

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# FRENCH DRAMA

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## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF FRENCH LITERATURE

French literature has its roots in the late Middle Ages, and is from its origins inflected by the pre modern world view of late antiquity. Epic and lyric both thrive in the growingly sophisticated work of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Without a sense of nationhood, however, even the strong individuals among these writers—Christine de Pisan, Francois Villon—seem almost to be voices creating in a geopolitical vacuum.

By the sixteenth century the French monarchy had consolidated much that was undefined in earlier centuries, and the great Renaissance voices we hear—the Pléiade, Rabelais, Montaigne—come through to us with that individuality Montaigne proclaimed to be the keynote of his entire opus, a massive testimony to the simple nature of being here as a human being. In a poet like Ronsard we begin to hear the tones of love, romance, hope, pathos which mark the multi sided lyricist in its increasingly accessible contemporary form. We *hear* Ronsard.

The seventeenth century, much of it presided over by a rich, powerful, despotic, and stimulating monarchy, imposes on us, to this day, as the *Grand Siècle*, the *Great Century*, of French culture. During this period, as France grows into cultural self-awareness, there is an explosion of powerful, and publically supported theatre: the great tragedies of Racine and Corneille, the comedies of Moliere, which so sharply mock the foibles of the rising Middle Class. Prose writers as diverse as the maximist duc de la Rochefoucauld or the subtle social analyst, Mme. de Lafayette, converge on the traits of a rapidly evolving social and economic culture, in which the elite still retains the sense of *noblesse oblige*, and the person on the street looks up with admiration.

The eighteenth century, an age of 'Enlightenment,' brings the new science, and its new egalitarian mentality, to the front of social awareness. Diderot and his associates, in creating the Encyclopédie, bring to general attention the new world views of a modern society raising questions about traditional values, and especially about the traditional religious world views of earlier France. Brilliant thinkers, like Voltaire and Rousseau, plunge into the effort to describe and promote a new world, in which mankind will improve at avoiding traditionalist pitfalls, and at acquiring self-awareness. Needless to say, this is a century of prose, not of poetry.

The nineteenth century, ushered in by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, traverses a roller coaster of political transformations and upheavals, sees the nation move into new cultural complexities of a world gradually becoming international. With the growth of the cities, urban culturescapes attract the attention of writers fascinated with the texture of the real: Balzac, de Maupassant, or Flaubert, who anatomizes life in the loneliness of the heart in the provinces. Where once, at century's beginning, there was the effusiveness of Romantic poetry, in Lamartine or de Musset, now there is the cold abstract poetry of Valéry or Mallarmé who, at century's end, seek refuge in the cold air of the pure.

The twentieth century, as all Westerners know, is the period when mankind decided to tear things apart and start all over again. Surrealism is one of the byproducts of this World War chaos, and we see it thrive in the poetries and manifestos of Breton and Aragon. Brilliant novelists, like Gide and Sartre, look closely at the character of their evolving society, and at the vise, between joy and despair, which increasingly constricts modern man. Inner life novelists like Marcel Proust and Francois Mauriac go into those places of despair, envy, hope, and frustration which increasingly mark the character of the person in the middle, the little person caught in the juggernaut of our time. One of the finest minds, and stylists, at work on defining the contemporary human condition is Albert Camus, whose small masterpiece, *The Stranger*, has crystallized in itself a sense of the entire perplexity of trying how to relate to the rapidly self-transforming twentieth century.

## MEDIAEVAL

### Overview

Though the deep origins of both the people and the language of France must be traced as far back as the tribe of the Galli, a tribal group living on the borders of the declining Roman Empire, and ultimately destined to build their Gallo-Roman dialect into what we call Old French, the language form in which we find the first authentic texts of French literature, is found in the 11th century.

From the outset, the creative output of this culture devolved about a variety of kinds of expression: religious poetry, *chansons de gestes*, 'songs of heroic deeds,' and epic style romances.

Four short works, chiefly of linguistic interest, were written in the tenth century. In the eleventh century, the importance of the Church and of feudalism are indicated by the three types of literary productions: saints' lives, neo-Latin religious works; and *chansons de geste*, poems concerning the mighty deeds of heroes. Both the large number and the excellence of *chansons de gestes*, poetic romances, and lyrics written during the twelfth century, have led critics to call this the Golden Age of mediaeval French literature. This poetry shows an increase in polish, in sophistication, and in social consciousness over that of preceding centuries.

The thirteenth century is noteworthy for its prose romances, its drama, its satire, its lyrics, and its allegory. Much of the literature of this century reflects the rise of the bourgeoisie. It shows an increasing tendency toward rationalism, realism, and cynicism. The literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows the disastrous effects of the Hundred Years' War. There was at that time little opportunity or inspiration for imaginative works. A few narrative poems, a few prose chronicles, and a few lyrics were written, but as a whole the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were literarily sterile.

