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978-0-521-10087-8 - French Theatre in the Neo-Classical Era, 1550-1789

Edited by William D. Howarth

Excerpt

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Introduction

In her book *La Vie théâtrale en France au xviii^e siècle* (1988), Martine de Rougemont writes: 'I have tried to encompass in this study what the Anglo-Saxons call *drama* and what they call *theatre*'. Let me return the compliment by borrowing for the purposes of this volume the French term 'la vie théâtrale', for which there is no adequate English equivalent, combining as it does the whole socio-political side of theatre history – its economic and sociological aspects, as well as its more formal institutional character – with the aesthetic and theoretical approach to drama as an art-form, in addition to the technical study of theatre design and the staging and performance of a play.

The history of the French theatre in the important period that we can for convenience call the neo-classical era mirrors the political and social history of France in the same period to a remarkable degree. After a turbulent half-century dominated by civil war, when there was virtually no professional theatrical activity in the capital, and when the survival of the theatre in France depended on its fortunes in the provinces, the success of Italian companies imported by royal patronage, and the creation of the *ballet de cour*, an entertainment not unlike the English court masque, theatrical life returned to Paris with the more settled conditions of Henri IV's reign. The creation of a viable political state under the Bourbon kings, as France emerged from the violent anarchy of the Wars of Religion, brought with it, at court and in the capital, conditions in which the arts – including the theatre – could prosper. It is perhaps no accident that a new, increasingly authoritarian and conformist century was to see the adoption of regular dramatic forms as the classical aesthetic took over from the relative indiscipline of baroque drama; the establishment of well-regulated theatre companies leading up to the creation of the Comédie-Française in 1680; and the acceptance on the part of playwrights and their audiences of a generally uniform taste. In cultural matters, this was a society increasingly self-sufficient and turned in on itself; and France's political domination of Europe – the ultimate objective of Richelieu's foreign policy, largely to be achieved during the reign of Louis XIV – was matched by an aspiration towards cultural hegemony. The ready receptiveness to influences from Italy and Spain that had inspired the dramatic art of the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth gave way to a self-imposed insularity as regards modern literature, together with a backward-looking obsession with classical antiquity. There seems to have been

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little doubt, by 1680 or so, that the programme of the Renaissance humanists – that French culture should replace that of Italy as the outstanding intellectual achievement of the modern age – had now been realised; and attention was henceforth turned to comparison with the Ancients themselves: just as Louis XIV was the modern Alexander, whose exploits would eclipse those of the rulers, and the military commanders, of the ancient world, so the ‘siècle de Louis’, by its achievements in the arts, justified comparison with the Golden Ages of Greece and Rome.

The Hôtel de Bourgogne theatre soon took up the dominant position it would maintain through most of the seventeenth century, and its resident playwright Alexandre Hardy – the first ‘poète à gages’, or salaried writer, in the history of the French theatre – kept up a prolific output throughout its first three decades. While the young playwrights of the second half of the sixteenth century had been gifted amateurs writing for a cultured elite of kindred spirits, Hardy was a professional craftsman, of whose prodigious production only those plays that were published survive. The 1630s, however, saw a veritable dramatic renaissance in the capital. The Pléiade poets and their successors had created a bookish drama unsuited to the socially mixed audiences of a professional theatre, whereas Hardy, for his part, lacked the literary polish to impose his more vigorous productions on a cultured public in the long term; but this new development was due to a successful alliance between the talented poets who chose to write for the theatre and the two companies, at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and Marais theatres, for which they worked. This was a period of intense theatrical activity encouraged by Cardinal Richelieu and other influential patrons. It was a period during which the rivalry between ‘irregular’ and ‘regular’ drama reached its climax, with the triumph of the latter. But the successful establishment of regular tragedy, together with the gradual eclipse of the lively, colourful tragicomedy, the form *par excellence* of the baroque theatre of the 1620s and 1630s, was by no means (as manuals of literary history tended to represent it until quite recently) the victory of the ‘back room’ theorists over the practising dramatists. On the contrary: the partisans of the new tragedy were a sort of *avant-garde*, who needed little persuasion to embrace the formula of regular tragedy in their competitive striving for box-office success. And more important still, the theoretical turning-point was the literary counterpart of a vital development in *mise en scène*, as the ‘décor simultané’, or compartmented stage, inherited from medieval practice, gave way to the more realistically representational single set adopted from recent Italian models.

