

STROLLING PLAYERS AND THE ADVENT OF THE FOOL

The years around 1600 mark a watershed moment in the history of German theater. Importantly, though, the process that established the fool in the German-speaking lands was not an articulated project with proponents and detractors; nothing about it was planned or inevitable. It was an unforeseeable explosion of enthusiasm, followed by an equally improbable run of success. When in the 1590s a small ragged band of English actors made its way across the Channel, through the Low Countries, and into the western part of what is now Germany, they could very well have come and gone without leaving a lasting footprint. Instead, they precipitated a major shift in the conventions of theatrical performance. The coming century was witness to the abiding presence of professional troupes passing under the name *Engelländische Komödianten*, which led to the establishment of theatrical conventions that remained vital long after the earliest traces of this history—especially the use of the English tongue—had passed

into oblivion. Given that no one orchestrated, planned, or even served as theoretical advocate for the fool's rise to popularity, his beginnings possess a haphazard quality; indeed they were not just contingent, but also recognizable as such only after the fact. One consequence of the fool's unplanned rise to popularity is that it traced a path through historical epochs that the dominant narratives of history treat as fundamentally separate. Equally importantly, the process of transfer that breathed life into the stage fool does not fit neatly within the divisions among modern nation-states and their putatively unique cultures. The history of the stage fool is, rather, a history of interference across temporal as well as linguistic-cultural boundaries.

It bears mentioning at the outset that the decision to begin this story of the German stage fool with the English troupes dislodges a story of origin that has long seemed unassailable. This account, that is, does not begin with the form of improvisatory, comic theater known as *commedia dell'arte*, which spread beyond the Italian border over the latter half of the sixteenth century and, among other places, into the German-speaking territories. The Italian term originally meant roughly "professional acting show," but came to refer to a cohort of regionally specific theatrical personalities, with distinct costumes and character traits. Over the course of time, manuals codified scenarios that could be played out in varying ways and inventoried types of improvisatory sequences that could be added on. Quite early in their career, in 1568, such *commedia dell'arte* troupes made their way into the German-speaking lands and, indeed, drummed up interest in some social circles.¹ In particular, Italian acting made its impact in princely courts that hosted the players and among the social elite as they made their educational peregrinations across Europe.

Although scholars of German literature have often lent *commedia dell'arte* pride of place in the historiography of German comic theater, there are compelling considerations that speak against such an approach. For one, Italian troupes relied heavily on gesture and

1. See Ralf Böckmann, *Die Commedia dell'arte und das deutsche Drama des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Baut, 2010), 46ff.

mimicry that was immediately intelligible (and humorous) to spectators in the German-speaking lands, but never put down linguistic or geographic roots there. What is more, their performances took place in the rarified environment of the court, and, at least in the seventeenth century, textual traces of their mode of performance are surprisingly rare. Despite the early arrival of Italian *commedia dell'arte* troupes, in fact, it took another one hundred years before the comic servant figure with the sobriquet Harlequin made regular appearances in German-language plays—and, even then, via the French *comédie-italienne*, and not via Italian channels of transmission. Although eighteenth-century writers sometimes conflated and sometimes held apart the English fool and the French-Italian Harlequin, the crucial transformations that took place in the early decades of the seventeenth century pertained exclusively to the former.

Although part 1 of this study focuses primarily on the tradition of the Engelländische Komödianten, with comparatively little attention spent on the French-Italian lineage, it does not thereby engage in the search for a point of absolute beginning along a timeline or reconstruct theatrical event after event.² The attempt to trace out the movements of individual troupes across the German countryside can too easily lose itself in a microhistory that fails to illuminate the larger-scale

2. The task of tracking single troupes, writing history of the theater in a single town, and drawing out of lines of influence has been nobly undertaken a number of times over the last century, often in fastidious detail. In addition to the large corpus of literature on the topic from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, impressive microhistorical reconstructions of the itineraries of individual troupes have been undertaken over the last four decades by Bärbel Rudin. I have made reference to many of her essays, where relevant, below, but recommend them generally to the reader interested in a more granulated picture of individual troupes. The recently revised and published study by Peter Brand is, to be sure, the most exhaustive discussion of the very earliest stage of this history. See Peter Brand and Bärbel Rudin, "Der englische Komödiant Robert Browne," *Daphnis* 39 (2010): 1–134. A comprehensive account of the English troupes and their aftermath can be found in Ralf Haekel, *Die englischen Komödianten in Deutschland: Eine Einführung in die Ursprünge des deutschen Berufsschauspiels* (Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 2004). For the discussion of a single town, see Markus Paul, *Reichsstadt und Schauspiel: Theatrale Kunst in Nürnberg des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2002).

historical processes that are ultimately of interest here. The following pages work toward resolving a basic question: How did context shape the emergence of and abiding popularity of the fool? How did the life of traveling theatrical troupes in the seventeenth century give rise to a comic force that deserves reference in the singular, that is, as *the* fool? Which circumstances assisted in the consolidation into a unique theatrical form? Since a decisive goal of part 1 is to understand what allowed the fool to appear in a multitude of stage events, repeating the same sorts of words and engaging in the same sorts of actions, our analysis must look beyond a one-by-one recounting of those very same events. It must look for commonalities in the composition of theatrical troupes, their repertoires and lifestyles, and the relationship they entertained with audiences. These are the contextual factors that contributed to the genesis of the practice of stage interaction that will come into focus in chapter 3.

