

The Early Reception of Aristotelian *Poetics*

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The neo-classical European theater came into being more than 500 years ago in Italy. Mundane Italian comedies and tragedies were drafted on the basis of classical Greek and Roman drama genres and met a tremendous success: about 700 Italian comedies, tragedies, pastorals, tragicomedies were written, staged and printed during the sixteenth century. Comedies like Mantovano's *Formicone* (1503), Ariosto's *La Cassaria* (1508), Dovizi di Bibiena's *Calandra* (1513), Machiavelli's *La Mandragola* (1518), Beolco's *La Piovana* (1532), tragedies like Trissino's *Sophonisba* (1515), Rucellai's *Rosmunda* (1515), and Pazzi's *Dido in Cartagine* (1524), pastorals like Tasso's *Aminta* and pastoral tragicomedies, like Guarini's *Il pastor fido* stick out of a vast production of texts fallen into an unjustified oblivion since then.

For a long time authoritative scholarship has taught that these texts dwell on the *Poetics* of Aristotle. The following citation from the Enciclopedia dello spettacolo gives a typical example for the widely acknowledged – but misleading – majoritarian position:

[...] le composizioni tragiche d'ispirazione sofoclea, euripidea o seneciana di Trissino, Rucellai, Speroni, Giraldi Cinthio o la stessa *Orazia* dell'Aretino (insieme alla *Sofonisba* forse il più alto esempio cinquecentesco del genere) restano come documenti di dignitosa letteratura o tentativi talora interessanti ma chiusi nel proprio tempo, di applicazione alle esigenze e alla pratica dello spettacolo della *Poetica aristotelica*, trad. in quegli anni (1548) e posta a fondamento di ogni principio estetico.¹

According to Prosperi's understanding even the tragedies before 1548 are to be interpreted as performed theater, based on mimesis, including anagnorisis and peripeteia,

1 Giorgio Prosperi, «Italia», in: Silvio D'Amico (ed.), *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*, t. VI, Roma: Le Maschere, 1959, p. 631–700, here: p. 634, my italics. «*Orazia* by Aretino (in conjunction with the *Sophonisba* which is the highest example of the genre in the sixteenth century) remain as documents of venerable literature or as interesting attempts, yet all too self-contained in their time, to conform to the requirements and to the exercise of drama performance of the Aristotelian *Poetics* which was translated in those years (1548) and chosen as foundation of every aesthetic principle.» My translation. If not indicated otherwise, I will use my own translations in what follows.

respecting the classical three units (of time, space, and action), and aiming at the experience of catharsis among the spectators. The cathartic effect is achieved by provoking the sensations of fear and pity in each spectator – thus clearing him (or her) from these or similar sensations.

As the assumption of an encompassing Aristotelian frame for reference of drama theory in the first half of the sixteenth century is unfounded as for chronological reasons, we have to conceptualize a more convincing description of the theory framework of early neo-classical drama. The argument in this paper will focus on two aspects of the Italian reception of the *Poetics*. In addition, one aspect of the French reception of the *Poetics* will be developed in order to demonstrate that the idea of an exclusive Aristotelian theory of literature has led to disregard other important sources of drama theory. The concise tracts of the late antique grammarians Euanthius and Donatus have to be considered as important sources for the literary theory at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century. With high probability they were even decisive for the way the Aristotelian *Poetics* was read and commented upon during the sixteenth century.

During the early years of existence of neo-classical drama – the years before 1536 – only very isolated references to the Aristotelian *Poetics* can be detected. The scarcity of such references shows that during the formative years of the European neo-classical theater (1480–1536) in Italy there has not been anything like a fully developed frame of reference of Aristotelian descent. The investigation will then concentrate on the commentaries of the *Poetics* by Robortello (1548), Segni (1549), and Maggi and Lombardi (1550) in order to show that these scholars interpret the Aristotelian text on the basis of already existing literary theories passed on by late antique and medieval scholarship. The so-called Aristotelianism turns out to be of a strong non-Aristotelian descent. The conclusion of this paper will briefly hint to a third problem: the so-called rule of the three unities has been constantly taken into account by later critics when interpreting the Italian theater of the sixteenth century even if such a rule has not even been formulated in the sixteenth century. According to textual evidence this rule can be dated quite precisely in the late 20s of the seventeenth century. The final discussion of the

paper will name the consequences of these historical findings for an adequate interpretation of the sixteenth century's discussion of poetics and, what is more, for our understanding of the reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics*. As the theoretical framework of neo-classical Italian theater has yet not (or only exceptionally) been described in a convincing way, this contribution is meant to open a path leading to a historically more satisfactory approach to the drama theory of the Renaissance.

The theory framework of neo-classical Italian drama

When Italian authors started using the Antique mundane drama genres comedy and tragedy in the 1480s, the process of recovery of the Aristotelian *Poetics* started alike.² While it is true that Giorgio Valla's Latin translation of the *Poetics* was available in print from 1498 on, it is equally true that this text was discussed very few times and only in small fractions during the following three and a half decades. The year 1536 is the crucial date for the beginning of a productive reception of the *Poetics*. It starts with the publication of Alessandro Pazzi's Latin translation of the text.³ The reading, understanding, commenting, and criticizing of the *Poetics* went on during the whole of the remaining century and did not come to an end in 1600.⁴ The numerous comments of the *Poetics* after 1540 show that there has been a great demand for explanation of a text which was repeatedly labelled as «obscure» and which is still full of questions today.⁵

2 A manuscript of Angelo Poliziano on the old comedy, dating back to the mid-eighties of the 15th century gives an accurate summary of Aristotle's statements on comedy. This very early document proves, on the one hand, the beginning of the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*, but on the other hand, it delivers no proof for a beginning Aristotelianism as Poliziano considers equally Diomed's *Ars grammatica* and Donatus and Evantius' *De comoedia*. Rosetta Lattanzi Roselli, *Andria Terenti. La commedia antica e l'Andria di Terenzio*, Firenze: Sansoni, 1973. Lattanzi Roselli's study points, ceteris paribus, to the important theoretical achievements of the fifteenth century's scholars Weinberg does not take into account.

