Sir Thomas Urquhart and
"The Admirable Crichton"

In 1652, while a penniless prisoner of war in London, Sir Thomas Urquhart wrote two considerable works with the purpose of attracting Cromwell's attention and sympathy. The first and best known of these is *Ekskubalauron* [Eskubalauron] or *The Discovery of A Most Exquisite jewel . . . To frontal a Vindicatiue of the honour of Scotland*. The "Jewel" is Urquhart's description of his "universal language", and the "Vindicatiue", an odd and disunified collection of short essays and biographical sketches, is his attempt at answering English criticisms of Scotland, and therefore, by implication, of himself. Among the many Scottish heroes Urquhart describes here, the extraordinary and mysterious James Crichton of Cluny, who died in Mantua in 1583, figures prominently. Urquhart's account of his life is exceptional; unlike the other biographical sketches in *Ekskubalauron*, the sketch of Crichton is descriptive and ornate, resembling a diminutive romance. It might well have appeared as a "book", a short story, within one of the long French romances so popular in the mid-seventeenth century. Urquhart's Crichton does not perform supernatural acts, but rather what Mlle. de Scudéry called "chooses merveilleuses". Such acts were expected of the romantic hero, "pourvu qu'elles n'arrivent pas trop souvent, et qu'elles produisent de beaux effets". Perhaps because of its extravagant style, Urquhart's sketch of Crichton has received little attention from readers, although an undated newspaper clipping in the London Library copy of the eighteenth-century edition of *Ekskubalauron* advertises that the sketch was dramatized on the BBC. Nevertheless, it has provoked literary comment, and has provided a model for a hero on one notable occasion — Johnson's essay on self-confidence and prodigies in *The Adventurer*, No. 81, 1753. Crichton also appears in several eighteenth and nineteenth-century biographical collections, nearly all of which are indebted to Urquhart's sketch, and as the hero of Harrison Ainsworth's novel, *The Admirable Crichton*, 1831. Sir James Barrie's Crichton, the hero of his play *The Admirable Crichton*, 1902, "the perfect butler", is certainly the most familiar example of the hero today, but he scarcely

resembles Urquhart’s Crichton, whom Barrie evidently did not know.²

Urquhart did not invent the character or the story of his extraordinary hero, for the most part. Although several important details of Crichton’s life did not come to light before 1900, and are therefore omitted from earlier accounts, its general outline was available to the interested reader shortly after his death, and was certainly known to Urquhart. James Crichton, born in 1560, was the son of Robert Crichton of Eliock, and Elizabeth Stuart, both descended from Scottish royalty. Having taken BA and MA degrees at the University of St. Andrews, Crichton went to the continent for further education in 1577. Records show that he enlisted in the French army that same year. In 1579, he went to Genoa, and from then until his death his life is well documented. The occasion of his disputation before scholars and priests in the church of St. John and St. Paul in Venice is first mentioned in a single sheet handbill printed in 1580 by the Guerra brothers. Circulated in Venice a few weeks before his disputation of “two thousand conclusions, embracing questions in all the different faculties”, the handbill describes Crichton as a “master of ten languages”, “deeply skilled in philosophy, in theology, and in astrology”, and possessing “a most thorough knowledge of the Cabala”. The handbill continues:

His memory is so astonishing, that he knows not what it is to forget; and, whenever he has once heard an oration, he is ready to recite it again, word for word, as it was delivered. He possesses the talent of composing Latin verses, upon any subject which is proposed to him, and in every different kind of metre. Such is his memory, that even though these verses have been extemporize, he will repeat them backwards, beginning from the last word in the verse. His orations are unpremeditated and beautiful. He is also able to discourse upon political questions with much solidity. In his person he is extremely beautiful. His address is that of a finished gentleman, even to a wonder; and his manner, in conversation, the most gracious which can be imagined. He is, in addition to this, a soldier at all points, (soldato a tutta botte), and has, for two years, sustained an honourable command in the wars of France. He has attained to great excellence in the accomplishments of leaping and dancing, and to a remarkable skill in the use of every sort of arms; of which he has already given proofs. He is a remarkable horseman, and breaker of horses, and an admirable jouster, (giostratore singolare). His extraction is noble; indeed, by the mother’s side, regal; for he is allied to the royal family of the Stuarts. Upon the question of the procession of the Holy Spirit, he has held disputation with the Greeks, which were received with the

