

Poetry & Language in 16th-Century France

Jochim du Bellay, Pierre de Ronsard, and Thomas Sébillet

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
LAURA WILLETT

Before the 1540s, French poetry was conceived as merely versified rhetoric. With the influence of Italian humanism, however, poets began to question the limitations of rhyme schemes, rhetorical principles, and native French practice. Joachim du Bellay's *Defense and Illustration of the French Language* (1549) was the first "art of poetry" to enunciate these views. Breaking with tradition, he condemned French as inadequate for composing poetry equal to that of the ancients and the modern Italians. Du Bellay called upon the French to invent neologisms and new syntactic structures and to enrich their language (and hence their poetry) by words, ideas, and genres from the Greeks, Romans, and Italians. In response, the author of a rival *ars poetica*, Thomas Sébillet, attacked Du Bellay, while Pierre de Ronsard defended his position.

These translated texts both initiated a debate that refocused poetic theory onto the question of language and influenced theorists in France, England, and Scotland.

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DU BELLAY • RONSARD • SEBILLET



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