8

Comedic Plot, Comic Time, Dramatic Time

The previous three chapters have shown that the early Enlightenment campaigned for the imposition of a certain type of comedy and drama. On a superficial level, the early Enlightenment installation of a generically unified drama appears as a recovery of the Aristotelian standards of unity of time, place, and action, along with the Horatian belief that a poem should be morally instructive. This line of thought is entirely correct, but it is also unilluminating. It tells us little about the underlying reasons for and procedures supporting the creation of the ennobled dramatic poem. In order to illuminate the specific use of rule-governed, generically unified, and textually codified dramas as instruments for theatrical reform, it is helpful to frame the early Enlightenment reforms as a rearticulation of comic time, organized around the differing modalities of joke and character. This chapter shall demonstrate that the overhaul of comedy and drama attempted to control the temporality of playmaking.

The following pages can be understood as spelling out the implications of a formal problem articulated much later in the eighteenth century by Johann Joachim Eschenburg (1743–1820): "But in general the comic of comedy does not consist merely in individual statements and humorous gags (*einzelne Reden und witzigen Einfällen*), but rather must arise out of, and have sufficient ground in, the plot itself (*Handlung selbst*)."[1]

Let us recall that the discussion of the parasite in chapter 6 distinguished between two distinct strategies for arranging comic elements within a play, strategies that were formal and independent of the theme or content of individual utterances. Comic effects, one could say on the basis of that analysis, can be either punctual or syntactic; they can consist in momentary gestures or remarks, as in Plautus, or in narrative threads developed and sustained for the duration of the play, as in Terence. One might also think of this opposition in the more technical vocabulary developed by the linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982), who distinguished between paradigmatic and syntagmatic dimensions of poetic language.[2] According to this schema, the comic strategies of the fool elaborated in part 1—punctuality, detachment, encapsulation, extemporaneity—fall under the category of the paradigmatic. These strategies were also the ones that came under fire during the early Enlightenment, which sought stricter forms of syntagmatic or synthetic continuity.

In order to draw out the intimate connection between the institution of a morally univocal plot structure and the temporality of the comic, consider an example that is tellingly difficult to place in a specific epoch. Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–1764), who published under the pseudonym Picander, wrote plays that resemble the ones composed during the early Enlightenment, but in several

1. Johann Joachim Eschenburg, *Entwurf einer Theorie und Literatur der schönen Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1789), 227.

2. The application of Jakobson's helpful distinction was first undertaken in a brilliant essay on comedy that has remained, in my estimation, underappreciated. See Rainer Warning, "Elemente einer Pragmasemiotik der Komödie," in *Das Komische*, ed. Wolfgang Preisendanz and Rainer Warning (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1976). For the original Jakobson publication, see the essays collected in Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Wauh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

decisive ways stand just beyond the Enlightenment's ambit. More than any other author of his day, Henrici inhabits a gray zone in which Enlightenment ideas were beginning to take shape but had not yet coalesced.

Two examples will have to suffice: first, Henrici's plays do not assign great importance to genre distinctions or to their role in the improvement of the stage; and, second, he is indifferent to whether or not his published plays will ever be performed.[3] At the same time, the title page to his 1726 collection makes clear that Henrici conceives of his plays as instruments of moral improvement.[4] Their declared purpose is the "edification and amusement of the mind," a reference to Horace's dictum that poetry must amuse or delight (*aut prodesse . . . aut delectare*), a dictum that Gottsched happily endorsed. And Henrici also blames the traveling players for the current disrepute of the stage. But, by Hernici's own lights, the moral instruction his drama aims to achieve is not possible without the fool, the comic persona, albeit absent "saucy and scurrilous" speech.[5] In other words, Henrici proposes to include the fool, but in an unfamiliar and purified guise, thereby ensuring that the Horatian mandate is fulfilled. While Henrici seems to be offering a Lessing-like defense of the fool *avant la lettre,* superficial impressions are misleading, and the reasons why say quite a bit about what the unity of plot meant to Gottsched and his followers. In truth, Henrici is highly influenced by the current conventions of the Parisian stage, especially in his use of the Harlequin figure.[6]

Henrici's play *Der academische Schlendrian* (*The Academic Slacker*) evinces a formal design utterly foreign to the dramatic comedies written between 1730 and 1750. It is prolix, its scene changes coincide with location changes, its cast of characters is imperspicuously numerous, and its plot is disjointed. Moreover,

3. See the "Preface to the Reader," reprinted in Reinhart Meyer, *Das deutsche Drama des 18. Jahrhunderts in Einzeldrucken* (Munich: Kraus, 1983), 4:3–14.