² The idea of the plot was given to him by Conan Doyle. R. L. Green, _J. M. Barrie_ (London, 1960), pp. 32, 33.
highest applause; and, in these conferences, has exhibited an
incalculable mass of authorities, both from the Greek and Latin
Fathers, and also from the decisions of the different councils.
The same exuberance is shewn, when he discourses upon subjects
of philosophy or theology; in which he has all Aristotle and the
commentators at his finger ends (alle mans). Saint Thomas and
Duns Scotus, with the different disciples, the Thomists and Scotists,
have all by heart, and is ready to dispute, in utramque partem;
which talent he has already exhibited with the most distinguished
success: and, indeed, such is his facility upon these subjects, that
he has never disputed, unless upon matters which were proposed
to him by others. The Doge and his consort were pleased to
hear him; and, upon doing so, testified the utmost amazement.
He also received a present from the hands of his Serene High-
ness. Upon the who'le, he is a wonder of wonders; in so much
so, that the possession of such various and astonishing talents,
united in a body so gracefully formed, and of so sanguine and
amiable a temper, has given rise to many strange and
chimerical conjectures.3

It is difficult to assess the truth of this laudatory statement, probably
written by Aldus Manutius the younger, because there is so little with
which to compare it. Most of the handbill’s information reappears,
with further comment, in several later works. The tenth volume of the
Aldine edition of Cicero’s works, published in 1583, contains a dedica-
tion to Crichton, in which it is noted that Crichton had argued twice
in public. His performance in Venice was followed by a debate in Padua.
In preparation for this, Crichton wrote a notice stating what he proposed
to discuss, “errores Aristotelis pene innumerabilis . . . refutabit, et ad
objecta respondebit,” which he posted on the doors of the principal
churches in Padua. Aldus writes that he attended the disputation, which
lasted three days.4

In 1583, two notices appeared in the Aldine editions of Cicero’s
works, De Universitate, and Aratus, stating that Crichton was dead.
Neither describes his manner of death. In 1586, Baldini wrote that “a
wicked hand had cut off his poetic life”; this is the first mention of
his murder.5 Subsequent notices appeared in various collections: in

3. Lo Scanzese detto Giacomo Crioni, e giovane di 20 anni (Venice,
1553). This handbill is translated in Patrick Fraser Tytler, The Life of James
Crichton (Edinburgh, 1819), pp. 52-54, from which the present text is taken.

Gglv., Gg2r.

5. Bernardi Baldini Insus ad M. Antonium Baldinum fratris filium
(exyp. P. Pontii, 1586). This poem is translated in Douglas Crichton, “The
Circumstances Relating to the Death of James Crichton”, Proceedings of the
John Johnston’s *Heroes Scoti* (1603) in which Crichton is described as “omnibus in studii admirabilis” (the first time this adjective is used in connection with Crichton), in Adam Abernethy’s *Musa Campestris* (1603) in which he is “flos juvemum, Scotiae spes, Palladis ingens”, and in David Leitch’s *Philosophiae Illacrymans* (1637). David Buchan’s manuscript account “Jacobus Crichtonius, genere et natione Scotus”, written about 1625, but not printed before 1819, is of special interest, because it states that Crichton was killed by the Prince of Mantua while walking at night “quod amasiam principis desperet.” This is the only mention of a love quarrel in any of the early accounts of Crichton’s death before Urquhart’s sketch. The most detailed account of Crichton’s death before Urquhart’s comes from Thomas Wright’s *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604) in a chapter entitled “Passions that blinde the judgement,” under the subtitle “Precipitation.” Crichton, not actually identified, but mentioned only as a Scotsman of “most rare and singular partes, who was a Retainer to the Duke of that Country” [Italy], is said to have encountered the Prince incognito in a duel. Crichton soon got the upper hand, whereupon the Prince, afraid for his life, revealed his identity, Crichton “fell downe upon his knees, demaunding pardon . . . gave his Prince his naked rapier who no sooner had received it, but with the same sword, he ranne him thorow to death.” The true facts concerning Crichton’s death have not yet been ascertained beyond question, but certain papers, preserved in the archives of the Gonzagas in the State Archives at Mantua, reveal that Crichton was murdered by Prince Vincenzo, son of Gugliemo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, by whom he had been employed early in February, 1582, not as a tutor, but as an architect. At the time of his death, Crichton had already prepared plans for the fortification of the city’s esplanade. Having achieved a great notoriety in Mantua shortly after his arrival, Crichton appears to have made the Prince jealous, but whether their quarrel on the night of July 3rd, 1583, which ended in Crichton’s death, was a result of this is uncertain. It may have been no more than a street brawl between Crichton and the Prince, accompanied by his friend Hippolito Lanzone, in which neither party recognized the other at first. Crichton killed Lanzone, and was then fatally wounded himself by the Prince. He died in the nearby house of Messer Hippolito Serena. Wright’s story of Crichton’s last

