

A COMPANION TO THE WORKS OF  
**Gotthold Ephraim Lessing**



**Edited by Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox**

*A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*

*Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture*

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Barbara Fischer  
and  
Thomas C. Fox

CAMDEN HOUSE

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First published 2005  
by Camden House

Camden House is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Inc.  
668 Mt. Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA  
[www.camden-house.com](http://www.camden-house.com)  
and of Boydell & Brewer Limited  
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK  
[www.boydellandbrewer.com](http://www.boydellandbrewer.com)

ISBN: 1-57113-243-0

### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Companion to the works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing / edited by Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox.

p. cm. — (Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57113-243-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 1729-1781 — Criticism and interpretation. I. Fischer, Barbara (Karin Barbara), 1963-. II. Fox, Thomas C. III. Title. IV. Series: Studies in German literature, linguistics, and culture (Unnumbered)

PT2414.C66 2005

832'.6-dc22

2005008882

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

This publication is printed on acid-free paper.  
Printed in the United States of America.

### Disclaimer:

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To view these images please refer to the printed version of the book.

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## Acknowledgments

WE WOULD LIKE to express our gratitude to all who helped make possible this *Companion to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, a book situated between the 275th anniversary of Lessing's birth (2004) and the 225th anniversary of his death (2006). We thank our contributors for their willingness to collaborate on this project and for their patience during a changing of the guard at Camden House. Camden House editor James Hardin and his successor Jim Walker made many helpful suggestions. Jim Walker oversaw the majority of this project, and we appreciate his judgment, diplomacy, and availability. We thank the University of Alabama, the Dean's office of its College of Arts and Sciences, and Capstone International Programs for their generous support. The Lessing Museum in Kamenz, especially Matthias Hanke, and the Lessing Academy in Wolfenbüttel, especially Helmut Berthold, fielded numerous inquiries and helped us obtain photographs. Carl W. Schmidt-Luchs (Fotostudio Schmidt-Luchs), Monika Klocker (Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, Universität Köln, Schloss Wahn), Christine Drawer (Deutsches Theater Berlin), Silke Bernd (Mecklenburgisches Staatstheater Schwerin), and Peter Festersen also graciously made available photographs. We are grateful to our colleague George Williamson for his input as a historian, and we also thank our colleagues in the German Program at the University of Alabama for their support, which they have demonstrated in many ways. We thank our former graduate students: Bastian Quindt for his research assistance, and especially Tracy Graves and Martin Bäuml for their extensive help with correspondence, bibliography, and translations. As always, we are indebted to Lothar and Elfriede Fischer, Dr. Alois Biller, and Margaret Fox for their support. Last but certainly not least, we thank Katharina and Christopher for their patience and flexibility. We dedicate this book to them.

Barbara Fischer  
Thomas C. Fox  
Regensburg, Germany  
February 2005



# Lessing Editions and Abbreviations

(In alphabetical order by title.)

*Gesammelte Werke in zehn Bänden.* Ed. Paul Rilla. Berlin: Aufbau, 1954–1958. 2nd ed. Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau, 1968.

*Sämtliche Schriften.* Ed. Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker. Stuttgart, Leipzig, Berlin/Leipzig: G. J. Göschen'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1886–1924. Reprinted Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968; Berlin/New York 1979. 23 volumes. Abbreviated as LM with volume and page number.

*Werke.* Ed. Herbert G. Göpfert et al. Munich: Hanser (also Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft), 1970–79. 8 volumes. Abbreviated as G with volume and page number.

*Werke.* Ed. Kurt Wölfel. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1972. 3 volumes.

*Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden.* Ed. Wilfried Barner et al. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2003. Abbreviated as Ba with volume and page number.

*Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe in 25 Teilen.* Ed. Julius Petersen and Walde-mar von Olshausen. Berlin: Bong, 1925–1935. Reprinted Hildesheim/New York: Olms, 1970.



# Selected Works by Lessing

## Eighteenth-Century Editions of Lessing's Works

These editions include most of the individual works and translations mentioned below, sometimes in more than one edition. For recent Lessing editions see our introduction.

*Schriften*, 6 vols., 1753–55.

*Lustspiele*, 2 vols., 1767 and 1770.

*Trauerspiele*, 1772.

*Vermischte Schriften*, vol. 1, 1771.

*Vermischte Schriften*, 2–14 vols., ed. by Karl Gotthelf Lessing and Johann Joachim Eschenburg, 1771–1793.

*Sämmtliche Schriften*, vols. 1–31, ed. by Karl Gotthelf Lessing, Johann Joachim Eschenburg, and Friedrich Nicolai, 1793–1825.

*Theatralischer Nachlass*, ed. by Karl Gotthelf Lessing, 2 vols., 1784–1786.

*Theologischer Nachlass*, ed. by Karl Gotthelf Lessing, 1784.

*Kollektaneen zur Literatur*. 2 vols., ed. and expanded by Johann Joachim Eschenburg, 1790.

*Gotthold Ephraim Lessings Leben, nebst seinem noch übrigen litterarischen Nachlasse*, 3 vols., ed. by Karl Gotthelf Lessing, 1793–95.

## Individual Works Authored or Edited by Lessing

Listed here alphabetically with date of first publication. English title and date of first English publication in parenthesis.

*Anti-Goeze. D. i. Notgedrungene Beyträge zu den freiwilligen Beyträgen des Hr. Past. Goeze*, 1778. (*Anti-Goeze*, 1862).

*Axiomata, wenn es deren in dergleichen Dingen giebt. Wider den Herrn Pastor Goeze, in Hamburg*, 1778. (*Axiomata, if such there be in these matters*, 1862).

*Berengarius Turonensis: oder Ankündigung eines wichtigen Werkes desselben, wovon in der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel ein Manuscript befindlich, welches bisher völlig unerkannt geblieben*, 1770.

*Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters*, 1750.

*Briefe, antiquarischen Inhalts*, 1768–1769.

*Briefe, die Neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 1759–1765.

*Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel*, 1789.

*D. Faust: “Berliner Szenarium”* (Vorspiel, Erster Aufzug), 1786; *Faust und sieben Geister*, 1759. (*Faust*, 1823).

*Damon, oder die wahre Freundschaft. Ein Lustspiel in einem Aufzuge*, 1747. (*Damon, or True Friendship*, 1878).

*Das Christentum der Vernunft*, 1784. (*The Christianity of Reason*, 1956).

*Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes*, 1751.

*Das Testament Johannis. Ein Gespräch*, 1777. (*The Testament of John*, 1956).

*Daß mehr als fünf Sinne für den Menschen sein können*, 1795. (*That More than Five Senses Are Possible for Human Beings*, 2005).

*Der Eremit: Eine Erzählung*, 1749.

*Der Freigeist. Ein Lustspiel in fünf Aufzügen*, 1755. (*The Freethinker*, 1838).

*Der junge Gelehrte. Ein Lustspiel in drey Aufzügen*, 1754. (*The Young Scholar*, 1878).

*Der Misogyne. Ein Lustspiel in einem Aufzuge*, 1755. (*The Woman-hater*, 1878).

*Der Schatz. Ein Lustspiel in einem Aufzuge*, 1755. (*The Treasure*, 1838).

*Die alte Jungfer: Ein Lustspiel in drey Aufzügen*, 1749. (*The Old Maid*, 1878).

*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, 1777/1780. (*The Education of the Human Race*, 1806).

*Die Juden. Ein Lustspiel in einem Aufzuge*, 1754. (*The Jews*, 1878).

*Die Matrone von Ephesus*, 1784.

*Die Religion Christi*, 1784. (*The Religion of Christ*, 1956).

*Durch Spinoza ist Leibnitz nur auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen*, 1795. (*Spinoza only Put Leibniz on the Track of [his Theory of] Pre-established Harmony*, 2005).

*Ein Mehreres aus den Papieren des Ungenannten, die Offenbarung betreffend mit Gegensätze des Herausgebers*, 1777. (*Editorial Commentary on the “Fragments” of Reimarus with Counter-Propositions of the Editor*, 2005).

