

Introduction

For what creates a universal, lasting, and profound dramatic effect is what is really substantive in action—i.e., morality as specific subject matter, and greatness of spirit and character as form. And here too Shakespeare is supreme.

—Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics*¹

In a work of art, as in life, the greater a man's character the more are different interpretations put on it by different people.

—Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics*²

Part I: Moral Imagination

This book operates on the premise that the imagination is one of the most important arenas in ethics. A number of works have influenced me: Mark Johnson's book *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*; Hegel's *Lectures on Psychology*, his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

Mark Johnson's *Moral Imagination*

In *Moral Imagination*,³ Johnson argues for a non-dualist approach to morality. He claims that work in cognitive science, linguistics, and psychology has shown that human beings operate as whole individuals, using "moral imagination."⁴ Johnson points us to his book, co-authored with George Lakoff, entitled *Metaphors We Live By*. He elaborates as follows.

In general, we understand more abstract and less well-structured domains (such as our concepts of reason, knowledge, belief) via mappings from more concrete and highly structured domains

of experience (such as our bodily experience of vision, movement, eating, or manipulating objects).⁵

A good example is that something “*weighs* on my conscience.”

According to Johnson, our “Basic-Level Experience” and our “Narratives” are central to moral imagination. He claims that there is “abundant empirical evidence” in support of this and points to philosophical texts for support as well, such as Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* and Paul Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*.⁶

Hegel’s Ethical Theory Is a Moral Imagination Theory

The idea that imagination is central to ethical thought springs from my work on the role of imagination in Hegel’s epistemology (see my *Hegel’s Theory of Imagination*).⁷ Hegel wrote his epistemology and ethics more than a century before Johnson developed his theory of moral imagination. But one can read Hegel’s philosophy as an expansion of the Johnsonian account given above. Hegel develops that non-dualist view as a dialectical, systematic account of experience. The following are my arguments in support of these claims.

Hegel’s Epistemology Paves the Way for Understanding Moral Imagination

According to Hegel, the preparation for doing speculative logic requires us to move from *Vorstellung* (representation or “picture-thinking”) to speculative thinking (thinking according to the Concept). The latter requires that we properly understand what the Concept is and can think its moments in any given representation. The moments of the Concept are immediacy, negation, and the negation of negation (or mediated synthesis). *Die Einbildungskraft* (the imagination), as the middle moment of picture-thinking, is at the heart of the Concept.

The imagination is the moment of negation: Because of it we are no longer caught in the immediacy of intuition; we have a freedom to negate given times and spaces and to put them together differently. Imagination is the first moment in cognitive sublation (*Aufhebung*) in which the mind has freedom.

The imagination is necessary for complete freedom. But it is not sufficient for it: One has to go through the long process of education (*Bildung*) and to live in a time and place in which State institutions support freedom of thought. Nonetheless, it is by thinking our imagination to its end, in the sense of understanding its role in our cognition, that we come to understand the grip that representations have on us and that we begin to exercise our freedom in all its richness.

Furthermore, Hegel’s account of the imagination in the transition from the use of signs to the use of names in his 1805–1806 *Geistesphilosophie* (*Lectures on Psychology*), and again its role in the transition, from the use of symbols to

the use of signs in his 1830 *Geistesphilosophie*, is best described in terms of layers of maps.⁸

The imagination is not only central in the genesis of communicative thought. It is also essential in maintaining the organic, living quality of that thought. According to Hegel, the inwardizing activity of the mind stores up its experiences, not in order to have fixed laws that are then unyielding to circumstance. He shows that such laws and categories do not work in our organic, embodied, ethical lives. Reason is inadequate without imagination. Indeed, he famously criticizes Kant for discussing the mind as a bag full of faculties⁹ for generating an empty formalism as the highest moral imperative¹⁰ and postulates that result in a “‘whole nest’ of thoughtless contradictions.”¹¹ It is only in externalizing signs, in constructing maps, in layering them, and reusing them, all in organic relationship to others and to our bodies’ world, that what has become rigid in the depths of our mind comes to life again.

The same principle is at work in ethics. What defines us ethically is not the self that is sunk in immediacy without the capacity for reflection or metaphorical mappings, nor a Kantian kind of transcendental self (which, according to Hegel, can just as well be evil as good). Rather, what defines us ethically is our imagination. For imagination cultivates free deliberations by means of empirical enrichments, metaphors, and narratives.

According to Hegel, in an individual’s history, as in our social histories, there is a spiraling ascent from lesser, simplistic forms of the dialectic, to more complex and comprehensive forms that embrace the depth and range of human experience. We are only as knowledgeable as the depth to which we go into our minds, both in the sense of knowing what stands before our minds in the shape of intuitions, images, memories, and thoughts, and in the sense of knowing the mind as that which gives rise to those objects. And we are only as versatile as we are widely educated about our world. The productive imagination is part of Reason and Reason cannot dispense with the content provided by imagination’s work at the other levels of cognition.

So, as I argue in my first book, Hegel’s philosophy does not impose a logic on experience or endorse a dualism of human nature. He is only understandable once we completely grasp his conception of dialectic and its developments. Since sublation (*Aufhebung*) has the imagination at its core, the imagination is operative at every level of the dialectic’s development. Therefore, to understand his philosophy, we must understand the role of imagination in it. This is what Hegel means by coming to terms with “picture-thinking.”

