

Pierre Corneille

By Cathleen Sheehan, Dramaturg

Pierre Corneille was a playwright of varied and prolific ability whose contributions to the French stage left their mark on theater history and paved the way for those who followed him.

Born in Rouen, France in 1606, Corneille came from a family of lawyers. He was educated by Jesuits and went on to study law. (He continued to practice law in some capacity even as he became successful as a playwright.) His first success on the stage came with *Mélite* in 1630. While his earlier works were light-hearted comedies, he made popular and literary waves with his drama *Le Cid* in 1637.

By then, Corneille had been invited to become part of a society of writers that worked under the patronage of the Cardinal de Richelieu. This was certainly an honor—but one that came with restrictive conditions. Richelieu acted as the patron for the writers, and he intended his guidelines to be followed to the letter. For example, he insisted on adherence to the Classical notion of the three unities in a play—consistency in time, place, and action. Corneille was an opinionated and determined writer who experimented with forms and expression. Not surprisingly, he was resistant to Richelieu's rigid guidelines—and not possessed of the accommodating personality traits that would have helped him get along with the formidable Cardinal. The two men clashed—and Corneille left the group.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the popularity of *Le Cid*, the French Academy was advised to review the play. Possibly inspired by an opportunity to rebuke the former recipient of his patronage, Richelieu brought the play to the attention of the Academy—which he had founded. *Le Cid* worked from Spanish sources, sources which did not adhere to the three unities, and so the play was officially censured for its lack of technical coherence. The official marks against it notwithstanding, the play was hugely popular—and is considered by many to be Corneille's masterpiece.

Undaunted if disgruntled, Corneille continued to write and achieve popular success with this plays. The variety of his works is impressive; he wrote comedies and dramas and combinations thereof, musical works and heroic works, and created an original type of five act comedy in verse. He said of his work, "My vein...often combines the lofty buskin with

the comic sock, and....pleases the audience by striking contrasting notes.” Corneille’s *Le Menteur* or *The Liar* appeared in 1643. Also based on Spanish sources, the play is often hailed as the greatest French comedy to precede Molière. A few years later, Corneille was finally elected to the French Academy.

His success did not last, however. He was ultimately overshadowed in his lifetime by the popularity of Racine. Irked by his dwindling popularity, Corneille was further burdened by the periodic removal of the pension he was supposed to have been guaranteed by Richelieu. He died near Paris in 1684.

Corneille was a playwright of impressive ability—writing more than thirty plays over the course of forty years. Widely acknowledged as the father of the French modern drama, Corneille has been almost entirely eclipsed, even in his native France, by the theatrical giants who followed him—Racine (1639-1699) and Molière (1622-1673).

Corneille was championed posthumously by the Enlightenment philosopher and writer Voltaire (1694-1778). An advocate of civil liberty and artistic freedom, Voltaire saw in Corneille’s difficulties with Richelieu the frustrating conflict between the great artist and the small-minded patron. Voltaire devoted himself to the cause of elevating the financial well-being of Corneille’s descendants as well as burnishing the well-earned reputation of Corneille—the playwright whose inspired and varied creative voice had transformed French theater.