3. German Baroque Drama and Seventeenth-Century European Theater

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As the seventeenth century drew to a close, John Dennis, the Augustan dramatist and critic, became involved in public debate on the subject of dramatic poetry. Championing it against the charge of immorality and profanity in his aptly entitled treatise *The Usefulness of the State, to the Happiness of Mankind, to Government, and to Religion* (1698), he produced what amounts to a pre-echo of Schiller’s *Die Schaubühne als moralische Anstalt betrachtet* (1784/1802); in the course of it passing mention is made of Germany. Dennis wonders whether there can be any correlation between the stage and the general corruption of manners, that is, the low standard of public and private conduct, as some would claim. In Germany, he says, and in Italy too, the theaters are less frequented than in France or England: “For in Italy they seldom have Plays, unless in the Carnival; and in most of the little German Sovereignties, they have not constant Theatres. And yet in Germany they drink more.” Manifestly, he says, it would be unthinkable “to derive the Brutality of the High-Dutch Drinking, from the Prophaneness of our English drama.”¹ The remark is a curious one; what does Dennis mean? There is no reason to suppose that he was as well informed about seventeenth-century Germany as we are, and it is very doubtful that he knew anything about the antics of the Englische Komödianten. Yet his two interrelated references to conditions in Germany are not without relevance as we set about the task of surveying dramatic activity there to discover where it stands in relation to the practices and achievements of other countries.²

When Dennis was composing his most interesting and admired aesthetic study, the ablest, most productive, and arguably most neglected German playwright of the period was at the height of his powers. For Christian Weise’s powers were considerable; he possessed imagination (though he would not have used the word, preferring to call the quality that I have in mind invention) as well as the technical know-how that nondramatic authors lack. The particular quality of Weise’s dramatic writing may be shown by focusing on a specific
episode in Der Fall des Frantzösischen Marschalls von Biron (1693).³ Biron, the protagonist, has overreached himself; his swelling self-esteem, indeed his good fortune, forces his king, Henry IV of France, to take the decision to order his arrest. But what then? We have almost reached the end of the third act as Henry, torn between his impulse to display clemency and his obligation to be just, muses on his dilemma in soliloquy: “Wie schwer wird es einem Könige / der seine Gnade mittheilen wolte / gleichwohl aber sich benöthiget befindet die strenge Gerechtigkeit zu ergreiffen.” If only Biron could have met the king halfway; but no, his stubbornness prevented him: “Doch das Unglück / das über ihn beschlossen ist / macht ihn hartnäckicht / daß er auch wider unsern Willen seinen Untergang suchen muß.” There are pointers here to a conception of tragedy more akin to that of Heinrich von Kleist in Prinz Friedrich von Homburg. But such pre-echoes tell us little. Of much more immediate interest and significance is what Weise now chooses to do with his play, for this is the measure of his ability. As the king’s soliloquy dies away to the ominous words just quoted, the scene opens (i.e., “Die mittelste Scene zeucht sich auff,”) to reveal his queen, Marie de Médicis, sitting at a table: “Biron steht davor / ein Page mischt die Karten / sie spielen.” The scene is intimate, but its familiarity is charged with terror, for as they play, “der König sieht eine Weile zu.” The drama here is all in the grouping; the game of cards, deliberate and calculating, yet a game of chance and thus unpredictable; the watching king, alone in the knowledge that Biron’s freedom, indeed his life, is measured in rapidly decreasing moments. Then, only then, is the silence broken as Henry casually inquires: “Herr Marschall / was haben sie vor einen Zeit-Vertreib?” Biron, startled, comes hurriedly forward toward the king: “Ein Spiel, Ihro Majestät.” Henry: “Wir haben auch ein Spiel / das wollen wir bald gewinnen. . . . ADJEU BARON BIRON.” Impassively he withdraws, leaving Biron to communicate his mounting anxiety to us, the audience, in an aside that skillfully fuses pride with apprehension, tragic blindness with tragic insight: “Was ist das / hat der König vergessen / daß ich ein Marschall bin? Soll ich so niedrig werden / und nicht mehr als ein BARON bedeuten? Ach ich fürchte mich vor meinem Untergange.” Biron is losing his concentration; the queen has to call him back: “Beliebt dem Herrn Marschall nicht das Spiel zu vollführen?” They resume the game, and the queen of course takes the trick: “Der Herr Marschall ist höflich und überläßt uns das Glücke.” she says most charmingly. He repays the compliment, but in words that betray his inner state of mind: “Das Glücke ist scharffsichtig / es weiss den Ausgang nach den meriten zu urtheilen.” She thanks him for his
company and he reciprocates with profuse expressions of gratitude for her "hohe Gnade." The curtain closes. As he issues from the royal apartments, the blow falls: "Im Nahmen Ihr Königlichen Majestät begehre ich seinen Degen!" says the captain of the guard.

