

FLORIO AND THE 'UR-HAMLET'

In this little article I want to pose an important question, did Florio write the so-called 'Ur-Hamlet' while he was tutoring at Cambridge?

The Florio-Nashe quarrel makes it clear that when Nashe refers to the man who quotes "whole Hamlets" he is speaking of John Florio, so there must be some significant connection. We know that scholars and tutors, like Nashe and Florio, wrote plays of a fairly intellectual nature for performance within the University and this may be where the early Hamlet had its first outing. Whoever wrote it, we assume that early text is lost, but there is just a chance we have been looking at it all along without realizing quite what we were seeing. I think the 'Ur-Hamlet' and 'Hamlet Q1' may be one and the same, because there is another Florio connection. One connection is merely interesting, but two look like more than a coincidence.

In my article 'Sonnets 1' I explained that one of the decorative blocks used in the book had appeared earlier in Florio's translation of Montaigne's Essays. There are two versions of the design, and the second makes a surprising appearance in the first, so-called 'bad' edition of 'Hamlet', published in 1603, known as 'Hamlet Q1.'

The ladder-style A-formation design which is used at the top of the first page of the text of the Sonnets also appears at the top of the opening page of 'Hamlet Q1', suggesting that Florio somehow had a hand in this publication.

It is an old assertion, frequently repeated, that this early edition of Hamlet must have been a pirate publication, perhaps drawn together from the memories of actors who had performed the play.

There are, however, several good reasons to believe that this was an authorised publication which ran into problems.

The printer in question, James Roberts, had been concerned with the publication of three other Shakespeare plays; 'Titus Andronicus', 'Merchant of Venice' and 'Midsummer Night's Dream' and he had obtained a licence for a fourth, 'Troilus and Cressida', during 1603. He regularly published handbills to advertise forthcoming productions for the players' companies. His partners in this enterprise, according to the Stationers' Register, were the book-seller Nicholas Ling and a stationer called John Trundell. None of these were men likely to alienate good customers by 'stealing' a play for publication; it is far more likely they were doing business with Shakespeare as usual, only 1603 was not a 'usual' year. There had been a particularly severe outbreak of plague in London which had closed the theatres throughout the summer and nobody remained in the city unless they had a real need to do so. Shakespeare probably retreated to Stratford at times like these to see to his business affairs and spend time with his family unless the company toured country houses to continue performing. 1603 was also the year James the First came to the throne and every artisan in the capital was eager to produce a showpiece of work to gain Royal favour and the possibility of advancement. Florio had just published his great translation of Montaigne's essays and set about making a personal translation, from Latin into Italian, of the King's own work on the duties of a Monarch, 'Basilikon Doron'.

For Shakespeare, 'Hamlet' was the key work to bring to the King's attention. It was by far his most successful play to date and the only one to be performed at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, it gave him the literary credibility he craved and it seems probable he had every intention of publishing the work at this crucial moment.

What seems strange is that this first edition was clearly not the account of the play in current production, but an earlier version with various parts missing. I suspect the plague played its part.

It is necessarily pure conjecture, but in my view Shakespeare was keen to get 'Hamlet' into print as the King came to the throne, and with most of his friends having absented themselves from London, he sought the help of John Florio as the man most likely to have a copy of the text in his study and able to take it to the publisher. It was still possible to send letters into London and Florio was obliged to brave the contagion as he was busy in the capital with his Montaigne translation, but the problem must have been that Florio only had the older version of the play at his disposal. In trying circumstances, it seems he did his best. When the plague cleared and the players returned to the city, an up to date edition of the play was quickly put to the press, using the same printer and publisher, to replace the earlier, flawed version.

The traditional view, that both 'Hamlet Q1' and the Sonnets were pirate publications requires us to believe that two different "pirates", working with two different printing houses some six years apart just happened to select the identical decorative block to open their texts, which I think highly unlikely, especially as those blocks appear to have been the personal property of Florio.

When studying these works, to look only at the text is to look without seeing. This artwork is important too. Decorative banners produced from individually hand-crafted blocks have a forensic value which should not be overlooked by those seeking the provenance of these antique publications. This particular block can be easily and credibly traced back to John Florio and his translation of Montaigne's essays, a fact which should be taken into account, whatever interpretation one favours.

This question seems especially important to me because if 'Q1' is Florio's own 'Ur-Hamlet' from 1589 or earlier, and 'Q2' represents the changes wrought upon it when he joined forces with Shakespeare, comparing the two texts may help to identify what each writer brought to the feast.

Sadly there is no smoking gun to confirm my suspicions, but more little pieces of the jigsaw puzzle turn up all the time and this question will be one that is worth returning to if more evidence comes to light.