

*The Reinvention of Theatre in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Traditions, Texts and Performance.* T. F. Earle and Catarina Fouto, eds.

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Grown out of the 2011 conference “Sixteenth-Century Theatre in Europe: The Latin and Vernacular Traditions,” this book is the outcome of an ambitious project rather than a publication of conference proceedings. The title of the book, if compared to that of the symposium, signals a shift of focus that, on the one hand, seems to announce a broader scope of the research, while providing, on the other, a unifying hermeneutic category under which to understand the widely varied and multifaceted theatrical experience of the century. If the main aim of the volume is “to contribute to the understanding of [the] specificity” of the sixteenth-century drama in Europe (1), “the reinvention of theatre” works then as a formula suggesting a break with the past, the coalescence of different and sometimes divergent forces into a common movement of renewal. Yet the pace of the single essays does not allow for a narrative of big epistemological fractures. In this sense, continuity is mostly privileged over discontinuities, and the detailed exploration of complexity and contradictions is a remarkable trait of most essays. It is out of this background that the newness of the theatrical experience of the century is brought to the fore. As well outlined by the editors in the introductory note, the picture that emerges is that of a period characterized — especially in its earlier manifestations — by a rather big variety of forms and aesthetic solutions. Playwrights were, on the one hand, pushed to be flexible by the multiplicity of groups and subjects, both private and institutional, promoting the theater, and by the corresponding varied composition of the public; but on the other, at the same time they had not to suffer the constraints of a too-strict observance of aesthetic prescriptions, such as those that toward the end of the century the reading and misreading of Aristotle’s *Poetics* will make more and more binding. All this made room for the most acute dramatists of the period to free their inventiveness and to produce an art that to some extent could be seen as experimental, at least with regard to the creative handling of tradition, the exploration of the possibilities of dramatic devices — such as the monologue in Gil Vicente’s work — and the contamination of forms and genres.

Neither encyclopedic in its intents, nor thematically focused on a specific issue, the volume offers a composite, albeit not comprehensive, view of the European drama of the period, which will be welcomed by comparatists and scholars approaching literary phenomena across geographical and linguistic boundaries. An interesting attempt is

made here to combine a view “in the round” (1), not restricted to one or another aspect of the sixteenth-century theater, with a specific attention to the singularity of texts and cases.

The volume is divided into three parts of unequal length. The first and longest section, “Literary Tradition and the Theatre,” offers close readings of playtexts belonging to the different national contexts. Ample space is reserved for the case of Portugal, to which are devoted four of the eight contributions of the section, with the figure of Gil Vicente emerging as one of the most eminent of the whole century. The relation to the classical tradition and the reuse of Greek or Latin materials as a model for imitation or a source for adaptation or even for precise lexical and stylistic echoes links the essay of Fouto (“The Reinvention of Classical Comedy and Tragedy in Portugal”) with those of McLaughling (“The Recovery of Terence in Renaissance Italy: From Alberti to Machiavelli”) and Sandis (“Palimpsestuous Phaedra: William Gager’s Additions to Seneca’s Tragedy for his 1592 Production at Christ Church”).

Part 2, “Theatre and Performance,” made up of three essays, draws attention to the rich variety of performing styles and practices that coexisted in Europe at the time. A special focus is paid to those spaces of cultural experimentation opened up by the competition and contamination between them. This is the case of the ambiguous proximity of the newly born groups of professional comedians and the learned, nonprofessional actors of the academies in Italy (chapter 9), as well as that of the encounter of the fool William Kemp with the Italian comedians (chapter 10). The last part, “Theatre and Society,” shows how the drama of the sixteenth century was throughout Europe also a means of direct political and religious intervention on the most urgent controversies of the time. Each of the four chapters of the section is devoted to one exemplary case in England, Portugal, France, and Germany.

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