

Thursday 2 May

1pm Milgate Room, AD Hope Bldg, SLL

## Manuel Clemens

### How (Not) to Become Tolerant: Affects and *Habitus* in Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*

The coincidences and phantasms that open Lessing's *Nathan the Wise* reappear throughout the entire drama and even bring about its happy ending. While the usual interpretation of the plot maintains that the illusions held by the protagonists of the play—such as their superstitions, unrestrained affects and prejudices—are overcome via a learning process and transformed into tolerance, I maintain a different view. In my presentation I will argue, first, that these illusions are gently enlightened, rather than overcome, and, second, that this process only ostensibly leads to tolerance. As a consequence, my analysis focuses on the negotiation between tolerance and intolerance, and finally arrives at the conclusion that the maid Daja actually represents tolerance better than the protagonists, because she is the only one from whom tolerant endurance is demanded.

In my interpretation, the play represents how *not* to become tolerant because of the gap between the privileged notion of tolerance exemplified by the main characters, such as Nathan's daughter Recha and the Templar who rescues her, and the disadvantage experienced by the maid Daja, whose affective life is rendered illegitimate by the development of the play. The affective life of the main protagonists follows Bourdieu's model of a privileged *habitus* and Daja, a maid and supporting character, is excluded from it. My reading of *Nathan the Wise* reverses the conventional understanding of tolerance as something that always refers to the main characters. Instead of focusing upon how they exemplify tolerance, I focus on the process through which their tolerance is constituted (and its difficulty), which enables me to argue that it is easier for them to become 'tolerant' than it is for Daja.

*Manuel Clemens* has taught in the German program in SLL since August 2018. He has previously taught at Rutgers University, Leuphana University, Germany, and University Iberoamericana and the University of Michoacán, Mexico. His work focuses on the vexed relationship between aesthetics, education and politics in the constitution of liberal society.



Moritz Daniel Oppenheim, Lessing and Lavater as guests in the home of Moses Mendelssohn (1856)



enquiries: [russell.smith@anu.edu.au](mailto:russell.smith@anu.edu.au)



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