“THE RHYMING MONSIEUR AND THE SPANISH PLOT”:
TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF EARLY MODERN THEATER IN WESTERN EUROPE

A dissertation presented by

COLLEEN M. MCCORMICK

to

THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the field of

HISTORY

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
July 2014
“The Rhyming Monsieur and the Spanish Plot”:
Transnational Dimensions of Early Modern Theater in Western Europe

by

Colleen M. McCormick

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities of Northeastern University

July 2014
ABSTRACT

The birth of permanent, secular, and popular theater in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe gave rise to some of the most famous names in western literature, including Molière, Lope de Vega, and Shakespeare. For centuries, early modern playwrights have been celebrated as cultural heroes in their respective homelands, but their status as ‘national’ figures—intimately connected to a specific linguistic heritage—bely the fact that the creation, performance, and publication of their enduring works took place within a complex network of transnational and translingual exchange. Western European theater in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was driven by the movement of texts, people, practices, and ideas between the stages of London, Madrid, and Paris.

The theatrical practices that emerged in these capitals arose out of regional trends in demographics, urban social organization, the consolidation of monarchical authority, print culture, trade, travel, and nascent nationalism. As a result, these practices shared not only obvious similarities, but also systems of mutual influence. Notably, the dramatic content appearing on Europe’s urban stages reflected persistent patterns of acknowledged and unacknowledged translation, adaptation, and appropriation that contradict traditional assumptions of stable national literary canons. The widespread borrowing of plots, themes, and even entire scripts across geopolitical boundaries generated a dialogue of intense competition between the various European theater capitals and their representative playwrights in attempts to locate and segregate authentic national identities.

These debates—compounded by significant cross-cultural currents in staging, scenery, properties, music, and dance—reveal that the early modern theater, both as physical space and
creative act, became a place where individuals and groups experienced and made sense of the relationship between the familiar and the foreign. This dissertation explores the entwined histories of performance, publication, commodities exchange, human migration, and cultural identity to illustrate the manifold ways in which theater provided the people of early modern Europe with a window onto the wider world.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express profound gratitude to all those who made this project possible. First and foremost, my dissertation committee made this arduous process infinitely less terrifying through their eager and valuable assistance. Harvey Green, World’s Greatest Advisor, was my guide and cheerleader from the beginning. In addition to being a source of constant inspiration, he continually encouraged me to probe this topic in unexpected and fruitful ways. Harlow Robinson’s steady and watchful presence kept me on track and helped smooth my often-jumbled ideas into a coherent whole. Richard McElvain graciously stepped in to assist and played an enthusiastic devil’s advocate whose challenging questions greatly improved the focus of my project. I owe an immeasurable debt to these three scholars for their hard and diligent work.

Also deserving of thanks are the students and faculty of Northeastern University who proffered knowledge, advice, and numerous varieties of support. Many have moved on to new institutions and additional noteworthy achievements, but their contributions left a powerful impression. Particular thanks are due to Amber Clifton, Marco Costantini, Tara Dixon, Stacy Fahrenthold, William M. Fowler, Jr., Christina Gilmartin, Rachel Gillett, Ethan Hawkley, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, Rachel Moloshok, Ross Newton, Satya Som, and Karin Vélez.

Much gratitude goes to those who facilitated my travels and research as I wandered across Europe in search of theater: Ellyn Miller, Lizzie Gillett, Ms. Elsie, Susan Holcomb, Allan Havey, Anne-Claire Courau, Clémence Courau, and the Courau Family, Sybille Erbsheuser, Mathilde Delecourt, Sarah Greenall-Sharp, and Lilith and her family who adopted me for one lovely day in Toledo.
I am incredibly lucky to have had access to an extended network of assistance and advice. Timothy and Kathleen McCormick and Richard O’Donnell were my earliest and most ardent supporters. Adrienne Masler and Dragan Gill provided numerous helpful suggestions. The Shakespeare Theater Company intern class of 2007-2008 kept me (mostly) sane when work became overwhelming. Though too numerous to be named individually, all my family and friends have helped me push on with this project, even when I was at my most frustrated and discouraged. Many thanks to all of you.

Finally, the most important thank you of all goes to Jacob—friend, counselor, food-fetcher, financier, travel planner, social activities director, public information officer, and formatting editor extraordinaire—who was at my side every step of the way.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Images</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Shakespearian Narratives of Theater History</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Transnational Rise of Early Modern European Theater</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Dramatic Inspiration, Translation, and Adaptation</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: National Identity and Theatrical Competition</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: The World on Display</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF IMAGES

Figure 1.1: Chandos Portrait of William Shakespeare. 29
Figure 1.2: Droeshout Portrait of William Shakespeare. 30
Figure 1.3: Poster advertising a 1921 production of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* by the Yale University Dramatic Association. 38
Figure 1.4: Poster advertising the 2011-2012 season of the Maryland Shakespeare Festival. 39
Figure 3.1: Dramatic borrowing by language. 172
Figure 3.2: Authors as nodes in dramatic transfer. 173
Figure 5.1: Sketch of London’s Swan Theater, a typical late-sixteenth century English open-air playhouse. 363
Figure 5.2: The stage and the galleries around the perimeter of the new Globe theater in London. 364
Figure 5.3: The Teatro Farnese in Parma. 365
Figure 5.4: The Duke’s House in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. 366
Figure 5.5: The Théâtre Palais Cardinal (later the Théâtre Palais Royal) circa 1643 by Micheal van Lochun. 367
Figure 5.6: The *aposentos* [boxes] and the stage at the preserved seventeenth century *corral de comedias* in Almagro, Spain. 372
Figure 5.7: The interior courtyard of an early modern Spanish dwelling. 372
Figure 5.8: The stage of the *corral de comedias* in Almagro. 373
Figure 5.9: The exterior of a typical small-town middle-class Spanish home. 373
Figure 5.10: The rear of the *corral de comedias* in Almagro. 375
INTRODUCTION

There are certain historical topics so enduring that they surface again and again as subjects of fascination, curiosity, and debate. Taking the form of shared cultural knowledge, they shape our collective understanding of the past and become public property, belonging not only to scholars but also to the general populace. The world of sixteenth and seventeenth century Western European theater is an excellent example of an historical subject that has generated perennial recognition and interest in minds both ordinary and erudite. These centuries have long been represented as a dramatic golden age, particularly in England, France, and Spain. Indeed, the Spanish commonly refer to the seventeenth century in precisely those terms, as the “Siglo de Oro.” In France, that same century is remembered as the great age of neoclassical drama. For England, the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries endure in public memory as a pinnacle of theatrical innovation: the period of Elizabethan drama and the Age of Shakespeare. Cultural fascination has rendered them pivotal moments, not just in theater history, but in world history.

However, the enthusiastic celebration of theater as a cultural monument tends to produce one-dimensional historical pictures. The dramatic output of these nations in these years has garnered such an elevated reputation that it has a tendency to eclipse other historic events and achievements of the era. On such occasions, the theater becomes the chief—sometimes the only—historical element recognized in popular memory. However, the glorification of drama also serves to dehistoricize theater, disassociating it from the past in which it was created. As a

---

result, the towering presence of Renaissance drama in contemporary culture—including education, popular entertainment, and literature—seems to render it separate from or tangential to “real” history. Such a view presupposes that artistic endeavors, such as theater, music, dance, and the visual arts, are largely unrelated to other events of the past, including war, trade, invention, and politics. However, this presumption ignores the ability of artistic cultural products to reveal pieces of the historical landscape unavailable through other sources. As Amy Koritz has illustrated, “[t]he ways of knowing and genres of communication peculiar to the arts make available modes of organizing and experiencing the world not otherwise accessible.”\(^2\) The presence of disciplinary boundaries among professional scholars has not helped to remedy the division between the arts and “true” history, for often theater remains the province of literary and dramatic study, rather than being fully integrated into historical scholarship. Combined, these trends encourage misleading images of the past and blind us to the complex relationship between cultures, their performing arts, and the larger world.

During the same years that birthed many of western literature’s greatest dramatic works, fundamental shifts were occurring all over the globe. Changes in technology facilitated communication, transportation, and exchange over greater distances. Cultural and economic forces combined with these technologies to provide more people with wider access to a diverse array of goods and services. Increasingly, people living in one land experienced, directly and indirectly, the customs, commodities, people, and ideas of other lands. This greater global interconnectedness is one marker that contemporary historians use to define the “early modern period,” a term that roughly indicates the centuries between the medieval and the industrial ages:

According to this standard of periodization the popular vernacular theater produced in Western Europe during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is fundamentally “early modern” not simply because of the years in which it occurred but also because it depended upon and illustrated the increased mobility of people, goods, and information occurring throughout the world in that time.

As we shall see, Western European theater developed out of networks of movement and exchange within Europe and well as those that linked it to the wider world. For this reason, it proves an effective medium through which to navigate many of the patterns and changes that transformed human societies in those times, including the rise of nationalism, the advent of commercialism, the introduction of many important cultural traditions, and the creation of a system of western dominance and entrenched patterns of Eurocentrism that endure to this day. After all, theater people wrote about and performed interactions with other cultures, evoked an expanding world of goods and experiences, and refined the influential rhetoric of class, race, gender, and national markers. What they put on the stage often reflected their real-world experiences. Through the stage, and the dramatic elements played out upon it, we can glimpse

---

3 There is a marked lack of agreement on precisely what “early modern” means. Different people have delineated its temporal boundaries in different ways. Jack Goldstone objects to the use of “early modern” because he believes it “can mean almost nothing, or almost everything, and as such is a wholly meaningless term” (Jack A. Goldstone, “The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 41, no. 3 (1998): 261). A more useful, though still terminologically problematic, approach is that advanced by Jerry H. Bentley who posits a “modern age, extending from 1500 to the present, a period during which all the world’s regions and peoples ultimately became engaged in sustained encounter with each other, thus a period that inaugurated a genuinely global epoch of world history” (Jerry H. Bentley, “Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History,” The American Historical Review 101, no. 3 (June 1996): 751). By focusing on interaction rather than progress, this definition can avoid teleological determinism and prevents scholars from having to locate (or invent) structural commonalities between disparate world cultures at given moments in time. Furthermore, such a schema can allow us to refer to the early part of this modern period—again, roughly 1500-1800—as early modern.
developments that drastically transformed the way individuals of all stations lived their lives and interacted with the world around them.

The complicated international dimensions of sixteenth and seventeenth century theater are rarely acknowledged, either in popular perceptions or in professional historical scholarship. Instead, there is a tendency to view early modern theater as an enclosed and national phenomenon in which great works of drama were created and performed in relative geographic and cultural isolation, both from each other and from larger historical forces. This piece seeks to account for this impression of the past while exploring the complex and far-reaching historical reality of Western European theater culture and dramatic exchange in these centuries. Moreover, it investigates the ways in which drama was, and remains, an important tool for constructing and negotiating identity, difference, national sentiments, and relationships with the foreign and the global.

A study of this scope proves challenging in many respects. The scholarship surrounding early modern European theater is so abundant that it is difficult to assimilate and decipher the various arguments and approaches that have been used to illuminate it. Furthermore, dealing with sources that have been examined time and time again by expert scholars is an intimidating process, as is advancing arguments that critique elements of previous work. The interdisciplinary nature of this project required familiarity not only with the theories and methods of historical scholarship, but also a wide range of material from the fields of theater, literature, translation studies, anthropology, music, architecture, and more. The length of time examined—more than a century—and the geographic scope of this study are also daunting. This later parameter necessitated the consultation of materials in four different languages, in addition to Latin.
History as an academic and professional discipline is also forced to contend with popular
beliefs and presentations of the past. These deep rooted and emotionally compelling visions
frequently come into conflict with the rigorously researched and carefully constructed accounts
that historians hope to produce. As a result, scholars have tended to be extraordinarily dismissive
of popular perceptions of history: shaking their heads at common misconceptions while doing
little to make their own findings accessible or interesting to the world at large. But ignoring
public sentiment will not make it magically vanish and shying away from constructive dialogue
will not aid the spread of knowledge. On the contrary, examining the ways in which historical
knowledge (or purported knowledge) achieves cultural currency should be a vital component of
the historian’s project. As Raphael Samuel illustrates:

[H]istory is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism
contends, a historian’s ‘invention’. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the
work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands. If this is true, the point
of address in any discussion of historiography should not be the work of the
individual scholar, nor yet rival schools of interpretation, but rather the ensemble
of activities and practices in which ideas of history are embedded or a dialectic of
past-present relations is rehearsed.4

Popular memory is not the antithesis of history, but its essence. It is therefore vital to interrogate
cultural perceptions: why do people—including historians themselves—cling to certain
narratives, categories and personalities while rejecting or neglecting others? Only through asking
such questions and using their answers to inform historical research and writing can historians
effectively interrogate our own inevitable biases and ultimately construct arguments that are
potentially meaningful for a wider public.

4 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London;
This brand of analysis proves particularly vital in dealing with subjects such as early modern theater that have received considerable attention in both the popular and scholarly realms. Scholarly output concerning early modern theater is extensive, but the topic has also captivated the public imagination and given rise to a plethora of popular presentations, both historical and otherwise. In such cases, academic and popular accounts of the past are both firmly established and in serious need of reexamination and, perhaps, reconciliation. Yet, the divide between these two realms is often far flimsier than we might think. There is also an additional force at work in the creation and perpetuation of early modern theater fact and myth: systems of public and private education, particularly at the secondary level, where study of dramatic texts often forms part of the curriculum. In many respects the scholarly, popular, and educational presentations of drama’s most famous age share shortcomings and jointly preserve simplifications and exaggerations of theatrical practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Breaking new ground first requires examination of the attitudes and assumptions that already exist: what understandings of early modern theater do most people have, and how do they come by these ideas? Therefore in chapter one, I dissect some common (mis)perceptions of early modern theater and history, with a focus on those pervasive in the United States, and then attempt to offer some more fruitful ways for looking at the workings of sixteenth and seventeenth century theater in light of contemporary and historical realities. The remaining chapters explore various ways in which sixteenth and seventeenth century European theater possessed transnational dimensions and how the people of early modern cultures encountered and made sense of these forces. Chapter two provides a broad overview of the development of western European theater culture, looking at the reasons for, and characteristics of, strong
dramatic traditions in certain places at certain times and how they tie into larger regional and global processes. The third chapter focuses in on play texts and how their creation reflects vibrant systems of literary and dramatic exchange between the established theater capitals of western Europe, primarily London, Madrid, and Paris. Chapter four deals with attitudes toward dramatic transnationalism and how early modern rhetoric responded by creating the perception that plays and playwrights belonged to and reflected specific cultural, temporal, and national characteristics. This chapter also highlights the cultural and identity politics of dramatic borrowing, translation, authorship, and fame. In the final chapter, I investigate the manifold channels through which international influence made its way into the playhouse and into theatrical performance: people, goods, performance modes, and the organization of space. Ultimately, these patterns of influence and exchanged shaped the way that people thought about and used theater. The topics addressed here are diverse, but, to my mind, all essential pieces of the same vast historical puzzle. In the end, my only hope is that I have made some sense of this complex picture, and caused my readers to reflect on subjects that we take for granted.
CHAPTER 1

SHAKESPEARIAN NARRATIVES OF THEATER HISTORY

Being a doctoral student invariably means explaining the subject of your research to everyone you meet, whether during Thanksgiving dinner with your family or talking to a complete stranger on the subway. So in the time that I have been at work on my dissertation, I have delivered my ten-second explanation hundreds of times. Usually, it goes something like this: “I’m looking at transnational theater exchange and the movement of plays in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.” While reactions to this pronouncement have differed, typically the person listening says, “You mean Shakespeare?” or “Was that during Shakespeare’s time?” On a rare occasion someone may reference another playwright of the era, but those mentioned are almost exclusively English playwrights who were Shakespeare’s contemporaries—Johnson, Marlowe, Kyd. When speaking with fellow Americans, English authors of later date and poets of other countries almost never come up. Even students of theater appear to think of Shakespeare first and foremost.

It is clear, even from these brief exchanges, that for most Americans sixteenth and seventeenth century theater is synonymous with Shakespeare, and by implication England, while the concurrent theatrical history and dramatic output of other countries goes almost entirely unnoticed. Despite the fact that Shakespeare’s career as a playwright and actor lasted only a couple of decades and that hundreds of others penned influential dramatic works throughout Western Europe during the same era, he is, at least in the Anglophone world, the preeminent symbol of dramatic history. Hence why the term “Shakespearean” has been applied to such a
range of things and practices;\(^1\) His is the name and image we conjure to represent an entire culture—perhaps an entire continent—and a time span of more than a century. He is one of the only cultural referents from his age that most English speakers have, and as such, Shakespeare dominates nearly all perceptions of early modern history, both popular and scholarly.

Despite the direction in which we seem to be heading, allow me to insist that this dissertation is not about Shakespeare the man. Nor is it particularly about his work, although it certainly pertains to the world in which he and his contemporaries lived and wrote. Rather, this chapter investigates the manner in which Shakespeare’s reputation shapes ideas, both popular and scholarly, of history and theater in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Once we realize that nearly everything most English-speakers know (or think they know) about sixteenth and seventeenth century history and drama stems from their ideas about Shakespeare, it becomes necessary to unpack the role Shakespeare plays today in order to examine his significance as a source of historical information about his own time. Certain common assumptions about the man and his world have inhibited the formation and propagation of innovative assessments of early modern theater and continue to distract us from its complexity and its relationship with larger historical events. Specifically, the preeminence of Shakespeare as a literary figure skews our understanding of Shakespeare as an historical figure in his own day. Compounding the two prevents us from having more than a vague notion of life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, places undue focus on England and English language literatures to the exclusion of other lands and worldwide processes, and distorts our ideas about history as discipline by either idealizing the past or dismissing it as unimportant fluff.

\(^1\) The term “Shakespearean” first exploded in popularity in the late nineteenth century, presumably inspired by the 1864 tricentennial of Shakespeare’s birth.
Living in the United States and other nations heavily populated by English language speakers, it is rare to get through life without acquiring at least a passing familiarity with the legacy of the man named William Shakespeare. We are constantly presented with his image and his works in a wide range of formats. He is ever present, but also something of an ambivalent figure in that he is capable of embodying divergent understandings of literature, history, and legacy. On one hand “Shakespeare serves as a trademark for time-tested quality and wisdom, and so it lends legitimacy to whatever it is associated with,” but at the same time he represents the domination of traditional authorities and acts as a marker of social division which invites rebellion against them.² He and his works are alternately accessible and inaccessible, comforting and confusing, familiar and strange—depending on one’s cultural placement and literary exposure. He is both man and myth, and this complexity has allowed him to embody a wide range of meanings and to remain an object of fascination. However, many of the factors that have resulted in Shakespeare’s perpetual appeal (and at times, vilification) have also resulted in the misunderstanding of his historical significance. Misconceptions about Shakespeare beget parallel misunderstandings of how the theatrical world operated in early modern times. Because contemporary ideas about Shakespeare do tend to fall into distinct patterns, they highlight certain common myths about the playwright’s historical world and his participation in it that warrant exploration.

**Popular Understandings of Shakespeare**

Even people who know next to nothing about Shakespeare’s dramas or his biography know him by reputation. For centuries, he has been heralded in print and speech as the greatest playwright, English or otherwise. His importance, if not the precise reason for it, is impressed

---

upon us at a young age. Public memory tells us that he matters, but often does not tell us why. After all, “great” is a rather vague adjective. Yet his name is widely known and firmly identified with the English language and the English nation. Furthermore, in the words of Barbara Fuchs, “Shakespeare is a “synecdoche of sorts for ‘culture’ in an Anglo-American context.”³ But culture itself is also a vague concept. This lack of specificity would seem to imply a popular confusion about Shakespeare’s fame that translates into an impression of the whole early modern world as vague and distant, although presumably important since apparently full of important accomplishments. Shakespeare’s great and unmatched fame conveys the impression that his era—and history in general—must have been the province of great men who carried out fine deeds, largely apart from their fellow humans.

Shakespeare also functions as a convenient, multipurpose heritage symbol for the English and for English speakers. Many feel a sense of pride that their language, ancestry, or homeland possesses ties to such an elevated figure. Because of the exclusivity of his status, his renown can appear inevitable, his authority unquestionable, and his relevance universal. However, not everyone feels the same connection to Shakespeare or necessarily takes comfort in his lofty status. To some he represents a traditional and troubling white, western, male power structure. Others see familiarity with Shakespeare as a method for engaging successfully with the cultural elites who have long embraced him. Some resent him merely because of his association with unpleasant classroom instruction. An adamant few have insisted that Shakespeare was a fraud, and that his impressive canon must have been someone else’s work.

Indeed, in recent decades, Shakespeare has come under renewed attack, both as a subject for scholarly inquiry and as a lauded cultural figure. Some have suggested that he is part of an educational tradition that is no longer effective in contemporary life. Others have denounced an apparent shift away from the study of Shakespeare and the classical literary canon as a symbol of cultural malaise. In a world of diminishing respect for traditional authorities, he has often embodies both the genius poet and snooty bore. If nothing else, Shakespeare is a figure that inspires passionate responses.

But whatever our attitude toward the author, Shakespeare unarguably dominates our expectations about language, literature, drama and history. Phrases from his dramas pepper our speech. Words attributed to him fill contemporary dictionaries. School children pick apart his verses year after year. Television and film presentations pay tribute to him in both subtle and overt ways. His face is instantly recognizable. The result of this constant bombardment of Shakespeareana in its various permutations is that Shakespeare exists as both culture hero and cliché: both “the greatest writer of the English language” and a familiar image ripe for reference and parody. We are constantly torn between reverence and mockery, between belief and skepticism. As a result, we often find ourselves looking for the true Shakespeare—some key that will satisfactorily explain his complex legacy. But we also unconsciously absorb, through the figure of Shakespeare, assumptions about cultural identity, historical forces, the relationship between individuals and societies, and the defining attributes of “greatness.”

---

4 Witness commonplace phrases such as “Greek to me” (*Julius Caesar*), “the be all and end all” (*Macbeth*), “the long and the short of it” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) among many others that had their first recorded appearance in Shakespeare’s plays.

Shakespeare’s Texts: Literary Study and Quotation

Aside from general knowledge of his identity and reputation, Shakespeare enters popular understanding through his texts, both complete and fragmented, read and performed. One of the factors that has made Shakespeare such an enduring literary and historical touchstone is his longstanding place in education. In predominantly Anglophone countries, people are taught from a very young age about the importance of his contributions to English literature and language. One or more of his plays inevitably make the required reading list for American high school English courses, as specified in “The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, and Technical Subjects” currently adopted by 45 states and four territories. Unsurprisingly, in the United Kingdom and commonwealth countries, Shakespeare is also a prominent, if much debated, educational figure. The fact that formative


7 New guidelines for the English literature General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) given to most secondary school students in the UK will, as of 2015, require students to read “at least one play by Shakespeare” the only author mentioned by name or required. Students will have more choice in their selection of a “19th century novel” and “poetry since 1789.” Department for Education, “English Literature: GCSE Subject Content and Assessment Objectives,” 2013, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254498/GCSE_English_literature.pdf.

Scotland does not have a national curriculum. The so-called “Curriculum for Excellence” which was implemented beginning in 2004 does not require literary texts for study, even the popular Shakespeare. However, beginning in 2014, students in Scotland who prepare for the Higher English and National 5 English exams administered to secondary school students will be required for the first time to read selections from a list of Scottish authors and answer an exam question on Scottish literature. Interestingly, while Robert Louis Stevenson’s Kidnapped made the National 5 list, no works by Robert Burns or Sir Walter Scott--assuredly the most famous names in Scottish literature--appear. Robert Burns appears on the Higher English list, but the other two authors do not. And even appearing on the list does not make an author or a literary
encounters with Shakespeare frequently occur in English and language arts classes cements the popular connection between the man and the language, with varying results.

Stacks of teaching guides, media commentary, and first-hand experience indicate that the most common feature of Shakespeare instruction is its challenging nature, which is immediately apparent to students and teachers alike. Both typically consider Shakespeare, perhaps rightly, to be difficult material, largely due to the differences in language use and cultural understanding that separate us from Shakespeare’s early modern audience. As University of Washington professor John Webster explains:

…the biggest difficulty people have is simply in understanding the language and structure of Shakespearean texts themselves. That students have such trouble should not be surprising. Most come to reading him through a clutter of cultural clichés: some think he is great because profound—indeed, profound beyond their humble comprehension; others know him as a “classic,” dusty and stodgy in the way that only a comic book could recover; still others see him as a dead white male, and on that account irrelevant. Moreover, his plots are old fashioned—about


For Irish secondary school students in “Higher Level [English] the study of a Shakespearean drama is compulsory.”(National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, “The Leaving Certificate English Syllabus,” accessed January 17, 2014, http://www.curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/79aab7be-cdd3-4bf1-937f-34e203b1b915/SCSEC14_English_Syllabus.pdf, 18.) Ordinary Level testing does not require the study of Shakespeare, but his works are always included as options for study and examination. Students in Wales are required to study English and to read “drama, including Shakespeare” between the ages of 11 and 14. (Wales and Lifelong Learning and Skills Department for Education, English in the National Curriculum for Wales: Key Stages 2-4. ([Cardiff]: Welsh Assembly Government, Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2007), http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/101013englishncfwen.pdf, 17.) Although Welsh children are required to study both English and Welsh between the ages of 7 and 16, no other author is specifically proscribed for study in either language. (Wales and Lifelong Learning and Skills Department for Education, Welsh in the National Curriculum in Wales: key stages 2-4 ([Cardiff]: Welsh Assembly Government, Department for Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008), http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/111025welshen.pdf.)
kings and emperors, maidenheads and cuckolds--and his settings seem almost infinitely remote in time and place.\(^8\)

Shakespeare, for all his cultural familiarity, can thus be immensely intimidating, and this aspect of his reputation precedes him, compounding the difficulty that readers may have in navigating early modern vocabulary, grammar, and cultural references (only slightly mitigated by the extensive notes provided in most editions of his plays). For every child that develops an informed appreciation for Shakespeare, there are many others who will forever think of him as incomprehensible, boring, and pointlessly disconnected from contemporary life. At the same time, Shakespeare’s preeminence appears to necessitate student exposure, lest they fail to learn traditional cultural conventions or somehow develop fully as literate human beings. It ought to be no surprise that frustration between educational intentions and realities often ensues.

In recent decades, a wealth of articles and commentaries have suggested strategies for helping young people understand, appreciate and even find personal meaning in Shakespeare’s works. These strategies take a number of forms, everything from graphic novelizations to classroom performances to technological presentations. Yet, they continue to cement the same idea in the mind of students: Shakespeare is important, and he is important to the English language. Yet, in learning that Shakespeare is “for all time”, students also learn that Shakespeare is of no particular time. While providing brief glimpses of how the early modern theater might have worked, these lessons nevertheless avoid most discussion of Shakespeare’s role in his own time, and very little is learned about the existence of non-Shakespearean authors and their works.

The most frequently read plays, and therefore the plays that students learn to consider the greatest in all of literature, include *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Othello*, and

---

Macbeth, all of them tragedies. Therefore students learn to see Shakespeare primarily as a tragic dramatist whose themes are important because somehow weighty or profound. Students attain little familiarity with the ribald or comedic in his work and his serious character feeds the perception of his greatness. Study of Shakespeare in language and literature classes also has the potential to unconsciously encourage assumptions of cultural superiority. If Shakespeare was the greatest writer of all time (or at least the greatest writer that students know), then English, by implication, must be the greatest language because of his influence.

As a result of these tendencies, the knowledge acquired about Shakespeare in schools can be arbitrary, and most people retain a reliance on popular notions of Shakespeare’s works that are rarely displaced by direct contact with them. Indeed, classroom experiences often confirm the same messages presented in other forums. Through classroom study, even when that study contains intertextual and multimedia dimensions, students learn to understand Shakespeare primarily as a literary figure rather than an historical one. Students may hear a brief summary of Shakespeare’s life or the theatrical conventions of his day, but little or no emphasis is placed on his playwriting methods or his relationship with the literature and history of his time. Even more disappointingy, history classes do not complement the image of Shakespeare presented in English classes, nor do they attempt to frame the students’ literary knowledge in light of a larger historical picture. For this reason, Shakespeare is understood as an isolated author, not as a part of a wider sixteenth and seventeenth century culture. He therefore remains a figurehead, and often an unpleasant one.

In recent years, the study of Shakespeare by young people has undergone considerable scrutiny, resulting in changes in teaching methods, but having only a limited impact on the historical messages that such study conveys. There has been debate over Shakespeare’s place in
the classroom for over a century and the controversy over his educational worth has only expanded in recent decades. Some institutions and curricula have reduced or removed Shakespeare requirements at multiple educational levels.⁹ Students at the high school level and sometimes in the middle grades who continue to engage with Shakespeare in the classroom are more likely to do so not simply through textual examination but increasingly through performance and through new formats, including modernized play texts, films and recordings, and even comic books and other popular adaptations of Shakespearean stories. While these make Shakespeare’s plots and themes more approachable for neophytes, they also send conflicting messages about his true historical purpose. Because his works and time appear utterly mystifying without considerable innovation and updating, the past from which Shakespeare came is rendered impossibly remote and ultimately unimportant. The result is a Shakespeare further detached from historical processes and developments.

While many encounter Shakespeare through literary study as a part of formal schooling, he remains perhaps more accessible and more integral to daily life through other channels, including brief snippets taken from his dramatic works. Long before concentrated examinations of Shakespeare’s plays are undertaken and long after high school memories have faded, Shakespeare exists as a part of the language we use. He endures in the many phrases coined by him that we employ unwittingly and in the quotations that many recognize as familiarly Shakespearean. Millions who have never studied or have forgotten their experience of his full-length plays can easily identify “To be, or not to be: that is the question”, “wherefore art thou Romeo?”, and “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears” as part of the Shakespearean

canon. Longer passages seldom make it into the public memory, and many speeches are reduced in popular imagination to only their first few lines.

In this reduced form, Shakespeare is both easier to appropriate and less intimidating. Gleaned from lengthy passages with complicated and outmoded phrasing, quotations provide bite-sized chunks that are easy to digest and prove unmistakably popular. We encounter his words sprinkled throughout ordinary conversation, as well as in literature, film, television, greeting cards, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and much more.¹⁰ They are so popular and so well known that rather than representing the larger works from which they come, these brief lines have become literary units unto themselves. As communication has become ever faster, briefer, and more haphazard, Shakespeare has been reduced to fit those needs. This is Shakespeare for everyday use, but not necessarily for greater understanding. Incessant quotation reduces his complex poetic output to a few one-liners, divorces his words from their original literary context, and changes or obscures the significance of Shakespeare’s language. Yet, even though the original meanings become largely incomprehensible, these excerpts continue to possess an aura of gravitas or profundity simply because they came from Shakespeare’s pen.

Despite their brevity and their detachment from the play scripts from which they are extracted, whole volumes are routinely dedicated to Shakespearean quotation. In such books, the complexity and variety of the Shakespearean oeuvre is replaced by collection of truisms, witticisms, and pretty sayings. Often, they are arranged by theme, augmenting the impression of Shakespeare’s universality since he, apparently, has something to say on every possible subject, from trees to traitors. This organization also suggests that the volume is a comprehensive collection of literary knowledge, the poet’s distilled essence, and that a few simple lines can

¹⁰ Lanier, 3.
carry as much weight as a five-act play. The existence of such publications also suggests that the “important” material in Shakespeare’s works can be easily separated from lines of less consequence and convinces us that the extraction of phrases from their dramatic purpose and their poetic structure elevates rather than diminishes their meaning. We can therefore successfully substitute a solid grounding in the catchy, profound bits for a broad familiarity with Shakespeare’s dramatic output. But while Shakespeare’s quotations are undoubtedly considered important, contemporary emphasis on quotation also diminished any pressure we might feel to become conversant in his full plays or the theater of his time. Quotation functions as a replacement for comprehensive literary and historical knowledge.

Justin Kaplan, the editor of Bartlett’s Shakespeare Quotations, suggests that his and other compilations can “serve as an informal concordance to Shakespeare, a quiz and game book, and a memory jogger that invites you to sample and then go deeper into one of the glories of world literature.” Kaplan, perhaps unintentionally, suggests that Shakespeare experienced in the form of quotation is both monumental and comfortingly irrelevant. If we possess familiarity with Shakespearean quotations, we have a right to feel proud of our knowledge of literature (for a few lines of famous text presumably equate a larger literary prowess). Yet if, on the other hand, we lack this knowledge, then we need not worry too much. After all, Kaplan seems to imply, it’s really just a curiosity and a game. And despite Kaplan’s suggestion that quotations act as an effective introduction to the larger Shakespearean and literary canon, how many people actually take that opportunity? I would wager not many. Fewer still engage with his historical significance.

Thus, the quotable Shakespeare remains the intersection of high literature and cliché, and, as such, shapes our impressions of the man and his work in powerful ways. The prevalence of his literary excerpts leads us to assume that he is the only element of his era that has any bearing on our present culture, the rest being more or less irrelevant. However, quotations remain distinctly unhelpful in framing Shakespeare in appropriate performance and historical contexts, and it becomes easy to completely overlook the conditions in which these texts were generated. Furthermore, because we know these quotations today as unmistakably Shakespearean, we assume that they, and the rest of his texts, were absolutely original to him. In becoming commonly used, if not overused phrases, they become difficult to comprehend as part of acted, dramatic texts. In becoming part of everyday life they drift loose from history. So, while quotations help secure Shakespeare’s position as an important cultural figure, they also distract from comprehension of historical reality.

Images of Authorship: Still, Moving, and Literary

The popular images we have of Shakespeare are not derived solely from his own words. We also learn a great deal about him from other artistic products, be they illustrations, audio
visual media, or fictionalizations of his life. We even presume we know what he looked like, because his image can be found everywhere. Ironically, for a figure so prone to visual depiction, there are only a couple of images that might have been reasonably faithful portraits of Shakespeare himself, and a larger number of others whose provenance is less firmly established. The most famous images, those that are most consistently recycled in popular culture, include the Chandos portrait (Figure 1.1)—one of few that dates to Shakespeare’s lifetime—and the Droeshout engraving (Figure 1.2) that accompanied the 1623 printing of the first folio of Shakespeare’s plays. Stylistically, the two are extremely different, yet they both contributed to the formulation of a familiar Shakespearean image. Though one is a disproportionate engraving and the other a shadowy oil painting, both depict a balding, middle-aged man with chin-length hair who, though at an angle to the viewer, gazes at him or her. These portraits and others inspired by them have helped establish a more or less standard repertoire of features that inform the viewer that they are looking at an image intended to depict William Shakespeare. Because these visual tropes have become so widely used and recognized, depicting Shakespeare visually has become astonishingly easy, to the extent that any mustached gentleman with a receding
hairline and a prominent collar is assumed to be Shakespeare, or a Shakespeare-like figure. This is doubly true if he is pictured with puffy knee-breaches, a famed quotation, a quill, or a skull. However, no figure need have all these qualifications in order to embody the persona of the famous playwright. The artist is free to pick and choose those stylistic elements that create the desired impression of Shakespeare as thoughtful, comical, inspiring, or mysterious.

The Shakespeare figure is so familiar that even the barest of outline is enough to convey his identity. Picasso needed only a few scribbles to create a recognizable rendering. Statues—both busts and full body—cartoon characters, claymation models, and posed animals have also been used to portray him. Yet, as widely recognizable as his form might be, images convey messages about Shakespeare that are not immediately obvious. The frequent repetition of the illustrated figure of Shakespeare highlights his importance and his presumable ubiquity in contemporary culture. But at the same time, this familiarity begets a figure ripe for caricature and parody. The manner of his depiction in each instance also sends messages about the man and his significance.

He can be a figure of dignity or absurdity, aloofness or accessibility. He can be shown as an author figure, an actor figure, or both. Shakespeare is consistently portrayed as a mature fellow—not ancient, but also not in his first youth. His image speaks of considerable experience in his chosen profession. He is often portrayed with a quill pen or a book, to draw attention to his role as preeminent playwright. His poetry, this implies, came straight from his head to his pen and to paper without external inspiration, drafts, or editing. If Shakespeare is shown with a book or a page it is inevitably a book that he has written rather than one that he has read. Depicting Shakespeare with a skull—as though he were his own literary creation, Hamlet—lends the impression that he is a serious figure. But that same juxtaposition of elements can also be
employed to mock the seriousness with which many people approach the playwright and his plays. In visual renditions of the man, his Elizabethan breeches are displayed, more often then not, in goofy, cartoonish pictures, reminding us how strange the costume of the day looks when compared with our own, and how temporally distant a figure he was. Based on such images alone, we are left to imagine an historical world in which England drove cultural production, unfamiliar dress and quaint writing implements were its most distinctive features, and literary or playhouse amusements the most important events.

Both fictionalized dramatizations and documentaries have also presented Shakespeare’s life to the public in the last several decades, with the former receiving more popular attention than the latter. While historical fiction films are just that—fiction—they exert a very strong influence over our ideas about the past. Indeed, film often presents “history” in its most exciting, moving, and accessible format, while necessarily taking certain forms of dramatic license with the material. William Shakespeare, a pervasively popular Hollywood film subject, figures as a character in a number of costume dramas. Of these, John Madden’s delightful 1998 film, *Shakespeare in Love*, is perhaps the best known to contemporary American audiences. Set in 1593 during the “glory days of Elizabethan theatre” amid the competition between rival playhouses, *Shakespeare in Love* shows a young Shakespeare navigating writer’s block and romance as he seeks to establish himself as a respected playwright. A more recent but more controversial film, Roland Emmerich’s 2011 *Anonymous*, was based upon the premise that Shakespeare’s plays were really written by Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford (a theory most reputable scholars find patently ridiculous) and depicted the man named William

---

12 Pictorially, the line between Hamlet/actor and Shakespeare/author is usually very fine, often non-existent. Especially when that skull comes into play.
Shakespeare as a boorish idiot. But despite their divergent approaches to the historical figure of Shakespeare, both films employ many of the standard tropes and assumptions common to depictions of Shakespeare’s works, Elizabethan theater, and the early modern world.

In each of these cases, the “Shakespeare” character—whether the Stratfordian player or his noble alter ego—is presented as a lone genius possessing a tortured relationship with his plays. In these films, the inspiration for his dramas derives from some complex amalgamation of innate genius, life events, and emotional experiences: a thwarted love affair becomes *Romeo and Juliet*, and dialogue heard in the street makes its way into scripts and onto the stage. Plays have the ability to shape political events and vice versa. At the same time cinema (and other fictionalized accounts) uses the plays as substitutes for the lack of historical documentation about Shakespeare the man. Thus, Shakespeare’s plays are portrayed as deeply personal, and “Shakespearean biography is a fictional adaptation of his fiction,”13 with the plays heavily reflecting the author’s life events and familial and romantic sensibilities. Indeed, these cinematic depictions would not work half so well if Shakespeare’s biography were more readily accessible. Dramatization of Shakespeare’s life also emphasize his personal creativity, especially in scenes where the hero is depicted scribbling away with his pen, transferring the stories in his head directly onto parchment. The message conveyed is that great works of theater spring, more or less intact, from a single great mind.

The films also take a similar approach to depicting Shakespeare’s motivations in writing his plays. Ultimately, they suggest that the exemplary poet wrote his best work not out of commercial ambitions or the desire for renown, but out of passion and the drive to create beauty and profundity. Indeed, in the course of *Shakespeare in Love*, as the love-struck Shakespeare

13 Lanier, 113.
taps into his genius, he becomes less enmeshed in the worldly concerns of the London theater scene. His art elevates him above them. His writing, initially economically motivated, transforms into art for art’s sake. This disengagement with commercialism sets him apart from his fellow characters. Yet when they and the public see his *Romeo and Juliet* in rehearsals and finally in performance, they also succumb to the magic of its poetry, which expresses “the very truth and nature of love.” In *Anonymous*, De Vere, writing under the name Shakespeare, is cut off from the fame or financial gain associated with his plays. He writes from an inner drive, a love for Queen Elizabeth, and a felt need to touch the minds of London and shape public opinion. Both films suggest that part of what makes Shakespeare’s plays so important is their supposed transcendence of base and ordinary concerns. The author’s pure intent, these filmic depictions suggest, went hand in hand with his uncompromised genius.

Dramatic fiction films do suggest certain historical truths about the Elizabethan world, including its theatrical rivalries, instabilities, plagiarisms, and commercialism. At times, they also play off scholarly uncertainties about Shakespeare’s life. However, they also perpetuate historical misconceptions by implying that his works were based on newly invented stories, were created in cultural and physical isolation, and were intended as profound art, uncontaminated by selfish motivations. Perhaps these depictions and characterizations stem in part from contemporary idealization of the past and a yearning to locate a time more authentic and less cynical than our present. But the impulse to concurrently simplify and spice up events and people in the interest of a compelling narrative is not limited to treatments of history. Indeed, demand for simplistic and romantic presentations of complex occurrences reveals itself in all aspects of the arts and media and in all ages. In a complex and uncertain world we cannot help but be drawn to narratives of obvious heroes and villains, certainty of motivation, and ultimate
explanation or resolution. As a result, we rarely bother to question the story—historical or otherwise—that “feels right.”

Like fiction films, documentaries (of varying levels of scholarly rigor) begin with the premise that Shakespeare is important and the assumption that he is familiar. And, like their fictional counterparts, documentary films are overwhelmingly concerned with Shakespeare’s biography and the mysteries surrounding it, so that the film becomes a quest or treasure hunt for the highly personal details of his life and is rife with conjecture. Where did he spend the years during which there is no mention of him in the historical record? What relationships are there between the content of the plays, poems, and sonnets and his experiences? What set Shakespeare up to become a famous playwright? Guesses and partial answers abound, so that, while well-researched historical information is given, what stands out most clearly in the viewer’s mind are not the details of Shakespeare’s biography, but his elusiveness. In the search for Shakespeare’s personal history, it is easy to lose sight of the history that existed around in and in which he participated. His eternal aura of mystery feeds into his legend and his fame, and make him a “romantic” figure in the formal literary definitions.

By this same measure, each proffered piece of evidence presented in Shakespearean documentaries is treated like a sacred relic for its connection, whether actual or metaphorical, with the Bard of Avon.14 The genre trades on building mystery and suspense among the

---

14 In ancient Celtic cultures, bards were poet-servants who recited and sang praises of their patrons and other exemplary figures, often accompanied by music. For the early modern Scots, “bard” carried derogatory connotations, referring primarily to itinerant Gaelic entertainers from the north. Entering the English language in the fifteenth century, the term referred in Shakespeare’s time to outsiders: tribal poets from Wales, Scotland, or Ireland. Sometimes they were associated with mystical visions of the future. Eventually, the terms was coopted to describe not just Welsh and Gaelic poet-musicians, but any poet or singer, particularly those who chronicled historical events or tales of great deeds in rhyme or song. (Robert Crawford suggests
viewership. What information will the next clue hold? Will it tell us anything new and surprising about the playwright? Physically trekking over the English countryside in pursuit of Shakespeare’s biography establishes a clear link between the poet and his homeland.

Shakespeare is both the pinnacle of English literature and England personified. By implication, his is the only English history of much interest or relevance. While such explorations do hint at the difficulties of establishing historical fact, they tend to grossly oversimplify the process of historical research. Watching scholars sift through mountains of paper makes for dull entertainment.

Both fiction and non-fiction literature have also made extensive use of Shakespeare. Every few years a new popular examination of his life is put forth, and he is reworked and pulled in different directions. However, through it all, he maintains his literary and historical primacy that Shakespeare himself helped to regularize the term, although he would not have referred to himself as a “bard.” Crawford, 124. While Shakespeare was referred to as “immortal bard” as early as 1713 and as the “Bard of Avon” by 1751, the use of “Bard” to designate Shakespeare expanded in popularity in the 1760s, after the “rediscovery” (actually a forgery) of the poems of a Scottish bard known as Ossian. Both “Ossian” and the bardic tradition ignited great interest in the British Isles and beyond, with the result that the English sought to counter the mania for Scottish culture by crowning its own “National Bard”: William Shakespeare. SEE: “bard,” Celtic Culture: a Historical Encyclopedia (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2006): 169-173. Robert Crawford, “The Bard: Ossian, Burns, and the shaping of Shakespeare,” Shakespeare and Scotland (Manchester, UK; New York: New York: Manchester University Press ; Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2004): 124-140. Francis Reynardson, The Stage: a Poem, Inscribed to J. Addison by Mr. Webster of Christ-Church Oxon (London: Printed for E. Curll, 1713).

15 Tom Stearn suggests that, inevitably, “[m]ainstream history programmes divorce history from sources and research.” (Tom Stearn, “What’s Wrong with Television History,” History Today 52, no. 12 (December 2002): 26–27.) With a focus on emotional stories and the moment of discovery, many popular documentaries, as well as television shows like “History Detectives” (PBS), employ “omniscient” narrators and experts (who are often not actually historians) whose pronouncements conceal the time consuming work that grounds historical inquiry. Also see: Jerome De Groot, Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 2009).
and often the “Bardolatry”\footnote{A term coined by George Bernard Shaw in disparagement of the exuberant “worship” of Shakespeare in the late nineteenth century. (Edwin Wilson, ed., Shaw on Shakespeare: An Anthology of Bernard Shaw’s Writings on the Plays and Productions of Shakespeare (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp., 2002), xvi.)} of worshipful fans. Conspiracy theories, which attempt to explain that Shakespeare was not the author-poet we believe he was, likewise prove perennially popular. Few topics generate as much interest as casting doubt on established convention and challenging accepted authorities. Shakespeare has also proved a convenient figure for imaginative stories, which, like films, make great use of the yawning gaps in the biographical material. His towering legacy combined with the lack of historical documentation about his life have made him an ideal subject for intrigue and speculation, and hence, suspense and mystery stories. Such tales provide alternative histories in which fanciful speculation plays a key role. Sometimes he is the subject of the mystery, sometimes the sleuth solving it. Like cinematic fiction, literary fiction provides an ideal format in which to indulge in romantic imaginings of his love life, his family, his “true” identity, and the links between his life and his work. It is also an ideal venue for exoticizing the past, making it fascinating and bizarre by accentuating the disparities between past and present and simultaneously encouraging authors (and readers) to take greater and greater liberties with historical events, people, and lifestyles. History is up for grabs in the world of fiction. It belongs to those with the most inventive imaginations, the most compelling arguments, and, often, a willingness to indulge popular whims for the scandalous and salacious. In a sense, making Shakespeare such a popular subject for historical fiction ironically further cements popular perception of the grand significance of his historical role, even when the precise details of that role are unknown.
Shakespeare in Performance

Another form of common, although less widely accessed, exposure to Shakespeare’s world occurs in theaters, parks, and other performance venues. Stagings of Shakespeare’s plays occur all over, in both big cities and small towns. He forms a significant portion of the repertoire of professional theater companies. Shakespeare festivals, free performances, and community theater groups make these works available to an even larger public (Figures 1.3 and 1.4). Many such performances are of high quality, and there has been a push in recent years to have schools and other educational programs combine literary study of Shakespeare with the experience of actually seeing one or more of the plays performed, either in recorded or, when possible, live versions. After all, live performance, replete with dramatic deliveries, technical wizardry, and physical action, often prove more exciting and comprehensible than what many see as dry textual study, and these aspects often help viewers to overcome the linguistic difficulties that Shakespeare presents to the contemporary reader.17

17 Of course, traditional, live presentations of Shakespeare’s plays are only one means of engaging with the figure of Shakespeare through performance as either participant or audience.
This is largely well and good. Increased accessibility to and engagement with Shakespeare’s works enhances public education in language arts and theater, inspires creativity, and allows people to enter new cultural communities. But these performances also have limitations as conveyers of cultural and historical meaning. First, they can unwittingly highlight cultural and socio-economic divisions within society. People who are older, white, and from higher income brackets are more likely to attend such performances than are young people, minorities, and individuals with less disposable income. Therefore performances, Shakespeare himself, and even history, are understood to be the domain of certain groups, which further generates conflicted attitudes toward the playwright (and hence theater) among those less privileged. Secondly, performances in their various

Other platforms include creative adaptations of Shakespeare’s œuvre (witness plays as diverse as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged), West Side Story, and Shakespeare in Hollywood), films and audio recording of live plays, cinematic adaptations, live readings, theater workshops, and even board games (Shakespeare—The Bard Game, for one).
manifestations tend to work alongside literary and popular culture approaches to obscure the bulk of early modern history in the shadow of this one playwright. Performances further enhance Shakespeare’s dominance of the theatrical past and therefore of the historical past. This is especially true when festivals and companies announce themselves—and literally name themselves—as specializing primarily in a Shakespearean repertoire. His name has become a symbol of high-quality theater, such that “Shakespeare as a brand name, identifiable and authoritative, creates a stage for others to establish their credibility by successfully reinterpreting his work.”18 Hundreds of thousands see Shakespeare’s plays every year, yet his dramatic prominence is never contextualized within a larger historical picture. For many, Shakespeare might as well have been the only working poet and playwright in early modern Europe.

Performances are generally poor vehicles for understanding Shakespeare’s era or his own historical role. After all, it has almost always been fashionable to perform Shakespeare in ways that draw upon the styles and norms of the current age—indeed this imaginative revising is what keeps many people returning to Shakespeare. This occurred when seventeenth century theater companies “updated” Shakespeare for their own day, changing dialogue, adding music, characters, and subplots, and even transforming tragic plays into comedies (as in Nahum Tate’s 1681 adaptation The History of King Lear). In most centuries, Shakespeare has been frequently performed in various styles of contemporary dress.19 On other occasions, Shakespeare’s plays are

19 Indeed, as Alec Guinness remarked in the mid-twentieth century, “There is nothing new about presenting Shakespeare in modern dress. In fact the plays were always performed in contemporary costume until about one hundred and twenty years ago, when the actors Charles Kean and Macready startled theatrical London with their elaborate productions, the results of painstaking historical research…[Shakespeare himself] was notoriously indifferent to historical accuracy and was quite content to make ancient Romans refer to clocks and rapiers, buttons on
set in the past, but only sometimes in the historical early modern past. During the nineteenth century, Shakespeare was set in an idealized Elizabethan past, full of ostentatious elegance and without many of the naughty bits. In the past fifty years, Shakespearean dramas have been set in an almost limitless array of periods and locations, from the closing days of World War II (The Folger Theatre’s 2005 *Much Ado About Nothing*), to feudal Japan (Kurosawa’s 1957 *Throne of Blood*), to the not-so-distant future (the Yale Dramatic Association’s dystopian *Measure for Measure* in 2012).

While the works of Shakespeare have been made to inhabit an incredible variety of historical settings, there have also been, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, concerted efforts to locate and reproduce the historical manner in which his plays would have originally been performed. Using extensive research on everything from early modern speech patterns, dress, stage directions, music, and playhouse design, devotees of Shakespeare and his theater have attempted on numerous occasions to capture a theatrical experience that mirrors an Elizabethan original. The most notable and far-reaching example of this trend has been the reconstructed Globe Theater built on London’s south bank. Such attempted recreations give us the notion that there must have been something terribly profound about experiencing an “unadulterated” Shakespeare, the “pure” Shakespeare that his contemporaries would have witnessed.²⁰ By coming to a thatched, wooden playhouse we can presumably transcend our

---

²⁰ A similar argument is made by some practitioners of “Living History” the (theatrical) portrayal of everyday life in the past practiced at history museums such as Colonial Williamsburg and Plimouth Plantation. History, when “accurately” restaged is often assumed to possess a powerful emotional and educational effect on those who witness it. For the many problems with this notion, see Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums Undoing History through Performance* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007).
modern sensibilities and have a more meaningful Shakespearean experience than could occur in an ordinary auditorium. While it attempts accuracy, and through that a kind of profundity, “the Globe presents a Shakespeare that has crossed over from high art representation to the realm of commodified icon and image available to all consumers.”21 The result, while entertaining and enlightening, is usually not some mystical experience. What comes across most vividly to modern audiences during period performances are the technical limitations and compensations of early modern drama. Even in an obsessively researched replica of his own theater, Shakespeare remains difficult to historicize since each performance simultaneously creates him afresh.

Even when the stage and the performance are the most detailed recreations that historical and theatrical study can produce, there are limitations to the portrayal of the past that they present. The result is still a sanitized portrait, one that is orderly and consumable. The spectators in the pit are not as dirty, smelly, loud or violent as in days gone by (which is good!). The plays are well-worn favorites rather than uncertain newcomers. The spectacle entertains but rarely shocks. Through this type of performance we assert control over the past by recreating aspects of it for our own amusement. Our presumed knowledge of this past gives us power. And by staging Shakespeare in the style of the past—what we assume to be his more or less authentic past—we justify our present attitudes toward his era.

21 Dennis Kennedy, “Shakespeare and Cultural Tourism,” Theatre Journal 50, no. 2, Shakespeare and Theatrical Modernisms (May 1998), 187. Kennedy laments that the Globe is essentially a tourist-centered enterprise that throws a bit of education in with its entertainment, and sells a falsely “authentic” experience. He seems to suggest, somewhat absurdly, that the purity of theater and history have been somewhat corrupted by contemporary capitalist impulses, without acknowledging that these impulses were very much around in Shakespeare’s own day and are many centuries old: “If the Globe Centre wishes to be more than Disney it must strive—in the midst of its touristic success—to show that Shakespeare is not us, he is a strangely surviving other in a world of the same, and our fascination with him is a fascination with something that we can never fully assimilate.” Ibid., 188.
An historically inspired performance can give us a more accurate perception of the arrangement, atmosphere and experience of early modern play-going. Attendees note the lack of sound systems, the differences in lighting, the diminished fourth wall, the hierarchy of seating, and many other true and useful realities about the early modern theater. But what it usually cannot do is connect the experience of that theater to the outside world in any meaningful way. As in contemporary scholarship, the contents of the theater remain often very isolated from the larger culture that created and engaged with it. Two hours standing in the pit or sitting on a wooden bench cannot tell us much about the early modern conceptualization of theater or the relationship between the playhouse and the era’s social, political, economic, cultural forces. We enter the playhouse and the “past,” but as soon as we exit again we are back in the twenty-first century. Theater, which is virtually synonymous with Shakespeare, remains our prevailing experience of the early modern and we don’t have much else to work with, aside from Queen Elizabeth I, the Spanish Armada, and the plague.

**Conceptualizing Shakespeare’s World**

These, then, are some of the most common ways we experience Shakespeare and some of the most fundamental ideas about him that result. Mass culture and education present him as a mysterious figure but a natural genius that singlehandedly crafted the most powerful dramatic works of all time. Though thoroughly English and linguistically isolated, he transcends time, place and language to become a figure of global import. His fame remains unbroken and his favor in all ages overwhelming but not unchallenged. Conceptually, he exists separately from—and towers above—most other historical knowledge.

Yet, because Shakespeare is the most famous representative of the early modern world, he drastically colors public perceptions of sixteenth and seventeenth century history. Since
Shakespeare remains one of the few historical figures from these centuries that we regularly encounter, the popular image of early modern history is reduced exclusively to English history. Because Shakespeare is practically the only early modern figure studied in any detail, the entire swath of time between the Italian Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution is overwhelmed by one country, and specifically its primary urban center, London. In American cultural memory, the rest of world history during the era is neglected, with the sole exception of early English colonial efforts in the Americas. The remaining inhabitants of the early modern globe are left out of the picture entirely. Part of this may be because Americans, renowned for their dismal knowledge of their own history, tend to know even less about the history of other lands. While American students are at least nominally required to take American history classes, their access to other histories is more haphazard. Therefore, any knowledge of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that they possess is typically derived from literature classes and popular culture, and thus predominantly Shakespeare-focused. Most are left with the impression that if they do not know about other histories of the era, these must not have been important. Shakespeare, by contrast, is relatively well known and easily accessed, adding to his power and significance. As a result, the figure of Shakespeare and the legacy of his dramatic works obscure other political, social, and historical occurrences. Furthermore, because we have a tendency to understand Shakespeare as a national figure, it becomes likewise tempting to construct our understanding of history along national lines.

So the history of the 16th and 17th century is, in most American minds, the history of England. Presumably in other lands people were speaking other languages and were ruled by other monarchs, but they are largely unfamiliar, and the differences therefore unimportant. England’s centrality implies that it was the most powerful force of the era. Familiar symbols of
the early modern—elaborate portraits of the English nobility, the triumph of the English navy over the Spanish Armada, the English colonization of the New World—appear to bear this out. This assumption overshadows the historical reality that in the fifteen and sixteenth centuries the English continually struggled with the Dutch, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Danish, Swedes, and Italians for political, military, economic, and cultural power in Europe and in other lands. Nor was English superiority assured. Yet English history feeds into pre-Revolutionary American history and, as a precursor to the American experience, appears (to Americans, at least) more important than other concurrent histories.22

Focusing on Shakespeare as the pinnacle of early modern culture to the obfuscation of broader historical understanding can also prevent history from being taken seriously. When disconnected from larger historical trends and events, Shakespeare and the early modern world he inhabited are made to appear eternally significant but at the same time always potentially outmoded and irrelevant. With his funny clothes and flowery language, Shakespeare can be easily made to appear nonessential, quaint, and even a little bit silly. After all, he did not decide battles, invent new technologies, or change the lifestyle of his contemporaries in materials ways. He may have written the most acclaimed plays of all time, but he still wrote plays, and theater is difficult for some to take seriously. Experienced without historical context, Shakespeare and the years in which he lived have a tendency to appear simplistic, obscure, and old fashioned. History thus can also be easily trivialized, making it appear unworthy of deeper exploration.

22 It is often forgotten that the colonial Americas were the site of international tension and military clashes between the English, France, Spain, Dutch, Native American tribes, and others. As a result, the American Revolution was a global conflict in which European powers struggled not only for control over North America but for power within Europe and its colonial assets around the world. See William R. Nester, The First Global War: Britain, France, and the Fate of North America, 1756-1775 (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000).
An historical outlook based entirely upon perceptions of Shakespeare can lead to highly conflicted ideas about the past. On the one hand, this early modern era generates attractive and familiar images of beautiful clothing, sweeping romances, witty poetics, and profound thoughts and accomplishments. On the other land, life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries strikes us as “nasty, brutish, and short,” given the era’s poor personal hygiene, lack of medical knowledge, rampant disease, lack of indoor plumbing, pervasive social inequalities, and hundreds of other realities that we would consider inconveniences, if not tragedies. Movies and novels in particular play off these contrasting visions, making the early modern alternately sexy and violent, beautiful and disgustedly unsanitary. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are both distant enough and familiar enough to be compelling. A successfully consumable past will give a nod to the downsides of the age—in order to convey a sense of reality—while at the same time mitigating the audience’s exposure to the undesirable.

Because of the inherent disadvantages we see in the past, there is also a tendency to imagine that this was an age in which people were isolated. After all they did not have access to rapid transportation. Nor did they have the communication technologies that we have come to take for granted. Compared to us, they seem to be trapped—by space, by landscape, by social inequalities, and by limited educational resources. But this did not mean that people did not operate as—and feel themselves to be—part of a much larger world. Ordinary people could see, hear, touch, and sometimes even taste these global linkages, which were ever expanding in the early modern world and which were frequently played out in the creation and presentation of theatrical performance.\(^{23}\)

\(^{23}\) Of course, early modern populations often accessed inaccurate and biased portrayals of the wider world, but these impressions were nevertheless important in shaping their worldview.
The Shakespeare Mythos: Problematic Misunderstandings of History

Because of the centrality of Shakespeare to contemporary Anglo-American culture and the manner in which his figure obscures most other knowledge of the dramatic literature and practice of his time, people are understandably inclined to assume that he was the only playwright of his own day. If Shakespeare had any true rivals, this reasoning suggests, they would be likewise depicted, read, and examined in mass culture and education. The fact that he is so widely known, and his contemporaries less so, simply seems to reaffirm his dominance of the historical thought. The modern reception of Shakespeare’s plays as great works of literature can blind us to their true historical contexts, and by extension, to that of their author.

Because of his contemporary reputation, it is very tempting to assume that the adulation of Shakespeare went all the way back to his own day. In fact, if we selectively examine the early modern commentary about him, we can convince ourselves that his contemporaries believed in his genius just as firmly as we do. Certainly, one need only examine the poems printed in the first pages of Shakespeare’s first folio to believe that other writers of the day held him in great esteem. Ben Johnson’s characterization of Shakespeare as “Not for an age, but for all time” is frequently cited as an indication of the author’s reputation at the beginning of the seventeenth century (and today). However, the statement, though highly flattering, is historically misleading, and “[t]he fact that these ways of presenting and representing Shakespeare have endured for so long has tended to make their specifically Enlightenment origins and interests virtually invisible.”24 Essentially, the literary Shakespeare complicates our understanding of the historical Shakespeare.

Certainly, modern-day admiration has some root in Shakespeare’s fame among his contemporaries, both in literary circles and in playhouse audiences. However, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Shakespeare was far from being considered the only playwright of merit. Many seventeenth century English critics considered the work of Ben Johnson and John Fletcher superior or equal to that of Shakespeare. And let us not forget that to many early modern critics, few or no modern playwrights could come close to equaling the glories of Greek and Latin drama. Thus, when John Davies referred to Shakespeare as “our English Terrence,” he pays his fellow playwright a great complement by comparing him with the acknowledged master of Latin comedy, but in no way elevates Shakespeare above those illustrious ancient masters.

Many of Shakespeare’s fellow poets received similar accolades, particularly after their deaths. A volume of poems dedicated to Ben Johnson shortly after his 1637 death refers to him as “Great Johnson King of English Poetry” and “the most Excellent of English Poets.” Just like Shakespeare, he is compared favorably with the most celebrated poets of classical times. It is equally convenient to overlook that several of his sixteenth and seventeenth century viewers speak disparagingly of Shakespeare’s plays. Restoration diarist Samuel Pepys was no particular fan, though he saw Shakespeare most often in altered adaptations of his works. It was only in the eighteenth century that Shakespeare’s reputation began to rise far above that of other early modern English poets.

28 Dobson, 27.
As with all cultural memories, the legacy of Shakespeare is one that can be most effectively illuminated through the lens of history. Scholarship has very ably shown the process through which Shakespeare the English poet, playwright, and actor became Shakespeare the legend, illustrating that, indeed, Shakespeare’s cultural ascendancy was not somehow inevitable or foreordained but the product of distinct and often haphazard historical processes: chance survivals, theatrical rivalries, economic opportunities, and cultural needs that occurred over the course of several centuries. Although Shakespeare is firmly rooted in an historical past, it remains tempting to romanticize Shakespeare and interpret him as though he were one of his own plays: full of fated events, dramatic coincidence, and foreshadowed significance. While Shakespeare certainly produced high quality plays with enduring appeal, it is worthwhile to examine the other historical factors that have allowed Shakespeare to achieve an unprecedented cultural stature. One very important factor is the degree to which England and English theater interacted with and responded to the larger early modern world and its theater.

Greater communication, the result of increased trade, travel, and textual circulation within and outside Europe, inspired among English writers and critics, particularly John Dryden, “a massive case of cultural inferiority complex.” Within fifty years of Shakespeare’s death, his popularity in performance was compounded by a desire to locate great English playwrights who represented and legitimized the nation’s great cultural achievements. The poets chosen to embody this legacy were those that endured most successfully in printed form, for in the mid-seventeenth century, the Puritan government had effectively banned public live theater. Unable

---

29 Ironically, even studies (such as those of Michael Dobson and Robert D. Hume) that explore the means whereby Shakespeare became, in the face of many odds, a great cultural figure, allow the public focus to remain on Shakespeare and Shakespeare alone.

to see the work of English playwrights upon the stage (but often aware of dramatic developments occurring in other lands), interested readers turned to plays that had been written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. These were readily available and English readers learned to revere them as textual, rather than performed, national products.  

Michael Dobson notes:

By 1660, the Commonwealth’s necessary recourse to reading plays in print instead of seeing them performed had already done much to exaggerate the preeminence among the old dramatists of those whose work had achieved the prestige (and sheer physical durability) guarantees by publication in folio, namely Jonson, Shakespeare, and the younger and more fashionable Beaumont and Fletcher…

When theaters reopened in 1660, actors turned first to the old repertoire of Elizabethan and Stuart plays until new dramatic pieces could be composed. This only increased familiarity with and interest in the poets of previous decades, and combined with other forces to facilitate Shakespeare’s transformation into a cultural giant. Fed by the nationalism and cultural imperialism that began to grow at an incredible rate even in the sixteenth century (and only began to fall under serious scrutiny in the twentieth), the increasingly literate English population sought out a poet-hero who was perceived to be thoroughly English and free from foreign influence or contamination. They latched onto Shakespeare to fill this role, both because of his Englishness and the success that his plays had met with in Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, at the

---

31 Even as the Puritan regime banned most performances of plays, it had little problem with the publication of play texts. Nor were all performances banned: operas and masques continued to be openly performed. Frances N. Teague, Shakespeare and the American Popular Stage (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13.

same time, these developments in nationalism and cultural symbolism also began to effectively obscure the historical workings of early modern dramatic authorship and practice.

**Originality and the Romantic Cult of the Artist**

The terms “Shakespeare” and “genius” have long been linked. However, Shakespeare’s genius as a poet can often impede our understanding of the historical world he inhabited. Today, we have a very romantic notion of what it means to be a creative genius, which is in large part a product of the late nineteenth century, and certainly did not exist in quite the same way in Shakespeare’s time. The idea of genius, meaning either a special ability or the person manifesting that unique ability, dates back to Shakespeare’s day, but the modern concept of artistic genius did not develop for at least another century.

Contemporary notions of “the artist” and “genius” are rooted in the philosophical and artistic Romanticism that swept Europe beginning in the late 1700s. In a Europe wracked by revolution, corruption, and war, the ambitious Enlightenment project to perfect man and society appeared to have fallen short. Romanticism was a reaction against the rationality, secularism, and idealism that had been popularized earlier in the century. Instead, European youths, first in Germany and later in England and France, turned toward the emotional, the spiritual, and the introspective. As the present appeared ever less-glorious, individuals turned to history, literature, and the arts for compelling depictions of noble deeds and heroic portraits. The novels of Sir Walter Scott and the works of historical authors, including Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare, proved particularly compelling, as readers search not simply for diversion but also for existential meaning.33

---

Correspondingly, the advent of Romanticism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changed the definition of “art,” shifting it from a commercial product to one supposedly embodying pure intent and emotion. Previously most artists and many writers were craftsmen in the employ of patrons. However, by the mid-1800s there emerged certain conventions and behaviors associated with the artistically gifted, particularly poets and composers. The creative genius—exemplified in that era by Beethoven and Goethe—was a tormented soul, who had a mysterious and almost uncontrollable impulse to produce his artistry.\textsuperscript{34} He lived and worked almost exclusively in solitude, for his creativity was of an anti-social nature: unpredictable, sometimes even violent, obsessive, and frequently painful to the artist, who could think of little else but the drive to perfect his creation. Art was struggle, and one could never be sure when one’s genius might come or go. The artist was engaged in the eternal pursuit of inspiration, which often arrived in the form of romantic passion (often doomed or unrequited) or the majesty of the natural world. The art produced by the romantic genius was transcendent, unsullied by crass temporal concerns, and produced for its own sake rather than profit. The result might prove too lofty and profound for the ordinary mind to comprehend.

It is this romantic image of artistic genius that has been grafted back in time onto the most famous of poets. According to the ideal of romantic creativity it is only through struggle, perhaps even suffering, that true art is created. Thus, in film and fiction, Shakespeare struggles with his plays, just as the contemporary audience struggles to authentically locate him. As the consummate artist, Shakespeare works alone. He has startling flashes of inspiration and is driven by compulsion to bring his project to fruition. This vision of Shakespeare as romantic genius is

poetic and emotionally appealing. The trouble is that genius is not something that can be evaluated in terms of historical processes. Ignoring the obvious hard work and the range of external influences that went into Shakespeare’s plays and poetry provides us a way to admire him without loss of self-esteem, for genius (or the lack thereof) is something that cannot be helped. Thus, while we venerate the playwright, the fickle and unpredictable nature of genius gives us hope that we too can potentially ascend to the level of Shakespeare’s achievements without very much effort should inspiration strike.

Today, the idea of genius goes hand in hand with the concept of originality, and so depictions of Shakespeare portray him as a great originator, not simply of the words, phrases, poetry, and human portraits he did create, but also of stories and themes with a more complex literary origin. Shakespeare is frequently imagined as a solitary figure with a pen and paper. We are led to presume from both visual and narrative cues, and often from what we learn in school, that he made up the stories that he told so skillfully. For example, viewers of the film *Shakespeare in Love* essentially see Shakespeare’s script for *Romeo and Juliet* emerge from thin air, the product of a single Englishman’s imagination (with perhaps a little help from fellow-poet Christopher Marlowe).

The truth is considerably more complex and perhaps difficult to reconcile with popular understandings of Shakespeare, for “[t]he playwright did not invent his tales: he borrowed and adapted plots from sources in other media, turning stories and histories from books into dramas played out in a theater.” Rather than acting in inspired isolation, Shakespeare was part of a complex network of international literary exchange and education. Far from being created from

---

whole cloth, his plays were inspired by classical drama, British, Greek and, Roman histories, and
Italian plays and stories, among others. In addition to being a great writer, his plays show him to have been a great reader, yet in popular portrayal he is never depicted reading, only writing. It is much more attractive to imagine that the idea for a play like *Romeo and Juliet* came directly from Shakespeare’s own inventiveness rather than an English adaptation of an Italian story which had been popular throughout Europe for decades and was published and performed in English versions long before Shakespeare got hold of it. Shakespeare’s play borrows considerably from English iterations of the translated Italian poem, a detail conveniently but entertainingly ignored in *Shakespeare in Love* where viewers see the title and plot of the play evolve throughout the course of its composition.

In Shakespeare’s day nearly everyone would have been familiar with the stories he told before they had read or seen his play. Some would have known precisely what sources had inspired his own versions. On seeing *A Comedy of Errors*, his contemporaries noted his debt to Plautus. Many plays relied on material from authors as famed as Boccaccio (*All’s Well that Ends Well, Cymbeline*), Chaucer (*Troilus and Cressida*), and Plutarch (*Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus*), though often filtered through translations and intermediaries. The myth of Shakespeare as a genius of narrative originality, rather than poetic originality and adaptive storytelling, spills over onto his contemporaries and to the whole early modern era.

---

[36] Often, although scholars can note the transmission of specific stories over time, it is unknown what particular version Shakespeare himself accessed. Probably he did not read most of these authors in the original. Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare’s Books: a Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

[37] In *Anonymous*, de Vere’s writing desk is surrounded by books that suggest his literary sensibility and his wealth, yet he is never seen consulting any of them. He may have been a great scholar, the film suggests, but the plays of “Shakespeare” came straight out of his imaginative genius.
But Shakespeare was by no means alone in his method of adaptive composition. In Shakespeare’s own day, borrowing was routine, evident, and expected from a range of source types, including texts both printed and manuscript, oral tradition, and dramatic performances themselves.

The legend of Shakespeare’s natural genius, which came to inspire the image we have today, goes back to his lifetime and to some of the standards and expectations of the Elizabethan literary world. Many of the most prolific poets of Shakespeare’s days were very learned men, possessing university education. Shakespeare did not have such extensive schooling, and in the commentary of the day he is needled for not being among the so-called “university wits,” of the time. One critic, Robert Greene, famously referred to him as an “upstart crowe” who believes he can compete or outdo with the best minds of his time. But while some were dismissive of Shakespeare’s more limited educational background, others evidently believed it to be an advantage rather than a drawback. Shakespeare gained a reputation for innate skill and natural talent. He represented to fellow playwright, Francis Beaumont, “[h]ow far sometimes a mortal man may go/By the dim light of Nature.” Plentiful depictions of Shakespeare as a “born poet” and an original wit give the mistaken notion that Shakespeare wrote without literary inspiration or poetic antecedents. Indeed, one contemporary wrote of Shakespeare:

Next Nature onely helpt him, for looke thorow
This whole Booke, thou shalt find he both not borrow,
One phrase from Greekes, nor Latines imitate,
Nor once from vulgar Languages Translate,
Nor Plagiari-like from others gleane,
Nor begges he from each witty friend a Scene

---

38 Robert Greene, *The Groatsworth of Wit bought with a Million of Repentance*, 1596.
To peece his Acts with, all that he doth write,
Is pure his own, plot, language exquisite…

The implication here is that Shakespeare, unlike his fellows, was completely free of debts to other authors, be they classical, contemporary English, or foreign. Yet, despite Diggs’s protestations, both Shakespeare’s language and his plots display considerable debts to all of these, which many of his contemporaries would certainly have realized. This doesn’t mean that he and his contemporaries did not transform the material they borrowed in innovative ways, but it is a great mistake to isolate Shakespeare and his fellow authors from the extensive reading and play going that helped shape their careers. Nevertheless, in popular culture, the image of the lone inventor is much more romantic than that of the laboring craftsman.

