Conclusion

A NEW POETIC DISPENSATION BORN OF THE QUARREL OF
the Cid governs the next seven of Corneille's heroic plays. As a
vision of man and art, it retains the nobility of spirit that had
marked the Cid, but adds a broader historical perspective and a
much higher degree of literary self-consciousness. It implies a
sense of high-serious adventure gravely undertaken as a su­
preme test of the validity both of the world and of the self. Emu­
lation and rectification lie at the heart of the new vision. The
poet, like his heroes, dares to measure himself by the highest
standards there are, then aspires to become a standard of mea­
surement himself. The plays embody the central vision with
varying degrees of success. The vision itself remains in place at
least as long as it takes the playwright to explore it fully from all
angles.

The seven plays in question fall into two groups, separated
by the comedies Le Menteur and La Suite du Menteur. The
playwright's interests and modes of operation are substantially
different in the two groups but are clearly relatable dialectically.
The first group consists of the Roman plays: the trilogy and La
Mort de Pompeé. Corneille here borrows very heavily from the
epic tradition. The ancient texts from which he was working and
which he was intent on rectifying were the two best known Latin
epics: the Aeneid for the trilogy and the Pharsalia for Pompeé.
The De Monarchia of Dante, an epic poet, appears to have sug­
gested the Christian providential interpretation of Roman history
that infuses the trilogy; and it is the modern Christian epic, as
practiced by Tasso, that opens up a new, hopeful interlude in the
otherwise closed historical framework of Pompeé. In the second
group of plays, Corneille chooses three dramatic texts to rectify,
one from the ancient world (Electra in Rodogune) and two from
the Cinquecento (Tasso’s *Aminta* and *Torrismondo* respectively in *Théodore* and *Héraclius*). It is obvious that Corneille did not choose the subjects of these two groups of plays at random. The pattern of his choices clearly indicates that he wanted to exploit both types of heroic poetic texts, epic and dramatic, and wanted also to draw on the modern as well as the ancient literary legacy. Except perhaps for the *Pharsalia* and *Torrismondo*, the quality of the texts he chooses to correct is undeniable. He uses lesser texts along the way—the *Polietto* of Bartolommei, the *Teodora* of Rospigliosi, for example—but these are of secondary importance. They simply offer a means of transposing the much greater texts that the playwright is really working on.

Corneille had practiced rectification on a very limited scale before *Horace*: specifically in the little tragedy of act 5 of *L’Illu­sion comique*, which recasts some of the material of * Médée* in a more modern, more ethically acceptable form. He had also begun to think in terms of emulation in the dedicatory letter for *La Suivante*, but the poets he spoke of vying with and perhaps learning from were not the greatest poets of all time but his own French contemporaries. Corneille already knew a great deal about dramatic techniques and had the extraordinary dramatic imagination that was never to desert him; but before writing the trilogy, he had not yet placed himself, in his mind’s eye, on the world stage of poetry. From the way he transposes events and images from the Quarrel into certain of his later plays, it is clear that he experienced the Quarrel of the *Cid* as a real trauma. By dint of his own heroic resolve, however, he turned it into something glorious; and as a consequence he emerged from the controversy with a heightened sense of his own potential as a poet, a deeper understanding of the history of poetry, and a much nobler sense of purpose.

