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Pity Play: Sympathy and Spectatorship in Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

"Sympathy" was a key term in two of the liveliest discourses of the eighteenth century.¹ On the one hand it provided the underlying foundation of influential moral philosophies from Rousseau to leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which has received a renaissance of attention from economists and political scientists over the past decade, is in many ways the culmination of this trend in the moral sense tradition.² On the other hand it was a principle term of contention in the battleground of theatrical practice and theory. From Lillo and Steele in England to Diderot and Beaumarchais in France, the heralded bourgeois drama was meant to elicit sympathy with the internal feelings of its protagonists as a principal distinguishing characteristic over and against the older Baroque tragedies of external affect. The clearest enunciation of this new theatrical ideal comes from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose famous maxim, "the most compassionate person is the best person,"³ serves as his defense of sympathy as the chief edifying aim of all tragedy. While sympathy provided the first keystone of human epistemology for sentimentalist philosophy,⁴ it represented the final *telos* for sentimentalist theater.

1 There is no space in this essay to dwell on the thorny issues of Smith and Lessing's terminology. Briefly, "sympathy" in Smith usually refers to what psychologists today call "empathy" (the capacity to feel emotions that others feel), though sometimes it must be understood in the more limited sense of feeling pity for another's misfortunes. Lessing's use of *Mitleid* is precisely the opposite: usually it refers to pity; occasionally it should be understood as empathy. For English usage, see Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Emotion: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 301–304. For Lessing's *Mitleid*, see Thomas Martinec, *Lessings Theorie der Tragödienwirkung. Humanistische Tradition und aufklärerische Erkenntniskritik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003), especially 164–181.

2 See especially the enthusiastic reception of Smith's *TMS* as a tool for grounding international justice by Amartya Sen, "Open and Closed Impartiality," *Journal of Philosophy* 99, no. 9 (2002): 445–69.

3 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Friedrich Nicolai, and Moses Mendelssohn, *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Munich: Winkler Verlag, 1972), 55. All translations from German are by the author.

4 David Hume, *Moral Philosophy* (Hackett: Indianapolis, 2006), 31.

Any investigation of the *performance of knowledge* in the eighteenth century cannot do without an inquiry into sympathy's interpersonal operation.

If one begins to look at the rhetoric of sympathy in these two discourses side by side, however, one notices that the philosophers constantly borrow the language and imagery of theatricality while the dramatists repeatedly make assumptions about ethical distinctions. This essay will show that despite this affinity, each of the two discourses seems to have precisely the other's focus on compassion as its own blind spot.⁵ We can see evidence for this mutual neglect best in two of the most developed thinkers who championed compassion in their respective fields, Smith and Lessing.⁶ Smith's understanding of the mechanics of sympathy is profoundly theatrical, but he never engages seriously with the theater or the actor's craft. Lessing's hope for the playhouse as a place of moral improvement, meanwhile, never openly addresses the ethically questionable structure of voyeuristic and self-interested theatrical compassion. The concrete language of both writers, however, forces a reckoning with the very issues that they seem to ignore. This essay does not argue for a reductionist deconstruction of the respective discourses, but rather points to a productive paradox inherent in the theatrical structure of sympathy.

It turns out that the birth of a new theatrical genre, the bourgeois tragedy, provides the stage for sympathy to act out its paradoxes. In addition to showcasing heroes from the emerging middle class, as the name of this eighteenth-century innovation implies, the bourgeois drama also distinguishes itself from earlier theatrical

5 This mutual neglect and its implications have gone largely unremarked in scholarship despite many excellent studies on the discourses of both theater and moral philosophy in the eighteenth century. David Marshall has written two insightful book-length investigations of sympathy and the theatrical: *The Figure of the Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). The first has a helpful chapter on Adam Smith, which rightly demonstrates that the discussion of sympathy in *TMS* is suffused with the theatrical. He does not, however, remark on the strange absence of *the stage* and *acting* from Smith's thoroughly performative analysis.

6 It is surprising that there has not been more comparative scholarship on Smith and Lessing. For Smith's influence on Lessing's later thought, see Arnold Heidsieck, "Adam Smith's Influence on Lessing's View of Man and Society," *Lessing Yearbook* 15 (1983): 125–143; and Helga Slessarev, "Nathan der Weise und Adam Smith," in "Nation und Gelehrtenrepublik: Lessing im europäischen Zusammenhang," ed. Wilfried Barner and Alfred M. Reh, special issue, *Lessing Yearbook* (1984): 248–256. For an insightful reflection on sympathy and rhetoric in Lessing and Smith, see Zachary Sng, "Parenthysos: On the Medium which is not One," *Modern Language Notes* 125, no. 5 (2010): 1029–1049.

modes by aiming to communicate interior states of feeling to audiences.⁷ It is a theater of sentiment rather than of affect, and sympathy is one of the principle modes of its operation, both technically and morally. After making a brief show of the performative structure of sympathy in Smith, this essay turns to the close reading of a single act in the first famous German bourgeois tragedy, Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755). The play famously demands spectators' sympathy for a fallen woman, Sara, and can be seen as a social plea for expanded tolerance and understanding. The act in question, however, features the play's villain, Marwood, rather than its titular heroine. In it, a jilted woman tries to win back her lover by putting on a show of pity (Lessing 1755, II.1–6, 448–462).⁸ This scene provides evidence for three arguments this essay will lay out. First, the very theatricality of sympathy so devastatingly demonstrated here points surprisingly away from the vaunted moral efficacy of compassion and towards some later critics of this elusive sentiment, such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Brecht. Second, by casting an experiment in new sentimental drama within a seeming throwback to older dramatic conventions, the act challenges prevailing generic understandings of the play. Finally, the essay shows how these two seemingly unrelated arguments – one concerning moral philosophy and the other concerning genre and literary history – are in fact inextricably linked. Just as Lessing cannot eschew Baroque gestures in inaugurating the bourgeois drama, Smith's encomium to sympathy ignores the more natural, sentimental drama that would best fit its analysis in favor of stagey stoicism and tragedies of affect. These apparent contradictions do not negate the arguments in which they occur, but rather highlight the tensions at work in the dynamics of sympathy.

1 Adam Smith's performative sympathy

For Adam Smith, sympathy is central and fundamental to human morality, but in a way very different from Hume and other moral sense philosophers. Instead of being a mere mechanism whereby passions are communicated between people, it takes on a more normative character of judgment. When we see another person in joy or pain, our imagination calls forth similar sensations from our own memory, as in Hume, yet Smith immediately goes on to allow sympathy a greater power: "By the imagination we *place ourselves in his situation*, we conceive our-

⁷ Despite many excellent recent studies of the bourgeois drama, the best analysis of its paradoxes remains Peter Szondi, *Die Theorie des bürgerlichen Trauerspiels im 18. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973).

⁸ Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Conrad Wiedemann, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2003). Further citations are indicated parenthetically by act, scene, and page number.

selves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and *become in some measure the same person with him* [...]” (Smith 1759, *TMS* 9, emphasis added).⁹ This unifying function of fellow feeling provides the basis for all personal and civic virtue and perfectibility. Sympathy is therefore not only a faculty or mechanism with which we are all equipped, it is also a skill that we ought to practice and improve.

