



John Harding.

FLORIO AND THE SONNETS – PART TWO

written by

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Introduction.

It was my father John Harding who began this quest to learn more about the connections between John Florio and the works of William Shakespeare, and it began with his doubts about the authenticity of the Sonnets. He had been part of that generation which first became fascinated with the ‘authorship debate’ in the 1930’s. In the early 1970’s however, he discovered that John Florio had been tutor to the Earl of Southampton from the age of twelve. He looked again at the paternal and intimate tone of the so-called ‘marriage sonnets’ which open the sequence and felt that

he had found a more likely author. That began a quest to track Florio's career and find any connection to Shakespeare's works, which occupied his every spare hour for the rest of his life.

June 2009 represents two important anniversaries for me; it will be ten years since my father died and four hundred years since 'Shakespeare's Sonnets' were published. Now is a good time to venture my alternative appraisal of some of these verses.

I have no spectacular proof that Florio wrote most of them, but there is a good deal of internal evidence that points in his direction. There are certainly Shakespeare sonnets in the book too, the latter group belongs to him and the 'Will' sonnets announce his capture of the quill. I detect what may be an interesting passage of interweaving in the middle, sonnets which appear to reply to others in an almost conversational mode. In my reading of Florio's sonnets, Shakespeare is chief among the rival poets and ultimately the friend of the central group.

The Earl of Southampton is certainly the young man of the early group, but there are sonnets which may not be about any of these relationships because Florio also wrote about his work, his enthusiasm for language and composed individual verses for some of his other patrons and he marked events, both triumphant and tragic, in his own life. The so-called 'dark lady' has nothing to do with John Florio and must remain a red-herring. There is no question of attempting to piece together a complete biography from these verses either; they represent snapshots of episodes in various lives, but some of them are quite illuminating. When the truth strikes home, the poetry opens like a flower to reveal unsuspected inner layers of petals and can be more fully appreciated. That, in itself, is a joy which makes this exercise so worthwhile.

How can one tell John and William apart when their literary style is so similar? Well, when we look at John Florio's poems, we certainly see John Florio, who is often very self-revealing; but when we look at William Shakespeare's sonnets we find he is holding a mirror in front of his face and instead of seeing William, we see ourselves. He catches us unawares with an unflattering view as often as not and makes no apologies for that. The fact that our nature has not changed much in four hundred years is why Shakespeare is still read, performed and as relevant as ever. We are the same noble and base, clever and foolish human beings that he so acutely observed. There is a virile power to his lines and a fearless exploration of human passion, but it is generally somebody else's passion. Even in apparent anger, he rarely gives much away; it is the object of the rage that occupies his pen, not his own emotion.

If an actor or playwright wishes to convince us of a character created on stage or screen, the more anonymous he or she can remain the better. Knowing too much about the individual actor can muddy the waters and undermine the performance. We frequently indulge our curiosity about movie stars at the expense of our enjoyment of their work. The casting directors know it, and Shakespeare knew it too. Like an artful puppeteer, he kept to the shadows himself. William was not only a great artist but an astute professional and he understood that self-revelation could damage dramatic credibility. I have little doubt that he consciously kept a low profile.

Florio, on the other hand was a neo-Stoic, who believed a man's passions, hopes and fears should be governed by reason and often used poetry to explore and share his vision. Those sonnets in which the author struggles to come to terms with his feelings and rationalise his way to equilibrium are absolutely characteristic of John Florio. (Sonnet 33 is a particularly spectacular example.)

It has been suggested in the past that this volume of Sonnets represents one poet at two different periods of his life, but I maintain they are two different poets, similar in many literary ways, but quite different in their hearts and minds. Florio would examine his soul in a sonnet; Shakespeare preferred to make you examine your own. This has been a useful benchmark for differentiating between the two poets from my perspective.

These were two men who had worked closely together and knew each other very well indeed. I think they might have rather enjoyed hurriedly assembling this collection, they probably didn't expect many people to read it outside their own circle. If my theory is correct it was always intended to be ambiguous and short-lived, a nine-days wonder, briefly on sale in just two London bookshops. They would, I am sure, be decidedly surprised to learn that four hundred years later these Sonnets are still being subjected to all manner of doubtful interpretation and minute examination.

One might wonder why Florio chose Sonnets as the poetic form to wrap around the Queen's very different poem at a time when they had fallen out of fashion. He was of an older generation than Shakespeare and had been at the heart of the sonnet writers' circle in the early 1580's during his French Embassy years. Through his friendship with Giordano Bruno he came into contact with Sir Philip Sidney's literary set. Sidney was the most famous sonneteer of all and Bruno's patron; and then, of course, there was Samuel Daniel, Florio's friend and brother in law since his Oxford days whose 'Delia' sequence is among the best of the genre.

There was some debate about the Petrarchan tradition of romantic praise of a beloved, 'lips like rose petals' and so forth. Bruno condemned 'compare' as a waste of ink and paper and set out his own case for more intellectual and spiritual sonnets with his 'Heroic Furies'. That is a view we see examined in "Shakespeare's Sonnets" too. In this environment it was only natural for Florio

himself to enter into the sonnet writing vogue and we can be sure he had a boxful of unpublished verses still in his possession at the end of his life. In his Will he left all his manuscripts to William Herbert and particularly mentioned “my rhapsodies” – sonnet cycles. It may be that some of those short groups in ‘Q’ were extracted from these longer sequences.

