson velvet gowns, with damask undercoats; four in blue damask gowns, with taffety undercoats; four in yellow damask, with their undercoats of a Persian stuff; his page in cloth of gold; his four footmen in carnation taffety. 43

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43 Quoted in Ross 1933, p. 204.
Fig. 29 Aegidius Sadeler (ca. 1570–1629), Husain ‘Ali Beg, 1601
engraving, 20 x 13.4 cm (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1941-285)
Inscribed:
CVCHIIN QLIREAG ICLLYTVS DOMINVS PERSA SOCVS
LEGATIONIS MAGNI SOPHI REGIS PERSARUM
(Husain Ali Beg, friend of the illustrious Persian lord, legate to
the Grand Sophi, king of Persia)
cum priuil. S. Ca. Mtis
(with privilege of His Imperial Majesty)

Husain ‘Ali Beg icht fristadan hamrah-i hazrat-i amirzada
(Husain Ali Beg, legate despatched as travel companion to the
exalted amirzada [son of the prince])
S. Ca. Mtis sculptor Aegidivs Sadeler ad viuum delineavit Pragæ
1601
(Made after life by His Imperial Majesty’s engraver Aegidius
Sadeler in Prague, 1601)

Fig. 30 Aegidius Sadeler (ca. 1570–1629), Sir Anthony Sherley,
datable to January 1601, engraving, 19.4 x 13.4 cm (London, The
British Museum, P.1.169)
Inscribed: ANTONIVS.SHERLEYNS.ANGLVS.EQVES.AVRATVS
(Anthony Sherley, Englishman, Knight in the Order of the Golden
Spur)
cum priuil. S. Ca. Mtis. (With privilege of His Imperial Majesty)
Magni Sophi Persarum Legatus inuictissimo / Caesar Ceterisque
Principibus Christianis: huiusce Amicitie et Auctor et ductor
EX ORE, AD OS. (From the gaze [of the artist] to the face [of the
sitter], [that is to say, after life])
S. Ca. Mtis sculptor Aegidivs Sadeler D[ono]D[edit]: (Aegidius
Sadeler, printmaker to His Imperial Majesty, gave this offering as
a present)

Fig. 31 Dominicus Custos (Dominicus de Coster; 1560–1612)
after Aegidius Sadeler, Sir Anthony Sherley, datable to February
1601, engraving, 17.3 x 12.8 cm (London, National Portrait
Gallery, NPG D26056)
Inscribed: ANTONIVS.SHERLEYNS.ANGLVL AVRAT.MAG.SOPH.
PERSAR. AD CAESAREM, etc. LEGATVL. (Anthony Sherley,
Englishman, knight in the Order of the Golden Spur, legate of the
Great Sophi of Persia to the Emperor and others)
ANTONI Orator Persæ, Angliae, regis, ad istud / Excelso munus
peruenis ingenio (O Anthony, legate of the Persian king to the
king of England, you were given this appointment thanks to your
great gifts)

In the entry on this print in Evelyn Shirley’s book on the Sherley
genealogy and coats of arms, Stemmata Sherleano (1841, 2nd
ed. 1873), three additional verses followed:
Multorum mores hominum qui vidit et urbes,
A Persa Orator Rege Britannus hic est.
A Persis aliquem tanti factum esse Britannum,
Historici veteris num liber ullus habet?
Extremis placuit sed Lusitanus ut Indis,
Sic, extreme, favet Persa, Britanne, tibi.

(This is the Briton who saw the cities and customs of many peoples, ambassador of the king of Persia. Did historians of old ever write a book treating of a Briton who did as much for the Persians? …)

Fig. 32 Dominic Custos (Dominicus de Coster; 1560–1612), Husain 'Ali Beg, 1601, engraving, dimensions unknown (reproduced from Babinger 1932, fig. 4)

Inscribed: CVCHEIN.OLLI.BEAG.INCLTVS.DOMINVS.PERSA.SOCIUS.