Gaining a clear-eyed perspective on German-speaking theater throughout the seventeenth century, but especially at its start, demands that we strip away the familiar trappings of modern theater: buildings, regularly scheduled performances, publicity outlets, authors, and regular theatergoers. Indeed, to speak of the theater in the singular projects a consolidation that emerged only more than a century later. When the first acting troupes arrived around 1600, theater took place irregularly and in disconnected institutional settings, in the absence of any professional training or the potential for a career as a paid actor. Its three main venues were communal fairs, royal courts, and schools. None of these bore a strong resemblance to the playhouses that would gain a foothold in urban centers during the closing decades of the eighteenth century and become increasingly dominant in the course of the nineteenth century. Two of these three institutions provided the fertile ground for the growth of a novel and, as it turned out, enduringly popular mode of theatrical presentation.

The inclusive town fairs and the exclusive princely courts, in particular, became the institutional platforms upon which the fool first captivated audiences with his intoxicating verve and impishness. Despite the dissimilar social-economic composition of these two settings, both responded with enthusiasm to the first

forays of English actors in the German-speaking territories. The mere fact that both of these environments proved hospitable to the fool thwarts the temptation to apply the grab-bag term that has enjoyed currency in academic discourse over recent decades for such phenomena, namely, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque.³ For Bakhtin, the fool amounts to a fundamentally transgressive or emancipatory force, opposed to the quotidian life of social hierarchy and inhibition. But it would be a mistake to begin with a celebratory image of the fool and his role, one that attributes to him both an overarching purpose and a predetermined set of semantic possibilities. While the fool often antagonized the values propounded by other members of the fictional world represented on the stage, his stage activity is not worthy of unqualified glorification. What is more, the different phases of the fool's long history—from widespread success in the seventeenth century to vituperative attacks and then enthusiastic revival in the eighteenth century—each embedded the fool within a different conception of the internal coherence demanded of a play as well as the purpose the theater, taken as a whole, should serve. Working too closely with the concept of the carnivalesque risks obscuring the fine-grained differences in the composition and function of comic theater between the first arrival of the fool around 1600 and the explosion of literary interest over two hundred years later.

Playmaking was a central part of German carnival. The calendrical cycle of Christian holidays, especially Shrovetide, gave rise to a rich heritage of theatrical performance, particularly during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁴ Its single exponent still widely recognized today—in no small part due to Richard Wagner's mid-

3. This line of thought is ubiquitous in the scholarship, largely because of the immense influence of Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Rabelais and the medieval carnival. However appealing it may seem to understand the tradition of the stage fool as evidence of a subversive force against "official" culture, the evidence speaks against such a monolithic approach. For the pioneering study, which has produced an abundance of epigonal discourse, see M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

4. A succinct presentation of the carnival environment in Nuremberg is provided in Samuel Kinser, "Presentation and Representation: Carnival at Nuremberg, 1450–1550," *Representations* 13 (1986): 1–41. See also the very useful typology of different carnival plays in Anette Köhler, "Das neuzeitliche Fastnachtspiel

nineteenth-century opera—the Meistersinger and cobbler named Hans Sachs (1494–1576), lived at the tail end of this line. Even though the guild of performers known as the Meistersinger lived on into the seventeenth century, their popularity steadily diminished beginning with the arrival of traveling English players in the 1590s.⁵ The sort of plays Sachs and his colleagues put on generally consisted of a small handful of roles distinguished by social position or profession (doctor, servant, farmer, etc.). The plays were performed impromptu by amateur actors in public houses without a stage. Among the many reasons that Hans Sachs (unlike many of his predecessors and successors) secured a place in literary history, two in particular stand out. First, he did not exploit themes related to the confessional battles that wrought havoc on the German territories during the sixteenth century. The second reason is a consequence of the first: his brief sketches of cuckolds, rubes, and foolhardy masters, in the end, resonated well with the comic imagination of later generations. Evidence of this is the fact that when the aspiration to write histories of German drama gained traction around 1800, Hans Sachs earned a place as revered forefather. Over the same years, a massive corpus of playwrights who focused on biblical narratives, colored by interconfessional strife, fell essentially into oblivion.⁶

Even though Shrovetide and carnival plays have found a prominent place in the broader literary-historical consciousness, they were by no means the most influential public festivals for the history of German theater. By the end of the sixteenth century, Shrovetide playmaking forfeited pride of place to biannual commercial fairs

(1600–1800),” in *Fastnachtspiel—Commedia dell’arte: Gemeinsamkeiten—Gegensätze* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1992), 103–117.

