

Vivien, *Pierre Richelet*

NEIL JEFFARES



[Joseph Vivien](#)

Pierre Richelet (1626–1698)

Pastel on paper, 60x48 cm, oval

a.1689

Private collection

EXHIBITED Paris 1935b, no. 997bis.

PROVENANCE Mme Ferdinand-Jules Deveaud, née Anna-Mélanie-Henriette Fabre (1866–1955), artist, by 1935; desc.: ses petits-enfants; Paris, Artcurial, 23.III.2022, Lot 103

LITERATURE René-Doumic 1935, p. 486; Börsch-Supan 1963, no. 79, as lost; *Dictionary of pastellists* online, [J.77.301](#)

ENGRAVED (1) Jean Langlois, reversed, pour *Les Plus Belles Lettres françaises*, 1689, 13.8x8.4 (FD 1025; Mariette, iv, 156; IFF 77). Lit.: François Gacon, *Le Poète sans fard*, 1698, p. 181 with Richelet's verses as printed by Langlois and Gacon's riposte; (2) Siméon Thomassin, reversed, pour *Les Plus Belles Lettres françaises*, 1698. Lit.: Börsch-Supan 1963, fig. 72; (3) Étienne-Jahandier Desrochers (1668–1741), 14.3x10 (FD 390; IFF 510)

RELATED WORKS (1) bust by Veillard, 1890, at Cheminon; (2) cop. Henriette Deveaud Fabre, miniature, 1.6x1.1 cm ov., sd “H Deveaud Fabre d’après Vivien 1940” (art market 2022)

THE PORTRAIT OF THE LEXICOGRAPHER AND GRAMMARIAN Pierre Richelet (1626–1698) is the earliest surviving pastel in Vivien’s œuvre, and its rediscovery in 2022 advances our understanding of the artist’s career in several respects.

Richelet¹ was born on 8.XI.1626 in Cheminon, Marne, the son of Jehan, procureur du roi in the town, and Marie-Madeleine Herard. His baptismal entry in the parish register has been damaged by flooding, making it impossible to see if he received the names César-Pierre or just the Pierre by which he is more often known.² In any case both parents died before he was 6. Little is known of his education: he is known to have been tutor to the future marquis de Courtivron in Dijon. A taste for satire – “peindre sur papier” – made him enemies, including lawyers and priests in the town, forcing him to flee to avoid prison. According to a deposition (in the 1657 trial, *infra*) by the curate of Saint-Vrain:

Deux ans sont ou environ, ledit Richelet lui dit qu’il avait fait des vers contre les Pères de l’Oratoire, qu’on disait être jansénistes, et que pour ce sujet les dits Pères de Dijon voulaient le faire chasser de ladite ville.

The vicar at Vitry-le-François further deposed that Richelet had spoken to one of the

¹ There are numerous accounts of Richelet’s lexicography. Robert Connesson’s 1985 monograph and Laurent Bray’s 1986 thesis on Richelet remain the most comprehensive studies of his life and work. Many of the biographical legends are to be found in G. Hérrelle, “Les friponneries de Pierre Richelet”, *Revue de Champagne et de Brie*, xxii, 1887, pp. 161–75.

² César is found only in his marriage entry, never in any other contemporary document; but it appears widely in the secondary literature.

seminarians—

touchant des vers qu'il disait avoir fait contre la femme d'un président et conseiller du parlement de Dijon, par lesquels vers il traitait le mari de ladite femme de *cornard*; lesquels vers avaient obligé ledit Richelet de quitter ladite ville, et qu'il y avait eu prise de corps à l'encontre de lui.

Richelet was then appointed régent in the college of Vitry-le-François: a payment of 305 livres for the year 1654–55 is recorded. The establishment had fallen into disrepute, but Richelet introduced a new approach. A tragedy he wrote in 1655 was performed by his pupils, followed by a ball: this, one critic quipped, pleased the spectators more: “le bal valait bien la tragédie”, to Richelet’s fury. The teacher nevertheless continued his own campaign of satires: on being warned of the likely consequences, he replied “Il faut bien que j’aie des sujets de satire.”