The Quarrel of the *Cid* spurred Corneille to measure himself henceforth only against the very greatest poets of all time. It brought him, in like fashion, to turn away from comedy and tragicomedy, and to turn toward tragedy, tragedy being the noblest of all the dramatic genres. Nor was he content to rectify great poetic texts that had come down to him from the past. Such was the extent of his daring that he undertook in addition to rectify the traditional concept of tragedy itself. According to the inherited view, tragedy concerned a flawed hero (neither all good, nor all
bad) who experienced a fall from prosperity to misfortune, exciting in the audience the emotions of pity and fear. The first change Corneille made was to replace the flawed hero with a perfect (a virtually perfect) hero, in *Polyeucte*. Then he discarded the traditional plot in favor of a dichotomous plot (good versus bad) together with a double reversal at the denouement, in *Pompeè*. (He continued to speak of pity and fear in connection with his new tragedies, but it is clear that they often excite awe—or admiration—also, as he himself finally admitted in the dedicatory letter for *Nicomède*.) The means by which Corneille effected this rectification are obvious: he found in the *Discorsi* of Tasso traditional contrastive definitions of the two genres, with stress on the perfection of the epic hero, and he conceived the idea of rectifying tragedy by making tragedy more like epic. There are no doubt other reasons why Corneille gravitated toward epic texts just after the Quarrel of the *Cid*. Tasso and Vergil had both figured in the argument of the Quarrel: Tasso as the greatest modern poet, whom Corneille might (Chapelain) or might not (Scudéry) be able to emulate; Vergil, as guarantor of the poet’s right to modify any literary or historical text he wants, provided only that (unlike Vergil) he make changes always in the direction of the ethically, better. Like Tasso, Corneille had seen a poem of his become the center of a major literary debate, involving not just individuals but an academy; like Vergil, he was criticized for having created an unworthy heroine. (The Vergilian Dido was unworthy of the real historical Dido; Corneille’s Chimène, true to the facts of history, was unworthy of modern audiences.) The overriding factor in Corneille’s preoccupation with epic at this point in his career, however, must have been the desire to refashion tragedy. Refashioning tragedy would be a major accomplishment, on the scale of Tasso’s own accomplishment in Christianizing the epic. He could lay claim to having done for tragedy what Tasso had done for the epic; and by this emulation he would have advanced the development of poetry as a whole, releasing tragedy from its second-class heroic status and bringing about the final perfection of heroic poetry in general. It was only after this new vision of tragedy was in place that the playwright began to correct dramatic texts.

The progression of the plays within the trilogy seems to recapitulate Tasso’s theory of the evolutionary succession of
great epic poem-types, from the archaic *Iliad* to the refined but still pagan *Aeneid* to the modern, Christian epic (like the *Gerusalemme*, which Tasso out of modesty does not mention). To the extent that the trilogy constitutes the sum of all previous epics (that is, all first-class heroic poetry) and at the same time transcends the limitations formerly imposed on tragedy (as second-class heroic poetry), it constitutes a real *summa eroica*. The Mazarin cabinet, with its portraits of Homer, Vergil, Tasso, and Corneille, celebrated the succession of great heroic poets across time and space. It did not, insofar as one can tell from descriptions, convey the whole of the dialectical relationship among these poets, however; it simply asserted succession without explaining by what modes succession had taken place. The trilogy, if the reading I have proposed is right, goes much farther: it shows that epic poetry has served to perfect tragedy, and that in turn this new tragedy serves to perfect heroic poetry as a whole.

It is one thing to forge a new concept of tragedy; it is another thing to live with and to use it. At the end of *Polyeucte*, Corneille had completed the perfecting of the tragic hero; at the end of *Pompee*, he had completed the plot structure of the new tragedy. In the “trilogie des monstres,” he takes the end of *Polyeucte* and the end of *Pompee* as a starting point. The new plot structure seems not to have given him any trouble, but the new hero did. A hero not on his way to perfection, but already in possession of perfection, turned out to yield little in the way of dramatic interest. Corneille himself commented on the problem in connection with the most perfect of these perfect heroes, Théodore:

[Le caractère] de Théodore est entièrement froid: elle n’a aucune passion qui l’agite; et là même où son zèle pour Dieu, qui occupe toute son âme, devrait éclater le plus, c’est-à-dire dans sa contestation avec Didyme pour le martyre, je lui ai donné si peu de chaleur, que cette scène, bien que très courte, ne laisse pas d’ennuyer. Ainsi, pour en parler sainement, une vierge et martyre sur un théâtre n’est autre chose qu’un Terme qui n’a ni jambes ni bras, et par conséquent point d’action. (Examen of Théodore, *Oeuvres*, 5:12)

The problem was solved by giving to the antihero the task of carrying the play, with the result that *Rodogune, Théodore, and*
Héraclius can be said to constitute a "trilogie des monstres." In some respects Rodogune is a mirror image of Polyeucte. Cléopâtre dominates the action as Polyeucte had in the earlier work. Both set a challenge to the other characters in the play; both are absent from act 3 (so too are Horace and Auguste), as the other characters react to that challenge. Cléopâtre goes down in defeat, however, whereas Polyeucte triumphed and carried the other characters to triumph along with him. Rodogune shifts the focus from good to evil, but otherwise changes nothing. The new tragedy remains a providential tragedy, centered on the clash between good (virtually perfect) characters and bad (or evil) characters. From Rodogune to Théodore to Héraclius, Corneille does gradually decrease the evilness of the antihero; and this evolution away from the almost absolute evil of Cléopâtre results eventually in a modification of the double reversal (the triumph of the good and the defeat of the bad). This occurs outside the present frame of reference—in Nicomède, which ends with the repentance and reintegration into society of the antihero, Arsinoé. The "trilogie des monstres" offers considerable aesthetic satisfaction, particularly Rodogune. It does not, however, have the sweep or the incisiveness of the Roman trilogy, perhaps because Corneille's major effort lay behind him. To put it another way, the Roman trilogy draws strength from the fact that the poet and his heroes were engaged in the simultaneous pursuit of much the same kind of heroic goal: to break through to a new higher level of ethical and/or aesthetic truth. That sort of concatenation, almost by definition, cannot be expected to repeat itself; and, in Corneille's case, it did not.