Ioannes Orlandi formis Romae in platea pasquini Anno Domini 1601. Super. P[er]messu (Made by Giovanni Orlandi in Rome in Piazza Pasquino, in the year 1601. With permission [of the authorities])

Fig. 33 Giovanni Orlandi (fl. 1590–1640), Anthony Sherley, 1601, engraving, 19.6 x 14 cm (London, National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG D35607)

Inscribed: ANTONIVS SHERLEYNS ANGLVS E qVES AVRATVS / Magni Sophi Persarum Legatus Santiss D.N. Clem. VIII ceternique Principibus Christianis huius amicitiæ et Auctor et Ductor

Fig. 34 Giovanni Orlandi (fl. 1590–1640) after Aegidius Sadeler (ca. 1570–1629), Husain 'Ali Beg, 1601, engraving, dimensions unknown (reproduced from Babinger 1932, fig. 5)

Inscribed: CVCHEIN.OLLI.BEAG.INCLTVS.DOMINVS.PERSA.SOCIUS.

Ioannes Orlandi formis Ramae in platea pasquini Superiori permisso (Made by Giovanni Orlandi in Rome, in Piazza Pasquino. With permission [of the authorities])
We are here dealing with modes of self-fashioning and self-presentation that are intertwined with affairs of state, private interests and, for Anthony, irresistible opportunities for embezzlement. Because of the basic hollowness of their enterprises in themselves, it is the shell that has remained, and its interplay with the parts of Persian, Russian, and European society that responded to it. As Julia Schleck argues, the “conclusion to the Sherleys’ efforts to unite England with Persia—militarily, economically, and textually—remind us that the Sherleys’ success was highly determined by the audience to which they addressed themselves.” The first and most important of these were the court and the merchant community. They were addressed in the True Report of 1600, which has the appearance of a serious news pamphlet. Publications of this kind often contained the texts of official documents, and so does this one. The documents concerned, following an “oration” by Sherley himself, were “Coppies,” in English translation, of Sherley’s letters of credence from “the great Sophic” and of “the free Priviledges ob[tained] by Sir Anthony Sherley, of the great Sophie, for all Christians to trade and trafique into Persia.” Sherley was bringing back the goods.

The alliance with Persia is thus presented as a fact accompli—Sherley the Englishman speaks with the voice of the Persian king and “You shall credit him in whatsoever you shall demande, or he shall say, as mine owne Person.” This speech act simultaneously lends a powerful boost to the credibility of the “True Report” and establishes the absolute credibility of Sherley’s embassy in Europe … The statement repeatedly enacts the living link between England and Persia through the medium of Anthony’s body, a body that could then be metaphorically figured into the corps of a joint Anglo-Persian army … Evoked as a witness to the accuracy of reported events, this letter makes witnesses of its readers to an embassy already metaphorically accomplished through the living link of Sherley himself.46

The trouble was that the message was not accepted by the intended audience. The publication was suppressed twice, and the authenticity of its contents doubted. Sherley’s credit was not restored. At once, he played the media card, lowering his pitch, in Parry’s New and large discourse of 1601, to the general reader, who was easier to convince. (Parry had left the main party off the Dutch coast to hurry on to London to prepare for Anthony’s re-entry, which never took place.) “As the many … references to the Sherleys during this time attest, they were quite popular among the London populace reading the accounts of their journeys or watching them on the stage.”47

Next to Anthony’s concerted appeal to the reading audience, his employment of visual media was decidedly minor. During his brief stay in Prague in January 1601 he posed for a printed portrait by Aegidius Sadeler (ca. 1570–1629), printmaker to the emperor since 1597. It was a rather conventional head-and-shoulders portrait of a military man in an oval format that Sadeler used for other portrait prints as well, with similar borders and inscriptions (fig. 27). The Latin inscription seems to say that the print was made without charge to the sitter, which suggests that the artist was paid by Rudolf for its execution as one of his courtesies to the ambassador. If so, a gesture of the same kind surely lay behind the origins of the very similar portrait of Husain ‘Ali Beg (cat. 1), made at the same time. This assumption is strengthened by the identical formulation and placing of the lines claiming imperial privilege for the prints.