A project to marry the young sister of one of his pupils did not meet with the approval of her father, the surgeon Isaac Garner, who objected to the lowly social station of the libertin and was unimpressed by his offer to convert to the Reformed religion to suit the family. The subsequent quarrel provoked Richelet into publishing his *Satire contre l’escargot sans coquille* which in turn led to his prosecution and conviction (after a lengthy trial with more than 40 witnesses) in 1657. The penalty was a fine, sustained on appeal.

Richelet nevertheless remained at Vitry for several more years until 1661, when he moved to Paris to become an avocat in Paris (as had been his great-uncle, Nicolas Richelet, who was also an amateur littérateur best known as an editor of Ronsard).

Falling under the influence of Nicolas Perrot d’Ablancourt (1606–1664), the linguist and translator, and the writer Olivier Patru (1604–1681), and perhaps in response to a sonnet by Pierre de Pelletier (in the *Délices de la poésie galante...*, 1664) advising him to abandon law for literature, Richelet was persuaded to leave the bar and devote his energies to the study of linguistics. In addition to Latin and Greek, he mastered Italian and Spanish in preparation for his work on the origins of the French language. Richelet’s first exercise in lexicography was a *Nouveau Dictionnaire des rimes* in 1667. This led in turn to his hugely important *Dictionnaire françois*, one of the first works prepared on methodical principles, and the first monolingual encyclopaedic French dictionary. While the Artcurial sale catalogue noted that “son œuvre épouse le Grand Siècle qui propulse la France à la première place en montrant la voie de l’excellence”, Richelet’s contribution may also be seen as forward looking. Summarised by Alain Rey³,

[l]’ouvrage de Richelet était un recueil de format pratique, une sorte d’usuel au texte très dense. Pour la première fois une conception relativement homogène du lexique français et une description ne devant plus rien au bilinguisme s’y faisait jour.

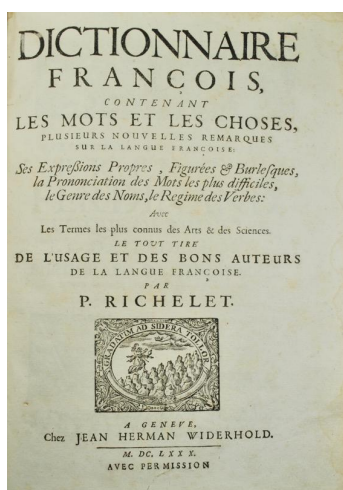


Figure 1

It underwent some 60 editions up to 1811, starting with the first, in Geneva in 1680, and second, printed in Lyon by Benoist Bailly in 1681 (which omitted the more objectionable entries), and was widely copied or plagiarized. That the original edition appeared outside France was because the Académie française had an exclusive royal monopoly (unlike Antoine Furetière, Richelet was not a member; but Furetière was expelled when his plans for an independent dictionary emerged: he too published his abroad). The first edition of the Académie’s dictionary appeared in 1694. These and other works of systematization paved the way for the *Encyclopédie* in the following century. As another modern critic noted,⁴

Qu’ils consignent l’usage ou qu’ils se réfèrent à la raison, les dictionnaires de l’époque Classique sont, suivant l’expression de Richelet, l’“ouvrage de tout le monde”.

While it may sound dry, Richelet’s dictionary has been compared with Johnson’s (who

³ Alain Rey, *Antoine Furetière : Un précurseur des Lumières sous Louis XIV*, Paris, 2006, p. 91.

⁴ Georges Matoré, *Histoire des dictionnaires français*, Paris, 1968, p. 87.

owned⁵ a copy of the 1710 edition of Richelet) for his occasionally quirky or even snarky observations: for example, of “bain”, “Quand les Médecins ne savent plus où ils en sont ils ordonnent le bain à leurs malades.” Similar witticisms earned him the enmity of several influential figures in the literary world. Indeed, when, after numerous requests, Nicolas Toinard finally managed to find a copy to send to John Locke, he wrote on 7.XII.1680 to excuse the delay⁶:

Vous avez a cete heure a ceque je crois le *Richelet*, que lon ne doit considerer que comme le plan imparfait dun bel ouvrage a faire. ce livre est tres recherché à cause des impertinences que dit l'auteur parcy parla contre beaucoup d'honetes gens.

