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THE FRENCH WRITERS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



THE LITERARY WORKS OF CORNEILLE CONVERTED
AND STABILIZED THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

A THESIS
PRESENTED
as
PARTIAL REQUIREMENT
for the
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

by

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THE FRENCH WRITERS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

"One of the most interesting facts concerning the arts of all kinds is that those who wish to give their lives to them do not appear where the appliances for instruction in them exist. An artistic atmosphere does not create artists; a literary atmosphere does not create literators; poets and painters spring up where there was never a verse made or a picture seen."

W.D. Howell's "Literature and Life."

Thesis: The literary work of Corneille converted and stabilized the French language.

Mostly every nation has had its "Golden Era" of literature. Each great epoch thus understood encloses many smaller epochs which point out all the great characters, with all the accomplishments that they have made from the decadence. It also points out some types of fortunate and misfortunate occurrences which might be renewed again. In this time a wise and tasteful man will be able to choose after so long an interval, a golden age, in which he will more or less add to the fame of that epoch, through some immortalizing work. He will be able perhaps to improve the fluency of the language, in this great epoch, or he might suggest new plans, which might be helpful to many, especially towards the adaptation of that nation to its environment, thus perhaps catering to their enthusiastic desires.

These results are not always sensible for the contemporaries, for those who work it out and prove it; for from a more remote

point of view, as of a point of view from history, one can remark at what epoch a nation loses the originality of its characters and the purity of its language. This I have readily noticed from experience while struggling in attempts to translate and to get a comprehensive understanding of the ancient classics, after having studied one author who lived in one epoch, and then another author who lived in another epoch.

But the impression of such a decadence is slightly present in the minds of all nations even when they have put aside all barbarous ideals, and profiting by their past experiences, they begin to taste vigorously the charms of beautiful arts.

From these general causes we might then form a general conclusion that all nations have found a sensible difference through the changing rapidity of the epochs through their formations and laxations, and that the languages which once seemed fixed, develop again with slight alterations, and without loss to the nation.

The duration and obvious stability of these epochs, indicate enough that everything is not accidental or spontaneous in the language, but the language grows through the customs of the people, who make it theirs. The superior talents of a writer cannot hasten these epochs, or go beyond their general progress.

A careful survey and study of the three greatest literary epochs of the world, and later the epoch enclosing the seventeenth century French writers, will display these facts.

It is said that the Athenian culture in the fifth century B.C., under the rule of Pericles, gave birth to more literary men than the world has ever produced in any other time. Why was that?

History tells us because freedom of thought was tolerated, and literature and art appreciated.

Let us take the Renaissance period which predominated all of Europe, and the Elizabethan period which perpetuated England in literature.

This Renaissance period which marked a transition from medieval to modern history, had great influence upon the European nations. For as we have already learned, the word Renaissance means only a "rebirth", and this was shown in the use of the classical language in literature.

But we are concerned with the French writers in the seventeenth century. It is stated that the Renaissance started in France from the invasion of Naples in 1495 by Charles VIII. The effects of this invasion, in regard to the Renaissance, brought about an intellectual contact between the two people, and brought about a preparation for the writers of the seventeenth century.

Let us consider the first three periods in the development of French literature in the seventeenth century.

In the first period, (1600-1659) France seemed to have borrowed her artistic style from Italy, and possessed nothing original. Poetry had become infected with mannerisms and was devoid of tone. The language grew through the strange customs of the court, and the work of the writers was free, due to the confusion of the popular dialects, and it was sometimes Italianized, sometimes Latinized, and sometimes Gasconized. A reformation was then made through the work of Malherbe.

In the second period, "The Golden Age of Classicism"

(1659-88) Boileau, who is called the "Great law-giver of classicism," presented his work, "Poetic Art" (1614). His motto was, "Seek the truth, be guided by reason, imitate nature." These principles were greatly observed by Molière, Racine and La Fontaine.

The period of transition was the third great period. It was from 1688-1715. At this time preciosity seemed to revive again. This, of course, gave rise to new and artificial words in the language. The literary work of this period greatly dealt with the language of the précieux, and of course the writers of that period adopted such a style in order to satisfy the popular demand of that time. Such a confusion in the style of that period, has left to us opinions about the true style of the writers of that period, and it is for this reason that I have selected one of the authors in that epoch, whom I shall defend.

