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THE UTILITY OF PLAY OR THE ENCHANTMENT OF INSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS: GEORG PHILIPP HARSĐÖRRFER’S FRAUENZIMMER GESPRAECHSPIELE

Summary

The instructional model of the Horatian dictum *prodesse et delectare* at play in the *Gesprächspiele* renders the useful pleasant in an encounter with (foreign) cultural practices — which can be read as an encounter with knowledge itself — and which, in turn, prepares the learners for material encounters with others. These encounters with foreign cultural practices (knowledge) represent a form of “situated learning” with its multi-sensory inputs rendering learning more effective. This oral-visual culture in print allows us to examine this sensory form of learning through interactive multidirectional games that were both enchanting and useful (educational). The *Gesprächspiele* imparted cultural knowledge and social rules of conduct and practiced mental and physical dexterity and sensory coordination.

There is little debate in Harsdörffer scholarship on the *Frauenzimmer-Gesprächspiele* (1641-1649) that the genre combines the Horatian dictum *prodesse et delectare* in an almost exemplary fashion.¹ The instructional model of the *Gesprächspiele* renders the

useful pleasant in an encounter with (foreign) cultural practices — which can be read as an encounter with knowledge itself — and which, in turn, prepares the learners for material encounters with others. This nexus is at the center of this article.

Etchings of culturally significant sites open each volume of the Gesprächspiele. The initial etching sets the scene, opening both the volume and the entire series with a depiction of a garden and the façade of a country house on one page and an interior space in which the conversations take place on the other. The players are depicted in the representative semicircle, which opens a space for the reader to participate. Several aspects of “play” are represented: the quick movement associated with play, variety, gaiety, and sociability, and also proper social conduct and its rules of conversation and gestures. Movement is suggested by the play of the water in the fountain, the movement of the animals in their differing associations. The splendid peacock suggests the enchantment of instruction and the chicken the utility of play. Varying the clothing and gestures and facial expressions of the players, the etching for the second volume takes us visually into an enclosed garden space, where we meet the circle of players. These etchings visually prepare the reader for the encounter with the book’s content and provide illustrations to an important game or activity in the respective volume. Taken together they create a visual microcosm of cultured sociability, centering on the activity of play.

The Gesprächspiele prepares not only its fictional players, but also its readers for these encounters through the art and science of “learning by doing”. The participatory performances and enactments make learning more pleasurable, and thus renders the preparation for social encounters more effective. On one level of didacticism, the playful practice provides encyclopedic knowledge through discussions of the central cultural topics of the time, ranging from astrology, chemistry, physics, poetics, and ethics to the arts and theater. On another level, the form of play itself teaches conduct and rule-based decisions, creates order, rehearses skills, such as question and answer sessions, and offers practice in the vernacular language and in social conduct. In this sense, we can speak of two levels of

refer to this edition; the Roman numerals refer to the volume and the Arabic numbers to the original page numbers.