Postlude

In perhaps the most technically astute aesthetic treatise from the turn of the nineteenth century, *Preschool of Aesthetics* (*Vorschule der Aesthetik*, 1804/1812) by Jean Paul, we find the claim that the stage fool is the "chorus of comedy."[1] It is a straightforward-enough, but also very surprising, assertion. The statement comes in a lament over the declining state of the contemporary German-speaking theatrical world. The author blames the current situation on the suppression of the figure whom he calls the "true god of laughter, the personification of humor." Reflecting on the major transformations in eighteenth-century theater, Jean Paul (1763–1825) identifies the disappearance of the fool from the stage as the event that robbed the German theater of its vitality and hindered the development of a literature of rank. In passing this judgment, Jean Paul

1. Jean Paul, *Werke* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1973), 5:160–161. All quotations are from §40, a short section entitled "Der Hanswurst."

takes a place in an impressive lineage of writers around 1800, including Goethe and Kleist, who shared the conviction that the fool, either through his presence or absence, determined the fate and phases of German theater. Jean Paul makes the fool into the centerpiece of his discussion of comic theater, well aware that the theatrical figure had been a lightning rod for critical energies, attracting vituperative attacks as well as passionate support. Looking back at the eighteenth century, there was little doubt in Jean Paul's mind that the stage fool had consistently provided a medium for disputing the conditions of dramatic composition and theatrical performance.

In his assessment, Jean Paul avoids commonplace definitions of the fool in terms of a specific linguistic register, a particular garb, or even an individual actor. Instead, he introduces the strange equivalence between the fool and the chorus. But what does the group song and dance from the most vaunted genre of classical antiquity share with the figure whose mutations since his first appearance in the German-speaking lands have been the focus of the foregoing sixteen chapters? Jean Paul's analogy, which makes the fool into a more ennobled figure than many of his predecessors would have countenanced, relies on a pattern of formal similarity between two far-removed theatrical cultures. Moreover, the analogy urges us to approach the notion of role in an emphatic sense: much like the chorus, the fool does not possess a "character of his own," but instead "hovers above the dramatis personae without being one." The two are united in a *how*, not a *what*. To be more precise, their connection lies in a practice of interaction, in a particular way of conducting dialogue. What is more, the reference to the chorus invokes a distinctive rapport between performer and spectator, as the ancient Greek chorus is a voice of retrospection and anticipation on behalf of the audience.

It is helpful to think of Jean Paul's analogy within the context of other major statements about the ancient Greek chorus from around 1800. Friedrich Schiller authored perhaps the most influential one, when he introduced the claim that the chorus separates "reflection" from "plot."[2]

2. Jean Paul was clearly familiar with Schiller's text, as is evident in Jean Paul, *Werke*, 5:396. For the relevant passage from Schiller, see *Friedrich Schiller*, "Über den Gebrauch des Chors in der Tragödie," in Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996), 5:281–291, here 288.

According to this division of responsibilities, the chorus is not an agent in the forward march of deeds and events, but is instead the source of interspersed commentary, which effects a pause and brief respite for the audience, a step back from the events on stage, and a remark on what has transpired or a preview of what is still to come. The chorus is a full-fledged member of the dramatic fiction, observing events as they transpire and even engaging in back-and-forths with the other participants in the play. But the chorus also enjoys a special ability to step outside of the story and communicate with the spectators watching it. Often enough, the commentary by the chorus seems more directed toward the spectators than the other members of the dramatic fiction, whom the chorus "hovers above." This special communicative arrangement imbues the chorus with its civic function: its odes ensure that the audience members from the polis have clarity about the meaning of the tragedy.

The theoretical accomplishment of the parallel between chorus and fool lies in the mode of explanation it encourages us to assume. It tells us to look at the stage fool primarily in terms of his function within the fabric of the fiction, to consider his distinctive way of relating to other figures and the theatrical environment. Upon this basis, Jean Paul feels justified in following what had become standard practice since Gottsched's early Enlightenment reforms, gathering together under a single heading a genuine grab bag of seemingly distinct personae. In fact, it is also the justification for the disputable translation with which I began, but have not yet acknowledged, namely, my statement that Jean Paul is here talking about the fool. For Jean Paul entitles the section "The Hanswurst," and I have implicitly claimed that, with this moniker, he is not talking about one specific actor or persona, but rather about the fool as a single category. I find the translation convincing given that Jean Paul goes on to list a number of other names, including Pickelhäring, Kasperl, Harlequin, and Lipperl, as all falling under the same category. The litany of distinct names is not evidence of just as many full-fledged individuals—the fool does not have a "character of his own"—but rather conventional ways of referring to a single theatrical and dramatic function. While a microhistorical disposition might take offense at gathering together such an array of titles under a general heading, Jean Paul is doing much the same,

as when the chorus of enslaved Trojan women from Euripides's *Hecuba* and the chorus of male Theban elders in Sophocles's *Antigone* appear as cognate theatrical devices. Jean Paul's bold analogy, ultimately, rests on two assertions. First, the German fool and the Greek chorus play a similar function in dialogue and dramatic action. Second, the fool is capable of passing under variable guises across a variety of plays, much as all Greek tragedies feature a chorus whose identity changes from case to case.

