

The Fair Cloak of Vengeance:

Antoine de Montfleury's *La Femme juge et partie* (1669)

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The quest for revenge was something of a common theme in seventeenth-century French theatre, though in two divergent contexts. Where vengeance has most readily been understood to sustain the poignant narrative of tragedy that was the lifeblood of classical theatre, this has not been the case for the comedies of the same period. Vengeance in comedy, if no less prevalent, has figured more peripherally as a spirited catalyst for its blithe and mannered scenarios. As a result, critics have tended to underestimate the potential meaning and socio-critical consequence of the disruptive and volatile motivation that fuels revenge when it figures within the relatively benign setting of a comic *divertissement*.

In classical French theatre, Jean Racine famously invested the Greco-Roman models of personal violation and public retribution with an intrinsic presence and passionate quality that resonated with French audiences.¹ This understanding of vengeance eventually became a hallmark of tragedy during the 1660s and 70s, spawned a contemporaneous theoretical discourse on its place in the public sphere, and has been thoroughly studied and deconstructed ever since. This is not the case for the treatment of the quest for revenge in comedies of that same period. Recent scholarship has, in fact, confirmed its exclusion from the literary debate as evidenced, for example, in Éric Méchoulan's important article on "Revenge and Poetic Justice in Classical France".

¹ This is not to overlook the importance of Corneille's seminal treatment of the subject in the tragicomedy, *Le Cid* (1636) that greatly shaped the ethos of revenge dominating tragic theatre in the latter half of the century.

Here, he specifically insists on tragedy and the novel as the literary foci of revenge studies. A further defining collection of articles on *Ancien Régime* vengeance by such authorities as Christian Biet, Aurélia Gaillard, and Anne Defrance, among others, underlines this restriction to the socio-political public sphere, novels, and theatrical tragedy² while building upon the groundwork laid in the 1980s by Raymond Verdier's collection of multi-disciplinary essays on *La Vengeance*.

As a topos of comedy, defined chiefly by an obligatory happy ending, vengeance generally lacks that inexorable immediacy within the boundaries of a protean poetic form. In outward appearance, if not entirely in spirit, order must always be restored within recognized institutions such as marriage, family, and the prevailing social hierarchy. Consequently, the mechanisms of comic plot and distraction, whether involving trickery, transvestism, mistaken identity or more menacing threats of violence, tend to be largely mitigated by an unequivocal conclusion. All challenging elements of a capricious *monde à l'envers* must, of necessity, be neatly replaced at the point of *dénouement* with their socially normative counterparts, thus deflating the enduring importance of plot-specific motives, social issues and individual concerns.

Antoine de Montfleury's (1639-1685) largely overlooked *La femme juge et partie*,³ however, is an exceptionally profound comedy in that it transcends stock expectations on many levels, most notably in its use of vengeance at the core of its plot.

The playwright also adroitly introduces commentary on gender, violence, and justice in a

² Méchoulan also edited and contributed to this exceptional collection of articles on the wide-spread representation of vengeance in Ancien Régime literature (with emphasis on tragedies and novels). It is also interesting to note that scholars of English literature have long identified "revenge tragedy" as a distinct and popular genre of Elizabethan theatre inspired by the same Senecan paradigms of violence and vengeance that later fueled an important subset of 17th-century French classical tragedy. See most recently, Condon, et al.

³ All citations of *La femme juge et partie* are drawn from Antoine Jacob de Montfleury, *La femme juge et partie* (Paris: Chez Jean Ribou, 1680).

nuanced and revealing theatrical production that merits closer appreciation. The play, first performed to great success in 1669, contains a remarkable scenario in which the agonizingly private politics of vengeance intersect with the power of public justice. What adds to its singularity is that the two features are conflated within and ultimately embodied by a single female victim/hero/heroine who navigates these complex issues of passion, identity, and retribution in the unlikely framework of a transvestite comedy.

Though this play offers a full measure of clever dialogue, complete with a cross-dressed protagonist placed in predictably enigmatic and sexually ambiguous situations, its dramatic foundation is not just the stuff of gentle satire.⁴ The violence at its core, for example, far exceeds the famous and fleeting assault on Martine, so amply repaid in Molière's elegantly constructed *Le Médecin malgré lui*. Montfleury's heroine, Julie, is driven throughout *La femme juge et partie* by a compulsion, first to understand and then to avenge her own apparent murder.

