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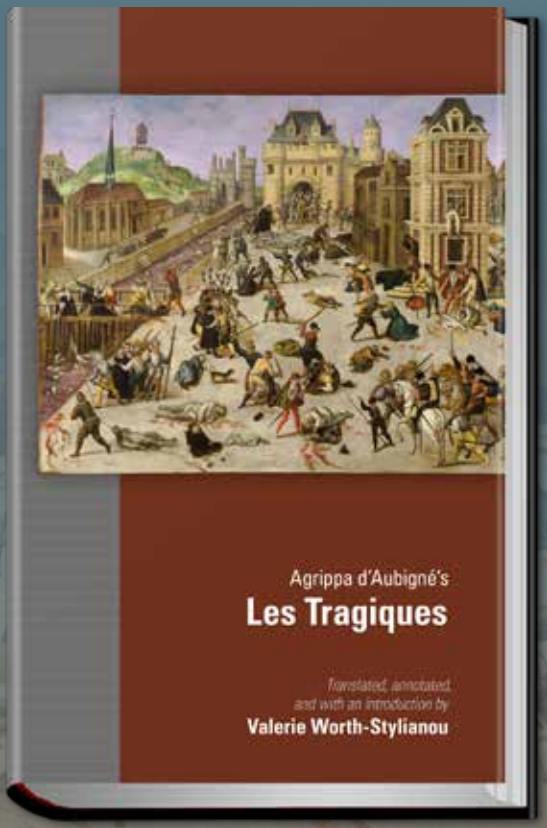
Les Tragiques



Translated, annotated, and with an introduction by

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Agrippa d'Aubigné's
Les Tragiques

Agrippa D'Aubigné's remarkable epic poem, *Les Tragiques*, was composed in France in the 1570s, and first published in 1616 in Geneva. It sets the recent sufferings of the Protestants in the French Wars of Religion within the overarching context of God's eternal plan for his chosen faithful. Recording the bitter story of the defeated party, the poet movingly combines depictions of a devastated country, vivid tableaux of the worst atrocities of the Wars, and satirical attacks on leading political and religious figures. As he narrates a story which he believes must not be forgotten, d`Aubigné develops an innovative style that deliberately challenges conventions. This is a work of pure baroque, a pearl of irregular shape, making a unique appeal to both the senses and the intellect.

The complete work has never previously been translated into English. Valerie Worth-Stylianou's translation of the entire text is accompanied by her illuminating introduction and detailed critical notes. This English version will interest scholars and students of early modern political, social and religious history and of comparative literatures, as well as all readers looking to understand how literature seeks to mediate the pain of partisan struggles.

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Les Tragiques

Prefaces

To the Readers[1]

Behold the thief Prometheus,[2] who instead of asking forgiveness asks for gratitude for his crime. He thinks he can reasonably make you a present of what did not belong to him, as though stealing on your behalf what his master hid from you. What is more, this fire that I stole was dying without air, it was a light under a bushel;[3] my charitable sin brought it into the open. (I mean charitable for you and for its author.) From the center of France, from the far corners, and from even further away, especially from an elderly minister in Angrogna,[4] various writings added support to the demands voiced by God's servants, who reproached him for hiding his talent.[5]

One spoke thus:

> We are tired of books that teach; give us ones that will stir our hearts[6] at a time when all Christian zeal has perished, when the difference between truth and falsehood has been obliterated, when the hands of the Church's enemies hide the blood that stains them beneath gifts, and their inhumanity beneath tolerance.[7] The "Indifferents,"[8] those mixing blasphemy and derision, those prepared to sell God's commands, display their sweet way of life and their rewards, and have dazzled the eyes of our young men who are no longer driven by honor or stirred by danger.

My master replied:

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1 Although the Preface is allegedly written by Prometheus, modern critics agree this is a pseudonym adopted by d'Aubigné, following the literary convention of disguised pseudonymity.

2 In classical mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods to give to mankind.

3 [L] Cf. the parable in Matthew 5:14–15, Mark 4:21–25, and Luke 8:16–18.

4 Valley in Piedmont which resisted attacks by the Duke of Savoy.

5 [L] Cf. the parable of the buried talent: Matthew 25:14–30.

6 On the resonances of "esmouvoir" (literally "move," including to political action), see Maynard 2018, 108 and Frisch 2015, 100–103.

7 [L] D'Aubigné is accusing the Catholics of having first persecuted Protestants, then having sought to win over those less committed by offering positions and money.

8 [L] I.e., Protestants pursuing an easy peace, who wished to believe disputes over points of doctrine a matter of indifference.

