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**Between Metaphor and Cultural Practices: Theatrum and scena in the German-Speaking Sphere before 1648**

**Introduction**

Whereas the early modern period is celebrated as the hour of birth for many European theatrical traditions, the German-speaking sphere seems to come late to the table; some older works of literary history even speak about a theater-less period. As such a leap seems to be implausible—*cultura non facit saltus*—I would like to take a closer look at the period between the spread of the printing press (after 1460) and the end of the Thirty Year’s War, a period often lamented as lacking a genuine “German” (whatever that might be) theatrical culture. With the juxtaposition of theater as a metaphor and as a cultural practice, I try to unfold a panorama that allows for a different and more nuanced assessment of this period of theater history. As framing assumptions, I would like to state:

- Theater and drama describe more or less autonomous forms of theatrical phenomena—the concept of the “theater of drama”,¹ based on the temporal and hierarchical succession of drama being first and theater second, does not fully apply to the period I am talking about.
- The practices of “performing theater” and “printing play” constitute two poles of a complex configuration that comprises not only semiotic models of production and reception (including a special temporal and spatial order) but also different materialities and economic modes.

Following these two assumptions, I will first discuss a metaphorical concept of theater in this period and will then contrast it with some observations on scenic practice.

¹ H.-Th. Lehmann’s influential *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt/Main 1999) popularized a historical periodization centered on the concept of the “theater of drama”, which the author identifies with the bourgeois theater emerging in the eighteenth century. Accordingly, the classical drama of Greek antiquity is classified as pre-dramatic theater, whereas twentieth-century theater is called post-dramatic theater. This periodization has been criticized for its inherent evolutionary logic as well as for its focus on drama.

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Theater as a metaphor and the absence of theater

Among the first books printed (as early as in the 1490s) are various editions of Terence’s comedies, which were obviously widely read by students of Latin. The frontispieces are symptomatic in their claim to present “theater”: The 1493 edition presents a two-storied building; on the ground floor we see a *fornices* (Lat.: brothel) forming the foundation for a somewhat distorted auditorium—apparently the social prejudice about theaters and actors had been more successfully transmitted through the ages than the actual practice.

The 1496 edition presents a picture that makes it rather obvious that the engraver probably had no idea of what a *theatrum* actually was: it shows a tower from which the spectators look at the world—not a place to look at itself. It is evident that the engraver had no real point of reference, but literally illustrated an abstract concept. J. Stone Peters, in her seminal study *Theatre of the Book* (2003), acknowledges the importance of these editions—together with the “re-discovery” of Vitruvius’ *De architectura*—even claiming that the printing created a boost in the rise of theater:

Print, then, was central to the late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century theatrical revival, and it continued to shape its unfolding history. As the press began to circulate dramatic texts and images of the ancient theatre, as the multiple late-medieval entertainment genres were interwoven with the classical genres in the new plays being circulated by the press, an institution (or, more accurately, a set of institutions) was created. Theatres used exclusively for the production of plays sprang up.²

While this assumption is true for the Italian Renaissance and the influence of the Italian humanists, the German-speaking sphere again seems to have failed to keep up with its neighbors: As O. Brockett and F. Hildy show in a diagram about purpose-built playhouses in Europe,³ the German-speaking sphere is significantly absent. Whereas France (1548: Hôtel de Bourgogne), England (1567: The Red Lion), Spain (1579: Corral de la Cruz), and Italy (1584: Teatro Olimpico) can proudly point to this tradition of theater architecture, the German-speaking sphere could only refer to the *Ottoneum* in Kassel, a theater of which we do not

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Fig. 1: Frontispiece of Terence edition 1493.
Fig. 2: Frontispiece of Terence edition 1496.
really know whether it was ever used as a playhouse,\(^4\) and to a theater built in Ulm in 1640/41 by the legendary Joseph Furttenbach (1591–1667). Stone Peters follows the tempting equation of printed texts and purpose-built playhouses to argue for the constitutive impact of printed play texts:

In disseminating ancient drama, in producing texts about the Greek and Roman theatre, in identifying comedy and tragedy with gesturing actors, in publicizing the classical rubrics around which theatrical institutions formed themselves, in circulating images of buildings called “theatres,” in printing and circulating vernacular playtexts that could be performed in them, in identifying the textual drama as the paradigmatic performance art, print gave the theatre an image of itself.\(^5\)

While this assumption is consistent with the grand récit of the “re-discovery” of antiquity at the end of the Middle Ages, a glance at the usage of the term theatrum in German-speaking publications from that period gives us a different impression: As N. Roßbach\(^6\) has shown in an extensive survey of printed books of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term theatrum did not refer to theater in our sense of the word but rather to a heightened point of observation—as we might see it in the 1496 edition of Terence—from which to look at the world. Stone Peter’s argument applies to Italy, France, and partly to England, but the development in the German-speaking sphere was symptomatically different.

While some research does exist about the discourse of theater in England in the sixteenth century—for example on stage directions\(^7\)—comparable studies for the German-speaking sphere are still a desideratum. Apart from some older studies,\(^8\) there is no systematic exploration of the semantic field (and scenic practices) of theater in this period. If one examines these older studies, they soon reveal the terminological confusion noted above: R. Stumpfl, for example,


\(^6\) Cf. [http://www.theatra.de](http://www.theatra.de) accessed 13 January 2019, for a complete list of the titles included in the project.


notes that the term *theatrum* covers a very broad and almost indistinguishable semantic horizon; the term is even applied to town halls. For more specific elements of the theatrical art, the historical discourse uses terms that today no longer refer to theater: for example, the stage (i.e. the scaffold on which the performance took place) is often described as *Brücke* [*brüge*] (bridge).\(^9\) The terminological conflation is an index of theatrical activities that just might have been captured by different expressions. W. N. West—departing from a different angle—comes to a comparable conclusion:

> Before theatre was a real space in which to enact plays, the theatre was an idea built around a word that referred to an object that no longer existed except in texts, in which its attributes, functions, and powers changed.\(^10\)

Conversely, in the following we will look at the real spaces in which theater was performed and how its *Sitz im Leben* was defined.

**Interjection: scena as a concept**

A terminological alternative to *theatrum*—that is already present in the early modern period—is the concept of *scena* and its various vernacular variations. The OED lists various meanings of *scene*, ranging from a subdivision of a dramatic text to the “material apparatus” or “the place where an action is carried out”. These two latter meanings can already be found in the sixteenth century—i.e. in the period when the modern notion of theater is formed. In contrast to the rather broad and vague term *theatrum*, *scena* has a very practical, material reference to the place and apparatus and to the action taking place. A later semantic twist includes “a view or picture presented to the eye”. The comparison with further historical dictionaries reveals a comparable semantic profile: In his Latin-German dictionary of 1536, Petrus Dasypodius defines *scena* as “hütte od. gemach/in welchen sich die Comedispyler uebeten”\(^11\)—further German dictionaries follow suit, providing translations that usually refer to *Schau-Platz*, often implying a scaffold and some kind of temporary construction designed for better viewing.

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The term has also gained some scholarly interest recently. In his essay on the concept of *scene*, B. R. Smith has discussed the term with its specific dimension in the early modern discourse; he concludes:

And what does “scene” mean in these cases? It certainly includes the act of acting and the physical structure of the playing place as well as the fictional location. What is remarkable about all the remarks upon “scene” that I have assembled here is their solid grounding in scene as stage structure. This firm connection between physical means and theatrical ends in early modern usage constitutes the most significant difference from our own understanding of scene.12

I would like to highlight the three key components in Smith’s reading of *scena* that make the term so attractive for further discussion:
- act of acting
- physical space of acting
- fictional locale (created through the acting).

Smith’s emphasis of the physical space as the center of the various semantic dimensions is helpful in understanding *scena* not only as a synonym of theater but rather as a narrower, more specific term that emphasizes the material conditions of theatrical practices. In contrast to the general term theater (*theatrum*), which lends itself in the early modern period rather to a metaphorical usage, the term *scena* focuses on historically (and culturally) specific conditions—highlighting the amalgamation of material conditions, conceptual framings, and techniques and practices.

