

RICHELIEU'S EXEMPLARY THEATREⁱ

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To provide a context, let me begin by rehearsing some of the now well established, if incomplete, facts concerning Richelieu's involvement in the development of French theatre in the 1630s and early 1640s. Before 1634-35, his interest in theatre appears to be only a passing one: in 1629 he entertained the King and Queen with "comédies", in 1631 he is said to have dubbed Pichou's *Filis de Scire* the best pastoral he had seen, implying he had seen others, in 1632 Baro dedicated to him his *Clorise*. In 1634-35, this passing interest became a positive enthusiasm and the French stage began to benefit from what Georges Couton has called a "grande impulsion théâtrale" initiated by the Cardinal. As announced in Renaudot's *Gazette*, a kind of official newspaper, on 6 January 1635, the public theatre companies established in Paris, the Hôtel de Bourgogne and the Marais, began to receive annual state subsidies. The reason? Because "la Comédie, depuis qu'on a banni des théâtres tout ce qui pouvait souiller les oreilles les plus délicates, est l'un des plus innocents divertissements et le plus agréable ." Prior to this, actors had already been ordered by royal authority to transfer from one company to the other. In February 1635, Boisrobert delivered a speech, now lost, entitled "Défense du théâtre" in the series of set speeches which were to be officially organised and are referred to in the Statutes of the Academy. In March 1635, the French Academy was officially established by letters patent. It would not be long before its attention was to focus on the theatre in response to an express wish of the Cardinal, who was to intervene directly in the Querelle du Cid.

In 1635, Georges de Scudéry, a Richelieu man through and through, produced his *Comédie des comédiens*, in which he lavishes praise on dramatic writers and defends actors against accusations of debauchery. He was to repeat the lesson in 1639 in his *Apologie du théâtre*, in which theatre is presented as having been venerated by all virtuous centuries, as the entertainment of Emperors and Kings, a preoccupation of great minds, a tableau of the passions, an image of human life, and especially as the scourge of vice and the throne of virtue. Corneille's *Illusion comique* performed in the 1635-36 theatre season would sing even more eloquent praise of the theatre as a

power for moral, social and commercial good. In March 1635, *La Comédie des Tuileries*, the first play by the Cinq Auteurs, a kind of state subsidised writers collective drawn together on the Cardinal's initiative, was performed before the Queen and again in April before the King, the Queen and Monsieur at a private performance given in the Hôtel de Richelieu. Richelieu probably had a hand in its composition as the "inventeur" of the subject, invention being then regarded as the most important aspect of dramatic writing. The group would go on to devise two further plays, which benefited from official, and therefore lavish, production before royal audiences gathered in Richelieu's residence.

It was from 1635 that, through the auspices of intermediaries like Chapelain, Conrart, Bautru, and particularly Boisrobert, the Cardinal's favourite, a kind of jester and go-between between the prime minister and writers, an official system of pensions or gratifications for writers was established and was to last until Richelieu's death in 1642. Many dramatists were to profit. An actor too, like Montdory, whom the Cardinal "affectionait", came under his protection and wrote grateful verse published in 1635 in *Le Sacrifice des Muses*, an officially printed encomium of Richelieu offered by the almost all principal poets of the day. This in itself was unthinkable before then, since, in the eyes of the Church, actors were excommunicated and, in civil law, had to be "réhabilités" if they wished to take up any kind of office. The protection of actors culminated in the royal declaration of 16 April 1641, undoubtedly inspired by Richelieu, which rehabilitated actors, exempting them from "blâme", i.e. infamy, and prejudice to their reputation in "le commerce public" for the exercise of their profession. Though, as Henry Phillips has shown, implementation of this legal measure met resistance and other types of obstacle and was therefore less effective than intended, it none the less represents a striking example of the way in which Richelieu attempted to raise the status of theatre generally and would certainly have been more beneficial to actors, had the Cardinal not died some 18 months after it was issued. The fact that in July 1641 it was supported by a conference given at the Bureau d'Adresses, another official organ, which replied in the affirmative to the issue "De la comédie et si elle est utile à un Etat" is testimony to the Cardinal's firm intentions in this regard.

Theatre architecture and staging were other areas which benefited from Richelieu's direct support. In 1636 he already had in the Palais Cardinal a theatre known as the Petite Salle. Its importance has been little understood. Far from being an ill equipped "installation de fortune", as Antoine Adam among others claimed, this theatre was, for France, state of the art, with proscenium arch and front curtain (with which neither of the two major public theatres in Paris were equipped). It held 600 spectators, had "loges" for the actors, and continued to be used for theatrical entertainments by members of the royal family well into the 1640s. In 1636, it was good enough to stage Desmarest's *Aspasie*, with a successive scene change between acts, and with ballets and collation lasting some three hours afterwards, before an invited audience to honour an important French ally in the Thirty Years War, namely Odoardo Farnese, the Duke of Parma, he who had inherited the magnificent theatre at Parma built by his father – completed in 1618 and the first in Europe to boast a proscenium arch stage. There is no way that Richelieu would have contemplated feting such a prestigious international guest in a theatre that was likely to show French culture in a distinctly inferior light. Moreover, it was under Richelieu and not Mazarin, as has previously been thought, that the importation into France of advanced Italian theatre technology began. Mazarin was, however, involved. In 1636, Mazarin, then papal nuncio in Paris and already thought of by Richelieu as his successor, returned to Rome and began negotiations with Giovanni Bernini, the era's greatest specialist in *mise-en-scène*, for the installation in the Palais Cardinal of machinery, décor and lighting. Bernini's designs resulted in the opening on 14 January 1641 of Richelieu's second theatre in the Palais Cardinal, the Grand' Salle, with the premiere of Desmarest's tragi-comedy *Mirame*, a production the like of which France had never before seen, in a purpose designed theatre to rival any in Europe in size, splendour and technical possibilities, including spectacular "changements à vue". Save that it was rectangular rather than "à l'antique", it was very much in the line with the wishes of l'abbé d'Aubignac, another of Richelieu's creatures, who, before 1640, at his instigation undertook to write a *Projet de rétablissement du théâtre français* to accompany his more theoretical survey, the *Pratique du théâtre*. Among the six major deficiencies of French theatre referred to by D'Aubignac is the unsuitability of the auditoria in which the public had to strive to hear plays in the unraked *parterres* of the Marais and Hôtel de Bourgogne theatres, leading to frequent disorder. Instead of this, D'Aubignac called for immovable seating

on a raked and stepped floor accompanied by hierarchical seating arrangements to enable separation of “les personnes de condition” from “le menu peuple”. With bishops and priests acting as ushers to a hierarchically organised, ticket-only audience of some 1,200 people from the whole Parisian establishment including the Court, “admis chacun selon sa condition” and seated on forms arranged on spacious “gradins”, and who, on the lifting of the proscenium arch curtain, greeted the “majestueux ornements” of this “superbe théâtre” with “une acclamation universelle d’estonnement”, who thereupon were treated to perspective sets, “de forts délicieux jardins ornez de grottes, de statues, de fontaines et de grands parterres en terrasse sur la mer, avec des agitations qui sembloient naturelles... et deux grandes flottes dont l’une paroissoit éloignée de deux lieues, qui passèrent toutes deux à la veue des spectateurs”, to hitherto unseen lighting effects as well as a mobile sun and moon, and afterwards to a magnificent collation served by 32 pageboys and to “un bal si bien ordonné”, the premiere of *Mirame* was undoubtedly a grand occasion, a clear illustration of the elitism of Richelieu’s theatre and probably the high point of his career as a theatrical impresario.

