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Julius Caesar, altered

The travels of tragedy under neoclassical conditions (Voltaire, Conti)

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> *Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence*
> *Shall this our lofty scene be acted over*
> *In states unborn and accents yet unknown? (*Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, *3.1.111–113)*

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has Cassius and the conjurers rejoicing with blood-soaked hands after the murder of Caesar. Cassius's question is a metatheatrical one: it poses a challenge to Shakespeare's posterity. First, it draws attention to that which is *inherently* dramatically engaging in the story of Caesar's assassination. Second, it signals that the characters themselves are aware of the spectacular nature of this scene. The question points to a problem: In what ways do tragedies travel through space and time? What are 'lofty' scenes in the eyes of posterity? What does it take for a play to become known across borders ('states') and languages ('accents')?[1]

In the following, I hope to contribute answers towards these questions. I will examine the first continental tragedies of the eighteenth century that emerge in reaction to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: Antonio Schinella Conti's *Giulio Cesare* (1726) and Voltaire's *La Mort de César* (1735), looking at both plays as adaptations – in a broad, non-pejorative sense (Fortier 2016: 1046) – of *Julius Caesar* and the forms in which it was conveyed in Restoration-era England. In the eighteenth century, adaptation in the sense of reworking was a central travelling mode of tragedies, which were cast in new forms rather than being translated in the narrower sense. This is also the case for the early dissemination of Shakespeare's plays (Clare and Goy-Blanquet 2021: 12). The historical term for this formal process, 'to alter' (Depledge 2011: 199–200), indicates that tragedies are not stable objects. Even before Shakespeare's tragedies travel across English borders, the plays are shifted to other formal

states in England itself as they are 'improved' and 'altered' by authors and companies (Davenant 1674; Spencer 1963: 78). Conceived as a change 'made only in some part of a thing' (Johnson 1755), alteration implies gradual changes to a model form; as a widespread contemporary practice, however, it also shows that individual parts could be detached from a whole and changed. I will argue that historical practices of alteration involve operations that also apply to the broader reworkings that made Shakespeare's tragedy travel.

Indeed, the case of the early neoclassical reactions to *Julius Caesar* – especially those by Voltaire and Conti – is paradigmatic of the frictions and problems that occur when forms travel. No survey of the 'Worlds of Shakespeare' can fully omit *Giulio Cesare* and *La Mort de César*: while pioneering, they occupy a minor role because of their great distance from the 'original' (Bassi 2016: 694; Petrone Fresco 1993: 52). *Giulio Cesare* and *La Mort de César* were therefore sometimes considered either as completely independent works or as 'cosmopolitan' (Fletcher 1981: 439) forms integrating a variety of influences and formal traits. My approach, instead, insists on travelling forms as altered forms. Both plays purposely react to Shakespeare's tragedy. Even in the negation and alteration of Shakespearean forms, I argue, parts of these forms are carried further.

My argument is also about literary history. Whoever asserts the untranslatability between Shakespeare (or, non-codified formal languages) and neoclassical (or, codified) formal languages risks contributing to a teleological view that emphasizes the triumph of romanticism and the decline of neoclassicism. Per Paul Kottman, this is a view that has been adopted by scholars since Johann Gottfried Herder and within which neoclassicism seems unable to contribute anything to an understanding of the 'formal freedom' and 'heightened self-reflexivity' (Kottman 2016: 9–10) of Shakespearean tragedy. My approach counters this in a twofold manner: first, it reminds us that the 'full-scale canonization' of Shakespeare was not carried out against, but via 'wholesale-adaptation' (Dobson 1992: 4–5). Second, and more importantly, it considers neoclassical forms as carrier forms for innovations. *Giulio Cesare* and *La Mort de César* are indeed the first tragedies that, alongside their paratexts, convey an *idea* of Shakespeare on the continent while also reacting through their *forms* to the foreign form of Shakespearean tragedy. Like the great translation projects of the late eighteenth century, these early tragedies prepared the ground for Shakespeare's further dissemination. They have however received insufficient attention as forms in their own right, ones that innovated neoclassical tragedy following contact with Shakespeare and the English theatre (Agarez Medeiros 2013; Fazio 2020).

In examining *Julius Caesar* and its reworkings as paradigmatic cases of travelling eighteenth-century tragedies, I will proceed in three steps: at

the level of historical actors and networks, I will ask which sociocultural conditions shape the form of travelling tragedies. At the level of literary form, I will analyse how a number of Conti's and Voltaire's operations on Shakespeare's tragedy (and its adapted versions by English Restoration authors) shine through in the continental authors' plays. At the level of discursive strategies and intertexts in Conti's and Voltaire's work, I argue that both authors seek to create a discursive framework within which foreign Shakespeare and familiar neoclassical authors can be compared.

Agents and networks

Shakespeare's tragedies do not travel alone, nor of their own volition. In contrast to the seventeenth century, it is not English acting troupes that export the plays during the eighteenth century; rather, intellectual circles on the continent first adapt and later translate parts of them, a process that privileges the written over the spoken word and the fragment over the whole. Both in England and on the continent, authors fit parts of Shakespeare's tragedies into neoclassical arrangements. The *Tragedy of Julius Caesar* is among the most adapted plays and, more importantly, the first tragedy to be translated, adapted and imported both in parts and in whole on the continent. The following will aim to analyse the ways in which literary forms are transferred in a century known for its rich international networks and culture of translation. Special attention will be paid to acts of mediation, to actors and structures that serve as cultural brokers and nodes, thus potentially transforming the forms they receive and work with.