## 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Overview

The literature of the French Renaissance had many of the characteristics of Italian Renaissance literature. Individualism, humanism, a spirit of adventure, and a careful attention to form and technique were usually evident. The era of the French Renaissance in literature has been divided into four parts: the period of origins (1494-1515); the national period (1515-1550); the Italian period (1550-1572); and the age of Montaigne (1572-1598).

No literature of importance was written during the age of origins.

At the beginning of the national period the so called *Grands Rhétoriciens*, the Great Rhetoricians, were dominating French poetry; they emphasized technique, rhetoric, and intricacy of versification and rhythm. They were opposed by Clément Marot (1497-1544) who aimed at simplicity, clarity, and elegance. The poetry of Marguerite de Navarre falls into this period. Her best poems are either religious or personal. Her *Prisons* is an allegorical poem in which Christianity and Platonism are blended, and her *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* is a series of theological discussions. In prose, as distinct from poetry, this period saw huge achievements: the work of Rabelais, Calvin's *Institutes*, and a work by Marguerite de Navarre, her *Heptameron*, based around a collection of short stories by Boccaccio.

The Italian period is dominated by the *Pleiade*, a group of poets who stressed the importance of Greek and Latin poetry, and who attempted successfully to enrich the French language.

Montaigne was the greatest writer of the last period of Renaissance French literature. The religious troubles of the time inspired both poetry and prose. The most notable pieces are by Agrippa d'Aubigné: *Les Tragiques*—seven cantos of poetry giving the Protestant view of the religious wars—and the *Menippean Satire*, a piece of religious and political satire written by Catholics, but supporting the

moderate party and expressing preference for a French Protestant rather than a foreign Catholic as King of France.

## 17<sup>TH</sup> 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?

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?

## Authors

### Corneille, Pierre

**Pierre Corneille, man and works.** Pierre de Corneille (1606-1684) was born and grew up in Rouen. His father was a distinguished lawyer (and his younger brother a well known playwright, like Corneille himself.) He received a thorough Jesuit education at the College de Bourbon, and at eighteen began to study for a career in the law, following his father. This plan failing, and Corneille losing interest in law, his father got him two successive posts with the Rouen Department of Forests and Rivers but by that time Corneille had convinced himself that the stage was his destiny. (Already in 1629 he had drawn attention to his first play; he offered it to a troupe of traveling actors, who carried it all the way to a small audience in Paris.) In 1634 he produced his first so-called tragic-comic drama, *Médée*, and in the next year his tragedy, *Le Cid*, brought him fame and attention after the successes of a single night's performance.

**Corneille and *Le Cid*.** *Le Cid* was a fruit of Corneille's long time preoccupation with Spanish drama and chiefly with the stage of Calderon (1600-1681). This play deals like its predecessors with those questions of honor, fate, and destiny which belong to the Spanish tradition. For several reasons, among which was the tribute to the Spanish tradition—the Spaniards being the greatest foreign rivals of France at the time—*Le Cid* aroused huge controversy, and though the newly formed Académie Française objected strongly to many violations of the Aristotelian unities, and to the play's 'primitive' addictions to dueling and honor, the play won enormous approval from the French public, and Corneille was from then on the principal father of French classical drama. In retrospect it is easy to see why *Le Cid* scored so strongly with the French public. The play intertwines several passions: lust, honor, glory on the battlefield, and although the tale ends as what was at the time called a "romantic comedy," it had spilled much blood and evoked much heroism before it concluded. In literary historical terms, this play will remind you of the world setting of the twelfth century *Song of Roland*, where honor and chivalry join. The element of Romance—Rodrigue and Chimene are "destined for one another"—marks the modernity of this quasi mediaeval tale. In *Cinna* (1643), a few years later, we expect bloodshed to come out of the hero's hostility to the Emperor Augustus. But what happens? To our surprise, and pleasure, the Emperor's benign and guileless attitude wins over his enemies. The "sentimentality" of the modern stage remodels the starker world presentations of older literature. Corneille went on from dramas like these to a prolific dramatic career, comedies as well as tragedies, and it is generally felt that the four tragedies he created between 1636 and 1643—*Le Cid*, *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyeucte*—were not only his finest work but one of the triumphs of the French tragic drama, which was establishing the 17th century as one of the world's most fertile, in skilled and wise portrayals of human fate.

**The themes of Corneille's work.** The general themes of these works turn repeatedly around issues of honor and the dignity with which the tragic hero, representing a summit of human virtue, can survive the most dreadful events with his tragic endurance. Many of Corneille's finest plays were based on ancient Roman history, though not from a desire to be historically accurate, rather, to use the Roman event as background for staging eternally valid truths about human nature and its destiny. It is worth noting that for Corneille it was essential at least broadly to follow the dramatic rules of the three unities, which were at that time enshrined in the value system of the French Academy. The unities of place, time, and action, as Aristotle was interpreted to have meant them, in his *Poetics*, held firm sway over French dramatic creation throughout the 17th century.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*The Cid, Cinna*, tr. Cairncross, 1976.

