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978-1-107-63974-4 - The 'Délie' of Maurice Scève

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by I. D. McFarlane

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Maurice Scève, compliqué, savant, singulier, obscur, avec une sorte d’ardeur intime qui soulève parfois le lourd appareil des allusions érudites et de la forme laborieuse.’<sup>1</sup> Such is Gustave Lanson’s sole contribution to Scevian criticism; without completely damning the author of *Délie*, he makes it quite clear that we are dealing with a difficult writer unlikely to repay the hard work necessary to understand his poetry. More recently, in the post-Symbolist period, criticism has treated Scève with greater kindness and respect, but his reputation for obscurity has persisted, in spite of attempts, notably by Saulnier, to dispel prejudice on this score. It is true that Scève, writing at a time when Marot and his followers were so successful, was far from giving an impression of facility: Sebillet refers to ‘la rudesse de beaucoup de nos nouveaux’ in his poetry,<sup>2</sup> and the poet himself certainly struck his contemporaries as somewhat aloof, an attitude which is affirmed on occasion in the *Délie*;<sup>3</sup> but there is no question of his consciously following an aristocratic hermetism such as was affected by some Neo-latin poets of his age. To be sure, a considerable number of dizains in *Délie* require elucidation, but too much has been made of the charge of obscurity, which in modern eyes may often be explained as the result of features not peculiar to Scève alone. An understanding of a poet who belongs to an earlier age presupposes some acquaintance with the literary traditions and the intellectual climate in which he worked, and if we are to obtain a satisfactory response from Scève’s dizains, we shall be the better for an awareness of Petrarchan convention, of Neo-platonic themes, and of the world-picture from which Scève draws so many of his images. It is only in fairly recent times that a fuller understanding has been reached of the symbolism in sixteenth-century art; and a reader who is ignorant of this iconological lore or who, perhaps, has lost touch

<sup>1</sup> G. Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française*, 12th ed., p. 276.

<sup>2</sup> T. Sebillet, *Art poétique françois*, ed. F. Gaiffe (1932), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for instance D 414.

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with the Bible, will find that the 'obscurity' of poetry such as Scève's is due less to the poet's hermetism than to his own failings. More pertinently, voices have been raised against the difficulties inherent in Scève's language. Here there are grounds for complaint, but some of the difficulties may be laid at the door of his printers, and moreover, once one has mastered Scève's habits, it is surprising how many of the linguistic obstacles will melt away; thus, an awareness of the Latin background to his language will prove very helpful. There are two other difficulties under which Scève has laboured: on the one hand, certain critics have, whether consciously or not, succeeded in presenting Scève as a rather ungainly camp-follower of Petrarch and his men;<sup>1</sup> this is totally unfair, and we shall return to this matter presently. On the other hand, there are some who have sought to connect him with the cabalistic tradition, and Brunetière in particular seemed prepared to believe any sort of mumbo-jumbo when he was dealing with Scève.<sup>2</sup> One need hardly mention the dangers of this approach to poetry, from which other fine writers, such as Nerval, Baudelaire and Mallarmé, have suffered: it is the quickest way of reducing poetry to cryptogram.

Nevertheless, when all is said and done, one cannot help wondering why dizains such as the following have not struck readers of earlier generations:

Le iour passé de ta douce presence  
 Fust vn serain en hyuer tenebreux,  
 Qui fait prouuer la nuyst de ton absence  
 4 A l'œil de l'ame estre vn temps plus vmbreux  
 Que n'est au Corps ce mien viure encombreux,  
 Qui maintenant me fait de soy refus.  
     Car dès le point, que partie tu fus,  
 8 Comme le Lieure accroppy en son giste,  
 Ie tendz l'oreille, oyant vn bruyt confus,  
 Tout perdu aux tenebres d'Egypte. (D 129)

<sup>1</sup> Notably, J. Vianey, *Le Pétrarquisme en France* (1909), pp. 58–80; even Parturier, who warns against this danger in his introduction, gives this impression by his copious footnotes on sources and analogues.

<sup>2</sup> F. Brunetière, 'La Pléiade lyonnaise', *Revue des Deux Mondes* (15 Dec. 1900), vol. 162, pp. 898 ff.; *Etudes critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française*, 6th series (1899); article on Scève in the *Grande Encyclopédie* (1901). Cf. also A. M. Schmidt, 'Haute science et poésie française au XVIe siècle: La gnose de Maurice Scève', in *Les Cahiers d'Hermès* (1947), 1, and J. Vianey, *op. cit.* pp. 72–3.

