



# Shakespeare and the French Lens

## ESSAY

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### HIGHLIGHTS

The author of Shakespeare's plays clearly knew the French language, history, and court, but the Stratford man seems neither to have visited France, studied French in a provincial school, nor had any direct contact with French aristocracy.

### ABSTRACT

Academic studies of Shakespeare in Great Britain and France present the historian with startling contrasts. Beginning in the late 18th century, the English debated the extent of his knowledge and eventually turned the poet-playwright into a national hero and secular saint. When Thomas Carlyle published in 1840 *On Heroes, Hero Worship, and the Heroic in History*, he actually stated that Shakespeare was "an unconscious intellect" whose dramas "grew up out of Nature." Carlyle's book was an incredible success, deifying the uneducated and untraveled man from Stratford, making him a religious Anglo-Saxon icon never to be questioned. Some had their doubts. In France in 1918, Professor Abel Lefranc, a renowned Renaissance scholar and member of the Académie française, published *Sous le masque de William Shakespeare*, a volume that tried to prove "to all those with an open mind" that the author William Shakespeare could not have been Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon. Among his reasons: William Shakespeare knew France, the French aristocracy and French history too well. Leaving aside the author's missing paper trail, inconceivable for the "soul of the age," Lefranc examined Shakespeare's works in extraordinary detail and revealed just how political they were and how often they subtly commented on a much wider European culture and politics. Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, he argued, was not limited to the Anglo-Saxon world but was actually multi-national and deeply influenced by France. English scholars did not handle this French questioning of Shakespeare so well. Indeed, with only a few exceptions, Lefranc's work was ignored in the Anglo-Saxon world. Lefranc argued that the plays needed to be re-examined as creations for the Elizabethan court, making clear references to what was actually happening in France at the time. This essay argues that the significance of Shakespeare's knowledge of French courtly politics and culture should not be underestimated because there are no records that the man from Stratford ever left England or knew French. That is, once the profound French influence is recognized in Shakespeare's plays, the man from Stratford could not have been the author.

### KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, Shakespeare Authorship Question, Abel Lefranc, Shakespeare and France, Edward de Vere, French nobility. French politics.



## The Academic Tradition

Academia does not always accept new ideas willingly. Notable discoveries have been met with ridicule in such fields as genetics, cancer transmission and continental drift to name just three. That is, academics are not free from Group Think -- especially when reputations are going to be lost because accepted theories are disproven (see my own 2016 essay in *Psychology Today*). Research can be ignored, as in the case of Reus' discovery of tumor-inducing viruses because Reus was an MD, not a physiologist; or as in the case of Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar, who was mocked because of his theory about Black Holes.

Imagine then what could happen to anyone who suggests that Shakespeare wasn't simply a "gift of Nature," (Carlyle, 142); and that furthermore, it is "impiety to meddle" (101) with Shakespeare as the enormously popular Carlyle insisted in *Heroes and Hero-worship*: "Call it worship...call it what you will" (108). Carlyle's admonition of not "meddling" with but "worship"-ing Shakespeare has been strictly adhered to: doubters are denigrated as imbeciles, lunatics, quacks, snobs, elitists, and have even been compared to "holocaust deniers." As a result, Stratfordian journals and conferences regularly refuse to accept submissions that address the authorship question.

The fact is, Shakspeare and his brothers were all pulled out of school to help with their father's business and neither Will's parents nor his children were able to write anything more than their signatures, something typical of village life in those times. Will also grew up with almost no exposure to European languages, culture, and politics. That said, in reading the works ascribed to him, we discover that they are deeply imbued with a knowledge of French and contain a pan-European worldview that actually includes a very detailed knowledge of European courtly politics, suppressed scandals, and even minor French historical figures. How Will could have picked up such an impressive knowledge of a language barely heard in Stratford and how he created more new words based on French than any other English author of his day (Lee, p. 245), as well as knowledge about secret political negotiations, suppressed scandals, and minor French historical figures is totally unexplainable. There are certainly no records of him having ever been at a French court. We do not even have letters written to him, or even any letters from him as there are for virtually all other established writers of the period. (Price, 5). That is to say, there is no paper trail for Will Shakspeare as a writer. What we do have, on the other hand, is a paper trail for him as a businessman.

