CHAPTER I
Motives for Emulation:
The Quarrel of the Cid

IN THE DEDICATORY LETTER FOR LA SUIVANTE, CORNEILLE writes: “Je ne me suis jamais imaginé avoir mis rien au jour de parfait, je n’espère pas même y pouvoir jamais arriver; je fais néanmoins mon possible pour en approcher, et les plus beaux succès des autres ne produisent en moi qu’une vertueuse émulation, qui me fait redoubler mes efforts afin d’en avoir de pareils” (Oeuvres, 2:118). This statement is of interest for several reasons. For one thing, it seems to mark a change in Corneille’s attitude toward his colleagues and perhaps also toward his art. Written at the height of the Quarrel over the Cid, it is too tentative to constitute a real manifesto, but it clearly looks forward to something beyond the immediate context. The playwright had precipitated the Quarrel by the publication of the “Excuse à Ariste,” in which he had adopted a rather arrogantly independent posture. Now, a few months later, he reverses himself and, in a gesture of conciliatory good will toward rivals like Mairet and Scudéry, presents himself as belonging to a brotherhood of poets. The business of this society of playwrights, as Corneille sees it, is moreover very serious. It involves no less than the arduous pursuit of perfection, with each individual poet vying to do his share toward the realization of a single great and noble dream.

More than twenty years later, as he girded himself to resume a career long interrupted, the playwright was to speak again of emulation and the search for perfection. The occasion was the
poem he addressed to Foucquet, who had urged him to come out of retirement:

Choisis-moi seulement quelque nom dans l'histoire  
Pour qui tu veuilles place au temple de la Gloire,  
Quelque nom favori qu'il te plaise arracher  
A la nuit de la tombe, aux cendres du bûcher.  
Soit qu'il faille ternir ceux d'Enée et d'Achille  
Par un noble attentat sur Homère et Virgile,  
Soit qu'il faille obscurcir par un dernier effort  
Ceux que j'ai sur la scène affranchis de la mort:  
Tu me verras le même, et je te ferai dire,  
Si jamais pleinement ta grande âme m'inspire,  
Que dix lustres et plus n'ont pas tout emporté  
Cet assemblage heureux de force et de clarté,  
Ces prestiges secrets de l'aimable imposture  
Qu'à l'envi m'ont prête et l'art et la nature.  

(Oeuvres, 6:122–23, ll. 37–50)

As in the dedicatory letter for *La Suivante*, so here Corneille pictures himself engaged in a struggle to exceed in the future what others, including his own younger self, have done in the past. There is the same sense of high purpose as before, the same emphasis on competition, the same eagerness to undertake challenge. The playwright has become more sure of himself, however; and the rivals he invokes in Homer and Vergil are the most illustrious conceivable. This later text serves to confirm and to expand the implications of the earlier text. It suggests that the call to emulation announced at the time that *La Suivante* appeared stayed with Corneille for a long time, but that the parameters of emulation changed, as the playwright looked beyond the Paris of his closest rivals to the universal history of poetry and of poets.

The crux of the argument that I intend to develop in what follows is that Corneille came to emulate above all Torquato Tasso, and that the plays that earned the French playwright his reputation as "le grand Corneille" were part of a long, sustained effort to duplicate, not the particular modes, but the overall sense of the Italian epic poet's earlier achievement. Such a thesis is no doubt surprising, in view of the fact that Corneille nowhere mentions Tasso or any of his works. I am convinced, nevertheless, that it was the example of Tasso that inspired Corneille to
look beyond the rivalry with Mairet and Scudéry to consider poetry as something belonging to the world in general and to history. This hypothesis will have to be tested in the plays themselves, beginning with *Horace*. First, however, we need to know in what context and for what particular reasons Corneille could have been attracted to Tasso; and for that we must turn to the Quarrel of the *Cid*.

