

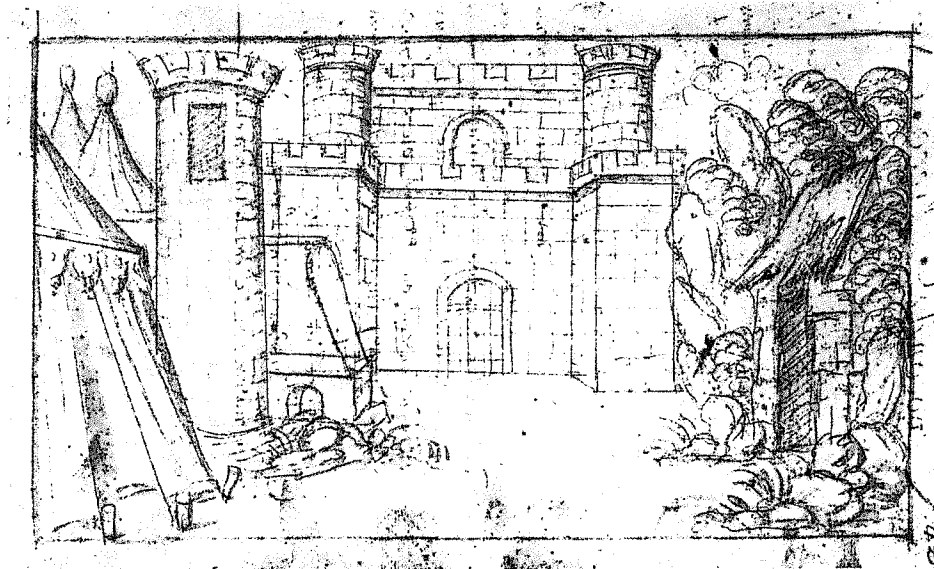
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The French Background

The development of the French theatre had been interrupted by the civil wars that grew out of religious controversy in the sixteenth century and recurred in the seventeenth. Stability did not return until around 1625, by which time Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII's prime minister, having secured absolute power for the king, set out to make France the cultural center of Europe. Up to that time, France's theatre had remained under medieval influence. Although religious plays were outlawed in Paris in 1548, the theatre had continued to use simultaneous settings for its plays, most of which required numerous locales. (See the illustration below for a typical stage setting around 1635.) Richelieu believed that the French stage needed drastic reform and looked to Italy for guidance. He advocated adoption of the proscenium stage and perspective scenery and a drama that would adhere to theoretical principles articulated in Italy during the sixteenth century. These principles make up what came to be called the neoclassical ideal.

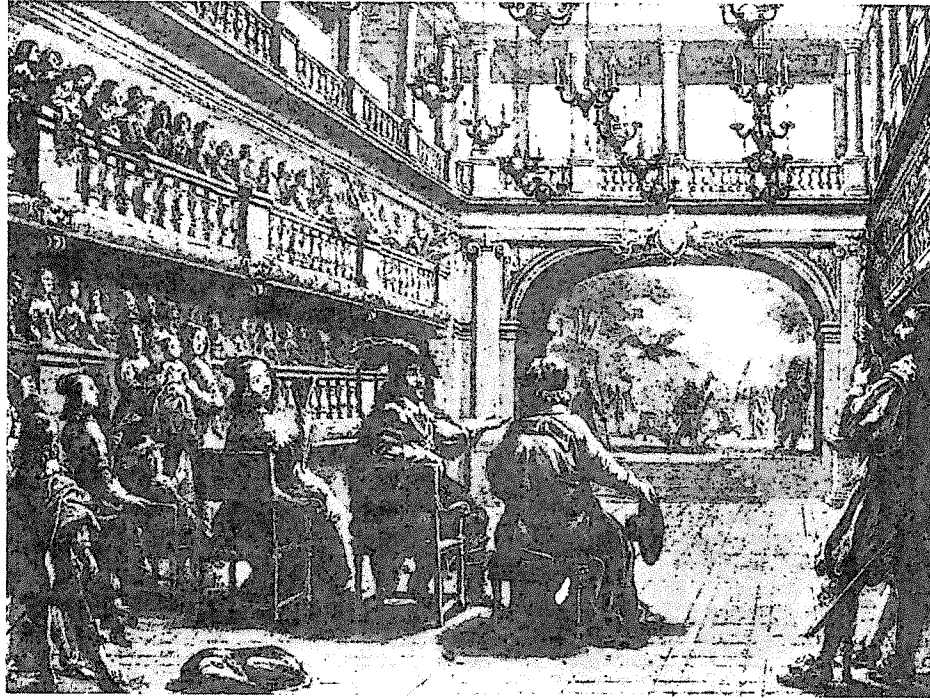
The neoclassicists recognized only two legitimate forms of drama—tragedy and comedy—and argued that the two should never be mixed. They believed that tragedy could be written only about kings and nobles, whereas comedy should deal with the middle or lower classes. They thought that all plays should be written in five acts, that plays should observe the unities of time (all the action should occur within twenty-four



