

CHAPTER 21

DUEL

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In this essay, I want to discuss an abiding challenge to theatricality exemplified by philosophical reflections on drama. I have in mind here not what Jonas Barish called an ‘anti-theatrical prejudice’ characteristic of certain philosophical discourses; nor what I have elsewhere described as political philosophy’s constitutive expropriation of theatrical categories (such as ‘representation’ or *mimesis*).¹ Rather, I will be talking about a challenge to theatricality that comes from a powerful philosophical appropriation of drama—which I will call ‘philosophical dramaturgy’. This challenge is less an attack on theatricality’s legitimacy as a public practice than it is a claim that drama—as a mode of human self-understanding—can and does free itself from needing re-enactment or sensuous expression in order to present an understanding of human agency, historical existence and inter-personal dynamics. The aim of my discussion—towards the end of this essay—will be a consideration of whether Shakespeare might be understood to offer an answer to this challenge or ‘philosophical dramaturgy’.

To preface what I have to say—and to get this challenge into better focus—I will, in the first section of this essay, recall a few aspects of what are probably our two most far-reaching philosophical accounts of drama: that of Aristotle and that of G. W. F. Hegel. I will then turn in the second and third sections to what I see as an exemplary instance of ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ in modern philosophy: the presentation of the life-and-death struggle (or ‘duel’) in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is presented as the primal act (albeit a kind of idealized act, or mythologeme) through which human life in its normative dimension is achieved. The final sections of the essay to will be devoted to sketching a Shakespearean response to this philosophical dramaturgy.

¹ See Jonas Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Paul A. Kottman, *A Politics of the Scene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Aristotle and Hegel

Since Aristotle's *Poetics*, dramatic works have been understood to be graspable apart from—at a minimum—the sensuousness or 'theatricality' of their material performance.² Recall, for instance, Aristotle's well-known assertion that plot (*mythos*), rather than diction or spectacle (*opsis*), is the soul of tragedy—and that, furthermore, 'the plot [of a tragedy] ought to be so composed that, even without seeing a performance, anyone... will experience terror and pity as a result of the outcome.'³ For Aristotle, tragedies are gripping quite apart from their reliance on theatrical, sensuous representation—indeed, for the author of the *Poetics*, it is enough to recall to mind a tragic *mythos* in order to be moved by it.

Of course, Aristotle's reflections presuppose—that is, they historically follow—the ritual, public enactment of tragic drama in a manifestly theatrical setting. However, once dramas had actually been performed in fifth century BC Athens, *once tragedy had become a self-consciously ritual activity* distinct from epic, it became possible to see (as Aristotle did) that what was being sensuously represented were not only idealized theatrical (visual, choreographed, sensuously perceptible) representations of human beings—characters like Oedipus, to stick with Aristotle's favourite example—but the *actions themselves* of these figures, their words, their gestures, their individual deeds.

And furthermore, once it became clear that tragedies represented human *actions*—that tragedies were sensuous representations of an action and its consequences for the agent and his world (*mimeseos praxis*, to use Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy)⁴—then the specific power of drama with respect to the other arts (image, narrative, dance) was seen to lie, significantly, *not* in its status as sensuous performance (*mousike*) but rather in its capacity to yield a special understanding about what it is for human beings to act among others in a given social world, a philosophical understanding in light of which the poetic mimesis of action (the *mythos*) becomes philosophically defensible, as in Aristotle's own account.⁵

² By 'theatricality' I mean what Henry Turner has described in Chapter 1 as 'a cluster of mimetic and symbolic techniques: the objects, bodies, conventions, and signs, the collective habits of apprehension and affective response' that are 'shared across individual theatrical occasions and that even motivate performances that take place outside of a conventional theatre building'.

³ See Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453b1–4, translated by Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 45.

⁴ *Mimeseos* is the genitive form of *mimesis*, indicating that the representation 'belongs' to the action, not the reverse.

⁵ That tragic drama—the most refined representation of human actions, more refined than epic or lyric—yields a special understanding not available elsewhere was, of course, central to Aristotle's defence of tragedy in the face of Plato's criticism of tragic drama. Note: Aristotle did not defend tragedy as sensuous performance [*mousike*] against Plato's attack; his defence of tragedy lay in his view of tragedy as yielding an understanding of an action in light of its unintended consequences.

