



Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)

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Playwright / Dramatist; Art Theorist/ Historian/ Critic; Political Philosopher.
Active 1749-1781 in Germany

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, one of the most important dramatists and aesthetic theorists in European literature, was born on 22 January 1729 as the third of twelve sons of Johann Gottfried and Justine Salome Lessing into a humble and deeply religious family in the small town of Kamenz near Dresden (Saxony). His father, a recognized theologian, was the town's Protestant minister, a severe patriarch and a lover of culture. He soon recognized his son's extraordinary intellectual abilities, instructed him at an early age in various areas of knowledge and sent him to the *Lateinschule* (high school) in Kamenz from 1737-41. At the age of twelve, young Lessing was rather proficient in Latin and Greek, and spoke English and French fluently. He was enrolled at the *Fürstenschule* (school of princes) St. Afra in Meissen, one of the élite academies in the area, usually restricted to sons of influential Saxon families and, of course, the aristocracy. He was an outstanding student, and his teachers were often unable to satisfy his inquisitive mind. Lessing enrolled at the University of Leipzig in the autumn semester of 1746 to pursue his studies; the University of Leipzig was the most prestigious institution of higher learning in Saxony, located in a cosmopolitan city where most intellectuals of the time congregated. Following his beloved father's path, Lessing initially decided to study theology, but he soon abandoned it due to his lack of vocation, and changed his field of study to philosophy, medicine and literature. As a student he became increasingly enchanted with the world of the theater. His active night life at the theaters (a liaison with an actress was rumored), and the support he provided to destitute actors, first met with his parent's disapproval, then brought him into an untenable financial position and in conflict with the law. In order to avoid the debtors' prison, Lessing had to leave avant-garde Leipzig and, after a brief period of medical studies in Wittenberg, take refuge in a strait-laced and uninspiring Berlin, a city he detested. This crisis temporarily interrupted his studies.

Upon his arrival to Berlin in 1748, Lessing established himself as a journalist, translator and literary reviewer in hopes of making a living. Although he was not successful in economic terms, and never earned more than a bare subsistence, the author won public recognition as a journalist and theater critic. During his first stay in Berlin, Lessing met some of the foremost intellectuals of the time and he befriended, among others, the poet Ewald Christian von Kleist, the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn and the writer Christoph Friedrich Nicolai. In his extensive work as a translator, Lessing eventually rendered many French and English texts into German. In fact, the early reception of William Shakespeare in Germany – previously quite unknown in that country – was due to his efforts. However, his preference for English texts over the then much revered French classicists was a source of difficulties for Lessing. A personal enmity with Voltaire arose at that time and later thwarted Lessing's candidacy for an important position as head librarian in the Royal Library. Voltaire's negative verdict convinced Frederick II of Prussia that Lessing was not qualified for the appointment. In 1751 Lessing went to Wittenberg where he graduated from the university. He returned to Berlin in 1752 and remained there until 1755 when he

completed *Miss Sara Sampson*, his first major play, and moved back to Leipzig.

His plan of accompanying a wealthy young merchant on a trip to England - and eventually around the world - were foiled upon their arrival in Amsterdam by the beginning of the Seven Years' War (1756-63). A disappointed Lessing returned to Berlin in 1758, where he stayed until 1760. There he published his important 55 theoretical *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend* [*Letters Concerning the Latest Literature*, 1759-60], the most remarkable of these the *17th Letter* (1759), in which Lessing makes a strong case for Shakespeare as a model for a renewed German theater. The *17th Letter* includes the strikingly original fragment of a Faust drama Lessing had written himself, but passed off as part of an old folk play. Also in 1759 Lessing wrote the prose tragedy *Philotas*, one of his lesser works. In 1760 he moved to Breslau, where he took employ as the secretary of the Prussian general Tauentzien who was the governor general of Silesia. He pursued his studies of classical philosophy and art in Breslau and wrote his comedy *Minna von Barnhelm* and the aesthetic treatise *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* [*Laocoon, or On the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, 1766] before he returned to Berlin in 1765.