Design by Laurent Mahelot for *La Prise de Marsilly*. Notice that several locales are represented simultaneously. (courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

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The first proscenium-arch theatre in France, built by Cardinal Richelieu in his palace in 1641. Seated in the foreground (from right to left) are Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII, and the queen. After Richelieu's death, this theatre was called the Palais Royal. It was used by Molière's company from 1660 until his death in 1673. (a contemporary engraving)

hours), place (all the action should occur in the same place), and action (there should be only one plot), and that the endings of plays should uphold "poetic justice" (that is, punish the wicked and reward the good). There were other demands, but these were the most important. Neoclassicists believed that the purpose of all drama is to teach and to please.

Although Richelieu and others favored them, these rules were not widely known or accepted in France until 1636, when *The Cid* by Pierre Corneille (1606–1684) became the most popular play yet written in France. Despite its popularity, the play was viciously attacked because it failed to adhere to some of the neoclassical rules. This controversy, which was heated and dragged on for some time, focused attention in France on the neoclassical rules. Richelieu asked the recently formed French Academy (whose membership was restricted to the forty most eminent literary figures of the day) to deliver a verdict on the play. The Academy praised the play for many of its qualities but faulted it wherever it deviated from the rules. It was especially unhappy because, though the unity of time had been observed, too many events, including an entire war, had occurred within a twenty-four-hour period. The play, unlike tragedy, ended happily because the heroine agreed to marry the man who had killed her father a few hours earlier. This controversy is a watershed event in French theatre, because it effectively legitimized the neoclassical view. After 1640, Corneille adopted the new mode, which

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was later perfected by Jean Racine (1639–1699), especially in his *Phaedra*. The tragedies of Corneille and Racine were to set the standard for serious playwriting throughout Europe until the nineteenth century. On the European continent, these French tragedies were, until around 1800, thought superior to those of Shakespeare.

The transition to the new ideal also required that the theatre structure be altered. To set an example, Richelieu in 1641 had the first theatre in France with a proscenium arch erected in his own palace. By 1650, all of the Parisian public and court theatres had been transformed into picture-frame stages of the Italian type. Thus by the mid-seventeenth century, the Italian order had replaced the medieval heritage.

Onstage Audiences

From the 1630s until around 1760, some members of Parisian audiences were seated on stage during performances. This practice apparently originated during the controversy over Corneille's *The Cid*, when the demand to see that play was so great that spectators were allowed to sit or stand in the wings. Sitting on stage soon became fashionable for those who came to the theatre to be seen, and the actors permitted it because they could charge more for onstage seats than for seats in the boxes. That some onstage spectators were determined to give their own performances is indicated in this speech from Molière's *The Bores*:

I was seated on the stage waiting to hear the play, which I had heard praised by several persons. The actors began and everybody was silent when, with a blustering air . . . in rushes a man . . . crying out for a chair, surprising the audience with his great noise which interrupted one of the most beautiful passages in the play. . . . The actors were willing to go on with their parts, but the fellow in seating himself made a new disturbance, and crossing the stage . . . he planted his chair in the middle of the front . . . hiding the actors from three fourths of the house. The yells this aroused would have shamed another man, but he, steady and firm, did not mind at all. [The speech goes on to say that the man moved only so he could talk to another onstage spectator, to whom he insisted on explaining in a loud voice what was coming next.] He got up a good while before the play ended, for these fine fellows, to prove their gentility, are careful above all not to hear the conclusion.

