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► To cite this version:

Line Cottegnies. ”Of the Importance of Imitation: Du Bellay, Shakespeare, and the English Sonneteers”. Shakespeare Studies -Columbia then Albuquerque-, 2020, XLVIII, pp.41-47. halshs-02523550

HAL Id: halshs-02523550

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02523550>

Submitted on 29 Mar 2020

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"Of the Importance of Imitation: Du Bellay, Shakespeare, and the English Sonneteers", *Shakespeare Studies*, 48 (2020), 41-47.

Of the Importance of Imitation: Du Bellay, Shakespeare, and the English Sonneteers

By Line Cottegnies

Since the groundbreaking work of Anne Lake Prescott, critics have become aware of the importance of *Pléiade* poets and of translation and imitation for the reception of Petrarchism in England. They now fully recognize the centrality of French poetry to the European, transnational context in which England's literary idiom was fashioned.¹ But in a digital age that has revolutionized approaches to influence and source studies, the myth of Shakespeare the poetic genius impervious to influence dies hard. Although new, thought-provoking attribution theories have emerged for his dramatic works, as a lyric poet Shakespeare still baffles critics and defies digital anatomy. The most recent scholarly editions of Shakespeare's sonnets thus include surprisingly few references to other poets, and merely to point to loose thematic similarities, as if Shakespeare's debt to tradition was either untraceable, or limited to his contribution to the sonnet sequence as a genre. This essay argues that we need to move away from the myopic quest for sources to better perceive differing modalities of imitation in a transnational context. As William Kennedy reminds us, Shakespeare grew as an author in a multilingual, multicultural context, within a European community of readers and authors.² Shakespeare's singularity as a poet lies not in an alleged ignorance of tradition, but in his particular rapport with imitation, suggesting by the same token a deeper affinity between Shakespeare and French Du Bellay in their irreverent, ironic approach to the Petrarchan sonnet sequence and their participation in a larger European trend of anti-Petrarchism.

Du Bellay, who was hailed by Spenser as "first garland of free poësie / That France brought forth [...] well worthie [...] of immortalitie," had a prominence in England that no

other lyrical French poet enjoyed, not even Marot or the Huguenot-friendly Ronsard, mostly thanks to Spenser's mediation.³ Spenser first translated some of Du Bellay's *Songe* in Jan van der Noot's anti-Catholic *Theatre for Worldlings* (1569), before turning *Les Antiquitez de Rome* into "The Ruines of Rome," published in the 1591 *Complaints*.⁴ His interest in Catholic Du Bellay can perhaps best be explained by the French poet's satirical stance on Rome, which made him compatible with a Protestant outlook. Other Du Bellay sonnets were also absorbed into the English repertoire, often unacknowledged. Sir Arthur Gorges, a member of the Howard Catholic circle in the late 1570s, translated twenty-three of Du Bellay's poems, from five different collections. Samuel Daniel also translated five of his sonnets.⁵

There is no evidence that Shakespeare read Du Bellay in French, although the linguistic humor of *Henry V* and his reliance on French sources prove that he had some French.⁶ In a 1983 study, A. Kent Hieatt analyzed verbal and thematic echoes between Spenser's "Ruines" and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.⁷ Anne Coldiron and Hassan Melehy have since shown the importance of Du Bellay's program for a defense and illustration of the vernacular for European poets, pleading for a reconsideration of translation and imitation in the fashioning of an English literary idiom; but even Melehy could only point to a diffuse "influence" of Spenser's Du Bellay on Shakespeare, which he detects in the latter's conception of time and mutability, and of poetry as both granting immortality and embalming.⁸ More recently, Anne Prescott has framed the discussion of the verbal and thematic echoes between *Sonnets* and *Ruines* within the larger context of the European predilection for "Ruinish," the language of ruins.⁹ The description of time as "devouring" or "injurious," the "war" made against time, and words like "antique," "antiquities," and, even rarer, "to ruinate" were, as Prescott points out, shared by a generation of poets who had all read one another, and relied on a common transnational literature.¹⁰

While it is likely that Shakespeare had read Spenser's imitation, whether he had read

