

The White Devil: Webster's collaborative play with Florio¹.

This past century, playwright John Webster has gained in prominence within the canon of English Renaissance dramatic literature. Born in London sometime around 1580, Webster has been defined the last of the great Elizabethan playwrights. In 1604, he wrote his first play in collaboration with fellow playwright Thomas Dekker on *Westward Ho!*. Other collaborations include the tragedy *Caesar's Fall*, the history play *Sir Thomas Wyatt* and *Christmas Comes but Once a Year*. However, he is best known for two macabre tragedies based on real-life events in Italy: *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) and *The White Devil* (1612). The latter is based on the assassination of the Italian noblewoman Vittoria Accoramboni and follows the illicit affair between her and the Duke Bracciano, with their actions resulting in an epic and bloody end. Considered to be among the finest of all Jacobean tragedies, *The White Devil* is not divided into acts, but runs straight through, cumulatively, until the finale, the masque-like scene where Vittoria, together with her brother and her waiting-woman, are murdered in ritual revenge for the lady whom she had supplanted.

Dr. Gunnar Boklund, in his book *The Sources of the white Devil*, examines Webster's historical sources and a large number of printed books and manuscripts relating to the story of Vittoria Accoramboni that have been used for the play. One of the sour-

¹ This article was published on May 4th, 2020 on www.resolutejohnflorio.com. It is also available on academia.edu at the following link: https://www.academia.edu/42948582/The_White_Devil_Webster-s_collaborative_play_with_Florio.

ces used for *The White Devil* is *A letter lately written from Rome*, written by John Florio.

Originally titled *A Letter Lately Written from Rome, by an Italian Gentleman, to a Freende of His in Lyons in Fraunce*, and signed I.F., it was written in 1585 when Florio was working in London at the French Embassy, and began a pioneering job in translating news from the world as novels.

“There was a tremendous demand for news in Elizabethan England, and though newspapers were not yet born, their coming was presaged by the numerous news-pamphelts, generally translations of dispatches from abroad, which poured from the presses and had a ready sale.²”

A letter lately written from Rome belongs to this class of literature, and was published by John Charlewood in 1585 and dedicated to Henry Stanley, 4th Earl of Derby:

“So when I consider the excellencie of your calling, the nobility of your bloode, and the vertues wherein you shine, though I be desirous to giue a tast of your prayes vnto the world, yet finding my sight too weake to stare vpon such a sun, I am compelde to turne away my face and giue it over.³”

² Yates, F., *John Florio: The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England*, Cambridge University Press, 1932, p. 79.

³ Florio, J., *A Letter Lately Written From Rome by an Italian Gentleman, to a Freende of His in Lyons in Fraunce*, John Charlewood, London, 1585.

Since The Earl of Derby worked as ambassador in France, it is very likely John Florio met him during his stay at the French Embassy in London between 1583 and 1585.

A Letter Lately Written From Rome: From News To Plays.

In this work, John Florio translated a several number of news from Italy, like the death of Pope Gregory and the murder of Vittoria Accoramboni, turning them into novels.

The Calendar of Foreign State Papers, Volume 19, shows an interesting gossips of different news from Italy concerning the Pope addressed to Lyons from February 1585, as well as various news from Venice. However, there's no trace of the other news Florio mentions in his work. Frances Yates suggests that, without any doubt, he had run several letters into one, since there are at least three different dispatches, one is in the Record Office (the one about Pope's Gregory's death), while others are missing. It is also very likely that Florio had access to these letters during his stay at the French Embassy, working side by side as secretary and legal representative of French ambassador Michel de Castelnau.

Dr. Boklund too in his sensitive study about *The White Devil* underlines that no Italian original of *A Letter lately written from Rome* exists. He concludes that the book was not really a translation, as the misleading title might suggests, but it was written or at least compiled by Florio himself⁴.

⁴ Boklund, G., *The Sources Of The White Devil*, Haskell House, A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1957.