Eventually five rows of benches were permanently installed on either side of the Comédie Française's stage and were not removed until 1759, when the premiere of a tragedy by Voltaire was ruined when a ghost could not make its entrance because the stage was so crowded with spectators. When someone among the spectators shouted, "Make way for the ghost," the audience began laughing and never recovered, thus turning a tragedy into an unexpected comedy. This fiasco supposedly motivated the permanent removal of spectators from the stage, allowing it thereafter to be devoted entirely to the dramatic action for the first time since 1636.

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Molière and Seventeenth-Century French Theatre Practice

Just as Corneille and Racine set the standard for tragedy, Molière (1622–1673) set the standard for comedy. Molière began his career as an actor in 1643. Meeting little success in Paris, his company toured the provinces for some thirteen years, often competing with commedia companies, from which he learned much about playwriting and how to please an audience. Upon returning to Paris, his company performed in the theatre that Richelieu had built and that had become the property of the crown upon the cardinal's death. Usually referred to as the Palais Royal, this theatre had a picture-frame stage and a box, pit, and gallery auditorium. Thus Molière performed in a theatre owned by the king but open to the general public. He also shared this theatre (alternating playing days) with a commedia company.

Like Shakespeare, Molière was involved in every aspect of the theatre. He was head of his own company, its principal actor, and its principal playwright. He was not part owner of a theatre, however.

Despite the differences between the Elizabethan and French stages, their acting companies had many features in common. French companies, like the English, were organized on the sharing plan. They usually included ten to fifteen sharing members, but others were hired as actors, musicians, stage assistants, and so on. A major difference was that French companies included women, who had equal rights with the men and received comparable pay. At the end of each performance, the costs of production were deducted from the receipts, and the remainder was divided among the shareholders. All of the leading companies in Paris (usually two or three) received a subsidy from the crown, but the sum was not sufficient to guarantee them against loss.

Plays were selected by a vote of the shareholders after hearing a reading of the play. A play might be bought outright, but the more usual method of payment was to give the author a percentage of the receipts for a limited number of performances, after which the play belonged to the company. An acting company usually had in its active repertory fifty or more plays, which were alternated in order to keep the audience coming back.

Casting was simplified because each actor played a limited range of roles. By the eighteenth century, actors were being hired according to "lines of business" (according to the type of characters they played) and remained in those lines throughout their careers. A new actor in the company usually learned roles from the person he or she was understudying or replacing, and therefore many roles came to be played in a traditional manner handed down from one generation to the next. Such practices continued well into the nineteenth century, not just in France but also throughout Europe.

In France, actors were expected to furnish their own costumes, a major expense for the actors. As on the Elizabethan stage, most costumes were contemporary garments, although there were exceptions, especially for Near Eastern, Moorish, and classical characters. Because so many French plays were based on classical myth or history, the costumes for classical characters were of special concern. The typical dress for classical heroes was the *habit à la romaine* (Roman costume), an adaptation of Roman armor, tunic, and boots, which by the late seventeenth century had become highly stylized (see illustration on page 140). Classical female characters, however, wore the fashionable dress of France but with such added exotic touches as ostrich-feather headdresses.

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The *habit à la romaine*, the costume worn by actors playing the heroes of tragedies set in ancient Greece or Rome. Originally based on Roman armor, it became increasingly stylized and ornate, as in this engraving based on a painting by Watteau. (Gillaumont, *Costumes de la Comédie Française*, 1884)

The scenic demands of regular comedy and tragedy were simple. Ordinarily, in compliance with the neoclassical rules, the plays were set in one place and required no scene changes. (Opera and other “irregular” forms were permitted many scene changes and elaborate effects.) Most settings were so generalized in their features (appropriate to a particular kind of play but without individualizing details) that the same set could be used for several different plays. The setting was removed from specificity by using only those stage properties (chairs, tables, beds, and the like) absolutely demanded by the action; thus the stage was largely bare. This emphasis on generalized place served as well to keep down the costs of both scenery and costumes.

Because the theatre was now indoors, lighting was a concern. The available illuminants were candles and oil lamps. The auditorium was usually lighted by chandeliers, those hung just forward of the stage being of special importance because they, along with a row of footlights at the forward edge of the stage, were the primary lighting sources for the actors, who usually played near the front of the stage. Audiences as well as actors were lighted throughout performances, promoting considerable interaction between auditorium and stage. Sometimes chandeliers were also hung above the stage, but more often the onstage lighting sources were concealed by overhead or side masking. Along the sides, behind the proscenium arch and each wing position, were vertical poles on which oil lamps were mounted, one lamp above the other. Lamps could also be mounted on horizontal pipes above the proscenium and behind the overhead borders.

