ON THE DICTATES OF LOGIC IN
LESSING'S EMILIA GALOTTI

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Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* has proved to be one of the great enigmas
of the German theater.\(^1\) It is paradoxical that a play which is famous
for being logical—indeed, perhaps *too* logical—in its structure should
have given rise to so many divergent and speculative interpretations.
The present essay is an attempt to follow the play's logic to its natural
conclusions, without the assumption of any authorial intentions beyond
those manifest in the text itself and a few relevant letters.

In 1758, when he was drafting a first version of the drama,
Lessing wrote to Nicolai about his conviction

> daß das Schicksal einer Tochter, die von ihrem Vater umgebracht
> wird, dem ihre Tugend werter ist, als ihr Leben, für sich
> schon tragisch genug, und fähig genug sei, die ganze Seele zu
> erschüttern, wenn auch gleich kein Umsturz der ganzen
> Staatsverfassung darauf folgte.\(^2\)

The Roman historian Livy had treated the death of Virginia as a
political "incident"; Lessing, by dismissing the political aspects of his
source, put greater emphasis on the peculiar nature of the murder
itself. Goethe's definition of the proper novella subject as "eine sich
ereignete, unerhörte Begebenheit"\(^3\) applies equally well to Lessing's
treatment of Emilia's death. It has already been asserted that *Emilia
Galotti* is definitely a drama of action, not of character.\(^4\) And the
crowning action of this "bürgerliche Virginia"—the filicide—is un-
questionably a startling, remarkable, almost unique event.

Since the *manner* of Emilia's death is the main thing, and since
her father is the essential factor in this manner, one may not simply
assume (on the basis of the title) that Emilia is the principal character
of the tragedy. As has been pointed out more than once, Lessing in
a letter to his brother Karl denied the central importance of Emilia:

> Weil das Stück Emilia heißt, ist es darum mein Vorsatz gewesen,
> Emilien zu dem hervorstechendsten, oder auch zu einem
> hervorstechenden Charakter zu machen? Ganz und gar nicht.
> Die Alten nannten ihre Stücke wohl nach Personen, die gar
> nicht aufs Theater kamen.... Die jungfräulichen Heroinen
> und Philosophinnen sind gar nicht nach meinem Geschmacke.
> (LM, xvIII, 18)\(^5\)

Henry Hatfield seeks to deprive this passage of its force by suggesting
that it was meant ironically.6 But this is only a possibility, and rather a remote one. The implications of the fatal act itself point to Odoardo as the central figure; his position of ultimate eminence is a logical necessity.7

To be sure, Lessing does not treat the daughter as a mere victim. In Livy's narrative she had appeared as such: Virginia says nothing for or against her father's action, and the responsibility for the fateful decision is all his. Emilia, however, expresses the wish to be liberated by death and even tries to commit suicide. While the Roman Virginia is helplessly subject to the forces around her, Lessing's "bürgerliche Virginia" has a will of her own—the German playwright has succeeded in making an interesting, stageworthy figure out of the puppet he found in his source.8 The development of this character is at least in part a logical result of Lessing's decision to eliminate all political considerations from the plot. If the political situation cannot (as in Livy) justify the father's deed, then the daughter herself must contribute something to the creation of a situation in which the deed is possible and understandable.

Odoardo's stern moral views are fully accepted and shared by Emilia, who has never disgraced her father. Consequently it is in a double sense that Odoardo must act against his natural instincts when he slays her: as her loving parent and as a just man who is loath to condemn the innocent. Yet there have been several attempts to interpret the play in terms of guilt and punishment: Thus Hermann J. Weigand contends that Emilia views her death as punishment for an imaginary complicity in Appiani's murder.9 Were guilt and punishment involved, Emilia's attempts at suicide—as well as the encouragement she gives Odoardo—would have to be viewed as a tragic decision based on considerable moral insight and maturity of character. Her role, however, is supposed to be undemanding, as Lessing said to Nicolai (1772): "Die Rolle der Emilia erfordert gar keine Kunst. Naiv und natürlich spielen kann ein junges Mädchen ohne alle Anweisung" (LM, xx, 159, note 3). It is unlikely that Lessing would have entrusted the tragic decision to such a role.10

