

## Shakespeare en France!



**“Can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram  
Within this wooden O, the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?”**

*Henry V*, Act 1 Prologue

1564 – the year of Shakespeare’s birth. Coincidentally, also the year that England lost its final hold on French terrain with Mary I’s loss of the port of Calais. For the last two hundred years, the port had been subject to English rule, adding tensions to two superpowers of the Middle Ages.

Of all of England’s European neighbours, France was the last country to hop on the Shakespeare train. It is not difficult to imagine why, due to the fraught and tense history between the two nations. With the devastation of the Hundred Years’ War still in social memory, and the Tudor dynasty battling in eventual vain to keep a hold of French terrain, it is not difficult to see why the French may well have wanted to keep aspects of English culture out of France, after finally being shot of the English just as England’s greatest cultural export was born. What this article seeks to discover is not only why the French were so vehemently anti-Shakespeare, but also what eventually changed to allow this change of heart to finally embrace the ‘barbarous’ nature of Shakespearean theatre.

As we have seen, English and French history is closely tied, a fact reflected in Shakespeare’s own history plays. For example, *Henry V* covers the events of the Hundred Years’ War, and while it ends with a marriage peace-treaty, its sequel, *Henry VI* is concerned with English trouncing of Jeanne d’Arc – represented as a witch and ultimately defeated (Jeanne d’Arc is a national heroine in France). Overall, the patriotic tone of Shakespeare’s history plays come at the expense of the reputation of France. It then makes sense as to why his plays would not immediately be warmly received well in 16<sup>th</sup> century France, with memories still fresh with tension.

In the time after Shakespeare’s death, and despite ongoing peace between the two nations, France continued to view England as a barbaric country. Not only had England divorced itself from the Catholic Church under Henry VIII, England also came to be viewed as the regicide country after the

execution of Charles I by Parliament. As Delcourt puts it, Shakespeare could then only be known as one dear to those that had violated the laws and the faith that the French held so dear.<sup>1</sup> Even restoring the monarchy in 1643 did not do much to change the French sentiment towards England; at the beginning of Louis XVI's reign in 1643, England was described as semi-barbarous.



Illustration by Jean Hugo of Juliette's costume from Jean Cocteau's 1924 production of *Romeo et Juliette*

The first review ever written in French of Shakespeare appeared on a slip inside a copy of Shakespeare's most famous works, from Louis XIV's library. It read: 'a monument of genuine thought and shrewd expression, but disfigured by coarse language'.<sup>2</sup> This image of Shakespeare as a crude and barbaric poet was perpetuated by Voltaire, a prolific French poet, philosopher, satirist and historian. Voltaire was not shy about bastardising and re-appropriating Shakespeare's plays – *Zaire* equating with *Othello*, *La Mort de César* as *Julius Caesar*, *Semiramis* as *Hamlet* – haunted by the memory of Shakespeare's dramas, of the process and situations of which he is ever anxious to avail himself.<sup>3</sup> Voltaire was not alone in his re-interpretations of Shakespeare works, as the writer Ducis also did his own take on *Hamlet*. This version did away with key points in the play such as the ghost, the gravedigger scene and the number of violent deaths – including that of the titular character. Although Ducis considerably watered-down Shakespeare's narratives, it is arguable that these sanitised versions brought Shakespeare to a point where he could eventually be digestible to the 18<sup>th</sup> century French theatre-going public. This was aided by the 1748 translation of Shakespeare's works into French for the first time, yet again followed the tradition of suppressing allusions to 'low register' or lewdness. Pierre de la Place and Pierre Le Tourneur's prose translation of the works, which showed greater fidelity to the original works. However, these translations for the public were attacked by Voltaire and l'Academie Francaise [the council that maintains and protects the French language], who claimed that translations of Shakespeare made 'France a burnt-offering to England'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Delcourt, 'Shakespeare and the French Mind' in *the Nineteenth Century and After* (1916)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

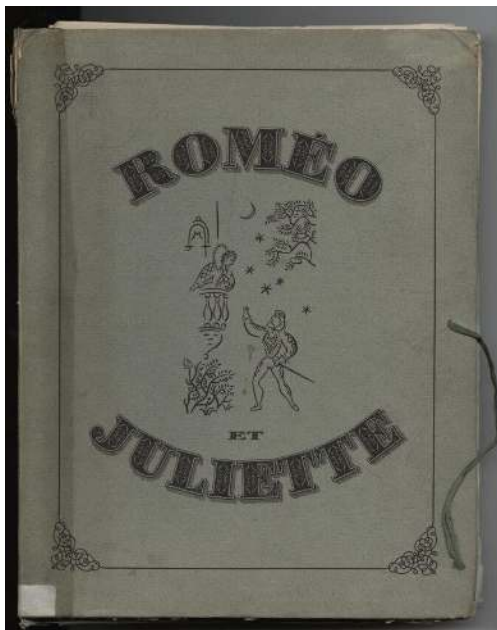
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

In La Place's *Discourse on the English Theatre*, he posited that perhaps Shakespeare should not be admired, but he should at least be known.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth noting that French traditions of theatre, specifically tragedy, had followed the Aristotelian/classical model, that being of violence only occurring off-stage, the plot is carried on in one and the same place over one day and is to begin at a point close to the dénouement. There was also the principle of a playwright's language being informed by *bienséance*, that is decorum.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is evident that not only Shakespeare was a foreign writer, but the conventions of his own narratives were foreign to French tastes, too, even vulgar or 'barbaric'. This attitude demonstrates the principal barrier of Shakespeare coming to France, that being the view of Shakespeare as a foreign genius, a genius of France's once antagonist, that may infringe upon the nation's established cultural sensitivities.

