

Theory

Formulating overarching theories about any *longue durée* phenomena is a thankless, often unfruitful task and, given the sheer scope of the European dramatic tradition during the early modern era, any attempt in this sense might fall short of actually offering a coherent narrative. A notable exception, nonetheless, was represented by ‘Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch’ – a short, but significant essay which argued for a progressive differentiation process within early modern drama out of an earlier formal unity, and analysed its implications.

After recounting Moretti’s narrative, this chapter brings up a different perspective by introducing some competing theories, informed by concepts such as the ‘cultural net’ (Küpper, 2018) or the ‘theatergrams’ (Clubb, 1990), which stress instead the constant flux of interchanges between European dramatic spaces. Ultimately, a succinct summary of the evolution of European early modern drama within the five different linguistic areas under investigation is proposed, with particular attention to issues of poetics and playwriting which contributed to shaping the texts’ formal features.

Diversity out of unity: Franco Moretti's evolutionist account

As it often happened with many of Moretti's early essays, 'Modern European Literature'¹ "[took] a branch of empirical social or natural science as a freestanding model for a new literary history" (Eyers, 2017, 38). More specifically, he began there to blend three approaches which would remain central in his later career, i.e. evolutionary theory, geography, and formalism (cf. Moretti, 2013a, 2). This can be clearly seen in works such as *Atlas of the European novel, 1800–1900* (1998) or *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2005).

The conceptual framework for this early essay was provided by Ernst Mayr's *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942), a book which introduced the idea of allopatric speciation – the genesis of new biological species through their movement into new spaces. As Moretti himself later recounted, the argumentative device he developed out of that idea was relatively straightforward: he "took forms as the literary analogue of species, and charted [several] morphological transformations triggered by European geography" such as "the differentiation of tragedy in the seventeenth century, the novel's take-off in the eighteenth, the centralization and then fragmentation of the literary field in the nineteenth and twentieth" (Moretti, 2013a, 1).

Moretti's account of European literary evolution begins indeed with the genesis of the baroque tragedy, which he describes as a movement away from a previously unified formal model and towards a multitude of competing dramatic traditions. In the sixteenth century, he argues, figures like Scottish humanist George Buchanan – wandering across the Continent, writing acclaimed Latin tragedies² – embodied "the lasting unity-across time and across space of European drama". From London

1 Originally written in Italian for the first volume of Einaudi's *Storia d'Europa* (1993), the essay appeared in English in the *New Left Review* (208, 1994) and was eventually reprinted in *Distant Reading* (2013), with a new preface by the author which sheds some light on its inception. Unless otherwise specified, I hereafter quote from this latter version (= Moretti, 2013a).

2 See Cardinali (2009).

to Naples, “cultivated tragedy” was “almost always [modelled on] Seneca, while medieval traditions, rooted in popular religion, tend[ed] to be very similar everywhere” (9). Even on a thematic level, elements like the tragic hero (i.e. the absolute sovereign at the centre of his court) and his downfall were repeated in endless variations.

Then, during the early modern era, something happens:

[...] within a couple of generations, the stable, common features of European drama are replaced by a rapid succession of major formal mutations. By the mid seventeenth century, the tragedy of western Europe has branched out in three or four separate versions, where everything has changed: the relationship between word and action, the number of characters, stylistic register, temporal span, plot conventions, spatial movements, verse forms. In fact, not even the name of ‘tragedy’ is shared any longer. (11)

This passage effectively sums up most of Moretti’s argument and is worth a closer look. On one side, the focus is on a specific genre (tragedy) and its alleged local mutations – even though the essay often switches to the more general term of ‘drama’, suggesting that the model it proposes could be extended to other theatrical genres as well. On the other side, the elements where this change is visible touch upon several aspects of drama, including performance (“spatial movements”), style (“stylistic register”, “verse forms”), and content (“plot conventions”). His perspective, however, is decidedly oriented towards form, as the continuation of his argument (12) shows.

Furthermore, while the topic is not explicitly addressed by Moretti, the ‘branching’³ (or speciation, in evolutionary terms) of European

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- 3 “We should borrow a different metaphor from evolutionary theory, and think of literary development as a large bush: branches that coexist and bifurcate, that overlap and at times obstruct each other – but that, whenever one of them withers away, are ready to replace it with an ever thicker and stronger organism” (18). More than thirty years later, Moretti will still refer to “the age of Shakespeare and Racine” as “the great bifurcation in the history of tragic form” (Moretti, 2024, 8).

drama is linked, as one could expect, to the political fragmentation within the Continent: the progressive consolidation of (some) state entities during the early modern age creates ‘protected’ spaces where experiments in form, deviating from previous models, are allowed to blossom. Within the large European space, each local ‘mutation’ is able to occupy its own milieu of influence – “cultural ‘niches’ for mutations to take root, and later contribute [back] to literary evolution” in other regions (11).

