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The Drama of Obedience: Introduction

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In Germany, where, compared to other large European countries, the theatre had long been marginalized to local courts, Latin schools, and wandering troupes, the mid to late eighteenth century brought about tremendous change, effected by the productive collaboration of theatre directors, actors, critics, and writers.¹ In the generations of Friederike Caroline Neuber and Johann Christoph Gottsched, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Conrad Ekhof, German drama and theatre were progressing at a higher pace than ever before, and German playwrights were at the forefront of innovation in Europe.² In this period, as still through much of the nineteenth century, drama was the most prestigious of literary genres, and German playwrights had now caught up to recent developments. They were eagerly adopting the new bourgeois tragedy from England as well as the serious comedy from France, while also developing, in the *Sturm und Drang*, a distinctly new form of playwriting. Moreover, attempts were being made to establish stages on which at least some of the new German production of drama could find its home — from the short-lived *Hamburger Nationaltheater* (1767–69) to the reinvention of Vienna’s court theatre under Joseph II as *Nationaltheater* in 1776. For once, drama and theatre appeared to be crucial concerns of directors, writers, and (enlightened) statesmen alike.

¹ The special issue *The Drama of Obedience* emerged from a planned conference of the same title, scheduled to take place at the University of Calgary in April 2020. The conference was cancelled in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. We would like to thank all those who had made arrangements to attend the conference and also all those who helped us prepare the event, notably Annika Gilgen. This project received support through the Connection Grant “The Drama of Obedience, 1700–1900” from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (grant number: 611-2019-0036).

² Peter Holland and Michael Patterson, ‘Eighteenth-Century Theatre’, in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*, ed. by John Russell Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 [1995]), pp. 255–98.

Writing in 1782, the young Friedrich Schiller described the advancement of drama in ‘beinah in allen deutschen Provinzen’³ as the distinguishing feature of the spirit of that decade in Germany (while also deploring many shortcomings in drama and theatre that still needed to be overcome). Indeed, as Schiller specified two years later in his seminal lecture ‘Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken’, theatre was not just seeing great advancement *in* the various states, but it also deserved to be recognized as a crucial institution *of* and *for* the state.

The importance of drama and theatre, Schiller argues in his lecture, derives from a shortcoming of the legal system. In contrast to the theatre, the law can only prohibit, but it cannot instigate good behaviour, and it remains helpless in face of bad behaviour that, for some reason or another, escapes the law courts’ direct grasp. The theatre creates abhorrence of evil and ‘kleidet die strenge Pflicht in ein reizendes, lockendes Gewand’.⁴ It thus opens up a space for regulation that remains off limits to the law: ‘Die Gerichtsbarkeit der Bühne fängt an, wo das Gebiet der weltlichen Gesetze sich endigt.’⁵

Schiller’s understanding of drama and theatre as institutions whose power begins where the power of the law courts ends is strikingly illustrated in the works of his fellow Weimar playwright Charlotte von Stein. In Stein’s drama *Die zwey Emilien* — first published anonymously in 1803 and then, in 1805, as a supposedly English-language text translated by Schiller⁶ — the main villain’s evil deeds remain explicitly outside the grasp of the law. Stein

³ Friedrich Schiller, ‘Über das gegenwärtige teutsche Theater’, in *Sämtliche Werke in 5 Bänden*, ed. by Peter-André Alt, Albert Meier, and Wolfgang Riedel (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), v: *Erzählungen und theoretische Schriften*, ed. by Wolfgang Riedel (2004), pp. 811–18 (p. 811).

⁴ Friedrich Schiller, ‘Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken’, in *Sämtliche Werke in 5 Bänden*, ed. by Peter-André Alt, Albert Meier, and Wolfgang Riedel (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), v: *Erzählungen und theoretische Schriften*, ed. by Wolfgang Riedel (2004), pp. 818–831 (p. 824).

⁵ Schiller, ‘Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken’, p. 823.

⁶ On the publication history of the play, see Gaby Pailer, ‘Nachwort’, in Charlotte Stein, *Die zwey Emilien. Drama in vier Aufzügen. Nach dem Englischen*, ed. by Gaby Pailer (Hanover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2020), pp. 85–101 (pp. 85–89). Schiller served as editor for the 1803 edition. Pailer analyses the 1805 edition, in which Schiller figures as

focuses neither on legally punishable acts nor on a direct confrontations in which legitimate forms of authority are overturned and orders disobeyed. Instead, the emphasis is on the immorality of various forms of cunning and deceit that escape the courts' direct reach. As if to make this feature explicit in the play itself, Stein has 'Gerichtspersonen' enter and exit the stage in the final act, largely unable to intervene. Any attempt to punish the villain, Emilie Fitzallen (one of the two 'Emilien' of the title) for duping her rival's intended husband into marriage with herself, fails. After the disappearance of the members of the law court, her (natural) father aims to send his illegitimate daughter Emilie Fitzallen to the monastery as at least some form of penalty, but Emilie questions his power to do so — and simply walks off. This act of defiance constitutes perhaps the most direct instance of disobedience in the play, although even here Emilie's questioning of her father's power to utter his order leaves it unclear whether there was ever any legitimate authority one could disobey. The one and only punishment that Emilie Fitzallen cannot escape is the drama's audience's censure. Her status as theatrical villain remains largely unmitigated — and, indeed, arguably heightened — by the legal and familial systems' inability to punish her. There is room, to be sure, to see in Emilie Fitzallen beyond an agent of evil also a more positive example of female assertiveness and agency. Because of her unwillingness to be subdued, one might even go so far as to call her, despite all her revengeful deceit, a 'Sympathieträgerin',⁷ as Gaby Pailer recently ventured in her commentary of the play — although it appears not beyond doubt that such a positive reception is actually intended. The crucial point in all this, however, is that in whichever way one judges this character, this

translator, as 'unautorisierten Nachdruck, der nach Schillers Tod am 9. Mai 1805 veranlasst worden sein muss' (Pailer, 'Nachwort', p. 89).

