

## INTRODUCTION

The overarching theme of this book is the historicity of theatrical and dramatic form. It aims to show that an underappreciated figure, the stage fool, played a decisive role in the birth of German literary drama. Admittedly, the fool provides an improbable focus for a book-length study. For long stretches of the story told over the following chapters, there were no instances of literary greatness to vaunt; and the German tradition is not known for the clowns and fools celebrated in, for instance, Shakespeare's oeuvre. That being said, this book does include analyses of some of the most acclaimed voices in the history of German letters, as well as two of the greatest comic works from the years around 1800, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* and Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochne Krug* (*The Broken Jug*). But to understand the continuity between these literary masterpieces and the tradition of the stage fool, it is necessary to broaden the scope of our historical view and to expand it to include a corpus of works far beyond what

has typically earned a place in studies of classical German literature. Doing so will bring into perspective the broad range of cultural factors that conspired, over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to make the fool into a fixture of stage performances and debates over their proper configuration. The following chapters seek to understand what gave the fool such staying power *and* what changes this form experienced in the course of its long career. Answering these questions will mean considering the many reworkings and redeployments—some unacknowledged, some willfully artistic—that made a figure seemingly incompatible with serious literature pivotal to the effort, during the latter half of the eighteenth century, to create a German literature of world-historical rank.

To analyze the fool as a historically variable dramatic and theatrical form is to revise a prominent mode of inquiry that has organized literary-historical investigation since its very beginnings. This approach can be found in the first and perhaps greatest literary critic in the European tradition, Aristotle, whose fourth-century BCE treatise known as the *Poetics* has shaped the terms of debate more than any other text. It is essentially impossible for us to imagine what literature would be if Aristotle had not passed down this text to posterity, particularly because he utilizes a classificatory practice, derived from his logical and natural scientific texts, to divide up genres of poetry and separate them from other kinds of writing. Aristotle's argument that poetry can be organized in terms of comedy, tragedy, and epic is, ultimately, akin to his conviction that cognate divisions are possible among kinds of living beings. When we forfeit the notion that poetic kinds are natural and given, however, it becomes necessary to explain the cultural mechanisms that allow for and encourage their perpetuation in time. The preeminent approach to this question—What encourages the reproduction of literary forms?—is to consider the efforts of individual artists to preserve established forms through intentional acts of creative appropriation. But the artistic accomplishments of monumental individuals can provide only a partial explanation for the persistence of dramatic forms. An adequate explanation of *broad-based*

*conventional practices* must look beyond the achievements of exceptional individuals to consider a range of cultural-historical and discursive factors. Because the fool was just such a conventional form, the task of this study is to grasp the reasons underlying both its unspectacular persistence across vast stretches of time *and* its innovative appropriation in the hands of artists such as Goethe and Kleist.

The fool is a form whose significance can be discerned, as Friedrich Nietzsche's genealogical method suggests, only in terms of "its actual use and integration into a system of ends" (*thatsächliche Verwendung und Einordnung in ein System von Zwecken*).<sup>1</sup> Expanding the discussion of this dramatic and theatrical form to a larger network of goals means looking beyond the field of the literary proper, beyond plays and aesthetic treatises, to other contexts that address the place of comic theater in the weave of life. Unexpected deviations in the conception of the fool resulted as much from poetological disagreements over the proper way to write a play as from arguments over the broader civic potential of comic theater. Treating the fool as a form that persisted across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within an encompassing "system of goals" means examining its place in a broad swath of discussions on the relationship between text and performance, tradition and innovation, the individual nation and the broader European context, and more. These are the competing forces that allowed for the fool's perpetuation and modification over time.