Florio chose sonnets in 1609 because he had plenty of them available to use in the publication and seized his own opportunity to publish. William Shakespeare may actually have encouraged him to do so, he would have been aware of Florio’s collection and given that Shakespeare belonged to a later generation it is actually doubtful that he had written many scores of sonnets himself. The fashion had already started to fade by his day and Shakespeare was always pressing forward with his work, striving to stay at the cutting edge of popular taste. His life in the theatre actually obliged him to keep his finger on the pulse of the latest trends.

It is self evident that an individual like the Earl of Southampton would recognise those verses that had been addressed to him in his youth and one must assume or hope that permissions were sought. One sonnet, for example, I believe was written for Lady Penelope Rich, by then she was one of Queen Anne’s Ladies in Waiting and a former patroness of Florio in his translation of Montaigne’s Essays. It would be going too far to suggest this was a conspiracy, however it is fair to venture that quite a few of Florio’s most trusted associates were probably privy to this publishing adventure.

One noteworthy implication of Florio’s involvement is that the composition of the Sonnets can be assumed to span a much broader time-scale than has been previously supposed, which makes it all the more difficult to pin down the personalities, relationships and events that might feature within them. With Florio in the frame, everything changes and old assumptions will no longer serve.

What follows is intended as companion notes to “Shakespeare’s Sonnets” and I have not set out dozens of verses in full, merely quoting key passages for the most part and only quoting the sonnet in full where I feel it is necessary. I trust you have a copy to hand and will pardon me if I do not attempt to analyze and attribute every single one. Interpreting poetry for other people is a dangerous occupation, get it wrong and you can ruin the readers’ enjoyment of the verse, so I have resisted the temptation to offer a new reading of a sonnet unless I am truly convinced about it. A breathless game of ‘pin the tail on the donkey’, based on Florio’s biography, would be a bad mistake which I hope I have avoided here. I have concentrated specifically on the Sonnets which I believe have something to tell us about their author. You may care to continue the quest yourself, it is an interesting occupation for a wet afternoon, and I would like to leave our web site visitors with food for thought and more ideas to pursue themselves. (To give a few examples: is the girl of sonnet 42 Florio’s teenaged daughter Aurelia? Is the woman at the spinet in sonnet 120 Florio’s musical wife? Are the ‘away from home’ sonnets, 43 to 45, addressed to her too? Is the ‘lust’ sonnet, 129, based on Florio’s translation of a Guevara essay on the same subject in “First Fruits”? These are all valid questions in my view.)

Incidentally, please consult the articles on this site “Florio and Language” and “Florio’s Fingerprints” for essential background information before continuing here or you might be baffled by some of the assertions.

The Marriage Sonnets: 1 - 19.

In fact Sonnets 1 – 17 are actually about marriage but I include the next pair as being part of the same sequence, in which the poet despairs of the youth attaining immortality by procreation and

suggests his verse may manage the duty instead. They seem to me to be part of a complete set.

Having posed so many questions about the Sonnets it is important to determine whether the youth of these verses really is Henry Wriothesley, the Third Earl of Southampton. Three things within the verses confirm it. First the pressure on the youth to marry, which was real enough, the fact that his father was deceased, (Sonnet 13, “You *had* a father, let your son say so.”) and that he bore an extremely strong resemblance to his Mother. These are all statements of fact in the Sonnets which match his profile. Compare portraits of the Earl and his Mother Mary painted at about the same age and one might be looking at twins they are so alike. The line in Sonnet 3, “*Thou art thy Mother’s glass and she in thee calls back the lovely April of her prime*” describes them perfectly. Other possible candidates for the ‘fair youth’ do not share these features, so Henry Wriothesley is clearly the boy concerned here.

There are two problems with attributing these Sonnets to William Shakespeare. One is their intimately paternalistic and often admonishing tone and the other is the actual timing of the marriage crisis in young Henry’s life. The issue came to a head early in 1590, fully four years before Shakespeare secured the Earl’s patronage and quite probably before they even met.

Lord Burghley had marriage plans for all his wards and it seems that Henry had been promised to Burghley’s eldest grand-daughter, Elizabeth Vere, from the start. Letters between him and the boy’s Mother clearly suggest there was an understanding between them on this issue and in 1590 Elizabeth turned fifteen while Henry was just seventeen. In Burghley’s view the time was right for marriage. The boy declined, protesting that the previous summer, when apparently Burghley had first suggested a wedding should be announced, he had agreed to let Henry have another year of

freedom. Burghley now enlisted the help of Henry's grandfather Lord Montagu who had a serious talk with Henry and his mother while both were staying with him at Cowdray in the summer of 1590. In a subsequent letter to Burghley, Montagu explained that the boy wanted more time and his year of freedom had not yet expired, although few months of it remained. In his letter he promised to meet Burghley and figure out a way forward, but the trouble with young Henry was not that he objected to Elizabeth Vere so much as that he objected to the ties of marriage altogether.

He wanted adventure, foreign travel and military glory. He was already in the thrall of his glamorous elder friend the Earl of Essex and dreaming of adventure. He had made his own plans, he knew Essex was about to lead an expedition to support Henry of Navarre in his war against the Catholic League to secure his throne and in fact Southampton anticipated the adventure by fleeing to Normandy early in 1591, writing to Essex from there in early March that year promising his enthusiastic support.

It had become obvious to Burghley that there would be no wedding between Elizabeth and Henry and he married her instead to the Earl of Derby. At the end of Southampton's wardship, in 1594, he fined the Southampton estate to the tune of five thousand pounds for breach of promise, a defeated but unforgiving man in such circumstances.

