



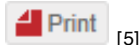
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Cardinal Richelieu: Hero or Villain

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Robert Knecht looks at the ‘eminence rouge’ and considers how his image, carefully crafted during his lifetime, has become that of a demonic schemer.

Among foreign statesmen of the past who are well-known to the average educated Briton, Cardinal Richelieu (1585-1642) occupies an almost unique position. He turns up in the most unlikely places, such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and the children's cartoon *Dogtanian and the Three Muskehounds*. Yet his career did not impinge particularly on English history. His role in defeating Buckingham's expedition to the Ile de Ré hardly explains the exceptional place he has come to occupy in British historical thinking. The only other foreign statesman who enjoys a comparable status is Bismarck. We need to ask ourselves whether we have been brainwashed by Richelieu's own propaganda or by the fictional portrayal of the Cardinal generated by the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century.

Richelieu, who dominated French foreign and domestic politics as Louis XIII's chief minister from 1624 until his death in 1642, took great pains to ensure for himself an enviable reputation. His skilful use of propaganda has left its mark on history, though recent research has helped to put the record straight. From the start of his ministry he took care to amass extensive personal archives. The many reports which he sent to Louis XIII (r.1610-43) and his letters to other important contemporaries bear the stamp of a man writing for posterity. He supported extensive archival research by men such as Pierre Dupuy (1582-1651) and Théodore Godefroy (1580-1649) in the hope of giving his policies a historical perspective. He sponsored the composition of pamphlets in his favour, reviewed and corrected the works of historians writing about contemporary events. The history of Louis XIII's reign written by Scipion Dupleix, a militant Catholic and protagonist of absolutism, is an excellent guide to the estimate Richelieu wanted to leave of himself. Dupleix lists the qualities needed of a minister: judgement, reason, diligence, assiduity, knowledge, experience of state affairs, uprightness, reputation, nobility of birth, eloquence, skill and courage. He finds them all in Richelieu and even asserts that the Cardinal was divinely chosen and inspired.

Controlling public opinion is, of course, a two-way process. Criticism needs to be stifled, and Richelieu did this with much success. He submitted the press to a brutally repressive regime. Most pamphlets published in France in his day supported the government; those taking the opposite view emanated from abroad. The Cardinal extended his concept of *lèse-majesté* to any publication critical of the government. He employed more writers to boost his administration than any other statesman of his time. They included Mathieu de Morgues, who began by supporting Richelieu, but turned against him after the Day of Dupes (November 10/11th, 1630, when the Queen Mother, Marie de Médicis, jealous of the Cardinal's rising influence over the King and disapproving of his anti-Spanish policy, plotted unsuccessfully to topple him), and François Langlois, sieur de Fancan. After the Day of Dupes, which consolidated Richelieu's position and resulted in Marie de Médicis' exile to the Low Countries, Richelieu assumed the role of

'schoolmaster to the French people' and gathered around himself a group of subservient writers, including the poet Boisrobert (1592-1662), who played a leading role in the foundation of the *Académie française* in 1635. This body, while it was intended to enhance the artistic and intellectual prestige of France, also had a political motivation. Richelieu was determined that its members should be only his known servants. He employed some to write his speeches, others to check his theological writings, and others still to write pamphlets supporting his policies.

The 1630s saw the creation of an official French press. *Le Mercure françois*, which already existed when Richelieu rose to power, appeared only once a year. The need for a more regular and frequent newspaper was met by the creation of the *Gazette* in 1631. This was edited by Théophraste Renaudot (1586-1653), who hailed from Poitou, like Richelieu. The *Gazette* appeared every Saturday. It was four pages long at first, then grew to eight and even twelve pages. Three presses could produce 1,200 to 1,500 copies in one day. Richelieu's influence on the *Gazette* ranged from making suggestions to assigning articles to specific individuals and to writing and editing complete dispatches himself. Richelieu enjoyed being an object of adulation. According to the gossip writer Tallemant des Réaux, the Cardinal once deleted the word 'hero' from a dedication to himself, substituting the word 'demi-god'.

The theatre, too, fell under Richelieu's influence. Writers from whom he commissioned plays were the so-called 'Five authors', including Corneille, Boisrobert and, above all, Desmarests. In 1641 a tragi-comedy by Desmarests (1596-1676), called *Mirame*, celebrated the opening of the theatre in the Palais Cardinal. *Europe*, another play by Desmarests, was an allegorical glorification of Louis XIII's foreign policy. Alongside these works, a flood of pamphlets defending Richelieu's policies poured out of the printing shops. The *Coup d'État de Louis XIII* praised him for rediscovering the art of governing like Tiberius or Louis XI. Many pamphlets equated obedience to Richelieu with submission to the King. 'Ministers', wrote Sirmond, 'are to the sovereign as its rays are to the sun'. Achille de Sancy compared Richelieu's relationship with Louis XIII to that between Moses and God. Guez de Balzac in *Le Prince* (1631) addresses Richelieu as follows:

After the King you are the perpetual object of my mind. I hardly divert it from the course of your life, and if you have followers more assiduous than me ... I am certain that you have no more faithful servant nor one whose affection springs more from the heart and is more ardent and natural.

