CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

NEO-LATIN DRAMA: CONTEXTS, CONTENTS AND CURRENTS

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EARLY MODERN EUROPE—HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Petrarch (1304–1374), the ‘Father of Humanism’, became the first Poet Laureate since Antiquity in 1341, the Renaissance can be said to have begun.¹ The times were turbulent. Europe had suffered from the Black Death (1340), which according to some estimates reduced its population by as much as half or at least killed a third of the people. In conjunction with this depopulation social unrest and warfare afflicted society. In the following years, France and England experienced peasant uprisings: the peasants’ rising called Jacquerie (1358) during the Hundred Years’ War, a series of wars in France from 1337 to 1453, and in England the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The unity of the Catholic Church was broken by the Western Schism (1378–1417), which was ended by the Council of Constance (1414–1418). These events as a whole came to be called the Crisis of the Late Middle Ages.

At the same time, the century experienced progress within the arts and sciences. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 when the city was conquered by the Ottomans contributed to a renewed interest in ancient Greek and Roman texts. Byzantine scholars fled to the West through the Empire’s western bulwark Venice, which entailed a renewed knowledge of Greek. At the same time, the fall cut off trading possibilities with the East. Europeans were forced to discover new trading routes. Columbus sailed to the Americas in 1492 and Vasco da Gama navigated around India and Africa in 1498. The world was rapidly changing towards a new world view, a new economy and a newly discarded Church. The conquest of the New World with its gold caused a rapid upheaval of the economy; the

¹ For this introduction, we used among other works Wiesner-Hanks, Early Modern Europe, 1450–1789; Bloemendal, Spiegel van het dagelijks leven; Bot, Humanisme en onderwijs; Grund, Humanist Comedies and id., Humanist Tragedies; IJsewijn and Sacré, Companion to Neo-Latin Studies, vol. 2; Kindermann, Das Theaterpublikum der Renaissance; Parker, The Thirty Years’ War, and Worp, Drama en tooneel.
sky seemed to be the limit, until inflation brought people back down to earth.

Whereas Italy was one of the leading cultural countries, the Baltic Sea became one of the most important trade routes in the fourteenth century. The Hanseatic League, an alliance of trading cities, connected vast areas of Baltic countries to Europe’s economy. Powerful states in Eastern Europe could grow, such as Poland, Muscovy, Lithuania, Bohemia and Hungary. This age of crisis and change was a fertile soil for cultural and religious development.

The Early Modern period, which spans the centuries from the discovery of the New World in 1492 to the French Revolution in 1789, is characterized by the rise of science and technological progress. One of the major inventions was that of printing with movable type in the 1450s, which made it possible to spread ideas in a kind of ‘mass production’, even though oral culture remained important. Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543), for instance, had his *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*) printed just before his death. Most of the plays we are discussing in this volume were also printed and published in (relatively) large numbers. Capitalist economies developed, beginning in some northern Italian republics, but also in the southern part of the Low Countries and then in other regions. This entailed demand for more schooling and a flowering of the arts and literature that was later called the Renaissance, i.e. a rebirth of classical Antiquity. For Petrarch, this rebirth was so real that he wrote letters to men from Antiquity. For this reason, he is considered to be the first humanist.

Humanism was a literary, scholarly and educational movement that aimed to spread knowledge in order to improve people morally and religiously on the basis of the classics. To this end, Latin and—although to a lesser extent—Greek texts were read and studied; Greco-Roman culture was admired as a Golden Age. Of course, the medieval monks had also read and studied ancient texts, but they focussed more on Christian views and the Kingdom of God, whereas the humanists studied these texts both for their own beauty and for their philosophical content, although these texts remained a means to internalize and deepen Christian faith. This change in scope is associated with the changing place of higher education that was dominated by the Church in the Middle Ages, whereas from the second half of the fifteenth century municipal authorities founded more secular schools. Nonetheless, these schools continued to be training centres for pastors. Jesuit colleges offered free education in Latin, theology, philosophy, history and other branches of knowledge.