

READING GUIDE

“The testament was a forgery”

A novel by Robert Casanovas — Second revised and corrected edition (2025)

Historical fiction — restitution, art and truth

1. Fact sheet

Title: The testament was a forgery

Author: Robert Casanovas

Genre: Historical novel / documentary thriller, dual timeline

Structure: Prologue + 4 chapters + Epilogue

Edition: Second revised and corrected edition, legal deposit November 2025

ISBN: 979-10-980729-5-6

Period(s) covered: 1516-1570 (Renaissance strand) and 2023-2025 (contemporary strand)

Main settings: Clos Lucé and Amboise, Milan, Paris (National Archives, the Louvre)

Complementary resource: Academic article by the author, Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences (SSOAR)

Associated publisher: International Restitutions (NGO chaired by the author)

2. General presentation

“The testament was a forgery” interweaves two narratives separated by five centuries. On one side, the exploits of Francesco Melzi and Salai, disciples of Leonardo da Vinci, who organise in the wake of the master's death (2 May 1519) the concealment of part of his legacy — paintings and manuscripts — to escape the “droit d'aubaine” (the crown's right to seize the estate of a resident alien), which would have allowed the Crown of France to confiscate the entirety of this foreigner's property, since he had left no direct heir. On the other, the investigation conducted in 2023-2025 by historian Pierre Bertier and curator Antoine Marchand at the National Archives, who reconstruct, document by document, the mechanics of this founding imposture — down to the forged will “rediscovered” at the end of the nineteenth century.

The novel is explicitly presented as a work of historical fiction grounded in real sources: the author's opening note specifies that the documentary inconsistencies and the absence of letters of naturalisation are genuine, whereas the scenes, dialogue and characters' motivations belong to the realm of fictional invention.

3. Chapter-by-chapter summary

Prologue — *Paris, National Archives, October 2023*

Pierre Bertier, obsessed for three years by an enigmatic phrase in a 1519 letter from Melzi mentioning “letters from the King” permitting Leonardo to make a will, discovers with Antoine Marchand that no trace of such letters of naturalisation exists anywhere in the nine volumes of the Catalogue des actes de François Ier. Doubt sets in over the legality of Leonardo's will.

Chapter 1 — The master of Clos Lucé — *Clos Lucé, 1516-1519*

Leonardo, Francesco Melzi and Salai settle in France under the protection of François I. A portrait of the master's daily life (the Mona Lisa, his notebooks, his vegetarianism, his rheumatism), of his relationship with his two disciples, and of his physical decline. The chapter closes with Leonardo's death (2 May 1519) and the secret pact sealed by Francesco and Salai to spirit away part of the inheritance before the royal inventory.

Chapter 2 — The king's agents — *Clos Lucé, 5 May 1519 and the following days*

Montcornet, a clerk of the Treasury, arrives to carry out the official inventory of Leonardo's estate in the name of the droit d'aubaine. Francesco and Salai hide paintings (Leda and the Swan, Saint John the Baptist) and manuscripts, invent plausible explanations for their absence, and play out a comedy of cooperative mourning. Funeral at Saint-Florentin; the scene of the child with the daisy, a symbol of the master's popular posterity.

Chapter 3 — The years of mystification — *Milan, 1519-1570*

Francesco returns to Milan with the concealed spoils. He meets Pompeo Bonini, an intermediary who helps him fabricate a credible provenance to quietly offload the works. His relationship with Salai deteriorates; Salai is later killed (by a crossbow bolt) after threatening to confess everything to a priest. On his deathbed (1570), Francesco passes the secret on to his son Orazio and entrusts him with a sealed document meant for posterity, before dying fifty-one years after Leonardo.

Chapter 4 — The architecture of the lie — *Paris, 2024-2025*

Bertier and Marchand reconstruct, via Montaiglon's 1893 article and the affair of the notaries Bureau d'Amboise, the fabrication of the "will" — a seventeenth-century copy for which no original minute has ever been found. Development of the legal reasoning on the droit d'aubaine, the imprescriptibility of legally non-existent acts, and the identification of Leonardo's collateral descendants. Writing and publication of the academic article (January 2025), then of the novel (November 2025).