The language Smith uses to describe how sympathy operates is surprisingly resonant with the work of many performance theorists, both in its insistence on an awareness of performance in every aspect of human behavior, and in its tendency to universalize this awareness as a key to explain every human action to an extent that can become vague and unhelpful.¹⁰ This performative nature becomes apparent in the verbs and images to which Smith repeatedly turns in order to describe sympathy’s working, as he constantly dips into the metaphorical well of both theatrical and musical performance for his vocabulary of fellow-feeling. From the stage: spectate; view; observe; wonder; change places in fancy; picture out in our imagination; from the concert hall: harmony of sentiment; concord; reecho; keep time with.¹¹ The two registers of visual and audible performance even inspire mixed metaphors: “to *see* the emotions of their hearts *beat time* to his own” (*TMS* 22, emphasis added). Let us look more closely at this passage, which vividly demonstrates the double nature of sympathy that is so crucial to Smith’s system.

[Concerning the person who is the object of sympathy:] To see the emotions of their hearts [i.e., those of the sympathetic spectators], in every respect, beat time to his own, in the violent and disagreeable passions, constitutes his sole consolation. But he can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him.

In order to produce this concord, as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators. [...] As their sympathy makes them look at it [the sufferer’s passion], in some measure, with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence and acting under their observation. (*TMS* 22)

⁹ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 22. Further citations are indicated parenthetically with *TMS* and page number.

¹⁰ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskia Jain. (London: Routledge, 2008), 24–37.

¹¹ All taken from the first few chapters of *TMS*.

The anthropologist Erving Goffman could not have made his principle contention of mutual performativity more expressly than with Smith's language describing "the habit which a man, who lives in the world, has acquired of considering how everything that concerns himself will appear to others" (*TMS* 43).¹²

Despite this clear reliance on an awareness of performance as a fundamental category of Smith's system, however – despite this insistence that we are always acting, whether we are the receivers or the givers of sympathy – he never speaks directly about the art of acting or the practices of the stage. The examples he takes from dramatic works are few and paltry compared with the use he makes of figures from the pages of Greek and especially Roman history. The narrative accounts of Livy and Plutarch are clearly much more alive and vivid to him than the plays of Shakespeare and Racine. But the way Smith describes his sympathetic judgment of their actions is again incredibly theatrical:

In imagination we become the very person whose actions are represented to us: we transport ourselves in fancy to the scenes of those distant and forgotten adventures, and imagine ourselves *acting the part* of a Scipio or a Camillus. (*TMS* 75, emphasis added)

One is reminded of the young Wilhelm Meister, who cannot help but act out every narrative he reads on the inner stage of his mind. The activity of sympathy turns even the driest chronicles of history into a virtual theater. Smith, in one of his few explicit forays to the theater, even anticipates Schechner's insistence that every aspect of an audience's experience before, after and during a theatrical production is an integral part of the performance event:¹³

When we attend to the representation of a tragedy, we struggle against that sympathetic sorrow which the entertainment inspires as long as we can, and we give way to it at last only when we can no longer avoid it: we even then endeavor to cover our concern from the company. If we shed any tears, we carefully conceal them, and are afraid lest the spectators, not entering into this excessive tenderness, should regard it as effeminacy and weakness. (*TMS* 46)¹⁴

This is the only explicit acknowledgement of theatergoing in a book replete with performative imagery, and it calls attention to the performance of the *spectators*

¹² See Goffman on teams, 47–65. Compare also Fischer-Lichte on co-presence, 38–74.

¹³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (London: Routledge, 1988), esp. 70–71.

¹⁴ This passage also gives an anticipatory nod to Judith Butler's claims about the cognizance with which we enact gender roles as we imagine them to be expected of us in society. See her "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519–31.

rather than that of the actors. For a thinker whose language is so thoroughly theatrical, Smith is remarkably silent about the stage.¹⁵

Finally, and most interestingly, this reflecting action of sympathy (between the consciousness of the spectator and the spectated) is only one of the doubling splits that occur in Smith's construction of self and other in the social system. He also makes it clear that a kind of second-order observation of sympathy is taking place in the sympathizer that is universally positive, regardless of the first-order passion being compassionated with.

In the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful. The other may be agreeable or disagreeable, according to the nature of the original passion, whose features it must always, in some measure, retain. (TMS 46n)

Hume perceptively noted this feature as “the Hinge of [Smith’s] System.”¹⁶ He is very right to put his finger on this doubling, second-order sympathy as the key point of theoretical innovation in Smith’s moral theory. It is a powerful new explanatory model for human behavior, perfectability, and social harmony. At the same time, however, a closer inspection of the language used to describe sympathy reveals a serious and perhaps insurmountable paradox at the heart of Smith’s system. We saw above how the power of sympathy lets the spectator “become one” with the suffering person. Smith later describes how the same sympathy splits that very spectator as she regards herself. “I divide myself, as it were, into two persons [...] spectator and actor [...] judge and judged” (TMS 113). Sympathy both unites disparate persons into one and divides single individuals into two. This contradictory movement to simultaneously achieve unity and duality is not meant by Smith as some irony-laden Romantic maxim of productive paradox. The impartial spectator becomes:

the man within the breast. [...] With the eyes of this great inmate he has always been accustomed to regard whatever relates to himself. [...] He does not merely affect the sentiments of the impartial spectator. He really adopts them. He almost identifies himself

15 Space considerations prevent a thorough analysis of Smith’s mention of the theater here, but suffice it to say that the few appearances of theatrical performances in *TMS* concentrate on the audience (e.g., the nervous spectators of the tightrope walker, *TMS* 10) rather than the performers.

16 David Hume, Letter 36 to Adam Smith dated 28 July 1759, quoted in *TMS* 46n.

with, he almost becomes himself that impartial spectator, and scarce even feels but as that great arbiter of his conduct directs him to feel. (TMS 147)

Smith never confronts or reflects upon this apparent inconsistency, and the effect it might have on the practice or recipient of sympathy is left unclear. Instead, a play written in German some four years before Smith's book was published stages this very problem with tellingly insightful results.

2 Lessing's performance of sympathy

It should not come as a complete surprise that Lessing, steeped as he was in the arguments of the moral sense philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, should hit upon this central point of Smith's system. During the same years he was writing *Miss Sara Sampson*, Lessing was working on a translation of Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*. Hutcheson had been a teacher and mentor to Smith, and the valorization of sympathy in his moral system founded on benevolence no doubt sent both men thinking along similar paths, as evidenced in Lessing's famous correspondence on the nature of tragedy with Nicolai and Mendelssohn (1756–1757). *Miss Sara Sampson*, the first performance of which in Berlin helped instigate this flurry of letters between the three friends, represented a revolutionary moment in German theatrical history. Heralded as the first native “bourgeois tragedy,” it remained a huge success on German stages for the next twenty years.

