

The New Field of Shakespeare Authorship Studies

by Don Rubin

My Shakespeare, William Leahy (ed.), Edward Everett Root, 2018

The New Oxford Shakespeare, Gary Taylor et al (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2018

John Florio: The Man Who Was Shakespeare, Lamberto Tassinari, Giano Books, 2009

Le Vrai Shakespeare, Chaunes, Independent Publisher, 2018

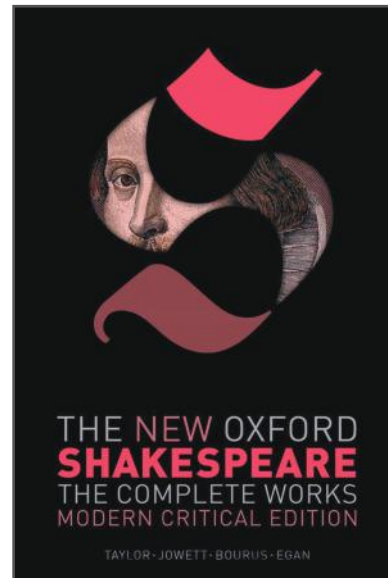
The final chapter of the recent volume *My Shakespeare*—a series of essays about the Shakespeare Authorship Question edited by Professor William Leahy of Brunel University in London—is written by Leahy himself and is provocatively entitled “My (amalgamated) Shakespeare.” His conclusion has raised the ire of many in academe but Leahy—a noted Shakespeare scholar and a Vice-President of Brunel—is himself academe personified and his argument is based in part on the work of numerous other academics, some of whom actually edit Shakespeare volumes for Oxford University Press.

Leahy states: “the authorship of the plays and poems traditionally attributed to Shakespeare of Stratford is an enormously complex issue, rife with uncertainty and ambiguity... it is a field in which it is difficult to speak with any

kind of authority” (Leahy 204). In short, with numerous leading academics behind him, he is arguing that no one can any longer be sure who wrote the plays of Shakespeare. One can only say they were written by numerous hands, meaning that the traditional assumptions based primarily on the First Folio now must once again be thrown into question. To quote former cleric James Carroll about God, “Settled ideas are forever on their way to being unsettled” (June 2019 *The Atlantic*).

A New Group Theory of Authorship

In fact, Leahy has long thought Shakespeare was not just a fancy spelling of the name of the businessman from Stratford—Shakespeare—but a pseudonym. With publication in 2017 of Oxford University Press’s multi-volume edition of *Shakespeare’s Works* (including one volume focusing on authorship issues), Leahy now thinks his view has been totally justified. Indeed, the editors of the OUP volumes—Professors Gary Taylor et al—have themselves made the claim that the works of Shakespeare were created by multiple authors. Shakespeare, according to Taylor and friends, was not simply a “he” but rather a “they,” and that all of them agreed to share the name Shakespeare the same way designers at fashion houses work under the aegis of a single name like Dior or Givenchy.



So, who were the core members of the Shakespeare Workshop? For the Oxford scholars, they included apparently Richard Barnfield, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Middleton, Thomas Nashe, George Peele, Walter Raleigh and a handful of others not so well-known. Added in are two other names

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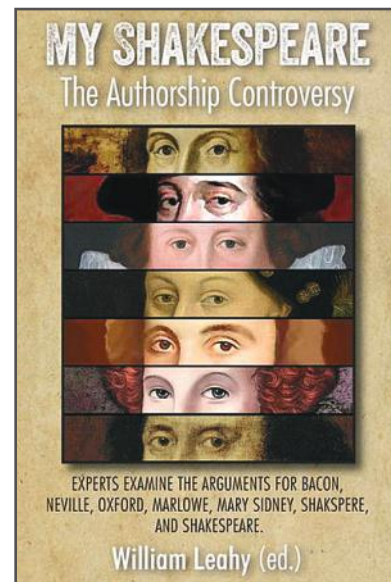
that are not specifically identified by Taylor—someone identified simply as “Anonymous” within the group and someone who may well have already used the name “William Shakespeare” on other works like *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and 154 sonnets. In short, this is the new group theory of Professor Taylor et al at Oxford.