Epilogue — *The Louvre, 20 December 2025*

One month after the novel's publication, Bertier contemplates the Mona Lisa shortly after the famous burglary of the Salon Carré. A final dialogue with Marchand on the meaning of the revelation: was Melzi a thief or a saviour? The moral ambiguity is deliberately left unresolved, handed over to the reader's judgement, while the work of art itself continues to endure independently of the legitimacy of its provenance.

4. Main characters

Leonardo da Vinci (16th c.)

Ageing universal genius, settled at Clos Lucé under the protection of François I; dies on 2 May 1519. A near-paternal figure for Francesco.

Francesco Melzi (16th c.)

Leonardo's favourite disciple and spiritual son. Becomes the architect of the founding theft and lie; spends his life (until the age of 79, in 1570) discreetly protecting and monetising the inheritance, then passing the secret on to his son Orazio.

Salai (Gian Giacomo Caprotti) (16th c.)

The second disciple, an unruly and seductive spirit. Accomplice in the initial theft, he falls out with Francesco and threatens to confess before dying, murdered in troubling circumstances.

Pompeo Bonini (16th c.)

A Milanese intermediary who helps Francesco fabricate a credible provenance in order to offload the purloined works.

Montcornet (16th c.)

A clerk of the royal Treasury tasked with enforcing the droit d'aubaine and inventorying Leonardo's estate.

Orazio, then Carlo Melzi (16th-17th c.)

Francesco's descendants, successive keepers of the secret and the sealed document, perpetuating the concealment out of filial loyalty.

Pierre Bertier (21st c.)

A historian obsessed with the inconsistencies in the Leonardo file; leads the investigation for three years and publishes an academic article, then the novel itself.

Antoine Marchand (21st c.)

A curator at the National Archives, Bertier's intellectual accomplice; embodies the institutional outlook and methodological caution.

5. Main themes

Restitution and the legitimacy of cultural property

The novel questions the legality of the “droit d'aubaine” applied to Leonardo, a foreigner with no proven letters of naturalisation, and raises the question of whether a legally non-existent act can ever become imprescriptible — a direct echo of the author's own involvement with the NGO International Restitutions.

Historical truth vs. official narrative

A dual timeline sets side by side the fabrication of a founding lie (16th c.) and its methodical deconstruction through archival research (21st c.).

Moral ambiguity: thief or saviour

Francesco Melzi is portrayed as a forger and a deceiver, but also as the saviour of a heritage that might otherwise have been dispersed or destroyed — the novel refuses to settle the matter and leaves the judgement to the reader.

Transmission and family secrecy

The secret passes from generation to generation (Francesco → Orazio → Carlo Melzi), taking on a new meaning with each era (Italian patriotism, cultural resistance, and so on).

The afterlife of the work of art

Whatever the flaw in its provenance, the work (the Mona Lisa, the Saint John the Baptist) continues to fascinate: beauty is presented as independent of the legitimacy of its journey.

The historian's craft

The Bertier/Marchand duo illustrates the method of archival research (catalogues of deeds, nineteenth-century correspondence, philological analysis) as the true engine of the contemporary plot.

6. Established historical facts / fictional elements

In keeping with the author's opening note, the list below distinguishes what belongs to documentary research from what belongs to invention.

Leonardo's stay at Clos Lucé and his death on 2 May 1519 — *Historical fact*

Dated and documented.

Absence of letters of naturalisation in the Catalogue des actes de François Ier — *Historical fact*

Presented by the author as established.

Absence of the French original of The testament — *Historical fact*

No original has ever been found, according to the author's note.

Montaiglon's 1893 article on the “discovery” of The testament — *Historical fact*

A seventeenth-century copy, with no original minute, presented to the Congrès des Sociétés des Beaux-Arts.

Application of the droit d'aubaine to foreigners — *Historical fact*

Confirmed by the author as real at the time.

