

# DID OXFORD KNOW RONSARD?

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Whenever a so-called orthodox critic is baffled or amazed by some to him or her inexplicable element or fact to do with Shakespeare, there is usually a more than adequate Oxfordian explanation. Peter Levi in his book expresses his opinion that certain verses of Ronsard's represent an 'astonishing prophecy', and so one is put on enquiry. What part prophecy should play in scientific biography is a question I leave to others.

The verses in question were first published in 1565 when Ronsard was 41 years old, the Court poet and leading poet of France and probably the world. Levi quotes from the *Bocage Royale* the version published in 1584. First he quotes a passage on the virtues of English beer in French and then switches to an English translation (perhaps his own) for these: -

Soon the proud Thames shall see  
A flock of white swans nesting on his grass,  
his holy guests, they mount to the heavens  
in circles over those delightful banks  
uttering song which is the certain sign  
that many a Poet, and the heavenly troop  
of sister Muses quitting Parnassus  
shall take it for their gracious dwelling place,  
and tell the famous praise of England's Kings  
unto the crowded nations of the world.

Suspicion is aroused that we are not being given what was written by the failure to supply the original French: this is totally unfounded. The 1584 version reads:-

Bien tost verra la Tamise superbe  
Maint Cygne blanc loger dessus son herbe,  
Hostes sacrez, puis eslevez aux cieux,  
Tout à l'entour des bords delicieux  
Jetter un chant, pour signe manifeste  
Que meint Poëte, & la troupe celeste  
Des Muses sœurs y feront quelque jour,  
Laissant Parnasse, un gracieux sejour,  
Pour envoyer aux nations estranges  
Des Roys Anglois les fameuses louanges.

Perhaps the original 1565 version is more relevant? No, apart from the substitution in lines 2 and 3 above of *Meint Cygne blanc les hostes de son herbe*, /En nombre espais, there is nothing of consequence.

Before discussing the 1587 posthumous version below, it might be helpful to consider how

Ronsard came to write the original version in the first place.

In France, in 1562/3 there took place the first of the debilitating civil Wars of Religion, when the Catholic party attempted to suppress the Protestant Huguenots. In her inexperience Elizabeth intervened on the side of the Protestants, not officially, and gave considerable help to them. Early in 1563, the Protestants behind her back made a peace treaty with the Catholics, and both factions then turned upon the English forces.

Elizabeth attempted to negotiate the position by sending a special envoy Nicholas Throckmorton, but the French refused to recognize his credentials and put him in prison. In a rage Elizabeth then imprisoned the French Ambassador in London. The French followed suit and imprisoned the English Ambassador, who was Sir Thomas Smith. Finally Elizabeth was forced to sign a rather humiliating peace treaty the following year.

Ronsard the Court poet, in an effort to mollify Elizabeth, and perhaps to keep her neutral in any future conflict involving the Protestants then produced the long poem in praise of England in which the 'astonishing prophecy' appears.

Sir Thomas Smith with his access to the French Court must have had some degree of acquaintance with him if only as the Court poet: this could have been quite close, with Sir Thomas being one of the foremost English classical scholars, and a man of deep cultural interests.

Oxford as we learn from Sir Thomas' letter to Burleigh of 25th April 1576 was 'brought vp in my hous'; is it too much of a speculation to suggest that the young earl was actually in Paris during some part of Sir Thomas' ambassadorship, also knew Ronsard and was advised by him? If Oxford was at (or even in touch with) the French Court at that early age, might he not have been influenced in an Italian direction by the pronounced Italian element in Catherine de Medici's Court?

To date I have no evidence to substantiate the suggestion that the barely teenage Oxford was part of Sir Thomas Smith's household in Paris: indeed it might have been dangerous for him to be there, in case he became a hostage of the catholic party (of which Ronsard was a supporter). Young aristocrats did as part of their education serve as

pages in foreign courts: the English ambassador to Paris in the 1580's was Sir Edward Stafford, who served in one of the Bourbon households.

Consider: we know that Oxford aged 13 was competent in French. There is the letter in the British Library illustrated in Ogburn, headed 'Monsieur tres honorable'. It is worth studying fully. In full it reads:

"Monsieur i'ay receu voz lettres, plaines d'humanité et courtoyse, et fort ressemblantes a vostre grand'amour et singuliere affection envers moy,; comme vrais enfans doucement procreez d'une telle mere, pour la quelle ie me trouve de iour en iour plus tenu a v.h.. Voz bons admonestements pour l'observation du bon ordre selon voz appointemens, ie me delibere (dieu aidant) de garder en toute diligence – comme chose que ie cognois et considere tendre especialement a mon propre bien et profit, usant en cela l'admis et autorité de ceux qui font apres de moy. La discretion dequels i'estime si grande (s'il me convient parler quelque chose a leur advange) qui non seulement ils se porteront selon qu'un tel temps le requiert, ains (?) que plus est feront tant que ie me gouverne selon que vous aves ordonné et commandé. Quant a l'ordre de mon etude pour ce que il requiert vn long discours a l'expliquer par le menu, et le temps est court a cette heure, ie vous prie affectueusement m'en excuser pour le present, vous asseurant que par le premier passan ie le vous ferai scavoit bien au long. Cependant ie prie a dieu vous donner santé.

