

Course II: The Development of Western Literature

1. Greek Literature:

c.8th century BCE attributed to Homer¹, the epic *Odyssey* continues the story of a leading figure in the *Iliad*, Odysseus.

C.700 BCE at roughly the same time as the final versions of the Homeric epics take shape, Hesiod writes the *Theogony* ('Birth of Gods'), a poem that describes the creation of the world and the mythology of the ancient Greek gods.

1st century BCE the Greek epic poems provides a model for Roman poets such as Horace, Virgil, and Ovid.

Epics are narrative poems that recount the story of a hero who represents a particular culture. They chronicle his quests and ordeals and account for the hero's choices and motives, so helping to establish and codify the moral principles of the society.

Epics were among the earliest forms of literature in many cultures. These popular stories were initially told orally, and over time they were embellished, reinterpreted, formalized and finally written down. Epics usually contained many characters and were long and complex in structure.

They were learned by rote in a repetitive poetic meter, or recited to a musical accompaniment, since it is far easier to memorize verse than prose. Indeed, the word "epic" itself is derived from the ancient Greek word *epos*, meaning both "story" and "poem".

The Trojan War

In ancient Greece many epic tales were told about the Trojan War a conflict between the Achaeans (an Alliance of Greek states) and the city of Troy. The first and the most famous of these accounts were the *Iliad* and

Odyssey, both attributed to a single author, known as Homer. Historians concede that these epics were inspired by actual events-sporadic war between Greece and Troy did occur some five centuries before the works were written-but their characters and plots are works of the imagination.

The Greeks began to write down their epics around the 8th century BCE. Like the spoken tales on which they were based, they took the form of narrative poems. These Greek epics have a regular meter-each line is comprised of six basic rhythmic units, and each of these units contains one long and two short syllables. This meter is known as dactylic hexameter or more commonly, "epic meter".

A tale of gods and men

The *Iliad* is a sophisticated piece of storytelling. It relates the tale of the war in Ilium (Troy) from the perspective of one character "Achilles. Parts of the story of the war are told in flashback, or in prophecies of the future. Woven into this plot are subplots and insights into the lives of protagonists.

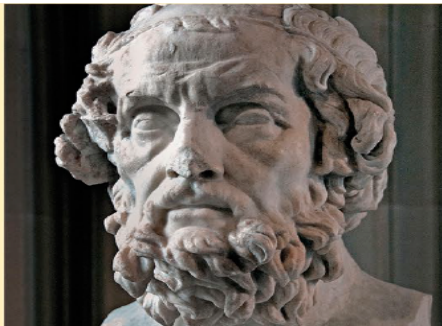
How much this complexity can be credited to Homer and how much is a result of refinement over generations, is impossible to tell. The result is a work that combines history, legend and mythology, while offering the essential ingredients of good storytelling-adventure and human drama.

The *Iliad* is massive, both in its length and its narrative scope, consisting of over 15,000 lines of verse, divided into 24 books. Rather than simply telling the tale chronologically, Homer grabs the reader's attention by using a device common to many epics. This is to drop the reader straight into the thick of the action. The story starts in the final year of the war which began nine years before.

Origins of the war

The roots of the war began in a celebration that was attended by many gods and goddesses, including Hera,

1



Homer lived in a time before realistic portraiture. This bust is based on images of the writer that appeared only in the 2nd century BCE.

The Homeric question

The two great ancient Greek epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are traditionally ascribed to the poet Homer—yet little is known about him. Since the time of the Greek historian Herodotus in the 5th century BCE, widely differing suggestions have been made for Homer's dates of birth and death, place of origin, and other details of his life. Classical scholars refer to "the Homeric question," which includes a number of related issues. Who is Homer—did he ever exist, and if so when? Was Homer

the sole author of the epics, or one of a number of authors? Did the author or authors of the work originate them, or simply make a written record of poems that had been passed down orally through the generations?

Many scholars argue that the epics evolved from an oral tradition and were refined and embroidered upon by multiple poets in several versions. Solid evidence is lacking and the Homeric question is yet to be answered definitively.