Having no records for Will indicating either knowledge of French or travel abroad surely creates unresolv-

able problems because so many of the plays by 'Shakespeare' are set in France or Italy and reveal an astonishing knowledge of both those languages and the places in which the plays are set. Certainly the lack of knowledge of French on the part of Shakspeare poses a problem even for *Hamlet*, which was itself based on a French source not translated into English until 1608, well after the Shakespeare *Hamlet* was published in 1603.

This latter problem actually gave rise to a complicated theory which surmised that the author Shakespeare must have seen a play about *Hamlet* written by a playwright who could read French—probably Thomas Kyd. This theory maintained that Shakspeare of Stratford was so inspired that he then wrote his own *Hamlet*. And Kyd's original *Hamlet*? Supposedly, this earlier *Ur-Hamlet* was lost forever -- with no record of any presentation or publication of it apparently recorded. This is clearly fantasy but essential for creating plausibility for the Stratford man as the author, one small example of mythologizing that we find in so many Shakespeare biographies (books which Mark Twain described in his own response, *Is Shakespeare Dead*, to brontosaurus skeletons "fifty-seven feet long and sixteen feet high" and composed of only "nine bones" all covered with barrels and barrels of plaster (p. 49)-- i.e. an imaginary skeleton covered up so thoroughly that the trickery cannot be seen.

Scholars have certainly long been puzzled by finding so much French in Shakespeare's works partly because London audiences of the 16th century would for the most part not understand French. As scholar George Watson has observed, "The French scenes in *Henry V* are surprising: not just that Shakespeare could write them, but that he should expect a London audience in 1599 to understand them." One must assume therefore that the French in Shakespeare's plays was, at least initially, intended for an audience that *could* understand it. The only such English audience to fit this definition at that time was, of course, the upper aristocracy and those in academia. (Ormond, p. 785) Shakespeare, it should be noted here, was the only Elizabethan author to write at length in French. Why? Precisely because he was writing for the upper aristocracy -- Queen Elizabeth and her court, people with really good French. For example, the English lesson in *Henry V* between the French Princess Catherine and her maid is a seemingly innocent language lesson, but thanks to the bilingual puns written by this supposedly non-French-speaking writer, it becomes a scene that is actually hiding one of the most salacious dialogues in all of Shakespeare.

Traditional scholars have also long maintained that Shakespeare must have read Montaigne in John Florio's English translation, not in the original French because, again, the man from Stratford did not know French. Travis

Williams observes, however, that Shakespeare must have read Montaigne in the original because, for example, in his work he uses Montaigne's French word *born*, rather than Florio's English translation "boundary." Indeed, Shakespeare showed a marked fondness for the word *born* and used it repeatedly in his work.

In *Shakespeare's Sonnets and the Court of Navarre*, Honneyman observes that in the sonnets, Shakespeare even uses French words with their French, rather than their English meanings, which are sometimes quite different: [e.g. *travail* used by Shakespeare to mean "workmanship" in sonnet 79 as opposed to meaning "difficult work" [Honneyman, 41]. Shakespeare, in fact, plays with both meanings of the word, precisely because he is writing for a high-ranking noble audience which understood both the French and the English and would, therefore, enjoy his wordplay. Honneyman concludes that The "vestigial remains of the continental octave" [38] as well as imagery, vocabulary, and stylistic devices drawn from the [French language] Pléiade poets indicate that whoever wrote the Sonnets was steeped in the French sonnet tradition.

### Love's Labour's Lost: The French Influence

University of Tours Professor Richard Hillman, whose work has not received the attention it deserves, has many books and articles studying the French influence in Shakespeare. Hillman's research has, in fact, led some Shakespeare scholars to conclude that it "affirms Shakespeare's proficiency in French" (Williams, 358) and that "knowledge of French material can illuminate Renaissance English texts" (Haynes, 265). "Hillman calls decisively into question any narrow Anglo-centric view of Shakespeare" (Maskell, 289). Scholars have proven the author Shakespeare not only knew French but several other languages as well and must have had access to an extraordinary number of books which were only to be found in the libraries of the upper aristocracy, wealthy academics, or university libraries.

As for the possibility the name Shakespeare (as it was often spelled) was a pseudonym, one might note here that even the French author Jean-Baptiste Poquelin wrote his many plays under the pseudonym Molière. Understanding that, the idea that Shakespeare could also be a pseudonym should not really seem so far-fetched. Like Shakespeare, Molière also wrote plays that mocked the powerful, something which got Molière into trouble with the authorities on several occasions. In Shakespeare's case, he escaped the kind of authoritarian crackdowns that so many of his contemporaries suffered, despite the fact that his plays were so often political. A pseudonym clearly helped protect him (and other authors) address-

ing sensitive subjects. More on this common Renaissance practice can be found in Marcy North's useful book *The Anonymous Renaissance* (2003).

