



Dialogues

SHAKESPEARE & JOHN FLORIO:
DIALOGUES

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JOHN FLORIO'S DRAMATIC DIALOGUES

John Florio, like Shakespeare, in *First Fruits* and *Second Fruits* wrote dramatic dialogues about love, women, theatre and philosophy; arguments that cannot be found in another language lesson manuals of the Elizabethan period. These dialogues are more recreational than didactic: many Florio's scholars have pointed out that Florio's works contain dramatic dialogues which "Owe something to Cinquecento Italian Comedy."¹

The proverbs John Florio wrote in the dialogues are also organised as a kind of "parameological struggle or servant and master dialectic" that "has something in common with the conversational dynamic developed in certain scenes in Elizabethan's theatre."²

Florio's scholar Michael Wyatt recognises a "theatrical structure" in Florio's bilingual dialogues.³ William N. West, associate professor of English, comparative literary studies, and classics at Northwestern University, notes in a discussion on Jacobean theatre how "the dramatic potential" of Florio's bilingual language manuals could be brought to the stage.⁴

Clara Longworth de Chambrun, scholar of both Shakespeare and John Florio, analysed their dialogues, and in the second chapter of her book *Giovanni Florio, un apôtre de la renaissance en Angleterre à l'époque de Shakespeare*⁵ made an extensive analysis of John Florio's dramatic dialogues of *First Fruits* and *Second Fruits* doing a comparison with Shakespeare's dialogues, and pointing out the similarities between the two writers. The same analysis was made years later by **Rinaldo Charles Simonini**, University Of North Carolina Studies In Comparative Literature, in his book *Italian Scholarship in Renaissance England*.⁶ Some passages of these analysis can be read below.

¹ Boutcher, Warren (January 1997). *A French Dexterity, & an Italian Confidence. Reformation*, Vol II, 39–109

² Boutcher, W., *A French dexterity*, p. 65

³ Wyatt, Michael, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 167.

⁴ West, William N., *Talking the Talk: Cant on the Jacobean Stage*, *English Literary Renaissance* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 228-251, p. 234

⁵ De., Chambrun, Clara Longworth (2016) *Giovanni Florio, un apotre de la renaissance en angleterre a l'epoque de Shakespeare*, Payot & Cie, 1921.

⁶ Charles, Simonini, Rinaldo (1952), *Italian scholarship in Renaissance England*, University of North Carolina.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SHAKESPEARE'S AND JOHN FLORIO'S DIALOGUES

In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Valentine discusses his lady with Speed:

Val. I have loved her since I saw her; and I still see her beautiful

Speed. If you love her, you cannot see her.

Val. Why?

Speed. Because Love is blind. O, that you had mine eyes: or your eyes had the lights they were wont to have when you chid at Sir Protens for going ungartered! (II. i. 73-79)

The whole scene written by Shakespeare is very much like a dialogue written by John Florio on “**Amorous talke**” in Chapter 14 of *First Fruits*:

"Oh deare brother, I am in love

With a woman, the which is

So cruel, that she wyl neither

see me, neither heare me, the

which thing maketh me almost die."

"Alas brother, will you let love

Vanquish you, the which is but

A boy, blind & seeth not?"

"Alas, for al that he is but a boy,

he hath great strenght, for al

that he is blynd, he seeth."

"But how can this thing be?"

"Aske of them that have made prooffe of it."

Chapter 17 of *First Fruits*, "To talke in the darke" recalls the atmosphere of the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

Ho, ho, who goeth there?

I am your friend.

What is your name:

I am called A.

You are well met.

And so be you also.

Pardon me, for I know you not.

I beleve you certis.

Where have you been so late?

I have ben forth at supper with

A friend of myne.

Other similarities can be found in the syllogisms and witty sayings found as comic in Shakespeare as in Florio's manuals:

"Wel, tel me which is the oldest thing that is."