The vicissitudes of the form of the fool are evidence of the deep cultural need to regulate laughter. In other words, controversies surrounding the fool's status as a figure worthy of celebration or scorn were rooted in concern with the individual and collective effects of different varieties of comic speech. Although it can easily escape attention, one of the most basic distinctions organizing cultural activity and its analysis is the difference between humorous

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 5:313.

and serious modalities of human behavior.<sup>2</sup> Discourses on the significance of joking and techniques of soliciting laughter, extending from classical antiquity to the present day, often brush up against but fail to directly address the fundamental importance of this distinction. Just as laughing and crying stand opposed as distinct manifestations of human expression, so the serious and the humorous issue from two distinct and opposed attitudes, two distinct and opposed ways of experiencing life and finding meaning in it.<sup>3</sup> A version of this distinction can already be found in ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric, and the construction of this distinction there can help sharpen our own methodological stance. The rhetorical tradition stresses the need for public speakers to intuit the line between seriousness and jest, and develop the ability to solicit each mood separately, under the appropriate circumstances, and to the proper degree. A directive attributed to the fifth-century BCE sophist Gorgias, later enthusiastically endorsed by Aristotle in his own treatise on rhetoric, suggests that a public speaker should “destroy their opponents’ seriousness with laughter and their laughter with seriousness” (τὴν μὲν σπουδὴν διαφθεῖρειν τῶν ἐναντίων γέλωντι, τὸν δὲ γέλωτα σποθδῆν).<sup>4</sup> However, just because the two species of speech are opposed does not mean that they should be used indiscriminately. Quintilian, the first-century CE Roman rhetorician, accordingly disparaged Cicero as overly humorous and Demosthenes as overly serious. Much like Greek and Roman orators before him, Quintilian asserts that the proper apportionment of light- and heavyheartedness is necessary to establish and maintain internal coherence. The premise of this historical typology, as well as Gorgias’s prescript, is the belief that seriousness and joking form an opposition and, even more, that

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2. There is a brief but insightful discussion of the “dialectic of play and seriousness” in Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19–38. I strongly recommend the methodological observations in Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 23–69.

3. Helmuth Plessner, *Laughing and Crying: A Study of the Limits of Human Behavior*, trans. James Spencer Churchill and Marjorie Grene (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

4. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1419b3–5.

they can counteract one another. In a crucial formulation, Quintilian writes, “We understand as a joke that which is the opposite of serious” (*iocum vero id accipimus quod est contrarium serio*).<sup>5</sup>

Despite the appearance of a watertight division, the traditional distinction is weighted disproportionately toward the side of seriousness: humor enters into rhetorical typologies only insofar as it serves an ulterior purpose of promoting serious contents. The risible worth attending to is essentially a more gripping, pleasurable, and efficacious avenue for arriving at a destination that is no less available along a more earnest route. In rhetoric, laughter-provoking speech is only a peer to serious speech insofar as it can contribute to the final purpose of rhetoric in general—whether that goal be civic or philosophical.<sup>6</sup>

The basic structure evident in the rhetorical distinction is, in fact, common to a group of seemingly discrepant theories, including several modern ones, which are far removed and seemingly more radical. While the ancients expressed exclusive interest in those jocular modes of speech that communicated subjects of import, the modern tendency has been to insist on the subterranean seriousness of even the most trivial forms of speech or sign-making. Two distinctive permutations of the opposition between seriousness and levity have made a huge impact over the last century. First, modern anthropologists and semioticians have endeavored to expose the “human seriousness of play,” to show that human society is held together by shared meanings that are evident in even the most mundane and mindless rites, rituals, signs, or statements.<sup>7</sup> Within this scheme, the analytic task is to show that all human activity, no matter the context, is meaning-making, and that this meaning is the glue that holds together a society. There is a second, equally prevalent strand, which seems irreconcilably different, but in truth possesses a deep structural affinity. It has become a near-theoretical commonplace to claim, in line with highly celebrated thinkers from Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud to Mikhail Bakhtin and Mary Douglas, that joking and laughter are

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5. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 2:72.

