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# Opera Versus Drama: *Romeo and Juliet* in Eighteenth-Century Germany

THOMAS BAUMAN

SERIOUSNESS WAS A HIGHLY PRIZED QUALITY in eighteenth-century Germany, manifest in all corners of artistic and practical life. During the second half of the century, it united with the internationally pervasive taste for sentimentality to give German literature its distinctive character in the literary era now referred to as *Empfindsamkeit* [sensibility]. There were even attempts at infusing a seriousness of tone into the *Singspiel*, but these have remained obscured by easy generalizations which depict the genre as a trivial species for bad actors and worse singers, composed of simple-minded plots in which rubes invariably outwit courtiers and city folk, and featuring equally simple-minded ditties that properly belonged in the streets and taverns, and often wound up there.

No work suffers more from such misapprehensions than Jiří Benda's *Romeo und Julie*, a three-act music drama first performed at the Gotha court, where Benda was Kapellmeister, in 1776. At that time the designation *Singspiel* was not applied specifically to a spoken drama with interspersed arias, ensembles, and choruses, but was a generic term for any dramatic work employing music (Wieland referred to his opera seria *Alceste* as a *Singspiel*). What we use the word to betoken today was known then as a "komische Oper"—a term used by Hiller for almost all of his comic operas but never applied to *Romeo und Julie*. Benda's librettist, F. W. Gotter, called the work a "Schauspiel mit Gesang" in his printed libretto (Leipzig, 1779). The composer in his keyboard reduction (Leipzig, 1778, 2/1782) labeled it simply "eine Oper," and manuscript scores surviving at Berlin and Darmstadt use this as well as "eine ernsthafte Oper" and "ein ernsthaftes Singspiel."

In this context, "ernsthaft" carries a musical connotation—that of Italian opera seria. Although Benda's work utilizes spoken dialogue, even a cursory glance at the score's elaborate arias and affective obbligato recitatives will establish that *Romeo und Julie* has very little in common with the *Singspiel* popularized by Hiller. The musical precedents in Germany for Benda's work are obvious if one considers its basis in Italian opera style—Anton Schweitzer's setting of Wieland's *Alceste* (1773) and Benda's own melodramas *Medea* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1775). All these works are further related since they were written for the same theatrical company.

Yet Benda and Gotter did not seek simply to create another opera seria in German along the lines of *Alceste*. Already in his two melodramas, Benda had brought his musical talents to bear on texts conceived as spoken dramas, in effect huge monologues (or as one contemporary put it, the fifth act of a tragedy whose first four acts have been omitted). The literary traditions of Wieland's *Alceste* are those of Metastasio and Italian opera, but *Medea* and especially *Ariadne* derive from French classical tragedy transmuted by the new naturalism of Diderot and the *drame*. *Romeo und Julie* is also very much a product of the German spoken theater, but instead of confining music to instrumental accompaniment (as the melodrama does), it embraces the language and procedures of Italian opera. In choosing this subject, Gotter carried one step further not only the innovations in opera and melodrama just mentioned but also the progressive transformation of Shakespeare's tragedy at the hands of German translators and adapters.

The history of *Romeo and Juliet* in Germany during the second half of the eighteenth century begins in London and, perhaps fittingly, not with Shakespeare but with David Garrick. In 1750 *Romeo and Juliet* kindled a remarkable theatrical confrontation on the London stage. Beginning on 28 September Covent Garden and Drury Lane mounted their rival productions of the play in a series of performances unbroken by any other work until 12 October.<sup>1</sup>

Both Spranger Barry at Covent Garden and Garrick at Drury Lane used Theophilus Cibber's adaptation of 1744; Garrick made several alterations and additions of his own and published his version in 1751. His text influenced nearly all the German translations

<sup>1</sup> See George W. Stone, Jr., *The London Stage, 1860–1800*, 4 pts. (Carbondale, Ill., 1962), pt. 4, I, 208–11.

and adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* published during the next quarter century. The first, issued at Basel in 1758, explicitly claims Garrick's version as its source on the title page. The anonymous translator, Simon Grynaeus (1725–99), may actually have seen Garrick as Romeo on a visit to England in 1749–50. Grynaeus' translation, literal and in blank verse, caused no great stir; the author never followed up on his intention, should *Romeo und Julie* be favorably received, to translate all of Shakespeare "and, as far as possible, word for word."<sup>2</sup>

A much more significant translation of the play appeared in the seventh volume of C. M. Wieland's *Shakespear Theatralische Werke* (Zurich, 1766).<sup>3</sup> Like the other twenty-one plays in this undertaking, *Romeo und Juliette* was not intended for performance. The adapter was more interested in the cultivated German reader in his armchair, anxious to acquaint himself with the bard. (Thus Wieland also included a life of Shakespeare in the last volume of the set.)

