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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE OR JOHN FLORIO

ABSTRACT. This short article provides a satisfying solution to a centuries-old problem: why are there so many information gaps in Shakespeare's life and how did he acquire such vast classical knowledge with limited schooling and no European travel experience? Two Italian researchers have provided a very convincing hypothesis, the result of long and painstaking researches.

Despite centuries of research, much of Shakespeare's life continues to remain a mystery; it has, in fact, been impossible to get any kind of information or find any correspondence by or about this world famous playwright and poet. A century after his death, scholar George Stevens stated that the only certainties about his life were his date of birth and date of death, both taken from parish registers. Since then doubts have always been thrown on his real identity, expressed over time by such famous people as Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Thomas Mann, Freud, Jung, Chaplin and Jorge Luis Borges. They all agreed that genius and exceptional creativity were not in themselves sufficient to explain how Shakespeare could have acquired the extraordinary culture that emerges from his plays and poems. However, a new breakthrough has been created by two young Italian researchers, Roberta Romani and Irene Bellini, who have put forward a valid new theory which is the main subject of this article.

In the course of time, many names have been put forward for the identity of the real author of Shakespeare's works, from Queen Elizabeth I herself, to the poet Philip Sidney, the sister of the Earl of Derby, a shareholder in the Globe theatre or Christopher

Marlowe, the last quite impossible due to his early death. Francis Bacon was another popular candidate, but he was dedicated to science, and it must be remembered that at that time there were only a few mediocre quality translations of some classical texts available. The case for Bacon was supported by one of his descendents, Delia Salter Bacon, who made a series of parallels with the philosophical elements of both writers, but this proposal had already been investigated and rejected by a parish priest from Warwickshire in 1785. The Metaphysical poet Samuel Daniel was suggested, brother-in-law of John Florio and Elizabeth's ambassador in Italy. But rather than a single name, the Italian literary critic Giorgio Melchiorri suggested the collaboration of a group of writers which included Shakespeare.

The Italian settings of many of Shakespeare's plays is an undeniable fact: Milan, Rome, Venice, Padua, Verona, Treviso, Mantua, Florence, Naples, Lucca and Messina. These towns are not only mentioned but are described in detail, along with a deep knowledge of the laws of these places. Where could Shakespeare possibly have obtained this knowledge? If the plays are analyzed, as researchers Romani and Bellini have done, it emerges that out of a total of five hundred and thirty-two Shakespearean characters, only one hundred and nine have English names, eighty-four Greek names, thirty-one French, twenty Spanish, while no fewer than two hundred and eighty-eight have Italian names. No writer before or after Shakespeare has ever shown such a wide knowledge of the Italian Renaissance masterpieces. Not even the claim of genius could justify such an experience of the world in one who had never left his native land.

Shakespeare's life is notoriously poorly documented: there is no real evidence that he actually attended Stratford Grammar School. In those days grammar school covered an age range from seven to fourteen years of age, and the syllabus was very basic, with a little Latin but no Greek. Some sources even think that William was the only literate member of his family, notwithstanding nothing written in his hand exists, no letters, no manuscripts, only a few uncertain signatures on land and property transactions, and even on these documents the surnames are all spelled differently. In fact, the handwriting expert, Saul Gervini, supported by Paul Deterbel, maintains that, judging from these signatures, William could not write.

Young William presumably spent his adolescence working with his father. The only documents from these early years are a fine for poaching, the certificate of his marriage to Anne Hathaway, of his daughter Susannah's baptism six months later and that of the twins, Hamnet and Judith in 1585. Legend has it that Shakespeare left Stratford and his family the same year, abandoning his wife and three small children to go to London in search of fortune. The reason for this sudden flight is unknown, and nothing at all is emerges about the following seven years, the so-called "lost years". Some critics optimistically have him travelling abroad to acquire his vast culture, but this hypothesis seems highly unlikely without an income and a family to support.