The victory of ‘regular’ tragedy over baroque tragicomedy; the acceptance of the new staging conventions; and the readiness of ordinary playgoers to follow the example of influential patrons of the art: these developments did not take place overnight, but were the subject of experiment and controversy over a decade or more. However, if one were obliged to identify a decisive turning-point, there is little doubt that this would have to be the theatrical season 1636/7,

which saw the production of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*. Conceived as a tragicomedy, and first performed on a multiple set, this play, which was to remain the outstanding success of the century in box-office terms, nevertheless represents the last fling of that tradition. The real subject of the pamphlet war known as the 'Querelle du *Cid*' can with hindsight be seen to have been the struggle for dominance between the old and the new, the backward- and the forward-looking. Pierre Corneille was one of several ambitious young playwrights who came to Paris in about 1630 and contributed to this flowering of dramatic art in the capital. Favoured by Richelieu in the mid-1630s, he was a member of the Cardinal's 'Compagnie des Cinq Auteurs' until he broke away and, with *Le Cid*, achieved instant recognition as outstanding among his contemporaries. His pre-eminence in tragicomedy and tragedy lasted until his eight-year retirement from the theatre in 1651: when he returned in 1659, it was only to be eclipsed almost immediately by the younger Racine. Their rivalry, reinforced by competition between the theatres for which they wrote, lasted until Racine's retirement from the public theatre after *Phèdre* (1678) and Corneille's death in 1684; Racine triumphed both in terms of success in the theatre and according to the measured critical acclaim of the literary salons – though Corneille was to retain many partisans among the older generation.

The case of Molière differs from those of Corneille and Racine in that he was a practising man of the theatre. Corneille's successes in the 1630s had been closely identified with the fortunes of the Marais theatre (whose director, Montdory, created the role of Rodrigue in *Le Cid*), while Racine is known to have been associated with the production of his plays at least to the extent of coaching Mlle de Champmeslé in the speaking of his verse; but Molière was a professional actor, and an actor-manager, long before establishing himself as a playwright. 'He's written some plays that are quite clever; but he's no great shakes as an actor, except in ridiculous parts': this laconic entry in Tallemant des Réaux's *Historiettes* records an early reaction of the theatregoing world to this unknown actor who was nevertheless, in the brief span of less than fifteen years between his return to Paris from the life of an itinerant troupe in the provinces and his death in 1673 at the age of 51, to establish himself as the outstanding man of the theatre of his age, and one of the greatest dramatists of all time. During his short career, Molière set a new standard by which French comedy would henceforth be judged; he left a corpus of comic writing, covering the spectrum from popular farce to sophisticated comedy of manners and provocative theatre of ideas, that has never been surpassed; and he created a well-organised and efficiently run theatre company, whose structure served as a model for the Théâtre-Français, founded in 1680 and known unofficially to generations as 'la Maison de Molière'.

Molière catered for the taste of the 'honnêtes gens' – the well-educated, cultured playgoers of the capital – by developing an original form of literary comedy (of which, perhaps, *Le Misanthrope* (1666) is the outstanding example); but his company was also in much demand at the royal palaces and at other noble

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houses. The taste of Louis and his courtiers ran rather towards spectacular entertainment – the King himself was fond of dancing in the latter-day *ballets de cour* – and to satisfy it Molière created a new form of hybrid spectacle: in effect, a dramatic text with musical interludes (including ballet, song and mime) thematically linked to the central narrative. The Italian Lully was his collaborator in some of these mixed entertainments; however, the dominance of the world of musical drama by the ambitious Lully was confirmed by his appointment as director of the Académie Royale de Musique (with a royal *privilege* for the new genre of opera) in 1672.

On Molière's death, his troupe was amalgamated by royal decree with that of the Marais theatre, to perform in the Théâtre de la rue Guénégaud, where Thomas Corneille, younger brother of Pierre, was to act as the new company's principal provider, specialising in machine-plays. Seven years later, a further decree amalgamated this combined body of actors with those of the more prestigious Hôtel de Bourgogne, thus creating the Théâtre-Français.

Such a name (with its variant, the Comédie-Française) was not originally intended to indicate the new theatre's status as a national institution: this secondary implication was a much later development. Rather, it served to distinguish the French company from the Comédie-Italienne, or troupe of Italian actors who had been intermittently resident in Paris since the latter part of the sixteenth century, the latest of these, under the capable leadership of their Scaramouche (Tiberio Fiorilli), being permanently established since 1655. The repertory of the Italians was still characterised by the summary scenario which served as a basis for the extempore improvisation of skilled specialist actors. Their performing style remained lively and spectacular; but once fully acclimatised in Paris, the Italians ceased to perform wholly in their native language. Their subject-matter at the same time began to include more parody and satire alongside the traditional love-plots of the *scenari*; and in 1697 the company was disbanded and sent back to Italy, allegedly because the authorities took their play, *The False Prude*, to be a satire on Madame de Maintenon.

