



FLORIO AND THE SONNETS – PART ONE

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Shakespeare's Sonnets pose a problem for modern scholars. Most today agree that the poem bound with them, "A Lover's Complaint" is not by Shakespeare at all. It has been specifically excluded from the latest edition of his complete works (edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen for the Royal Shakespeare Company), a decision which reflects current thinking and is a fairly definitive conclusion to many years of debate.

The poem appears to be modelled on, but is considered inferior to, Samuel Daniel's "The Complaint of Rosamund". In its original publication however, we find these words on the title page: "A Lover's complaint – BY – William Shake-speare" which raises a wider issue. If this statement is actually a bare-faced lie, surely it should be admitted that the whole volume is open to more sceptical scrutiny. Where there is one deceit, there may be others and it would be useful to discover why there was any need for a falsehood in the first place.

In this article I aim to demonstrate a very new theory, that King James I's wife, Queen Anne, was the true author of "A Lover's Complaint" and that she charged her private secretary John Florio with the task of publishing it anonymously. He sought the help of his old friend William Shakespeare and current publishing partner Thomas Thorpe to generate a smoke-screen that he hoped would be dense enough to disguise her identity and fulfil her wish without causing a scandal. Women writers simply did not publish love poetry in the early 17th century, just as they did not appear on stage in the public theatre. Such social taboos were exasperating hypocrisy to Anne of Denmark and she was frequently criticised for breaches of etiquette. It was Florio's job to guide and protect her.

Florio was Anne's most trusted adviser, he had an active working relationship with the sonnets' publisher Thomas Thorpe during the year they were published and he acted as an agent in procuring finance from William Herbert. The decorative band on the front page of the sonnets was printed from a block in Florio's personal possession and the date of publication gives a crucial clue to the Queen's involvement. A year after Florio's death his old friend William Vaughan published three volumes of cryptic memoirs about events at the Court of James and Anne. One story in

particular seems to point to the curious case of “Shakespeare’s Sonnets.”

Thanks to the careful habits of one individual 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’. Alleyn recorded his dealings in life with great care, accounting for every penny he spent and luckily those records survived. 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. It is important to understand something of how the book-trade worked four hundred years ago to see why one can be confident that June 19th was publication day.

The first print-run of any book in those times was largely governed by the size of advance orders and the customers would report to the bookshop on publication day, pay their money and collect their copies. If they failed to do so the cash-hungry bookshop might sell them all, there was no contract of sale implied by placing an order. No doubt many placed orders for books and then forgot about it, but the publisher aimed to make as accurate an estimate of likely sales as he could, the burden of debt if he ordered too many copies or the book simply failed when it went on sale was considerable. Success of the first print-run would quickly lead to a second and more if demand persisted. The capital outlay required to produce a book was substantial and publishers like Thorpe needed private investors to get a project from manuscript to printed book. The publisher usually had to bear the cost of purchasing the manuscript, hiring the printers, paper and ink, decorative and soft-binding work. He had to rent fire-proof warehousing to store

vulnerable manuscripts and framed pages of type. Then he needed to allow a profit margin for the book seller and a return for his investor before he made a penny. There were no royalties for writers in 1609, a manuscript once sold to a publisher belonged entirely to him. Nevertheless if a book failed, it was the publisher who bore the brunt of the financial disaster. Unsold books would soon be broken up and the waste paper sold off at two pence a quire (two-dozen sheets) to shop-keepers for use as wrapping paper to reduce the losses. It was a high-risk, high-speed industry which was strictly controlled and extremely competitive. Against this background we can deduce that the meticulous Mr. Alleyne made a note in his diary to pick up “Shakespeare’s Sonnets” on publication day, June 19th.

A month was a very brief period of time in which to produce even a small volume of verse and there is evidence confirming that this publication was rushed. The text of the Sonnets is full of typographical errors and the verses have been laid out with more attention to economy on paper than elegance of form. Remarkably, however, the poem bound with them, ‘A Lover’s Complaint’ is error-free and the verses more neatly framed on the page. Why should that be so? Why the great hurry anyway? Was June 19th an important deadline?