After his failed candidacy for the chief librarianship at the Prussian Royal Library, he moved in 1767 to Hamburg, where he intended to revive a moribund theater (Hamburger Entreprise) as its artistic advisor and to advocate the concept of a German national theater as a critic. But his innovative ideas did not win over an indifferent and conservative audience. His *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* [*Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 1767/69], a collection of 104 short essays on the drama, was the result of his stay in Hamburg and proved eminently influential for the later development of the German drama. After the bankruptcy of the Hamburg theater, Lessing was once again destitute and forced to leave the city for steady employment elsewhere. In 1770 he accepted the poorly paid position of librarian at the prestigious Wolfenbüttel Library. Although the position itself was secure, Lessing was deeply unhappy in Wolfenbüttel, plagued by poverty, lack of recognition and increasing ill health. After 1774 he became embroiled in a much-publicized acrimonious controversy about theological matters with the Hamburg pastor Johann Melchior Goeze, which ended when the Duke of Brunswick silenced Lessing. The eleven years spent in Wolfenbüttel he characterized as an “an intense agony”. In 1775 Lessing traveled to Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna and – as the companion of a Brunswick prince – to Milan, Venice, Florence and Rome.

While in Wolfenbüttel he courted Eva König, a widow with whom Lessing had been in love for years. Administrative problems delayed their marriage until it finally came to pass in 1776. The couple's happiness, however, was short-lived. In 1778 Traugott, Lessing's only son, was born and died shortly after his birth. Two weeks later Eva Lessing passed away. Her two daughters from her previous marriage were put into the author's care and comforted him in his grief. In a letter, Lessing eloquently bemoaned that his only chance to enjoy a good life, as other mortals were allowed to, had ended in devastating loss. In fact, he never recovered from the blow of having lost his wife and child. His final years were spent in poor health and loneliness. On 15 February 1781, only 52 years old, Lessing died of a stroke in the city of Brunswick, where his grave can still be visited today.

Despite his constant struggles for economic survival and the concomitant restless wandering life, Lessing achieved remarkable success as a playwright during his lifetime. Drama was his first passion, and his plays remain innovative and moving even more than two centuries after they were written. During Lessing's formative years, German literature conformed to the poetics of Johann Christoph Gottsched. Although Gottsched was later overshadowed by Lessing, his theory of the drama, based on the aesthetics of French classicism, governed dramatic writing and performance in the early German Enlightenment. Gottsched re-vitalized the role of the actors in performance practice and insisted on creating a professional and well-paid drama company in order to develop theater into an effective cultural agency, and his dramatic theory and practice provided an important, though flawed, first foundation for the later development of drama in Germany. However, his great admiration of the French classicists, who were not widely understood by the German public, prevented his ideas from

gaining much popular support. Lessing's literary productivity began when he was a student in Leipzig: he had written poems as well as moralizing fables in his youth, but it was his first drama which brought him some acclaim. The satirical comedy *Der junge Gelehrte* [*The Young Scholar*], performed in 1748 by the enterprising drama company of Friederike Caroline Neuber, was an immediate stage success. Still attached to the French tradition and strongly influenced by Molière, the text critically illuminates the role of intellectuals in society. Several other satirical plays were written in the Leipzig period, most remarkably *Die Juden* [*The Jews*], a play presenting a plea for tolerance and emancipation of the non-privileged and still ghetto-bound Jewish citizenry.

It was during his second stay in Berlin, when his time was primarily devoted to translations, that Lessing delved into literary theory. His readings of Aristotle and Shakespeare inspired his conception of a radical reform of German drama. The first step was to abandon the French model, as it derived from a culture Lessing considered quite different from the German. The English national character and, specifically, Shakespeare's works, were deemed compatible with the German cultural traditions. A first attempt to put these ideas into practice was the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (tragedy in a bourgeois setting) *Miss Sara Sampson*, published and premièred in 1755, the first German drama to draw its main characters from the bourgeoisie, not the aristocracy. The plot-line of an evil seducer who corrupts and brings an innocent girl of a lower class to a tragic end is not entirely original, but Lessing's version – including elements of the melodrama – touched the audience deeply and made him famous over night. The main male protagonist, Mellefont, returns in different incarnations in Lessing's own later works, and in plays by Goethe and Schiller, as well as by many lesser authors.

It is important to note that Lessing's major plays are either the result or the forerunners of his theoretical aesthetic writings. In his *Letters Concerning the Latest Literature* (which followed *Miss Sara Sampson*), he laid out his critique of Gottsched and proposed an amalgam of Shakespeare with Enlightenment principles as the foundation for the renewal of German drama. The *Faust* fragment of the *17th Letter* radically breaks with the prevalent theological view of a sinful Faust and portrays the hero as a man driven by his thirst for knowledge (“the most noble of all drives”) and anticipates both *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) notions and Goethe's approach to the Faust theme. In *Laokoon*, published eleven years after *Miss Sara Sampson*, Lessing differentiates between the visual arts and literature. Whereas visual art has to freeze a moment in time of utmost importance for the artist's rendition of an event, literature (i.e. the drama) can represent the elements of time, temporality, action, movement, succession and development. This essay engaged in the nascent classicism debate with Johann Joachim Winckelmann and proved to be eminently influential on Goethe and the next generation of writers. In his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (written just after the next play, *Minna von Barnhelm*), Lessing deals with all issues of play-writing and performance: the problem of catharsis (distinctions between the Greek and French tragedies and their strategies to instill fear as a means to morally “purge” the audience), a critique of the Aristotelian unities and their application in French classicism, the merits of Shakespeare's depiction of the supernatural versus the French, reflections on drama and history and on the playwright's preference for ambiguous situations and characters. Thus, the playwright will show his wit by composing a work abounding with equivocal situations, where humor is displayed in multi-faceted dialogue. Lessing's defense of “mixed” characters, neither truly evil nor good, was inspired by the Spanish author Calderón de la Barca.

