

Stephen John Bamforth and Jean Céard, eds. *Histoires prodigieuses (édition de 1561)*.

Textes Littéraires Français 605. Geneva: Librairie Droz S.A., 2010. 968 pp. index. illus. gloss. bibl. \$120. ISBN: 978-2-600-01395-6.

This long-awaited critical edition makes available to scholars of Renaissance literature, history, and culture one of the most widely distributed illustrated books published in sixteenth-century France. Printed twenty-four times between 1560 and 1598, translated into English, Dutch, and Spanish, Boaistuau's *Histoires prodigieuses* had been reissued by Yves Florenne in 1961, and more recently, with a short introduction, by Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani in 1996. These two modern editions, however, did not fully do justice to Boaistuau's work since they presented a transcription that was often faulty for lack of sound editorial principles, and did not provide readers with proper annotations. With this text, Jean Céard and Stephen Bamforth finally allow us to rediscover and appreciate the forty-one *histoires* that Boaistuau devoted to the kind of uncanny events and phenomena that fascinated Renaissance *curieux* and humanist scholars alike. They also remind us that the *Histoire prodigieuses* were much more than a minor genre, but rather an endeavor that naturally found its place and significance within the humanist quest

for encyclopedic knowledge, as well as a form of discourse that was of great interest to such thinkers as Ronsard, Paré, and Montaigne.

The value and originality of this edition are in part the result of Stephen Bamforth's discovery of a handsomely illuminated manuscript version of Boaistuau's work, dedicated by its author to Queen Elizabeth of England in late 1559. This first version of the *Histoires prodigieuses*, found in the collection of the Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine in London, has allowed the editor to provide new information concerning the life and whereabouts of an author who was seeking the patronage of a young queen, and therefore to complete the biographical research undertaken by Michel Simonin and Richard Carr in the 1980s.

Most importantly, the Wellcome manuscript has made it possible for Bamforth to shed a new light on the complex creative and editorial process that resulted in the 1561 publication of Boaistuau's *Histoires* by printers Vincent Sertenas, Jean Longis, and Robert le Mangnier. Bamforth convincingly shows that this manuscript is not merely a preliminary handwritten version of the printed *Histoires prodigieuses*, but in many ways a text that needs to be considered as a work in itself, especially prepared in view of Boaistuau's trip to the English court.

Rather than the original 1560 printed version, the editors have chosen as their base text the 1561 edition, on the grounds that it contains corrections and variations that can be attributed to Boaistuau himself. In the pages of his extremely rich introduction, Stephen Bamforth provides a detailed study and history of the various editions of the text printed between 1560 and 1598, and notes the importance of the 1568 Jean de Bordeaux edition, whose small in-16 format shows that Boaistuau's *Histoires prodigieuses* had quickly become an extremely successful book of popularization and entertainment. The editors' research also allows us to witness the gradual metamorphosis of Boaistuau's single volume into a six-tome set that included continuations written by Tesserant, Belleforest, and Hoyer.

Bamforth has also paid particular attention to the illustrations contained in both manuscript and printed versions of the *Histoires prodigieuses*, demonstrating that they should not be viewed as ornamental afterthoughts, but rather as a key component in Boaistuau's work. He traces those images that are imitations of prints found in texts that include Münster's *Cosmographiae universalis libri* (1552) and Gesner's *Historiae animalium* (1558), and carefully studies those that were made especially for the printed version of the text.

The abundant notes prepared by Jean Céard for this critical edition highlight Boaistuau's methods as well his tendency to disguise some of his sources and to conceal others. Céard also shows that the author intentionally misled his readers in several instances, stating for example that Marco Polo described the devil of Calicut that appears in his first *Histoire*, a reference that is nowhere to be found in the explorer's travel narratives. All in all however, Céard reminds us that Boaistuau was a true erudite who was well versed in Latin and Greek and who, although he wrote for a wide readership, is a worthy representative of Renaissance humanism.

With this impeccable edition, Stephen Bamforth and Jean Céard have offered an outstanding contribution to scholarship on sixteenth-century French literature,

and to the field of Renaissance studies in general. This is a welcome publication that makes us hope its editors will later reissue the continuations written by Tesserant, Belleforest, and Hoyer.

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