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Persistence of Folly: On the Origins of German Dramatic Literature / Stella: A Play for Lovers

by Joel B. Lande, Ithaca, NY, Cornell UP, 2018, x + 354 pp., 4 illustrations.by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, translated by Susan E. Gustafson and Kristina Becker Malett, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2018, 105 pp.

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Joel B. Lande's monograph, *Persistence of Folly: On the Origins of German Dramatic Literature*, traces the figure of the fool on the stage from its beginnings in the shows of traveling English players around the turn of the seventeenth century to the birth of German literary drama later in the seventeenth century and finally documents its significance in the early nineteenth century in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808) and Heinrich von Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Jug* [1811]). Lande's focus on the historicity of theatrical and dramatic form and the fool's place within it demonstrates that the fool did not coincidentally find his way into German literary drama after attempts to banish him by early Enlightenment reformers such as Johann Christoph Gottsched; rather, he played a decisive role in shaping the *Nationalgeist* (national character or national spirit) that was essential for the creation of German literary drama.

Part 1 provides background information about the historical phenomenon of troupes of English players who traveled through Europe around the turn of the seventeenth century, also known as "englische Komödianten" (21) or "Engelländische Komödianten" (40). Although these actors performed in English, they inspired German translations and adaptations that became popular largely due to their tendency to "put the fool front and center" (20). Through this process of cultural transfer, the fool was brought to the theatrical tradition of German-speaking lands and remained a central figure until the early Enlightenment reforms beginning around 1730, which are the subject of part 2 of the monograph. Chapter 1 documents the arrival of the jokester character in German-speaking areas via English acting troupes and inquires into the possible reasons for his success, first using the example of a German adaptation of *Hamlet*. The adaptations from this period are best described as acting scripts; they are not dramatic texts in the conventional sense, because they were always in flux and not meant to be performed word-for-word. Some printed versions of these acting scripts have survived, and the earliest edition of the *Hamlet* adaptation in question was published in 1778 and based on a manuscript from around 1710 with the title: *Tragedy of Fratricide Punished, or Prince Hamlet of Denmark*. Shakespeare's text was altered in significant ways, for example, by the addition of a court jester named Phantasmo. This character was not a standard Shakespearean fool, but an emerging distinct theatrical figure: the German stage fool. Phantasmo's genesis would have been "unthinkable" (23) without the traveling English players who brought the fool with them. His behavior marks him as an unmistakably new incarnation of the English stage fool: he addresses the audience directly with metacommentary about the plot as it unfolds, makes vulgar remarks, and provides slapstick humor.

Chapter 2, "Strolling Players and the Advent of the Fool," provides a more detailed account of the bands of English actors and asks the question: "How did the life of traveling theatrical troupes in the seventeenth century give rise to a comic force that deserves reference in the singular, that is, as *the* fool?" (41). The first acting troupes around 1600 performed mostly at communal fairs, royal courts, and schools—settings that differed greatly from the playhouses of the late eighteenth century, which were dedicated performance spaces. Lande describes the repertoires and travel schedules of seventeenth-century acting troupes led by John Green and Carl Andreas Paulsen, who performed plays by authors such as Marlowe, Shakespeare, Thomas Dekker, and Thomas Kyd (48–59). He documents the significance of

the emergence of the first stationary playhouse in Germany, the Fechthaus in Nuremberg, built in 1627–28. The description of the Fechthaus is accompanied by a print of a copperplate engraving of the venue, which depicts the four-story building with a handful of actors occupying its open courtyard (51). The author gives a historical account of how these traveling troupes garnered enough attention to make their way into this kind of venue, and he focuses especially on the figure of the fool as he appeared in the plays performed by such troupes. The character was known by various names: *morio* (the Latin equivalent of the German *Narr* or English *fool*), Johann, Pickelhering or Pickelhäring, Harlequin, and Hans Wurst (56–59). Lande documents the contexts in which each of these versions of the fool was most likely to appear.

