

THE PLACE OF LAUGHTER IN LIFE

In addition to providing an essential ingredient in the recipe for a flourishing society, the syncopation of work and play also provided latitude to redescribe the activity of theatergoing. Chapter 9 uncovered the modulation of the spectator's experience in *policey* discourse and the consequent function assigned to comic theater. But the defense of the pleasure provided by public entertainment also drew inspiration from a teleological account of laughter that had found partisans already in antiquity. Advocated most influentially by Cicero and Quintilian—but with lines of filiation reaching back as far as Plato and up through the church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)—the gold-standard apology for laughter pointed to its restorative and rehabilitative potential.¹ Of course, recovery

1. See Anton Hügli, “Lachen, das Lächerliche,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001).

counts as an individual and social good only by virtue of its participation in a high-order good, namely, the universally binding good of making one's labor and indeed one's life useful to the creation of a flourishing society. Assigning worth to laughter because of its subordinate usefulness raises a number of questions. Is this usefulness an unconditional effect of the bodily experience of laughter? Or is its fit for a well-ordered society dependent on the cause of laughter, on the statements and/or gestures that solicit the spectator's response? And if the worth of laughter is determined by the relationship to its external source, what conditions must be satisfied in order for laughter to count as societally beneficial?

Whenever the causal source of laughter comes under consideration, regulatory forces are not far behind. And for as long as laughter has been an object of knowledge—even, as we shall see, of medical knowledge—the distinction between its proper and improper varieties has seemed necessary. It is important to note that the word *regulation* need not bear the burden of heavy pathos; it need not evoke, that is, the image of pernicious and suppressive forces. Wherever human social life exists or has existed, norms of propriety, even in matters of play, have played a form-giving role.² Chapter 8 divided up these patterns in terms of their temporal organization, their paradigmatic punctuality or syntactic duration. But that is only part of the equation. The appropriateness or inappropriateness of laughter, its permissibility for certain contexts, depends on the kind of meaning transmitted in the act of laughter. The disciplining of laughter, including its communicative and semantic dimension, figured centrally in the decades around 1750 in assigning the theater the appropriate seat in life.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to trace the transformations of the conceptual understanding of laughter that emerged in response to the theatrical reform movement. The dynamism had its source in a ferment of discontent, as visible, for example, in a sequence of slapstick scenes from one of the most irreverent and iconoclastic writers of the 1770s. The scenes in question, from Jakob

2. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1949).

Michael Reinhold Lenz's (1751–1792) *Der neue Menoza oder Geschichte des Cumbanischen Prinzen Tandi* (*The New Menoza or Prince Tandi of Cumba*, 1774), are especially apposite because they portray, with brevity and clarity, the critical nodes in changing attitudes toward the purpose of laughter. As a member of what became known as the Storm and Stress movement, comprised of an engaged circle of young artists and intellectuals in Strasbourg, Lenz was acutely interested in overthrowing the existing conventions of stage propriety. Lenz deserves attention not least because Storm and Stress writers, as Goethe later pointed out in his autobiography, possessed a strong fondness for the “absurdities of the clowns” (*Absurditäten der Clowns*).³ While this fascination is also evident in Lenz's translations of Plautus and Shakespeare, the most telling evidence is from his original compositions. There, Lenz shows a strong interest in the idea that theatrical spectatorship should work as an instrument of restoring health to the laboring body. The two scenes that will concern us here thwart the early Enlightenment demand for the internal unity of plot, and constitute a sort of scenic addendum addressing the conditions of playmaking and theatergoing at large.

Lenz's comedy is about a visitor from an unfamiliar Asian land, who has come to Germany to “get to know the mores of the most enlightened European nations.”⁴ It characterizes the reform movement as fundamentally geliophobic, particularly in its identification of good taste that adheres to formal rules. The final sequence pits a young academic named Zierau against his father, the mayor of the town Naumberg and a faithful habitu   of the fool's performances. The governmental role of the father can easily be skipped over, given that in the preceding five acts his position as mayor is unimportant. Even so, the exchange between father and son makes a subtle political statement, particularly because the former holds an official governmental position. The son, meanwhile, plays the role of an austere academic who has “sacrificed more than three years to the muses and graces in Leipzig.”⁵ Mere mention of this town in Saxony

3. Goethe, FA I 14:540.

4. Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Werke und Briefe in drei B  nden*, ed. Sigrid Damm (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 2005), 1:133.

