A Constellation of Courts

Published by Leuven University Press

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Anne of Austria, 
founder of the Val-de-Grâce in Paris 

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It might be rather surprising to include an article concerning a Parisian abbey in a book on the Habsburg courts. I was nevertheless delighted to accept the invitation to contribute to this volume since it gives me the opportunity to re-place that singular royal foundation in a new and wider perspective, the *pietas austriaca*, than that of traditional French historiography. Apart from some concise and often misleading allusions to the Escorial, the historians who have been studying Anne of Austria or the Val-de-Grâce Abbey never tried to relate the former infanta’s religious sensibility with that of her Spanish and Austrian relatives. They ignored the Styrian court of Graz as well as the convents of the *Descalzas Reales* and the *Encarnación* in Madrid. Consequently, the Val-de-Grâce, obviously one of the most outstanding 17th-century century Parisian buildings, remains quite neglected and misunderstood, in spite of very valuable studies by art historians.1 It appears like a rather strange exception without any significant consequences on French classicism: an abbey founded by a devout queen who withdrew there in accordance with the piety of a foreign and often rival dynasty, a Roman-inspired church in a country supposed to have resisted the so-called “temptation of baroque architecture”. A detailed study what Anne of Austria intended to do will certainly bring out a more accurate and renewed definition of the whole architectural enterprise of the Val-de-Grâce.

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WHY FOUNDING THE VAL-DE-GRÂCE?

The encounter with Mother Marguerite

When in 1615 the infanta Anna left her father the Spanish king to become queen of France, he advised her to visit convents as she used to do before.² In France, too, kings’ and queens’ daughters would do it as a rule, like several devout ladies of the court. In 1616 or 1617, the queen met the Benedictine prioress of Notre-Dame de Grâce de la Ville-l’Evèque, near Paris, Marguerite de Veny d’Arbouze, whose religious name was Mother Marguerite de Sainte-Gertrude.³ She spoke Spanish very well and the queen became friendly with her.⁴ When the prioress was recalled to her abbey at Montmartre, Anne of Austria asked her royal husband to make her abbess somewhere. The king chose to appoint her to the Val-Profond Abbey at Bièvres, south of Paris, a religious place that in 1513 started to be known as the Val-de-Grâce de Notre-Dame de la Crèche (“Our Lady of Nativity’s in the Vale of Grace”). On 21 March 1619, the queen attended the new abbess’s investiture and her own coach took her to the abbey. At the queen’s request, Louis XIII granted permission to the nuns to move from Bièvres to Paris, where they bought the house of the Petit-Bourbon in the southern suburbs (Faubourg Saint-Jacques) in front of the Carmelite nuns’ house. On 4 March 1621, the queen announced that she would become the founder of the abbey, giving enough money to buy the new house, and, in September, while she was still busy with the king besieging the southern protestant town of Montauban, the nuns moved from Bièvres to Paris, near queen and court.

⁴ A generation earlier, in Madrid, when the young queen Margaret arrived from Styria in 1599 without being fluent in Castilian, she could speak in German at the convent of the Descalzas Reales with empress Maria (widow of emperor Maximilian II) and her daughter sister Margaret of the Cross: Magdalena Sánchez, *The Empress, the Queen and the Nun. Women and Power at the Court of Philip III of Spain* (Baltimore and London, 1998), 141.
The queen’s vow

In doing so, Anne of Austria felt individually protected. She paid all the more visits to the Val-de-Grâce as her position at court became more difficult. After a miscarriage in 1622, the king deserted her and didn’t trust her anymore. As a foreign woman unable to give a Dauphin to the kingdom, she found herself in a hopeless situation, the centre of court intrigues and constantly spied by the king’s and Richelieu’s creatures. In such conditions, Mother Marguerite’s friendship and spiritual advice made the Val-de-Grâce especially attractive.

