Jacques Yver's Winter's Springtime

A Modern English Translation

Margaret Harp

Amsterdam University Press

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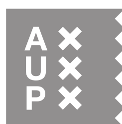

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In loving memory of my husband
Richard Layne Harp

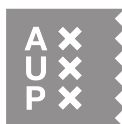

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 9

Introduction 11

Anagram of Jacques Yver 17

To the Beautiful and Virtuous Young Ladies of France, Greetings 19

Sonnet by Joseph Yver on the Springtime by Jacques Yver, His Brother 21

Response in Similar Rhyme by Marie Yver, Their Only Sister 23

To the Favorable and Good-Willed Reader, Greetings 25

First Day 27

Second Day 83

Third Day 117

Fourth Day 159

Fifth Day 207

Farewell to His Book 257

Death of the Author 259

On the Same Subject. Sonnet 261

Bibliography 263

Index 265

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Introduction

Le Printemps d'Yver by Jacques Yver is a work of prose and poetry featuring five tales of chivalry, tragedy, farce, and fable. It also provides an intriguing and distinctive echo of Boccaccio and Marguerite de Navarre's stories and framing narratives. Yver's premise highlights late sixteenth-century France: five young members of the nobility—three men and two women—from the region of Poitiers entertain each other by arguing the cause of doomed love affairs. They have gathered in the wake of the Third War of Religion and to rejoice in the 1570 Peace of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Published in 1572, *Le Printemps* knew immediate success, perhaps because it acknowledged contemporary strife without proposing a partisan position. At least twenty editions appeared in the following twenty years. This span of time corresponds almost exactly to the most entrenched period of the French Wars of Religion.

I first discovered *Le Printemps d'Yver* when asked to provide an entry on Jacques Yver for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. I was immediately struck by how such a relatively short work seemed to offer a compendium of the dominant classical sources, themes, and genres of better-known examples of French sixteenth-century literature. I discovered that Yver's work is relatively little studied and certainly not taught. And yet the inclusion of excerpts of *Le Printemps d'Yver* in Pierre Jourda's Pléiade volume *Conteurs français du XVIe siècle* (1965) attests to its value to the French literary canon.

References to Yver often mention that his work was translated into English by Henry Wotton in 1578. In perusing this edition, I soon discovered, first, that its changes alter substantively Yver's work and, second, that its English was barely understandable to modern-day readers. It was then I decided to offer my own English translation.

The title *Printemps* ("spring") makes multiple references, the most obvious being a playful juxtaposition with Yver's own name being a homonym of the French term for "winter." *Printemps* evokes rebirth, nascent love, and beauty, and it is these very themes broached, if not maintained, in all the stories. Yver's inclusion of his own name in the title emphasizes not oppositional but, rather, tangential, natural seasons. Spring derives from winter and, by extension, this imagery reinforces the stories' themes of quickly shifting movements from peace to war, love to enmity, security to danger, and admiration to jealousy, emotions and actions that imbue both the stories and the framing narratives.

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The title can also be heard as *printemps divers* or "diverse/diverting" spring, a subtle reference to the many genres, narrations, and themes found in the collection. Beyond this play on words, however, the notions of birth, maturation, death, and resurrection appear regularly. Yver emphasizes that the five days of storytelling take place not just during a moment of military peace at the height of spring, but also during *la fête de Pentecôte*. As a moment that proclaims the arrival of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost is associated with the special graces of enlightenment and, by extension, communication, represented by the gift of tongues accorded the apostles. The consistently witty banter of Yver's storytellers, even while recounting tales of woe, reinforces the celebratory atmosphere.

Printemps is also the name Yver attributes to the residence where the stories are told. It is thus a physical incarnation of this season of political and spiritual hope. Resembling the spectacular Lusignan castle in Poitou, *Printemps* is described by Yver as surpassing the splendor of the Sudanese Dultibia's palace, which itself "degraded the glory of the Cairo pyramids."[1]

It was Yver's brother Joseph and sister Marie who oversaw the publication of *Le Printemps* after Jacques Yver's death in early 1572. As fellow poets who offer introductory sonnets alluding to Yver's ill-health and death, they clearly intended the edition to be a tribute to their brother. The original edition also concluded with three brief memorial poems signed "J. Th.," presumably the initials of Jean Thirmoys, a minor nobleman who owned one of the most complete private libraries in France of this period, and who was both friend and patron of writers. Thirmoys's first memorial, a quatrain, is addressed to Yver and emphasizes that he will be immortal provided his work lives on. A subsequent sonnet reinforces this motif, claiming that Yver's book provides him a strong enough shield to disappoint Death and its force.