During the opening scenes of this *comédie d'intrigue*, Montfleury acquaints his audience with the violently tragic circumstances that long preceded the action and yet actively define the direction of the plot and the depths of understanding he will allow his comedic play to achieve. In accordance, of course, with the classical unities, the single day's events transpire in the household of Bernadille; a jealous bourgeois who was apparently widowed three years previously when his wife, Julie, supposedly fell ill and died during a voyage at sea. In a masterful exposition, Bernadille's valet and Julie's former maid discuss the folly of their master's intention to remarry that very day. The

⁴ See Forestier, Garber, Harris, and Steinberg for comprehensive analyses of the form and function of transvestism in French 17th-century theatre, literature, and culture. Forestier in particular catalogues dozens of plays during the early modern era in which transvestism figured in some form, mostly in a somewhat frivolous manner motivated by love or mischief.

manservant's disapproval is quickly revealed to be less a matter of opinion than one of conscience as he struggles with the dreadful secret of Julie's supposed demise. He reveals that her death was the result of Bernadille's cold-blooded intent to simultaneously punish and rid himself of the wife he believed unfaithful. Having at that time observed a man's hasty departure from his wife's apartment, the audience is informed that Bernadille assumed the worst. Bypassing any formal accusation, he summarily chose to avenge himself by contriving Julie's death rather than to avail himself of any of the legal recourses afforded a cuckolded husband, none of which, however, permitted uxoricide.⁵ By suggesting this visceral reaction to the mere suspicion of infidelity, Montfleury draws attention to an alarming tendency in early modern France for husbands to circumvent favorable laws dealing with marital infidelity.⁶ The autogenous alternative was to exact an extra-legal, private revenge rather than submit the offending spouse to the exercise of public and supposedly dispassionate justice.

When we first encounter Bernadille on the day he is to marry a new fiancée, Constance, he is in a profound state of disquiet, not for a guilty conscience, but because of a portentous fear that his nuptial plans may be in jeopardy. Montfleury allows Bernadille to articulate a fleeting uncertainty on his widowerhood: "Je fis voeu d'être veuf, & le suis que je pense." [I,ii] These are the prescient words that raise the fundamental element of doubt that runs throughout the play and predicts the equivocal nature of all that will transpire. For the benefit of his audience and before his conscience-

⁵ Among other remedies, a husband could obtain a "lettre de cachet" providing for the confinement/imprisonment of an adulterous wife in a convent, for instance. He could also seek public shaming or a wife's return to her family without losing control over her assets. For further discussion, see Desan.

⁶ See a lengthy essay on the subject in Carroll, chapter 10.

stricken valet, Montfleury also has Bernadille review the lurid, murderous details of what he manifestly felt was a justified act:

Tant qu'arrivez aux bords d'une Isle inhabitée,
Par mon commandement Julie y fut portée.
Voyant qu'on l'y laissoit, d'un ton piteux & doux,
Elle crioit, mon cher, pourquoy me quittez-vous?
De peur d'être attendry par des douceurs pareilles,
Je luy tournois le dos, & bouchois mes oreilles.
[...]
Après que je me fus vengé de cette sorte,
Quand je fus de retour, je dis qu'elle étoit morte[.] [I,ii]

Bernadille's treacherous abandonment of Julie to die on a deserted island underlines his calculated intention to personally exercise the ultimate form of vengeful violence in condemning her to a long and miserable death as befits her supposed adultery.⁷ In Montfleury's hands, this pre-meditated and merciless punishment defines a contorted view of *lex talionis*, or an eye for an eye. Bernadille's privately held notion of retributive justice dictates that perceived adultery can only be answered with death, thus equating the two transgressive acts with the absolute confidence that a wife's life is the appropriate price for a husband's social and sexual humiliation. In abandoning Julie to die, Bernadille re-establishes for himself, through vengeance, a perverse moral equilibrium and is loath to look back, both literally and figuratively.

This cold-blooded episode of cruel intent is obscured for the audience by the fact that it occurs well beyond the scope of the stage.⁸ Yet, the power of description and the echo of suggestion render the act more shocking than the playwright could have ever

⁷ According to Ruff 117-118, pre-meditated murder during this period was generally quite rare. Involuntary manslaughter was much more the norm rendering the intention behind Bernadille's act of violence particularly heinous.