Twin print portraits of the two were also made in Augsburg and Rome, two further destinations on their journey (figs. 28 and 30). In Augsburg they encountered a Flemish colleague of Sadeler’s, Dominicus de Coster (1560–1612), better known by the Latinized form of his name, Dominicus Custos. Custos had a large production of portrait prints of the great persons of the earth, including Shah ‘Abbas. His prints of Sherley and Husain were put into Part III of his series Atrium heroicum (Atrium of heroes), published in Augsburg in 1601. Following that edition, the portraits were also issued as separate prints. The astute German historian Franz Babinger, who made one of the signal contributions to research on Anthony Sherley, writes with categorical insistence that Sadeler’s portraits were the model for all copies to follow and that Custos adapted Sadeler’s models “with minor changes” for his own.48 This may be true of Custos’s portrait of Anthony, in which he is shown not in armor, but in civilian dress and wearing a chain with a medal of honor. These kinds of changes could have been required by the sitter for the specific aims of the print. However, Custos’s portrait of Husain departs from that of Sadeler in ways that suggest that it was made in the artist’s studio during the six days of the party’s stay in Augsburg in February 1601. The differences to which I refer are the substitution of a fur hat for the Shi’ite turban and the head itself, in its lighting, facial expression, and details of the pose, such as the uncovered ear. Whatever the truth of the matter, Dominicus’s prints, with different captions than those of Sadeler, are careful productions and not mechanical copies after Sadeler.

Finally, when the delegation arrived in Rome, the Italian printmaker Giovanni Orlandi (fl. 1590–1640) produced portraits of the two that do reproduce Sadeler’s likenesses, though they are shown in reverse, in rectangular format and with the addition of the coats of arms of the two sitters (figs. 29 and 31).

The similarities in composition, format, and lettering of the pairs leave no room for doubt that they came into being in tandem. The visual presentation of the sitters follows identical patterns and seems to treat the two men as equals, but, as Babinger has remarked, the captions do not. Whereas in Isfahan, according to Don Juan, Shah ‘Abbas appointed Anthony to “accompany his envoy the Persian ambassador,” here the roles are reversed.49 In all three sets of prints, Anthony is called the legatus or orator, the ambassador, and Husain Beg the socius, companion or concomitant. This is true even of the Persian inscription on Dominicus Custos’s portrait, which goes so far as to call Anthony “the exalted amir-
zade, an honorary title meaning literally “son of the prince.”

In the struggle for primacy between Anthony and Husain, Anthony clearly had the upper hand. Naturally enough, he will have been the one to provide the engraver with the information for captions, a position he exploited for his own advantage.

To say that Robert was more aware of the possibilities offered by the visual arts for the propagation of his image is a gross understatement. When he was received by Pope Paul V—“after many months”; evidently the Pope was not desperate to meet him—on September 28, 1609, he let no grass grow under his feet before seeing to the publication of a portrait engraving by Matthias Greuter, provided with a small vignette of the audience itself (fig. 32). What is most striking about the portrait is that Robert is dressed in Persian garb and wearing a turban of a special kind. Alexandra van Puyvelde of the Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire in Brussels confirmed upon request that the turban is of a Persian variety, both in its fabric—light, perhaps silk, with a motif of small lozenges—and in its bulk. Also Persian is the upright rod sticking out of it, called a 

taj, around which the cloth of the turban is wound. The 

taj was worn from the late fifteenth century on by the Qizilbash, the Turkmen followers of the Safavid shahs, mainly in the military. It was taken on by Persians as well; in the seventeenth century it was still in use, though the original long rod had been shortened.

The comments on this headdress by Master Safi al-Khamsa seem completely appropriate to the case:

This was a very special hat, and became a symbol of the Safavid Shah and his power. It was given as a gift by the Persian rulers during this time period, and only those who were supporters of the royalty and his regime could wear them. There are stories of Shah Abbas gifting European dignitaries with this hat on very rare occasions, and in these unique circumstances it was decorated with a Christian crucifix to respect the beliefs of these special recipients.

This hat was also called the Taj-Hayedari, pronounced /taj-high-eh-dahr-ee/, which means “Crown of Haydar.” Wrapped with a cloth turban made of cotton or linen, it was then sometimes wrapped with a decorative silk layer. The turban was also carefully arranged in order to display twelve distinct symbolic folds. These turbans were probably sewn on a hat form, rather than wrapped every time, as they are often seen pictured sitting on a pillow or tipped on a person’s head.

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50 For the reading, typographical rendition, and translation of this line I am indebted to Thomas Milo. According to Milo, the high quality of the inscription was exceptional in the west, where as a rule even scholars who read Middle Eastern languages were incapable of writing the letters correctly. See Milo 2012.

