

Why is it that Saul Gerevini and I are so confident that John Florio had a significant hand in the writing of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets?

Well, imagine that I placed before you two typewritten pages from unpublished Sicilian crime stories. I have told you that one is from a novel by Leonardo Sciascia and the other from a story by Andrea Camilleri, and then I challenge you to determine which is which. I know that if you are at all familiar with the work of either or both writers you would correctly match the pages to their authors almost immediately.

We identify the work of a known author in the same way that we recognise the familiar face of a friend in a busy street, but if we are to understand the process we need to analyze the elements at work. How do we recognise a writer?

If you read a string of stories by a favourite author you soon settle into the familiarity of the rhythm of their writing, you might even be irritated by the over-frequent use of a favourite adjective or a habitual grammatical error. You notice there are certain subjects they pay special attention to, or how they always seize a chance to criticize something they dislike. When a male author describes his female characters, the reader soon learns what features the writer finds attractive in a woman. Such characteristics are what I would term an author's 'fingerprints' and Florio's fingerprints are especially distinctive.

In the late 1940's and early 50's, a Welsh scholar by the name of Herbert Wright 'recognised' John Florio's style in the first English translation of Boccaccio's 'Decameron' and set out to prove it by analyzing Florio's style and habits as a writer. His work carried such authority and conviction that it has never been challenged and today John Florio is acknowledged to be the translator in question. For our purposes, Wright's work can be applied to Shakespeare's plays and sonnets to startling effect.

Modern computer technology, not available to Wright, makes it possible today to scan the entire canon of plays for instances of Florio's habitual phrases, favourite words and metaphors. Wright also analysed Florio's personal interests, such as the law, drama, seamanship and fencing, his favourite authors from antiquity from whom he frequently quoted, his mind-set, his Protestantism and strong opinions about the value of education and the learning of languages in particular. His affection for domestic pets and horses and his strong belief in the education of women are also noticeable.

In the half-century since Wright's work, we have since learned more about Florio which provides further evidence of his 'presence' in a text. His devotion to Stoic philosophy, particularly the notion of 'constancy' and the virtue of 'following nature' often feature in his writing, whether as part of the dialogues in his language manuals or in the licence he took when elaborating on a translation.

We also know that John Florio was pushing at the boundaries of the English language, devising new words by eliminating the barrier between nouns and verbs (see 'Florio and Language'). He added to that a habit of hyphenating nouns and verbs together to create mental or visual images that have particular resonance. In this he demonstrates a style that was unique to his age which serves to make his work more readily identifiable. Pairs of words that had an

alliterative rhythm particularly appealed to him. For instance Wright noticed Florio's preference for the use of the word ten, or 'ten times' to indicate a multiplicity of something or a serious emphasis of a point. This is a device you will frequently find in Shakespeare; not twenty times or thirty, but habitually ten. "Were she ten times our mother" (Hamlet: 3,2); "ten times more dishonourable" (1.Henry 4: 4,2) and so on, I can find 13 examples of the phrase 'ten times' among just the early plays.

Florio's many and ingenious means of securing alliteration in his writing is another clear example and his repeated use of key consonants to achieve what can only be described as an 'atmosphere' in the language. Think of those snake-like hissing s's in the opening lines of Richard III, emphasise them as you read:

"Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York." You can also see that one more 'hiss' would have been too many, this is Florio's real skill in alliterative construction and one that he shared with Shakespeare but developed to an even higher level himself in later years. He could achieve all the effects of clever alliteration without allowing the mechanism itself to become annoyingly obvious, as was often the case among those Elizabethan writers who embraced the art of alliteration with less subtlety. Wright especially noticed how Florio was not above quite changing Boccaccio's words to achieve a more decorous version of an idea. So a line that could have been translated as "dragging me along" became instead, "haling me along by the hair of my head."

Doublets are another Florio favourite and a way of introducing an alliterative touch to decorate a sentence and emphasize an idea:

"honest and honourable", "crosses and calamities", "miseries and misfortunes", "pains and perils", "familiar and friendly", "cabinet or casket" are just a few examples of Florio elaborating the translation of what was, originally, a single word. Go and look for them in Shakespeare and you will find an abundance of such doublets. There are scores to be found in Florio's own translations and language manuals. In Florio's world the dungeon is always dark and every Lent lingers. It is one of his most distinctive fingerprints, but again, he was always careful not to over-egg the pudding.

Florio's love of rhythm and balance to a sentence, with a neat closing clause, is evident everywhere in his work and becomes particularly evident as his own style where he quite alters a translation to achieve it. "Andiamo" easily became "let us delay no longer" if it delivered the tempo he desired.