What we must remember is that throughout this troubled time, the man at Southampton's shoulder was his tutor from childhood, the man who had cared for him, shared college rooms with him at Cambridge and been, in all but name, a father to him from the age of twelve. John Florio was, however, only in this role as an employee of the Guardian, Lord Burghley.

What a tricky balancing act, to be both master and servant to a rebellious teenaged Nobleman and at the same time to be in the

pay and service of a powerful schemer like Burghley. There can be little doubt that Burghley enlisted Florio's support on the question of persuading Henry Wriothesley to agree to the marriage with Elizabeth Vere and it is against this complex background that we should consider Sonnets 1 – 19.

What they most candidly reveal is that the author adopts a policy which we might nowadays call 'tough love' to try to persuade his charge to the wisdom of marriage and procreation. The author must take sides with Burghley, the Countess and Lord Montagu on the marriage issue and yet do so without either offending or alienating the young Earl. Florio seized upon the idea of attaining immortality through producing an heir as his best line of attack. Sonnets on this very theme had been composed by his favourite poets Sidney and Daniel to provide an intellectual model.

Young Henry may have already read them under Florio's tutelage and, given his position, Florio had to consider that Burghley himself may demand to see evidence that his employee was playing his part in the marriage campaign. Florio worked the argument in various ways through these seventeen sonnets, but at times one can sense his exasperation at Henry's obstinate and continued refusal. Florio especially gives himself away in Sonnet 6 by playing with one of his favourite devices, the use of the phrase '*ten times*' for emphasis. In Sonnet 10, the tone of which is positively irritable, ("*For shame deny that thou bearest love to any*"), he urges, "*Make thee an other self for love of me*" which gives us a clear insight to his confidence of the strong, mutual affection between author and recipient of these verses.

In Sonnets 18 and 19, the threats that the Earl may be lost and forgotten to time if he fails to marry and get an heir are put aside almost gratefully. Was Florio's heart not really in this mission? It is with what feels like a sense of release that the famous line, "*Shall I compare thee to a summers day?*" relents on the issue of

procreation and offers instead, immortality through the poet's verses, "*So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*" Certainly the poetry soars with this concluding pair ending with the line, "*My love shall in my verse live ever young.*" As indeed he does.

Overall these Sonnets can be seen to reflect a relationship which was truly shared by John Florio and his pupil Henry Wriothesley. Florio was twenty years senior to the Earl and by 1590 had been in his constant company for about five years. One can recognise, for example in Sonnet 2, the author saying what many of us tell our youngsters, '*When you're my age you'll see things differently*' in that opening line, "*When forty winters shall besiege thy brow*".

It is sincerely difficult to believe that William Shakespeare, a much younger man (aged 26 in 1590) and still a relatively unknown and unpublished author from a rural backwater could have written these verses at this time in the Earl's life. His part in Southampton's story would come several years later, when, in the ripeness of his new freedom from Wardship and at last in control of his finances, Wriothesley would aspire to become a patron of the arts, with John Florio still at his elbow to guide him. However, in the spring of 1591, Florio may have been somewhat uncertain about his future in the Earl's service once he had left the country. He dedicated his next work, "Second Fruits" to his friend Nicholas Saunderson (though I believe the single commendatory sonnet in that book by 'Phaeton' was probably written by the young Earl, rather puckishly styling himself after the disobedient youth who refused the advice of his elders from classical mythology.) Florio must have been waiting to see if Burghley would continue to retain him in Southampton's household or not, after the marriage debacle. I believe it probable that Sonnet 26 was addressed directly to Burghley at this difficult time. It is a transparent appeal for either employment or patronage written by someone who feels he is in an insecure situation:

*“Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage
Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit;
To thee I send this written ambassage
To witness duty, not to show my wit,”*

He goes on to express his current doubts about the immediate future,

*“Till whatsoever star that guides my moving
Points on me graciously with fair aspect”*

There is a sense of having let the patron down in the last line,

“Till then, not show my head where thou mayest prove me.”

As it happened Burghley left Florio in his post to the end of Southampton's wardship, when a fresh anxiety about his continued employment would arise.

It is worth mentioning at this point that I believe Florio first met William Shakespeare in the summer of 1591 and that during this hiatus in his situation, with Southampton fighting abroad, perhaps never to return, he began to consider the attractions of an alternative source of income writing for the theatre.

‘Iphis’ – Sonnets 20 and 21.

These two make a pair and to those familiar with Florio's work on the English language they perfectly partner his prose on the subject, identifying him as their author with some assurance. Without that understanding, Sonnet 20 is indeed perplexing and apparently homosexual in nature, but that is very wide of the truth. This concept of something female, transfigured into something

male by the deliberate intervention of the poet can also be found in Florio's introduction to his dictionary. When he looked around for an analogy to explain the essence of his work Florio found a tale in Ovid which perfectly fitted the case. Iphis is a young girl who is moved by religious fervour to a desire to enter the temple reserved only for access by men. The men would bar her way, but as she approaches the doorway, the Gods intervene to help her and transform her into the figure of a boy, so that she can pass through the portals unmolested. The moral of Ovid's tale is that only mortal man would contend that women cannot be the spiritual and mental equal of their male counterparts; the Gods would not condone that view.

This must have had a strong appeal for Florio who was championing the cause of womens' education right from "First Fruits", where he condemned those fathers who would spend a fortune educating a son, but allow a daughter to grow up virtually illiterate. Such parents, he said, took a crass, commercial view of learning and did not truly understand the purpose or value of education. He also often commented that his female students frequently outperformed their brothers. A respect for the intelligence of women had been impressed upon him by his father Michelangelo, whose biography of Lady Jane Grey was written, in the early 1560's, to bear testament to her intellect and moral strength.

