

SANITATION AND UNITY

The debate over the history of the comedic genre that took place between approximately 1730 and 1750 amounted to more than a protracted deliberation over which of the two Roman comedians was worth imitating. The controversy over the parasite figure was an essential element in the project of constructing a unified comedic genre. Indeed, what may initially appear as an antiquarian quibble was, in truth, a disagreement over the legitimate form of comedy. For instance, when Gottsched dismissed Plautus for his “nasty jokes and base grimaces” while celebrating the portrayal of “character” in Terence, he simultaneously expressed his favor for a particular configuration of events in a play and, by consequence, his preference for a particular articulation of theatrical performance. And Lessing’s approach took the opposite perspective, favoring a type of theater that is more accommodating of the fool. In their attempts to justify their respective positions, these two humanistically educated writers buttressed their assessments with an array

of references—sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit—stretching from Horace and Aulus Gellius to Scaliger and Dacier. But we should not miss the wood for the trees; there is more at stake here than humanistic jousting. These are all authors who would have been bewildered at the use German critics were making of their arguments.

In order to place the generic pedigrees established by Gottsched and Lessing in the appropriate framework, it is important to recognize that these two writers inhabit differing positions within a shared paradigm, which we might call, in terminological shorthand, drama. In assigning drama significant analytic weight, this chapter employs the concept in a thicker sense than is usual. Drama here seeks to capture something more specific than just a single branch in the traditional triad of poetic genres alongside epic and lyric. In the early Enlightenment, drama was more than just a strategy for arranging words, personae, or events; it was, equally, a strategic use of the print medium.¹ Drama, in this instance, marks out a historically specific unity of design and matter, of the configuration of fictional elements within a material format. To be sure, the strategic importance and persuasive power of a textually framed notion of drama proceeded from the controversial status of—indeed, the desire to rein in, either by wholesale elimination or acts of rehabilitation—the paradigmatic figure of improvisation and theatricality, the fool.

By paying close attention to the interlacement of form and matter in drama, it is possible to sharpen the rough-and-ready distinction, familiar from chapter 1, between the mutable acting script and the fixed text. In the early Enlightenment context, two forces shaped the notion of drama: the avowed belief in the power of the textual medium to seize hold of theatrical performance and a novel conception of the internal makeup of comedy.² These two forces

1. For a focused study of the triadic division during the modern period, see Stefan Trappen, *Gattungspoetik: Studien zur Poetik des 16. bis 19. Jahrhunderts und zur Geschichte der triadischen Gattungslehre* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2001).

2. My argument is intended to lend more precise analytic shape to issues first raised in Georg Lukács, “Zur Soziologie des modernen Dramas,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 38 (1914): 303–345 and 662–706. Lukács’s essay

conspired to make the following statement become not just possible, but commonplace:

Whoever wishes to be in charge of the stage must keep a sharp watch that no word is spoken by an actor on the stage that is not contained in a play that has been completely written down and handed in for him to censor.

Wer also immer der Schaubühne vorzustehen haben möchte, muß scharf darauf sehen, daß kein Wort von einem Schauspieler auf der Bühne gesprochen werde, daß nicht in dem vorher gänzlich schriftlich abgefaßten und ihm zur Censur eingereichten Stücke befindlich sey.³

In this passage, the compositional fixity of the playtext assumes a programmatic significance fundamentally different from that found in the theory of poetry up to this point. In the first half of the eighteenth century, drama became a mechanism for rethinking and, moreover, remaking the entire enterprise of theater, from its performance culture to its sense of purpose and the social esteem it enjoyed.

In what follows, I refer to the drama-theater dyad in order to describe the textual medium's assertion of control over the theatrical performance. The imposition of a classical form—the imposition of comedy—can be understood as the attempt to use textual fixity and compositional unity to control the irruptive and interruptive presence of the fool. Comedic drama became, in short, a tool for renovating the prevailing stage culture, including its most popular avatar.

The emphasis on textuality in the early Enlightenment reform project was connected to the social and institutional vantage point of its participants. By the end of the 1720s, when Gottsched first developed an interest in the theater, he was already head of Leipzig's most prominent literary society, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft* (German Society).

also forms the foundation of another study I have found profoundly instructive: Kurt Wölfel, "Moralische Anstalt: Zur Dramaturgie von Gottsched bis Lessing," in *Deutsche Dramentheorien: Beiträge zu einer historischen Poetik des Dramas in Deutschland*, ed. Reinhold Grimm (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum Verlag, 1980), 56–122.

