

BIRTH OF A COMIC FORM

German theater—and, in particular, its early modern ancestor—is not especially well known for its sense of humor. But the lack of acclaim is not for lack of evidence: beginning around 1600, comic elements reigned supreme on the stage. In fact, during the period before German-speaking towns could espouse a local theater building, no single factor ensured a leavened atmosphere with the same effectiveness and frequency as did the stage fool. A verbal and gestural wild-card figure, the fool dazzled audiences with song and dance, and used rude jokes to provoke their laughter. He was more protean and less rooted in a specific social context than the court fools that still today in the twenty-first century occupy a vivid place in our cultural imagination. At the same time, the stage fool shared with his royal cousin a strong penchant for the irreverent and salacious. While the court fool belonged, in general, to a structured social-political environment, the German stage fool flourished on the makeshift stages lacking for luster that first began to sprout up,

through an improbable turn of events, across the German countryside around 1600. His unlikely appearance raises the question, Whence did he come? His long-lasting presence, meanwhile, presses the related query, What provided for his success? In order to trace the beginnings of the German stage fool and account for his centrality to the flourishing dramatic and theatrical culture that arose in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we must look at a little-known process of transfer that brought English players and their plays to the German-speaking lands. However some caution is necessary in approaching these plays—their language, their integrity, their form—for they testify to a process of transmission quite different from what ordinarily falls under the category of “literary tradition.”

It may seem strange to imagine traveling English players as the decisive point of departure for a genealogy of German drama. After all, the beginning marked out by the sudden appearance of English-speaking players around 1600 was anything but a glorious one. The traveling groups of players numbered fewer than ten and scarcely more than twenty, and they spent long stretches of time on the road in search of a paying audience. Despite their tireless efforts, they seem to have rarely emerged from a pitifully impecunious existence. The itinerant and often penurious lifestyle of troupes means that material evidence of their concrete situation is rather scant. Moreover, the fool’s lifeblood was the live unfolding of a stage performance, especially spontaneous gesture and improvised expression. A historical reconstruction thus cannot rely on the highly educated authors of the seventeenth century, among whose writings very few traces of the fool can be detected. And the English traveling players traced a different path than the *commedia dell’arte* troupes, whose improvisatory scenarios were enjoyed by the political elite and within courtly contexts as early as 1568.¹ The fool of English extraction, by contrast, first

1. Although the scholarship once conflated the fool of English extraction and the tradition of the *commedia dell’arte*, the two lineages can, at least for the seventeenth century, be kept largely separate. See, most recently, Ralf Böckmann, *Die Commedia dell’arte und das deutsche Drama des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Baut, 2010). See also Peter Sprengel, “Herr Pantalon und sein

gained a foothold, around 1600, in a milieu without lofty artistic ambitions, which made liberal use of translations or loose adaptations from preexisting playtexts. Wherever he appeared, the fool delighted with a unique blend of immediate recognizability and humorous surprise. From his first appearance, the fool was, in a word, a hit.

Although the historical record leaves no doubt as to the overwhelming success of this impertinent jokester, the cause of that success is less easy to identify. In contrast to a genre such as tragedy, we cannot chalk up his long and widespread career to the imprimatur of aesthetic experts or the rigors of humanistic training. Reverence for traditional poetic forms was nowhere to be found in those settings where the fool beguiled audiences. Moreover, dictates such as (good) taste and novelty did not provide direction for the popular stage of the seventeenth century, and traveling players did not feel the sway of rhetorical and aesthetic dictates. In general, early modern German playtexts seldom circulated in authoritative editions (the sort a modern reader might expect), and they almost never commanded fidelity from actors.² While the early seventeenth century did see a movement aspiring to establish German as a language for the making of poetry, such efforts took place in elite scholarly venues far removed from the traveling troupes that first brought the fool into existence.³ Indeed, the fool gained traction in a world far less concerned with poetic authors or texts than with just giving audiences a gripping show.

Knecht Zanni: Zur frühen Commedia dell'arte in Deutschland," in *Wanderbühne: Theaterkunst als fahrendes Gewerbe*, ed. Bärbel Rudin, Kleine Schriften der Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte 34/35 (Berlin: Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte), 5–18.

2. On the emergence of dramatic authorship in the broader European context, see Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book, 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3. The project of putting German-language poetry on the international map has been the subject of a major body of research, most often focused on Martin Opitz (1597–1639). For a sound introduction to the topic, see Wilhelm Kühlmann, *Martin Opitz: Deutsche Literatur und deutsche Nation* (Heidelberg: Manutius, 2001).