Taking its point of departure in a spatial order, *scena* is also parallel to anthropological considerations. In his *Homo Ludens* (1944), J. Huizinga has provided a definition of play that is based on temporal limits as well as spatial seclusion:

More striking even than the limitation as to time is the limitation as to space. All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.13

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The play-ground is a sphere in its own right: “Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns.”

Reading *scena* as a play-ground in Huizinga’s sense allows not only for the identification of theatrical spaces but also for a discussion of the framing conditions and the specific “jurisdiction” that enabled the space and its practices.

**Practice (1): *Scenae* without theater**

To get a better sense of the specificities of the theatrical landscape in the German-speaking sphere of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I will pick two exemplary locales: Nuremberg and Cologne. The two cities display symptomatic similarities, as both were important centers of trade and commerce, and both were Free Imperial Cities with a strong magistrate; both cities had been important urban centers already in the Middle Ages. Yet, they also differ significantly: While Nuremberg declared itself a Protestant city in 1525, Cologne remained Catholic. Thus, a comparison between the two cities might also provide a glimpse of the different paths of transformation along the denominational divide in early modern Europe.

**Nuremberg**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Nuremberg became a central point of reference for cultural politics as well as for the emerging discourse of cultural history: Epitomizing the German Renaissance as the hometown of artists such as Hans Sachs (1494–1576) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), the town also represented the high art of German Protestantism. Turning to Protestantism in 1525, Nuremberg became a symbol of the German Reformation—also by bridging the gap between the “new” doctrine and the tradition of the medieval concept of the *Kaiser*. These references were in particular fashionable in late nineteenth-century Germany and its attempt to define itself through a great tradition.

At the same time, the focus on the Reformation offered a hidden dramaturgy for the history of Nuremberg’s theater that fit the general *grand récit* remarkably well. Nuremberg was known for its *Fastnachtsspiel* (Shrovetide play) and its masked pageants, documented in the illuminated *Schembart* manuscripts.

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14 Ibid.
Accordingly, the emergence of theater in the sixteenth century was often read as part of the process of overcoming rites and customs of the “Old Faith” and preparing for the secularization and rationalization of the Enlightenment. Hans Sachs became the most prominent representative of this early form of German drama.

Yet, if we take a closer look, the relation between these carnivalesque traditions and the emergence of theater appears more problematic: Whereas the first Schembart pageants are documented starting in 1449, and the first performances of plays in 1517, the documents that give proof to this tradition are the product of a legislative campaign to tame the wild activities of Nuremberg’s citizens during carnival.15 “Purging” itself from the stains of irrational (i.e. Catholic) rites and costumes, the Fastnachtsspiel appears as a first mode of literary drama: still imperfect, but certainly a medium of enlightenment and national/bourgeois formation.

At the end of the sixteenth century (since 1593), English comedians visited Nuremberg regularly. Their lasting impact can be seen in the works of Jacob Ayrer (1544–ca. 1605). His Opus Theatricum, published as an extensive Folio in 1618, contains 69 of his alleged 109 plays. Thus, Nuremberg figures as an example for the process of “literarizing” theater and performance in the sixteenth century.

If we take a closer look at the specific locales in which these performances took place, it becomes evident to what extent theatrical activities in these periods used existing spaces: while the carnival performances usually did not require any specific place—the scena was strictly performative in the sense that it was created through the action itself16—later performances of the Meistersinger (Hans Sachs was part of this social institution) also used the church St. Martha—a usage that obviously was enabled through the impact of the Reformation.17 While this repurposing of ecclesiastical spaces was rather common in the sixteenth century,18 the English comedians used the yard of the Heilbronner Hof—a space surrounded by buildings with open galleries. Eventually, in 1628, the magistrate of Nuremberg decided to build a Fechtschule (fencing school) which

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18 The rise of the private playhouses in London is a comparable phenomenon.
was equally usable for public fencing exercises and for performances. The architectural similitude to the public playhouses of Elizabethan England is striking and probably not accidental. According to Th. Hampe, the space allowed for up to 3,000 spectators. It is symptomatic that this space was open for multiple usages such as public fencing exercises, bear- and ox-baiting—and theatrical performances. Aesthetically, it is clear that the performances could not rely on any form of scenery or stage machinery. Visual illusion obviously was no part of this theatrical tradition. The scenae of Nuremberg were defined by performance and scenic narratives—the locales might not have been purpose-built but they provided an “interface” in the sense of “a means or place of interaction between two systems or organizations” (OED).

