

## Faith and Reason: Schiller's "Die Sendung Moses"

The literary dimension of Friedrich Schiller's portrayal of Moses in his lecture entitled "Die Sendung Moses" (1789; NA 17: 377–97) has not received much scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> This seemingly ancillary text is nonetheless key to central aspects of its author's philosophical and aesthetic positions because it encapsulates his views on both the relationship between religion and aesthetics, and—perhaps even more pertinent—on human nature in general. In fact, Schiller's text is less about the historical figure of Moses than about what it means to be human. Schiller presents Moses as a philosopher, politician, and poet (NA 17: 391–96) who united his people under monotheism, which, according to Schiller, helped further the enlightenment of Western civilization (NA 17: 377).<sup>2</sup>

Most of the scholarship on the lecture examines it either in the context of eighteenth-century historiography or of Schiller's use of literary sources (Wübben 125–26).<sup>3</sup> Schiller's reference to Karl Leonhard Reinhold's *Die hebräischen Mysterien*—initially published in 1787 under the Masonic pseudonym "Br[uder] Decius"—contributed to the preoccupation with the complex history of Schiller's sources (NA 17: 397).<sup>4</sup> The somewhat narrow research focus has resulted in the assumption that Schiller paraphrases Reinhold's essay (Hartwich 30) and simply emphasizes those aspects of Reinhold's treatise that appear particularly important to him without adding any new arguments (Assmann, "Nachwort" 184).<sup>5</sup>

While my analysis builds on this research to provide necessary background information about the intellectual climate in which Schiller's "Die Sendung Moses" was written, I will read the text in light of the author's anthropological and poetological principles. One can assume that Schiller is not interested in simply summarizing his sources but in recreating history according to his own point of view, in line with his own premises laid out in his famous lecture on universal history, "Was heisst und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?" (1789) (NA 17: 359–76, see pages 362–63 and 372–75 in particular). In this lecture—which he delivered only a few weeks before he spoke on "Die Sendung Moses"—Schiller expects philosophically minded historians, like himself, to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless accumu-

lation of facts (NA 17: 370, 373). From his argument it follows that he is not satisfied with the critical examination of historical sources. Instead he proposes that poetic illusion restore a truth that has been distorted by the limited perspective of each particular era (NA 17: 373–74). Schiller justifies his belief in a so-called “rational totality” of history with the continuous and unchangeable unity of human nature, which forms the basis for the similarities between ancient and modern-day events (NA 17: 371). In other words, understanding human nature is crucial to understanding human history. And history is relevant to Schiller only as long as it sheds light on the dark recesses of the human soul. My reading of Schiller’s “Die Sendung Moses” intends to provide insights into the author’s ambivalent stance toward humanism in the context of Enlightenment ideology. This article seeks to reveal the connections between Schiller’s foundational assumptions about human nature, his dramatic oeuvre, his approach as a universal historian, and his use of biblical sources for his aesthetic pursuits.

Of particular interest is the question of whether it is possible to preserve the rights of the individual in a society that is guided by abstract principles of truth. This question ties into the larger debate about the dialectic of the Enlightenment that—as some would argue—already began during Schiller’s time and continues to this day: namely, whether the pursuit of Enlightenment ideas could lead to a tyranny of reason and the perversion of abstract, ethical principles, such as freedom, truth, and honor (Borchmeyer 130).<sup>6</sup> Adherence to these universal ethical concepts often infringes on the fulfillment of individual human needs, which have generally been associated with the biological nature of the human species. Schiller, in accordance with Immanuel Kant’s ideas, considered egotistical instincts subordinate to those higher moral values that would lead to the perfection of the human species. “Die Sendung Moses” is one of the author’s numerous attempts at defining a human nature that, on the one hand, justifies his artistic utilization of the senses and, on the other, devalues them by giving priority to a higher universal abstract truth. In Schiller’s re-interpretation of Moses’ life, Moses becomes the archetypal poet/writer who, like Schiller himself, was committed to converting his audience to “truth” by appealing to their instincts and ingrained habits. Schiller relies on a widely known biblical source to reinterpret the beginnings of monotheist religion in a way that supports his Enlightenment anthropology. The question is whether Schiller’s elevation of reason to the status of a *Vernunftreligion*, that is, a religion in the service of reason, prepares the path for the tyranny of reason, and whether his concomitant devaluation of “bare life” (Agamben, 15–16)—that is, of a creaturely, instinctual life without higher meaning—paves the way for a political theology that legitimates the manipulation of a people in the name of ethical ideals.

My reading of “Die Sendung Moses” suggests that while Schiller seems to favor abstract universal ideals over and against the particular rights of individ-

uals, the text also hints at the risks that this favoring poses to the individual and thus points to the Enlightenment's coercive potential. In fact, the struggle between the abstract principles of the Enlightenment and the rights of the individual can be viewed as another variation of the conflict between duty and inclination and reflects the anthropological views that continue to surface in Schiller's dramas and aesthetics. To contextualize my interpretation I will first depict how intellectual circles of the German Enlightenment viewed the Jewish religion and briefly refer to the sources for Schiller's "Die Sendung Moses."<sup>7</sup>

Schiller—like many of the later adapters of the story of Moses, such as Freud—follows very much the Enlightenment tradition by claiming that monotheism originated in Egypt. Reinhold, who also locates the origins of monotheism in Egypt, points out the similarities between the ritualistic concealment of an absolute truth in Freemasonry and in Egyptian mysticism in order to prove that all religions originated in a shared "truth." Reinhold belonged to a group of Freemasons who viewed their belief in truth as a way of opposing dogmatic forms of Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