So what led theatrical troupes to put the fool front and center? At first glance, it is hard to understand what could make even the most malleable figure appealing enough that his presence in play after play would be a source of enthusiasm and amusement rather than a bore. Here we stumble on a second, equally puzzling question: What gives license to speak of *a* fool or *the* fool, of a single conventionalized figure? It seems obvious that it would not make much sense to treat every stage appearance as unique and different. But by virtue of what? To return to the previous grammatical contrast: What makes any individual fool an instance of *the* fool? These are all questions clustered around what one might call the reproduction of a theatrical form. The biological ring of the term *reproduction* need not be cause for concern; at issue here is a distinctive way of interacting on the stage, from the words chosen to how the fool speaks them, from his position within the cast of characters to the attitude he assumes toward them.

Instead of proceeding on the basis of historical generalization, it is worth considering a text first published during the latter half of the eighteenth century, but that properly belongs among the materials at the center of part 1 of this study. The play, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, discloses decisive features of the fool's stage activity, and its analysis can provide methodological orientation for the following chapters. The example is particularly revealing because of its high degree of conventionality, something that a modern reader can easily skip over in sheer excitement of discovering a version, albeit radically altered, of perhaps the best-known play in the English language.

The surviving German adaptation of *Hamlet*, it bears emphasizing, is an acting script, not a dramatic text in the ordinary sense of the word. While the German-language play overlaps on a schematic level, a few times even up to the level of a whole scene, with the Shakespearean play, it would be a mistake to treat the adaptation as a translation. But the difference between the *Hamlet* adaptation and a dramatic text extends beyond the difference visible today on the printed page. Rather, the acting script is of a different categorical order than that of a dramatic text; it is even tempting to say, in more traditional philosophical jargon, that the two are

different kinds of material substance. But the terminology is not as important as the recognition that the division between these two types or classes (acting script/dramatic text) does not just depend on surface characteristics like formal or verbal organization, but also on how the acting script or dramatic text ordinarily gets used. For the purpose of marking out extreme poles, we might think of a dramatic text as a kind of poetic composition defined by its fixity: it has been uniquely written and edited and, by and large, can be attributed to an author. An acting script, meanwhile, carries on its existence in the more open-ended, presentist world of theatrical performance. It can be expanded and contracted, modified and recast. Furthermore, its relationship to authorship is more nebulous and prone to variation from performance to performance and context to context. This chapter and the three that follow focus attention primarily on acting scripts; dramatic texts come into view in part 2.

The distinction, even if rough-and-ready, helps make sense of the mechanisms that allowed the German *Hamlet* to endure, such that copies can now be found in university libraries and on the Internet.⁴ It also helps to make sense of the fact that the survival of the adaptation is due to unplanned and uncontrolled circumstances of appropriation and transformation, not the willful bequeathing of a work by a great author to an unversed audience. The version that survives today is based on a printed edition from 1778, itself based on a manuscript from around 1710.⁵ The acting script bears the sort of two-part title typical of seventeenth-century German plays: *Tragedy of Fratricide Punished, or Prince Hamlet of Denmark*. The modified title testifies to a long period of circulation among traveling players who certainly did not treat any particular script they came across as authoritative or as commanding fidelity. In fact, something like the surviving adaptation had probably been used by actors in Germany since the early decades of the seventeenth century, even though no version seems to have found

4. At present the German *Hamlet* adaptation, as well as an English translation, is available for download at <https://archive.org/details/shakespeareinger00cohnrich>.

5. For the historical record, see Wilhelm Michael Anton Creizenach, *Die Schauspiele der englischen Komödianten* (Berlin/Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1889), 144.

its way between bound covers until much later. It is crucial to keep in mind that when *Hamlet* first appeared in the German-speaking world, the theatrical culture where it found a home did not even identify plays with authors, nor did it feel the need to search for or treat one version as original and final. The proper name of the Bard, in other words, only became an identifying marker for the *Hamlet* adaptation long after the play first began its career on the German stage. While in the first half of the seventeenth century authorship was becoming increasingly important to English publishing practices, in no small part due to the popularity of Shakespeare himself, the very same period the German-speaking theatrical world showed little concern for original authorship and, in general, allowed for free tinkering with every part of the play, from plot construction to title, to fit the needs and desires of actors.⁶

The liberties taken with the Shakespearean play shine through most forcefully in the latitude afforded a figure utterly alien to the original: a court jester by the name of Phantasmo.⁷ Of course, English theater in Shakespeare's own time had a sparkling tradition of fools and clowns, and no one exploited the available conventions

6. The importance of Shakespeare's First Folio to the emergence of dramatic authorship has been studied in Douglas A. Brooks, *From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66–103. In Germany, there is a lineage of dramatic authorship within educated circles beginning around 1650. Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664) and David Caspar von Lohenstein (1635–1683), among other lesser-known playwrights, composed tragedies, many of which were intended for stage performance. However, the inclusion of copious scholarly annotations in their published plays indicates that these authors were interested in textual circulation in a fashion utterly alien to the traveling players. For instance, when one of Gryphius's tragedies was adapted by traveling players, the author's name is nowhere to be found, and the manipulation of the acting script is rampant. I discuss this matter in greater detail in chapter 4.