The closing decades of Louis XIV's reign were a period of cautious stability as the Comédie-Française, freed from competition with a rival company, drew its repertoire from the successes of earlier years, or from derivative imitations of the masterpieces of comedy and tragedy. A hierarchical system of values was soon well established, and was accepted by playwrights, actors and the theatregoing public alike. Pre-eminence was given to tragedy (in verse, naturally), followed by five-act verse comedy and thereafter, enjoying progressively less prestige, comedy in prose, from five-act plays down to the often ephemeral one-act curtain-raisers. However, as regards tragic drama, the outstanding events of this period can be seen to have taken place outside the professional theatre, with the productions at Saint-Cyr, Madame de Maintenon's academy for young ladies, of Racine's two biblical plays, *Esther*, in 1689, and *Athalie*, in 1691. The last decades of Louis's reign show French culture at its most inward-looking and complacent; and

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nowhere is this more true than in the theatre, where a self-perpetuating monopoly seemed well placed to ignore influences from abroad, as well as any challenge that might come from French sources.

The half-century from the beginning of Louis XIV's personal rule in 1661 through to his death in 1715 had seen the consolidation of a remarkably homogeneous taste with regard to public spectacles in France. This was the officially sanctioned taste of an elite, based on the sort of consensus implied by the talismanic phrase 'la cour et la ville' which recurs throughout this period, and which points to a closely knit community of theatregoers and readers: the cultured aristocrats and *haute bourgeoisie* of the capital, most of whom had their *entrée* at court, and the increasingly large numbers of 'professional' courtiers attracted by the King's deliberate policy, and held captive by the magnetism of Versailles. By the turn of the century it is impossible not to be struck by the near-unanimity of surviving comment as regards the aspirations and achievements of French neo-classical dramatic art.

The death of Louis XIV, and the setting-up of a Regency under the Duc d'Orléans during the minority of Louis's great-grandson Louis XV, led to some relaxation of the austerity that had marked the last decades of the old King's reign. One immediate consequence of this, in 1716, was the return of the Italian players to Paris, where they lost little time in re-establishing themselves as the second official company – retaining to some extent a distinctive repertoire, but performing in French. As a result, such challenge as there was to be to the monopolistic privilege of the Comédie-Française now came not from the Italians (who were keen to enjoy their own privileged position), but from the *théâtres de la foire*, or fairground establishments.

Fairground theatre had originated in the seventeenth century, developing from the publicity patten used by quack doctors to attract the public into their booths. These monologues, or simple sketches (which were to retain the name *parades* from their original function), soon achieved the status of autonomous entertainment; and in due course the fairground theatres gained a degree of permanence, being no longer confined to the timetable of the seasonal fairs themselves. By the early decades of the eighteenth century their racy, irreverent sketches had become a vehicle for a subversive 'anti-theatre' parodying the forms, and satirising the personalities, of the established theatres. Reprisals from the monopoly houses were frequent and severe: repeated attempts to curb the activities of the fairground limited the number of performers allowed on stage, or the number of speaking roles, and drove them repeatedly in the direction of mime and 'vaudeville' songs. Paradoxically, this led to their greater attractiveness; and far from being merely a popular art-form for the uneducated, the *parades* of the fairground theatres became a sort of cult entertainment for aristocratic and wealthy playgoers, seeking an alternative to what was often seen as the repetitious tedium of the Comédie-Française.

Voltaire, remembered by posterity as a thinker, humanitarian campaigner

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and author of witty philosophical tales, was for his contemporaries primarily a tragic poet, inheritor of the mantle of Corneille and Racine. His plays broke new ground, both in the adoption of subjects from modern history alongside those drawn from ancient history or mythology, and in the use of tragedy to express his humanitarian and anticlerical propaganda; but from a formal point of view he was a complete reactionary, whose years of exile in England merely reinforced his prejudices against the 'irregular' drama of Shakespeare and the English tradition. Although he provided one of the principal channels through which Shakespeare was to be introduced to his compatriots, Voltaire's attitude was always patronising, and over nearly fifty years hardened into hostility and contempt. Indeed, throughout this cosmopolitan century, when travel, personal correspondence, a new-style journalism and an increased knowledge of foreign literatures all led to a vast broadening of French intellectual horizons, the official theatres remained remarkably conservative and inward-looking.