Moreover, the illogical consequence would have been to deprive the unique death of its most singular aspect: if the father is only the tool of his determined daughter, then the filicide loses its special sting. Odoardo himself has to will the act, not be tricked or rushed into it. He must have to overcome his natural love for his daughter.
for the sake of a higher principle, or the deep tragedy of the situation remains untouched.\(^{11}\) (One of the most unsatisfying features of the later fate tragedies, in which a person is often destined to kill a son or daughter, is the absence of a tragic decision made with insight into the true nature of the situation.) Odoardo must be accorded his tragic stature, or Emilia herself is placed in an ambivalent light: Can a sympathetic heroine deal so disingenuously with her honorable, upright father? In short, neither Emilia nor her father can be reduced to the victim, or the tool, of the other. The primary question to be answered is not why Emilia has to die, not even why she wants to die, but rather why her father must kill her, and what her death accomplishes from his point of view.

Obviously a key passage in understanding Odoardo’s action is Emilia’s response to his assertion that innocence can resist force: She says that she fears the force of seduction. Here we see again why Lessing had to give her a more fully developed, individualized character than Livy gave Virginia. We must believe her when she says, “Ich habe Blut, mein Vater; so jugendliches, so warmes Blut, als eine” (v.vii). It is this very speech, however, that critics have balked at from the beginning.\(^{12}\) Some have tried to convert Emilia’s manifest weakness into strength: They say she is only pretending a susceptibility to the Prince in order to provoke Odoardo into stabbing her.\(^{13}\) Naturally their reasoning gives responsibility to Emilia for her own death and relegates Odoardo to a subordinate role—although it also excuses Lessing from the “error” of failing to plant clues in advance to prepare us for this amazing confession. If we accept Emilia’s words at face value, however, are we truly left with no choice but to charge Lessing with negligence in motivation?

Actually, examination of the text of the second act reveals careful and adequate—although subtle—preparation for Emilia’s outburst of candor about her sensual nature. In the first place, Odoardo (like the stereotype Latin father) has heretofore believed in constant chaperonage for his daughter. He was perturbed to hear from Claudia that Emilia had gone to church unattended, and refused to be mollified by the explanation that it was only a few steps to walk: “Einer ist genug zu einem Fehltritt!” (n.ii), he retorted—not showing thereby any great confidence in Emilia’s powers of resistance to temptation. Secondly, and more vividly, Emilia’s narration of her encounter with the Prince in church contains an element that commentators have not paid sufficient attention to: Emilia is strongly
and involuntarily stirred by the bold declaration of passion from the personage behind her—before she is even aware of his identity. Her blood is so warm that virtue can think only of the most drastic measures to rescue her:

_Was konnt' ich sonst?—Meinen guten Engel bitten, mich mit Taubheit zu schlagen; und wann auch, wann auch auf immer!—Das bat ich; das war das einzige, was ich beten konnte._ (II.vi)

Emilia's prayer for deafness clearly anticipates her later demand for death. She does not ask for courage to stand firm but seeks escape, first by deafness, then by death. A likely source for her prayer is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount: “And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee” (Matt. v.29). In connection with Emilia's situation it is particularly illuminating to recall the passage that precedes Christ's stern admonition: “But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. v.28). That a young woman might identify herself as the lustful individual (vis-à-vis the male sex) whom Christ speaks of here is readily understandable; and the substitution of ear for eye as the instrument of temptation in a woman is both psychologically appropriate and in line with literary tradition (i.e., female delight in receiving flattery and well-phrased expressions of ardor). The Biblical allusion—natural for a girl as pious as Emilia—is a direct indication that passions stronger than her moral will are awakening and threatening her purity. These passions should not be confused with _love_, which is a noble spiritual sentiment reserved for her fiancé Appiani and sheltered by the familiar, accepted institution of marriage. In church with an “unknown” and shortly thereafter in the street with a now recognized Prince, Emilia is confused and frightened, but as much by her own involuntary response to whispered blandishments as by the clever seducer himself. She is reduced to an irrational state:

