

Arms and Letters and the Name “William Shake-speare” Robert Detobel

I submit some reflections on arms and letters, a major theme at the end of the 15th century and throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. The question whether arms or letters should have the better claim to political leadership played a major role in the debates of the legitimacy of aristocratic rule. We can start with Cicero's famous phrase *arma cedant togae, concedat laurea laudi*, in *De Officiis*, “Yield, ye arms, to the toga, to civic praise, ye laurels.”¹ Another possible translation would be: “Let arms give way to the toga, give the laurel to civility.” Cicero's influence on Western European culture and ideas can hardly be overstated. The idea is expressed, among other places, in Thomas Nashe's preface to the (surreptitious) 1591 edition of *Astrophel and Stella*. Nashe addresses the Countess of Pembroke and includes a remembrance of her brother, Sir Philip Sidney: “Amongst the which, fair sister of *Phoebus*, & eloquent secretary to the Muses, most rare Countess of Pembroke, thou art not to be omitted; whom Artes doe adore as a second *Minerva*, and our Poets extoll as the Patroness of their invention; for in thee the Lesbian Sappho with her lyric harp is disgraced, & the Laurel Garland which thy Brother so bravely advanced on his Lance is still kept green in the Temple of *Pallas*”² (emphasis added).

“Arms” are expressed here by metonymy as “lance,” sometimes it was expressed by “spear” or “sword”; “letters” are expressed by “laurel,” more generally by “pen.” Sidney is praised by Nashe for his dedication to both arms and letters. In the First Folio Ben Jonson will be praising Shakespeare for “shaking a lance at the eyes of ignorance,” i.e., for using his pen as a soldier in the war against ignorance. The junction of arm and letters indicates an aristocrat dedicated to both arms and letters, as in the case of Sidney. And as in the case of Shakespeare.

We have here an example of how the dichotomy of arms and letters structured the social perception, thinking and language of the Elizabethans. Without awareness of it, we would probably not note that Ben Jonson was speaking of Shakespeare in a similar register as Thomas Nashe of Sidney, as an aristocrat who also excelled in letters.

At some time before his death in 1661, Thomas Fuller wrote on Shakespeare: “*Martial* in the *Warlike* sound of his Sur-name (whence some may conjecture him of a *Military extraction*), *Hasti-vibrans*, or *Shake-speare*.” So Fuller understood, playfully or not, the name as a signifier. It is noteworthy that Fuller marks out the signifying name from the mere surname by a hyphen. Hence, contrary to what many Stratfordians would like us to believe, the hyphen, in that it makes the surname signify, is not insignificant, as David Kathman has continually tried to argue. It was probably the same intention that moved Ben Jonson to write the name in the list of actors in two different ways, once as “Shakespeare” in the list for *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), and once as “Shake-Speare” in the list for *Sejanus* (1603).³ Thomas Vicars in 1628 also took the name to be a signifier when he wrote, “To these I believe should be added that famous poet who takes his name from ‘Shaking’ and ‘Spear.’”⁴

Arms and Letters

The following is a list of several quotes related to the topic, first outside England, then in England.

Outside England

From Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, it was first printed in 1528, quoted here in modern translation by George Bull (London: Penguin books, 1976), 88:

However, in addition to goodness, I believe that for all of us *the true and principal adornment of the mind is letters*; although the French, I know, recognize, *only the nobility of arms* and think nothing of all the rest; and so they not only do not appreciate learning but detest it, regarding men of letters as basely inferior and thinking it a great insult to call anyone a scholar.

(emphasis added).

From Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, contemporaneous translation by Thomas Hoby (London, 1561):

But beside goodnesse, the true and principall ornament of the mynde in every manne (I believe) are *letters*, although the Frenchmen know onelye the noblesse of *armes*, and passe for nothing beside: so that they do not onelye not sett by letters, but they rather abhorre them, and all learned men they

count verie rascalles, and they think it a great vilany when any one of them is called a clarke.

Though it is mainly concerned with letters (also termed “arts” or “sciences”), arms are said by Castiglione to be more important. He does not fully subscribe to Cicero’s *arma cedant togae*. The insistence on the precedence of arms was essential for the medieval aristocracy, which had developed from a class of warriors, to affirm its leading position (as “governors,” as Sir Thomas Elyot termed it in 1531). Already the Spanish Marquis de Santillana (1398-1458) had criticized the nobility’s hostility to learning. A Spanish marquis felt it not unnecessary to maintain: “Science [letters] neither blunts the sword nor slackens the spear (lance) in the hand of the knight.”⁵ The poet-soldier Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536), through whose influence the Italian sonnet took root in Spain, wrote: “Now I hold the *sword*, now the *pen*” (emphasis added). Stefano Guazzo (1530-1593), author of the widely read educational handbook *The Civil Conversation*, the first three books of which were translated into English in 1581 and the fourth in 1586, wrote in his *Dialogues Pacevoli* (Pleasant Dialogues): “Few knights excel in both *letters and arms*” (emphasis added), and he goes on to praise one of his interlocutors as a new Caesar, no less excellent in *letters than in arms*.

