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**JOHN FLORIO,
TRANSLATOR OF MONTAIGNE'S *ESSAIS***

The Life and Times of John Florio

John Florio (1553-1625),¹ translator and lexicographer, lived during one of the most exciting eras in English history. His life spanned five different monarchies, religious upheaval and the English Renaissance. John (Giovanni) Florio, the son of Michael Angelo Florio, a Protestant preacher who fled religious persecution in Italy, was born in London in 1553. His family was forced once again to flee persecution during the reign of the staunch Catholic, Mary I (1553-1558), and consequently the young Florio received his early education abroad (most likely in France and Switzerland).

It is not certain exactly when John Florio returned to England but by 1576 he was a French and Italian tutor at Oxford. In 1578, his first work, *Firste Fruites*² was published in London. This book, which contained a grammar and 44 Italian-English dialogues, was a "*perfect Introduction to the Italian, and English tongues.*"³ In 1580, at Richard Hakluyt's request, Florio translated Giovanni Battista Ramusio's Italian translation of Jacques Cartier's voyages which was published in English as *A short and Briefe Narration of the Two Navigations and Discoueries to the North-weast Parties called New Fraunce*. Shortly after this publication, Florio matriculated at Magdalen College in 1581.

Little is clear about John Florio's activities between 1582 and 1591. It is known, however, that he was employed at the French embassy in London as a tutor and interpreter from 1583 to 1585. In 1591, *Second Frutes*, consisting of 12 more Italian-English dialogues, was published and to this was added the *Giardino di Ricreatione*, a volume of six

thousand Italian proverbs. Soon thereafter, Florio became an Italian tutor to the Earl of Southampton, who was coincidentally Shakespeare's only patron.

The next decade in Florio's life was particularly notable. Elizabethan England had entered into "a phase of unparalleled fertility and magnificence." 4 Near the end of the century, Florio was a familiar figure in London's literary circle and had several influential friends and patrons, including the Earl of Pembroke and the Earl and Countess of Rutland. In 1598, Florio's Italian-English dictionary *A Worlde of Wordes* was published. It contained roughly 46 000 definitions and 72 works cited and was one of the first of its kind in England. The translation from French of *The Essays Or Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses of Lo: Michaell de Montaigne*, published in 1603, was by far Florio's greatest work. Not only did it make Montaigne's ideas available to a large number of unilingual readers in England, but it enriched the English language as well. That same year, Elizabeth I died and James I of England ascended to the throne. Upon Sir Robert Cecil's suggestion, Florio was appointed reader in Italian (and later private secretary) to Queen Anne of Denmark. In 1604 he became one of her Grooms of the Privy Chamber, a position he held until her death in 1619.

The second edition of his dictionary was published under the title *Queen Anna's New World of Words* in 1611. This enlarged edition contained 74 000 definitions and 249 works cited; in fact, "[it] is not merely a word-list but an epitome of the general knowledge of the period. To contemporaries its author must have appeared as a walking encyclopedia...."5 Florio's revised edition of Montaigne's essays appeared in 1613, this would be the last work he ever published, although he continued to work on a third edition to his dictionary until his death.

After Queen Anne's death, Florio retired from court and lived the last years of his life in poverty with his wife in Fulham. It seems that Florio did not ever receive a cent of his pension for the years spent at James' court because of the "stupid wastefulness and carelessness of

James...."6 The last existing record of John Florio is the appearance of his name in the 'Parish of Fulham, Poor Rate and Churchwardens Accounts' dated October 12, 1625. His wife's name appears in it on April 26, 1626 as John Florio's widow. The dreaded plague had visited Fulham in the fall of 1625 and it is assumed Florio succumbed to it. "So ended in the first year of Charles I this life begun in the reign of Edward VI."7