⁷ Pailer, 'Nachwort', p. 98.

judgment will be a moral judgment beyond clear categories of legal rule or of the demands of established authority.

By securing compliance beyond the reach of the law, Schiller further argues in his lecture, theatre takes a place that was previously filled by religion. If theatre is now the stronger candidate for the regulation of behaviour than religion, this is not only because religion has lost some its social relevance, but also because, in essence, religion was, in Schiller's understanding, only ever able to speak to the senses. As religion was deprived of its sensual nature — Schiller does not name here explicitly, but evidently thinks of the legacy of the Protestant Reformation — it was robbed of its influence altogether. Theatre, by contrast, not only still wields this sensual power, but it also speaks in equal terms to the intellect *and* the senses. Theatre thus allows human beings to experience themselves as whole human beings, and it brings moral betterment to them in its impressive display of vice and virtue.

What is more, theatre, thus understood as an anthropologically wholesome and fulfilling institution of moral betterment could, in Schiller's view, also be used as a tool to increase acceptance for local rulers. These rulers, Schiller urges, could use the dramatic performance on stage as a platform to propagate their politics without ever having to make such propaganda explicit. Complaints could be responded to even before they arise, and the subjects' doubts could be subdued without making such suppression explicit:

Nicht weniger ließen sich – verstünden es die Oberhäupter und Vormünder des Staats – von der Schaubühne aus die Meinungen der Nation über Regierung und Regenten zurechtweisen. Die gesetzgebende Macht spräche hier durch fremde Symbole zu dem Untertan, verantworte sich gegen seine Klagen, noch ehe sie laut werden, und bestäche seine Zweifelsucht, ohne es zu scheinen.⁸

⁸ Schiller, 'Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken', p. 829.

Schiller's lecture, notwithstanding the fact that it was (consciously) overstating the potential of theatre even for its own time,⁹ lives on as an astonishing monument of a bygone age in which art, and especially drama and theatre, claimed an importance that few would be inclined to grant them today. However, in retrospect, Schiller's lecture is also legible as part of a complex transformation of power from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, in which power was stratified and dispersed away from central legal and state institutions only thus to gain a greater grasp on nearly all aspects of an individual's life. In this period, there was an increasing recognition (and accompanying theorisation) that power relations are not always rigid and visible, but rather that they can be dynamic and invisible. This applies in various spheres: political power; gender-based power; class-based power; familial power. Schiller's theatre, to the extent that it was ever fully realized in this way, is, in this reading part of the institutions of modern power analysed by Michel Foucault and by generations of scholars working in Foucault's paradigm: the prison, the school, the factory, the mental asylum, the hospital etc. Importantly, these modern institutions work, in Foucault's interpretation, not so much through legal acts of prohibition and punishment, as through a broad array of techniques of surveillance, classification, training, encouragement, and, in the final analysis, simply discourse: establishing categories and ideals of good behaviour. These institutions were thus replacing — or at least significantly supplementing and altering — the system based on prohibition and (severe corporal) punishment that was characteristic of the era of absolutist rule in the seventeenth century.

⁹ Peter-André Alt suggests that Schiller, who was employed at the theatre in Mannheim at the time when he presented this lecture to the *Deutsche Gesellschaft*, was trying to impress upon his audience the relevance of his work. Peter-André Alt, *Schiller. Leben – Werk – Zeit*, vol. 1, second edition (Munich: Beck, 2004), p. 383.

The causes and agents of this transformation are widespread and not easy to identify. Only to some limited extent did the sovereigns themselves introduce such change in the system of governance away from rule through direct prohibition and punishment. With respect to Frederick II's Prussia, for instance, Steffen Martus points out Foucault's interpretation of Frederick's *Antimachiavel*: Frederick's goal was not to control individual people but to shape an environment that would make the passions productive.¹⁰ This means that the operation of power became less tangible as its operation became less directly associated with the person and pomp of the sovereign.¹¹ In the *Antimachiavel*, Frederick II recognized the wider problem of trying to maximize the power of the state, and argued that instilling fear was a less effective basis for governance than inspiring love: 'la cruauté et l'art de se faire craindre ne sont donc pas les uniques ressorts de la politique [...] l'art de gagner les cœurs est le fondement le plus solide de la sûreté d'un prince et de la fidélité de ses sujets'.¹² Frederick was concerned with finding means of redirecting unproductive self-interest into communitarian feeling.

Beyond the introduction of new stratagems of power by enlightened monarchs (like Frederick II), however, the reordering of power was also advanced by various other cultural and political forces, including, notably, playwrights and theatre practitioners. In consideration of that broader context of a rethinking of power and compliance in the eighteenth century, Schiller's famous dictum that the power of the stage begins where the power of the law courts ends can be called emblematic of the newly emerging institutions of discipline more broadly. Through the

¹⁰ See Steffen Martus, *Aufklärung: Das deutsche 18. Jahrhundert – ein Epochenbild* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohl, 2018), pp. 467–68.

¹¹ See T.C.W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹² Frederick the Great, *Potsdamer Ausgabe. Werke in 12 Bänden*, ed. by Gérard Laudin and Anne Baillot (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2007–), VI: *Philosophische Schriften/Euvres philosophiques*, ed. by Anne Baillot and Brunhilde Wehinger (2007), p. 104.

stage, the citizens could be steered in their thinking and behaviour without the need for direct orders and prohibitions. In this analysis, the central concept of the present special issue — obedience — appears as a rather antiquated term, belonging more to the realm of absolutist sovereigns of the seventeenth century than to the modern organization of power, as it emerged in the mid to late eighteenth century. Obedience defines a structure of explicit compliance with orders and prohibitions received from above, and this structure of forcing the desired behaviour seems to lose its importance as the modern mechanisms of surveillance, training, indirect propaganda, and the internalization of authority gain ground.¹³

This well-established Foucauldian narrative of a decline of obedience, however, needs to be revisited, and we need to refocus our perspective to understand the various ways in which the basic structure of obedience — in which a person complies with an order received from authority — continued to shape German society even as it transitioned away from established absolutist rule. At the same time, however, we also need to understand how this very basic and seemingly stable structure of obedience was adapted in the process and revealed itself to be open to change.

