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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'I have become all things to all men [and women] that I might by all means save some' (I Corinthians 9:22, KJV). Theatricality and conversion in the poetry of Pierre Le Moyne

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The exceptionally diverse and extensive literary output of the Jesuit poet Pierre Le Moyne is full of apparent paradoxes and ambiguities which have always proved a challenge to commentators, from his own contemporaries to the present day. This article takes as its starting point the recent recovery of a detailed account of Le Moyne's first known creation, a spectacular dramatic production put on by the Jesuit college in Reims, to consider a pervasive, but relatively unstudied, feature of his works: the poet's frequent allusions to the theatre, and, beyond this, the relationship between his strikingly original imagination and the creative techniques of dramatists and actors. It is argued that these are crucial to the ways in which he sets out to engage his worldly readers, and to encourage a receptive response to the moral and spiritual ideals which he seeks to transmit.

KEYWORDS Pierre Le Moyne, Jesuits, theatre, poetry, spirituality

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Pierre Le Moyne (1602–1671) was the most celebrated, versatile and commercially successful Jesuit poet writing in French of the early modern period. His œuvre is unique in the seventeenth century in its extent and its astonishing diversity; no doubt for this reason, it has always proved exceptionally difficult to provide a convincing *Gesamtübersicht* of his achievement.¹

His intentions are consistent: to celebrate the glory of the monarchy, and above all to encourage his readers to take seriously what he regarded as the truest interpretation of the Christian religion and its moral prescriptions. To achieve these aims, it seems as though he could turn his pen to any form that was currently finding readers: devotional, controversial and moralising works, panegyrics, devises, and treatises on poetry in general, epic theory, the ideal financier, l'art des devises, the writing of history, and a massive folio of advice to the young king, De l'art de régner. In verse, his output ranged from epigrams and light society badinage to an epic poem (in two contrasting versions), and included four brilliantly successful and moving mystical hymns, ekphrastic works, and by far the most substantial collection of serious verse letters of the century.²

His contemporaries found that he eluded any easy characterisation, and, when discussing his work, frequently have recourse to paradox. As early as 1639, Balzac read Le Moyne's two hymns on *La Sagesse divine*,³ and wrote to Chapelain with typically hyperbolic enthusiasm ('Quelle hardiesse d'esprit! Quelle magnifique expression! De quelenthousiasme est-il possédé!'⁴). But Le Moyne's *enthousiasme* was not at all to Chapelain's taste; in reply, he assured Balzac that 'ce grand homme, cet excellent Père de la Sagesse, est un des plus foux personnages ... que nous connoissons', and called it 'un paradoxe des moins probables que les Stoïques ayent jamais mis en avant'.⁵ Later in the century, a frequently repeated anecdote seems to sum up a widespread judgement: when asked why there is no mention of Le Moyne in his *Art poétique* or satires, Boileau is reported to have replied with a parody of Corneille's celebrated epigram on Richelieu:

- The most comprehensive study of Le Moyne's life and work is still Henri Chérot, SJ, Étude sur la vie et les œuvres du Père Pierre Le Moyne (1602–1671) (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1887); the only complete study of his poetry is Richard Maber, The Poetry of Pierre Le Moyne (1602–1671) (Bern and Frankfurt/Main: University of Durham Publications, 1982). All other scholarship has focused on individual works or single themes in his vast œuvre. There has been no complete edition of the poetry since 1671/2: Les Œuvres poétiques du P. Le Moyne (Paris: Louis Billaine/Simon Benard/Thomas Jolly, 1671/2). However, there have been two modern critical editions of individual works: Hymnes de la sagesse divine et de l'amour divin, ed. by Anne Mantero (Paris: Le Miroir volant, 1986), and Entretiens et lettres poétiques, ed. by Richard Maber (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012); an edition of Saint Louis is currently in preparation, edited by Anne Mantero and Francine Wild.
- ² The most complete bibliographies to date of Le Moyne's works are to be found in Chérot, Étude, pp. 503–47, augmented in his À propos du troisième centenaire du Père Pierre Le Moyne (1602–1671). La « Carte nouvelle de la Cour » (1663) (Paris: Henri Leclerc, 1902) (reprinted from the Bulletin du bibliophile, 1902, pp. 353–88), and in Maber, The Poetry, pp. 279–85, augmented in Entretiens, ed. by Maber, pp. 455–68; see also the list drawn up by Anne-Élisabeth Spica, detailed in note 11 below, pp. 103–05.
- ³ La Sagesse divine. A Monseigneur le Cardinal Duc de Richelieu (Paris: S. Cramoisy, 1639).
- ⁴ Les Œuvres de Monsieur de Balzac (Paris: Thomas Jolly, 1665), I, 794.
- 5 Lettres de Jean Chapelain, ed. by Ph. Tamizey de Larroque (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1880–1883), I, 428–30. The exchange is printed in extenso in Maber, The Poetry, pp. 35–37; see also Chérot, Étude, pp. 65–79.

