The Routledge Companion to Jacques Lecoq

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The body voice of satire

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A theatre school [. . .] should have a visionary aspect, developing new languages of the stage and thus assisting in the renewal of theatre itself.

(Lecoq, 2001: 162)

One of the central metaphors of Jacques Lecoq’s teaching is the journey: his own, to perfect a teaching method and hone his craft; his students’, to test their bodies’ capabilities and find their own voice; and the theatre’s, to continue evolving with changing audiences and times. The actual journey that eventually led him to found his own theatre school in Paris in 1956 began in French gymnasia before World War II and continued in amateur theatre first, and with Jean Dasté next. Dasté is the one who introduced Lecoq to the teachings of Jacques Copeau before taking him to Italy in 1948, invited by Director Gianfranco Bosio, who had studied and met Dasté at Éducation Par le Jeu Dramatique (EPJD). As Lecoq admits in an interview with Jean Perret, ‘In Italy I was also the actor that I would one day train’ (Lecoq, 2006: 107). The friendships and collaborations that Lecoq forged across the Alps were fundamental in shaping his teaching methods. His three years in Padua made him understand the power and potential of the masks created in collaboration with sculptor Amleto Sartori, who sought to re-discover ancient Commedia dell’arte ways of crafting leather masks for performance; he also came to understand and appreciate the true late medieval/early Renaissance roots of the Commedia Italiana (or dell’arte), and the importance of dialects, through the works of the sixteenth-century Paduan author Ruzzante. In 1949, Lecoq met Giorgio Strehler, who had founded the Piccolo Teatro di Milano with Paolo Grassi two years earlier and had been reviving Goldoni’s Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters, reinserting and reinventing routines (lazzi) that had been lost over the years. Lecoq introduced Strehler to Sartori, who began, in turn, his own long collaboration with the Milanese theatre, infusing new life into productions and performances that made theatre history. In 1951, Lecoq was asked to choreograph the chorus for a Piccolo Teatro production of Sophocles’ Electra. Subsequently, Strehler asked Lecoq to move to Milan and start the Piccolo drama school alongside Grassi and Strehler himself. It is there that he met and worked with the newly constituted acting troupe I dritti, which included professional actor Franco Parenti (with whom Lecoq later
founded a company) and emerging young actors Giustino Durano and Dario Fo, as well as Lecoq's own graduating students from the Piccolo school. Almost half a century before Fo was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Lecoq's choreography of the two shows of I dritti marked a fundamental change in both Fo's and Lecoq's careers. As they both acknowledged in writings and interviews, they learnt a lot from each other.

By 1951, Dario Fo had barely begun his career as an actor. Disillusioned with the career possibilities offered by a degree in architecture, he interrupted his studies when all he needed to graduate was the completion of his thesis. However, the artistic knowledge and painting skills developed at the Accademia di Brera and the architectural concepts learnt at the Politecnico of Milan eventually contributed to give him an understanding of structural and spatial composition, as well as an awareness of the power of visual images that marked his subsequent career as playwright, director, set designer, choreographer, actor, and company manager. Fo's career began with Franco Parenti in 1950, when he asked the established actor to participate in a show in a small town on Lake Maggiore, close to Sangiano, where Fo grew up. As Parenti recalls about Fo's impromptu audition,

He began with a sort of parody of jazz, accompanied by his whole body, by gestures, by very effective miming. Then, he started telling violent, paradoxical, absolutely original sketches that had nothing to do with what we were accustomed to hear from actors in variety shows.

(Valentini, 1977: 31)

Some of those stories were conflated in the 1951 radio show Chicchirichi as 'Poer nano' sketches (‘Poor dear’, literally ‘poor child’ in the Milanese dialect), an irreverent re-writing of famous stories from the Bible, Shakespeare, opera, and history (Julius Caesar, Christopher Columbus, William Tell) told from the underdog's or the villain's point of view. The line 'poer nano' is repeated for comedic effect to underscore the injustice undergone, for instance by Cain, the ugly brother always compared to his handsome brother Abel, who was blue-eyed and had golden locks. Parenti helped Fo get a part in the variety show Sette giorni a Milano (Seven Days in Milan), where he met his future wife, actress and lifelong collaborator Franca Rame, and Giustino Durano. With them, Fo later also acted in Coccociò, a variety show a bit more political than usual, which criticized, among other things, racial discrimination in America. When Parenti, Fo, Durano (I dritti), and Lecoq collaborated in Il dito nell'occhio (A Poke in the Eye) in 1953, and in Sani da legare (Fit . . . To Be Tied) in 1954, Fo had already developed his own style, comedic timing, stage presence, and gestural expressiveness. Exuberant, unruly, and crowd pleasing, Fo's technique needed to be fine-tuned, and Lecoq, with his rigorous athletic training and acting discipline acquired from Copeau via Dasté, was the right man for the job.

