

Fabricating the Founding Gesture

*Scipion Pinel, René Semelaigne,
and the Making of the Pinel Myth, 1836–1912*

*Fabriquer le geste fondateur :
Scipion Pinel, René Semelaigne et la formation du mythe*

エスキロールと1838年法（日本語原文・第一章より展開）

松石 竹志 Takeshi Matsuishi, M.D., Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

The confrontation between Philippe Pinel and Georges Couthon at Bicêtre — in which the physician faces down the paralysed Jacobin and wins permission to strike the chains from the insane — is the founding scene of French psychiatry, and it did not happen. That much has been established since Dora Weiner's study of 1994. This article asks a different question: not whether the scene is true, but how it acquired and then defended its authority. It follows the scene through three documented stages in the writings of Pinel's own family. In 1836 his son Scipion composed it, placing invented dialogue in his father's mouth and dating it to a year in which his father was not there. In 1888 his collateral descendant René Semelaigne reproduced it as continuous narrative, without attribution and without a trace of source criticism, in the first substantial biography, published three years after the unveiling of Pinel's statue at the Salpêtrière; there Couthon is given an office he never held. In 1912 the same Semelaigne returned to the scene

and did three things at once: he attributed it explicitly to Scipion's *récit* and set it in quotation marks, he silently corrected the false office, and he recorded — in order to dismiss it — the objection of contemporaries who denied that Couthon had ever come to Bicêtre. The myth's custodian thus documents, in a single paragraph, the moment at which a legend acquires an immune system: the challenge is admitted, and the truth of the story is relocated from the event to the will that the event was invented to display. Two further findings are reported: that the number of prisoners liberated drifts upward across the versions, from forty in Pinel's own account of 1809 to eighty in Esquirol's of 1838; and that the canonization must be dated to Semelaigne's inaugural thesis of 1888, six years earlier than the standard attribution.

Keywords: *Philippe Pinel; Scipion Pinel; René Semelaigne; Couthon; Pussin; myth of the unchaining; Jacques Postel; historiography of psychiatry; Broussais; traitement moral*

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1. The Question After Weiner

That Pinel did not strike the chains from the insane of Bicêtre in a scene of revolutionary confrontation has been known to specialists for a generation. Dora Weiner's "Le geste de Pinel: The History of a Psychiatric Myth" established the essentials in 1994, and no serious historian now repeats the story as fact.

[1] TO VERIFY — Weiner's chapter is to be consulted directly before submission; the characterization here is provisional.

What has not been done in English is to follow the myth's transmission rather than its falsity. Demonstrating that a legend is false is a smaller achievement than showing how it came to be believed, by whom it was maintained, and what its custodians did when the challenge arrived. That history is available, and it is unusually well documented, because in this case invention, canonization and defence were all carried out within a single family: by Pinel's son, and then twice by a collateral descendant who was himself a psychiatrist and a former intern of the Salpêtrière.

The French-language groundwork was laid by Jacques Postel and Gladys Swain, neither of whom has been translated into English.^[2] This article takes over Postel's central interpretative claim — that Scipion Pinel's dramatization was a compensatory device, made necessary by his own theoretical desertion of his father — and adds to it three things: a documentary reconstruction of the canonization, which must be dated six years earlier than the standard attribution; an analysis of a text that appears to have gone unremarked, the version Semelaigne published in 1912, in which the myth can be caught defending itself; and an observation on the arithmetic of the legend, whose figures drift upward from version to version in a way that is itself diagnostic.

2. What Actually Happened, and When

2.1 Pinel at Bicêtre: a hiding place

Pinel welcomed the Revolution but was a moderate who did not accept the Terror, and it was in order to shelter him from arrest that his friend Michel-Augustin Thouret had him appointed physician at Bicêtre. He took up the post on 11 September 1793 and remained until the day after 9 Thermidor.^[3] TO VERIFY — from Garrabé and Postel; the appointment dates should be checked against a documentary source.

The chronology deserves to be stated plainly, because it is the whole of the matter. The period during which Pinel was at Bicêtre — the period that would be mythologized as his heroic liberation of the insane — coincides with the period during which he was sheltering from the Terror. And the end of that period falls immediately after Couthon's execution.

