The Annotated *Amleth*:  
Belleforest in the British Library

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François de Belleforest’s *Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques* is the underlying source for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This volume of *Les Histoires Tragiques* was published in 1576 in Lyon and republished in Paris in 1582. There are copies of both in the British Library. The earlier edition is thought to be the source for the play. Stabler pointed out that the 1576 edition is occasionally more like Shakespeare than the 1582 text. The story of ‘Amleth’ is told in the third section of *Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques*. The earliest mention of a play of *Hamlet* is Thomas Nashe’s 1589 reference to ‘whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of Tragical speeches’. The play as we know it was either written or revised circa 1601. Nashe’s reference would suggest *Hamlet* first appeared on stage at some time between 1577 and 1588. New evidence has recently emerged that the so called *Ur Hamlet* may actually have been an early version by Shakespeare himself and this is still extant as the First Quarto (Q1) which was published in 1603. Jolly provided clear evidence that the First Quarto is closer to the Belleforest text than the Second Quarto (Q2) and First Folio versions of the play.

In the British Library there are eight volumes of Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques*. These editions range from 1571 to 1616 (BL, C8.a.1-8) including that printed in Lyon in 1576 (C.8.a.5). This was in the King’s Library but there is no evidence for its provenance before it was obtained by George III. This 1576 volume has some marginal annotations. The annotations are either underlinings, the letter Y, dots or a dash, all drawing attention to sections of the text. Most of these occur in the third section which tells the story of Amleth, the original Hamlet. There are also three annotations in the fifth section which is about the reign of Canute. None of the other volumes of Belleforest in the British Library has any marginal annotations. Furthermore none of the five copies of *Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques* in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, which are dated between 1572 and 1604, have any such annotations. The single copy of *Le Cinquiesme Livre* dated 1581 in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, is also clean. Thus it can be seen that the British Library copy is the only 1576 edition that has any annotations.

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3 The editions of *Le Cinquiesme Livre* at the Folger are (with shelf marks): PQ4606 Z411 v.5 Cage [1604, Rouen] - the lower half of this title page was torn away; imprint is extrapolated from vol. 6, which seems to have a matching title page. Not all of the volumes in this set match (e.g. vol. 7 has a 1595, Lyon imprint).

PQ4606 Z413 v.5 Cage 1572, Paris.

PQ4606 Z414 v.5 Cage 1604, Rouen.

PQ4606 Z415 v.5 Cage 1601, Lyon.

PQ4606 Z419 v.5 Cage pt. 1 1601, Lyon.

4 One copy of *Le Troisiemme Livre* dated 1568, at the John Rylands, has some sqiggly vertical lines in the margins of ff. 6v-51 after which the annotator ceased making any marks. Many of these passages have references to women. The copy of *Le Cinquiesme Livre* was once owned by a Jean Louis van der Haer.

5 I have traced editions through COPAC with the help of the John Rylands Library. It is possible that there are some editions in private collections or libraries in other countries which are not listed.
Annotated Texts

Stoddard and Sherman examined marginal annotations in old books. Both gave examples of underlinings and marginal letters or symbols used to draw attention to text that interested their readers. Although Sherman lists ‘vy’ as an annotation meaning ‘very’, he has no example of anyone using the single capital Y. In no other text have I found this use of Y in a marginal annotation although I have found the Greek letter gamma, ‘γ’, which looks like ‘y’ in two sixteenth-century books.

The Date of the Annotations

One of the marks in the Canute section may help to suggest a possible dating for the annotations to late in Elizabeth I’s reign. On page 410 there is a printed marginal note that has been underlined in ink:

Droit de succession plus prouffitable que celuy de l’election.

Translation:

The right of succession is a better way (to choose a monarch) than that of election.

Thus the annotator betrays a particular interest in the issue of how the succession to the throne occurs: whether by election or hereditary right. This would suggest the annotation was made during the childless Elizabeth I’s reign, when this issue was paramount and dangerous: the Queen had ruled discussion about the succession was treason. That the annotator is discreet in not revealing his identity suggests perhaps a caution about material which could be seen as dangerously political.

The Annotations

I have translated Belleforest’s French text using the 1608 English version, The Hystorie of Hamblet, but modernized it with further translation assistance from colleagues. The 1608 translator used fragments of Shakespeare’s Hamlet (such as Polonius hiding behind an arras and Hamlet crying ‘A rat, a rat!’: neither of which are in Belleforest but are in the play). For ease of reference I have added the page number of the passage in The Hystorie of Hamblet after the translation. Other page numbers refer to the text in Belleforest.