4. See the title page in Meyer, *Das deutsche Drama*, 4:1.

5. Meyer, *Das deutsche Drama*, 4:6.

6. The connections between Henrici and the French *comédie-italienne* have been discussed in Walter Hinck, *Das deutsche Lustspiel des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts und die italienische Komödie: Commedia dell'arte und Théâtre italien* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1965), 156–163.

the fool, named Harlequin, appears in nearly every scene, typically serving as a mocking confidant and recalcitrant servant who points out the moral shortcomings of others. By and large, comic effects in this play are produced by the fool's many pithy commentaries on his master's poor financial decisions and misguided romantic inclinations. And in engaging in such commentary the fool contributes essentially to making Henrici's play into an instrument of moral instruction.

Der academische Schlendrian manipulates the servant-master asymmetry in interesting ways. In the opening lines, the master asks his servant for money, and the servant in turn does not miss the opportunity to reprimand his master. The importance of the fool in scenes like this one is not so much his role as a plot-driving agent, but instead his commentary on the actions and utterances of others. This commentary, though, is not the form of jest we saw in part 1, but instead is now part of the moralizing mission of the play. The fool is no longer transgressive, but is instead the mouthpiece of transgression's pitfalls.

A striking example of the fool's ancillary role comes at the end of act 3, when one of the central figures appears onstage with a violin, declaring his love in a fusillade of arias and *da capos*. The show culminates, however, in the fool's unsolicited commentary: "That is a twisted prank (*ein vertracter Streich*)!"[7] The scene's comic effect depends, in no small part, on the fool accusing his master of committing a prank, the very thing a fool is typically guilty of. Three elements in the scene deserve emphasis, because they push Henrici's play just beyond the cusp of the Enlightenment reform project. First, the scene contains a musical performance in an otherwise spoken play, an admixture that runs contrary to Gottsched's strict demands for stylistic homogeneity. Second, the fool makes a joke by pointing out the absurdity of the lover's song—the sort of punctual capsule of mockery that the Enlightened sought to avoid. And thirdly, the fool inhabits a liminal position with respect to the events on the stage, insofar as he acts as commentator.

7. Meyer, *Das deutsche Drama*, 4:90.

As in the seventeenth century, the fool is here able to occupy a position on both sides of the distinction between fiction-internal and fiction-external communication. All three of these structural features run against the strict demands for plot continuity central to in the early Enlightenment.

Some conceptual clarification will help sharpen our analysis. This chapter began with the distinction syntagmatic and paradigmatic as a way to capture the varying assessments of Plautus and Terence. These terms offer an abstract rubric for understanding a broad swath of comic effects in the theater. Writers on playmaking at least as far back as Aristotle's *Poetics* have asserted that comic effects have their home in a self-sustaining plot, as the unfolding of a story, perhaps even an archetypal pattern of stories. Others have focused on the presence of comic episodes (gestures, jokes, miniature stock scenes) that are only loosely connected to a plotline. The celebration of the *commedia dell'arte,* of *lazzi*, of English clowns like Richard Tarlton, falls into this camp. Discussions of comic theater—be they explicit attempts to think about the organization of a genre or to understand laughter-provoking techniques on their own—can thus be grouped together under the opposition between punctual and syntactic conceptions of the comic.

Ultimately, it is not important for present purposes to endorse one or the other of these species as the source of true comedy. The distinction's utility lies, rather, in its role in shaping the early Enlightenment reform process, in which Gottsched and Lessing celebrated the syntagmatic dimension and denigrated paradigmatic comic effects. The seamless concatenation of plot elements and the exclusion of sporadic punctual comic effects provided the cornerstone for a unified comedic genre. Beginning with Gottsched and continuing on to Lessing, comedy required duration, not spontaneity. During this period, punctual comic effects were treated as morally dubious, while telling a continuous story appeared as necessary for moral instruction. The reform paradigm argued that only a poem that was, in Horace's words, *simplex et unum* could count as a genuine drama.

