Acknowledgments

THE IDEA THAT A SIGNIFICANT LINK MIGHT EXIST BETWEEN Torquato Tasso and Pierre Corneille came to me unexpectedly in the fall of 1978 as I was reading Mario Praz’s book On Neoclassicism. A sentence-long quotation from the Discorsi del poema eroico jumped out at me: “Broken lines, entering one into the other . . . make the language magnificent and sublime.” That this fine point in the theory of heroic style was not original with Tasso made no difference; I connected it immediately in my own mind with a number of audacious run-on lines in Corneille’s fourth Roman play, La Mort de Pompée, lines that had long struck me as anomalous both in the playwright’s own practice and in that of the French classicists in general. Thanks to being on leave at the time, I was free to follow up on the hunch and, accordingly, set about making a cursory first acquaintance with the great Italian poet and critic. In the end, the question of run-on lines would drop out of the picture entirely; in the process of reading the Discorsi, however, I proved to have stumbled on a text that would shed new light not only on La Mort de Pompée but, eventually and in conjunction with other texts of a theoretical or poetical nature, on several other of the playwright’s best known works as well. The intuition, if that is what it was, that I experienced in happening on the sentence from Tasso was not quite like the “click” that Leo Spitzer spoke of in his famous essay on linguistics and literary history. It enabled me, nevertheless, to break into the hermeneutic circle—with what results it is now up to others to say.

Since 1978, I have incurred other debts both to individuals and to institutions. Among Corneille scholars, those whose works lay closest to my own line of inquiry were Marc Fumaroli and Marie-Odile Sweetser, both of whom at various times and in different ways lent encouragement. To Professor Sweetser I am grateful in particular for suggestions helping me, at an important juncture, to broaden the original focus of my study.

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Parts of my argument concerning Tasso’s influence on Corneille have appeared elsewhere, most recently in two papers read in France and later published: one in connection with a symposium held in the Spring of 1983 on “Le Mécénat en France avant Colbert” (“La Théodore de Corneille ou le statut social de l’écrivain”); the other in the context of the celebration in the fall of 1984 of the tercentenary of Corneille’s death (“Corneille, émule du Tasse”). The subject matter of these papers has been entirely recast here, however. Chapter 5, on the other hand, incorporates virtually unchanged most of the text of an article published in 1982 in *PMLA* (“La Mort de Pompée: Roman History and Tasso’s Theory of Christian Epic”). I am indebted to the editors of *PMLA* for permission to republish that material here.