Tasso's fame, secure in France during his lifetime, stood even higher perhaps in the decade 1630–40, with which we are here concerned. Universally hailed as the greatest poet of the modern era, he was much admired also as a critic-theorist. His works were readily available, both in the Italian original and in French translations. The years preceding the Quarrel had seen the publication of French versions not only of the *Gerusalemme liberata* but also of the poet's two plays, *Aminta* and *Torrismondo*, as well as some of the *Dialoghi* and part of the *Discorsi*. *Torrismondo* had been one of the great successes of the 1635 season at the Marais. Corneille's theater. The translator, Vion d'Alibray, was a fellow Norman and perhaps a friend. The preface he wrote, when it came time to publish *Torrismon*, attests as well as anything else to the exceptionally high regard in which Tasso was then held. For d'Alibray not only praises Tasso himself, he quotes the praises of others: beginning with Paolo Beni, "[qui] a montré l'avantage que sa Hierusalem avoit sur l'Aenéide," going on to Du Bartas, for whom Tasso was "le premier en honneur, & le dernier en aage," and coming finally to Balzac, who is quoted as saying that "Virgile est cause que le Tasse n'est pas le premier, & le Tasse, que Virgile n'est pas le seul." A young poet bent on achieving the highest excellence in his art could not afford to overlook Tasso. Tasso was the standard by which others who came after were going to be judged.

One finds this idea of Tasso as master poet reflected in the fascinating correspondence of Philippe Fortin de la Hoguette concerning the *Cid*. Stationed at the fortress of Blaye at the time the play opened in Paris, La Hoguette had procured one of the first copies of the work through his Paris friend, Jacques Dupuy. He and his fellow officers were so enthralled by the *Cid* that they did more that read it: they acted it out. His enthusiasm survives receipt of the startling news a few weeks later that in Paris critics have begun to attack the play:
Pour moi je confesse de n'avoir jamais vu une plus vive image
des vrais sentiments de l'honneur et de l'amour, qui sont les
deux mobiles de toutes les plus grandes actions des hommes.
Ce n'en est pas l'image seulement, c'en est l'âme. Si je ne m'a-
buse, je suis impénitent, et trouve mieux mon compte d'errer
avec le peuple et le badaud que d'être des raffineurs. Tout y
est généreux jusques aux confidents, et merveilleux pour l'in-
telligence du théâtre. (Mongréduen, p. 64)

La Hoguette defends the *Cid* by comparing it, favorably, with
the most canonical poems he can think of. The *Cid,* he says, most
certainly has flaws ("de le voir égal partout, c'est lui désirer trop
d'embonpoint"), but the world's greatest poems would appear
flawed, too, if they were to be viewed in the same harsh light:
"De dire qu'il y a des défauts en l'élocution, si nous avions la
pureté des langues grecque, latine et italienne comme de la nô-
tre, et que nous voulussions égratigner sur Homère, Virgile et le
Tasse, je doute qu'on en fît un jugement plus favorable. . . ." La
Hoguette does not mean to consecrate the young playwright
prematurely; but he has discerned in him rare poetic qualities,
and he is not afraid to hail him as a future candidate for the most
exalted of ranks in the pantheon: "Ce n’est pas offenser les An-
ciens que de leur donner un concurrent. Honneur leur soit
rendu, et aux Modernes aussi qui seront un jour Anciens, s’ils le
méritent." The fact that the *Gerusalemme liberata* (like the *Ae-
neid* and the *Iliad*) is an epic poem whereas the *Cid* is a play
poses no problem for La Hoguette. It is enough for him, it would
seem, that both are cast in the heroic mold. If asked, he could no
doubt have added that Aristotle had treated dramatic and epic
poetry together in the *Poetics,* as indeed Tasso himself had also
done in the *Discorsi,* but he is obviously less interested in ex-
plaining than he is in affirming. And what he affirms, essentially,
is that Corneille could become in a sense the French Tasso, just
as Tasso had become the Italian Vergil, and Vergil, the Roman
Homer.