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Such a poem will present some initial difficulty to those unfamiliar with sixteenth-century language,<sup>1</sup> and in l. 4 the infinitival clause complicated by a Scevian inversion needs careful scrutiny; but the poem's closely woven texture, its density and the way in which the imagery is set to work, should surely encourage the reader to linger. The dizain begins with an antithesis which we shall meet very frequently in the *Délie*, that of absence/presence and of darkness/light; but it also sets the theme of the whole dizain in the first three words. The contrast of past and present is carried through the first six lines, which also reveal the complex structure of the Scevian sentence, and its vigorous, if perhaps sometimes stiff, grammatical pattern. Though the two introductory lines have a marked beauty of their own, the first section of the poem (ll. 1–6) would not perhaps call for serious comment, were it not for the fact that it is followed by four memorable lines which illuminate the rest of the poem and display Scève's unusual mastery of imagery. Not only do we have two arresting images, but they are fused in a sharp clash which electrifies the whole pattern of the dizain, a feature which recurs frequently in the *Délie*. First we have the hare in its form: an effective image, not because it may seem original—in fact, it is not, because for the sixteenth century the hare is a familiar symbol of timidity<sup>2</sup>—but because, by its sudden appearance, after *partie*, strengthening the sense of absence, we are made aware of the poet's panic and uneasy alertness, which all but paralyse him. The *bruit confus* provides the transition to the second image, the *tenebres d'Egypte*. Parturier's erudite footnote quotes an interesting passage from Fr. Georgius' *Harmonie du Monde* (1525), translated in 1578 by Lefèvre de la Boderie, pp. 289*d*, 290*a*: 'Egypte qui est dicte en Hebrieu Mizraïm est bien interpreté angoisses, combien qu'aucuns, ne sçay pour quelle raison, ajoutent qu'elle signifie aussi tenebres.'<sup>3</sup> But need we go to the Italian humanist Georgius? Surely the sixteenth-century reader would have recognised without further ado the reference to Exodus?<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. notes to the text.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Horapollo, *Hieroglyphica*, 1727, p. 43: 'Patulum autem quippiam significare volentes leporem pingunt' (Bk I, ch. 26).

<sup>3</sup> In his edition of the *Délie*, p. 96, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus x, verses 21 ff.: 'And the Lord said unto Moses, Stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which

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In other words, the biblical tone of the image, not really brought out by Parturier's note, increases the effect of the hare-image and also forces us back to *iour* in l. 1, with which the *tenebres* are inevitably contrasted. Thus the somewhat commonplace antithesis of light and darkness is given fresh life by a familiar image (itself rejuvenated by its 'poetic realism') which combines with one of religious complexion: the sense of panic, desolation and destitution is thus made to reverberate the more powerfully; and this sense of void is transferred to the spiritual level because of the religious harmonics of the latter image.

Other dizains could be cited to confirm Scève's claim to be considered a poet of stature. Indeed, his poetry possesses qualities which are appreciated more easily by modern readers attuned to the writings of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry than they could be by, say, the average nineteenth-century man of culture. But his poetry has for us an additional interest which goes beyond that of its intrinsic worth: Scève appears at a very special moment in French literature. Janus-faced, he stands at the cross-roads of sixteenth-century poetry: not only does he look back to the age of medieval decline—many of his literary habits and his very concept of man are firmly rooted in the past—but he faces a new world. With the instruments of the past, his imagination helps to fashion the poetry of the future; there is in him also a remarkable balance between fidelity to tradition and powerful literary creativeness. In his writing, we can see the workings of Petrarchism, Neo-platonism, and scientific inquiry which appear massively on the horizon of French poetry for the first time in Scève<sup>1</sup>—one has only to compare him with Jean Lemaire de Belges and Marot; and at the same time he shows how these currents and the *fonds commun* of literary *topoi* can be harnessed to ensure the expression of a very personal vision. That this vision

may be felt. And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days. They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.' The *topos* is also found in England: the *NED* quotes R. Brooke, 1641: 'a Glympse that might | Enlighten them in the midst of Egyptian darknesse'. There are also the phrases 'Egyptian days', which refers to the two unlucky days of the month, and 'Black as Egypt's night'.

<sup>1</sup> Neo-platonism manifests itself in the poems of Marguerite de Navarre, but these writings were published much later.

