'Throughly ransackt': Elizabethan Novella Collections and Henry Wotton's Courtlie Controuersie of Cupid's Cautels (1578)

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Abstract

Henry Wotton's Courtlie Controuersie of Cupids Cautels (1578), a translation of Jaques Yver's Le Printemps d'Yver (1572) deserves a place in the history of English prose fiction, of Tudor translations, of Euphuism, and of English poetry. In the late sixteenth century, several writers referred to it, quoted from it, adapted it, including John Lyly, Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd, and possibly Shakespeare. It is then surprising that Wotton's work, contrary to other Elizabethan novella collections, has hitherto largely escaped the attention of scholars. Situating A Courtlie Controuersie in the literary culture of its time, this article presents an introduction to Wotton's collection and argues that it is a work of considerable historical importance that still awaits full appreciation.

Reference


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Henry Wotton's *Courtlie Controversie of Cupids Cautels* (1578), a translation of Jacques Yver's *Le Printemps d'Yver* (1572), is a work of considerable importance. It deserves a place in the history of English prose fiction, of Tudor translations, of Euphuism, and of English poetry. In the late sixteenth century, several writers referred to it, quoted from it, adapted it. It is then surprising that Wotton's work has hitherto largely escaped the attention of scholars. Other collections of novellas have found their modern editors: William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566-67); Sir Geoffrey Fenton's *Tragical Discourses* (1567), a collection of novellas translated from the *Histoires tragiques* by Belleforest and Boistuau; George Pettie's *A Petite Pallace of Pettie his Pleasure* (1576); George Turberville's *Tragical Tales* (1576), ten novellas translated in verse, chiefly from Boccaccio; and Barnaby Rich's *Rich His Farewell to Military Profession* (1581). A *Courtlie Controversie*, however, has not been printed since its first appearance in 1578. Consequently, Woton's work has been passed over in some of the most comprehensive studies: in his monumental (ten volume) *History of the English Novel*, E. A. Baker devotes more than two hundred and fifty pages to the Elizabethans, but fails to mention Wotton. C. S. Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* does not mention the collection of tales either, nor is it listed in his comprehensive bibliography. The four volumes of *Sixteenth-Century British Non-dramatic Writers* in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (DLB) series cover more than two hundred and fifty pages to the Elizabethans, but fails to mention Wotton. Nor is *A Courtlie Controversie* included in the comprehensive *Microfiche Collection of Prose Fiction of Shakespeare's Time*, edited by Charles W. Whitworth. Similarly, Wotton does not find his way into studies on Elizabethan translation such as F. O. Matthiessen's *Translation: An Elizabethan Art*, James Winn's *Elizabethan Prose Translation*, or J. Clements's *Tudor Translations: An Anthology*. In *Antecedents of the English Novel*, 1400-1600, Margaret Schlauch notes that *A Courtlie Controversie* has been neglected by scholars. She writes that Wotton's collection of tales "is to be recommended as a subject of future investigation", a recommendation to which nobody seems to have responded so far. Very little is known about Henry Wotton, the author of *A Courtlie Controversie*. He is not to be confused with Sir Henry Wotton, poet and diplomat in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I, who was not born before 1568. The *Dictionary of National Biography* informs us that he was "son of John Wooton of North Tudenhall, and brother of one Wooton of Tudenhall, Norfolk, whose second wife was Mary or Anne, daughter of George Nevill, lord Bergavenny, and widow of Thomas Fiennes, lord Dacre of the South." The Lady Dacre of the South, Wotton's sister-in-law, is the dedicatee of *A Courtlie Controversie*. A *Courtlie Controversie* was published in 1578, a good ten years after Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1566, vol. 1; 1567, vol. 2) and Geoffrey Fenton's *Tragical Discourses* (1567) and only two years after Pettie's *A Petite Pallace of Pettie His Pleasure*. Novellas had clearly become a fashionable genre by his time. As Wotton writes in his address "To the fauourable and wel-willing Reader": considering howe greatly tragicall histories haue bin commended and esteemed of late dayes, even in such sorte as it seemeth a shame vnto all Gentlemen and Gentlewomen, nurtured in the schoole of curtesie, but principally vnto Courtiers, to be ignoraunt thereof. The moment was propitious for English prose in general. A number of works of lasting importance were written within a few years: Holinshed's *Chronicles* had appeared a year earlier and North's *Plutarch* was going to be published a year later. Lyly's *Euphues* appeared in 1578, *Euphues and His England* in 1580, whereas Sidney's *Arcadia* and his *Apology for Poetry*, although not published for many years, were written around 1580. Wotton's collection of tales was entered in the Stationers' Register on 1 July 1578.
The first and, as far as we know, only edition appeared later in the same year with the following title page:

