*French Reaction to Shakespeare**

JOHN A. GREEN**

It is known that before and after Shakespeare's death in 1616, troupes of English actors often performed in Sweden, Denmark, The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and even Latvia. In Germany and Austria, particularly, where extensive research has been conducted, the bulk of the repertories was Shakespearean. In France, however, investigation of early seventeenth-century material, published or otherwise, has yet to bring to light any mention of Shakespeare whatsoever. The only document of that time containing even the slightest allusion to what may possibly have been a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays is the journal of the first physician to the Dauphin at the court of Henri IV of France. The doctor recorded that, in September 1604, an English company of actors appeared at the Fontainebleau palace to amuse the Dauphin, then only three years of age. For two weeks afterward the young prince insisted on strutting around the palace dressed like the English comedians and saying "Tiph toph, milord." Some have speculated, since the publication of the journal in 1868, that the child was playing Falstaff saying "Tap for Tap, my lord," in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, Act 2, Scene 1. Whatever the play was, the actors never finished. The record indicates that their performance broke up when the Dauphin ordered one of the troupe beheaded.

If Shakespeare was the author of the play performed in part before the young prince, none of the audience would have

*This paper, originally presented to faculty and graduate students of the various departments and sections of the College of Humanities, necessarily involved some popularization. Similarly the footnotes added for this publication, are intended essentially for the nonspecialist. In most cases, therefore, I have avoided referring to primary sources, which for this study too often involve holographic, foreign, scattered, or out-of-print materials, in favor of works currently available. I must recognize, at the outset, my debt to two contemporary scholars: Robert Wythe Cannaday, Jr., "French Opinion of Shakespeare from the Beginnings through Voltaire: 1604-1778," unpub. diss., University of Virginia, 1957 (394 pp.); and Helen Phelps Bailey, *Hamlet in France from Voltaire to Laforgue* [1730-1886], Geneva: Droz, 1964 (181 pp.). All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from them; the translations are mine.

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cared. Writers received little credit for their work at that time. Indeed, it was not until 1625 that notices began to carry the name of the playwright.[1] And as far as Shakespeare is concerned, "no Frenchman [between 1604 and 1682] is known to have made any reference to him, or to any of his plays," writes Cannaday, "nor is there any concrete evidence of performances of his plays, or those of any other English playwrights, by actors of any nationality, in France." Nothing significant happened in 1682, either, except that a nobleman who knew no English mentioned a "Comédie de Henri VIII" in a letter. Three years later a relatively obscure author dropped the name of Shakespeare and twelve other English writers in two sentences on "English poets."

The general attitude of the French toward the English is probably summed up in a letter written about that time—at least during the reign of Charles II of England. The French ambassador at that court, in answer to a request from Louis XIV for the names of the most illustrious men in English letters, began: "It seems that the arts and sciences sometimes abandon one country to go and honor another. . . ." Now in the sciences, Harvey, as early as 1628, had discovered and published a treatise on the circulation of the blood, one of the greatest discoveries of medical science. It was rejected in France, however, *a priori,* partly because the word *circulateur*—even before 1628—had become synonymous with "quack," and partly because France, in the seventeenth century, wanted to influence more than to be influenced. "Presently," to return to the ambassador's letter, "they [the arts and sciences] have passed into France, and if any vestiges remain here, it is only through the reputation of Bacon, Morus [Thomas More], Buncanan [sic] and, more recently, of one Miltonius [John Milton] who has made himself more infamous through his dangerous writings than the executioners and assassins of their king."

Of all the countries of Europe, France knew less about England in the seventeenth century—and preferred it that way—than of any other major power. England had been the enemy during the "Hundred Years War." Her longbowmen had decimated the French nobility at the battle of Agincourt. Her

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[1]Gustave Lanson, *Esquisse d'une Histoire de la Tragédie Française,* rev. ed. (Paris: Champion, 1954), p. 55.

ecclesiastics had killed Joan of Arc. Her king had separated her from the Church. She had supported the Protestants against Cardinal Richelieu, and finally, in 1649, as the ambassador referred to in his letter, she had rebelled against the young Charles I, and beheaded him. Behind this general prejudice and ignorance, however, lie other facts that help to explain why Shakespeare remained unknown in France throughout the seventeenth century.