3 The precise chronology of the discussion of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in the sixteenth century is no controversial issue. August Buck, *Italienische Dichtungslehren vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang der Renaissance*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1952, p. 146; Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 t., Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961, p. 371ss. The reference will be abbreviated to «Weinberg 1961» in what follows. Brigitte Kappl, *Die Poetik des Aristoteles in der Dichtungstheorie des Cinquecento*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006, p. 2; Danilo Aguzzi-Barbagli, «La conquête de la poétique d'Aristote», in: Eva Kushner (ed.), *L'époque de la Renaissance*, t. 3., *Maturations et mutations* (1520–1560), Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2011, p. 247–254, esp. p. 248.

4 The invention of French Classicism in the 1620s and 1630s and the vivid discussion of the *Poetics* during the seventeenth century can be understood as further steps of the continuing discussion.

5 In 1541 Giralaldi writes in his «Dedica all'Orbecche» to Ercole da Este II: «Et anchora ch'Aristotile ci dia il modo di comporle, egli oltre la sua natia oscuritade, la quale (come sapete) è somma, riman tanto oscuro, & pieno di tate tenebre, per non vi essere gli auttori, de quali egli adduce l'auttoritadi, &

If this reading proves correct, we have to admit that the neo-classical Italian Theater has emerged without reference to the Aristotelian *Poetics*. This brings us to the understanding that neo-classical theater must have been thriving on another theoretical framework. This «other» theory framework is thoroughly known, but it has not sufficiently been taken into consideration by scholars and researchers of the last four hundred years. The theory framework in question stems from the late-antique tract *De fabula* by Donatus and Euanthius, which has been printed several times from 1470 on. The relevant definitions of the dramatic genres can be found in the fourth part of this tract:

Inter tragoediam autem et comoediam cum multa tum inprimis hoc distat, quod in comoedia mediocres fortunae hominum, parui impetus pericula laetique sunt exitus actionum, at in tragoedia omnia contra: ingentes personae, magni timores, exitus funesti habentur; et illic prima turbulenta, tranquilla ultima, in tragoedia contrario ordine res aguntur; tum quod in tragoedia fugienda uita, in comoedia capessenda exprimitur; postremo quod omnis comoedia de fictis est argumentis, tragoedia saepe de historica fide petitur.⁶

According to Donatus and Euanthius the dramatic genres of tragedy and comedy are complementary: the tragedy presents an action that starts happily and ends sadly. The

gli esempi per cōfirmatione de gli ordini e delle leggi, ch'egli impone a gli scrittori d'esse, ch'a fatica è intesa, non dirò l'arte ch'egli insegna, ma la diffinitione, ch'egli dà della tragedia.» Giovanni Battista Giraldi, «Dedica all'Orbecche» (1541), fol. 2, in: Bernard Weinberg (ed.), *Trattati di poetica e retorica del Cinquecento*, t. 1, Bari: Laterza, 1970, p. 409–413, here p. 411, my italics. In what follows the reference to this edition of Italian tracts will be abbreviated to «Weinberg 1970». «Even if he gives us the way of composing them, Aristotle, whose native obscurity is as you know extreme, also remains very obscure and full of darkness, because he does not name the authors from which he deducts authority, and the examples that serve to confirm the instructions and the laws which he imposes on writers of tragedies, so I will not say that the art he teaches is understood only with effort, but the definition he gives of the tragedy.» – Robortello gives the following appreciation of Aristotle's *Poetics* in his letter of dedication to Duke Cosmo II of Florence: «in hoc difficillimo, obscuribimoque Aristotelis libro». Francesco Robortello, *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes, paraphrasis in librum Horatii*, Florentiae: in officina L. Torrentini, 1548, fol. iii. The reference will be abbreviated to «Robortello 1548» in what follows. «[...] in this very difficult and obscure book by Aristotle.» – Castelvetro speaks of «cose oscure». Ludovico Castelvetro, *Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata, Et Sposta*, Stampata in Vienna d'Austria: per Gaspar Stainhofer, MDLXX, fol. Aiii.

- 6 Evanzio 1979, p. 135–148, IV 2; p. 146–147. «But many things distinguish comedy from tragedy, especially the fact that comedy is concerned with the average fortunes of people, the onset of moderate risks, and actions with happy endings. But in tragedy, everything is the opposite: great people, immense terrors, and deathly endings. Furthermore, in comedy what is stormy at first becomes smooth at the end; in tragedy the action has the opposite pattern. Then, too, tragedy presents the kind of life that is to be avoided, whereas the life of comedy is one which we are drawn towards. Finally, in comedy everything comes from fictional plots, whereas in tragedy, we often look to the facts of history.» Translation cited from: Sarah Dewar-Watson, *Tragedy. A readers' guide to essential criticism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 82.

characters belong to the highest ranks of society. And the moral implication is clear: tragedy shows actions that you should avoid. According to Euanthius tragedy shows what can be qualified as «fugienda vita». The comedy, on the other hand, is characterized as the exact contrary of tragedy. It starts in disorder and has a happy outcome. The characters belong to the lower ranks of society. Its moral implication is opposed to the one of tragedy: comedy describes the type of life that has to be seized – «capessenda vita».