By and large Wieland follows Shakespeare's plot quite closely, but he does not hesitate to omit scenes and passages which he finds offensive or nonsensical. He cast his translation in prose, and indeed did not hold a very high opinion of Shakespeare's own poetry, which he found "mostly hard, forced, and dark; the rhyme forever forces him to say something other than what he intends—or else to express his ideas poorly." Shakespeare's couplet conjoining "maidenhead" and "wedding bed" (III.2, 136–37) particularly offended Wieland, who believed there was no nonsense or impropriety Shakespeare would stop at to find a quick rhyme.

Similarly, he objected to the surfeit of puns in Shakespeare—not only untranslatable but also tedious in his view. Hence, Mercutio ends up with very little to say (Wieland will not even grant him his dying pun on 'grave'), and Romeo's character suffers as well. The translator also condemned Lady Capulet's extended comparison of Paris to a book as the base broth of the most tasteless kind of wit

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Hans Kury, *Simon Grynaeus von Basel, 1725–1799, der erste deutsche Uebersetzer von Shakespeares Romeo und Julia*, Basler Beiträge zur deutschen Literatur- und Geistesgeschichte, vol. II (Zurich and Leipzig, 1935), 64. The *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste* complained of the translator's verses: "Sie sind bisweilen so holpricht, die Harmonie, und der Abschnitt so verabsäumt, kurz, so—schweizerisch, dass wir eine wohlklingende Prose, diesen Versen weit vorziehen würden" (6:1 [1760]: 61).

<sup>3</sup> Wieland used the Pope-Warburton and Theobald editions as the bases for his translations. He also translated and put at the head of his first volume of plays the preface written by Pope (1725) for the former edition.

and totally unworthy of the character of a mother. The crude interchange among Peter and the three musicians after Juliet's body is discovered (IV.5) is only summarized. Wieland conjectures that this "small *divertissement* of puns and pranks in the taste of the Viennese Harlequin" was included so that the preceding scene of lamentation would not touch the audience too deeply. In this Wieland reflected the taste of his age, for Garrick too had excised this comic incongruity in his adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Wieland obviously placed considerations of tone and propriety above those of characterization and dramatic construction. This is evident in his own plays and librettos as well. Herder saw the particular failing of *Romeo und Juliette* in the translator's lack of personal empathy with the star-crossed lovers. In the fall of 1770 Herder wrote to his wife:

Of all Shakespeare's plays, Wieland is never more unsuccessful than with *Romeo and Juliet*. The reason, perhaps, is that Wieland himself has never felt a Romeo's love, but has always inflated his head with Sympathies and Pantheons and Seraphim, without his heart ever feeling human warmth.<sup>4</sup>

There is an undeniable coldness in Wieland's translation. As a specimen one may offer his stiff reworking of the Prince's closing homily, which takes an entirely new direction at his hands, pounding with a pompous, sermonesque tone called "Kanzelberedsamkeit" [pulpit oratory] at the time:

Ihr aber, getreue Liebende, die ein allzustrenges Schicksal im Leben getrennt, und nun ein freywilliger Tod auf ewig vereiniget hat, lebet, Juliette und Romeo, lebet in unserm Andenken, und die späteste Nachwelt möge das Gedächtniss eurer unglücklichen Liebe mit mitleidigen Thränen ehren!

[A glooming peace this morning with it brings  
The sun for sorrow will not show his head.  
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things.  
Some shall be pardoned and some punished.  
For never was there story of more woe  
Than that of Juliet and her Romeo.]

By 1773 Wieland's set of translations had finally been sold out, and his publisher suggested a new edition to incorporate the many

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by August Koberstein, "Shakespeare's allmähliches Bekanntwerden in Deutschland und Urtheile über ihm bis zum Jahre 1773," in *Vermischte Aufsätze zur Litteraturgeschichte und Aesthetik* (Leipzig, 1858), p. 206, note 60.

errors critics had pointed out. Wieland refused, and J. J. Eschenburg, a distinguished scholar and Anglophile, undertook the task. Eschenburg not only restored all the passages suppressed or altered by his predecessor but also translated the plays omitted by Wieland—which included *Richard II*, *Coriolanus*, and *Cymbeline*. The new thirteen-volume edition, which appeared from 1775 to 1782, already belongs to a new chapter in German literary history. In his preface, Eschenburg could look back with scholarly perspective on the goals of Wieland's undertaking: "Its purpose was, insofar as it was possible, to cloak the English poet in German garb."<sup>5</sup> Yet, in spite of its flaws, Goethe preferred Wieland's translations even to Schlegel's and dated the widespread acquaintance of German readers with Shakespeare from its appearance.