Just as enthusiastically as Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* was long hailed by literary historians as the first German bourgeois tragedy (*bürgerliches Trauerspiel*), critics lately have begun to revel in revealing the extent to which it still depends on rhetorical strategies and formal elements of the Baroque tragedy it is meant to replace. To do so, they have largely concentrated on the figure of Marwood, whose declamatory rage at the end of act two has been touted as the epitome of everything the bourgeois tragedy was intended to correct and supplant in earlier dramatic practice.¹⁷ Marwood personifies the “remainder”

¹⁷ Anja Lemke nicely summarizes this tendency in criticism: “Marwoods sprachliche Inszenierung des Pathos gilt [...] als Zeichen der unvollkommenen Umsetzung des ästhetischen Projekts einer auf Unmittelbarkeit und Natürlichkeit zielenden Darstellung von Leidenschaften. [...] Bis in die kleinsten Details ihrer Rede und ihrer Körpersprache zeigt die Marwood in ihrem kontrollierten Spiel der *simulatio* die rhetorische Kunst der Verstellung und den bewussten kalkulierten Einsatz des Gefühls.” Lemke, “‘Medea fiam’- Affekterzeugung zwischen Rhetorik und Ästhetik in

of Baroque rhetoric in the new, naturalistic drama. A glance at the scene (II.7) in which Marwood ‘becomes’ Medea makes it is easy to see why readers and watchers of the play as early as Lessing’s own friend Mendelssohn were left uneasy by the scene. If the chief programmatic goals of the bourgeois tragedy were (a) to produce characters closer in social position and feeling to average audience members instead of grand royalty or mythic heroes, (b) to replace a language of rhetorical affect with a more natural idiom, and (c) to exchange the pointed stimulation of passion for the realistic representation of sentiment,¹⁸ then Marwood here clearly violates every single one of these principles, almost as if she had a checklist of rules she intended to transgress one by one. Marwood herself, even within the short space of the scene in question, makes us unfailingly cognizant of her inconsistency with the new aesthetic when, at the opening of the scene, in full conformity to the sentimentalist program, she berates Mellefont for alluding to the ancient gods:

MARWOOD *mockingly*: Express yourself without such learned allusions. (II.7462)

Marwood thus anticipates the criticisms that Mendelssohn, Staiger, and a host of others would level at her character.¹⁹ Barely a page and a half later, however, she is dropping her own learned allusions [gelehrte Anspielungen], when she makes it clear she has transcended the representation of any “average” character who might be taken from the ranks of the audience: “Behold in me a new Medea!” (II.7464). Marwood has thus clearly reverted back to the heroic grandiosity, the rhetorical flourishes, and the raging passions of an earlier dramatic idiom.

This essay will do nothing to challenge this understanding of Marwood’s function as a vestige of Baroque *Trauerspiel* in the midst of Lessing’s new bourgeois tragedy.²⁰ Instead, it will uncover the surprising source of her reactionary

Lessings *Miss Sara Sampson*,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 86, no. 2 (2012): 207.

18 These three programmatic “aims” are largely gleaned from Diderot’s preface and afterward to *Le Fils naturel* (1757) and *Le père de famille* (1758) respectively (Lessing translated both). The aims can also be sighted as early as George Lillo’s 1731 preface to *The London Merchant*, which Diderot and Lessing admired. The name of Marwood herself is a tribute to Lillo’s evil seductress, Millwood.

19 Emil Staiger, for instance, wryly claimed “Niemals sind einer verlassenen Geliebten, auch nicht der kältesten Intrigantin, solche Satzgefüge und Konjunktionen über die Lippen gekommen,” in “Rasende Weiber in der deutschen Tragödie des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 80 (1961): 377.

20 Lemke convincingly demonstrates connections between the ancient or humanistic rhetorical traditions and the aspirations of eighteenth-century aesthetic representation. See also Marti-

character. In turning to observe the events of act two leading up to Marwood's assumption of the Medean mantle, this essay will show that it is, in fact, a failed test-run of the new type of bourgeois drama that necessitates her resorting to older models of affectation (II. 7–8). Of the eight scenes in act two, only these last two exhibit the Baroque paroxysms that have garnered all the critical attention. In scenes 1–5, in contrast, Marwood prepares and executes a seemingly successful sentimental drama for Mellefont. Scene 6, however, reveals the ephemerality of the play's desired effect in its spectator. As we shall see, Mellefont's progress as effected audience complements and shapes Marwood's evolution as affected actor. Moreover, because Marwood's resolution to kill Sara results from Mellefont's refusal to heed her appeal, the origin of the tragic plot of the play as a whole has its seed in this first failed prototype of the sentimental drama. It is Marwood's Baroque reaction to the failure of her aesthetics of sympathy that ultimately turns a potential tearful comedy (*comédie larmoyante*) into a bourgeois tragedy (*tragédie bourgeoise*).

3 Marwood as actress

Let us turn back to the opening of the second act. In a play where the unity of place is conspicuously maintained by its setting in the quintessential space of transience – of changing between places – in an inn, only one act ever violates the original announcement of the setting in the very first scene of the first act:

*The setting [Schauplatz] is a hall in an inn
Sir William Sampson and Waitwell
enter in traveling clothes*

(I.1.433)

Act two alone is separated in space from this first specific inn, but the act's locale is also a guesthouse: the *type* of space is identical. The second act thus simultaneously brackets itself off from the rest of the play by the change of setting while also precariously preserving the play's unity of place by virtue of the interchangeability of roadway inns. The stage directions for act two echo those of act one:

nec's *Tragödienwirkung*, which traces Lessing's debt to pre-Enlightenment modes of thought in his reception of his contemporaries.

*The setting [Schauplatz] represents Marwood's room
in another inn
Marwood in a negligé; Hannah*

(II.1.448)

As before the opening of act one, these lines of orientation before act two are the only indications of any characters' dress – the introductions of all other figures throughout the first two acts are absent any sartorial directives. Sir William and his servant, meanwhile, appear in travel clothing [in Reisekleidern], surely the most appropriate dress for a place that is only useful for a pause before resuming travel. Marwood, in contrast (and the difference is stressed by the strange singularity of parallelism in costume notes), though she is also introduced in an inn (in *another* inn), appears in a negligée: she makes herself at home in the place of transience. The echoes in the introductory remarks to the two first acts serve to show off their disparities quite nicely.

The contrasts thus highlighted, however, appear more cosmetic than substantial upon a closer look at the opening scene. Marwood is speaking to her servant, Hannah, in preparation for Mellefont's arrival. She freely admits the just wrath she feels towards him, but then immediately reins in her anger: "Don't I seem a little uneasy to you, Hannah? The traitor! But still! Enraged [zornig] is the last thing I should become" (II.1.449). She realizes from the beginning that an unbridled display of emotions will not achieve the desired effect on her former lover: she knows that the time of showcasing passions in the grandiloquent and lyrical mode of a Racine or Corneille has passed, and that a new type of theatricality is at hand. "Leniency, love, and entreaty [Nachsicht, Liebe, Bitten] are the only weapons I may use against him, if I rightly know his weak side" (II.1.449). She is listing out the techniques of the new sentimental drama: though Lessing and Diderot might shy away from terming them "weapons," forbearance, love, and solicitation are indeed the stylistic and moralistic innovations they propose. Hannah immediately brings up the possibility of these tactics not working: "But what if he should be hardened against them?" (II.1.449). Marwood has two successive answers. First she foreshadows her eventual reaction when she learns that her play has indeed failed: "Then I won't just be angry [zürnen] – I shall rage [rasen]! I can feel it, Hannah; and I'd rather be doing it now" (II.1.449). This quip makes it clear that if Marwood is anything "by nature," then it is the excessively unnatural rhetorician she will later become. Her second response reveals the trump card with which she will eventually bring her upcoming sentimental theater-piece to a resounding climax: her daughter. Another great shift in the latter half of the eighteenth century, alongside and related to the rise of the domestic drama, has been touted as the inven-

tion of childhood and the growing idealized centrality of children in the family.²¹ It is no coincidence that the star sympathy-catcher in the play *Marwood* is staging should be the young Arabella, sole rival to Sara in innocence and authenticity.²² The mother has few illusions that the language of old love is much weaker than the language of blood, as she calls it, and has no qualms about using both to whatever effect they may achieve.