In his introduction to *Die hebräischen Mysterien* Reinhold explains what Freemasonry means and in what sense the Jewish religion can be viewed as a kind of Freemasonry. According to him, Freemasonry is a secretive religion that conceals its inner truth behind "*Hieroglyphen, Ceremonien und Ritualgesetze*" (see Assmann 23). In Reinhold's text Moses copied these arcane religious practices from the Egyptians in order to give the Hebrew people a common religion. Moses wanted them to believe in *his* God—the monotheistic God that he had come to know in his Egyptian upbringing.<sup>9</sup> But he had to confront two problems that seemed insurmountable. The first was that his God is not a person or a thing but an abstract concept—the *all-in-one*, that has neither name nor shape nor place. Both Reinhold and Schiller claim that this concept was too difficult to grasp for the Hebrew people, who had never been exposed to monotheism. The other difficulty was that this universal divinity was unfit to function as the founding myth of a nation. This is why Moses had to present his religious message in ways that would captivate the imagination of his unsophisticated audience. Consequently, Reinhold presents his story of Moses as an analogy to the Freemasons' arcane rituals, which they deemed necessary to protect their mission of educating a general audience in the spirit of *Vernunftreligion*.<sup>10</sup>

Discussions on how to communicate abstract concepts effectively are central to Enlightenment pedagogy. The popularity of fables during the Enlightenment can be attributed to the practice of presenting abstract moral concepts in the form of simple narratives that appeal to an uneducated audience. Lessing—whose writings had already been introduced to Schiller by his teacher Jacob Friedrich Abel (1751–1829) at the *Hohe Karlsschule*—showed in an exemplary fashion how one can use fables in the service of enlighten-

ment.<sup>11</sup> Lessing, in his essay on the “Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts” (1777), viewed the Bible as an allegorical revelation of the truth which can be grasped before reason can explain it, and Schiller had studied Lessing’s text (Alt 1: 608). Schiller builds on Lessing’s thinking when he presents the pedagogical and psychological tasks of the stage as a moral institution in his famous essay “Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet” (1784). Among other tasks he mentions the fostering of religious tolerance, the correction of educational errors (NA 29: 98) and the instruction of superstitious, barbaric people. These pedagogical tasks are also essential in “Die Sendung Moses,” and it is perhaps no coincidence that Schiller mentions them with reference to Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* (1779) (NA 20: 98).

When Nathan attempts to convince his adolescent step-daughter that the person who saved her from death was not an angel but a real human being, Nathan does not fully oppose her false conviction by contradicting her, but very carefully corrects her imagination by building on it, thus creating a counter-fantasy that helps bring her back to reality (LW 9: 492–97). Like Lessing’s Nathan, Schiller’s Moses does not deprive his fellow Hebrews of their superstitions but uses them as a means to convince them of his own belief. His technique of concealing the truth behind religious ceremonies and rituals, which he acquired in Egypt as an inductee to priesthood, attempts to make monotheism attractive by adapting it to the intellectual abilities of his audience. In this regard Schiller follows Lessing and can be placed squarely in the tradition of Enlightenment pedagogy. For both Reinhold and Schiller religion is a counter-fantasy, which Moses either adopts (Reinhold) or invents (Schiller) to make the abstract concept of truth appealing to the Hebrew people. Schiller presents Moses as an *alter ego* and an archetypal poet who creates fiction to correct superstitions and bring his disciples closer to the truth. While Reinhold justifies the inexplicable emergence of the Bible as divine intervention, Schiller goes much further in secularizing the story by making Moses an exceptional leader who invents God’s revelation.

Yet there were other decisive influences on the young Schiller that help explain his fascination with the origin of religion and with biblical themes—a fascination that also inspired his dramatic productions. Although Schiller was never a member of the Freemasons, it is very likely that his interest in the organization as well as in the origin of monotheism was prompted by his teacher Jacob Friedrich Abel. Abel joined a more radical group called the *Illuminaten*—a secret society (*Geheimbund*) of radical representatives of the Enlightenment in the late 1770s and early 1780s under the leadership of Adam Weishaupt (1748–1830)<sup>12</sup>—in 1781, one year after Schiller had left the *Hohe Karlsschule*, an elitist military academy founded by Duke Karl Eugen for the education of the most gifted students in the state of Württemberg. In a series of hypotheses, entitled “Philosophische Sätze über die Religionen des Altherthums”<sup>13</sup> published under Abel’s tutelage by the Military Academy in 1780, one can find

several assumptions about the origins of monotheism and religion in general that must have inspired Schiller (Abel 87–94). Many convictions expressed in Abel's hypotheses can also be detected in Schiller's "Die Sendung Moses," namely, that "Ohne Religions-Gebäude besteht keine Fortschreitung der Gesellschaft oder des Menschen-Geschlechts überhaupt" (89); that religion leads humans faster and more intuitively to the same truth as reason (89–90); that religion takes on different forms according to the national character and national history of its believers (90); that anthropomorphisms and the sensuous appeal of religions "vermehrten das Interesse und dadurch die Wirkung derselbigen" (91); that monotheism and morals were at first understood by only a few wise men whereas the majority remained superstitious and believed in many Gods (92); that only in rare instances "ein weiser und edler Religions-Verehrer aus dem Haufen von Thoren und Wizlingen sich erhob" (92); that the Judaic religion was based on miracles and the belief in divine revelation and that monotheism was probably not founded by "weise Erfinder aus dem jüdischen Volk selbst" (93). Schiller elaborates on these ideas in "Die Sendung Moses" and secularizes religion by making it part of the human psyche. He focuses on the question that Abel finds most puzzling and cannot explain: why an uneducated people "dessen Kopf und Herz zum thörichten Polytheismus neigte" embraced a book that contained the most advanced truths ["kaum erreichbare Wahrheiten"] that can hardly be matched by the most subtle reasoning of the Greeks [die feinste Schlüsse der Griechen] as well as the deepest, newest philosophy ["die tiefste neueste Philosophie"] (93).