John Florio's England

In order to fully appreciate John Florio's method of translating and the impact his work had on his contemporaries and the world, it is important to discuss the political, religious and social circumstances of the era in which he lived. Sixteenth-century England was an exciting and dangerous time to be living. Indeed some of the most famous events in English history were playing themselves out during Florio's life. For instance, religious affiliation was of utmost importance in Tudor England and throughout Europe. The Reformation on the Continent fuelled by such people as Luther and Calvin spilled over into England where religious tolerance took on a new meaning with each new monarch. Protestants fleeing persecution across Europe flocked to England during the reign of Henry VIII and Edward VI only to find themselves outlawed almost overnight with the coming to power of Bloody Mary. Elizabeth I then restored Protestantism in England only five years later. The constant changing of religious policy caused a mass influx of people of all nationalities to England and thus "made the learning of modern languages more of a necessity than it had been in the past."8 Consequently, textbooks and dictionaries like Florio's were in high demand in Elizabethan England.

In fact, Elizabethan England marked the coming together of many essential factors in an equation that resulted in a flowering of the arts as never before seen in England. Relative peace and security, the humanist

movement, the lifting of the Catholic doctrine and the Renaissance flourishing of the vernaculars all contributed to "the rediscovery of man by himself"⁹ and to experimentation in new literary genres to embody the revolutionary ideas being born. The stage was thus set when, through his translation, Florio introduced the thoughts of Michel de Montaigne to England:

every phase of [Montaigne's] broad philosophy struck some responsive note in England. The sane penetration of his scepticism was what her thinkers wanted, since it cleared their fevered minds and lifted from them the oppression of medieval authority.¹⁰

Translation was a tool used by many to spread the ideas circulating in Europe around England and as F.A. Yates points out: "Translation as an art has rarely, perhaps never, reached such a high level as in the Elizabethan age...."¹¹ However, it was by no means an art accepted by everyone. Opposition to translation stemmed from "the medievalism still firmly entrenched at the universities [and the fear] that the spread of pagan writings in the vernacular would subvert Christian morality."¹² Florio, who was well aware that Montaigne's pagan ideals would meet with criticism, deemed it necessary to explain in the preface to the translation that, being a Christian, he disagreed with some of Montaigne's views. In fact, Florio's opinions, personality and nationality are visible throughout his translation.

Florio's Style of Translation

Although John Florio translated works other than Montaigne's *Essays*, this translation is by far the most studied of all, and as such it will be the basis from which his style is demonstrated. Florio's translation reflects

several important movements that were characteristic of the English Renaissance. First, since the mid-sixteenth century, English translators had been expressing "dissatisfaction with the language."¹³ In fact, in his work *Firste Fruites*, Florio deplors the number of borrowings into the English language:

It doth not like me at al, because it is a language confused, bepeesed with many tongues: it taketh many words of the latine, & mo from the French, & mo from the Italian, and many mo from the Dutch, some also from the Greeke & from the Britaine, so that if every language had his owne wordes againe, there would but fewe remaine for Englishmen, and yet every day he adde. Take a book and reade, but marke well, and you shall not reade foure woordes together of true English.¹⁴

Bearing in mind this opinion, it is easy to explain Florio's voluptuous approach to translating. In fact, his style can be summed up in one word: elaborate. He used several different methods of elaboration when translating Montaigne. It appears that Florio "shared the Elizabethan desire for energy and movement and [this] caused him to heap up words."¹⁵ For example, very often he would render a single word of Montaigne by two or three words in English:

Les armoiries n'ont de seurté non plus que les surnoms
Crests, Armes, and Coats have no more certaintie than surnames.¹⁶

Florio also loved to use compounds, and his enthusiasm for them reflects the popular Elizabethan method of adding of words without contributing to meaning. For example, "L'âme pleine" is rendered as "a mind full-fraught" and the simple "d'une voix tremblante" becomes "with a faint-trembling voyce and selfe-accusing looke."¹⁷ Undoubtedly, Florio's liberal practise of doubling was to create a

rhythmic balance between two polar entities in a phrase:

les rende non froids amis seulement, mais ennemis.
not only prove *faint and* cold friends, but *cruell and sharpe*
enemies.18

Frequently, he did not restrict his doubling to the word level, but would add a whole new phrase to Montaigne's original:

Il en est mille qui rompent au port.
Thousands miscary in the haven, *and are cast away, being nearest*
home.19

...dans la fleur de son croist...
...in the *flowre of his growth*, and *spring of his youth*...20

His additions allowed him room to create alliterations that would have otherwise not been possible.

