

JEAN CHAPELAIN TO JEAN-BAPTISTE COLBERT

1) Paris, 18 November 1662

Monsieur,

The project which you have done me the honour of discussing is substantial, noble and fully worthy of the greatness of the King and of the greatness of your zeal for his service and for the glory of His Majesty. I have considered the proposals over and over again, and each time have been fully satisfied with the ideas. In consequence I do not think there is anything further to discuss, and that we should now move to carrying out the proposals and assessing the means required to advance them.

The striking of medals – an invention of the Greeks and Romans in order to immortalize the memory of heroic actions carried out by their princes, their military commanders and their emperors by the use of incorruptible metals, above all gold and silver – is entirely appropriate as a means to perpetuate the reputation of the King. Medals have been used throughout the ages to achieve the same aim, and it is a practice entirely compatible with the dignity of the monarchy. However I am divided as to the practical manner in which these medals should be produced, whether they should be struck in the manner of antiquity or in the modern style. The classical approach was content simply to place on the reverse of the medal an image to signify the action or event depicted on the obverse, sometimes without any text at all, sometimes with a word or two, the whole accomplished with gravitas but without much inventiveness. The modern medal, for the most part, is far more concerned with the reverse side of the medal, providing a devise which would represent the “soul” to the “body” represented on the obverse – a conceit practised in Europe over no more than the last two hundred years. Both approaches are beautiful and praiseworthy, but the antique style, through its gravitas, seems to me better suited to the status of his Royal Majesty, who I would wish to make use of the modern style of medals only on occasions of festivities and *carrousel*s. However in this matter it is obviously necessary that we should accept the will of the King and his tastes, although having presented him with the arguments for both styles of medal.

In the matter of verses, Monsieur, your ideas could not be more in accord with my own. Of all the durable symbols of monarchy, poetry is without doubt the best defended against the damage of time – provided only that a great writer is involved in the production of the verses. All the tombs, all the portraits, all the most renowned statues, have proved transient in comparison; even the most exquisite prose works have come down to us in fragments, or mutilated by lost sections. Only poetry, beginning with Homer himself, has passed down to us entirely intact. Thus, whatever your efforts to commission that which is truly great within the realm of poetry to celebrate the virtues of the King, it will be this genre which most infallibly guarantees the immortality of His Majesty and his deeds.

It is provoking that the large number of marvels that the King has already brought about, and that the even greater numbers which will follow in future under his direction, have not been celebrated in a great narrative (epic) poem. For poetry in general is distinguished from history by its use of fictive events, and the critical feature of the narrative poem is the convention absolutely forbidding the invention of great deeds which

might then be contradicted by those contemporaries, like us, who have seen the true actions and deeds. The authors of such narrative poems recognize clearly that such inventions will destroy confidence in the veracity of the rest of the account, and in consequence will harm the very reputation of the prince they wish to serve. As an alternative to other types of poetry, the prince can be celebrated through deliberate (contrived) panegyrics in which an element of fiction (hyperbole) is acceptable, but which are capable of all the sublimity of epic poems. Moreover panegyrics are written in a rhyming scheme identical to that of elegies – as was the case with that written by La Picardière for Queen Marie de Médicis and that written by Gombauld for M. le Cardinal Richelieu. For the most part these panegyrics are made up of stanzas grouped into separate odes, most notably by Malherbe for the Duc de Bellegarde, following whose example most poets have adopted this convention, judging it more agreeable than continuous verses. Sonnets themselves are not unsuitable for the celebration of great deeds, if they are written by an expert such as Malherbe, who never allows the form to diminish the heroic stature of the events described.