6. See the historical account in Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 1:257–417.

7. See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

defined in terms of their “subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas.”<sup>8</sup> These authors developed trenchant theories, each deserving of meticulous attention, that are united in the assertion that joking speech possesses the capacity to challenge and subvert conscious thought, rationality, bodily control, or hegemonic social structures. In this respect, they are also unified in the assertion that joking copes with matters of ultimate importance to the individual human being and for society.

Missing from these theories is a type of laughter that does not serve a higher purpose, which is sometimes called, in thoroughly uncomical jargon, autotelic laughter. What of this sort of humor? What of the varieties of speech and gesture that cause a good chuckle and nothing more—which do not solicit deeper reflection, but instead provide a distraction from heavy-duty thoughts and concerns? These, too, are subject to policing and controlling, and can thus be shaped and changed. What is more, these, too, can serve a purpose. One does not have to look hard to find historical examples of entertainment—from public spectacles in Rome to American romcoms—that would be unfairly assimilated into the category of the serious. I wish to claim that something similar is at work in the first appearance of the stage fool in the German-speaking lands. Here, a variety of comic theater was born that aimed to pass the time, to supply ephemeral amusement, and to strive for nothing more than to bring the audience pleasure. His first appearance on the stage could be described in terms of the typical American-English locution “It’s just entertainment.”

A more supple and encompassing distinction between the risible and the serious can help account for the historical alterations to which the stage fool was subject. The hallmark of the fool may have always been humor, but he also went from being a figure featured in contexts without any aspiration to countermand authority or challenge norms to serving as the comic

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8. The phrase is from Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” in *Collected Works* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 5:146–164, here 150.

engine of some of the most profound plays in the German literary tradition. The heuristic potency of a distinction between the risible and the serious depends on its capacity to account for such historical changes, to describe modifications in the purpose and execution of theatrical communication. For this reason, we might think of the serious and the risible as occupying different spaces on a continuous line, with some regions of overlap where they seem one and the same, and other disparate zones of complete antithesis. This view can be understood as the radicalization of a stunning observation from Jean Paul's *Preschool of Aesthetics* (*Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 1804/1812), one of the most technically insightful aesthetic treatises in the German tradition. Jean Paul postulates that "one could make on every planet a different kind of literature out of the serious and the jocular" (*aus Scherz und Ernst in jedem Planeten eine andere Dichtkunst setzen könnte*), and continues by saying that literature is *per se* a mode of human expression "connected to time and place."<sup>9</sup> The different historical embodiments of the fool, therefore, are essentially different ways of negotiating this fundamental distinction. Literature is not based on an exclusive either/or, but on space- and time-specific combinations of these two kinds of speech. We find a related idea in Goethe's references to his own works, during his later years, as "very serious jokes."<sup>10</sup> Goethe here identifies his literary productivity as inhabiting a place toward the center of the continuum of the joking and the serious. To modify perhaps the most famous formula for the aesthetic around 1800,

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9. Both quotations from Jean Paul, *Werke* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1973), 5:92. The programmatic importance of the distinction between "serious" and "comic" literature for Jean Paul's classifications cannot be overestimated. Literature can, in his view, have either an objective (serious) or a subjective (comic) thematic focus (5:67). Jean Paul's analysis of humor provides a good test case for the claim I am making, namely, that we are not dealing with irreconcilable opposites, but rather poles along a continuous line, with antithesis as well as overlap. For a probing explication, see Paul Fleming, *The Pleasures of Abandonment: Jean Paul and the Life of Humor* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006), esp. 44–57.

10. Letter, 3/17/1832, FA II 11:555.

from Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteils-kraft*, 1790), we might say that the joking character of Goethe's literary works means they lack an instrumental purpose, while their serious engagement with issues of fundamental importance in life lends them their purposive shape.