The Cardinal, then, had clearly made a valuable contribution to a profound socio-cultural change. He had improved the status of authors and actors. He had sponsored plays and productions. He had built theatres to the most modern technical specifications. He had championed critical and theoretical thought and writing. Without the stimulus he provided it is doubtful that in less than a decade the French theatre would have been transformed from what D’Aubignac and others described as a theatre in lamentable state frequented by a vulgar, yobbish crowd among whom no decent woman would dare show her face, into a highly respected and respectable social institution, which was now the “divertissement le plus doux de nos princes”, the “plaisir des grands”, an institution that “chacun idolâtre”, especially the “nobles esprits” to whom writers like Desmarets exclusively address their work and who can no longer be unaware of its “éclat”, “utilité” and “appas”. It is surely in part thanks to Richelieu that the period between 1635 and 1642 is now commonly recognised as one of the most glorious in the history of French drama. If Richelieu promoted the theatre to this extent, it was no doubt in part because he was a genuine enthusiast. But it was also because he had realised how important culture was to his efforts to increase national prestige. And since theatre is, or rather was, one of the most immediate and

public manifestations of a national culture, it provided him with the quick fix he needed. Towards the end of his ministry, he would use it for overtly political ends in promoting his foreign policies (Desmarest's last play *Europe* is an allegory of Richelieu's vision of the settlement of Europe at the end of the Thirty Years War). Initially, it was more a matter of catching up with and competing with Italy, who had hitherto always seemed to be culturally ahead of France, especially in theatre, whether in terms of dramatic forms, technology or architecture. Through its international prestige, literature, especially dramatic literature, was an enviable asset for the Italian nobility. Was it not precisely "chez les modernes Italiens" that Jean Mairet, prompted by French noble patrons with Italian connections, had sought the models for the regular form of theatre he wished to introduce into France in 1631? Hence from 1635 onwards it is as if the Cardinal had taken the decision to turn the situation around or at least catch up lost time by revolutionising French culture, the theatre in particular, by a kind of nationalisation of literature. Though there is no written cultural policy or plan (but then where does Richelieu ever define clearly and explicitly a policy, on absolutism, for instance?), his actions and interventions seem none the less vigorous, rigorous, dynamic and sharply focused. One is reminded of Stalin and his industrialisation of the USSR. One is reminded therefore that the effects can be as negative as they are positive.

But before discussing this issue in more detail, let me say a word or two more about the two authors I have just mentioned and their relationship with Richelieu. They are illustrative of trends and attitudes and this will be useful later. Let me then go on to introduce an aspect of the development of theatre under Richelieu which is crucial, namely the demand that theatre should be edifying. We will then be able to consider in more detail some other problems to which this demand gave rise, for instance problems of the Cardinal's taste, and problems for dramatists such as Mairet, particularly in the writing of tragedy, and finally problems for the theatrical exploitation of the most obviously exemplary subject matter, namely Christianity.

Desmarests was a reluctant dramatist (which is perhaps one reason why he was not a particularly good one, despite the influence and qualities of his second comedy, *Les Visionnaires*). Attached to Richelieu from 1634 in an "employ d'esprit" which seems to have consisted in providing him with distraction from the great affairs of State

through intellectual games of verbal dexterity, Desmarests, who may well have been a significant contributor to Court ballet and probably as a dancer, suspended a career as poet and novelist at the Cardinal's behest to devote himself to writing plays.

Pellisson's account of the Cardinal's persuasiveness is eloquent:

Non-seulement il assistoit avec plaisir à toutes les comédies nouvelles; mais encore il étoit bien aise d'en conférer avec les poètes, de voir leur dessein en sa naissance, et de leur fournir lui-même des sujets. Que s'il connoissoit un bel esprit qui ne se portât pas par sa propre inclination à travailler en ce genre, il l'y engageoit insensiblement par toute sorte de soins et de caresses. Ainsi, voyant que M. Desmarests en étoit très-éloigné, il le pria d'inventer du moins un sujet de comédie, qu'il vouloit donner, disoit-il, à quelque autre pour le mettre en vers. M. Desmarests lui en porta quatre bientôt après. Celui d'*Aspasie* qui étoit l'un lui plut infiniment; mais après lui avoir donné mille louanges, il ajouta que celui-là seul qui avait été capable de l'inventer, serait capable de le traiter dignement et obligea M. Desmarests de l'entreprendre lui-même quelque chose qu'il put alléguer.

In other words, Desmarests could not refuse in the face of the "soins and caresses" of an authoritarian prime minister and so between 1636 and 17 or 18 November 1642 – the date of the first performance of his last play, *Europe*, comédie héroïque – Desmarests was to produce seven plays and two ballets, all designed for private performance before an elite audience in the theatres of the Palais Cardinal. Like many others, he gave up writing for the theatre on Richelieu's death. Interestingly, none of these plays is designated as a tragedy. We shall return to this.

An interesting aspect of Pellisson's account is the stress laid on invention as the most difficult and meritorious element of the playwright's craft. The search for the subject (*inventio*) and its organisation, arrangement of the incidents, the construction of the action (*dispositio*), these are more esteemed than the versification regarded as pure rhetorical embroidery, a task that could easily be handed to any hack rhymster without affecting claims of authorship. Racine and Corneille would say nothing different, though as writers mainly of tragedy, for which the subjects – historical or mythological - were to some extent ready made, *dispositio* would take pride of place

over *inventio*. In the Cardinal's scale of values, however, first place is awarded to those plays whose subject has seemingly been invented from nothing, through the pure exercise of the writer's imagination. Could this be one of the reasons why Mairet, who had been instrumental in re-introducing tragedy to the French stage in 1634 with his renowned and highly successful *Sophonisbe* and thereafter rapidly produced a further two tragedies, abandoned the genre, once he became one of Richelieu's protégés, probably in 1636, and thereafter produced only romanesque tragi-comedies, mostly insipid and more or less fanciful, he too abandoning his career as a dramatist on the Cardinal's death? Could this be the reason why in the repertory of plays known to have been performed in the Cardinal's private theatres, incomplete though our knowledge of the repertory may be, not a single one, at least to my knowledge, is a tragedy? Could this be why Desmarests avoided labelling as a tragedy an historical tragi-comedy such as *Scipion* (Paris, 1639), preferring, as claimed in his notice "Aux Lecteurs", to thereby "suivre la mode telle qu'elle est, que d'estre seul à suivre les anciens en chose de si peu de consequence"? Given that the play, based on a "sujet plein de vertu", was dedicated to Richelieu, and that it had thus become a matter of presenting "la Vertu à la vertu mesme" (*Epistre*), the label barely appears to be as inconsequential as Desmarests claims. The clear implication is that Richelieu was not enamoured of tragedy, or at least not of historical tragedy, or at least not yet. Was there then a "tragédie style Richelieu", as Couton claims? The matter merits further investigation and we shall return to it.