7. The play has been reprinted, along with an English translation, in Albert Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: An Account of English Actors in Germany and the Netherlands and of the Plays Performed by Them during the Same Period* (London: Asher & Co, 1865), 237–304.

with the same acuity as did Shakespeare.⁸ Without question, a figure like Phantasmo would have been unthinkable without the influence English actors had in the first half of the seventeenth century in the German lands. That being said, this figure is far removed from what one might expect from the fools and clowns that inhabited the Elizabethan comic imagination. This difference, the following discussion will show, supports the claim that the German stage fool was a distinct theatrical form.

The divergence between adaptation and original asserts itself from the start and remains consistent throughout. In the version performed by German traveling players an introductory prologue mixes Christian and pagan themes, as four chthonic spirits of classical Greece set up a moralizing frame for the modern tragedy of Danish aristocracy. And then, in its main body, the play includes the court jester Phantasmo who, with relentless barbs, solidifies the initial impression that the German adaptation is far from Shakespeare's universe. By any estimation, the play possesses highly unusual internal heterogeneity: while the prologue announces a story of providential justice, the ensuing tragedy puts a figure front and center who, in his trivializations of the ongoing action, constantly threatens to spill the play over into farce.

For a sample of the sort of material an analysis of the German stage fool must account for, consider the following pivotal moment in the play. When Hamlet's desire for vengeance for his father's death has reached its peak intensity, and Ophelia is crestfallen but has not yet gone mad, the fool arrives on an empty stage and remarks, "Everything has now become fantastical here at court. Prince Hamlet is crazy, Ophelia is crazy. In sum, it has become so crazy here that I almost want to leave, myself."⁹ This comment seems inconsequential enough, especially to a modern reader expecting Shakespearean nuance. There is, indeed, little

8. The Shakespearean fool has been the subject of much scholarly discussion. I recommend in particular Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

9. Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany*, 277.

artistry to be unearthed here, no hidden aesthetic dimension to vindicate. Nonetheless, much can be learned from this simple passage, particularly concerning the German stage fool's integration into the plays performed by traveling players across the early modern period.

Consider the way this scene positions the fool within the sequence of events. He appears here in the guise of commentator, and offers his viewpoint as the opening to a scene. In so doing, he addresses the audience directly with words that serve to belittle elements of the plot that others in the play treat with utmost gravity. All of these are noteworthy dimensions of Phantasmo's utterance because—this can only be asserted at this juncture, but should emerge as fact in due course—they are utterly commonplace. Even though the play may have survived oblivion merely because of the exalted status of the English original, a fortuitous fact that can easily make Phantasmo seem exceptional, he assumes exactly the role one would expect from a stage fool among the traveling troupes in Germany during the early modern period.

Before drawing any general inferences, a second example deserves attention: this time, the fool Phantasmo in dialogue with Ophelia. The scene begins with Phantasmo alone on the stage, Ophelia to join him soon. Before she makes her entrance, he sets up the ensuing dialogue:

Wherever I go or linger, the simple girl Ophelia comes after me out of every corner. I can find no peace from her; she's always saying I am her beloved; but that's just not true. If only I could hide so she wouldn't find me. Now the devil's at it again: here she comes again.¹⁰

And with that Ophelia storms onto the stage, proclaiming that she has just visited a priest who has consented to marry her and Phantasmo the very same day. Surprised by the announcement, the fool consents, but goes on to make certain she is aware of his desperate need to consummate as soon as possible. Before the scene

10. *Ibid.*, 283.

comes to a close, Ophelia thrashes him for his vulgar remarks and flees the stage in a fit. The scene thus blends salacious joking with slapstick—two elements of licit impropriety facilitated by the unique position of the fool in the dialogue. On a thematic level, we see the fool here recasting love as a mere obsession and connubial romance as corporeal satisfaction. The fool's coarse humor, here as elsewhere, possesses a hypertrophic masculine dimension; it reduces the love between a heterosexual pair to the man's pleasure. At the same time, the scene subjects the fool to violence, pointing to the transgressive character of his speech act that, at the same time, remains essentially inconsequential. In this way, the fool's expression of a masculine desire, at once drastically reduced to a single element and playfully exaggerated, is marked as a harmless peccadillo, a tolerated impropriety.