Schiller first delivered "Die Sendung Moses" as a lecture in the summer of 1789, shortly after he was named Professor of History at the University of Jena. He uses the story of Moses as an example of universal history (NA 17: 377). According to Schiller, the Hebrew nation was the first people with a monotheistic religion to achieve worldwide importance (NA 17: 396–97). Beginning in the 1780s there was an intense debate among different factions of the Freemasons about whether Moses' monotheism originated from Egyptian mythology and to what extent Moses deliberately embellished this mysticism to further his political and theological goals (Wübben 127). Schiller must have been aware of this debate (Wübben; Schings). Several radical atheist Enlightenment thinkers regarded the founding of the Jewish religion as a deceptive invention by religious leaders for political purposes.<sup>14</sup> For them Mosaic monotheism became a symbol of religious fanaticism which contradicted Enlightenment ideas.<sup>15</sup> Even some deist thinkers doubted the miraculous stories of the Bible and contrasted the scientific methods of the Enlightenment to what they considered to be the obscurantist political strategies of the Mosaic religion (Hartwich 22–23). Yet not all Enlightenment thinkers concurred with such indiscriminate condemnation of the Old Testament. Others like Lessing and Schiller recognized the sensuous appeal of biblical stories and used them

in the service of reason as a vehicle to further Enlightenment goals. While Schiller gives the story of Moses his own spin, his text still echoes the debate.

Schiller's "Die Sendung Moses" reflects a certain ambiguity about the debate's central issue of whether Moses was a divine messenger or an impostor by presenting Moses as both a shrewd ideologue and a person with moral integrity. The question of whether Moses' creation of a poetic illusion in the name of truth by telling stories of miracles is legitimate, even morally desirable, or whether it results in political demagoguery is also significant in the context of the so-called *Illuminaten* debate, a controversy over whether the clandestine pursuit of Enlightenment ideals by the *Illuminaten* leads to the "despotism of the Enlightenment" ["Despotismus der Aufklärung"]. According to Hans Jürgen Schings the debate marks a new level of awareness as its participants discover the dialectic of the Enlightenment for themselves (164). My analysis, which highlights the resemblance between Schiller's Moses and some of his best-known dramatic heroes and Machiavellian villains, such as Franz Moor, Fiesco, Don Carlos, and Wallenstein, will show that Schiller addressed the despotic abuse of Enlightenment ideals even before the *Illuminaten* debate.<sup>16</sup>

Schings and others<sup>17</sup> generally examine Schiller's connections to the *Freimaurer-Logen* and to the *Illuminaten* in the context of *Don Karlos* (1787) and his *Briefe über den Don Karlos* (1788). At the beginning of the tenth letter Schiller explicitly states that he is "weder Illuminat noch Maurer" (NA 22: 168), and he distances himself from the pursuit of political schemes in the name of universal ideals in his eleventh letter (NA 22: 170–71). In light of these letters and passages taken from *Don Karlos* and *Die Geschichte des Abfalls der Vereinigten Niederlande von der spanischen Regierung* (1788), Schings concludes that Schiller was without doubt directing his criticism against the despotism of the Enlightenment whose universalist ideals tend to disregard human nature and the rights of the individual (Schings, *Posa* 163–65; Borchmeyer 130).

Yet, the principles that Schiller laid out in his lecture on universal history—one year after his letters on *Don Karlos*—reveal the historian's/dramatist's fundamental and conscious dependence on universal abstractions. History would remain simply an accumulation of empirical data without the historian's ability to generalize individual human characteristics and to project them onto the larger canvas of world history. Schiller's universal historian is not nearly as interested in what happened as in how and why it happened. The uncertainty of how Moses was able to convert and unite an entire nation under monotheism provides Schiller with the opportunity to fill in the gaps and to create a meaningful totality from a compilation of historical fragments: "indem er die Bruchstücke durch künstliche Bindungsglieder verkettenet, erhebt er das Aggregat zum System, zu einem vernunftmäßigen zusammenhängenden Ganzen" (NA 17: 373).<sup>18</sup> Schiller, Herder and others used the allure of biblical myths to convey abstract moral concepts in the form of



illustrious examples that would captivate the imagination of an unenlightened audience, in the same way that writers like Lessing, Gellert and others took advantage of the genre of the fable to teach the uneducated. Schiller's distinction, in "Die Sendung Moses," between an illusory surface appearance and an inner truthful core proves that the author continues to favor what he considered an essential truth over shallow empiricism.<sup>19</sup>

Schiller's elevation of Reason to the status of the sacred *Vernunftreligion* is accompanied by his contempt for creaturely life, such as the diseased, degenerate, and utterly pitiful existence of the "pre-monotheistic" Hebrew people who were "durch eine solange anhaltende Dummheit endlich fast bis zum Thier herunter gestoßen" (NA 17: 380). Schiller uses the animal metaphor in a variety of contexts. In his dramas *Die Räuber* and *Kabale und Liebe* the villains like Franz Moor or Sekretär Wurm are compared to low and often dirty forms of creaturely life (NA 3: 21, NA 5: 114). Sekretär Wurm is characterized as the spineless, despicable character that his name suggests. In his essay on the *Schaubühne* as well as in his lecture on universal history and in "Die Sendung Moses" Schiller stresses the beneficial powers of the Enlightenment by contrasting it to the "uncivilized" societies in the distant past and in distant locations (NA 17: 364–67) or by equating the "Pöbel" of his own time to animalistic existence (NA 20: 100). Schiller excludes all those groups or aspects of life from humanity because they lack a spiritual dimension that would enable them to recognize "truth." He condemns not only uncivilized societies but also egotistical needs that are essential for bare survival. A corollary to this idea is his admiration for the "heroic" decision to sacrifice one's material existence in order to uphold a universal ideal, an idea that can be found throughout his work.<sup>20</sup>

The exclusion and sacrifice of all those particular aspects of life that do not conform to the ability to reason is, of course, where enlightenment becomes its tyrannical other. Is Schiller's conspicuous distinction between a human Moses and the animalistic Hebrews a rhetorical exaggeration conceived in order to help spread the power of reason to all civilizations? Does his exclusionary definition of the human contradict his intentions? Does the author attempt to impose his ideological view under the guise of brotherly love onto what he considers a barbaric group? Needless to say, by depicting the Hebrew people as uncivilized, he pushes his audience to identify with Moses, the exception, rather than with the Hebrews.

