

H-France Review Vol. 5 (December 2005), No. 138

John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France*. London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2005. xix + 240pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$39.95 US (hb). ISBN 1-85285-452-9.

Review by Lenard R. Berlanstein, University of Virginia.

The first French translation of Shakespeare's works appeared in 1746, and the term "*shakespearien*" entered the French language in the 1780s. For the next two centuries, French cultural leaders would contend with Shakespeare's genius and its import for their own cultural traditions. It turns out that Shakespeare is one more category that is good for thinking, particularly about French exceptionalism. John Pemble argues that Shakespeare was "crucial to the long and painful adjustment of French consciousness to a world in which France and the French were no longer paramount" (p. 15). This is a subject that has not been explored as completely as it should, and with some reservations, Pemble proves to be an engaging guide.

Although a folio of Shakespearean plays mysteriously found its way into the Sun King's library, the Bard's work was basically unknown to the Parisian elite until Voltaire, Montesquieu, the Abbé Prévost, and a few others sought to educate their countrymen about the wisely-governed isle across the Channel. All French commentators immediately recognized the power of his works. Voltaire took the lead in making Shakespeare worth knowing but soon insisted that his genius was sorely lacking in good taste and finally lamented ever having drawn attention to the Bard's "pearls... in this enormous dung heap." [1] Did not the nineteenth-century Romantic revolt against classicism install Bardolatry? To be sure, Victor Hugo worshipped Shakespeare and summoned his spirit back from the netherworld at no less than seven séances. Nonetheless, Pemble sees the Romantic battle as a turning point that did not turn. Critics for the next century accepted the judgment that, for all their dramatic power, Shakespearean plays were excessive. In any case, a new criticism came to weigh heavily against a thorough appreciation: that the Bard was irretrievably foreign.

French critics had occasionally been inclined to identify Shakespeare with a European-wide Renaissance humanism, but that was not the dominant mode of thinking in the second half of the nineteenth century. Shakespeare became to the French the quintessential Anglo-Saxon poet who provided a measure of what French writers could never be. Every French schoolboy, Pemble claims, "knew that the English were shrouded in perpetual fog, always reading the Bible, and fanatically addicted to Shakespeare" (p. 46). Hippolyte Taine's 1867 *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* pressed home this view by making fiction an expression of race, milieu, and moment. Even Taine's critics (Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, André Gide, among others) never rid themselves of the view that when the "French spirit" confronted Shakespeare, the result would be a sense of regret that such a genius remained so untamed. Cultural leaders were well aware that Racine bored French audiences but persisted in identifying his work with the French spirit. As late as 1947, the actor Jean-Louis Barrault could still claim, "Opinions have not changed since Voltaire. In the name of taste, Shakespeare is reproached for triviality; in the name of rules, for long-windedness and implausibility." [2]

Pemble describes translating Shakespeare as the labor of Sisyphus. The works of John Milton, Ben Johnson, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope appeared in French earlier than those of the Bard, but a long list of French literary luminaries eventually struggled with the task. The Shakespearean metaphor

proved to be the bane of all who would dare to make the Bard speak French, and their efforts usually brought them to realize that French was too refined to make optimal sense of Shakespeare. Every act of translation made the Bard's foreignness more apparent.

Adoptions for the stage were even more problem laden. They often received productions that were feasts for the eyes, but the texts were distorted to raise the level of refinement. George Sand, unorthodox in so many ways, nonetheless softened Shakespeare's "savage genius" in her 1856 translation of *As You Like It*. Jean-François Ducis, whose productions were standard before the French Revolution and 50 years after, gave France a *Hamlet* with no ghost, grave diggers, or fencing match, and a *Romeo and Juliet* with no brawling and no balcony. Pemble is particularly amusing as he recounts the nearly 200-year struggle for French audiences to learn exactly what Desdemona had lost. Even after Alfred de Vigny broke the taboo about calling a handkerchief a "*mouchoir*" instead of a "*tissus*," there was still the matter of the article being spotted with (lowly) strawberries in the original. Ducis had made the lost article into a diamond headband, but the usual way of dealing with the problem was to decorate the handkerchief with *fleurs asiatiques*. Critics repeatedly called for rendering Shakespeare as he really was, but the impulse to make Shakespeare French won out until the late twentieth century.

