If the function of comedy is to correct men’s vices, I do not see why any should be exempt. Such a condition in our society would be much more dangerous than the thing itself; and we have seen that the theatre is admirably suited to provide correction. The most forceful lines of a serious moral statement are usually less powerful than those of satire; and nothing will reform most men better than the depiction of their faults. It is a vigorous blow to vices to expose them to public laughter.

-Molière, preface to *Tartuffe*
Molière Timeline

1622 - Jean Baptiste Poquelin born in Paris

1643 - co-founds acting troupe Illustre Théâtre; takes stage name "Molière"

1650

1659 - Molière's first successful comedy in Paris: Les Précieuses ridicules

1662 - L'Ecole des Femmes

1664 - first performance of Tartuffe; play banned. Rewritten and performed 1667; play stopped mid-performance and banned. Third version performed 1669.

1643 - Louis XIV's accession (he's now 4 years old)

1648 - Peace of Westphalia ends the 30 years war

1651 - Hobbes publishes Leviathan.

1673 - Molière dies

1689 - Locke publishes Two Treatises of Government
Drama – Introduction

• Classical Drama
  – The dramatic tradition of ancient Greece provided the foundation for European stage drama for thousands of years. Each culture would modify the tradition according to its own tastes, mores, customs, and cultural priorities.
  – These modifications produced Senecan Tragedy in ancient Rome, medieval mystery plays and passion plays, and revenge tragedy in early modern England, just to name a few examples.
Drama – Introduction (cont.)

• Note that many other parts of the world practiced drama in ways that developed independently of this European, Greco-Roman tradition. (E.g. Japanese Noh and Bunraku).
  – Although by the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, many of these formerly independent traditions had influenced each other
Classical Greek Drama

• One of Classical Greece’s enduring contributions to European drama is the division of plays into two major categories: Tragedy and Comedy.
  – In 5th c. BCE Athens, virtually all plays fell into one of these categories. Over time, other genres have developed as well.
Tragedy

• Tragedy is characterized chiefly by the catastrophic downfall of the protagonist, often called the “tragic hero,” usually (though not always) resulting in his or her death.

• The hero’s decline and downfall is often brought about by an imperfection in the protagonist’s character, often called the “tragic flaw.”
  – More accurately, to use Aristotelian terminology, the protagonist’s decline is caused by his or her *hamartia*, which translates as “error” or “mistake.”
Comedy

• Much confusion is caused by the fact that a “comedy” is not necessarily humorous. The term refers specifically to plays (or later, narrative poems and novels) that conclude with a positive resolution that reinforces the dominant cultural values.

  – An excellent example of this use of the term is Dante’s *Comedy*, which ends with a vision of the divine and an understanding of divine love.
Comedy (cont.)

- In practice, humor is often a significant element of comedy.

- Depending on the period, location, and particular playwright, several possible sources of humor may appear:
  - Physical humor
    - Exaggerated masks, funny costumes, faux-violence, falls, etc.
  - Wit, puns, word play
  - Parody of well-known figures
  - Satire, irony (particularly dramatic irony)
Other Important Dramatic Terminology

• **Deux Ex Machina**: literally, “god from a machine”
  – In many ancient Greek plays, a representation of a deity was physically lowered onto the stage using a crane or other mechanism to resolve the play’s conflict.
  – The term is now used more generally for a contrived method of resolving conflicts or plot complications.

• **Soliloquy**: a speech by a character who is alone on stage which reveals the characters thoughts or feelings.

• **Aside**: a short remark spoken by a character to the audience which is meant to be inaudible to other characters on stage.
Molière’s Comedies typically are humorous, but usually with serious undertones.

- He parodies well-known figures and satirizes the faults and follies he sees in people in France.

- The serious undertones are an attempt to make people aware of those faults so that they may reform their ways.
One last important influence:

Commedia dell’arte

- Italian in origin, but perhaps even more popular in France
- Fashionable during the late 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries
- Relied on stock characters (identifiable by their masks)