Florio's invention in the English language took very much the 'Iphis' route, transforming something feminine into something masculine in order to pass through a barrier and achieve a wider purpose. The old constriction, as he puts it, that '*words be women and deeds be men*' (a proverb quoted in "Second Fruits"), was now gone, as far as he was concerned, and every word had new potential for variant forms. In his address to the three patrons of the first edition of his dictionary, "A World of Words", (which included the Earl of Southampton,) he invited them to bless his boy

child, his “brain babe” as if they were attending the baptism of a unique new son. This was the professional passion of his life and Florio absolutely anthropomorphised his work. Those patrons, back in 1598, would certainly have understood Sonnet 20 for what it is, a more emotive and poetic version of all that he tells us in that introduction to his dictionary.

Here he refers to his “Mistress Muse seeing her female turned to a pleasing male” which clearly identifies the “Master Mistress of my passion” in the sonnet and we can now see that the “more bright” eye gilds “*the object whereupon it gazeth*” in a linguistic sense. Not merely naming an object, but giving it life and animation by varying the form of the word almost infinitely within the natural order of the language. Now masculine, the all-male word has “*all hews (forms) in his controlling*” – words empowered to give more perfect expression. Words, says Florio in his prose version, “*were commonly feminine, why might not I by strong imagination (which physicians give so much power unto) alter their sex?*”. If the mistress of this sonnet is Florio’s muse, the master is the word, newly liberated by his intervention.

In later sonnets we can see the theory in action; nouns are turned to the work of verbs in almost every verse. Their originality is one of the most striking features of the collection.

Sonnet 21 is a partner to 20. It is a pledge to Florio’s belief that his work would stand on its own merits and take on a life of its own, as people discovered new words and a new, expressive freedom to become more inventive with the English language. Here he is not writing of a “*painted beauty*”, or indeed of a human entity at all, but of a love as fair “*as any mothers child, though not so bright as those gold candles fixed in heavens air*” by which he means, but not stars and therefore not female. The original concept that all women are stars comes from Sir Philip Sidney’s “Stella” sonnets and is reflected here in Florio’s “Second Fruits” – “*we rejoice now*

to behold the heaven be-spangled with so many twinkling stars and eyed lights (all which are women) with their threefold Queen, that is to say Luna in heaven, Cinthia or Diana on earth” – this last being a reference to Queen Elizabeth, the moon among the stars. Thus we can see this sonnet also refers to his girl/boy creation and the author tells us he seeks to do no more than present it to the world, not vaunt it with exaggerated claims. It represents a modest antidote to the unmistakable pride of Sonnet 20. Florio didn’t want to boast. He does, however, refer to his work elsewhere in the sonnets and display its versatility.

My eye is drawn to the playful line in Sonnet 104: “*when first your eye I eyed*” in which we see the noun and the verb derived from it divided only by the sound-alike “I”. The sounds of words are always important in Florio’s work and it is something to watch out for; read him aloud and you can more perfectly hear his voice. Using a surprising word, and yet in perfect context, is another of his favourite devices. Look also at Sonnet 105 in which the poet says, “*Fair, kind and true, varying to other words, and in this change is my invention spent.*” This is a Sonnet on the trinity of virtues which come from the Neo-Stoic philosophy which Florio so intently embraced, “*my verse to constancy confined*” and owes much to his intellectual mentor Justus Lipsius; we shall take a closer look at this, and its fellows which follow a theme of constancy further on.

Before we leave Sonnets 20 and 21, it would be appropriate here to deal with the old question of whether a homosexual relationship is explored in these Sonnets, for I believe that to be a fallacy. England’s harsh laws on homosexuality have their roots in Henry the Eighth’s campaign to close down the monasteries and seize for himself the power and wealth of the Catholic Church. A propaganda campaign, that monks, in their cloistered, all-male environment, were continually engaged in ‘unnatural acts’ was an intrinsic part of his take-over operation. It was Henry who drew

the sins of the flesh out of the confession box and into the Canon of secular, criminal law. This was part of a wider plan to bring people's day to day behaviour under the rule of the State rather than the Church, diminishing the power of the Pope and increasing the power of the Crown. The penalty for sodomy was death, though it was rarely invoked. The threat was enough to inspire a fear which continued for centuries. James the First wrote a denunciation against sodomy himself, though he seems to have had a predilection for handsome young men which may, or may not, have been of a sexual nature; we shall never know. During Elizabeth's reign that law held fast and it is frankly most unlikely that Shakespeare and the Earl of Southampton indulged in a sexual encounter which the poet was then foolish enough to record in verse and even more foolish to carelessly allow those verses to fall into the hands of an unscrupulous publisher. These suggestions come from a flawed tradition of Sonnet interpretation which dates back to the late 19th century. It is a folly to make a study of antique literature without a thorough knowledge of its historical context and today, in the 21st century, we should be wise enough to know better.

There are numerous correspondences between the Sonnets and Florio's 'Second Fruits' of 1591 and no doubt a computer programme could be run to show the full extent of this, but what would it prove? Much confidence is placed in the scientific nature of word and phrase analysis and on that basis alone one could make a strong case for Florio as the Sonnet author, but it would be an unsatisfactory claim. All that computer analyses can prove, at best, is that writer 'A' read and stole from the book of writer 'B'. To truly test the idea we need the human eye, coupled with the human brain and all it can understand of the author to detect the same mind at work. One writer may steal from another, but to suggest that he might actually purloin that writer's personality and intellectual outlook would be stretching credulity to breaking point. So it is with eye and brain that we must seek out those

parallels which carry real conviction. Is it John Florio who takes a favourite Italian proverb from 'Second Fruits' and elaborates it into an entire sonnet or is it Shakespeare? We have to dig below the primary layer of linguistic similarity to find out.

