6

Early Modern Developments in Italy and France (1400s–1600s)

A. Renaissance Europe, TIMELINE

- 1450s, Gutenberg's invention of a printing press with moveable type made literature more accessible, including ancient Greek and Roman plays and theories, plus the Bible
- 1517, the Protestant Reformation began with Martin Luther posting his "95 Theses" in Wittenberg, Germany, while John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli developed other protests in Switzerland
- 1543, Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published *On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres* just before his death, although it was written 13 years before, arguing for a heliocentric (sun-centered) model of the orbiting planets and stars—against the biblical earth-centered model
- 1545, the Catholic Counter-Reformation began with the Council of Trent (1545–63), which proclaimed the value of art (except when evoking "carnal desires"), especially images of Mary, contrasting with Protestant iconoclasm
- 1598, the Edict of Nantes ended the Catholic versus Protestant war in France with tolerance for Calvinist Huguenots (promulgated by King Henri IV, who had been a Huguenot, yet became Catholic as King of France)
- 1600, Giordano Bruno, a Dominican friar, was hung upside-down, naked, and burned to death at the stake in a public square (Campo de' Fiori in Rome) by the Roman Inquisition for his religious and

cosmological theories, including pantheism (a belief that everything is god), reincarnation (the transmigration of souls), and heliocentrism (with the sun at the center of the planets' orbits and stars as other suns with their own planets, which might also bear life)

- 1608, the colony of Quebec was founded, starting the settlement of "New France," which eventually spread to "Louisiana" in the 1680s
- 1618–48, the Thirty Years' War occurred across Europe with Austria, Spain, parts of Italy, and southern Germany as Catholic forces against northern Germany, Bohemia, Sweden, Denmark, and France on the Protestant side (although France was mostly a Catholic country), causing the death of a third of Germany's population—which, like Italy, was not one country until the 1800s
- 1620, the Roman Inquisition "corrected" Copernicus's *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres* (1543) to exclude the theory that the earth revolves around the sun (heliocentrism)—as against a literal reading of the Bible
- 1629 was the peak year in a wave of witch hunts across Europe, torturing and executing witches as scapegoats through fear of supernatural evil
- 1633, Galileo's popular *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, with a character arguing for the heliocentric model but also others arguing against it, was banned as heretical by the Roman Inquisition and he was put under house arrest until the end of his life—although he viewed the universe as a book written by God with mathematics as its language
- 1685, the Edict of Nantes, involving religious tolerance, was revoked by King Louis XIV and 200,000 Protestant Huguenots left Catholic France.

B.   Italy's Renaissance Ideals (1400s–1600s)

1. Merchant princes became wealthy rulers in the Italian city-states of Venice, Milan, and Florence (where the Medicis developed the biggest bank in Europe). They supported the new artistic techniques of "Renaissance humanism," a rebirth of classical knowledge focusing on individual human figures with realistic physical details, symmetrical balance, and the illusion of perspective distance in sculpture and painting. Such artists included Donatello, Brunelleschi, Botticelli, Bellini, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci (who was also a scene and costume designer of plays and pageants in Florence). Renaissance humanism also involved scientific advances in physics, engineering, and astronomy, especially by Galileo, despite threats against him from the Roman Inquisition.

2. The writings of Aristotle, Horace, and ancient playwrights returned to Western Europe when scholars fled the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Influenced by these writings, Italian theorists developed the *neoclassical rules* of three unities for stage plays: limiting the *time* to one day or less, based on Aristotle's notion of one "revolution of the sun," *places* to those available by travel in that amount of time, and *action* to a single plot line. They also described rules of character *decorum* (proper behavior regarding class and gender) and distinct *genres* with moral *verisimilitude* (truth-likeness), pleasing and instructing—based on the ancient ideals of Horace. But Lodovico Castelvetro (1505–71) went further than Aristotle and disagreed with Horace, saying a play should be believable to common people and common sense, by matching their time in the theatre, with scenery limited to the view of a single person, not to teach them, just to please them (Carlson 49).