By identifying Yver as a warrior, this sonnet underscores the themes of conflict and war that permeate the preceding stories. The anagram of Jacques Yver's name *J'acquiers vye* ("I obtain life") are the last words of the concluding four-line anagrammatism and hence of the entire work. In later editions, this anagram appeared as frequently as did Yver's formal name. Thus, the original edition evokes everlasting fame for the author, thanks in large part to these introductory and concluding poems.

Wotton chose to publish his translation under the tongue twister title, *A Courtlie Controuersie of Cupids Cautels: Conteyning fiue Tragicall Histories,*

1 This Sudanese is mentioned in Paolo Giovio's *Histoires de Paolo Giovio Comois, evesque de Nocera, sur les choses faictes et advenues de son temps en toutes les parties du monde* of 1552 (Maignan and Fontaine 24). Otherwise, there is little other historical record of him or his palace.

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very pithie, pleasant, pitiful, and profitable.... While maintaining Yver's original narrative frame, story lines, and at times syntax and imagery, Wotton removed all references to the original author. The ancillary poems disappear from *Cupid's Cautels* and hence, along with them, all references to Yver.

In his preface to the "favorable and well-willing reader" he freely acknowledges a French source:

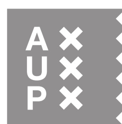
> ... I knowe thou shalt haue cause to frowne, beeing translated so neare unto the Frenche as our Englishe toung will tollerate, which may seeme in many steedes straunge vnto thee. But if happily thou desirest the knowledge of the Frenche toung, conferre the works togither, and I doubt not thou shalt finde some contentation of thy desire. (7)

Wotton's suggestion that the works be read together but without providing the French source is odd. Acknowledging differences between the two works, he leaves it to the reader to discover them. Is he referencing the ever-present conundrum of translation in accurately transmitting an original text? Or does he want to avoid thorny contemporary issues? He may well have been motivated by both the problematics of translation and the pitfalls of international relations.

By eliminating all allusion to Yver, Wotton implicitly acknowledges Yver's death as well as the end of the precarious peace. By 1578, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre had occurred and the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Wars of Religion had been waged. Religious persecutions in England continued, following the execution of the first of the Douai Martyrs in 1577. Wotton's subtitle stresses the stories as antidotes to "the irkesomeness of tedious time."

Wotton's edition provided English readers with accurate, albeit embellished, versions of Yver's storytellers and their tales. Wotton's understanding of French is nuanced and he could be a careful reader of Yver. His changes and deletions, however, distort or hide Yver's poetic art. By eliminating references to Yver and to the springtime motif, Wotton suppresses a foundational level of specificity—Poitou in a moment of reprieve at the time of Pentecost—and, by extension, deprives his initial English readers of the original author Yver.

Virtually all published research on *Le Printemps* has focused—rightly—on the stories, their framing devices, and the narration. However, a significant amount of poetry appears throughout Yver's work. The poems include a lament, a hymn, two long *branles*—a type of song distinctive to Yver's native region of Poitou—an epithalamium and Yver's concluding "Farewell to His Book."



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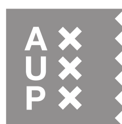
It is Yver's poetry that Wotton changes most, either through elimination or complete rewriting. More significant changes regularly occur. In an early scene, the mistress of the castle *Printemps*—mother and aunt of the two female storytellers—sings a 220-verse ode, "Lament on the miseries of the civil war," in which she derides other European nations' exploitation of France's Wars of Religion:

Vous tous Princes Europois
Qui jadis la ligue fites,
Pour empescher les François
D'estendre au loing leur limites:
Vous ne les peustes ranger
Voire en païs estrangé:
Mais or qu'ils sont en oppresse,
Comme corbeaux acharnez,
Sur ce corps mort vous venez
Et nul de vous ne le laisse. (*Printemps* 38)