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Molière

Molière, born Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (1622–1673), was the son of a prosperous upholsterer and furniture maker. After receiving an excellent education, he abandoned a promising future with his father at the age of twenty-one to join nine other young people in founding the Théâtre Illustre. At this time he took the stage name Molière. After the company failed in Paris, it toured the provinces for fifteen years, polishing its skills and learning to please audiences, often in competition with commedia dell'arte companies. In 1658, the company was invited to play for the king, who was sufficiently pleased to let it use a court theatre for public performances. Molière remained in Paris thereafter, often stirring up controversy with plays that satirized obsessive behavior and repressive customs, but enjoying the favor of the king, for whose festivals he wrote entertainments and who awarded the company an annual subsidy. Molière's enemies were often vicious, even spreading the rumor that his wife, some twenty years younger than he, was actually his illegitimate daughter. Molière virtually died on stage, having taken ill while performing the title role in his *The Imaginary Invalid* and surviving only a few hours. Initially denied a Christian burial because he was an actor, only after the king intervened was he permitted minimal ceremony and burial in consecrated ground.

Reflectors were sometimes used to increase the amount of light that reached the stage. At least three methods were used to darken the stage: Lights were extinguished (although this was awkward if they had to brighten again); open cylinders were suspended above the lamps and lowered over them to darken the stage, then raised to brighten it; or lamps were mounted on rotating poles that could be turned either toward or away from the visible portions of the stage. Because the intensity of lamps and candles was so limited, providing an adequate level of illumination took precedence over all other functions of stage lighting. By modern standards, the level of illumination was very low.

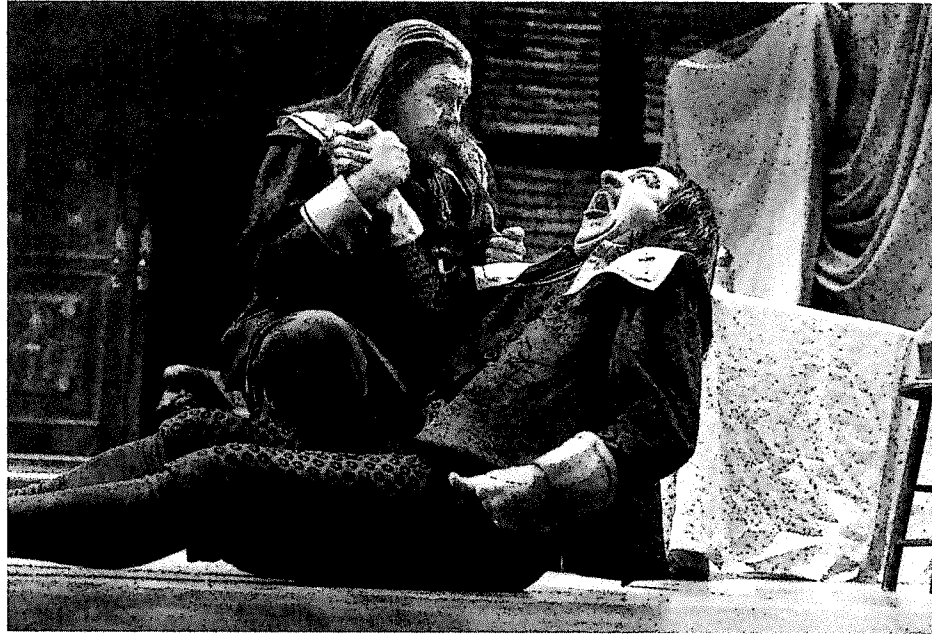
These were the prevailing practices during the years 1658–1673, when Molière performed in Paris. Molière wrote several kinds of plays, many of them resembling commedia and using commedia characters. But his best-known works are comedies of character, among which the most popular is *Tartuffe*.