According to this narrative, formal variety is not the product of history, but rather of geography: “form needs time in order to reproduce itself; but in order to arise it is space that it needs most” (13). The divided European space, “where the exploration of formal possibilities may be allowed, and in fact encouraged as a sort of patriotic duty” (13), offers such a playground for dramatic imagination, and can thus be described as a “discontinuous, fractured, [...] archipelago of (national) sub-spaces, each of them specializing in one formal variation” (12) – the optimal breeding ground for the diverse dramatic forms of early modernity.

Similarity beyond diversity: cultural nets and theatergrams

This account of European drama history seems, however, to downplay a significant aspect, i.e. the possible transnational exchanges between literatures. According to Moretti’s perspective, the process of ‘branching’ seems to imply a progressive compartmentalisation of the various dramatic traditions: even if contaminations with other dramatic spaces are still possible, they tend to build stable models where the same formal features are repeated over and over until they are exhausted (13). In recalling the work of one of the first systematic historians of literature, Henry Hallam, and his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1837), Moretti underscores how, within the European space, “spatial proximity never turns into functional interaction” (14) between dramatic cultures. Only later will French-led neoclassicism present itself as a meaningful supranational phenomenon, but in a homogenising fashion (15–16).

While the idea that the early modern age “marks the birth of original national aesthetics” in theatre (Lochert, 2009, 28) is fairly uncontroversial among scholars, emphasising the divergence between dramatic spaces is not, however, the only possible approach. As Levi (1988) points out, the problem of the plurality/unity of early modern culture can indeed be tackled from multiple angles, from social to symbolic, and actually goes beyond literature itself. Moretti’s model, however powerful, does indeed raise the question of how one could account for the possible cross-pollination between dramatic traditions during this same period.

In this vein, calls have been made to at least problematise the category of national dramatic literatures and adopt instead a more holistic perspective. A notable example of such a stance is Joachim Küpper’s proposal to understand early modern drama as a ‘cultural net’: according to this theory, the “[p]arameters informing a given artifact (a “work”), such as plot, genre, ideological frames (explicit or implied), message, style, etc., are [...] items that are conceptually separate from, and in most cases indeed independent of specific vernaculars” (Küpper, 2018, 105), and circulate freely within a common, continent-wide network structure. From time to time, such elements are extracted from the ‘information flow’, refashioned, and employed in individual works, thus accounting for transnational similarities.⁴

Although Küpper does not explicitly engage with Moretti, his approach seems to implicitly challenge the evolutionary model proposed by the Italian scholar. As an example, his constant warning about “the nonproblematized (over)interpretation of the bonds that literary texts of any kind by necessity maintain to the extra-literary ‘reality’ from

4 Evident common traits could be explained as originating from the participation in one common network structure [...]. Transculturality would thus become the standard case, “nationality” of cultural artefacts would be considered the particular case to be explained according to the control logics outlined above (mainly: power- or belief-driven attempts to restrict the floating material available at a given place at a given moment)” (Küpper, 2018, 21).

which they originate" (252) could be read as a jab at Moretti's belief that geography represents a key component of drama history.⁵

Furthermore, the very concept of a consistent cultural evolution is treated with some scepticism, even in its non-teleological variants. In the cultural net, Küpper argues, "most artistic development is caused by the random, or at least nonsystematizable combination of pre-existent material", due to "external needs and demands, or conscious processes of active transculturation" (299), and thus narratives of linear evolution are not sustainable.⁶

From the outset, Küpper's theory of the cultural net appears indebted to the relational framework developed by Pascale Casanova in her *World Republic of Letters* (Casanova, 1999). Although not always in agreement with her approach (see e.g. 46 ff.), he nevertheless shares her core premise that "specific features of [...] cultural elements [...] can be explained on the basis of their position" (Erll et al., 2021, 83) within a complex socio-cultural environment, be it the 'world literary space' or the 'cultural net'.

Furthermore, his attempt to map early modern drama according to an intercultural perspective is not unprecedented, and rather builds on earlier conceptualisations of transnational dramatic exchange. Most notably, the 'parameters' Küpper envisions as floating within the cultural net could be seen as more abstract versions of the modular dramatic units, or 'theatergrams', first singled out by Louise George Clubb.⁷ This

5 While Küpper indeed accepts that language and topography *can* act as 'bonds' in that sense, he also proceeds to deconstruct them through a short contrastive analysis of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Fontane's *Effi Briest* (see 252–54).

6 This view, however, would be consistent with one of Moretti's most famous essays, 'The Slaughterhouse of Literature' (*Modern Language Quarterly* 61, 1, 2000, 207–227), where the (in)voluntary exploitation of a formal device (clues) is considered the key to the success of Conan Doyle's detective stories against contemporary competitors.

7 "Constant as a principle from the time of Ariosto on was construction by contamination, the meditated and usually explicit combination of pre-texts. But in addition to the mere fusion of borrowed plots, this demanded the interchange and transformation of units, figures, relationships, actions, topoi, and framing

concept, indicating “elements of dramatic composition such as character, situation, genre, and scene out of which narrative arcs and climaxes, catastrophes and dénouements of plays are assembled” (West, 2010, x), remains influential in contemporary theatre research.