Schiller portrays Moses as a leader who transformed the highly philosophical and abstract mysticism of an elitist Egyptian circle of priests into a national religion. Establishing an inner correspondence with Moses allows the author to understand and rationalize his protagonist's actions from his own, personal point of view. Schiller follows the premise laid out in his lecture on universal history: to take the harmony that he finds within himself and project it onto the external order of things ["Er nimmt also diese Harmonie aus sich

selbst heraus und verpflanzt sie außer sich in die Ordnung der Dinge"] (NA 17: 374). Schiller projects his own psyche onto historical figures like Moses to make them more comprehensible to his eighteenth-century audience.

He motivates psychologically Moses' extraordinary accomplishment of liberating and uniting the Hebrew people under an entirely new religion. Moses was predestined to unite his people under the banner of monotheism because he was neither a born Egyptian nor a "mere Hebrew." For "[e]inem gebornen Egypter fehlte es [...] an dem Nationalinteresse für die Ebräer, um sich zu ihrem Erretter aufzuwerfen. Einem bloßen Ebräer mußte es an Kraft und Geist zu dieser Unternehmung gebrechen" (NA 17: 381). Schiller stresses that Moses' Hebrew mother managed to raise him under a false identity as his "nurse," and that she probably did not forget "ein recht rührendes Bild des allgemeinen Elends [seiner Nation] in seine zarte Seele zu pflanzen" (NA 17: 382). The mother's depiction of the mistreatment of the Hebrew people at the hands of the Egyptians conditions young Moses not to forget his Hebrew descent.<sup>21</sup> His tender soul is receptive to sensual impressions that have a lasting effect on his moral disposition and affect his personality more deeply than his Egyptian education, so much so that he identifies with the Hebrew people and harbors a desire for revenge against the Egyptian oppressors (NA 17: 388). His anger against the Egyptians is reinforced whenever he remembers the injustice of slavery. The continuous discrimination of his people fosters his hatred and finally provokes him to murder an Egyptian whose abuse of a fellow Hebrew he witnesses. Moses becomes an outlaw and flees into the Arabian desert, and his political instincts are awakened by the humiliation he experiences.

Schiller puts himself in Moses' shoes in order to depict the emotional turmoil of an aspiring political leader whose tragic fall and deep disappointment over the loss of all his hopes fuse his personal fate with the fate of his oppressed fellow Hebrews: "Seine Phantasie, durch Einsamkeit und Stille entzündet, ergreift was ihr am nächsten liegt, die Parthey der Unterdrückten. Gleiche Empfindungen suchen einander, und der Unglückliche wird sich am liebsten auf des Unglücklichen Seite schlagen" (NA 17: 389). Once more, the inner emotional correspondence gives Moses the ability to connect with his fellow Hebrews, despite their different cultural levels of education. Compassion forms an invisible bond among all humans regardless of their different social standing.<sup>22</sup>

The connection between Moses' personal fate and his calling to convert an entire nation to his belief in a universal truth embodied in monotheism becomes apparent through the split in Moses' biography. The fact that Moses, the humiliated Hebrew, was inspired by his experience as a future Egyptian priest and statesman emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the particular and the universal (NA 17: 390). Moses would not have been able to unite his uneducated, pagan people under the banner of monotheism without



his ability to think in abstract terms, an ability which he owes to his Egyptian education. Neither Hebrew nor Egyptian, only an exception like Moses is capable of transcending the limits of his particular identity and of forming a unifying bond. Schiller's characterization of the Hebrew nation "als ein unreines und gemeines Gefäß, worinn aber etwas sehr kostbares aufbewahret worden" (NA 17: 377) clearly gives preference to the universal over the particular. In "Die Sendung Moses" Schiller presents Moses as an innovator who is capable of preserving and promoting the ideal through the power of reason.

In his "Briefe über Don Karlos" Schiller seems to sing a different tune, however. He firmly criticizes the one-sided pursuit of ideals by his character, Marquis Posa, who "sich in moralischen Dingen [...] von dem natürlichen praktischen Gefühl entfernt, um sich zu allgemeinen Abstraktionen zu erheben" (NA 22: 172). Posa loses "die Achtung gegen andrer Rechte" (NA 22: 172) by betraying his best friend, Karlos, in pursuit of his political ideals (NA 7.1: 557–58). Schiller also explicitly warns of the dangers of "universellen Vernunftideen" and apodictically states that "nichts führt zum Guten, was nicht *natürlich* ist" (NA 22: 172). If we were to apply these statements to "Die Sendung Moses," we would have to condemn Moses as a schemer who tricks the Hebrew people into suppressing their natural inclinations and into abandoning their polytheism in order to worship a foreign abstract universal monotheism. Schiller's own dramatic theory—in "Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?"—which aims to improve human nature, as well as his concept of tragedy and theatrical practice, seem questionable in light of these premises. After all, Posa's willingness to die for his ideals appears to absolve his personal flaws and turn him into a tragic figure that also deserves the respect and compassion of his audience (Borchmeyer 140). How can we explain the paradox that Schiller knows about the dangerous power of abstract ideas and still promotes the ideal over and against "the natural" inclinations of the Hebrew people?

Schiller does not grant the Hebrew people individual rights because he argues that they have not been able to develop a consciousness as autonomous individuals and are simply subjected to abusive mistreatment by the Egyptians, which keeps them in a state of dependence and inanity, "entnervt und gelähmt zu allen heroischen Entschlüssen; durch eine solange anhaltende Dummheit endlich fast bis zum Thier herunter gestoßen" (NA 17: 380). He devotes the first part of his essay to explaining the Hebrew people's superstitions and their inferior intellect, and portrays their reputation as "unclean" people as a consequence of the inhumane abuses suffered at the hands of the Egyptians. Schiller attributes the Hebrew people's leprosy to social discrimination, which forced them to live in unsanitary close quarters. On the one hand, Schiller tries to avoid racist or essentialist prejudices by attributing the Hebrew people's lack of sophistication to the particular socio-political conditions to which they are subjected. On the other hand, he implies that

such a “verwahrloste [...] Menschenrasse” (NA 17: 380) can only develop a higher form of consciousness under the guidance of a mentor from outside and thus denies rights to groups that he believes incapable of thinking in abstract terms. In describing biblical Jews in such a manner, he undermines his goal of demonstrating the liberating efforts of reason for all of humanity.