The late Roman scholars Donatus and Euanthius have probably not witnessed any theater performance, but they disposed of texts, especially of comedies by the Roman author Terence. They tried to accumulate all the knowledge they could lay hands on in order to comment these texts. These comments on drama genres have been passed on during the Middle Ages with the comedies of Terence. If the notions «comedy» and «tragedy» were partly stripped off of any reference to performed theater during the Middle Ages, parts of their content were still virulent as proves the famous *Letter to Cangrande* by Dante explaining the choice of the title of his «Divina» Comedia.

Et est comedia genus quoddam poetice narrationis ab omnibus aliis differens. Differt ergo a tragedia in materia per hoc, *quod tragedia in principio est admirabilis et quieta, in fine seu exitu est fetida et horribilis*; et dicitur propter hoc a «tragos» quod est hircus et «oda» quasi «cantus hircinus», id est feditus ad modum hirci; ut patet per Senecam in suis tragediis. Comedia vero inchoat asperitatem alicuius rei, sed eius materia prospere terminatur, ut patet per Terentium in suis comediis.⁷

From the first edition of Terence's comedies (Strasbourg 1470) on, Euanthius' and Donatus' commentaries were always included in the subsequent editions. The commentary section by Euanthius and Donatus became nothing less than common knowledge of literary theory.⁸

7 Dante Alighieri, «Epistola ad Can Grande della Scala» (Ep. XIII, 1312–1319), in: *Tutte le opere*, ed. by Luigi Blasucci, Firenze: Sansoni, 1989, p. 341–352, here: 344–345, my italics. «And the comedy is a narrative genre different from all the others. In regard of tragedy, the difference is in its matter, the tragedy is in its beginning admirable and calm, at its end foul-smelling and horrible, its name roots in «tragos» which is the he-goat, and in «oda», meaning quasi «song of the he-goat», which means malodorous as a he-goat; such as you can witness in Seneca and his tragedies. The comedy begins with the bitter or harsh side of a matter, but the story ends well, as you can see in Terence and his comedies.»

8 Important scholars and printers like Jodocus Ascensius Badius printed these texts and commented on them. For example in his 1496 edition of Terence's comedies.

This – including of course the *Ars poetica* by Horace – is the very basis of drama theory at least until 1536.⁹ Bernard Weinberg points to this basis of literary theory during the first 36 years of the sixteenth century, but he is unwilling to consider it other than a deviation from the Aristotelian main road he assumes.¹⁰ His idealistic construction of sixteenth century Aristotelianism leads him to the rearrangement of the chronological order reversing the moments when Donatus and Aristotle were adopted:

When the *Poetics* was added to the body of ancient authority, and after the innumerable «parallels» between Aristotle and Horace had been discerned, the *theorists transferred the Horatian precepts to the Aristotelian text. Nothing could have been more natural or easier*. Since both writers had talked about the same things, they must necessarily be recommending the same things; an identity of doctrine led to an identity of rules. *Other texts were gradually brought into consideration*, for the number of precepts available in Horace and Aristotle was limited. Aristotle offered a complete set of guides for the writing of tragedy, some suggestions about the epic, only the most modest remarks on comedy. Horace was somewhat more inclusive, treating comedy and satire as well as tragedy and the epic. Therefore the critics turned to other sources. [And this can only mean afterwards!] In Donatus and Diomedes, transmitted to them in the commentaries on Terence, they found a few hints about the minor genres, along with a complete set of dicta on the making of comedy.¹¹

This passage taken from Weinberg's *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* shows the peculiar twist of his construction: according to Weinberg, Renaissance scholars first looked to Aristotle and then to other sources like Donatus. The contrary is most probably true: Donatus' and Euanthius' brief definitions of dramatic genres are the primordial theory framework of the emerging Italian mundane theater – not only during the first 36 years but for the rest of the century and even further on. It is even the very basis for understanding Aristotle's *Poetics* in that time.¹²

9 This argument is developed in detail in my book *Renaissancedrama und humanistische Poetik in Italien*. München: Fink, 2015, chapter 2.2. In what follows this reference will be abbreviated to «Lohse 2015».

10 Weinberg 1961, p. 807.

11 Weinberg 1961, p. 807, my italics.

12 Denores' (1586) and Patrizi's (1585) trattati still offer views based on Donatus. Giason Denores, *Discorso di Giason Denores intorno a' que' principii, cause, et accrescimenti, che la comedia, la tragedia, et il poema heroico ricevono dalla philosophia morale, & civile e da' Governatori delle Repubbliche*, in Padoua: appresso Paulo Meieto, 1586. Francesco Patrizi, «Parere [...] in difesa di Ariosto», in: Torquato Tasso, *Apologia del Sig. Torquato Tasso. In Difesa della sua Giervusalemme Liberata [...]*, in Ferrara: appresso Giulio Cesare Cagnacini, et Fratelli, 1585, fol. [L4]–N2. What is more, even today's views on the theory of drama are not Aristotelian, but refer to Donatus, for example our understanding of the endings of tragedies and comedies.