Both authors discussed here had travelled to England: Schinella Conti, after years in Paris, lived mainly in the City of London and in Kensington from 1715 to 1718. Voltaire found exile in England from 1726 to 1728. Both brought their impressions of the English theatre back to France. Without a doubt, theatre performances – especially Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* – had left an impression, especially on Voltaire (Voltaire 1967: 155; see also Edelstein and Kassabova 2020, Martinez 2015). Conti and Voltaire both transfer their experience as spectators of English theatre immediately to their own playwriting practice. Conti, who until then had been a natural scientist and scholar, writes that he owes England one thing above all: 'the resolution to write a tragedy' (1726a: 46). Voltaire begins to compare strengths and shortcomings of the respective theatrical traditions in England and France; while still in England, he drafts the first act of his tragedy *Brutus* 'en prose anglaise' (1998: 157)[2] and probably also the first sketches for *La Mort de César*. Neither Conti nor Voltaire carries the whole of Shakespeare's

Caesar with them to translate it. Rather, both produce their own sketches and take them back to France, where they go on to develop and refine them (Fletcher, in: Voltaire 1988: 5–15; Conti 1726a: 61). However, it would be illusory to trace an initial 'Shakespearean impulse' (Gronda 1964: 164–5) to Voltaire's and Conti's continental plays. The paradigm of influence and imitation does not help here: instead, the notion of travelling tragedy can help trace complex, non-straightforward relationships and itineraries of forms and actors. Perceiving the process of travelling tragedy not as bound to an original but as a continuous translation and alteration of forms turns the focus on the journey itself and its intermediary instances.

Agents as mediators

While personal experience of the two continental travellers in England has no explanatory potential in itself, it is nonetheless connected to socio-intellectual contexts and other historical agents who enable such experiences. Mediators who actively transform the ideas and literary forms they pass on (Latour 2005: 39) play a crucial role in the present case. Both Conti and Voltaire knew little or no English and learned it only on their arrival. They were thus dependent on mediators. Conti's first contact with Shakespeare's tragedy proves indeed to be a highly mediated one: John Sheffield, duke of Buckingham, an admirer of Dryden and friend of Pope, not only gives Conti his classicist *Essay upon Poetry* to translate but also hands him his own adaptations: *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, altered* and *The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus*. Buckingham had divided Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and adapted it in a neoclassical manner. Thus Conti, who himself had been socialized within French academic circles in Paris, encounters Shakespeare through a French-trained neoclassical poet in England. Buckingham was not only a mediator of Shakespeare's tragedies and English literature as a whole; as a Tory and Jacobite, and as a poet schooled in French culture, he also served as a bridgehead for continental scholars like Conti. The latter acquires his English literacy thanks to Buckingham, learning the language through his translation of his *Essay*, which interprets and conveys English literature and Shakespeare in a very specific way.

In the reverse direction, another agent may be considered a bridgehead of English literature and ideas on the continent. Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, a Tory who was close to the Jacobites, received a wide range of guests in his country house near Orléans, among them Voltaire and Conti. Adopting the language of network theory, Bolingbroke can be described as a 'hub' (Levine 2015: 113, 120). Threads of various network clusters come together in his country house. Bolingbroke is also an important mediator,

having contributed, among other things, to Voltaire's perception of English literature. Bolingbroke and his guests, including Conti after his return from England, discuss, adapt and translate works of philosophy (Locke), science (Newton) and literature (Pope, Dryden, Shakespeare) (Fletcher, in: Voltaire 1988: 35; see also Fedi 2009). When Voltaire arrives a few years later at Bolingbroke's, he gains insight into English literature and the mediation thereof via these very activities. The Bolingbroke circle contributes to the formation of an idea that will become dear to Voltaire: the relative intrinsic value of national literatures and authors in comparison (Fletcher, in: Voltaire 1988). It is only after his visit to Orléans that Voltaire exiles himself in England and attends performances of *Julius Caesar*.[3] Voltaire, in turn, dedicates his 'English' tragedy (1998: 157) *Brutus* to Bolingbroke. In his dedication, the *Discours sur la tragédie,* he puts Shakespeare's piece at the core of his considerations of the merits of English and French theatre cultures.

Modes of distribution

In the eighteenth century, Shakespearean adaptations and the journey of Shakespeare's tragedies to Europe do not depend on the modes of personal experience and live performances: instead, the crucial sites and modes of diffusion of the plays in question are Parisian salons and letters. Immediately after Conti's return to Paris in 1718, he presented his unfinished *Giulio Cesare* to Luigi Riccoboni and Elena Balletti, 'the greatest actors in the theatrical reform of [the Italian] early 18th century' (Alfonzetti 2009: 271); further readings of the constantly improved script followed at the house of the ambassador of Spain and at that of the envoy of Parma. The play is discussed in letters to Italy and to literary circles in Paris; copies of the play are passed on 'from hand to hand' (Robertson 1906: 319) in local networks. It was in the form of letters – and via comments and paratexts of Voltaire's and Conti's plays – that Shakespeare's name and the actual plays themselves were most widely disseminated. In addition to the readings, leading political and intellectual figures of the time – such as the *papal nuncio* Bentivoglio and the scholars Giovan G. Orsi and Ludovico A. Muratori – receive and comment on Conti's manuscript (Conti 1726a: 62). The enlightened Republic of Letters famously turned the private medium of the letter into a genre that helped 'to bridge the gap between the private circles in which [the *philosophes*] gathered and the public arena that they sought to shape and conquer' (Goodman 1994: 137). While it may not be not surprising that authors send plays to friends and mentors before performing them, it is striking that the contemporary reception and circulation of Voltaire's and Conti's plays happens *mainly* on letter paper. There are strategic reasons behind the commentary on