2.2 Pinel's own account: the credit given to Pussin

Pinel himself did not claim the unchaining, and his account is precise about who did what and when. In §190 of the second edition of the *Traité médico-philosophique* (1809) he writes:

Ces inconvénients avoient été pour moi un objet de sollicitude pendant l'exercice de mes fonctions à titre de médecin de Bicêtre durant les premières années de la révolution ; **ce ne fut pas sans un regret extrême que je ne pus voir le terme heureux de cette coutume barbare et routinière** ; mais j'étois d'un autre côté tranquille, et je me reposais sur l'habileté du surveillant de cet hospice (**M. Pussin**), qui n'avoit pas moins à cœur de faire cesser cet oubli des vrais principes. **Il y parvint heureusement deux années après (4 prairial an VI)**, et jamais aucune mesure ne fut mieux concertée et suivie d'un succès plus marqué.^[4]

These drawbacks had been an object of concern to me during the exercise of my functions as physician at Bicêtre in the first years of the Revolution; it was not without extreme regret that I was unable to see the happy end of this barbarous and routine custom; but I was on the other hand at ease, and relied on the skill of the *surveillant* of that hospice (M. Pussin), who had no less at heart the ending of this forgetfulness of true principles. He happily succeeded two years later (4 prairial an VI), and never was any measure better concerted or followed by a more marked success.

He continues with the figure and with a detail that no later version retains:

Quarante malheureux aliénés qui gémissaient sous le poids des fers depuis une suite plus ou moins longue d'années, furent mis en liberté **malgré toutes les craintes manifestées par le Bureau central**, et on leur permit d'errer librement dans les cours, en contenant seulement les mouvemens de leurs bras par le gilet de force ; la nuit ils étoient libres dans leur loge.^[5]

Three points follow. The agent is Pussin, the *surveillant*, not Pinel. The date is 4 prairial an VI — 23 May 1798. And the resistance overcome was that of the Bureau central, an administrative body, not of a revolutionary tribunal.

2.3 The chronological impossibility

Set beside the legend, this account is decisive in a way that is worth spelling out, because the usual formulation — that Pinel was in hiding rather than confronting the Terror — understates the difficulty.

The unchaining at Bicêtre took place in May 1798. By then Couthon had been dead for nearly four years, guillotined on 10 Thermidor an II (28 July 1794). And Pinel himself had left Bicêtre for the Salpêtrière three years earlier, in 1795. The

scene requires the presence, in one room, of a man who had left the building and a man who had been executed. It is not an exaggeration of an event; it is a composition placed in a year when neither participant was available.

3. Esquirol, and the First Drift

Esquirol's handling of the story is the first stage of its political career, and it is instructive because his emphasis shifts with the regime.

In his doctoral thesis of 1805, discussing the effect of Pinel's *Traité*, he writes that since its publication the lot of the insane has infinitely improved: “**On ne contient plus les furieux avec des chaînes comme des bêtes féroces.**”^[6] The credit is given, in the same sentence, to “les principes du professeur Pinel.” It is worth noting that the French is *les furieux* — the raving — and that the sentence describes a general change of practice, not a single act.

By 1818, in the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, the tone has changed: the ideas of the time, he writes, distorted the importance of breaking the chains at Bicêtre, and the success achieved by a learned physician and friend of the unfortunate became the trophy of agitators.^[7] TO VERIFY — passage carried over from the Japanese version; to be re-checked. Swain identified in this the supreme stratagem by which a mythical construction protects itself from contradiction.^[8] Under the Restoration, Esquirol was placing a distance between his master's achievement and the revolutionary enthusiasm that had claimed it — preserving the deed by detaching it from the politics. It is the same operation that Semelaigne will perform, in a different direction, in 1912.