The relevance of Donatus' text has not been considered properly by Weinberg due to the strong and arbitrary assumption of an Aristotelian theory-framework at the beginning of the sixteenth century. If we accept the chronological order of the reception that is historically more reliable, new insight can be gained on how Renaissance scholars «understood» Aristotle's *Poetics*. As it happens, the understanding of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in the sixteenth century is conditioned to a great extent by a substratum of pre-existing poetological knowledge. This knowledge includes the tracts of Donatus and Euanthius, the humanist interpretation of Horace and more general Christian ideas. This substratum can be understood as point of departure for their explanations of the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Taking this substratum into account can help to understand why the *trattati* of literary theory and the prefaces of dramatic texts until 1540 only rarely show traces of Aristotelian notions, but almost always *formulae* deriving from the traditions based on Donatus, Euanthius, and Horace. The discussion of the Aristotelian *Poetics* seems to be much more moored to Donatus and Euanthius than to an intrinsically Aristotelian context. This holds true even for the texts Weinberg presents as evidence for an early reception of the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Vittore Fausto's *De comoedia libellus* (1511) is one of those texts usually put forward in order to prove the supposedly overwhelming Aristotelian tendency in early literary theory. It includes three references to the Aristotelian *Poetics* – only the first of them concerns a central feature of his theory on comedy, but there is no hint to his theory of tragedy, to catharsis, or to structural considerations, like peripetia or the qualities of the tragic hero. The first and most important reference is: «etiam Aristoteles comprobavit, inquires, quod in turpitudine ridiculum est, comoediam imitari.»¹³

This line concerns the ridicule imitated in the comedy. According to Aristotle the ridicule is rooted in disturbance. Neither this one nor the other two references to Aristotle concern the question of dramatic structure, so they can be left aside as not relevant for our discussion.¹⁴

13 Vittore Fausto, *Hoc Pugillari Terentius Numeris Concinatus, Et L. Victoris Fausti De Comoedia Libellus Nova Recognitione, Litterisque Novis Continetur*, Venetij 1511, fol. Aaz–AA8v, here: AA3. Recent edition: «De Comoedia Libellus» (1511) in: Weinberg 1970, p. 5–19, here p. 8. In what follows this reference will be abbreviated to «Fausto 1511». «Aristotle acknowledges this, saying that the ridicule is in the disturbance the comedy imitates.»

14 The second reference to Aristotle is: «Non defuerunt etiam, qui fabularum initia Siculis adjudicarent,

The second text cited by Weinberg as «earliest extensive exploitation of the *Poetics* in Italian [...]»¹⁵ and often discussed also elsewhere is Trissino's letter (printed in 1524) to Pope Leo X to whom he dedicates his tragedy *Sophonisba*. This tragedy written in 1515 is implicitly presented by Weinberg as early neo-classical tragedy with a strong Aristotelian tendency.¹⁶

At a first glance, Weinberg's conclusion appears to be justified, as the letter of dedication gives a brief paraphrasis of Aristotle's definitions of comedy and tragedy, and even a reference to the Aristotelian concept of catharsis seems to be included: «Ma la Tragedia muove compassione, e tema, con le quali, e con altri amaestramenti arreca diletto agli ascoltatori, et utilitate al vivere humano.»¹⁷

quemadmodum Aristoteles in *Poeticis* ait, quum Epicharmus comicorum antiquissimus poeta illinc esset oriundus.» Fausto 1511: AA4, Weinberg 1970: 10. «Also those were not lacking who ascribe the beginnings of plays to the Sicels just as said Aristotles in the *Poetics*, that the poet Epicharmus, the oldest of comedigraphs, was born there.» The third reference to Aristotle is: «Arbitror etiam in comodia cum Donato longe plures ab initio fuisse cantores, quum (ut Aristoteles in *Naturali* quadam sentit *quaestione*) multi facilius servare numeros possunt.» Fausto 1511: AA6v, Weinberg 1970: 15. «I also think with Donatus that in the comedy there were a long time after its beginning singers [as actors], so (as Aristotle thinks in a certain place in *Natural Questions*) being numerous they could more easily be attentive to the metrics.»

15 Weinberg 1961, p. 361.

16 This appreciation follows a long-lasting tradition going back at least to the seventeenth century: Girolamo Ghilini writes in *Teatro d'hvomini letterati*, in Venetia: Per li Guerigli, 1647: «Nasce la tragedia [...] all'esempio suo [*Sophonisba* by Trissino], e con la scorta d'Aristotile seguendo le sue pedate» (p. 108). «The tragedy comes to life following his example and with the escort of Aristotle following his footsteps.» Voltaire expresses the same position in the «Préface» of his *Sophonisbe* (1770), however with a slight hesitation: «La première tragédie italienne vraiment digne de ce nom est une tragédie de *Sophonisbe*. L'auteur en est Jean-Georges Trissino, patricien de Vicence, mort en 1550. [...] On a reproché à Trissino une imitation trop servile de l'historien latin et on lui a reproché de ne pas savoir appliquer les lois propres au théâtre [...]. La *Sophonisba* n'en est pas moins une œuvre très-remarquable, si l'on tient compte de l'époque où elle s'est produite. [...] les unités sont, pour la première fois dans l'art dramatique moderne, strictement observées.» Voltaire, «Préface», *Sophonisbe* (1770), 1877, Bd. 7, p. 27. «The first Italian tragedy worthy of this name is a tragedy about *Sophonisba*. Its author is Giangiorgio Trissino, patrician of Vicenza, who died in 1550. [...] Trissino was blamed for a too servile imitation of the Latin historian and for not knowing how to apply the proper laws on theatre [...]. The *Sophonisba* is nevertheless a very remarkable piece of work, if you take into account the historical moment when it was produced. [...] The unities are, for the first time in the modern dramatic art strictly observed.» The tragedy deals with the last hours of the Queen of Carthage, who after the negative outcome of the decisive battle against the Roman army during the second Punic War is forced to take poison in order to avoid Roman captivity. – The tragedy's action seems to be underpinned by the rule of the units of time, space and action. The criterion of mimesis seems to be fulfilled. But on the other hand, there is neither peripeteia nor anagnorisis. As for the catharsis the fate of the Queen trying to escape her dilemma can be seen as the source of the sensations of fear and pity in the spectators. While the drama seems to fit in what we would expect to be an Aristotelian tragedy – though it does not fulfill every criterion – the dedication to Pope Leo X printed with the tragedy in the first edition 1524 does not support this pretense.