The development of the French theater, for example, begins to differ markedly, during the Renaissance, from that of the English. It had begun, in both countries, in the Church, then moved to the public square as the comic element, the crude, and the grotesque were introduced into the drama. Both countries eventually reacted against the excesses, but not at the same time, nor with the same intensity. The resistance in France was sudden, and forcible, sixteen years before Shakespeare was born; in England it began to develop about the time Shakespeare embarked on his career, but remained as an undercurrent until the Puritans came to power toward the middle of the seventeenth century.

The French parliament pronounced against the coarse humor and grotesque scenes of the Renaissance mystery plays in 1548 by decreeing the suppression of religious drama. During the next hundred years French critics and writers succeeded in eliminating other excesses. Consider, for example, the stage setting for a typical religious drama taken from a manuscript of 1547, only a year before parliament's restraining order. The audience had at once a view stretching from hell on the right to paradise on the left, with other *mansions* representing the cities of Nazareth and Jerusalem, the palace, the temple, and the *sea*—with a boat on it!—in between.[2] Some plays called for thirty and even forty *mansions*. With this type of staging, the action is described as simultaneous, rather than successive, making it possible for any number of mortals, of all ages and types, to appear together with beings from the lower regions and from the world above in dramas covering a decade, a century, or even—as in the *Mystery of the Old Testament*—four thousand years.

The gradual elimination of these excesses of time, place, and action began after 1548 as playwrights, under constant

[2] "Théâtre" (anon. art.), *Nouveau Larousse Illustré,* VII, 988.

pressure from the critics, worked toward establishing simplicity and verisimilitude as guiding principles of an improved French theater. And, of course, refining the drama to exclude the coarse and the grotesque involved purifying and simplifying the language. At the beginning of the sixteenth century translators had been hard put to find French equivalents for the noble thoughts of the Latins. In less than a century, writes Lanson, invention and borrowing of words by all levels of society had swelled the vocabulary to the bursting point, spelling was chaotic, and grammar hopelessly cluttered.[3]

The greatest contributions toward refining the language of the poet were made by Malherbe about 1600, and by the literary salons after 1608. Malherbe, who established poetry, not prose, as the preferred form of literary expression in France for more than 200 years, followed the critics and writers of his time in that he strove for simplicity and the elimination of affectation or artificiality of manners, sentiments and style. He condemned the Renaissance poets for having given free rein to their imagination and emotions, and for having expressed personal sentiments in verse.

By 1625, when notices began to carry the name of the playwright, French theater had begun to attract people of quality, including ladies.[4] No play of lasting merit had yet been written, and was not until 1636, but in that year Corneille's *Le Cid* "gave modern French drama its first masterpiece"[5] and determined the form of French classical tragedy which Racine and his generation were to carry to perfection. That is, *Le Cid* established most of the guiding principles, at least for the theater, that critics, playwrights, and poets had begun to define in France sixteen years before Shakespeare's birth. After *Le Cid* the principles would stand unchallenged for another century and a half until Hugo and the Romantics, like the Middle Age and Renaissance playwrights before them, imagined a drama that again emphasized scenic art and an unrestricted vocabulary, and embraced everything, including the infinite.

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[3]Lanson, "La Langue Française au XVIe siècle," in *Histoire de la Littérature Française,* 16th ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1921), pp. 351-356.

[4]Lanson, *Esquisse d'une Histoire de la Tragédie Française, loc. cit.*

[5]Henry Carrington Lancaster, *A History of French Dramatic Literature in the Seventeeth Century, Part V: Recapitulation, 1610-1700* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), p. 61.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, simplicity, refinement, and purity in French drama had developed from a matter of educated, artistic taste to a case of necessity. Special seats, located right on the stage, but at each side, gave the nobility an opportunity to display their fine manners and clothes to the rest of the audience and, in a poor performance or play, to trip the actors or interfere with the dialogue. France adhered to this extravagant custom, which Charles II took back with him to England when he came to power, until the middle of the eighteenth century.[6] Until then, playwrights helped to solve the problem by reducing the number of characters, and their movements, to an absolute minimum, and by continuing to refine the language and the subject matter to the point that the distinguished stage audience felt more inclined to listen than to participate.

