Stendhal Annotates Lessing

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In Stendhal’s hitherto published writings, the only mention of the dramatic works of Lessing appears in a note of August 1804 concerning Emilia Galotti (1772). Stendhal, who had no German at that time, presumably read Lessing’s tragedy in a French, English, or Italian translation, though it is possible that he acquired his

1/In Emilia Galotti, the father of the eponymous heroine stabs his daughter to death to save her from being debauched by the corrupt Prince of Guastalla. Stendhal sums up the subject of the tragedy as follows—“Qui ne craint point de lois est aussi puissant que celui qui n’en reconnaît point”—and notes the similarity between the dénouement of Lessing’s play and that of Vittorio Alfieri’s Virginia (1783). See Stendhal: Œuvres complètes, ed. V. del Litto and Ernest Abravanel, 50 vols. (Geneva, 1967–74), 34:84.


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knowledge of the play at second hand. V. del Litto remarks that “Stendhal a pu . . . connaître l'existence [d'Emilie Gaiotti] en lisant Werther: le héros de Goethe laisse, en se tuant, cette tragédie ouverte sur son bureau.”

The Stendhal inédits presented below concern the two other principal plays of Lessing’s maturity, Minna von Barnhelm (1767) and Nathan der Weise (1779), as published in French translations in a volume now preserved at the Fondo Stendhaliano Bucci of the Biblioteca Comunale di Milano. The volume, which appeared in Ladovcat’s Chefs-d’œuvre des théâtres étrangers series under the title Chefs-d’œuvre du théâtre allemand: Lessing (Paris, 1822), also contains Emilia Galotti, but Stendhal did not annotate any part of that tragedy, a circumstance which suggests that he had found occasion to read it previously—if not by 1804, when he referred to the play, at least by 1822, when he acquired the French translation published by Ladovcat. Stendhal’s annotations of Lessing are introduced here by notes explaining the context in which they appear. Accents missing in the autographs are supplied; my other additions appear between brackets. Stendhal's frequently eccentric capitalization is maintained throughout. Most of the marginalia reproduced seem to have been written between June 14 and 16, 1822, judging from the occasional dates they include.

* * *

On page 12 of the “Notice sur Nathan le sage” (pp. 3–14), which is signed P. B., Stendhal was struck by a quotation from Mme de Staël in which she comments on the social persecution that Nathan suffers as a Jew: “La défaveur dans laquelle le nom de juif l'a fait vivre au milieu de la société, mène une sorte de dédain pour la nature humaine à l'expression de sa bonté.” Stendhal, who recognized some of his own traits in this description of Nathan, placed a mark next to the second half of the passage and noted in the outside margin: as D[omini]que.

Though the following note appears at the end of the “Notice sur Nathan le sage” on page 14, it presumably refers (see n. 8 below) to the play itself, whose title figures on the facing page (p. 15). The note dates from June 14, 1822.

Beaucoup de morgue philosophique, nulle bonté.

5/None of Lessing's other plays are included in the volume, which places Emilia Galotti after Nathan der Weise and before Minna von Barnhelm. The titles of these works and the proper names of the dramatis personae henceforth will be given in French, as they read in the translation published by Ladovcat.
6/Dominique is the pseudonym most frequently used by Stendhal to identify himself in his marginalia.
7/That date appears immediately after the note and is used to introduce a second note commemorating Stendhal's receipt of the first galley proofs of De l'amour (1822). An inédit, it reads: “14 Juin 1822, first Prova.” Two similar marginalia concerning the first proofs of De l'amour appear elsewhere in the Lessing volume under the same date. They were published by V. del Litto in his recent edition of Stendhal's Œuvres intimes, 2 vols. (Paris, 1981-82); see 2:59, and cf. p. 1041, nn. d and 7, and p. 1042, n. 9.
8/As we shall see, Stendhal frequently censures Lessing's philosophizing in his other marginalia to Nathan le sage. Perhaps he was influenced to some extent by the “Notice sur Nathan le sage,” whose author holds that Lessing's play is encumbered by its “bagage philosophique” (pp. 9–10).
In act 1, scene 5, of *Nathan le sage*, the Templar encounters a friar who has been charged to extract information from him by the Patriarch of Jerusalem. It does not take the friar long to reveal the nature of his mission: “Je dois seulement m’informer de vous et vous tirer les vers du nez.” Facing this passage and the few lines of dialogue that follow on page 45, Stendhal gave vent to his anticlericalism in the outside margin:

quelle sale figure! Voilà leur délicatesse, la délicatesse des hommes petits par excellence.

14 Juin.

Still in act 1, scene 5, the friar requests on behalf of the Patriarch of Jerusalem that the Templar help to assassinate Sultan Saladin. The Templar, who owes his life to the Sultan, indignantly refuses: “Je suis redevable de la vie à Saladin, et je lui ravirais la sienne?” Stendhal altered the end of this line at the foot of page 51:

et je lui arracherais la vie?

A little later in act 1, scene 5, the friar argues that the Templar does not owe a debt to Saladin, as the Sultan had spared him for a selfish reason: “Vous avez trouvé grâce devant Saladin, parce que dans votre visage, dans votre air, il avait reconnu quelque chose de son frère.” The Templar replies: “Le patriarche sait cela aussi, et cependant? Ah! quand il serait vrai? Ah! Saladin! quoi! la nature aurait formé un seul de mes traits à la ressemblance de ton frère, et rien dans mon âme n’y répondrait? ce qui en moi répond à cette conformité, je l’étoufferais pour plaire à un patriarche? Nature, tu ne peux mentir! Dieu ne se contredit pas ainsi dans ses œuvres! Allez, mon frère! n’excitez pas ma colère. Allez! allez!” Next to this passage, in the outside margin of page 52, Stendhal observed:

Philosophie Allemande ou de Platon.

In act 1, scene 6, the Templar is approached by Daya, a companion of Nathan’s adoptive daughter, Recha. Daya wishes to see the Templar rewarded for his having saved Recha’s life, but he coldly rejects her advances: “Je ne veux pas que vous soyez sans cesse à me faire souvenir d’une action que j’ai faite sans y penser; qui, lorsque j’y penserai à l’avenir, sera pour moi-même une énigme.” Stendhal underlined the last two words of this sentence and wrote next to them in the outside margin of page 56:

φιλό[. i.e., philosophie] allemande

At the end of act 1, scene 6, Daya, who is angered by the apparent callousness of the Templar, shouts after him as he leaves: “Va-t’en, ours germanique! va-t’en!” Next to this passage, in the outside margin of page 57, Stendhal remarked derisively on the Germans:

ours Germanique[, ] Cela leur fait le Comique[,] ils aiment mieux être ours que rien.

15 Juin.

9/In making this revision, Stendhal clearly was not faulting the translator’s fidelity to Lessing’s German, which reads: “Ich war dem Saladin mein Leben schuldig: / Und raubt ihm seines!”

10/The date of this note is followed in the autograph by the words “2 feuilles already,” a reference to the proofs of *De l’amour* that Stendhal then was correcting. This final portion of the note was published by V. del Litto (n. 7 above), 2:59.
In act 2, scene 3, Sultan Saladin learns from his sister, Sittah, that it is said of Nathan “que son cœur était ouvert à toutes les vertus, qu’il était en harmonie avec tout ce qui est beau.” Stendhal underlined the words “était en harmonie avec” and wrote in the outside and foot margins of page 75:

galimatias Platonique[] for me: être en harmonie avec le Soleil[,] qu’est-ce?