After Marguerite’s death 1626, the queen gave Father Ferraige – the Val-de-Grâce chaplain – the responsibility of writing a life of Mother Marguerite, which was published 1628. Its frontispiece shows how strong the queen’s attachment to the abbess was. Both are represented kneeling and praying, on either side of the corpus Christi, the queen with a globe and sceptre, the abbess with a crook and ruler. The Nativity is represented behind this radiant monstrance, and, on both sides, the Virgin Mary and the angel Gabriel, are reminiscent of the Annunciation. The engraving shows the angel’s promise and its extraordinary fulfilment, and also conveys a dual feeling of suffering as well as hope: the lack of a Dauphin as well as the faith in God to whom nothing is impossible. The childless queen identifies with the Virgin and the angel’s promise applies to her, too. Anne vowed to build a magnificent church if she were given a son.

Unfortunately, time went on without the queen producing any child, and the king declared war on Spain. Lonely, under close watch, the queen would often visit the Val-de-Grâce, whose abbess, Louise de Milley, the spiritual heiress of Mother Marguerite, was born in Franche-Comté, a Spanish territory. The abbey was used by the queen as a secret letter-box for her correspondence with her brother the Cardinal-Infant, governor of the Low Countries, and his mayordomo mayor, the marquis of Mirabel. When it was discovered in August 1637, chancellor Séguier and the archbishop of Paris, Gondi, entered the Val-de-Grâce and searched the nuns’ cells and the queen’s own apartment. They found nothing there, but the abbess was deposed and exiled in a castle outside Paris, the queen herself interrogated about her letters and in the end proved guilty by Richelieu of corresponding with the enemy. The worse was still to come: she was forced to write and sign

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5 Claude Dulong, “Anne d’Autriche, la piété d’une reine, la piété d’une mère,” in Trésors d’art sacré à l’ombre du Val-de-Grâce [see n. 1], 48-51.
a full confession she submitted to her husband. From then on, the king forbade her to enter any convent without his permission.\textsuperscript{6}

\textit{Fulfilment}

Still without a Dauphin and guilty of secret correspondence with the king’s enemies, Anne of Austria was in grave danger of being repudiated and she was obliged to abandon her fate to Richelieu. But the cardinal was well aware that the kingdom without a Dauphin was on the road to destruction, and he urged the king to draw closer to his wife. In January 1638, it became clear that the queen had become pregnant and on 5\textsuperscript{th} September she gave birth to Louis Dieudonné whose Christian name expresses how immensely relieved the new parents felt. Later, in 1640, Anne gave birth to another son, Philip, duke of Anjou. Louis XIII granted his wife permission to visit convents again, except the Val-de-Grâce whose access remained forbidden to her. She therefore refused to visit any convent as long as she could not visit her own foundation. However, her unexpected double motherhood greatly improved her situation at court. Richelieu died in 1642 and when Louis XIII died, too, in May 1643, she became queen-regent. As soon as her husband died, she sent for Louise de Milley. At few weeks later, on Whitsunday, she herself returned to the Val-de-Grâce.

Anne of Austria was very proud of her sons. She was now queen-mother and regent, unexpectedly leaning on cardinal Mazarin to govern France. The prayers of the barren and humbled queen were granted. It now remained for her to fulfil her vow and build a large and magnificent church. In April 1645, the still very young king, Louis XIV, laid the foundation stone. A gold medal, by Jean Varin, explains the importance of such a ceremony: on one side the queen and her son are represented, alluding to the prayers’ fulfilment; on the other side, the church stand for the vow’s fulfilment.\textsuperscript{7}

The former infant of Spain is now the queen-regent of France at a time of war with Spain, and her main task is to preserve her son’s royal inheritance and establish his power. She shows how grateful she is for being the king’s mother. Three ceremonies can sum it up: 1624, the queen lays the foundation stone of the first abbey buildings; 1645, her son the king does the same for the church; and 1655, her younger son,

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Mignot} Mignot, \textit{Le Val-de-Grâce}, 26.
\bibitem{Mignot} Mignot, \textit{Le Val-de-Grâce}, 33-34.
\end{thebibliography}
the duke of Anjou, attends the monastery’s achievement. Both Anne’s sons were therefore associated to their mother’s vow.