Il s'est trop élevé pour en dire du mal. Il s'est trop égaré pour en dire du bien.⁶

It is impossible to escape the paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions which abound throughout Le Moyne's works. His two principal publications of the 1640s, Les Peintures morales (1640–43) and La Gallerie des femmes fortes (1647), both offer the reader an extraordinary variety of contrasting views of their subjects, where, through selective quotation, Le Moyne can be claimed to be promoting almost any position. In the Peintures morales, for example, the Jesuit poet appears to dwell with disconcerting fascination on the devastating beauty of the courtesan Laïs, so irresistible as to exonerate her innumerable adulterous lovers, while, in the same work, the poems 'L'isle de pureté' and 'Les fidèles morts' extol respectively 'L'Amour spirituel et innocent' and the moral necessity of conjugal fidelity.⁷

The Gallerie, similarly, with its 20 widely different principal subjects, each accompanied with a 'question morale', and its 22 'exemples' of more modern heroines of all kinds, seems expressly designed to argue as wide a range as possible of generalities about the capabilities of women (strong, independent, equal to, or better than, men at almost everything), and their obligations (subservience, obedience and faithfulness to their husbands, who must always come first).

In both of these works, Le Moyne seems to have no qualms about skating on what, to purists of all kinds, might seem very thin ice: the stern unbending moralists of Port-Royal might have found more telling examples even than those quoted by Pascal and Barbier d'Aucour. For example, in the *Gallerie*, in repeatedly dwelling on how extraordinarily difficult, indeed heroic, it is for a woman to remain chaste, his intention is no doubt to flatter his virtuous female readers while not alienating those with a more flexible morality; and yet, as with Laïs in the *Peintures*, he comes perilously close to providing a religiously sanctioned excuse for sexual licence. Thus in the *Question morale* to 'La Judith françoise' (a sixth-century Christian woman who killed a lustful duke) he writes of: 'La Volupté, qui est une Ennemie opiniastre et pressante: et qui ne peut estre presque vaincue, ny à force ouverte, ny par diversion, ny par stratagéme'. His readers might well reflect that since, as Le Moyne also insists, true heroism is granted to but few, then *humanum est errare*, and they can hardly be blamed if they fail to resist the wiles of *la volupté*.

The great epic *Saint Louis* includes an almost inexhaustible variety of contrasting characters, adventures, ideals and moral choices, while even Le Moyne's plan for the whole work is shaped by an unacknowledged paradox. When Louis is

⁶ Chérot, Étude, pp. 423–24, and É. Magne, Bibliographie générale des œuvres de Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux et de Gilles et Jacques Boileau (Paris: L. Giraud-Badin, 1929), I. 39.

⁷ The poems are included in the Œuvres poétiques, pp. 405-09 ('L'isle de pureté'), 409-12 ('Les fidèles morts') and 412-15 ('Laïs déchirée').

The most well-known attacks on Le Moyne's 'morale relâchée' are contained in the ninth and eleventh Lettres provinciales, where Pascal refers only to the Peintures morales and, to a much lesser extent, La Dévotion aisée. Following Pascal, Barbier d'Aucour devotes a whole poem of his Onguent à la brûlure (no place or printer, 1670) to Le Moyne ('Du Feu d'Impureté allumé par les Jesuites'), referencing the Peintures and La Dévotion aisée, and also adding a reference to one of the Entretiens (pp. 59–63). This section of the work does not appear in the first edition of the Onguent (no place, printer, or date, probably 1664).