And once it was recognized that the chief accomplishment of the theatrical performance of tragedy was, at bottom, a new understanding of human *praxis* through its mimetic representation, then tragic drama ended up *by means of its ritualized sensuous performance* obviating—in Aristotle’s own view—the need for that very theatrical performance.⁶ That this obviation was not only Aristotle’s idiosyncratic opinion is, in a sense, borne out by the historical fact that performances of tragic dramas were well on the wane in Athens by the time Aristotle composed the *Poetics*.

In light of all this, it could be said that the self-dissolution of the *sensuous* material performance of drama belongs, already, to its classical milieu as a formal artistic practice.⁷ Classical theatricality (when it comes to tragedy, at least) *lends itself to this self-dissolution* inasmuch as it succeeds in bringing what it represents—human actions—to the understanding. The understanding, as it were, takes over for our eyes and ears—hence, again, Aristotle’s claims about the ability of a tragic *mythos* to move us independent of its sensuous performance. Dramatic performance alone among the classical fine arts emerges as a practice that tends toward its own self-dissolution because the medium of its artifice—the here-and-now performance of human words and deeds—invariably evacuates the here-and-now, leaving behind only an *ex post facto* practical understanding of the deeds that have been represented.⁸ In another context, it would be important to consider tragedy’s special significance for Greek philosophy’s own self-authorization in light of its distinctiveness in this regard.

So, by sensuously representing human beings in action, classical tragedy obviates the need for the sensuousness of that very representation. *This obviation is nothing*

⁶ The obviation of the sensuous performance is expressed by Aristotle when he argues that the soul of tragedy is its plot-structure, ‘the intrinsic structure of events’, and distinguishes the *mimesis* particular to the composition of tragedy from the ‘material resources’ required to produce spectacular performances. See Aristotle, *Poetics*, 45–6.

⁷ I offer a longer elaboration of these arguments—those gathered in Section 1 here—in my essay, ‘Shakespeare and the Self-Dissolution of Theatrical Drama’, in Jennifer Bates, ed., *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, forthcoming). My discussion here is an effort on my part to rethink some aspects of that essay; both are ‘works-in-progress’ in that sense.

⁸ The same self-dissolution does not, I would argue, apply to the other arts in their classical forms. Epic narrative still requires the spoken word if it is to represent *the past* (that is, the temporal distance between the speaker and that of which he speaks)—so the fate of epic narration is, as Walter Benjamin aptly suggested, tied to a tradition in which the physical act of speaking is capable of transmitting historical experience. Cf. Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Similarly, the performance of music obviously requires the hearing of sound; images require light and surfaces. Unless, of course, one sees in the Pythagorean (or Platonic) conception of music as an invisible *harmonia* (a ‘harmony of the spheres’) a similar ‘philosophical’ self-dissolution of the sensuousness of music. See the discussion in Adriana Cavarero, ‘The Harmony of the Spheres’, in *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). But here philosophy would silence music from the outside, in mute opposition to its sonority—whereas I am arguing, pace Aristotle, that drama is self-dissolving and this historical self-dissolution is noted by, but not enacted by, philosophy.

less than the temporality of the performance of drama itself—its resistance to sensuous reification, its dependence on a shared here-and-now context, its inevitable vanishing at the ‘end’ of the play, its iterability, its retrospective fulfillment in the understanding or collective judgment (*phronesis*) that the performance occasions.⁹ From the perspective of tragedy, theatrical performances are intrinsically self-dissolving as a sensuous practice—both as a historical-artistic practice and at the level of each individual performance.