⁸ See Solga's monograph on the power of the performance of invisible acts of violence on the Early Modern stage.

represented on stage without contravening strict rules of propriety (*bienséance*).⁹ Montfleury asks his audience to accept this account of the past, delivered like the testimony of a witness and so invites them to judge independently the implications of the initial act of vengeance. Tellingly, however, even the specter of doubt that gradually disrupts Bernadille's composure remains studiously devoid of regret. In fact, he quickly dispels all thoughts of his former wife as he confesses himself more perturbed by the troubling presence of a splendid young man named Frédéric who has recently arrived in the company of the region's governing Duke and has attracted much attention, including that of his fiancée.

Predictably, before the first Act ends, the audience alone learns wherein lie all the complications that will prove Bernadille's undoing and from which Julie will derive strength, wisdom, and the impetus to exact her own revenge. As the servants compare notes, we discover that Julie was never unfaithful – the young man fleeing her rooms was the maid's lover. Too afraid to admit her indiscretion because of Bernadille's deadly threats ("Ta perte est assurée, me dit-il, tu mourras si tu déguises rien." [I, i]), the maid failed to contradict her master's suspicion when questioned. Moreover, when she learns from the valet that her actions may have precipitated Julie's death, she bribes him for his silence.

With only the audience complicit in the murderous cover-up, we are then introduced to Julie, cross-dressed in the masculine garb of Frédéric and fully possessed of this altered identity. She briefly imparts a crucial confidence in conversation with her only confidant, Octave, when she explains to him the circumstances of her survival and the extraordinary events that now return her home in a cross-gendered disguise that runs

⁹ See Merlin-Kajman on theorizing *bienséance* during the 17th century.

far deeper than her external trappings. Having been fortuitously rescued from her sepulchral island by passing mariners, she traveled with them to Venice where she first opted to dress as a man simply to ensure her safety. However, what began as a transgressive act born of necessity ultimately turned into the means for her revenge. She took the name of Fédéric and, until this scene with Octave, has permitted no one to learn the true nature of her identity. Octave, it should be noted, plays no other role than to figure as the embodiment of a complicit audience – what he learns, we learn. He is the interlocutor who enables Julie to describe her development and transformation while gradually exposing the form her revenge will take.

Filling in the details of the missing years, she tells of her travails in Venice. Already cross-dressed and cultivating a set of mannerisms and behaviours to match, she met an erstwhile neighbour from her country of origin in the person of its highly influential Duke. Although known to her by sight, he had not previously made her acquaintance, so her transvestite disguise is never suspect and they soon become friends and traveling companions. His ducal personality proves to be the forthright masculine influence that provides Julie not only with an impressive setting for her disguise, but also with the authority to exploit its advantages to their full potential. After nearly three years traveling together, the Duke has returned home, accompanied by his trusted countryman, Fédéric, whom he deems worthy of a great future in his realm. When Julie makes her entrance on stage, it is also implied that she has already spent time insinuating herself into Bernadille's social circle in her now practiced guise of an ambitious young man, fortunate enough to have the ear of the powerful Duke. From this advantageous position,

the potential reward of merely exercising comic social and sexual disruption will yield, at this juncture in the play, to the implacable appeal of vengeance.

Montfleury's concise plot line and clever language convinces the audience by the end of Act I that Julie has undergone a profound transformation in every aspect of her appearance, personality, and demeanour. Her disguise, far from merely sartorial, is shown to have been quite literally and violently emblazoned on her skin and psyche by the hardship she has endured. When Octave wonders how Bernadille has so far failed to recognize his own wife, she observes bitterly:

[...] Et comment
Me reconnaîtroit-il sous ce déguisement?
Depuis plus de trois ans il croit que je suis morte,
Et mon teint a depuis bruny de telle sorte,
Du hâle et du chagrin que mon sort me causoit,
Qu'il faudrait s'étonner s'il me reconnoissoit. [I,iii]

Montfleury safeguards the dramatic integrity of both his play and his cross-dressed character in this short and elegant explanation of how it could be that not even her husband's gaze can penetrate the depth of her disguise.