It is worth dwelling on this scene from act 3 of Weise's *Biron* because it graphically illustrates both Weise's dramatic sense and his effective use of stagecraft to arouse that *frisson* of tension that all genuine drama creates between suspense and conflict. It is genuine theater, one may unhesitatingly say, and as such it is equally alive to sight and sound, speech and silences, grouping, gesture, and movement and, of course, auditorium and stage. Yet the very words *stage* and *auditorium* raise problems. When we say that Weise was writing for the stage—or for that matter Andreas Gryphius or Daniel Casper von Lohenstein—what stage was he writing for, what auditorium? The simple answer is well known; it was a collapsible wooden structure put up in the town hall or sometimes in one of the larger rooms in his grammar school at Zittau; this, his "Zittauerischer Schauplatz," as he liked to call it, was from 1678 to the turn of the century the effective center of serious theatrical activity in the vernacular in the German-speaking lands. Yet this statement, too, raises reservations. Is it possible to talk about theatrical activity in a linguistic and cultural landscape that had no public playhouses in the full and accepted sense of the term until well into the next century, with the exception of the short-lived Ottonium in Kassel? Accepted notions of auditorium and stage, audience and actors, have to be radically revised if what was written and produced ostensibly for the stage is to be assessed and understood with any degree of accuracy. Has it not struck us all, as we read the steady flow of academic studies devoted to German Baroque drama, that the actual conditions governing its composition are overlooked by scholars more intent on demonstrating their erudition than on undertaking the more humdrum and often painstakingly unproductive detective work without which the dramatic texts under discussion bear scant relationship to the plays that were written, rehearsed, performed, and responded to by an audience of spectators and readers about whom we know too little? It is a pity there was no German Pepys.