- Ein Vade Mecum für den Hrn. Sam. Gotth. Lange*, 1754.
- Eine Duplik*, 1778. (*A Rejoinder*, 2005).
- Eine Parabel. Nebst einer kleinen Bitte, und einem eventuellen Absagungs-schreiben an den Herrn Pastor Goeze, in Hamburg*, 1778. (*A Parable from the German of Lessing*, 1806).
- Emilia Galotti. Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen*, 1772. (*Emilia Galotti. A Tragedy*, 1800).
- Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freymäurer*, 1778 and 1780. (*Ernst and Falk 1–3*, 1854; *Masonic Dialogues*, 1927).
- Fabeln. Drey Bücher. Nebst Abhandlungen mit dieser Dichtungsart verwandten Inhalts*, 1759. (*Fables: In Three Books*, 1829).
- Friedrichs von Logau Sinngedichte. Zwölf Bücher*, 1759. Edited by Ramler and G. E. Lessing.
- Gedanken über die Herrnhuter*, 1784.
- Gedichte von Andreas Scultetus: Aufgefunden von Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, 1771.
- Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 1767–1769. (*Hamburg Dramaturgy*, 1879).
- Kleinigkeiten*, 1751.
- Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie*, 1766. (*Laocoon, or the Limits of Poetry and Painting*, 1836).
- Leibnitz von den ewigen Strafen*, 1773. (*Leibniz on Eternal Punishment*, 2005).
- Minna von Barnhelm, oder Das Soldatenglück. Ein Lustspiel in fünf Aufzügen*, 1767. (*The Disbanded Officer: or, the Baroness of Bruchsal. A Comedy*, 1786).
- Miß Sara Sampson: Ein Trauerspiel in fünf Aufzügen*, 1755. (*Lucy Sampson; or, the Unhappy Heyress. A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 1789).
- Nathan der Weise. Ein dramatisches Gedicht, in fünf Aufzügen*, 1779. (*Nathan the Wise*, 1781).
- Neue Hypothese über die Evangelisten als bloß menschliche Geschichtschreiber betrachtet*, 1784. (*New Hypothesis concerning the Evangelists regarded as merely human Historians*, 1956).
- Noch nähere Berichtigung des Märchens von 1000 Dukaten, oder Judas Ischarioth der Zweyte im November 1779*.
- Nötige Antwort auf eine sehr unnötige Frage des Hrn. Hauptpastor Goeze in Hamburg*, 1778. (*Necessary Answer to a very Unnecessary Question*, 1956).
- Philosophische Aufsätze von Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem*, 1776. Edited by G. E. Lessing.



*Philotas. Ein Trauerspiel*, 1759. (*Philotas*, 1878).

*Pope ein Metaphysiker!*, 1755.

*Preußische Kriegslieder in den Feldzügen 1756 und 1757 von einem Grenadier. Mit Melodien*, 1758. Written by Gleim, edited by G. E. Lessing.

*Rettung des Cochläus aber nur in einer Kleinigkeit*, 1754.

*Rettung des Hier. Cardanus*, 1754.

*Rettungen des Horaz*, 1754.

*Rettung des Inepti Religiosi, und seines ungenannten Verfassers*, 1754.

*Samuel Henzi. Ein Trauerspiel*, Fragment. 1753.

*Sophokles. Erstes Buch. Von dem Leben des Dichters*, 1790.

*Tarantula. Eine PossenOper, im neuesten italienischen Gusto oder Geschmack, aufgesetzt von einem reisenden Liebhaber der Musik und Poesie, bey Eröffnung des Operntheaters in Teltow. Teltow an der Tyber*, 1784.

*Theatralische Bibliothek*, 1754–1758.

*Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft. An den Herrn Director Schumann, zu Hannover*, 1777. (*On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*, 1956).

*Über die Entstehung der geoffenbarten Religion*, 1784. (*On the Origin of Revealed Religion*, 1956).

*Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott*, 1795. (*On the Reality of Things outside God*, 1956).

*Vom Alter der Ölmalerei. Aus dem Theophilus Presbyter*, 1774.

*Von der Art und Weise der Fortpflanzung und Ausbreitung der christlichen Religion*, 1784.

*Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger. Noch ein Fragment des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten*, 1778. Edited by G. E. Lessing.

*Von den lateinischen Trauerspielen welche unter dem Namen des Seneca bekannt sind*, 1754 [1755].

*Von Duldung der Deisten: Fragment eines Ungenannten*, 1774. Edited by G. E. Lessing.

*Weiber sind Weiber, ein Lustspiel in 5 Aufzügen*, 1784.

*Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet. Eine Untersuchung*, 1769. (*How the Ancients Represented Death*, 1879).

*Zerstreute Anmerkungen über das Epigramm, und einige der vornehmsten Epigrammatisten*, 1771.

*Zur Geschichte und Litteratur. Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel*, 1773–1781.

## Translations or Fragments of Translations by Lessing

Listed here alphabetically with date of first publication and title as given in Ba.

*Agamemnon. Ein Trauerspiel aus dem Englischen des H. Thomson übersetzt, 1876.*

*Ajax des Sophokles. Fragment einer Übersetzung, 1790.*

*Auszug aus dem "Schauspieler" des Herrn Remond von Sainte Albine, 1754.*

*Auszug aus dem Trauerspiele "Virginia" des Don Augustino de Montiano y Luyando, 1754.*

*Aus: Franz Hutchesons Sittenlehre der Vernunft: Aus dem Englischen übersetzt, 1756.*

*Aus: [Johann Gotthilf Vockerodt] Anmerkungen eines unpartheiischen Fremden über die gegenwärtige Streitigkeit zwischen England und Preussen; in einem Briefe eines Edelmanns in dem Haag an seinen Freund in London. Aus dem Englischen, 1753.*

*Aus: Römische Historie von Erbauung der Stadt Rom, Bis auf die Schlacht bei Actium, oder das Ende der Republik; aus dem Französischen des Herrn Rollins ins Deutsche übersetzt. 1749 /1750.*

*Bemerkungen über Burke's Philosophische Untersuchungen über den Ursprung unserer Begriffe vom Erhabenen und Schönen, 1793.*

*Betrachtungen über das Weinerlich Komische, aus dem Französischen des Herrn M.d.C. [hassiron], 1754.*

*Briefe über die Tanzkunst und über die Ballette [J.-G. Noverre]. Aus dem Französischen, 1769. Translated by G. E. Lessing and J. J. C. Bode.*

*Catilina. Ein Trauerspiel des H. von Crebillon. Aus dem Französischen, 1876.*

*Das Leben ist ein Traum. Ein Schauspiel aus dem Spanischen des Pedro Calderon de la Barca, 1838.*

*Das Theater des Herrn Diderot. Aus dem Französischen, 1760.*

*Des Abts du Bos Ausschweifung von den Theatralischen Vorstellungen der Alten, 1755.*

*Des Herrn von Voltaire Kleinere Historische Schriften. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt, 1751/1752.*

*Die Gefangenen, ein Lustspiel. Aus dem Lateinischen des M. Accius Plautus, 1750.*

*Die Schauspielkunst. An die Madame \*\*\* durch den Herrn Franciscus Riccoboni, den jüngeren. Aus dem Französischen übersetzt, 1750.*

*Des Abts von Marigny Geschichte der Araber unter der Regierung der Califen. Aus dem Französischen, 1753.*

*Des Herrn Prof. Gellerts Abhandlung für das rührende Lustspiel, 1754.*

*Die Liebe macht edel. Eine Geschichte, 1751.*

*Eine ernsthafte Ermunterung an alle Christen zu einem frommen und heiligen Leben. Von William Law. A. M. Aus dem Englischen übersetzt, 1756.*

*Eraclio, 1876.*

*Fenix, 1876.*

*Friedrich II. Schreiben an das Publicum. Aus dem Französischen, 1753.*

*Friedrich II. Zweytes Schreiben an das Publicum. Aus dem Französischen, 1753.*

*Friedrich II. Drittes Schreiben an das Publicum. Aus dem Französischen, 1753.*

*Hannibal. Nach Marivau, 1876.*

*Hrn. Samuel Richardsons Sittenlehre für die Jugend in den auserlesensten Aesopischen Fabeln mit dienlichen Betrachtungen zur Beförderung der Religion und der allgemeinen Menschenliebe vorgestellt, 1757.*

*Johann Huarts Prüfung der Köpfe zu den Wissenschaften. Aus dem Spanischen, 1752.*