Christian Felix Weisse, universally beloved in his own day for the *Singspiel* librettos he wrote or adapted for Hiller, earned the highest regard from his countrymen with his five-act version of Shakespeare's tragedy, a complete reworking which he claimed to be "ein ganz neues Stück." Weisse's *Romeo und Julie, ein bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (Leipzig, 1767) is as much a work for his own age as Shakespeare's was for his. Although Weisse was acquainted with the literary history of his subject, he draws on the story's various versions only to serve his own ideals (substantially those of Lessing, too), the spirit of bourgeois sentimentality framed by the constructive rules of French classical tragedy.

Weisse's indebtedness to Shakespeare and the Italian novellas of Bandello and Porto has been carefully studied by German scholars,<sup>6</sup> but the provenance of his alterations is less important than his artistic intentions in incorporating them. Unlike Wieland, Weisse was very much a man of the theatre and wrote his play to be performed as well as read. In his preface to the first edition, he relates how he had the play brought on stage (in the fall of 1767 at Leipzig) before offering the printed text to the public. As a result he cut the

<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Gisbert Freiherr von Vincke, "Zur Geschichte der deutschen Shakspeare-Uebersetzung," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Bühnengeschichte, Theatergeschichtliche Forschungen*, vol. VI (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1893), p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Johanna Gruber, "Das Verhältnis von Weisses *Romeo und Julie* zu Shakespeare und den Novellen," *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*, 5 (1905), 395-428; Walter Hüttemann, *Christian Felix Weisse und seine Zeit in ihrem Verhältnis zu Shakespeare*, Inaug.-Diss., Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität (Duisburg, 1912); and Artur Sauer, *Shakespeares Romeo und Julia in den Bearbeitungen und Uebersetzungen der deutschen Literatur*, Inaug.-Diss., Königliche Universität (Greifswald, 1915).

last two scenes, in which Montague and Capulet learn of the disaster and reconcile their families. He had realized that in performance they were expendible, since the spectator is overwhelmed with interest for the lovers. He retained the two scenes as an appendix in the printed text "for more tranquil readers."

In order to conform to the unities, Weisse begins his tragedy after Romeo and Juliet have met, fallen in love, and married, after Mercutio and Tybalt have been slain and a warrant has been issued for Romeo's arrest. Appropriately enough in terms of Weisse's concerns, his story opens with Juliet center-stage, alone and anxiously awaiting her Romeo. Much of the author's handling of her character is typical of the German sentimental drama. He seeks to imbue his heroine with the sweet and passive tenderness his age idealized in the female sex. Rather than respecting the growing sense of self-assurance and maturity which transforms Shakespeare's Juliet, Weisse draws a static, timorous soul. There are, however, a few exceptions. Juliet's soliloquy in which she summons up the horrors of the grave before taking the potion provided by Friar Laurence (the family doctor Benvoglio in Weisse) captures at least an echo of the fortitude of Shakespeare's heroine. The nurse (Laura in Weisse's version, as well as in Gotter's) and Lady Capulet, against whom Juliet's development was gauged by Shakespeare, also undergo alterations: both become sympathetic confidantes. Weisse also decided to blacken Capulet into a remorseless tyrant against whom the three ladies wage a common battle.

Romeo, stripped of the scenes with Tybalt and Mercutio in which he could display his manliness to advantage, matches Juliet's distaff languor with his own insipid whining. In his first appearance he seeks to justify his fleeing her and Verona. Where Shakespeare's hero had needed Juliet's urging to go, boldly asserting, "Let me be ta'en, let me be put to death!", Weisse's Romeo quails before the very thought: "As soon as morning breaks they will hear the rumor that I am still in Verona and come looking for me, and think what would happen if they found me! Think, Juliet!" She offers to flee with him, but he protests that then, if caught, he would be punished as her seducer as well. From this point, the middle of the first act, to the beginning of the last, Romeo disappears. When he returns he spins out a long monologue at Juliet's tomb which Weisse drastically shortened in later editions.

