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1986 Volume III: Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development of Urban Life,
1250-1700

Masks, Costumes, Ceremony: Life in Seventeenth Century France

Guide for Curriculum Unit 86.03.02

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Rich in culture, literature, and the arts, France's Seventeenth Century remains vibrantly alive today in its records. During this time, Corneille, Racine, Moliere, La Fontaine, Pascal and Descartes were writing; Poussin, Le Vau and Le Brun were painting; and Mansard was building Versailles.

One literary work in particular lends itself to a study of this century. "Le Bourgeois gentilhomme" ("The Would-Be Gentleman") by Moliere forms the basis of this unit focusing on the "rise" of the bourgeoisie and the "fall" of the nobility, which started in the early 1600's and ended in the late 1700's with the French Revolution.

The bourgeoisie came about because of economic changes. Prices increased steadily during the Sixteenth Century, which lowered the value of land (the basis of the nobles' wealth) and encouraged commerce (the basis of bourgeois wealth).

The upward movement of the bourgeoisie helped Louis XIV to weaken the power, especially economic, of the nobles. In playing off both, he controlled both.

The ambiguities, conflicts, and manipulations of the times found their way into art. An astute observer of men, Moliere developed the ambivalences into an art form through his plots. The theatricality of life at Court gave Moliere much to ponder.

In order to explore more fully the idea of life as theatre in Seventeenth Century France, this ten-week unit will study the many levels of Moliere's "Le Bourgeois gentilhomme."

(Recommended for French III classes, grades 11 and 12; French IV classes, grades 11 and 12; French V classes, grade 12; World Literature classes, grades 10-12; World History classes, grades 10-12; and Art, Music, and Theatre classes, grades 10-12)

Key Words

Moliere Would-Be Gentleman Literature Drama French Foreign Language Instruction France Seventeenth Century History

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