and diffusion of the plays by letter. Conti's and Voltaire's pieces do indeed undergo problematic first printings: *Giulio Cesare* was printed in 1726 at the instigation of the *papal nuncio*, although Conti was hesitant. A pirate edition of Voltaire's *La Mort de César* was produced on the basis of the first college performance (at collège d'Harcourt), against which Voltaire waged a passionate campaign. The authors opposed these editions because in the age of illicit prints and circulation of the book as a 'common object', reading practices via private letters ensured distinction (Chartier 1989: 174).

The diffusion of the plays, and of Shakespeare's name in the medium of the letter, would have consequences for the literary form. Reacting to the pirated edition and its poor quality Voltaire had mainly promoted his play in letters to influential acquaintances and friends, concentrating his efforts on one single scene – one which had not been included in the aforementioned school performance. It is the last scene of his play: falling completely out of the framework of classical *bienséance*, it stages the bloody corpse of dead Caesar. Calling it 'the' 'scène de Shakespear' (Voltaire 1968–1977; D934, Voltaire to Cideville, 3 November 1735), Voltaire uses the name Shakespeare to advertise the novelty of his play. At the same time, he explicitly limits the 'Shakespearean' form of his play to this one scene which represents a formal break with the rest of the play. Voltaire sends this scene, falsely advertised as an exact translation of Shakespeare's scenes of Caesar's death and Antony's subsequent speech, to a multitude of correspondents, including the editor of *Mercure de France*, a central organ of the French elite. It has the status of a 'pre-translation',[4] testing and preparing the ground for possible innovations – a strategy that underlies the entire economy of letters outlined here.

Without Conti's and Voltaire's personal experiences in England and its theatres, the travelling *Caesar* tragedies would probably not exist. More decisive, however, are the mediating steps: the impulse to turn Shakespeare's tragedy into one's own tragedy, the orientation towards neoclassical reworkings, discussions with cultural brokers and a veritable cascade of readings, discussions and letters in salons and with peers from these very circles. This mediatedness can also be seen in the form of the tragedies themselves, which I have thus far not discussed. The mediated character of the journey of Caesar (testing strategies, hesitant publication) is also an indication of the actors' awareness of the new character of their plays.

Operations on the tragic form

Why is *Julius Caesar* the first tragedy by Shakespeare to be discussed, transferred and adopted by Italian, German and French authors? The subject

of Julius Caesar's death lends itself without doubt to modern interpretation, since it stages a prominent moment of ancient history – and a moment that had not been treated in any antique tragedy. The figure of Caesar and the tyrannicide allow modern authors to discuss questions of just rule, legitimate violence and the superiority of republic or monarchy (Mazouer 1986).

In the following, however, I am concerned not with the various reinterpretations of the 'character' of Julius Caesar (Fletcher 1981) but with the reappropriation of a classical theme by neoclassicism. Obviously, the Roman theme of tragedy harmonizes with a formal tradition that sees itself as classical, as stemming from antiquity. For Enlightenment thinkers, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* combined a seemingly perfect *tragic plot* with a provocative *form*. The critical paratexts of the neoclassical plays say much about the strategic interests of their authors. For example, the *Avertissement* of the edition of *La Mort de César*, written by La Marre on Voltaire's behalf, justifies the creation of the play by asserting that Shakespeare's tragedy is, due to its 'barbarie' (Voltaire 1988: 246), translatable only in parts and not in its entirety.[5] Instead, Voltaire decided to write a *Jules César* that did not resemble Shakespeare's play but claimed to be written 'yet entirely in the English taste' (Voltaire 1988: 246). Voltaire thus publicly and strategically describes his play in relation to Shakespeare's play.

The following section examines Conti's and Voltaire's plays as reworkings, reappropriations and deliberate responses to the provocation that the 'barbaric' form of Shakespeare represented for neoclassical formal traditions. Conti and Voltaire respond explicitly, I argue, to two elements of Shakespearean tragedy: the duality of the plot, which finds a continuation with the battle after Caesar's death; and the problem of the blood-soaked and spectacular tyrannicide followed by Antony's speech. The following remarks aim to map out the formal operations that accompany the adaptation to the continental public, while seeking also to reveal the extent to which significant differences in the neoclassical repertoires of form manifest themselves within a comparable classicist line – the reduction of the *dramatis personae*, the adherence to Aristotelian rules and the elevation of dramatic language.