Turning now to *Love's Labour's Lost*, a work not so often performed because it is seen as overwrought and perhaps too detached from reality, we will be able to clearly see this French influence in Shakespeare's practice. Certainly, traditional academics have often criticized Shakespeare for this play -- trying to write about a world he apparently knew nothing about -- the French court. Others have challenged that view. One such challenger was the great French scholar of the early 20th century Abel Lefranc. Over a century ago, this expert on the Renaissance observed that Shakespeare must have been fluent in French because he regularly made bilingual puns, particularly in this play. In Act III, Armando and Moth play with the similarity of sound between the words *envoy* and *goose* (the French word for goose is *oie*). Without knowing this verbal link, the introduction of "goose" in the scene makes no sense (Lefranc, 60). That is, only members of the audience familiar with French would understand why the word *goose* was even introduced. Lefranc also notes, in the same discussion, the use of *sans* and *capon*. He highlights the extended pun on the French word *branle* "a brawl," combining it with the dance *branle*, which Moth describes humorously. The dance *branle* was, in fact, Marguerite de Valois' favorite.

In addition to such bilingual wordplay, Shakespeare also reveals in the play a knowledge of the 16th-century French writer François Rabelais. Rabelais had earlier created a character called Braggardo, a braggart, a character found in *Love's Labour's Lost* as Armando. Rabelais also earlier created a pedant named Holofernes, as does Shakespeare in the play, possibly a caricature of the French author de Guillaume de Salluste du Bartas. (Honneyman, 9). Scholars also see an echo of Rabelais in *Love's Labour's Lost's* longest word -- *honorificabilitudinitatibus*. This is actually a medieval word meaning "the state or position of being able to achieve honors" and an allusion to Rabelais' longest word -- *antipericatametaanaparcircumvolutioirectumgustpooops*, a teasing scatological reference to his mocking of excessive Latinisms. It should also be noted here that Rabelais was not translated into English until the 17th century. So did Shakespeare know French?

### Love's Labour's Lost: Characters

Traditional Shakespeare scholars have ignored *Sous le Masque de William Shakespeare* by Abel Lefranc when it was first published in 1918. Some still ignore this important volume which is a loss because in it this respected member of the Académie française examines how *Love's*

*Labour Lost* actually re-enacts the historical negotiations in France between the Protestant Henry of Navarre and the Catholic Marguerite of Valois regarding their marriage. To put the play in its historical context, six days after the wedding of this young couple in 1572, the St. Bartholomew Massacre took place in which thousands of French Protestants -- the Huguenots -- were slaughtered on the streets of Paris and throughout France. Henry, the 19-year-old groom, suddenly found himself a French prisoner. Four years later, in 1576, with the help of Marguerite, he escaped, but the couple remained separated for another two years until the Queen Mother, Catherine de Médici, traveled with her daughter Marguerite and an entourage of the most beautiful and savvy noblewomen of the French court to meet with Henry to solve the religious and dowry issues.

The female entourage had been selected by Catherine for their wit, intelligence, and beauty. They were referred to as the “*escadron volant*” -- the flying squadron, an ironic military term. Catherine also regularly used this royal entourage as spies, and they were, in fact, extremely successful in ferreting out useful information and, therefore, in helping to advance or thwart political agendas. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* illustrates perfectly how *l’escadron volant* distracted many noblemen from their plans, in this case, a plan to devote themselves to academic studies. Historically, the squad was attempting to distract the king and his court from figuring out (“studying”) how to organize the Protestant Huguenots into a coherent resistance. The immediate goal, of course, was to reunite Protestant Henry and Catholic Marguerite and ultimately to forge peace between French Catholics and Protestants.

The French referred to these negotiations as *la Guerre des Amants*, the Lovers’ War. When the Treaty of Fléix was eventually drawn up, it was actually referred to in French as *La Traité des Amants*, The Lovers’ Treaty. Shakespeare’s play *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (along with the lost companion play *Love’s Labour’s Won*) mirror these French monikers.