### Secondary source reading

Moriarty, M. *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves*, 2003.

## Further reading

Benichou, Paul, *Morale du grand siècle*, 1949.

## Original language reading

Bonnet, Jean-Claude, *Essai sur le culte des grands hommes*, 1998.

## Suggested paper topics

In what ways did Corneille rethink and rework the Spanish tradition of heroic drama, from which he took much inspiration? Did he deepen that drama, by converting it from histrionics to fundamental human issues? Or don't you find Corneille's drama that 'human'?

How do you evaluate the role of the 'three unities' both as it plays out in Corneille's work, and in its overall contribution to theatricality? Do those 'unities' add to the value of a work like *Le Cid*? How do they strengthen the work?

Excerpt <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14954/14954-h/14954-h.htm#>

*Chimène*. Elvira, have you given me a really true report? Do you conceal nothing that my father has said?

*Elvira*. All my feelings within me are still delighted with it. He esteems Rodrigo as much as you love him; and if I do not misread his mind, he will command you to respond to his passion.

*Chimène*. Tell me then, I beseech you, a second time, what makes you believe that he approves of my choice; tell me anew what hope I ought to entertain from it. A discourse so charming cannot be too often heard; you cannot too forcibly promise to the fervor of our love the sweet liberty of manifesting itself to the light of day. What answer has he given regarding the secret suit which Don Sancho and Don Rodrigo are paying to you? Have you not too clearly shown the disparity between the two lovers which inclines me to the one side?

*Elvira*. No; I have depicted your heart as filled with an indifference which elates not either of them nor destroys hope, and, without regarding them with too stern or too gentle an aspect, awaits the commands of a father to choose a spouse. This respect has delighted him—his lips and his countenance gave me at once a worthy testimony of it; and, since I must again tell you the tale, this is what he hastened to say to me of them and of you: 'She is in the right. Both are worthy of her; both are sprung from a noble, valiant, and faithful lineage; young but yet who show by their mien the brilliant valor of their brave ancestors. Don Rodrigo, above all, has no feature in his face which is not the noble representative of a man of courage and descends from a house so prolific in warriors, that they enter into life in the midst of laurels.'

## Racine, Jean

**Racine the man and the early work.** Jean Racine (1639-1699) Racine was born in Aisnes, in the province of Picardy, in the north of France. Orphaned at the age of four, by the death of both his parents, his grandmother moved, with him, to the Convent of Port-Royal, the stronghold of Jansenist faith and culture. (The Jansenists constituted an influential and highly controversial group within the Catholic Church, insisting on predestination, original sin, and man's incapacity to form his own destiny. Racine remained under the influence of this perspective all his life.) Brought up, like Molière, in the center of Paris--which is where the Port Royal convent was located--Racine however was of high middle class background, and at an early age, in the schools of Port Royal, he received the most thorough classical education available, coming especially into a mastery of Greek, which was to be a major source of inspiration throughout his dramatic career. (The Greeks, rather than the Romans, were becoming the inspiration of choice in the French theater of the time.) After an unsuccessful attempt to study theology, which did not interest him, Racine returned from seminary to Paris, and once more embraced the excitement of urban life, making influential and agreeable friendships, with the fable writer La Fontaine, and soon with Molière and Boileau. Racine's first tragedy was published in 1664.

**Racine in full career.** There followed a period of pain and growth for Racine, as his masters of religious instruction, from whom he had learned so much at seminary, published their strong disapproval of his devotion to the stage, a slur which brought sharp response from Racine, and a firm new decision to commit his life to the theater. Already his first efforts on the Parisian stage were met with strong approval from the critic par excellence, Boileau, the author of the doctrinal masterpiece *L'Art Poétique*, with its brilliantly expressed obeisance to Aristotle. With the superb play *Andromaque* (1667) Racine initiated a series of masterpieces—*Britannicus*, *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre*—which would establish for French tragedy, as Molière did for comedy, a world wide pre eminence. It comes to us as a shock that at the height of his powers and fame, with *Phèdre* in 1677, Racine virtually abandons the theater, marries a woman who has never read a line of his work, reconciles with his Port Royal masters, and devotes himself henceforth to God, king, and family.

**The remaking of the ancient Classics.** Montaigne and Rabelais were both steeped in the texts of Ancient Greece and Rome. Racine, creating a century later, reinterprets those same ancient texts for the stage, and in so doing must bring his new vision to a living audience with its own contemporary tastes. Take a small example of the new sensibility Racine introduces. In the play of Euripides, from which Racine's *Phedre* derives, Phedre herself is not on stage when she receives the tragic news of the death of Hippolytus. In Racine's play Phèdre remains on stage, to absorb the full brunt of the news. Can you see the sensational vivacity Racine is driving at, which contrasts with the reticence of the Greek playwright?