Moral Imagination in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right

My discussion above has largely to do with theoretical knowledge in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Lectures on Psychology*. There are other texts from which to argue Hegel’s non-dualist epistemological and ethical foundations.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that the will arises out of a diremption in nature. We use reason to control our baser natures, but our will arises out of the dialectical development of nature.¹²

Hegel's ethical life is a life arising out of history and culture, not an a priori system imposed on an otherwise uncontrolled mass of people and contingencies. The metaphors and narratives that make up that history, therefore, are the representations we must think through (in both senses) if we are to be free citizens of an awake, rational State.

In the *Philosophy of Right* account of the will, there is no normative shift in the development of will out of nature. Furthermore, the moment of morality, in which there is an incommensurability between the subjective will and everything external to it, arises well after the will has come on the scene; and according to Hegel, that moment of morality must be surpassed by a return—at a higher level—to an ethical life, a life that has overcome the incommensurability.

Allen Wood's account of Hegel's ethical theory as a "self-actualization theory" is helpful here.¹³ Wood writes that Hegel's theory is neither deontological nor teleological. (In other words, it is neither duty-driven nor purpose-driven, at least not in the Kantian sense of these.) "Its starting point is the conception of a certain self or identity to be exercised or actualized, to be embodied and expressed in action. The theory selects the actions to be performed and the ends to be pursued because they are the actions and ends of that kind of self."¹⁴

In Hegel's theory, therefore, (unlike a dualist theory), there is no line dividing our theoretical considerations from our practical deliberations.¹⁵ We have mentioned that in the *Philosophy of Right*, there is no dividing line between our natural selves and our wills. Wood also points to Hegel's account of the development of the human individual in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* in which Hegel moves "from a discussion of embodiment, through consciousness and reason, to theoretical spirit and ends with practical spirit defining itself as free spirit."¹⁶

Just as it is the whole embodied individual that inwardizes experiences and externalizes them in communication, it is a physically and socially embodied self that decides what to *do* on the basis of its experiences and the dialectical development of these into more reflective forms.

Moral Imagination and Hegel's Lectures on Aesthetics: Hegel's Use of Shakespeare as Example

Finally and most importantly for us, in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel places Shakespeare's imagination, indeed the imagination that Shakespeare gives to his characters, at the pinnacle of the arts. Hegel writes that "he [Shakespeare] equips them with a wealth of poetry but he actually gives them spirit and imagination, and, by the picture in which they can contemplate and see themselves objectively like a work of art, he makes them free artists of their own selves."¹⁷ Shakespeare

“gives them this force of imagination which enables them to see themselves not just as themselves but as another shape strange to them.”¹⁸ Let us look at Hegel’s use of Shakespeare and the imagination more closely.

IMAGINATION AS A METHOD OF DISTANCING ONESELF
FROM THE IMMEDIATE

In the section of the *Aesthetics* called “Symbolism of the Comparative Art-Form,” Hegel praises Shakespeare for his ability to make his characters distance themselves from their unfortunate or evil situations by using the language of simile, metaphor, and comparisons. He gives many examples from Shakespeare, like the following from *Henry IV*: When “old Northumberland asks the messenger who came to tell him of Percy’s death ‘How doth my son and brother?’ and gets no answer, he cries out in the composure of bitterest grief [2 Henry IV, Act I, scene i]:

Thou tremblest; and the whiteness in thy cheek
Is apter than thy tongue to tell thy errand.
Even such a man, so faint, so spiritless,
So dull, so dead in look, so woe-begone,
Drew Priam’s curtain in the dead of night,
And would have told him half his Troy was burnt;
But Priam found the fire ere he his tongue,
And I my Percy’s death ere thou report’st it.¹⁹

Hegel also uses Macbeth as an example. In the face of the horrid death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth says: ‘Out, out, brief candle! / Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.’”²⁰ The irony here of course is that Macbeth is symbolically representing the death of his own imagination as well as the death of his wife. I will return to this in Chapter 9.

According to Hegel, the character’s distancing via simile makes him or her “stronger and more noble.” Being more “noble” is only vaguely moral. The point I want to draw out here is that distancing through metaphor, simile, comparatives, and narratives is present in ethical deliberation. There are levels of distancing, and, at each level, varieties of distancing. Hegel goes to great dialectical length to show these as they appear in art. That the distancing is imaginative is clear. How distancing is moral is a question that needs to be solved differently for each particular moral topic and character. For example, in Chapter 9, I show how imaginative distancing can be at work at different levels and in a variety of ways, in the consciences of characters such as Richard III, Macbeth, Hamlet, and Henry V.

HEGEL'S TEXT IS ITSELF AN EXAMPLE OF METAPHORICAL MAPPING

In Hegel's use of passages from Shakespeare to illustrate this point about distancing, we can see that Hegel is himself using layers of metaphor. In other words, on one level, he is telling us that one can become "a stronger and nobler spirit" by using similes and comparisons to distance oneself from the immediate. On another level, he is symbolizing this to us through Shakespearean drama: He is using Shakespeare's use of metaphor and simile as a map for his theory of symbolic comparison. Furthermore, Hegel is celebrating Shakespeare for making the *characters* appear so endowed with imagination as to *themselves* use metaphorical mappings with regard to their situations.²¹

In other words, the layers of comparison and metaphor in Hegel's text are performative examples of how we communicate insights. Through imagination we *create* the distance and contextual richness needed for insights into immediate experience.