Athena, and Aphrodite. An Argument broke out between the three goddesses, each of whom claimed to be the most beautiful. To resolve the dispute, Zeus asked Paris, the son of king Priam of Troy, to judge a beauty contest between them. Aphrodite offered Paris a bride-the hand of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, Helen was already married to Menelaus, brother of king Agamemnon of a Greek state. Readers join the story when Agamemnon's army is fighting to recapture Helen. So it is a story of revenge and involvement of gods².

The power on anger

Anger is a theme in the epic, manifested in the war itself and as motivation for the character of Achilles. His anger is not directed solely at the Trojans, not even restricted to human foes; at one point he fights the river god Xanthus. Still, he is known for his sense of honor and nobility. During the fight, Achilles becomes enraged by king Agamemnon, who has taken for himself a woman who had been given to Achilles as a prize of war. Unable to vent his anger toward the king directly, Achilles withdraws to his tent, refusing to fight any more. Only the death of his close friend, Patroclus, at the hands of Hector (the eldest son of king Priam and the hero of the Trojans) brings him back into battle, more violently than ever, by giving him a focus for his anger.

A tale of two heroes

Hector is like Achilles, a military leader. He is considered the noblest and mightiest of Trojan. But his character and motivation stand in contrast to those of Achilles. Achilles is driven by an inner rage, defending the honor of his king and country and avenging the killing of his friend Patroclus. Hector fights out of loyalty to Troy and his family. In addition being protective to his younger brother Paris.

Homer portrays both men as noble, but not without their flaws. Neither side is wholly right or wrong, but in this war one must emerge victorious, even though both heroes ultimately die in the conflict.

Destiny and the gods

To ancient Greeks, the gods were immortals who possess power. Occasionally they interact with humans, but generally leave them to their devices. In the war, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda. Paris had seized Helen in the collusion with Aphrodite, so sides had already been taken on Mount Olympus, the home of gods. Also, Thetis is a sea nymph and the mother of Achilles.

So gods intervene in human affairs, protecting their favorites from harm and making life difficult for their enemies. Apollo in particular is fiercely anti-Greek, and causes them trouble on several occasions. For example, when Patroclus goes into battle disguised as Achilles, by wearing Achilles' famously protective armor, Apollo contrives to dislodge it, allowing Hector to kill him. Incensed by death of his friend, Achilles vows vengeance. And again the gods intervene: his mother Thetis presents him with a new suit of divine armor.³

Beyond the conflict

After the war, the elderly King Priam visits Achilles and pleads for the return of the body of Hector. Temporary truce is called to give the Trojans time for an appropriate funeral. Later the battle resumes, Troy falls and at some point Achilles dies. The story is not over yet.

Indeed, Homer's second epic poem "the Odyssey", ties up some of the loose ends by following the fortunes of another of the Greek heroes, Odysseus (known to the Romans as Ulysses), as he makes his way home to Ithaca from Troy after the war.

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The Greeks and Trojans were helped or hindered by the gods, who used the conflict to fight their own battles. Hera, Athena, and Poseidon were aligned with the Greeks, while Apollo, Aphrodite, and Artemis supported the Trojans. Zeus remained largely neutral.

The Gods

Zeus
king of the gods

Hera
queen of the gods

Athena
goddess of wisdom

Poseidon
god of the sea

Apollo
god of the sun

Aphrodite
goddess of love

Artemis
goddess of the moon

The Achaeans (Greeks)

Agamemnon
king of Mycenae

Achilles
Greece's greatest warrior

Patroclus
companion of Achilles

Menelaus
king of Sparta

Odysseus
commander, and king of Ithaca

The Trojans

Priam
king of Troy

Hector
son of Priam

Paris
brother of Hector

Helen
wife of Menelaus

Aeneas
a son of Aphrodite

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Community-minded, Hector is a family man who tries to avert wider bloodshed.

Dependable, Hector leads his men bravely, bonded by ancestral loyalty.

Moderate in mood, Hector is fallible and weakens in the final confrontation.



The warriors Hector and Achilles have contrasting personalities and motivations, which provide recurrent themes in Homer's examination of the heroic ideal.

Individualistic, Achilles is absorbed in his own thirst for glory.

Unpredictable, Achilles is indifferent to others and obsessed with honor.

Hot tempered and prone to rage, Achilles thrives in the violence of battle.