"Truely, I know not. I pray you tel me.

"God is the oldest thing.

Because he hath alwayes ben, & never had beginning..."

"You have not erred: but tel me, what is the swiftest thing that is?"

"The swiftest thing that is, I beleeeve it be the mynd of man, for in a moment he is here, and now he is there, now in one place, now in another" (First Fruits, page 37)

The gravediggers in ***Hamlet*** use the same device to amuse themselves while they work:

First Clown. Ill put another question to thee: if thou answerest me not to the purpose, confess thyself--

Second Clown. Go to.

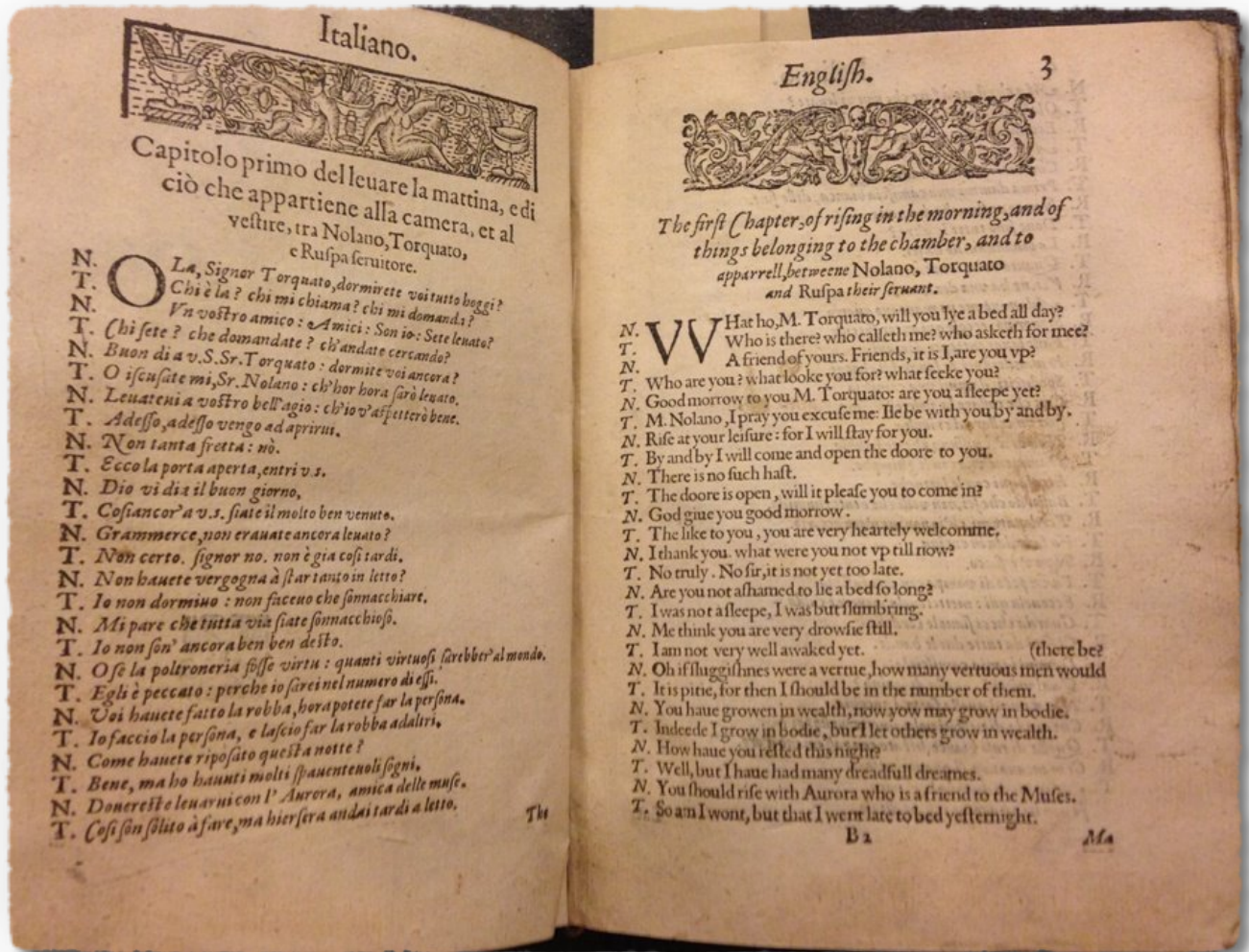
First Clown. What is he that builds stronger then either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?