Without any documentary evidence of previous writing experience, it is to say the least amazing that Shakespeare should suddenly produce *Henry VI*, a complex historical work, in 1592, which was, from its first performance, a great success. William was,

however, immediately attacked by the playwright Robert Greene and accused of being a vulgar social climber, a “crow in borrowed feathers”. Other critics have reconstructed these intervening years more convincingly, with the writer first guarding horses and carriages outside theatres, then taking minor parts, thus gaining a sound practical knowledge of the stage. It remains highly doubtful that in the twenty-one years from 1592 to his death in 1616, Shakespeare could have written thirty-seven masterpieces, more than half of which were set in distant countries he had never visited, one hundred and fifty-four sonnets and several long poems. There is no trace of a cultural formation and it appears nothing short of miraculous that he could have studied Greek, Latin and Italian texts not yet translated into English.

When *Henry VI* was performed historical plays were very much in vogue, but two years later, in 1594, all the theatres were closed because of the plague. *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* were written in this period but Shakespeare’s deep knowledge of Ovid and Seneca is inexplicable. Moreover, in the next three years, the playwright apparently wrote *Richard III*, *King John*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, and *The Comedy of Errors*. When the theatres re-opened Shakespeare was writing *The two Gentlemen of Verona* and there was a lot of jealousy and criticism from other playwrights. In the meantime the playwright was using his business skills by buying shares in the theatrical company “The Lord Chamberlain’s Men”, which performed in rapid succession not only *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but also *Edward III* and *Richard II*. So, in summary, in

the four years between 1592 and 1596, Shakespeare (or Florio) wrote fourteen plays, the sonnets, two long poems and shortly afterwards *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado about Nothing*, set in Messina, two worlds apart. But, it must be emphasized, no evidence has so far been found that Shakespeare ever left England.

The period 1597-99 was one of great popularity for the theatre and Shakespeare's business sense drove him to take part in a new venture, the building of The Globe Theatre belonging to the company which included the Burbage brothers. In those times, plays did not belong to the dramatist or to the actors, but to the company that staged them, so there were other interests involved. The new Globe was built in record time, using in part the timber salvaged from the demolition of the old Globe, and with the manual labour of members of the company. It had a modern structure with an oval apron stage and room for three thousand spectators. Shakespeare was becoming rich, and more important works were performed: *Henry IV parts I and II*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, the plot of which draws on the *Menaechmi* of Plautus and "Gli Ingannati" of Matteo Bandello. The question arises spontaneously as to how Shakespeare could have had access to a work written in the spoken Tuscan dialect.

At the turn of the century *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* appear and Shakespeare is clearly a rich man, buying land and a second house in Stratford. With the death of Queen Elisabeth in 1603 and the succession of James I the prestige of the theatres

continued. The “Lord Chamberlain’s Men” took on the new name of “The King’s Men” and Will Shakespeare, no longer an actor, was one the main managers. However, another outbreak of the plague closed the theatres again and Shakespeare officially stayed in London writing *Measure for Measure*, *Othello* and *King Lear* (1602-1605), followed by *Macbeth* for the superstitious Scottish James I, finally, from 1606-1608, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Timon of Athens* and *Pericles Prince of Tyre* appeared, the last perhaps written with Fletcher. In 1609 the Globe burnt down and the King’s Men bought Blackfriars, a roofed theatre. Suddenly, it seems, Shakespeare left London, never to leave Stratford again, where officially, he wrote *Cymbelline*, *a Winter’s Tale*, *the Tempest*, *Henry VIII* and, perhaps in collaboration with Fletcher *The Two Noble Cousins*. There is no evidence that Shakespeare attended the first performances of these plays and nothing bears his signature except property buying documents. Nothing at all remains of Shakespeare’s last years and even though the distance between Stratford and London was two days on horseback or four days on foot, it appears that Shakespeare left Stratford only three times between 1609 and 1611, once for a lawsuit against a son-in-law Stephen Bellot, once to buy a house, and the third time to stay with Susannah’s husband, John Hall.

