

From Hastings to Montesquieu: Franco-English Cultural Interferences

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The theme "From Hastings to Montesquieu: Franco-English cultural interferences" explores the cultural, political, and intellectual relations between France and England from the Battle of Hastings (1066) to the Enlightenment of Montesquieu (the 18th century). The direction of influence is biunivocal and manifests itself in numerous areas: the introduction of feudalism along the French model, the influence of the French language on medieval English, as well as architectural and legal transformations inspired by French traditions. I propose to trace the cultural exchanges from the Plantagenets to the Age of Enlightenment, including Eleanor of Aquitaine, Chrétien de Troyes, Geoffrey Chaucer, Erasmus, Thomas More, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare and Montesquieu. It will be noted that the two cultures form a complex system of communicating vessels.

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1. Historical introduction

The relations (primarily historical, but not only) between France and England have gone through a sinuous evolution, oscillating between conflict (sometimes open) and collaboration. The political rivalry, often fierce, did not exclude cultural influence; on the contrary. From the Norman conquest of 1066 to the Enlightenment political thought of the eighteenth century (the so-called «Lumières» period in France), the two kingdoms shaped their identities, political institutions, and artistic forms that were often in symbiosis.

My communication follows the main stages of the course of these interactions, highlighting the mutual influences on the political, religious, literary and philosophical levels. It explores, thus, the cultural, political and intellectual relations between France and England, from the Battle of Hastings (1066) to Montesquieu's Enlightenment era (eighteenth century).

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2. From Hastings to the Reform

In 1066, the Normans led by William the Conqueror (Guillaume le Conquérant, Duke of Normandy) invaded England, causing a profound change in the English society. After the defeat of the English in 1066 in the Battle of Hastings, the French feudal system was widely introduced in England. The king became the undisputed sovereign of the territory, and this territory was divided among loyal barons, who had military and administrative obligations to the crown, based on vassalage relationship. This French model replaced the previous Anglo-Saxon systems of government and property. A consolidation of central authority is thus achieved (not without convulsions, as we can see, among others, in Walter Scott's historical novels) and a clear hierarchy is established between kings, nobles, and peasants (serfs). The Norman nobles take control of the land, and the social structure is thus reconfigured.

This opened a period of strong French influence on English institutions, language and culture. Norman French became the official language of the court, the administration and the nobility.

For over 300 years after the conquest, French was the language of the English court, government, law, and elite society, while the common people continued speaking English. This created a culturally stratified society where French words permeated English, especially in law, government, art, cuisine, and military terms.

The linguistic and cultural influence was profound: the English vocabulary expanded with French borrowings, and Anglo-Norman became the language of official documents, while English re-emerged later as a written language around the 13th century. One major impact of the Battle of Hastings that can still be seen today is the change in the English Language. William, being from 11th Century Normandy, spoke French, and when he conquered England he brought the Norman / French language across with him. In fact, after the invasion of William the Conqueror, the next king of England to speak English as his first language was Henry IV, more than 300 years later!

In the court, an Anglo-Norman language was used, but the majority of the Anglo population continued speaking their English. Eventually over time, the two languages merged together and created a new one.

Often the difference in language was associated with a difference in social class. This can be seen in jobs and trades of the time - with trades like *bakers* and *shoemakers* keeping their Anglo-Saxon names, while trades such as a *tailor* or *merchant* adopted the French name.

The clearest difference is with food - most farmers would have been Anglo, so the names of animals stayed the same, such as *cow*, *sheep*, or *deer*. However, once

served and ready to be eaten, their names became French: *beef, pork, bacon* and *venison*...

This linguistic influence led to a mixture between French and Old English, contributing to the emergence of the Middle English language, which would later evolve into modern English. Thousands of French words have been borrowed, especially in fields such as law, administration, culinary art, and fashion (e.g. *justice, court, noble, judge, beef, fashion, etc.*).

Architecturally and legally, French traditions shaped medieval England: castles, cathedrals, and legal systems inspired by French feudal norms reinforced the centralised and uniform style of English government.

During the period of the Plantagenet dynasty (12th–15th centuries), the ties between the two kingdoms multiplied and strengthened. A capital role in this process was played by Eleanor of Aquitaine, one of the most influential women of the time, who, through her marriages to the King of France and, then, to Henry II of England, brought with her the cultural refinement of the French courts. Through her prestige and influence, she introduced courtly literature and the ideals of chivalry to England. Under his patronage and that of his successors, art and themes such as love, honor and adventure flourished.

In France, Chrétien de Troyes laid the foundations of the chivalric novel through his works on Lancelot, Perceval, and the myth of the Grail, texts that were assimilated and reinterpreted in the English-speaking world. At the same time, in England, Geoffrey Chaucer, influenced by French and Italian literature, created the masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales*, a work that expresses the complexity of medieval society and marks the beginning of vernacular English literature.

This period was marked by an important transition: from a society dominated by the chivalric code and feudal values to the beginnings of a centralized state, with increasingly consolidated administrative and legal institutions.