Only an outsider, someone with a superior point of view who was privy to the universal truth of monotheism, was capable of enlightening the ignorant Hebrew people. Although Schiller does not address the contradiction between the promise of individual freedom and mentorship,<sup>23</sup> he takes great pains to protect Moses’ tutelage of the Hebrew people from the accusation of the “despotism of the Enlightenment” that had been invoked against the *Illuminaten* who were restricting access to their ideology to an exclusive group of members.<sup>24</sup> While Schiller’s Moses, like the elitist priests who taught him, uses his intellectual superiority to manipulate the Hebrew people, he differs from the intellectual elite because he has actually suffered the hardship of his people and is therefore able to identify with them. Moses is not simply privy to a universal truth; he also possesses a distinct Hebrew identity since he has suffered the same discrimination as his fellow Hebrews as an outlaw in the Arabian desert. Moses has the advantage of understanding the full impact of social discrimination against his fellow Hebrews because he can see the huge difference between his former privileged existence as a “ruler of the people” [“Menschenherrscher”] and his later existence in the desert as a “slave to a nomad” [“Lohnknecht eines Nomaden”] (NA 17: 389).

His intellectual superiority as well as his ability to adapt his vision to the imagination of his uneducated fellow Hebrews endows him with an instinct for power which is more fully fleshed out in the political leaders of Schiller’s dramas, such as Fiesco, Posa, and Wallenstein (Alt 1: 455). Moses shares with these larger-than-life figures, besides their bravery, ingenuity, and idealist vision, the potential to use his leadership skills for opportunistic goals. Schiller himself presents the precarious proximity of idealist altruism and opportunist despotism as an inherently human trait by emphasizing in his eleventh letter on Don Carlos:

daß der uneigennützigste, reinste und edelste Mensch aus enthusiastischer Anhänglichkeit an seine Vorstellung von Tugend und hervorzubringendem Glück sehr oft ausgesetzt ist, ebenso willkürlich mit den Individuen zu schalten, als nur immer der selbstsüchtigste Despot, weil der Gegenstand von beider Bestrebungen in ihnen nicht außer ihnen wohnt, und weil jener, der seine Handlungen nach seinem innern Geistesbilde modelt, mit der Freiheit anderer beinahe ebenso im Streit liegt als dieser, dessen letztes Ziel sein eigenes Ich ist. (NA 22: 170)

Fiesco and Posa illustrate that “fortschrittliche und machiavellistische Politik keineswegs als streng geschiedene Distrikte erscheinen, sondern [...] auf bedenklichste Weise ineinanderspielen können” (Alt 1: 465). In Fiesco and Posa the well-intended striving for a better society is overshadowed by per-

sonal ambition and hunger for power. Fiesco, whose conspiracy initially aims to liberate the Republic of Genoa from the despot Andreas Doria, turns into a despotic leader himself. Similar to Moses, who invents miraculous stories, Fiesco wins the support of the representatives of the people by telling them a fable. Yet while Moses intends to convince his audience of "the truth," Fiesco convinces his gullible audience of the need for a strong leader, like himself, by equating human society with the animal kingdom (NA 4: 49–50). He implies that the inequality of the animal kingdom is natural and must therefore also be accepted in human society. The strong leader—embodied in the figure of the lion—is of course no one but himself. Fiesco shares with Moses the opinion that the masses are intellectually inferior and in need of guidance. Just as in "Die Sendung Moses" the people appear simply as the mob, "als kontrastierende Grundierung für den großen Mann" (Michelsen 343; NA 4: 46). Schiller created a whole string of Machiavellian figures whose abilities at manipulating others can make them devious, and their affinities to certain aspects of Schiller's Moses are hard to overlook. Wallenstein, for example, shares with Schiller's earlier tragic heroes, such as Fiesco and Posa, an enigmatic, mysterious quality that lends him charisma (Alt 2: 438). Wallenstein promotes this appeal as part of his political strategy (Alt 2: 442). Like Moses, Posa, and Fiesco, he disregards the opinions of his fellow humans and uses them for his political objectives. For instance, he intends to marry off his daughter against her own will to one of the European rulers in order to increase his own status and power (NA 9: 242–43).

Yet while Schiller's tragic heroes often fail because of their personal ambitions, Moses successfully manages to reconcile his personal aspirations with universal ethics. For him religion promises to recover his lost national identity as well as guarantee the human dignity of his entire people. Moses' calling "humanizes" his people in the same way that Schiller hopes his writings will humanize his own society. Although Moses cannot be called a "natural" Hebrew, in light of his biography and his Egyptian upbringing, he becomes aware of his human nature and of the feelings that he shares with his fellow Hebrews when he is left alone and separated from his "unnatural" environment at the Egyptian court. In a sense Moses' growing awareness of his own "true" identity as a Hebrew goes hand in hand with his calling to instill national sentiments in his fellow Hebrews. Religion helps Moses to transform his people's negative self-image as outcasts of Egyptian society into a positive identity. In a sense, Moses makes up for his disregard of the Hebrews' individual right to self-determination by providing them with a national pride that they had lacked.

