THE 1653 INVENTORY OF ART OBJECTS AND FINE FURNITURE belonging to Cardinal Mazarin contains the description of some twenty-two cabinets. One of these is said to have been decorated with "dix tableaux de mignature" depicting Apollo and the nine Muses and with "les portraits de deux poètes anciens, et deux modernes" (d'Aumale, p. 252). In all probability this is the same cabinet as the one to which Charles Perrault referred at the end of the century in a biographical article on Corneille (in *Les Hommes illustres qui ont paru en France pendant ce siècle*):

Tout Paris a vu un cabinet de pierres de rapport fait à Florence, et dont on avait fait présent au cardinal Mazarin, où, entre les divers ornements dont il est enrichi, on avait mis aux quatre coins les médailles ou les portraits des quatre plus grands poètes qui aient jamais paru dans le monde, savoir Homère, Virgile, Le Tasse et Corneille. (Mongrédienn, p. 356)

The iconographical message of this cabinet is not hard to read up to a point. The cabinet very clearly not only celebrates the accomplishments of Corneille, it proposes a view of the history of poetry itself. This history is one of the transfer of poetic hegemony, as represented in each case by a single preeminent poet, from Greece, to Rome, to Italy, and finally to France. Corneille and French literature in general are seen as both inheriting a rich legacy from the past and reaffirming the highest sanctions of poetry for the present. The history of poetry is seen also to entail transference from the ancient world to the modern era, each world being represented by a pair of poets. This arrangement acknowledges the success of Renaissance efforts to reestablish a literary tradition rooted in antiquity. Because of its perfect symmetry, the decoration on the cabinet may also imply closure and retrospection, as if a divine equation had been completed and history had arrived at its full term.

If this much is clear, the rest is not. And what is most problematic of all is Corneille's relationship to the other three poets. Vergil won renown in large part by emulating Homer, and
Tasso in turn by emulating Vergil. Does the cabinet imply that Corneille has extended the line by emulation of Tasso? And Tasso’s modernity rested above all on the fact that he had Christianized the Vergilian epic. Are we to assume by extrapolation that Corneille is a “modern” in the same sense as Tasso, that his plays somehow embody a decorum or ethic opposed to an earlier decorum or ethic? Finally, there is the question why Corneille, a playwright, is compared to three epic poets. Is this anomaly accidental and therefore of little interest, or does it perhaps point to something that for the time being escapes understanding?

The core of the argument I develop in this study is that Corneille did in fact set out to emulate Tasso (and secondarily Vergil also), although he never acknowledges the fact and indeed never even mentions the Italian poet’s name. I intend to show, moreover, that he emulated Tasso in such a way as to enable us to read a number of his most important works (not restricted just to *Polyeucte* and *Théodore*) as “modern” in the Tassoan sense and, moreover, that he had a very conscious purpose in crossing a generic frontier in order to join forces with the epic tradition in poetry.

This thesis is new, but it draws on previous scholarship in three well-established fields. Two of these are Franco-Italian literary and cultural relations in the decades leading up to the Quarrel of the *Cid* and the Christian or providential dimensions of Corneille’s theater. The scholars to whom I am indebted in these areas include Marc Fumaroli, Bernard Weinberg, Chandler B. Beall, and Joyce G. Simpson, on the one hand; Marie-Odile Sweetser, Jacques Maurens, André Stegmann, and Germain Poirier on the other. What I add to their work lies in the nature of specifying Italian influence as it exerts itself on Corneille and linking the playwright’s “modernism” with a particular Italian source, Tasso.

Corneille’s emulation of Tasso begins in the Quarrel of the *Cid* and is reflected above all in the tragedies he wrote from *Horace* to *Héraclius*. I pay special attention to four of these plays—*Polyeucte*, *La Mort de Pompée*, *Théodore*, and *Héraclius*—because they mark the most important stages of the development of that emulation; but I try to integrate the intervening plays into the argument as well. And I conclude with a chapter
designed to confirm the thesis of emulation by examining it somewhat obliquely from two complementary angles: from the point of view of images incorporated into certain of the plays from the Quarrel of the Cid, and from the point of view of the "Discours de la tragédie" of 1660.

The third area of scholarship on which I rely consists of studies that stress the interrelationship of the plays themselves and the dialectics of Corneille's whole career as a playwright. Here, I think particularly of Marie-Odile Sweetser's La Dramaturgie de Corneille and Serge Doubrovsky's Corneille et la dialectique du héros, very different works, but both quite sensitive to how much inspiration Corneille draws from himself and how often he builds one play on the accumulated logic of earlier plays. My study is restricted to the production of a short but crucial period—the decade, 1637–47, during which the playwright earned his reputation as "le grand Corneille." Within this period I follow a dialectical development that is concerned both with emulation and with "modernism" and that, once understood, sheds light on the question of why Corneille, a playwright, is compared to three epic poets in the decorative motif of the Mazarin cabinet.

The Quarrel of the Cid, a major vehicle for the entry into France of Italian ideas on poetry (Searles, p. 388), is the initial stimulus for Corneille's emulation of Tasso. It is, therefore, with the Quarrel that I begin.
Comeille, Tasso
and Modern Poetics