Additional Remarks About the Role of Imagination in the Aesthetics

HEGEL CELEBRATES IMAGINATION IN THE DISSOLUTIONAL FINAL PHASE OF ROMANTIC ART

Hegel's history of the development of art ends with an art that is quintessentially imaginative. This final stage of art has "an interest only in . . . imaginative occupation, which is satisfied in the freest way with its hundreds of changing turns of phrase and conceits, and plays in the most ingenious manner with joy and sorrow alike."²² Hegel cites Goethe and Rückert as authors capable of this. He notes, for example, that in Goethe's poem *Wiederfinden*, "love is transferred wholly into the imagination, its movement, happiness, and bliss."²³ Hegel goes on to generalize about similar productions:

we have before us no subjective longing, no being in love, no desire, but a pure delight in the topics, an inexhaustible self-yielding of imagination, a harmless play . . . and a cheerfulness of the inwardly self-moving heart which through the serenity of the outward shape lift the soul high above all painful entanglement in the restriction of the real world.²⁴

HEGEL'S THEORY IS NOT THE ROMANTIC THEORY

This is not to say that Hegel was a German Romantic who celebrated the liberating, poetic, productive powers of the imagination over fate, reason, and law.²⁵ Romantic poetry, according to the Schlegel brothers, raises the individual

above the mundane world into a poetic “world with its own laws, proportions, relation and measurements that stand out from those of the real world in a most meaningful manner.”²⁶ That “most meaningful manner” relies on mythical structures rather than on structures that are properly expressive of the actual, real world.

Nor is the distancing the same as Romantic irony (or its ethical equivalent in Fichte’s abstracted and all-productive ego).²⁷ Hegel claims that Romantic irony reduces true pathos and character to ridiculous emotion and frivolous caricature and that Fichte’s ego is hard to separate from evil.

Rather, the distancing of which Hegel is writing allows us to see the inherently rich rationality of the world we are in. There is no formula for the distancing: According to Hegel, it is precisely Shakespeare’s genius that he can endow his characters with sufficient imagination to develop languages that speak directly to their particular experiences and situations. Imaginative languages arise out of their world and reflect that world more intensively.

Interestingly, we see this in Shakespeare’s life. According to Stephen Greenblatt:

Shakespeare was a master of . . . distancing; if he had a sympathetic understanding of country customs, he also had ways of showing that they were no longer his native element. . . . Virtually all his close relatives were farmers, and in his childhood he clearly spent a great deal of time in their orchard and market gardens, in the surrounding fields and woods, and in tiny rural hamlets with their traditional seasonal festival and folk customs. . . . [Shakespeare] used his boyhood experiences—as he used virtually all of his experiences—as an inexhaustible source of metaphor.²⁸

SIMILE AND COMPARISON PROVIDE *ETHICAL* DISTANCING

The kind of character one *is* determines one’s level of moral insight. We have seen that for Hegel, the kind of self one *is* determines both one’s practical and theoretical view. The different levels of distancing correspond to levels of self-consciousness in the dramatic characters in relation to their situations. Sometimes an image provides a merely “tranquilizing effect” (e.g., for Cleopatra at death’s door).²⁹ Other times, the image or comparison is generated by a skeptical character in order to sort out what is true (e.g., Hamlet’s play “The Mouse Trap”).

According to Hegel, the difference between ancient and modern drama has to do with the kind of ethical agency at work. In Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Antigone and Creon are two sides of an immediate ethical substance that is self-divided into the law of the Penates (the household gods) and the law of

the State. The tragedy is not so much personal as the destruction of that form of ethical substance. In *Hamlet*, on the other hand, what is at issue is Hamlet's character, his skepticism, and the strictly individual pathos that drives him. And the tragedy is his.

According to Hegel, ethical categories arise at certain points in the history of human development: For example, Hegel claims that conscience is not an ancient Greek phenomenon but a quintessentially modern one.³⁰

Again, the concept of fate is very different in ancient and modern drama.³¹ In modern drama, a character's fate is as much or more a result of the individual's character and passion as of the circumstances into which that character—with the kinds of propensities for action that such a character has—finds him- or herself.³² It is part of the work in the chapters of my book to show what kinds of language and (ethical) insights are at work in different levels of imaginative distancing.

HOWEVER, ART IS NOT ABOUT “MORAL BETTERMENT”

One might reply that Hegel's celebration of imagination in *art* does not translate into *ethical* theory. For support, one might point to Hegel's explicit argument in the *Aesthetics*, against art as “moral betterment.”³³

But Hegel's argument against art as moral betterment is not pitched against our gaining moral insight from art. It is pitched against making the *aim* of art be moral insight. More broadly, Hegel is arguing against art being teleological or deontological in any respect. In other words, in this argument, Hegel criticizes precisely the kind of dualistic thinking that we discussed above was anathema to his philosophy. Let me address his anti-teleological stance first.

According to Hegel, art should no more be directed by the desire for moral betterment than for instruction or any other goal.³⁴ Such goals make the artwork explicitly “a veil,” a “pure appearance” in the service of a utility.³⁵ They pull the sensuous apart from the universal, making the sensuous subservient to the universal theory (of morality or instruction).

By contrast, Hegel argues that the work of art should be conceived holistically. It “should put before our eyes a content, not in its universality as such, but one whose universality has been absolutely individualized and sensuously particularized.”³⁶ This becomes clearer when we look at his second argument against art as moral betterment. This argument is less against teleology than against deontology in particular.