This understanding of Shakespeare as possessed of a natural, even divine, genius has been consistently compelling and has helped to shape his contemporary reputation. The assumed tension between learning and inborn genius has overshadowed the fact that Shakespeare’s presumably grammar school education was much more rigorous in its literary requirements that we have a tendency to imagine. Furthermore, it did provide students with a thorough grounding in classical literature and a certain amount of exposure to classical, and possibly also foreign languages. This is certainly different from what we today would consider a basic education. The romantic image of Shakespeare also obscures the fact that the man was an autodidact who engaged with a wide array of literature. He is also popular because of his reputation as the “people’s poet” rather than as someone well educated. Presumably, he is more relevant than someone bogged down in book learning and trapped by outmoded classical conventions.

---

becomes, then, a figurehead for the worthiness of ordinary people—while at the same time considered far from ordinary himself.

In the words of Douglas Bruster, seeing Shakespeare as the sole creative force that shaped his plays teaches us to forget that “literature itself has a history, that it speaks with others’ words, talks back to them and manifests authors’ own histories of reading and writing.”  

Too frequently we assume that literature reflects only the era in which it was composed, when it is nearly always a reflection of, and response to, other, older literatures. This intertextuality, which shows the historical Shakespeare to have been in dialogue with a vast array of other works, can help refocus our historical attitude toward Shakespeare and encourage the exploration of international literary transmission and cultural adaptation during the early modern era and its impact upon the Western European theater.

Identity: Who and What is Shakespeare, Anyway?

The impressive contemporary status of Shakespeare, emphasized in education and popular culture, deceives us into assuming that he has had a stable significance; however, “suggesting that Elizabethan audiences responded to Shakespeare in the same ways that we respond to popular culture risks projecting our own assumptions, preoccupations, and emotions onto popular audiences of a demonstrably different past.”  It conceals the very real and very wide gaps that separate the past and present and locate false human universals. The Shakespeare we experience today was a very different one from the Shakespeare familiar to previous generations. And one person’s Shakespeare may well be different from the next person’s.

---

42 Lanier, 96.
For all the discussion, illustration, and performance of Shakespeare and his plays, it is ultimately challenging to define a set repertoire or a corpus of texts that comprise “Shakespeare.” Certainly, this popular concept does not adequately address many historical realities of the early modern theatrical world. To begin with, Shakespeare’s works have never been stable entities. As performed scripts, they undoubtedly changed in both subtle and overt ways from performance to performance. Even in written form, they cannot necessarily be considered authoritative. Shakespeare probably had only limited control over the publication of his plays, which were owned by his theatrical company and extensively published only after his death. Scripts for publication were often cobbled together from different versions of actors’ parts and from the actors’ memories, and for this reason the various printed editions of many plays contain sizable differences, to say nothing of printer errors. In such cases, which text is “correct”—which is “Shakespeare”? There is no convenient or easy answer. It is also important to realize that, historically, Shakespeare has never “embod[ied] a single, monolithic consensus.” Indeed, that is part of his enduring power: the apparent ability to be all things to all people.

The people of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries recognized these realities, and that texts—with the exception of the Bible—were far from sacred. Imitation, adaptation, alteration, and outright theft of dramatic material were widely practiced and only occasionally condemned. As a result, early modern theater practitioners had no qualms in changing any aspect of a play, including the text itself, to better serve an audience or to keep up with changing tastes and times. Popular pieces, and literary texts in general were highly mutable, and only works such as the Bible or the writings of Greek and Roman masters, inspired any kind of reverence or desire for textual fidelity, even among the scholarly. In the latter half of the seventeenth century,

43 Dobson, 12.
Shakespeare was a name that was well known, but that fame did not mean his plays remained free of alteration. Indeed, over the centuries the vast majority of audiences saw plays that were much changed from the texts he penned. As Robert Hume points out “Bardolatrous rhetoric notwithstanding, [the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] do not see Shakespeare’s plays as sacred or untouchable.” Shakespeare was well respected, but Shakespeare’s exact words were anything but sacrosanct in these centuries, for “Shakespeare’s plays belonged to the theatre more significantly than they belonged to Shakespeare.”

Later performances paid complements to Shakespeare’s plays not by performing them in the most accurate way possible but by updating them in innovative ways. Veneration and alteration were not antithetical but went hand in hand. A similar statement could also be made about playwrights more generally, both English and foreign, in the years after the Restoration. Free and creative adaptations were common. Only in the mid-eighteenth century did a mania for textual purity develop, and even then it was mostly literary scholars rather than performers who abided by these regulations. Nor did alteration of Shakespeare’s plays cease; substantial censorship was common from the 1800s into the twentieth century. Even today directors trim scenes, delete lines and sculpt their vision onto the works; they “simultaneously revere Shakespeare and deny him full rights in his own works.”

In addition to textual discrepancies and alterations over time, there is ample evidence to confirm that certain of Shakespeare’s plays were not the work of a single poet but collaborative efforts. Collaboration was common among early modern English playwrights, and two or more

---

44 Hume, 48.
45 Dobson, 18-19.
46 Ironically, no one criticizes Dryden for “corrupting” Lope de Vega, but critical authorities still deride his reimagining of Shakespeare’s works.
47 Dobson, 18.
authors often worked together on a single play. Sometimes collaborative partnerships spanned entire careers. It is well established that Shakespeare collaborated with Thomas Dekker on his *Two Noble Kinsman*.\(^{48}\) It has been hypothesized that other Shakespeare plays were also collaborative efforts. If Shakespeare was not writing alone, is the play still “Shakespeare”? And what are we to make of translations? As Monica Matei-Chesnoiu asks, if Shakespeare’s identity is so bound up in his use of the English language, is Shakespeare outside of the English language still Shakespeare?\(^ {49}\) What makes something “Shakespeare”?\(^ {49}\)

Throughout history, the instability of Shakespeare’s texts has been alternately embraced and ignored. He has, on the one hand, been very creatively used but on the other transformed into an immutable holy relic. Every generation has had its own Shakespeare, in terms of both reputation and text. At the same time, there has long been a search for the true, the ultimate, the authoritative Shakespearean play, one that can never really exist.\(^ {50}\) In the same way, we seek a definitive account of history that is similarly inaccessible.

**Constructing a Global Role for a National Hero**

One of the common tropes found in nearly all popular and didactic presentations of Shakespeare is a strong emphasis on his Englishness and his role as a manipulator of and contributor to the English language and its literary heritage. His contemporaries lauded him in print as an English equivalent of the greatest poets of antiquity. Subsequent commentators were

\(^{48}\) Interestingly *Two Noble Kinsmen* remains one of the least well known of Shakespeare’s plays—it is almost as though this overt instance of collaboration has diminished the play’s standing within the Shakespeare canon.


\(^{50}\) Nor is Shakespeare the only example of the ongoing search for the definitive in literature. The Bible is perhaps the most highly contested work of literature in the western world with the quest for the “true” version resulting in obsessive research, factionalism, and even warfare.
also deliberate in their portrayal of his national significance. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to understand Shakespeare outside of a national context because:

[1]literary history has erected Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as great national monuments, with the playwright ensconced in the pantheon of plucky Englishness somewhere between Elizabeth and her dashing privateers. Beyond the facile myth, the early modern theater clearly accomplishes the consolidation of the nation-state. Shakespeare, in particular, has long occupied a central role in the construction of an exclusively national literary canon.

Shakespeare was not simply a figure whose accomplishments generated pride in the English cultural legacy. Shakespeare’s reputation was also deliberately employed to construct a proud British heritage. But as we shall see, this need to construct a national heritage was not simply an English phenomenon but a larger early modern trend put into effect “when the supranational (broadly European) culture identified with Latin and classical civilization began to give way to vernacular cultures.” The fragmentation of European culture and a greater familiarity with non-European cultures engendered competitive fears that gave way to nationalism and its cultural baggage. Shakespeare has been firmly established as an English (and now British) national emblem, so how has he become a figure of such global importance lauded far beyond his homeland? Much of his international influence can be traced back to British imperial dominance

---

51 See: Dobson, *the Making of the National Poet.*
52 Fuchs, 89.
53 Shakespeare’s elevated status and role as a national icon is one example of what Hobsbawm and Ranger termed “invented tradition”: “a set of practices…which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” In effect, “invented traditions” like reverence for Shakespeare become powerful enough to obscure their own origins. They are passed off as natural developments from an ageless past rather than constructed beliefs and behaviors of more recent manufacture. (Eric J Hobsbawm and Terence Osborn Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.
in the nineteenth century, when Shakespeare was presented as a marker of civilization and a culturally elevating experience to peoples in Africa and Asia. However, Shakespeare’s innate Britishness has not prevented him from being embraced by scores of non-British and even non-Anglophone cultures. Indeed, the dual process of nationalizing Shakespeare and spreading his reknown was aided by Shakespeare’s popularity abroad, particularly in eighteenth century Germany and nineteenth century Russia.

In the contemporary United States, millions take great pride in not being English or British but still maintain a similar kind of reverence for England’s most famous poet. We have seen how widespread his influence is in American speech, American schooling, American theater companies, and in all forms of popular culture: “Shakespeare has shaped our language and our culture. His works provide a common frame of reference that helps unite us into a single community of discourse.”  

Indeed, Americans are responsible for a large part of the Shakespearean popularization that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even today, Americans do not think of Shakespeare as a foreign playwright. His English identity has certainly not stopped a large number of Americans from adopting Shakespeare as their own cultural possession, or at least a recognizable piece of popular culture.  But how precisely does he fit into the narrative of Americanism, which so often finds difficulty in assimilating outside influences? Perhaps this tension is eased because Shakespeare comes from an era that predates

---


56 Even the animated cartoon, that most American of genres, pays tribute to Shakespeare. In 1940, “Shakespearean Spinach” depicted Popeye the Sailor performing in a production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Bugs Bunny gives a nod to *Macbeth*, *As You Like It*, and *Hamlet*, and performs part of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet* while a note-taking Shakespeare-like figure looks on in 1959’s “A Witch’s Tangled Hare.”
rivalry between American settlers and the English motherland. Therefore, he can easily function as a kind of pre-American who died not long after the first permanent English colonies were established in the new world, and is thus perceived to possess ties to American heritage. Americans of Anglo-Saxon decent are numerous, and, for most of the country’s post-colonial history, wielded considerably more power than other American ethnicities. In Shakespeare’s lifetime, most of their ancestors were still thoroughly English, and so Shakespeare himself can be fashioned into one such ancestral figure. Shakespeare, in his rural origins and lack of higher education, also symbolizes the common man elevated to great stature, a narrative very compelling to many Americans.

In addition to being an honorary American progenitor, Shakespeare is also a linguistic celebrity to Americans, the precursor of American literature as well as British. Recent arguments over the preeminence of the English language in American institutions of all kinds, illustrate how strongly many Americans feel about language as a cultural identifier. Although the United States has no official language, English speakers have constituted the largest linguistic group for centuries, and English has long been the nation’s unofficial language. Unlike in many other parts of the world, many Americans are monolingual—speaking only English and nothing else. American political and economic influence has helped to make English of the most frequently spoken languages the world over, and many Americans take great pride in this act. However in recent years, the linguistic primacy of English within American borders has been challenged, particularly by the growing numbers of Spanish-speakers in the United States. This shift has both worried and outraged many English-speaking Americans who appear to fear that in a Spanish speaking or bilingual nation, something fundamentally American will be lost. For many, American nationalism and the English language, including its literary legacy, are deeply
Therefore, Shakespeare is often perceived as forming an integral part of the culture of the United States. After all, he bears as much linguistic similarity to modern American English as to modern British English.

It helps that Americans are so heavily exposed to Shakespeare during their formative years. Furthermore, because he was an artist, he and his plays are elevated above the political controversies and concerns that separated the two nations in the centuries since the American Revolution. It does not hurt that Americans have often found his subject matter appealing. Overlooking themes, such as the divine right of rulers, that pepper many of the histories, Americans cling to Shakespeare’s diatribes against tyranny and deception and his portrayals of bravery, action, and love. But regardless of whether these feelings are understood or articulated, it is evident that Americans, particularly comfortably situated, educated, English-speaking Caucasian Americans, have long considered Shakespeare one of their own.

But Shakespeare is not merely the most famous poet of the English-speaking world. His memory extends far beyond the geographical boundaries of Anglophone nations. Simultaneously, Shakespeare the national and linguistic hero is presented as a figure of international prestige, the greatest poet of all time. His dramas “are accepted as exemplary

---

57 John Lipski notes that language affiliation is often nationalist sentiment by another name, for “language may become an instrument of nationalism, serving to identity the origin of the speaker, and aiding him in maintaining his political and social independence from the rest of the world.” John M. Lipski, “Orthographic Variation and Linguistic Nationalism,” *La Monda Lingvo-Problemo* 6 (1975), 38.

58 Or perhaps, as John Barton of the Royal Shakespeare Company has suggested, “American is actually closer to Elizabethan English than…current English speech. That’s ironic, because American actors are often worried about not speaking what they call standard English, yet they’re actually doing it closer to Shakespeare’s way…” John Barton, *Playing Shakespeare* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), 53.
universal art works.”\textsuperscript{59} Not only has the greatness of Shakespeare come to be widely accepted the world over, his popularity has also greatly shaped the relationships between people and the cultural ownership of theater products.

In summer and fall of 2012, the Royal Shakespeare Company hosted the World Shakespeare Festival, described by its organizers as “a celebration of Shakespeare as the world’s playwright.”\textsuperscript{60} The festival had numerous components including an international conference on Shakespeare in education and “Globe to Globe,” a project to stage:

performances of nearly every play in the canon by companies from 35 countries working in 37 languages. It is a motley collection – an Armenian \textit{King John}, \textit{Henry IV Part Two} in Argentine Spanish, \textit{Coriolanus} in Japanese, the \textit{Henry VIs} done as a “Balkan trilogy” by companies from Serbia, Albania and Macedonia.\textsuperscript{61}

Elaborate celebrations of William Shakespeare reflect the prominent place that he has traditionally held in western literature, theater, education, and history, as well as the manner in which his influence has spread around the globe.\textsuperscript{62} In the four hundred years since his works were written, and most notably in the twentieth century, performances of Shakespeare in a multitude of language and styles have occurred all around the world. Many have celebrated such contemporary performances as great leaps in multicultural theater and a new \textit{post}-\textit{post}-colonial world of artistic sharing without messy cultural appropriation or indoctrination. But it is not quite


\textsuperscript{62} The earliest celebration, the Shakespeare Jubilee organized by David Garrick in 1769, was a purely nationalistic affair.

65
that simple, nor so warmly received from all corners. What may seem above political positioning and therefore free of assumptions can actually be steeped in preconceptions, many of them unconscious. Seemingly organic cross-cultural or intercultural performances can also be construed, in the words of one critic, as opportunities for “marketing fashionable discourses such as interculturalism and postmodernism under the safe brand name of Shakespeare”.63

Shakespeare remains a cultural figure isolated, in a pocket of Englishness, from a larger cultural realm while paradoxically dominating that outside world:

The wide promulgation of the English language and English culture have helped sustain Shakespearean dominance. So has the geopolitical dominance of the United States, a former colony suffering from its own case of cultural inferiority. But if there is a single factor that has sustained twentieth-century style Bardolotry, it is widespread, generally mandatory indoctrination in schools.64

We have noted how widely Shakespeare is studied in predominantly-Anglophone countries, but Shakespeare’s role in education is global. According to a survey by the British Council and the Royal Shakespeare Company, roughly half of the world’s schoolchildren, more than 64 million, study the works of Shakespeare at some point in their education. Of the 43 countries that responded to the British Council survey, 65% indicated that Shakespeare was explicitly mentioned in their curricula.65 In non-English speaking countries, the vast majority of Shakespeare study occurs in literature classes and in English language classes, where he is presented as “the greatest English writer” (if not “the greatest writer”) in many Anglophone lands. The result is that the words “Shakespeare” and “English” are inevitably uttered side by side, in many minds nearly synonymous. Worldwide, Shakespeare is indelibly linked first to the

63 Yeeyon Im, 258.
64 Hume, 67-68.
English language and second to the nation of England. Globally, students who take English as a second language are very likely to read parts of Shakespeare’s works in the original rather than in translation. As one student video remarked, “We wouldn’t consider ourselves English language students unless we read Shakespeare.”

These circumstances suggest that, despite the emphasis of the World Shakespeare Festival on creating and sustaining a multi-cultural Shakespeare, students most frequently experience him as an English cultural figure first and as a global cultural figure second. Indeed, it would have been impossible, it seems, for him to have become the second had he not already been the first. This is not to suggest that Shakespeare is necessarily the pervasive tool of Anglo-Western cultural domination or that his works don’t have the potential to be meaningful across cultural and linguistic borders. On the contrary, it is certainly possible for persons around the world to relate to, adapt, and appropriate Shakespeare effectively and meaningfully, both in text and in performance. However, Shakespeare, particularly in the minds of students, is very much a national representative of the English nation and English culture. He is the figurehead of the English language. His international legacy, on the other hand, feels relatively new. In our age of mass culture and communication we can spread information around the world. Shakespeare is available in new places. Much of what is shared passes from one culture into another without people noticing that it was ever foreign. But no matter how much Shakespeare is transmuted, he remains in many ways English: Western, white, and Anglo-Saxon.

---


67 If the ownership of Shakespeare by white, English speakers is problematic, so too are attempts by other cultural groups to assert ownership over the same material. One of the few overtly non-white characters in Shakespeare’s oeuvre, Othello, has remained an intriguing yet mildly controversial figure in the African American community. *Othello* will eternally be a play that
The implications of this rhetoric are complex and troubling. It suggests the presumed superiority of the English language, if not also the preeminence of English (or by extension “western”) culture. Because of his firmly English identity, Shakespeare, at the same time that he represents the best of western and Anglophone literary production, symbolizes for some the historical domination of western/Anglophone learning over non-western learning, and the domination of the less educated and disadvantaged by the wealthy and erudite. Even within the United States, those who have been disconnected from the structures of political and cultural power have a tendency to see Shakespeare as affiliated with oppressive elitism. Martin-Smith, et al, find that minority and disadvantaged youth “often experience ‘doing Shakespeare’ as the imposition of an alien (white, middle-class, adult) cultural form.”

In past centuries and today, considerable effort has been taken to internationalize Shakespeare, to make him relevant around the globe, and not just in Anglophone or European foregrounds racial antagonism, even if individual productions seek to combat it. Yet, the character has been a vehicle for many well-known African American stars of stage and screen, including Paul Robeson’s famous ground-breaking portrayal in segregated America in 1943. In this respect the role is understood to belong primarily to the black community, with the result that debates have occurred over whether a given actor was “black enough” to play the part. At the same time, Kent Thompson explains “there are several African American actors who don’t want to perform Othello, who doubt that we should ever produce Othello again. They feel it’s a white man’s version of a black man’s play.” “Interview with Ken Thompson,” Philip C Kolin, Othello New Critical Essays. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 451. Or to employ the words of Ed Guerrero, “The black star, while a wealthy, privileged symbol of equality and showcase success for white folks, is at the same time expected to exemplify and speak for the social aspirations of an oppressed racial formation.” Ed Guerrero, “Black Stars in Exile: Paul Robeson, O.J. Simpson, and Othello”, in Paul Robeson: Artist and Citizen, ed. Jeffrey C. Stewart (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 282-3.

68 Alistair Martin-Smith, Annette Hayton, and Maya Ishiura, “Emancipating Shakespeare: Cultural Transmission or Cultural Transformation?,” Caribbean Quarterly 53, no. 1/2, Returning the Gaze: Reclaiming the Voice - Post-Colonialism and its Implications for Drama and Education (June 2007), 150.
countries. Many have felt drawn to “the aspiration to reach universality through Shakespeare.”69 The terms in which this is conducted are problematic for several reasons. First, this impulse presupposes that Shakespeare and his world were historically very isolated, which we have seen is far from the case. Furthermore, it makes the dangerous assumption that everyone is capable of understanding Shakespeare in much the same way (by implication, the “right” way).

Anthropologists, in particular, have struggled with the notion of human universals and the search for characteristics and values common to all human cultures. Laura Bohannan’s classic fieldwork essay “Shakespeare in the Bush” would seem to disprove the myth that there is much that is universally obvious or understood in the works of Shakespeare.70 Indeed, the discord and debate among literary scholar and historians would seem to confirm this: everyone will interpret these works differently, even within a given cultural atmosphere. There is little that diverse individuals and different cultures cannot find meaning in and put their own stamp on. So Shakespeare’s global importance becomes about participation rather than consensus. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does have a tendency to disassociate him from the historical forces of which he was a part and that had influence on him and his work. His plays and poetry gain in approachability, but often lose historical context.

Possibilities and Pitfalls in Intercultural Performance

Shakespeare represents to many “the cream of Western civilization”, so that “[p]laying Shakespeare successfully will demonstrate that the troupe is on a level equal with other international theatre companies.”71 But what exactly constitutes “playing Shakespeare”? In

69 Yeeyon Im, 263.
71 Yeeyon Im, 260, 263.
English-language performance, Shakespeare’s essence is presumed to lie primarily in the words: the verses and the prose that Shakespeare himself wrote. Anything else, no matter how creative, is not quite fully Shakespeare. However, even the most conscientiously translated non-English language performances of “Shakespeare” necessarily contain very little actual Shakespearean verse, for the text has been rendered into another language. In popular culture, too—with the exception of a few famed speeches and quotations—it is the dramatic stories themselves that are conceived of as “Shakespeare.” Yet, most Shakespearean plot elements were not originally his own, but as we have seen, borrowed from other sources. This was recognized in the seventeenth century: a well-known plot used by Shakespeare became another man’s play when new dialogue and some edits were inserted. Reducing Shakespeare to plot rather than poetry and word choice is the necessary outcome of broadening access to Shakespeare through translation and adaptation, but as a result many of his powerful contributions to the English language are glossed over. Transforming Shakespeare into a global phenomenon has bolstered his status as a national figure but further concealed his actual historical role and his influence on his home culture.

While transcultural adaptations assert that Shakespeare does not belong only to the West, they nevertheless have a tendency to bolster western cultural values by esteeming and performing Shakespeare in the first place. This is part of the double trap—the catch-22—of exchanges between cultures. No exchange is ever entirely innocent. There is nearly always power at play. Francesca Rayner suggests that Portuguese theater companies “use the international status of Shakespeare to enhance their own.” Yeeyon Im contends that the frequent performance of Shakespearean drama, especially in Asia, represents cultural groups still passively living under the cloud of colonialism and honoring the works of Europe’s most famous

author in order to make themselves appear “civilized” in the eyes of the West. They have, she suggests, bought into western ideas about cultural supremacy. The result is “[a]n ultimately hollow internationalism [which] makes little difference to existing national theatre practices.”

Neither tradition, she suggests, is demonstrably enriched. Though it may seem counterintuitive, the global celebration of Shakespeare has encouraged a nationalist understanding of theater the world over. Dramatic works, playwrights, forms, styles, contentions, companies, and audiences are all assigned national identities. Rayner wonders that national understandings of theater are still so prevalent in a globalizing world, but realizes that globalization has been a force from the very beginning of permanent public theater operations in Europe. Indeed, that globalization and national ideas, more often than not, went hand in hand. Exposure to other cultures, combined with growing uniformity among groups exposed to the same cultural resources, often inspires societies to look to nationalism for identity and security. Thus, Yeeyon Im reports that “[n]ationalism is common in the intercultural theatre of New Asian directors”, and asserting cultural pride is one of its central purposes.

Yet, adaptive performance does not serve only the interests of the culture performing the adaptation. Yeeyon Im argues that Shakespearean displays in this nationalistic vein “more often than not content themselves with achieving recognition from the West without challenging Western hegemony.” Loren Kruger proposes, and perhaps rightly so, that the stage—particularly the public stage—is the ideal location for debating and determining the nature and meaning of nationality because of perceptions of its essentially and overtly public nature.

---

73 Ibid., 145.
74 Yeeyon Im, 259.
75 Ibid.
Even with these complexities and contradictions, the worldwide study and performance of Shakespeare’s works does have the benefit of creating more widely understood cultural referents. Dialogues are perhaps opened, assumptions challenged. Exposure to the modes of expression of other groups is never an inherently negative process, for learning begets power and intercultural understanding. But the motivations and impulses that lie behind the embracing of Shakespearean drama around the world are potentially disconcerting and sometimes downright controversial. This is especially true when one considers the cultural legacy of European literature in general, and Shakespeare in particular, in non-western lands. Historically they have often been used as a civilizing tool and a cultural mascot. Representing the very greatest achievements of English, European and Western civilization, they were compared vigorously with presumed not-quite-equivalents in other cultures. Non-Europeans were encouraged to read, view and sometimes even perform Shakespearean poetics in order to approach acceptability in western eyes. Even today, continuing to endow Shakespeare and other literary figures of Western Europe with such a prominent reputation emphasizes the primacy of Western history and culture at the expense of others, and therefore the West itself over the rest of the world.

**Shakespeare and the Idea of the Poet-Hero**

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the most famous face of drama worldwide, but other prominent poets of the early modern world have been celebrated alongside him and in similar ways. Three hundred years later their names are more famous, often, than those of the monarchs who ruled them and the actors who brought their plays to life. Even if we cannot name the plays they wrote, we have a mental image of them—an image that takes visual form on the title pages of published collections or in the shape of marble statuary: larger than life, elegantly arrayed, intimidating, often clutching the pen that symbolizes their cultural contribution. Like
Shakespeare they have been assigned national and linguistic identities, and along with early modern theatrical culture, have been studied almost exclusively within a national framework. In the United States today they are easy to ignore (after all, they did not write in English), but in other countries their stature approaches Shakespeare’s.

While Shakespeare is the most extreme example of the national poet-hero, Shakespeare’s celebrity reflects a much more widespread cultural impulse that has encouraged the veneration of the early modern playwrights and their dramatic efforts. By the mid-seventeenth century, the various countries of Western Europe were already touting the achievements of their best national poet-playwrights, and comparing them with both the writers of the past and those of other nations. Many emerged as leading figures: Molière, Racine, and the brothers Corneille in France and Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca in Spain. They were the progenitors of the dramatic arts in their respective lands and contributed to the most prestigious literature of the era. Within their respective nations and language traditions, this has endowed them with a heroic status. Yet, their deification would not have been possible without the textual preservation of their lives and works. Ironically, had their plays and poems not been captured in written form and widely disseminated through the print trade, their enduring cultural significance as creators of live theater would never have been established.

But why are they and their plays honored as such great cultural monuments, so that both cultural memory and scholarship remain dominated by them? Heroes do not make themselves.

77 In the early modern context, the terms “playwright” and “poet” were—and can still be—used interchangeably. After all, most plays were written in verse, whether iambic pentameter, heroic couplets, or the diverse rhyme schemes employed in Spanish drama. Many playwrights (particularly in England and Spain) also produced varying quantities of non-dramatic poetry. Patrick Cheney points out that Shakespeare “and his colleagues are more likely to use the term ‘poet’ to designate the writer of both poems and plays; they frequently call a play a ‘poem’.” Patrick Gerard Cheney, *Shakespeare, National Poet-playwright* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26.
We make them. Individuals collectively decide what feats are worthy of commemoration and in what circumstances. If we are to begin to answer this question we must look back into the world in which these poet-icons were born, and the historical events and situations involved in their ascendancy. Before they wrote a line, indeed, long before they were even born, things were happening that would eventually shape their cultural significance. The sixteenth century altered the nature and understanding of authorship, as, according to Patrick Cheney, the opening of the theaters, the rise of professional printing, and the commodification of published literary texts combined to “play a decisive role in the birth of a new Western author who is both a poet and a playwright.” What ultimately made these men into enduring national monuments is the combination of their popular theatrical fame through performance, their literary acclaim through publication, and the need of nations to represent their cultural identities and achievements in recognizable ways.

In an early modern world of rising nationalism and increased competition between states, cultures were continually evaluated in comparison with other cultures: militarily, morally, economically, and even artistically. By the seventeenth century especially, thinkers and writers were very concerned with how their particular nation measured up to others, especially their European neighbors. But it was not just their contemporaries with whom these cultural evaluators felt they were competing. In the wake of the Renaissance, with new interest in and access to classical plays, the early moderns also measured themselves against their distant “ancestors.” By the seventeenth century, contemporary plays were being compared with plays composed in the previous century and those of revered ancient Greek and Latin playwrights. In

this charged atmosphere of theatrical competition, it became necessary to elevate these poet-playwrights to heroic status in order to cast the contemporary nation in a positive light.

Today, the early modern poet-heroes remain figures of considerable reputation in their nations of origin and among those interested in the theater arts. While their plays may not be as widely performed or visually recognizable as are Shakespeare’s works, they play a similar role within the nations and language traditions that claim them. They are depicted frequently in art and sculpture, performed in their original languages and in translations, and taught in secondary schools. They form an important part of the cultural heritage of their homelands and often that of other countries that speak the same language. They are objects of national and cultural pride. Because we have had a tendency to celebrate these individual playwrights and their texts above other historical markers, essentially making them the representative symbols of both early modern theater and the whole of the early modern world, they prevent us from seeing larger patterns in a bigger historical picture. Early modern poet-heroes often make poor historical examples because “the so-called ‘national playwright’ is not a representative citizen-artist, but rather an individual who happens to somehow be identified as a national playwright.”79 He is the deviation rather than the norm.

The realm of early modern theater is hardly the only area in which the valorization of individuals frequently detracts from the larger historical picture. In traditional historical writing, which concerned itself largely with the “great figures” of the past, men (almost always) who embodied the glory of the past were celebrated by those who felt themselves to have inherited that glorious legacy. But the desire to identify and align oneself with greatness is not anyone’s

---

fault. On an emotional level human beings need heroes. Heroes are incredibly useful, if not somehow essential, to the formation of a popular historical understanding. They provide us with a past that is simple rather than complex and exceptional rather than ordinary. We can comprehend and relate to them much more easily than we can the uncountable and multifaceted masses of the past. Yet, in our compulsion to associate ourselves with their greatness, there is a tendency, if not a necessity, to whitewash their faults and their other problematic qualities. Deifying historical heroes along lines of group identity, as individuals representing the glory of a given group, nation, culture and race is a typical response all over the world and has been so since the beginning of recorded history.

In the last several hundred years, in the face of a pervasive nation-based understanding of history (and theater), heroes have been likewise perceived as exceptional representatives of particular nations. We have ours and you have yours. They all exist on an elevated plane, and we can often respect the heroes of other peoples while still hoping or declaring that ours are the best. For example, during the First World War and in its wake, the “flying aces,” each attached to the spirit of his homeland, were valorized and became folkloric heroes. In sport, the modern Olympic games pits the athletically gifted from nations all around the world against one another, both as specimens of human prowess and also as symbols of the superiority of some nations over others. It is no secret that when political relationships between countries are fraught, the interest in seeing their athletic greats compete becomes heightened. Why else would news outlets publish a running tally of the medals won by each participating nation? Although there may not be interest in each specific contest (there are reasons why some events are broadcast in the middle of the night), the overall ranking of each nation is closely followed. But we also insist that our cultural heroes should be too lofty to be embroiled in petty rivalries. We often assume them to be
motivated by higher ideals, by inner vision, or by their own genius or talent rather than (presumably base) external pressures and stimuli. Yet while individuals earn respect by seeming to rise above competition, their cultural significances can be intensely political and competitive.

This is not to suggest that we should, or even can, abandon our quest for great cultural figures. Like stories themselves, they are a pivotal aspect of human existence, giving our lives, our struggles, and our goals meaning. They comfort and motivate us. They provide cultural touchstones that we can use to communicate and build relationships with others. But we should be aware of what we forget, conceal, and gloss over by focusing too heavily on these “greats,” particularly in our historical consciousness. The treatment of Shakespeare and other “great playwrights” in Western culture has given us a skewed perception of both early modern theater history and the early modern world at large. When we focus on these individuals as representatives of the cultural triumph of particular nations, we ignore the extensive and growing transnationality—even the global nature—of events, people, and cultural products in these centuries.

**Scholarship and the Early Modern Theater**

It is all too easy to deride popular culture for its historical flaws, and it must be acknowledged that scholarly approaches to both Shakespeare and early modern theater have often been similarly shortsighted. While it is difficult to know how much academic assessments influence popular understandings, it remains very clear that prevalent cultural assumptions continue to guide the conclusions of scholarship. Despite increasing attempts to evade the blunders of past scholarship—focusing on great men, assuming the nation-state as the standard unit of historical analysis, conscious or unconscious elevation of the Western world, taking the stability of texts for granted—these very issues continue to haunt us. Reversing these trends will
require scholars to construct even more innovative approaches to the era, its artistry, and their own relationship with the public.

However, taking an historical perspective on these topics can prove challenging. Trained historians often appear disinclined to venture into the realm of early modern drama, which has been so dominated by scholars of theater and literature. Perhaps this is because of a traditional disinclination for interdisciplinary work and the assumption that the arts are somehow less historically relevant than other topics. Or maybe this disengagement with the topic reflects many historians’ pursuit of the new, untapped story, rather than rehashing seemingly old and tired topics. Whatever the cause, the history of sixteenth and seventeenth century European theater is overwhelmed by the study of its literature, with the result that the available studies often focus heavily on texts only as literary works. Even a recent fashion for historicism in the study of literature and performance, which necessitate a certain amount of historical inquiry, often misses out on valuable historical perspectives. Literature scholar Douglas Bruster criticizes the practitioners of the New Historicism for ignoring historical complexity in their studies of literature and performance. In their attempts to root literary works in a larger cultural picture, they often neglect to explore the historical and human contingencies that resulted in the production of those particular pieces: “too rarely do new historicists consider how writers made these plays and what that process of writing may imply for our interpretations.” A similar critique, directed at cultural historians, is voiced by Jean-Christophe Agnew, who admonishes:

It is not enough, consequently, to treat the...theater as a mere text or register in which to read the cultural consequences of an emerging world economy. The

---

80 Thankfully, this trend may finally be dissipating.
81 Bruster, *Quoting Shakespeare*, 5.
early modern stage did more than reflect relations occurring elsewhere; it also modeled and in important respects materialized those relations.  

The arts and literature are not just passive markers of a long-ago culture. They were instrumental in shaping the world in which they were created. When observed from this perspective, they reveal not just a stable cultural moment but the various choices, changes, and chances that together comprise a complex and dynamic world.

Like popular culture, academic explorations of early modern theater have traditionally focused on individual playwrights and their textual output in a national context. However, in more recent decades they have become more likely to examine other significant themes. As Deborah Payne Fisk says of this trend in her introduction to The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre, “[o]nce upon a time a volume such as this would have been organized along the lines of authorship, with requisite chapters on Dryden, Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and (Perhaps) Vanbrugh. Increasingly, though, studies of Restoration drama and theatre focus on historical contexts, on material culture, on gender and class rather than individual authors.” Yet, this shift has not served to displace the study of artists who are largely divorced from their true historical significance. Nor has it questioned the notion that the most well-known and critically acclaimed plays always had a greater historical importance. We run the risk of equating contemporary stature with historical significance.

Perhaps even more troubling is the continuing trend of conducting research and producing arguments that depend on single nations or literature canons. There is certainly some awareness that “it is virtually impossible to write a history of the theater in any single country

---

83 Bruster, Quoting Shakespeare, xvii.
without constant reference to achievements elsewhere”, but this does not go far enough.\textsuperscript{84} Even constant references to and comparison of different theater traditions cannot fully illustrate how deeply they were entwined, for “it is difficult to reconstruct a translational literary [or theatrical] history when literary history has organized itself along national lines.”\textsuperscript{85} Most articles and monographs exploring early modern theater continue to look at one location or language while ignoring the interrelationships between different European theater traditions. Thus, studies of \textit{The London Stage}, \textit{French Theater}, and \textit{The Theater of Golden Age Spain} are plentiful. However, these national divisions are highly artificial and assume that there were fundamental disparities in repertoire and stage practice from country to country. In reality, it often becomes impossible to label a play as purely French, Spanish, Italian, or English since it can embody elements of multiple regional traditions and even borrow extensively from classical drama. When studies do examine more than one theater tradition, they usually only compare and contrast them “instead of finding more intricate, historically determined connections between the national literatures, or even interrogating their development as such.”\textsuperscript{86} Thus, examinations of early modern theatre have been almost exclusively literary, nationalist, and textual in their approaches, and “theater historians in general have been much more attentive to the means rather than the relations of theatrical production.”\textsuperscript{87}

A brief glance at the dramatic activity of sixteenth and seventeenth century London, Madrid, and Paris reveals that, in terms of repertoire, the theatrical traditions usually explored as

\textsuperscript{85} Fuchs, 89.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
discreet national units share distinct commonalities. During the early modern era, the flourishing literary culture enabled by improvements in printing technology and trade allowed access to a shared collection of writings, both from the distant and recent past. The themes and plots that poets drew upon for their plays came in large measure from a common pool: Classical mythology, Greek and Roman theater, various historical chronicles, and Italian and Spanish short stories. Of course, the extent to which these established texts permeated individual city stages varied from location to location. Separating theater cultures by language is also a problem because it downplays continuous translation and assimilation of texts from one language to another and denies the pervasive presence of foreign influence on the stages of Western Europe.

However, recent decades have witnessed the an emerging body of literature about early modern drama operating across cultural divisions. Importantly, they have explored the ways in which plays, particularly Shakespeare’s, have been exported, adapted, adopted and performed around the world. However, these studies nearly always focus on the twentieth century, with little acknowledgement that theater, like people, ideas, goods, and fashions, was mobile and transcultural in earlier times. European theater traveled to China in the eighteenth century with Jesuit missionaries. Plays from the Madrid playhouses arrived in colonial South America. As early as 1608 English sailors invited African tribal leaders aboard their vessel for a performance of *Hamlet*. While studies of more recent transmissions and adaptations do have firm historical

---


dimensions, they tend to oversimplify the politics of cultural borrowing by emphasizing how peoples around the world have embraced western drama. When studies do highlight the agency of non-western, non-elite peoples in interacting with early modern drama, they provide little exploration of transmutability of these works in their own historical era. In addition, the frequent emphasis on Shakespeare’s adaptability in the recent past further serves to exaggerate his historical role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like their analogs in popular culture, scholarly voices have often perpetuated the cult of stable literary masterpieces, the myth of geographical isolation in the pre-industrial era, and the trap of Eurocentrism, skewing perceptions of the larger early modern world and of history in general.

**Seeking Solutions**

How can we remedy a prevailing historical consciousness that sees the past primarily in terms of national heroes and immortal deeds, that confuses contemporary popularity with historical insight, and that appears to privilege the artistic legacy of Europe and the West over that of the rest of the world? How can we integrate theater, literature, and historical studies more profitably, and ultimately create an historical narrative that is less “Bardcentric” and more attuned to patterns of development, change, and interaction? How can we appreciate the contribution of great playwrights without overstating them and without using them as a force that perpetuates cultural jingoism and imperialism?

Unfortunately, it does not appear that any single step or strategy will be able to address of all these issues. Popular conceptions of Shakespeare, for example, are far too ingrained in the Anglophone, western and global psyche to be entirely expunged. As Helen Hackett suggests, popular history is not a set of constraints out of which we can easily wiggle: “Arguably, we are obliged to offer Shakespeare and Elizabeth [I] to our children, in order to make them fluent in
our shared cultural language and equip them with that we call “general knowledge.”

Millions have learned about dramatic and poetic conventions, the development of themes, plots, and characters, and modes of analysis, critical examination and self-expression from the famous early modern poets. Such lessons are difficult to unlearn. Shakespeare has been important for centuries, and we cannot—we should not!—suddenly make him unimportant.

Shakespeare need not go anywhere, but we would do well to change the way we think about him—not as a literary figure, but as an historical person. Is it truly possible to make early modern theater, Shakespearean and otherwise, meaningful around the world while still remaining historically rooted and culturally sensitive? I believe that there is. However, this approach requires understanding how early modern theater depended upon larger regional and global forces and how much it was caught up in international, rather than simply national, processes. While Shakespeare’s celebrity is an unusual phenomena, he is nevertheless indicative of wider historical trends to those who are willing to look for them.

In order to better understand the world as it was, we must first reconfigure the impressions that Shakespeare and his fellow artists have made on our understanding of the past. We can dispute the notion that the works of Shakespeare and his dramatic compatriots were somehow purely English (or French or Spanish or Italian). Rather, the early modern poet-playwrights were bound up in and reflective of an increasingly global sensibility, even while they were, and are, constantly used as a metaphor for isolation, nationalism, and cultural exclusivism. They did, after all, live and participate in a world of heightened interactions between diverse cultures and growing intellectual and material exchange. This reconsideration

---

constitutes a vital step toward shifting our attention from mythic cultural-linguistic heroes and sacred texts to larger networks and historical processes.

The field of history is becoming ever more interested in subverting accepted categories and finding new linkages across space and time, but these trends are only slowly becoming evident in the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theater. One discipline that is making notable strides to address this gap is translation studies. The work of Jorge Braga Riera,91 with its emphasis on the translation of ideas and attitudes across linguistic and cultural barriers, represents a refreshing change from the usual textual analyses of intercultural drama from this period. There is much need for an approach that builds upon many of his themes but encompasses a wider geographic space and an examination of performance as rooted in very specific and very real historical circumstances. Explorations of how Europe shared dramatic materials, ideas, and people across borders can illuminate the artistic, cultural, social, economic and even political activity of the period in a new light and effectively question many of the analytical practices to which we have become accustomed. Rather than solely examine how the “text” was altered to “work” in a new geographic setting and for a new audience, new scholarship ought to examine how literary and performed translations and adaptations were part of the very fabric of theater culture. They linked people across time and space, while simultaneously constituting a unique dramatic moment characterized by specific cultural sentiments. Each national and local theater tradition had its customs, assuredly, but also shared relationships and commonalities.

Ultimately we can engage in focused examination of the interconnections between different theatrical centers, plays, and people, as well as their many linkages with the wider world. Once we acknowledge the multitude of ways in which the stage provided an international experience during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it becomes difficult to view early modern theater as an exclusively national or even a (white, wealthy, Western) European phenomenon. Early modern theater was engaged in a constant struggle between the foreign and the domestic and occurred in the presence--rather than the absence--of a rapidly expanding and diversifying globe and its various cultural groups. Embracing these realities has the potential to complicate the popular and scholarly images we have of the early modern European world and make its drama more accessible to a larger population in the present.

---

92 For example, Anthony Dawson suggests, “The view now fashionably current in Anglo-American academic circles, that Shakespeare’s text are in one way or another complicit with colonialism and other forms of domination, needs to be understood in the light of his story of Shakespearean migration. We can perhaps more usefully think of Shakespeare as a kind of engine of cultural appropriation.” Dawson, 176-77.
CHAPTER 2

THE TRANSNATIONAL RISE OF EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN THEATER

Our current systems of education, scholarship, and popular culture often relate the history of the early modern European stage only within the context of specific isolated countries and attribute it almost exclusively to the influence of a few brilliant individuals, overlooking the role of larger historical forces in the creation of theater. Because national narratives dominate the telling of theater history, and because the nation and the playwright are inextricably linked, attempts to chart the rise of early modern theater modes focus primarily on the innovative contributions of a nation’s “great” playwrights. Playwrights—more than actors, company managers, masters of stagecraft, financiers, legislators, and audience members—are frequently understood (particularly in the nineteenth century) to be the founders or pivotal figures of national theater traditions. “[I]f France has a national theatre,” C. E. Oxbury wrote, “she owes it to Molière.”¹ George Tickner likewise insisted that Lope de Rueda was “justly reckoned, both by Cervantes and Lope de Vega, to be the true founder of the popular [Spanish] national theatre.”² These individuals are portrayed as the sole progenitors of early modern theater culture, as though they singlehandedly created the systems of acting companies, economic support, and public interest that allowed their plays to be written, acted, published, and preserved.

The rise of early modern theater cannot be attributed solely to great minds or even great nations. Certainly, early modern theater would never have existed without the work of individuals and the structural support of nation-states, but ignoring the larger role of culture and

¹ Sidney Morgan, *France*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. (London: Henry Colburn, 1817), 188.
² George Ticknor, *History of Spanish Literature*, vol. 2 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1866), 56.
history in shaping dramatic repertoire and performance practice presents a woefully incomplete picture of the past. The renowned playwrights of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, whose works have been so long lauded and loved, did not live and work in a vacuum. They participated in an artistic and social system that frequently lay beyond their control, and their skill converged with historical forces that had been centuries in the making. What were the influences and parameters within which they experimented with, innovated, refined, and reworked material for the stage?

Theorized as a performed, textual, cultural and organizational process underwent significant change throughout many of the nations of Western Europe between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, confirming that these new developments were not merely the result of individual drive or even national temperament. Furthermore, the fact that many similar and parallel changes occurred from country to country indicates that the development of early modern public secular theater was a shared experience across a larger region. However, the forces behind the transnational rise of theater remain largely obscured by nationalist narratives, a narrow geographical and temporal focus, and the omission of the larger historical picture.

For a very long time, historical studies of theatrical practice in past societies have been conducted primarily by scholars who paid little attention to the role of history in the shaping of theater writing and practice. Many nineteenth century positivists assumed that theater, like many cultural forms, developed along a teleological trajectory: each new era improved on previous practice to produce ever more refined dramatics. John Thacker writes:

The search for the origins of and influences on what became the norms of Spanish Golden Age drama needs a cautionary preface. Traditionally, literary histories of Spanish drama have begun with speculations about the extent to which a medieval
liturgical drama existed in Castile, and gone on to trace the increasing sophistication of dramatic works…

While contemporary scholars have largely ceased to insist that some theatrical styles or forms are inherently superior to others, the role of historical events in shaping the stage remains largely unexplored. Even today, many scholarly accounts continue to cover different eras of theater practice in turn, without providing significant historical context for their development and historical significance. Theater’s role in history and history’s role in theater have been obscured by the writing of theater histories that explored only “the various forms theatre has taken and…their distinctive powers.” Chapters cover theater of ancient, medieval, early modern, and contemporary varieties without considering the cultural transitions that created different theatrical norms at different times and in different places. Oftentimes, historical background is only seen as useful insofar as it helps today’s production teams create historically accurate sets, costumes, and properties. As a result, “much if not all of the critical approaches to the origin of the drama are almost entirely innocent of history.” In depicting great drama as “timeless,” many analysts have divorced theater from the culture that created it, as though that culture was not responsible for its appealing qualities. In separating dramatic works from their roles in past performance and publication, we lose the meanings that the plays were intended to convey to their historical audiences and the messages they can provide to us about the local and the global past.

---

3 Jonathan Thacker, *A Companion to Golden Age Theatre* (Woodbridge; Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2007). While he objects to a positivist spin of theater history, Thacker nevertheless considers theater to be something created by playwrights rather than societies.


When faced with the need to explain the emergence of new theatrical trends in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, traditional academic accounts consistently imply that early modern theater derived more or less exclusively from the European theatrical and literary past. In other words, they suggest that theatrical change occurs only through imitation of past forms or in continuity with previous dramatic practice, remaining largely unaffected by non-theatrical transformations within a given society.\(^6\) Accounts that do attempt to provide historical context for theatrical trends, usually limit themselves to one country and to a rather narrow time frame. Scholars of early modern drama and literature often begin their studies in 1568 or 1576, with the opening of the first permanent, enclosed, public theaters in Madrid and London respectively, as though such events came out of thin air.\(^7\)

As a result of such narrow geographic, temporal, and disciplinary parameters, there are few coherent explanations for why or how similar theatrical trends should have manifested themselves in a number of European countries in a short period of time. In particular, why did impressive popular commercial theater centers such as Madrid, London, and Paris all develop and give rise to esteemed traditions of dramatic literature in less than half a century? If the popular cultural myth—that early modern theater arose from great playwrights participating in isolated national theater traditions—is fundamentally mistaken, where did the “golden ages” of sixteenth and seventeenth century come from? Why and how did individuals of various countries write and produce plays that were (and are still) considered among the finest pieces of western literature? What cultural, intellectual, political and other forces gave rise to these iconic creative acts?

---


Facile simplifications abound, merely reporting that “theatre had been evolving over a long period of time”; and that general regional similarities in early modern theater stem from “a common heritage and common origins”. Older European dramatic tradition, the narrative goes, came into contact with the dramatic literature of Greece and Rome to produce new ways of writing and performing. Thus, the early modern theater is commonly portrayed as the simple synthesis of medieval religious drama with newly rediscovered classical dramatic and theoretical texts. The former are frequently accounted more powerful an influence than the latter. Yet, this explanation proves too narrow because it negates a wealth of larger (non-theatrical) factors that these theatrical cultures shared in common and which contributed to the rise of early modern theater. Furthermore, it ignores the reality that much of the similarity of early modern theater—and particularly the convergence of European theatrical practice in the seventeenth century and beyond—stemmed from ongoing exchange, movement, and trade in theatrical pieces, people, and practice. To locate the true origins of the early modern European stage and its dramatic literature, we must look further back in time and outside national boundaries.

8 Sandra Clark, 1.
9 McKendrick, 6. Indeed, there is little scholarly consensus on what might have spurred the creation of theatrical activity among human beings in the first place. Ronald Vince remarks, “[T]here is still no theory of theatre origins that every budding theatre historian can be expected to know. The problem is normally discussed in the most general of terms…” Ronald W. Vince, Ancient and Medieval Theatre: A Historiographical Handbook (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1984), 4
11 Luckily theater histories have largely moved away from teleological accounts, in which medieval theater is considered “primarily as a prelude to…the much greater drama of the seventeenth century.” Alan E. Knight, Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 11.
12 Leading to the assumption that, for example, “Shakespeare’s theater owes more to native medieval traditions than to neoclassical influences.” Lorna Hutson, “‘Che indizio, che prova…’ Ariosto’s Legal Conjectures and the English Renaissance Stage,” Albert Russell Ascoli and William N West, eds., Renaissance Drama: Italy in the Drama of Europe, vol. 36/37 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 181.
A reframing of the roots of early modern theater in Western Europe will help us to more accurately understand the role of this performance tradition within global history. First, it will show us that the rise of the early modern stage and its plays was a complex one, resulting not simply from shifts in artistic and literary practices but also from a peculiar and haphazard combination of bigger ecological, social, political, and economic circumstances. Secondly, it becomes clear that early modern theater was created not by just by genius individuals but by and through global, regional, and transnational processes. Third, these larger processes interacted with social realities in particular localities to create variations in practice and performance ideology, eventually giving rise to the perception that early modern theater was a purely national rather than an international force. Because the majority of early modern theater studies have been isolationist or comparative, there is great need to look at the interrelationships between the centers of early modern theater and their relationships with a larger European and global reality.

Finally, our search for the historical evolution of the early modern European stage reveals that, when observed alongside the other artistic traditions of human history, there is little in early modern theater that is historically exceptional. Rather, the works, performance practices, and key figures so lauded in popular culture are simply products of human cultures. Nevertheless, early modern theater, when examined in its rightful context, provides a valuable cultural window into the societies, individuals, and shifting worldview of early modern Europe that neither exalts nor romanticizes them.

Medieval Antecedents

While medieval theater and classical literature undoubtedly served as sources of inspiration for sixteenth and seventeenth century playwrights, these were far from the only historical elements to play a role in the creation and legacy of the early modern stage.
Nevertheless, it behooves us to take a look at the early modern stage’s direct precursors, not because we can presume that they were the sole influences on early modern theater, but because in examining them we are able to determine what real changes occurred in theatrical practice and culture from the fifteenth century onward. At that point we can more efficiently begin to understand why and how the now-lauded theatrical pieces and practices of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe came about.

The theater of medieval Europe was traditionally juxtaposed with that of the Renaissance, and it continues to serve as a familiar touchstone for studies of early modern theater. Yet, where medieval European theater was once snubbed as unsophisticated and the haphazard product of simple fools and gullible religiosity, it has since gained respect and credibility, largely for its reconsidered role in the origin of early modern theater. Indeed, various forms of medieval performance, particularly religious displays and pageants, are often assumed to be the most important precondition for the creation of early modern theater. For this reason, many scholarly accounts of the early modern stage duly acknowledge the genres and conventions of medieval theater as a prelude to their primary subject matter, identifying any elements or works that appear

---

13 As Ronald Vince explains, nineteenth and early twentieth century historians “generally agreed that [medieval theater] represented at best a crude interlude between classical and Renaissance flowerings and that its influence on the later drama of the Renaissance was minimal.” Vince, 4. Medieval theater only became worthy of extended study when theorists began to suggest that medieval theater slowly evolved into the theater of the Renaissance, believing “[t]he Latin liturgical drama was slowly transformed, via accretion and elaboration, into a vernacular and secularized drama, performed by the laity in the streets and public squares.” Ibid., 90.

to be precursors to early modern drama and performance.\textsuperscript{15} In addition to recognizing the obvious similarities between European medieval and early modern theater, more recent scholars have also come to respect and examine medieval theater on its own terms, determining that the “Middle Ages” were not simply a cultural lacuna in the artistic history of Europe, but a time of great activity and creativity.\textsuperscript{16}

Even though relatively few records of theatrical activity survive, the dramatically arts were an integral part of medieval life throughout the whole of (what we today consider) the European continent and were indicative of many broader social phenomena. Before Europe had dedicated public theater spaces of any sort, it shared a common tradition of public entertainments, performed by both local amateurs and professional wandering players, which was accessible to the masses. Though varying from town to town, popular theatrical productions overwhelmingly shared stylistic and thematic commonalities because of the resources available and the feudal manner in which societies were ordered.

Most famously, by the twelfth century, medieval Europe possessed a tradition of amateur theatrics closely associated with, and financed by, the churches and the confraternities (religious societies for lay men and women). On occasion, municipal officials, local nobility, guilds, and schools also sponsored performances. For the most part, theater was a local effort wherein citizenry of the town performed Bible stories, allegories, and plays on religious or moral themes for the festivals, feasts, and holy days that occurred frequently in the Christian liturgical calendar.

\textsuperscript{15} E. K. Chamber’s, for example, was interested in medieval theater primarily as a foreshadowing and explanation of Shakespeare’s drama. E. K. Chambers, “Preface,” \textit{The Mediaeval Stage}, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), v.

The feast of Corpus Christi, newly instituted by the Church in the thirteenth century, would give rise to some of the most well known and impressive medieval theatrical performances. Some performances were haphazard in form and clumsy in execution, but during the late middle ages “major religious festivals were celebrated in many towns and villages with the performance of a well-organized, scripted and rehearsed play.” Since there were no spaces dedicated exclusively to theater, performances might occur in or near the local church or the town square and usually made do with limited staging, props, scenery, and costumes. On certain occasions, elaborate wagon-stages, scenery, and even special effects were devised.

This amateur, sacred theater performed important social functions, for it helped to ease the relationship between religious and political authorities and contribute to the formation of a more devout and a more stable society. In the medieval European world, theater was often an extension of the religious education offered to a largely uneducated public. Along with stained glass windows, elaborate architecture and statuary, sacramental objects, processions, and familiar ritual, religious theater was a visual medium for conveying sacred stories and teachings to the illiterate. From the festival plays of York and Chester, street processions, or the anonymous morality play Everyman, audiences could learn church doctrine, Biblical stories, norms of religious devotion, and moral behavior in a dramatic and entertaining manner. However, it is important to remember that, not all theater prior to the late sixteenth century was purely spiritual.

17 For more on amateur religious theater, patronage, and the Corpus Christi festivals, see: Lynette R Muir, The Biblical Drama of Medieval Europe (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
20 Goldstein, 9.
21 The vast majority of medieval theatrical pieces have no known authors.
in its purpose or content. In a cultural world so heavily imbued with religious feeling and thinking, it would be difficult for any social practice to be completely secular. Sacred plays, often created to entertain, could also be comic or even profane. Plays with religious themes, like “The Second Shepherd’s Play”, from Wakefield, England that concludes with the visitation of shepherds to the newborn Christ child, are often full of farcical antics and humorous anecdotes.

Theatrics with secular content did exist widely—though not always formally—in Europe prior to the late sixteenth century. A wide variety of secular performing arts, including music, dance, acrobatics, and drama, were both common and incredibly popular, though their practice is seldom detailed in surviving records.

It is revealing to note how central medieval religious, rather than secular, performance has been to the telling of theater history. Indeed, some have insisted that early modern “public theater grew out of the ritual of religious worship.” While medieval secular theater has certainly not been ignored, it has somewhat ironically been considered less of a precursor to later secular theatrics than medieval religious theater. To a certain extent, this emphasis on medieval sacred theater over the secular stems from the kinds of texts that survive from the period. There continues to be less scholarly emphasis on medieval secular performance because the

22 Medieval theatrics of all kind were “informed by a concern for religious aspirations in general and doctrinal orthodoxy in particular”, and “since so much of what recorded information survives about...secular activities reaches us from ecclesiastical sources, how can they be properly regarded as manifestations of a wholly secular theatrical tradition rather than a religious one?” Wickham, 1, 128.
25 “[T]he mystery and morality plays represent the single most important influence on the early development of drama as a genre.” McKendrick, 6.
26 Ibid., 6.
contingencies of recordkeeping and preservation resulted in the survival of very little evidence of secular theatrics before the early modern era. There is simply a dearth of usable knowledge. Exploring the secular in medieval theater is a difficult endeavor, but this does not justify presenting medieval sacred plays as “the source of all later drama” or “directing the course of the later vernacular plays”.

A number of scripts and other accounts — typically authored by the clergy or the highly educated laity — survive to convey the stories and suggest the dramatic conventions of religious or morality plays. Those with sacred content were more likely to be taken seriously and mentioned in historical records. Popular secular entertainments, though enjoyed throughout Europe, were not usually considered important enough to record or reflect on frequently in writing. Of the secular arts, the performance pieces created by the nobility and the educated (for example, the songs of noble troubadours) had a better chance of enduring because they were often notated, rather than existing only in oral form. By contrast, popular theatrics, especially those replete with absurdity and physical comedy, even obscenity, were not often deemed worthy to record and so little information remains about their plots or specific performance conventions.

---

28 Ibid., 697. In scholarly accounts, drama has typically been treated as literary genre or as stage performance, but rarely as both simultaneously. It is rarely discussed as a cultural or economic enterprise.
29 Wickham, 73.
30 “Much of the drama that has survived was written to teach: that is, to familiarize people with the stories of the Bible and Apocrypha (Old and New Testaments) as well as to inculcate Christian doctrine and encourage good moral behavior.” Meredith, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, 696.
31 One twelfth century authors insists “it was a much finer thing that St. Peter walked on the sea than that a jongleur walks on a rope playing an instrument.” Cited in: R.S. Loomis, “Some Evidence for Secular Theatres in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” *Theatre Annual* (1945), 36.
The often-haphazard practices of pre-modern theater further inhibited the recording and memorialization of dramatic pieces and practices, both secular and sacred. Medieval European performers were usually, like most of the populace, illiterate—another reason their dramatic content was infrequently written down, particularly in secular theater where the actors themselves created most of the material. As a result, performance relied in large part on the actors’ ability to improvise. Among professional actors the content changed, often considerably, from performance to performance as the actors struggled to appeal to audiences and quickly modified material before it could become too tired. Medieval theatrical economics did not encourage long runs in one place, and amateur players gave a limited number of performances. Professional troupes of performers did not stay for very long in a single location, although many troupes made the same rounds year after year to attend the same festivals and fairs. These strolling companies were constantly in competition with one another.32

Lacking any systematic mode of advertising, performers simply took their acts to the public squares and courtyards, relying on passersby and word-of-mouth communication to bring in an audience. But there was no guarantee that the audience would pay them in the end. Audiences were not large enough or wealthy enough to induce professional acting troupes to take up permanent residence, and there was no commercial system in place to ensure that performers were compensated for their work. Politically and economically, performers only obtained sporadic patronage to support their theatrical endeavors. A highly mobile aristocracy, which moved seasonally to remain close to monarch and court, also discouraged long-term noble sponsorship of secular drama and encouraged itinerancy among performers. A limited number of

performers found positions in royal or noble households by the fourteenth century and later, and those who did struggled often struggled to remain in their patron’s good graces. Rather than sustained sponsorship from a wealthy noble or ruler, most performing groups received permission to perform from the local authorities, but might have only specific performances endowed by the crown or the gentry. Without economic or political security, most professional entertainers were forced to wander. As they did not necessarily remain within any particular geographic boundaries, considerable exchange of style and technique occurred, although this too is poorly documented. Although popular, professional actors, musicians, and dancers remained social outsiders by default and possessed unsavory reputations of the sort that have plagued actors through the ages. For all these reasons, evidence of medieval drama is sparse. Yet sacred drama has survived more successfully than traces of secular theater before the mid-fifteenth century, and thus the examination of sacred theater tends to dominate the scholarly literature of medieval performance and receive significant attention as presumed precursor to early modern theater.

From Medieval to Early Modern: Practices Old and New

Describing a phenomenon as complicated as early modern theater is no easy task. For one thing, it is impossible to locate a place where medieval theater styles end and new early modern practices begin. Academic studies and popular culture have confused the issue by creating conflicting narratives. On the one hand we have witnessed the assumption that medieval theater—particularly in its sacred incarnation—was the chief precursor to the early modern stage. Yet, early modern theater is simultaneously represented as an innovative and

33 Wickham, 158-159, 175.  
34 Chambers, 42-69.
unprecedented force, in many respects “an entirely new phenomenon”, leading many to assume that it departed radically from the theater that came before it.\textsuperscript{35} Ultimately, neither assumption is entirely correct.\textsuperscript{36} We must accept that early modern theater practice was neither as indebted to nor as different from medieval theater as many conventional accounts would lead us to believe. While many characteristics of early modern theater (such as the construction of permanent playhouses and the celebration of playwrights) contrast sharply with their medieval predecessors, others (including improvisation, physical comedy, and concern for morality) show a clear similarity with previous practice. The truth is that some aspects of theatrical culture changed greatly, many changed more subtly, and others remained more or less the same. The medieval theater already carried within it many elements that would be retained as drama moved into the early modern world.\textsuperscript{37}

Certainly, some aspects of early modern theater can appear to be quite far removed from the theatrical practice that preceded it. Common textbook definitions highlight presumed

\textsuperscript{35} Simon Barker and Hilary Hinds, eds., \textit{The Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 1. The conceptualization of the “Renaissance” as a turning point in human history marked in particular by increased individualism is largely due to Jacob Burckhardt’s \textit{The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy} (1860).

\textsuperscript{36} It remains undeniable that the early modern theater possessed ties with the theatrical traditions that preceded it, but owes as much to new trends as it did to past theatrical tradition. In Spain, for example, many of the regions that developed the most robust new theater practice were those in which religious theater appears to have been relatively unknown. The non-existence or rarity of sacred drama in certain parts of medieval Europe did not prevent a vigorous early modern theater tradition from growing in those places. The proliferation of early modern secular drama was not utterly dependent on the existence of medieval sacred drama. Theater developed anyway, for early modern theater was not as wholly reliant on formal sacred medieval drama as many would like to think. Performance in many forms was a fundamental part of European culture. However, we have less direct evidence of these theatrical practices. Efforts to prove direct lineages of literary inspiration are almost certainly doomed to failure.

\textsuperscript{37} Thus, only someone familiar with the “medieval drama” Glynne Wickham suggests, “has the faintest hope of understanding the structural principles and stage-conventions of Elizabethan drama…” Wickham, 73.
differences over similarities and describe the Renaissance/early modern as an age in which “playwrights rescued tragedy and comedy from the oblivion into which they had fallen with the collapse of Rome…A purely secular and commercial theater now emerged, with professional playwrights and actors, playhouses, and a ticket-buying public.”

From a contemporary perspective, the early modern age represents the birth of a performance tradition to which many feel personally and culturally connected. We tend to notice (or desire) similarities with contemporary practice that we do not find (or acknowledge) in the theater of earlier times. Even many scholars are not immune to the popular image of an early modern theater diverging widely from its medieval predecessor and heralding the advent of contemporary theatrical values. Thus, Melveena McKendrick posits that early modern Europe gave rise to the earliest practice of “theatre as we would still recognize it today—the theatre understood as performances by professional players before a public audience in a secular setting.” While these are surely important characteristics of much early modern theatrical practice, they do not in themselves define that practice or distinguish it from medieval conventions.

Too often the contrast between medieval and early modern theater has been portrayed as a simple shift from the religious to the secular, from amateur to professional, from Latin to the vernacular, or from improvised performance to scripted drama. In reality “the perceived boundary between what has come to be called ‘professional secular drama’ and ‘amateur,’ ‘sacred,’ or ‘household’ drama was…porous” in both the medieval and early modern worlds.

---

39 McKendrick, 6.
40 The myth of the “the development of a secular drama out of the religious drama of the pre-professional theatre” has proved particularly enduring. Clark, 65-66.
41 Jeanne H. McCarthy, “The Sanctuarie is become a plaiers stage”: Chapel Stagings and Tudor “Secular” Drama” in S. P Cerasano and Heather Anne Hirschfeld, *Medieval and Renaissance*
Medieval secular theater, public performances, and professional actors, coexisted with the sacred, amateur, and private, even if the former were less prevalent—or less notable—than in later centuries. Furthermore, the early modern era did not betoken the end of religious performance, Latin-language dramatics, or amateur participation. All of these continued to persist, and at times flourish, in the sixteenth century and later. While theater as a whole did become more frequently secular, more obviously professional, and more famously popular than the theater of previous centuries, it is all but impossible to use these characteristics as decisive markers of innovation.

Because medieval style performance practice coexisted with new theatrical trends for centuries, the beginning of new practices did not spell the end of the old. There is no clean division that can be made between the era of medieval theatrics and that of the early modern stage. Traveling companies continued to roam. Festivals and events continued to inspire public street spectacles in the medieval mode, marked by public and private performances of both the amateur and professional varieties. Even as sacred drama died off in many countries over the course of the sixteenth century, it remained a powerful force in others. Spain, for example, retained a form of sacred theater tradition, which remained medieval in its purpose but early modern in much of its dramatic elements and performance practice. Indeed, throughout Europe, “Church performance for quasi-religious drama thus actually persisted long after a critically

---


42 The French government banned the performance of most public religious plays in 1548. The English government did likewise in 1576. Yet, Jeanne McCarthy illustrates that “[c]hurch performance for quasi-religious drama thus actually persisted long after a critically assumed evolution from sacred to secular popular drama.” McCarthy, 57.

assumed evolution from sacred to secular popular drama." Furthermore, ordinary human concerns, humor, and what people found exciting did not change radically. Thus there were many similarities in dramatic content. For example, “[i]n point of structure and incident [medieval] plays have much in common with the chronicle plays of the Elizabethan era, especially in respect of battles and scenes for torture and bawdy humor." Theater also continued to possess many of the same social purposes: instruction (or, at times, mis-instruction) and entertainment. In both ages, theater could be taken quite seriously or it could appear to be a frivolous enterprise. Yet, we can also see that many of the structures, practices, and social meaning of theater did undergo significant change in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

We are reluctant to admit that early modern theater did not make as clean a break with its precursors as we would like to think. In popular culture, this is largely because acknowledging the continuities between medieval early modern theater threatens to diminish the status of our poet heroes and their achievements. If we admit that Shakespeare and his famed contemporaries were heavily influenced by past playwrights, folk tradition, and festival modes of performance rather than possessed of innate knowledge or divine inspiration, it becomes harder to romanticize them as cultural innovators and bask in the glow of their contributions. We want so much to believe that they owe no debts. Similarities between early modern and medieval modes of performance are also downplayed by Whiggish approaches to history which tend to suggest that human activity has evolved in a neat, linear manner from past to present. It is uncomfortable to admit that human activity, both past and present, is typically haphazard rather than rational and messy rather than easily compartmentalized. Though scholars have overwhelmingly attempted to

44 McCarthy, 57.
45 Wickham, 98.
break out of these thought patterns, they nevertheless remain compelling and difficult to subvert completely.

The problem is not just that early modern theater practice remains difficult to distinguish from the medieval, it also encompassed an astounding variety of styles, purposes, and operations. There was not just one kind of theater at work in the early modern world, and there were many new (and old) trends at work. It is therefore challenging, even overly simplistic, to observe overarching similarities across all of early modern European theater practice. Compared with medieval theater there is a relative abundance—even an overabundance—of source material to provide insight into early modern performance, making it difficult to analyze.\textsuperscript{46} It is difficult to grapple with all of the many theatrical characteristics observable across the spectrum of early modern theater. Theater could be so many things that it is all but impossible to describe all of the possible ways in which it operated. It might be a scripted dramatization or rely on the improvisation of actor. It might be publicly or privately staged by strolling players or resident companies, or even by amateur thespians. It might seek payment from patrons and playgoers or be offered free of charge. It might deal with themes both religious and secular in either the local vernacular or in classical languages. Therefore, when it comes to providing a clearer picture of the varieties of early modern performance practice and their corresponding dramatic efforts, simplification is required and an overview of general categories will have to suffice.

Despite the incredible variety, certain varieties of theater practice came to new prominence between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries. They can be broken down into categories based on who was performing what, where and for whom. Most of these general

\textsuperscript{46} As a result, scholars have usually limited themselves to particular segments of early modern theater within one (or occasionally more) geographical areas.
varieties were regional in their scope and existed in numerous countries or frequently crossed borders. These performance styles and conditions existed side by side in many locations across Europe. Yet it is important to remember that these general categories also encompass an amazing variety of specific local characteristics and peculiarities.

**Latin Plays**

Among the varieties of theatrical activity to attain a new importance in early modern culture and to distinguish itself from medieval roots was the scholarly performance of Latin plays associated with humanist learning. Beginning as early as the fourteenth century with renewed Italian interest in classical writings, ancient Latin and Greek drama and dramatic criticism drew scholarly interest. Scholars, first in Italy and then in most of western Europe, read and translated ancient plays and commentaries and, in time, began to reimagine the theater of their own times according to classical standards and philosophies. Increasingly, students in Latin grammar schools, universities, gymnasia, and similar educational institutions were also required to read these works and, before long, to perform them. Throughout Europe, students studied and acted much of the same classical *oeuvre*: Plautus, Terence, Seneca and others, both in the original language and in translations.47

But the schools did not rely wholly on the corpus of ancient plays.48 In addition, they worked newly composed pieces into the curriculum. Scholars, like members of religious orders, had written and performed religious plays in Latin throughout medieval Europe but eventually these plays began to combine sacred lessons with classical playwriting techniques. These new

47 Ancient Greek plays were less studied and less well known although many became accessible through, and were performed in, Latin translations.
48 Often the same scholars who produced translations of classical plays were also engaged in composing new dramas.
Latin plays varied in the degree to which they imitated classical dramatic styles, rhetoric, or narratives. They were, in many cases, hybrids between classical and medieval antecedents. Neo-Latin plays might tell religious stories from the Bible or the lives or saints. They might present historical tales and folk legends, celebrate political authorities, or present fictional moral struggles. Penned by teachers, students, or scholarly authors, these newly composed dramatic pieces were presented on numerous occasions throughout the year, often coinciding with religious and political celebrations.

Jesuit schools frequently performed Latin dramas of both the classical and the early modern varieties. Both the performing and the viewing of these Latin plays had a didactic purpose since they were memory exercises for students and Latin lessons for both actors and audiences. Most plays involved instruction in Christian or classical values. Since the scholars

49 The Scotsman George Buchanan based his Jephthes upon the Old Testament story from the book of Judges about a Hebrew general who offers his daughter as a human sacrifice after making a vow to God. The play has a highly moralistic Christian messages, which encourage compliance to divine will, proclaims vindication for those living under persecution, and depicts the Christ-like submission of Jephthes’ daughter Iphis. At the same time, it was heavily influenced by Greek theatrical and poetic models, making use of a chorus, and some common themes of Greek tragedy. The play also enjoyed an international and translingual existence. After being written at a school in Bordeaux and dedicated to a French patron, it was translated into French by 1587 and into English by 1750. George Buchanan, Jeptha, trans. Gordon Mitchell, 1902.

