

CHAPTER LIV.

THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV.

Literary Character of the Seventeenth Century in France.

—The sixteenth century had seen religious reformation; the eighteenth century was to see political reformation. Placed between the two revolutionary ages, the seventeenth century maintained so perfect an equilibrium between the powers of the mind, a capacity for writing so completely equal to the capacity for thinking, that it has remained in an especial degree the literary age of France.

The Age of Louis XIV. before Louis XIV. — At the time when Louis XIV. took the government into his own hands, France had already acquired a portion of the literary glory that the seventeenth century had in reserve for her. Corneille, Descartes, and Pascal had written their masterpieces; Madame de Sévigné, La Rochefoucauld, Molière, La Fontaine, Bossuet, were at the height of their powers; the two great painters of the age, Lesueur and Poussin, were dying or about to die. French society had then, in 1661, all the necessary capacities. One thing only was wanting, — perfection of taste; but the *Lettres provinciales* (1657) struck the first blow, the *Précieuses ridicules* (1659) the second, and the third was to be struck by Boileau, who had just written his first satire.

All that genius asks of power is, not to oppose it. But governments can also sustain it and stimulate it by favors, or, better still, by consideration, and Louis XIV. perceived this and did it admirably. The grateful muses bestowed on him more than they received; they consecrated his name. We ourselves will preserve the consecrated phrase of the "age of Louis XIV." in order to designate that period of our literature which extends from the early writings of Corneille to those of Voltaire, because the king had a taste for arts and letters, and bestowed favors which, while they did not create great writers, surely paved the way for their supremacy.

Academies and Pensions. — Louis XIV. not only considered literature a power, but regarded it as a necessary ornament, as a luxury worthy of a great king. Consequently he favored letters, and gave literature an organized government, of which Colbert was the minister. The members of the academies had, in a sense, public duties, and pensions and rewards for attendance were their salary. The French Academy continued to prepare the dictionary of the language, and the Academy of Inscriptions wrote devices for medals and escutcheons and inscriptions for monuments, whose decorations were designed by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture.

The academies formed corporations of literature, sciences, and arts. Their most distinguished members had, besides, official duties and a rank at court. Jules Mansard was the king's chief architect and superintendent of buildings; Lebrun was his chief painter; Lulli, his chief musician. Louis XIV. did not grant poetry a court office; but he bestowed one upon history, as if to secure in advance the favorable judgment of posterity. Racine and Boileau were his historiographers. Even his valet Molière had, as assailant of the nobility, his part in the great drama which went on so gravely around the king at Versailles.

Prose Writers. — "In eloquence," says Voltaire, "in poetry, in literature, in books both of morals and of amusement, the French were the lawgivers of Europe." A genuine eloquence in the use of the French language had hitherto been but seldom attained. Jean de Lingendes, bishop of Mâcon, was the first orator who spoke in the grand style. Balzac (1594-1654), at this time was giving rhythm and harmony to prose, and Voiture (1598-1648) was giving some idea of the light graces of epistolary style.

"One of the works which contributed most towards forming the taste of the nation," says Voltaire (*Siècle de Louis XIV.*), "was the small collection of the Maxims of Francis, Duke of La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680). Although there was scarcely more than one thought in this book, which was that self-love is the motive in everything, nevertheless this thought was presented in so many different aspects, that it was almost always attractive. The little collection was read with avidity; it accustomed men to think and to give their thoughts a lively, concise, and delicate style.

"But the first book of genius which appeared in prose,

was the collection of the *Lettres provinciales* in 1657.¹ All the varieties of eloquence are exhibited in it. There is not a single word which in the space of a hundred years has undergone the change which so often takes place in living tongues. This book marks the period of permanent establishment in the language. . . .

"One of the first who sent forth from the pulpit truly eloquent reasoning was Bourdaloue (1632-1704), about the year 1668. He was a new luminary. After him came other pulpit orators, Massillon, bishop of Clermont (1662-1742), for example, whose discourses contain more ornament, finer and more impressive representations of the manners of the age; but not one of them has caused him to be forgotten. In his style, nervous rather than ornate, devoid of imaginative expressions, he appears to wish rather to convince than to touch, and he never seems to think of pleasing.

"He had been preceded by Bossuet (1627-1704), afterwards bishop of Meaux. Bossuet, who became so distinguished a man, had preached when very young before the king and queen in 1661, long before Bourdaloue was known. His sermons, sustained by a noble and affecting manner, were the first that had been heard at court which approached the sublime, and had such success that the king caused a letter to be written in his name to Bossuet's father to congratulate him upon having such a son. But when Bourdaloue appeared, Bossuet no longer passed for the leading preacher. He had already given himself to the composition of funeral orations, a species of eloquence which requires imagination and a majestic grandeur approaching poetry. . . . The funeral eulogy of Madame, who had been taken away in the flower of her age, and had died in his arms, achieved the most signal and most unusual of successes, that of drawing tears from the eyes of the courtiers. . . .