Cutting and compressing

The most obvious difference to *Julius Caesar* is the compression of the plot in *Giulio Cesare* and *La Mort de César*. Both tragedies focus on the conspiracy against Caesar up until his death and cut the sequel at Philippi, from Shakespeare's fourth act on. There is an important – and already mentioned – model for the division of the tragedy: Buckingham literally cut Shakespeare's tragedy into two parts, *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar, altered* and *The Tragedy*

of Marcus Brutus. In line with Aristotelian poetics, he thus preserves the unity of place, action and time. One could speculate that Shakespeare's continuation of the tragedy after Caesar's death quickly came to be regarded as a predetermined breaking point. The title of an acting version attributed to Dryden and Davenant points in this direction: *The tragedy of Julius Cæsar; with the death of Brutus and Cassius: Written originally by Shakespear, and since alter'd by Sir William Davenant and John Dryden*.[6]

Conti adopts the cut Buckingham proposed but criticizes Buckingham for not having adapted 'irregular' Shakespeare to completely fit the rules (1726a: 54–5). Accordingly, Conti sacrifices the central scenes of Caesar's death on stage and Antony's speech to neoclassical conventions. With his 'traduzione-rielaborazione' (Rabboni 2008: 58) of Buckingham's version (Buckingham 1752), and in ending with Caesar's death, Conti thus joins the ranks of the improvers. Voltaire, however, goes a step further: *La Mort de César* ends with the third act. Given its all-male cast of characters, this can be partly explained by its first performance at a Paris *collège*, where plays had to be shorter. However, this explanation is not sufficient, since the play was later also performed at the Comédie and underwent further changes after its first performance. Three acts meant an intensification of action, and it was precisely this kind of action that Voltaire envied in English tragedies and for which he was willing to defy strongly entrenched French classical conventions, such as the one that a tragedy must have five acts (Perchellet 2004: 166; Voltaire 1974: 44). Voltaire's three acts thus seem to deliberately mark the end of the third act in Shakespeare's play. This is also clear from the position of the cut: *La Mort de César* ends not with the assassination of Caesar but with Antony's speech. This non-exact cut ensures that elements of Shakespearean tragedy can migrate into the neoclassical form. Voltaire's theatrical experience in England, witnessing Brutus take the stage with a bleeding dagger and gathering the Roman people ('avec quel ravissement je voyais Brutus tenant encore un poignard teint du sang de César, assembler le peuple romain'; Voltaire 1998: 169), finds a mediated, formal response in his own play. The attention is shifted to Cassius appearing in Brutus's stead, 'dagger in hand' (*César* 3.7). More importantly, Voltaire thus prolongs the play beyond its first catastrophe and beyond the rule of the unity of action, preparing the last scene including Antoine's public speech to the citizens of Rome.

The division of Shakespeare's tragedy following Buckingham leads to very different results for both authors, Conti and Voltaire. At first glance, Conti's cleanly cut tragedy in five acts seems to overplay Shakespearean forms and his 'gross violations' (Conti 1726a: 54) of the unity of action. Voltaire, on the other hand, emphasizes Shakespeare's legacy by singling out and putting to the fore a particular scene he advertises as Shakespearian.

Amplifying and making-antique

In line with my initial thesis – that even in the negation and alteration of forms, parts of said forms are carried further – it is worth examining Conti's attempts to build a classicist and historicist tragedy (Rabboni 2008: 305–6; Mattioda 1994) out of Shakespeare's (and Buckingham's) tragedy. *Giulio Cesare* first seems to be modelled more strongly on antique than on contemporary and Shakespearean forms. As in Buckingham, a chorus is introduced; Conti amplifies historical details in his play, in accordance with dominant contemporary, neoclassical Italian poetics. However, this anticization is not so much due to a vertical dialogue with ancient sources. Rather, Conti amplifies elements of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* that serve the purpose of a specific imaginary of antiquity. This applies in particular to the area of *religio* and *superstitio* in *Julius Caesar*, that is, nightmares, supernatural powers, sacrificial rites and the interpretation of all of these by the protagonists. Sacrifices with troubling results, warnings from prophets and nightmares (*Caesar* 1.3.15–30) are prominent in Shakespeare's play (and less so in the ancient sources like Plutarch). In *Giulio Cesare*, however, these signs and their interpretations multiply from the middle of the third act on. Disturbed slaves report eerie things; wolves are sighted, Caesar's victory insignia have fallen over (*Cesare* 3.5). It is precisely in their redundancy that these elements can be characterized as amplifications of a single aspect of Shakespeare's form: the uncanny presence of signs that need to be interpreted. These amplified signals of disaster and their interpretations determine the whole of Conti's tragedy and even compensate for the *omission* of other central features to Shakespeare's tragedy, namely Caesar's death on stage. Here, Conti again lets signs – linguistic and visual – take the place of overt action (Alfonzetti 1989: 161–2). The protagonists refer to Caesar's death only in terms of linguistic and visual indications: 'io vidi / Uscire in fretta del Senato Bruto / Con un pugnale insanguinato' (I saw / Brutus rushing out of the Senate / with a bloody dagger; *Cesare* 5.7.181). Only rumours and shadows remain of the conspirators' bloody hands and daggers.