_Aus Scham muß' ich Stand halten: mich von ihm loszuwinden, würde die Vorbeigehenden zu aufmerksam auf uns gemacht haben. Das war die einzige Überlegung, deren ich fähig war—deren ich mich nun erinnere._ (II.vi)

Here is her characteristic inability to offer resistance coupled with her characteristic desire to flee; but there is also a significant lapse of memory. We need not take recourse to very profound psychological speculation in order to suspect that Emilia's forgetfulness is due to her suppression of censorable thoughts.14 Small wonder that she later
dreads the consequences of being put into the custody of the pleasure-seeking Grimaldis!

Henry Hatfield's interpretation focuses on Claudia's characterization of Emilia as "die Furchtsamste und Entschlossenste unseres Geschlechts" (iv.viii). These seemingly antithetical qualities, however, may be viewed as existing in a logical cause-and-effect relationship. Her easily aroused anxiety about the likelihood of sinning leads directly to determined flight from temptation (as in the church and street episode). Hers is the kind of determination needed to "pluck out an eye," or to wish for deafness—or for death.

Thus Emilia's character is by no means heroic, for heroism implies, in the moral sphere, conquest of self. Moreover, as can be seen from comparison, her character is not original and individual but derivative: looming behind most of her actions and attitudes is the example of her father. Rather than remain at court and combat its immorality and injustice, Odoardo retires to his estates. Although his personal physical courage is never questioned—in fact Pirro extols it (π.iii)—it extends only to resisting physical force. It is completely consistent with Odoardo's character when he tells Emilia that force can never harm her (v.vii). But he does not show the same courage in combatting intangible threats to his moral equilibrium. Appiani is cast in the same mold.15 Though immediately ready to cross swords with the courtier Marinelli, he has no stomach for standing fast and defying the court on its own terms: He plans a private wedding ceremony and a rapid retreat to the country for a quiet and remote existence.16 Ultimately, the character of the father is the archetype for both young people's characters and explains their fate. The only member of the family to remain at the periphery of tragedy is Claudia, whose pragmatic attitude, particularly regarding the court, stamps her as the furthest removed in character and conduct from Odoardo.

In Lessing's source the presence of armed guards around the tyrant explains why Virginius slays his daughter instead of directly attacking Appius. Lessing, too, could have brought a few soldiers onto the scene; but he chose another way, one more in harmony with the ironically "polite," "civilized" atmosphere of the play and better suited to demonstrate Odoardo's character. The doughty old colonel, who might have known how to deal effectively with the physical threat of soldiers, can only "flee" when entrapped by the Prince's sacred person and presence alone. He has fled from the court and
the council, he has lived in the country and encouraged daughter and son-in-law to do the same, and a moment before the climax scene he still tries literally to flee the palace and the whole situation (v.vi). As Emilia feels the court's dominance over her sexuality, so Odoardo feels it over his manliness. He is entrapped. By all standards of expected human conduct there is nothing he can do to preserve his daughter's innocence and his own integrity; he must acknowledge miserable defeat. But the unexpected happens—yet within the framework of his established character: He cuts himself free by severing the life of his daughter, and leaves ultimate vengeance up to God.

While obviously a product of the flight-reaction, Odoardo's deed is far more remarkable than a suicide on the part of Emilia would have been. She herself emphasizes the multitude of precedents for her way of escaping temptation: "Nichts Schlimmers zu vermeiden, sprangen Tausende in die Fluten und sind Heilige!" (v.vii). There is reflection and self-control in Odoardo's action; only with reluctance can he make up his mind to slay his innocent, most dearly beloved daughter for the sake of an ideal. There is in Emilia's instant readiness to run, to wish for deafness, to plunge a dagger or a hairpin into her heart something of that unfeeling recklessness once criticized by Lessing in connection with Christian tragedy: "Was in 'Olint und Sophronia' Christ ist, das alles hält gemartert werden und sterben für ein Glas Wasser trinken" (Hamburgische Dramaturgie, Stück 1, LM, IX, 187).