**The nature of Racinian tragedy.** Racine is a psychologist, at his best dissecting the intense emotions of passionate, vengeful, and introspective women. His sense of structure is faultless in his finest plays, like *Phèdre*, and mounts to a purifyingly tragic climax, handled with infinite verbal subtlety, in the consummate French classical blend.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

Racine, *Phedre*, trans. Wilson, 1987.

### Secondary source reading

Butler, Philip, *Racine: A Study*, 1974.

### Further reading

Moriarty, M., *Early modern French Thought*, 2003.

## Original language reading

Forster, Georges, *Jean Racine*, 2006.

## Suggested paper topics

It is roughly true that Racine takes his greatest inspiration from the ancient Greeks, while Corneille takes his from the Romans. Evaluate that perception. Do, say, Britannicus and Iphigenie provide good examples of the point? What kind of inspiration does the Greek matrix provide?

Does Racine, at his best, provide the kind of shock and awe that the greatest of Greek dramas, like *Oedipus the King*, provide? Or does the modern, courtly setting, of Racine limit its fundamental power?

**Excerpt** <http://archive.org/stream/phaedra01977gut/phrdr10.txt>

*HIPPOLYTUS* My mind is settled, dear Theramenes, And I can stay no more in lovely Troezen. In doubt that racks my soul with mortal anguish, I grow ashamed of such long idleness. Six months and more my father has been gone, And what may have befallen one so dear I know not, nor what corner of the earth Hides him. *THERAMENES* And where, prince, will you look for him? Already, to content your just alarm, Have I not cross'd the seas on either side of Corinth, ask'd if aught were known of Theseus where Acheron is lost among the Shades, visited Elis, doubled Toenarus, and sail'd into the sea that saw the fall Of Icarus? Inspired with what new hope, under what favour'd skies think you to trace His footsteps? Who knows if the King, your father, wishes the secret of his absence known? Perchance, while we are trembling for his life, The hero calmly plots some fresh intrigue, And only waits till the deluded fair--  
*HIPPOLYTUS* Cease, dear Theramenes, respect the name Of Theseus. Youthful errors have been left behind, and no unworthy obstacle Detains him. Phaedra long has fix'd a heart Inconstant once, nor need she fear a rival. In seeking him I shall but do my duty, And leave a place I dare no longer see.  
*THERAMENES* Indeed! When, prince, did you begin to dread these peaceful haunts, so dear to happy childhood, Where I have seen you oft prefer to stay, rather than meet the tumult and the pomp of Athens and the court? What danger shun you, Or shall I say what grief? *HIPPOLYTUS* That happy time is gone, and all is changed, since to these shores The gods sent Phaedra. *THERAMENES* I perceive the cause of your distress. It is the queen whose sight offends you. With a step-dame's spite she schemed your exile soon as she set eyes on you. But if her hatred is not wholly vanish'd, It has at least taken a milder aspect. Besides, what danger can a dying woman, one too who longs for death, bring on your head? Can Phaedra, sick'ning of a dire disease of which she will not speak, weary of life And of herself, form any plots against you? *HIPPOLYTUS* It is not her vain enmity I fear, Another foe alarms Hippolytus. I fly, it must be own'd, from young Aricia, The sole survivor of an impious race...

## Molière

**Molière the man; the early career.** Jean Baptiste Poquelin Molière (1622-1673) was raised in the heart of Paris, son of an upholsterer, who became valet de chambre to King Louis XIV. He was educated by the Jesuits, in whose College he became active in Latin learning and in acting of Roman comedy. The following years found Molière gradually making his way into the world of street theaters—he spent thirteen years on the road as an itinerant actor--and getting a sense of the whole dramatic territory. His confidence at last well established, after the favorable reception of certain of his youthful efforts, he returned to Paris in 1658, and had the perfect luck to catch the favorable attention of King Louis XIV. (Acquiring a stage and theater in which to perform was of top importance, and Molière skillfully ingratiated himself with royalty, never touching that target in his wide ranging career as a dramatic satirist. Even so, he spent considerable time in deep poverty, and had at one point to be rescued from debtor's prison by his father.) In 1668 he returned to Paris from a barnstorming tour of the provinces—with a number of high successes to his credit—*Le Medecin malgre lui* (*The Doctor in spite of himself*) 1666; *Tartuffe* 1664; *The Misanthrope* 1666-- and the final fifteen years of his life were spent in a high creative mode. He created nineteen plays during this period, many of them among the highest achievements of French literature.