The marks and underlinings in the section of Amleth’s story are:

1) Y against text on page 204:

le desir de regner, ne respecte sang, ny amitié, & n’a soucy aucun de vertu voire il est sans respect, ny reverence de loix, ny de la maiesté divine, s’il ny est possible que celuy qui sans aucun droit enuahist le bien d’autruy, aye quelque opinion de la divinité.

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7 Both of these are to be found in the library at Audley End House and were annotated by Sir Henry Neville (1562-1615). The books are a 1574 Justus Lipsius edition of Tacitus in Latin and a 1551 volume of Appian’s Roman History in Greek. Neville also used underlinings and dots in the margins to draw attention to passages.

Translation:
The desire to rule respects neither blood nor friendship, nor has any respect for virtue, nor any reverence for the law, nor for divine majesty; for it is not possible that he who, without any right, invades the land of another man, has any understanding of God’s will. (p. 185)

The printed marginal annotation against this passage is also underlined:
Vn qui enuahit le bien d’autruy, est.

Translation:
One who invades the land of another is …

2) Y on page 205 against text:
que l’homme qui se laisse aller apres vn vice, & forfait detestable, estant la liaison des pechez fort grande, il ne se soucie en rien de s’abandonner à vn pire, & plus abhominable.

Translation:
that the man who has let himself yield to one vice [that was seducing his brother’s wife while the brother was still alive] and the detestable crime of the affair of the two great sinners [Fenegon and Geruthe] doesn’t trouble himself about embarking on [or abandoning himself to] a worse and more abominable crime [the murder of Horvvendille].

3) Y on page 212 against text:
l’homme qu’il veut tromper, loië ses actions, l’estime sur tout autre, & contraire en toute chose à ce qu’il a en son esprit:

Translation:
the man whom he wishes to deceive, praise his actions, and esteem him above all men, clean contrary to his own intent and meaning … (p. 197)

Three lines later there are also three dots in the margin against the text:
quand il faut dissimuler, & baiser la main de celuy, que l’on voudroit sçauoir cent piedz sous terre, pour n’en sentir point les aproches.

Translation:
when a man is constrained to dissemble and kiss his hand, whom in heart he could wish an hundred foot under the earth, so he might never see him more. (p. 197)

4) Y on page 214 against text:
qu’il est presque impossible de couvrir telle affection, ny d’en dissimuler les apprehensions part art …

Translation:
that it is almost impossible to cover the foul affection, neither yet to dissemble or hide the same by art or industry. (p. 199)

5) The printed marginal annotation on page 215 is underlined:
Corrupteurs de la ieunesse es courts des grãds.

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9 ‘Le bien’ might best be translated as ‘property’ in its widest sense but in this context the translation of ‘land’ seems to be most appropriate.
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Translation:
Corrupters of the young in the great courts

6) A small ‘r’ or ‘c’ mark on page 226 against text:
C’est n’est sans cause & juste occasion que mes gestes, countenances & paroles
resentement le fol, & que ie veux que chacun me tienne pour privé de sens &
cognoissance …

Translation:
It is not without cause, and just occasion, that my gestures, countenances, and words,
seeme all to proceed from a madman, and that I desire to have all men esteem me
wholly deprived of sense and reasonable understanding (p. 215)

7) Y on page 228 against text:
car ce n’est les vices d’autruy qui doinent elancer nos consciences, aiins faut se douloir
de noz meffaictz, & trop grandes folies.

Translation:
for we are not to sorrow and grieve at other men’s vices, but for our own misdeeds, and
great follies. (p. 219)

8) A dash — on page 207 against text, just above printed marginal annotation of ‘Mariage
incestuous de Fenegon avec sa belle suer’:
eussent voulu punir les brigans, & assassineurs de sa vie.

Translators:
Printed annotation: The incestuous marriage of Fenegon with his sister-in-law.
Noted text: They would want to punish the outlaws and assassins of his life. (p. 189).

At the end of the book someone has written in large letters the single French word ‘apres’
with a flourish. It is not certain that this is the same hand as the annotator. The ink is certainly
darker. At the top of the title page is a handwritten note cut off by whoever later rebound the
book: it is possible to read the start of this but the rest of the text is uncertain because of being
cut. It seems to state: ‘Bibliot mona [?c/rg] [?5 / do. at 200 wc]’. Given the first words, this may
refer to its place in a library. Lower down on the frontispiece is ‘C3’, which might be a library
catalogue number.