Du Bellay must remain a moot point. He could, however, have found in Du Bellay a precedent for an irreverent practice of imitation based on an ironic playfulness regarding generic conventions. For Du Bellay, like Shakespeare, revisits Petrarchism with a freedom that few poets of his generation had. *Les Antiquitez de Rome* can thus be read as a warped rewriting of a Petrarchan sequence, with the lost glory of Rome as a new Laura.¹¹ Through this personification, the sequence foregrounds the analogy between the ruined city and a ruined female body. Shakespeare suggests a similar, yet implicit, analogy between the fair youth and the remains of the past, by submitting his body to the “bloody tyrant time” (Sonnet 2), just as he compares Lucrece’s body to a ruined building in *The Rape of Lucrece*. In Sonnets 55 and 65, the youth is thus compared to ruined “statues” and “works of masonry,” both a reference to the decay of ancient empires and to a funeral monument “besmear’d with sluttish time”; and when Shakespeare emphasizes the immortalizing power of poetry, it is to associate the young man with physical decay.

Du Bellay and Shakespeare show an obvious affinity in their playful distortion of the generic and epistemological principles of Petrarchism. While Du Bellay’s *L’Olive* is a fairly orthodox Petrarchan sequence, he uses the form more critically in *Regrets*, where he invents an elegiac form to express Rome’s decadence as well as the speaker’s sense of loss, making of the sequence an anatomy of the melancholy self.¹² He also distorts the patronage relationships on which sonnet sequences are usually predicated by conjuring up a community of readers and friends, named in the sonnets, but alternatively blamed and praised. With the speaker as sole authority to elect the subjects of his literary commonwealth, he asserts the author’s symbolic power over his own patrons. Shakespeare also plays with the conventional tropes of patronage, although it is by turning a patron figure first into the beloved, then a rival, and by substituting the rhetoric of praise with blame. Like Du Bellay, Shakespeare thus foregrounds the author’s symbolic power; and while he claims to be immortalizing the youth,

he reneges on the implicit contract of the patronage relationship by paradoxically failing to name him in the sequence. Moreover, like Du Bellay's *Regrets*, Shakespeare's 1609 *Sonnets* read as an exploration of the self, with its seasons and its discontents.

As Kennedy and Prescott have noted, Du Bellay, the most anti-Petrarchan of *Pléiade* poets, and Shakespeare were both vocal about their criticism of Petrarchism, and share a similar sense of irony.¹³ This is perceptible in their treatment of the blazon, which Shakespeare describes in Sonnet 106 as a *passé* poetic practice. Du Bellay's verse diatribe against Petrarchan poets, "Contre les Pétrarquistes," published in *Divers Jeux rustiques*, was known in England — it was imitated by Gorges. In this poem, Du Bellay dismisses the blazon as a mere rhetorical exercise.¹⁴ In contrast with highfaluting lovers who plunder the heavens for divine comparisons, the speaker describes himself as a no-nonsense lover, looking for a more concrete satisfaction: "For me I cannott reache soe hye."¹⁵ This poem anticipates Shakespeare's persona of the down-to-earth lover who admits he "never saw a goddesse goe" in Sonnet 130.¹⁶ In *Regrets* 91, Du Bellay similarly plays with generic expectations: after a moment of hermeneutic hesitation, the blazon gradually turns out to be a "counterblazon" — the ironic portrait of an ugly woman. In the last lines, the speaker rejects the woman, though he had ironically treated her as a goddess: because he is a mortal, he cannot love her and gives her up.¹⁷

Du Bellay's *L'Olive* 91 is a counterblazon that conversely becomes a paradoxical blazon, like Shakespeare's Sonnet 130: Du Bellay's speaker angrily feigns to let go of his lady, "unblazoning" her step by step and ordering her to relinquish assumed qualities unduly stolen from nature. In Daniel's version: "Restore thy tresses to the golden Ore / [...] Bequeath the heavens the starres that I adore."¹⁸ While the woman is thus reified into a material composite reminiscent of an Arcimboldo object portrait, Du Bellay's sonnet seems to end on the usual complaint about the lady's obduracy; but at the last moment, an ironic twist is

introduced with the conjunction “or”: “Ou aux rochez rendez ce cœur de marbre / Et aux lions cet’ humble felonnie.”¹⁹ This playful “or” cancels out the previous critique and reasserts the validity of the blazon: *if* the lady renounces her cruelty, she can get away with her thefts and remain the *sans pareille*.