Edward Oxinford

Ogburn states that this letter was written in August 1563,; and that two months earlier Lawrence Nowell wrote to Cecil stating that 'I clearly see that my work for the Earl of Oxford cannot be much longer required' i.e. he had not much more to teach the boy of 13. Who then could ? Who would require to be written to in French as an educational adviser ? I would love to suggest that the letter is in fact addressed to Ronsard himself, to whom he, Oxford, will be writing again par le premier passan. Oxford is writing in affectionate terms apparently to a very distinguished literary Frenchman but not a noble. Ronsard fits the bill.

However I have to point out that Professor Nelson's new book *Monstrous Adversary* (Liverpool University Press 2003) relying on the Oxfordian Fowler says that there is an endorsement in Oxford's writing to Cecil. This may be Cecil's file copy or a draft submitted to him for vetting before transmission to France at a politically-sensitive time.

However the heading 'monsieur tres honorable' may translate as '(to) the Right Honourable

Sir (William Cecil)',; his correct mode of address at the time. 'Admonestements' sounds cecilian, but 'l'ordre de mon etude' may indicate something wider. Professor Nelson suggests that anyway the letter may have been dictated by a tutor, and that Lawrence Nowell's letter means that Oxford was beyond his control – no admission of Oxford's competence let alone genius must be entertained. I do not think a tutor would have allowed the delaying excuse to be forwarded to Sir William in the terms set out.

It might appear that the young Oxford is out of the immediate reach of Burleigh to be able to write in these terms, so there is just the possibility that the letter was written from France – i.e. from the French court with Ronsard in attendance - to Sir William with its promise of a follow-up 'par le premier passan'. Perhaps though it would certainly seem logical to have him back home in view of the rapidly deterioration of English fortunes in the early part of that year 1563.

Some might say that this is merely walking on the wild side of Oxfordian speculation: but, how much 'wilder', not to say ludicrous, is it to suggest in a supposedly scientific biography that Ronsard wrote an 'astonishing prophecy' about William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon, when he was only a few months' old ? I might have some sympathy with the basic criticism, were it not for my final piece of evidence, which goes a long way to legitimising my earlier speculations.

In 1585 Ronsard died. The 1584 edition of his works is quoted above. However before he died he prepared another edition subsequently published in 1587. In it he substantially rewrote the lines in question:-

Bien tost verra la Tamise superbe  
 Maint Cygne blanc les hostes de son herbe,  
 Chantant en l'air d'un son melodieux  
 Tourner ses bordes & rejoyr les cieux:  
 Oiseaux sacrez à Phebus pour predire  
 Que les neufs Sœurs, & l'autheur de la Lyre,  
 Changeant la Grece, y feront quelque jour  
 Comme en Parnasse un desiré sejour.  
 Pour envoyer aux nations estranges  
 Des Rois Anglois les fameuses louanges

A rough translation:-

Soon proud Thames will see  
 Many a white Swan guests on his grass  
 Singing in the air with a melodious sound  
 To circle her banks and rejoice the skies:  
 Birds sacred to Phoebus to predict  
 That the nine Sisters,; and Poetry's progenitor,  
 Displacing Greece, there will make some day  
 As in Parnassus a desired stay  
 To send to foreign nations  
 Famous praises of English Kings.

I would comment as follows: *Les neuf soeurs*: the nine Muses; *et l'auteur de la Lyre /Changeant la Grece*: this description may well refer to an Englishman of very great literary attainment. So-called orthodox literary criticism would not be able to produce a candidate who would have arisen in the period 1564-1585, i.e. since the first version of the verses was published, but by the latter date Oxford had already written and in part produced about half of the 'Shakespeare' oeuvre. In this context "Changeant" would mean "replacing" Greece.

However "l'auteur de la Lyre" may well refer to Apollo rather than any Englishman, but then a strained interpretation of "Changeant" would produce "Changing his residence from Greece", which duplicates and distorts "*les neuf soeurs, et l'auteur de la Lyre /...y feront quelque jour /Comme en Parnase, un gracieux séjour*". Perhaps Ronsard was synthesising the two ideas, like a Classical author: Apollo/Oxford (or Apollo personified by Oxford) in displacing or replacing Greece as the fount of literature will make a stay on the banks of the Thames.

In any event it is significant that instead of merely repeating, or even deleting, the earlier version, Ronsard in 1584/5 is rewriting the verses in an even stronger form, plainly to make them more applicable to the current literary scene in England in 1584/5 rather than to any prospective literary renaissance in 1564. We may term the rewriting revolutionary in its implications, and let us hope its impact.

