

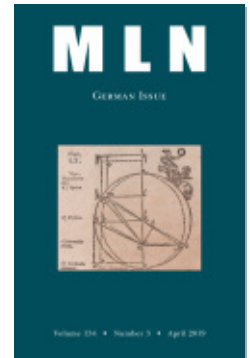


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*Persistence of Folly: On the Origins of German Dramatic
Literature* by Joel B. Lande (review)

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Joel B. Lande. *Persistence of Folly: On the Origins of German Dramatic Literature*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2018. 366 pages. ISBN 9781501727108.

Its title an alliterative echo of Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly*, Joel Lande's *Persistence of Folly* tracks the many historical transformations undergone by the figure of the fool from the Early Modern period to the Age of Goethe. Anything but a straightforward literary historical account, Lande's study reconstructs the evolving media-historical and public discursive coordinates that allowed for the continuous persistence of this bawdy agent of dramatic discontinuity. The fool is not understood here as an individual character nor even as a stock type, but as a role qua form that achieves variable theatrical embodiments in novel historical contexts. The theatrical form of the fool thereby functions as a kind of seismograph that renders legible how different periods negotiated the distinction between *Scherz* and *Ernst*, itself an evolving index of a "deep cultural need to regulate laughter" (3). As Lande demonstrates, this distinction is ultimately tied to that between the non-literary and the literary. One of the study's central ideas is that the fool was a decidedly *unliterary* figure that contributed (via its initial banishment and subsequent reintegration) to the emergence of German dramatic 'literature' as such.

Three theoretical innovations exemplified in the study deserve immediate remark. The first is Lande's deft avoidance of any paleo-formalist sequestration of questions of dramatic structure from historicity: dramatic form in all of its intricate detail is read here as inextricably bound to historical context in the very broadest of senses, from the media of theatrical performance (e.g., the wandering stage) to political discourses (e.g., the nascent biopolitics of *Policywissenschaft*). As a result, Lande's discussions of individual dramatic works (many of which are quite neglected) tend to also double as characterizations of the entire 'theatrical culture' that hosted them. A second theoretical avenue opened up by this approach lies in the historicization of the very idea of literariness. As Lande's final chapter (consisting of close readings of Goethe's *Faust I* and Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*) demonstrates, the most self-reflexive of aesthetic turns in these decidedly literary works draws on and creatively transforms the base conventions that governed the fool's seemingly senseless antics. Literariness thus emerges not only as a structural feature of texts, but as a historico-institutional achievement of the public sphere in the wake of early Enlightenment theatrical reforms. The study here provides important impulses for those thinking about the emergence of national literatures in non-Germanic contexts. A third theoretical innovation can be found in how the study ties the literary/non-literary distinction to the medial consideration of what Goodman would call the theater's status as an 'allographic' art made up of a written script that sponsors an ephemeral performance. As Lande shows, this privileging of the script as the source of the dramatic work's identity was not always the case, above all for 'pre-literary' stages for which scripts functioned as revisable templates legitimately deviated from

and even abandoned. Rendering German drama 'literary' turns out to have depended on a valorization of fixed textuality at the expense of the fool's improvisatory exuberance

The study's first part elucidates "[t]he game rules the fool plays by" (61) by distinguishing between an open-ended, fluid acting script and a more fixed dramatic text. The theatrical culture organized around the fool was improvisational, itinerant, and lacked a conception of authorial originality. Instead, scripts and their more primary performative realizations were conceived as partaking in "an ongoing chain of production that allowed for the unrestricted appropriation and redeployment of pre-existing narratives" (56). Wandering English players did not perform in theater houses, but at town fairs, royal courts, or schools, thus in contexts where they would have had to compete for spectatorial attention. Given such performative settings, Lande reconstructs the fool's constitutive role as a theatrical *practice*. To track the fool within this itinerant and improvisational theatrical culture hence requires methodological tools closer to those used for drifting oral forms rather than written genres.