In these closing scenes the two do not die severally; rather Romeo

lives on after taking poison to see Juliet awake, to curse his lack of trust in Providence, and to weep through a final dialogue. However much this alteration may have suited Weisse's goals, he cannot claim credit for the change. Again, Garrick had made exactly the same departure. Weisse's preface reveals that he knew of Garrick's revision,<sup>7</sup> although the farewell dialogue also occurs in another of his sources, Porto's novella. The differences between Garrick's scene and Weisse's reflect the German dramatist's preoccupation with his heroine. In Garrick's version Romeo takes the initiative. He suggests they flee "from this cave of death, this house of horror"—forgetting for a moment the fatal step he has already taken. Juliet wakes in confusion, not realizing at first where she is (as in Porto). Romeo tells her of the poison when he recollects his situation, and in the end he dies with an appeal to their parents on his lips. Weisse's Juliet, in contrast, comes immediately to her senses and takes charge, exhorting Romeo to flee with her. She stumbles upon the emptied vial—he has not been able to summon the fortitude to tell her himself that he is undone. Wrapped in morbid self-pity, Romeo can do nothing but expire in helpless anguish.

The suicide of Juliet after Romeo dies chilled Weisse's audiences. The poet Gleim wrote from Leipzig shortly after the première of the tragedy that "Juliet aroused not tears but shocks of horror."<sup>8</sup> This dark scene, rather than the lovers' reunion, was chosen for the play's frontispiece in the collected edition of Weisse's tragedies issued at Leipzig in 1776. By that date, the suicide scene was no doubt considered among the most "Shakespearean" in the tragedy. Yet it was not shudders of horror but rather sympathetic tears that expressed the approval Weisse sought for his drama, especially in adopting and expanding Garrick's final farewell for the lovers. Both men considered the absence of such a dialogue in Shakespeare an error in judgment. Weisse appeals to "the tears of the spectators, which have flown for Romeo and Juliet" as his vindication for departing so sharply from Shakespeare—and, indeed, his play went on to achieve a success never before equaled by a German tragedy.

While many of Europe's most beloved comedies and farces had

<sup>7</sup> Weisse refers in his preface to Garrick's criticism of Shakespeare's "jingle and quibble," a phrase used by the actor in the foreword to the printed edition of his adaptation.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Schüddekopf, ed., *Briefwechsel zwischen Gleim und Uz*, Bibliothek des litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, vol. 218 (Tübingen, 1899), p. 377.



been turned into musical works in the second half of the eighteenth century, librettists had completely avoided the domestic tragedy until Gotter decided to create a German opera out of the Romeo and Juliet story. Such a daring venture was only possible because he and Benda envisioned a new kind of music drama, one in which the emotionalism and seriousness of character essential to the domestic tragedy would be intensified by the most elevated musical language available, that of opera seria.

At the beginning of his preface to *Romeo und Julie*, dated October 1778, Gotter wrote, "Let Benda's music be the document in my defense against those who consider it a desecration to transplant a subject of the tragic muse to the opera stage." By then, Benda's music had already established the work's popularity throughout Germany. Yet voices had been raised against the libretto, and Gotter had been particularly stung by the criticism of Heinrich Leopold Wagner, who charged him with diluting Shakespeare to ninety-five percent water.<sup>9</sup> Against this the librettist made the inaccurate claim that he had indeed returned to Shakespeare in fashioning his text, which had nothing but title and plot in common with Weisse's tragedy.

It is true that many passages in Gotter's libretto stand closer to Shakespeare's language than to Weisse's. Compare, for example, the parting scene at Juliet's balcony in the three versions:

GOTTER:

*Julie*: Ach, ich habe eine Unglück weissagende Seele. — Sieh! wenn ich dich so betrachte, Romeo, glaub' ich einen Todten zu sehen, den sie in das Grab legen. — Sind meine Augen düster — oder bist du wirklich so bleich?

*Romeo*: Auch du kömmt mir bleich vor. Der Kummer trinkt das Blut in unsern Wangen auf.

WEISSE:

*Julie*: . . . Sieh mich immer noch recht an! — Du scheinst mir bleich wie das Grab! Scheine ich dir nicht auch so? O Romeo, lass mich meine Seele noch in die deinige atmen! (Sie fällt ihm um den Hals.) — und sterben —

SHAKESPEARE:

*Juliet*: Oh God! I have an ill-divining soul.  
Methinks I see thee, now thou art below,

<sup>9</sup> *Briefe, die Seylerische Theatergesellschaft und ihre Vorstellungen zu Frankfurt am Main betreffend* (Frankfurt, 1777).