50 Gregorius Holonius of Liège, is particularly remembered for the martyr plays featuring Sts. Catharine of Alexandria, Laurence, and Lambert of Liège that he composed for German students and published in 1556. Catholic martyrs were portrayed as more admirable equivalents of the classical tragic heroes, and their plays celebrated both humanist learning and the Counter Reformation Catholic Church. Jan Bloemendal “Neo-Latin Drama in the Low Countries,” Neo-Latin Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 339.

51 Ratio atque institutio studiorum the official document structuring the education offered in Jesuit schools specifies that Latin plays may be employed on select occasions, but the plays must be pious and not contain women’s roles or clothing: “Tragoediarum & Comoediarum, quas nonnisi Latinas, ac, rarissimas esse oportet, argumentum sucrum sit, ac pium: neque quidquam actibus interponatur, quod non Latinum sit, & decorum; nec persona vila muliebris, vel habitus introducatur.” Societatis Jesu, Ratio Atque Institutio Studiorum (Rome, 1635).
had no dedicated playhouses in which to perform, plays were staged in schoolrooms, noble households, or sometimes even urban marketplaces. There was most likely no fee charged for entrance, although sponsors often compensated the student performers and schoolmasters for their efforts. Because only males were allowed to attend these schools, no female performers took part and women were often discouraged even from attending. The audiences at Latin plays were generally well educated, although in all probability many attendees would have been unable to understand all of the language.

The variety, quantity and importance of Latin drama varied from place to place. Not all post-Reformation Latin dramas were written from Catholic perspectives. Protestant Latin plays, including John Fox’s apocalyptic *Christus Triumphans* and Thomas Naogeorgus’ fervently anti-Catholic *Mercator*, which depicts salvation resulting from faith rather than good works were also widely disseminated. In some cases, Protestant and Catholic Latin plays were published in the same volume, as in the 1547 published volume *Dramata Sacra Comoediae atque tragediae aliquot e Veteri Testamento desumtae*. Nor were all Latin plays performed in educational institutions. Dutchman Joost van der Vondel (1587-1679) wrote Latin plays with religious and Biblical messages that were performed on the public stages of Amsterdam. Scandinavia had almost no Latin theater tradition, while in parts of central Europe it was one of the few theatrical


options available. However, “Latin drama was written and read, rehearsed and performed, all over Europe.” It also had an international life, where plays were read, performed, and adapted across geopolitical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. This trend illuminates not only the utility of Latin in bridging European cultures, but also the increasing mobility of the early modern world.

**Theater of Traveling Companies**

In medieval Europe, travel had been an inevitable aspect of life for professional performers. Constantly outsiders, they moved from place to place in search of enthusiastic audiences, wealthy sponsorship, and to avoid the wary eyes of local authorities. Though they might perform privately for those who could afford to pay, itinerant troupes predominantly performed for the masses at fairs and in public squares and made a living off the takings given by viewers. Their performances were highly improvisatory, acrobatic, and simple in plot. Usually the content they performed was secular—farcical pieces, songs, dances—but sacred themes were not unknown. As they could carry little with them, their stage effects were crude, and often their theater was simply a makeshift raised platform. It was not an easy existence. Such performers did not simply vanish in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Groups of wandering players continued to operate across early modern Europe, living on the edge of society and continuing to work in the medieval vein. However, many such groups were successfully able to expand their travels, their regional visibility, their theatrical offerings, and at times their facilities and economic situation.

---


56 Ibid., 5.
In the early modern world, travel became cheaper, easier and more predictable, so that wandering performers could go further and cross borders with greater facility.\textsuperscript{57} Actors performed in the vernacular—if not always the vernacular of the particular locality they were visiting\textsuperscript{58}—and the simple, physical, unscripted, dramas they typically performed were designed to entertain across linguistic barriers and circumvent competing companies and the censorship of authorities.\textsuperscript{59} In early modern Europe there were also larger gatherings of people in towns and cities, which meant more opportunities to perform for profit. Actors increasingly moved their performances into the inns, coffeehouses, and taverns common in towns both large and small. Some companies made appearances in the new public theaters that were beginning to appear in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.\textsuperscript{60} Enclosed theaters allowed companies greater financial security, since patrons were charged upfront rather than at the end of the performance. Often the line between traveling players and resident urban performers was a very tenuous one. Theater troupes that resided permanently in larger European cities, often sent touring companies out to the surrounding provinces, where they performed the company’s plays in new

\textsuperscript{57} Increased trade in the late medieval world led to advances in road construction, canal digging, shipbuilding, and other forms of conveyance that James E. Vince has called the sixteenth century’s “transportation revolution.” James E. Vince, \textit{ Capturing the Horizon: The Historical Geography of Transportation since the Sixteenth Century}, Softshell Books ed (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

\textsuperscript{58} Their transcultural positions were reflected in the dialects employed by their actors: each \textit{commedia} stock character spoke as though from a different European country or Italian region. Richard Andrews, \textit{ Scripts and Scenarios: The Performance of Comedy in Renaissance Italy} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 170.


\textsuperscript{60} The Hôtel du Bourgogne, the first purpose-built playhouse in Paris was regularly leased to traveling companies from both within France and from other lands before it became the permanent home of a French troupe in 1629. (James Van Horn Melton, \textit{The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe}, New Approaches to European History 22 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 166.
surroundings and new audiences. Wandering companies could prove so successful that they took up long-term residence in foreign cities. Some even acquired theater spaces of their own, like the Italian troupe that won royal patronage in Paris as Comédie Italienne.61

The most famous itinerant companies of early modern Europe were those in the tradition of the Italian commedia dell’arte, which coalesced by the mid-sixteenth century.62 Building upon the long medieval tradition of impromptu comedic theater, these performers codified the stock characters, plots, themes, patter, and gags that were common in folk drama and then recycled them endlessly in performance.63 Lovers court each other while disguised, scheming servants try to get wealthy, braggarts, buffoons, and disapproving fathers attempt to thwart the harmony of the amorous and fun-loving. The most prestigious itinerant troupes expanded beyond improvisational theater to perform in a variety of fully scripted plays.64 Commedia troupes traveled not only within the Italian city stages, but throughout western Europe, including France, Spain, German lands, England, and the Low Countries.65 Some commedia actors and companies (such as I Gelosi, managed by Francesco and Isabella Andreini) became so well known that they performed for royalty across the continent and their services were requested at grand weddings,

63 Luckily for scholars, there are surviving published records that document the style and content of these improvised comedies, particularly Flaminio Scala’s Il Teatro delle Favole rappresentative (Theater of Tales for Performance) (1611) and Évariste Gherardi’s multi-volume Le Theatre Italien (1694-1700).
64 Schmitt, 256.
coronation festivities, and other important political occasions.\textsuperscript{66} It was through traveling players like the \textit{commediantes} that much theatrical material moved within Europe during the early modern era. Because of these changes in technology, economics, and organization, wandering troupes were able to achieve fame, wealth, and influence far beyond that of any itinerant performer of the medieval era.

\textbf{Court and Household Theater}

For as long as people have wanted to be entertained, those with more resources have had greater influence over the types of entertainment provided. In medieval Europe, the wealthy hired performers as members of the household or for festal occasions. In early modern times the rich and noble continued to patronize actors, musicians, and dancers with increasing regularity and with more consistent monetary investment. Royal courts and noble households consistently patronized playwrights and companies of actors, both for single performances as well as for longer terms, sometimes endowing them with official titles and the right to wear the household livery.\textsuperscript{67} The regularization and the greater expectation of patronage stem less from an increased demand for performance than an increased ability and willingness of political and economic authorities to set aside time exclusively for theater and to pay for it. Henry VIII set a powerful example when he became the first English ruler to form his own company of players in 1494.\textsuperscript{68}

Not only did many elites personally develop a passionate love of theatrical entertainment, they

\textsuperscript{66} One famous \textit{commedia} piece “The Madness of Isabella,” in which Isabella Anderini played a young woman thwarted in love who suddenly begins to rant, cry, and sing in a host of different European languages, was specifically requested at the wedding of the Grand Duke of Florence. Flaminio Scala, \textit{The Commedia Dell’arte of Flaminio Scala: A Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios} (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 225-238.


also realized that theater could be employed as a symbol of material, social, and political power. So the wealthy and the royal, more cognizant of the worth of theatrical performance for entertainment, cultural, and propaganda purposes, were more likely to commission projects and more willing to undertake long-term patronage of individuals and companies. This supplemented the incomes of playwrights and acting troupes, allowing for a greater flowering of dramatic activity in both private households and in the public playhouses.

Because wealthy private patrons had the means to finance fantastic and elaborate works tailored to their values and viewpoints, court and household theater could differ from more popular theatrics. The need to write for an educated and worldly audience inspired poets to draw from the grand narratives and lofty themes of classical mythology, allegory, and history. Staged in palaces and wealthy homes, some of which possessed their own dedicated theater spaces, the content of court dramas often mirrored the neo-classical architectural popular among the nobility. Court performance frequently incorporated sumptuous costumes and scenery,


70 Jerzy Limon suggests that “Court theatre’s principal feature was its departure from the drama dominating the public stage, or—more generally speaking—its abandonment of the word in favor of the image, stage design, costume, music, special effects, dance, and light.” Jerzy Limon, “Performativity of the Court: Stuart Masque as Postdramatic Theater,” The Return of Theory in Early Modern English Studies: Tarrying with the Subjunctive, Paul Cefalu and Bryan Reynolds, eds. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 263.

71 For example, Psyché, a collaboration between Molière, Pierre Corneille, and Phillipe Quinault, Jean-Baptiste Lully, and others, was based upon the classical tale of Cupid and Psyche. Performed before a royal audience at the Tuileries Palace in 1671, it was a grand spectacle featuring ballet, operatic music, multiple complex sets, and machines to help the performers “fly” across the stage.

72 Palaces like El Escorial and Versailles, which were themselves inspired by Italian architecture, further influences the building of noble houses and theater spaces that reflected neo-classical ideals. Carole Shammas, “The Early Modern Built Environment Globally: The State of the Field,” Investing in the Early Modern Built Environment: Europeans, Asians, Settlers and
complicated mechanical devices, and effects.\textsuperscript{73} Sometimes royalty would insist upon participating themselves!\textsuperscript{74} Other times, private performances often employed the same dramatic pieces shown in the public theaters, the Latin schools, or the streets and performed by the same actors.\textsuperscript{75} But seemingly private performances were not always exclusive. Even theaters in the royal palaces might be open to paying public audiences.\textsuperscript{76} During the rule of Philip IV, the Buen Retiro Palace hosted both private and public audiences.\textsuperscript{77} With their extensive resources and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Julie Sanders, The Cambridge Introduction to Early Modern Drama, 1572-1642}, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014) 202. Sanders also reminds us that “[d]espite the…considerable degree of dislike or even open hostility toward court theater, many historians of theater and drama do admit that the majority of technological novelties have their source in princely entertainments.” \textit{Ibid.}, 262-263.
  \item \textit{Louis XVI} designed and appeared in many French court masques. (W. D. Howarth, ed., \textit{French Theatre in the Neo-Classical Era, 1550-1789}, Theatre in Europe (Cambridge ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 219.) Henrietta Maria, Charles I’s queen, had a particular fondness for dancing in court masques that celebrated her as “the proponent of heroic, platonic love, and chaste behavior, loved of all but only desired by her husband, who is the only person worthy of her.” (Dawn Lewcock, \textit{Sir William Davenant, the Court Masque, and the English Seventeenth-Century Scenic Stage, c1605 -c1700} (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008), 52.) In the eighteenth century, Russian monarch Catherine the Great penned dozens of dramatic pieces which were subsequently performed at court. Catherine, O’Malley, Lurana Donnels Catherine, \textit{Two Comedies by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia} (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998).
  \item For example, Shakespeare’s King Lear was performed before the king even though the King’s Men played “usually at the Globe on the Bank-side.” William Shakespeare, \textit{M. William Shakspere: his true chronicle historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three daughters With the vunfortunite life of Edgar, sonne and heire to the Earle of Gloster, and his sullen and assumed humor of Tom of Bedlam: as it was played before the Kings Maiestie at Whitehall vpon S. Stephans night in Christmas hollidayes. By his Maiesties seruants playing vsually at the Gloabe on the Bancke-side}, (London : Printed for Nathaniel Butter, and are to be sold at his shop in Pauls Church-yard at the signe of the Pide Bull neere St. Austins Gate), 1608.
  \item With royal permission, Molière’s troupe played to public audiences in several Paris court theaters, including the Salle du Petit-Bourbon and the Salle du Palais-Royale.
  \item Laura R. Bass, \textit{The Drama of the Portrait: Theater and Visual Culture in Early Modern Spain} (Penn State Press, 2008), 133.
\end{itemize}
cosmopolitan tastes, court and household theatrics often drew upon foreign styles of theater and influenced them in turn.

Public and “Private” Theater in the Commercial Playhouse

The most well-known and celebrated variety of theater to appear for the first time in early modern Europe was that performed in the permanent, dedicated playhouses of European cities by professional actors before paying audiences. When permanent playing companies took up residence in European cities, they first used courtyards, inns, taverns, and halls that were designed to accommodate entertainments of many types. However beginning in the sixteenth century, urban spaces were built (or rebuilt) specifically to house theatrical performances, first in France (1548), England (1576), and Spain (by 1579) and later in Italy, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. The playhouse, as a structure, was especially innovative for it ensured audience payment and made theatrical takings more consistent. This, in turn, helped to regularize many performance conventions and encourage the creation of new and more elaborate dramatic works. With playhouses, popular theater became more economically successful and culturally viable.

Yet, when the playhouses were closed by disease or decree, the companies of players reverted either to performances at court or noble households or took their act on the road.

Of course, not all commercial playhouses were equal in terms of their status or theatrical offerings. London audiences in particular distinguished between “public” theaters and “private”

---

78 Beloved plays like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*, and Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna* were written for and debuted at Europe’s early modern public theaters.
80 In 1642, the new Puritian government of England ordered the closure of all public playhouses. They were not reopened until 1660. In the 1640s, Madrid theaters were closed for a time due to wars and a period of national mourning honoring the death of King Phillip II. Bass, 2. When the daughter-in-law of Louis XVI died in 1690, theaters were closed for several weeks. Howarth, 318.
theaters. The former were generally purpose-built, free-standing amphitheaters open to the sky, which differed from the enclosed “private” theaters created from converted halls and monasteries. The distinction was not entirely architectural. Although both varieties of playhouses were open to the paying public, “private” theaters possessed greater prestige and tended to charge more. As a result, the repertoire and clientele found in the private theater were generally more erudite and of higher social status. By contrast, public playhouses tended to see a wider range of social types and plays with broader appeal. These were also more frequently the targets of criticisms lamenting unruly audiences and immoral activities.\textsuperscript{81}

The public often knew what to expect when it attended a performance, based on the companies residing at that playhouse.\textsuperscript{82} In seventeenth century Paris, some theaters housed French companies who specialized in tragedies inspired by classical modes and others who performed coarser comedies. Some playhouses housed Italian companies that performed in the commedia dell’arte style. In sixteenth century London, some “private” theaters, like the Blackfriars, were renowned for the neo-classical musical plays performed by troupes of pre-pubescent boys.\textsuperscript{83} The London public theaters featured adult actors in a wide range of play types. Most of the “great” early modern playwrights (including Shakespeare, Molière, and Lope de

\textsuperscript{82} The relationships between playhouse management and theater companies varied widely. In France and Spain, playhouses were either rented, often from religious confraternities, or endowed by patrons. In England, companies might rent a performance venue from men like Philip Henslowe. There are also cases of company members owning their own playhouse, such as the members of the Chamberlain’s Men who owned shares of the Globe and Blackfriars theaters. Hugh M Richmond, \textit{Shakespeare’s Theatre} (New York; London: Continuum, 2004), 20-21.
\textsuperscript{83} The Children of Paul’s, who performed regularly both at court and at the Blackfriars often performed the plays of John Lyly and John Marston, including the latter’s \textit{What You Will}, a play about rival poets that was highly critical of Ben Johnson. John Marston, \textit{What You Will}, (London), 1607.
Vega) are celebrated as champions of the commercial public stages, although their works were often performed or written for more exclusive venues.

**Popular Sacred and Morality Theater**

Although early modern theater is often depicted as a secular contrast to the heavily religious dramatics of medieval Europe, and while some countries did largely abandon religious theater, sacred drama remained an important part of Europe’s religious practice. As the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent Catholic Counter-Reformation embroiled Europe in various religious wars and conflicts, religious theater proved to be too contentious in some locations, though it remained culturally desirable in others. England and France both banned religious drama from the public stages, but productions continued in the countryside and in private performance. Even “secular” drama could not help but retain religious influences. Italy retained its own traditions of sacred drama that borrowed heavily on medieval practice combined with increased neo-classical sophistication of verse and performance. The *sacra rappresentazione* that developed in Florence in the fifteenth century were one-act, vernacular, rhymed verse plays with plots taken from the Bible or the lives of saints. Deliberately devotional and aimed at a broad public, they could also boast impressive mechanical effects and scenery. Skilled poets wrote these sacred pieces, including Giovanni Battista Andreini, the son of the famed *commedia* players, who wrote “sacred plays” on the stories of Adam and Mary Magdalene alongside secular tragedies and comedies. Though religious plays were less popular in Italy after

---


the sixteenth century, they were performed with increasing frequency by convents and other religious communities.  

Fervently Catholic, Spain turned religious theater in the form of *autos sacramentales* into a sophisticated dramatic and performance form. Written in the vernacular, and primarily non-liturgical, *autos sacramentales* were usually performed in the streets for feasts such as Corpus Christi. While they did incorporate elements of secular theatrics, including music and dancing, and were designed to be broadly entertaining, these plays were primarily a vehicle for religious stories, historical narratives, displays of devotion, and allegorical lessons in morality. Though drawing heavily on medieval sacred drama, festivals, and public processions, these plays were often performed by professional actors rather than amateurs by the late sixteenth century. While popular, the form was also prestigious and the most revered of Spanish playwrights, including Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega, contributed to this genre. In one such *auto*, *El gran teatro del mundo*, Calderón portrays the Christian God as “El Autor” (the theatrical manager), directing the course and organization of human existence. In the Netherlands, religious and moral plays with clear or subtle Protestant or Catholic leaning were often paid for by the community. Intended to provide spiritual edification, they were also just as clearly meant to entertain.  

---

86 For more on the tradition of sacred theater in female religious communities, see: Elissa Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women*, Cambridge Studies in Italian History and Culture (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
87 McKenrick, 238-240.
medieval theater traditions were retained and expanded upon in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

**Locating Larger Trends in Early Modern Theater**

The types of theater described above give a general indication of some of the prominent trends in early modern theater, but they certainly do not represent clear and distinct categories. Companies, actors, plays, patrons, and performances might straddle the lines between categories, belong to multiple types simultaneously, or not fit neatly in any of them. For example, public spectacles, staged by governmental authorities, guilds, or other groups do not easily fit into any one category. Resident companies of the commercial playhouses occasionally wandered the countryside. Traveling companies could take of residence in a town or even a specific playhouse. Plays and companies that were seen on the public stages might also appear in command performances before private royal audiences. Playwrights who learned to pen Latin plays in Jesuit schools often graduated to writing for the popular stage. Latin school plays might be brought into private residences for the benefit of a wealthy donor.

As in medieval times, the boundaries between different varieties of early modern performance remained fluid. Indeed, seemingly contrasting characteristics could intertwine even within individual plays. For example, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the dramatic material created or used in court performance was also commonly used in public performance, potentially for audiences both paying and non-paying. Religious material could appear in a predominantly secular play. Scripted drama was continuously elaborated in performance by extemporizations. For this reason we should be wary of scholarly writings that seek to examine only “popular” theater, “court” theater, or any other single variety of performance. Often these
boundaries do not actually exist. This lack of categorical distinction also makes it difficult to wrap one’s mind around the theatrical activity of the early modern era.

Another limiting factor in the study of the larger picture of early modern theater is the considerable difference in practice that persisted from country to country. Because practices varied so widely, it is difficult to see them all as aspects of “early modern theater.” Just as there exists no clear division between medieval and early modern theater practice, there were no clear geographical boundaries demarcating the places that experienced early modern fluctuations in theater. Yet they did exist simultaneously and, more importantly, influence each other greatly. However, it remains difficult to pin down precisely what they might have in common. As Wiles points out:

> [t]he parallels [between the various early modern theater traditions] are striking, but rarely pursued by theatre historians because we have no vocabulary that allows us to speak of William Shakespeare, Flaminio Scala and Lope de Vega as creatures of a single historical period.90

Nationalist approaches to theater history further obscure the commonalities that underlay the vast majority of theatrical productions during this era.

In broad terms, what separated the new theater practices of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from medieval theater (or even classical theater), is not its dramatic quality, its secular character, or even its popular appeal. Rather, theater of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe differed principally from its Euro-Mediterranean predecessors in its increasing consistency of practice and interconnectivity. These concepts require additional explanation as they are part of a larger picture of change, which shifted the very significance of theatrical performance in early modern Europe.

---

Between the 1570s and the 1620s theatrical performance in much of Western Europe, which had heretofore been a sporadic and unregimented practice, was greatly expanded and achieved greater consistency in its scheduling, locations, performers, and repertoire. Early modern European theater became more codified in its various forms and more integrated into daily life, largely because it was more economically secure. The more complex and predictable the production, the more effort and expense were needed to bring it to life. In the sixteenth century, new avenues for funding theater came into being that allowed many aspects of theatrical life to be regularized. Rather than occurring only during annual festivals or depending upon the whims and wanderings of itinerant players, as theater had done throughout the medieval era, theater became a regularized part of urban life, in large part because permanent playhouses were dedicated to its performance and because economic conditions created a market for theater in which performances might be financed not by haphazard donations but by paying audiences or wealthy patrons.  

The increasingly commercial nature of many varieties of early modern theater has not gone unnoticed by many scholars of the stage. This is not to imply that performers and theater artists had never before been compensated for their work. Indeed, many actors and playwrights had long been remunerated for their efforts by a combination of wealthy patronage and public generosity. However, neither source of income was particularly regular or predictable in the medieval world. The construction of dedicated playhouses combined with increased demand for performance by those with money to spend made theater, and playwriting in particular, newly

---

lucrative. While theater personnel still faced economic insecurity, the strengthening of revenue streams heavily impacted both the practice and the content of early modern theater.

As patrons increasingly demanded dramatic activity that was more frequent and more elaborate, it became widely possible for the first time to make a living as a writer of plays. Before the sixteenth century, most authors of dramatic works either made their livings as actors or were occasional playwrights writing works from time to time as occasion dictated, but none that we know of attempted or succeeded in making a career of dramatic writing alone. Yet, from the fifteenth century onward we see the rise of court playwrights, and much of theatrical writing and performance was driven by “the need felt by a court poet to find new ways of amusing his lord and lady.” Beginning in the late sixteenth century, playwrights, as well as actors, could make a living practicing their art for both the popular stage and for wealthy patrons. Not all patronage was of the overtly monetary variety. Without elite patronage, acting companies could not legally perform. As we read in the dedications of published plays, many poets dedicated their works to persons of esteem (or even the general public) in hopes of both pecuniary and social remuneration or in gratitude for benefits received. Even if they did not pay your wages, the reputation of your patron determined your company’s status and influenced opportunities for performance and payment.

---

92 McKendrick, 10.
93 Evidently, early modern poets often expected monetary payment in exchange for the “gift” of their dedication. In the derisive dedication to Nathan Field’s *Woman is a Weathercock*, the author rebels against this formula, insisting that he “did determine, not to have Dedicated my Play to any Body, because forty shillings I care not for.” Quoted in: *The Actor As Playwright in Early Modern Drama.* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 72. Financial contributions were doubtlessly appreciated, but as David Bergeron points out, “[M]any dramatists simply sought recognition, hoping that the patroness’s name would lend a kind of luster to their efforts.” David M. Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570-1640* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 78. Also see: Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R Westfall, *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
In general, theater of all varieties became increasingly predictable and more uniform in practice and quality, a trend that continued through the eighteenth century in most major European cities. Outside of urban centers these changes did not occur to the same degree, but even in the provinces, theatrical performance was impacted by the significant changes occurring in the capitals. Unlike medieval theater, which was associated primarily with holidays and celebrations, early modern theater was less dependent upon special occasions. Public performances of one kind or another took place almost daily, and even private performances became more frequently scheduled in the dedicated theater spaces built for them. People could even access theater by themselves through the medium of printed plays. Drama as text also helped to make theater more reputable.\footnote{The Humanist Renaissance, with its veneration of Classical authors, lent dignity to the dramatic arts, which potentially altered the theater’s social role.} Theater gained a new familiarity and predictability because audiences increasingly knew who would be performing what play in what venue at what time, how much it would cost, and what the general experience of playgoing would be like. Theater became a routine part of urban life in a way that had not occurred before.

Not only was sixteenth and seventeenth theater more readily available for public and private consumption, it was more easily transmissible. Moreover, through travel, trade, and publication it reached more people. Through texts, performances, persons, and properties, theater traversed Europe and beyond, finding its way to the Americas, East Asia, and other parts of the globe. In these ways early modern theater was exchanged, but it also increasingly operated as a medium of exchange. It was not simply a product passed from hand to hand or from mind to mind, but a vehicle through which ideas, trends, cultural practices, and information were conveyed. More and more, theater practice acted not within cultures but as a bridge between
cultures. At the same time, the fruits of worldwide activity and interaction made their way back to the theater capitals of Europe to expand and influence performance practice and dramatic writing. Indeed, the same qualities—global integration and widespread communication (both of them spurred by commercialism)—that render the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries “early modern” make their theater productions “early modern” as well.

Just as the shift from theater as extraordinary occasion to ordinary occasion impacted its cultural significance, so too did its shift from geographical isolation to international importance. As long as theater occurred sporadically in distant locations, and often operated without textual scripting, it was difficult to observe similarities or differences between the theatrical practices of different groups in different locations. It was similarly difficult to understand theater as having peculiarly local or regional characteristics when compared with other works or performance techniques. Once theater became a persistent activity in urban life (though set apart from other ordinary daily activities) it began to invite more frequent comparison across geographic, linguistic, and national divisions. Now that theatrical activity was a fixture, it was possible to observe it more frequently both at home and abroad and to draw parallels and contrasts between plays, performers, and practices. The rise of printing, and the printing of play scripts in particular, also helped create an intellectual space in which theater pieces could be more easily compared, both within and between different geographical and cultural spaces and traditions.

As a media consciously observed both domestically and internationally, theater practice took on important cultural significance by representing nations, languages, ethnicities to those peoples and to the wider world. Dramatic writing and performance both served to record impressions of national identity and to reinforce ideas of national character and international rivalry. These cultural messages were bound up in larger economic and political motivations that spurred the
creation of theater performance and often reflected the thinking of social and political elites. Yet this does not mean than others did not find the rhetoric of national identity similarly appealing.

Despite what we might infer from the elevated reputations of famed playwrights, the truly historically significant developments of sixteenth and seventeenth drama existed less in its specific content—the words spoken and movements performed by the actors—than in its economic-political operations and its socio-cultural significance during its own era. And these changes occurred not simply within national confines, but across larger regions. All of western European theater embodied these trends in consistency and internationalization to varying extents.

**Charting the Precedents for Early Modern Theater**

Even more difficult to chart than performed differences are the factors that have accompanied changes in the nature of theatrical performance over time: the relationship between performance and culture, and the interrelationship of contrasting (even competing) theatrical trends. In recent years historians and theorists of theater have turned their attention to these complex issues, in an attempt to overturn the narrative of positivistic development (and subsequent perversion) that has traditionally made theater history simplistic and replete with modern biases about the past. Despite the wealth of scholarship concerning western European plays and dramatic productions, scholars are only beginning to fully examine theatrical performance and drama into the wider historical, cultural, and global events through which it was created. Why did important theatrical activity arise at a similar time in the countries of Western Europe, and how can we account for its similarities? The roots of both the early modern world and its western European theatrical traditions lay in larger, long-term societal tendencies, ecological phenomena, and demographic changes.
The Growth of Urban Centers

Even though it comforts our human fear of the unpredictable and our romantic sensibilities to ascribe many of the specific traditions and practices of early modern theater to great playwrights, or cultural genius, in actuality its development stems from a host of changes occurring around the world and throughout the region of Western Europe. The first important change that gave rise to the new theatrical conditions of the early modern age was the rise of cities as new centers of social, political, and economic power.

Before the early modern age began, Europe was already one of the most densely settled regions on earth, most likely because of its temperate climate and abundance of natural resources. Yet, sites of culture production and artistic influence were rare and scattered, for “[i]n the Middle Ages the nation state was no more than a loose confederation of autonomous communities. Europe had no clear political and cultural center, and no seminal playwrights or dramatic texts acquired classic status.”\textsuperscript{95} Though towns grew in medieval Europe and became trade hubs, independent of feudal agricultural relationships, they remained relatively small and lacked significant political power within their regions. This changed considerably over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries as the European landscape witnessed the growth of large cities that functioned not only as economic centers but also as densely populated strongholds of political authority and cultural production.

There are a number of reasons why cities gained influence in the early modern period: demographics, labor, and social climate. For one thing, urban centers underwent substantial population growth. Paris, London, and Amsterdam had tremendous population spurts between

\textsuperscript{95} Wiles, 65.
Cities such as Madrid, Berlin and Naples boomed in population during the seventeenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, London and Paris were the most populous cities in Western Europe while Madrid and Naples tied for third. Though the reasons why are still debated, late medieval and early modern Europe witnessed a modest population surge which fed the urban populations. Indeed, by 1500 Western Europe had recovered what numbers had been lost as a result of the Bubonic plague and continued to slowly swell over the course of the sixteenth century. Jan De Vries suggests:

In the extended period of European demographic and economic recovery and expansion that stretched from the late fifteenth into the sixteenth century, the stock of cities with which medieval civilization had endowed Europe was not significantly enlarged, but the growth of urban population was quite broadly distributed among cities of all types, sizes, and locations.

A larger population required more land for cultivation with the result that rural land became a more expensive commodity. Unable to afford to rent and farm their own land and thus without stable income, many Europeans, the young especially, made their way toward towns and urban centers. So did those unable to obtain jobs in rural industries like clothworking and

---

96 Tamara L. Whited, et al., *Northern Europe: An Environmental History*, Nature and Human Societies (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 76 Population growth was not a consistent force, however. It slowed in the later half of the seventeenth century in most European countries.
98 Ibid, 531.
metalworking and the many people or who otherwise lacked a livelihood, and had previously been consigned to an itinerant existence. Subsequent years of poor harvests in the seventeenth century, rather than bringing laborers back to the countryside, further encouraged displaced rural workers to seek new opportunities in towns. Europe’s population boom had created surplus labor and more hungry mouths, so when sixteenth century scarcity drove up food prices, particularly grain, workers’ wages were often insufficient to purchase it. Those who encountered financial hardship made their ways to the urban centers, with the result that cities continued to expand.

But the growth of cities cannot be attributed solely to the general increased in population. For example, throughout southern Europe, the population declined beginning in the seventeenth century, even as Madrid and Naples continued to experience population growth. Other parts of Europe, such as England and the Netherlands, grew through on a smaller scale than in the sixteenth century while cities such as London and Amsterdam continued to boom. Clearly other factors were operating to make cities more populous. Growing urban centers also exerted a pull of their own, and people increasingly had freedom of movement and the option to take advantage of urban life. Serfdom had been in decline since the fourteenth century, which meant that peasants were not obliged to work the land owned by their lords. Cities were swelled not just by internal migration but by an increasing number of people from other countries, brought there by the increased amount of trade, entrepreneurial opportunities in innovation, increasing ease of travel, religious persecution, and numerous other factors.

---

102 Grigg notes that Holland, although it experienced significant population growth, suffered less from these ill effects than the rest of Western Europe. David B. Grigg, Population Growth and Agrarian Change: An Historical Perspective, Cambridge Geographical Studies 13 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 149.
104 Grigg, 58, 281.
For newcomers and long-time residents alike, cities appeared to provide social and economic mobility as well as opportunities for cultural production. Feudal relationships between peasants and landowners and the strong influence of religious authority had kept social stratification relatively stable in the countryside. However, decreased feudal authority and increased migration to the cities upset older social and economic patterns. The swelling ranks of town and city dwellers created an abundance of new urban labor that allowed for the creation or expansion of trades and professions. Literary production and the theater were among those sectors that began to thrive with the influx of urban dwellers. Among city residents, new employment opportunities made a previously static social order more flexible. It became feasible to train for new professions and trades, rather than inheriting one’s family’s traditional livelihood.  

105 A farmer’s child could become an apprentice. A merchant with wealth could rise to become a magistrate and marry into the nobility, as did one-time Montpellier silk merchant Jean de Cezelli (though he is an extreme example).  

106 Economic opportunity and social mobility for certain people abetted the creation of the “middle class” composed of those who were neither peasants, nor wage laborers nor nobility. Skill and economic power begat political influence as professional groups and merchants increasingly wielded social and political power in the towns.  

107

105 “In England, it was relatively easier to move from the ranks of prosperous farmer into the ranks of the gentry. The real barrier was between the gentry and the peerage or titled nobility. On the continent, on the other hand, it was more difficult to penetrate the ranks of the lower nobility, but relatively easier to acquire a title.” Mark W Konnert, *Early Modern Europe: The Age of Religious War, 1559-1715* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 39.  


107 “In towns and cities all over Europe, the wealthy and powerful bourgeois became a kind of urban partriciate, an oligarchy that dominated their city’s social, economic, and political life. Increasingly, their horizons and ambitions went beyond their home town. They were involved in international trade and finance and had political, social, and economic ambitions beyond the
It is not merely that people desired cities. Cities also required people. Griggs points out, “There was a greater proliferation of trades and crafts in the sixteenth century than in the medieval period, and thus there were more outlets for productive employment for the landless.”\(^{108}\) Expanding manufacturing and trade required larger number of laborers in these profitable industries. It is also important to recall that cities were completely stable neither in numbers nor in social organization: “In all kinds of cities, the turnover among urban dwellers was high.”\(^{109}\) Until the nineteenth century, urban birthrates failed to keep pace with urban mortality. Therefore, in order to sustain or expand the population of a city, a continual influx of outsiders was needed, both from the surrounding countryside and from further afield.\(^{110}\) The increased urban labor supply permitted the creation of new businesses and ventures, and the creation of products on an unprecedented scale. As Fernand Braudel noted, “[T]here can be no door to the rest of the world, no international trade without towns.”\(^{111}\) Whether or not one agrees fully with Braudel’s assessment, it is undisputable that throughout western history population centers and their various mechanisms have served as the most efficient and enduring conduits of information, goods, and people. An increasingly concentrated population (combined with technological innovation) increased the ease and efficiency with which materials could be

---

\(^{108}\) Grigg, 289.


\(^{110}\) Braudel, 481.

\(^{111}\) *Ibid.*
moved. Thus, those locales with the largest population, and therefore largest market capacity, had the most frequent and sustained contact with the world beyond their perimeters. The establishment of dense urban populations in numerous locations across Western Europe combined with technological advances in the production and distribution of material goods to swell commercial endeavors, both in scope and intensity.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, urban life also gave rise to more segments of the population who worked less, and could afford to do so.112 Urban life, even for those who labored long and hard, meant that there were more compelling reasons to not be working: increased opportunities for socialization, the variety of urban entertainments, and the loosening of the social pressures that govern close-knit communities. The establishment of permanent playhouses, the rise of a coffeehouse culture, and the beginnings of shopping as an “experience” all coincided with a greater differentiation between work and play. The growth of cities, the expansion of disposable income, and the development of a more formalized culture of leisure among urban residents were all essential to the creation and maintenance of a permanent and popular theater system.113 European cities continued to expand throughout the modern period, and it can be no coincidence that the most robust theater capitals of the early modern period were those with the largest populations.114

112 Kuritz, 162.
113 “Whether or not real standards of living or particular sectors of society in particular places improved or declined, and whether or not the nominal wage for a day’s work in a particular trade or the market place for a quintal of wheat in a particular area rose and fell, discretionary income was still in the lands of a large and increasing number of people in early modern Europe.” Woodruff Smith, Consumption and the Marking of Respectability, 1600-1800 (New York: Routledge, 2002), 98-99.
114 Barker, Routledge Anthology of Renaissance Drama, 1.
Shifts in Political Authority

At the same time that certain cities were growing numerically and commercially, they were also rising in political importance. More individuals were amassing wealth through trade and investment, and both the middle and working classes possessed increased disposable income. By virtue of their numbers and economic clout, the urban populace of Europe wielded a power that common folk had not heretofore possessed. In order to maintain authority and preserve order, governing entities needed to tame this “mob.” With the tremendous demographic growth that occurred within many European cities in the early modern period came waves of legislation designed to manage the teeming—and increasingly threatening—masses. Ferrone links the rise of theater not only to the rise of cities and the expansion of commerce, but to the growing power of urban residents, and the need of authorities to more effectively regulate the citizenry. Regulation of theater was one such stricture, and Ferrone furthermore suggests that there was a strongly felt need to regulate theatrics because of their association both with foreigners and with other disreputable types: beggars, thieves, charlatans, and prostitutes. Theatrical regulation allowed the authorities to keep an eye on these problematic personages. Yet at the same time, government regulation of the stage also served to legitimize the stage. Because companies could more effectively be monitored and their offerings reviewed by the censors, those that met with approval were protected by their official patents. When this official recognition became fused

115 Braudel, 526.
with noble sponsorship and the playhouse system, these forces created an atmosphere in which
playacting could be physically and financially stable as well as legal. As a result, conditions
became ripe for the proliferation of permanent commercial theater.

In Western Europe, the boom in urban populations coincided with the greater
solidification of power, money, and land in the hands of ruling elites. Indeed, these developments
were closely related, for “urban growth outside Italy, southern France, and the Low Countries
was often affected as much by royal residences and the growing power of monarchs vis-a-vis the
nobility as by trade and manufacturing.”117 Although kings and princes had ruled in Western
Europe since ancient times, they were able to assert new authority in the early modern era
because of changes in the power base that supported them. Within the context of the near-
constant warfare of the medieval and early modern world, rulers built up armies and stockpiled
resources. The growth of cities permitted these power-building processes to function more
efficiently, for rulers could center their power in the urban centers, where they were more
efficiently able to enact regulatory measures over the populace including taxation and
conscription.118 Accompanying the surge in military power and organization that occurred in
Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, urban centers witnessed a concentration of
criminal activity that stemmed from population density and became more visible as a result of

117 International Commission for a History of the Scientific and Cultural Development of
Mankind, History of Humanity, ed. Louis Bazin, Sékéné Mody Cissoko, and M.A. Al-Bakhit,
vol. 4: From the Seventh to the Sixteenth Century, Routledge Reference (New York: Routledge,
1994), 274.
118 For more on the role of warfare and military organization during this period, see: Julius R.
Ruff, Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800, New Approaches to European History 22
legislation and its enforcement.\textsuperscript{119} Citizens sought out the protection of national and municipal authorities, the legal system, and, if they existed, the police. With a greater number of subjects and a more centralized stronghold, political authorities gained power but also needed to regulate urban society in order to maintain that influence. Permanent commercial theaters were brought to life in large part by the legislation that restricted their activities but also gave them protection and legitimation. Increased external control of the stage often worked with, rather than in opposition to, the success and stability of the theater.

Before the rise of powerful, centralized monarchies that took an interest in culture and the arts, the lives of theatre people--actors, authors and assorted personnel--were particularly precarious. They had no real protection from anyone. The Church largely opposed theatrics that it could not regulate, the powerful might be willing to sponsor them (but not usually for long), local governments saw them as a nuisance, and although the populace might enjoy their performances, they remained deeply distrustful of actors. Everywhere they went they were outsiders. And the job of amusing people was (and remains) a difficult one. Moreover, as a wandering troupe, they were forced to compete with others like them, professional and amateur. Even after the establishment of theatrical centers and the endowment of permanent companies and playhouses, those who operated outside the boundaries of the patronage structure continued to live lives of uncertainty. Under the expanding early modern system of patronage, companies needed to have patrons who would support them, or they would not be able to obtain permission

\textsuperscript{119} Historically, new laws and modes of enforcement often have the effect of increasing the reported crime rate, as the word “crime” “comprehends behavior which can be…classified as criminal by a specific society and can therefore be created by legislators or law enforcement agencies. As criminologists have reminded us, there is a need to distinguish between crime waves and ‘enforcement waves’…” J. A. Sharpe, \textit{Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750}, Themes in British Social History (New York: Longman, 1984), 5.
to perform.¹²⁰ Prestigious patronage could bring other social and economic benefits too. For example, members of the monarch’s own company of players essentially ranked as servants in the royal household and were authorized to wear royal livery.¹²¹ Under the patronage of English monarchs, the King’s company wore bright red outer-garments of velvet and other costly materials.¹²²

The increased clout of secular authorities in their urban strongholds precipitated a relative decline in overall clerical influence, particularly when compared to the medieval era. Although secular and clerical authorities worked closely together on many matters and relied heavily on each other, secular authorities were able to increase their economic and political influence during the early modern era in a way that religious authorities were not. This is not to imply that religion suddenly became unimportant. On the contrary, the early modern period was a time of deeply held beliefs and ongoing religious warfare, such as occurred during the Thirty Years War. People remained willing to kill and die for what they held sacred, but at the same time, the splintering of the Catholic Church that occurred during the Protestant Reformation also resulted

¹²⁰ “‘Players’ still had not legal status in sixteenth-century society, defined as vagabonds and beggars unless they were attached to a noble, so the movement away from medieval theatre emerged from an alliance between court society providing legitimation on the one hand, and commercial enterprise on the other, with theatre companies often taking the form of join-stock companies owned by the leading actors and financiers.” Robert Van Krieken, *Celebrity Society* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 34.

¹²¹ The convergence of servitude and performance was especially noticeable in eighteenth century Russia, where serfs (peasants bound to the land owned by noble families) were organized into acting companies and performed elaborate operas, ballets, and plays for their masters. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, eds., *A History of Russian Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61-64.

in the decline of large-scale political and economic power for churches across Europe.\textsuperscript{123} A growth in the creation and trade of goods beginning in the fifteenth century, and the prestige and wealth that accompanied mercantile activity disadvantaged religious authorities whose products were less tangible.\textsuperscript{124} The influence they formerly possessed was redirected to city centers along with secular economic growth and military might.

**Shifts in the Economics of Theater**

The expansion of business in the early modern world was closely tied to the expansion of theater, for “the commercialization and commodification of culture contribute[d] to the growth of cultural industries, such as the eye-catching theatre and opera”.\textsuperscript{125} Theater has always been a business practice, whether its profits went into the pockets of performers, charities, or regulators. But changes in early modern life allowed the stage to grow and succeed as a business venture in new and unprecedented ways. In urban centers under monarchical control, a growth in financial resources combined with new techniques for collecting money greatly altered theater operations and the role of the theater in daily life.

Public though they might be, the permanent theatrical companies of the early modern era developed in response to the availability of sponsorship from economic and social elites. The

\textsuperscript{123} “Early modern religion…began to decentralize their bureaucracies as smaller, geographically dispersed, and local bureaucracies evidence only loose administrative ties to a central staff of clergy and as strict relationships of authority among units within the religious bureaucracy decline.” Jonathan H. Turner, *Human Institutions: A Theory of Societal Evolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 218


\textsuperscript{125} Peter Clark, 249.
wealthy and the noble have always exchanged payment and patronage for entertainment and their own glorification. Medieval nobles had occasionally maintained their own household of musicians and entertainers, even actors. What began to change in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the nature of demand for dramatic work and the relationships between those who produced it and those who desired it. The consolidation of power by royal courts in urban centers created a more regular demand for performance arts and the money to finance them, what McKendrick called, “systematic royal patronage and the creation of sophisticated theatres in the royal palaces.”\textsuperscript{126} As trade and government became increasingly centered in cities, so too did the aristocracy. With the presence and the influence of the aristocracy, the entertainers that had formerly sought out public and noble patronage in the countryside followed them into cities. Monarchs and the influential desired more than ever to display their prestige through performance.

However, this would probably not have been enough to encourage a real focus on the writing and staging of new dramatic works had their not been another urban market for them. Individuals and companies found new ways to tap into the consistent public demand for entertainment. It was not that the public discovered theater for the first time or wanted more of it. People have always longed for amusement. But as the demand for entertainment was harnessed in new ways, it could become newly profitable, and expanding the market for scripted dramatic works and their performance. Anderson points out that “the moment when companies began performing indoors…was the moment in which theatre indisputably became a commercial business”\textsuperscript{127} He Further notes that “the advantages of performing in a hall are as much economic

\textsuperscript{126} McKendrick, 163.
\textsuperscript{127} Anderson, 82.
as artistic. Your audience must pay in advance for admission, and cannot drift away when someone comes round with the hat."\textsuperscript{128} It also helped that most permanent playhouses provided some protection from the elements, a feature that allowed performances to continue despite inclement weather and revenue to trickle in despite meteorological phenomena. Roofs shaded and sheltered most of the audiences, even if some still got wet in the open-air playhouses. The use of tarps and awnings to protect even the low-paying patrons was not unfamiliar.

However, retaining a permanent, indoor playing space presents challenges of its own. Because they were not moving from town to town, companies needed a larger repertoire to meet the demands of local audiences. This in turn means more time in rehearsal and more energy and money spent obtaining materials. The resident company also needed increased internal stability in order to maintain the resources of the company and ensure that their personnel were sufficient for the performances planned. This kind of company organization required planning, calculation, and—often—money up front. It was a life less precarious, but perhaps rather more complex than that of a traveling troupe.\textsuperscript{129} As the very word "company" suggests, groups of players were not just associates but business partners, and the theater became more and more of an institutionalized business, with all the legal strictures and bureaucratic inconveniences that this implies.

The economics of early modern life also allowed significant numbers of people to devote more time to theater and other leisure pursuits. In cities, skilled labor became increasingly powerful and influential, as was the merchant class. The number of civil service jobs was growing, distributing administrative power more widely. These groups, which constituted a large

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
component of the rising middle class, were able to make more money while simultaneously working more flexibly or more infrequently. The booming early modern economy meant that many people got very wealthy and the relative comfort of their lifestyles increased. There was more money available to be spent on frivolities. It was largely these middle-class individuals who composed the core of the theatrical audience, supplemented by travelers, soldiers, and those involved in trades. Menial workers were less likely to be part of the audience. Most had neither time nor ready cash to participate in this cultural experience. Yet on the whole, early modern Europe witnessed a substantial increase in the consumption of both goods and experiences.\(^{130}\)

As a result, the kinds of theater offered also shifted in notable ways. Medieval theater pieces coincided largely with festivals and other days devoted primarily to leisure. Indeed, performances were deliberately staged on days when audiences could be in attendance and free from other obligations. Furthermore, as performers catered to passersby who could come and go as they pleased, audiences did not really have to commit to being in the audience for any length of time. Even if one stayed around for the entire show, it was usually rather short. By contrast, the rise of permanent theaters with an entrance fee and extended performance lengths indicates that people were willing to devote more time (if not more attention) to theater. With plays performed on most days of the week, audiences who attended would seem to be giving up valuable working time—potentially four whole hours—often in the middle of the day. Even in places where viewing a theater performance was relatively cheap, attendees were still giving up valuable working time in order to amuse themselves at the theater. This suggests a disinclination to conform to regular laboring hours, a rise in leisure time, or less need for the money that the

---

time could be spent earning. The success of the stage was driven by the economic success of the early modern city.

**Shifts in Education**

New modes of theater gained in popularity and stability in part because people were beginning to acquire educations that primed them to create and enjoy such performances. Theater and education have often been closely related throughout European history. Indeed, the medieval theatrical form that most closely resembles the dramatic offerings of early modern Western Europe was that found in the universities. In Europe these institutions had been an early medieval invention, dedicated to the training of young men to be priests and members of other learned professions, such as medicine and law. Though graduates were often intended to enter specific professions, their university experience was intended to expose them to a vast body of knowledge that included not only mathematics and philosophy, but theater as well.

By the fourteenth century, the link between ancient and contemporary theater began to strengthen as the rediscovery and renewed interest in classical writings inspired thinkers and scholars to examine and even emulate the dramatic products of their ancient forbearers. University and grammar school study not only gave wealthier young men familiarity with classical literature, including drama, but as we have seen, it also presented them with opportunities to become theater-makers themselves. Students learned the ancient “rules” of Greek and Roman theater, memorized significant passages from classical plays, and debated the merits and heresies of pagan drama. Early modern education taught students to value theater. This holds true all over Europe, occurring even in places that did not have a very strong public theater tradition.

In scholarly discourse, the theater of the universities and that of the city centers are usually dealt with separately: one being philosophical and academic and the other coarse and
common. However, this division obscures the fact that university and grammar school theater helped to transform popular theater in the early modern world and was a pivotal component of the changes occurring in the late sixteenth century and into the seventeenth. Beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing through the rest of the early modern period, there was a general, though gradual, expansion of education in Europe. Literacy, previously reserved for priests, statesmen, and lawyers, became increasingly common. By the end of the eighteenth century increased educational opportunities had created a much more literate Europe.\textsuperscript{131} The rise of early modern popular theater coincides with this shift. New opportunities allowed more of the (male) population to attend grammar schools and university, where they were exposed to theater in their studies. Even the grammar schools of the day had students study classical drama, usually in Latin.

At the same time that education in theater was growing in universities and among the general public, there was increased demand for skillfully composed plays. Thus the ranks of the playwrights were often filled with new and well-educated young men. The majority of prominent early modern playwrights were well educated, but not of the nobility. The expansion of upper

\textsuperscript{131} It is challenging, if not impossible, to reconstruct literacy levels in Europe before the nineteenth century, and the daunting task is compounded by varying literacy levels from country to country and within the population. Cipolla has suggested that in sixteenth century Europe all that can be stated is that the rural literacy rate was less than 50 percent and the literacy rate in more advanced urban areas probably greater than 50 percent. Carlo M. Cipolla, \textit{Literacy and Development in the West} (Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), 60. Literacy rates can be estimated with more facility within individual countries and regions. For example, David Cressy estimates that adult male illiteracy in England dropped from 90% around 1500 to less than 60% in 1700 and less than roughly 40% by 1750. David Cressy, \textit{Literacy and the Social Order Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England} (Cambridge [England]: New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 177. The trend toward greater literacy in early modern Europe was typical, if not quite universal: “For England, lowland Scotland, the Netherlands, north-western Germany, and north-eastern France, and expansion of literacy for the middling ranks had occurred by the end of the seventeenth century. For men at least, Castile in the sixteenth century had been on par with France and England until the second quarter of the seventeenth century.” Robert A. Houston, “Literacy,” \textit{European History Online (EGO)}, Published by the Institute of European History (IEG) (Mainz, November 28, 2011), URL: http://www.ieg-ego.eu/houstonr-2011-en URN: urn:nbn:de:0159-2011112135. [2014-02-21].
middle-class education in the sixteenth century created a new class of literary men who were not necessarily “gentlemen”—that is, they still needed to work and earn a living—but who were nonetheless not of the peasantry. Some students who attended universities and preparatory grammar schools later became a major part of the wave of playwrights who brought scholarly ideas about drama to the public sphere and combined academic theories with crowd-pleasing spectacle, either on a casual or a professional basis. Dramatic poets from this upstart middle class were joined by a number of noble playwrights, some of whom merely dabbled in drama and others who devoted considerable energy and talent to its creation. The participation of noble, wealthy, and well-educated people in the creation of theater with clear neo-classical linkages gave the stage a more prestigious reputation than in previous ages.

Overall, literary and dramatic education helped create a society that appreciated and demanded new kinds of plays in addition to the farcical buffoonery and religious allegory of centuries past. Increased exposure to scholarly ideas about theater allowed for an easier integration of theater into society. But even ordinary uneducated people would have had a familiarity with theatrical performance of a less erudite nature. And they would have been familiar with many of the narrative techniques of the early modern stage through their knowledge of Biblical tales, folk legends, heroes, and tragic figures.

**Shifts in Dramatic Writing and Performance Practice**

City life, the increased political stability and regulation wrought by secular authorities, certain economic opportunities, and increasing educational access all changed the way in which theatrical personnel plied their trades and heavily impacted the way that plays were written and performed. For one thing, theater attained greater cultural acceptability. As literature scholar Loren Kruger put it, “A theatre in the center of the city confers on the cultural practices housed
there a legitimacy generally denied to performance of the same text in a peripheral sphere.”¹³² Urban theatrics, overseen by censors, government officials like the “Master of the Revels,” and influential patrons became more desirable and less threatening.¹³³

The existence of constant paying audiences and patrons created more opportunities but also put new demands on playwrights, performers, and other theater personnel. It was no longer enough to stitch together a few scenes with comic antics or a couple of simple stage effects. Plots became more elaborate, language wittier and more lyrical, properties and machinery more sumptuous as the tastes of a more educated and worldlier public became increasingly sophisticated.¹³⁴ Dramatic productions became more complex and more formalized in the sixteenth century. They also became more expensive, for “[dramatic art, whether used as religious propaganda or for purposes of social recreation, becomes more costly as it becomes more elaborate”¹³⁵ and so greater investment in talent, time, and money went into each production. Thus, the public and private stages increasingly needed the work of educated authors to write plays, versatile and popular actors to perform them, and a host of talented individuals to attend to the technical side of performances. With greater expectations placed upon performances by this increasingly theater-savvy audience, jobs such as playwriting, scenic design, and musical composition (all formerly accomplished by actors of the troupe) were increasingly handed over to specialized workers. To meet the need for more elaborate stagecraft, machinists were recruited and given the opportunity to use their new familiarity with

¹³⁴ As a result, “most dramatists of Shakespeare’s time were making things up as they went along, which creased both energy and uncertainty.” Bergeron, 18.
¹³⁵ Wickham, 1.
mathematics and the sciences to create flying chariots, self-propelled carts, and other intricate devices for the court and public stages.

At the same time, actors were expected to become much more versatile. Not only did they need to memorize greater amounts of scripted dialogue, they were required to be proficient in a greater diversity of dramatic styles and roles. While actors of the Italian *commedia* were justly famous for their stock characterizations and the performance of narrowly defined roles and types, the new breed of actor was expected to flesh out the characters they performed and to act across genres. The actors of a single company would need to successfully play not only comedies and farces, but also tragedy, tragicomedy, and pastoral plays. While actors certainly had specialties for which they were well known, they increasingly pushed the boundaries of their abilities in ways not previously required.

New modes of performance required more investment up front. They could also be more lucrative. With luck and a positive public reception, a play might run for several weeks, or even longer. The longer the run, the greater was the reward for the creators. The return on investment could potentially extend beyond the initial run since the script and properties could be reused long after the original play closed. Materials were appropriated into new plays and old plays were restaged. As productions increased in complexity, they also increased in length and in the number of their offerings. Performances lasting four or more hours appear to have been common, and this length reflected audience demand. Early modern audiences were accustomed to attending multi-hour religious services and observing extended court pageantry. Therefore, the increased length of early modern performances, which might contain not only a play, but also numerous dramatic, balletic, and musical interludes, as well as prologues, epilogues, and other material, was a bonus rather than a detriment.
Despite the new regularizations that accompanied the transition to dedicated playing spaces, audiences retained considerable social freedom to experience performance on their own terms. These audience members were not just casual observers but paying customers, with all the expectations that such a status entails. They demanded to be entertained. Theater was not something that they endured in silent rapture or polite diffidence. They loudly voiced their approval or disapproval of the performance. Unlike contemporary performances, which often occur in darkened playhouses and insist upon audience silence and (presumably) their close attention to the stage, early modern audiences were often lit as well as the actors. Viewers were accustomed to carrying on all sorts of social intercourse and commercial activities within the playhouses. Indeed to the contemporary theatergoer, the performances of those years might appear more akin to a fair or festival than a play. Therefore the transition from outdoor performances into indoor ones was not necessarily a culturally jarring one. Audiences remained accustomed to the bustle in the playhouse, even as the content of performances became more and more valued. There were also new formats through which audiences experienced theater, most notably the printed text. The theater as a place remained much less reputable than theater as a script. The latter had—and in some respects still possesses—a cultural legitimacy that the former is hard pressed to obtain.

**Theater in the World**

As we have seen, the combination of more powerful and centrally-located secular authorities, the new customs and opportunities of urban life, and the economic and commercial expansions that, in part, define the early modern world proved pivotal to the rise of a new theater culture in Western Europe. These same forces also helped to shape two more emerging trends that shaped the way theater operated within the larger early modern world: the expanded
mobility of individuals, goods, and ideas and the rise of the nation state. These would in turn change the significance of theater in early modern culture, as European theater developed a complex ideological and tangible relationship with the wider world.

Early modern cultures were more mobile and more frequently exposed to outsiders than ever before. The same technology that brought European warfare to the seas and distant shores allowed for greater mercantile efforts beyond a country’s borders. Thus, between 1492 and the seventeenth century, Spain colonized much of the Caribbean and South and Central America as well as the Philippines. England colonized Ireland, parts of the North American continent, and established trading posts in Asia. France also expanded into North America. These nations also gained access to the larger world through conquest and territorial expansion. The Dutch, Italians, and others also expanded their influence and served as conduits between nations, particularly because the Netherlands and some Italian city-states remained under Spanish rule into the late seventeenth century. Not all contact with the larger globe took the form of colonization. Trade relations with other parts of Europe, Asia, and the Mediterranean continued to expand and became further economically entrenched. Natural resources from the new world and from east Asia made their way into Europe and helped to drive the engines of production and the zeal for commercial projects. The new simplicity and profitability of trade spurred economic growth and created a market for previously unneeded goods and services. However, greater interconnectedness also created tensions between countries and cultures. Spain and England, for example, felt threatened by the other’s culture, resources and military power even when not engaged in outright conflict.136

136 For more on this theme, see: Charles H. Parker, Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400-1800 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
The exchange of information and the migration of individuals across political and cultural borders helped to shape theatrical performance in manifold ways. The movement of theater troupes, particularly Italian ones, carried performance conventions from place to place. Playwrights brought their experiences of living in other lands and their facility with foreign languages into their plays. Play scripts in both manuscript and printed form traveled widely and were translated for new audiences. Foreign plays were adapted for performance on new stages. Theater was particularly receptive to outside influences and also served as an important mode of transmission across cultural boundaries. Theater’s reliance on mobility and the sharing of ideas was by no means new, but during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it clearly operated on an unprecedented scale.

The early modern period also coincided with the rise of nation states in Europe. Increasingly dependent on centralized governments to defend them and provide structure to their world, the citizens of Western European kingdoms were willing to concede stronger allegiance to their monarchs and fellow citizens. Furthermore, ongoing conflict between countries and attempts to solidify political borders allowed individuals to envision themselves as members of not just a kingdom or a region, but of a nation-state. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “nation” indicated a “people” or a “country”—a collective with basic geographic, cultural, linguistic, and ancestral commonalities. Nations became more self-aware, not just because of more centralized authorities and better communication channels, but because of increased knowledge about the wide world. By witnessing the differences between themselves and other cultural groups, Europeans were able to imagine that those most similar to them

---

constituted a single culture, despite social, economic, political, and philosophical differences. In a world in which the “nation” was increasingly a geopolitical entity among other geopolitical entities, people increasingly sought markers not simply of cultural difference between groups, but of cultural, political, economic, and military superiority over other nations. As borders on maps were drawn with ever more precision, borders between peoples were more rigidly constructed and more adamantly defended, and playwrights (among other public figures) became celebrated as figures of national significance and as symbols of the country’s character and greatness.

For example, the anonymous author of the “Vida de Don Antonio de Solís y Ribadeneyra” prefixed to several printings of his works announces of the playwright, “It is a great honor for such a great man to come from a nation.” Another playwright, Juan Perez de Mantalban is similarly described as “the glory of his nation” Poet-playwrights are portrayed as the most glorious of national citizens, capable of elevating the whole of the land with their illustrious status. William Congreve acknowledges the impulse to harness the greatness of the playwright for the benefit of the nation in his prologue to John Dryden, Jr.’s The Husband His Own Cuckold: “Where e’er the Poet does his dwelling chuse, Yet still he knows his Country claims his Muse”. According to Dryden, not even the removal of the poet from his native land can prevent his nation of origin from taking credit for his genius, for the poet’s abilities stem

---

139 María de Zayas Sotomayor, “A La Muerte Del Doctor Juan Perez de Montalban,” in Lágrimas Panegíricas a La Temprana Muerte Del Gran Poeta, Y Teleogo Insigne Doctor Juan Perez de Monalban... (Madrid: Imprenta del Reino, 1639), Fol. 51.
from a “Muse” which is national property. Not only does the playwright glorify the nation, he remains indebted to the nation that created him. Prominent playwrights are thus cast as markers of national brilliance, unaffected by external forces and global patterns in the creation of their dramatic works. Indeed, the presence of larger extra-national factors might compromise the “greatness” of that achievement and undermine narratives of cultural exceptionality. Resulting depictions of the nationalized playwright distort our understanding of authorial process—which appears to derive from inspiration and genius rather than hard work—and values authorial texts (which are presumed to be stable entities) over live performance. The immense fame achieved by poet-playwrights, both in their own day and in subsequent centuries, has transformed them into figures of international influence and heightened national significance.

**The Playwright and the Nation**

It is clear from examination that no one “national” theater developed in isolation from a number of others and that innovation was frequently imported from elsewhere. However, the identification of illustrious playwrights as national symbols and national property, firmly established in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continues to dominate the narratives of theater history. As one member of the Spanish Royal Academy effused at the end of the nineteenth century, “Where is there a crown more glorious than that of the national poet, whether epic or dramatic?” Well-known early modern playwrights continue to act not only as symbols of but also synecdoche for the prestige of their languages and homelands. By the mid-nineteenth century, it had become commonplace for Britons to “regard [Shakespeare’s] merits

---


and reputation as almost identical with [their] country’s honor and greatness,” and the sentiment extends to other writers. Mechele Leon observes that even in the twenty-first century “Molière occupies a position of great significance in France, not only for its theatre, but also for French culture in general and notions of national identity…he is part of the national soul.” Today, great playwrights are not understood simply as competent writers and national treasures, they are widely believed to capture something elusive yet fundamental about the culture, language, and geopolitical entities they represent.

In large part, this romantic perspective of the relationship between the poet and the “nation” is a nineteenth century development. Romanticism (as described in chapter 1), not only altered the concept of “art” and “artist,” it also recast the relationship between the artist, the nation, and its people. The nineteenth century idea of “nation,” reflected prominently in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, suggested a group of people who had possessed a common unifying spirit (the volkgeist, in Herder’s terminology) from time immemorial, a spirit reflected in their traditions, social structures, religion, homeland, arts, literature, and—above all—language. Nineteenth century thinkers became obsessed with isolating and describing the fundamental “essence” of various national groups, which had become tainted by external influences in the modern era but potentially existed in an uncorrupted state in the fables, folksongs, and texts of the past. The result was an elevated interest in past authors and folk traditions as potential sources for the nation’s true and ancient being. The poet-playwrights of early modern Europe

---

144 Mechele Leon, Molière, the French Revolution, and the Theatrical Afterlife (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 3.
were venerated in a new way in the nineteenth century, as the embodiment of the nation and windows into its essential characteristics.\textsuperscript{145}

Because the most lauded of early modern playwrights are figures of national significance and intimately linked to national literary canons, histories of theater have often taken the nation as a primary unit of analysis. For many, examining theater in a national context is an attempt to avoid the traditional glorification of individual playwrights. For example, Malveena McKendrick, whose \textit{Theatre in Spain: 1490-1700} has understandably become an indispensable text for students of early modern Spanish theater, openly celebrates that she “has concentrated on the Spanish drama as theatre, as a national institution” rather than a list of prominent authors.\textsuperscript{146}

Yet, national theater histories often fall into the same trap that their authors attempt to avoid; just as the celebration of great playwrights over the centuries has encouraged nationalist ideas about the early modern stage, national theater histories have tended to reinforce the cult of immortal playwrights.

Telling theater history in national terms also presents other challenges, not least of which is the ongoing problem of defining the concept of “nation.” Most “nations” have not possessed stable borders, constant structures of governance, or culturally, ethnically, and linguistically unified populations throughout their histories. Yet, nation-based methodology assumes that each nation-state possesses its own distinctive theatrical styles, authors, player, repertoire, and

\textsuperscript{145} Guntram Henrik Herb and David H Kaplan, \textit{Nations and Nationalism a Global Historical Overview} (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 73.

\textsuperscript{146} Melveena McKendrick, \textit{Theatre in Spain, 1490-1700} (New York. N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 1989), x. This is similar to a comment made by Felicia Hardison Londré: “Without espousing a “great lives” approach to theatre history, I have tried to keep the individual craftsman or artist at the center of my study.” But because of the cultural value attached to theater it is almost impossible to discuss the well-known individual without glorifying them. Felicia Hardison Londré, \textit{The History of World Theater: From the English Restoration to the Present} (New York: Continuum, 1999), viii.
important cultural themes. Internal differences are downplayed, when they are mentioned at all. Thus, it becomes difficult to determine what histories are and are not encompassed by the national narrative. Much is inevitably omitted when it is not deemed “national” enough. For example, because a national theater tradition is often inextricably linked to a specific language tradition, national theater histories tend to limit themselves to a single language dramatic canon. Consequently they ignore theater offerings that might appear in other languages, whether presented to a multilingual cosmopolitan court audience, performed by students of Latin and Greek, or staged by traveling foreign troupes in spaces both public and private.

The result of national focus is a diminution of transnational and global influences and practices, for “[n]ational theatre histories have helped strengthen national borders by simulating a national fortress of artistic activity despite the fact that writers, directors, designers, and performers have frequently crossed those borders.” In focusing on the nation as an organizing framework we risk losing the many stories of the people, plays, goods, and ideas that were influential beyond the borders of a single nation state or language. “The level of cultural exchange characteristic of the era,” David Wiles writes, “is often rendered invisible because of how scholars focus on their own national theatres.” We also tend to misunderstand the transnational origins of Western European theater. After all, if one looks for theatrical

---

147 For more on the challenges of writing national histories of theater, see: S. E Wilmer, *Writing & Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004).

148 S.E. Wilmer points out, “Some national theatre historians have privileged linguistic over geographical borders….This makes sense because of the tradition of drama being language-bound…” S. E Wilmer, *Writing & Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 19-20.

149 Wilmer, 19.

development only within the confines of a single country it is easy to conclude that the “golden ages” of theater that sprang up in sixteenth and seventeenth century Western Europe were products of individual genius, national spirit, or some combination of the two.

When cultural products are deemed important, as early modern plays often are, there remains a strong desire to attribute them to human agency rather than happenstance. The resulting narratives, which minimize historical contingency and amplify the influence of select prominent figures, are easy to comprehend and comforting in a world of uncertainties. Furthermore, they aid us in the construction of our own cultural, educational, linguistic, and geopolitical identities; it is tempting to see in the “great” figures of the past not only a broad legacy of cultural achievement but also the possibility for greatness within ourselves. Authors and artists appear particularly susceptible to this brand of elevation and emotional attachment because of the enduring nature of their product, recorded on paper or other physical formats. Poets and playwrights have been particularly valued because their works were uniquely accessible within their home countries and beyond. They can be experienced in either printed or performed versions, both of which traveled into distant lands and languages. Indeed, the transnational consumption of drama in the early modern period necessitated that playwrights be assigned national identities and celebrated as cultural heroes.

Subsequent chapters will explore some of the key ways in which early modern European theater operated internationally. Looking primarily at the commercial theater of London, Madrid, and Paris in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I will examine the patterns and mechanisms of dramatic exchange, how theater’s international dimensions shaped ideas of nationhood and national character, and the ways—tangible, metaphorical, and symbolic—that early modern audiences experienced the larger world through theatrical performance.
CHAPTER 3
DRAMATIC INSPIRATION, TRANSLATION, AND ADAPTATION

As we have seen, the development of early modern theater did not take place within strict cultural limits or national borders. Nor did the theatrical “Golden Ages” of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe represent unique and isolated outpouring of cultural genius. The rise of European urban centers, the solidification of nation-states, the increased control of European monarchs, intensifying trade, and the commercialization of entertainment all played a part in ensuring that similar and intertwined dramatic traditions arose across the region within a relatively short span of time. Regional preferences and variants certainly existed, but they did not conform to geopolitical or linguistic boundaries. Theater styles existed across national and cultural boundaries and continuously influenced one another through trade and travel to create blended and evolving traditions of performance and dramatic writing. Sixteenth and seventeenth-century theater also depended heavily upon individuals who worked between locations and cultures to knit together the theater practice of Western Europe.

These trends are clearly illustrated in the ongoing dramatic exchange that shaped the theatrical output found on the stages and in the bookshops of London, Paris, and Madrid. Because these three theater centers continue to be so celebrated for their early modern dramas, it is vital to recognize how many of their great dramatic works were created in an atmosphere of cross-cultural literature, performance, and international reputations. Playwrights like Shakespeare and Calderón set their dramas in foreign lands (including Italy, Denmark, the Holy Roman Empire, Poland, and others). They also borrowed stylistic and narrative materials from beyond the borders of their homelands. Indeed, recognizable dramatic elements—Louise George
Clubb termed them “theatergrams”—were (and are) mobile, with the result that dramatic pieces often existed between, rather than within, languages, nations, and cultures.¹ Although theater and drama are frequently studied as cultural windows, only rarely are they explored as phenomena capable of simultaneously providing insight into multiple cultures, not to mention the entire network of exchange, translation, and negotiation in which they operated.

In the face of this knowledge, we need to change the way we look at theater in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and ask new questions. To begin with, why, how, and to what extent did exchange occur? To which foreign and domestic sources did playwrights turn for inspiration? How did they feel about the works from which they borrowed and those than they created from them? How frequently were plays performed, read, and adapted outside of their place of origin? How aware was the European public of early modern theatrical mobility, and what opinion did they form of this practice? What cultural significance did foreign dramatic material possess, and how did its meaning change over time?

By tracing and noting the patterns and channels through which theatrical inspiration and exchange operated we can discern a far clearer picture of early modern theater, and its connections with economics, politics, literature, and identity formation. These examinations can provide insight into what this pervasive borrowing of material meant culturally, both within theatrical and literary communities and to the public at large. Using this gathered information, it may even be possible to note what stories, playwrights, and performance practices were most

popular and most influential in their own day, by charting their movement across cultural and linguistic boundaries. This chapter first examines the modes and means of narrative and dramatic exchange within sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, before interrogating early modern ideas and sentiments regarding these cultural processes.

**Circulating Narratives: The Western European Literary World**

At first it might appear that the dramatic material of the early modern period can be easily segregated into national categories distinguished by language, place of performance, and the cultural identity of the author. However, a nation-based understanding of theatrical presentations obscures the reality that the early modern theater largely drew its dramatic materials from a shared European literary tradition that stretches back to ancient times and has been persistently blurred by exchanges of texts and performance. Many well-known stories had been a part of European culture for millennia, and new ones continued to arrive. For example, Western Europe, though increasingly destabilized by religious divisions and reforms, had been culturally imbued with Biblical narratives, the lives of saints, and other religious stories for many hundreds of years. In medieval times, fables, folk and fairy tales, Arthurian legends, the tales of Amadis de Gaul, and the *Song of Roland* all crossed borders and cultural divisions in both oral and textual formats. The ideas and people of the past were much more mobile than they might appear to the contemporary mind, and despite a lack of twenty-first technologies, trade and travel

---

2 For example, Ben Jonson and *Every Man in His Humour* are “English,” Paul Scarron and *La Fausse Apparence* are “French,” Agustin Moreto and *No puede ser* are “Spanish.”

3 The story of Amadis de Gaul is a chivalric romance first recorded in the fourteenth century. The author or authors are unknown, but the work is likely of Spanish origin (though that has not stopped French and Portuguese critics from claiming it as their nation’s creation). Amadis, modeled on the knights of King Arthur, is a model of Christian virtue and an unrivaled warrior who overcomes many obstacles and monsters in service to the world and his lady-love. Edwin
continuously brought information from afar. Crusaders brought back stories and narrative styles from the Middle East and the holy land. Journeys to and from the great medieval pilgrimage sites—particularly Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela—all required devotees to traverse political and linguistic boundaries. Inevitably they exchanged stories, songs, and texts along the way, but some materials traveled more easily than others. In the medieval era, Latin was the language not only of religion but also of international communication. Though only the educated were likely to be fluent in Latin, travelers knew that it would likely be understood wherever they roamed in Europe or the Mediterranean.