It was a habit among the Elizabethans to keep a cabinet of curiosities, one sees them occasionally coming up for auction these days and fetching high prices. They are highly decorated, often with stump-work embroidery and contain many little cupboards and drawers which would have contained anything from birds' eggs to semi-precious stones which their owners would take out and pass around their friends to inspect and discuss.

Florio himself was interested in the supposed healing powers of crystals and itemised a great number of them in his dictionary. Florio's friend, Giordano Bruno, gave him the nick-name 'Elitropio', after the crystal which, according to Boccaccio's "Decameron", could endow its owner with the power of invisibility. This may have been a wily reference to Florio's spying mission at the French Embassy. Ben Jonson borrowed the name when portraying Florio in one of his plays, using another of his nick-names 'Sogliardo' (the man from Soglio) on another, similar occasion and one can learn much about how his friends characterised him from Jonson's portrayal. They are satirical figures in the drama but it certainly not done in any malice, Jonson and Florio became close friends in their mature years at Court.

On the subject of collections however, the curiosities Florio gathered with most enthusiasm were proverbs. If one compares the Sonnets with "Second Fruits" and its companion collection of proverbs, "The Garden of Recreation", one can see the curio-cabinet idea at work. Florio would draw a gem from his collection, work it into a sonnet and then repair back to his cabinet for another. The correspondences found between the two are so numerous it cannot be mere coincidence. His dialogue on the

comparative vices and virtues of men and women seems to have been particularly fertile ground for sonnet-writing material. That is not to say all these poems were purely intellectual exercises, but that some of them appear to belong to that category.

The Marigold and the Sun.

Sonnet 25 is probably the most obvious example. I cannot conceive that anyone but John Florio wrote this poem as it combines his coat of arms and his personal motto in a way that could apply to nobody else. The motto, ‘chi si contenta gode’ is an old Neapolitan proverb, quoted by the Bruno character in “Second fruits” and translated by Florio as; “who lives content has all the world at will.” This also connects to Stoic philosophy, shedding ambition and learning that “public honour”, fame and fortune, are ephemeral things that can easily be taken away. A Stoic would term them ‘indifferents’ – apparently desirable things which in fact have only transient and unreliable value. Florio’s coat of arms was a motif taken from the Stoic treatise “On Constancy” by Justus Lipsius, ‘a marigold at the eye of the sun’ which you can see mounted over his engraved portrait at the front of our web site. According to Lipsius, a marigold follows the course of the sun during the day just as a man’s intellect should be guided through his lifetime by reason. For once it is worth quoting the Sonnet in full so that you may see, or rather hear, Florio’s voice:

*Let those who are in favour with their stars,
Of public honour and proud titles boast,
Whilst I whom fortune of such triumph bars
Unlooked for joy in that I honour most;
Great Princes favourites, their fair leaves spread,
But as the Marigold at the sun’s eye,
And in themselves their pride lies buried,*

*For at a frown they in their glory die.
The painful warrior famoused for worth,
After a thousand victories once foiled,
Is from the book of honour razed quite,
And all the rest forgot for which he toiled:
Then happy I that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove, nor be removed.*

Did you spot the comparison between the ‘fair leaves’ – heraldic devices, of Great Princes’ favourites and the Marigold at the sun’s eye? Our poet is saying “*they are no better off than I, far from it; the things they value can be snatched away from them, whereas I, content with my lot, am secure. I am therefore, despite appearances, the lucky one in this contrasting picture.*” You will find many quotations from the great Roman Stoic Epictetus which advocate this attitude of mind.

‘Famoused’ is not a word recognised by modern dictionaries but once again you can see the gender-bending in language Florio promoted and deployed to particularly elastic effect in verse. Today we would say ‘famed’ – a contracted noun-to-verb progression from the original invention. Here is its root, adjective turned to verb, a passive (female) word turned to an active (male) version. Every little example like this helps us to understand the ‘Iphis effect’ of Florio’s invention. That little adjustment from ‘famous’ to “famous’ed”, gives the whole line more vitality by virtue of its kinetic energy.

This is the sonnet which cracks open the egg of the whole volume, it is so personal to Florio that he has done everything to identify himself short of signing his name, in Lipsian style, ‘Resolute I.F.’ Florio announces his presence in this book and obliges us to seek him out elsewhere. It also paves the way to understanding more clearly what is going on, psychologically, in other poems that relate to it. Take for example Sonnet 91. Here the author

examines similar ground and realises he has broken a Cardinal rule of his philosophy by allowing himself to invest too much of his happiness in something that might, at any moment, be snatched away:

*Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their bodies force,
Some in their garments though new-fangled ill:
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse
Wherein it finds a joy above the rest,
But these particulars are not my measure,
All these I better in one general best.
Thy love is better than high birth to me,
Richer than wealth, prouder than garments cost,
Of more delight than hawks or horses be:
And having thee, of all men's' pride I boast.
Wretched in this alone, that thou may'st take,
All this away, and me most wretched make.*

In some ways these verses break new ground, examining the conflict between the resolve of a Stoic and the bonds of human love. The loss of loved ones is dealt with generally in terms of bereavement by the ancient Stoics; another 'indifferent' to be tolerated through the application of reason that all things must pass. These sonnets tackle the loss-issue of love withdrawn, a very different kind of pain and the poet is searching for a solution.