Scenes, dialogue and motivations of the characters (Francesco, Salai, Bertier, Marchand...) — *Fiction*

Invented by the author to give life to the documentary thread.

Salai's violent death by crossbow bolt — *Novelistic fiction*

A dramatised staging of Salai's fate.

Transmission of the secret down to Carlo Melzi (17th c.) — *Fiction*

A fictional reconstruction meant to explain the persistence of the mystery.

7. Narrative construction and style

- A dual-timeline narration (1516-1570 / 2023-2025) that alternates by chapter and creates a gradual sense of resolution, with the contemporary strand progressively “explaining” the older one.
- Writing in the service of argument: long argumentative dialogues (notably in Chapter 4) turn the fiction into an almost didactic exposition on law and historiography.
- The use of period sources (extracts from letters, from Montaiglon's article) anchors the fiction in a genuine documentary apparatus.
- Marked temporal ellipses (leaps of several decades in Chapter 3) to cover half a century of the secret's transmission.
- A mirrored close: the epilogue, set at the Louvre just after the 2025 burglary, echoes the original theft of 1519 and brings full circle the reflection on the legitimacy of possessing works of art.

8. Notable quotations

Opening — Bertier's doubt

“As he held letters from the most Christian King permitting him to make a will...”

The pact between Francesco and Salai

“We shall protect the master's legacy to the very end.”

The 1885 discovery

“Not the original minute, but an old copy on paper dating from the seventeenth century, made evidently on account of the curiosity and exceptional importance of the document.”

The final moral dilemma

“Had Francesco Melzi been a thief or a saviour? A criminal or a hero? The answer, as always, would depend on who was asking the question, and to what end.”

9. Critical analysis

Strengths

- A solid dual-timeline plot that keeps the reader engaged through a mechanism of gradual revelation.
- A genuine documentary foundation (catalogues of deeds, Montaiglon's article, the droit d'aubaine) that gives the novel a historical depth rare in mainstream fiction.
- A nuanced moral reflection, refusing easy black-and-white judgement, on the sensitive and topical question of the restitution of works of art — directly resonating with the author's own involvement in International Restitutions.
- Engaging secondary characters (the child with the daisy, Salai) who humanise the documentary framework.

Limitations and points of caution

- The most legalistic passages (Chapter 4) sometimes overtake the novelistic dimension, coming close to an essay disguised as dialogue.
- Certain sixteenth-century secondary characters (Pompeo Bonini, Montcornet) remain functional, serving the mechanics of the plot more than possessing psychological depth of their own.
- The deliberately open conclusion (“Criminal or hero?”) may leave the reader wishing for a firmer stance on the legitimacy of the droit d'aubaine itself.

10. Conclusion

“The testament was a forgery” succeeds in its wager of a historical fiction that questions, through the emblematic case of Leonardo da Vinci and the Mona Lisa, the legitimacy of cultural possessions founded on the laws of another age. By weaving a sixteenth-century novelistic plot together with a methodical twenty-first-century investigation, Robert Casanovas builds a hybrid work, at once entertaining and engaged, which extends through fiction his advocacy for the restitution of cultural property.

THE TESTAMENT WAS A FORGERY

Novel by Robert Casanovas

A study of language, narrative construction and rhetorical effects
Prepared by Pierre Collonges

Registers of language — Narrative structure — Character system — Motifs and symbols — Rhythm and syntax

Methodological introduction

This study examines the French version of Robert Casanovas's novel "The Testament Was a Forgery" in its entirety (prologue, four chapters, epilogue). The analysis proceeds from the text itself: quotations, lexical and syntactic surveys, and observation of the dual-temporality construction. It aims to identify the author's major stylistic choices and to assess their coherence with the book's project — a "documentary thriller" that, from the opening notice, claims a hybridisation of fictional narrative and historical inquiry.