In act 2, scene 4, Recha, Nathan, and Daya observe the Templar’s movements from a distance. Beneath a passage in which Recha says, “Ah! il semble indécis. Où ira-t-il? ici, ou plus loin? à droite, ou à gauche?”, Stendhal wrote at the foot of page 78:

forme de l’École qui tue le Dramatique, le laisser-aller11 nécessaire à un Spectateur.

In act 2, scene 5, Nathan, who is about to meet the Templar, observes: “J’ai presque peur de cet original; sa rude vertu m’intimide presque. Un homme devrait-il ainsi embrasser un homme?” Stendhal placed a mark next to this passage on page 80 and wrote in the outside margin:

trait Allemand[,] un vieillard et marchand et Philosophe Se troubler!

Still in act 2, scene 5, in the course of Nathan’s dialogue with the Templar, the latter, being moved by the kindness of his interlocutor, confesses in an aside: “Mais ce Juif commence à me troubler.” Stendhal underlined the last two words in this sentence and noted beneath, at the foot of page 82:

autre trait Allemand mais aimable[,] des hommes Se troubler! Tremar Tancredi!12

At the beginning of act 3, scene 1, Recha, who is enamored of the Templar, anxiously looks forward to seeing him: “Comment disait donc mon père, Daya? ‘Que je dois m’attendre à le voir dans un moment?’ Cela veut dire, n’est-ce pas vrai, que nous allons le voir paraître tout à l’heure?.. Cependant voilà déjà beaucoup de momen[ ]s passé... mais qui songe au passé?.. je ne vis que pour l’instant qui va venir; il arrivera enfin, le moment qui doit l’amener ici.” In the outside margin of page 97, facing the last few lines of this passage, Stendhal wrote:

toujours ce diable de Stile [sic] de la philosophie allemande.

At the beginning of act 3, scene 8, the Templar reflects on his meeting with Recha, with whom he has fallen in love against his own will. “Voir celle [Recha] que j’avais si peu le désir de voir! La voir et me résoudre à ne la laisser jamais loin de mes yeux!.. Que dis-je, résoudre? La résolution est un projet, une action, et moi, j’étais passif, rien que passif!” Stendhal placed a “(1)” in the back margin at the end of this passage and noted beneath, at the foot of page 124:

(1) Cette couleur de l’École ôte toute profondeur. le Spectateur a le sentiment d’un Pédant au lieu de voir un héros dans un moment fort attachant, celui où il réfléchit.

11/ Stendhal in fact wrote “laisser=aller.”

12/ The exclamation in Italian derives from act 1, scene 8, of Rossini’s opera Tancredi (1813), in which the eponymous hero is urged by Amenaide to escape from his enemies. In response to her entreaties—

In act 3, scene 9, Nathan says of Saladin to the Templar: “cet homme soutient sa renommée; sa gloire n’est que l’ombre de lui-même.” Facing the words “sa gloire n’est que l’ombre de lui-même,” Stendhal wrote in the outside margin of page 126: bravo!

At the beginning of act 3, scene 10, the Templar soliloquizes: “C’en est déjà trop!... le cerveau humain peut contenir l’infini; et parfois cependant il se trouve tout à coup rempli, rempli par une misère!... cela ne vaut rien, cela ne vaut rien, quelle que soit la chose qui le remplisse... Mais patience! l’âme agit sur cette matière qui fermente, la transforme, reprend sa place; et l’ordre et la clarté reviennent... Est-ce pour la première fois que j’aime?.. ou ce que j’appelais l’amour, n’était-il pas l’amour?... ce que j’éprouve maintenant est-il mon premier amour?” Stendhal wrote next to this passage, in the outside margin of page 130:

Platon, ce diable de Platon.

In act 4, scene 7, the friar, impressed by Nathan’s goodness, tells him: “Par le Seigneur, vous êtes un chrétien; il n’y eut jamais un meilleur chrétien.” Nathan replies: “Nous sommes bien ensemble; car, ce qui me rend chrétien pour vous, vous fait juif pour moi: mais ne nous affaiblissons pas l’un l’autre; il y aura besoin d’agir.” Stendhal placed a mark next to the last two clauses of this sentence and wrote in the outside margin of page 170: excellent[.] digne de Shak[e]sp[eare].