In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, G. W. F. Hegel offered a more historically self-aware version of Aristotle’s reflections. In Hegel’s account, the development of artistic practices—that is, of historically shifting, context-specific needs for different ‘arts’ (e.g. the need for pyramids in Egypt, for classical sculpture in Greece, or for painting in Christian Europe), as well as internal developments within those arts (from ‘symbolic to classical to romantic’, for example, or from epic to lyric)—presents an ongoing and increasing denaturalization or ‘spiritualization’ of our self-understanding. According to Hegel, the more that we see ourselves as—or teach ourselves that we are—free and self-determining subjects, the less we are limited to artistic expressions that work with ‘natural’ or sensuous media in order to understand ourselves, and our world. The twist in Hegel’s story is that sensuous, representational artistic practices *are* a primary way we teach ourselves this lesson—because by transforming natural-sensuous material in modes that we can regard as ‘free’ from material or instrumental needs, we express our own liberation and, in this way, *become* free. (Art, claims Hegel in a famous passage, allows a free human being to ‘strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself’.¹⁰) And once this lesson is absorbed—that is, once we see ourselves as liberated from nature, inasmuch as the terms of our self-understanding no longer depend upon, and are no longer fully limited by, something ‘out there’ called ‘Nature’ or ‘God’ or the ‘One’ or whatever—we find ourselves less needful of the sensuous representational works by which we ‘taught ourselves’ this lesson. Coming to understand ourselves as free and self-determining entails (and perhaps even requires) a diminishing need to make sensuous, representational artworks, even as it entails a heightened need for ‘philosophical’ reflection on our (past) need for sensuous representation. This is what Hegel means when, famously, he claims—‘art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past’.¹¹

⁹ It is this last element, especially, that distinguishes the performance of spoken drama from the acoustics of music in classical accounts like Aristotle’s.

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1975), 1: 31.

¹¹ As many others have pointed out, Hegel’s argument is not that art has come to an end, but rather that we can outlive, culturally, our need for sensuous, representational art as a deeply essential mode of self-understanding. So, this is not to say that there are not other ongoing critical ‘needs’ for sensuous, representational art—only that these needs are now less essential to our deepest efforts at self-understanding, what

Furthermore, for Hegel, this ongoing denaturalization unfolds (or has unfolded) through an increased awareness *within* artistic practices of artistic practices as medium-specific. So, for instance, classical architecture manifests a higher awareness of its own status as architecture—of itself as a freestanding, artificial, material construction—than does symbolic architecture.¹² Similarly, as Robert Pippin has convincingly argued, the deepening self-reflexivity of modernist and abstract painting—paintings about painting as such—might be understood to fall within the purview of the overall narrative that Hegel offers.¹³ Perhaps the easiest way to see the point here is to consider how artworks—once they no longer *need* (for a given historical community) to be about this or that content ‘out there’ (a material purpose, an animal quarry, a ‘god’, the afterlife, a bit of shared history)—are freed up to determine *for themselves* their own content. And this ‘freeing up’ is perhaps most clearly manifested when artworks start to be about themselves. Self-reflexive artworks and practices undeniably assert the autonomy of human artistry.

Now—to move closer to our topic here—thinking along these lines also led Hegel himself, at the end of his *Lectures on Fine Art*, to consider dramatic poetry as ‘the highest stage of poetry and of art generally’ because ‘in contrast to the other perceptible materials, stone, wood, color and notes, speech is alone the element worthy of the expression of spirit.’¹⁴ Such statements seem to place Hegel close to a view prevalent in Jena Romanticism—found especially in the thought of Lessing and Friedrich Schlegel—according to which poetry holds a privileged place among the arts because its medium (speech, language) places fewer material constraints on the freedom of the imagination.¹⁵

Hegel calls ‘the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of spirit [*Geist*]’. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 7. For more on this point, see, as a start, the discussions of Hegel—and the debates over this pronouncement—in Dieter Heinrich, ‘Art and Philosophy of Art Today: Reflections with Reference to Hegel’, in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism*, edited by R. Amacher and V. Lange, translated by D. Wilson et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 107–33; Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), especially 81–115; Stephen Houlgate, ‘Hegel and the “End” of Art’, *Owl of Minerva* 29.1 (1997), 1–19; Gregg Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel*, trans. James McFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), especially Chapter 2.

¹² ‘The peculiarity of Greek architecture,’ writes Hegel in a typical formulation, is that by fluting and other means ‘it gives shape to . . . supporting *as such* and therefore employs the column as the fundamental element in the purposiveness of architecture.’ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 2, 666, my emphasis.

¹³ I realize, of course, that I am skipping over a number of important questions—for example, those having to do with the differences between the fates of classical and romantic art in Hegel’s account. But I think my overall point about denaturalization as self-reflexivity can stand, for the moment, without tackling those questions. See, Robert Pippin, ‘What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)’, *Critical Inquiry* 29 (August 2002), 1–24.

¹⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’, in Paul A. Kottman, ed., *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 57.