The form of comedy thus emerged through the distinction between punctual and durative modes of the comic—which is to say, on the basis of a conception of comic time. But why is it that the proper temporal mode appropriate to comedy and conducive to instruction is duration, not punctuality? The answer cannot be uncovered by looking only at the form. It is also important to consider the value assigned to it. The problem of how to extract an abiding moral effect from an ephemeral performance seemed particularly acute to Gottsched and his followers, not least because their project was a reaction to the performance style of the traveling players, who, as part 1 demonstrated, used encapsulated episodes of play to celebrate the ephemeral and entertainment-driven experience of theatrical performance. And as part 1 also showed, the various strategies of interruption that were the trademark of the fool were not perceived as a threat to the overarching unity of a performance, but instead a contribution to entertainment. Gottsched and his followers accomplished a reorchestration of comic effects, which classified interruptions as extrinsic elements, as ruptures in what should be a syntactically unified fabric.

It is helpful to recall Gottsched's typical condemnation of the traveling players. The fool, he says, "mixes in antics"—in other words, he constitutes an superadded element that contaminates or disturbs the main body of the play. By recoding the fool as an alien body, an incursion, Gottsched installs a barrier between the plot and encapsulated moments of comic play. A proper play demanded a higher degree of closure, of internal continuity. This demand betokened not simply a new form, but a recalibration of the distinction between form and formlessness, between openness and closure.

An example will help illustrate the exclusion of punctual comic effects. In a prelude to *Die mit den freyen Künsten verschwisterte Schauspielkunst* (*The Art of Playmaking and Its Kindred Liberal Arts*, 1745), Johann Christian Krüger (1723–1750) provides an allegorical representation of the traveling players. The portrait he paints depends on the distinctions that drive the

Enlightenment separation of its concept of comedic form from the itinerant players' comic strategies. Krüger's prelude appears in the sixth volume of Gottsched's *Die deutsche Schaubühne* and depicts the traveling players in the allegorical form of a farce (*Possenspiel*), a preferred term among contemporary reformers for the plays featuring the fool. The following ridicule of the spectators' response illustrates the desire for a new temporal constitution of comedy:

> He who lacks a heroic spirit
> Grows tired in two minutes of watching heroes.
> He's gotten enough if he is fascinated by the hero's clothes;
> Won't the fool come soon, he asks, as soon as the hero speaks.
> The fool attracts him with a step, wordplay;
> He perks up, as soon as he sees a figure like this.
>
> Wer keinen Heldengeist in seinem Busen hat
> Wird Helden anzusehn in zwo Minuten satt.
> Genug, wenn ihn das Kleid des Helden eingenommen;
> Spricht der, so fragt er schon, wird nicht der Narr bald kommen?
> Der ihn durch einen Schritt, ein Wortspiel an sich zieht
> Man lebt sich gleich auf, sobald man seines gleichen sieht.[8]

The prelude introduces a blatantly derisive characterization of the spectator's desire for immediate amusement. Within two minutes, the unenlightened spectator already lusts after the satisfaction offered by the fool, who will delight with a brief gambol or prank. Krüger paints a scene where spectatorship is charged with an enlivening desire: the fool's appearance breathes life into a monotonous, even empty, experience. In this short episode, spectatorial engagement is not achieved through continuous immersion in a plot, but rather through the punctual intrusions of the fool. Krüger's own stance is made clear when he has Apollo, patron god of the arts, respond to Farce by saying, "Such riffraff only pleases

8. Johann Christian Krüger, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. David G. John (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986), 82.

the riffraff; / He whose thoughts are noble can never be a friend to folly."[9]

The theatrical reform movement thus recasts the fool as a formal problem—a problem of plot contamination. The unity of a play is codified as an internally coherent story line, and the fool's interruptions are detached entirely from the theatrical whole to which they had previously belonged. The sort of supporting role assumed by a figure like the Harlequin in the Henrici play—pointing out the shortcomings of his master, poking fun at him—has now become illicit. All punctual comic effects are coded as inimical to a coherent dramatic syntax. For these thinkers, a properly constructed play is defined by plot design, while the fool's encapsulated commentaries and interruptions are understood as forces that corrupt it.