Les dix mille Grecs, en leur longue et fameuse retraite...
The ten thousand Graecians in their long-lingering, and farre-famous
retreat...21

Les uns exercent le corps pour en acquerir la gloire des jeux; d'autres
y portent
des marchandises à vendre pour le gain.
...some to get the glorie, and to win the goale of the games, exercise
their bodies
with all industrie; others for greedinesse of gaine, bring thither
merchandise to
sell...22

Florio's wealth of words is remarkable, especially considering that

neither of the two languages he worked with, in this translation, were his mother tongue. As F.A. Yates observed: "It is easy to see how his work on the dictionary which stocked his mind with groups of English synonyms had done its part in preparing him for the translation."²³ Furthermore, the skillful rendering of Montaigne's proverbs reveals the translator's previous work with this type of expression. He was very adept at finding English proverbs for French ones:

d'avoir trouvé la fève au gasteau

to have hit the naile on the head, or to have found out the beane of this Cake²⁴

In fact, Florio valued proverbial expressions to such an extent that he would often slip them in when there was no call for them in the French. For example, "en voyla assez" is rendered "we have harped long enough on one string" and "plus au large" becomes "where they might have more elbow-roome."²⁵

Florio's "passionate delight in words"²⁶ made him a master at the elaborate creation of beautiful images, pleasing rhythmic patterns and witty proverbs in English. While this reflected the popular literary style in the early seventeenth century in England, both F.A. Yates and F.O. Matthiessen find it ill-suited to Montaigne's logical, economical, simple, elegant use of language. Moreover, F. A. Yates remarks:

It is somewhat ironical that Montaigne, who was one of the first great writers in a modern tongue to write in a modern manner, using words simply as the exact clothing of his thought and relying for beauty of style solely upon the aptness of the word to the thought and upon emotional rhythm, should have had as his translator one to whom elaborate rhetorical word-pattern was an instinctive necessity and a habit deeply ingrained by long training.²⁷

Similarly, F. O. Matthiessen suggests that "Florio's flowing style can

completely obscure a vivid point."²⁸ But Florio's inability to be simple was not his only fault. In fact, the translation contains numerous mistakes of all types. Beside his chaotic punctuation there are spelling mistakes such as "moneth" for mouth (*bouche*), "light" for night (*nuict*),²⁹ some of which can be blamed on the English printer or the errors in Florio's copy of the French. However, there are many errors that cannot be accounted for by blaming the printer and as F. O. Matthiessen writes: "it becomes evident that the translator wrote at full speed, with little reflection, and no reconsideration of his result."³⁰ For instance, Florio rarely translates numbers exactly:

...après *quinze ou seize* ans

...after he hath there spent *ten or twelve* years³¹

Je me mariay à trente trois ans...

I was married at thirty yeares of age...³²

This numerical inaccuracy may not seem too serious except in the latter case where Montaigne is referring to himself. Sometimes Florio's errors are of the most elementary nature and they produce an unintentionally humorous effect:

...à qui le *poisson* seroit plus appetissant que la chair

He to whom *poison* should be more healthy than meat.³³

At other times, he falls into the trap of less experienced translators and renders the French too literally:

Il me sembloit que ma vie ne me tenoit plus qu'au bout des lèvres

Me thought, my selfe had no other hold of me, but of my lips-ends.³⁴

The result of this is, of course, utter nonsense. Examining Florio's inaccuracies and overflowing sentences may suggest that his translation

was terribly confusing but this was not the case. In fact, his contemporaries were not bothered by his errors or his style "for Florio gave them the *Essays* in a form they were accustomed to and liked."³⁵

This brings us to the second important movement of the English Renaissance, namely, the sense of patriotism that was manifest in Elizabethan writing. Not only does Florio's desire to improve the English language reveal the profoundness of his patriotism but so too does the liberty he took when translating to make the *Essays* welcome in England. Indeed, "native customs and usages, and a strong national feeling, color every line."³⁶ For example, Florio continually strove to create equivalents in English for French realities that might have been unfamiliar to his English readers. Therefore "les Basques et les Troglodytes" became "the Cornish, the Welch, or Irish,"³⁷ "une harangere de Petit pont" was rendered by "any Oyster-wife about the streets."³⁸ Likewise, a French agricultural reality "vigne" became English with "farme"³⁹ and the French occupation "un vigneron" was substituted with its English counterpart "a ploughman."⁴⁰ Florio's slight, yet effective changes plunged the reader into the depths of Elizabethan England. F. A. Yates poignantly remarks:

"How evocative of the London atmosphere is "the common-rabble of Scriblers and blur-papers which now adayes stuffe Stationers shops" for "la tourbe des escrivailleurs!"⁴¹

The more Florio's literary and national transformations come to light the more it is evident that "Florio created an Elizabethan book."⁴² However, Florio did not just simply change the surface features of Montaigne, he saw his translation as an opportunity to influence the minds of his readers.

Florio very much wanted his book to be read by everyone, not by scholars and nobles alone. To make his translation accessible to the largest number of readers, he took it upon himself to be as explicit as possible by either pairing unknown words with English ones,

("sorcelleries" is doubled as "sorceries and witchcrafts"⁴³), or by incorporating explanatory notes into his translation: "Diaphragma, which is a membrane lying overthwart the lower part of the breast, separating the heart and lights from the stomache."⁴⁴ Ironically, he sometimes defined terms that did not even appear in Montaigne's original!

He took his educative role quite seriously, however, and frequently felt that it was his moral duty, as a Protestant, to insert his own opinions. It is here, that the third movement of the English Renaissance, the role of religion in English writing, is demonstrated by John Florio. F. O. Matthiessen explains that, "often under the guise of dispensing information, Florio appears really to be stating his own views, or instructing the reader in what the cultivated man should think."⁴⁵ This is evidenced by such transformations as "les erreurs de Wiclef" into "Wickliff's opinions"⁴⁶ or "Ces deux qui conspirent la mort du roi d'Oreng" into "those two *villaines* that conspired the death of the Prince of Orange"⁴⁷ where Florio's politico-religious bias is clear. Furthermore, "there is a certain Puritanical bitterness, not present in the French."⁴⁸ For example, when Montaigne describes a woman "vestue en garce, coiffée d'un attiffet emperlé," Florio is quick to display his disgust with women of her sort: "*disguised and* drest about the head like *unto an impudent harlot, with embroyderies, frizelings, and carcanets of pearls.*"⁴⁹ In yet another example, Florio's scholarly contempt for popular reading is visible in his translation of "tels fatras de livres" as "such idle time consuming and wit-besotting trash of bookes"⁵⁰ And finally, at other times, it becomes obvious that Florio wished to "tone his book to English ears."⁵¹ On a few occasions he replaced a crass word with a dash or 'etc' and in others he reverted to a euphemistic approach to translating as in the rendering of "Ils en montrent d'autant plus le cul, qu'ils esperent en hausser la teste..." by "By how much more they hoped to raise their head, so much more do they show their simplicity."⁵²