Meanwhile, back to Mairet. Considered by many to be the leading French dramatist in the ten years preceding *Le Cid*, Mairet had been the protégé of the Duc de Montmorency until the latter's death by execution in 1632, a fate that had befallen him for his involvement with Gaston d'Orléans in an ill-starred rebellion. Mairet was therefore clearly associated with the opposition to Richelieu and had espoused their causes in his plays and poetry. A native of Besançon, he was also a foreigner, from a country against which Richelieu had begun to wage war (La Guerre de dix ans), precisely in 1636. Despite the protection of the Comte de Belin, a theatre enthusiast who had largely retired from public life, Mairet was, by 1636, on his uppers and reduced to begging Boisrobert to intercede on his behalf in order to gain the Cardinal's favour. This duly came in the shape of an annual pension, which he began to receive certainly in 1637 and possibly in 1636. What better way to silence a

potentially dissident voice and ensure its allegiance to different values than to enrol him among the growing list of state-funded writers and render him dependent upon you? *Sophonisbe* can be read as a plea for freedom of the individual aristocratic soul to live according to an independently chosen ethic in the face of an oppressive centralising political force which values obedience above all else. The tragedy is to this extent reactionary and belongs, in this sense, to the era of Montmorency. Not surprisingly it went down very well at a special performance given before Gaston d'Orléans and his acolytes in 1634. The contrast with the dramatist's next tragedy, his working of the Anthony and Cleopatra story, composed largely in the early months of 1635, just when Richelieu's theatre initiatives were beginning to happen, is striking. I intend to explore this further.

For now, let me add that Mairet was not unique. André Mareschal had also been formerly attached to the rebel prince Gaston d'Orléans, but was now "assagi"; a vehement opponent of the introduction of the unities, he was now converted to regularity, and duly dedicated his regular comedy *Le Railleur* to the Cardinal in 1637, the play having been performed before him some time earlier. Richelieu had drawn Mareschal into his circle at the time of Gaston's disgrace in 1632, having begged Louis XIII to exempt him from the order of exile imposed on all the Prince's officers. One can easily detect in such moves the hand of a prime minister anxious to gain control over, and order in, this useful Republic of Letters. He welcomes them and traps them in just when they have no other recourse, a convenient way of rendering their dependence all the more irrevocable.

But he also opened the door to new talents. Benserade, for instance, had no sooner enjoyed success at Court with a performance there in 1635 (again) of his *Cléopâtre* than he became one of Richelieu's privileged writers with a pension of 3,000 livres, a prodigious sum for a precocious talent with just one play behind him. Naturally the play was dedicated the following year to the Cardinal. Similarly, Rotrou, Scudéry, Du Ryer, La Calprenède, Tristan, among others, would show their gratitude to the one they called their "maître" by dedicating their plays either to him directly or indirectly via his niece, Madame de Combalet, duchesse d'Aiguillon. Even Corneille, the great independent, would fall into line. Lancaster counts as many as 19 plays dedicated to him. There is not a single dramatist of note in this period whose career and reputation

between 1635 and the Cardinal's death in 1642 are not in some way attributable to him. And so they rejoice in their very works at the renaissance of French theatre and at their newly enhanced status.

In his efforts to rehabilitate the theatre, Richelieu insisted constantly upon one thing above all others: that it should be exemplary, a force for moral good. Notions of "honnêteté" and "bienséance" and "vertu" occur like a leitmotif throughout all the theoretical writings he inspired, in prefaces and dedicatory letters, in the plays themselves. D'Aubignac, for instance, demands in his *Projet de rétablissement du théâtre français* that the charge of infamy should be lifted from actors, but only in so far as they be forbidden from saying or doing anything on stage "contre les bonnes moeurs... ny de commettre aucune action dans leur vie particulière contre l'honnesteté, à peine d'estre chassé du Theatre et de retomber dans la premiere Infamie dont ils avoient esté notéz". The same proviso was to appear almost verbatim in the royal declaration of 1641. The theatre then was to become an "école de vertu", putting before the public models of perfection for their admiration and hopefully emulation. Audiences in this period, particularly the new audience of more educated middle class extraction, especially decent women, could still not attend a theatrical performance without a vague sense of having committed a sin. They needed to be persuaded to set aside their preconceptions, as had already done so the more enlightened elite audiences of Richelieu's theatre, amidst whom could be found leading members of the Church. Plays needed to show therefore, like Desmarests's *Aspasie*, that "la Vertu n'a jamais un succès malheureux" (l.110). They had to "imprime[r] dans l'âme l'horreur du vice", as Scudéry puts it in his *Observations sur le Cid*. The stage had to be purified in order to prove its moral usefulness. Vice therefore must be seen to be punished and virtue rewarded, an Aristotelian principle that Mairet boasted of having fully implemented in his 1633 tragi-comedy *Virginie*. D'Aubignac too would declare, in a more nuanced vein, that "la principale regle du Poeme dramatique, est que les vertus y soient toujours recompensées, ou pour le moins toujours louées, mal-gré les outrages de la fortune et que les vices y soient toujours punis, ou pour le moins toujours en horreur, quand mesme ils y triomphent". Exemplarity could therefore be both positive and negative. But, in adopting what was more accurately the Horatian principle of *utile dulce*, which Scudéry colourfully described as "dorer les pillules afin qu'on les prenne sans repugnance", the practice of

Richelieu's theatre, especially from 1635 onwards, as opposed to the theory, was to stress the promotion of virtue rather than the deterrence from vice. As Jacques Maurens explains, "une époque créatrice en morale ne peut placer son idéal dans une hypothétique correction des passions; à la menace du désordre elle oppose non la défiance et la mesure, mais l'intensité des valeurs humaines". Scudéry went so far as to claim that Aristotle required that, if it was at all necessary to introduce into plays "des personnes pleines de vices, [que] le nombre en soit moindre que des vertueuses". And some dramatists did seem to take such mathematical considerations quite seriously. But it was perhaps not just a matter of interpretation of Aristotelian poetics by foregrounding the latter's belief in the moral usefulness of theatre, a medium which Scudéry sees as more adept than others as a means of "imprime[r]...les bons sentiments". It was also hard to forget that Plato believed that theatre should be outlawed completely, for fear that the human mind, which takes great pleasure in accurate reproduction of reality, should be corrupted by the pleasure of an accurate representation of vice, an argument which would be used frequently by the opponents of theatre in the seventeenth century. From all points of view, therefore, it was safer to put virtue at the centre of attention and if necessary to ensure that it outweighed vice either in quantitative or qualitative terms, through sheer intensity.