Richelieu also used painters or sculptors to proclaim his achievements as a royal servant. He commissioned galleries of portraits in all his residences, the most famous being the *Galerie des hommes illustres* in the Palais Cardinal, in Paris. This consisted of portraits of royal servants from Abbot Suger in the ninth century to Richelieu. The Cardinal commissioned numerous portraits of himself, most of them from Philippe de Champaigne. None shows any sign of age or illness, for the painter was instructed to retouch them all to conform to one painted in 1640, which he liked best of all. All except three show the Cardinal standing and in full length. Normally, churchmen were portrayed seated; only rulers and statesmen were shown full length. Richelieu evidently wanted to be among the latter.

Richelieu's mastery of propaganda, however, was not able to guarantee him an unblemished reputation. A host of pamphleteers, mainly based outside France, did their utmost to counter his self-glorification. Thus, Mathieu de Morgues in his *Catholicon françois* (1636) accused him of manipulating religion for political ends:

You make use of religion, as your preceptor Machiavelli showed the ancient Romans doing, shaping it, turning it about one way after another, explaining it and applying it as far as it aids the advancement of your designs. Your head is ready to wear the

turban as the red hat, provided that the Janissaries and the Pasha find you sufficiently upright to elect you their Emperor.

In another work, de Morgues attacks Richelieu's foreign policy thus:

... his anger has brought the Goths into the state; his madness has called the Poles, Cossacks, Croats and Hungarians into France and has brought us enemies, wars, and disorders such as France has never seen since her beginning.

Morgues' solution is the tyrant's overthrow:

... all good Frenchmen, open your eyes to see what a miserable condition you are in; open your minds to foresee the great desolation that menaces you. Do not permit a puny man, sick in body and mind, to tyrannise over the bodies and minds of so many sane persons, nor an apostate monk [Father Joseph], his principal counsellor, to treat you as galley slaves. Cast off these two evil instruments.

News of Richelieu's death on December 4th, 1642, was greeted with rejoicing in France. According to Father Griffet, writing in 1768, the Cardinal

... was disliked by the people and I have known old men who could still remember the bonfires that were lit in the provinces when the news [of his death] was received.

Even Louis XIII seems to have had mixed feelings. According to Monglat, the keeper of the King's wardrobe, 'within his heart, he was much relieved and delighted to be rid of him, and he did not conceal this from his familiars'. All kinds of stories were spread about Richelieu after his death. He was accused of sacrificing all, including justice, to his insatiable ambition. Cardinal de Retz (1614-79) claimed that he had created 'within the most lawful of monarchies the most scandalous and most dangerous tyranny which may ever have enslaved the state'. He 'blasted rather than governed the King's subjects'. Michel Le Vassor wrote in his history of Louis XIII (1712) 'I can look only with horror on a prelate who sacrifices the liberty of his fatherland and the peace of all Europe to his ambition'. A similar charge was levelled by Voltaire in his *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751): 'there was fighting since 1635 because Cardinal Richelieu wanted it; and it is likely that he wanted it in order to make himself necessary'. While conceding that Richelieu had begun to make France great internationally, Voltaire accused him of neglecting prosperity at home: the roads were in a poor state and overrun by brigands; the streets of Paris were filthy and full of thieves. He dismissed Richelieu's *Testament politique*, a personal memoir written under Richelieu's close personal supervision, probably for the King, and covering the essentials of the Cardinal's social and political ideology, as 'stuffed full of errors and misconceptions of every kind'. Montesquieu called him a 'wicked citizen'.

With the advent of the Romantic movement in the nineteenth century Richelieu was relentlessly vilified by poets and dramatists. Alfred de Vigny in his novel, *Cinq-Mars* (1826), suggested that all the ills of France stemmed from Richelieu's attack on the nobility. In the preface, Vigny draws a distinction between reality (*le vrai*) and truth (*la vérité*). The historian searches for reality, he argues, but reality without truth is not worth the search. It is truth which gives reality a moral dimension without which reality is nothing, and it is the responsibility of the novelist or poet to draw the truth from reality by using his imagination. *Cinq-Mars* offers the reader a portrait of Richelieu so vivid as to suggest that truth and reality are one and the same. The novel recounts an episode from the nobility's resistance to Richelieu. Its heroes are two young noblemen, Cinq-Mars and de Thou, who were executed by order of the Cardinal. In their punishment Vigny sees the death sentence of the monarchy which, by suppressing the nobility, prepared the turmoil which was to bring about its own downfall. *Cinq-Mars* provided the painter Paul Delaroche

(1797-1856), with the subject of one of his most successful works, now in the Wallace Collection, in London. This shows the aged and ailing Richelieu slumped against cushions in his barge, towing the boat in which the young and healthy conspirators are being taken to their place of execution.