L'HOTEL DE RAMBOUILLET

In order to discuss the literary work of the seventeenth century, salons were opened by those of great social standings.

The most popular salon of this period was the Salon de Rambouillet, or L'Hôtel de Rambouillet. Its purpose was to abolish barbarism and to see that pure diction was used in all literary work, and to adopt an altogether different custom from that of the courts. It was built a few steps from the Louvre, and was in the care of Mme. de Rambouillet and her daughter Julie d' Angennes.

Malherbe, Balzac and Armand Du Plessis were members. Later Richelieu, Corneille, Mme. de Sévigné, Molière, Racine, Boileau, La Rochefoucauld and a few others were frequenters of this salon.

These members considered it an honor to be a member of that literary society, and they were looked upon as beings who were morally and intellectually cultured. "It was" said Saint-Simon "the rendezvous of all that which was the most distinguished in condition and merit, a tribunal on which one was to depend and whose decision had the greatest force in the world."

The famous writing, "Guirland de Julie" presented to Mlle. de Rambouillet January 1, 1641 by the Duke of Montausier, added much to the fame of the Salon. It was written on a kind of lace paper (velin), and each leaf contained a flower painted by Robert, a famous painter of that time.

Such a composition I surmise, must have closely resembled the monastical work of the Middle Ages. In addition to this each page had a madrigal which was the work of nineteen of the best poets of the time.

But like everything else, the Salon was accomplishing its end, and was failing in another way. The over-refinement of the précieux had flourished there. Such an affectation of customs as was displayed in later years at the Salon, became the subject matter for Molière in his "Précieuses Ridicules" 1659.

Since the salons were only a creation of affectation in language which had the people very confused and uncertain about their own language and customs, I might say like that condition after the destruction of the Tower of Babel, another resort was to be sought which was to make an adjustment to the language. This was none other than the French Academy.

At the request of Richelieu in 1635 the Academy began its work. Its purpose was to fashion a dictionary (Le Dictionnaire de L'Académie Française) which was to serve as a treasure and a store room for expressing simple terms. It was to act as a recorder to the progress of the language, and to put into the language an element of fixity, and into its literature an element of unity.

This plan was great, and the next step was to get the individuals to compile such a book. Just as the old saying, "To win a battle we need men and ammunitions", so it is to develop culture, we need men and geniuses.

Now the Academy busied itself in selecting authors who wrote purely in the French language, and whose writings were good enough to be compiled in "Le Dictionnaire".

At the time of the first complement of the Dictionnaire in 1635, Corneille was dismissed by Richelieu, who had hired him to alter some plays that were written by the great politician. Therefore it was not in the first days of the French Academy that Cor-

neille through his works could contribute anything to it, since he was on unfriendly terms with Richelieu. It was later in his career when he used the purest of ideas and expressions.

In his theatrical works we shall be able to see how the language of the Dictionnaire was benefited, and how the people were benefited through both mediums, his plays and the Dictionnaire.

Corneille founded the French classical drama which benefited the French language. Ticknor declares that Corneille's "Le Cid" did more than any other drama to determine for two centuries the character of the theatre all over the continent of Europe."

Corneille was greatly influenced by the tragedies of Seneca. A tragedy of this kind is not entirely tragic, but has in it some elements of humor. It also violates as it were the unities of time, place and action, and displays anachronisms. Compression of style also predominates in this work. To accomplish this Corneille omitted anything that would take away interest from the main plot.

This compression of style for which Corneille and Racine became masters was secured through their close study of the inspiring works of the famous Greek and Latin authors, especially Horace.

Also did Corneille adhere to the Aristotelian unity of action. This unity of action requires that everything that is not indispensable to the development of the plot, should be eliminated from the play. He had a main action with the sub-action closely related, and followed by the principal action. If there were to be any incompleteness, Corneille always allowed it in his sub-actions, which served as preliminary actions.