It is no doubt for these reasons that exemplary women begin to proliferate in French theatre during the period, especially from the time Richelieu begins to take it in hand. Characterised almost exclusively by their virtue manifested in its external corollary, physical beauty, the Berenices, Aspasiés, Laures, Didons, Marianes, Polyxènes, Ormènes, Virginies, Cleopatras (yes, even Cleopatras) begin to dominate the French stage, forming a veritable regiment of edifying heroines, barely distinguishable one from the other, whose fidelity, generosity, constancy, sacrifice, submission and obedience ennobles and culpabilises, incites to admiration and emulation, but more especially simply amaze and bedazzle heroes and spectators in what Jacques Maurens has aptly called "une course haletante au sublime".

What interests me particularly is the effect of this demand for positive exemplarity on tragedy. For the two are essentially incompatible. Tragedy presents fallen heroes, characters who, according to Aristotelian principle, are neither completely good nor completely evil, who are flawed in some way and whose defect or sinful actions will

lead to their inevitable downfall. Moreover, they are often real people, historical figures who actually existed or figures whose existence has been consecrated in ancient myth. Fictional beings on the other hand, the products of pure invention, need not be like that, they can be fashioned ideally, as you would like. Hence Richelieu's prioritisation of *inventio*, which favours positive exemplarity, and his suspicious attitude towards tragedy, which at best favours only negative exemplarity and at worst the seductions of sinfulness. Besides, tragedy was an ancient genre, whereas tragi-comedy and pastoral were modern genres, unknown to the ancients, more easily presented as a product of national culture, rather than of imitation of someone else's. They were therefore a much better vehicle for the promotion of national prestige. No wonder the Cinq Auteurs produced a comedy (no more than a general term for a play), a tragi-comedy and a Grande Pastorale.

Tragedy, however, would not go away. It was after all the noble genre, the only genre capable of dealing with important issues. Its pedigree was impeccable and it had only recently been re-introduced to the French stage, championed by cultured and powerful noblemen. It had been immensely successful and had drawn "des soupirs des plus grand coeurs et des larmes des plus beaux yeux de France". It had become an unstoppable cultural force. The whole problem was to reconcile it with the constraint of positive exemplarity. But how? Time for some analysis. A comparison of the Anthony and Cleopatra plays of Mairet and Benserade may be instructive in this regard.

Mairet does it by shamelessly applying the principle of *inventio* to history, manipulating events and characterisation in order to achieve the idealisation he seeks. In giving primacy to *inventio* over *dispositio* in the treatment of historical subjects, Mairet is striving to assert the modernity of writers of regular tragedy against the rival claims of writers of irregular tragi-comedy, for whom *inventio* is the very symbol of modernity. The process by which the centre of the debate on regularity shifted from *dispositio* to *inventio* – a transition which Georges Forestier attributes to the insistence of Richelieu and to Scudéry's *Observations* during the Cid quarrel – had in fact already begun with Mairet's *Marc-Antoine*. Thus he devotes his "ingenieuse liberté" to "redresser et embellir le naturel" of protagonists on whom History had passed highly negative judgement. Going further than the idealising portraits of his

Renaissance predecessors, Mairet transforms Plutarch's seductive corruptress and fallen queen, the *meretrix regina* of so much Roman propaganda, into a model of conjugal fidelity and stoic feminine dignity. To purify her as much as possible he relegates to the distant past the vices and sins responsible for her downfall, having her openly repent her sins, and resignedly accept her punishment. The most original aspect of her characterisation is her staunch piety, of which one finds not a trace in the literary sources and which turns the historical sources upside down, since in them it is much more a matter of the Egyptian queen's impieties. He even puts her piety to good dramatic use: it is because of her piety that Octave grants her the freedom to make a libation over Antoine's tomb. She takes advantage of this to commit suicide. None of the historians make any attempt to explain the motive of Octave's concession. The character explains himself by reference to local custom: *Donc puisque parmy vous, en mysteres semblables/ Les tesmoins estrangers ne sont pas recevables, / Prenez pour satisfaire à ce pieux devoir,/ Toute la liberté que vous souliez avoir*". Mairet never read any such thing in any of the known sources.

If piety is added, the rest of the characterisation is mostly subtraction. He removes from her love for Antoine all traces of sensuality. For Antoine, Cléopâtre is "un autel qu'il a tant révééré". Their relationship is, as in pastoral, chaste and "honnête", devoid of sexual connotation, and in stark contrast to the smouldering animal passion of Massinisse and Sophonisbe, Cléopâtre is a long way from the lascivious corruptress, the irresistible femme fatale, portrayed in Augustan propaganda. There are in fact few references to her physical beauty and there is never a question of using her charms to seduce Octave after Antoine's death. Nothing must sully the image of unshakeable fidelity. Similarly, she is devoid of all political motivation. No question in this play, as there had been in *Sophonisbe*, of a clash of two opposing world orders. Here there is barely a distinction in political and ethical terms between Roman and Graeco-Egyptian worlds. The catastrophe is rather an entirely personal one, and has already happened before the start of the action. The protagonists merely have to wait for the settlement of accounts, to which Antoine and until the last act Cléopâtre passively submit. She sees herself not as a victim of Roman politics but of divine anger, and even after Antoine's death her behaviour is determined not by political considerations, that is by the desire to defy Roman power by refusing to be led in triumph in Rome, which is the motive attributed to her by all the historical and most literary sources, but

rather by “l’amour et le devoir”. Hence this “courage superbe, et de plus amoureux”, this “fidelle esprit”, this “espouse loyale” chooses to die in order to maintain honour and faith in a bold demonstration of conjugal fidelity. Only in the final act does she shake off fatalistic passivity and find the *vertu* required to defy Octave and make a glorious death.

De-sensualised, de-politicised Totally de-dynamised? Mairet seems to be aware of this potential defect since the difference in heroic dynamism between Cléopâtre and Sophonisbe is commented upon by an incredulous Octave: “...se ravir par elle [la mort] aux triomphes de Rome,/ Plustost que d’une femme est l’ouvrage d’un homme”. To which Maecène replies: “Sophonisbe pourtant ne le fit pas trop mal”. And Octave further responding: “Mais toutes ne sont pas la fille d’Asdrubal” . Cléopâtre’s triumphant suicide was not doubt meant to show the inappropriacy of such “heroic misogyny” and that the heroine of Mairet’s second tragedy is quite the equal of the heroine of his first. But if one pities Cléopâtre less, it’s because one is supposed to admire her more. No internal conflict tears her conscience apart; she has already settled accounts with morality. She differs from Sophonisbe in that her *vertu* is not acquired through struggle, through the brush with events, it is already built in. When in an extreme situation, she merely needs to summon up the force that is latent within her. But the affirmation of positive *vertu* comes too late to erase entirely the image of a resigned and submissive woman, whose courage is essentially passive. She is to this extent a regression to the lamenting heroines of elegiac tragedy. Her virtue is far from the energetic force that will galvanise Corneille’s heroines, among whom is the rejuvenated Cléopâtre of *La Mort de Pompée*. The virtue of Mairet’s Cléopâtre is rather the Madonna-like moral goodness that emerges from the salons, the manuals of *honnêteté* and in the moralising writings of Richelieu’s ideologues. She is to this extent a much less modern heroine than Sophonisbe.