*Leben des Herrn Jacob Thomson, 1754.*

*The Country-Wife, A Comedy by Wycherley, 1857.*

*The Soldiers Fortune by Otway, 1857.*

*[Thomsons] Tancred und Sigismunde. Ein Trauerspiel, 1876.*

*Übersetzung der Ode des Horaz Ad Barinen, 1794.*

*Virginia II, by Henry Samuel Crisp, 1754.*

*Von Johann Dryden und dessen dramatischen Werken, 1758.*

# Introduction

*Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox*

ONE OF THE MOST independent thinkers in European intellectual history, a combative critic and major playwright, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) contributed in decisive and lasting fashion to the discussion of philosophy, theology, and literature within the German-speaking countries and beyond. Lessing lived during the period of German Enlightenment, that liminal point between the age of religious authority and the more secular culture of modern times. He supplied new impulses to Christian theology, initiating one of the major theological disputes of the eighteenth century while contributing to debates on religious tolerance and on the emancipation of the German Jews. He published *Laokoon* (Laocoon, 1766) a trailblazing treatise on aesthetics, a work still influential today, particularly in semiotics and media theory. Long before Germany became a unified nation-state, Lessing supported the first attempt to create a German national theater, one financed by citizens and independent of any court. He wrote with great originality on drama theory, reinterpreting Aristotle for the eighteenth century, reforming German drama and opening it to contemporary social concerns of the rising middle class. As a playwright, Lessing employed a dramatic genre that was new to Germany, and in so doing wrote *Miß Sara Sampson* (1755), the first successful German “domestic” or “bourgeois” tragedy. He is also the author of one of the finest German comedies, *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767). In his final dramatic masterpiece, *Nathan der Weise* (Nathan the Wise, 1779), he writes of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, of religious intolerance and the clash of civilizations. The centerpiece of that play, the parable of the rings, has entered the world’s cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> Still resonating today, Lessing’s dramas are the oldest theater pieces in German that continue to be performed regularly on German-speaking and international stages. Lessing’s plays and his drama theory influenced Goethe, Schiller, Hebbel, Hauptmann, Ibsen, Strindberg, Schnitzler, and Brecht, among many others. F. J. Lampert in fact calls Lessing not merely the founder of modern German drama but of modern European drama.<sup>2</sup>

The “first German intellectual in the modern sense of the word,”<sup>3</sup> Lessing authored not only dramatic works, but also poetry, fables, and parables. In addition, he wrote intensively *about* literature, translated it,

and wrote critiques of translations. Today, we would call Lessing a freelance writer and journalist, in addition to a writer of belles lettres. He specialized in polemics and developed into one of the most respected, and feared, critics of his time. Germans often celebrate Lessing as part of a triad with the later writers Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), all “classical” authors incorporating the highest ideals of German thought and art. Schoolbooks and anthologies feature excerpts from his work. With remarkable frequency, Germans have interpreted Lessing as an exemplary national figure, even though his writings reveal only few German nationalist impulses. Some see in his work royalist, others bourgeois-revolutionary tendencies. The anti-Semites of the later nineteenth century, and their heirs, attributed “Jewish” traits to Lessing’s life and work, while orthodox Jews and the Zionists rejected his plays *Die Juden* (The Jews, 1754) and *Nathan der Weise* as too assimilationist. The Nazis banned both plays from their stages; after the war many major German theaters reopened with *Nathan der Weise*.

Given the quality and sheer magnitude of Lessing’s achievement and reception, it would be an enormous and perhaps impossible task for any one book to do justice to the complex interrelation of biographical, historical, sociological, philosophical, and theological aspects in the work and reception of this canonical author.<sup>4</sup> Not a little has already been written on Lessing. Wolfgang Albrecht has calculated that approximately 6000 publications had appeared by 1995.<sup>5</sup> Especially since the major anniversary celebrations in 1979 and 1981 (marking Lessing’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday and the two-hundredth anniversary of his death, respectively) a considerable upsurge in Lessing scholarship has taken place, often marked by new critical and revisionist approaches within Enlightenment research. Lessing’s works belong to world literature and have a considerable international audience;<sup>6</sup> by 1998 they had been translated into forty-one languages. One-hundred-and-forty-six English translations lead that list.<sup>7</sup>

Any *Companion* to Lessing’s work must confront the dilemma of where to begin and where to end, which aspects to include, which issues to treat, and which scholarly approaches to invite. The editors commissioned thirteen English-language contributions from scholars working in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and the former East and West Germanys. Their essays discuss the most significant aspects of Lessing’s life and work for an audience ranging from novice to seasoned Lessing scholars. Considering the wide-ranging, different but often overlapping facets of Lessing’s career as Enlightenment thinker, scholar, freelance writer, journalist, translator, book reviewer, poet, art critic, librarian, dramaturge, and playwright, we deemed it more appropriate to structure the *Companion* according to broad themes rather than chronologically by individual works. Thus one will not find an individual essay on, for example, *Nathan der*

*Weise*, but one can read discussions of that play from various perspectives in essays treating Lessing and religion, Lessing and the Jews, gender in the works of Lessing, or Lessing's reception by the Nazis, the East Germans, or the West Germans. In addition we will provide short synopses of the major works in our essay "Lessing's Life and Work." Each reader will focus on different aspects of the *Companion*, and we trust that all will find at least some aspects useful to their purposes.

We have organized the essays under the following rubrics: Lessing's Life and Times; Criticism and Aesthetics; Philosophy and Religion; Drama and Drama Theory; and Reception. Following our introduction to Lessing's life and work, Steven Martinson situates Lessing within a wider European context, tracing the interplay of ideas between the German lands and their neighbors. Arguing against the perception of the German Enlightenment as belated, and introducing many of the issues that will be developed further in the *Companion*, Martinson's wide-ranging study examines Lessing within the context of European philosophy (Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Spinoza), emphasizes Lessing's familiarity with European authors, many of whom he introduced to the Germans, and discusses Lessing's encounters with the French theater of Corneille and Diderot.

In the section dealing with Criticism and Aesthetics, Klaus Berghahn argues that Lessing's acerbic criticism is the "purest expression of Enlightenment thinking: enlightenment as criticism and polemics as method." He asserts that Lessing developed a new literary criticism, one that did equal justice to the principles of art and our emotional response to it. At the same time, drawing on Habermas and Koselleck, Berghahn emphasizes that debates on aesthetics and criticism in the eighteenth century were also a form of compensatory thinking with consequences for the development of a bourgeois public sphere in Germany. John Pizer notes how Lessing combines aesthetics and ethics in the fable. As an educational genre with moral utility and also the possibility for social commentary, the fable proved particularly attractive to Lessing, who thought it well suited to the development of inventiveness, creativity, and independent thought in readers. Pizer asserts that despite Lessing's occasional pedantic streak, he wrote open-ended fables that demanded a hermeneutically active reader. In her essay "Lessing's Poetics as an Approach to Aesthetics," Beate Allert investigates text-image relations in Lessing's fables, in his aesthetic treatise *Laokoon*, and in his parables, all of which have significant implications for the theory of art. Allert writes that Lessing was not a philosopher creating general rules for a theory of beauty, but rather an art critic trying to understand the working of such rules. According to her, Lessing made evident that not only *what* we read or observe in literature or art deserves to be understood and analyzed, but also *how* we do these things.

In the section on Philosophy and Religion, H. B. Nisbet assesses as a distinct strength Lessing's ad hoc, fragmentary, non-systematic approach

to philosophy. He argues that Lessing's "method" resulted from his temperamental distrust of authority, his perspectival view of religious and philosophical questions, and his "tentative, self-subverting, yet richly suggestive" style of writing, which allows him simultaneously to proclaim an idea and to question it. Nisbet concludes by asserting that Lessing believed that all philosophical approaches and religious confessions contained a degree of verity; Lessing hoped that by scrutinizing these approaches and beliefs, we might keep moving in the direction of an ever-receding truth. Arno Schilson's "Lessing and Theology" underscores Lessing's vast knowledge of theological issues and his unique position between religious orthodoxy and the radically deistic work of such thinkers as Hermann Samuel Reimarus. Schilson praises the originality of Lessing's thought, especially with regard to such central issues as the opposition between letter and spirit in the Bible or the role of revelation in the development of human reason. Here and elsewhere, Schilson asserts, Lessing achieved insights that echo far beyond his times. In "Lessing and the Jews," Willi Goetschel writes that Lessing believed it imperative that Christianity acknowledge its foundations and genealogy in Judaism and that Christians rethink their relationship to Jews, if Christianity were to play a role in the Enlightenment at all. As opposed to many of his contemporaries, who helped define the emerging German national identity against the "foreign" element in "Germany," Lessing argues for a recognition of Jewishness that enriches an already inherently multi-ethnic German society. Lessing's attitude towards the Jews is not merely a token of good will, but a key element in his twin concerns of rethinking Christianity and imagining the nation.

Beginning the section on Drama and Drama Theory, Peter Höyng notes that Lessing's writing on the subject over decades should be seen as a work in progress rather than as one coherent statement. Investigating Lessing's critical encounters with various dramatic texts, his reviews of theater performances, and his reflections on theater as a public institution, Höyng demonstrates that Lessing argued for, and helped create, a new approach to theater in general and to German theater in particular. Lessing developed a new style of theater for the emerging bourgeoisie, and his theory and practice of theater influenced many of the subsequent major German and European playwrights. Karin Wurst presents a survey of Lessing's plays, with special attention to gender roles within the new bourgeois value system those plays helped engender. Wurst concentrates on the depiction of the familial value system in Lessing's dramas, as well as the new kinds of love relationships developing in the eighteenth century. She concludes that Lessing's general skepticism regarding absolute values carries over to his views on gender as well, where he appears reluctant to assign rigid roles based on biology. She argues that for Lessing, a complex sense of practical ethics, not gender, determines the essence of humanity.