With the logistics of her appearance established, Julie takes full advantage of the re-gendered power afforded by her transformed identity to craft her own revenge. Her clear intention is to visit upon her husband the same sort of wrath as that which befell her by blindsiding the unsuspecting Bernadille with anguish and misery comparable, in some truncated way, to the suffering she has already endured. At this point, her concept of revenge reflects precisely that of her husband and demands proportionate punishment for the senseless assault on her own life. When Octave proposes that Julie simply allow Bernadille to marry unlawfully (rendering him a bigamist) and then reveal herself to bring about his humiliation, she responds that “une telle vengeance est indigne de moi”

[I,iii]. This sense of dignity relative to such a serious mission proves that her appreciation of self-worth forms an integral part of a transformed sense of being; one that rises above the ordinary social expectations of feminine value during this period of French history when the economy of personal worth depended heavily upon a gendered hierarchy. The plot, though still loosely contained within the traditional structure of a comedy, begins to assume the unprecedented and menacing countenance of tragedy as the drive for revenge begins to supersede norms of social convention.

Octave explicitly presses the issue and inquires “Aimez-vous la vengeance?” [I,iii] The answer to this question, so crucial to the outcome of the power struggle that now ensues between Julie as Frédéric and her unsuspecting husband, will suggest itself to us by the end of the play. It will ultimately prove the measure of Julie’s development while perhaps helping us to gauge the character of Montfleury’s controversial views on female authority and the feminine condition. Although there are moments of levity while Julie as Frédéric tempts Constance, titillating the audience with sexual confusion¹⁰ and enflaming Bernadille’s jealous nature, we are moved, most importantly, towards the long-overdue response to her mistreatment as news comes that the Duke has named Frédéric chief magistrate for the region. This was a position of influence that Bernadille himself had dearly sought going so far, in Act II, as to set aside pride and beg Frédéric to plead for him with the Duke. Receiving such a request from Bernadille allowed Julie an unanticipated moment of vengeful pleasure as she made a false promise of help, declining gold in favour of the unusual condition that he declare Frédéric to be a true friend, “que pour jamais l’amitié nous unisse.” [II,ii]

¹⁰ As mentioned previously, cross-dressed comedies were common during the seventeenth-century and most exploited the provocative suggestion of same-sex intimacy for superficial comic effect, stopping short of more profound exploration of transvestism as a transformative strategy.

This request, lightly and insincerely granted by Bernadille, nevertheless serves to underscore an important element of Julie's objective; that is to extract from her husband the basic acknowledgement of an equal relationship of the sort she could scarcely expect in her original, female form. Equipped, as she now is, with not only the accoutrements, but also the influence of a more successful man than Bernadille, she only paused to confirm this recognition of equality before surpassing him entirely. Because Frédéric was thought the worthier candidate for high office and so was appointed to it, Bernadille is now appalled that such a supposed friendship as the one Frédéric insisted upon sealing is so easily betrayed. Julie, however, has the satisfaction of knowing that a false bond of friendship can be as readily and abruptly broken as were her husband's bonds of marriage three years earlier. Yet Bernadille remains unaware that the unfathomable stranger before him has only just begun to exact her revenge.

Julie's first act as magistrate is to have him arrested for an undisclosed crime, initially exercising a moderate degree of that particular range of legislated violence inherent to seventeenth-century France's judiciary. Bernadille's ensuing bewilderment is calculated to reflect the years of doubt Julie endured unaware, as indeed she still is, of the original cause of her ruin. What follows is a summary trial, so neatly conceived that it truly earned Montfleury the distinction of having written the play that equals, if it does not surpass, Molière's *Tartuffe* in importance (Léris 189). Contemporaries, the two playwrights enjoyed an enduring rivalry and both plays aroused controversy, but Molière gained greater notoriety for satirizing the Church, while his rival's interest in all too prescient gendered social and legal issues only incited a passing public debate and little lasting fame.

Montfleury addresses these concerns before the trial begins, when he has Julie step aside and ponder, in soliloquy, the propriety and ramifications of her judicial garb along with the authority it represents. It is a complex disguise, the adoption of which complicates what had been, thus far, a uniquely gender-based act of cross-dressing. Her speech allows the playwright to acknowledge and discuss the potential offense against strict rules of *bienséance* in the depiction of a woman who not only bests her husband, but goes so far as to accept an office to which a woman simply cannot accede; an office that assumes a precise intellectual apparatus to which a woman is supposed to have little access. Worse yet, she is in the unlikely position of contemplating the condemnation of her own husband in a reversal of roles that would normally see a husband condemn a wife. In addressing such a serious transgression of theatrical norms, Montfleury shares his own reasoning with his audience when Julie is shown to weigh, in her own conscience, the merits of proceeding with her plan.

