CATONEM NARRARE:
CHARLES LE BRUN AS READER AND PAINTER OF A STOIC’S SUICIDE

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Two pieces of red drapery have been lifted or pushed apart [Fig. 1].1 Just as in a theatrical setting, where the drawing of the curtain marks the beginning of a play, the viewers are introduced to a small but well prepared stage. Originating from an undisclosed source in the upper left, strong light falls onto the bedstall of a bearded man with curly black, slightly greyish hair. The man’s nude upper torso is resting on a blank sheet; his energetic bodily features are aptly defined by a strong chiaroscuro. The head has slid down from a cushion, the eyes are closed. His right hand is placed on the page of an open book whose lines are illegible. The man appears to have fallen asleep while reading in his bed.

After just a short while, however, other visual clues reveal the actual state of affairs: the man’s left arm is stretched out in a manner quite unusual for sleepers, the colour of his skin is irritatingly pale, the white sheets are bloodstained. The blade of a sword or dagger, likewise covered with blood, is positioned next to the open book in the foreground. Rather than sleeping peacefully, this man is mortally wounded. The shadow of

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his right arm hides almost all traces of the wound in his stomach that (as is implied by the position of the dagger) was self-inflicted. In a dark background space defined by the bedpost behind the man’s head, two further persons can be made out whose reactions to what they see are divided between deep grief and hectic attempts at the man’s rescue. In terms of composition, the artist has carefully focused the beholder’s attention on the head of the man by combining the painting’s oblong format with the almost indiscrete close-up effects of the lifted curtain, the theatrical lighting and the various diagonals indicated by the blade, the open book, and the movements of the two persons in the dark background.

According to his earliest biographers, Charles Le Brun (1619–1690) painted this picture in Lyon, where he spent some time on his return from a three year stay in Italy.² Nothing is known about the person who com-

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