

SHAKESPEARE 'S MONTAIGNE.

Yes, but which Shakespeare?

Joshua Cohen's review (April, 2014, pp.83-85) of Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Platt's book on the Bard titled *Shakespeare's Montaigne* is unbearably misleading.

We don't need to read the book as Greenblatt's strategy is clearly revealed in Cohen's review. Greenblatt actually started years ago his "revisionist" treatment of the mythical Bard aiming, practically, to transform "Shakespeare" into a postmodern writer who looks strangely like John Florio! In his 2005 bestseller book, *Will in the world*, Greenblatt had this to say about Florio

Born in London, the son of Protestant refugees from Italy, Florio had already published several language manuals, along with a compendium of six thousand Italian proverbs; he would go on to produce an important Italian-English dictionary and a vigorous translation, much used by Shakespeare, of Montaigne's *Essays*. Florio became a *friend of Ben Jonson*, and there is evidence that already in the early 1590s he was a man highly familiar with the theater. (227)

Greenblatt's attentive readers prick up their ears at this point, realizing that Florio was perhaps an important author. In this passage, intriguing particulars glitter for an instant, demonstrative proofs almost of his *Shakespearean* identity: besides the manuals, whose literary and linguistic value is however not stressed, the reader finds out about an important dictionary that is a mine of English words; and again about a great translation of a book very precious for *Shakespeare* and of great importance for English letters; about the friendship with Jonson, the initiator and celebrant of the myth; and finally that this was a writer closely linked to the life of the London theatre. The unconscious fascination of the abyss lures Greenblatt toward the place of danger. But he halts at the brink, and manages to avoid referring to Florio again for

the rest of the book. Since Greenblatt's awareness of how powerful and destructive threat Florio could be for Stratford he decided to defy it and openly risk a sortie to tame it.

Once upon a time, George Coffin Taylor, another American scholar, had already demonstrated in 1925 the magnitude of Montaigne's influence on Shakespeare in a small book "*Shakspere [sic] Debt to Montaigne*", bitterly criticized by Shakespearian scholarship and ultimately forgotten as it exposed the *dangerous liaison* between John Florio and the Bard. *Shakspere's debt* was of course with Florio as those 750 or so English words found in the plays were Florio's words which according to Taylor surfaced in Shakespeare before the publication of Florio's Montaigne translation in 1603. In addition to those words, there are *virtually identical phrases* (nouns with a verb or an adjective), like *caste the gorge at; sacrilegious theefe; cheverell conscience; idle, immaterial; fustian terms* ("speak fustian," in Shakespeare); *strike amazement; ignominy and shame; nipping air, etc. etc.* which Greenblatt/Cohen do not mention. If we consider as I did in my book *John Florio The Man Who Was Shakespeare*, other works by Florio, the two bilingual manuals *First* and *Second fruits*, and the 1598 and 1611 editions of his dictionary, we conclude that *Shakspere's debt* is immense.

Returning to the review, Cohen reports some misleading statements from Greenblatt-Platt's book, yes, John Florio was the son of an Italian Protestant but Greenblatt/Platt omit to mention that his father, Michel Angelo Florio, was also of Jewish origin, a great humanist writer and translator very close to the prominent aristocratic English families from the 1550s and that before his conversion to Calvinism in Italy he was a Franciscan friar. About his wife, John's mother, little is known. Was she Italian? Or English? John Florio never mentions his mother but we do know that when John returned to London in 1571 his knowledge of the English tongue was uncertain as he writes in the dedication of his 1598 Italian-English dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes*

If I, who many yeeres have made profession of this toong, and in this search and quest of inquirie have spent most of my studies; yet many times in many wordes have been so stal'd and stabled as such sticking made me blushingly confesse my ignorance, and such confession indeede made me studiouslie seeke helpe, but such helpe was not readielie to be had at hande.

A forceful, intimate image of a difficult birth: John Florio studied the language destined to transform him, a language *that was not his mother tongue*, with passion and perseverance.

