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A Study of the Social and Political Implication of Friedrich Schlegel's 'Comedy of Freude'

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Manjit Singh Bhatti entitled "A Study of the Social and Political Implication of Friedrich Schlegel's 'Comedy of Freude'." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in German.

Stefanie Ohnesorg, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Daniel H. Magilow, Maria Stehle

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS
OF FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL'S 'COMEDY OF *FREUDE*'

A Thesis Presented for
the Master of Arts Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Manjit Bhatti
December 2009

Abstract

Generally speaking, scholarship in the field of Germanistik has taken an interest in Friedrich Schlegel's early publication, "Vom aesthetischen Werte der griechischen Komoedie" (1794), either because of its perceived influence on German Romantic Comedy [(Catholy 1982), (Kluge 1980), (Holl 1923), (Japp 1999)], or else because of its relevance as an example of Schlegel's still inchoate aesthetic philosophy [(Dierkes 1980), (Behrens 1984), (Schanze 1966), (Michel 1982), (Dannenberg 1993), (Mennemeier 1971)]. As a theory of comedy in its own right, Schlegel's essay has garnered little attention, in part because of its supposed inapplicability to comedic praxis and at times utopian implications, in part because of its seemingly contradictory argument, and lastly in part because Schlegel himself abandoned the essay's central premise soon after its publication. However, it is the central argument of the present study that Schlegel's essay can be shown to be interesting and relevant precisely for the theory of comedy it contains. Through a close reading of Schlegel's essay on Old Greek Comedy, as well as an examination of Schlegel's early political and aesthetic beliefs, which will help render Schlegel's theory more intelligible, it will be shown that Schlegel's theory of comedy is novel in so far as it is one of the first aesthetic theories to claim that comedic practice is necessarily deprived of aesthetic validity unless it exists in a social atmosphere of freedom of expression, namely, such as that of the Athenians. The implication is that Schlegel here predicates an aesthetic theory upon one of society. Schlegel's theory is also interesting for the peculiar type of comedy it advocates, namely a joyous comedy (Comedy of 'Freude'), which stands in direct opposition to the 'Satirische Verlachskomoedie' of the Enlightenment and makes use of a

comedic mechanism (joy) that is anathema to traditional negative comedic elements (satire, derision, mockery etc.). The conclusion discusses what the relevance and value of these implications might be for future research.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Stefanie Ohnesorg, who helped me to develop what was originally only a vague interest in German Idealism into a more focused research project which yielded, I hope, interesting conclusions. Not only did my desire to meet her standards force me to transcend what I myself believed I was capable of, but her continuous support and suggestions helped me to tighten my argument and to write only that which could be supported by my research. I would also like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Daniel Magilow and Dr. Maria Stehle, who took the time out of their busy schedules to read through my thesis and offered much welcomed feedback.

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I Introduction

In October 1794, Friedrich Schlegel sent his brother, August Wilhelm, a copy of an essay he had been working on for close to a year under the working title “*Apologie des Aristophanes*”¹. It was, he wrote, “nur eine Rhapsodie, die künftig einen Teil der Geschichte der Griechischen Komödie ausmachen wird” (*Let. to A.W.* 10-27-1794)². Nevertheless he conceded to his brother that he had taken pains to make the essay’s argument cogent and its style clear: “Ich gab mir Mühe die Sprache leicht, und den Zusammenhang fließend zu machen, das Gehackte zu meiden, was Du mit Recht immer an mir tadelst” (*ibid.*). The essay’s publication came a few months later in the December issue of the *Berlinsche Monatschrift* under the title *Vom ästhetischen Werte der griechischen Komödie* (KAI 19-33). It was Schlegel’s first publication, and it became one of his most well-known and well-regarded early works³. In part, its fame at the time rested on the fact that the essay – as its initial title indicates – was seen as a defense of Aristophanes’ worth as a playwright. In it Schlegel did more than simply defend the famous Greek playwright’s place in the comedic canon against what he saw as a long and unfair tradition of dismissal from primarily French criticism. Schlegel champions Aristophanes’ plays as the

¹ The earliest mention of the essay is in a letter to his brother dating from December 11, 1793 (*Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* XXIII 162). We cannot know for sure how long he had already been working on his essay on Aristophanes, but in that letter he claims that it and a few others studies, “werden auch wohl zugleich fertig werden” (*Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* XXIII 164).

² All the letters by Friedrich Schlegel used in this study are addressed to his brother, August Wilhelm. For brevity’s sake, citations of these letters will hereafter be followed by a parenthetical citation in the form, (*Let. to AW*, 4-5-1794). The reader will find a list of the page numbers as well as the volume in the *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* where these letters are to be found in the appendix that follows the present study.

³ In his introduction to volume one of the *KA*, which includes all of Schlegel’s early works on Classical literature, Ernst Behler cites the positive reception that Schlegel’s essay found with a number of his contemporaries; among them Christian Gottfried Körner and Friedrich Creuzer (Behler *Einleitung* CXLIVf.). Behler, whose immense scholarship on Friedrich Schlegel helped yield the very helpful *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (*KA*), will be quoted from liberally in the following study.

genre's finest. "Die alte griechische Komödie", he writes, "ist eins der wichtigsten Dokumente für die Theorie der komischen Kunst; denn in der ganzen Geschichte der Kunst sind ihre Schönheiten einzig, und vielleicht deswegen allgemein verkannt" (KAI 20)⁴. In addition, the essay attracted attention at the time of its publication and, indeed, has maintained an appeal ever since because of its surprisingly novel approach to the theory of comedy, eschewing completely the familiar concepts and schemata of Enlightenment theories of comedy, and choosing instead to build a theory from an entirely different set of premises, which Schlegel developed from his understanding of Old Greek Comedy. The vindication of Aristophanes, which followed naturally, amounted to a theoretically backed endorsement for a new comedic ideal. In recent years, a fair amount of scholarship in *Romantikforschung* has sought to examine the extent to which this new comedic ideal corresponds with the Romantic plays of Tieck, Brentano, and Arnim⁵. It is important to note, however, that Schlegel himself was only secondarily interested in clearing Aristophanes' name. Primarily, he was concerned with developing a sound theory of comedy. In fact, from around 1793 to 1796, Schlegel had been immersed in an ambitious effort to develop a general theory of literature, which would arrive at the essential elements of the various traditional literary genres by examining the history of their 'birth' and development under the Greeks, and to a lesser extent, Romans. Though Schlegel never completed this work, and after 1796 turned his attention increasingly to post-Classical literature (Behler *Selbstzeugnisse* 44), the theory of comedy that he developed in his essay on Aristophanes is one

⁴ Throughout his essay on Aristophanes, Schlegel takes the term 'Old Greek Comedy' to be synonymous with the plays of Aristophanes, since these were the only complete plays known to him to have originated during that period.

⁵ See, for example, works by Japp (1999), Catholy (1982), Kluge (1980), and Scherer (2003).

the most realized theories of any genre from this early period of his career, and it has made its way into the canon of German theories of comedy⁶.

Inasmuch as Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay is meant to be a systematic and complete theory of comedy, it is remarkably short; 20 pages in its original printing. To a large extent, Schlegel was capable of such brevity because his theory is quite bare; it ascribes to the comedic ideal only a few essential qualities.

Schlegel's explanation of what he believes to be the true essence of comedy follows from three sources:

1. his assumptions about human nature and the human purpose; in other words, his anthropological beliefs and his *Bildungstheorie*, respectively;
2. his understanding of the social practice of Greek Comedy; and
3. his interpretation of Aristophanes' plays themselves.

Schlegel begins his essay on Greek Comedy by positing the concept of *Freude* both as a fundamental characteristic of human nature, and also as a positive personal and social value. He then describes how this value is obtained at the personal level, arguing that individuals realize their capacity for *Freude* through wanton and purposeless activity. According to Schlegel, comedy's essential characteristic is that it functions as a symbol of *Freude*, and he sees the comedic ritual as an act that brings individuals together in a collective celebration of *Freude*. An essential prerequisite to the success of this ritual is that the community in which a comedy is produced and staged guarantee – through religious, political or some other form of protection – comedy's complete freedom of expression. Schlegel then shows how Greek Comedy most

⁶ See for example, Profitlich's *Komödientheorie: Texte und Kommentare vom Barock bis zur Gegenwart* (1998), which dedicates a chapter to Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay. Also, see Catholy, 184-191, and Kluge, 186-199.

closely resembled what he sees as the comedic ideal, and further explains what kept Greek Comedy from *fully* realizing this ideal. The implication is that since Schlegel's ideal had not yet been fully realized, it could only, if ever, be achieved by future generations.

This is an extremely brief summary of Schlegel's argument, and it will be one of the main objectives of the present study to explain this theory in more detail. Yet, a few important aspects are already apparent from the description above. First and foremost, Schlegel's theory is normative and programmatic. He describes an aesthetic ideal, not an interpretive framework for understanding the mechanisms behind comedy. And more than being an aesthetic ideal against which existing plays might be judged, Schlegel's theory of comedy – or more appropriately, theory of a comedic ideal – concerns itself with understanding the essence of the comedic spirit. Thus, his theory ill lends itself to the judging of actual comedies. To the extent that a vast number of comedies make no effort to symbolize *Freude*, they could not even be classified as comedies under his framework.

Schlegel's theory is also peculiar to the extent that it is as much a normative theory of *society* as it is of *comedy*. His argument is explicitly anchored in a moral/anthropological premise. For him, what comedy should be is inherently linked to what society should be, which in this context, is itself a function of what is good and fitting for individuals. This normative aspect of Schlegel's theory is the central interest of the present study, which intends to outline the socio-political implications of Schlegel's theory of comedy. It will seek to answer from a descriptive standpoint, what place Schlegel sees comedy as having in society and from a normative standpoint, what role Schlegel believes comedy should play in society. This requires that I first arrive at a formal and methodologically sound understanding of Schlegel's theory of comedy.

Doing so will allow me to uncover the socio-politically predicated components of Schlegel's theory. In the end, I hope to show that Schlegel's theory of comedy is implicitly political, since it defends and requires a limited form of freedom of expression, and that furthermore, parts of Schlegel's theory imply a democratic state structure – in the Athenian sense – as an aesthetic necessity.

It must be stated at the outset that this study does not attempt to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of Friedrich Schlegel's views on comedy; that is to say, it does not attempt to explore Schlegel's general attitude towards comedy throughout his life. Rather, this study seeks to best understand the theory of comedy laid down in Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes. To the extent that there are ambiguities in that essay, recourse will be made to Schlegel's contemporaneous letters and publications. Thus what is sometimes termed the post-Fichtean Schlegel is of no real interest here.

After giving a brief publication history of the Aristophanes-essay and an overview of the current body of relevant research, which is the aim of Chapter II, I will address in Chapter III, three prerequisites for a proper understanding of Schlegel's theory, each in individual subchapters. Subchapter III.1 concerns itself with certain assumptions of German aesthetic philosophy in the 1790s which Schlegel takes as given. A modern understanding of Schlegel's own theory of comedy is only possible if one considers it within the context of the *language* of German aesthetic philosophy in the 1790s⁷. Schlegel's theory operates primarily by bringing a

⁷ In proposing this, I choose a methodological approach not unlike Gadamer's in *Truth and Method*, who claims that in order to properly examine the issue of the humanistic tradition in the late 18th century, and more specifically for him, the hermeneutic tradition, one is well-served to historicize key aesthetic terms which we might at first take as self-evident: "Key concepts and words which we still use acquired their special stamp then [i.e. during the Age of Goethe], and if we are not to be swept along by language, but to strive for a reasoned historical self-understanding,

few key concepts into play with one another and as such, eludes easy comprehension, because it assumes a contemporary understanding of the terminology used. Abstract terms like *Freiheit*, *Schönheit* and *Freude* are made liberal use of and are central to the theoretical framework of his argument. It is important to remember that they also have historically bound meanings, and we will be led astray if we approach this text without taking the trouble to define them in their historical context. It is well known, for instance, that the notion of *Freiheit* played a ubiquitous role in the social and political rhetoric of the Enlightenment⁸ and later became a central theoretical component of German writings on literary aesthetics in the wake Kant's publication of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Martin Holtermann, in his discussion of the German reception of Aristophanes in the 1790s makes the apt point that the notion of freedom plays a central role not only in Schlegel's theory of comedy, but also in many of his contemporaries' theories of comedy as well⁹.

Subchapter III.2 addresses the programmatic component of Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes. Schlegel's effort to understand comedy is, in part, motivated by a desire to rectify

we must face a whole host of questions about verbal and conceptual history. In what follows it is possible to do no more than begin the great task that faces investigators, as an aid to our philosophical inquiry. Concepts such as 'art', 'history', 'genius' [...] which we take to be self-evident, contain a wealth of history" (Gadamer 9). Furthermore, Schlegel's aesthetic philosophy during this time, it has been often claimed, is best understood as a sub-movement of German Idealism or – as it has sometimes been termed – Transcendental Philosophy. For example, Ernst Behler writes: "Friedrich Schlegel [war sich] darüber im klaren, daß seine Sehweise oder Darstellung der griechischen Bildung eine auf der Transzendentalphilosophie beruhende 'Geschichte des Bewußtseins' war, 'die [er] da und nicht in der künstlichen Methode suchte'" (Behler *Einleitung* LXXVII). [Behler quotes from Schlegel (*KAXV Studien des Altertums*, Nr. 2)]. Thus it will be necessary in what follows to base definitions of aesthetic terms not only on the Aristotle-derived poetic systems of the Baroque and early Enlightenment but also on German philosophy of the late 18th century, which took, as it did, a great interest in matters of art.

⁸ Peter Gay expresses what has become a truism of our understanding of the Enlightenment when he writes that "freedom" is the unifying theme of the Enlightenment program: "The men of the Enlightenment were united on a vastly ambitious program [...] of [...] above all, freedom in its many forms" (Gay 3).

⁹ Holtermann (pg. 96) cites others who have remarked on the centrality of freedom in theories of comedy during the 1790's; for example Beare's *Theorie der Komödie* (1927): "Diese Freiheitsforderung ist überall in der Theorie der Zeit zu spüren" (Beare 67), and Walzel's "Aristophanische Komödien": "Das Schlagwort Freiheit beherrscht ebenso Schillers wie Friedrich Schlegels Gedanken über die Komödie" (Walzel 491).

what he sees as the inadequacies of some of the most prevalent tendencies in 18th century theories of comedy. His essay constitutes an implied attack on those who he believes had misunderstood comedy's essence and had, as a consequence, dismissed Aristophanes' worth. In addition, his proclamation of a new comedic ideal is meant to demonstrate the inadequacies of prevalent comedic genres in the mid to late 18th century, like the *comédie larmoyante*, the *Familiengemälde* and similar emerging bourgeois comedic styles.

Subchapter III.3 gives a brief overview of Schlegel's general early project of developing a historically based literary aesthetic system from the corpus of Classical literature. As I mentioned above, Schlegel intended to eventually supplement his theory of comedy with theories of all the various Classical genres. In fact, everything that he wrote during his study of Classical literature was done so with one eye toward this ultimate goal. Thus, a sound understanding of his theory of comedy necessitates that one understand the contours of his general attitude toward Classical literature and his general aesthetical-historical approach to literary theory during this period. Most importantly, Schlegel's theory of comedy only makes sense if one is acquainted with his understanding of Greek tragedy. For example, one explanation that he gives, in the Aristophanes-essay for "die Natur des Komischen" is that it is, per definition, devoid of "tragische Energie" (KAI 20). Schlegel sees the ideal comical and the ideal tragical as absolute opposites, and periodically in this study, explanations of his theory of comedy will follow from explanations of his beliefs about tragedy. Since Schlegel wrote extensively on Greek tragedy

elsewhere in his early writings, I will make use of these other writings to help clarify the tragedy/comedy dichotomy as he understood it¹⁰.

Following Chapter III, I turn in Chapter IV to a close reading of the Aristophanes-essay itself, with the goal of presenting a faithful and logical formulation of Schlegel's theory. I hope to show what Schlegel believes the comedic ideal means for the individual, what it means for the form that a given comedy should take, and what it means for society at large. Chapter V is an excursus into Schlegel's early political thought, which will allow me to return to the question of the extent to which his theory is predicated on certain political structures and socio-political rights. The conclusion (Chapter VI) addresses the question of what contemporary scholarship might stand to gain from Schlegel's theory of comedy and what his theory's applicability, if any, might be in a modern context.

¹⁰ It is necessary here to list the main texts by Schlegel that will be used in the following study. Of course the central text for this study is his *Vom ästhetischen Werte der Griechischen Komödie* (1794) (KAI 19-33). Excerpts from this text constitute the vast majority of the citations from Schlegel that are found in this study. However, in the construction of my argument, I have found it necessary to supplement Schlegel's thoughts in that essay with others that can be found, for the most part, in his writings (both published and unpublished) and letters from the time. The reader will notice that besides the Aristophane-essay, the present study draws here and there from Schlegel's other writings on Classical topics, which are taken for the most part from vol. 1 of the *Kritische Ausgabe*, and to a lesser degree from vol. 11. Schlegel's letters to his brother August, particularly those written between 1793 and 1795, are used to clarify certain aspects of Schlegel's methodology and approach; these are taken from vol. 23. Likewise, Schlegel's unpublished sketch of a system of aesthetics (1795/96) entitled *Von der Schönheit in der Dichtkunst* aids in the same pursuit. Lastly, my formulation of Schlegel's early political beliefs is based largely on his publication, *Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus*, which is in vol. 7. For an entire list of the individual publications, sketches, and letters cited in this study, see the table dedicated to that end in the appendix.

II Publication History and Review of Secondary Research

Friedrich Schlegel's investigation of Aristophanes' plays, and reassessment of their contemporary worth, was a relatively small undertaking. It was part of a general study of Greek – and to a lesser extent Roman – literature, which occupied him intensely over the course of several years, and the resulting essay, *Vom ästhetischen Werte der griechischen Komödie*, which his study of Aristophanes' plays engendered, can only be accurately understood in this context¹¹.

After his move to Dresden in 1794, Schlegel embarked on a partly systematic, partly random study of Greek literature, reading virtually everything on the subject that he could get his hands on, and making plans for studies that began to multiply “in verwirrender Anzahl”¹². By April 1794, the impetus behind his various studies had coalesced into a more comprehensive project, one that would constitute both a history of Greek literature *and* a genre-centered theory of literature that developed from his historical account and at the same time helped make sense of it:

Das Werk ist [...] von noch größerem Umfange, als Du angebst. – Die Geschichte der Griech.[ischen] Poesie ist eine vollständige Naturgeschichte des Schönen und der

¹¹ Years later (1822), Schlegel reflected fondly on the supreme importance of the Greeks for him in his youth: “In dem ersten Jünglingsalter von etwa siebzehn Jahren, bildeten die Schriften des Plato, die tragischen Dichter der Griechen, und Winckelmanns begeisterte Werke, meine geistige Welt und die Umgebung, in der ich lebte, und wo ich mir, in meiner dichterisch nachdenkenden Einsamkeit, wohl oft auch nach jugendlicher Art, die Ideen und Gestalten der alten Götter und Helden in der Seele vozubilden versuchte” (KAIIV 4).

¹² In July of 1795, he had sketched out in a letter to his brother the various studies he was planning. They included, “Über antiken und modernen Republikanismus”, “Über die Grenzen des Schönen”, “Sophokles”, “Fragment aus einer Geschichte der attischen Tragödie”, “Vom Wert des Studiums der Griechen und Römer”, “Über die Diotima”, “Über die Darstellung der Weiblichkeit in den griechischen Dichtern”, “Über die politischen Revolutionen der Griechen und Römer”, “Theorie der Geschichte der Menschheit”, “Über die alte Religion”, “Briefe über den Plutarch”, “Über den griechischen Rhythmus”, and “Alte Politik in zwei Bänden” (*Let to A.W. 7-4-1795*). What is perhaps most surprising is not the number of studies that Schlegel was undertaking simultaneously, but rather the fact that Schlegel actually finished a majority of these planned studies and eventually many more.

Kunst, daher ist mein Werk – Aesthetik. Diese ist bisher noch nicht erfunden, sie ist das philosophische Resultat der Geschichte der Aesthetik und auch der einzige Schlüssel derselben (*Let. to A.W.* 4-5-1794).

Schlegel planned on publishing a two-volume work, *Die Griechen und Römer*, which – he had hoped – would be authoritative as an aesthetic treatise and as a Classical literary history (Behler *Einleitung* CLXI); the first volume would discuss theory, the second would apply it to Classical praxis. Ultimately, only the first volume made it to paper, but it did establish Schlegel as an authority on Classical literature¹³. Based on this publication, it was certainly imaginable that he was poised for an illustrious career as a Classical philologist, and that he would be successful in his wish to do for Greek literature, “was Winckelmann für die bildende [Kunst] versuchte; nämlich die Theorie derselben durch die Geschichte zu begründen” (KAIII 334). This, then, is the context in which Schlegel wrote his Aristophanes-essay. And though he never developed it further into the section on Greek comedy that he intended for the uncompleted second volume of his planned work, it nevertheless became, on its own, one of the most famous works from Schlegel’s early career, and its high praise for Aristophanes is one of the main reasons behind the ‘rediscovery’ of that author in 19th century Germany.

Predictably, scholarship into Schlegel’s early writings, and particularly the Aristophanes-essay, has waxed and waned, taking various forms, depending on its perceived contemporaneous relevance. However, research into these early writings on Classical literature has always remained “ein Stiefkind in der Forschung” as Hans Dierkes wrote in his expansive study of

¹³ The form that the first volume eventually took already shows Schlegel’s move away from pure *Altertumswissenschaft* to the interest in modern literature which would characterize his middle – or Romantic – period since it outlines in depth the Ancient/Modern dichotomy that would form the fundament of his notion of the *Romantik* (Behler *Einleitung* CLXII).

Schlegel's literary-historical method in 1980 (47). Schlegel's fame does, after all, rest principally on the work he did between 1796 and 1801, namely his *Lucinde* (1799), his *Athenaeum-* and *Lyceum-Fragments* (1797-1801), his *Charakteristiken* of Lessing (1798) and Forster (1797), his *Kritiken* of Jacobi's *Woldemar* (1796) and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1798), and his *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1800). In contrast to his later academic *Vorlesungen* and earlier writings on Classical literature, these texts have always maintained a relevance for subsequent generations, and the ideas expressed therein are widely considered to be Schlegel's unique contribution to modern literary theory¹⁴. Even today in the historiography of literary theory, one seldom finds any mention of Schlegel's contributions to the discipline outside of what Walter Benjamin claimed in 1920 were the "Hauptquellen" for any exposition of Romantic literary criticism, at least for Friedrich Schlegel's version of it; namely, "derjenigen Schlegelschen Arbeiten im 'Lyceum', 'Athenäum', [und] in den 'Charakteristiken und Kritiken' [...] welche unmittelbar den Begriff der Kunstkritik bestimmen" (Benjamin 13). Generally speaking, scholarship on Schlegel within the field of *Germanistik* has tended to be concerned with this subject – Romantic literary theory – and with the corresponding works that Benjamin mentions.

In the 1960's, due in large part to the publication of a wealth of previously unpublished material in the *Kritische Ausgabe*, one notices a new interest in previously underrepresented aspects of Schlegel's career. And if the rule before had been rather to focus on the "Romantic" Schlegel independent of his work before and after that phase, then one sees, as Raimund

¹⁴ Helmut Schanze, in his summary of modern Schlegel-scholarship, says for example that Schlegel's work on the theory of the novel is what has had the largest historical impact: "...gleichwohl kann immer noch der Beitrag Friedrich Schlegels zu[r] [...] Konzeption und Programmatik des ‚Romans‘ als eines universellen Ausdrucksmediums, als der historisch wirksamste gewertet werden" (Schanze 5).