It has been claimed that bad translations or indoctrination to classical standards made it impossible for the French bourgeoisie to appreciate Shakespeare. However, Pemble tries to offer a new explanation that involves him in constructing his own notion of Frenchness. He affirms that levity and pleasure were more conducive to French culture than tragedy. Indeed, the French lacked a sense of the tragic, and so they could not appreciate Shakespeare. And why was this? Pemble takes to heart Sainte-Beuve's claim that "in France, we shall remain Catholic long after we have ceased to be Christian."^[3] Pemble postulates a "pervasive Catholicity [that] kept France comparatively free from the tragic consciousness" (p. 150) that would have been necessary to read Shakespeare in all his depth.

Such pervasive Catholicity would not dissipate quickly, but in the second half of the twentieth century, it finally did, and Pemble finds France converted to Shakespeare—"the other French Revolution" (p. 141), as he calls it. French literature became infused with a non-Catholic tragic sense of life. For Pemble, this came about partly as a result of the succession of national catastrophes that French writers had to confront after 1900 (and even before), but the author takes historical circumstances to be less significant than the shifts in twentieth-century science and philosophy, which finally ceased to ratify the Catholic expectation of a happy ending. Indeed, these sources of truth had, themselves, become in Pemble's view "Shakespearean and tragic" (p. 157). Thus, the old reasons for being suspicious of the Bard's work (he was Anglo-Saxon, he was barbarian) became obsolete in the second half of the twentieth century. When modernism and postmodernism tried but failed to produce satisfying alternative theater, Shakespeare even became a living model for contemporary French writers.

Though Pemble seems to presume through most of the book that regarding Shakespeare as anything less than perfection constituted a cultural failure, his thinking becomes more flexible in a final chapter that turns to eighteenth-century Britain. Here, he proposes that Britons had as much trouble appreciating Voltaire as the French had appreciating the Bard. "In England, Voltaire became the Other just as Shakespeare became the Other in France" (p. 188). Moreover, Pemble points out that the English often had the very same reservations about their national poet as the French did. It was just that the British did not want to hear the criticisms from across the Channel. Honesty occasionally made British writers admit that laughing at Alexandre Dumas for mutilating *Hamlet* was unfair when David Garrick had done much the same to other plays. While this line of reasoning resolves one of the book's logical quandaries, it produces another. If the responses to Shakespeare in Protestant England were closer to those of the French than is often supposed, where does this leave Pemble's thesis about the centrality of Catholicity to a French reading?

Ultimately, this book does not work as a scrupulous and sober engagement with the scholarly issues at hand. Pemble offers the book more as a series of gracefully-written and provocative essays.[4] Even though he limits his discussion of “the French” to the intellectual elite, the text is still too short to treat most of the issues in the depth that they merit. Despite the subtitle, Shakespeare’s conquest gets short shrift compared to cultural resistance. For all its limitations, though, this is still a notable contribution to studies of French cultural exchange. Pemble knows his Shakespeare on both sides of the Channel, so he can treat translation and production with authority. He has intelligent points to make about the emergence of what he calls “race”—really, Otherness—as a central category of intellectual discourse during the nineteenth century. At the very least Pemble drives home the point that the French were not guilty of indifference to the Anglo-Saxon icon. They were, if anything, too intimidated by his genius.

NOTES

[1] Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire on Shakespeare* (Geneva: Institut et musée Voltaire, 1967), pp. 211-212. Cited on p. 5.

[2] Jean-Louis Barrault, *A propos de Shakespeare* (Paris: Parade, 1947), p. 62. Cited on p. 143.

[3] Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Nouvelle correspondance* (Paris; F. Bonnet-Roy, 1880), p. 123. Cited on p. 20.

[4] Pemble’s previous books have treated mainly Britain and its empire. They include *The Invasion of Nepal: John Company at War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971); *The Raj, the Indian Mutiny, and the Kingdom of Oudh, 1801-1859* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1977); *Venice Rediscovered* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Lenard R. Berlanstein
University of Virginia
lrb@cms.mail.virginia.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172