Just as Harvey's discovery, then, in 1628, could not penetrate into France because of the peculiar situation existing in the French medical profession, so the unique position of French theater and French society in general posed a formidable barrier in the seventeenth century to any extension of Shakespeare's genius or influence across the channel. Of course, the French medical profession eventually had to recognize the truth of Harvey's discovery, and Shakespeare did not remain unknown in France during the eighteenth century.

Toward the end of Louis XIV's reign, the state hovered on the brink of financial ruin, faith in the Church was wavering, and a quarrel had broken out as to which writers were superior, the ancients or the moderns. The greatest classicist writers modestly supported the ancients, but in a losing cause that stretched out over forty years. The moderns won, and those they defended, the most illustrious moderns among them, were caught, as the Church had been caught in its handling of Galileo and the Copernican theory, preaching false doctrine. Immediately, some thought of other comparisons to be made. While the long quarrel had raged, changing conditions in France had opened up all sorts of cultural and other exchanges with England. For example, a translation of Addison's *Spectator* appeared in 1714, "The first vehicle of Shakespearean influence in France." The abbé Prévost, returning home after

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[6] "Théâtre," *loc. cit.*

several years in England, published a newspaper every Monday from 1733 to 1740 "with the avowed purpose of spreading knowledge of English literature." Voltaire, while reflecting the prejudices of Milords Bolingbroke and Chesterfield, whose pronouncements against Shakespeare are known to have exceeded a mere "Tiph, toph," unintentionally aroused the interest of all France in English literature, generally, and in Shakespeare, particularly. And, in 1746, La Place published an eight-volume edition of Shakespeare's works. It attempted to do justice both to Shakespeare and to French classicism—to the latter by omitting or giving short synopses of "monstrous" or objectionable scenes, and by rendering the rest into alexandrine verse, or prose. France read this first translation with enthusiasm.

In 1760, then, following the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, which Racine and Corneille had lost . . . while winning, an anonymous writer for the *Journal Encyclopédique* measured the best writers of France against those of England: Corneille vs. Shakespeare, and Racine vs. Otway. France had known less about England in the time of Corneille, and Racine, than about any other country in Europe, but less than half a century after the death of Louis XIV she was obsessed with Anglomania, and the two English writers were compared favorably with Corneille and Racine. Voltaire, who could not admit the inferiority of the French classicists without admitting his own, published, in pamphlet form, an *Appeal to All the Nations of Europe,* calling on all who could read "from St. Petersburg to Naples," to examine with him *Hamlet, Othello,* and Otway's *The Orphan,* to compare them with selected plays of the French writers, and then to decide which country had the superior theater.

But Voltaire could not stem the tide. In 1769 *Hamlet* was adapted for the French stage by Ducis, who literally worshiped Shakespeare. Since he knew no English, however, he was obliged to use, and trust, the La Place translation. Considering the changes he made to reconstruct the whole play in accordance with the conventions of French tragedy, he did not even need La Place. A list of names of the principal characters would have sufficed because Laertes was eliminated, along with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Fortinbras, the ambassadors to Norway, the strolling players, and the "monstrous"

gravediggers. Those left spoke alexandrine verse, and the dénouement was brought about without violence to the unities. Ducis recast Ophelia as "strong-minded, fearless, and aggressive." She loses her father, but not her mind. As for the Queen, she has but one thought: to make up for her crime. She was "an embodiment," says Bailey, "of remorse and retribution, certain to please an audience who expected tragedy to uphold virtue and draw a moral lesson." Diderot suggested that Ducis should quit playwriting and turn to copying letters, or composing official dispatches, but audiences applauded wildly, while ladies—no doubt with great propriety—swooned. It does not matter whether this polite society was applauding Shakespeare, or Racine and Corneille in disguise. They thought they were expressing approval of the Englishman.

In 1776 the first of Letourneur's twenty-volume prose translation of Shakespeare's works appeared, containing "a list of over 800 subscribers for more than 1200 copies." It was a singularly impressive list, headed by the king and queen of France, the king of England, and the Empress of all the Russias. It has been judged a good translation, but the prefaces and preliminary *discours* ran a sort of quarrel of the ancients and moderns in reverse. This time Corneille, Molière, and Racine became the ancients and the eighteenth-century writers the moderns. While the three ancients were lauded for their efforts, nothing at all was said about Voltaire or any of his contemporaries.