**The nature of Molière's plays.** In the highest, and most universal of his comedies, Molière comes close to portraying universal types, characters who act out, indeed almost become, traits of what is 'always and everywhere valid.' *The Doctor in spite of Himself*, *The Would be Middle Class Gentleman*, *The Miser*, *The Misanthrope*; all these characters are known to all at all times. Underneath this level of broad humanity, in many of Molière's satirical dramas, lies a level of farce and slapstick, which was always part of the French dramatic tradition, from the times of the rough and tumble streets dramas of mediaeval times. Molière himself was used to the street performance, and the local country farce.

**Middle Class Society and its Foibles.** Racine and Corneille are tragic or tragic-comic dramatists, but Molière introduces us to a new register in French literature, irony or satire. (Rabelais seems to write a mixture of caricature and fantasy.) For that, French literature needed an analytic genius as playwright; in return French culture served up, to Molière, a new phenomenon, the middle class. This class was starting to make prominent appearance throughout Europe, by the mid-17th century. Once again, many factors—economic, political, military-- contributed to that social phenomenon, which was sure to generate all those foibles that assert themselves when what we might call "family values" are called to perform like the chivalric values of old. Molière had an ample field for satire in the pretentious or self-deluded individuals who surrounded him in the court and streets of Paris. It was only when Molière attacked the clergy, physicians, courtiers, bores and *precieuses* that the critics closed in savagely on Molière. At such times only the protection and patronage of the king saved him. It comes as a supreme irony that Molière met his death while playing the lead role in *Le Malade Imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Invalid*); while playing that character he was seized by a hemorrhage and died a few hours later.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*Tartuffe*, tr, Richard Wilbur, 1992.

### Secondary source reading

Scott, V., *Molière, a Theatrical Life*, 2000.

### Further reading

Riggs, L., *Molière and Modernity*, 2005.

### Original language reading

Simon, Alfred, *Molière, une vie*, 1988.

## Suggested paper topics



## 18<sup>th</sup> century

Unlike the literary productions of the seventeenth century, the literature of the Age of Enlightenment was more concerned with content than with form and technique. Much of it was utilitarian, purposive, and didactic. "It was dominated by a skeptical philosophy, a hatred of any form of tradition or authority, and a desire for political and social reform..." The watchwords of the age were reform, freedom of thought, and tolerance. Seventeenth century authors superseded the ancients as models, but classical forms and genres were still employed, and the rules of Boileau's *Art Poétique* were not questioned. Wit and cosmopolitanism were frequent ingredients, and, after the middle of the century, "sensibility" became popular.

Quite understandably, all eighteenth century French literature is prose. Voltaire, it is true, wrote many types of poetry, and at the end of the century Andre Chénier (1762-1794) wrote interesting lyrical and philosophical poems.

In the field of the essay, Montesquieu (1689-1755) was one of the leaders. His *Persian Letters* (1721) were satires on Parisian culture. Of more importance was his *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), an analysis of various governments which demonstrates that they are the results of moral, economic, and physical conditions, and that human laws are relative. Another distinguished essayist was the Comte de Buffon, who wrote a thirty-six volume *Natural History* (1749-1788). The most famous and influential undertaking of the eighteenth century was the *Encyclopedie* (1750-1777), of which the principal editor was Denis Diderot, and to which most of the leading intellectuals of the time contributed. The *Encyclopédie* attempted to gather and systematize all knowledge about the sciences, arts, and trades. Its contributors, however, used it for attacking tyranny in all its forms, and for championing individual liberty and human reason in all their forms. The work played a large part in the development of ideas which would be influential in the French Revolution.

While stage drama was weak in this period, the French novel reached its maturity at this period. Marivaux began two novels of which the main feature was psychological analysis, the Abbé Prévost (1697-1763) wrote one now famous novel, *Manon Lescaut* (1731), and Bernardin de Saint Pierre (1737-1814) wrote *Paul et Virginie*, a sentimental novel deeply involved with nature, which proved an important precursor of Romanticism.

## Discussion questions

Is Beaumarchais basically a political playwright? Does the figure of Figaro represent the little man of his time? The vox populi?

## Authors

### Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin de

**Pierre-Augustin de Beaumarchais (1732-1799)** was a watchmaker, playwright, inventor, musician, diplomat, fugitive, spy, arms dealer, satirist, revolutionary, who lived the intense years of the American and French revolutions, at century's end, as well as the inscape of high court politics under Louis XIV. Born in Paris, the son of a watchmaker, Beaumarchais enjoyed the blessings of a comfortable middle class childhood. At ten he was sent to 'country school' where he learned some Latin, and incidentally, in the same years, pursued his interest in the craft of watchmaking. (By researching closely into the mountings of pocket watches, he invented an escapement that made those watches both more compact and more accurate. For Mme. de Pompidou, the mistress of King, Louis, Beaumarchais created a brilliant watch mounted on a ring.) As a skilled musician, Beaumarchais used this ability to get himself employed as harp instructor for the daughters of King Louis XIV. Having proven himself witty, vitriolic, and articulate, Beaumarchais, who wrote a number of better forgotten plays, found his way into the creation of the three plays which made his fame, to this day: *Le Barbier de Seville* (1775) *Le Mariage de Figaro* (1784), and *La Mère Coupable* (1792). Nor, though, was this major literary achievement all Beaumarchais undertook at court. For one thing he was deeply involved in financial investments, in partner with a highly placed business person—Beaumarchais saw moments of high poverty and high wealth in these years—for another he served the French government as a spy on England, and as the period of the American Revolution approached he found himself engaged increasingly in somewhat covert, and high level effectual, dealings to support both the American and French Revolutions. His sympathy for the 'common man' was not only a driver for his political stance, but the mainspring of his viewpoint in his greatest dramatic achievements.