⁹ La Gallerie des femmes fortes, 4th edn (Paris: J. Cochart, 1663), vol. 2, p. 80.

transported to Heaven in Book 8, he is given a choice of three crowns: Rome, Byzantium or the Crown of Thorns. He naturally chooses the Crown of Thorns, and is promised a life of suffering but a heavenly reward. This more or less fits the repeated failures of the king's real crusades. In Le Moyne's epic, though, all of this is abandoned by the end: in a wildly unhistorical climax, Louis routs the Saracen army in a final great battle, kills all its leaders, wins the Crown of Thorns, and emerges triumphant.¹⁰

It might, though, be possible to find a common factor in Le Moyne's works that helps to reconcile such paradoxes. When one surveys the scholarship devoted to him over the past 150 years, it is curious to note that, of the 130 books, articles and editions that I am aware of, with one recent exception (discussed below) none take as their principal focus one of the most immediately striking aspects of his poetry: the theatricality and dramatic imagination which animate so much of it, and which are crucial to understanding the techniques through which he sets out to achieve his serious moral purpose.¹¹

Such a characteristic should come as no surprise. The dramatic imagination was central to every aspect of Jesuit formation, from the Spiritual Exercises to the *Ratio Studiorum*, and found its most celebrated expression in the spectacular performances put on by the Jesuit colleges; Le Moyne spent half his career as a *régent*, in the colleges at Reims, Dijon and Langres, and finally at the Collège de Clermont in Paris, and will have been closely involved in their dramatic productions.

Indeed, the latest addition to the canon of Le Moyne's works, and the first of which we have a record, is precisely the invention of such a production. Rosa de Marco has recovered the detailed account of a *spectacle* that he wrote in 1628 for the Jesuit college in Reims, where he was a young *régent*: La Conquête du char de la Gloire par le grand Théandre. Représentée en cinq ballets par les Pensionnaires du Collège de la Compagnie de Jésus de Reims. En rejouissance de la reduction de la Rochelle, à l'obeissance du Roy (Reims: Nicolas Constant, 1628, in-4°, 5 pp.). ¹² The event was clearly a notable success; the outline of the production was later described by Claude-François Menestrier, ¹³ but the pamphlet account provides invaluable new details.

Historically, and less heroically, Louis IX was defeated and captured. The Crown of Thorns was given by, or bought from, the Latin Emperor Baldwin II of Constantinople.

These figures are based on Anne-Élisabeth Spica, 'Pierre Le Moyne (1602–1671): essai de bibliographie critique', in the special issue of *Œuvres et Critiques* devoted to Le Moyne, 35:2 (2010), pp. 103–11. To the 105 works listed there can be added the nine essays in that issue of *Œuvres et Critiques*, and a further 15 articles and one edition that have been published since. A special issue of *Revue Bossuet* is intended to be devoted to Le Moyne (Numéro 13, 2022), but has not yet appeared at the time of writing. The sense of theatre in Le Moyne's poetry is inescapable, and touched on in a number of scholarly studies (including Maber, *The Poetry*, pp. 187–88), but without pursuing its full implications.

Rosa de Marco, 'Un incunable de l'imagination: La Conquête du Char de la Gloire du père jésuite chaumontais Pierre Le Moyne (1628)', in Art et artistes en Haute-Marne, XVe-XIXe siècle: actes du 1er Colloque biennal des "Cahiers haut-marnais", Chaumont, 17–19 octobre 2014, ed. by Patrick Corbet, Alain Morgat and Samuel Mourin (Chaumont: Le Pythagore), 2016, pp. 128–37. As de Marco describes it, 'L'exemplaire est relié dans un recueil factice contenant dans un ordre chronologique d'autres programmes de ballets; ex-libris des Jésuites de Lyon (Lyon, Bibliothèque Part-Dieu, Rés 360234)'.

Des Ballets Anciens Et Modernes Selon Les Regles Du Theatre (Paris: René Guignard, 1682), pp. 62-64.
See also the account in Chérot, Étude, pp. 48-51.