Despite the widespread illiteracy of medieval Europe, texts too made important journeys between cultures, and even between languages. In medieval times, many cross-cultural texts were written in Latin, the language of the Church, and accessible to most of the educated throughout Europe. Religious works were penned almost entirely in Latin, and many secular Latin texts on history, philosophy, the sciences and were well traveled. As a result, many authors did not even bother writing in their native vernaculars, which so few Europeans outside of their


Though we tend to consider the ages before mass transit systems, air travel, and highways to afford less opportunity for movement than our own, “mobility was the norm” rather than the exception in early modern times. Moch, 22.

Among the literary devises likely brought to Europe by returning crusaders are “frame narratives” (stories that serve as a vehicle for a collection of other tales), like those that structure Boccacio’s *Decameron*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the numerous Italian *novellas*. Donald Haase, ed., *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 627.

For more on the medieval pilgrimage experience, see: Jonathan Sumption, *The Age of Pilgrimage: The Medieval Journey to God* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003). Pilgrimage was understood not only as a departure from home but also from the familiar use of vernacular languages: German Franciscan Paul Walter declared his intent to “go away to a place where the German language is unknown” is order to achieve absolution from his sins. *Ibid.*, 9.

Although the Latin used often differed substantially from region to region.
homeland could read.\footnote{Of course, many vernacular literary pieces were penned (\textit{Beowulf}, for example), but these texts were less widely disseminated or appreciated before the twelfth century. Many of these vernacular literary works were derived from oral tradition.} For this reason, Englishmen Odo of Cheriton and Roger Hoveden, among others, wrote primarily in Latin.\footnote{Preacher Odo of Cheriton’s (d. 1247) \textit{Fabulae} comprised a number of fables that feature animals and plants with human characteristics and convey both religious messages and social critiques. For an accessible English version, see: \textit{The Fables of Odo of Cheriton}, John C. Jacobs, trans. (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1985). According to literary tradition, Roger of Hoveden was the twelfth century chronicler responsible for the historical accounts of English history contained in the \textit{Gesta Henrici II} and \textit{Gesta Regis Ricardi} (accounts of the reigns of Henry II and Richard I) and other chronicles. See: William Stubbs, ed., \textit{Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis. the Chronicle of the Reigns of Henry II and Richard I, AD 1169-1192}. (Cambridge University Press, 2012).} Furthermore, many European languages retained a multitude of competing dialects until the late middle ages, meaning that even one’s literate countrymen might not be able to make easy sense of a variant of “their own” language. Indeed, it was not until the fourteenth century that Italy began to adopt a single, standard dialect.\footnote{The Tuscan dialect was the ancestor of the modern Italian language; Brian Richardson explains, “Behind this trend lay the combined prestige of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, helped by the nature of the Tuscan dialect itself, which shared characteristics of both northern and southern dialects and was relatively close to Latin.” Brian Richardson, \textit{Print Culture in Renaissance Italy: The Editor and the Vernacular Text, 1470 1600} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.} Thus, although translations to and from vernacular languages were made, in the medieval European world they very often occurred through Latin intermediary texts.\footnote{Martin Andrew Sharp Hume, \textit{Spanish Influence on English Literature} (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1905), 53. For some examples of medieval scientific works that achieved wider importance through translations to and from Latin, see: Michèle Goyens, Pieter de Leemans, and An Smets, eds., \textit{Science Translated: Latin and Vernacular Translations of Scientific Treatises in Medieval Europe}, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia ser. 1, studia 40 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008).}

These patterns in literary exchange were further expanded by early modern increases in travel and trade, printing, the use of vernacular languages, and demands for translated materials. From its origin in the 1400s, the European printing industry continued to boom throughout
subsequent centuries. The ability to reproduce numerous printed copies of a text relatively quickly generated a spate of new publications whose numerous copies avoided many of the inconsistencies and errors that plagued hand-copied texts. The expansion of printing complemented, rather than eradicated, the distribution of texts in manuscript form. In the face of this new supply of literary materials, texts went from the sole province of a few wealthy scholars to a commodity that was much more widely—and cheaply—available. Individual copies of printed books often did not need to be specially commissioned, and due to their increased availability and wider dissemination, they could be purchased locally as well as abroad.

The rise of the print trade also coincided with the growth of vernacular literary communications. As more people learned how to read and had access to books, they increasingly read in their own vernacular in addition to or instead of Latin. Beginning in the early sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation, which encouraged the reading of sacred texts in the vernacular, led to the increased importance and mobility of vernacular language writing. In the midst of this linguistic shift, an increase in the trade of printed books, and even of manuscripts, also generated a need for new translations. Works from abroad were increasingly moving into other countries, and although some people were able to read them in the original language, many could not. Vernacular translations gave more people entry to a wider literary world.

Concurrently, individuals, especially the educated, became more likely to read and speak foreign

---

12 As Elizabeth Eisenstein points out, printing in itself did not make a text less prone to errors, but it did reduce the number of different errors appearing from copy to copy. Furthermore, “the duplication of a given error made it more visible to many eyes and thus more susceptible to being corrected.” Elizabeth L Eisenstein, The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 350.

13 Ibid., 345.

14 As a result, Eisenstein illustrates “early modern Europeans were much better able than their forbearers had been to consult more or less the same text, chart, or table at more or less the same time and to correspond with each other about the same items on the same page.” Ibid., 349.
vernaculars—often with the help of newly devised and printed language dictionaries and grammars.\textsuperscript{15}

When public theater began to play a more prominent role in European cultural life in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the new plays that were performed in the new playhouses were heavily shaped by this expanding textual trade, and soon acted as traded textual commodities themselves. A linguistically segregated and nationalist understanding of theater ignores these occurrences, and in particular the fact that playwrights borrowed heavily from the works of authors and dramatists in other lands. It is worth noting that plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth century tended, perhaps even more so than other literary forms, to derive from pre-existing source materials. Poet-playwrights only rarely concocted their plots out of their own imaginations. As we shall clearly see again and again, the playwrights that we tend to celebrate as innovators were voracious readers and frequent borrowers in a society that largely condoned those practices. Frequently playwrights turned to the stories that they knew, either because they were culturally prevalent or available in text or performance.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, early modern plays are typically based on other literary works or sometimes on popular cultural myths. Even today we continue to see dramatic works that have been inspired by recognizable happenings and texts, but do not always note or understand the complex relationship between source and product.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Peter Burke and others suggest that the seventeenth century in particular witnessed increased interest in the mastery of foreign languages thanks to practices such as the “Grand Tour” and that education of both formal informal varieties were more likely to include foreign language training. Peter Burke, \textit{Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe}, The 2002 Wiles Lectures given at the Queen’s University, Belfast (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113-115.

\textsuperscript{16} The playwrights likely saw more plays than read books, but it remains more difficult to trace the influence of performances as opposed to books.

\textsuperscript{17} For example, of the four works nominated for best play at the 2013 Tony awards one was inspired by the works of Anton Chekov (\textit{Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike}), one was
Dramatists appear to have been heavily inspired by the multitude of texts that they read, in addition to whatever plays they saw in performance. Therefore, the widespread sharing of literature among the denizens of Western Europe is reflected in the reality that playwrights did not rely exclusively on their own language’s or nation’s literature to create new works of drama. Instead, source material from other European countries—source material that playwrights often could not experience in the form of live performance—appears to have been uniquely popular and repeatedly borrowed. As a whole, early modern theater was heavily indebted to stories that had been imported from abroad, either through texts or oral transmission. Folk legends, like those of Faust and Patient Griselda, inspired early modern plays in both their oral and textual incarnations. Literary texts were also key sources for playwrights, who sometimes followed their sources very closely when they made their adaptations. It is difficult to trace the path of oral traditions like folktales or popular ballads. However, when stories are recorded in either print or manuscript form, it becomes easier to identify their role in the transmission of narratives and cultural knowledge. We therefore gain additional insight into early modern theater when we focus on these shared texts that served as foundation for new dramas. By examining patterns and peculiarities, it is possible to see the movement of literary and dramatic texts between cultures inspired by Biblical accounts (The Testament of Mary), one was a dramatized biography of a public figure (Lucky Guy), and only the last was an original story (The Assembled Parties). Of the four musicals nominated for best musical, two were based on films (Bring It On: The Musical, A Christmas Story: The Musical), one on a children’s book (Matilda: The Musical), and the last “inspired by a true story” (Kinky Boots). In contemporary theater, the majority of new plays are based on or derived from pre-existing stories and pre-existing texts. Many narrative devices, such as the bed trick and disguised courtships, which were common in European folk takes, were also popular material for plays on the early modern stage. Written texts and oral tradition are not opposing forces. Rather, they function as co-producers and transmitters of cultural knowledge. For folk tales and songs are often recorded in textual form, and textual narratives and ballads are spread and popularized by word of mouth. However, it is much more difficult to trace the transmission of oral materials than texts.
and the construction of an international dramatic repertoire that cannot be said to belong solely to one nation.

Indeed, a significant portion, if not the majority, of plays written in early modern France, England, and Spain were either adapted from foreign works or were themselves adapted for foreign readers and audiences. The true number is difficult to determine because so many plays have been lost. Yet, it has been estimated by H.C. Lancaster that between 1640 and 1648, fully half of the plays written and performed in France were derived from Spanish models.¹⁹ For example, Antoine Le Métel d’Ouville (1590-1656) penned ten comedies, two of which are based upon Italian models, and the remainder upon Spanish plays, principally those of Lope and Calderón. Nor is this an isolated trend; of the nine full-length plays written by French playwright Paul Scarron (1610-1660) between 1645 and his death, all but one are based on early modern Spanish sources, particularly those by Fransisco Rojas Zorilla and Calderón.²⁰ The plays of d’Ouville and Scarron were further adapted by French playwrights as well as English ones. Indeed, English playwrights appear to have been as fond of adapting French plays as French poets had been of Spanish plays. Of thirty-four surviving plays and entertainments by Molière, at least twenty-four were reworked in whole or in part into new plays by Restoration poets between

---


²⁰ Scarron produced relatively close adaptations of the Spanish plays he employed, often retaining the Spanish setting and slightly “Frenchifying” the names of characters while remaining faithful to the plot and pacing.
1660 and 1700, some of them multiple times. The vast majority of these adaptations appeared on stage. The great profusion of extra-national source material used in the construction of early modern plays—plays that we tend to associate with a distinct national tradition—runs counter to our ideas about theater and national identity in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century. In the preceding chapter we observed some of the shared political and cultural forces that created interrelated centers of theatrical practices throughout the continent. When we examine early modern theater in the light of its dramatic content, the lines between the practices of the various theater capitals of Western Europe become further blurred.

**Dramatic Sources and Inspirations**

While it remains clear that early modern drama was culturally mobile, teasing out the transnational patterns inherent in early modern theatrical activity can be a tricky task. Although common narratives and theatrical tropes existing across borders can be useful in comparative examinations, they frequently cannot communicate patterns of theatrical exchange and inspiration. Most do not possess a clear provenance. For example, plays as linguistically and geographically diverse as *La Gelosa Isabella Comedia a commedia dell’arte* piece recorded by Flaminio Scala in 1611, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (1602), Calderón’s *La vida es sueño* (1635), and Pierre Corneille’s *Clitandre* (1630) all feature female characters who assume male disguises. Yet this plot devise is so commonly used in early modern European theater and varies so fundamentally from play to play that it would be impossible to observe patterns of transmission and reception. None of the writers above bothered to record the inspiration for their

---

21 English playwrights who borrowed from Molière include Thomas Shadwell, John Dryden, William Wycherley, Aphra Behn, and John Caryll.

22 For more on cross-dressing in the early modern world, and France in particular, see: Joseph Harris, *Hidden Agendas: Cross-Dressing in 17th-Century France* (Tübingen: Narr, 2005).
use of this devise. By itself, female-male cross-dressing does not indicate how or why theatrical inspiration circulated in the early modern era, nor do a host of other common dramatic devices.\footnote{Other examples of common tropes in early modern drama include: servants masquerading as their masters/mistresses, forbidden romances, lovers communicating through letters, persons down on their luck to whom wealth is suddenly and fortuitously restored, and farcical attempts to hide lovers from spouses.}

Biblical stories, too, exert a broad influence on early modern drama because religious ideas certainly influenced dialog, character and plot in an important way across geo-political borders. Many such inclusions were unconsciously performed and simply reflected contemporary speech patterns and other basic cultural assumptions. However, when it comes to early modern theater, many instances of literary influence reflect the conscious manipulation of source into product. Though many of Pierre Corneille’s plays were inspired by classical drama (Sophocles’ \textit{Oedipus} and Seneca’s \textit{Medea}), history (such as the stories of Pompey and Attila the Hun), and legend (\textit{El Cid}, the Golden Fleece), we can trace the path of the French playwright’s inspiration because he frequently mentions the sources that he used in the writing of his drama.\footnote{These details are often divulged in the “Avertissement”s that precedes Corneille’s plays. In the 1648 edition of \textit{Le Cid}, Corneille even quotes from his source: “the story presented by D. Guillen de Castro, who put this famous event on the stage before I did.” (“Voilà ce qu’a prêté l’histoire à D. Guillen de Castro, qui a mis ce fameux événement sur le théâtre avant moi.”) Pierre Corneille and Milorad R. Margitic, \textit{Le Cid Edition Critique}. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989), 129.}

Though seeking accord with pre-existing texts Corneille also fits these well-known stories specifically to French audiences living in the reign of Louis XIV. In similar ways, various cultural texts had an influence upon early modern drama that was both deliberate and traceable, and thus provide a clearer picture of the ways in which playwrights drew upon various sources and incorporated select elements of them into new dramatic works.

Deciphering the movement of theatrical practices and ideas requires either relying on the attributions of authors and performers or examining larger narrative and structural elements as
“theatergrams.” When a playwright declares that he has based his play upon another work, as Thomas Shadwell and the Corneille brothers tend to do, we can often be reasonably confident that this was the case. In other cases, there exists an unmistakable similarity between two works that cannot reasonably be attributed to chance, signifying that one of the works must have derived from the other. Dates of composition can reveal which was the borrower and which the borrowed. However, there is often no guarantee that one work was another’s direct predecessor: multiple versions of the same story can exist and thereby obscure the link between the inspiration and the derivative work. For example, so many versions of the “Romeo and Juliet” story exist that despite multiple scholarly attempts it remains difficult to determine precisely which one(s) influenced the creations of Shakespeare’s play: was it the original Italian short story, one of a number of French translations, one of the English versions derived from them (including a late-sixteenth century staged version) or several of the above?

Suffice it to say that when indicators of provenance exist, the line between source(s) and adaptation is often anything but clear-cut. Many instances of borrowing are best guesses by scholars rather than a proven lineage, and the problem is compounded when an author draws

---

25 Shadwell’s The Miser, is based on Molière’s play, and he readily admits this: “The Foundation of this Play I took from one of Moliere’s called L’Avare; but that having too few persons, and too little action for the English Theater. I added to both so much, that I may call more than half of this Play my own: and I think I may say without vanity, that Moliere’s part of it has not suffer’d in my hands, nor did I ever know a French Comedy made use of by the worst of our Poets, that was not better’d by ‘em.” (Thomas Shadwell, “Reader,” The Miser, (London), 1672.

26 Of course, playwrights were also prone to misconceptions and mistakes. Many French (and English) playwrights, including Pierre Corneille when he wrote Le Menteur, thought they were reading and adapting plays by Lope de Vega when they were really works by other authors that had been published under Lope’s name. On other occasions playwrights seem to have assumed that a given work of Spanish theater was Lope’s simply because he was the most famous Spanish poet they knew.

from multiple works in the creation of a new one. Doubtless, many instances of inspiration have also occurred more or less unnoticed by early modern and contemporary viewers and readers—even the playwrights themselves. Therefore, it cannot be claimed that a reliance on play texts is a foolproof method for tracing early modern dramatic inspiration, but they are often the best sources available. Because the circulation and translation of texts played a profound role in the dramatic vitality of the early modern stage, it is fascinating to take note of what texts, stories, genres, and narrative characteristics were most central to this process.

In this great exchange of text and enthusiastic consumption of foreign literatures, several genres of texts proved to be the most compelling and accessible and therefore the most frequently transformed into new dramatic works at different times and in different places. Early modern playwrights in various theater capitals continuously borrowed from a transnational pool of texts that included classical writings, short stories, pastorals, and more.

**Non-Dramatic Texts as Sources**

During the early modern period, all of Western Europe was drawn to a common classical heritage, and Greek and Roman drama proved especially appealing. The rediscovery of Greek and Roman culture that is often referred to as the Renaissance was generated by the translation and dissemination of ancient Greek and Latin texts. Ancient poetry and prose, history, philosophy, and science were all read with enthusiasm. However, the classical stories most likely to inspire theatrical adaptation included classical mythologies, epics, and ancient plays. Indeed, by the mid-eighteenth century, the use and reuse of classical stories in the repertoire of all the Western European theaters led Voltaire to comment that “Oedipus, Electra…belong to the

---

28 For example, John Dryden’s *An Evening’s Love* appears to draw upon *Le dépit amoureux* and *Les Precieuses ridicules* by Molière as well as Thomas Corneille’s *Le feint astrologue*, (which in turn draws upon Calderón’s *El astrólogo fingido*).
Spanish, to the English and to us [the French] as to the Greeks.”

The stories of figures such as Psyche, Hercules, and various classical historical figures appeared frequently on the early modern stages. Plautus, Terence, Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca were a handful of the most frequently adapted authors of the ancient world. Classical stories used by dramatists might be borrowed from their original texts, from translations, or from intermediary adaptions in the form of early modern stories, plays, and poems. Katherine Phillips, who probably had no Latin, accessed the story of Horace through the Horace of Pierre Corneille, rather than the Livy that Corneille took as the basis for his play. In writing his Oedipus, John Dryden apparently borrowed from not only the original by Sophocles, but also from later versions by Seneca and Pierre Corneille.

In addition to classical sources, early modern playwrights were also inspired by Italian and Spanish stories. Italian writers had pillaged material from each other from medieval times, but beginning in the fifteenth century translations and adaptations from Boccaccio, his imitators, and other Italians, increasingly became available in other lands. Several prose translations of

---

29 Voltaire, Oeuvres de Mr. de Voltaire, Tome 4, 298-299.
30 The most famous seventeenth century adaptation of the Psyche story was the French tragedy-ballet Psyché, a collaborative work by Molière, Pierre Corneille, Philippe, Quinault, and composer Jean-Baptiste Lully. It was a machine spectacle with singing and dancing produced at the Tuileries Palace in 1671. This version inspired an English adaptation by Thomas Shadwell. The French stage witnessed at least six plays featuring different episodes of the Hercules (Hercule) legend between 1589 and 1681.
31 Adaptations of Euripides’ Elektra and Iphigenia at Aulis and Sophocles’ Oedipus and Antigone made numerous appearances on the French stage and inspired derivative pieces. Works derived from Plautus include Shakespeare’s Comedy of Errors, Molière’s Amphitрион (thereafter adapted by John Dryden) and Jean Rotrou’s Les Menechmes, among others. None of Lope’s surviving plays borrow overtly from the narratives of classical drama. Indeed the playwright claimed to have “taken Terence and Plautus from my study” in order to focus on writing for popular audiences of his day.
32 John Dryden, “Preface,” John Dryden and Nathanial Lee, Oedipus a Tragedy, as It Is Acted at His Royal Highness, the Duke’s Theatre (London, 1679).
Italian tales came out in late sixteenth century England. They evidently proved popular among playwrights, for “the stories of Bandello and other Italian writers especially were translated by Painter, and finished plots for the playwrights of Elizabeth’s reign”, including Shakespeare (All’s Well That Ends Well) and John Webster (The Duchess of Malfi). They remained popular sources for plays after the Restoration, and a number appear translated in John Dryden’s Fables Ancient and Modern (1700). Nor were France and Spain immune to the charms of Italian novelle, and many translations from the Italian stories were published in those lands, from the fourteenth century onward. Lope de Vega wrote at least eight plays inspired by tales in Boccaccio’s Decameron and Bandello’s Histoires tragiques, and French dramatists continued to access them through the translations of François Belleforest and Jean de La Fontaine for centuries to come. Italian influence remained important theater throughout the early modern era, but began to wane in the eighteenth century as French culture gained in influence across Europe.

Other influential texts came from Spain. Indeed short stories (novellas) like those that Cervantes penned (often inspired by Italian literary styles) became popular in France very soon after their Spanish publication. Within a few decades, they had become the foundation of plays

---

35 Lope’s Boccaccio plays include El anuzelo de Fenisa and La boda entre dos maridos. Cesare Segre, Semiótica filológica: texto y modelos culturales (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1990), 93-94.
in France, Italy, and England. French dramatists such as Alexandre Hardy drew upon these
works in the construction of new plays, and so too, eventually, did English playwrights.37 Several
of Shakespeare’s plays bear evidence of this exchange, even though it was likely that he
encountered Spanish sources through French or Italian intermediary texts.38 Writing in the late
seventeenth century, English critic Gerald Langbaine finds that Shakespeare’s contemporaries
Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher had borrowed in large measure from those same “Spanish
Novels: witness The Chances, The Spanish Curate, Rule a Wife and have a Wife, The little
French Lawyer, and so many others of them as compose the greatest part of their Volume in
Folio.”39 These Spanish novellas continued to influence popular theater through the seventeenth
century. English playwright John Dryden was not always the kindest or least biased critic of
French-language theater, but he speaks truly when he asserts that in the 1660s “Most of their new
Playes are like some of ours, deriv’d from the Spanish Novells.”40

Nor were novellas the only popular Spanish source for new drama in other lands.41 Other
monumental works, including the epic story of the Cid, Cervantes’s famous novel El Ingenioso
Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha, and the Celestina of Fernando de Rojas all proved enduring
sources for plays written and performed throughout Europe for centuries. They further illustrate
the pervasiveness of literary exchange and its role in the development of drama. The origins of

37 Hume, 145. Such French plays include Hardy’s La Force du Sang and de Scudery’s L’Amant
Liberal.
38 Stuart Gillespie, Shakespeare’s Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare Sources (New York:
Continuum, 2004).
39 Gerard Langbaine, An Account of the English Dramatick Poets: Or, Some Observations and
Remarks on the Lives and Writings, of All Those That Have Publish’d Either Comedies,
Tragedies, Tragi-Comedies, Pastorals, Masques, Interludes, Farces, Or Opera’s in the English
41 Many of the most popular Spanish documents translated for English consumption were
accounts of sea voyages, exploration, trade routes, and the new world. Hume, 196.
such works and their subsequent travels and reshapings also suggest that no piece of literature is ever solely the product of one person or one nation. For example, a multitude of plays, English plays in particular, were also inspired by one or more episodes from *Don Quixote*, including George Wilkins’s *The Miseries of Infant Marriage* (1607) and Middleton’s *Your Five Gallants* (1607), Ben Johnson’s *The Silent Woman* and *The Alchemist* (1609 and 1610), Fletcher’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1611). Later plays also borrow from the tale.

The Spanish story of the *Cid* was itself initially inspired by French *chansons de geste*, the heroic, adventuresome poetry both recited by wandering musicians and composed by noble *trouvères* across medieval France. Well known examples include the *Chanson du Roland* and *Gormond et Isembart*, both recorded in the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries, and thereafter spread across Europe. However, by the fifteenth century the genre of the chivalrous romance had ceased to be popular in countries such as France and England. Spain retained its enthusiasm for the literary form, and the story continued to be passed along in both text and oral forms and elaborated as it went. When the *Cid* story once again piqued international interest in the late sixteenth century, (particularly in the aftermath of Pierre Corneille’s adaptation) the story’s French roots had been entirely forgotten, both in Spain and abroad. Thus, to the Spanish, the story was a nationalist piece pitting a Spanish savior against foreign intruders, and to the rest of the Europe the concepts of chivalry, honor, and duty explored in the tale appeared to be thoroughly and unmistakably Spanish. These tropes continued to be associated with Spanish culture and Spanish literary works for the rest of the early modern period. Originally penned at

---

44 Eventually, these themes became less directly associated with Spanish culture and more associated with Romantic literature.
the close of the fifteenth century, the story of a bawdy brothel keeper, *Celestina*, became immensely popular not only in Spain but all over Europe.\(^{45}\)

Pastoral romances were another genre that captured the imagination of seventeenth century England and France, largely because of Spanish contributions to the genre in addition to Italian ones.\(^{46}\) Though Italian in origin, these romantic tales of shepherds, shepherdesses, nymphs, and other mythological beings frolicking in a bucolic landscape were popularized by Spanish and Portuguese authors as well.\(^{47}\) Both the Italian and Spanish varieties were also inspiration for a large number of plays.\(^{48}\) These are only a few of the most prevalent genres from which early modern authors constructed their dramas. Other sources included various works of history and cultural myth, ancient and more recent, domestic and foreign.

**Stage to Page and Back Again**

Between the 1570s and the late 1610s, the earliest years of permanent popular theaters in Europe, there was already extensive borrowing by dramatists from the literature of other European countries. This exchange continued throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, but the borrowing patterns changed over time in several ways. To begin with, there is a shift away from using older classical and medieval literatures and a general move toward adapting newer works and foreign ones. Furthermore, while most of the

\(^{45}\) Hume 126.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 120.


\(^{48}\) Pastoral images and their romantic stories, proved enduringly popular in European art culture through the nineteenth century, as witnessed by the proliferation of ballets, operas, historical romances, decorative arts, and many other mediums to employ pastoral themes.
source material worked into plays prior to the 1620s was itself non-dramatic, the seventeenth century soon saw a hefty component of its drama—if not the majority—derive from other plays, and foreign plays in particular. As formal theatrical activity became more and more a part of ordinary life in early modern Europe, and more plays became available in print, there was a drastic increase in the exchange and reading of these play texts, and dramatists were more and more inclined to make use of them in their own dramatic writing.

Of all the foreign plays that were used to inspire domestic adaptations, Spanish plays appear to have been the most prized. Lancaster writes that in the 1620s:

Spanish literature begins to assume special importance [in France]. Before this [French playwright Alexandre] Hardy had based several plays on Spanish tales, the Diana had influenced a few plays and there had been a few references to Don Quixote, but no play had been based directly on a Spanish play…

The first documented case of an adaptation of a Spanish play into a French one was performed by Jean de Rotrou, who drew upon Lope de Vega’s Sortija del Olido. While Rotrou adapted from the Spanish throughout his career, he was also heavily indebted to Italian and Latin plays. Just as Spanish novelas achieved fame and influence beginning in the early seventeenth century, Spanish drama rose to international notice in the 1620s and was increasingly adapted by the French, English, Italians, Germans, and others.

However, “the direct influence of Spanish drama upon France was greater than upon England.” Earlier in the seventeenth century the limited Spanish influence in England was largely due to the popularity of Italian story collections, which continued to serve as a major source for the English theater much later than elsewhere. Later in the century it became

49 Lancaster, 282.
50 Ibid., 362.
51 Ibid., 310.
52 Hume, 266.
commonplace for English playwrights (and hence their audiences) to access Spanish drama through French intermediaries such as Molière and the Corneille brothers. Nevertheless, a handful of English plays did borrow directly from Spanish and Italian plays, although they never outnumbered borrowings of French plays.

As might be suspected given extensive Spanish interest in Italian literature during the late sixteenth century, some “Spanish” plays, though by no means all, were actually taken largely from Italian dramas. In the sixteenth century Spaniard Bartolomé de Torres Naharro, a longtime resident of Italy, adapted Italian comedies into Spanish that were eventually performed both in Spanish Naples and in Spain itself. His plays had five jornadas (days or acts), mirroring the Italian tradition of five acts rather than the Spanish convention of three. Whether or not they were actually Spanish in narrative origin, Spanish-style plays were popular throughout the continent. By the late seventeenth century Italy, ironically, borrowed frequently (if less consistently) from Spanish plays. Writing in the 1730s, Italian-born actor and Paris performer Luigi Riccioboni noted that “[f]inally the taste for Spanish drama, which has great merit, grew in Italy to the heights of extravagance; these types of dramatic poems are without number in Italy…”

Considering the prevalence of theatrical exchange, it quickly becomes clear that studies structured around the assumption of national or linguistic divisions between various theater traditions cannot tell the whole story. If Spanish-derived drama became established and desirable in France, England, or Italy, then this adapted drama was culturally both a Spanish and a

53 Ibid.
54 For example, Samuel Tukes An Adventure of Five House is one of a handful of English plays that draw directly from Spanish source material.
55 McKendrick, 26-27.
56 Hume 249-250.
57 Luigi Riccoboni, Réflexions Historiques et Critiques Sur Les Differens Théâtres de L’Europe (Amsterdam, 1740), 58-59.
domestic national product in the recipient country. However, despite the overwhelming evidence about the pervasiveness of cross-cultural and translingual theatrical exchange, scholars persist in treating the ongoing trade in dramatic material like a curiosity rather than a systemic and commonplace feature of the era.

**Reconstructing Networks of Early Modern Dramatic Exchange**

Illustrating the patterns of dramatic exchange within England, Spain, and France between the 1580s and 1700s remains a fairly complex task, chiefly because records of dramatic writing and theatrical performances in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are very incomplete. So it is often not possible to know when specific plays were performed or for how many performances. Nor is it always possible to trace the extent to which one play draws upon another. A great many play texts from the period have been lost. As a result, there is a need to rely on a diverse collection of textual source materials, including printed and manuscript play scripts (with any attached authorial and editorial matter), published pamphlets and treatises, diaries, bookseller’s records, and early modern periodicals to supplement fragmentary theater records—not to mention the wealth of relevant secondary sources. These materials exist in a number of different languages. Therefore, the scope of the project is daunting.

![Figure 3.1: Dramatic borrowing by language.](image)
Digital tools can help to make sense of the vast amount of information and draw conclusions. Network visualization can provide a useful picture of historical phenomena, because it allows us to more easily see the transmission patterns and the primary personalities that facilitated it. The charts above (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) were created by plotting the origin, adaptation, authorship, and publication dates of more than three hundred early modern plays in order to examine their movement and the linkages between them. There are inevitably gaps, shortcoming, and room for error, but by working with a large data set, we can assess some of the prevailing trends.
Here are some of the patterns of drama-to-drama exchange that these visualizations suggest. First of all, they confirm the prevalence of early modern dramatic exchange, particularly in the seventeenth century. They also verify that the principal borrowers were England, (which borrowed primarily from French language drama) France (which drew most often upon Spanish language drama but also from the Italian), and Italy (which borrowed from both France and Spain). Overall, the dramatic material most widely borrowed was Spanish in origin. As critic Luigi Riccoboni put it, “The Spanish...have supplied all the Poets in Europe.” By contrast, Spanish dramatists were much less likely to adapt from foreign plays, especially after 1600. Yet, while Spanish plays often served as source material, French language drama appears to be more accessible to the wider European community. Where French playwrights adapt Spanish plays, it is often the French versions that become the most celebrated internationally. This would seem to confirm the observation of dramatist Pierre Corneille, who, in a 1663 preface to his plays, acknowledges that his plays and the French language in general have been disseminated all over Europe “principalement vers le Nord” so that few countries are unfamiliar with it. Corneille’s concern with this international audience inspired him to employ alternate spellings to make his writing more accessible to non-French speakers who may struggle with French pronunciation.

---

58 Luigi Riccoboni, Relfaxions Historiques et Criticques Sur Les Differens Théâtres de L’Europe (Amsterdam, 1740), 75. “ce sont les Espagnols au contraire qui ont fourni à tous les Poëtes de l’Europe”

59 Within seventeenth century Spain, focusing on the long and powerful legacy of Spanish literature and drama was much more important than assessing the products that other lands might have produced. This is why, to a very large extent, foreign plays were not translated or adapted into Spanish productions. When borrowing occurred it was surreptitious. Which is why we find evidence of dozens of French and English productions that draw on Spanish drama, but almost nothing illustrating the opposite.

These networks also reveal that there is a great deal of borrowing through intermediary translations. Many French and Italian playwrights, including Scarron, d’Ouville, Rotrou, Quinault, Thomas Corneille, Rotrou, and Cicognini borrow directly from the Spanish, but the English do not perform much direct borrowing from Spain. Instead they perform much indirect borrowing via French drama. Molière and Thomas Corneille in particular served as conduits for the transmission of Spanish narratives into the English plays of John Dryden, Thomas Shadwell, and Edwards Ravenscroft, among others. Though the primary focus here has been on international and translingual borrowing, much dramatic transfer occurred through intermediary adaptations within a single language. For example, many of the plays by Calderón that entered the wider European dramatic sphere were first adapted from plays of his countryman and predecessor, Tirso de Molina. Though Lope de Vega and his plays became renowned abroad, they were also adapted within Spain by Agustín Moreto, and occasionally borrowed in other lands in that derivation. Scarron’s adaptations of Spanish plays were used by poets like Boisrobert and Thomas Corneille in their own writing. Shakespeare and Fletcher were reused by other English poets after the Restoration.

It may come as a surprise to English speakers, with their love of Shakespeare and English language drama, that English theater was much less influential internationally than that of Spain, France or Italy. By contrast, the English were very eager consumers of theatrical material from abroad, which often proved much more popular in England than English writers’ original plots. Dramatists in continental Europe appeared uninterested in borrowing from English plays, even though there were certainly signs that the well educated and well traveled were familiar with the names (if not the poetry) of certain English playwrights.⁶¹ This is further indication that many of

⁶¹ As we will see in the next chapter, continental critics were at least vaguely aware of English theater practices and of the existence of Johnson and Shakespeare.
our contemporary assumptions do not match the historical reality. English plays, including Shakespeare’s, were not internationally popular until the mid-eighteenth century. Outside of England, they only appear to be admired in Germany and the Low Countries.

**International Dramatic Borrowing: How and Why?**

Data collection and analysis can provide a larger picture of transnational early modern dramatic transfers. However, it takes some extra work to figure out precisely how and why all of this sharing and exchange took place. There is not one simple explanation. Rather the international flow of dramatic materials occurred for larger cultural reasons as well as by unique personal choice. Europe already possessed an extensive legacy of borrowing, appropriation, and reuse. Authors have always found it useful to base their works on some kind of popular source material, for well-loved tales are sure to draw an appreciative audience. Poets had become accustomed to borrowing from their countrymen and the poets of the classical past long before appropriating foreign books and plays for the domestic stage became all the rage. In an early modern Europe increasingly focused on capitalism and commodity exchange, it was only financially prudent to take useful dramatic inspiration from wherever it could be found. Trade, travel, and, publication opened up a wealth of new source material to the playwright-adaptor, and it seemed only natural to incorporate these influences into the dramatic repertoire. But

---

62 “[T]his exchange [between England and Spain] was largely one-sided, because Spain had the cultural capital England sought” a fact that “fails to satisfy the entrenched relative standing of the disciplines in our own time.” Fuchs, 95-96. The same reasoning explains why the French were disinclined to borrow from Spanish plays.


64 Though early modern Europe was rife with warfare, trade continued to blossom. Combat primarily occurred away from the urban theater centers, allowing them to grow in prestige and complexity. Though almost no direct trade occurred between England and the lands ruled by
borrowing would not have occurred on such a large scale had the foreign-inspired theatrical product not proved uniquely desirable.

One compelling reason for drawing upon foreign sources was their often-immense popularity, and the resulting potential for profit. Across Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a very real interest in foreign dramatic activity, often explicitly because it was foreign. There is always a mystique attached to the unfamiliar and the exotic, and this surely played a part in setting the whole enterprise into motion. This interest in difference applied not only to the theater. Foreign fashions, music, and personalities fascinated Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even as hostilities persisted between nations. This impulse to experience, own, or even embody, the strange and unusual surely encouraged the international trade in published plays and other foreign works of literature just as it begat a desire for Indian fabrics, Chinese porcelain, African wood, and American tobacco. At times it also encouraged the depiction of exotic figures—Turks, Africans, Indigenous American, and more—on European stages.

However, foreignness has two sides. On the one hand it is attractive because of its rarity and mystery. On the other hand, it has the potential to be dangerous: a threat capable of imperiling the cultural identity and ideological stability of those who embrace it. Early modern theater, we shall see, continually searched for this balance: how much desirable exoticism could be allowed in before it became a dangerous and contaminating force? The answer to this

Spain between the 1580s and the 1600s, other nations traded with both and transported goods between the two lands. Illegal trade was also a factor. At the same time war and diplomacy scattered people about the continent, which facilitated the movement of dramatic works, even between nations that were hostile toward each other. Later, many Spanish and French plays were encountered by Englishmen who fled to the continent (and the Netherlands in particular) during the English Civil War.
question was answered differently in different locations and in different times. However, in
general, literary and dramatic works that originated elsewhere on the European continent were
seen by fellow Europeans to possess a largely positive, or at least, innocuous, foreignness. The
rest of Europe was foreign, but not too foreign—though (as we shall see in the next chapter) this
did not preclude many from arguing that their own national tradition was by far the best. The
perceived safeness of the foreign elements from other European lands, combined with a general
similarity of theatrical styles, formats, plots, themes, and personalities, eased this transition.
Thus, playwrights adapted literary and dramatic sources that were almost exclusively European,
even though their adaptations might later be exported overseas.65 Europe remained oblivious to
Asian, Middle Eastern, or African texts and performance.

On the whole, foreign theater was familiarly European, even as it provided a hint of the
exotic that proved inherently interesting. As Luigi Riccoboni suggests, there was a curiosity that
compelled the early moderns to investigate other lands, for “[i]f the French, who are naturally
curious, shall endeavor to make themselves Masters of the Manners, the Customs, and the Form
of Foreign Theatres, can we imagine that their Neighbors will be backward in searching for the
same Piece of Knowledge?”66 The Duke of Buckingham paints the English as similarly innately

65 However, Spanish plays made their way to the Americas, where they formed part of the
culture of the Spanish colonial system. Through Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza, in particular,
Spanish theater had a transatlantic (if not especially transcultural) dimension. Alcarón was born
in New Spain (today’s Mexico) in the 1580s to a family with ties to the Spanish nobility.
Educated primarily in Salamanca, he wrote most of his plays in Spain and they contain
practically no reflection of his experiences in the Americas. For some interesting notes on early
modern English plays performed in Africa, see: Richmond Barbour, “The East India Compan
Journal of Anthony Marlowe, 1607-1608,” Huntington Library Quarterly 71, no. 2 (June 2008):
255–301.
66 “si les François, naturellement curieux de ce qui leur est inconnu, s’empressent à favor les
usages, manières & la forme des Théâtre qui leur sont étrangers; les autres Peuples, à leur tour,
imitative: “being naturally prone to Imitate the *French* in their Fashions, Manners, and Customs, let them be never so Vitious, Fantastick, or Ridiculous [sic].” Interest in other cultures—even imitation—was considered an inevitable compulsion.

Because similarities existed to mitigate the disruptive potential of foreign dramatic influences, the distance between European theater capitals and styles lent foreign theater a certain prestige. Despite the growing accessibility of foreign texts, plays from abroad remained—or at least felt like—something of a luxury experience. Theater, especially theater from other lands, opened to people sights, speeches, and circumstances that they would really only experience were they wealthy enough to travel, or at least well educated enough to read other languages fluently. Imported commodities, plays included, often have a higher cultural (and even monetary) value than those associated with the homeland, simply because of the challenge of procurement. Attendance at the playhouse was an expense, but a less prohibitive one than travel. Going to see a play that derived from, and hence embodied, the foreign make the larger world available at cheaper price. As Kristen L. Hoganson suggests in *Consumers’ Imperium*, entertainment with foreign dimensions can be “way to prove sophistication and cosmopolitanism…” These concepts of theater as an experience of the extra-national world will be further explored in chapter 5.

---


68 Kristin L Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium the Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 150. Though Hoganson writes about late nineteenth and early twentieth century America many of her discoveries about the social meaning of foreign goods are also true of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.
While international dramatic exchange reveals a keen general interest in the foreign-yet-not-too-foreign, it also reflects observable historical events and patterns. The expansion of borrowing over time and the types of sources most frequently utilized coincide with the development of printing and public performance in Europe. Early in the development of early modern theater, source material was primarily limited to non-dramatic material, for it was almost impossible to borrow from contemporary plays unless travelers carried them across the continent in manuscript or observed their performance firsthand in other lands. Borrowing directly from play texts was challenging before plays were sold in print form and obtaining them could be expensive. Julie Stone Peters explains that “the output of printed drama between 1480 and 1630 was small…the publication of even successful plays had simply not become a regular institution.”69 Sixteenth century companies guarded their play scripts jealously, fearing that other troupes would steal the material. So, at first some of the only plays readily available for examination were those of ancient authors like Sophocles and Terence or those written by others in the same country. As a result, sixteenth century playwrights were more apt to borrow from their countrymen, from classical literature, or from non-dramatic foreign works.

Yet, even before contemporary foreign plays were readily available in other nations, popular theater was tinged with foreign associations. The strongest and most internationally identifiable contemporary popular theatrical tradition in the early sixteenth century belonged to the Italians. Their roaming troops carried not only the theatrical practice of commedia dell’arte but the mental association between things Italian and things theatrical to cities across Europe. Thus, even when dramatic material was unavailable, Italy, both in its ancient and early modern

incarnations, was therefore a very powerful source and inspiration for early modern playwrights in Spain, England, and France at the end of the sixteenth century, simply by virtue of its availability and recognizable presence. This is one reason why Italianate sources such as ancient histories, ancient plays, early modern Italian short stories, and the improvised dramas of itinerant Italian players were such important source material for Shakespeare, Johnson, and Tirso de Molina, who number among the first wave of early modern dramatic poets writing for popular audiences.

Beginning in the early seventeenth century we have observed a shift away from the reliance on Italianate sources throughout Europe, to the more frequent borrowing of sources with a (presumed) Spanish origin. Perhaps one reason was the peculiar relationship between Spain and the ideas of foreignness espoused by other European countries. To countries such as England and France, and even parts of Italy, Spain was one of the most foreign of European locales. On the Iberian Peninsula, Spain was the edge of Europe in more than just geography. It was also a bridge between Europe and Africa and the Mediterranean world. This was evident both in the existence of the Strait of Gibraltar—which marked the south eastern end of the European world—and in the fact that Spanish land had been not merely influenced but actually controlled for many centuries by Muslim Moros from northern Africa. This relationship left, even in the aftermath of the Reconquista, a deep cultural stamp upon the Spanish, and one that the rest of Europe recognized. As a result, Spain represented to other Western European lands the foreign in a way no other European country did. It was as exotic as one could get, while still remaining within the bounds of civilized, Christian Europe.

In the late sixteenth century, Spain was a extensive importer of foreign literatures, particularly the Italian novelle mentioned above. Thus, in the preface to his Novellas Exemplares (1613), Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra expresses his pride at being the foremost Castilian
author during an era when most popular literature in Spain is of foreign origin.  However by the early seventeenth century, the cultural trends were swinging back in the other direction, and Spain was rapidly transformed into the source (rather than the recipient) of much European literature. This shift reflects attitudes and events both in Spain and abroad. First, Spanish tastes changed. By the late sixteenth century, Spain was becoming more insular and less willing to import literature from elsewhere. As Spain’s political power began to wane and its interactions with foreign visitors began to grow, it felt both militarily and culturally threatened. Just as Spanish authorities demanded a land free of foreign influences—like the moriscos expelled in 1609—they demanded literature that was culturally Spanish. However Italian stories, now considered “Spanish” by dint of their long residence in Spanish culture, continued to be cherished and adapted into new material. The second change was a growing European appreciation and clamoring for Spanish (and Spanish style) literary and dramatic pieces.

In the late sixteenth century, despite ongoing war between England and Spain, English familiarity with and appreciation for Spanish drama continued to increase. As the same time,

---

70 Hume, 149.
71 Colin Pendrill suggest that in the seventeenth century, Spain was “weaker compared to other states in Europe, but this was rather more to do with their rise rather than Spain’s decline.” Colin Pendrill, Spain 1474-1700: The Triumphs and Tribulations of Empire (Oxford: Heinemann, 2002), 279.
72 As travel to Spain from other parts of Europe increased during the seventeenth century, favorable impressions of Spanish culture developed abroad while the Spanish were increasingly uncomfortable with the outside world.
73 Even before 1604, when there was minimal Spanish influence on the English stage, the English encountered Spanish dramatic materials through the Netherlands. “Por la alianza Inglaterra y Holanda, que había estado muchos años bajo el dominio español, los ingleses tenían la oportunidad de leer obras de teatro en español y quizá de verlas representadas en Amsterdam.” John Loftis, “La comedia española en la Inglaterra del siglo XVII,” La Comedia Española Y El Teatro Europeo Del Siglo XVII, Colección Támesis. Serie A, Monografías 164 (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY, USA: Tamesis, 1999), 103. Conflict between the two nations inspired greater study of Spanish culture and the Spanish nation. Loftis, “La comedia
the changing political climate rendering Spain an ever more appealing fountain of source materials. In the fifteenth century, Spain had been one of the most powerful nations on earth and had intimidated Europe with its powerful military might, its naval strength, and its far-reaching presence. However, the end of the sixteenth century brought a slow end to perceived Spanish dominance of the global order. Over the course of the seventeenth century, even as theatrical life continued to flourish in Spain, the nation began to weaken militarily, politically, and economically. When the Dutch gained independence, much Spanish manpower was diverted to the Americas. Less concerned that Spain might overrun the rest of the continent (or the globe), the rest of Europe looked to Spain for stories and styles, which were no longer deemed a cultural threat. In the early seventeenth century as England and Spain once again began to operate on friendly terms, England developed a deeper regard for Spanish theater, literature, and fashion. Soon, the English, and the French as well, became more willing to view the Spanish not only as political allies, but also as cultural models in many respects. The French, feeling their newly won dominance of Western Europe, found Spain intriguing rather than threatening. Spanish Queens Anne of Austria and Catherine of Braganza wielded influence at the French and English courts, inspiring a fashionable Hispanophilia, and a greater awareness of Spanish arts and literature. Cervantes, with his widely appealing novel *Don Quixote* and a number of shorter fiction pieces, aided the fad for Spanish literature.

---

74 Although the 1588 defeat of the Spanish armada has often been understood as a turning point in Spain’s dominance, the actual decline of the Spanish military and political systems occurred in the seventeenth century and was a much more gradual process. However, by the end of the sixteenth century, England and France were gaining influence, so that Spain’s stature was concurrently diminished.
These years witnessed a temporary English fascination with Spanish objects, clothing and ornamental styles, language, and literature. Spanish courtiers frequented the English court and both they and others translated a multitude of Spanish works into the English language. However, these fads lost much of their foothold when the engagement fell through due to governmental pressures.  

Italianate sources remained the most popular foreign literature in England in the early seventeenth century, but increasingly French plays were borrowed as well. Yet, however powerful the lure of Italian and French culture, the movement of Spanish elements into English theater did not stop entirely. If anything, the frequency with which Spanish drama entered England heightened. But increasingly Spanish drama began to first pass through intermediary French sources. By the end of the seventeenth century the English fad for Spanish culture was replaced by the rising popularity of all things French. However, the popularity of French culture was embraced ambivalently by many. Even though English playwright Thomas Shadwell adapted Molière’s *Le Avere (The Miser)* for the English stage, he complained in the prologue that France, “The Universal Monarchy for Cloaths,” dominated European fashion, both sartorially and theatrically.  

He found the English fascination with French culture troubling, for Englishmen apparently thought anything that came from France, no matter how foolish, was desirable:

> our good natur’d Nation thinks it fit,  
> To count *French* Toys, good Wares;  
> *French* nonsence, wit.  

By the 1620s, the French too were experiencing their own brand of Hispanophilia. In 1615, French King Louis XIII had been wed to Anne of Austria (another Spanish Infanta).

---

75 Hume, 245.  
76 Shadwell, “Prologue,” *The Miser.*  
Thereafter, Spanish culture became fashionable at the French court and in popular culture.\footnote{Hume 282.} As a result, new French plays were frequently adapted from Spanish originals, which then made their way into England.\footnote{Ibid., 297-298.} As Hume writes, “It is impossible to trace every play from the Restoration to the Age of Anne to distinct Spanish sources, but it is not too much to say that hardly one of them is free from signs of Spanish inspiration”, largely because of intermediary borrowings.\footnote{Ibid., 297.} It is unclear how much of this the English populace realized, although many playwrights were certainly aware that the French plays they adapted more and more frequently were previously borrowed from Spain. The French continued to feel Italian influence on their dramatic works, but in a less regular and less extensive manner than Spanish influence. Riccoboni noted in the early seventeenth century that “the source of the French poets’ imitations was Spain, which for a century had been the sole model for French theater: Corneille and Moliere have found excellent ideas for tragedies and comedies.”\footnote{“la source des imitations des Poëtes François étoit l’Espagnol, qui pendant un siècle a été le seul modèle du Théâtre en France: Corneille & Moliere y ont trouvé des idées excellentes de Tragédies & de Comédies.” Riccoboni, Réflexions Historiques, 120.} Italian works occasionally inspired French adaptations,\footnote{As in the case of the numerous adaptations of Tasso’s \textit{Aminta}, of which there were at least 8 French adaptions between the 1580s and the 1730s. Charles de Fieux de Mouhy, \textit{Tablettes Dramatiques: Contenant L’abrégé de L’histoire Du Théâtre Français, L’établissement Des Théâtres À Paris, Un Dictionnaire Des Pièces et L’abrégé de L’histoire Des Auteurs et Des Acteurs} (Paris: Chez Sebastien Jorry, 1752), 14-15.} but Spanish sources remained the default.

Spanish dramatists, by contrast, felt less need to borrow from other cultures. When borrowing, Spanish authors appear to have borrowed primarily from each other, or from Italian sources. For much of the early modern period, large segments of Italy were governed by the Spanish, and thus seemed less foreign that most other countries did. Spain had a long history of
contact with foreign cultures, but as Spain’s international influence waned throughout the late sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, fears about the prevalence of foreign influence within the Spanish nation grew. Soon, the importation of foreign books into Spain was strictly regulated. Spanish authors probably did not have access to foreign plays or other works to the same extent that other nations accessed Spanish works. Many desired to keep out foreign influence in order to assert a pure Spanish national identity. Although Spanish theater, especially in its early years, depended heavily on Italian theater and adapted many plays out of that material, as the years progressed there was an increased desire among playwrights and patrons to suppress this influence and to rely on themes, plots, styles, and characters that by now did seem fully Spanish. The Spanish theater needed to suit Spain. There was no need to import theater from elsewhere and no desire to have Spanish culture contaminated by other elements. Of course, this did not stop Spanish playwrights from borrowing (or stealing) from each other with great frequency.

As a result of these cultural trends, the Spanish were dramatic exporters rather than importers in the seventeenth century. However, these trends began to reverse in the early

---

83 In the centuries since antiquity the Spanish have a long history of powerful cross-cultural encounters that have resulted in outlying groups being gradually either submerged into the larger society or driven out of it. The early medieval Goths are an example of the former group and the eight-century Muslim Moors an example of the later, but many others also existed. In reality these cultural shifts played out over the course of hundred of years, but in the lenses of history they are collapsed and present a much more compelling narrative of Spanish cultural (and sometimes military conquest). This narrative, featuring a Spain with a legacy of either overcoming or dispelling its cultural rivals, had been well developed by the time of the Reconquista and would play a pivotal role in shaping the early modern Spanish nation and its theatrical engagement.

eighteenth century, when political and economic instability took Spanish theater into a decline. Spain became increasingly enamored of French culture, and began to borrow trends, including theater, back. Hume comments, “When the king and court dressed in French garb and read French books, it is not to be wondered at that Spanish literature, which once more began to raise its drooping head, looked across the Pyrenees for the inspiration which was to give it fresh life.”

Italian writers, ever keen to follow the larger fashions of the day, also looked to France for its theatrical inspiration in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, once they recognized that the French were so dependent upon Spanish theater, they began to adapt from what appeared to them the original source (Spanish plays themselves) rather than from French intermediaries. Often, such adaptations from the French and Spanish took operatic form.

We can see some of the compelling reasons why France and Italy borrowed from Spain, and England borrowed from all three. But why was English theater, or indeed, English literature as a whole, not a sought-after source for the plays of other countries? While critics and dramatists sometimes discuss the reasons for intercultural borrowing, they rarely mention their reasons for not doing so. However, there are several possible reasons, many of them interrelated. Isabelle Pantin considers that, “the great obstacle to the penetration of foreign markets by

---

85 Hume, 301.
86 “Además, habían empezado a apoderarse de su público los éxitos de Lope y sus seguidores, llevados a la Nápoles virreinal a principios del siglo XVII (hacia 1620) y desde allí a las cortes de los embajadores en Roma, Florencia, Mantua, Milán y Venecia.”(2) La Comedia Española y El Teatro Europeo del Siglo XVII Sullivan, et al ed. D’Antuono: La comedia española en la Italia del siglo XVII: La Commedia dell’arte Italian adaptations of Spanish plays include: Giancinto Andrea Cignini’s operas Il maggior monstro del mondo and La Vita è un sogno (from Calderón’s El mayor monstruo del mundo and La Vida es sueño, respectively).
English books was their prohibitive cost of production.\textsuperscript{87} English works were simply more expensive to obtain than those on the continent. Furthermore, among the countries of Europe, England was widely seen as one of the most backward, certainly of all the prominent drama-producing nations. Thus, although England possessed a long history of theatrical practice, and a few English plays traveled abroad in text and performance, almost no adaptations from English theater were made.\textsuperscript{88} As Spanish and French culture became broadly popular in the seventeenth century, English culture simply did not. The French and Spanish retained their old enmities for England, attitudes that were not altered by England’s growing love of things Spanish and French. And because the English were renowned—and perhaps sneered at—for adopting foreign fashions, perhaps other cultures simply saw them as not having a true culture of their own. Perhaps even more importantly, England was also a Protestant country, and therefore an undesirable influence upon the leading Catholic powers of the continent. In lands such as Spain, France, and Italy where the Catholic Church continued to wield enormous power, literature and drama of English origin was constantly suspected of heretical content and might be carefully regulated or even banned entirely. Furthermore, England’s growing political and military power over the period in question was unsettling. In summation, to borrow from the English oeuvre was to invite cultural, political, and religious invasion, a fear made more unsettling by the realities of sixteenth and seventeenth century political and religious warfare.

\textsuperscript{87} Isabelle Pantin, “The role of translations in European scientific exchanges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” Peter Burke and R. Po-Chia Hsia, eds., \textit{Cultural Translation in Early Modern Europe} (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 176.

\textsuperscript{88} English comedians performed Shakespeare in Germany in the early seventeenth century, but a meager few copies of Shakespeare’s works made their way to the continent before the late seventeenth century. One of these volumes was housed in the French royal library during the reign of Louis XIV. John Pemble, \textit{Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France} (London; New York: Hambledon and London, 2005), xiii-xiv.
In the seventeenth century, there were also fewer English plays available for borrowing than there were Spanish, French, and Italian plays. In 1642 the Puritan Commonwealth that had deposed Charles I shut all the theaters and banned public performances. This acted as a major deterrent to the creation of new dramatic works, even as playwrights such as William Davenant continued to work, publish, and even stage performances “in a Country, where the Stage and Learning flourish’d.” Even when public theatrical activity resumed in England in 1660, it remained noticeably indebted to foreign theaters. Thus, during the years when France and Italy began to borrow more and more heavily from Spain, England appeared to have relatively little to offer in the realm of drama.

The subject and style of English theater also discouraged foreign adaptation. While all countries had some form of dramatic censorship, things that appeared on the English stage would often be considered too coarse and immoral abroad. This was less a matter of religious concern over the importation of Protestant heresies into Catholic nations than a matter of divergent tastes and moral outlook. In France, theater, as dictated by Cardinal Richelieu and the Academié, was intended to be a civilized and elevating experience free from savagery or the celebration of vices. Spanish theater was also strictly censored by both civil and religious authorities. Certainly, the English were renowned for showing stage violence and brutality to a level not acceptable elsewhere, and the bawdy was tolerated to a degree not found in other lands. Rapin suggested that the English enthusiasm for tragedy was due to “the spirit of their nation, which is pleased by

---

90 In a 1662 sermon, minster John Wall declared that “in France the Theatres are less licentious than ours, and yet the corruption of manner is there as great, if you only except our drinking, which, as I shall prove anon, can never proceed from any encouragement of the Stage.” Wall, 20.
atrocious things.”91 This colored foreign views of the English stage as potentially contaminating and thus unfit for adaptation when compared with “the Decorum of Foreign Theatres.”92

Furthermore, when early seventeenth-century the theater critics and playwrights of early modern Europe began to spell out the “rules” of classical drama (discussed in detail in the next chapter) and judge contemporary pieces by those standards, English plays again failed to measure up. They did not conform to the ideas described by the French and supported in the works of literary practitioners and critics across Europe. For all of these reasons, the rest of Europe found England dramatically lacking. As a result, the authors and plays that are revered so highly in contemporary Anglophone culture had very little impact upon the larger European theater scene in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.93

**Playwrights and the Adaptation Process**

While there were compelling cultural reasons for borrowing dramatic material, both from one’s own countrymen and from foreigners, in every case there existed individual decisions and elements of personal choice. Indeed, we must also look closely at the playwrights—and by extension the patrons—who actively transformed one work into another in order to better comprehend the larger phenomenon. It helps to view early modern playwrights as nodes in the theatrical network who essentially enact the transmission of materials by making one country’s play available to another country’s audience. As Dryden suggests, translations and adaptations were in large part “the Caprice of some Writers” and reflected independent creative decisions.94

---

91 “par l’esprit de leur nation qui se plaist aux choses atroces…” Rapin Réflexions sur la poétique (1675), 201.
92 Buckingham, ix.
93 It was not until the mid-eighteenth century that Shakespeare would be translated and performed on the French stage.
94 Riccoboni, 136.
But why did many authors make such heavy use of foreign drama in constructing their own? They were, of course, aware of the popularity of foreign theater in their own lands, but other factors also influenced their dramatic activity and gave them agency in the process of dramatic exchange. Looking at the profile of typical and atypical playwrights of the period provides a window into the personal experiences that helped shape international phenomena. Furthermore, by treating these playwrights as people who made discreet choices within a larger system of cultural pressures, we can begin to see them as people with historical agency rather than unapproachable transcendent geniuses with unearthly skill. We can then appreciate them as ordinary men acting within historical contingency rather than as “great” ones operating outside of normal events. Labeling early modern playwrights as geniuses or the owners of transcendent inspiration makes them resistant to historical analysis, for it suggests that they exist apart from and uncorrupted by the ordinary and assessable forces that govern human lives. When we treat these people as exceptional and transform them into ahistorical figures then we necessarily rob their works of true cultural significance and risk imposing on them our own interpretations and desires. In doing so, we lose sight of historical perspective and mistakenly assume the inevitability of our own cultural standards.

**Experience and Ability**

Early modern playwrights, particularly those who participated in significant international exchanges, were individuals whose social station, education, and cultural location gave him—or, occasionally, her—the tools and abilities to function in that line of work. In the earliest years of early modern theater, playwriting was primarily the work of amateurs who provided occasional
material for local festivals, religious feasts, court celebrations, or student productions. Popular sources for dramatics included religious tradition and classical literature and mythology, since oral folk culture frequently prefigures textual literary culture. Contemporary foreign textual material was only rarely used, but when it did emerge it could be found most the universities, where students occasionally performed plays adapted from imported literature, especially Italian sources.

The establishment of the public playhouses transformed playwriting into a paying profession that began among actors but increasingly drew upon the talents of other, mostly well-educated men. The most influential playwrights of the early modern period were often extremely well read; however, they were often not of the traditional scholarly set. Though scholars and members of the nobility continued to produce many dramatic translations, adaptations, and original plays for publication or university performance, they often eschewed the vulgarity and popular appeal of the public stages, which continued to be associated with disreputable sorts: actors, prostitutes, thieves, and scoundrels. Similarly, there were some actors who also found continued success as dramatic poets, but for the most part they were similarly prodigious in their literary knowledge. On the continent—France and Spain in particular—the majority of the era’s famed playwrights were educated in Jesuit grammar schools. The Jesuits, with their interest in dramatic performance and classical learning, encouraged students to study and perform plays, even to write their own. Education in the classical principles of dramatic poetry was, in

95 Before the late sixteenth century only a small segment of dramatic material was recorded. Itinerant professional actors gathered their own materials, but they rarely wrote out their scripts and relied heavily on improvisation. Of course, this does not mean that international exchanges of dramatic materials were not occurring, for translations and transmissions were performed by actors and actresses of the commedia dell’arte even if the results were not transcribed. 96 Shakespeare and Molière were both actors as well as playwrights, and their works show a deep and consistent engagement with literatures both classical and early modern.
particular, a staple of Jesuit education, and a large number of prominent early modern playwrights were also schooled by the Society of Jesus, including Lope, Calderon, Molière, the brothers Corneille, Voltaire, and Goldoni. According to one biographer’s tale, Thomas Corneille wrote his first play while he was a youngster at a Jesuit school, and even then his play was a success. It was doubtless as a youthful student of the Jesuit school in Madrid that Lope de Vega became acquainted with Horace and Aristotle (or at least of their Italian commentators) whom he mentions in his *Nueva arte de hacer comedias* (1609). After leaving Jesuit grammar schools, the average playwright typically studied at university, though many did not ultimately take degrees. England, though it did not have Jesuit schools, did produce playwrights with a similar educational background. Ben Johnson, for example, is reputed to have studied “first at a Private-School, in St. Martin’s Church, then plac’d at Westminster, under the famous Mr. Cambden…afterward he was sent to Saint John’s Colledge [sic] in Cambridge; from thence he remov’d to Oxford, and was enter’d of Christ-Church Colledge…”

We have seen how even in the late sixteenth century, Shakespeare’s lack of formal schooling was a rarity for a poet. Into the

---

99 Though the biography of Lope penned by Montalbán says he took a degree at the university in Alcalá, in his *La Dorotea* (1632), which is widely regarded as autobiographical, Lope suggests that he left without a degree in order to pursue a love affair. However Lope’s entire early life is impossible to substantiate. Juan Perez de Montalban, *Fama Posthuma a La Vida Y Muerte Del Doctor Frey Lope Felix de Vega Carpio Y Elogios Panegiricos a La Inmortalidad de Su Nombre* (Madrid: Imprenta del Reyno, 1636), 1-3.
100 Langbaine, *An Account…*, 282.
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of the highly successful playwrights continued to be well, rather than modestly, educated.

Extensive education—particularly of the Jesuit variety—gave early modern playwrights not only a familiarity with classical dramatic principles, practical theatrical skills, and the ability to write well, it also provided them with language training. Familiarity with foreign languages opened up to poets a wider world of dramatic material to use as sources and inspiration. While we tend to think of early modern playwrights as having supreme skill in one language (i.e.: the “language of Shakespeare” (after 1750) or “le langue de Moliere” (beginning in the mid nineteenth century and blossoming in the 20th)) the truth was that most educated Europeans knew more than one language, often very well, and that Latin training continued to be prevalent in early modern education. In addition, students were also trained in one or more contemporary vernaculars.\textsuperscript{101} The languages they learned were those popular at the court, in trade circles, and in literary circles. From childhood, translation was one skill that they practiced diligently.

Language skill was another product of the expansion of literary culture, since foreign language reading and study materials were increasingly available. Proficiency came from study but also from social reinforcement. Those persons who could afford extended schooling (and hence extended language training) were also those who could afford to travel, and those most likely to conduct business or have appointments in foreign lands. The courts, too, were inherently international and multilingual places. Royal consorts came from foreign nations bringing whole households of attendants. Ambassadors from all the lands of Europe congregated to the courts. Early modern international politics and the frequent reorganization of geographic

\textsuperscript{101} The Jesuits realized the importance of vernacular communications, which facilitated their missionary endeavors overseas.
boundaries necessitated the learning and use of foreign languages, and the university education that shaped early modern playwrights was that afforded government officials and secretaries.\footnote{102} Increased trade with the rest of Europe and other parts of the globe made language skills essential, for tradesmen were unlikely to speak Latin, and French had yet to emerge as the prime language of international affairs on the continent. Languages like Italian, French, and Dutch—and to a lesser degree Spanish, English—were important in both political and commercial transactions. Often, students seeking foreign language mastery attended foreign universities to best attain fluency.\footnote{103}

Most of the highly successful playwrights were multi-lingual and capable of reading foreign texts in the original languages, which gave them access to the literatures, including the plays, of other countries. Many works were close translations of foreign originals. Examinations of play texts suggest that during the seventeenth century many playwrights who borrowed from contemporary foreign works and plays performed the work of translation themselves. For example, noting that playwright John Dancer adapted three of this plays from works by Pierre Corneille, Toquato Tasso, and Philippe Quinault, Gerald Langbain asserts that Dancer’s “[t]ranslations shew him well vers’d in the French, and Italian Tongue.”\footnote{104} Some playwrights do appear to have relied on translations to make their adaptations, but this appears to have been a

\footnote{102} “Spanish was often taught in France in the seventeenth century, and Dutch sometimes, at the Collège de Guyenne, for instance, perhaps on the principle that it is necessary to understand one’s enemies. German was also taught in France at this time. Burke, Languages and Communities…., 114.\footnote{103} Hilde de Ridder-Symoens, “Mobility,” A History of the University in Europe Volume II, Volume II, eds. Hilde, Rüegg, Walter De Ridder-Symoens (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1996), 416-444.\footnote{104} Langbaine, An Account…., 98.
minority. Some also consulted multiple sources, original language texts and translations, in order to produce their own version of a given story.  

Access

Many playwrights certainly had the ability to make use of foreign dramatic material, but how did they gain access to it? There is certainly some evidence of playwrights collecting plays while traveling and even seeing plays in foreign capitals. Dramatic poets were often individuals who had undertaken extensive foreign travel, which would have increased their access to languages, plays, and fashions from elsewhere. Many English playwrights were royalists who had fled the country during the commonwealth period, taking refuge in France or in the Netherlands, the latter partially under Spanish control. Thus, many English playwrights were familiar not only with the French and Spanish languages, but had potentially seen performances of French and Spanish plays abroad. Buckingham notes in his parody of the Restoration stage,


107 The provinces of the Netherlands became Spanish possessions in the first half of the sixteenth century, but economic and doctrinal differences between Catholic Spain and the Protestant Netherlands led to the latter’s resistance and rebellion in the second part of the century. In 1581, the seven provinces that comprised the northern Netherlands declared their independence from Spain and formed the United Netherlands, though it was not official recognized by Spain until 1648. The United Netherlands, though not completely free of threat from Spain, created an extensive global trading empire in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The “Spanish Netherlands” remained under Spanish control into the eighteenth century. For more on trade and culture in the United Netherlands, see: Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press : Distributed by Random House, 1988).

108 Perhaps this is one reason why we want to believe that Shakespeare’s life much have included foreign travel. It does seem to have been a commonality among most playwrights of the early
The Rehearsal that “By Travel [Dryden] had the Opportunity of observing the Decorum of Foreign Theatres; especially the French, under the Regulation of Monsieur Corneille.”

William Wycherley had spent time in France. D’Ouville had lived in Italy, Spain and other countries. English playwrights of the later seventeenth century were well traveled, but they were not the only ones with extensive knowledge of other countries. Calderón spent several years in Italy. The royalty, nobility and ambassadorial envoys brought plays and performers with them across international borders. For example, during Carnaval, the representatives of the Spanish crown in Italy would offer Spanish comedies in the Italian language for the nobility.

Because of this frequent travel it is likely that in certain cases playwrights should then borrow from what they had seen without recourse to any script. However, a poet did not necessarily need to acquire source material through travel. It is also possible that on some occasions they imitated the stories that appeared on foreign stages after hearing secondhand accounts of their plots. This sort of inspiration would be far more difficult to trace. Thomas Shadwell admits hearing about Molière’s Les Fascheux from other accounts and writing the beginning of his True Widow play using a similar plot. Shadwell did eventually acquire a copy of Molière’s French script, but he insists that he found little more to work with, and so his direct modern era. Of course, there is no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare did so, or that any of his plays derived from extensive engagement with foreign language sources.

109 Buckingham, The Second Volume..., ix.
110 Allen, 163.
111 Frederick A. De Armas, “¿Es Dama o es Torbellion?: La dama duende en Francia de D’Ouville a Hauteroche, La Comedia Española Y El Teatro Europeo Del Siglo XVII, Colección Támesis. Serie A, Monografías 164 (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY, USA: Tamesis, 1999), 89.
scene stealing was limited. Nevertheless, the textual fidelity between many plays and their foreign adaptations strongly suggests that dramatists drew directly from foreign texts when they sat down to compose. The extensive publication and trade of printed plays, which were both shipped abroad and carried by collectors and literary enthusiasts, made the reading of foreign plays a popular pastime. Devoted collectors even acquired manuscript copies of dramas. The recognition that adapted performance is largely dependent upon textual transmission of plays reconciles much of the text-versus-performance dichotomy that has troubled theatrical scholarship in recent decades. When looking at early modern theater from the perspective of an international network, the two are inseparable.

**Personal Reasons for Adaptation**

Early modern Europe witnessed groups of well-educated and well-traveled individuals who increasingly had access to printed works from abroad and the ability to read them, both in original languages and in translations. We also have, in the cases of England and France (and even Italy), domestic cultures that highly prize the cultural products of other nations. But these facts and impulses in themselves do not entirely explain why some examples of dramatic borrowing occurred and others did not. In each case, the borrowing of theatrical material from one play for inclusion in another is also the result of personal choices and the interactions of individuals. So why exactly did playwrights borrow so heavily to create their dramas? Certainly playwrights had to create material that would be popular with audiences if they aspired to financial success. If a play had a very short run, the playwright might be paid only a meager sum.

---

114 Bayes [Dryden], says in *The Rehearsal* that his first step in writing is to “take a Book in my hand” and transform its contents just enough that no one can claim he stole them. George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, *The Rehearsal* (London, 1672), 4.
If a play ran longer, or was especially pleasing to an important person, they were likely to get more financial compensation. Adapting plays that fed a nation’s curiosity for distant lands and love of foreign trends was certainly a wise choice. Thus, in many cases, playwrights simply took their material from sources that had already proved popular in other settings. If a story played well for audiences abroad, surely it would have a good chance of performing well in the poet’s native land.

In addition to the pressure to please a public, playwrights were often pressured by the demands of their patrons. Compared to many careers, writing plays could be a lucrative profession. But this did not mean that many playwrights did not find themselves often struggling for cash. Even the author of a successful drama often received little in the way of box-office returns. Therefore, in order to establish financial security, many relied on other sources of income. For members of the nobility who turned to dramatic poetry, money was less problematic, but for the majority of professional playwrights the need to make a livelihood created a system of reliance on, and cultivation of, patronage. As a result, playwrights often wrote to satisfy a benefactor, or woo a potential patron. The nobility and the royalty who sponsored theatrical activity in the various capitals of Western Europe were the same individuals who possessed international ties, acquired international goods, and traveled widely. They enjoyed the cosmopolitan nature of the theater, and even made specific requests for adaptations from foreign material.

In his dedication fronting John Dancer’s translation of Pierre Corneille’s *Nicodeme*, printer Francis Kirkman salutes Thomas, Earl of Ossory, remarking that the play had been “made English in your Honors Service, and by your Command, having already passed the Suffrage of the Stage.” Kirkman suggests that the Earl, in his status as a patron, is largely responsible for

---

115 Francis Kirkman, “To the Right Honorable Thomas, Earl of Ossory” Pierre Corneille and John Dancer, *Nicomede a Tragi-Comedy Translated out of the French of Monsieur Corneille by*
the play’s entrance into English culture. However, it is unclear whether Ossory had actually commissioned the translation itself or merely the performance after Dancer had done the work. Pierre Corneille was commissioned by the court to translate the opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* from Italian into French. However the commissioners evidently considered the Italian-style stage machinery far more interesting than Corneille’s new French text, for Corneille was only paid a fraction of the salary given to Torrelli for his work on the machine effects. Corneille also penned his *L’Oedipe* at the request of the Attorney General, apparently completing it in only two months because “French impatience made me hurry, a just eagerness to carry out the favorable orders I had received.”

Aside from the general popularity of foreign adaptations and the whims of patrons, playwrights had other incentives to produce them. For one thing, it made financial sense; playwrights usually were only paid when they produced a new play. They were therefore under pressure to churn out new material as quickly as possible. By systematically borrowing from foreign sources, a poet could save time otherwise spent in creating characters, elaborate plots, and amusing jokes. Assuming one was fluent in the original language, it could be much less arduous to translate someone else’s play than come up with a wholly original plot, especially if one did not feel the need to rigidly imitate the original in every respect. According to Riccoboni, when Italian writers created dramatic works it proved very tempting to “translate them from the

---

116 The play itself had been performed in Dublin, but the printing and distribution of the script took place in London. Corneille’s name and the fact that it was a translation from the French are both emblazoned on the title page.