The queen’s monastery

The original abbey

Moving 1621 to the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, the Benedictine nuns settled on the outskirts of the capital’s not far away from other important convents, those of the Carmelite nuns, the Ursulines, the Feuillantines, etc., along the ancient road to Spain and Santiago de Compostella. We know little about the original abbey. It consisted of medieval buildings, the Petit-Bourbon (later destroyed) and of new ones, erected from 1624 onwards. The cloister remained unfinished. Such a haphazard complex of buildings is typically reminiscent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, the former house of the contador Gutiérrez, which was used as residence by empress Isabella and later turned into a convent. Empress Maria, Maximilian II’s widow, when she returned to Spain, settled in her apartment near the closure and was therefore able to communicate with her daughter, Sor Margarita de la Cruz, the former archduchess Margarita.

At the Val-de-Grâce, Anne of Austria, who first settled in the Petit-Bourbon – which, despite its name, was never a royal house –, hard an apartment fitted for her inside the abbey, on the first floor of the eastern wing overlooking the garden. This was the very place of the 1637 search. Unfortunately, we have no remaining drawing, not even a description, of the queen’s apartment. We just know that it comprised a room for the ladies in attendance, a bedchamber, a study, a wardrobe and another room. However, a report written by Guillet de Saint-Georges about the painter Philippe de Champaigne (born in Brussels) tells us that he created

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8 Pierre Lemoine, “L’Abbaye royale de Notre-Dame du Val-de-Grâce,” in Trésors d’art sacré à l’ombre du Val-de-Grâce [see n. 1], 76-83.
11 See Magdalena Sánchez, The Empress, the Queen and the Nun [see n. 4], especially chapter six, 137-155.
the decoration of two rooms. For one, he painted a series of portraits of empresses and queens who died in odour of sanctity: it was said to feature no less than 5 empresses from Occident and 15 from Orient, 17 holy queens who became nuns, 23 queens nuns, 4 queens who were compelled to become nuns, 4 nuns who became queens and died in the world, 4 others who endured the same fate but died nevertheless in a convent, 21 daughters of Roman emperors, 8 of Byzantine emperors. None of these portraits survived to this day, but they could be compared to the series of Habsburg ones at the Descalzas Reales. The Bourbon family portraits were hung in the chapter’s room until the Revolution. For the second room, Champaigne and his workshop painted 12 scenes of St. Benedictus’ life, inspired from Sangrinus’s Speculum et exemplar christicolarum vita beatissimi patris Benedicti monarchor. Patriarchae sanctissimi, published in Rome 1587. Nowadays, 8 of them still exist: St. Benedict fed by friar Romanus (Brussels, Musée Royal des Beaux Arts); Poison avoided, or the poisoned jug (St. Petersburg, Ermitage); St. Benedict meets Placidus and Maurus (Menton, Musée); The axe fastened again to its handle (Brussels); Placidus pulled by Maurus out of the water (Brussels); Stone exercised (Brussels); Risen child (Brussels).

Lastly, thanks to a 1644 estimate, it’s known that, in the queen’s bedroom, the chimney piece was decorated with two sculptures of virtues and angels bearing her coat of arms. Another painting by Champaigne (now at Versailles) shows Anne of Austria, Louis XIV and the duke of Anjou presented by St. Benedict and St. Scholastica to the Holy Trinity. From her apartment, the queen could keep up with the advance of church’s building from 1645 onwards.

Monastery-palace or hermitage?

In 1645, the church’s architect F. Mansart submitted a very ambitious design for a monastery-palace. At that time, the possibility that the Val-de-Grâce could turn into some sort of Escorial was at its highest. A large church surmounted by a dome would be built between the abbey to the South and the palace of the queen-regent to the North. The nuns’ choir

13 Dorival, Philippe de Champaigne, I, 48-49 and III (Catalogue), 61-63, nrs. 100-108 [see n. 12].
ANNE OF AUSTRIA, FOUNDER OF THE VAL-DE-GRÂCE IN PARIS

would have linked the church with the abbey, while St. Anne’s chapel would have the same with the church and palace. The whole building complex would have been preceded by a large rectangular forecourt, closed by railings and flanked by two pavilions, resembling a castle’s main forecourt.\textsuperscript{14}

However, it never came to anything. It should have given Paris an absolutely unique building without any real precedent in French history. Mansart was dismissed as early as 1646 and the work entrusted to Lemercier, the architect of the Sorbonne chapel, although the endless war with Spain and the incoming Fronde hindered the project. St. Anne’s chapel was built, but not the queen’s palace. We don’t know precisely if the abandonment of the project owes more to the overwhelming financial difficulties or to the queen’s own decision. When Lemercier died in 1654, Le Muet succeeded him and there was no further reference to the projected palace of the queen-mother.\textsuperscript{15} Louis XIV soon became of age.