As one dead in the bottom of a tomb.  
 Either my eyesight fails or thou look'st pale.  
*Romeo*: And trust me, love, in my eye so do you.  
 Dry sorrow drinks our blood. Adieu, adieu!  
 (III.v.54–59)

Constructively, however, Gotter follows Weisse in observing the unities and concentrating on the female characters. When his purposes deviate from Weisse's it is because of the medium in which he is working. For example, after the exchange just quoted, Shakespeare's Romeo leaves. Weisse, however, draws out the scene. He is forced to establish character here, having sacrificed Romeo's earlier appearances in order to compress everything into twenty-four hours. Gotter, of course, faced the same problem, but could call Benda to his aid.<sup>10</sup> In his libretto, a sort of operatic scena follows in which Romeo offers an aria of hope and love (its incipit suggested by a line from Weisse). Juliet counters that there is no hope, and only love remains. She suggests a double suicide and draws a knife. Romeo snatches it from her and they join Laura in a trio which closes the act. In such a situation Romeo makes a much stronger impression, and momentum builds toward the musical capstone of the act, the trio, rather than dissipating. Weisse, in contrast, has Romeo scurry off when Laura announces Lady Capulet.

Gotter's delineation of Juliet's character is instructive. She is still the unchallenged center of attention (one manuscript calls the opera *Julie und Romeo*) and also gains considerably in courage and resourcefulness over Weisse's heroine. To be sure, weakness is still valued highly, but especially where Gotter calls on Benda's obbligato skills Juliet gathers strength, as in her final monologue before taking Friar Laurence's potion. This musical complex culminates in a minor aria whose final line is drawn straight from Shakespeare: "Romeo, diess trink ich dir zu." Weisse avoids such an "operatic" flourish.

Capulet, one of Weisse's most unfortunate creations, is toned down considerably in the opera, perhaps partly for musical reasons.

<sup>10</sup> Because Romeo is forced to stay on in both versions, neither Weisse nor Gotter can take advantage of the splendid visual effect sought by Shakespeare—Juliet looking down to her Romeo at the foot of the rope ladder, standing "as one dead in the bottom of a tomb." It will be noticed that neither man translates Shakespeare's "now thou art below." Garrick, too, changes the line to "now thou art parting from me" (perhaps the ladder and balcony were not used in his production).

His big spoken monologue in Act II is not filled with the execrations and threats of Weisse's Capulet. At the close he cries, "I will use force if argument has no effect! I? Use force against the darling of my heart?" There follows an aria, "Schweres Amt," in which he reflects on the pangs of parenthood. In such instances Capulet's anger takes on an impulsive, more human character, and his grief in the last act is thus much more genuine. Had Gotter preserved Weisse's storming villain, a noisy bravura aria full of impassioned virtuosic passages would have come here by long-standing operatic custom. Yet the vocal demands on Capulet, here and throughout the opera, are not very great. In fact, the musical demands on the whole cast reflect conditions at Gotha, where first-rate female singers abounded, but good male singers were scarce (the best tenor and bass having both left in 1775). The most virtuosic role in *Romeo und Julie*, that of Juliet's confidante Laura, was written especially for Benda's own daughter. Capulet's solo numbers, on the other hand, approach the dimensions of the lied, as found in most *Singspiele* of the day.

Despite Gotter's more elliptic approach and shifts of emphasis in characterization in conflating Weisse's five acts to three, his departures in the first two of his three acts are not major ones. Benda's music, too, seldom shows much inspiration in these two acts—in Winton Dean's somewhat harsh judgment, it is "fluent and superficial, rich in period clichés and sparing of surprises."<sup>11</sup> Except for Juliet's recitative and aria at the close of Act II, most of the music is conventional and sentimental, although now and again Benda effects one of the astonishing harmonic sallies he used with such splendid results in his melodramas. More often than not, these moments come from the opera's three obbligato recitatives. For example, in the opening solo scene of Act 1, where as in Weisse Juliet anxiously awaits Romeo's arrival, jumping at every footfall, Benda portrays her unrest with a jarring shift from V of b minor to F major, a tritone away from the expected resolution (Musical Example 1).

Benda's arias are all well crafted and evoked from his contemporaries the age's highest praise for an artist—their tears. The most celebrated one in the opera was Juliet's "Ihn wieder zu seh'n," an aria with intermixed recitative elements which she sings in response

<sup>11</sup> "Shakespeare and Opera," in *Shakespeare in Music*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll (London, 1964), p. 146.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1. Jiří Benda, *Romeo und Julie*, act 1, scene 1.

*Adagio* *Str.* *Andante moderato*

JULIE:

Er ver-zicht noch im-mer.