The question here is whether one of these two unidentified people might be Edward de Vere? And might the other even be Will Shakspeare of Stratford?

There are other names, of course. Based on Professor Leahy’s contribution to the argument in *My Shakespeare*, his authorship list would certainly include Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford, called by his contemporaries “the best” of the Court writers. It would also include the philosopher Francis Bacon; the diplomat and courtier Henry Neville, Ambassador to France during this time; and the Countess of Pembroke, Mary Sidney Herbert. Marlowe is also on Leahy’s list of possibilities, as is Will Shakspeare.

The problem for Professors Leahy and Taylor is that they just don’t know who was the “key” author in this fascinating Elizabethan “whodunit.” Moreover, Leahy seems convinced that we never really will know. Hence his belief is that the Authorship Question is now not so much a quest for some particular 16th century person’s identity as much as it is a “field” for examination, a new field that needs to be seriously recognized by academe, a legitimate field of study that should include scholars in many disciplines including theatre, literature, history and the law.

So have we just experienced a paradigm shift? I certainly believe that new evidence really is overturning the prevailing authorship framework. It is significant, and it has not been given enough attention by most of us interested in the authorship question in the last three or four years. There are certainly implications here even for teachers with intellectual integrity and theatre people only casually interested in this period. As teachers, for example, what do we now tell our students? What year do we tell them that Shakespeare, whoever he or she was, was born? As theatre producers, what do we tell our audiences about the author when a play by “Shakespeare” is produced? That “he” was born in Stratford-upon-Avon? How and when do we say that the whole Bardic biography is now being contested?



The truth is that most people will continue to prefer to accept the official story of the Stratford Birthplace Trust: there once was a man from Stratford who came from an illiterate family but who was a genius born whole from some Medusa's head already knowing the law so well that he could make in-jokes about legal issues in the plays, was born knowing foreign languages that were not taught in the schools, that despite his low birth and lack of money growing up that he knew everything by intellectual osmosis about aristocratic sports like falconry, tennis and the royal court, and that he knew quotidian details about France and especially Italy by standing around taverns listening to tales told by boastful sailors.

Or do we finally start suggesting to our students that the contested name Shakespeare may well have been a pseudonym? And then, once we open up that issue to new generations, surely we then need to take the next step and tell them who might have actually been behind the spear—or the many “who's” who now seem to be populating what Leahy argues persuasively should be a whole new and exciting field: Authorship Studies.

Let's examine some of these many “who's” currently being proposed as the author.

Professors Taylor et al have employed computer stylometrics to identify a variety of authors on the plays. It is thanks to this still controversial method that they compare the signed writings by people such as Middleton, Nashe, Raleigh and Marlowe with large portions of the “Shakespeare” plays. What we do *not* know, of course, is who actually wrote the parts still credited by OUP to that unknown person who actually used the name “Shakespeare.” And we certainly don't know who Taylor's “Anonymous” really was.

Taylor says he doesn't try to make these identifications because the larger sections of the plays don't seem to be written by anyone who left us anything to compare the dramatic works with. For instance, it is clear we have no plays “signed” by de Vere. What we have is some signed youthful poetry by him but not enough from a later period that can be accurately identified through Taylor's stylometrics. Nor do we have any writing by Will Shakspeare other than a handful of nearly illegible signatures on legal documents, such as his will. Not a letter to this wife. Not a letter to his theatre colleagues or his company in London.

What we do have is the First Folio, which appeared seven years after Shakspeare's death in which the editor—Ben Jonson—informs readers that, if they wish to know who the author really was, look not to the engraved picture of the man in the book—another piece of contested evidence—but to the writings themselves, created by a person Jonson simply calls “the Sweet Swan of Avon.”