Voltaire, an old man, responded vigorously with a long "Letter to the Academy" which he hoped would be read in public session to serve as a lesson to the court and as a joint reminder to the Academicians of "the horrors of Shakespearean tragedy and the elegance of the French." D'Alembert did read a modified version of the letter to a closed session of the Academy but eventually had to inform Voltaire that it was futile to attempt to get official sanction for his own views. Two years later, in 1778, Voltaire died, and the man elected to replace him in the Academy was Jean-François Ducis.

At the end of the eighteenth century a revolutionary France, to use Danton's words, "flung at the feet of Europe's kings the head of a king."[7] The Romantics soon believed that

[7]Quoted in *The Horizon Book of the Age of Napoleon* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1963), p. 21.

they had sent the heads of Corneille and Racine rolling after it, but at the beginning of the century, while Madame de Staël pleaded eloquently with French writers to begin to seek inspiration from Germany and England, and while Ducis successfully staged an adaptation of *Othello*—which eliminated Iago—and reworked *Hamlet,* Chateaubriand, one of the foremost precursors of Romanticism, spoke out sharply against the growing Shakespeare cult:

> A people that has always been more or less barbarous in the arts may continue to admire barbarous works, and this is of no great importance; but I do not know how far a nation that has masterpieces in all genres can risk its morals. It is in this that the leaning toward Shakespeare is much more dangerous in France than in England. In the English, it is simply ignorance; in us, it is depravity . . . . Bad taste and vice almost always go together; the first is nothing but the expression of the second, as speech is, of thought.

As late as 1836 Chateaubriand dismissed *Hamlet* with one word, "bedlam," but his opinions had no more effect than those of Voltaire before him. The French had not seen the true Shakespeare once on the stage, but they thought they had, and nothing could oppose their imagination. Even those who had read Letourneur's translation understood very little except that Shakespeare was as free of the rules, and the unities, and all the rest, as the French revolutionaries had made themselves in 1789.

In 1821 another good prose translation appeared, this time by Guizot. The reception, at first, was a little cold, because England's part in the defeat and exile of Napoleon was still fresh in the public mind, but before long it was selling well, enough to justify a revised edition in 1860 which was still being reprinted in 1938.

During the 1820's two troupes of English actors performed Shakespeare in Paris. The first, in 1822, fared little better than the earlier troupe which had appeared before the Dauphin in 1604. On opening night a whole act of *Othello* had to be omitted, and two nights later the troupe was so pelted with apples and epithets that *A School for Scandal* never got beyond the first scene. It was the poor acting, however, not Shakespeare, that aroused the audience.

Before the second troupe's appearance one last famous comparison was made between Racine and Shakespeare. Stendhal thought Racine a great writer for the court of Louis XIV, but reminded his contemporaries that the whole of the *ancien régime* had been swept away, and that any modern imitation of him was simply out of place with nineteenth-century audiences. Shakespeare, not bound by the unities, or by slavery to alexandrine rhyme, offered a better model. For a year or two, with the support of Lamartine, Stendhal assumed the role of a leader among the younger writers. He was fifteen or twenty years older than most of them, however, and by 1827 they had grouped under Hugo. In that year, when Hugo wrote his first play, *Cromwell,* centering about the man responsible for beheading Charles I, but so vast in its scope it could not be staged, Stendhal was a loner, and the preface to *Cromwell* served as a manifesto of the Romantic school, with Hugo, not Stendhal, at the head.