Belgardt wrote in 1967, “daß sich in neueren Arbeiten ein Schlegel-Bild abzeichnet, dem die von der älteren Forschung scharf durchgeführte Aufgliederung und Einteilung der geistigen Existenz Schlegels in eine frühe ‘klassische’ (bis 1796), eine mittlere ‘romantische’ und eine spätere ‘katholische’ (1808 Übertritt zur kath. Kirche) Period weichen muß” (Belgardt 322)¹⁵. But this new interest in emphasizing the continuities that span the various phases of Schlegel’s work should not be overemphasized. In Belgardt’s study, as in the work of Richard Brinkman (1958) and Karl Polheim (1961) – two other scholars who place an emphasis on the study of continuities in Schlegel’s thought –, the primary aim is still the best possible understanding of Schlegel’s Romantic literary theory; they simply maintain that one cannot properly understand it without studying its genesis, that is, without studying his work on Greek and Roman literature. If Walter Benjamin’s aim was “nicht das Werden seines [Schlegels, *MB*] Begriffs der Kunstkritik, sondern diesen selbst dar[zu]stell[en]” (Benjamin 13), then it is precisely this “Werden” that scholarship after 1960 turned increasingly towards¹⁶. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that a 1985 collection of scholarship nominally dedicated to Schlegel’s *Kunsttheorie* put out by Helmut Schanze still includes, for the most part, texts that focus on Schlegel’s *Romantische Dichtungstheorie*. Thus it is not so much the object of interest, but rather only the method of exposition, which has changed. It should be clear, then, why one must be particularly wary

¹⁵ Karl Konrad Polheim, writing in 1961, echoes a similar sentiment. For him, newer Schlegel research, in contrast to pre-war scholarship, “fass[t] Friedrich Schlegel in seiner Gesamtheit auf, sie beton[t] die ungebrochene Kontinuität seiner geistigen Entwicklung, die organische Zusammengehörigkeit der einzelnen Phasen” (Polheim 280)

¹⁶ This is, for example, the perspective that Matthias Dannenberg (1993) takes in his study of Schlegel’s early (pre-Romantic) literary-theoretical method as is evidenced in the title of the work itself: *Schönheit des Lebens: eine Studie zum „Werden“ der Kritikkonzeption Friedrich Schlegels*. It is clear from the title that Dannenberg already starts from the premise that these early writings of Schlegel’s are to be understood as something inchoate, as in a process of “Werden”, which in turn, presupposes that his later “Romantic” writings constitute something of a fruition.

while wading through the secondary research when the aim is – as in this study – to understand Friedrich Schlegel’s early literary-theoretical method, independent and irrespective of what he may have later gone on to do, when so much of the available scholarship, if it focuses on this early period at all, then very often still does so with one eye to the direction in which he was going. In the section that follows, I will therefore give an overview of the available scholarship relevant for an understanding of Schlegel’s Aristophanes-essay. The essay has, in fact, made its way into some unexpected nooks and crannies of research, and it has, independent of Schlegel’s Romantic literary theory, and even independent of his other writings on Greek and Roman literature, had something of a life of its own.

II.1 Reception of Schlegel’s Aristophanes-Essay in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

In one sense, Dierkes’ claim in 1980 that Friedrich Schlegel’s Classical studies had always been a “Stiefkind” in research is not entirely accurate (47). They did actually enjoy genuine popularity during Schlegel’s own lifetime and for several decades afterwards. In fact, they now carry the dubious honor of having lost their initial relevance in the field of Classical Studies (*Altertumswissenschaft*) only to gain increasing recognition within the field of German Studies. In preparing for the republication of his writings on Classical literature for an edition of his

Sämtliche Werke in 1822, Schlegel could remark with pride in his *Vorrede*, that these writings had, despite their flaws, found a positive reception in Classical Studies in the interim¹⁷:

Und wenn diese Arbeit, ihrer vielen Mängel ungeachtet, die bei solchen Gegenständen, und in diesem Alter kaum vermeidlich waren, dennoch von den ersten und bedeutendsten Gelehrten in dieser Wissenschaft der Altertumskunde günstig aufgenommen worden ist; so verdankt sie dies wohl dem Umstande, daß sie ganz nach dem einen rein künstlerischen Standpunkte entworfen, und daß dieser so streng darin durchgeführt worden (KAI 570).

One of Schlegel's primary objectives in these writings had, after all, been philological in nature; he had been working towards the publication of the aforementioned two-volume work, *Die Griechen und Römer*, which would have constituted a comprehensive literary history of ancient Greece and Rome.

A perusal of Volker Deubel's 1973 *Forschungsbericht* for Friedrich Schlegel shows, however, that in the 20th century, these writings were rarely discussed in Classical Studies except for perhaps in their obvious and limited role in the historiography of Classical literary studies in Europe. Rather the vast majority of publications on Schlegel's early work now come from the fields of *Germanistik* and philosophy, and are motivated by a desire not to better understand Classical literature, but rather to better understand the roots of Romantic literary theory,

¹⁷ Behler indicates that among those who positively received Schlegel's works could be counted F.A. Wolf, Christian Gottlob Heyne, Friedrich Creuzer and Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt wrote of Schlegel's Classical studies in a letter to Varnhagen von Ense in 1833: "Ich habe sie fleißig studiert und mich überzeugt, daß viele Ansichten des hellenischen Altertums, die die Neuern sich zuschreiben, in Aufsätzen vor 1795 [...] begraben liegen" (Behler KAI LXXIVf.). [Humboldt quote taken from: *Briefe von Alexander von Humboldt an Varnhagen von Ense*, 4. Aufl., New York 1860, pg. 10.] Further Behler claims: "Charles Andler und René Wellek haben auf eine bestimmte Tradition der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft in Deutschland aufmerksam gemacht, die sich direkt von den Brüdern Schlegel, besonders von Friedrich Schlegel herleitet und Auswirkungen bis auf Friedrich Wilhelm Ritschle und auf Friedrich Nietzsche hatte" (Behler *Einleitung* LXXIVf.).

particularly as an outgrowth and dialectical response to German Idealism, and the historicization of philosophy at the turn of the 18th century¹⁸.

II.2 Post-WWII Research Trends

Post-war scholarship on Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay can be grouped under four general categories, which differ from one another both in terms of methodological approach and in terms of their respective use of the essay¹⁹.

1. The Aristophanes-essay often turns up in scholarship on Friedrich Schlegel's early aesthetic philosophy, presenting as it does, a relatively concise illustration for the genre 'Comedy', of what he wished his general theory of literature to be.
2. The essay is also mentioned in scholarship on Schlegel's political philosophy. This is a limited field, since it is debatable in the first place whether Friedrich Schlegel even had anything like a coherent political philosophy. But the Aristophanes-essay, in so far as it examines the reciprocal dependency of theatrical comedy and socio-political organization in Classical Athens, is relevant for any examination of Schlegel's early political beliefs. These two research

¹⁸ See Volker Deubel's "Die Friedrich Schlegel-Forschung 1945-1972" (1973).

¹⁹ I choose the end of World War II as my dividing line in handling the relevant Schlegel-scholarship for two reasons: first of all, there was a noticeable growth in scholarly interest in the *Weimarer Klassik* and in the *Romantik* after the war. This coupled with the second reason – namely, that the complete works of Schlegel (*Kritische Ausgabe*) were published in 1958 bringing to light vast amounts of previously inaccessible material – led to a renewed interest in Schlegel after the war, an interest that tended – moreover – to look increasingly at Schlegel's entire career.

areas will be the main sources for the supplemental material that I will draw on to best understand Schlegel's theory of comedy.

3. Further, however, the essay is often read as a theoretical foundation for German Romantic Comedy.
4. The essay also comes up in research in so far as it is relevant in the history of the reception of Aristophanes.

The latter two research areas will only be discussed briefly, since they have only limited and tangential applicability for the purposes of the present study.

II.2.1 Scholarship on Schlegel's Early Aesthetic-Philosophical Method

The primary focus of this thesis – the socially and politically predicated conditions of Schlegel's theory of comedy – necessitates not only a formal understanding of the aesthetic theory of comedy Friedrich Schlegel develops in the Aristophanes-essay, but also an examination of his general beliefs in the interdependency of art and society at the time of its publication (1795). It necessitates thus a sound understanding of Schlegel's early *philosophical* and *aesthetic* attitude. To be sure there is no dearth of literature that tackles this very question, but as mentioned above, often with the intention of better understanding his later thought. This is, for example, the case with Dierkes (1980), Behrens (1984), Schanze (1966), Michel (1982), Dannenberg (1993) and Mennemeier (1971), all of whom offer exhaustive accounts of Schlegel's pre-1801 literary theoretical thought from his earliest writings on, but who ultimately

aim at discovering the genesis of what became his Romantic literary theory. Though each study is motivated by a slightly different question – Behrens and Dierkes are concerned with Schlegel’s *Geschichtsphilosophie* whereas Dannenberg and Michel trace the development of his closely related *Kritikkonzeption* – each extracts an overarching philosophical approach from Schlegel’s early corpus of publications, which each of Schlegel’s early writings in turn exemplifies to a greater or lesser degree. Implicit in many of these studies is an attempt to situate Friedrich Schlegel’s proper place in the canon of German literary theory²⁰. Even when research focuses on Schlegel’s early (pre-Romantic) aesthetic project as an end in itself, it nevertheless attempts to cull from his overall writings on Greek and Roman literature their general underlying system²¹. To my knowledge, there is no research that examines the Aristophanes-essay alone and attempts to extract from it that which it purports to offer, namely a serious theory of comedy. Brummack’s chapter on Schlegel in *Satirische Dichtung* (1979) comes closest to a logically rigorous reconstruction of his theory of comedy, though here, Brummack’s objective is to pin down Schlegel’s peculiar attitude towards satire. I engage with Brummack in chapter IV.5 of this study, as it will be seen that Schlegel’s understanding of satire yields certain fundamental implications with respect to his theory of comedy.

Some scholars, for example Dannenberg and Behler, have alluded to the fact that the Aristophanes-essay constitutes the most realized encapsulation of Schlegel’s early method. In

²⁰ Dierkes and Michel both dedicate entire chapters to the debate surrounding Schlegel’s proper place in the history of German literary theory; whether, for example, Schlegel belongs to the discipline of Aesthetic Theory, stretching from Kant and Hegel through to Benjamin and Adorno in the 20th century as, for example, Achim Geisenhanslüke holds in his *Einführung in die Literaturtheorie* (2006), or whether Schlegel is better understood as standing within the modern tradition of *Hermeneutik*, beginning with his peer, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and running through Dilthey in the 19th century to Gadamer and Szondi in the 20th century, as Dierkes and Michel hold.

²¹ This is, for example, Kraus’ approach in his study, *Naturpoesie und Kunstpoesie im Frühwerk Friedrich Schlegels* (1985).

limiting his scope to just comedy, he successfully realizes what he had only hoped to achieve for literature in general, namely, the development of a system of normative aesthetics that was grounded in the study of Greek literature. Matthias Dannenberg, for example, claims that one finds in the Aristophanes-essay “so deutlich wie sonst nirgendwo in seinen frühen Arbeiten zur griechischen Antike [...] [die Vermittlung] normative[r] und historisierend[er] Kunstreflexion, ästhetische[r] Theorie und geschichtliche[r] Kunsterfahrung [...] miteinander” (Dannenberg 159). Ernst Behler expresses a similar opinion when he writes; “Wie sich der dichterische Gestaltungsprozeß konkret vollzieht, hat Schlegel in den Studien des Altertums besonders an zwei Autoren der griechischen Literaturgeschichte illustriert, an Homer und Aristophanes.” (Behler *Einleitung* CXXV).

That little or no research addresses the Aristophanes-essay in its own right should come as no surprise, since Schlegel himself soon realized the extreme limitations of his theory, and it has been more than clear to subsequent generations that the “system” he sketches out is not only contradictory in parts, but also largely impractical²². The followings study, however, aims at what amounts to a close reading of the Aristophanes-essay, an attempt to understand as best as possible, the theory of comedy laid out therein with recourse to as little else as possible. Schlegel saw the essay as a systematic attempt, though he soon abandoned any hopes at comprehensive system-building.

²² See, for example Dannenberg (166), and Schere: *Spielgemälde* (22).

II.2.2 Scholarship on Schlegel's Political Philosophy

There are, it should be mentioned, a few post-WWII publications that seek to emphasize the political aspects of Schlegel's early method. Worth mentioning are studies by Wieland (1968), Hendrix (1962) and Beiser (1992). All three of these studies fall victim to the impulse to make out of Schlegel a political thinker, and to emphasize rather too much his political writings. Though Schlegel undoubtedly nurtured a life-long interest in politics and political philosophy, even to the point of famously working later in life for Metternich, he was motivated above all throughout his life, irrespective of whatever intellectual project he undertook – be it political philosophy (*Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus*) or a philosophy of life (*Philosophie des Lebens*) – by artistic and aesthetic concerns. Even Heine, one of his sharpest critics, realized and praised this in Schlegel, writing in 1828:

Die religiösen Privatmarotten, die Schlegels spätere Schriften durchkreuzen, und für die er allein zu schreiben wähnte, bilden doch nur das Zufällige, und namentlich in den Vorlesungen über Literatur ist, vielleicht mehr, als er selbst es weiß, die Idee der Kunst noch immer der herrschende Mittelpunkt, der mit seinen goldenen Rädern das ganze Buch umspinnt (Heine 484).

Thus comments like Beiser's, that for Schlegel "the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual standpoints are ultimately subordinate to a higher one that directs all of human *Bildung*", namely the "political viewpoint" (Beiser 249), tend to distort Schlegel's thought to prove a thesis²³. Nevertheless, in so far as these texts seek to accentuate the very component of Schlegel's

²³ Beiser also claims, for example, that "we can now see that Schlegel's Romanticism was [...] an attempt to address [...] the political problematic of modern life" (Beiser 259).

writings that is central to this study's examination of his theory of comedy – that is to say, the political – they will be of assistance.

II.2.3 Scholarship on the Relevance of Schlegel's Essay for German Romantic Comedy

Interestingly, the only branch of contemporary German Studies which has dealt exclusively with Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay, without seeing it simply as a subcomponent of his Classical writings in general, is that of German Romantic Comedy. Previously an under-researched facet of German Romanticism, it has emerged as a subject of study in its own right in the past few decades²⁴. Within the context of Romantic Comedy, Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes is of relevance to the extent that its delineation of a theory of comedy lays the groundwork for an understanding of the formal aspects of Romantic Comedy. Furthermore, from the perspective of literary history, the essay is of interest in so far as it – particularly its enthusiastic reception of Aristophanes – paved the way for the literary climate that made the relatively experimental – and in some cases unstageable – comedies of Tieck, Brentano, Arnim and Eichendorff possible²⁵. However, while Schlegel's essay may have been regarded as the “*locus classicus* einer Theorie der romantischen Komödie” (Japp 17) in earlier studies – by Catholy (1982, 184-86), Kluge (1980, 186-88) and Holl (1923, 215), for example – Japp and

²⁴ Japp traces the reason for this under-representation in scholarship to the favoritism that Romantic literary theory itself shows for the novel over drama: “Aus sachlicher Perspektive kann [...] angeführt werden, daß die romantische Poetik selbst den Roman – und nicht das Drama – in den Mittelpunkt ihrer Interessen gestellt habe” (Japp 1)

²⁵ These, according to Japp, are the canonical authors of Romantic Comedy. Of questionable membership to this group are however, for Japp, the plays of Platen (Japp 11).

later scholars limit the relevance of Schlegel's essay for the study of Romantic Comedy to its praise of Aristophanic stylistic devices, such as the parabasis, and Aristophanes' literary satire²⁶, devices which were later adopted by the Romantics²⁷. Japp draws parallels, for example, between Schlegel's celebration of the parabasis – which, he claims, was novel for the time (Japp 23) – and Tieck's use of it in his comedies²⁸. Japp also sees the plays of Brentano, which he labels as “illudierend” under his typology, as embodying Schlegel's normative appeal that *schöne Komödie* be devoid of “satirische Bitterkeit” (Japp 23f.). Japp's study marked a sea change in scholarship to a diminished use of Schlegel's essay in the study of Romantic Comedy. Perhaps the most recent, and certainly the most definitive and comprehensive study of Romantic Comedy, Stefan Scherer's *Witzige Spielgemälde: Tieck und das Drama der Romantik* (2003), only cursorily mentions the Aristophanes-essay in a footnote²⁹. In so far as the fundamental drive of this research area has been to assess the applicability of Schlegel's essay to Romantic Comedy, the motive behind the use of Schlegel's essay was to decipher the formal aspects of his theory of comedy, which could be applied to contemporary dramatic praxis. Thus the contours of Schlegel's philosophy of history and his philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), which are

²⁶ The most famous example of this is Aristophanes' satire of the language of Euripides and Aeschylus in *The Frogs*.

²⁷ During the Enlightenment, Aristophanes had been criticized for, among other things, the use of the parabasis, since it constituted a disruption of dramatic illusion. For example, under “Comédie”, the *Encyclopédie*'s complaints of Aristophanes are that he was “qu'un comique grossier, rampant, & obscene ; sans goût, sans mœurs, sans vraisemblance [my italics]”.

²⁸ For example, in *Der gestiefelte Kater*, characters step out of their roles and address the audience; for instance, Hanswurst: “Verzeihen Sie, wenn ich mich erkühne, ein Paar Worte vorzutragen, die eigentlich nicht zum Stücke gehören” (Tieck 147).

²⁹ Scherer claims, among other things, that Schlegel's essay has been “nur teilweise zu Recht [...] von der Forschung [...] als programmatische Grundlegung einer Theorie der romantischen Komödie gehandelt [worden]” (Scherer 22).

necessary for an understanding of *how* he arrived at his theory of comedy, were of no relevance to the projects of Japp, Scherer and Catholy.

II.2.4 Scholarship on the Relevance of Schlegel's Essay for the European, Specifically German, Reception of Aristophanes

The last research area on Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay that is relevant for the purposes of the present study lies in the field of reception history. Schlegel's essay is of interest in this field in so far as it contributes to an understanding of the history of Aristophanes' reception in Germany. Interestingly, most of the *Rezeptionsgeschichten* of Aristophanes in Germany were written during the time of the German Empire and the Weimar Republic³⁰; many of these take a positivistic literary-historical approach, as is characteristic of the time period, and go no further than to simply provide a summary of Schlegel's contribution to the Aristophanes-reception, and to accentuate the changes in general attitude towards Aristophanes' plays, which he initiated. Perhaps due to structural and methodological shifts in German literary scholarship, no contemporary scholars, besides Martin Holtermann, have shown much interest in this aspect of Schlegel's essay. However, Holtermann's *Der deutsche Aristophanes* (2004) is of particular relevance here. Though continuing the tradition of Aristophanes' reception history, Holtermann deviates from his predecessors by focusing on the history of interest in specifically the *political*

³⁰ For example Süß, *Aristophanes und die Nachwelt* (1911); Hilsenbeck, *Aristophanes und die deutsche Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts* (1908); Zelle, *Die Beurteilung des Aristophanes im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (1900); Hille, *Die deutsche Komödie unter der Einwirkung des Aristophanes* (1907); Friedländer, "Aristophanes in Deutschland" (1932/33).

content of Aristophanes' plays³¹. In limiting his inquiry, he thus emerges with a more nuanced – and less purely narrative – history of the German Aristophanes reception. Of particular interest here will be Holtermann's chapter on Schlegel, specifically its discussion of Schlegel's understanding of *Freiheit* and his notion of comedy as a democratic art form.

³¹ Holtermann is clear about his objective in his introduction: "Ich möchte analysieren, wie das Interesse an den politischen Aspekten in Aristophanes' Komödien entstand" (Holtermann 14).

III Cultural Landscape: Prerequisites for a Proper Understanding of Schlegel's Theory

III.1 Relevant Intellectual Trends in Germany in the 1790s

An understanding of the socio-political implications of Schlegel's theory of comedy will necessitate a reconstruction of his argument as well as an examination of his early understanding of the reciprocal connections between art, society, politics and *Bildung*, and this will be the goal of the Chapters IV and V. But it also requires, as with any text, that one understand the wider historical context in which it was written. Germany in the 1790s found itself in the midst of what, without exaggeration, could be termed a turning point in intellectual life, both literary and philosophical. The Age of Enlightenment had flowered, and its program of the emancipation of man into a free agent and the rationalization of all aspects of society is a process that many acknowledge as still being in effect to this day. At the same time, the 1790s witnessed the first clear indications of a dialectical response to the Enlightenment. Kant had definitively placed limits on the possible extent of human knowledge and understanding, the nascent German Romanticism of the late 1790s turned to literary themes, such as the fantastical, which seemed more to emphasize man's irrationality than his rationality, and the terrible mutation of the French Revolution into, first a reign of terror, and then an absolute dictatorship, seemed to indicate that liberty, equality, and fraternity might necessarily remain unrealizable ideals.

The 1790s also witnessed an incredible growth of interest in aesthetic philosophy in the German principalities, and Goethe's plea that his contemporaries dedicate themselves more to the praxis of literature than to its theory is so famous because of how accurately it describes the

peculiar prominence of investigations into the theoretical nature of literature during this time³². Interestingly, as Gerhard Schulz notes, aesthetics was, in fact, one of the last fields to be subjected to the Enlightenment fervour for reexamining the previously accepted truths and prejudices of classical authorities, and for subjecting systems and principles to rigorous analytical examination (Schulz 216). For example, whereas the Enlightenment notion of a continuous progression of understanding had been recognized without hesitation in the natural sciences, it was not until the late 18th century that Schlegel and his contemporaries began to believe in the infinite perfectibility of art as well. Prior to this, art and taste had been understood since classical antiquity as going through cycles that roughly mirrored the growth and decay of nations. And even otherwise progressive thinkers like Diderot and Voltaire still held to this traditional belief. Diderot, for example, famously postulated a “decree pronounced for all things in this world”, namely, “the decree which has condemned them to have their birth, their time of vigour, their decrepitude, and their end”³³, and Voltaire wrote in his *Age of Louis XIV*, first published in 1751, that the world had experienced only four cycles of birth, fruition, and decay in the arts, whereby the most recent one had occurred during the age of Louis XIV³⁴.

Not only did literary theory experience a sizeable growth during this time, however. It also – and Schlegel’s early writings are examples of this – looked at literature from new

³² Goethe to Eckermann, March 12, 1828: “Könnte man nur den Deutschen, nach dem Vorbilde der Engländer, weniger Philosophie und mehr Tatkraft, weniger Theorie und mehr Praxis beibringen” (Eckermann 668).

³³ Citation from Behler *GRLT*, 97.

³⁴ Voltaire: “Mais quiconque pense, et, ce qui est encore plus rare, quiconque a du goût, ne compte que quatre siècles dans l’histoire du monde. Ces quatre âges heureux sont ceux où les arts ont été perfectionnés, et qui, servant d’époque à la grandeur de l’esprit humain, sont l’exemple de la postérité” (Voltaire *Siècle de Louis XIV* 455). Notice Voltaire’s use of a supratemporal normative faculty, “goût”, whereby anyone possessing this sense of taste will clearly see that only these four ages came anywhere close to bringing the arts to a state of perfection. That Voltaire is using the same standard of perfection for all four ages is indicated by the fact that Voltaire says that the Age of Louis XIV is “peut-être celui des quatre qui approche le plus de la perfection” (456). Interestingly, Voltaire did not see himself as being part of that period, feeling rather that he was writing during its time of decline.

perspectives. Schlegel's writings, like those of many of his contemporaries, show a growing sense for the importance of historical context in the examination of art as well as an interest in the fundamental drives that could be said to be constitutive of human nature and made man receptive to art. Furthermore, they show a shift in perspective from the traditional aesthetic approach of determining norms of literary form to an interest in the subjective reception of literature. Lastly, there is an unmistakable programmatic undercurrent in the writings of this period, an obsession with the role that art might play in society's *Bildung* and an interest in the positive future of humanity. The roots of Schlegel's philosophy of history and of his anthropological understanding of human nature will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections (III.3 and IV.1). In the two sections that follow, however, it is hoped that an examination of two historical events – the reaction to the French Revolution in Germany and the publication of Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in 1790 – will elucidate the reasons for the programmatic style of Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay, as well as the peculiarity of his aesthetical-philosophical method, respectively.