"The French were the only people who succeeded in this department of eloquence. Later, Bossuet invented another, which would have little success save in his own hands. He applied the art of oratory to history itself, from which it seems naturally excluded.

"His Discourse upon Universal History, composed for the education of the dauphin, had no model and has had no imitators. One is astonished at the majestic strength with

¹ Voltaire forgets Descartes' *Discourse concerning Method* (1637).



MOLIÈRE. (Mignard.)

which he describes manners, governments, the growth and downfall of great empires, and at those rapid and yet vigorously true strokes with which he painted and pronounced judgment upon all nations. . . .

"Almost all the works which distinguished this century were in a style unknown to antiquity. *Télémaque* is one of them. Fénelon (1651-1715), the disciple and friend of Bossuet, and who afterwards became, in spite of himself, his rival and his enemy, composed this singular book, which is at once a romance and a poem, and which substitutes rhythmic prose for versification. He seems to have desired to treat romance as Bossuet had treated history, by giving it a dignity and charm till then unknown, and especially by drawing from his fictions morals useful to mankind. He had composed this book to be used for the instruction of the Duke of Burgundy, whose tutor he was. Full of the literature of the ancients, and born with a vivid and delicate imagination, he created a style which was all his own, and which flowed from a never-failing source. . . .

"Among productions of a unique kind may be mentioned the *Caractères* of La Bruyère (1644-1696). This style of writing was as rare among the ancients as that of *Télémaque*. A rapid, concise, nervous style, picturesque expressions, a way of using words which was entirely original, but disregarded no rules, attracted attention, and the allusions which were constantly to be found in the book completed its success."

Voltaire says only a word or two of Madame de Sévigné (1636-1696). She deserves more; for in her conversations with her daughter she transports Versailles and Paris to Grignan, and teaches us more of the real history of the times than can be learned from many large volumes. So long as wit of excellent quality and a frank, clear style are enjoyed, the world will never weary of reading her fine and often eloquent letters, in which are seen reflected the splendors and miseries of a unique society.

France is of all countries the richest in memoirs. This curious branch of historical literature began there at an early period, with Villehardouin and Joinville. The seventeenth century abounds in memoirs, generally by acute and discriminating writers, who reveal to us the secret causes of many events and movements. Those of Richelieu are a precious mine for the political history of the time; those of

Madame de Motteville (1621-1689), the confidante of Anne of Austria, introduce us to the private life of that princess. Paul de Gondi, cardinal de Retz (1614-1679), has left a book which is one of the monuments of the French language, and which will always be read with pleasure, even though one cannot always believe the author. In this kind of literature the great nobles willingly engaged. We have the Duke of La Rochefoucauld's memoirs bearing on the regency of Anne of Austria, and, for the last part of the reign of Louis XIV. and the beginning of that of Louis XV., the twenty volumes of the duke and peer, Rouvroy de Saint-Simon, a writer of the greatest talent.

Poets. — Régnier and Malherbe belong to the preceding century, though one died in 1613, and the other in 1628. With Corneille (1606-1684) masterpieces at last appear, and in quick succession are put upon the stage, which he has elevated to the level of the Greek theatre. "Pierre Corneille," says Voltaire, "is so much the more admirable because he was surrounded only by bad models when he first began to produce tragedies. Moreover, these bad models were held in good estimation, and, worst of all, encouraged by Richelieu, the patron of men of letters, but not of good taste. Corneille consequently was obliged to combat his age, his rivals, and the cardinal, who decried the *Cid* and disapproved of *Polyeucte*. Corneille formed his style unassisted; but Louis XIV., Colbert, Sophocles, and Euripides contributed to the formation of Racine (1639-1699). An ode which he composed at the age of twenty years, on the occasion of the king's marriage, procured him an unexpected donation from the king, and determined him to adopt poetry as a career. His reputation increased from day to day, and that of the works of Corneille somewhat diminished. The reason is that Racine, in all his works after his *Alexandre*, is always elegant, always correct, and Corneille too frequently fails in these respects. . . .

