

The “Ayde of his Muses?”

The Renaissance of John Florio and William Shakespeare

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Abstract

Jeremy Lester’s essay focuses on John Florio, arguing a far deeper implication of the prominent linguist and translator of Montaigne in the production of the Shakespearean oeuvre than previously thought. Although known by specialists, until not long ago, Florio was considered a secondary figure within the intellectual and artistic panorama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean times. After examining closely the life and works of Florio in accordance with Lamberto Tassinari’s book *John Florio. The Man Who Was Shakespeare* (Giano Books, 2009), Lester discusses the case of British scholar Saul Frampton of Westminster University who in two feature articles published in the London *Guardian* in July and August, 2013, asserted that John Florio was the editor-in-chief of Shakespeare’s collected plays (the *First Folio*, 1623). According to Frampton, this role allowed him to “censor,” “change” or “supplement” the original works of Shakespeare. Ben Jonson, the main instigator in the publication of the *First Folio*, was also a close friend and devotee of Florio, of whom he states in a dedication to a copy of his *Volpone*, that he was “an Ayde of his Muses.” Analyzing Tassinari’s theory, Lester comes to the conclusion that Florio, more than the editor and “Ayde” to the Bard, has a very good claim to be considered the author under the pseudonym Shakespeare. Tassinari’s book, now translated into French with the title *John Florio alias Shakespeare* (Le Bord de L’Eau, 2016), is sparking an animated debate within the French media.

You know the name you were given, you do not know the name that you have.

José Saramago

In two articles published in *The Guardian* in July and August, 2013, Saul Frampton brought to light the important role that John Florio played in the life and times of William Shakespeare. First, as the possible secret editor-in-chief of the first Folio edition of Shakespeare’s collected plays in 1623; a role which allowed him to “censor,” “change” and “supplement” the original works. And second, as the person responsible for the premature, “pirated” publication of the sonnets, which also included one of his own poems at the end (“A Lovers Complaint”); actions which were motivated, we are told, by his supposed desire to seek revenge against Shakespeare because of the Bard’s liaison with his first wife, who in turn is surmised to be the “mysterious Dark Lady” referred to in the sonnets. But, as with all things to do with Shakespeare’s time and life, the claims made by Frampton are not anywhere near as clear-cut as he makes out and they are inevitably open to serious challenge. Frampton, though, is right about one thing. John Florio did play a vitally important role at this time in many spheres of English and European

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cultural development, and a momentum of interest in his achievements is now, at long last, beginning to grow apace.

Whatever else we can say about Florio, we know for sure that this man of exiled Italian parents, who was born in London (probably) in 1553, and who passed his whole life in England, apart from a long interval spent on the continent in his formative adolescence, was a very prodigious wordsmith and translator of unequalled skill. In 1578 and 1591 respectively, he published his two volumes of *Frutes*, the first of which contained 44 bilingual dialogues in English and Italian, which was then followed by a second volume, which had a companion piece attached to it (*Il Giardino di Ricreatione*) containing over 6,000 translated Italian proverbs. In 1598, he went on to publish his ground-breaking Italian-English dictionary (*A Worlde of Wordes*), which was then enlarged in a second edition in 1611. On the equally important translation front, he produced the first English translation of Montaigne's *Essais* in 1603; a feat of such innovative renown that even today many people still read (and refer to) "Florio's Montaigne." In 1620, he then published a translation of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, and in between these two great feats he made an English translation of the voyages of Jacques Cartier (in 1580), edited the 1590 edition of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, and made an English translation of *Basilikon Doron* (in 1603). It is also possible that towards the end of his life (before his death in 1625), he also made a translation of Francis Bacon's *Essayes* into Italian. Educator, diplomat, courtier and possible English spy for Sir Francis Walsingham (the head of the Secret Service), these known achievements in their own right make John Florio a man of exceptional qualities and character.