The final four essays in the volume investigate the reception of Lessing, and while they treat multiple aspects of his oeuvre, they emphasize his dramatic work. Ann Schmiesing, noting that little scholarly research has been done on Lessing's literary reputation in the Third Reich, investigates the Nazi celebration of *Philotas* (1759) and *Minna von Barnhelm* as ostensibly patriotic works, the interpretation of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Hamburg Dramaturgy 1767–69) as Germany's liberation from France, and the use of Lessing's aesthetic principles to legitimize Nazi film theory. She examines Hans Schweikart's film version of *Minna von Barnhelm*, which glorifies German militarism and marginalizes women. While *Nathan der Weise* remained a forbidden embarrassment, the Nazis called for a new Lessing whose pursuit of truth would necessarily lead him, in the twentieth century, to take up arms against the Jews. Reinhart Meyer looks at representative postwar stagings of Lessing in West Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. Writing from the dual perspective of a scholar and a theater director, he underscores the tension between the richness of Lessing's texts as literature, and the difficulty of actually staging those texts in the twentieth century. Meyer singles out Fritz Kortner's 1970 production of *Emilia Galotti* in Vienna as a high point in Western postwar stagings. Hans Joachim Kertscher and Thomas Fox examine the situation in the former East Germany, where cultural politicians appropriated Lessing to demonstrate that "their" Germany had achieved enlightenment and "die Zeit der Vollendung." The authors report on East German performances of Lessing's major plays, including the provocative East Berlin *Minna von Barnhelm* production of 1960, which interprets the play as an anti-Prussian manifesto. Kertscher and Fox also examine two film adaptations of Lessing's work made in East Germany, and a discussion of Lessing's reception by Heiner Müller, the most accomplished East German playwright, concludes the essay. Finally, Hinrich Seeba discusses the use and abuse of Lessing over the past two hundred years. Lessing has served as intertext and foil for some of Germany's most renowned *Dichter und Denker*: Schlegel, Goethe (who, famously, had his Werther commit suicide while reading *Emilia Galotti*), Heine, Nietzsche, Fontane, Brecht, and Müller, among others. Seeba describes the nineteenth-century attempts by both the left and the right within German culture to appropriate Lessing, and the struggles between proponents of Lessing and Schiller to canonize their respective poet as the German national playwright. Seeba notes that Lessing's concerns prefigure those at the critical forefront today, including aesthetics, semiotics, politicized literature, and even post-colonial thought.

The volume ends with short descriptions of important centers of Lessing research: the Lessing-Akademie in Wolfenbüttel, the Lessing-Museum in Kamenz, and the Lessing Society in Cincinnati.



## A Note on Editions, Archives, and Lessing Scholarship

In collaboration with Klaus Bohnen, Gunter E. Grimm, Helmuth Kiesel, Arno Schilson, Jürgen Stenzel, and Conrad Wiedemann, Wilfried Barner compiled the most recent Lessing edition, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*. Published by Deutscher Klassiker Verlag in Frankfurt am Main beginning in 1985 and finished in the fall of 2003, the impressive edition reflects the most recent scholarly research, and is edited by leading Lessing scholars. It organizes Lessing's works chronologically, but primarily according to when they were written, not by publication date. This long-awaited edition, which provides excellent commentaries, will allow further scholarly progress<sup>8</sup> and as such it will soon become the standard edition. Contributors to this *Companion* have generally used either the Barner edition, providing the necessary volumes were available, or the earlier standard edition, the twenty-three-volume *Sämtliche Schriften*, edited by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker. This edition, begun in the nineteenth century by the Germanist Karl Lachmann and later thoroughly revised by Franz Muncker, provided the first authoritative collection of Lessing's literary estate and continues to stand as one of the most comprehensive Lessing editions available.<sup>9</sup> Other editions often used by Lessing scholars or students are: *Werke* in eight volumes (1970–1979), edited by Herbert G. Göpfert,<sup>10</sup> and *Werke* in three volumes (1967), edited by Kurt Wölfel.<sup>11</sup> Two further editions, not used in this *Companion*, are *Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe in fünfundzwanzig Teilen*, edited by Julius Petersen and Waldemar von Olshausen from 1925 to 1935 and reprinted in 1970,<sup>12</sup> and an East German edition: *Gesammelte Werke* in ten volumes (1954–1958; 2nd ed., 1968) edited by Paul Rilla.<sup>13</sup>

Our list of selected works by Lessing provides dates of the first translation into English of Lessing's writings. Readers seeking information on these translations, additional translations, or secondary literature should consult the Lessing bibliographies compiled by Siegfried Seifert and Doris Kuhles.<sup>14</sup> Another important study with a selected bibliography is Wolfgang Albrecht's *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*.<sup>15</sup> Readers interested in Lessing biographies will find a wide selection;<sup>16</sup> Willi Jasper's *Lessing: Aufklärer und Judenfreund. Biographie*<sup>17</sup> presents a recent and informative example of this genre. The following reference works will also prove helpful: *Lessing im Urtheile seiner Zeitgenossen: Zeitungskritiken, Berichte und Notizen*, collected and edited by Julius W. Braun; *Lessing — ein unpoetischer Dichter: Dokumente aus drei Jahrhunderten zur Wirkungsgeschichte Lessings in Deutschland*, edited by Horst Steinmetz; Richard Daunicht's *Lessing im Gespräch: Berichte und Urteile von Freunden und Zeitgenossen*; Jürgen Jacobs's *Lessing: Eine Einführung*; Wilfried Barner, Gunter E. Grimm, Helmuth Kiesel, and Martin Kramer's *Lessing: Epoche — Werk — Wirkung*;

Monika Fick's *Lessing-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung*; Peter J. Brenner's *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*; and Werner Jung's *Lessing zur Einführung*.<sup>18</sup> Karl S. Guthke has written numerous investigations of Lessing research.<sup>19</sup> An important venue for Lessing scholarship is the *Lessing Yearbook*, published annually since 1969 by the Lessing Society in Cincinnati. Various supplemental volumes resulting from conferences and symposia complement the *Yearbook*.<sup>20</sup>

Lessing's literary estate is located primarily at the Herzog August Library in Wolfenbüttel, Germany; in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin; and in the Biblioteka Uniwersytecka Wrocław/Poland.<sup>21</sup> The Lessing-Museum in Kamenz, Germany, also possesses considerable material of interest to Lessing scholars, including manuscripts, first editions, stage-related material and realia, and documents relating to the German and international reception of Lessing's work. The website of the Lessing-Akademie in Wolfenbüttel provides a link to a list with the location of all titles contained in the Lachmann-Muncker edition. The Akademie furthermore plans to develop a CD-ROM that will contain every Lessing title as well as the first lines of Lessing poems, and will provide for all these texts information concerning date of first publication and the text's location within all major Lessing editions. The *Digitale Bibliothek* series published by Directmedia and the *Projekt Gutenberg-DE* published by Spiegel Online provide further internet and CD-ROM primary text and reference material concerning the life and work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To mark the occasion of the 275th anniversary of Lessing's birth, the Lessing-Akademie in Wolfenbüttel reissued known translations of the parable of the rings in twenty-seven different languages, including for example Arabic, Japanese, Armenian, Latvian, Greek, and Hebrew.

<sup>2</sup> F. J. Lampert, *German Classical Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Demetz, "Introduction," Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise, Minna von Barnhelm, and Other Plays and Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Continuum, 1991), xxi.

<sup>4</sup> Even Monika Fick's impressive and wide-ranging Lessing handbook does not promise to be comprehensive. See Fick, *Lessing-Handbuch: Leben — Werk — Wirkung* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2000), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Albrecht, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1997), 129.

<sup>6</sup> A significant symposium on this subject was organized by John McCarthy at Vanderbilt University in 1999. The contributions on the subject appear in *Lessing Yearbook* 32 (2000), ed. John McCarthy, Herbert Rowland, and Richard E. Schade.

