

Medievalism in the French Counter-Reformation Baroque:

Pierre LeMoyne's Epic *Saint Louis*

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Pierre Le Moyne (1602-1671), a French Jesuit, authored a vast corpus of verse and prose, Christian in inspiration and with a strong didactic element. Le Moyne was famous in his day, respected and admired by his contemporaries, by poets and by the high nobility, some of whom became his patrons. He moved in the highest circles. Then came Classicism, with Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (often known simply as Boileau), poet and critic, as the new Regent of Parnassus. Le Moyne fell into complete obscurity until today, with even seventeenth-century specialists unaware of his existence or recalling only his name. A modest revival has now taken place, launched by Jean Rousset: *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France* and the two-volume *Anthologie de la poésie baroque française*, where he refers to Le Moyne as an “extraordinarily gifted poet, the Victor Hugo of his century.”¹ This revival culminates in two new scholarly editions of *Les Hymnes de la sagesse divine et de l'amour divin* and *Entretiens et lettres poétiques*.² Here I should also mention the excellent doctoral dissertation by a student at Florida, Laila Farès: “Pour une poésie chrétienne à l'âge baroque: mysticisme, héroïsme et féminisme chez Pierre Le Moyne.”³ The Le Moyne revival continues.

Of particular interest for scholars of medievalism will be Le Moyne's epic poem, situated in the thirteenth century: *Saint Louis, ou la Sainte Couronne Reconquise* (Saint Louis, or the Holy Crown of Thorns Retaken) of 1658.⁴ I published a brief monograph on the epic, later partially incorporated in my *A Muse for Heroes*.⁵ I made no reference to medievalism, indeed showed no interest, because Leslie Workman had not yet invented it.

First and foremost, for modern scholars, is the remarkable extent to which Le Moyne distorts history in what is, after all, a text grounded in history. Historically, on the Seventh Crusade Louis IX gathered an army to invade Egypt. In 1249 he did so, landing at Damietta. However, the result was an ignominious defeat at Mansourah, with the king taken prisoner and, later, ransomed at great cost.

In the epic by Le Moyne, Louis sets out from France with a magnificent army and is joined at Damietta by Christian contingents from all over the world. His unique goal is to win back a relic

¹ Jean Rousset, *La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France: Circé et le paon* (Paris: Corti, 1953); and *Anthologie de la poésie baroque française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Colin, 1961); also, *L'Intérieur et l'extérieur: Essais sur la poésie et sur le théâtre au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Corti, 1968).

² *Les Hymnes de la sagesse divine et de l'amour divin*, ed. Anne Mantero (Paris: Miroir Volant, 1986); *Entretiens et lettres poétiques*, ed. Richard Maber (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012).

³ Diss. University of Florida, 2012.

⁴ I quote from my copy of the earliest edition, *Les Œuvres poétiques du P. Le Moyne* (Paris: Thomas Jolly, 1672).

⁵ William Calin, *Crown, Cross and "Fleur-de-Lis": An Essay on Pierre Le Moyne's Baroque Epic "Saint Louis"* (Saratoga: Anna Libri, 1977); *A Muse for Heroes: Nine Centuries of the Epic in France* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), chap. 10. See also the especially insightful studies by David Maskell, *The Historical Epic in France: 1500-1700* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); and Richard G. Maber, *The Poetry of Pierre Le Moyne (1602-1671)* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1982).

taken by the Saracens: the Holy Crown of Thorns which Jesus was forced to wear during his Passion, while being mocked as the king of the Jews—Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum. Louis wins a series of battles, all but wipes out the enemy, and returns to Paris with his army and with the Crown of Thorns. Note that the crown of thorns was not amongst the relics the historical Louis brought back from Egypt. In fact, he purchased the relic from the Venetians in 1238, they having acquired it from Baudouin II, the Frankish emperor of Byzantium.

Significantly, the poem was highly praised during the Baroque period, and no-one criticized the distortion of history, or, apparently, even noticed or remarked upon it. This phenomenon persisted up to the end of the eighteenth century when Schiller, in “Die Jungfrau von Orleans,” has Joan of Arc fall on the field of battle, this after her romance with an English captain. Only with Romanticism do we find *Historismus*, the respect and appreciation of the post-Graeco-Roman past, in both cultural and historical reality. Today’s historical novelists, whatever their aesthetic aims, whatever their ideology, generally have to respect the facts. Perhaps this is less of an issue for dramatists: Jean Anouilh based the action of his play *Becket ou l’Honneur de Dieu* on a conflict between the Anglo-Saxon archbishop and the Norman king, whereas, in reality, Becket was as Norman-French in language, culture, and origins as King Henry. Le Moyne’s extremes of invention would not be countenanced today.