The book never went beyond its first print-run. It excited no reactions from contemporary writers. Only thirteen copies survive today, scattered around various academic libraries and it might well have disappeared without trace if those few had not been preserved. It is a small miracle that “Shakespeare’s Sonnets” survived for our pleasure but it is very curious that no further impressions were made. There has been speculation that the book was suppressed, so faint is its literary footprint. Was there no market demand for poetry by Shakespeare in 1609? His “Venus and Adonis” had gone to seven reprints between the first in 1593 and the last in 1617; his “Rape of Lucrece” reaped five harvests in the market place between 1594 and 1616. That clearly

demonstrates a long-term appetite for his poetry with the reading public during his lifetime. It has been suggested that sonnet writing had waned in popularity by 1609, but is that an adequate explanation?

Some writers in the past have suggested Shakespeare himself suppressed the book, but they fail to explain how he might have done so. With no copyright laws, a writer could only suppress a book by proving the publisher had acted illegally. A difficult, lengthy and expensive court case would be required and nothing of that nature exists on the record. To speculate about pay-offs or threats is to enter the realm of fantasy. How could Shakespeare have so lost track of one hundred and fifty four poems that they would end up in the hands of a pirate publisher? A dozen or so perhaps might go astray, but this many? Furthermore, if Thorpe had acted discredibly over the Sonnets, why would the Earl of Pembroke happily finance his very next publishing venture less than a year later? Indeed in such a case, would Thorpe have had the temerity to appeal to him, via Florio, for funds? This argument lacks credibility and ignores the reality that it was actually remarkably difficult to suppress a book in this era. Elizabeth I's security chief Francis Walsingham tried, and failed to suppress books on several occasions; "Leicester's Commonwealth" being a case in point. More copies would brazenly reappear despite his best efforts to eradicate it. Admittedly that was a more politically charged affair but Walsingham learned that a book, like a cat, once out of the bag, was very difficult to stuff back in again. We have to wonder why the Sonnets disappeared so quickly from public view, but none of these theories have a shred of evidence to support them so there must be a more realistic explanation.

John Florio had an agent's relationship with the Earl of Pembroke (William Herbert, to whom Florio willed his library), and Thomas Thorpe the publisher. This had come about because of Florio's habit of collaborating with other writers and translators throughout

his career. On this web site we aim to show he worked in partnership with William Shakespeare, but there were many others. Richard Hakluyt, Sir Fulke Greville, Sir John Harrington, Matthew Gwinne, Ben Jonson, Robert Burton, John Healey and William Vaughan to name but a few key figures in a long career. It was his work with Healey which brought Florio into contact with Thomas Thorpe. Together they had translated Joseph Hall's satirical work in Latin prose "Mundus Alter et Idem" and produced, between them, a somewhat updated and altered version entitled "The Discovery of a New World". Florio, by now a seasoned patronage-broker, obtained the investment support of William Herbert to finance the book and Thomas Thorpe entered it for publication just four months before "Shakespeare's Sonnets". (January 18th, 1609).

A year later Thorpe had the opportunity to publish Healey's translation of "Epictetus Manual" but he could only afford to produce a short print-run of a rather poor version. He wanted funds from the Earl of Pembroke again to produce a finer edition, more suitable to the noble contents of that seminal work of Stoic philosophy. (If, gentle reader, you do not own a copy of "Epictetus Manual" you must find it at once and keep it by your bedside for all time, it contains a pearl of wisdom for every occasion.) Thorpe therefore dedicated the first effort to John Florio, begging him to intervene once more and seek the Earl's financial support:

'To a true favourer of forward spirits - Maister John Florio.

Sir, as distressed Sostratus spake to more fortunate Areius, to make him his mediator to Augustus, "The learned love the learned, if they be rightly learned." So this your poor friend though he have found much of you, yet doth still follow you for as much more – that as his Maecenas you would write to Augustus, "Be as mindful of Horace as you would be of myself." For his apprentice's essay

you procured (God thank you) an impregnable protection. He now prays the same Patron (most worthy of all praise) for his journeyman's masterpiece.'