Lecoq achieved Copeau's and the EPJD's idea of making a kind of theatre accessible to all audiences by creating a physical language for the stage that would be understood intuitively, with or without the aid of words. Fo felt the urgency of denouncing what did not work in a country that still felt like a work in progress after the destruction and devastation of World War II. As Lecoq and Fo say in the video Les deux voyages de Jacques Lecoq (The Two Voyages of Jacques Lecoq):

Fo: We were really kids, because I was twenty-three, you were twenty-five, so young . . .
Lecoq: We didn’t know what would be the outcome of what we did; we did it like that, in creative bursts; we were not diplomats or strategists . . .
Jacques Lecoq and Dario Fo

**Fo:** Yes, but we were living a very important phenomenon: a renewal; we lived through an incredible renewal movement where everything had to be thrown away and (re) built [. . . ] there were no rules. . . .

**Lecoq:** It was a matter of finding a new 'play'.

**Fo:** New rules.

(Roy & Carasso, 1999)

In these words, spoken forty-five years after they met, one can still feel the energy and the enthusiasm of the two actors, who truly believed that they were operating on a clean canvas, where the rules of theatre had to be rewritten so that the medium could speak to people directly and honestly about their times. They also thought that the rules of society needed to be redefined both in Italy, which was becoming a republic after twenty-three years of fascism, and in France, which had been a divided country for most of the war and needed to rebuild its identity. Theatre had the potential to reach all those who could not afford a television or who would not accept being brainwashed by a State-run medium into believing that everything was fine. The way to achieve this goal was, in part, to recover the craft of those forms of theatre that traditionally had been able to attract illiterate audiences and keep them interested. Commedia acting techniques, its vast physical and verbal repertoire, *lazzi*, and physical stage language able to convey meaning even without using facial expressions (since most actors wore half masks) provided the sub-stratum for Lecoq's scientific method of using an actor's body to his or her advantage to create meaning. As Fo recounts:

> With me as well he tried to establish a well-defined geometrical progression, but when he understood that my disorder was my strength and that the absence of a pre-determined and absolute discipline was the strength of my disequilibrium, then he pushed to free further and definitively that negativity that became thus defining. Disorder within order.

(Roy & Carasso, 1999)

Later on in the documentary, in his unmistakeable style, Fo draws a typical 'pulling' pose of Lecoq's. In it, he shows the perpendicular lines that would centre and give balance to a still figure, while drawing a pose that defies symmetry and balance, to create an imbalance that is much more interesting to watch and that already contains expression and content in its movement. His comment, as he draws the lines of the figure's centre of gravity, is that 'this is one of Jacques' fundamental lessons' (Roy & Carasso, 1999).

When Lecoq and Fo met, the only sure thing about Fo was that he had great instinctual comedic timing and a knack for telling stories. In his capacity as co-director of the Piccolo school, Lecoq helped Fo to find a way to use his physical qualities and defects better to communicate on stage. He reined in Fo's exuberance by training him and getting him to find measure in his physical language; once Fo mastered precision in his movements, then he could reject symmetry to create a kind of off-balance, unexpected disharmony, which became his signature stage language. As can be read in the posters for both shows, Parenti, Durano, and Fo co-authored the texts and shared directing responsibilities, with the fundamental help of Lecoq as miming choreographer (*composizioni mimiche*), and Fo as scenic and costume designer. The impression, from reading critiques in the contemporary press, looking at stage photographs, and reading the texts of the two shows (all available in the online Fo-Rame...
archive at http://www.archivio.francarame.it/home.aspx), is that this was a true collaboration among like-minded artists whose purpose was the creation of a thought-provoking new theatrical concept.