In death Emilia finds sweet release and comfort: "Eine Rose gebrochen, ehe der Sturm sie entblättert.—Lassen Sie mich sie küssen, diese väterliche Hand" (v.vi). But Odoardo shows in his bitterness what this deed has cost him, though doubtless he would commit it again if need be. From the position of safety he has won at such a desperate price he hurls a grim taunt at the Prince:


Mixed with the bitterness is a note of triumph, and understandably so. Odoardo has preserved his daughter from a damning alterna-
tive between two mortal sins: prostitution and suicide, and himself from culpability in the shedding of blood—for like a new Abraham, he has only followed God's bidding ("Er will meine Hand, er will sie" [v.vi]). In addition, he has scored a victory over the Prince, appearances notwithstanding. Hettore, first of all, is cheated of his prey (a loss which can, to be sure, soon be made up!). More important, this sovereign who had schemed to use his office as judge to bring Emilia under his power now is compelled to use the same office in a still more monstrously hypocritical way: as judge over the father. A genuine dilemma confronts the Prince. If he punishes Odoardo for murder, then he compounds his own guilt before the next higher court, which is God's own tribunal. If, on the other hand, he confesses his own implication in the catastrophe, he may possibly suffer the fate of his ancient counterpart Appius. And even if the whole affair is hushed up diplomatically—the most likely solution—Hettore is inevitably damned.

Odoardo's "victory" is suitably tragic because of the almost equally great loss that he sustains; and it is morally satisfying in the framework of a universe governed by a just God who eventually rewards and punishes according to merit, although the drama strains belief in such a universe nearly to the breaking point. It must be conceded that Odoardo achieves a certain tragic grandeur when he, in full consciousness of his actions, kills for virtue's sake. Emilia has not badgered him into it. Her role was to encourage and support, not to take over the initiative. Odoardo insists on assuming the responsibility when she, with her last breath, tries to protect him from criminal prosecution: "Nicht du, meine Tochter;—nicht du!—Gehe mit keiner Unwahrheit aus der Welt [after all, he has saved her from suicide and prostitution, and he will certainly not allow her to compromise her salvation now with a falsehood]. Nicht du, meine Tochter! Dein Vater, dein unglücklicher Vater" (v.viii).

A tragic hero, however, must have a flaw, or at least make some mistake that connects him with his downfall, for otherwise our sense of justice is outraged and the proper feelings of pity and fear are obliterated. Lessing develops this Aristotelian thought in the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*:

Ein Mensch kann sehr gut sein und doch noch mehr als eine Schwachheit haben, mehr als einen Fehler begehen, wodurch er sich in unabsehliches Unglück stürzt, das uns mit Mitleid

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und Wehmut erfüllt, ohne im geringsten grässlich zu sein, weil es die natürliche Folge seines Fehlers ist. (Stück 82, LM, x, 135)\textsuperscript{17}

What, then, is Odoardo's *hamartia*? Is it to be found in the flight-reaction, which has also been inculcated in his daughter and son-in-law? If so, then it may be true that Lessing meant to write an "indictment of bourgeois passivity."\textsuperscript{18} Since Lessing, however, did not make his possibly tendentious purpose explicit in the text, and since, as stated above, Odoardo's "victory" is not inconsistent with the prevailing passive viewpoint of the day, one may leave political-philosophical considerations aside and seek a purely literary explanation. Odoardo's critical mistake was to let Claudia persuade him in the first place that Emilia should be taken to the capital city to find a husband. This is parallel to Emilia's mistake in letting herself be persuaded by Claudia to conceal her encounter with the Prince from Appiani. Claudia is a realistic person unacquainted with the flight-reaction. She says to Emilia in regard to the Prince, "Ich will hoffen, daß du deiner mächtig genug warst, ihm in einem Blicke alle die Verachtung zu bezeigen, die er verdient" (II.vi); and she is not afraid to hurl forthright accusations at Marinelli and the Prince in the very confines of the palace, after the murder of Appiani. Such a person is prepared to meet intangible evil on its own ground, in direct confrontation. Her more virtuous, finer-grained husband and daughter, however, must keep to their own remote sphere, or tragedy ensues.