**Cologne**

The situation in Cologne is strikingly similar, but the historical account differs: Whereas Nuremberg serves as a prime example of a linear, evolutionary development, Cologne, in contrast, has been widely perceived as symptomatic of a medieval community and its failing struggles to adjust to the new era. Whereas Nuremberg opted for the Reformation in 1525, Cologne—quite the opposite—firmly rejected the new doctrine. Being one of the key sites for European pilgrimages—with its cathedral and the relics of the Magi—it was also one of the major centers of European trade. Since Cologne was a member of the Hanseatic League, it was connected to cities in Norway and Scotland in the North, Sicily, Spain, and the Canary Islands in the South, Lisbon in the West, and Novgorod in the East. Despite its firm stand with the Roman church, Cologne also became the safe haven for Protestant refugees from the Netherlands (the Geuzen) in the sixteenth century. Artists such as Peter Paul Rubens or the dramatist Joost van den Vondel partly lived in Cologne and held close ties to the city.

Cultural and theatrical life in Cologne was correspondingly multifaceted: The commonwealth is determined politically by its status as a Free City (with the archbishop officially not residing in Cologne), but its social and cultural status is determined by the presence of various monasteries and religious orders—some of them heavily involved in the system of education, such as the Jesuits or the Franciscans—, by being one of Europe’s main centers of trade, by its

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university, and by a community of urban dwellers who developed a strong sense of local identity and independence early on.

Cologne was also an important location for the rising print and book market: As early as 1464, Ulrich Zell opened the first book printing shop in Cologne.\footnote{For the history of printing in Cologne, see P. Norrenberg, \textit{Kölnisches Literaturleben im ersten Viertel des sechszehnten Jahrhunderts}, Viersen 1873; E. Voulliéme, \textit{Der Buchdruck Kölns bis zum Ende des fünfzehnten Jahrhunderts: Ein Beitrag zur Inkunabelbibliographie}, Bonn 1903; W. Schmitz, \textit{Die Überlieferung deutscher Texte im Kölner Buchdruck des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts}, Cologne 1990; W. Schmitz, \textit{500 Jahre Buchtradition in Köln}, Cologne 1999.} Very soon, Cologne became one of the most productive printing locations in Europe. Its central position in Western Europe also made Cologne one of the most influential printing places for the Flemish-speaking regions.

The theatrical landscape of Cologne mirrored this vibrant and multi-faceted profile:

- As early as 1526, school performances are documented; with three different Gymnasia (grammar schools) in town—two of these being municipal institutions, the third taken over by Jesuits in 1556—there was a fierce competition for students but also for public recognition and performances as an additional source of income for the principal and the school.

- Due to its lively scene of book printers, the practice of printing plays was established early on. An interesting case in point is the printer Jaspar van Gennep (ca. 1500–1564). Gennep published various plays, but his biggest success was \textit{Homulus: Der sünden loin ist d. Toid} (staged 1539; published 1540). The play—an adaptation of Everyman—was widely circulated, translated, and performed.\footnote{J. Bolte, \textit{Unbekannte Schauspiele des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts}, Berlin 1933, p. 4. The play was performed in Vienna in 1553; see C. Niessen, “Nachträge zur alten Kölner Theatergeschichte (2)”, in: \textit{Jahrbuch des Kölnischen Geschichtsvereins}, vol. 42, 1968, pp. 199–260, p. 208.}

- The files of the city council also provide proof of the fact that there were many local performance initiatives: in 1576–78, Adam von Trier received permission to perform comedy three times; the printer Conrad Lewen staged three productions in 1591 and continued to receive permission for various performances until 1602, so we might consider the existence of a local tradition of setting up shows.