Hegel writes that art should not be designed according to a (Kantian) conception of what “ought” to be. He critiques the attitude that is duty-driven. Such an art adopts the opposition of will and nature; it pitches duty against inclinations and the sensuous:

For the modern moralistic view starts from the fixed opposition between the will in its spiritual universality and the will in its sensuous natural particularity; and it consists not in the complete reconciliation of these opposed sides, but in their reciprocal battle against one another, which involves the demand that impulses in their conflict with duty must give way to it.³⁷

Hegel objects to dualisms between “the dead inherently empty concept, and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience.”³⁸ He admits that these oppositions have arisen naturally in consciousness. But it is therefore all-important to overcome this alienation in our understanding of art.

If general culture has run into such a contradiction, it becomes the task of philosophy to supersede the oppositions, i.e., to show that neither the one alternative in its abstraction, nor the other in the like one-sidedness, possess truth, but that they are both self-dissolving; that truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of both, and that this mediation is not mere demand, but what is absolutely accomplished and is ever self-accomplishing.³⁹

Against the teleological and deontological view of art as moral betterment, Hegel asserts that we must delve into the self-accomplishing process of art.

Against this we must maintain that art’s vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned, and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honour, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature.⁴⁰

That is the end of Hegel’s argument against art as moral betterment. To it we add the following. We need only consider the place of art in Hegel’s system: Art is one of the three forms of Absolute Spirit, alongside religion and philosophy. Art deals more comprehensively with reality than either the State (objective spirit) or individual minds (subjective spirit) can.

CONCLUSION REGARDING HEGEL’S *AESTHETICS* AND OUR PROJECT

According to Hegel, drama is the highest, most comprehensive form of art because it places the living, moving, speaking human being before us; it thereby

allows us to think through that most complex form of representation. Shakespeare is, in Hegel's view, the supreme dramatist. So if ethical life requires us to think about ourselves, about how we represent the world and ourselves to ourselves, then dramatic art, and particularly Shakespeare, is the most important to consider.

Therefore, the present book is simply doing, in more detail (though by no means comprehensively), what Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, calls upon us to do based on his general theory about art and its relation to reality. That is, we are studying the highest form of drama in order to understand the nature of human reality. Such an investigation comprises ethics as one part of its makeup. I am focusing on that.

In conclusion, the present work assumes that Hegel's ethical theory is a kind of moral imagination theory. It is not my goal in this book to argue for this. Nonetheless, arguments in support of this theory can be found peppered throughout the book, in implicit and explicit form.

This View of Hegel's Ethics as a Theory of Moral Imagination Is Compatible with His Distinction Between Moralität (Morality) and Sittlichkeit (Ethical Life)

For Hegel scholars in particular, the title of this book requires clarification. In Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere, Hegel distinguishes between Morality (*Moralität*) and Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*). The former is chiefly concerned with the independence and freedom of the individual. The latter is concerned with the re-immersion of the free individual into rational, civil society.⁴¹ Before I defend my use of the term moral imagination, let me explain Hegel's distinction and why it matters to him.

By "morality"⁴² Hegel almost always means the Kantian conception of it. That is, he means morality that is based on the accordance of a free, autonomous will with categorically derived duty.⁴³ As I mentioned above, Hegel criticizes this view as "empty formalism."⁴⁴ Hegel thinks that the will has to recognize itself as the *ethical* reality of the actual social laws that have come about in a society's development. In other words, in ethical life,⁴⁵ as in art, any universal law must be reconciled with sensuous life rather than pitted against it in a battle for mastery. Thus, for example, according to Hegel, the requirement not to murder is not arrived at a priori. Nor is it maintained as a duty without input from the existing circumstances. It is a prohibition that has been arrived at socially and it is implemented in context.⁴⁶

For Hegel, although morality is an *advance* beyond the immediacy of right (just as, in the *Phenomenology*, it is an advance over the immediacy of ethical belief), it must be superseded. It must, because morality on its own can generate evil as much as it can generate the good. Evil arises from autonomy of will. What generates the possibility of evil is the freedom of the individual to operate on the basis of his or her particularity instead of for the common

universal good.⁴⁷ The individual must come to realize that the rational lies not simply in autonomy but equally in the ethical substance, i.e., in the mores and laws of the society. In turn however, the moral agent can only commit itself to the universal good of the society when the society has developed to the point where its institutions uphold the freedoms of individuals.⁴⁸

Given Hegel's distinction between morality and ethical life, why have I chosen the expression "moral imagination" in this book (instead of, say, *ethical* imagination)?

First of all, this book is not a Hegelian interpretation of Shakespeare. My use of the word "moral" is meant to encompass whatever commonly falls under that term in practical philosophy nowadays—concepts such as good, evil, conscience, right, wrong, just, and so on. The whole gambit (from morality to ethical life, as well as other practical distinctions in and outside of Hegel's philosophy) is open for investigation. In Shakespearean drama, we find ourselves all over the map of practical possibilities.

Second, according to Hegel, the moral standpoint of *Moralität* is not *removed* from the ethical standpoint. It is sublated into it—in other words, it is risen above but also preserved. Hegel's Ethical Life is Kantian morality conjoined with concrete, dialectically inwardized and externalized experience. In ethical life, moral theory and the social imaginary are dialectically related. Therefore, a full investigation of moral imagination in Hegel must look into both *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*.