Examples of its lasting productiveness can be found in the work of the *Theater without Borders* research collective (see e.g. Henke and Nicholson, 2008, 2014b, Katritzky and Drábek, 2019). Devoted to investigating the “transnational and comparative impact of Early Modern Drama”⁸, this group has often been more interested in performance-related issues, but they still retain an understanding of cultural dynamics akin to Küpper’s: as Henke and Nicholson (2014a, 6) postulate, “[t]he transnational dissemination of European theatre resembled an amorphous net or web much more than a line”.⁹

Globally, their work is useful insofar as it maps the main avenues of influence within the European dramatic space, going beyond individual translations, reprises, or imitations. Such contributions help indeed to understand the fundamental asymmetry of intercultural relations, which might be characterised by direct influence (e.g. Italian on English theatre, or English on German) or non-influence (English on early modern Italian, Spanish, and French theatre) (Henke and Nicholson, 2014a, 5).

Such an account of flow and circulation, nonetheless, requires a structuring framework. Patterns of exchange between dramatic traditions have been traditionally understood by scholars within the context of a pan-European ‘rift’, which Clubb describes as follows:

Most polarizations divide European theater into regular, ‘Aristotelian’, theoretical Italian and French on one hand and irregular, pragmatic

patterns, gradually building a combinatory of theatergrams that were at once streamlined structures for svelte play making and elements of high specific density, weighty with significance from previous incarnations” (Clubb, 1990, 6).

8 <https://theaterwithoutborders.org>.

9 It should be noted that, while referencing Küpper on this point, they also raise the possibility of combining theatergrams and distant reading by name-checking Moretti (1–2).

Spanish and English on the other, whether the antipodal concepts are labeled classical and romantic, or have been further dehistoricized as learned and spontaneous, or artificial and natural, or evolved politically into conservative and progressive or elite and popular. (Clubb, 1990, 3)

While Clubb herself views with suspicion such dichotomies, especially when cast as the stale opposition between a ‘classical’ and a ‘romantic’ mode, this interpretative scheme still holds some value in sketching a general picture of the field. Tracing its roots, Véronique Lochert shows how early modern theatrical aesthetics across Europe can actually be defined in their relationship with the two main preceding models, i.e. the performance-centred medieval theatre and the reading-centred humanist theatre:

In France and Italy, the medieval tradition was rejected by theorists and modern dramaturgy was developed as an extension of humanist theatre through imitation of ancient theatre. In Spain and England, on the other hand, the theoretical reflections of a few readers of Aristotle and the erudite imitations of humanist playwrights remained marginal in the face of the development of new theatrical practices, which were part of the continuity of medieval theatre. (Lochert, 2009, 93)

Again, this account should not imply an overly rigid partition, nor rule out any instance of internal strife within individual literary cultures,¹⁰ but remains useful in summarising a series of oppositions¹¹ between two

10 Some examples, offered by Clubb and Lochert (*passim*), are the French debate between *réguliers* and *irréguliers* (starting with the *querelle* about Corneille's *Cid*), the contrast in England between Elizabethan (Shakespeare) and Jacobean dramatists (Jonson), the ‘War of the Theatres’ between Jonson and Dekker/Marston, the Italian contraposition between *commedia erudita* and *commedia dell'arte*, the more general gap between baroque and classicist theatre, etc.

11 Lochert again: “The tension between these two poles covers a number of other divides: between text and performance, within the dramatic work itself; between reading and performance, scholarly public and popular public, at the

main modes of drama, centred either on the performance or on the text, which were actually attested in literary history.

To sum up, the two frameworks introduced – which one might term, with some approximation, *differentiation-based* and *circulation-based* – offer contrasting readings of the history of early modern European drama. The former, exemplified by Moretti's evolutionist account, emphasises the progressive branching of dramatic forms into distinct national traditions, shaped by geography and political fragmentation. The latter, informed by concepts such as Küpper's cultural net and Clubb's theatergrams, foregrounds instead the continuous movement of dramatic elements across linguistic boundaries, and the resulting structural similarities between otherwise distinct traditions. While the first captures an evident increase in formal divergence visible by the end of the seventeenth century, the second accounts for the persistence of links that complicate any narrative of simple compartmentalisation. The tension between these perspectives must then always be taken into account for a global understanding of the landscape of early modern theatre.