Let us take a closer look at the habit Wright identified of linking pairs of words to create new phrases. It's a talent Shakespeare is also credited with, but Florio was doing this from his earliest work. Some of those phrases have such resonance many of them are still in common usage today. From 'weak-witted' to 'heart-rending' from 'hare-brained' to 'high-pitched' and from 'cold-blooded' to 'full-grown' and of course the familiar but less commonly spoken 'chop-fallen' from Hamlet's little chat with the old Jester's skull. These phrases also tell us something about the personality behind their devising. Florio despised excessive drinking and eating, he made frequent reference to his views on this in much of his writing so when he describes a man as a 'smell-feast', even though we've never seen the phrase before, we know exactly what he means and what he thinks too. Florio and Shakespeare have all these and

many more habits in common and all unknown elsewhere in literature before them, though swiftly emulated by the writers who followed.

You might now ask, but which came first, the chicken or the egg?

I believe that given what we know of Florio, his seniority, his existing published work and the way his influence seems to grow within Shakespeare's output, we have to acknowledge that Florio was the master and Shakespeare the pupil.

Florio took artistic liberties in his translations which betray his individual style, personality and habits which can then be tracked to other texts, and in the plays and poetry of Shakespeare it seems to my eye that his contribution almost always elevated the language and balance of the text. To quote Herbert Wright:

"The careful reader cannot fail to be impressed by Florio's quest for a unified design, and wherever we turn, the signs of his elaborate planning are manifest."

Wright also went to some trouble to demonstrate that Florio had used every version of Boccaccio's "Decameron" available to him to render his translation. He would never use just one edition if he could find three. This is something Shakespeare scholars have also noticed about the use of source materials for the plays. If there was both a short story and a dramatic text available to examine, internal evidence within Shakespeare's version repeatedly shows both were consulted. A study of Florio's library shelves, described in the preface to his dictionary, reveals that he possessed the various versions required. Even the comic interludes; short sketches performed between plays by travelling companies, were in Florio's collection and plainly used in the plays, (Agnol Malevolte, a stock character from the 'Sacrificio' sketches was surely the model for Sir Andrew Aguecheek) although these were little known, often written in regional dialects and sixty years out of date. What we can also see from the use of Florio's library is that Shakespeare seems to have taken a particular interest in the repertoire of a literary theatrical company from Siena known as 'The Academy of the Thunderstruck' or 'Intronati', whose comedy performances made them folk heroes of their age and brought them considerable prosperity. This was just the thing to fire the ambition of a young English playwright, given access to the learning and library of a man like Florio.

It is well known that Florio was fond of proverbs, particularly those of Italian origin. He published hundreds of them and demonstrated their use in everyday speech in "Second Fruits" showing that a well-chosen proverb could refract shades of meaning within a phrase rather as a prism refracts the colours contained in 'white' light. They can stand alone as the force of a statement, or imply a wider context when used in an appropriate association. We see this regularly occurs in Shakespeare's writing and it is surely noteworthy that Florio's particular favourite or most often used proverbs are the very ones which recur regularly in the plays. Proverbs were fashionable currency in the literature of the day but the specifics of Shakespeare's use of them ring true to Florio's custom and practise.

I have mentioned that computer technology today allows us to 'scan' the entire catalogue of Shakespeare's works in search of particular words or phrases and I have repeatedly found that the heaviest evidence of Florio's 'fingerprints' occurs in the early plays, up to and including Hamlet. After 1601 however, something changes. Certainly the influence of Florio, the ideas

gleaned from his Montaigne translation for example, are still much in evidence in the later plays, but it is my belief that their truly active partnership may have been brought to a rather abrupt close by the imprisonment of their joint patron, the Earl of Southampton, for his involvement in the Essex rebellion. There is only one late play which computer-scanning shows to contain a significant rash of Florio-isms (in terms of actual words and phrases common to his own work) and that is "The Tempest", so perhaps the two collaborated more closely once more in this endeavour. At the time they were again both in the service of the same master, the Court of James I.

Once you become truly familiar with Florio's style it is actually quite easy to spot passages in the early plays which seem to be very much his own. I believe "Two Gentlemen of Verona" may have been their earliest collaboration, if only because it is done rather more clumsily here. In later works it's as if the two literally put their heads together and worked in tandem, but in this work, it rather looks as though Florio went over the text and 'improved' passages, like a tutor working with a pupil. After several repeated readings of "Two Gentlemen" one can actually begin to see the joins. Here is the scene which opens Act 4 in which Valentine encounters a group of outlaws in the woods who mean to rob him until they discover he is outcast like themselves. Then they invite him to become the leader of their gang. I have marked the most obvious Florio 'fingerprints' in italics.

Outlaw 1: Fellows, stand fast: I see a passenger.

Outlaw 2: If there be ten, shrink not but down with 'em.

Outlaw 3: Stand, sir, and throw us that you have about you: if not we'll make you sit, and rifle you.

Speed: Sir, we are undone. These are the villains that all the travellers do fear so much.

Val: My friends –

Outlaw 1: That's not so sir: we are your enemies.