Indeed, so important was his role, so decisive were his literary creations and translations, so inventive were the words and terms he used, and so deep was his knowledge of Italian and European culture, which provided so much source material for the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare, that one might be naturally and immediately tempted to ask whether there is even more to him than meets the eye. His close friend and devotee, Ben Jonson, wrote of him (in a personal dedication of a copy of *Volpone*) that he was an "Ayde of his Muses." This is a worthy compliment and tribute in itself, of course, and should make any scholar sit up and take note of Florio's contribution. But what if he was even more than an "Ayde"? What if he was one of, if not the, finest of "Muses" in his own right? Given the often enormous similarities between Florio and Shakespeare's use of language, their styles, and their shared interests, does it not make sense to consider the possibility that the coincidences are too close for comfort, and that maybe—just maybe—what we are dealing with here is not just an issue of Florio being the hands-on editor and contributor to the plays and sonnets, but perhaps the author of these works himself? Might this explain why he had the temerity and the confidence to make wholesale changes in his editorial work precisely because he was at the end of the day editing his own work? Unfortunately, it is a question that Frampton refuses to ask. He wants stubbornly to cling to the belief that the actor-impresario and small-time venture capitalist from Stratford on Avon was truly the author of the plays. However, where Frampton fears to tread, others have found the courage.

In 2009, another Italian expatriate, Lamberto Tassinari, published a major study of John Florio's cultural achievements. The book has been revised and expanded, as an e-book, into a second edition in 2013 which, in January 2016, at the very beginning of the Shakespearian 400th Anniversary, was published in France by Le Bord de l'Eau as *John Florio alias*

Shakespeare, translated in French by Michel Vaïs. The principal finding of Tassinari is immediately revealed in the title of his monograph: *John Florio: The Man Who Was Shakespeare*, and in nearly 400 pages of very detailed, very thorough investigation, some extremely convincing evidence is revealed, or brought out of long-locked closets, which certainly merits Florio being considered a very strong contender to Shakespeare's literary throne. The evidence gathered together falls into a number of broad categories.

First, and perhaps most crucially of all for Tassinari, are the deep-seated parallels in terms of Florio and "Shakespeare's" shared use of very specific (and often innovative) words, terms, concepts, phrases, proverbs and puns, not to mention the common style, manner, spelling, grammar and the sophistication of the language that one finds in the works that bear their respective names. Some of these shared uses were well spotted and identified in Frampton's earlier *Guardian* articles, but the depth of the links, as explored by Tassinari, are at times nothing short of overwhelming. "Hundreds and hundreds of words and dozens and dozens of expressions, phrases, and ideas that pass for Shakespearean actually turn out to belong to the Florios [John as well as his educated-writer father, Michel Angelo]—and do so earlier, appearing in their books before re-appearing in those of Shakespeare." And, this is the nub of the issue—the first use and timing of the language being employed. Nothing perhaps better illustrates this than the pivotal importance of ideas and terms which "Shakespeare" borrows from Montaigne's *Essais*. Unless the "Stratford Shakespeare" could have read Montaigne in the original (which virtually no one accepts as possible), then the constant use of Montaigne's words and expressions before the translation was published in 1603, can only possibly derive from Florio's own constant engagement with the French writer. In total, it has been calculated that there are more than 750 words and phrases that "Shakespeare" took directly from Montaigne's *Essais*, some of the earliest usages of which include, according to George Coffin Taylor in a study that goes back to 1925 (*Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne*): caste the gorge at; sacrilegious theefe; cheverell conscience; idle; immaterial; fustian, strike amazement; ignominy and shame; nipping air, just to name a few.

But, it is not just the identical lexical creativity, or the fact that Florio invented more than 1,200 brand new English words, nearly all of which appear in "Shakespeare's" oeuvre, or the often strange, common exotic, idiosyncratic choice of words or wordplay that counts here. The evidence connecting Florio and "Shakespeare" goes way beyond this. There is the man himself: educated, cultivated, well-travelled, multi-lingual, and well-read; possessor of a large library of books containing 340 works in Italian, French and Spanish, a great many of which are precisely the source material for "Shakespeare's" plays. Florio's cultural interests seemingly know no bounds. Everything interests him. At the same time, he is also a little arrogant, bombastic, withdrawn, with a clear sense of superiority because, as Tassinari stresses, he is a commoner who made it by himself. In short, precisely the traits required by "Shakespeare."