5. Paul, *Reichsstadt und Schauspiel*, 30–36.

6. An example of this historiographical shift is the relatively minor role Sachs plays in Carl Friedrich Flögel’s *Geschichte der komischen Litteratur*, which appeared in four volumes between 1784 and 1787. See the remarks in Carl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte der komischen Litteratur* (Liegnitz/Leipzig: David Stegert, 1787), 4:291–294. By contrast, August Wilhelm Schlegel—following a number of his contemporaries from Goethe to Tieck—isolates only Sachs for detailed attention while ignoring nearly all the other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century playwrights. August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846), 2:401–403.

around such holidays as Easter, Michaelmas Day, and Pentecost. Towns from Leipzig to Frankfurt, from Basel to Graz, hosted fairs that became as much platforms for economic activity as magnets for traveling performers, confidence men, and quacks. Since the Middle Ages, groups of minstrels and mountebanks had been known under the rubric *Farhendes Volk*, the traveling or itinerant people. Whereas this group suffered stigmatization, essentially regarded as swindling vagabonds, the English theatrical players that arrived in the decades around 1600 were accorded a more privileged status.⁷ Upon their arrival, towns consistently granted the English comedians the license required to set up their boards and sell their wares, which included as much music and dance as play-making. The home of the acting troupes became the town square, especially in the bustling weeks when the major towns hosted their fairs. For the duration of the seventeenth century, acting troupes did well at securing the necessary municipal permissions, even though their itinerant lifestyle and impecunious existence meant that they were lastingly associated with unseemly social groups.

Just as the diversity of town fairs offered ample opportunity to supply a paying audience with a novel performance, the sheer quantity of German-speaking principalities meant that courtly entertainments were also in high demand. Although the houses of German-speaking princes never reached anything near the level of opulence and profligacy that, for instance, seventeenth-century French royalty could espouse, theatrical performances were regular installments in dozens of German-speaking courts, including Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel and Wolgast, Dresden and Heidelberg, Munich and Vienna, just to name a few. Although courts maintained a strong preference for French drama and Italian opera, traveling theatrical troupes with translations of English plays and original German compositions also made inroads into the courtly milieu.⁸

7. See Ernst Schubert, *Arme Leute, Bettler und Gauner im Franken des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Neustadt an der Aisch: Gegner & Co., 1983); Schubert, *Fahrendes Volk im Mittelalter* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 1995).

8. The presence of traveling players in courtly contexts has been discussed in detail in Harald Zietske, "Die deutschen Höfe und das Wandertruppenwesen im 17. und frühen 18. Jahrhundert—Fragen ihres Verhältnisses," in *Europäische*

There can be little doubt that the English traveling acting troupes that first visited the fairs and courts around 1600 encountered (and quickly electrified) an otherwise lackluster theatrical landscape. But how are we to think of the existence of these small bands?

The English players made their way to Germany from London, an urban center supporting multiple stages and acting companies, during periods when the theater was closed because of contagion or political mandate.⁹ In general, English companies spent some time in the provinces, in rare instances venturing onto the Continent, but London was undeniably the epicenter of their activity.¹⁰ It is crucial to emphasize that the English players arrived on the Continent at a moment when clowning had become intensely controversial in England.¹¹ On the one hand, some currents in England opposed roles, as Sir Philip Sidney put it, “with neither decency nor discretion.”¹² It had become current, to quote Hamlet’s famous instructions to his visiting players, that they should “let those that play your clownes speak no more than is set down for them.”¹³ At the same time, complex verbal and gestural clowning remained a fixture at many of the London playhouses. Within the German context, meanwhile, linguistic barriers demanded simplicity, gave free rein to improvisation, and amplified the musical and gestural dimensions of theatrical expression. The characteristics of play and wit, which were most strongly associated with the English clown, were reinvented in the German context as an exceedingly coarse brand of extemporized humor.

Hofkultur im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert: Vorträge und Referate, ed. August Buck (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1981), 521–541.

9. Among studies of traveling English acting troupes and the London scene, I have found Andrew Gurr’s work particularly informative. Andrew Gurr, *Playing in Shakespeare’s London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

10. Alan Somerset, “‘How Chances It They Travel?’ Provincial Touring, Playing Places, and the King’s Men,” *Shakespeare Survey* 47 (1994): 45–60.

11. Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

12. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Prose Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 3:39.

13. *Hamlet* 3.2.40–47.

Even before the ravaging of the Thirty Years' War began, the German territories found themselves in a fragmented political order and without a central metropolis that might serve as a hub of cultural activity. Visiting acting troupes were hence relegated to a punishing regiment of travel across astonishingly vast stretches of land, from Berlin to Basel and Strasburg to Prague. In small caravans of horse-drawn carriages, which were as much a means of locomotion as makeshift abodes, the actors spent time in all corners of the German-speaking world. Although they often performed in municipal buildings, they also often brought along primitive wooden stages to set up in the town square or wherever else the local municipal authorities would allow them. Although they were at first dominated by only male actors, we know that, by the second half of the seventeenth century, troupes in the German-speaking lands included both sexes. As one might expect from their itinerant lifestyles, husband-and-wife couples became regular installments. To give the two most famous examples, Catharina Elisabeth Velten (1646–1712) and Johannes Velten (1640–1693) were preeminent on the theatrical scene during the closing decades of the seventeenth century, while Friedericke Carolina Neuber (1697–1760) and Johann Neuber (1697–1759) became key players in the early decades of the eighteenth. Both instances were also second-generation acting families. Professional acting was, in short, a family affair.

The influx of Englishmen was strongest in the decades around 1600, but their influence—both in terms of personnel and repertoire—would have remained nonexistent if some among them had not quickly mastered the local language and begun to adapt their plays to make them appeal to audiences. A few Englishmen seem to have had a particular knack for the entrepreneurial and managerial role. For instance, from 1608 on, John Green led a troupe, which was taken over in 1628 by a longtime member, Robert Reynolds.¹⁴ Another major English manager was George Jolly (fl. 1640–1673), who led a troupe of German actors for over a

14. For the generational connections among these actors, see Brand and Rudin, "Der englische Komödiant Robert Browne," 92 and 97–98.

decade around midcentury.¹⁵ All of these men led troupes of German-speaking and almost exclusively German-born actors; their own heritage and role in charge, however, meant that English plays secured a place at the center of repertoires.