Enter Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke

Wasn't Mary Herbert's symbol the swan? Wasn't she referred to as the sweet swan? That's one of the arguments made in Professor Leahy's biographically-centered volume, which helpfully examines the major authorship candidates. The reference to the Avon, it is assumed, must be to the Avon River running through Stratford-upon-Avon. But numerous scholars have pointed out that "avon" simply means "river," while Elizabethan scholar Alexander Waugh has published a paper showing that Queen Elizabeth enjoyed many of her Shakespearean theatrical entertainments at Hampton Court Palace in Richmond, 12 miles southwest of London on the River Thames. Moreover, "Hampton Court was called 'Avon' as a shortening of the Celtic-Roman name 'Avondunum' meaning a fortified place (dunum) by a river (avon), which the common people by corruption called Hampton" (Waugh 100). In addition, swans, it is known, were an oft-used symbol for poets generally. So, the sobriquet Sweet Swan of Avon, according to Waugh, is simply one of Jonson's many coded references to the "poet" whose works often premiered before the court at Avon, a poet Waugh identifies as Edward de Vere in his own persuasive essay in Professor Leahy's book.

The chapter on Mary Herbert in Leahy's volume is by the scholar Robin Williams, author of an earlier book entitled *Sweet Swan of Avon*. It portrays a woman who, after Elizabeth herself, was surely the most well-educated and brilliant woman in England. Connected by family ties to the Dudleys, particularly to the Queen's long-time lover Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who was her uncle, Mary Sidney was sister to the greatest poet of the early Tudor period, Philip Sidney, and mother of William and Philip Herbert, to whom the First Folio was dedicated. The Sidney, Dudley, and Herbert families composed one of the most powerful familial nexuses in the realm. They "controlled vast holdings... equalling about two-thirds of the land under Elizabeth's rule." Indeed, "Shakespeare's ten British history plays are filled with historical figures from the... family pedigree" (Williams 139).

The home that Mary Sidney and her husband, the Earl of Pembroke, established at Wilton House "became a base away from London for the Herberts, Dudleys and Sidneys" (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 140) as well as a literary salon for numerous writers including Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, Sir John Davies and Samuel Daniel, whose brother-in-law was John Florio. Educated at home, Mary Sidney spoke Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, probably Greek and some Hebrew. She was trained in poetry, rhetoric, history and the classics, had, like many women of the time, medical training, dabbled in alchemy, played the lute, virginals, and apparently the violin, and composed music. Her mother's friends included the five Cooke sisters, "who were among the first generation of female humanist scholars. Her mother's closest friend was Mildred Cooke, herself married to William Cecil, the Queen's

Secretary of State and then her Lord Treasurer. Another good friend, Anne Cooke, was the mother of Sir Francis Bacon (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 141). What an assembly of extraordinarily educated and powerful women. Add Mary Sidney into the authorship question and you are adding another whole world of writers.

In terms of theatre, virtually all the known companies of the period played for the Sidney and Pembroke families. The Pembrokes, like the Dudleys, sponsored their own acting troupes and the Sidney family even had their own jester. Mary Sidney was also acknowledged as a writer. In her own religious poetry—the only form women were expected or allowed to write in at this time—“she used 126 different verse forms.” She was also “the first woman to publish a play in English, *Antonie*, a translation from the French of a closet drama meant to be read aloud in a noble household” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 146). She is even noted in Francis Meres’ 1598 *Palladis Tamia* as “a most delicate poet...comparable to Sappho as the Tenth Muse” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 147).

Like Shakespeare, she also invented new words in English, including “feathery,” “heart-broke,” and “head-on” as well as compound adjectives such as “brain-sick” and “angel-like” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 147). She and her brother Philip also encouraged writers to publish their works, not so common earlier, helping to create “a print-based literary culture” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 148).