Early modern poetics: A panorama

This last section presents a concise summary of the evolution of dramatic literature within five key European linguistic areas (the Italian-, French-, Spanish-, German-, and English-speaking territories); the reasons for their choice will be outlined at the beginning of the next chapter. This purposely minimalistic account of drama history is clearly not meant to offer a comprehensive overview of authors and literary movements,

level of its reception; between absolute rules and historical relativity, in the context of the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns; between theory and practice, with France and Italy producing far more treatises than Spain and England, where theoretical reflection is generally integrated into the works themselves" (93). The notable absence of German-language drama from this narration, while justified by the focus of Lochert's book, is also telling of the difficulty in placing such dramatic tradition inside this binary scheme.

but rather to highlight key aspects in the development of dramatic traditions which may help contextualise Moretti's depiction of European drama as an archipelago of formally distinct literary experiences. As discussed extensively in later chapters, my approach here is decidedly text-centric, and thus I do not explore here the dimensions of staging and acting, which would be otherwise crucial for a global understanding of early modern theatrical texts. Here, I prefer to offer a necessarily limited overview of questions of poetics, citing relevant theoretical texts and critics.

This focus seems warranted by the fact that, during the period under investigation, theatrical practices were increasingly the object of a theoretical reflection which often led to the establishment of normative aesthetics. To employ Jurij Lotman's notable categories, one could indeed read the evolution of early modern drama as a transition from a 'work' or 'example-based' landscape (i.e. largely devoid of theorisation, such as the medieval one) to a 'rules-based' or 'grammaticalised' one (Allegri, 2000, 1183–84). Within this framework, it is therefore imperative to take into account the poetological discourse which shaped the playwrights' activity and eventually peaked in seventeenth-century Classicism – an exemplary instance of 'rules-based' culture according to Lotman and Uspensky (1978, 218–19).

While Lotman's ideas are mostly compatible with Moretti's general theory on dramatic evolution, there is an important distinction to be noted. While Moretti sketches a monodirectional evolution (*ex uno plures*), Lotman envisions rather a cyclic process, where the two cultures "can be considered stages of a single evolution that takes place as a pendulum alternation of different constitutive principles", with none of them establishing itself once and for all (Lotman, 1985, 81).¹²

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- 12 Lotman describes such a cycle in these terms: "When an original civilization constituted as a system of customs ossifies itself to the point that its redundancy assumes catastrophic dimensions, the need arises for self-codification, which takes the form of the adoption of a grammar of culture. At this stage, grammaticality intervenes as a revolutionary principle and leads to the abrupt complication of the internal structure of the code of culture. Even rules, however, tend to ossify: their redundancy increases, and the ability to effectively

At the same time, however, both authors agree that geographical space is a decisive factor to be taken into account: while Moretti sees it as the actual engine of literary evolution, Lotman underlines that the two types of culture he describes could also be considered not only stages of a process, but also “stable national or area features”. Thus, cultural material moving from a ‘work-based’ to a ‘rules-based’ environment could from time to time be subjected to a “functional reinterpretation” to adapt to the new context (Lotman, 1985, 80–81).

Actually, this interpretative framework fits neatly with the traditional understanding of European theatrical cultures with regard to their poetics: to reprise Clubb's terminology, ‘regular’ Italian and French theatre could be seen as an expression of a ‘grammaticalised’ culture, while ‘irregular’ Spanish and English ones seem to still belong to an ‘example-based’ one – with German theatre in a somewhat intermediate position.

Such a systematisation, however, should not be assumed as conclusive, since in all areas the dominant aesthetics – be they ‘prescriptive’ or ‘unmediated’ – were not completely uncontested. The following summaries trace these dynamics within each linguistic area, attending particularly to how normative poetics emerged, were contested, or remained marginal – and to the formal consequences of these different trajectories.

Italian drama

According to Küpper (2018, 29), the first instance of a true ‘post-medieval drama’ emerged in the Italian territories. From there, its modules were gradually exported beyond the Alps to the other major dramatic cultures.

own and retain information begins to expire. Although the problem can be solved within this or that cultural cycle by changing grammars, this nevertheless discredits the very principle of grammaticality. At this stage, the irruption of the textual principle into the construction of culture decisively increases its capacity for informational content” (Lotman, 1985, 81). – Since no English translation of the original Russian essay (Lotman, 1971) is extant, I translate here from an Italian edition.

This could be said specifically in terms of literary norms, since the Italians were the first protagonists in the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* and the dissemination of its principles – *vraisemblance*, morality, universality, genre differentiation, the three units of space, time, and action, etc. – through several commentaries,¹³ which also incorporated prescriptions from Horace's *Art of Poetry* and later treatises.

Despite this regulatory framework, pastoral drama – a 'third', conventions-breaking genre – soon became the dominant genre of the late sixteenth century theatre, marking the passage from Renaissance to Baroque (Angelini, 2000, 255); notable examples were Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* (1573) and Giovan Battista Guarini's *Pastor Fido* (1580). Criticism from purists, who saw it as a perverse cross-breed of the established Aristotelian genres,¹⁴ did not prevent the pastoral – and, more broadly, tragicomedy – from assuming a central role by the end of the century, which was recognised and defended in contemporary theorization by Guarini himself (*Compendio della poesia tragicomica*, 1601) and Angelo Ingegneri (*Della poesia rappresentativa e del modo di rappresentare le favole sceniche*, 1598).

