



*“Yet in that year Thorpe addressed to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke - via Florio - a sonnet-sequence by William Shakespeare.”*

SHAKESPEARE & JOHN FLORIO:  
SONNETS

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## John Florio in William Vaughan's *Golden Fleece*: Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare and John Florio were both involved in the production of sonnets.

A year after John Florio's death, in 1626, his old friend William Vaughan published three volumes of cryptic memoirs about events at the Court of James and Anne. *Golden Fleece* is an assortment of memoirs from James and Anne's court, told in a cryptic language. But behind apparently apocryphal yarns, Vaughan recounts real stories and gossips from the period of Florio's presence at court. He uses for Queen Anna the pseudonym *Princess Thalia* while for James I *Apollo*. When it comes to John Florio however, Vaughan has no problem giving us the real name and a few stories about him.

Hugh Broughton, who was an English divine and rabbinical scholar, was aspiring at the same position of Groom of the Privy chamber. Jealous of Florio's prestigious position at court, Broughton tried to make trouble when he discovered Florio had been instrumental in producing some verses that Vaughan defines "a strange morall letany", which was released during a royal birthday. As a result, Florio had to appear before James I to defend himself from this charge which has been brought against him, having been accused to have descended to a frivolity of tone and matter unsuited to a person of his gravity. Broughton considered himself a superior and more serious scholar to the "Novelist Italian" and resented his appointment. For this reason, Broughton hoped to bring John Florio down by revealing his involvement in this poetic production. Florio is described performing salacious and obscene verses during the royal birthday. Florio defended himself by arguing that it is sometimes necessary to temper gravity with brightness to suit the tastes of one's pupils and patrons. There are several sexual puns that Florio used to make his own "apology". He, for example, refers to the Queen Anna as "The great lady". This throws a light upon the level of confidence which Florio had with the aristocracy.

Giulia Harding, Florio's scholar, has pointed out that Vaughan, in his work, was referring to Shakespeare's sonnets, therefore proving that both Shakespeare and John Florio were involved in the sonnets production:

*"We know the precise date the Sonnets went on sale. Edward Alleyn was the leading actor in 'The Lord Admiral's Men', a well known theatre company and chief rival to Shakespeare's group 'The King's Men'. We know he went to John Wright's bookshop on June 19th, 1609 and paid five pence for a copy of 'Shakespeare's Sonnets'. He would have ordered the book when it was first registered at the Stationers' Company and advertised as a forthcoming publication and arranged to collect it as soon as it arrived. The Sonnets had been registered by Thomas Thorpe on May 20th, barely a month before the book appeared. If you had been living in the early seventeenth century you would probably have known why June 19th was an important date. It was the King's birthday. In 1609 James the First turned forty three years old. The publication of the Sonnets on this exact date was no coincidence and to discover the link we must consult the gossipy anecdotes recounted in William Vaughan's 'Golden Fleece'.<sup>1</sup>*

William Vaughan was therefore describing John Florio as deeply involved in the production of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

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<sup>1</sup> Giulia Harding, John Florio and The Sonnets, Part I, [www.shakespeareandflorio.net](http://www.shakespeareandflorio.net).

Miss Frances Yates also pointed out that John Florio was connected with the publication of Shakespeare and Sonnets:

*"It might be interesting to inquire why Thorpe was so keen on publishing old material in this year. [...] Yet in that year Thorpe addressed to William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke - via Florio - a translated satire, Healey's Discovery of the new World, and to a "Mr W.H." a sonnet-sequence by William Shakespeare."*<sup>2</sup>

Marianna Iannaccone, Florio's scholar, in her monograph, *John Florio's Italian & English Sonnets* demonstrates that Florio was both a highly-skilled verse-maker and a poetry artist of imaginative power. The book also unveils an English sonnet attributed to Shakespeare, later shown to have been by Florio.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this attribution were due to striking similarities in language register and poetic voice. While Shakespeare's scholars have tried to dismiss Florio's stylistic closeness to Shakespeare by asserting that he was "no poet"<sup>5</sup>, this monograph shows that he was an "acrobat of words", able to pen sonnets in both Italian and English, using different styles, from the Petrarchan structure to the English iambic pentameter