Then there are her two sons—William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke, and Philip, Earl of Montgomery, the latter such a favorite of James I that he kissed the king on the lips at one public ceremony rather than on the hand. This was the incomparable duo behind publication of the First Folio. In 1604, six months after Edward de Vere died, it was also Philip who married Susan Vere, Edward’s youngest daughter. The morning after their wedding, James (quoted in a letter from Dudley Carleton) apparently “spent a good time in or upon their bed” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 154). Why did they have to wait until after de Vere’s death to marry? Edward hated Philip Herbert’s uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, “one of those the Earl of Oxford said he wanted to kill” (*My Shakespeare*, Williams 156).

Simply by being a woman—even so famous a woman—it becomes manifestly clear why she herself might actually prefer to write for the public under a pseudonym. But could Mary Sidney Herbert have written three dozen plays as Shakespeare without anyone else discovering her secret? Based on text alone, I have serious doubts that she could actually be the poet behind so many bawdy references in the poetry and the plays, from being “pricked out” in the sonnets to Malvolio’s encomium to his lady’s C’s, U’s ‘n’ T’s in *Twelfth Night*. Leahy, for the record, considers her as part of the new field, while Taylor does not mention her.

More Candidates: Shakspere, Bacon and Neville

Considered by Leahy only tangentially, but by the more orthodox Taylor et al more seriously, is Will Shakspere himself. In Leahy's volume, Shakspere's cause is challenged by the independent American scholar Diana Price. In her essay, "A Conjectural Narrative," she continues to maintain that there is no contemporary evidence for him as a writer, but does argue that William of Stratford clearly was a good businessman, and that he does deserve a place in the field because he appears to have made a profitable career buying and selling popular play-texts—including those of "Shakespeare." Moreover, it was through his dramatic brokerage work that he eventually became an investor in the company that was most closely associated with the plays of Shakespeare. Yet Shakspere himself, Price makes clear, is never suggested as actually being the writer "Shakespeare," nor did he himself ever make that claim.

The other essays in Leahy's collection put forth the standard candidates, including Marlowe, Bacon and Henry Neville. The Marlowe position by British scholar Ros Barber is well argued, but it is still skewed by a conspiracy theory, in which Marlowe's death was faked for political reasons since he worked as a spy for Sir Francis Walsingham. He is then sent off to Italy, where he lived out the remainder of his life in protective custody while writing and sending the results—all the plays of "Shakespeare"—back to London under that pseudonym. A key point is that after his ostensible death in 1593, Marlowe's name is never again attached to a piece of writing, so something has clearly happened, while the name Shakespeare only begins to appear after 1593. It also does much to explain themes of exile and the appearance of Italy and its geography and culture in so many of the plays. But I don't believe the government would go to these lengths to protect the life of a supposed political asset at that time, no less cooperate with that person—a commoner—in the secret transport of his stage plays back to England.

The Henry Neville argument is perhaps the weakest in the Leahy volume. Certainly, Neville's biographical dates (1562–1615) fit the period plus he was an educated aristocrat who traveled widely in Europe. In addition, he knew the law, knew Southampton, and knew music because he played the lute. And his father was a "keen falconer" (Leahy 114). Unfortunately, there is no proof that Neville ever actually wrote a play or even attended the theatre. There are some personal annotations in volumes of plays that he owned. An example of the dubiousness of this argument is the assertion that the plays may have been written by Neville because, "There are twenty members of the Neville family either on stage or mentioned in *Richard III*" (Leahy 133). But was he known as a poet or playwright? No.