Thus the expression "moral imagination" includes but is not exhausted by Hegel's notion of *Moralität*. Our investigation of moral imagination would be limited if it were kept within its arena. Similarly, although ethical life comprehends *Moralität*, our analysis of moral imagination would also be limited if we were to investigate it purely in terms of Ethical Life. We would lose the juicy discussions of, for example, evil and hypocrisy.

Finally, were I to determine the title of the book according to Hegel's distinction, I would be less able to address tensions and difficulties in that distinction to which the study of Shakespeare gives rise.⁴⁹

To conclude, Hegel's distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* is a distinction that falls *within* what I, following current language usage, call "moral imagination."⁵⁰

Part II: Historical Context of Hegel's Reception of Shakespeare⁵¹

Shakespeare on the Continent and his Reception in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Germany

The role of Shakespearean drama in eighteenth-century Germany simply cannot be overstated: Not only was Shakespearean drama central to the development

of eighteenth-century German culture, it was foundational in the shaping of it. Shakespeare was the rage of literary and cultural movements. These movements (and Shakespeare's role in them) shaped the identity of Germany.

In 1741, Germany had the first translation of Shakespearean drama to appear in any language. It was of *Julius Caesar*, and it was translated by the Prussian ambassador in London, Caspar Wilhelm von Borck.⁵² Borck translated the text into German Alexandrines. This version (*Der Tod des Julius Caesar*) "not merely gave men like Lessing, and, doubtless, Herder also, their first glimpse of the English poet, but it also led to the earliest German controversy on Shakespeare's art."⁵³

A debate emerged between those who held Voltaire's view that Shakespeare was a threat to proper classical theater, and those who nonetheless found something of worth in the "drunken savage." (Johann Elias Schlegel, though a Voltairean, was one of the latter.)

In these early years, German interest in Shakespeare was most aroused by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing did not have a great deal of knowledge of Shakespeare. Until at least 1753, he only knew Brock's translation of *Julius Caesar*. He was primarily interested in Aristotle and Sophocles. Nonetheless, Lessing was able to bring the classical and the Shakespearean into one discussion.⁵⁴

In his 1759 *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, Lessing formulated two conclusions that would have enormous effect in Germany. The first was that "the drama of Shakespeare was akin to the German *Volksdrama*."⁵⁵ It was Lessing's hope that, by imitating Shakespeare, "Germany might be assisted to a national drama of her own."⁵⁶ The second was that Shakespeare "was a greater and more Aristotelian poet—in other words, more akin to Sophocles—than the great Corneille." Lessing wrote that "[a]fter the *Oedipus* of Sophocles, no piece can have more power over our passions than *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*."⁵⁷

This was the climax of Lessing's involvement with Shakespeare (his *Ham-burgische Dramaturgie* has relatively little to say about Shakespeare). At heart, Lessing was a classicist and in sympathy with Voltaire's conception of tragedy. Finally, for Lessing, Shakespeare was great "because he could be proved to have obeyed the Greek lawgiver [Aristotle] instinctively."⁵⁸

The first great achievement of translation into German was made between 1762 and 1766 by Christoph Martin Wieland. The translation was into prose. It was clumsy, but with respect to its immediate influence on German culture "no subsequent translation could vie" with it.⁵⁹ Like Lessing, Wieland had allegiances to the classical style. And like Lessing, he was "filled with dismay at the extravagances which followed the introduction of Shakespeare to the German literary world."

It was only with the *Sturm and Drang* movement in Germany that something new took hold. Critics moved away from "Shakespeare the brother of Sophocles" to "Shakespeare the voice of nature." The writers in this move-

ment did not criticize; “they worshipped; they sought to ‘feel’ Shakespeare, to grasp his spirit.”

The new view was put forward by Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg in his *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*. These letters are “perhaps the most important contribution to continental Shakespearean criticism of the entire eighteenth century.” They were, not least because of their influence on Herder.

Herder’s essay on Shakespeare was a main part of the pamphlet *Von deutscher Art und Kunst* (1773) “with which the new movement was ushered in.”⁶⁰ But Herder tempered the *Sturm and Drang* views. He made them acceptable “beyond the pale of the literary revolution.” He had read Lessing’s *Dramaturgy* and had studied Shakespeare intensively (from 1769–1772). Herder believed that the study of literature required understanding the history of literature. Sophocles and Shakespeare were trying to accomplish the same thing, but they were different because of the historical periods within which they were writing. With his essay, Herder “sowed the seeds of the German romantic criticism of a later date.”

New translations of Shakespeare began to emerge, though as yet none of them were particularly good. In 1775–77, an advance was made in terms of further naturalizing Shakespeare into German language and culture: Johann Joachim Eschenburg published *William Shakespeare’s Schauspiele*, in twelve volumes. Eschenburg thoroughly revised and completed Wieland’s translation, to the point of making an entirely new text. (It was Eschenburg’s translation into German that Hegel would read.⁶¹)

The *Sturm and Drang* movement had thoroughly entrenched Shakespearean drama into the German national repertory. In the years 1777–1792, Germany’s greatest actor, Friedrich Ludwig Schöder, produced many Shakespearean plays (*Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, *King Lear*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Macbeth*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*). Shakespeare became “one of the chief assets of [the German] national stage.”⁶² This was not the Shakespeare that Germany came to know best twenty years later through Schlegel, but it was what was possible for the theater in Germany at the time. When these performances were occurring, Hegel would have grown from the age of seven to twelve years old.