Broadly speaking, most of what German speakers composed in dramatic form in their own language during the seventeenth century was specifically intended, indeed designed, for school consumption; this is a basic fact which must be realized in all its implications before one can go on to analyze Baroque Germany's achievement in relation to that of the other literate nations of Europe. The exceptions are few.
Occasionally, of course, a work might be taken up by the Wanderbühne; for instance, Lohenstein's *Ibrahim Bassa* was taken up by Paulsen's company. Some of Gryphius's plays entered the repertoire of the company led by Joris Joliphus (alias George Jolly). *Maria Stuarda*, the principal play by A. Haugwitz, may have been performed at the Saxon court; and his vanished *Wallenstein* was performed there by Johannes Velten's company just before the accession of an opera-loving new elector led to its dismissal. Haugwitz's "Misch-Spiel" *Soliman* was clearly aimed at a different type of performance which represents the other main alternative to the general rule: it was, the author tells us, "vor vielen Jahren auff einer Universitet einer damahls von etlichen Studenten zu einiger Sprach = Ubung unter sich auffgerichten Commoedianten Compagnie zugefallen auffgesetzt." Haugwitz, in any case atypical because of his superior social background, provides us with handy reminders of what other alternatives were open to the would-be German playwright, though few seem to have managed to take them up. Caspar Stieler was a notable exception with his *Rudolstädter Festspiele*, discussed in detail by Judith P. Aikin in chapter 16 of this book, as were the products of J. C. Hallmann's late creative period. Another interesting earlier alternative is provided by Josua Wetter (1622–56), who was a minor dramatic author and also something of an anomaly because he was Swiss. On the title page of his *Deß Weyland Großmächtigen und Großmütigen Herzogen I Carle von Burgund &c / unglücklich geführte Krieg mit gemeiner Eydgenossenschaft . . . auch kläglicher Undergang vor Nancy*, Wetter provides a rare instance of conclusive evidence of performance by specifying that the play was "durch eine Junge Burgerschaft der Statt St. Gallen in einem offentlichen Schau-Spiel widerumb an das Tage-Liecht gebracht"—an event repeated a year later, in 1654, when this group produced his *Denkwürdiges Gefecht der Horatier und Curiatier*, or, later, Gryphius's *Leo Armenius* (1666) and *Papinianus* (1680). What else they produced in the interim is uncertain. Wetter's plays were posthumously published in Basel in 1663. Now the published text of a performed play is clearly a valuable document for the theater historian, as Ronald W. Vince has recently reminded us, but such texts are seldom true production documents, that is, texts used as scripts during rehearsal or directly based on a specific production. At most, students of German Baroque drama only receive a fleeting glimpse of a performance—a glimpse provided more often than not by a title page or a dedicatory preface. As for the place in which the performance was held, German editions are coy. There were no playhouses as such, as we know already;
but—was it a sense of shame that suppressed the information?—few, tantalizingly few are the overt references to venues, let alone to the facilities would-be performers could draw on and which would tell us so much about the practical, tangible realities that circumscribed their concept of the stage. The De Witt drawing of the Swan Theatre in London is both literally and symbolically at the center of Elizabethan stage studies. But Germany, equally obsessed with the simile of human life as a play upon a stage, has no such central Dingssymbol, not even a drawing. Was its stage, then, just one of the mind, a topos that only now and then found its inadequate counterpart in reality? If that is so, this makes it almost impossible to compare Germany's seventeenth-century achievement in comedy or tragedy with that of France, England, Spain, or the Netherlands despite the shared delight in the spectacle of life's inherent drama, and some shared dramatic subject matter too—though rather less than one might at first suppose.15

In 1773 Lessing remarked to his brother that Weise had an occasional spark of Shakespeare's genius. We smile when we hear this, but we should bear in mind that Zittau grammar school was Weise's Globe and draw practical inferences from this juxtaposition. The pedagogic nature of German Schuldrama has often been stressed; but other important aspects may have more to tell us about his plays and those of several others—about the plays themselves, that is, and not their underlying educational strategies and academic objectives. If modern Germany still had an established tradition of school plays, its literary scholars might probably be more alive to certain practical factors and less prone to gaze beyond the text (the primary evidence we have that the play was ever given) in order to develop retrospective theories about their deeper meanings.16 A school or undergraduate play production takes for granted a number of things that distinguish it from productions on the professional stage of any place or period: first, the audience; then, the cast. In seventeenth-century Germany's case, the audience consisted of an assembly of parents, relatives, and friends, plus school governors, staff, and local dignitaries, many of whom were Protestant clergymen—people who would probably never otherwise have attended a public playhouse, even if they had had the opportunity to do so. Respectability was assured. The actors they watched were schoolboys: is there any evidence of Schuldrama in girls' schools to set alongside Racine's Esther and Athalie?

On the other hand, apart from those two plays, where in French or English drama are the dramatized parables and Bible stories that constitute an important element in the German school tradition? The repertoire of Jacobean and Restoration England was almost wholly
secular in subject matter and spirit, while that of France tended to look to classical antiquity for its subjects except for the brief vogue for plays on religious subjects between 1637 and 1645 associated with Jean Rotrou, Corneille, and Pierre Du Ryer. Although there are points of similarity (e.g., the vogue for "Islamic" subjects in all three countries during the early 1670s), the criteria governing the German playwrights' choice of subject matter have yet to be fully investigated. One may surely surmise, however, that in cases of close collaboration between dramatist and school (as was generally the case both in Breslau and Zittau) the choice was at least partly dictated by current emphases in the school curriculum, and that some plays were therefore in fact dramatizations of episodes drawn from "set texts" being studied by the senior boys who were also leading members of the cast.