<sup>7</sup> Dieter Fratzke, "Lessing in fremden Sprach- und Kulturwelten: Übersetzungen als museale Zeugnisse der Rezeption und Wirkung im Ausland," *Lessing Yearbook* 32 (2000): 408. For the most recent translations in English see *Lessing: Philosophical and Theological Writings*, ed. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Guy Stern's call for a new Lessing edition in his "Introduction: Current and Future Trends in Lessing Studies," in *Lessing and the Enlightenment*, ed. Alexej Ugrinsky (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessings *Sämtliche Schriften*, 3rd ed., 23 vols., ed. Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker (Stuttgart/Berlin und Leipzig: Göschen, 1886–1924 [Reprint Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968]).

<sup>10</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. *Werke*, 8 vols., ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1970–1979).

<sup>11</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke*, 3 vols., ed. Kurt Wölfel (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1967).

<sup>12</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke. Vollständige Ausgabe in 25 Teilen*, ed. Julius Petersen and Waldemar von Olshausen (Berlin: Bong, 1925–1935, reprinted Hildesheim/New York: Olms, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols., ed. Paul Rilla (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1954–58; 2nd edition: Berlin & Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1968).

<sup>14</sup> Siegfried Seifert, *Lessing-Bibliographie* (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1973); Doris Kuhles, *Lessing Bibliographie 1971–1985*, with Erdmann von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1988). See also endnote 7, and Wolfgang Milde, *Gesamtverzeichnis der Lessing-Handschriften: Veröffentlichung der Lessing-Akademie Wolfenbüttel*, vol. 1 (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1982); Karl-Heinz Finken (in cooperation with Richard E. Schade), "Lessing-Bibliographie 1979–1982: Veröffentlichungen in den Lessing-Jubiläumsjahren," *Lessing Yearbook* 17 (1985): 285–319.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfgang Albrecht, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*. See also Wolfgang Albrecht, "Lessing-Forschung 1979 bis 1983. Ein Literaturbericht auf der Grundlage ausgewählter Buchpublikationen aus der BRD und den USA," *Weimarer Beiträge* 31 (1985): 670–79; also his "Lessing-Forschung 1984 bis 1988. Ein Literaturbericht auf der Grundlage ausgewählter Publikationen," *Weimarer Beiträge* 36:7 (1990): 1164–1180.

<sup>16</sup> The following biographies in German will assist Lessing scholars: Erich Schmidt, *Lessing: Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Schriften*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923); Wolfgang Drews, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1962); *Lessings Leben und Werk in Daten und Bildern*, ed. Kurt Wölfel (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1967); Gerd Hillen, *Lessing Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk* (Munich: Hanser, 1979); Dieter Hildebrandt, *Lessing: Biographie einer Emanzipation* (Munich: Hanser, 1979); Günter Schulz, ed., *Lessing und der Kreis seiner Freunde* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1985); Gustav Sichelschmidt, *Lessing: der Mann und sein Werk* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1989). For information in English see: H. B. Garland, *Lessing: The Founder of Modern German Literature* (London: Macmillan / New York: St. Martin's, 1962), and F. Andrew Brown, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (New York: Twayne, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> Willi Jasper, *Lessing: Aufklärer und Judenfreund. Biographie* (Berlin/Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> *Lessing im Urtheile seiner Zeitgenossen*, 3 vols., ed. Julius W. Braun (Berlin 1884–1893, reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1969); *Lessing—ein unpoetischer Dichter: Dokumente aus drei Jahrhunderten zur Wirkungsgeschichte Lessings in Deutschland*, ed. Horst Steinmetz (Frankfurt am Main/Bonn: Athenäum, 1969); Richard Dau-nicht, *Lessing im Gespräch: Berichte und Urteile von Freunden und Zeitgenossen* (Munich: Fink, 1971); Jürgen Jacobs, *Lessing: Eine Einführung*. (Munich/Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1986); Wilfried Barner, Gunter Grimm, Helmuth Kiesel, Martin Kramer, *Lessing: Epoche — Werk — Wirkung*, 5th ed. (Munich: Beck, 1987); Peter J. Brenner, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000); Werner Jung, *Lessing zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> See Guthke's "Lessing Forschung 1932 bis 1962," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 38 (1964): 68–169; *Der Stand der Lessing-Forschung: Ein Bericht über die Literatur von 1932–1962* (Stuttgart: Metz-ler, 1965); "Lessing-Literatur 1963–1968," *Lessing Yearbook* 1 (1969): 255–64; "Grundlagen der Lessingforschung: Neuere Ergebnisse," *Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung*, vol. 2, ed. Günter Schulz (Bremen/Wolfenbüttel: Jacobi, 1975), 10–46; "Aufgaben der Lessing-Forschung heute: Unvorgreifliche Folgerungen aus neueren Interessenrichtungen," *Das Bild Lessings in der Geschichte*, ed. Herbert G. Göpfert (Heidelberg: Schneider, 1981), 131–60; "Lessing zwischen heute und morgen: Expeditionen in die Region der offenen Fragen," *Humanität und Dialog: Lessing und Mendelssohn in neuer Sicht*, ed. Ehrhard Bahr, Edward P. Harris, and Laurence G. Lyon (Detroit/Munich: Wayne State UP, 1982), 9–36.

<sup>20</sup> Further important Lessing scholarship can be found in the series "Wolfenbütteler Studien zur Aufklärung" and "Kleine Schriften zur Aufklärung," published since 1974 and 1988 respectively by the Lessing-Akademie.

<sup>21</sup> See also Wolfgang Milde, *Gesamtverzeichnis der Lessing-Handschriften*, vol. 1. Vol. 2, which will list all additional parts of the literary estate, is in preparation.



## **Lessing's Life, Work, and Times**

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*The Lessing House in Wolfenbüttel, Germany,  
where Lessing lived from 1777 to 1781.  
Here he wrote his play Nathan der Weise.  
Courtesy of Lessing Museum, Kamenz.*

# Lessing's Life and Work

*Barbara Fischer and Thomas C. Fox*

*Wie lange währts, so bin ich hin,  
Und einer Nachwelt untern Füßen?  
Was braucht sie wen sie tritt zu wissen?  
Weiß ich nur wer ich bin.*

— G. E. Lessing, "Ich"<sup>1</sup>

*Wir verlieren viel viel an ihm, mehr als wir  
glauben.*

— J. W. Goethe to Charlotte von Stein<sup>2</sup>

We can only speculate as to what Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's self-analysis, cited above, might have revealed. By the same token we have no certitude as to what Goethe meant when he responded to Lessing's death in 1781 with the remark that we have lost much, much more than we know.<sup>3</sup> Yet if we summarize the many tributes of the past centuries to Lessing, the great man of letters born in a modest Lutheran parsonage, the following statement captures some of his salient traits: Lessing lived and worked at an important point in German intellectual history. He stands between the rationalist philosophy of Spinoza and Leibniz and emergent German idealism. In literature he helped Germans navigate away from Gottsched's neoclassicism, based on French models, to the Storm and Stress period, with its admiration of Shakespeare, and then to a new understanding of classicism with Goethe and Schiller. In religion he mediated between orthodox Christianity and the radical deists of his age. He did all this at a time when there existed no unified German nation.

Lessing worked in many spheres: literature and literary criticism, theology and philosophy, criticism, journalism, and translation. Despite the magnitude and versatility of his oeuvre, one can discern several recurring and unifying characteristics. Lessing employed a highly flexible, multidimensional, dialectical mode of thought. For him, thinking meant searching; the anti-dogmatic idea that no fixed truth exists (except with God) served him as guide. As a result, regardless of Lessing's sphere of activity, he vigorously put everything into question. He attacked prevalent opinions and "truths" with a polemical energy that proved often rude but always brilliant.



He believed in development through contradiction, in progress through education. In his early, unfinished *Das Christentum der Vernunft* (The Christianity of Reason, published posthumously in 1784) he expresses his belief that humankind can approach perfection, the absolute perfection reserved for God alone. This idea, which recurs throughout his work, culminates in his final drama *Nathan der Weise* (Nathan the Wise, 1779) and his final completed work *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (The Education of the Human Race, 1780). Although a belief in progress through education is not unusual among Enlightenment thinkers, Lessing refused, both in his life and in his work, to acquiesce to the disciplining of the senses through reason that would appear to be one logical outcome of rationalist thought. In his personal life, Lessing early expressed his preference for the theater, the café, the pub, and the gaming table over the scholar's study. His early reviews, one scholar points out, "show his positive response to such books that appealed not only to the mind but also to the heart, his later theological writing greater sympathy for the 'feeling' rather than the 'rational' Christian."<sup>4</sup> Lessing's theology also affected his literary work. Although hardly unusual in his view that literature should serve a social purpose and improve morals, Lessing again differed from the rationalists in that he did not think this possible by reason alone; he sometimes called the stage his pulpit. Finally, Lessing's sympathies lay with the weakest or with those who could not speak for themselves. He advanced new insights into the work of declared heretics, he rehabilitated the work of disrespected contemporaries and of those from the past, and turned an "outcast" of society, a Jew, into a dramatic hero on stage. Through his metonymical friendship with the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), and through his association with freemasonry, Lessing lived the idea of social, political, and religious equality.