2. Roman Literature

Rome began to replace Greece as the dominant Mediterranean power from around the 3rd century BCE, and it is from that time that the first literature in Latin appeared.

Romans wrote epic poems and dramas based on Greek models, but in Latin and about Roman mythology and history, usually tell the history of Rome following the fall of Troy.

Although Roman writers were writing in Latin, they produced poetry, drama, and histories firmly in the Greek mold until around 80BCE when the statesman, orator, writer, and poet Cicero inspired the beginning of “Golden Age” of Latin literature, which established the style and forms of distinct Roman tradition.

Roots of empire

The so-called Golden Age straddled Rome’s evolution from Republic to Empire. This transformation which involved the turmoil of civil wars, was reflected in a shift from the historical and rhetorical writings of Cicero to the poetic works of Horace, Ovid and Virgil.

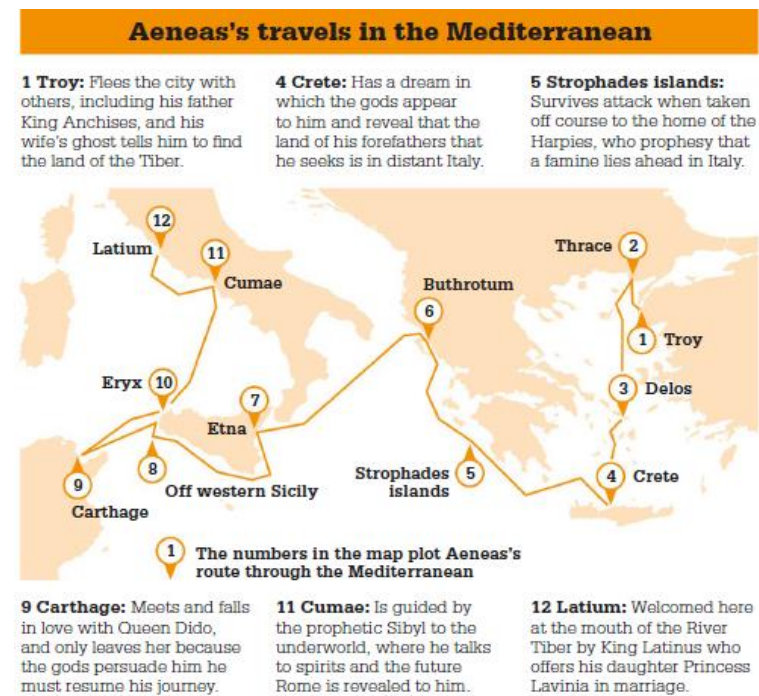
Virgil’s masterpiece is “Aeneid” which is a patriotic poet about the Roman Empire. Despite its nationalistic theme, the Aeneid has its roots in greek literature, and especially Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey, on which it is largely modeled, sharing the same regular poetic meter, or classical epic meter. The 12 books of Aeneas recount the journey of Aeneas from his home in Troy to Italy, and the war in Latium, which ultimately led to the foundation of Rome.

A Homeric achievement

Aeneas was already known as a character in the *Iliad*, but Virgil’s continuation of his story neatly connects the legends of Troy with those of Rome, and in particular the virtues of the hero with traditional Roman values.

Virgil begins the poem “Arma virumque cano ...” (“I sing of arms and a man ...”), stating his themes in a similar way to the *Iliad* (“Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus ...”), and takes up Aeneas’s story on his way to Italy as he is forced by a storm to land in Carthage. Here, he tells Queen Dido the Greeks had hidden offshore and left behind a vast, wheeled wooden horse. The Trojans were persuaded by a Greek agent that the horse was under Athene’s protection and would make Troy impregnable. At night, after the Trojans had taken it within the walls, a select band of warriors emerged and opened the gates for the returned Greek army. Throughout

the epic, Virgil emphasizes Aeneas’s *pietas*, his virtue and duty, which is steered by fate and the intervention of the gods, taking him from his home to his destiny in Latium.



The *Aeneid* not only secured Virgil’s reputation as a distinctly Roman writer, but went on to become probably the most respected work in Latin. Virgil was revered as a writer throughout the Middle Ages, and appears as the guide in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Stories from the *Aeneid* have been retold continuously since it first appeared, and the idea of danger represented by the “Trojan horse”—“Beware of Greeks bearing gifts”—has entered popular culture.

Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro was born in 70 BCE in Mantua, northern Italy. He spent much of his early life in this part of the Roman Republic, and wrote his poems of rustic life, the *Eclogues*, there. Virgil’s next major work, the *Georgics*, was dedicated to his patron, the statesman Gaius Maecenas. Virgil also befriended Octavian, who was to become Emperor Augustus, and established himself in Rome as a poet alongside Horace and Ovid. He began work on his

magnum opus, the *Aeneid*, in around 29 BCE, encouraged by Octavian, and continued writing and revising it until his death from fever in 19 BCE. It is said that on his deathbed Virgil asked that the *Aeneid* be destroyed, possibly because of his disappointment with Augustus’s reign, but it was published posthumously on the orders of the emperor.

Other key works

c.44–38 BCE *Eclogues*
29 BCE *Georgics*

3. Anglo-Saxon Literature: Beowulf (8th -11th century)

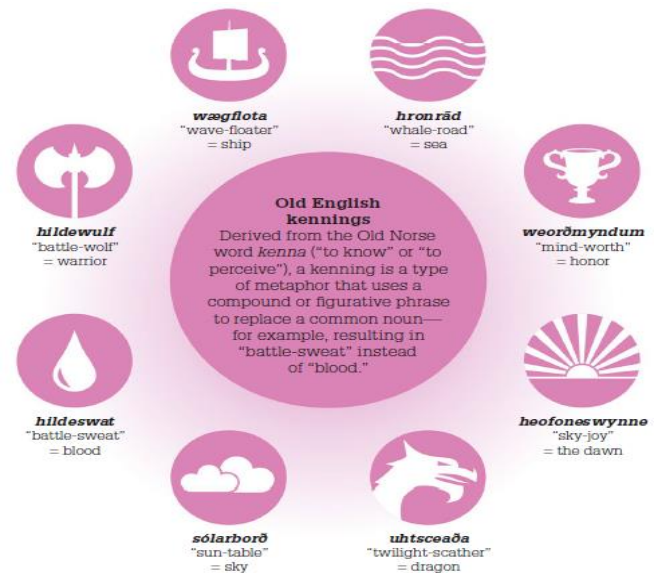
Although academic opinions differ about the exact date *Beowulf* was written, it is the earliest Anglo-Saxon epic poem to survive in its entirety. It is told in the language now known as

Old English, or Anglo-Saxon, which developed from the Germanic languages brought over to Britain by Scandinavian invaders, and remained the common language until the Norman Conquest in 1066. Old English was widely spoken in England and southern Scotland from the 5th century, but written literature in the vernacular only emerged gradually. During the 7th century, Britain underwent conversion to Christianity. Latin was the language of the literate classes, and used in the Christian monasteries and abbeys where manuscripts were created. But by the reign of King Alfred (reigned 871–899), Old English translations of Christian Latin texts were appearing alongside original texts.

An oral tradition

It is likely that *Beowulf* dates from between the 8th and early 11th centuries, because it appears to have been written from a Christian perspective, in spite of its pagan subject matter. It is not clear whether *Beowulf* was composed by the person or persons who wrote the original manuscript, or whether this was a transcription of an older poem. There was an Anglo-Saxon oral tradition of storytelling by reciters of poetry known as “scops,” mentioned in several Old English texts including *Beowulf*, and it is possible that the poem had been passed down orally many years before it was recorded.

Like its language, the poem’s story has its roots in Scandinavia, and deals with the legends of the people there, including several historical figures from around 500 ce. It tells of the life and exploits of a Geatish warrior, Beowulf, who comes to the aid of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, to rid the land of the monster Grendel and then Grendel’s mother. Beowulf progresses from a brash young adventurer to become a respected king of the Geats, following Hrothgar’s advice to “Incline not to arrogance, famous warrior!” His final battle is to save his own people from a dragon.