Navarre’s initial refusal in the play to receive the entourage at his castle represents what actually happened when the two religious factions could not agree on where to meet. Eventually, the town of Nérac was chosen, and Nérac is the setting for the play. Looking at the characters in the play, we also find real people. Navarre, for instance, is obviously King Henry of Navarre, who would later become King Henry IV of France. Some academics have argued against this reading because Navarre’s name in the play is actually Ferdinand. But this is easily answered: because it was against the law to present a living monarch onstage, Shakespeare could not use the king’s real name.

There are other names also changed slightly for the stage. Longaville in the play is Henry I of Orléans, Duke of

Longueville, a member of the so-called *Malcontents*. Another nobleman is Dumaine, whose name mirrors that of Charles, Duke of Mayenne. Mayenne was a member of the League and later a *Politique*, one historically interested in maintaining a strong monarchy, which would, in turn, maintain his own family’s status and power. Henry later rewarded de Mayenne richly for his support. Shakespeare reveals an extraordinary knowledge of the intricate political maneuvering between the various political factions in France at the time.

Another lord in the play is the charming Berowne, based on Charles de Gontaut, Baron de Biron. Biron/Berowne was, in life, an enormously charismatic figure called “the thunderbolt of France.” Unfortunately, he was never satisfied with Henry’s largesse, and despite being a close friend, Biron often mocked the king as Berowne does in the play. The real Henry forgave Biron for his initial act of treachery but not his later one for which he was beheaded. Berowne’s fall in the play clearly mirrors Biron’s fall in life. (Richmond, 319).

French scholars also identify numerous minor characters with historical figures. Don Adriano de Armado is a caricature of Agrippa d’Aubigné. Like Armado, Agrippa was responsible for court entertainment. He was socially awkward like Armado and both spoke Spanish.

Moth is based on Bertrand de Salignac Fénélon, Seigneur de la Mothe, the French ambassador to England from 1570 to 1574 and again in 1583. (Moth makes a second appearance in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, apparently written when Seigneur de la Mothe was in England to participate in marriage negotiations between Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Alençon.)

Lefranc sees in *Holofernes* a representation of Guillaume de Salluste, seigneur du Bartas, a Protestant author with a very ornate style. (Honeyman, 9). Du Bartas was a highly regarded French poet of the late 16th century who influenced Sidney and Spenser and was highly esteemed by James I.

Marcadé in the play, the one who announces the king’s death, is based on the Duke of Mercadé, (Lefranc, 60) and Boyet represents Antoine de Boyet, who was Henry of Navarre’s treasurer as he is in the play (Lefranc, 60). Lefranc also believes that Boyet is a disguised caricature of Guy du Faur de Pribac, master of the Paris academy, who dared to flirt with Marguerite de Valois only to be brutally rejected like Boyet. Katherine calls him “an old love monger,” and Maria mocks him as “Cupid’s grandfather” (Act II). Boyet was in his 50s when he declared his love for the young Marguerite, who was apparently horrified. (Lefranc, *Les Elements francais*, 420).

Richmond identifies Katherine as Catherine de Bourbon, the sister of Henry of Navarre, and Maria as Marie de

Bourbon, Duchesse d'Estouteville. Of the play's many real characters, Richmond says, "It is Shakespeare's genius to have copied, not invented, such psychologies" (Richmond, 338) -- a truly startling statement from one of England's major traditional Shakespeare scholars.

Shakespeare was also apparently quite familiar with an astonishing number of historical French aristocrats of major and minor importance. If the author is copying, not inventing, these psychologies, this suggests Shakespeare was very familiar with the highest levels of French society. And with no records that the Stratford man was ever in France, such intimate knowledge of the French court, its personalities, and private negotiations is absolutely inexplicable.

Lefranc also observes that Henry of Navarre was known for writing along the edges of his letters once the page was full, just as the King of Navarre does in the play (Lefranc, 63). As well, Navarre was known to be a great equestrian, and the play references this same prodigious skill (Lefranc, 65-66). Even the lovely park of Nérac is described along with the time the courtiers spent there when negotiations were concluded for each day, as were the formal entertainments like masques with the appearance of Moscovites. Russians had been in the news at the time because of the catastrophic Tartar invasions of 1570-'72 and their ongoing war between Christianity and Islam. Without a doubt, *Love's Labour's Lost* mirrors these historical characters, their activities, and even the latest continental events of the day.