On the other hand, for the author’s contemporaries, she must have represented significant progress in relation to Sophonisbe since her characterisation is a concrete manifestation of the latest theoretical and aesthetic developments. Unlike the Cleopatras of the seventeenth century, she is the product not of respect for history but of history subjected to *inventio*. Paradoxically, the more this potentially strong woman emerges as enfeebled and bleached, the more *inventio* appears to be effective. In

creating his Cléopâtre, Mairet showed that thanks to *inventio* authors are capable not only of modifying the deeds of history but also of restoring the innocence of the doers. *Inventio* confers on them therefore a quasi-divine power. Much more than embellishing vices, it enables them to purify them, even to absolve them and redeem them. Under Richelieu *inventio* becomes a tool of redemption and the authors of historical tragedy are transformed into redemptive magi endowed with a miraculous power that is not enjoyed by the authors of irregular tragi-comedy. Thanks to *inventio*, which transforms corrupt reality, the theatre can prove its moral and social usefulness. This seems to me to be the meaning of Mairet's rehabilitated Cléopâtre: shorn of her dangerous political content, her corrupting and seductive power transformed into exemplary virtues, her sins redeemed by piety, she has been brought into line in the name of a patriarchal political authority keen to exercise control also in the sphere of moral behaviour, a "récupération" which has been accomplished by means of aesthetics which are also those of the very same authority.

And yet, in the face of history's condemnation of Cleopatra, Mairet's idealisation is not entirely convincing. Even some contemporaries would seem to have had their doubts. In the *Cid* quarrel, the *Bourgeois de Paris*, complaining of the lack of exemplarity of the heroes and heroines of recent tragedies, remarked: "Quant à Cléopâtre et Antoine, voila de vertueuses personnes, dont l'une estoit une dissolue, et l'autre un homme noyé dans un amour infame, et dans les delices". Moreover, purification having removed much dynamism from her, Mairet was probably aware that in order to be truly edifying she lacked the intensity he was seeking. It is, I believe, for this reason more than any other that Mairet made his greatest modification of history by introducing Antony's first wife, Octavia, into the action in *Alexandria*. He is the first, but not the last, to do so in the whole literary tradition. It enables him to double the intensity of the lesson in conjugal fidelity and constancy. There are no obstacles here to idealisation, since the role of Octavie in *Alexandria* is entirely of the author's invention. When she appears, she emerges from the temple, and with all the dignity of her "âme héroïque" and in all the splendour of her dazzling virtue, the intensity of which is designed to illuminate her husband's blindness. Octavie is therefore a "beauté sans reproche et sans prix", a "digne objet d'amour et de pitié", a "beauté si parfaite, et si persécutée", a "coeur si genereux", a "femme, incomparable, entre les plus parfaites", a "parfait exemple/ De toutes les vertus les plus dignes d'un

temple”. In a gesture of supreme altruism, she forgives Antoine his cruel repudiation of her and even offers herself as a hostage in order to protect him against the consequences of his imminent defeat. She is then a saintly figure willing to sacrifice herself on the altar of conjugal fidelity, and as such she tends to outshine a Cléopâtre who is still stained by her past and who cannot surpass her moral perfection and martyrize herself to the same extent.

Mairet modifies history still further by reintroducing Octavie at a later point in the play when she convinces her brother Octave to yield to her plea for clemency for Antoine and grant him a pardon. At the same time, she begs him to spare Lucile, Antoine’s confidant, another paragon of fidelity whose role in relation to the historical and literary sources has been considerably embellished. The pardons she wins turn out, however, to be useless, since neither she nor Octave know at the time that Lucile is already dead and Antoine dying. We have here a kind of primitive tragic irony, which may have been all the more galling if the scene had been placed earlier, before Lucile’s death and Antoine’s botched suicide. How pitiful it would have been to see two heroes, unaware of a generous pardon, killing themselves quite needlessly! If that had been the case, Antoine and Lucile would have been the objects of our pity. But the crucial thing is that, given where the scene actually stands, our pity goes out instead to Octavie, since it is she who is the victim of tragic irony. This is a token of the importance Mairet has given to the exemplary character born of *inventio*, who thus steals the limelight from the hero and who, at the very moment of his agony, appears even more tragic than he.

But the pardon won by Octavie fulfils another, perhaps even more important, function. It is through this that Mairet demonstrates explicit respect for the rule according to which virtue must be shown to be rewarded. How else could he have done so in a play which tells the story of Antony and Cleopatra? However exemplary he may strive to make his protagonists, the story could hardly end with reward for their virtue, unless the play were to become comically fantastic or a romanesque tragic-comedy with happy ending. Mairet is careful to ensure that Octave states explicitly that the granting of the pardon is the direct result of Octavie’s virtue: “Certes je suis contraint d’avouer hautement,/ Qu’on ne voit point d’effets de vertu consommée,/ Comme ceux que produit cette soeur bien aymée.” Yet again, therefore, *inventio*

reveals its effectiveness, this time by guaranteeing the application of the rule. In this sense, the new moral imperatives governing the rehabilitation of the theatre make the introduction of Octavie – the biggest distortion of history that Mairet ever made - almost obligatory. The problem is that *inventio* in the service of edification may work wonders in terms of transforming imperfect beings into exemplary figures, but that for all that, because of that, it does not make them more tragic. *Inventio* cannot serve both masters well at the same time. The demands of politico-moral orthodoxy are not easily reconciled with the demands of authentic tragedy.

Though their martyrdom to fidelity is overshadowed by the shining exemplarity of Octavie, Mairet's Antoine and Cléopâtre remain “un couple infortuné que l'amour avoit joint”, two lovers whose stories are dramatised in parallel. Benserade, on the other hand, deals with them separately, allotting the first half of his tragedy to Antoine and the second to Cléopâtre and her struggle with Octave. The virtues or vices they exemplify are similarly distinct. The choice of such a bipartite structure may well have been influenced by the need to prioritise the promotion of virtue over the deterrence from vice, that is by the modalities of the dramatist's determination to idealise, as expounded in his dedication to Richelieu: “La nature des choses que l'on vous consacre doit estre tout à fait excellente, ou si elle a quelques deffauts, il est besoin qu'ils soient comme cachez, et ensevelis, dans l'excellence de l'art, c'est à dire que les victimes que l'on vous immole doivent estre parfaitement pures, ou extremement parées”. Since Antoine is the more difficult character to idealise, his “intégrité” having been corrupted, Benserade dispatches the story of this negative example relatively quickly, leaving him free to focus on what will be the audience's abiding impression – the positive exemplarity of Cléopâtre, a character whose heroic resistance is seen as lending itself more readily to idealisation.