Anne of Austria had an apartment fitted for herself in the North-east corner of the convent buildings now in the process of being enlarged.\textsuperscript{16} Between 1654 and 1655, a corner pavilion facing both the dome and gardens was erected. On its pediment, under a pelican feeding its young and the initials “A and L”, one can still read nowadays the following motto: “natos et nostra tuemur” (Let’s protect our children and estates). The queen’s apartment was then laid on two floors: a lower hall paved with black and white marble and decorated with 4 landscapes by Philippe de Champaigne, whose subjects are the lives of holy hermits and a ceiling painting of Mary Magdalen borne into heaven by angels; a bedroom with an alcove also decorated by Champaigne, and a small chapel.

The queen-mother had a true hermitage at her disposal, both within the closure and perfectly autonomous, for praying and meditating. But she never became a nun and remained the founding queen who left her imprint on the whole building.

\textsuperscript{14} Mignot, \textit{Le Val-de-Grâce}, 28-35.
\textsuperscript{15} Mignot, \textit{Le Val-de-Grâce}, 35-38 and 46-51.
\textsuperscript{16} Mignot, \textit{Le Val-de-Grâce}, 39-42 about the first apartment, and 51-53 about the second. I'd like to thank my colleague Krista De Jonge who turned my attention to the form of the pavilions without any equivalent elsewhere in France. They can be compared with the Spanish pavilions looking like towers at the Escorial or in the Cárcel de Corte in Madrid. The original model is nevertheless Flemish.
Despite the queen’s admiration for Mother Marguerite, certain disagreements remained with the abbess because of her insistence on austerity. Mother Marguerite, and, later, Louise de Milley and Marie de Burges, were reforming abbesses who succeeded in strictly enforcing the Benedictine rule. Soon, Mother Marguerite persuaded the queen not to turn the abbey into a palace.17 And when thirty years later, it was finally possible to resume work and complete the cloister, its buildings were as imposing as austere. The unique exception was precisely the queen’s pavilion, perched on top of columns, and overlooking the dome.

But the queen imposed her will on the nuns as far as the church-building was concerned. She fulfilled her own vow. God had given her a Dauphin, now the Most Christian King of France. For such a favour, it was impossible for her not to express her deep gratitude through the magnificence of her scheme, as suited an infanta of Spain and queen of France. Le Muet completed a very Roman-looking church with the highest dome in Paris at that time, covered in gilt-coppered plates, as the Invalides dome, later modelled after it. Inside the church, deals were made with Mignard for the dome’s fresco in 1663, and with Le Muet and Le Duc for the main altar. For it, the queen refused a design by Bernini. The queen’s mark is everywhere. On the front both initials “A and L” give its meaning to the Latin inscription “Jesu nascenti Virginiq. Matri”. Celebrating the Nativity, it’s her own motherhood that the queen reminds everyone. Outside, as inside, fleurs de lis appear everywhere, like the intertwined initials and the arms of France and Spain. The sculptures on the nave’s vault (medallions with figures of St. Zacharias and St Elizabeth, the Virgin and St. Joseph, St. Anne and St. Joachim) link the birth of the Dauphin with miracles: Elizabeth was too old to give birth to a child, and so was Anne, who lived apart from Joachim.

The dome expresses the political and religious dimension of the queen’s vow: the coats of arms of France and Spain are figured on the dome’s pendentives; the royal initials are repeated on several places; at the basis of the drum, the church’s dedication reads: “Anna Austria D.G. Francorum regina regniq. Rectrix cui subjicit Deus omnes hostes ut corderet domum in nomine suo Ecc. A.M.D.C.L.”.

The fresco represents the Trinity, Ecclesia triumphans and militans, and the queen herself presented to the Trinity by her saint patron, St.