4. The Invention: Scipion Pinel, 1836

4.1 The scene

The scene as we know it appears for the first time in Scipion Pinel's *Traité complet du régime sanitaire des aliénés*, published in 1836, in the third chapter of the second part.^[9] Scipion introduces it with a claim of documentary warrant that will not bear inspection: this famous fact, he says, has curious details, part of which he has been able to find *in his father's own notes*, and which must at last emerge from the profound oblivion in which they have so long remained.^[10]

He dates the episode to “les derniers mois de 1792” — some nine months before his father took up the post, and five and a half years before the chains actually came off — and then supplies the dialogue:

Fatigué bientôt de la monotonie de ce spectacle et de l'inutilité de ses recherches, Couthon se retourne vers Pinel : « Ah ça, citoyen, lui dit-il, es-tu fou toi-même, de vouloir déchaîner de pareils animaux ?

— Citoyen, lui répond celui-ci, j'ai la conviction que ces aliénés ne sont si intraitables que parce qu'on les prive d'air et de liberté, et j'ose espérer beaucoup de moyens tout différents.

— Eh bien ! fais-en ce que tu voudras, je te les abandonne !

Mais je crains bien que tu ne sois victime de ta présomption.
»^[11]

Around this exchange Scipion builds the apparatus of the legend: Couthon carried in men's arms, “a human fraction planted on another body,” letting fall in a soft and feminine voice his sentences of death; the corridor of the agitated; the glacial noise of chains on flagstones filthy with ordure and damp; and, immediately afterwards, the first twelve unchained — of some fifty he judged it necessary to free — among them the English officer confined for forty years.^[12]

4.2 Why the son needed it

That a son should embellish his father's memory requires no special explanation. What requires explanation is the *form* of the embellishment — why the memory needed to be relocated from the work to the deed.

Postel's answer is that Scipion had ceased to believe in the work. In his own medical orientation he had not continued his father's line at all: he had gone over to the organicist psychopathology of François-Joseph-Victor Broussais, whose *Examen de la doctrine médicale généralement adoptée* (1816) had subjected Pinel's aetiology, therapeutics and nosology to a systematic demolition — an assault which contemporaries compared to the shock of Sieyès's *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état ?* and christened “un 89 médical.”^[13] Scipion attended Broussais's lectures as a progressive student of that medical 1789, and was a thoroughgoing organicist, urging that mental illnesses be renamed *cérébries* to mark their cerebral seat. TO VERIFY — the “89 médical” testimony and the *cérébries* proposal follow Postel and should be re-checked against his text.

The theoretical innovation on which his father's reputation rested — the recognition of the alienated as a subject with whom one could speak, and the therapeutic address to the remnant of reason — was thus precisely what the son had given up. Postel's formulation of the resulting predicament is exact: having assented to the violent critique of his father's medico-philosophical work, the son could save his father's memory only by consigning his books to oblivion and celebrating his administrative and philanthropic action alone.^[14]

On this reading the confrontation with Couthon is not merely an ornament. It is a substitute memorial. What could no longer be commemorated as doctrine was commemorated as courage.

5. The Canonization: Semelaigne, 1888

Scipion's narrative might have remained one son's embellishment. It became the standard account through a book published half a century later, in circumstances that gave it every advantage: René Semelaigne's *Philippe Pinel et son œuvre au point de vue de la médecine mentale* (1888), his inaugural thesis, written by a member of the family — Semelaigne was the grandson of Pinel's brother — who was himself a physician and a former intern of the Salpêtrière, three years after the unveiling of Pinel's statue before that hospital.^[15]

Semelaigne opens by saying that the subject is dear to him on more than one count: as a child he was raised amid family memories and traditions in which the great figure of the philanthropic physician lived again.^[16]

A bibliographical point should be entered here, since the standard French account attributes the fixing of the scene to Semelaigne's *Les grands aliénistes français* of 1894.^[17] The scene is already complete, in the form in which it would circulate, in the inaugural thesis of 1888. **The canonization must be dated six years earlier than is usually supposed**, and to a doctoral thesis rather than to a work of mature scholarship — which matters, because a thesis carries the imprimatur of a faculty.