3. *Tragedies, comedies*, and *pastorals* were written in Italian, based on ancient models. They showed the distinct moral values of each genre with tragedies about elite heroes (admirable yet flawed), comedies about ordinary fools, and pastorals about rustic romantics (as softened versions of satyr plays).

   [How are the moral or realistic ideals of plot and character in today's media genres like/unlike the neoclassical rules of the Renaissance?]

4. Religious dramas continued in Renaissance Italy (unlike in England), as *sacra rappresentazione*, especially in Florence. Performed with music, they led to the development of Italian *opera*, with libretto, aria, and recitative, in the 1600s.

5. Opera was also influenced by ancient models of tragedy and by Renaissance *intermezzi* (or *intermedi*). These were musical interludes with mythological characters appearing and dancing between the acts of plays, at court for special occasions, such as weddings. They became increasingly elaborate during the 1500s, with their own scenery and choruses, as allegories developing during the four breaks in a five-act play, often upstaging it. Several *intermezzi* were organized in Florence by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), who also wrote comedies, including *Mandragola* (1518).

6. Machiavelli's *The Prince* was published in 1532, five years after his death, but shared in manuscripts for two decades before that. It describes the ideal ruler as practical, all controlling, and sometimes cruel, while appearing virtuous. For social stability, he lies if necessary and kills rivals because "it is safer to be feared than loved if one cannot be both."

7. The ancient Roman *De Architectura* (*Of Architecture*, 30–20 BCE) by Vitruvius, describing theatre designs, was translated and printed in Italian in 1486. Later editions, starting in 1511, were illustrated with recent performances of classical plays.

8. The earliest full-stage use of perspective scenery probably appeared in Rome in 1513, designed by Baldassare Peruzzi (1481–1536). The painted scenic details, on parallel flats, gradually shrank toward a central vanishing point, giving the illusion of a great distance captured onstage—and reflecting an ideal ruler watching (like Machiavelli's "Prince"). This shifted the emphasis toward his almighty power, instead of the ancient gods or Christian God watching in prior periods.
   [**How do today's media illusions reflect a power in the mass audience, or beyond it, as controlling or cruel, akin to Renaissance perspective illusions and princes? How do such performance media create metaphysical frameworks, then and now, for bio-cultural identity needs, with religious and humanist elements?**]

9. In the second of his *Books of Architecture* (1545), Mannerist architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475–1554) offered one set with central vanishing point for each genre: tragedy, comedy, and pastoral (influenced by Vitruvius). Serlio advocated angled wings and a raked stage (toward "upstage" in the back) for more three-dimensional illusions (Figs. 6.1, 6.2, and 6.3).

10. Teatro Olimpico was built in Vicenza, as designed by Andrea Palladio (1508–80) who also illustrated an Italian translation of Vitruvius's *De Architectura*. The theatre still exists today with an elaborate set for its first production, *Oedipus the King* (1585). It involves a raked stage, angled wings, and Roman-style *scaenae frons* with three vanishing points, showing balance yet depth in its Italian Renaissance cityscape (Fig. 6.4). Designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616), who completed the theatre after Palladio's death, the set has oil lamps within its street-corridors to increase the illusion of depth.

11. As the audience appetite for spectacle increased, multiple sets for each play became popular. This conflicted with neoclassical rules of restraint and with the prior use of angled wings, which were difficult to change quickly. So flat wings (with painted corners) replaced them by the early 1600s.