The construction of comedic form in terms of a tightly bound syntax—as plot or *Handlung*—aims to achieve a particular end. That is, the selection and causal arrangement of dramatic elements aim to depict vice in a morally instructive way. The concatenation of scenes, events, and utterances in the dramatic plot is directed toward the demonstration of *moral failure*. In the absence of the fool, the depiction of a moral shortcoming becomes the origin of comic effects. But because a depiction of vice must fulfill a clear function, must instruct, comic playwrights of the reform movement also developed a particular way of representing moral shortcoming. Human defects or failures are featured in plays for the purpose of pointing out an avenue toward their repair or avoidance. Thus the functional imperative dictates that the errors and vices, with which the comedic genre busies itself, must lie within the scope of potential human intervention and rectification. The human being at the center of Enlightenment comedy is, in short, *fundamentally corrigible*, for the depiction of an intractable failure would not satisfy the demand for moral serviceability. Human finitude appears during this period exclusively under the guise of avertable failure.

A scene from the end of Luise Adelgunde Gottsched's *Die ungleiche Heirat* (*The Uneven Marriage*, 1743) illustrates the stakes of this anthropological design. Known to her contemporaries and

9. "Ein solcher Pöbel nimmt allein den Pöbel ein; / Wer edel denkt, kann nie ein Freund der Thorheit seyn!" Krüger, *Werke*, 82.

subsequent generations of scholars as the Gottschedin, Luise Adelgunde contributed her own translations and original compositions to her husband's reform project, and wrote with a hand almost as heavy as his. Through and through, her plays are tools for moral instruction, characterized by a zeal lacking for ambiguity or ambivalence. *Die ungleiche Heirat* relates the attempt of a bourgeois bachelor to marry into an aristocratic family. Although the portrait of the aristocracy is undeniably critical, it becomes clear that the focus of the comedy is not the profligacy of the aptly named Ahnenstoz family, but the bachelor's misunderstanding of his station in life. Upon making a second marriage proposal to an aristocratic woman, he is admonished:

> And I tell you, you err. You err very gravely, my dear Mr. Wilibald. I belong to the aristocracy, and though I know that you possess much reason and merit and skill, all of this does not change my opinion that a young noble maiden cannot live happily with you. Consider only what I have already told you! If you were of the nobility, you would be my favorite among my suitors; yes, I would prefer you to the most genteel of them. Now, however, I will hold to my rule. Make someone happy who is of the same rank as you, and let your appetite for the noble maidens fade.[10]

At the close of the comedy, a member of the nobility reprimands Wilibald for the failure to recognize his social constraints. In the end, his good intentions are revealed as misguided, as blind to concrete social reality. Although some of the comedy is devoted to the wanton lifestyle of the aristocracy, its primary focus is Wilibald's inability to judge right from wrong. Conspicuously absent is a scene of final reconciliation; this comedy, as many others in the early Enlightenment, ends not with a scene of social inclusion or a

10. "Und ich sage ihnen, daß sie sich irren. Sie irren sich gar erschrecklich, mein lieber Herr Wilibald. Ich bin von Adel, und weis zwar, daß sie viel Verstand, Verdienste, und Geschicklichkeit besitzen: allein dieß ändert meine Meynung noch nicht, daß ein Fräulein mit ihnen nicht glücklich leben kann. Bedenken sie nur alles, was ich ihnen schon gesagt habe! Wären sie von Adel, so sollten sie mir der liebste unter allen Freyer seyn; ja, ich würde sie den vornehmsten vorziehen. Nun aber bleibe ich bey meiner Regel. Machen sie eine Person glücklich, die ihnen am Stande gleich ist, und lassen sie sich den Appetit zu den Fräuleins vergehen." Gottsched, *Die deutsche Schaubühne nach den Regeln der Griechen und Römer* (Leipzig: Bernhard Christoph Breitkopf, 1748), 4:183.

betrothal, but instead with the demonstration that all the events in the comedy are due to injudiciousness, to the failure to know and pursue the proper course of action.

