

The origin of De Vere's Contribution to the English Language: The French Connection

The enrichment of our English Language by Edward de Vere is astonishing. His appropriation of words from Latin, French, etc. mark the beginning of the methodical introductions that have made English the Lingua Franca of scientific and technical advance. Careful study of de Vere's wordplay shows he perceived words as so many flexible etymologic syllables or elements, rather than unities restricted to standard usage. Further, he imported to England Renaissance innovations in dramatic and literary forms that broadened international and classical influences to what had been the provincial character of English Literature. **This was a rare and daring feat, particularly if you sense the near isolation in which 'Shake-speare' would have had to write to leave no trail of letters among like-minded linguistic revolutionaries.** Perhaps an untutored genius might achieve this; but let me frame the story a little differently.

To begin, many cultures that have grown self-aware fret that other cultures are, or once were, finer. Quintilian deplored the excess ornament of Augustan Latin and leaned backward to the elegance of Cicero, who leaned backward to the 'brevitas' of Demosthenes' Greek. Similarly, Sperone degli Speroni, in his *Diálogo de la Lengua*, approved of Dante's and Petrarch's efforts to improve the 14th century Italian vernacular with an eye to Latin models. Frenchman Joachim du Balley extended Speroni's argument with his *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française 1548*, which, according to Ignacio Navarette, suggested:

“... a conception of literature as a supersystem involving both the classical literatures and the vernaculars, and the enrichment of the vernacular by the adoption of classical genres.” *Strategies of Appropriation in Speroni and Du Balley*, *Comparative Literature*, V.41, No.2, 1989

This work lamented the (then 1548) inadequacy of the French language for the full range of poetic expression, and encouraged its systematic improvement by the appropriation of classical examples. Without servility, du Balley encouraged “intercanonic plundering” whereby Latin words might be adopted, Latin grammar emulated, and classical genres adapted to vernacular French. The *Défense* became the defining essay of the group of French poets known as ‘the Brigade’, or ‘La Pléiade’: chiefly Pierre Ronsard, du Balley, and Jean Antoine de Baïf. It is useful to note that ‘La Pleiade’ was a humanist group—spiritual descendants of Erasmus and Marguerite of Navarre, preferring reform from within the Catholic Church to schism.

‘La Pléiade’ was a loose affiliation with a nominal membership of seven, but there were many associates and adherents. Two associates of particular note, Nicholas Denisot 1515-59 and Charles Utenhove, will interest us here. Nicholas was a tutor of French language who quietly advertised his sympathy with Protestant reforms and sought employment in England. He was hired by the Lord Protector Edward Seymour and his wife Anne *née Stanhope* to help educate their children. He made a remarkable success of the Seymour's daughters, Anne, Margaret, and Jane, whose poetical works were circulated about the literary communities of Europe. This would place du Balley's *Défense* within arm's length of young de Vere, who was allied with his first cousin (the Seymour girl's younger brother) Lord Edward Seymour 1548-74, in the early 1570's. What fascinates about Denisot and ‘La Périade’ is their moonlighting; several are known to have engaged in espionage for the French King while ostensibly tutoring—Denisot is credited with the plan by which Francis, Duc de Guise, captured Calais from the English in 1558 *Margaret of France, Duchess of Savoy 1523-74*, Winifred Stephens, 1911.

Like Denisot, Charles Utenhove was another infiltrator of influential English families and a tutor and promoter of precocious young women. His most famous student was the poetess Camille Morel, whose parent's literary salons were closely associated with du Balley and Ronsard. He urged communication between Camille and Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley, and he “include[d] copies of Camille's poems in a manuscript collection that he presented to William Cecil”. “One of Camille's compositions was included in a collection of poems... to commemorate” Queen Elizabeth's visit to Cambridge University in 1564 *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters*, Julie D. Campbell, Anne R. Larsen. It is difficult to determine Utenhove's authority in his extensive embassies of 1567-8; but he is known to have attempted to persuade William Cecil of the benefits (to England) of assisting William of Orange in the Low Countries, and to have travelled in the company of Thomas Radclyffe, 3rd Earl of Sussex 1525-83, both, of course,

key figures in de Vere's life. While he seems to have been a trusted agent by Protestants, his intimacy with Catholic sympathizers like Ronsard, Denisot, and Radclyffe, advises ambiguity or uncertainty.

From these connections I suggest the likelihood that Anne Cecil, de Vere's wife to be, and indeed Oxford and Rutland, must certainly have known the *Défense*, and that, with a self-conscious sense of the inferiority of vernacular English to French, Italian, and Latin, de Vere might well appropriate for himself an established ethos for what would become his singular achievement.

Pierre Ronsard, chief of the Pléiade Poets, continued as an agent of the French Monarchy as late as 1581 when he received £2000 from Mary Stuart *Queen of Scots* ostensibly for having dedicated a book of poetry to her. This surely was a transfer of funds to assist Ronsard in facilitating a joint Scottish, French, and Spanish military force that planned to 'spring' her from prison.

Therefore the influence of 'La Pléiade' poets was profound, yet an (almost) incidental effect of political intrigues of the Reformation. While scholars generally regard Shakespeare's achievements as borrowings and derivations, Oxfordians often make a 'fountainhead' of him. This 'French Connection' with du Balley, Ronsard et al, robs from de Vere some intellectual property rights, yet confirms the obvious rationale for his extraordinary literary invention... or appropriation, if you will.