The impact of English actors was sudden and profound as they crisscrossed the German-speaking territories with a repertoire of enough plays to remain in a single place for at least one to two weeks and, in some rare occasions, even longer.¹⁶ One can expect that they had about two dozen plays in their repertoire, about as many as any English acting company of the same period.¹⁷ At first, acting scripts consisted entirely of materials freely adapted from plays that had already proved themselves on the English stage. Almost immediately, new German compositions and adaptations joined in the fray.

The earliest extant play list, submitted in 1604 to the town council of Nördlingen as part of the troupe's request for permission to perform, indicates how quickly the actors adapted to their new environment.¹⁸ Although modern historians first took notice of the list because it attests to the first staging of *Romeo and Juliet* on the Continent, the name Shakespeare, importantly, appears nowhere on it. The tragedy of ill-fated lovers appears rather inconspicuously as the seventh in a list of ten plays distinguished only by title. By contrast, the most extensive surviving early play list is an inventory of

15. Robert J. Alexander, "George Jolly [Joris Joliphus], Der wandernde Player und Manager," *Kleine Schriften der Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte* 29/30 (1978): 31–48.

16. The permissions have been particularly well documented for the early decades of the seventeenth century, in no small part due to the interest in the activities of English players on the Continent. The most impressive case study of a single troupe, with rich documentary evidence, is Brand and Rudin, "Der englische Komödiant Robert Browne." A diverse array of further municipal permissions has been discussed in Bärbel Rudin, "Pickelhering, rechte Frauenzimmer, berühmte Autoren: Zur Ankündigungspraxis der Wanderbühne im 17. Jahrhundert," *Kleine Schriften der Gesellschaft für Theatergeschichte* 34/35 (1988): 29–60.

17. Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre*, 18.

18. Haekel, *Die englischen Komödianten in Deutschland*, 105. Haekel also provides a number of other early lists, all of which attest to the same shift in the early 1600s to the German language.

forty-two performances by John Green's troupe at the Dresden court in June 1626; plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Kyd are listed anonymously together with many others.¹⁹ Green was traveling with a repertoire large enough that a different play could be performed each night for more than one month—much longer than a typical sojourn—and the play list tells us that spectacular titles and tantalizing plot synopses were his pivotal advertising devices. Using acting scripts as loose templates for their performances, troupes like Green's showed no interest in authorial attribution, and audiences seem to have been equally uncurious.²⁰

Although diversity of repertoire allowed for longevity and flexibility, an additional factor proved important to success. Take the example of Carl Andreas Paulsen (1620–1679), who led his troupe around the German-speaking world beginning in the 1650s. During a particularly long residence in Nuremberg in the summer of 1667, Paulsen and his group received permission to perform as “English Comedians,” a term that was used in the seventeenth century more as a strategy to attract audiences than as a statement of national provenance.²¹ In the course of at least thirty performances, Paulsen's group put on plays ranging from a derivative of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* to an adaptation of Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's *Ibrahim Bassa*, in addition to a smattering of other German, French, and Italian pieces. In the following year, however, municipal authorities rejected Paulsen's application with the statement that the stagings tended to “mix in irritating things and farce” (*ärgerliche sachen und possenspiel miteinzumischen*).²²

19. For the complete list, see Haekel, *Die englischen Komödianten in Deutschland*, 111–114.

20. We might understand the German disregard for authorship as a more radical version of the contemporary English situation. By and large, authorship was of dwindling importance in the London theater industry. However, names like Shakespeare were becoming increasingly known, and print editions of plays did become available in select instances, even though the circulation remained rather small. For a critical discussion of this issue, with a focus on Shakespeare and references to the vast body of literature, see Douglas A. Brooks, *From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14–64.

21. Paul, *Reichsstadt und Schauspiel*, 173.

22. *Ibid.*, 174.

The condemnation of disjointed plays interspersed with comic, and evidently galling, skits alludes to a problem of theatrical form. A loose conception of internal continuity and the amplification of comic effects were the bedrock of the fool's success.

With a full repertoire and a vigorous travel schedule, the actors took part in a motley spectacle that looked quite different from modern plot-driven theater. Among the contextual factors that helped shape the fool's unique practice of producing comic effects, one deserving of attention is the competition for attention within the broader spectacle. A play in the town square was not a stand-alone entertainment to which audiences devoted exclusive attention for the duration of a narrative. Plays were, instead, intermingled with a heterogeneous array of routines of song, dance, and acrobatics. The greatest German picaresque novel, Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1668–1669), includes an informative description of the place of the fool at the town fairs. The novel's concluding section begins with a comparison between the eponymous protagonist and the sort of farceurs and funnymen that had populated the town square:

Carnival-barkers and quacksalvers . . . enter the open marketplace with their Hans Wurst or Hans Supp. With the first cry and fantastical crooked leaps of the fool they attract a greater throng and more listeners than the most zealous pastor.

