

# FRENCH CLASSICISM

# Confrérie de la Passion

- An association formed in 1402 to produce plays. By 1420 it was established in a permanent theater in Paris. Almost the sole producer of plays thereafter.
- 1548 – the Confrérie built a new theater, the Hôtel de Bourgogne. Would be used until 1783.
- At same time, the Confrérie was forbidden to produce religious plays, formerly its primary function.

- Was given a monopoly on all theatrical production in Paris.
- Began renting theater to traveling troupes. After 1598 it became simply a landlord, but any troupe/group performing in Paris had to pay a fee to the Confrérie, whether or not the Hôtel de Bourgogne was used.

# Alexandre Hardy

- Principal French playwright of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- Supplied Valleran-Lecomte with a large proportion of plays for production, Valleran-Lecomte being the first professional manager in France to produce high quality productions.
- Majority of plays were tragicomedies. The plays lacked depth, and emphasized a continuous sweep of action similar to novels of chivalry & adventure.

# France 1625-1650

- Religious civil wars drew to a close in the 1620s after Cardinal Richelieu became chief minister.
- A concern grew over cultural image, seeking to improve status of literature and arts.
- 1641 – Richelieu built an Italian type theater with proscenium arch in his palace. Would be called the Palais-Royale after his death in 1642.

- Cardinal Mazarin followed Richelieu. A lover of Italian opera, Mazarin brought Giacomo Torelli (the “Great Wizard” of Italian Theater) to Paris in 1645.
- By 1650, Torelli had established Italian scenic methods & theater architecture at the French court.
- The French Academy, formed in 1636, would exert great influence on French literature and drama. [elite group of 40 learned men of letters]

# Neoclassicism

- Was greatly formalized in France.
- Neoclassicists were concerned with 6 primary topics
  - Verisimilitude
  - Purity of dramatic types
  - The five-act form
  - Decorum
  - The purposes of drama (to teach & to please)
  - The three unities

# verisimilitude

- “the appearance of truth”
- Embodied reality, morality, and generality or abstraction
- Playwright had to exclude anything that could not happen in real life, unless they were accepted part of a Greek myth or biblical material (and then had to be minimized)
- Discouraged soliloquies and chorus as unnatural. Replaced such with a trusted companion or ***confidant*** to whom they could reveal innermost secrets.

- Violence was removed offstage because of difficulty in making it convincing (real).
- Dramatist must teach moral lessons, reveal life's ideal moral patterns. Whenever injustice appeared to prevail, it was explained as a "part of God's plan," beyond human comprehension, but inevitably just.
- Truth = those norms that are discoverable through the rational and systematic examination of phenomena (natural or man-made)
- These "truth in norms" were to extend to every aspect of dramatic composition.

# purity of dramatic types

- Only two forms allowed: tragedy and comedy.
- Other forms were inferior because they were mixed forms.
- Tragedy norms
  - Characters drawn from rulers or nobility
  - Stories dealt with affairs of state, downfall of rulers and similar events
  - Always with unhappy endings
  - Style was lofty and poetic

- Comedy norms
  - Characters drawn from middle or lower classes
  - Stories dealt with domestic & private affairs
  - Always with happy endings
  - Style characterized by use of ordinary language
- These norms were to be strictly adhered to.
- Deviate plays did exist, but were denounced as not serious efforts and unworthy of critical consideration, products of poorly educated or tasteless writers, and labeled irregular or *illegitimate* drama

5-Act form: Any legitimate play must be written in 5 acts

Decorum = fittingness or appropriateness

- The principle of character portrayal was termed *decorum*
- Each age group, rank, profession, and sex was said to have its own essence. Each dramatist was expected to remain true to these norms in character creation.
- Dramatist must only write about the permanent aspects of humanity, governing patterns that remain the same in all places and time periods.

# 3 unities: time, place, action

- Verisimilitude dictated no more than 24 hours of subjective time should pass during a play.
- Because the audience knows it has only been in one place, all action must take place within one location. This was gradually loosened to allow for a change of place PROVIDING it could be reached within 24 hours.
- Only ONE action allowed. No subplots were permissible.

# Major French Playwrights

- Pierre **Corneille** (1606-1684)
- Jean **Racine** (1639-1699)
- Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, aka **Molière** (1622-1673)

# Corneille

- Most closely associated with transition to classicism
- Won great success in 1636 with ***The Cid***, which set off controversies ultimately affirming neoclassical forms
  - Strained *verisimilitude* with too much action in 24 hours
  - Was a tragicomedy, but adjudged to not be a tragedy (despite a death of character) because of happy ending for one main character, violating *decorum*.

# Racine

- Marked peak of French classical tragedy.
- First play, *La Thébaïde* was produced by Molière in 1664.
- Reputation firmly established by 1667 with *Andromaque*.
- *Phaedra* is considered to be the greatest of French tragedies.
- His plays contain little external action. Most concentrate on a psychological conflict within a single character who wants to do the right thing but is prevented from doing so by circumstances or his own nature.

# Molière

- Well educated son of a prosperous upholsterer in Paris.
- Entered theatre in 1643 (21 yrs old)
- His 1<sup>st</sup> venture, the Théâtre Illustre, failed and he and acting friends toured French provinces from 1646-1658.
- Upon return to Paris, Molière's troupe became second only to the Hôtel de Bourgogne troupe, surpassing it in comedy.

- Molière became a favorite of Louis XIV who allowed him to use the Palais-Royal, and protected him in many controversies.
- Known principally for his comedies of character and ideas, he did write other plays. Many of these are farces featuring commedia dell' arte character types.
- Also wrote a number of comedy ballets and tried some tragedy.
- Most famous works are: *The School For Wives* (1662); *Tartuffe, or The Imposter* (1664); *The Miser* (1668), *The Doctor In Spite of Himself* (1666); *The Misanthrope* (1666); *The Would-be Gentleman* (1671); and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673)

# *Tartuffe, or The Imposter*

- Attacked religious hypocrisy, quite possibly targeting the Company of the Holy Sacrament and their “spiritual police.”
- First produced in 1664, the Company immediately attacked it. Controversy became so heated Louis XIV forbade further performances.
- Molière revised play in 1667 and tried again, only to have to withdraw it.
- A third version in 1669 went largely without opposition. SUCCESS!
- The play also attacked forced marriages, but that was secondary to the hypocrisy.

# PLAY PRODUCTION IN FRANCE

## 1650-1675

- Parisian acting troupes were organized on a sharing plan similar to Shakespeare's company. Democratic organizations with voting, and women enjoyed full membership.
- French company was 10-15 members, but they employed others. While all troupes received an annual stipend from the crown, it was not enough to live on. Profit-sharing from successful performances were necessary.

- Usual practice was for playwright to receive a percentage of receipts from a limited # of performances, after which play belonged to troupe.
- Playwright assisted in original production, including casting it. Casting in revivals required agreement within the troupe.
- After initial production actors were to be ready to perform it upon 24 hours notice.
- Actors tended to specialize in either comedy or tragedy. Molière was never successful in tragedy, but noted as best comic actor of day.
- Actors furnished own costumes, usually contemporary, but some conventionalized.