French Theater rather than to compose new ones.”

He recognizes how much easier it is to produce plays with maximum appeal and limited effort when one borrows foreign dramas. Englishman Thomas Shadwell largely agreed, asserting that “[t]is not barrenness of wit or invention, that makes us [English poets] borrow from the French, but laziness, and this was the occasion of my making use of [Molière’s] L’Avare.”

Foreign adaptation could provide substantial rewards for less effort and it was unlikely anyone would complain about the practice. Using obviously foreign plays could also be more politically expedient than adapting plays from contemporary domestic events and personalities, which might prove problematic to government censors. Whether or not they were borrowing from foreign source material “[m]any [English] writers chose France, Italy, and vaguely remote countries like Bohemia as a scene for their plays because it was safer.”

A play with a history of performance in another land was presumed free from controversial criticisms of the home country. Of course, this was not always the case, and it appears that some authors chose to adapt foreign plays whose themes were distinctly applicable to domestic events and personalities. For example, as a reflection of the political corruption at the court of King James I, “some [English] dramatists and poets turn to those Italian texts that speak most eloquently on matters of double-dealing, hypocrisy, and internecine struggles for political power.”

For playwrights composing for a diverse audience, comprised of the nobility, the middle class, and whatever lower class patrons were able to make

---

119 “elles aiment mieux en traduire du Théatre François, que d’en composer de nouvelles.” Riccoboni, Réflexions Historiques..., 22.
120 Thomas Shadwell, “Preface,” The Miser, 1672.
121 John Allen, 135.
it into the playhouses, it was essential to appeal to the widest possible tastes. Using foreign plays not only seemed expedient, it also proved a successful method time and time again.

**Methods of Adaptation**

Ultimately, each example of dramatic borrowing is a unique event and technique varies from author to author and from play to play. Some playwrights produced close translations, while others preferred to put their own spin on a borrowed plot. Buckingham’s “Bayes” character, who appears in *The Rehearsal*, is portrayed as a scavenger who consults "Perseus, Moneaigne, [sic] Seneca’s Tragedies, Horace, Juvenal, Claudian, Pliny, Plutarch’s Lives, and the rest” and casually splices their wisdom together into a play that he calls his own.¹²³ For the most part, adaptation took quite a bit more effort. Some authors, Shakespeare included, did specialize in borrowing from a wide array of source material and distilling a new product from it. Other authors followed only one or two plays rather closely and frequently borrowed from them with a good deal of faithfulness. Thus, Rotrou insists that his *La Bague de L’Oubly* (printed 1635) is “a pure translation from the Spanish author de Vega”¹²⁴ Similarly, Thomas Corneille uses his close adaptation of Fernando de Rojas’ *Entre bobos anda el juego* as an excuse for why his *Dom Bertrand de Cigarral* deviated from the conventions of French playwriting: “Maybe you blame me for not closely binding myself to the strict laws of theater that require a fixed location for the stage…but remember that I walk in the footsteps of a Spaniard…”¹²⁵ Some

---

¹²³ Buckingham, *The Rehearsal*, 4-5.
¹²⁵ “Peut-être que vous me blâmerez de ne m’être pas assez étroitement attaché à ces lois sévères du théâtre qui demandent un lieu fixe pour la scène, et que vous trouverez étrange que mon premier acte se passe à Madrid, et les autres dans l’hôtellerie d’Illescas, moitié chemin de Madrid et de Tolède, mais souvenez-vous que je marche sur les pas d’un Espagnol, et que comme l’unité de lieu, et l’observation des vingt-quatre heures sont des règles que le fameux
adaptors clearly had “favorite” source authors, or at least those whom they turned to again and again. For example, Thomas Corneille borrowed often from Calderón de la Barca (who had borrowed much from Tirso de Molina), Routrou and Moreto from Lope, and Dryden and Shadwell from Molière.

**Cultural Attitudes Toward Literary and Dramatic Borrowing**

When literature was translated or adapted a blending of cultural elements often occurred. To the new audience, such works sometimes bore the distinct markers of their foreign origin. However, certain changes also had to be made to render the new product acceptable and intelligible to this new audience. This was especially true in the world of the popular theater, where plays were performed not just for the nobility and the court—cosmopolitan groups accustomed to cultural practices from abroad—but for a much more provincial population of common folk.

How did the people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understand and evaluate the international dramatic materials that they encountered in their playhouses and bookshops? Before examining early modern ideas about borrowing and authorship, we would do well to think for a moment about our own. As much as we would like to think that creativity and originality are synonymous, art and culture do not exist in a vacuum. As in the past, literature, drama, film, and other forms of media frequently rely on borrowed materials. Nevertheless, we live in a world where the “ownership” of certain stories, characters, images, or other narrative elements is often taken very seriously, even though it is not always clearly defined. In theory, the

---

governing principle of contemporary borrowing is the recognition and potentially the compensation of the author(s) responsible—assuming they are living and locatable. Even when a work enters the public domain and is no longer legally protected, it is considered poor form to borrow from it without crediting the original author. If due consideration of the original author occurs and any permissions are obtained, there is usually little or no cultural condemnation of the practice of adaptation. Indeed, it is often considered indicative of the cultural value of the original. And in this most sources are considered equally available and appropriate for borrowing. By contrast, the unsanctioned “borrowing” of materials protected under copyright law, particularly in a for-profit endeavor, is considered criminal as well as ethically objectionable. However, “borrowing” is usually sanctioned when it fully credits the original creator (citation), makes only minimal use of the original material (quotation), or is intended primarily for educational or personal consumption. Therefore the defining features of acceptable borrowing are attribution, authorization, selectivity and, in many cases, financial compensation.

However, the early modern world espoused very different, and certainly less articulated, ideas about intellectual property and the legitimacy of borrowing practices. Throughout the medieval world and into the early modern era, performances and literary texts were generally assumed to be common property. While individuals might hold ownership of physical objects—a manuscript, a published book, a collection of theatrical properties—the verbal and imaginative content of texts, stories, and dramatic performances became the property of those who gained access to them, whether or not they paid for the privilege.126 Once something had been made public through performance or publication, there were few legal or cultural edicts regulating its

126 The idea of textual ownership based on physical possession had been commonly understood during the middle ages. Mark Rose, Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9.
reproduction or reuse. In an age without copyright legislation or even very firm ideas about authorial ownership, plays were frequently borrowed (stolen), reworked, and restaged by rival playwrights or theater companies within the same city or country. Nor was there much moral outrage over this practice, except among companies whose plays had been pirated. It was a fact of life, and only rarely a legal matter. The unauthorized printing of plays was also rampant and drew the particular ire of Lope de Vega, who expressed outrage at “[s]eeing every day my plays in print, which surely it is impossible to call my own…”127 Literary thievery in newspapers, fiction, and other print genres remained a fact of life until the twentieth century, and authors had no formal protection of their creations.128

Playwrights and scavengers would publish dramas that borrowed from successful plays, or even copied them outright, without giving credit to the author. This attitude largely stems from the reality that before the sixteenth century authorship was an amorphous idea.129 Words, especially those not penned by the nobility, were frequently anonymous and, unlike physical books, did not truly belong to any one person. Plays were often similarly anonymous, and playhouse attendees might have been largely unaware of the identity of the playwright(s) whose work they saw performed. Even when acknowledged, authorial identity and creative ownership carried far less importance in those days than they do today.

127 Lope de Vega, “Prólogo,” Felix Lope de Vega Carpio, Doce Comedias de Lope de Vega, Sacadas de Sus Originales Por Él Mismo, Novena Parte (Madrid, 1617).
128 “By 1774…all the essential elements of modern Anglo-American copyright law were in place.” (Rose, 132). However, the particular strictures, cultural attitudes, and enforcement that we associate with contemporary copyright law were primarily the products of the late nineteenth century. See Lionel Bently and Brad Sherman, The Development of Modern Intellectual Property Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
129 Even today, the complexity of copyright law struggles to define authorial rights, particularly when it comes to digital materials.
In the early days, once the play (in manuscript form) was purchased by a theatrical company and out of the author’s hands, it ceased to be his property.\textsuperscript{130} It belonged to the company that paid for it, and it was the company’s job to keep the scripts secure so that theatrical scroungers would not pilfer them in either performed or published incarnations. It is impossible to determine precisely when audiences became aware of the identities of the playwrights whose plays they enjoyed, but it was not until the late sixteenth century that printed play scripts regularly included an author’s name.\textsuperscript{131} Since the plays that were performed belonged to the companies, authorship was not considered nearly so important as ownership. But even companies had a hard time obtaining legal settlement when a rival company performed an obviously pirated version of their play. Early modern printing did not require authorial permission, but beginning in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, it did necessitate the granting of a “Privilege” (“Privilegio” in Spanish) or “Patent”—permission from the government to act as the sole publisher of a given text. The state also reserved the right to censor any of the content it found to be objectionable.\textsuperscript{132} Of course, pirated scripts and competing performances existed despite these precautions, which were more concerned with protecting consumers (from poor editions and lying attributions) than authors. The most dedicated of thieves apparently went to the playhouses with pen in hand, prepared to copy down dialog. Lope de Vega bemoaned a handful of dramatic parasites that memorized passages of plays in performance in order to print knock-off scripts that they then sold for their own profit:

\textsuperscript{130} Rose, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{131} Julie Stone Peters suggests that this development represents “an after-effect of a certain kind of celebrity, not its precondition.” Stone Peters, 134.
\textsuperscript{132} For example, Spanish texts were printed with a note of “Aprovacion” (approval) declaring that the contents “do not have anything contrary to the [Christian] faith, and decent behavior…” (“no tienen cosa contra la fè, y buenas costumbres…”)

206
[T]here are men who come to my plays and see a *comedia* seventy times and, learning twenty verses from each act, go home and by these same steps write their own, and sell it with the title and name of the author but with all the nonsense and ignorance retained from the one with the felicitous memory.\(^{133}\)

Of course, even attributing a work to the original author did not mean that the author received any compensation.

Eventually, people began to acknowledge that, despite the rights of companies or individuals to own, perform, or sell a play, the author nevertheless possessed a certain moral status as the creator of the script. Despite the author not having any legal standing, it was increasingly understood that he or she had a stake in the fate of the performed or published piece, especially insofar as it impacted reputation and fame. This concern with public perception in general—and international reputation in particular—inspired some poets to oversee the publication of their plays directly. Ben Johnson in England, Alexandre Hardy in France, and Lope de Vega and Calderón in Spain all took charge of publishing “authorized” versions and collections of their play scripts, largely to combat what they felt to be corrupt versions of poor quality and potentially damaging to their reputations. In the early sixteenth century, plays were generally only printed once they were no longer being profitably performed, in order to prevent another company from staging their own version of a popular play.\(^{134}\) However, as time went on and rising sales made printed plays increasingly profitable, plays began to be printed sooner after

\(^{133}\) Felix Lope de Vega Carpio, “Prologo del Teatro a los Lectores,” *Onzena Parte de Las Comedias de Lope de Vega Carpio* (Madrid, 1618).

\(^{134}\) Lope de Vega had a number of legal (and literary) battles with the companies that had staged his plays. After having much of his work printed without permission, Lope wanted to be able to publish his own works and wrest control of the process, but the company managers argued “the printing of the comedias damaged their finances…” (“les imprimen sus comedias en daño de su hacienda…” Felix Lope de Vega Carpio, “Prólogo al Lector,” *Decimaseptima Parte de Las Comedias de Lope de Vega Carpio* (Madrid, 1622).
they were staged.\textsuperscript{135} This profitability provided additional incentive for playwrights to assert ownership over their dramas, retain personal copies, and to publish them personally.\textsuperscript{136} By a 1642 decree, English publishers were nominally required to obtain the author’s consent and to identify the author on the title page of the printed work.\textsuperscript{137} However, even greater recognition of authorial status or property rights did not prevent thefts, attempted or realized. Dramatic borrowing remained a time-honored practice—and as we shall see—resulted in a range of responses.\textsuperscript{138}

\textbf{Different Forms of Borrowing}

Just as we have different regulations (both formally imposed and culturally implied) concerning the borrowing of literary and dramatic materials, contemporary society recognizes distinct forms of borrowing that evoke differing perceptions. Today we understand there to be a considerable difference between “translation,” various forms of creative “adaptation,” and “copying/plagiarism.” And we subsequently have differing attitudes toward them: the first is pervasive yet barely appears on our cultural radar, the second is so commonplace as to be unremarkable, and the third is typically understood to be completely unacceptable. This outlook owes a great deal to our ideas about authorship and the ownership of cultural property. In the

\textsuperscript{135} Laura Rosenthal, \textit{Playwrights and Plagiarists in Early Modern England: Gender, Authorship, Literary Property} (Ithaca (N.Y.): Cornell university press, 1996), 8. In 1637, Pierre Corneille deviated from the norm by publishing \textit{Le Cid} mere months after its stage debut.\textsuperscript{136} Mark Rose refers to this as the “individualization of authorship” and suggests that “there developed a general sense that it was improper to publish an author’s text without permission.” Rose, 18.\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 22.\textsuperscript{138} While the staging of a play belonging to another company was considered a duplicitous act and in line with the dubious reputation theater people possessed, the borrowing of published material was a different matter. Because of the presumed division between the stage performance and the “public” play text, it was possible for respectable people to borrow from other plays without incurring either legal trouble or damage to reputation.
contemporary English-speaking world, we have become accustomed to reading literary translations or viewing dramatic translations and thinking little of it. Translations are so prevalent and so easily accessible that we hardly remember that they are translations. In our Anglophone-centric minds, it barely registers. We hardly notice the intermediary whose selection of word and idiom has such a profound impact on the reader’s experience. Rather, it is the “author’s” name on the title page that receives attention, and it is the author, rather than the translator, whom we praise or censure if the writing is elegant or clumsy.

Unlike a translator, the contemporary adaptor of a play, a book, or story is usually considered its “author” for purposes of critical appraisal. Presumably, this person has put enough unique creativity in the work to be considered its “author,” even if it owes much to a predecessor. Usually that predecessor, especially when he or she is well known and well regarded, is explicitly given credit for being the originator. Such is the case with many books adapted into films. As long as proper credit for the original story is given (even if only in passing), permissions obtained where needed, and copyright regulations observed, adaptors might alter as much as they like of the original material without causing any sort of public uproar. 139 Adaptation along these lines is not considered a form of thievery. Indeed, having someone purchase the rights to use your story or characters in an adaptation is considered desirable. And creative handling of familiar material is very popular among consumers.

When it comes to contemporary theater performance, translated pieces are usually firmly attributed to their original language author (witness Ibsen, Chekov, and, of course, Molière). While new plays frequently draw on pre-existing source material, the recognizable adaptation of

139 Nevertheless, fans of a given literary work are apt to harshly judge the adaptation and complain loudly when it does not meet their expectations. Authors, too, might well object to the handling of their work, but when they have sold the rights they rarely have legal recourse.
contemporary plays is infrequent. When dramatic adaptations of plays do occur they tend to draw from temporally distant plays (Shakespeare, for example) and produce fairly lose interpretations of the original. Using old material in a new way is considered innovative, so long as it does not mirror the original very closely and does something unique with it. It is only plagiarism—the unacknowledged and uncompensated use of someone else’s work—that is condemned.

In early modern Europe, with its contrasting attitudes toward authorship and artistic borrowing, there existed a more fluid boundary between translation, adaptation, and copying. Indeed, in circumstances where dramatists borrowed from foreign plays, the works they produced were very often simultaneously translations and adaptations. Furthermore, without the concepts of authorized and unauthorized borrowing, all translations and adaptations were also, in a sense, unauthorized copies. Thus, rather than conforming to our division between relatively strict translation (belonging primarily to the original creator) and freer treatments (belonging primarily to the adaptor), the early modern world was characterized by a richer continuum of borrowing that need not obey any restrictions concerning authorial identity or authority. Both a faithful translation and careful copy might omit all mention of the work on which it was based.¹⁴⁰

When it came to publishing of dramatic works, it was frequently the translator or imitator, rather than the original author, who received authorial credit. Yet, interestingly, this is not true of many non-dramatic publications, which even in translation often seek to credit—or at the very least allude to—the first author.¹⁴¹ Perhaps this speaks to the mutability, fluidity, and less elevated reputation of dramatic pieces.

¹⁴⁰ Indeed, any direct attribution of dramatic works in early modern Europe is quite rare. Playwrights like the Corneilles and Shadwell are the exception rather than the rule.
¹⁴¹ This is particularly true of translations of classical authors.
While literary “theft” of various stripes presented few legal problems or popular condemnation, it nevertheless generated concern among playwrights, critics, and cultural commentators. Although most of early modern Europe calmly accepted the unchecked borrowing from other literary and dramatic pieces, (and, indeed, would not have realized it in many cases), there were certainly individuals—especially literary contributors themselves—who found these practices problematic, both in general and in specific circumstances. In general, this apprehension stemmed from a disconnect between creative ideals and realities. While authors routinely pillaged the poetry of their predecessors and contemporaries with impunity, the ideal early modern author was not a borrower but a creator, indebted to no other man for his creation. Puttenham and Spencer both describe the ideal poet as an originator.142 The Spanish poets too, suggest, that the best works derived only from nature and the author’s invention, not adaptation. In his *Philosophia antiqua poetica* (1596) Alonso López Pinciano described how:

> the author who imitates nature is like a portraitist, and one who imitates the imitation is a simple painter. Thus, the poem that directly imitates nature and art is like a portrait and one that imitates the portrait is like a simple painting. And here one may see how much finer is the invention of the poet, and the first imitation but not the second.143

However, as we have seen, the reality of dramatic and literary production was a far cry from this

---

142 In 1589 George Puttenham had attempted to distinguish between the poet, the individual who created “both the verse and matter” of his poetry out of his own head, and the translator who relied on “foreine copie or example [sic].” Yet, he allows that the poet is an imitator, not of other mens’ verses, but of the natural world and the foibles of mankind. (George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie: Book 1* (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library, 1994), 1. http://web.archive.org/web/20101204041924/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/PutPoes.html)

143 “el autor que remeda a la naturaleza es como retratador, y el que remeda al que remedo a la naturaleza es simple pintor. Assi que el poema que immediatamente remeda a la naturaleza, y arte es como retrato, y el que remedo al retrato es como simple pintor. Y de aqui vereys de quanto mas primor es la invencion del poeta, y primera imitacion que no la segunda.” Alonso Lopez Pinciano, *Philosophia Antigua Poetica Del Doctor Alonso Lopez Pinciano, Medico Cesaro* (Madrid, 1596), 102-103.
ideal, and it was often expedient for authors to deviate from this (perhaps unattainable) model. The tension between the prestige of originality and the profitability of invention creates something of a quandary for dramatic poets. Therefore, despite a heightened interest in the concepts of translation and adaptation among early moderns, there remained ambivalence toward the persons and products involved in this process. The very act of borrowing, whatever its circumstances, might not constitute outright theft, but certainly involved a moral ambiguity. Translators and adaptors were slightly suspect in that their work was not entirely their own. Derived works lacked a creative purity that was assumed to accompany original works. Potentially, borrowing—particularly of the unacknowledged variety—could be an offence against three parties: the public, which was misled when a playwright passed off someone else’s product as his own, the original author whose work and fame had been “stolen,” and the borrower himself who had succumbed to servile imitation and laziness.

Thus, according to Hauteroche, many railed against his *La Dame invisible* “saying that his piece had already been made forty-five years ago by Monsieur d’Ouville, under the name *L’Esprit follet* and that also it was not full of the features of satire that form, they say, the beauty and excellence of theater pieces.”¹⁴⁴ Hauteroche protests that:

> It is not an extraordinary thing to see the same subject treated by different authors: we find examples among the ancients; but without searching that far, we see it every day in our theaters. *Les Sosiese* or the *Amphytryons*; the *Mithridates*, the *Comte d’Essex*, and many others are clear evidence of what I suggest.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ “en disant que cette pièce avait été faite il y a quarante-cinq ans par Monsieur d’Ouville, sous le nom de L’Esprit follet, que d’ailleurs elle n’était pas assez remplie de ces traits de satire qui font, disent-ils, la beauté et l’excellence des pièces de théâtre.” Noël Le Breton de Hauteroche, “Préface,” *La Dame Invisible* (Paris, 1685).

¹⁴⁵ “Ce n’est pas une chose extraordinaire de voir un même sujet traité par différents auteurs : on en trouve des exemples chez les Anciens ; mais, sans en aller chercher si loin, nous en voyons tous les jours sur nos théâtres. Les Sosies, ou les Amphitryon ; les Mithridate, les Comte
Despite pervasive dramatic imitation, such practice was not without its detractors and remained questionable. Popularly, such thievery reinforced ideas about the disreputable character of theater and theater personnel. But there were other considerations that made dramatic borrowing more or less problematic.

Perhaps the biggest early modern critic of borrowing all its many incarnations was the Englishman Gerald Langbaine. In his *Momus triumphans: or, the plagiaries of the English stage: expos’d in a catalogue* (1688) and his *Account of the English Dramatick Poets* (1691) Langbaine attempts to catalogue the wealth of borrowing done by English playwrights, and the sources from whence they have taken their materials. He is generally disapproving of these poets and their methods of composition, berating them especially for concealing their imitation and essentially claiming the ideas of another as their own. For this reason Langbaine has been described “the earliest proponent and champion of intellectual property rights.” However, Langbaine’s evaluative criteria are frequently vague, contradictory, and self-interested; his praises and condemnations based largely on personal preference and political affiliation. While Langbaine held extreme views on dramatic appropriation for his own time, his arguments nevertheless highlight many of the patterns of dramatic borrowing and early modern cultural attitudes toward it. Above all, he highlights the ambivalence toward borrowing that existed in European intellectual culture, and the various ways in which people tried to make sense of it. In

---

d’Essex, et plusieurs autres, sont des preuves évidentes de ce que j’ose avancer.” Hauteroche, “Préface.”

146 Most of the contents were reprinted in Langbaine’s *The Lives and Characters of the English Dramatick Poets* (1698).


213
many respects, Langbaine’s conclusions about dramatic borrowing agree with the concerns of his contemporaries, both in England and abroad.

Even in his incomplete knowledge of dramatic productions and authors, Langbaine illustrates the tremendous scope of dramatic borrowings—both domestic and foreign—that occurred in sixteenth and seventeenth century England and on the European continent. In roughly half the productions described he identifies one or multiple works to which it was indebted. While his account is certainly not free of errors, his characterization of the sheer quantity of dramatic borrowing is accurate. Yet, Langbaine asserts that the pervasiveness of literary and dramatic borrowing does not render it unproblematic. Borrowing to any degree is potentially suspicious and deceitful, but neither is borrowing uniformly contemptible. Through language and tone, Langbaine suggests that there are better and worse ways in which to engage in the practice, for some translations and adaptations are praised while others are furiously condemned as thefts. Other instances of borrowing are simply reported without judgment.

In Langbaine’s opinion there are several factors at play in the honorable or dishonorable appropriation of anothers’ work—many of them more or less subjective—that differentiate a contemptible “plagiary” from an acceptable adaptation. He suggests that the two most important characteristics of legitimate or acceptable borrowing are the quality and novelty of the finished product. Often, in Langbaine’s mind the difference between genius and plagiarism comes down to the excellence of the product, for “provided the Author shew Judgment in the heightning and working up of his Story, it matters not whether the Play be founded on History, or Romance, or whether the Story be his own, or anothers’ Invention.”148 Hauteroch appears to agree with Langbaine:

---

148 Langbaine, “The Preface,” *An Account...*
For myself, I think we should extend good will to an author who remade a subject treated by another, in a time when the greater part of those who compose tragedies and comedies do not take the trouble to follow or study the rules of this art. We have a large number of pieces made sixty years ago that are not performed because they have nothing of correctness or good taste; and because we find bad editing in some of these poorly treated subjects should we let these beauties perish? On these occasions it is necessary to consider only whether one has been successful, and not regard whether the piece is newly made or not.\textsuperscript{149}

Simply put, if your work was impressive and likeable than your borrowing was acceptable; if your play was less than satisfactory you committed a crime against art, the original author, and society. For all practical purposes, the borrowed piece ought to improve upon, or at least be as good as, the predecessor from which it draws. Thus, many of Aphra Behn’s plays are excused from censure in part because Langbaine believes that “[w]hatever she borrows she improves for the better,”\textsuperscript{150} To ruin a good play by creating a poor adaptation is less unforgivable, and he declares that the only examples of borrowing for which Behn ought to be condemned are those where the original was so good that “‘tis pity they should have been altered.”\textsuperscript{151} Of course, the determination of whether a given translation or adaptation matched or surpassed the original depended solely on the whim of the reader. While Langbaine is has strong opinions of his own, many times he concedes to public opinion, and occasionally he leaves the evaluation to the discretion of his readers (though not viewers, which suggests that the audience Langbaine has in mind is not composed of playgoers but well-educated play-readers).

Alongside this idea of borrowing legitimized by quality, is the idealization of originality. Langbaine praises Thomas Shadwell (ironically a prodigious borrower) for drawing largely from “Men’s Converse and Manners, and not from other Men’s Ideas, copied out of their publick

\textsuperscript{149} Hauteroche, “Préface,” \textit{La Dame Invisible}.
\textsuperscript{150} Langbaine, \textit{An Account…}, 18.
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid.}, 21.
Writings."\textsuperscript{152} Copying from life was admirable, but borrowing from another’s text potentially problematic, and copying outright from another play was definitely not sanctioned. Despite the fact that authors openly scoured the works of their fore-bearers for usable material, they were nevertheless expected to make their play distinct and personalized, especially in his use of words and wit. “[T]ho’ the Poet be allow’d to borrow his Foundation from other Writers,” Langbaine muses, “I presume the Language ought to be his own.”\textsuperscript{153} In this way, Langbaine reserves copious insults for John Leanard, whom he finds guilty of “re-printing another Man’s Play, under his own Name.”\textsuperscript{154} To borrow too much material from a predecessor reflected poorly on a playwright, as it indicated that the author’s “own Genius is either lazy, or very barren of Invention.”\textsuperscript{155} Similarly Pierre Corneille, usually compelled to admit every instance of borrowing, feels himself not indebted to the ancients for his Medée. “[S]o little have I translated from Seneca,” he writes, “that there is no need to set the text forward for the reader to discern what is from him or me.”\textsuperscript{156} The reverse was also true: playwrights who produced substandard work are often spared criticism if it was known or believed that their plays were entirely their own. Originality could excuse a bad play: “if they are not to be compar’d with some Dramatick Pieces of this Age, at leastwise what our Author has published is His Own, and not borrow’d from others.”\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 443.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 162.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 319.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 422.
\textsuperscript{156} “si peu de ce que j’ai traduit de Sénèque, qu’il n’est point besoin d’en mettre le texte en marge pour faire discerner au lecteur ce qui est de lui ou de moi.” Pierre Corneille, \textit{Le Theatre de P. Corneille Reveu & Corrigé Par l’Auteur}, vol. 1 (Paris, 1664), xii.
\textsuperscript{157} Langbaine, \textit{An Account...}, 379.
This interest in literary originality also competed with the early modern veneration of classical literature and the growing celebration of “great poets.”\(^{158}\) This tension emerges in the conflicted feelings expressed over the practice of translation. Translation was inherently problematic because it produced a derivative work rather than an original creation. Furthermore, since languages were understood to be representative of the cultures that used them, no translation could ever yield a product perfectly equal to the original, and any altered passage would likely “lose something in the Translation.”\(^{159}\) The transnational character of drama is central to the issue of translation. Many esteemed works of early modern poetry and prose were composed in foreign languages and needed translation in order to have the accessibility demanded by the reading populace. The practice of translation itself, however, remained less commendable than the creation of new and original work. The very large number of plays crossing national and linguistic boundaries, resulted in an ambivalent attitude towards translation. The very accessibility of foreign plays made borrowing possible, desirable, and simultaneously troubling. Of course, “translation” in the early modern context could describe a wealth of cross-linguistic borrowing: both faithful renderings and loose adaptations, attributed borrowings and unadmitted ones. Poets routinely changed a great deal of the original language and dramatic organization in their so-called “translations.”

Translation, especially the kind that accurately renders the content and meaning of the original, is difficult work but was not (and still is not) considered to require the same creativity and genius as something newly composed. Langbaine writes that “Those who translate, hope but


a Labourer’s praise, / Who well invent, contrive; deserve the Bays.”

His meaning is clear: translation is a menial task and only those writers with ingenious originality deserve to be celebrated for their creations. These sentiments toward translation had been a part of creative dialogue long before the Restoration. Thus, Owen Feltham wrote slightingly of Ben Johnson:

‘Tis known you can do well, And that you do excel, As a Translator: But when things require A Genius, and Fire, Not kindled heretofore by others pains As oft y’ave wanted Brains And Art to strike the White, As you have levell’d right.”

Even the illustrious Johnson, idealized by later poets and critics, is here described as lacking in originality and fitted primarily for the less-elevated task of appropriating dramatic material from foreign languages. Despite this tendency to devalue translations when compared to original pieces, they could also be considered works of great literary merit—even brilliance—on the part of the translator. A well crafted translation, particularly of the ancient masters, could “shew the Translator a Gentleman of Learning and Judgment” or even be place an author’s “Name in the Temple of Immortality.” Commentary on Katherine Phillips, an educated noblewoman who translated several of Pierre Corneille’s plays into English, illustrates how a translation could be a work of art in itself and given wide acclaim.

Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrey (and a lauded adaptive dramatist in his own right) writes of Philips:

You English Corneil’s Pompey with such flame, That you both raise our wonder and his fame;

---

160 Langbaine, An Account..., 49.
161 Ibid., 302.
162 Ibid., 473.
163 Ibid., 490.
If he could read it, he like us would call
The copy greater than th’ Original…
The French to learn our Language now will seek,
To heat their greatest Wit more nobly speak;
Rome too would grant, were our Tongue to her known,
Caesar speaks better in’t than in his own.\(^{164}\)

Phillips’ translation was celebrated largely because she obeyed the primary rule of acceptable early modern dramatic borrowing: she created a product as good or better than that from which she borrowed. Another critic wrote of Phillips: “[H]ere the Copier’s honour is not small, When artists doubt which is Original.”\(^ {165}\) Thus, dramatic quality creates its own kind of originality. However, there were other reasons why Phillip’s translations received such praise: her attribution to the “original” author, her fidelity to the borrowed work, her prestigious source material, and her own status as a noblewoman also made her borrowing practices--and hence her plays--more acceptable to critics than those of many of her contemporaries. Because Phillips was female, she was assumed to be more suited to the imitative work of translation rather than the creative practice of original composition.

Even without our contemporary understanding of authorial ownership, the early moderns did understand dramatic output to be tied to one’s reputation, which Langbaine called “so dear to All Men, but the very Darling of Poets.”\(^ {166}\) Those who wrote plays, even when their identity was not widely made known in the public playhouse, remained concerned with their own prestige and recognition of their own genius, particularly among the reading public. However, concern with

\(^ {164}\) “The Earl of Orrey to Mrs. Philips,” Katherine Philips, *Poems by the Most Deservedly Admired Mrs. Katherine Philips, the Matchless Orinda; to Which Is Added Monsieur Corneille’s Pompey & Horace, Tragedies; with Several Other Translations out of French* (London, 1667).
\(^ {166}\) Langbaine, *An Account...*, 444.
one’s own reputation did not automatically translate into respect for the reputation of others. In the world of early modern dramatic borrowing, source material was not always acknowledged. However, Langbaine asserts that one of the central principles of acceptable dramatic borrowing is admission that the material came from elsewhere and the crediting (or even the attempted crediting) of the original author. And over time it became more and more honorable to credit the original author. Thus, Jean de Rotrou announces in the introductory material to his *Clarice; ou L’Amour constant* that:

> I would hurt the Italian Author Sfoza Oddi if I stole from his reputation the glory of this work. I am but the translator, as I am of plays by Plautus, which this man has imitated perfectly; the inclination he had for the great Genius of Comedy has made me take it, and I thought the original so successful that imitations and copies of the other could not be found lacking.

Rotrou here highlights the importance of reputation to playwrights and desire of some poets to credit their sources. However, he also hits on several other common borrowing tropes: the lesser status of translation compared to invention and the idea that prestigious source material could aid the creation of a prestigious adaptation.

Poets who name their sources, admit their borrowing, or are apologetic about their lack of originality generally get something of a free pass from the likes of Langbaine. Thomas Shadwell is therefore deemed acceptable because he makes “in his several Prefaces” admission of “the Persons to whom he was obliged for what he borrowed.” Conversely, those who conceal their thefts, or openly deny them are contemptible, Langbaine writes of one piece: “here is a whole Play borrow’d, and yet nothing own’d by the Author; a procedure which favours of the highest Ingratitude.” It seems the ultimate crime against poetic fame and reputation is hypocrisy. Poets

---

such as John Dryden and Edward Ravenscroft receive the full brunt of Langbaine’s wrath not only because they borrow without restraint and without attribution, but also because they have the nerve to denounce other playwrights for engaging in the same practices they refuse to admit. This Langbaine considers the worst possible offense. But in the end only a few poets are denounced by Langbaine as truly egregious offenders and “plagiaries.”

But even if an author did not stoop to the level of Dryden, his selection and treatment of borrowed material was not necessarily sanctioned by Langbaine or other critical voices. The kind of source material utilized, the amount of credit given to the originator, and the reputation of the authors involved influenced whether or not an instance of borrowing was deemed more or less acceptable. In the world of early modern drama, the overarching goals of quality and originality were further complicated by the reality that there were different levels of prestige attached to the use of different materials which might or might not require attribution. To begin with, Langbaine and others suggest that some types of works were considered more available for borrowing than others. Stories from history, which generally had been treated multiple times before their dramatization and were not necessarily the product of a single authorial brain were more frequently and more casually adapted without condemnation. The authors of Greek and Roman antiquity also provided more-or-less acceptable material to the plundering early modern playwright: Rotrou remarks that “we cannot fail in imitating” Plautus.\textsuperscript{169} This was not because, as we might assume today, theft from long-dead poets was considered less offensive than from those still living, but because of the perceived high quality of classical literature and the prestige attached to imitating these authors. The assumed benefits of drawing upon ancient writings are

such that “[t]here have been few great Poets which have not proposed some Eminent Author for their Pattern.” Not only did the elevated stature of the ancient poets mean that early modern authors were more inclined to acknowledge their debts, widespread knowledge of these classical stories seems to have made attribution less necessary. Familiar stories from history, antiquity, legend, folktales and other popular oral traditions provided less problematic source material, because these tales, if not the specific language employed, were considered public property. As Dryden points out “The Ancients were never accused of being Plagiaries, for building their Tragedies on known Fables,” and in imitation of the ancients the early moderns rehashed well-loved stories with impunity. In the case of history and classical literature, fidelity to the original story (if not always the original language) was generally considered positive.

**Attitudes Toward Foreign Influence**

As we have seen, theatrical bandits and adaptors did not only borrow from the literature and practice of their home nation. Many cultural constraints on dramatic thievery only seem to have applied to the works of one’s countrymen. Works by foreign and deceased authors, unlike those of living and domestic writers, had few moral restrictions on their use. This was especially true when the original author was a foreigner writing in a foreign language. There was also little pressure to attribute anything to an original author, unless it served the borrower’s purposes. Attribution might be made in cases where it could bolster the borrower’s prestige, but borrowers were perfectly free to claim an adaptation, or even a translation, as their own creation, either overtly or by neglecting to mention a predecessor. Thus, when the ancient Greek and Roman authors were translated or adapted, their names usually remained attached to the new versions.

---

170 Langbaine, *An Account...*, 149.  
171 Ibid., 161.
The elevated reputation of classical writers allowed those who borrowed from them to appear
cultured and erudite.

There were also categories of literary and dramatic works considered less appropriate for
adaptation, and more likely to require attribution. While Langbaine allows that John Dryden has
taken “a lawful prize” in the Greek and Latin poets, he complains that the playwright “has
plunder’d the chief Italian, Spanish, and French Wits for Forage, notwithstanding his pretended
contempt of them.”

On the whole, borrowing from Greek and Latin authors was considered more acceptable than borrowing from foreign poets. Clearly, early modern foreign authors also
tended to possess less prestige than their counterparts in classical antiquity, and Langbaine finds
the corresponding dearth of authorial attribution particularly offensive in the case of more
contemporary literatures. However, many early modern authors--Cervantes, Lope de Vega,
Pierre Corneille, and Molière in particular--possessed exalted reputations of their own, and
certain borrowers were eager to provide attribution.

Borrowing openly from the best of the modern poets was something of a risk, but could yield positive results, especially if the preceding
author is given appropriate credit and the end product was well received. The more highly
acclaimed the original, the greater the expectations directed toward the copy, but the greater the
acclaim for the borrower or translator if the work was well-executed.

If foreign elements on the stage were consistently, though not inevitably, met with public
enthusiasm (except in Spain where they influence was severely muted), the act of borrowing from

\[172\] *Ibid.*, 149.

\[173\] However, this desire to associate plays with a well known author could lead to excessive
attribution. Calderón complains extensively about the plays attributed to him that he did not
write and the lying publishers who “not content with their thefts, press to add their mistakes to
mine.” Indeed, he found them to be full of typos and abridgements. Pedro Calderón de la Barca,
“Dedicadas a un amigo ausente,” *Cuarta Parte de Comedias Nuevas de Don Pedro Calderón de
La Barca, Caballero de La Orden de Santiago* (Madrid, 1672).
foreign sources was not always met with universal approval. Despite its unmistakable popularity in performance, many voices also decried the immense influence of foreign theater upon the drama of their homeland. But this concern was often expressed in vague, complex, and contradictory ways and warred with the fashionable love of the exotic. While the foreign was prized for its rarity and its mystery it could become a threatening force if became too prevalent or too influential.

To many English thinkers, late seventeenth-century France had been “Italianated, and over-run with Opera and Farce”. It was” Venom” that “cross’d the narrow Seas and Poyson’d the English Stage.” English folly, ironically, lay less in imitating the French than in borrowing Italian materials through French intermediaries. With the Restoration and the return of many English nobles from foreign exile, many felt there to be a corruption of the English stage, as evidenced by female actors and other supposed immoralities. The foreign had the ability to contaminate as well as to amuse. Even if not innately corrupting, plays from other lands were often considered problematic when they appeared to hamper native genius. Luigi Riccoboni suggests that, “[t]he Ease [with which the French Plays are translated] leads astray even those have the talent to devise plots.” Riccoboni makes it clear he is not happy about the practice—declaring that Italian poets have become merely the translator of other men’s works. According to Riccoboni and to Shadwell, it is not that Italian and English poets cannot come up with original material, but it is much easier not to do so. The defect is thus blamed on individual laziness rather than insufficient national brilliance.

175 Riccoboni, Réflexions Historiques…, 28.
176 In his (or her) dramatic art, the playwright is often expected to be a diligent laborer in addition to being an ingenious inventor of material. Accusing playwrights of laziness implied that they were craftsman rather than scholars.
indebted to another. Indeed, a debate emerged in the *Mercure du France* in 1724 over whether Calderón or Pierre Corneille was the imitator of a given plot.\footnote{Henry W. Sullivan, *Calderón in the German Lands and the Low Countries: His Reception and Influence, 1654-1980*, Cambridge Iberian and Latin American Studies New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 105.}

There was also ambivalence about the relative quality of foreign and domestic dramas. On the one hand there was usually the implicit assumption in each nation that foreign poets were simply not as good as domestic ones. At the same time, there was the temptation to celebrate foreign playwrights—if they could be used to bolster one’s own reputation. In an artistic world in which imitation was inevitable, dramatists sought to borrow from the best works penned at home and abroad. Yet, when working with foreign dramas, poets sought to not simply create a marketable product but to “improve” foreign plays as a display of cultural dominance.\footnote{The emphasis on “improving” rather than “creating” was also echoed in seventeenth century technology. Christine MacLeod remarks “Outside the Royal Society’s idealist orbit, contemplation of invention exercised few minds. Technical change…was apparently deemed either unlikely or unnecessary; in fact it was something best left to foreigners—for Englishmen to copy and improve upon. Christine MacLeod, *Inventing the Industrial Revolution: The English Patent System, 1660-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 202.} For Pierre Corneille, it was a point of pride to be adapting the best and most noble of ancient and foreign authors and stories. He therefore provides a great deal of information about sources he used: not only the names of the original works, but summary and quotations as well. So keen was he to attribute that plays to the appropriate author that when he learned the Spanish play from which he derived *Le Menteur* was not, in fact, written by Lope de Vega, he wrote an apologetic correction in the next published edition of the play.\footnote{Pierre Corneille, *Le Theatre de P. Corneille. Reveu et Corrige ’Par L’auteur*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1664), xxxiii. Often Lope’s name was put on pieces that were not his. D’Antuono, *La comedia española…La Comedia Española y El Teatro Europeo del Siglo XVII …*,7.} Whether or not an author admitted to his borrowing was a highly arbitrary matter. Certainly, they did not appear to find it strictly
necessary. Ultimately, attribution generally only occurs when it will enhance the prestige of the borrowing poet.

While the reputation of the original author could be important, the success of a borrowed play was overwhelmingly attributed to the borrowing playwright. Riccoboni notes that “Men of Genius, in translating the Spanish Plays into another Language, may easily reduce them to all the Exactness which is necessary. This we see has been done by the two Corneilies, by Moliere, and many others.” But even the best foreign author was rarely considered the equal of domestic playwrights. One critic writes that “[a]lthough…French comedies were well received by the public, the Spanish models [on which they were based] were either denied or considered very inferior.” Though the Frenchman Bertaut sought out the famed Calderón during his foreign travels “[l]ike all good Frenchmen of the Neoclassical age, Bertaut could not embrace the idea that a foreign writer could simply be a great writer.” Foreign playwrights were curiosities and personalities, but not artists or geniuses on the same level as poets back home.

**Plagiaries Past and Present**

If borrowing from foreign poets with or without acknowledgement could be problematic, borrowing from domestic playwrights without admission was especially egregious. Langbaine reports himself appalled when he discovers Dryden guilty of surreptitious borrowing not only from foreign authors, but from English ones as well. “Had [Dryden] only extended his Conquests over the French Poets,” Langbaine might have overlooked the error. But instead he is shocked to

---

181 “Aunque estas comedias francesas fueran bien recibidas por el público, los modelos españoles fueron o bien desmentidos o bien considerados muy inferiores.” Armas, “Es Dama o es Torbellion?,” 85.
182 “Como todos los buenos franceses del siglo clásico, Bertaut no lograba hacer suya la idea de que un escritor extranjero pudiera ser simplemente un gran escritor.” Alejandro Cioranescu, “Calderón y el Teatro Clásico Francés…,” 37.
find Dryden “not content with Conquests abroad, like another Julius Caesar, turning his Arms upon his own Country.”¹⁸³ To steal from one’s fellow citizen is one of the lowest borrowing behaviors. Thus, Langbaine asserts that one of his primary missions in writing An Account of the English Drammatick Poets is to rescue the reputations of the previous generation of English poets and “put a stop to [Dryden’s] Spoils upon his own Country-men”.¹⁸⁴ Ravescroft agrees, remarking in the Preface his to Titus Andronicus that it constitutes “a greater theft to rob the Dead of their Praise, than the Living of their Money.”¹⁸⁵ The reputation of an author, even a dead author, was more valuable than the monetary worth of the play.

Based in part on these attitudes and in part on his own biases, Langbaine also distinguishes between the borrowings performed by English poets of the pre-Interregnum past and those committed by his contemporaries. He recognizes that borrowing is not a recent phenomenon and that even the greats of classical antiquity and the sixteenth century were also prodigious borrowers. But while the borrowing performed by the great poets of the past is acknowledged, he also considered it far less offensive than contemporary seventeenth century “plagiaries.” On the whole, Langbaine considered past authors to be victims of unwarranted borrowing rather than perpetrators. Indeed, early in his work Langbaine professes his intention of “vindicating [the] Fame” of pre-Restoration authors such as Johnson, Shakespeare, and Fletcher, by illustrating the “Thefts” of “Modern” playwrights.¹⁸⁶ Somehow borrowings that occurred in

¹⁸³ Langbaine, An Account..., 133.
¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 133. Langbaine, as might be apparent from his commentary, was a good friend of Thomas Shadwell who was embroiled in an ongoing literary feud with John Dryden. Langbaine makes no secret that he is partial to his friend’s plays over Dryden’s. For further details, see: Thomas Shadwell, Richard L. Oden, and John Dryden, eds., Dryden and Shadwell, the Literary Controversy and Mac Flecknoe (1668-1679) (Delmar, N.Y: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977).
¹⁸⁵ Langbaine, An Account..., 464.
¹⁸⁶ Ibid., “The Preface.”

227
the past are more acceptable than borrowings in the present, and the reputations of great playwrights of the former age must be salvaged from abusive borrowing by later authors.

Langbaine bases this claim on the assertion that late seventeenth century poets borrowed with a different purpose and to a different degree than their predecessors. According to Langbaine, Johnson and his ilk merely “follow’d the Pattern of the great Men of former Ages [antiquity]” employing classical precedents and well-known tales but weaving them into high quality plays of considerable originality. By contrast, Langbaine insists that “If we now on the other side examine the proceedings of our late English Writers, we shall find them diametrically opposite in all things.” According to Langbaine, they are copying from the wrong sources, so that the public is presented “not with Sound Roman wit, as in Ben [Johnson]’s time, but with empty French Kickshaws.” Furthermore, he declares the purity of the early poets’ intentions. These “Eminent Men” of the past, he implies, respected their source material. They distilled the best of other works and made them their own, and when required they provided attribution to the original authors from whom they borrowed. Thus, Johnson “has no ways endeavor’d to conceal what he has borrows’d, as [Dryden] has generally done.” He completely ignores the dramatic thievery that occurred between the playwrights of long ago, and the mercenary motives that inspired them to pillage. Finally, Langbaine asserts that recent authors have depended much more heavily and consistently on their source material, sacrificing originality and stealing not only stories but the very scenes and dialogue. He claims that his particular foe, Dryden, like some others of his generation, has “far outdone [Ben Johnson] in thefts, proportionable to his

187 Ibid., 145.
188 Ibid., “The Preface.”
189 Ibid., “The Preface.”
190 Ibid., 148.
Writings: and therefore he is guilty of the highest Arrogance.”¹⁹¹ Therefore, contemporary playwrights he finds objectionable in the sources they steal from, the deliberate deceptiveness of their actions, and the degree to which they are dependent on other writers. At the same time, it is important to recognize that Langbaine is operating within a web of personal opinion and subjective judgments. His elevation of past poets reflects a growing idealization of the early English theater, and his stern attitudes toward the present stem in large part from his quarrels with many of his contemporaries. However he also illustrates the constructed early modern English dichotomy between the present and various pasts.

While Langbaine attempts to make a compelling case about the state of late seventeenth century drama, he undermines his arguments with inconsistency. As a result, it is difficult to take his protestations seriously. While theoretically condemning all instances of unattributed, concealed, or highly imitative borrowing, he consistently makes allowances in cases where he believes there were mitigating factors. Thus, there are several extenuating circumstances allowed authors to escape Langbaine’s condemnation. Some “plagiaries” are pronounced “excusable only on the account of the Author’s Youth.”¹⁹² Other authors are exempted because they were suffering financial hardship, or were forced to pen a play very hastily.¹⁹³ Female poets like Aphra Behn and Katherine Phillips, though few in number, are considered curiosities and generally excused from whatever crimes of plagiary they commit. Women, it seems, were considered more suited to borrowing than inventing. Borrowing poets might easily be forgiven because of “[h]ow difficult it is for Poets to find a continual Supply of new Humour.”¹⁹⁴ He

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 145.
¹⁹² Ibid., 11
¹⁹³ Ibid., 16.
¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 455.
excuses one poet on the grounds that he did “not believe that [the] Author design’d to conceal his Theft.” Indeed, Langbaine appears reluctant to censure the poets he personally admires or praise those whom he dislikes. Friends like Shadwell generally get a free pass while foes like Dryden are met with stern condemnation for their thievery. Thus, we must examine closely to find any consistent opinions regarding the practice of dramatic borrowing.

**Common Handlings of Borrowing**

Langbaine is one of the biggest denouncers of unrestrained borrowing, both in England and in Europe, but he is hardly alone in his sentiments. Indeed, among poets and critics these ideas regarding the legitimacy and illegitimacy of dramatic translation and adaptation are frequently repeated. When it came time for authors to discuss the origins of their plays, some share more than others. They respond to cultural ambivalence over dramatic borrowing either by seeking to justify the practice or conceal it altogether. Many poets who admit their appropriations frequently seek to excuse their borrowing, giving reasons why they used another poet’s ideas instead of concocting new ones, and attack rivals whom they characterize as literary thieves. Thomas Shadwell’s *The Amorous Bigottee* was largely borrowed from a Spanish source, which is readily admitted to the audience in the prologue. But he also attempts to justify this borrowing on the grounds that he has improved the original through his own originality and is more inventive than other poets who borrow from foreign sources. For:

```
On that foundation then he built, ‘tis true,
But like *Drake’s Ship*, ‘tis so repair’d ‘tis new;
Newer than his Contemporaries show,
Who all to Novels or Romances owe,
And from whose Native Springs nought e’re did flow.  
```

---

Thomas Shadwell recognizes the cultural boundary he has traversed in borrowing so much from French and Spanish plays, writing “I freely confess my Theft, and am asham’d on’t.” Nevertheless, he attempts to mitigate his complicity by evoking “the Example of some that never yet wrote a Play, without stealing most of it”\(^{197}\) He refers to Dryden, of course. When Shadwell does create an original play, he takes pains to announce his genius. Indeed, many who have not borrowed the material used in their plays boast of that fact. The Duchess of Newcastle admits pride in the fact that:

> From Plutarch’s Story, I nere took a Plot,  
> Nor from Romances, nor from Don Quixot  
> As others have for to asset their Wit  
> But I upon my own Foundation writ… \(^{198}\)

In many cases, a play’s origins are attributed not to an identified author but to a nation or linguistic tradition. By painting an image of a play as a product of “Spain” or “France,” rather than an individual, borrowing poets made their “theft” less problematic. Culture, presumably, is generally available for adaptation, while the work of an individual belongs to that individual. There are only a few poets so prestigious as to warrant being named. The idea that borrowing from another person’s work is not an inherently innocent or acceptable practice is widely repeated, even if individuals find it difficult to agree on what specific practices make borrowing acceptable. Early modern attitudes toward dramatic and literary borrowing employ a peculiar logic. The author of a well-written play could be excused for not admitting his theft, while the author of a poor adaptation without attribution was doubly at fault.

\(^{198}\) Langbaine, *An Account*..., 392.
Public Awareness of International Dramatic Exchange

We have established that a large and influential segment of the early modern dramatic repertoire of Western Europe was derived from foreign sources of both classical and early modern origin. Continual exchange of dramatic material was particularly evident in England and France. Borrowing from early modern sources occurred to a lesser degree in Italy and in Spain. I have suggested that these differences occurred because of variances in cultural attitudes and theatrical conventions in different areas. These historical conclusions are relatively straightforward, but by themselves they give us little indication of how and whether ordinary people of the era made sense of international dramatic exchange, and how it reflected and impacted their worldviews. It is one thing to observe that Spanish plays or French plays were popular, but did much did the audience know about the movement in dramatic materials occurring—so to speak—behind the scenes? How did the indisputable internationality of early modern drama impact real groups and individuals?

Many people have questioned whether or not the average theatergoer would actually have known that the play they were enjoying was an import or a link with a larger theatrical culture. It has been suggested that the audience would have been largely unaware of the dramatic borrowing whose fruits they witnessed in the playhouses. After all, it is commonly believed that the name of the playwright was usually not mentioned in theatrical advertisements before the eighteenth century. The company and the actors were regarded as more important for publicity purposes. How often, then, would an audience be told that the play was actually adapted or translated from another? I would like to suggest that there was a whole spectrum of dramatic familiarity. A person might be privy to different sources of information about a theatrical performance and its literary debts depending on social station, level of education, and cultural location.
Although most people today have very little idea that many well-known plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and beyond, were the products of cultural exchange and a transnational literary canon, those who lived, read, and attended performances during those years were often acutely aware of the origins of early modern dramas. But how did people get this information? It is not all that different than the many ways in which we in the twenty-first century obtain information about performances in our own times. Occasionally we might be familiar with the work upon which a play is based. For example, we can recognize drama based on well-known histories or books that we have read. At other times a play is a restaging or a recreation of another drama we might have seen. Publicity—which was prevalent today but seldom survives from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—can make it evident that a work comes from a certain author or theatrical tradition. Even hearsay plays a role in the amount of knowledge an audience has about the performance they witness, although most of the oral information passed among theatergoers in the early modern world has been irrevocably lost.

We can think of the early modern theatrical public divided into three groups: playwrights and critics, enthusiasts, and casual viewers. Each segment of the dramatic audience had a different experience and a different engagement with the drama as text and as performance. However, I would like to suggest that knowledge about the transnational nature of dramatic exchange often crossed social boundaries and was not limited to theater professionals and well-read devotees. The fact that international borrowing was rampant might have been well known, although noticed and understood differently by persons of differing status, education, and inclination. The nobility of Europe were often extremely conversant with foreign drama. For them the theater was both a hobby and a status symbol. They might have read them in the original language, and perhaps even seen them performed on a foreign stage. They would then easily recognize
instances of borrowing when they encountered them in either performance or in private study. In addition to having a greater and more consistent connection with the cultures of foreign countries, the royalty and nobility were in a position to be able to obtain and read scripts in several languages and to frequent regularly the theaters, at home and abroad.

Literate people too often had easy access to such information. Among the reading public, discussions of a particular drama’s inspirations would have been familiar in dedications and prefaces. Many authors freely and consistently admit their borrowing, although they don’t always provide a clear idea of the extent to which they recycled material. Samuel Pepys, that fortuitous gold mine of information about the restoration theater, is extremely well attuned to the foreign roots of the plays he sees, as well as to many of the ways in which foreign influences pervaded his homeland in the 1660s. Pepys was a devoted follower of the theater, consuming it in both live performance and published text, and we cannot reasonably assume that most people would have been quite as interested in the subject or as knowledgeable about it. However, we also need not assume that the international exchange of theatrical material would have gone completely unnoticed by those factions of the populace who were less literate or less interested. It is highly unlikely most people would have been familiar with the original stories that came from foreign lands to play out on new stages. Langbaine even suggests that the uneducated would not care anyway, for “[t]is sufficient for the vulgar Audience, that they Play is taking and divertive, without troubling their Heads whence ’tis borrowed.” Racine agreed “most of the

199 Pepys obviously knew about much of the foreign exchange in plays from his extensive reading, but this does not explain how he knew about foreign influence in plays that were still being performed at the theater. For examples, he describes “The Ladys a La Mode” as a “translation out of French by Dryden” after seeing it on stage. Samuel Pepys, The Diary of Samuel Pepys, ed. Henry Benjamin Wheatley, vol. 2, n.d., 932.

200 Langbaine, An Account..., 450.
world cares little about the intention or diligence of authors.” Despite the opinions of some scholars to the contrary, ordinary audience members would have certainly noticed many of the international exchanges and transnational trends implicit in many of the dramas they witnessed.

Even those who were not exceptionally well read likely knew, or at least guessed, that many of the plays they saw in the playhouses were of foreign origin. The English tradition of prologues before the play and epilogues afterward was often a vehicle for communicating the international origins of a piece. Prologues and epilogues are strange theatrical elements because they could vary so considerably from piece to piece and performance to performance. The earliest performances of a play were almost always sandwiched by these short poetic devices, which broke down the fourth wall between actors and audiences, and introduced or concluded the companies—and sometimes the author’s—treatment of the material. Some are boastful and hyperbolic, other self-deprecating and sycophantic. And although many poets penned the epilogues and prologues, they might also be written by members of the acting company, or by another individual altogether. Most problematically, they might change from one night to the next, and later in the run might not be included at all. Therefore the prologues and epilogues that were published with early modern English plays were not necessarily an indication of a typical performance. Sometimes the most well-known or well-received material was included in the print version. Sometimes the only surviving example might have been included. And these examples might represent only one of a number of versions used.

However, if we can assume that the prologues and the epilogues that have come down to the present are even shadowy examples of their true selves, it becomes clear that audiences who

---

heard prologues (especially) and epilogues were very frequently provided with information indicating the borrowed nature of many play plots and even texts. The prologue to Caryll’s *Sir Saloman* admits outright that the play is largely a theft and the identity of the original author, announcing that “if our Cheere/Doth hit your Palates, you must thank Molliere.” Disparaging comments about the prevalence of “The Rhyming Monsieur, and the Spanish Plot” upon English stages not just a comment on dramatic quality. They also make clear that foreign influences appeared frequently in a popularly recognizable form. Comments of this sort make no sense unless the theater-going populace knew that a great number of the performances they witnessed were derived from the theatrical offerings of France and Spain. Furthermore, we cannot and should not underestimate the power of hearsay, particularly in cultures where conversation, as a means of communication, was far more prevalent than writing. We can assume that authors spoke about their work with friends and colleagues, who in turn shared information about their well-known acquaintances.

And beyond the simple statement of a play’s origin, audiences sometimes had a fairly good idea of whether a play they saw leaned toward the foreign or the domestic. Each regional variation had certain recognizable characteristics. Often these translated into performed elements that audiences would have recognized as part of one tradition or another. While not always a sure indication, the use of a Spanish setting and Spanish names for characters (as in Routrou and the

---

Corneilles) could also be a giveaway that the original story was a Spanish one, as could the appearance of the witty servant. However, even plays with no known foreign antecedent sometimes styled themselves as foreign, or incorporated elements that were recognizably French, Spanish, or Italian. The cloak and dagger (capa y espada) style of drama was recognizably Spanish, even when diluted through a French intermediary text.

At the same time, adjustments of foreign material would necessarily have to be made to accommodate audiences in a new location. Pierre Corneille confides that his La Suite de Menteur he had to tone down the irreverent servant usually found in Spanish comedies (and derived principally from the Italian commedia tradition) and some of the romantic banter because it was displeasing to French audiences. He also altered a number of cultural references in Le Menteur, so that the characters spoke about European culture and politics rather than Spanish colonial possessions. John Dryden does not go into detail about the changes that he made in adapting Amphytrion for the English theater, only stating “that the difference of our Stage from the Roman and the French did so require it.”

Ultimately, there are a number of ways in which an audience could get a sense of the history or origin of the work that they were viewing, some more obvious and some more covert than others. We tend to ignore how much early modern people were aware of the international nature

---

204 While the character, setting, dialogue, mannerisms, costume and other stage phenomena suggested a play’s foreign origins, this might be a problematic clue because many plays were written, particularly in England and France, which depicted exotic locations and frequently stereotypical characters.


206 “Par exemple, tout ce que je fais conter à notre Menteur des guerres d’Allemagne, où il se vante d’avoir été, l’Espagnol le lui fait dire du Pérou et des Indes, dont il fait le nouveau revenu ; et ainsi de la plupart des autres incidents, qui, bien qu’ils soient imités de l’original, n’ont presque point de ressemblance avec lui pour les pensées, ni pour les termes qu’ils expriment.” Pierre Corneille, Théatre de Pierre Corneille Avec Des Commentaires, vol. 3 (1764), 356.

207 John Dryden. “The Epistle Dedicatory.” Amphytrion or the Two Sosias, 1717.
of theater, because we have been so determined to fit it into a nation-based model. Although most people today have very little idea that many well-known plays of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and beyond, were the products of cultural exchange and a transnational literary canon, those who lived, read, and attended performances during those years were often acutely aware of the origins of early modern dramas. The specifics differed from country to country, but these examples suggest that both the literati and the average theatergoer perceived theater as an experience through which they negotiated and responded to international elements. Furthermore, the people of early modern Europe saw international events through the lens of theater and vice versa. Indeed the realization of, and attitudes toward, international theatrical borrowing played a key role in the development of a textual and psychological competition between theater cultures and resulted in the rise of nationalist sentiments about theater.
CHAPTER 4
NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THEATRICAL COMPETITION

“The Nation’s weather-glass a Play-house is”
~Prologue, The Woman-Captain, Thomas Shadwell

Early modern European drama was deeply rooted in the international movement of dramas and other literary works, and awareness of this exchange shaped both scholarly and popular understandings of theater during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the combination of Renaissance learning, constant trade, and, eventually, the rise of print culture created among the intellectuals of England, France and Spain a broad familiarity with a shared literary canon featuring works both classical and contemporary. The proliferation and translation of ancient Greek and Roman writings, in particular, inspired a lively ongoing debate over the relative merits of various literary, historical, and scientific texts, past and present. Persistent comparison between authors and literary offerings fed into the budding nationalism that gripped Europe from the sixteenth century onward. Cultural groups began to define themselves by their literary heritage and saw reflected in the written word the essential differences that separated them from outsiders. Drama, in particular, served as a touchstone of cultural identity and as a proxy for the national culture in a competitive international arena.

In Western Europe, the early moderns had a meaningful, if ambivalent, relationship with their classical forbearers. On the one hand, the “ancients” represented many ideals of civilization, literature and art. On the other hand they were old, distant, and pagan. Some Renaissance theorists wanted to imitate their achievements as closely as possible, viewing them as the pinnacle of human perfection. Others sought to learn from their example but ultimately break
free of their mold and surpass their greatness.¹ Various arguments on the subject were written and published throughout the early modern period. However, the vast majority of these arguments, championing the ancients over the “moderns” and vice versa, were purely theoretical and speculative. There was little practical guidance on the best methods of imitating or rivaling classical art, science, history, or literature. Furthermore, theorists waffled between viewpoints, producing vague and mixed messages. As David Lowenthal summarizes, “Almost every humanist on occasion compared his own epoch favorably with antiquity, yet at other times disparaged moderns as dwarfs compared with ancient giants, new work as mere dregs next to classical wine.”² Yet, these competing perspectives endured into the seventeenth century when the querelle (quarrel) between proponents of “Ancient” and “Modern” output, particularly in literature and the arts, became especially heated.³

With the rise of vernacular literatures, cultural appraisers became accustomed to evaluating the literary output of their homeland by comparing it with that of classical civilization. For instance, in The Arte of English Poesie (1569), George Puttenham argued that the English language and its authors were equally suited to poetic glory as those of ancient Greek

¹ L’Abbe Jean Terisson largely took the part of the moderns in his Dissertation critique sur l’Iliade d’Homère (1715) as did William Wotten in his Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning (1694). Wotten warns against valuing something “because it is oldest, not because it is best,” but also insists that the moderns are able to attain their greatness specifically because they have borrowed so much from the ancients. William Wotten, “Preface,” Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning (London: J. Leake, 1694).
³ Timothy Steel notes that the Quarrel also “introduced a divisions between the arts and the sciences, a division which is foreign to ancient, medieval, and Renaissance discussion of the subject.” Timothy Steele, Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt against Meter (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 233-234.
and Latin. Frenchman Joachim Du Bellay asserted in his *La deffence et illustration de la langue Francoyse* (1549) that the French vernacular could become a language of beauty and profundity “though the imitation of the ancient Greek and Roman authors.” Theater, as a practice that merged literature and cultural performance, was eventually caught between old and new—between Classical emulation and contemporary invention—and in time controversy over the “correct” practice of the dramatic arts became especially contentious.

**Defining and Regulating Dramatic Literature**

Scholars had long scoured Greek and Latin literary works and treatises to uncover the conventions that governed classical poetry—including dramatic poetry. Ancient theatrical works took the form of poetic verse, and when these old plays were read anew in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they were understood primarily as poetry or as stirring oratory rather than “theater.” Classical drama appeared vastly different from the first plays publically performed in the early modern era. The meticulous verse of the ancient dramas seemed worlds away from simple—often-unscripted—prose plays mounted by itinerant players or enterprising religious confraternities. The former represented the pinnacle of ancient civilization, penned by the

---

6 Today we tend to separate drama, as a form of writing and a mode of performance, from other types of non-dramatic poetry and prose, but this distinction made little sense in the past. After all, most poetry—epic, lyric, and dramatic—was explicitly intended for performance rather than solitary reading. The practice of solitary and silent reading first developed during medieval times. See Paul Henry Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997).
7 College plays were the exception, for they imitated classical works in versification as well as subject, structure, themes, and the use of Latin.
greatest minds of the past. The latter were cobbled together by common folk, rarely profound, and often disreputable. It is therefore understandable that early modern writers classified ancient drama with Homeric epics and Horacian odes, rather than with the *commedia dell’arte*, Eastertide passion plays, and the early plays staged in the public theater. Nearly all that remained of classical theater (and ancient poetic literature in general) was written poetry and textual commentary. Because little evidence of performance conventions survived, ancient drama was evaluated primarily as a form of written poetry, and only secondarily as a mode of live performance.

Of course, the early modern age did not merely mark a passive return to the reading of ancient drama and the study of ancient dramatic commentary. It also witnessed heated discussions on these topics. Fueled by the passion of Renaissance-era rediscovery and the rise of print culture, new editions, translations, and discussions of classical dramatic theory circulated widely by the late sixteenth century, becoming accessible to a variety of interested parties. These theatrical treatises tended to fall into two categories: arguments condemning or defending the theater on moral grounds or descriptions of ancient dramatic arts. Italian scholars who read ancient scholarship produced translations and put forward their own claims. Their arguments were widely read and discussed, even among those who had never encountered the original texts of ancient plays or criticism from the classical age. Critical texts on theatrical topics soon became the heart of a transnational discussion about the true purpose of ancient theater and the ideal dramatic conventions. From its Italian roots, the fad for producing dramatic histories and

---

8 The former category includes Georges de Scudéry’s *Apologia del teatro* (1639), the latter category includes works such as Gerardus Joannes Vossius’ *Poeticae institutions* (1647).
theoretical treatises very quickly migrated to France. By the 1570s, even though most French theater companies and performance venues would not be permanently established for several decades to come, French authors engaged in intense literary debates with each other and with ancient and Italian neoclassical thinkers. English and Spanish literati eventually jumped into the conversation as well.¹⁰ In keeping with the understanding that drama was simply one category of poetry, the early modern authors who assessed drama often did so as part of a larger literary discussion. Inevitably, their publications recited the classical ideals of drama and interpreted them in light of their supposed effects. They also routinely disparaged modern poetry (eventually to include early modern dramatic poetry) for having departed so extensively from its prestigious antecedents, and for violating the “rules” that classical drama was supposed to have observed.

At this juncture it becomes expedient to explain what the early moderns understood to be the “laws” of ancient drama. Borrowing heavily from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*¹¹, Aristotle’s¹² *Poetics*,¹³ and several other authors from late antiquity, neoclassical theorists decided that “correct” theater needed to observe the three “unities” of place, time, and action. However, discrepancies existed in the interpretation of these rules and the severity with which they ought

---

¹¹ Horace, the first century BCE author, wrote a much examined treatise on the poetic arts which endured in European culture through numerous commentaries and was also available on its own by the sixteenth century.
¹² Aristotle, by the way, lived many centuries after the great Greek playwrights whose practices he analyzed.
¹³ Aristotle’s *Poetics* was rediscovered just before 1500 and was not widely disseminated until almost fifty years later, but it is perhaps the most frequently cited repository of classical knowledge. While the original text had been lost, many of its ideas had been preserved in Arabic and Latin works. Once Aristotle’s writings became available they were examined exhaustively by sixteenth century Italian literary scholars.
to be implemented. Unity of Place generally meant that the setting of the play ought not to occupy much more physical space than the stage itself. For example, a play where the action begins in a London residence should not subsequently shift the location to another town or another country. Ideally, there should only be one scene for the entire play, although most argued that different locations were acceptable so long as they were found within a small radius.\(^{14}\)

In addition, the amount of time over which the story took place was expected to not long exceed the duration of the actual performance (Unity of Time). It was absurd, many thought, for a tale that unfolded over the course of months or years to be played out on the stage in only a couple of hours. At the same time there was little consensus as to the limits of this regulation. Some held that any action of less than a day’s duration was acceptable. Others were adamant that a two-hour play should have no more than a two-hour story. Finally, plays were theoretically expected to have Unity of Action: one central plot without the distraction of subplots or other insertions that did not ultimately contribute to the dramatic arc of the central story. Theorists also invented other rules, built upon the study of ancient dramas. Thus, tragedies should feature royalty while comedy should showcase common folk. According to neo-classical ideals, plays were expected to be morally uplifting, setting good examples for the audience. Observation of all these rules was supposed to increase the believability of the performance and therefore the emotional effects that it produced upon viewers. Presumably, fidelity to “correct” patterns of playmaking would strengthen the moral messages of the drama and inspire greater audience attentiveness to virtue and self-improvement.

\(^{14}\) Dryden wrote of the Unity of Place, “We neither find it in Aristotle, Horace, or any who have written of it, till in our age the French Poets first made it a Precept of the Stage.” John Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie: An Essay* (London, 1684), 13.
Ancient comedies and tragedies by dramatists such as Sophocles, Aeschylus, Seneca, and Plautus were held up as pinnacles of human achievement, but at first they had only a limited impact upon early modern theater. Until the late sixteenth century, any discussion of classical drama was a purely academic exercise. No performers or playmakers outside of the universities heeded, or even knew about, these rules. Popular theater was simple, typically farcical or devotional, and largely extemporaneous. There was little room for comparison with the great ancients. Professional performers needed to be flexible and innovative, requirements that often precluded the creation of scripts and the recording of lines. Similarly, local amateur performing ensembles, such as those that banded together for festivals and holy days, might perform only once or twice. Under such circumstances it was hardly worth investing heavily in brilliant poetry or in dialogue that had been planned in advance.

Newly composed dramatic poetry became an important part of early modern European culture in the 1570s and 1580s with the establishment of permanent theaters, companies, and channels of funding. This atmosphere also gave rise to new theatrical conventions, new audiences, and a new breed of dramatist. By limiting their audiences, theater troupes could perform plays many more times before their revenue-generating potential was exhausted. As the economic structures of the playhouse made each individual play less accessible and more lucrative, there was both more money and higher demand for scripted plays—the longer, poetic, elaborate, and dramatically intense ones composed by a rising coterie of playwriting professionals. In the older tradition, inspiration for new performances had come almost exclusively from inside the acting troupe. While sixteenth and seventeenth century playwrights sometimes continued to be actors (this was, after all, how many of them got their start in the theater world) they were more often educated literary men than troupe managers and members. For this reason, authors
like Molière, who acted in most of his own plays, Alexandre Hardy, and Shakespeare, who probably took small acting roles even after embarking on a playwriting career, were increasingly anomalies. Playwriting became a distinct profession—a literary profession—and so, to the early modern mind, something more akin to what Aeschylus and Sophocles had done.

Rising playwrights, many of whom were well educated in the classical languages, were certainly influenced by the drama of the ancient past. However, despite their fascination with the stories and characters of Homer, Plautus, and Terence, working playwrights were not much interested in the dramatic theory expostulated by Horace and Aristotle. Though, as we have seen, they borrowed widely from classical epics, plays, and other ancient literary works to create attractive plays, their concern with arbitrary rules was negligible until the mid-seventeenth century.

While playwrights and their eager audiences might have been content to ignore the more esoteric qualities of classical drama, others were not. Indeed, as early modern plays began to appear more and more literary, they were keenly examined in light of older dramas and dramatic conventions and were compared with ancient models. The proliferation of printed plays, in particular, invited these comparisons. With recourse to scripts, critics could more easily judge the form and content of playhouse offerings, and compare them with other dramas both ancient and modern. The widespread publication of popular, scripted drama, spurred by seventeenth century public interest and commercial expedience, transformed plays from playhouse amusements into a part of the literary canon—the category of “literature” being itself a value judgment. As a result, early modern dramatic criticism, heavily imbued with neoclassical ideas,

\[15\] In the late sixteenth century, most of the plays printed were classical translations or those that dealt with serious and literary themes. Popular works were rarely taken to press before the 1610s. \[16\] For more on issues of canon formation and its relationship with English culture: Herbert Grabes, “Cultural Memory and the Literary Canon,” Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B
began to take on a life of its own. As neoclassical ideas appeared more in published pamphlets they began to influence expectations of dramatic writing and performance.