The more it is considered what is known of Shakespeare’s life the more doubts arise. The only message written in his hand dates back to 1588, a note addressed to a certain Richard Quincy of Stratford, asking for help with debts. Apparently neither of his daughters went to school and no books or manuscripts are mentioned in his will. The strange epitaph on his headstone in Stratford churchyard makes no mention of his art.

So, who was John Florio and why is he a convincing candidate for the authorship of Shakespeare's plays ? The life of his father, Michel Agnolo Florio, was conditioned by two very important events which occurred before his birth in 1520: the expulsion of all Jews from the Kingdom of Naples by Ferdinand of Spain in 1492 and Martin Luther's 95 theses. Some critics give his birth place as Siena, Lucca or Messina, where he may have been a doctor or a Rabbi. He himself declared he was a Jew converted to Christianity. At the end of 1490 there was a mass exodus of Jews from Sicily towards the North of Italy; three years earlier the Jewish population of Sicily alone amounted to 100,000, an enormous number if it is considered that the total number of Jews resident in Italy today is 25,000. Trading in Sicily in the previous two centuries was mainly carried out by a network of Jewish merchant, favoured by the fact that Messina was a porto franco. Many Sicilian Jews settled in Pisa where there was a flourishing river port. There were several Synagogues in Messina, the remains of one still visible today near the church of St. Maria del Carmine. Research carried out by the Tel Aviv database reveals that Florio was a common surname, associated with the silk industry; originating in Ukraine in the form of Flor, it had been Italianized into Florio, Florian and Flores. Much could be said about the interesting life of Michel Agnolo, described in detail by the researchers, but suffice it to say that he studied in a Franciscan Convent, took his vows at fourteen, becoming brother Paolo Antonio, and that he travelled all over Tuscany as a preacher in a turbulent period for the Catholic church.

His biographer Corrado Panzieri states that Michel Agnolo went to Naples in 1535 under the protection of the Prince of Salerno, Ferrante Sanseverino, a great lover of the

theatre. Coming into contact with Juan de Valdes he not only absorbed the ideas of the protestant reformation but was fascinated by a manuscript written by Valdes “Dialogo de la lengua” containing notes about the new Italian Language. Later, his son John applied the same passion to enriching and renovating the English Language. In those years Michel Agnolo returned to Messina in search of his roots, also because there was a close connection between the Accademia Pontiana in Naples and the Scuola Greca in Messina, the first Institute to receive the precious manuscripts rescued from the sack of Constantinople at the end of the XVI century. The person who saved most of the manuscripts was a Christian monk, Costantino Lascares, who made numerous voyages to Constantinople, after which he taught Greek in Rome, Milan, Naples and Pavia, settling finally in Messina and Founding the Scuola Greca, so Michel Agnolo was intimately connected with Greek culture. In Tuscany he read the works of Boccaccio and of Matteo Bandello, in whose works can be identified *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado Nothing*. In the work of Luigi da Porto of Vicenza is the “*Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*” that is, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Michel Agnolo gave up preaching because this was in conflict with his interest in the Reformation and he became more and more focused on the Italian language and literature in general. In 1542 he was the guest of Gianbattista Giraldi, the first person ever to write a tragedy based on the canons of Aristotle’s poetics, and among whose works can be found the plots of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline*. Visiting Ferrara Michel Agnolo met Boiardo, among whose works appears the translation of *Timon of Athens*. In fact, Shakespeare’s version, performed in 1608, echoes many of

the monologues. Such sources, as Panzieri points out, were available in English only many years later and after the publication of John Florio's English-Italian dictionary. In 1545 Michel Agnolo moved to a village near the Swiss border where he published his first book "I Secondi Frutti" in 1549. After his arrest in Valtellina for heresy and his imprisonment in the Torre dell'Annone in Rome, Michel Agnolo escaped after his death sentence and fled across Europe, reaching London in November 1550. In London he found new influential friends such as Archbishop Cranmer of Canterbury and Sir William Cecil. He fell in love with an English woman, Rose Daniel, and John was born in 1553; they were helped and lodged by the Duke of Suffolk, father of Lady Jane Grey, "Queen for nine days", whose biography he had written in Italian when in Italy. From then on Michel Agnolo worked as a teacher of language and literature to groups of young nobles.