Locke was pleased with the volume, replying two days later:

il me semble avoir trouvé le vray secret de fair un bon dictionnaire, parceque la maniere ordinaire de rendre les paroles d'une langue en ceux d'une autre n'est pas plus raisonnable que d'envoyer querir un estui en France pour un instrument Anglois dont on ne scait pas en France ny la forme ny l'usage. parceque les mots de different langues ne s'accordent pas mieux que cela.

Among Richelet's more sober definitions (as well as obscenities he included technical terms from arts and sciences which other lexicographers preferred to omit, as not part of the vocabulary of the *honnête homme* which constituted *bon usage*), that of *Pastel* is early and important enough to be cited in our [TREATISES](#) from the first edition:

PASTEL, s.m. Craion fait d'une espece de pâte composée. Il y a de ces craions de toutes les couleurs & l'on fait des tableaux au pastel comme on en fait à l'huile, ou en détrempe. [*Dessiner au pastel*.]

Richelet's annotated anthology of *Les Plus Belles Lettres des meilleurs auteurs français* was published in several editions, of which the second, Paris, 1698, is best known; but the first, single volume, appeared in Lyon in 1689 and is of particular relevance because the frontispiece is the portrait of the author engraved by Langlois (fig. 2) after the present pastel. Subsequent editions and other publications carried reprints and variants engraved by other hands, of which the most important are those by Thomassin (fig. 3) and Desrochers (fig. 4). The Langlois and Thomassin prints are inverted from the pastel, the Desrochers corrected. It is fair to say that all three prints are fairly wretched and give no idea of the accomplishment of the original – but the significance of the Langlois print is the *terminus ante quem* it provides for the pastel.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Of Jean Langlois little is known. The *Inventaire du Fonds français, XVII^e siècle* (VI, pp. 321ff) tells us that he had been a pensionnaire of the Académie de France in Rome by 1673. In 1692 he was established at the sign of *Le Soleil d'or*, rue Saint-Jacques. There is nothing to suggest a local

⁵ Donald Greene, *Samuel Johnson's library, an annotated guide*, 1975, p. 97.

⁶ Cited from Electronic Enlightenment.

Lyon connection.

The Langlois and Thomassin prints are inscribed with verses written by the sitter himself, and the subject of a satire by François Gacon (*Le Poète sans fard*, 1698, pp. 181f):

VERS DE RICHELET

*Pour mettre au bas de son Portrait, devant un mauvais recueil de Lettres.*⁷

A quoy bon nous faire paroître
D'après nature Richelet?
Cet Ouvrage le fait connoître
Mille fois mieux que son Portrait.

EPIGRAMME

Sur les Vers precedens.

A quoy bon nous faire paroître
D'après nature Richelet,
Cet Livre pour un fat le fait assez connoître,
Il devoit épargner l'argent de son Portrait.



Figure 5

Quite why the *Plus Belles Lettres* was first published in Lyon, and whether that led to the author's acquaintance with Vivien whose roots were in that town, is uncertain. The portrait's place in Vivien's œuvre is however clear: no other pastel from before 1693 is known, nor anything that demonstrates so clearly the full mastery of Vivien's mature talent. Although far from being a copy – indeed the directness and warmth of the face are in some contrast with the Grand Siècle demeanour of the master – the parallels with the self-portrait (Uffizi, fig. 5) which Charles Le Brun sent to Grand Duke Cosimo III of Tuscany in 1684 are undeniable and confirms their relationship was closer than previously established.

An oval workshop copy of the Uffizi portrait given to the Gobelins in 1749 by Jacques Caffieri and now in the Mobilier national (inv. GOB-794-000, fig. 6) offers even closer parallels with the Vivien pastel, most

obviously in the depiction of the drapery and lace. It is usually credited to Nicolas de Largillierre, the Edelinck engraving, the Largillierre portrait of Le Brun in the Louvre (inv. 5661) and the Munich study for it all compounding the problem. Georges de Lastic even thought that Largillierre was also responsible for the Uffizi version. The question is discussed at some length by Myra Nan Rosenfeld in her 1981 Largillierre exhibition catalogue (pp. 181f); her conclusion was that the Uffizi painting was by Le Brun himself, and that the Mobilier national painting was not by Largillierre either. If so it is tempting to suggest that Vivien himself was responsible for the oval copy, and translated his technique for depicting lace and silk brocade into pastel for his Richelet portrait. That said, the facial expression remains quite different: the Le Brun as impassive and distant as in a portrait of the king, Richelet however as intimate and warm as the impudent writer he was.