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should be expressed so freshly in terms of these poetic conventions and themes is due in great part to Scève's mastery in his search for a poetic language to replace that on which Marot and his followers relied and which was sorely in need of renewal. And this is indeed a further reason why Scève is so useful a subject of study: no approach to sixteenth-century literature (or for that matter to any other century) can be satisfactory unless an adequate grasp of the language is acquired—a point so obvious that it is frequently overlooked. No more in his language than in his themes is Scève entirely original, but this is valuable, for, more than any other poet before the Pléiade, Scève knows what to jettison, what to develop and what to introduce at the right moment; and he deserves credit for anticipating in some measure what the Pléiade set out to do in their *Déffense et Illustration*: renewing the French language as a vehicle of poetic sensibility. Of course, like most writers of sequences, Scève is unequal in his achievement: all is not Benedictine here, indeed there is much small beer; still, this is not in itself a disadvantage, for this very inequality provides an excellent schooling for those who are training their sensibility. But at all times the poetic attitude dominates; we are not given the opportunity to be side-tracked into wondering, for instance, what the precise colour of his religious convictions was, or into perusing poems whose main interest might lie in their reference to contemporary events. As we shall see, Scève does draw on historical material, but nearly always it is subservient to the main themes of the sequence. All in all, Scève is something of a poet's poet, and yet his *Délie* reflects in miniature the literary climate in which it came into being. And for these various reasons, Scève is an excellent introduction, not only to certain problems connected with poetry in general, but also to sixteenth-century French poetry, for he has taken up what was vital in the traditions of his time and created a work which above all looks forward into the future.

### 1. SCÈVE BEFORE 'DÉLIE'

We are in one sense fortunate that we do not know a great deal about Scève's life: this allows us to concentrate more easily on the essentials of his poetry. Nevertheless, some remarks on his appren-

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ticeship and the milieu in which he attained maturity will not be out of place. Though we do not know the date of his birth, it may be presumed that he was born towards the beginning of the century, and probably before 1505, if the reference to an early love in D 112 (=c. 1520) is not just a literary artifice.<sup>1</sup> He was of good family, older members having played an honourable part in the administration of Lyon, and no doubt he came early into the cultural circles of local society; two of his three sisters certainly had some literary attainments. His cousin, Guillaume, appears as something of a patron during the fifteen-thirties, and his name recurs frequently in the numerous books of Neo-latin verse which came out at Lyon at that time. Maurice Scève took his doctor's degree before 1540,<sup>2</sup> but whether in Italy or at some French University has not yet been established. Up to 1533 we are ill-informed about his activities: Saulnier suggests that he may have gone into some retreat; there is evidence to show that he was 'addictus Deo' and that he took the first steps towards Holy Orders.<sup>3</sup> By 1533 we know that Scève is studying at Avignon and that he plays some part in the obscure story of the discovery of 'Laura's tomb'; whatever may be the truth of the matter, it has little relevance to his later life, except in so far as it shows early interest in Petrarch and that moreover he is in contact with various Italians.<sup>4</sup>

More important, Scève begins to make his way in the literary world of Lyon from 1535 onwards. Lyon, in spite of various famines and some social disturbances, such as the well-known Rebenne of 1529, was a highly prosperous city with well-developed cultural interests. The re-establishment of the fairs by Charles VIII had helped to set it on its economic feet, and the course of history had brought it into its own; it lay closer than today to the Italian frontier, at a time when contact with that country, in peace or in war, was so close, and it formed a cross-roads where men from all parts of

<sup>1</sup> On all problems connected with Scève's life, see V.-L. Saulnier, *Maurice Scève*, 2 vols. (Paris, Klincksieck, 1948–9). For Scève's family and probable date of birth, see ch. II.

<sup>2</sup> Scève is referred to as *docteur* in a document connected with the *entrée* of Hippolyte d'Este into Lyon that year; cf. Saulnier, *Scève*, II, p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> Saulnier, *Scève*, I, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> On this matter, see Saulnier, *Scève*, I, pp. 40 ff.

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Europe, not only Italy, but also Switzerland, Germany and the Low Countries, were able to meet; its relations with Geneva were gradually to assume greater importance.<sup>1</sup> The comparative freedom which the city enjoyed in matters legal and ecclesiastical—it had neither Parlement nor University in the first half of the century—was well known, and though royal authority was maintained through a Vice-roy, and though ecclesiastical vigilance did often result in heretic-hunting, things were happier there than in Toulouse, or Paris after the *Affaire des Placards* (1534), as is shown by the eagerness with which so many humanists, and especially Neo-latin poets, such as Boyssonné, Dolet, Visagier (*Vulteius*) and Nicolas Bourbon, sought residence there. Many of these persons were moreover to come into contact with the Scève family, more often perhaps with Guillaume, owing to his generous patronage, but also with Maurice, who was to join in their literary activities. Lyon, too, had had an early start in printing, and during the last third of the fifteenth century had shown greater enterprise than Paris, where books appeared under the shadow of the Sorbonne; and during the fifteen-thirties, printing-houses were numerous and thriving, staffed often by scholars and men of an inquiring turn of mind, of foreign extraction (*S. Gryphius*) as well as of local origin.<sup>2</sup> Lyon had played its part in spreading new ideas and knowledge, not only through its printers, but through outstanding scholars such as Symphorien Champier; nor should it be forgotten that Josse Badius had a period of apprenticeship there under Trechsel before moving to Paris. Many of the local families, often of Italian origin, pursued cultural activities, and the fact the court not infrequently came to reside in or near Lyon, especially when military operations in Italy were brewing, helped to promote the public and cultural life of the city, a life in which the humanists, poets and musicians all had their considerable role to play; and through the city blew all the vigorous winds of literary fashion.