Marwood thus gives her stage-manager, Hannah, a quick synopsis of the drama to come. In it, she will employ all the techniques the promoters of sentimental theater will aspire to in their programmatic writings.²³ In the domestic drama she puts on for Mellefont, *Marwood* successively tests out six strategies of the new theater: everything from the actor's craft to moralistic ideals of tolerance, admiration, compassion, reason, and even a proto-Diderotian familial tableau. Let us examine these six policies in turn.

3.1 Technique of the actor

Diderot and Lessing both had rather controversial notions about the technical aspects of acting – the Frenchman went so far as withholding publication of *Paradox of the Actor* [*Paradoxe sur le comédien*] until after his death (which means Lessing would not have had the pleasure of reading this delightfully slippery dialogue). Both men, however, would have agreed that to achieve a histrionic natural lifelikeness, which they championed over the bombastic posturing of the traditional French stage, a great deal of artifice would be necessary. *Marwood* displays the complexities involved in this artificial naturalness as she gives us a glance at how “an actress prepares” in the second scene of act two.

MARWOOD: Oh, Hannah, he's here now! How should I receive him? What should I say? What face should I wear [...]? Is this one calm enough? Look at me!

HANNAH: Anything but calm.

MARWOOD: What about this one?

HANNAH: Try a little more grace [Anmut – also: sweetness, charm].

²¹ See Friedrich Kittler, *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: Göttingen, 1978), 14–43. Although Kittler directs his claims to the time between Goethe's composition of the *Sendung* and the *Lehrjahre* (1770s–1790s), it is important to remember that Goethe's novels were set mid-century, and many of Kittler's observations about the construction of ideas of childhood and family are already emerging in *Sara*.

²² In fact, it is remarkable how alike Sara and Bella are – they are the only two characters able to move Mellefont to pretend to commit to anything, and Mellefont's interest in Sara seems more ruled by a suspiciously parental joy in her childlikeness than any more sexually mature motives.

²³ See Lessing's 1760 translation of Diderot's prefaces (*Werke und Briefe*, Vol. 5.1, 15).

MARWOOD: How about this?
 HANNAH: Too sad!
 MARWOOD: Would this smile suit me?
 HANNAH: Perfect! But just more free – he’s coming.

(II.2.450 – 51)

This exchange, in which Marwood tries on expressions as she might dresses before a ball, reveals the value of composure and grace as well as the importance of avoiding histrionic scenes of melodrama: “Too sad! [Zu traurig!].”²⁴ Hannah coaches her mistress in the natural ways of the new heroine of the stage – there is no more room for Phèdres full of fire and ice, but only for Saras steeped in sweetness and light. The crowning commentary on all this effort to achieve effortlessness arrives with Hannah’s final judgment: “Perfect!” she praises, “but just more free.” Naturalness and freedom can only be achieved by studiously practiced craft.

This is an exact staging of the way Smith argues the prospective recipient of sympathy should try to pitch her performance to the expectations of an audience. Expressions either too stoical or too passionate would turn off the spectator rather than draw him in to sweet sympathy. Hannah here is an embodiment of the division of Marwood’s self into a creature who feels and an “impartial spectator” who must moderate the outward appearance of those feelings.

Marwood’s strained efforts to affect the naturalism of new sentimental heroines can thus be read as emblematic of the double bind placed on actresses in the second half of the eighteenth century in both their social situation and their acting craft. On the one hand, by being an actress, women were always already transgressing against traditional expectations of gender propriety. On the other hand, although the acting profession demands ostentation and flagrant affectation, actresses were suddenly expected to restrain this element of their artistic identity in order to play the self-effacing, demure roles (like Sara) that had come into fashion. Meanwhile, it is equally suggestive to think about how the character Sara is ultimately successful in winning Mellefont’s devoted spectatorship away from Marwood simply because she proves to be better at *acting* like the natural, unaffected object of sympathy that had come into vogue. Sara’s acting is more effective because it masks its theatricality. The play’s female rivalry thus dramatizes tensions inherent in the position of actresses in eighteenth-cen-

²⁴ Marwood: “Welche Miene soll ich annehmen? [...] Ist diese ruhig genug?” Hannah: “Geben Sie noch mehr Anmut.” II.2.450 – 451.

tury Germany as documented in Mary Helen Dupree's excellent study, *The Mask and the Quill*.²⁵

3.2 Tolerance and forgiveness

The appeal to tolerance was not only a programmatic ideal of the Enlightenment in general, but was a pet objective of Lessing's dramatic efforts in particular. *Miss Sara Sampson* is no exception: the play takes a young woman who has run away from home in order to live in sin with a man and shows her not as a figure of horror and ridicule, an admonishing example of what to avoid, but rather as a picture of virtue and innocence, an object of sympathy and even admiration. Marwood's first tactic in her performance for Mellefont is equally magnanimous in its espousal of toleration and forgiveness. Instead of appearing as the wronged, vengeful lover, as Mellefont expects, she approaches him with smiles. Mellefont would rather hear "reproaches," as he quickly reminds her. She responds:

You dear, funny soul, why would you forcibly compel me to remember a trifle that I forgave the very moment I found out about it? Does a brief infidelity that your gallantry, but not your heart, played on me really deserve reproach? Come, let's laugh about it together!
(II.3.452)

Thus does Marwood introduce her first strategy of programmatic tolerance and forgiveness for Mellefont's transgressions. The eighteenth-century discourse of toleration and acceptance is based in right knowledge of the relation of the other to oneself, and thus it makes sense that Marwood should attempt to stage a scene of anagnorisis-like revelation here. Two successive but opposed discoveries in fact take place, both grounded in a claim to *know* Mellefont better than he can know himself.²⁶ The first of these asserted recognitions contends to espy the central goodness at Mellefont's core; the second will descry his human weakness and evil. Thus we watch within the space of a few short minutes of stage business the two poles of contention about human nature in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – from Hobbesian insight into man's depravity to Rousseauian sentimentalist testimonies to human goodness. Marwood first tries out the latter:

²⁵ Many thanks to Mary Helen Dupree for suggesting these lines of thought, which deserve to be pursued much further than space allows here. See her *The Mask and the Quill: Actress-Writers in Germany from Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2011).

²⁶ Mellefont, "Ich kenne [Ihr Herz] besser als Sie" (II.3.452).