Both the persistence and the reformation of obedience left a significant mark on a range of literary genres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably, as we have argued elsewhere, on the various subgenres of the novel that emerged in this period.¹⁴ Drama and theatre, however, provide an especially fertile ground for such a revaluation of the history of obedience, because of their vital importance for the late eighteenth-century cultural debate and because they appear to be central places through which the alleged move to new forms of governance was realized.

¹³ Ulrich Bröckling, *Disziplin. Soziologie und Geschichte militärische Gehorsamsproduktion* (Munich: Fink, 1997).

¹⁴ See the special issue *Genres of Obedience*, edited by Elystan Griffiths and Martin Wagner (= *Seminar* 56.2 [2020]).

As the contributions assembled in this special issue demonstrate, the question of obedience played out in three distinct — albeit interconnected — ways in drama and theatre. These included, first, the need to discipline the theatre in order to attain respectability and congruence with the norms of middle-class conduct. Second, it included the emergence of censorship as a specific regulatory activity, which represented not only a constraint on artistic freedom, but also an opportunity for playwrights to contest the new boundaries both overtly and covertly. Finally, obedience was thematized in the drama of the era. As we demonstrate in this introduction and in this volume, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw increasingly subtle reflections on the relationship between obedience and the changing discourses surrounding the family, class, gender and nationhood.

Perhaps most immediately, to implement the new theatrical aesthetics of the mid-eighteenth century, which notably sought to replace improvisatory spectacle with strictly text-based performance, German playwrights and theatre directors saw themselves confronted with the need to regulate the theatre and, especially the actors. Here the establishment of concrete rules to be followed by the actors both on and off stage played an important role, and many of the leading German playwrights of the eighteenth century contributed in some form to the formulation of such rules. The most prominent example, Goethe's 'Regeln für Schauspieler', is analysed in depth by S.E. Jackson in this volume. Goethe's 'Regeln' stem from the period of his directorship of the *Weimarer Hoftheater* (1791–1817). Here the broad context are the attempts at the *Verbürgerlichung* of the theatre by purging the theatre of improvisation and slapstick. Jackson argues, however, that Goethe's ambitions go a step further by aiming not only at the *Verbürgerlichung* of theatre as an institution, but at the reformation of the actors themselves. Goethe's vision, Jackson specifies further, was not so much to turn the actors simply into well-

socialized *Bürger* (who find their own way to act within the existing structures of society), but into aesthetic objects, who live through a fully internalized set of rules. As such obedient aesthetic objects, the actors no longer threaten bourgeois society while also being firmly excluded and differentiated from that same society. Jackson contextualizes her discussion within the debates that run through *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–96) concerning the relationship between the actors' subjectivity and their approach to theatrical performance. Jackson contends that Goethe's rules for actors demand a kind of fusion between duty and nature, to use Schillerian terms, so that actors internalize his rules so deeply that they become a kind of second nature.

A particularly fascinating earlier example of the ways in which the obedience to codified rules remained important for eighteenth-century theatre can be found in the third section of Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767–69), where Lessing discusses rules for how actors are to present abstract moral lessons. Lessing regards these moral lessons as central to the project of drama and theatre. At the same time, however, and in line with the new conceptualization of power as being removed from direct order and prohibition, he is anxious to present these moral lessons as emanating directly from the immediate experience of the character on stage. Morality is thus meant to be perceived as the natural pronouncement of an 'affective truth', so to speak, and not as a teaching forced authoritatively upon the audience. 'Alle Moral', Lessing writes, 'muß aus der Fülle des Herzens kommen'¹⁵ — a saying that evokes, incidentally, both the tenets of moral sense philosophy and Luther's Bible language.¹⁶ If the audience is being taught here, in other words, it is taught not explicitly and directly, but by cloaking the teaching as a natural

¹⁵ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 'Hamburgische Dramaturgie', in *Werke*, ed. by Herbert G. Göpfert, 8 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1970-79), IV: *Dramaturgische Schriften*, ed. by Karl Eibl (1973), p. 244.

¹⁶ Compare Luke 6:45, 'Denn wes das Herz voll ist, des geht der Mund über.'

human expression born out of the immediate situation on stage. Presenting abstract moral lessons in this naturalizing manner, Lessing acknowledges, is a major challenge for actors. However, in an importantly paradoxical move, he argues that this challenge can be successfully addressed by obeying relatively simple standardized rules of acting. In preparation for the moral sentence, Lessing asserts, the actor simply has to observe whether the situation in which the character finds himself or herself is a calm one or an agitated one — and depending on the answer to this, one or another way of acting have to be adopted:

Ist die Situation ruhig, so muß sich die Seele durch die Moral gleichsam einen neuen Schwung geben wollen; sie muß über ihr Glück, oder ihre Pflichten, bloß darum allgemeine Betrachtungen zu machen scheinen, um durch diese Allgemeinheit selbst, jenes desto lebhafter zu genießen, diese desto williger und mutiger zu beobachten.

Ist die Situation hingegen heftig, so muß sich die Seele durch die Moral (unter welchem Worte ich jede allgemeine Betrachtung verstehen) gleichsam von ihrem Fluge zurückholen; sie muß ihren Leidenschaften das Ansehen der Vernunft, stürmischen Ausbrüchen den Anschein vorbedächtlicher Entschließungen geben zu wollen scheinen.

