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DRAMATURGIE
II

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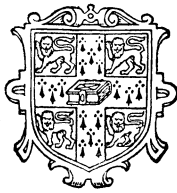
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NOTE

THE sections of *Die Hamburgische Dramaturgie* included in this volume are generally regarded as among the best specimens of Lessing's polemical writings. They deal with two main subjects, allied in nature yet distinct in treatment, and the discussion of both is sharply seasoned with a bitter hatred of Voltaire. In the first group of articles Lessing examines the theory of the "three unities" in connection with Voltaire's *Mérope*; in the second he interprets Aristotle's definition of tragedy in connection with Weisse's *Richard III*.

Lessing accuses Voltaire of lack of originality in his treatment of the theme of *Mérope* and sees no advance on the *Mérope* of Maffei. He then proceeds to a condemnation of the common French view of the unities of time, place, and action and offers his own view of the theory and practice of the Greeks. In the second group of articles he discusses a much larger question, viz. the excitement by tragedy of "pity" and "fear" and the consequent *κάθαρσις* or "purging" of the emotions.

Although we must recognize Lessing's ability in stating a problem, the clarity of his argumentation, and his vigorous eloquence, it is easy to over-estimate his originality. In recent years Professor Robertson has shown that Lessing borrowed freely from Batteux, Dacier and Curtius, and that he is sometimes inconsistent, witness his use of "Schrecken" in the earlier numbers and his condemnation of the word in LXXIV ff.¹

¹ "Lessing's Interpretation of Aristotle" (*Modern Language Review*, 1917, Nos. 2 and 3; 1919, No. 1).

Lessing's antipathy to Voltaire deserves a word of explanation. They had met in Berlin as early as 1750 and the distinguished guest of Frederick the Great had shown the aspiring literary novice marked favour. Their relations were first disturbed by an indiscretion on the part of Lessing, who, having been entrusted by Voltaire's private secretary, Richier de Louvain, with a copy of *Le siècle de Louis XIV* before its actual publication, had incautiously shown it to others. Voltaire took offence and an estrangement ensued which had unfortunate results for Lessing. In 1765 he became a candidate for the post of Director of the Royal Library in Berlin, but his name only served to remind Frederick of Voltaire's grievance and the royal scholar precipitately offered the post to an obscure and incompetent Frenchman named Antoine Joseph Pernetty. It can hardly be doubted that Lessing attributed this check in his career to the malign influence of Voltaire.

G. WATERHOUSE

May, 1926

CONTENTS

	PAGE
XXXVI, XLIV– XLVI, L. VOLTAIRE: <i>Mérope</i> . VOL- TAIRE, MAFFEI, AND THE THREE UNITIES	I
LXXIII–LXXXIII. WEISSE: <i>Richard III</i> . ARIS- TOTLE'S DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY	16
CI–CIV. CONCLUSION	74