

Making Characters: Lessing's Dramaturgy of Imagination

Today, I will talk about Lessing's dramaturgy of imagination particularly with regard to the formation of characters.¹ The connection between theater on the one hand and imagination on the other might seem counterintuitive at first glance, if one considers imagination to be an operation of the mind and theater to be mainly involved with the actual presentation of figures and events on a stage. However, I propose that Lessing envisioned a theater that addresses and engages the spectator's imagination in a sustained manner, allowing her to benefit from the theatrical experience. The spectator takes, as it were, something with her when she leaves the theater. That means, in addition to Lessing's theoretical account of imagination in his *Laokoon* essay, that a particularly *theatrical* imaginative portability can be traced in his dramatic texts. In the following I will look at aspects of "imaginative portability" in Lessing's early comedies and comedic fragments. Already in his very first finished play *Damon oder die wahre Freundschaft* (1747) reflects this with exemplary precision.²

Let me start by roughly sketching out the discursive background which Lessing confronted/engaged. Imagination (in German *Einbildungskraft*) played of course a significant role in the German aesthetic discourse of the 18th century. Developed by thinkers like Christian Wolff,³ Johann Christoph Gottsched,⁴ as well as Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger,⁵ "Einbildungskraft" is defined as a twofold faculty that encompasses at once receptive and productive, passive and active abilities. Passive in the sense that imagination

¹ By dramaturgy I mean the way in which the dramatic text reflects upon its inherent intention to be transferred onto stage. I am not at all concerned with actual stagings but am only referring to the dramatic text as such.

² (Despite the judgment of low quality ascribed to some of Lessing's early comedies, both by himself and Lessing scholars, most of these pieces can be read as experiments in which he tinkers with dramaturgical issues that will concern him in his later creative work.)

³ (in *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen*, 1712)

⁴ (1730)

⁵ (1740)

denotes the faculty of the mind [Seele] which perceives external things sensually and saves them as in an archive. But imagination is also **active**--, since it enables the recombination of the perceived data in order to create new images.⁶ Moreover, imagination allows one to mentally re-present ('*vorstellen*') *absent* ideas or concepts and fictions *as if they were present*.⁷ In Georg Walch's lexical entry from 1727 one reads: "Einbildungskraft erlaubt es, die Ideen der Sachen, die Vermuthungen und Erdichtungen als gegenwärtig und als etwas reelles vorzustellen."

The medial transfer between absence and mental presence, which is of central importance for the aesthetic function of imagination that I have just sketched out, is also crucial for Lessing's negotiation of "Einbildungskraft" in his *Laokoon essay* (1766). The central determination of his media theoretical distinction between painting and poetry is the evocation and sustainability of the "freie Spiel der Einbildungskraft" in the reader or beholder. Painting has to stimulate the faculty of imagination by choosing the right or with Lessing "fertile moment" ("fruchtbarer Augenblick") that provides a single visual moment with a narrative, an imaginative context.⁸ Poetry, by contrast already provides a non-pictorial text. Poetry already provides the visually absent object (the thing, figure or concept it refers to), which, once again via the faculty of imagination, leads to a mental visualization *as if* that object *were present*. The core aesthetic aim for Lessing is thus to actively engage the subject in the process of aesthetic reception.⁹ It is also important to note that Lessing uses *Einbildung* more derogatively as a potentially passive and fixed *image* that one has internalized, and stresses the productive force of *Einbildungskraft*, the faculty of imagination, which actively processes and manages sensual and intellectual data – a distinction that gets lost in the English

⁶ Georg Walch (1726) and Johann Heidrich Zedler (1734)

⁷ "Einbildungskraft erlaubt es, die Ideen der Sachen, die Vermuthungen und Erdichtungen als gegenwärtig und als etwas reelles vorzustellen".

⁸ just as in Johann Georg Sulzer's definition from 1771

⁹ Wellbery in *Gesetz der Schönheit*: Subject is a product of concepts of representation

term *imagination*, but that I will try to keep as clear as possible in the following.

In his *Laokoon* essay, Lessing brings up drama only once in a comparably brief, but nonetheless prominently positioned passage. It is particularly the beginning of his discussion of Sophokles' Philoktet in paragraph four that is of interest for me here. Lessing compares narrative poetry to dramatic poetry, concluding that the effect of an incident on the recipient depends on whether it is narrated in a poetic text or visibly represented on a stage. He then clearly suggests dramatic arts to be medially positioned between poetry and painting. Lessing implies that the theater is concerned with both, the visibility of the stage-presentation and the linguisticity of the dramatic dialogue. It is my claim now that the spectator's free play of imagination is enabled by the theatrical experience and that this can be discerned by looking at Lessing's dramatic works themselves. The interplay between the economy of visibility on the one hand (what or who appears or does not appear, when and in what way) and the economy of narration on the other hand (what is being said by whom about whom, when and in what way) is negotiated within his plays.