3. Joseph Heinrich Engelschall, "Zufällige Gedanken über die deutsche Schaubühne zu Wien, von einem Verehrer des guten Geschmacks und guter Sitten," in Philipp Hafner, *Burlesken und Prosa*, ed. Johann Sonnleitner (Vienna: Lehner Verlag, 2007), 252–271, here 267

This collective was modeled on the literary societies (*Sprachgesellschaften*) that had, since the early seventeenth century, devoted their energies to the improvement of the German language and vernacular poetry. Sprouting up in university towns across the German-speaking world, the learned societies before Gottsched spent their time delivering scholarly lectures and reciting original poetry, but had not yet shown much interest in commercial theater.⁴ Perhaps more than any other society, the Deutsche Gesellschaft had a passion for texts, particularly ones that fit with its cultural chauvinism. For instance, a huge portion of the funds available to the Deutsche Gesellschaft was spent collecting German vernacular texts of all varieties for its ever-growing library. Already by the early 1720s, the group possessed around a thousand volumes of German vernacular poetry.⁵ While this may initially sound like a small number, especially in comparison to the private scholarly libraries of the time, which sometimes reached 35,000 volumes, such collections tended to consist of Latin, French, and Italian texts.⁶ The Deutsche Gesellschaft, meanwhile, collected German-language texts with an obsessive zeal. The interweaving of cultural-linguistic and national identity is evident in a poem Gottsched wrote in 1722, where he declares his goal to shine on the “German language greater rays of light” and thereby ensure that “the fatherland may rest in golden peace.”⁷

4. Detlef Döring, “Die Anfänge der literatur- und sprachwissenschaftlichen Studien an der Leipziger Universität bis zur Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts,” *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 44 (2012): 103–138, 111.

5. An earlier iteration of the German Society, called the German-Practicing Society (Teutsch-übende Gesellschaft) possessed more than one thousand volumes in 1723, and was steadily adding new ones as they became available. The details of the split between the German Society and the German-Practicing Society have been recounted in Detlef Döring, *Die Geschichte der Deutschen Gesellschaft in Leipzig: Von der Gründung bis in die ersten Jahre des Seniorats Johann Christoph Gottscheds* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2002), 205–227.

6. For a good overview of the library culture at the time, with particular emphasis on the private libraries of scholars, see Paul Raabe, “Gelehrtenbibliotheken im Zeitalter der Aufklärung,” in *Bibliotheken und Aufklärung*, ed. Werner Arnold and Peter Vodosek (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988), 103–122.

7. Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Der deutschen Gesellschaft in Leipzig gesammelte Reden und Gedichte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1732), 2.

For Gottsched and those working in his wake, the improvement of the German language and print culture went hand in hand. We can get an impression of the connection from an encomium he wrote on the fifteenth-century inventor Johannes Gutenberg (1400–1468). Gottsched takes up the theme in 1740, a good decade into his involvement with the overhaul of the theater.⁸ In a speech peppered with erudition and patriotism, Gottsched claims that the fame of Germany in 1740 far exceeds that of any other nation in the history of mankind because of the invention of movable type. The core of Gottsched's argument is that the invention of Gutenberg's press was not simply an advancement in the forward march of knowledge or technology; it effected a tectonic shift in the entire "shape" or "Gestalt" of knowledge.⁹ By "reproducing (*vervielfältiget*) to an astonishing extent" texts that would have otherwise remained rare, Gutenberg's invention increased the sheer number of books available and radically expanded the number of people able to access them.¹⁰ A similar sort of *Gestalt* change was at stake in his own effort to use print dramas as instruments to alter the broader cultural reception of the theater.

The creation of drama consisted of two steps: first, the inscription of a text with edifying content; and, second, the yoking of performance to textual compositions. Taken together, these steps aimed at ensuring that comic theater would no longer address "amusements of the body" but instead gain access to "amusements of the understanding."¹¹ This distinction between pleasure of the mind and of the body comes from a 1690 speech by the theologian

8. Gottsched understands Gutenberg as the inventor of "the art of printing books" or *Buchdruckerkunst*. See Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Gesammlete Reden* (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1749), 125–172.

