

THE HARP, THE LYRE, AND THE LUTE
IN DU BELLAY'S LES ANTIQUITEZ DE ROME

Betty J. Davis

Hunter College

The City University of New York

In Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art, Emanuel Winternitz writes: "It was not the historian of music who first indulged in the systematic collection of musical information from monuments of art. It was rather the artist himself who, during the early and high Renaissance, turned to the monuments of antiquity for models and inspiration, and borrowed what he needed for his own artistic purposes, including the images of ancient musicians and musical instruments."¹ Poets as well as painters turned to antiquity for inspiration.

In 1558, the French Renaissance poet Joachim Du Bellay published a collection of sonnets entitled Le Premier Livre des Antiquitez de Rome (The First Book of the Antiquities of Rome). Although, in fact, Du Bellay never wrote a second book of the Antiquitez, the word "Premier" ("First") in the title may not refer to the first in a series of books he intended to write, but to the fact that no one before him had done what he was going to do, to bring to life the ancient monuments of the city of Rome.

In this study, I wish to associate the poet's feeling of creative power with stringed instruments--the harp, the lyre, and the lute--and with the correspondences among the arts of poetry, painting, architecture, and music as seen in three sonnets of the Antiquitez: the dedicatory poem, "Au Roy" ("To the King"), with which Du Bellay begins his collection; the twenty-fifth sonnet, "Que n'ay-je encor la harpe Thracienne?" ("Why do I not still have the Thracian harp?"); and the final poem, number thirty-two, "Esperez vous que la posterité?" ("Do you hope that posterity?").

Du Bellay dedicates his collection to the king, who was such an important personage that he required no further identification for the reading public of his day than the words "le Roy" ("the King"). The king in this case was Henri II, who had come to the throne in 1547 on the death of his father, François I^{er} (Francis I). It was this king whom Du Bellay hoped to attract as a patron.

The first quatrain begins with a negation. What the poet cannot do is to give the king the works of art of ancient Rome to decorate his palaces at Saint-Germain-en-Laye or Fontainebleau.

Ne vous pouvant donner ces ouvrages antiques
Pour vostre Saint-Germain ou pour Fontainebleau,²

(Not being able to give you these antique works
For your Saint-Germain or for Fontainebleau,)

The names Saint-Germain and Fontainebleau evoke the architectural splendors of the French Renaissance, just as the palaces of ancient Rome reflected the glory of the Roman Empire. The palace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, not the church or the abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, founded in 555 A.D. by Childebert I,³ was begun in 1539 under Francis I, but the beautification of the chateau continued under Henri II.⁴ The poet then is fully justified in calling the chateau "vostre Saint-Germain" ("your Saint-Germain"), and, in addition, Henri II was born in an earlier edifice at Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1519.⁵ Fontainebleau, on the other hand, was perhaps too closely allied with the king's father, Francis I, to merit the possessive adjective "vostre" ("your"). Fontainebleau had a life of its own, giving its name to an artistic movement called the School of Fontainebleau initiated by the Italians whom Francis I brought to France to decorate the palace and which influenced the French sculptors, architects, and painters Jean Goujon, Jean Cousin, and Antoine Caron.⁶ These examples of the glories of French architecture, painting, and decorative arts contrast with the dead, dusty bones of the monuments of Rome.

Instead of offering to the king the actual objects of ancient Rome, Du Bellay is going to give these works of art to him in a small tableau painted in poetic colors:

Je les vous donne (Sire) en ce petit tableau
Peint, le mieux que j'ay peu, de couleurs poétiques:

(I give them to you (Sire) in this little tableau
Painted, the best I could, with poetic colors:)

Thus, the book, a volume of verses in black and white, is transformed into a painting in poetic colors.

The king's name, unmentioned though it may be, has the power to contribute to the book's success with the public, if the king will but look with favor upon the poet's work.

Qui mis sous vostre nom devant les yeux publiques,
Si vous le daignez voir en son jour le plus beau,

(Which placed under your name before the public's eyes,
If you will deign to see it in its most favorable light,)

Du Bellay attributes to his verses the power of the resurrection of the dead, for his poetic representation of Rome can boast of having brought forth from their tombs the dusty relics of the ancient Romans. The poet prays that the gods may grant to the king the happiness of one day rebuilding such a greatness in France.

The final tercet takes on an ironic meaning in the light of history:

Et peult estre qu'alors vostre grand' Majesté,
 Repensant à mes vers, diroit qu'ilz ont esté
 De vostre Monarchie un bienheureux presage.

