



# World drama

## Introduction

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When Jo Riley translated Erika Fischer-Lichte’s seminal work into English, she significantly modified the title. In German it was *Geschichte des Drama* (Fischer-Lichte 1990), which I would translate as “A history of drama,” while in the English editions it became *History of European drama and theatre* (Fischer-Lichte 2002). It is hardly a secret that Fischer-Lichte’s project was actually to write the history of European drama—or the epochs of identity in European theatre. However, it is quite telling how naturally the history of European drama was first presented as the history of drama *tout court*. It goes without saying that the English translation was designed for a global, but mostly for a North-American readership, and it seemed a good idea to warn US readers that they would find in this book very little about American drama (a chapter on Eugene O’Neill and a couple of pages on the Performance Group, the avant-garde theatre in New York around 1970). The other translations of Fischer-Lichte’s monograph vary from the viewpoint of emphasizing the European focus in the title. In Hungarian, for example, it is “the history of drama” (Fischer-Lichte 2001), while in Greek “the history of European drama” (Fischer-Lichte 2012). Drama plays an important, maybe central role in the western literary system, and Earl Miner convincingly argued that western literary thinking is saturated so deeply by the ideas of representation (or mimesis) because it was first developed in a period and location when and where (namely by Aristotle in classical Greece) drama was the most influential literary genre (Miner 1990). Drama has flourished in many epochs in many places around the globe, but what is exceptional is that it is so deeply connected with the general ideas about literature or literariness in general. This situation would hardly legitimize any Eurocentric approach to drama; literary studies should take into consideration non-European scenic traditions too.

Comparative literature has ceased to simply compare disparate literary phenomena to see similarities and differences long ago, tending rather to focus on actual

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connections between literary cultures. The current movement of world literature studies also encourages us to see how geographically (or even historically) different theatrical traditions may be connected. European, Indian and Chinese drama had hardly any contact before the twentieth century, but the connections have become very important since then. Ning Wang has convened this special cluster of *Neohelicon* to develop a world literature approach mostly to Western and East-Asian drama.

What is attempted here is a concept of world drama as a special subfield of world literature. The papers in this cluster analyze cases of intercultural exchange, although they have difficulty resisting the temptation of canonical thinking. Readers will rarely meet unfamiliar names of playwrights in this issue, and Ning Wang has even gone so far as to define world drama as “a canonical body of high quality national dramas”—in sharp contrast to Damrosch’s concept of world literature. And when he analyzes Cao Yu’s *Thunderstorm*, he presents his results as a suggestion of canonization: it should be regarded as world drama. However, he also uses a very interesting argument: the Oedipus complex is such a universal theme that its theatric elaborations belong to world drama (probably depending on their canonical status in the original context too, Wang implies). This argument scrutinizes the question of what enables a drama to have a strong effect beyond its culture of origin. The suggested answer is that it is a universal theme or a potential of a universal meaning, which may show some similarities to Gadamer’s concept of the classic (Gadamer 1990, pp. 290–295).

A history of drama starts with ancient Greek tragedy, which at first glance appears to have been the business of one single political community, namely fifth-century BCE Athens. However, drama was world literature already in classical antiquity—at least in the context of the west. Not all the tragedies were premiered in Athens. Aeschylus wrote a play called *The Women of Aetna* (*TrGF* 3 F6-11) in Sicily for a Sicilian audience on a Sicilian topic, and it was first staged in Syracuse (Wright 2019, p. 17–18). It is also possible that Aeschylus later adapted the play for an Athenian performance, and that is why the ancients knew of two versions (Corbato 1996), but the non-Athenian premiere was definitely the first. Aeschylus spent many years in Sicily staging several plays, and the archeological evidence of vase painting in Magna Graecia (the shores of South-Italy and East-Sicily populated by Greek colonies) shows that Athenian drama was well known there (Taplin 1992, 1993). According to the—undeniably anecdotal—ancient biographical tradition, Euripides spent his last years in Macedon, in the court of king Achelaus, restaging his earlier plays, writing there his last masterpieces, and also writing a tragedy called *Achelaus* (*TrGF* 5 F228-64) to promote the king’s direct descent from Hercules (Easterling 1994), a drama maybe never staged in Athens but well known and widely quoted in Greece (Wright 2019, p. 160).