- In 1592 we have the first proof of an appearance of an English troupe in Cologne. The English troupes kept appearing until 1670—when they disappear altogether. According to older statistics, Cologne was the second most visited city: 34 performances in comparison to 53 in Frankfurt and 28 in Nuremberg.
But what is probably even more significant is that Cologne was also a widely sought-after destination for troupes of various other countries/traditions, such as France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland (probably English actors), and the German-speaking lands. Thus, Cologne’s theater audience must have been treated to a rather broad variety of theatrical styles and traditions—much more diverse than the city itself would have been able to entertain permanently.

But why is this variety registered so minimally in most historical accounts? The reason is twofold: On the one hand, most of these theatrical enterprises were rather short-lived—their existence was based on the often opaque system of seeking permission for performances from the magistrate. Secondly, the linguistic variety lacks the homogeneity which is conventionally associated with literary theater.

But this is a nineteenth century perspective which takes especially the Comédie Française as its ideal model. In the process of nation-building in the nineteenth century, theater was conceived as one of the formative elements—and so was theater history: The longing for the nation as an essence included the concept of a shared language and a shared cultural identity. The Cologne model seems to have followed an (at least partly) different pattern: Linguistically situated not only in the German-speaking but, through the Ripuarian dialect, also closely connected to the Flemish-speaking sphere, the city entertained a certain polyglot atmosphere. Theater and theatrical activities were not understood as creating a national identity, but were part of an urban life that was fueled by trade and exchange.

It is in line with this practice that, as early as 1441–47, the magistrate of Cologne decided to build a municipal warehouse and banquet hall, called the Gürzenich, for public events of all sorts. Since the demand soon exceeded the capacities of the building, the magistrate acquired a nearby building in 1561, called Quattermart, which was then refurbished as a public space for banquets, festivities, and also for theater performances. As in Nuremberg, Cologne institutionalized the option to provide a scena, but it was politically conceived of as a temporal, ephemeral space.

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22 Cf. B. Anderson, Imaged Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, London and New York, NY 1983, as well as The Invention of Tradition, ed. E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, Cambridge 1983—these studies have drawn attention to the nineteenth-century demand for historical narratives to foster the idea of the nation state.

Practice (2): Theater made out of other performances

In 1581, the Laurentius Gymnasium (one of the grammar schools of Cologne) produced a St. Lawrence play, a common and rather conventional subject for a Catholic school. What was so remarkable about this production was the organization of set and scene: Built on a provisional stage—mounted on barrels—the scene depicted ancient Rome. All loci of the play are marked by the painted backdrop that depicts the places in which the plot is situated. Thus, the scenery marks a transformation from the medieval practice of the stage of simultaneity, where every location of the plot has its own physical space, towards the stage of succession. C. Niessen, who first discussed the visual material of this production in his dissertation in 1913 (published in 1917), understood this material as one of the rare visual documents of a major shift in the practice of creating performance spaces (scenae in our terminology). What might look like a rather minor change is actually a radical step that called for a very different form of spectating, a literacy that required the audience to conceive of the scenic space as an integral space in time, to perceive the painted backdrops as constitutive parts of the performance. Whereas earlier performances used textile backdrops either as mere confinements of the scenic space or as tools to veil parts of the space, here the paintings were a direct index of the locale of the scenic plot. The audience had to learn how to “read” this new decoration and this new scenic space as it also required a different understanding of time and space: The previous model presented all locales at once—hence the term stage of simultaneity—while the new model presented only one locale through which time runs (hence stage of succession).

These scenic changes were clearly not fueled by a new dramaturgical model—the text was rather conventional in its form. It was the spatial structure that fostered innovation and change. In order to understand the cultural constellation that allows for this new form, we need to broaden our scope and to look at related phenomena. West has offered such an approach by adapting J. Bratton’s concept of intertheatricality to the early modern drama:

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Instead of reading the historical record of early modern theatricality as a collection of allusions and references, it opens the possibility of understanding theatre as made out of other performances.26

“Theatre made out of other performances”—this is a precise description of a scena that is not confined to a fixed framework but is determined as a space that is permeable to different forms of performances. The use of painted, textile backdrops is known in this context, for example tapestries that were also used in churches or in aristocratic abodes. The empty spaces of the Gürzenich and the Quattermart as well as their bare walls required furnishing with movable textiles and decoration to fashion them for the respective occasions. Aristocratic courts also used tapestries to add an additional symbolic layer to various festivities. In this sense, the emptiness of public spaces such as the Gürzenich or Quattermart (or the Fechtschule in Nürnberg) clearly was functional and effective in the sense of being open to multiple occasions and meanings.