As the scene underscores this masculine dimension to the fool's role, it maintains a number of striking similarities with the previous example. Of particular importance is the fool's assumption of the role of commentator. He appears on the scene before Ophelia, installing a frame for the ensuing action. In the final moment of slapstick, his commentary is revealed for what it was all along: a laughter-provoking infringement on the sense of propriety that governs the rest of the play. Even if the other figures in the play lack the linguistic nuance and poetic beauty we identify with Shakespeare, they nonetheless display a strong penchant for pathos and grandiloquence. Phantasma's role, meanwhile, makes it difficult to know just how seriously the tragic dimension of the play should be taken.

In both foregoing instances, it is important to keep in mind that the play is not intended as parody; the adaptation does not presuppose knowledge of a real *Hamlet*. Actually, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* remained basically unknown and unperformed in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, aside from versions like this one with Phantasma. Until an epoch-making explosion of enthusiasm beginning in the late 1760s, Shakespeare was a nonentity in the German-speaking world. His plays largely made their way through the German-speaking lands as stock in an inventory of translated

adaptations for itinerant players.¹¹ Despite the temptation to treat this play and the fool in it as specimens of the broader European “Shakespeare reception,” there is good cause to resist the idea that any author, especially one bearing the laurels of literary greatness, was coming to the awareness of a new public here. At least from the perspective of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century German theater, there is little special about this play. Rather, the adaptation is noteworthy because, especially in its deployment of the fool, the play is so humdrum.

I have emphasized the fool’s strategy for framing scenes in order to make clear that he introduces a parallel, comic avenue running alongside Hamlet’s tragedy. Such scenes accompany others more directly cognate with Shakespeare’s original. And yet the adaptation does not show an obvious concern with the convergence, or even bare compatibility, of these two avenues. The acting script lacks any moment that might support the belief that Phantasmo’s role amounts to a full-fledged subplot that, in its reflection of the main action, contributes to a complexly integrated play. Although the play assigns Phantasmo the role of debasing the main action, the values espoused in his remarks do not form a contrast with the values outside of them that spectators or interpreters could synthesize into a coherent stance.¹² Perhaps most importantly, Phantasmo’s machinations are of a different ilk than the riddles, witty wordplay, and semantic inversions that characterize the fools populating Shakespeare’s universe. Instead, the roughly hewn nature of the two aforementioned passages

11. Johann Elias Schlegel’s comparison of Shakespeare and the seventeenth-century German playwright Andreas Gryphius is a true historical anomaly. Writing in 1741 on the occasion of a translation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Schlegel endorses the enterprise but remains highly critical of this particular execution. His commentary is particularly unique since Schlegel read English and offers a measured defense of Gryphius, whose style had fallen into disrepute during the first half of the eighteenth century. See Johann Elias Schlegel, “Vergleichung Shakespears und Andreas Gryphs bey Gelegenheit einer Uebersetzung von Shakespears Julius Cäsar,” in *Werke*, ed. Johann Heinrich Schlegel (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971), 3:27–64. I return to the eighteenth-century fascination with Shakespeare in chapter 11.

12. In this respect, I believe his role is fundamentally different from the sort of subplot construction we find in Elizabethan drama. See Jonas A. Barish, “The Double Plot in ‘Volpone,’” *Modern Philology* 51, no. 2 (1953): 83–92; Richard Levin, “Elizabethan Clown Subplots,” *Essays in Criticism* 16, no. 1 (1966): 84–91.

disappoints the modern reader's hope that Phantasma might offer the sort of dramaturgically integrated derision that we find in figures like Dogberry of *Much Ado About Nothing* or even Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in *Hamlet*.¹³ The contrast between the English clown and the German fool is, of course, very important, but must await a fuller treatment in chapter 2.

For the time being, it is worth drawing out some of the structural features of the fool's role revealed in these two episodes from the *Hamlet* adaptation.

Dialogic Integration In the foregoing scenes from the *Hamlet* adaptation, the content of Phantasma's speech cannot be dissociated from its position in the encompassing nexus of dialogue. The *what* of his statements and the *from where* are inextricably connected. The commentary he provides on the other members of the fictional universe—here Hamlet and Ophelia—functions by jutting out of the environing dialogue. He frames the events onstage before they transpire and casts them in a tone that differs strongly from the one struck by others in the play. It is helpful to imagine the fool as a kind of switch operator, flipping from an austere vantage point to one of playful disparagement.