Second Clown. The gallow-maker; for that frame outlives a thousand tenants. (V. i. 42-50; see also V- i. 51-68).

Simonini also underlines how Shakespeare begins his dialogue on nationalities in the *Merchant of Venice* in the accustomed Florio style:

Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*: Por. I pray thee, over name them; and as thou namest them, I will describe them; and, according to my description, level at my affection.

John Florio, *First Fruits*, page 70: *Tel me of curtesie, if you know the customes of certaine nations, I know you know them.*



Dialogues of Second Fruits, 1591.

In *Second Fruits*, the worldly wisdom given by Stephen to Peter, the neophyte traveller, is much like Polonius' advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*⁷ and "the high regard for scholars manifest in this same dialogue is of particular interest because both Florio and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* show the same respect for actors."

John Florio, *Second Fruits*: Be circumspect how you offend schollers, for-knowe,

A serpents tooth bites not so ill,

As dooth schollers angrie quill.

And if thou wrong him in his goods,

He will deprive thee of thy good name,

And longer bleedes a wound made with a quill,

Then any made with a sword or lance (page 97)

Shakespeare's **Hamlet** shows the same respect for actors:

Hamlet. Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used; for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time: after your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live. (II. ii. 547-551)

Furthermore, the long dialogue of Chapter 12 of *Second Fruits* is a kind of compendium of arguments on love and women, both for and against. It would seem that Shakespeare echoes the *Second Fruits* in his arguments for and against love and sonnet-writing in ***Love Labour's Lost***. Miss Frances Amelia Yates, Shakespeare's and Florio's scholar, in *A Study of Love Labour's Lost*⁸ page 24, underlined that Shakespeare not only carefully studied this dialogue written by Florio, but also knew the history behind it.

⁷ Florio, *Second Fruits*, pp. 93-111, *Hamlet*, liii.

⁸ Verfasser, Yates, Frances A. 1899-1981 (2013). *A study of Love's labour's lost*, Cambridge Univ. Press.

Both John Florio and Shakespeare also wrote dialogues on social injustice. Florio in *First Fruits* writes as follow:

John Florio: *Going thorow the world, I have seene, that the seditious command the peacible, the proud command the humble, the tirant the just, the cruel the pitiful, the dastard the hardy, the ignorant the prudent: I have seene the worst theaves hang the most innocent...Nowe wee see some gobaern soules in Churches, that are not sufficient to govern sheepe in the mountaines, and that this be true, wee see the effect thereof dayly, for such Prelates doo not governe, but merre: they do not helpe, but offende: they do not resist enimies, but rather yeld the innocent into their handes: they are not Judges but tyrants: they are not clemet, but hangmen: they doo not keepe the lawes, but fynd newe tributes: they doo not raise the good, but raise the bad: these are the Bishops of our Popedome. (page. 81)*

We find these same ideas in Shakespeare:

Arragon. *How many then should cover that stand bare! How many be commanded that command! How much low peasantry would then be glean'd from the true seed of honour! And how much honour Pick'd from the chaff and ruin of the times To be new-varnish'd! (Merchant of Venice, II, ix, 44-49)*

Lear. *What, are mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Lok with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yound simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?*

Glouchester. *Ay, sir.*

Lear. *And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. Thon rascal beandle, hold thy bloody hand!*

Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back;

Thou htlly lust'st to use her in that kind

For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener.