In act 5, scene 1, Saladin, having failed to reward a messenger who brought him good news, reflects regretfully: “De quoi me suis-je donc avisé vers la fin de ma carrière de devenir tout autre soudainement? Saladin ne veut-il plus mourir comme Saladin? il ne devait donc pas vivre comme Saladin.” Stendhal wrote next to this passage, in the outside margin of page 176:

Retour sur Soi bien ridicule dans un homme accoutumé à agir.

In act 5, scene 5, the Templar entreats Nathan to permit him to marry Recha as a means of saving her from the machinations of the Patriarch of Jerusalem: “Donnez-moi-la donc, donnez-moi-la seulement, et laissez-le [le Patriarche] faire.” Stendhal, presumably because he objected to the translator’s placement of the personal pronouns in the expression “donnez-moi-la,” put a small cross next to those words in the outside margin of page 188.

In act 5, scene 6, Recha says to Sittah: “Mon père n’aime point la froide science des livres qui n’imprime dans le cerveau que des lettres mortes.” Sittah replies: “Que dis-tu là? il n’a peut-être pas grand tort.” Stendhal placed marks linking these two passages in the outside and back margins of page 194 and observed in the outside margin:

Petitesse de N[atha]n[.] fi cela: maudire son Seul bien. Affectation

Still in act 5, scene 6, Recha, having complimented Sittah for being “si simple, si raisonnable, si dénuée d’art,” adds: “Les livres nous laissent rarement ainsi, dit mon père.” Next to this sentence, in the outside margin of page 195, Stendhal wrote:
On page 215, the fourth of the Ladvocat edition’s endnotes to *Nathan le sage* (“Notes sur *Nathan le sage*,” pp. 215–16) concerns a passage in which Saladin, while playing chess with Sittah, comments on the featurelessness of the chess pieces they are using (act 2, scene 1, p. 61). The endnote begins as follows: “On aime assez, en Allemagne, à jouer avec des échecs sculptés en forme de figures humaines. Il y a des rois avec leur couronne, des fous avec leur cape, et quelquefois même les pions sont des soldats, semblables à ceux dont s’amusent les petits enfants: nous trouverions cela d’assez mauvais goût en France. Dans l’Orient, ce serait de plus un péché; car toute espèce de représentation de la figure humaine est interdite par la religion musulmane.”

Stendhal underlined the words “assez mauvais goût en” and wrote next to them in the outside margin, evidently with a view to defining French taste in contrast to that of the Germans:

Peuple d’attention aux détails. Philosophie de la simplicité.

* * *

Page 364 of Merville’s “Notice sur *Minna de Barnhelm*” (pp. 363–66) contains the following criticism of that play: “Les romantiques auraient tiré peut-être un plus grand parti de ce sujet auquel un peu plus de composition n’aurait certes pas nui.” Stendhal underlined the word “composition” and remarked sarcastically in the outside margin:

un peu plus de stile [sic] niais!

On the part-title page of *Minna de Barnhelm* (p. 367), Stendhal wrote:

assez plat Sentimentalisme allemand. Il n’y a pas de Loup. Le dernier acte est détestable. C’est que le pauvre Lessing veut se faire énergique.13

The second statement in the above passage is correct: there is no wolf in *Minna de Barnhelm* or indeed in *Émilie Galotti* or *Nathan le sage*.14 Stendhal presumably used the word “Loup” as a figure of speech to suggest that *Minna de Barnhelm* would have been a less insipidly sentimental play had Lessing included in it at least one menacing or evil character. A more fanciful explanation also comes to mind: Stendhal, who frequently encoded portions of his marginalia, may have used the word “Loup” to translate the first name of one of the characters in *Nathan le sage*, Wolf de Filneck, a dead friend of Nathan’s whose eventual identification as the Templar’s and Recha’s father and as Saladin’s and Sittah’s brother constitutes the play’s dénouement. Thus construed, Stendhal’s note would imply that he preferred the final act of *Nathan le sage*, however flawed it may have appeared to him, to “le dernier acte . . . détestable” of *Minna de Barnhelm*.