"It was a singular destiny that made Molière (1622-1673) the contemporary of Corneille and Racine. It is not true that Molière, when he appeared, found the theatre absolutely deficient in good comedies. Corneille himself had given *Le Menteur*, and Molière had still only produced two of his masterpieces, when *La Mère coquette* of Quinault, a play of both character and intrigue, was already before the public. It was published in 1664, and was the first comedy

in which were presented those characters which have since been called the *marquises*. Most of the great nobles of the court of Louis XIV. tried to imitate that air of grandeur, distinction, and dignity which characterized their master. Those of inferior rank copied the haughty bearing of their superiors; and of course there were those, and a great number of them, who carried this haughty manner and this intensity of self-assertion to a ridiculous extent. This affectation lasted a long time. Molière attacked it frequently; he helped to laugh down these aspiring subalterns, the affectation of the *précieuses*, the pedantry of learned women, the quackery of doctors. Molière was, so to speak, a lawgiver of social good sense. I refer here only to this service rendered to his own age; his other merits are sufficiently well known. . . .

"This was a period worthy the attention of posterity, when the heroes of Corneille and Racine, the personages of Molière, the symphonies of Lulli, all new to the nation, and the voices of Bossuet and of Bourdaloue, were heard by Louis XIV. and Madame, so noted for her good taste, a Condé, a Turenne, a Colbert, and by that throng of superior men of all sorts who flourished at that time. The day will never return when a La Rochefoucauld will pass from a conversation with a Pascal and an Arnauld to attend a play of Corneille. And La Fontaine (1621-1695), much less chaste in style, much less correct in language, but original in his artlessness and in the grace peculiar to him, rises by the very force of his simplicity almost to a level with these great men."

Philosophy. — Philosophy had just been transformed by Descartes (1596-1650), less by what he built up than by what he destroyed. His system has fallen; his method still exists. Since Socrates there has not been so important a philosophical reform. Descartes accepted as true, in the department of moral and physical sciences, only what seemed evident to the reason, and this evidence he placed, so far as concerns philosophical matters, in the irresistible authority of the manifestations of consciousness. Thus in his *Discourse concerning Method* (1637), and in his *Meditations* (1641), he tried to prove, simply by processes of reasoning, the existence of God, the spirituality and immortality of the soul, the liberty and consequently the responsibility of the human will. His principles were adopted by

the most religious minds of the seventeenth century; they inspired Malebranche (1638-1715), who has been called the Plato of France, Bossuet, and Fénelon.

Thus France in the seventeenth century was laying the foundations of speculative philosophy in contradistinction to the triumphant empiricism of Bacon and Locke in England, as in the eighteenth century she defended experience against the nebulous metaphysics of Germany; going on, step by step, guided by her native gift of lucidity, in the two highways opened to the world by Plato and Aristotle, and always aiming to re-establish equilibrium by leaning toward that side which contemporaneous exaggerations were endangering.

Pascal (1623-1662), another great philosophical thinker, takes rank also as a great writer by his *Lettres provinciales* (1657), against the loose system of morals, upheld by the Jesuits, and in his *Pensées*, fragments of a work which he intended to compose upon the truth of Christianity. With Pascal should be mentioned his friends, the pious recluses of Port-Royal, intensely earnest, but somewhat narrow minds, who founded, in the heart of Catholicism and of the Gallican Church, an energetic and active sect, which was persecuted by Louis XIV., and which revived theological discussions in the middle of the seventeenth century. The principal doctors of Jansenism were Le Maistre de Sacy, Antoine Arnauld (whose life was a perpetual theological discussion with the Jesuits, with the Protestants, and with Malebranche), Nicole, and Lancelot.

Erudition.—A few laborious spirits continued in endeavors to elucidate classical antiquity, and to clear up the chaos of the nation's early history. They had little or no influence upon the language, since usually they were not stylists, and many of their books were in Latin, but they had a powerful influence upon thought. The greatest of these learned men were Casaubon, Scaliger, Salmasius, Dugange, and Baluze, several Benedictines of Saint-Maur, Mabillon, Montfaucon, etc., and the Protestant Bayle. Mézeray (1610-1683) wrote a history of France to Louis XIII., which is more valuable for its style than for its matter; Abbé Fleury (1640-1723) wrote an ecclesiastical history of considerable repute; Le Nain de Tillemont, a learned history of the Roman emperors.

Literary Influence of France.—No other nation of Europe

could exhibit such a magnificent collection of literary productions. Italy and Germany were in complete moral degeneration. Spain still possessed eminent painters and too prolific writers. England had had Shakespeare in the beginning of the century, Milton in the middle, and Dryden at the end; but its literature had not gained influence beyond its own island. France, on the contrary, by the recognized superiority of her wit and her taste, forced all Europe to accept the sway of her artists and her authors.