This shadowiness is the poetic programme of *Giulio Cesare*. It is a rearrangement of temporally vertical (i.e. ancient), and horizontal (i.e. Shakespearean and eighteenth-century continental) forms. The strong presence of shadows as an element of plot in the tragedy may be linked to its very form and more precisely to the formal operation of cutting Shakespeare's model tragedy. From the beginning, a shadow chases the characters of Conti's tragedy. As an unavenged past, the ghost and shadow of Pompey besieges and determines Caesar's tragic present. Conti refers here to ancient drama, more precisely to the spirit of Polydor in Euripides' *Hecuba*; at the same

time the strong presence of the ghost throughout the play can be related to Shakespeare. Pompey's ghost added in Conti's version may be seen as a prequel to the ghost of Caesar that famously makes his appearance only in Act IV (*Caesar* 4.3) of Shakespeare's tragedy, in the run-up to the battle of Philippi, where it announces the battle to Brutus and its own intervention. In Dryden's and Davenant's 1719 version, Caesar's ghost appears even more prominently, after the death of Cassius on the battlefield (*Caesar altered* 5.4). There, the ghost considers himself half avenged and calls on Brutus who fears the 'fatal shadow' (*Caesar altered* 4.3 [74]).

In Conti's tragedy, the spirit of Caesar as successor to the spirit of Pompey makes an appearance in the very last words of Antonio: 'Ombra illustre, che qui forse t'aggiri. / Vendicarti conviene. O Sacerdoti, / Sollecitate, commovete Roma' (Illustrious shadow, who may be lurking here, / Avenge you. O Priests / Urge, stir up Rome; *Cesare* 5.8.185). The call for revenge on the ghost reads here not only as a preview of the ensuing catastrophe of civil war, omitted in Conti. It also ensures a presence of Caesar's ghost before the cut Conti operates on the form of Shakespeare's tragedy. The severed and discarded half, 'Caesar's revenge', looms as a trace and shadow in Conti's tragedy.

Producing grand scenes

While the cut and the formal operations in Conti's case tend more towards an amplification and phantomatic presence of single Shakespearean formal elements, cutting through a given formal model like Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* can bear very different and even contrary results. This is the case for Voltaire's *La Mort de César* which, I shall argue, focuses on grand scenes. Although Voltaire, like Conti, avoids openly showing the murder of Caesar (the 'lofty scene' as Cassius had it in Shakespeare's play), he conserves and translates the *other* great scene of *Julius Caesar*, namely Antony's speech. This scene is known to be a masterpiece of (political) escalation and uncontrollable force. Voltaire is aware of this scene's potential, both in terms of its plot and of its placement. By putting it at the end of the play, Voltaire transgresses the unity of action. This is proven by the fact that Voltaire keeps the scene mobile, deleting it for the first staging of the tragedy and subsequently circulating it to a great number of correspondents, critics and journals. Voltaire brands it explicitly as the 'Shakespeare scene', pretending to have translated it faithfully (Voltaire 1968–1977; D934, Voltaire to Cideville, 3 November 1735 and D937, Voltaire to Asselin, 4 November 1735). Antoine's speech and the appearance of dead Caesar are thus mobile elements in Voltaire's tragedy but also foreign ones. One may see here a precursor of what Juliane Vogel has named the 'dramaturgy of the great scene', a 'theatre of highlights,

of operatic climaxes' (2002: 10). It is no coincidence that individual scenes of Shakespeare travelled and continue to travel widely – in them a general characteristic of dramatic scenes is condensed: '"scenes indicate change", and therefore escape the control that normative poetics seek to exert on dramatic production' (Vogel 2021: 4).

How, then, does Voltaire translate (in the broadest sense) Shakespeare's grand scene? He takes over and develops three features of *Julius Caesar* in particular. First, and most importantly, Voltaire's separating of Antoine's appearance before the crowd from the rest of the tragedy introduces Caesar's dead body at a very late stage. Shakespeare's scene had introduced Caesar's body together with Antony much earlier, during Brutus's speech; Antony then lifts the cloak of the body during his own speech. Voltaire's play brings Caesar from offstage (where he must lie according to neoclassical rule of *bienséance* (Scherer 2014: 607)) onto the stage at the very end of Antoine's speech. The importance of the body's appearance is evident in the detailed stage directions: '*Le fond du théâtre s'ouvre; des licteurs apportent le corps de César, couvert d'une robe sanglante; Antoine descend de la tribune, et se jette à genoux auprès du corps*' (The rear of the theatre opens; lictors bring the body of Caesar, covered with a bloody robe; Antony descends from the tribune, and throws himself on his knees beside the body; *César* 3.8.239). The play thus turns dead Caesar's presence intro a real entrance, the performance of the dead body is given a state-republican, classical touch with the appearance of the lictors.

Second, as a kind of climax to Antoine's speech and the tragedy as a whole, the dead body transforms the character of the speech itself. It shifts from a rhetorical masterpiece to a real spectacle that no longer needs the kind of retardation structures in Shakespeare's version of the speech. Everything in Voltaire's tragedy pushes beyond the end of the tragedy itself and into a new action. The Romans and Antoine himself run after the conspirators in their last words: 'Oui, nous les punirons . . . Courons.'; 'Succédons à César, en courant le venger' (Yes, we will punish them . . . Let's run; Let's succeed to Caesar, by running to avenge him; *César* 3.8.402–3). Antoine's speech, following quite closely that of Antony, opens up the 'cerebral' (Haas 2024: 16) form of neoclassical tragedy.

