

III

SUCCESSFUL STUDIES

The adolescence of Claude seems to have been just a continuation of his childhood – pious and studious. *“Nevertheless, he subsequently had to fight long battles to resist the temptation to pleasure. His temperament inclined him in that direction and invitations and the example of his friends increased the inclination; but his love of duty and the supervision of a father and mother who were anxious that he be well educated did not allow him to give free rein to it. He not only had to satisfy his director, but also his parents. On holidays, they asked for an account of the time taken to have a walk and the attention he had given to his studies. On Sundays and holydays, he was expected to give a summary of the sermon. M. and Mme. des Places did not want to rely on any one else regarding the education of a son who was so dear to them and on whom the future of their family rested. They eventually had the consolation of seeing their care rewarded by his academic achievements and by the great promise of his excellent qualities”.*¹

But if Claude retained the lessons of his religious training as he grew up, there was nothing stuffy about him. Through his pleasant manners and courteous behaviour, *“he won the approval and friendship of important people and the respect of his equals”.*²

At Rennes, as in all the Jesuit colleges, theatrical presentations were very popular. There were two each year - one in February and another at the end of August for prize-giving day. There were very many students in the school, so it is all the more remarkable that his teachers frequently called upon Claude to take part in the tragedies and the ballets which went with them. Each member of the audience was given a programme containing the titles of the plays to be performed and the names of the actors. *“In this way, they were all able to enjoy the entertainment on offer. The well-composed ballets, enhanced by music and dancing, must have been quite a spectacle”.*³

Thanks to a collection of these programmes which has survived (unfortunately incomplete), we have detailed information on several roles played by Claude. On August 27th, 1692, he took part in a ballet entitled *“Fortune”*, presented by the students of the third grade; it was part of the tragedy of *“Josaphat, King of Juda”*. On February 17th, 1694, he figured in a ballet called *“Glory”* which was attached to a tragedy about the martyrs Saints Prime et Félicien. This was given by the students of Rhetoric and Claude took the principle role of ‘Glory’.⁴ The programme explains the plot of this ballet: *“The whole population of the world is languishing in a shameful state of slothfulness, so Glory is sent down by order of Jupiter to wake them up. Glory is accompanied by Peace, Mars, Apollo and Religion, to show the people that they can distinguish themselves in peace, war, knowledge and religion”.* In the

¹ Thomas, p. 230.

² Thomas, p. 234

³ G. Durtelle de Saint-Sauveur: *“Le Collège de Rennes(1536-1762), 1918, page 161.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196

grand finale, Glory dances “surrounded by those who had excelled in these particular accomplishments”.¹

Claude’s parents did everything they could to encourage him in this kind of activity. They arranged for him to have coaching in music and singing by Joseph Manet, the organist of the cathedral. Manet was very impressed by Claude and chose him to be the godfather of his first child.²

Claude was very keen to be successful in all that he did. But one day, his reaction to teasing by his little sister, Françoise, almost ended in disaster. *“He was studying a role for a tragedy in which he was to act and his sister kept distracting him. To get rid of her and to frighten her, as people are wont to do with children, he took up a rifle which was not normally loaded and, thinking it was in its customary condition, he cocked it and pulled the trigger. And it went off! The shot passed between his mother, his sister and his cousin, about two inches from their heads. Everyone was thunderstruck with fear – his father more than anyone, for he knew that the gun had been loaded because some noise had been heard around the house the night before. However, fright was followed by joy and thanksgiving to divine Providence that had watched so carefully over the preservation of the family”.*³

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Claude studied rhetoric under Fr. Jean-Pierre de Longuemare. Although only 27, this Jesuit already had the reputation of an outstanding teacher. His expertise in eloquence and drama was noted in the *“Mercure Gallant”*, where one of its correspondents gave a very flattering account of his conference, given on March 6th, 1694, entitled, *“In praise of the Breton Nation”*. The journalist wrote: *“The praise I have heard for the talk given by Fr. De Longuemare, professor of rhetoric at the Jesuit college of Rennes, demands our attention. This priest delivered his lecture on the vigil of St. Thomas, in the presence of the Duke of Chaulnes, the Governor of the Province, and many other notables. His subject was that Brittany had never been as flourishing as during the present war, where the nation has distinguished itself by its bravery. He attributed all this to the glory of the King in such a delicate manner that everybody felt they had never heard such an eloquent discourse.”*⁴