To stage their first show, Il dito nell’occhio, Parenti, Durano, and Fo rented the Piccolo Teatro in June 1953, when the season was over and theatres were scarcely frequented. Their success was immediate and unprecedented. Even unfavourable press could not deny the novelty of the show’s structure and topics. The enthusiastic critic of the Swiss newspaper Libera Stampa points out that it defies definitions:

We wouldn’t know how to catalogue it in any traditional genre: neither farce, nor ballet, nor variety show, nor comedy, nor political satire, nor pochade. What is it, then? It is simply a new way that we hope will soon be followed.5

The show is composed of twenty skits in two acts: the first ten skits illustrate stories from the Bible to the Risorgimento, while the last ten depict contemporary socio-political events. What marks the innovation is the fact that the three authors stage a show that is not based on attractive costumes, half-naked girls, and forgettable, easy satire (as variety shows did and continued doing on TV later on), but rather on precise ensemble work, where gesture and speech have equal relevance. As remarked in the programme for a staging at the Teatro Quattro Fontane in Rome, ‘On this canvas of possibilities thirteen young people have worked in accord, they have reached a peculiar harmony, they have been able to acquire a common style and expressive mood, notwithstanding their different origins.’6 The programme also relays extracts of reviews that appeared in the most important national newspapers and magazines, which also note how meaning is conveyed not through words alone but also by gesture. The critic for Oggi, G. Albani, says: ‘This show could have been staged in Turkey and the audience, even without understanding, for the most part, a word of Italian, would have had fun for sure.’7 This success is largely the result of a show that reached out to audiences in unconventional ways, forcing them to be receptive to images and content more actively than usual. In his introduction to the full text of the show in the prestigious magazine Teatro d’oggi, Italian critic, theatre scholar, and director Vito Pandolfi remarked that the show was ‘visual spoken theatre’ rather than [. . .] “written” theatre.8 He describes the simple and versatile costumes (black pants and long-sleeved t-shirts for the men, and simple black dresses with wide skirts for the women) upon which appropriate accessories and signifiers for the different settings could be applied quickly. The basic and versatile set design (a parallelepiped with ladders and a small curtain in front of a round backdrop) allowed actors to change on stage and act on multiple spatial levels, climbing on the structure on one of three ladders, while lights would draw the audience’s attention to critical moments of the performance. Pandolfi gives Lecoq credit for the new theatrical écriture by identifying Barrault and Decroux’s influence on the French artist’s miming technique that makes ‘gestures take on an extended meaning greater than words alone’.9 The critic gives practical examples of the unlimited possibilities that this way of acting (‘jeu’ for Lecoq) gives theatre:

A simple example: we observe a porter carry on his shoulder a heavy box; the mime’s ability is to imitate the porter and give the exact impression of the weight of the box, showing the effort necessary to carry it. Another example: we observe two runners who, close to the finish line, are competing to win; the mimes’ ability is to give the audience the impression that they are actually running, even though they are running in place on stage.10
As the critic for the *Giornale di Brescia* observes in his scathing review, the idea of staging skits that depict historical facts and legends is not new; however, the innovative satirical element is the attention to the underdog and to ordinary people, caught up in the political schemes of others since Biblical times. A good part of the text relies on absurd situations, puns, and a play on stereotypes (all Egyptian scenes are acted in profile), and amusing anachronisms such as Romans being hesitant in condemning Christians since, after all, they are just living in holes underground that one day will be important for tourism. A Christian woman interrogated by her jailer offers the other cheek after being slapped (thus proving that she is a Christian) and protests that all her people are doing is searching for love and freedom for all mankind. Her crime is against the Roman State: no matter how absurd, laws must be respected. The police of yester-year are just as clueless as their twentieth-century equivalents: the impression is that they are all pawns in a political game that takes place above their heads. Things do not change during the Crusades, where chivalric ideals are quickly unmasked as good press for a massacre; Napoleon and Nelson are depicted as petulant children trying to outdo one another; a volunteer leaving his pregnant girlfriend must go, otherwise Garibaldi’s 1000 men would only be 999. History appears absurd in its claims of symmetry and justice, and in its lofty ideals that never take into account the devastation they leave in their wake. The tone is amusing and ‘light’, the staging fun and incredibly animated, and the parodies of pervasive American cultural referents in Italian life hilarious – but the overall effect of the show is to leave the audience with food for thought.