It is thus reasonable to conjecture that literature, as a time- and place-specific mode of creative expression, depends on an alchemy of the serious and the joking, not their irreconcilable opposition. The great benefit of this claim for the history of the stage fool is that it forces us to expand the field of inquiry beyond linguistic or properly literary phenomena and to remain sensitive to variation over time. By looking at more than plays and aesthetic treatises, it will also become possible to approach the fool as a historically variable form, rather than as a static character or type. Whereas the notion of character typically provides a qualitative description of a human being with a unique biography, and a type invokes a static mold, the notion of form is significantly more elastic. It has the virtue of not picking out any biographical qualities as essential or terminological tendencies as definitive. Instead, it locates the fool as a dramatic and theatrical phenomenon that survived through its incessant regeneration. By that, I mean that as the fool was taken up repeatedly as a theme in discourse and a presence on the stage, the encompassing "system of ends" within which the fool was situated also underwent major changes. The form of the fool was, on the one hand, portable: it could migrate from the stage into poetological discourse, into discussions of the well-ordered polity, and so on. But the form was also mutable: the transposition into new argumentative settings wrought significant changes in the potential assigned to the fool's comic practice. Looking back at the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it seems that the fool was, for some, the main attraction of an entertainment-driven show, and for others, a vulgar distraction from the edifying potential of drama; for some, a community-building comic force, and for still others, an underappreciated tradition that could revitalize the stage culture.

In the domain of dramatic and theatrical forms, the cardinal rule is to adapt or perish. And so if the fool persisted in time through



adaptation, it is worth searching for an underlying logic to these changes. The guiding claim of this study is that throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the fool consistently provides a medium through which the most basic elements of drama and theater could be distilled, debated, and tested. I claim that the emergence of German literary drama, viewed in retrospect, cannot be severed from the ongoing controversies that surrounded the fool. Paradoxical as it may sound, a profoundly unliterary and emphatically theatrical figure contributed in essential ways to the creation of German literary drama.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, identifying the fool as a form is not without risk. Broadly speaking, within twentieth-century scholarship, the analysis of form has often entailed a sequestering of literary objects from broader social-historical issues, with an emphasis instead on the internal organization of individual works and the complexities of their linguistic patterns. My intention is to use the concept of form for the exact opposite purpose. I wish to understand what forces, beyond the imagination of the solitary author, secured the centuries-long persistence of the fool as a dramatic and theatrical form. Accordingly, I approach the vicissitudes of form in connection with the broader cultural context, not in isolation from it. And as a further consequence, the individual and unique work does serve as the sole crucible of analysis. Since the fool was a widespread, general role, not an individual character, so too the following discussion draws on a rich body of evidence.

With this methodological framework in place, it is worth saying a word about the notion of origins in the title of this book. As a point

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11. My aspiration to provide a succinct and coherent account of certain origins of German literary drama has led me to exclude another context, within which the theatrical fool traced a singular trajectory. The Viennese folk theater, which has been the subject of a large body of exceptionally meticulous research, does not figure in this book. Its origins, development, and outgrowths ultimately unfold in very different ways than elsewhere in the German-speaking world, and for this reason I have elected not to examine it in close detail. To do the unique and fascinating Viennese tradition justice would have, unfortunately, exploded the frame of this study.

of contrast, let us return to the first account of the origin of a dramatic form. Aristotle's *Poetics* gives us a narrative of the steady emergence of an ennobled genre from archaic—we might say, pre-poetic—prototypes. In book 4, he claims that tragedy began as improvisatory choral songs and only progressively emerged into what we would recognize as a *bona fide* genre. The ennoblement and consolidation of the genre comes about through two simultaneous procedures. On the one hand, there is a shedding of impropriety, through a “step-by-step” (κατὰ μικρὸν) process that “brought about many changes” (πολλὰς μεταβολὰς μεταβαλοῦσα) until it reached “its own nature” (τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν).<sup>12</sup> This civilizing process is accompanied by the addition of more dialogic complexity into the plays. First there was only the chorus singing and dancing in unison, then there was the chorus and one additional role, then two, then three. Genuine tragedy comes about in the twin passage from the simple to the complex and the raw to the cultivated. Aristotle provides us with a fairly simple story of things getting better; he accounts for the existence of the most venerated literary genre by showing how a certain set of elements undergoes a process of self-improvement. Tragedy emerges from the division and recombination of a basic set of properties until “its own nature” comes to full flower.