The fortune of the pastoral continued in the following century, even though it soon found a competitor in another 'mixed' genre, the melodrama, whose first example has been traditionally recognised either in

13 Influential commentaries included those by Francesco Robortello (1548), Vincenzo Maggi (1550), Giulio Cesare Scaligero (1561), Antonio Minturno (1563), and Lodovico Castelvetro (1570). On this topic see, among others, Conte (2003) and Weinberg (1961).

14 The most famous expression of this conflict is often acknowledged in the querelle between University of Padua lecturer Jason Denores and Guarini himself. A devout Aristotelian, Denores criticised tragicomedy and pastoral as 'monstrous' and 'disproportionate' hybrids, trying to stitch together comic and tragic without success (*Discorso intorno a que' principii...*, 1586). Guarini perceived it as an attack on his *Pastor Fido* and sharply replied with his *Verato* (1588). Further exchanges in 1590 and 1593 were eventually cut short by Denores' death. For more details, see Artico (2020) and Perella (1973).

Jacopo Peri's and Ottavio Rinuccini's *Euridice* (1601) or in Emilio de' Cavalieri's and Agostino Manni's *Rappresentazione di anima et di corpo* (1600).¹⁵

Even writers working within the neo-Aristotelian framework did not shy away, to some extent, from blending different genres, as evident in the production of two leading writers of the time, Giambattista Andreini and Giacinto Andrea Cicognini (Angelini, 2000, 245–246). More generally, comedy did develop on a double track, reviving classical Platine and Terentian models (as in Guarini's *Idropica*, 1584) but also embedding innovations from the *comici dell'arte*, whose themes and topics, as outlined in their *canovacci* (content outlines), were summarised in Flaminio Scala's *Il Teatro delle favole rappresentative* (1611). As usual in Italian early modern theatre, distinct regional cultures contributed to the development of different local variations of comedy (e.g. the *commedia ridicolosa* in Rome).

High tragedy, for its part, still enjoyed some success as “the preferred form of expression” (Angelini, 2000, 228) of the Baroque zeitgeist, with authors like Federico della Valle, Carlo de' Dottori, Giovanni Delfino, in addition to those writing classical tragedies (Carletti, Alberi, Bonarelli) or operating in the milieu of religious colleges (Santi, Scammacca, Tuccio, Pallavicino, Stefonio).¹⁶ In their works, the general adherence to the prescriptions of Aristotelianism was often bent to ethical and ideological needs, i.e. to the necessity of offering moral teaching in the context of the Counter-Reformation (Angelini, 2000, 242).

French drama

Like the Italian one, French theatre in the second half of the seventeenth century was heavily influenced by classicist models, first upheld by the Pléiade movement.¹⁷ Writers belonging to this group, such as Étienne Jodelle and Jean-Antoine de Baïf, and later like-minded authors (Jacques Grévin, Jean de la Taille, Robert Garnier, Pierre Larrivey, etc.) set out to

15 On the birth of melodrama see among others the considerations by Leopold (2003).

16 Cf. Russo (1959), Trivero (2015).

17 See Faisant (1998).

develop a classicist theatre, often taking the Italian *commedia erudita* as a model (Brockett and Hildy, 2013, 179). De la Taille himself authored an essay (*De l'art de la tragédie*, 1572) in which, despite not referring directly back to Aristotle, he popularised some of his prescriptions within French theatre, through the usual mediation of Horace and the Renaissance theorists (Refini, 2009).

Political upheavals marked the development of the French dramatic tradition, with the production slowing down at the time of traumatic events such as the religious wars (1572–1598). At the turn of the century, tragedy started again to develop under Antoine de Montchrestien and Alexandre Hardy, but the dominant genre remained the farce influenced by the *commedia dell'arte*. Only with the renewed political stability of the 1620s and 1630s did further developments occur, including the rise of notable figures like Jean de Mairet, Pierre du Ryer, Jean de Rotrou, and Pierre Corneille. These authors were instrumental in consolidating classical aesthetics in drama, “link[ing] back to the humanist theatrical tradition (Jodelle, Garnier), mov[ing] away from Seneca’s tragedies to get closer to Sophoclean and Euripidean models, and begin[ning] to read, translate and discuss Aristotle’s *Poetics*” (Biet, 2016, 303).

This process concerned first and foremost the tragedy. As argued by Georges Forestier, it took authors just a few years to move from shunning the whole genre as too bound to classical models to keenly accept the need for rules to steer dramatic creativity:

Classical tragedy had been rejected by moderns because it symbolised slavish obedience to the rules of the ancients; the modern introduction of ancient rules presented as necessary in the name of reason and the effect produced on the spectator led to the reintroduction of tragedy. [...] All reasoning was overturned: while classical rules had been contested because the rigour of the *dispositio* seemed to restrict the richness of the *inventio*, now, conversely, the modern rules were said to only hinder the ‘sterile genies’ incapable of finding ‘matter that was rich enough’ to produce ‘beautiful effects’ within the framework of a regular *dispositio*; while classical tragedy had died because it was an unreasoned imitation of the tragedy of the ancients, now modern

tragedy appeared, beyond any principle of imitation, to be the most suitable genre for expressing the new dramaturgy resulting from the reasoned acceptance of the rules. (Forestier, 1993, 127–128).