¹⁵ See Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, ‘Laocoön: A Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry’, trans. A. W. Steel; and Friedrich Schlegel, excerpts from ‘Critical Fragments’, ‘*Athenaeum* Fragments’, ‘Ideas’, ‘On Goethe’s *Meister*’, ‘Letter about the Novel’, and ‘On Incomprehensibility’, in J. M. Bernstein, ed., *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

However, although Hegel apparently analyses drama in the *Lectures on Fine Art* under the heading of poetry, he does not reduce drama to linguistic or poetic expression. Drama, he writes, ‘also displays a complete action’, and it is this centrality of *action* (not of the poetic free imagination) that, for Hegel, permits and requires drama to suture subjective experience and objective reality more fully than the other arts.¹⁶ Hence, dramatic poetry is, for Hegel, inherently more self-reflexive than sculpture, painting, or architecture not only because both its ‘medium’ and its content—namely, speech, and action—are from the start ‘spiritual’, human, denaturalized; drama’s self-reflexive potential is also tied to its resulting capacity to hold together both a first-person (subjective) and a third-person (objective) viewpoint.¹⁷ For all of these reasons, drama is for Hegel already freer than the other arts when it comes to choosing its content, when it comes to the expressive capacities of its medium.

Another quick way of grasping the stakes of Hegel’s high regard for dramatic poetry is to recall his idiosyncratic (for a German writer of his period) disinterest in natural beauty, his assertion that ‘the beauty of art is *higher* than the beauty of nature.’¹⁸ Recall, for instance, Hegel’s blunt declaration that in landscape painting ‘the work of spirit acquires a higher rank than the mere natural landscape’; or, similarly, his provocative assertion that Titian, Dürer, and others have painted portraits that are ‘more like the individual than the actual individual himself’; or, still more plainly, ‘even a single fancy as may pass through a man’s head . . . is higher than any product of nature.’¹⁹ Only in being transformed artistically do natural materials (stone, sound, colour, and so on) acquire a specific meaning for us.²⁰ In Hegel’s view, nature and natural materials are in and of themselves boring, lacking a plot (as Hayden White once quipped to me, as we gazed upon a choice piece of California

¹⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’, in *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, 57. To repeat, and to distinguish Hegel from Lessing and Schlegel in this regard, I am suggesting that drama’s privileged status arises, for Hegel, not just from its status as ‘poetry’ (as de-materialized sign or linguistic object) but from its status as action; hence, drama’s self-reflexive capacities need to be grasped in light of drama’s capacity to connect subjective experience and objective reality—not in light of the aesthetic-poetic reason defended by Lessing or the Jena romanticism of Schlegel. It is true that Lessing also thought that ‘actions’ are the real content of poetry—but he did not regard, as did Hegel, action to be also poetry’s *medium*. See the discussion in Lessing, ‘Laocoön’, Chapter xvi.

¹⁷ For more on this last point, see my ‘No Greater Powers Than We Can Contradict’, *Criticism*, special issue on Phenomenology and Shakespeare, ed. James Kearney and Kevin Curran, 54.3 (Summer 2012), 445–54.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. 1, 2. On this point see also Pippin, ‘What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)’, 9.

¹⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 29; 2: 866–7.

²⁰ At a minimum, a bit of ‘nature-wrought-into-art’ expresses the capacity of stone, sound, or colour to transmit meaning for a particular community and its practices. Art, as Hegel puts it, creates a reality that is ‘besouled’ [‘für sich beseelt’]—by which, as Robert Pippin aptly states, Hegel does not mean that human freedom re-enchants the world through artistic means but rather that art ‘elevates us above the need for [the] enchantment [of the natural world]’. See Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 2: 834; and, Pippin, ‘What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)’, 8.

real estate).²¹ Northrop Frye expressed the same thought about drama when he wrote that dramatic poetry fully ‘belongs to the world man constructs, not to the [natural] world he sees; to his home, not his environment.’²²

If artistic practices are medium-specific modes of self-understanding, goes the thinking here, then what medium could be more adequate to our reflexive self-understanding than that which, so to speak, we know to be ‘ours’ from the get-go? Not elements ripped from an indifferent domain of nature (sound, colour, hard materials like stone or marble), in other words—nor only linguistic elements which, to borrow Lessing’s definition, articulate sounds in time—but rather what Giambattista Vico described in terms of ‘poetic wisdom’: elements of culture and history, words and deeds, social principles and passionate aims, conflicts between individual characters.²³ Because all of these are the ‘stuff’ of poetry—and in particular of dramatic poetry—to work in the dramatic arts entails, relative to other artistic media, a heightened degree of historical self-awareness.