A dramatic operation that reflects upon the management between verbal and visible between speech and scene emerges in the outlines of two comedies Lessing never finished: *Der Leichtgläubige* (1747) and *Der Vater ein Affe der Sohn ein Jeck* (1748). In these two drafts, Lessing briefly describes what is supposed to happen in the individual scenes mostly still without any dialogue. In *Der Leichtgläubige* he defines the function of a young widow with regard to her fiancé, saying "Sie macht seinen Charakter" before her fiancé appears on stage. Lessing thus emphasizes the very moment when a figure is being developed in the interaction of the stage presentation and the speech of another figure, a dramatic operation that requires the spectator's sensual perception as much as linguistic understanding to evoke her imagination. This is what I call the dramatic operation of *making a character*. Less than a year later, a similar formulation can be found in the outline for *Der Vater ein Affe der Sohn ein*

Jeck, where Lessing describes it as the maid Lisette's task to "insert" the character of the vain father, again *before* he eventually enters the scene. Lessing writes: "Sie schiebt den Charakter des Vater's ein." What he seems to be after here is a gradual *emergence* of a dramatic character that is dependent on a close correlation between visible and verbal elements, and that involves the spectator in an active imaginative process, in the course of which the *image* of the character is sketched out verbally and visualized in the spectator's mind. This mental image is supposed to provide the imaginative framework in relation to which the actual figure eventually appears on stage.

In order to show how I see this operation to be deployed in Lessing's plays I am turning now to my main literary example: *Damon oder die wahre Freundschaft*. A few words about the content of the play: The main characters, Damon and Leander, who are competing to win the affection of a young widow, have realized that they are best friends. This coincidence decreases the intensity of their affection for the widow. Lisette, the widow's maid, tries to revitalize the play by forcing the widow's decision. Both suitors have been waiting for the return of their merchant ships from India and the one who makes the greatest profit will be chosen. Lisette tells Leander and Damon about her mistress' plan and the audience is presented with the two men's subsequent reactions at the same time as there emerges confusion about whose merchandise had been shipwrecked. All manner of intrigue results: Leander tries to dupe Damon in order to escape defeat, and Damon, in contrast, struggles between love and friendship, trying to please the widow as well as Leander. In the end, luck comes to Damon's aid and it is revealed that it was indeed Leander's ship that was wrecked. Damon gains the widow's love and forgives Leander. He is fully rewarded for both—honest friendship and real love.

From this synopsis alone, *Damon oder die wahre Freundschaft* looks like a traditional morality play. Yet, a closer look reveals it to be more complex. In the first scene the widow

and her maid Lisette establish the setting as well as the opposition of the two male characters, Damon and Leander, *before* they appear in person in a later scene. Lisette asks the widow: “Was stellt denn jetzt Herr Damon und Herr Leander bei Ihnen vor?” *Vorstellen* of course has an at least twofold meaning here. On the one hand, it refers to the register of representation, and thus marks the point of the characters' introduction. On the other hand, it invokes the register of imagining or fancying: Lisette explicitly asks what the two lovers *mean to* the widow, what she *envisions*, or *imagines* them *to be*. The widow's repetition of the question (“Was sie vorstellen?”), instead of offering an answer, displays not only her irritation, but emphasizes the question as such and challenges its apparent simplicity: what do Damon and Leander *represent*? The medially reflective way in which Lessing employs *Vorstellen* here thus also reveals the essential role that imagination plays with regard to character formation.

The widow tries to characterize Damon and Leander by ascribing a particular feature to each of them, which form the imaginative framework for the eventual appearance of the characters on stage. In the course of the play, Leander, whom the widow calls wild and impetuous (“ungestüm”), emerges as a deceiver who tries to win the widow's affection at all costs while pretending to be Damon's friend. Damon, on the other hand, whom the widow describes as fickle or “flighty” (“flüchtig”), is prone to digressions and soliloquies. Once he enters the stage, he proves to be flighty with regard to his supposed function within the actual comedy, for he is unable and unwilling to make a decision for one or the other object of his affection. One result of shifting his attention from the widow to Leander and back is that in contrast to Leander, even in person, Damon remains still inaccessible for Lisette who cannot come to terms with him and complains: “Ich kann jetzt aus ihm eben so wenig klug werden als zuvor.” His resistance to Lisette, the instigator of the plot, does not lead to a clear image of him and challenges the widow's and Lisette's imagination.