Within England

“Tam Marti quam Mercurio” (as much Mars as Mercury) was George Gascoigne’s motto. It is an equivalent of “as much arms as letters,” the god Mercury symbolizing letters. Most of the usual metaphors for arms and letters are brought together in Gascoigne’s sentence “poet with a spear... a Soldier armed, with pencil in his ear, with pen to fight, and sword to ride a letter.”⁶ The idea of a “poet with a spear” will later appear in a few references to Shakespeare (see above Thomas Fuller, Thomas Vicars, also the anonymous “M.L.” who has “poetry supported by a spear”).

In the play *Campaspe*, John Lyly twice refers to the dichotomy of “arms and letters.” Alexander the Great’s general Hephestion: “That whilst arms cease, arts may flourish, and joining letters with lances we endeavour to be as good philosophers as soldiers, knowing it no less praise to be wise than commendable to be valiant” (I.i.95-97). Later, in II.ii.34-36, the same Hephestios reminds Alexander: “Will you handle the spindle with *Hercules*, when you should shake the speare with *Achilles*? Is the warlike sound of drumme and trumpe turned to the soft noyse of lire and lute?”

This suggests that the representation of Shakespeare as a “poet with a spear” might have been more familiar in literary and courtly circles than we now can comprehend and makes it likely that the pseudonym “Shake-speare” was derived from Gascoigne’s sentence, as a poetical-ironical name for a courtier whose first occupation should have been, according to Castiglione, the military profession, “to shake a spear,” but who was principally a poet.

Less directly we find the reference to arms and letters in Gabriel Harvey’s speech to the Earl of Oxford at Audley End in 1578, coming after Gascoigne (who

had died in 1577). In Harvey's Latin speech the passage reads *Vultus tela vibrat*. Captain Ward translated it "thy countenance shakes spears." To this it has been objected that the Latin word for spear is *hasta*, whereas *telum* designates more generally a weapon to be thrown, such as a dart, spear, javelin or missile. However, this is hair splitting. The tenor of Harvey's speech to Oxford is that he should abandon writing. "O thou hero worthy of renown, throw away the insignificant pen, throw away bloodless books, and writings that serve no useful purpose, now must the sword be brought into play, now is the time for thee to sharpen the spear and to handle great engines of war."⁷ Ward may be accused of a bias in twice translating "spear." In fact, I think his translation is defensible, for what Harvey clearly means is that Oxford should dedicate himself entirely to arms, not letters. And in English the most common metonymies for handling "arms" were: "to shake a spear/lance" or "to hold a sword" (see Gascoigne). However, I don't think that Harvey's words can be taken as directly defining Oxford as Shakespeare. On the contrary, the pseudonym "Shakespeare" suggests that he was a courtier, an aristocrat whose principal occupation should be the military profession and that he was not living up to his more important vocation as a military man (a reproach he reiterated in "Speculum Tuscanismi").

Why "William"?

If the significance of the name "Shakespeare" seems clear, the significance of the first name "William" is less so. "William" can be read as "I am Will." Did Oxford bear the name "Will" or "Willy" as a pastoral name? The best evidence I know of, as Charles Wisner-Barrell has pointed out, is Nashe's dedication of *Strange News* to "Apis lapis, alias Master William," and his reference (in the text proper) to "Will. Monox."

But why should Oxford have borne the pastoral name Will? That the name was apparently also used for Philip Sidney does not rule out that it was also used for Oxford. A pastoral name was not the same as a pseudonym. Two different persons could be given the same pastoral name by different authors and even by the same author (for instance, Melibœus in Chettle's *England's Mourning Garment*). As Sidney was dead by 1592-93, the date of Nashe's *Strange News*, the name could have devolved to Oxford.

But what could be the meaning of "Will"? Playing on the words "wit" and "will" occurred frequently. The first occurrence I came across rather looks like a curiosity. It is an entry in the Stationers' Register of 7 September 1580, to William Wright of "*WILLIAM WITTE, wittes will, or willswitt Chuse you whether*." Nicholas Breton published two minor works: *Wit's Trenchmour – In a conference had between a scholar and an angler* (1597) (the trenchmore was an Irish dance), and *The Will of Wit*, according to A.B. Grosart and Halliwell-Phillipps written before 1582 and the same work as *William Witte*; it contains commendatory verses signed "W.S."; no issue of 1580-82 is extant; the first known version bears the date 1599. Halliwell-Phillipps declares the ascription to Shakespeare absurd; he prefers William Smith

as author, probably on the basis of the mere initials; Grosart believes they have a Shakespearean sound; in point of poetical sensibility Grosart is more to be trusted than Halliwell-Phillipps, whose spirit was that of a collector).

