

## Drama and Poetics in the Cinquecento Introductory Remarks

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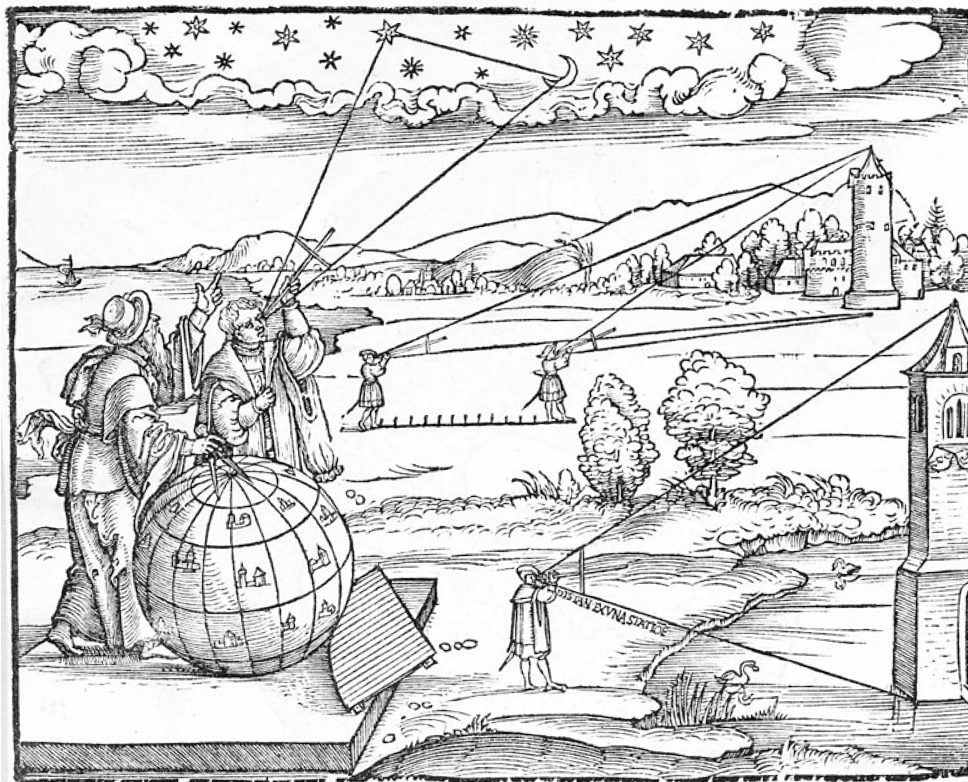


Illustration from *Introductio geographica in doctissimus Veneri annotationes...* by Petrus Apianus, 1533<sup>1</sup>

The Italian Renaissance can be described as an age of fundamental transformation, both in aesthetic forms and in poetological discourses. At the end of the fifteenth century mundane drama, a whole new form of art, leading to the development of court theater, was re-invented with firm references to the textual models provided by Classi-

<sup>1</sup> Apian, Petrus (1495-1551). Auteur du texte. [Illustration de *Introductio geographica in doctissimus Veneri annotationes...*] / [Non identifié]; Petrus Apianus, aut. de texte. 1533. © Source [gallica.bnf.fr](http://gallica.bnf.fr) / Observatoire de Paris.

cal comedies and tragedies. At about the same time several ancient texts on literary theory were published in print, among them a Latin translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The impact of this text on the poetological framework of the neoclassical mundane drama still has to be discussed as it is crucial to understand the framework of drama theory in order to interpret appropriately the evolution of the Italian neo-classical theater that came into being half a millennium ago and soon became a major cultural achievement of modern Europe. The evolution of the poetological framework of the neoclassical mundane drama in the Italian Cinquecento was at the heart of a series of papers presented at four panels jointly organized by Prof. Dr. Deborah Blocker, University of California, Berkeley, and PD Dr. Rolf Lohse, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn, during the sixty-first annual meeting of the RSA in Berlin in 2015.