<sup>1</sup> On the development of Lyon, cf. A. Kleinclausz, *Histoire de Lyon, 1, Des origines à 1585* (Lyon, 1939). Saulnier, *Scève, 1, ch. 1*, gives useful information in a way more detailed than can be attempted here. One must not forget the various writers connected with Lyon, who were associated in some way with Marguerite de Navarre's circle.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Baudrier, *Bibliographie lyonnaise* (Paris–Lyon, 1895–1910).

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Scève's first ventures show his dependence on fashion, though here and there we shall find some interesting straws in the wind. First of all, the translation of Juan de Flores's adaptation of Boccaccio's tale *Fiammetta* (*La Deplourable fin de Flamete*, 1535, 2nd ed. 1536), which had an early, but not lasting success.<sup>1</sup> It is relevant to *Délie* in that it allows the author to interest himself in the psychology of love—though the conception of love in *Flamete* cannot be said to tally in all respects with that of *Délie*—and also in that Scève by undertaking a translation gave himself the opportunity to study the mechanics of language and to try out various experiments with word and phrase.<sup>2</sup> In other words, *Flamete* may be seen primarily as a technical exercise which allows Scève to develop his powers of expression. After this work come two contributions to the literary fashions of the period. On the one hand, Scève writes a few *blasons* as his share in the poetic competition associated with Marot's memory; these poems are not remarkable for concision or inspiration, and only occasionally does a notable phrase occur, which Scève may remember later when he comes to write *Délie*. On the other hand, he collaborates in the *Tombeau du Dauphin* organised by Etienne Dolet towards the end of 1536.<sup>3</sup> His offering, apart from the Latin verse, consists of two huitains and an eclogue, *Arion*, which owes much to the tradition of the Grands Rhétoriqueurs, as it is really a *Déploration* in Vergilian disguise.

To all this may be added, perhaps, some Neo-Latin activity—since the Lyon *sodalitium* do refer to him from time to time as if he were an ally<sup>4</sup>—but the sum total of his poetic work does not yet amount

<sup>1</sup> On the *Flamete*, see Saulnier, *Scève*, I, ch. III, and B. Matulka, *The Novels of Juan de Flores and their European Diffusion* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1931).

<sup>2</sup> Certain phrases recur in D 34, 38, 39, 40, 45, 66, 68 and 88; D 34, 45 and 68 contain two separate echoes of the *Flamete*.

<sup>3</sup> On all these minor writings, see E. Giudici, *Le opere minore di Maurice Scève* (Parma, Guanda, 1958). On the *Tombeau*, see Saulnier, 'La Mort du Dauphin François et son Tombeau poétique, 1536', *BHR*, VI (1945), pp. 50–97.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Nicolas Bourbon, in a letter to William Boston, dated 1536 (publ. in the 1538 edition of the *Nugarum libri octo*) announces that he will send his English correspondent some pieces by Guillaume and Maurice Scève that will make him laugh uproariously. In the *Nugarum libri octo* (1538), VIII, 51, Bourbon encourages Scève to publish his writings. Bourbon may well have been thinking of Latin verse as much as of French.



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to anything very substantial; for all the respect he appears to enjoy, he has not risen above the rank and file of the writers of the day.

What is reasonably certain is that, during the middle fifteen–thirties Scève fell in love, and for many years it has been generally accepted that the lady in question was Pernette du Guillet, herself the author of a number of poems.<sup>1</sup> Scève must have fallen in love with her when he was about thirty–five, that is when he was some twenty years older than she was. On the other hand, too much must not

<sup>1</sup> The identification of Pernette du Guillet is due to J. Buche, 'Pernette du Guillet et la Délie de Maurice Scève', in *Mélanges... Brunot* (Paris, Soc. nouvelle de Librairie et d'Édition, 1904), pp. 33–9. The textual evidence is: (i) Pernette's play on Scève/*saeuus*/*sévère* in *Épigramme* 34, Schmidt, *Poètes du XVIe siècle*, p. 243; (ii) two anagrams on Scève's name in *Épigramme* 5 (Schmidt, p. 230); (iii) textual parallels between Pernette's *Désespoir traduit de la Prose du parangon italien* (Schmidt, pp. 263–5) and D 60.

