

Shakespeare's Knowledge of French

By Eddi Jolly

Recently I was forwarded a string of emails in which one of the correspondents wrote that Shakespeare didn't know French.

However, a range of scholars who have examined different aspects of the plays have discovered borrowings from French sources, and apparent allusions to French personages and events, and, of course, the plays include French phrases and occasional exchanges in French.

Let us consider a few of the proposed literary borrowings. In the *Memoires* of Queen Marguerite de Valois there is the tragic story of a young girl at court who dies for love and grief. A young lord, living in the same household, falls in love with this young woman. Their love is thwarted by family objections; the young girl has a domineering parent. Her lover then turns cruel and rejects her. She tries to hide her distress, but then breaks down, and dies within days, mourned by a queen. Her lover returns, and comes across her funeral procession. The coffin is strewn with flowers. He wonders whose funeral it is, and then realises it is his beloved's. It sounds familiar, though the participants are not Ophelia and Hamlet, but Helene de Tournon and the Marquis de Varenbon.

Or consider Frances Yates, writing about *Love's Labour's Lost*.

'Everyone is agreed that *Love's Labour's Lost* is one of the most topical of all Shakespeare's plays, that it bristles throughout with allusions to contemporary events...¹

Perhaps the academy in the play reflects that run under Charles IX, or his brother and successor Henri III, namely *l'académie du Palais*, the Palace academy. Perhaps it reflects the one in the south of France, in the kingdom of Navarre, modelled on the Parisian one. Or perhaps the play

is based upon Pierre de la Primaudaye's book, *L'Académie Française*. It was published in French in 1577, and translated into English by 1586.² It tells of a little academy of four young men from Anjou, placed under the tuition of a master to learn Latin and Greek and the moral philosophy of ancient sages and wise men.³ The little academy that de la Primaudaye wrote about may or may not have existed, but Thomas Bowes' English translation of *L'Académie Française* in 1586 is useful for scholars who are source-hunting, and it may have been Shakespeare's source for the idea of an academy of four gentlemen.

The King of Navarre's contemporaries included the Maréchal de Biron; father and son held that title. The name resembles Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*. It seems likely to be the son, Charles de Gontaut, who is alluded to here. Another contemporary was the Duc de Mayenne, at one point an opponent of the King of Navarre but later a valuable supporter. The latest Arden editor, Woudhuysen, sees him as the source for the name Dumaine.⁴ However, writing in 1981 on the influence of French culture upon Shakespeare's plays, Hugh Richmond considers the Maréchal d'Aumont to be a more likely model for Dumaine,⁵ in the play. Both names resemble Dumaine, given to another of the three men in the King's academy in *Love's Labour's Lost*. A third contemporary was Henri d'Orléans, Duc de Longueville, whom scholars identify with Longaville in the play.

In act I scene i of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the King of Navarre, Berowne, Dumaine, and Longaville all allude to Frenchmen in the 1580s.⁶

Other historical figures include Marcadé and Boyet, names found in contemporary French records.⁷ Antoine Boyet was a treasurer to the French King. We might also note Bertrand de Salignac Fénélon, seigneur de la Mothe, who was the French ambassador in England in 1568-75.

Or we could just turn to *Henry V* which, apart from some French lines for the soldiers, also has an entertaining scene between Katherine

and her maid, Alice, where the latter teaches the former some French. The subject is parts of the body, so Katherine learns ‘de sin’, ‘de fingres’, ‘de mails’ and ‘de bilbow’ which gives us a hint of a French accent and is probably not so different from a French vocabulary lesson even today. The play demonstrates a clear knowledge of vernacular French too, with its sideways glance at ‘baiser’, a verb one needs to be careful with. And in *1 Henry VI* there is its hero, Talbot, the terror of the French, and an man laden with titles. Boswell-Stone quotes from the tomb in Rouen Cathedral where Talbot was buried; it gives him fifteen titles. The playwright gives him fourteen of those, in the same order.⁸

It isn’t necessary to offer the same level of detail for the many French sources the playwright drew upon. Stuart Gillespie and Geoffrey Bullough offer different overviews of the ‘narrative and dramatic sources’ of Shakespeare. For example, both see Etienne (Estienne: Bullough) Jodell as a source for *Antony and Cleopatra*.⁹ Both suggest Jean Créton, as a source for *Richard II*,¹⁰ just as they also both suggest Jean Froissart for the same play,¹¹ Shakespeare even helpfully cites Froissart in *1 Henry VI*.