Whether by embracing the Elizabethan literary style of voluptuous

and rhythmical writing, or by substituting Montaigne's references to everyday life in France with English realities, or by colouring the passages with his own opinions, "Florio [created] a Montaigne who [was] an actual Elizabethan figure."⁵³ So complete was his anglicizing of Montaigne that he created the illusion that the book was "originally written in English for English readers."⁵⁴ It can certainly be concluded therefore that Florio applied his own style to Montaigne to the point that "he [was] no longer translating, but envisaging the scene anew."⁵⁵

The Impact of John Florio's *Montaigne*

Florio's publication of *The Essays of Montaigne* had an immediate effect on his contemporaries. It became clear, by references to Florio and to Montaigne in the writings of Ben Johnson, Sir Walter Raleigh and Shakespeare, that Florio's *Montaigne* had reached the mind and emotions of England."⁵⁶ For example, the popularity of Florio's translation is revealed in the play *Volpone* (1605) by Ben Johnson when one of his characters says:

All our English writers,
I mean such as are happy in the Italian,
Will deign to steal out of this author, mainly;
Almost as much as from Montaigne.⁵⁷

Sir Walter Raleigh was also influenced by Florio's translation. According to F. O. Matthiessen, he took a copy of it to the Tower, where he wrote an essay called "The Skeptick" which closely parallels an essay of Montaigne's entitled "Apology for Raymond Sebond."⁵⁸

Shakespeare's reaction to Florio's Montaigne has been studied in depth. The animosity between the Italian and the playwright has been well documented. Florio's disdain for social inferiors is clear when he "joined issue with the 'university pens' against Shakespeare"⁵⁹ and wrote the following passage in his *Second Frutes*:

Be circumspect how you offend schollers, for knowe,

A serpents tooth bites not so ill,
As dooth a schollers angrie quill.⁶⁰

Shakespeare, who according to A. Acheson, "distrusted Florio from the beginning of his acquaintance"⁶¹ reacted to Florio by exposing him to ridicule in a most effective way; he used Florio as an original for several of his characters. Exactly which characters were based on Florio is still debatable but various scholars have reason to believe that there are allusions to Florio in characters such as Sir John Falstaff, Parolles, Armando, and Holofernes. What has been more concretely proven is the resemblance between Montaigne's essay "Of the Caniballes" and a passage from the second act of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.⁶² Mr. G.C. Taylor,⁶³ in his book *Shakspeare's Debt to Montaigne*, has listed 750 words found in Florio's translation and in Shakespeare's plays that do not appear in any of his plays written before 1603. Of these words, around 20 had been introduced into English by Florio. "He does not claim that Shakespeare took all these seven hundred and fifty words from Florio, but he urges that the coincidence of this expansion in Shakespeare's vocabulary [...] is significant."⁶⁴

The impact of Florio's translation did not end with his era, many of his words, that appeared for the first time in English, are still in use today. For example, words such as, "entraîne, conscientious, endeare, tarnish, comporte, efface, facilitate, amusing, debauching, regret, effort, and emotion"⁶⁵ passed into English because Florio decided that his language "well may beare them."⁶⁶ Florio was also the first writer to make use of the genitive neuter pronoun 'its'. The English language was at a very impressionable stage in Florio's time and F. A. Yates suggests that it is difficult to measure "how much the rich treasure of our tongue owes to this Italian [who worked] with the artistic virtuosity which was his inheritance from an older civilization."⁶⁷

Finally, in addition to the words Florio left us, his works remain a testimony to the literary style, politico-religious attitudes and the everyday life of England at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Notes

1. There remains some dispute as to the year in which John Florio was born. F.A.Yates mentions that Anthony Wood believes the date of Florio's birth to be 1545, which is most likely based on The Oxford Matriculation Register which states that Florio was 36 in 1581. A. Acheson believes Wood to be correct simply because he thought Florio was vain enough to lie about his age. F.A.Yates presents a more sound argument when he explains that the Oxford Matriculation Register was probably incorrect because Florio's age was given on his portrait as 58 in 1611 and that he made a statement in 1623 that he was 70. Both of these references make his birth year 1553.