Sonnet 92 wrestles with the problem again. There is always Cato's way, the exit from the intolerable is death, which is tolerable and not to be feared. Better a noble end by one's own hand than the misery of an insufferable existence when the citadel falls. But the concluding lines give pause for reflection, what if this love he so values has less worth than he imagines? What if the citadel was only ever a castle in the air? What then?

*But do thy worst to steal thyself away,
For term of life thou art assured mine,
And life no longer than thy love will stay,
For it depends upon that love of thine.
Then need I not to fear the worst of wrongs,
When in the least of them my life hath end,
I see a better state to me belongs
Than that, which on thy humour doth depend.
Thou canst not vex me with inconstant mind,
Since that my life on thy revolt doth lie,
Oh what a happy title do I find,
Happy to have thy love, happy to die!
But what's so blessed fair that fears no blot,
Thou may'st be false, and yet I know it not.*

We don't know who the 'lover' is in these poems and speculation, while interesting, never gives a satisfactory conclusion. The real significance lies in their philosophical examination of an issue the Stoics of old virtually ignored. That is clearly the key issue on the poet's mind, 'how does my philosophy handle this?' and he genuinely and repeatedly struggles to find an answer.

As far as I can tell, "Shakespeare's Sonnets" represents the first attempt in literature to apply Stoic philosophy to the thorny questions raised by romantic human love, an issue even Marcus Aurelius avoided in his "Meditations". The form of the sonnet, traditionally a love poem, provided the perfect medium for this exploration.

The next in the series, Sonnet 93, accepts the possibility of deceit; the lover might have been entirely taken in, either by the beloved's behaviour, or his own imagination and in such a case the option of death would be ignoble. Consequently the sonnet begins: "*So shall I live, supposing thou art true,*" for without a resolution to the question there can be no philosophical conclusion. Love is like

Eve's apple, temptingly beautiful and apparently wholesome but who knows what lies beyond that first bite? Reason can offer no judgement without tasting knowledge; it cannot tell us whether the apple is safe to bite into or not. Doubt stays the poet's hand, rather as it causes Hamlet to stop in his tracks in the "*to be, or not to be*" soliloquy. There is a different kind of 'hereafter' examined here but the dilemma is the same.

Sonnet 29 to some extent inverts the premise of Sonnet 25. This time the poet is prey to all the philosophical sins that failure of reason provokes: chiefly self pity and envy. Even Florio's motto is inverted, "*with what I most enjoy contented least*" but even in this state, "*thy sweet love*" restores the original order, "*then I scorn to change my state with Kings.*"

The Loss of a Son.

At Sonnet 30 a new sequence begins on the theme of death and bereavement. The poet has moved from the sin of self pity to the sin of regret, "*with old woes new wail my dear times waste*" and here, love is a consolation, "*all losses are restored, and sorrows end.*" In the next verse the beloved recalls and breathes new life into those losses, it is again a Sonnet of solace and restoration. Sonnet 32 considers the future death of the poet himself and how his verses might be best remembered, "*for my love, not for their rhyme*" if later poets should prove to be his superior in the art.

Sonnet 33 marks, I believe, a very specific bereavement; Florio's only son Edward who died in infancy. It is telling that in this verse the poet recalls the landscape and dramatic climate of his childhood home among the Swiss alps around Soglio, (certainly the topography in this Sonnet does not describe Warwickshire), to express the extreme change from joy to grief, and there is no lover

at the end of this verse to redeem the loss, it must be accepted as a natural occurrence, in true Stoic fashion.

*Full many a glorious morning have I seen,
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy:
Anon permit the basest clouds to ride,
With ugly wrack on his celestial face,
And from the forlorn world his visage hide
Stealing unseen to west with this disgrace:
Even so my Sun one early morn did shine,
With all triumphant splendour on my brow,
But out alack, he was but one hour mine,
The region cloud hath masked him from me now,
Yet him for this, my love no whit disdaineth,
Suns of the world may stain, when heavens sun staineth.*

“Stain” and “staineth” mean to grow dim or become obscured in this context. It is worth noting the strange coincidence that baby Edward Florio, the only boy of the family, was baptised on June 19th 1588, which would have been very shortly after his birth in the custom of the times. As the volume of “Shakespeare’s Sonnets” was being prepared for the press it would have been around the time of his twenty-first birthday, had he lived. That must have been very much on Florio’s mind. It is not known exactly when the boy died, but there is absolutely no record of him after that baptism (St. Andrew’s Church, Holborn), and by the time Florio was at the court of James the First we find only his eldest daughter Aurelia had survived of the entire family. When she married and provided healthy grandchildren, Queen Anne lavished gifts on them. It serves to remind us that the death of beloved children was something the Queen and her secretary had in common, another tie to seal their friendship.