Third, with Antoine's speech, Voltaire introduces the people on stage, even if their presence is tamed. Nonetheless, the eloquence of the protagonist does not serve to convince a sovereign or court assembly but to seduce a popular collective. 'Les Romains' make their appearance in the play only in the last scenes, which are the ones that most closely refer to Shakespeare's form. Voltaire's translation of Shakespeare coincides, quite deliberately, with the bending of neoclassical rules and the arrival of the people on the stage.

This appearance and agency of the living body of the collective is contrasted with the daring appearance of Caesar's dead body.

Voltaire develops his own, neoclassical dramaturgy of the grand scene. Neither he nor Conti makes Shakespeare's 'lofty' scene of the conspirators' murdering, bathed-in-blood hands travel across borders into the domains of neoclassical tragedy. Instead, the neoclassical poets transform Shakespearean tragedy into their own conception of a 'lofty ideal of majestic austerity' (Voltaire 1988: 109–10). This indicates a further general development of the century: neoclassicism opens itself up to the spectacular and seeks the sublime in particular scenes, taking the risk of weakening the coherence of tragedy and classical unities. In Voltaire's and to a lesser degree in Conti's case, however, it is interesting to see that innovations to the neoclassical form are accompanied by branding or mediating strategies, such as highlighting the foreignness of the scene and name of its author.

In the last part of my text, I will take a closer look at such mediation strategies. Whereas my analysis of Conti and Voltaire has shown the transpositional power of neoclassical forms in the eighteenth century, I would like to further substantiate my claim that *La Mort de César* and *Giulio Cesare* stand for two central aspects of the migration of forms: lateralization and mediation.

Creating comparability

Voltaire and Conti were among the first to make the foreign name of Shakespeare known on the continent (Cronk 2015: 193; Agarez Medeiros 2013). This foreignness of Shakespeare is evident not least in Conti's spelling: he refers to 'Sasper' (1726a: 53) in his cover letter to Martello, printed in the first edition of the play. This can serve to demonstrate the influence that mediators like Conti have on the first diffusion of Shakespeare: German-speaking critics like Johann Jakob Bodmer adopt 'Sasper'. The fact that research has mostly focused on such early mentions of Shakespeare on the continent only shows that the journey of a foreign form also involves discursive and paratextual strategies of those who host it. For this process, names are crucial. It means classifying the foreign name by placing it alongside more familiar names and forms for domestic audiences. In the final part of this text, I will investigate these mediating strategies by using comments and paratexts to connect discursive strategies to formal strategies, through intertexts, in Voltaire and Conti. What does it take to integrate new and foreign forms and names into a common frame?

Discursive strategies: Making 'Sasper' commensurable

Conti and Voltaire connect two other names to Shakespeare: Pierre Corneille and Joseph Addison. Both Conti and Voltaire contrast Shakespeare's irregular genius with the more 'moderate' French genius of Corneille and his English alternative, Addison, who possesses Corneille's elegance but seems too 'effeminate' (Voltaire 2022: 484). For his part, Conti writes in his letter to Pier Jacopo Martello, added to the 1726 edition of *Giulio Cesare*: 'Sasper è il Cornelio degl'Inglesi, ma molto più irregolare del Cornelio' (Sasper is the Corneille of the English, but much more irregular than Corneille; 1726a: 53). He continues explaining to his correspondent that 'the English despised Aristotle's rules until *Cato*' (Conti 1726a: 55). Voltaire too compares Shakespeare and Corneille as early as 1735 but devaluates the former: 'Shakespear, le Corneille de Londre, grand fou, d'ailleurs' (Shakespear, the London Corneille, a great fool, moreover; Voltaire 1968–1977; D934, Voltaire to Cideville, 3 November 1735). Compared to irregular Shakespeare, Voltaire considers Addison in his letter *On tragedy* to be 'the first English Writer who compos'd a regular Tragedy' (Voltaire 2022: 484).

As an axis of comparison, the trio of Shakespeare, Corneille and Addison also offers us a means of assessing poetic codification. Grand Corneille forms the model of neoclassical theatre for both Conti and Voltaire and is thus worthy of imitation. However, he also represents a certain poetic licence in the age of *doctrine classique*. By identifying Shakespeare as the 'London Corneille', Voltaire and Conti acknowledge Shakespeare's greatness, authority and the grandeur of his scenes, despite his 'faults'. Conversely, Corneille is made the poet of great scenes and great heroes but not the author of 'perfect' tragedies (Voltaire 1975: 231–2).[7] At the other end of the scale is Joseph Addison with *Cato* (1712). The mention of Addison shows that, in contrast to Shakespeare, English neoclassicism is already known and appreciated on the continent (Paulin 2012: 316) and is therefore suitable as a basis for classifying other English playwrights. By 1715, Addison's successful tragedy had already been translated and circulated on the continent. *Cato* provided a substantial impulse for continental authors: its republican ideas, the strong semantics of freedom and the heroic sacrifice of the protagonist energize the neoclassical form. Voltaire, however, is careful not to present *Cato* as superior to French neoclassical tragedies – rather, he pretends that Addison took the polish of English tragedy too far.