9. Gottsched, *Gesammlete Reden*, 133.

10. See the animated remarks on the triumph of print in Gottsched, *Gesammlete Reden*, 150.

11. Martin Stern and Thomas Wilhelm, "Samuel Werenfels (1657–1740): Rede von den Schauspielen," *Daphnis* 22 (1993): 73–171, here 131. The denunciation of sensory experience in the Enlightenment reform movement has been the subject of a large body of research. I recommend, in particular, the discussion under the heading of antitheatricity in Christopher J. Wild, *Theater der Keuschheit—Keuschheit des Theaters: Zu einer Geschichte der (Anti-)Theatralität von Gryphius bis Kleist* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Rombach, 2003), esp. 167–262.

Samuel Werenfels (1657–1740). Although little known today, the Latin text of Werenfels's speech was translated into German on two separate occasions as part of the post-1730 theatrical reform movement, finding supportive readers in Gottsched and Lessing.¹² The alignment between Werenfels and the reform movement can be ascribed to his stalwart belief that once the rational faculty took the helm, "the craft of the Pickelhering" would give way to a "school of virtue."¹³ The potential success of the endeavor rested on the assumption that, as the lexicographer Zedler put it, just because "plays should be of use . . . need not diminish amusement, even if this enjoyment is not due to some so-called Harlequin."¹⁴ Figures like Werenfels and Zedler argued that a theater of genuine moral utility depended on the eradication of the purposeless and intrinsically anarchic sensory pleasure provided by the stage fool. Insofar as pleasure counted as one of the—in some instances even the primary—purposes for the existence of drama, it had to issue from the perception of "order and perfection" (*Ordnung und Vollkommenheit*).¹⁵ Spectators would then take pleasure in plays about "the most serious philosophical truths, yes, even religious quarrels."¹⁶ The major gamble of the early Enlightenment movement was that a rational form of pleasure could be had in rigorously constructed dramas, and that this pleasure could attract and retain a paying audience.

The impassioned sanitization of the German stage had its roots in the conviction that the theater, if properly orchestrated, could inculcate reason in spectators with unique efficaciousness. Among poetic

12. Martin Stern, "Über die Schauspiele: Eine vergessene Abhandlung zum Schultheater des Basler Theologen Samuel Werenfels (1657–1740) und ihre Spuren bei Gottsched, Lessing, Gellert, Hamann, und Nicolai" in *Théâtre, nation & société*, ed. Ronald Krebs and Jean-Marie Valentin (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1990), 167–192.

13. Stern and Wilhelmi, "Samuel Werenfels (1657–1740)," 105.

14. Johann Heinrich Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*; cited from the online version (<http://www.zedler-lexikon.de>).

15. See Johann Elias Schlegel, "Von der Nachahmung," in *Werke*, ed. Johann Heinrich Schlegel (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1971), 3:95–176, here 134.

16. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 1:883.

forms, Gottsched claimed, only theater relates its contents “with vivid colors (*lebendigen Farben*) before one’s eyes.”¹⁷ If a properly constructed drama underwrites theatrical performance, he continues, it would surpass all other poetic forms because it provides “so to speak, not an image, not a portrait, not an imitation any longer, but the truth, nature herself, that one can see and hear.”¹⁸ He champions the theater as a passive sensuous experience that can contribute to the slow process of advancing human reason:

The improvement of the human heart is, to be sure, not a task that can be accomplished in a single hour. A thousand preparations, circumstances, much thought, conviction, experience, examples and encouragement are required before a vicious man lets go of his ways. Enough that one throws one seed after another into his heart. In due course, the seed will blossom and bear fruit.

Die Besserung des menschlichen Herzens ist fürwahr kein Werk, welches in einer Stunde geschehen kann. Es gehören tausend Vorbereitungen, tausend Umstände, viel Erkenntniß, Ueberzeugung, Erfahrungen, Beyspiele und Aufmunterungen dazu, ehe ein Lasterhafter seine Art fahren läßt.¹⁹

Gottsched believes that a properly constructed theater could attract an audience as well as a theater featuring the fool, but with the added benefit of offering moral improvement.

Before taking a closer look at the compositional standards of drama, it is worth pointing out that belief in the viability of an intellectual, text-based theater had potential pitfalls. Even Gottsched’s adamant supporter, Caroline Neuber, thematized the tension between her own theoretical commitments and the practical need for commercial survival. In a prelude entitled *Die Verehrung der Vollkommenheit durch die gebesserten deutschen Schauspiele* (*Reverence of*

17. Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen* (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1730), 569.

18. “Es ist, so zu reden, kein Bild, keine Abschilderung, keine Nachahmung mehr: es ist die Wahrheit, es ist die Natur selbst, was man sieht und höret.” Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 569.

19. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 572.

