CHAPTER THREE

NEO-LATIN HUMANIST AND PROTESTANT DRAMA IN GERMANY

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In ‘Germany’ (i.e. the Holy Roman Empire) as in many other European countries, the new literary genre ‘Neo-Latin drama’ was originally an academic experiment, based on the analysis and reception of classical Roman drama and Roman rhetoric, but was also influenced by Italian, French and Dutch early Humanist traditions. The typical spheres for Neo-Latin drama were the universities, secular and clerical courts, diets, Humanistic circles in the broader surroundings of courts or universities, and schools, or civic communities, especially in free cities. Convents and monastic schools followed the universities and civic schools in using and developing their own Neo-Latin dramas for didactic purposes. The following chapter mostly focuses on Neo-Latin drama in the Holy Roman Empire, but it eventually looks across the border to Switzerland. The history of Neo-Latin drama in the German speaking countries can roughly be divided into three periods:

(1) The early Humanist period before the Reformation is a time of formal experiments in Neo-Latin drama. During that time the dramatic conception in the proper sense separates from the semi-dramatic dialogue; the genres of tragedy and comedy followed classical examples (Seneca and Terence), while a third, less clearly defined genre comes about, which might be interpreted as an attempt to imitate the classical satyr play: the mythological or allegorical ‘spectaculum’, which often appears in the shape of a festival play that is strongly linked to the festive context of its performance.

(2) During the time of the Reformation, the field of Neo-Latin drama in the Holy Roman Empire is clearly split into two separate if not hostile camps: the Protestant (mostly Lutheran) and the Roman Catholic. Both of them develop a new genre of biblical (or legendary) drama that is supposed to replace the medieval religious play. Both of them also develop new forms of tragedy and comedy and of allegorical and moralistic plays or dialogues. The developments on both sides react to each other and are parallel to a certain degree, but, led by religious considerations, their decisions on how to use theatrical or dramatic
forms for their respective purposes are clearly distinguished. In contrast to the Lutheran Church, the Reformed Church in the Empire and in Switzerland displayed an increasing opposition against theatrical presentations in general.

(3) In the late 16th and 17th centuries, after the Neo-Latin drama has been fully established in Germany, new tendencies of reform can be observed: the Reformation Drama starts to reflect upon itself and upon the achievements of the Reformation in the field of dramatic literature. There are some attempts to reestablish classical dramatic norms, while at the same time new techniques are explored on stage, leading to a literary form that traditional scholarship called ‘baroque’. The borderline between the confessional sides is stressed by the new theatrical activities of the religious orders, especially by the Societas Jesu, which develops a new form of Neo-Latin drama.

Following the traditional periodization of German language and literature, this survey ends mid 17th century (i.e. with the 30 Years’ War), which is generally regarded as marking the end of the Early Modern German language and literature. Neo-Latin drama, however, was still being written in German speaking countries in the 18th century, not only by Jesuit authors, but also by authors from other religious orders and teachers from Catholic schools, for example the Benedictines in Salzburg (Thomas Weiβ, Otto Gunzinger, Otto Aicher, Wolfgang Rinswerger) and in Kremsmünster (Simon Rettenpacher, Ernst Leopold), the Cistercians in Stams (Cassian Primisser), or the teachers of the Brixen gymnasium (Joseph Resch). There are also protestant authors of Neo-Latin dramas in the later 17th and 18th centuries, such as (for example) Valentin Merbitz in Dresden, Martin Hanke and Gottlob Krantz in Wrocław or Johann Christoph Bremer in Quedlinburg. The corpus of German 19th-century Neo-Latin drama mostly comprises scholarly translations from German dramas (e.g. Karl Essler).

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1 See Rädle’s chapter.
6 Cf. Roling, ‘Valentin Merbitz und das protestantische Antikendrama in Dresden’.