If the circumstances and conditions governing play production in Germany differed from those elsewhere, this must also have been evident in actual performance. No neat parallels can be drawn with Elizabethan performing style or Jacobean acting practice. In Germany, boys' grammar schools thus provided the experience of legitimate theater. This makes the question of when the first woman appeared on a German stage both irrelevant and very hard to answer, for in Germany female roles were acted by schoolboys, whereas in England they were played by professional actors and therefore in due course by women when they were admitted to the acting profession. The performances attended by audiences in Breslau and elsewhere must certainly have been challenging displays of rote learning glorified. Not so in London, Paris, or Madrid, where the rapid turnover of plays catered to a limited audience in constant search of novelty. A school play, on the other hand, was generally an annual event put on by a group of mainly older pupils who in all probability would never meet again. In other words, the Einmaligkeit of German Baroque plays was not dictated by the public's potential boredom but by the fact that they were written for a specific school year which, like a vintage, never comes again. Revivals were therefore almost invariably out of the question unless, like some of the plays of Gryphius and Lohenstein, they were taken up elsewhere. It follows that there must have been some local performing traditions associated with particular institutions, though nothing that could be termed a national style such as we see developing on the legitimate stage in Paris. The style lay in the text rather than in the performance. This bred in turn a further characteristic phenomenon, the learned poet-playwright, and as a corollary, the drama publication complete with learned notes, which paradoxically flourished in seventeenth-century Germany despite the virtual absence...
there of closet drama; for were any of these German plays specifically written to be read rather than performed? None comes readily to mind within our period.

Apart from various kinds of court entertainment and the published repertory of the Wanderbühne, almost all extant seventeenth-century German dramatic texts owe something to school performance—often their inspiration and very existence. School was not just the matrix of seventeenth-century German dramatic literature, as G. Spellerberg calls it—for that would apply equally well to France or England. School was the common denominator of German Baroque drama. This disqualifies the plays of Lohenstein, Gryphius, Hallmann, and Weise from being designated as "theater," yet it underpins them all with a genuine performing situation—one that cared little and knew next to nothing about the performing arts in contemporary Europe but which must have developed some practical performing tradition of its own handed on from boy performer turned schoolmaster to his own pupils in each generation, about which we know very little. The extant data are meager, and what there is has not been scrutinized with archaeological flair; it is significant that our most obvious source about Breslau, the diaries of Elias Major, the rector of the Elisabethanum during its heyday of dramatic activity, are not available in a modern critical edition and translation. Indeed, how figuratively apt is his remark of 25 September 1658: "Theatrum pro ludis scenicis exstructum, dissolvitur; eiusque partes sub tectum Gymnasiai (Elisabetani) reconduntur" [The stage erected for the plays is dismantled, and its parts are stored away under the roof of St. Elizabeth's grammar school]. Both literally and figuratively, German Baroque drama was in the hands of its schools. From the point of view of Anglo-German literary comparisons, Major's vague but thought-provoking remarks should be collated with the dramatic productions he oversaw, the parallel happenings at Breslau's other grammar school, the Magdalenäum, and of course what we partially know about the Englische Komödianten there, not to mention the important contribution to the city's cultural life being simultaneously made by the Jesuits. Then a picture, however incomplete, would emerge of what was actually taking place in one of the Holy Roman Empire's main literary centers during the decade or so that saw the interplay of Corneille, Racine, and Molière, the reconstruction of the Amsterdam Schouwburg, and the emergence in London's two patent theaters of what Robert D. Hume calls Carolean drama, which introduced major innovations such as the use of actresses, and the vogue for Spanish romance, heroic plays, and the Restoration comedy of manners.
By 1669 that Breslau epoch was over. Time passes, new tastes emerge, and new requirements stimulate innovation. In the late 1680s, the Zittau plays of Weise pose different problems and display different aesthetic criteria. But within the ambit of German literature Weise's Zittau plays simply mark a further evolution of Schuldruma, whereas to the comparatist they reveal exciting parallels; for instance between his Trauer = Spiel von dem Neapolitanischen Haupt-Rebellen Massaniello (1682) and that isolated anomaly in the English context, Thomas Durfey's Famous History of the Rise and Fall of Massaniello (1699), an equally realistic picture of the lower orders raised to power, couched in flat, harsh prose and achieving a coarse mimetic realism found nowhere else at that time except in a remote corner of Germany. Indeed, the differences of occasion, purpose, and technical means are what make the obvious similarities between Durfey and Weise so fascinating.