A Courtlie controuersie | of Cupids Cautels |
Conteyning fiue Tragicall Histories | very pithie, pleasant, pitifull, and profitable; | Discoured vpon wyth Argumentes of Loue, | by three gentlemen and two gentlewomen enter- | medled with divers delicate Sonets and | Rithmes, exceeding delightful to | refresh the yrkesomnesse of tedious tyme. | Translated out of French as neare | as our Englishe phrase will permit, | by H. W. Gentleman | [device] | At London, | Imprinted by Francis Coldock, | and Henry Bynneman. | Anno. 1578.

The Black-Letter quarto of A Courtlie Controversie is extremely rare: the STC as well as the ESTC mention three copies (STC 5647), one in the British Library, one in the Bodleian Library, and one in the Harvard University Library. I have located a fourth copy in the Huntington Library. The copy in the British Library is imperfect, with the title page lacking and several blank pages. Apart from that, the copies in London and Oxford appear to be identical.

Wotton’s dedication is followed by an address “To the Reader” (A4v) in which Wotton comments upon his translation:

Wherein if thou finde any faults passed in the printing, pardon the Printers speedie dispatche therein, for at the phrase I knowe thou shalt haue cause to frowne, beeing translated so neare vnto the Frenche as our Englishe toung will tollerate, which may seeme in many steedes straunge vnto thee. But if happily thou desierest the knowledge of the Frenche toung, confere the works togither, and I doubt not thou shalt finde some contentation of thy desire. (A4v)

Wotton protests too much. Although it faithfully preserves Yver’s plots, his translation is relatively free in matters of style. Despite Wotton’s assertion, it would barely do as a textbook for the acquisition of the French language. Where Yver has:

Ha Eraste, Eraste, ce n’est pas à moi que deutez addresser vos ruzes si bien affilliée; mais bien me soit que de bonne heure ie les ay cognes. Parquoy dés à present ie renonce & desavotte toutes les faueurs qu’avez jamais receu de ma sottise, vous permettant toute liberté d’aller chercher recompense vers celles [sic], qui vous est si redeuable, iusques à ce qu’en soyez las pour vosler a vne autre nouuelle, Et [sic] me laissez désormais bannie de voz yeux, de vostre bouche & de vostre memoire, comme de ma part ie practiqueray bien. Et de peur que rien ne m’y donne empechement, tenez vostre bague que ie vous réds, & qu’il ne vous souiuenie jamais, combien ie l’ay gardee cherement.

Wotton translates:

Ah Erastus, Erastus, it was not against me thou shouldest haue devised thy crafty collusions so cunningly conueyed: but I am a happie creature to understand them so timely. Wherfore from henceforth I renounce the vowses, and revoke al the fauour wherof thou hast bene partaker by my folye, and render thee free libertie to secke recompence at hir hand, who is so beholding vnto thee, vntill thy wandering affections glutted with one dish of dainties, glue thee appetite to search more delicate diet. Banish me therefore for evermore from thy sight and speech, and blot me clearly out of thy remembrance: as I for my part, wil practise with al mine endeavor to regester thy lewde demeanor in the roll of obligation. And to the ende nothing maye hinder myne entent, io here the parted pledge of thy falsed faith, which I restore vnto the right owner, wyth desire thou mayest never thinke, how dearly I haue vntil this houre preserved it.