The discrepancy between the fool and the other dramatis personae issues from his distinctive way of relating to the most basic element of theater: dialogue. The interweaving of verbal and gestural action on the stage—the integration of words and movements—constitutes the signature mechanism by means of which theater creates a fictional world. Dialogue in theater is modeled, to varying degrees and standards of fidelity or artfulness, on the manifold and historically variable ways human beings interact face-to-face.¹⁴ In order

13. The surviving adaptation has a scene that is perhaps a far-fetched mutation of the gravediggers. Two robbers (ruffians in Cohn's translation) encounter Hamlet, whom they threaten to kill. After Hamlet has accepted his fate, the two robbers fumble the execution and, rather preposterously, end up shooting themselves. See Cohn, *Shakespeare in Germany*, 285–288.

14. The relationship between theater and face-to-face interaction is the subject of the underappreciated essay by Dietrich Schwanitz, "Zeit und Geschichte im Roman—Interaktion im Drama: Zur wechselseitigen Erhellung von Systemtheorie und Literatur," in *Theorie als Passion*, ed. Jürgen Markowitz, Rudolf Stichweh, and Dieter Baecker (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 181–213. It may seem

to analyze the theatrical situation in this adaptation, therefore, it is helpful to consider the contrast between fictional dialogue and the conditions under which ordinary conversation gets off the ground. In particular, it is worth recalling that interlocution demands a minimum common ground among statements, including both linguistic formulation and meaning. Communication, that is, depends on the articulation of differences on the basis of, to use a well-worn metaphor, a shared space of intelligibility. Dialogue is not made up of atom-like utterances; the words evince a dynamic of back-and-forth, of understanding and misunderstanding, of agreement and disagreement.¹⁵ Too much difference, and a statement seems peculiar; too much similarity, and dialogue comes to a standstill. One of the key interpretive dimensions of watching or reading a play is, then, understanding the balance of continuity and difference in sequences of dialogue. And this includes registering the anomalous moments, when dialogue does not interlock at all or deviates from its usual proportion of continuity and difference. Humor, it deserves emphasizing, often depends on just such abrupt deviations in the flow of speech.

A fool like Phantasmo, meanwhile, furnishes the play with an exceptional degree of discontinuity, when compared to the other utterances making up the fabric of the fiction. To put it figurally, the fool's utterances and gestures are fringes in the weave of dialogue. In his role as commentator, Phantasmo introduces a view of the events that seems to stand both inside and outside the patterns of face-to-face interaction. He phrases things in ways others cannot and recasts the tragic events in the most trivial terms.

that I am unduly leaving aside the possibility of a purely monological theater. I believe that is only partially true, insofar as monologue only becomes theater by virtue of its placement within a dialogic setting, before an audience. For this reason, I distinguish in chapter 3 between fiction-internal and fiction-external axes of communication. The potential existence of experimental forms of modern or contemporary theater that conform to neither axis of communication is not germane to the present, historically rooted analysis.

15. On dialogue structure, I recommend in particular Jan Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art: Selected Essays* trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 81–115.

He breaches the flow of dialogue and upbraids protagonists with abandon. He jumps out onto the stage and informs the audience of things in words that are sometimes mirthful and sometimes more caustic. All the while, though, his statements rely for their relevance on their thematic connection to the rest of the dialogue. The fool is, importantly, not talking about something completely foreign or unfamiliar, but instead channeling a distinct perspective on the fiction. Hence the switch operator—only he can participate in the ongoing dialogue and then, at will, alternate the frame.

In both of the two brief scenes from the Hamlet adaptation, the fool's position in the dialogue is further defined by its incidental or opportunistic quality. That is to say, his foremost skill lies in his ability to seize on a statement or a scene as the occasion for a comic intervention. On the basis of his loose dialogic integration, the fool offers a sort of hermeneutic fork in the road—shall we take things seriously or not?—and the play on the whole pursues both paths with insouciant disregard for their overall compatibility.

Form as Practice Thinking of Phantasmo in terms of his locus in the dialogic interplay provides the basis for the recognition that one and the same figure—the fool—assumes dozens of guises and in myriad contexts. Patterns in the configuration of dialogue are, in essence, the units that hold together the diversity of the fool's stage appearances. Concentrating attention on such repeated structures entails leaving out certain other modes of investigation to account for his unforeseeable genesis and resulting permanence. For instance, it does not involve chronicling stage appearance after stage appearance, beginning with debut and continuing for decades, in pursuit of lines of influence. And for good reason: the fool is not a human being with a biography, and the parameters of his narrative are not birth, life, and death. The fool is, instead, a conventionalized figure, a theatrical form, brought to life under multiple sobriquets, clad in varying costumes, and embedded in different plots. Throwing light on such a form requires making its constitutive parts clear and showing how they fit together. And this

because the form in question—the characteristic kinds of activity executed by the fool—constitutes what we ordinarily think of as a *practice*. The formal unity characteristic of the fool must be elaborated in terms of a constitutive practice.