Later on in the Quarrel, a somewhat different kind of emula-
tion comes into view; and Tasso and Corneille are compared,
not as heroic poets, but rather as participants in important literary
controversies. The *doctes,* who were attacking the *Cid* on
Aristotelian grounds, had learned their Aristotle as much from
Cinquecento commentaries as from the *Poetics* itself. Indeed, an
American scholar from the beginning of this century was able to propose Italian "sources" for most of the major points made for or against Corneille in the pages of the *Sentiments de l'Academie française*. It was common knowledge, too, among French poetic theorists that the Cinquecento had been punctuated by four great literary quarrels and that through these quarrels ancient theory and modern practice had confronted one another in a continuing dialectic that produced important changes in both. The first of these great quarrels had concerned Dante and the *Commedia*; the next, *Canace* and dramatic poetry. The two most recent controversies, which for that reason were uppermost in French minds, had centered on the *Gerusalemme* of Tasso and its relation to Ariostos' *Orlando furioso* and on the *Pastor fido* of Guarini. Chapelain's library, we know, was well stocked with books and treatises not only on the *Poetics* but on every one of these Italian quarrels of the century before (Searles, pp. 364-65).

Chapelain and Scudéry both see Italian debates as part of the background of the debate raging in France, but they interpret the current situation and its implications for the future quite differently. Scudéry invokes the memory of both Tasso and Guarini in the course of his first letter to the Academy and of Tasso alone in a follow-up letter. He holds the *Cid* to be a false masterpiece, in contrast to the true masterpieces of the *Gerusalemme* and the *Pastor fido*. And he declares Corneille to be the exact opposite of Tasso in his reaction to critical attack. These two letters taken together show that, in Scudéry's mind, the Quarrel of the *Cid* could never be considered the equivalent of an Italian quarrel. It seemed to him instead a perfect travesty of the real thing and nothing more than that. Chapelain, writing later in the name of the Academy, is much more sanguine, however. He opens the *Sentiments* with an apology for criticism suggested by Guarini, or at least by the quarrel over the *Pastor fido* (Searles, p. 366). This apology argues for the usefulness of literary controversy as a means of discovering new truth about poetry. Chapelain no doubt is interested in countering the idea that the Quarrel over the *Cid* has been the persecution of the *Cid*. His faith in criticism and in progress toward perfect understanding of poetry seems genuine, however. In any event, he transforms the literary quarrel into something quite heroic, the equivalent in fact of the kind
of formal *duellum* found in *Horace*. No matter how violent the encounter, it will serve the cause of truth, in Chapelain's opinion, provided only that all participants maintain the proper decorum and enter the fray not for personal advantage or out of animosity toward others, but solely in hope of aiding the triumph of truth. Conducted according to such rules, the literary quarrel becomes “une espece de guerre qui est avantageuse pour tous, lorsqu'elle se fait civilement et que les armes empoisonnees y sont defendues,” or “une course, ou celuy qui emporte le prix semble ne l'avoir poursuivy que pour en faire un present à son rival.” The rivalry among participants may be intense, but it is never personal. It produces only “des contestations honnestes” and “[une] heureuse violence [par laquelle] on a tire la Verite du fond des abysmes” (Gasté, pp. 356–57).

Quarrels of this ideal nature have been fought, says Chapelain, throughout history. He calls attention particularly to the beneficial results of the last two Italian quarrels:

. . . Parmy les Modernes il s'en est esmeu de tres-favorables pour les Lettres, et . . . la Poésie seroit aujourd'huy bien moins parfaite qu'elle n'est, sans les contestations qui se sont formées sur les ouvrages des plus celebres Autheurs des dernier Temps. En effet nous en avons la principale obligation aux agreables differens qu'ont produit la Hierusalem et le Pastor Fido, c'est à dire les Chef-d'oeuvres des deux plus grands Poëtes de de-là les Monts; apres lesquels peu de gens auroient bonne grace de murmurer contre la Censure, et de s'offenser d'avoir une aventure pareille à la leur. (Gasté, p. 357)

These last remarks are clearly aimed at Corneille, who had protested the intervention of the Academy. It is significant, however, that Chapelain, far from sharing Scudéry’s estimation of the Quarrel as only a poor travesty of the real thing, now holds out hope that the controversy over the *Cid* in time will prove just as beneficial to the advancement of poetry as the heroic encounters in Italy at the end of the Cinquecento. Imbued himself with a high sense of emulation, Chapelain would like nothing better than to think that he had helped raise the Quarrel of the *Cid* to the level of the quarrels over the *Gerusalemme* and the *Pastor fido*. He and the Academy had done their part, he thought; it remained to be seen whether Corneille would follow suit. From a different point of view and for different reasons, then, Chape-
lain arrived at the same conclusion as La Hoguette: Corneille was a good candidate for greatness, a worthy "concurrent" for the highest of poetic prizes.