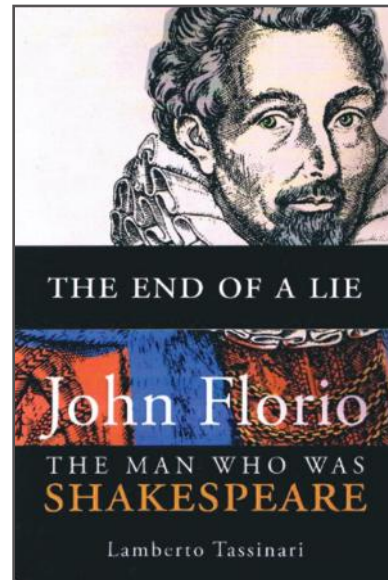
The case for Sir Francis Bacon is based upon Sir Francis's extraordinary erudition, his world view and his proximity to the court. But even Professor Taylor's stylometrics and the ready availability of Baconian writings are not persuasive. Barry Clarke says little more in theatrical support of his argument than that Bacon was a "producer for the Inns of Court acting companies" (Leahy 168) and that he produced "two masques at Whitehall" in 1612-13 (Leahy 186).

The Case for John Florio as Shakespeare

There is one other claimant not mentioned by either Taylor or Leahy, but whom I have been investigating recently because there has been much coverage about him in both France and Quebec—John Florio. Interest in Florio's life and a claim by several scholars that he is the name behind the pseudonym has, in fact, been revived in the last decade by the francophone authorship community.

It must be noted here that virtually no one since the 1930s has paid more than passing attention to Florio, a London-based 16th century teacher of Italian, known primarily as editor of the first Italian-English dictionary and as the first translator of Montaigne from French into English. It was in 1932 that Elizabethan scholar Frances Yates published a fine life of Florio with Cambridge University Press called *John Florio: The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England*. She ended her nearly 400-page study with a three-page chapter saying that her next project would be an examination of the relationship between Florio and Shakespeare because there had to have been one. The parallels in the writing, she said, from Shakespeare's use of the compound word form known as hendiadys to the ideas of Montaigne found in the Bard's plays absolutely requires further examination. Would that Professor Yates had done so, but she did not, and virtually no one else chose to examine the relationship between Florio and Shakespeare in the intervening 90 years.

About ten years ago, a new Florio champion appeared—Italian scholar Lamberto Tassinari. He went even further than Yates in his work and began arguing publicly that Florio was in fact the "true" Shakespeare. Born in Italy and since 1981 a resident of Montreal, Tassinari, like Florio, taught Italian language and literature. As well, he founded an intercultural journal called *ViceVersa*. Most people, of course, assume that Florio was born in Italy,



but according to Yates and others, Florio was actually born in England in 1553. His father, Michael Angelo Florio, was born in Italy and later immigrated to England. A man of faith who chose the church for a career, Florio Sr. became fascinated by the ideas of Luther and other Protestant thinkers. Hauled before the Inquisition and jailed for 27 months for his heretical views, he left Rome shortly thereafter and lived for various periods in a variety of northern Italian cities where his views, including supporting polygamy, were more tolerated. Eventually the elder Florio, a skilled linguist, made his way to Switzerland, then to France and ultimately to England where Protestantism was taking hold.

Yates and others write of the numerous immigrant community churches in London in the mid-16th century, particularly with the help of England's new Puritan aristocracy. Robert Dudley as Earl of Leicester personally encouraged several of these foreign churches, as did the young and well-connected William Cecil. Thanks to Cecil in particular, the elder Florio became minister at one of these immigrant churches in about 1550. In early 1553, however, Pastor Florio was charged with fornication with a member of his congregation. When the woman was found to be pregnant, the awkward situation was resolved when Florio Sr. married her. Later that year, a son was born and baptised Giovanni, or John to the English. Though no name comes down to us for John's mother, it is assumed that she was also an Italian immigrant. As a result of this scandal, Michael Angelo Florio lost his pastorate and had to earn a living simply teaching Italian.

By 1556, Protestant politics turned once again in England as Queen Mary was determined to restore Catholicism to the country. For Michael Angelo Florio, his wife and young son, this meant another exile, through France and then back to Switzerland. So, growing up, young John—English by birth but Italian by culture—found himself in a rich multi-lingual environment, one in which he learned to speak Italian as his mother tongue, English as his step-mother tongue, French, German and Latin. When Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558, Protestantism was reinstated and numerous emigres returned. At the age of 13 in 1566, young John Florio found himself back in London but now on his own.