Jenes erfordert einen erhabnen und begeisterten Ton; dieses einen gemäßigten und feierlichen. Denn dort muß das Raisonement in Affekt entbrennen, und hier der Affekt in Raisonement sich auskühlen.¹⁷

Simply following this and related rules for how to behave on stage, the actor will manage to develop overall the correct sentiment for the situation, so that the moral lessons appear as natural immediate pronouncements of the character in the play: the natural ‘Modifikationen der Seele’,¹⁸ which bring about visible physical changes, can in turn be achieved by altering the body according to formalized rules.

Lessing’s discussion of acting in this passage can, to be sure, usefully be understood in terms of Diderot’s contemporaneous discussion about the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, that is, the question of whether the actor should most importantly be guided by emotional identification with

¹⁷ Lessing, ‘Hamburgische Dramaturgie’, p. 246f.

¹⁸ Lessing, ‘Hamburgische Dramaturgie’, p. 245.

the character or by rule-based method.¹⁹ But much more interesting in our context is the fact that Lessing's directives speak not only to the paradox of the actor, but also to a 'paradox of obedience', as it were: the actors have to obey certain rules prescribed to them — but these rules are being formulated with the express goal that the moral teachings lose all their character of admonition to be appear instead as the expression of a natural reaction. The new implicit form of governance through a naturalized morality propagated on stage thus relies on an underlying system of explicit rules to which the actor is being submitted. In this way, the system of obedience retains its relevance even in times in which alternatives to the basic structures of obedience are being sought.

A second way in which the older system of obedience remained important in the eighteenth-century theatre concerns the emergence of literary censorship. With the rise of the theatre to relevance, not only actors and theatre directors, but also governments saw the need for regulation — directed not only at the actors and the performances, but also at the literary production. If society was to be governed by a discourse of morality beyond the law, and if the theatres were central institutions for the formulation of this new discourse, then the theatre itself had to be regulated through a new system of laws. This is, as Norbert Bachleitner explains in his contribution to this volume, the background for the emergence of literary censorship (and theatre censorship in particular) in the eighteenth century. Again, the new system of morality can thus be seen to rest on a foundation of obedience, governed by explicit prohibitions. In his article, Norbert Bachleitner discusses through readings of *Sturm und Drang* plays by J.M.R. Lenz, Leopold Wagner, and Friedrich Schiller how this new regulation through censorship shaped the

¹⁹ On the centrality of Diderot's paradox for Lessing's theory of acting, see Anja Lemke, "“Medea Fiam.” Affekterzeugung zwischen Rhetorik und Ästhetik in Lessings *Miss Sara Sampson*", *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 86 (2012), 206–23.

production of plays. To the extent that these plays boasted independence from the censorship rules, it was less through direct confrontation and transgression than through forms of irony and inconsistency that cast a shadow of doubt on the compliance with the rules — the strangely conciliatory endings of both J.M.R. Lenz's *Der Hofmeister* (1774) and Schiller's *Die Räuber* (1781), Bachleitner argues, are a case in point.

Finally, beyond the demand for the obedience of actors and of playwrights, the topic of obedience also figures prominently as an explicit or implicit topic in the plays themselves. To be perfectly clear, there were certainly playwrights who sought to replace the binary of obedience and disobedience with other, more subtle metrics — Charlotte von Stein's *Die zwei Emilien*, analysed above, is an example of this trend. But for many other authors, obedience did remain an important category even when they partially embraced the move away from the rigid structures of authority characteristic of absolutist rule. Again, Lessing proves insightful here as a case study for how structures of obedience provide an important subtext for a period that seeks to define human bonds in less rigid and less directly authoritarian terms. Consider here Lessing's 1755 bourgeois tragedy *Miß Sara Sampson*, which effected an important transition in literary history towards the dramatization of natural (though certainly intense) affective states and which centres on relationships defined by love, seemingly far from traditional ties of obedience between men and women, parents and children.²⁰

Lessing innovations may have been inspired by the British stage, especially by the domestic tragedies *The London Merchant* (1731) by George Lillo and *The Gamester* (1753) by Edward Moore. Both of these plays had achieved success in translated versions in the early 1750s. And yet, as Monika Fick notes, these putative prototypes differ in adopting the structure

²⁰ Lemke, 'Medea fiam'.

of a courtroom drama, and they aim to deter their audiences from similar behaviour.²¹ In Lessing's play, by contrast, the discourses of Sensibility moderate the narrative of judgment and replace condemnation with sympathy.

While the rhetoric of affectionate relationships dominates the discursive level of the drama, it is possible, however, to see it as a cloak above the skeleton of (dis-)obedience that structures the play's plot. Indeed, the play's central motif of elopement is based on an act of filial disobedience, defying the father — and the titular character experiences her act precisely as such an act of disobedience (her conscience is burdened by 'den ganzen Umfang des kindlichen Ungehorsams'²²). To be sure, it is important to note that the father's order that Sara believes to have transgressed appears as such an explicit order only in a dream — the real father actually appearing in the play is shown as loving and forgiving — and even in the dream, the order is, paradoxically, spoken, in a 'friendly' tone: 'Schnell hörte ich hinter mir ein *freundliches* Rufen, welches mir still zu stehen *befahl*. Es war der Ton meines Vaters'.²³ Little in the explicit behaviour of the father would warrant that Sara is haunted by the thought of disobedience — and yet she cannot liberate herself from conceptualizing her relationship to her father at least also in terms of obedience. Obedience, as we see here, remains at work even where the father seems to have redefined his relationship to his children.²⁴ While the relationships are, on the surface,

²¹ See Monika Fick, *Lessing-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), p. 123

²² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Miß Sara Sampson*, in *Werke*, ed. by Herbert G. Göpfert, 8 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1970-79), II: *Trauerspiele, Nathan, Dramatische Fragmente*, ed. by Maria Elisabeth Biener and Karl S. Guthke (1971), pp. 9–100 (p. 54).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 19 (emphasis added).