L’Olive 91 was imitated at least twice in England, by Gorges and by Daniel, and both ignore the final twist. Gorges dryly dismisses his mistress: “teach me withall how to foregett her name.” Daniel, perhaps because he read Gorges’ imitation, similarly overlooks the conjunction “or” and adds a blunt last line: “So shalt thou cease to plague, and I to paine.”²⁰ These versions are perhaps more in tune with the coarse realism that was all the rage in England then, but they ignore Du Bellay’s subtle play on the expectations created by the counterblazon and his shift to paradoxical blazon (revolving around “or”). This deafness to Du Bellay’s playfulness fascinates in light of Shakespeare’s own ironic treatment of the blazon in Sonnet 130, where in a final twist, the speaker paradoxically subverts the topos of the counterblazon of the ugly lady and endorses the conclusion of a conventional blazon by reasserting the superiority of his mistress *with* all her faults.²¹

Finally, both Shakespeare and Du Bellay share an attention to the epistemology of Petrarchism, namely its neoplatonic framework. Like Du Bellay, Shakespeare makes physical desire explicit — with his sonnets dedicated to sinful desire, in particular. In “Contre les Pétrarquistes,” Du Bellay revisits the androgyne of Plato’s *Symposium* to turn it into a metaphor for the perfect, equal friendship between lovers. After denouncing the artificiality of this stance, he nevertheless proposes to continue wooing his lady as “the most beautiful idea,” if she so wishes, provided that she step down from her pedestal.²² In his imitation, Gorges leaves out Du Bellay’s critique of the neoplatonic principles of Petrarchism and the reference to the physicality of desire. Shakespeare’s engagement with neoplatonism is explicit, however: the youth is presented as the perfect union of “fair, kind, and true” (Sonnet 105),

before betrayal causes this Platonic trinity to splinter.²³ Sonnet 20 subverts the Petrarchan topos of impossibility, which proceeds here from a supplement (“*one thing to my purpose nothing*”) that renders him improper for the poet’s love. The sonnet thus wittily reasserts the paradoxical chastity of this “Platonic” love, suggesting a dichotomy between spiritual love (“thy love”) and physical love (“thy love’s use”), in a complete revision of the Platonic antithesis between the celestial and terrestrial Venuses of the *Symposium*. This in turn displaces the topos of loss and failure that lies at the heart of sonnet sequences by attributing the impossibility of love to this “supplement,” experienced as privation. Other obstacles are then evoked to dissipate the Platonic fable created in the symbolic system of the *Sonnets*. The final sequence-within-the-sequence focusing on the speaker’s sinful love for a fallen woman (experienced as abject) allows other variations on Petrarchan topoi: here, a darker conception of love emerges, which is subsumed by a new poetic and a new, blasphemous metaphysic, as the speaker chooses to call beautiful and good what he knows is ugly and evil.

Like Du Bellay in *Regrets*, Shakespeare makes of the sonnet sequence a kind of psychomachia — a drama of a sinful, split self.²⁴ Whether or not Shakespeare had read Du Bellay is of no importance, for their kinship lies elsewhere: in the ironic, self-conscious playfulness with which they revise the Petrarchan tradition. Melehy argues that Spenser practices a form of humanistic imitation, “an imitative reworking of Du Bellay and the other poets, especially Virgil and Petrarch,” in which the original is never far from sight, with a view to creating “an English literature that would rival that of Antiquity, and then ultimately surpass it.”²⁵ Shakespeare’s and Du Bellay’s attitude to imitation is different. Reminiscences are so well digested that they disappear from sight. If, according to Melehy, Spenser’s *Complaints* are “a kind of ‘defence and illustration’ of English poetry,” then perhaps Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* might be read as the “Regrets” of Petrarchism, the magnificent rearing of a new poetry from the glorious ruins or *disjecta membra* of a transnational poetic language

which, around 1600, already belonged to the past.²⁶

Notes

¹ Anne Lake Prescott, *French Poets and the English Renaissance. Studies in Fame and Transformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). For a discussion of translational literature(s), see Warren Boutcher, “Intertraffic: Transnational Literatures and Languages in Late Renaissance England and Europe,” in *International Exchange in the Early Modern Book World*, eds. Matthew McLean and Sara K. Barker (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 343–73.