John Florio duly obliged, the money was procured and a much finer edition of Epictetus was published thanks to the generosity of the Earl of Pembroke. The relationship between these three individuals is firmly established and we can see that in the late spring of 1609, when a discreet publisher was required for "Shakespeare's Sonnets", Thorpe owed Florio a favour. There seems to be little doubt, in the light of all this, that the 'Mr. W. H.' Thorpe dedicated the Sonnets to was the bountiful William Herbert. Here is a reminder of Thorpe's odd dedication:

TO . THE . ONLY . BEGETTER . OF .
THESE . INSUING . SONNETS .
Mr . W . H . ALL . HAPPINESSE .
AND . THAT . ETERNITIE .
PROMISED .
BY .
OUR . EVER-LIVING . POET .
WISHETH .
THE . WELL-WISHING .
ADVENTURER . IN .
SETTING .
FORTH .
T.T.

Anti-Stratfordians have wrestled with this dedication for more than a century trying to find within it a clue to the identity of the 'real' Shakespeare. It seems to me that Thorpe was not entirely sure whether Herbert wanted to be openly associated with this book but could not refrain from thanking him altogether so the result was this rather cryptic message instead. It is certainly a far cry from

the obsequious dedication of thanks which appears in the final version of 'Epictetus Manual' in which all the Earl's titles are carefully listed, as if Thorpe was trying to redeem himself for the terse address of 'Mr. W. H.' used earlier. We can never know what went on in Thorpe's head, but we do know that keeping an important patron happy must have been like walking on egg-shells.

The next connection between Florio and the Sonnets is entirely visual and plain for all to see. In fact this may have been the slip which gave away his involvement to his critics at the time. Take a look at the decorative strap which ornaments the title page of 'Shakespeare's Sonnets' – to our eyes there seems nothing remarkable about it, but to anybody looking at it in 1609 it might have seemed strangely familiar. The identical ornament had appeared across the dedication pages of Florio's translation of Montaigne's essays just a few years earlier. To understand the significance of this one needs to make a study of the origins and use of such decorative blocks in book printing at the time.

I have searched the microfilm archives of books published by the parties involved in both publications and can find no other use of this decorative device anywhere. If the block from which it was printed did not belong to any of the printers or publishers, one must conclude it belonged to the author, and indeed we know that Florio owned a magnificent set of expensive, German-made engraved copper blocks of this type. He used them repeatedly through work with different publishers and printers during his career. At the end of a print-run, they would have been cleaned, wrapped and returned to him for future use. The splendid frontispiece we find at the opening of 'First Fruits' (a folio sized volume) he also owned in a Quarto version as it re-appeared in 'Second Fruits', the smaller work. Banners and headings were also re-used and this elaborate device in the Sonnets is obviously one of his. The band which heads the first sonnet is from the same set, although a slightly different design, this time with griffins; each

resembles a pair of stylised letters 'A' in mirror image; like twisting and elaborate ladders in one version, floral skeins form the design in the other.

Why German? Well the Germans were famous for excellence in this type of artwork and did it better than anybody, their country was, after all, the home of the first printing press and they worked hard to retain their place as market-leaders. Perhaps Florio brought this set of blocks with him in his luggage when he first arrived in England, he certainly couldn't have afforded to import them on a 'poor scholar's pay at Oxford when his first book came out and I like to imagine they were a parting gift from his father. Michelangelo Florio had successfully written and published books all his adult life and doubtless hoped his son would emulate him. Take a closer look at the strap and study the faces of the cherubs, they suggest a much earlier date than 1609. Depictions of the human face are the most obvious clue to dating artwork of this type and these faces suggest a date at least half a century earlier than the Sonnets. The inclusion of a pair of hares in the design is typically German, a magical symbol of good fortune in their folk-lore and one of their favourite motifs in popular art.

English printers and publishers generally used English made blocks, carved from wood which soon suffered from being relentlessly soaked in ink and crushed in the press. Look at 'The Hermites Tale' in our download section for an example of a blurred and thickened image, the design-block used here had certainly deteriorated by the time this, the third edition was printed. These wooden blocks didn't have the staying power of copper which would last through thousands of visits to the pressure of the press and still provide a crisp, finely detailed image. It is curious, too, to find such a costly and perhaps rather elderly piece of artwork used to decorate a slender, five-penny volume of verse. The conclusion must be that if this was Florio's copper block, then

he must have been closely involved in the supervision of the publication at the very least.