I come now to History which, with good reason you have judged, Monsieur, to be one of the most important means to preserve the memory of the splendour of the King's great enterprises, and the detail of his achievements. But History is like those fruits which are harvested, but are not good to eat until much later in the year. If a History does not seek to explain the reasons for the events that are recounted, if it is not accompanied by prudent reflections and accompanying documentation, what remains is simply a shallow narrative, without weight and without dignity. But even if the best sort of account is written during the reign of the Prince whose deeds it is intended to celebrate, the effect is to expose to public view the stratagems of Councils, to give enemies warning of the *modus operandi* of the Prince's government, and to betray those who have close working relations with the Prince, but whose work and success depends on remaining in the shadows and observing silence about their activities. Thus, I consider that if you wish to commission such histories of the King in the approved manner, they should be kept hidden until the damage and prejudice that a full account of the prince's activities may do to him, his servants and his allies have been dissipated by time. If, nonetheless, you (Colbert) wish to press ahead and commission histories of the reign despite this danger, then I would stress that you also need to be wary of substantial potential problems in the writing of Histories. For to be a good historian, it is necessary to be a man of considerable means and high status, to have an intimate knowledge of the aims of the projects and the conduct of the Prince, to be well-informed of the interests and ambitions of his friends and his enemies, to grasp theories of policy-making, to understand the art of war, to be knowledgeable about matters of chronology and geography, about the customs and practices of different nations, and to have an ability to read and extract the relevant portions from documents and treaties. To have all of these qualities is far from common. But over and beyond this, the historian needs to possess the sense (genius) of historical perception – which has been shared by few men indeed over the 3,000 years since Histories were first written. The latter is a natural talent, a gift from Heaven, which only operates in conjunction with a broad and receptive mind, and a lengthy experience in diplomatic or political service, or at the very least, in a Court.

How often, therefore, is it likely that men of such ability and genius will be found, to whom a task of such importance can be given without concern that it will lead to failure or inadequate execution? It's this point that most concerns me, Monsieur, in your project which is otherwise so worthy of praise. For anything which is attempted without the most carefully constructed plan and without the most rigorous economy of style and content, will never turn out well, however hopeful the various contracting parties may be at the outset. All of the possible flair and imagination committed to such a project without carefully-honed judgement and structure, will serve only to create a phony and false composition which, like a monstrous birth, will either prove still-born or will not live long.

Those capable of writing great Histories are so rare in every age, and above all in the present one, that it seems to me perilous to give the commission to any particular individual, and I have no better idea than you who to choose and to direct in nsuch a project at present.

But to ensure that the King does not lack the praise which he merits in prose as well as in verse, I am of the opinion that we should employ the best writers in order to treat his great deeds through panegyrics such as that produced by the younger Pliny for the Emperor Trajan – which far more people are capable of writing, and for which considerably fewer of the aforementioned conditions are required. Do not believe that it will be possible to find large numbers of persons even with these more reduced skills, for the age is most lacking in really great authors of any sort – as you yourself recognized. That which might be regarded as spirited writing and adherence to the formal rules of writing is, in the majority of cases, intermingled with confused organization and poor judgement. That said, I will not fail to propose to you, Monsieur, all those who in my judgement I feel would be best capable of fulfilling this task, and would be prepared to discuss their merits with you, whether for the writing of poetry or for French or Latin prose, and whether living in France or abroad. You may make up your mind on the basis of my suggestions, which are intended, sincerely and candidly, simply to offer the best advice that I can in order to facilitate your most praiseworthy intentions.

There are, Monsieur, many other praiseworthy ways of seeking to enhance and maintain the glory of His Majesty, of which the Ancients have left us innumerable examples – many of which still incite the respectful attention of the people. Examples are provided by monumental pyramids, columns, equestrian monuments, colossal statues, triumphal arches, busts of great men in marble and bronze, or bas-reliefs. All of these are traditional classical forms of glorifying the prince, to which could be added our own production of rich tapestries, paintings and frescos and our copper-plate engravings, which, although less lasting than some of the ancient forms, will nonetheless serve to preserve the memory of the prince and his deeds for times to come. But these sorts of work belong to Muses other than those concerning which you have sought out my opinions. I simply mention them so that you might decide whether they could also be incorporated into your sublime project.

2) To Colbert: Paris, 10th June 1664:

Monsieur,

I received the reply which you sent to me concerning my letter about the use of allegory in the paintings and tapestries that you have commissioned in order to celebrate the life of the King, and I consider it the greatest possible honour that neither the King nor yourself should have disagreed with my suggestions. Those gentleman who will be meeting you to discuss the project have heard my views on the matter, and have received the King's and your own orders to discuss the issues with M. Le Brun about the completion of the project.

Not a moment will be wasted in pressing ahead with the project and ensuring that M. le Brun will continue to discuss these matters with the gentlemen (of the *Académie*) – especially if it is implied to him that accommodating himself to the proposals (for the use of allegories) will be a matter very much after the King's own wishes. While waiting for more specific orders from you, we will neglect nothing on our own side to ensure that your intentions are entirely fulfilled.