But the transfer of these meaningful backdrops to the scena of the St. Lawrence play of 1581 adds a new quality: the backdrop becomes an integral part of the narrative of the play, conveying important information to the audience. This information was not—as in the case of tapestries at court—located on a commenting meta-level, but was essential information in the sense of providing spatial orientation. Thus, the transfer of a performative technique to the realm of theater fostered the emergence of a new literacy in spectating theater.

The extent to which this circulation of techniques, narratives, forms of spectating, and economies was a hallmark of pre-Thirty Year’s War theater in the German-speaking sphere can be determined with the help of another performance in the year 1627, when the Jesuits of Cologne celebrated the dedication of their new church Mariae Himmelfahrt with a theatrical production of the story of St. Stephen.27 The opening took place on November 16 and 17, 1627. In the main nave of the church, a massive stage was erected, divided into three parts: there was an exterior stage for the people, an interior for the regal and aristocratic scenes, and an upper stage for the scene situated in heaven.


As Niessen has stated, the Jesuits had taken this form of stage design from the English comedians, who worked with a similar scenic structure. The similarity of descriptions is actually striking—and astonishing at the same time as the English comedians were not only mostly Protestants, but also came from very different social strata. The structure of intertheatricality—"theatre made out of other performances"—allows us to understand that the circulation of narratives, techniques, and devices was not restricted to a homogenous field in terms of religious denomination.

In light of this fact, it is even more astonishing that Niessen assumes—without any form of evidence—that the artistic consultant for the construction of the stage was probably Valentin Boltz, a Cologne Jesuit who is known for having designed and built the main altars of the church. The altar in the northern nave shows a similar tripartite structure—the two lower parts present paintings, while the third one is decorated with small figures and represents the Resurrection. This upper section contains two interesting references. In depicting the Resurrection it builds an intertheatrical relationship to the emblematic scene of Christian theatricality: the Easter plays. The presentation of

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28 Cf. ibid., p. 41.
29 Die Kunstdenkmäler der Stadt Köln, ed. P. Clemen, Düsseldorf 1911, p. 143.
small figures, indicating through their distinctive proportions a spatial distance, also reminds us of T. Stern’s much-discussed hypothesis of an early modern practice of presenting plays with human actors and puppets at the same time.\textsuperscript{30} This altar might give us an idea of how these mixed performances

might have looked: using the puppets in structures like the *discovery space*\(^{31}\) not as a breach of aesthetic devices, but rather to signal and demonstrate spatial and temporal dimensions.

What is remarkable here is that the circulation obviously was not restricted to homogenous groups or strata (sacred vs. profane), but ran across all these categories. Even further, I would argue that the *scenae* of the pre-1648 theater world in the German-speaking sphere were of high importance as they allowed for cultural, social, and intellectual mobility in a period that otherwise was determined by an aggressive policy of distinction and the creation of differences.

**Epilogue**

The above arguments can hardly do more than scratch the surface of a complex, polyphonic, and sometimes contradictory theatrical landscape. It should have become obvious by now that concepts well established in literary or art history can be misleading when it comes to describing and analyzing the early modern theater of the German-speaking sphere. Even the notion of such a sphere might be misleading as it suggests reading the various developments in light of the later nation-building process. Instead, micro-histories of specific cities or regions seem to be a genuine desideratum when it comes to getting a better picture.