5. Ibid.

closely associated with Gottsched and other reform-minded luminaries indicates that the son, Zierau, functions here as a fictional proxy for the norms and aspirations of the early Enlightenment reform movement. And so it comes as no surprise when he brandishes the three Aristotelian unities (time, space, and action), crucial pillars of rule-based dramatic composition, in his assault on his father's theatrical predilections. The father-son exchange, which by the second scene breaks out into literal slapstick, executes a verbal and corporeal attack on the veneration of rule-based drama and theater.

The first of the two concluding scenes can be straightforwardly summarized. After a long day of bureaucratic work, the father-mayor expresses the desire to go to the puppet show. His son refers to this activity as the pursuit of an illicit desire; doing so is like "prostituting himself" night after night in depraved pursuit of sensual satisfaction.⁶ The son's metaphorical projection onto the domain of sexual misconduct establishes a connection between laughter and sex. In other words, laughter itself is cast as a corrupt species of enjoyment, at least so long as it is not yoked to external regulating instance. In response, the mayor advocates going to the puppet show for reasons that reveal a novel notion of theatrical spectatorship, conceived in direct opposition to the reform movement. "Today," the mayor explains, "I have written until I am lame and blind. I have need of a laugh."⁷ Underlying these words is the familiar distinction between the serious business of work and the salubrious pleasure of theatrical spectatorship. He even goes so far as to announce his need for *Rekreation*, a lexical choice more unusual in German than English, and thus bearing almost technical connotations. And he also makes clear that this relief will be supplied by none other than the fool, his beloved Hanswurst.⁸

The contrast to his son's position could not be more flagrant. Zierau insists that the performances of the fool do not live up to the standards of good taste and thus cannot be a source of genuine pleasure. In his

6. Ibid., 188.

7. Ibid., 187.

8. Ibid., 188.

own formulation, "Pleasure without taste is not pleasure" (*Vergnügen ohne Geschmack ist kein Vergnügen*).⁹ He tries to convince his father that the key to spectatorial pleasure lies in the adherence to the rules of dramatic composition ostensibly derived from ancient poetic authorities. And with this, the mayor agrees to go to the theater in order to test whether knowledge of poetic rules enhances his experience of theatrical performance. When the father storms back onto the stage at the start of the next scene, stick in hand, he claims that attentiveness to the rules of dramatic composition, to the fulfillment of Gottsched's classicizing standards, undermined his absorption in the play. "I counted and calculated and looked at my watch," the father complains as he beats his son. "I'll teach you to prescribe rules for how I should amuse myself (*wie ich mich amüsieren soll*)."¹⁰ The father lambastes his son for averting his attention to rules that detract from his pleasure in viewing and that disturb his ordinarily rapt attention to the performance.

The father's verbal and physical explosion, which contains a litany of insults and accusations, also points to a deeper issue. Whereas the father wanted nothing other than the restoration provided by "that chap, that Hanswurst,"¹¹ the son prevailed upon him to commit himself to the "improvement of all arts"¹² in the name of taste. The scene thus counterposes two kinds of evaluative criteria for the theatergoing experience: broadly speaking, entertainment and education. Spectatorship, the father insists, becomes stale and artificial when its apprehension is mediated by a rule-based awareness rather than absorption. According to the view espoused by the mayor and implicitly endorsed by the structure of the text, the early Enlightenment program blocks the potential of rehabilitation from the day's labor and means having one's "pleasure ruined."¹³ In the words of another of Lenz's comedies, "Does one always have to learn something? Isn't it enough if we amuse ourselves?"¹⁴ Entertainment, that is, is presented as a

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 190.

11. Ibid., 188.

12. Ibid., 134.

13. Ibid., 190.

14. Ibid., 199.

value that alone justifies the theater and its audience, regardless of a performance's educational utility.

Before abandoning this example, a final point must be made concerning the confrontation between father and son. The final scenes of Lenz's comedy can also be read as a reversal of the symbolic ritual that, according to the reform movement's founding myth, had inaugurated a new way of conducting the business of theater. Rather than driving the fool from the stage in the name of *prodesse*—of improving taste by means of an educational mandate—here the representative of the body politic, championing a principle of *delectare*, expels the agelastic advocate of reform. Thus Lenz's scene presents us with the dramatized installation of the new conception of the theater—not one oriented toward generic and compositional unity, but toward the solicitation of laughter, culminating in individual restoration and collective coalescence. This sequence of scenes provides a verbal and corporeal agon that dramatizes the desire for a rupture with the key aspects of the reform program. Of particular importance for the following discussion is the link between theatrical spectatorship and pleasure, especially the pleasure of the physical act of laughter. So what are the lines of filiation and transformation that made it possible for the final scenes from Lenz's comedy to assume the shape they did? How could rule-governed drama come to seem anathema to the rapt enjoyment of spectatorship? These questions demand historical excavation.

