

VII. *Remarks on the antient Pronunciation of the French Language, by the Rev. Mr. Bowle, F. A. S. In a Letter to the Rev. Mr. Norris, Secretary.*

Read November 25, 1779.

REVEREND SIR,

AMONG the several writers who have exercised their talents on that inexhaustible fund of criticism the works of Shakespeare, Dr. Farmer in his Essay on his learning confessedly stands foremost. My present business to you, Sir, and the Society, is to point out a mistake of his, and some other commentators, on the following French passage in Henry V. act 4. “Est-il impossible d’eschapper la force de ton *Bras*?” Pistol. “*Bras*s, cur, thou damned and luxurious mountain goat, offer’st me *Bras*s?” Whether this came from the pen of Shakespeare or no, as it is not in the quarto of 1608 in my possession, is foreign to the present purpose, but seems to evince that it was then so pronounced, as it would now be by an Englishman totally unacquainted with the French mode of pronunciation. The assonance was undoubtedly in this instance as in what follows: French soldier. “O pardonnez moy.” Pistol. “Sayst thou me so; is that a ton of moys?” Mr. Johnson makes a doubt, says Dr. Farmer [a], whether the pronunciation of the French language may not be

[a] Essay on the learning of Shakespeare, p. 87.

changed

changed since Shakespeare's time: *but this does not appear to be the case, at least in this termination.* The following authorities, which very probably escaped the searches of this diligent enquirer, will I think amount to proof positive, that the pronunciation of the French language has materially varied, and that it was originally pronounced as we do those French words, which are become a part of our own language. *Theodore Beza* in his *De Francicæ Linguae recta pronunciatione Tractatus. Geneva, 1584, 8vo. p. 34.* speaking of the letter *f*, says, “Haec
 “consonans *suo nativo sibilo* semper profertur dictionem incipiens.
 “Intra ipsam autem dictionem, si inter duas vocales deprehenda-
 “tur, tunc lenissimo *sibilo* ut *Zain* Hebræorum et Francorum *Zeta*
 “pronunciatur, ut *cause, raison, oser, &c.* quae sic efferuntur ac
 “si scriberentur *cauze, raizon, ozer*: idque usque adeo perpetuum
 “est, ut etiam haec litera dictionem finiens, et inter duas vocales
 “deprehensa similiter pronunciatur.” From whence it may be safely inferred that the *f* was not totally dropt, but was more or less retained *nativo suo sibilo* even at the end of words where no vowels followed; as *pas a pas, de pis en pis, vis a vis*, where according to *Richelet* in modern pronunciation *on la fait entendre*. And this genuine pure mode of expression unadulterated by modern refinement is still in use amongst us, as a *croûst* of bread, *oust* a man out of his possession, *honest*, and the like. As to this last word, *Pasquier*, who died at 87 in 1615, says the *f* was in his youth pronounced, but afterwards turned into a very long E. The *O yes* of a modern cryer in a louder tone, but with the same modification of voice with which we sometimes express a familiar assent, may very probably have been the old manner of expression. To *calenge* is to this day in use among the commonalty in the west of England: and who can demonstrate it to be wrong? I find the word so used in the old
 French

French Romance of *Huon de Bourdeaux*, Ed. Lyons, 1612, 8vo. p. 618. “Je te *calenge* la terre la quelle fera mienne.” It is also to be found in *Halle’s Chronicle*, Edward V. f. 1. “Their father began not by war, but by law to *calengè* the croune of England.” But to return to what gave rise to this enquiry, I have only to add, that, without this pronounciation which I have endeavoured to establish, Pistol’s reply is totally devoid of sense or meaning.

J. BOWLE.

P. S. As it is necessary to produce proper vouchers for what is above asserted, they are here added; with this farther view to shew that the several letters were originally pronounced distinctly. ‘Voyant le monde par un jugement delicat *mots proferez* avec toutes leurs lettres estre un peu trop rudes au son des aureilles, on reforma au long aller cette grossiere façon de parler en une plus douce, et au lieu d’*eschole, establir, &c. avec prononciation de chaque lettre*, et element, l’on s’accoustuma de dire, *école, établir, &c.* vray que tousjours est demeuré l’ancien son en ces mots *espece*, et *esperer*, mais peut estre que quelque jour viendront-ils au rang des autres, aussi bien que de *nostre temps* ce mot d’*honneste* (auquel en ma jeunesse j’ay veu prononcer la lettre de S,) s’est maintenant tourné en un E, fort long.’ Pasquier, *Recherches de la France*, l. viii. ch. 1. 676. ed. Paris, 1633. fol.

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