This is not to say that Antoine, if impossible to purify completely, is untouched by the process of extreme “parure”. Having railed briefly against fortune, he acknowledges from the outset that his “vertu” has been weakened by love, but he then proceeds to a dazzling demonstration of all the social graces of chivalrous deference typical of the submissive pastoral hero so popular in salon literature. On Cléopâtre's appearance, he immediately sets aside his accusations of betrayal against her on the grounds that her beauty cannot possibly be associated with any moral imperfection of this kind.

Defeated and dispossessed of his princely rank, he is imperfect and therefore no longer “digne de vous servir”; she would do better to transfer her affection to Octave, whose acquisition of Antoine’s “grandeurs” make him worthy to possess her also. Confirming her love for him, Cléopâtre defends herself against the charge of betrayal on the grounds that infidelity is incompatible with her royal status. Filled with remorse at his failure to recognise this fundamental condition of royalty, Antoine demands that he be punished. Furthermore, his offence is claiming that love of her is responsible for his misfortune is unpardonable. The punishment will be to agree to her request to refrain from taking part in the imminent battle, to which, after a short debate with himself, he accedes, concluding that “Ma honte c’est ma gloire et pour tout dire, j’aime”. With Antoine trapped by his precious reasoning, a victim of the dramatist’s indulgence in antithesis, it takes a long intervention from Lucile, whose winning argument is the need to fight to defend Cléopâtre’s royal status, before there is a semblance of a return to history and before Antoine begs her to revoke her decision. Reluctantly she agrees on condition that “Vous refroidirez cette bouillante ardeur”, of which, in truth, there has been little evidence. And so he goes off to battle with a kiss, which “secondé d’un seul de vos regards/ Me peut faire aujourd’huy vaincre mille Césars”.

However absurd such *galanterie* may now appear, it no doubt delighted Court and *mondains*. But, more importantly, what these early scenes posit is that high rank, especially royalty, beauty and virtue are consubstantial. In this respect it is significant that after Antoine’s exit Cléopâtre’s first thoughts are for her “couronne [qui] chancelle”, rather than her lover. For, rather than fidelity in love, regal virtue, seen as the higher value and as embodied in the heroine, will become the major theme of the play. Even Antoine, defeated and contemplating suicide, will find as the first of a set of more effete motives the idea that “il n’est rien plus honteux qu’un sceptre que l’on perd,/ Qui le quitte est plus Roy que celui qui s’en sert”. Hence the importance of Antoine’s early proposal, preposterous though it may appear at the time, that Cléopâtre should transfer her affection to Octave, a proposal he will repeat in his dying words. For, when she does attempt to seduce Octave, her purpose will be to preserve her royal status, by avoiding the humiliation of his triumph, and she can attempt to fulfil it in the audience’s knowledge that Antoine has sanctioned her advances – and therefore without attracting the same degree of moral opprobrium, if

any, to which her “infidelity” would otherwise give rise. So it is in order to enable Cléopâtre to set a royal example and die “en Reine” that Benserade has conferred on Antoine thoughts and words which in Dio Cassius he never had. Dio’s judgement of the Egyptian queen is damning. By choosing to adhere to this source for his plot, rather than Plutarch, Benserade made the task of redeeming her all the more difficult. The result is the kind of exacting contortion, performed with stunning athleticism, we have just seen.

In fact, in the second half of the play, Cléopâtre’s second thoughts are always for Antoine and her first for regality. A long soliloquy preceding the confrontation with Octave almost neglects to mention Antoine at all. Imprisoned in a “chambre tendue de deuil”, her mind turns immediately to the loss of rank symbolised by “Diadèmes, grandeurs, rang, titres absolus” and “Sceptres qui m’élève avec tant de gloire”. The “éclat” and “pompe vaine” with which Octave continues to surround her are but a cruel reminder of her lost regality. In the confrontation scene itself, she begins not with a plea for clemency or pity, but with a haughty disquisition on her queenliness – “Vous voyez, ô Cesar! Une Reine à vos piez/ Qui vid devant les siens des Rois humiliez” – designed to flatter his vanity: “Par ce que vous foulez jugez de vostre gloire”. She pursues the tactic by reminding Octave, “vivante image” of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, that the latter had conferred upon her the throne of Egypt, and, with Octave unmoved, finally pleads in tearful desperation for permission to die and for the preservation of her kingdom through her children – again only the most scant reference to Antoine.

Significant too is Octave’s reaction on reading her letter informing him of her intention to follow Antoine into suicide and asking for burial in the same tomb. In it, she refers to herself as “asservie”, and the triumvir is not deceived:

Pour un sujet d’amour voila des mots bien fermes,
 Dans ce mouvement lâche use-t’on de ces termes?
 Sans doute en cet écrit où j’ai l’oeil attaché
 C’est la vertu qui parle, et non pas le péché,
 C’est le ressentiment d’une âme généreuse
 Des beautez du trépas seulement amoureuse.

Indeed, in her final scene, for Cléopâtre herself, the prime motive for seeking death is “la peur d’un Tyran” who threatens to deprive her of her “gloire”. Defiantly “monstrant son sceptre”, she proclaims that if she is to descend “au séjour de la Parque” it will be “de mon trône”. Hence Octave will only inherit her crown rather than rob her of it.

And so, surrounded by all the golden trappings of royalty, on which Benserade’s stage directions and other indications urgently insist, she dies an exemplary royal death, “venerable à l’Empire Romain”, her “diadème affermy” around her head, a death that is for Cléopâtre “noble, riche et pompeuse”, for Octave “genereuse et belle”, and for Charmion “digne [...] de sa majesté”. In this way, then, from a potentially negative example of the follies of love, Benserade has fashioned an heroic model of queenly virtue, glorifying the concept of monarchy itself, whose gilded splendour is thus defended against the “froideur severe” of villainous imperialistic *présomption*. With the Holy Roman Empire threatening and France about to fight its first battles in the Thirty Years War, Richelieu could have asked for no better propaganda.

At least not from tragedy, especially that based on Roman history, since it put an obstacle in the path of theatre’s transformation into an “école de vertu”. Caught between conflicting demands of positive exemplarity and a new-found sense of the tragic based on pity as typified by Mairet’s *Sophonisbe*, tragedy almost inevitably fell between two stools. Pushed towards the stimulation of *admiratio*, it lost tragic value and intensity. Pushed towards the authentically tragic, it lost exemplarity. In Mairet’s case, the submission to the added requirement for edification best explains why his second tragedy failed to live up to the first, the composition of which was relatively free from such direct external pressure. In Benserade’s play also, the determination to edify positively has led to the obfuscation of human weaknesses, to a loss of human value and hence to a dilution of dramatic conflict, which has been replaced by exemplary demonstration.