Critics seemed to agree that *I sani da legare* owed a debt to Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*. Once again debuting in the summer at the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, it keeps the same structure of the first show (eleven skits per act), depicting life in a city from morning to night. It is difficult not to think of Brecht’s *Jungle of Cities*, from Fo’s set design (two floors of a horseshoe structure with ten ‘rooms’, defined by mini-curtains and structural poles, that allow actions and situations to develop simultaneously or consecutively); to the protagonists (ordinary people, but also marginal subsets of the population: call girls, unemployed and homeless people, thieves, and also factory workers and loaders); to the general depiction of the alienation of city life. As poet Salvatore Quasimodo writes in the programme, ‘In this minor epic (epic, as Brecht defines this word), they tackle contemporary events, i.e., our contemporaries – fit . . . to be tied – not in order to judge them with open laughter, but to portray them “detachedly”’. He praises Lecoq for his use of mime associated with words, which he tentatively associates with the Commedia dell’arte. In fact, Commedia acting and scenarios are arguably precursors of Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*. How else could we be able to laugh at Arlecchino’s constant beatings, misfortunes, and perennial hunger, at soldiers coming back maimed from the war to find their beloved living with another man, at old men threatening the virtue of innocent maidens? The very nature of Commedia acting establishes the alienation. As Fo comments forty-four years later, ‘Jacques has an in-depth awareness of the origins of the Commedia dell’arte that most French scholars do not have, because he has a direct, palpable, real knowledge, not a literary one, of what Commedia dell’arte means’ (Roy & Carasso, 1999). Lecoq had staged Brecht’s plays with De Bosio in Padua several times, and Parenti declared that their next play would have been Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, had the company not disbanded (Valentini, 1977: 49). What Parenti, Durano, and Fo did, however, was to turn Brecht’s bitter detachment and irony into open laughter and absurdism, to push the boundaries even further and avoid the risk of sentimentalizing what was meant to be merciless satire on the complacency and duplicity of the bourgeoisie. As Chiara Valentini points out, Fo’s set allowed Lecoq to use the actors’ bodies as props:

Gestures, miming, movements had further developed their marionette-like quality, recalling even more explicitly than *Il dito nell’occhio* the French absurd ways already
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in full bloom in Paris. Perfectly achieved is also the fusion of miming, developed by Lecoq here as well, with music, by Fiorenzo Carpi, a name that will be tied to Fo from then to 1968.

(Valentini, 1977: 48)

The use of songs in the show is yet another link with Brecht.

Lecoq introduced the idea of rigorous physical preparation for actors as well as vocal exercises that would become a staple in Fo’s subsequent shows, from Settimo ruba un po’ meno (Seventh Commandment: Steal a Little Less) to Mistero Buffo. As Eva Marinai relays:

The company actors spend hours and hours daily with the equipment of Lecoq’s ‘gym’ in Corso Magenta 63. The teachings of anatomy and of physical reactions to external and internal stimuli lead artists to understand and master the mechanisms of laughter.

(Marinai, 2007: 235)

She goes on to explain that the grammelot that appears in this show for the first time derives from the French ‘grommeler’ (to mutter) that was used by Les Copiaus (Copeau’s actors) as warm-up vocal/verbal exercises; she argues that Fo got the idea from Lecoq, who would have learnt this technique from Jean Dasté, Copeau’s son-in-law. Fo probably did take the name of the exercise from Lecoq’s teachings, but he later made it his own by adding meaning to the muttering – to the point that in Mistero Buffo (and all the similar shows and episodes added onto it for thirty years), it is used entirely in lieu of words in an existing language. Children use a sort of grammelot when they mimic a foreign language or as they invent one; Fo uses this ability, espousing Lecoq’s theory of the ‘jeu’, and gives it a credible story:

‘Grammelot’ is a term of French origin, coined by the actors dell’arte and turned into Venetian slang as ‘gramlotto’. It is a word devoid of specific meaning, a mixture of sounds able to evoke the meaning of discourse. ‘Grammelot’ means, in fact, onomatopoeic play on speech, arbitrarily articulated, but able to communicate, along with appropriate gestures, rhythms, and sounds, a full blown speech.