The persecutions of protestants during the reign of Bloody Mary drove him and his family to Antwerp in Belgium then to Strasbourg and again to the Swiss border where John grew up, economically poor but intellectually very rich, learning Latin, Greek, Spanish, German and French from his father's library, English from his mother and four Italian dialects. He also worked as a notary, gaining legal knowledge, especially of Venetian laws, completely unknown in England. Later he studied at the University of Padua and Tübingen in Germany, afterwards travelling round Europe. Father and son settled in London again when Elisabeth I became Queen and worked together from 1576 to 1605, as is proved by John's English translations of the texts collected by his father and by the large number of neologisms and idiomatic expressions brought into

English for the first time. Michel Agnolo had in fact collected a lot of aphorisms and proverbs from the dialects of Venice, Sicily, Tuscany, Lombardy and the Kingdom of Naples. When Michel Agnolo died in London in 1605 there is no mention of his library, already in John's possession, as emerges from John's will drawn up in 1625, where he leaves the library to William Herbert Earls of Pembroke, according to his father's wishes. John was working as a teacher and translator of both classical Greek and Latin, and contemporary Italian, Spanish, French and German works, soon becoming tutor at Oxford to the Bishop of Durham's son and collaborating with Hackluyt to translate Jacques Cartier's "*Travels in Canada*". Proof of Michel Agnolo's presence in London is John's translation of "First Fruits" which continues Michel Agnolo's famous text "I secondi frutti" "First Fruits" would be termed today "Testo a fronte", and John revised his father's work enriching it with his own contribution. The two Florios can therefore be considered the first great spreaders of European Classical Contemporary and Italian Renaissance literature. In both "First Fruits" and "Second Fruits" are to be found the titles of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing*, performed respectively in 1594 and 1599.

The 1581 saw John Florio at Oxford enrolled and Magdalene College and translating texts until then unavailable in English. At University Florio became close friends with Giordano Bruno, a friendship which lasted a lifetime. Scholars have found references to the theses of Giordano Bruno in *The Tempest*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Hamlet*. There is obviously no evidence of a link between Shakespeare and Giordano Bruno, and in any case Bruno spoke very little English. In 1592, the year of Shakespeare's debut,

Florio was already well known in England, whereas William Shakespeare went by several surnames, mostly Shagsper. Nobody knows how or when the two men met. *Henry VI* is a complex work which assumes a good knowledge of English History and of the working of power, so much so that it was thought to have been written by a group of people. Another unsolved mystery is that, if Shakespeare had not been in close contact with John Florio, how could he have used so many new English words which only appeared in Florio's dictionary "*A World of Words*", first edition 1598. The idea of a collaboration between the two is perfect, with Florio providing the texts and hiding behind the pseudonym of Shake-speare, and William adding his knowledge of the theatre; proof of this is to be found in *King Lear* of which there are various versions. Two have survived: one, literary and descriptive, the other lively and incisive, which was used for the theatre. *King Lear* turns out to be a synthesis of the 8th century B. C. legend of the mythical King Leir and a lawsuit which occurred a few years before regarding a certain Brian Annesley with three daughters, two married and the youngest named Cordel, who defended her father and which ended in 1604, receiving great public attention. Shakespeare's plays were so popular that they attracted much criticism: when Robert Greene criticized Shakespeare, calling him "Johannes Factotum", he was probably referring to John Florio. From the texts of Nash and Greene, it emerges that they refer not to one person but to a group, using "they" and "them" and also to Will Shake-scene. In fact the use of the name "Shakespeare" as we know it today only became widely used after the publication of *Venus and Adonis*.

