

In the autumn of 1585 England's Catholics still believed they might prevail and return their country to the fold of the Vatican if they could rid themselves of Elizabeth and bring Mary Queen of Scots to the throne. They sought support from abroad and there was pressure from the Pope to help.

Thus in September of that year a new, hard-line Catholic ambassador was sent to London from the French court, Baron de Chasteuneauf. He was immediately suspicious of John Florio, he had no children in need of a tutor and did not want the prying eyes of Burghley's man looking over his correspondence and listening into his conversations.

Although he offered him continued employment, it was in a lesser capacity and on condition that the Florio family (by now there were two daughters) should move out of the Embassy into a home of their own. Lord Burghley knew that Florio could be of little further use to him there and he had a new post in mind for his protégé. He needed a tutor to accompany one of his wards to St. John's College at Cambridge, the 12 year old Earl of Southampton.

The boy's father, Henry senior, had died four years earlier under a cloud of Catholic suspicion and left a complex and disputed will that ultimately led to Burghley taking over the wardship of the boy from Lord Howard of Effingham.

Two weeks after Chasteauneuf's lacklustre offer of a job at the Embassy there was an exchange of letters between Florio and Mauvissiere in which the latter happily provided references recommending Florio's skills as a tutor, with a second, 'fair' copy on fine parchment for presentation purposes. It is likely the 'fair' copy was intended for perusal by the Queen who took an interest in all the Court wards who would be her future Courtiers.

Mauvissiere's testimonial is dated September 28th and the young Earl arrived at St. John's (Burghley's old college) on October 16th in the company of his personal tutor.

Lord Burghley knew he could rely on John Florio to give the boy a good education and steer him on the right religious path too. The young Earl's estate was in ruins; his father had been a wastrel, but Burghley had plans for the son's future career and marriage prospects. There is other evidence which points to Florio as the tutor in question. There is a three year gap, between 1585 and 1589, in the sequence of births of Florio's four children, indicating a lengthy absence from his wife.

At least five of Florio's known Italian language pupils were students at St. John's at exactly this time. There is no evidence of his presence in London during these years. In a loving dedication to Southampton in his 1598 dictionary, Florio tells us not only that he has lived, as he says, "some years" in the pay and patronage of the Earl, but also that he regards him as the man "to whom I owe and vow the years I have to live."

If Florio thought, at that time, that he had a job for life with Henry Wriothesly it suggests he had already been with him a good number of years and that their relationship was close and trusting. In the preface to his 'Second Fruits' in 1591 Florio refers to having recently spent three years in study at a university, a long time after he had left Oxford so the only other university he could be referring to is Cambridge. The best evidence comes, however, in a personal attack on Florio from a man who had become his enemy, the writer Thomas Nashe.

Nashe had held a poorly paid but secure post at St. John's which he gave up in 1589, the year Southampton left the college, fondly believing that he had won the Earl's patronage and could now strike out and earn a living as a creative writer. His hopes were dashed however, and he was horrified to subsequently discover an 'upstart' poet and player with no university background at all was boasting to the world that he, William Shakespeare, was the Earl of Southampton's literary protégé.

Nashe blamed Southampton's meddling tutor John Florio for this disaster to his career as we shall see in all the exchanges and parodies of the quarrel that followed. The young Earl had moved back to London to begin his legal studies at Gray's Inn and the bright lights of the big city must have seemed marvellous to his teenage eyes. Masques were performed for the entertainment of the law students, plays could be seen in the open yards of London taverns and there were all kinds of sporting activities available, he became a fan of 'real tennis' among other entertainments.

This was a dangerous world for a sixteen year old Noble with cash in his pockets and Florio, very much in loco parentis but also the Earl's employee must have found it difficult at times to guide his pupil's path through life. At Cambridge, student and tutor had lived in adjacent rooms but back in the City, Florio rejoined his wife and family at the house he had bought for them in one of the merchant districts, at Shoe Lane. Parish records reveal the births of two more children in the following years.

In guiding his pupil's enthusiasm for literature and the arts, Florio knew Nashe's pen could be dangerously caustic, even vulgar and politically volatile. Young William Shakespeare may simply have seemed a safer choice, easier to groom, as well as a bright and original talent. Nashe was enraged when he realised his potential patron had been snatched from him by a 'nobody'. It was common practice for new publications to carry prefaces or letters which amounted to dialogues and arguments between rivals at this time, perhaps encouraged by publishers who believed hot gossip would increase sales.

So when Nashe's friend Robert Greene brought out his play 'Menaphon', Nashe appended to it an "epistle to the gentlemen students of both Universities" which amounted to an outburst against his rivals, one in particular occupies most of his attention.