Fluent in five languages, along with Hebrew and a little Greek, Florio parlayed them into a strong teaching career using some of his father's connections. Italy, of course, was perceived as the source of the Renaissance, and anyone who wanted to advance socially had to speak at least modestly proficient Italian. William Cecil was certainly quite fluent, as were Robert Dudley and Elizabeth herself. The young Florio used such connections to work in numerous wealthy homes as an Italian tutor, eventually making his way to Oxford in the employ of one young aristocrat studying there. In Oxford, he met and befriended the poet Samuel Daniel, whose sister he would later

marry. It was also Daniel who would connect Florio to Mary Sidney and the Wilton Circle. It was also at Oxford that Florio would meet the itinerant magus, Copernican philosopher, and religious freethinker Giordano Bruno who, though not a linguist, was obviously pleased to meet another Italian who could translate for him.

Eventually offered a job back in London working as a tri-lingual translator for the French Ambassador (French, English and Italian) and as tutor for the Ambassador's wife and daughter, Florio again comes into the orbit of Bruno. Unable to find a job as a professor in Oxford, Bruno is invited to move into the French Embassy as the Ambassador's resident philosopher and intellectual celebrity. Without much English, Bruno was dependent on the talents of John Florio to act as his interpreter at the many aristocratic homes, where his daring ideas were considered at worst amusing and at best visionary. In fact most English scholars, particularly its churchmen, simply couldn't wait to refute Bruno's notions about the universe, astronomy, astrology, and especially his ideas about Rosicrucianism, an ancient belief system also known as Hermetic philosophy rooted in Egyptian mysticism, man's place in the new Copernican universe, and about free love. In such wide-ranging debates, Bruno, never a diplomat, engaged British scholars with insults and anger. When they returned his verbal abuse, he suggested that the English were ill-educated boors living in Plato's cave. Little wonder that Bruno eventually decided to leave England, ending up back in Italy, where he was burned at the stake after failing to convince the Italian Inquisition that he possessed the true meaning of the Cross.

Florio, however, remained in London, where he flourished in English high society despite agreeing with Bruno that most Englishmen were uncultured and boorish with no real abilities in foreign languages and little patience for foreign customs. Over the next decades, Florio, while also serving as one of Walsingham's many spies, would put together a series of Italian-English dictionaries which included amusing dialogues as examples of how the words could be used in conversation. One such dialogue is between a young man named John (clearly Florio) and a young man about town called Henry (assumed to be Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton). Florio knew the Earl of Southampton and Oxford, Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham, Ben Jonson and the Wilton Circle.

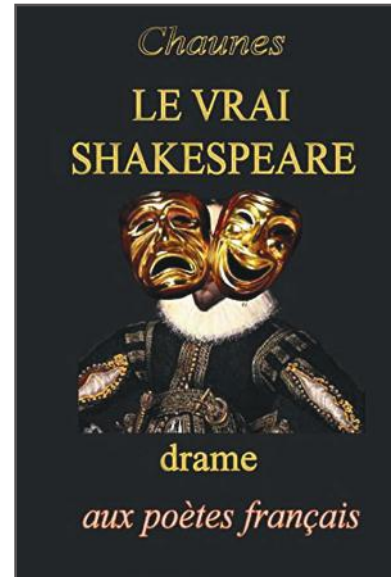
Could Florio have been the real Shakespeare, as Tassinari argues in his 2009 book, *John Florio: The Man Who Was Shakespeare*? Could Florio have been Mr. Anonymous in the Shakespeare Workshop? He had the Italian background that Shakespeare employed in at least a dozen plays. He had the requisite language skills of a Shakespeare and had shown them off in his dictionaries, dialogues and volumes of proverbs translated from Italian to English to French. He clearly had the contacts with the courtly elite.