There are his upper-class, aristocratic friends and patrons, key protagonists of the times, upon whom he can rely and without whom the plays could not have been written in the first place. The list of these people covers two entire pages, but perhaps the most notable ones are King James I; Queen Anne of Denmark; Henry Prince of Wales; Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton; Lady Elizabeth Grey; William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke (the most likely "WH" of the sonnets and executor of Florio's last will and testament, which Tassinari justly considers very "Shakespearean," in stark contrast to that other infamous Shakespearean will);

Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke; Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester; Lord Burghley; Sir Walter Raleigh; and Sir Francis Walsingham. There are also his literary and artistic friends and associates, such as Samuel Daniel (who is also his brother-in-law); Francis Bacon; Thomas Nashe; and Ben Jonson, again just to name a few. And, one must certainly not forget as well his long direct association and friendship with Giordano Bruno, the Neapolitan philosopher and writer, whose own direct influence on "Shakespeare's" output is increasingly being recognised. And then, there are his musical associates and his own deep-seated knowledge and appreciation of music, which is an absolutely vital element of the Shakespearean oeuvre. Indeed, as Jorge Luis Borges once put it, Shakespeare's writing is nothing less than "verbal music." And yet, as Tassinari and many others point out, the biography of the man from Stratford "shows not the slightest trace of musical education, of experience and contact with musicians."

There are his direct life-learning, life-enhancing experiences that he can draw on, giving him and his works—acknowledged and unacknowledged—great depth of authenticity precisely because they have been lived. Of paramount importance here is without doubt the dominant theme (and direct experience) of exile. Drawing on other recent works, most notably Jane Kingsley-Smith's important study of *Shakespeare's Drama of Exile*, it is highly significant that at least 14 of the 38 plays "represent the banishment of one or more central characters. If we include minor characters and self-imposed exile, that number is considerably increased." Why is this the case? Why was "Shakespeare" so infatuated with the theme of exile? Once again, the known experiences of the man from Stratford cannot really provide an answer here. But for Tassinari, Florio's personal experiences (and those of his father even more so) can. "Shakespeare," he writes, "thematizes exile not just because it works well as a plot device for the plays, but because exile concerns him" directly and personally in the most acute ways, given that his Calvinist father initially sought exile in London in 1550 so as to escape the Catholic Inquisition of heretics then plaguing all of Italy. Indeed, if one also bears in mind that his father had Jewish ancestors, it was a double motive for exile; a Jewish ancestry that again would provide the necessary firsthand knowledge and background for use in some of "Shakespeare's" plays of course.

Last, but by no means least—indeed for many, myself included, it is one of the most significant factors of all—there is at long last a very satisfactory resolution of the well-known "Italian conundrum" that emerges out of the study of Florio's life. And "conundrum" it has most certainly always been. Just why were so many of the plays—at least 16 of them, or 17 if you accept the argument put forward by Richard Paul Roe that the Athens of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was really the city of Sabbioneta, near Mantua, which was always known as "little Athens"—set wholly or in part in Italy, or contain countless allusions to Italy and Italian characters? Where did the knowledge of not just the national Italian language, but words and terms in local dialects come from? How can there be such familiarity with so many precise directions and descriptions of locations often known only to local inhabitants? From where were the Italian books of prose and novels, so frequently used as source material for many of the plays, acquired? And, how does one explain the fact that a good many of them possessed no English translation at the time that "Shakespeare" must have supposedly consulted them? (Books such as *Il Pecorone* by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino, first published in Milan in 1554, which underpins *The Merchant of Venice*, or *Gli Ecatommiti* by Cinzio, a collection of more

than 100 stories dating from 1565, a couple of which were clearly used for the composition of *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*, to give just a couple of examples here). The simple fact is once more that there is nothing at all in the known biography of the man from Stratford which can possibly answer these (and other Italian-related) conundrums with one iota of genuine merit or conviction. Not surprisingly, therefore, there has long been the conviction that whoever Shakespeare was, not only did he visit Italy on more than one occasion, but he also had a tremendous grasp of the language. Indeed, such a grasp and knowledge of the language, people and locations that he just might have been a native Italian himself. After all, Tassinari's claim that John Florio was "Shakespeare" is by no means the first such claim of an Italian contender. Over the years there have been others (see, for example, Professor Martino Iuvara's book *Shakespeare era italiano* [Shakespeare was Italian], which was published in 2002).