MARWOOD: Your heart, Mellefont, is a good little fool. It lets itself get talked into whatever your imagination fancies. But believe me: I know it better than you do. If it weren't the best, the most faithful of hearts, then I wouldn't make such an effort to keep it. (II.3.452)

She immediately must confront the results of her misstep in claiming such a relation to the good heart she discerns in Mellefont, however, as he reacts with a fit of (proto-) Marwoodian rhetorical hyperbole: "Marwood, if I thought that you possessed even a single fiber of my heart, then I would rip it out of my chest here before your eyes" (II.3.452). After this rebuff, she tries another tack with a second kind of recognition.

MARWOOD confidentially: Just listen, my dear Mellefont; I know well what your situation is. (II.3.452)

This second strategy of tolerance is marked by two gestures that may seem to counter but in fact support her diagnosis of his character flaws. The stage direction makes explicit that she is to deliver the speech "confidentially [vertraulich]," and this sudden intimacy is even more emphasized by her move to the familiar form of the second person singular. In fact, these two speeches, in which Marwood is professing a forgiving recognition of Mellefont's darker nature, are the only passages but one in the entire play where Marwood addresses Mellefont as *du* (the other occurs in Marwood's rage at the end of the act). Appropriately, after sharing this intimate psychological study with its subject fails to effect change in him, she will return to *Sie* when she moves on to her next tactic (admiration).

The content of Marwood's diagnosis begins with a stoical (or Cartesian) assessment of human passions: "Your desires and your taste are now your tyrants" (II.3.452). But the treatment she prescribes for Mellefont is much more in line with the wryly knowing wink-wink-nudge-nudges of British moralists like Hume or Laurence Sterne: "But that's okay: you have to get them out of your system [man muß sie austoben lassen]. It is foolhardy to resist them." (II.3.452). She proposes instead to give his desires and passions "free range" (*freies Feld*) so that when they have eventually exhausted themselves in each novel object, he will return to her forgiving arms with fresh ardor. This brand of tolerance is one that recognizes the unavailability of a man's falling under the sway of his passions; one that simply forgives and forgets. Marwood's second speech addressing Mellefont as *du* makes the character sketch even more pointed. "You men must not even know yourselves what you want" (II.3.453), she opines, and then proceeds to make a prophecy about the lifespan of Mellefont's infatuation with Sara. She traces the development of his attachment from devotion to indifference week by week and gives the affair a month's life expectancy. Sara's

death at the end of the play prevents us from testing the accuracy of this prediction, but the wavering distaste at a prospective loss of freedom Mellefont expresses in his soliloquy after discovering that every hindrance to a hasty marriage with Sara has been removed (IV.2) gives no uncertain hint that Marwood indeed knows her patient very well.

3.3 Admiration (*Bewunderung*)

Immediately after demonstrating that she knows the shabby side of Mellefont's character, Marwood manages an adroit segue to prove that she is much nobler than he gives her credit for. She quotes from a letter Mellefont had sent her and turns his concern about "sums of money" into a subtle indictment of his petty (and in the England in which the play is set, utterly ungentlemanly) over-concern with money. She feigns doubt as to his authorship of the letter, which "an innkeeper must have written" (II.3.454) (which would render Mellefont as grubbily at home in the transience of hostelry as Marwood's negligee seemed to do). Then, with hurt pride, she announces not only her willingness, but indeed her insistent desire that he should take back any valuable gifts she has received at his hand. In the same breath in which she continues her diagnostic of Mellefont's forgiven imperfections, she engineers a moment of admiration for her own virtue and honor. But just as Lessing knew that admiration (*Bewunderung*) of stoical forbearance could never be a lasting effect of drama,²⁷ Marwood does not rest with this achievement: she immediately uses the potential state of penury to which this admirable act of self-denial would lead to provoke the next stage of her sentimental drama: pity.

3.4 Compassion, sentiment

Not too long after *Miss Sara Sampson* was first performed in Frankfurt (Oder), Lessing engaged in a correspondence about the purpose and function of tragedy in which he claimed, "These are the steps: fear; pity; wonder [Schrecken, Mitleid, *Bewunderung*]. The name of the ladder, though, is pity; fear and wonder are nothing but the first buds, the beginning and the end of pity."²⁸ Marwood

²⁷ See Lessing's respectful arguments with Mendelssohn, who held *Bewunderung* to be the chief end of tragedy (Lessing, *Briefwechsel*, 80). As we shall see, Adam Smith would surprisingly side with Mendelssohn in this debate.

²⁸ Lessing, *Briefwechsel*, 54.

seems to get the order of the steps a bit out of kilter, as she will move from this momentary ploy for admiration directly to a plea for compassion, and will invoke fear (in the guise of a Baroque Medea) only after her sentimental drama has run its course and proven a failure. Perhaps we can say that she *descends* the ladder rather than climbs it: admiration is a first step and fear the result of its end. But the ladder's central coherence in compassion is certainly at work throughout Marwood's production in scenes 1–4 of act two. The centrality of sympathy is evident from her very first words to Mellefont at the beginning of their interview: "Share my joy! [Teilen Sie doch meine Freude!]" (II.3.451). Marwood's conception of *Mitleid* in this opening salvo is clearly more akin to that of the British moral-sense philosophers (something like the later "empathy") than that of Aristotle (a more discriminating "pity"). Lessing himself seems to vacillate between the two in the *Correspondence* [*Briefwechsel*] no less than in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* [*Hamburgische Dramaturgie*] and *Laocoon* [*Laokoon*]: He is definitely aware of the distinction, and at several points addresses it explicitly, but it is also undeniable that when he himself uses the word "Mitleid," it is often unclear if he means one, the other, or both at once.²⁹ As we shall see below, Marwood's subsequent pleas for mercy (*Erbarmen*) (and her incisive critique of self-serving vs. true compassion) will, in contrast to this first exclamation, also switch over to a more Aristotelian notion of (and then Kantian critique of) pity.

A following exclamation of Marwood's, "Oh, how unfortunate I am, that I can express far less than I feel!" (II.3.451) is a perfect expression of the shift from affect to sentiment (it will be echoed as a central motif of Goethe's *Werther*, for instance), and it is immediately followed with repeated references to tears, the yardstick by which the success of all eighteenth-century drama was measured. Now however, in the wake of his admiration for her imagined selfless, peniless state, Marwood moves directly to a plea for pity:

MARWOOD: Then run away; but be sure to take everything with you that might remind me of you. Poor, despised, without honor or friends, I will dare once more to awaken your pity [Ihr Erbarmen rege zu machen]. I will show in Marwood nothing but a miserable wretch who has sacrificed her family [Geschlecht], respectability [Ansehen], virtue and conscience all for you. (II.3.455)

Marwood's language unabashedly stresses the theatrical nature of pity in this speech: she will dare to *activate* his mercy ("rege machen"— rather like a theat-

²⁹ Martinec makes a valiant and erudite attempt to determine when precisely *Mitleid* means empathy and when it means pity in Lessing's work (Martinec, "Boundaries"), but I find his distinctions a bit too neat and rigid for Lessing's actual usage, even in the examples Martinec cites (see especially 746–747).

rical effect [*Wirkung*]); and she will *display* herself as a miserable wretch [als eine Elende zeigen]. Indeed, the presentation Marwood wants to make of herself here is precisely what the play as a whole intends for Sara.