This particular sonnet takes on a new resonance and poignancy when properly understood. It has an intellectual grace which strongly reflects Stoic writings on the death of a child. Epictetus tells us to kiss our children, ever mindful that tomorrow they might die. That a death of someone close to us is really no more or less tragic, globally speaking, than the death of a stranger and that all death is simply a question of Nature reaping her own. Anything which follows Nature must therefore be part of the wider scheme of things and must be accepted as such. We can see in this sonnet how the death is depicted as ‘following nature’ very clearly. The recollection of childhood memories in the face of mortality seems to be an instinctive and universal human reaction which we can often observe in poetry; works by Sassoon and Houseman, among many others, can be seen to respond in similar fashion. It is as if we need to retreat to a safer and happier place; childhood, when the grim reaper knocks at our door.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that interpreting poetry can be dangerous in that it can close, rather than open, the box of delights if it misfires. I would comment here that it is a great pity that Sonnet 33 has, for more than a century, been regarded as tale of disappointed sexual desire. However I doubt you will ever be able to read it in quite that way again now. The lid is off the box.

Constancy, in the Stoic context, represents a much broader principal than simple loyalty. It is to be steadfast in your principles, faithful to the power of reason, accepting of life’s trials and obeying the flow of the natural world. Marcus Aurelius put it most simply, “to be your best self” and we can find this combination of philosophy and personal principal in sonnet after sonnet. All these lines touch the Stoic lode-stone.

*“Look what is best, that best I wish in thee,
This wish I have, then ten times happy me.” (S.37)*

“And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow” (S.60)

“Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye,” (S.62)

“But let your love even with my life decay.” (S.71)

“The earth can have but earth, which is his due,” (S.74)

*“They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing, they most do show,
Who moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold and to temptation slow:
They rightly do inherit heavens graces,” (S.94)*

*“Kind is my love today, tomorrow kind,
Still constant in a wondrous excellence,
Therefore my verse to constancy confined,” (S.105)*

*“Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul,
Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come” (S.107)*

(note: the notion that the Universe is a sentient being with an over-arching soul and control over providence comes from the early Stoics.)

“For what care I who calls me well or ill,” (S.112)

*“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments, love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,” (S.116)*

Sonnets 123, 124 and 125 all make vows binding the author to constancy. This was the new ‘buzz’ word that Lipsius had defined to modernise Stoic philosophy as a practical application to everyday life, taken from Seneca’s dialogue, “De Constantia Sapientis”. It was published in Latin in 1584, when Florio and

Bruno were together at the French Embassy and seems to have had a profound effect on both of them.

The Painted Harlequin.

In 1593 John Elliot, a contemporary translator and writer, produced a volume which satirised the dialogue books of the day, paying especial attention to Florio's "Second Fruits" and inserting many pro-English responses to what he perceived as Florio's Italian snobbery. The elegant feast of "Second Fruits" becomes a "Drunken Mens' Banquet" in Elliot's version "Ortho-epia Gallica" and lengthy passages of his book mirror and parody passages from Florio's manual. In one of Elliot's dialogues the chattering group visit a painter's shop and spot this picture:

*"It is an Italian Harlequin.
He is, believe me, very well counterfeited for a fool.
He is not very well shadowed for a wise man.
What wanteth there?
He is crump-shouldered and crooked, and hath a Hawks nose.
The Persians adored those who had an aquiline nose, for Cyrus
sake, who they say, had his of form like a shoeing-horn.
He hath his hands very crooked and limy fingered.
For all that he is not a thief.
What can he do?
He can hold his peace and keep his own counsel.
He is then wiser than many fools."*

Sonnet 110 responds absolutely to this vision of Florio.

*"Alas 'tis true, I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear,
Made old offences of affections new,*

*Most true it is, that I have looked on truth
Askance and strangely: But by all above,
These blenches gave my heart another youth,
And worse essays proved thee my best of love...*

The most interesting line in Elliot's dialogue is the very adamant statement "*For all that he is not a thief.*" It is as if Elliot is denying an outstanding accusation and it recalls the remarks in the letter to the play-makers published towards the end of the previous year in "Greenes Groatsworth of Wit", in which "absolute Iohannes Factotum" is linked to 'Shake-scene' and accused of plagiarism.

Modern textual analysis of "Henry VI, Part One" finds much evidence of Thomas Nashe's style and it has been suggested Shakespeare may have 'collaborated' with him on the play, which was first performed in March, 1592. I think it far more likely Shakespeare, helped by Florio, re-wrote the older play and had a fresh hit with it, much to Nashe's annoyance. The phrase in that letter "tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide" is a direct quotation from the rewritten "Henry VI" cycle and the letter goes on to say, "*never more acquaint them with your admired inventions*". Nashe had commented on it earlier, apparently heaping praise on the play, but I read these comments as sarcasm and a reminder of just whose bright idea it had been to bring this story to the stage in the first place:

"How would it have joyed brave Talbot, the terror of the French, to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again on the stage and have his bones new-embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least, at several times, who in the tragedian that represents his person imagine they behold him fresh bleeding?"

If Nashe believed he was the victim of literary theft in this manner it further justifies the premise that he was in fact the author of the ‘Groatsworth’ letter. Elliot’s statement that Florio was “not a thief” confirms that the conflict was well known among their peers and it seems to me that in this parody of Florio’s dialogues, Elliot is at the same time keen to disassociate himself from the slanderous comments in “Groatsworth” published a few months earlier. When you look at the time-scale of these events and publications they follow a date-sequence which perfectly matches the conjecture.

If Florio is the author of most of these sonnets then it seems likely that the rival poet, who is so admired as well as feared, must be William Shakespeare and I believe the sequence begins at Sonnet 53:

*“What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one, hath every one, one shade,
And you but one, can every shadow lend:
Describe Adonis and the counterfeit
Is poorly imitated after you...”*

It was, of course, Shakespeare, whose “Venus and Adonis” was addressed to the Earl of Southampton, appealing for patronage, the year before the end of his wardship in 1593. In the sequence that follows, our sonnet author puts the case for truth and unspoken but sincere love and admiration ahead of Petrarchan poetic flattery but in the end, his admiration for the chief rival poet overwhelms him. The muse has dried in his brain like the ink on his pen when he attempts to rival this poet. Sonnet 86:

*“Was it the proud full sail of his great verse,
Bound for the prize of (all too precious) you,
That did my ripe thoughts in my brain inhearse,*

Making their tomb the womb wherein they grew?"