The final, main shape of Shakespeare in German culture was introduced by the Romantic School and by August Wilhelm Schlegel’s and his followers’ translations of Shakespeare.⁶³ Like the members of the *Sturm and Drang* movement, the romantics were in awe of Shakespeare. But unlike them, the romantics sought to interpret and understand him. The starting point for the romantic debates was Goethe’s famous comparison, in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, of Hamlet to an oak tree in a costly jar.

Schlegel’s translations started in 1797. By 1801, eight volumes of *Shakespeare’s Dramatische Werke, übersetzt von August Wilhelm Schlegel* had appeared. The ninth volume appeared in 1810. Its worth is unparalleled:

[N]o translation of Shakespeare can vie with this in the exactitude with which the spirit and the poetic atmosphere of the original have been reproduced; to Schlegel, in the main, belongs the credit of having made Shakespeare the joint possession of two nations.⁶⁴

Ironically, the attitude of Germany's two greatest poets at the turn of the century was not favourable toward Shakespeare. Goethe and Schiller endorsed a kind of classicism which was "opposed to the irregularities and subjectivity of Shakespeare's art." They produced "carefully pruned and polished" versions of *Romeo and Juliet* (1812) and *Macbeth* (1800), respectively, and in 1815, Goethe produced a kind of apology for his adaptation (see his *Shakespeare und Kein Ende!*).

In conclusion, the eighteenth-century German reception of Shakespeare was profound and extensive:

[Shakespeare's] influence in Germany from Borck to Schlegel can hardly be exaggerated; and it may be said without paradox that the entire efflorescence of German eighteenth century literature would have been otherwise—have stood much nearer to the main movement of European literature in that century—had it not been for Shakespeare. It was he who awakened the Germanic spirit in modern German literature and pointed out to Germany how the traditions of the renaissance poetics might be abandoned; it was he who freed the intellectual growth of northern Europe from the clogging presence of influences Latin in their origin. . . . There was thus hardly a question round which controversy raged in the German literature of the eighteenth century with which the English poet was not in some way bound up.⁶⁵

In the early nineteenth century, the gulf between Germany and France with regard to Shakespeare was wider than ever ("in the summer of 1822, English actors, who attempted to present *Hamlet* and *Othello* in Paris, were actually hissed off the stage."⁶⁶) As the century progressed, Shakespearean drama gained ground in France. But it was only ever a matter "of intellectual curiosity." In Germany, Shakespeare had become completely naturalized. Translations upon translations were made.⁶⁷ Shakespeare has remained a "vital and ever-present force" in German literature.

Nonetheless, by the middle of the century, a more modern kind of drama appeared on the German stage, and those still caught up in Shakespeare were no longer experiencing it as a new revelation in the way that Goethe and Herder had experienced it. By the middle of the nineteenth century, modern German drama had "little in common with Elizabethan ideals."

Leaving drama aside, a number of things need to be said about the history of German scholarship on Shakespeare. Several figures and works stand out.

Aside from Goethe's analysis of Hamlet mentioned above, there was Friedrich Schlegel's analysis of genius, Tieck's extensive investigations into the entire world of Shakespeare, and August Wilhelm Schlegel's lectures *Über dramatische Kunst und Literature* (1809–1811). Schlegel's work led to the popularization of the romantic criticism of Shakespeare and was of international importance.⁶⁸

Hegelian-Inspired Shakespearean Criticism in the Nineteenth Century and this Book

There were several German authors who had Hegelian readings of Shakespeare:

The influence of Hegel's aesthetics, which was essentially anti-romantic in its tendency, is to be seen in Hermann Ulrici's *Über Shakespeares dramatische Kunst und sein Verhältnis zu Calderon und Goethe* (1839), and, in a less accentuated form, in Georg Gottfried Gervinus's *Shakespeare* (1849–52), in Friedrich Kreyssig's *Vorlesungen über Shakespeare und seine Werke* (1858) and in the recently published *Shakespeare-Vorträge* of the famous Swabian Hegelian, Friedrich Theodor Vischer.⁶⁹

This passage from the *Cambridge History* continues in a way that is critical of Hegelian interpretations of Shakespeare. This critical attitude is naturally of interest to me in relation to my own project in the chapters that follow. On the one hand, I can attribute the Cambridge attitude to the consistently critical light which Anglo-American (analytic) philosophy sheds on Continental philosophy. On the other hand, the critique invokes a similar warning to the one Hegel made when he admonished against seeing art as fundamentally teleological or deontological. With this in mind, I cite the Cambridge critique as an amulet against such mistakes in my book:

On the whole, the influence of Hegelianism on German Shakespeare criticism has not been favourable; it has led to an excessive preoccupation with metaphysical theories of tragic guilt and tragic purpose, to a misleading confusion of moral and aesthetic standards and to a too confident reliance on *a priori* theories of literary genius. It has also made it difficult for Shakespeare's countrymen to appreciate at their true value the learning and scholarship which lay behind the metaphysical veil.⁷⁰

Part III: Hegel's Reception of Shakespeare in the *Aesthetics*⁷¹

The citations I have already discussed are but a few examples of the many passages in which Hegel celebrates Shakespeare's supremacy in dramatic art. To

make sense of this supremacy within Hegel's philosophy of art, let me briefly describe Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* and then summarize where and why Shakespeare is discussed in the lectures.