This publication antedates Le Moyne's first collection of poetry, Les Triomphes de Louys le Juste en la reduction des Rochelois et des autres rebelles de son royaume (Reims: Nicolas Constant, 1629), and is intimately connected to it. Not only was Le Moyne responsible for the creation of the spectacle, but two of his earliest surviving poems were specifically written to be declaimed in the course of the performance: 'Recit de l'Ombre de Cloridan pour la rejouyssance qui fut faite au College de Reims, sur la prise de la Rochelle'¹⁴ and 'Recit de Bergers pour la mesme rejouyssance'. ¹⁵

Thereafter, throughout his career, Le Moyne seems to have written many of his poems in the anticipation that they would initially be heard rather than read on the page; many are written in a declamatory and highly imaged style that is ideally suited to oral performance, and are especially effective in this way. More than 30 years after his first publication, a large number of his *Entretiens et lettres poétiques* were clearly written on the assumption that they would be read to, rather than by, the dedicatee; in one case, a lighter piece addressed to the duc de Saint-Aignan ('Gazette du Parnasse'), the poet is explicit about how he expects his work to be presented:

Souffrez tandis qu'on vous habille, Que d'une aventure gentille, Qu'au Parnasse hier on m'apprit, J'amuse un moment votre Esprit.¹⁶

Whether they were read aloud or privately – which itself, in the period, might well involve an element of vocalisation – Le Moyne's works are permeated with a sense of theatre. In both *Les Peintures morales* and *La Gallerie des femmes fortes* the images portrayed in the engravings are described not as static pictures, but as dynamic scenes of action; the reader becomes a spectator, watching the drama unfold. Thus, in the *Peintures*, the engraving to 'Laïs déchirée' depicts a relatively early stage of the attack, whereas the poem, ostensibly describing the picture in the gallery of 'peintures des passions', in fact invites the reader to 'see' the progressive dismemberment of the beautiful courtesan:

Voyez de quelle ardeur, de quelle barbarie, Chacune fait contre elle, office de Furie ... L'une avec un couteau, l'autre avec un poignard, Toutes d'une colere indiscrete et sans art, Sur cette infortunée assouvissent leur haine; Celle-cy la déchire, et cette autre la traisne ... Celles qui sont sans fer ne sont pas sans courage, Leurs dents avec leurs mains sont mises en usage: Elles font cent lambeaux de ses habillemens, Déchirent ses atours, rompent ses ornemens ... Mais quoy, pourrions-nous bien avoir la dureté,

¹⁴ pp. 181-83.

Printed only in the second edition of the collection: Les Triomphes de Louis le Juste. Nouvelle edition reveüe et augmentee de plusieurs pieces (Reims: Nicolas Constant, 1630, 24°). Neither Chérot nor de Marco was aware of this edition, or of the second poem.

¹⁶ Entretiens, ed. by Maber, Lettre I, 13, p. 228. All subsequent references are to this edition.

D'assister de la veuë à cette cruauté? ...
Respectez vostre sexe, inhumaines Rivales ...
Elles n'entendent pas, je les appelle en vain;
De haine et de dépit leur esprit est trop plein.
Dés-ja la malheureuse a la teste coupée ...
La teste après le coup toute froide et sanglante,
Par bravade est montrée à la troupe insolente ...¹⁷

A similar sense of drama animates the prose text and the sonnets which accompany the engravings in the *Gallerie*, and equally the sonnets of Le Moyne's third ekphrastic series, the 'Cabinet de peintures', which purport to describe famous paintings by Veronese, Guido Reni, Poussin, Giuseppe Cesare, Vignon, Mignard and Champagne. ¹⁸ On a vaster scale, Le Moyne enlivens the immense length of his epic, *Saint Louis*, by continually interspersing the narration with passages of direct speech, and sensational action described in strongly visual terms. The great set-pieces are imagined in terms of dramatic performance, with finely constructed *tirades*, reflective monologues, dynamic confrontations between enemies, and declarations of passion between lovers. ¹⁹ Like a dramatist, the poet imagines himself into the minds of all his huge cast of characters, male and female, heroes and villains, Christians and Muslims.