6. S. L. Lee in *DNB*.


moments appears to be an elaboration of the information contained in a letter written by Luigi Olivo, the castellan of Mantua, immediately after the murder, to Zibramont, the Duke's secretary. Olivo writes that the Prince gave him an account of the fight immediately after it had taken place, saying that neither combatant had known the other's identity until Crichton had been wounded, after which Crichton had exclaimed "Pardon me, your Highness, for I had not recognized you". Crichton's popularity was enough to incense the citizens of Mantua against the Prince, who eventually had to leave the city for a time, although officially he was acquitted of the charge of Crichton's murder.9

These are the outstanding facts of Crichton's life, as they appear in written record. Urquhart probably based his account of Crichton on that given in Johannes Imperialis Musaeum Historicum et Physicum (1640) summarizing earlier accounts, but not including, of course, the facts contained in the Mantuan archives, other than as they are reported in Wright. Urquhart begins his story at the Duke's court in Mantua, where Crichton fights a successful duel with a "certain Italian gentleman . . . to the eternal renown of the whole Isle of Britain". The fight, apparently Urquhart's invention, is described at length. Crichton's sword, tracing "Geometrical flourishes of straight & oblique lines", "transqualified . . . the fierceness of his foe into the numbness of a pageant" at which point the Italian gentleman's end is inevitable.10 Urquhart next describes Crichton's disputation before the clerics at the Sorbonne, which happened, he notes, before Crichton arrived in Italy. Urquhart's choice of Paris, instead of Venice or Padua, is almost certainly owing to Rabelais' influence, whose Gargantua and Pantagruel Urquhart was translating at this time. Like Pantagruel (Pantagruel, chap. 10), Urquhart's Crichton posts bills on the church doors of Paris, and prepares himself for the disputation by playing innumerable games. Unlike Pantagruel, however, whose opponents are "stubborn Jades," easily made to appear "monkies," Crichton has to argue with "sorbonist, Canonical and Civilian Doctors . . . most judiciously" about "the most prudential Maxims, Sentences, Ordinances, Acts, and Statutes, for order- ing all manner of Persons in their consciences, bodies, fortunes, and reputation" (p. 100). Here the tone of Urquhart's prose is effectively, but not intentionally, satiric. This is because Urquhart follows Rabelais in his use of exaggeration without realizing that he, Urquhart, unlike


his master, is not writing satire. The result is confusing; Crichton is clearly intended to be a romantic hero, yet in this portion of the story, as in many others, where his performance is described with exaggeration, he appears ridiculous. Moreover, instances in which exaggeration is misused, in the manner described above, are scattered throughout all of Urquhart's original work, and show him to be the humorless person that Rabelais most enjoyed mocking. Urquhart's description of Crichton's next feat, the impersonation of "fifteen several sorts of men" before the court of Mantua, is exemplary: it resulted in "an inestimable Ollapodrida of immaterial morsels of diverse kinds," a "Drammatical exercitation" that caused an "enchanted transportation of the eyes & ears of its spectabundid auditorie" (pp. 100, 111). Urquhart's love of latinate words, neologisms, and conceits, was probably innate, but it made him sympathetic to Rabelais' work, which occasionally exhibits similar diction. Both writers coined a large number of words, but unlike Rabelais', Urquhart's coinages were not generally useful words, and they have had little, if any currency. Urquhart's extravagant style is particularly evident in the last pages of the Crichton story, which concern Crichton's love affair and death. Here, he writes with a préciosité that is sometimes ludicrous — Crichton's lady appears before him like "the Antarick Oriency of a Western Aurore, or Aeronick rising of the most radiant constellation of the firmament" (p. 124). Then, in a curious periphrasis describing Crichton's love-making, Urquhart writes of the lady's hirqualliancy at the elevation of the pole of his [Crichton's] microcosm", and "his luxuriousness to erect a gnomon on her horizontal dial" (p. 125). Crichton's happiness is brief, however. The Prince, in carnaval dress, arrives at the lady's palace at night, and demands to see her. Crichton descends, having "step'd from the shrine of Venus to the oracle of Pallas armata," and after trying to convince the Prince to return to the court, he is forced to take out his sword to defend himself.