Breton's *Will of Wit* can be found here online at <https://archive.org/details/willwitotherwis00bretgoog>

Most interestingly, he writes: "Since when, I have wandred through a wilderness of woe, which in the mappe of that country (I find) is called the Desart of Desire." Even more interestingly, Breton's booklet contains a "Song between Wit and Will" which is an obvious variation on Oxford's "When wert thou borne, Desire."

Oxford:

When wert thou born, Desire? In pomp and prime of May.
By whom, sweet boy, wert thou begot? By good conceit, men say.
Tell me, who was thy nurse? Fresh youth in sugared joy.
What was thy meat and daily food? Sore sighs with great annoy.

Breton:

Wit. What art thou, Will? *W.* A babe of natures brood.
Wit. Who was thy syre? *W.* Sweet lust, as lovers say.
Wit. Thy mother who? *W.* Wild lustie wanton blood.
Wit. When wert thou born? *W.* In merrie moneth of May.
Wit. And where brought up? *W.* In school of little skill.
Wit. What learndst thou there? *W.* Love is my lesson still.
Possibly Breton is the (anonymous) author of the following song text:
All my wits hat will enwrapped
 All my sense desire entrapped
 All my faith to fancy fixed
 All my joys to love amixed
 All my love I offer thee
 Once for all yet look on me.

Breton might possibly also be the author of poem 15 of *The Passionate Pilgrim*:

It was a lording's daughter, the fairest one of three,
That liked of her master as well as well might be,
Till looking on an Englishman, the fairest that eye could see,
Her fancy fell a-turning.
Long was the combat doubtful that love with love did fight,
To leave the master loveless, or kill the gallant knight;

The entry of Breton's *Wit of Will* as "WILLIAM WITTE, wittes will, or willswitt Chuse you whether" shows that the pun on "Will" and "Will-i-am" was more or less familiar to contemporaries and no modern fancy. Moreover, Breton's booklet justifies the interpretation of "will" as desire.

....Enter William Shakspere

How did William Shakspere of Stratford come into play? Surely because of his name. How could his role as a front work? Some anti-Stratfordians have resorted to an analogy with the McCarthy era. Take the case of the screenwriter James Dalton Trumbo. Trumbo wrote several scripts under pseudonym. For the script of *Roman Holiday* he received the Academy Award. Being blacklisted, he was fronted by Ian McLellan Hunter, who was the official recipient of the award. However, this is the wrong analogy. In Shakespeare's day there were no Academy Awards, Pulitzer prizes, Oscars and the like. In addition, Hunter was a screenwriter himself. Not only was Shakspere no writer, he could hardly write anything. How could he have passed as the author of *Venus and Adonis* or *The Rape of Lucrece*, when he was not able to write? It might have been possible on condition he stayed in Stratford. But he did not; he was in London, probably from 1594 to 1597-98. Was he in London before 1594? There is no trace of him until late in 1594. After 1598 it is clear that he was in London but, as Charles Nicholl has put it, as a lodger. Despite almost frenetic research no London address has been found for him. A great many London addresses have come to light for other actors. The Quiney letter and the subsequent exchange of letters between Richard Quiney and Abraham Sturley reveal that he had no permanent address in London (the Quiney letter does not show one). From the Mountjoy-Belott suit it is clear that in 1604 he had been lodging in Mountjoy's house for some time. All documents between 1598 and 1616 identify him as a resident in Stratford, where he had bought a house in 1597. His "permanent" London career seems to have been short-lived.

It is hard to imagine a sustained London career under such circumstances. Yet this is what Diana Price seems to have attempted in *Shakespeare's Unorthodox Biography*, and William Leahy seems to have subscribed to it in *Shakespeare and His Authors: Critical Perspectives on the Authorship Question*.

The Name "Chrétien de Troyes" and the Name "William Shakespeare": A Comparison

The following is an extract from the first chapter about the signification of the name Chrétien de Troyes, which I think carries some relevance to that of the name William Shakespeare.