Marckscheyer oder Quacksalber . . . wann er am offnen Marckt mit seinem Hanß Wurst oder Hanß Supp auftritt/ und auf den ersten Schray und phantastischen krummen Sprung seines Narren mehr Zulauffs und Anhörer bekombt/ als der eyfrigste Seelen-Hirt.²³

This passage provides a good sense of the general atmosphere where the fool had his home. For one, it testifies to the enthusiasm

23. Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, *Continuatio des Abentheuerlichen Simplicissimi oder der Schluß Desselben* (Mompelgart: Johann Fillion, 1669), n.p. For the modern reprinting, see *Hans Jacob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen, Simplicissimus Teutsch* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2005), 564.

of audiences for the fool, here under the interchangeable monikers Hans Wurst and Hans Supp. But it also gives an impression of acoustic and visual pageantry that accompanied the traveling players. Plays earned a place in a hodgepodge of attractions that, as Grimmelshausen notes, offered a profane diversion of greater fascination than a pastor's promise of spiritual redemption. At the annual fair and in the town square, all sorts of entertainers were ruthlessly competing for attention and money.

We find the very same sort of insistence on the sensational at the first stationary playhouse in Germany, Nuremberg's Fenchthaus or Fencing House, built in 1627–1628. The roofless square building, with three floors of galleries, hosted circus entertainments like tight-rope walking, choreographed bear and ox hunts, and acrobatics in addition to playmaking.²⁴ Performances took place during daylight hours on a wooden stage that could be assembled and disassembled as needed. Although the excitement surrounding the English actors undoubtedly contributed to the municipality's decision to build the Fencing House, playmaking alone was not enough to keep the doors open—especially as the financial impact of the Thirty Years' War made itself felt. The copperplate engraving (fig. 1) of the Fencing House from around 1720 gives us some idea of the scripted hunts. Within the broader German-speaking context, Nuremberg actually appears quite exceptional; other towns made due with makeshift setups, often in public spaces, well into the latter half of the eighteenth century.

But how did traveling troupes first establish themselves and achieve enough popularity that, within a few decades, the first experiments in public playhouses, like the one at Nuremberg, made even remote economic sense? Let us return to the years around 1600. The unwitting pioneer of these developments was an actor named Robert Browne (1563–ca. 1621), who had spent decades in English companies in and outside of London. With a group of about ten players, many of whom had been associated with an English company called the Admiral's Men, Browne headed out in

24. See Paul, *Reichsstadt und Schauspiel*, 40–55.

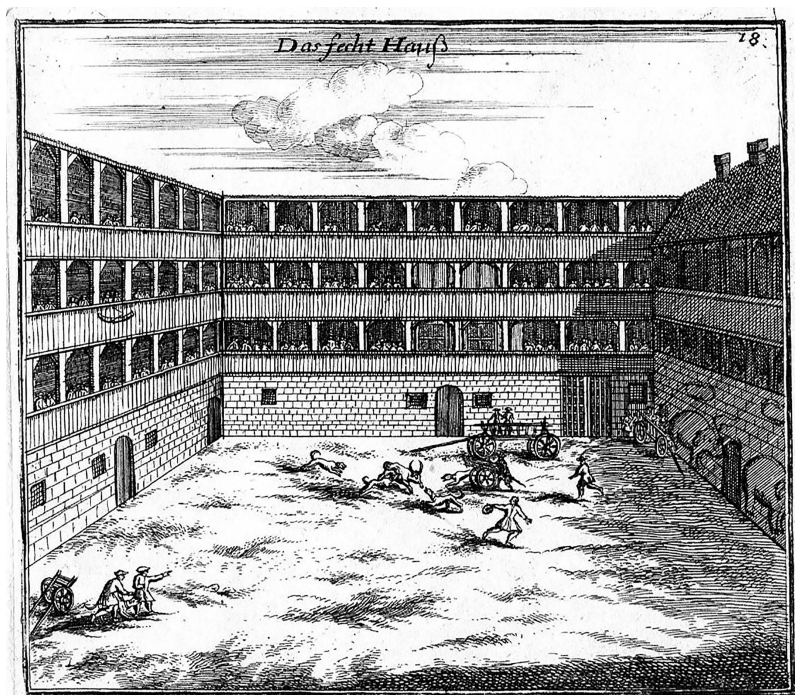


Figure 1. Das Fecht Haus in Nuremberg. Copperplate by Samuel Mikoviny from *Nurembergische Prospekte* ca. 1720.

search of employment around 1590, a time when the plague was ravaging the city and the London theaters were closed.²⁵ While a lack of steady income and an impoverished lifestyle were hallmarks of an actor's day-to-day life in England, the troupe enjoyed unexpected economic success on the Continent. So even though the itinerary of relentless travel just barely elevated members of the troupe above the level of subsistence, this was a marked improvement over

25. The convincing evidence in favor of this reading was first outlined by Brand. To be brief, the passport the men carried, written by the benefactor of the Admiral's Men and Charles Howard (1536–1624), refers to the troupe as *mes joueurs et serviteurs*. The letter is reprinted in full in Brand and Rudin, "Der englische Komödiant Robert Browne," 120–121.

sure poverty and possible death from the London plague. Despite significant obstacles to success, including language itself, the English players secured enough pay to warrant multiple visits over the coming years and even to spawn offspring troupes.