**Classical Rules in the Early Modern Drama**

Dramatic poets increasingly faced new roles and new pressures: they needed to address audience members who were well versed in classical drama. Furthermore, a growing literary audience who engaged with plays in a textual format supplemented the crowds who came to the playhouses for entertainment. For the first time, cultural necessity dictated that playwrights also function as literary critics. Thoroughly familiar with the ancient rules of poetic art and their literary importance by the mid-sixteenth century, playwrights were forced to negotiate between what they assumed to be ancient theatrical ideals and the needs of the present. The classical unities and other rules of dramatic poetry were all very well in theory, but playwrights wrote for a real world. Playwrights had to please the crowds and the patrons they depended upon for their livelihoods. They knew the absurdity of submitting entirely to classical models when audiences and readers were more often interested in witty jokes, topical allusions, a good love story, or an anguished death scene.

However, most dramatic poets wanted to win on both fronts, if they could, and attain scholarly approbation as well as popular acclaim. French dramatist Pierre Corneille insisted:

> as we [playwrights] fashion poems to be represented our first goal should be to please the court and people, and attract the wide world to their representations. One should, if possible, follow the rules so as to not displease the scholars, and receive universal applause, but especially win the public vote.18

---

**Notes:**

17 This familiarity, as we witnessed in the previous chapter, was the result of new educational trends and social classes from which playwrights came.

Success in the playhouse helped secure one’s finances, but critical success was a matter of pride and ensured one’s reputation, both at home and—increasingly—abroad. Thus, when they declined to employ classical dramatic theory, playwrights often took it upon themselves to justify their choices. Ultimately, the decision to conform to or depart from the rules not only defined individual plays and playwrights but reflected regional traditions and their positions in an international literary community. In order to illustrate these patterns, let us look at three popular seventeenth century playwrights who visibly participated in the negotiation between classical dramatic tradition and early modern innovation.

**Felix Lope de Vega Carpio**

Both the founding father and the foremost practitioner of Spanish language theater in the seventeenth century, Lope de Vega also had an ambivalent relationship with classical drama. Yet he used the rhetoric of the classical rules—if not necessarily the rules themselves—to help enunciate a Spanish national tradition and take part in the transnational discussion of early modern theater. When Lope was invited to speak in front of the Spanish Academy about his approach to the drama, he outlined what has often been called the *comedia nueva*—his “new style” of Spanish theater. In the opening lines of his 1609 poetic essay entitled *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias en este tiempo* (The New Art of Making Plays in this Time) he confesses that he wrote his plays “without art” (“sin el arte”)—that is, without relying upon classical conventions.19

---

Speaking in a vein of humor and mock-humility, the poet deprecates himself as the foremost violator of classical convention. But, how else—he asks his classically educated audience—was he supposed to churn out hundreds upon hundreds of plays? However, if Lope did not follow all the dictates of the ancients, (or indeed, even many of the methods that he himself prescribes in *Arte nuevo,* ) he insists that this was not due to ignorance of those conventions. On the contrary, he studied the classical rules of poetry from his youth. Rather he attributes his deviance to a need or a desire to please a popular audience. Having been exposed to crude, unsophisticated entertainments, *Arte Nuevo* asserts, viewers were in no state to appreciate grand ancient practices. Thus, Lope evidently valued his plays’ popularity over some arbitrary notion of art. Indeed, he pronounces art and popularity incompatible, for “he that now writes [plays] artistically/dies without fame and reward...” consigning himself to a lifetime of mediocrity and financial hardship. Lope, furthermore, insists that he could certainly write according to ancient practice if he wanted to do so. However the playwright must bow to public taste even if his inner scholar would rather observe the rules of Plautus and Terence and their associates.

Lope’s suggestion, then, was to seek a middle path between the classical dictates and facile entertainment. Ultimately *Arte Nuevo* advocates a cautious observation of the ancient rules but urges bending them when it seemed expedient. In this manner Lope sought to curry favor

---

20 *Ibid.*, ln 367-369. “¿qué puedo hacer si tengo escritas,/con una que he acabado esta semana,/cuatrocientas y ochenta y tres comedias?” According to Lope, he wrote well over a thousand comedias. Contemporary scholarship suggests there is evidence that he wrote at least eight hundred.  
21 *Ibid.*, ln. 17-21. “No porque yo ignorase los preceptos, gracias a Dios, que ya, tirón gramático, pasé los libros que trataban de esto antes que hubiese visto al sol diez veces discurrir desde el Aries a los Peces.”  
both with intellectuals and ordinary playgoers, building a positive reputation among groups with competing expectations. His poem makes it clear that while ancient conventions had a limited practicality in ensuring theatrical success among the masses, their rhetorical importance continued to play a key role in how plays were understood, discussed and evaluated by literary elites. Even while flouting tradition in his writing, Lope paid tribute to the ancients in his rhetoric. He even flattered the assembled Academy by comparing them favorably with the geniuses of Greece and Italy. While proven capable of writing for audiences in the corrales, he illustrates in Nuevo Arte that he also knows how to write for the learned members of the Spanish academy who appreciate a discussion of classical theatrical practice and its Spanish legacy.

But Lope’s attitude is not merely the opinion of an isolated playwright. His speech alludes to the broader defining attributes of seventeenth century Spanish drama, and illustrates the larger growth of nationalist attitudes toward the theater. In this presentation, Lope shows himself to be concerned with the peculiar dramatic expectations of his homeland. Thus, the advice that he proffers contains practical observations for crafting dramas specifically pleasing to Spanish tastes.

Pierre Corneille

One of the most documented arguments over theatrical rules with regard to an actual play was the intellectual hubbub surrounding Pierre Corneille’s Le Cid, an argument so well known that it has often been called “Le Querelle du Cid.” Le Cid premiered at Paris’s Théâter du Marais in January of 1637 to instant acclaim. Audiences adored the play’s interpretation of love, honor, and chivalry with a touch of Spanish exoticism. Corneille, only in his early thirties at the time, became an overnight sensation. Le Cid was performed before royal audiences on no less than

---

23 Ibid., In 3-4. “excederéis no sólo a las de Italia, que, envidiando a Grecia…”
three occasions, and the court proved just as enthusiastic than the town. Corneille was rewarded handsomely for his work with a government annuity. The stunning success of the play also led to its early publication. Most published plays of the time were released six months or more after their final performance. However, the printed script of *Le Cid* was printed less than three months after its debut, while there was still great demand to see it performed live. The acting company that possessed the performing rights to the play was reaping a hefty profit. By publishing earlier Corneille could get a bigger cut of *Le Cid’s* financial success while it held the public’s attention.

One result of publication was to disseminate the text of *Le Cid* widely among the French reading public in Paris and beyond. At the same time, the abrupt manner in which Corneille rushed his play into print and the confidence with which he exploited his newfound fame were distasteful to the academic literary community. Furthermore, the plays’ publication transformed it from part of the performance repertoire to part of the literary canon and rapidly brought it under critical scrutiny. And critical scrutiny was far from kind, for many of Corneille’s contemporaries were exceptionally jealous of the play’s success. Within a month of publication several pamphlets blasting *Le Cid* were printed, employing the dictates of classical theater to attack the play. They cataloged its deviations from ancient rules and accused the playwright of immorality.

---

24 Geoffrey Turnovsky and Project Muse, *The Literary Market Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 40-41. Jean Mairet chided Corneille “not for having made *Le Cid* with the irregularities regularly noticed by all...but only your indiscretion in delivering it so soon to the bookshop before the knowledge that your best friends gave you of its faults.” “C’est là Monsieur mon Amy, qui vous estes generalment blasmé, non d’avoir fait le Cid avec les irregularitez qu’on y remarque regulierement par tout...mais seulement de votre indiscretion à le livrer i tost au Librarie apres la connoissance que vos meilleurs Amis vous donnerent de ses defauts.” Jean Mairet, “Epistre Familliere du Sieur Mairet au Sieur Corneille Sur la Tragi-comedie du Cid,” in Armand Gasté, ed., *La Querelle Du Cid: Piéces et Pamphlets Publiés d’Apres Les Originaux Avec Une Introduction Par Armand Gasté* (Paris: H. Welter, 1898), 289.
and poor writing among other sins. Just as Corneille’s competitors used the vocabulary of classical dramatic theory to bash *Le Cid*, the play’s author and his defenders used it to insist that he was indeed a follower of the rules. Indeed, Corneille accused his critics of “illuminating Aristotle and other authors that you have not read nor entirely understood…” Like Lope, Corneille also appealed to the great popularity of the play as justification for his dramatic choices and proof of the acceptability of his writing. As a result, from the spring of 1637 well into the fall there was waged a vehement print battle over the merits and failings of *Le Cid*.

Many well-known (and a few anonymous) literary figures weighed in, some in support of Corneille and others in opposition. Finally, the powerful Cardinal Richelieu demanded an end to the fracas in the public press and left the debate in the hands of the newly constituted Académie Française. The Académie examined the play and the opposing claims before making their own pronouncement in December. They came down against Corneille on a number of issues, including the charges of immorality and irregularity. The debate subsided, and in the future the playwright would learn to be more sensitive to his literary reputation—or at least less flamboyant in his manipulation of dramatic conventions. His next offering, *Horace*, was more in line with the Académie’s expectations. However, this resolution certainly did not indicate that neoclassical rules were no longer challenged or disregarded.

---

25 The print debate over *Le Cid* and transcriptions of the original documents are usefully chronicled in Armand Gasté’s *Le Querelle du Cid*.
27 Corneille asks of an attacker (Scudery), “did you not remember that *The Cid* had was performed three times at the Louvre and two times at Richelieu’s palace”? “Ne vous estes-vous pas souvenu que le Cid a esté representé trois fois au Louvre, et deux fois à l’Hostel de Richelieu”? *Ibid.*, 148.
The “Querelle du Cid” illustrates that the esoteric nature of literary criticism did not prevent dramatic debates from becoming heated. It also shows the divide between the expectations of audiences and those of readers. Additionally, the Querelle made literary debates accessible and interesting to a wider demographic. However, what at first appears to be an isolated argument over dramatic theory soon reveals itself as a larger debate over the role of authors. As we shall soon see, it indicated an abiding concern with the national, and by implication international, standing of French theater.

**John Dryden**

Among seventeenth century English playwrights, John Dryden was one of the most persistent commentators on the relationship between older dramatic models and contemporary creations. The quarrelsome playwright had many enemies, both at court and among theatrical professionals. Thus his combative stance on dramatic theory echoes the insecurity of his position, both socially and economically. Yet Dryden also shared the same concerns that haunted other early modern playwrights and hit on many of the same themes addressed by Lope and Corneille. Like his Spanish and French colleagues he felt the need to point out his familiarity with Greek and Latin drama and simultaneously defend his departure from them. In the preface to his *Don Sebastian*, Dryden admits that in composing the drama he did “not exactly” obey the three unities. But he too maintains that his deviation is not the result of ignorance; he “knew [the rules] and had them in my eye, but follow’d them only at a distance,” even spelling out the rules themselves lest someone suspect him of lacking familiarity with classical learning. As Lope had done before him, Dryden blames his apparent aberration on the overriding need to please and

---

entertain the playhouse audience. In the same vein as his Spanish predecessor, he asserts that his particular liberties with dramatic theory were necessitated by the specific inclinations of the London theater-going public, “for the Genius of the English cannot bear too regular [classically modeled] a Play; we are given to variety, even to a debauchery of Pleasure.” Thus, Dryden also believed his drama to be particularly suited to the requirements of his nation, the implication being that English affection for innovation and creativity would be stifled under the sterner limitations that governed the theater of the ancients and his French contemporaries.

These are themes that Dryden returned to again and again throughout his career, particularly in the introductory material that accompanies his published plays. Indeed, in the dedication of his *Love Triumphant, or Nature will Prevail* (1694) he enumerates neoclassical expectations and unapologetically divulges the manner in which he has strayed from them. In Dryden’s estimation, failure to observe unity of time:

> is a fault which, I shou’d often practice, if I were to write again; because ‘tis agreeable to the English Genius. We love Variety more than any other Nation; and so long as the Audience will not be pleased without it, the Poet is oblig’d to humour them.\(^\text{31}\)

Again, he defends himself by citing the need to please audiences and provide material suitable to the national character. However, he pushed his argument a step further, suggesting that it was possible for “irregular” plays of the early modern age to objectively surpass the celebrated ancient ones. Numerous evaluators, both ancient and modern had decreed that a resolution engendered by the quick and unexpected reversal of a character’s attitude was an unsuitable ending for a play. The circumstances, not the character, should change. However, Dryden insists

\(^{30}\) Ibid.

that this cherished dictate was merely the result of short-sightedness and a certain “Poverty of Invention” declaring that “[h]ad it been possible for Aristotle to have seen the Cinna [of Corneille], I am confident he would have alter’d his opinion.” 

In such a circumstance, he suggests, disregarding ancient dictates could become a badge of honor. Nevertheless, Dryden never wanted to suggest that his decision to subvert the classical conventions was anything but a deliberate and expedient choice.

These three brief examples represent only a fraction of the extensive discussion of ancient dramatic theory in the world of early modern theater. However, in the dramatic discussions of Lope, Corneille, and Dryden, seemingly esoteric rules of classical theater were rhetorically important, even if they had a more limited impact on actual dramatic creations. When the playwright conversed with a learned audience it was expedient—if not necessary—to draw these elements into the discussion and be prepared to explain how their own plays reflected such expectations. Securing a popular reputation necessitated an entertaining play, but ensuring one’s literary reputation meant successfully engaging with a body of literary conventions that one might find completely outmoded and unworkable. Even when poets did not abide by the rules, the rules themselves remained a critical touchstone. John Lyons writes:

The fact that so many people had a common vocabulary and a focus on a limited number of issues does not mean that they agreed upon a common set of “rules” for writing tragedy. Instead, the power struggle between the neo-Aristotelian scholars…and the practicing playwright produced a highly publicized discourse available to anyone who wanted to stake a claim to knowledge about tragedy.

Thus, although classical conventions became an essential part of the discussion of dramatic

---

32 Ibid.

33 John D. Lyons, Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France, Purdue Studies in Romance Literatures v. 18 (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1999), 205-206.
criticism, adhesion to the rules proved less significant than the willingness of authorial and critical voices to acknowledge them.

Early modern texts reveal a tendency to understand controversy of many kinds—social, political, national, international, in terms of ancient and modern. Debates over the ancient and modern in drama also encouraged the demarcation of different types of theater, by genre, era, and eventually, by nation. This dialogue shaped a culture of dramatic comparison, which in time led to competition and the understanding of drama as a reflection of a larger culture.

A Growing Familiarity with Theater: Critics, Readers, and Audiences

So far we have seen that dramatic concerns became a mainstay of scholarly writing during the early modern era, and that playwrights felt the weight of this debate. For example, John Dryden, in his dedication to *Love Triumphant*, reveals his familiarity with the debate’s international character by referencing André D’Acier and other “Modern Criticks” in France who argued for the supremacy of the ancients in the realm of poetry. He shows himself to be at least aware of the basic tenets of their arguments. Dryden had evidently read some of the many essays on drama written in these decades. Their circulation created an international debate among scholars that intrigued both specialists and the literate public.

In the late sixteenth century, all of Western Europe was experiencing a new interest in the dramatic, which took the form of erudite inquiry, popular literature, and live performance. Even those who did not contribute to the literary dialogue on theater might read it in the popular press, and those unable or disinclined to read increasingly discussed it with those who did. All of these groups might, on frequent or rare occasions, find themselves in the playhouse, observing dramatic performance. Through these many modes of access, the population of Europe had

34 John Dryden, “To the Right Honourable James Earl of Salisbury, &c.,” *Love Triumphant*…
increased contact with emerging theatrical conventions. Yet, we must bear in mind that the theater, as both idea and practice, was experienced quite differently by different persons. Indeed Robert H. Hume illustrated the need to consider the diversity of the theatrical community by examining the public in terms of at least three distinct groups: the literary minds of the age—a group including dramatic authors and commentators; devotees of theater who frequently attended the playhouses and purchased published plays; and the ordinary theater-goer with occasional attendance but little engagement with dramatic literature. Each faction was privy to a different dramatic experience and possessed different levels of familiarity with the international debates on the subject. While all groups sought entertainment, the textually aware contingents also sought erudition and “improvement” in the playhouse and its published fruits. Drama could be both amusing and informative.

Therefore, while scholarly comparisons between ancient and modern proved enduring in their own right, they also educated a reading public. Seventeenth century critical writings on theater became widely popular, both within their lands of origin and abroad. France produced the majority of this dialogue, but toward the end of the seventeenth century, England began to participate much more heavily. Spanish contributions to this discussion were more sporadic, but often similar in tone and argument to the rest. The popularity of these publications made the ideas of the educated elites available to literate persons from the emergent middle class. They also exerted additional pressure on playwrights to make use of neoclassical rhetoric.

In addition to detailing the classical theories of drama, these writings also exhibit—or at least pretend to exhibit—a basic knowledge of the more celebrated dramas and dramatic poets

that had recently emerged from other nations. Indeed, by continually referencing a classical ideal, authors inspired judgment of those modern theater traditions that did or did not conform to classical drama in various ways. Furthermore, comparisons between the ancient and modern dramatic arts brought the characteristics of the various theatrical traditions of early modern Europe into focus.

Because the popular professional theater (through its connections with classical tradition and noble sponsorship) became an important social force, playhouse drama was a subject of great interest. Familiarity with theatrical practice both at home and throughout Western Europe was essential for the well educated. Thus, deep or superficial, plentiful descriptions of the dramatic arts in their various geographic and temporal settings reflect the attentiveness with which many sought to follow theatrical developments abroad. They also highlight the importance of international theater to the home country. What actor-critic Luigi Riccoboni wrote in the mid-eighteenth century applied equally to the seventeenth:

…if the French, naturally curious about that which is unknown to them, are eager to learn the customs, manners, and forms of foreign theaters, will other peoples, in turn, be less pleased to experience something which looks at the theaters of their neighbors?36

The life of the stage provoked great interest across Western Europe, and descriptions of theatrical matters were in great demand.

With this increase in published content, theorists and experts—and through them members of the literary public—began to associate the different European theater traditions, past

---

36 Luigi Riccoboni, “Au Lecteur,” Réflexions Historiques et Critiques Sur Les Differens Théâtres de L’Europe (Paris, 1738), vi. “si les Français, naturellement curieux de ce qui leur est inconnu, s’emporessent à savoir les usages, les manières & la forme des Théâtres qui leur sont étrangers; les autres Peuples, à leur tour, auront-ils moins de plaisir à connaître ce qui regarde les Théatres de leurs voisins?”
and present, with distinct themes, dramatic devises, and other poetic and performance characteristics. Many of these were widely agreed upon and oft repeated. As a result, the different lingual-dramatic traditions were perceived to be separate and recognizable. Through published sources, readers became acquainted with the structure and performance practice of theater in other lands, largely illustrated through inevitable comparison with ancient theatrical characteristics.

Easily recognizable differences between theatrical traditions are necessarily the most frequently cited. Dramatic structure, the number of acts, and the basic characteristics of plots were elements that could easily contrast one nation’s theater with another. It was widely known that French and English dramas were divided into five acts while “the Spaniards at this day allow but three Acts, which they call Jornadas, to a Play; and the Italians in many of theirs follow them.”  

However, these simple observations frequently generated value judgments with roots in ancient theory. Most critics cited Horace’s assertion that ancient drama had a five-act structure. With these ancient precedents in mind, François Hedelin d’Aubignac, referred to the use of three acts as a “bad habit” (“mauvaise coûtume”), that in its deviation from classical wisdom makes the flow of the action lopsided.  

While many playwrights allowed that national characteristics might necessarily produce regional discrepancies, Hédelin asserts the existence of universal preferences in line with the classical mode: “we do not enjoy a Piece of Theater that has more or less than five Acts…”  

Other commentators, particularly those who favored modern plays over

---

38 François Hédelin d’Aubignac, La Pratique Du Theatre (Paris: Antoine de Sommaville, 1657), 279.
39 Hédelin, La Pratique Du Theatre, 278-279. “que nous ne pouvons approuver une Piéce de Theatre s’il y a plus ou moins de cinq Actes…”
classical ones, were less harsh. Dryden, for example, did not see either trend as more faithful to an ancient model because he doubted that Greek drama had a definite number of divisions.\textsuperscript{40}

Critics of every nation roundly admitted French dramatists to be the most observant of neoclassical conventions—perhaps even inventing ones that had not been a consistent part of classical practice. Dryden remarks, “you never see any of their [French] Plays end with a conversion, or simple change of will, which is the ordinary way which our Poets use to end theirs.”\textsuperscript{41} The French are widely praised by both English and French writers for having the least immorality on their stage. For example, Dryden remarks that many events that appear on English stages are not shown in French plays: “the French avoid the tumult, to which we are subject in \textit{England}, by representing Duells, Battels, and the like.”\textsuperscript{42} In the French theater, violence occurred offstage and was only described in the verse. In England, combat and killings often occurred onstage.

However, esteem for French theater was by no means unanimous. It might vary depending on the critic’s feelings about the central purpose of the drama. One outlier, the French-born London resident, Charles de Saint-Évremond asserted that embodying the spirit of ancient drama through compelling portrayals of human existence was more important than the cultivation of a few oft-cited rules. He was therefore inclined to praise the English as the foremost producers of drama:

There is no comedy more conformable to that of the Ancients, than the English, in what respects the manners. It is not pure and sincere Galantry full of Adventures and amorous discourses, as in Spain and France ; but in the representation of humane life in common, according to the diversity of Humors, and several Characters of Men.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} John Dryden, \textit{Of Dramatick Poesie}…, 68.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, 25.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, 23.
\textsuperscript{43} Saint-Evremond, “Of the English Comedy,” \textit{Miscellanea, Or, Various Discourses upon 1. Tragedy, 2. Comedy, 3. the Italian & 4. The English Comedy, 5. and Operas … Together with
In this statement, he also references some of the plots and themes common to the different traditions, highlighting the fact that readers learned about the various performance conventions of other European nations.

Ultimately there is little substance and considerable rhetoric. Nevertheless, these critical writings are important because they suggest the appearance of knowledge. Most writers would not have read the original Greek and Latin texts that they typically claimed as the basis for their critiques. They relied for the most part on translations and the interpretations of their contemporaries. Furthermore, comparisons between different modern theater traditions were mostly driven by opinion rather than fact. Such treatises ultimately say more about the opinions of the writers than about the true state or quality of drama in any one land. However, these writings effectively illustrate the spread of information about drama throughout Europe, and the conceptualization of discrete theater traditions and repertoires based on language and nationality.

**Nationalist Concepts of Theater**

Critical writings, in published pamphlets and in the material appended to plays, formed a rhetorical basis for describing modern dramatic texts from specific national and linguistic traditions. As a result, the rules of the ancients came to have particular importance in specific personal and national contexts, and their treatment in different locations was understood to reflect fundamental cultural traits. Through early modern dramatic criticism, we also begin to see

---

that increased knowledge about the various theater traditions was infused with a growing realization of dramatic exchange. In light of persistent transcultural theatrical borrowing, the debate over the importance of classical models takes on a new meaning. Just as playwrights engaged in negotiation of the relationship between ancient and modern theater, their writings also reflected their knowledge that theater operated in the wider European community. In response, they took part in a larger discussion of national identity.

By advocating certain positions on suitable dramatic activity, playwrights and other critical voices sent complex messages about the theater cultures in which they participated and their own role within the nation. Indeed, playwrights understood their work to possess and require certain characteristics in order to appeal to their particular national demographic. In *Nueva Arte* Lope insists that there are dramatic effects specifically suited to the Spanish temperament and that Spanish audiences will not tolerate plays that run too long. Corneille believed that he has uncovered a way to tap into the French dramatic psyche, and found a way to tailor ancient dictate to best suit his early modern French audience. As we have seen, Dryden similarly excuses his persistent unconventionality by harkening back to the national English character: the plays suitable for classical audiences simply will not please on the English stage because their regularity conflicts with the viewers’ penchant for variety and unpredictability.

These examples suggest that playwrights felt the need to attach themselves to a national theatrical identity and the particular dramatic techniques that characterized it. As a result, playwrights produced nationalist arguments to demonstrate the acceptability of their own plays.

---

44 Tenga cada acto cuatro pliegos solos, que doce están medidos con el tiempo y la paciencia del que está escuchando”.
But why was this an important discussion? Why would these three authors, from different countries, make the same case in different decades of the seventeenth century? Assuredly, they all drew upon a much larger—and largely shared—body of dramatic commentary, but they also felt a common impulse to culturally define their homelands through drama. No nation, or culture has ever felt secure enough that it could cease to actively construct its identity. The early modern world was a particularly tumultuous place in which to search cultural stability. During the same years that produced the rise of permanent popular theater and its widespread dissemination, Europe was encountering—through commerce, travel, and communication—new ideas about itself and its global role. Individual nations redefined their relationships with the rest of the world, as that world expanded and power balances shifted. The specific cultural context in which each author makes his case, gives us a more detailed picture of the ideas and sentiments that drove theatrical conventions and theories in Spain, France, and England. Context also illustrates the ways in which theater and theater debates occurred both within and between national borders.

**Spain**

Lope de Vega’s Spain was a country that appeared to have finally come into its own, but nevertheless remaining terribly insecure. In the centuries since antiquity, the Spanish had a series of powerful cross-cultural encounters that resulted in outlying groups being gradually either submerged into the larger society or driven out of it. The early medieval Goths exemplify the former trend and Muslim *Moros* the latter. While these cultural shifts played out over the course of hundred of years, popular memory collapsed the centuries into a ongoing story of Spanish cultural (and sometimes military) conquest. The resulting narrative, depicting Spain as a powerful force that either overcomes or dispels its cultural rivals, had been well developed by the fifteenth century Reconquista. This myth of Spanish resistance to foreign influence and cultural
purity played a pivotal role in shaping the early modern Spanish nation and its theatrical engagement. For hundreds of years, the Spanish had defined themselves in contrast to groups of “outsiders”: Muslims, Jews, and Arabs in particular. Muslim domination of the Iberian Peninsula during the Medieval era produced a Spanish majority that identified itself as staunchly Catholic. Fifteenth century monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella celebrated their unification of Catholic Spain by forcing the deportation of Spain’s Jewish population in 1492. The final expulsion of the *moriscos*, the converted descendants of the Spanish Muslims, in 1609 marked what many considered a return to true Spanishness, uncorrupted by undesirable influence. While these expulsions were enacted to achieve social, political, and religious stability, they also had the effect of physically removing the very groups against whom Spain had rigorously constructed its image. The *morisco* remained a popular literary and folk character in Spain, exemplifying the difficulty of defining a Spanish identity in his absence. Spain also became a colonial power in the fifteenth century, so that by the time permanent, popular theater began to emerge in Madrid, it possessed well-established colonies in the Americas. Spain’s new world encounters were also channeled into the national narrative of cultural triumph and military success.

---

45 Parts of Spain had acted as international cultural centers from the age of the Roman Empire. Córdoba, in particular, was the seat of first Roman colonial and later Caliphate power that allowed it to act as a center of learning and artistry. Hume, *Spanish Influence on English Literature*. . ., 11.

46 Hume suggests that Alfonso X’s prolific use of the Mozarabic (predecessor to today’s Castilian) dialect was a deliberate choice to employ “a pure Spanish speech evolved on Spanish soil, and owing nothing to Provence [in France]”. This dialect was also much more distinct from the other Latin-based languages of Europe than other medieval Spanish dialects. It was, in short, a bid for cultural identity. *Ibid.* , 21.
The impulse to construct a recognizable national identity, which sharpened as Spanish political and military influence waned in the late sixteenth century, continued to manifest in many modes of cultural production, including the drama. Spanish comedias were perennially set in Spain. Neither English nor French plays employed English or French settings with similar frequency. The characters, too, were thoroughly Spanish, with the exception of the few derived from classical story and legend. Whether the plays depicted the nobility, commoners, or, the emergent middle class, comedias provided familiar portraits of Spanish life and Spanish values. Overwhelmingly, the Spanish wanted to see themselves portrayed on stage. Printed dramas and the shows performed in the playhouses functioned not merely as entertainment, but as reassurance. When Spaniards saw their history enacted in a heroic manner, they were assured that they, as a people, were brave and honorable, witty and steadfast. Supervised by conscientious censors, plays also taught Spaniards that they were devout and models of social propriety.

By the time Europe began to compare ancient poetic glory with modern ingenuity, Spain’s attitude toward classical culture differed considerably from that of its neighbors. England, France, and Italy all witnessed the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns. But Spanish thinkers did not conceive of this dichotomy in the same way. Spanish scholarship, critics asserted, did not forget classical learning—which was largely transmitted through Eastern learning—during medieval times. Since Greek and Roman culture had never really vanished in Spain, they suggested, there was no need to rediscover it. Spanish literary and dramatic tradition represented, to their minds, an unbroken legacy dating back to the Caesars. As a result, the ancients were honored forbearers rather than rivals. This identification of a Spanish antiquity is evident in historical examinations of theater, which focus on the poet Seneca not as an ancient
but as a Spaniard, practically a modern Spaniard. Spain felt a resulting pride toward its literary
cultural products. Spain felt it already possessed classical learning in an older and more authentic
form, and channeled those sentiments into their national narrative.

Many scholarly arguments have sought to illustrate how Spanish popular theater was or
was not a tool of the authorities or a gage of popular sentiment. In reality, nearly all of Spanish
society took comfort in these hyper-Spanish portrayals. They produced cultural images in which
the entire community was invested. Lope de Vega, thoroughly aware that he was doing the
Spanish nation’s work, declared it not only excusable but laudable to devote energy to writing
plays befitting the Spanish character rather than emulating the ancients. After all, to his mind,
Spanish culture already embodied the best of the classical world.

France

The Spanish Academy had little problem when Lope praised but then disregarded
classical dramatic theory. However, French Academy created very real problems for Corneille
when he appeared to disregard classical convention. This reflects the state of literary and
dramatic criticism in the two nations and the role of the theater within society and nation
building. Though familiar with the classical rules, French dramatists paid little heed to them in
the early seventeenth century. Alexandre Hardy and other popular authors were, like Lope, often
proud of their disregard for their classical predecessors.47 In the 1630s, classical rules suddenly
took on a new importance. Unity of place, especially, became newly popular. French participants
in the transnational debate over drama overwhelmingly came out in favor of a stricter approach
to the neoclassical regulations. As a result, deviation from those rules began to appear suspect

and somehow “un-French.” Accompanying the new obedience to classical dictate and national prestige was a rising concern over the relationship between the state and the playwright. The French became—both in the minds of Frenchmen, and to some respect the international community—the presumed heirs of classical tradition in the early modern era.48

Regardless of Le Cid’s actual treatment of the ancient dramatic rules, the resulting debate reveals a literary landscape in which the consensus of literary elites determined what dramatic practices were truly “perfect” and, thus, truly French. To defy that consensus, as Pierre Corneille appeared to do in his attitudes as well as his dramatic writing, was to break with a cultural and a national tradition. In subverting authority, Corneille upset established procedures, literary politics, and social hierarchies. Molière prompted a similar outcry when he refused to bend to the expected rules. In France, dramatic purity lay in regulation—in terms of classical unities, dramatic conventions, political acceptability, and moral purity. The French theater prided itself on its highly principled, even overtly moralistic, content. As a result, critics condemned Le Cid for the impropriety of Corneille’s heroine Chiméne in her dealings with the hero, Rodrigue. Any lewd behavior was itself a brand of foreign-ness, contrary to the French establishment and its affiliated church.

In disregarding certain accepted practices, and by extension the cultural organs that regulated the drama, Corneille was viewed as a mechanism of social and political instability. At stake in the Querelle du Cid were not simply the reputation of a single play or a single playwright, but apparently, the very identity of French theater, especially when contrasted with other European theater traditions. Also contested is the prevailing social order and the parties permitted to assess dramatic success: was it to be the people or the literati? The quarrel ended

48 Ibid., 96.
with the Académie Française firmly in charge, reaffirming the cultural and national importance of French drama. This outcome also assured the existence of a national body to oversee the creation and maintenance of a national theater tradition. Playwrights could not be left to their own devices.

Ultimately, Corneille got into trouble because he defied the regulations, not of the ancients, but of the self-appointed guardians of French theater, who felt the need to enforce a standard that they thought best reflected their culture. In addition to Corneille’s supposed corruption of the dramatic arts, his enemies also charged him with plagiarism. Several critics believed that he must have faithfully translated a Spanish play and taken the credit for it himself. This accusation was understandable in an atmosphere where such borrowings frequently occurred, even though the practice might be frowned upon by literary critics. The availability of Spanish dramas and their frequent appearance in both loose and strict adaptations were well known. However, passing another play (especially a foreign play) off as one’s own was an affront to dramatic convention just as surely as was the failure to observe Aristotle’s admonitions. A French author too dependent upon foreign example could be a shameful thing. Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter, many French authors borrowed from Spanish and Italian sources without incident. The charge was just another arbitrary complaint leveled at playwright who refused to toe the line. While the querelle itself was full of such contradictions, its underlying purpose was not: to establish and uphold a uniquely French theater tradition in a manner that served French society and ensured the French drama’s international repute.

Finally, the battle over *Le Cid* could only have occurred against the backdrop of a European culture in which cultural and dramatic exchange were both pervasive and acknowledged. What often gets lost in the debate are the transnational role of Corneille’s play and the international dimensions of the dispute that it generated. To begin with, in adapting the *Cid* story, Corneille had taken an important part of the Spanish literary canon and transformed it into French drama. Indeed, the general availability of Spanish dramatic materials was what led some of his attackers to assume that *Le Cid* was a close adaptation, even a plagiarist, of a Spanish play. Furthermore, Corneille’s play emphasized the essentially Spanish character of the story, setting, and characters. This adaptation coincided with the beginnings of the French mania for borrowing Spanish plays, exemplified in the drama of Pierre Corneille’s younger brother Thomas, who borrowed heavily and openly from the plays of Lope, Moreto, de Solis, and others. Thus, the presentation of *Le Cid* on the stage, its public success, and Corneille’s own attitudes represented not only an affront to classical rules and French expectations about the social role theater but a celebration of the foreign that was equally problematic.

Certainly earlier French dramatists, including Hardy and Rotrou had felt Spanish influence, but rarely had Spanish culture been so visible and so celebrated upon the French stage. *Le Cid* thus proved troublesome to a dramatic tradition obsessed with maintaining a theater culture that was distinctly French. The resulting *Querelle du Cid* was rooted in a need to redefine the accepted conventions of French theater through a dialog about its ancient forbearers. Through the debate, the combatants seek to ally themselves with the traditional qualities of French drama and state while painting their opponents as outsiders, barbarians, and foreigners. Literary arguments thus reflect knowledge of dramatic circulation and reveal its role in the construction of national identities.
The popularity of *Le Cid* and the resulting debate also illustrate the extent and the heightened awareness of dramatic exchange that pervaded the sixteenth century. Although written for the French language and the French stage, Corneille’s play generated a host of translations and adaptations throughout Europe.\(^{50}\) It was subsequently imported to England, to Italy, and even to Spain, the very birthplace of the *Cid* story. Importantly, Corneille’s name travelled along with it. As we have seen, when playwrights translate or adapt from foreign material they often conveniently leave out the author to whom they own their dramatic debt. However, the name and reputation of Pierre Corneille and his *Cid* became so well known and well loved that they resisted displacement. In its transnational and translingual incarnations *Le Cid* became one of the most widely performed, published, and debated plays of the early modern era. Few authors or plays were as widely respected or as influential. As apprehensive as the French were about irregular dramas appearing on their stages, they embraced the international legacy of French plays such as *Le Cid* as a mark of cultural superiority.

**England**

Like its European neighbors, England was also struggling to define itself through its dramatic literature in the early modern era. The reign of Queen Elizabeth marked the beginning of England’s tenure as a nation with global influence. Shakespeare and his cohort wrote for a theater that was just beginning to appreciate its national role and international significance. Increasingly frequent encounters with other cultures in Europe and beyond made it imperative for England to project a cohesive national identity as a display of cultural, as well as military and economic, prowess. This projection of an English national character made Shakespeare’s history

\(^{50}\) Translations of the *Cid* script were printed at least three times in London between 1637 and 1650.
plays popular in their own day. The same can be said for many of his contemporaries; Johnson in particular specialized in depicting ordinary Englishmen. But just as the theater illustrated the nation, it was perhaps even more popular for its ability to depict the foreign. The English were both entranced by the world of difference around them and eager to define their own particular place within it. Sometimes reconciling these different impulses would prove challenging. This dilemma certainly drove much theatrical debate.

The ability of the English to articulate a unified cultural identity was further challenged throughout the course of the seventeenth century. The resulting uncertainty manifested itself clearly in the nation’s relationship with the drama. Religious conflict and Civil War in the 1640s undermined national unity and cultural cohesion. The closing of the playhouses by Puritan authorities (1642-1660) largely prevented live theater from articulating cultural views and identities. Therefore, in the last four decades of the seventeenth century, John Dryden was writing for an age in which England and English theater were still coping with an identity crisis. While theatrical tradition was not completely lost between the Elizabethan golden age and the Restoration, the continuities felt particularly thin. So much had happened in the interim. Few playwrights from before the Civil War were still around. As a result, Shakespeare and his contemporaries became “old”, though not “ancient” like the Greeks and Romans. A divide was established between the present and the recent dramatic past. English critics even conducted a running argument as to whether the poets of the “last age” (writing before the interregnum) were superior or inferior to those of the “present age.” The growing feeling of disconnection from a national literary and dramatic heritage stemmed from several factors, including the loss of

51 In early modern parlance, the Romans were often referred to as the “Latins.”
established English dramatists and a general lack of new English plays to perform upon the newly reopened public stages.

The dearth of fresh English material, as we have seen, inspired both revivals and adaptations of older English plays as well as increased dependence on foreign content to fill the stage. On the one hand, appropriation from English poets of the “last age” was an attempt to reconnect with a cultural legacy and with the English-ness they supposedly embodied. The older poets had been the great minds of their age and country. Who and what would define the English stage—and the nation’s poetic soul—now? At the same time the persistent adaptation of foreign material for the English stage cast further doubt upon the ability of contemporary English authors to generate worthy dramatic material. What did it mean for the nation if Englishmen could not write plays as lofty and entertaining as those of France or Spain? Foreign adaptation was a proven recipe for popular success, but these products did not appear to represent England and the English character. The exceptional popularity of foreign plays clashed with nationalist impulses to produce turmoil in many minds and hearts.

There were other respects, too, in which the nation struggled to articulate an English identity. Late seventeenth century monarchs, to the dismay of many, seemed very un-English. Charles II, who had spent his years of exile primarily in Paris, returned to England with a taste for French fashions and French theater. He was also accompanied by a whole host of foreign courtiers, and within two years of his coronation had made a Catholic Portuguese princess his consort. Despite Catherine of Braganza’s unpopularity, both with the public and with her husband, she too had influence on popular trends including theater. Portuguese courtiers became a part of the court, and many elaborate court masques were staged. The death of Charles brought another Francophile monarch to the throne, this one with noted Catholic sympathies of his own.
While the Glorious Revolution seemed to promise an end to English political instability and rampant factionalism, it failed to lessen the pressure to locate an English national identity. The new monarchs, William and Mary, were Dutch, and under considerable continental influence. Fashions and fads from across Europe continued to infiltrate the English court and popular culture.

The argumentative John Dryden, writing most productively between 1660 and his 1700 death, lived and worked in an atmosphere teeming with French, Spanish, and Dutch influence. Dryden had a particularly difficult time reconciling his dependence on foreign theatrical modes with his admiration for the previous generation of English playwrights and the desire to follow in their footsteps. He became an outspoken critic of foreign drama and a promoter of what he identified as good English drama, in both Shakespeare’s generation and his own. Significantly, like Lope and participants in the *Querelle du Cid*, he uses ancient precedent, or lack thereof, to make a nationalist argument. In his essay *On Dramatick Poesie* he insists:

there is no man more ready to adore those great Greeks and Romans than I am: but on the other side, I cannot think so contemptibly of the Age I live in, or so dishonourably of my own Countrey, as not to judge we equal the Ancients in most kinds of Poesie, and in some surpass them; neither know I any reason why I may not be as zealous for the Reputation of our Age, as we find the Ancients themselves in reference to those who lived before them.\(^{52}\)

For Dryden as for many, the classical dramatic poets were the yardsticks by which it was possible to measure the merits of theater in the current age. Yet, Dryden suggests that the valuation of one theater tradition above another is largely a matter of personal preference and national allegiance; he roots for his theatrical “team.” However, his textual idealization of English practices never stopped him from borrowing, both overtly and covertly, from the same

\(^{52}\) Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie*..., 4.
theatrical traditions he found somewhat threatening. His own hypocrisy is evident in his criticism of the foreign adaptations produced by his English contemporaries, Thomas Shadwell in particular.

Nor was Dryden the only critic ambivalent toward continental influence on English theater. One anonymous author blamed the supposed degeneration of the English theater, both in its literary essence and in its presumed immorality, on “foreign corruption” stemming from the crown and court. Foreign influences supposedly ruined popular taste “[s]o that Poets who writ immediately after the restoration, were obliged to humour the deprav’d tastes of their audience.”\(^3\) In the midst of this apparent threat from outside cultures, the idea of articulating “Englishness” through specific theatrical works, figures, and practices proved compelling to many.

**International Dramatic Reputations**

Through early modern dramatic criticism, we begin to see that increased knowledge about the various theater traditions was infused with a growing realization of dramatic exchange. In light of persistent transcultural theatrical borrowing, the debate over the importance of classical models takes on a new meaning. Dramas might be crafted specifically to cater to the tastes of the Spanish or the English, but they were also generated in a much larger world of dramatic interest, cross-cultural exchange, and, potentially, international influence. Authors were also keenly aware that their drama was functioning not only in a national context, but also in an international theater landscape. Surveying the various pieces produced in the seventeenth century reveals that poets and critics were highly aware of the international theater scene in which they

---

\(^3\) *Historia histrionica an historical account of the English stage, shewing the ancient use, improvement and perfection of dramatick representations in this nation in a dialogue of plays and players* (London: Printed by G. Croom for William Haws, 1699.) 23.
were living and working. Not only did they make ample reference to the persistent sharing of
dramatic material that shapes their own work, they saw their own plays having a real or potential
life outside of their homeland and their native language.

Faced with the knowledge that they were importing or exporting dramatic material (and
other theatrical elements) from elsewhere, poets and critics engaged in a dialogue of comparison
to separate themselves from other theater cultures and in the hope of gaining dramatic renown in
an international setting. Thus, studies and texts, especially those that were extensively published
and translated, demonstrate a true interest not only in foreign theater and its conventions but also
in the international theatrical reputation of the home county.

Despite his inclination to please a popular audience rather than a scholarly one, Lope de Vega remains aware of the judgments of the international community, where “Italy and France call me ignorant.” By poking fun at international expectations, he illustrates yet again a keen awareness of drama across national and linguistic divides. Not only were the dramatic critics of Italy and France presumed to be familiar with Lope’s output, they were also busy evaluating it by comparing it with ancient pieces and the drama of other nations. Furthermore, through the wide ring of theatrical communication, Lope’s international reputation had made it back to Spain. However, despite unkind foreign commentary, both Lope and the international community knew how much influence Spanish plays had on the plays of other lands. Despite censure from literary critics, Lope’s plays, when disseminated and adapted, “rightly acquired the favor of all Europe, and America owes him and pays him gloriously.” While the playwright

54 Lope de Vega, Arte Nuevo de Hacer Comedias, In 365-366. “me llamen ignorante Italia y Francia…”
55 Ricardo de Turia, “Apologetico de Las Comedias Españolas, Por Ricardo de Turia,” in Norte de La Poesia Española. Illustrado Del Sol de Doze Comedias (que Forman Segunda Parte) de
understood his plays to have a particularly Spanish character, he was also aware of their
prominent role in a much wider literary dialogue and a transnational performance world.

Like Lope de Vega, the French were well aware of their international influence and the
extent to which foreign playwrights adapted French material for their own stages. Jean-Baptiste
Dubos pointed out that Italian poets “have admired and translated [our plays] of the seventeenth
century” and suggests that it is as “rare in foreign countries to find a cabinet without a Moliere,
as without a Terence.” Like French plays, French ideas about drama also infiltrated the larger
theater culture. Even the tendency of French drama to serve nationalist aims was itself a familiar
topic elsewhere in Europe, for Dryden, writing from England, invited the curious to “Look upon
the Cinna and the Pompey [of Pierre Corneille], they are not so properly to be called Playes, as
long discourses of reason of State: and [Corneille’s tragedy] Polieucte in matters in Religion is as
solemn as the long stops upon our Organs.”

Although, as we have seen, English plays were not fruitful generators of international
adaptation and performance before the eighteenth century, they were often familiar to the
international literary community. English playwrights and critics were cognizant that their plays,
representing the English nation itself, were held up to international scrutiny. However, foreign
authors and theorists were often unkind to English drama, and it was especially humiliating to
hear English playwrights slighted in foreign commentaries as scavengers capable of producing

---

Laureados Poetas Valencianos: Y de Doze Escogidas Loas, Y Otras Rimas a Various Sugetos.,
ed. Aurelio Mey (Valencia: Felipe Mey, 1616). “con justa razon adquiere el favor que toda
Europa, y America le debe, y paga gloriosamente.”

56 Jean-Baptiste Dubos, Reflexions Critiques Sur La Poesie Et Sur La Peinture, vol. 2 (Paris:
Jean Mariette, 1719), 409. “ils ont admiré & traduit les nostres dans le dix-septième…” “Il est
aussi rare dans les pays étrangers de trouver un cabinet sans un Moliere que sans un Terence.”

57 Dryden, Of Dramatick Poesie..., 29.
only simple adaptations. Unlike the Spanish and French, the English could not tout out obvious examples of their international influence. They therefore tended to exaggerate their own reputation among foreigners and the borrowing of English theatrical materials in other lands. Dryden insisted that “of late years Moliere, the younger Corneille, Quinault, and some others, have been imitating of afar off the quick turns and graces of the English Stage.” He often saw only what he wanted to see. Because the English poets identified themselves in part through a lax observance of the classical dramatic rules, they sometimes mistook other authors’ deviation from ancient models as an indication that they were adopting English techniques. On the other hand, English writers and readers were all too aware of the considerable influence that French and Spanish theater had had upon the English stage.

The interest each country took in its international reputation was closely tied to theater’s emergence as a national cultural form. Prestige in the international realm of theater served to bolster national pride; the favorable reception of plays and stylistic devices abroad appeared to indicate the success of the national culture as a whole. Playwrights and critics remained concerned with being part of a national tradition, and even concerned about the characteristics of foreign drama, because they recognized how much influence different theater traditions had on one another. The national role and character of the theater became essential themes because, by the seventeenth century, Europeans very much realized that they were participating in a transnational world of theater, created largely by dramatic exchange, literary publication, and

---

59 Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesie...*, 27.
60 By citing *Cinna* above as Corneille’s (and therefore European theater’s) greatest drama, Dryden is also sending a political message. Just as Corneille’s play ends with the peaceful submission of dissidents to a forgiving political authority (in defiance of dramatic convention), so did Dryden wish to signal his allegiance to the monarchy, which had never fully trusted him. His is a plea for royal magnanimity.
greater communication across Europe. The quest for national identity only became compelling in the presence of extra-national forces, and so nationalist rhetoric about theater was a reflection of its international dimensions and, in particular, the influence some linguistic-national dramatic traditions had upon others. National theater traditions had to be constructed and claimed because they did not truly exist in an atmosphere where plays, people, and performance elements were so mobile and culturally adaptable. In time, the extensive borrowing of dramatic material combined with the pervasive literary evaluations of the various theater traditions it helped enabled the emergence of true theatrical rivalry that pitted modern against ancient practice and the various modern theater centers and authors against each other.

**International Theatrical Rivalries**

In the seventeenth century, neoclassicism, nationalism, persistent dramatic exchange, and a flowering of treatises on theater came together to create an international atmosphere of dramatic competition that manifested itself in the literary criticism of Western Europe. The development of thriving theater cultures and scripted plays invited comparison between early modern playwrights and ancient dramatists. Meanwhile, as dramatic material crossed geographic and linguistic boundaries in an increasingly visible manner during the seventeenth century, the line between a foreign play and a domestic one became increasingly blurred. As knowledge about the various theater centers increased it became accepted that the drama originating in the different locations inherently possessed certain cultural characteristics. It therefore became easier to pass judgments—often sweeping ones—about the national character and tendencies of theater. Once national varieties of theater were constructed, the international prestige of a nation’s theatrical output became an important marker of its cultural power. As a result, the poetic competition already evident between the ancients and the moderns combined with the increasing
accessibility of foreign plays and performance practice to create a transnational debate over what constituted the illustrious dramatic poetry, and which theatrical tradition was the best. Though the arguments might appear trivial, some people took them very seriously. Dryden referred to the debate as a “war of opinions” that drove wedges between the oldest of friends. While it certainly appears that many writers, like those who participated in the *Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns*, were deeply invested in this competition, their specific claims cannot be taken at face value. However, the rhetoric of comparison—and, at times, outright rivalry—between plays, playwrights, and the nations that they represented provides additional insight into the early modern mindset. These comparisons illuminate the creation of historical memory and, ultimately, the importance of theater as a social and cultural tool.

In the midst of extensive translation and dramatic dissemination, a country’s theatrical output was acknowledged to be a kind of ambassador abroad. Plays judged to be poor, for one reason or another, reflected poorly on the country that engendered them. Esteemed plays and poets bolstered cultural pride and international respect. By discussing their work in terms of a commonly understood set of classical literary references, dramatic authors are, whether subtly or overtly, comparing their output with playwrights in other nations who were inspired by the same classical tradition. Thus, the formation and expression of cultural (and dramatic) identities coincided with a rising sense of international, and even intertemporal, competition in the theater arts.

Depicting the arts as a cultural contest was certainly not original to theater. Nearly two decades before the establishment of the first permanent theaters in London, George Puttenham already viewed contemporary poetry through a competitive and nationalist lens, insisting that:

61 Dryden, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” *Of Dramatick Poesie*...
at this day it will be found our nation is in nothing inferior to the French or Italian for copie of language, subttiltie of deuice, good method and proportion in any forme of poeme, but that they may compare with the most, and perchance passe a great many of them.\textsuperscript{62}

Thus, he clearly believes the literary output of his homeland to be in competition with foreign creations as well as (we have seen) with classical poetry. However, not all commentators were so generous as Puttenham. Others resorted to name-calling and offensive stereotypes. Examine the following exchange from \textit{An Evening’s Intrigue}, an English translation of an unknown Spanish \textit{comedia}:

\begin{quote}
Pleasant: …what think you of Cervantes, who write Doctor Quixot?
Damn-all: Dull, dull, Insipid; and so is all the Nation,
Pleasant: I hope you have some more Charity for the Italians?
Damn-all: Not a Jot, Sir. There is your Bocalin, your Petrarch, your Dante, your Aristo, and all the rest of them; are all alike to me. I don’t relish their dull Pedantry: I have a Gust above them.
\end{quote}

When asked what writing he does favor, Damn-all replies:

\begin{quote}
Damn-all: None Sir, none; the whole Frame of Wit and Learning requires new Moulding, for hitherto Mankind ha liv’d in Blindness. The Spaniard is lost in his Metaphysicks; the Italian in his Politicks; the Frenchman is all Air; the German and Dutch-man are nothing but Fumes of Wine and Beer; and the Englishman a Medley of all these, ill compounded by an Unskillful Apothecary.
Pleasant: What is your Opinion of the Antients?
Damn-all: The Antients did well enough for their time of Ignorance; and we are all Mad to be so fond of them, when the World much be so much Wiser.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

The humor in the exchange is derived from Damn-all’s predictable (given his name) bashing of literary works and scholarly figures that were popular and extremely beloved in London at the beginning of the eighteenth century, particularly the writings of Cervantes and the secular Italian medievalists. He directs particular scorn at the much-admired ancient authors. Ever the

\textsuperscript{62} Puttenham, \textit{The Arte of English Poesie}. 49.
\textsuperscript{63} John Stevens, trans., \textit{An Evening’s Intrigue} (London, 1707), 172-173.
pessimist, he despises the literature of all nations equally, including that of his homeland. At the same time his tirade effectively demonstrates that the early moderns were accustomed to thinking about the literary arts as national products, and with particular distinctive characteristics based on their national and linguistic flavor. It also indicates the seeming need of the early moderns to measure the modern national and international authors against the achievements of classical writers, and against each other. Were this not the case, the jokes could hardly have had the effect that the author intended. It remains to be wondered whether a parallel exchange existed in the lost Spanish original and what famed international figures Damn-all’s Spanish counterpart might have insulted. Even without additional information, this exchange serves to illustrate that nations were assumed to be in competition through their arts and literary offerings. The high visibility of performed theater, its engaging and fashionable characteristics, and the literary prestige of ancient drama all combined to make plays the center of an even more hotly contested international debate.

However, this debate did not emerge immediately with the opening of the public theaters. In the late sixteenth century, critics were only slowly beginning to pay heed to the arguments of the ancients, and it would not be until the seventeenth century that international theater competition emerged in full force, coming to a head between 1650 and 1750. Yet, the competitive rhetoric between national theaters was seldom apolitical and almost never disinterested. When we turn from the content of dramatic arguments to their stated purpose, we realize that they are often expressly intended to wage a battle in an international arena, and, more frequently, to argue the international appeal and superiority of one or another national tradition. Thus, François Hédelin, abbé d’Aubignac, announces that his goal in writing a *Practique du*
Théâtre is to “make known to people the excellence of the [French dramatic] art…”64 Dryden confirms that On Dramatick Poesie is specifically intended to “to vindicate the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them” and, even more boldly, “to pronounce of our present Poets that they have far surpass’d all the Ancients, and the Modern Writers of other Countreys.”65 While France and England remained ever the loudest voices in the debate, Spain also engaged with these themes in its own way. All three nations are concerned with ultimately establishing their own dramatic superiority. Despite the desire to establish one’s homeland (or adoptive homeland) as possessing the best theater, the writings reveal that there was little agreement on what the criteria ought to be or what methods should be employed in order to attain it. For example, oughts theater to reject or rely on classical theory? And what factors were the most important—the classical unities, the beauty of poetry, the inventiveness of the plot, the vitality of the staging, or the moral correctness of the story? If we are seeking a consensus of critical opinion on the relative merits of dramatic output in various times and places we will be disappointed. As might be expected, the opinions are diverse and inconsistent. Competition between countries was real and powerful, but the competition with the ancients was more rhetorical. After all, the ancients themselves were long gone. Competitive rhetoric, though it attempts to sounds decisive, also reveals the uncertainty and the subjectivity of the evaluative process. Ultimately, most theorists find ways to justify deviation from even their strictest pronouncements.

Spain

The Spanish were, as a rule, less prone to producing theatrical analyses or asserting the superiority of their plays over those of other nations. Yet, by the early decades of the seventeenth

---

64 Hédelin, 19. “J’écris seulement pour faire connoistre au Peuple, l’excellence de leur art…”
century, there was already ongoing debate about theatrical ideals and which country’s drama best embodies them. As we saw in the example of Lope de Vega, the Spanish keenly recognized that they had an international reputation and were very invested in bolstering its prestige. Yet international opinions of Spanish theater were mixed, frequent international adaptation notwithstanding. Accustomed to hearing scathing judgments of the Spanish stage for not adhering to classical models, Ricardo de Turia recognized in “Apologético de las comedias españolas” (1616) that “[t]he very Terencian and Plautian Critics of these times generally condemn all of the Comedias made and represented in Spain as monstrous in invention and disposition as well as improper in elocution”66 However, echoing many of themes that Lope had brought up several years before, Turia argued that the Spanish were engaged in something new, something that did not—and should not—conform to ancient rules. It is vital, blended form of theater made to appeal to audiences and not to dead philosophers.67 He suggested that Spanish theater, like fashionable clothing, is constantly changing and new.68 Therefore, Turia proclaimed that even his argument about the drama was constructed “without availing myself of the

66 Turia, “Apologetico de Las Comedias Españolas.” Norte de la Poesia Española…. “los muy Críticos Trensiarcos, y Plautistas destos tiempos, condenar generalmente todas las Comedias que en España se hazen, y representan, assi por monstruosas en la inuencion, y disposicion, como impropias en la elocucion…” Also see Cervantes’s comments on the international reputation of Spanish drama in Don Quijote: “que todos esto es en perjuizio de la verdad, y en menoscabo de las historias, y aun en oprobrio de los Ingenios Españoles ; porque los Estrangeros, que con much puntualidad guardan las leyes de la Comedia, nos tienen por baruuros, é ignorantes viendo los absurdos, y disparates de las que hazemos.” Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra, El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de La Mancha, Compuesto Por Miguel de Cervantes Saauedra (Madrid, 1605), 293.
68 “Then it is infallible that the Spanish character called for in the Comedies, as in the costumes, are newly used every day.” “Pues es infallible, que la naturaleza Española pide en las Comedias lo que en los trages, que son nuevos usos cada dia.” Turia, “Apologetico de Las Comedias Españolas.” Norte de la Poesia Española....
examples of other foreign poets.” Ironically, much of the rhetoric contained in his “Apologético de las comedias españolas” was indeed borrowed from the Italian Guarini, author of Il Pastor Fido and other works of international repute.⁶⁹

By the early seventeenth century, Spain also clearly recognized the extent to which the rest of Europe is beginning to appropriate Spanish plays. The Spanish therefore employed this knowledge to construct a national theatrical identity as originators rather than borrowers. Spaniards thought of their theater as embodying a unique genius that its attackers could not fully appreciate, but were compelled to imitate. They asserted their theatrical prowess by differentiating Spanish drama from that of neighboring countries and by celebrating the impressive international reputations of their leading playwrights and “comedias famosas.”

Direct comparisons between Spanish drama and that of the ancients or moderns were rare in early modern Spanish commentary. Instead, there was constant talk of the poetry and drama of the “Spanish Nation.” While France and England are almost never explicitly mentioned, discussions of the artistry of the “Spanish Nation” drew a deliberately unspoken comparison between the Spanish and these others. The implication is that foreign theater traditions were not important enough to be brought into the discussion. Spanish commentary does discuss the ancients in great detail, not to contrast them favorably or unfavorably with modern Spanish poets, but to suggest a link between this illustrious past and Spanish contemporaneity. Lope’s Nueva arte de hacer comedias also suggests that Spain inherited the literary—and by extension theatrical—greatness of the ancients and will even surpass them. He announces that the thinkers of the Spanish academy, if not necessarily the Spanish drama, will eclipse Rome, just as Rome

⁶⁹ McKendrick, 281.
eclipsed Greece.\textsuperscript{70} Spanish disregard of classical rules does not prevent them from declaring Spanish playwrights rightful heirs to the ancient masters.

By constructing a theatrical discussion which emphasized the inherently Spanish and national nature of theater, Spain participated in an international debate while simultaneously denying that the debate existed. Just as the Spanish (of both the early modern period and later) desired to make it seem as though no foreign elements permeated their own theatrical tradition, they were very keen to be recognized for their role as supplier of theatrical modes, plays, and playwrights to the rest of Europe. The stage might be utterly Spanish in character, but it was certainly intended to play to audiences well beyond Spanish boarders. The successful exportation of Spanish theatrical culture is therefore mentioned and praised. In the preface to the collected works of Antonio de Solis, the editor takes great pleasure in describing how Solis’ \textit{Amor al uso} was translated into French and proved a hit in France.\textsuperscript{71} The best example of this tendency occurred in the deification of Lope de Vega, whom Spanish commentators loved both for his enormous contributions to Spanish theater and the interest and respect that he garnered for Spanish theater abroad.

Because the Spanish decided early on that they were playing a different game than the rest of Europe’s theater cultures, they seldom directly compare the virtues and vices of Spanish and foreign plays. Certainly they refuse to judge dramatic traditions by classical regulations. However, this does not mean that they did not feel competitive or seek to outshine their neighbors in theatrical attainment. Instead of arguing flat out that their plays are superior, they

\textsuperscript{70} Lope de Vega, \textit{Arte Nuevo}…., ln 3-4.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Vida de Don Antonio de Solís y Ribadeneyra}…” in Antonio de Solis y Ribadeneyra, \textit{Varías Poesías Sagradas Y Profanas}, ed. Juan de Goyeneche (Madrid: Antonio Roman, 1692).”Francès se ha bueltu su \textit{Amór al uso}.”
rely on the prestige of famous Spanish playwrights, “inimitable writers of Poetry, especially comic poets, whom all the world have admired,” to imply their superiority.\textsuperscript{72} Of course, the seventeenth century poet of choice was Lope de Vega. It would not be until rather late in the seventeenth century that he was joined on his pedestal by Calderón de la Barca. Other poets were also given accolades, though none with such frequency. Spanish writers were invested in illustrating not only that Lope was the most renowned Spanish poet, but also that he was lauded beyond Spain. Even a collection of funereal poetry dedicated to Calderón reports on the extent of Lope’s fame, for he was truly the marker against which all other playwrights were measured: “When Lope de Vega died, it was not only Spain but in foreign countries that he was applauded with various Elegies and Epitaphs to his memory; for our poet deserved no less”\textsuperscript{73} Not only does the Jesuit Juan de Mariana compare the death of Lope de Vega to that of Plautus, thereby rendering the Spanish poet equal to the ancient one, he also points out that Lope’s work was commended by the pope and “all the nations of Christendom.”\textsuperscript{74} His bid for international renown is further confirmed with the statement “There have been printed two books of works by different poets celebrating his fame posthumously, one by Spanish Poets and the other by

\textsuperscript{72} Maria Fernandez de Villa-Real, “Al Serenissimo Señor Don Luis Primero, Príncipe de las Asturias,” in Pedro Calderón de la Barca, \textit{Sexta Parte de Comedias de Celebre Poeta Español Don Pedro Calderon de La Barca, Cavallero de Orden de Santiago, Capellan de Honor de Su Magestad, Y de Los Señores Reyes Nuevos de La Santa Iglesia de Toledo. Sacadas de Sus Originales, Y Aora Nuevamente Corregidas En Esta Vltima Impression} (Madrid: Juan Sanz, 1715). “inimitables escritos de Poesia, especialmente Comicos, que han admirado al Mundo…”

\textsuperscript{73} “Provest a del Marques de Villatorcas, al Presidente del Alcaçar,” in \textit{Funebres Elogios a La Memoria de D. Pedro Calderon de La Barca...} (Valencia, 1681).

“Quando murió Lope de Vega, no solo en España, pero en los otros Países extranjeros, le aplaudieron con diferentes Elogios, y Epitafios a su memoria; pues no merece menos nuestro Poeta, pues el realce que ha dado al asunto, porque aplaudieron á Lope, es bien notorio.”

\textsuperscript{74} Juan de Mariana, \textit{Historian General de España}, vol. 2 (Madrid: Andrés Garcia de la Iglesia, 1678), 397. “todas las naciones de la Christiandad.”
Italians. Both achieved merit, both deserved their muse and subject.”75 The death of Calderón unleashed a similar outpouring of praise, which lauded him as “the sun of Poetry in our age.”76 He too is compared with the ancient poets and dubbed the “Plautus of Spanish Theater.”77 Witness also the accolades offered to Antonio de Solís who is:

…not revered in Spain alone. Many other nations esteem him. With his comedias he ennobled France…the farthest lands wish him for their own. They envy us him, and with good reason. Such a great man is a great honor for a nation.78

France

The French were second only to the Italians in entering the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns and quickly came to dominate that debate. Once they began to evaluate the merits of the various western European theater traditions, they became the leading voices in that discussion as well. As we have witnessed in the Querelle du Cid of the early to mid-seventeenth century, theater could be of immense national importance. The French authors who participated in the critical debates of the seventeenth century attempted to be evenhanded in their pronouncements about the current state of theater. Nevertheless, they inevitably wanted to see French theater outstrip all its rivals.

François-Hédelin d’ Aubignac79 seeks to announce in his Practique du Theatre (1657), “[t]he glory to which the French Theatre had risen.”80 Yet he is curiously ambivalent about

75 Ibid., 397. “Imprimieronse dos libros con obras de diferentes Poetas, celebrando su fama posthuma; eul vno de Poetas Españoles, y el otro de Italianos. Tanto alcanzaron sus meritos, tanto mereció su numen, y estudio.”
76 “Papel Al Ilustre Marques de Villatorcas,” Funebres Elogios a La Memoria de D. Pedro Calderon de La Barca… “el sol de la Poesia de nuestro siglo”
77 “Aprobacion de Noble Don Diego de Scals, y Salcedo…,” Funebres Elogios a La Memoria de D. Pedro Calderon de La Barca… “el Plauto de las comedias Españolas”
78 Vida de Don Antonio de Solís y Ribadeneyra…” “No es venerado en sola España, Solís. Estimanle muchas otras Naciones. Con sus Comedias se Enobleció la Francesa…Las mas estrañas, le desean propio. Por él embidan, y con razon, à la nuestra. Es gran Honor de vna Nacion tan gran hombre.”
exactly how well France performs in the realm of the theatrical. He reports that French theater began to improve tremendously under the auspices of Cardinal Richelieu, extensive censorship, and the strict observation of classical rules, but it has since slipped back into its old ways. In more recent years, the court and the crowds were more drawn to fancy decorations and dirty jokes than to worthy plays and all sorts of rabble had infiltrated the playhouses. Therefore, he attempts “a project to restore the French Theater,” a goal which is presumably possible because of the close relationship with classical tradition forged earlier in the seventeenth century.

According to Hédelin, if France is currently struggling in the late seventeenth century, then at least it can take comfort in the knowledge that no one else is doing any better:

for everyone knows, there has never been anything so monstrous in this point, as what we have seen since the rebirth of Theater in Italy, Spain, and France, and aside from the Horaces of Corneille, I doubt whether we have a single one [play], where the unity of place is rigorously observed, at least, I am sure I have not seen any yet.  

At least France then possessed one good play—and one more than everyone else.

Other commentators also gave evidence that the French scholarly community took the classical tradition much more seriously than foreign writers, even as many individual French playwrights struggled against these dictates. In his Réflexions sur la poétique [of Aristotle], René

---

79 According to Ambroise Lalouëtte, Hédelin was “first French author of this century who dared take it upon himself to vindicate the prohibited Comédie of all ages.” “Hédelin est le premier Auteur Françoix de ce Siècle, qui a ozé entreprendre de justifier la Comedie proscrite de tout temps.” Ambroise Lalouëtte, Histoire et Abrégé Des Ouvrages Latins, Italiens & François, Pour & Contre La Comedie et L’opéra (Orleans: Paris, 1697), aii.

80 Hédelin, 18. “La gloire où s’est elevé le Theatre Françoix…”

81 Ibid., 17. “vn Proiet pour le rétablissement du Theatre Françoix.”

82 Ibid., 140-141. “Je ne parle point ici des Modernes car chacun sçait qu’ils n’y a jamais eu rien de plus monstrueux en ce point que les Poèmes que nous avons veus depuis le renouvellement du Theatre, en Italie, en Espagne, & en France; & hors les Horaces de M. Corneille, ie doute que nous en ayons un suer, où l’unité du lieu soit rigoureusement gardée; pour le moins est-il certain que ie n’en ay point veu.”
Rapin, announced “Into what faults have most of the Spanish and Italian Poets fallen, by their ignorance” of classical principles. Though Rapin seeks to judge each nation’s theater fairly and without bias according to their dramatic “correctness,” he nevertheless takes pride in announcing that the French have written in the tragic genre with the most success. Another neoclassicist, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux reprimands the Spanish for not correctly observing the unity of time and compares their methods unfavorably with French conventions:

A rhymer across the Pyrenees [in Spain], without any peril,  
On the stage, turns days into years.  
Where, often, the hero of the rude show  
Is a child in the first act and a foggy in the last.  
But we for this reason follow these rules,  
We want to handle the action artfully;  
In one place, in one day, only one action  
And so it remains until the drama is compete.

Even as French critics clearly desire their own playwrights to be the best in the world, they sincerely believe in using classical criteria to form their judgments, which can lead to confusion when loyalties and observations come into conflict. Charles de Saint-Évremond, who lived in England for much his life, seems uncertain as to whether French or English drama ought

---

83 René Rapin, *Oeuvres Du P. Rapin Qui Contiennent Les Reflexions Sur L’eloquence, La Poetique, L’histoire et La Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Paris: Freres Barbou, 1725), 105. “on ne va à la perfection que par ces regles, & on s’égarè dès qu’on ne les fuit pas. Dans quelles fautes ne sont pas tombéz la plûpart des Poëtes Espagnols & Italiens por les avoir ignorées?”

84 *Ibid.*, 195. “Mais notre Nation qui s’est plus appliquée à ce genre d’écrire que les autres, y a aussi mieux reüssi…”

Sur la scene en un jour renferme des années,  
Là souvent le Heros d’un spectale grossier,  
Enfant au premier acte, est barbon au dernier.  
Mais nous, que la Raison à ses regles engage,  
Nous voulons Qu’avec art l’Action se ménage:  
Qu’en un Lieu, qu’en un Jour, un seul Fait accompli  
Tienne jusqu’à la fin le Theatre rempli.”
to be preferred. Even as he professed to like French drama the best, Saint-Évremond declared that English comedy most closely mirrors the classical spirit. Saint-Évremond was torn between praising the French for adhering most staunchly to the three unities and admiring the English for inventiveness and novelty. Even when an author was committed to classical theory, making comparative judgments proved a tricky business. Despite their admitted concern with the classical purity of drama, French writers nevertheless seek confirmation of the superiority of their preferred dramatic tradition in ancient discourse. The English, as we shall see, were even less subtle about their favoritism.

**England**

Thomas Rymer asserts in his preface to Rapin’s *Réflexions sur la poétique* that for a long time there had been very little English commentary written so that “till of late Years, England was as free from Criticks as it is from wolves.” But Rymer finds that by the late seventeenth century “the most ignorant” had started to enter the dialogue. From the rise of the public playhouses through the interregnum there was a steadily growing familiarity with foreign theater, but it was not seen as a threat or even a major influence upon domestic theater. However, after the Restoration, non-English theater and culture became increasingly visible and problematic. Other European countries and lands around the globe exerted a more visible influence on English life. During the same span of time England first engaged with the writings of French critics, which were blistering in their comparisons of the various national theatrical styles. In response, the English threw themselves into the debate to carve out an international voice for English theater. Theorists began to translate and publish French dramatic criticism and also wrote their

---

own, comparing not only ancient and modern plays but “the Wits of our Nation with those of others.” The majority of these English assessments, understandably, convey an overwhelmingly positive portrait of English theater.

When Thomas Rymer published his translation of Rapin’s Réflexions, with its ambivalent stance but its firm critique of all European theater traditions, the Englishman could not help but insert his own opinions into the preface, charging that “Were it proper here to handle this Argument, and to make Comparisons with our Neighbours, it might easily by our Poetry be evinc’d, that our Wit was never inferior to theirs, though perhaps our Honesty made us worse Politicians.” He insists that if the English theater has met with less critical acclaim than that of other lands, it is only because the English have been too modest to toot their own horn. Despite Rymer’s feigned concern about the propriety of engaging in the competitive international debate, he evidently had no such qualms. To any reader who might have missed the point, he announces “for the Drama, the World has nothing to be compared with us.”

Sir William Temple’s Of Poetry was not flatly condemnatory of foreign drama. Yet, he too supposed the English drama, by reason of its point of origin, possessed some ineffable quality that rendered it superior to the rest of Europe, both past and present:

In this [drama] the Italian, the Spanish, and the French have all had their different Merit, and received their just Applauses. Yet I am deceived if our English has not in some kind excelled both the Modern and the Ancient, which has been by Force of a Vein Natural perhaps to our Country.

English plays are asserted to be the best in Europe not through any specific combination of rules,

87 Dryden, “The Epistle Dedicatory,” Of Dramatick Poesie....
89 Ibid., 121.
techniques, or sensibilities, but in some inherent and inimitable way. Richard Flecknoe presents a
different approach to the conversation of competition than either Dryden or Temple, writing,
“For us, we began before them, and if since they seem to have out-stript us, ‘tis because our Stage ha’s stood at a stand this many years; nor we may doubt, but we shall soon out-strip them again, if we hold on but as we begin.”⁹¹ “If French err less,” he asserts, “it’s only because they dare less.”⁹² Flecknoe proposes that England’s subordinate dramatic standing is largely the result of its long hiatus from theatrical activity in the mid-seventeenth century, and that it will soon regain its edge. The English stage, he suggests, is also more inventive than the French, who are too limited by their reliance on outmoded conventions.