51 He may not have followed the process through all of its steps. His own name seems to be misspelled in the caption around the frame of Sadeler’s print. SHERLEYNS is engraved where SHERLEYUS would seem to be meant, a mistake that is easy to make in reading a handwritten u. However, since the form with n is repeated both by Custos and Orlandi, there is the possibility that Anthony somehow or other preferred SHERLEYNS to SHERLEYUS.

52 The audience was recorded in the Diario del ceremoniere of the Vatican: “1609 Septembris 28. Ingressus est Romam dominus comes dom Robertus Sherleys Anglus, alter orator regis Persarum, missus ad Sanctissimum Dominum nostrum post multos annos.” [c. 509B-510] Published In Orbaan 1920, p. 8. Robert is called “the other ambassador.” On August 27, his Persian counterpart had already been received by Roman noblemen.
Fig. 35  Matthias Greuter (1564–1638), Sir Robert Sherley (with vignette of his audience with Pope Paul V on September 28, 1609), engraving, 14.5 x 9.7 cm (trimmed inside the plate mark) (Collection of Loekie and Gary Schwartz, from an album owned by the Earl of Portland, William Bentinck [1649–1707])


die 29. septembris (September 29)


Supm lic. / MG f. / Si vendino alla Pace / cū priuil.° (Under license. MG [Initials of Matthias Greuter, intertwined] made it. On sale at the [Piazza della] Pace.)

Fig. 36  Diego de Astor (1584–ca. 1650) after Matthias de Greuter (1564–1638), Sir Robert Shirley, engraving, 17.8 x 12.9 cm (London, National Portrait Gallery, NPG D33608)

Inscribed: as in fig. 32, except for Robert Sherley’s age, which is given as 30.

Supm lic. / MG f. / Si vendino alla Pace / cū priuil.° (Under license. MG [Initials of Matthias Greuter, intertwined] made it. On sale at the [Piazza della] Pace.)
intact. As they were given in ceremonies by the Shah, it would make sense that the entire hat was sewn together. 53

If this is correct, then the cross was not added by Robert in deference to the Pope, as one might think; rather, it was included in the design by Shah Abbas out of respect for the religious feelings of non-Muslim protégés like Robert. Gestures of this kind as well as occasional suggestive remarks by the shah contributed to the speculation that he was considering converting to Christianity, a supposition upon which Christian emissaries like the Sherleys could and did play on in Kraków, Rome and elsewhere.

Van Puyvelde goes on to examine Robert’s other garments:

The cloak he seems to be wearing is only partly visible. The cloth may well be Persian; ogival and vegetal motifs on velvet, lampas and other fabrics were widely available. The collar looks like fur, which was fairly common. A non-Persian element in the dress is the clasp at the top of the cape, which I do not encountered in Persian garments of this kind and which looks European to me. The robe beneath the cape may be Persian. The buttons with their decorative horizontal bands (called a ‘frogged front’ in English) was widespread in Persia, adapted from Western models. The band across his chest does not look Persian to me. 54

In the vignette, Sherley kneels on a carpet at the feet of the enthroned Pope, who makes a gesture of benediction. Behind him stand three companions in turbans. Seated at the far wall are four cardinals. The inscriptions frame the image and the event rather pompously. Around the portrait in majuscules: “Robert Sherley, English count, Knight of the Golden Spur of the Emperor.” In the frame of the vignette is the date September 28, 1609, with a tablet below containing the text “Legate of the Great Sophi, king of Persia, to His Holiness Our Lord Paul V and other Christian princes. Entered Rome in solemn ceremony on the 28th day of September 1609 at the age of 28.” (Remarkably, in a copy after Greuter’s print by Diego de Astor, the same caption is repeated, except that Robert’s age is changed from 28 to 30 [fig. 33]. Robert’s year of birth is not documented, but is assumed to have fallen in 1581, making him 28 or at the most 29 in 1609.) The audience was a personal success for Robert, if not for the interests of the shah. “The Pope made Count Robert a count and a chamberlain of honor, and what was more lucrative, granted him the right to sell blessed rosaries, crosses, medals, and images, although of course the Papal letter was not quite worded in that way.”