### Love's Labour's Lost: Politics

Having familiarized ourselves with the play's characters and who they represent, let us now ponder what actually transpires in the play. It opens with the King's desire to establish "a little academe" within his court. The concept of an academy at court seems a mystery to traditional scholars who look for an English source but ignore the fact that poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585) established just such an academy, a group of the greatest French intellects in science, religion, and the arts to educate Charles IX and Henri III through discussion. Ronsard introduced this idea to the French court in 1562, where it continued and eventually developed into the Académie française.

Such an academy at the court had a very serious goal -- that of creating an enlightened sovereign who could rule wisely. Not surprisingly, other French nobles went back to their own provincial courts and established their own similar academies. It is Agrippa D'Aubigné (1552-1630) who informs us that even the town of Nérac had its own academy, which included many impressive thinkers,

including Montaigne. Jolly also points out the influence of Pierre de la Primaudaye's book *L'Académie Française* (1577). That book describes the formation of an academy to educate four young Frenchmen over a period of four years. Their intellectual endeavors turn out to have been interrupted by the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572, which ends their studies as they depart to serve their king.

Considering the impressive knowledge of French politics and literary sources of the period, it is clear that *Love's Labour's Lost* is not simply an amusing exercise by an English writer but a fascinating historical mirror, a conceit veiling real historical dilemmas with potentially disastrous reverberations for England, the greatest of which was a religious civil war like the one in France.

As for the flirting that takes place in the play with the masked French princesses, as well as Jaquenetta's pregnancy, both these elements hint at the libertine atmosphere of Henry's court during Catherine's visit with the flying squadron as well as Henry of Navarre's own reputation as a *Vert Gallant* (a womanizer). As such, the opening lines of the play spoken by Navarre in search of a life of monastic constraints would have greatly amused the English court, whose members would have immediately noticed the discrepancy between the monk-like and studious Navarre portrayed on stage and the real French king of Navarre whose reputation was known. Jaquenetta's pregnancy also mirrors the pregnancy of the 13-year-old "La Fosseuse" one of Marguerite's ladies in waiting, impregnated by none other than Henry himself, a scandal which could only be hinted at on the stage.

The opening sentences clearly set the tone for the many clashes in this play between words and reality, one of the major themes. The numerous court dalliances obviously belie the tense negotiations in the war-torn country, making the characters appear somewhat absurd in their indulgent self-centeredness. This ultimate masking of the characters portrays not only the formal masque entertainments at Nérac but also parodies the fact that the French were frequently masked at court, something intended in reality to make life a bit safer since mortal enemies, Protestant and Catholic, were constantly crossing paths with dueling factions. Ultimately, the contrast between the play's fantasy world in Nérac and the historical reality is really quite breathtaking and hints, centuries ahead of its time, at a kind of comedy of the absurd in which stage characters are clearly divorced from reality.

The play also has references to Marguerite's actual visit to the city of Brabant just before her trip to Nérac. In Act II, Biron asks Rosaline, "Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?" Rosaline answers the question with the same question. Before arriving in Nérac, Marguerite really

was in Brabant to help her brother Alençon politically and to settle his portion of her dowry. Marguerite's Brabant trip was officially described as a trip to the baths, however, rather than as a diplomatic mission to gather support for Alençon as king of Brabant -- a title he desperately needed to enhance his courtship of Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare uses such mirroring to reflect the complicated political activity going on in both France and England.

A second reference to Marguerite's trip to Brabant occurs in Act V when Katherine refers to the fact that one of her ladies-in-waiting died tragically of a broken heart -- a shocking story that was not made public until Marguerite de Valois/Navarre's *Mémoires* were published in 1628, long after the play was first performed in 1597. (Shakespeare alludes to this story again in *Hamlet* in Ophelia's burial scene.)

This unexpected death foreshadows the unexpected death of the King at the end of the play that postpones the lovers' flirtations, which are suddenly changed from games to duties as reality sets in. Shakespeare uses the events in France in his play to serve as a warning for what could happen in England. Because Queen Elizabeth I had not chosen an heir, there were enormous risks of conflict between Protestants and Catholics, just as the death of the King of France posed this same risk. All this was a lesson for Queen Elizabeth not to wait to pick her successor.

The play ends with a play within a play, which presents "The Nine Worthies." This is yet another historical reference to Marguerite's stay in Nérac. Henry of Navarre had a collection of nine tapestries depicting the Nine Worthies. We know from the historical records that all nine tapestries were moved from Henry's castle at Pau to his castle in Nérac for Marguerite's visit (Lefranc, 425, *Les éléments français*). The lords mock the Worthies just as the ladies mocked the lords when mortality suddenly crashes the party with the announcement of the king's death.