Perfection through the Improved German Plays, 1737), Neuber identifies her bind as a director:

It should please the wise world and the riffraff too,
And both are cut from different cloth,
Whoever comes between the two, has no safeguard.
The one ridicules him, if he deviates from the rules,
The other scolds him, if he demonstrates the rules.
The artist is left bare and driven to despair,
When he is cursed and derided for his art and industry.
Otherwise, I would have the desire for it.

Sie soll der klugen Welt, dem Pöbel auch gefallen,
Und beyde Theile sind von unterschiedener Arth,
Wer zwischen beyde kömmt, ist schlecht genug verwahrt.
Der eine lacht ihn aus, wenn er von Regeln weicht,
Der andre schählt auf ihn, wenn er die Regeln zeigt,
Da steht der Künstler bloß und wird verzagt gemacht,
Wenn man ihm Kunst und Fleiß verfluchet und verlacht;
Sonst hätt ich Lust dazu.²⁰

This excerpt from Neuber describes a potential discrepancy between the ambitions of the reformers and the predilections of theatergoers. The source of the audience's displeasure, as related here, is the insistence on rule-bound playmaking—the very same rules that, according to the reform program, should ensure the compositional integrity of a drama. But the reform project aimed at nothing less than eliminating, in Gottsched's characteristically supercilious phrasing, “the nasty taste of the great mass” (*der üble Geschmack des großen Haufens*).²¹ Neuber too aspired to alter what she referred to as the predilections of “the riffraff which had been nourished by earlier bands of comedians” and their “rude antics” (*grobe Possen*).²²

20. Friederike Carolina Neuber, *Poetische Urkunden*, ed. Bärbel Rudin and Marion Schulz (Reichenbach: Neuberin Museum, 1997), 1:136.

21. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 116.

22. See the early letter from Johann Neuber to Gottsched in Friedrich Johann Reden-Esbeck, *Caroline Neuber und ihre Zeitgenossen: Ein Beitrag zur deutschen Kultur- und Theatergeschichte* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1881), 96.

The reform movement sought to accomplish a revolution in taste through the publication of dramas. The essential first task was to translate and craft original texts that could form the substrate of ennobled theatrical performances. What reformers called a “purified” and “rational” stage culture would only come about by means of the transposition onto the stage of “purified” and “rational” dramas, which would in time alter the preferences of audiences.²³ Perhaps the most revealing testament to the irreducibly textual nature of early Enlightenment drama was Gottsched’s groundbreaking publication project, *Die deutsche Schaubühne* (*The German Stage*, 1741–1745). Comprised of six volumes of translations and original compositions, Gottsched’s collection aimed at much more than just finding a sympathetic readership. The anthology put into print circulation plays to reach “the clever minds, which are showing themselves here and there among young poets,” inspiring them to “send [Gottsched their own] pieces.” The professor promised to “make [the plays] known, insofar as they are rule-governed,” as part of his campaign to “save the honor of German wit and reputation” (*zu Rettung der Ehre des deutschen Witzes und Namens*).²⁴ He hoped his collection of published dramas would become part of a larger circuitry, in which dramas would find readers and encourage imitation. Because the cycle gives rise to feedback loops—more dramas reaching more readers and encouraging more imitation—growth in the circulation of properly constructed dramas could be logarithmic. An indication of the publication project’s overarching goal can be found in the title *Die deutsche Schaubühne*, which points beyond the printed page to the performance venue. Along the same lines, the professor celebrates his texts as vehicles for “progress” in the field of “theatrical poetry” (*theatralischen Poesie*), a hybrid denomination that absorbs the act of theatrical realization into the craft of poetic

23. Gottsched, *Die deutsche Schaubühne nach den Regeln der Griechen und Römer* (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1742, 1:21.

24. *Ibid.*, 2:42.

composition.²⁵ Accordingly, the entire cycle of production and consumption demands that “different troupes of German actors” make use of the volumes “to amuse spectators in such a reasonable and purified manner” (*ihre Zuschauer auf eine so vernünftige und geläuterte Art zu belustigen*).²⁶ And to ensure harmony between the activity of actors and the “rules of theatrical poetry,” Gottsched collected in each volume of *Die deutsche Schaubühne* six plays, “in alternation a comedy and a tragedy, always three of each genre.”²⁷