III.1.1 The Impact of the French Revolution on Schlegel's Thought and Style

The French Revolution was not received in the German-speaking world as it had been in France, as the impetus for a process of social emancipation; for that, German principalities

lacked the necessary socio-political climate³⁵. Rather it was understood as a tangible culmination of Enlightenment ideas, proof positive of the materialistic effect that words could have³⁶. Kant's enthusiasm for the French Revolution can be seen in many ways to typify this German attitude, which though it was quick to condemn the Revolution's terrifying political consequences, nevertheless maintained its respect for the material potential it showed ideas to have. For Kant, the Revolution's significance lay not in its success or its failure but in its relevance for its *spectators*:

Die Revolution [...] mag gelingen oder scheitern; sie mag mit Elend und Greuelthaten [...] angefüllt sein [...] –, diese Revolution, sage ich, findet doch in den Gemüthern aller Zuschauer [...] eine Theilnehmung dem Wunsche nach, die nahe an Enthusiasmus grenzt. [...] Wenn der bei dieser Begebenheit beabsichtigte Zweck auch jetzt nicht erreicht würde, [...] so verliert jene philosophische Vorhersagung doch nichts von ihrer Kraft. – Denn jene Begebenheit ist zu groß, zu sehr mit dem Interesse der Menschheit verwebt und ihrem Einflusse nach auf die Welt in allen ihren Theilen zu ausgebreitet, als daß sie nicht den Völkern bei irgend einer Veranlassung günstiger Umstände in Erinnerung gebracht und zu Wiederholung neuer Versuche dieser Art erweckt werden sollte (Kant *Erneute Frage* 85, 88).

Despite any contemporary atrocities caused by the Revolution and despite the threat of its ultimate failure, it could not, according to Kant, help but maintain its relevance as the realization of the *philosophical prophecy* that induced it. For it confirmed, as Behrens writes, that “Geschichte selbst als machbar und planbar erfahren [werden kann]” (Behrens 13). Precisely

³⁵ Indeed, the short-lived Mainz Republic (March – July, 1793) was the only political realization of revolutionary ideals on German soil during the age of the French Revolution.

³⁶ See, for example Behrens: “Die Französische Revolution wurde in Deutschland nicht als sozialer Emanzipationsprozeß, sondern überwiegend als moralisch-philosophische Umwälzung und Verwirklichung aufklärerisch-humanistischer Ideale verstanden” (Behrens 12). Schulz expresses a similar sentiment: “Die meisten deutschen Intellektuellen der Zeit, die Schriftsteller, Gelehrten und Philosophen, haben die Revolution in ihren Anfängen als eine letzte Konsequenz aufklärerischen Denkens betrachtet und begrüßt. Sie bedeutete für sie eine Bestätigung der Erwartung; Denken und Schreiben könne die Welt nicht nur interpretieren, sondern sie auch verändern. Diese Folgerung war für ein Land von besonderer Wichtigkeit, das seine politisch-ökonomische Unterentwicklung mit einer hohen geistigen Kultur kompensieren konnte” (Schulz 85).

this is what Friedrich Schlegel took from the Revolution. It informed his understanding of history and human progress more than it influenced his early political convictions. For Schlegel, the Revolution was interesting from the historical perspective of its place in the progress of humanity. This is clearly expressed in his 216th Athenaeum Fragment (1798):

Die Französische Revoluzion, Fichte's Wissenschaftslehre, und Goethe's Meister sind die grössten Tendenzen des Zeitalters. Wer an dieser Zusammenstellung Anstoss nimmt, wem keine Revoluzion wichtig scheinen kann, die nicht laut und materiell ist, der hat sich noch nicht auf den hohen weiten Standpunkt der Geschichte der Menschheit erhoben (KAII 198).

Schlegel uses an expanded definition of revolution. The actual material changes that the French Revolution may have caused are less relevant for him than its symbolic significance. From the perspective of human history – of human progress – intellectual events can have as much revolutionary force as material ones. It is the confidence that the French Revolution instilled in German intellectuals, the belief that their words could have material force, which lends much of the philosophy of the 1790s its programmatic flavor. We see this, not only in Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes, but indeed to a greater or lesser extent, in all of his early writings, and even more explicitly during his *Romantic* period. His writings on Greek and Roman literature always show themselves to be peripherally concerned with the contemporary relevance that they can have³⁷. In *Vom ästhetischen Werte der griechischen Komödie*, Schlegel already reveals in the opening lines that he is not only concerned with understanding Greek comedy, as the essay's title might lead one to think, but that he also wants to show how that

³⁷ Helmut Schanze, among others, has referred to this aspect of Schlegel, namely “die systematische Vernetzung, ja Fundierung dieses Denkens in ‘seiner Zeit’” which he believes lends Schlegel's work an “Aktualität [...] für die ‘Moderne’” (Schanze 3f.). Thus it is Schlegel's attempt to make his work on Classical literature contemporaneously relevant that keeps modern scholarship interested in these works.

understanding can illuminate the failures of contemporary comedy. “Nichts ist seltner”, he writes, “als eine schöne Komödie. Das komische Genie ist nicht mehr frei, es schämt sich seiner Fröhlichkeit, und fürchtet durch seine Kraft zu beleidigen” (KAI 19).

His essay is not meant to be purely scholarly; it is also polemical. Though Schlegel doubtless wanted to understand Greek Comedy to the best of his abilities, this was ultimately only secondary to the theory of comedy that he derived from it. And this theory was not meant primarily as an analytical tool for interpretation, but much more as a blueprint for the future potential of comedy. Schlegel’s ideal was that the Aristophanes-essay – and in fact all of his writings – be revolutionary in the same way that he felt that the French Revolution, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, and Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre* had been.

III.1.2 The Influence of Kant’s Kritik der Urteilskraft on Schlegel’s Aesthetic Approach

Like the French Revolution, the publication of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* marks another pivotal point in the formation of the German aesthetic climate of the 1790s. But whereas the French Revolution’s influence was felt in nearly every field of German intellectual life, confirming intellectuals in their belief in progress and in the power of ideas, the influence of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* was more limited in scope; its impact was felt largely in the field of aesthetics, but here it brought radical change. In this section, I wish to show how Schlegel’s own aesthetic beliefs during the early period of his thought can be seen as both incorporating and rejecting some of the fundamental changes in aesthetics that Kant’s *Kritik* helped catalyze.

In short, the *Kritik* shifted the primary objective of aesthetic analysis from a pursuit of the normative rules for making and interpreting art – the proper content and form required for the attainment of beauty –, to an interest in its reception by the subject – an interest in how beauty is *perceived*. To say that Kant’s *Kritik* did this alone would be to neglect a slow paradigm shift that had already begun during the *Sturm und Drang* period. The growth of the *Geniebewegung*³⁸, which was coupled closely with the first widespread positive reception of Shakespeare in Germany, led to a definitive structural shift away from the so-called French-influenced classicist *Regelpoetik* (the emulation of the authorities and adherence to traditional aesthetic/rhetorical rules) to a notion that both the work of art and its creator – the genius – are autonomous of any external or predetermined rules³⁹. Even Lessing, who in theory and praxis made a conscious effort to divorce himself from prevailing comedic and tragic norms (e.g. adherence to the *Ständeklausel*), did not advocate pure autonomy in art; his and his contemporaries’ dramas still wished to be bound to a purpose; they had a persuasive intent external to the play itself, namely, to compel their audiences to rational thought or – as Lessing believed in the case of the tragedy – to awaken their sense of compassion⁴⁰.

³⁸ For more on the importance of the *Genie-Ästhetik* in this time period see, for example, Jochen Schmidt’s *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens 1750-1945, vol. 1: Von der Aufklärung bis zum Idealismus* (1985).

³⁹ Evidence of this paradigm shift is found both in dramatic praxis and contemporary theory. Many *Sturm und Drang*-dramas – for example Lenz’s *Die Soldaten* and *Der Hofmeister* and Goethe’s *Götz* – show the obvious influence of Shakespeare and few to none of the formalistic characteristics of the French classicist authorities, such as, for example, fidelity to the so-called *drei Einheitenlehre*, to the *Ständeklausel* and to *Wahrscheinlichkeit*. Theoretical support for art as autonomous – that is, without external purpose – was first given, according to Richard Newald (290), in 1786 by Karl Philipp Moritz, who described the sole-purpose of the work of art, in this case plastic art, as being „in sich selbst vollendet“ (Moritz *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* 983).

⁴⁰ The former is more often seen as the intent of the so-called *satirische Verlachkomödie* of the Enlightenment, sometimes called the *sächsische Typenkomödie* (e.g. Lessing’s *Der junge Gelehrte* [1747]). Scherer describes the external intent of these comedies as being the “Warnung vor den Fehlern normabweichenden Verhaltens; Überredung zu vernünftigem, lebenspraktischen Handeln; Belehrung durch satirische Demaskierung eines Fehlers als Torheit; dadurch moralische Besserung beim Zuschauer“ (Scherer *Vorlesungen* 5.5.1). The latter is associated with Lessing’s theory of tragedy; see, for example, his *Briefwechsel über das Trauerpiel*: “Wenn es also wahr ist,

The necessary consequence of this so-called *Autonomie-Ästhetik*, whereby an artist created – according to his own aesthetic principles – a work whose only purpose if any should be, as Kant wrote, an “*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*”, and as Moritz famously claimed, a “*Vollendung in sich selbst*”, was that aesthetics could no longer concern itself with the correct formalistic qualities of the art-object (Kant *KdU* 204 §2; Moritz *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* 975). Kant is explicit about the impossibility of deriving any objective rules for art:

Genie ist das Talent (Naturgabe), welches der Kunst die Regel gibt. [...] Die schöne Kunst ist nur als Produkt des Genies möglich. Man sieht hieraus, daß Genie ein Talent sei, dasjenige, wozu sich keine bestimmte Regel geben läßt, hervorzubringen: nicht Geschicklichkeitsanlage zu dem, was nach irgendeiner Regel gelernt werden kann; folglich daß Originalität seine erste Eigenschaft sein müsse (Kant *KdU* 307 § 46).

The philosopher, therefore, must not and cannot concern himself with the mechanism behind the creation of beauty, since for this, there can be no rational approach, and must therefore limit his study to the judgment of beauty. Not objective beauty, but only its perception, can be critically conceptualized⁴¹. Furthermore, since no formalistic norms for beauty can be logically determined, any claim to universality that the judgment of beauty can have is necessarily limited to the sphere of intersubjectivity⁴². The judgment of beauty must be limited to the capacity of the community of recipients who, through debate and consensus, arrive at an

daß die ganze Kunst des tragischen Dichters auf die sichere Erregung und Dauer des einzigen Mitleidens geht, so sage ich nunmehr, die Bestimmung der Tragödie ist diese: sie soll *unsere Fähigkeit, Mitleid zu fühlen, erweitern*“ (Lessing 55).

⁴¹ According to Schulz, this psychologization of aesthetics constitutes one of Kant’s most fundamental contributions to aesthetics in the 1790’s: “Man versteht den großen Einfluß Kants auf seine Zeit nicht, wenn man seine Philosophie nicht zugleich als Psychologie versteht.” (Schulz 216).

⁴² Kant: “Aber von einer subjektiven Allgemeingültigkeit, d. i. der ästhetischen, die auf keinem Begriffe beruht, läßt sich nicht auf die logische schließen; weil jene Art Urteile gar nicht auf das Objekt geht. Eben darum aber muß auch die ästhetische Allgemeinheit, die einem Urteile beigelegt wird, von besonderer Art sein, weil sich das Prädikat der Schönheit nicht mit dem Begriffe des Objekts, in seiner ganzen logischen Sphäre betrachtet, verknüpft, und doch eben dasselbe über die ganze Sphäre der Urteilenden ausdehnt” (Kant *KdU* 215 § 8).

aesthetic judgement. In other words, it is not possible to develop rules, which might indicate how the artwork should be constructed or created. Rather, one can only outline how a community of subjects might make an aesthetic judgment about the (art)-object.

The radicalness of this conclusion and the depth of its impact in the German-speaking world cannot easily be overestimated. The limit that Kant placed on the rational subject's ability to *know* any sort of objective beauty is aptly characterized by Gerhard Schulz as “das erste große Fragezeichen” to the Enlightenment belief that the objective world could be systematically understood (Schulz 157). And the so-called “Erkenntniskrise” that Kant inspired is one of the reasons why so many poets from this era felt driven to aesthetic philosophy in order to ground, as Schulz puts it, “ihre Kunst und ihr Handwerk theoretisch auf festen Boden”⁴³ (*ibid.*). At the time, few could approach aesthetics without first dealing with Kant's *Kritik*, whether it was in the form of a complete incorporation of Kant's ideas or, on the other hand, in an attempt to discredit them.

In Friedrich Schlegel, we see both tendencies – incorporation and repudiation of Kant's aesthetics – at work. His interest in Kant dates back at least as early as 1793, that is, to his years as a law student, before he had yet decided to dedicate himself to professional writing. In a letter to his brother August, from June 2, 1793 he writes: “Ich habe den Geist einiger großer Männer, vielleicht nicht ganz ohne Erfolg, zu ergründen gesucht als Kant, Klopstock, Göthe,

⁴³ Most famous among writers that Kant's *Kritik* influenced is perhaps Schiller, who took a break from dramatic praxis after the publication of *Don Carlos* (1787) and – between 1792 and 1796 – wrote a series of aesthetic studies, all deeply informed by Kant's *Kritik*. Schulz summarizes this as follows: “Schiller hat stets die philosophische Grundlegung für seine literarische Arbeit als notwendig empfunden” (Schulz 218). The central problem for Schiller was that he wished to ascribe a purpose to art, which would not however compromise its unconditional autonomy. To that end, his earlier formulation of the purpose of theater in his *Mannheimer Rede* (1784) as a “moralische Anstalt”, a “Schule der praktischen Weisheit” (Schiller 194), would have been too limiting.

Hemsterhuys, Spinoza, Schiller; anderer von weniger Bedeutung nicht zu erwähnen” (*Let. to A.W. 6-2-1793*)⁴⁴.

We see more explicit evidence, however, of Schlegel’s concern with the implications of Kant’s *Kritik* from an unpublished fragment on aesthetics dating from 1795/96. Here, he postulates an “allgemeingültige Wissenschaft des Schönen und der Kunst”, through which the “Kantische Theorie [...] wiederleget [würde], nemlich die Behauptung, daß keine Theorie des Schönen möglich sey” (KA XVI 6). The implication here is that Schlegel still believes in the objective validity of a theory of beauty. This is, in fact, of central importance in understanding Schlegel’s early writings, that although they were all published after Kant’s three critiques, thus in the *critical* era, they still pursue traditional metaphysical – i.e. pre-critical – aims⁴⁵. This is why it makes sense for Schlegel to speak – as he does in the Aristophanes-essay – of “die eigentliche Komödie” and “die Natur des Komischen” (KA I 20) as objects that can be pursued and described. According to Dannenberg, Schlegel treats *Ideas* in their Platonic sense, as “metaphysische Wirklichkeiten, [...] objektiv-konstitutive Prinzipien des Erkennens und Handeln” (Dannenberg 30)⁴⁶. This amounts to a rejection of one of the central principles of

⁴⁴ Schlegel’s remark is of added importance here in so far as it also shows his high regard for Hemsterhuis, whose influence is quite explicit in the essay on Aristophanes. Hemsterhuis’ influence will be discussed in Chapter IV.1 in conjunction with Schlegel’s notion of the fundamental human drives and of freedom. It is, in fact, remarkable that neither Behrens (1984) nor Dierkes (1980) mentions the influence of Hemsterhuis on the young Schlegel in their otherwise expansive treatments of Schlegel’s early critical method.

⁴⁵ Dannenberg sees this as being a neglected aspect in studies on Schlegel’s *Geschichtsphilosophie*. Dannenberg: “Gerade diese Tatsache findet in denjenigen Untersuchungen zu F. Schlegels Frühwerk, die ihre Darstellung erst mit dem Studium-Aufsatz beginnen [...] oftmals zu wenig Berücksichtigung” (30).

⁴⁶ In fact, the influence of Plato’s dialogues on the young Schlegel has not escaped attention (see, for example: Behler, *Friedrich Schlegels Theorie der Universalpoesie*, 221). Schlegel himself was clear about the influence Plato had had on him in his youth. In his later *Vorlesungen* on the *Philosophie des Lebens* (1827) he writes, “es sind jetzt eben neununddreißig Jahre, seit ich die sämtlichen Schriften des Plato in griechischer Sprache zum ersten Mal mit unbeschreiblicher Wißbegierde durchlas; und seither ist, neben mancherlei andern wissenschaftlichen Studien, diese philosophische Nachforschung für mich selbst eigentlich immer die Hauptbeschäftigung geblieben” (KAX 179f.).

Kant's *Kritik*. However, though Schlegel may have believed that his comedic ideal actually existed in some metaphysical sense, he was also fully aware that it was an ideal, and as such, may remain forever unrealized. Like the Platonic form however, Schlegel's comedic ideal, whether it has a metaphysical existence or is just a theoretical construct, nevertheless has a practical relevance as an abstraction against which existing comedies may be compared.

Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes does, however, show an incorporation of Kant's *Kritik* to the extent that one sees there the same shift in perspective away from an examination of the formalistic aspects of art to a study of its reception. Schlegel's essay concerns itself very little with the actual structure of Aristophanes' plays, and whenever structure is alluded to, it is only to show in which ways this structure is symptomatic of the socio-historical context within which Greek Comedy developed. His theory, as I will show in Chapter V, examines the ideal effect that comedy should induce in the individual. Any play that induces this peculiar effect is a comedy, and its aesthetic worth is in direct proportion to the degree to which it induces this effect or serves its purpose, regardless of what formal aspects it may or may not have.

III.2 Programmatics in Schlegel's Essay on Aristophanes

In the review of secondary research (Chapter II), I alluded to the fact that, at the time of its publication, Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay enjoyed a positive reception in its own right, and not merely within the field of Classical Studies. Ernst Behler writes that during the early 19th century, it was "eine der berühmtesten und anerkanntesten Arbeiten Friedrich Schlegels" (Behler

KAI CXLIII). This is no small honor considering the fame and success – at least in the intellectual community – that Schlegel would garner with his later writings. The essay's fame derived not so much from the theory of comedy it contained, but rather from the way in which Schlegel used his theory both as a programmatic defense of Aristophanes as a canonical playwright, and at the same time, as a polemical attack on what he felt was the sad state of contemporary German comedy. The following section examines the historical background underlying the polemical war that Schlegel here wages, which will, in turn, make it clear why Schlegel felt that a new comedic ideal – his ideal – was so necessary.

Schlegel begins his short essay with the bold claim that Old Greek Comedies – particularly those of Aristophanes – represent the purest realization of the comedic ideal and this is, in fact, the premise from which his argument develops. This was, in 1794, far from an obvious truth. Aristophanes' plays had fallen into disrepute in the 17th and 18th centuries. And in preparing for the republication of the Aristophanes-essay in his *Sämtliche Werke* (1822), Schlegel remarked in a footnote on the impact that his essay had had in the turn towards a more positive reception of Aristophanes in the early 19th century:

Daß Aristophanes [...] als ein Urkünstler [...] neben den erhabensten Meistern der alten tragischen Kunst seine Stelle einnehme und verdiene; das war damals, als dieser kleine Aufsatz [...] zuerst erschien, noch durchaus nicht so allgemein anerkannt, als dieses jetzt überall zu vernehmen ist (KAI 19).

It was not only, as we might today assume, Aristophanes' sexual licentiousness and Europe's later prudishness, which led to a natural condemnation of the playwright. The reasons are in fact more varied and have as much to do with the formal aspects of his plays and

characters as with the perceived influence of his plays in the sentencing of Socrates. Martin Holtermann, in his reception-history of Aristophanes, writes that Aristophanes was generally dismissed in France in the 17th and 18th centuries, “gerade auch von Interpreten, die ansonsten die antike Literatur für vorbildlich erklärten” (Holtermann 55f.). Holtermann gives three reasons for this trend:

1. Aristophanes’ language was criticized for its perceived “Unordnung” and “Vulgarität”.
2. His plays were criticized from the viewpoint of the hegemonic dramatic *Regelpoetik*. According to critics who argued along this line, Aristophanes violated the classical unities of time, action, and place and failed to bring his plays “zu einer befriedigenden Abrundung”.
3. Aristophanes’ satire of public and political contemporaries was a dramatic mechanism that was inapplicable within the context of 17th and 18th century France, and ran counter to the literary tastes of a people writing for a court audience, where overt political criticism was out of the question (Holtermann 54f.).

Aristophanes was criticized, thus, from a normative aesthetic standpoint for not adhering to the rules of dramatic art and from a moral standpoint for both his perceived moral degeneracy and for his personal satires, which one critic termed “que des libelles diffamatoires” (D’Aubignac 81)⁴⁷. It is possible that Friedrich Schlegel, when he calls the worth of Aristophanes’ plays “allgemein verkannt” (KAI 20), would have traced the reasons for this misjudgment back to the same place that his brother August Wilhelm did in his 1808 lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, namely back to Voltaire:

⁴⁷ Citation from (Holtermann 55)

Mit dem erbarmungswürdigen Uebermuthe der Unwissenheit urtheilt Voltaire [...] über Aristophanes ab, und die neueren französischen Kritiker sind meistens seinem Beyspiele gefolgt. Uebrigens kann man die Grundlage aller schiefen Urtheile der Neueren hierüber, und die verstockte prosaische Ansicht schon beym Plutarch in seiner Vergleichung des Aristophanes und Menander finden (A.W. Schlegel 127).

The sweeping condemnation to which A.W. Schlegel here refers can be found in the following widely-cited passage from Voltaire's entry for 'Athéisme' in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764):

Ce poète comique [*Aristophanes, MB*], qui n'est ni comique ni poète, n'aurait pas été admis parmi nous à donner ses farces à la foire Saint-Laurent; il me paraît beaucoup plus bas et plus méprisable que Plutarque ne le dépeint (Voltaire *Dictionnaire Philosophique* 469)⁴⁸.

Voltaire, in turn, is referring here to Plutarch's *Comparison between Aristophanes and Menander*, in which his extreme devaluation of Aristophanes is accompanied by effusive praise for Menander. Among other things, Plutarch criticizes Aristophanes for his "coarseness [...] in words, vulgarity, and ribaldry", a playwright to be enjoyed only by the "rude and vulgar person" (Plutarch 463), and for having a style with such great "varieties and dissonances in it, so neither doth he give to his persons what is fitting and proper to each" (Plutarch 467). As was the case with Shakespeare, so too did Voltaire's condemnation of Aristophanes help delay the possibility for an unbiased examination of his art on the continent. Characteristic of the criticism from

⁴⁸ Voltaire's judgment of Aristophanes is in the section on atheism because it was important for him to show who he believed was really responsible for the unjust charge against Socrates that he was an atheist. According to Voltaire, Aristophanes (specifically, because of his play *The Clouds*, in which he casts Socrates as a money-minded sophist) is to blame above all others: "La mort de Socrate est ce que l'histoire de la Grèce a de plus odieux. [...] Aristophane fut le premier qui accoutuma les Athéniens à regarder Socrate comme un athée. [...] Voilà l'homme qui prépara de loin le poison dont des juges infâmes firent périr l'homme le plus vertueux de à Grèce" (*ibid.*).

Voltaire and other French writers is the fact that it condemns Aristophanes from the perspective of the normative aesthetics of the 18th century – what in Germany was termed the *Regelpoetik*⁴⁹ – and that it shows an inability or a refusal to understand Aristophanes from within the context of the time in which he was writing.