The fool takes shape in this analysis as a "switch operator" (27) that executes a bundle of functions within the theatrical performance. Among these are deviating from and even rupturing the dialogic flow of speech exchanges; the comic, sometimes ironic deflation of serious and lofty themes in the main plot along a parallel yet separate track not necessarily compatible with it; and tapping into the phatic dimension by playing at the boundary between stage and audience in a 'thin' act of theatrical self-reference that does not disturb the illusion, but encourages the spectator's hedonic immersion in it. This last dimension of the fool's 'doubleness' forms a continual focus of the study in each chapter: standing both inside and outside the world as staged, the fool qua form toggles between what Lande terms the fiction-internal and fiction-external axes of theatrical communication. As the embodiment of this ensemble of operations, the fool interrupts dialogic exchanges to open up a self-enclosed hiatus that exposes the theater as 'mere' play (*Spiel*) so as to allow for the audience's spectatorial enjoyment of the otherwise illicit. Social transgressions are thereby rendered publically enjoyable insofar as they are quarantined into the fool's dialogically interruptive hiatus, whether as interlude, postlude, or aside. The world that flashes onto the stage during such foolish interruptions of dialogue is one dominated by corporeal desire and recalcitrant materiality, enabling the audience's absorptive enthrallment to the present moment liberated from the causal, chronological concatenations of plot.

The second part turns to Gottsched and Caroline Neuber's early Enlightenment reform of German theater from 1730 to 1750. The fool's ritual banishment from the stage takes shape here as the founding gesture or origin myth of comedy qua literary genre. The German theater undergoes refashioning as a 'literary' institution founded on staging dramatic texts rather than performative templates. Lande innovatively understands such reforms as a media enterprise that strategically sought to put German theater on par with that of

other nations via a tighter integration of text and performance. Particularly interesting is Lande's interpretation of the debate between Gottsched and Lessing on which Roman comedian was greater, Terence or Plautus. Lande reads this as a conflict between two conceptions of comedic temporality, Terence representing a syntagmatic model of drama oriented around temporal duration established through syntactic narrative interlockings, Plautus representing a paradigmatic model oriented around a spontaneous present established through punctual, transient gestures. Aligning itself with Terence, the early Enlightenment recodes the fool's folly as a moral flaw, in turn understood as a cognitive weakness. This shifts the relationship between fool and spectator: whereas the foolish protagonist remains incapable of observing the syntactic unity leading to his moral failures, by virtue of the unifying action of plot, the spectator gains this moral capacity that the protagonist lacks. The fool now comes to embody a morally flawed counterforce to plot itself.

The study's third part examines the restoration of the fool's centrality through the political discourse of *Policeywissenschaft*. Unlike other political discourses that focused on questions of sovereignty, *Policeywissenschaft* concerned itself with the population being ruled and its socioeconomic optimization. The audience's collective enthralment before the fool and their spectatorial pleasure was thus uncoupled from the faculty of reason and moral-didactic instrumentalization to be recoded as "potentially salubrious." Shared laughter now promotes social welfare and economic productivity, allowing theater reform to morph into theater regulation resemblant of the creation of public streets or the encouragement of certain dietary habits in the population. Simultaneously, Lessing moved away from Gottsched's French neoclassical imports to espouse a more organic conception of genre as a self-transformative process of endogenous improvement that took place within a more flexible "matrix of cultural comparison" (209). Within such a new national-literary framework, comedy became a fecund imaginative site for working out the meaning of Germanness at a time when a politically unified 'Germany' did not yet exist. The fool above all was the pre-literary resource tapped in order to forge a German literary identity secured through a coherence of customs (*Sitten*) that ensured shared laughter.

The final and fourth part of the study returns to the close structural analysis carried out in the first part with interpretations of Goethe's *Faust I* and Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*. Drawing on Goethe's comparison of his internally heterogeneous dramatic composition to a muddy ecosystem, Lande works out the 'literarization' of the fool in the figure of Mephisto, who integrates and transforms the form in a new context. Particular attention is paid to the three paratextual frames: *Zueignung*, *Vorspiel auf dem Theater*, and *Prolog im Himmel*. Rather than interpreting these frames as supplemental to the more essential play, or reading them as commentaries meant to expose the tragedy's status as aesthetic semblance, Lande productively shifts attention to how they operate according to figures of thought drawn from Goethe's natural science: *wiederholte Spiegelungen* and *Reihenbildung*. These techniques for elucidating paradigmatic

resemblances allow Lande to read the text not in terms of causally interlocking plot episodes, but in terms of a serial arrangement of mutually mirroring elements. These considerations lead Lande to an insight about what, exactly, Mephisto is. Neither a psychologically thick character nor a mere allegorical personification of a principle, whether evil or the negative, Mephisto comes to represent a “dramatic agent that brings the ‘limited’ character of the human being to the surface” (298) — an operation of comically distortive reduplication that functions to expose the human being’s conditionedness via cynical deflation: of love to erotic prowess, transcendence to sublimation, and so forth.

