AN EARLY FRENCH BOOK OF WORDPLAY

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In the Kickshaws section of the May 1979 Word Ways, Will Shortz described a 1616 book of French wordplay by Etienne Tabourot, entitled Les Bigarrures et Touches du Seigneur des Accords (The Designs and Strokes of the Lord of Harmony), hereafter denoted by B-T. This book is believed to be the first one in the world entirely devoted to recreational linguistics. Of this work one nineteenth-century reviewer has written "This is a curious collection whose author has been pleased to temper his erudition with numerous pleasantries, sometimes good, sometimes bad and often smutty."

Readers of Word Ways may wish to search for and purchase a copy of their own; be warned that there is no definitive edition, and that prices vary widely for different printings and compilations from as little as fifty dollars to several thousand. According to one New York antiquarian book dealer, it appears rarely at auctions in this country. To aid the reader in his search, we give here a brief description of the various editions that appeared over three-quarters of a century, as noted in Brunet's Library Manual (1867) and the Bookman's Price Index.

The book has a somewhat involved history, having also been issued in separate parts: Les Bigarrures du Seigneur des Accords, denoted here by B, and Les Touches du Seigneur des Accords, denoted here by T. To complicate matters further, two of the four books of B (the second and third) apparently never appeared in print, and different editions of T (and of B-T) include different mixtures of its five distinct books.

According to Papillon (in his Bibliothèque de Bourgogne) the first edition of B contained only the first book, and was published in Paris by Jean Richer in 12mo in 1572. Although Tabourot was in Paris in 1572 and published another work in that year, there is considerable doubt about the correctness of this claim. In the foreword to a 1584 edition of B, Tabourot himself asserts that this "facetious collection, begun by him at the age of eighteen, was published for the first time only in 1582." Although no edition of this date is known to exist, at least two different 1583 editions, both printed in Paris by Richer in 16mo, do exist: one contains 216 pages, the other 219. In the following twenty years several other editions of B were issued:

Paris, 1585-88 (also 1595?), J. Richer in 12mo (fourth book only, containing 118 pages)
Rouen, 1591-95, J. Bouchu in 16mo (214 pages)
The 1591 Rouen was offered for 75 pounds ($210) in 1965, and the 1595 Rouen for 40 pounds ($112) the same year; the 1599 Lyon was offered for 50 pounds ($140) in 1970.

The earliest edition of T contains the first three books of 56, 37 and 19 pages, respectively, and was published in Paris in 1585 by J. Richer in 12mo; a second edition, published in 1586, was offered for $2500 in 1969, and the same book for 7750 francs ($1510) in 1973. In 1588, J. Richer published in 12mo in Paris a different T containing the fourth and fifth books of 60 and 75 pages, respectively.

The first edition of B-T appears to be the one issued by J. Richer in 12mo at Paris in 1586; it contained the first and fourth books of B together with T. Since this was published two years before the fourth and fifth books of T appeared, it is believed that the first three books of T were used. (A 1588 edition of this work was offered in 1968 for $900, and the same book in 1973 for 2800 francs ($550).) However, all later editions of B-T suffered a mutation: instead of the first three books of T (as in the 1585-86 Paris edition), they contained the last two (as in the 1588 edition). Brunet notes that nothing which is contained in the 1585 edition of T is reproduced in the different collective editions of B-T where, nevertheless, is found a part entitled Les Touches. Again he says, "It is from books 4 & 5 that the editors of the collective editions have drawn all that in their collection comprises the section called Les Touches."

He also notes that in the collective editions many features of the originals have been left out, including the prose explanations of T, and that in some cases notable variations from the original text have crept in.

The major editions of B-T in the seventeenth century are:

Paris, 1603 (1608?), J. Richer in 12mo
Paris, 1614-16, J. Richer in 8vo
Rouen, 1616-21, David Geuffroy in 12mo
Rouen, 1640-48, Du Mesnil in 8vo
Paris, 1662, (publisher unknown) in 12mo

These later editions have been generally available at considerably lower prices. The 1608 Paris was offered in 1963 for $85; the 1614 Paris was offered in 1964 for $30, and in 1965 for 180 francs ($34); the 1640 Rouen was offered in 1964 for 20 pounds ($56) and in 1969 for $50; and the 1662 Paris was offered in 1967 for 12 pounds ($34).