There is a good deal to be said about this difficult period for Florio, when, as the end of the Earl's wardship approached and, largely through Florio's influence, young William Shakespeare made such an impression on Henry Wriothesley. Had Florio introduced a Trojan horse into his own domain? Would he be discarded in exchange for the new favourite? There is a tone of anxiety bordering on desperation in these sonnets. By this time Florio had been in the Earl's service, but only on Burghley's payroll, for eleven years, and that contract was about to end. Would Henry offer Florio continued employment, even though he clearly no longer needed a tutor? This must surely have put considerable stress on the friendship which had formed between Florio and Shakespeare until the matter was settled. Southampton did, indeed, renew Florio's employment, only now as personal secretary and steward in his household. Peace would reign in Florio's comfortable world for a further seven years and the friendship with that 'rival' poet would blossom into an extremely productive partnership. This would be the era of the Italian comedies, "Romeo and Juliet", "Henry V" and "Hamlet".

I believe a considerable number of the sonnets which follow this sequence represent the relationship between Florio and Shakespeare and there may be some 'reply' sonnets by Shakespeare among them, but dissecting these would require a whole extra chapter. For example there is a brief sequence which I believe centres on the illicit borrowing of a treasured manuscript of Giordano Bruno's. That's another chapter too. I can sense Saul Gerevini at my shoulder now saying "save something for that book we're going to write together." So I shall.

Best Friends.

I shall close then with what I believe to be Florio's last sonnet in the collection, a verse designed to first baffle and then amuse. It was aimed at a particular lady who was an important friend to Florio for many years, Lady Penelope Rich. I make no apologies for the fact that Sonnet 130 is a shaggy dog story.

Florio first encountered Lady Rich in the early 1580's during his association with Sir Philip Sidney's circle while he and Giordano Bruno were living at the French Embassy. We have already considered how Florio was involved in Sir Fulke Greville's first attempt to edit and publish Sidney's "Arcadia" after his death and Florio's dedication to Lady Rich in the opening pages of his "Montaigne" translation makes it clear she must have sided, in that dispute, with the Greville/Florio camp. Florio makes no bones about his view of the "imperfect" version which followed, sponsored by the Countess of Pembroke and undertaken by Hugh Sanford. The "Montaigne" dedication clearly reflects a long-standing friendship and his favourable comments about the accomplishments of Lady Rich's children suggest he may have been involved in their education. In later years they would be closely associated again in the service of Queen Anne, he as her secretary, she as one of the senior Ladies-in-Waiting. This was a friendship which spanned the best part of two decades, rooted very much in their shared enthusiasm for the arts and languages and their admiration for the late Sir Philip Sidney. They also shared a love of dogs, an enthusiasm which made no sense at all to Sir Philip.

Here is what Sidney had to say about Lady Rich's affection for her favourite pooch at Sonnet 59 of the "Astrophil and Stella" cycle.

*Dear, why make you more of a dog than me?
If he do love, I burn, I burn in love;*

*If he wait well, I never thence would move;
If he be fair, yet but a dog can be.
Little he is, so little worth is he;
He barks, my songs thine own voice oft doth prove;
Bidden, perhaps he fetcheth thee a glove,
But I unbid fetch e'en my soul to thee.
Yet while I languish, him that bosom clips,
That lap doth lap, nay lets, in spite of spite,
This sour-breathed mate taste of those sugared lips.
Alas, if you grant only such delight
To witless things, then love, I hope (since wit
Becomes a clog), will soon ease me of it.*

Florio would have none of this. Reversing the genders of both owner and pet, he set out to demonstrate the true worth of man's best friend. Look out here for cunning references to Sidney's "sour-breathed mate", a welcoming raucous bark and eager but muddy paws reaching up to a beloved master. This "Mistress" is canine:

*My Mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,
Coral is far more red, than her lips red,
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun:
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head:
I have seen roses, damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks,
And in some perfumes is there more delight,
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know,
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,
My Mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.*

Modern readers may find this sonnet extraordinary and perplexing, who is this peculiar woman? Lady Penelope Rich would, however, have understood at once, not only the subject, but the moral of the story too. It forms a warm-hearted, witty defence of the pampered pooch's place in the heart of its owner. Furthermore, dogs may not be capable of philosophy, but they do often seem to demonstrate Florio's favourite Stoic virtue – constancy. Justus Lipsius himself always ensured his own dog, Mopsulus, was included in portraits painted of him, perhaps as a symbol of 'Constantia'.

The rest of the sonnets in the collection are, in my opinion, all by William Shakespeare who heralds his arrival at 131 with the first of the 'Will' sonnets, though perhaps the final pair, two treatments of the same theme, came from Daniel, possibly offered as a choice but Florio included them both, which makes an interesting comparison.

Finis

For further reading on the internet about the Stoic philosophy elements described here I recommend two web sites:

www.newstoa.com – where you can learn about modern Stoics and see how the philosophy has evolved.

Also take a look at the site of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy where you can read about Lipsius, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and the rest and even see pictures of Mopsulus, a singularly ugly dog.