It is for these reasons that Corneille's "Le Cid" shows such a marked difference from "Le Cid" of Guillen de Castro. Guillen de Castro's work is more of an epic drama, rather than a drama filled with romance and heroism as Corneille makes his.

For these causes it lacked unity and was crudely finished.

It seemed then that it was left for Corneille to polish this drama and to make it as classical as possible, by a strict observance of the laws that were set by Aristotle. It seemed also that such was the work of Corneille at that time -- to polish all other crude writings. Also did it seem that a play was not completed until it was supervised or reproduced by Corneille. For as we have already learned it was not more than three years after he was appointed by Richelieu to polish some plays and later dismissed by Richelieu, that he perfected "Le Cid."

But Corneille disregarded the precepts of Horace and Aristotle as to the unity of place. The unity of place required that the scene of the action should be limited to one definite locality. It kept Corneille uneasy at times whether he should keep to the classical unities, in restricting the play to one place, or whether he should follow the style of his predecessors in France, who disregarded the unities, as to the number of cities or mansions in which the scenes were to take place. But Corneille restricted the place to one town whenever a possibility arose, and allowed the action to be carried on in one house.

Corneille also disregarded the classical law for time. The unity of time prescribed that the action represented on the stage should be such as might with probability take place within twenty-four hours. He was just as uneasy about the unity of

time as he was about the unity of place. For this reason he extended the time and lessened it whenever it was necessary. By so doing he believed that the duration of time could be left to the imagination of the people.

Corneille did as all great authors are apt to do when they write for the enjoyment of the people. In order to satisfy the enthusiastic desire of the people in the seventeenth century, the classic writers used the language that was in vogue and suitable to the customs and environment of the people. Being poets and dramatists they were given licenses that perhaps were questionable, and these brought constant additions of words and phrases to the language.

The dramatists did not call the things directly by their names, but only hinted at them. For in Molière's "Précieuses Ridicules" we meet such a term as "the commodities of the conversation," meaning "chairs." It seemed as though one would have to be poetically inclined at times to understand what they meant. But Corneille sought a different method. He preferred to use words that were used and should actually be used among the people. This of course had affected to a certain degree, the language of the "Precieux," but his freedom in the use of the words he thought best, would sooner or later abolish the affected language. Occasionally Corneille being influenced by the contemporary "preciosite" would introduce phrases that were characterized by affectation.

In the "Cid" Corneille has a mixture of prose and verses which he himself later remarked should not be employed. Justice must be given him that whenever he found himself at fault he

quickly acknowledged it. When he was questioned about the unities in his play "Mélite" (1629) he acknowledged that he knew nothing concerning the unities at that time.

The facts that Corneille allowed affectation in his play is readily seen in the monologue of Rodrigue in "Le Cid". Corneille later condemned it himself, but critics have deemed it possible since Rodrigue is after all not a mediaeval Spanish Knight, but a "precieux" courtier.

Corneille offered pleasure to the people by inserting long speeches in the play. This was not done due to the fact that he was a lawyer, but the long speeches were taken directly from the ancient Greek dramas, for which the chorus stood.

We must remember that Corneille was beginning a new kind of drama, in France, which had not yet been perfected, and this new drama, the "Cid" was a tragic comedy.

It was closely observed by the dramatists, when writing tragedies, to adhere to a sad ending. In the comedy the ending was to be vice-versa. Therefore in writing a play that was to be partly tragic and partly comic, Corneille had to seek some ways of offering a comic relief, so as to lessen the sad tension.. This is readily seen in the role of the Infanta in the "Cid". The insertion of this character caused Corneille to be severely criticised by Richelieu. But as the majority was satisfied at having such a character in the play, we might just as well attribute the criticism of Richelieu as a personal feeling against Corneille.

In the "Cid" Corneille violates probabilities and reason, by allowing too many events to follow at one time. It is true

that when Corneille wrote the story of the "Cid", it was already made, partly historical and partly legendary, by Guillen de Castro, but in criticising the play we must remember that to Corneille in due some credit in his work, because Guillen de Castro's "Cid" was no more than a sort of dramatized chronicle which Corneille reproduced and perfected.