12. The first permanent proscenium arch (or the earliest that survives) as picture frame for the set, hiding offstage flats, was installed at the Teatro Farnese in Parma in 1618.
   [**How are picture frames and perspective scenery used in various media today, like/unlike the vanishing points of the Italian Renaissance?**]
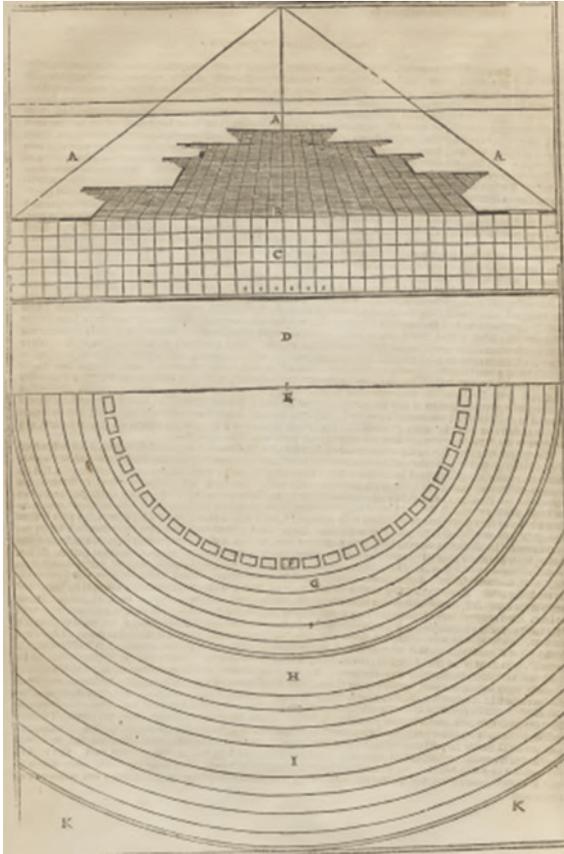
Fig. 6.1 Serlio's plan for angled wings to create a vanishing point perspective (photo: Mark Pizzato)

13. Giuseppe Torelli (1658–1709) invented the pole-and-chariot system in Italy and took it to France in the 1640s, with a mechanism under the stage for the simultaneous scene-changing of flats painted in perspective, as parallel wings in grooves, along with shutters in the back. (This mechanism still exists today in the Drottningholm Theatre in Sweden, built in the 1700s.) Torelli also invented cutout flats of trees or bushes to give more of a three-dimensional illusion onstage.

14. Flying machines (glories) and trapdoors were used for scenic spectacles, plus candles or oil lamps in chandeliers above, in "ladders" along the wings, and as "footlights" on the stage edge (casting unnatural shadows on actors' faces).
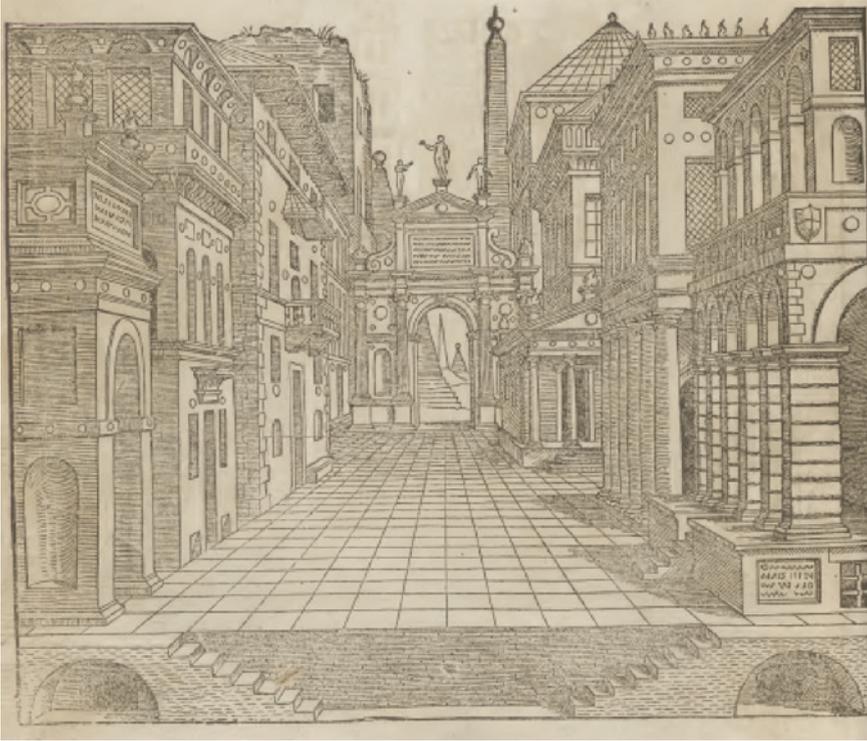
Fig. 6.2 Serlio's tragic scene, showing an Italian Renaissance city with classical statues (photo: Mark Pizzato)

15. Italian *commedia dell'arte* developed from ancient Atellan farce and regional caricatures. It involved masked actors, stock characters, conventional costumes and props, *zibaldoni* (plot sketches), and *lazzi* (slapstick bits)—in improvised, satirical, street performances on a bare stage for a popular audience. It was also valued by the French court, which brought *commedia* troupes to Paris as "Comédie Italienne," which at first performed in Italian, then added French to their improvisations, plus scripted farce.