In the small circles in which they moved, Robert and Tereza became sights to see for their rich, exotic dress. As the representative of the shah, Sherley habitually appeared in honorific high-status Persian attire made of silk and silk velvet; since negotiations concerning the silk trade were part of his brief, this was particularly appropriate. The churchman and historian Thomas Fuller (1608–1661), a near-contemporary, observed that Sherley “much affected to appear in for-

54 Alexandra van Puyvelde, in an e-mail of November 7, 2012.
55 Davies 1967, p. 228.
56 Quoted in Hearn 2007, p. 52.
57 Davies 1967, p. 236.
his enemy, the Turk; and Anthony portrayed this gentleman and his wife in Persian dress, enhancing the beauty of the portraits with the charm of their exotic garments.64 On the basis of information provided by the late Patricia Baker, Karen Hearn ventured the following description of Robert's dress:

Robert stands, holding a bow and arrows, wearing his overmantle (or balapush) half off the shoulders, in a characteristically Persian style. His folded turban cloth, balapush, sash and close-fitting sleeved underrobe (or qaba) would all have been made in Persia, probably in the royal tailoring department which handled the most important honorific garments. Although no textiles identical to those depicted by van Dyck putatively Persian; the cloak is surmised to be a khil’at or honorific garment of a particular, nearly mysteriously exalted kind. The shah would invest a departing ambassador with a khil’at as a token of his imperial immanence in the ambassador’s person.65 More exceptional was the right to wear a taj. “Sometimes,” wrote Pietro della Valle, quoted by Willem Floor, “His Majesty, as a token of esteem for a foreigner, makes him a Kizilbashi, by bestowing on him the taj; this, however, is rarely the case.” “In fact,” Floor adds to this quotation in paraphrase, “the only person, he [della Valle] learnt, to whom had befallen this honor was Robert Sherley.”66 This is surely one of the high points in Persian-European relations. To my mind it is second only to the gift to ‘Abbas in January 1608 by the bishop of Kraków, Cardinal Bernard Maciejowski (1548–1608), of one of the great treasures of European art, the Bible of Louis IX (known since 1916 as the Morgan Picture Bible62). So numerous and splendid are the illuminations in the manuscript that no one could imagine it to have been made for anyone but a king. The gift was instigated by Pope Clement VIII as part of his drive to bring Persia into the Christian fold.67 In fact, there might be a close connection between the two events. Within a month of the receipt of this royal gift, ‘Abbas released Robert from his semi-captivity, married him off to a lady of the Safavid court and dispatched him on his ambassadorial mission. After a stop in Moscow, his first long stay abroad was nowhere else but Kraków.

Van Dyck’s Terezia is more down to earth, in color-matching garments of Ottoman or European origin. Three drawings made by the artist in preparation for the paintings have survived in his Italian sketchbook in the British Museum (figs. 33–35). One of them shows Robert in profile rather than frontal pose, with the apparent intent of recording with some precision the cut of his clothing. Van Dyck inscribed the drawing, Ambasciatore de Persia in Roma and drapi dorati / le figure et gli fogliaggi / de colori differenti / de veluto (gold cloth / figures and foliage / [in] velvet of different colors). Another sheet bears the slightest outline of the composition of Robert’s portrait and a third a sketch for the portrait of Terezia, inscribed habito et maniera di Persia (Persian costume and manner). Although this is not literally true of Terezia’s clothes, Van Dyck endowed her with an air that has always been interpreted as one of Oriental magnificence. On the left, a monkey plays with a frame on a table. In Italy the portraits, which soon passed by inheritance into the Egremont Collection in Petworth House, made such an impression that they soon passed by inheritance into the Egremont Collection in Petworth House, made such an impression that they were still being written about half a century later. Gian Pietro Bellori wrote in 1672 in his life of Anthony van Dyck: “During this time Sir Robert Shirley, an Englishman, had come to Rome while traveling about Christendom as the ambassador of Abbas, king of Persia, who had sent him primarily to Gregory XV for the campaign against...”

60 Riding 2008, p. 49.
61 Floor 1999, p. 285. Floor’s invaluable book, with its exhaustive descriptions of Persian costume, seems to have been ignored so far, to their own cost, by historians of art and costume. This was true of me as well, until the book was recommended to me by Rudolph P. Matther.
62 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 638.
64 Bellori 2005, p. 254.
Robert had done. There is every reason to believe that his attire in the Van Dyck portrait, concerning which the artist and sitter conferred in detail, is perfectly authentic. One does not get the same feeling of complete confidence in Rubens’s portrait in Kassel of the Antwerp merchant Nicolas de Respaigne of the following year, 1623 (fig. 51), let alone from Rembrandt’s self-portrait in oriental costume of 1633, in the Musée du Petit Palais, Paris. These paintings of Europeans in Oriental clothing, from three countries, are evidence enough to indicate the existence of a fashion to which the Sherleys contributed not only with portrait commissions but in their public appearances as well.