The masterpieces of Corneille had elevated the French thought. They created emulation and had invited others to write. There lived in this epoch besides Corneille such men as Molière, Racine and La Bruyère. One could not attempt to write about such a glorious epoch as the seventeenth century without mentioning these men.

Boileau when being asked by Louis XIV who was the greatest poet in his reign, answered, "Sire, C'est Molière." Just as Corneille can be called, "The father of the French tragedy," so can Molière be called, "The father of the French comedy." He was born in Paris, France 1622. His right name was Jean-Baptiste de Poquelin. He assumed the name of Molière in his theatrical works. His first play was "l'Etourdi!" In this he began to use the language of the fine comedy which Corneille had created ten or twelve years before. His next production was "Les Précieuses Ridicules" at Paris in 1659.

This play was as satirical as Cervantes', "Don Quixote." Just as Cervantes in his "Don Quixote" satirized the absurdities into which chivalrous stories, and chivalrous sentiments had degenerated, so does Molière in the "Précieuses Ridicules" satirize the absurdities and the affectation of the "Precieux".

One striking reason can be given why the work of Molière was so successful, -- the simple reason that he, himself, acted in the plays that he wrote. He knew what he wanted to convey and so he expressed it through his emotions and feelings. He acted the part that he wanted ridiculed, and for this reason in order to emphasize it, he exaggerated the representation.

His works include "Les Femmes Savantes" (1672), "L'Ecole des Maris" (1661), which shows the beauty of a confiding and gentle character in a man. In "Tartufe" he was so provoked against hypocrisy that he for a time forgot that he was writing this play also for pleasure. He disregarded this fact and rather than amuse, he reproved the people vigorously for hypocrisy in religion. We later meet such writings among our poets of Romanticism especially in the "Hind and the Panther."

After the first production of "Tartufe", the play was banned for five years. During this time Molière wrote "Don Juan" (1665). It was intended as a revenge for the suppression of "Tartufe". The next in order "Le Misanthrope" (1669) was a great comedy of characters; and then "Amphitryon" (1668). His last four comedies received a great ovation, but not as much as his other works. His last four comedies were "Monsieur de Pourceaugnac" and "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" in 1669, "Les Fourberis de Scapin" in 1671 and "Le Malade Imaginaire" (1673). He was seized with an haemorrhage while taking part in the "Le Malade Imaginaire", was taken home, and died an hour after.

Molière saw in man that spiritual substance which should be kept at all times incorruptable. In scanning human visages, he saw and felt that man was more than a social being, but had

in him an element of sacredness, to be revered. It is for this reason that he disapproved of any misdemeanors that could be found in him and could corrupt others. No writer of the seventeenth century has surpassed him in seeking the means towards the attainment of his end. La Bruyère came to be his closest rival, but did not surpass him.

His style has been questioned, and a few faults have been found, particularly in his verse. Boileau, Fénelon, and La Bruyère did so in the seventeenth century; Vauvenargues in the eighteenth, and a few others in the following.

We must remember that Molière like the other writers of his century had to fall into some faults in order to accomplish an end. Molière used the language of the "precieux" at times, not because he loved to, but to bring out the force of his work and to attain the end for which he wrote. The carelessness of his style, the useless repetitions, the incoherent metaphors, and the heavy, entangled phrases that occur in his works must be overlooked when we consider the little time that was spent in the preparation of these plays. We must also not fail to realize that Molière's writings were to deal with the present time for which they were presented, and if he were to spend much time in writing them or polishing them, the work would not be valued so much as if it were presented at a different time.

His profession as a comedian hindered him from being admitted in the French Academy, but later a bust of him was placed in the meeting room with this inscription, "Rien ne manque à sa gloire, il manquait à la nôtre."

Another writer of marked renown in the seventeenth century, is Racine. Racine was born at La Ferté-Milon in the Old Duchy

of Valois, December 20, 1639. He was left an orphan at an early age, and was sent to the College of Beauvais by his relatives. This College was connected with the Port Royal, which as we shall see later, greatly interfered with the writers of this period. And this Port Royal later became the school of Racine.

Racine as a student excelled in the romance languages, also in Greek and Latin, and this ability no doubt is what formed the element of success in his French writings.

