

- Tassinari, Lamberto. *John Florio. The Man Who Was Shakespeare*. Trans. William McCuaig. Montréal: Giano Books, 2009. Pp 389. ISBN: 10-2981035819.

In 2008, yet another book was added to the plethora of works on the rather popular question of Shakespeare's authorship: Lamberto Tassinari's *Shakespeare? È il nome d' arte di John Florio*. A year later, the book was translated into English and published under the flamboyant title *John Florio. The Man Who Was Shakespeare*. The "mystery" of Shakespeare's authorship was solved once more, and this time the "claimant" of his works was Italian.

Like most of his fellows in the authorship controversy, Tassinari claims, among other things, that Shakespeare could not have written the works attributed to him due to his wanting education. And yet, Tassinari wrote a book about Shakespeare having himself no relevant educational background. As an unqualified writer regarding Shakespearean matters, Tassinari bases his theory on others' findings throughout his book. In fact, the very claim that John Florio was involved in the writing of Shakespeare's works was first introduced several decades ago. As for his particular arguments, Tassinari draws heavily on several monographs, such as Diana Price's *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography* (2001), Clara Longworth de Chambrun's *Giovanni Florio. Un apôtre de la Renaissance en Angleterre à l' époque de Shakespeare* (1921), but mostly Frances Amelia Yates's *John Florio. The Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England* (1934). With the exception of *The Tempest* and maybe one or two more plays, the references to the Shakespearean canon in Tassinari's book are taken from other works, and one wonders to what extent the author is familiar with Shakespeare's work, when he attributes to him characteristics such as aristocratic and royalist (chapter 13), or misogynist (235).

In his introduction, subtitled "The End of a Lie," Tassinari summarizes his theory: John Florio, who was born in London in 1553 but left the city a year or two later to spend his childhood and youth with his father in continental Europe, returned to England some time between the ages of eighteen and twenty; having started his working life as a tutor of the aristocracy and the court, he eventually decided to become a playwright, too, in order to "endow his new, beloved homeland (then a culturally backward place) with a literary oeuvre of supreme quality"; for this work he chose the pseudonym "Shakespeare", which "turned out to coincide phonetically" with the name of William Shakespeare, who "profited from the homophony" (15-16).

Tassinari argues that Florio chose to use a pseudonym for several reasons: he was "a highly visible immigrant, hence envied and hated"; his father Michael Angelo, followed by the Roman Inquisition, decided to live in secrecy (Tassinari does not explain how this relates to John's use of a pseudonym); John, "an 'aristocrat' in sentiment, avoided acknowledging that he had written for the theatre"; and, finally, the writer who had assumed "the

mission of elevating the English language and the culture of England” could not bear a foreign name (16).

According to Tassinari, the “illiterate” “man from Stratford” pirated Florio’s plays, exploiting them on stage and in print (61); however, he seems to have no clue about how the plays ended up in Shakespeare’s hands—and in his hands only. Elsewhere, considering that the name Shakespeare only appears in print in 1598, Tassinari argues that for about ten years Florio circulated his anonymous manuscripts on the theatre market of London (64), but does not explain why Florio decided to use a pseudonym a decade after he started his anonymous career as a playwright. Furthermore, he fails to consider that, if Florio had indeed been involved in the theatre market of the time, he would have known that the name Shakespeare was already in use, and would probably be a bad choice for a pseudonym. As for Ben Jonson, who, according to Tassinari, falsely refers to Shakespeare in his preface to the First Folio, thus establishing the Shakespearean myth, the author does not explain why this friend of both Florio and Shakespeare would betray a still living friend to promote a dead one.

Tassinari argues that there is no proof that Shakespeare wrote the plays and poems attributed to him, ignoring, apart from Jonson’s references to his colleague, a variety of documents that link Shakespeare to literary writing, including the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More*, whose Hand D was positively identified with Shakespeare’s handwriting in a 1990 study by Giles E. Dawson, who compared Hand D to the handwriting of 250 authors of the period (“Shakespeare’s Handwriting,” *Shakespeare Survey* 42: 119-28).

Apart from ignoring evidence, Tassinari presents a series of shaky arguments to prove that Shakespeare did not write the works attributed to him. The Bard’s social and educational backgrounds, two of the chief arguments we find in practically all Anti-Stratfordians, are also found here: Shakespeare was lowly born (and hence ignorant of courtly matters) and never went to university (which means that he could not have written anything so knowledgeable). The same, however, would apply to Ben Jonson, the son of a bricklayer who had no tertiary education either. Moreover, Shakespeare and his colleagues were familiar with the court, their plays often being performed as part of courtly entertainments; as for the learning issue, a wide selection of books on various matters was available at the time to anyone who could read and afford or borrow them.

More particularly, Tassinari argues that Shakespeare displays a deep knowledge of languages, music, the Bible and other matters; however, his examples (mostly drawn from elsewhere) denote, among other things, that Shakespeare’s use of languages is faulty (Florio, as a linguist, would not have made Shakespeare’s mistakes), and his references to music do not include any specific terms. As for the Bible, it was available to anyone. On the other hand, Shakespeare’s works reveal a knowledge of things that Florio had no

contact with, such as theatre technicalities. Moreover, Tassinari does not mention what happened with the plays written in collaboration with other playwrights, such as John Fletcher.

Based on the Bard's multiple references to Italy (which is also the setting of several of his plays), Tassinari argues that the author behind Shakespeare's works is definitely Italian and that the theme of exile in *The Tempest* betrays Florio's own experience. And yet, references to Italy were most common in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays (numerous of which were set in Italy), and so was the theme of exile, a recurrent literary motif since classical times.

Several Shakespearean scholars admit that Shakespeare had access to Florio's work, which could explain similarities between the two authors. On the contrary, several elements in Shakespeare's works indicate a man of the theatre, which was not Florio's case. John Florio was born eleven years before Shakespeare and died nine years after him; in that respect, he might as well have written all of Shakespeare's works, unlike other unfortunate claimants, such as Christopher Marlowe, who died too soon. However, Tassinari does not explain why Florio's supposed activity as a playwright coincided with that of Shakespeare's presence in the theatre industry of the time. Furthermore, he provides no convincing answer to the question of why Florio also used his pen name for his poems (and admits that the dedications of *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* do not resemble those of Florio's other works). Most importantly, though, he does not bother to justify the use of so much bawdy language in a work that was supposed to elevate English culture.

Tassinari never discusses how Florio could have possibly written all these plays (and poems) while working on colossal works (such as his Italian and English dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes* or the translation of Montaigne's *Essais*), as well as being the tutor of several members of the aristocracy and the court. And this is not all. Recently Tassinari came up with another "discovery": apparently, John Florio might also have written Cervantes's *Don Quijote*. One wonders who and what comes next.

XENIA GEORGOPOULOU
Ph.D
Aristotle University
Greece