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 2. Jiří Benda, *Romeo und Julie*, act 2, scene 6

(Allegro)

JULIE:

Al - le Ge - dan-ken ver - lie - ren sich in dem Won-ne-ge - dan-ken mei -

nen Ro - me - o zu seh'n - - - - -

Ach! ach!

to Friar Laurence's suggestion that he may have a way to reunite the pair. J. F. Reichardt praised it as "the highest expression of rapture that art is capable of reaching,"<sup>12</sup> and Benda's necrologist transmitted the following anecdote concerning the aria:

A librettist spoke at great length on the pains it cost him to make his verses musical. "That is no great favor to *me*," cried Benda, with whom the poet in general did not sit well; "for my best and most moving melodies I have unmusical verses to thank, which force me to bend my every effort in order to improve on the poet." In support he referred to his beautiful aria "Meinen Romeo zu sehn" and its verses:

Alle Gedanken verlieren sich  
In dem Wonnegedanken:  
Meinen Romeo zu sehn, etc.

He sprang to the clavier and sang this splendid aria with such inner emotion that crystalline tears rolled down his cheeks and everyone present, in spite of his dreadful voice and his broad Bohemian accent and heavy gestures and facial expressions, was moved to tears.<sup>13</sup>

Benda may be allowed his pride in the declamatory merits of his setting (Musical Example 2, drawn from near the end of the aria's first part); but the passage has other, more significant virtues as well. The melisma on "seh'n" not only caps the long drive of the aria's first part to the dominant, A major, but also paints Juliet's joy at seeing her Romeo again, and the sudden shift back to D major at the brink of achieving the dominant offers a heart-wrenching musical jolt back to the reality of the lovers' present separation. The extent of the dominant preparation for A major and the long-awaited melodic climax on high a''' at the end of the melisma speak with a Mozartean breadth of conception.

Such moments arouse great expectations for the composer's acquittal of himself in the closing scene at the tomb. Yet here Gotter departs from the models before him and substitutes for the tragical close a happy ending (Juliet awakes before Romeo can poison himself)—an alteration that aroused much discussion at the time.

<sup>12</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 40:1 (1780), 130. (A review of the printed keyboard reduction of 1778.)

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich von Schlichtegroll, *Musiker-Nekrologe*, ed. Richard Schaal (Kassel and Basel, n.d.), p. 29.

Reichardt cried out for the restoration of the ending as it stands in Shakespeare and Weisse (he also inveighed against the *lieto fine* in Wieland's *Alceste*). Eschenburg, on the other hand, found much to praise in Gotter's libretto. The plot develops quickly, he observes, adding: "How much more offensive, in contrast, are so many tedious scenes in our German tragedy of this name [Weisse's *Romeo und Julie* is meant]." He found nothing objectionable in the happy ending. "Presumably, the author was anxious to assemble all the characters at the close and to end the work with a chorus."<sup>14</sup>

A happy ending was standard in opera seria, but served in most of the genre's librettos as an excuse for the hero to display his magnanimity. The theme present here, reconciliation, was rather the property of the sentimental comedy and of comic opera. However, Gotter was not the first to transfer this theme to serious opera—or indeed to the Romeo and Juliet story. The Italian librettist Sanseverino wrote a *Romeo e Giulia* (unrelated to Weisse's tragedy) for the composer Schwanberg at the Brunswick court early in 1773 and added a happy ending. Gotter may possibly have known this work; a second edition of the libretto was published at Berlin in 1776.<sup>15</sup>

Gotter did not mention this direct precedent, however, when he set forth his reasons for altering the ending in the preface to his printed text. Two considerations, he claims, would not allow him to retain the "all-too-tragic catastrophe": musical economy and the abilities of the singers. A lexicon of the day notes that "Oekonomie" was used figuratively with reference to the disposition of ends and means within a work of art.<sup>16</sup> Gotter apparently held that the musical means of an opera were not appropriate to the tragic ending he found in Shakespeare and Weisse. He may also have felt that the singers were not equal to the dramatic demands of such a close.

It seems odd that Gotter would seek to put the blame on the composer and singers in circumstances where he had competent vocalists as well as the best dramatic composer in Protestant Germany. Only a year earlier, Gotter had provided Benda with a text of unquestionable tragic credentials—the melodrama *Medea*, in which

<sup>14</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 39:1 (1780), 162–63.

<sup>15</sup> See O. G. T. Sonneck, *Catalogue of Opera Librettos Printed Before 1800*, 3 vols. (Washington, 1914), I, 949.