In order to revise earlier positions, we might need to reconsider our own historiographic toolbox and catalogue of concepts. As D. Niefanger has pointed out, the lament about the lack of a national theater (like the *Comédie Française*) neglects that the German countries had one of the most diverse theater-scapes in Europe.\(^{32}\) The reason for this distorted retrospective view is—of course—that the nationalist paradigm that fueled the emergence of historiography in the nineteenth century favored homogeneity and autochthony over diversity and transcultural exchange. In light of this, Nuremberg becomes the textbook example for an autochthonous culture transformed from a performative and oral tradition into a “proper” literary culture. Professionalization and


“literarization” appear as the governing forces behind the emergence of German theater. When one looks at the actual cultural practices, it becomes evident that this functions as a “principle of limitation”\textsuperscript{33}: The publication of prestigious Folio editions of the works of Hans Sachs and Jacob Ayrer should be regarded as intertwined with the larger discourse about taming the time-bound, spontaneous, ephemeral practices that grow out of carnival traditions. \textit{Sola scriptura}—Luther’s famous dictum—gains here a rather different resonance.

The concept of \textit{scena}—as suggested here—is at the same time a point of intersection and a prism to get the different fields and institutions at play into view. The usage of theater as a metaphor, or as an abstract cipher for a relation of observation and overview, as we have encountered it in the frontispieces of the Terence editions, relates to the discourse of epistemology as it meanders from medieval axioms to early modern attempts to define humans’ attitude \textit{vis-à-vis} the world anew.\textsuperscript{34}

Related to this discursive thread is the rise of poetic discourses about genres and the formation of drama. Throughout Europe, the seventeenth century is filled with normative attempts to define drama “proper”—most clearly by the French in the \textit{doctrine classique}. But again, the German-speaking discourse displays a symptomatic discrepancy: While the plays of the English comedians were printed in at least three editions between 1620 and 1630, Martin Opitz does not even mention them (or any other itinerant troupes) in his \textit{Buch von der deutschen Poeterey} (1624). To acknowledge this bias against theatrical practices is the first step to understanding the contradictory development of theater in the German-speaking sphere.

The rise of the genre and of the poetological discourse related to it is rooted in the emergence of book printing as a praxis of circulating knowledge and formal patterns. While centralist states such as France, with its epicenter of Paris, i. e. the Royal Court, created institutions to secure cultural homogeneity and specific formal standards giving expression to it already in the early seventeenth


\textsuperscript{34} The prototypical—but by far not the only—example for this is certainly Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592), whose essays can be understood as impressive documents of the development of a sense of individual subjectivity through self-observation. While Shakespeare’s interest in Montaigne has been widely discussed, the question of the extent to which the essays can be read as contributing to the metaphorical discourse about theater is still to be investigated more broadly.
century, the situation in Germany was categorically different. The rising tensions and conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were catalyzed by the political system of numerous small principalities with secular and clerical princes. In this sense it is also important to note that neither the territories nor the linguistic borders were clear-cut. As pointed out in the case of Cologne, the Riparian dialect most likely was easily understood by most speakers of Flemish. Again, the clear conjunction of territory and a homogenous language is a nineteenth-century fiction created with a view to nation-building. The book market had a homogenizing effect with regard to these pre-modern structures—but economically speaking it was less profitable than theater. In this sense, the title pages of Quarto editions of Elizabethan play texts are indicative as they often do not mention the author but announce past performances as decisive selling points. The printed scripts of the English comedians make a similar claim to a theatrical practice.

The various theatrical practices form a broad horizon that mirrors the manifold tensions constituting the profile of this historical period: from liturgical and para-liturgical practices, through carnival rites, to school performances and the emergence of professional troupes—all these forms are fueled and enabled by the social, political, intellectual, and economic developments of this period before the beginning of the Thirty Year’s War, which marks an interruption of all cultural development in central and northwestern Europe.

To acquire a view of these processes of cultural formation, it is necessary to develop a refined understanding of the cultural mechanisms of transformation and transmission of ideas, techniques, narratives, ideas, and economic models; to acknowledge that innovation is but one aspect of these developments, often accompanied, thwarted, or even promoted by phenomena of anachronism, residues, and simultaneities of contradicting developments.

The French model clearly becomes the ideal for all European states in the process of nation building. It is remarkable how the close connection between the foundation of the Académie Française (1635) and the Comédie Française (1680) is indicative of the concept of theater as a secular institution and art form designed to grant expression to the idea of national identity.