Both epic and elegy

In addition to the story of a monster-slaying hero, and the battle of good and evil, the poem deals with themes of loyalty and brotherly love, the ephemeral quality of life, and the danger of pride and arrogance in the face of humanity’s inevitable doom. *Beowulf* is as much an elegy as an epic, mournful as well as heroic; not just a lament for the death of the eponymous hero, but also a nostalgic elegy for a dying way of life, and of our struggles against fate. Although the manuscript of *Beowulf* was preserved in the late 10th- or early 11th-century, it was regarded as simply a historical artifact until the 19th century, when the first translations into modern English were made. Not until the 20th century was its literary merit recognized. *Beowulf* has now been translated countless times into many languages, and in addition to its popularity in its own right, the poem has influenced much recent fantasy literature.

Poetry in Old English

Beowulf is in the form of an epic poem—3,182 lines long—in a declamatory (forcefully expressed) style and using idiosyncratic Anglo-Saxon poetic devices.

Most strikingly, unlike the rhyme schemes of modern verse, Old English poetry is typically written in a form of alliterative verse. Each line is divided into two halves, which are linked not by the rhyming of the ends of words, but by the similar sounds of the beginnings of words or

syllables. The two halves of each line are often divided by a caesura, or pause, effectively marking them as an alliterative couplet. Another feature is a metaphorical device known as a kenning: a figurative compound word in place of a less poetic single word, such as *hildenaedre* (“battle-serpent”) for “arrow.”

Devices such as these pose problems for the translator into modern languages, especially given the richness of allusion in Old English.

4. Early Arabic Literature

Across the Arab world there is a long tradition of storytelling, with folktales passed down orally through many generations. However, from the 8th century onward, with the rise of flourishing urban centers and a sophisticated Arabian culture that prospered under the guidance of Islam, a widening distinction was made between *al-fus'ha* (the refined language taught at educational centers) and *al-ammiyyah* (the language of the common people). Pre-Islamic literature written in the vernacular—including traditional folktales—fell out of favor with the educated elite, and writers of Arabic literature turned away from composing works of imaginative prose to focus instead on poetry and nonfiction.

The appeal of stories

Yet despite the emphasis placed on the “high art” of poetry, there was a continuing public appetite for a good yarn. Although not highly regarded by Arabic scholars, the collection of tales that appeared under various titles over the next few centuries, but which are now known as the *One Thousand and One Nights* or the *Arabian Nights*, was perennially popular. The collection came together in a chaotic fashion over several centuries, and no canonical version of the tales exists. Storytellers combined ancient Indian, Persian, and Arabic tales, with more stories being added over the centuries. The oldest Arabic manuscript still in existence is believed to have been put together in Syria in the late 15th century. It is written in everyday language that offers a strong contrast to the classical Arabic of poetry and the Koran.

Tales within tales

The structure of the *One Thousand and One Nights* takes the form of a frame narrative, where one story contains all the others within it. The framing device is the tale of Princess Scheherazade, who faces execution by her husband, Prince Shahryar. After his previous wife's adultery, the prince believes that all women are deceitful; he has vowed to marry a new bride every day, “abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honor.” The princess averts her fate by withholding the ending of a story she tells on her wedding night, leading Shahryar to delay her execution. After 1,001 such nights, he confesses that she has changed his soul and he pardons her. The tales told by Scheherazade intermingle fantastic tales set in legendary locations with stories involving historical figures—such as Haroun al Rashid (c.766–809), ruler of

the Abbasid Caliphate during the Islamic Golden Age. The diverse nature of the tales is responsible for the wide variety of genres to be found within the collection, from adventure, romance, and fairy tale, to horror and even science fiction.

The nights of Scheherazade



Influence in the West

It was not until the 18th century that the stories became known in Europe, thanks to a retelling by French scholar Antoine Galland in *Les Mille et Une Nuits* (1704–17). The manuscript from which Galland translated was incomplete, falling well short of 1,001 nights worth of stories, so he added the Arabic tales of “Ali Baba,” “Aladdin,” and “Sinbad.” These were never part of the original *One Thousand and One Nights*, but have since become some of the most well-known stories from the collection in the West. Galland’s book derived much of its popularity from its exoticism, with its tales of genies and flying carpets, and was an important influence on the folktale-collecting movement taken up by the Brothers Grimm and others in the early 19th century. A translation of the original stories by Sir Richard Burton in 1885 inspired a more serious interest in Islamic culture—but in the Arab world the tales are still regarded as entertaining fantasies rather than literature.