In this essay we introduce Lessing's historical environment, present the important stations and signal events of his life, and introduce his major works. Subsequent contributions to this *Companion* will expand upon the outline we sketch here.

## Lessing's Times

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born on 22 January 1729 in Kamenz, a small, provincial Saxon town northeast of Dresden, close to what is today the Polish-German border. In order to understand what life was like in the German lands of the eighteenth century, one first needs have a sense of the socio-historical milieu with which Lessing interacted. His eighteenth-century "Germany" was, unlike France, Spain, and England, not a centralized nation-state. The Reformation and the counter-Reformation, as well as the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) had created

religious schisms throughout the German-speaking world, and this retarded any movement towards centralization. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the German lands did not have a single national monarchy that could have served as a central reference point for national development, as elsewhere in Europe. "Germany" consisted of hundreds of virtually sovereign states and territories. They ranged in size and character from the Habsburg state of Austria to ecclesiastical territories, imperial cities, and minuscule enclaves ruled by imperial knights. These entities were loosely held together by the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation), an elective monarchy headed by an emperor. From 1438 until 1806, with one short interruption, the office was under the control of the Habsburg monarchy. While there were many aspects that made the Empire one German society, there were none that marked Germany as a single political entity or *state*, and the formal structure of politics of the Empire could not substitute for a national political structure. The Empire was a medieval construct that Napoleon would eliminate in 1806. But prior to Napoleonic intervention the political fragmentation and diversity of the Empire, caused by centrifugal forces, characterized German history.

During the eighteenth century, the German Empire was dominated by the inner-German rivalry between Austria and the emerging Prussia, between the South and the North, between Catholicism and Protestantism. During most of Lessing's lifetime the Hohenzollern King Frederick II, called Frederick the Great, ruled Prussia (1740 to 1786), while Empress Maria Theresia ruled the Habsburg Empire (1740 to 1780), which during various times in the eighteenth century incorporated parts of present-day Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, Italy, Poland, and the Czech and Slovak Republics. In ongoing competition with the House of Habsburg, Prussia advanced to the status of a European power; it did so by military interventions and by wresting the large, mineral-rich province of Silesia from the Austrians. This land grab by Frederick occasioned three wars. As a schoolboy in Meissen, Lessing witnessed an overwhelming number of dead and wounded soldiers as a result of the second Silesian war (1744–1745), an experience that troubled him deeply. Nonetheless, he sought out a position as secretary to a Prussian army officer during the last and longest struggle for Silesia, the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). That war and its aftermath constitute the backdrop for Lessing's best-known comedy, *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767).

German thought of the eighteenth century was profoundly influenced by the Enlightenment, a European intellectual movement that found its beginnings in ideas circulating in England and France during the seventeenth century. These included British Empiricism, founded by John Locke (1632–1704), and Continental Rationalism, represented by René Descartes (1596–1650) and developed further by such thinkers as Baruch

de Spinoza (1632–1677) and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Optimism and a belief in progress characterized the reformers, who hoped for the improvement, if not the perfectibility, of humanity through the use of reason. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) chose as his motto the Latin *sapere aude* (dare to know) and he formulated his well-known goal of enlightenment as humanity's release from self-imposed tutelage: "Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit."<sup>5</sup> But beyond issues of political freedom, the Enlightenment in the German-speaking lands also featured attacks on religious orthodoxy and the authority of institutionalized religion. The propagation of tolerance towards other religions, and an emphasis on citizenship instead of religious denomination, became part of those debates. During this time German Jews began to emerge from the ghettos in which many of them had lived since medieval times and enter mainstream German society.

The lively intellectual debates of the time often took place in learned journals. In 1740 alone, 260 journals were founded, between 1770 and 1780 718, and between 1780 and 1790 1,225.<sup>6</sup> Censorship existed, but criteria differed, so that an essay forbidden in one German territory might well be published in the next. Lessing was an active participant in these intellectual exchanges. During his years in Leipzig, he made the acquaintance of the mathematician and poet Abraham Gotthelf Kästner (1719–1800), the philologist Johann Friedrich Christ (1700–1756), the poet, dramatist, and editor Christian Felix Weisse (1726–1804), and the actress and theater director Friederike Caroline Neuber (1697–1760), among many others. During his stays in Berlin, the capital of German Enlightenment, he befriended the publisher Christian Friedrich Voss (1722–1795), the poets Karl Wilhelm Ramler (1725–1798) and Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim (1719–1803), the philosopher and aesthete Johann Georg Sulzer (1720–1779), the writer and publisher Christoph Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), and the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. In Hamburg Lessing met the poets Matthias Claudius (1740–1815) and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803).

Lessing was born at a time when Latin was still widely used by scholars and theologians, French by the aristocracy, Italian on stage. Lessing himself, although able to read, understand and translate Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and English, wrote his extensive oeuvre in the German language. In light of eighteenth-century "Germany's" extreme political fragmentation, intellectuals viewed German language, philosophy, literature, and especially drama as potential elements of cultural consolidation. Such elements helped educated German speakers to imagine themselves as belonging to a community called Germany. In this sense one can understand the rather optimistic title of the short-lived (1767–68) German National Theater in Hamburg, where Lessing worked as dramaturge, playwright, and

literary critic. The German Empire of this time also witnessed the emergence of a growing middle class that became increasingly self-confident and self-assertive. This led to class tensions, some of which Lessing records, but also to attempts to bridge class barriers, such as the German Free Masonic Lodge, of which Lessing was also a member. The first German lodge was founded in Hamburg in 1737 and hundreds more followed. They allowed for the mixing of nobles and non-nobles and helped contribute to the development of a new bourgeois public sphere.

After 1770, the legacy of the Enlightenment became palpable though such radical political experiments as the American Revolution and Constitution and the French Revolution. In the German Empire, however, so-called enlightened or reformist absolutism became the predominant form of government during the eighteenth century. Enlightened rulers attempted to make their governments and states more modern and efficient, but they also began to be influenced by the teachings of such thinkers as Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754), both professors at Halle University, who developed natural law and social contract theory. They argued that it was the ruler's duty to promote the general welfare and happiness of the ruled. Despite numerous reforms, however, the enlightened absolutist state remained, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, a modern head on a Gothic body.<sup>7</sup> It was, to a limited and always arbitrary extent, government for the people, but most certainly not of the people.

## Lessing's Life and Work

### *1729–1746: Kamenz and Meissen*

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born in Kamenz, Saxony in 1729. He was the third child of twelve (seven survived early childhood), and the oldest son of Johann Gottfried Lessing (1693–1770) and Justina Salome Lessing (née Feller, 1703–1777). The Lessings and the Fellers were well known in Kamenz. Theophilus Lessing (1647–1735), the grandfather of Gotthold, had been mayor of Kamenz, and is also known for having presented a disputation on religious toleration.<sup>8</sup> Growing up in a Christian parsonage, the young Gotthold absorbed countless sermons by his father, a learned Lutheran pastor, in the large church of St. Marien. Lessing's father was a high-minded preacher with a brilliant command of rhetoric. These sermons played a central role in his son's early years, and indeed had a lasting effect on his entire life and work. Lessing's personality formed itself through an ongoing inner struggle with the Protestant tradition of his childhood, with the written and the spoken word, with books and sermons.<sup>9</sup>

Lessing left Kamenz for the substantially larger city of Meissen to study at the elite school (Fürstenschule) St. Afra from 1741 to 1746. He obtained a strong grounding in theology and the classics, studying Theophrastus, Plautus, and Terence, among others. He also began his literary efforts, writing poetry and drafting his play *Der junge Gelehrte* (The Young Scholar), which was staged in January 1748 and published in 1754. With a stipend from the municipality of Kamenz, he departed Meissen at the age of seventeen to enter the University of Leipzig, where the young Goethe was to study nearly twenty years later. Encountering the amusements of big-city life and the excitement of theater, Lessing quickly abandoned his plan of studying theology. He turned to other subjects, among them philology and later medicine, and most important, decided to investigate “real life.” He wrote his mother: “Ich lernte einsehen, die Bücher würden mich wohl gelehrt, aber nimmermehr zu einem Menschen machen. . . . und ich suchte Gesellschaft, um nun auch leben zu lernen.”<sup>10</sup> Here we have an early indication that Lessing, though excellently equipped for the life of a scholar, would not be satisfied by books alone.