Another important stage in this process was represented by the so-called *querelle du Cid*, which raged around Corneille's eponymous piece and its transgression of some Aristotelian norms. The final deliberation of the Académie Française¹⁸ was instrumental in defining rules to be applied across the stages, but did not end the debate, which was carried on by Corneille himself in the prefaces to his collected works, and by his opponent, the Abbé d'Aubignac. The latter's *Pratique du théâtre* (1657), written under the auspices of Cardinal Richelieu, also established itself as a key reference for playwrights, summing up a series of recommendations for writing and staging dramatic pieces,¹⁹ a similar role, though limited to textual aspects, was later played by Nicolas Boileau's didactic poem *L'Art poétique* (1674).

In the heyday of French classical theatre, the different genres found also specific production niches, with tragedy shifting back to the “declamation of a simplified poetry” and assuming the form of a text-centric “theatrical poem” – as evident in the works of Scarron first and then, after another period of relative stagnation corresponding to the Fronde crises, in those of Thomas Corneille and Jean Racine. On the opposite side of the dramatic spectrum, mixed forms came to play the “hyper-spectacular role” previously reserved to tragedy (Biet, 2016, 316).

Opera eventually spread from Italy into France, where early hybrid forms of theatre, music, and dance, such as the *comédie-ballet*, were joined by truly ‘operatic’ (i.e. completely sung) compositions such as the *tragédie lyrique*. Popularised among others by Jean-Baptiste Lully and François Quinault, such compositions soon became the standard form

18 Documents on the *querelle*, including the Académie's official response penned by Jean Chapelain (*Des sentiments de l'Académie française sur la tragi-comédie du Cid*, 1638), are collected with a rich introduction and commentary in Civardi (2004).

19 See the still useful account by Arnaud (1970).

of French opera, capable of rivalling spoken theatre (Norman, 2001, 7). At the same time, comedy achieved the same dignity of tragedy thanks to the efforts by Molière,²⁰ and flourished within the context of the now professionalised theatre companies, such as those of the Palais Royal, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, and the Marais – later fused in the world's first national theatre, the Comédie-Française.

Spanish drama

While Italian and French drama represent an instance of a transition toward 'rules-based' culture, with theoretical codification preceding and shaping dramatic production, Spanish theatre, by contrast, exemplifies the persistence of 'work-based' principles, where practice resisted (to some extent) theoretical prescription.

The early political situation in the Iberian Peninsula, shaped by the Reconquista, contributed to the prominence of religious drama, which served the State's agenda of reasserting Catholic cultural hegemony. While before 1500 such representations had shared features with other postmedieval European analogues, they then developed some idiosyncratic features which granted them a large fortune until 1765, when they were suppressed. The most successful genre, practised by Pedro Calderón de La Barca and others, was the auto sacramental, recovering themes and modes from the morality and cycle plays but also abiding by contemporary theatrical practice.

Cultural exchanges with Italy gradually led to importing humanist models, but Aristotelian norms never gained the same traction as in Italy and France, due to a limited reception of the *Poetics*, which was translated only a couple of times, and the presence of other composition models (Sánchez Laílla, 2000, 9). This could be seen in the tragedies of the time, such as those by Cristóbal de Virués, Juan de la Cueva, or Francisco Agustín Tárrega (Capra, 2000, 691 ff.), in the comedies and *entremeses*

20 On Molière's relationship with the Aristotelian models see in particular Calder (1993, 2–5).

(short comic interludes) by Miguel de Cervantes, but also in theoretical writings.²¹

Perhaps the most famous rejection of neo-Aristotelian tenets can be read in *El Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (1609), the artistic manifesto of the age's main playwright, Félix Lope de Vega Carpio. There, drawing some conclusions from his long and successful stage career, the author defended his unorthodox playwriting style by openly rejecting principles such as the separation between comic and tragic and the unities of time and space, and proposing instead a style tailored to the tastes of the public, without pedantism.

In the end, Lope set the example for the dominant form of Spanish drama, the *comedia nueva* – where *comedia*, out of habit and diffusion, had come to indicate a 'work to be staged' in a neutral sense, beyond its actual 'comic' content (Sullivan, 2018, 33; Newels, 1959, 17). Genre distinctions were not however completely blurred; rather, one witnessed a multiplication of specific labels for its different types (such as *comedia heroica*, *palaciega*, *de figurón*, etc.).²² Another distinction had to do with the author's operating milieu: while some wrote for public theatres or *corrales* (Juan de la Cueva and Miguel de Cervantes early on, and later Lope, Guillén de Castro, Tirso de Molina, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón), others were more active in court theatres (such as Francisco de Rojas Zorrilla, Agustín Moreto, and Calderón himself, who wrote autos and light dramas called *zarzuelas*).