Marwood is providing exactly the kind of technical analysis of the *acting* involved in the performance of pity that Smith's account falls short of. As we shall see below, she furthermore offers the kind of cogent moral critique of pity that Lessing's theoretical works lack. She thus is illuminating the blind spots of both.

3.5 Familial duty

Despite the clever dramaturgy of Marwood's staging, none of the rapid succession of sentimentalist ploys to gain Mellefont's sympathies achieves its end: tolerance, admiration, and pity all fall on ultimately deaf ears. But so far Marwood's theater has employed only one actress; just as Aeschylus added a second actor to create classical tragedy (or if we consider Mellefont as a Boalian "spect-Actor" in her piece, then she plays Sophocles adding the third), Marwood calls in her advocate (*Vorsprecher*) to add another voice to the stage.

It is appropriate, for the age that saw the "invention of childhood" and the idealization of domesticity,³⁰ that their young daughter should play the starring and most stirring role in Marwood's little drama. It is also telling, however, for the age that was supposedly bent on replacing rhetorical models of dramatic convention with more natural and immediate ones, that her mother refers to the little girl with the ultra-rhetorical term, *Vorsprecher*. Contrary to the fantasies of interiority feeding the new sentimental aesthetic, no emotion, however genuine, can speak itself: nature requires a declaiming advocate.

Considering Lessing's preoccupation with the *Poetics*, it is useful to consider this scene in Aristotelian terms. After the one-sided and partial recognitions Marwood attempts to impose in the previous scene, Arabella's entrance provides the setting for and culmination of a classic anagnorisis scene, and makes up the true peripeteia for her mother's play. Her opening lines frame their encounter explicitly in terms of recognition. Upon her appearance, Mellefont turns his face away [mit abgewandtem Gesichte], and she approaches him hesitantly:

ARABELLA *approaching him fearfully*: Oh, Sir! Is it you? Are you our Mellefont? – No, Madam, it's not he. – Wouldn't he look at me, if he were really Mellefont? Wouldn't he take me in his arms? He always used to do so. Oh, I'm such an unfortunate child! What

30 See Kittler, *Dichtung als Sozialisationsspiel*, 14–43.

did I do to make him angry, this man, this most dear man, who once allowed me to call myself his daughter? (II.4.457)

She opens with the piercing question, “Is it you?” and closes with the reminder that he had allowed her to call herself his daughter. That is, Mellefont’s acknowledged paternity had provided her own identity. She is basically asking, then, “Are you still my father?” Will he recognize her as his daughter? In the developing image of domestic bliss unfolding in the eighteenth century, it would be increasingly difficult to acknowledge the paternal relationship and not feel obligations that would play into Marwood’s hand. Now it is Arabella’s turn to try out the techniques of sentimental drama on her audience (though in her case, we cannot know whether she is “acting” as consciously as her practiced mother – indeed the success of the play’s effectiveness relies on the mother’s guile and the daughter’s complete lack thereof). Mellefont still will not turn to face her:

ARABELLA: He’s sighing, Madam. What’s wrong with him? Can’t we help him? Can’t I? Nor you? So let us sigh along with him.³¹– (II.4.458)

Mitleid at its most literal: to sigh along with (*mit-seufzen*). And Arabella’s sympathy is effective: “Oh, now he’s looking at me!” she next exclaims, and then: “No, he’s looking away again! He’s looking up to heaven!” For the first time, Mellefont is indecisive. He has been brought to complete aporeia, as his scattered glances indicate. Shortly thereafter, Marwood’s production reaches its climax in a passage of simultaneous peripeteia and anagnorisis:

MARWOOD: What have you decided, Mellefont?

MELLEFONT: What I shouldn’t, Marwood; what I shouldn’t.

MARWOOD *who embraces him*: Oh, I know that the honesty of your heart has always won out over the obstinacy of your desires.

MELLEFONT: Don’t assail me any further. I am already what you want to make me: a perjurer; a seducer; a thief; a murderer.

MARWOOD: Well, you’ll be those things for a few days in your imagination, and later you will realize that I have prevented you from becoming them in reality. (II.4.458)

Here the dramatic reversal, Mellefont’s decision to leave Sara and return to Marwood, is accompanied not, as we might expect, with an explicit acknowledgment of Arabella as his daughter or of Marwood as a woman for whom he bears responsibility – indeed at no point in the scene does he address his daughter.

31 Arabella, “So lassen Sie uns doch mit ihm seufzen” (II.4.457).

ter as such or admit any obligation to her mother – but rather with an almost Oedipal³² moment of self-recognition: “I am already what you want to make me: a perjurer, a seducer, a thief, a murderer.” This effect may be less surprising if we recall what a self-centered cad Mellefont is (his servant Norton would have been unfazed to learn of this reaction on his master’s part). However suspect its expression, however, it is undoubtedly Marwood’s ability to stage this triadic domestic tableau – mother and daughter imploring on their knees before a man with averted face – that engineers the intended effect in the audience.

3.6 Voice of reason

Marwood is a good enough playwright to know that the sensual effect alone of any piece is not sufficient for a lasting conversion, so she immediately begins to buttress the transformative impact of her play with a host of explanatory interpretations. In other words, she follows up the sentimental drama with a good dose of that other Enlightenment panacea: reason. Marwood’s acute analysis of Mellefont’s actions amounts to a critique of sympathy that foreshadows many of its later philosophical opponents. Surprisingly, it is precisely this criticism of compassion, the principal *means* of her drama, that leads to the climax of her play and its desired *end*: Mellefont’s acquiescence.

When Mellefont wonders what he is going to do with poor Sara, and chastises Marwood’s heartlessness towards his young lover, she retorts:

MARWOOD: If you could have seen to the bottom of my heart, then you would have discovered that it feels more true pity for your little Miss than you do yourself. I say true pity, for yours is a self-serving, soft-hearted pity.³³ (II.4.458)

Thus she corrects both his wayward recognition of his old lover as well as any still remaining illusions about his own virtue. The linguistic move that Marwood makes here mirrors the lexical spread of sympathy: the protasis of her conditional sentence sets up the possibility of *empathy* while the apodosis reveals the pitfalls of *pity*. The wording of the former suggests an epistemological paradox; the

³² Oedipal in the Sophoclean (and Aristotelian), not the Freudian, sense – though Mellefont’s passion for the utterly sexless Sara, who so resembles his daughter Arabella in her childlike innocence, may point to some other kind of disturbing complex.

³³ The close reading that follows warrants quoting the German: “Wenn Sie bis auf den Grund meines Herzens gesehen hätten, so würden Sie entdeckt haben, daß es mehr wahres Erbarmen gegen Ihre Miss fühlt als Sie selbst. Ich sage wahres Erbarmen; denn das Ihre ist ein eigennütziges, weichherziges Erbarmen.”

latter points to a moral failing. Together, they provide a cogent commentary on the (unavoidable) ambiguity in Lessing's own usage of *Mitleid* between these two meanings.

