



Robert Estienne's Influence on Lexicography

DeWitt T. Starnes

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Towering above printers of his time and their successors for many years afterward was the figure of Robert Estienne, the great French lexicographer of the sixteenth century, whose contribution to knowledge and its dissemination is the subject of this authoritative book. The span of Robert Estienne's life (1503–1559) encompassed the historical epochs and events which shaped his career: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the invention of printing by movable type. His keen interest in the revival of ancient literatures and languages and his training in the art of printing pointed the road he would travel, and the climate of opinion in the Reformation determined his destiny.

Robert Estienne promoted classical learning by printing the works of good authors; to spread knowledge of ancient literature he compiled dictionaries and grammars which were adopted by most of the universities of Europe. His dictionary of proper names of Biblical and classical origin, the *Dictionarium historicum ac poeticum*, became one of the great source books for later compilers of dictionaries and for authors. His influence on English writers was pervasive. Ben Jonson showed familiarity with his texts; Spenser and Milton sometimes set translations of his phraseology directly into their poetry. Perpetuation of the few errors he made is one sure proof that his dictionaries were used and copied.

An exemplar of learning in the classics and scripture, he searched in ancient manuscripts to avoid repeating the numerous errors that had crept into Bible translations over hundreds of years. For his efforts he was called a heretic by *docteurs de theologie* in the Sorbonne, but was protected by the royal favor of Francis I of France. Between attacks of theologians on the one side and the King's protection on the other, he became a "controversial" figure and after many years of calumny and persecution finally took refuge in Geneva.

Estienne established a family tradition of printing correct and beautiful books, and the printing establishments which made the name of Estienne celebrated throughout the world continued for 162 years.

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