German drama

On Lotman's spectrum, German theatre would occupy an intermediate position – open to theoretical frameworks imported from abroad, yet

21 See, e.g., the works by Alonso López Pinciano (*Philosophia antigua poética*, 1596), Luis Alfonso de Carvallo (*Cisne de Apolo*, 1602), Francisco Cascales (*Tablas poéticas*, 1617) and Jusepe Antonio González de Sala (*Nueva idea de la tragedia antigua*, 1632).

22 For this, see the useful scheme by García Berrio and Huerta Calvo (1992, 210), based on Vitse (1988).

sometimes resistant to strict codification. This ambivalence could, of course, be explained in social terms. As noted by Niefanger (2012, 231), the political and cultural milieu of the German-speaking lands, still split in a myriad of mostly autonomous small states within the nominal Empire, prevented the birth of a uniform theatre as happened in the early nation-states (cf. also Levi, 1988, 231–32). The lack of a national theatre – which should not be assumed to imply, however, a lack of idiosyncratic dramatic forms – translated thus into an openness to innovations from neighbouring countries, with a large influx of translations and adaptations dominating German scenes.

In terms of poetics, however, the influence of Aristotle was as decisive as in other countries, representing an inescapable theoretical reference to be either followed or rejected.²³ His influence was mediated through Renaissance poetics, such as Scaliger's fundamental *Poetices libri septem* (1561), and later contributions by Daniel Heinsius, Gerard Vossius, and Nicolas Boileau. While German theorisations of theatre were quite uncommon,²⁴ some dramatic principles were enunciated directly in the plays' prefaces or in broader treatises on poetics, like the seminal *Buch von der deutschen Poeterey* (1624) by Martin Opitz. Those remarks, however, were mostly reserved to tragedy, while comedy and the mixed genres, lacking a solid theoretical tradition, did not get much attention (Alexander, 1984, 49–50).²⁵

Across the wide spectrum of dramatic possibilities found in German early modern theatre, it is possible to identify some major strands: the religious drama (both Protestant and Catholic), the *Wanderbühne* movement, and the Silesian school of drama. In addition, the role of music theatre cannot be discounted completely: Italian opera was imported

23 Schings (1980, 21) considers “the deviation from Aristotle” as the “guiding heuristic principle” of German Baroque drama, where new ideas and concepts were introduced under the disguise of interpretation of established theories.

24 An example is Balthasar Crusius' short Neolatin treatise *De Dramatibus* (1609); see Alexander (1980).

25 As Bonfatti (2000, 838) notes, however, an attempt to introduce mixed genres into the Aristotelian binomy of tragedy and comedy was done by Jesuit Jacob Masen in his *Palaestra Eloquentiae Ligatae* (1654–1657).

at the beginning of the century into the courts of Bavaria, Saxony, and Austria, and its models and texts remained long dominant. By contrast, smaller courts in the Protestant North developed relatively soon a German-language opera, which found its main expression in the *galante Stil* centred in Hamburg.²⁶

Religious drama with didascalical purposes was produced on both sides of the Reformation, finding its epicentres first in Protestant colleges (such as the gymnasium of Strasbourg) and then in schools run by Catholic orders like the Jesuits, and could be actually considered “the backbone of German theatre in the XVI and XVII century” (Bonfatti, 2000, 806). Plays written in these contexts were usually in Latin, but German often surfaced in intermezzi and paratextual materials (such as the *periochae*, i.e. booklets containing information on the play’s staging and contents).

This dramatic tradition lacked prescriptive poetics, but developed manuals on staging practices, starting from the early comments by Jakob Willich and later culminating with Franz Lang’s *Dissertatio de actione scenica* (1727) (Bonfatti, 2000, 811; Niefanger, 2012, 238–39). Towards the end of the century, Protestant school drama gained again some prominence with authors like Sebastian Mitternacht, Johannes Riemer, and especially Christian Weise, whose eclectic work however failed, according to Bonfatti (2000, 864), to create a German-language comedy with original features; the same could be said, outside the school environment, of Christian Reuter.

An alternative to the school drama was represented by the *Wanderbühne* movement, made up of theatrical companies travelling across German lands and staging their plays in various venues (courts, markets, cities). Initially dominated by foreign actors, such as the English ones fleeing the Puritan shutdown of playhouses, these groups offered the public a theatrical experience where the non-verbal elements and body language prevailed over the actual text. Their international repertoire creatively remixed major coeval authors, from Calderón to Molière and

26 See the edition of relevant *galante* texts by Wiedemann (1969).

Shakespeare, and was later decisively shaped by *commedia dell'arte* modules imported through France, while touching upon all genres and often featuring stereotypical buffoon figures like Hanswurst or Pickelhäring.