1. Narrative architecture and temporal alternation

1.1 A diptych structure

The novel is built on two clearly disjointed temporal strata: the retrospective account of the sixteenth century (Leonardo's death, the theft of the works, decades of mystification in Milan) and the present-day investigation of the historian Pierre Bertier, in Paris, between 2023 and 2025. The prologue and Chapter 4 ("The Architecture of the Lie") frame Chapters 1 to 3, forming a mirrored opening-and-closing movement: the reader is projected into the contemporary enigma, then plunged back into the narrative origin of the events, before returning to it for the resolution.

This alternation is not merely chronological but functional: the sixteenth-century chapters belong to dramatised narrative (scenes, dialogue, internal focalisation on Melzi), whereas the prologue and Chapter 4 adopt the form of a Socratic dialogue between Bertier and Marchand — a device that turns documentary exposition into a living scene rather than a didactic digression.

1.2 The mise en abyme device

The final part of the novel tips into mise en abyme: before our eyes, Bertier himself writes the academic article and then the novel bearing the same title as the one we are reading, and sketches its outline in four chapters identical to those of the actual book. This self-referential vertigo deliberately blurs the boundary between Casanovas's novel and the "novel" Bertier claims to be writing within the fiction — the text's boldest stylistic signature.

"He created a new document provisionally titled: 'Novel'. [...] Chapter 1 — The Master of Clos Lucé. Chapter 2 — The King's Agents. Chapter 3 — The Years of Mystification. Chapter 4 — The Architecture of the Lie."

Chapter 4 — mise en abyme of the title and the structure.

2. Registers of language and lexicon

The author consciously works with two levels of language, corresponding to the two temporal strata, without ever conflating them.

The period lexicon

A technical vocabulary — legal, painterly, historical — carefully dosed, never explained heavily but always contextualised through dialogue: “aubain” (alien resident), “droit d'aubaine” (right of escheat over aliens' estates), “lettres de naturalité” (letters of naturalisation), “gold écus”, “escarcelle” (purse), “litter”, “sfumato”.

The contemporary lexicon

In the Bertier–Marchand sections, a resolutely modern French of legal and editorial expertise: “question prioritaire de constitutionnalité” (priority question of constitutionality), “fraus omnia corrumpit”, “digital self-publishing” — a deliberate register break from the sixteenth-century chapters.

Muted orality

The dialogues reproduce an elevated, almost theatrical diction, without period phonetic reconstruction: the modern reader understands effortlessly, at the cost of a slight anachronism of fluency.

“Sire, you honour me with your presence and your words.”

Chapter 1 — an example of courtly diction, stylised rather than reconstructed.

This lexical two-tone effect reinforces the readability of the dual temporality: from the vocabulary used, the reader immediately knows which century he is in, without any need to date every scene (a device the author nonetheless also uses, in brief intertitles such as “Milan, autumn 1519”).

3. Lively dialogue and reported speech

The novel consistently distinguishes two regimes of speech: the living speech of exchanges between characters, and the deferred speech of documents — letters, the Testament, inventories, correspondence — which the characters quote, manipulate or fabricate. This structural distinction, independent of any particular typographical convention, is one of the novel's deepest mainsprings: it constantly opposes what is said to what is written and preserved, what can be contradicted on the spot to what becomes, once set down on parchment, a proof believed unassailable.

This tension between the oral and the written matches the very subject of the book: Melzi fears not so much being contradicted in words as being confounded by a document — an undestroyed letter, a 1516 inventory he thought forgotten, a private note a notary keeps for three centuries. Reported speech thus becomes, throughout the novel, the central dramatic stake: every character knows that a spoken sentence fades, whereas a written sentence can resurface centuries later and overturn a destiny.

The dialogues themselves are dense, often long, which in places brings the text closer to historical theatre or philosophical dialogue than to the adventure novel with its brisk exchanges. The negotiation scenes — with Trivulzio, with Boreau, with Montcornet — are thus constructed as genuine argumentative jousts, in which each interlocutor develops a full line of reasoning before yielding the floor.