Even though Lenz depicts the early Enlightenment program as the enemy of laughter, it would be a misrepresentation to call early Enlightenment writers fundamentally agelastic or geliophobic. Reform-minded writers did not proscribe all forms of laughter. Instead, they sought to articulate its rationally controlled and teleologically directed modalities by restricting the pool of acceptable causes.

The extreme demand for composure and deep misgivings about the explosion of laughter are nowhere more evident than in the sudden appearance in the first half of the eighteenth century of the *rührendes Lustspiel* or *weinerliches Lustspiel*, both of which stood

in close proximity to the French *comédie larmonyante*. All three terms lack ancient pedigree and run athwart the traditional alignment of tragedy with tears and comedy with laughter. Even the mere appearance of these genres counted as an attempt to imbue comedy with the seriousness characteristic of the tragic genre and thereby to appropriate some of its esteem as well.¹⁵ The idea of a comedy more tearful than hilarious found its most prominent champion in Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–1769), a widely revered professor and philosopher in Leipzig. In addition to publishing plays that are, at least from our historical vantage point, barely recognizable as comedies except for their title pages and betrothal narratives, Gellert also authored a tractate in Latin on the virtues of a mirthless species of comedy entitled *Pro Comœdia Commovente*, which Lessing translated into German.¹⁶ While the text bears all the familiar trappings of self-legitimization via classical references, its most revealing argumentative maneuver is the distinction between two forms of risibility: “a laughter aloud” and a laughter that takes place in the “innermost of the heart.”¹⁷ The seemingly preposterous classification of an inaudible species of laughter, which may have been intended as an echo of the medieval Christian trope of a *risus cordis*, functions in Gellert’s apology as an attempt to fold comedy and tragedy into a single genre.¹⁸ He sought to enhance the status of comedy by incorporating tragedy’s gravitas while still allowing genre-specific, thematic foci. Gellert

15. Lessing characterizes the emergence of bourgeois tragedy and sentimental comedy as twin enterprises, based on the reduction in rank of the first and promotion in the second. See the introductory remarks in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Jürgen Stenzel (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 3:264–267.

16. The entire text has been reprinted in Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, *Gesammelte Schriften: Kritische, Kommentierte Ausgabe*, ed. Bernd Witte (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1988), 5:46–173.

17. Gellert, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:149.

18. See Marc Föcking, “‘Qui habitat in caelis irridebit eos’: Paradiesisches und irdisches Lachen in Dantes *Divina Commedia*,” in *Paradies Topographien der Sehnsucht*, ed. Claudia Benthien and Manuela Gerlof (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 77–98.

believes that, absent solicitations of laughter, such a comedy could provide the spectator with “a more serious emotion” (*Gemüths-bewegung*) and a “more composed gratification” (*eine gesetztere Freude*).¹⁹ Brushing aside the explosive moment of laughter, which sets the body into wild motion and transgresses its boundaries, Gellert here imagines a perfectly continent and internally efficacious variety of laughter. Such laughter is not externalized; instead, it proceeds along a purely internal communicative channel that, by avoiding potential interruptions through the occasional audience guffaw, can relate issues of enhanced moral significance. This conception of laughter fit together with the conception of an internally unified comedic form that stood at the center of part 2.²⁰

The appeal to a silent form of laughter rested on a division between the upper section of the body, home to positively valorized intellectual and emotional capacities, and the lower domain, where fleeting and compulsive desire is born. Accordingly, Gellert imagines a comedy without appeal to those “who wish to shake their bellies with a heavy laughter.”²¹ At the same time, the elimination of an undesirable corporeal response is part of an exercise in cultural aggrandizement, of altering the status of the genre by attracting a select audience. The shift in status demanded that comedy no longer cater to the predilections of the lower social classes, which supposedly cannot discriminate among varieties of laughter in a way that accords with the pedagogical mission of the theater.²² Among writers from the first half of the eighteenth century, there was a widespread view that the sort of laughter enjoyed by the “ignorant rabble” appeals only to “the amusements of the

19. Gellert, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:149. For an important reiteration of the same distinction, buttressed by physiological assertions, see Carl Friedrich Flögel, *Geschichte der komischen Literatur* (Liegnitz/Leipzig: David Sieger, 1784), 1:31–33.