Reflections

As the majority of the annotations are in the Amleth section the annotator seems to have had a
special interest in this story. Who had the motive to annotate the Belleforest section on Amleth?
In the 1580s and ’90s one writer is definitely known to have written using this text as a source:
Shakespeare. Whilst the annotator could be any reader, Ockham’s razor suggests we must
consider the possibility that Shakespeare might have been the annotator. In the early Jacobean
period an anonymous writer was interested in Belleforest and used it as a basis of his *Historie
of Hamblet* but according to Bullough he used the 1582 edition because it has some textual
alterations from the 1576 edition.

10 In Elizabethan secretary script ‘c’ looks like ‘r’.
Following Jolly’s discovery that the First Quarto was the earliest extant version of *Hamlet* and that this is closer to the Belleforest source text than the Second Quarto or the First Folio, I am mainly using this version to compare Shakespeare’s possible relationship to these marginal annotations.

The first two annotations are concerned with the sheer wickedness of Fenegon’s adultery, assassination and usurpation. Hamlet is likewise incensed by such immorality. The Ghost tells Hamlet of Claudius’s crimes in the same order; incest first, then murder. Indeed he uses the word ‘virtue’, just as the Belleforest text has ‘vertu’.

But virtne, as it neuer will be moued,  
Though Lewdness court it in a shape of heauen,  
So Lust, though to a radiant angle linckt  
Will fate itself in a celestiall bedde,  
And prey on garbage.  
(Q1 spelling: 517: 1.5.53)

This parallels the thought process in the Belleforest passages: ‘The desire to rule respects neither blood nor friendship, nor has any respect for virtue, nor any reverence for the law, nor for divine majesty’ and ‘that the man who has let himself yield to one vice and the detestable crime of the affair of the two great sinners doesn’t trouble himself about embarking on a worse and more abominable crime.’ The sins of ambition and incest outrage not only ideas of virtue but the divine order (in the Belleforest) and this is reflected in the words ‘angel’ and ‘celestial’ (Q1). A dash against text on page 207 occurs just above printed marginal annotation of ‘The incestuous marriage of Fenegon with his beautiful sister.’ In the play, the incestuous nature of Claudius and Gertrude’s marriage is emphasized. In the sixteenth century an in-law was termed a sister, not a sister-in-law. *Hamlet* is the earliest of Shakespeare’s plays to use the word ‘incestuous’. The word is used four times and only occurs once in *King Lear*. In the First Quarto Hamlet uses the word ‘incestuous’ three of the four times it appears in the First Folio so we can be reasonably sure it was in the earliest version of the play.

The annotator was interested in the idea of dissembling and Amleth’s strategy of appearing to be mad: the third, fourth and sixth of the annotated passages are concerned with this. Hamlet introduces this idea with the words (Q1):

> How strange or odde soere I beare my selfe,  
> As I perchance hereafter shall thinke meet  
> To put an Anticke disposition on …

(Q1: 1.5.)

The text on page 226 of Belleforest reads: ‘C’est n’est sans cause & juste occasion que mes gestes, countenances & paroles ressentement le fol, & que ie veux que chacun me tienne pour privé de sens & cognoissance …’

In the First Quarto Claudius asks Rosencraft and Gilderstone ‘to wring from’ Hamlet ‘the cause and ground of his distemperancie’ (p. 722). Though brief, the annotations are relevant to ideas and passages in *Hamlet*. Some words that occur in the annotated sections, such as ‘occasion’, ‘countenance’, ‘gestures’ are to be found in the Second Quarto and the First Folio so Shakespeare may have re-read Belleforest in preparing his major revision of the play circa 1601. Jolly provided evidence, such as the word ‘occasions’, that Shakespeare had returned to Belleforest for details in Q2.11

11 M. Jolly, p. 40.
Annotations in the Canute section

The fifth section of Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques is about Canute. There are three marks and underlinings including the underlined marginal note on the ‘Droit de succession’ (see p. 2):

1) Y on page 242 against text:
   C’est ainsi aussi que de tout temps les bons sont persecutez, & le plus souvent un tiran sera plus honoré, & ceux qui se veautrans au sang des innocens, sont tort & iniure à tout le monde, que non pas le iuste Gouvernour, & le Prince qui ne peut aimer rien qui porte tant seulement un simple ombrage de vice.

Translation:
   Thus it is that in all ages the good are persecuted and most often a tyrant will be more honoured, and those who bathe in the blood of innocents do wrong and harm to everyone, rather than the just Governor, and the Prince who can love nothing that bears the slightest trace of vice.

2) On page 246 a marginal note is underlined:
   Peuple lourd cherist celuy qui l’accable

Translation:
   A dull people cherishes him who overwhelms them.