17 Trissino 1524, aiiiv. «But the Tragedy stirs compassion and fear, with which, in conjunction with other instructions it causes pleasure for the listeners and benefit for human life.»

However, a closer analysis of this sentence reveals that Trissino refers to this core concept of the *Poetics* only in a most selective way. While he names the two sensations Aristotle mentions when defining catharsis, Trissino neither refers to catharsis nor to purgation. In fact, he does something quite different. Trissino replaces the Aristotelian purpose of tragedy which is catharsis with «diletto» and «utilità» – pleasure and utility –, notions that can be linked to Horace, but not to Aristotle. Trissino transfers the Aristotelian sensations causal to catharsis to the context of the Horatian theory of poetry.

Trissino is obviously interested in the Aristotelian idea that drama stirs sensations. But this arousal of sensations seems to be useful only in the framework of the formerly established Horatian poetic theory. It seems rather implausible that Trissino overlooked the Aristotelian core notion catharsis. But the text clearly shows that he tried to tie the affects produced by drama to Horace's literary theory. The idea of a spectator being freed from these sensations, however, does not seem to fit into this framework. The question is if Trissino's fragmental reference to the *Poetics* can be considered as an Aristotelian position or if it is not more adequate to state what is written in his text. Here, Trissino maintains the Horatian framework of literary theory and extends it by grafting onto it the two notions from the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Whatever Trissino is doing, it can not be called «commenting Aristotle»!

Reception theory may help us to understand Trissino's intellectual operation.¹⁸ The adaptation of parts of the *Poetics* to the already existing literary theory can be understood in analogy to what happens according to the reader-response theory when a reader encounters an unheard-of text. According to this set of theories, readers can only react to a new text by activating their horizon of expectations and of suitable knowledge they dispose of in order to interpret the new in the light of what is already known. The interpretation of the unknown can not proceed but from the basis of what is known, and will refer to this basis, even though we can not be sure that the interpretation is re-

18 Reception theorists and Reader-response critics like Norman H. Holland, Wolfgang Iser, and Hans-Robert Jauss have insisted on taking into account the horizon of previous knowledge when looking at the reception act. The concept of reception horizon – «horizon of expectations» is taken from Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 25.

liable in respect to the intrinsic sense of the encountered text. But as there is no other way to understanding, one has to take this hermeneutic road.

Accordingly, Trissino comes to an understanding of the affects Aristotle speaks of by considering them on the basis of the Horatian literary theory which he is undoubtedly more familiar with. In this way, the chosen elements of the Aristotelian *Poetics* can be exploited by integrating them into the familiar literary theory of the time – even if this means that they are taken out of their genuine context. Trissino proposes a way to explain Aristotle by picking notions and arguments from his *Poetics* and by transferring them to the still prevailing framework of humanist drama theory. As others follow Trissino's method, it will become a common model for adopting Aristotelian notions to the expanding poetological discussion in the sixteenth century. By integrating some of these notions into the still reliable framework of Horatian, Donatian, and Euanthian literary theory, an understanding of Aristotle's *Poetics* is generated that is not very Aristotelian. According to Weinberg, Renaissance scholars, lacking «intellectual purity and orderliness» (Weinberg 1961: viii), can only produce texts that are «misreadings» (Weinberg 1961: 523) and «departures» from Aristotle (Weinberg 1961: 790). But in reality, these are first-hand attempts to *understand* Aristotle on the basis of a non-Aristotelian theory framework.

A brief look at two more examples for this type of interpretation applied to the *Poetics* of Aristotle can help to understand the common scholarly practice at that moment of history. Bernardino Daniello's *Della Poetica* (1536) is often presented as a key example for an early adoption of the *Poetics* of Aristotle. Daniello in fact refers to the Greek philosopher's distinction between the poet and the historian: «Dico mescolar le cose uere con le false & fitte, perche non è tenuto il Poeta com'è l'Historico, di descriuere le cose tali, quali elle ueramente state et auenute sono: ma ben quali esser deurebbono.»¹⁹ However, this important distinction does not give a revolutionary insight into the convictions of Aristotle, it does not even prove that it is an adoption of an Aristotelian position, as the distinction between historian and dramatist could also have

19 Daniello 1536: 41. «I invite to mix true things with false and invented ones, as the poet is not forced like the historian to describe the things exactly as they have happened and come about, but as they should be.»

been derived from Horace's *Ars poetica*.²⁰ Daniello's text refers to one feature of the Aristotelian literary theory but passes over in silence other important issues. Daniello neither mentions catharsis in his *La poetica* (1536) nor Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero.

The anonymous tract *Giuditio sopra la Tragedia di Canace & Macareo* (printed 1550, but dated 1543) illustrates how successful Trissino's approach to the Aristotelian *Poetics* is in the sixteenth century and gives evidence how Trissino's method evolves. The *Giuditio*, written probably by Guido Cavalcanti, relates – like Trissino – to the emotions that are the prerequisite of the catharsis effect in the *Poetics*, but again, there is no reference to catharsis or to purgation. Only horror and pity are addressed in the *Giuditio*, but not a word is said about what they are needed for in the *Poetics*.

Però che se bene la tragedia è di cose terribili, & miserabili, non deue però esser introdutta in essa persona scelerata, su laquale debbia nascere l'horrore, & la commiseratione. Però che qual misercordia puo nascere ne gli animi de gli spettatori di una persona scelerata, la quale per sua malignità incorra nelle infelicitadi, & miserie?²¹

The main argument of this text is that wicked characters like Canace or Macareo cannot produce the feeling of misery in the spectator. This seems to be compatible with the Aristotelian theory. However the question remains if the affects of horror and compassion alone are enough to conclude that the text can be read as one that refers exclusively and without doubt to the *Poetics*. What about the fact that the function of compassion for the process of catharsis is entirely omitted in this context? What argument is relevant in order to decide to what degree the author of the *Giuditio* refers to the *Poetics*: is it mentioning «horrore» and «commiseratione» or is it not mentioning catharsis? Even if the reference to the *Poetics* is undeniable, it remains in fact rather inaccurate. The emotions Aristotle mentions are taken into account, but not their frame-

20 Horace, *Ars poetica*, v. 119 «Aut famam sequere, aut sibi convenientia finge.» «Either follow the legend or invent according to your standards.»