The popular reputation that Richelieu enjoyed in England during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries owed more to fiction than to history. *Cinq-Mars* inspired Edward Bulwer-Lytton to write a play, called *Richelieu or the Conspiracy*. This amalgamated the conspiracy of the duc de Bouillon with the Day of Dupes and the treason of Cinq-Mars. Bulwer-Lytton saw Richelieu as France's dictator, but also as her benefactor; a man with a dual character, both witty and sinister. He captured the interest of the famous actor James Macready, and tried to make him see

Richelieu's dramatic potential. The correspondence between the two men is fascinating. On September 16th, 1838, Bulwer-Lytton wrote:

Richelieu would be a splendid fellow for the Stage, if we could hit on a good plot to bring him out – connected with some dramatic incident. His wit – his lightness – his address – relieve so admirably his profound sagacity – his Churchman's pride – his relentless vindictiveness and the sublime passion for the glory of France that elevated all. He would be a new addition to the Historical portraits of the Stage.

On the same day, he wrote to John Forster: 'Richelieu has never been brought on the Stage, but his character is most dramatic And he has always what Macready wishes for – one leg in Comedy, the other in Tragedy'. On November 17th, Bulwer-Lytton sent Macready a bibliography of works on Richelieu including the Cardinal's Political *Testament*, describing it as 'apocryphal'. He explained:

In France there is a kind of traditional notion of his Person much the same as we have of Henry VIII or Queen Mary – or almost of Cromwell, viz. A Notion not to be found in books, but as it were, orally handed down. And this seems general as to his familiarity with his friends – his stateliness to the world – the high physical spirits that successful men nearly always have & which, as in Cromwell, can almost approach the buffoon, when most the Butcher.

Macready read *Cinq-Mars* assiduously, but had great difficulty understanding Richelieu's character as conceived by Bulwer-Lytton. He took the unusual step of consulting Alfred de Vigny himself, when the latter came to England early in 1839. Vigny prophesied:

He will make a fine Richelieu, and I will have much to say to him about that man whose intimate enemy I have been during the entire period when I was writing *Cinq-Mars*.

Macready met Vigny on February 16th, and reported 'Count de Vigny gave me more than two hours on Thursday, and brought the man Richelieu directly before me'. The correspondence between Bulwer-Lytton and Macready may be read as an attempt to bring Reality and Truth into line; in the end Truth won. It was Macready's portrayal of Richelieu as a villain, not Bulwer-Lytton's more tempered version of the character that conquered the English stage. When *Richelieu* was first staged on March 7th, 1839, it proved a triumph. In his old age, the playwright John Westland Marston (1819-90) remembered that first night:

I fought my way with another young enthusiast to the pit door of old Covent Garden on the first night of Bulwer's *Richelieu*. What a human sea it was, and how lit up by expectation, that surged and roared for two hours against that grim, all-ignoring

barrier! But its stubborn resistance, and the dense pressure which, at last, almost wedged out the breath of every unit in the crowd, gave an almost stern delight, a zest of contest for a prize, of which the lounge into a reserved box or seat has no conception.

Macready did not disappoint. The grandest scene was the last in which Richelieu, on the verge of death, attends Louis XIII to submit his resignation:

How touching was the proud humility of the weak old man as he relinquished, seemingly forever, the splendid cares of State; how arresting the sight of him as, supported in his chair, his face now grew vacant, as if through the feebleness of nature, now resumed a gleam of intelligence, which at times contracted into pain, as he gathered the policy of his rivals – a policy fatal to France! One noted the uneasy movements of the head, the restless play of the wan fingers, though the lips were silent, till at last the mind fairly struggled awhile through its eclipse, as, in a loud whisper, he warned the King his succours would be wasted upon England. Then came the moment when, recovering the despatch which convicted his foes of treason, he caused it to be handed to the King, and sank supine with the effort. Slowly and intermittently consciousness returned, as Louis thrice implored him to resume his sway over France. So naturally marked were the fluctuations between life and death, so subtly graduated (though comprised within a few moments) were the signs of his recovery, that the house utterly forgot its almost incredible quickness when, in answer to the King's apprehensive cry as to the traitors – 'Where will they be next week?' Richelieu springs up resuscitated, and exclaims – 'There, at my feet!'

At the end 'it was an audience dazzled, almost bewildered by the brilliancy of the achievement, that, on the instant fall of the curtain, burst into a roar of admiration that, wild, craving, unappeasable, pursued, like a sea, the retreating actor, and swept him back to the front'.