Another key period in understanding Franco-English relations was the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), caused by claims to the French throne and territorial rivalries. This was a protracted military conflict between the kingdoms of England and France, which, although it brought with it a political rift between the two countries, maintained and even amplified cultural and artistic exchanges.

French influence persisted in England through language, fashion, political ideas, and literature. Chivalry, heraldry, and courtly literature were present on both sides of the conflict. Although the war contributed to the birth of distinct national identities (among other things, the most prominent figure in French mythology, Joan of Arc, is now looming), mutual influences were maintained in art, language, and lifestyles.

A significant episode in the use of French language is the one of The Order of the Garter, which is the oldest and most senior order of chivalry in Britain, founded in 1348 by King Edward III. It is renowned as the highest British civil and military honour and is dedicated to Saint George, the patron saint of England. Membership is strictly limited to the sovereign, the Prince of Wales and no more than 24 living members known as *Companions*. Additional members can include members of the royal family and foreign monarchs as Supernumerary Knights and Ladies. Appointments are made solely at the sovereign's discretion, usually in recognition of national contribution, service to the Crown, or distinguished personal service to the monarch.

The order's emblem is a blue garter bearing the motto “Honni soit qui mal y pense” (Anglo-Norman for “Shame on him who thinks evil of it”). The original story involves Edward III picking up a dropped garter at a court ball and declaring this motto to silence snickering courtiers.

3. The Reform

It should also be noted that, in the early period of modernity, religious reforms accentuated the differences between the two great kingdoms. In England, Protestantism was imposed by the break from the authority of Rome of Henry VIII and the formation of the Anglican Church. In France, despite religious tensions and conflicts with the Huguenots, Catholicism remained dominant. This religious cleavage produced ideological differences in the organization of the state, in education and in public morality.

The French influence on the English Reformation is a nuanced and often overlooked aspect of Reformation history. While the Reformation in England was largely driven by internal political and religious factors—most notably Henry VIII's break from the Roman Catholic Church—French religious, political, and intellectual currents played an indirect but meaningful role.

John Calvin (1509–1564), although based in Geneva, was French by birth and his writings deeply influenced Protestant thought across Europe, including in England. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* shaped English Puritanism and later the English Presbyterian movement. On the other hand, Huguenots (French Protestants), especially after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572), sought refuge in England. They brought with them Reformed theology. Many settled in London and other cities, influencing English Protestant communities.

French Renaissance humanists such as Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Guillaume Budé contributed to a scholarly movement that questioned Church

authority and emphasized biblical languages and texts. English reformers like Thomas More and Erasmus engaged with these currents. This humanist scholarship laid the groundwork for theological reform by emphasizing *ad fontes* ("back to the sources") - returning to the Bible and the Church Fathers.

English Protestants fleeing Mary I's Catholic regime (1553–1558) found refuge in Protestant French-speaking cities like Geneva and Strasbourg. These exiles returned under Elizabeth I, bringing with them more radical Protestant ideas, liturgies (like the *Book of Common Order*), and continental ecclesiology.

On the other hand, in both countries, Renaissance humanism exerted profound cultural repercussions. In England, figures such as Erasmus and Thomas More promoted Christian values and moral ideals, reflected in works such as *Utopia*. In France, humanism was represented by François Rabelais, with his satirical and exuberant style of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and by Michel de Montaigne, the founder of the modern essay and promoter of individual reflection and ideological relativism.

William Shakespeare, the most important Elizabethan playwright, was, in turn, influenced by French and Italian sources, taking themes, structures, and characters from continental literature. In turn, the Elizabethan theater was a source of inspiration for the French dramaturgy of the classical century. Canonical authors such as Corneille and Racine assimilated elements of Shakespearean tragedy, adapting them to the poetic rigors of French classicism.

4. Montesquieu

During the Enlightenment, a special figure, particularly appreciated in England was that of Montesquieu. Through *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), he was influenced by the English constitutional model, appreciating the separation of powers in the state in Great Britain as a premise of modern democracy.

Here is what he said, in the *Spirit of Laws*, with a modesty that reminds us of Montaigne (Montesquieu 1748/1949, LXVII):

"I beg one favor of my readers, which I fear will not be granted to me; this is, that they will not judge by a few hours' reading of the labor of twenty years; that they will approve or condemn the book entire, and not a few particular phrases. If they would search into the design of the author, they can do it in no other way so completely as by searching into the design of the work."

In turn, his thinking influenced future debates on democracy in both countries. We can therefore say that the eighteenth century marked a new stage in the Franco-English relationship, subsumed by ideological and philosophical dialogue.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that, over seven centuries, Franco-English relations have evolved from domination and conflict to cultural dialogue and exchange of ideas. Although in the Middle Ages Franco-English relations oscillated between rivalry and cultural borrowing, France's influence on England was indisputable.

If, on the one hand, political and religious conflicts generated ideological fissures, on the other hand, artistic, literary and intellectual exchanges were constant and profound. These interactions resulted in a common European heritage, in which national identities were shaped not only in opposition, but also through mutual influence, in a veritable system of communicating vessels.

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