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Introduction

It is a measure of Richelieu's success in transforming the country he governed that many still believe that the grass of Parnassus grows only in Paris. One consequence of such intellectual centrism has been that Corneille's historical and political drama has almost invariably been discussed in terms of Parisian taste or 'national' political preoccupations, or even assumed to be unambiguously expressive of his patron's policies. Few critics have related the plays to their author's provincial context, and then it was to see allusions to contemporary events, despite the aesthetic impropriety of reducing the universals of Classical drama to the particulars of history. Thus, before discussing the political interest of Corneille's serious drama written in the reign of Louis XIII, this study proposes both to re-examine the historical facts of this Norman dramatist's experience of politically momentous times (Part I) and, as a preliminary control to critical assessment of the plays, to explore the principles upon which Corneille believed that the drama, by transmuting history into tragedy, offered a means to the better understanding of his times (Part II).

Corneille was no different from many of his contemporaries in having a special interest in history and political theory as essential instruments in the understanding of present political events. But his disagreements with theoreticians in Paris on the proper dramatic imitation of history remind us of an intellectual independence which was already apparent in his private life. In an age when so many 'robins de province' left for Paris in pursuit of patronage, he was decidedly unusual in holding to a career as *officier* in the Palais de Justice in Rouen at the same time as successfully pursuing in Paris another literary career which was to bring him the patronage of Richelieu. Since that illustrious patron was also the man most responsible for a series of economic miseries and institutional

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humiliations in Corneille's native Normandy, it is unlikely that the Rouennais political dramatist read the course of events with the Minister's eyes. Indeed, the tensions between Corneille's twin careers go far to explain his independence in discussion of the principles underpinning the dramatic recreation of history and the problematic nature of his dramatic illustration of political issues.

Apart from his plays and a small amount of occasional poetry, Corneille left little to tell us of his response to fundamental political debates which characterized the ministry of Richelieu, or to decisions made in Paris which severely affected his native Normandy. How Corneille's experience of his times contributed to the larger significance of his drama will only become clear if, by turning first to the external historical evidence of what it was to live in Normandy, we recognize that, educated in the rich humanistic culture of his Jesuit teachers and a proud participant in the cultural inheritance of the *officier* caste to which he belonged, he was also heir to a specifically Norman patrimony.[1] Part I can do little more than set out the major perspectives and bare facts of Corneille's provincial context, but it should suffice to show how a sense of 'Normanness' is likely to have affected the way in which he envisaged the dramatist's art and inflected the ways in which his plays recreated ancient history in the light of moral and political issues of immediate concern to the audiences of his day.

The very variety of the studies of Corneille which have appeared in the last forty years suggests that it would also be useful to look at his own description of his art before turning to direct discussion of his plays. Although Corneille wrote what is arguably the most original and distinguished body of seventeenth-century French dramatic theory, it is surprising how few critics have consistently tried to apply its lesson to the ways in which they approach the texts themselves.[2] As Corneille himself observed of the various interpretations which had been laid upon the *Poetics*, 'Je crois qu'il est à propos de parler de ce qu'il [Aristotle] a dit, avant que de faire effort pour deviner ce qu'il a voulu dire.'[3] And yet, despite the fact that Corneille's developing understanding of the practice of his art indicates his sensitivity to institutional changes and political pressures in a period when matters of poetics were never very far from matters of political ideology, critical discussion has traditionally been more concerned with exploring the literary influences and traditions which bear upon his work.[4] Thus, in offering a preliminary exploration of the

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attendant moral and aesthetic assumptions which informed the creation of his plays and their presentation to their audience, Part II of this study also aims to show how Corneille's work assumed and exploited habits of mind and intellectual structures specific to a period when there was no other generally current theory of art than the didactic theory of poetic imitation which ultimately derived from Aristotle. This view of poetry as a means to knowledge was not unaffected by the changing political circumstances of Corneille's long lifetime: indeed it came to be much modified by influential theorists whose establishment and political allegiances were of a very different kind to Corneille's, and whose conclusions on the obligations of the poet and on the nature and ends of poetry were correspondingly different, for all that each claimed to respect the spirit of the *Poetics*. In consequence, an awareness of the tensions which existed between provincial *officier* traditions and the interventionism of centralizing ministerial rule can give valuable relief to Corneille's theoretical originality, since prescriptive theorists close to the centres of power undoubtedly influenced him by their differences about what priorities governed literary judgements.