The play's ending has been criticized as artificial; however, once again, it mirrors what happened historically. We don't know why, but Marguerite left with her ladies-in-waiting—probably because one of them, La Fosseuse, impregnated by Henry, was making life difficult, and her relationship with Henry was deteriorating, as we now know from her 1628 *Mémoires*. Shakespeare mirrors this pregnancy with Jacquenetta's. The play's allusion to the death of the king refers to Alençon, Marguerite's beloved brother, who died in 1584, who was briefly King of Brabant. King Henry III died in 1589. Shakespeare clearly telescopes history to make it more dramatic.

What is the political message of *Love's Labour's Lost*? The sudden death of the King stops love's labours. The play is a gentle reminder to Queen Elizabeth that England,

like France, needs stability -- a plan for the future of the kingdom because a king (or queen) can die unexpectedly. These historical and political messages are tightly linked to the spiritual message of the play -- our days are numbered, and we best not be distracted and unprepared -- especially the ruler upon whom the country depends.

The first Queen Elizabeth never made plans for her succession. The older she got, the more dire this situation became because it threatened England with a religious war to determine whether the successor would be Protestant or Catholic. France faced the same dilemma when Henry of Navarre, a Protestant, became King: to have peace, Henry converted. England was transferred to the Catholic James VI of Scotland without religious warfare, but religious warfare did come to England later. Shakespeare was clearly prescient.

*Love's Labour's Lost* is the only play in which Shakespeare presented living, historical figures so clearly, barely disguising their actual names. Why did he choose to set all his other plays in an historical past or fantasy? Perhaps because he was both banned from presenting contemporary individuals on stage and because he realized historical distance allowed an audience more freedom to make their own interpretations.

For the record, the historical events in Nérac took place between 1578 and 1582, with Alençon's death occurring in 1584. According to the traditional dating system offered by most Stratfordian scholars, the play was first performed in 1597, 15 or so years after the events depicted in the play. Immediately, we see can see a problem. Based on the assumption that because the play was published in 1598 and presented to the Queen at Christmas, it must have been written in 1597. When academic honesty prevails in such discussions, the words "or even earlier" are added. But after 15 years, the play's events would be so far in the past they would really have lost any historical immediacy. Scholars not so locked into the Stratford man's dates have shown that most of the plays were probably developed over time, even with title changes for political or other reasons.

Why all the emphasis on politics? In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare tells us that plays are of utmost political importance, not once, but twice. *Hamlet* says: "they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (Act II, ii, pp. 550-551); and again in Act III, he says the actors should show "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure," (Act III, ii, p. 25). Here, Shakespeare tells us how important the politics of the day are for understanding his plays. Today, we marvel at the psychological depths of Shakespeare's characters, forgetting that they were also created to reflect the historical struggles of the day through a veil of fantasy. This layering of history and

fiction, past and present, creates their complexity.

The continuing effort to analyze Shakespeare's plays based on what Shakespeare of Stratford could have known is really no longer tenable. Recent stylometric analyses of the play indicate that some parts were probably written by different authors. Lefranc had a much more credible theory in 1918: he believed that other writers might have simply updated the author's plays for later performances. Certainly, if we simply let the plays speak for themselves, they reveal a stunning knowledge of history, even suppressed stories from across the channel.

### Enriching Our Understanding of Shakespeare

Understanding the importance of the continental influence in Shakespeare's work also allows us to understand fully the Renaissance dimensions of the oeuvre. The Renaissance was "a rebirth" which opened up English literature not only to the ancients but also to cultural developments throughout Europe. Shakespeare was well aware of the cultural awakening in Italy, not only literary but also theatrical and artistic. He was also well aware of the political challenges facing Europe. Problem plays like *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Love's Labour's Lost* regain their resonance when put into their historical contexts. Even a play like *Hamlet*, about which so much has been written, is greatly enriched when studied from historical and political aspects as academics such as Richard Hillman have done. These studies have not gotten the attention they deserve because the political sophistication they reveal makes it clear *Hamlet* was written by someone with access to the innermost workings of Queen Elizabeth's court.