17 Mignot, Le Val-de-Grâce, 32-33.
Anne, and St Louis, giving her the sceptre and a model of the Val-de-Grâce.\(^{18}\)

Just as king Louis XIII vowed to dedicate his kingdom to the Virgin if he were given a Dauphin, the queen vowed to do the same with the Val-de-Grâce.\(^{19}\)

Anne’s religion

There is no study of Anne’s religion. For that reason, it remains difficult to distinguish what belongs to the \textit{pietas austriaca}, what is in accordance with the gallican traditions and what originates in the queen’s individual faith. Nevertheless, the Val-de-Grâce enables us to trace some of its major features.

Founder-queen

As a founder since 1621, the queen fits into a dual French and Habsburg tradition. Many French queens had founded abbeys or convents, but there were no recent examples. Nevertheless, Mary de Medici, Henry IV’s queen, had supported the settlement of the Spanish Carmelite nuns in France. Anne of Austria, taking the Val-de-Grâce under her protection, paid for the new establishment in Paris and persuaded the king to abandon his right to appoint the abbess, re-establishing the triennial election system there.

But Anne of Austria went further and, in doing so, recalled two other Habsburg women who also founded convents: doña Juana of Austria, widow of don Juan Manuel of Portugal, who founded the \textit{Descalzas Reales} (Royal Discalced Poor Clares) in Madrid in 1555, and Anne’s mother herself, the archduchess Margarita, sister to the future emperor Ferdinand II and queen of Spain, also founded in 1610 in Madrid the \textit{Encarnación} for Augustinian sisters.\(^{20}\) She laid the foundation stone in

\(^{18}\) Jean-Claude Boyer, “La fresque de Pierre Mignard,” in \textit{Trésors d’art sacré} [see n. 1], 152-156.


\(^{20}\) Sánchez, \textit{The Empress, the Queen and the Nun} [see n. 4], 140. The queen founded the convent as a thanksgiving act to God for expulsion of the Moriscos which began in 1609. It is worth noting that she designated as prioress her friend nun, Mariana de San José who she knew from Palencia near Valladolid. Quite the same story happened again with queen Anne and Marguerite d’Arbouze a few years later in Paris. Mother and daughter were founder and patroness.
July 1611 and died prematurely some months later. The convent stands near the Alcazar in Madrid and a secret passage links the palace and the convent. Built very carefully, the Encarnación provided the pattern for several later buildings in Madrid. The same was true later in Paris with the Val-de-Grâce.

But I’d like to report a more significant similarity between mother and daughter. The devotion to Corpus Christi was a permanent feature of pietas austriaca insisting both on the incarnation and God’s real presence in the consecrated host. Margarita of Austria founded the Encarnación and her daughter the Val-de-Grâce de Notre-Dame de la Crèche, whose dedications are pretty similar. In both monasteries, the adoration of Corpus Christi was the most important element of the nuns’ daily life with the holy Mass. We have also seen the frontispiece’s engraving recalling Mother Marguerite’s biography. There is even a possibility that Mother Marguerite, who spoke Spanish and whose name was Margaret, too, was like a spiritual mother to the young queen, although I am incapable of saying whether the appointment of Mother Marguerite as abbess of the Val-de-Grâce was rather the outcome of chance than that of the queen’s request. It remains that from the beginning of her life in France, Anne of Austria took a keen interest in those Benedictine nuns.

A keen interest in the Benedictine nuns of the Val-de-Grâce

In supporting a Benedictine abbey, Anne of Austria had chosen an order that was not the most cherished one in her family. She was not deeply attached like other infantas to the Poor Clares and she did not choose the Augustinian sisters her mother loved so much. But she was no less resolute than her. Margarita of Austria, born at the Styrian court where the Jesuits knew a special favour, refused to accept a Franciscan confessor, as it was usual in Spain, but retained an Austrian Jesuit as her confessor. Her daughter proved to be no less attached to Benedictines than her mother to the Jesuits and the Augustinian sisters. Her iconography expresses it very clearly: the twelve paintings about St. Benedict’s life were in the queen’s apartment, and another painting by Champaigne shows the queen and her sons being presented to the