(And perhaps then [that is, after Henri II has
 rebuilt Rome's grandeur in France] your great Majesty,
 Thinking again about my verses, will say that they were
 A happy portent of your Monarchy.)

Henri II was killed in a joust in 1559,⁷ one year after the
 publication of Les Antiquitez de Rome. The king, whom Du Bellay
 had hoped to secure as his patron, was dead, having joined the
 ancient Romans in the tomb.

For the concept of poetic creation and artistic power,
 Du Bellay uses three different nouns: the harp, the lyre, and
 the lute. The harp and the lyre date back to antiquity. The
 lute was a more modern invention. The common link is that all
 three are stringed instruments used to accompany poetic words
 or songs.

In the twenty-fifth sonnet, "Que n'ay-je encor la harpe
 Thracienne?" (Why do I not still have the Thracian harp?),
 Du Bellay wishes that he had the Thracian harp, the harp of
 Orpheus, to bring to life the ancient Caesars and the builders
 of Rome.

Que n'ay-je encor la harpe Thracienne,
 Pour reveiller de l'enfer paresseux
 Ces vieux Cesars, & les Umbres de ceux
 Qui ont basti ceste ville ancienne?

(Why do I not still have the Thracian harp
 To wake from lazy Hades
 These old Caesars, and the Shadows of those
 Who built this ancient city?)

The Thracian harp refers to Orpheus and his lyre, or harp, even though Orpheus's name is not mentioned. The geographical adjective "Thracienne" ("Thracian") is drawn from the birthplace of Orpheus on the banks of the River Hebrus in Thrace, a country which is now divided among Greece, Turkey, and Bulgaria.⁸ His father is listed variously as Peleagre, as Oeagrus, or even as Apollo.⁹ His mother was the nymph Calliope ("she of the fair voice"), the noblest of all the muses, the muse of epic song. Among her attributes are a wax tablet and a pencil, linking the arts of writing and song.¹⁰ Orpheus sang and played so beautifully that he could move trees and rocks and tame wild beasts.

The old Caesars are unnamed. In not specifically naming any of them, Du Bellay in effect names them all. The builders have faded into such anonymity that they are but shadows, the

shades of the underworld. Even Rome is unnamed and is referred to by the periphrase "cette ville ancienne" ("this ancient city"), emphasizing both the city's antiquity and its urban nature. The rhymes "Thracienne" and "ancienne" associate the antiquity of the legendary poet and the antiquity of Rome. Antiquity and priority are important considerations in the game of poetry, as they are in the game of science. For the mystic and religious sects which claimed Orpheus as their founder, Orpheus was the most ancient of the poets, living long before Homer.¹¹ For them, Orpheus was the first poet, just as Du Bellay's book, recreating the antiquities of Rome in French, was the first of its kind.

The power to resurrect the dead which the poet desires in calling for the Thracian harp brings to mind not only Orpheus's famous journey to the underworld, to the region which Du Bellay personifies as "l'enfer paresseux" ("lazy Hades"), to bring back his dead wife Euridyce,¹² but also the claim by the poet in his dedicatory poem, "Au Roy," that he was going to call forth from their tombs the dusty relics of the ancient Romans.

In the second quatrain, Du Bellay uses a device similar to the one in the previous quatrain when he evokes the character of Orpheus by using the word "Thracienne" ("Thracian"), an adjective formed on a place name. In the second quatrain, he uses adjectives formed from personal names. He uses these adjectives to call for the musical instruments, or poetic talents, of two other poets,

Amphion, a mythological player of the lyre, and Ausonius, a French poet of ancient Rome.

Ou que je n'ay celle Amphonienne,
 Pour animer d'un accord plus heureux
 De ces vieux murs les ossemens pierreux,
 Et restaurer la gloire Ausonienne?

(Or why do I not have the Amphonian one,
 To bring to life with a happier tune
 The dusty bones of these old walls,
 And restore the Ausonian glory?)

Amphion and Zethus were the twin sons of Antiope by Zeus. One of the twins was a builder; the other a musician. After seizing the sovereignty of Thebes, the two brothers began to fortify the city with walls and towers. Zethus brought up the stones with his strong arms, while Amphion, a musician of supernatural skill, fit them together by the music of his lyre.¹³ In his sonnets, Du Bellay carries on this legendary alliance of architecture and music, rebuilding the walls and monuments of Rome in his poetry and constructing his sonnets like works of architecture.