In summary therefore, The poem is not an 'astonishing prophecy'; it is a reasonable estimate in 1564 of future developments in English literature. Great parts of those developments had already by 1585 come to fruition – certainly as far as the literary elite of two countries were concerned – and are accordingly celebrated by the poet, not just by altering the original version, but deliberately inserting a substitution for it. Only one candidate Englishman and one body of work can qualify as a

catalyst for this change and for these praises: and that man must have done enough by 1585. Only Oxford meets the tests.

Oxford and Ronsard knew (of) each other.

ENVOI: What is the effect on Oxford of the French connection? I am not a professional literary critic, so I can only rely on the verdict of those who are. I recommend the following quotation from Sams' *Edmund Ironside* (Wildwood House 1986) pp 339/40:

'Shakespeare's French diction is shared with Ironside ; and in this respect the observable resemblances are no doubt traceable in some degree to the course that language was in any event taking. Yet here too the influence is so marked as to suggest some closer relationship than mere contemporaneity. The Ironside Gallicisms are at first glance, even at first reading, unobtrusive ; but they become conspicuous on closer analysis. They amount to deliberate exploitation of unfamiliar forms. Among Tudor dramatists, so far as I can elicit, only Shakespeare shows such concern for stylistic effect.

According to Hart (*Shakespeare and the Homilies* 1934, p.228) he habitually experimented with a certain type of word or construction in each play. Ironside is certainly notable for linguistic invention, as Everitt ( *The Young Shakespeare II* 1954) first pointed out. Most apparent is its specialisation in reflexive verbs and other Gallic attributes. No such general tendency is noted in any other Tudor writer. In Shakespeare it has been carefully studied and documented.'

Sams then sets out a long list of examples. Some Oxfordians consider that Edmund Ironside was written c. 1571, when Oxford was barely 21 years old, but still at the point of immediate receptivity of the French influence on his education as a literary genius.

Of the sceptic, one may legitimately inquire, from where else did 'Shakespeare' acquire his expertise and interest ?

## Notes

Peter Levi: *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare*: Macmillan 1988 pp.1,2. I am indebted to Professor Quainton of Lancaster University who introduced me to the Lammonier edition of Ronsard with the alternative readings, and keeping my translation on the straight and narrow, as did our member Mme Patricia Poullain.

Letter in French and Nowell. Professor Nelson in his new book: *Monstrous Adversary*: Liverpool University Press 2003 claims to write free of bias. In regard to Nowell, Nelson writes '...nothing indicates that Oxford was an enthusiastic scholar, and much indicates that he was not – Nowell found the youth intractable'. Professor Nowell

produces nothing by way of evidence to justify that conclusion ( see pp. 41 and 39). I found it interesting that no-one at our Henley meeting on the 20th September (and there were at least two fluent French speakers present) disputed my translation of '*par le premier passan*' as meaning 'by the first (person) crossing (the Channel)'.

"*..les neuf soeurs*" i.e. the nine Muses. Shortly after the publication of these final revision verses, Spenser wrote his *Tears of the Muses*, in which he addressing each of the nine Muses in turn bewails the current state of the Arts in England, containing the lines which have baffled the so-called orthodox ever since, beginning

*continued over*

## Notes *continued*

"Our pleasant Willy, ah ! is dead of late....."

and complaining of his current idleness. There is of course no problem for Oxfordians, who believe that it was at this period 1588-91, that Oxford "chose to sit in idle Cell", as Spenser puts it. The near simultaneous reference by Ronsard and Spenser to both the poet and the nine Muses should be noted. See *When Shakespeare Did Not Write (1588-91)*- DVS Newsletter July 2001.

"l'auteur de la Lyre" may specifically refer to Apollo, but whether "changeant la Grece" refers only to removing his residence, and not something more fundamental must be arguable. If there had not been some radical development in English literature just before 1585, why rewrite the passage ? Is Ronsard really putting Shakespeare/Oxford on the same pedestal as Apollo ? Note "changeant" applies only to "l'auteur", and not to the Muses. Even if the reference is really only to Apollo, it is quite revolutionary enough to support my thesis.

The problem for those who disagree is that there was no political compulsion on Ronsard to alter his original version(s) – quite the reverse as Ronsard was or would

have been anti- both the Henri III moderates (with whom he had apparently fallen out) and the Henri IV protestant party, and in fact in simple terms a Medici/Guise supporter - as such very anti-English -, but then why so full of praise and expectancy about English literature in 1585 ?

If this article substantially reflects the state of comparative literature in, say 1585, one ought to consider the relationship between Giordano Bruno, and also Beaujoyeux and his Balet Comique de la Royne, and say *Loves Labours Lost*. See *Arthos: Shakespeare: The Early Writings* (Bowes and Bowes 1972) pp.71-2, and the article on Bruno DVS Newsletter Jan/Feb 2002. The final conclusion may well be that by 1585, Oxford had already become a leading light of English literature, and of European culture generally.

Again many thanks to Mme. Patricia Poullain who nobly did the honours by reading the French and saving the membership from my what passes for a French accent when this paper was given at Henley on September 20th