

# French Classical Drama: Corneille, Moliere, Racine

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# French Classical Drama

- Aristotelian Three Unities: Time, Place, Action (plot)
- *Vraisemblance*: Believability or Probability
- Genre Purity: Tragedy, Comedy; Not Tragi-comedy
- Decorum: Dignity, harmony, sense of clarity
- Violence off stage

# Disputes over Drama

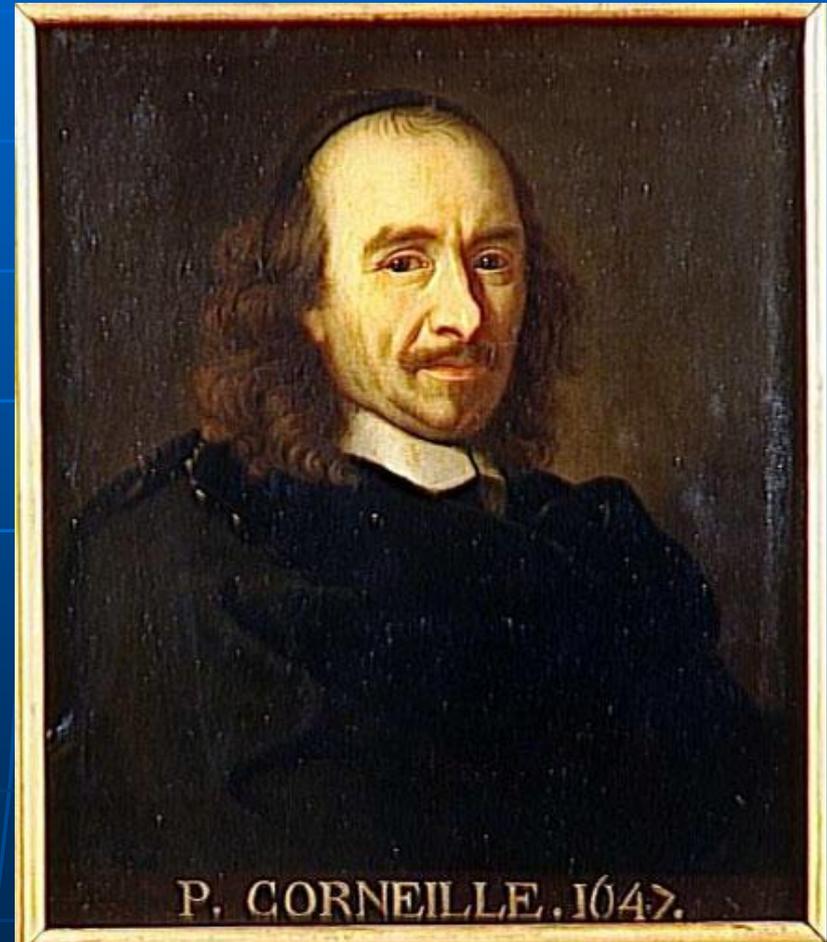
- French Academy and Cardinal Richelieu
- Battle over Corneille's *Le Cid*
- Battle over Moliere's *L'Ecole des Femmes* (School for Wives), *Tartuffe*, and *Dom Juan*.
- Question of Taste, Decorum and "The Rules"
- Question of Religion and Politics
- Question of Morality and Social Norms

# Moral and Social Norms Reinforced

- Bourgeois Morality: a moral viewpoint that comes from the new Middle Class who were acquiring wealth but were not noble
- Temperance and moderation
- Respect for appearances; Reputation
- Money (bourgeois) and Honor (aristocratic) values often clash; finding a harmony is the challenge of the Classical

# Pierre Corneille (1606-1684)

- *The Comic Illusion*, 1636; Baroque
- *Cid*, 1637:  
Transition from Baroque to Classical
- Both a tragic and a comic playwright
- Not elected to French Academy until 1645



# *The Comic Illusion*

- Very much still in the Baroque style
- Magic (challenges believability)
- Meta-theatrical: play within play and commentary on the theatre
- Mixed Genre: Tragi-comedy
- Unity of Action: many sub-plots
- Illusion and reality