For the adjective "Ausonienne" I have two theories to propose. One is that the adjective is geographical in origin, referring to Ausonia, the name the ancients sometimes gave to all of Italy because the Ausonian people were thought to have been the most

ancient inhabitants of the Italian peninsula.¹⁴ The second possibility, and one that corresponds to the theme of individual poetic inspiration, is that the adjective comes from the name of the poet Decimus Magnus Ausonius. Ausonius was considered the most remarkable Latin poet of the fourth century A.D. He was born about 310 A.D. at Burdigala, the Latin name for the modern French city of Bordeaux. He was educated in grammar, rhetoric, and law, practiced law in Burdigala, and was later a professor of grammar and rhetoric. He was invited by Valentinian I to educate his son Gratian. Gratian, in turn, conferred many honors on Ausonius after he ascended to the throne.¹⁵ In longing to restore "la gloire Ausonienne," Du Bellay may simply wish to revive the grandeur of ancient Rome, or he may dream of securing for himself, perhaps as the result of this book, a position as a tutor for a prince or of being recognized as an important French poet in Rome, where he wrote not only in French, but in Latin as well.¹⁶

In the first tercet, Du Bellay returns to his comparison of the poet with the painter. At the same time, though he attenuates his reference to the author of the Aeneid with the adjective "quelque" ("some"), Du Bellay extends his poetic ambitions. Why stop at Ausonius? Why not be another Vergil?

Peusse-je aumoins d'un pinceau plus agile
 Sur le patron de quelque grand Virgile
 De ces palais les protraits façonner:

(Could I at least with a more agile brush
On the model of some great Vergil
Fashion the portraits of these palaces:)

The second tercet unites writing and architecture.

J'entreprendrais, veu l'ardeur qui m'allume,
De rebastir au compas de la plume
Ce que les mains ne peuvent maçonner.

(I will undertake, given the ardor which inflames me,
To rebuild with the compass of my pen
That which hands cannot construct.)

We have all heard the saying that "The pen is mightier than the sword." In this tercet, Du Bellay asserts that the pen is mightier than the hands of a mason. Put another way, "The poet is mightier than the builder in stones and mortar."

The poet's lyre is mentioned by name in the final sonnet, number thirty-two.

Esperez vous que la posterité
Doive (mes vers) pour tout jamais vous lire?
Esperez vous que l'oeuvre d'une lyre
Puisse acquerir telle immortalité?

(Do you hope that posterity
 Will [my verses] read you forever?
 Do you hope that the work of a lyre
 Can acquire such immortality?)

Du Bellay addresses this quatrain to his verses, "mes vers."
 The hopes of his verses, being read forever by posterity, acquiring
 immortality--and to what extent are they divorced from the hopes of
 the poet himself?--seem excessively optimistic.

In the second quatrain, Du Bellay appears to deflate these
 hopes by questioning the immortality of the things of this life.

Si sous le ciel fust quelque éternité,
 Les monuments que je vous ay fait dire,
 Non en papier, mais en marbre & porphyre,
 Eussent gardé leur vive antiquité.

(If under the heavens some form of eternity existed,
 The monuments which I had you recite,
 Not of paper, but of marble and porphyry,
 Would have kept their lively antiquity.)

The question of any eternity here below is posed very clearly by
 the first word of the quatrain, the subordinating conjunction "Si"
 ("If"). The poet contrasts the fragility of the paper on which the
 poems are written with the stones of which the monuments of Rome

are constructed, marble and porphyry. Yet, although the monuments may endure, they have lost their life.

In the tercets, Du Bellay compares himself to the gods or to the poets of antiquity, for Apollo, son of Zeus and twin brother of Diana, himself gave to Du Bellay a lute.

Ne laisse pas toutesfois de sonner,
Luth, qu'Apollon m'a bien daigné donner:
Car si le temps ta gloire ne desrobbe,
Vanter te peux, quelque bas que tu sois,
D'avoir chanté, le premier des François,
L'antique honneur du peuple à longue robbe.

(Do not in any event stop playing,
Lute, which Apollo deigned to give to me:
For if time does not steal your glory,
You can boast, no matter how lowly you may be,
Of having, the first of the French, sung
The antique honor of the people of the long robe.)