John Dryden proved to be one of England’s most combative participants in the international dramatic contest, writing his On Dramatick Poesie with such vehement criticism of theatrical practice both in England and abroad that he later proffered an apology for his hastiness. Composed in the form of a dialogue between four friends who debate the merits of English theater in comparison with that of the ancients and foreign, Dryden’s Essay proclaims that “as for the Italian, French, and Spanish Plays…those who now write [in England], surpass them; and…the Drama is wholly ours.”⁹³ Of Dramatic Poesie, like many of Dryden’s compositions, takes particular aim at those who prefer French drama to that of the English. Nevertheless, his essay illustrates an English familiarity with French theater and the immense popularity of French plays on the English stage.

---

⁹² Ibid., 93.
⁹³ Dryden, Of Dramatick Poesie..., 5.
However, English words have a tendency to contradict English actions. Despite asserting the superiority of their native theater, English authors continued to borrow prodigiously from the continent. Indeed, the very poets and works they critiqued were often those that proved most compelling to playhouse viewers and to readers. As Peter Holland points out, “[t]hough English dramatists clearly understood the theatrical brilliance of Molière’s work, they could do nothing to overcome a nationalistic dislike of anything that came from across the Channel.”94 A slew of defensive and jingoistic publications cannot conceal the English fascination with foreign cultural influence, and the French in particular. Indeed, in many cases, authors intentionally react with disapproval to popular tastes. However, their stern pronouncements do not prevent men like Dryden and Shadwell, some of the more vehemently pro-English faction, from borrowing heavily from foreign plays. The greatest literary censure is directed toward those cultures from whom the most prodigious borrowing occurs, for they are felt to be the greatest rivals. Dryden, himself a prodigious borrower of Spanish and French dramatic material, made the Heroic form of drama—which was commonly understood to be a French style—the most popular genre on the Restoration stage.95 Despite viewing France as something to be bested, Dryden found the French avoidance of brutality and bloodshed on stage to be “many times both convenient and beautiful.”96

The English, in addition to comparing their poets with the ancients and the moderns of other nations, also felt themselves to be in competition with playwrights from the recent past: the age of Shakespeare and Johnson. The interregnum created a pause in the production of plays on

95 Carlson, Theories of the Theatre, 117.
96 Dryden, Of Dramatic Poesie..., 23.
English public stages that divided the theater of the pre-1642 stage and its Restoration-era counterpart. Not that nothing was produced or created, but creative efforts were slowed drastically. With a dearth of emerging talent, people clung to the old plays and the old poets with enthusiasm and admiration and engaged with their dramatic texts more frequently. Once the theaters reopened, they depended heavily on revivals of these older plays, which further elevated the reputations of the works and their authors. It was not until several decades into the Restoration that critics were driven to compare the “old” English poets with the new. Opinions were divided as to which playwrights were better, but this particular contest was less passionately contested. Dryden mused that “those [plays] we now see acted, come short of many which were written in the last Age: but my comfort is if we are overcome, it will be only by our own Country-men.”97 The English poets of the past constituted a cultural resource rather than a cultural threat.

**Into the Eighteenth Century**

The spirited dialogue over dramatic quality had certainly not died down by the eighteenth century. If anything, nationalist debates over theater became more contentious. Italian actor Luigi Riccoboni, in his compendium detailing the theatrical life of Western Europe, seeks to settle the dispute about who has the best drama. Ultimately, Riccoboni is a Francophile, and so decides that:

> All Nations of Europe should cede that to France, since those who produce the largest number of works have so little excellence. The French Theater, by a long train of great pieces, marked the genius and character of its Dramatic Poets, who for a hundred years have walked in the right path.98

---

Riccoboni’s anonymous English translator could not help but add his two cents to the argument, suggesting that Riccoboni “by not being acquainted with the English Stage, has here been very partial to France; for it is certain England has produced a greater Number of beautiful Tragedies and Comedies than any Nation, and perhaps fewer faulty ones.” By the early eighteenth century, the ancient rules of classical drama were becoming less compelling and formed less of a basis for comparison. Rather, arguments focused on characteristics like audience enjoyment and “effectiveness.”

Spanish drama critics of the sixteenth century appeared least militant in their comparisons of the various national stages. Indeed, Spanish writers barely touch the debate until the mid-eighteenth century, when attacks against other lands became more forceful. Blas Antonio Nasarre, in his 1749 Disertación o Prólogo Sobre Las Comedias de España, complains about the treatment that foreign commentators and playwrights have afforded Spanish plays. He is best known for his scathing criticism of Cervantes’ comedias and entermeses, but also reveals a profound concern for the international reputation of Spanish drama. Indeed, his admitted purpose in writing his prologue is to “warn the French author, should the criticism and borrowing of our comedies continue, of the things he ought to do and that he lacks the ability to judge impartially.” If the French are going to use Spanish theater for their own purposes, they need to stop perverting it and cease insulting it.

---

Ouvrages, marque le génie & le caractère de ses Poëtes Dramatiques, qui depuis cent ans marchent dans le bon chemin.”

99 Luigi Riccoboni, An Historical and Critical Account of the Theatres in Europe (London, 1741), 140. Of course, he does not provide any examples.

100 Blas Nasarre, Blas Nasarre Disertación O Prologo..., 59. “hacer aquí presente el origen, progreso, estado y decadencia del teatro español, advirtiendo al autor francés, por si continúa la crítica y extracto de nuestras comedias , de las cosas que le son necesarias y le faltan para juzgar sin parcialidad.”
Like French and English critics, he evaluates the theatrical output of different regions. Nasarre defends not only the quality of Spanish drama, but also its antiquity, asserting that French theater got its start “only in the sixteenth century, at which time in Spain we had dialogues, farces, and comedias created three or four centuries earlier.”

He does however admit a Spanish debt to Italian comedy. His comments are founded on the assumption that Spanish drama, in its finest incarnations, is the object of Spanish national pride. The perception abroad that Spanish plays are of poor quality and fit only for reworking, he attributes to the fact that, “Foreigners examining our plays do not deign to speak of any but those that are bad and they adapt the good ones to their languages and customs.”

Most foreigners, he insists, talk about Spanish dramas without knowledge of them, or based on the works of author who—while certainly famous—did not have the power represent the nation, and so they came to believe that such comedias were the best Spain had.

He also attacks Calderon, “he whom they unrightfully call ‘Prince of the Comic Poets’”. Nassare claims Calderon’s foreign travels and foreign reputation have hurt Spain and raised the general opinion of French and Italian theater. Foreign authors like Tomas Corneille and the “great” Molière can successfully adapt him by rendering his language into pretentious nonsense. But none of Spain’s esteemed authors—Guillen de Castro, Francisco de Rojas, Antonio de Solis—require or deserve this sort of treatment.

---

101 Ibid., 62. “este origen no fue en los tiempos antiguos de que hablamos, sino en el siglo XVI, cuando en España teníamos diálogos, farsas y comedias formadas de tres y cuatro siglos anteriores.”
102 Ibid., 59. “extranjeros, examinando nuestras piezas de teatro, no se dignaron hablar de otras que de las malas, y pasaron a sus lenguas y costumbres las buenas, unos con evidente plagio, y otros con ingenua y agradecida confesión, digna de alabanza particular en Tomás Cornelle.”
103 Ibid., 75. “al que llaman sin título alguno príncipe de los poetas cómicos.”
104 Ibid., 78.
Lope and Calderón, merely because they are famous, speak for Spain and represent the finest of its literature. Yet Nassare also employs the same competitive language as the critics of late seventeenth century France and England, boasting, “We have a greater number of perfect and artful plays than the French, Italians, and English put together!”

These documents were exercises in argument and persuasion, so it is difficult to ascertain exactly how indicative they were of an author’s—or a culture’s—true opinions. However, when the critics were themselves playwrights, it would be foolish to consider their assessment as a purely rhetorical enterprise. The poet had too much at stake, and used this platform to explain his methods and his reasoning to literary critics. We find common themes and correlating arguments across national and linguistic divisions, indicating that they did indeed reflect larger cultural ideas. Ultimately, these dramatic evaluations are less about impartial artistry and more about maintaining, rectifying or asserting the international reputation of one’s homeland and its theater. One’s impressions of the merits and detriments of the various modern theater traditions were also shaped by one’s attitudes toward the ancients, and what one believed to be the purpose and the popular role of the theater. Some classical antecedent could be found to support nearly any opinion. Whether or not individual authors truly believed in what they wrote is impossible to prove. However, they clearly imagined that dramatic criticism and theatrical productions were available to and relevant to an international (if not possibly universal) audience. The poets of a given age and location remained both in dialogue and, in some sense, in competition with the great minds of the past and their contemporaries in other lands.

\[105\] *Ibid.*, 79. “tenemos mayor numero de Comedias perfectas, y según arte, que los Franceses, Italianos, y Ingleses juntos…”
Theater and National Greatness

Early modern thinkers were not foolish in their concern with dramatic superiority and positive theatrical reputation. A strong, well-defined dramatic tradition functioned as a barometer of cultural unity and national strength. “[W]hat more sensitive and general markers,” Hédelin muses, “can be given of the greatness in any State, than these illustrious entertainments?” The argument is simplistic, but the assumption understandable. In order for theater to flourish internal peace and economic opportunity are integral, if not essential factors. If one nation’s theatrical output is noticed and appreciated by other countries, then that nation is probably economically and culturally sound. Successful playwrights function not simply as national monuments, but as national servants. Pierre Corneille, in the dedication to Horace, his first play after the Querrelle du Cid, asserts that “[t]he service we [playwrights] are rendering to the State is not a small one, since contributing to your amusements, we are contributing to maintaining a health that is so precious and so necessary to it.” No doubt the rest of the theatrical community would have agreed with his assessment, even if some critics disliked Corneille’s plays.

Just as inadequate theater alluded to larger cultural failings, a more perfect theater culture was an indication of a more perfect society. Therefore, Hédelin asserts that when French theater is perfected and “magnificent, and worthy of the Court of France, and the City of Paris,” it will also ease social tensions. By providing ordinary folk a window into the entertainment of the

106 Hédelin, 2. “Aussi, quelles marques plus sensibles, & plus generales pourroit-on donner de la grandeur d’un Estat, que ces illustres diuertissemens?”
“& qu’ainsi nous ne rendons pas un petit service à l’Estat, puisque, contribuant à vos divertissements, nous contribuons a l’entretien d’une santé qui lui est si précieuse & si necessaire.”
108 Hédelin, 514. “Ainsi l’on remédiera à l’imperfection des Spectacles que l’on renda magnifiques & dignes de la Cour de France & de la ville de Paris; le peuple par ce moyen aura
nobility a perfect French theater will level cultural attitudes, increase sympathy across social brackets and ultimately diminish the discontent of the masses. Theater, Hédelin suggests, is not simply a reflection of greatness, but also potentially a tool for improvement, education, and social regulation.

Nevertheless, to the early modern mind, a theater with a distinguished international reputation was not merely a marker of cultural stability or the happiness of the citizenry. Dramatic skill showcased on the playhouse stage became metaphor for military prowess on the world stage. Internal stability manifested itself in external power and the ability to influence international trends in politics, commerce, and even the arts. By this logic, a failure to compete dramatically with the other nations of Western Europe presumed a more general cultural malaise. To insult a country’s poetry was to slight its government, its enterprise, its moral foundations, and its intellectual capacity, and in particular its martial vigor.

One “Mr. Dennis,” in his defense of theatrical performances from the inevitable accusations of immorality and cultural degeneracy, argues a direct correlation between the proliferation of dramatic poetry and military might. He suggests that since the establishment of a strong theatrical tradition in France around the beginning of the seventeenth century, “the French have not only been remarkably united, but have advanced their Conquests so fast, that they have almost doubled their Empire.”

Indeed, between 1600 and the 1690s, France had steadily made qualche image des merveilleuses Representations Qu’on a vœüs sur le Theatre du Palais Cardinal, & du petit Bourbon & sera moins jaloux des plaisirs que les Grands doivent recevoir des magnificences de la Cour.”

109 Mr. Dennis. The Usefulness of the Stage, (1689), 61. French armies marched into a number of bordering lands in the second half of the seventeenth century. Some of them remained under permanent French control. Others were lost after 1688 during France’s involvement in the Nine Year’s War and the War of Spanish Succession. In the 1670s, the French successfully wrested Franche-Comté from Spanish Habsburg rule. Darryl Dee, Expansion and Crisis in Louis XIV’s
territorial gains against neighboring provinces. Dennis further suggests that a subsequent drop-off in theatrical productivity likewise indicated national decline, for, in the years since the poetic greats Molière, Corneille, and Racine died or retired, the French have “lost almost half their Conquests” within Europe.\(^{110}\) This argument discounted the notion that peace and theatrical prosperity go hand in hand. Whether or not it entered combat, a nation with a vibrant theatrical culture appeared to possess both the energy and the finances to perform well militarily. Thomas Rymer therefore asserts that “Wit and Valor have always gone together, and Poetry been the Companion of Camps.”\(^{111}\)

Theater might even act as a military strategy of sorts. Hédelin reports that during a period of warfare, the:

> two great Cities [Paris and Vienna] by their Magnificence, by their Plays, by their incomparable Ballets, and all their superb and pompous entertainments, have tried to convince everyone that the events of the war are indifferent to their good or ill Fortune.\(^{112}\)

In the midst of conflict, a strong theatrical presence in a nation’s capital offset political and military concern. The cultivation of dramatic activity might be a deliberate attempt to broadcast the appearance of stability and self-assurance. War and theater were both spectacles, and both were often used to enhance royal power.

---

*France: Franche-Comté and Absolute Monarchy, 1674-1715, Changing Perspectives on Early Modern Europe 13 (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 3-8. What Dennis does not mention is that French territorial expansion had been an ongoing process beginning in the late fifteenth century, considerably earlier than the flowering of early modern French drama. However, territorial gains in the seventeenth century were indeed large and impressive.*

\(^{110}\) Dennis. *The Usefulness of the Stage*, 61.


\(^{112}\) Hédelin, 4. “nous dirons que ces deux grandes Villes par leur Magnificences, par leurs Comedies, par leurs Ballets incomparables, & par tous leurs diuertissements superbes & pompeux, se sont efforcée de faire croire à tout les éuenemens de la guerre font indifferentes à leur bonne ou à leur mauusaise Fortune.”
Whether real or imaginary, the link between theatrical reputation and force of arms caught the early modern imagination. Dryden, too, felt compelled to discuss his nation’s theatrical reputation in military terms, declaring himself “at all times ready to defend the honour of my Country against the French, and to maintain, we are as well able to vanquish them with our Pens as our Ancestors have been with their swords.”

Literary output not only indicates combat readiness but also becomes another form of combat. Dramatic composition is a duel, a contest of honor fought by representative champions, but it also represents a large battle between combatant countries. One-time or current competitors for territory were also inherently competitors in other aspects of cultural life—drama in particular. The reflections of Hédelin and Dryden confirm a general awareness of foreign theater throughout early modern Western Europe, where dramatic displays were visible not only to locals but to the wider world and were followed with as much interest as the military campaigns they paralleled.

The Rise of the Poet-Playwright-Hero

Volumes assessing the relative merits of the various national theaters also heaped literary laurels on their leading playwrights. We noted that Spanish accounts loved to mention when a local author achieved fame outside of the homeland. While the scholarly voices of each nation wanted to commend their own national authors, they also wanted to participate in an international dialogue, which meant paying attention to what writers in other lands were doing. Armed with this knowledge, they used it to defend, or occasionally critique, domestic authors by contrasting the best work of various playwrights from different places. Many poets attained an international status, which went hand in hand with their national importance. Their fame at home

---

113 Dryden, Of Dramatick Poesie..., 18.
made them ideal ambassadors to the international community, and their inescapable international popularity could effectively be used to bolster international pride.

The elevation of “national” poets parallels this inter-nation-state competition. If drama was a form of competition, then the playwrights of each theater center were competitors. The more contentious the arguments over the various national dramatic traditions, the more lofty the reputations of these poet-heroes needed to be. They were (and are) the dramatic athletes representing their native land in the competition for literary supremacy. These competitions and their champions remained compelling not because the participants operated in isolation, but because they recognized they truly were performing on an international stage. The celebration of national playwrights only reflects a hyper-awareness of international theatrical practice. For this reason, the greatest pens of England (Shakespeare, Johnson)\textsuperscript{114} are directly compared with those of France (Corneille, Molière) and at times those of Spain (Lope, Calderon) but rarely with their own countrymen.

The story of theater became a story of personalities. Shakespeare and his contemporaries became the monumental figures we know and venerate today because there was a cultural need in the early modern world to showcase the best that the nation had to offer and to assert theatrical primacy over rival nations. John Dryden, concerned about the Englishness and the international status of London theater, was one of Shakespeare’s principle advocates, declaring him “the Man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive Soul.”\textsuperscript{115} Thus, Shakespeare was espoused as a playwright capable of outshining the completion: seventeenth century foreign poets. In order to cast doubt upon the superiority of French

\textsuperscript{114} Few other English playwrights appear to have been known or admired abroad until Joseph Addison in the mid-eighteenth century.

\textsuperscript{115} Dryden, *Of Dramatick Poesie*..., 33.
playwrights, Dryden needed to offer up an English writer to surpass them, and Shakespeare became this figure. Dryden thus claimed that Shakespeare was considered by his own contemporaries to have been the best playwright of the age. Shakespeare was just one example, but commentators capitalized on a few specific poets, who represented and vindicated all national poets.

**Popular Culture and International Theatrical Competition**

Through their purchasing power and their reception of dramatic material, audiences helped shape both theatrical offerings and the terms of the critical discourse among the literary minds of Europe. We have already noted that Lope’s *Arte nuevo de hacer comedias* was composed to specifically illuminate techniques that ensured theatrical popularity. Because playwrights needed to remain sensitive to popular whim, public enthusiasm for foreign or domestic dramas heavily impacted exchange. So to what extent did the audience engage with the impassioned debate over the relative merits of different national theater traditions, their dramatic output, and their authorial standard bearers? Did this literary debate carry over into public discourse, and become meaningful to those not able to follow the published literary debates or who were less familiar with classical drama? Answers to such questions remain elusive, for the experiences of ordinary theatergoers were rarely recorded in a manner useful to contemporary historians. However, on the English Restoration stage, theatrical competition did occasionally enter the playhouses.

English poets John Dryden and Thomas Shadwell borrowed heavily and regularly from French and Spanish plays, but they also conspicuously referenced national pride and international dramatic competition in their performed material, particularly prologues and epilogues. The prologue to Dryden and Davenant’s *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (an
adaptation from Shakespeare’s play) is an ode to Shakespeare and the celebrated Elizabethan age of English theater. It also provides an early description that will lend itself heavily to later idealizations of Shakespeare, who is portrayed as setting the example for his fellow playwrights, although he himself was “taught by none.”116 By reinterpreting a work deeply associated with the older author, the two enterprising playwrights are seeking to establish a connection with the famed poets of the previous century. However the epilogue begins in a less celebratory vein:

Gallants, by all good signs it does appear,
That [Sixteen] sixty-seven’s a very damning year,
For knaves abroad, and for ill poets here.
Among the Muses, there’s a gen’ral rot,
The Rhyming Monsieur and the Spanish plot:
Defy or court, all’s one, they go to pot.117

In other words, no English plays or playwrights have been terribly successful in the past year. English theater as a whole appears to be in decline, with a heavy reliance on French poetic forms (“the rhyming monsieur”) and Spanish stories. The speech also hints at the ongoing competition between these traditions. Dryden ultimately suggests that by showing appreciation for his dramatic effort, the English audience has the ability to elevate its authors above those of the French and Spanish stage, thereby setting them on the same footing as the illustrious English poets of the previous century.

Thomas Shadwell evokes this competitive atmosphere vividly in the prologue to his 1688 play The Squire of Alsastia:

How have we in the Space of one poor Age,
Beheld the Rise and Downfal of the Stage!
When, with our King resto’d it first arose,

117 Ibid.
They did each day some good old Play expose…
Then came Machines, brought from a Neighbor Nation,
Oh how we suffer’d under Decoration!118

Just as the English theater was being revived to its old glory, Shadwell complains, it was beset by foreign stage practice. Audiences were generally aware that stage machinery was primarily an Italian phenomenon, and Shadwell described these effects like an occupying force. English drama and performance practice have been, he further rants, “Infected by the French.”119 The only thing that can now save English theater, he proclaims, is a return to the past, to plays “[c]onforming to the Rules of Master Ben [Johnson]”120 Thus, late seventeenth century English theater competed not just with the scripted plays of other nations, but in their performances as well.

The epilogue to Shadwell’s *Psyche* couches this competitive atmosphere even more bluntly, declaring that “No foreign Stage can ours in Pomp excel.”121 In the epilogue to Shadwell’s *Timon of Athens*, a play understood to be thoroughly English despite the story’s older Roman and Italian treatments, he proclaims that French “Ships or Plays o’re ours shall ne’er advance,/For our Third Rates shall match the First of France.”122 Not only is Shadwell reaffirming the connection between theatrical prowess and military might, he provokes competitive sentiments among English theater-goers and contributes to the popular elevation of English Poets (Shakespeare) above foreign ones. Such comments certainly had the potential to

119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
shape the theater-going experience of the crowds, across social and educational boundaries and
instill in them a pride in the English drama.

Thus, on the English stage in particular, the idea that the theater and its heroes were
important markers of national prestige was successfully conveyed to a diverse audience. Yet,
though nationalist literary debates carried into the playhouse, English audiences continued to
clamor for foreign-inspired plays, and so poets and companies provided them. National
reputations and sentiments of cultural superiority did not prevent interest in and enjoyment of
foreign products. Just as playwrights pillaged from foreign scripts and then had the audacity to
condemn these same models, audiences applauded foreign-derived works while still believing
that English plays (and therefore the English nation) were best. Indeed, as we shall see,
nationalist rhetoric offset the cultural hazard inherent in adapting foreign plays and transformed
playhouses into spaces in which the foreign and the threatening could be safely experienced and
even enjoyed.
CHAPTER 5
THE WORLD ON DISPLAY

In the preceding chapters, I have urged a reexamination of early modern theater and its presentation in both academic studies and in popular culture. I have argued that the familiar narratives that present sixteenth and seventeenth century European theater in terms of discrete national traditions, linguistically defined canons of dramatic texts, and isolated poetic geniuses clearly do not hold up under historical inquiry. Instead, we must pay heed to the transnational arch of its development and observe the patterns of communication, transportation, trade, and national identity that made early modern European theater truly international in its operations, repertoire, and in the imaginations of those who experienced it. Furthermore, I have suggested that the early moderns were largely aware—and at times very keenly aware—of the ways in which theater pieces and productions were created and recreated across national boundaries. Just as theater is more than simply the words performed, the international dimensions of the early modern stage encompassed not only the stories that were exchanged but also a much wider range of people, goods and experiences, both contrived and real. Plays were not international in their origins only. In countless other ways, theatrical pieces brought the experience of the foreign into domestic culture. Their reach—both literal and metaphorical—altered the very concept of “theater.”

Theater and World

The very use of the word “theater” has an extensive international history. It changed over time to reflect the comingled understanding of theater and world. The oldest concept of “theater” was of a simple physical space—nearly always a specially-created space—where spectacles and plays could be seen. In ancient times, the viewability of theater was the essential element that
made it “theater”—for performance is not fully performance without audience. The distant etymological ancestor of the modern word “theater”, the Greek word “theatron”, literally indicated a place designed for viewing and derived from “theaomai,” meaning the action of viewing.¹ By extension, “theater” could refer to both a real place and a metaphorical place where events could be observed and performances occur. These meanings first enter Western European vernaculars in late medieval times. From the Latin “theatrum” arises the thirteenth century French “théâtre” which in turn gives rise to the English “theater” by the fourteenth century.² Similarly, the Italians transformed the Latin original into “teatro,” which subsequently became both “theatro” and later “teatro” in Spanish. All of these words referred specifically to the physical theater building where the spectacles of classical antiquity took place. Eventually, the word came to signify both contemporary sites for dramatic performance and by extension the performances themselves.³

Thus, the development of the very word “theater” came about in the midst of phenomena that affected all of western Europe: the rediscovery of classical languages and texts, the rise of vernacular languages, and the birth of print culture. Linguistically, the term “theater” developed


³ Julie Stone Peters writes, “By the mid-sixteenth century the word “theatre” was regularly being used to refer to the spaces in which textual entertainments were given…The use of the word ‘theatre’ to denote performance spaces spread metonymically to include the productions in those buildings and the plays that contributed to them, as in Jacques Grévin’s 1561 collection of plays: his Théâtre.” Julie Stone Peters, Theatre of the Book, 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99-100.
out of networks of literary exchange between various regions. The continued parallel
development of the term in numerous languages of the early modern era and beyond, suggests
how closely interrelated these European cultures were, and hints at an early modern
understanding of theater that transcends linguistic and regional boundaries. Of course, the
linguistic evolution of “theater” was by no means identical or fully simultaneous in different
lands and tongues. In France, “théâtre” referred to contemporary performance spaces as early as
the fourteenth century. However, it is not until the sixteenth century, that the English “theater”
is used to refer to contemporary buildings rather than ancient or metaphorical ones. This ought
not to be surprising, for this century saw the construction of the first permanent edifices
dedicated exclusively, or at least predominantly, to dramatic performance.

While “theater” has always indicated particular locations used for stage performances, it
has also been used as a symbol for much larger phenomena. Metaphors describing the world as
stage and stage as world are cliché. Shakespeare’s rendition is probably the most famous, but it is
worth remembering that the idea was no means revolutionary when Shakespeare first used it.
The comparison, had existed long before his lifetime, and early modern people were accustomed
to the juxtaposition of the world and the theater. Yet somehow the constant use of this theme
over the course of centuries did not diminish its importance, and so it continues to intrigue us
today—if the contemporary popularity of his quotation is any indication. There remains a very

4 “theater, subst. masc.”, Portal lexical: Etymologie, Centre National de Ressources Textuales et Lexicales.
5 Harrison et al, 275.
6 All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely players:/They have their exits and
their entrances:/And one man in his time plays many parts... (As You Like It, II, 7)
7 The gift shop at Shakespeare’s Globe in London, for example, currently (2014) offers hoodies,
cloth bags, magnets and more emblazoned with this line. When I paid a spring 2012 visit to the
real felt connection between the places and acts of theatrical representation and our understanding of human life and the larger world within which it exists. And through such musings we participate in a tradition that has transcended temporal, geographical and linguistic boundaries, for this fundamental association between “world” and “theater” was common not only in the English of Shakespeare’s day, but in many other ancient and modern languages and cultures as well.

To theater historians Robert Crosman and Thomas Postlewait, the great historical utility of the expression across space and time lies in its adaptability, the fact that *theatrum Mundi*—the so-called Theater of the World—“could signify anything or nothing”\(^8\): “it can suggest both the ability of human beings to control themselves and others by a mastery of roles, and the contradictory view that we are merely characters in a play not of our own making.”\(^9\) Certainly people’s understanding and use of the phrase has not remained static over time. The theme dates back at least a far as Classical Greece, when authors and philosophers used it to illustrate the vanity and brevity of human existence and the power of fate or distant gods to control human destiny.\(^10\) Just as actors play short scenes of little real consequence, so do all humans in their real lives. Like stage actors, people may assume the trappings of wealth and nobility when the role demands, but these and other external attributes bear no relation to their authentic selves or their worth. Like plays, human lives are fleeting and often disingenuous representations of the grim human condition. To take the metaphor to its logical conclusion, we are merely playing parts that

---

Museo Nacional del Teatro in Almagro, Spain, a Spanish translation of the quotation appeared in large lettering on a wall panel.


\(^10\) Antonio Vilanova, “El Tema Del Gran Teatro Del Mundo,” *Boletín de La Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona* 23 (1950), 153-159.
are largely beyond our control.\textsuperscript{11} In its ambiguity, the idea of the Theater of the World spoke not only to ancient civilizations, but to medieval cultures as well, offering comfort and resignation to populations in times of hardship and powerlessness. European Christendom appropriated the metaphor by equating the theatrical author who dictates the roles and the action with the Christian God.\textsuperscript{12} In this new context, life was no longer meaningless, but a drama far larger than the individual can possibly comprehend. Human actions and desires were overshadowed by a larger plan for the universe, and kept in check by an all-seeing divine eye.

Although the idea of the “theatricum mundi” was ancient, it took on a new life during the Renaissance—not coincidentally during the same period in which creation of and access to staged theatricals began to grow dramatically in many European cultures. And its usages become both increasingly commonplace and popular as variations on the phrase come to pepper the vernacular in numerous western European languages.\textsuperscript{13} French humanist Pierre Boaistuau used the title \textit{Le Théâtre du Monde} (1558) to compare the world to a stage that showcases the incredible variety of human suffering. In the early modern period, for the first time “these metaphors of drama enter the genre of drama.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Spanish playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca, entitled one of his dramatic, moralistic, seventeenth century \textit{auto sacramentales}, \textit{El Teatro de el Mundo}, a phrase he would not have used had the wording not already been meaningful to his spectators. Marveling at the use of such phrases and tracing their literary use

\textsuperscript{11} This last sentiment must have been particularly reminiscent of debates over predestination and free will in Reformation era Europe.
\textsuperscript{13} And these usages and ideas are transplanted and adapted to the new world. Jeffrey H. Richards, \textit{Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).
\textsuperscript{14} Ruby Cohn, “‘Theatrum Mundi’ and Contemporary Theater,” \textit{Comparative Drama} 1, no. 1 (Spring 1967), 28.
and development has proved a popular pastime for scholars, especially those engaged in literary analyses.\footnote{Vilanova asserts that it was Lucian whose writings made a direct impression on the Spaniards of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, inspiring both Cervantes and Calderón as well as numerous others, including, for example, Erasmus. He states that Erasmus “es el primero en la Europa del Renacimiento que exhuman la profunda alegoría de los filósofos estoicos y la aplica a la vida real, escenario de la universal comedia humana.” Vilanova, 7. But if Erasmus is responsible for the transmission of the term itself into Spanish (and thence, presumably, into all other European tongues), by the mid-sixteenth century, it was beginning to enter into common speech. For when Don Quixote makes the comparison, Sancho comments that it is “no tan nueva, que yo no la aya oydo muchas y diversas vezes…” The number of scholars who have weighed in on the topic of “theatrum mundi” is truly vast. For some examples of Europe-wide perspectives on the metaphor see Ernst, Trask, Willard R Curtius, \textit{European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 138-44. and Peter Norman Skrine, \textit{Literature and Culture in Seventeenth-Century Europe}. (Methuen, 1978), 1-24.} While investigations into this theme commonly elucidate changing ideas of life, mortality and human relationships, rarely do they attempt to explain how this metaphor might have corresponded to people’s views of the real theaters—the physical playhouses and the live performances—they increasingly frequented in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Notably, the meaning of “theater” broadened over time in ways that reflect popular understanding of and engagement with actual theatrical practice.

Beginning in the sixteenth century, the very nature of theater as an artistic and cultural form was undergoing significant alterations. It came to occupy a host of new places, practices, and associations. As a result, the ways in which people thought and spoke about plays and performing also shifted. Thus, at the same time that Western European audiences were beginning to accept the permanent and formalized appearance of theater and its foreign dimensions as a routine part of urban life, they were also using their words for “theater” in new and different ways that reinforced understanding of stage performance as an international force.
In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries “theater” and its various cognates witnessed a veritable explosion of meanings and usages. These changing definitions also affected the enduring understanding of the link between the theater and the world. By the mid-seventeenth century, the word (in numerous languages) could be taken to indicate not just a playhouse, but a whole range of articles and practices linked to the playing-space. In English, French, Spanish and Italian, the respective words for “theater” come to reference the whole business of stagecraft: the writing of plays, the body of play texts, the profession of actors, as well as the spectacle that occurs within the playhouse. “Theater” by the seventeenth century is no longer just a place or a relationship between performers and spectators, but also a specific action and idea. As today, going to, or enjoying the theater meant more than just entering a building or appreciating its architecture. It referred to an entire experience.¹⁶ Yet it is not merely that the definition of “theater” broadens in these years to encompass more concepts related specifically to dramatic practice; the various words for “theater” also come to indicate, by themselves, something broad and something far-reaching. These two ideas, although interconnected, are well worth examining individually.

In one early modern definition, a “theater” is an array, whether of items, people, or ideas. For example, a “Theater of Delights” is a metaphorical arena in which pleasures of every kind are available, a “Theater of Horrors” a comprehensive museum of miseries. To use the term in this manner is to suggest that “theater” is a vast collection, a wide range of something. We can recognize a connection between this emergent meaning of theater and the world-stage comparison found in the above-quoted “Seven Ages of Man” speech from Shakespeare’s As You

¹⁶ Not that the definitions of these words evolved identically. In French, for example, “theatre” also become the imagined world of the performance and the physical setting in which the characters on stage are living and moving. “Theatre” is thus also the “scene” where the action is set, whether it be a local city street or a distant land.
Like it, where the classical and medieval emphasis on the brevity and pointlessness of the human charade was now compounded, and even overshadowed, by the author’s interest in the great variety to be found in the “many parts” man plays. The Spanish “teatro” and French “théâtre” became used to indicate a more or less all-inclusive catalogue, something viewed in its entirety. A whole range of Spanish and Italian publications were produced that call themselves a Teatro—“a title promising a complete treatment of its theme.” Frenchman Alexander Hardy, the first prominent early modern playwright to attempt the publication of his collected works, released his plays under the title of Le Théâtre du Alexandre Hardy. Here, two overlapping meanings of “théâtre” are at work. The title indicates that these are Hardy’s plays, but also that they represent all (or at least the foremost examples of) the author’s oeuvre. A “theater” in both the literary and performed senses, acts as an encyclopedic compendium wherein all things are potentially visible and discoverable. Early modern audiences, exposed to the rich diversity of texts, characters, goods, and experiences that appear on physical stages, now used the word to indicate any offering of vast (and usually by implication, global) breadth.

Similarly, beginning in the late sixteenth century, “theater” comes to designate not just a concrete space for dramatic entertainments, but also potentially any space (literal or figurative) in which momentous and dramatic events occur, specifically if they occur in an impressive or particularly visible manner. Thus, this period witnessed the birth of phrases such as “Theater of War” and “Theater of Justice.” Of course, the landscapes on which opposing armies converge

---

and the courtrooms (real or imagined) in which sentences are handed down, are not theaters in the sense that they are places to view playacting. Yet, to the early moderns, such events were becoming increasingly visible, even if they were not increasingly visual. The printing industry and the literary trade allowed news to travel much more quickly and messages to be passed much more accurately to larger number of people. Thus, the implied audience witnessing important regional or global events becomes ever more vast. Indeed, “theater” now came to imply the broadcasting of events and ideas over a much larger geographic, cultural and social space. A theater was not longer just a location where people went to see things; it was also a place, both metaphorical and actual, in which things became increasingly visible to a wider world. In the same way, a play on the stage was becoming understood as a performance not just for the audience in the playhouse that night, but also a message sent out to a much larger world.

This close look at the etymology of a simple word illustrates that the very idea of theater in the early modern European world was growing and changing during the very years that stage conventions and practices were undergoing significant shifts. Indeed, “theater” begins to further encompass additional meanings that refer to larger and more international concepts. The transnational blending and codification of new theatrical practice engendered the parallel adaptation of new ways to talk about it. But even more importantly, this examination illustrates

---

19 Johan Huizinga discusses “play” and “playacting” aspects of legal activities in Homo Ludens, including a complex system of rules, the role played by chance, the battle of opposing forces, special dress, and the scripted nature of many events. The relationship between law and theater further highlights that “the sacredness and seriousness of an action by no means preclude its play-quality.” Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 76.
20 However, theatrical language alone cannot completely reveal attitudes toward theater or its historical realities, as Richards describes in a colonial America “with little actual theater but with a varied and frequently articulated theatrical discourse.” Richards, 8.
that this developing vocabulary, from a range of countries, ties the very idea of theater clearly and strongly to larger forces and a larger world.\textsuperscript{21}

As the meanings attached to the word “theater” changed, the significance of the ancient idea of “the theater of the world” changed with it. So while this phrase was by no means new in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the commonly understood relationship between the theater and the world necessarily altered as cultural understandings of theater itself were transformed. As might be expected, the metaphor of the world-theater was not merely gaining popularity during the sixteenth and seventeenth century, it was also collecting new layers of meaning. Manfred Pfister notes one such change when he suggests that in post-medieval Europe the so-called “theater of the world”:

become[s] an infinitely variable topos, in which the original transcendental perspective (God as dramatist and audience, mankind as actors of puppets) was retracted in the early-modern period in favor of a purely mundane perspective in which the theatre metaphor points toward the role-playing component in conventional modes of behavior and towards the pretensions and hypocrisy of social life.\textsuperscript{22}

In the wake of real theatrical performance, theatrical metaphors come to reflect ideas of performance that are human rather than divine, and secular rather than sacred. Thus, Pfister argues that by the sixteenth century the Medieval notion of world as a theater where human life is driven by God is transformed into an understanding of the world in which human life is driven by the need and desire of individual people to perform for one another.

Yet, the old significance of the world as “God’s Theater” did not entirely die out (especially in Spanish practice), but there was a notable shift wherein the world was understood to operate

\textsuperscript{21} This idea of “theater” as any symbolic place of visible action or events continues in the present.
as a secular theater in addition to, and often instead of, a divine one. Pfister makes a valid point about the changing, and secularizing, nature of the long-standing world-stage metaphor during the early modern period, but ultimately he does not take his conclusion far enough. He suggests the world is like a stage (and vice versa) because both of them are covered in people in the midst of some kind of performance. The important early modern shift in the conceptualization of “performance” and “theater”, he believes, is one from divine performance to ordinary performance. The world of unconscious manipulation by God becomes one of conscious role-playing.

Yet Pfister only captures one of the emergent implications of the “theater of the world” that were beginning to proliferate in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. 23 Other very important, and closely related, shades of meaning emerged concurrently: first, the idea that the “theater” is a platform (both metaphorical and actual) that showcases elements of the wider world to its audience, and secondly, the idea that within the theater space (again both metaphorical and actual) the actions that play out are visible not only to the people in attendance that day but to a wider world population. These themes reflect growing recognition of the heightened ability of plays to communicate internationally and the power of plays to depict the foreign in a multitude of symbolic and tangible ways. We should not discount “the felt ability, of early modern plays, to capture the world, to represent the dazzling variety of people, actions,

23 Christian Andrès recognizes that something like Pierre Boaistuau’s work (Theatrum Mundi) has a very real connection to the theater-world metaphor as it was understood in Calderon’s day, and that the similarities between the ideas expressed in the works suggests a very pervasive intercultural dialogue about human life and its relationship with theater. Yet he dances around the possibility that this very “examen casi enciclopédico” is becoming part of the association, and even part of the definition, of theater. This added meaning did not diminish the other meanings and associations attached to the word and concept, but it is clearly coming to constitute another layer of understanding. Christian Andrès, “La Metáfora Del «theatrum Mundi» En Pierre Boaistuau Y Calderón (en La Vida Es Sueño Y El Gran Teatro Del Mundo),” Criticón 91 (2004): 67–78.
things, and ideas on the bare boards of its stages.”24 Indeed, presenting this display was one of the essential facets of early modern theater. One anonymous French critic asserted that:

The purpose of Dramatic Poetry is to imitate all action, all places at all times, such that there is nothing that for any reason whatsoever happens in the world, regardless of the amount of time [it occupies], and no country so lofty or so remote, that the Theater cannot represent it.25

Not only did theater apparently possess the ability to depict everything under the sun, it also appealed to a human desire for familiarity with other cultures. Ferrand Spence declared that “all the world knows how necessary to ourselves is the observation of other Mens [sic] minds and manners. The Stage has been so often call’d the Looking-glass of Mankind.”26 The theatre acted as a primary form of information about and interaction with other nations. Indeed, Swiss tourist Thomas Platter remarked of English playgoing public that “in the comedies they learn what is going on in other lands, and this happens without alarm, husband and wife together in a familiar place, since for the most part the English do not much use to travel, but are content ever to learn of foreign matters at home.”27 All over Europe, it was a place to see foreign dignitaries, foreign plays, as well as representations of foreign locations, people, and events. It makes sense that this was how many people learned about foreign geography, history, and personalities.

25 “Discours a Cliton sur les Observations du Cid” in Armand Gasté, ed., La Querelle Du Cid: Pièces et Pamphlets Publiés d’Apres Les Originaux Avec Une Introduction Par Armand Gasté (Paris: H. Welter, 1898), 255-256. “L’objet de la Poesie Dramatique est d’imiter toute action, tout lieu en tout temps, de façon qu’il n’arrive rien au monde par quelque cause que ce soit, il ne s’y faiet rien par aucun espace de temps, et il n’est point de pays de si grande entendue, où si esloigné, que le Theatre ne puisse représenter.”
The appearance of knowledge about the world, however, did not always lead to exchanges of accurate information. Monica Matei-Chesnoiu explains:

While taking into account the potential of drama as a medium of instruction as well as entertainment, it is easy to see the diagonal and often incredibly thwarted relationship between the geographic and historical realities of the places mentioned in plays as the metaphorical treatment they generated in the theater…sometimes straightforward and accurate, sometimes allusive and extravagant…

Just as people were content to experience the wider world from the comfort of the theater, they were content to accept the images presented to them on the stage. This is not to imply that they uniformly imagined all portrayals and stereotypes to be the unquestioned truth. Culturally, the accuracy of the portrayal mattered rather less than its practice. We witness this in the use of stage clothing, for “the costumes worn on the English stage were not accurate depictions of foreign fashion but English notions of the apparel deemed appropriate to specific countries.” Dressing characters in foreign garb and other nations’ theater traditions in foreign qualities was a way of expressing domestic needs and desires. Early modern England, France, and Spain were all countries that had grown accustomed to using other people and other lands for their own purposes, as commodities and experiences to be indulged in, rather than living human societies or people. Being “Other,” they were eternally available for consumption as well as manipulation. Performance when freely enacted is a powerful way to define the self, and the

---

29 In much the same way, we like to believe that performances “based on a true story” are showing us accurate portrayals and that the romance, intrigue, and excitement we witness really happened—or close enough.
misrepresentation—or the unimportance of accuracy in representation—of other groups and people acts as a display of dominance over those unable to represent themselves.  

Equally importantly, we should recognize that the stage was no longer just a place where the world was represented. The metaphor of the “theater of the world” continued to work, and remained meaningful, not just because the theater was a place to view, (it had always been that) but because theater as a cultural form and a tangible practice was ever more widely visible, even more internationally significant. It was increasingly a place where images, messages, and actions were assumed broadcast to the whole of the earth. Critics insist repeatedly that “all the world knows” about the relative quality of dramatic poetry in the lands of western Europe.  

Of course, it is one thing to suggest that the early moderns had an idea of a metaphorical “theater” space from which things might be visible to a global audience. It is another thing entirely to suggest that they understood the very real and tangible acts and words they witnessed in their local playhouses to be somehow truly visible beyond the walls of the theater. However, I would like to suggest that this is not merely a literary trope, but that these vernacular definitions and usages of “theater” were the product of cultures that truly considered their own theater to have international dimensions. The events that occurred both on physical stages and in real life increasingly appeared to be more and more visible beyond the confines of the specific “theater” in which they took place. Scholars of drama have overlooked this idea, largely because the sources that suggest it are often not exclusively theatrical in nature. Yet it is clear that this particular meaning of the word “theater” (and its linguistic relatives) had entered into

---

conventional use during the early modern period. Nor has this usage ceased to operate. When we talk about people or events on the “world stage,” for example, we indicate that they are doing something of import and notice to the wider international community in a metaphoric space visible to all. They are not merely playing a role in their society; the whole world is the society to which they are playing. The very idea of the “world stage” developed for the first time in early modern Europe, and was predominantly occupied by monarchs. Thus, “a King is himself sometimes annoyed by his own greatness, because he is always on the world stage [le theatre du monde] exposed to the view of a crowd of spectators.” These examples illustrate that it is clearly not just the inherent performativity of life in the early modern world that leads the thinkers, playwrights and others to compare world and stage—it is also the realization that what occurs in the world is now much more widely accessible to the world. The stage became a powerfully visible way to transmit information from one land to the next.

While the “world stage” was a popular metaphor, the comparison was not just frivolous rhetoric. Many people did conceive of a wider theatrical world—one that bridged national boundaries. People were aware of, if not deeply familiar with, the ways in which their own cultural theatrics were part of a larger international picture. They knew not only that people in other lands had their own stage practices and conventions, they also possessed varying degrees of familiarity with those conventions. Indeed, some of the most visible ways in which outsiders entered cultural space was through, and in, the medium of theatre. But this was not just a question of familiarity; there was a serious perception of international knowledge of the larger

theatre world. Many writers appear to be convinced that something performed on a stage in London, for example, was visible around the globe. In their minds, the contents of their stages really are on display to the world.

People really did note some sort of constant communication going on between different parts of the world. Because theater put on a deliberate display, it was desirable that other nations and peoples should see and admire it. This was true of theater in both its written and performed incarnations. As Manfred Pfister points out, “By producing a literary text, and this is particularly true of the dramatist, the author is making a public statement.” And the playwright, the creator of the dialogue-text is not the only “author” of a performed play. The actors too make a public statement, in both their recitation of the text as well as their gestures and characterizations. Even the spectators are making a similarly public statement, by virtue of their attendance, their actions within the public space of the theater building, and their reactions toward the performance. Just as the actors on the stage feel the audience’s watchful eye, the early moderns were conscious of other eyes watching the theatrical world across geographic distances and national borders. As a result, theatre existed (and in many ways still exists) as a form of national property that acted as the face of that nation.

In the early modern era, peoples’ worlds were expanding rapidly. Communication had changed. The nature of theater had also changed. Because script texts, performers, and reports on the theater arts all traveled across national boundaries, the international nature of theater could be experienced in many forms and several different media. One might witness the performance of a foreign play by both foreign actors in a foreign language or by locals, professional or amateur. Plays from abroad, whether translated or in the original language, could be read in private or in a

---

group setting. Nor were audiences and readers simply spectators. They interacted with the
material and the actors by engaging in dialogue in the playhouse, producing written
commentaries, and adapting older works into new ones. The fruits of this interaction also
traversed Europe. The idea that the stage within the theater was inherently viewable by nearly
anyone, anywhere is important because it speaks to a contracting worldview.34

The lands of early modern Europe were in many respects consolidating and centralizing.
Using the new power derived from these developments, these nations simultaneously began
conducting more formal and more extensive political, economic and cultural interactions in
Europe and farther afield. There was an influx of information and goods from such places, even
though not everyone approved of the disappearing boundaries of the globe. One playwright
complained “Trafficke and travell hath woven the nature of all Nations into ours, and made this
land like [French] Arras [tapestry], full of devise [device], which was Broade-cloth, full of
workmanshippe [sic].”35 In other words, the incorporation of foreign novelty is interesting but
represents a gaudy show rather than meaningful substance. This great age of global interweaving
arose at roughly the same time as public theaters. Indeed, the economic surge that took place in
the aftermath of New World colonization and Old World interconnectivity was what helped to
fund both the playhouses themselves and create an audience willing to enjoy it. The shifts in
cultural thought that accompanied the rise of early modern theater reshaped expectations about
performance and the vocabulary of the era. Theater, which had always shown the exceptional
and the unusual, also showcased the foreign and exotic in unprecedented way.

34 The early moderns were not the first group in history to feel that their world was contracting
and becoming more interconnected, but the inhabitants of the sixteenth and seventeenth century
were attuned to—and vocal about—such changes in an unprecedented way.
A Theater of Foreigners

Dramatic content reflected international influence and exchange both in its narrative provenance and in the characters, places, and customs portrayed upon European stages. Representations of persons from other lands did occur regularly in early modern theater. A parade of stage-Frenchmen, Spaniards, Italians, and Germans appeared on the English stage, as did characters from much farther way: Turks, Chinese, Moors, Native Americans, and more. French theaters witnessed less diversity but still played host to performed personalities from a broad geographical base, particularly in court pageants and ballets. In Spain such characterizations were even fewer in number, but still present. Most often played by local...
residents, on some occasions they employed accents, foreign vocabulary, or even whole passages in other languages to communicate a character’s foreign status.\(^{39}\)

This linguistic play could be problematic for audiences who did not speak other tongues, but, as many foreigners also visited the theater without fluent use of the language employed, the problem does not appear to have been insurmountable.\(^{40}\) Indeed, language was used both to communicate the action of the play as well as to provide an image of cultural difference that could be understood by all. When Isabella Andreini switched rapidly between several different languages while performing her famous “mad scene”, few in the audience would have been able to understand all of the dialogue, but they would have nevertheless appreciated the feat and the humor.\(^{41}\) Shakespeare’s *Henry V* contains a scene almost entirely in French, but made clear to English-speaking audiences through gesture and the occasional English word.\(^{42}\) Many Italian plays performed abroad contained a bare minimum of dialogue, instead employing movement and expression (along with costume) to tell an often-complex story.\(^{43}\) As in contemporary

---

\(^{39}\) Among these are the French Dr. Cauis in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.\(^{40}\) Charles Nicholl describes Shakespeare’s use of French in *Henry V* as “a calculated theatrical risk—a good proportion of the audience knew no French at all—but it adds a new dimension of reality to this chronicle of events in the ‘vasty fields of France’”. Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger Shakespeare: His Life on Silver Street* (London: Penguin, 2008), 183.\(^{41}\) Indeed, Andreini’s multilingual performance at a Medici wedding highlights the international character of early modern audiences, particularly at court. According to accounts, the bride, a Frenchwoman, was most pleased to hear Anderini sing and speak in that language. Brown, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, 121.\(^{42}\) Princess Katherine and her maid Allice engage in French dialogue. *The Cronicle History of Henry the Fift with His Battell Fought at Agin Court in France. Togither with Auntient Pistoll. As It Hath Bene Sundry Times Played by the Right Honoroble the Lord Chamberlaine His Servuants* (London: Thomas Creede, 1600).\(^{43}\) Remember that the early *Comédie-Italienne* used Italian dialogue almost exclusively, a fact that did not seem to bother French audiences.
theater, the appearance of foreign characters was often cause for farcical misunderstandings, but such characters could also represent more serious virtues and flaws. In every age, the stage has depicted those whom audiences find rare and interesting, and early modern theater witnessed its fair share of international representations, which “invite[d] audiences to ponder on the existing nations of early modern Europe, as they knew them from atlases or geography books.” Global flavor was present in the playhouse not merely in the plays or characters themselves but also in the performers, scenery, effects, costumes, props, and even audience members.

Actors on the stage often portrayed foreigners, but there were also opportunities to see real foreigners perform upon early modern stages. Traveling from place to place, often far from their land of origin, actors, dancers, acrobats, musicians, and other performers brought unfamiliar stories, songs, movements, faces, objects, and ideas along with them. Indeed, in the late sixteenth century permanent companies were an oddity rather than a common feature of theatrical life. Some companies kept constantly on the move and others took up longer periods of residence in theatrical capitals, but both brought their native customs and cosmopolitan acquisitions to new places and new audiences. Thus we see Italian acting companies traversing the various Italian states and frequently appearing in France, the German states, and even Spain. Italian performers had a particularly strong influence in Paris where their troupes coexisted with French companies throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Comédie-Française, with its long history, ties to the illustrious Molière, and nationalist moniker, is often held up as the pinnacle of French theatrics in this early modern era. Yet, the company shared their rented venue, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, with an Italian troupe that was considerably older and more established. Italian companies, including I Gelosi and the

---

company of Alberto Ganassa, were frequent and long-term renters at the Hotel de Bourgogne.\footnote{Virginia Scott, 
\textit{Women on the Stage in Early Modern France: 1540-1750} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87. Pierre de l’Estoile reported: “This month of June 1601 there was to be witnessed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris, where Arlequin was playing, the rarest and most amazing sight you could imagine. It was an Italian lass about thirteen years old who for a good quarter of an hour danced upon a tightrope far above the floor in time with tunes played on fiddles. Backwards and forwards she went, with no more fuss than if she had been dancing in the middle of a room.” Translated by and quoted in Howarth, 49.}
The Comédie-Française and other French troupes succeeded, not because the Italians failed to please, but in spite of their great popularity. Indeed, the great popularity of Italian comedic styles was one reason why French comedy thoroughly absorbed the characters and devises of the \textit{commedia dell’arte}. Indeed, Italian actors and, in particular, actresses, were often more beloved in early seventeenth century France than were their French counterparts.\footnote{Scott, 93.} They were also frequently summoned to perform at court. The constant and often disruptive presence of Italian actors is also reflected in a wealth of legal records including one (apparently unenforced) dictate from 1571, which banned Italians from performing in public.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 77.} Other ordinances temporarily banned Italians from the capital altogether, for their popular entertainments also inspired anti-Italian factions in French society.\footnote{Indeed, Katherine Ibbett has argues that, “what we now call French classicism was understood more generally as a resistance to the Italian…” Katherine Ibbett, \textit{The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660: Neoclassicism and Government} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 10.} Over time, the most successful foreign troupes found reason to travel less and less and successfully operated alongside native acting companies. Eventually, the \textit{Comédie-Italienne} was established with royal permission. These Italian actors continued to exert an Italianate influence not only on their audiences, but also on French language theater as a whole. As a result it is difficult to decide where French theater practice begins and Italian theater traditions end, so closely are the two intertwined.
But the Italians were not the only acting companies to venture into foreign lands. As enamored as they were of Italian comedy, French actors also brought their own performances abroad, particularly to London. There are records of English companies performing in Paris in 1598, 1604, and at other points during the seventeenth century.\(^49\) They also appeared throughout Germany. English troupes performed at the French court but also rented out public spaces such as the Hotel de Bourgogne. It is unclear how popular their French travels proved, but German audiences appear to have loved them.\(^50\) Nor were Spanish performers less mobile abroad. In addition to Spanish actors who often attached themselves to Italian companies or who accompanied Spanish officials to Italy (recall that parts of Italy remained under Spanish control), companies of Spanish actors also traversed Western Europe. Navarro’s Spanish company visited England during Charles I’s reign.\(^51\) Spanish actors were playing in Paris in October 1613, \(^52\) and a Spanish troupe rented the Hotel de Bourgogne in April 1625.\(^53\)

Despite uneven record keeping and the erratic and chance survival of relevant accounts, these examples show that the presence of foreign actors in any of the major early modern theater capitals was a constant and regular aspect of theater culture. Indeed, contemporary critics occasionally complained that there were too many foreigners performing on stage. In 1699, one

\(^{49}\) There were English actors in Paris in 1598 playing at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. William Howarth asserts that the fact that they “would be performing in English appears to have concerned neither the Confraternity nor the authorities, but the fact that the contracting parties took a dispute to court in early June may well indicate that audiences did not flock in.” Howarth, 15. English actors appeared periodically at the French court throughout the early modern era. *Ibid*, 88.


\(^{51}\) Hume, 279.

\(^{52}\) François de Malherbe, “A Paris, ce 27e d’octobre.,” *Oeuvres de Malherbe*, ed. Lalanne Ludovic, vol. 3 (Paris, 1862), 350. “Je viens tout à cette heure de la comédie des Espagnols, qui ont aujourd’hui commencé à jouer à la porte Saint-Germain dans le faubourg…”

\(^{53}\) Lancaster, 12.
English commentator mused that the theaters of his day “can hardly draw an Audience, unless there be the additional Invitation of a Signor Fideli, a Monsieur L’abbe or some such Foreign Regale expert at the bottom of the Bill.”  

Such a remark suggests that foreign actors were not simply commonplace on the early modern stage, they were also immensely appealing to audiences both for their skill and their novelty. It certainly seems that theater managers were both willing to pay handsomely for their artistry, and that performing abroad could be a lucrative career move. Downes notes:

In the space of Ten years past, Mr. Betterton, to gratify the desired and Fancies of the Nobility and Gentry; procur’d from Abroad the best Dancers and Singer, as Monsieur L’Abbe, Madam Sublini, Monsieur Balon, Margarita Delpine, Maria Gallia, and divers others; who being exorbitantly expensive, produc’d small Profit to him and his Company, but vast Gain to themselves; Madame Delpine since her arrival in England, by modest computation; having got by the Stage and Gentry, above 10,000 Guineas.

Actors were also known to travel great distances to satisfy the demands of an admiring monarch, as evidenced by the fact that the Italian players of *I Gelosi* journeyed in 1577 to the French court of Henri III at Blois. The troupe then stayed in Paris where they played before admiring crowds at the Hôtel de Bourbon for many months. The disapproval of many court councilors notwithstanding, one onlooker observed that “there was such crowd and press of people that the last four preachers in the city put together did not attract so many when they preached their

---

54 *Historia Histrionica an Historical Account of the English Stage, Shewing the Ancient Use, Improvement and Perfection of Dramatick Representations in This Nation in a Dialogue of Plays and Players.* (London: G. Croom, 1699).

55 John Downes, *Roscius Anglicanus or an Historical Review of the Stage: After It Had Been Suppres’d by Means of the Late Unhappy Civil War, Begun in 1641, Til the Time of King Charles the IIs. Restoration in May 1660. Giving an Account of Its Rise Again; of the Time and Places the Governours of Both the Companies First Erected Their Theatres...,* ed. Thomas Davies (London, 1789), 62-63.

56 Howarth, 84.
sermons.”57 Though foreign players were generally popular they still struggled to stay in royal favor and satisfy popular interest. It was reported in November 1613 that “[t]he King [Henri V?] does not enjoy the Italians much; the Spanish please nobody.”58

Performers represent another important way that theater operated across borders in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but other figures also played a pivotal role in performance and served to internationalize the early modern stage by their very presence. When we enter a contemporary theater to see a show, filmed or live, we are accustomed to sitting in a dimly lighted space while the stage or screen is illuminated. Yet, when patrons of Europe’s sixteenth and seventeenth century theaters went to take in a play they clearly saw not only the actors, but their fellow audience members as well. Recall that in those days specialized stage lighting was almost non-existent and audiences were lighted as much as the performers. Performances occurred almost exclusively during daylight hours and public playhouses and private stages were often open to the sky in order to take advantage of natural light. As a result, audience members usually had full view of their companions, which appears to have enhanced rather than diminished the enjoyment of viewers. Samuel Pepys elaborates on many of the famous, and infamous, persons he sees in the playhouse. And surely, with all the notice that he took of them, they must have distracted him quite a bit from the play being performed. We can assume therefore, that another of the appealing reasons to go to the playhouse was to gawk at one’s betters: to see their famous faces, note their elaborate garb.59 Audience members played a part in the drama by dressing up in fine clothes, sitting in a prominent place, or even making comments

57 Pierre de l’Estoile, quoted in and translated by Howarth, 84.
58 Mahlerbe, Malherbe, Oeuvres de Malherbe, vol 3, 358. “le Roi ne goûte point les Italiens; les Espagnols ne plaisent à personne…”
59 Of course, attendees also went to show off before their social and economic inferiors, admire or seek out potential lovers, discuss business transactions, and catch up on the latest news.
to the actors. Indeed, one of the primary reasons for going to playhouse was to see and be seen, even to socialize. It was (and is) all part of the performance.\textsuperscript{60} Theaters were not quiet, sterile spaces. Playhouse patrons negotiated business deals, purchased food, drink, and trinkets (and sometimes prostitutes), and gossiped with their neighbors during the performance itself. Attendees took note of those around them, including highly visible foreign personages.

The playhouse or the court theater was an important place for international visitors, particularly influential figures, to appear. Visitors to foreign lands seem to have considered local stage traditions to be important cultural experiences to have while abroad. This was especially true of important, noble, and wealthy travelers and “a visit to the theatre was an important item on the agenda of any visiting dignitary.”\textsuperscript{61} While distinguished guests were drawn to the stage, attentive hosts used theater as a tool of diplomacy. Performances were one way in which rulers sought to impress or appease foreign nobility, royalty, and other visiting dignitaries. As a result, it was very common for foreign ambassadors and other officials to attend theatrical performance, both at court and in the public playhouses, and other audience members noted their presence with interest. Generally, these visitors came from other European countries, predominantly Spain, England, France, and the Italian and Germany States. But international affairs also blew in

\textsuperscript{60} Richard Schechner has commented extensively on the role of audience as participant in performance. He particularly noted the ritualized behaviors that result when “the audience is transformed from a collection of separate individuals into a group or congregation of participants.” Richard Schechner, \textit{Performance Theory} (New York: Routledge, 2003), 157. We can note, both then and now, that all kinds of performance involve varying amounts of participation and interaction on the part of onlookers—not just in playhouses but also in sporting events, political ceremony, and religious ritual. Audiences routinely wear specialized garments, comment on the activity in either predetermined language or extempore remarks (including laughter and booing), engage in common acts (clapping, for example), and remain in attendance for a discrete amount of time. Some forms of contemporary performance, like “Renaissance Faires,” \textit{The Rocky Horror Show}, and karaoke, encourage more extensive public participation than others.

\textsuperscript{61} Howarth, 379.
travelers from much further afield. When Japanese visitors were escorted to Italy for the first time by Jesuit missionaries in 1585, they were received in the Teatro Olympico in Vincenza as well as Verona’s ancient Roman amphitheater. In 1686 the Comedie-Française even received a visit from the Siamese ambassador, who apparently spoke little French, but had Le Bourgeois gentilhomme explained to him by an interpreter. According to one of the company, he represented only one of “several Ambassadors, who driven by their curiosity, had come to admire their Spectacles.”

A Theater of Goods

In addition to stories and people, there were several other components of early modern performance that exemplified international exchange and influence. While stage productions ranged from very simple to extraordinarily lavish, they frequently offered audiences access to rare and curious sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes. Not only was play-going a form of consumer behavior in itself, it was enmeshed in other forms of consumption, both visual and

---

62 Brown, 123. Between 1584 and 1586, young Japanese converts to Christianity were escorted to Portugal, Spain, and Italy by Jesuit missionaries. They were warmly welcomed wherever they traveled and ignited a heightened interest in Asian cultures among Europeans. At the Teatro Olympico, designed by Paladio and newly completed, the Japanese guests appear to have witnessed a performance. A fresco at the Teatro depicts the visitors in European dress. Donald F Lach, Asia in the Making of Europe Volume I, Book Two (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 217, 700.

63 Voyage Des Ambassadeurs de Siam En France (Paris: Mercure Galante, 1686), 276. “plusieurs Ambassadeurs, qui poussiez par leur curiosité estoient venus admirar leurs Spectacles” The book also recounts how the Siamese ambassador, “Ayant vû jouer la Comedie du Bourgeois Gentilhomme, il comprit tout le sujet de al Piece sur ce qu’on luy en expliqua, & dit à la fin qu’il auroit souhaité qu’il y eust eu dans le dénouement de certaines choses qu’il marqua.” Ibid., 275-276. “Having seen the comédie of the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, he understood the whole plot of the piece which was explained to him, and said at the end that he wished that there had been certain things in the dénouement that he had recorded.” In response to an embassy from Louis XIV, the King of Siam sent three ambassadors to the French court in 1686. During their six month stay, they partook in all manner of French sightseeing, ceremony, and entertainment. Robert W. Berger, Diplomatic Tours in the Gardens of Versailles under Louis XIV, Penn Studies in Landscape Architecture (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 31-42.
material. Indeed, theater permitted and encouraged people to encounter rare and desirable commodities and experiences. The early modern playhouse, especially in England and France, was not merely a location for viewing diverting dramas. It was also a means to experience the new, fashionable, and luxurious, both from Europe and beyond.

In this way costume, both that of the actors and those in attendance, frequently served to expose audiences to international goods and fashions. Besides seeing the performance of the actors, one also came to the playhouse to see people decked out in fine attire, and there existed “an awareness that the theater staged and marketed new fashions in clothes through actors and audiences alike.” Remember that spectators in the early modern theaters had a clear view of the rest of the audience. For this reason, the wealthy were sure to wear impressive clothes when making an outing to the theater. In a very conscious way English “audiences used the space of the playhouses to flaunt both sumptuary laws and moral prescriptions, displaying themselves in extravagant and expensive costumes with as much vigor and imagination as the lavishly-dressed actors themselves.” But the playhouse was also a place where those who could not afford to purchase or did not dare to wear rich garments could revel in their beauty. For Spanish audiences, “luxurious theater costumes were…an important incentive for attracting to the

---

65 Helen Smith, “‘This one poore blacke gown lined with white’: The Clothing of the Sixteenth-Century English Book” in Catherine Richardson, ed., *Clothing Culture, 1350-1650*, The History of Retailing and Consumption (Aldershot, Hampshire, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 196. English dictates regarding dress were proclaimed most heavily during the reign of Elizabeth I and were largely repealed by James I. Interestingly, no further prescriptions were enacted by the Puritan government in power from 1649 until 1660. See Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996).
corrales spectators, who, because of the many “premáticas” against expensive clothing, could not make a public display of their own.\textsuperscript{66}

The view-ability, and hence, the significance of these garments is made clear by the practice of allowing important patrons to sit upon the stage itself, and to essentially become part of the decoration of the show: in the first scene of Ben Jonson’s \textit{Cynthia’s Revels}, a viewer is invited to “throne yourself in state on the stage, as other gentlemen use”\textsuperscript{67}. Ludovico Vigarani, an Italian visitor to Paris, complained about the practice of allowing important folk to sit on French stages during the performance because “so much is the confusion and the multitude of the nobility on the stage, which you see on the occasion of these ballets, that to those not accustomed to seeing such a thing it seems impossible that anything succeeds, and truly this confusion does not cease to disgust the eye of anyone who is not accustomed to seeing it.”\textsuperscript{68} Nevertheless, England, France, and Spain permitted this practice. As a rule those sitting on the stage were either nobles or wealthy dandies, and they were almost exclusively male. They constituted a fashion show of sorts, in addition to a display of wealth and power. Through costume the early modern theatergoer witnessed not only sartorial splendor but also the fruits of international exchange.

\textsuperscript{66} José M. Ruano de la Haza, \textit{La Puesta En Escena En Los Teatros Comerciales Del Siglo de Oro}, Literatura Y Sociedad 67 (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 2000), 76. “La lujosa vestimenta teatral era además incentivo para atraer a los corrales a espectadores que, a causa de las muchas “premáticas” contra la ropa cara, no podían hacer ostentación pública de ella.”


\textsuperscript{68} “—25 Aout. De Fontainebleau. Lodovico a la Duchesse [of Modena],” in \textit{Inventaire Des Lettres et Papiers Manuscrits de Gaspare, Carlo et Lodovico Vigarani}, Vol. 1, ed. Rouchès, Gabriel (Paris: H. Champion, 1913), 61. “è tanta la confusione e la moltitudine di nobiltà anco sul palco medmo, che si vede nel occasiun di questi balletti, che a chi non e accostumato di vedere tal cosa, gli rassembra essendo impossibile che niente riuscisca, e veramente tal confusione non lascia di disgustare l’occhio de chi non è avezzo a vederla.” The custom was mocked in Francis Beaumont’s \textit{The Knight of the Burning Pestle} (1607) where a middle class couple (not the usual on-stage viewers) sits upon the stage and directs the actors to perform as they wish.
Of course, foreign made or foreign inspired fabrics, trimmings, and complete garments also made their way onto the stage in other ways. For one thing, many records suggest that discarded noble garments were given over to acting companies. Actors might need to “call on princes and gentlemen and let drop the odd word reminding them that their wardrobes are needlessly full of garments which could well serve to make known to the public just how generous they are.”\textsuperscript{69} In addition, the companies purchased fabrics in order to make their own costumes, which might also be of the costly and stylish imported variety. The most famous and successful actors had incredibly elaborate and costly wardrobes, and were noted for their sumptuous apparel even when not performing.\textsuperscript{70} Costumes were “often the most expensive part of a production,” particularly on the popular stage where garments represented a sound and reusable investment even if the play itself were a flop.\textsuperscript{71} They were also one of the more portable theatrical properties. Itinerant companies brought along trunks of costumes with them on their travels, and their wardrobes, crafted in their native land, would have been materially and stylistically foreign to audiences.

For most of this period, the cloth used to make the finest and most elaborate garb came from foreign lands. By the early modern period, silks no longer came exclusively from China, but they continued to be imported from there in large quantities and, even when produced domestically, remained tinged with the exotic. Most European manufactured silks needed to be imported from Italy, where Venice and Florence were important centers, or from Spain, which began to produce the luxury fabric in its American colonies. Beginning in the sixteenth century

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Gaultier-Garguille, Last Will and Testamanet, translated by and quoted in Howarth, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Jones and Stallybrass, 180.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 177. This is one reason why there were so many accounts detailing the costumes held by theatrical companies, and why the price of those garments is so often listed.
\end{itemize}
France wrested control of much of the silk trade from Italy, but most other European countries that attempted silk production failed. Other fabrics had more tangible foreign origins. The gold and silver used to make lace decoration was taken largely from the Americas. Chintz (calico) fabrics, decorated with hand painted or wood-block printed floral designs, were imported from India. The fabric became so desirable that countries such as England and France, which could not produce chintzes themselves, banned their import for a time. Cotton fabrics were known in Spain and Italy but they did not reach England until the 1600s, when the British East India Company imported it in large quantities. Of course, it would not be long until Europeans began to produce these good for themselves. Velvet arrived from Italy and Spain. But despite the change in the physical origin of the fabric, these clothes and trimmings continued to symbolize the luxury of other lands.  

Cloth of both foreign and domestic origin was often dyed and painted using bright shades, and many of the colors that appeared in stage garments were themselves imported from the far corners of the globe. Before the introduction of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century, all the colors used in textile manufacture, painting, and other artistic pursuits were derived from natural sources: plants, animals, minerals. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries European dyes were largely supplanted by dyes from overseas. Dried cochineal insects, native to Mexico and South America and imported to Europe by the Spanish, became the primary source for scarlet dyes and paints, displacing less vivid domestic dyes. Indigo, as the name suggests, was imported from India by the Portuguese and the Dutch to produce desirable shades of blue. Spain,

---

72 In the same way, Josiah Wedgewood’s ceramics, which often imitated the form and decoration of foreign antiquity, were felt to embody neo-classical values of purity and order despite their manufacture in English factories. Better than the original. Adrian Forty, Objects of Desire: Design and Society since 1750 (New York, N.Y: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 15-28.
and later England, imported American-grown indigo to the European continent. A wide range of African, Indian, and American dye words were used to create rich reds, yellows, and browns, as well as the pure black garments so popular in Protestant lands.\textsuperscript{73} Even when Europeans developed effective techniques for matching the results of foreign dyes with domestic products and techniques, the resulting colors and patterns retained an association with foreign lands, including “Turkey Red” cloth that rivaled cochineal dyed fabric in its scarlet appearance.\textsuperscript{74} In these ways, color itself could act as a signal of foreign luxury in the early modern playhouse.

And it was not simply the materials used that rendered garments symbols of international cultural exchange. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, fashion was already an international enterprise and dress (like texts and performances) was clearly understood to posses “power to materially articulate national identity.”\textsuperscript{75} As revealed by style guides, such as Habiti antichi et moderni di tutto il mondo (1598) by Cesare Vecellio, certain countries were known for particular styles of dress, patterns, cuts, colors, and needlework. And these stylistic details spread rapidly throughout Europe, while remaining symbols of their land and culture of origin. Thus, in 1604, the Spanish troupe headed by Juan de Tapia, Luis de Castro, and Alonso de Paniagua purchased garments that included six Moorish costumes and a French ensemble.\textsuperscript{76} While some foreign styles were used on stage to clearly mark characters as foreigners, others appeared on stage because of their growing popularity as fashionable attire. The “French Hood” became all the rage in England. Dutch ruffs were adopted throughout Western Europe. “Turkish” styles of

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Ibid.}, 134.  
\textsuperscript{75} Rose Hentschell, \textit{The Culture of Cloth in Early Modern England: Textual Constructions of a National Identity} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2008), 49.  
\textsuperscript{76} Cristóbal Pérez Pastor, \textit{Nuevas Datos Acerca Del Histrionismo Español En Los Siglos XVI Y XVII} (Madrid: La Revista Español, 1901), 63. “vestido de moros”, “un vestido de Francés
dress, including turbans, long, colorful coats, and rich, flowing draperies, became all the rage by the end of the seventeenth century and remained popular for decades. Decorative feathers, associated with Native American cultures, were incorporated into European dress. These goods were essentially put on display in the playhouses, exposing viewers to the latest fashions, which were often imported from abroad.\(^77\)

In “Notes from Black-Fryers” (1617) Henry Fitzgeoffrey mocked the pervasive influence and indiscriminate employment of foreign fashions among the young and wealthy patrons of the London commercial theaters:

> Knoest thou yon world of fashions now comes in
> InTurkie colors carued to the skin.
> MountedPolonianly vntill he reeles.
> That scornes (so much) plaine dealing at his heeles.
> His Boote speakes Spanish to his Scottish Spurre,  
> His Sute cut Frenchly, round bestuck with Burres.\(^78\)

To see such a dandy at the playhouse was to experience the whole world in a single outfit, even if the pieces themselves had been domestically manufactured. And if the trend-setting gallants of the English upper classes were donning such garments, we can expect that actors would also acquire and employ such styles in a similar—often haphazard—fashion. Therefore we see, both off stage and on, garment of complex cultural identity. One French company owned a garment described as “a little robe in the Turkish style of Chinese material”\(^79\).