But, of course, Florio's credentials and circumstances are ideal here. Courtesy of his immediate ancestors, his knowledge of Italian was akin to that of a native speaker, and in the years of his youth he certainly did pay visits to different parts of the country. For sure as well, he would have been told stories galore of his father's adventures, which took him the length and breadth of the peninsula and its islands. Being someone born in London, meanwhile, he had the ideal means and opportunity to translate the Italian experiences into his English circumstances, concerns, and ambitions. This is where his role as a translator was most vital. It was not just in a narrow linguistic or literary sense where this function was performed. "The fact is that all of Shakespeare appears from the Florian perspective to be, and is, a work translated, in other words 'transferred' from one culture to another." In short, it is thanks to the likes of John Florio that England witnessed its own veritable Renaissance at this time. In the words of Vernon Lee, "the English mind in the time of Elizabeth, had found itself all of a sudden full-grown and blossomed out into superb manhood, with burning activities and indefatigable powers. [But] the materials on which English genius was to work must be sought, and abroad they could be found only in Italy. For in the demolished Italy of the sixteenth century lay the whole intellectual wealth of the world" (*Euphorian: Being Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in The Renaissance*). Or, as Violet Jeffery put it in her study of John Lyly and the Italian Renaissance, Italian gardens were "ransacked... to adorn English orchards." Translation, then, is transference, but it is also much more than that. It is a productive and creative process in its own right. And, it is perhaps not without significance that the Italian term *tradurre* and its old English equivalent possess a much wider range of meaning than the modern-day English usage of "translation" seems to convey. It is this broader translating and transcultural part of Florio's life story which makes Tassinari's study of him so valuable, intriguing and full of conviction (not least because it also reflects the author's own personal experiences).

All of the evidence cited, then, certainly helps to build a very strong case for the central claim that it was John Florio who authored the plays and sonnets which have gone down in history as the works of "Shakespeare." Notwithstanding this, it is fair to point out that as with any contender to the Shakespeare literary throne (including the man from Stratford most of all), there are some omissions, limitations, inconsistencies, and a few remaining doubts. Would Florio, for example, have had the time and opportunity to have written the 38 plays, sonnets and prose poems on top of everything else he wrote and did? He was certainly capable of writing poetically, but was he capable of writing in the style required of theatrical drama

(which is a point made by at least one of his chief sympathisers)? Did he write alone, or with his father, or with other collaborators as well? This is never made clear. Above all, if he was the author of the plays and sonnets, why did he keep his authorship such a well-hidden secret? And just as importantly, why did he choose the pseudonym of "William Shakespeare" in the first place? In some other contenders' cases, the man from Stratford—call him "Shakspere," "Shakspear," "Shexpir," "Shagspere," "Shackspeare" or whatever you will—was a willing front man for the true author of the works that bore his name, but in this case it seems that the nom de plume was nothing more than a random choice which just happened to bear a lot of similarity with the name of the real-life actor/businessman from Stratford (thus giving him the happy opportunity to cash in on the coincidence). According to Tassinari, the immigrant status of the Florio family at this time, and the mistrust that accompanied foreigners (especially at a time of plague), would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to present himself as the author of such a body of dramatic works in the English language. Likewise, their complicated religious position made their lives constantly insecure. Writing for the theatre at this time came with few rewards, either financial or in terms of prestige. In addition, we are told that "John Florio had decided to assume the mission of elevating the English language and the culture of England above its rivals, but to do so incognito, for the author of those plays, the man responsible for that enrichment of vocabulary and style and ideas, could simply not be seen to bear a foreign name." As Florio himself wrote, "*Un Inglese Italianato, è un Diavolo incarnate*" (An Italianised Englishman is a Devil incarnate).