Indeed, several major papers written in recent years in France have proposed Florio as Shakespeare. A major authorship conference was held this past year at New Sorbonne University, Paris, with Tassinari's 380-page book as the primary research source. Translated into French in 2016 by Michel Väis, a noted theatre critic in Montreal and Secretary-General of the International Association of Theatre Critics, the volume was received warmly by the French press.

And in 2018, a play was written about Florio by a respected and well-known poet-scientist named Jean-Patrick Connerade under his pen name Chaunes. In it, Florio is identified without qualification as the author of the plays of Shakespeare. Entitled *Le vrai Shakespeare* (*The True Shakespeare*) the play, which I have read in French, is dedicated to Lamberto Tassinari, "l'homme par qui Florio est arrivé" (the man through whom Florio has arrived).

Chaunes is not a superficial scholar. He has been awarded the Académie Française's Heredia Prize, the Maison de Poésie's Paul Verlaine Prize and the French Poetry Society's Prix Victor Hugo. In his professional life, he is an internationally decorated astronomer and the author of numerous volumes in science and philosophy. In 2018 he was awarded the World Prize for Humanism.

Le Vrai Shakespeare is itself fiction—a rather old-fashioned five-act play which shows Florio as the leader of a group of spies, including Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe, all working for Sir Francis Walsingham. Their collective goal is to find a way to combat all the pamphlets being published about both the Tudors and the royal succession. Florio suggests they do not write more pamphlets but use the new popular art form of theatre to show the Tudors in a positive light. Walsingham is intrigued by this idea and agrees to it, but only on condition that the identities of the authors be hidden lest the plays be traced back to the crown. Walsingham then proposes that the name of the theatre's playbroker, Shakspere, be used as the author of these plays. The writers finally agree to this plan when they realize that no one would ever believe Shakspere actually wrote the plays because he is illiterate. But they do insist on using a more elegant version of his name: Shake-Speare. The play is a flashback from 1604 when Florio, older and poorer, is living in Fulham. A Danish courtier named Rosenkrants arrives in Fulham looking for



the author of *Hamlet*, whom he says is libeling him, his cousin Guildensterne and the whole Danish court. He wants to stop its performance.

Clearly catching this French poet-astronomer's attention were the philosophical ideas about geo-heliocentrism put forth by the 16th century Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe that had been floating in astrological as well as astronomical circles in the mid-16th century. As Chaunes puts it in a long introduction to the play:

The opposition between a geocentric universe and a heliocentric one... composes one of the grand scientific issues of the period, an issue that specifically dominated the thinking of Italian-born Giordano Bruno, a Copernican who followed Galileo into this huge area.... Among those who actually took note of the Tychonian model was Shakespeare. In *Troilus and Cressida*, using the voice of Ulysses... he proclaimed this model of the universe loudly and strongly...
(Chaunes iii–iv)

Connerade then quotes a speech making reference to “the glorious planet Sol” in Act 1, scene 3 of *Troilus*, and notes that “the exact same unusual phrase ‘planet sol’ appears as well in the dictionary of John Florio, who apparently had also become a Tychonian” (Chaunes iv). Connerade explains that two cousins of Tycho named Rosenkrantz and Guildensterne were received by Queen Elizabeth at court and several courtiers noted they were “exceedingly close.” He asks if the Bard could have heard about the visit of this “apparently homosexual couple, these inseparable cousins at this time?” (Chaunes v)

He asks further if Shakespeare's knowledge of Judaism could “have come from the fact that John Florio's grandfather was a Jewish converso,” helping us to “understand his secret sympathy for both Shylock and the situation of European Jewry” (Chaunes, vi–vii).