Moreover—à propos of our topic here—we will do well to remember not only that Hegel ranks dramatic poetry as the highest (the most prevalently ‘spiritual’) of artistic practices, but also the fact that he thought among modern dramatists ‘you will scarcely find any . . . who can be compared with Shakespeare.’²⁴ And so, although Hegel does not say so explicitly, we can nevertheless infer—from the perspective of my highly condensed account here—that Shakespeare’s pre-eminence in Hegel’s account of the history of human artistic development should have something to do with Shakespeare’s heightened degree of self-reflexivity, his dramatic presentation of drama *as such* and of the sort of self-understanding it affords.²⁵

²¹ Hegel’s way of putting it is to say that nature is ‘spiritless’.

²² Northrop Frye, *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963), 8.

²³ Lessing, ‘Lacoön’, 81.

²⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, vol. 2, 1228. Shakespeare’s pre-eminence in Hegel’s account—the fact, for instance, that Hegel’s discussion of Shakespeare comes at the culmination of his *Lectures on Fine Art*—would, of course, require some qualification. Hegel also seems to claim that Greek art is more fulfilled *as art* than modern art, and his high regard for Sophocles seems of a piece with that view. ‘There is,’ as Robert Pippin notes, however, ‘another sense in which he claims that the ethical life behind Shakespeare’s presentation and the kind of self-awareness visible in Hamlet, say, does represent an advance or moment of progress.’ Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84 n 12. See further the discussion of Hegel and Shakespeare in Henry and Anne Paolucci, *Hegelian Literary Perspectives* (Smyrna, DE: Griffon House rpt, 2002), and, especially, in Jennifer Ann Bates, *Hegel and Shakespeare on Moral Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 5–20.

²⁵ Of course self-reflexivity (or self-referential theatricality) abounds in other pre- or non-Shakespearean dramatic works and practices—for example, in the formal composition of the Chorus in Greek Tragedy, or the self-referential character of gestures and costumes in Japanese Noh or Kabuki (not to mention in the architectonics and choreographic practices of various types of world drama, whether or not such dramas are ‘scripted’). So, too—to move closer to Shakespeare’s original context—it is by now a scholarly truism to note that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English drama comprised a set of highly self-conscious artistic practices, in which a dramatic work’s standing as ‘theatre’ was reflexively presented in both the composition and performance itself.

I would now like to take seriously Hegel's depiction of Shakespeare as a highly self-reflexive dramatist in order to further explore Shakespeare's dramatic presentation of drama as such. My broader ambition—which cannot be realized in the space of this essay—would be to bring into better focus Shakespeare's historically self-conscious understanding of human agency and human freedom. Here I will only try to begin sharpening some features of Shakespeare's own dramaturgy—by contrasting it to a particularly influential dramaturgical understanding of human action offered by modern philosophers, including above all Hegel himself: the duel, or life-and-death struggle.

I will have two claims to defend by way of this contrast. First, whereas Hegel and Hobbes' philosophical dramaturgy' is meant to show how human life in its historical-institutional-normative dimension distinguishes itself from nature or mere living, Shakespeare nowhere presents anything like a natural state or biological viewpoint on the basis of which the achievement of human life might be grasped.²⁶ For Shakespeare any difference between human-historical life and 'mere living' already belongs to human history. Second, and correlated, if the achievement (or failure) of human life is to be regarded as historical through and through, then it must be enactable, stageable before an audience—it must be something whose implications *we*, some particular historical community, can recognize as a concretely 'playable' human situation. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, this took the form not of drama but of *theatre*, or of something we could call a *theatricalized drama*. I will leave ~~here~~ open the form that such enactments might take for us: theatrical, a close-up shot of an actor in a film, or something else entirely.