As this passage makes clear, Yver and Wotton’s insistence on rhetoric and reflection rather than plot and action associates them more closely with Belleforest and Fenton than with Bandello and Painter. When it comes to the nature of the translation, it is clear that Wotton does not translate Yver as Belleforest “translates” Bandello. Several passages are indeed “translated so neare vnto the French as our Englishe toung will tollerate” (H4). For example, “Parquoy dés à present ie renonce” is rendered word for word as “Wherfore from henceforth I renounce”. On other occasions, however, Wotton consciously deviates from his original. A common device of his is to turn a simple passage into a more elaborate and alliterative one, adding or expanding an attribute. Thus, “vos ruzes si bien affilliée [sic]” is translated as “thy crafty collusions so cunningly conueyed”. Similarly, Wotton turns Yver’s straightforward “bague” into the tortuous “parted pledge of thy falsed faith”. The English “dish of dainties” and “delicate diet” have no direct equivalent in the French text and seem to have been composed for the sake of alliteration. In one case, Wotton adds an entire subordinate clause: “comme de ma part ie practiqueray bien” becomes “as I for my part, wil practise with al mine endeavor to regester thy lewde demeanor in the roll of obligation”. In fact, Wotton adds the most arresting image of the entire passage.
The translation of the poems, with which the main text is interspersed, is naturally even less close to the original. The following verses are representative. Yver has:

Pourquoy t’esbahis tu comme tombé des nues  
Si chacun est tromp& des femmes de nostre age,  
Puisque d’un masque faux, nous courent leur  
[visage?  
Masque qu’elles ont bien, voire estans toutes  
nues,  
Pour desguiser leur ris, leurs yeux & leur  
langage?

Wotton “translates”:

What moueth men abashed thus to stay,  
As tumbled from the cloudes in suche a maze?  
Sith Maidens mocks doe yeelde but mere delay:  
Whose cloking scarfs doth holde men at the gase,  
Whilst couered close in shape of masking showe,  
By deepe deceyte our loyes they ouerthrowe.  
Bereaue them of their outwarde masking vayle  
Yet inwardly disguised they remayne:  
Their thoughtes lye hidde, their tounges of truth  
do fayle,  
Till sugred words the harmless hart hath slayn:  
If in their chaunge they fast on men their hookes,  
Their smiling then conuertes to louring lookes  
to louring lookes (L3)

Wotton turns five Alexandrines into twelve iambic pentameters. He takes up all the ideas present in Yver but substantially expands them. Granted, his rather mechanic alliterations lack the musical subtleties of Yver’s lines as illustrated in the repetition of the sound pattern before and after the caesura in the first line: “t’esbahis tu [...] tombé des nues”. Yet Wotton’s language is more vivid, enriched with images contributing to the carefully developed theme of disguise. Contrary to Yver, Wotton imposes a tight structure upon the ideas expressed, “outward disguise” in the first six lines being followed by “inward disguise” in the following six lines. The verse flows naturally, even though the heavily end-stopped lines at times lack rhythmical variety. Collier calls Wotton “by no means a contemptible versifier”. As he points out, “the poetry it contains much more resembles the ease and grace of [Sidney’s] school, than the formality, and even rigidity, of that in which Whetstone and Turberville, some ten years earlier, were masters”.

Yver, in turn, is not as independent of his source as he would have his reader believe. In his preface, he alludes to Belleforest and Boistuau, accusing them of slavish imitation. It is all the more surprising then that four of Yver’s five tales are clearly indebted to Bandello. For the story of Soliman and Persida, Yver goes back to Bandello’s novella of Cyrus and Pantea. The basic plot of the two tales is the same: as a pair of star-crossed lovers is separated, the young man enters the service of a foreign sovereign into whose hands his lover falls. Enthralled by her beauty, the monarch presses hard his captive who nevertheless remains faithful to her beloved. When he discovers the deep affections between the two lovers, he magnanimously withdraws. Despite a reversal of fortune, the woman remains faithful unto death. To trace the origins of the tale even further back, Bandello drew upon Xenophon’s famous love story of Cyrus and Pantea in books four to seven of the Xyropedia.

Even though clearly indebted to Bandello’s fictional novella, the story of Soliman and Persida is also set against a historical background: in 1522, the troops of Sultan Suleiman II, Emperor of the Turks, besieged and, after several months of resistance, conquered the Christian Isle of Rhodes. Sarrazin identified the specific historical source for the story of Erastus and Persida in Jacobus Fontanus’ (Fontaine’s) De Bello Rhodio. Accounts of the siege were popular and one of them was printed as early as 1525.