Gillespie’s book lists sources in alphabetical order: Bullough’s eight volumes discuss sources and often provides extracts from them. Robert Miola’s book, *Shakespeare’s Reading*, discusses the breadth of his reading, much as Kenneth Muir’s book did thirty years earlier. Each of these four scholars makes comments about Shakespeare’s knowledge of French.

Thus, Muir writes:

Of modern languages Shakespeare acquired some knowledge of French... He could certainly read French... He had lodged with a French family...¹²

This brings together both Muir’s assertion that the playwright knew French, and also a cross reference to one of the facts of his life, his

(Shakspere's) lodging with a French family in London. Might that have been how he learnt French?

Miola writes:

'Shakespeare's library certainly contained books in French... The poet read... a French conversation manual, and perhaps works by Boaistuau and Belleforest'.¹³

Miola's reference to Shakespeare's library is enticing. The will of William Shaksper (as his name seems to appear upon the will) runs to three pages, over a thousand words, and no mention of any book, whether a bible, texts of any poems or plays, or any sources. The absence of books is a marked feature of the will. No inventory which might have defined the 'goodes chattels' and 'householde stuffe' mentioned in his will is known to exist. More fascinating is Miola's reference to Belleforest, whose translation of the story of Amlethus (Latin) into French (Amleth) is the source for *Hamlet*. The play makes more than fifty allusions to characters, events or words and phrases in Belleforest's *Les Histoires Tragiques*, but currently it is Thomas Kyd who is often credited with the first English *Hamlet*. J.R. Mulryne, editor of *The Spanish Tragedy* by Kyd, and also the writer of the *Dictionary of National Biography*'s entry for Kyd, tells us Kyd learnt French and Italian at the Merchant Taylor School, run by the enlightened Richard Mulcaster who understood the value of modern languages. It would be very useful to show that Kyd definitely was or was not the author of the hypothetical *Ur-Hamlet*, because scholars need to explain how it is that one of the plays, *Hamlet*, is undoubtedly rooted in a French source.

Gillespie comments first on Shakespeare's standard of French:

'Shakespeare's French is usually thought to be not quite of a standard commensurate with professional (or native-speaker) help...'

and continues with a comment on one source, John Eliot, *Ortho-epia Gallica*, the French manual mentioned by Miola, which seems

‘exactly the type of book Shakespeare could have used to teach himself French.’¹⁴

If, on the other hand, the playwright knew or had taught himself French, then perhaps there would be less need for the *Ur-Hamlet* hypothesis?

Together these scholars and Shakespeare himself show that he was sufficiently fluent in French to read and make use of French sources and was familiar with a French person’s pronunciation in English, and knew something of the contemporary French scene. The problem is, we don’t know how. Assuming William Shaksper did go to school in Stratford, did he learn French? There? From a manual? Elsewhere? And how did he know about contemporary French events and personages?

It looks as though the correspondent who wrote that Shakespeare didn’t know French identifies a problem with our current knowledge of the education of William Shaksper, not with the playwright.

Endnotes

¹ Frances Yates. *A Study of Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Vol V in *Shakespeare Problems*, ed. A. W. Pollard and J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: CUP, 1936), p. 2.

² Geoffrey Bullough. *The Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. 8 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 427.

³ G. R. Hibbard, ed. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 47.

⁴ H. R. Woudhuysen, ed. *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. The Arden Shakespeare (3rd) (London: Thomson Learning, 1998, reprinted 2001).

⁵ Hugh M. Richmond. *Puritans and Libertines. Anglo-French Literary Relations in the Reformation* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1981), p. 305.

⁶ Bullough, p. 429.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

- ⁸ Kevin Gilvary, *Dating Shakespeare's Plays* (UK: Parapress, 2010), p 261.
- ⁹ Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books* (London: The Athlone Press, 2001), p 269ff; Bullough vol V p228.
- ¹⁰ Gillespie, pp 120-1; Bullough, vol III p354.
- ¹¹ Gillespie, pp 177ff; Bullough, vol III p354.
- ¹² Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (UK: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1977), pp 6-7.
- ¹³ Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Reading* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), p 168.
- ¹⁴ Gillespie, p 137.