An exception must, however, be made for the development of a new genre: *le drame bourgeois*, or domestic drama, which originated in an attempt to fill the middle ground between tragedy and comedy, and to replace the conventional artificialities of these two genres with something relevant to the daily life of the middle-class spectator. The origins, and affinities, of the domestic drama of the 1760s are nothing if not cosmopolitan. The chief architect of the theory underlying it, Denis Diderot, was following similar lines of thought to the German Lessing, whose 'bourgeois tragedy' was almost exactly contemporary; and even if the new genre did develop as a vehicle for the ideology of Enlightenment thinkers, there is no doubt that its original literary inspiration was English: on the one hand Richardson's novels, on the other the domestic tragedies of Lillo and Moore. Diderot's theoretical model was based on the conception of a new, and more intimate, relationship between a dramatic action and the spectators watching that action in the theatre: subject-matter and setting, dramatic structure and dialogue, were to have as their aim the achieving of total illusion so as to convey a moral message relevant to contemporary life. His own plays, and the domestic dramas of his contemporaries and successors, seldom rose above the mediocre; but the theoretical programme on which they were based anticipated many of the ideas behind the Naturalist movement in European theatre over a century later.

Such a radical approach to the question of writing for the theatre inevitably called for a new style of acting. In fact, acting styles in the French theatre had evolved considerably during the century and a half for which documentary evidence exists. The impassioned declamatory manner of Montdory (whose career came to an end when he burst a blood-vessel on stage in 1637) had modified but little a generation later at the Hôtel de Bourgogne, whose Montfleury was lampooned by Molière for his bombastic extravagance – Molière who seems to have failed to find favour in tragic roles largely because he performed in what we should no doubt call a more 'natural' style. Baron, an actor trained by Molière,

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provides the transition to the eighteenth century; and thereafter, the narrative is one of a general acceptance of the need for greater naturalism in delivery and gesture. In costume, too, the move towards simplicity of dress, allied to a search for historical accuracy, dates from the mid-eighteenth century; and once the stage had been freed from spectators in 1759 – a move for which Voltaire and others had campaigned for a long time – a new degree of visual realism became possible. In acting and in *mise en scène*, developments reflected cosmopolitan influences. Luigi Riccoboni's treatises drew on his experience of the Italian tradition, while Diderot's contacts with Garrick influenced his arguments for a more naturalistic acting style.

If individual performers showed a certain responsiveness to the ideas of forward-looking thinkers in matters of acting style and *mise en scène*, the monopoly theatres as institutions remained secure in their privileged status: preserved not only from competition on the part of the fairground theatres, but also from any close rivalry between themselves. The demarcation was absolute in theory, and nearly so in practice: Théâtre-Français, tragedy and five-act plays; Théâtre-Italien, comedy in the Italian manner; Opéra, works including music and ballet. (In 1762, the monopoly for the new genre of *opéra-comique* was added to the existing privilege of the Italians.) The royal privilege was maintained in the case of a company like the Comédie-Française by the strict control of the Premiers Gentilshommes de la Chambre du Roi (First Gentlemen of the Royal Bedchamber). Actors were appointed, dismissed or retired by royal command, and were constantly on call for performances at court or away from Paris; right up to the Revolution, they were in the first place the King's servants. Internally, however, a democratic structure prevailed; there was no director, and the 'sociétaires' enjoyed a large degree of equality: very much the structure that has survived through to our own day.

The built-in conservatism of the privilege system not only enabled the Comédie-Française to preserve the monopoly of serious drama against any challenge from the irregular theatres, it also allowed the company to deal with playwrights on its own terms. From the days of Hardy at the beginning of the seventeenth century, relations between actors and authors had overwhelmingly favoured the former. Playwrights were allowed whatever share in the takings for the first (often quite short) run of a play their experience or reputation enabled them to bargain for; after that, nothing. Any notion of copyright in the text of a play was unheard of, until Beaumarchais negotiated this by establishing a Union of Writers for the Theatre in the penultimate decade of the *ancien régime*.