Sciences.—In the sciences she kept abreast of the movement, but was not at its head; for though she had Descartes and Pascal, other countries possessed Kepler, Galileo, Newton, and Leibnitz. Alchemy, magic, astrology, all the follies of the Middle Age, became sciences from the moment that man ceased to concern himself with the impenetrable essence of things, and instead of stopping before isolated phenomena proceeded to investigate the laws which produce them. This period began with Copernicus, in the sixteenth century; but it was not until the seventeenth century that the revolution was accomplished, and triumphed under Kepler, Bacon, and Descartes.

Descartes greatly advanced algebra by inventing the notation of powers by numerical exponents; also the geometry of curves, which enabled him to solve problems hitherto considered insoluble. He discovered the true law of refraction; he believed, with Galileo, in the theory of the earth's motion round the sun, and his system of *vortices*, though in itself chimerical, was the germ of the celebrated Newtonian hypothesis of attraction. To the mind of Descartes, as to that of Newton, the problem of the physical universe is a problem of mechanics, and Descartes was the first to show, if not the solution, at any rate the true nature of the problem. Pascal composed his treatise on conic sections, at the age of sixteen. A little later he invented the calculus of probabilities, demonstrated the weight of the air by his famous experiment on the Puy de Dôme, and invented the dray, and perhaps the hydraulic press.

After these two great men come a numerous crowd of others,—Pierre Fermat, perhaps the most powerful mathematical mind of this period; Abbé Mariotte and Denis Papin, who first thought of employing compressed steam as a motive force, and made in Germany, on the Fulda, some experiments with a steamboat which ran against the current.

Geography was reformed by Nicolas Sanson and Guillaume Delisle; Tournefort revived the study of botany. The royal press equalled the Dutch publications in correctness and elegance; and surgery continued the traditions of Ambroise Paré. Three foreigners whom Colbert attracted to France justified by their works the favors bestowed by the king, — the Dane Roemer, the Dutchman Huyghens, and the Italian Domenico Cassini.

Arts; Paintings. — Except in painting, the great age of French art is the sixteenth, and not the seventeenth, century. There is nothing among the monuments of Louis XIV. which equals the central pavilion of the Tuileries, the old Louvre, a part of Fontainebleau, or the châteaux of Francis I. and Henry II. But there were four painters of the first rank; Poussin, Lesueur, Claude Lorraine, and Lebrun; one admirable sculptor, Puget; architects of talent, Mansard and Perrault; and a skilful musician, Lulli.

Poussin (1594–1665) lived a long time at Rome and was considered the greatest painter of his time; in spite of his too sombre coloring he remains at the head of the French school on account of the moral elevation, the dramatic interest, the richness and poetic quality of his compositions, his pursuit of the ideal, and the dignity of his life. Lesueur and Lebrun may be regarded as his pupils. Lesueur was born at Paris, lived poor and obscure, and died at the age of thirty-eight in 1655. He was a frank and gentle spirit; his paintings, always graceful, even in the sternest subjects, by softness of tone and delicacy of touch express admirably the sentiments and even the deepest affections of the personages whom he represented. Of another sort was his rival, Lebrun, born at Paris two years later (1619), whose talent, often theatrical, better suited the taste of Louis XIV. The king appointed him his chief painter, and commissioned him to decorate the great gallery of Versailles. He was at work on it fourteen years. He was, until the death of Colbert, the arbiter and even the dictator of the arts in France; his influence and sometimes his touch may be recognized in all the works of the time. His drawing was weak and heavy, the expression of his faces somewhat exaggerated; he had neither the bright coloring of Titian nor the natural grace of Lesueur, nor the spirit of Rubens, nor Poussin's depth of thought. Yet he holds the chief place among painters of the second rank. The establishment of the

French school at Rome is due to him; thither the young artists who have taken what is called the *grand prix de Rome* are sent at the expense of the government to finish their studies among the masterpieces of antiquity and the great Italian masters. A place must be kept beside these four master-painters for Philippe de Champagne, who left some admirable portraits. Claude Gelée, called Claude le Lorrain (born in Lorraine in 1600, died at Rome in 1682), is the best of the French landscape painters, and one of the best in Europe: he is distinguished for the richness of his style and the beauty of his coloring. Others to be noted are Rigaud, the most eminent of French portrait painters, and Watteau, of Valenciennes (1684–1722), who inaugurated the genre style with mannerism, but with brilliant coloring.