16. Major commedia caricatures were the innamorato and innamorata (overly serious young lovers without masks), Dottore (foolish academic from Bologna), Pantalone (miserly, lecherous old Venetian), and

Fig. 6.3   Serlio's pastoral scene (photo: Mark Pizzato)

Capitano (swaggering yet cowardly soldier). There were also several *zanni*, including Brighella (lusty, greedy servant or tavern owner, from Milan or Bergamo), Arlecchino/Truffaldino (hungry trickster servant with a dull mind in an agile body), and Smeraldina/Colombina (strong and rational, as personal maid to the innamorata).

[How are today's satirical caricatures in stage or screen media akin to specific commedia types?]

Fig. 6.4 Teatro Olimpico's *Oedipus* set, with central street-corridor (photo: Mark Pizzato)

C.   France's Neoclassical Tensions (1500s–1600s)

1. French culture was influenced by the Italian Renaissance through Catherine de Medici of Florence who married King Henri II in 1533 (ruling 1547–59), with her sons as the next three French kings (Francis II, Charles IX, and Henri III). And then, Marie de Medici married the subsequent French king, Henri IV (1589–1610), with her son becoming King Louis XIII. Also, the Roman Catholic Cardinals Richelieu and (Italian) Mazarin were advisors to the young kings Louis XIII (1610–43) and Louis XIV (the "Sun King," 1643–1715).

2. Court ballet (*ballet de cour*) started in the 1570s with dramatic dances involving costumed court members, in royal halls such as the Petit-Bourbon in Paris.

3. The Hôtel de Bourgogne, built in Paris in 1548, was the first permanent indoor theatre in France.

4. The Marais Theatre, converted from an indoor tennis court into a theatre in 1634, gave the first production of *Le Cid* in 1636.

5. The Petit-Bourbon theatre (Great Hall) was transformed by Torelli with his pole-and-chariot system and was the first theatre of Molière's troupe in 1658.

6. The Palais-Royal Theatre had the first proscenium frame in France in 1641 and became the theatre of Molière's company in 1660.

7. The Salles de Machines, built for "machine plays" in 1660, had a stage (140 feet long by 52 feet wide) that was much longer than the auditorium (92 feet) and could fly 100 people at once. But it was rarely used after 1670 because of its bad acoustics and expensive productions.

8. Such theatres typically involved a long, rectangular room with a stage at one end, a standing area near the stage and orchestra musicians (as the pit or *parterre*, meaning "on the ground"), a curved *amphithéâtre* of bleachers behind that, and upper galleries with seats along the side and back walls, partly divided into boxes as *loges*. Some theatres had a third level as *paradis* ("heavens"). There were also benches onstage for elite spectators.
[**How do the current structures of theatres, cinemas, concert venues, sports arenas, or other performance places compare with French Renaissance theatres?**]

9. French neoclassical plays often used balanced alexandrines, with six beats per line, rhyming each pair of lines—with a pause in the middle for symmetry like that in the scenery. They also followed the rules of the three unities, decorum, and separate genres.