Treating figures like Phantasmo as manifestations of a theatrical form also steers the discussion away from two ready-made terminological schemata. The first is captured by the locution “stock character,” used commonly in both colloquial and academic discourse. This schema is used to indicate a sort of cookie-cutter persona, distinguished by signature personality traits that remain recognizable in play after play.¹⁶ According to this line of thought, the fool is something like a skeletal type, a rube or buffoon. Accounts of the comedy genre, particularly of its flowering in classical antiquity and the Renaissance, have often involved the identification of a set repertoire of such character types that participate in rigid plot patterns. And continuities between ancient and modern comedy are often explained in terms of the repetition of such standard and set elements. But such an approach ignores the sort of cultural-historical vicissitudes that stand at the center of this study.

A common procedure in discussions of the fool is to turn to the early modern distinction between a person deprived of adequate mental wherewithal (the *Naturnarr*) and a witty and rollicking jokester (the *Kunstnarr* or *Schalksnarr*).¹⁷ This model of analysis, however, draws on a preexisting category the stage fool ostensibly falls under, without explaining what makes this category hang together in the first place, needless to say endure over time. So unless we suppose there is some sort of primordial human need fulfilled by jokester figures—a difficult claim to defend—the assertion of a ready-made category does not assist in uncovering the fool’s genesis or explaining his reproductive mechanism. A more fruitful avenue

16. This mode of analysis reached its theoretical acme in the still deeply impressive study by Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

17. Edgar Barwig and Ralf Schmitz, “Narren, Geisteskranke und Hofleute,” in *Randgruppen der spätmittelalterlichen Gesellschaft*, ed. Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller (Warendorf: Fahlbusch Verlag, 2001), 239–269.

of inquiry is, so the basic claim of this study, to gain a firm grip on both the overarching theatrical context and the patterns of stage interaction that integrate the fool into dialogue. The goal, in other words, is to uncover the organizational principles of dialogue, the distinctive ways of going on, that allowed for the fool's spectacular diversity of embodiments while still maintaining enough consistency that he could be understood as a distinct role.

Context-Sensitivity of Form An analysis of the fool involves the consideration of structures of dialogue as well as of the larger environment—to put it simply, of form and context. Understanding how fool figures could be freely inserted into plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* demands an appreciation of the highly unusual theatrical culture within which the fool gained a foothold. This means exploring how the happenstance arrival of English strolling players around 1600 and even more unexpected success of itinerant theatrical troupes over the ensuing decades gave rise to a new variety of theater, utterly different from more familiar modern counterparts. The traveling troupes inhabited a theatrical sphere lacking venerated tradition and strict ceremony, without the aspiration to everlasting fame or artistic greatness. Their plays were lavish in liberal adaptation and playful improvisation, focused on crowd pleasing and commercial success. And the centerpiece of it all was none other than the stage fool.

My insistence on the context-sensitivity of form is motivated by the chasm separating the seventeenth-century fool from the category we typically call literature. In the classicizing movements that run through the modern age, plot structures and generic categories made their way from antiquity into the modern period via translation and adaptation in the Latinate world of the social and political elite. The reproduction of classical forms was, in essence, a disciplined procedure; it emerged out of a philological tradition invested in ensuring the preservation of ancient knowledge. It further depended on a broad array of ancillary forces, including educational venues, religious and political authorities, and poetic handbooks. Procedures of imitation or emulation labored to accomplish the conformity of new

poetic productions to established standards. The entire enterprise had as its foundation a reverence for the ancients that has occasionally come under fire but has nonetheless remained a major force up to the present day. The reproduction of classical forms, however interesting in its own right, cannot supply a model for understanding how the *Hamlet* adaptation survived for so long, and how the figure of the fool found a place in this play and so many like it. In lieu of supporting institutions—church, university, or others—to celebrate the preeminence of ancient forms and command their imitation, the subsistence of the fool for expanses of time largely depended on factors internal to the conventionalized role itself. The stage presentation he embodied, in other words, contained many of the means by which the role endured across time. Indeed, the appearance of the fool in play after play depended on the exercise of a recognizable stage practice—which, if popularity is any indication, provided audiences with abundant pleasure.