Life and death struggles as philosophical dramaturgy

Before going any further, let me now make an observation, on the basis of which I hope to (at least partly) defend these theses. The observation is this: While modern philosophers, from Thomas Hobbes and G. W. F. Hegel to Alexandre Kojève, Heidegger, and Derrida, have regarded the life-and-death struggle as central to emergence of the modern self-conscious individual, Shakespeare did not seem to regard duelling as such to be an elemental scene for human beings. If anything, in play after play and throughout his career—from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Richard II*, from *Hamlet* to *Macbeth*, from *Coriolanus* to *Cymbeline*—Shakespeare depicts idiosyncratic, aborted, perverted, botched, or failed struggles to the death: as if there is simply no such thing as an idealized 'struggle to the death' whose motivation and upshot can be staged as such.

²⁶ Some might argue that this is what Shakespeare does with the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, or the heath in *King Lear*, or Prospero's Island. I would argue that each of these is a historical predicament; see my comments on these plays in *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

What to make of this?

First, we should recall that when Thomas Hobbes speaks of ‘the state of nature’ as a ‘war of all against all’, he is suggesting that a battle to the death is not a socio-historical practice but rather that this *bellum omnium contra omnes* aptly characterizes a pre-historical or ‘natural’ circumstance *out of which* human life in its institutional, political, normative dimension emerges.²⁷ So, while Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is clearly a reflection on the stakes of the English Civil War, he does not have in mind a *particular* enacted (or enactable) battle or duel. The ‘war of all against all’ functions, rather, as a dramatic mythologem or idealized primal scene in his philosophy.²⁸ Similarly, when G. W. F. Hegel speaks of a ‘struggle to the death’ as the predicament in which human self-consciousness is forged, he thinks he is putting his finger on a drama—on a particular action—that not only does not depend upon a given set of historical circumstances in order to be meaningful, but that might actually explain the emergence of historical-institutional life as such.²⁹ He does not, therefore, mean to set a *theatrical scene*—he does not give the combatants proper names, nor arrange a particular *concrete* conflict for an audience. And though Hegel is elaborating a primal, dramatic scene that might perhaps take any number of ‘lived’ phenomenal shapes, it is far from clear that the struggle to the death as related in the *Phenomenology* lends itself to any *particular* re-enactment. At any rate, important differences between these philosophers notwithstanding, both regard the life-and-death struggle as a dramatic predicament through which human, historical life *tout court* emerges—rather than as a function of the duel’s relation to some socio-historical form of life, or concrete ‘theatrical’ moment.

These assertions, I think, raise fundamental questions about drama that scholars of literature and theatre, too, must address: what if certain human actions are compelling not only because of their meaning within an pre-existing form of cultural, human, socio-historical life but because of their function at, or as, the threshold of what makes a life ‘human’? What if certain actions are paradigmatic not because they reflect this or that social world but because sociality as such comes to light through these actions?

My point here is not primarily to determine whether Hobbes and Hegel are ‘correct’ to privilege life-and-death struggles in what I am calling their ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ (although I will try to say something about what I think it means that Shakespeare does not privilege duelling in the same way).³⁰ My point, rather, is that

²⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1968).

²⁸ See Kottman, *A Politics of the Scene*, Chapter 3.

²⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Self-consciousness’, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

³⁰ It should be underscored that what interests Hegel and Hobbes, primarily, are not fights in which one side (or both) is killed. There are, of course, many such scenes in Shakespeare—but these are not our primary focus. Instead, Hegel and Hobbes focus on how the relationship between the surviving combatants—and their very way of life—is irrevocably altered by the fight.

instead of seeing drama solely as the depiction of the values, rituals, and practices of a *particular* culture or social-historical world, ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ also tries to depict the threshold of social-historical life, our *becoming* human, by offering an idealized picture of *how* human (socio-historical, cultural, institutional) values and practices take shape or crumble through the performance of certain paradigmatic actions. Struggles to the death are, for these philosophers, part of our self-distancing from mere life or nature (for Hobbes, the ‘state of nature’; for Hegel, ‘the sphere of life’) and are essential to the achievement of our humanity as a form of historical, and not merely natural-biological, existence.