A nearly constant theme in Enlightenment comedy, blindness to proper moral judgment, is portrayed with a metadramatic valence in Johann Elias Schlegel's *Der geschäftige Müßiggänger* (*The Diligent Good-for-Nothing*, 1743). This comedy depicts the repeated failures of an apprentice jurist, Fortunat, to execute his assigned tasks. He is incapable of arriving at the appropriate place at the appropriate time, and is always preoccupied with anything and everything except for what is truly urgent. The comedy depicts a constant back-and-forth between Fortunat and his family, between the voice of responsibility and the youth who refuses to listen. While they attempt to convince him to attend to his professional responsibilities, he pursues his inconsequential interests. In a conversation between Fortunat and his stepfather, Sylvester, the son's failure is addressed with the sententious blatancy characteristic of so many of the plays written in Gottsched's purview:

> Sylvester: You act the whole damn day like you are the busiest man in the world. But I have never seen you do what you should be doing; or finish what you should, when you should.
> Fortunat: Father, I never do anything mischievous.
> Sylvester: Oh my! Whatever's useless, that's mischievous.[11]

This dialogue between father and son presents *in nuce* the problem that the subsequent scenes laboriously unfurl. Unable to recognize the moral truth his stepfather advocates, Fortunat catches himself in a repetitive loop, from which even the most strident interventions of mother and father cannot rescue him. This failure is described by the stepfather as Fortunat's incapacity to direct his actions toward an end with social utility. His failure is one of judgment, a

11. "Sylvester: Ihr thut den ganzen geschlagenen Tag, als wenn ihr der geschäfftigste Mensch von der Welt wäret. Aber ich habe noch nicht geshen, daß ihr was gethan hättet, was ihr gesollt habt; oder daß ihr gethan hättet, wenn ihr gesollt habt. Fortunat: Herr Vater, ich thue nie was Unrechtes. Sylvester: Je! was unnütze ist, das ist unrecht." Gottsched, *Die deutsche Schaubühne*, 4:266.

failure to recognize things as they in fact are. His dilatory flitting about results from a cognitive shortcoming: time and again Fortunat undertakes a project he does not pursue to its completion, instead allowing himself to become absorbed in whatever else he encounters. Indeed, the very notion of a project, of a course of action directed toward a finite end, would be an inapt description of what Fortunat does in this comedy; his actions are not capable of maintaining the continuity in time constitutive of this concept. Fortunat's activity lacks the unity of a sustained action—the capacity to maintain the continuous direction toward an end over time.

The exposition of this comedy also provides an unusually complex reflection on the nature of Fortunat's moral defect and its metadramatic ramifications. In the opening scene, Fortunat expresses his desire to make a portrait of his stepfather. The conflict that plays out in the dialogue between father and son is the result of Fortunat's failure to meet his professional responsibilities that morning. Instead, Fortunat had spent his time painting Aesop's fable "The Fox and the Grapes." Aesop's story of the fox who curses the grapes he cannot reach mirrors Fortunat's own shortcomings. The irony of Fortunat's choice to create a visual representation of this fable is that, like the fox, Fortunat does not fully execute the actions he undertakes. He is blind to the meaning of the image and thus blind to his own failures. Fortunat's obsession with painting, moreover, elicits his father's criticism that such activities lack utility. Unable to grasp the moral lesson of Aesop's fable, Fortunat simultaneously fails to recognize the utility of art. His is a cognitive shortcoming: the inability to see things as they are, even in the act of rendering their likenesses.

Such a cognitive failure is encoded as a moral failure in this play, indeed as the very inability to conceive of the moral purpose of art. One can even go so far as to say that Fortunat's myriad stillborn attempts to bring his projects to fruition result from the inability to order actions and events into a meaningful sequence—or better yet into a continuous syntactic unity. In fact, one might say this comedy portrays the competition between syntactic and punctual dimensions of the comic. It is ultimately concerned with the

necessity of strict continuity among individual actions and episodes for the construction of a whole. The trips to the cobbler, to the chief advocate, to his client—these are so many actions that do not achieve the necessary continuity. It is not a stretch to suggest that Fortunat is an embodiment of the punctual dimension of the comic. Schlegel's drama itself performs in its syntagmatic array the failure of the punctual dimension of the comic.

One could easily add still further examples showing that the foundation of many plots in the early Enlightenment is the assertion that cognitive weakness causes moral failure. A comedy is a comedy because it tells the story of a figure's failure to adjust his or her view to accord with things as they are. This conception of moral failure is not unique to early Enlightenment comedy, but rather depended on a concurrent idea in moral philosophy. The salient conceptual heading in moral discourse was nothing other than the fool (*der Narr*). The entry under the lemma "Narr" in Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon* evinces a number of analogues with the comedic discourse I have been discussing. Zedler refers to a fool as someone who suffers from "weakness" issuing from a lack of "judgment."[12] A lack of *judicium* or *Beurtheilungs-Kraft* translates, according to Zedler, into a "ruin of the human will," which robs the human subject of "mastery over himself." Such vices as excessive ambition, greed, and lust all result from the mind's failure to achieve proper control over the will. The parallel with Schlegel's comedy is unmistakable. Fortunat's incapacity to accomplish any of his assigned tasks results not from an alternate understanding of the good but rather from a weak mind. One might say, then, that the signal accomplishment of early Enlightenment comedy was to banish one fool, the stage fool, only to replace him with another, the moral fool. The fool, according to this design, became a figure of human finitude.