10. But unlike neoclassical plays, with unity of place and action, "machine plays," along with operas and court ballets, emphasized grand spectacle with various exotic scenes, using a series of flats in painted perspective, each having a central vanishing point.
[**How is spectacle or poetry valued in today's performance media, with balance or extravagance, like French neoclassical plays and scenery?**]

11. In 1637, the French Academy (Académie Française), established by Cardinal Richelieu two years before, to give "exact rules" for the French language and culture, *criticized* Pierre Corneille's popular, performed, and published tragedy *Le Cid*. The Academy was judging a complaint against it by another playwright (Scudéry) for mixing genres, as a serious play that ends happily, and straining credibility as it followed the neoclassical rules of the three unities but with too many events. The play's Spanish hero, the Cid, fights a battle and two duels within 24 hours—offending "verisimilitude" (moral truth-likeness). The play also violates decorum (proper character and class behavior), as the Cid's beloved, Chimène, following the King's command, *marries* the Cid

(Rodrigue), *who killed her father* in one of his duels. Even if based on historical incidents, the play ought to be suppressed, the Academy said, "for the good of society," because art "purifies reality" from its defects and "should prefer verisimilitude to truth" (qtd. in Carlson 96).

12. Pierre Corneille (1606–84), stung by the critique, stopped writing for several years. His rival, Georges de Scudéry (1601–67), wrote a less popular play with a similar story conforming better to the rules. But then Corneille returned to writing successful tragedies and comedies for several decades, following the rules of separate genres, the three unities, and decorum.

   [Which genre and character expectations do we have for plays and films today, based on historical paradigms or fantastic ideals? Which social values and metaphysical frames are reflected in them, like/unlike in the French Renaissance?]

13. Jean Racine (1639–99) became the most highly regarded French tragedian, who obeyed the neoclassical rules while also drawing on ancient myths in plays such as *Phèdre* (1677). It shows the Greek queen, Phèdre, falling in love with her stepson, Hippolyte, while he has a different, forbidden love. When he rejects her, Phèdre encourages her husband, the Greek hero Thésée (Theseus), to think that he tried to rape her. This induces Thésée to curse his son, calling on the god Neptune. Due to this curse, Hippolyte falls from his chariot (offstage) and is dragged to death behind his own horses, after a sea monster frightens them. Phèdre then kills herself by drinking poison.

14. Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, 1622–73), as actor and writer, drew on Italian commedia characters for his French satirical comedies. He came into conflict with church authorities when he presented a religious hypocrite and his foolish, upper-class admirers in *Tartuffe* (1664–69). Molière revised it several times, appealing to King Louis XIV for protection. He was allowed to perform it and honored the king with a *deus ex machina* conclusion. A messenger describes the king's godlike, all-seeing wisdom, creating a sudden, happy ending to the conflict, with Tartuffe's villainy exposed, despite his apparent holiness.

15. In the preface to *Tartuffe* and his appeals to the king, Molière argued for the social value of such satirical comedies "to correct men's vices," even those of the upper class. This went against the neoclassical separation of genres with tragedies about the elite and comedies making fun of less noble characters.

16. In 1673, while playing the hypochondriac Argan in his play, *The Imaginary Invalid*, Molière, who suffered from chronic pulmonary tuberculosis, had a coughing fit onstage, hemorrhaging blood. He barely finished the performance and died a few hours later.

17. Armande Béjart (1643–1700), the sister or daughter of Molière's lead actress and mistress (Madeleine), grew up as an actress in his care. They married in 1662, when she was 19 and he was 40. She led the company after his death, with the help of the actor La Grange.

18. That company merged with another in 1680 to form the French National Theatre, the Comédie Française, with actors as shareholders (sociétaires) and fixed-salary workers (pensionnaires). The lead shareholder (doyen) conducted the short rehearsal periods, with all actors providing their own costumes.

19. French Renaissance theatre companies performed a repertory of up to 70 plays but usually had audiences of just 20–25% of their theatre's capacity, mostly from the upper class.

20. In 1697, Louis XIV expelled the Comédie Italienne troupe, for a political satire about his wife, leaving the Opera and Comédie Française as the only royally sanctioned theatres in Paris.
    [What dangers do satirists face today—like/unlike Moliere and the Comédie Italienne? Do current entertainers help to cure audience vices, especially of the elite, and change our social systems, as Moliere argued in his time?]

References

Carlson, Marvin. *Theories of the Theatre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Serlio, Sebastian. *Five Bookes of Architecture*. 1611. https://archive.org/details/ldpd_12760359_000.