4. Syntax and sentence rhythm

4.1 The ample sentence with parenthetical clauses

The narration favours long descriptive sentences, often segmented by commas into successive clauses that accumulate adverbial complements before closing the period on a brief fall. This “fan-then-point” rhythm is particularly noticeable in scenes of death or mourning:

“As the chapel bells rang vespers and the setting sun set the windows ablaze, Leonardo da Vinci drew his last breath, a peaceful smile on his lips.”

Chapter 1 (tightened excerpt) — the cumulative structure delays the fall to intensify its impact.

4.2 The frequency of present participles and gerunds

A lexical survey confirms a very frequent use of the “-ing”-type form (the prepositions and adverbs corresponding to “before”, “now”, “during”, “in front of”, “throughout” each number several dozen occurrences, alongside numerous present participles such

as “revealing”, “containing”, “seeking”, “showing”). This syntactic preference — the participial clause rather than a succession of short sentences — gives the text a fluid, continuous, almost cinematic sweep, but can also, in the passages densest with historical information, slow the pace of reading for the sake of documentary thoroughness.

4.3 Nominal sentences and fragments

Conversely, the author punctuates certain moments of tension with very brief nominal sentences, sometimes reduced to a single word, which break the usual ample flow:

“Toll. Toll. Toll. Farewell, Leonardo. Farewell, master. Farewell, father.”

Chapter 2 — the knell and the funerary anaphora, one of the rare passages in the novel to resort to such minimal scansion.

5. Rhetorical devices and recurring figures

The ternary anaphora

It lends solemnity to testamentary utterances and gives a sentence-like cadence to the transmission of the secret.

“A burden because it forces one to lie [...]. An honour because it makes us the guardians of an incomparable treasure.”

Chapter 3 — Francesco Melzi to his son Orazio.

The cascading rhetorical question

It conveys the existential anxiety of the dying Leonardo, without resorting to the classic interior monologue.

“How many paintings have I left unfinished? How many commissions have I disappointed?”

Chapter 1.

The moral antithesis

It structures the novel's ethical debate and recurs as a closing clause in several chapters and in the epilogue: “a burden and an honour”; “criminal or hero? Thief or saviour?”

Narrative prolepsis

Sudden shifts toward the future short-circuit the immediate tension in favour of an overview spanning five centuries.

“Until at last, in 2025, the truth came to light.”

Chapter 3.

Personification and apostrophe

They make the Mona Lisa an almost-character, the silent guardian of the secret, a motif spun through to the epilogue.

“Forgive us for abandoning you.”

Chapter 1 — Francesco Melzi addressing the painting before the royal inventory.

Dramatic gradation

The scene of the cracking wall during the inventory (Chapter 2) illustrates the classic suspense of the near-unmasking, defused at the last moment — a pattern repeated three times in the novel.

6. Focalisation and narrative voice

The narrative adopts a classic omniscient third-person narrator, but practises a variable focalisation almost always tightened on Francesco Melzi in Chapters 1 to 3, before opening, in Chapter 4, onto a dual focalisation shared between Bertier and Marchand. Leonardo's own point of view is never adopted from within: the reader perceives his thoughts only through his direct speech or Melzi's gaze, which preserves his aura of mystery and spares the novel from settling, by the mere access to a consciousness, the question of his moral consent to the theft.

This narrative reticence is a choice coherent with the book's documentary project: by never “knowing” with certainty what Leonardo truly thought, the text reproduces, at the scale of fiction, the uncertainty that Bertier, in the present, feels when facing incomplete archives.

7. Recurring motifs and symbols

The smile and the sfumato

Repeatedly associated with the technical term “sfumato”, the motif of the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile runs through the entire novel as a spun metaphor of undecidability: just as sfumato “makes the contours disappear” between shadow and light, the novel refuses to draw a clean line between crime and heroism. The book's final sentence explicitly picks up this image of the smile that endures through the centuries.

The sealed casket

A recurring object passed down through generations, the casket containing Melzi's confession functions as an allegory of family memory and deferred truth. It symbolically structures the passage of time in Chapter 3, up to its opening, mentioned elliptically, by a seventeenth-century descendant.