Thus, first, the incommensurable, 'irregular' genius of Shakespeare becomes commensurable through comparison; second, the more codified, neoclassical alternatives, Corneille and Addison, are presented as potential models. However, Voltaire relativizes the merits of English neoclassicism:

particularly revealing are his comments in his letter *On Tragedy*, in which he sees the 'English theatrical genius' only in 'detach'd passages' and 'resplendent flashes' (2022: 483–4). In the same letter he refers critically to the migration of theatrical forms 'pass'd from Paris to London about 1660', namely 'the Custom of introducing Love at random and at any rate' (Voltaire 2022: 484), the very thing he accuses Addison of. Voltaire, the importer of great scenes from England may thus have been implying that English theatre should not polish itself via imported (and anachronistic) French forms, but that French theatre should enrich itself with single 'English' elements such as action and 'energetic' language.

Intertext: Pompey and Cato re-enter the scene

It is without doubt because it fits particularly well into a common horizon with neoclassical models that *Julius Caesar* is the first of Shakespeare's tragedies to have travelled to the continent in the eighteenth century. Voltaire's and Conti's axis of comparison also points to the fact that Shakespeare, Addison and Corneille handled the late Roman Republic in their tragedies. To Voltaire's and Conti's contemporaries, Corneille's *Cinna* and *La Mort de Pompée* and Addison's *Cato* were well-known, paradigmatic examples of the genre. Whoever adapts or rewrites Shakespeare's conspiracy of Brutus against Caesar in the first third of the eighteenth century must also relate to the respective struggles of Pompey and Cato against Caesar. Both names, like Brutus, evoke counter-models to Caesar's model of rule *and* evoke the famous tragedies of Corneille and Addison. It is no coincidence that Conti, who was in London at the time of the success of *Cato*, sees in his Brutus a copy of Cato (Conti 1726b: 24).

Studies have noticed the similarities between the two Caesar tragedies and Corneille's and Addison's Pompey and Cato tragedies. Their findings are key to my thesis on the mediation that Voltaire proffers: Alfonzetti showed how Voltaire's last Shakespeare scene borrows formal procedures from Addison, namely the entrance of the dead body that closely follows Addison's stage directions in *Cato* (Alfonzetti 1989: 39). This is to say that Voltaire integrates Shakespearean scenes through the mediation of renewed, neoclassical protocols (which, in the case of Addison, are themselves influenced by Shakespeare). The exposition scene of *La Mort de César*, on the other hand, borrows from Corneille (Voltaire 1988: 54–60). Conti's borrowings from Addison's *Cato* are well documented (Perrone 2006).

Yet the most obvious mediation practice of *Giulio Cesare* and *La Mort de César* has not been studied so far, presumably because of its obviousness: the *sheer presence* of the names of Cato and Pompey in the neoclassical plays. This

formal procedure can, in keeping with adaptation studies, be understood as *amplification*. Compared to Shakespeare's play, the references and allusions to Pompey and Cato multiply in Conti and Voltaire. Although both historical figures were already dead when Brutus's conspiracy against Caesar took place, they play a prominent role in Voltaire's and Conti's tragedies. Pompey is referred to twice as often in *La Mort de César* and in *Gulio Cesare* as in Shakespeare's tragedy – references to Cato quadruple (Voltaire) or triple (Conti).[8]

This has two principal effects: first, both neoclassical plays intensify the representation of the past as a burden, something that was already present in Shakespeare. In Conti, the permanent appearance of Pompey as an 'ombra gigante' (*Cesare* 4.1) refers to the recent past as a burden for the tragic present; in Voltaire's play, Pompey, together with 'divin Caton' (*César* 2.2.29), is repeatedly invoked as an authority by the characters. Second, Pompey's and especially Cato's intensified presences reinforce the semantics of freedom in both plays. Voltaire and Conti thereby introduce conflicting political ideals in the characters' private relationships with each other. In *Giulio Cesare*, Bruto's wife Porzia is a more independent heroine than in Shakespeare and legitimizes her courageous actions with constant references to her father, Cato. Bruto, in turn, is constantly driven by Cato's spirit. *La Mort de César*, on the other hand, forges an intimate bond between the opposing parties, the freedom-loving Brutus and the ambitious Caesar, thus intensifying the tragic conflict: Caesar is literally Brutus's father. Brutus is characterized by Voltaire as a 'farouche' who sets out to avenge 'Caton, Pompée, et le peuple romain' (*César* 2.5.220; and 2.4.174). At the same time, Caesar not only reveals to Brutus that he is his father but also that Brutus is the fruit of Caesar's secret marriage to Servilie, Cato's daughter. In Voltaire's work, Cato and Caesar literally become relatives – the republican fight for freedom and paternal ties collide, bringing the tragedy closer to the aesthetics of tears in a bourgeois drama (Sclippa 1993; Bret-Vitoz 2003: 169).

With the permanent presence of Pompey's and Cato's shadows, the shadows of Corneille and Addison also enter the plays; the prominent semantics of freedom combined with the repeated invocation of Cato in the two neoclassical plays must in particular have been understood by contemporaries as an Addison quote. On the level of political ideals, Conti and Voltaire thus react to Addison's tragedy, which is perceived as republican, and bring differing political models into conflict. On a formal level, both authors very consciously renew neoclassical tragedy by integrating Shakespearean forms through the mediation of different neoclassical models. Conti's and Voltaire's formal practice and accompanying discourses open up a common space of comparison, putting Shakespeare in perspective by naming Addison

and Corneille but also by deliberately using recognition effects through the presence of Pompey and Cato.