The treatment of the Couthon scene in the 1888 volume has one decisive characteristic. It is presented as history. There are no quotation marks around the borrowed narrative, no attribution to Scipion, and no discussion of evidence. The reader is given a setting, a dialogue and an outcome, in the same voice as the surrounding biography:

Le président de la Commune était alors le paralytique Couthon, qui, voyant partout des embûches, traita sans plus de façon Pinel d'aristocrate. « Malheur à toi, lui dit-il, si tu nous trompes, et si parmi tes fous tu caches des ennemis du peuple. » [...] Se tournant alors vers Pinel : « Ah ça, citoyen, est-ce que tu es fou toi-même de vouloir déchaîner de pareils animaux ? » Pinel lui répondit avec calme : « Citoyen, j'ai la conviction que ces aliénés ne sont si intraitables que parce qu'on les prive d'air et de liberté. — Eh bien, fais-en ce que tu voudras ; mais je crains bien que tu ne sois victime de ta présomption. »

Et là-dessus, on transporta Couthon dans sa voiture. Son départ fut un soulagement ; on respira ; **le grand philanthrope** se mit aussitôt à l'œuvre, et le même jour la réforme du traitement fut appliquée à un petit nombre d'aliénés. On attendait impatiemment le résultat de l'épreuve. « Ah ! s'écria l'un d'eux amené au dehors et se trouvant en face du soleil, que c'est bon ! » C'était un officier anglais séquestré depuis quarante ans...^[18]

The dependence on Scipion is verbatim in its two central speeches. What Semelaigne adds is the setting — the Bureau central, the Commune “soupçonneuse et jalouse de son autorité absolue,” the spirit of Marat still dominant, the law of suspects not yet gone, the September massacres commanding prudence — and the hagiographic sequence that follows: the confrontation, the victory, the reform applied the same day, the forty years of darkness ended by a cry at the sight of the sun.

Two internal marks betray the material as legend rather than record.

The first is chronological instability. Scipion had headed his narrative “the last months of 1792”; Semelaigne places the scene after Pinel's appointment of 11 September 1793. A date that shifts between versions is not a date; it is a narrative convenience.

The second is an error of office. Semelaigne calls Couthon “président de la Commune.” Couthon was a deputy to the

Convention and a member of the Committee of Public Safety; he never presided over the Paris Commune. The mistake is diagnostic: an account transmitted through administrative records does not misname the office of its principal actor. This one had come by an oral and literary route.

6. The Custodian's Second Thoughts: Semelaigne, 1912

The most interesting document in this history is one that appears to have escaped notice. Twenty-four years after his thesis, Semelaigne returned to Pinel in *Aliénistes et philanthropes : les Pinel et les Tuke* (1912), and treated the Couthon scene again.^[19] He did three things, and each of them matters.

He attributed it. The narrative is now introduced as Scipion's and enclosed in quotation marks throughout: “Pinel, **d'après le récit de son fils Scipion**, « prend le parti de se rendre lui-même à la Commune de Paris, et là, répétant ses plaintes avec une chaleur nouvelle, il exige la réforme d'un traitement si monstrueux... »”^[20] What in 1888 had been the biographer's own voice is in 1912 a quoted source with a named author. The scene is no longer offered as established fact; it is offered as testimony.

He corrected the office. Couthon is no longer “le président de la Commune.” He is now introduced as “un des membres de la Commune” — still not accurate, since Couthon sat in the Convention rather than in the Paris Commune, but the specific and checkable falsehood of the presidency has gone.^[21] The correction is made silently. No acknowledgment of the earlier error appears.

He recorded the objection, and neutralized it. Elsewhere in the same volume Semelaigne writes:

Scipion Pinel a raconté, en termes émouvants, la scène de la suppression des fers des aliénés. **Certains lui ont reproché d'avoir trop dramatisé le sujet ; Couthon, déclarent-ils, ne serait point venu à Bicêtre, car cette visite ne se trouve signalée dans aucune des biographies du trop célèbre conventionnel. Ce fait, personnel, n'a, du reste, qu'une bien minime importance ; la libération des aliénés s'est accomplie par la volonté de Pinel...**^[22]

Scipion Pinel recounted, in moving terms, the scene of the removal of the irons from the insane. Some have reproached him with having over-dramatized the subject; Couthon, they declare, never came to Bicêtre, for that visit is recorded in none of the biographies of the too-celebrated Conventionnel. This fact, a personal one, is moreover of very slight importance; the liberation of the insane was accomplished by Pinel's will...