Corneille was a modern before the Quarrel of the Cid. One can see it above all perhaps in his insistence on positing pleasure as the primary aim of the theater and positing contemporary audiences as arbiters of the playwright's success. After the Quarrel, he remained a modern, but he considerably modified the modernism with which he had started out. In his greatest plays, he is a modern in much the same way that Tasso had been a modern: he venerates the pagan heritage and draws on it to a greater extent than before, but at the same time he wants to renew and to complete that heritage by infusing it with a new, Christian ethics and a corresponding new, Christian aesthetics.

The story of Corneille's emulation of Tasso connects with
several important areas of previous Cornelian scholarship: with studies on providentialism in his theater (Maurens, Poirier, Stegmann, Sweetser); with the groundbreaking article by Marc Fumaroli on *Rodogune* as the work of a Christian humanist "correcting" the Ancients' view of man and tragedy; with the same author's numerous contributions to the history of Italian cultural and intellectual influences in seventeenth-century France; finally, with approaches to Corneille's theater that emphasize the dialectical relationship of the plays one to the other (Sweetser, Dubrovsky). Emulation was for Corneille a powerfully integrative act; studying that emulation, I hope, has in turn provided the occasion for bringing various aspects of previous knowledge about Corneille into new, sharper focus.

There remains the question of how to judge Corneille's silence about his debt to Tasso and, even more, his reticence about having created a form of Christian art at all. I suggested earlier that considerations of prudence may initially have dictated a policy of silence. In setting out to emulate Tasso, Corneille was aiming exceptionally high; if he were to publicize the fact, he might only make it easier for his critics to attack him again. The weight of such an argument would have diminished with the passage of time, however. But as the playwright began to feel himself coming closer and closer to achieving his original goal, pride could have taken over from prudence as a motive for continuing silence. In the "Excuse à Ariste," Corneille had exulted in his own independence: "Je ne dois qu'à moy seul toute ma Renommée"; and Mairet had promptly taken him to task for the transparency of his dependence on Guillén de Castro in the *Cid*. Perhaps the debt toward Tasso came in the end to seem too great for acknowledgment simply because to acknowledge it might detract from the playwright's legitimate accomplishments, which were to have dared to emulate Tasso in the first place and to have succeeded in the second. These motives, it seems to me, are both plausible and, if not noble, at least respectable.  

If we look at the problem from another angle, it is possible, I think, to say more. Corneille was trying to combine elements of the sacred and the profane somewhat as Tasso had done in the *Gerusalemme liberata*. The authority of the *Gerusalemme* went unchallenged in France insofar as epic poetry was concerned, but Corneille could not automatically transfer that authority to
the theater. The theater had recently reformed itself, thrown off its old licentiousness, and become a place where even decent women might safely go. Corneille calls attention to the fact in the final scene of *L'Illusion comique*; and in creating a modern, basically Christian form of tragedy, he no doubt hoped to push that reform still further. There were limits beyond which he could not go, however. A cloud of moral ambiguity still hung over the theater, and it would continue to hang there for the rest of the century. The power of the theater to move its audience was a fact recognized by friend and foe alike. It was a power that derived from the mode of dramatic imitation itself: imitation of an action by means of representation or reenactment by living actors. Such was the fear of the theater's special rhetoric of persuasion that the strict moralists condemned it outright (and thought that the better the play was aesthetically, the more corruptive it was likely to be morally). Those of more worldly inclinations entered eagerly into the theatrical illusion, but did not expect or want to find a great deal more than confirmation of the grandeur, the pleasures, and the pains of this world. This is the audience for which Corneille wrote, the audience which he said it was his purpose to please, not instruct. He was too dependent on this audience, too respectful of its prejudices, ever to think of assaulting its expectations head-on. The conditions were not right in France for transposing Tassoan modernism directly into dramatic terms. All things considered, one should perhaps wonder then not that Corneille concealed so much, but that he dared to go so far and reveal so much.