In the same year, 1827, the second troupe of English actors—this one talented—arrived in Paris. The effect they had on the audience may be judged from the reaction of but one young romantic, Alexandre Dumas:

> They announced *Hamlet*. I was familiar only with Ducis' version. I went to see Shakespeare's . . . I also saw Romeo, Shylock, William Tell, and Othello. I read, I devoured everything in their repertory, and I recognized that, in the world of the theater, everything emanated from Shakespeare, just as in the world of reality everything emanates from the sun; that no one could compare with him for he was as dramatic as Corneille, as comic as Molière, as original as Calderón, as much a thinker as Goethe, and as passionate as Schiller. I realized that his works, alone, contained as many types and personalities as the works of all others combined. I recognized, lastly, that he was the man, next to God, who had created the most.[8]

It was probably after the publication of Stendhal's essay on *Racine and Shakespeare,* or after the 1827 performances, that the cartoon "Racine's wig" appeared in Paris. It shows the younger generation, grouped under the banner "Long live Shakespeare," setting fire to the wig, while the classicists,

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[8]Quoted by Elliott M. Grant, in "The Theater from 1800 to 1830," *Chief French Plays of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1934), p. 3.

flourishing their own banner "Long live the three unities," are trying to extinguish the flames.[9]

Even though Romanticism began to wane after 1844, Shakespeare remained popular. Dumas, for example, established the Théâtre Historique in 1847 for the express purpose of presenting Shakespeare in French. What he did with the Bard, however, indicates how shallow his understanding really was, or how little theater audiences had changed in spite of Romanticism. For *Hamlet* he used a new translation by Meurice, but it was all in alexandrine verse, and Dumas personally arranged the scenario, omitted a few scenes, altered passages as he saw fit, and followed Ducis in devising a dénouement calculated to suit French taste better than the original would have done. In answer to Dumas, the *Comédie-Française* revived the Ducis version and continued to play it until 1852.

In 1864, Hugo, to promote his son's new, eighteen-volume translation of the complete works, rated Shakespeare as highly as Dumas had after the visiting English troupe's successful performances in 1827. Meanwhile, actors and poets had become obsessed with Hamlet, suffering with him on stage and off. This particular mania lasted until the turn of the century, and although in some individuals the madness had little or nothing to do with Shakespeare, still it sprang from a general desire to penetrate and understand the English playwright. Some of the foremost poets and writers were caught up in it, including Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Laforgue, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Paul Bourget. For Jean Moréas, there were only two subjects of conversation: his own poems and *Hamlet*.[10]

Against two translations of Shakespeare's works in the eighteenth century I count seven in the nineteenth, and eventually, in 1899, a French stage performance of *Hamlet* followed Shakespeare rather than Ducis or Dumas. Sarah Bernhardt had commissioned Marcel Schwob to give her a new, accurate and faithful translation for the stage. Sarah had played Ophelia some years before in a production that folded almost

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[9]This cartoon is reproduced by Gustave Lanson and Paul Tuffrau, in *Manuel Illustré d'Histoire de la Littérature Française* (Boston: Heath, 1953), p. 541.

[10]Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris* (New York: Dutton, 1918), p. 193.

as soon as it began. When Schwob completed his prose translation, based on the Oxford text, Sarah, at the height of her career, used it to launch her own theater in 1899. This time she played Hamlet, and with such success that she took the production to London. The critics were far from kind but, undaunted, she moved to Stratford-on-Avon for the Shakespeare festival. Here, agree her many biographers, her performance was a sheer delight.

Georges and Ludmilla Pitoëff used the Schwob translation to score a similar success before audiences all over France and Belgium in 1927 and 1928, and the Comédie-Française produced it in Paris from 1932 to 1934.[11] André Gide, a friend of Schwob's who never cared for the latter's translation, published one of his own in 1945 that has been played. The Schwob translation has not been performed since, although it was republished twice in the 1950's.

There have been two more French translations of Shakespeare's complete works in this century, I believe, the latest a twelve-volume bilingual edition by Leyris and Evans around 1964. There are few educated people in France today who have not heard of Shakespeare, whereas every semester I meet American college students who have never heard of Corneille, Molière, or Racine.

French literary critics and historians would be willing, I believe, to write in the name of Shakespeare at the top of the list of the world's greatest writers, but between him and the next English writer on that list, I think they would be inclined to propose the names of their three great classicists, and probably those of Hugo and one or two other later poets. Shakespeare is today played or translated with some regularity and commendable fidelity in France, about every decade, but Racine, Corneille, and Molière have come back into the picture. They are performed every year.

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[11]Information in a letter to the author from Geneviève Delune, librarian at the Comédie Française, April 18, 1959.