Today, we might well have a knee-jerk aversion to the teleological direction of Aristotle's narrative of origin. It is easy to feel some discomfort with the idea that, from the very beginning, inchoate choral songs and dances were aiming toward the perfection or entelechy of fourth-century BCE tragic poems. And yet there is little controvertible about the claim that, viewed in retrospect, the constitutive elements of tragedy came about through a process of progressive accrual and transformation; the intermediate steps within this process then culminated in the birth of a full-fledged form. Even if we deny that there can be a complete and enduring form of tragedy, according to “its own nature,” by pursuing an origin story, we still leave open the possibility of anticipatory stages of incompleteness.

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12. Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449a12–15.

At the same time, it is worth emphasizing that Aristotle's account radically limits the sorts of causes deemed relevant to the making of genuine tragedy. He makes no mention of different domains of society, nor of influences from other cultures, or the mandate of religious, civic, or scholarly authorities. Instead, tragedy emerges through the persistent labor of solitary poets, whose searching efforts eventually draw out the genre's intrinsic possibilities and bring about its fully developed state.

It is a near truism today, meanwhile, that the course of history is unpredictable and its significance prone to multiple, retrospective interpretations. The contrast to Aristotle's teleological arrangement is crucial not because it illustrates the wrongheadedness of each and every origin story, but rather because it helps us recover, in the absence of natural necessity or intentional design, the improbability of the pivotal presence of the fool in drama and theater for two centuries. The task, therefore, is to discover underlying developmental patterns without subscribing to a predetermined narrative that imagines the modernization process as a forward march of cultural refinement. That is to say, the persistence of folly throughout the eighteenth century runs athwart well-worn narratives about the eighteenth century as the moment of an enlightened assertion of rational control. Just as the eighteenth century cannot be understood as the moment that reason overcame religious superstition, so too should it not be treated as the moment when literary earnestness replaced preliterate folly.

For the period between roughly 1730 and 1810, the fool provides a prism through which two rudimentary but utterly pressing matters came into view, both related to the relationship between the two seemingly self-evident terms *drama* and *theater*. The first matter pertains to the question, What is the theater for? And the second, What is a dramatic text? In the final analysis, these are not two questions but rather interdependent ways of thinking through a single historical state of affairs. For a core controversy running through the eighteenth century was the relationship between the fixed and controllable dramatic text, on the one hand, and the singular and therefore always unforeseeable actuality of performance,

on the other. The fool was uniquely ambidextrous, playing a pivotal role on each side of the distinction and imposing, by the end of the eighteenth century, a higher unity on them both. These two questions are, properly speaking, historical questions, and therefore the narrative I build in this study proceeds chronologically. That is not to say that it proceeds through a paratactically arranged sequence of events. Instead, the four parts of the study, each subdivided into four succinct chapters, argue that the fool is one of the chief pillars in the internally dynamic and contentious process that gave rise to German drama and theater.

The starting point of this book, it bears emphasizing, lies outside the gamut of what is ordinarily treated as modern German literature. Laying the foundation for the chapters to come, part 1 investigates the process of cultural transfer that brought the fool to the German stage at the turn of the seventeenth century and that provided for his immense popularity. My objective in this part of the book is to understand how scrappy traveling players from England, who came to the German-speaking lands in search of gainful employment but lacked facility in the local tongue, created a veritable star. Part 1 shows that the distinctive practice of stage interaction associated with the fool was deeply connected to the contexts in which the itinerant acting troupes performed. Examining a rich body of scripts as well as the extant testimonial evidence, I distill the fool's patterns of dialogue participation. While much of his art was improvisatory, the fool's comic interventions come at specific junctures and possess a consistent significance. My overarching claim is that the fool provided the centerpiece of a commercially driven performance culture that placed greater emphasis on sustained entertainment than on coherence of plot. His characteristic joking techniques were responsible for arresting the audience's attention and comically deflating the concerns of quotidian life. Part 1 demonstrates the interdependence of the concrete circumstances of performances and the telltale conventions of the fool's stage role.