21 *Giuditio sopra la Tragedia di Canace & Macareo* [...]. In Lucca: per Vincentio Busdrago, 1550, fol. 2v, my underlining. «Even if the tragedy treats of terrible and miserable matters, no nefarious person should appear in it, which shall arise horror and pity. Namely what pity can arise in the spirit of the spectators of a nefarious person which runs into infelicity and misery for its own perniciousness?» This is a partial paraphrase of the 13th chapter of the *Poetics*, where Aristotle distinguishes four different versions of the plot in relation to the moral quality of the hero.

work. So the argument could be qualified as Aristotle without the Aristotelian theory of catharsis.²²

The non-Aristotelian Aristotelianism of the great commentaries on the *Poetics*

Even in 1550 – so it seems – the notion of catharsis is not yet included in Italian contemporary poetic theory. An evolution in theory should however be expected due to the prominent mid-century commentaries of the *Poetics*. One of the first relevant textual references to catharsis, the central notion of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, is Robortello's commentary *In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* (1548) on the *Poetics*. In this commentary, Robortello incorporates the *Poetics* into a system of thought determined by moral utility.²³

When catharsis is discussed, Robortello comes to an interpretation that is rather faithful to the Aristotelian text. Citing Pazzi's translation, Robortello states that the catharsis clears the very emotions that produce the cathartic process: «Tragoedia est imitatio actionis illustris, absolutae, magnitudinem habentis, sermone suaui, [...] per misericordiam verò atque terrorem perturbationes huiusmodi purgans.»²⁴

Robortello's interpretation is noteworthy as it is free from any explicit reference to morals – and as it limits the purging effect of catharsis to the two emotions that are supposed to trigger it.²⁵ In his commentary, Robortello insists that the catharsis will

22 This type of approach can be observed with regard to other notions and arguments of the *Poetics*. If on the one hand Renaissance dramatists interpret Aristotelian notions in ways that are not compatible with the Aristotelian *Poetics*, questioning Donatian theory, on the other hand, does not mean that Aristotelian theory is entirely accepted. In the *Giuditio*, Cavalcanti criticizes Donatus' genre definitions. Commenting on tragicomedy Cavalcanti states «[...] che molto in ciò s'ingannasse Donato; il quale fu di ferma opinione, che tutte le Tragedie fossero di fine infelice, come ancho s'ingannò, quâdo disse che le comedie sempre cominciavano da cose turbolente, & le tragedie da cose felici.» (1550, 17v) («[...] in many respects Donatus was mistaken. He was of the strong opinion that all tragedies were of a sad ending, as he went wrong saying that comedies always started in unrest and the tragedies in a happy state.») But does this distancing from Donatus mean that Cavalcanti opts exclusively for the *Poetics* of Aristotle?

23 See the detailed exegesis by Deborah Blocker in her article «Élucider et équivoquer: Francesco Robortello (ré)invente la «catharsis»». In: *Stratégies de l'équivoque. Les Cahiers du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 33 (2004). Internet publication: <http://ccrh.revues.org/250>, 4th November 2013.

24 Robortello 1548, 52. «The tragedy is the imitation of noble actions, that are complete and have grandeur, in nice style, [...] that cleans by compassion and fear from those [affects].»

25 Robortello understands the demonstrative *toioútôn* in Aristotle's sentence «tôn toioútôn pathemátôn» as limited to the emotions *éleos* and *phóbos* (compassion and fear). According to this reading

operate exactly on these two «perturbationes»: «Quòd si quis roget, qualis sit Aristotelis sententia de tragoedia. Respondeo, existimare illum; eius recitatione, & inspectione purgari perturbationes has duas, commiserationem, & metum.»²⁶ The commentaries by Segni (1549) and Maggi and Lombardi (1550), however, interpret the central notion of catharsis almost immediately in a way that is not clearly Aristotelian. They are the result of extrapolating a traditional theoretical and religious frame of reference: late-antique literary theory and Christian thought result in an interpretation of catharsis that includes moral elements Aristotle would not have dreamt of. These interpretations seem to be counter-productive if you want to maintain the idea of an Aristotelian theory framework in the sixteenth century. But they are most appropriate if you interpret them as contemporary ways to read Aristotle's text in the light of the existing theory framework.

The beginning of the moralisation of catharsis can be traced back to Bernardo Segni's commentary on the *Poetics* in 1549. Segni widens the useful purgation effect of catharsis to other emotions («affetti») than those named by Aristotle:

È adunche la Tragedia una imitatione d'attione uirtuosa perfetta, & che habbia grandezza con parlar suaue separatamente in ciascheduna sua spetie nelle parti di coloro, che uan negociando; conducendo l'espurgatione degli affetti non per uia di narratione, ma per uia di misericordia, & di timore.²⁷

Segni widens the scope of emotions and considers even vices as relevant for catharsis:

Mache uuol dir' il Filosofo per purgar' gli affetti? Vuol' dir, che nel considerare simili imitationi, oue succedono casi terribili, o compaßioneuoli, noi purghiam' l'animo; ma in che modo? Ouero con considerar' tal imitatione, che ci arreca piacere, faccendoci imparar' quei casi seguiti? O ver quello, che è meglio? perchè, ueggendo noi simili casi auuenuti in persone eccellenti, più ageuolmente comportiamo le calamità nostre; ò uero impariamo à sopportarle. Et in tal' modo se noi siamo iracundi, ò intemperati uenghiamo à purgar' l'animo di tali affetti; considerando quei pericoli, & quei

the demonstrative *toioutôn* can be understood as «exactly those» or as «such» passions.

