The Tragedy of the Late Gaspard de Coligny and The Guisiade (review)

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François de Chantelouve and Pierre Matthieu. *The Tragedy of the Late Gaspard de Coligny* and *The Guisiade.*


The fortieth volume of the Carleton Renaissance Plays in Translation series shows hallmarks of how far the series has come: instead of a tiny paperback with a short introduction — the format of earlier volumes offered by general editors Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavolella — we now have a genuine scholarly edition, complete with an extensive introduction and contextual notes. This is the second volume for the series (now available through CRRS Editions at the University of Toronto) by Richard Hillman, professor at the Université François-Rabelais in Tours. An experienced editor and translator, Hillman has produced several editions of literary texts in addition to serving as the editor of the journal *Renaissance and Reformation* (*Renaissance et Réforme*). It comes as no surprise, then, that his translations of Chantelouve’s *Tragedy of the Late Gaspard de Coligny* (1575) and Matthieu’s *The Guisiade* (1589) should be accurate in both content and poetry. The shift from French to English is difficult, but Hillman maintains accuracy while making the complex poetic structures of both plays flow.

While the second half of the sixteenth century is underrepresented in modern editions of French playtexts — a condition the publishing house of Leo S. Olschki in Florence is correcting with their series Théâtre français de la Renaissance; sixteenth-century editions of *Coligny* and *The Guisiade* are also available on the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s Gallica website in electronic format — the paucity of English translations of these plays in favor of their seventeenth-century, neoclassical rivals is downright scandalous. The two plays offered here are unmistakably products of the French Wars of Religion: the first was written in response to the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572; the second takes as its subject the assassination of the Duke and Cardinal of Guise prior to Christmas of 1588. Hillman argues in his introduction that “the frankly polemical orientation and occasional contingency of *Coligny* and *The Guisiade* have encouraged their dismissal as sub-literary and ephemeral” (11). He brings up an important question regarding which texts deserve editions: if a play is propagandistic, why do so many scholars assume that this cancels out its artistic merit? And why are plays from sixteenth-century France considered less worthy for their failure to conform to the (anachronistic) seventeenth-century neoclassical ideals of the Academy? Shakespeare’s history plays have met with the same criticism, but nobody is suggesting that we discount them from study and performance.

Shakespeare is a particularly apt comparison here, considering Hillman’s research interests: he is a specialist in English Renaissance theater, a part of the CNRS/Université de Montpellier project Representing France and the French in Early Modern English Drama, and author of *Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Politics of France* (2002). Perhaps it is inevitable that one of his arguments for the importance of bringing *Coligny* and *The Guisiade* to an English-speaking public is for
comparison to the more popular Elizabethan and Jacobean playtexts, thereby lending the legitimacy of the Bard to the French plays. One wonders if the introduction had been written by a scholar of French Renaissance theater, would the plays have been championed for their own sake rather than for connections to much-studied English Renaissance dramas? Hillman does attempt a certain amount of this, but ultimately falls back on the English connection, somewhat ironically stating that “scholars inevitably remain imprisoned within the myths they reject” (17). These are minor points; Hillman’s translations are delightful, and make this edition a useful discussion text for a course in the history of France or the Reformation, as well as theater history or literature.

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Though research in recent decades recognizes the phenomenon of Renaissance Aristotelianism and its place in early Reformed theology, few examples of sixteenth-century Protestant appropriations of Aristotle have been accessible. Fortunately, this new volume illustrates not only that Aristotle was important within the Reformed academy, but also illustrates how Reformed theologians could engage the philosopher without abandoning the core of their tradition. Vermigli’s commentary provides a concrete specimen of the phenomenon of Protestant scholasticism and validates newer interpretations of the movement that view scholasticism as a method of academic theology, not as reliance on medieval dogmatic assertions, elevation of reason, or uncritical devotion to Aristotle. Rather than using Aristotle as an authority, Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562) dissects, explains, summarizes in syllogistic form, and ends each section by comparing the Nichomachean Ethics to scripture. He does not simply use biblical proof-texts to defend Aristotelian propositions, but offers critical engagement with an ancient ethical system in order to cultivate virtue in his own context.

The commentary derives from Vermigli’s lectures at Strasbourg from 1553 to 1556, and is unique within his primarily theological corpus. For professional reasons, he was unable to move beyond the first two chapters of Aristotle’s third book. However, the value of the work rests in Vermigli’s combination of skills developed at the University of Padua, Ciceronian style, and Reformed theology, which finds sufficient expression within each section. Despite a few references to Aquinas, and one to John Duns Scotus, there is little medieval influence. Instead, references to classical figures and their writings are abundant. Vermigli is far more concerned with translating Greek terms or explaining logic and grammar from ancient sources than he is with medieval controversies.