Expanding the historical trajectory into this largely uncharted territory allows me, in part 2, to account for the complexities of an intensely dynamic and oft-neglected epoch, the years between 1730 and 1750. During this period, conventionally referred to as the early Enlightenment, the fool became a crucial object of dispute

among reform-minded scholars and playwrights. The aspiration to endow the theater with a moral and aesthetic purpose, reformers claimed, required limiting the fool's comic prerogative. The reform project returned again and again to the story of a spectacular auto-da-fé in which the fool was supposedly banished, once and for all, from the stage. My argument concentrates on two components of the early Enlightenment endeavor to overhaul the theatrical culture. The first was a strict conception of the comedic genre. Although ostensibly modeled on ancient Greek and Roman sources, the design of early Enlightenment comedy was equally inflected by contemporary concerns, in particular by the desire to craft a moral message and to block the fool's comic interventions. In addition, the early Enlightenment sought to use the print medium as a tool for altering performance standards. Translations, new compositions, and anthologies became the key mechanisms for improving the stature of the German stage. Contrary to scholarly consensus, I claim that the fool did not simply disappear from the stage to make space for compositionally conventional, classicizing dramas. Instead, the early Enlightenment evinced a nuanced and internally conflicted attitude toward the capacity of laughter-provoking folly to make theater flourish.

In part 3, I turn to the latter half of the eighteenth century, during which questions concerning the relationship between the theater and the broader nexus of social life come into sharper focus. I begin by discussing a widely influential discourse on the role of the government in assuring the well-being of its citizens, the so-called *policey*. The fool was conceived of as a mechanism for ensuring that members of society had the entertainment necessary to recover from the day-to-day life of labor. I then move to the debates over the potentially salubrious effects of laughter on both the individual and the larger social community. In the final two chapters of part 3, I advance the claim that the fool plays a pivotal role in perhaps the most important project of the late eighteenth century, the attempt to create a nationally distinctive mode of dramatic composition and theatrical performance. A broad spectrum of authors and critics turned to the fool as a resource for the propagation of performance conventions specific to German culture. I show that the use of folly as a nation-building instrument hinges on the belief

that the comic, rather than the tragic, depends on and fosters local custom. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the fool returns to the stage as a socially binding force.

In part 4, my approach switches in a significant way. Rather than considering large-scale phenomena by synthesizing large quantities of evidence, I focus my attention on the role of the fool as he appears in two works by the two greatest German playwrights around 1800, Goethe and Kleist. I claim that the fool functions in their plays as a model of theatrical presence, as the guarantor of intimacy between the figures on stage and the audience. Across his long and storied career, Goethe asserts that the early Enlightenment banishment of the fool was based on a mistaken assessment of both the elementary function of theatrical entertainment and the artistic potential of this once-beloved figure. I show that the scenic construction and overarching patterns of significance in Goethe's 1808 *Faust* tragedy cannot be properly understood without acknowledging their debt to the fool. In the final chapter of the study, I draw out the brilliant recasting of the fool in Kleist's 1811 comedy, *The Broken Jug*. Kleist's play amounts to a subtle but penetrating reflection on the possibility of a literary rendering of the fool in the early decades of the nineteenth century. His comedy profoundly thematizes the tension in eighteenth-century Germany between, on the one hand, the broader European literary tradition since classical antiquity and, on the other, the immensely popular tradition of the stage fool. These phenomenal literary achievements, I claim, stand in productive dialogue with a tradition that subsequent scholars have typically dismissed as a trivial forerunner to serious works of literary art.