If we want to understand why Shakespeare was such a great author, why his characters are so complex, and why he is still able to enthrall us centuries after he created his masterpieces, we need to listen to what he tells us himself -- how he created his masterpieces and how we are to relate to them. They truly are the "brief chronicles" of their times as well as works inspired by the medieval allegorical tradition, which sought multiple levels of meaning. Dante termed this complexity the literal, allegorical, and anagogic (spiritual) interpretations. Shakespeare was deeply conscious of these multiple dimensions -- these prisms -- as he created his plays and poems. To understand them more fully, we also need to know, as *Hamlet* says, "the very age and body of the time."

[N.B. The author highly recommends Frank Lawler's recent translation of Abel Lefranc's *Behind the Mask of William Shakespeare for anyone wishing to further pursue the French influence on the Bard. The volume is published by Veritas.*]

### BIOGRAPHY

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- King Lear** (1605): *Le garçon et l'aveugle*, oldest surviving French farce.
- Love's Labour's Lost** (1598): Pierre de la Primaudaye, *L'Académie française* (1577); *L'Histoire d'Hélène de Tournon* (no translation available).
- Macbeth** (1606): Pierre Le Loyer Seigneur de la Brosse, *Discours et histoires des spectres; François de Belleforest, Histoires Tragiques* (no translation available).
- Measure for Measure** (1604): François de Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques*; Goulart, *Histoires admirables et mémorables de notre temps*; Philippe de Mornay (seigneur du Plessis-Mornay), "Excellent discours de la vier et de la mort," (A Discourse on Life and Death), translated by Mary Sidney (1592) influenced the Duke's "Be absolute for death" speech in *Measure for Measure* (3.1.5-41) (source: Shakespeare's Books).
- Much Ado About Nothing** (1598): Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques* (no translation available).
- Othello** (1604): Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio, *Hecatommithi* (1565), translated into French by Gabriel Chappuys (1583). In *Othello*, critics have noted direct verbal echoes of both Chappuys's French and Cinthio's Italian.
- Richard II** (1592): Jean Créton Froissart, *Chronique de la traison et mort de Richard II* (1401), an eye-witness's account of the death of Richard II ; Ronsard, "Callirée" (1573).
- Taming of the Shrew** (1593): *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* (1372): translation, 1483; *La Comédie des Supposés; La Guisiade* by Pierre Matthieu (1589).
- Cymbeline** (1609): the Old French miracle play, *Miracle de Nostre Dame, comment ostes, roy d'Espaigne; perdi sa terre* and its probable source *Le Roman du roi* (also in Boccaccio's story in the Decameron II, 9, no translation until 1620).
- The Winter's Tale** (1610): *Théon et Obéron*.
- The Tempest** (1611): *Essais*, Montaigne, (Williams provides proof Shakespeare read Montaigne in French).
- Roman History Plays**: Jacques Amyot's French translation of *Plutarch's Lives: La vie des hommes illustres grecs et romains* (1559).
- Two Gentlemen of Verona** (1594): Antoine Le Maçon's translation of *The Decameron*: the French edition of Montemayor's *Diana* (1582), which was only translated into English in 1598.
- Sonnets** (1609): see the Pléiade poets such as Ronsard and Jodelle.

## APPENDIX

**Some French sources for Shakespeare's plays and sonnets.** *This list is based on the work of Stuart Gillespie with updates:*

- A Midsummer Night's Dream** (1595): *Huon de Bordeaux*, 13th century, provides the name *Obéron* (translated by Sir John Bourchier, Lord Berner, 1534).
- All's Well That Ends Well** (1604-05): Antoine le Maçon, *Décameron ou cent Nouvelles de Boccace* (1569); Symphorien Champier, *La vie du preux chevalier Bayard* (circa 1525); François de Belleforest, *La Pyrénée ou La pastorale amovrese* (1571); Marguerite de Valois, *Mémoires* (1628).
- Antony and Cleopatra** (1606): Robert Garnier, Marc Antoine (1578); Étienne Jodelle, *Cléopâtre Captive* (performed 1552, published 1574); Nicolas de Montreux and Jacques Amyot, *Vies parallèles des hommes illustres* (1559-1565), translated by Thomas North (1579).
- As You Like It** (1599): poetry of Maurice Scève (Kaston and Vickers, pp. 165-166).
- Hamlet** (1600): Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques* (1568); *L'Histoire d'Hélène Tournon*, not published until 1628.
- Henry V** (1599): *L'Hostellerie*.