This is against the following text:
   estant le people une beste si peu voyante, & grossiere en son iugement, qu’elle ne tient compte que de ceux qui luy tiennent le pied sur la gorge, & ne cherissant point ceux qui usent plus de courtoisie que de rigueur: tellement qu’elle est du naturel d’un Perroquet, qui n’apprend rien, si la verge ne luy est continuelle sur la teste, pour luy ramentever son apprentissage.

Translation:
   since the people are a beast with so little insight so gross (my emphasis) in judgement that it only takes heed of those whose foot is on their throat not cherishing those who treat them more courtesy than harshness: as such it shares the nature of the Parrot, who learns nothing if the rod is not continually applied to his head, to recall him to his apprenticeship.

Reflections on the Canute Annotations

Canute appears on stage in Edmund Ironside and, recalling the above text, says:

   True as all the rest. I say thy wit is thick.
   Gross flattery, all-soothing sycophant,
   doth blind thy eyes and will not let thee see
   that others see thou art a flatterer.
   Amend, amend thy life; learn to speak truth.

The idea of ‘si peu voyante’ translated as ‘so little insight’ (‘voyante’ literally meaning ‘clear sighted’ or ‘clairvoyant’) becomes ‘eyes/see’ in the passage and ‘recall him to his apprenticeship’ becomes ‘amend thy life; learn ...’ in the play. Such a parallel passage is not strong evidence and it may seem improbable that the author of the earliest version of Hamlet and Edmund Ironside were the same person, though several scholars have argued that Ironside is an early work by Shakespeare dating to 1587-8. Sams found a number of parallels between these two plays, including rare shared vocabulary such as ‘perturbed’, ‘distilled’, ‘piece of work’, ‘God
wot’, ‘sick soul’, ‘twenty thousand’ and ‘galled’. Whilst these might be regarded as the result of coincidence, Sams did point out links between the plays and this annotated Belleforest could be the first external evidence to suggest a possible common source.

Earlier I referred to the underlined annotation on page 410 of the Canute section:

Droit de succession plus prouffitable que celuy de l’election. (see fig. 1).

I translated this as, ‘The right of succession is a better way (to choose a monarch) than that of election’. Section 5 is about treason against St Canute IV of Denmark who was assassinated. This underlining seems to relate back to Shakespeare’s Hamlet. In the play the words ‘succession’ ‘election’ and ‘unprofitable’ occur but none of these are in the First Quarto, only in the Second Quarto and First Folio. However they do occur in Edmund Ironside, where we find ‘success/successively’ ‘elected’ and ‘profit’. This may be simply coincidence. In the first scene of Edmund Ironside Canute asserts his right to the throne because the ‘lords spiritual and temporal’ have chosen him. The Archbishop of Canterbury, referring to Canute’s succession to the throne by election rather than hereditary right, comments on the son of Ethelredus claiming the throne using two words that occur in the underlined annotation:

Indeed his rashness is unportable
and merely nothing but a proud contempt
against us of the clergy and the rest
that have for public profit of the realm
for peace, for quiet and utility
elected prince Canutus for our king …

In a speech that follows Southampton offers to defend Canute’s right (of succession) thus using a third word that is in the underlined annotation (‘right’ for ‘droit’).

Edmund Ironside has been linked to Titus Andronicus which is also concerned with issues of the election of a ruler. Shakespeare was certainly concerned with the way monarchs succeeded to the throne. In Titus Andronicus there is a disputed election; in the history plays kings are deposed, there are usurpations, assassinations, rightful heirs are disposed of or inherit the throne. Stabler, following Dover Wilson and Honigmann, considered the evidence that in Hamlet Shakespeare deliberately referred to an elective element in the succession to the Danish throne which is apparent in Belleforest. The underlining of this annotation, suggesting the hereditary principle was ‘plus prouffitable que celuij de l’election’, is in accord with Shakespeare who reinforced Hamlet’s right to the throne at a time when the English people were aware that James VI of Scotland had the hereditary principle on his side despite his mother’s adulterous, even treasonous, behaviour. Stabler concluded that, ‘The political and constitutional background of the play has considerable importance in its general development’.

Given Shakespeare’s interest in the issue of succession and his possible authorship of Edmund Ironside, a play about Canute, might the annotations on the Amleth section be by the Bard, examining the source for his great play Hamlet? The annotator does not refer to either play which would suggest these marks predate the plays. This would date the annotations to between 1576-1586. If the annotator had nothing to do with the writing of the plays then the annotations show that these two chapters, on Amleth and Canute, were meaningful to someone possibly before they were used as sources for the plays. It also suggests that there were political motives for both the annotator and playwright. The fact that no other section of the book is annotated must also be taken into account. This copy of Le Cinquiesme Livre des Histoires Tragiques seems to be unique. Whilst we cannot identify the annotator with any certainty these marginal notes throw some dim light onto the possible relationship between this text and these two contemporary plays.