²⁴ This lasting relevance of obedience beyond its declared end can also be observed in the relationship between the father and his servant, Waitwell. Near the centre of the play (act 3, scene 7), Sir Sampson elevates Waitwell from his status as a servant and promises to treat him as an equal: 'Ich will allen Unterschied zwischen uns aufheben [...].' (61). However, this promise is followed immediately by another request for service: 'Nur dasmal sei noch der alte Diener, auf den ich mich nie umsonst verlassen habe' (*ibid.*).

defined by tenderness — the words ‘zärtlich’ and ‘Zärtlichkeit’ appear a total of 23 times in the play — this tenderness continues to be built on a subtext of obedience.

At a psychological level, Sara’s dream can be seen as demonstrating her internalisation of the patriarchal law, but it also raises a question about the limits of individual agency by seeming to anticipate the further course of the play, as Sara is saved, and then killed by ‘einer mir ähnlichen Person’.²⁵ The dream is suggestive of Sara’s later poisoning following Marwood’s intervention. While Sara and Marwood are in many respects presented as moral opposites, Sara’s identification of Marwood as a ‘mir ähnlichen Person’ raises the uncomfortable question of whether the two women do not also share some similarities, particularly with regard to their sexual desire outside of wedlock. More broadly, it raises the difficult question of whether the project of Sensibility to make sentiment the foundation for morality has potential to lead to moral relativism, given that these women are judged as polar opposites, at least in Mellefont’s judgments, and yet they share similarities in their disregard for conventional morality.²⁶ Of course, despite her actions, Sara continues to recognize external norms, including filial obedience and the importance of marriage to Mellefont. Indeed, when Sara receives her father’s letter of reconciliation, she is surprised to find him *asking* for forgiveness for his strictness, rather than issuing orders, and she insists that her elopement is an illustration of ‘den ganzen Umfang des kindlichen Ungehorsams’.

Aside from the dream sequence, another striking illustration of this bedrock of obedience defining the tender relationships appears when Sara’s lover, Mellefont, promises to Sara a

²⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁶ See further Lothar Pikulik, ‘Bürgerliches Trauerspiel’ und Empfindsamkeit (Cologne: Böhlau, 1966); and Dieter Borchmeyer, ‘Lessing und sein Umkreis’, in *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Viktor Žmegač (Frankfurt am Main: Hain, 1992) 1: 1, 105–49.

possible reconciliation with her father, to whom he vows ‘zärtlichsten Gehorsa[m]’.²⁷

Tenderness, as we see here, might be an ideal feature of relationships in the play, but this tenderness is, in the final analysis, still imagined only as a qualifier of obedience. What is demanded is ‘*the most tender* obedience,’ to be sure, but obedience nonetheless. Moreover, even if Sara and her father Sir William are reconciled at the end of the play, Sara still regards her murderer Marwood as the ‘Hand, durch die Gott mich heimsucht’,²⁸ suggesting that her elopement remains sinful. Commending Mellefont’s illegitimate daughter to Sir William’s care, Sara also urges him to speak of her death as a cautionary tale: ‘Reden Sie dann und wann mit ihr von einer Freundin, aus deren Beispiele sie gegen alle Liebe auf ihrer Hut zu sein lerne’.²⁹ Even if the play relativizes the sense of transgression against an objective moral order by virtue of its aesthetics of empathy and identification, it does not dispense with all ethical norms requiring compliance. This balance is summed up in Sir William’s final words about the dying Mellefont: ‘Ach, er war mehr unglücklich als lasterhaft’.³⁰

The intersection between gender and obedience, which figures prominently in Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy about the disobedient daughter, is one that would continue to preoccupy dramatists over the following decades, especially as women appeared to gain ground as political actors towards the end of the century. The events of the French Revolution had seen women attain prominence in that role following the women’s march on Versailles of October 1789 and Olympe de Gouges’s *Declaration of the Rights of Women and of the Female Citizen* of September 1791. Across the border in the German states, the theme of the revolutionary woman

²⁷ Lessing, ‘Miß Sara Sampson’, p. 63.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 98.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

captured the imagination, while writers also questioned critically the notion of the essential differences between men and women by exploring the theme of the cross-dressed woman.³¹

The motif of the armed woman was picked up by Goethe in *Herrmann und Dorothea* (1797), where Dorothea's defence of endangered women from marauding French revolutionary troops is presented as a fittingly heroic response to an emergency, but where the female hero also eventually retreats into the sphere of domestic servitude. Goethe nonetheless suggests the potential for power in Dorothea's evocation of the power of the domestic woman, as she tells her future husband: 'Dienen lerne bei Zeiten das Weib nach ihrer Bestimmung; | Denn durch Dienen allein gelangt sie endlich zum Herrschen'.³²

Kleist explored a similar dialectic in dramatic form in his plays *Penthesilea* and *Das Käthchen von Heilbronn*. His work on the two plays overlapped in the period between 1806 and 1808, and he clearly considered them to be connected. Kleist wrote to his relative Marie von Kleist in late autumn 1807 of the potential for the subservient to attain power:

Unbeschreiblich rührend ist mir alles, was Sie mir über die Penthesilea schrieben. Es ist wahr, mein innerstes Wesen liegt darin, und Sie haben es wie eine Seherin aufgefaßt: der ganze Schmutz zugleich und Glanz meiner Seele. Jetzt bin ich nur neugierig was Sie zu dem Käthchen von Heilbronn sagen werden denn das ist die Kehrseite der Penthesilea ihr anderer Pol, ein Wesen das eben so mächtig ist durch gänzliche Hingebung als jene durch Handeln.³³

While we might read Kleist's words on *Käthchen* simply as a male apology for female abjection,

³¹ On this question, see, inter alia, Julie Koser, *Armed Ambiguity: Women Warriors in German Literature and Culture in the Age of Goethe* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016); and Elisabeth Krimmer, *In the Company of Men: Cross-Dressed Women around 1800* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

³² See Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche*, 40 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2013), 1/8: *Romane I: Die Leiden des jungen Werthers. Die Wahlverwandtschaften. Kleine Prosa. Epen* (1994), ed. by Waltraud Wielthölder, 864.