The conditions under which Browne's troupe first performed shaped the strategies they used to flourish. Indeed, their lasting resonance can be attributed to two instances of resourceful stagecraft. The very linguistic barrier that made a warm welcome so unlikely also propelled gestural effects, song, and dance to the forefront of the stage.²⁶ In addition, although the English troupes, unlike Italian ones, quickly showed a willingness to learn German and to adapt their plays to local preferences, firsthand accounts of spectators give the impression that when it seemed impossible to capture the audience's attention with dialogue, the comic register, and especially nonlinguistic elements, became the primary means of theatrical address. A 1597 poem about the Frankfurt fair, for instance, identifies as the English troupe's key attributes "bawdy jest and comic strokes . . . antics and salacious jokes."²⁷ An English traveler from the same period, Fynes Moryson (1566–1630), was baffled by the popularity of "stragling broken Companyes."²⁸ The "wandring Comedyans," he observed "hauing nether a Complete

26. In addition to Brand's exhaustive study, I have also found helpful the concise discussion in Willem Schrickx, "English Actors at the Courts of Wolfenbüttel, Brussels, and Graz during the Lifetime of Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Survey* 33 (2007): 153–168. There is a vast body of older research dating back to the nineteenth century, much of which is gathered and reviewed in J. G. Riewald, "The English Actors in the Low Countries, 1585–c. 1650: An Annotated Bibliography," in *Studies in Seventeenth-Century English Literature, History, and Bibliography*, ed. G. A. M. Janssens and G. A. M. Aarts (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984), 157–178. On the broader European context, I recommend in particular Jerzy Limon, *Gentlemen of a Company: English Players in Central and Eastern Europe, 1590–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

27. This translation is from Ernest Brennecke, *Shakespeare in Germany, 1590–1700, with Translations of Five Early Plays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 8.

28. Fynes Moryson and Charles Hughes, *Shakespeare's Europe; Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary, Being a Survey of the Condition of Europe at the End of the 16th Century* (London: Sherratt & Hughes, 1903), 476.

number of Actours, nor any good Apparell, nor any ornament of the Stage” are “more descruing pittie then prayse, for the serious parts are dully penned, and worse acted, and the mirth they make is ridiculous, and nothing less then witty.”²⁹ Having thoroughly denounced the quality of the acting by the traveling players, Moryson goes on to paint a picture that reveals quite a bit about the form of their performances:

The Germans, not vnderstanding a worde they sayde, both men and wemen, flocked wonderfully to see theire gesture and Action, rather than heare them, speaking English which they vnderstood not, and pronowncing peeeces and Patches of English playes, which my selfe and some English men there present could not heare without great wearysomeness.³⁰

This passage speaks to the rapport between stage and audience. Moryson recognizes that the very strategies that made the actors successful with German audiences also made them appear vapid to an English spectator. In particular, the focus on corporeal devices, even in the absence of linguistic intelligibility, ensured the rapt attention of men and women who did not understand English. As a consequence, the actors felt little need to sustain a continuous plot, instead using abbreviated slices of plays to keep audiences fully engaged. As Moryson’s remarks make clear, the transfer to a new context compelled the small bands of English actors to change their strategies for soliciting and sustaining the audience’s attention. Even if the English theater of the late sixteenth century did not possess the strict standards of compositional unity that one finds in, say, French classicism, it seems that the relocation to the German territories shifted the accent even further in the direction of an internally heterogeneous and discontinuous construction—a *pieces-and-patches construction*.

The derisive observations of the English traveler Moryson hint at, but do not yet make explicit, the ludic presence that achieved fame over the seventeenth century. Meanwhile, a 1601 chronicle of the town Münster attests that the performances by visiting English

29. Ibid., 304.

30. Ibid.

troupes were largely unintelligible but for “plenty of tricks and gags” interspersed by the fool.³¹ A poem about the Frankfurt fair from a few years earlier similarly locates comic gesture at the center of its remarks. It paints a picture of a highly informal environment in which the players on the stage do “such crooked things / that they often must laugh themselves.” If their motivation is “taking money from the people,” the poem tells us, the means by which they do it is fairly straightforward: “The fool causes the laughter.”³²

There is good reason to believe that a single member of Robert Browne’s group played an exceptional role in sparking the love affair with the fool. At the turn of the seventeenth century, a socially diverse array of German-speaking audiences at both public fairs and royal courts fell under the spell of an actor named Thomas Sackville (d. 1628). He seems to have possessed superlative gifts as a dancer, musician, and improvisator. Even though it is quite clear that Sackville, in particular, pioneered the new role of the fool—in no small part to circumnavigate the linguistic barrier that initially separated him from the audience—the sobriquet he used, Jan Bouschet, was never substantively attached to a single actor. Instead, the role was immediately recognized as an iterable form, a way of acting and interacting that could be reproduced. While Sackville achieved a good deal of notoriety, it was not he, but his role, that made a lasting impact. Both on the stage and in writing, the role of the fool, under a single and soon familiar sobriquet, quickly entered into wider circulation. Consider the following two textual examples, one related to the court context, and the other to the fair. These examples lend support to a perhaps initially bewildering claim: what happened with the arrival of Browne’s troupe

31. Helmut G. Asper, *Hanswurst: Studien zum Lustigmacher auf der Berufsschauspielerbühne in Deutschland im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1980), 26.