Considering that authors proved so skillful in the art of concealment and, on the other hand, so indifferent to literary property should incite us to a more in-depth analysis of the rhetorics at work in the medieval practice of coining

pseudonyms. From thence to the conjecture that the name *Crestiens de Troyes*, of which there is no trace in the archives, it takes only one step more. Suffice it to center on a salient fact: the way Chrétien de Troyes associates the first part of his name with the word *crestiantez* (Christianity):

Herewith I shall begin a history,
That will be remembered
As long as Christianity subsists:
That is of which *Crestiens prides himself*

It would be difficult to deny that the association of the two words (*crestiantez* and *Crestiens* — *Christianity* and *Christian*) clearly represents a deliberate stylistic effect linked with the conventions of a prologue. One can readily see that, while the author foregrounds the first part of his name by giving it quite a “Christian” accent, he is at the same time eying the signifying potential of the second part. In our view Chrétien is playing on the homophony of *Troyes*, a city in the northeast province Champagne, and *Troie*, the French spelling of the ancient city of Troy. *Troyes* and *Troie* are pronounced identically. We should bear in mind that in the Middle Ages the city of Aeneas was linked with both a literary and an historiographic tradition which made the Franks of France, to the benefit of their greater glory, the descendants of the Trojans. In addition, Troy supplied the first French chivalric novels, clad in an ancient coat, with one of the most productive foundation myths in the Middle Ages.

All this leads to the conjecture that the name *Crestiens de Troyes*, cleric and author of Christian or “Trojan” novels, suggests the twofold origin of his works through the signification of a name and a surname, whereby the latter contradicts the former. Indeed, how could a *Christian* who glorifies *Christianity* at the same time be a dweller in the pagant city of Troy?

Dragonetti further remarks that with Chrétien the name operates as a kind of revelation. “The names are pure poetical signifiers.”

Some additional reflections. Not only the French cherished the tradition of ancient Rome and, via Rome, their descent from Troy. As such England and France entered a cultural and historical contention for the medieval foundation myth. See Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, book III, canto IX: “For noble *Britons* sprong from *Trojans* bold/And *Troynouant* was built of old *Troyes* ashes cold.” Not surprisingly, Britomart, the personification of Queen Elizabeth, and the false Paridell compete for the true descent from Troy. The name Paridell points to both the Trojan hero and to Paris, the capital of France. Paridell probably represents King Henri III of France, who had a bad reputation of being a decadent king. Incidentally, some interpreters who believe that in false Paridell and his bad reputation was based on the Earl of Oxford, though on the backdrop of historical facts he is most likely to represent Henri III.

When Rome, during its expansion in the Mediterranean region, came in contact with the far superior Greek culture, it must have worked like a culture shock. Virgil’s *Aeneid* can be seen as the attempt to overcome this culture shock by tracing

the Roman descent to Troy, a world as old as Greece and with a culture equal to that of Hellas.

We may conceive that the Western knighthood, at first a rather unmannered and uncivilized class of mere warriors, experienced a similar shock when it came in contact with the more civilized Byzantine and Middle East. Chrétien de Troyes's novels can be seen as an attempt to civilize the manners of the knighthood. His novel *Erec and Énide*, in the prologue of which he expresses this aim, is telling. "Erec" is a name of Frankish origin; Énide, derived from Aeneid, is of Trojan origin. It is the task of the woman Énide to soften the manners of the rough knight Erec. The same pattern of sentimental education survives in Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* with the knights Musidorus and Pyrocles and the heroines Philoclea and Pamela.

Thus the name Chrétien de Troyes can be understood both as the name of a person and as applicable to a person and a literary program. So can the name William Shakespeare. The surname "Shakespeare" symbolizes the martial part. In John Lyly's play *Campaspe* it is what the general Hephestion urges Alexander the Great to consider as his genuine duty: to shake a spear like Achilles. But in Lyly's play Alexander has a weaker, more feminine side. This opposite to spear-shaking Achilles (as the dichotomy "Christian/Trojan" in the case of Chrétien de Troyes), this more passionate, feminine side is symbolized in the name William, Will-I-am, Will. The first name "Will," meaning "desire," is as symbolic as "Shakespeare," which, if understood as personifying metaphor, destroys the argument for someone really bearing the first name William from the "will" sonnets; for, after all, though "Chrétien" is a real French first name, we cannot be certain that it was the real first name of the author of the 12th-century chivalric novels.

My suggestion is that the name "Chrétien de Troyes," and the name "William Shakespeare" both refer not only to an identity, but also to a literary program.

Endnotes

¹ *De officiis, On Duties*, translation of Walter Miller (London: Heinemann, 1913), I.77.

² Thomas Nashe, *The Works of*, 5 volumes, ed. R. B. McKerrow and F.P. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), vol. 3, 331.

³ Fred Schurink, "An unnoticed arly reference to Shakespeare," *Notes and Queries*, March 2006, 72-74.

⁴ STC 14751, 438.

⁵ Jean-Marc Pelorson, *Les Letrados – juristes castillans sous Philippe III. Recherches sur leur place dans la société, la culture et l'état.* (Poitiers, 1980), 208. Philip III was king of Spain from 1598-1621.

⁶ Gascoigne, Works II.

⁷ Charlton Ogburn, Jr., *The Mysterious William Shakespeare—The Myth & The Reality* (McLean, Virginia, 1984), 597.