As has been noted, this is not the first attempt to establish the centrality of Odoardo's role; such attempts date back to Bürger. Nevertheless, the array of distinguished and perceptive critics who have missed the father's true significance is formidable and includes Goethe, Grillparzer, and Freytag. It is a brave—or impertinent—critic who dares to speak counter to this *consensus gentium*.\textsuperscript{19} At best, some will say, such a critic has merely proved that the play is an artistic failure, for how could a successful work have concealed its real structure from so many expert judges? But Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* is no failure. For nearly two hundred years, despite critical head-shaking and many strictures, it has held the stage and stirred the emotions of audiences and readers. An interpretation that purports to reveal the basic logic and dramatic unity of this great play, as the text stands, has not done it a disservice.

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LESSING'S *EMILIA GALOTTI*  19


3 *Gespräche mit Eckermann*, January 29, 1827.


5 These lines are cited, for example, by Robert R. Heitner in "Emilia Galotti: An Indictment of Bourgeois Passivity," *JEGP*, LII (1953), 486. But Heitner, who champions Odoardo as the protagonist of the play, argues on the basis of the social aspects of the clash between two classes; his conclusions are not without some validity, but since many critics have shown reluctance to accept a socio-political interpretation, another line of proof seems to be needed.


7 Karl S. Guthke in *Der Stand der Lessing-Forschung: Ein Bericht über die Literatur von 1932-1962* (Stuttgart, 1965) shows that all political interpretations have Odoardo as the protagonist (p.51). The following interpretation represents the first attempt to examine the father as a nonpolitical hero.

8 Nevertheless, Fred O. Nolte maintains in "Lessing's Emilia Galotti in the Light of his Hamburgische Dramaturgie," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, xix (1937), 184: "Lessing's heroine, no less than Livy's, is a victim."

9 "Warum stirbt Emilia Galotti?" *JEGP*, xxvIII (1929), 478. A further variation on Weigand's interpretation has been attempted by Harry Steinhauer, who claims in "The Guilt of Emilia Galotti," *JEGP*, XLVIII (1949), 182: "That she had not the clearness of vision to react absolutely in accordance with the dignity of her class-consciousness—that is her sin, her mistake, her hamartia." The same objection can be raised here as toward any interpretation based on class-consciousness: the social aspects of the conflict are often missing where they could be most naturally expected.

10 Although he calls Emilia simply a victim, Fred O. Nolte nevertheless states that Odoardo is dramatically superfluous in the last act, for he "ceases to be an independent, determining agent and becomes the mere instrument of his daughter's will" (187).

11 The importance of this fact was already noted by G. A. Bürger: see Dvoretzky, op.cit., p. 41.
One of these objections is represented by Goethe's famous assertion that Emilia must be either a "Gans" or a "Luderchen."

H. J. Weigand and Harry Steinhauer put forth this view.

This point is also taken by Weigand, op. cit., 473 ff.

Fred O. Nolte presents a very convincing case for his assertion: "Odoardo and Appiani are almost identical figures, removed from each other by an interval of years" (189).

Yet his seemingly prudent withdrawal has the unwished-for consequence of provoking a fatal sense of urgency in Hettore and Marinelli. Had Appiani not been in such a hurry to leave the city, the Prince would not have acted so impulsively and violently.

This statement is cited by E. L. Stahl, op. cit., 112, who then comments: "Die Tötung ist letzen Endes eine unbesonnene Tat . . . Sie entspricht genau dem Charakter Odoardos, der in dem Stück stets aus bedenklichen Beweggründen voreilig handelte." Although Stahl is one of the few who call the father a tragic hero, his denial of conscious motivation and ability to reach a tragic decision deprives Odoardo of tragic stature and leaves him as "ein brausender Jünglingskopf mit grauen Haaren," a type described by Odoardo himself as most contemptible (v.ii).

See footnote 5.

Cf. Henry Hatfield, op. cit., 287, footnote 1.