³³ See Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. by Ilse-Marie Barth and others, 4 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–97), IV: *Briefe von und an Heinrich von Kleist*, ed. by Klaus Müller-Salget and Stefan Ormanns (1997), 397–98.

taken together, the two plays can be read as a reflection upon the relationship between obedience and agency. Käthchen's devotion to Graf Wetter vom Strahl and her successful passing of the 'Feuerprobe' contribute to a reassessment of her by the Graf and finally to her triumph over Kunigunde von Thurneck. On the other hand, Penthesilea's obedience to the code of revolutionary female autonomy embodied in the 'Gesetz der Tanais' mutates into her decision to deploy overwhelming force against Achilles to redeem herself for her previous weakness. As Christa Wolf notes, the brutal form of Penthesilea's atonement demonstrates 'wie hauchdünn die Wand ist zwischen fragloser Gesetzestreue und hemmungsloser Gesetzesverletzung'.³⁴

Female dramatists of the era also picked up the question of female agency in an acute form. Some, at least, were dissatisfied with the promise held out by male writers of the possibility of attaining power through subjection and sought other means of negotiating agency within the limits of gendered roles. A particularly striking example of the interest in female agency is found in the work of Karoline von Günderrode. Writing of her experience of reading Macpherson's *Darthula*, she writes to Gunda von Brentano: 'Schon oft hatte ich den unweiblichen Wunsch, mich in ein wildes Schlachtgetümmel zu werfen, zu sterben. Warum ward ich kein Mann! Ich habe keinen Sinn für weibliche Tugenden, für weibliche Glückseligkeit'.³⁵ Günderrode goes on to speak of the disproportion between her masculine desires and her lack of male strength. Yet in her writing she develops means of overcoming this mismatch. She adopts a male pseudonym, Tian, for the publication of two of her literary

³⁴ See Christa Wolf, 'Kleist's *Penthesilea*', in *Ins Ungebundene gehet eine Sehnsucht: Gesprächsraum Romantik*, by Christa Wolf and Gerhard Wolf (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1985), pp. 195–210 (p. 208).

³⁵ See Günderrode's letter of 29 August 1801 to Gunda Brentano, in '*Ich sende Dir in zärtliches Pfand*': *Die Briefe der Karoline von Günderrode*, ed. by Birgit Weissenborn (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1992), p. 79.

collections, *Gedichte und Phantasien* (1804) and *Poetische Fragmente* (1805), and at times she adopts a male persona in her letters to Friedrich Carl von Savigny and Friedrich Creutzer.³⁶

In her short dramas, G nderrode imagines female heroism, albeit in mythic pasts and distant locations, rather than contemporary European settings.³⁷ Indeed, in writing drama at all, G nderrode was aspiring to recognition in a genre widely considered to attract the highest prestige, an endeavour that came with some risk. G nderrode’s contemporary Christian Nees, for instance, criticized G nderrode in a review for attempting to deal with heroic motifs, as he considered that women lacked the ability to give dramatic form to such material.³⁸

In G nderrode’s dramatic sketch *Mora* (1804), the heroine finds herself compelled to defend herself against Karmor, the man she has spurned. Mora puts on the armour of her sleeping lover Frothal only to be killed as Karmor takes her for his rival. Elisabeth Krimmer argues that the radicalism of G nderrode’s text lies in her ‘refusal to celebrate female death and sacrifice by endowing them with redemptive powers’.³⁹ Elsewhere, in her short drama *Hildgund* (1805), G nderrode imagines new possibilities for female agency while also respecting the limits imposed by gender norms. The playlet opens as Hildgund is reunited with her father, the Burgundian king Herrich, following a period of captivity at the court of Attila the Hun, where she was raised to the status of the royal treasurer thanks to the favour of Attila’s wife, Ospiru. Hildgund relates the tale how Walther of Aquitaine, to whom she has been promised in marriage following an agreement between their fathers, initiated the lovers’ secret flight from the court. However, Attila demands that she return and marry not Walther, but him, and threatens to

³⁶ See Krimmer, *In the Company of Men*, pp. 132–33.

³⁷ See Koser, *Armed Ambiguity*, p. 130.

³⁸ See further Carola Hilmes, ‘Unbotm  ig: Karoline von G nderrodes literarische Inszenierungen der “Jungfrau in Waffen”’, *Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts*, (2017), 147–68 (pp. 148–54 and 159–61); and Dagmar von Hoff, ‘Kontingenzerfahrung in der Romantik’, *Pand monium Germanicum*, 4 (2000), 179–97 (pp. 190–91)

³⁹ See Krimmer, *In the Company of Men*, p. 139.

subjugate the Burgundians if she refuses. Hildgund immediately agrees, to her father's approbation and Walther's disgust, but in a soliloquy she reveals that her intention is to liberate the world from domination: 'Italien zage nicht! ich werde dich befreien, | Der Völker Geisel fällt durch Hildegundens Hand.'⁴⁰

Given the emphasis in the play on Attila's desire to subjugate the entire world, it is not difficult to imagine that contemporaries might have understood Hildgund's story in the context of the growing domination of Napoleon over Europe, even if some of Günderröde's earlier work such as 'Buonaparte in Ägypten' suggested her admiration for the French Emperor.⁴¹ Even so, much of the play thematizes the characters' lack of agency. Even Attila speaks of his compulsion to carry out 'Was meiner Ahnen Plan, was meines Vaters Wille'.⁴² Yet the play places even greater emphasis on women's limited agency, as Hildgund tells Walther when he criticizes her for returning to Attila:

Wie herrlich ist der Mann, sein Schicksal bildet er,
Nur eigener Kräfte Maas ist sein Gesetz am Ziele,
Des Weibes Schicksal, ach! ruht nicht in eigener Hand!
Bald folget sie der Noth, bald strenger Sitte Wille,
Kann man sich dem entziehn, was Uebermacht befiehlt?⁴³

Despite this stress on the limitations of female agency, Günderröde also suggests means for a woman to achieve heroism and liberty. However, this involves a decided shift away from the aesthetics and gender politics of Sentimentalism, which prized women for their supposed ability to cultivate and express fine feeling. By contrast, Günderröde's heroine suggests that women's liberation is best achieved through introspection, rather than by representing her feelings to the

⁴⁰ See Karoline von Günderröde, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, ed. by Walter Morgenthaler, 3 vols (Berlin: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990), I: 101.