The third chapter establishes "the game rules that the fool plays by" (61). What allowed the fool to behave uniquely in ways that would not be allowed in other dramatic character types? A key element in the fool's exceptional status was the fact that he existed outside of the performance—addressing the audience directly and giving commentary on the action as it unfolded—as well as inside the narrative, interacting with the other characters in decisive ways. To this end, the fool made liberal use of the aside, which was his "most pervasive device for manipulating the boundary between fiction-internal and fiction-external communicative axes" (70). In addition, the fool defied social norms by vocally disrespecting those of a higher standing in a "permitted" joking relationship (61) and by breaking taboos with his use of scatological humor and tendency to make light of death and suffering. The fool's comic practice became particularly popular because he "provided a temporally and narratively circumscribed indulgence of the audience's desire to experience otherwise forbidden pleasures" (78). These behaviors, along with the fool's improvised singing and dancing, had the effect of increasing the audience's engagement with the performance during a time when it was common for the spectators' attention to drift throughout the play. In demonstrating how unique and memorable the stage fool was during this period, Lande returns in chapter 3 to his argument that the stage fool played a crucial role in the development of German literary drama.

Chapter 4 explores the fool's place within the broader theater tradition. His role is characterized here by the term *kurzweilig*, which can be rendered as "*amusing*" or "*entertaining*," and entails "a diversity or variation in experience" (81). To demonstrate what *kurzweilig* means in practice, Lande analyzes a fool character named Traraeus in Andreas Gryphius's tragedy *Großmüthiger Rechtsgelehrter oder Sterbender Aemilius Paulus Papinianus (The Magnanimus Jurist Aemilius Paulus Papiniianus* [1659]). Lande compares Gryphius's original text with an adaptation used by strolling players. Because a fool character was added, the adaptation was able to "transform even the most austere moments in Gryphius's tragedy into risible spectacle" (86). For example, when the fool discovers the dead body of one of the co-emperors of Rome, he remarks, "So who strangled the poor devil? He is lying there and is bleeding like swine" (86), reducing this tragic and significant moment to "a banal corporeal occurrence" (86).

Part 2 begins with the story of the banishment of the fool from the stage following his rise to fame documented in part 1. A reform movement in the 1730s spearheaded by Gottsched and director and actress Friedericke Caroline Neuber aimed to make the fool, who was "the most beloved single stage persona in the German-speaking world" (94), into an outcast. Although it was common for the fool to be chased off the stage in a literal sense as part of a comic or slapstick episode, the 1730s saw the fool chased off the stage in a figurative sense when early Enlightenment critics advocated for the removal of the character from scripts entirely. The "comic persona" or "*lustige Person*" (97) had to be eliminated because he destroyed the continuity, thus the versimilitude and moral impact of the play on the spectator, as outlined in Gottsched's *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst* (*A Critical Approach to Poetry* [1730]).

Chapter 6 brings other Enlightenment thinkers into dialogue with Gottsched, for example, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who attempts to shift "Gottsched's theatrical reform project so that it conformed to what Lessing sees as the immanent and imminent needs of the German stage" (122). Lande documents both Gottsched's and Lessing's appraisals of the works of Plautus to demonstrate their contrasting approaches to dramatic theory and practice. In his *Abhandlung von dem Leben, und den Werken des Marcus Accius Plautus* (*Treatise on the Life and Works of Plautus* [1750]), Lessing engaged with Plautus's works because he recognized that they bore similarities to the German stage of his own time and were historically and culturally relevant to his reform efforts. The stock character of the "parasite" (124), who played a central role in eight of Plautus's plays, is in effect a version of the fool because he performs many of the same functions: he is "an itinerant and impoverished figure, who supplicated the wealthy to sustain himself and performed brief comic speeches, mockery, or tricks in return" (124). Lessing notes: "Plautus used the parasite for the same final purpose as the moderns have enlisted the Harlequin" ("Man sieht wohl, Plautus hat den Parasiten zu dem Endzwecke gebraucht, wozu die Neuern den Arlequin aufgeführet haben" [125, 125n30]). Because Plautus was able to advance "a program of theatrical reform" similar to Lessing's, the parasite, or Harlequin, must have a rightful place on the stage (126). The parasite was recoded as "a figure who exposes moral failures" (127). His shortcomings, i.e., his inability to distinguish right from wrong, would make clear to the spectator what the correct course of action would be.