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Après sue-
don.

Histoire

grande charge qu’un royaume, fut pré-
feré à Kanur, aymant mieux celle sotte
& ignorantemultitude vn couard pour
Roy, que celuy qui avec sa hardiesse &
magnanimité, faisoit trébler toutes les
regions Septentrionales. Et c’est, ou ie
voy que la løy de succession est plus re-
cevable, que la liberté de l’élection, quel
que justice qui semble reluire en celle
maniere de suffrages:veu que la ou la di-
versité des humeurs faut que soit mesu-
ree par l’équité du jugement d’une mul-
titude, bien souuéte ce qui est de pis em-
porte la victoire, à cause que le plus de
voix & nó ce qui surmonte en vertu est
celle qui done la puissance, la ou la suc-
cession ofte le peuple de ce different,sai
sans celuy Prince:auquel nature octroie
droit, sans que l’aduis d’autrui luy
puisse tollir sa seigneurie:mais en ces e-
lections plusieurs fois les parties mal có
tentes ne font conscience de venir aux
mains, cóme voulas vuider vn tort pre-
tendu avec vn plus grande injustice, &
violén

Fig. 1. BL, C.8.a.5, p. 410. Enlarged.
d’envie, crueant de despit en son coeur, tant pour la grand’ réputation qu’aqu’elle par Horvendille au manier de ses armes, que solicité d’une forte jalouseie, le voyant honoré de l’alliance & amitié royale, craignant d’etre depossédé de sa part du gouvernement, ou plutôt désirant de le seul en la principauté, & obscurer par ce moyen, la mémoire des victoires & conquêtes de son frere, delibera, comme que ce suff, de le faire mourir. Ce qui luy succeda affez aisément, nul ne se doutant de luy, & chacun pensant que d’un tel nœud d’alliance & consanguinité, ne pourroit jamais sortir autre chose, que les effets pleins de vertu & courtoisie: mais comme i’ay dit, le desir de regner, ne respecte sang, ny amitié, & n’a soucy aucun de vertu voire il est sans respect, ny reuerence des loix, ny de la maisté divine, s’il ny est possible que celuy qui sans aucun droit ennulifie le bie d’autrui, aye quelque opinion de la
entendre de celuy qui ne nous est point souverain, contre lequel ne faut remuer, ny luy tramer aucun strahison, ou conspirer aucunement contre sa vie. Celuy qui veut susyer tel chemin, faut qu’il parle face tout au plaisir de l’homme qu’il veut tromper, loy les actions, l’estime sur tout autre, & contrare en toute chose à ce qu’il a en son esprit: car c’est véritablement faire le fol, & contre faire le fol, quand il faut dissimuler, & baiser la main de celuy, que l’on voulroit savoir cent piedz sous terre, pour n’en sentir point les approches.

Amleth donc se façonnant à l’exercice d’une grande folie, faisoit des actes pleins de grand signification, & respon- sable à propos, qu’au sage homme est ingé bien tost de quel esprit est ce que sortoit une invention si gentille: car est état auprès du feu, & aiguissant des bouchets, en forme de poignards, & etoques, quelqu’il a luy demanda en riant à quoi fer...
les plus mignardes & attrayantes, de-
quelles elle se pourroit adoucir. D’au-
tant que le naturel de toute jeune hom-
me, mêmement étant nourri à son
ayre, est si transporté aux plaisirs de la
chair, & se lance avec telle impatien-
té à la jouissance, qui luy est octroyée,
de ce qui est excellentement beau, qu’il
est presque imposible de couvrir telle
affection, ny d’en dissimuler les appré-
hensions par art, ny industrie quelcon-
que, ny de le fuir, quelque ruse qu’il
visait pour pallier la malice : veu que
s’offrant l’occasion, & icelle secrette
de la volupté la plus chatouilleuse, il
faudroit que forcé des apetits, il suc-
combât aux efforts, & puissance de la
partie sensuelle.

Ainsi furent deputez quelques cour-
trisans, pour mener le Prince en quelque
lieu escarté, dans le boys, & lesquels
luy presentant cette femme, l’inci-
tans à se fouiller en ses baysers & em-
brasements, artifices assez frequent de
son...
Fig. 5. BL, C.8.a.5, p. 215.
Fig. 7. BL, C.8.a.5, title page.