The word 'théâtre' itself is used abundantly in both literal and figurative senses, as a playhouse and the works acted there, a locus of action, and a spectacle of any kind; in all these senses, it is generally found in a moralising context, and even the most banal commonplaces of the *Theatrum mundi* are reinvigorated by the force of the poet's imagination. One of the longest of the *Entretiens*, 'Le Théâtre du sage', addressed to the Président de Mesmes, opens with a play on the meanings of *théâtre* and *scène*:

De Mesmes, en ce temps que règnent les Spectacles, Dont les petits Esprits se font de grands miracles: Que l'un fait du Théâtre, et l'autre fait du Bal, De sa Félicité l'article capital ... Souffrez que devant vous, je découvre une Scène En ornements pompeuse, en structure hautaine ... Là vous ne verrez pas un Œdipe inhumain, D'un couteau parricide ensanglanter sa main: Un Oreste emporté d'un zèle illégitime, Châtier sur sa Mère un crime par un crime. Vous ne verrez point là, l'Amante de Jason, Après l'honneur perdu, perdre encor la raison ... Les autres vains sujets du Théâtre profane, Cléopâtre, Panthée, Artemise, Ariane ... Ne se produisent point sur cette Scène auguste, Où rien ne se fait voir, que de grand et de juste ...

Euvres poétiques, pp. 413-14.

Euvres poétiques, pp. 426-35.

¹⁹ For some examples, see Maber, *The Poetry*, pp. 187–88.

Le Monde est un Théâtre ouvert aux yeux des Sages: La Scène en est diverse et de divers étages ... ²⁰

After this opening, evoking well-known works of the contemporary stage to transcend them with the works of God, the poem moves on to an 800-line elaboration of the theme of *Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei*,²¹ where the familiar argument of nature revealing the glory of God is developed with startling originality.

A further example of the figurative use of *spectacle* and *théâtre* is worth quoting at length for the dynamic imagination with which the poet visualises a universal Dance of Death:

La récolte se fait partout et chaque jour:
La Mort règne au Village, elle règne à la Cour ...
Quel spectacle de voir, sur de funestes chars,
Les Femmes, les Maris, les Jeunes, les Vieillards,
Les Artisans, les Rois, les Charlatans, les Sages,
Toute sorte d'états, de sexes, de visages;
Et la Mort au-dessus, la Faux noire à la main,
Qui traîne en herbe, en graine, en fleur le Genre humain!
Quel théâtre de voir dans la Cave fatale,
Où sans ordre, et sans choix, cette moisson s'étale,
Les restes des Vivants à monceaux entassés,
Et comme paille sèche, au hasard amassés!²²

Even the most familiar of all commonplaces, that all the world's a stage, is given the unexpectedly vivid touch of casting Fortuna as the *fripière*:

Combien d'Hommes d'État, combien d'Hommes de Guerre, Dans ce Louvre ont servi de spectacle à la terre: Et sifflés par les uns, par les autres loués, Après leur montre faite, et leurs rôles joués, Par un retour fatal à l'inconstance humaine, À d'autres ont laissé leurs habits et la Scène? La Cour est un Théâtre, où les Princes Acteurs Donnent la Comédie aux Peuples Spectateurs. Le Théâtre subsiste, et sa face changeante Quelquefois est funeste, et quelquefois plaisante. Les Jeux y sont divers: l'Ambition, l'Amour, La Faveur, la Disgrâce y règnent tour à tour: Et la Fortune, illustre et fameuse Fripière D'atours de toute mode, et de toute matière, Selon les qualités, les emplois, et les noms, Distribue aux Acteurs colliers, manteaux, bâtons:

²⁰ Entretiens, I, 11, pp. 192-93.

Psalm 18.

[&]quot;Miroir fidèle', Entretiens, to the comtesse de La Suze, II, 1, pp. 266-67.