An important role was also played, in the second half of the century, by the Silesian school of drama, whose representatives, such as Andreas Gryphius and Daniel Casper von Lohenstein, wrote both tragic (*Trauerspiel*) and comic works (*Lustspiel*). Especially the first type, a composite blend of classicist (Seneca) and allegorical influences informed by neo-Stoic ethics, was considered an *unicum* within the European horizon by Walter Benjamin, who also underscored its differences from the classical tragedy.²⁷

More recent scholarship, however, has somewhat tempered this claim, alleging that “the genre emerged into something unique [...] within a matrix that contained both the appropriation of alien forms and autochthonous developments”, i.e. “working with templates lifted from the broader European context” (Lande, 2016, 320 and 342) – with the relation between Gryphius and Dutch dramatist Joost van den Vondel being a case in point. In any case, both *Trauer-* and *Lustspiel* still deferred to the example set by Opitz in his double role as theorist (with his already cited *Buch von der deutschen Poeterey*) and translator of Seneca (*Troades*, 1625).

27 See Benjamin (1963, 45 ff.). The key differences Benjamin sees between *Trauerspiel* and *Tragödie* are thus summarised by Bloemendal and Smith (2016, 29): “[Benjamin] distinguishes *Trauerspiel* with its origins in history, its earth-bound stress on this world from the more transcendental *Tragödie*, which originates in myth, acts out a rite of sacrifice and centers on hamartia, a human mistake. Whereas *Tragödie* features a tragic hero and is characterized by reticence, the protagonists of *Trauerspiel* are tyrants and martyrs, often embodied by one and the same character, and its signature is ostentation. This *Trauerspiel* was rooted in Lutheranism and the Counter-Reformation. Behind all ‘mourning-play’ protagonists is Christ, the ultimate king and martyr”.

English drama

Like Spanish drama, English theatre largely resisted theoretical codification, though neoclassical ideals found occasional advocates. Examining the situation of English theatre around the mid sixteenth century, it appears that the main Aristotelian genres were still sufficiently distinct both in terms of locations and contents. On one side, comedies were mostly acted in the houses of nobles or in schools, and the need for entertainment was reflected in the persistence of medieval and farcical models, albeit tempered by a composition technique inspired by Latin 'regular' comedy (as exemplified, early on, by the production of Nicholas Udall).

On the other hand, tragedies were often conceived in the milieu of professional colleges, such as the Inns of Court in London, and took up a more experimental character, creatively reassembling a variety of source materials while emulating Seneca's tragic style. As the starting point of this latter wave, critics have traditionally cited Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561), which also introduced iambic pentameter as the standard tragic verse.

The fusion of elements from classical and medieval theatre with diverse themes and topics from history, mythology, and folklore was furthered by the next generation of authors, the so-called University wits, and by William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Nonetheless, such hybridism was not uncontested, with Philip Sidney criticising it in his *Defence of Poesy* (1583) and expounding instead neoclassicist ideals which were then taken up, to some extent, by Ben Jonson (Marenco, 2000, 314–15). Sidney's text was also embedded within the large controversy on the liceity of theatre, attacked by Puritans as immoral;²⁸ incidentally, it ought to be noted that the playwrights themselves rested their hopes for social advancement more in poems and translations

28 See, e.g., the pamphlets by John Northbrooke (*A Treatise against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes*, 1577) and Stephen Gosson (*The School of Abuse*, 1579), countered by Sidney's apology and by Lodge's *A Defence of Poetry, Music and Stage Plays* (1579). On the issue see Marcus (2017).

than in their drama, still suffering “the stigma of [being] a minor genre” (Marenco, 2000, 415–16).

The turn of the century – and the dynastic succession from Elizabeth I to James I – brought again some diversification of drama according to its staging occasion: while public theatres, already consecrated to a central role in English society, hosted the bourgeois drama of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Heywood, private ones gave authors like George Chapman and John Marston the occasion to critically reflect on society with their satirical plays (Marenco, 2000, 428). Further playwrights, such as John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, Philip Massinger, John Webster, and John Ford, united polished dramatic skill with an already Baroque gusto for the pathetic and the sensational, especially visible in their tragicomedies (Brockett and Hildy, 2013, 115).

The English civil war (1642) and the Puritan revolution led to an 18-year-long closure of theatres, which did not, however, stop dramatic activity in full – musical ‘entertainments’ were still permitted and under this guise William Davenant was able to present his *Siege of Rhodes* (1656). With the Stuart Restoration, new acting companies (led by Davenant and by Thomas Killigrew) rose to fame while renovating their repertory to meet the mutated tastes.

Heroic tragedy modelled after continental authors (such as Corneille) was soon followed by ‘neoclassical’ plays which combined some superficial respect of Aristotelian norms with echoes of the Shakespearian heritage. Together with lyrical opera, comedy was also highly successful and was developed across a range of subgenres (comedy of humours, of intrigues, of manners, London and Spanish comedy, etc.), even though the end of the century with the Glorious Revolution saw a renewed Puritan-based attack on theatre.²⁹

29 I refer here to Jeremy Collier’s *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), which elicited responses from dramatists such as John Vanbrugh and William Congreve. On this see Cordner (2000).