Claude profited greatly from the lectures of this priest. At the opening of the new school year in 1694, he did not move on to philosophy; Fr. De Longuemare was very impressed with the boy and had asked his father to let him continue to guide Claude in his studies for another year. The priest had been appointed to the college in Caen, so Claude moved to the capital of Normandy to complete a second year of rhetoric. Even though he was now far from his family, he remained as he always had been. The period is well described by Pierre Thomas, who had also studied at Caen:

“Although there are many opportunities for becoming dissolute in a large town that is full of young men from different countries who are their own masters for the first time in their lives, it does not seem that Claude compromised his morals during the year he spent

¹ Ibid., p. 171.

² Baptême de Claude Manet: Reg. de Saint-Sauveur, 11th October, 1694.

³ Thomas, 233.

⁴ *Mercure Galant*, February 1695, p. 126.

there. His parents had made sure to recommend him strongly to the director and this man felt it his duty to keep a close eye on his pupil. Moreover, the young man had several safeguards on his side. He did not like wine at all and, whether by education or virtue, he was quite indifferent towards the fair sex. His one preoccupation at the time was to distinguish himself and win the increasing approval of his parents and friends by excelling in his studies in a university where brilliant minds were the order of the day. His director took care to keep this competitive spirit alive in the young student. Because his own honour was at stake, he had to watch over his pupil, urge him to work and inspire him with dislike for anything that might distract him from his studies. The authorities had good reason to be satisfied with him. He won three awards of which the one for eloquence was the most prized".¹

At Rennes, a few months before the Duke de Chaulnes handed over the government of Brittany to the Count of Toulouse, Fr. De Longuemare had set out to prove that this province had never been so flourishing. At Caen he also seized upon a similar opportunity; when the Maréchal de Luxembourg died on January 4th, 1695, he made it the subject of a theatrical presentation which was greatly praised by the *Mercurie Galant*. *"Fr. de Longuemare, the professor of rhetoric, used all his literary skill to present a three-act play entitled "The Apotheosis of Laodamas" in memory of the late Maréchal. It was given by torchlight by some of the rhetoric students of this priest, to honour a hero who had done so much for the State; it represented allegorically all that God and men had done at his death to glorify him. In the allegory, the Maréchal is known as Laodamas, which means, 'the conqueror of peoples'.*

There are many things to indicate that Claude Poullart was not just a spectator at this theatrical evening but one of the main reasons for its success.

The religious atmosphere that Claude had known at Rennes was relatively peaceful; the Jansenists had never made much of an impact there. But at Caen, things were very different. They were very numerous and active, looking for any excuse to confront the Jesuits whom they rightly saw as their principal adversaries. Claude arrived in time to hear the last rumbles of a controversy that had broken out in 1693 as a result of a theological thesis presented by a student of Fr. Honoré Carascouët. The central argument of this thesis can be summarised as follows; *"The Christian religion is divine, because it has God for its author and therefore only teaches what is divine. Therefore, it is evidently believable, but this does not mean that it is evidently true, because the truth of the mysteries that it enshrines remains partially obscured and therefore not evident".* This was excessively subtle, but the thesis reverberated *"above all, amongst the women who prided themselves on being great intellectuals".²*

Very soon, commentaries, both for and against, began to circulate. Although some of the propositions of Fr. Parascouët were not beyond criticism, the Jansenists determined to take every advantage from the furore unleashed by this thesis and turned it into a frontal attack

¹ Thomas, p. 234.