A moment of introspection signals Julie's first real appropriation of the role of judge when she undertakes deliberations that transcend both masculine and feminine sensibilities. To mitigate some of the concerns he raises, Montfleury resorts to the time honoured remedy of gently reminding his audience of the basic constraints on Julie/Fédéric's situation. Any outrage to the exigencies of either theatrical or social behaviour are always temporary and will, unquestionably, be assuaged in the end. First, however, Julie demands that such metatheatrical concerns be set aside to allow her to "jouir d'un moment de vengeance." [III,v]

As the interrogation begins, Bernadille assumes that Fédéric has contrived an obscure charge to prevent the wedding and take Constance for 'his' own.

Characteristically, he resorts to hurling abuse at the newly minted judge, only to fall momentarily silent when Frédéric raises the specter of his dead wife and asks him to describe her. His pause for thought is short lived and his impudent behaviour immediately resumes while Julie gradually assumes a commensurate air of authority as she attempts to temper a tendency to rapid judgment with an equally quick wit. In fact, she will require all of her carefully honed faculties to lead Bernadille to confess his crime during proceedings in which, as yet, no formal accusation has been lodged. In this manner, Montfleury structures another attenuated parallel to the ordeal that Julie endured when Bernadille judged her without any judicial process at all. Unlike her, Bernadille will eventually have his say. Julie, though, is inclined to prolong the agony and force self-incrimination, thus transforming Bernadille into the very instrument of her revenge.

Exercising the full range of her powers as *juge*, she continues to pursue a severe line of questioning, despite Bernadille's invective, until the gravity, if not the nature, of his predicament is revealed. At that very moment, he ignobly offers Frédéric his place at the altar beside Constance in exchange for freedom. Julie is immune to such impropriety, not only because of her gender, but because she has shown herself throughout to be "incorruptible" [II,ii], a quality that only invigorates her campaign for undiluted revenge. Moreover, by this time, her original identity seems so far subsumed to her complex persona of male judge, female accuser, and ultimately potential executioner, as to have become both physically and philosophically unrecognizable. Nevertheless, though she wields decisive power of life and death and is little inclined to tolerate Bernadille's unruly performance, she does explain to him the peril of his situation.

After many leading questions on the circumstances of his wife's death, all falsely answered, she informs him that she is not only aware that he murdered his wife, but that she is intimately acquainted with all the details. Bernadille is now entirely at her mercy and there is only one route to redemption:

Ta vie est en ma main,
Ton crime m'est connu, tu t'en défends en vain;
Ton sort me fait pitié, je te veux secourir;
Ne me force donc pas à te faire mourir.
Oüy, malgré ton forfait, & la mort de Julie,
Si tu confesses tout, je te sauve la vie. [IV,ii]

He must confess to his crime and provide justification for having committed it in the first place. As the trial proceeds, now *in camera*, and therefore only in the presence of the judge, he resists confessing the truth, at first claiming it was Julie's indulgence in all things feminine and frivolous that drove him to despair. Her anger is piqued by this false accusation and she redoubles her threats of execution until Bernadille finally and fully admits how he came to think his wife unfaithful.

Knowing her own innocence, Julie readily believes his confession and Montfleury now reveals a particularly progressive light in her worldly wisdom. He has her contrast the social reality of contemporary gendered relations with legal specifications to which they could be subjected in an approximation of the notion of the double standard. In a realistic judgment of the underlying reasoning of Bernadille's vengeful act, that he thought himself cuckolded, Julie, the wife and private individual, is incredulous, "Est-ce là le sujet de tout ce grand courroux?" [V,v], while Frédéric, the *juge* and public hand of justice, demonstrates an acute awareness of the fact of adultery not to mention the disconnect between *de facto* practice versus *de jure* imperative in the treatment of adulterous women, both real and imagined. Were all husbands to avenge their honour by

dispatching their wives as had Bernadille, “Cette Isle inhabitée où vous mîtes la vôtre, Deviendrait un pays plus peuplé que le nôtre. [V,v]”

Well aware of the institutionalized condemnation of infidelity, Julie offers her husband the chance to somehow justify his crime by proving his wife’s infidelity. When he cannot and his reasoning disintegrates, Bernadille is revealed to understand his error, and becomes inconsolable, not out of grief, but out of fear for his very soul:

Cet injuste trépas demande une victime,
La vertu fait ma honte et le malheur mon crime.
Le desordre où j’en suis, ne peut s’imaginer.
Mais je voy Frédéric qui va me condamner. [V,v].