In light of Gottsched’s identification of the bond between drama and theater as the crux of reform, it is worth taking a closer look at the internal construction of drama itself. As a point of departure, let us briefly return to the generic histories from chapter 6. Recall that Gottsched distills two different avenues for the production of comic effects, one that he considers conducive to comedic reform, and another that he sees as destructive. His diagnosis of the two Roman poets sets into opposition two methods for producing comic effects: Plautus’s spontaneous jokes and laughable interludes and Terence’s internally coherent, dramatically unfolding characters. The uneven appraisal of these two comic forms depends, as we have seen, on the role of the parasite—present in Plautus’s comedies and absent from Terence’s. In much the same vein, Lessing defends the parasite by highlighting the figure’s integration within a larger tapestry. Indeed, when accused of celebrating the parasite’s “shallow jokes,” Lessing responds that he has only done so “with respect to the whole and in view of the relevant nature” (*in Betrachtung auf das Ganze und in Ansehung der getroffenen Natur*).²⁸ Both elements of Lessing’s defense are important. He adverts to a superior level of integration, an encompassing plot structure, from which the parasite has been illegitimately excised. And he also insists that the parasite can only be assessed in light of the set of traits, duties, and activities he

25. Ibid., 2:17.

26. Ibid., 1:21.

27. Ibid., 2:31.

28. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 1:870.

embodies—in light, that is, of the character he represents.²⁹ Lessing resists dismissals of the parasite because he believes the role must be appraised according to higher-order synthetic principles—that is, principles of dramatic unity.

How does Lessing intend the reference to the whole or *das Ganze*? What constitutes the synthetic unity that one must take into account when judging a figure like the parasite? A basic framework for answering these questions, exhibiting the patina of venerated authority, was provided by the Horatian injunction that a poem must be both “simple and uniform” (*simplex . . . et unum*).³⁰ The first of these adjectives, simple or *simplex*, does not refer to a dearth of meaning or sophistication, but instead to the poem’s possessing a single fold, a well-defined center of gravity organizing the whole. Thus a simplex poem will also be one without narrative splintering or unintegrated subplots. Horace defines what it means to be a single poem (*unum*) rather than multiple poems smashed together in terms of the exhibition of internal continuity (*simplex*).³¹ A poem counts as one by virtue of its interlocking parts—in a more technical jargon, by virtue of its concinnity. Gottsched, meanwhile, rewrites the uniform co-belonging required for a poem to be *simplex* and *unum* in terms of stylistic criteria. He translates the formula as *schlecht [sic] und einfach*, which we might render as “plain and simple.”³² Unity, for him, can be achieved by heeding principles of stylistic coherence manifest on the level of dialogic-linguistic expression. For a poem to be *schlecht und einfach*, Gottsched remarks, it must avoid intermingling registers of speech, especially through

29. For Lessing’s suggestion that the parasite represents a character type that has become alien by virtue of changes to the social institution of hospitality, see Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 1:776.

30. For the relevant passage, see Horace, *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica, with an English Translation*, ed. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 452–453.

31. See the discussion in C. O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: The “Ars Poetica”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

32. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 12.

the addition of lowly patois (his word is *kauderwelsch*).³³ It should not “mix up” different elements “as if one wanted to make all the different parts of one’s clothing from a different color.”³⁴ The comparison to textiles carries significant weight for Gottsched’s understanding of the sort of homogeneity demanded of comedy. He remarks that a poem “must be cut from whole cloth like a good frock, not stitched together from different sorts of colorful rags like a Harlequin’s smock.”³⁵ A drama that is *simplex* and *unum* is one that possesses internal concinnity, and thus also one without the encapsulated comic effects of the fool. The heterogeneity of meanings and registers engendered by the fool has no place in Gottsched’s conception of a comedy worthy of being referred to in the singular.³⁶

The checkered garb worn by the Harlequin—and by consequence the fool himself—became the symbol of the violation of formal purity. To be *simplex* and *unum*, that is, entailed stylistic homogeneity and adherence to genre constraints. In Caroline Neuber’s *Die Verehrung der Vollkommenheit*, the opposition between a garment cut of a single cloth and the composite garb of the fool becomes an allegory of unreformed and hence corrupt tragedy:

It is so motley, at one point sad, at another laughable,
Eventually I have to do both in a single play,
Now my art is like the colorful frock
Of a Harlequin.

Es ist so vielerlei, bald traurig, bald zu lachen,
Bald muss ich beydes wohl in einem Stücke machen,

33. Gottsched’s telling description, “nicht gar zu bunt und kauderwelsch durch einander gemsicht”; Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 12.

34. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 12.

