

François de Belleforest. *Le Cinquiesme Tome des Histoires Tragiques*.

Ed. Hervé-Thomas Campagne. Textes Littéraires Français 622. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2013. cxviii + 804 pp. €104. ISBN: 978-2-600-01569-1.

Thanks to his prolific and heterogeneous output, Belleforest (1530–83) is an inescapable but somewhat elusive figure of the French Renaissance. Volume 5 of his *Histoires tragiques* (1572), which, as this handsome critical edition demonstrates, coheres as an autonomous work despite its title, constitutes his most original contribution to the genre, while illuminating his broader ethical and aesthetic priorities. The influential collection, which saw sixteen printings (listed on cxv), contains twelve novellas, each preceded by a substantial “argument,” consisting primarily of moral analysis and exhortation rather than summary.

Campagne commences his introduction by situating the volume with respect to Belleforest’s larger oeuvre. Whereas volumes 1 through 3 were translations of Bandello’s novellas, both volume 4 and the *Discours mémorables de plusieurs histoires tragiques* (1570) featured texts composed by Belleforest from varying sources. The *Cinquiesme tome* (1572) included the eight narratives featured in the latter volume, to which Belleforest added four stories and a new ordering. Despite this canny recycling of texts, Campagne describes the volume as “profoundly innovative” (x). Its geographic variety recalled the encyclopedic ambitions of Belleforest’s historical and cosmographical writings, while its focus on individual lives offered a form of microhistory that filled in the gaps in universal history. In the spirit of Amyot’s translation of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, Belleforest groups the stories in thematic pairs: the first two stories, for example, involve Christian and Islamic heresy; the fifth and sixth juxtapose tales of family violence, the first vernacular version of the Hamlet story and the Ottoman emperor Soliman’s assassination of his son Mustapha; the ninth and tenth recount insurrections by the female warrior Vlasta of Bohemia and the Caribbean cacique Enriquillo. This organizational scheme externalizes a more pervasive drawing of moral lessons through historical parallels.

The second section explores the relationship between tragedy proper and the *histoire tragique*, which emphasized moral interpretation rather than imitation of the ancients. Campagne reviews claims for Shakespeare’s use of *Amleth*, noting that *Hamlet* is the only of his works to bear the title *tragicall historie* (li, n63), and analyzes Montfleury’s adaptation of the novella to the demands of the classical French stage in his tragicomedy *Trasibule* (lvii). The third section treats tragic history as a hybrid genre that, unlike cosmography, blurs the boundaries between myth and history. If Belleforest drew parallels with ancient myths and incorporated more recent legendary materials, he also contributed to such modern myths as the noble savage and the oriental despot. A final section on testimony examines Belleforest’s claims for the authenticity of his written and oral sources and offers an extended examination of two stories in which the writer appears as eyewitness. Campagne concludes by considering how Belleforest, witness to France’s Wars of Religion, shapes the entire volume into an allegory of the conflict he attributes to tolerance of Calvinist heresy.

This volume effectively combines the demands of readability and scholarship. Based on the 1572 edition, it offers variants from the *Discours* of 1570 and the 1580 edition, the last published in Belleforest's lifetime. Appendixes supply paratexts to the other editions, Nicolas de Moffat's 1555 account of Mustapha's assassination, and a table comparing the order of stories in the three editions. Comprehensive endnotes to each *histoire* and an index increase the accessibility of Belleforest's narratives. A brief review cannot do justice to the broad and suggestive introduction, which effectively contextualizes the volume while offering numerous critical insights. Given the emphasis Campagne places on the ordering of the 1572 edition, one might wish for broader treatment of its abandonment in 1580, attributed to the claims of a revised edition (xxx). The contributions to the novel by Belleforest, also credited with the first French pastoral novel (*La Pyrénéé*, 1571), do not figure in the introduction, which concludes with the barest mention of Rosset and Camus, seventeenth-century practitioners of the *histoire tragique* (cxiii). This volume, however, will prove invaluable to scholars of other narrative genres. The story of Mustapha's assassination, for example, figures prominently in part 2, book 2, of Scudéry's romance *Ibrahim* (1641), set largely in the court of Soliman. This edition thus makes a welcome contribution to scholarship, both for signaling the *Cinquième tome's* intrinsic interest and for the light it will shed on early modern genres and mentalities.

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