# *Le Cid*

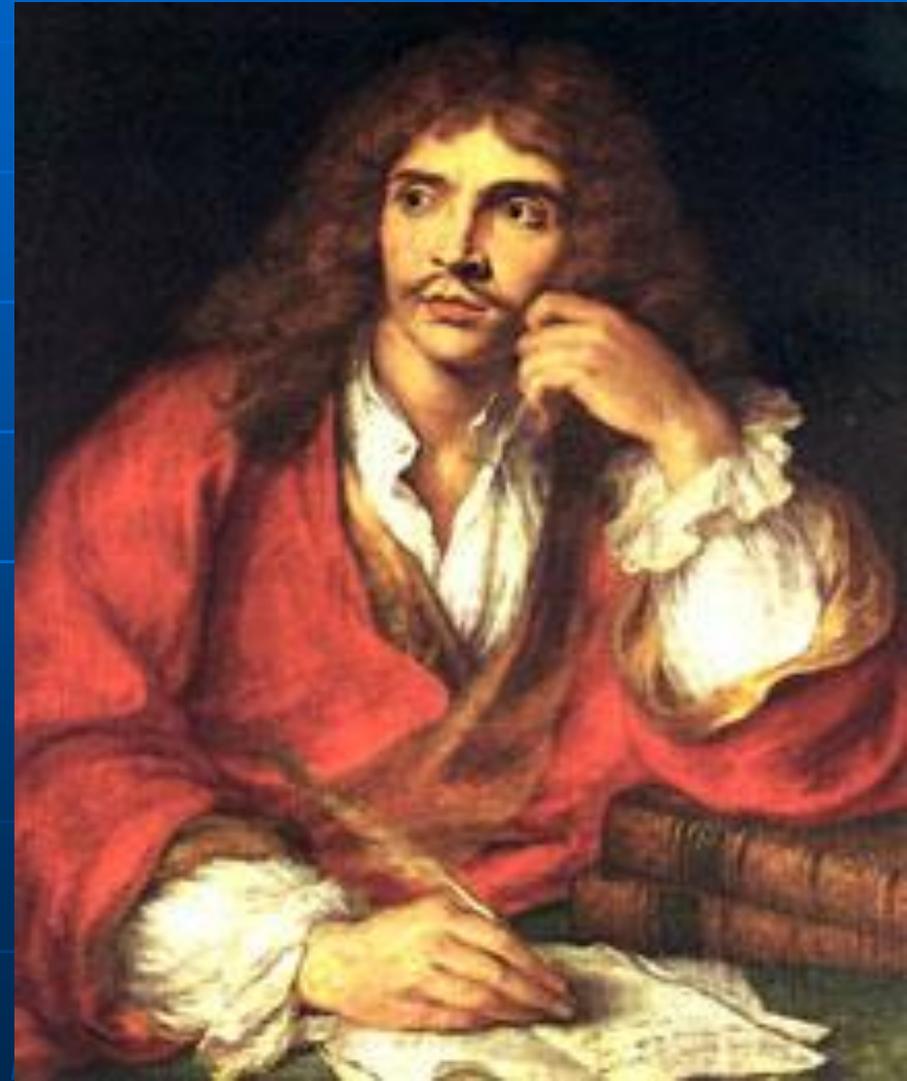
- Rodrigue and Chimene are young lovers
- Rodrigue kills her father in a duel
- He fights back the Moors and wins honor
- She has a legitimate claim to filial revenge
- He had a legitimate claim to defend his Honor
- Reconciled by the King commanding their marriage.

# Le Cid and Classicism

- Character motivation is clear and valid
- Conflict is between two competing, equally valid forces: Passion and Honor.
- Controversy was driven by lack of three Unities and the Tragi-comic form.
- But the situation is plausible (*vraisemblance*) and the characters behave with Decorum and dignity.
- It is a transitional piece from Baroque to Classicism

# Jean-Baptiste Poquelin Moliere (1622-1673)

- Father, valet de chambre tapissier
- 1658, service of the King's brother; *Les Précieuses Ridicules* satirized Mme. de Rambouillet (Leader of a Salon)
- Théâtre du Palais Royal and King Louis XIV's protection



# Character Types in Moliere

- Characters are an exaggeration
- Lack Bourgeois Moderation
- Misanthrope: Alceste is overly critic of human weakness
- Tartuffe: Orgon is too trusting of the Appearance of piety
- Dom Juan: Dom Juan is obsessed with conquering female sexuality
- Avare: Harpagon loves Money too much
- The Imaginary Invalid: Argan is obsessed with his mortality (hypocondriac)

# Moliere and Classicism

- Moliere achieves the classical by showing us what happens when it is lacking
- Characters who are self deluded: they think they are pursuing a valid passion—but they are deluded about the true nature of their passion and of themselves.
- Their social and personal failures reinforce the Classical Values

# Racine (1639-1699)

- Went from common origins to become “royal historiographer”
- Enjoyed support of Louis XIV
- Represented strong kings who are decisive, ruthless, and majestic
- The ultimate expression of French Classicism
- Draws on plots and characters from Greece, Rome, and the Bible
- Moral Dilemmas born of Circumstances, not Heroic Flaw



# *Phedre* Analysis

- Based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*
- Psychological Drama rather than Fate
- Phedre is the center of the play to the end (in Euripides she commits suicide in the middle)
- Racine's Hippolytus is not a pure and chaste follower of Artemis; he loves Aricia
- Both Phedre and Hippolytus struggle with their Moral idea of themselves and their Passion.
- Phedre betrays Hippolytus and frames him when she discovers that he can love, but doesn't love her.
- Original Sin implied by the corruption of human passion (Huguenot influence?)

# Restatement of Classicism

- The “rules” help to focus the dramatic interest
- The end result is the presentation of some essential reality of the world.
- Jacques Guicharnaud: “The French classical theatre concentrates on the bare and austere presentation of moments of truth...things suddenly come to light through the objective and ordered exteriorization of inner-realities.”

# Conclusions

- Classical Theatre broke with conventions of Baroque
- Observe Three Unities for the purpose of Believability
- Decorum, honor, knowing your place in society: these values and morals are reinforced.
- Moliere showed us characters whose ideas of themselves do not match reality
- Racine's heroes suffer because of being caught between Real and Ideal