13/In Stendhal’s autograph, each of the observations in this passage forms a discrete paragraph.
14/Wolves do figure prominently in Lessing’s *Fabeln* (1759). See bk. 1, fables 8, 12, and 28; bk. 2, fable 4; and bk. 3, fables 16–22. Several French translations of the *Fabeln* were available by 1822, but there is no evidence, so far as I know, that Stendhal was familiar with the work.
In act 3, scene 5, of *Minna de Barnhelm*, Werner, a former sergeant major in the major de Tellheim’s regiment, and Francisca, Minna’s maid, discuss a ring that Tellheim has pawned. Francisca observes: “c’est un anneau trés-précieux, qu’il tenait d’une main chérie,” to which Werner replies: “Voilà ce que c’est, d’une main chérie!” Stendhal placed a mark next to these two passages on page 445 and wrote in the outside margin:

*jolie réponse.* 16 Juin 1822.

In act 3, scene 7, Tellheim and Werner talk about a sum of money in terms of both ducats and thalers. In the outside margin of page 449, next to a passage in which Tellheim says, “c’est que les cent thalers n’y soient pas tout entiers,” Stendhal wrote:

Ducats

In act 4, scene 6, after a passage of dialogue in which Minna speaks jestingly to Tellheim about a wound that he has received in battle, Stendhal commented (no doubt ironically) at the foot of page 487:

*de l’esprit partout.*

In act 5, scene 9, Minna tells Tellheim that she is not worthy to be his wife. “TELLHEIM frémissant, et jetant autour de lui des regards égarés,” as the major is described in the stage directions, replies: “Qui ose parler ainsi? Ah! Minna, s’il arrivait que quelque autre que vous eût pu dire de pareilles choses... je me redoute moi-même: ma fureur contre lui serait sans bornes.” Next to this passage, in the outside margin of page 518, Stendhal wrote:

Matamore de Boulevard, voilà le bout du talent du pauvre Lessing[,] homme de Cabinet.

In act 5, scene 11, Werner brings Tellheim a large sum of money that the latter urgently had requested but now refuses to accept without offering any explanation for his change of mind. Werner, who has the prickly pride of a military man and who is on the verge of losing his temper, says indignantly to Tellheim: “Qu’avez-vous donc? Je suis Werner.” Stendhal placed a mark next to this passage on page 523 and noted in the outside margin:

*malgré cette charge on voit bien que l’Allemand manque de Caractère. Le défaut*¹⁶ est sensible même dans une mauvaise copie.

The following marginalium has been published previously,¹⁷ but without any indication of its relevance to *Minna de Barnhelm*. In act 5, scene 15, Francisca asks Werner if he would like to marry her. Werner accepts gladly and, thinking of the major de Tellheim’s forthcoming marriage to Minna, declares in the final passage of the play: “Attendez, monsieur le major; ne vous renflez pas tant. J’ai pour le moins une amante aussi tendre et un ami aussi fidèle que vous. — Donnez-moi votre main,

15/ Owing to a printer’s error, there is a reference to act 4, scene 4, at the top of this page.
16/ Stendhal in fact wrote “deffaut.”
17/ It was published by V. del Litto (n. 7 above), 2:348.
ma petite. Va comme il est dit! Dans dix ans vous serez femme de général... ou veuve.” Beneath this passage, Stendhal noted at the foot of page 532:

comme si les pièces de 40 fr[ancs] s’indignaient qu’il y eût des 20 Sous!

5 mai 1839, vis-à-vis d’Honfleur.

Lafayette College