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 17th 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 permissable.
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 1st 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 form 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.