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". This was published in 1626, the year after Florio's death, and consists of a strange assortment of memoirs from James and Anne's court, told in almost surreal and cryptic pseudo-religious language, mainly to protect Vaughan from the wrath, or litigation, of those individuals still living whose activities he describes through three volumes of eccentric narrations. So, for example, he makes almost every event happen in 1626, the current year of the publication, to allow himself a disclaimer should he have been accused of revealing too many secrets. He was very careful in his comments about 'Apollo' and 'Princess Thalia' – his pseudonyms for James and Anne, even though the Queen had died some years earlier. When it comes to John Florio however, Vaughan has no problem giving us the real name and a few racy stories. Research into Vaughan's tales has long since revealed that a true event lies at the heart of even his apparently apocryphal yarns.

We are concerned here with the story of Florio and the controversial poetic publication told in chapters four and five of the second volume of 'The Golden Fleece'. It seems a rival scholar by the name of Hugh Braughton, jealous of Florio's position as 'Dean of Lady Thalia's Chapel' (i.e. the Queen's private secretary) tried to make trouble when he discovered Florio had been instrumental in producing a volume of verse (Vaughan calls it "a strange morall letany") which was done to please the Queen for the King's birthday. Braughton considered himself a superior and more serious scholar to the "artistical Italian" and resented his

appointment; he hoped to bring him down by revealing his involvement in this poetic production. We are told that Florio was summoned to the Royal Presence to recite some of the verses and defend his actions. Vaughan tells us the King was not displeased and the chapter ends with these words from King James:

“There is a time for men to fast and pray
And so a time to sing like Birds in May.”

I have since carried out the most thorough search I can manage to discover what, if any, volumes of verse were published on or near the King's birthday during the years that Florio was close to the Queen and there is only one, 'Shakespeare's Sonnets', published exactly on James' 43rd birthday. Given the links already observed between Florio and the sonnets it is hard to resist the conclusion that this was the poetic publication 'to please the Queen' that Vaughan was speaking of.

It is clear that Florio had not put his name to the publication because Hugh Braughton had to 'find him out', I imagine by recognising that decorative strap from his Montaigne translation, or possibly through Court gossip. The story does of course beg the question, what poetry would the Queen wish to see published for the King's birthday? Vaughan doesn't give anything away on this question. Yet the impetus must have come from her because we can see the book was rushed. If the painstaking John Florio had planned this book of verse on his own initiative, he would have allowed more time and taken more care in the preparation of it. She had set him a challenge.

I have enjoyed studying the life and activities of Queen Anne, she is often dismissed as a trivial and rather vain woman but I disagree. She certainly had a sense of mischief and delighted in challenging stuffy convention and she was very much a party-girl who surrounded herself with like-minded Ladies in Waiting, some of

whom figure among Florio's female patrons for the Montaigne translation, such as Penelope Rich, the 'Stella' of Sir Phillip Sidney's love sonnets. Vaughan tells us Florio was appointed to be Anne's tutor early in James' reign because she had already come in for some stern criticism for her behaviour. Parading around in the old Queen's dresses had caused a particular outrage. Anne was over six feet tall, highly unusual for a woman of that period and we are told that the hemline of the diminutive Elizabeth's old gowns barely reached her knees. She had worn one to appear in a Court masque, something else women simply didn't do at this point in history and instead of provoking mirth, as she had hoped, she was met by an outraged silence. Oh dear. James enjoyed Anne's high spirits, she could always make him laugh, but he knew she had to be curbed and he appointed the old tutor with the reliable reputation John Florio to provide a steady influence and guiding hand.