2. The spelling of Florio's work *Firste Fruites* is represented differently in various books. It has been spelt 'First Fruites' by Acheson, and 'First Fruits' by F.A.Yates in the text of his book. The spelling adopted in this paper is that of F.O. Matthiessen which probably represents the original because it is found in a quote of Florio's dedication of the book. Additionally, the bibliography of Florio's works in Yates' book corroborates this spelling. Furthermore, the spelling of Florio's other works in this paper are based on these two authorities.

3. F. O. Matthiessen, *Translation: An Elizabethan Art*, p. 109.

4. F. A. Yates, *John Florio*, p.124.

5. *Ibid.*, 273.

6. *Ibid.*, 298.

7. *Ibid.*, 318.

8. *Ibid.*, 139.
9. Matthiessen, op. cit. p.105.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Yates, op. cit. p. 239.
12. *Ibid.*, 223.
13. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 118.
14. F.O. Matthiessen, *Translation: An Elizabethan Art*. p. 119. Quoting Florio, John. *Firste Fruites*. 1578.
15. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 125.
16. F.A. Yates, *John Florio*. p. 228. Quoting Florio. *Montaigne's Essays*, John Florio's translation. Stewart, J.I.M., ed. London: The Nonesuch Press, 1931. (There is no mention of the edition of the French *Essays* used by Yates.)
17. F.O. Matthiessen, *Translation: An Elizabethan Art*. p. 125. Quoting Montaigne. *Les Essais*, ed. E. Courbet and Ch. Royer (Paris, 1872) and Florio. *Montaigne*, Tudor Translations, ed. G. Saintsbury (London, 1892).
18. *Ibid.*, 126
19. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 229.

20. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 231.
21. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 233.
22. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 230.
23. Yates, op. cit. p. 229.
24. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 127.
25. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 234.
26. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 121.
27. Yates, op. cit. p. 227.
28. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 127.
29. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 131.
30. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 131.
31. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 132.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 133.
34. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 238.
35. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 129-130.
36. Matthiessen, op. cit. p.154.

37. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 154.
38. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 153.
39. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 237.
40. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 153.
41. Yates, op. cit. p. 237.
42. Matthiessen, op. cit. p.155.
43. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 128.
44. Matthiessen quoting Florio, op. cit. p. 135.
45. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 137.
46. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 234.
47. Yates quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 234.
48. Yates, op. cit. p. 234.
49. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 139.
50. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 154.
51. Matthiessen quoting Florio and Montaigne, op. cit. p. 140.
52. *Ibid.*
53. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 141.

54. Yates, op. cit. p. 237.

55. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 147.

56. Matthiessen, op. cit. p. 158.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 160.

59. A. Acheson, *Shakespeare's Lost Years in London*, p. 91.

60. Yates, op. cit. p. 334 quoting Florio, John. *Second Frutes*, 1591.

61. Acheson, op. cit. p. 187.

62. Yates, op. cit. p. 234:

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Act II, sc. i.

I' the commonwealth I would by contraries

Execute all things; for no kind of traffic

Would I admit; no name of magistrate;

Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,

And use of service, none; contract, succession,

Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;

No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;

No occupation; all men idle, all;

And women too, but innocent and pure...

Florio's Of the Caniballes:

It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that hath no kinde of traffike, no knowledge

of Letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of

politike
superioritie; no use of service, of riches or of povertie; no contracts, no
successions, no partitions, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred,
but
common, no apparell but naturall, no manuring of landes, no use of
wine, corne,
or meetle.

63. Matthiessen gives Taylor's book in a footnote:

Taylor, G. C., *Shakspeare's Debt to Montaigne*, Harvard University
Press, 1925.

64. Yates, op. cit. p. 245.

65. Yates, op. cit. p. 227.

66. Matthiessen quoting Florio, op. cit. p. 120.

67. Yates, op. cit. p. 227.

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