Places such as Sicily and Macedon had their own local dramatic performances and hosted visiting performances. Several playwrights, including Euripides, Agathon and Theodectes as well as Aeschylus, travelled in order to produce dramas specially written for other locations. (Wright 2019, p. 17)

The Athenian tragedy experienced immediate success outside Athens too, and this widespread success must have contributed to the canonization of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as the three classics (Cartledge 1997, p. 5). One may say that the non-Athenian reception did not make Athenian tragedy world drama, because it still happened in a Greek, i.e. national context, even if not in the same (city) state. This may be true for Sicily, but not for Macedon. Macedonian kings may have been honorary Greeks, but this does not apply to all Macedonians. According to Herodotus (5.22.2) it happened first to King Alexander I of Macedon that the judges allowed him to enter the Olympic games, because he had proven his Greek ancestry. It was a decision about his person, not about the Macedonians as a whole, who remained excluded from the games of Hellenic people. The monarchs of Macedon developed a Hellenized court, in which the audience could enjoy tragedy in Greek. This makes Athenian tragedy world literature according to David Damrosch's definition: "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003, p. 4).

Maybe it stopped being world literature in the third century BCE when the whole Eastern-Mediterranean area became Hellenized, therefore it could not travel beyond that unified culture of huge areas. But let us return to Magna Graecia. From this part of the Hellenic world a Greek boy moved to Rome (not on his own initiative but having been enslaved after his native city Taras was conquered by the Romans), and in 240 BCE staged a Greek-style tragedy, which he wrote in Latin. It was not a literary work that started circulating beyond its culture of origin, however, but a whole literary genre, with its usual topics (Greek mythology), patterns of meter (also applied to a different language), features of literariness, rules of representation, and ways of being performed. With the Roman elite's decision, instead of having a Hellenistic Roman literature in Greek, to hire foreign professionals to create a complete literary system with all the Greek genres in Latin, Greek literature had already become world literature, including drama. A couple of decades later, Roman playwrights were translating and adapting many fourth-century Greek comedies into Latin, founding the European tradition.

It would be difficult to find any moment of isolated dramatic or scenic practice in European cultural history. Great inventions may have been either inspired by alien influences, or exerted widespread influence, or both. Not only books or authors travelled, but also thespian troupes. Two arbitrary examples may be enough, one for plot of an important play, one for a complete genre. It is well known that Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* shows a strong thematic continuity with a group of Italian plays that John Manningham, who saw the play on February 1, 1602 and found it similar to Plautus' *Menaechmi* too, might have referred to collectively with the title "Inganni" (Donno 1985, p. 5).<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare might have read the Latin or the French translation, but could have also seen a Latin performance in Cambridge in 1595 (Hunter

<sup>1</sup> The family of plays contains what follows: *Gl'Ingannati* (anonymous, 1531), *Gl'Inganni* by Nicolò Secchi (1562), and *Gl'Inganni* by Curzio Gonzola (1592), but also *Les Abusés*, the French translation of the *Gl'Ingannati* by Charles Estienne (1543) and its Latin translation *Laelia* (1595). Cf. Ford (2006), p. 19.

1971, p. 62), or the Italian original, since an Italian company performed in London and in Windsor in 1577–78, and *Gl'Ingannati*, “being a popular play, was certainly included in the repertory of that company” (Winter 1969, p. 6). This example does not only show that William Shakespeare took inspiration from plays of others, which is hardly a surprise (including ancient Roman comedy, which was already a kind of translation of Greek comedy), but also the vivid interconnection of Italian, French and English thespian life in renaissance Europe. For second example, I take the German *bürgerliche Trauerspiel*. I use the German expression to avoid the oxymoron inscribed in usual English equivalents ‘bourgeois tragedy’ and ‘domestic tragedy’. The problem is splendidly indicated by the practice of John Osborn, the translator of Walter Benjamin’s seminal work on German baroque drama, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Benjamin 1925), who used the expression ‘tragic drama’ in the book title, but the italicized German expression *Trauerspiel* everywhere in the text (Benjamin 1998). The genre originated from England, where George Lillo invented it with his *The London Merchant* in 1731. And he was “well aware of the enormous reform” (Fischer-Lichte 2002, p. 152). The German audience, which responded with enthusiasm to Lillo’s plays staged in various theatres in Germany, may have expected an English setting from any German experiment in the genre too. This may be the reason why the first German bourgeois *Trauerspiel*, Lessing’s *Miss Sara Sampson*, is set in England. On the one hand, the way a new genre travels from England to Germany may fit in Franco Moretti’s pattern (Moretti 1999) of how invention travels from core literatures to the peripheries (although this particular genre travels to the other core, i.e. France, as well). On the other hand, the genre becomes much more important in its target location; it would be difficult to mention one single canonical English playwright of bourgeois tragedy, while the German list would contain Lessing, Schiller, Hebbel, Schnitzler and Hauptmann.