By noting such differences of theory and practice, I hope to show how Corneille's serious drama, so closely bound up with the intellectual inheritance and political evolution of his age, was particularly liable to misunderstanding once times changed and its supporting poetics fell into discredit or neglect. Since this happened even before Corneille's death, it is not surprising that twentieth-century readers are even less familiar with fundamental aspects of the theory within which he worked. Even at the most commonly received level, Corneille's poetics and their accompanying philosophy and moral psychology are at some remove from the literary sensibility and critical expectations of modern audiences and readers. The result has sometimes been perplexity and impatience or, worse, incautious invocations of 'realism' or 'anti-didacticism' which lead us yet further away from Corneille's explicit assertions on his art. In seeking, however tentatively, to re-establish the particular view which Corneille entertained of the artist's imitative relationship to 'reality' and – through his plays – to his audiences, we surely stand a better chance of appreciating the specific character and interest of his work. The twentieth-century mind, more attentive to the literal than to the figurative, and working within the pervasive assumptions of modern psychological terminology, all too easily falls into a

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language which, because foreign to seventeenth-century habits of thought, may not offer the most sympathetic means by which to describe Corneille's achievement, or define the relationship he envisaged between dramatic performance and spectator.

Since my principal concern is to isolate those elements of Corneille's poetics which are most distinctive in telling us about his understanding of his art, little time is spent on aspects of his theory where he is largely in accord with contemporary practice and which have been amply treated elsewhere. On the other hand, my discussion of Corneille's position under Louis XIII must necessarily include some consideration of the much later *Discours* of 1660. This is because, despite the special problems posed by their polemic context and by the fact that they are an author's retrospective reading of his own work, the *Discours* maintain an astonishing continuity with earlier major expressions of principle and offer insights into Corneille's earliest practice which are too valuable to leave aside. Furthermore, Corneille's later explanation and defence of his work defines what he understands by tragedy, an issue which he did not directly address in the period 1629 to 1643 but which is central to critical assessment of his plays.

Since it is intended that this preliminary study of Corneille's poetics should serve in some degree to control subsequent critical discussion of the plays themselves, I shall be more concerned with those elements of his theory which bear most heavily upon the moral and political significance of historical drama. For instance, it is of exemplary importance that Corneille so emphasizes the importance of the dramatic action as a whole and is so attentive to the fortunes of individual roles in an extended political conflict. Of similar interest is his enduring preoccupation with immediacy of meaning in the drama, since this throws into special relief the retrospective political significance of his *dénouements* which 'place' previous elements of the unfolding action and serve to order and weigh those elements, whether they be actions or earlier expressions of sentiment or principle. Only with the completion of the hero's destiny can audience or critic come to final judgement on the quality of individual motivation and choice as they had earlier been illustrated by various *dramatis personae* in the course of the action. Thus, when Corneille suggests that his plays pleased their audiences because they made immediate moral sense, he offers a salutary reminder to the critic that the leisurely interpretative pleasures of the expert scholar

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in his study are at some remove from the ways in which his plays' performance stimulated an audience to political reflexion.