Tartuffe

Tartuffe is concerned with religious hypocrisy. The play's title character denounces others for their pursuit of worldly pleasures while privately seeking those pleasures for himself. The most likely target of Molière's satire was the Company of the Holy Sacrament, a secret society of the time, whose purpose was to improve morals by being "spiritual police" who spied on the private lives of others. Molière read *Tartuffe* to several persons before it was produced in 1664, and the Company immediately organized an attack

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Tartuffe as performed at the McCarter Theatre, Princeton, New Jersey. Here Orgon (Jim Baker, kneeling) comforts Tartuffe (Richard Risso). Directed by Nagle Jackson. (photo by Randall Hagadorn; courtesy of the McCarter Theatre Center for the Performing Arts, Princeton, NJ)

upon it. The controversy became so heated that Louis XIV forbade further performances. Molière revised the play in 1667, only to have it withdrawn again. But by 1669, the opposition was largely gone, and the play was performed frequently thereafter.

Whether or not Molière had the company in mind, he was clearly thinking of groups like the company, who feel that they alone can discern true piety from false, creating conditions under which hypocrites flourish. As in all of Molière's works, in *Tartuffe* the balanced view of life is upheld. To Molière, true piety demands not the abandonment of pleasure but rather the right use of it. The truly devout try to reform the world by actions that set a good example, rather than by pious speeches.

The conflict in *Tartuffe* is established quickly in the opening scene, as Madame Pernelle, Orgon's mother, storms out of the house while denouncing the entire household for failing to appreciate Tartuffe's piety. The conflict is further clarified when Orgon, the head of the household, returning home after an absence, demonstrates more concern for the welfare of Tartuffe than for his own wife. When Orgon's brother-in-law, Cleante, tries to reason with him, Orgon asserts his power by announcing his intention of marrying his daughter, Mariane, to Tartuffe, even though he has promised her to Valère. The news of this proposed marriage leads to a quarrel between Mariane and Valère, who assumes that Mariane has not opposed the plan; the rift is finally healed through the intervention of Dorine, the outspoken maid. Orgon's son, Damis, also tries to bring his father to his senses by reporting that he has witnessed Tartuffe trying to seduce Orgon's wife, Elmire. When Tartuffe, with an air of injured humility,

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refuses to defend himself, Orgon denounces Damis and, to protect Tartuffe from such attacks in the future, signs over all of his property to Tartuffe.

Elmire, at last recognizing how deceived Orgon is, seeks to show him his mistake by hiding him under a table to witness Tartuffe's assault on her virtue. Finally convinced, Orgon orders Tartuffe from the house, but Tartuffe, now the owner of the property, declares that, rather than moving out, he will have the family evicted. Just as Tartuffe seems triumphant, officers arrest him as a notorious deceiver on whom the king has been keeping watch and return the property to Orgon.

The plot of *Tartuffe* can be divided into five stages: the demonstration of Tartuffe's complete hold over Orgon; the unmasking of Tartuffe; Tartuffe's attempted revenge; the foiling of Tartuffe's plan; and the happy resolution. There are three important reversals. The first (the unmasking of Tartuffe) brings all of the characters to an awareness of the true situation. The resulting happiness is quickly dispelled, however, when Orgon is shown to be at the mercy of Tartuffe. The first two reversals (Orgon turning the tables on Tartuffe; Tartuffe turning the tables on Orgon) have been carefully foreshadowed, but the final one and the play's resolution have not. The contrived (*deus ex machina*) ending (in which Tartuffe is discovered to be a notorious criminal) is emotionally satisfying in the sense that justice triumphs, but the contrivance is totally unprepared for in the preceding dramatic action.

To prevent any confusion about Tartuffe's nature, Molière uses two acts to prepare for his entrance. The first act includes a lengthy argument by Cleante, the character who apparently represents Molière's point of view, in which true piety is distinguished from false. The structure of *Tartuffe* may be clarified by examining the use of



Tartuffe as directed by Ariane Mnouchkine at the Théâtre du Soliel in Paris. It was staged to draw parallels between seventeenth-century moralistic strictures and today's Islamic fundamentalism. Seen here are Mariane being defended by Dorine (the maid) against the demands of Orgon (Mariane's father). (photo by Martine Franck/Magnum)

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various characters. Cleante appears in Act I, where he performs his principal function: to present the commonsense point of view. He does not appear again until Act IV, in which, as well as in Act V, he merely reinforces the ideas he set forth in Act I. Cleante does not influence the action, rather he clarifies the theme.

Although Dorine, the maid, appears in each act, her role is virtually completed after the beginning of Act III, though she has been a major character up to that point. Her frankness and outspokenness serve to show up Orgon's credulity, the lovers' petulance, and Tartuffe's false piety. Her wit and common sense put the exaggerated behavior of others in proper perspective.