Outlaw 2: Peace, we'll hear him.

Outlaw 3: Ay, by my beard, will we; for he is a proper man.

Val: Then know that I have little wealth to lose. A man I am cross'd with adversity; my riches are these poor habiliments, of which, if you should here disfurnish me, you can take the sum and substance that I have.

Outlaw 2: Whither travel you?

Val: To Verona.

Outlaw 1: Whence came you?

Val: From Milan.

Outlaw 3: Have you long sojourn'd there?

Val: Some sixteen months; and longer might have stayed, if crooked fortune had not thwarted me.

Outlaw 1: What! Were you banish'd thence?

Val: I was.

Outlaw 2: For what offence?

Val: For that which now torments me to rehearse, I kill'd a man, whose death I much repent; but yet I slew him manfully in fight, without false vantage or base treachery.

Outlaw 1: Why, ne'er repent it, if it were done so, but were you banish'd for so small a fault?

Val: I was, and held me glad of such a doom.

Outlaw 2: Have you the tongues?

Val: My youthful travel therein made me happy, or else I often had been miserable.

Outlaw 3: By the bare scalp of Robin Hood's fat friar, this fellow were a king for our wild faction.

Outlaw 1: We'll have him. Sirs, a word.

Speed: Master, be one of them: it is an honourable kind of thievery.

Val: Peace, villain!

Outlaw 2: Tell us this: have you anything to take to?

Val: Nothing, but my fortune.

Outlaw 3: Know then, that some of us are gentlemen, such as the fury of ungovern'd youth thrust from the company of awful men: myself was from Verona banished for practising to steal away a lady. An heir, and near allied unto the duke.

Outlaw 2: And I from Mantua, for a gentleman, who, in my mood, I stabb'd unto the heart.

Outlaw 1: And I for such-like petty crimes as these. But to the purpose: for we cite our faults, that they may hold excus'd our lawless lives: and, partly, seeing you are beautified with goodly shape, and by your own report a linguist, and a man of such perfection, as we do in our quality much want –

Outlaws 2: Indeed, because you are a banish'd man, therefore, above the rest, we parley to you. Are you content to be our general? To make a virtue of necessity, and live, as we do, in this wilderness?

You will notice the curiously high value the outlaws place on Valentine's learning in languages, the deployment of proverbial speech and the alliterative doublet 'sum and substance'. It is interesting also to observe how phrases are plucked from longer proverbs to given them a new context. 'To make a virtue of necessity' was one of Florio's all time favourites, perhaps because it reflected a Stoic value; he rarely missed a chance to include it if a sentence offered him an opportunity.

Here is another passage from the same play where the entire thread comes from Florio, both in style and content. Here his devotion to the principals of Stoic philosophy comes to the fore when Julia explains to her servant that she, like a stream running to the ocean, must follow her nature.

"The current, that with gentle murmur glides, thou know'st, being stopp'd, impatiently doth rage: but, when his fair course is not hindered, he makes sweet music with the enamell'd stones, giving a gentle kiss to every sedge he overtaketh in his pilgrimage; and so by many winding nooks he strays with willing sport to the wild ocean. Then, let me go, and hinder not my course, I'll be as patient as a gentle stream, and make a pastime of each weary step, till the last step have brought me to my love: and there I'll rest, as, after much turmoil, a blessed soul doth in Elysium."

Wiser critics than I have noted a somewhat erratic temperament to the text of "Two Gentlemen of Verona" and I believe that's because it reflects one of Shakespeare and Florio's earliest attempts at collaboration, just the seeds of things to come as their partnership achieved cohesion and balance in their subsequent work together.

Another feature worthy of study is Florio's spelling habits. Scholars at the turn of the 20th century noticed and listed certain spelling forms in Shakespeare's sonnets which were seen to be aberrant from the usual norm of the day among other writers. 'Marchandise' instead of 'merchandise' for example, 'beleeve' rather than 'believe', they are quite distinctive. Dedicated anti-Stratfordians have ransacked the works of everyone from Christopher Marlowe and Edward de Vere to Queen Elizabeth herself to try to find the same aberrant spellings but all in vain. The several dozen words in the list do however all match the spellings in Florio's dictionary "A World of Words". The same study came close to proving beyond much doubt that the Sonnets were written in Italianate handwriting which sometimes caused confusion and typographical errors by the printing company.

I think we have already passed the point now where that should be dismissed as just another coincidence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

'The First English Translation of the Decameron' by Herbert G. Wright. (Lund, 1953).

'Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare' by Geoffrey Bullough, Volume 2 (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968)

Notes and monographs by Canon Gerald Rendall held in the library archives of Liverpool University.

Any of our English-speaking readers who are not familiar with the authors Leonardo Sciascia or Andrea Camilleri will find most of their works in English translation at Amazon.co.uk – they are equally delightful to discover in their very different ways and I commend them to you.