If we are to recapture something of this effect with which Corneille's political plays first unfolded in performance, we need not only to respect the aesthetic assumptions which governed their creation and reception but also to situate their illustration of conflicts of values within the ideological controversies and institutional changes of the times when they were written. This is not to confine Corneille's drama to a dusty corner of literary history by evoking the preoccupations and prejudices of times none too close to us, for the plays, like Corneille's own theoretical works, make amply clear that it was the enduring necessities of our political condition which he sought to elucidate. Thus a primary aim of my discussion of Corneille's political drama in Part III is to explore the enduring appeal of those plays by setting them in relationship to the common assumptions of the seventeenth-century audience for which they were written. Others have amply established Corneille's affinity with the learned humanistic culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but that culture extended, albeit in dilute form, to the far wider social spectrum of his first audiences. If we hold to the fact that Corneille's plays were enjoyed by many more than a cultured few, and remember that analogy was central to the intellectual habits of seventeenth-century France, then an interesting critical field emerges. As long as the obvious risk of confusing analogy with identity is borne in mind, a re-examination of Corneille's plays in the light of the minor moral and political writers of the period can serve to re-establish the link between the text and the moral and political convictions which governed the judgement of the reflective, if less expertly learned, spectators who formed the bulk of Corneille's seventeenth-century theatre public.

While Plato, Aristotle, St Thomas Aquinas, or Machiavelli were certainly familiar names to many of those spectators, their actual teaching was more likely to be known to them through the many popular, but minor, writers of the period who peddled moral commonplaces nicely adjusted to the understanding of a larger public. In fact Corneille's first audiences were likely to be far more familiar with the truisms contained in works by these largely forgotten contemporary moralists and political theorists than through direct acquaintance with the thought of the intellectual fathers of humanistic culture, or indeed with the major originals of

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contemporary French literature. For this reason such authors figure little in this attempt to pick up the calculated resonances of Corneille's 'peinture parlante' as it addressed itself to the collective 'mind' of its seventeenth-century audience. Indeed it is the very lack of originality of minor seventeenth-century moralists and political theorists, who rehearsed common belief rather than broke new ground, which links us to Corneille's first spectators and tells us something of the ways in which his plays challenged or appealed to the emotions and understanding of that intended audience. In discussing the significance of his plays, then, it is not my intention to extend yet further the literary biography of the dramatist himself, much less to treat the plays as a pre-text to the demonstration of a single preoccupation governing their overall development. This attempt to recapture something of the moral and political resonances of the serious drama which Corneille wrote under Louis XIII may reveal certain ideological sympathies and recurrent preoccupations, but these should emerge as no more and no less than the characteristic intellectual coherence to be expected of an uncommonly thoughtful and gifted dramatist's attempt to penetrate the significance of his times and set it before his public.

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PART I

'Une muse de province'

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'*Une muse de province*'

A DRAMATIST IN EVENTFUL TIMES

> La première fois que je le vis, je le pris pour un marchand de Rouen: Son extérieur n'avait rien qui parlât pour son esprit ... Il n'a jamais parlé bien correctement la langue française: peut-être se ne mettait-il pas en peine de cette exactitude; mais peut-être aussi n'avait-il pas assez de force pour s'y soumettre.

> Corneille était assez grand, et assez plein, l'air fort simple et fort commun, toujours négligé et peu curieux de son extérieur ... Il parlait peu, même sur la matière qu'il entendait parfaitement. Il n'ornait pas ce qu'il disait: et pour trouver le grand Corneille il le fallait lire ... Il avait l'humeur brusque, et quelquefois rude en apparence: au fond il était très aisé à vivre, bon mari, bon parent tendre et plein d'amitié ... Il n'aimait point la Cour, il y apportait un visage presque inconnu, un grand nom qui ne s'attirait que des louanges et un mérite qui n'était point de ce pays-là.[1]

These descriptions of Corneille in old age, with his undistinguished appearance and Norman accent, show a man quite content with his provincial origins and who had no interest in acquiring 'le bel air de la cour'. All who met Corneille in later life remark on his lack of the social graces which had come to be expected in the brilliant world of Paris and the Court during the last forty years of the century. All suggest that the famous dramatist remained in many respects a provincial for all his life, and all show a striking lack of interest in his Normanness as they separate his incorrigibly provincial accent and unpolished appearance from the distinction of his plays. This metropolitan distaste for Corneille's obstinate provincialism is already apparent in Chapelain's letters to Balzac in the early days of the young Rouennais lawyer-poet's rising fortunes. Having com-