First, empathy: "If you had seen to the bottom of my heart," Marwood begins; that is, "If you could feel what I am feeling..." The precondition for empathetic sympathy in this formulation is to *see* one's *heart*. Sight, associated since antiquity with epistemological paradigms, is the sense Marwood invokes for others to know her innermost feelings. The paradox is clear: no eye can penetrate to the interior of another's breast to see the heart; if knowledge of what another person feels functions in a way analogous to this optical operation, then true empathy is impossible. We have already observed how Adam Smith echoes this very dissonance in his own mixed metaphor of seeing the emotions of the heart beat time (*TMS* 22). Despite the entire push of literary production in the eighteenth century away from affect and towards an intimation of interiority, the only access anyone can have to another's feelings – the only way empathy can be constructed – is via inferences based on the outward signs available through verbal and gestural performance. Marwood's language sets up the new poets' and philosophers' desideratum for immediate knowledge of others' feelings as always already impossible: as a metaphor that leaps from one incompatible transference to another.

Just as Marwood's protasis unveils the paradox of empathy, her apodosis – even beyond the logical trap of its dependence on an impossible precondition – suggests several problems inherent in pity that will later be amplified by the opponents of *Mitleid*: Kant, Nietzsche, and Brecht. The ostensible thrust of Marwood's critique is clear. The mercy and compassion Mellefont purports to have for Sara's fate are belied by the situation into which he has placed her: unmarried and dishonored, cut off from her friends and family. She reproaches Mellefont for his role in seducing and corrupting the innocent young Sara for the gratification of his own desires, with no thought to what is best for the girl. His brand of pity resembles the useless kind that a play or sermon might engender for the poor in a wealthy audience: even if it leads them to give an extra farthing to the beggar on the way out of the theater or church, they will never be induced to change the social inequality that produces their own comfort and the mendicant's poverty in the first place. This insightful critique of self-serving compassion will be repeated in Brecht's denouncement of the bankrupt moral efficacy of *Mitleid* – and of the dramas that engender its warm and fuzzy sensibility.

Notice, too, in Marwood's speech the transformation of *Mitleid* into mercy (*Erbarment*) – from a category of secular moral philosophy to one of religious virtue – which is indicative of a further moral hazard of pity. As Nietzsche will emphatically point out in his linking of compassion with Christian mercy, both at-

titudes emanate from a position of superiority. The object of pity is necessarily an object of contempt, and hence the supposedly ennobling power of compassion is undermined. Kant also shows how both parties in the relationship of pity end up demeaned: the pitied is taken for too weak to know true virtue and worth, independent of mere worldly deprivations and sufferings; the pitier foolishly fancies that she is bestowing something of value on the sufferer with her commiseration.³⁴

As if to augment this Kantian critique of pity with Nietzschean flair, Marwood's speech and the following exchange are suffused with the language of shame. Marwood reinforces her earlier appeal to family ties by accusing Mellefont of breaking, merely for the sake of his lust, "the strongest bonds of nature" by enticing Sara away from her loving father (II.4.459). Marwood's own machinations to reunite Sara with Sir William are then paraded before him as truly considerate and compassionate solicitation in her rival's best interest. The supposedly noble motivations of domestic virtue that bring about Mellefont's conversion are necessarily comprised of guilt. None of the other tricks from the bag of bourgeois drama Marwood has hauled out make a dent in his determination; only when she couples "true mercy" with shame does she effect a softening in his resolve. This fact suggests that the compassion Marwood's play inspires in Mellefont – and by extension the pity Lessing's play conjures in its audience – is never far from (and perhaps even dependent on) the attendant feelings of guilt.³⁵

The play within a play that seems so successful at the end of scene four is a lachrymose comedy (*comédie lachrymose*) in the vein of Richard Steele or C. F. Gellert. The entire exchange after Mellefont's reversal works as a kind of denouement – explaining how everyone comes to be reunited with their appropriate partners and families after the painful confusions and mistakes of the tearful plot. "Make amends for your mistakes, as far as it is possible to amend them." (II.4.459), Marwood commands: Go and sin no more. And the sentimental drama she staged in all its elements has gone over with resounding success: "Oh Marwood, with what feelings did I come to you, and with what feelings must I leave you now!" (II.4.459). We are even treated to a tableau of father and daughter tenderly exchanging kisses before his exit from the stage, a changed man.

34 See Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 6 (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1914), 456.

35 For Nietzsche's critique of *Mitleid*, see *Morgenröte* II, §132–146.

4 Mellefont as spectator

Any time the theater presents us with a play within a play, we are invited to speculate on the self-referential implications of the *mise en abyme*, and Marwood's sentimental drama is no exception. The most remarkable thing about it, of course, is its awful failure. Mellefont's dramatically induced conversion turns out to be ridiculously short-lived. Lessing's play very carefully orchestrates the aftermath of Marwood's production. The theatrical audience is treated to an eye-opening scene after Mellefont's exit, which meticulously reveals all of Marwood's pretensions to Enlightenment and sentimental ideals in the preceding scenes to have been feigned (II.5). One after another, her discussion with Hannah shows that her previous airs of tolerance, forgiveness, admirable carelessness for material possessions, and expansive compassion were calculated shams put on with shrewd psychological insight into Mellefont's value system. Least forgivable for audiences surely is the selfish cruelty with which she now addresses her daughter. All this serves to cancel out any positive impressions the role she played for her lover might have inspired in spectators outside the play. The cognitive judgment of "undeservedness" that Aristotle makes a necessary component of pity is thereby fully undermined. The entire scene makes it difficult for spectators to feel any compassion for this unhappy, forsaken woman, and ensures the negation of any effects from the *mise en scène* she staged for Mellefont that might have spilled over into the ranks of the audience.

None of this scene, however, is witnessed by Mellefont. So when he returns a few seconds later, full of all the righteous indignation and invective that the theatrical audience has been encouraged to feel, it is perhaps easy to overlook the fact that he has *not* been privy to the intervening scene's revelation of character that justifies the spectators' withdrawal of compassion. It is all the more pressing, therefore, to inquire into the source of his offstage change of heart. As far as Mellefont can know, all of the compassion for Arabella and Marwood he has been made to feel, together with all of the rational, moralistic arguments condemning the selfish, destructive results of his desire for Sara that he has been made to acknowledge, are still entirely justified and valid. Observe his explanation to Marwood's surprised query as to why he is returning so quickly:

MELLEFONT *heatedly*: Because I didn't need more than a few moments to regain my senses
[wieder zu mir selbst zu kommen].

MARWOOD: Well?