² William J. Kennedy, “‘*Les langues des hommes sont pleines de tromperies*’: Shakespeare, French Poetry, and Alien Tongues,” in *Textual Conversations in the Renaissance*, eds. Zachary Lesser and Benedict S. Robinson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 91–111.

³ Edmund Spenser, *Complaints* (London, 1591), S4^v.

⁴ Jan van der Noot, *A Theatre... [for] Worldlings* (London, 1569); Joachim Du Bellay, *Les Antiquitez de Rome* (Paris, 1558).

⁵ Arthur Gorges, *Poems*, ed. Helen Estabrook Sandison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953); Samuel Daniel, *Delia* (London, 1592). See Prescott, *French Poets*, 52–59. Gorges' poems were not printed before the twentieth century.

⁶ William J. Kennedy, “*Les langues des hommes*,” 91–93.

⁷ A. Kent Hieatt, “The Genesis of Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Spenser’s *Ruines of Rome*,” *PMLA* 98 (1983): 800–814; William Shakespeare, *Sonnets* (London, 1609).

⁸ A. E. B. Coldiron, “How Spenser Excavates Du Bellay’s *Antiquitez*; or, The Role of the Poet, Lyric Historiography, and the English Sonnet,” *JEGP* 101 (2002): 41–67; Hassan Melehy, *The Poetics of Literary Transfer in Early Modern France and England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 205–20. See also Prescott, *French Poets*, 65–68, and Richard Danson Brown, “Forming the ‘First Garland of Free Poësie’: Spenser’s Dialogue with Du Bellay in *Ruines of Rome*,” *Translation and Literature* 7 (1998): 3–22.

⁹ Anne Lake Prescott, “Du Bellay and Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 134–50, at 135–37.

¹⁰ Hieatt, “Genesis,” 801.

¹¹ Wayne A. Rebhorn, “Du Bellay’s Imperial Mistress: *Les Antiquitez de Rome* as Petrarchist Sonnet Sequence,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 609–22; Prescott, “Du Bellay,” 142–43.

¹² Joachim Du Bellay, *L’Olive* (Paris, 1550), *Les Regrets* (Paris, 1558).

¹³ Kennedy, “*Les langues des hommes*,” 108, Prescott, “Du Bellay,” 144–45.

¹⁴ Joachim Du Bellay, *Œuvres poétiques*, 2 vols., ed. Daniel Aris and Françoise Joukovsky (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1993), 2:190–92.

¹⁵ Gorges, *Poems*, 52; Du Bellay: “Mais quant à moy, qui plus terrestre suis, / [...] Le plus subtil, qu’en amour je poursuis / S’appelle jouissance.” (*Œuvres* 2:194)

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Sonnets* (London, 1609), H4.

¹⁷ Du Bellay, *Œuvres*, 2:84.

¹⁸ *Delia*, D1^v; Du Bellay, *Œuvres*, 1:62; also Gorges, *Poems*, 23.

¹⁹ Du Bellay, *ibid.* “Or return to the rocks this marble heart, / And to lions this humbling treachery” (my translation).

²⁰ Gorges, *Poems*, 23; Daniel, *Delia*, D1^v. See Prescott, *French Poets*, 59, and Christopher R. Wilson, “Samuel Daniel in France and Italy,” *Studies in Philology* 34 (1937): 148–67.

²¹ See Patrizia Bettella, *The Ugly Woman. Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

²² Du Bellay, *Œuvres*, 2:194, 196 (my translation). For Gorges’ edulcorated version, *Poems*, 50–52.

²³ For a different interpretation, see Stephen Medcalf, “Shakespeare on Beauty, Truth and Transcendence,” in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah

Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 117–25, and William J. Kennedy, “Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Economy of Petrarchan Aesthetics,” in *Petrarchism at Work: Contextual Economies in the Age of Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 219–312.

²⁴ See Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

²⁵ Melehy, *Poetics*, 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 76–77.