20. In this context, Lessing's observations from the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* are worthy of close consideration. See Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:479–536.

21. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 5:149.

22. A representative statement linking the reform movement and the disparagement of the baser predilections of the group identified as the rabble: “Die Poesie ist eine Kunst so der Wahrheit und Tugend viel Dienste thun kann, wenn sie in den Händen eines verständigen und redlichen Bürgers ist, und mehr nach den Regeln der Weltweisheit, als nach dem verderbten Geschmacke des unverständigen Pöbels eingerichtet wird.” See Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Der Biedermann*, ed. Wolfgang Martens (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1975), pt. 2, 123.

body," while paying little heed to the more noble "amusements of the understanding."²³ The power of this distinction rested on its crisscrossing of physiological and anthropological divisions with stereotypical gestures of social condescension. These dimensions coincide in their ahistorical character. Just as the dispositions of the upper and lower domains of the body are unchanging, so too is the ruffraff forever driven by the need for base and fleeting amusement. Improvement of the meanings transmitted in comedy fit together with an improvement of the social groups addressed by the theater.

Although Gellert's fantasy of a "laughter of the heart" undoubtedly marks out an extreme position, it points to a general trend that can also be noticed in more moderate positions. The tactical gambit of the reform program rested on the belief that "a comic object" (*ein komischer Gegenstand*) should not be unconditionally identified with "that which has something risible about it" (*etwas Lächerliches an sich*).²⁴ In other words, the goal was to draw a qualitative distinction between the broad class of things capable of soliciting laughter and the genuinely comical. Lessing, for instance, repeatedly expresses a cautious aversion to the corporeal expression of laughter, including in the introduction to his 1760 translation of the French *lumières* Denis Diderot (1713–1784), where he remarks, "The truly risible (*das wahre Lächerliche*) is not that which makes one laugh the loudest; and imperfections (*Ungereimtheiten*) should not just set our lungs in motion."²⁵ Insofar as laughter has a role to play, it must, rather, be subservient to a training in the recognition of moral failures and thus a stepping stone along the avenue of moral improvement. In much the same vein, Lessing elsewhere says that the "true universal utility" (*wahrer allgemeiner Nutzen*) of comedy

23. Martin Stern and Thomas Wilhelm, "Samuel Werenfels (1657–1740): Rede von den Schauspielen," *Daphnis* 22 (1993): 131. Gellert taught at the university in Leipzig beginning in 1745. Despite quibbles and minor differences, Gellert undoubtedly participated in the same general movement, characterized by common concerns and reform aspirations, with his colleague at the university, Gottsched.

24. Christian Ernst Schenk, *Komisches Theater* (Breslau: Carl Gottfried Meyer, 1759), 51. This rather unknown text by Schenk also contains the lengthiest programmatic elaboration of comedy in the terms set forth by Gellert. See pp. 51–88 in the same volume.

25. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 5/1:16.

“lies in laughter itself, in training this capacity to detect the risible (*das Lächerliche*).”²⁶ These remarks delineate a qualitative boundary between the expressive, corporeal dimension of laughter—its volume or intensity—and its long-lasting, ratiocinative repercussions. The distinction between these two temporalities was based on the hierarchical rank of the faculty of reason above the senses, passions, and affects. Lessing, for one, identifies the absence of a substantive connection to more epistemically and morally focused ratiocination as the source of the overwhelming mediocrity in mid-eighteenth-century German theater. As he observes in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, whoever “wants more than to convulse with his belly, whoever also wants to laugh with the understanding (*mit dem Verstande lachen will*),” abandons the theater after a single visit.²⁷ We can legitimately take Lessing’s diagnosis from 1768 as one of the culminating gestures in an epochal project of cultivating a species of laughter harnessed by reason and thus capable of improving aesthetic taste in general and the theater in particular. It does not take much imagination to hear an echo of Lessing’s remark in Lenz’s play, particularly in the association of laughter with prostitution.