During their last sojourn in England, between December 1623 and March 1626—probably sooner rather than later in this period—the Sherleys were painted once more in life size, (fig. 38) Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), Lady Teresia Sherley, from van Dyck’s Italian sketchbook, datable to the period of the sitter’s visit to Rome between July 22 and August 29, 1622, pen and ink, 19.9 × 15.1 cm (London, The British Museum, ME 1957, 1214.206.61v)

Inscribed 61 / 57 / habito et maniera di Persia (the dress and [in] the manner of Persia)

Yet a nearly identical textile does survive. In the present volume, Jennifer Scarce illustrates a Persian silk and gold velvet coat of strikingly similar design to Robert’s, a coat that Czar Mikhail Romanov presented to Queen Christina of Sweden in 1644 and that is preserved in the Royal Armory in Stockholm (fig. 24). We see the same combination of large human figures floating in graceful poses on a flat, golden cloth that is otherwise adorned with delicately spaced floral motifs.

To wear these clothes properly, one had to have precise information, preferably acquired at the Safavid court, as

... 

65 Hearn 2007, p. 52.
Fig. 40 Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641), Sir Robert Sherley, 1622, oil on canvas, 200 x 135.4 cm. (Petworth House, The Egremont Collection)
Fig. 41 Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), Lady Teresia Sherley, 1622, oil on canvas, 200 x 133.4 cm (Petworth House, The Egremont Collection)
Terezia—in a standing pose that weakens the argument for her physical impairment—again wears European dress, of a splendid kind that Sheila Canby compares to the clothing in portrait prints of Elizabeth Stuart (1612/13) and Anne of Denmark (1616), while “her jewelled crown and veil represent a variation on the headdress of Isfahani women of the first quarter of the seventeenth century.” In an astonishing detail, Terezia holds a long pistol in her right hand, conspicuously silhouetted against a large, empty red chair, as if aiming at the back of a person sitting there. With her left hand she fingers a watch, often a symbol of transience or death, hanging on a bright red ribbon dangling from her waist. The explanations offered so far for this excitingly unusual iconography fail to link convincingly with the imagery. By comparison, Robert is portrayed in a more conventional pose, his left arm akimbo in his side, holding a rod in his extended right hand. He wears the same robe as in the portrait by Van Dyck, over a garment of which Canby writes that its pattern “relates to silks produced in the last quarter of the sixteenth century … Sherley’s voluminous turban and silk sash would have also [like the robe of honor] been part of the gift of ceremonial costume presented by Shah ‘Abbas.”

66 Christine Riding states that Robert was also painted by Richard Greenbury. Riding 2008, p. 49, no source given.
67 Canby 2009, p. 57.
68 Ibid., p. 56.
part of the human experience as the successful conclusion of treaties and contracts. “The Sherley myth” that Roger Savory debunks fed the imaginations and spurred the ambitions of younger adventurers. Anthony’s fabrications and Robert’s vanity entered a mix that also included allusions in Shakespeare, the masterful portraits of Van Dyck and a burgeoning body of written and visual facts and imaginings about the east. As futile as they may have been in terms of diplomatic history, they were precious incunabula of European orientalism. Four hundred years after their death, no study of Persia and Europe should try to ignore Anthony’s magniloquence and Robert’s magnificence.

“One must inevitably ask oneself if the story of the Sherleys is important, and the answer is, of course, that it is not.” With that judgment of David W. Davies, as great an authority as he may be, and however much I am indebted to him for all that I know about the Sherleys, I can no longer agree. If Robert’s release in February 1608 and his sojourn in Kraków were reciprocal gestures for the gift to Shah ‘Abbas of the Bible of Louis IX, he played a key role in a great game between sovereigns. His mission may have failed, but that was not all there was to it. Legends and myths, costume and fashion, stories and images—let alone superior works of art—are just as much
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