Precisely this is what Friedrich Schlegel wished to rectify in his essay on Aristophanes, and he did so in a radical manner⁵⁰. He does not just advocate a relativistic understanding of Aristophanes by which he, like all writers, would be judged only against contemporary aesthetic standards. Indeed, the Aristophanes-essay is meant to outline a *theory* of comedy and as such is every bit as normative as the *Regelpoetik* it attacks. Schlegel, at least at this time in the development of his thought, believed that Old Greek Comedy was a necessary and sufficient subject from which to develop a comedic theory. According to him, an understanding of “die Natur des Komischen” could only be acquired from its purest examples and this, for him, meant comedies that were devoid of “tragische Energie” or, to use Schlegel’s anthropological terminology, bereft of any traces of *Schmerz* (KAI 20). And the only comedic genre that, for him, met this standard, was Old Greek Comedy, precisely because of its independence from any

⁴⁹ For a detailed discussion of what was understood as the dramatic *Regelpoetik* in Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries, see: Manfred Fuhrmann. “Die Rezeption der aristotelischen Tragödienpoetik in Deutschland”, particularly pgs. 93-96. Fuhrmann traces the roots of the *Regelpoetik* back to Aristotle’s *Poetics* and to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*. Apart from the aforementioned ‘Mißachtung der Einheit des Ortes’, Aristophanes would have been criticized, according to the *Regelpoetik* and its famous *Dreieinheiten-Lehre*, for failing to match the correct cast of characters with the correct genre. According to the *Regelpoetik*, gods and generals, who are often in Aristophanes’ comedies (e.g. Cleon in *The Knights* and Dionysus in *The Frogs*), belong to “die erhabene Sphäre [...] der Tragödie” and were considered unsuitable subjects for comedy (Fuhrmann 93).

⁵⁰ It should be mentioned here that Friedrich Schlegel was not actually the first in Germany to praise Aristophanes’ worth in response to French criticism. This honor goes to Johann George Sulzer and Christoph Martin Wieland. Sulzer, in his *Allgemeine Theorie* (1777) expresses an opinion that is very similar to Schlegel’s statement that “das komische Genie [...] nicht mehr frei [ist]” (KAI 19). Sulzer writes: “es wäre vielleicht nicht übertrieben, wenn man sagte: daß in einer einzigen von seinen Comödien, mehr Wiz und Laune ist als man auf den meisten neuern Bühnen in einem ganzen Jahr hört” (Sulzer 215). Wieland held lectures on Aristophanes in Erfurt at the beginning of the 1770’s and later translated many of his plays into German (Holtermann 74).

reliance on tragic elements. The opening lines of Schlegel's Aristophanes-essay constitute a polemical attack on the traditional understanding of comedy and hint at the radical novelty behind Schlegel's theory:

Das komische Genie ist nicht mehr frei, es schämt sich seiner Fröhlichkeit, und fürchtet durch seine Kraft zu beleidigen. Es erzeugt daher kein vollständiges und reines Werk aus sich selbst, sondern begnügt sich, ernsthafte dramatische Handlungen aus dem häuslichen Leben mit seinen Reizen zu schmücken. Aber damit hört die eigentliche Komödie auf; komische Energie wird unvermeidlich durch tragische Energie ersetzt: und es entsteht eine neue Gattung, eine Mischung des komischen und des tragischen Drama. [...] Die Natur des Komischen kann man nur in der unvermischten reinen Gattung kennen lernen: und nichts entspricht so ganz dem Ideal des reinen Komischen, als die alte Griechische Komödie. Sie ist eins der wichtigsten Dokumente für die Theorie der Kunst; denn in der ganzen Geschichte der Kunst sind ihre Schönheiten einzig, und vielleicht eben deswegen allgemein verkannt (KAI 20f.).

Schlegel calls for nothing short of a complete reappraisal of Old Greek Comedy. The implications here are far-reaching. Likely, never before and never since has anyone tried to develop a full and systematic theory of comedy from the work of a single playwright, and certainly not from Aristophanes. Further, according to Schlegel, there is little to nothing that came after Aristophanes, which could be called true comedy. The inference to be drawn is that those works, which according to previous critics were usually classified as comedies – works by Plautus and Terence, or Molière and Shakespeare – were, for Schlegel, nothing of the sort, but were better thought of as mixed forms, “Mischung[en] des komischen und des tragischen Drama” (*ibid.*).

That the system of classification for the genre “Comedy” itself was in need of reworking must have been obvious to many by the 1790s, and in this respect, Schlegel's attack, however unique its form, is indicative of a general dissatisfaction with inherited literary poetics. Critics

during the High Enlightenment (1740s and 1750s) had engaged in a sort of theoretical gymnastics in trying to apply the inherited genre-dichotomy “Tragedy/Comedy” to plays that seemed to fit neither type. The outcome tended rather to expand the definition of comedy than that of tragedy. Tragedy had, after all, been clearly defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics* whereas the section on comedy had famously gone missing. Profitlich accurately describes the dilemma in which “Kunstrichter” from this time period found themselves:

Die nur begrenzte Erlaubnis, aus dem System der etablierten Genres auszubrechen und neue Formen, z.B. die für das klassizistische Denken suspekten Mischformen, zu kreieren, erklärt den Eifer, mit dem eine große Zahl von Kunstrichtern v.a. der vierziger und fünfziger Jahre die Frage erörtert, ob zu den ‘Komödien’ Dramen gezählt werden können, die ihre Protagonisten [...] statt Lachanreize zu bieten, Empfindungen, Teilnahme, Mitleiden, Rührung erregen (Profitlich 35)⁵¹.

The catalyst for this theoretical debate, one that actually considered removing the element of humor and its effect – laughter – from the definition of comedy, was above all the freshly imported and increasingly popular *comédie larmoyante* from France (in Germany *das rührende Lustspiel*), and the difficulty it posed for the traditional tragedy/comedy dichotomy. According to Gottsched, the *rührende Lustspiel* depicted “das bürgerliche Leben der heutigen Welt” (Gottsched 593f.)⁵², and though it tended to be sentimental and moving, it did not however end tragically⁵³. Its eschewal of traditional tragic elements (noble or divine personnel, tragic ending)

⁵¹ Profitlich writes that Adam Daniel Richter and – of all people – Johann Elias Schlegel, Friedrich Schlegel’s uncle, went furthest in theorizing humor completely out of comedy (Profitlich 35-37).

⁵² This citation is from Gottsched’s “Zufällige Gedanken über Herrn Adam Daniel Richter”. The reference is taken from Profitlich (35).

⁵³ For a more in depth clarification of the sub-genre ‘Rührendes Lustspiel’, see the *Reallexikon*’s entry. There, it is thus defined: “Das Rührende Lustspiel konstituiert sich als eine ‘Komödie ohne Komik’ [...]. Wirkungsästhetischer Zweck des Rührenden Lustspiels ist es, daß die Zuschauer mittels Identifikation vom traurigen, aber nicht tragischen Schicksal der Bühnenfiguren ‘gerührt’ werden” (*Reallexikon* ‘Rührendes Lustspiel’ 337).

led to its classification as a comedy (*Lustspiel*) despite the absence of any intended laughter-effect⁵⁴.

Friedrich Schlegel starts from a completely different – nearly opposite – premise from these theorists of the High Enlightenment. Instead of widening the definition of comedy beyond recognition, Schlegel substantially limits it and transforms it into an ideal, which only Aristophanes has come anywhere close to achieving. This is why Schlegel labels Old Greek Comedy “eins der wichtigsten Dokumente für die Theorie der Kunst” (KAI 20). He is careful not to ascribe absolute perfection to it, writing instead: “nichts entspricht so ganz dem Ideal des reinen Komischen, als die alte Griechische Komödie” (*ibid.*). As for contemporary comedy, Schlegel has nothing nice to say. Without a doubt, when Schlegel says of contemporary dramatic praxis, “es schämt sich seiner Fröhlichkeit, und fürchtet durch seine Kraft zu beleidigen”, the types of drama that he has in mind are the *rührende Lustspiel* and the so-called *Familienstücke* which followed in its wake and had become ubiquitous to the point of triviality by the 1790s⁵⁵. The scorn that Goethe, Schiller, and the Romantics had for the immensely popular *Familienstücke* of successful playwrights like Iffland and Kotzebue has been well documented⁵⁶. According to Eckehard Catholy, Schlegel’s contemporaries would have easily picked up on the essay’s veiled polemics against these types of drama:

⁵⁴ One need look no further than Christian Fürchtegott Gellert’s *Die zärtlichen Schwestern* (1747) for proof of how unfunny comedies were becoming. The play is essentially a *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* with a happy ending (marriage, as one might expect). It exemplifies the typical structure of the *rührende Lustspiel*: “Tugend und Ernsthaftigkeit auf der Bühne, statt tragischem Scheitern ein glückliches Ende; Erbauung und Rührung im Parkett, statt Schrecken und Erschütterung gerührte Erleichterung” (*Reallexikon* ‘Rührendes Lustspiel’ 338).

⁵⁵ The *Familienstück* is also sometimes termed the *Familiengemälde* (Schulz 467).

⁵⁶ See for example, Schulz, 449-455; also Glaser’s *Das bürgerliche Rührstück* (1969).

Die Spitze, die sich hier gegen Schlegels erfolgreiche Zeitgenossen Iffland und Kotzebue richtet, ist unübersehbar, auch wenn deren Namen in einer Untersuchung, die der Komödie einer längst vergangenen Zeit gewidmet ist, nicht ausdrücklich erwähnt werden. Die gebildeten Leser der 'Berlinischen Monatsschrift', in der Schlegel seinen Essay publiziert hatte, mußten die geheime Beziehung erkennen (Catholy 186).

One of the essays intentions is that the new sense that Schlegel gives to the comedy might help free contemporary drama of these popular *Familiengemälde* and *Rührstücke*. According to Holtermann, Schlegel's intention was "dem Lustspiel seiner Gegenwart neue Möglichkeiten auf[zuzzeigen]. Für Komödien in Anlehnung an Aristophanes war damit der Zwang zum geschlossenen Drama aufgehoben und breiter Raum für Formexperimente geboten" (Holtermann 95).

III.3 Schlegel's Early Critical-Historical Project: Implications for the Aristophanes-Essay

As I mentioned in the preceding section, Schlegel believed Old Greek Comedy to be a necessary and sufficient object of study for the development of a theory of comedy. Because of the peculiar socio-political structure of Athens, comedy achieved, according to Schlegel, a state of comedic aesthetic perfection, or as Schlegel puts it purity, that had not since been matched. Accordingly, he believed that any theory concerned with the essence of comedy would do well to begin there. Before I examine the reasons that Schlegel gives in the essay on Aristophanes for ascribing such excellence to Old Greek Comedy in particular, I find it constructive to briefly discuss Schlegel's early attitude toward Classical literature in general, since it will be seen that

his high praise for Greek comedy is not peculiar, but rather exemplary of his general attitude towards Greek literature.

Nearly all of Schlegel's early writings on Classical literature, even those on quite specific topics – like *Über die Diotima* – were written with one eye towards his planned critical-historical project of developing a system of aesthetics out of the history of Classical literature. And the Aristophanes-essay is supported by the implicit assumption that a theory of comedy, and indeed any adequate theory of literature, must necessarily begin with the *history* of its genesis, which Schlegel traced to the Greeks. Both Hans Dierkes and Klaus Behrens, who have written detailed studies of Schlegel's early aesthetic-philosophical method, emphasize this historical approach as being one of the central principles of his early theoretical attempts⁵⁷. It is an interest that he shared with many of his contemporaries; German intellectual thought in the late 18th century saw the awakening of a more nuanced understanding of history, and practically all of Schlegel's literary peers, but most famously Herder, tried to deal with what they felt was the importance of understanding the progression of history⁵⁸. In Germany, writes Schulz, “leistete Herder auf diesem Gebiet in seinen *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* grundlegende Arbeit” (Schulz 181). Herder's response to the traditional pursuit of supratemporal norms that could apply equally to artworks from different historical eras was to emphasize instead the relative historical context in which each artwork was produced. In this manner, writes Dierkes,

⁵⁷ Behrens, for example, calls *Geschichtsphilosophie* Schlegel's “hermeneutisches Werkzeug” (Behrens 29). Dierkes entire study of Friedrich Schlegel's early method is based on the assumption that it can best be understood as rooted in a philosophy of history (Dierkes 11-12).

⁵⁸ Schulz, in his history of late 18th and early 19th century German literature, sees the awakening of a new historical consciousness in Germany as being one of the main cultural-intellectual trends that characterize this era (Schulz 180). In the section that he dedicates to this ‘tendency’, Schulz lists a virtual who's-who of late 18th century German authors who sought to understand the relevance of the history of humanity.

Herder was able to arrive at “eine Lösung des von der ‘Querelle’ überkommenen Problems eines universalen Geschichtsmaßstabes” (Dierkes 16). The contours of Herder’s argumentation cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say that Schlegel’s own *Geschichtsphilosophie* can be seen in many ways as a reaction to what he saw as Herder’s historical relativism. Much as Schlegel considered his own work in aesthetics to be a response to the limitations that Kant had placed on the possibility for an objective theory of beauty, his *Geschichtsphilosophie* both incorporated Herder’s sense for the importance of historical context while at the same time dismissing its relativistic conclusions. In a review of Herder’s *Briefen zur Beförderung der Humanität*, Schlegel makes his criticism of pure historical relativism clear:

Die Methode [...], jede Blume der Kunst, *ohne Würdigung*, nur nach Ort, Zeit und Art zu betrachten, würde am Ende auf kein andres Resultat führen, als daß alles sein müßte, was es ist und war” (KAII 54).

For Schlegel, supratemporal aesthetic norms were still possible. Their determination simply required a far more nuanced understanding of historical context than his predecessors had given them. They could no longer simply be the traditional norms of the *Regelpoetik*, but needed instead to take into account the society, Schlegel might say the societal *Bildung*, that had helped to make possible the production of a given work of art. And as we will later see, the theory of comedy that Schlegel developed is more concerned with the socio-political context that frames Aristophanes’ plays than the plays themselves⁵⁹. Schlegel’s belief that it was precisely the

⁵⁹ It is noteworthy that Schlegel so often makes reference to the “alte Griechische Komödie” and far less often mentions Aristophanes by name, even though Aristophanes’ plays are the only full examples of Old Greek Comedy that we now possess. Schlegel wishes to derive his theory of comedy more from the *practice* of Old Greek Comedy than from Aristophanes’ plays in particular. Aristophanes’ dramatic structure, his use – for example – of the parabasis, his constant rupturing of dramatic illusion, his depiction of people who must have certainly been in the

Greeks whose literature might form the basis for a universal theory of literature followed from two assumptions: first, that the Greeks invented *Epik*, *Lyrik*, and *Dramatik*, and second, that under the Greeks, these genres developed naturally. This naturalness is, for Schlegel, one of the key characteristics of Classical (and specifically Greek) literature, and is one of the principle things that separates it from modern literature. In his early writings, he offers various formulations of this central belief, calling the progression of Classical literature “[ein] ganze[r] Kreislauf der organischen Entwicklung der Kunst” (KAI 307-08), or alternately “[eine] allgemeine Naturgeschichte der Dichtkunst; eine vollkommene und gesetzgebende Anschauung” (KAI 276). Elsewhere he describes it as “ein Maximum und Kanon der natürlichen Poesie” (KAI 307), “das Urbild der Kunst und des Geschmacks” (KAI 287-88), and “das Höchste, was im Systeme des Kreislaufes möglich war, ein Maximum der natürlichen Bildung: also ein relatives Maximum” (KAI 634). For Schlegel, the Greeks were unique in that they had no literary models outside of their own with which they could compare themselves. Modern literature, on the other hand, is often characterized by Schlegel as *künstlich*. He claims that, under the conditions of modernity, “Absicht das Prinzip der menschlichen Bildung ist”, as opposed to the “freie Natur” that characterized the Greeks and their literature (KAI 29). This is why Schlegel sometimes traces the birth of modernity to Socrates who, he believes, was the first thinker “welcher [...] den Versuch wagte, Sitten und Staat den Ideen der reinen Vernunft gemäß

audience, these stylistic devices are not in themselves valuable, but only in so far as they are symptoms of the “schöne Fröhlichkeit” and the “erhabne Freiheit” (KAI 24) that Schlegel believed were, and should be, the actual aesthetic criteria for comedy.

einzurichten” (KAI 636). Plato’s dialogues, he believes, could be considered the first canonical texts of modernity⁶⁰.

Another assumption that one sees as running through all the various formulations of Greek literature cited above is that Schlegel viewed its progression as a *Kreislauf*. It represented, for Schlegel, a complete and closed cycle spanning from birth, to maturity, and finally to its death. And though it was up to Schlegel’s time rather paradigmatic to see literature as going through cycles of growth and decay, for Schlegel, only Greek literature could be characterized as a “System des Kreislaufs” (KAI 631). On the other hand, modern literature, by which Schlegel meant post-Classical literature, was because of its reflectivity progressive in nature. We can see in this early dichotomy, which Schlegel draws between ancient and modern literature, an inchoate form of what he would later term the *Classical* and the *Romantic*⁶¹. These, he believed, could be

⁶⁰ The belief that the age of reflectivity began with Socrates and Plato is not peculiar to Schlegel. George Sabine, writing on an altogether different topic (the history of political philosophy), expresses a sentiment that is quite similar to Schlegel’s, and he sees the socio-historical impetus for the writings of Plato, which Schlegel believed embodied the reflectivity of modernity, as being Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War. “The great age of Athenian public life”, writes Sabine, “fell in the third quarter of the fifth century B.C., while the great age of [...] philosophy came only after the downfall of Athens in her struggle with Sparta. Here, as in so many cases in history, reflection followed achievement, and principles were abstractly stated only after they had long been acted upon” (Sabine 21). The Greeks he writes, “probably would not have turned to philosophy, at least in the manner they did, had the life of Athens remained as happy and as prosperous as it seemed to be when Pericles’s Funeral Oration struck its dominant note” (Sabine 35). Greek literature’s naturalness, Schiller called it its naivité, was thus one of its most essential qualities.

⁶¹ Schlegel was certainly not the first to draw comparisons between ancient and modern literature. The famous *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* which began in the late 17th century and was fought largely in France and England started from a similar point of inquiry and was well-known by Schlegel’s time. What was novel about the Schlegel brothers, however, was that they approached the interpretive distinction between Ancient and Modern – or alternately Classical and Romantic – with a more nuanced historical understanding. The brothers argued in the wake of what Schulz calls the growing “Geschichtsbild der Aufklärung, in dem jeder Kultur und jeder Epoche ihr eigenes Recht innerhalb des Fortschreitens der Menschheit zugestanden wurde” (Schulz 60). Thus their comparisons of the Classical and Romantic were concerned with understanding the historical necessity of those styles as reflections of their social, theological, even political contexts, and though Friedrich Schlegel believed, at least during his early phase, that artworks could be judged according to an ideal, this ideal was far removed from idealizations of literary form, and tended rather to be an ideal of beauty. And if ancients approached this ideal within the various genres that they created, then the moderns, because of their peculiar historical condition, approached it through the mixing of genres. This is the theoretical argument that would later allow F. Schlegel to

distinguished from one another not only temporally, but also formalistically, that is to say, by genre. For example, whereas *Epik*, *Lyrik*, and *Dramatik* are classical genres, modernity is characterized by mixed genres: the tragicomedy, which Schlegel and his brother believed was best exemplified by Shakespeare, and the novel, which Schlegel saw as the modern literary genre *par excellence*, having the ability to incorporate all other genres, thus representing the universal mixed-form.

In opposition to the notion of Greek literature as a fully realized *Kreislauf*, Schlegel repeatedly characterizes modern literature as in a state of progression, as “ewig nur werden, nie vollendet” (Behler *Einleitung* CIX). This is most succinctly put when he famously writes that modern – or Romantic – literature is a “progressive Universalpoesie” (KAII 182 [Fragment 116]). Schlegel arrived at this understanding of modernity after he began turning his focus to modern literature in 1795⁶² and used Condorcet’s mathematical notion of infinite perfectibility⁶³ as a way to characterize modern literature as being in a state of infinite progress.

Since, for Schlegel, the essence of modern literature is its mixing of genres, and the fact that it is – in an Enlightenment sense – a progressive project which can never be completed, it lends itself as a basis for the development of an aesthetic system which wishes to identify the

find worth in both ancient and modern literature; they were, according to him, doing different things. Perhaps the most comprehensive definition of how the Schlegel brothers understood the Classical/Romantic distinction can be found in the first of A.W. Schlegel’s lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1808).

⁶² Schlegel began engaging in intense studies of Lessing, Forster, Jacobi’s *Woldemar*, and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* in 1795 (Behler *Selbstzeugnisse* 48).

⁶³ Schlegel terms this characteristic of modern literature as “d[ie] unendliche Fortschreitung” (KAI 631). Condorcet, in his *Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain*, which Schlegel reviewed in the summer 1795, applied the notion of infinite perfectibility from infinitesimal calculus to the Enlightenment notion of the progress of humanity, thereby finding a scientific, thus unassailable, defense of progress. Condorcet: “The perfectibility of man is truly indefinite: and [...] the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe upon which nature has cast us” (Condorcet 3). For more on the Condorcet-Schlegel connection, see Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* 66-68.

essence or ideal of the various genres, as it was Schlegel's intent to do. In fact, we can take his claim – “die Natur des Komischen kann man nur in der unvermischten Gattung kennen lernen” (KAI 20) –, and say that this is what he ultimately wished to do for all literary genres. Ideally, Schlegel would have developed an aesthetic system explaining the ideal comical, the ideal tragical, the ideal lyrical etc. It is indicative of the influence that Kant had in turning aesthetic philosophy away from the pursuit of developing ideal norms for literary forms, that Schlegel does not characterize his own project as the pursuit of the ideal comedy, but rather of “das Komische”. And, in fact, the theoretical paradigm in the early and mid 19th century was rather to concern oneself with the comical and the tragical, as it were, and not primarily the comedy and the tragedy⁶⁴. The ambitious nature of Schlegel's project makes it understandable why he was never able to finish it. But in his theory of comedy, one finds perhaps the most fully realized subsystem of what he had envisioned as a universal system, whose description he never completed.

⁶⁴ A perusal of Profitlich's two-volume collection of German dramatic theory from the Baroque to the 20th century shows that, beginning in the 1790's, theorists begin to concern themselves less with *die Komödie* and *die Tragödie* and rather more with *das Komische* and *das Tragische*. This is most apparent in the dramatic theories of Schlegel, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. Szondi, in his *Essay on the Tragic*, speaks of the aesthetic pursuit of the *tragic* as opposed to the *tragedy* as beginning with Schelling. I was, unfortunately, unable to obtain a copy of the German original. Szondi writes: “Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling has there been a philosophy of the tragic. [...] Aristotle's text strives to determine the elements of tragic art; its object is tragedy, not the idea of tragedy. [...] The realizations it thereby achieves [...] are meaningful not in themselves, but rather in their significance for tragic poetry, whose laws are to be derived from them” (Szondi *Tragic* 1). However, already in Schlegel, we see a definitive turn away from viewing the dramatic form as the primary end. What a comedy's form and content should be is left completely open. Schlegel does not yet, however, take the radical step that Schelling does and this is precisely the point for Szondi. Schelling's aesthetics go so far that they eschew any concern for the drama (the tragedy) whatsoever, not only in its form, but also in its effect and social function: “By no longer focusing on the effect that the tragic has on the audience but on the phenomenon of the tragic itself, [Schelling] commences the history of the theory of the tragic” (Szondi *Tragic* 7). On the other hand, Schlegel's anthropological approach in aesthetics, as we will see, still necessitates that his primary concern be precisely the play's – or more specifically beauty's – effect on its audience. What separates Schlegel from his Enlightenment predecessors (particularly Lessing) who likewise argued from the perspective of dramatic effect, is first of all, that Schlegel sees art as bringing the individual's disparate fundamental drives into harmony, whereas Lessing saw art as having a rationalizing social-didactic function, and second of all, that Schlegel, like his contemporaries (Schiller, Moritz, Kant) emphasizes the freedom and autonomy that art must have in order to be beautiful.

IV *Towards Schlegel's Theory of Comedy as
Argued in his Essay on Aristophanes*

As I stated in the introduction, the aim of the present study is to arrive at an understanding of the socially predicated components of Schlegel's theory of comedy. To that end, the present chapter focuses on retracing Schlegel's line of argumentation in order to gain an accurate and logically sound understanding of his theory of comedy. It is my intention that, in approaching Schlegel's essay thus, that is, via a close reading, we will be able to see to what extent his notion of comedy rests on his understanding of the socio-historical context out of which it arises. Illustrating this dependence will, I hope, make it clear why the normative component of his theory of comedy itself presupposes certain normative beliefs as regards what is proper for society.