² "A letter from a theologian to one of his friends", in an anonymous manuscript in the Archives of Calvados, 2D 1139 bis.

on the Jesuits themselves. The tone of this attack is exemplified by an anonymous leaflet that was soon in circulation:

"I was not at all surprised by what was written in these horrible propositions. Once the heart is corrupted, the contagion will rapidly spread to the mind. People who follow a morality as lax and pernicious as that of the Jesuits will inevitably reflect this in their writings.

*"These theses of Caen reminded me of the advice given to his friends and clerical students by the illustrious Alain de Solminihac. When he was dying, this holy bishop of Cahors warned them solemnly to be on their guard against the teaching and conduct of the Jesuits, assuring them that they were the most dangerous enemies of the Church and they should never be engaged as spiritual directors or formators of young clerical students. This wise Prelate, enlightened from heaven, foresaw the deep wounds that these 'venerable' priests were capable of inflicting on the spouse of Jesus Christ!."*¹

Such passionate attacks only served to strengthen the attachment of Claude to his Jesuit teachers and to make him react strongly against the calumnies of this sect. All his life, he remained faithful to the sons of St. Ignatius. When he eventually founded the Seminary of the Holy Spirit, he resisted pressure coming from Cardinal de Noailles and insisted that all direction and teaching for his young students would be given exclusively by the Jesuits.

At the end of the scholastic year, Claude returned to Brittany. He brought with him not only many books that he had been awarded as prizes and which his disciples carefully preserved in his memory right up to the Revolution, but also *"a great facility of expression and a grasp of public speaking which later helped him so much in presenting cogent reasons why people should lead a virtuous life"*.² It also made him very wary of Jansenism and led him into a growing devotion to the Mother of God and her Immaculate Conception.

Back at the Collège Saint-Thomas, the course of philosophy lasted for two years, the first devoted to logic and the second to physics and metaphysics. There were two professors in residence, but both taught the entire programme. Each class had at least 200 students, of whom a large number were destined for the priesthood.³

At the start of the academic year of 1695, Claude Poullart entered the class of Fr. Prévost. He was a specialist in scholastic philosophy, but he was also a *"very holy religious, devoted to the sanctification of his pupils... He had a special devotion to the Blessed Virgin and was keen to share this with those he taught"*.⁴

Claude studied philosophy under the eyes of his father and mother *"and they would not have tolerated undue freedom or waste of time. They knew how to maintain their authority and they redoubled their watchfulness over their son. They fostered that noble spirit of*

¹ *"An account of what happened regarding the thesis that was presented at Caen"*, pp. 6-7

² Thomas, p. 235

³ According to J-B Blain, at the time when Louis Grignon was following the lectures of Fr. Prévost there were around 400 students in the class!

⁴ Blain

*emulation which they had always observed in him and if they granted him a little more liberty, they took great care that he did not abuse it”.*¹

In no way had Claude lost his desire to shine academically as his parents wished, but he also greatly benefited from the classes and exhortations of Fr. Prévost. Shortly before the holidays, each professor of philosophy would organise a large public debate. For the “*Grand Acte*” as it was called, “*The most outstanding student in the class was given the task of defending the doctrine of his teacher. Having made his presentation in Latin, he then entered into debate*”. The event and the subject of debate were advertised throughout the town a month before it was to take place. When the day arrived, the bells were rung to summon the distinguished audience. The debate was conducted in a syllogistic format in Latin.

At the end of his first year of philosophy, Claude was chosen to make this presentation by Fr. Prévost. He dedicated his thesis to a young man only a few months older than himself, His Serene Highness the Count of Toulouse, the son of Louis XIV. Two years earlier, the Count had been appointed Governor of Brittany. “*The financial outlay for this event was extraordinary. The President and Councillors of Parliament, who assisted with due ceremony along with all persons of rank and importance in the city and the neighbourhood, took part in the event*”.² When the defence came to an end, everybody was talking about Claude, his knowledge and his eloquence. The Count de Marbeuf was very proud of his godson and M. and Mme. des Places were more certain than ever that the dreams they had always cherished for their son’s future would soon become a reality.



¹ Thomas, p. 237

² Thomas, p. 239