This "idiot art master" is described as an "intruder", as being among "those that never wear gown in the University" (i.e. not on the staff) and "deep read Grammarians" and as one who privately tutors an entourage of followers who "intermeddle with Italian translations". Nashe recalls the attack on the importation of Italian literature, manners and morals published nearly twenty years earlier in Ascham's 'The Schoolmaster' for authority to support his own attack. In his opening salvo against students who follow the path of the translator/tutor he makes an immediate connection with the drama.

"I cannot so fully bequeath them to follow as their idiot art-masters, that intrude themselves to our ears as the alchemists of eloquence; who (mounted on the stage of arrogance) think to outbrave better pens with the swelling bombast of a bragging blank verse." In praising Robert Greene he contrasts him with "the Italianate pen, that a packet of pilferies, affordeth the press a

pamphlet or two in an age and then in disguised array, vaunts Ovid's and Plutarch's plumes as their own" and criticises expedient fluency and the quick phrases and pithy sayings of which Florio was so fond with these words, "was it not Maros twelve years of toil that so famed his twelve Aeneiads?".

In Nashe's view, speed of literary production betrays plagiarism. This is a specific attack on an individual he associates with his own college, St. John's and it is necessary to quote from it extensively so that one can see, further down the line, that Florio recognised himself in this attack and replied point by point. Nashe tells his student audience that they should only read the output of such translators and filchers to better appreciate the masters of literature. Instead, he says, they lack discernment and add "a tale of John a Brainford's" to their libraries as eagerly as if it were a poem of Tasso's.

He goes on "which being the effect of an undiscerning judgement, makes dross as valuable as gold, and loss as welcome as gain, the glow-worm mentioned in Aesop's fables, namely the ape's folly, to be mistaken for fire, when as Got wot poor souls they have nought but their toil for their heat, their pains for their sweats and (to bring it to our English proverb) their labour for their travail."

Nashe tells his readers "It is a common practice nowadays amongst a sort of shifting companions that run through every art and thrive by none, to leave the trade of 'Noverint' whereto they were born, and busy themselves with the endeavours of Art, that could scarcely latinize their neck-verse if they have need; yet English Seneca read by candle light yields many good sentences, as 'blood is a beggar' and so forth and if you entreat him fair in a frosty morning, he will afford you whole 'Hamlets', I should say handfuls of tragical speeches. But oh grief! 'tempus edax rerum', what's that will last always? The sea exhaled by drops will in continuance be dry, and Seneca let blood line by line and page by page, at length must needs die to our stage: which makes his famished followers to imitate the Kid in Aesop, who, enamoured with the Fox's newfangles, forsook all hopes of life to leap into a new occupation; and these men renouncing all possibilities of credit or estimation, to intermeddle with Italian translations: wherein how poorly they have plodded, (as those that are neither provincial men nor are able to distinguish of articles,) let all indifferent gentlemen that have travelled in that tongue, discern by their twopenny pamphlets."

The trade of 'noverint' is a dig at Florio's involvement with the translation of newsletters, the pamphlets which kept Londoners informed of affairs abroad. Most of them probably ended up hanging from a nail on the privy door but some survive, including Florio's translation of the story of the death of one Pope and the installation of the new preserved in Church records.

Nashe had criticised the bookshops of St. Paul's for trading in news pamphlets in his 'Pierce Penniless' as follows: "Look to it, you booksellers and stationers, and let not your shops be infected with any such goose giblets or stinking garbage as the jigs of newsmongers." He goes on, "Not a base ink-dropper, or scurvy plodder at Noverint but nails his asses' ears on every post, and comes off with a long circumquaque (discourse) to the gentlemen readers."

It was suggested years ago that the reference to the 'kid in Aesop' might refer to Thomas Kydd

but I doubt that. The reference to Hamlet is the first mention of it in literature but we know an early version of the play was in circulation from references by Henslowe in 1594 and Lodge in 1596. Nashe frequently quoted Aesop and it is worth having a volume of the fables at one's elbow when reading Nashe to pick up the often cryptic allusions to the morals he refers to.

Here's the story of the fox and the kid, and bear in mind it is the fox, not the kid, who is the butt of Nashe's attack: "A fox one day fell into a deep well and could find no means of escape. A goat, overcome with thirst, came to the same well, and seeing the fox, inquired if the water was good. Concealing his sad plight under a merry guise, the fox indulged in a lavish praise of the water, saying it was excellent beyond measure, and encouraging him to descend. The goat, mindful only of his thirst, thoughtlessly jumped down, but just as he drank, the fox informed him of the difficulty they were both in and suggested a scheme for their common escape.

"If," he said, "you will place your forefeet upon the wall and bend your head, I will run up your back and escape, and will help you out afterwards." The goat readily assented and the fox leaped upon his back. Steadying himself with the goat's horns he safely reached the mouth of the well and made off as fast as he could."