Ordinary people, including those who

\(^77\) It is important to make clear that the importation of goods and styles from around the world into Europe is only part of the larger picture of early modern exchange, for European goods and fashions were also exported around the globe on a vast scale, and appropriated into the textile culture of many other groups in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.


\(^79\) “Inventory after decease of Charle Le Noir,” translated in and quoted by Howarth, 203. Mixing “materials imported from Europe, Asia, or India, with the artistry of local or foreign
composed the audiences in the public theaters were aware of international fashion trends and consumable goods, as well as the aura that they created when worn on the stage or on the street.

These culturally diverse garments were used not only to establish the nationality of characters and dazzle audiences, but also to provoke amusement that touched on cultural insensitivity, as in the 1670 performance of James Nokes in Caryll’s *Sir Solomon, or the Cautious Coxcomb*:

The French Court wearing then excessive short lac’d coats; some scarlet, some blew, with broad wast belts; Mr. Nokes having at that time one shorter then the French fashion, to act Sir Arthur Addle in; the Duke of Monmouth gave Mr. Nokes his sword and belt from his side, and buckled it on himself, on purpose to ape the French; that Mr. Nokes lookt more like a dressed up Ape, than a Sir Arthur: which upon his first entrance on the stage, put the King and Court to an excessive laughter; at which the French look’d very Shaggrin, to see themselves ap’d by such a buffon as Sir Arthur.  

The story is ripe with intercultural meanings. Not only is Nokes mocking the French by dressing his exceedingly buffoonish character in an absurd caricature of French fashion, he pushes the envelope by donning a nobleman’s sword. With that gesture, Nokes makes it plain that he pokes fun not simply at the French nation, but the particular courtly French visitors who were visiting the English court at Dover—visitors who, the passage makes clear, were in the audience. This alone would have been enough to displease the French courtiers, but Nokes’ insulting display occurred during the performance of an English play that had been adapted from an extremely well-known French piece: Molière’s *L’Ecole des Femmes*. The performance not only becomes a mockery of French dress, the French nation, and the visiting French court, but one that employs craftsmen resulted in textiles whose composite origins can be difficult to identify of assess.”  

Peck, 43. However, the very cultural ambiguity of many fabrics and garments often added to their exotic appeal.

80 Downes, 39. Thomas Davies later noted: “I do not think that even the Savages of Owhyee [Hawai’i] would, in similar circumstances, have been guilty of such an incivility.” *Ibid.*, 39.
as vehicle France’s most esteemed institutions and cultural treasures. Needless to say, the incident endured long in English memory.

Nor was clothing the only textile product in the playhouse to reflect a world of transnational global exchange. Companies also possessed tapestries and clothes that were used for decoration on stages that featured only small amounts of scenery. Often these were the fruit of foreign exchange, such as a[n Italian] Bergamo tapestry possession by one group of traveling players, or the French “arras” that proved so important in *Hamlet*. Similar tapestries—attractive, portable, and useful—were a staple of stage décor. While it might have been difficult to pinpoint the origin of a given tapestry, their rich threads and elaborate patterns bespoke exotic luxury to early modern audiences. However, other properties owned and used by theater companies appear to have been less obviously tied to global exchange and foreign luxury, at least in the minds of viewers. By contrast, properties such as chairs, tables, benches, and bedding were not usually the subject of extensive description. They were typically constructed out of standard native materials such as oak rather than exotic foreign woods. While early modern performances often took place on a relatively bare stage and required the audience to imagine the luxury goods necessitated by the story, many stage properties, particularly those used to stock the shops of merchants and apothecaries on the English Restoration stage, must have provided a real glimpse into foreign opulence. French actors visiting England in 1661 brought not only themselves, but also “stage decorations, props, and scenery.” In one French playhouse, the young men who sat upon the stage (and refused to move to the less elevated seating in the parterre) made use of cane chairs.

---

81 Howarth, 79.
83 Howarth, 241.
Although such chairs were crafted in Europe, they were constructed out of imported Chinese rattan. Fashionable first in England and the Netherlands, they were soon desirable throughout the continent as well.

Other commodities with distant roots that appeared in the early modern playhouse were consumed not just with the eyes but also in a very physical sense. In an age when stage plays could last four hours or more, it was very common to partake of refreshment at the theater. Indeed, it appears that eating and drinking during a performance was not simply a means to assuage hunger and thirst but often a social endeavor and a particularly compelling form of indulgence. One critic of the English stage complained that many who will give “a penie in the Church, can yet willingly and chearefullie afoord both pence and teasters [tasters, snacks] enough for himselfe and others at a play”.84 To partake of some treats, and perhaps to treat one’s friends, was an important part of the play-going experience. In certain cases the allure of these foodstuffs lay not just in the occasion of their consumption but also in their origins. Of all the foods sold in the playhouses of Restoration England, oranges were undoubtedly the most popular. Samuel Pepys purchased them nearly as frequently as he attended the theater and treated his companions on more than one occasion. The sweet citrus, which originated in China and Southeast Asia and was first introduced to Europe by merchants from the Middle East, still

---

carried exotic associations. In most of Europe, oranges had to be imported—from places like Portugal and Italy—or cultivated in greenhouses known as orangeries. Even as they became more affordable, oranges continued to be a special treat associated with the playhouses. To heighten their exotic appeal, oranges were distributed to customers by female vendors (who were usually assumed to be prostitutes). In the second half of the seventeenth century, oranges were also sold at the Hotel de Bourgogne. Although in France they were associated not just with tropical foreign climes but also with the French monarchy, which over the years had grown for itself more and more impressive orange groves in royal gardens.

Lemonade, made from another imported fruit, was also popular in French playhouses. Performances at the French court featured an extensive buffet, where attendees used silver plates to partake of a variety of seasonal foods, including “water flavored with raspberry, currant, and cherry, all succulent fruits that delight and refresh, in the summer, and rissoles, liquors, and fine Spanish wines, which warm and invigorate the stomach, in winter.”

Even though the fruits were locally grown, the plateware and the wine both indicated international, even global, exchange. Less exotic breads, wines, and fruits were also common in French and English playhouses. Fruits of various kinds appear to have been the most common foodstuff in the

---

85 The “first orange that Europeans tasted was the bitter variety…The sweet orange with which we are more familiar was introduced into Europe from the Far East by the circumnavigator Vasco de Gama only at the beginning of the sixteenth century.” D. Eleanor Scully, Terence Scully, and J. David Scully, Early French Cookery: Sources, History, Original Recipes and Modern Adoptions (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 200.


88 Frédéric Loliée, La Comédie-Française: Histoire de La Maison de Molière de 1658 À 1907 (Paris: Lucien Laveur, 1907), 44. “les eaux de framboise, de groseille, de cerise, toutes les succulences qui délectent et rafraîchissent, en été, et les rissoles, les spiritueux, les bons vins d’Espagne, qui réchauffent et ragaillardissent l’estomac, en hiver.”
The traditional drink of the Spanish corrales was aloja a drink made by flavoring water with honey and spices. Although the precise recipe differed from theater to theater and remained a carefully guarded secret, it has been conjectured that cinnamon, native to Sri Lanka, and pepper, originally from India, were likely ingredients. The clandestine flavoring of the aloja allowed consumers to imagine it a purely domestic beverage, free from the contaminating influence of foreign lands and foreign products, even if this was not really the case. Most Spanish playhouses discouraged or banned the consumption of alcohol, although that apparently did not prevent some from mixing wine with their aloja.

Food and drink were not the only substances consumed in the theater. Both actors and audience might use tobacco during a performance. The tobacco leaf, introduced to Europeans only in the early seventeenth century, retained the associated exoticism of its American origins, and for the English was also closely associated with the Spanish, from whom they obtained it in large quantities. In the playhouse the use of tobacco was difficult to ignore, for it provided both a visual and olfactory experience to those nearby. Many English Restoration plays describe characters smoking pipes on stage. The English dandies who commonly sat on stools around the stage apparently smoked as well, engulfing the rest of the audience with tobacco smoke. Henry Butte in 1599 composed a poem railing against a man he encountered at the theater who was “[c]lowding the loathing ayr with foggie fume/of Dock-Tabacco”. Indeed, despite royal

---

89 Perhaps the presence of these ready-to-hand edibles in the early modern theaters inspired the pelting of unimpressive actors with rotten fruit.
92 “A Satyrical Epigram, upon the wanton, and excessive use of Tabacco” in Henry Buttes, *Dyets Dry Dinner Consisting of Eight Seuerall Courses: 1. Fruites 2. Hearbes. 3. Flesh. 4. Fish*.
disapprobation from James I, tobacco was sold in the playhouses. When English public theaters were shut between 1642 and 1660, it displaced “The Tobacco-men, that used to walk up and down, selling for a penny pipe, that which was not worth twelve pence an horse-load” along with many others “that had dependence on the stage.” Unlike in the English theater, smoking was prohibited in most Spanish playhouses, due to fears about fire. However, stage directions do have characters taking snuff (toma tabaco) in *La mayor degracia de Carlos Quinto* and *Castigar por defender*. A few allegorical characters in *entremeses* are even named “Tabaco.” The smoking of tobacco does not appear to have been popular in French theaters, either. Though smoking was not unknown, performers (and presumably audience members as well) were more likely to engage in the fashionable practice of taking snuff (*prendre du tabac*). It is hard to imagine that the French would have tolerated smoking in the theaters after their deep concern with the smoke generated by the candles, which occasionally threatened to obscure the stage of enclosed theaters. While tobacco smoke was a fixture in Elizabethan playhouses, the practice appears to become less popular in the second half of the seventeenth century. Undoubtedly this was partially in response to a rise in the use of snuff, a practice popularized by the French, who had adopted it from the Spanish.

The theater was also closely associated with other international consumer goods. The most obvious of these are the printed books of plays that were produced more frequently and

---

93 *The Actors Remonstrance or Complaint for the Silencing of Their Profession and Banishment from Their Severall Play-Houses in Which Is Fully Set Downe Their Grievances for Their Restraint ... as It Was Presented in the Names and Behalfes of All Our London Comedians ...* (London, 1643), 7.
94 Howarth, 353.
95 While the taking of snuff does not appear to have captured the early sixteenth century English imagination in quite the same way, it is clear that the English did know of this practice.
more rapidly as the early modern period wore on. Not only did theater generate the content of and the demand for printed plays, in many cases they also became sale venues.  

As we have seen, many of the books bought, sold, read, and collected in early modern Europe came from other European countries. Books thus constituted another way of tapping into international theater. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England imported most of its printing paper from the continent, first from Spain and then from the Low Countries, France, Switzerland, and Italy. William Congreve bought paper and printing equipment from Holland for use in publishing his plays. Therefore, to the English, the very materials used to print books were the fruits of trade across borders. Printed and engraved images of actors or theatrical scenes were also distributed, although less frequently and less widely than books. Often these were used to capture the likeness of admired foreign performers. The French, especially, delighted in pictures of Italian performers of the commedia dell’arte tradition, such as those produced by Jacques Callot during his time in Italy. In French-made illustrations, Italian actors or characters are far more frequently depicted than French ones, alluding to the popularity of Italian-style theatrics and personalities in France.

**A Theater of International Experiences**

Other theatrical components also carried foreign connotations. Particular art forms tended to be associated with particular nationalities. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Italian music, even before the development of opera as an independent art form, influenced European theater music on a large scale. The most famous musicians were Italians,

---

96 Stone Peters, 52.
98 Stone Peters, 58.
one reason why composers and singers from that land were imported to France and later to England. French dancers, as well as their dances, became particularly celebrated in late seventeenth century England, while the Italians, according to some disparaging reports, “claim that their own country is presently the most skilled in this science.” It has already been noted that foreign performers in general were popular fixtures of the early modern stage, but foreign styles of music and dance drew interest in addition to, if not completely independent from, the foreign bodies which performed them. In English opinion most of the “best Dancers and Singers” came from abroad.” However, music and choreography were also interesting foreign products in and of themselves. *The Temple of Love*, an opera “consisting all of Singing and Dancing,” attracted attention in England not simply because of the imported story or the international cast, but because the music and the dancing were also distinctly foreign: “The Singing Composed by Monsieur Sidgeon: The Version into English by Monsieur Moteux from the Italian:…The Dances, made and perform’d all by French-Men.” Likewise, “the long expected Opera of Psyche” imported from Paris to in London in 1673 was embellished with “new French dances.”

When Cardinal Mazarin invited Italian composer Cavalli to France in 1660 to write a new opera for the royal wedding of Louis XIV and Spanish princess Maria Teresa, he doubtless wished to capture the Italian musical flavor that was proving so popular in Italy and central Europe. Though Italian opera was met with only mixed success when introduced to France in the 1640s, it remained highly influential in the development of French operas. French ballets, which

---


100 Downes, 62-3.


did capture the admiration of the French public in a large way and brought the nation considerable fame abroad, developed out of Italian-style opera, when dance was interspersed between the acts. Although ballet-operas soon became considered uniquely French, they were pioneered by a Florentine Italian: Jean-Baptiste Lully.

Certain musical instruments were also associated with foreign countries. During the reign of James II of England, when all things Spanish were in vogue, the guitar and its music were immensely popular. Indeed, the monarch was particularly pleased “with hearing Signor Francisco…an Italian, play on this instrument; as he knew how to fetch better music out of it than any other performer. Hence it became fashionable at court, and especially among the king’s mistresses, who were greater leaders in fashions of all kinds, than the queen herself.”103 Though guitars bespoke Spanish identity, it seems they were popular even in the hands of Italians. The Sacarmouche/Scarramucia character of the commedia dell’arte was frequently depicted carrying a guitar in his impersonation of a Spanish nobleman.

Italy also provided Western Europe with inventors and technicians who designed impressive stage effects.104 Indeed, these proved so popular in France that “machine plays” were created specifically to showcase them. Using such devices “gods” rode chariots down from the heavens and back again, boats and pieces of scenery appeared to move by themselves, “monsters” were brought to life, live horses flew, and fountains erupted on stage. Though native specialists began to take over the design of stage machines, they nevertheless remained linked to their Italian origins. Italian machinists continued to be invited for consultations and commissions

103 Davies in Downes, 51.
104 “We owe more to the Spaniards than to the Italians: from the latter we have borrowed machinery and music, from the former their fine poetic inventiveness.” Chappuzeau. Le Théâtre François in Howarth, 279.
to produce stage effects, particularly for operas and court ballets. Giocomo Torelli was among the most renowned. Even Spain felt these influences, albeit to a limited extent, since “[n]ew staging techniques, brought to Spain at mid-century by Italian professionals such as Cosme Lotti y Baccio del Bianco, were reserved for the palace festivities, although it is true that some were later used in the corrales.”¹⁰⁵ While the Elizabethan stage was famously bare and simplistic in its décor, the English did eventually develop a mania for the scenic and mechanical effects developed on the continent. Reputedly, the first English play to feature a specially designed scenic backdrop was a 1662 performance of Davanant’s The Siege of Rhodes.¹⁰⁶ Despite the slow emergence of stage scenery and mechanical effects in England, they did become immensely popular and continued to be associated with the French and Italian theaters. The London staging of the French opera Psyche was highly praised for its “new scenes, [and] new machines” and was described as “splendidly set out, especially in scenes.”¹⁰⁷

Of course foreign elements, whether they appeared in the guise of plays, performers, clothing, objects, music, machines, or other theatrical components, were not uniformly distributed either between or within Europe’s theater centers. England and France remained far more open to and more infatuated with foreign influences than was Spain. While foreign characteristics and commodities could be observed in nearly all theatrical productions, they also

---

¹⁰⁵ Ruano de la Haza, La Puesta En Escena En Los Teatros Comerciales Del Siglo de Oro, 33. “Nuevas técnicas de escenificación, traídas a España a mediados de siglo por profesionales italianos como Cosme Lotti y Baccio del Bianco, se reservaron par alas fiestas palaciegas, aunque bien es verdad que algunas de ellas fueron despúes represenadas en los corrales.”

¹⁰⁶ Downes, 29. Downes relates, “Sir William [Davenant], in order to prepare Plays to open his Theatre, it being then a building in Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields, rehearsed the First and Second Part of the Siege of Rhodes; and the Wits at Apothecaries-Hall: and in Spring 1662, opened his House with the said Plays, having new Scenes and Decorations, being the first that e’er were introduced in England” on the public stage.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 45.
tended to be showcased more explicitly in court performances than in the public playhouses. European courts, with their extensive resources and cosmopolitan tastes, were far more able and apt to showcase the global in the performances they commissioned from actors both foreign and domestic. Costumes reached the heights of opulence, machines and sets were the most intricate and impressive, the best performers on the continent were summoned, and even the refreshments available were markers of foreign opulence. Furthermore, the presence of large number of foreign courtiers, diplomats, and even royalty, turned the occasion into more than an ordinary theatrical performance. It very obviously became a performance of national power and influence, not simply for a domestic audience, but for the larger European community and the world. When in 1615 the French Queen ordered a ballet performed at court, famed Italian engineer Francini designed the machines, the dancing was done on Turkish carpets, and a diverse array of French and foreign nobles and officials were in attendance. Even the costumes were designed as a commentary on French wealth and splendor for they “were so laden with precious stones that foreigners thought there could be any more left in their countries or that France possessed more than the rest of the world put together.”

All of these elaborate elements combine to form a deliberate display of French authority and influence in the global order. In theatrical glory (and, by implication, politics, economics, and warfare), France “could not be intimidated by any other nation.” Thus, the display of foreign products and behaviors in the theater could be one way of asserting dominance over the lands and people from which they had been imported.

---

110 Control of foreign material and its presentation demonstrated the powers of consumption and representation as well as the power of knowledge. Kristin Hoganson argues that those who “turned other peoples’ cultures into the stuff of amusement could feel that they knew the
The Complexity of Theatrical Identity

As a result of dramatic transfer, material exchange, and cross-cultural performance, early modern theater was inherently indistinct in its cultural identity. Embodying no pure dramatic tradition, it cobbled together textual and performance elements from home and abroad to represent both the cultural self and the culture of the “other” in a single space. This duality produced tensions; exoticism heightened the appeal of the performance but foreign influence also produced cultural anxiety. In an age where strengthening nation-states sought to distinguish themselves from their neighbors more fiercely than ever before, European countries competed in the artistic, cultural, and economic arenas in addition to more familiar economic and military ones.

Thus, we witness two simultaneous occurrences: on one hand, the admission of and fascination with the foreign origins of many dramatic pieces and practices and on the other hand, early modern efforts to assign plays and performance techniques firmly to individual nations and to weigh their relative merits. While these two impulses—the large-scale incorporation of borrowed foreign material and the attempt to differentiate domestic theater from foreign theater so to assert the superiority of the former over the latter—appear to be in conflict, they represent two sides of the same coin. Indeed, the early moderns conceptualized and vocalized theater as a national phenomenon in response to its blatantly international character.

Just as “white” light shone through a prism reveals itself the composite of all colors, every entity or identity implies—and to a degree—contains its opposite. Just as the “self” cannot exist or define itself without an “other,” no “culture” can endure without the existence and

world…But of course, rather than really engaging with difference, they merely engaged with their own approximation of it.” Hoganson, 46.
persistent characterization of the foreign. There would be little need to speak of “English” theater or “French” theater nor fixate on distinguishing the two unless that boundary were somehow confused or blurred, which was in fact the case. Therefore, we cannot allow the rhetoric of the early modern literary critics, with their distinctions between Spanish, Italian, French, and English plays, people, and goods to persuade us that these nice, neat categories existed in any incontrovertible way. Rather, this rhetoric informs us that it was often politically and cultural advantageous to conveniently forget that large numbers of plays crossed international borders to triumph (and fail) on foreign stages. Furthermore, this nation-based conceptualization of early modern theater endured well beyond the early modern era. Even today theater histories separate their accounts of the early modern European stage by nation and language. But the segmentation of theater cultures was only one aspect of the early modern understanding of dramatic performance; underneath the rhetoric, everyone recognized on some level that the theater was an amorphous transnational creature. Indeed, that was why boundaries needed to be drawn so firmly: to retain cultural control over such a volatile and potentially contaminating art form. It was therefore culturally expedient to distinguish the local theater tradition from those existing elsewhere, and to extol the virtues of domestic drama and performance over those of outsiders. Once the national ownership and peculiar characteristics of various theater traditions had become ingrained and expected, the already-ambivalent relationship each culture had with theatrical foreignness was complicated further. However, the insistence on national categories for theater did not lead to a serious reconsidering or end to dramatic borrowing—although many complained loudly that too much dramatic material in their own country was unoriginal. On the contrary, borrowing increased in the late to mid-seventeenth century, in the midst of expanding nationalist rhetoric, international theatrical competition, economic and political imperialism, and
warfare. So too increased the frequency with which performers traveled to other lands, donned foreign attire, and presented interpretations of the larger world.

How, then, was national theatrical, and specifically dramatic, identity articulated in early modern Europe? In theory, plays could be categorized by their nation of origin, their author’s homeland, and their language of composition. For purposes of broad comparison, a nation’s plays were often lumped together and presumed to constitute a homogenous whole. Then, specific playwrights were called out as representing the best of each tradition, and (as we have seen) essentially competed with the playwrights of rival traditions. But, of course, this system of classification does not account for the plots and dramatic elements that traveled between nations and languages. Since true divisions between theater traditions did not exist, the theoretical boundaries between theater traditions proved difficult at times to uphold in any rigid ideological fashion. Therefore, the national identity of plays became a malleable set of guidelines, able to be wielded for a number of purposes. Foreign borrowing could be labeled either a detriment or a benefit, depending on the slant of one’s argument. A popular author might be deemed capable of creating an original work of art or even of transforming promising pre-existing material into a work of originality that qualified as part of a national tradition. An unpopular playwright or play could fall under heavy criticism for borrowing too extensively from either foreign or domestic sources. The rhetoric of theatrical nationalism could discredit outsiders and endorse insiders as being ideologically and culturally correct. However, these great efforts to nationalize plays, playwrights, and performance traditions would hardly have been necessary if theater did not possess such a wealth of extra-national or otherwise “foreign” components that needed to be controlled, limited, or modified for popular consumption.
The early modern theater had foreign connotations and connections in more ways than one. It is true that material from foreign lands arrived frequently on European stages, but the theater was also foreign in that it embodied and portrayed aspects of the unknown and the strange. Even before the rise of early modern theater culture and its persistent dramatic exchange, theater was already foreign in that it was different from everyday life, and the world of plays existed apart from it. By its very essence, theater transforms people, places, and objects into things that they are not—at least not in the ordinary course of their off-stage lives. Penniless actors become kings and conquerors, playhouses become forests, and sticks are transformed into swords through and for compelling storytelling. Theater requires suspension of disbelief, but one that often comforts viewers with its unreality. For this reason, theater has often been a space and a place in which the impossible is possible, reality becomes malleable, and things that are ordinarily impermissible can be safely portrayed. The odd, the deviant, and the illicit can be explored through performance in a way that might never be acceptable in other cultural settings because theater is not “real” in the same way as the world outside the playhouse seems to be.

However, many of the same characteristics that allow theater to operate outside the normal laws of identity, decency, human relationships, and cause and effect leave it open for criticism. To many of its critics, it was inherently “foreign” matter in that it was outside of the bounds of propriety, unwelcome, and potentially hazardous. Throughout history, the mere theatrical portrayal of aberrant behaviors and flouted conventions could be troublesome. Others,

---

111 Susan Stewart points out the human desire to seek comfort in storytelling, no matter how absurd, by highlighting “all narrative’s desire to invent a realizable world, a world which ‘works.’ In this sense, every narrative is a miniature and every book is a microcosm, for such forms always seek to finalize, bring closure to, a totality or model…It is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and, in fact, creates the illusion of the real.” Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 1st paperback ed (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), xii.
particularly in pre-modern Europe, were dismayed by theater in its entirety because it showed things that were both not acceptable and not “real.” The basic premise of theater as a space for unrealities concerned those who viewed performance as a species of lie. The Catholic Church in particular could be especially harsh toward the theater, and numerous treatises both attacking and defending theatrical performance were written as a result. Not only did plays present falsehoods and unsavory behaviors, such works asserted, they encouraged audience members and by extension the whole population in a host of spiritually “foreign” vices: sloth, lust, debauchery, gaming, and more. These treatises had little impact on performance practice or on public enthusiasm for the stage, but they nevertheless illustrate the recurring connection between theater and “the foreign” material that ought to play no role in a reputable Christian life.\textsuperscript{112}

While the theatrical was eternally disreputable for many, it is certainly possible to glimpse those theatrical aspects that appealed to popular taste. Peter Motteux writes that his own play, \textit{Beauty in Distress}, is:

\begin{quote}
divested of all the things that now recommend a Play most to the Liking of the Many. For it has no Singing, no Dancing, no mixture of Comedy, no Mirth, no change of Scene, no rich Dresses, no Show, no Rants, no Similies, no Battle, no Killing on the Stage, no Ghost, no Prodigy; and, what’s yet more, no Smut, no Profaneness, nor Immorality.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112} The debate over the acceptability or the objectionable nature of theatre was likewise an international endeavor, which occurred all over Europe throughout the course of many centuries. Authors, on one side or another, borrowed arguments, citations, and examples from writers in other lands. Because the value or harm of theater was closely tied to its role in Christian civilizations, a civilization which was well understood to exist above and beyond national borders, we can certainly say that the relationship between Church and stage was one that existed in an international context. But even as the churches glanced with suspicious eyes at the public stages, they continued to embrace many performance elements as part of liturgical ritual.

\textsuperscript{113} Peter Motteux, “The Preface,” \textit{Beauty in Distress as It Is Acted at the Theatre in Little Lincolns-Inn-Fields by His Majesties Servants / Written by Mr. Motteux; with a Discourse of the Lawfulness & Unlawfulness of Plays, Lately Written by the Learned Father Caffaro, Divinity-Professor at Paris, Sent in a Letter to the Author by a Divine of the Church of England}. (London, 1698), vii.
In short, he explains, the public enjoyed spectacle, violence, and sex—the very portrayals that made it suspect and the aspects of theater that the most puritanical desired to squelch. Ordinary people were most likely not paying attention to the fine poetry, the elegant dramatic pacing, or indeed any of those textual dramatic elements that we are typically compelled to study today. Attempts to redeem or purify theater of its “backward” impulses or contaminations often alienated all but the most stuffy or erudite audiences.

However, even those parties not opposed to theater on principle could find its execution problematic. Government and religious authorities often united to oversee theatrical performance and censor any aspects that they found objectionable. It was not simply immoral activities that brought censorship upon plays. In England and France overtly religious plays were disallowed. Any hint of political dissidence, defamation, or even social insubordination could create trouble for authors, performers, and theatrical financiers. Comments or characters that were perceived to possess a deviant political message or to criticize the monarch or powerful government officials were expunged or rewritten. For example, Spanish plays were criticized if servants displayed too much contempt for their social “betters.” We have also seen how many critics condemned plays that did not follow specific dramatic patterns. Such plays were labeled “irregular”—in other words, contrary to the prevailing modes of social, religious, and political discourse.

Dramatic content was far from the only potentially “foreign” element inherently present in the theater. Those who inhabited the world of the theater were also foreigners, in a social if not a geographic sense. Theatrical personnel, even when they had not arrived from far off lands, were “other”, “exotic”, and potentially disruptive. Actors, while entertaining in the context of the performance, were generally considered to be a public nuisance. Performers and managers were presumed to be thieves and charlatans and female performers little better than prostitutes.
Professional playwrights, except for those of national importance, were considered hacks. They were outsiders that could enter the prevailing cultural space for specific purposes only. Existing outside of normal patterns of behavior and social membership, theatrical professionals were often itinerant—a suspicious behavior in an era when identities could easily be concealed or reinvented—and sometimes acted in ways that disturbed and scandalized the public. They were fascinating yet dangerous in their potential influence. Reports detailed the concerns of authorities about the theater troupes visiting their locale. Actors and their fellows constituted a threatening foreign presence—which was worrying even to those who were regular patrons of the stage—and must be skillfully managed. Actors made their living by pretending to be something they were not. Italian and Frano-Italian actors who performed in the commedia tradition even took stage names, which further distanced them from the realm of ordinary folk and turned them into characters who “performed” even when not on stage. Just as these impersonators and professional tricksters presented performances of events that were not fully believable, they were not considered trustworthy offstage either.114

Thus, we can see some of the ways in which theater, even apart from its staged display of elements from other lands, was already a haven for the foreign in many ways and according to numerous definitions. It is easy to see why the theater was predisposed to seem like a place inhabited by the strange, the distant, the larcenous, and the licentious; In brief, the theatre was

---

114 Actors were professional deceivers, which made them inherently untrustworthy both within and without the context of stage performance. In theatrical performance, characters come and go (both literally from on stage to off stage and within the dramatic narrative) and disguise themselves as other characters. Often one actor performs more than one character. These common stage practices mirrored legitimate social anxieties about actors and other strangers, foreigners, and charlatans who might also appear and disappear without warning, and assume new identities at will (in an age where identities were difficult to verify). They could never truly be trusted to be who they claimed to be.
the abode of the “other.” The impulse to nationalize theatrical productions was an attempt to deal with a fundamental discomfort at the appearance of foreign, disruptive, and disreputable elements on stage, all of which was compounded by the worrying effects of international dramatic exchange.

**Playhouses: Showcasing and Suppressing the International**

Early modern theater in idea and practice was perpetually tinged with the international, the foreign, and the global. Yet, while manifestations of the “foreign” in theater had their appeal, they could not be allowed to operate unchecked. Elements were always at work to cover or counteract the undesirable qualities of theater in order to make it acceptable for public consumption while remaining appealing to popular tastes and, of course, profitable. There needed to be assurance that this “outside influence” did not threaten cultural security, identity, or purity. Nationalizing theater, celebrating it as an important cultural asset, and demonstrating one’s own national theater tradition’s superiority all helped to accomplish that goal. But the process of constructing the relationship between society and the stage was never simple and never complete. As a result, theater as text, practice, and place acted (and still acts today) as the site of a complex cultural negotiation between things foreign and domestic as well as between the local and the global. This ongoing negotiation resulted in specific ideas about theater and its relationship to the home nation, which varied depending on prevailing national attitudes toward difference and the larger world. However, in every location, theater both displayed and minimized the foreign by turns, reflecting cultural pressures and preferences.

This unresolved tension between the theater’s foreign desirability and the need to safeguard a coherent cultural identity can be observed in the drama and items that appeared on the stage, but also, in a very physical way, in the stage itself. While the theater buildings of
Western Europe in many ways shared a common set of inspirations, they varied, sometimes considerably and sometimes subtly, in their design, construction, and cultural significance. These structures reflect the role and understanding of theatrical performance within a given society and each playing space, in turn, reflected and influenced the presentation and reception of theatrical material occurring both within its walls and without.

The Nation, the World, and the Playhouse

Before the sixteenth century, buildings that functioned exclusively as playhouses were unheard of. Instead, acting companies used spaces that had been created for other purposes. In London, stage spaces were commonly improvised in inn courtyards until the 1570s. Temporary Parisian stages were created out of tennis courts. In Madrid, inns and hostelries were also used as performance spaces. Similarly, outside of major cities, almost all early modern performances continued to occur under impromptu conditions, including makeshift stages. Actors erected simple benches in town squares or other open spaces. In France, “over half the known provincial venues were tennis courts.”\(^\text{115}\) The earliest theater deliberately built for that purpose was Paris’s Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1548. It would be some time before other spaces were similarly created exclusively for theatrical purposes. Other early theaters, in London, Madrid, as well as elsewhere in Paris, were modified from existing structures until the very late sixteenth century or even later. These modified theaters, as well as public squares and other impromptu stages, continued to be used throughout the early modern period.

However, the rise of purpose-built or converted playhouses, particularly in major cities, provides additional insight into the way that early modern performers and audiences understood

the theater. When able to design playhouse layout they constructed their theaters in a manner they considered the most efficient, financially sound, socially acceptable, and reflective of theater’s role in the nation and beyond. Wood was the building material of choice, for, compared to stone, it was less expensive and labor intensive to employ. Of course, the permanent theater spaces that emerged in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe varied both within and between each nation, but they also reflect certain commonalities, including parallel arrangements of the audience. When playing spaces were only temporarily constructed or arranged, it was rare to have special categories of seating. Most people had to stand or sit on the floor immediately in front of the stage. However, the construction of permanent playhouses allowed for audience segmentation.116 Having pricier seats for wealthier patrons not only increased revenue, it also made some components of the audience more valued than others. The position of the spectators relative to the stage reflected their social status, wealth, and their relationship with the world beyond the theater.

If the theater as a whole was a space occupied by global forces, then the stage itself was the epicenter of its potent power and any resulting cultural threat. In England, Spain, and France, the youngest and vainest of the men who could afford the fee often sat directly on the stage, for several reasons. As previously noted, they sat where they could best be seen and noticed, but also, doubtlessly, to better experience the action and excitement of the performance. Their location also brought them dangerously close to all those aspects of performance that were colored by the foreign, in both wondrous and threatening varieties. Indeed, to lounge upon the stage was to, symbolically, face the suspect and the unknown. Like another set of young, ambitious, early modern European males—the explorers and traders making their way around

116 Castagno, 67.
the world in tall sailing ships—theatrical stage-sitters were poised to be the first to encounter and
endure both the dangerous and the splendid offered by the larger world. Though (and because)
they sat directly on the edge of impropriety, immorality, confused cultural identities, and
fictions, their presence proclaimed their ability to withstand these, as well as their ability to
appreciate the finer goods and experiences that global exchange made available.\textsuperscript{117}

Commonly, the space directly in front of the stage was occupied by a large, standing, and
(often almost entirely) male segment of the audience. Perhaps this was a deliberate borrowing
from the \textit{commedia dell’arte} tradition, or perhaps it was simple expedience to bring as many
bodies into the playhouse as possible. Often, because the places they occupied were the cheapest
in the theater, the standers were among the poorest of the playhouse’s clientele while wealthier
patrons sat higher up and on benches. Yet, they were not always “poor” in comparison to the rest
of the urban population. Middle class viewers often occupied this space, particularly in Paris
playhouses, which in general served a more prosperous audience. However, even men who could
afford nicer seating were known to sometimes stand before the stage, particularly when they
were unaccompanied by their female relations.

Despite the fluidity of the social composition of the pit, those who filled it were often the
subject of ridicule and disgust from those in more lofty seats. Certainly, the group could be
unpredictable. It was claimed that these “groundlings” (in Hamlet’s parlance) were more likely

---

\textsuperscript{117} Early modern adventurers returned home with stories of the fantastic and hazardous, again
mirroring the narratives showcased on the playhouse stages. The similarities between exploration
and theatrical presentations were not lost to the early moderns. Indeed, the prologue to \textit{The
Unhappy Favourite: or the Earl of Essex} explained how the poet’s profession was much
different from that of an intercontinental merchant: “The Play’s his Vessel, and his Venture, Wit:/
Hopes are his Indies, Rocks and Seas, the Pit.” John Banks, John Dryden, Major Mohn,
“Prologue” in John Banks, \textit{The Unhappy Favourite, Or, The Earl of Essex a Tragedy : Acted at
the Theatre Royal by Their Majesty’s Servants} (London: 1682).
to move around, hold extended conversations, make trouble, start fights, and in general engage in disruptive if not dangerous behaviors. Playwrights feared their wrath even as they courted their favor, wealthy patrons objected when plays pandered to their “common” tastes. In Spain they were called “mosqueteros,” [musketeers] and were exclusively male. In France, the pit was called the “parterre,” and was the object of both critical disdain and actor obsequiousness. In many ways, these standing viewers were the heart of the audience. They made the most noise and voiced the loudest opinions about the quality of the performance. At the same time, looking up at the stage and its displays, they could not usually access the riches and wonder that they saw during the performance—unless they were members of a wealthier class and merely “roughing in” on the floor of the playhouse with humbler spectators. Either way, they were exposed to their rougher countrymen, and denied foreign luxury.

Further out, along the walls of the playhouse, sat more privileged patrons, usually on multiple levels. As a general rule, the higher up the seating, the more prestigious the spectator. However, the location of spectators of different stations around the perimeter of the stage could vary. Viewing the action from above, patrons seated in the stalls and galleries generally had a much better view than most of those standing on the floor. The entire playhouse and the wonders it held was theirs to survey, but at the same time they were removed from the domestic rabble as well as the (often foreign) corrupting influence of the actors onstage. In France and England, those seated above on the sides of the stage were also in the best place to be seen. The very wealthy, the politically influential, and in some cases, the royalty, sat in the boxes closest to the stage—a great place to be seen from the pit, even if it often proved a poor place from which to view the play. Yet, those seated in such places were largely there to be seen, rather than to see.
They added to the exotic glory of the play and performance with their personal decorations or their own foreign origins.

While these general similarities existed from location to location, playhouse arrangement was far from uniform. Even within a given city or country, theater architecture and seating could vary significantly and changed with the passage of time. Yet the layout and use of playhouses indicated in a meaningful way each culture’s attempts to come to terms with the influence of the international. English theaters took several forms over the course of the early modern period, but in London, theaters showcased the outside world, often in very overt ways. The earliest permanent, public playhouses were adapted from pre-existing structures: inns, arenas for animal fighting, and the like—all spaces with very overt foreign (morally or geographically) connotations. Many private playhouses were located in renovated monasteries (hence Blackfriars and Whitefriars) which had been seized in the Reformation but nevertheless remained a reminder of “foreign” Roman Catholic influence.

Once newly built structures for theatrical activity began to appear, it becomes even more plausible to see the playhouse as a reflection of the concept of world-stage. As some have argued, by naming the playhouse “the Globe” Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders were making that link very explicitly. They were familiar with the metaphorical connection, but by linking the rounded playhouse (Figure 5.1) and the name with the theatrical activities taking place there, they illustrated that they understood the connection to operate on a number of different levels. In addition to reflecting a rounded world, the shape of playhouses like the Globe and the Rose also reflected the presumed shape of the ancient playhouses of the Greeks and the Romans. And indeed, they were imitated not merely as cultured predecessors of the western and English theater traditions, but as a “foreign” culture. And the evidence suggests that the
decorators of the playhouses deliberately attempted to echo this foreign culture, and especially its appealing opulence, in their own project. Thus, they painted the columns on the stage to look like Italian marble, the heavens were painted with symbols and images of the classical heavens. Furthermore, the wealthiest and more prominent individuals, who sat in the private boxes nearest the stage on their side, were deliberately being put on display (along with the play itself) for the rest of the audience. These wealthy people often included foreign visitors, but even when they were English, they would have been the members of English society most in touch with, and most illustrative of, foreign trends in style and consumption (Figure 5.2).

Between 1642 and 1660, when public theatrics were outlawed in England, playhouses were dismantled or converted for other use. When theater troupes were again licensed to perform, new theaters were built. In the seventeenth century, English theaters borrowed not only a significant percentage of their dramatic content from abroad, but also the arrangement of its
theaters, which were heavily inspired by those in France and Italy, such that “[t]he actual look of the stage [as well as] the presence of both male and female actors were…innovations partly derived from the French.”118 Those responsible for designing and building the new theaters, were usually those who had spent significant time on the continent, such as Inigo Jones and William

118 Stedman, 78.
The French style of theater building was based strongly and consciously on Italian innovations in scenery and mechanics that subsequently caught on in England (Figure 5.3). From France, playhouse builders borrowed the rectangular theater, and Italian developments like the proscenium arch (introduced from the Continent by Inigo Jones) and movable scenery were present in Davenant’s theatre at Lincoln’s Inn Fields (Figure 5.4). The truly public theaters continued to accommodate standing audience members, even as private theaters did away with the practice, in emulation of the Italianate opera theaters that were beginning to appear throughout Europe.

In the first years after the reestablishment of theatrical life in London, there was a fine between the importance of theater as a domestic entertainment and one that reflected global English pursuits and engagements. Because performance had been banned for more than a decade, Restoration theater at first latched onto “plays that had been popular in royal circles

119 Ibid., 77.
120 Ibid., 79.
when the Caroline theatres closed in 1640.”¹²¹ Then foreign plays became all the rage, in spite of the small number of critical voices that railed against them. Most of the Restoration changes to English theater came under criticism, and its failings were continually blamed on foreign influence, particularly:

the example of the Court, which for the most part was just arriv’d from abroad with the King, where it had endavour’d by foreign corruption to sweeten, or at least to soften adversity, and having sojourn’d for a considerable time, both at Paris and in the Low Countries, united the spirit of the French Whoring, to the fury of the Dutch Drinking. So that Poets who writ immediately after the restoration, were obliged to humour the deprav’d tastes of their audience.¹²²

¹²¹ Dobson, 25.
While the French theater heavily influenced the English stage, particularly in the areas of seventeenth century theater design and repertoire, it had its own unique way of grappling with the international qualities of theater. Though France developed its strong dramatic tradition later than either England or Spain, it possessed dedicated theater spaces earlier than either. The first theater, the Hôtel du Bourgogne, was constructed in the Saint-Germain area of Paris. It was both the commercial center of Paris, and heavily populated by foreigners. This one theater retained a monopoly on public performance for almost a century. It was modified over time to allow for moving set pieces and other machinery—Italian innovations. Thus the theater retained foreign dimensions even when the Comédie Italie was not performing there.

Most Parisian playhouses had similar ties to the world of theater exchange and internationalism, but they also largely navigated theatrical foreignness and mitigated its presence through the figure of the monarch, particularly Louis XIV, who reigned from 1643-1715 (Figure 5.5). Foreign displays were made acceptable for the French nation because of royal approbation and royal participation, both real and symbolic. As in England and Spain, theater companies needed a royal license to perform. But unlike England and Spain, French theater (and Parisian

123 Howarth, 323.
theater in particular) was mindful of the monarch in a particularly powerful way. The king could act as both an international force and a national force that made the international safe and palatable. In practice, this meant that the line between court and public theater was blurred.

While most English and Spanish royalty attended the public performances rarely, if ever, French royalty and court regularly patronized the public stages. Similarly, “court” performances—those that occurred in the theaters at the various royal palaces—were at times open to a larger segment of the population. The King gave the Palais Royal to Molière’s troupe for over a decade, and it began to operate as a public playhouse. French audiences were also much less diverse than those in other lands, so it was not as though the lowest social classes were invited into royal performance.

The content of performances also reflected this focus on the French monarchy. Spectacles and ballets glorified the monarchy and the nation. Plays began and ended with verse in praise of the King. Cardinal Richelieu himself designed theater spaces and dramatic performances explicitly to make such political statements. Louis XIV himself participated in ballets and other public spectacles that occurred in theatrical settings. French theater was also markedly royal in less overt ways. Like many temporary French stages, the Hôtel du Marais, the Hôtel du Guénégaud, and the Palais Royal theater were converted from tennis courts into playhouses. These venues helped give French playhouses their distinct rectangular shape, and the presence of galleries for spectators facilitated the transition. Tennis, or rather its predecessor, jeu de paume, had been a royal sport, played by Louis X and Charles V. Kings were among the first builders of

---

124 In late eighteenth century Russia, Catherine the Great was another monarch who involved herself heavily in theatrical pursuits. Not only did she establish theaters and schools for performers, she also wrote more than twenty plays and musical dramas for performance at court. Catherine, O’Malley, Lurana Donnels Catherine, Two Comedies by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), xiv-xvi.
tennis courts, which were attached to royal palaces. Their courts inspired the building of similar structures across Europe. Thus, theaters were inherently spaces marked by royal privilege and leisure. With such connotations, theaters could welcome and even celebrate Italian actors and their farces.125

Whether round or square, temporary or permanent, newly built or modified, French and English playhouses all articulated the theater’s relationship with the foreign and the wider world. In each space, participants conducted ongoing negotiation of this relationship, and there were many ways that playhouses communicated “foreignness.” Some stages were more and less open (literally and figuratively) to the outside. English playhouses could be metaphorical and geometric “globes” or channel the world through association with actual and spiritual foreigners. Rectangular and oval playhouses could both represent different aspects of the international. French playhouses might imagine foreign influence not only in architecture and urban geography but also in the omnipresent monarch and the cosmopolitan composition of the court.126

The perceived link between the monarch/court and the wider world was strong in all European countries during this period, though the French example is an extreme one. Not only were monarchs travelers, and occasionally of foreign extraction themselves, their consorts were almost always foreign-born. And these foreign queens brought with them all sorts of personalities from their home courts (who in turn might very well have come from elsewhere in Europe). Not only were members of the court often from another land, the material elements of their lives tended to be as well. They were part of the display, along with the actors and the script.

125 Farce as a genre was associated with Italian and lowbrow comedy, despite the success of French authors in bending it to their own ends.
126 Of course, playhouses were not constructed simply to showcase a conscious or unconscious relationship with distant lands, they also existed to house large number of paying patrons and bring in revenue.
Thus, even though the Palais-Royal originally had seating directly in front of the stage, Molière and his company removed it to create room for a standing audience, and retain the class segmentation common to public theaters. By maintaining a large standing audience, they reinforced the differences between the social elite and everyone else. They also harkened back to the staging practices of the Italian comedians. Molière, known for incorporating farcical elements and commedia dell’arte characters in his plays (both of which carried connotations which were both international and associated with middle-class tastes), walked a line between national triumphalism and foreign exoticism in both his drama and performance. By using the King’s theater from 1660 until 1673, these practices used monarchical authority to sanction foreign qualities and preserved social divisions in order to acceptably regulate the amount of exposure to foreign luxury (and foreign depravity) that each audience member could access. The figure of the King and the idea of the nation were both ever-present in early modern French theater. Foreign influence could be tolerated and even cherished as long as royal favor supported these practices. As long as the French monarchy—the foremost symbol of the French nation—was stable and powerful, French “national” theater, language, dance and fashion were understood to surpass and heavily influence the rest of Europe.

Early modern Spanish theater, by contrast, had completely different ways offsetting foreign theatrical influences: they often preferred to imagine that these foreign influences did not exist. Spain, eternally wary of outsiders and weakening politically and militarily throughout the seventeenth century, feared this infiltration. Thus, while dramatic borrowing from Italian source material was common, this fact was generally ignored by a populace and secular and religious authorities that wanted their theater to be thoroughly Spanish. Other Italian influences certainly

\[127\] Castagno, 69.
appeared in the form of *commedia* troupes, opera companies, stage machinery, and set dressing, but they tended to be less pervasive than in France or England.\(^{128}\) Furthermore, when Italianate influence was apparent, it was easier to justify its presence in Spanish theaters and to find it non-threatening. Largely under the rule of Hapsburg Spain from 1559-1714, Italy was not quite foreign, even if it was not quite Spanish. Thus, Spain could use, even enjoy, Italian theatrical materials without too much concern that it might corrupt the nation and its theater. A dominated Italy was unthreatening, particularly when compared with powerful England or France. As a result, Spain largely ignored French and English theater, even as these countries mined the Spanish stage for dramatic material. Spanish commentators only deigned to notice the theater of these countries when they could boast of foreign reliance on Spanish drama. Even as Spain was inescapably a part of the international theatrical community, Spaniards predominantly went to the theater to see Spain (or Spanish possessions), not the rest of the world. In the words of Melveena McKendrick:

> At a time when Spanish military hegemony was beginning to yield to outside pressure and social tensions and economic decline started to gnaw at the vitals of Spain’s self-confidence, the *corrales* responded with a national drama of epic achievement and individual self-assertion which allowed the Spaniard, when he gazed for a while in the mirror, to burnish his self-image and go away assured.\(^{129}\)

Nor was drama the only reflection of the Spanish desire for national images and experiences on the stage. The playhouses, or *corrales de comedias*, built in the sixteenth and seventeenth century also served to mitigate foreign influence in the theater and proclaim Spanish themes.

\(^{128}\) “a mythological *comedia* whose sets featured perspective and complicated stage machinery that moved through the air from right to left, on a downward or upward diagonal, and above the stage could not be represented in a typical commercial theater of the seventeenth century.” Ruano de la Haza, *La Puesta En Escena En Los Teatros Comerciales Del Siglo de Oro*, 10. “una comedia mitológica con decorados en perspectiva y complicados vueltos de traymoyas que se movian en el aire de derecha a izquierda, en bajada o subida diagonal, y por encima del tablado, no podían representarse en un teatro commercial típico del siglo XVII.”

\(^{129}\) McKendrick, 74.
In Spain, playhouses were often created out of the public squares in which performances had previously been held. Even when purpose-built theatrical structures were erected, they remained close to their predecessors in many ways—many of which were unique to Spain. Unlike in England, these newly made public playhouses were not often freestanding structures. While the French playhouses made use of previously existing structures, they employed positive space within buildings while Spanish theaters grew from the negative spaces in between structures, particularly the empty spaces between and within dwellings (Figure 5.6). The Spanish stage of the Siglo de Oro is curiously, even deliberately, indebted to the style, dimensions, and therefore the cultural implications of the early modern Spanish home (Figure 5.7). The original corrales had been nothing more than open courtyards, similar to the central courtyards around which houses were constructed. Not only did the corrales de comedias frequently use the pre-existing walls of ordinary homes and buildings to create its shape, it retained the appearance of a domestic courtyard.
The architectural similarities are pervasive, demonstrating how Spanish theater was domesticated in a manner not found in the other counties examined here. Those who owned and occupied the building adjacent to the playhouse effectively had access to it, and to the productions that took place there. In Madrid, neighbors could look right into the theater space from the windows of their own homes. Rather than paying for admission, they could see the plays for free, without even going out to mingle with the crowds. Usually, these were wealthier individuals who had contracts with the theater owner that insured their access rights. In theaters like the one in Almagro, the playhouse is located within a domestic dwelling. One must enter through a (pre-existing) house in order to access the newer theater space in the courtyard. And the stage itself was constructed to look like, and therefore to theatrically represent, a domestic space: with the placement of its balcony and doors, the stage space looked like the front of a typical Spanish dwelling (Figures 5.8 and 5.9). The stage design prefigured the scenes that were expected to be played there—most

Figure 5.8: The stage of the corral de comedias in Almagro. This is the last surviving seventeenth century theater in Spain. Although the playhouse decoration is not original, it is an extensively researched recreation of the corral in the seventeenth century.

Figure 5.9: The exterior of a typical small-town middle-class Spanish home. Compare the arrangement of the façade with that of the playhouse stage.
early modern plays were set in and around the houses of the Spanish middle class and the nobility.

The boxes in the galleries of the playhouse, reserved expressly for town officials, also served to control the theater and to create a connection between the Spanish state and the theater. Even if unoccupied, they served as a reminder that theater had a governmental function in addition to a social and cultural one. However, unlike in other countries, where the reserved boxes of the wealthy were open to the public and facing the audience at times, in Spain they were much less visible and, at times, their occupants were actually screened off from the rest of the audience. They were not displayed as the wealthy and noble theatre-going populations usually were in England or France. Their persons and goods (with potential foreign connections) were hidden from view, and the celebration of home and nation within the playhouse was thus visually maintained.

The most obvious social difference between the early modern Spanish playhouse and its foreign cousins was the obvious segregation of men and women. In Western Europe, it was everywhere expected that a reputable woman would be accompanied to the theater by a male escort, preferably a spouse or relation. In England and France, custom further dictated that a female remain under male protection for the duration of her visit. However, in Spain, this escorting was only desirable, and indeed, only possible, until the party reached the playhouse door. At that point men and women entered the corral by two separate entrances, sat in segregated areas of the playhouse, and only joined company again when the production concluded.

Here, once again, the physical arrangement of the Spanish corral de comedias reflects contemporary domestic arrangements, at least those of the nobility, which largely segregated the female members of the family from the male ones. In the home, women had their own spaces,
their own household occupations, and their own decorative modes. While fashionable women did not sit on cushioned slabs when they attended the theater as they often did at home, they were expected to sit in the company of other women, which of course, would afford them the same opportunities for social interaction to which they were accustomed in the home. In the playhouse, the women’s area was known as the cazuela, literally the “stew” or “casserole” (Figure 5.10). While the exact reasons for this naming are debatable—perhaps it was a reference to the heat of the playhouse, and the female attendees, on a summer afternoon, or to the fact that scandalous gossip was often “cooked up” there—it is worth noting that the term further links the women’s space inside the theater with women’s domestic roles and concerns: the kitchen, food preparation, and gossip.130

For all intents and purposes, the cazuela was an extenuation of the female domestic sphere, and the entire corral, therefore, an extension of the Spanish home. It was organized rather than chaotic, safe rather than threatening, and attempted to be overtly familiar rather than exotic. In England and France, the playhouse was a place of licentiousness and a freedom of behavior, thought and mode that was directly connected to the idea of the foreign. By contrast, the Spanish

130 In early modern English, the word “stew” also possessed decidedly female connotations and was used to designate a prostitute or a brothel in addition to a foodstuff. “stew, n.2”. OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/190080?rskey=ISZAn&result=2 (accessed May 05, 2014).
corral was a place, if not of restraint, certainly of firmer regulation when it came to things like behavior. In England and France, the playhouse itself was an open and potentially a threatening place. It was a part of the larger world, which is why male guardians were expected to remain with and “protect” their female charges even inside its walls. However, by separating men and women, the Spanish corral conveyed the message that, as in the home, the theater’s potential threat came not from exposure to the outside but from men and women interacting and upsetting the delicate balance of daily life. When looked at alongside the writings, it becomes clear that, unlike the English and French playhouses which celebrated the foreignness available to them within a theatrical setting, the Spanish corral de comedies was deliberately conceived as, and socially organized as, firmly domestic in character and firmly Spanish in nationality. As McKendrick has pointed out, “[t]he fully-developed corral was not a self-contained theatre. It was a curious and uneasy mixture of public and private seating, of theatre property and public property.”\textsuperscript{131} However, it effectively allowed international forces to be subsumed by comforting domestic experiences. In the seventeenth century, fervently Catholic Spain, where the Church exerted a greater influence over both social custom and theatrical practice than in either France or Italy, felt itself to be threatened by “foreign” influences—be they Protestant, morisco, or immoral. Religious error was conflated with social transgression and with imported immoralities, none of them welcome in “pure,” Catholic, Spain. The result was the suppression, removal, and denial of such influences in both social life and on the stage.

We see that different societies took playing spaces with many of the same design elements and turned them into structures that operated quite differently with regard to social function and cultural significance. The degree of contact with the international also differed from

\textsuperscript{131} McKendrick, 184.
theater to theater and production to production during the same age and in the same nation. For example, the Hotel du Bourgogne, housing the Comédie-Italian in the late seventeenth century, perhaps felt much more foreign than the Palais Royal, housing the Comédie-Française, even though Molière incorporated Italianate characters, comedy, and, occasionally, mechanical effects into his own plays. The latter specialized in exotic luxury and the former in the darker side of foreignness. In France, “popular” elements were often also foreign elements, which many loved and a few wished to expunge completely. “Native” French plays (with less Italian influence) were deemed superior, and international influence occasionally toned down to make productions more acceptable.

Ultimately, every stage was both a potential site for experiencing the exotic and a structure for confirming the cultural stability and superiority of the home culture. Just as the early moderns (like most cultural groups through the ages) were torn between fascination and fear at the foreign, they were torn between heightened interest in foreign elements portrayed on stage and periodic concern about the broader cultural influence that foreign powers held over their homeland. Just as they frequently downplayed pervasive dramatic borrowing by evoking theatrical nationalism, they also structured their performances and theater practices to create an ideal blend of comforting domesticity and foreign excitement. By asserting the virtues of “national” plays and poets, they offset the widespread, though problematic, adoption and enjoyment of international materials. Indeed, this insistence in assigning early modern theater a national identity has proved so compelling that it continues to influence popular culture and academic scholarship in the present. But it remains important to recognize that the rhetoric of nationalism and the fierce guardianship of independent cultural identities was reacting to and often deliberately concealing the reality of theatrical internationalism.
CONCLUSION

Though scholars are well aware of intercultural influences and persistent borrowing in the creation of early modern theater, too rarely have these phenomena foregrounded discussions of the early modern stage and its relationship with European culture. These transnational aspects ought to be noted—not simply because they existed, but because of the powerful ways in which they shaped peoples’ perceptions of themselves, the stage, and the wider world. Indeed, theater served as a pivotal avenue for exploring the boundaries between the familiar and the unknown, the real and the imaginary, the self and the other. Theater helped the early moderns make sense of their world, and it can aid us in making sense of their time and our own.

Now, as then, human beings are increasingly connected to one another by developments in communication and transportation and encounter difference and diversity in unprecedented ways. In such a climate, it is easy to feel threatened by unfamiliar cultural practices and beliefs. We have a tendency to cling to the familiar and value only those cultural products that seem to celebrate and validate our particular group. In this way, the early moderns often used the drama and the theater to construct symbolic barriers between cultures. However, those same forces can also be used to dismantle divisions. Beloved theatrical works, particularly those of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Europe, have often been treated as sacrosanct pillars of Western civilization: made by geniuses, appreciated by elites, existing outside the experience of common mortals. Yet, by fostering an understanding of early modern theater (and the arts in general) as the product of diversity, complex patterns of influence, and shared authority, we can more effectively convey the theater’s relevance to a multifaceted audience. In the end, all people should have a stake in the arts and feel a sense of ownership of beautiful and meaningful things.
Once cognizant of theater’s tenancy to subvert national borders and the broader interconnectivity of the early modern world, it becomes easier to glimpse and appreciate the hints of theatrical transnationality evident in both historical sources and contemporary portrayals of the past. By interrogating these elements, we can gradually re-center our understanding of early modern theater as a culturally hybrid phenomenon produced in a climate of rampant imitation, consistently drawn from multitudinous fonts of inspiration, and traveling a convoluted path from source to product. We can begin to recognize transnational elements of early modern theater as systemic rather than anomalous, and more effectively appreciate the complexity of cultural products in all places and times. This is an important shift for scholarship, but even more so for history as interpreted in public forums and for diverse audiences.

Performance itself can serve as a meaningful medium for interrogating historical events and processes, so long as we recognize that its methods and purposes differ considerably from other historical presentations. Indeed, theater in the present is uniquely placed to shape our perceptions of the theater of the past, whether through the staging of old plays, adaptations, or newly scripted material. Even the most unlikely of performances can serve as a space for interrogating assumptions about theater history, its creation, and its relationship with wider cultural trends.

Contemporary performers Steven J. Madden and Dusten Welch bill themselves as “The Dueling Fools” and, portraying sixteenth century swordsmen George Silver and Rocco Bonetti respectively, perform their combination of stage combat and slapstick humor at Renaissance Faires and cultural festivals across the country. Much of their patter revolves around contested national identities, particularly the cultural tension between the characters of the Italian Bonetti
and the Englishman Silver, each of whom firmly believes in the superiority of his own fighting ability and his homeland. Here is a sample of their banter:

Silver: …It turns out William Shakespeare is writing a new play...
Bonetti: …a new play to go along with all the other ones no one ever reads.¹
Silver: You’ve never read Shakespeare?
Bonetti: Of course not, it’s written in….English…
Silver: Oh yes, well, Shakespeare is from England.
Bonetti: No, Shakespeare is from Italy!
Bonetti: Well, if Shakespeare is from England, why does he base all his plays in Italy?
Silver: Oh come now, what about The Taming of the Shrew?
Bonetti: It takes place in Padua, Italy.
Silver: Well then, Measure for Measure.
Bonetti: Vienna [sic], Italy.
Silver: Much Ado About Nothing?
Bonetti: Sicily!
Silver: Aha! Sicily is not Italy.
Bonetti: But they wish they were…
Silver: I know! The Two Gentlemen…
Bonetti: of Verona?
Silver: Uh…The Tempest—that play took place on an island.
Bonetti: But they were from Naples and Milan!
Silver: Winter’s Tale.
Bonetti: Sicily.
Silver: A Comedy of Errors.
Bonetti: Syracuse.
Silver: Coriolanus.
Bonetti: Rome!
Silver: Julius Caesar!!
Bonetti: (disgusted) …Really!? There’s also Titus Andronicus, The Merchant of Venice, Othello, and Antony and Cleopatra—all take place in Italy.²

In the routine above, the characters debate the cultural ownership of Shakespeare in an attempt to reconcile the author’s nationality with the stories he scripted. In large measure, the humor turns upon the Silver’s (and the audience’s) conviction of Shakespeare’s English

¹ This dialogue also features interesting projections of the present into the past, for in Silver and Bonetti’s world Shakespeare’s plays were more likely to be performed than read and were popular entertainments rather than homework assignments.
² Steven J. Madden and Dusten Welch, “The Dueling Fools,” performed at the Maryland Renaissance Festival, Summer 2013.
identity—everyone knows Shakespeare is not Italian!—and his mounting frustration at not being able to name a single Shakespearean play set in England. Yet, the simple joke hints at a more complex historical truth, for Shakespeare did rework Italian stories, both ancient and early modern. Though Shakespeare, the man, was English by virtue of his birth, he and his oeuvre are not only English, for they did not exist in an exclusively English world. Like most early modern playwrights writing for English stages, Shakespeare evoked foreign plays, texts, lands, people, and languages in his plays. Furthermore he and his contemporaries often acted as figureheads for English poetry in a cosmopolitan world. As a result, we cannot separate the plays he produced from the larger cultural geography in which they were created. Shakespeare has always been multicultural.

Underneath the silly banter, Madden and Welch manage to evoke many essential, though often overlooked, qualities of early modern Europe and its theater. For example, they successfully imply that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were eras in which people, ideas, reputations, texts, and goods traveled widely and quickly. Though there is no proof that the historical Silver and Bonetti ever met, the two certainly knew each other by reputation. Furthermore, the early modern meeting of men from the northern and southern extremes of the European continent was no anomaly. On the contrary, Italian fencing masters like Bonetti were greatly admired in Early Modern England though vilified by master English swordsmen who held up English modes of fencing as a superior alternative to the various continental schools of swordplay. Fighting, like theater, evoked the foreign, and fashionable weaponry and fighting

3 There are many, of course, including all of Shakespeare’s histories, but that would have spoiled the joke. To a knowledgeable audience, Silver’s inability to remember these plays makes him a humorous dolt. Yet, his ignorance also highlights the fact that Shakespeare’s most well known plays are those that reflect foreign influences and settings. A less knowledgeable audience might be led to wonder whether Shakespeare even set any of his plays in England.
styles imported from other lands increased the prevalence of sword violence among upper-class young men throughout Europe.

While no conclusive evidence exists that Silver or Bonetti served as models for well-known Shakespearean characters (as “The Dueling Fools” suggest), Madden and Welch portray a world in which ordinary folk from across Europe—including Shakespeare—could well have been familiar with each man’s exploits. Silver, in particular, published a widely read treatise on the art of swordplay. The fictionalized repartee of Bonetti and Silver illustrates an age in which nations, through their celebrated representatives, dueled (rhetorically, if not always physically) with other competitor nations.

Another example of early modern theater interrogated through dramatic performance occurs in the 2007 film Miguel y William. This delightful, though fanciful film imagines a past in which William Shakespeare travels to Spain and encounters his contemporary, Miguel de Cervantes.4 Miguel y William bears much in common with Shakespeare in Love, particularly in its balance of comedic and romantic elements. The plot too, resembles that of its predecessor: a beautiful and imaginative young lady is promised in marriage to an odious but wealthy man, nurses a passion for the stage, and finds adventure in her encounters with illustrious playwrights. However, the film is not intended to glorify either Shakespeare or Cervantes, instead it celebrates the joy and inventiveness that the arts bring to our lives. Not only does Miguel y William put a multifaceted spin on early modern drama, the film itself is a collaboration between Spanish and English production teams.

While the meeting of Cervantes and Shakespeare, the love triangle in which the two become embroiled, and their eventual collaboration are fantastical scenarios, the film also alludes

to many early modern phenomena in a range of creative ways. For one thing, the entire premise of the story hinges upon the possibility of international travel and communication in sixteenth century Europe, both of which were real, extensive, and influential.\(^5\) A lack of evidence for the historical Shakespeare’s travels should not limit our understanding of his world as one in which it was perfectly reasonable for thinkers and writers to travel in both physical and metaphorical ways. The dialogue, which combines Spanish and English, evokes a cultural landscape in which languages, like people, interacted and basic familiarity with foreign languages was not uncommon.

Furthermore, the film presents early modern theater as a collaborative endeavor rather than the product of an isolated mind: Shakespeare, Cervantes, the heroine (Leonor), and her nurse all have a hand in the shaping of a single performance. That performance, like the film itself, ultimately reflects recognizable elements of the Shakespearean canon, *Don Quixote*, Spanish *comedia*, and Italian *commedia dell’arte*. Literature and performance, it suggests, are not segregated by genre, author, land, language of origin, or cultural status. Instead they flow into one another, reinterpreting familiar ideas in new lights, serving as adaptable works of cultural expression rather than rigid monuments of cultural identity.

Just as the theater of the past can act as a window onto historical events, personalities, and ideas, contemporary performance has the power to make us think about the past in innovative ways. The dramatic pieces above serve as evidence that food for historical thought can exist in the most creative and unorthodox of performance pieces. Because much theater inherently encompasses elements of the fantastical and the absurd, done correctly it can be a

\(^5\) Unfortunately, it is never explained in the film precisely how Shakespeare travels to Spain, a plot point which could have resulted in a useful historical lesson.
creative venue that inspires further inquiry. At liberty to imagine a wider range of historical possibilities than those spelled out in textbooks, creative teams can unwittingly allude to many truths as well as many improbabilities. Performance also attempts to communicate aspects of the past often omitted or underdeveloped in scholarly historical accounts, though they are evident in our daily lives—emotion, uncertainty, irony, confusion, ridiculousness—thereby widening the scope of what is considered valid material for historical inquiry.

Reconfiguring our ideas about the early modern past, its theater, and artistic identity can aid us in addressing questions of cultural ownership and appropriation. Because human beings tend to care deeply about cultural products, their use, and their ownership, these materials have often been contested. Dominant societies have used cultural materials to establish and demonstrate their authority and control over less powerful societies in both overt and subtle ways. One particularly common method of demonstrating power has been to appropriate modes of imagery, literature, and performance from other societies and rework them. This metaphor of control through artistic production was widely and consistently practiced throughout the early modern world. Yet, the resulting patterns and products of exchange illustrate that the fruits of adaptation belong fully to neither the adaptor nor the source. Neither can claim total ownership. This reality indicates that we would do well to envision a shared ownership of the arts, of cultural materials, and of history more broadly. Of course, shared ownership of culture cannot exist without open dialogue, equity of access to cultural resources, and respect for the differences that shape perception. Acknowledging the hybridity of cherished cultural events and moments enhances their relevance rather than diminishing their importance. They thereby achieve profundity not in their exclusivity, but in their shared appreciation. Both theater and history become more meaningful when they cease to be understood as the property of cultural and
academic elite. Only when histories and the arts are widely accessed and widely cherished, can they be forces for widespread cultural improvement.

The importance of theater in the early modern world and in contemporary life also begs us to rethink the relationship between history and the arts. Historians have often shied away from grappling with theater because it can seem at odds with the project of historical scholarship: theater illustrates fantasies while historians seek truths; theater deals in emotions while historians cling to facts; theater can be frivolous and farcical while historians desire their work to be always taken seriously. Yet, theater and history are not so incompatible. History straddles the divide between empirical proof and subjective imaginings. For this reason, works of history—like works of theater, literature, and other artistic products—are not stable entities but fluid matter shaped and interpreted through individual encounters. At the same time, the arts posses a “magic” that is not incompatible with historical causality nor at odds with scholarly observations. History’s lessons enrich the arts with new dimensions and highlight overlooked meanings. Both disciplines encourage us to ceaselessly question even our most fundamental assumptions. Their joint exploration can open spaces for all people to find meaning in both history and the performing arts.

Ultimately, my intent in conducting this study is not simply to illustrate the cultural hybridity of early modern theater and emphasize the ways in which the Europeans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries understood theater as a transnational phenomenon. Equally importantly, I wish to suggest that popular presentations of history are just as vital to the examination of the past as academic studies. After all, public history and academic history are not opposing forces, nor are they hierarchically divided methods of historical inquiry and revelation. Rather, the two forms are united in both purpose and potency as they empower us to explain the past, confront the present, and conceive the future.
WORKS CITED


Cervantes y Saavedra, Miguel de. El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Qvixote de La Mancha, Compuesto Por Miguel de Cervantes Saauedra. Madrid, 1605.

———. Segynda Parte Del Ingenioso Cavallero Don Qvixote de La Mancha. Madrid: Juan de la Cuesta, 1615.


Cohn, Ruby. “‘Theatrum Mundi’ and Contemporary Theater.” *Comparative Drama* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1967): 28–35.


———. *Nicomede a Tragi-Comedy Translated out of the French of Monsieur Corneille by John Dancer as It Was Acted at the Theatre-Royal, Dublin / ; Together with an Exact*
Catalogue of All the English Stage Plays Printed till This Present Year 1671. Trans. John Dancer. London, 1671.


Downes, John. *Roscius Anglicanus or an Historical Review of the Stage: After It Had Been Suppres’d by Means of the Late Unhappy Civil War, Begun in 1641, Til the Time of King Charles the IIs. Restoration in May 1660. Giving an Account of Its Rise Again; of the Time and Places the Governours of Both the Companies First Erected Their Theatres...* ed. Thomas Davies. London, 1789.


*Funebres Elogios a La Memoria de D. Pedro Calderon de La Barca...* Valencia, 1681.


Greene, Robert. *The Groatsworth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance*, 1596.


*Historia Histrionica an Historical Account of the English Stage, Shewing the Ancient Use, Improvement and Perfection of Dramatick Representations in This Nation in a Dialogue of Plays and Players.* London: G. Croom, 1699.


Knight, Alan E. *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983.


Langbaine, Gerard. *An Account of the English Dramatick Poets: Or, Some Observations and Remarks on the Lives and Writings, of All Those That Have Publish’d Either Comedies,*


Levenson, Jill L. “Romeo and Juliet before Shakespeare.” Studies in Philology 81, no. 3 (Summer 1984): 325–47.


Loliée, Frédéric. La Comédie-Française: Histoire de La Maison de Molière de 1658 À 1907. Paris: Lucien Laveur, 1907.


———. Doze Comedias de Lope de Vega, Sacadas de Sus Originales Por Él Mismo, Novena Parte. Madrid, 1617.


Motteux, Peter. *Beauty in Distress as It Is Acted at the Theatre in Little Lincolns-Inn-Fields by His Majesties Servants / Written by Mr. Motteux; with a Discourse of the Lawfulness & Unlawfulness of Plays, Lately Written by the Learned Father Caffaro, Divinity-Professor at Paris, Sent in a Letter to the Author by a Divine of the Church of England.* London, 1698.


Philips, Katherine. *Poems by the Most Deservedly Admired Mrs. Katherine Philips, the Matchless Orinda; to Which Is Added Monsieur Corneille’s Pompey & Horace, Tragedies; with Several Other Translations out of French*. London, 1667.


——. *La Bague de L’Oubly.* Paris, 1635.


———. *The History of Timon of Athens, the Man-Hater as It Is Acted at the Dukes Theatre: Made into a Play*. London: J. M, 1678.

——. The Squire of Alsatia A Comedy, as It Is Acted by Their Majesty’s Servants. London, 1688.

——. The Sullen Lovers, Or, The Impertinents a Comedy Acted by His Highness the Duke of Yorkes Servants. London, 1668.


“SQA Announces Set Scottish Texts,” n.d.


*The Actors Remonstrance or Complaint for the Silencing of Their Profession and Banishment from Their Severall Play-Houses in Which Is Fully Set Downe Their Grievances for Their Restraint ... as It Was Presented in the Names and Behalfes of All Our London Comedians ...* London, 1643.