26 Robortello 1548, 53. «What, you can ask, is the Aristotelian definition of tragedy? The definition consists, this is my answer, in the following: by performing and contemplating it, two disturbances are removed: compassion and fear.»

27 Bernardo Segni, *Rettorica et poetica* 1549, 290. The reference will be abbreviated to «Segni 1549». The citation is from the 1551 edition, 171. «Hence the tragedy is an imitation of a virtuous and perfect action, that has greatness, in a sublime language, separately in differentiated fractions of those who talk; effectuating the purgation of the affects not by narration, but by commiseration and anguish.»

mali, che incontrano à chi è ne' uitij rinuolto, & à chi è fitto nelle perturbationi: dalla qual' consideratione è forza, che ne risulti piacer' grandissimo.²⁸

Watching a tragedy, one can learn to bear the adversities of life and avoid harmful passion that may lead to vice. Segni considers pleasure and utility as the aims of poetry defined by Horace, and he interprets them – like Trissino – as the decisive effects of tragedy. These effects can be achieved when all sorts of negative emotions are neutralized and can no longer lead to vice and confusion. Cleansing these emotions leads to pleasure and utility. Aristotle's theory which names only two affects is transferred to a subplot of the Horatian theory and can now cover any further emotion considered as harmful. Transforming the Aristotelian theorem in this way, Segni is opening it to more than two emotions and affiliating it to the Christian distinction of virtues and vices. Maggi and Lombardi – the authors of the third commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics* (1550) – interpret the Aristotelian concept in the same larger sense. According to them, the catharsis is not limited to only two emotions but can operate on a wider scope of passions and, what is more, forthright on vices. Maggi creates thus a connexion between the concept of catharsis, moral utility (dear to humanistic literary theory) and the Christian notion of vices.²⁹

His itaque rationibus haudquaquam dubito, Aristotelem nolle Tragoediae finē esse animā humanā à terrore misericordia'ue [sic] expurgare; sed his uti ad alias perturbationes ab animo remouendas: ex quarū remotione animus uirtutibus exornatur. nam ira, uerbi gratia, depulsa succedit mansuetudo. expulsa auaritia, inducitur liberalitas. atque ita de caeteris.³⁰

- 28 FN Segni 1549, 294, my italics. «But what does the Philosopher mean by purging the affects? He means that by watching such imitations, in which terrible or compassionate deeds happen, we cleanse the mind, but in what way? Either by watching such imitations which generate pleasure, and which make us know these deeds? Or – which is even better – by seeing such cases, happening to excellent persons, with more lightness we carry our calamities; or learn to support them. And in this way – if we are in rage, or excessive, we can come to cleanse the mind from such affects by weighing those dangers and evils that encounter him who is involved in vices and who is engaged in perturbations: and from this consideration necessarily will result great pleasure.»
- 29 This position is immediately taken up by scholars like Vettori, Sassetti, Speroni, Frachetta and others.
- 30 Vincenzo Maggi, *In Aristotelis Librum de Poetica Communes Explanations*, Venitijs: in officina Erasmiana Vincentij Valgrisi, MDL, p. 98, my italics. «For these reasons, I do not doubt that Aristotle did not see as the aim of tragedy, that the human soul be cleaned of horror and compassion, but that these were needed to clear the soul from other disturbances. By their removal the soul is adorned with virtues. If, for example, you cast out anger, gentleness will take its place. If you cast out parsimony, large-handedness will move in. And so on.»

Robortello's much more Aristotelian explanation – which does not necessarily harmonize with the religious background of the time – is challenged by Maggi's and Lombardi's interpretation which allows a broad variety of effects and which acknowledges the dominance of Christian ideas. Catharsis is thus transformed to a functional part of literary theory that serves pleasure and utility and rejoins Donatus' and Euanthius' position who understand tragedy as demonstration of what they call «fugienda vita». In this way, Maggi integrates the Aristotelian concept of purgation of certain emotions into the traditional humanist poetology and into the Christian theory of virtues and vices. Nothing in the Aristotelian text, however, calls for such an interpretation. Aristotle does not say anything about the punishment of sinners. It is the religious context of the Italian Renaissance that inspires interpretations of this kind, which reveal to be successful even among scholars of later times as they create a link between the obscure Aristotelian catharsis and Christian ideas of justice.

Segni's, Maggi's and Lombardi's commentaries provide the essential tool that renders the Aristotelian catharsis compatible to Christian morals by putting it under the control of Horace's concept of *prodesse* and *delectare*. Thus they follow the way Trissino opened in 1524. At the same time, these scholars extend purgation to a wide range of passions and vices. This very successful interpretation of catharsis can be found in many texts on literary theory in the years to come, e.g. in Giovanni Battista Giraldi's *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie* published in 1554, «[...] purgando la Tragedia gli animi de gli huomini per l'horrore & per la compaßione, che nascono dalle pene sofferte per gli errori loro, da coloro su i quali cadono i casi auersi, non essendo in tale attione peccato, non puo hauere il suo fine la Tragedia³¹»; as well as in Paolo Beni's *Disputatio in qua ostenditur praestare comoediam atque tragoediam metrorum vinculis soluere* (1600): «*Finis enim tragoediae comoediaeque propositus ille est ut auditores inde evadant cautiore, ac vitae officia perdiscentes, componant mores [...]*». ³²

31 Giovanni Battista Giraldi, *Discorso intorno al comporre delle commedie e delle tragedie*, Vinetia: Giolito de Ferrari, 1554 [antedated to 1543], p. 216. «[...] the Tragedy purges the minds of the human beings by horror and by pity which come to life from the pains suffered by its heroes, by those on who fall down the adverse cases; but when there is no vice in such an action, the tragedy cannot reach its goal.»