As he sees Frédéric step forward to condemn him to death, he laments:

Je pense, en le voyant, voir devant moi ma Femme;
Le frisson de la mort m’a déjà saisi l’âme. [V,v].

Not until Bernadille truly believes he is to be executed does he finally begin to view his wife, figuratively at first, as a person. Though he still believes he is looking on the face of Frédéric who has, in the course of the day, reduced his life to nothing, he begins at last, if only unconsciously, to pierce through three years of disguise and development, to recognize the true nature of his wife. Only then, when Julie’s power over her husband is absolute and she is assured of the sincerity of his contrition, does she judge it necessary to return to him both his freedom and his wife. In revealing her true identity to all, the playwright formally re-established the order of things. However, in contrast to most transvestite comedies, where the emphasis is on the idea that “love serves both to reinstate gender difference [...] and to demonstrate the cross-dressed woman’s subordination to the man through her readiness to forsake her male privilege for him,” (Harris 190) Montfleury seems to have broadened the scope of gendered identities within

the framework of comedy. In casting her return to womanhood, he appears to point Julie to a new-found sense of wisdom and superiority thus rendering her place tantalizingly indeterminate even at the close.

Montfleury, in effect, so arranged his plot that he need not return Julie to any pre-defined physical state or social status as generally expected in comic theatre. The audience was never given a basis for comparison or primary frame of reference against which to measure Julie's character after her highly anticipated return to the status of woman and wife from that of victim, man, and judge. Our only knowledge of what Julie once was is furnished through narrative. Her previous, normative existence was obscured and brought to a seemingly violent end long before the play even begins. Consequently, by a seeming sleight of hand and contrary to the demands of dramaturgical convention, she was not returned to the *status quo*, suggesting that her transformation was not merely sartorial, nor was it only fueled by the exigencies of vengeance. Montfleury thus opens the door for the audience to wonder if they have witnessed a real change in a rare and evolving identity.

In her vengeful journey through this remarkable play, Julie/Fédéric is shown to reflect the playwright's wholesale appropriation of ambiguity to achieve a more profound understanding of the play's chief character and the qualities she embodies. Having seized the opportunity to exercise the rule of public law with the option of exacting unimpeded personal vengeance on a man with few redeeming qualities, Montfleury has Julie choose, against all odds, the noble side of justice. From a humanistic perspective, she weighs the failings of the man against the quality of forgiveness that she alone can dispense, having

come to a unique understanding of human nature through the travails of an evolving identity.

What then is the answer to Octave's question of Julie at the beginning of the play, "aimez-vous la vengeance?" Madame de la Sablière (1640-1693) observed that vengeance always springs from the weakness of man's soul which is incapable of withstanding insult.¹¹ Montfleury offers us, in Bernadille, a stock character, the very example of this timely *sentence* that reads like a post-script to a classical tragedy. Julie, on the other hand, is guided through a wide range of highly gendered experiences, not the least of which was confronting the dangers of violence in both its legal and extra legal aspects – as its female victim in the latter case, and its judicial executioner in the former. Yet Julie's answer to Octave's question must forever reside in the elusive spirit of the play and the unique and evolving perspective of its audience and readers, then and, all too infrequently, now. In his day, Montfleury could only treat himself to a brief and enigmatic exploration of Julie's gendered character before having to recast it in its conventional theatrical form.

¹¹ "La vengeance procède toujours de la faiblesse de l'âme, qui n'est pas capable de supporter les injures." La Sablière. This maxim is still widely but erroneously attributed to La Rochefoucauld because Madame de la Sablière's *Maximes Chrétiennes* were first published in the 18th century as an anonymous appendix to La Rochefoucauld's *Réflexions, sentences et maximes morales*. See Conley 82 for a fascinating explanation of how this came about.

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