Intimate objects

Against the grandeur of the works of art, the author sets modest objects charged with feeling — a vial of Tuscan earth, a locket bearing the likeness of Leonardo's mother, the compass passed on to Melzi — which counterbalance the story's patrimonial dimension with a more intimate, almost elegiac vein.

The barrel of archives

In Chapter 4, the motif of the document recovered “in a barrel” becomes the very image of historiographical doubt: an object of domestic, trifling preservation, which contradicts the solemnity expected of so pivotal a testamentary piece — a quiet irony underscored by the investigators themselves.

8. The treatment of History: between erudition and suspense

Chapter 4 constitutes a deliberate break in genre: it almost entirely abandons the dramatised scene for a long argumentative dialogue between Bertier and Marchand, built on the model of a legal debate — a chain of numbered pieces of evidence, citations of statutes, competing hypotheses explicitly stated and then evaluated. This choice occasionally brings the novel closer to the historical essay or the popular-legal article, at the risk of slowing the narrative pace compared with the preceding, more event-driven chapters.

The author is evidently aware of this, since he has his own character voice, in a kind of metatextual wink, the difficulty of choosing between the academic path and the narrative path — a dilemma that is precisely the one facing the reader as he closes the book.

9. Dialogues: dramaturgical function and didactic function

The dialogues fulfil a dual function rarely kept separate in the text: advancing the plot (confrontations, negotiations, confessions) and conveying historical or legal information (on the droit d'aubaine, Leonardo's painting techniques, notarial procedure). This fusion can be read as a strength — it avoids blocks of exposition detached from the action — but also as a stylistic limitation: certain secondary characters (Deloynes, Rousseau, Boreau) serve above all as pedagogical relays, and their lines, though consistent with their social function, sometimes amount to lectures disguised as conversation.

10. Dramatic irony and mirror play

The novel multiplies effects of dramatic irony, with the reader often knowing more than the characters or sensing the outcome before they do: the sergeant who nearly discovers the walled-up hiding place, the Venetian merchant's letter recovered by Montcornet, or again Leonardo's own use of the term “aubaine” (windfall) to describe his own death — a bitter play on the very name of the law that despoils him.

"Some advisers [...] see in my death a windfall — quite literally — with which to enrich the royal collections."

Chapter 1 — a conscious paronomasia on "droit d'aubaine" / "aubaine", a rare incursion of black humour into an otherwise very grave text.

11. Stylistic strengths and limitations

Strengths

- Remarkable coherence between substance (a mystification built over centuries) and form (a structure of dual temporality, a mise en abyme of the title itself).
- Mastery of the historical and legal lexicon, never gratuitous, always placed at the service of suspense: every technical term becomes a dramatic device.
- Symbolic motifs spun with consistency — sfumato, the sealed casket, the smile — which lend poetic unity to an otherwise heavily documented text.
- A feel for confrontational dialogue, particularly successful in scenes of legal tension: the Chapter 2 inventory, the Chapter 3 Trivulzio affair.

Limitations and points of vigilance

- Chapter 4, heavily dialogued and didactic, noticeably slows the narrative tempo compared with the first three, more scenic chapters.
- Certain structural repetitions (ternary anaphora, cascading rhetorical question) recur with a frequency that, over time, can be noticed as a writing tic rather than as a punctual effect.
- The length of certain lines lends secondary characters, in places, an eloquence more functional than plausible, speech serving above all to convey information to the reader.

Conclusion

The style of "The Testament Was a Forgery" is defined above all by its structural coherence: every stylistic choice — the alternation of registers, the punctuation of dialogue, the spun motifs, the final swing toward argumentative dialogue — directly serves the hybrid project announced from the opening notice, that of a novel questioning its own boundary with the historical document. The language, rich but rarely ostentatious, favours the ample classical period for the sixteenth-century scenes and a drier, almost procedural prose for the contemporary investigation — a device simple in principle and remarkably sustained across the whole text.

"History, like art, is never simple. It is made of grey areas, impossible choices, lies that serve the truth."

Chapter 3 — a key sentence that sums up, in one final formula, the aesthetic and the ethics of the entire novel.