Fearing that too close an intimacy with the actors of that time would encourage Racine to become connected with the stage, his guardians sent him to an uncle, the Abbé Sesurin, at Uzès. But when one is dramatically inclined, especially at this time when rivalry and emulation are enkindled among the talented writers, who could dwarf such an ambition in Racine?

There was a need for tragic writers. Corneille's work after the appearance of "Pertharite" in 1652, was in a decline. The tragic writings were continued after Corneille for a period of ten years by Qunault and Thomas Corneille, but their contributions were not enough to satiate the thirst for good tragedies, especially after such a nation had once seen the production of Corneille.

Racine began his work in 1664, his first play being "La Thébaïde" ou "Les Frères Enemis." This was played by the troupe of Molière. "Alexander" was the next good drama of Racine. His originality was questioned in this drama for it closely resembled the work of Corneille. "Andromaque" was the next production in 1667. This production removed from him the title of "imitator", because of his originality in this play, and its equality to

Corneille's "Le Cid", he was looked upon as a great creator of the tragedy. His only comedy was "Les Plaideurs" (1668).

Just as Molière's specialty was in comedies, so it was Racine's to specialize in tragedies alone. "Britannicus" followed in 1669; this is he based on Tacitus' "Annals." Next appeared "Bérénice" (1670) and "Bajazet" (1672) "Mithridate" (1673) "Iphigénie" (1674).

As it seems to be a common characteristic with most writers, that after they have failed in one of their productions, they silently steal away into obscurity, and begin to seek privacy, and remain free from writing, so it was with Racine after the failure of "Phèdre" in 1677. But after being asked by Madame de Maintenon to write again, he wrote "Esther" and "Athalie."

Racine excelled in the classical schools as a dramatist. There is no doubt about his adherence to Boileau's motto, "Seek the truth, be guided by reason, imitate nature". Corneille preferred a complicated action, that is, allowing many events to come at one time. Racine chose what was simple, true and natural. In Corneille the characters are secondary to the action, in Racine, the action is suited to the characters. His style is simple and smooth, and when necessary, it is strong and bold. He displayed a unique style in psychological analysis which later our American genius, Hawthorne, equaled.

But we must not forget our great Corneille in classing the tragic writers. It is through him that they were influenced. We must not forget that it was he who pioneered the paths and set the pace for the tragic writers. No better suggestion can be offered, in my estimation, than that of Madame de Sévigné to her daughter:

"As for the plays of Corneille, be sure that never will anything approach - the beautiful passages in Corneille.... In the plays of Racine there are, to be sure, agreeable things, but nothing perfectly beautiful, nothing which takes you by storm, none of those tirades of Corneille which thrill you. Je suis folle de Corneille."

La Bruyère is the next writer who brings about discussion among the seventeenth century French writers. He was born at Paris in 1645, and was a graduate in law at the University of Orleans. Through his friend Bossuet, he was admitted into the house of Condé.

After Condé's death, though his grandson had been released from tutelage, La Bruyère continued to live with the royal family, with a special title of "gentilhomme."

The discussion that comes about in La Bruyère's work is his altogether different style of writing, from the best writers of the seventeenth century. The literature of the seventeenth century in France is characterized by simplicity and directness. In "Les Caractères" of La Bruyère none of this is shown.

The only explanation that can be held for his obscure style is that he wrote towards the close of this epoch, because it has been observed that in spite of the fact that he lived in the seventeenth century, his style foreshadows to a great extent the style of the eighteenth century.

"Les Caractères" appeared in 1688 and was met with much success. It is based upon the Greek model "Theophrastus." There was a constant addition made to this book which lasted from 1689 to 1696. The first fifteen chapters he said "are preparations for the six-

teenth and last, 'Des esprits forts' in which Atheism is attacked or overthrown."

The success of this book gained for him a membership into the French Academy in 1693.

Like Molière his ambition is to describe the customs of his time and to give some happenings in society. It is said that his style is inimitable, and his works are an inventory of the powers of the French language.

About this time Molière, Boileau, Racine and La Fontaine had already founded the French poetic language. Molière excelled through his striking expressions always to the point, vigorous, picturesque and often elegant. Boileau excelled through his simple and natural style which influenced most writers of that period. Racine excelled for his great analysis of characters in his works. La Fontaine excelled in his wits, natural perfection, and especially in his ability to use expressive words.