Captain Emmo

Among the various news John Florio translated in his work, Frances Yates points out how a particular story might have “struck the imagination of some dramatist.”:

*“Emmo, a nobleman of Venice, went out to scour the seas for pirates. Near Corfu he met a galley belonging to the King of Algeria going with tribute to the Great Turk and containing also one of the king's wives and her two daughters. Disregarding the alliance between Venice and Turkey, Emmo fell upon this galley, took the booty, murdered the crew, dishonoured the two daughters and threw their mother into the sea.”*⁵

This is the story of Captain Emmo, originally Gabriel Emo, a Venetian captain who was executed in 1585 for an act of piracy that threatened Venice's sensitive relations with Ottoman Islam. Emo perhaps thought he could get away with an act of piracy against the Turks, but there was a fear that this incident might disrupt the peace with the Sultan.

The documents about the crime and punishment of Gabriel Emo is mentioned in *Venice: A documentary History, 1450-1630*, which contains the story written by Alvi-
 se Michiel in *Memorie pubbliche della Repubblica di Venezia*:

“The Senate received a letter containing the dreadful news that Ser Gabriel Emo, Commander of the Galleys of the Condemned, had encounte-

⁵ Yates, F., *John Florio*, cit., p. 82.

*red two Berber galleys on his return from Cefalonia. One of these galleys took flight, ran for Zante, and was well treated by the governor of that island. The other put out a flag of truce, and lifted its oars out of the water, but the Commander [Emo] attacked it with two Cretan galleys, set free 290 Christian slaves, and butchered all [the rest]. Aboard this galley [gale-*ra bastarda*] of twenty-six benches was the son of the late Pasha of Tripoli, with his mother, wife and children, who were bound for Constantinople with a vast treasure to have him appointed in his father's place. Others said he was the son of the King of Fez, even as they called the woman the Queen. They were flung into the water and died; of the others, some drowned, and others were hacked to pieces. The treasure consisted of eight chests of gold and silver, pearls and jewels, and thirty chests of precious materials, cloth of gold, carpets, velvets, sarcenet of high and low quality, and other such things to a total value of almost a million in gold. Most of these were presents intended for the Sultan and the grandees of the Porte. This terrible news filled every heart with a profound bitterness. Since the Provveditore had sent Ser Lorenzo Priuli and his galley specially to deliver the news, everyone understood the great danger to all the Venetian merchants and their goods in the land of Turkey and the danger to the person of the Bailo. Greater still, however, was the fear that this incident might disrupt the peace with the Sultan. Instructions were sent to the Provveditore that he must seek out Emo, take him prisoner, clap him in irons, and send him back to Venice under close guard. [...]" The Provveditore dell'Armata sent to Venice Ser Gabriele Emo, a prisoner in irons, with the two galleys of ser Antonio Zustignan, son of Benedetto, and Ser*

Lorenzo Priuli, son of Constantin. With Emo there were fourteen prisoners, i.e. Fedel Fedeli, Zuanne Emo and other functionaries of the galley who had received money and goods from the plunder, and information was given that some articles had arrived in Venice on board a ship, and were directed towards a soldier of Signor Silvio da Portia, who held a command in Verona. All the culprits were cast into the prisons of the Heads [of the Ten], and Emo had become so corpulent that he could no longer walk, and was taken to prison by lamplight on his own. The Avogado Lando arraigned him, and then it determined by decree of the Senate that the tribunal should consist of one Ducal Councillor, one of the Censors, one of the Heads of the Forty, and one Avogador, to be chosen by lot. Letters were sent to Verona, ordering the arrest of the soldier....⁶

.....

John Florio, in his story, changed the name from Emo to Emmo⁷:

.....

“Truely a lamentable and memorable case that a Lady in that extremitie, floating vp and downe the waters, with smyling countenance, should take her death so constantly, saying, that it was more pleasant vnto her to die, then to lyue with such a wicked beast.⁸”

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⁶ Alvise M., *Memorie pubbliche della Repubblica di Venezia*: BMV ms. Ita., cl. VII, 811 7299) ff. 321r-3223, 334r-v, 346r-347v, in Chambers, D., Pullan, B., Fletcher, J., *Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630*, Renaissance Society of America 2001, University of Toronto Press.