Chapter 7 explores the concept of the drama for early Enlightenment thinkers and their struggle to find a unified definition of it. Drama was "a historically specific unity of design and matter, of the configuration of fictional elements with a material format" (129), and the fool's role in this definition was controversial. The chapter focuses on the project of sanitizing the stage, which "had its roots in the conviction that the theater, if properly orchestrated, could inculcate reason in spectators with unique efficaciousness" (133). For Gottsched, the comedy, which was supposed to "both amuse and edify the spectator" (141), had as its ultimate goal to be a site of intellectual growth or a school of virtue guided by a "'highly instructive moral principle' (*einen lehrreichen moralischen Satz*)" (143). Gottsched saw the fool in direct opposition to this goal because he weakened the play's verisimilitude (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*) to the extent that the moral principle could not be imparted.

Chapter 8 offers a reading of works by Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–64), a dramatist who "inhabits a gray zone in which Enlightenment ideas were beginning to take shape but had not yet coalesced" (149). Henrici's play *Der academische Schlendrian (The Academic Slacker*) has a disjointed plot, an enormous cast of characters, and frequent location changes. The fool, named Harlequin, appears in nearly every scene, and provides commentary on the behavior of other characters, frequently reprimanding his master. He is "part of the moralizing mission of the play. The fool is no longer transgressive, but is instead the mouthpiece of transgression's pitfalls" (150). Lande describes other examples of this special type of fool during the period, such as Damis in Lessing's *Der junge Gelehrte (The Young Scholar* [1754]), whose lack of perspective and inability to make decisions that would help him toward his own goals ultimately serve as a warning to the spectator. Johann Elias Schlegel's *Der geschäftige Müßiggänger* (*The Diligent Good-for-Nothing* [1743]) likewise features a character, Fortunat, whose "blindness to proper moral judgment" (156) provides the occasion for spectators to reflect on whether they want to emulate such a moral failure. In these cases, the fool is not the stock character, but has become "a flaw internal to the protagonist" (162). Lande concludes that the two comedies by Lessing and Schlegel indicate that "Enlightenment drama, with its close ties to the theater, became a vehicle for the *training of moral capacities*" (161) that "sought to banish the fool from the spectator, just as from the stage" (163).

Part 3 consists of four chapters that view the theater and the fool's place within it through a wider lens of society's well-being and the emergence of a national literature as part of a *Nationalgeist* (national character or spirit). Chapter 9 introduces the term "*policey*, or the *science of policey* (*Polizeiwissenschaft*)," defined as a discourse surrounding "the organization of government and its capillary institutions for supplying the population with order and welfare," which led to the "epoch-making idea that the theater is a forum potentially vital to a society's well-being" (170). In Justus Möser's *Harlekin oder Vertheidigung des Groteske-Komischen* (*Harlekin or Defense of the Grotesque-Comic* [1761]), Harlekin states the spectator's motivation for going to the theater: "We are merely asking . . . to soothe, calm, to cheer ourselves, and to ready the tired spirit for more serious duties" (179). Productivity and social order are maintained only because the theater is there to offer respite from a hard day's work: "The pleasurable experience of laughter, issuing in the experience of rejuvenation, is the very source of the theater's social utility" (180). Chapter 10 further investigates the restorative and rehabilitative potential of laughter and how jokes were treated as "a form of knowledge making" (197), as demonstrated by the fact that "laughter expresses the listener's discovery of a connection where one had hitherto been undisclosed" (196).

Chapters 11 and 12 pose the question of what would be unique about a specifically German theatrical tradition with a German audience. There was a sense of a failure to produce a distinct, idiosyncratic (*eigentümlich*), or original German stage: "Again and again, authors such as Lessing and Herder complained that Gottsched's reform movement had inhibited the German theater from properly differentiating itself and instead relegated it to a dreadfully mongrel existence" (217). The identity crisis in the theater tradition reflected a sense of lacking a *Nationalgeist*—national character or national spirit—on a larger scale (225). One obstacle in conceiving of a *Nationalgeist* relates to the term *Sitte,* which is notoriously difficult to translate, but might be rendered as "custom," "convention," "moral," or "more" (231). The customs varied so widely from region to region in German-speaking lands that they could hardly serve as a foundation for "an idiosyncratically German comic theater" (235). Herder proposed that the first phase in finding a national character might be found in the "old-German Hans-Wurst" with his "coarse humor" and "base laughter" (236). This line of thought brings Lande to the conclusion that "the fool constituted a particularly promising mechanism for shaping the nation" (236).