Under his tutelage Anne's love of entertainment developed into a passion for the arts. She studied languages with Florio, becoming fluent in Italian, read a vast quantity of books, adored plays, continental literature and poetry. We should remember that Anne's life was not all ease and pleasure; as a mother she had suffered a good deal of exhausting unhappiness. The record reveals she went through eleven pregnancies, three of them miscarriages, there was one cot-death and of her seven children only two survived to adulthood. Even in those days of high rates of infant mortality that was a heavy burden of sorrow and the death of the eldest son and heir Prince Henry in 1612 was a crushing blow when it fell. Anne's reaction to grief was to seize the day and enjoy what pleasures life could offer her; painfully aware of the fragility of life she wanted to taste every fruit while she could. She was no armchair critic either, she liked to take part. It was this quality in her that Florio admired and interpreted as strength of character. I suspect most modern women, looking at that track record, would probably agree. Anne was a trooper and Florio dedicated his most

cherished life's work, his 'World of Words' to her with genuine affection. It is a mark of his regard for her that even in dire poverty late in his life, after Anne had died and he had retired from Court, he was never tempted to part with the gifts she had given him, even though they would have realised a useful sum of cash. He still possessed her presents when he made his will, including her writing desk set with pearls and fitted with silver ink wells and sand box. Even when there was no bread on the table, Florio had refused to part with that. Anne had promised him a pension of £100 a year until death, but as King James' financial position worsened these Court pensions were never paid. Many loyal old courtiers were abandoned to poverty in the last years of his reign.

Queen Anne took her poetry lessons seriously; she paid Florio's brother-in-law Samuel Daniel a stipend of £60 a year to teach her the art and write verses for various occasions. She made him a Groom of her Privy Chamber and she wrote verse herself as a hobby. It would be typical of her nature to want to break the convention which barred women from publishing their written work, but to do it in such a way that it would please the King without embarrassing him she would have had to publish anonymously. The obvious person to turn to for help would be Florio; he was "with her all day long" according to the observer from the Tuscan Court Ottaviano Lotti, and wrote "all her most confidential letters". Lotti was one among many emissaries visiting the English court to try to negotiate marriage matches with the Royal children and they all had to deal with Florio before they could hope for an audience with the Queen.

I believe 'A Lover's Complaint' is her poem. The style, in rhyme royale, Daniel's preferred poetic form, suggests a pupil or follower of Daniel and even the title is a tribute to one of his most famous works. It is written entirely from a female point of view and with a very knowing and feminine personality behind it. That naughty sting in the tale where the wronged woman admits she would

gladly be wronged all over again by such a beau, she relished details about hats and jewellery, to my eye it is scarcely the product of a male imagination. She had worked hard on her poem and she wanted to see it in print, a mischievous but pretty gift for the King's birthday. If you re-read the poem with the idea in mind that a woman wrote it, all manner of feminine detail jumps off the page.

Florio, I believe, sought the help of old friends, Samuel Daniel was very likely involved, William Herbert was a close and trusted patron and loyal subject of the Queen, Thomas Thorpe owed him a favour and William Shakespeare would not pass up a chance to please his monarch.

This, I consider, is how and why 'Shakespeare's Sonnets' came to be published in the manner we discern today. It was never meant to go beyond a single print-run and was probably only on public sale for a brief period. It was a one-off, a Royal indulgence which James enjoyed but it was probably he who arranged for it to quietly disappear before gossip spread and his wife's latest jape caused embarrassment. What was done to please the King could be easily undone to the same purpose, so he didn't have Walsingham's problem in that respect. Florio was of course forgiven, after all, he had done his best to keep the peace and please everybody.

William Vaughan composed a 'strange lettany' of his own to illustrate the scene where Florio had to recite before the King and this is something I hope to devote more time and study to in the future. There are references which seem link to Shakespeare's plays; for example the lines that refer to 'sour custard and broken shins' look very like a hint at 'Loves Labours Lost' and the scene where Costard trips and breaks his shin. Vaughan and Florio, along with Robert Burton (the author of 'The Anatomy of Melancholy') were all close friends at James' Court and worked

together on translations, Vaughan would have been privy to Florio's less public activities.

In part two, I shall delve into the sonnets themselves and tackle the next big question. Did Florio include sonnets of his own in the collection?

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- 'A Lover's Complaint'. You can find it in our download section of this web site in pdf format.