This paragraph is worth the whole of the preceding argument. By 1912 the objection was in circulation: critics had observed that Couthon's visit to Bicêtre is not recorded in any biography of the Conventionnel, and had accused Scipion of over-dramatizing. Semelaigne reports the charge accurately. And then he disarms it, not by rebutting the evidence but by declaring the point to be of minimal importance — because the liberation of the insane was accomplished by Pinel's will.

The manoeuvre is the one Swain identified in Esquirol, executed at a further remove and with the challenge explicit. The truth of the story is relocated. It no longer resides in whether Couthon came to Bicêtre; it resides in what Pinel willed. Once so relocated, the narrative is no longer vulnerable to evidence, because no possible finding about Couthon's movements can now touch it. This is not a lapse of scholarship. It is the moment at which a legend acquires an immune system, and it can be dated: it is in print in 1912, in the work of the myth's own custodian, twenty-four years after he had helped to canonize it and eighty-two years before Weiner would return to the question.

It should be added that Semelaigne's escape clause is, on its own terms, not even available to him. The liberation was not accomplished by Pinel's will: on Pinel's own testimony it was accomplished by Pussin's, four years after Couthon's death and three years after Pinel had left the establishment. The sentence that immunizes the legend against the loss of Couthon does so by asserting something the family's founding document had already denied.

7. The Arithmetic of a Legend

One further index of transmission deserves recording, because it is measurable. The number of prisoners liberated is not stable across the versions, and it moves in one direction.

Pinel in 1809 writes of **forty** unfortunates freed, at Pussin's hands, over the objections of the Bureau central.^[23] Scipion in 1836 has his father face the task of freeing **about fifty** raving patients and decide, prudently, to unchain **twelve** for a first trial — a narrative refinement that adds suspense while raising the eventual total.^[24] Esquirol in *Des maladies mentales* (1838) writes that Pinel broke the chains and that **eighty** of the insane of Bicêtre were unchained.^[25]

Forty becomes eighty in twenty-nine years, and the agent changes from Pussin to Pinel in the same sentence in which the number doubles. The drift is not evidence of dishonesty; it is evidence of a text being retold rather than consulted. Where a figure grows monotonically across successive versions and the earliest version is also the only one written by a participant, the direction of dependence is not in doubt.

8. Why the Republic Needed It

The persistence of the story cannot be explained by family piety alone, since by the 1880s it had ceased to be a family possession. TO VERIFY — this section summarizes the Japanese article and requires re-checking of each item. Tony Robert-Fleury's canvas of 1876, commissioned by the state and hung at the Salpêtrière, gave the scene a visual form — though, as Garrabé notes, that painting in fact depicts the second and real unchaining, of the women at the Salpêtrière, carried out by Pussin at Pinel's request.^[26] The statue was unveiled before that hospital on 13 July 1885 — the eve of the national festival, a date chosen rather than found. The secular curriculum established under

the Ferry Laws carried the figure of the liberating physician into elementary instruction. Through these three channels the story passed from the internal memory of a profession into the collective memory of a nation.

What made it serviceable is not obscure. A republic engaged in displacing clerical authority with scientific authority required a repertoire of secular saints, and Pinel was ideally shaped for the role: a physician, a man of reason, a liberator whose act could be represented in a single canvas and understood by a child. The scene's utility, in other words, ran in exactly the opposite direction from its accuracy. It could be believed because it was needed.

But it should be said, against a too-easy reading, that the myth was not manufactured out of nothing. Pinel had genuinely been a moderate who refused the Terror; the humane transformation of the treatment at Bicêtre was genuinely accomplished under his authority, if not by his hand; Pussin was a real man who really removed chains, and Pinel said so in print. The legend is a selective amplification of an existing figure, not a fabrication *ex nihilo* — which is precisely why it proved so hard to dislodge, and why its custodian in 1912 could dismiss the factual objection with a clear conscience.

9. Conclusion: Four Stages

The formation of the myth can now be set out as a sequence, each stage documented and datable.