Even Tartuffe is given strange treatment when he finally makes his appearance after two acts of preparation. Most of his time onstage is given over to his two "love scenes" with Elmire. Molière seems to take it for granted that the audience will accept the picture of Tartuffe painted by the other characters and that the play need only emphasize one aspect of his hypocrisy. Tartuffe displays his wiles most fully when he is denounced by Damis. Rather than defend himself, he endures the accusations with apparent humility. This scene, more than any other, shows how Orgon has been taken in by Tartuffe.

The lovers, Valère and Mariane, first appear in Act II and are unimportant thereafter. They serve merely to show the depth of Orgon's credulity, because he plans to marry his daughter to Tartuffe. The lovers' quarrel that ensues is a source of amusement largely unrelated to the rest of the play.

Elmire appears in Act III (in which Tartuffe first tries to seduce her), but she has only a few lines, and most of these treat Tartuffe's suggestions with an air of frivolity. Most of her lines come in Act IV, where she serves as the instrument for unmasking Tartuffe. This uneven distribution of the role has led some critics to argue that Elmire's moral character is questionable, because she originally seems undisturbed by Tartuffe's advances. Molière probably meant to show Elmire as a reasonably worldly but upright woman who is capable of defending herself without making a fuss about it.

Orgon's role is the one most evenly distributed throughout the play. Although the Tartuffes of the world are dangerous, they can exist only because of the Orgons, because the success of the wicked depends on the gullibility of the foolish. Just as Molière emphasizes Tartuffe's calculated piety, so, too, he emphasizes Orgon's impulsiveness and stubbornness. Orgon errs largely because he acts without considering sufficient aspects of a question. When Tartuffe is finally unmasked, Orgon's character remains consistent; failing to see the difference between hypocrisy and piety, he says: "I'm through with pious men: Henceforth I'll hate the whole false brotherhood." Instead of returning to middle ground, he assumes an equally exaggerated (though opposite) position.

Little indication is given of the age or physical appearance of the characters. Because Molière wrote with his own company in mind and directed the play, he did not need to specify every detail in his script. The role of Tartuffe was written for DuCroi, a large man with a ruddy complexion. No doubt this was one of the sources of humor. All of Tartuffe's talk about scourges and fasting was contradicted by his obvious plumpness and lecherousness. Orgon was played by Molière, noted for his expressive face and body; Elmire was acted by Molière's wife, who was twenty-seven years old in 1669. As was often the case with comic old women, Mme. Pernelle was played by a man; thus the character was no doubt intended to be seen as ridiculous in her denunciation of

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pleasure. All of the characters are drawn from the middle or lower classes (in accordance with neoclassical theories of comedy).

In *Tartuffe*, Molière uses the verse form that by that time had become standard in French drama, the alexandrine (twelve-syllable lines, with each pair of adjacent lines rhyming). The nearest equivalent in English is the rhymed couplet, although this form seems far more unnatural than the French alexandrine because English verse, unlike French, uses repeated heavy-stress patterns within lines, and these, in combination with rhymed line endings, encourage a singsong quality in English. In French verse, in which these internal stress patterns are absent, rhymed endings are far less intrusive. Molière, like most French dramatists until modern times, started a new scene each time a character entered or exited in order to indicate an alteration in motivations or focus created by the change of characters on stage. Thus although the action may be continuous, the printed text is divided into numerous scenes. (Such divisions are usually referred to as "French scenes.")

The unities of time and place are strictly observed in *Tartuffe*. Only a single room is used, and even that requires only a table, under which Orgon can be concealed, and a closet, in which Damis can hide, both used to witness Tartuffe trying to seduce Elmire. No specific use is made of the setting except in these two instances. The action is continuous, or nearly so, and occurs in a single day. All of the episodes, with the possible exception of the lovers' quarrel, are directly related to the main theme of the play. *Tartuffe* is clearly within the neoclassical tradition. It has remained in the repertory almost continuously and has been performed more often than any other play by Molière.