Part 4, which contains the final four chapters—three on Goethe's *Faust* and one on Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug*—is the most engaging and thought-provoking section of the book. Lande's analysis of Mephistopheles rests on the claim that

> Goethe constructs the figure Mephistopheles as the projection of the theatrical form of the fool into a new artistic context that at once integrates preexisting aspects of the form and alters them to accommodate the particular literary context of *Faust I*. (244)

Lande offers a reading of the self-reflexive *Vorspiel auf dem Theater* (*Prelude on the Theater*), in which the theater director (*Direktor*), poet (*Dichter*), and a *Lustige Person*—variously translated as "Clown," "Player of Comic Roles," "Merry Person," and "Comedian"—discuss the most effective way to reach their audience (245–46). Given the extensive historical background on the fool that has preceded this chapter, it is easy for Lande to convince the reader that the best translation for the *Lustige Person* is indeed "fool." In Goethe's prelude, it becomes clear that the director and the poet can only succeed with the fool's help: "Eternal truths fall on deaf ears unless the audience is kept alert to the present with jests and entertainment." Although *Faust* is labeled "A Tragedy" on the title page, Lande argues that the play "includes just as much of the Poet's metaphysical grandeur as the Fool's mundane folly" (256). Lande lists the many attributes that Mephistopheles shares with the fool: he is the "advocate of the here and now of human experience," "provides a final commentary," "announces the end of the

scene," "provides hermeneutic information on how it should be understood" (275), and "serve [s] as the comic commentator of [Faust's] divine-like aspirations . . . both inside and outside the fiction in the drama, treading the line, traditionally reserved for the fool, between extrafictional and intrafictional modes of address" (276). This reading of Mephistopheles against the backdrop of the historical development of the fool provided in the preceding chapters provides an insightful perspective on Goethe's work as a whole, including several references to *Wilhelm Meister*. Mephistopheles's performance of the fool's role—how he pokes fun at Faust, provides commentary on his actions, and reminds him of the here and now—leads to Lande's conclusion that the "possibility that our grandest wishes can be revealed as mere folly is not just a definitive part of Goethe's tragedy, but of his vision of the human being" (299).

Lande saves the most stimulating chapter for the very end, a reading of Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* in which Adam's disappearance—being chased out of town, i.e., off the stage at the end of the play—is revealed as an allegorical recreation of the history of the stage fool who was banished from the stage by Gottsched and Neuber. Adam plays the fool throughout the play: he is "a figure of mundane corporeality" and an "intractable rascal" whose speech contains many "outbursts and digressions" (309). He interrupts the continuity of the plot and delivers eight of the ten asides in the text. At the end of Kleist's play, Adam's "flight replays what we have identified as the founding myth of eighteenth-century theater: the banishment of the fool from the stage" (311). Whether the fool can ever return, Lande notes, is not a question that Kleist addresses. Although Lande does not mention this, it is remarkable that both Mephistopheles and Adam were played in film versions by Emil Jannings (F. W. Murnau's *Faust* in 1926 and Gustav Ucicky and Jannings's *Der zerbrochene Krug* in 1937), one of the greatest comedic actors of his time. The casting of Jannings for both of these roles further underscores how both Mephistopheles and Adam have their roots in the German stage fool.

The book closes with a short postlude that uses Jean Paul's *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (*Preschool of Aesthetics* [1804]) to provide one more perspective on the fool's development as German literary drama came into existence. Jean Paul "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" (319). This postlude, along with part 4, which contains Lande's readings of *Faust* and *Der zerbrochene Krug*, show Lande's skill in implementing a large amount of historical and theoretical research to produce fascinating contributions to the way we read these plays. The book takes the reader on a journey along the fool's trajectory with carefully chosen examples that render his conclusions convincing and insightful, and provides indispensable insights for any Goethe or Kleist scholar, or for those interested in German literary history in general.