A more or less coherent school of drama that often parallels the interests of the stage in other countries but whose raison d'être was quite different: this is my view of German Baroque drama; a half-tradition, rather, of which contemporaneous Jesuit drama in Latin represents the other component, one now much better known thanks to the work of E. M. Szarota, J.-M. Valentin, and F. Rädle. Call it a dual tradition, then, which only now and then came into constructive contact with the more popular but more amorphous brand of entertainment provided by successive generations of strolling players. Its authors evolved a dramaturgy both practical and theoretical in keeping with the aesthetic of the age but molded to requirements quite different from those catered to by their Spanish, French, and English counterparts. Its origins went back to humanism and the sixteenth-century grammar school tradition, which was not quite so moribund as sometimes claimed. It was highbrow and male-dominated, but its Baroque tone and format were a response to the changes in taste governed by the Opitzian revolution and by other factors; for example Dutch, Italian, and Jesuit Latin drama, the reservations Gryphius may have had about Corneille, and maybe a pre-Lessingian instinct that German taste was more akin to that of England—as represented by its thespian exiles, the “histriones anglicani,” whose competition Rector Major deplored. If this thesis has any validity—and I think it does—it may account for the difficulties literary historians have had in accommodating, for instance, Duke Heinrich Julius of Brunswick within the overall pattern—and thus for his quite unjustifiable neglect. The century ended with attempts by schoolmaster dramatists to teach politics to the prospective civil servants of princes; its prelude had
been that rare and short-lived episode when it pleased a German prince to bypass the earnestness of Teutonic education and learn his stagecraft from professional actors fresh from some of Europe’s major theaters.

Notes


6. But see the pioneering work carried out by the distinguished theater historian Willi Flemming: *Andreas Gryphius und die Bühne* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1921) and *Einblicke in den deutschen Literaturbarock* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1975).

7. Ibrahim Bassa, first produced at the Magdalenäum, Breslau, in 1650(?), seems to have been the only Lohenstein play to have been taken up by the “alternative” professional stage; performances are documented in Nuremberg (1667) and Danzig (1669). See Alberto Martino, *Daniel Casper von Lohenstein*, 1 vol. to date. (Pisa: Athenaeum, 1975), 1:186–87; 197, and now Pierre Béhar, *Silesia Tragica. Epanouissement et fin de l’École dramatique silésienne dans l’œuvre tragique de Daniel Casper von Lohenstein* (1635–1683), Wolfenbütteler Arbeiten zur Barockforschung, 18 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989).

8. What could happen when a serious school drama was adapted to the requirements of the strolling players is shown by Barbara Drygulski Wright, “Kunstdrama und Wanderbühne, Eine Gegenüberstellung von Gryphius’ *Papinian* mit der populären Bearbeitung,” in *Literatur und Gesellschaft im deutschen Barock*, ed. Conrad Wiedemann (Heidelberg: Winter, 1979), pp. 139–54.

10. Ibid., 80; Béhar speculates that this took place in Leipzig between 1675 and 1678.


16. Secondary evidence is provided by the plot synopses that accompanied the original Breslau performances of plays by Gryphius, Lohenstein, and Hallmann. Interesting exploratory work has been done on some of these counterparts of the Jesuit *periochae* by Gerhard Spellerberg in his two articles: “Szenare zu den Breslauer Aufführungen Gryphischer Trauerspiele” and “Szenare zu den Breslauer Aufführungen Lohensteinscher Trauerspiele,” *Daphnis* 7 (1978): 235–65; 629–45.

17. Helpful work is being done in this connection by Ilona Banet; see her article “Die Entwicklungstendenzen des Schulwesens der Stadt Breslau zur Zeit Daniel Caspers von Lohenstein,” in *Virtus et Fortuna* (= Festschrift Rolf), ed. J. P. Strelka and J. Jungmayr (Bern: Lang, 1983), pp. 479–95.