Given his eschewel of literary theories grounded in formalistic norms, Schlegel's essay on Greek Comedy does not begin with a description of Aristophanes' plays. Rather, his theory develops from an anthropological premise. His strategy is to start by outlining what he believes to be the fundamental characteristics of human nature that make the individual receptive to comedy. And from there, he hopes to show that classical Athenian society and the comedy which arose out of it, allowed for this receptivity to be realized. If in his early writings, Friedrich Schlegel treats *Geschichtsphilosophie* as a tool for understanding how literature and culture develop over time as a reflection of the historical context out of which they arise, then anthropology – what Schlegel calls *Lebensphilosophie* – is, for him, what grounds literature and beauty as supratemporal human necessities, manifesting themselves through all eras, in greater or lesser degree, as a function of cultural cultivation (*Bildung*). It is, as Dierkes calls it, “der

apriorische Ansatz” (Dierkes 47), that which Schlegel’s entire understanding of historical development presupposes.

IV.1 *Anthropological Basis: The Concept of “Freude”*

Schlegel begins his argument by giving an explanation of the dialectical interplay between two basic human drives – *Freude* and *Schmerz* – which he believes are activated by and represented in art. Only later in the essay does it become clear how these drives relate specifically to comedy. As I hope to show, a close examination of the concepts of *Freude*, and to a lesser degree *Schmerz*, as they are used in this essay are of importance, not only because they underlie Schlegel’s theory of comedy, but also since they form, as Brummack writes, “ein[en] Grundbegriff in der Anthropologie des frühen Schlegel”, and thus help make sense of the social function Schlegel believes art to have as a necessity of human nature (Brummack 14). The entire passage on the concepts *Freude* and *Schmerz* is given below as it forms the basis for the analysis that follows:

Die Freude ist an sich gut, auch die sinnlichste enthält einen unmittelbaren Genuß höhern menschlichen Daseins. Sie ist der eigentümliche, natürliche und ursprüngliche Zustand der höhern Natur des Menschen; der Schmerz erreicht ihn nur durch den geringeren Teil seines Wesens. Rein-sittlicher Schmerz ist nichts als entbehrte Freude, und rein-sinnliche Freude nichts als gestillter Schmerz; denn der Grund des tierischen Daseins ist Schmerz. Aber Beides sind nur Begriffe; in der Wirklichkeit, bilden beide heterogene Naturen in durchgängiger Gemeinschaft ein Ganzes – den Menschen, verschmelzen in einen Trieb – den menschlichen; der Schmerz wird sittlich, und die Freude wird sinnlich (KAI 21).

Schlegel presents two interpretive dichotomies that elucidate what he considers to be the difference between animal and human nature:

1. *Sittlichkeit/Sinnlichkeit*, and
2. *Freude/Schmerz*

Whereas the term *Sinnlichkeit* is relatively straightforward – *sensuality* seems a sufficient translation – *Sittlichkeit* is rather more difficult. The meaning it assumed in German philosophy during the late 18th and early 19th centuries is different, though related to, the translation that is conventionally given – *morality*. The way that Schlegel uses the term seems to accord with the various definitions for *Sittlichkeit* that Grimm’s *Wörterbuch* cites Schlegel’s contemporaries as giving; namely the human capacity to act according to the intellect, as opposed to the purely instinctive reaction that arises out of sensual stimulation⁶⁵. Whereas all sentient beings are per definition *sinnlich*, only humans are *sittlich*.

While the same animal/human distinction can be made for *Freude* and *Schmerz* – *Freude* is, according to Schlegel, purely human – it is not at first clear what exactly these terms indicate, or rather, how they should be treated. According to their conventional meanings, one would think of *Freude* (joy) as purely an emotion and of *Schmerz* (pain/sorrow) as, in one sense, a sensory experience, and in another, an emotion. And Schlegel does indicate that, for him, *Schmerz* originates in the senses, since he writes: “der Schmerz erreicht ihn [den Menschen, MB] nur durch den geringeren Teil seines Wesens” (KAI 21). He also acknowledges that in humans as opposed to in animals, *Schmerz* can take on a more emotional or ‘*sittlichen*’ character, in which

⁶⁵ This formulation is taken from various definitions and examples from Schlegel’s contemporaries, which Grimm’s *Wörterbuch* gives. For example, Schiller is cited as writing, “Sittlichkeit ist Bestimmung durch reine Vernunft”, and according to Kant, “Übereinstimmung einer Handlung mit der Form des r. (*reinen*) Willens ist Sittlichkeit” (Grimm *Deutsches Wörterbuch* “Sittlichkeit).

case it develops into something like sorrow or suffering. *Freude*, on the other hand, is for Schlegel an essential and distinguishing quality of human nature. More than simply an emotion, it is, as he writes, “der eigentümliche, natürliche und ursprüngliche Zustand der höhern Natur des Menschen” (*ibid.*). It is important to note that Schlegel emphasizes the fact that he is treating *Freude* and *Schmerz* as idealized human drives. Their separation from each other occurs only at the conceptual level; they are “nur Begriffe”, as he says (*ibid.*). In fact, in a later edition of the essay (1822), Schlegel changed the original sentence, “Aber Beides sind nur Begriffe” to “Aber Beides sind nur Begriffe der Absonderung”, which seems to indicate more firmly that they are to be taken as practical constructs⁶⁶. “In der Wirklichkeit”, as he writes, “bilden beide heterogene Naturen in durchgängiger Gemeinschaft ein Ganzes – den Menschen, verschmelzen in einen Trieb – den menschlichen” (*ibid.*). Both drives must be thought of as working simultaneously in man. That Schlegel was adamant about the inseparability of human *drives* – that is, that they only represent *idealized* constructs – is evident if we look at an early unpublished sketch on aesthetics by him. There he writes: “Das Thier und der Geist sind so vereinigt, daß die Gemeinschaft ihrer Triebe *absolut* ist; ein innigerer gegenseitiger Einfluß ist nicht denkbar” (KAXVI 27).

Matthias Dannenberg claims that Schlegel’s pronouncements in the Aristophanes-essay and elsewhere in his early writings on human nature are part of a general intellectual current in the 18th century, which sought to discover man’s purpose through an examination of his essential qualities. Above all Plato, François Hemsterhuis (himself a Platonist), Schiller, and Ernst Platner

⁶⁶ Interestingly, in a letter to his brother from 1793, Schlegel defines “die strenge Absonderung” as “nur Werk des Verstandes” (KAXXIII 142). Thus, critical thought is for Schlegel something that categorizes and separates but which, in the process, can misrepresent its object.

are, for the young Schlegel, “Anknüpfungspunkte für eine Wiederaufnahme traditionell-metaphysischer Fragestellungen” (Dannenberg 26f.). Characteristic of this attitude is an understanding of man as a dualistic being, representative of both animalistic and divine tendencies. Hemsterhuis famously understood this as man’s amphibian nature, which man adopted after his fall from grace (Hemsterhuis 279). And Ernst Platner, expressing a similar sentiment, calls man “weder Körper noch Seele allein”, but rather “die Harmonie von beyden” (Platner XV)⁶⁷. Both of these formulations share with Schlegel the attempt to explain human nature by way of its perceived differentiation from animal nature. And all three describe this difference by way of an unempirical metaphysical appeal; for Hemsterhuis, it is man’s divinity, for Platner his ‘Seele’ and for Schlegel his ‘higher nature’.

We might best arrive at an understanding of what Schlegel means by *Schmerz* – and from there approach *Freude* – by examining Hemsterhuis’ dialogue *Alexis*, in which one finds a definition of man that is parallel in structure, though somewhat different in content from Schlegel’s. According to Diokles, Alexis’ mentor and interlocutor, animals are completely motivated by displeasure arising from want and their sole purpose is to alleviate it.

Also ist die Begierde, die erste Sensation, die in der tierischen Natur entsteht, aus der Empfindung eines Bedürfnisses und der eines Gegenstandes, der dies Bedürfnis befriedigen könnte, zusammengesetzt; und folglich ist vor dem Genuß die Begierde eine Unlust (Hemsterhuis 231f.).

Schlegel echoes this sentiment when he writes in the Aristophanes-essay: “Der Grund des thierischen Daseins ist Schmerz” (KAI 21). Animals experience only *Schmerz* and its alleviation

⁶⁷ That Schlegel was acquainted with Hemsterhuis’ philosophy is evidenced by the already-cited letter to his brother from 1793. In the same letter, he mentions Ernst Platner as one of the authors of “weniger Bedeutung”, which he had been reading of late (KA XXIII 101).

or avoidance; in other words, they are beings that vacillate between *Schmerz* and *Nichtschmerz*. For Diokles, what distinguishes humans from animals is man's capacity for freedom, though in his view, most humans do not in reality actualize this capacity. "Es [gibt] wenig freie Menschen, [...] und eigentlich [ist] nur der Weise frei" (Hemsterhuis 236). Hemsterhuis here echoes the characteristic Enlightenment sentiment that humans free themselves through the proper use of their distinctive intellectual capacity. Importantly, the concept of *Freude* plays no role in Hemsterhuis' dialogue. For him the relevant distinction is between the necessity of animal pain and the freedom of human wisdom. For Schlegel, however, who is tailoring his anthropology in his Aristophanes-essay to an ultimate determination of comedy, *Freude*, and not wisdom, is the leading theoretical concept⁶⁸. Nevertheless both make the claim that though animals are bound by necessity, those characteristics or drives that are distinctly human – for Hemsterhuis *wisdom*, and for Schlegel *Freude* – do not exist as a matter of course in humans, but rather as a potentiality, the active realization of which makes one human. For both Schlegel and Hemsterhuis, the question of human nature is inseparable from the question of the human purpose. *Freude* is not, according to Schlegel, a purely sensory emotion, i.e. not merely *pleasure*, and thus is not to be confused with Freud's understanding of the pleasure-principle as the psychological desire to increase one's pleasure⁶⁹. Rather for Schlegel, *Freude* is, as Brummack indicates, both an

⁶⁸ I draw the conclusion that Schlegel tailors his beliefs on human nature in this essay to their relevance for comedy because I have not found any mention of the concept of *Freude* anywhere else in his writings. The implication that I draw is that *Freude* is, in Schlegel's view, not the main distinguishing characteristic of humans, as Hemsterhuis treats wisdom, but rather that it is perhaps one of many.

⁶⁹ In fact, Freud's pleasure-principle is only the negative formulation of Schlegel's definition of the animal as a being that seeks to alleviate its (natural) *Schmerz* and thus would not apply in the least to humans as Schlegel understands them. See for example, Freud's definition of the pleasure-principle: "Wir glauben, daß [der Ablauf der seelischen Vorgänge] jedesmal durch eine unlustvolle Spannung angeregt wird und dann eine solche Richtung einschlägt, daß sein Endergebnis mit einer Herabsetzung dieser Spannung, also mit einer Vermeidung von Unlust oder Erzeugung von Lust zusammenfällt" (Freud 3).

anthropological and an ethical concept⁷⁰; after all, as Schlegel writes, *Freude* is “an sich gut” (KAI 20). Later in the same essay, Schlegel writes that *Freude* is “ein Symbol des Guten” (KAI 21). Schlegel’s use of the word ‘Symbol’ is of central importance. In the 1822 edition of the essay, Schlegel clarified by writing instead of simply “ein Symbol des Guten”, “ein Symbol oder *die sinnbildliche äußere Erscheinung* des Guten [my italics]”. *Freude*, much like Hemsterhuis’ freedom, is an ideal. It can only exist purely as an idea, as a symbol. According to Schlegel, *Freude* in its pure form can only be depicted and beheld; it can only be glimpsed in its pure form as a “sinnbildliche äußere Erscheinung”. This is where the role of comedy comes into play for Schlegel. Specifically, comedy is precisely this symbol of *Freude*. Under Schlegel’s theory, comedy’s essential element is that it is a symbol of man’s capacity for pure joy. As Schlegel writes a few lines later, “mit der Hoffnung ungehinderter Vereinigung, scheint die letzte Hülle der Tierheit zu verschwinden; der Mensch errät den völligen Genuß, nach welchem er nur streben kann ohne ihn zu besitzen” (KAI 22). Thus, in the aesthetic depiction of pure *Freude*, which Schlegel believes the Old Greek Comedy came closest to achieving, we *appear* to be finally successful in our aspiration to divorce ourselves from our animal nature.

In a letter to his brother, August Wilhelm, dating from October 16, 1793, we see an inchoate formulation of the more nuanced anthropological aesthetics laid down in the Aristophanes-essay. Specifically one notices the same desire to pin down man’s “Bestimmung” and to transfer those findings into an aesthetic reflection about what gives the “Dichter” and the “Gedicht” their “Werth”:

⁷⁰ “Der ethischen Formulierung [der Freude] [...] kann man also die anthropologische an die Seite stellen” (Brummack 16)

Die Richtung auf Gott und der Genuß Gottes ist [...] nicht unsre ganze Bestimmung, aber unsre höchste. Ein Mensch hat so viel Werth als Daseyn, d.h. als Leben, Kraft und Gott in ihm ist. Hat er aber auch viel Kraft und Leben, sind diese aber im Streite mit dem Gott in ihm, so wird er immer ein häßlicher Mensch, ein verächtlicher Dichter, und sein Urtheil schief seyn. – Dieser Maaßstab gilt auch für einzelne menschliche Werke; also ein Gedicht z.B. hat so viel Werth als menschliche Lebenskraft darin ist. Dazu gehört aber auch die Richtung aller Theile auf das höchste Ziel; und was anders ist Sittlichkeit? (*Let. to A.W.* 10-16-1793).

There is a striking similarity between Schlegel's description in the Aristophanes-essay of *Freude* as an expression of "höher[es] menschliche[s] Dasein" and his definition in the citation above for man's "höchste[r] Bestimmung" as "die Richtung auf Gott und der Genuß Gottes". Both the experience of *Freude* and the act of gravitating towards God are, as Schlegel puts it, our highest, though "nicht unsre ganze Bestimmung". This early formulation highlights the latent use in the Aristophanes-essay of what Dannenberg characterizes as "der Topos von der Verähnlichung des Menschen mit Gott" (Dannenberg 26)⁷¹. In other writings it is more explicit, as, for example, in a letter to August Wilhelm dating from August 28, 1793 where Schlegel states: "Unsre Würde [ist] Gott ähnlich zu werden" (*Let. to A.W.* 8-28-1793). It is interesting to note that, for Schlegel, when the individual exhibits a disharmonious combination of "Kraft und Leben" with "dem Gott in ihm", this results in *das Häßliche*, i. e. in an insult not to goodness, but to beauty; it is *aesthetically* displeasing.

⁷¹ This is a topos, which Dannenberg dates back at least as early as Plato, who – it has already been mentioned – was one of Schlegel's favorite authors, and if we look at an excerpt from a dialogue from Plato's Middle Period – the *Theaetetus* – we see a formulation of man as a corrupted reflection of the gods which is similar to Schlegel's own formulation in the above-excerpted letter. In *Theaetetus*, Socrates is explaining to his interlocutor, Theodoros, that evil, "having no place among the gods in heaven, of necessity [...] hover[s] around the mortal nature, and this earthly sphere". And he continues, "wherefore we ought to fly away from earth to heaven as quickly as we can; and to fly away is to become like God, as far as this is possible; and to become like him, is to become holy, just, and wise." (Plato 72).

An understanding of the concept of *Freude* and its relation to art is easier if we recast it in the more explicitly theological terminology that Schlegel's uses in the above-cited letters. His comments are not religious; they might even be construed as atheistic. Rather, it is only theological symbolism that he uses. He transfers the traditionally theological/mythological⁷² metaphor of man as a being, hovering between completely unreflective animalness and omniscient and benevolent divinity, to a normative aesthetic one of man striving, through art, to approximate his divinity. This theological symbolism is generally not very overt in the Aristophanes-essay but is nevertheless unmistakable when Schlegel writes: "In dem Höchsten, was er fassen kann, erscheint dem Menschen das Unbedingt-Höchste; seine höchste Freude ist ihm ein Bild von dem Genuss des unendlichen Wesens" (KAI 22). Thus, in Schlegel's view, the realization of *Freude* is a positive goal, approached in the comedic act.

Ernst Behler, in a short biography of Schlegel meant for popular consumption, gives one of the most detailed accounts of what beauty means for the early Schlegel. Its anthropological foundation is unmistakable. I'll include here the excerpt in near entirety, first of all because it is perhaps one of the best elucidations of what the concept of *Schönheit* means for Schlegel, but also because it is closely related to the concept of *Freude*, since *Freude* is the primary component, for Schlegel, that determines a comedy's aesthetic beauty:

Schönheit ist für ihn [Schlegel, *MB*] das Resultat einer glücklichen Harmonisierung von zwei antagonistischen Trieben in der menschlichen Brust, von denen der eine in ungeschmälerter *Natur* verharren möchte, während der andere danach strebt, die *Natur* zu überwinden und die eigentlich menschliche Sphäre als ein Reich bloßer *Kultur* oder *Kunst* zu errichten. Schönheit ist, mit anderen Worten, das Resultat einer ästhetischen Erziehung, welche den tief eingewurzelten Dualismus des Menschen zur Versöhnung

⁷² I use both terms (theological and mythological) here because the metaphor is found throughout both Greek and Christian thought.

bringt. Dieser besteht darin, daß wir als geistige Lebewesen aus zwei verschiedenen Naturen zusammengesetzt sind – aus Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft, aus Trieb und Geist, Rezeptivität und Spontaneität, Notwendigkeit und Freiheit, *Tierheit* und *Menschheit* (Behler *Selbstzeugnisse* 34).

As Schlegel writes in the Aristophanes-essay, “Leben und Geist sind unzertrennlich” in man (KAI 21); thus the aesthetic goal is not the subsumption of *Leben* to *Geist* or vice versa, but rather, as Behler puts it, the “Harmonisierung” of both “in der menschlichen Brust”. Further, Behler points out the normative *Bildungskonzept* latent in Schlegel’s understanding of *Schönheit*. If *Schönheit* results in a harmonization of the natural and cultural spheres, then art’s effect is to bring about a conciliation of this inherent dualism, a mediation, which results in beauty. For Schlegel, art cultivates a mediation between, as Behler puts it, one’s “Sinnlichkeit” and one’s “Vernunft”. The notion of *Schönheit* here is social. Pure beauty may be represented in the art object itself, but it is only experienced, and thus only gains validity, as an approximation in the individual. This occurs as a product of the right sort of *Bildung*, and *Bildung* – that is cultivation – only makes sense as a social phenomenon. The artistic phenomenon is thus dialectical; its success depends on the art object and on a person’s or a society’s ability to experience or appreciate the object. In the case of comedy – as reflected in the Aristophanes-essay –, the realization of beauty is a function of the comedy itself as a symbol of *Freude* and of a society’s capacity for *Freude*. Schlegel calls for “eine Bildung des Menschen durch Freiheit und Natur [...], wo alle seine Kräfte ihrem freien Spiel und ihrer eignen Entwicklung ungehemmt überlassen sind”. And he continues that once this is achieved, “dann wird der Mensch, seine Bildung und seine Geschichte, ein gemeinschaftliches Resultat seiner beiden heterogenen Naturen” (KAI 24). In the following section, I explore what this cultivation of an unrestricted

freedom means for Schlegel, how it relates to comedy and the concept of *Freude*, and how Schlegel believes it is best achieved.

IV.2 'Inner' Freedom in Man and in Dramatic Form as Prerequisites for the Experience of Freude

After discussing the anthropological basis for the concept of *Freude*, and postulating it as “der höchste Gegenstand der schönen Kunst” (KAI 22), i.e. comedy⁷³, Schlegel turns to a discussion of how *Freude* is to be treated both in its relation to comedy and to comedy’s audience. He does this by way of discussing *Freude*’s essential qualities. In short, he claims: “Schöne Freude muß frei sein, unbedingt frei. Auch die kleinste Beschränkung raubt der Freude ihre hohe Bedeutung, und damit ihre Schönheit” (KAI 22). Freedom is thus the necessary precondition *par excellence* for the attainment of “schöne Freude”; if *Freude* is subjected to limitations in any way, it is necessarily hindered: “Zwang der Freude ist immer häßlich, ein Bild der Vernichtung und der Schlechtheit” (*ibid.*). Schlegel follows by describing what he means by freedom and he gives both a moral-anthropological and a social-political definition of the term. Freedom is achieved, per definition, “durch das Hinwegnehmen aller Schranken”:

Eine Person also, die sich bloß durch ihren eignen Willen bestimmt, und die es offenbar macht, daß sie weder innern noch äußern Schranken unterworfen ist, stellt die vollkommene innre und äußre persönliche Freiheit dar. Dadurch daß sie im frohen Genusse ihrer selbst nur aus reiner Willkür und Laune handelt, absichtlich ohne Grund oder wider Gründe, wird die innre Freiheit sichtbar; die äußre in dem Mutwillen, mit

⁷³ Based on context, I make the assumption that by ‘schöne Kunst’, Schlegel means *comedy*.

dem sie äußere Schranken verletzt, während das Gesetz großmütig seinem Rechte entsagt (KAI 23).

There is an aspect of this conception of freedom that is wholly in keeping with the Enlightenment notion of freedom. It is hard to overlook the similarity between Schlegel's formulation that freedom means "sich bloß durch [den] eignen Willen [zu] bestimm[en]" and Kant's famous definition that Enlightenment means having the freedom and courage to use one's own reason⁷⁴. In both we see the realization of freedom as being not only a passive but also an active process, as being something that cannot only be granted and protected, but must also be actively willed. Schlegel makes the distinction between inner and outer freedom; Kant calls it "geistlicher" and "bürgerlicher" freedom (Kant *Beantwortung* 41). However, whereas Kant's spiritual freedom has more to do with the instrumentalization of one's capacity for rational thought – the awakening from "Unmündigkeit" (Kant *Beantwortung* 35), as it were –, Schlegel's definition of inner freedom is tailored to its relevance for comedy. It is depicted in the person, "dadurch daß sie im frohen Genusse ihrer selbst nur aus reiner Willkür und Laune handelt, absichtlich ohne Grund oder wider Gründe". Thus Schlegel's freedom is far more anarchical than Kant's, and it is anathema to rationality, which must always necessarily be motivated by a purpose. Schlegel's inner freedom is not only without purpose; it is *against* purpose. It is the freedom to act purely arbitrarily, and to enjoy doing so. Only with this sort of freedom can *Freude* be attained, or at least strived after.

Just as Schlegel first defines *Freude* as an anthropological function of human nature and then transfers the concept to its symbolic depiction in art, so too does he first describe *freedom* in

⁷⁴ "Sapere Aude! Habe Muth dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen! ist also der Wahlspruch der Aufklärung. [...] Zu dieser Aufklärung aber wird nichts erfordert als Freiheit" (Kant *Beantwortung* 35f.)

the personal sense, and then hint at what this implies for the art object. It should be mentioned, however, that many of Schlegel's explanations leave something to be desired, and it is difficult not to agree with Dannenberg that Schlegel's definitions of the terms *Freude* and *Freiheit* come off in places as somewhat "verschwommen" rather than "klar und deutlich" (Dannenberg 166). For example, Schlegel avoids citing many concrete examples from Aristophanes' plays, which would have made some of the most confusing aspects of his distinctions clearer. Nevertheless, to the extent that Schlegel discusses how previous critics misjudged Aristophanes' dramatic form, he implicitly hints at those formalistic aspects of Aristophanes' plays, which are indicative of the *Freude* and *Freiheit* that he is referring to. "[Man] wirft [...] dem Aristophanes vor: seine Stücke seien ohne dramatischen Zusammenhang und Einheit, seine Darstellungen in Karikatur und unwahr, er unterbreche oft die Täuschung" (KAI 30). These are the familiar Enlightenment criticisms of Aristophanes. He was disparaged for failing to adhere to one of the central principles of the *Regelpoetik* that drama be believable, that it have *vraisemblance*, as the French called it and that the cultivation and maintenance of dramatic illusion (*Täuschung*) be pursued. Maintaining dramatic illusion was, after all, one of the principle motivations behind the so-called *Lehre von den drei Einheiten*, according to which the ideal play was to take place in one setting, ideally last as long as the staging itself but no longer than 24 hours, and have a unified plot with beginning, middle and end (*Einheit von Ort, Zeit und Handlung*). These unities were thought to be requisite for maintaining dramatic illusion. For Schlegel, however, these stipulations are too constricting for comedy, and constitute in his terminology the very "Schranken" that must be removed if pure *Freude*, and consequently pure comedy, is to be achieved. If, as Schlegel says, the inner freedom necessary for *Freude* is represented in the person by arbitrary purposeless and

life-affirming action, then the same holds true for what he believes is true comedy. It cannot be subject to dramatic norms. For him, the breaking of traditional dramatic norms “ist nicht Ungeschicklichkeit, sondern besonnener Mutwille, überschäumende Lebensfülle, und tut oft gar keine üble Wirkung, erhöht sie vielmehr” (KAI 30). Thus the formal manifestation of comedic freedom is complete purposelessness. Furthermore, the plot has no responsibility to truth in its depiction of characters. That Aristophanes’ depiction of, for example, Socrates in *The Clouds* is a “Karikatur und unwahr” is, in Schlegel’s view, no grounds for criticizing the beauty of the play itself (*ibid.*). According to A.W. Schlegel, who – some have claimed – drew heavily from his brother’s essay on Aristophanes for his lecture on Old Greek Comedy (1808), the Athenians did not understand the depiction of living characters in Greek Comedy as having anything to do with the actual people themselves⁷⁵. It was obvious to them that the stage versions were gross caricatures of their living counterparts:

Man lasse sich dadurch nicht täuschen, daß die alten Komiker lebende Menschen genannt und mit allen Umständen auf das Theater gebracht haben, als ob sie deswegen in der That bestimmte Individuen dargestellt hätten. Denn solche historische Personen haben bey ihnen immer eine allegorische Bedeutung, sie stellen eine Gattung vor: und so wie in den Masken ihre Gesichtszüge, so dennoch ist dieß beständige Anspielen auf die nächste Wirklichkeit [...] sehr wesentlich für die Gattung (A.W. Schlegel 131).