H. Redman, jnr, 'A proposed identification for Maurice Scève's *Délie*', *Renaissance News*, x, 4 (1957), pp. 188–93, suggests Anne de Pisseleu, duchesse d'Etampes: (i) the family name d'Heilly = *Délie*; (ii) both are blonde; (iii) Scève could have met her c. 1524–6, near Lyon; (iv) Scève's preoccupation with an important rival makes one think of Francis I. Nevertheless certain difficulties inevitably arise: the use of so stylised an art for biographical evidence can arise only when there is further external and explicit testimony—the fact that *Délie* is blonde and has a jealous husband or friend may well belong to the literary tradition. So little is known about Scève's early years that corroboration is at present impossible; and one might wonder why Scève should take twenty years to sing of his love. There may well be an early love, but 'Pernette' can hardly lose her privileged place.

From what follows, it will become clear, I think, that the identification of *Délie* with Pernette depends on the internal evidence provided by the *Délie* and the *Rimes* of Pernette du Guillet; moreover, what we know of Pernette is drawn from her volume of verse. It would seem therefore that this hypothesis would be vulnerable to any 'external' evidence that might be discovered concerning the lady with whom Scève was in love and/or the identity of Pernette herself. There have been signs in recent years of a more sceptical attitude to the view that Pernette is the lady concerned. There is Professor Redman's suggestion that Anne de Pisseleu should be considered; E. Giudici has expressed doubts about the identity of Pernette, and very recently Charles Perrat, 'Les Relations de Maurice Scève et de Clément Marot; d'après le ms. 524 du Musée Condé', *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Année 1962 (publ. 1963), pp. 81–7, has tentatively put forward the name of Hélène de Tournon. When the full results of the researches undertaken by Giudici and Perrat are made available, this chapter in Scève's life may well have to be re-written. From the strictly literary point of view, it has to be admitted that the identification of *Délie* with Pernette has not contributed markedly to our appreciation of the text. Throughout the sequence, there are allusions of an apparently autobiographical nature, and these I have mentioned in the Introduction and notes; but, whatever correlation may be eventually established between these references and strict reality, they will still preserve literary value in that, by giving some sort of narrative thread, they contribute to the 'poetic realism' of the *Délie*.

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be made of this biographical background: in the first place, *Délie* acquires interest for us to the extent to which she transcends the particular experience or situation at a certain time in the poet's existence, and her value in the sequence lies less in the force of her personality than in the poet's reactions: indeed the personality of *Délie* remains stylised and blurred in outline. No doubt Scève has embroidered his poetry on the canvas of reality: Pernette crystallised his emotions at the proper time. It is unlikely that Pernette was an isolated experience—the testimony of *Le Petit Œuvre*, if it is by Scève, speaks against this, and moreover so does Pernette.<sup>1</sup> More important, the experience of the middle fifteen-thirties recalls to Scève's memory emotions that belong to an earlier part of his life, and this evocation of the past does colour Scève's presentation of his feelings. In the opening huitain, and also in D 147, the poet refers to a renewal of emotions which he imagined had died in him, and in D 112 we shall find an even more explicit statement of an experience which came to him fifteen years earlier:

Longue silence, ou ie m'auainissoys  
 Hors la memoyre & des Dieux, & des hommes,  
 Fut le repos, ou ie me nourrissoys  
 4 Tout deschargé des amoureuses sommes.  
     Mais, comme aduient, quand a souhaict nous sommes,  
     De nostre bien la Fortune enuieuse  
     Trouble ma paix par troys lustres ioyeuse,  
 8 Renouellant ce mien feu ancien.  
     Dont du grief mal l'Ame toute playeuse  
     Fait resonner le circuit Plancien.

Memory, and the ambivalent feeling of rejuvenation, but also of time passing, give special overtones to certain parts of the *Délie*. Nevertheless, Scève shows a marked eagerness to place his love in time and place, and to an extent perhaps rather greater than we normally associate with the Petrarchan tradition. He will link Lyon and the surrounding countryside with his love, and also describe its stages by reference to political and other events of his time. In consequence, we are able to form some impression of the outlines

<sup>1</sup> In *Epigrammes* 26 and 34, to quote two examples. On the controversy about this work, see Saulnier, *Scève*, I, pp. 167–93. Giudici is less certain about its authenticity.