Corneille was perceived, then, to have at least two things in common with Tasso, the acknowledged prince of modern poets: a rare gift for heroic poetry and the honor of having been at the center of a momentous literary dispute. The closing pages of the *Sentiments* map out a plan of artistic action that, I think, serves to bring Corneille into relationship with Tasso in yet a third way. These pages deal almost exclusively with heroic decorum and the choice of a proper subject for poetry. One must ask why it is that Chapelain ignores completely the question of verisimilitude, which had preoccupied him often in the past and which had figured prominently throughout the Quarrel and, therefore, in the main body of the *Sentiments*. The answer, I think, lies in the remarks he makes about audience reaction to the *Cid*: they were so enthralled by the story, he says, that they lost all power to discriminate the good in the play from the bad. Ironically, this suspension of critical faculties was exactly what Chapelain himself had said, in the famous "Lettre sur les vingt-quatre heures," was the aim of illusionist art and, specifically, of techniques of verisimilitude in the theater. The idea was, he said, to induce such a powerful illusion of reality on stage that the spectators would cease to think of the action as unreal and so be receptive to experiencing the full emotional effect of the play. It is quite likely, I think, that if not the Quarrel, at least the *Cid* itself opened Chapelain's eyes to a new truth about verisimilitude: namely, that it was a kind of poetic rhetoric and, like rhetoric, was dangerous when not coupled securely to high ethical aims. If the critic puts the whole of his emphasis on decorum at the end of the *Sentiments*, it can only mean, in any event, that in Chapelain's opinion Corneille has learned the lesson of theatrical illusion well enough already but needs advice, perhaps urgently, on the matter of *bienséances*.

Chapelain is intent, above all, on stressing the poet's personal responsibility in the selection and treatment of a subject. The authority of history and the authority of earlier poets who may have treated the same subject not only do not bind a poet, the poet is obligated, instead, to honor the highest authority (aesthetic or moral, but particularly moral) that happens to exist
at the moment be writes. For just as Chapelain had seen the great literary quarrels as contributing to the progressive discovery of truth about poetry, so here he conceives of an evolution in ethical (and, occasionally, also aesthetic) perception, a succession of authorities or jurisdictions or dispensations that, over time, bring mankind, ideally, ever closer to perfection. In this constantly shifting aesthetico-ethical landscape, what once appeared right, what once was authorized, may in time be seen as faulty and lacking in essential sanction. Though the poet necessarily draws from the past, he has the responsibility, qua poet, to adjust the past, if necessary, to the present:

. . . Les fautes mesmes des Anciens qui semblent devoir estre respectees pour leur vieillesse, ou si on l'ose dire, pour leur immortalite, ne peuvent pas defendre les [mesmes fautes reprises par des Modernes]. Il est vray que celles la ne sont presque considerees qu'avec reverence, d'autant que les unes estant faittes devant les regles, sont nees libres et hors de leur jurisdiction, et que les autres par une longue duree ont comme acquis une prescription legitime. Mais cette faveur qui a peine met a couvert ces grands Hommes, ne passe point jusques a leurs successeurs. Ceux qui viennent apres eux heritent bien de leurs richesses, mais non pas de leurs privileges, et les vices d'Euripide ou de Seneque ne scauroient faire approuver ceux de Guillen de Castro. (Gaste, p. 415)

The basic fault in the Cid, according to Chapelain, lay in the denouement: that is, in the marriage of Rodrigue and Chimène. It makes no difference to him that history, first, and Guillen de Castro, second, had recorded that event before Corneille put it into his own play. He holds Corneille responsible for everything in the Cid, whatever its source may be. The historian, he says, is bound to respect factual truth; the poet must often violate it, because his first allegiance is never to truth, but always to "la bienséance": "Mais comme cette Verite [de l'historien] a peu de credit dans l'Art des beaux mensonges, nous pensons qu'a son tour elle [la Vérité] y doit ceder a la bien-seance, qu'estre inventeur et imitateur n'est icy qu'une mesme chose, et que le Poète François qui nous a donné le Cid, est coupable de toutes les fautes qu'il n'y a pas corrigees" (Gaste, p. 416).