Secondly, Le Moyne ignores or neglects utterly what so many of us treasure in the French Middle Ages: everything that is art, architecture, sculpture, poetry, romance, the theater, and even philosophy and sacred theology. When architecture is evoked, it is, for example, the decadent and grotesque ruins of the enemy (including the pyramids), redolent with stench, excrement, decay, and pestilence. Jesuit education had its limits. Yet we are dealing once again with a far from unique phenomenon. The men of the classicist age, which, to some extent coincides with the *ancien régime* (1500-1789), for the most part do despise what they called—with derision—Gothic, and, for that matter, what they perceived to be not classical enough, called—with derision—Baroque. Le Moyne’s attitude to the Middle Ages was not at all unusual in his own time.

What then did interest Pierre Le Moyne in the Middle Ages? The story alone? Far from it. In addition to Christian triumphalism, he insists on what becomes a leitmotiv, a major structural anchoring, in his epic. This is French military accomplishment—the power, heroism, and splendor of the French crusaders. Not that Le Moyne was necessarily incorrect with regard to French military prowess over the centuries; nevertheless, this very special muscular nationalism reveals more about the ages of Louis XIII and Louis XIV than it does about thirteenth-century crusaders. Power, heroism, and splendor radiate from the pages of *Saint Louis*: “La valeur est pompeuse, et la pompe est vaillante” (224A). Grandiose speeches and ferocious battle scenes serve as backdrops to a martial saint-king whose every word and deed are solemn, heroic, and hierarchical. Perhaps all this valor and arrogance and bravery transmits the essence of the Counter-Reformation, called also the Catholic Renaissance, equally visible in the major Baroque churches and basilicas.

This Christian splendor is also dynastic. The saint-king is the ancestor of the two Louis, XIII and XIV, who supported Pierre Le Moyne. The same is true for Louis IX's heroic nephew Archambaut de Bourbon. The Capetian/Valois and Bourbon lines are fused in Le Moyne's patrons. We also find, among the leading crusader captains, Matthieu baron de Montmorency with his kin plus Robert d'Artois, Chasteauroux, and Schomberg, all their names those of eminent gentlemen in the seventeenth century. The dynastic bond functions for both the past and the present. The medieval Montmorency's glory is enhanced by our recognizing the accomplishments—the great victories—performed by his descendant, just as Le Moyne's contemporary, seventeenth-century Montmorency, benefits from having a great ancestor in the crusades. Thus the blood line of the nobility is proclaimed and illustrated.

Le Moyne's epic resembles the work of the authors of the *Song of Roland* and other *chansons de geste*, but not the rest of medieval literature, in the moral and political stance: "Païen unt tort e Chrestien unt dreit" (Pagans are wrong and Christians are right). Following the tradition of the *bellum pium*, he proclaims the prince's right to exterminate his enemies, especially when they are infidels. According to his crusading Jesuit ethos, a Christian can do no wrong. Bourbon is considered good because he conforms to a given code: his actions are proven to be good because it is he who commits them. Le Moyne's medieval world, like his contemporary world, involves binary oppositions, right and wrong, good and evil.

There is little inner conflict in Le Moyne's world. God's grace is freely given, and, under his gaze, the world has no place for tragedy: their fallen ascend to their thrones in heaven; the winners benefit from God's miracles when they are needed. Le Moyne's characters do not grow in the course of the narrative; they are steadfast in the cause, driven by *ardeur* and *vertu*. These heroes, like those in Corneille's plays, are creatures of the will to power; so too are the Saracens but, because they are Saracens, they are doomed to failure. Perhaps the most striking festivity in the epic is a tournament which corresponds, more or less, to the courtly tourney in medieval romance. However, as the four contingents march onto the field, each clad in distinctive colors and proclaiming allegiance to a particular form of love, with a page singing or declaiming a cartel, with a gigantic artificial rock that opens to display a grotto inside or an elephant with a globe on its back that also opens before our eyes, we recognize that Le Moyne's tourney is entirely in the spirit of his own age. This is a universe of pageantry and luxury, dedicated to sparkle and to a riot of colors. Yet, for the seventeenth-century public, the tourney was presumed to be a peculiarly medieval institution. And, given the example of late-medieval Burgundy, they were not mistaken.