### *1746–1748: Leipzig*

Life in cosmopolitan Leipzig differed substantially from Lessing’s family life in the remote provincial town of Kamenz. Lessing’s contemporaries called the elegant city a “little Paris”; international trade fairs, among them the annual book fair, lent it a worldly touch. It was during his time here that Lessing, through his relative Christlob Mylius (1722–1754), a journalist, writer, and genial *bohème*, came into contact with touring theater companies and traveling actors. The actress and stage director Friederike Caroline Neuber administered the most prominent of these companies. Neuber had also worked with the famous Leipzig professor and theater reformer, Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–1766), in earlier years, but their working relationship ended in acrimony. Lessing’s parents strongly disapproved of this growing flirtation with the theater, which in those days still stood in ill repute. Nonetheless, Lessing, who was also experimenting with other genres, for example Anacreontic poetry, embraced the theater with enthusiasm. Lessing’s Leipzig friend and fellow student Christian Felix Weisse shared his excitement. Lessing attended performances (he and Weisse translated French plays into German in order to pay for their tickets) and continued to write his own plays. The Neuber troupe staged the successful première of his comedy *Der junge Gelehrte* in January 1748. But his affiliation with the stage had a darker side as well; in the summer of 1748 Lessing fled Leipzig in order to avoid his creditors — he had offered surety for some actor friends who had then left the city. He traveled toward Berlin, rested in Wittenberg due to illness, and arrived in the Prussian capital in late 1748. There he found modest shelter with Christlob Mylius, who had already served as Lessing’s mentor in Leipzig before himself leaving for Berlin.

### 1748–1755: *Berlin and Wittenberg*

Lessing confesses in his preface to his comedy *Die Juden* that his pleasure in theater was so strong that he transformed everything that came to mind into a comedy: “Meine Lust zum Theater war damals so groß, daß sich alles, was mir in den Kopf kam, in eine Komödie verwandelte.”<sup>11</sup> Exchanges of heated letters between the young bohemian and his parents demonstrate that the subject of theater versus theology proved a constant source of irritation. Yet Lessing saw little difference between pulpit and stage: both allowed public influence and served as moral institutions when the written and unwritten laws of society failed to function adequately. (In a famous statement in his later life Lessing notes that he will return to his old pulpit, the stage, to avoid censorship of his theological writing.<sup>12</sup>) His father, deeply angered, considered his son’s poetic ambitions atheistic and felt betrayed. Writing from Berlin on 28 April 1749, the son suggests that he would be eternally famous were he to become a great playwright, a second Molière. He adds that he cannot understand why a writer of comedies should not be a good Christian. Comedies, he continues, describe the ludicrous side of vice. Does vice then deserve so much respect, he asks, that a Christian may not laugh at it?<sup>13</sup> Nearly ten years later, in 1758, he asserts to his friend, the poet Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim, that he intends to write three times as many plays as Lope de Vega.<sup>14</sup>

Gottsched’s rules for the theater, which Lessing later subjected to scathing ridicule, influenced the latter’s early writing. At a time when German drama compared poorly with that of England and France, Gottsched functioned as an influential German pioneer of theatrical reform. In his *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst* (Essay in Critical Poetics, 1730) he defined the rules for all literary and dramatic genres, based on morality, reason, and good taste as well as the critical principles of seventeenth-century French drama. Especially Gottsched’s employment of comedy for didactic purposes left its mark on Lessing’s early work. Yet Lessing also included what Gottsched excluded: he was stimulated by Italian literature, especially the *Commedia dell’arte*, and by the Roman playwright Plautus, whose wit and lively dialogue had influenced Lessing already in Meissen. As a dramatist he followed the traditional premise that the action on stage serves to reveal and correct inappropriate behavior. Often the titles of his early comedies disclose the “vice” or character flaw in question. Some of Lessing’s better-known early dramatic achievements include *Der junge Gelehrte*, *Der Misogyne* (1755), and *Der Freigeist* (The Freethinker, 1755).<sup>15</sup>

One of Lessing’s finest early dramas, *Der junge Gelehrte* compared favorably with Enlightenment comedies by such established playwrights as Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (1715–1769) or Johann Elias Schlegel

(1719–1749). Lessing sketched this traditional satire as a first draft in Meissen and finished it in Leipzig in 1747–48. The play reveals autobiographical traces in the characters Damis (with hints of the young Lessing in Meissen) and Valer (with echoes of the more mature Lessing in Leipzig), and pillories Damis's pedantic scholarly existence with its meaningless, self-serving discussions divorced from real learning. In another early Lessing drama, *Der Freigeist*, written in 1749, Lessing devotes his analytical efforts to the psychology of friendship, family, love, and attraction. Freethinker Adrast regards all clergymen as hypocrites. Theophan, a pious young clergyman with a morally honorable character, challenges Adrast's assumptions and brings him to the insight that people should be judged by their deeds and not by their profession alone. The comedy ends with a union of friendship (*Freundschaftsbund*) between the worldly, rationalist Adrast and the homebound and simple Theophan. Their connection deepens when they marry two sisters. Each marries his opposite: Adrast the virtuous Juliane, and Theophan the strong-willed, free-thinking Henriette, who demonstrates significant social skills. Family and friendship overcome all incompatibilities and contradictions. *Der Misogyn*<sup>16</sup> presents an analysis of prejudice through its main character Wumshäter (Woman-hater). Hilaria, the fiancée of Wumshäter's son Valer, unmasks Wumshäter's vice. Degraded and humiliated by him due to her gender, she gains his respect when she interacts with him disguised as a man named Lelio. Lessing takes his strategy of revealing prejudice, hypocrisy, and intolerance yet further in *Die Juden*, staged in 1749 and published in 1754. Lessing's contemporaries, aware of ancient conventions concerning the use of titles, might well have expected a play that presented Jewishness itself as the "flaw," or a play that somehow corrected the "vice" or "flaw" represented by the Jews. Lessing, however, utilized the title to lure his audience into the theater in order to present it with a reversal of expectations, as well as a reversal of patterns of prejudice. A virtuous and learned traveler saves the life of a Christian baron after the latter is attacked by robbers. Stich and Krumm, Christians and servants of the baron, claim that the robbers were Jews. Their strategy succeeds until they themselves are revealed in the end as the thieves. After the attack, the baron, in order to show his gratitude towards the traveler, invites him to his estate and offers him his daughter in marriage, unaware that his savior is a Jew. In the end the traveler reveals that he is Jewish. After the publication of Gellert's novel *Leben der schwedischen Gräfin von G.* (Life of the Swedish Countess of G., 1747/1748), to which Lessing was quite likely responding,<sup>17</sup> *Die Juden* is one of the first works of German literature to portray a Jew in a positive light. Nonetheless, this play about tolerance also reveals its limits as set by the religiously motivated moral codes of the eighteenth century: the traveler and the baron's daughter do not marry. The baron's well-known line regarding the interference of heaven ("...wo uns der Himmel selbst



verhindert dankbar zu sein")<sup>18</sup> is one of the concluding statements of the play.

During Lessing's initial sojourn in Berlin, it was again Christlob Mylius, now writing for the *Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung*, the leading newspaper of Berlin, who supported his interest in journalism. Beginning in early 1751, Lessing worked as a contributor to what since March 1751 was called the *Berlinische privilegierte Staats- und gelehrte Zeitung*, for which he published the monthly supplement "Das Neueste aus dem Reiche des Witzes" (The Latest from the Realm of Wit). He was also responsible for the section "Von gelehrten Sachen" (On Scholarly Matters). Together with Mylius, Lessing founded the first theater magazine in Germany, the quarterly review entitled *Beyträge zur Historie und Aufnahme des Theaters* (Contributions to the History and Reception of the Theater, 1750). Only four volumes appeared, but they allow excellent insight into the changing literary scene, especially the theater. Lessing decried the uniformity (Einförmigkeit) of the German stage and promised a new development influenced by English and Spanish theater.<sup>19</sup> As F. J. Lamport points out, Lessing began to direct attention both to the dramatic repertory of classical antiquity — Plautus, Seneca, Euripides — and to the latest developments in modern European theater. He encouraged German dramatists to experiment and to liberate themselves from their exclusive dependence on the models of French neoclassicism.<sup>20</sup> Lessing developed this approach further in his *Theatralische Bibliothek* (Theatrical Library, 1754–58). In 1750 and 1751 Lessing is also said to have contributed to the weekly *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit* (Critical News from the World of Erudition), which was founded by Johann Georg Sulzer and edited by Sulzer, Karl Wilhelm Ramler, and later Mylius.<sup>21</sup>