But what does it mean to “laugh with the understanding,” to imbue laughter with a rational content and purpose? To answer this question and round out the picture of the early Enlightenment, it is helpful to consider another text: the most protracted attempt to craft a regime of laughter compatible with the “purification of taste.”²⁸ In the treatise *Gedancken von Schertzen* (*Reflections on Jokes*, 1744), by Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777), reason

26. “Ihr wahrer allgemeiner Nutzen liegt in dem Lachen selbst; in der Übung dieser Fähigkeit das Lächerliche zu bemerken.” Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:323.

27. Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:656.

28. The phrase is used explicitly and programmatically in the treatise I am discussing. See Georg Friedrich Meier, *Gedancken von Schertzen* (Halle: Carl Hermann Hemmerde, 1744), 2. As a student of Baumgarten, Meier’s conception of taste differs in certain respects from Gottsched’s. Meier insists on an impermeable boundary separating the higher and lower mental faculties, and relegates taste to judgments concerning the perfection—that is, the beauty—of objects that humans become aware of via their lower faculties, in this case the senses.

serves as the tribunal over laughter. A student, translator, and biographer of the man often referred to as the pioneer of the science of aesthetics in Germany, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762), Meier was a close observer of the contemporary debates over the possibility of a philosophically grounded demonstration of the rules of artistic, especially poetic, production. Jokes belong to the domain of taste because their acceptable forms are all, in Meier's view, verbal formulations; yet words are spoken and understood with the lower mental faculties, the senses. Since he structures his text more like a rhetorical manual than a commentary on artworks, its task is to categorize, explain, and provide rules for the construction of laughter-provoking statements in much the same way that rhetoric had traditionally treated persuasion. At issue in the treatise is a conception of the joke that is much broader than an ossified verbal formula, incorporating, even if often dismissively, almost all spontaneous as well as rehearsed verbal and gestural acts that can call forth laughter.

The treatise's structuring opposition between jokes in accord with and those contrary to taste falls out along lines defined by the distinction between, roughly speaking, the deliberations of the mind and the disinhibitions of the body. Again, physiological-anthropological distinctions intersect with social ones. For the division between the upper and lower domains of the body is supported, in turn, by reference to the erratic antics of the fool. The following passage warrants being quoted in its entirety, since it cuts to the heart of the opposition between, on the negative side, the irrational and basely instrumental machinations of the body and, more affirmatively, the cool and controlled activity of reason:

Whoever makes his body, by means of industry and practice, into an instrument for the amusement of others, deserves the unequivocal disdain of rational people. Jokes that are related with incongruous and extreme distortions of the face and inhuman twisting of its parts belong on the stage. And even there, they have already been chased away. A speech that is related with a grimaced face is a joke that belongs to a vulgar and raffish taste.

Wer seinen Körper durch Fleiß und Uebung zu einem Werckzeuge, andere Leute zu belustigen, macht, verdient ohnfehlbar die Verachtung vernünftiger Leute. Schertze, die mit ungereimten und ausserordentlichen Verzuckungen der Gesichtszüge, und unmenschlichen Verdrehungen der Teile desselben, vorgetragen werden, gehören auf die Schaubühne, und da hat man sie schon weg gepeischt. Eine Rede, die mit einem Fratzen-Gesichte vorgetragen wird, ist ein Schertz der für einen groben und pöbelhaften Geschmack gehört.²⁹

The background to this passage—much like the scenes from Lenz's *Der neue Menoza*—is, of course, the notorious story of Caroline Neuber's banishment of the fool, the founding myth of the Enlightenment reform movement. Meier understands his own text as offering a conception of laughter that does not depend on gesticulations and wordplay, but that culminates in an act of ratiocination. The characteristic comic strategies of the fool treat laughter as an end in itself, as a self-fulfilling species of sensory pleasure, whereas a more rational mode of the comic treats laughter as subordinate to higher-order cognitive activities. The form of laughter deserving of approbation, meanwhile, is founded on and culminates in what the treatise calls "wit" or *Witz*. A joke in good taste depends on the speaker's ability to "to test and to judge" the sources and implications of a joke before they are being made; it requires deliberation and patience, not spontaneity and celerity.³⁰ If the rational power of wit is in command, a joke will depend on comparisons among mental representations, on the discovery and elaboration of the way things stand objectively.³¹ A joke in good taste is, then, one that unearths unexpected relationships among mental representations (*Vorstellungen*) of objects; a joke is an instrument for fabricating new knowledge. According to this scheme, joking may come to the surface in speech and therefore count as a sensory experience, but its ultimate worth is dictated by subservience to higher-order forms of reasoning. Because wit allows for crafting combinations between seemingly disparate or disanalogous entities, laughter expresses the listener's discovery of a connection where one had hitherto been undisclosed.