Richelieu was revived by Henry Irving in September 1873 with enormous success. It was performed on 120 nights at the Lyceum. The following account of Irving's performance appeared in the Standard on October 14th, 1873:

In the first act, huddled in his furred robe, darting with arrowy keenness vulpine glances from beneath his shaggy brows, a smile, bitter or benevolent, ever hovering about the stern pursed-up lip, the senile gait still preserving remnants of vigour, made up a perfect picture to the eye, while the measured and significantly terse speech, illustrated by ever-varied and appropriate attitude, the thoughtful by-play, as it is called, completed to the sense, in the most satisfactory fullness, both of character and situation. The rhapsody ending this act, delivered with an eloquent fervour, gaunt arms and glistening eyes uplifted, worthy of words weighted with more genuine metal, gives the first hint of Mr Irving's emotional intensity. As the play proceeds, these vivid outbursts of strongly realised feeling become more frequent, upheaving like volcanic commotions, and pouring out words in a boiling torrent, fiery and scathing as lava. Such was the threat of Rome's anathema ... when the tempest of the soul seemed to act outwardly on the frame, swaying and lifting it bodily from the ground, like an uprooted tree, towards the object of the Cardinal's terrific wrath. The physical grandeur of the explosion, combined with the overbearing moral force, is unmatched by any other similar exhibition of the actor's power throughout the play, and only approached by the triumphant springing up of the Cardinal from his arm-chair at the close of the action, and after the finely-wrought scene of feigned exhaustion, when, trampling the state paper, so perplexing to poor Louis, beneath his

feet, he lowers up in savage exultation at the recovery of his lost power, and the distant prospect of dire vengeance over his discomfited enemies. The concentrated malignity with which, as he half-glided, half-tottered towards Baradas, his clenched teeth and parched throat, rather than his lips, force out the words 'thou hast lost the stake', could scarcely be surpassed for spell-like power over the imagination – the man seemed transformed into some huge cobra.

Thus did Richelieu become a well-known stage villain in England. Bulwer-Lytton's play continued to be performed across England for many years in many theatres that no longer exist. It brought Richelieu to the attention of a public not otherwise particularly cognisant of French history and may serve to explain why he has become such a frequent presence in examination papers. Ultimate responsibility for the play's success lay with Alfred de Vigny, but other figures of the Romantic movement contributed to this portrayal of the Cardinal, notably Victor Hugo whose verse drama, *Marion Delorme* (1831), portrayed Louis XIII as a cypher, the real ruler of France being the tyrannical and bloodthirsty Cardinal. Richelieu in this play never appears on stage. His voice, however, is heard from behind a curtain saying at the end 'No pardon!' as the hero, Didier, is about to be executed. For the historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874) the Cardinal was the 'sphinx in a red robe' whose dull grey eye said: 'whoever guesses my meaning must die', the 'dictator of despair who in all things could only do good through evil', a soul tormented by 'twenty other devils' and torn by 'internal furies'. The Cardinal, according to Michelet, 'died so feared that no one dared speak of his death, even abroad. It was feared that out of spite and with a terrible effort of will he might decide to return'.

An unflattering portrait of Richelieu was also widely disseminated in the nineteenth century through the popular novels of Alexandre Dumas, particularly the *Three Musketeers* (1844). This shows the Cardinal as a man without faith or sense of justice who uses his red robe to conceal his depraved appetites. Louis XIII in his presence is little more than a whimpering child. In 1896 Richelieu reappeared in Stanley Weyman's popular novel, *Under the Red Robe*, which was successfully dramatised at the Haymarket Theatre in London. In the face of so much public exposure, is it surprising that Richelieu became almost a household name this side of the Channel?

The most sweeping indictment of Richelieu's policies is to be found in Hilaire Belloc's biography of 1930. This presents the Cardinal as the creator of modern Europe in which nationalism has replaced Catholicism as the state religion:

We are what we are, as divided and in peril of dissolution through our division, because Richelieu applied his remote, his isolated, his overpowering genius to the creation of the modern state, and, unwittingly to himself, to the ruin of the common unity of Christian life.

Through him, writes Belloc, 'modern Europe arose; until there came, two hundred years after Richelieu, to confirm its divisions, and to render apparently irreparable the schism in our culture, the corresponding genius of Bismarck'.

For Further Reading:

W.F.Church, *Richelieu and Reason of State* (1972); H.M.Solomon, *Public Welfare, Science and Propaganda in Seventeenth-Century France* (1972); R.J.Knecht, *Richelieu* (1981); H.Gaston Hall, *Richelieu's Desmarests and the century of Louis XIV* (1990); A.S.Dower, *The Eminent Tragedian William Charles Macready* (1966); L.Irving, *Henry Irving the Actor and His World* (1951).

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