**The major plays.** All three of his major plays revolve around the mischief of Figaro, a man of all trades, educated and quick, who ends up as a Barber. In the first of these plays Figaro acts out the role of a witty partner in a love triangle, but in the second play, *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Figaro takes on the role of a critic of the aristocracy, an embittered victim of a privileged society with no respect for the common man; and he expresses these feelings with an incendiary vigor which, in looking back, we may feel part of the spirit that impelled Beaumarchais toward a revolutionary position at century's end. The final address of Figaro to the monarchy, in the last act of *Le Mariage de Figaro*, brought down the ire of establishment France, and is seen, by many, as among the many clarion calls being sounded throughout late eighteenth century Europe, to remind the powers on high that their time was limited. Figaro speaks:

**A tirade of Figaro.** 'I throw myself full-force into the theatre. Alas, I might as well have put a stone round my neck! I fudge up a play about the manners of the Seraglio; a Spanish author, I imagined, could attack Mahomet without scruple; but immediately some envoy from goodness-knows-where complains that some of my lines offend the Sublime Porte, Persia, some part or other of the East Indies, the whole of Egypt, the kingdoms of Cyrenaica, Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Morocco. Behold my comedy scuppered to please a set of Mohammedan princes—not one of whom I believe can read—who habitually beat a tattoo on our shoulders to the tune of "Down with the Christian dogs!" Unable to break my spirit, they decided to take it out on my body. My cheeks grew hollowed: my time was out. I saw in the distance the approach of the fell sergeant, his quill stuck into his wig.'

## Reading

### Primary source reading,

*The Figaro Trilogy*, tr. David Coward, 2008.

### Secondary source reading

Lever, M. *Beaumarchais: A Biography*, 2009.

## Further reading

Paul, J.R., *Unlikely Allies: How a Merchant, a Playwright, and a Spy saved the American Revolution*, 2011.

### Original language reading

Dussert, Gilles, *La machinerie Beaumarchais*, 2012.

### Suggested paper topics

What connection do you see between Beaumarchais' political underground activities and the view of life and society he develops in *The Marriage of Figaro*? Is he in some sense a 'political writer'?

What significance do you see in Beaumarchais' technical skill as a watchmaker? How does that skill, in your opinion, play out into his genius as musician, director, playwright? Give some thought to the escapement he invented for improving watch performance. What kind of intelligence was required for a discovery of that sort?

**Excerpt** [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Beaumarchais](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Pierre_Beaumarchais)

*Ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.*

That which is not worth speaking they sing.

*Que les gens d'esprit sont bêtes.*

What silly people wits are!

*Aujourd'hui, ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante.*

Nowadays what isn't worth saying is sung.

*Je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d'être obligé d'en pleurer.*

I hasten to laugh at everything, for fear of being obliged to weep.

*Médiocre et rampant, et l'on arrive à tout.*

Be commonplace and creeping, and you attain all things.

*Calomniez, calomniez; il en reste toujours quelque chose.*

Calumniate, calumniate; there will always be something which sticks.

*Il n'est pas nécessaire de tenir les choses pour en raisonner.*

It is not necessary to retain facts that we may reason concerning them.

*De toutes les choses sérieuses, le mariage étant la plus bouffonne.*

Of all serious things, marriage is the most ludicrous.

*Boire sans soif et faire l'amour en tout temps, madame, il n'y a que ça qui nous distingue des autres bêtes.*

Drinking when not thirsty and making love all the time, madam, is all that distinguishes us from other animals.

*Parce que vous êtes un grand seigneur, vous vous croyez un grand génie! ... vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus. Du reste homme assez ordinaire!*

Because you are a great lord, you believe that you are a great genius! You took the trouble to be born, no more. You remain an ordinary enough man!

*Sans la liberté de blâmer, il n'est point d'éloge flatteur; et qu'il n'y a que les petits hommes qui redoutent les petits écrits.*

If censorship reigns, there cannot be sincere flattery, and only small men are afraid of small writings.