Sculpture and Engraving. — Puget, like Michael Angelo, whose pride and energy he equalled, was at the same time painter, architect, and sculptor. He was born at Marseilles in 1622, and died in 1694. He was for a long time engaged in carving wooden figures for the sterns and galleries of the ships of Toulon, built several splendid hotels on the Canebière, and filled Genoa with his masterpieces. Louis XIV. ordered of him the group of Perseus and that of Milo of Croton, remarkable for energy of expression and truthfulness of design. But Puget was a man of too independent a character to succeed at Versailles. He left no pupils. Coysevox, the two Coustous, and Girardon are the product of another system; they are rather sculptors of the graceful school, masters of a brilliant and easy style without elevation. Girardon filled Versailles with his works; the mausoleum of Cardinal Richelieu at the Sorbonne is his masterpiece.

Architecture. — François Mansard forsook the elegance and grace of the Renaissance for a style which he thought majestic, but which was in reality heavy. He invented the mansard roof. His nephew, Jules Hardouin Mansard, was a cold and regular genius, who almost attained grandeur of design, because Louis XIV. gave him unlimited space and money; but who seems wanting in inspiration and elegance, except in his beautiful cupola of the Invalides. Claude Perrault (1628–1688) was at once a surgeon, a physician, and a great architect.

Music. — The Florentine, Lulli, came to Paris at thirty years of age, and was, with Quinault, the real founder of

the opera in France. His music now seems cold and characterless, even in the case of sacred music, in which he excelled. His contemporaries held another opinion: "I do not believe," wrote Madame de Sévigné, upon hearing the service sung for the Chancellor Séguier, "that there will be any other music than his in heaven."

Monuments and Endowments. — The principal monuments of the reign of Louis XIV. are: the Val-de-Grace, the Observatoire, built after the designs of the astronomer Picard and of Claude Perrault (1666); the Porte St. Denis, and the Porte St. Martin; the Invalides, with its church; the Place du Carrousel, between the Louvre and the Tuileries; the Place des Victoires, and the Place Vendôme, built or rather enlarged to receive the statues which Marshal de la Feuillade and the municipality of Paris had erected to Louis XIV. at the time of the treaty of Nymwegen.

Work upon the Tuileries had been carried on from the beginning of the reign; the west façade was completed, the garden was reunited to the château and laid out upon a new plan. There was more to be done to the Louvre. Under Louis XIII., Lemercier had finished the western interior façade. The masterpiece of Pierre Lescot was now to be completed. Colbert submitted the matter to competition; the plans of the physician Claude Perrault were preferred. Between the years 1666 and 1674 the celebrated colonnade of the Louvre was built. At the same time the outer southern façade overlooking the Seine, and also the northern, were commenced. These great works were at first carried forward with great activity; by degrees the work progressed more slowly, and finally it was suspended entirely in spite of the remonstrances of Colbert. The king then built Versailles.

Louis XIV. disliked Paris, which had given birth to the Fronde, and whose monuments told of so many other princes. Versailles seemed to him a safer place, which he could fill with his own majesty, and where the court, hitherto lost in the immense capital city, would assume all the distinction of royal domesticity as the palace of the monarch became surrounded by a princely town. The works undertaken from the year 1661 were entrusted to Jules Mansard, and were continued without interruption till the end of the reign. Le Nôtre, Lebrun, and Girardon embellished this royal dwelling-place, which cost two hundred and fifty or

three hundred millions of the nation's money, and where nothing is commemorative of France but everything suggests the king. Versailles was poorly supplied with water; the machine of Marly was built at great expense. Still other waterworks, of gigantic extent, were projected; but after enormous expense had been incurred, the king was forced to abandon them.

The king also built at this time the great Trianon and Marly (1679), which, according to Saint-Simon, cost as much as Versailles. Last of all, the châteaux of St. Germain, Fontainebleau, Chambord, St. Cloud, and Sceaux were enlarged and restored. It is estimated that 160,000,000 livres, which would amount at the present time to two or three times as much, were spent on these constructions. There was certainly an excessive disproportion between the expenses incurred for the fancies of the king and those which had for their object the interest of the country. This was the inevitable consequence of a political system which placed at the discretion of the prince, without discussion and without control, the whole public welfare.

Beginning of a New Literature. — Louis XIV. established the absolute authority of kings, but at the same time he encouraged industry and literature. Thus he fostered the two forces destined to overturn absolutism itself. The one would give the Third Estate wealth, which would cause it to demand political safeguards; the other, intelligence, which would cause it to demand rights. The spirit of criticism which, during the minority of Louis XIV., had advanced so powerfully in the sphere of philosophical and religious subjects, had recoiled before the splendors of his reign, and had either become silent or taken refuge in the cells of a few recluses. It reappeared when sincere or official enthusiasm fell exhausted beneath the repeated strokes of public misfortune. The study of letters leads us then to the same result as that of politics, and we shall end this chapter, like the preceding one, by announcing the approach of threatening changes.