⁷ I'd like to point out that the two copies of *A letter lately written from Rome* owned by the Bodleian Library, digitised by Oxford Text Archive, and the copy digitised by the Early English Books Online, both do not correspond to the authentic work published by the author, since they lack of Quire C, the chapter of the story of Captain Emmo. This can be also easily deduced by the quote cited by Miss Yates below, which is missing in the both online works digitised by the two websites.

⁸ Florio, J., *A letter*, cit., f. missing.

It seems John Florio was particularly interested to the life of the Turks, since in his library he owned a book about their history and wars: *Trattato de Costumi Et Vita De Turchi* (1548) by Giovanni Antonio Menavino. Another story translated and edited by Florio in his work refers to Rialto in Venice. Here too, he made additions of his own to adapt the story to the English audience:

“A noble man of the house of Contarini, euen in ye Rialto (which is a place in Venice as the Royall Exchange in London) shot at another Noble man with a Pistol who being taken, was foorthwith banished the citie, and all the States thereof, on paine of a thousand crownes, and to loose his life if he be taken, and howbeit many sue for hym, yet can no fauour be obtained, vntill ten yéeres be expired, and if his father die in ye meane time, his goods shalbe confiscated.”

Florio's style in this work is still close to the *Navigations and Discoveries*, written in 1583 than to the 1603 *Montaigne's Essays*. However, his technique is already recognisable, a trademark which will soon become his most famous and greatest stylistic device, like the use of “doublings” of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. In the *Letter*, such usages are few and mainly conventional, as in the narrator's statement that he “arrived safe and sound”, and his description of “torches burning day and night”, or describing the Pope's death in the night of April 9th, “there discended a rume downe into his breast, with such violence, that in two houres it dispatched him.”

⁹ Florio, J., *A Letter*, f.30.

As highlighted by Professor of Shakespeare and Performance Studies Carol Chilington Rutter in her essay *Hear the ambassadors!: Marking Shakespeare's Venice connection*, these news were disseminated to policymakers and, as information leaked into the public domain, to a wide readership, including playwrights.¹⁰

That's how these news became novels which later were transformed into plays, included *The White Devil*.

Florio's Modus Operandi.

Applying the theory of his fellow-housemate-at-the-French-Embassy Giordano Bruno, who told him that "from translations all sciences had their offsprings."¹¹, in the act of "translating" Florio applied his *modus operandi*, which consisted in reading something in another language which appealed to him, translate it in English, editing, adding details with his rhythmic moments and creating an entirely different piece of work to adapt it to an English audience. But Florio's style in this work can also be recognised by the way he decided to translate a particular news titled "Pasquill", using a device he had already experimented in his first work *First Fruits*: dramatic dialogues. In this chapter of *A Letter*, Pasquill is preparing to go to Rome and casually meets Marforius and they discuss his soon-travel to the Italian city:

"M. Pasquine, whether goest thou in such hast?

P. I goe to seeke my fortune, for I will stay no longer heere.

¹⁰ Rutter, C. C., *Hear The Ambassadors: Marking Shakespeare's Venice Connection*, Shakespeare Survey n. 66, Cambridge, 2013, p. 282

¹¹ Florio, J., *The Essayes*, To The Reader, Edward Blount, London, 1603.

M. *Alas, what doo I heere and what is the cause that moueth thee to forsake thy deare and naturall countrey?*

P. *Because there is no more religion heere.*

M. *How many that be? and if there be no Religion heere, where is there any then?*

P. *That knowe not I, but well I wote, that the holy Trinitie is nothing at all accounted of heere.*

M. *Alas for you, and where is it more manifestly knowen and openly professed then heere? I dare take vpon me to make thee confesse, and say, that in no place else so much as in this holy Citie.*

P. *I pray thee Marforius, doo mee that fauour, as to make mee perceiue that, which if thou doost, I promise thee I will not forsake my countrey.*

M. *I would doo it willingly, but I feare thou wilt but mocke mee, being a thing so manifest that euery one may see it, and feele it.*

P. *I will rather thinke my self beholding to thee then mocke thee. wherfore I pray thee proceed.*

M. *Is it possible that thou doost not perceiue in the Popes persō the representatiō of the eternal father, & in the Lord Giacomo, that of Iesus Christ his sōne, & in yoūg Philip, begotten of the Pope, and fathered vpon L. Giacomo, that of the holy Ghost, proceeding both from the father and the sonne?*

