The notions of tragedy and comedy that one can intuit from the theater of Corneille are markedly different from those found in other authors of the period. This is but one aspect of a larger issue concerning Corneille’s placement in the hallowed pantheon of literary history. He is one of the major canonical authors and yet he often disconcerts. He was one of the principal theorists of drama in the seventeenth century and yet he took a number of stands in direct and lonely opposition to his peers. Alain Couprie points out that Corneille “a toujours été un auteur suspect,” and certainly the unusual relationship in his theater between tragedy and comedy as well as that between the tragic and the comic have occasioned some of that suspicion. The generic interpenetration of comedy and tragedy in Corneille’s theater has long been recognized and discussed at length. Han Verhoeff expressed the central issue succinctly:

Chez Corneille, la distinction entre les genres s’avère malaisée. Les comédies ne sont pas très gaies et les tragédies célèbrent des réussites et non des catastrophes. (p. 17)

That Corneille was consciously interested in the boundaries between tragedy and comedy is evident in L’Illusion comique, where he juxtaposes different theatrical genres and sub-genres while erasing the borderlines between them. Intimately tied to the issue of genre, but moving beyond it, is that of register: a number of critics have noted, and been disconcerted by, comic elements in Corneille’s serious drama, starting with Donneau de Visé who said that the tragedy Sophonisbe “fait rire en beaucoup d’endroits.”

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Though the gods rarely appear in these plays, ghosts and witches abound. Classical Greek drama was largely forgotten in Western Europe from the Middle Ages to the beginning of the 16th century. Corneille's tragedy thus highlighted the moral dilemma that arose from the questions of the relative importance of family honor or love, but Corneille did not neatly resolve this dilemma. Instead, his work insisted that either path—love or duty—might have been the correct one for the heroine to take. Several pamphlets soon appeared in Paris attacking his work as morally defective, and Richelieu himself found his young playwright's ending troubling.