Lessing put his dramaturgical theories into practice and to the test with *Minna von Barnhelm oder Das Soldatenglück* [*Minna of Barnhelm, or Soldiers' Fortune*], written 1760-63, premièred in 1767 and today considered the first German classical comedy. It is a comedy in prose, full of ingenious dialogue where the wit of the main characters is an integral part of the action and just as important as the intrigue about love and miscommunication. The play is set in the Prussian officers' circles – Lessing observed this milieu during his stay in Breslau – and satirizes their notions of pride and honor. The main character of Tellheim, a proud and stubborn Prussian soldier plagued by economic and emotional problems, is inspired by his friend Ewald Christian von Kleist, who lived in a very similar situation. Tellheim's inability to ask his beloved for help due to his false pride is ridiculed by the play, as is the inconsistency of women. The moral of the text is that, despite the undeniable differences between male and female nature, affection and honesty can overcome every problem. One of the

main innovations of this comedy is that the German audience, for the first time in the comedic genre's history, laughs *with* the characters – who are part of the very same cultural and social background – and not *at* them.

Lessing's outstanding tragedy in prose is *Emilia Galotti*, published and premièred in 1772. The author had worked on the text intermittently from 1757, constantly revising it according to the evolution of his theories. Inspired by the tale of Virginia as told by the Latin author Titus Livius in *Ab urbe condita*, Lessing considered it a subject apt to touch and edify the German public. The tragedy of a father persuaded by his own daughter to kill her in order to avert dishonor moved the audience deeply. In the character of the tyrannical prince, who brazenly violates the virtue of bourgeois women, Lessing's audience could easily recognize the abuses of power by the aristocracy of their own time.

The author's most progressive and daring text is his drama (he called it a “dramatic poem”, as it is written in Shakespearean blank verse) *Nathan der Weise* [*Nathan the Wise*]. The text was ready for print in 1779, but it was not performed until 1783, two years after Lessing's death. Situated in the time of the Third Crusade, the main character is the kind, tolerant and wise Jew Nathan. The sultan Saladin and a young Templar are the other main characters – and proponents of the three major religions – in a plot designed to show the absurdity of religious strife. The play makes a strong case for friendship and peace between the different confessions and is centered around the famed parable of the three rings as told by Nathan. The aims of Christianity, Judaism and Islam are the same: to shape exemplary and spiritually rich human beings, who must practice tolerance of each other in order to fulfill the will of their creator. Nathan is the most intricately crafted character in all of Lessing's works, as he stands for the truly enlightened – and therefore intrinsically good – man of his time. Some critics claim that understanding Nathan means understanding Lessing, as they are the same person.

Shortly before his death, Lessing wrote the philosophical treatise *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* [*The Education of the Human Race*, 1780]. Influenced by Spinoza's pantheism, the didactic text affirms Lessing's belief in the moral perfectibility of humankind and its potential ultimate salvation in ethical freedom – outside of any dogma and even beyond the Deism typical of Enlightenment thinking. For Lessing, this is an ever ongoing, evolutionary progression toward a yet utopian goal. Both *Nathan* and *The Education* are strikingly modern in their transcendence of every philosophical discourse prevalent during their author's time.

Lessing left a rich heritage of critical, dramaturgical, philosophical and fictional writings, all of which had a tremendous impact on later generations of authors, thinkers and artists. German Weimar Classicism, greatly inspired by his theories and plays, would have taken a different direction in its development without this model. Lessing's reform of the German theater resulted in the evolution of a national and democratic stage, which eventually was able to liberate itself from the aesthetic and political shackles of absolutism. His plays continue to win much acclaim around the globe. Lessing's noble vision – exemplified above all by *Nathan the Wise* – of peace and tolerance, human dignity and beauty, and the liberation of humanity through reason and truth, remains as valid today as it ever was.

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