P. *Ha, Ha, Ha, by my faith thou sayest true. I must needes confesse that the Trinitie is not so apparently knowen in any other place as it is in Rome,*

*and therefore I will euen get me home againe, and stay the euentof the
Romaine Trinitie. And thus endeth the Pasquill.*"¹²

Florio's method was already well developed here, and follows the example of *First Fruits*, a work in which he borrowed contents from his favourite classic authors, like Ovid or Plutarch, translating, editing, and creating new content for the English readers. *A letter lately written from Rome* follows the same scheme, and that's why, still today, there is no original letter found with such news. Because what John Florio created was something anew, borrowed from different sources, in this case, news from Italy.

*"Florio's talent lies in recognition of his most accomplished predecessors
and in borrowing and adapting their work."*¹³

Boklund hints that John Florio may have acted as a personal intermediary between the dramatist Webster and the source material. In this context, the important role he played was not just to write useful material for his colleagues but to have an active role in the composition of the play. Too often he has been relegated to a supplier of banal informations about Italian folkore, when, in reality, his real role was more of a collaborator, editor and ghostwriter, which would also justify Ben Jonson's dedication to him in a copy of *Volpone* in which he defined Florio the *Ayde of his muses*¹⁴.

¹² Florio, J., *A Letter*, cit., f.13.

¹³ Dewitt T. S., *John Florio Reconsidered*, Texas Studies in Literature and Language, Vol. 6 N. 4.

¹⁴ To read Ben Jonson's dedication to John Florio and know more about their relationship, read the page "**Groom of the Privy Chamber**" and the article in Florio Journal "**John Florio: the ayde of Jonson and Shakespeare.**"

Virginio Orsini & Twelfth Night.

The hypothesis that John Florio worked side by side with John Webster for *The White Devil* is supported by British scholar M.C. Bradbrook, who in her book *John Webster, Citizen & Dramatist* underlines that the play had another Florio's fingerprint, his translation of Montaigne's *Essays*. Their collaboration, suggests Bradbrook, can be supported also by the fact that "as he dwelt in Shoe Lane, Holborn, John Florio lived near Webster.¹⁵"

But the most interesting connection that Bradbrook attributes to Florio is the presence, in the play, of Virginio Orsini, Second Duke of Bracciano, and son of Paolo Giordano Orsini. *The White Devil* opens with Vittoria's seduction by the Duke of Bracciano, Paolo Giordano Orsini, planned with the help of his secretary, her brother Flamineo. Virginio appears at the end of the play as Giovanni Orsini, to give judicial sentence on the murderers. Earlier he has appeared in armour, proudly announcing his martial ambitions; then he makes a dramatic entrance in a suit of black, accompanied by the villainous Lodovico to bring on the Duke of Florence the news of his mother's death. For a minor part it is strongly highlighted.

Virginio Orsini

Virginio Orsini, best known as Lord of Bracciano, was a supporter of the arts, and in particular of music and poetry. He was responsible for having introduced musicians and dancers into the artistic entourage of the Duke of Bracciano. He also had an

¹⁵ Bradbrook, M.C., *John Webster, citizen and dramatist*, New York:Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 193.

important role in the poetic and musical context of Florence and Rome, and was involved in the theatrical and musical activity at court. His patronage to Luca Marenzio was crucial for the creation of *Quinto libro di madrigali a sei voci* (1591), and the composition of madrigals for Vittoria Archilei. Orsini was also a member of the *Pastori della Valle Tiberina*, an academy in which he appeared as 'Prince Tirsi', and whose Torquato Tasso was an affiliate. He participated in the Florentine confraternity of the *Compagnia del Gesù*, in the *Accademia degli Umoristi*, the *Accademia della Crusca* and the *Accademia degli Alterati*, establishing himself at the centre of a broader poetic network¹⁶.

Bradbrook argues that John Florio would certainly have remembered this gallant young man who in January 1601 had paid a private visit to London, after escorting his cousin, Maria de' Medici, on her way to become Queen of France.