Wotton’s French original, Jaques Yver’s Le Printemps d’Yver, was first printed in 1572. The title page of the editio princeps reads:


Although originally intended as a prologue to a more substantial volume, Le Printemps d’Yver is the only work Yver managed to complete. It appeared in the year of his death. Its success in the sixteenth century was remarkable. Paul Lohr listed no fewer than twenty-five editions up to the year 1600, five alone in the year of its appearance. The British Library houses copies of seven editions dated 1572, 1575, 1588, 1589, 1598, 1600, 1618. The first modern edition of Le Printemps appeared in 1841.

Contrary to Wotton, Yver has recently received considerable critical attention. With its emphatically alliterative title, Wotton’s Courtie Controversie of Cupid’s Cautels refers back to Pettie’s A Petite Palace of Pettie His Pleasure which, in turn, acknowledges Painter’s Palace of Pleasure as an ancestor. Wotton thus places himself
within a succession of writers of collections of novellas. Yver can be seen as growing out of a different tradition, however. Like Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Marguerite de Navarre, he arranges a collection of tales within a narrative framework. The third War of Religion has just ended and people are returning home and taking up their everyday lives. At Pentecost, three noblemen and three noblewomen assemble in a castle, appropriately called "Le Printemps," and, to pass the time, decide to tell stories centering on the question of love or, more specifically, the cause of misfortune in love. The hostess, a widow who remains nameless throughout the work, functions as arbitrator. The five contestants are Marie and Marguerite, respectively daughter and niece of the hostess, and the three guests, le sieur de Bel-Accueil, le sieur de Fleur d'Amour, and le sieur de Ferme-Foy.20

The ensuing debate has a tight structure, one story being told on each of the five successive days, men and women taking turns. Fleur d'Amour opens the contest, arguing that the fickleness of women causes all misfortune in love, and to illustrate his argument, he tells the story of Soliman and Perside. The day after, Marie tries to prove the very opposite and, as an instance, relates the unhappy love of Fleurie and Hernan. Neither of the two are right, Bel-Accueil argues on the third day; and telling the story of Clarinde and Aligre, he tries to prove that it is Fortune that crosses the design of lovers. Next day, Marguerite imputes crossed love to man's jealousy and drives home her point by means of the tale of Parthenie and Guillaume le Bâtard. Finally, Ferme-Foy holds that both the man and the woman contribute to unhappy love, narrating the story of the mutual deception of Claribel and Floradin. For the next days, the lady of the castle promises to illustrate the use Kyd made of Wotton's tale.27 There seems to be a mistaken consensus, however, that Kyd was alone in being influenced by Wotton. Thomas Freeman, for instance, has written that "no other playwright of the era shows any familiarity with Wotton's compilation",28 a statement that is far from true.

Wotton's fourth tale, for one, is an uncontested source of Fair Em. Paul Lohr has shown in detail how the plot dealing with the love of William the Conqueror closely follows Wotton.29 Having been included in a seventeenth-century volume bearing the label "Shakespeare, vol. I.", the play has gained a place in the Shakespeare Apocrypha. The ascription has found few followers and is discredited today.30 Robert Greene was once believed to be the author of Fair Em, but since Richard Simpson showed that Greene ridiculed the play and attacked its author in Farewell to Folly (published 1591), this possibility can be excluded.31 Robert Wilson and Anthony Munday have been suggested as possible authors, but the corrupt text makes authorship attribution by means of internal evidence very difficult.32 The play may well have to remain anonymous.

Greene did know Wotton's collection of tales, however, bringing the number of Elizabethan writers acquainted with it to at least three. In his Mamilla, printed in 1583, but registered as early as 3 October 1580, only two years after A Courtlie Controversie was published, Greene, as John S. Weld has shown, borrowed entire passages from Wotton more or less verbatim.33 In addition, Greene refers specifically to "the betroathed fayth of Erasto to his Persida" which "shal not compare with the loue of Phaircles to Mamilla".34 Typically for prolific Greene, he recycles the allusion mutatis mutandis.
whether others might not have ignored it either. Wotton's writings, might well be familiar with Wotton's but Greene does seem to imply that young lovers reached the fame of proverbial lovers by the 1580s, the loue of Valericus and Castania”.

Erasta [sic] to his Persida, shal not compare with mutandis Wotton. In Lyly's play, Alexander opens his final passage.