⁷⁵ A.W. Schlegel was in many ways the great popularizer of his brother’s literary theories. His Vienna lectures on dramatic literature, though original in their own right, particularly in their understanding of Shakespeare, borrowed heavily from Friedrich Schlegel’s work on Classical tragedy and comedy and from his literary-historical subdivision between Classical and Romantic. Oskar Walzel has, among others, written of August Wilhelm’s debt to his brother in this respect: “Schon Marie Joachimi-Dege hat gezeigt, daß Wilhem in den Wiener Vorlesungen d[ie] Anschauung[en] seines Bruders popularisiert und trivialisiert” (Walzel *Methode?* 39). Holtermann echoes a similar attitude: “Friedrich Schlegels Gedanken wurden durch die einflußreichen Vorlesungen seines Bruders August Wilhelm Schlegel allgemein verbreitet und von verschiedenen Komödientheoretikern aufgegriffen und weiterentwickelt” (Holtermann 92). Consequently, A.W. Schlegel’s lecture on Old Greek Comedy will hereafter be used as a surrogate for or an explanation of what Friedrich Schlegel’s more obscure formulations might mean.

This is in keeping with the playfulness that both Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel ascribe to Old Greek Comedy. They believed that its participants – both actors and audience – understood it as a play in the truest sense, as something that had no necessary responsibility to accuracy in depiction. It is therefore a moot point to debate about whether a play is faithful to reality since it cannot help but have some connection to reality, being that it is made by humans and addresses human situations, no matter how outlandish its formal depiction may be. For similar reasons, Friedrich Schlegel believes that dramatic illusion can never actually be broken, since the cultural practice of staging a play naturally implies a pretense to accepting depicted actions as real, if only temporarily. According to him, the whole purpose of the dramatic ritual is to actively engage the imagination in order to make-believe, as it were, that the depicted actions are real. Aristophanes' plays don't break this illusion, at least not in any real sense. The comedy, he says,

verletzt nur, um mehr zu reizen, ohne wirklich zu zerstören. In der Begeisterung des poetischen Witzes, schadet und stört es nicht, wenn die Täuschung scheinbar vernichtet wird; weil das Wesentliche des Eindrucks einer solchen Darstellung, nicht in dem geordneten Zusammenhange dieser und in der Täuschung besteht, sondern in eben jener Begeisterung des Witzes, welche alle Schranken durchbricht (KAI 30f.).

The illusion created by the comedy is genetically different from that created in the tragedy. Whereas all the various components and actions in a tragic play must be brought into relation with one another so as to result in the necessary implication of the tragic end, and thus must maintain dramatic illusion in the traditional sense, comedy continually finds its end in the various jokes (*Witze*) that are strung together in it. The butt of each joke or witticism constitutes an end in itself, and must give no regard to the preceding or succeeding actions. Thus the

destruction of what is traditionally thought of as dramatic illusion is only seemingly (*scheinbar*) destroyed, since comedic illusion arises out of the enjoyment of each individual joke.

Schlegel's understanding of comedy is more radical than it may at first seem. Comedic theorists had often spoken of the mechanism of laughter as a constitutive element of comedy and that which separated it from tragedy, even though this had itself become questionable with the rise of the *Rührende Lustspiel* in the latter half of the 18th century. And Schlegel's predecessors in aesthetic philosophy had already emphasized the absolute autonomy that the artwork should allow itself. Schlegel, however, goes further than his predecessors in so far as his theory implies that a play can be called a comedy, which lacks any dramatic unity whatsoever, that more than being a play in the traditional sense – i.e. with a story and characters – is more akin to an unadulterated expression of joy. But this is precisely what Schlegel indicates with his emphasis on *Freude* and *Freiheit* as the primary aim and mechanism, respectively, of comedy. Even the traditionally important concept of laughter is not here seen as a constitutive element. Under Schlegel's conception, comedy is not meant to be first and foremost *funny* but rather *joyous* and *wanton*.

Interestingly, an emphasis on the joyous and free aspect of Old Greek Comedy has continued in modern scholarship. Dana Sutton, in her study of ancient comedy, attributes these characteristics to the protagonists in many of Aristophanes' plays. The Aristophanic comic hero's primary objective, she writes, is "to achieve his ambitions of freedom and fun" (Sutton 11). And within the context of the Dionysian festivals, considerations of "fun" and "freedom" are, she writes, "so predominant that they override any others, including those of morality" (*ibid.*).

August Wilhelm Schlegel manages to formulate more clearly than his brother the purposelessness that Friedrich indicates as being an essential element in Old Greek Comedy. We form the best idea of the Old Comedy, he says, by considering it as the direct opposite of Tragedy:

Die Tragödie ist der höchste Ernst der Poesie, die Komödie durchaus scherzhaft. Der Ernst besteht, wie ich schon in der Einleitung zeigte, in der Richtung der Gemüthskräfte auf einen Zweck, und der Beschränkung ihrer Thätigkeit dadurch. Sein entgegengesetztes besteht folglich in der scheinbaren Zwecklosigkeit und Aufhebung aller Schranken beym Gebrauch der Gemüthskräfte, und ist um so vollkommner, je größer das dabey aufgewandte Maaß derselben, und je lebendiger der Anschein des zwecklosen Spiels und der uneingeschränkten Willkühr ist (A.W. Schlegel 129)⁷⁶.

For Friedrich Schlegel and his brother, the Old Comedy is best understood, from a genre-theoretical standpoint, as the complete opposite of Greek Tragedy. Thus any formalistic features that are associated with tragedy, purposefulness (*Zweckgebundenheit*), restraint, earnestness must *per definition* be absent in comedy⁷⁷. Rather, it is purposeless freedom and the *Freude*, which results, that are the constitutive elements for *reine* or *schöne Komödie*, and are also, from an anthropological standpoint, the emotions or drives that are to be awakened in the experiencing of the comedic act⁷⁸.

⁷⁶ The notion of Aristophanic comedy as being sportive and playful has taken hold in modern Classical scholarship. See, for example, Harsh: "Old comedy is one of the 'sports' of literature. Fantastic from the beginning, if we may judge from the costumes of the komos-chorus, it deliberately cultivated its perversity" (Harsh 257).

⁷⁷ This is why Friedrich Schlegel believed that in the transition from Old to New Greek Comedy, "komische Energie" was "unvermeidlich durch tragische Energie ersetzt", creating "eine neue Gattung, eine Mischung des komischen und des tragischen Drama". This is because the plays of Menander have unified plots. According to Schlegel, the comedies of Menander borrowed from tragedy "die sanfte Wärme der Leidenschaft, welche sich oft dem tragischen Ernst nähert, und den eigentümlichen Zauber der dramatischen Kunst, das Interesse durch die leichte Entwicklung einer schöngeordneten vollständigen Handlung zu spannen" (KAI 32).

⁷⁸ In the emphasis that Schlegel places on *Freude* as an important aesthetic element in *Schönheit*, one might be misled to believe that Schlegel implies that only *Freude* and thus, only comedy – the literary vehicle for *Freude* – can be justifiably called *schön*. However, Schlegel is careful to indicate that *Schmerz*, and its dramatic vehicle,

IV.3 'Outer Freedom' and the Freedom of Expression

“Äußre Freiheit” (*ibid.*) forms the other half of Schlegel’s definition of freedom, at least in its relation to comedy, and it is his emphasis on the importance of ‘outer freedom’, which – as I hope to show – securely anchors Schlegel’s theory of comedy in a more general implied theory of society. Schlegel’s description of ‘outer freedom’ is, if possible, even more terse than his explanation of ‘inner freedom’, but its meaning may still be gathered with relative certainty from passages in the Aristophanes-essay. In the above-cited anthropological definition that Schlegel gives for ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ freedom, he writes: “die äußre [Freiheit wird sichtbar] in dem Mutwillen, mit dem sie äußre Schranken verletzt, während das Gesetz großmütig seinem Rechte entsagt” (KAI 23). One may think of ‘outer’ freedom as roughly the same as what is known in modern terminology as “negative liberty”⁷⁹ and what Kant terms “bürgerliche Freiheit”. If ‘inner’ freedom is represented by the psychological drive to free oneself from acting in accordance with purpose and rationality, then ‘outer’ freedom is, for Schlegel, represented by society’s allowance to let one do so. It is, in simplest terms, what today is called the freedom of expression.

For Schlegel, as for many authors and aesthetic philosophers towards the end of the 18th century, the belief in art’s asolute autonomy meant not only that the artist had to keep him- or herself from falling victim to an unreflective emulation of inherited literary norms, it also meant

tragedy, can also be classified as aesthetically *schön*. “Der Schmerz”, he says, “kann ein höchst wirksames Medium des Schönen sein; aber die Freude ist schon an sich schön” (KAI 22).

⁷⁹ See Isaiah Berlin’s essay “Two Concepts of Liberty”, which was first published in 1958. Berlin is one of the first who clarified the implicit distinction between negative and positive freedom which exists in Enlightenment philosophy, positive liberty being associated with continental thinkers like Hegel, Rousseau, Herder, and Schlegel, and negative liberty being associated more with British philosophers such as Locke, Hobbes, and Adam Smith.

that there could be no external restrictions placed on his or her art. For Schlegel, art's only motivation must be *Schönheit*, and "Schönheit", he writes, is "ein ächtes erstgebornes Kind der menschlichen Natur, und hat [...] ein [...] vollgültiges Recht, niemand zu gehorchen als sich selbst" (KAI 24). This right applies to all arts, plastic as much as literary; however, from a socio-political perspective, Schlegel believes that literature – which expresses itself through the medium of language – necessarily falls victim more often to social and political censorship than other arts: "Die Poesie kommt leichter in Gefahr, dies Recht zu verlieren, als andre Künste" (*ibid.*). And of all genres of literature, Schlegel believes that drama, particularly comedy, comes most often in danger of losing its expressive freedom: "Eine bloße Äusserung des Gefühls, die lyrische Darstellung der Freude, kommt nicht so leicht in Gefahr, ihre äußere Freiheit zu verlieren, – desto mehr die dramatische" (KAI 22)⁸⁰. Drama, as opposed to narrative and lyrical literature, requires a greater public infrastructure and public resources for its existence. Furthermore, for the greater part of the last 2,000 years, drama has been the only genre in the traditional *Gattungstrias*⁸¹, which could theoretically be experienced by the vast majority of society, since literacy was generally a privilege enjoyed by a small minority. Because theater has had a greater public profile, it has at times tended to attract stronger political censorship than literature intended only for reading. This was, for example, the case in France in the years leading up to the Revolution. Although that country had a universal censorship (free publishing

⁸⁰ I take Schlegel's implied formulation in this line – *die dramatische Darstellung der Freude* – to be a synonym for comedy, since this is or should be, for him, comedy's essential quality.

⁸¹ *Epik*, *Dramatik*, and *Lyrik*: literature was classed into these three genres as early as Plato (in the *Republic*) and Aristotle (in the *Poetics*), but this traditional system of classification held sway and remained relevant in Germany into the 19th century. Goethe writes (1819), "Es gibt nur drei echte Naturformen der Poesie: die klar erzählende, die enthusiastisch aufgeregte und die persönlich handelnde: *Epos*, *Lyrik* und *Drama*" (Goethe 187). All other sub-genres, as it were, such as "Lehrgedicht", "Epistel", "Elegie", "Balade" and "Roman" (!), are for Goethe not "Naturformen", but "Dichtarten" (*ibid.*).

and free theaters were unknown in the France of Louis XVI), it has often been noted that banned prose literature – both erotic and political – was nearly freely distributed whereas drama remained firmly guarded. This doubtless has to do with the fact that largely only “the court and the high nobility” were the “prime customers” for works like the *Encyclopédie*, whereas drama’s reach was far wider (Heargraves 154)⁸². However, according to Schlegel, the tendency to more strongly censor theatrical output lies not so much in its function as a widely accessible medium, but rather – and particularly in the case of comedy – because of the themes and subjects it addresses:

Sie [die dramatische Darstellung der Freude, *MB*] nimmt den Stoff zu ihren Schöpfungen aus der Wirklichkeit, ihre Bestimmung ist eine öffentliche laute Darstellung des Lächerlichen, und ihre Freiheit ist dem Laster, der Torheit, dem geheiligten Irrtume fürchterlich (KAI 22f.).

Comedy often addresses, and treats in a satirical manner, contemporary issues from reality; indeed, this is one of the defining characteristics of Aristophanic comedy. He depicts the day-to-day particularities of *polis* life, not – as in tragedy – mythological events. For Schlegel, Aristophanes constantly tested the stability of the freedom that Athens allowed comedy by publicly ridiculing “Laster” and “Torheit” wherever he found these things. Later in his essay, Schlegel again offers a formulation of the singular necessity of “äussre Freiheit” for comedy:

In andern Kunstwerken ist das Genie von seiner äußern Lage unabhängig: seine innere Freiheit kann ihm niemand rauben. Aber das komische Genie verlangt auch äußere

⁸² For more on the proliferation of banned literature in France, see, for example, Robert Heargraves, 154-156 and Simon Schama’s seminal study, *Citizens*, particularly pp. 174-83. We see an analogous situation in modern American society where film and television – now the artistic mediums that enjoy the largest mainstream distribution – are subject to the careful inspection of the MPAA and the FCC, respectively, whereas drama, which has become a marginal art form, is granted nearly complete freedom, limited at most by the force of social etiquette.

Freiheit, kann ohne diese sich nur bis zur Grazie, nie bis zum höchsten Schönen erheben (KAI 29).

According to Schlegel, political censorship may exist without, however, endangering the expressive freedom that tragedy, for example, requires. Greek tragedy's plots are taken from mythology, or in the case of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, the distant past, and tend to address questions of 'human fate' (KAI 25). It is not inherent to tragedy, for example, that it be able to satirically address contemporary issues, and as such, Schlegel believes that a fully realized tragedy, one that is *schön* and by implication autonomous, can be written even under conditions of literary censorship. However, censorship, at least as Schlegel knew it, had generally existed for the very purpose of deterring libel against heads of state⁸³, which is precisely what Schlegel believes that comedy needs to be allowed to do. Thus for Schlegel, a comedy may not even hope to be of aesthetic value, unless the community in which it is produced fully acknowledges its right to free expression. Without this, it can achieve grace (*Grazie*) perhaps, but never beauty. It is clear then, why Schlegel believes that the Athenians came closest to achieving 'pure' comedy, since they were the only society known to him, which protected comedy's freedom of expression. The "komische Muse" was, as Schlegel writes, "nur bei einem Volke, und bei diesem einen Volke nur eine kurze Zeit, frei" (KAI 24). Schlegel sees the roots of this freedom in comedy's religious origins. It was originally, "nichts anders als eine öffentliche religiöse Handlung, ein Teil von dem Feste des *Bakchus*" (KAI 21). The playwright and the chorus were considered "heilige Personen", enjoying the protection and blessings of

⁸³ I make this distinction between censorship as Schlegel would have seen it and as it exists today, since the form that censorship often takes in many modern republics tends to be more often of a moral character, forbidding rather than what is sexually 'obscene' than what is politically satirical.

Dionysus, the “Gott der Freude” (KAI 23). Being the god of irreverence and intoxication, of ritualistic madness, of “freeing one from one’s normal self” (Sutton 2), Dionysus’ servants in the dramatic ritual were seen as naturally having the freedom to say anything and everything. For Schlegel, the dramatic poets were the protected human mouthpieces of Dionysus on earth; “Aus ihnen redete der Gott der Freude, und unter diesem Schutze waren sie unverletzlich” (KAI 23). And with the development of Athenian democracy the original religious ritual became a political institution:

Bald ward aus einem religiösen Institut auch ein politisches, aus dem Feste eine öffentliche Angelegenheit, aus der Unverletzlichkeit des Priesters eine symbolische Darstellung der bürgerlichen Freiheit. Der Chor besonders deutete auf das Athenische Volk, welches in der Schönheit eines Spiels seine eigne Heiligkeit erblickte (KAI 24).

Comedy’s freedom of expression developed, according to Schlegel, into a symbol of freedom itself, a symbol of the unique democracy that Athens enjoyed, under which citizens enjoyed a widened platform for publicly presenting their grievances. Of course, this complete freedom was only granted to drama, and did not exist for the Athenians as a civil right, nor does Schlegel advocate the civil protection of the freedom of expression for anything other than art. The trial of Socrates is proof enough that the Athenians had no notion of natural human rights that could be constitutionally protected. And Schlegel takes pains to show that the freedom of speech granted to the drama was only conditionally allowed, that is to say, protected only during religious festivities. There is, nevertheless, some indication that Schlegel may have idealized the freedom allowed in Aristophanes’ comedies. K. J. Dover indicates for example, that we cannot be entirely sure that Greek playwrights enjoyed complete freedom since in Aristophanes we

nowhere find any indication that he criticized the democratic state-system of Athens; rather, his political satire limits itself to attacks on politicians and on political decisions (Dover 33). However, even if Schlegel misread the situation in Athens, it does not fundamentally affect his argument; it would simply make Aristophanic comedy less ideal according to his theory than he had supposed it to be. Aristophanic comedy is, after all, for him only the best known approximation of the comedic ideal he wishes to develop.

IV.4 The Festivity of Greek Comedy

The fact that Greek Comedy's worth relied in part on a certain political – specifically democratic – context, does not mean that, for Schlegel, it should ideally be political in content or aim. His theory of comedy might itself be considered revolutionary – it does, after all, radically reinterpret the meaning of the genre to the point that it is nearly only applicable to Aristophanes – but it is not something that in itself should carry a revolutionary or socio-critical aim. This can already be gathered from the stipulation that the 'inner freedom' required of comedy means that it cannot be bound to any purpose outside of itself, implying that it not seek to have any social or political effect. True, the plays of Aristophanes do address political issues, and are much more obviously political than the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. And it might certainly seem that Aristophanes wished to have some wider social effect than that of merely bringing joy to his audience when he criticized prominent political figures. However, in Schlegel's understanding at least, these endeavours would have been harmless because of Old

Greek Comedy's festive context. It seems to be rather important to Schlegel that Greek comedies were staged during religious festivals, and that thus whatever potentially subversive undercurrents they contained could be rendered innocuous by the fact that it was all only "Scherz", taking place as they did during the festival dedicated to the god of playfulness and intoxication. The "Verletzung der [äußeren] Schranken", the joyous emancipation from all societal strictures, which Schlegel believed was a constitutive element of Greek Comedy, was according to him "nur scheinbar", since it took place during the festivals (KAI 23). Thus any societal criticism and personal attacks it contained could be explained as a result of the general relaxation of standards of behavior and the bawdy spirit of irreverence towards both men and gods that resulted from the holiday spirit (Levi 175).

This playful and societally innocuous freedom has more modern parallels. "So stellten sich die Römer in den Saturnalien die Freiheit dar", writes Schlegel, and "ein ähnlicher Gedanke lag vielleicht bei dem Karneval zum Grunde" (KAI 23). In fact, we would likely not be far off the mark in comparing Schlegel's notion of the societal function of comedy with that, which Bakhtin gives to the carnival in his study of Rabelais, and interestingly, Bakhtin notes that Rabelais and Aristophanes have often been compared (Bakhtin 98). Like the Greek dramatic festivals – the Lenaia and the City Dionysia –, the medieval carnival offers a "nonofficial [...] and extrapolitical aspect of the world" (Bakhtin 6). While it lasts, the carnival "is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit" (Bakhtin 7). Bakhtin, like Schlegel, emphasizes the fact that the festival was extrapolitical. It constituted a space that had no necessary connection to the world outside of itself. Thus, whatever political attacks the comedies that are performed during the festival might have, these cannot however make it past

the bounds of the festival because of its unique structure. All externally directed purposeful aims are neutralized.

Thus the festival, and the understanding that the Athenians implicitly had of their festival, meant that whatever purposefulness Aristophanes' plays might have had, was only seeming purposefulness. For Schlegel, this would have been obvious to the Athenians. Dana Sutton, in her study of ancient comedy, *Ancient Comedy: the War of the Generations* (1993), writes that one cannot correctly understand ancient comedy unless one considers its festive context. In fact, she goes so far as to term ancient comedy "festive comedy" in order to emphasize this point (Sutton x). Furthermore, the festival context in which these plays were staged is reflected in the plays themselves. "Festive comedies", she writes, all "tend to have a characteristic spirit and viewpoint reflecting the festival holidays that served as their production contexts" (*ibid.*). For example, in the plays, there are certain "psychological mechanisms", later she calls them "anxiety-reducing mechanisms", such as "self-referential metadrama and deliberate violation of dramatic illusion", that "create an emotionally safe environment, and deflate comic derision" (*ibid.*). The freedom allowed in the comedies because of their festive context is, according to Sutton, one of the reasons why the Roman senate later forced the suppression of the *Bacchae* festivals in Rome (Sutton 6).

There is one key difference, however, between Schlegel's understanding on the one hand, and Sutton's and Bakhtin's on the other. Both Sutton and Bakhtin acknowledge the social role of these festivals as mechanisms "for venting the aggravations, frustrations, and resentments" felt by individuals (Sutton, 6). In the case of Athens, this could have been the frustrations resulting from the powerlessness the Athenian citizens felt in the face of the gods, or in the face of

imminent defeat in the Peloponnesian War, or it could have been the powerlessness that certain citizens felt towards richer or politically more powerful peers. The festival was, according to Sutton, as such “an approved instrument of socialization” (*ibid.*). Though Schlegel does not mention this function of the festivals – indeed he really only mentions Greek Comedy’s festive nature in passing – it seems that he would have been reluctant to accept such a function. The Greek comedy and the festival in which it was performed was primarily, for Schlegel, an opportunity for the celebration of joy, and it was not a mechanism whereby, in allowing periodic though innocuous ventings of frustrations, the status-quo could be maintained. He does not see the festival as cathartic, but as purely affirmative.

IV.5 Logical Implications of Positing an Ideal: Reasons for the Unattainability of the Comedic Ideal

It is a distinct peculiarity of Schlegel’s theory of comedy as expressed in his Aristophanes-essay – moreso than any theories or beliefs that he held regarding other literary genres – that the realization of comedic perfection is not only a function of formal requirements – in the case of comedy, the symbolization of *Freude* through the depiction of purposeless [e.g. free and unbounded] joy – but that it is also premised on, and *absolutely* dependent on a particular community’s capacity for *Freude*. It is an ideal that can only be realized in a community, whose members have achieved, “eine Bildung des Menschen durch Freiheit und Natur [...], wo alle seine Kräfte ihrem freien Spiel und ihrer eignen Entwicklung ungehemmt überlassen sind” (KAI 24).