The fame of Orsini as patron attracted the attention of Queen Elisabeth I, who honoured his visit with magnificent musical celebrations, sending special coaches to convey the Duke to Court for a Twelfth Night feast, followed by a play and a ball at Whitehall. Queen Elizabeth loved Italian manners and customs to the point of protesting on occasion that she herself was "as it were, half Italian¹⁷" and she loved to be nicknamed "the Florentine". Unquestionably, she enjoyed the challenge his visit presented. When Virginio arrived in London, his audience with the queen though "not (to be) quite as private as I had desired,¹⁸" was set for Tuesday January 6, the feast of Epiphany. Later, Elizabeth saw to it that her special Italian visitor was kept handsomely entertained. Virginio was certainly overwhelmed by his reception at

¹⁶ Morucci, V., *Poets and musicians in the Roman-Florentine circle of Virginio Orsini, Duke of Bracciano (1572–1615)*, *Early Music*, Volume 43, Issue 1, February 2015, Pages 53–61.

¹⁷ Erickson, C., *The First Elizabeth*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York, 1983, p. 231.

¹⁸ Hotson, L., *The first night of Twelfth night*, New York:Macmillan, 1954, p. 184.

court, and in two letters written to his wife Flavia Peretti Orsini, he described Queen Elizabeth I, dressed in white with many “pearls, rubies and diamonds.” and talking so well Italian that “I might say she took lessons from Boccaccio or the Academy.¹⁹” But her Highness’s guest of honour was an Italian duke who had no English. For this very reason, Bradbrook points out that:

“The young Duke stayed with an Italian merchant in the city; he would have needed an interpreter, and Florio would have been an obvious choice for his friends, the Cecils, to supply (as he had worked for that family).²⁰”

Bradbrook’s hypothesis is corroborated by one of the two letters Orsini wrote to his wife, in which he details the extraordinary length to which the Elizabethan court went to welcome the only Italian of his station it was ever to see, and that he needed gentlemen who could translate for him from English to Italian:

“Ho trovato Due Cavalieri che non sappino altri lingua che l’Inglese, e con questi ho adoperato altri Cavalieri per interpreti.” - “I found two Gentlemen who knew no other language than English, and with these I was helped by other Gentlemen interpreters.²¹”

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 227.

²⁰ Bradbrook, M.C., *John Webster*, cit., p. 121.

²¹ Virginio Orsini in Hotson, L., *The First Night*, cit., pg. 226-235.

It is also important to note that in his letters Virginio Orsini mentions that he also visited the French Embassy, where John Florio began working and lived from 1583 to 1585, and kept doing secretarial job until at least 1606, with an office of his own, as proved by a letter sent to him on September 8, 1606²².

Doubtless, Virginio Orsini's visit at the English court was a huge success. In her book *Murder of a Medici Princess*, Caroline Murphy confirms that the "young and gracious nobleman proved popular with his English counterparts.":

*"On 6 January, Epiphany of 1601, the Queen's players performed Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, a light-hearted comedy composed especially for the feast. One of the play's principal characters, Duke Orsino, took his name from the Italian visitor seated as guest of honour in the audience."*²³

For John Florio the term Orsino means "of the nature of a Beare. Also Beeregarlike."²⁴ This Italian connection is supported by contemporary documents such as a memorandum of the Lord Chamberlain, Lord Hunsdon, in which he wrote that on the occasion of the Queen's 1601 Twelfth Night festivities, it was chosen a play "that shalbe furnished with rich apparel, have great variety and change of Musicke and daunces, and of a Subiect that may be most pleasing to her Maiestie"²⁵.

²² TNA SP 46/125/fo163-163d.

²³ Murphy, C., *Murder of a Medici Princess*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 348.

²⁴ Florio, J., *Queen Anna's New World of Words, Or Dictionarie of the Italian and English tongues, Collected, and newly much augmented by Iohn Florio, Reader of the Italian vnto the Soueraigne Maiestie of ANNA, Crowned Queene of England, Scotland, France and Ireland, &c. And one of the Gentlemen of hir Royall Priuie Chamber. Whereunto are added certaine necessarie rules and short obseruations for the Italian tongue*, London, Printed by Melch. Bradwood, for Edw. Blount and William Barret., 1611.