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21 Bonet Correa, Monasterios reales [see n. 10], 48-55.
22 Anna Coreth, Pietas austriaca. Österreichische Frömmigkeit im Barock (Vienna, 1980, 2nd ed.). We completely lack such a study for the French kings of the Modern Era.
23 Sánchez, The Empress, the Queen and the Nun [see n. 4], 143.
Trinity by St Benedict and his sister St. Scholastica who thereby became the intercessors of the French royal family. Consequently, Anne of Austria, the young king and the duke of Anjou are at home there. But when the queen goes to the Val-de-Grâce, she is alone, not even in the king’s company. Her apartment is distinct from the king’s. Thus we can trace both similarities and differences with the Spanish tradition of royal monasteries: on the one hand, the queen’s apartment is not a mere annexe, but really belongs to the abbey. Anne of Austria could take part in the monastic life as often as she wished, which can be compared with the royal housing in medieval Castilian monasteries. On the other hand, Anne of Austria never went to the abbey with her court. The Val-de-Grâce was not a royal palace and remained a place of retreat for the queen.

Retreat

Choosing the Val-de-Grâce as a place of retreat, the queen followed at least partly her own family tradition. The Descalzas Reales had successively welcome two widows: doña Juana and empress Maria. Both were born in that place. But Anne’s position in 1643 France was completely different. Firstly, for both women, their husband’s death signified the end of their public life, but for Anne it meant, on the contrary, becoming queen-regent. She spent several days of retreat went in the Val-de-Grâce, but never left power nor worldly life (although it was sometimes said that she intended to do so). Secondly, it is obvious when one looks at the queen’s portrait as a widow in 1643 that she didn’t follow the Spanish tradition established by empress Maria: she does not look like a nun. Finally, the queen had her own apartment inside the abbey, a simpler one than that of Louvre but very luxurious in comparison with the nuns’ cells. She could stay with the nuns and walk in the gardens, whereas empress Maria lived outside the closure.

Except in the years 1637-1643, Anne of Austria went very frequently to the Val-de-Grâce. When Mother Marguerite was still alive, twice a week and each Friday she had lunch with the nuns. She attended all the feasts of the Virgin Mary and just before Christmas was in charge of laying the infant Jesus in the manger in the church’s nativity piece. From 1643 to her death in January 1666, she went 537 times to the abbey.

24 Pericoloso, Philippe de Champaigne [see n. 12], 145, and Philippe de Champaigne 1602-1674 [see n. 12], 220-225.
and spent 146 nights there. She took part in the liturgy and adoration of Corpus Christi. She spent time conversing with the abbess. In the first chapel she could pray on the grave of Mother Marguerite and often said: “If she obtains a child for me, I will made her a saint”. Nevertheless, she didn't share her mother’s passion for relics. She longed for solitude, as Mme de Motteville noted, which explains why her apartment was decorated with scenes from lives of hermits.25

There, at Christmas 1664, physicians informed her that she had cancer. She wanted to die near the nuns, like a widowed infanta, but the king, her son, ordered her to go back to the Louvre and die there in a palace, instead of a monastery.

Conclusion

The Val-de-Grâce is an exceptional foundation in France, mingling pietas austriaca and French monarchical traditions. The Escorial’s pattern was quickly abandoned but the comparison is obvious with the Descalzas Reales and the Encarnación. Anne of Austria was the worthy daughter of Margarita and grand-daughter of Maria Anna of Bavaria, two somewhat unknown figures in France. The Val-de-Grâce was founded by a queen who became regent, and not by the king himself. The fact dismisses any comparison with the Escorial. Anna of Austria didn’t build a monastery-palace, but an abbey with a place of retreat for herself, where she could find peace and energy to carry out her duty as a queen. The Val-de-Grâce, unlike the Descalzas Reales, never became a place of retreat for widows, unmarried or illegitimate kings’ daughters. After Anne’s death, no other queen occupied her apartment. Her niece and daughter-in-law, Maria Teresa of Austria, also founded in Paris a small Carmelite convent she often visited. Anne of Austria created another Bourbon necropolis in 1662 when she obtained from the king her dead grand-daughter’s heart to be sent to the Val-de-Grâce. Her last will and testament also provided for her own heart to be buried there, in St. Anne’s chapel.

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25 Philippe de Champaigne 1602-1674 [see n. 12], 230-237.