The 1590s are prosperous years : William calls his brother Edmund to London to work in the theatre, John Florio lives richly and is married to Samuel Daniel's sister Rose with four children. In only two years, 1596 to 1598, there are the first performances of *Henry IV , parts I and II, the Merchant of Venice, Much Ado about Nothing, Henry V, The Taming of the Shrew, Richard II, Richard III, King John, Love's Labour's Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1598 Florio published the first edition of his Italian- English Dictionary, "A World of Words", dedicated to The Earl of Southampton, who was also Shakespeare's patron. This dictionary favoured the reading and translation of great Italian writers such as Boccaccio, not yet translated into English. In 1599 *As you Like it* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* were staged. Then, tragedy: a ravaging epidemic of the plague hit London in 1601 and carried off John Florio's wife and three of his children, leaving him with his daughter Aurelia and his elderly father Michel Agnolo. In the years immediately after the death of Queen Elizabeth I, Will devoted himself to acting and managing the theatrical company "The King's Men". The unanswered question is where he could have found the time to write *Troilus and Cressida, All's Well that Ends Well*, performed in 1603, then immediately afterwards *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*. In 1605 it is supposed that Michel Agnolo died in his 80s and in fact the production of plays also goes ahead more slowly: *Macbeth* in 1606, then *King Lear*, and between 1606 and 1608 the Greek-Roman group *Anthony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Timon of Athens* and *Pericles Prince of Tyre*. In 1609, year of the first performance of *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare suddenly decides to retire to Stratford aged

only forty-five, where he manages his property and lands. In Stratford he uses his pen only to sign contracts and accounts.

Later that year the sonnets were published, bearing the name of Shakespeare but in the poet's absence. John Florio, on the contrary was in London, invited by Queen Anne to supervise the publishing of the sonnets for the 19th June 1609, the 43rd birthday of James I. Great mystery has always surrounded the sonnets, including the question as to which one was written by the Queen as a gift to her husband. In 1613 the Globe theatre burnt down again and in 1616 Shakespeare died. A year later Florio remarried and in 1619 he finished translating *the Decamerone*; he is now less rich because his patron Queen Anne has died. In vain he asks for a pension then goes to live in Fulham in relative poverty. In 1624 the Earl of Southampton also dies and the following year another epidemic of plague strikes down 35,000 victims in London alone including John Florio, buried in a common mass grave. All he had to leave was his wonderful library a real treasure in those days considering it contained three hundred and forty volumes, mostly in Italian but many in other European languages, as well as his correspondence and various documents testifying the work of father and son. Although today this seems small, Florio's library had the same number of books as the University of Cambridge in the same period. The library, at Michel Agnolo's wish was to be left to the Earl of Pembroke who, however died five years later leaving it to his brother Philip Herbert, indifferent to its value. Both brothers ignored Florio's plea to re-publish the dictionary and to give the profits to his indigent second wife.

Over time, critics have continued to raise doubts about the validity of Shakespeare's authorship and have investigated Florio's travels as a possible source of the various Italian settings of the plays. As can be expected, such voices have always been hushed by the British, but before examining an important event in 1925, mention should be made again of the wills left by Shakespeare and Florio. The former is, to say the least, surprising: drawn up in very ordinary language and not couched in legal terminology in 1616, William leaves money to his daughters and one son-in-law, his clothes to his sister, £10 to the poor of Stratford, the land and house named "New Place" to his daughter Susannah, the second bedroom to his wife, a large gold and silver bowl to daughter Judith, all the rest to Susannah and her husband, but, significantly, there is no reference to a library, or books, or his plays. On the contrary, Florio's will, drawn up in 1625, is written in an elegant and refined English: he leaves all his goods to his wife, his first wife's wedding ring to his only surviving daughter, Aurelia, much grieved that he has nothing else to give her, and all his books, as stated above, to William, Earl of Pembroke, begging him to look after his poor wife who had looked after him so lovingly. It is a very long will, in which he describes in detail his writings and expresses his worries over possible debts.