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plained of Corneille's 'bourru' manners in the 1630s, in 1640 Chapelain referred to his vulgar interest in the profits his pen could earn him. *Horace* would only be published after a profitable run on the stage and Balzac would have to wait for the pleasure of reading it: 'telles sont les conventions des poètes mercenaires et tel le destin des pièces vénales'. Six months on, when Balzac had still not got his copy, Chapelain returned to Corneille's provincial concern for his money:

> Pour les *Horaces* de Corneille, on ne vous en saurait servir parce que le poète est à Rouen, et que le poème est de ces marchandises qui sont à vendre et non à donner.[2]

For his part, Corneille was well aware of his differences with the experts on the merit of his play, and deliberately marked out his chosen distance from the capital when he dedicated *Horace* to the Cardinal as the work of 'une muse de province'.[3]

The tenacity with which Corneille held to his roots provoked open scorn and mistrust in his literary adversaries. To D'Aubignac, who had been much more closely linked to Cardinal Richelieu's côterie than Corneille and whose view of the proper pursuit of literature made the drama symbiotic with the cultivation of central power and patronage, Corneille's enjoyment of the literary life of a provincial capital was almost incomprehensible.[4] But Corneille knew his real worth, and when he finally removed to the capital in 1662, he was too old and too confident of that worth to be convinced of the necessity of acquiring new social graces. His pen spoke better for him than ever could his tongue with an accent which he would not reform simply to please the ears of Paris society. This defensive pride seems to have been a major feature of Corneille's character, constantly showing itself in an obstinate independence which strained relations even with the best-intentioned of his contemporaries. Chapelain perhaps hit on the truth in 1662 when, reporting on the literary talents of the day, he observed that Corneille had prodigious poetic talents as well as 'de la doctrine et du sens', but added that he entirely lacked other qualities essential to success in the world of 'les grandes affaires': 'Hors du théâtre on ne sait s'il réussirait en prose ou en vers, agissant de son chef, car il a peu d'expérience du monde et ne voit guère rien hors de son métier.'[5] Corneille's failure to adapt to Paris manners, his flagging conversation and apparently narrow interests seem to reflect a social unease which stemmed from being appreciated only for that part of

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himself which complemented a world with which, in other respects, he had less in common. As Fontenelle implies, Corneille's qualities were too deeply rooted in another provincial world to be much appreciated in 'ce pays-là'.

Present-day readers, less convinced that the centres of power alone express the proper order of things, may well suspect that the repeated contrast of poet and man tells us more about the exclusive viewpoint of the capital than about the author of *Le Cid* and *Horace*. What is missing in contemporary references to the poet's worries about his profits or to his carelessness about his accent or appearance is an awareness of how important Corneille's Norman roots were to him. These pundits simply did not consider that an interest in money was characteristic of life in a province where times were a good deal harder than in Paris, or that Corneille's concern for the profitability of his plays might stem from a healthy respect for the pleasures of an audience rather broader then an élite group of literary experts. For our part, we should be careful not to adopt the same intellectual centrism which so discounts aspects of Corneille's character and preoccupations which may seem to have little to do with a 'great French dramatist'. Notoriously miserly and unkempt himself, Chapelain was nonetheless General Secretary of the Académie Française and Corneille's provincial habits were easy to misinterpret from the relative comfort of the capital.[6] And yet, had Chapelain given a little thought to the way Corneille was marked by his Norman background, even he might have been struck by the irony that the man whose decisions most cruelly affected Corneille's province was also his patron in Paris. If we are to understand the paradox of that position, and its implications to the drama which transformed plain Pierre Corneille into 'le grand Corneille', we need to recall the Norman context and eventful times in which the poet began his long career.

Of Corneille's thirty-two complete plays, no less than twenty-six were written during the first fifty-six years of a life firmly rooted in Normandy. Corneille had tried his hand as a poet in his student days, but his true career began with the attachment to the local Palais de Justice and the purchase of a double *office* in the Rouen Parlement in 1628. Twenty-one of his plays were composed while he fulfilled his obligations as 'Avocat du Roi à l'Amirauté de France, et des Eaux et Forêts à la Table de Marbre'. As such, Corneille represented the third generation of his family to belong to the

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