Invention (1836). Scipion Pinel composes the confrontation, supplies dialogue, claims his father's notes as warrant, and dates the scene to a year in which his father was not there and his antagonist could not have been. His motive is not simple filial piety but the resolution of a private contradiction: having gone over to Broussais, he could no longer commemorate his father's doctrine, and commemorated his courage instead.

Canonization (1888). René Semelaigne reproduces the scene as continuous historical narrative, without attribution, in the first substantial biography — an inaugural thesis, published by a family member into a climate of national commemoration, six years before the work to which the fixing of the scene is usually credited. The dependence is verbatim; the office attributed to Couthon is false; the chronology has shifted again.

Immunization (1912). The same author, in a later work, attributes the scene to Scipion, sets it in quotation marks, silently corrects the false office, records the objection that the visit never occurred, and neutralizes it by declaring the point to be of minimal importance beside Pinel's will. The myth survives the disclosure of its source because its truth has been moved out of the reach of evidence.

Demythologization (1970s–1990s). Postel and Swain in French, Weiner in English, examine the scene as a construction. It is worth noticing that this stage has not displaced the story. The unchaining remains the standard opening image of psychiatry's history in textbooks and in popular accounts, and

the reason is legible in Semelaigne's paragraph of 1912. A narrative whose truth has been relocated from the event to the intention cannot be refuted by establishing what happened. It can only be replaced, by an account of the past that does the same work better — and the work in question, of which the profession is not always conscious, is to say what psychiatry believes itself to have been founded upon.

There is a modest irony in the fact that the better account is available, and has been since 1809. Pinel's own paragraph names an administrator who overcame an administrative body on a datable day, and it is a more instructive founding text than the confrontation invented for him: it locates the origin of humane treatment not in a physician's courage before power but in the patient competence of a man who was not a physician at all.

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- [11] Ibid., p. 57. (Cited at 4.1.)
- [12] Ibid., pp. 57–58. (Cited at 4.1.)
- [13] F.-J.-V. Broussais, *Examen de la doctrine médicale généralement adoptée* (Paris, 1816). TO VERIFY — the “89 médical” testimony attributed to Peisse. (Cited at 4.2.)
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- [15] R. Semelaigne, *Philippe Pinel et son œuvre au point de vue de la médecine mentale* (Paris: Imprimeries Réunies, 1888). Two digitized copies have been used: the Columbia University copy (Wellcome Collection) and the University of Ottawa copy (Internet Archive). The Couthon scene is at pp. 33–36; the pagination has been verified from the page headers of both scans. (Cited at 5.)
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- [17] J. Garrabé, “De Pinel à Freud,” attributing the fixing of the scene and of Couthon's apostrophe to R. Semelaigne, *Les grands aliénistes français* (Paris, 1894). (Cited at 5.)
- [18] Semelaigne, *Philippe Pinel et son œuvre*, pp. 34–35. (Cited at 5.)
- [19] R. Semelaigne, *Aliénistes et philanthropes : les Pinel et les Tuke* (Paris: G. Steinheil, 1912). (Gallica, ark:/12148/bpt6k56266569.) (Cited at 6.)
- [20] Ibid., p. 45. (Cited at 6.)
- [21] Ibid., p. 45: “Citoyen, lui dit un des membres de la Commune, j'irai demain à Bicêtre te faire une visite...” followed by “Le membre de la Commune qui parlait ainsi était Couthon.” (Cited at 6.)
- [22] Ibid., p. 223. (Cited at 6.)
- [23] Pinel, *Traité*, 2nd edn, p. 201. (Cited at 7.)
- [24] S. Pinel, *Traité complet*, p. 58. (Cited at 7.)
- [25] J.-É. D. Esquirol, *Des maladies mentales considérées sous les rapports médical, hygiénique et médico-légal* (Paris: J.-B. Ballière, 1838), t. II, p. 200, quoted in Garrabé, “De Pinel à Freud.” TO VERIFY — to be checked directly in Esquirol's text. (Cited at 7.)
- [26] Garrabé, “De Pinel à Freud.” The canvas at the Académie de Médecine by Charles Muller, by contrast, illustrates the invented Bicêtre scene directly. (Cited at 8.)

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