A Brief Overview of the Aim and Structure of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*⁷²

The *Aesthetics* is a history of art from ancient Zoroastrianism to artists of Hegel's time. His view is that art is the objective expression of the consciousness of a people. Art developed over time in relation to developments in consciousness. Initially, art and consciousness developed from immediate, unconscious forms of symbolism. Then, they developed through increasingly self-conscious complexity. Finally, art and consciousness reached the point where art, in the modern era, self-consciously dissolves itself.

The task of the philosophy of art is to comprehend this content and development:

Art has nothing else for its function but to set forth in an adequate sensuous present what is itself inherently rich in content, and the philosophy of art must make it its chief task to comprehend in thought what this fullness of content and its beautiful mode of appearance are.⁷³

Let us briefly walk through these general claims.⁷⁴ According to Hegel, the three main eras or Forms of art are the Symbolic (to which ancient forms of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Egyptian art belong), the Classical (ancient Greek and Roman art) and finally, the Romantic (medieval and modern Christian art). Each represents a development over its predecessors.

In the Classical Greek representation of the human body, art achieves its artistic ideal of unifying form and matter. But art as a shape of consciousness is completed only at the end of Romantic art form in drama.⁷⁵ In Romantic art, consciousness seeks to move beyond representation.

To illustrate the difference between the culmination of Greek art and the culmination of Romantic art, I propose that we imagine a Greek statue of a human form and beside it, Shakespeare's dramatic character Hamlet. The Greek statue is the culmination of the human desire "to be" in art; Hamlet's spoken words "to be or not to be" express human alienation. The one is contented embodiment, the other, witness to an inner spirit that is no longer at home in its shape. This is not to say that Romantic art is forlorn; it is to say that its task, unlike that of the earlier forms of art, is to deal with the recognition that the modern spirit cannot be contained in representation. Hegel, with Hamlet, might in an alienating society say: "Seems, madam! Nay, it *is*; I know

not 'seems.'"⁷⁶ Of course the truth behind such a statement, for both Hegel and Hamlet, is the assertion "I *know* seems." In other words, they are saying "I, unlike you, am fully aware of how alienated our representations of ourselves are from what we really are."

Hamlet's experience of "modern" consciousness is tragic. But in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, Hamlet's experience is not the final picture of consciousness: Art develops further. This modern separation of subjective consciousness from its representation in art has a *happy* resolution in comic drama. "The spirit of comedy is to rejoice in the destruction and dissolution of all the elements of tradition and custom which it negates."⁷⁷ According to Hegel, this is a healthy and happy condition.

Importantly for us, it is in Hegel's discussion about comedy in the last three pages of the *Aesthetics* that we find Hegel's final celebration of Shakespeare's supremacy:

In contrast to the whole prosaic way of treating comedy, the modern world has developed a type of comedy which is truly comical and truly poetic. Here once again the keynote is good humour, assured and careless gaiety despite all failure and misfortune, exuberance and the audacity of a fundamentally happy craziness, folly, and idiosyncrasy in general. Consequently there is present here once more (in a deeper wealth and inwardness of humour), whether in wider or narrower circles of society, in a subject-matter whether important or trivial, what Aristophanes achieved to perfection in his field in Greece. As a brilliant example of this sort of thing I will name Shakespeare once again. . . .⁷⁸

But there is nonetheless a limit as to how far art can go in reconciling the subjective with its representations. According to Hegel, at its culmination, art transcends itself. Comic drama—even with its success in representing time as well as place, and speech as well as figure—naturally gives over to philosophical thinking. We move from images to thought, from representation to philosophy. Thus with the peak of comic drama we arrive at Hegel's famous "dissolution of art itself":

Satisfied in itself, [absolute subjective personality] no longer unites itself with anything objective and particularized and it brings the negative side of this dissolution into consciousness in the humour of comedy. Yet on this peak[,] comedy leads at the same time to the dissolution of art altogether. . . . [T]he presence and agency of the Absolute no longer appears positively unified with the characters and aims of the real world but asserts itself only in the negative form

of cancelling everything not correspondent with it, and subjective personality alone shows itself self-confident and self-assured at the same time in this dissolution.⁷⁹

Philosophy alone can cope with the dissolutorial characteristic that the act of thinking has in relation to the object that it thinks. Philosophy alone is versatile enough to accommodate the dialectical, overcoming nature that consciousness has always been but that it did not know itself to be until Hegel's time.

Shakespeare as the Pinnacle of Romantic Arts

As far as art goes, according to Hegel, Shakespeare is supreme. As I mentioned earlier, Hegel always divides each of his forms into three, since he believes there is a dialectical progression in every form from something immediate, to something contrary to that immediacy, to something that overcomes that contradiction by joining the two prior moments into a greater, more sophisticated form that comprehends the earlier moments. In the Romantic form of art, art progresses from painting to music to poetry. Within each of these, a three-part dialectic likewise develops. Thus the third moment—poetry—starts with epic poetry, develops into lyric poetry, and ends with dramatic poetry. Since poetry is the highest form of the final form of art, *its* final form—drama (indeed, comic drama)—is therefore the pinnacle of all forms of art. So when Hegel asserts that Shakespeare is the supreme dramatist (and an example of the finest when it comes to comic drama), he is making Shakespeare the supreme artist in the history of art. This is a grand claim indeed.⁸⁰

Where Hegel's Discussions of Shakespearian Drama Occur in the *Aesthetics*⁸¹

Of all the Shakespearean plays mentioned by Hegel, *Romeo and Juliet* is discussed by him the most, followed by *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, then *Lear* and *Othello*.