What is moreover being challenged here, I want to suggest, are the doctrines of

character comedy stated by Gottsched and Gellert that demand the images of opposite characters to be clearly defined as virtuous and vicious. The rules of comedy require the virtuous character to be clearly favored and the vicious character to be just as clearly denigrated.¹⁰ According to these rules, the comical judgment in *Damon oder die wahre Freundschaft* should prefer the generous friend, Damon.

Yet Lessing's comedy progresses in a different direction at the point when Lisette's laughter comes into play. Right after Damon's second soliloquy, Lisette openly laughs at Damon for his naïveté with regard to Leander: “Auf seine Treue können Sie sich verlassen. Ha ha ha! Er wird Ihnen in Ihrer Not redlich beistehen. Ha ha ha!” When he assures her that he hopes so too, she bursts out: “Und ich auch. Ha ha ha! Ich weiß seine guten Absichten. Ha ha ha!”. It is conspicuous that Lisette's ironic commentary is applicable to both Leander—who *acts as if*, i.e. who *pretends* to be a friend—as well as to the naïve Damon—who is so loyal that he cannot even conceive of a betrayal. Lisette's laughter not only ridicules Damon, but it also appeals to his self-awareness and his self-reflection.¹¹ It is not only Damon's conception of Leander, but Damon's *self*-conception that is being challenged here. Damon is fooled by the false image he has of Leander; he is fooled, so to speak, by the *false* image he has internalized of friendship, and thus of himself. Just as Damon is revealed as a character with a foolish and inflexible imagination, the spectator's judgment is challenged as well. The character that is supposed to be good turns out to be just as laughable as the one who is bad. The clear image (*Einbildung*) of what is good and bad is undermined.

Lisette's laughter manifests Lessing's understanding of comedy as neither a devaluating corrective (as in type-comedies à la Gottsched) nor as resulting in an affirmative joy (Gellert's sentimental comedy), which Lessing explicitly dismisses as a “Nahrung ihres

¹⁰ Gottsched in *kritische Dichtkunst* (1730) and Gellert in *Über das rührende Lustspiel* (1751/1754).

¹¹ This appeal to self-reflection becomes even stronger in *Der Freigeist*, where the virtuous character is explicitly asked to laugh about himself. [Quote]

[the spectator's] Stolzes".¹² He denies that such a "vain pleasure" can be of any benefit, since the spectator eventually "bleibt was er ist, und bekömmet von den guten Eigenschaften weiter nichts, als die Einbildung, daß er sie schon besitze." For Lessing, and that is my thesis, comedy is rather supposed to undermine passively received, fixed images, i.e. *Einbildungen*, and in turn re-enable the active faculty of imagination, *Einbildungskraft*, in order to facilitate the best possible critical judgments, even beyond the walls of the theater.

Let me conclude with a brief prospect: The question of how to shape dramatic characters by means of activating the audience's imagination will remain a central concern for Lessing in his later plays. Soon after *Damon*, in *Der Misogyn* (1748), and then again in his adaptation of Plautus, *Der Schatz* (1750), he will extend his perspective toward the feminine object of imagination in relation to which the male characters develop. In *Der Misogyn*, for example Hilaria appears in the disguise of a man in order to challenge the negative conception that her lover's father, Wumshäter, has of women. In *Der Schatz*, Kamilla, whose image of a beautiful, virtuous woman is created in the first scene, does not even enter the stage at all. Instead her figure is entirely substituted and thus objectified by a monetary *treasure* and just remains latently present as the imaginative object as well as the second meaning of the German title *Schatz*. The negotiation of character formation will be crucial also for Lessing's later major plays. Most paradigmatically this is of course the case in *Emilia Galotti* where the male character's conception of Emilia is gradually developed as an imaginative frame that inhibits Emilia's emergence on stage.¹³ What I was trying to show today was that Lessing had been interested in character formation and the role of imagination in theater from very early on—an observation that might also help to reposition his later plays within the context of his oeuvre.

¹² in the afterword to *Des Herrn Prof. Gellert's Abhandlungen über das rührende Lustspiel* that Lessing translated in 1754

¹³ as Brigitte Prutti has shown in her book on *Emilia Galotti* and *Minna von Barnhelm* in 1996