Noting the astronomical references in *Julius Caesar* and *Lear*, as well as a reference in Sonnet 14 (“And yet methinks I have astronomy”), Connerade concludes that in Shakespeare's “knowledge of the classical Greek theatre and his free usage of Greek dramatic conventions, one finds core connections between the dramatist and the Man from Fulham, John Florio... the true Shakespeare. To bring this idea to certainty, one must look forward to a time when Florio specialists [like Lamberto Tassinari] will be able to supply the final proofs” (Chaunes xii).

I have issues with Connerade because most of what he argues for Florio can also be argued on behalf of de Vere, who had many opportunities to hear Bruno's theories and who might have attended court for the visit of the Danish delegation.

I must also note several papers I have read from authorship conferences in France over the last three years featuring Florio discussions, and much material that has appeared in French newspapers such as *Le Monde* about him.

My own sense is that Tassinari and Väis are mistaken in their theory that Florio is the author of the plays of Shakespeare. First, those plays must have taken a significant amount of time to write and Florio, not a wealthy man (as Yates tells us and Tassinari acknowledges), needed to earn a regular income from teaching and translating. Any free time would have been directed toward his own English-Italian dictionaries, his books of proverbs and his translation of Montaigne. He, like Queen Elizabeth herself, who has also on occasion been proposed as Shakespeare, could simply not have had the time to write the plays as a sideline.

Second, there is absolutely no evidence that connects Florio to the writing of even a single play. Dialogues were the closest he ever came to writing an actual drama. No one during his life—unlike de Vere—ever stated he was the best for comedies or tragedies or any stage work in fact. He was a writer of tourist dialogues for his dictionaries, dialogues which reveal much about daily life in Tudor England but nothing that comes close to verse, iambic or otherwise.

Finally, Florio, like his friend Ben Jonson and others in the Wilton Circle, was a devout classicist who wrote often of the failures of British dramatists to create what he called “right” tragedies and “right” comedies—plays that followed the classical unities, plays that did not mix genres, plays that did not blend high and low society the way that Shakespeare’s did. Florio would never have created such plays himself because he did not approve of Shakespeare’s looseness of form and mixing of genres. The Wilton Circle argued for elegance, classical style and structure and involved classical-leaning writers who worked in that direction.

Was Florio an influence on Shakespeare? Absolutely. There are too many verbal flourishes in the Florio style, too many words that Florio used in his translations and dialogues or words even *invented* by him not to have had influence on the Bard. Perhaps there was even direct contact with the writer or writers of the “Shakespeare” works given Florio’s closeness to Henry Wriothesley, dedicatee of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*.

That said, there is no evidence that Florio ever had contact of any sort with William of Stratford.

On the other hand, Florio had regular contact with several writers proposed as co-authors of the works by Taylor and Leahy, including the Wilton Circle group and Edward de Vere. Many of these people were freethinkers, and

Florio could certainly have been a connecting link between them. The fact is that, like his father, John Florio was talented at ingratiating himself with the aristocracy and he loved talking to writers about language. And the Wilton Group was certainly the one that he and his good friend Ben Jonson were closest to. Given all this historical reality, I for one would certainly eliminate Florio as the Bard on both biographical and literary grounds.

Conclusions

As for the real identity of the author using the “Shakespeare” pseudonym, I still think that de Vere was the actual core of it all, the final arbiter and the corporate hallmark of the works published under that name. But the research of people like Gary Taylor and open-minded scholars like Bill Leahy is certainly providing convincing evidence that de Vere probably did work closely with many other writers, including some of those named in the new Oxford edition by Taylor and in Leahy’s *My Shakespeare*.

Let me end by saying that I certainly support Leahy’s call for the authorship question to be viewed not so much as the search for a single individual but, rather, as the beginning of a whole new academic field of research, one that will reveal, in the decades ahead—like Brecht and the creation of his plays, like Michelangelo and his art studios, like Yves St. Laurent and his dozens of collegial designers—that at the center of all these great works was the mind of a single genius like Edward de Vere, along with the hands of many others.

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