

RONSARD, PIERRE DE

Ronsard, life and works. Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), called in his day the ‘Prince of Poets,’ was born in the Valley of the Loire, into an illustrious family. His ancestors had founded the French branch of the family in their Manoir de la Poissonière, having behind them a history of noble exploits in the Hundred Years War. Ronsard himself was educated at home, then sent, in the fashion of aristocratic youth, to a nearby College, the College de Navarre where he benefitted from the traditional firm training in Greek and Latin. At the age of twelve he became a page of the Duke of Orleans; from that portal his way was opened into an early life of travel and sophisticated exposure. When Madeleine of France was married to the King of Scotland, Ronsard was sent along to serve as a page; his subsequent youthful travels thus included extensive stays in Scotland and England, and shortly later in Germany and Italy. He was by age twenty fluent in English, German, and Italian, no small part of his qualifications for poetic eminence, not to mention his diplomatic prospects, for at this point Ronsard seemed destined for an important role as a representative of the monarchy. At this fulcrum point in his brilliant youth, however, he was struck by deafness, a handicap challenging his strongest powers; and only the power of his personality led him to a life of extraordinary literary creativity. Ronsard determined quickly that he would be unable to pursue a diplomatic career, and betook himself to study the College Coqueret, where he was to confirm his true vocation, as a poet, and to make the acquaintance of those other distinguished young men—with whom he was to become immersed in the *Pleiade* movement. (The *Pleiade* were a cohort of seven brilliant and congenial poets, who named themselves after the Alexandrian septet of ancient fame, and who numbered such luminaries as Ronsard, du Bellay, and Antoine du Baif.) Ronsard’s self-deepening took over with several years of intense study of Greek and Latin literatures—one might think of the studious preoccupations of Rabelais or Margaret of Navarre—and before long came an increasingly close friendship with a kindred spirit, Joachim du Bellay, who was to be Ronsard’s partner in his literary career. Not long after the formation and fruition of the *Pleiade*, Ronsard was ready to retire to his country home, to take advantage of many kinds of royal perquisites, and to create the works that have made him famous: works touching every literary genre except drama, and paying constant close tribute to the poetries of Latin authors like Ovid and Horace.

Ronsard’s genius in poetry: deeply immersed in the subtle turns of phrase, enjambements, and feeling for interior cesurae, Ronsard did his best work when letting deep feeling out in measured and nostalgic tone. (The works we turn to with greatest pleasure are the *Hymns*, (1555), and the *Amours* (1556). His immense popularity in his day—the next two centuries would usher in a sharp decline in Ronsard’s literary reputation—is to us clearest in the infinite (and perfect) sadness of a sonnet like the following translation by the equally great English poet, W.B. Yeats:

*When you are very old, at evening, by the fire,
spinning wool by candlelight and winding it in skeins,
you will say in wonderment as you recite my lines:
“Ronsard admired me in the days when I was fair.”
Then not one of your servants dozing gently there
hearing my name’s cadence break through your low repines
but will start into wakefulness out of her dreams
and bless your name — immortalised by my desire.*

Reading

Primary source reading

Wolfe, Humbert, *Sonnets for Helen*, 1972.

Secondary source reading

Kenny, Neil, *An Introduction to Sixteenth century French Literature and Thought*, 2008.

Further reading

Castor, Grahame, *Pleiade Poetics*, 1964.

Original language reading

Fumaroli, Marc, *L'age de l'éloquence*, 1980.

Suggested paper topics

Do you think that we, today, are still enchanted by the Renaissance poetic theme of immortalizing a beloved individual, or oneself, in poetry? Is that a poetic conceit that leave us cold, or a perennial desire of the human imagination?

Ronsard, unlike Villon for example, lived and wrote from a very privileged background. Do you feel the results of this privilege in his poetry? Does he nonetheless seem to write for the human condition in a broad sense? Was Renaissance lyric, in France, largely a creation of the upper middle class or aristocracy?

Excerpt http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Ronsard.htm#_Toc69989198

*I'd like to turn the deepest of yellows,
Falling, drop by drop, in a golden shower,
Into her lap, my lovely Cassandra's,
As sleep is stealing over her brow.*

*Then I'd like to be a bull, white as snow,
Transforming myself, for carrying her,
In April, when, through meadows so tender,
A flower, through a thousand flowers, she goes.*

*I'd like then, the better to ease my pain,
To be Narcissus, and she a fountain,
Where I'd swim all night, at my pleasure:*

*And I'd like it, too, if Aurora would never
Light day again, or wake me ever,
So that this night could last forever.*