(Fo, 1987: 81)

I sani da legare already contains the seeds of Fo’s genius as actor, playwright, and set and costume designer: the architecture of his revolution of theatre begins with Lecoq’s teachings.

Fo did not theorize his discoveries and method until much later, when he wrote his Manuale minimo dell’attore (Basic Actor’s Manual, 1987), compiling lessons imparted in six days to acting students at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, workshops at the Riverside Studios in London, teaching demonstrations in Copenhagen, etc., at Franca Rame’s insistence and with her collaboration. In fact, as he told me in an unpublished interview in 1998, Fo has never been interested in becoming an acting teacher to create epigones. While Fo is an effective teacher, passing on his craft has always taken a back seat to his need to stage plays. The urgency of his theatre has always been to give audiences ways to think about politics, the way they affect their lives, and how to change the status quo. Teaching does happen during his shows, but it is not about the craft. His whole way of making theatre changes from 1969 on with the first edition of Mistero Buffo: even full-length comedies benefit from the pre-show (and in the 1970s post-show) chat with the audience, which becomes a veritable teaching moment where Fo
discusses the political events of the day or gives a background story for the show the company is about to enact, and explains its ties with and relevance to the audience's life. In the manual, though, he does reveal some of the tricks of the trade (as Joe Farrell aptly translated the title); particularly, he shows how he builds his stories in Mistero Buffo, using filmic techniques that audiences have assimilated without realizing it, and that Lecoq calls ‘cartoon mime’ in his own ‘manual for actors’ (Lecoq, 2001: 101). The structure of the play is known: Fo sets up the situation of the skit that will be acted by him alone, partly in grammelot and partly in a mixture of mostly Northern Italian dialects and standard Italian; he gives the audience a detailed introduction where historical data and their relevance to contemporary politics merge. The length of the play and the number of skits vary, often depending on the audience’s response: Fo feeds off the response and plays it, as a good musician does an instrument. The effectiveness of his method of communication in Mistero Buffo, which he has performed for decades, is based on the precision of his gestures, the editing of his storytelling, the balance of his movements on stage and of his word-to-gesture ratio in his stories, and his ability to evoke a reality that he reinvents to the point that audiences are tricked into seeing what he is only ‘describing’ through mime. The episode of ‘Bonifacio VIII’ begins with the Pope getting dressed for a procession. He asks for a hat, mirror, gloves, cope (the papal cloak), and rings. All the characters in the skit, as in the rest of Mistero Buffo, are acted by Fo, who manages to evoke as many as twenty different characters on stage by shifting the weight of his body or by changing the inflection of his voice. Years ago, he told me how, after a show, a couple of prelates stopped by his dressing room to congratulate him and asked him to solve a dispute they were having: was the colour of the cope red or golden? They were both convinced they saw it, but they could not agree on its colour. Of course, Fo just mentions it in the skit: we know that it is heavy, that one of the priests helping him get dressed steps on it; we know how he buttons it once it is finally on his shoulders, but he never describes it with words, never mentions colours or shapes.

As Lecoq says, gestures need to be created for the stage in order to achieve a desired effect: ‘Feelings are never performed or explained, but the actor produces lightning gestures which express, through a different logic, the character’s state at a given moment’ (Lecoq, 2001: 102). Fo echoes in his manual: ‘The real applied to what’s imagined is false . . . and annoying. Therefore, in order to achieve a credible effect, one must manipulate the real’ (Fo, 1987: 237). A different logic is needed to create gestures and languages for the stage that will be credible for the audience. That is why the whole body is needed in Lecoq and Fo’s theatre in order to create meaning. Lecoq, in his school, advocates empirical observation of reality, and he asks students to recreate it. Of course, a human being cannot ‘be’ a tree or even give a perfect illusion of one: the point is not to imitate what is real, but to recreate it in a way that will make an audience believe that one conveys the feel of a tree. A lump of sugar dissolving in a glass of water can become a metaphor for grief, love, etc., once appropriately translated for an audience that is given the tools (situation) to understand what they are seeing. That is how one may argue about the colour of a cope that was never on stage. The same goes for Fo’s language. Linguist Gianfranco Folena defines Fo’s koiné as a romance hyper-dialect or pan-dialect:

This theatrical inter-language is, in essence, an idiolect, an individual extra-grammatical language, artificial in its compositional formula, but equipped with a very strong oral communicative capability. In order to be understood, it does not require from its audience any specific dialectal knowledge, because mimicry, lazzi and onomatopoeia compensate linguistic arbitrariness and semantic deficiencies,
and because Fo, amazing mime, has a perfect command of the techniques of popular and narrative discourse, deictic and proxemics, and his narrative syntax is as uniform and real as his lexicon is artificial and composite.