## 19<sup>th</sup> century

**Overview** French literature of the nineteenth century can be roughly divided into two sections.

The first half of the century can be called by the term Romantic, for it picks up on tendencies evident in the French literature of the late 18th century, like the *Querelle des anciens des modernes*, which reflected a growing interest in the expression of feelings, and in independence from the past, which had the germs of the Romantic in it. But that is just a literary beginning, to the change in sensibility the Romantic heralds in. The first half of the 19th century in France also explodes with political and social energies, in which were released many of the open feelings and freed thoughts which became part of the Romantic perspective in literature and the other arts, as well as in morals and philosophy. The declaration of Napoleon as consul, in 1799, and Emperor in 1804, was the launching pad first for great French optimism, that a new era of growth and justice was at hand, and then for growing dismay at the abuses and humiliations of Napoleon. After Waterloo, in 1815, a despotic monarch was chosen to lead the nation, then replaced by a revolution, then a second (constitutional) monarchy was called in, headed by Louis Philippe, who was again replaced in 1848, by Louis Napoleon, a nephew of Napoleon I. As a result of these many changes, and the uncertainties accompanying them, creative forces, as well as hindrances, were freed in the society, and took expression in new literary voices which seem to come from a different world from that of Malherbe and Boileau, in the preceding century.

A survey of French literature of the last half of the nineteenth century consists in large measure of a discussion of four *isms*: realism, naturalism, Parnassianism, and Symbolism.

By 1842 the old forms of Romanticism that had been triumphant during the fourth decade of the century were already on their way out, although Hugo and a few others continued to write some Romantic verse for many years thereafter. Realism, of which there had been distinct traces since 1830, now received a powerful boost from several sources: first, the large number of eccentric—and usually indigent—writers and artists who lead a “Bohemian” life in the Latin Quarter of Paris, and who scoffed both at the ugly mediocrity of the bourgeoisie, and at the egoistic pessimism of some of the Romantics; and second, the caricaturists and painters of the Barbizon school (especially Corot and Millet) who reacted against the violence and unreality of the Romantic school of painting; the Barbizon artists turned to French landscapes and simple life for their subjects.

After 1850 two kinds of realism became discernible: first, artistic realism promoted by the proponents of “art for art’s sake,” a school of which Théophile Gautier was a prominent member, and in which we might well want to include Flaubert and the Parnassians; second, the schools of realism or naturalism, which Emile Zola, the founder of naturalism, defined as “the formula of modern science applied to literature.” Naturalism actually went a step beyond the earlier realism in targeting the sordid and unsavory for particular attention.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Overview** A new idealism and positive faith, which permeated French thinking toward the end of the 19th century—powered by faith in science, economic progress, exuberant forms of nationalism—found expression in the vitalist philosophies of such pan European thinkers as Bergson and Nietzsche. However intimations of upcoming political strife, of ominous force, were on the horizon.

The boiling conflicts within Germany came to the surface as early as 1905, when the Kaiser insulted France at Tangiers; there was more friction at Agadir in 1911. Then in 1914, came the First World War, and with it the destruction not only of the German Empire but virtually of France along with it. The era between the first and second world wars was one of disillusionment, frustration, and cynicism. Conflicting economic and political beliefs made for instability in governments, and pacifism met opposition from those who feared the resurgence of German militarism, especially after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The pragmatic philosophy of William James and the psychology of Sigmund Freud had deep effect on French thought during this interim period.

Like the period following World War I, the years since the end of the last conflict, were filled with insecurity, disillusionment and fear—especially, in the United States, the fear of Russia and communism.

In literature, many of the fin de siècle writers continued to produce into the twentieth century. Naturalism and symbolism were already on the decline, but no new school of significance took their place. Many minor schools had brief vogues—neoromanticism, vitalism, Dynamism, Paroxysm, Futurism, and others. Several general tendencies, however, can be noted. First, during the early years of the century, the optimism, nationalism, patriotism, and activism of the era determined the course of much of the literature. At the same time some writers were turning to mysticism and religion. During each world war some good war literature was written, and after each conflict the literature reflected the pessimism and frustration of the nation. During the twentieth century there have been other persistent trends, all of them inflected by the ominous Cold War which separated the Soviet Union from the rest of Europe and the United States, and which remained a reality almost to the end of the century. One of the trends is an increasing interest in the inner workings of the mind—a trend opened widely by the researches of Sigmund Freud. Another trend might be considered the exacerbation of social and racial tension—as new nations are formed in Africa, as civil rights movements manifest in powerful societies, and as the classical threats of World War between nations are replaced by civil and ideological conflicts. A third trend should be the widening of global communications through the internet, which was an operative force by the late eighties, and the resultant changes, still hard to explore, in the relationships among individuals and the operations of entertainment and world news itself.