32 Beni 1600, 3v, my italics. Citation from Weinberg 1974, t. 4, p. 352. «The goal tragedy and comedy

Summary

In this paper, evidence is presented for a critical re-evaluation of the poetological concept of Aristotelianism in Renaissance drama theory. In this context, Aristotelianism will have to be reconsidered with caution. As the beginning of neo-classical drama took place during the last two decades of the fifteenth century, it seems to be highly improbable that writers could have referred to the Aristotelian *Poetics*. Its core statements have not played any significant role in literary theory before 1536. We can affirm that from 1536 henceforward, the *Poetics* has been increasingly commented upon. But this does not mean that each and everyone has read this text and has started reformulating the literary theory in order to adapt it to the Aristotelian *Poetics*. It does neither mean that a general conversion to Aristotelianism has taken place. Even after 1536, Aristotelianism was far from playing the important role that Weinberg suggests. Before 1548 – the year Robortello's commentary was published – there is no irrevocable proof for the assumption that Aristotelianism has become the central theory for drama. It has been punctually exploited following Trissino who kept the basis he was familiar with and enriched it with interesting statements taken from the Aristotelian *Poetics*.

On the other hand, it can be proved that Renaissance scholars extracted notions from the *Poetics* of Aristotle they were particularly interested in and transferred them to the prevailing literary theory in order to enrich it. This is the case of Fausto, Trissino, Daniello, Cavalcanti, and many others.

Even the scholars who can be named as the founders of Aristotelianism – Robortello, Segni, Maggi, and Lombardi – did at all evidence *not* present the *Poetics* of Aristotle as the very theory that was meant to wipe out the literary theories that were considered valid up to that date. Our findings show that scholars either avoided talking of catharsis or that they tried to adapt this obscure Aristotelian concept to the prevailing theoretical and religious context. Still after 1550, the theoretical concepts of Aristotle were often discussed. This vivid discussion includes affirmative voices, those that reject the whole of the *Poetics* or parts of it, and those who tried to «rectify» it, like Castelve-

pursue, is that the spectators come out more circumspect and able to regulate their behaviour by learning the duties of life.»

tro's. The lively debate is more a sign of an ongoing discussion process than of a general affirmation of what you could call Aristotelianism. It therefore seems necessary to re-evaluate our concept of Aristotelianism on that basis. The very large variety of genres of the mundane drama in Italy underlines the fact that Italian dramatists were far from following the «Aristotelian rules» French scholars, like Chapelain, d'Aubignac, and La Mesnardière invented in the seventeenth century. These French scholars of the following century will cut clear through the thicket of elaborate Italian discussions and will again pick out of it what they consider useful in order to offer a unified literary doctrine in harmony with the concept of a centralized monarchy.³³

However, during the sixteenth century, the Italian scholars followed ancient and contemporary textual models and the basic theorems of Donatus and Euanthius, enriching them punctually by the one or the other notion they found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Many intelligent contributions were made during the second half of the century on how to come to a convincing reading of Aristotle, but no new theoretical basis did come into being – the traditional one proved to be reliable for several decades of the sixteenth century.

Two further questions have to be addressed briefly even if the space is lacking to develop extensive arguments. For what reason scholars have insisted for 400 years that the Italian theater was founded on the *Poetics* of Aristotle? There is no such thing as a simple answer to this question, but what we can say is that in the course of the formation of the very successful «doctrine classique» and after, dissident theoretical approaches to literary history had to overcome the obstacle of a very compact ideological construction based on a narrow choice of Aristotelian and pseudo-Aristotelian notions. So even if the assumption of an Aristotelian frame of reference for the first fifty years of the Renaissance of European drama is not convincing, it grew more and more convenient to cling to it – for two reasons: firstly, the emergence of two major cultural achievements in the sixteenth century could not miss and seduce the historians to assume an inner causal link between them: the formation of neo-classical theater, on the one hand, and the recovery of the Aristotelian *Poetics*, on the other. It certainly

33 For a more elaborate argument see the chapter on the «three units» in: Lohse 2015, p. 237–247.

seemed to be only too obvious that these – almost – contemporary evolutions simply had to be linked. Evident connections like this one should however stimulate circum-spect researchers to ask whether the link between these events has been described correctly, knowing that chronological incidence does not mean causality. Secondly, the long tradition of texts by famous scholars – ranging from Varchis *Lezzioni*³⁴ to Weinbergs *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961) and beyond – has gained enough persuasive power of its own and gives tremendous credit to a view which unfortunately is not precise enough to describe the correct link between the recovery of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in the course of the sixteenth century and the formation of neo-classical theater.³⁵

34 Varchis *Lezzioni* were held in 1553 and 1554 in the Accademia Fiorentina and were published 1590. Weinberg 1961, 429.

35 As this view has been hold for the last 400 years by important specialists and scholars of Renaissance Literature like Varchi, Riccoboni, Tiraboschi, and curiously enough also by scholars of the Romanticism like Schlegel, Croce, and De Sanctis, the responsibility for it does not exclusively lie with Spingarn and his influential *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (1899) and with Bernard Weinberg's *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961). However, important scholars like Zonta (1934) and Tigerstedt (1968) have hinted repeatedly to more reliable evidence. Our task should be to listen to them and to weigh their arguments.

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