²⁵ Elam, K., *Twelfth Night: Third Series*, The Arden Shakespeare, 2008, p. 93.

That the play chosen for Virginio Orsini was a comedy it is documented by the Italian guest himself, that in another letter written to his wife, informed her that “a comedy was performed, mixed with music and dances, but I will save this as well (like other details) to tell you about it in person.²⁶”

Long after midnight the great day ended in the Hall as Queen Elizabeth had planned it, with Duke Orsini standing and chatting close to her throne, seeing and hearing the pleasing comedy. His visit was certainly a major attraction for Queen Elizabeth I, and his figure, mentioned in two different plays written ten years apart, indicates the great mark his visit left at court.

But while *The White Devil* freely telescopes the horrors of Virginio's childhood, when at four years old his jealous father strangled his mother, in the *Twelfth Night* he is homaged for his passion for music. However, in *The White Devil*, even in a story intertwined with blood and death, Virginio is portrayed as the “sweet prince Giovanni”, a boy filled with romantic dreams of future glory as a generous paladin.

“Twelfth Night and The White Devil are the extremes of Elizabethan drama: the one, the happiest and most golden comedy of love, music, and laughter, and the other perhaps the blackest and most nerve-racking tragedy of lust, murder, and horrible death. It seems incredible, but these antipodes of the dramatic sphere share one point in common. Among the persons of the play in each of them figures the shadow of Don Virginio

*Orsino.*²⁷”

²⁶ Hotson, *The first night*, cit., p. 230.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 35.

Gunnar Boklund too gives John Florio a key role for the presence of the Italian Orsini in Webster's play, defining him a "well-known mediator of news from Italy available in London". The acquisition of further details about Orsini's life, suggests Boklund, would have been easier for Webster only through John Florio, the only Italian at court during Orsini's visit. Moreover, it would have been quite difficult for young Webster to join such an important event at court when in 1601 he was taking his first steps into the world of theatre. On the contrary, the role of John Florio, who already had a solid career behind him and well established at court through the patronage of Henry Wriothesley and living under the roof of Thomas Sackille, 1st Earl of Dorset, and later Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, can certainly explain how the inclusion of details about Virginio Orsini's apparel and personality in a play of Webster could be possible.

In this context, it is also necessary to observe that John Florio's role as writer and collaborator at court during Virginio Orsino's visit was already recognised and was confirmed three years later when he became Groom of The Privy Chamber, working with Queen Anna of Denmark and Italian ambassadors, as a letter written by the Florentine Ottaviano Lotti testifies:

"[..] This Florio, who is with the Queen all day long teaching her the Italian language and hearing her conversation on all subjects and who writes all her most confidential letters...²⁸"

²⁸ - August 12, 1611, Ottaviano Lotti, Archivio di stato, Firenze, Archivio Mediceo 4189, in Yates, F., *John Florio*, cit., p. 250.

As Groom of the Privy Chamber, Florio had also a major role in the selection of musicians and the preparation of masques at court. An evidence comes, again, from Ottaviano Lotti, who in 1606 wrote a letter to John Florio in which he urged him to assist with his influence a certain "Signora Gioua", a musician, who wished to obtain employment at court. The man was a good performer at the great lyre, the lute, the spinet and especially the viola. Lotti asked Florio to sup with him since the musician was anxious for Florio to come in order to "hear my lyre to see if it seems to you a thing worthy of being made public."

In conclusion, John Florio's involvement in the play *The White Devil* can be corroborated not just for the influence of his works *A letter lately written from Rome* and Montaigne's *Essays* but also for his personal acquaintance with Virginio Orsini. His role as active collaborator, more than a simple supplier of informations, can justify the many fingerprints he has left in the play. Moreover, since he already worked with Ben Jonson for the play *Volpone* in 1604, and the dedication of the Leicester's Men in his first work of 1578, *First Fruits*, already prove that at twenty five years old he was already well involved in the theatre, writing side by side with playwrights.

This new important discovery about John Florio's collaboration with John Webster for the play *The White Devil*, not only shed a light upon his role as mediator and go-between for Italian and English in London, but also as active collaborator in plays and masques at court.

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