Beaumarchais, whose artistic sympathies could be said to be the counterpart of the political attitudes of the leaders of the 'first', constitutional Revolution like Mirabeau, was in one sense a pillar of the establishment: his first two plays performed at the Théâtre-Français belonged to the new intermediate genre of *drame bourgeois*, and his *Barbier de Séville*, presented at the same theatre in 1775, could not have been more traditional in its form. On the other hand, *Le Mariage de*

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Figaro, performed in 1784 after being banned for years by the censor, was a brilliantly original synthesis of all that was best in the theatre of the eighteenth century, official and unofficial: satire, serious moralising, philosophical propaganda, parody – with a verve and verbal inventiveness which bore witness to the author's apprenticeship in the irreverent and licentious *parade*. Beaumarchais was no revolutionary, and he would have deplored the subversive interpretations which later generations have often read into *Le Mariage de Figaro*, but by its vigorous expression of the desire for innovation and renewal that was widespread among theatre audiences, his play certainly deserves to be considered as genuinely revolutionary in theatrical terms.

The state theatres, with their jealously guarded monopoly and their opposition to change, were not merely symbols of political privilege, but in a very real sense manifestations of the hierarchical structures of the *ancien régime*; and as if to provide tangible evidence of this, an early act of the revolutionary government was the edict of 1791 which abolished monopoly and privilege in the theatre. In the wider political context, reconciliation was to be brought about by the restoration of the Bourbon regime in 1815; by the same token, the Comédie-Française was reinstated in 1799 with all the prestige of a national institution, after the dissensions and feuds of the revolutionary years. But things would never be the same again: though controls and censorship remained, the absolute privilege of the monopoly theatres had been swept away for all time by the Revolution.

To a modern eye, the political history of the period from the Renaissance to the Revolution presents a narrative in which continuity, as French nationhood assumed the form of a strong monarchy and strove for political hegemony in Europe, can be seen as more important than any temporary obstacles to that forward progress. Similarly, the parallel bid for artistic supremacy demonstrates a continuity more vital than any minor challenges to the role of a central cultural authority on which that bid was based. If the eighteenth century shows in both respects something of a falling-off after the glories of the first half of Louis XIV's reign, nevertheless the institutions remain intact; and among these, the official monopoly theatres continue to represent up to 1789 the fulfilment, in a cultural context, of Richelieu's single-minded statesmanship and the Sun King's absolutist ambitions. And it is surely significant that the achieving of political identity by the Third Estate in 1789 should be mirrored in one of the decrees of the Assemblée Constituante in December of that year, which for the first time granted full civil rights to members of the acting profession along with other minorities who had for so long been disadvantaged by an authoritarian and ultra-conformist regime.

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Part One: 1550–1630

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I *Documents of control*

THE ROLE OF THE CONFRATERNITY OF THE PASSION

Since 1402 the lay Confraternity of the Passion and Resurrection of Our Saviour Jesus-Christ had been licensed to perform or to have performed mysteries and passion plays in the Eglise de la Trinité in Paris, all profits being devoted to pious purposes. During the reign of François I it first removed to the Hôtel de Flandre, then purchased property on the site of the Hôtel de Bourgogne where it built new premises. Furthermore, no dramatic performances, except college plays, were allowed to take place in the capital unless either the hall of the Hôtel de Bourgogne had been leased from the Confraternity for the purpose or else a fee had been paid to it for leave to play elsewhere. To safeguard its income and its investment in the Hôtel, the Confraternity naturally sought to renew its valuable privileges at the start of each reign. Successive kings generally agreed to this more readily than the Parlement de Paris, which by 1546 was understandably concerned about threats to public order, especially over religious issues. Accordingly, when the Parlement granted the Confraternity its wishes in that year there was one important proviso: it would no longer be permitted to perform religious plays.

I **The privileges of the Confraternity of the Passion in Paris**

Félibien, *Histoire de la ville de Paris*, vol. IV, p. 743

17 November 1548 The Court considered the petition presented to it on behalf of the dean, masters and brothers of the Confraternity of the Passion and Resurrection of Our Saviour Jesus-Christ, founded in the church of the Trinité, in the Grand' Rue St Denis. Inasmuch as they have, from time immemorial and by privileges granted and confirmed by the Kings of France, been permitted to have played and acted many fine mysteries for the edification and entertainment of the common people without causing offence either in general or to individuals, which privilege they had always enjoyed previously, they requested that, since for three years the Hall of the Passion had, by order of the said Court, been taken, occupied and used for the lodging of the poor and since the said petitioners had obtained other premises in order to continue, according to their said privileges, the performances of the said mysteries, from the profits of which they paid for the maintenance of divine service in the chapel of their Confraternity, they should be allowed to have performances put on in the said new Hall just as they had been