## Authors

### Beckett, Samuel

**Samuel Beckett: the imprint on his world.** Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) was an Irish novelist, poet, theater director, and commentator on the meaning of life, who left a deep mark on writing and thinking in English. He has been considered the last great master of Modernism, the greatest proponent of the so called Theater of the Absurd, and even one of the first of the Postmoderns. In other words a major literary figure at the crossroads of many of the artistic frontiers of his and our time.

**Samuel Beckett, school and study.** Samuel Beckett was born on Good Friday into a comfortable Dublin suburb. (His parents were devout members of the Anglican Church of Ireland.) His house, with its grounds and tennis court, gave the young Samuel a congenial venue for long walks with his father, as did the surrounding parks and roadways, which were green and inviting. His father was a surveyor, and in good relation with his son; there is little, in Beckett's childhood, to suggest the formation of a world class cynic and gallows humorist. He was educated first at a local playschool, then at Portora Royal School—where Oscar Wilde had also matriculated—and where Samuel began his serious career as an amateur cricketer. He was to become an outstanding player when he went up to Trinity College, Dublin, where he was a student from 1923-1927, and where he acquired the formal underpinnings of his linguistic genius. At Trinity he studied French, Italian, and English literatures and language, working under such luminaries as A.B. Luce the distinguished student of Bishop Berkeley's philosophy.

**Maturity and mature works.** Upon graduation from Trinity, Dublin, Beckett was invited to work as a teacher of English at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He was to remain in that city for much of his life, with occasional forays around the continent and home to Ireland. One important factor in his prolonged French residence was his early acquaintance, in Paris, with James Joyce, another transplanted Irishman. Upon arrival in Paris, Beckett had met the older man, and become his private secretary, doing research for *Finnegans Wake*. From the start this relation had been the great literary inspiration of Beckett's life, although he was later to discover that his own genius lay in a direction opposite to Joyce's, in the direction of contraction and simplification of language, rather than of exuberant and erudite growth. Language play and daring joined the two men, as they constructed very different kinds of verbal universe. (Their bond was threatened when Joyce's daughter, who was passing into schizophrenia, made advances to Beckett; the latter withdrew, bruising many feelings.) Beckett, meanwhile, was embedding himself in French culture, starting to write and publish actively in French—which was to remain his first language for writing, throughout his life—and participating actively in the French Resistance against German occupation. (Beckett fought throughout the war, served the French with high honors, and was rewarded at war's end with the French Croix de Guerre.) By this stage, Beckett was coming into mastery of his own minimalist, gallows humor drama. Starting with *En Attendant Godot* (1953), *Waiting for Godot*, he wrote a series of dark dramas which attained immediate success both in Europe and the United States. *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Fin de Partie* (1957), (*Endgame*), deserve mention, among others. These plays faced human beings with the bleakness of themselves, of their histories and prospects, and with the looming meaningless of the universe. Human beings flocked to the theater, to hear this about themselves.

## Reading

### Primary source reading

*Waiting for Godot*, tr. Beckett, 2011.

### Secondary source reading

Esslin, M., *The Theater of the Absurd*, 1969.

### Further reading

Ricks, Christopher, *Beckett's Dying Words*, 1995.

### Original language reading

Kamyabi Mask, A., *Les temps de l'attente*, 1999.

### Suggested paper topics

What seems to you, upon looking into it, to have been the major influence of James Joyce on Beckett? Did Beckett not write as a minimalist, while Joyce expanded his text to the limits of the world? Was the bond between the two men their common sense of language, or was it their view of the world?

Does Samuel Beckett belong in our French writers' syllabus? He did, after all, write a lot in English, and translate some of his own French work into English. Is his inclusion here owing to the special value of the work he did in his writing in French? Or, amazing possibility, did he come to write French better than English?

**Excerpt** [www.english-literature.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teaching/.../Sur-20c-read.do](http://www.english-literature.uni-bayreuth.de/en/teaching/.../Sur-20c-read.do)

*A country road. A tree. Evening.*

*Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.*

*As before. Enter Vladimir.*

**ESTRAGON:**

*(giving up again).* Nothing to be done.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart).* I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. *(He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.)* So there you are again.

**ESTRAGON:**

Am I?

**VLADIMIR:**

I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever.

**ESTRAGON:**

Me too.

**VLADIMIR:**

Together again at last! We'll have to celebrate this. But how? *(He reflects.)* Get up till I embrace you.

**ESTRAGON:**

*(irritably).* Not now, not now.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(hurt, coldly).* May one inquire where His Highness spent the night?

**ESTRAGON:**

In a ditch.

**VLADIMIR:**

*(admiringly).* A ditch! Where?

**ESTRAGON:**

*(without gesture).* Over there.

**VLADIMIR:**

And they didn't beat you?

**ESTRAGON:**

Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

**VLADIMIR:**

The same lot as usual?

**ESTRAGON:**

The same? I don't know.

**VLADIMIR:**

When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be . . . *(Decisively.)* You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it.

**ESTRAGON:** And what of it?