I—*Sufferings*

Since we must attack the legions of Rome,[1]
The monsters of Italy, we must do
As Hannibal,[2] whose pungent fires
Cleft a passage through the blazing Alps.[3]
My fiery courage, my strong and bitter resolve
Drive a breach, not a door, through the seven hills.[4]
I smash the rocks and the misguided respect
That made Caesar fear a terrifying nightmare.[5]
He saw Rome trembling, hideous, dishevelled,
In tears, sobbing, half-dead, despairing,
Wringing her hands, preventing, halting
Caesar's advance toward the blood of his kin.
    But beneath the altars of idols, I behold
The stricken face of the Church in Captivity,[6]
That calls me to deliver it, whatever the dangers,

Opposite: Detail from Jean Perrissin's illustration of the first major atrocity of the Wars of Religion, the massacre of Vassy. The Duke de Guise's forces attacked Huguenots worshipping in a barn which they used as a church; the barn was then set on fire. "Le massacre fait à Vassy le premier jour de mars 1562," 1569–70. (Bibliothèque publique et universitaire de Genève).

1 [L] D'Aubigné's opening lines conflate Hannibal's attack on Rome in the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) and the Protestant criticism of the papacy.

2 D'Aubigné draws on the detailed description of the crossing of the Alps in Silius Italius, *Punica* 3.477–556.

3 [L] It was believed Hannibal carved a passage through the Alps (in 217) by dissolving the rocks with hot vinegar and fire (Livy, *The History of Rome* 21:37).

4 [L] A periphrasis for Rome, built on seven hills, but possibly also suggesting the seven seals to be broken by the Lamb at the end of time (Revelation 6:1).

5 [L] Lucan (*The Civil War* 1.183–93) records the premonition that terrified Caesar when he had crossed the Rubicon and was marching on Rome (49 BCE). To advance armed beyond the Rubicon was an act of treason, which was tantamount to declaring civil war.

6 [L] Cf. Revelation 6:9–10. The Protestants regularly compared their situation to that of the Jewish period of captivity in Babylon, e.g., Luther's *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520).

Satan did not await the sunrise, for behold,
The onlookers' faces realize, with sudden astonishment,
That at peaceful midnight, when human rest
Envelops their labors and cares in silence,
As though from the depths of hell there stirred
So many fires, murderers, and weapons;
The city where once the law was held sacred,
That because of the laws was honored,
That dispensed throughout France life and rights,
Where the arts flourished, the mother of our kings,
Saw and suffered within herself an armed mob
Trampling justice, scorned under foot.
The armed masses of unbridled thugs,
The common workers' troops amassed
Cut short at will three thousand precious lives,[152]
Witnesses, judges, and kings, executioners and plaintiffs.
Here the two sides speak only French.
The formidable leaders[153] who previously
Freed merchants from the fear of Spain,
To trade freely across seas and the land,
Who had so often fought foreigners,
Freed the king[154] through fear of their strength,
Who had engaged in full-blown battles,
Whose hearts and faces had not wavered in combat,
The might of the true French, the terror of traitors,
Died, their strength but not their courage sapped,
Taken in the beds in which they rested,
Their jailer their host, their prison their rooms,
By cowardly hares,[155] armed to the teeth,
Who trembled as they pulled these lions' manes,
Their craven hands and timid bravery
Unable, though they were bound, to kill them swiftly.
In the name of the king who killed laws[156]

152 [L] Reference to the revolutionary aspect of workers killing the elite of Paris.

153 [F] I.e., the Protestant leaders, and especially Coligny for his part in the wars against Charles V of Spain (1552–59).

154 [L] Possibly a reference to François Ier's captivity in Madrid after he had lost the Battle of Pavia (1525).

155 [F] Based on an emblem in Andrea Alciati.

156 [L] A reference to the theory that the king held his power by virtue of the laws of the country, enshrining his authority in exchange for protecting the life of his subjects—a contract d'Aubigné believed he had broken.

They destroyed the hearts by which kings are kings.
The knave, holding royal power,
Dragged France's highest officers into the gutter.
All the rich were condemned; a word sufficed
To take private vengeance on a supposed Huguenot.
The interminable length of trials was over,
A daughter takes her mother's days and life,
There one brother suffers at the hand of another,
One cousin finds another his assassin;
Friendship was powerless, relations worthless,
Goodwill serving only as a cloak.
With a laughing face, our Cato[157] directed
Our gaze with his, his finger pointing
At himself run through: then he showed us how
He is cut[158] into pieces; his head runs to Rome,[159]
His body becomes a plaything for the eager rabble,
Giving the spur to the next unprecedented acts.
The bell that once sounded the hour of justice,[160]
The trumpet of thieves, declares the lawless arena open;
This great law court was unlawfully chosen
To fly the crimsoned standard.[161]
A war without enemies,[162] where blows strike
No breastplate, but skin or thin shirt.
One side cries in defence, the other attacks with their hands;
These wield a sword, those offer their breasts:
It is hard to judge who is less moved by human passion,[163]
He who slits the throat or he who offers his up.

157 [L] Comparison between the Protestant leader, Admiral Coligny, and Cato, the Roman epitome of Stoic virtue. Coligny's finger had been broken by a gunshot the day before the Massacre. Fanlo (p. 617) observes that this is the first time in the whole poem that d'Aubigné uses the first-person plural ("nostre" = our) to include himself explicitly among the elect.