Template as Reproductive Mechanism The origins of this stage figure are located in a deracinated and informal theatrical world. This means, firstly, that the conventions of the stage were not dictated by an authoritative mandate of any sort and, secondly, that the traveling troupes made their living by constantly moving about and looking for sufficient payment to survive. What is more, the fool belonged to a culture of playmaking that seems, in light of more modern expectations, highly unorthodox, particularly given the malleability of acting scripts and the reliance on commercial conditions defined by relentless travel. For all these reasons, it makes good sense to think of the plays put on by the strolling players of the seventeenth century as much closer to familiar oral traditions like the folktale or epic song than modern written literary genres like the novel or even the modern dramatic text.¹⁸

18. The scholarship on oral literature is insurmountably vast. In my thought on this subject I have been particularly inspired by the pioneering research conducted on the Homeric epics and on folktales. In place of a litany of scholarly references, I shall therefore mention only two I particularly recommend: Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Ancient Greek Poetry*

The printed edition of the *Hamlet* adaptation, for instance, ultimately amounts to a template that could be tailored to fit the immediate needs of actors, instead of a rigid blueprint for uniform stagings. As templates, scripts were used as supple instruments that could sponsor a multiplicity of different theatrical realizations. Much as forms like the folktale and epic song depend on unsystematic channels of proximate communication—passing from generation to generation through the act of face-to-face retelling, relishing in improvisation on the basis of rudimentary structures, and imbuing no single version with exalted status—the printed version of our *Hamlet* adaptation does not possess the authoritative and authentic character of a set literary text. Although only a single version of the adaptation has survived, it must be treated like a palimpsest of decades of informal transmission. The play withstood the test of time almost exclusively through live performances in town squares and royal courts. Accordingly, to read or study a scene repeatedly, submitting it to close scrutiny, is to engage in an interpretive act that would have been unthinkable during the era of traveling theatrical troupes. What appears today as a fixed play, with every word and scene in its proper place, is, in truth, the post hoc calcification of a more fluid phenomenon.

The media-historical status of the *Hamlet* adaptation—its template-like nature—deserves particular emphasis. Like many surviving plays, it derives from makeshift scripts that had been used primarily by the acting troupes themselves. Text and textuality entered the picture only in a very loose and impermanent sense, and certainly not as the material anchor for the singularity of a literary work. It seems that a typical troupe would have been in possession of only a single copy of each acting script in the repertoire, and it belonged to the manager of the troupe. It was used, not as a fixed substrate to which fidelity was required, but as an outline that could be filled in, even substantively altered, by an acting troupe as needed. Good evidence for approaching the

(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Hamlet adaptation as based on a template structure can be found already in the first major collection of plays featuring the fool, which appeared in 1620. The title page announces the wish that print circulation will allow actors to recreate “the manner of performance” and thereby ensure the “amusement and satisfaction of the spirit (*Gemüt*).”¹⁹ In other words, the collection—which consists of translations of English plays, a few original German compositions, and a stockpile of interludes—was intended to equip acting troupes with the material required to continue functioning as a performance outfit and to spur on the popularity of acting and theatergoing.

Within this realm of informal circulation and unconstrained adaptation, the fool inhabited a particularly open-ended role. Although Phantasma’s commentaries and interjections may appear in the printed edition as fully articulated utterances, they are in fact markers of a more freely manipulable discourse. The most instructive trace of the liberty afforded the fool is the presence in many surviving acting scripts of stage directions indicating that he should continue on extemporaneously. These could be as simple as “action here,”²⁰ “jumps around and is funny,”²¹ or “strange antics.”²² Other plays left entire scenes for improvised song or dance to be filled out according to the prerogative of the actor.²³ One adaptation of the English play *Old Fortunatus*, originally written by Thomas Dekker (ca. 1572–1632), includes five moments in the play when the text simply says, “Now Pickelhering plays,” indicating the insertion of a fully improvised song and dance.²⁴ Another stage direction

19. Manfred Brauneck and Alfred Noe, *Spieltexte der Wanderbühne* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1970), vol. 1, unnumbered cover page.

20. Johann Georg Schoch, *Joh. G. Schochs Comoedia Vom Studenten-Leben* (Leipzig: Johann Wittigauen, 1658), 42.

21. *Ibid.*, 67.

22. Brauneck and Noe, *Spieltexte der Wanderbühne*, 1:544.

23. Reinhart Meyer, “Hanswurst und Harlekin, oder: Der Narr als Gattungsschöpfer: Versuch einer Analyse des komischen Spiels in den Staatsaktionen des Musik- und Sprechtheaters im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,” in *Schriften zur Theater- und Kulturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna: Hollitzer, 2012), 295.

24. For the German adaptation, see Brauneck and Noe, *Spieltexte der Wanderbühne*, 1:128–209.

instructs the fool to perform “fantastic antics” with props like a dagger, perhaps indicating the insertion of a brief juggling show.²⁵ Yet another has him do something very similar with a glass that eventually falls and shatters.²⁶ In all of these instances, it seems to have been the actor’s prerogative to contract or expand such bouts of comic play to fit the circumstances of a given venue or event. One can, perhaps should, imagine that each of the scenes with Phantasma was accompanied by a dashing gambol or an unexpected verbal jest.