Prête aux uns de la pourpre, aux autres des dorures: Les distingue d'habits, de masques, de coiffures: Et le Jeu terminé, sans respecter le Grand, Sans plaindre le petit, ses biens elle reprend: Et laisse les Acteurs dépouillés de parure, Égaux en nudité, comme égaux en nature.²³

In such varied ways, Le Moyne's theatrical imagination is a crucial factor in the way that his works involve the reader through the immediacy of their personal appeal. Just as dramatists project themselves into each of the characters that they create, so the Jesuit poet and moralist attempts to project his imagination into the mind of the intended readers of each of his publications; and like an actor, he seems to take on a different authorial personality between, and even within, his different works. It is not too fanciful to see in this a parallel to the Jesuit missionary technique of blending in with their environment, to understand and engage with those they are hoping to convert: 'homme de Dieu' and 'homme du monde', Le Moyne adopts the persona of his different intended readers, just as the elite Jesuits in China might seek to understand the religious traditions, and adopt the costume and manners, of the mandarin class.

This is his method, for example, in *La Dévotion aisée*, ²⁴ whose title alone was enough to arouse the wrath of the austere. Through this attractive work the author begins by writing indulgently of worldly pleasures, to engage his imagined (female) reader; then he leads this reader sympathetically to a practice of religion that is neither *relâchée* nor especially *aisée*. Where Pascal attacks 'la manière si profane et si coquette dont votre Père Le Moine a parlé de la piété dans sa *Dévotion aisée*', a modern critic, Didier Course, writes perspicaciously: 'Le raisonnement élégant, l'image empruntée à la mode des cabinets de curiosités ou à l'alcôve précieuse, qui tous savent séduire un public habitué aux grâces de la mondanité, sont aussi et surtout des outils précieux dans l'avancée de l'introspection et de la révélation'. ²⁵

So also, in the *Entretiens*, the poet adjusts his language, register and range of reference to suit the person to whom a poem is addressed: he might sprinkle a poem with financial or legal terms as appropriate, while he adopts a vigorous style and military vocabulary for a soldier like Condé (I, 3, 4), and philosophical allusions and ruminations for Habert de Montmort (I, 12); when staying on the estate of the old maréchal d'Estrées he adopts the persona of a country gentleman (I, 10), and so on. The poems of Book II of the *Entretiens* are entirely addressed to ladies of the court and aristocratic society, and full of worldly allusions in a manner reminiscent of some of Le Moyne's earlier poems. Yet by now he very largely escapes the pitfalls of adopting a tone of excessive *galanterie*, and his moralising intentions are clear and firmly expressed; in fact he prided – and perhaps flattered – himself that one of these verse letters

²³ 'La Carte de Paris', to the Chancelier, Pierre Séguier, Entretiens I, 7, p. 131.

²⁴ Paris: A. de Sommaville, 1652.

²⁵ Pascal, Œuvres complètes, ed. by Jacques Chevalier (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p. 788; Didier Course, 'Le dévotion honnête du Père Le Moyne', Œuvres et Critiques, 35:2, 2010, 33-42 (p. 36).

was influential in bringing about the conversion of an aristocratic young Protestant woman.²⁶

From the evident success of his first engagement with a theatrical production, right through his literary career to his final poems, Le Moyne remained keenly aware of the varied ways in which his essentially dramatic imagination could serve his moral purpose. His aim is precisely to be all things to all people, as in St Paul's injunction to the Corinthians, and with the same intention: 'that I might by all means save some'. It is this intention that reconciles the paradoxes of his work. One could, in fact, apply to the poet himself the words that he attributes to Divine Wisdom: '[Je] conduis par degrez ... les Hommes à Dieu'.²⁷

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Biographical note

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Entretiens, II, 8, pp. 354–57, 'De la vraie foi. À mesdemoiselles de Haucourt'. The two young ladies were Jeanne and Suzanne d'Aumale, who both feature prominently in Somaize's Dictionnaire des précieuses. At the head of the poem, Le Moyne wrote: 'Il a plu à Dieu que l'Aînée de ces deux illustres personnes ouvrît les yeux à la Vérité, et se fit enfin Catholique'. Jeanne d'Aumale, who remained unmarried, did indeed become Catholic; but Suzanne, who married the celebrated Frédéric-Armand de Schomberg, maréchal de France, rather disobligingly remained a staunch Protestant.

²⁷ 'La Sagesse divine. Hymne second', Œuvres, p. 359.