## John Florio & Henry Wriothesley

Henry Wriothesley, The Third Earl of Southampton, has been frequently identified as the Fair Youth of Shakespeare's Sonnets. John Florio became tutor, secretary and close friend of Henry Wriothesley from 1590 to 1598. Countess Longworth de Chambrun pointed out that in *Second Fruits* (1591), there is a dialogue between John Florio and Henry. They play at tennis together and go to see a play at theatre.<sup>6</sup> For Frances Yates too, this identification meets with some support from the fact that in the dialogue John quotes the proverb "Chi si contenta gode," which is the motto on Florio's portrait. Moreover, the topics touched on in the *Second Fruits*, like primero, theatre, love, and tennis, represent Southampton's tastes.

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<sup>2</sup> Yate Frances Amelia, *John Florio: The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England*.

<sup>3</sup> Iannaccone Marianna, *John Florio's Italian & English Sonnets*, Lulu, 2021, ISBN 978-1716114977

<sup>4</sup> Iannaccone Marianna, *John Florio's Italian & English Sonnets*, Lulu, 2021, ISBN 978-1716114977, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Bate, <http://worldcat.org/oclc/38067661>, *The genius of Shakespeare*, 1998, Oxford University Press

<sup>6</sup> Arcangeli Alessandro, 2005-11-01 *Les Second Fruits de John Florio ou la vie comme un jeu*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/shakespeare.651>, *Actes des congrès de la Société française Shakespeare*, issue 23, pages 11-24



Portrait of Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton, the "fair youth" of Shakespeare's Sonnets. William Vaughan, in his *Golden Fleece*, wrote that John Florio was involved in the production of Shakespeare's sonnets. John Florio also lived at Titchfield with the young Earl from 1590 to 1598. Florio's dedication to Henry in his *A World of Words* has been compared to Shakespeare's dedication in *The Rape of Lucrece*. "There is no essential difference between these two texts, either in form or matter," declared Shakespeare's and Florio's scholar Clara Longworth de Chambrun.

## Shakespeare & John Florio: Dedications

John Florio and Shakespeare also wrote the same dedications to the same patron. In *Venus and Adonis* (1593), Shakespeare wrote to Henry:

*"If this first child of my invention prove deformed, I shall be sorry it had so noble a Godfather."*

Florio, likewise, in the dedication to Henry in *A World of Words*, declares himself:

*"Over presumptuous to entreat so high a presence to the christening of his brain-babe."*

And continues:

*"To me and many others the glorious and gracious sunshine of your Honour hath infused light and life; so, may my lesser borrowed light, after a principal respect to your benign aspect and influence,*



*afford some lustre to others. Good parts imparted, are not impaired. Your springs are first to serve yourself yet may yield your neighbours sweet water: Your taper is to light you first, and yet it may light your neighbour's candle."*

But the parallel with Shakespeare's second dedication which accompanied Lucrece in 1594 is still more striking<sup>7</sup>:

*TO THE RIGHT HONORABLE, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton and Baron of Titchfield.*

*The love I dedicate to your lordship is without end; whereof this pamphlet without beginning is but a superfluous moiety. The warrant I have of your honorable disposition, not the worth of my untutored lines, makes it assured of acceptance. What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, devoted yours. Were my worth greater, my duty would show greater; meantime, as it is, it is bound to your lordship, to whom I wish long life, still lengthened with all happiness.*

*Your lordship's in all duty,*

*William Shakespeare.*

Florio writes:

*"In truth I acknowledge an entyre debt, not onely of my best knowledge, but of all, yea of more then I know or can, to your bounteous Lordship most noble, most vertuous, and most Honorable Earle of Southampton, in whose paie and patronage I have lived some yeeres; to whom I owe and vowe the yeeres I have to live."*

There is no essential difference between these two texts.

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<sup>7</sup> Chambrun Clara Longworth 1960, Shakespeare: A Portrait Restored, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/40114402>, Books Abroad, volume 34, issue 1, pages 74