Phatic Structure of Play The word *play* describes precisely what the fool does. *Play* points to a quality of the fool’s conduct, of how he interacts on the stage.²⁷ The fool’s verbal and gestic interventions are exceptional moments in the rhythm of a performance, defined by the very absence of plot-driving information. The activity of the fool on the stage is play in the sense that it offers a hiatus, a circumscribed break, from the main action. The place of the fool within the performances of itinerant troupes is much like the place of play in ordinary life: it is an ulterior activity, taking place beside and along with ordinary life.²⁸ As play, the fool’s remarks are not superfluous or meaningless; his words and deeds are invested with their own expressive potential and significance. The fool’s play is something that “interpolates itself as a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there.”²⁹ His antics have no need for the participation of other dramatis personae; they subsist on their own, often adding nothing informative and instead just seeking to gratify the audience. Because of this self-enclosed status, the fool’s interventions can be as audacious as a lampoon of the main action or as whimsical as a surge of leaping and spinning.

25. Brauneck and Noe, *Spieltexte der Wanderbühne*, 2:509.

26. *Ibid.*, 2:180.

27. My thoughts and terminology here are deeply indebted to the pioneering study of Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949).

28. For insightful remarks on this structure, see Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), esp. 43.

29. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

Such mirthful capsules of dialogue also remind the audience that the show is a show and just pretend.³⁰ For this reason, the fool operates as a champion of *the* play—that is, of the fictional simulation contained in time and space. In this broader sense, too, the fool functions as an exponent of the play as “a temporary activity satisfying in itself and ending there.”³¹ The fool can ostentatiously direct attention to the fictive character of the play without undermining its ability to captivate audiences. However strange it may initially seem, the fool’s exposure of the play as a play is a strategy of heightening the experience of illusion. It is a technique of phatic communication, of ensuring the sustained attentive contact between audience and theatrical fiction.³² As an example of such phatic immediacy, consider Phantasmio’s remark that the events involving Hamlet and Ophelia are so ridiculous that he himself might abandon the court. Of course, he does no such thing, and the audience’s anticipation grows only more intense.

The structure of play associated with the fool ensured his abiding success. In every instance, he was a figure of transgressive masculinity who afforded spectators the pleasure of hearing about themes barred from ordinary discourse. That is, the fool’s distinctive form of play provided a moment when social values held in high esteem could be openly mocked simply for the enjoyment of throwing treasured forms of significance, even if only momentarily, into the wind.³³ The pleasure associated with the fool was that

30. See Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 8. For this reason Roger Caillois, in the above-mentioned study, treats the fictional status of games as the sixth and final of the essential qualities of play.

31. As above, Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9.

32. For this terminology, see Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study in the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, ed. Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1945), 296–336.

33. It is reasonable to speculate that there is something idic about the fool’s playful transgression of behavioral norms. In many instances, he does profess an infantile indulgence in instinctual pleasures and libidinal release. I have ultimately avoided the Freudian vocabulary for fear that it would provide an overly rigid framework for understanding the interplay of institutional, media-historical, and discursive forces that altered the fool’s role, especially over the course of the

of momentary abandon, often through vulgar speech and gesture. The privilege of such transgression was afforded only to the fool, with his exaggerated caricature of male desire. As a consequence, we can say that the sequestering of the meanings conveyed in his interventions provided the precondition for their presence. The fool negates the meanings conveyed by other figures in the play from within an insular sphere, and such separation licenses the audience's enjoyment of what would otherwise be illicit.³⁴

To understand how the fool goes about this, it is important to avoid ranking his role, or even the plays in which he participated, as either trivial or profound, as high or low. At issue is not whether the *Hamlet* adaptation possesses the linguistic beauty and nuanced construction of the original Shakespeare play. After all, this was a theatrical environment that was unbothered by, perhaps even unacquainted with, the desire to make great art. From the arrival of English players around 1600, it took over a hundred years for reform-minded poets and scholars to make the fool into the centerpiece of a discussion concerning the superior potential of a more sophisticated theater. But before we investigate the complexities of these later developments, including the pivotal role the fool played in them, we have to comprehend the conditions under which he first flourished.

eighteenth century. The idic thesis was famously advanced in Sigmund Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905).

34. In thinking through the relationship between the fool's insularity and the overarching semantic structure of plays, I have found Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht's reformulation of the concept of carnival highly instructive. See Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, "Literarische Gegenwelten, Karnevalskultur und die Epochenschwelle vom Spätmittelalter zur Renaissance," in *Literatur in der Gesellschaft des Spätmittelalters* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 1980), 95–144.