

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.'