32. The original lines from which I have quoted are the following: “Vnd Agieren doch so schlecht sachen / Das sie der poszn oft selbst lachen, / Das siesz Gelt von den Leuten bringen / Zu sich, vor so närrische Dingen, / Der Narr macht lachen, doch ich weht / Da ist keiner so gutt wie Jan begeht.” Ernst Kelchner, “Sechs Gedichte über die Frankfurter Messe,” *Mittheilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Althertumskunde in Frankfurt am Main* 6 (1881): 373.

was not imposition of a set type to which subsequent instantiations of the fool were beholden; it was the emergence of a much more elastic and variable theatrical form.

Perhaps the largest body of plays from around 1600 that feature the fool were written by Jakob Ayrer (1544–1605), who spent the last decade of his life as a civil administrator in Nuremberg. Ayrer probably came into contact with the English strolling players in 1593,³³ and began integrating a figure who, by his own account, “dresses like the English fool,”³⁴ into many of the approximately six dozen plays he wrote in his leisure. In fact, Ayrer’s posthumously published five-volume corpus of plays is replete with instances of the English fool, including multiple roles that are variations on Sackville’s sobriquet, Jan Bouschet. Ayrer composed highly moralizing plays—some closer to the Hans Sachs Shrovetide tradition, some closer to English song-and-dance numbers, some rewritings of episodes from Roman history and the Bible—in which a figure called Jahn (with some variation in spelling) assumed the role of a comic servant, often characterized by idleness and gluttony, and repeatedly suffering the abuse of his superiors. In a good number of instances, Ayrer also has the fool speak an epilogue, ensuring that the play ends with an unequivocal moral message. Even without looking at the individual plays in minute detail, a striking structural feature of Ayrer’s writing immediately sticks out: he composed his plays without any hope that Sackville himself, or for that matter any other English actor, would ever play the role of the fool.

Something very similar can be seen at work in the plays of another author from the early 1690s, Duke Heinrich Julius of Brunswick (1564–1613). As he was a member of the educated elite and the ruler of one of the most important northern German territories, the duke’s plays testify to the power of the fool to electrify people from all socioeconomic groups. In 1693–1694, after he had

33. Brand and Rudin, “Der englische Komödiant Robert Browne,” 33.

34. The relevant stage direction indicates that a figure is meant to enter the stage *kleidet wie der Engellendisch Narr*. Jakob Ayrer and Adelbert von Keller, *Ayrers Dramen* (Stuttgart: Litterarischer verein, 1865), 1:22.

hosted the group of strolling players led by Browne and featuring Sackville, the duke published a collection of plays that testifies to his fascination with the English acting troupe. As a pious Protestant, Duke Heinrich Julius possessed a fondness for biblical themes, and he drew upon his humanistic education in crafting a play after the Roman comedian Plautus.³⁵ But he also installs a fool, whom he identifies sometimes as a *morio*, the Latin equivalent of the German *Narr* and English *fool*. While the duke had been deeply impressed by Sackville, he was also concerned enough about the textual circulation of his plays that he revised and republished them a second time approximately a decade after they first appeared in print and after Sackville himself could no longer have possibly played the role.³⁶

Beyond Ayrrer and Duke Heinrich Julius, there were still more writers who populated their plays with a fool named Johann.³⁷ But none of the other texts or their authors ever achieved much fame. On the contrary, notions of originality, as well as the identification of the play with the voice and experience of a unique individual, had little relevance to the success of the plays featuring the fool. It would be more accurate to say that these writers understood their activity as part of an ongoing chain of production that allowed for the unrestricted appropriation and redeployment of preexisting narratives, with the expectation that their own rewritings would become the subject of further appropriations and redeployments. A similar fluidity underlies the use of the fool in plays by Ayrrer and Duke Heinrich Julius; they treat the fool as a theatrical convention detached from any single actor or script that could be deployed in new plays in accord with a standard purpose.

35. On potential Italian influences on von Braunschweig, see Böckmann, *Die Commedia dell'arte und das deutsche Drama*, 62–68.

36. Helga Meise, “Narrheit in den Dramen Heinrich Julius’ von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel und Lüneberg,” in *Der Narr in der deutschen Literatur im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Jean Schillinger (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 171–180.

37. See, for instance, Johann Neudorf, *Asotvs Das ist COMOEDIA vom verlohrenen Sohn, auß dem 15. Capitel S. Lucae* (1608; Goslar: Geschichts- und Heimatschutzverein Goslar e.V., 1958); Hektor Conradus, *Necrobaptista: Die Historia von Johanne dem Teuffer / Wie er von Herode Gefangen / vnd wie er jm endlich das Heubt abschlagen Lassen* (Uelzen: Michael Kröner, 1600).