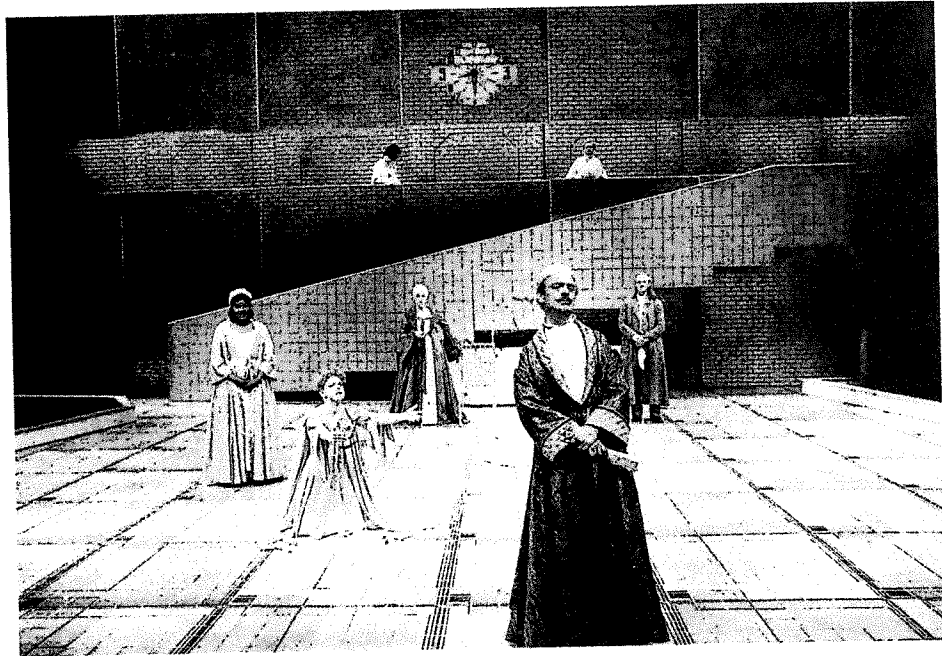
The Elizabethan, Italian, and French Traditions

Although Shakespeare and Molière are among the world's great dramatists and were separated in time by only a few years, they worked within different theatrical traditions. Shakespeare's offered greater flexibility, but before the end of the seventeenth century, it had been replaced by Molière's, probably because the tide of taste was moving steadily toward a preference for representationalism. When the English theatres reopened in 1660, after having been closed for eighteen years, they accepted actresses for the first time in England and adopted the picture-frame stage, perspective scenery, and the neoclassical vision (although never so completely as elsewhere in Europe). During the Restoration, several of Shakespeare's plays were adapted to make them conform more nearly to the neoclassical ideal. For example, at the end of Nahum Tate's adaptation of *King Lear* (1681) only the wicked people died; Lear, Gloucester, and Kent retired to the country, and Cordelia and Edgar married and became the rulers of England. This is the version of *King Lear* that was performed in English theatres until the 1840s.

English theatre between 1660 and 1700, a period usually referred to as the Restoration, was noted principally for its comedy of manners, which focused on the amoral behavior and witty verbal exchanges of the rich and idle upper class. Restoration comedy was concerned above all with sexual conquests, advantageous marriages (in which love played little part), the latest fashions, and a seeming determination to be shocked at nothing. The butts of ridicule included the fop, the old man who marries a young wife, the old woman who tries to appear young, the pretender at wit and

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A radical reinterpretation of *Tartuffe* as directed by the Romanian director Lucian Pintilie at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis. In this production the action progresses through various periods. In the final act, the rescuers arrive in an automobile. Set by Radu Boruzescu; costumes by Marina Boruzescu; lighting by Beverly Emmons. (photo by Joe Giannetti; courtesy of the Guthrie Theatre)

sophistication, and the self-deceived. The amoral tone of these plays has made them controversial ever since they were written. Restoration comedy originated with such works as Sir George Etherege's *She Would if She Could* (1668) and *The Man of Mode* (1676) and reached its peak in the plays of William Congreve, especially *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700).

Commedia dell'arte influenced many European playwrights. The degree of its influence on English writers of Shakespeare's day is still debated, but it was clearly evident in eighteenth-century English theatre, especially in pantomimes. Commedia's influence on Molière and other French playwrights is undeniable, and this influence continued throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, even after com-media had ceased to be a separate form.

By the eighteenth century, although there were still obvious differences among the theatres of various European countries, they shared the same basic conventions. The theatre had made the transition from festival offerings to professional, secular entertainment.