Nashe is claiming the 'fox' draws his pupils into the well of his Italian studies only to serve his own interests. By page fifteen of this diatribe Nashe is allowing for the use of strong drink to inspire his muse, which he says, might be excused by 'tam martiquam mercurio' (as much Mars as Mercury – a kind of literary fanfare which crops up occasionally in literature from the period, the poet Gascoigne used it to herald his verses for example).

Nashe tells us "a pot of blue burning ale with a fiery flaming toast is as good as Pallas with the nine Muses on Parnassus top" to inspire a poet. He adds "let frugal scholars and fine fingered novices take their drink by the ounce and their wine by the hap'sworth." Further on he adds "our English Italians, the finest wits our climate sends forth, are but dry-brained dolts."

Florio made frequent literary assaults on what he called the excessive "swilling and tipping" habits of the English. See now, how precisely Nashe has marked his target without actually naming him. Here is a man known to both universities, he is at St. John's as a private tutor, an 'art master' who specialises in Italian studies and translations and has a group of followers or private students.

He has been involved in the publication of news pamphlets and teaches 'Seneca by candlelight'; Florio was an enthusiastic Stoic. He abhors drunkenness (as did Florio) and has an interest in 'grammar' and the drama. He is an 'English Italian' above all. There was only one man at St. John's at this time whose head the cap truly fits, John Florio.

If there is still room for doubt, it evaporates when one reads Florio's reply to this attack, covering every point just highlighted in the Menaphon letter. It would turn out to be longest, but only the first of many attacks Nashe made on Florio in the years to follow. Before leaving 'The Cambridge Years' it is worth pausing to discover the strong impact of Stoic thought on Florio's life and consciousness, which seems to have really taken root in him during these years.

The favoured ancient philosopher at St. John's was of course Aristotle, it was his logic which students were set to learn, and yet the Stoics, perhaps through the interest generated from reading Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and commentators such as Cicero, were beginning to enjoy a revival. Marcus Aurelius' teacher Epictetus preached Stoic ethics as a way of life and in Renaissance Europe this thread was taken up by the famous Belgian philosopher Justus Lipsius.

In 1584 he published 'De Constantia', a twin-volume dialogue on the art of coping with life's ups and downs according to Stoic ideology, coupled with Christian values. It had particular impact in England where the infant Anglican Church was still in search of a moral code to call its own and afford some social backbone to the faith. We can see that Florio embraced it as a recipe for living and drew from Lipsius' call to be 'guided in all things by reason' and live a life of 'constancy' when we look at the following extract.

In this, Lipsius defines his picture of the 'constant' man: "For the good part in a man may sometimes be pressed down, but never oppressed, and these fiery sparks may be covered, but not wholly extinguished. Those little coals do always shine and show forth themselves, lightening our darkness, purging our uncleanness, directing our doubtfulness, guiding us at the last to Constancy and Virtue. As the marigold and other flowers are by nature always inclined towards the sun, so has Reason a respect for God, and to the fountain from which it sprang.

It is resolute and immoveable in a good purpose, not variable in judgement, ever shunning or seeking one and the self same thing: the fountain and lively spring of wholesome counsel and sound judgement. To obey is to bear rule, and to be subject to it is to have the sovereignty in all human affairs. Who so obeys her is lord of all lusts and rebellious affections, who so has this thread of Theseus may pass without straying through all the labyrinths of this life." It is no surprise then to see that the young Earl of Southampton's Latin exercises, sent to Burghley and preserved in the record, often reflect a study of Stoic philosophy. Florio went on to habitually sign himself 'Resolute Iohannes Florius' or 'Resolute John Florio' from the influence of Lipsius and chose 'a marigold with the sun in chief' as his personal emblem and coat of arms.

Neo-stoicism would flourish in the seventeenth century, but Florio was among the first to embrace it and it is probably no coincidence that he went on to translate the essays of Lipsius' friend and colleague Michel de Montaigne. That Stoic interest would surface in Shakespeare's plays and it is worth studying 'De Constantia' to perceive the influence more clearly. Stoics prevail in Shakespeare's world, while those who fail to be guided by reason, in the Stoic manner, (Lear, Macbeth, Othello and Shylock for example) fall prey to the whim of fate. Look also at the repeated emphasis on Constancy, and consider its philosophical resonance, when reading the Sonnets. It gives them a wholly different interpretation.

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FURTHER READING:

"Justus Lipsius on Constancy" (translated by John Stradling,) edited and updated by John Sellars, Bristol Phoenix Press 2006.

“John Florio, the life of an Italian in Shakespeare’s England”. Frances Yates, Cambridge University Press 1934.

“Shakespeare’s Southampton, patron of Virginia”. A. L. Rowse, Macmillan, 1965.

Antique texts sourced at the Shakespeare Institute Research Library in Stratford-upon-Avon, whose friendly staff and open access policy are exemplary. Many thanks.

Giulia Harding, Liverpool 03/10/2008