MELLEFONT: I was stunned [betäubt], Marwood, but not moved [bewegt]. (II.6.461)

Two things are very revealing in this exchange. First, Mellefont explains his change of mind as a return to himself [wieder zu mir selbst zu kommen]. This means either that he now perceives the self-recognition (as “perjurer, seducer, robber, murderer”) to which he has just been led in watching Marwood’s play as false, or that he accepts the condemnation of his selfish concupiscence and embraces it, abandoning any briefly held hopes of reform. Second, he describes the effect of Marwood’s drama as a matter of being *numbed* or stupefied rather than being *moved*. One is reminded of Meno’s accusation that Socrates is like a torpedo fish that *numbs* whomever it encounters. Indeed, paralysis (*Betäubung*) is a perfect description of the state of *aporia* to which Socrates endeavors to bring his interlocutors as the first step towards potential philosophizing. Being moved (*bewegt sein*) corresponds more with what Plato’s Socrates disparages as the effect of rhetoric, which aims at moving people with persuasion, rather than of dialectic, which aspires to knowledge and truth. Yet Plato’s dialogues often reveal the ephemerality and disingenuousness of aporetic admissions, and the rhetorical tricks that underlie Socrates’ dialectical methods. Just as Plato’s dialogues display the paradoxes and compromises inherent in the selfsame model of dialectic they espouse, Lessing’s play-within-a-play here interrogates the very genre it inaugurates.

Marwood’s staging (*Inszenierung*) counts as a bourgeois drama point by point, but not only is the achieved effect of inspiring sympathy and moral action almost immediately annulled as soon as its spectator leaves the scene, it is also revealed to have been carefully crafted through and through with rhetorical self-consciousness. Marwood says as much to Hannah in the intermediary sixth scene: “it’s all a matter of knowing who you’re facing” (II.5.460).³⁶ This is the central tenet of all rhetoric: to know the assumptions and opinions of one’s audience. Rhetoric, thus defined, is decried by Socrates and Lessing alike, but just as Socrates must equally know the character of his interlocutors in order to tailor his elenchus to their personal needs, Marwood uses her intimate knowledge of Mellefont to create the drama which will have an effect on him. Plato’s dialectic no less than Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy thus are shown to be doubly suspect (in terms of their end no less than their means) in the very works meant to showcase their merits.

36 “[...] man muß wissen, wen man vor sich hat.”

5 Conclusions

Marwood's pity-play – though it adhered to all the prescriptions for sympathy of which both Adam Smith and the dramatic theorists would approve – was ultimately a failure. There are several important lessons that we can draw about eighteenth-century doctrines of sympathy from this failure. First of all, Marwood's strategy shows the trouble with using sympathy to further the social advancement of minorities or disadvantaged portions of society, such as Jews or women. On the one hand, to encourage pity with herself, she must make her behavior conform to preconceived social norms of feminine weakness, victimhood, and dependency. On the other hand, if she refuses to play the weak woman and makes a show of strength and righteous outrage (if she becomes the new Medea), the rejection of her appeals is automatic. Pity can be a self-fulfilling trap into which the downtrodden might fall. This problem is ultimately linked to the paradox of unity and disjuncture hidden in the structure of sympathy, as we observed in Smith's conflicting metaphors. Marwood demonstrates the instability of identification and self-knowledge – the splitting of her self in the performance of sympathy in order to seduce Mellefont's sympathetic union with her leads directly to her madness and violent catastrophe.

The blind spot of the two discourses of ethics and theater is mirrored in Marwood's experiment: the failure of the bourgeois play within a play leads to her Baroque paroxysms and ultimately the tragedy of the whole. The scene shows how precarious it is to rely on the virtue of sympathy *per se* or through the edifying function of the theater. This volatile instability inherent in the structure of sympathy (unity with other/splitting of self) as described by its greatest champions calls into question the very laudable projects of economists and philosophers today who would like to replace a contract theory of justice with one that relies on notions of fairness and compassion.³⁷ Hence Marwood's tragedy could serve as a complicating gesture not only for eighteenth-century historiographers, but for the rehabilitation of moral sense ethics in contemporary political discourse. Both theater and sympathy can be powerful agents, but often have more insidious effects than one might wish.

Finally, we return to the question of genre: the dynamics of both Lessing's play and Smith's ethics can be traced by the way they depict the fate of the new bourgeois tragedy. Scholars have shown how the inaugural specimen of German bourgeois tragedy is set in motion by the Baroque remainder of Marwood's excessive affectation. Now we can see that this leftover older rhetoric in turn is

³⁷ E.g., Nussbaum and Sen.

motivated by a failure of Marwood's attempt at new sentimental drama. Hence the play dramatizes not merely how that against which sentimental dramatists were reacting is present in the current dramas, but moreover that the catalyzing trace of the old itself is a product of the failure of the new.

Smith's dynamics of inter-personal performance as a calculus of the greatest accrual of sympathy from an audience of one's peers, meanwhile, clearly echo the controlled naturalism of the new school of acting associated with the sentimental drama. One would expect, from a book of performative theory written in this vein in the 1750s (during the height of Diderot's and Garrick's fame), an appreciation for the new drama and actor's craft. Instead, the remarkably few times Smith mentions any actual play, he lauds Racine's *Phèdre* and Voltaire's *The Orphan of Zhao* [*L'Orphelin de la Chine*] – precisely the kind of affected fare the new naturalism was inveighing against. In fact, Smith goes out of his way to discredit one of the central tenets of bourgeois drama, the depiction of ordinary citizens: "It is the misfortune of Kings only which affords the proper subjects for tragedy" (*TMS* 52).³⁸ In addition to this reactionary dictum for the appropriate class of characters, Smith also wants to admire heroes who suffer stoically rather than weep with people who express their pain. His deprecation of the bodily sufferings of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (*TMS* 30) later leads to Lessing's long defense of that play in the *Laokoon*, and his claim that all stoicism is un-theatrical.³⁹ Despite advocating sympathy as the grounding of all morality, Smith would appear to be in Mendelssohn's camp rather than Lessing's in their debate about admiration versus sympathy as the goal of tragedy.⁴⁰ Far from advancing an aesthetics of sympathy in the book that proposes an ethics of compassion, Smith would reject many of the key innovations of Lessing's dramaturgy of sympathy (*Mitleidsdramaturgie*).

What Lessing fails to offer in systematic analysis for his claims about pity, Smith's book on *Moral Sentiments* provides exactly. Similarly, what Smith's account lacks in an awareness of the performer's craft inherent in his system, this scene in Lessing's play demonstrates with aplomb. Their complementary relation is comprised of two seeming contradictions. Lessing is the great champion of sympathy in tragedy, but has Marwood stage a prototype sentimental drama that reveals compassion as both morally suspect and dramatically ineffective. Adam Smith is the great champion of sympathy as the theatrical underpinning

38 Smith repeats in his second (and last) foray into tragedy: "The most interesting subjects of tragedies and romances are the misfortunes of virtuous and magnanimous kings and princes" (*TMS* 226).

39 See chapter four of the *Laokoon*, in which Lessing's one concrete reference to Smith's *TMS* appears (Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, 5: 2, 35–48, especially 43).

40 For a helpful assessment of Smith's debt to the stoics, see Nussbaum, 369.

of social virtue, but has a reactionary view of theater that upholds Baroque neo-classicism and the aesthetics of admiration over and against the new bourgeois drama and aesthetics of sympathy. These two double binds are emblematic not only of the double blindness of the eighteenth-century discourses of theater and moral philosophy for one another in the matter of sympathy, but also of the structural enigma at the heart of compassion in any age. Sympathy is always already a performative scene: any ethics based on fellow feeling cannot escape – but must shut an eye to – its inherent theatricality.

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