A chapter-length, dazzling reading of one stage direction from Kleist’s *Der zerbrochene Krug* represents the study’s last section. Read as a reincarnation of the fool, Adam interrupts the continuity of dialogue to stage clumsily corporeal derailments of court proceedings that work against the unfolding of plot. He further represents a figure of unscripted orality and improvisational theatricality opposed to the scribe Licht, read as an authorial figure of fixed textuality. Walter completes the triangulation as the figure of a regulatory poetological authority, a kind of theater-reformer within the theater. When Adam suddenly exits in the twelfth scene—when the stage direction in question comes about—the origin myth of German dramatic comedy is restaged and defigured: the fool exits stage to throw the relation between theatrical performance and dramatic text out of sync. As Lande argues, Kleist reinterprets the fool’s banishment as a founding act of violent exclusion that secures communal bonds. The play hence ends for Lande not with a juridical resolution, but with a moment of generic self-reflexivity: *Der zerbrochene Krug* reflects on its own “media-historical foundation in textuality” (318).

The study’s productive avoidance of any historicist/formalist dichotomy raises a number of theoretical questions. One among them is how ‘historicist’ one should take the book’s larger argumentative thrust to be: is literariness to be historicized ‘all the way down,’ resulting in the view that this category functions as a label appended to works for the sake of enacting cultural-discursive ends, or does the argument instead rely on a more fluid account of a universally valid literariness that somehow achieves variable historical refraction? At times the argument moves in the first direction (e.g., its shift from ‘What is a comedy’ to “What does calling something a comedy accomplish?” pg. 105). This would suggest that the generic designation functions as a strategic intervention in a cultural-historical discourse. At other moments, however, the argument moves in the second direction, tracking the process of a literary genre’s gradual consolidation out of pre-literary resources not only in retrospect, but according to a kind of immanent developmental logic, one that need not be rigidly teleological, but could remain open-ended while elaborating itself precisely through the medium of historical contingency (e.g., the “entelechy” of the tragic genre’s emergence out of ‘pre-poetic,’ archaic choral songs; pg. 10). The invocation of a concept of the ‘pre-literary’ makes it clear that the literary/non-literary distinction is subject to historical shifts,

but the conceptual infrastructure seems to retain some persistent, albeit flexible, notion of literariness, even when only latently present.

Perhaps an implicit solution is to be found in the book's final readings of Goethe and Kleist, who clearly exemplify a kind of literariness not as programmatic as that espoused by Gottsched. How the early Enlightenment valorized textuality via the scapegoated fool's exile only for Kleist's *Krug* to later self-consciously expose the violence inherent in that 'literarization' project points to the fact that constitutive (or 'universal') aspects of theater (e.g., text vs. performance) are always already in the process of being historically reframed. What enables both great historical change *and* intransigent persistence within any given genre emerges here as the reflection on and continual renegotiation of its constitutive aspects. Without these constitutive aspects, the genre could not have a history, could not persist as itself even in the throes of self-transformation. Any given generic exemplar would then be 'literary' if it reflects on what it means to exemplify and inherit its own generic tradition under novel historical circumstances.

More than a literary history of German comedy or a study of the figure of the fool in dramatic texts, the analyses carried out in *The Persistence of Folly* exemplify and point to key methodological and theoretical reorientations of broader relevance. The fool is not conceived here as one character among others on stage, but as more akin to a theatrical operation, in Lande's terms a "form" conceived as "constitutive practice" (30). Anyone interested in a more dynamic theory of genre that thinks form together with history, in the emergence of national literatures out of pre-literary resources, or in theater's Janus-faced status as written text and fleeting performance will find much to ponder in the continuities that allowed a figure of interruption to persist.

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