The dialectic between the particular and the universal is matched by the dialectic between truth and deception. Ironically, Moses not only achieves the unity of his people but also seduces them into believing in a national myth and in miraculous stories of an omnipotent God. Yet for Schiller the creation of

myth is not plain deception because it works in the service of a higher ideal and ultimately in the service of "truth." Schiller's emphasis on Moses' need for "Einsamkeit" and "Stille" underlines the parallels between himself, the writer, and Moses who, like himself, needs an aesthetic strategy to win over his audience. Moses' idea, "seinen wahren Gott auf eine fabelhafte Art zu verkünden" (NA 17: 392), is designed to convince his uneducated audience of a God who is neither comprehensible nor attractive nor useful to them (NA 17: 390–91). Moses is well aware that his "true" God is unable to fight for the Hebrews and help them in a miraculous way ["konnte nicht für sie kämpfen, ihnen zu Gefallen die Gesetze der Natur nicht umstürzen"] (NA 17: 391); nevertheless, he feels justified in presenting him as omnipotent. In other words, Schiller/Moses creates a poetic illusion that advances the "truth" and calls his theology a "Vernunftreligion," a religion in the service of reason.

How was Moses able to convince his people to believe in one God instead of the many natural gods that they had worshiped? Schiller attributes Moses' success in founding a new religion to the myth-making technique that he learned from the Egyptians. He mentions hieroglyphs as an example of a pictorial language that concealed the naked truth from the uninitiated and yet stimulated their curiosity (NA 17: 384). Paradoxically, hieroglyphs and ceremonies assumed the opposite function as they began to appeal to increasing numbers of non-believers and were eventually taken as symbols of truth itself. This dual function of the sign as veil and revelation is at the heart of Moses'/Schiller's pedagogical genius. In order to convert and convince non-believers, they used these signification techniques "mit einer gewissen sinnlichen Feierlichkeit" (NA 17: 384). The priests aroused their disciples' passions during initiation rites to prepare them for facing the truth. Yet Moses cannot simply copy Egyptian hieroglyphs and ceremonies because his people would not be able to understand them. His goals are also different from those of the Egyptians. While the elitist order of priests that trained him, the so-called *Epoptoi*, originally intended to protect the "truth" from the uninitiated, Moses wants to attract a following and therefore has to adapt his stories to the intellectual abilities of his audience. Moses learned from the Egyptians to take advantage of the contradiction between "essential truth" and "surface appearance" and of the tendency of the uneducated to mistake the latter for the former.

Ironically, Moses benefits from a technique that resulted in the profanization of religion while Moses' appeal to the senses has the opposite effect and serves the reclamation of the spiritual with the establishment of monotheism. In Schiller's text—which was written before the hieroglyphs had been deciphered—hieroglyphs are represented as a secret code that has no other function than to protect the truth from the uneducated and to prepare uninitiated members for "the truth." Yet as more unsuitable members demanded access to the circle of the initiated because they felt attracted by the cultural rites, religious leaders saw themselves compelled to make the truth less accessible

by inventing more theatrical gimmicks (NA 17: 387). As a consequence, the rituals gradually lost their original meaning of purifying religion from superstition. Eventually these hieroglyphs—with the help of the priesthood who felt they had to mislead the people for opportunistic reasons—assumed the powers of divine truth (NA 17: 382). Thus the attraction of the obscure caused the uneducated people to take signs for wonders. Their idolatry makes Moses aware of the psychology of the “uncivilized” state of mind, which is attracted by the sensual presence of the mysterious. By fusing monotheism with the foundational myth of the Hebrew nation and embellishing it with miraculous stories, Moses manipulates his fellow Hebrews and makes them receptive to monotheism, which, according to Schiller, brings them closer to the truth (NA 17: 383–84; 392; 396).

Monotheism opens the door to freedom because in monotheism it is up to the individual to decide whether to live according to God’s commandments, and—needless to say—it is freedom that matters to Schiller. Only through the freedom of choosing a moral life over and against nature can the individual live a godly life. This is Schiller’s explanation of how religion became “die stärkste und unentbehrlichste Stütze aller Verfassung” (NA 17: 396). Schiller explains this in his lecture, “Etwas über die erste Menschengesellschaft nach dem Leitfaden der mosaischen Urkunde,” which appeared in November 1790 in the journal *Thalia*, two months after “Die Sendung Moses.” He depicts human development from prehistoric paradisaal innocence to the beginnings of an ethical existence. The fall from paradise is presented as a blessing because it grants humans the freedom to become masters of their own fate. Humans have emancipated themselves from animal-like blissful ignorance, and reason allows them to regain a state of innocence beyond divine control.

While reason gives human beings freedom of choice to live a moral life, it also permits the simulation of so-called natural signs—signs whose subject matter is grounded in the very properties of what is designated. Tears, for instance, are considered a natural sign of sadness. In primitive societies nature is often understood as the language of the gods. In contrast to these natural signs, which render the truth apparent, the Egyptian *Epophtoi* invented hieroglyphs as a hermetic system of symbols in their attempt to protect the sacred truth of their religion from the uninitiated. Just as Moses invents miraculous stories to wean his people from their polytheistic superstitions and prepare them for the abstract truth of monotheism, so does Schiller create a counter-illusion in his dramas that portrays surface reality as false and conveys an inner, universal truth. Yet Schiller goes one step further than Moses by making the deceptive power of signs transparent.<sup>25</sup> Schiller’s use of biblical imagery to reveal deception is apparent in his first drama *Die Räuber* (1782). Franz Moor fabricates the story of his brother’s death to distort the truth. Like the dramatist himself, Franz creates a dramatic illusion by producing a forged letter and by reenacting his brother’s last words. However, Old Moor uncovers the

deception by having Amalia read the analogous biblical story of the fraudulent production of Joseph's blood-stained cloak (NA 3: 51–52). In these scenes Schiller uses dramatic enactment to reveal a fraud just as Moses repeats the technique of deception to convert his fellow Hebrews to monotheism, which brings the Hebrews closer to the "truth" or "einzige höchste Ursache aller Dinge" (NA 17: 385). Significantly, he repeats the *Epoptoi's* illusive signification practices to correct the deception caused by their artificial production of hieroglyphs, ceremonies, and rituals.