Before the Revolution in France, theatre was in effect under siege from clerics and moralists, with actors degraded by the state and even ex-communicated by the Church until the 1880s.<sup>7</sup> French historian and critic Hippolyte Taine diagnosed Anglo-Saxon psychology in the chaos, excess and recalcitrance of Shakespeare's work.<sup>8</sup>



Cover of Jean Cocteau's 1924 production of *Romeo et Juliette*

The Romantic period was the beginning of Shakespeare's triumph in France. 1828 saw performances of Shakespeare's works – in English! – on stages in Paris. Delcort claims that it was the support given to Shakespeare by the leading literary men of the period once and for all made his name a household word with the lettered class and higher public, which disseminated to wider society.<sup>9</sup>

One such man was Victor Hugo. In 1865, writer Victor Hugo compiled an entirely faithful translation of Shakespeare's works, honouring his puns, metaphors and coarseness which has not yet been seen. This translation is an example of why national poets do the best job of translating – he

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (2005)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Delcort, 'Shakespeare and the French Mind' in *the Nineteenth Century and After* (1916)

understands the literary sense of Shakespeare's meaning, rather than a word-for-word translation. Yet this is the difficulty with the act of translation of art, as translators often are not poets, and poets not often translators.

The main source for this article has been an article from 1916, published during World War I. This article argues for French-English amity through Shakespeare/the French getting to know England through Shakespeare. The article even admits the fault of Voltaire and his cohort who 'misunderstood and misrepresented [Shakespeare]', 'studied him with French preconceptions, judging him in the name of aesthetic principles not his own'.<sup>10</sup> The article continues: 'our brotherhood-in-arms with our heroic neighbours [the English] has added to our old curiosity a new attraction for the immortal hero of their wonderful literature'.<sup>11</sup> This speech is a clear deviation from the original attitude towards the English bard, as a way to now get to know the Ally.

The French have a particular affinity for *Romeo and Juliet*, such as with Jean Cocteau's 1924 production. This was a surrealist production, relying a great deal on choreography beyond the text.<sup>12</sup> It is notable that the costume and set designer of this production, Jean Hugo, was the great-grandson of Victor Hugo. The tradition of French theatre re-adapting specifically *Romeo and Juliet* into a more musical form can be found with Gérard Presgurvic's 2001 comédie-musicale interpretation: *Romeo et Juliette: de la Haine à l'Amour*, which launched the career of Francophone celebrity Damien Sargue, who starred as Romeo.

In more recent years, the Jardin du pré Catelan, Paris, has become home to the Shakespeare Garden and its 'Green Theatre'. This garden has a number of small, themed gardens inspired by the Bard's plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. This festival places Shakespeare and his works alongside great French poets and playwrights, such as Molière and Jean de la Fontaine.<sup>13</sup>

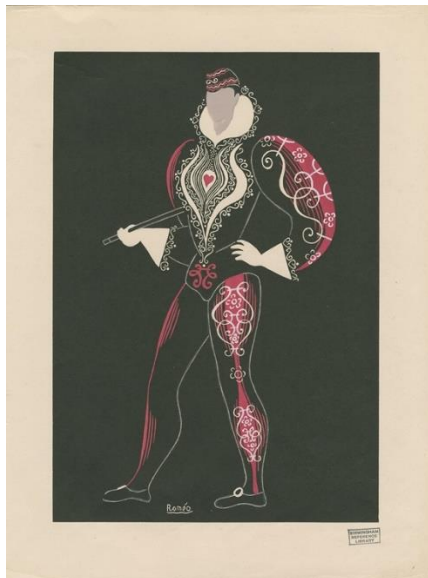


Illustration by Jean Hugo of Romeo's costume from Jean Cocteau's 1924 production of *Romeo et Juliette*

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<sup>10</sup> Transcript from 'Deux conférences sur l'enseignement des langues vivantes' from E. Hovelague, Inspector-General of France (1909)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/video/185938/discussion-stage-production-Surrealist-Jean-Cocteau-Romeo> [accessed 23.11.2023]

<sup>13</sup> <https://parisjetaime.com/eng/event/festival-theatre-jardin-shakespeare-paris-e055> [accessed 23.11.2023]

It is evident that Shakespeare's road to recognition in France was not easy, certainly not aided by the centuries of tension between England and France which Shakespeare used for his history plays, such as the *Henry V* and *Henry VI* cycles. The reception of his work as genuinely good was marred by French attitudes towards the English language and its theatrical conventions, obviously very different to those in France before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pemble offers the explanation: 'Shakespeare was a threat to the cultural heterogeneity that would safeguard Frenchness; preoccupation with ethnic integrity worked against Shakespeare'.<sup>14</sup> But thanks to the genuine, Romantic translations of Shakespeare – such as those of Victor Hugo – he has come to be known in France with reduced political baggage. La Place's judgement that 'perhaps Shakespeare should not be admired, but he should at least be known' has finally come to Shakespeare being both known *and* admired across the Channel.

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### **Bibliography**

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Find out about Jean Cocteau's Surrealist stage production of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/video/185938/discussion-stage-production-Surrealist-Jean-Cocteau-Romeo> [accessed 23.11.2023].

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<sup>14</sup> John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (2005)