Thus the realization of the comedic ideal is, by definition, dependent on the realization of a certain communal *Bildungsideal*. This is, for example, not how Schlegel sees tragedy as functioning. Whereas Schlegel consistently emphasizes that Greek Comedy did not achieve ideal beauty⁸⁴, he does not qualify his praise for Greek Tragedy. The Greeks did in fact realize the ideal tragical in Schlegel's eyes, namely, under Sophocles, and this despite the less than utopian level of *Bildung* that he believed the Greeks had achieved. In fact, Sophoclean tragedy represents for Schlegel the apex of Greek literature overall, after which he believed it inevitably decayed. In *Von den Schulen der Griechischen Poesie* (1794), Schlegel calls Sophocles "das höchste Schöne", and considers his play to be "das Maximum der Griechischen Poesie" (KAI 14f.). In praise that it would be hard to exceed, Sophocles is elsewhere described as having reached "das äußerste Ziel der Griechischen Poesie" (KAI 296), as having fully realized "[die] ästhetischen und technischen Gesetze" (KAI 297).

If we return to the Aristophanes-essay we can see why, in Schlegel's view, the tragic genre is socio-historically capable of achieving its full potential in an imperfect society, whereas comedy cannot. "Die Tragödie", Schlegel claims, "spannt und erhebt ihr Publikum, hält also das Verderben des Geschmacks so lange als möglich ab" (KAI 25). Tragedy, then, far from being limited to the cultivation of its public, rather dignifies it ["erhebt ihr Publikum"], and can have a positive influence on taste. "Das Komische", on the other hand, "richtet sich, weit mehr als das Tragische, nach dem Grade der Reizbarkeit und der Fassungskraft seines Publikums; und diese hängen wieder von dem Maße der geselligen Ausbildung und aller Seelenkräfte ab" (KAI 26f.). In other words, whereas tragedy, in Schlegel's eyes, might bring out what is best in a particular

⁸⁴ "Allein auch diesen Moment [vollkommner Schönheit, *MB*] hat die Griechische Komödie nicht erreicht" (KAI 25).

society, comedy appeals to and is dependent on common tastes. Whereas tragedy's intended audience was a subclass of Athenian society consisting of the most cultivated members, the comedy spoke to the general public, and to general tastes. And, as Schlegel explains: "[D]ie Sitten waren schon sehr verderbt, und der komische Geschmack noch roh" (KAI 25) by the time that Aristophanes wrote his plays. Whereas "der Künstler Aristophanes [...] sich an die Geschichte vom Anfange der Kunst [schließt], [findet] der Mensch Aristophanes [...] seinen Platz in der Geschichte vom Verfall" (*ibid.*)⁸⁵. Günter Oesterle, summarizing why Schlegel believed the tragedy had reached "das höchste Schöne" (KAI 14), writes: "[F]ür die tragische Kunst fielen historisch rechtzeitig die Entwicklung der Sitten und des ästhetischen Materials zusammen" (Oesterle 444).

Schlegel is unequivocal about the absolute predication of the comedic ideal on the level of *Bildung* that a society has achieved, and about the rather remote possibility that it will ever be possible:

Dramatische Vollständigkeit ist in der reinen Komödie, deren Bestimmung öffentliche Darstellung und deren Prinzip der öffentliche Geschmack ist, nicht möglich; wenigstens so lange nicht möglich, bis sich das Verhältnis der Empfänglichkeit zur Selbsttätigkeit im Menschen ganz ändert, bis reine Freude, ohne allen Zusatz von Schmerz, hinreicht, seinen Trieb aufs höchste zu spannen (KAI 31).

There is a quite logical system that underlies Schlegel's theory of comedy. His theory posits an ideal of a unique sort. For tragedy, we have textual documents, namely the plays of

⁸⁵ Schlegel sees the Golden Age of Athens, like many scholars before and since, as lying between the victories against Persia and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC. By the time Aristophanes had written his last plays in the 380's, Athens had suffered a terrible plague (430-29), a military debacle in Sicily (415-13), two oligarchic revolutions and two democratic restorations. Athens had been defeated in war and its empire had been completely dismantled.

Sophocles, which by definition provide us with what the logician would call sufficient, though not necessary, examples of the realization of the ideal tragical. Not so the ideal comical. In so far as the ideal comedy has not yet been achieved there is no attribute, or set of attributes – be they socio-political structure or having to do with dramatic form – that we could point to which are sufficient for comedy’s ideal realization. There are, however, attributes or characteristics, the absence of which *are* necessary. Many of these have been mentioned above: tragic elements like dramatic purposefulness, restrictions on the freedom of artistic expression, audiences who are incapable of relinquishing themselves completely to the experience of pure *Freude*. Thus, though the definition of the ideal comedy might be a positive one (i.e. the positive realization of *Freude*), in the examination of the societal conditions, political structures, and stylistic elements in comedy, we are confronted everywhere with negative conditions. We can, in other words, only know what is necessarily *and* sufficiently bad (or wrong), not what is necessarily *or* sufficiently good (or right). This is the logical implication of Schlegel’s statement: “Allein auch diesen Moment [vollkommner Schönheit] hat die Griechische Komödie nicht erreicht” (KAI 25). And it explains why Schlegel believes that, from the perspective of his theory, it is rather easy to point out the failures of Old Greek Comedy: “Aus der Natur des freien Komischen überhaupt, und aus dem Ursprünge und Charakter der alten Griechische Komödie, erklären sich sehr leicht ihre vorzüglichen Fehler” (*ibid.*).

If, according to Schlegel, the Greek Comedy did not reach a state of “vollkommne[r] Schönheit”, then clearly, Aristophanes’ plays contain some failures, which kept them from achieving aesthetic perfection, and obviously these ‘failures’ have nothing to do with the traditionally-criticized lack of dramatic illusion and absence of coherent plot which, as we have

seen, are precisely what Schlegel praises in Aristophanes. That the socio-political protection of comedy's expressive freedom is in itself no safeguard for a comedy's aesthetic worth is clear; 'external freedom' is after all, only a precondition. The primary aesthetic objective of comedy is, for Schlegel, *Freude* – both its depiction and its effect –, and 'inner' and 'outer' freedom, as aesthetic categories, are of relevance only in so far as they promote that end; they are, so to speak, to be treated only as aesthetic means.

Thus, whatever aesthetic 'failures' Aristophanes' plays are seen to have must be understood as being hindrances to *Freude*, or alternately, as promoters of *Schmerz* which, for Schlegel, is the absolute opposite of *Freude*. Among these 'failures' is, surprisingly, Aristophanes' satire, or at least certain aspects of it. An examination of Schlegel's criticism of Aristophanes' satire will make it clearer what role Schlegel believes comedy is to play in his conception of both the actual and the ideal society. In the Aristophanes-essay, we find the following cryptic sentences:

Noch ehe sie [die altgriechische Komödie, *MB*] sich aus ihrem fremdartigen Ursprunge [dem religiösen, *MB*] zu reiner Poesie entwickelte und völlig bildete, entartete sie schon in persönliche und politische Nebenabsichten. Die Satire des Aristophanes ist sehr oft nicht poetisch sondern persönlich, und ebenso demagogisch als die Art, mit der er den Wünschen und den Meinungen des Volks schmeichelt (KAI 28f.).

This has been seen as proof that Schlegel advocates an unsatirical comedic ideal⁸⁶. On the one hand, it would seem odd that Schlegel develops his entire theory of comedy from Aristophanes and at the same time criticizes that which Aristophanes is perhaps most famous for, his satire. On the other hand, satire is *per definition* bound to a purpose. Satire is, as Stefan

⁸⁶ This is Niedrig's (1950) reading of Schlegel's theory of comedy (27). This also seems to be Japp's (1999) reading as well, when he states that "die äußere Freiheit die polemischen Zwecke der Satire befördert, die Schlegel gerne fernhalten möchte" (19).

Scherer writes, “normgebunden, weil sie aus der Perspektive der Wahrheit – einer richtigen Sicht – heraus formuliert wird“ (Scherer *Dramenvorlesungen* 5.1). In this sense, it would seem that satire, by its very nature, is at odds with the purposelessness that is the primary characteristic of ‘inner freedom’. Thus, it is easy to see why the role that satire should play in Schlegel’s notion of ideal comedy is the source of so much confusion.

However, if we look at the above quote, it seems that not all satire, but rather only *persönliche*⁸⁷ satire is being criticized; it seems as if Schlegel implies that *poetische* satire is permissible. It is not entirely clear what Schlegel means by *persönliche* and *poetische* satire, and as Brummack writes, “das Begriffspaar poetische und persönliche Satire gibt es vor Schlegel nicht, auch bei ihm ist es vereinzelt” (Brummack 25). Brummack makes the convincing argument that *persönliche* satire is not to be confused with “Personalsatire” (*ibid.*), which is satire that is directed at a particular known individual. Rather *persönliche* satire should be thought of as ‘personal’ in the sense that it serves the personal interests of the poet; satire, as Schlegel writes, with “persönliche[n] und politische[n] Nebenabsichten” (KAI 29). Thus, for Brummack, Schlegel criticizes the fact that Aristophanes uses the dramatic platform as a forum for attacking his own personal enemies.

According to Brummack, Schlegel is here implying that there are certain forms of satire that are not only permissible, but actually to be valued, at least within the context of an imperfect comedy. Brummack believes that this is what Schlegel means by the following:

Bis dahin [that is, until that time when the comedy achieves its ideal, *MB*] wird die komische Kunst, um die Energie zu erreichen, ohne welche alle dramatische Darstellung

⁸⁷ I leave the original German here because, as is subsequently shown, the word *persönlich* cannot be unequivocally translated.

unnatürlich und unwirksam ist, das Schlechte und den Schmerz zu Hülfe nehmen müssen: bis dahin bleibt also auch die Erbsünde der komischen Energie die notwendige Lust am Schlechten. Die reine Lust ist selten lächerlich, aber das Lächerliche (sehr oft nichts anders als die Lust am Schlechten) ist weit wirksamer und lebendiger. Die eigentliche Aufgabe der Komödie ist: mit dem kleinsten Schmerz das höchste Leben zu bewirken (KAI 31).

It might seem like a complete contradiction that Schlegel now claims that the actual purpose of the comedy is “mit dem kleinsten Schmerz das höchste Leben zu bewirken”; however the context indicates that this is not the purpose of the ideal comedy, but rather that this should be the goal of any comedy created in a society that is not yet capable of excitement in the dramatic act which is wholly bereft of *Schmerz* – i.e. derision, sarcasm, mockery, ridicule, satire etc. Brummack mistakenly sees this as being an indication that Schlegel believes that satire is not only inevitable in unideal comedy, but that it is desirable. “Solange [die vollkommene Komödie] nicht verwirklicht ist”, writes Brummack, “gehört, in ihrem Dienste, die Satire zur komischen Kunst” (Brummack 23)⁸⁸. According to Brummack, Schlegel believes that comedy does not only find itself “in Wechselwirkung mit der Progression der Menschheit” (Brummack 23); in addition, comedy “soll aber auch auf die Bildung der Menschheit zurückwirken” (Brummack 23). Thus Brummack maintains that Schlegel wants comedy to help bring about the positive progression of humanity. If this were in fact the case, then it would make sense that Schlegel would value satire for its didactic potential. But Schlegel repeatedly makes it clear that the comedy, both in an ideal society and in a less than ideal society, should have no purpose outside of itself. It can only be a reflection of the state of man, not aid in its promotion. Schlegel would

⁸⁸ This sentence could be read as implying an *unavoidability* rather than a *desirability*. However, the subsequent quote should show that Brummack does in fact ascribe a *Bildungs*-objective to Schlegel’s comedy. Interestingly, Holtermann also sees Brummack as being mistaken in his interpretation of Schlegel in this respect (Holtermann 99)

not have emphasized Old Greek Comedy's festive context, which he believed neutralized any satirical purpose that someone might have associated with it if he did not firmly believe in this.

Rather, Schlegel's remarks on the role of "das Schlechte" and "der Schmerz" in comedy must be read as indicating that Schlegel believes that until the human community is fully actualized, comedy will simply not be able to avoid "Lust am Schlechten". In such a society, the most that a comedy can hope to do is minimize *Schmerz* as much as possible. This is what Schlegel means when he says that the comic playwright's job is "mit dem kleinsten Schmerz das höchste Leben zu bewirken" (KAI 31). In an ideal society, however, when individuals are completely inwardly and outwardly free, satire will not even be able to be a part of comedy, since there will be nothing for the society's members to make fun of.

If Friedrich Schlegel's normative comedic ideal is so intimately connected with the structure of the society in which it is produced, then it makes sense to look more closely at what Schlegel believes this society will look like. As Schlegel indicates with his emphasis on Greek Comedy's festive context, the relationship between society and comedy is one-way; comedy is to have no didactic effect. Hitherto, I have alluded to the fact that the society must give free reign to the comedic impulse, or in other words, abstain from censoring it. But can anything more be said about the desired socio-political structure that will foster comedy? Is it only incidental for Schlegel that Athens was a democracy or was it a necessary correlation? In the Aristophanes-essay itself, Schlegel gives no definite answer, except to say that in Athens, comedy was "eine symbolische Darstellung der bürgerlichen Freiheit" (KAI 24), which is really only a descriptive and not a prescriptive statement. Elsewhere, Schlegel says that comedy is a function "de[s] öffentliche[n] Geschmack[s]" (KAI 31), which is again only descriptive. To see what, in 1794,

Friedrich Schlegel might have considered the ideal societal structure for the realization of his comedic ideal, one is forced to look elsewhere, namely in his early political thought. In the brief detour that follows (Chapter V), I hope to illustrate why, for Schlegel, the democratic state is the only type of society, which could foster his comedic ideal. This will, I hope, clarify the question of comedy's social place and function as Schlegel understood it.

V *Schlegel's Early Political Thought and its Implications
for his Theory of Comedy*

To speak of a political philosophy in the early Schlegel is to engage in constructive theoretical work that is far more speculative than working out Schlegel's *Geschichtsphilosophie* or his anthropological *Lebensphilosophie*. To say that any formalized political philosophy can be gleaned from the early Schlegel comes close to being a gross over-exaggeration. As Behler writes, Schlegel only seriously started turning to politics in his works after 1804 and before that addressed the issue only occasionally in small publications⁸⁹. This is not to say that he was apolitical. From his letters to his brother, we can see that he was interested in politics from quite early on⁹⁰. In January 1796, for example, he informed his brother: "Bin erst bei dem Politischen, wie leicht und angenehm wird da alles von der Hand gehen, auch weit einträglicher" (KAXXIII 275). And in fact he had planned to add a third volume to his aforementioned work on Greek and Roman literature which would have discussed primarily the political revolutions of the Greeks and Romans, though this never actually made it to paper (Behler *Einleitung* XX). We may say, that in so far as Schlegel favored to such a strong degree, all things Classical, that he would have looked favorably upon the political systems of the ancients. And he does in fact write in his *Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus*, which is Schlegel's most famous

⁸⁹ Behler: "Unter den Werken, die Friedrich Schlegel seit 1804 verfaßt hat, nehmen Schriften historischen und politischen Inhalts eine beherrschende Rolle ein". Before 1804, "[hatte] Schlegel politische und historische Themen nur beiläufig, in kleineren Gelegenheitschriften und wenigen Fragmenten behandelt" (Behler *Einleitung* XV).

⁹⁰ Beiser locates the root of this interest in Schlegel's reaction to the French Revolution and his relationship with Caroline Böhmer, herself a sort of revolutionary figure in the short-lived Republic of Mainz (Beiser 245). Behler, on the other hand, emphasizes rather Schlegel's Classical studies as the primary cause of his interest in politics: "Schlegels Interesse an politisch-historischen Themen findet demnach in der Beschäftigung mit der klassischen Antike seinen Ursprung" (Behler *Einleitung* XX). Obviously both aspects are probably at play here, but I tend to agree rather with Behler that Schlegel's Classical studies were the catalyst for his entrance into political thought.

early political treatise, that “die politische Kultur der Modernen noch im Stande der Kindheit gegen die der Alten [ist]” (KAVII 18). It is primarily via Schlegel’s *Versuch* that we may gain insight into his early political thought.

It is best to approach Schlegel’s political thought by first noting that, for the early Schlegel, politics – like art and religion in fact – is subservient to the great program of human *Bildung*. “D[ie] Bestimmung des Menschen”, he later wrote, “ist das Wahre zu erkennen, das Gute zu tun, und das Schöne zu genießen, und in seinem Denken, Tun und Empfinden Eintracht zu bewirken” (KAI 627). In a sense, this can be partially understood as being the same as what many German Enlightenment thinkers were working out (e. g. Lessing’s *die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, Kant’s *Ideen zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, and Schiller’s *Aesthetische Briefe*), namely, the understanding of the progress of humanity and the programmatic determination of the correct *Bildung* for humans. At any rate, the ideal for Schlegel is to develop a political system, which promotes culture and cultivation on the one hand, and harmonious life on the other. In this sense, Schlegel is decidedly outside of – and would have been opposed to – Anglo-American political thought in the tradition of Hobbes; that is, political thought that tended to view the state as a safeguard for the protection of individuals from one another. Schlegel’s is a positive political ideal. Its “Fundament und Objekt”, as Hendrix writes in his study on Schlegel’s political worldview, is “die Gemeinschaft der Menschen” (Hendrix 9). In the *Versuch*, Schlegel calls for a “Gemeinschaft der Sitten” (KAVII 18), which indicates both an insistence on the value of the community and an emphasis on socio-cultural cultivation (*Bildung*). In fact, as Beiser aptly points out, the “search for community” is

the “fundamental leitmotiv” of Schlegel’s entire political-philosophical development (Beiser 261), which is as prevalent in his early panegyrics to republicanism as it is in his later medieval (Christian monarchical) state-theory. Even in his republican phase, Schlegel is hostile to the idea of the individualistic liberal state, and favors a more holistic political system. This is, in fact, one of the conclusions of his *Versuch*.

Originally intended as a review of Kant’s *Zum ewigen Frieden*, Schlegel’s *Versuch* ultimately carried the subtitle “veranlaßt durch die Kantische Schrift zum ewigen Frieden”, which is apt, since the essay ended up being something between a review and a free presentation of his own views. In his *Versuch* Schlegel takes issue with Kant’s proposed form of representative republicanism. In order to understand Schlegel’s approach, it is not necessary here to go into Kant’s own political theory. Suffice it to say that Schlegel believes, unlike Kant, that the only true form of republicanism is complete democracy⁹¹. For Schlegel, the ideal political system would be one in which the state acts in accordance with the general will: “der allgemeine Wille [ist] die notwendige Bedingung d[es] Republikanismus” (KAVII 16)⁹². But since, for Schlegel, the general will is an abstracted idealization and cannot actually be determined by the state, the democratic will of the majority will have to act as a surrogate for the general will:

91 Jakob Baxa succinctly pointed out the difference in Kant’s and Schlegel’s theories of the state when he wrote the following (1931): “Der tiefere Grund, warum Friedrich Schlegel in offenen Gegensatz zu Kant tritt, liegt darin, daß Kant unter Republik einen repräsentativen Staat im Sinne Montesquieus und unter ‘Republikanismus’ das ‘Staatsprinzip der Absonderung der ausführenden Gewalt von der gesetzgebenden’ versteht, während Schlegel sich als Anhänger der unmittelbaren Demokratie bekennt und nur in ihr das Urbild einer echten Republik zu sehen vermag” (Baxa 30).

⁹² It is not hard here to see the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and this influence has not gone unnoticed. See, for example; Hendrix 8; Behler *Einleitung* XXIII; Brummack 12. Sabine characterizes the Rousseauian “general will” as representing the “collective good, which is not the same thing as the private interests of its members. In some sense, it lives its own life, fulfills its own destiny, and suffers its own fate” (Sabine 588f.).

Der absolut allgemeine [...] Wille [kann] im Gebiete der Erfahrung nicht vorkommen [...], und [existiert] nur in der Welt der reinen Gedanken. [...] Es bleibt hier nichts übrig als durch eine *Fiktion* einen empirischen Willen als *Surrogat* des a priori gedachten absolut allgemeinen Willens gelten zu lassen; und da die reine Auflösung des politischen Problems unmöglich ist, sich mit der *Approximation* dieses praktischen x zu begnügen (KAVII 16).

The determination of the general will always remain a philosophical ideal. In practice, political organization will have to settle for a second best: the approximation of the general will through the democratic will of the majority: “Der *Wille der Mehrheit* soll als *Surrogat* des allgemeinen Willens gelten” (KAVII 17). Thus Schlegel shows himself to be a devout democrat. But he also shows that for him, the ideal remains a state in which the communal spirit reigns supreme and in which the general will takes precedence over the desires and even rights of any of its individual citizens⁹³. The historical example that Schlegel has in mind is, as might be expected, Attic democracy, and more than an echo of French revolutionary ideals, Schlegel is essentially proposing a system that is as close as possible to that which he believes to have been achieved in Athens. It is, for him, the best possible organization of an imperfect society, which is in fact what he saw as the purpose of political philosophy. Schlegel alludes to the practical nature of his political thought when he writes that he sees, “in ihr [der Politik, *MB*] eine praktische Wissenschaft, deren Objekt die Relation der praktischen Individuen und Arten ist”

⁹³ It is possibly indicative of Schlegel’s dissatisfaction with the notion of democratic government as the best possible – though not perfectly ideal – surrogate for the general will, that he gave up on democracy so soon after the publication of this essay. His turn to the medieval corporation of Christian monarchies was motivated by the desire to find a socio-political system that could, if possible, achieve the ideal of the fully cultivated and unified society on earth. Already in his *Philosophische Lehrjahre* (1796-99), we find the note: “Nie ist mehr wahre Freyheit und Gleichheit und Brüderschaft gewesen als im Mittelalter – und in dieser wieder das beste in Deutschland” (KA XVIII 299).

(Hendrix 9)⁹⁴. Nevertheless his ideal remains, as he writes in the same essay, the “Gemeinschaft der Sitten” (KAVII 18) that he believes the ancients had come closest to approximating⁹⁵. As Beiser writes, by “Gemeinschaft der Sitten”, Schlegel means “a society held together not only by abstract laws but also by a common public spirit. Simply conforming to the laws is not enough for the true state: there must also be genuine affection and love between fellow citizens” (Beiser 252). Interestingly, the argumentative approach in both Schlegel’s theory of comedy and his political philosophy is symmetrical. An ideal is posited, which however, is either unattainable or not yet attained, and actual models are offered – Aristophanic comedy and democracy, respectively –, which best approximate those ideals. It would seem that the “Gemeinschaft der Sitten” is exactly the type of society that Schlegel believes would allow for the realization of the comedic ideal. In the Aristophanes-essay, he writes:

Sie [die Komödie, *MB*] wird es [das höchste Schöne, *MB*] erreichen, wenn [...] aus Gesetzmäßigkeit Freiheit wird, wenn die Würde und die Freiheit der Kunst ohne Schutz sicher, wenn jede Kraft des Menschen frei und jeder Mißbrauch der Freiheit unmöglich sein wird (KAI 29).

Certainly, democracy alone won’t be able to ensure that “jede Kraft des Menschen frei [ist]”. This can only come from the positive self-actualization of each individual citizen, and will thus only occur in the true “Gemeinschaft der Sitten”, as Schlegel sees it. The conditions

⁹⁴ This citation is taken from Hendrix, who is quoting from an earlier edition of Schlegel’s works (not the *Kritische Ausgabe*) and Hendrix gives nothing but the page number. As such, I don’t know for sure where this quote comes from, but it must be from Schlegel’s early writings, because Hendrix is here discussing Schlegel’s theory of state before 1802.