<sup>16</sup> [Johann Christoph Adelung], *Versuch eines vollständigen grammatisch-kritischen Wörterbuchs der hochdeutschen Mundart*, 5 vols. (Leipzig, 1774–86), vol. III (1777), col. 911: ". . . so wird oft auch figurlich die ganze Einrichtung der Endzwecke und Mittel die *Oekonomie* genannt."

the jealous heroine slays her own children, then taunts her grief-stricken husband to suicide. The difference Gotter saw between *Medea* and *Romeo und Julie* reflects a mistrust, common in German literati of the period, of the abilities of the opera composer to discharge duties normally assigned to the tragedian. *Medea* had been written for an actress, not a singer; the text was spoken throughout, and music functioned as the drama's handmaiden. In *Romeo und Julie*, Gotter knew, the success or failure of the piece would depend principally on Benda's music, and thus the roles were reversed. It is bitterly ironic that later on Benda expressed in connection with this very opera his own artistic maxim: "Music itself suffers when one sacrifices everything for its sake."<sup>17</sup>

Dean ascribes the failure of Act III to its central episode, where the "deplorably false sentiment of Romeo's scene at the tomb" may well disgust the modern listener. Furthermore, the contrived and pallid closing scene of reunion and reconciliation belies the morbid forebodings of everything that precedes. Benda's music here is as workaday as the denouement is unmotivated. This dramatic disintegration is all the more offensive because the last act opens with unquestionably the finest, most impressive tableau in all of Benda's *Singspiele*, a funeral chorus at Juliet's grave. This chorus (more probably an ensemble of soloists, as the part writing will show) exists in two versions. Originally its dimensions were modest: a funeral procession led by Capulet enters the grove of cypresses and Babylonian willows where Juliet's casket lies; a quartet behind the scenes intones a dirge in c minor as Capulet and his followers pay their last respects to Juliet; he sings an expressive E-flat major duet with another mourner who seeks to comfort him; the last half of the quartet's dirge is repeated as the party withdraws.

When Gotter's friend Friedrich Ludwig Schröder mounted Benda's *Romeo und Julie* at Hamburg, he wrote to the librettist recommending to him some changes he had made in the last act, which included bringing the disembodied quartet on stage. Gotter incorporated these alterations in his printed text and also expanded the whole funeral scene, for which Benda provided additional music. In the new version the chorus bears Juliet's open casket to the crypt where it is placed next to Tybalt's. Capulet, after the c-minor

<sup>17</sup> The remark appears in an essay "On Simple Recitative" submitted by the composer to Carl Friedrich Cramer's *Magazin der Musik*, 1 (Hamburg, 1783), 751.

quartet, breaks free and kneels at her coffin. A few mourners follow him. After his E-flat duet with one of them he exits in despair. Laura, accompanied by maidens with burning candles, steps forward and sings a "Wechselgesang" (antiphonal duet) with one of these. She places a wreath on the coffin and leaves. During the repetition of the chorus the casket is closed, the crypt is darkened and shut, and the stage is emptied for the entrance of Romeo and his servant.

The scene gains much in the new version. The dignified and measured last exequies must have been of powerful theatrical effect when accompanied by Benda's quartet (Musical Example 3).<sup>18</sup> The combination of stark and unadorned harmonies (underscored dynamically) and a clear but distinctive progression announcing c minor establishes the scene's mood as the curtain rises. The quartet's pitiless unison descent of the tonic triad is truly Gluckian. But most astonishing of all is the unaccompanied, contrapuntal surge that follows. Whatever parallels one might be tempted to draw between Benda's funeral chorus and Schweitzer's choral tombeau in Act V of *Alceste* (also in c minor) quickly break down. Schweitzer writes mostly for the two soloists Admet and Parthenia; Benda's music recalls the North German motet, which after Bach turned to discreet polyphony and free combinations of voices within a homophonic context. While such an association must not be overlooked—a motet was a frequent adjunct to a funeral service—neither must the dramatic context in which Benda was working and its precedents in Italian opera. Several Metastasian librettos employ funeral choruses (for example, *Artaserse*, set as a quartet of soloists by Galuppi for Vienna in 1749); and, more important, Gluck's *Orfeo* opens with a strikingly similar scene—also in c minor.