29. Meier, *Gedancken von Schertzen*, 114.

30. *Ibid.*, 6.

31. See *Ibid.*, 19ff.

In a move that reveals the extreme limitations of the theory, Meier claims that any pleasure to be had in jokes is secondary to their intellectual accomplishment. Viewed from a distanced historical perspective, the claim that laughter should be caused by the discovery of knowledge may well be little more than the illusion of a stalwart rationalist. After all, the joke, according to this model, is not pleasurable play but a veridical mode of world observation. The basic premise of this intellectualist approach—which comes to expression in Gellert, Lessing, and Meier, but that, in truth, amounts to a broad-based historical trend—is that the body must be subjugated to the command of reason.³²

Treating jokes as a form of knowledge making, and laughter as an internalized sentiment, can make the act of theatrical spectatorship seem like high-powered ratiocination. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, subsequent years brought resistance to this perspective. Countervailing voices did not champion the irrational or the anarchic; instead, the reassessment of laughter's value remained, in an indispensable sense, internal to the project of creating social order through the exclusion of supposedly improper, deleterious, or useless forms of laughter. That being said, anachronic and retroleptic strategies provided decisive instruments in breaking with the reform program.

It is impossible to tell the story of the comic in the eighteenth century as a forward march of the civilizing process, nor can one speak of ever more expansive suppression. On the contrary, a general mood of dismissiveness toward Gottsched and company became audible in complaints that he had made the stage overserious and had mistakenly banished from the stage “the sole doctor for a large number of men” (*der einzige Arzt für eine grosse Anzahl Menschen*).³³

32. In addition to the passages from Gellert and Lessing that I have already cited, see Johann Christoph Gottsched, *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst vor die Deutschen* (1730), 601; and, more expansively, Gottsched, *Critische Dichtkunst* (1751), 654.

33. Remark by Thomas Abbt, reprinted in Justus Möser, *Harlekin: Texte und Materialien mit einem Nachwort*, ed. Henning Boetius (Bad Homburg: Max Gehlen, 1968), 68.

The intrinsic potential of the theater, including the salubrious individual and collective function it might discharge in a well-ordered society, demanded the restoration of antecedent forms of the comic.

The reference to the fool as the “sole doctor for a large number of men” contains two features worthy of closer consideration: the reference to the fool’s presence as therapeutic and the characterization of his palliative effects as essentially collective. In these two predications, we can track tectonic shifts in the conception of theatrical mirth. Perhaps most consequentially for the history of German dramatic literature, these shifts led to a categorical revaluation of the fool.

A good impression of the shifting conceptual landscape can be gathered from the theater by the doctor from Heidelberg Franz May (1742–1812), who published a text under the revealing title “On the Influence of Comedies on the Health of Working Citizens” (“Von dem Einfluß der Komödien auf die Gesundheit arbeitender Staatsbürger,” 1786).³⁴ May, who maintained an active engagement with the theater in the neighboring town of Mannheim, declares that the early Enlightenment movement had, to their peril, failed to realize the beneficial effects that the “farcical Hanswurst” has to offer “for the well-being of the state and its citizens.”³⁵ He goes on to say that “those improvers of the German stage” did not grasp that “laughter causes (*beibringen*) the spectators’ nerves profitable convulsions.”³⁶ By banishing the fool from the stage, the reform movement had disregarded the “health of the citizens” and their “lethargic bellies,” which are vulnerable to “constipation in the lower region of the body.”³⁷ But an ample dosage of explosive and uncontrollable laughter “sets the circulation of blood into a faster movement.”³⁸

Adverting to palliative physical effects in the act of laughter, as May does, simultaneously displaces the regulatory role of reason

34. Franz May, *Vermischte Schriften* (Mannheim: Neue Hof- und akademische Buchhandlung, 1786), 42–50.

35. *Ibid.*, 43.

36. *Ibid.*, 45.

37. *Ibid.*, 43.