The conception of poetry that emerges from the opening
and closing sections of the *Sentiments* is all of one piece: in the march toward perfection, the critic and the poet join forces to overcome error. Literary quarrels are beneficial because they root out error and reveal more truth; the poet, for his part, must invent even as he imitates and correct whatever faults he is able to discern in the material he has chosen to use. The corollary to the idea that the poet owes primary allegiance to decorum is, therefore, that he must either choose a highly decorous subject to begin with or else be prepared to correct or rectify the subject in order to bring it into conformity with the current highest perception of decorum.

The parameters of this program of literary rectification can be understood more fully if we look at what Chapelain has to say about the denouement in the main body of the *Sentiments*. For one thing, he gives several examples of how the faulty denouement could have been corrected. More important for our purposes here, he is at pains to justify the poet's right to introduce changes, because Scudéry in the *Observations* had specifically denied the poet any licence to tamper with historical fact (Gasté, pp. 76–77; 368). Chapelain's argument does not differ from what he says in the conclusion: a poet is not a historian, but if he changes his material, he must change it for the better, morally speaking. What is interesting is the authorities he cites in connection with this argument and the way he uses them. The authorities are Vergil above all, but also Tasso. Both poets are cited as having introduced significant changes in chronology: Vergil, in order to make Aeneas and Dido contemporaries; Tasso, in order to allow Godefroy de Bouillon and Rinaldo to fight in the same Crusade (Gasté, pp. 368–71). Vergil, he says, also made another kind of change: he took the historical Dido, who was chaste, and made her into "une femme impudique." Some critics, Chapelain adds, have criticized Vergil for his treatment of Dido; he himself does not. He refrains from passing judgment partly out of respect for Vergil, but mainly because his argument does not require that he do so. The point he wants to make in juxtaposing Dido and Chimène is that in the case of the *Cid* Corneille easily could have altered the historical facts for the better, and no one would have dreamed of holding it against him:
[Les critiques de Virgile] ne l'ont pas accusé proprement d'avoir péché contre l'Art en changeant la vérité, mais contre les bonnes moeurs en diffamant une personne, qui avait mieux aimé mourir que de vivre diffamée. Il en fut arrivé tout au contraire dans le changement qu'on eust peu faire au sujet du Cid puis qu'on eust corrigé les mauvaises moeurs qui se trouvent dans l'histoire, et qu'on les eust rendues bonnes par la Poésie pour l'utilité du Public. (Gasté, p. 369)

Chapelain does not say so, but one may assume he would think also that, if Corneille or any other modern poet were to treat the story of Dido and Aeneas, he would have to rectify the story and make it conform to the body of truths available to the modern, Christian artist. Vergil, a pagan, was not bound by an authority that came into the world only after his death. Ignorance excuses, but it does not justify; and Corneille could not duplicate Vergil's "fault" with impunity. Seeing it as a fault, he would have to correct it.

If Chapelain cites two epic poets in this crucial section of the Sentiments, very probably it is because the theory of rectification, if one may call it that, had been worked out in relation to the epic, not in relation to tragedy. Most likely of all, he was drawing on his knowledge of the theory of the Christian epic as Tasso himself had outlined it in books 2 and 3 of the Discorsi del poema eroico. Tasso's fame rested on the fact that he had Christianized the ancient epic, thus, in effect, bringing it to its final perfection. The Italian poet's theory supported his practice. He saw the traditional forms and genres inherited from antiquity as retaining their original validity because they corresponded to unchanging aspects of the human psyche. The ethical and religious systems of the Ancients, on the other hand, had lost their authority altogether with the divine revelation of the Christian truths. His advice to would-be epic poets, accordingly, was to adhere to the traditional form of the epic but to infuse it with the new true Christian spirit. The epic hero henceforth had to be Christian, he thought; and he was to be motivated above all by love instead of by wrath. The terms fault, error, correction, and rectification that loom so important in Chapelain's thought are new and reflect a heightened sense of ideological and psychological strain characteristic of the Counter Reformation in France. Except for the fact that Tasso had spoken only about the
epic, the message remained basically the same, however: the modern poet could accept the authority of the Ancients in matters of aesthetics, but he could not follow their example in regard to ethics or religion. Chapelain does not refer to Tasso in the last pages of the Sentiments as he did in the introduction. There can be little doubt that he is thinking of him, however, and that he is proposing the Italian poet to Corneille not only as an illustrious forebear in the history of literary quarrels but as a model to follow in perfecting heroic decorum in his theater.