Although there are obvious parallels between Moses and the playwright who both use fiction in the service of the truth, there is still a certain ambiguity as to whether Moses' actions are ethically commendable. While Schiller clearly presents Egyptian civilization as superior to Hebrew culture and tends to favor reason over faith, the final sentences of "Die Sendung Moses" leave open whether Moses uses his superior intellectual abilities to impose a premature way of thinking on the Hebrew people: "Die Epopoten erkannten die Wahrheit durch ihre Vernunft, die Hebräer konnten höchstens nur blind daran glauben" (NA 17: 397). Moses' political theology unites the Hebrew people and thus preserves their national identity, yet his calculated manipulation is reminiscent of Schiller's Machiavellian protagonists, such as Franz Moor, Fiesco, Marquis Posa, and Wallenstein. The ambiguity of these tragic leaders is an expression of Schiller's intellectual dialogue with the dialectic of the Enlightenment. Schiller's texts illustrate inconsistencies in Enlightenment thought that are still relevant for present-day skepticism about the compatibility of the optimistic belief in reason, progress, and human perfection on the one hand and human nature on the other. For one thing, "Die Sendung Moses" makes clear that reason can take on the function that religion once had as a tool to exert power over others. Although reason can bring humanity closer to the "truth," Schiller often connects it to exceptional figures who, like Moses' "despotic brothers" Franz Moor, Fiesco, Posa, and Wallenstein, use it for opportunistic reasons. To be sure, Schiller's fascination with such larger-than-life figures is spawned by the search for suitable characters for his tragedies. Yet one could also ask whether the admiration for human superiority is a necessary precondition of enlightenment or, to put it more bluntly, whether human progress depends on inequality. Schiller's text suggests that progress depends on an intellectual elite or superior mentor figures who teach the less educated.

To return to the initial question of whether "Die Sendung Moses" implicitly condones the sacrifice of life in the name of universal ideals, one has to conclude: while Schiller's lecture portrays the culture of the polytheistic Hebrew people as inferior and unworthy of preserving, Moses is successful in promoting monotheism only because he shares the Hebrew people's particular background and manages to adapt the universal to their intellectual and spiritual needs. By demanding that universal truth be anchored in the particular experience of the recipients, Schiller strives to prevent the domination of



the universal over and against the interests of the particular. Moses' attempt to anchor the universal in the particular also helps answer the question of whether Schiller justifies illegitimate means of deception to serve the end of "convincing" his fellow Hebrews. Although Schiller's narrator claims that Moses' fictitious account is not based on "Betrug" (NA 17: 391), the narrative perspective emphasizes that Moses considers his fictitious account as a legitimate means "seinen wahren Gott auf eine fabelhafte Art zu verkünden" (NA 17: 392). For Moses the truth simply needs to be mediated in such a fashion that the Hebrew people will accept it. Moses accomplishes this by inventing a national myth and making his God the *Nationalgott* of the Hebrew people (NA: 392).

Schiller's plea for *Vernunftreligion* can be associated with the "tyranny of Reason" because it excuses demagoguery for the purpose of starting a nationalist movement. Moses' masterful use of propaganda is based on mass manipulation. After all, the text presents the Hebrew people as blind followers of Moses' ideology. The fact that Schiller's psychological insights justify Moses' actions by emphasizing the commonalities between Moses and the author suggests that Schiller admires Moses' political skills because in his opinion "[er] läßt eine ganze Nation an einer Wahrheit Theil nehmen, die bis jetzt nur das Eigenthum weniger Weisen war" (NA 17: 397). The birth of the Hebrew nation thus can be seen as both emancipation and submission. The Hebrew people are liberated from their status as a disadvantaged minority under Egyptian rule, but only to surrender to their new leader and his political theology. Their conversion to monotheism means liberation for the nation but not for the individual. Schiller's favoring national unification over the emancipation of the individual points to his own struggle with the Enlightenment's coercive potential.

"Die Sendung Moses" exposes the psychological processes that underlie the formation of national and cultural identities and shows how these processes can be exploited for political purposes. Yet the text undermines Schiller's positive depiction of Moses by revealing how the author dismisses and distances himself from the animal aspects of man and projects them onto "the slave, the barbarian, the foreigner as figures of an animal in human form" in order to construe the Western human being as a superior, spiritual, civilized, and reasonable being (Agamben 37). This kind of reading would be in keeping with Giorgio Agamben's suggestion that "man must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human" (27). One could infer that shame about their sensual nature may have caused eighteenth-century German elitist thinkers like the *Illuminaten* to distance themselves from the masses in order to confirm their human superiority. It could also explain Schiller's ambivalent attitude toward the senses: of both detesting them and at the same time having enormous respect for their power, a power that he tried to take advantage of in his theatrical mission. "Die Sendung Moses" not only reveals how artful manipu-

lation can be applied toward progress but also how Enlightenment thinkers attempted to create a hierarchy of human beings based on Reason in order to assert a more privileged position for themselves as superior humans. In contrast to the essay on Moses, Schiller's plays reveal a more pronounced criticism of instrumental reason, but this would be a topic for another investigation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* and the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach* for providing the support and resources that enabled me to complete this article.

<sup>2</sup> Schiller explicitly stresses that Christianity emerged from Judaism and that Western civilization owes a great deal of the Enlightenment to Mosaic religion (NA 17: 377). See also Paul Michael Lützeler's essay on "Identität und Gleichgewicht: Schiller und Europa" that analyzes the author's historical and political views in the context of European history and views Schiller as "der europäische Dichter par excellence" and as proponent of the Enlightenment tradition (57).

<sup>3</sup> A fairly extensive body of research covers this aspect of Schiller's essay. See, for instance, Janßen; Buchwald 288; Schieder; Jahn; Engelberg; Sharpe; Hahn; Weimar; Malter; Süßmann 41.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Assmann, "Nachwort;" Hartwich, 20–49; Wübben.