At the end of this collection of sonnets, Du Bellay reveals that it is from Apollo himself that he has received his musical instrument. Although the lyre was invented by Apollo's brother Hermes, Apollo was so intrigued by the invention that he exchanged a herd of cattle for it.¹⁷ While Du Bellay earlier referred to his

poems as the work of a lyre, in verse ten he says that Apollo has given him a lute. It may be that the word "luth" is not just a convenient variant of the word "lyre," but a contemporary concretization of the god's favor, just as he hopes that the king, as he asks in his dedicatory poem, will deign to read his verses with favor. Du Bellay is far from modest in proclaiming that he has chosen to play the lute which Apollo has given him, thus making him the equal of Orpheus, who, according to legend, received his lyre from Apollo.¹⁸ In this collection of poems, Du Bellay is the first of the French, "le premier des François," as in the title of his book, Le Premier Livre des Antiquitez de Rome (The First Book of the Antiquities of Rome), to celebrate the honor of the ancient Romans, who, in this final sonnet are not named, but are identified by their form of dress, the toga, which itself is not named, but described. The Romans in this poem are the "peuple à longue robe," the "people with the long robes."

With regard to Du Bellay's conception of himself as the sixteenth-century equivalent of the legendary poet Orpheus, what Philippe Rouillard and Françoise Joukovsky say about Du Bellay's fellow Pléiade poet Pierre de Ronsard could apply equally well to Du Bellay: "Ronsard trouve surtout dans le mythe d'Orphée une image du pouvoir poétique" ("Ronsard finds above all in the myth of Orpheus an image of poetic power").¹⁹ In Les Antiquitez de

Rome, this power, symbolized by the poet's stringed instruments, the harp, the lyre, and the lute, is equal to that of the gods and as deserving of immortality as the marble and porphyry monuments of ancient Rome.

Betty J. Davis
Hunter College and
Borough of Manhattan Community College
City University of New York
New York, N.Y.

NOTES

¹ Emanuel Winternitz, Musical Instruments and Their Symbolism in Western Art (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 26.

² Joachim Du Bellay, Les Antiquitez de Rome in Oeuvres poétiques, II, Recueils de sonnets, ed. Henri Chamard; fifth printing, rev. Henri Weber (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1970), p. 3. The text of the twenty-fifth sonnet is on pages 23-24. The thirty-second sonnet appears on page 29. All references to the text of the Antiquitez in this article are to this edition.

³ "Saint-Germain-des-Prés," Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1985), IX, p. 9239.

⁴ "Saint-Germain-en-Laye," Grand Dictionnaire Encyclopédique Larousse, IX, p. 9240.

⁵ "Henri II," Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX^e siècle (Paris: Administration du Grand Dictionnaire Universel, 1873; reprint Geneva-Paris: Slatkine, 1982), IX, première partie, p. 184.

⁶ Encyclopedia of World Art (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), V, columns 551-552, 530, 665-666.

⁷ The king was struck in the temple by a lance during a joust on June 29, 1559. He died in Paris on July 10 of that year. J. C. I. Simonde de Sismondi, Précis de l'histoire des Français (Paris: Treuttel et Würtz, 1839), p. 347.

⁸ "Thrace," Encyclopaedia Britannica (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1972), XXI, pp. 1084-1085. See map of ancient Thrace following p. 534 in The Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge: At the University Press, third impression, 1965), VIII, ch. 17.

⁹ Mythologie générale, ed. Félix Guirand (Paris: Larousse, 1935), p. 181; Edward Tripp, Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970), p. 435.

¹⁰ Mythologie générale, p. 109.

¹¹ Oskar Seyffert, Dictionary of Classical Antiquities, rev. and ed. Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (New York: The Meridian Library, 1957), p. 438.

¹² Mythologie générale, p. 181.

¹³ Crowell's Handbook, pp. 43-44; Seyffert, p. 28.

¹⁴ "Ausonie" and "Ausonien, ienne," Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX^e siècle, I, deuxième partie (Paris: 1866; reprint Geneva-Paris, 1982), p. 961.

¹⁵ "Ausone (Decimus Magnus)," Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIX^e siècle, I, deuxième partie, p. 961.

¹⁶ "Notice," Poésies françaises et latines de Joachim Du Bellay, avec notice et notes par E. Courbet (Paris: Garnier, 1918), I, XXXV-XXXVI. Frédéric Morel's 1558 edition of Du Bellay's Latin poetry is reprinted in this edition, pp. 419-535.

¹⁷ Mythologie générale, p. 116.

¹⁸ Joël Schmidt, Larousse Greek and Roman Mythology, ed. Seth Benardete (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), p. 201.

¹⁹ Philippe Rouillard and Françoise Joukovsky, Ronsard: La Trompette et la lyre (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1985), p. 61.