The march'ess Crichtoun ... (having all his ten adversaries in a front before him who, making up above a quadrant of he' periphery whereof his body was the centre, were about, from the exterior point of all their arms and tucks, to lodge home in him so many truculent semi-diameters) he retrograding their invention, and beginning his agency, where they would have made him a patient, in as short a space as the most diagrammat- ically skilled hand, could have been able to describe lines representative of the distance 'twixt the earth and several Kardanas, or horary expeditions of the Sun's Diurnal motion, from his aequinoctial horizontality to the top of his Meridian hight (which with the he'p of a ruler by six draughts of a pen is quickly delineated) levered (sic) out six several thrusts against them, by vertue whereof he made such speedy work upon
the respective segments of that debauch'd circumference, through
the red-inkmarks, which has straight-drawn streaks imprinted,
that being alinged from the center-point of his own courage, and
with a thunder-bolt-like-swiftness of hand radiated upon their
bodies, he discussed a whole quadrant of those ten, where of
four and twenty make the circle; and laying six of the most in-
rared of them on their backs, left (in the other four) but a
testant of the foresaid ring, to avenge the death of their dismal
associates. Of which quaternity, the Prince (being the most
concerned in the effects of this disaster, as being the only cause
thereof (though his intentions levelled at another issue) and like
to burst with shame on all sides with so much dishonour, by the
incomparable valour of one single man) did set forward at the
swords point, to essay if in his person so much lost credit
might be recovered, and to that purpose comming within a dis-
tance, was upon the advancing of a thrust in quarr; when the
most ayeul Crichtown bareing it in the same ward, smoothly glided
along the Princes sword, and being master of its feeble, was
upon the very instant of making his Highness very low, and
lavine his honour in the dust, when one of the three Courtiers
whom fortune had not favoured to fall by the hand of Crichtown,
cryed aloud Hold, hold, kill not the Prince; at which words the
courteous Crichtown recoyning, and putting himself out of dis-
tance, the Prince pulled off his visor, and throwing it away,
showed his face so fully, that the noble-hearted Crichtown, being
sensible of his mistake, and sorry so many of the Princess servants
should have enforced him, in his own defense, to become the
actor of their destruction, made unto the Prince a very low
submiss and setting his left knee to the ground (as if he had
been to receive the honour of Knight-hood) with his right
hand presented him the hilt of his own conquering sword, with
the point thereof towards his own breast, wishing his Highness
to excuse his not knowing him in that disguise, and to be
pleased to pardon what unluckily had ensued upon the necessity
of his defending himself, which (at such an exteent) might
have befalln to any other, that were not minded to abandon their
lives to the indiscrption of others. The Prince, in the throne
of whose judgement the rebellious vanoirs of the Tyne had
installed Nemesis, and caused the irascible Faculty to shake off
the soveraignty of reason, being without himself, and unable to
restraine the impetuosity of the wills first motion, runs
Crichtoun
through the heart with his own sword, and kills him . . . (pp.
137-140)

Crichton is then buried with great public mourning.

Urquhart’s account of Crichton’s death and burial implies that he
considers Crichton’s last act an honorable one, not merely imprudent,
and a fitting culmination to his distinguished life. Clearly, in his sketch
of James Crichton, Urquhart wishes to portray a perfect gentleman and
his qualities: his unquestioned loyalty to his prince, his devotion to a
lady, his intellectual acumen, and his skill at fencing. These qualities are intended to contrast with those of the various self-seeking pseudo-gentlemen who appear from time to time in Ekskubalauron. Indeed, the sketch of Crichton, together with others of Scotland’s eminent men, is offered to show that Urquhart himself knew the meaning of integrity. For despite its préciosité, and its largely unintentional humor, Ekskubalauron’s purpose is most serious — to convince Cromwell that Urquhart is someone of consequence, although desperately poor, whose services might be of value to the state. Under a Parliamentary statute those prisoners whose “merits and services” were deemed of sufficient value to the state were to be given special consideration. This often included the right to retain the ownership of their property in Scotland, precisely the right that Urquhart was anxious to obtain at this time. That Ekskubalauron failed of its purpose is partly owing to the extravagance with which Urquhart expresses himself in it, an extravagance well exemplified in the Crichton sketch. Nevertheless, because Urquhart is remembered today as the first translator of Rabelais in English, and not as a writer of original work, his vigorous sketch of Crichton is of particular interest, indicating to some extent what Urquhart’s own capacities as a writer were. Although his style is preposterous at times, it is never vulgar, and may even be thought to lend a poignancy to the work. Reflecting on his own desperate condition, Urquhart perhaps saw in Crichton the hero he would have liked to have been. The sketch is then his projection of an ideal self-image. It is also the fullest account of the prodigious James Crichton that posterity has.

Yale University