Hegel's discussions are peppered throughout the *Aesthetics*. Hegel refers to Shakespeare early on, in his discussion of Collision and of Action (in particular agents and character) in drama.⁸² Shakespeare is not mentioned again until "The Symbolism of the Comparative Art Form."⁸³ There, as I discussed above, Hegel repeatedly uses Shakespeare in his discussion of metaphor, image, and in particular simile.

Further on, Hegel has a sustained discussion of Shakespeare beginning at the end of his chapter on Chivalry (Chapter II of "The Romantic Form of Art") and then throughout the following chapter on "The Formal Independent of Individual Characteristics."⁸⁴ Shakespeare appears very little from there until

the end of volume II of the *Aesthetics*, where Hegel discusses Dramatic Poetry in the final section of “The Romantic Arts.”

There, in “The Dramatic Work of Art,” Hegel discusses the three unities.⁸⁵ On the one hand, he defends Shakespeare for breaking the unity of time, on the other, he uses Shakespeare to highlight the importance of not breaking the unity of action.⁸⁶

Hegel also celebrates there how Shakespeare’s language exhibits genuine poetry: It harmoniously unites the contingencies and particularities of personality with universality.⁸⁷ This ability to harness the universal is then celebrated further with regard to Shakespearean drama’s wide range of appeal.⁸⁸

Hegel’s final discussions of Shakespeare occur in the final sections of Dramatic Poetry (and thus of at the end of the *Aesthetics* as a whole). There, Hegel discusses the principle of Tragedy, Comedy, and Drama; the Difference Between Ancient and Modern Drama; and the Concrete Development of Dramatic Poetry and its Genres. According to Hegel, *Hamlet* is an example of modern drama since the collision is not of universal forces but depends on character: What drive the modern tragic heroes to act is the “subjectivity of their heart and mind and the privacy of their own character.”⁸⁹ Hegel again celebrates Shakespeare’s ability to bring out the personality of the character. He also appeals to Shakespeare in his discussion of tragic denouement.

Given our focus on moral imagination, it is particularly interesting to note that in these pages, Hegel rejects “moralizing” plays: “[T]he more the abstract moral disposition is made the kingpin, the less can it be a passionate concentration on something, on a really substantial end, that the individual is tied to.”⁹⁰ Shakespeare succeeds because he does not overtly moralize.

Finally, as we saw above, when it comes to the last form of dramatic poetry—Comedy—Hegel asserts that Shakespeare reigns supreme.⁹¹

To summarize: Hegel uses Shakespearean drama to elucidate Hegel’s various theories about tragedy and comedy, collisions and characters, as well as more philosophical views about the unity of particularity and universality and about the final shapes of art in history. What stands out is, first, Hegel’s repeated celebration of Shakespeare’s ability to develop his characters as “whole people, entire and unique,”⁹² and second, that Hegel places Shakespeare at the pinnacle of artistic development in history.

In What Language Did Hegel Read Shakespeare?

We know from Rosencrantz’s biography that, in his early school years, Hegel had a German translation of Shakespearean drama (though it remains unknown what edition it was).⁹³ We do know that he used the German edition of Johann Joachim Eschenburg (1743–1820).⁹⁴ Terry Pinkard elaborates that “One of

[Hegel's] teachers, a Mr. Löffler, gave him at the age of eight a present of Shakespeare's works translated by Eschenburg, with the advice that although he would not understand them at that point, he would soon learn to understand them. (Hegel recorded years later in his teenage diary a laudatory remembrance of Löffler when he died).⁹⁵

The real question is whether Hegel read Shakespeare in English.⁹⁶ Pinkard claims that he did read some:

He also took great interest in the offerings in the various theaters in Paris. He was even able to see the great English actor Charles Kemble, and the legendary Irish actress Henrietta Smithson, perform Shakespeare at the newly opened English Theater in Paris; he followed the plays by reading along in the English editions he had procured, although it did seem to him that the actors were speaking rather fast.⁹⁷

There is evidence for the claim that Hegel read Shakespeare in English.⁹⁸ In a letter dated November 5, 1823, from Hegel's friend Peter Gabriel van Ghert, Ghert promises a single-volume collected works of Shakespeare from London.⁹⁹ There are also two letters that Hegel wrote to his wife in 1827 from Paris in which he indicates that he went to see Shakespeare plays played in English; he writes in one of the letters that he deplors the English troop's acting but adds that he was nonetheless able to follow because he "read along word for word in the handbook."¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

In this Introduction, I have explained the concept of moral imagination and how I use it in relation to Hegel and Shakespeare. I have addressed why, despite Hegel's distinction between morality and ethical life, it is appropriate to use "moral imagination" in discussing Hegel's work. I briefly addressed the historical importance of Shakespeare in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany as well as the important role Hegel attributes to Shakespeare in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. I leave further debate about the merits of "moral imagination" to philosophers of ethics, and I leave further discussion of the role of Shakespeare in nineteenth-century Germany to historians. We now happily turn to investigations of moral imagination in this rich and strange interface of Hegelian philosophy and Shakespearean drama.