Susan E. Gustafson and Kristina Becker Malett have produced a new translation from German to English of Goethe's *Stella: A Play for Lovers* (*Stella: Ein Schauspiel für Liebende* [1776]). Their translators' introduction gives a concise account of the origin and history of the play and its previous translations. The introduction piques the reader's interest and gives indispensable contextual information without unduly postponing the translation itself. Significantly, their translation is based on the original 1776 version of the play, while previous English translations used Goethe's revised version from 1806: *Stella: A Tragedy* (*Stella: Ein Trauerspiel*). After just ten stage performances of the first version in Weimar and Hamburg, Goethe was compelled to withdraw it because audiences were shocked by the ending, which depicts Stella and Cecilia, who are both in love with Fernando, deciding to come together with him in a consensual polygamous relationship. In the 1806 revision, Fernando and Stella commit suicide, which is reflected in the subtitle's change from "Ein Schauspiel für Liebende" to "Ein Trauerspiel." Here, the most scandalous element of the play—the ménage-à-trois at the conclusion—is removed. Reception of the original 1776 version by

the English-speaking world contemporary to Goethe included British magazines that called it a "disgrace" (2) and used it to "present Germany as having lesser, unacceptable values, while also demonstrating that England had higher values, and a much more refined culture" (2). Early English translations such as one by Miss T. Dalton sanitized the play considerably, for example, by rendering Goethe's original "one house, one bed and one grave" ("eine Wohnung, ein Bett und ein Grab") as "one dwelling and one grave" (7).

Gustafson and Malett translate Goethe's German into contemporary English aimed at a general modern audience (opting, for example, for "landlady" over "postmistress" and "coach driver" over "postilion"), and modernize the characters' names from Luzie, Cezilie, and Anngen to Lucy, Cecilia, and Annie (9). The translation stays very close to the original German wording, but also necessarily imparts the meaning of certain phrases in a more natural way by diverging from a word-for-word rendition; for example, "Auf ihr ehrlich Gesicht?" becomes "Honestly?" rather than "Because of your honest face?" (9). The translators state their goal in composing this new translation:

> to make Goethe's original edition of *Stella* available in its entirety and in contemporary English for a wide range of potential audiences: scholars, students of German or Comparative Literature, college drama clubs looking for new material, or anyone with an interest in the enduring issues that Goethe's play addresses. (10)

The themes that emerge from the complex social interactions depicted in the 1776 version of *Stella* are, as the translators note, just as relevant today as they were in Goethe's time.

The translation itself reads very smoothly and naturally, except for a few repeated instances of a comma preceding a dependent clause as it would in German, but not in English: for example, "Isn't it true, that you love her, Fernando?" (68). The traces of the text's German original are otherwise largely invisible and do not affect the reader's understanding of the text or the flow of the reading experience. The appendix following the translation gives further explanatory information, e.g., that the translations are based on the two versions of the play provided in the Münchner Ausgabe of Goethe's works: *Stella: A Play for Lovers* (1776) in volume 1.2 of the Münchner Ausgabe, edited by Hans-Jürgen Schings, and *Stella: A Tragedy* in volume 6.1 of the Münchner Ausgabe, edited by Victor Lange. The bulk of the pages in the appendix are devoted to a thorough listing of the differences between the 1776 and 1806 versions of Goethe's play. Most of the changes involve punctuation, shifts from question marks to exclamation points and vice versa, which change the intonation of the actors and thus the meaning or character development. There are also a few instances of sections of the play being omitted, as is, of course, the alternate ending of the second version, which once served to make the play more socially acceptable.

This new translation fills a gap in Goethe scholarship and will prove useful to those looking to understand the author's development from his earlier years of composing dramas and to those who wish to experience another side of Goethe that is seldom discussed in comparison with his later and more famous works. As the translators state in their introduction, the new translation also provides the occasion for contemporary theater directors to stage a play with themes that are still relevant to an audience in 2020. The translation makes it likely that *Stella* will, as they hope, once again "find its rightful place on the stage" (10).

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