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;

Robes and furr'd gowns hide all (King Lear, IV. Vi 153-169)

Both John Florio and Shakespeare also wrote dialogues about anti-feminist literature. **Iago's** banter with Desdemona in *Othello* is very much alike John Florio's antifeminist dialogue in ***Second Fruits***:

Iago. *Come on; you are pictures out of doors, Bells in your parlours, wild-cats in your kitchens, Saints in your injures, devils being offended, Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds. (Othello, II. i. 110-113)*

Florio, Second Fruits: *Women are purgatory of men's purses; The paradise of men's bodies; the hell of men's souls. Women are in churches saints; abroad angels; at home devils; At windows sirens; at doors pyes; and in gardens goats.*

In contrast, there is a dialogue of feminine beauty in John Florio's *Second Fruits*, particularly of “the partes that a woman ought to have to be accounted most faire.”

Florio:

In choyse of faire, are thirtie things required

For which (they saie) faire Hellen was admired,

Three white, three black, three red, three short, three tall,

three thick, three thin, three streight, three wide, three small,

white teeth, white hands, and neck as yvoire white,

black eyes, black browes, black beares that hide delight;

Redd lippes, red cheekes, and tops of nipples red,

Long legs, long fingers, long locks of hear head,

Short feete, short eares, and teeth in measure short,

*Broad front, broade brest, broad hipps in seemely sort,
 Streight leegs, streight nose and streight her pleasure place,
 Full thighes, full buttocks, full her bellies space,
 Thin lipps, thin eyelids, and beare thin and fine,
 Smale mouth, smale waste, small pupils of her eyne,
 Of these who wants, so much of fairest wants,
 And who hath all, her beautie perfect vauntes.*

The parallels in structure, phraseology, and unusual spondaic meter between Florio's poem and Shakespeare's description of an excellent horse in *Venus and Adonis* are striking:

Shakespeare:

*Round-hoof'd, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,
 Broad breast, full eye, small head and nostril wide,
 High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,
 Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide:
 Look, what a horse should have he did not lack,
 Save a proud rider on so proud a back. (lines 295-300)*

One further illustration will suffice to point out the variety of remarkable parallels and similarities between the dialogues written by Shakespeare and John Florio. In *First Fruits* there is a dialogue on the virtues of wine. **Falstaff's** speech on the virtues of sack runs very closely to

this. Note particularly how Shakespeare uses the same words or meanings around which he builds the simile: vapors (humors), wit, blood, heart, brain (spirits), and learning (memory)

John Florio: *Sir. I will tell you the truth, I love beere, I love aale, but I love a cuppe of wine beste of all: for, as Plinie saith, wine so it be moderately used, is a thing ordened of God, the wine doth quench the thirst, revive the spirits, comfort the hart, sharpen the wyt, gladded a doleful mind, maketh a good memorye, killeth yl humors, maketh good blod....(First Fruits, page 28)*

Falstaff. *A good sherris sack hath a two-fold operation in it. It ascends me into the brain; dries me there all the foolish and dull and curdy vapours which environ it; makes it apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble fiery and delectable shapes, which, delivered o'er to the voice, the tongue, which is the birth, becomes excellent wit. The second property of your excellent sherris is, the warming of the blood; which, before cold and settled, left the liver white and pale, which is the badge of pusillanimity and cowardice; but the sherris warms it and makes it course from the inwards to the parts extreme: it illumineth the face, which as a beacon gives warning to all the rest of this little kingdom, man, to arm; and then the vital commoners and inland petty spirits muster me all to their captain, the heart, who, great and puffed up with this retinue, doth any deed of courage; and this valour comes of sherris. So that skill in the weapon is nothing without sack, for that sets it a-work; and learning a mere hoard of gold kept by a devil, till sack commences it and sets it in act and use. (Henry IV, IV, iii, 103.127)*