There is no doubt that their works had an effect upon the language and customs of the people. That once prevailing language of the "precieux" had faded away. Those who sought culture could find it in no other way than to follow the example set by these writers through imitation and practice. Not only had these writers censured "preciosity" which seemed to be a menace to the language, but they offered amusement to the people,- an element which is always desirable..

But it is not always the language and the customs that influence society, neither is it always the familiar expressions of the writer. Sometimes it is false philosophy and religion which tend to disrupt society. This is readily seen in the teaching of the

Port Royalists especially in the seventeenth century. Port Royal was a kind of religious sect which had a great influence over the customs, writings and the language in the seventeenth century. The followers of that school pretended to be too Puritanical in their ideals, and from such a practice came a disrupted Catholic union which formed into a new religious sect called "Jansenism." Its adherents were in constant religious controversy with the Jesuits of that time. Besides having influenced the people with false philosophy and religious teaching, the Port Royalists adopted a new system of teaching which also opposed the Jesuit's System. The Jesuits in their thoroughness of teaching stressed Latin and philosophy, while the Port Royal system of pedagogy taught that French should be stressed. They dwarfed in the pupil the instinct of emulation and tried to impress upon him to acquire only a natural attraction of the interest that the subjects present.

The Port Royal System and the French Academy we might say were the dominant factors which held influence upon most of the writers of the seventeenth century, and chiefly upon the language. The Port Royalists tried as it were to give a practical character to their works, while the French Academy tried to stabilize the language and to set particular rules for it.

CONCLUSION.

We must not believe that the language of the "Precieux" was completely abominable, although to a certain degree it was detestable. The term "precieux" immediately brings to our minds anything that is worth while or refined. But the freedom of expression, used by the "precieux", caused the language to be too bombastic.

Corneille in his freedom in the usage of words, adopted a style that was fascinating, simple, and picturesque. His works in no way give any indications to his desire for the affectations of the "Precieux." It is true he used it occasionally, but he displayed a constant care to avoid any word or expression that would seem vulgar.

Corneille proved his ability as a genius of the French language. He was appointed by Richelieu to revise and polish some plays that Richelieu himself had written. We must remember that Richelieu, himself, was a literary critic at the time, and in selecting Corneille, he chose him as one of the five best authors of his time.

Corneille's language was idiomatic and condensed. He wrote on less general themes than did Racine, and was more archaic in his expressions than was Molière. Molière used affected language as a means to an end, and this end was to censure "preciosity." But La Bruyère adopted an altogether different style. His style is attributed more to the eighteenth century, than that of the seventeenth century. He, too, tends to point out the absurdities of the men of his time.

Although Corneille disregarded the classical laws of time and place, he adhered greatly to the classical languages. His great tragedy, "Le Cid" shows classical treatments. It intro-

duces expressions from Homer, Virgil and Seneca.

The literary work of Corneille converted and stabilized the French language. It was archaic and specific. He used the language of the "precieux" only when there was a necessity; and when he found no need for it, he condemned it.

Corneille showed such a great care in the production of his plays, particularly in usage of words, that he was made a member of the French Academy, and was allowed a position in the selection of words for the French Dictionary. No wonder Jean Racine could speak such of Corneille, to his brother Thomas, when the latter was being admitted into the French Academy in 1685, "Vous monsieur, qui non seulement étiez son frère, mais qui avez couru longtemps une même carrière que lui, vous savez les obligations que lui a notre poésie; vous savez en quel état se trouvait la scène française lorsqu'il commença à travailler. Quel désordre, quelle irrégularité! Nul goût, nulle connaissance des véritables beautés du théâtre; les auteurs aussi ignorants que les spectateurs; la plupart des sujets extravagants et dénués de vraisemblance; point de mœurs, point de caractères; la diction encore plus vicieuse que l'action, et dont les pointes et de misérables jeux de mots faisaient le plus bel ornement: en un mot toutes les règles de l'art, celles même de l'honnêteté et de la bienséance partout violées."

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