35. “Ein gutes Gedicht muß aus dem vollen geschnitten werden, wie ein gut Kleid; nicht aus mancherley bunten Lappen zusammen geflickt seyn, wie ein Harlekins-Rock.” Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 12.

36. Lessing reflects on the meaning of *simplex* as part of his protracted discussion of the philologically controversial question of whether Terence’s Latin texts imitate a single or multiple Greek originals. See Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:615–618.

Itzund ist meine Kunst als wie ein buntes Kleid
 Von einem Harlekin.³⁷

The opposed responses of laughter and sadness here represent the division between comedy and tragedy; the fool, their unwarranted intermingling. To remove the multicolored frock and to unify the fabric of genre are two sides of the same coin—the unified coin of a stylistically homogeneous drama.

The identification of the fool as a contaminating force, disturbing the installation of rigid generic categories, entailed the introduction of a new distinction between the necessary constituents of a play and its contingent inclusions. What may look like a recrudescence of classicism, especially if early Enlightenment reformers are taken at their word, in fact required a novel delineation of the boundary separating essence and accident—or, better yet, between indispensable core and accidental superadded elements. This hygienic logic first emerged as part of Gottsched's 1729 defense of the tragic genre in front of fellow members of the Deutsche Gesellschaft. In his speech "Die Schauspiele und besonders die Tragödien sind aus einer wohlbestellten Republik nicht zu verbannen" ("Plays and Especially Tragedies Should Not Be Banned from a Well-Ordered Republic"), he concedes that "deeply rooted prejudices" have made plays "such a widely despised thing."³⁸ Gottsched charts a path to redeem theater in the eyes of the educated elites based on the division between "rule-governed and well-ordered" plays and the "monstrosities" of the traveling players.³⁹ The characteristic feature that separates orderly dramas and contaminated ones repellent to the learned is "the intermixed revelleries (*untermischten Lustbarkeiten*) of the Harlequin."⁴⁰ The language Gottsched uses here is informative. He introduces the contrast between a rule-governed play—an unalloyed imitation of nature as it should be—and the presence of the fool. The latter amounts to an extrinsic element, a contaminating supplement, that inserts

37. Neuber, *Poetische Urkunden*, 1:138.

38. Gottsched, *Gesamlete Reden*, 564.

39. *Ibid.*, 567.

40. *Ibid.*

itself illegitimately. A direct consequence of the division between the rule-governed core and the polluting addition is Gottsched's insistence on the difference between the plays performed on a purified stage (*geläutert*) and the mongrels or deformities (*Mißgeburten*) of the traveling stage. His goal is to excise what he identifies as the abject intruder and thereby encourage the development of a more perfect birth. This is the logic of exchange that lent plausibility to eighteenth-century theater's founding myth, with which part 2 began.

In adducing the concept of rule-governed to describe drama that adheres to standards of generic unity, Gottsched develops a concept that will accompany him for the duration of his career and shape his legacy. The term I have translated as "rule-governed" is in Gottsched's speech *regelmäßig*, which in this context also carries the connotations of regular, orderly, and even well composed. In articulating this foundational principle for his conception of drama, Gottsched draws on the notion of a "théâtre régulier," which was common currency in the French works he was studying.⁴¹ In his hands, the concept comes to refer to the compositional standards that ensure the highest degree of accord with reason and therefore the most proximate imitation of nature.

Drama that is rule-governed and pure fits within clearly generic categories that ensure the felicitous imitation of nature. But what does this reference to nature entail and how does it impact the formation of a synthetic unity? Consider Gottsched's definition, which can be found in various permutations across the first half of the eighteenth century: "Comedy," he writes, "is nothing other than the imitation of a vicious action (*Nachahmung einer lasterhaften Handlung*), which by means of its comical essence can both amuse and edify the spectator."⁴² As so

41. I do not think it is possible to trace Gottsched's use of this term back to a single source. Already in 1730 (a year after the speech to the Deutsche Gesellschaft) Gottsched lists around a dozen authors who have had a strong influence on his thoughts about poetry and to whom the term could be attributed. See Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 11. Interestingly, he does not list François Hédelin d'Aubignac in this passage. The omission is curious, since the influence of d'Aubignac's treatise *La pratique du théâtre* (*The Practice of Theater*, 1657) is undeniable.

42. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 594.

often, the terminology is not wholly his own. It is lifted from the humanist toolbox and repurposed. In the background is, of course, the famous passage from book 6 of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which the Greek philosopher describes tragedy as the "imitation of an action" (μίμησις πράξεως).⁴³ He argues that the action that forms the basis of a tragedy (Aristotle's immediate subject in the *Poetics*) is the purposive activity of a human being through which he or she pursues an end with ethical content. Aristotle calls such an activity *mythos*, and Gottsched, following his French sources, calls it the *Fabel*. Because an action takes time to unfold, comedy requires that its constitutive narrative elements stand in causal relation with one another, each contributing to the formation of a coherent story. But, much more than his classical ancestors, Gottsched is concerned that the syntactic array of elements making up the plot (*mythos*, *Fabel*) exhibit stylistic homogeneity. He insists that the contrasts among the figures—their registers of speech as well as the meanings they convey—resolve into a single moral picture. Needless to say, exactly this sort of integration was violated by the comic practice of the fool.

The concinnity of drama was founded upon the logically antecedent claim that "all the rules of the art of poetry can be derived" from the lawful "imitation of nature."⁴⁴ The suggestion that imitation formed the foundation of poetry had a pedigree reaching back to Plato and Aristotle. But the philosopheme was as much a founding gesture of the early Enlightenment conception of genre as it was a fuzzily defined term that allowed for differing positions to be staked out. At first, the foundational principle Gottsched appropriates from his teacher Christian Wolff and introduces to his contemporaries is that every form of poetry admits of greater or lesser accuracy in the portrayal of an extrinsic reality.⁴⁵ The rules

43. Aristotle, *Poetics* 6 (1449b24).

44. See the description of Gottsched's own educational path in Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Erste Gründe der gesamten Weltweisheit, Praktischer Teil* (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1762), 35 (of the unpaginated preface).

45. The dependency of Gottsched's writings on Wolff has been developed in Ruedi Graf, *Theater im Literaturstaat* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1992). On the distinction between the rhetorical tradition and Gottsched's philosophically inflected notion of rules, see Klaus Berghahn, "Von der klassizistischen zur klassischen Literaturkritik 1730–1806," in *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturkritik*, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung,

for poetic composition are meant as the best avenue for imitating nature to the most perfect degree, for creating a maximally verisimilar work within conventional parameters of decorum. A characteristic formulation from the early Enlightenment would have it that “verisimilitude in poetry and therefore also in plays overall” (*Wahrscheinlichkeit in der Dichtkunst, und also auch in den Schauspielen überhaupt*) consists in “a similarity between that which has been depicted and that which tends to happen.”⁴⁶ Subordinated to a higher principle of reason, the task of the poet in imitating nature is fundamentally adjudicative and value-laden. To imitate nature means understanding the difference between “right and wrong use” of our mental facilities, to know “the nature and constitution of our thought.”⁴⁷ And so the verisimilar imitation of details lifted from experience is not enough; the poet and actor must possess knowledge of how things should be both epistemically and morally, including the appropriate representation of social rank and political order, and transpose this knowledge, with the highest possible degree of fidelity, onto the poem. According to this notion of verisimilitude (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*), the fiction, including its linguistic formulation, is coordinated with a notion of genre itself beholden to an extrinsic order of nature.

The value-laden notion of imitation provided the precondition for making the theater into an intellectual enterprise, a school of virtue. More than just entertain, a poem had to unfold a “highly instructive moral principle” (*einen lehrreichen moralischen Satz*)

1985), 10–75. The longer philosophical tradition has been discussed in Hans Blumenberg, “‘Nachahmung der Natur’: Zur Vorgeschichte des schöpferischen Menschen,” in *Ästhetische und metaphorologische Schriften*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 9–46, esp. 41–45. The prevalent focus in literary histories on the miraculous or *das Wunderbare*, which provided for controversy between Gottsched and his contemporaries, such as J. J. Breitinger, whom Blumenberg discusses, risks overvaluing a metaphysical dimension to the early Enlightenment debates over poetry—what counts as possible?—at the expense of a shared moral foundation.

46. Christlob Mylius, “Eine Abhandlung, worinnen erwiesen wird: Daß die Wahrscheinlichkeit er Vorstellung, bey den Schauspielen eben so nötig ist, als die innere Wahrscheinlichkeit derselben,” *Beyträge zur critischen Historie der deutschen Sprache, Poesie und Beredsamkeit* 29 (1742): 301.

47. Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Der Biedermann*, ed. Wolfgang Martens (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1975), pt. 2, 81st installment.

formulated in advance by the poet.⁴⁸ The principle of dramatic unity demanded a strict moral economy according to which all included elements of a play flow into the uniform communication of higher-order moral truths. The wager of the early Enlightenment reform movement—perhaps the wager that damned it to an ambivalent response over the following decades—was that such a conception of drama could also become a theater worth seeing. A decisive inheritance of the hard-edged and overcerebral articulation of early Enlightenment drama was the controversy it created over the need for poetry to be beholden to an external conception of nature. To a number of later critics, Gottsched's subordination of poetry to nature appeared so extreme in its initial formulation that it seemed implausible and in need of revision.

One heated quarrel among reformers pertained to the question of whether comedy could be written in verse or must, as the alignment of verbal register and social rank in the rhetorical tradition would have it, be composed in plain prose.⁴⁹ The controversy provided early Enlightenment critics a vehicle for negotiating the constraints or liberties of comedy as a poetic form. Ultimately, the debate over verbal structure (verse/prose) only made sense in the framework of a theatrical reform project with an insistence on unified dramatic form as its basis and principal tool. The most progressive stance was staked out by Johann Elias Schlegel, who asserted that a poet "determines in all imitations of nature how and how far he wants to imitate it."⁵⁰ He supports his view with the remark that verse (*gebundene Sprache*) and prose (*ungebundene Sprache*) are fundamentally different raw materials for the composition of poems that create different possibilities of form. Assessments of a poem must consider first and foremost the quality of its synthesis of these raw linguistic materials. Arguments like Schlegel's, while

48. Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 133.

49. For Gottsched's remarks on the matter, see *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst*, 600. For a defense of Gottsched's position, see Anonymous, "Versuch eines Beweises, daß eine gereimte Comödie nicht gut seyn könne," in *Beyträge zur critischen Historie der deutschen Sprache, Poesie, und Beredsamkeit* 23 (1740): 466–485. The contrary view was advanced in Schlegel, *Werke*, 3:73–94.

50. Schlegel, *Werke*, 3:75.

still a far cry from conceptions of aesthetic autonomy from the end of the eighteenth century, show how assessment criteria for poetic works were slowly becoming attentive to the work as a unified whole. He argues that a poem's verisimilitude consists in rendering a poetic object in which its "parts have a proportion" equivalent to the "parts" of "the original."⁵¹ This argument allows him to maintain that a felicitous comedy will also owe its success to an external nature, while insisting that any evaluative judgment must be guided by the synthetic unity of dramatic form.

What is true of a formal class also turns out to be true on a more encompassing cultural scale. Once again, the younger generation of early Enlightenment reformers utilized dramatic unity to articulate arguments that surely vexed Gottsched. Lessing challenges his senior colleague by insisting on the power of cultural difference. Against the professor's belief in universally applicable assessment criteria for the imitation of nature, Lessing argues that the developmental trajectory of each culture is distinct. He lays the foundation for his position when he argues:

I would wish that a man, a skillful and clear-headed man knowledgeable in such matters, would judge the changes and vicissitudes of the German stage in the same way that foreigners have investigated their own, and then give rational rules for its improvement. Every people and every age has, in this respect, something special.

Ich wünschte, daß ein der Sachen verständiger, geschickter und gesetzter Mann die Veränderungen und Abwechslungen der teutschen Schaubühne auf eben die Art wie die Ausländer die ihrige untersuchte, beurtheilte, und vernünftige Regeln zu deren Verbesserung gebe. Jedes Volk und jede Zeit hat hierinnen etwas besonderes.⁵²

The task of the "composer of a comedic staging" is to adjust his poem to the "kind of risibility" in his particular culture.⁵³ The form of verisimilitude required by a felicitous poem depends, accordingly, "not on nature, about which we know so little; it [verisimilitude]

51. Ibid., 3:76–77.

52. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Schreiben an das Publicum, die Schaubühne betreffend* (Frankfurt/Leipzig, 1753), 2.

53. Ibid., 15, 13.

must be derived from the stories, and namely the most common stories [of a given culture].”⁵⁴ Thus we can see the success criteria for a theatrical performance are still rooted to a notion of verisimilitude, achieved through the labor of poetic composition, but now adjusted to the peculiarities of cultural-historical context.

The modifications to the notion of verisimilitude proposed by Schlegel and Lessing amount to a reassessment of the implications of dramatic unity. Drama constitutes a (still limited) synthetic whole, not absolutely beholden to an external nature, but instead conditioned by the conventions internal to the form itself. These are claims to form-independence only possible in light of a shared conception of rule-governed dramatic composition as the key to theatrical reform.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 16.