“...if he could commaund himselfe”. Alexander should desire to commaund the world source of Lyly's play is Plutarch's Life of Alexander which provides the source for the Julia parts of the play - the fifth tale in Wotton is Shakespeare’s main source for The Two Gentlemen of Verona. Her argument was endorsed and expounded by Jim C. Pogue. Geoffrey Bullough, however, argued that Wotton “seems an analogue rather than a source of Shakespeare”. Clifford Leech, in his Arden edition of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, cautiously agreed, stating that “Bullough seems justified in seeing this as an ‘analogue’ rather than as a source”, yet he appears to be less than sure. Granted, Wotton's links to Shakespeare could be more substantial and, despite his initials, he does not qualify as a further candidate for the “Mr. W. H.” of Shakespeare's sonnets. Pending a detailed reconsideration of the sources of The Two Gentlemen of Verona, however, it should not be ruled out that Shakespeare may have taken hints from Wotton.

In 1582, Stephen Gosson - renegade playwright turned priest and writer of pamphlets against the stage - complained that the pernicious novella collections arriving from the Continent “haue beene throughly ransackt, to furnish the Playe houses in London”. Even though modern readers are likely to disagree with Gosson’s antitheatrical stance, his factual point is undeniable: Hamlet,
Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, All’s Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure, and Cymbeline are just a few of the plays that owe much of their plot to novellas of Italian or French origin. Appropriation and transformation of novelistic material was of considerable importance for the development of early modern drama. As Madeleine Doran has pointed out, “one of the controlling elements in plot-building by Elizabethan dramatists was certainly the source stories they chose to dramatize. In general, plays based on novellas or on Roman or Italian plays are better knit, more unified and coherent, than those based on chronicles or episodic romances.” Despite Gosson’s hint more than four hundred years ago, we may not have realized that Wotton’s Courtlie Controversie, published only four years before Gosson’s pamphlet, is to be counted among the “throughly ransackt” novella collections that helped shape the English drama in the late sixteenth century. Following its inclusion in the Chadwyck-Healey Early English Prose Fiction CD-ROM edition, it is to be hoped that interest in Wotton’s work finally awakens.

Lukas Erne

NOTES


16. Xenophon’s lovers are at the origin of another line of descendants leading from Bandello to Painter and from thence to the anonymous play The Wars of Cyrus, which was published in 1594.

17. Jacobus Fontanus, De Bello Rhodio: Libri tres (Paris, 1540), 73. Sarrazin prints the relevant excerpt on page 123.

18. Jacques de Bourbon, La grande et merveilleuse et trescruelle oppugnation de la noble cite de Rhodes (1525). Despite its title, Painter’s “Sultan Solyman”, first printed on its own in c.1558 and subsequently integrated into the second volume of The Palace of Pleasure in 1567, is not related to the tale of Soliman and Persida. It deals with a later portion in the life of the same sultan, the murder of his son in 1553. Painter is directly indebted to Nicholas Moffan’s historical account in a Latin pamphlet of 1555 which may also have influenced the Latin tragedy Soliman et Mustapha, performed in 1581, and Fulke Greville’s closet tragedy Mustapha. See Poems and Drama of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke, ed. Geoffrey Bullough (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), vol. 2, 8ff.


20. Note that a copy dated 1578 that was in the possession of Drummond of Hawthornden is now in the


3. The allegorical names may well be indebted to the Roman de la Rose.


5. See, for instance, English Epithalamies, ed. Robert H. Case (London, 1896): "It was, however, Sidney, whose Arcadia was written in 1580-81, that produced the first Epithalamium in English, whether original or translated" (xxvii).


15. Ibid. Vol. 4, 55.


21. Pliny, Natural History, Loeb Series (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 36. Holland’s first English translation of Pliny did not, of course, appear until 1601. The translation of the cited passage in the Loeb edition reads as follows: "he had such an admiration for the beauty of his favourite mistress, named Pancaspe, that he gave orders that she should be painted in the nude by Apelles, and then discovering that the artist while executing the commission had fallen in love with the woman, he presented her to him, great-minded as he was and still greater owing to his control of himself, and of greatness proved by this action as by any other victory: because he conquered himself, and presented not only his bedmate but his affection also to the artist."


27. Plays Confuted in fve Actions, in Arthur Kinney,