In view of these difficulties and of the pressure for exemplarity, it is not surprising that the vogue for historical tragedy that *Sophonisbe* had created lasted initially for only two or three years. By 1637 Tristan’s *Mariane*, a more Senecan type of tragedy,

took over as the model to imitate. The biblical source also helped to legitimise the form. It is no surprise either if the vogue for romanesque tragi-comedy remained as strong as, and sometimes stronger than, tragedy throughout the rest of the cardinal's ministry. Certainly, his own taste seemed to lie in this direction. What is perhaps less readily understandable, in view of the pressure for moral teaching, is why it took rather longer in a strongly Catholic country with all the might of the Counter-Reformation behind it for theatre to begin openly to promote Christian virtues and subject matter. But to do so it had to overcome some serious obstacles and that it eventually did so is due, I believe, in some measure to the fact that Richelieu was not just prime minister but also a prelate. Even then, the genre of Christian tragedy was never universally accepted, not even by many dramatic theorists who were fearful of the potential to mix the sacred and the profane, for instance by evoking pagan gods in a religious/Christian context. They were rightly fearful. Desfontaines's protagonist in his *Martyre de Saint Eustache* returns victorious from battle on behalf of the Roman emperor Adrian to proclaim "Mars enfin satisfait me rend auprès de vous" and only a few lines later launches into a bitter attack on "Vos Mars, vos Apollons, vos Jupins, vos Hercules, / Des esprits aveuglez fantosmes ridicules". Indeed, in his *Poétique* of 1639 La Mesnardière commended French dramatists for avoiding Christian subject matter.

The first obstacle was that significant parts of the Church held literature in general and theatre in particular to be suspect. They were essentially corrupting influences, full of concupiscence, depicting the pleasures of carnal love and exalting worldly values, promoting therefore an attachment to the world rather than turning people towards God.

The theatre moreover was a rival attraction to the church, attracting rival congregations, especially since performances were given on Sundays and with often beautiful actresses disporting themselves immodestly in the performance of worldly passions which gave rise to sinful thoughts and deeds. How could the actor, an excommunicate damned with infamy, impart moral teaching and thus compete with the priest? And when it comes to Christian teaching, the priest alone is qualified to give lessons, the actor the least qualified. It ill becomes the secular stage to attempt to usurp a role which was traditionally that of the clergy.

And then, when the theatre did promote virtue, it was often not of a particularly Christian kind. The sometimes strident Roman virtues of historical tragedy are a far cry from the humility expected of the good Christian. And, as Henry Philipps underlines, heroes who are neither good nor bad serve little purpose in the eyes of those, like the Jesuits, advancing a Christian heroism based on concepts of redemption and revelation unknown to the pagan world.

The problem therefore was how to overcome such misgivings. The approach adopted by dramatists in the period 1636-38 was nervously oblique, perhaps subtle, a series of “tâtonnements” as if to test public reaction and see how far they could go. Explicitly Christian virtues were first of all promoted allegorically through anagogic meaning. Desmarest’s *Aspasie* is a case in point. Dubbed a comedy, the play presents us with two young people, Lysis and Aspasie, united by mutual love, but separated by unequal fortune and by the surprise decision of Lysis’s father, Argiléon, to marry Aspasie himself. His plan is quickly carried out with the consent of Aspasie’s cupid parents. Aspasie, a submissive and obedient daughter, reluctantly yields and is reproached for her weakness by Lysis. However, inspired by her example and faced with a *fait accompli*, Lysis is resigned to renunciation of his beloved, fearing that he will be guilty of a mortal sin if he were to pursue a love that would now be both adulterous and incestuous. However, he does not do so without seeing Aspasie one last time in the enclosed garden in which Argiléon has imprisoned her. Overcome with emotion, the two lovers faint into unconsciousness. At first believing them dishonoured by criminal passion and then to have died from the pain of frustrated love, Argiléon repents his selfishness and, converted by their example, annuls the marriage to enable Lysis and Aspasie to live happily ever after.

The main themes of the play are the very Christian virtues of submission, obedience, respect for paternal authority, self-denial and renunciation. Rather than rebel against paternal authority, as in Molière and so many others, Lysis and Aspasie overcome the obstacle figure by subverting the traditional pattern, that is by submitting to it unconditionally. After long debates between love and duty, the two lovers take a reasoned decision, sustained by sudden intuition of the higher good, in favour of values seen as superior. Their heroic self-denial, sacrificing their personal interests,

their love, in favour of the respect for universal interests, holy laws (against adultery and incest, obedience of paternal authority), is achieved at the expense of an immense struggle for self-domination. The example they give is powerful enough to convert Argiléon and Aspasia's parents to more generous attitudes towards life. It is more through admiration of their ultimate sacrifice than through pity that Argiléon renounces his personal interest in favour of theirs.

In this sense, Lysis and Aspasia are allegorical figures, whose self-denial enables them to attain grace and redemption. It is through self-denial that these children of the Lord, whose chaste, pure and decent love is of divine origin, are reborn in paradise, to which the garden of Act V is explicitly associated. There, united by divine law, they will begin a new life of eternal bliss. Their reawakening after falling unconscious is a metaphorical expression of their resurrection, the scene change to the garden, the "belle prison" symbolising the spiritual transformation. The garden is a reminder of the *hortus conclusus* and *locus amoenus* of Renaissance pastoral, where it is symbolic of grace and redemption. What is particularly striking is the intensity, even the hyperbolic excess, of the virtue that martyrised Aspasia and Lysis. Paradoxically, both of them need an almost superhuman energy in order to withstand the pressure of their emotions, renounce their love and submit to higher values. The resolve of their submissiveness, their wilful abnegation, are the source of much psychological torment which borders on the tragic – a very "larmoyant" kind of tragic, it has to be said – but it is this which ultimately ensures their victory. From contemporary theatre Desmarests takes heroic human virtue based on neo-stoic constancy to propagate what in effect belongs to a totally different set of values, namely the virtue of submission to divine authority. By exalting the Christian virtues of self-denial, submission and obedience before an elite aristocratic audience (which, incidentally, included Gaston d'Orléans), *Aspasie* was designed to show that eternal glory would reward those able to rise above their individual, personal interests and subordinate them to higher and broader values. In doing so, *Aspasie* did the cardinal's policies and politics a sterling service. No wonder that out of the four subjects that Desmarests presented to him, that of *Aspasie* should have pleased him "infiniment".