38. *Ibid.*, 44.

characteristic of early Enlightenment writers. This rigorous emphasis on reason set aside, laughter was now afforded new functions and new possibilities. And yet there persisted a disciplinary impetus. Because of the ineluctably corporeal nature of laughter, discussions on the subject in the latter half of the eighteenth century faced a distinctive challenge: to understand laughter as a physical, bodily function while ensuring its difference from the affects and capacities of brutes. This entailed more than simply defending the Aristotelian argument, taken from book 3 of his treatise *De partibus animalium*, that laughter is a distinctively human capacity, also a theory commonplace in the eighteenth century. It further required an explicit distinction between “animalistic laughter” and the “external laughter” that was a dignified, healthful response to humor.³⁹

Thus a two-pronged compensatory strategy emerges in response to the dogma of reason. On the one hand, laughter was characterized as the motor response to a “variety of pleasant sensations (*Empfindungen*).”⁴⁰ In particular, it was sensations of external objects that caused a “convulsing of the nerves.”⁴¹ The nerves constituted, according to the prevailing physiological model of the time, the mediating instance between the inner domain of subjective experience and the outer world.⁴² This division between the cause of sensation and its subjective experience made it possible to at once provide a general defense of laughter’s social utility *and* limit it according to standards of propriety. For the intersection of *policey* and medical knowledge suggested that “laughter is beneficial for health” and health is the cornerstone of good governance.⁴³ The mere excitation of laughter, with its attendant benefits, made up for an intrinsic deficiency of the human

39. Ibid., 49.

40. Johann Christoph Adelung, *Über den Deutschen Styl: Zweiter und Dritter Teil* (Berlin: Christian Friedrich Voß, 1785), 193.

41. Ibid., 199.

42. On the far-reaching consequences of this model, see Albrecht Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003), esp. 112–129. For a representative discussion concentrated on the phenomenon of laughter, see Ernst Platner, *Neue Anthropologie für Aerzte und Weltweise* (Leipzig: Siegfried Lebrecht Crusius, 1790), 1:388–414.

43. Flögel, *Geschichte der komischen Litteratur*, 1:123.

body, namely, its proneness to exhaustion. By restoring the body, laughter allowed for the continuation and enhanced productivity of labor. The sheer enjoyment of laughter, causally related to the excitation of nerves by impingements of the external world, had to align with some basic standards of good taste, and then it could fulfill its service to society.

Although formal descriptions were not forthcoming, prospective calls for one figure in particular played a prominent role in the effort to jolt the German theater back to life. Advocates for the banished fool's return sought to counteract the "unnatural earnestness" that the reform movement had instituted.⁴⁴ Instead of opening the floodgates to all varieties of the comic, critics continued to insist on the categorical distinction between ridicule (*Verlachen*) and laughter (*Lachen*), which had been a mainstay in manuals on rhetoric since Roman antiquity.⁴⁵ What is more, they only made room for a fool who would not "spit nasty words at the ethically upstanding audience" (*Unflättereien auf das gesittete Publikum hin speien*).⁴⁶ The function of the fool was identified in his ability to "purify folly through folly" (*reinigt durch Narrheit von Narrheit*).⁴⁷ The task was then to come up with a model of the fool that could accomplish what, as Goethe writes in his first draft of the Wilhelm Meister novel, "the old philosopher promises of tragedy, namely that it purify the passions (*die Leidenschaften reinige*)."⁴⁸ Inoculation through laughter was the conceptual foundation for folly's place on the reformed stage.

Of course, much of this remains at best tentative, at worst woefully vague. But in order to understand how the fool's laughter-provoking presence should work, and why his presence became indispensable, we must fit together more pieces of the puzzle. In particular, we have to understand why the fool seemed a necessary instrument for laughter. Thus far in part 3, we have been concerned with the displacement

44. Quoted from Thomas Abbt's letter, reprinted in Möser, *Harlekin*, 63.

45. See, for instance, Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 6:322.

46. May, *Vermischte Schriften*, 44.

47. Flögel, *Geschichte der komischen Litteratur*, 1:28.

48. Goethe, FA I 9:132–133.

of the principle of reason as the source of laughter. Locating its cause in sensations and their purification, it bears particular emphasis, did away with a universal canon to which laughter must conform. Hence, it now became plausible to claim, incontrovertibly, that laughter can change “not just between different peoples (*Völkern*), but also in one and the same people at different points in time and among different social classes.”⁴⁹ Our next task, then, is to grasp the sorts of regional and historical differences that impact the conduct of laughter.

49. Adelung, *Über den Deutschen Styl*, 204.