Much of this information and the possible link between Florio and Shakespeare came to light in 1925, as already mentioned, and in such an unexpected and unlikely way as to seem almost incredible.

One night in December 1925, a young Italian journalist, unable to sleep, was going through the family library when he came across a very old parchment book. The

journalist was Santi Paladino, the place was Scilla, a small fishing town on the Calabrian coast, and the book was Florio's "Second Fruits". As it alluded to the Italian-English "First Fruits", Paladino began to read. The first thing that struck him was the expression "love's labour's lost", which appeared in Florio's English edition of *First Fruits*, published in England in 1585, and in *Troilus and Cressida*. Paladino checked the author and found the name "M.A.Florio, Valtellina. Paladino's parchment copy bore the date 1549, so he was amazed that it had been written fifteen years before Shakespeare's birth and four years before John Florio's. That edition, in fact, dated back to forty-five years before Shakespeare's "*Love's Labour's Lost*" was first performed. The young Santi was immediately alerted. The library at Scilla had been there for generations, so he had no idea how the book came to be there. Paladino was a highly cultured man, very knowledgeable about the theatre, and he had attended schools in Tuscany and Venice. It was only natural that he should pass on his discovery to all his intellectual friends; he then wrote an article which set the ball rolling and which changed the course of his life. In February 1927, Paladino published an article in a magazine called "Impero", with the provoking title, naturally in Italian, "*Il Grande Shakespeare sarebbe Italiano*", in which he proves his point by illustrating how the proverbs and sayings in Michel Agnolo's "Second Fruits" contains whole lines which were to appear in Hamlet many years later. The writer also stated that anyone interested could go to Scilla to consult the book. For the rest of his life Santi Paladino searched for information and was able to publish a book entitled "*Shakespeare sarebbe lo pseudonimo di un poeta italiano?*"; the book of course was ignored in Britain and the

United States and received with scepticism in international academic circles. Supported by numerous intellectuals including Santi Paladino, “L’Accademia Nazionale Shakespeariana” was created in Reggio Calabria in 1929, but during the fascist period, as the journalist specifies in a later book, was closed down and he was forbidden to reprint his book which had quickly sold out. Despite these difficulties Santi and other researchers all over the world were trying to shed light on the mystery. However when he died in 1981 he had not received the appreciation his research merited. An English lady, Frances Amelia Yates, died the same year as Santi; in the 30s she had researched the neo-platonic movement in the Italian Renaissance, also coming across the two Florios. In her first work “*John Florio: the life of an Italian in Shakespeare’s England*”, she showed the close link and evident collaboration between the two men, but again this did nothing to shake the certainty of Shakespeare’s defenders. Paladino and Yates were not alone in their doubts about the real identity of Shakespeare, but also the other famous writers mentioned at the beginning of this article. They all agreed that the Shakespearean texts revealed an extraordinary culture which not even genius and supreme creativity can explain. The question as to where and how Will Shagsper could have acquired so many languages, both classical and modern, such a knowledge of history and geography, about the Greek and Latin classical theatre, the traditional popular theatre from the Romance to the Commedia dell’Arte, still remains unanswered. The two Italian researchers suggest that behind Shakespeare’s signature there was a group of technical collaborators exactly as there is behind a modern film production, and that the main figure in this team was undoubtedly John Florio.

Further Reading:

Romani, Roberta e Bellini, Irene *Il Segreto di Shakespeare*, Milano: Mondadori, 2012

Gerevini, Saul *William Shakespeare, ovvero John Florio, un fiorentino alla conquista del mondo*, Aulla: Pilgrim, 2008