⁴¹ See Patricia Anne Simpson, *The Erotics of War in German Romanticism* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2006), p. 117. By contrast, Julie Koser argues that the politics of *Hildgund* should be understood in more general terms, as a statement of opposition to all oppression. See Koser, *Armed Ambiguity*, p. 138.

⁴² See Günderröde, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, I: 92.

⁴³ See Günderröde, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, I: 98.

outside world: ‘Der Gott, der mich befreit, wohnt in dem eigenen Herzen, | Wer seiner Stimme traut, dem ist die Rettung nah’.⁴⁴ Critics have noted that Hildgund’s political agency is achieved not by means of physical strength, but by seduction and intimacy: she means to murder Attila in the marital bed.⁴⁵ She is introduced to us as someone who abhors violence, even when the victor is her beloved Walther, and as one to whom deceit does not come naturally.⁴⁶ Yet it is also thanks to her control of emotion that Hildgund hopes to achieve heroism, and she only divulges her intent to murder Attila in her soliloquies. She only hints, even to her betrothed Walther, that her intent is not to become Attila’s queen, even when he accuses her of inconstancy.

Given Hildgund’s enforced deception, Simpson’s comparison of Hildgund to Goethe’s Iphigenie requires some revision: whereas Iphigenie ultimately reveals her intentions to King Thoas, it is precisely the ability to dissemble that will determine the success or failure of Hildgund’s mission.⁴⁷ Reading’s Hildgund’s deceitfulness as a reflection of her recognition of her limited agency, Anna Ezekiel suggests that Günderrode deliberately contrasts Hildgund’s model of limited agency with Herrich’s defeatism and Walther’s overconfidence in the face of Attila’s challenge: ‘it is Hildgund who embodies a form of successful agency on the basis of a recognition of vulnerability. In short, the idea that autonomy is a condition of action and/or self-determination is presented by Günderrode in this play as both false and likely to lead to failure’.⁴⁸

To complicate things further, Günderrode denies her audience closure, in a departure from the traditional aesthetics of drama. As the curtain falls, it is not clear whether Hildgund will

⁴⁴ See Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, I: 91.

⁴⁵ See Simpson, *The Erotics of War*, p. 123.

⁴⁶ Günderrode, *Sämtliche Werke und ausgewählte Studien*, I: 90-91.

⁴⁷ See Simpson, *The Erotics of War*, p. 112.

⁴⁸ See Anna Ezekiel, ‘Metamorphosis, Personhood, and Power in Karoline von Günderrode’, *European Romantic Review*, 25 (2014), 773-91 (p. 786).

carry through her deed, or what its consequences might be. While some critics argue that this suggests the failure of her deed, it seems more plausible to understand G nderrode’s innovative refusal of closure, as Ezekiel does, as an invitation to the audience ‘to reflect on the possibilities for action of a character who is, by traditional measures, disenfranchized and disempowered’.⁴⁹ In this sense, G nderrode asserts, departing from the models proposed by Goethe and Kleist, the possibility of women’s agency as something to be attained not by means of obedience to gendered norms, but in spite of it.

The articles collected in this volume further investigate the ways in which obedience remained a crucial category for playwrights of the late eighteenth century. But these articles also pay tribute to the fact that writers tried to imagine possibilities to realize one’s freedom within the recognition of such obedience. Veronica Curran’s contribution, for instance, focuses on the ways in which the works of J.M.R. Lenz show the contemporary class system as an important site for this negotiation between freedom and obedience. Whereas in *Mi  Sara Sampson* Lessing did not yet specifically investigate social class as a constraint on individual freedom, such questions had come to the fore by the mid-1770s. Curran is especially interested in the tensions between Lenz’s apparent acceptance of a rigid class system and the author’s simultaneous commitment to freedom of action. In Lenz’s play *Die Soldaten* (1776), these two opposing views meet in the story of the middle-class protagonist Marie Wesener, who unsuccessfully attempts to break through class barriers by marrying a member of the nobility. Curran illustrates the disjuncture between Lenz’s (bourgeois) commitment to individual freedom of action and the constraints placed upon the bourgeois individual, while also demonstrating that Marie’s attempts to access power are often rather flawed.

⁴⁹ See Ezekiel, ‘Metamorphosis’, p. 787.

