François de Malherbe Biography

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Biography

The French poet François de Malherbe (1555-1628), although not a great poet, succeeded through his works and teaching in assuring the acceptance of basic reforms in French poetry.

François de Malherbe was born at or near Caen. His education took him to Paris, Basel, and Heidelberg. In 1577 he became attached to Henri d'Angoulême, soon to be named governor of Provence. Malherbe remained his secretary until Henri was assassinated in 1586. Of the poet's compositions during this period little of note remains except the *Larmes de Saint Pierre,* a long poem inspired by the Italian Luigi Tansillo. The work is of interest because of its bombast and its exaggerated images-not uncommon practices in that day but elements that Malherbe would come to censure in others. He completely disavowed the *Larmes* in later life.

Between 1586 and 1605 Malherbe lived first in Caen and then (1595) returned to Provence. His reputation was growing. The ode written in 1600 to welcome France's new queen, Marie de Médicis, proved decisive for his future. The influential Cardinal Du Perron liked the poem; and when, in 1605, Malherbe went to Paris, it was to profit at last from the prestige he had won with his ode.

Malherbe's reform should be neither over-nor under-estimated. Quite independent of Malherbe many French poets in the last quarter of the 16th century, including Pierre de Ronsard, had begun to avoid hiatus and to temper the humanists' use of neologisms, archaisms, erudition, and mythology. Malherbe himself, even in his most mature poems, was not so circumspect as he expected others to be. At the same time, these facts only point out the main source of Malherbe's influence: his dogmatism. Uncompromising in his criticism, he was determined to show that such tendencies away from the excesses of 16th-century verse had to be treated as rules. He succeeded and completed a significant step in France's evolution toward classicism.

Mannered love poems, *consolations* in the Stoic vein, translations from the Psalms, and encomiastic *pièces de circonstance* account for Malherbe's best-known works. He strived in the relatively small number of poems he wrote for a distinctive clarity through careful organization, correct syntax, and above all intelligible vocabulary and imagery.

Malherbe knew greatest favor during the regency of Marie de Médicis (1610-1617). His last years were marked by the death of his son in a duel and a decline in poetic production. He died in Paris on Oct. 16, 1628.