Chapelain joins La Hogue and Scudéry, then, in evoking the name and the prestige of Tasso in connection with Corneille. La Hogue did so in order to praise the young French playwright; Scudéry, to damn him; Chapelain, to goad him to a higher level of poetic consciousness. All three held up the author of the Gerusalemme as an ideal object of emulation, Scudéry doing so, however, only to deny to Corneille the possibility of attainment. Corneille probably never saw La Hogue’s laudatory letters, and he could not act on Chapelain’s advice until it came time to write Horace. He seems to have taken up Scudéry’s challenge, however, even before the end of the Quarrel, and in such a way as to prefigure, as it were, something of the course he would take after the Quarrel.

Let us go back to the two letters that Scudéry wrote to the Academy. Scudéry had two reasons for grievance as regards Corneille. First, it seemed to him that the success of the Cid was unwarranted. He had tried to deal with that situation by writing and publishing the Observations, which he expected would lead Corneille into a theoretical debate on the play. Corneille had refused to debate, however; not only that, in a short “Lettre apologitique,” he had dismissed the Observations as irrelevant (“Si un volume d’Observations ne suffit faites-en encore cinquante”) and had declared in closing that public approbation was all the apology the play needed or would ever get. Scudéry dealt with this second blow by turning to the Academy and asking that it reply to the Observations, inasmuch as Corneille himself did not want to. Scudéry’s resentment at the refusal of Corneille to debate him is expressed most forcefully in his second letter to the Academy, which he begins with a contrast between Tasso’s Apologia della Gerusalemme liberata, a reply to the Accademia della Crusca, and Corneille’s “Lettre apologitique du sieur Corneille,
contenant sa réponse aux Observations faites par le Sieur Scudéri sur le Cid.” He starts with a quotation in Italian from the opening paragraph of the *Apologia*: “Io non mi dolgo, che habbiano cercato d’impedirmi questo onore, che m’era fatto d’al vulgo, perché di nissuna cosa regioneuole mi debbo dolere: più tosto douei lamentarmi di coloro, che inalzandomi doue non merito di salire, non hanno riguardo al precipitio” (Gaste, p. 219). This is followed immediately by a formal juxtaposing of the behavior of Tasso and that of Corneille in a like situation:

> Ce sont [là] les modestes paroles, par où le Tasse, le plus grand homme de son siècle, a commencé l’Apologie du plus beau de ses Ouvrages, contre la plus aigre, et la plus injuste Censure, qu’on fera peut-être jamais: Monsieur Corneille, tesmoigne bien en ses Responses, qu’il est aussi loing de la moderation, que du merite de cet excellent Autheur, puis qu’au lieu de se donner l’humilité d’un Accusé, il occupe la place des Juges et se loge luy-mesme à ce premier lieu, où personne n’oseroit seulement dire qu’il pretend.