Benda may have known Galuppi's *Artaserse*, and most certainly he knew Gluck's masterpiece. Yet, from the literary standpoint at least, it is the London stage of 1750 that once again offers a direct precedent for this German departure from Shakespeare. On the first evening of the *Romeo and Juliet* rivalry, Covent Garden added a funeral procession at the beginning of Act V which included a

<sup>18</sup> The high c''' in the first soprano part here, which makes the work highly unlikely for a chorus, is not found in all manuscripts. In these sources one also finds a rising chromatic line beginning on c'' an octave lower. Even in this form, the piece is so unusual for an opera chorus that there can be little doubt that it was intended for soloists. All the manuscripts refer to a "vierstimmiger Gesang" behind the scene, while the keyboard reduction calls specifically for "5 voci soli."



MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3. Jiří Benda, Romeo und Julie, act 3, scene 1

Lento

(Vierstimmiger Gesang hinter dem Theater)

(Hier wird das Theater eröffnet)

SOPR I  
Im Gra-be wohnt Ver-ges - - - sen-heit der Sor - gen

SOPR II  
Ver-ges - - - sen-heit der Sor - gen

TENOR  
Im Gra-be wohnt Verges - - - -sen-heit der Sor - gen

BASS  
Verges - - sen-heit der Sor - gen

solemn dirge composed by Thomas Arne. Garrick quickly got Arne's competitor, William Boyce, to provide music for a funeral scene written by Garrick for his own production.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that Gotter's scene was inspired by one or the other of these funerary processions, although his text betrays no direct borrowings. But it is equally important to recognize an operatic model which lay much closer at hand—the choral lament which opens Act V of Wieland's *Alceste* (Weimar, 1773). The English funeral scenes themselves no doubt took their lead from operatic traditions. Making a case for the precedents in either serious opera or the spoken theatre is less important, however, than recognizing this very ambiguity as a ratification of the dual heritage of Gotter's work. The choral scenes in all these works aspire to a common goal—a dignified moment of high seriousness investing the “death” of the heroine with the emotional reality the drama demands. Exactly the same may be said of the great opening chorus in Gluck's *Orfeo*. And there can be no ambiguity about the affinity of Benda's funeral tableau with this classic model.<sup>20</sup>

C. F. D. Schubart hailed Benda as an epoch-maker not just because of his melodramas but also because of his choruses in *Romeo und Julie*—and clearly he was thinking of this funeral tableau.<sup>21</sup> Reichardt, too, declared that with this chorus Benda had “harvested the highest praise: tears from an overflowing fullness of heart.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Arne's *Compleat Score of the Solemn Dirge in Romeo and Juliet* was published (London: Thorowgood, [1750?]), but Boyce's hasty effort (composed and prepared for performance in only two days) was apparently never printed and has not been traced. Charles Haywood, “William Boyce's ‘Solemn Dirge’ in Garrick's *Romeo and Juliet* Production of 1750,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 11 (1960), 173–87, attributes to Boyce a setting of Garrick's text in a manuscript which belonged to the American statesman and composer Francis Hopkinson (1737–91). It is difficult to share Haywood's confidence, based solely on stylistic grounds, in this ascription. One readily grants him the music's simplicity; less readily, however, qualities of “subdued lyricism and unaffected poignancy”; and it is scarcely more than wishful thinking to lump Arne with purveyors of “exaggerated affections and ornamental artificialities.”

<sup>20</sup> Serious opera as represented by Gluck and his reforms must not be construed as unrelated to the English stage. Burney remarks of Gluck, “He told me that he owed entirely to England the study of nature in his dramatic compositions.” That the good doctor's statement bespeaks more than insular pride is made clear by Daniel Heartz, “From Garrick to Gluck: the Reform of Theater and Opera in the Mid-Eighteenth Century,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musicological Association*, 94 (1967–68), 111–27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ideen zu einer Aesthetik der Tonkunst*, ed. Ludwig Schubart (Vienna, 1806), p. 112.

<sup>22</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 40:1 (1780), 130.

Today one can still admire the quartet. Yet its intensification of dramatic demands which Gotter felt an opera libretto could not fulfill points up the fundamental problem in *Romeo und Julie*. Benda, both at Berlin and in Italy, had mastered the international language that was Italian opera and proved that it could still find fresh validity in the melodrama, in which operatic music and French classical tragedy created a new dramatic genre. Gotter failed to see the promise this held for their collaboration on *Romeo und Julie*, and retreated from the work's literary basis in the spoken theatre under cover of a false aesthetic which separated opera and drama. He failed to grasp that in this new context the literary traditions of serious opera were fundamentally inappropriate. This is perhaps what Reichardt had in mind when he complained, "If only the poet had not so irresponsibly cut up his material into well-mannered, everyday opera garb!"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.