The Florios, father and son, spent about fifteen years in the Grisons, at Soglio, practically in Italy, then as now an Italian speaking town very close to Northern-central Italian *Shakespearian* cities like Milan, Venice, Padua, Verona, Florence, Pisa, etc. Yes, we have no records of his travels but it's quite natural, logic and normal that Florio travelled there and elsewhere. The rest of his Italian knowledge comes from Italian friends as the Neapolitan philosopher Giordano Bruno and others and from the intense relationship with his great father who travelled extensively in the peninsula. John inherited not only his genes, but his memories, books, manuscripts as well. He also read hundreds of books in Italian and by Italians.

Greenblatt's statement that "Florio's 1603 version of Montaigne's *Essayes* survives not because of its writing but because of a single reader – Shakespeare, whose initial encounter with the French philosopher was via Florio's 'enflourishing' eloquence" is totally foolhardy! Any student of Montaigne knows how beautiful and important Florio's translation of Montaigne was for English culture in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Frances Yates, author of one of the two Florio's biographies, wrote in 1934 (p.239)

So important an authority on style as Mr. T.S. Eliot puts the Montaigne above Plutarch and so second only to the Bible. It holds and will always hold an assured place among the English classics.

Yates herself thought that

Florio's translation of Montaigne is a great work (...) Florio was genuinely an artist.

Montaigne [is] probably one of the most influential books ever published in this country

(...) The wealth of English words which Florio had at his command is phenomenal...

(...) *Florio consciously experimented with English, grafting in to it words, phrases, even grammatical constructions, which he thought it [English] could digest. He was the first to use the genitive neuter pronoun "its".*

Many other statements on the great value of Florio's *Montaigne* can be found in Felix Otto Matthiessen's 1931 book *Translation: An Elizabethan Art* ("*Florio creates a Montaigne who is an actual Elizabethan figure*") and in an essay by the French linguist André Koszul . In 1997 Arthur Kirsch confirmed the substantial presence of Montaigne in the works of Shakespeare. He reminds us that ideas and vocabulary from various *Essays* of Montaigne have been shown to crop up in *King Lear*, and that the essay "Of Glory," which Florio so brilliantly translated into "Elizabethan," leaves a distinct imprint on *Coriolanus*. Kirsch maintains that Hamlet's way of thinking is plainly inspired by Montaigne and concludes:

These verbal parallels have been generally accepted in Shakespeare's criticism, but their larger implications for the characterization of Prospero and for much else in the play have been, I think, almost willfully neglected.

Two other scholars, Michael Wyatt and Warren Boutcher announced about nine years ago the publication of their respective extensive research on Florio's *Montaigne* but as far as I know they have never published their essays. In his conference at Indiana University on April, 2011, titled *Florio's Montaigne and the end of Renaissance Humanism*, Wyatt argues that "Florio's Montaigne speaks a language newly invigorated through the process of translation, in a context vastly different from its native French habitat, and in so doing—as Carlo Ginzburg has observed—participates in the emergence of a newly assertive English identity." Furthermore the publishing history confirms the importance of the translation: following the third edition of 1632, Florio's *Montaigne* was reprinted in 1885, and until 1934 there were ten complete editions and five volumes of selections and much more editions in the last eighty years.

Two quotes from Taylor's 1925 "censured" book

When the number of expressions in Shakspeare, and the number of

the thoughts in Shakspeare, which could never have taken on their final form but for a previous reading of Montaigne, are borne in mind, it may well be asked whether any other single work that Shakspeare read influenced him in so many different plays and in so great a variety of ways – words, phrases, passages, thoughts.

(...) Shakspeare bore Montaigne's marks upon him to the grave. In what respects did Montaigne affect him? Practically in every respect in which a dramatist would naturally be affected by an essayist.

We are not dealing here with a case of influence at all! The extensive and profound presence of Florio's English in the text of *Shakespeare*, such substantial borrowing, *cannot be the result of a reading, however passionate, of Florio's translation*. Such a spillover of hundreds and hundreds of words, expressions, and ideas *is explainable only on the view that the person who translated Montaigne also wrote the works of Shakespeare*.

Florio's figure, suppressed for about a century by the Shakespearian scholarship is mightily emerging with the publication in April 2013 of the critical edition of *A Worlde of Wordes* (ed. Hermann Haller, University of Toronto Press); two essays published in *The Guardian* by Saul Frampton of Westminster University sustaining that John Florio edited the 1623 *First Folio* and now the second, amplified edition of my 2009 book *John Florio The Man Who Was Shakespeare* as an eBook.

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