

FRENCH LITERATURE - 17th CENTURY

Overview

At the beginning of the century, and in anticipation of the sharp classicism of the 17th century, there was at this time considerable literary scourging of the attitudes of the late Renaissance. The poet Malherbe (1555-1628) violently attacked the mannerisms, affectation, and exaggeration of the later poets of the Baroque period. His emphasis on impersonality, clarity, sobriety and purity and precision of diction virtually killed lyricism, and substituted eloquence in its place.

The destructive criticism of Malherbe, the rationalism of Descartes, the absolutism of the court, the elegance and refinement of the salons, and the stabilizing influence of the Academy—all these combined to clear the way for French classicism, which was triumphant in the last half of the century. Boileau (1636-1711), who succeeded Malherbe as literary dictator, continued the work of purifying diction, and propounded the literary dogma of French classicism: Truth alone is beautiful. The poet should imitate nature, which is true. Reason should dominate the poet's work. Poetical expression should conform to good taste. Imitation of the ancients should be cultivated. Originality is not novelty of idea but the perfect expression of an idea. These ideas of Boileau were immensely influential, and he summed them up in a brilliant *Art Poétique*, which was of immense importance in both England and France.

During the last decades of the seventeenth century literary discussion revolved around the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes (1687-1715), the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, over whether the ancient authors were superior to the modern ones. At stake was one's view of whether the arts were progressive, and, in a wider sense, of whether human cultural life is progressive.

Discussion questions

To what factors would you point, in trying to explain the explosion of great drama in mid-seventeenth century France? Do you think the social milieu created by the grand monarch, Louis XIV, was an important factor?

What conception of the tragic does Racine extract from ancient Greek drama? Does Racine view the human as a helpless victim of 'divine plans'?

In what way is middle class society the essential target of Moliere's comedy? What is it that he 'pokes fun' at most?

Does *La Princesse de Cleves* qualify as a novel, or is it more nearly an historical memoir? Do you see novels, or the novel tendency, in French literature before the work of Mme. de Lafayette?

How does Corneille implicitly evaluate the culture of his own time, in his works which regularly draw on older and more honor-bound traditional cultures?