Despite these significant tensions, the (relatively) happy ending of *Die Soldaten* suggests that Lenz hoped to find a way beyond the tragedy of Lessing's plays *Miß Sara Sampson* and his later *Emilia Galotti* (1772). Both the reconciliation in the Wesener family and the conversation between the Gräfin La Roche and the colonel suggest the possibility of healing the social fractures in the play. Lenz's subsequent military reform project, which sought to integrate the soldier into wider society by way of marriage and to motivate him to serve his country more assiduously, further underscore his belief in the possibility of finding ways for human agency within the acceptance of the existing class system. However, this same project also reveals that his vision for social harmony showed authoritarian tendencies. Lenz himself speaks of tying 'tous les soldats l'un a l'autre et tous à la patrie par des liens bien doux'.⁵⁰ To a considerably greater extent than Lessing, the language of sensibility is used here to cloak a project that is complicit in the logic of absolutism and risks turning human beings into means rather than ends. Indeed, Lenz even imagines that each regiment will be accompanied by an historian and a poet, who will expose both heroic and cowardly acts to public view:

La ce soldat qui pourra *etre convaincu* d'avoir le premier mis le pied en arriere sera nommé publiquement et après jugé en consequence de la part de la cour mais ce procès va tout secrettement aussi jusqu'à l'heure même de l'execution.⁵¹

Paradoxically, perhaps, Lenz's project, which biographically emerged as an attempt by the bourgeois 'Projektenmacher' to find a place in the absolutist state, resulted in what some critics have referred to as a 'Sozialdisziplinierungsprojekt' that shows little respect for individual autonomy and in which social roles and existing structures of authority are reinforced.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Jacob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Schriften zur Sozialreform. Das Berkaer Projekt*, Historisch-kritische Arbeiten zur Literatur, 42, ed. by Elystan Griffiths and David Hill (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2007), p. 57.

⁵¹ See Lenz, *Schriften zur Sozialreform*, pp. 77–78 (emphasis in original).

⁵² See further Stefan Pautler, *Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz: Pietistische Weltdeutung und bürgerliche Sozialreform im Sturm und Drang* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1999), pp. 290–335; and W. Daniel Wilson, 'Zwischen Kritik und Affirmation: Militärphantasien und Geschlechterdisziplinierung bei J.M.R. Lenz', in '*Unaufhörlich Lenz gelesen...*':

While in Lenz the tensions between the acceptance of existing structures of authority and the simultaneous praise of human freedom remain, despite Lenz's attempts to the contrary, hard or even impossible to resolve, other writers of the period sought to construct models in which freedom and obedience are more clearly reconciled. Focusing on one such model, Sigmund Stephan's contribution to this volume sheds light on how early Romantic comedy evokes the possibility of ethical freedom through the realm of the aesthetic. Stephan demonstrates how the Romantics distance themselves from enlightened theories of comedy that see its primary purpose as the moral improvement of the audience, either by providing positive models for emulation or figures representing vice to be laughed at. Stephan argues, rather, that the Romantics resist such subordination of literature to extraneous ends. While their theorisations do not translate into detailed aesthetic prescriptions, Friedrich Schlegel's discussion of the parabasis serves to illustrate a possible means of reconciling disregard for artistic convention with a commitment to the universal moral law. Stephan goes on to illustrate how this might work in practice with a reading of Clemens Brentano and Ludwig Tieck's plays. Moreover, Stephan's article suggests that the displacement of these social contradictions into the realm of the aesthetic is not necessarily an anti-democratic manoeuvre, and indeed that Schlegel's admiration for the Athenian Old Comedy can even be identified with a continuing faith in democratic principles. It is in this latter respect that the turn to aesthetic disobedience in Romantic comedy is different from the polemical formal transgressions in the *Sturm und Drang* a generation earlier (notably the *Sturm und Drang*'s disregard for the neoclassical three unities of place, action, and time governing the writing of drama). There has been much debate about whether or not the *Sturm und Drang*'s 'literarische Revolution' (to use the term that Goethe coined in his autobiography

Studien zu Leben und Werk von J.M.R. Lenz, ed. by Inge Stephan and Hans-Gerd Winter (Stuttgart: Metzler 1994), pp. 52–85.

Dichtung und Wahrheit) also carries with it some political implications — but newer scholarship appears to be very sceptical of such attempts to read the *Sturm und Drang*'s aesthetic disobedience in directly political terms.⁵³ In contrast to the Romantics, there was almost certainly no sense among the *Sturm und Drang* writers of having produced a 'democratic' aesthetics. The literary revolution of the *Sturm und Drang* remained, by and large, a revolution within the realm of literary tradition and form.

While for Romantic playwrights, an explicit moral and political obedience is paired with an (implicitly political) aesthetic freedom, some other writers sought a reconciliation between freedom and obedience within the realm of morality itself. Helena Tomko's article thus discovers in Goethe's writings a possible harmony of obedience and freedom as an alternative to the misguided inwardness that Goethe frequently examined. Tomko traces the 'anxiety of inwardness' in Goethe's writing back through his composition of *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774), which for Tomko demonstrates the pitfalls of excessive inwardness, and into the first part of *Faust*, where Goethe's protagonist seeks in vain a means of aligning the inward and outward self. Tomko reads *Faust* intriguingly as 'an enlightened cosmic comedy', and sees the counterbalance to Faust's tortured inwardness in a series of scenes across the two parts of the play — from the Easter celebrations of 'Vor dem Tor' to the modest satisfaction of Philemon and Baucis. Above all, however, the positive alternative to Faust's destructive inwardness is found in the inner richness of Gretchen and the figure of St. Philip Neri, whom Tomko identifies with the figure of Pater Ecstaticus at the end of *Faust*. The achievement of a congruence of inner and outer selves relies in these characters at least in part on the acceptance of pre-given laws and serves as a positive counterpart to Faust's restless striving.

⁵³ Matthias Luserke-Jaqui, 'Sturm und Drang als Programm', in *Handbuch Sturm und Drang*, ed. by Matthias Luserke-Jaqui, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 1–8.

Read together, the five articles of this special issue provide a new perspective on the German eighteenth century. This is a perspective in which the lasting relevance of the fundamental bond of obedience becomes newly visible and in which we become attuned also to the novel ways in which writers sought to conceptualize obedience as possibly accommodating the agency of enlightened subjects. As a major new site of cultural debate and as an institution that appeared to be itself in need of regulation, the theatre played an important role in this preservation and reconceptualization of obedience for the modern age.

Keywords: Theatre; obedience; agency; Friedrich Schiller; Gotthold Ephraim Lessing; Karoline von Günderrode.

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