Recent research has cast increasing doubt on the prevailing view on the sixteenth century's drama theory as we find it displayed in Bernard Weinberg's monumental *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961). It is especially the unique role ascribed by Weinberg to the *Poetics* of Aristotle that has provoked disagreement. The emphasis on this poetics tends to mask the actual framework of literary theory that Renaissance poets, scholars, critics, and the audience had at their disposal, reducing thus excessively our access to precise knowledge of the discussion of drama theory during the Cinquecento. This does not only mean that the role of Aristotle's *Poetics* is frequently overrated but it means first and foremost that current knowledge the first dramatists disposed of remains inaccessible and out of range of our critical grasp. The intention of taking into account poetological theorems that were important at the time when scholars and authors of drama rediscovered the Aristotelian *Poetics* is not meant to compromise the importance of this stimulating text, neither to open a Pandora's box full of strange and unqualified notions, but to come to an appropriate understanding of how scholars and poets devised the framework of literary theory they thought suitable for the creation and the interpretation of dramatic texts and genres. If the contemporary point of view on this question matters, there is no other way than checking out of the all-inclusive cruise liner heading for the realms of Aristotelian bliss, and tackling the problems of historical adequate reconstruction of the horizon of ref-

erence specific to the sixteenth century. What is more, the investigation has to unveil the network of scholars and writers, male and female, of that time and the role of institutions of learning and of promoting culture with their diverse strategies. Thus we can build a basis that allows us to come as close as possible to an understanding of what were the poetological implications of writing mundane comedies, tragedies, tragicomedies, pastorals, and musical drama, Renaissance writers might have had in mind. Acting in this way we do not only come to a more accurate understanding of texts that have survived as canonical examples of a distant, but seminal cultural formation, but we open a way to understand texts which have been cast away to the limbo of non-canonization. Those non-canonical texts, contrariwise, might serve as reliable source material for a clairvoyant reconstruction of the actual shape of literary theory of that age. Such a critical reconstruction yields much more reliable results than any retro-active construction which all too often serves lack of interest better than the strife for knowledge. Looking at the existing textual basis and striving to enlarge this basis might foster a better understanding of the evolution of an art form and of its DNA profile that is still booming with attractiveness if you consider the current forms of drama that are present in all media, ranging from radio plays to Video games and current series in the streaming media, not to forget traditional and experimental theater and opera performances.

Half a millennium of modern dramatic experience and its interpretation challenge us to reconsider the achievements and the limits of existing interpretations of the framework of literary theory of the time of its beginnings. It is equally a good moment to lay the basis for an intellectually stimulating and circumspect reinterpretation of excellent theoretical achievements that have been overseen for several centuries.

The four panels dedicated to these questions gave the opportunity to read and discuss eight stimulating papers by scholars from the US, France, Italy and Germany, who share their expertise on:

- Speroni's drama theory in the context of the *Accademia degli Infiammati*,
- the interpretation of Horace's *Ars poetica* in the commentary by Robortello,

- the *a priori* that tragedy has to end sadly,
- the general idea that Aristotle gave the basis for the rising drama,
- the relation of literary practice to Aristotelian poetics,
- the aesthetic decisions and the institutional contexts in which Opera came into being,
- the implications of what could be called the aesthetic of pleasure for the emergence of Opera, and
- the implications of the political theater by Andrea Cicognini.

Five of these papers could be united and prepared for this publication in an elaborated version. The remaining three contributions have been or will be published elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Anna Le Touze, University of Rennes II, accentuates in her contribution «Drama and the notions of literary propriety and verisimilitude in Francesco Robortello's paraphrase on Horace's *Ars Poetica*» the fact that the sixteenth century discussion on literary theory is by far not limited to Aristotelian topics but is characterized by a wide reception and productive integration of Classical poetological theory. Le Touze shows how Francesco Robortello – in his paraphrase of the Horatian epistle known as *Ars poetica* – understands the way Horace combines the notions of literary propriety and verisimilitude and applies them to theater. Le Touze demonstrates how Robortello explicates both notions in view of five relevant topics: characters, metres, *deus ex machina*, actions that cannot be shown on stage and satyric drama.