To avoid confusion, by ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ I do not mean that Hobbes or Hegel (or, for that matter, Shakespeare) are ‘dramatizing’ a philosophical position—as if drama were a handmaiden of philosophical claims or positions that could stand on their own, non-dramaturgically. I am not talking about something like what Colin McGinn has revealingly called ‘the ideas embedded in Shakespeare’s text.’³¹ Rather, I am assuming that philosophy makes itself dramaturgical whenever it depicts the emergence of the human through a paradigmatic action—like a battle to the death—and that, therefore, philosophers like Hobbes or Hegel are *already* dramatists of a kind, even if they are not theatrical practitioners. And I mean, further, that such dramaturgy—understood as the search for those paradigmatic actions that make us who we are—is necessarily ‘philosophical’ inasmuch as it understands such actions to reflect something other than theatrical display, historical contingency, or residual habits and traditions. Philosophical dramaturgy, in short, shows certain human actions to be compelling—worth reflecting on—not only because they reveal something about the conditions of theatrical action or this or that historical moment or sociality but because they also depict human life being achieved by discovering its historicity and its possibilities.

I would now like to contrast Shakespeare to the ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ of Hobbes and Hegel. Again, I want to claim that whereas both Hegel and Hobbes are concerned to show—‘dramatically,’ through the duel—how human life distinguishes itself from ‘nature’ or from mere living, Shakespeare shows through a manifold of scenes that there is no single paradigmatic action which can fully capture the stakes of human life’s self-distinction in this way. Moreover, he shows that the ‘achievement’ (or failure) of our humanity is best grasped not by a proper suturing of ‘nature’ and ‘culture,’ but rather by provisional historical self-understandings which, because never properly idealized, must be ‘re-enactable’ in manifold concrete scenes *to ourselves*—that is, before *particular* audiences.

In order to begin sketching a contrast between Shakespeare’s and Hegel’s ‘philosophical dramaturgy,’ a few words about the centrality Hegel accords to the life-and-death struggle in the chapter on ‘Lordship and Bondage,’ towards the beginning

³¹ Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare’s Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays* (New York: Harper, 2006), vii.

of the section on Self-Consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.³² Given the many pages Hegel devotes explicitly to dramatic poetry, and to Shakespeare in particular—in the *Lectures on Fine Art* and elsewhere—my focus on these pages from the *Phenomenology* might seem out of place. However, I simply wish to take—as many others have—Hegel’s *Phenomenology* as a kind of dramaturgical presentation, in which various shapes of human consciousness unfold (albeit obliquely) in Hegel’s writing as concrete predicaments or scenes. Some well-known instances of such Hegelian dramaturgy include the *Phenomenology*’s presentation of Antigone, the Unhappy Consciousness, and Pleasure and Necessity. In such passages, Hegel’s tack is not only—as was Aristotle’s—to philosophically describe an object of study. Rather than talk *about* human self-consciousness, Hegel instead offers a perspective in which the drama of human self-consciousness unfolds *through* dramatic predicaments, scenes, and actions. These are not necessarily ‘theatrical’ scenes, though Hegel often seems to be inspired by (or to be condensing and refining) literary or dramatic representations, which he seems to want to offer as structural predicaments endemic to the struggle for human self-realization.³³

My reason for focusing especially on the life-and-death struggle is that it is the predicament through which Hegel turns from a descriptive account of consciousness to a phenomenological-dramatic staging of self-consciousness. Here, in other words, Hegel stops *explaining* what a human being is and starts *showing* how, from the inside, the doing of certain actions and the suffering of their outcomes makes us who we are. In this sense, as I have been intimating, Hegel is changing what it is to be a philosopher. For his task is now indistinguishable from a dramatist: to stage a uniquely gripping and consequential scene. Indeed, Hegel himself refers to the life-and-death struggle as the ‘turning point’ of the *Phenomenology*, and the chapter in which it occurs now seems a defining moment for modern philosophy.³⁴ Although Hegel was

³² One crucial question raised by this passage from Hegel is the appropriateness of the ‘pair’ or the duo as the most elemental form of human relationality. Many have asked whether all mediating ‘thirds’ can be so easily bracketed. Although I do not have the space to take up this question here, I will do so in other contexts.

³³ So, there are, in a sense, ‘characters’ in Hegel’s philosophical dramaturgy—‘The unhappy consciousness’, and so on. And these are not just blank names; they are also ‘characters’ with a ‘history’ or ‘baggage’ (namely, the historical development of *Geist*). So, I would not want to deny the many ways in which Hegel’s presentation is akin to that of a dramatist. My point here, rather, is that Hegel’s text *need* not be enactable in order to be *philosophically* compelling. For a good discussion of Hegel’s use of literary-dramatic figures, see Robert Pippin, ‘The Status of Literature in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*’, in Richard T. Gray, Nicholas Halmi, Gary Handwerk, Michael A. Rosenthal, and Klaus Vieweg, eds., *Inventions of the Imagination: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Imaginary since Romanticism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); also, Allen Speight, *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); more recently, to give another example, Terry Pinkard has explored the significance of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* for Hegel’s depiction of pleasure and necessity in a paper presented at the New School for Social Research in February, 2012.