Corneille was to make only two more substantial public statements during the course of the Quarrel: the “Advertissement au Besançonnois Mairet” and the dedicatory letter for *La Suivante*. In the “Advertissement” he adopted much the same truculent, condescending tone he had used in the earlier reply to Scudery, but he did not sign his name to the document. The dedicatory letter, for its part, reflects an entirely new attitude on the part of the playwright. Before, he had treated Scudery and Mairet as inferiors and had challenged them sarcastically to write as good a play as the *Cid* if they could. Now, as we saw at the beginning of the chapter, he speaks of wanting to engage these same rivals in a friendly competition from which he himself may hope to benefit: “Je ne me suis jamais imaginé avoir mis rien au jour de parfait, je n’espère pas même y pouvoir jamais arriver; je fais néanmoins mon possible pour en approcher, et les plus beaux succès des autres ne produisent en moi qu’une vertueuse émulation, qui me fait redoubler mes efforts afin d’en avoir de pareils” (*Oeuvres*, 2:118). Moreover, although he still affirms the idea that a playwright must first of all please his audience (“puisqu’en faisions des poèmes pour être représentés, notre premier but doit être de plaire à la cour et au peuple”), he is now ready to recognize another requirement as also legitimate: “Il
faut, s’il se peut, y ajouter les règles, afin de ne déplaire pas aux savants, et recevoir un applaudissement universel. . . . ” These two statements mark a clear reversal in Corneille’s public posture; and it may very well be that this reversal was prompted by Scudéry’s remarks in his second letter to the Academy.8

Corneille’s disclaimer concerning his ability to create anything perfect echoes the humility that Scudéry admired so much in the Apologia of Tasso. (Indeed, in the dedicatory letter of the Apologia, Tasso points out that, in the nature of things, poets will always fall short of perfection just as critics will often be quicker to blame than to praise.)9 Nor in the circumstances is Corneille’s desire to aim for universal approbation a sign of pride; on the contrary, it serves to recognize a point of view that the playwright had heretofore tended to ignore or to exclude. As a gesture of conciliatoriness and as a bid for consensus, the letter again reflects what Scudéry had held up as admirable in Tasso.10

The Quarrel of the Cid yields evidence, then, of a context in which it would make sense for Corneille to want to emulate Tasso, as well as evidence that he may actually have decided to do so in the dedication of La Suivante. It is interesting, moreover, to note that a degree of ambiguity and of secrecy already manifests itself at this early stage. Chapelain, we saw, cites Tasso at the beginning of the Sentiments, where he is talking about the glorious history of literary quarrels, but not at the end, when he is giving Corneille advice concerning the need to rethink the heroic decorum of his theater. The failure to mention the Italian poet at the end may be accidental and therefore of no great significance. It may point, however, to an unresolved tension in Chapelain’s thought. Tasso, whom he admires greatly and whose place in the history of the epic looms very important for Chapelain, dealt with specifically Christian themes and advised the would-be modern epic poet to do the same. Chapelain argues for the enhancement of heroic decorum in the theater, but he never links that enhancement with Christianity. One may suspect that he refrains from mentioning Tasso at the end of the Sentiments because he senses that Tasso’s authority for Christian subjects in heroic poetry cannot be extended from epic to tragedy, at least in France. The heightened decorum that he urges on Corneille is thus left somewhat ill defined and only implicitly Christian.
It is not hard to see reasons, on the other hand, why Corneille might have preferred not to mention Tasso in the dedication of *La Suivante*, even though, as I have suggested, he seems to be emulating him already. For one thing, to attribute his newfound moderation in debate to the example of Tasso would have been to credit Scudéry with that change also, inasmuch as Scudéry had brought up the exemplary nature of the *Apologia della Gerusalemme liberata* in the first place, in his second letter to the Academy. And though Corneille was striving to be conciliatory toward his opponents, there is no reason to think he would have wanted to go so far as to magnify the role of Scudéry in the Quarrel in the process. More generally, ordinary prudence could also have dictated discretion on the part of Corneille. Because of his remarks in the “Excuse à Ariste” his enemies already had accused him of inordinate pride. In the circumstances, if he had indicated an intention to emulate Tasso, who everyone agreed was the greatest of all modern poets, the playwright might well have exposed himself to ridicule and to charges of presumption that it would obviously be best to avoid.

Corneille and Chapelain both know that, like politics, art itself is often the art of the possible, or, to put it another way, that art can never be entirely divorced from the politics of art. In the matter that concerns us here, both men seem to recognize not only the desirability of some sort of emulation of Tasso but the need, for one reason or another, to be discreet about it at the same time. In any event, I hope to show in what follows that, from *Horace* to *Héraclius*, Corneille undertook in fact a secret emulation of Tasso, designed to accomplish for tragedy something of what the Italian poet was held to have achieved for the epic.