⁹⁵ Interestingly, Kant was explicit in his belief that classical politics had been fundamentally flawed: Kant wrote of the ancient republics that they lacked “ein repräsentative[s] System – in welchem allein eine republikanische Regierungsart möglich, ohne welche sie (die Verfassung mag sein, welche sie wolle) despotisch und gewalttätig ist. [...] Keine der alten sogenannten Republiken hat dieses gekannt, und sie mußten sich darüber auch schlechterdings in dem Despotismus auflösen, der unter der Obergewalt eines Einzigen noch der erträglichste unter allen ist” (Kant *Zum ewigen Frieden* 351f, 353.)

that Schlegel stipulates above imply that “wenn die Würde und die Freiheit der Kunst ohne Schutz sicher, wenn jede Kraft des Menschen frei und jeder Mißbrauch der Freiheit unmöglich sein wird”, there won’t even be any need for a representative political system. What makes democracy seem like the preferred societal structure for promoting and nurturing comedy on its path to realization, is Schlegel’s pervasive emphasis on freedom, and on the fact that comedy, unlike other genres, requires that all members of society work toward a universal and equal *Bildungsideal* so that they can each realize their inner freedom and experience true *Freude*. It seems to require not only a community of free members, but also equal members.

Thus Schlegel’s later political ideal, the feudal state, would be inadequate here because in the feudal state, there are various classes of individuals who might achieve a certain *Bildungsideal*, as it were, which is particular to their specific social class, but there is no universal ideal that is the same for all members. Thus, though Schlegel might have believed later that the true “Gemeinschaft der Sitten” was actually more realizable in a feudal state than in a democracy, the comedy, at least the comedy as he posits it in this early form, is not. The only political system in which the ideal comical is conceivable is necessarily that which allows all of its members equal participation. And, in fact, after Schlegel turned to medieval feudalism as his political ideal, he did change his attitude towards comedy:

Keineswegs sei die ‘Freiheit des Witzes’ statthaft ‘für die gemischte Menge, die des Genusses dieser Freiheit gar nicht würdig ist’: es seien sonst ‘die allerunangenehmsten, schädlichsten Folgen zu befürchten’, wie der Mißbrauch der Komödienfreiheit in Athen zeige (KAXI 94).

But dismissing democracy and turning to feudalism would amount to a fundamental alteration of his theory of comedy. The feudal state would be contradictory to it. And the adoption of the feudal state as the best political system for the attainment of the ideal community would necessitate the construction of a radically different comedic ideal. As Schlegel indicates in the Aristophanes-essay: “Die Freude und die Schönheit ist kein Privilegium der Gelehrten, der Adligen und der Reichen; sie ist ein heiliges Eigentum der Menschheit” (KAI 26). Nevertheless, one must be careful of ascribing too much explicit political substance to Schlegel’s theory. To say, as Holtermann does, that Schlegel’s theory elevates the comedy “zu *der* demokratischen Kunstform schlechthin” (Holtermann 96), runs the risk of confusing what Schlegel sees as the ideal society and the best possible society.

VI *Conclusion*

I have sought in the present study to arrive at the socio-political implications that underlie Friedrich Schlegel's theory of comedy as presented in his essay on Aristophanes. I wished to show to what extent Schlegel's aesthetic system as regards beauty and purity in comedy presupposes a normative understanding of society, and I have tried to outline what that normative understanding looks like. That Schlegel sought for totality in his thought, that he saw all aspects of human existence – art, political structure, culture and religion – as interconnected and as mutually dependent is, as I mentioned in my review of secondary research (Chapter II), a fact that has not escaped scholarship. Dierkes (1980), Behrens (1984), Schanze (1966), Michel (1982), Dannenberg (1993) and Mennemeier (1971) have all – in their expositions of Schlegel's early thought – placed special emphasis on this fact to varying degrees. In this study however, I took this tendency in Schlegel, and looked at one text – his essay on Aristophanes –, one that moreover, purported to offer a single theory – a theory of comedy –, so that I might see what this interconnectedness looks like on a minute level, what the practical implications of this tendency in his thought might be for a specific case. This undertaking necessitated that I first extract as best as possible a workable and systematic assessment of Schlegel's theory in its own right, irrespective of its historical relevance in the German reception of Aristophanes in the 19th century or in the emergence of German Romantic Comedy. That this was a worthwhile endeavor, that something like a workable theory of comedy could be distilled from the essay in the first place, may have initially seemed questionable for a number of reasons. And before I offer my own reasons

for holding to the belief that it was, in fact, ultimately a valuable scholarly undertaking, and before I summarize what I feel was gained from doing so, I feel it would be constructive to first examine the possible objections that one might raise against such a pursuit. For as I mentioned in the last chapter (V), even Schlegel, soon after the publication of his Aristophanes-essay in 1794, had already begun to change his views about the nature of comedy to the extent that they contradicted the Aristophanes-essay.

If one looks at contemporary theories of comedy, one finds that the sort of question that Schlegel seeks to answer, namely the question as to what constitutes the true essence of comedy, is today seldom thought to yield the most fruitful results. For example, Robert Hume, in an overview of the state of comedic theory (1972) published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, writes that theories of comedy in the preceding three decades could be grouped into two general categories: those that, from a psychological standpoint, tried to “‘explain’ comedy in terms of human response to the comic”, and those that, from a formalistic standpoint, sought to analyze canonical comedic works in an attempt to explain comedy’s formal attributes (Hume 87). Ruth Nevo, writing a decade earlier (1963), expressed a similar sentiment, claiming that the field was best thought of as two separate disciplines: the “theory of comedy” and the “theory of laughter” (Nevo 327). And although Schlegel’s theory does in part concern itself with a psychological understanding of the comical, he came, as we have seen, to the unique conclusion that it has nothing to do with laughter essentially, but rather with joy.

A perusal of more recent publications on the theory and criticism of comedy reveals that today, theorists in comedy must deal with a radically different comedic terrain than the one Schlegel was familiar with, one that includes stand-up, sketch comedy, sitcoms, film comedy,

cartoons etc. And the technological media by which comedies are transmitted have drastically changed⁹⁶. Theatrical comedy today exists at the fringes, and unlike in Aristophanes' time – and this is central to Schlegel's theory –, it is not enjoyed by a general populace but rather by a cultured elite. Schlegel's theory, on the other hand, presupposes a dramatic institution wherein theatrical comedy has widespread appeal and functions as a communal activity. Thus one might offer that even if Schlegel's theory may have once been thought to be applicable as a theory of comedy, it no longer finds a comfortable home within the contemporary terrain of comedic theories.

Despite, however, any reservations that one might have against extracting from Schlegel's essay an independent self-supporting theory of comedy, I nevertheless believe that in doing so, I was able to highlight some of the more novel and interesting aspects – as yet un- or underemphasized – of Schlegel's theory. I would argue that some of these insights can, and in some cases already have, found a home in comedic theory as it stands today. I will briefly list these and then discuss them in more depth below:

1. **Comedy and the Historical Method:** The first aspect relates to Schlegel's beliefs about the peculiarity of comedy as opposed to other literary genres and to the historical method which he believes might thus be applied to it. Comedy is different from other literary genres not only in form and content, but as I discussed in Chapter IV.5, also in the public to which it addresses itself. According to Schlegel, comedy's content must reflect contemporary tastes, or else it falls on flat ears. Further, as I showed, Schlegel believes

⁹⁶ See, for example, James Evans' *Comedy: an Annotated Bibliography of Theory and Criticism* (1987).

that comedy tends, more so than tragedy, to appeal to the most *common* or *mainstream* tastes in a given society. On account of this unique quality, comedy is also more *dependent* than other genres on social tastes, and consequently, Schlegel believes that one might study the social conditions necessary for producing the type of comedy that one sees as being ideal.

2. **Schlegel's Notion of a 'Comedy of *Freude*'**: The second aspect relates to Schlegel's peculiar normative anthropological-psychological conclusion as to the essence of comedy, namely, that pure comedy is comedy that aids in the realization of *Freude* in those who experience it. This was the subject of Chapter IV.1.
3. **Schlegel's Emphasis on Freedom of Expression**: Lastly, Schlegel's emphasis on external freedom yields a startling conclusion, namely, that comedy's realization, as Schlegel see it, is absolutely dependent on a society's protection of artistic freedom of expression. This was discussed in Chapter IV.3.

Comedy and the Historical Method

As I discussed in Chapter III, Schlegel's theory of comedy was one of the first in Germany that was not at all interested in content, structure, characters, in short, the art of dramatic storytelling or of inducing laughter, but rather in why certain societies produced the comedies that they did. For him, the relevant dichotomy was not author/audience, but rather artwork/society. He wished to develop a normative theory of comedy that still remained true to a historical approach, and though not often acknowledged, Schlegel's essay on Aristophanes – and the theoretical method it

utilizes – influenced to some degree comedic theories in the 19th century. The influence of Schlegel’s essay is acknowledged in part by Profitlich, when he claims that the Schlegel brothers were responsible for initiating the popularity that Aristophanes enjoyed during the 19th century (Profitlich *Komödientheorie* 88). However, Norbert Altenhofer’s collection of theories of comedy from the second half of the 19th century shows that many theorists during this time period took, at least indirectly, much more from Schlegel than simply his enthusiasm for Aristophanes⁹⁷. For example, Karl Hillebrand’s theory of what he terms ‘classical’ comedy (1873), and the methodology that underlies it, bears uncanny resemblance with Schlegel’s⁹⁸, and though an in depth comparison of both theories lies outside the scope of this conclusion, I would nevertheless like to address some of the strongest parallels between the two because Hillebrand’s study can – from the perspective of the method it utilizes – be read as a more realized version of Schlegel’s own historical-aesthetic approach, and thus discussing it might help clarify what is of value in Schlegel’s method. The title of Hillebrand’s work – *Die klassische Komödie und ihre Voraussetzungen* – already gives an indication that Hillebrand, like Schlegel, is interested in an ideal (for Schlegel the *pure*, and for Hillebrand the *classical* comedy) and moreover that one can sensibly examine the prerequisites that make that ideal realizable⁹⁹. He asks the same essential

⁹⁷ Interestingly, in his *Nachwort*, Altenhofer nowhere mentions Schlegel’s influence. In addressing the admiration for Aristophanes that these authors all share, Altenhofer makes the peculiar claim that only Hegel, among the German Idealists, recognized Aristophanes’ greatness: “Nur Hegel hat den ernsthaften Versuch unternommen, diesem Autor [Aristophanes, *MB*] seinen gebührenden Platz einzuräumen” (Altenhofer 216). It hardly needs to be stated that F. Schlegel’s Aristophanes-essay makes this claim untrue.

⁹⁸ In fact, the only real dissimilarity between the two in their approaches is that Hillebrand is not interested in the anthropological properties that drive humans to create and experience comedies.

⁹⁹ In fact the titles that Hillebrand gives his individual chapters read like a condensed summary of Schlegel’s argumentative approach in the Aristophanes-essay: *Vom Einfluß äußerer Umstände auf die verschiedene Dichtungsarten, insbesondere auf die Komödie; Vom inneren Zusammenhang zwischen Tragödie und Komödie; Von den nationalen Blütezeiten der klassischen Komödie und deren politisch-sozialen Voraussetzungen; Vom Zustand der Sitten und der Literatur in diesen Blütezeiten; Von den Faktoren, die einer Entwicklung der Komödie in*

question as Schlegel: What does it take for societies to produce good comedies (good being defined respectively by each author)? And like Schlegel, he believes that comedy and its aesthetic worth, more so than other literary genres, is dependent on societal circumstances.

Nirgends scheint mir der Einfluß der Zeitumstände und der sozialen Verhältnisse stärker wirksam zu sein als in der Komödie [...]. Die Komödie wendet sich unmittelbarer als jede andere Dichtungsart an die Masse des Publikums, an jene Majorität also, in der sich die Auffassungen und der Geist einer Epoche verkörpern (Altenhofer 31).

Like Schlegel, Hillebrand draws the logical implication that one thus arrives at the best understanding of what makes *Classical* ages of comedy possible, by examining the social, political and cultural conditions out of which *Classical* comedies arise. He proceeds then to outline the various societal prerequisites he sees as being necessary. First, Classical comedy requires “das Bestehen eines wirklichen Volkslebens”, which he alternately calls “d[as] öffentliche Leben” (Altenhofer 66)¹⁰⁰. And second, from the standpoint of *Bildung*, it requires that the respective nation exhibit “eine fortgeschrittene Entwicklung des Denkens, das Fehlen literarischer und sittlicher Verfallserscheinungen, schließlich Popularität und nationale Verwurzelung des Theaters” (Altenhofer 85). The parallels between Schlegel and Hillebrand are too apparent to ignore. Hillebrand, like Schlegel, sees in comedy a unique art form whose aesthetic worth depends on sociological conditions. It is a distinct peculiarity of Schlegel’s theory, and I have sought to emphasize this fact, that for him, society and comedy exist in a

Frankreich günstig sind; Von den Faktoren, die einer Entwicklung der Komödie in Frankreich ungünstig sind; Versuch einer Prognose über die künftige Form der klassischen Komödie in Frankreich (Altenhofer ix.).

¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, Hillebrand writes: “Der Geist der Öffentlichkeit ist de facto etwas ganz anderes als die öffentliche Freiheit: Ein wirkliches Volksleben ist keineswegs identisch mit der Volkssouveränität” (Altenhofer 66)

unique dialectic, and one can better understand a society by studying its comedies, but more importantly, one can better understand the preconditions for certain types of comedies by studying their societal context. This insight of Schlegel's is so provocative because it implies that comedy as a literary genre, on account of its character, lends itself to a particular methodological approach, namely the historical.

Schlegel's Notion of a 'Comedy of *Freude*'

One of the more peculiar and perhaps confusing aspects of Schlegel's theory is that he so strongly advocates joy as being the central drive behind 'true' comedy. Thus though he, like many theorizers of comedy, begins from a psychological (Schlegel would have thought of it as an *anthropological*) premise, his theory does not concern itself with the comedic affect or the mechanism behind the inducement of laughter. In fact, it is one of the most unique aspects of Schlegel's theory that it develops from a psychological premise and that it nevertheless makes no mention of the psychological mechanism that is traditionally thought of as most characteristic of comedy, namely laughter. Furthermore *Freude* is, as we have seen, conceived by Schlegel as an emotion that unifies individuals and transcends boundaries: "Nur der Schmerz trennt und vereinzelt; in der Freude verlieren sich alle Grenzen" (KAI 22). Whereas laughter is so often thought of as arising out of divisions, discord, or contrast: "Erscheint das Lachen selbst als ein Ausdruck der Freude, so wird der Gegenstand des Lachens statt dessen zumeist in Kategorien der Negativität gekennzeichnet" (Reallexikon *Komik* 289). *Freude* is, for Schlegel, an emotion that arises out of a certain affirmation of human existence. It is, he says, "[ein Produkt] reine[r]

menschliche[r] Kraft” (KAI 21), and he sees it as being best represented in Greek comedy not on account of Aristophanes’ plays themselves; these are, after all, very often satirical. Rather the Greeks best realized *Freude* in comedy because of the particular society and comedic institutions they had developed. For Schlegel, *Freude* was the natural expression of their comedic festivities, which – unlike tragedy – granted all members of society the potential for participation in the comedic act. “Das Athenische Volk”, writes Schlegel, “erblickte [...] seine eigne Heiligkeit [...] in der Schönheit eines Spiels” (KAI 24). In fact, Schlegel’s understanding of *Freude* seems not unlike that of Henri Bergson’s, who sees joy, in opposition to mere pleasure, as being an affirmative expression of man’s creative faculties:

Le plaisir n'est qu'un artifice imaginé par la nature pour obtenir de l'être vivant la conservation de la vie ; il n'indique pas la direction où la vie est lancée. Mais la joie annonce toujours que la vie a réussi, qu'elle a gagné du terrain, qu'elle a remporté une victoire : toute grande joie a un accent triomphal. Or, si nous tenons compte de cette indication et si nous suivons cette nouvelle ligne de faits, nous trouvons que partout où il y a joie, il y a création : plus riche est la création, plus profonde est la joie (Bergson 34).

Bergson wrote this around a hundred years after Schlegel’s death (1930), but the formulation seems nevertheless to get at the same affirmative understanding of joy by perceiving it as something that results not from the removal of obstacles but from the act of creation.

Furthermore, the implied dichotomy in Schlegel’s theory between “Joyous Comedy” and “Derisive Comedy”, which I alluded to in Chapter IV.5 is, I think, quite interesting as a system of classification. In fact, one might divorce from Schlegel’s theory of comedy its normative overtones and say that instead of positing a ‘true’ form of comedy, he advocates a specific type of comedy – namely, comedy of joy. Joyous comedy is unreflective, effusive, and optimistic;

derisive comedy, on the other hand, is reflective, critical, pessimistic. It arises, as Schlegel says, out of a “Lust am Schlechten” (KAI 31). Comedy that depicts “das Lächerliche” (*ibid.*) – as opposed to “reine Freude” (KAI 20) – is only natural in a society, as Schlegel sees it, where individuals can take pleasure in laughing at the folly of others. “[Den roheren Mensch, *MB*] kann auch wohl das Komische eines leidenden oder schlechten Gegenstandes ergötzen. [...] Aber wenn der öffentliche Geschmack sich bildet, wenn der Verstand und die Reizbarkeit des Publikums sich verfeinern, so wird es die Werke, die es ehemals schön fand, beleidigend finden” (KAI 27). The societal requirement for joyous comedy is a refined of public taste. As I discussed in Chapter IV.2, Schlegel unfortunately never gives a completely satisfying description of what exactly a refined public taste would constitute. Nevertheless the distinction between joyous and derisive comedy, and Schlegel’s attempt to link these comedic types to particular societal conditions, is a provocative thought, and it might yield interesting results to look at existing comedies according to this dichotomy and to try to see whether or not there is any credence to the belief that they are indicative at all of particular common societal values, preoccupations, and conventions. Can, one might ask, anything be said of a society that tends towards the satirical or towards the joyous in its comedy?

Schlegel’s Emphasis on Freedom of Expression

Lastly, one of the most interesting aspects of Schlegel’s theory is, as I showed in Chapter IV.3, that it takes the protection of artistic freedom to be an aesthetic necessity. More than simply pointing out that comedy flourishes in an open society, Schlegel maintains that an open society is an essential precondition for anything that wishes to call itself comedy, and for him this means

that it is an essential precondition for any comedy that hopes to have any aesthetic worth. Whether this is true or not is another matter, and probably many people would argue that ultimately, it is not. But the theory at least deserves acknowledgement as one of the first defenses of artistic freedom of expression. And there does in fact seem to be some credence to the belief, for example, that in modern society, comedy tends to be censored more often than other types of literature. Leonard Freedman, in his study of satire in both democratic and authoritarian regimes, comes to the – perhaps intuitively obvious, though nevertheless important – conclusion that “there is considerably more satire in democratic than in authoritarian regimes” (Freedman ix). Whether or not censorship affects comedy’s aesthetic worth, it inevitably affects its content¹⁰¹.

Interestingly, though Schlegel perhaps could not have anticipated it, many nations did in fact move, over the following century, towards full freedom of speech. And furthermore, it is only after a considerable amount of freedom was allowed to artistic expression that comedy returned to anything like the explicit satire that one sees in Aristophanes. One is hard-pressed, for example, to find the extreme mockery of public figures in drama that one finds in Aristophanes, unless one looks in modern literature. Of course true *external freedom*, as Schlegel sees it, has not been fully realized. This is because external freedom cannot exist solely through political protection. External freedom for Schlegel, as we have seen, means that a *society* grants full freedom to art, and in modern societies, we often observe that though

¹⁰¹ Freedman indicates that there is no reason to believe that political censorship actually affects the aesthetic worth of comedy when he writes that “Soviet satirist, even before Stalin clamped down on their efforts, worked within severe constraints. It could well be that these very constraints explain the high quality and intensity of much satire under authoritarian regimes, which provoked a deep indignation against profound injustice and required the ingenuity and subtlety need[ed] to outwit censors” (Freedman 5).

government censorship has been largely abolished, the force of political correctness is nevertheless strong enough to bend comedic output to its standards. In this sense, it could be argued that political correctness acts as a sort of societally based censorship. Furthermore, the robust culture of satire, which has persisted in comedy to the present day, seems to indicate that, as Schlegel sees it, we are still far from realizing what Schlegel saw as *internal freedom* on a large scale. In fact, it is doubtful whether Schlegel believed that what he saw as ‘true’ comedy could be achieved in anything less than a utopia, and I believe it is not a stretch to say that Schlegel’s theory, in so far as it grounds a comedic ideal in a societal ideal, constitutes an example of utopian thought. As I discussed in Chapter V., Schlegel seems to indicate that comedy’s aesthetic worth might be promoted in a community with a democratic political structure, but its absolute perfection, as he sees it, must be reserved for a society that has realized both internal and external freedom to the point that it has no need for the political protection of free expression, or unsatisfactory approximations of the communal will, such as democracy provides. As I showed in Chapter IV.5, though other genres might exist in idealized forms in imperfect societies, according to Schlegel, not the comedy. Schlegel is adamant about this point and some scholars, specifically Brummack and Oesterle, have emphasized that Schlegel is necessarily implying a utopian home for comedy. “Ist das tragisch bzw. erhabene Schöne in Zukunft [und Vergangenheit] realisierbar”, writes Oesterle, “so rückt die Verwirklichung des komisch Schönen unter Bedingungen künstlicher Bildung in utopische Ferne” (Oesterle 445). And, in fact, Schlegel seems to express doubt as to whether pure comedy will be realizable when he writes:

Sie [die Komödie, *MB*] wird es [das höchste Schöne, *MB*] erreichen, wenn die Absicht vielleicht in einer späten Zukunft ihr Geschäft vollendet und mit Natur endigt, wenn aus Gesetzmäßigkeit Freiheit wird, wenn die Würde und die Freiheit der Kunst ohne Schutz sicher, wenn jede Kraft des Menschen frei und jeder Mißbrauch der Freiheit unmögliche sein wird (KAI 29).

This passage from the Aristophanes-essay seems to imply that in such a future society, there would be no need for political protection. The freedom required of art would be self-evident to all. And society would become a sort of *Bildungsutopie*, rendering governmental force unnecessary. It is one of the results of this study, that it is this utopian undercurrent in Schlegel's theory, which ultimately goes furthest in keeping it from being applicable as a system for the interpretation of comedy, and which draws an inextricable link between an aesthetic system on the one hand, and a normative social prerequisite on the other.

Appendix

Schlegel Texts Used in this Study:

Publications and Notebooks (in chronological order)

- *Von den Schulen der griechischen Poesie* (1794) KAI, 3-18.
- *Vom ästhetischen Werte der griechischen Komödie* (1794) KAI, 19-33.
- *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie* (1795-97) KAI, 217-367.
- *Vom Wert des Studiums der Griechen und Römer* (1795) KAI, 621-642.
- *Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer* (1798) KAI, 395-568.
- *Lyceum-Fragment 115* (1797) KAI, 161.
- *Athenäum-Fragment 116* (1798) KAI, 182f.
- *Athenäum-Fragment 216* (1798) KAI, 198f.
- *Rezension: Herders Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (1796) KAI, 47-56.
- *Ankündigung der geplanten Übersetzung des Platon* (1800) KAI, 334.
- "Vorrede": *Ansichten und Ideen von der christlichen Kunst* (1823) KAI, 3-5.
- *Von der Schönheit in der Dichtkunst* (1795/96) KAXVI, 3-32.
- *Philosophie des Lebens: In fünfzehn Vorlesungen gehalten zu Wien im Jahre 1827* (1827) KAX, 1-288.
- "Charakteristik der Dorier" *Von den Zeitaltern, Schulen und Stilen der greich. Poesie* (1795) KAXI, 227-248.
- *Versuch über den Begriff des Republikanismus* (1796) KAVII, 11-25.

Letters (in chronological order)

- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Leipzig, 2. Juni 1793 KAXXIII, 99-102.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Leipzig, 28. August 1793 KAXXIII, 123-130.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Leipzig, 16. Oktober 1793 KAXXIII, 139-144.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Leipzig, 11. Dezember 1793 KAXXIII, 162-168.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Dresden, 5. April 1794 KAXXIII, 187-189.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Dresden, 27. Oktober 1794 KAXXIII, 208-210.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Pillnitz, 4. Juli 1795 KAXXIII, 236-239.
- Friedrich Schlegel an August Wilhelm Schlegel: Dresden, 19. Januar 1796 KAXXIII, 274-277.

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