Figure 6

⁷ The portrait is by Vivien, and the verses appear under the engravings.

Of course the Le Brun was by no means the only image of a writer or artist in an informal gown. Among numerous other examples (many engraved) is the only example known of the work of Verselin, one of the two other pastellists du Pradel listed in 1692 along with Vivien.

At the time of the Richelet pastel, Vivien was virtually unknown and as we discover from other documents impecuneous. Since Richelet himself made little if any money from his writing this may well have influenced his selection of portraitist. Richelet himself was curiously dismissive of the genre in the 1693 edition of his dictionary (in a passage not included in the 1680 edition, which predated his own experience with Vivien), defining “Portraitiste” as—

C’est un Peintre qui ne fait point l’histoire et qui n’est pas paysagiste, mais qui s’applique seulement à faire des portraits, & qui y gagne de quoi bien faire bouillir son pot, parce qu’il n’y a pas de bourgeoisie un peu coquette & un peu à son aise qui ne veuille avoir son portrait. Les plus fameux portraitistes qui soient de mon tems à Paris, ce sont L’Argilliere, Ferdinand, Rigaud, Vignon & de Troie.

Late in life Richelet married Michelle Brumeaux or Bruneau, some 24 years his junior, the mother of their illegitimate daughter Anne-Madeleine, baptised at Saint-Sulpice 23.VI.1688, some years before their eventual marriage which took place on 17.I.1693.⁸ Richelet died on 23.XI.1698, and was buried at Saint-Sulpice the following day. The daughter married Gilles Huet, huissier commissaire priseur au Châtelet de Paris, in 1731; she died 30.IX.1733, aged 45, and was buried in



Figure 7

Vitry-sur-Seine; there is no mention of the pastel in her inventaire après décès⁹, although a number of mainly religious paintings were listed. There was a son, Pierre Huet (1713–p.1749), bourgeois de Paris, but it has not been possible to trace the descent of the pastel. A possible clue lies in the frame, with its fronton inscribed with sitter’s and artist’s names suggesting it was once displayed in an institutional setting.

A bust of Richelet by Veillard (fig. 7), apparently based on the Vivien image but perhaps derived from the prints, was erected outside the town hall in Cheminon in 1890.

Nothing is known of the provenance of the pastel before 1935 when it was lent to the Paris exhibition celebrating the Troisième centenaire de l’Académie française. Perhaps a late entry (and a surprising one, since Richelet was not an *immortel*), it was numbered 997 *bis*. There it was noted in Solange René-Doumic’s critique in *La Revue hebdomadaire*, 1935, p. 486: “Un autre tableau de Vivien, aussi admirable que le premier, est le portrait de Richelet”, the preceding being the Munich portrait of Fénélon, “assurément...un des plus beaux tableaux du dix-septième siècle.” The lender, the wife of Ferdinand-Jules Deveaud, née Anna-Mélanie-Henriette Fabre (1866–1955), was a pastellist in her own right. Her copy of the Vivien, signed and dated 1940 (fig. 8), was on the art market in 2022, the sitter unrecognised. The pastel itself, which Artcurial indicate as passing through Mme Deveaud’s grandchildren, was unknown to Helmut Börsch-Supan when he compiled his 1963 Vivien catalogue, including Richelet only by virtue of the Langlois and Thomassin prints and vouchsafing no date for the work.

At the end of the bidding at Artcurial in 2022, M^c Fournier asked expectantly “sans pré-emption?”; met with



Figure 8

⁸ Jal prints 17.I.1698, but the register at Saint-Sulpice was consulted by Le Clerc: see his letter to président Bouhier in 1729; *n.* Louis Bertrand, *Vie, écrits et correspondance littéraire de Laurent Josse Le Clerc*, Paris, 1878, pp. 20ff. Le Clerc first heard the story from Valfray, the bookseller in Lyon who had known Richelet well.

⁹ Carried out 2.X.1737, AN MC/ET/LXXXIX/446.

none, he lamented “C’est vrai que la langue française est enterrée depuis longtemps.” Few today will turn to Richelet’s dictionary, but those that do will have a far better image of the author than the prints were able to convey.

Neil Jeffares