<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Wübben already pointed this out in her thoroughly researched investigation of Schiller's use of sources (125–26).

<sup>6</sup> Dieter Borchmeyer uses Hans-Jürgen Schings and Schiller's friend Körner as sources that substantiate his claim that Schiller's letters on *Don Carlos* "explizieren eine 'Dialektik der Aufklärung' (vom 'Despotismus der Aufklärung' redet schon Körner in seinem Brief an Schiller vom 18. September 1787), die sich aus dem Drama selber, aus der Handlungsweise des Marquis Posa ableiten läßt" (130).

<sup>7</sup> My references to Schiller's sources must remain brief and cannot do justice to the complex history of the eighteenth-century reception of "Die Sendung Moses," which has been extensively explored in recent years by Jan Assmann and Yvonne Wübben. For practical purposes I will only refer to those aspects that bear some significance in the context of my argument.

<sup>8</sup> Schiller's source, Reinhold's *Die hebräischen Mysterien*, has to be viewed in the context of the so-called Pantheism debate that preoccupied Germany's spiritual elite during the 1780s. At the heart of the debate was the so-called *all-in-one* [*Hen kai pan*], an enigmatic formula that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had written on the wallpaper in Gleim's garden pavilion, also known as *Freundschaftstempel* in Halberstadt (Assmann 161). The *all-in-one* refers to the one and only truth from which everything originates, a concept that is also essential for Spinoza's pantheism. For further research on this topic, see Müller-Seidel and Riedel; Neugebauer-Wölk; Schings, *Die Brüder des Marquis Posa*; Dülmen.

<sup>9</sup> Schiller calls the Jews "Ebräer" before Moses unified them under Judaism. In keeping with the original I will refer to them as "Hebrews."

<sup>10</sup> For a nuanced depiction of Reinhold's intentions regarding the legitimization of the arcane policies of the Freemasons see Wübben.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Wolfgang Riedel, "Aufklärung und Macht" 115.

<sup>12</sup> For a more general depiction of the secret societies, such as the Freemasons and the *Illuminaten* see Dülmen; Müller-Seidel and Riedel.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Riedel has edited Jacob Friedrich Abel's *Schulschriften*, a compendium of lectures and other writings that formed the basis for Schiller's philosophical education. Riedel has augmented this invaluable edition of the influences on Schiller's formative years by his informative introductions, commentaries and translations. All future references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>14</sup> The idea of religious imposture was not new, however. Wiep van Bunge traces "some of the ways in which the idea of religious imposture was passed down from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth century." Accordingly "religious imposture made its first appearance in the political writings of Machiavelli [...]. It was then taken up by the French *libertinage érudit* [...], after which it reappeared in some of the clandestine manuscripts of the early radical Enlightenment" (105).

<sup>15</sup> For instance Paul Thiery d'Holbach claimed that Moses led the Jewish people into the desert in order to brainwash them and make them blindly obedient. Accordingly he filled their hearts with hatred against all other religions and made them believe that God had promised them the land of their neighbors and taught them to conquer the adjacent nations. In these enlightenment accounts the priesthood ruled with an iron fist in Judaism and spread the myth of an invisible God in order to legitimate their position of power (Hartwich 22).

<sup>16</sup> See also Wölfel; Michelsen; and Wittkowski.

<sup>17</sup> See also Walter Müller-Seidel's introduction to *Die Weimarer Klassik und ihre Geheimbünde* (21–26) and Wolfgang Riedel's essay on "Aufklärung und Macht" (107–25) in the same volume.

<sup>18</sup> Schiller in particular mentions in his lecture that the origin of Christianity, albeit most important for the history of the world, has never found a satisfying explanation (NA 17: 372–73).

<sup>19</sup> According to Schings, Schiller followed his friend Körner in regarding the *Illuminaten* as responsible for the "despotism" of the Enlightenment: "[Schiller] folgte der Deutungslinie, die auch Körner eingeschlagen hatte. Sie bestimmt auch künftighin seine Haltung in politics, bis hin zur Zeit und Aufklärungsdiagnose [...]. Die 'Briefe über den Don Karlos' stellen somit einen folgenreichen Wendepunkt dar" (164–65).

<sup>20</sup> Most of Schiller's tragic heroes and heroines, such as Karl Moor, Luise Miller, Marquis Posa, Wallenstein, Maria Stuart, share this willingness to sacrifice their lives for their ideals.

<sup>21</sup> Schiller already formulated this idea of enhancing pedagogical instruction by sensual stimulation in his essay "Was kann eine gute stehende Schaubühne eigentlich wirken?" (1784), probably referring to Johann Georg Sulzers *Betrachtungen über die Nützlichkeit der dramatischen Dichtkunst* (1760) (Alt 1: 380).

<sup>22</sup> The common bond that supposedly unites all individuals in humanity informs Schiller's anthropological and ideological views. Schiller learned about the idea of a chain of beings from his teacher Abel, who taught his students about the doctrines of French biologist and philosopher Charles Bonnet (1720–93) at the *Hohe Karlsschule*. Although Schiller sharply criticizes Bonnet's hypothesis on how mechanical stimuli are transformed into sensory perceptions in his first doctoral dissertation, *Philosophie der Physiologie* (NA 20: 22), he was influenced by Bonnet's emphasis on the body's impact

on the mind as well as by his theory of attention (Safranski 81; Riedel, "Introduction" 438–39).

<sup>23</sup> Wolfgang Riedel points out, with reference to *Philosophische Briefe* (1786) and *Der Geisterseher* (1787–89), that Schiller had doubts about the success of Enlightenment through mentorship ["ob denn Aufklärung so, durch Instruktion und Psychagogik, überhaupt gelingen kann"] (Riedel 122).

<sup>24</sup> For more information about the *Illuminatenorden* and Schiller's relationship to this secret society that blossomed between 1773 and 1785 see Müller-Seidel and Riedel.

<sup>25</sup> See "On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences" (Mendelssohn 177–78).

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