With the new possibilities of intercultural exchange brought about by colonization and globalization, drama also started to travel long distance, both away from and towards Europe. One of the important lessons of this special cluster about world drama and especially European-East Asian exchange of thespian culture is a paradoxical asymmetry. Spoken drama or western style drama was imported into China in the early twentieth century, and can be regarded as the import of a globalized cultural commodity. Just as the novel or the Hollywood film are commodities marketable almost everywhere, bourgeois theatre was a very profitable kind of entertainment in the nineteenth century. To perform prose drama in China, not only a translated text was needed, but also a new kind of theater with differently trained actors, directors, and a differently educated audience. A whole system had to be imported. And while this well-established mainstream theatrical system traveled to the East, western authors rebelling against the very same system found inspiration in older East-Asian theatrical traditions. In this cluster, Chengzhou He, Weihua He and Binghui Song offer valuable information about how western drama traveled to China, while Youngmin Kim and Carrie J. Preston write about how East-Asian theatrical practices fertilized western experimentation with the form of drama. Hao Liu sports a double approach comparing both kinds of traveling drama.

The contrast of spoken drama imported from the West and traditional Chinese opera with its many dialects may invite us to consider the musical aspect of

theatrical performances, and how western opera can come into the picture. Many parts of ancient Greek tragedy were sung and accompanied with *aulos*.<sup>2</sup> We know this not only from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which listed music as one of the tragedy's six "parts" (or aspects), and from an immense body of textual and visual evidence; we also have a significant number of tragic papyri with musical notations (see Pöhlmann and West 2001), from which we can form a picture of the classical playwrights as composers, albeit a tantalizingly fragmentary one. At the beginning of western (Italian) opera, we find an important misunderstanding of chapter 48 in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problemata*, resulting in the belief that the Greek tragedy was sung in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that the operatic tradition was based on a (false) concept of ancient tragedy; the Italian composers rather used the authority of the ancient Greeks to legitimize the musical innovations of the newly established scenic genre. They presented the opera as a continuation of the most noble, although interrupted tradition, since, as Ottavio Rinuccini wrote in the preface to his libretto of the first opera, Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*: "Gli antichi Greci e Romani cantassero sulle scene le tragedie intere" (Rinuccini 1600). This might be a case of creative misunderstanding: when the artists looked at ancient tragedy they saw in it something they really needed to solve their current problem of how to reform contemporary musical life. They did not actually recreate ancient drama, but somehow created a connection between it and the new artistic form of the opera. And ancient tragedy also became different for them. Fifteen years before the first opera, *Oedipus Rex* was staged in Vicenza with newly composed music by Andrea Gabrieli, and it was entirely sung, i.e. made very similar to the opera, a genre to come soon. Opera is seldom discussed as literature, and the writers of the libretti are not remembered by the public, although the plot sometimes seems important.<sup>4</sup> When Rongnyu Chen in this volume analyzes how Euripides *Medea* was staged as Chinese opera, she does not only show the connection between ancient European drama and current Chinese thespian life, but also a case in which the Asian reception of classical tragedy becomes very similar to its European Baroque reception, which also connects western and Chinese opera.

When a piece of literature travels to a new cultural territory, it cannot remain the same, and it may induce changes in the target culture as well. To recognize such changes, is to learn a lot about both cultures, and it is this that makes comparative literature such an exciting a field of research. In the case of world drama, the cultural interaction (or interference) may be visible very directly, because dramatic performances presuppose the physical presence of an audience. The intensity of responses makes world drama an especially promising subfield of world literature studies.

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<sup>2</sup> Although *aulos* is usually translated as flute, that instrument was more similar to our oboe or clarinet.

<sup>3</sup> For the sources of the misunderstanding see Palisca (1977), pp. 75–80, and (2004) pp. xxi–lxx; for the consequences cf. Hansen (2003); Palisca (1983). My main source of information about the connections was Kárpáti (2013), pp. 263–265.

<sup>4</sup> As for rare examples of literary studies approaching opera libretti I would like to mention a seminal paper by John Neubauer, a late member of *Neohelicon*'s advisory board (Neubauer 2002).

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