A passage from a lost play

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Abstract
Essay on ms. annotations in the Kislak Center's copy of Florio's *First Fruits* (1578).

Keywords
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[Ed. note: Today’s post is by Andrew S. Keener, a Ph.D. Candidate in the English Department at Northwestern University who recently spent time researching in our collections]

“Doo Comedies like you wel?” asks a speaker on the first page of John Florio’s bilingual conversation guide First Fruits (1578). Such a question is hardly out of place among this book’s two-columned Italian and English dialogues, which scholars from time to time have labeled as “theatrical” or “dramatic.” Indeed, critics have often located Florio, a language instructor, translator, and lexicographer, in relation to the world of Renaissance drama. One tradition, for instance, holds that William Shakespeare fashioned Florio into the pedantic Holofernes for his comedy Love’s Labour’s Lost; according to Frances Yates, this character “spoke in a way which the audience would recognize as Florio’s very voice and manner”[1].

The Holofernes connection remains speculative, but the more we know about surviving copies of books like First Fruits, the more we might learn about the connections between these supposedly “theatrical” language-learning dialogues and works of early modern drama. To this point, an annotated copy of Florio’s book at the University of Pennsylvania’s Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts features an early reader’s handwritten transcription...
of a prologue from a seventeenth-century play. In striking terms, the speaker reprimands an antsy audience before the play begins:
Transcribed for legibility, the text reads:

“You who sitting heare, do stand
To see our play, which must this
Night, be acted heare to day –
Be silent, pray, tho: you allowd
Do tallke, sture not a jott, tho vp
And down you walke, for every silent
Noyes the players see, will make them
Mute & speake: full angerly, o tarry
Heare vntill you doe departe,
Gent[i]e your smileing frowns
Do vs impart, and then wee
Most thankless, than[k]fulle will
Apeare, and waite vpon you
Home, but yett stay heare”

Intriguingly, this prologue belongs to a lost play, and it does not seem possible to identify the work of drama at all, by title, playwright, or company. However, this passage does appear elsewhere in seventeenth-century print. "Comfortably inside books of poetry and miscellanies, 'severed' prologues find a new life as 'poems' amongst other poems, or as jests amongst other jests," states Tiffany Stern, who refers specifically to this case[2]. To name just two examples, The Booke of Bulls (1636) situates this prologue under the header "A Bull Prologu [sic], to a foolish audience," while a volume entitled VVit and drollery (1656) includes the passage simply as "A Bull Prologue."

Penn’s copy of First Fruits features a fascinating, and previously unknown, manuscript witness to this lost play’s prologue (including a textual variant that seems to appear nowhere else in print, “tarry”). We can also attribute the
inscriptions with confidence to Richard Parsons (1641/2 – 1711), an ecclesiastical judge and antiquary who signs his name in the same hand elsewhere in the volume. Known as a cantankerous suppressor of dissent, perhaps Parsons found something appealing in this prologue’s censorious language. Could he have brought First Fruits with him to the theater, copying down the verses as he heard them, or shortly thereafter? What makes Florio’s book a good place to record a dramatic prologue? How does this dramatic extract square with Parsons’s other inscriptions, both on this page and elsewhere in the book? Clearly, the Penn copy of First Fruits poses a number of questions. Whatever the answers, the book encourages us to consider the ways in which language-learning dialogues mingled with drama in a broad economy of seventeenth-century language and literature.

[Ed. note: This post has been updated from its initial publication of June 1]

[Author’s note: An earlier version of this post incorrectly linked this prologue to John Tatham’s The Whisperer. Like Tatham’s prologue, the one in question here belongs to a lost play, seems to have been acted at the Red Bull, and surfaced later on in verse miscellanies, but its completely unknown origins render Penn’s copy of First Fruits all the more mysterious and fascinating.]


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