You Europe Princes all,
Whiche sometime sought for peace,
Thereby to staye the Frenchmens force
Their kingdome to encreace,
Whom you with all your power,
Could not in forrayne soyle
Resiste, afflicted nowe you seeke,
Like carion crowes to spoile:
Not one is absent nowe
The carcasse to devoure,
Whose fleshe then in your greedy mawes
Had made your sauce but sowre. (Wotten 20)

Wotton's version, striking as it may be, changes Yver's dizain to an alexandrine, thus changing Yver's parallel with the principal inspiration for this *complainte*, the Hebrew Bible's Book of Lamentations. Comprised of five poems lamenting the destruction and loss of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587 BCE, the Lamentations' grief and entreaty are seen in Yver's *complainte*. The first, second, and fourth poems in Lamentations are acrostics made up of twenty-two verses—the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet and the initial letters of the verses following alphabetical order. Yver does not create acrostics but his *complainte* does consist of twenty-two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dizains. The destruction of two physical places, first Jerusalem and now France, is the principal conceit of each poem. Wotton's additional verses have diluted the source and once again deprived his English readers of an authentic aspect of Yver's *Printemps.*

Le Printemps d'Yver is a youthful work: Yver died when he was only twenty-four. Exuberance shines through, and the work's tone owes much to Rabelais and Marguerite de Navarre. The inhabitants of *Printemps* are the epitome of the thelemites, spending their time joking, laughing, dancing, and playing, all while flaunting their erudition. Accordingly, Yver's prose can be equally extravagant. Yver's sentences run overly long with semicolons, exclamation points, and parenthetical expressions abounding. To improve reading flow, I have shortened many of the sentences and created more paragraphs. I also have eliminated Yver's capitalization of nouns when it runs counter to standard, modern-day English usage.

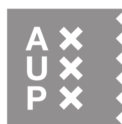
In 2015, Droz published Marie-Ange Maignan and Marie Madeleine Fontaine's authoritative, annotated edition of *Le Printemps d'Yver.* Maignan and Fontaine provide exhaustive critical background to the text, focusing on variations of the manuscripts and correcting previous publishing errors. It, along with the 1841 annotated edition by Paul Lacroix, have guided my translation.

Unlike the original editions, Lacroix's edition capitalizes allegorical terms; I have maintained some of these capitalizations. When referring to Love as the mythological god rather than the emotion, I have changed it to Cupid. Otherwise, I have followed Maignan and Fontaine's punctuation corrections based on their manuscript studies. Lastly, I have opted for free verse in the poetry while indicating the original meters and rhyme schemes in footnotes.

I hope that this annotated translation will help *Le Printemps d'Yver* be more widely known among world literature scholars, teachers, and students. It may be of particular use to English Renaissance literary scholars researching sources and influences on Shakespeare and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playwrights and poets. Robert Greene's romance *Mamillia* (1580), for instance, reveals clear influences in his protagonists' debates over love (Weld). The plots of several anonymous English plays, including *Faire Em* (1590), and Thomas Kyd's *Solyman and Perseda* (1592) are based partially on Yver's stories, by way of Wotton's translation.[2]

2 Maignan and Fontaine further cite Frederick Boas, author of *The Works of Thomas Kyd,* who specifies that Kyd's father was a friend of Wotton's publisher, Francis Coldock. He claims that Kyd himself translated French works and thus could have had access to the original *Printemps* text (cxx-cxxi).

Le Printemps d'Yver is, as Philostrate describes *Pyramus and Thisbe* to Theseus in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a work of "tragical mirth." It offers readers examples of the contrasts and contradictions inherent in times of conflict.



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Anagram of Jacques Yver[1]

The paintbrush's skilled attention
Makes me want to live,
But alas! No matter,
Since by dying, I GAIN LIFE.

1 Maignan and Fontaine note that this anagram was intended as a commentary on a portrait of Jacques Yver. Neither appeared until the 1580 Bonfons edition. Whether Yver composed the anagram remains in question (5). "I GAIN LIFE" constitutes the anagram of Jacques Yver's name in the original French.

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