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

Here it is helpful to recall a remark Lessing makes in passing about the difference between Plautus's fool and the modern one. In his eighth annotation to the translation of Plautus's *The Prisoners*, Lessing says that the modern reader may be able to learn a lot from the parasite, but that the creation of a similar comic role under modern conditions must proceed differently.[13] He remarks that whereas the ancients could use a single figure whose actions embodied comic failure, without investing in their psychology, a fool in the modern period is defined by his *Hirngespinste*, by the illusions and machinations of the mental faculty. The fool is reconceived by Lessing in terms of his psychological faculties.

The punctual dimension of the comic thus leads a subterranean existence in the early Enlightenment; it persists as a form of failure or shortcoming. The comic antics of the fool are not simply disavowed for once and all, but instead transformed into the failures of human judgment. The effects of this covert metamorphosis are especially evident in Lessing's *Der junge Gelehrte* (*The Young Scholar*, 1754).[14] The play was first performed in 1747 and 1748, years before its publication, and in a context closely connected to the reform movement. Lessing demonstrates a keen awareness not only of the conventions governing the attempt to bring forth a unified comedic genre, but also of the need to broaden and enrich them. Consonant with his remarks on Plautus, Lessing is more interested in the logic of a gradual transformation than in instituting an abrupt break with the past.

13. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 1:776.

14. My discussion of Lessing's comedy deviates in significant respects from the sort of analyses that have been advanced in the existing secondary literature. The literature has been largely preoccupied with the question of whether the protagonist is a one-dimensional character type, as one finds in many comedies of this period, or whether Lessing articulates a fuller vision of character. This discussion dates back at least to Erich Schmidt, *Lessing: Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Schriften* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923). It was revived in Hinck, *Das deutsche Lustspiel*. In the same vein, see Rolf Christian Zimmerman, "Die Devise der wahren Gelehrsamkeit: Zur satirischen Absicht von Lessings Komödie *Der junge Gelehrte*," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 66 (1992): 283–299.

Lessing's choice of a young scholar as the focus of his comedy is not without precedent. For instance, it is highly likely that the young playwright was recrafting the stock figure known as *Il dottore* from the *commedia dell'arte*. But Lessing's protagonist Damis is not simply a copy of the misanthropic know-it-all from the Italian improvisational stage. Rather, Damis evinces a stronger similarity to the type of comedic character we discovered in Schlegel's Fortunat. Like his contemporary, Lessing's protagonist Damis is distinguished by an inflated self-conception, especially an unwavering conviction of his own brilliance, that blinds him to his own limitations. He claims he is the master of languages ancient and modern, ostentatiously displaying his knowledge of Latin throughout the comedy. Despite Damis's expectation of victory in an academic competition announced in the very first scene of the comedy, his book is not accorded the recognition of his scholarly peers, and he ends the play in dejection. Particularly important for the present argument, however, are not so much the plot details as their structural configuration. It is crucial for the play's formal arrangement that the protagonist's swollen self-image ultimately hinders his ability to execute his many ambitious intellectual projects. In the words of his servant Anton, "everything" for the protagonist "is a transition."[15] Nothing, in other words, is ever completed; nothing stays the focus of his attention long enough to come to fruition; the self-effacement of onrushing time is, one might say, inscribed into the structure of Damis's personality. Damis the fool lacks a capacity for judgment that would enable him to establish the continuity in time necessary to complete his projects.