The Christian exemplarity of a play like *Aspasie* draws then less on contemporary neo-stoicism than on neo-platonism. Now it is precisely on neo-platonist inspiration

that the new French Academy draws in its early literary activity, when it promotes the notion of immortality achieved through eloquence and, in its letters patent, claims that literature is “l’un des principaux instrumens de la vertu”. One of the most important aims of the Academy then was to aspire to the kind of eloquence that would illustrate and enshrine for all eternity the exemplary virtues of the great and the good.

Desmarest was, of course, the Academy’s first chancellor. Throughout his career Desmarest was a Christian writer, a very French Christian writer. It seems clear that in his first play also he wishes to communicate a Christian message. Unable to do so directly, since theatre does not yet have the dignity of the pulpit, he does so indirectly by resorting to neo-platonist allegory.

Equally indirect is Mairet’s method of introducing Christian subject matter to the stage. His tragi-comedy *Athénais*, composed in 1637 and based on a semi-historical and much embellished account of an episode of early Lower-Empire Christianity in Caussin’s *Cour sainte*, tells the story of a learned pagan girl, Athenais, whose beauty, eloquence and virtue are so striking that Pulchérie, powerful sister of the Emperor Théodose II, sets her up as a potential bride for her younger brother. On seeing her he is immediately love-struck. Athenais is persuaded to agree to marriage, despite her lowly background. An obstacle then arises in the shape of their incompatible religions. Théodose is a Christian, whereas Athénais is a committed pagan, and intellectual to boot. She must therefore be converted before the marriage can proceed. Mairet devotes the whole of the fourth act to the eventually successful conversion. It is the most important episode and certainly the most innovative in what may be a deliberately episodic and incoherent play designed to please the zealous bishop, Emeric-Marc de La Ferté, to whom it is dedicated. The significant aspect of the conversion is that we are not allowed to witness it. The long and arduous debate (over four days) takes place off stage and we are privy to its progress and content only through a series of récits given by the Emperor’s confidants and Pulchérie. After tiring out the expert theologians, Athénais ultimately renounces the “erreur insensée” of paganism through the combined force of, first, gentle enlightenment via the use of “raison naturelle”, second a “coup du ciel”, a “miracle”, and third the strength of love which has enabled her illumination and transformed her into an “Ange de lumière”. From the condemnation of pagan gods (“Mars et Jupiter sont des Dieux sans pouvoir/ Dont l’histoire fertile en dangereux exemples/ Autorise le crime et le met dans les

Temples”; “Faut-il que des Pheobus, des Mars, et des Hercules/ Du veritable Dieu, phantosmes ridicules, Eux qui ne sont que bois, que pierre et que métal/ Cessent d’estre impuissans pour me faire du mal.”) to the curse of idolatry and a plea for religious tolerance (“Je ne veux point ravir à son entendement/ La liberté d’élire, et d’agir librement. Dans la Religion la contrainte est un crime”) Mairet has put in place here all the ingredients that will be used by a number of dramatists after him in dealing with similar themes. His discretion and modesty, perhaps even his scruples, in presenting this drama of the unspoken helped to legitimise the re-introduction of Christian subject matter to the French stage and cleared the way so that others could dramatise it more openly.

The oblique path of allegory and the discretion of indirect episodic account showed that theatre was capable of dealing with such subjects decently and with dignity. The message communicated is one with which even the most ardent religious opponents of theatre could scarcely disagree. If in the late 1630s and 1640s, especially 1640-42, French theatre experienced an outcrop of biblical and hagiographic tragedies, it was undoubtedly because the exemplarity of such subject matter was beyond challenge, at least in comparison with historical tragedy, provided, of course, that out of respect for the *bienséances* the spectacle of the tortured body had been removed.. If La Calprenède with *Herménigilde*, Du Ryer with *Saul* and *Esther*, La Serre with *Sainte-Catherine*, Desfontaines with *Saint-Eustache* can openly dramatise various aspects of Christian spirituality, it is thanks to the certificate of purity, innocence and dignity that the struggle for exemplarity had won. It was to some extent the pioneering efforts of dramatists like Mairet and Desmarests which ultimately rendered possible the “portrait de vertus chrétiennes” that is *Polyeucte*, which is perhaps the only masterpiece that this genre can claim, and which enabled Corneille to speak of a dramatist’s right to deal with Christianity on stage.

“C’est avec de beaux sentiments qu’on fait de la mauvaise littérature”, said André Gide. His view could no doubt be applied with much accuracy to many of the plays that resulted from the requirement to impart positive lessons in official conceptions of *vertu* under Richelieu. Historical tragedy, as we have seen, quickly ran into a temporary impasse and it took a genius in the shape of Corneille fully to synthesise within his aesthetics the contradictions of the moralistic imperatives of the theatre’s

rehabilitation, to return to the path opened up by *Sophonisbe*, exploring its potential for politico-moral inquiry, and, by dramatising the triumph of *vertu* as conflict internally resolved rather than as demonstration externally imposed, to produce historical “tragedy” which is both morally exciting and theatrically dynamic. Ironically, the cardinal himself may well have wished that the “tragédie style Richelieu” had never existed. But since it does it must surely also incorporate not only those tragedies by Corneille and Scudéry which are, as Couton remarks, “largement tributaires du climat politique qu’il a fait régner”, but also the tragedies like those of Mairet and Benserade, and like the martyr tragedies, which owe much to the moral revolution the cardinal sought to bring about. In this context, it is perhaps as well to remember two things. First, that there were powerful repressive forces at work in French seventeenth-century society which, had they held sway, may well have resulted in the complete suppression of theatre, were it not for the renewed prestige and popularity that Richelieu’s enthusiastic rehabilitation had brought to it. The “mauvaise littérature” of the cardinal’s exemplary theatre may then be the price well worth paying for the glories of Corneille, Molière and Racine. And second, though the notion of a moral revolution may well give off an unpleasant odour, that as prelate as well as prime minister Richelieu could claim more legitimately than most to embrace both politics *and* morals within his vision of unified national identity. As members of the post-war generation, we are probably as acutely aware as any that tough politics has often sought the sanctimonious veil of moral purification. With regard to the development of French tragedy and theatre in general, it might therefore be said of Richelieu, to echo Corneille, that he did too much ill that one might speak well of him, and too much good that one might speak ill of him.

ⁱ This lecture draws in part on the following of my previous publications where interested readers will find full annotation and references.

Jean Desmarets (de Saint-Sorlin), *Aspasie. Comédie*, Texte établi et présenté par Philip Tomlinson (Textes littéraires français) Geneva: Droz, 1992; ‘Le personnage de Cléopâtre chez Mairet et Corneille’, *XVIIe siècle*, 190 (1996), 67-75; ‘L’Art d’embellir les vices: The Antony and Cleopatra Plays of Mairet and Benserade in the light of Richelieu’s Rehabilitation of the Theatre’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 33 (1996), 349-65; Jean Mairet, *Le Marc-Antoine ou la Cléopâtre. Tragédie*, Edition critique, Texte établi et présenté par Philip Tomlinson (Durham Modern Languages Series) Durham: University of Durham, 1997.