Lessing interrupted his stay in Berlin and spent nearly a year in Wittenberg (1751–1752), where his younger brother Theophilus was studying theology and philosophy. There, Lessing studied religious thought, primarily of the Reformation. In keeping with his instinct to side with those who could not speak for themselves, he employed the knowledge gained in his theological studies in writing his *Rettungen* (Vindications, 1754),<sup>22</sup> which focus on a number of "heretics" or thinkers whose ideas had been, in Lessing's view, unjustly ignored or dismissed. In Wittenberg Lessing also continued his study of medicine and obtained the degree of Magister Artium in that subject on 29 April 1752. Legend has it that Lessing had left Berlin suddenly for Wittenberg due to a falling out with the great French Enlightenment writer and philosopher, Voltaire (1694–1778), who lived in Prussia at the time, at the court of Frederick II in Potsdam, outside Berlin. Lessing's not very felicitous contact with Voltaire may have prevented the former from achieving closer ties, and a secure position, with the king.<sup>23</sup>



Though Lessing was not able to find employment that would allow him financial independence during his Berlin years, his literary activity was immense. His writing was printed, staged, and read; he became widely known and feared for his sharp criticism. He made such new acquaintances as the poet and later director of the Berlin National Theater, Karl Wilhelm Ramler, and the publisher Christian Friedrich Voss, who, after the death of his father-in-law, inherited the *Berlinische*, later called the *Vossische Zeitung* (Voss's Newspaper). In 1754 Lessing began to develop friendships with Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Nicolai, who would later become leading representatives of the Berlin Enlightenment.

As early as 1747 Lessing's poetry (odes, songs, epigrams, didactic poetry, fables in rhyme) had appeared in various journals published by Mylius, and in 1751 Lessing himself published anonymously a collection of his anacreontic lyrical efforts titled *Kleinigkeiten* (Trifles).<sup>24</sup> As the title suggests, Lessing himself did not overestimate this poetry dedicated to wine, women, and song, to the sensual pleasures of the here and now, though his contemporaries had much praise for it. In its refusal to submit to the rules and didacticism governing early Enlightenment literature, anacreontic poetry presented, in its way, a declaration of the aesthetic autonomy of literature.<sup>25</sup> Together with his friend Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing would develop this argument in "Pope—ein Metaphysiker!" (Pope, a Metaphysician!) in 1755. In that anonymously published essay, the authors argue that poetry and philosophy represent two distinct modes of discourse, and that one cannot submit the former to the rules of the latter.

Between 1753 and 1755 the six volumes of Lessing's *Schriften* (Writings) appeared. The first volume contains many of Lessing's epigrams. The form of the epigram, with its concentrated distillation of an idea, its contrasts and witty, surprising turns, fit Lessing's temperament well. Here he already was practicing the rhetorical style that recurs in his fables, his critiques, and his plays. In 1754 he also published the first issue of *Theatralische Bibliothek*, which concluded with the fourth issue at Easter in 1759, though dated 1758. Lessing gained a reputation as a combative literary critic with the publication of his first large scale polemic entitled *Ein Vade Mecum für den Hrn. Sam. Gotth. Lange, Pastor in Laublingen* (A Primer for Mr. Samuel Gotthold Lange, Pastor in Laublingen, 1754), in which he dismantles Lange's translation of Horace.

The interest in English literature that formed a bond between the three friends Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and Lessing led to the first German bourgeois or domestic tragedy (bürgerliches Trauerspiel): *Miß Sara Sampson*. One of Lessing's most important early plays, it was included in the last volume of his *Schriften* (1755). Lessing wrote the play in solitude in a Potsdam garden house in eight weeks, and the Ackermannsche Truppe staged it in Frankfurt an der Oder on 10 July 1755. Lessing and Ramler

attended the successful première. *Miß Sara Sampson* clearly breaks with French influence and the conventional dramatic forms and rules favored by Gottsched. Lessing instead follows English models, the Restoration drama and the English family novel, for this play set in England.

Sara Sampson, a virtuous young woman, has at the beginning of the play eloped with her lover Mellefont to a wretched inn. The conflict between passion and religiously motivated morality structures much of the play and culminates with Sara's death. Through the tragedy of Sara's passing, her father Sir William Sampson becomes capable of unconditional love for humanity. He learns to overcome the barriers that separate people, including family members, by shedding his own role of authoritarian patriarch in order to become a prime example of bourgeois virtue. This "enlightened" father expresses love, tenderness, emotion (Gefühl), and forgiveness both for his daughter and her lover, whom he is willing to recognize as a son. One critic sees in Sir William the "first notable representative of sentimental patriarchy in German domestic drama."<sup>26</sup>

Lessing's contemporaries were moved to tears, the play received many favorable reviews, and even Diderot was interested in translating it. The plot presents a rewriting of the classical story of Jason and Medea, though Lessing has done away with the trappings of royalty to bring tragedy to the level of so-called ordinary people. In this first German "bourgeois tragedy" it does not matter that Sir William is of the lesser nobility. By moving away from kings and queens, by writing in prose, not verse, by emphasizing not the public sphere, but rather the private one of the family and opening that to tragedy, Lessing articulated the values and sentiments of the rising German bourgeoisie. This new genre would resonate in German literary history, with Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* (Intrigue and Love, 1784) and Hebbel's *Maria Magdalena* (1844) two of the more notable examples. Recently, with the rise of gender studies and with growing interest in the social history of women and the family, *Miß Sara Sampson* has received renewed attention.

### ***1755–1760: Leipzig and Berlin***

In 1755 Lessing returned to Leipzig. He agreed to accompany Johann Gottfried Winkler, the son of a rich Leipzig merchant, on a four-year-long trip through Europe. On 10 May 1756 Lessing and Winkler departed from Leipzig, but towards the end of August, while they were in Amsterdam preparing for the voyage to England, Winkler decided to return home due to the beginning of what would become known as the Seven Years' War. Winkler's actions caused Lessing to sue for breach of contract. He won the drawn-out lawsuit, ironically enough, after seven years. Lessing remained in Leipzig until 1758. He could barely support himself with his translation work, and from 1757 to 1758 he collaborated with Mendelssohn and Nicolai, who were in Berlin, on the Enlightenment journal *Bibliothek der*

*schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* (Library of the Liberal Arts, 1756–1806), which later was edited and published as *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und freyen Künste* (New Library of the Liberal Arts), by Christian Felix Weisse, Lessing's friend from his youth. While in Leipzig, Lessing was reunited with Weisse. In addition, Johann Wilhelm Ludwig Gleim introduced Lessing to the officer and poet Ewald Christian von Kleist (1715–1759), with whom Lessing shared a short but close friendship until Kleist's death in battle.

In May 1758, during the second year of the war, Lessing moved back to Berlin, where he met often with his Berlin friends, among them Ramler, Nicolai, and Mendelssohn. Together with Ramler, Lessing edited the works of the seventeenth-century poet Friedrich von Logau in 1759. Due in no small part to Lessing's efforts to resurrect Logau's reputation, the latter's life and works would influence later German writers of stature, for example Gottfried Keller with his cycle of novellas *Das Sinngedicht* (Epigram, 1881) or Günter Grass with his story *Das Treffen in Telgte* (Meeting in Telgte, 1979). Also in 1759 Lessing published *Fabeln: Drey Bücher* (Fables: In Three Books). Lessing found the genre of the fable, with its inherent didacticism, well suited to his desire to improve humanity through literature.

During this time in Berlin, Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Nicolai conversed regularly, and decided to record their topics of discussion in the form of fictional letters. Ewald von Kleist served as model for one of the imagined recipients of the *Briefe, die Neueste Litteratur betreffend* (Letters Concerning the Newest Literature, 1759) which were published by Nicolai's own publishing firm on a weekly basis from 4 January 1759 to 4 July 1765. The three friends considered the letters as intellectual weapons for a "war" on the battlefield of contemporary literature during the time of the Seven Years' War.<sup>27</sup> Lessing criticizes one of his well-respected literary contemporaries, Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), in these letters, but it is Gottsched whom he most fiercely attacks in the best-known letter, the "17. Literaturbrief" (17th Literary Epistle) dated 16 February 1759. This epistle represents a watershed for German drama. Gottsched's reputation was already on the decline, but Lessing argues that German drama would have been better served without Gottsched's efforts, and he clearly breaks with the French neoclassical tradition of drama that Gottsched had promoted. Instead he praises the English drama, primarily Shakespeare, and recommends such models to the Germans, arguing that English theater better fits the German national character. He ends by including a scene entitled *Faust und sieben Geister* (Faust and Seven Ghosts).<sup>28</sup> Here Lessing wishes to demonstrate to Gottsched, who in his *Critische Dichtkunst* had associated the Faust theme with improbabilities and irregularities, that these elements belonged to Enlightenment theater.