Jean Paul's discussion of the fool, composed at a watershed moment in the history of German theater, led to the heart of the issues that have stood at the center of this study. The foregoing chapters have sought to understand the confluence of cultural forces that made a renaissance of the fool in German literature around 1800 not only possible, but probable. Around the same time that the *Preschool of Aesthetics* appeared in print, Goethe was putting the finishing touches on the first part of his *Faust* tragedy, and Kleist *The Broken Jug*. As the foregoing chapters have argued, these plays lent literary prominence to a figure who had for nearly two centuries been a vehicle for testing and revising the fundamental categories of literary drama and performed theater. The fool—who had made his first appearance in the German-speaking lands in the age of Shakespeare and quickly become a fixture on the stage of the early modern period, had stood at the center of intense controversy among reform-minded Enlightenment thinkers seeking to endow the theater with moral and aesthetic legitimacy, and had provided a cornerstone of the late eighteenth-century effort to furnish the Germans with a distinctive literary tradition—became, in the years around 1800, a figure redolent with artistic possibility and a valuable instrument in the effort to put German dramatic literature on the world stage.

Jean Paul, Goethe, and Kleist were not alone in their sense that a rejuvenation of comic theater in Germany could draw powerful energies from the tradition of the stage fool. In fact, the magnetic pull of the fool could be felt across lines separating the multiple different literary centers that took shape in the years around 1800. Indeed, there emerged broad consensus among what one might call the literary avant-garde around 1800 that Enlightenment reform

efforts had misunderstood the relationship between the theater and comic play. The Romantics, for instance, also recognized that a genuine artistic resource had been lost with the fool's banishment. One the movement's leading figures in the 1790s, and a pillar of German literary culture in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853), brings a Hanswurst onto the stage in his satire *Der gestiefelte Kater* (*Puss in Boots*, 1797), in order to decry the degradation of all forms of "play" (*Spaß*) into something "common, raffish, abject" (*gemein, pöbelhaft, niederträchtig*).[3] A literary satire that portrays all the constitutive elements of the theatrical enterprise, including audience and author, Tieck's play has Hanswurst denounce the suggestion that the absence of the fool enhances the spectator's absorption in a fictional universe, and expresses skepticism about the worth of a theater without a funnyman to solicit the audience's laughter. The fool, in this play, is split between two roles: on the one side, he is a standard court jester, and, on the other, he functions as a sort of rival to the fictional Poet, who repeatedly appears to express his displeasure with the staging.[4] Beyond his standard role as commentator, Tieck's fool further claims authority over the play-within-the-play. While the Poet tries, in vain, to control the play from behind the curtain, the fool figure functions as a compère with privileged access to the other members of the fictional world and to the audience. The Poet's domain ends where the Fool's begins—in the field of theatrical visibility.

Tieck's portrayal of the fool, within a play that satirizes multiple dimensions of eighteenth-century theater, inhabits familiar conceptual terrain. The fool operates in this play—as in the writings of Herder, Lenz, Goethe, Kleist, and Jean Paul—as the paradigmatic exponent of theatrical presence, with a uniquely powerful and immediate rapport with audiences. The plot-driven serious drama of the Enlightenment, which assigned a preeminent role to the author and to fixed textuality, according to this epochal line of thought,

3. Ludwig Tieck, *Der gestiefelte Kater*, in *Schriften in zwölf Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985), 6:492–566, here 524.

4. See, in particular, Tieck, *Der gestiefelte Kater*, 6:538–542.

had not fulfilled its avowed purpose of ennobling comic theater, but instead destroyed its very essence. The recrudescence of the fool around 1800 was built on the belief that this form lies at the origin of comic theater, the indispensable essence required for the comic to achieve its theatrical purpose. The Romantics, in general, were possessed of the belief that the fool is, in the words of August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), "immortal," reappearing again and again "even when one believes so confidently to have buried him." For Schlegel, the fool is an "allegorical person" representing and thus persisting along with the comic itself.[5] The great virtue of the fool is to recognize that, in the words August Klingemann (1777–1831), another writer loosely associated with the Romantic movement, "he does not take the farce as anything higher than as a farce."[6] In other words, the power of the fool issues from his wholehearted endorsement of the audience's thrall as the highest possible theatrical achievement.

Jean Paul's analogy between the fool and the ancient Greek chorus—a notion Klingemann similarly champions—is founded on the attempt to trace comic theater back to an original rapport between stage and audience.[7] The "immortal" fool, whose multiple rebirths run across the second half of the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, persists as the demand for the experience of a theatrical performance that, with speech and gesture, holds attention in steady thrall and, in the corporeal experience of laughter, provides explosive moments of playful joy.

5. August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über die dramatische Kunst und Litteratur* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1811), 2:383.

6. August Klingemann, *Nachtwachen von Bonaventura: Freimüthigkeiten* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 39.

7. See Klingemann, *Nachtwachen von Bonaventura,* 69.