Another set of examples, this time with a significantly longer historical trajectory, clusters around the sobriquet Pickelhering.³⁸ It appears to have come into more widespread use during the first two decades of the seventeenth century as the sobriquet for an English actor named George Vincent (d. 1647). A formerly prominent actor from the company Queen Anne's Men, Vincent began touring the Low Countries and German-speaking territories around 1616 with a troupe led by John Green.³⁹ Vincent lived until about 1650, but by that point the name Pickelhering was no longer associated with him alone, having by then become a conventional calque for the fool.⁴⁰ Much like the name Jan Bouschet, the role of Pickelhering quickly became unmoored from a single actor and remained so for almost two centuries. When a massive collection of English plays appeared in print in 1620, the name was well-enough known to be used as an advertisement on the title page.⁴¹ In fact, for the duration of the seventeenth century, the fool possessed such central importance that the name Pickelhering by itself worked as a magnet to attract audiences. The earliest playbills from the 1650s tout the presence of a "very funny Pickelhering,"⁴² or prominently list the name Pickelhering at the very center of a broad swath of plays to be performed. The earliest surviving playbill from a performance of the immensely popular Faust story, from 1688 in Bremen, announces that the play will feature not just "the life and death of the great Arch-Magician D. Johannes Faustus," but also

38. The text name first appears in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, when the allegorical embodiment of gluttony refers to his godfather as Peter Pickelherring. For an attempt to uncover the etymological origin of the sobriquet, see John Alexander, "Will Kemp, Thomas Satchville, and Pickelhering: A Consanguinity and Confluence of Three Early Modern Clown Personas," *Daphnis* 3, no. 4 (2007): 463–486.

39. Willem Schrickx, "'Pickelherring' and English Actors in Germany," *Shakespeare Survey* 36 (1983): 135–147.

40. When the English name Pickelherring became a German calque, its spelling became highly irregular. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to Pickelhering, which seems to me most commonly used.

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

42. Wilhelm Michael Anton Creizenach, *Die Schauspiele der englischen Komödianten* (Berlin/Stuttgart: W. Spemann, 1889), xxv.

“Pickelhäring’s entertainments from beginning to end.”⁴³ Much like the sobriquet Jan Bouschet, Pickelhäring also cut across social and political strata, as his role in a 1686 play performed on the occasion of the meeting in Regensburg of the Imperial Diet of the Holy Roman Empire makes clear.⁴⁴ This remained true at least until 1794, almost 170 years after the stage fool first appeared in the German-speaking world.⁴⁵

Make no mistake, in the early decades of the seventeenth century, Jan Bouschet and Pickelhering were by no means the only sobriquets under which the fool circulated. There were many others either implicitly or explicitly identified as variations on the fool. Some names—like Traraeus, Grobianus, Schrämgen, and Morohn—appear to have been used just once.⁴⁶ Others like Kilian Brustfleck had their heyday, but then died off before long.⁴⁷ Names like Harlequin and Hanswurst, meanwhile, find only sporadic mention in the seventeenth century, before really catching fire in the eighteenth.⁴⁸ The latter two names, in fact, achieved such notoriety that they became synonymous with the role of the fool.

43. Willi Flemming, *Deutsche Literatur: Sammlung literarischer Kunst- und Kulturdenkmäler in Entwicklungsreihen* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1931), 3:203.

44. Anonymous, *Comoedia, Bitittult Der Flüchtige Virenus, Oder Die Getreue Olympia* (Regensburg: Johann Georg Hofmann, 1686).

45. Anonymous, *Pickelhärings Hochzeit Oder Der Lustig-singende Harlequin* (Fröhlichshaussen, 1794). This text provides a particularly apposite example, since it is actually based on a play about the marriage of Harlequin, a popular theme in the latter half of the eighteenth century, but it uses the name Pickelhäring in the title. The 1794 publication is a reprint of a play that first became available around midcentury.

46. Traraeus appears in *Tragoedia genandt Der Großmüthige Rechts Gelehrte Aemilius Paulus Papinianus* in Flemming, *Deutsche Literatur*, 3:138–201. Grobianus plays the fool in *Tragaedia von Julio und Hyppolita* in Brauneck and Noe, *Spieltexte der Wanderbühne*, 1:427–459. For Schambitasche, see *Comoedia von König Mantalors unrechtmäßessigen Liebe und derselben Straff*, *ibid.*, 2:311–401. And Morohn figures centrally in *Tragi Comedia*, *ibid.*, 2:451–551. This counts, of course, as only a small sampling of the abundant names for the fool.

47. Christian Neuhuber, “Der Vormund des Hanswurst: Der Eggenbergische Hofkomödiant Johann Valentin Petzold und sein Killian Brustfleck,” *Daphnis* 35 (2006): 263–299.

48. See Asper’s monumental study, *Hanswurst*. On the use of Harlequin and Scaramouche, see Walter Hinck, *Das deutsche Lustspiel des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts und die italienische Komödie: Commedia dell’arte und Théâtre italien* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1965).

Part 2 will explore in greater detail the unique trajectory that these two sobriquets traced across the German-speaking world and, in the case of Harlequin, across Europe.

At least as far the theatrical role of the fool in the seventeenth century goes, nothing really hangs on the moniker itself. So much can be gleaned from the career of the most famous German play of all. The 1688 rendering of the Faust story in Bremen featured a fool named Pickelhäring, while one from Frankfurt approximately fifty years later nominates Hans Wurst for the role. Different troupes seem to have preferred one name over the other, and each performance certainly allowed for a good amount of liberty in what was said and done, but underlying the onomastic variations is but one comic form. The formation of a conventionalized fool role was, as one can tell from the Faust comparsion, a way of affording audiences a familiar point of orientation. Plays changed from day to day as troupes passed through town and worked through their repertoire. But audiences always knew the pieces-and-patches construction of plays would provide ample doses of the fool, sometimes between scenes, sometimes within them, and sometimes after the show. In order to see what made the fool's comic practice hang together, across his various instantiations and sobriquets, it is necessary to have a closer look at his integration into the dialogue and scenic action. This is the task to which we now turn.