Conclusion: (Trans)national appropriation

This chapter has shown the contexts, the paths taken and the effects of the journey of Shakespeare's tragedy on the continent during the early eighteenth century. On the level of networks and communication, forms do not travel without people who import and circulate them. At least as important as a lived experience in a London theatre, however, are hubs such as Bolingbroke and Buckingham who help mediate between different literary traditions. My study of the respective forms of Conti and Voltaire has shown that neoclassical reworkings do not merely enforce expectable, uniform rules: they also allow for innovative operations on Shakespeare's literary form. Even Conti's bypassing of Shakespeare yields traces of Shakespearean form; more important, however, are the traces in Voltaire's *La Mort de César* which innovatively integrate single Shakespearean (and other) scenes into a reformed, neoclassical frame. On the level of the discursive and intertextual strategies, this chapter has established that both Conti and Voltaire specifically relate the foreign Shakespeare to recent and successful (Addison) or authoritative (Corneille) models of neoclassical tragedies. In this way, they open up a common space of comparison and recognition for their readers and spectators.

Rather than highlighting a sweeping cosmopolitanism on the part of Conti or Voltaire, my case study has sought to examine the frictions and national concurrences that arise in the transfer of tragic forms and ideas. While the ancient authoritative models (Plutarch in particular) remain important, Conti and Voltaire increasingly relate their work to modern models such as Shakespeare, Addison and Corneille. The neoclassical tragedy is by no means a monolithic, temporally vertical, form. Instead, the lateral comparison among 'neighbours', 'in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time' (Hardwick 2003: 4), signals that the neoclassical tragedies of the eighteenth century also compete with each other and become increasingly mobile. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, a modern tragedy with a classical subject, is particularly suited to becoming a contested site for reformed, neoclassical tragedies. Both projects discussed here follow this logic. For Conti, Roman history is a proto-Italian national history. According to him, it should be the task of Italian national theatre to present it (Conti 1726b). Voltaire locates his tragedy explicitly in a transnational context, seeking to ensure that it is

not measured solely by French standards. *La Mort de César* is destined 'to promote the taste of its neighbours', namely 'English theatre and even Italian theatre of which it gives some idea' (in Voltaire: 1968–1977; D931, D940). Adapting his communication strategies to his respective addressees, Voltaire presents *La Mort de César* as a novel form, a mediation between English/Italian elements and the French tradition. Consequently, Voltaire's tragedy is not a cosmopolitan form per se; rather, Voltaire advertises it as such.

The further history of adaptations of *Julius Caesar* confirms its primordial role in the dissemination of Shakespeare's work as a whole. The tragedy is the first of Shakespeare's plays to be available in full translation in Italy (in 1756 by Domenico Valentini). In the German-speaking world, too, *Julius Caesar* was the first of Shakespeare's plays to be translated (in 1741 by Caspar Wilhelm von Borcke). In France, Voltaire published a magnificent commented edition of Corneille's theatre in 1760 and sold it by subscription throughout Europe. Within this edition he inserts his (relatively faithful) new translation of *Julius Caesar* but ends with the third act. Once again, and in a very different way to his first *César*, Voltaire seeks to convey Shakespeare on the back of and in comparison with Corneille. By cutting Shakespeare's tragedy after the third act, he maps its form onto his own former reworking, *La Mort de César*. Voltaire wants to show the world Corneille's excellence by comparing him to Shakespeare – and implicitly brings his own tragedy into play.

Despite their differences, Conti and Voltaire work towards a revitalization of tragedy. For this purpose, they recur to antiquity but more prominently, as has been argued here, to the English theatre. Voltaire and Conti also show that the renewal of neoclassical tragedy does not amount to a dissolution of the codified form – rather, Voltaire and Conti use it innovatively in order to create a new neoclassical 'aesthetics of the severe' (Frantz 2019: 20) and sublime 'lofty' scenes that, paired with a new taste for the intimate, could in turn then be exported and thus travel.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Renaud Bret-Vitoz (Sorbonne Université) and my co-editors for their valuable and generous reading and comments on earlier versions of this text.

2 *Brutus* is already linked to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: it is designed as a spectacle and envisages larger collectives on stage.

3 Even this immediate experience is mediated: to aid in his own understanding, he obtains printed acting versions from another mediator, the prompter of Drury Lane theatre, William Rufus Chetwood. These acting

versions are abridged adaptations, and it is on the basis of these that he receives Shakespeare's plays. According to Fletcher (in Voltaire 1988: 35), the text used for performances by the Drury Lane Company was the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* by Dryden and Davenant.

4 I adapt the term from Bachmann-Medick (2018: 277), who uses it to mean 'often-overlooked pivot points in each translation process'. I use pre-translation here as a deliberate pilot project prior to literal translations of Shakespeare on the continent.

5 The fact that Voltaire later develops a veritable politics of translation is shown by his argument that Shakespeare was 'abridged' and adapted as early as the early eighteenth century in England itself (Voltaire 1967: 192).

6 The attribution is not proven. However, the formula 'alter'd' places this version in a common horizon with the adaptation by Buckingham.

7 The great absentee here, who advocates for perfection, is of course Racine.

8 Occurrences: 'Cato' 5x in Shakespeare (excluding minor character of 'Young Cato'), 15x in Conti, 20x in Voltaire. 'Pompey / Il Magno' 5x in Shakespeare, 16x both in Conti and Voltaire (excluding occurrences like 'Pompey's porch').

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