(Folena, 1991: 121)

Good theatrical language is always artificial: there is nothing ‘natural’ about Shakespeare’s poetry or David Mamet’s slang and truncated sentences, but they seem so. An effective playwright observes reality and recreates it for the stage with words that evoke meaning but that are, by no means, a faithful reproduction of how people speak. A good actor should know perfectly how his body, breathing, and hand dexterity work, in order to create a stage language that truly communicates with the audience, to find his own écriture: ‘Writing is not just about writing words, but also gestures in space’ (Roy & Carasso, 1999); ‘Each gesture possesses its own sonority, or voice, which I try to help the students discover’ (Lecoq, 2001: 68). By the same token, Lecoq understands that a word (parole) on stage creates its own movement that takes on life in space; his strength and importance for the history of theatre lies in his ability to share this knowledge and be a catalyst for actors to develop their own voice. The journey for him took an important turn in Italy: when he realized that he was a co-creator rather than an actor; through his work on masks with Sartori, on chorus movement in Milan and in Sicily at the Syracuse festival; and through the training, choreography, and the creation of a physical language with Parenti, Durano, and Fo. When students leave his school, Lecoq tells them that it is their time to act, while he will continue to teach: ‘It’s my role, because I am better at it and they are better at creating’ (Roy & Carasso, 1999). It takes a humble, intelligent man to understand his role. As long as the school lives, his teaching will live on in actors and directors such as Fo.

Notes

1 Éducation Par le Jeu Dramatique, founded by six directors: Jean-Louis Barrault, Roger Blin, André Clavé, Marie-Hélène Dasté (Copeau’s daughter, married to Jean Dasté), Claude Martin, and Jean Vilar. The association included a School of Dramatic Arts and evening acting workshops: ‘Considering itself as a school of life, it fosters individual development through the practice of “dramatic play”. The goal is to bring students to self-assurance through their personal creations’ (Page, 2010: 267). All translations henceforth are mine.

2 Marcello Moretti, Ferruccio Soleri, and now Enrico Bonavera, heir to the role.


4 ‘Far forno’ (in French, ‘faire un four’, make an oven), in the theatre means to flop, to be in an empty, dark, closed room with no audience. In the summer, the expression was apt, because theatres would also be as hot as the inside of an oven. When I spoke with Fo in the summer of 1998, he told me that they never ‘made an oven’ with Il dito nell’occhio and actually toured for a whole season after the summer. Their show was sold out in Milan for over three months (113 nights). Chiara Valentini also relays the news (Valentini, 1977: 41).


7 Ibid.


9 My word, not Pandolfi’s.
Several of these comedic elements will resurface in Mistero Buffo: the anachronism resurfaces for instances in ‘The Resurrection of Lazarus’, when the cemetery guardian is upset at all the people convened to assist at the miracle because they will ‘sit on crosses, twist their arms, and steal all the candles for the dead’; a street seller yelling ‘Panem et circenses!’ is reminiscent of the sardines and anchovies vendor at the miracle site as well.

A pun on ‘matti da legare’, fit to be tied. Here they are not ‘matti’, crazy, but ‘sani’, healthy, of sound mind; that’s why the way I translate the title as Fit . . . To Be Tied.

Fo’s only attempt at filmmaking, in 1958 (Lo svitato, The screwball) similarly portrays the alienating reality of a city, in which the naïve protagonist can hardly keep up with the harshness of the underworld of small-time criminals.


Any documentary impulse comes from Franca Rame: she is the one who has always felt the importance of preserving her husband’s work for posterity by curating the publication of the texts of his plays, making sure that his method would be made public in the Manuale, and by creating the online archive.

References