One can glean the importance of this governing feature of the protagonist's personality from a series of utterances made by Damis's father, Chrysander, in scene 4 of act 3. In a heated exchange, Chrysander attacks his son's self-righteous claim to infallibility. When Damis attempts to instruct his father that Socrates's Xanthippe was not an insufferable woman—contravening a standard humanist trope—his father responds with excoriation. At the end of the rant, Chrysander remarks, "So be quiet with your

15. Lessing and Barner, *Werke und Briefe*, 1:159.

foolish antics (*Narrenspossen*); I do not want you to instruct me otherwise."[16] The reference to Damis's behavior as "foolish antics" is not coincidental. This was the term that everyone from Gottsched to Lessing used to pick out the fool's punctual comic techniques. This was, indeed, the very form of the comic that the reformers wished to banish from the stage. In identifying his son's academic pretensions with the machinations of the fool, the father points out the continuity between this play and the comic tradition allegedly disavowed by the reform movement. The father indicates that punctual comic effects are not a formal feature of the play—not an element in dialogue—but instead a dimension of the protagonist's character.

As the scene continues, the central importance of Lessing's use of the ostensibly discredited concept of the fool becomes clear. Chrysander (the father) goes on, "You are such a fool (*eingemachter Narr*), such a bore—don't take it personally, my son—such an abstruse Pickelhering (*ein überstudierter Pickelhering*)—but don't take it personally—."[17] The father thus calls his own son by one of the most common traditional monikers of the fool. Lessing's artful coup is to conceive of the derided figure of the fool as a dimension of Damis's person, as a cognitive shortcoming. Punctual comic elements are recoded as Damis's myopic moral vision that inhibits him from achieving a proper view of the world. The exclusion of this comic form, constitutive of the moral serviceability of comedy, thereby reappears in Lessing's comedy on the level of the syntactic unfolding of character.

The function of the comedic genre and its representation of moral failure depend on each other. Whereas this connection has most often been conceived of in terms of moral messages inscribed in dramatic texts, the comedies by Schlegel and Lessing open up an alternative perspective. They indicate that Enlighenment drama, with its close ties to the theater, became a vehicle for the *training of moral capacities*. For these comedies were not just to be read; they

16. Ibid., 1:209.
17. Ibid.

were to be staged, alongside other similar stagings, and through the experience of repetition, to inculcate moral truths.

It is worth emphasizing the forms of moral breakdown to which Fortunat and Damis fall prey. Both are obtuse to moral judgment because of their inability to recognize the temporal unity of moral action. Fortunat vainly attempts to sustain an intention for the duration of a project and becomes immediately absorbed in the next activity that crosses his path. Damis, meanwhile, is so misguided as to the character of his intellectual capacities that he inflates his projects to the point where he properly completes none. This chapter has argued that this particular mode of moral shortcoming itself figures as the embodiment of the paradigmatic, laughter-provoking elements, the proscription of which provided the foundation of the comedic genre in the early Enlightenment. The fool, that is, becomes a flaw internal to the protagonist: his inability to achieve the temporal unity required for a moral action. Enlightenment comedy focuses on this form of moral failure in order to articulate the negative models that will train moral capacities in the spectator and reader. What the protagonist cannot do, the spectator must learn to do. In this sense, comedy is a form of theatrical training.

The discrete events depicted onstage train the spectator to recognize increasingly complex orders of causal unity—to recognize the syntax of a unified plot in the cases where a comedic protagonist (Fortunat, Damis) cannot. This is the function of Enlightenment comedy; this is its moral charge. Whereas the comedic hero remains in the thrall of the present, unable to connect a single moment with those before or after, the task of the spectator is to link scene with scene, act with act, into ever-increasing levels of causal complexity. The spectator should see the play as *simplex* and *unum*, whereas the protagonist notices only a disconnected array. As the moral failures of the protagonists issue from a weakness of judgment that inhibits them from seeing the *unum* behind the plurality of temporally unfolding events, the spectator becomes aware of and learns to avoid the moral pitfalls by learning to string together the unity of action. The identification of moral failure as fundamentally corrigible—its codification as cognitive

weakness—translates, dramaturgically, into training for the spectator in increasingly complex orders of causal unity. The inability of the protagonist to link event to event, action to action, and scene to scene shows the spectator how to recognize the drama's syntactic whole—that is, the causal unity that would allow for the potentially successful pursuit of moral ends. Damis and Fortunat are, to borrow Nietzsche's wording, animals unable to keep a promise. Enlightenment comedy tries to make humans of these brutes, drilling into them the capacity to sustain an intention. As moral failure arises from an incapacity to see a thought through to its completion, the task of comedy is to eradicate the will of such a lapse. The Enlightenment sought to banish the fool from the spectator, just as from the stage.