Like a number of writers in his century, Pierre Le Moyne does follow and illustrate an especially medieval mental structure—what today we call "typology" or "figura." Le Moyne situates his crusade in the broader context of sacred history. By patterns of imagery, including architectural ruins such as the pyramids, the Saracen emir Meledin is linked to Pharaoh in the Old Testament and to

Herod in the New. Pharaoh prefigures Herod and Pontius Pilate who, in turn, are post-figured by Meledin. Similarly, Moses prefigures Jesus, who is post-figured by Saint Louis and Archambaut de Bourbon. This is brought about by magnificent evocations in what Northrop Frye refers to as the demonic and the apocalyptic.⁶ Mireme calls forth demons in the pyramids and in a hall where the accused sorcerers, Moses's antagonists, hold their rites. The crusaders withdraw to a hall where they find the ruins of Joseph's palace. Lisamante slays the Holophernes-Herod of her day; she also walks on water. And God opens a passage for the crusaders to cross the waters. As in the past, when God spared the remnant from the flood, in Le Moyne's thirteenth century, in the apparent present of his text, the French army is spared from the Saracen Greeks. Fire and the fires of hell become the water of baptism. Note that one of D.W. Robertson's more egregious errors was to set off medieval typology to what he believed to be the modern.⁷ In fact, the figural vision is maintained by great Christian writers from Pierre de Ronsard and Agrippa d'Aubigné to today's French Catholic poets, including Pierre Jean Jouve, Patrice de la Tour du Pin, and Pierre Emmanuel.⁸

Finally, we find in the works of this complex, eccentric Jesuit a powerful strain of proto-feminism, a proto-feminism that was an intellectual current in the 1640s. Post-Petrarchan *fin' amor* exists in Le Moyne's world; it can lead to good, when it occurs between a married couple, or, more often, to evil. In his epic and in his other writing, especially *La Galerie des femmes fortes* (1647), his most popular work, he proclaims as a model the *mulier fortis*. She has nothing to do with courtly love, but comes from Antiquity, from Camilla in Virgil, and from Rachel, Judith, and Deborah in the Old Testament. Think also, perhaps, of Ariosto and Tasso. Almasonte, Alsinde, Belinde, Lisamante, and Zahide partake of heroism as do the men, and exemplify the same sort of heroism. No meek, delicate martyrs enter his world view; instead of the passive, suffering protagonist of much Baroque literature, identified by Frank W. Warnke,⁹ we find a curious return to *chanson de geste*, and, for the women, going beyond the stereotypes and structures of the *chanson de geste*.

And now an all too brief conclusion and some comments for future consideration . . . In a word, Pierre Le Moyne offers fascinating material for students of the Counter-Reformation, also called the Catholic Renaissance, and of the High Baroque. His is a masterwork which goes beyond the harmony and order of the classical generation, and also beyond the harmony and order of the High Renaissance, as embodied in Ronsard and Spenser. Thus he and his colleagues cross and expand the previous boundaries, mapping the first literature since Antiquity to seek and create new modes of perception and being largely without imitating the Ancients, without the presence of Virgil, Ovid

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 141-50.

⁷ Durant Waite Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

⁸ See William Calin, *A Muse for Heroes*, chaps. 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 18; and *In Defense of French Poetry: An Essay in Reevaluation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Park, 1987), chap. 5.

⁹ Frank J. Warnke, *Versions of Baroque: European Literature in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), chap. 8; and Maskell, *The Historical Epic*, chap. 13.

and Horace. They were the *moderns*, in all senses of the term. Thus *Saint Louis* can help enrich our perspective on the so-called “grand siècle” and the Renaissance. Le Moyne offers equally well a rich fund of material for students of medievalism, a medievalism so copious, varied, and complex, prior to Romanticism. His period more generally, the Baroque Counter-Reformation, also offers a rich and largely untapped vein for medievalist exploration.

Merely speaking of the Baroque in a French setting already means crossing boundaries and undermining popular opinion. Since Voltaire’s day the “splendid century” meant the generation of Louis XIV and classicism, not the Baroque. One result of this point of view was the generally accepted notion that France was/is the embodiment of classicism, the direct heir to Greece and Rome. This attitude became enshrined in the schools, so that, to the average educated French reader of books, great literature in the past was to be identified, first of all, with Corneille, Molière, and Racine. Many of these readers, possibly most of them, had never heard the term Baroque or, if they had, they did not associate it with French literature but with Italian architecture. Save for François Villon, poets who existed before Louis XIV did so only as precursors to the classics of that time.

Medievalism has been identified primarily with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its origin to be placed in the context of Romanticism. With regard to France, the earlier centuries, it is presumed, recoiled from or completely ignored the Middle Ages because, as everybody knows, France is the land of Classicism. To delve seriously and with scholarly rigor into *ancien régime* medievalism also implies crossing boundaries and differing from general scholarly opinion. The study of Le Moyne offers this opportunity to step beyond the liminal.