158 Another and very striking example of d'Aubigné alternating past historic and present tenses to shift the spectators' and readers' perspective. Cf. above n. on l. 778.

159 [L] According to popular rumor, Coligny's head was embalmed and sent as a trophy to the pope. See also *Histoire universelle*, VI.4.

160 [L] The bell of the Law Courts (Palais de justice) was meant to sound the start of the Massacre.

161 [L] A red flag symbolizing the Massacre.

162 [L] Cf. Lucan, *The Civil War* 1:682.

163 The adjective "astorge" (used in French, and translated here as "less moved by human passion") occurs in Romans 1:31 and II Timothy 3:3, meaning "without natural affection."

Every scoundrel speaks loudly, every just man fears,
Exalting what he hates; the innocent invents a crime.
No boy or child fails to shed blood
Lest he suffer the shame of pure hands.
Prisons, palaces, castles, houses,
Private chambers, bedrooms and beds
Of princes, their power, their privacy, their very breasts
Were marked with the blows of the extreme massacre.
Nothing now was sacred when the king ordered
The altars, pledges of faith, to be polluted.[164]
The princesses left their beds, their rooms,
In horror not pity, that they might not touch the bloody,
Dismembered limbs that this tragic day
Were led to seek life in the nest of false love.[165]
Libitina[166] marked her seat with her colors,
As the blood of the young animal reddens the teeth of a trap,
These beds, warm traps, not beds but tombs
Where Love and Death exchanged torches.
This day determined thus to show in the daylight
The instruments, devices, and causes
Of heaven's great decisions. Now indeed you see
The water covered with those injured and half-drowned,
Swirling against the banks of the dreadful Seine;
Both its banks full of the poisons of the age,[167]
It holds more blood than water; its waters curdle,
Then break up again, to be reunited
By those thrown in: the first pile drowns,
Another is killed by those next sent in;
In the muddled events of this strange outrage
The blade and the waters fight to deliver the deathblow.
The bridge, once built for the city's bread,[168]
Became the sad scaffold of this civic fury:
At one end is seen the dreadful gate, chosen
As the passage to death, marked in red;

164 [L] Reference to the dynastic marriages which preceded the St. Bartholomew`s Day massacre, and to the flouting of the tradition that an altar guaranteed asylum.

165 [L] Philippe de Lévis, vicomte de Léran, when wounded sought refuge with Marguerite de Navarre (although there is no evidence, beyond d'Aubigné's insinuation, of any affair between them).

166 [L] Roman goddess of funerals, represented as draped in black.

167 [L] Allusion to the luxury items sold on the banks of the Seine.

168 [L] The Millers' Bridge (Pont aux Meuniers), leading to the mills by the river.

The grim valley, place of death for so many lambs,
Will ever bear the name "shadow of Death,"[169]
And your four henchmen's faces[170] will display
Their share in the infamous horror of the bridge,
That bridge that made four hundred fall to their death.[171]
The Seine will swallow up, as a she-wolf, your buildings:
One fateful night demands eight hundred,
And would mix with the guilty the innocent.
Who walks in the first row of the serried hosts?
Who shall walk ahead of the slaughtered sheep?
Your reputation lives, your fine color is tarnished,
Pitiful, cautious, devout Yverny,[172]
Providing hospitality to the stranger, charity to the poor,
Caring for the sick and prisoners,
Your nun's garb did not protect you,
A scarlet shoe betrayed and denounced you:
For God did not approve of his chosen flock
Exchanging their worldly attire for that of a hypocrite;
And when he wishes to rescue from the tomb his people,
He wants nothing unclean to bestow his gifts.
But what do I see? A head caught
By its flowing locks around a joint
Of the tragic bridge, a person dead yet still beautiful,
Though pale and lifeless, half-hidden in the water;
The hair, cutting short the initial fall,
Raises up the face that seeks justice.
No, it is not this that the body awaited,
By a twist of fate left hanging for two days;
It is a much-loved breast, still alive,
That it awaits as its dear companion.
Thus do I see the condemned husband

169 [L] The rue Trop-va-qui-dure, running alongside the Châtelet and down to the Seine, became known as the "vallée de misère."

170 [L] Tanchou (Provost of Paris), Pezot, Croiset, and Perier. See *Histoire universelle*, VI.4.

171 [L] An allusion to the collapse of the bridge on 22 December 1596, killing many (though probably not the four hundred claimed by d'Aubigné), an accident that Protestants saw as an act of divine nemesis.

172 [L] Madeleine Briçonnet, widow of Thibaud de Longueil d'Yverny, sought to save herself by adopting the disguise of a nun, but her colored petticoat betrayed her. D'Aubigné chooses to represent it as a scarlet shoe, in accordance with the color symbolism throughout *Les Tragiques*. See also *Histoire universelle*, VI.4.