Enrica Zanin, University of Strasbourg, explains in her paper «Tragedy ends unhappily – the concealed influence of medieval poetics in early modern theory of tragedy» why Renaissance (and later) scholars and poets come to the not entirely Aristotelian statement, that the ending of tragedy must be sad. The answer lies in the strong medieval tradition of literary theory still prevailing in the sixteenth century. Zanin further investigates why sixteenth and later centuries' scholars claim that the idea that

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Tatiana Korneeva, «The Political Theater and Theatrical Politics of Andrea Giacinto Cicognini: *Il Don Gastone di Moncada* (1641)», in: *Politics and Aesthetics in European Baroque Tragedy*, ed. by Jan Bloemendal and Nigel Smith. Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 260–293.

tragedy has to end sadly derives from Aristotle's definition of the tragic genre, while it is clearly the expression of a conception of the tragedy developed in the late antiquity.

In «The Early Reception of Aristotelian Poetics» Rolf Lohse, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn, addresses the question to what extent scholars and drama writers in the first half of the sixteenth century take part in the reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics*. While it is generally admitted to speak of the reception of the *Poetics* in the wake of the great commentaries by Robortello (1548), Segni (1549), and Maggi and Lombardi (1550), earlier texts by Gian Giorgio Trissino, Bernardino Daniello, and others show that even if certain Aristotelian notions like catharsis are discussed, evidence can be proposed that this early discussion (and the early drama writing) is based on Donatian and Horatian rather than on Aristotelian terms. This orientation of both, the early poetological thinking and the early drama-writing, can be detected in the later Cinquecento as well as in seventeenth century texts – in spite of the claim of an overall Aristotelianism made by Spingarn in the 1890s and by Weinberg in 1961. As a consequence, 400 years of stern Aristotelianism will have to be reconsidered critically.

In her contribution «Sperone Speroni's Poetics of Tragedy before the background of the *Accademia degli Infiammati*» Simona Oberto, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München, investigates the institutional context of the academy in Renaissance Italy for poetological reflection and for the constitution of genre-poetics, which possibly can transcend the academy's program. The example chosen in this paper is the ephemeral *Accademia degli Infiammati* (ca. 1540–1548) in Padua. Oberto demonstrates that although this academy counts among the centers of Renaissance Aristotelianism, neither the message of the programmatic *impresa* – the academy's emblem or crest – nor the show-piece of their elected president Speroni seems to underpin this aesthetic choice. The question discussed in this paper is what relation can be established between the strong Aristotelian background of the *Accademia degli Infiammati* and the poetic and poetological implications of the programmatic *impresa* and Speroni's tragedy *Canace*, both pointing to Ovid, Seneca and Terence, and thus to a current of literary theory in vogue before the rediscovery of the Aristotelian *Poetics*.

Alexandra Origgi, Freie Universität Berlin, analyses in her contribution «The Metamorphoses of Dafne (and Apollo): the Birth of Opera at the Crossroads of Genres» the first «dramma per musica» *Dafne* (1600) by Ottavio Rinuccini as a production of theoretical endeavor on tragedy by members of the *Camerata dei Bardi* and references to Giambattista Guarini's pastoral tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido*, its staging, and the defense of the masterpiece in several tracts summed up in his *Il compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1602). Origgi is particularly interested in Guarini's ideas on pleasure grafted on the Aristotelian *Poetics*. The analysis of the resulting «aesthetics of pleasure» leads her to an all new interpretation of this first opera.

In this place I want to express my gratitude to the participants of the four most stimulating panels, the presidents and the discussants Prof. Dr. Virginie Leroux, Université de Reims, Prof. Dr. Jane Tylus, New York University, and Dr. Marc Laureys, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn, the audience, and, above all, the contributors for their patience, which I have hopefully not over-stretched by taking much time for the publication of the papers. I would like to thank the editors of the recently refounded periodical *Horizonte* to generously accepting the publication of these five contributions to the discussion of the Renaissance origin of modern European drama. This discussion may be considered a bit far away from contemporary literature which is the first vocation of this journal, but if you take a look at theater which is still a field of intense creative activity and source of a specific type of feedback to society – a tremendously valuable input during the last 500 years –, these contributions might be of interest to today's readers. Literary archaeology is mostly confined to specialists, but it may also be helpful to understand the historical evolution of contemporary forms, genres, practices, and art domains. So there is hope that the following essays will be enjoyed as stimulating and enriching reading.<sup>3</sup>

3 Citations of sixteenth century texts either follow the original orthography and typography – as in Lohse's article – or the orthographical norms of today's reference editions – as in Le Touze's article.