In themselves, these are arguments and reasons not beyond the bounds of reason and possibility, although it is perhaps strange that for a man who hated the exploitation of other's talents ("those notable Pirates on this our paper sea") and who took such pride and pleasure in the publication of those works which did bear his name, should have taken fright at the greater recognition that would have come with the acknowledged authorship of the plays and sonnets. Elsewhere in his book, meanwhile (Chapter 3), Tassinari begins to weave a very complex and complicated conspiracy theory, involving the likes of Francis Bacon and especially Ben Jonson, with Florio's own support, which was designed to forever preserve Florio's anonymity and to protect the "false Shakspere/Shakespeare" from ever being uncovered. However, not only is this conspiracy theory quite speculative and, thus, far from being completely convincing, it is also more than anything else manna from heaven for the "Stratfordians." They like nothing better than a complicated intrigue of this kind, for it provides them exactly with the ammunition that they most desire so as to be able to dismiss any such counter-identity claim with a curt flick of the hand, as if there is nothing more to be said. "We've heard it all before," we can hear them sigh, with a trace of a smile, and people have become so accustomed to the claim that "Shakespeare was not Shakespeare" that most do in fact become very blasé now about the whole topic of debate. One more, one less contender, what does it matter. In putting forward an alternative contender to the Shakespeare throne, therefore, the golden rule must surely always be: avoid a conspiracy theory like the plague. It can only work to your opponents' advantage.

Of course, even without the debilitating conspiracy theory, getting John Florio recognised as the true author of the Shakespearean oeuvre is an uphill task to say the least, and perhaps a thankless one in the end. After all, it is not just the rigid, dogmatic, academic "Stratfordians" who have such a stake in preserving and embalming the reputation and "honour of their man."

One must never forget just what an industrial-scale enterprise the Stratfordian Shakespeare has become. In 2011, for example, there were more than 800,000 visitors to one or more of the Shakespearean sites in the town, and recession or not, numbers have apparently continued to rise in the intervening years, reaching a crescendo this year (2016) with the 400th anniversary commemorations of “Shakespeare’s” death. In addition, the activities of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust alone contribute nearly £ 50 million to the local economy.

Tassinari, meanwhile, will find little succour, comfort or support from other anti-Stratfordians. Having an alternative contender who is a full-bloodied Englishman (or woman) is one thing. Having someone of such “foreign extraction” as the possible true Shakespeare is another matter entirely. Of course, in his defence, Tassinari makes the very good point that, “A Shakespeare ‘made in Europe’ shows us that the birth of the modern world possesses a richness and a complexity that fill one with awe.” It also makes “Shakespeare” even more universal, immortal and moving than before. But, it is hardly a good time to make any pro-European comments of any kind. And to make matters even more difficult, it is unfortunate, to say the least, that the Italian Shakespeare scholarly community does not feel the same enthusiasm for Florio as Tassinari and others do. For the most part, Florio still sadly remains a rather forgotten figure in his parents’ native land. It is almost as though, having given the world the likes of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio a couple of centuries before Shakespeare was even born, the Italians are content to rest on their laurels. Let the English at least have their pure-bloodied Shakespeare, since they so desperately want (and need) him, seems to be the common refrain.

Notwithstanding these deep-seated hindrances and barriers, however, it should be stressed in no uncertain terms that Tassinari’s book has rendered a vitally important service to the broad realm of “Shakespeare studies.” Florio’s contribution to England’s own cultural Renaissance was second to none; as too was his contribution to the modernisation of the English language, the creation of a much greater depth and breadth of linguistic use, as well as helping to secure the foundation for its imperial expansion. And, at the very least, even if it can never be definitively proved that Florio was the author of Shakespeare’s works, there can be no doubt whatsoever that whoever “Shakespeare” was, he was a serial plagiarist of Florio.

From now on, John Florio can no longer be dismissed as a minor footnote in English (or Italian or European) culture, and it is long overdue that he takes his rightful place centre-stage. Moreover, with Saul Frampton’s different kind of interpretation of John Florio and Shakespeare due to come out in book form very soon, it is clear that a veritable “school of Florio studies” is beginning to emerge.

Let me finish, however, where I began. José Saramago’s claim, taken from his imagined “Book of Certainties,” that one knows the name one was given, but one does not necessarily know the name one has, finds a strong echo in the life, times and creative work of John Florio. In a dialogue that takes place in Chapter 6 of his *Second Frutes* of 1591, we encounter the following exchange:

- L. May a man know your name I pray?
- G. Yea sir, why not? My name is William.
- L. I pray you sir tell me your name.
- G. I am called W. at your commandment.

L. What countrey man, and of what place are you?

G. I am Italian, and of Padoa, at your commandment.

Might this be when the pseudonym was first created? I don't know, but Tassinari can certainly be forgiven the glee in his eyes when he writes the words: "Two years later an author calling himself William Shakespeare published *Venus and Adonis*."