A Golden Age of Islamic literature

By the mid-8th century, the territory controlled by Muslims stretched from the Middle East across Persia into the Indian subcontinent, and from North Africa into Iberia. Sophisticated urban societies throughout the Islamic world became cultural as well as political centers.

This was the beginning of an Islamic golden age, which lasted for about 500 years. Centers of learning, such as the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, attracted polymaths—proficient

in science, philosophy, and the arts—as well as scholars of the Islamic holy book, the Koran.

The Koran is the word of God, revealed to Muhammad, so it is considered not only a source of religious knowledge, but also the model for Arabic literature. Its style and language greatly influenced the classical Arabic literature that flourished from the 8th century onward, mostly in the form of poetry, which was held in much higher regard than narrative fiction.

4

From the early 14th century, the cultural movement known as the Renaissance began to spread across Europe from the Italian city of Florence. It was marked by a change from medieval attitudes—which were dominated by the dogma of the Christian Church—to a far more humanist perspective that was inspired by a rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy and culture. But this was more than a simple rebirth of classical ideas—the period was also a time of innovation.

The epic and the everyday

In literature, although inspiration came from classical style and forms, writers chose to work in vernacular languages, as opposed to Latin or Greek, and to create their own stories rather than retell those of

the past. Among the first to write in this way was the Florentine poet Dante Alighieri, whose *The Divine Comedy* was not only an epic poetic journey through the afterlife but also served as an allegory for the contemporary world.

At the same time, other writers chose to turn away from the realm of epics and legends altogether, and focus on the lives, autonomy, and ingenuity of ordinary people. In *The Decameron*, published in 1353, Giovanni Boccaccio presented a collection of 100 “novellas” in prose in the Florentine vernacular. Shortly afterward Geoffrey Chaucer wrote a similar collection of stories, *The Canterbury Tales*. Both works contained a variety of tales of everyday life—from love stories to moral parables. With their discussions of human vices,

accounts of licentiousness, and bawdy practical jokes, they soon became popular reading.

The birth of the novel

In the 15th century, the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press hastened the spread of ideas, and this technology also made it easier to cater to audiences in vernacular languages. Popular demand for books had been stimulated in particular by the prose storytelling of Boccaccio and Chaucer. From these early stories emerged a form of literature as a long, prose narrative that is now ubiquitous, but was then very much “novel.”

During the 16th century, prose narratives gradually replaced the epic poem as the predominant literary form in most of Europe, and readers particularly responded to

humorous stories, such as François Rabelais’ satirical adventures of Gargantua and Pantagruel. Miguel de Cervantes of Spain continued in this tradition, albeit with a gentler wit, in *Don Quixote*. However, Cervantes’ satire about chivalry has a more serious undercurrent, and rather than a hero, the eponymous knight is depicted as all too human. *Don Quixote* is often considered to be the first modern novel, or at least the first European novel—China’s four great classical novels and Japan’s *The Tale of Genji* were all written much earlier.

Life on stage and page

In England, the prose narrative took longer to capture popular attention. Poets such as Edmund Spenser and John Milton continued to reinterpret the epic poem, but it was the

theater that most attracted the public. The plays of Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson built on the ideas of Greek tragedy and comedy with their dramas, but even they were eclipsed by Shakespeare’s mastery of the form, which allowed him to depict very human characters in a catalogue of comedies, histories, and tragedies.

Novels began to appear in England soon after Shakespeare, and rapidly overtook the theater in popularity. From the beginning, English novelists such as Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding presented believable characters in their novels, which contain vivid descriptions of time and place that give the works a degree of realism. Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* professes to be a “true” autobiographical account. Both Laurence Sterne’s comic *Tristram*

Shandy and Jonathan Swift’s fantastical *Gulliver’s Travels* also use the autobiographical voice, but do so in ways that test the reader’s willingness to believe the narrator.

In 17th-century France, the theater was also at the heart of literature, and was even more indebted to classical models than in England, with Jean Racine and Pierre Corneille striving to follow the “rules” of Greek drama. However, the public tended to call the tune, and it was Molière’s comedies of manners that seemed more in keeping with the times. Poking fun at the contemporary mores continued to be a part of the French literary scene in the 18th century, with Enlightenment philosophers such as Voltaire wittily satirizing the conventions of the establishment. ■