³⁴ For a recent and excellent discussion of this, see Robert Pippin’s *Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 3–4 and *passim*.

not the first to consider a fight to the death as the elemental scene of human self-realization—again, Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes* is one precursor—his account is notable for its inspiration of a wide swath of modern thought.

This influence is due in no small measure to the interpretation of Hegel given by Alexandre Kojève in a set of lectures attended by Jacques Lacan, Georges Bataille, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and many others. In fact, Kojève's interpretation of the 'duel' as a struggle for recognition—though influential and well known—is somewhat off the mark. Kojève takes Hegel to be staging a 'fight to the death between two beings that claim to be men' as 'a fight for prestige carried on for the sake of "recognition" by the adversary'.³⁵ In this sense, Kojève perceives the distinctiveness of human desiring in its orientation toward a non-natural object, toward something that cannot be the object of 'animal desire'—namely, another's desire. This desire to be desired (to be recognized by another) is the core of Kojève's explanation of Hegel's battle:

... anthropogenetic Desire is different from animal Desire (which produces a natural being, merely living and having only a sentiment of its life) in that it is directed, not toward a real 'positive,' given object but toward another Desire... Thus, an object perfectly useless from the biological point of view (such as a medal, or the enemy's flag) can be desired because it is the object of other desires. Such a desire can only by a human Desire, and human reality, as distinguished from animal reality, is created only by actions that satisfy such Desires: human history is the history of desired Desires.³⁶

However, as Paul Redding has rightly pointed out, Kojève's account is beset by a circularity that Hegel himself sought to avoid.³⁷ On the one hand, Kojève wants to follow Hegel in seeing the life-and-death struggle as an elemental drama through which human self-consciousness, historical being, as such is forged—as a struggle whose need cannot be fully explained by pre-existing social norms. On the other hand, Kojève understands the quarrel to be *already* motivated by a distinctly 'human' (or historical) desire—namely: the desire for prestige or social recognition. Since the 'humanity' (or socio-historicity) of our desire cannot *both* 'come to light' in the battle and be the (already 'socio-historical') 'motivation' for the battle—something in Kojève's interpretation is amiss.

To cut to the chase, I tend to agree with Redding that, for Hegel, the duel is meant to depict the primal scene in which human-historical life is achieved—and, therefore, meant also to show human life to *be* an achievement rather than some essence attributable to a substantive, biological or metaphysical 'human nature.' Human-historical life is achieved, first of all, by *actively proving* its independence from species-specific

³⁵ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1980), 11–12.

³⁶ Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 6.

³⁷ See Paul Redding, *Hegel's Hermeneutics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), especially chapters 5 and 6.

requirements for life and self-preservation—human Desire [wins] out over the desire for preservation. One fights to *prove* one's humanity—and, by the same token, only in such an active demonstration does one come to have the standing (for oneself and for others) as human, as part of history.

Shakespeare understood this, too, I would argue. Indeed, on this point at least, Hegel and Shakespeare seem to meet. Consider, for example, the opening of *Romeo and Juliet*, ~~for instance~~, which forces us to ask: Why do the men fight? If our answer is that the men fight because they happen to be Capulets and Montagues, then we are left with something like *West Side Story*—a pre-existing ethnic, tribal context or 'gang war', in which the characters are caught up and by which they are defeated. As if they all merely had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time among the wrong people. We might also answer that the brawl gives each participant the chance to prove his manhood.³⁸ But by 'manhood' we would have to mean not just some desired social standing, masculine virtue or 'manliness'—such as the 'man at arms' described in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Such a standing may indeed be desirable in certain contexts, and may be obtainable in some circumstances by prevailing in violent conflict. However, because violent conflict is not absolutely *necessary* for the acquisition of such a standing—if anything, in Shakespeare's Verona, one's civic status appears to depend upon keeping the peace—the desire to be recognized *by others* as 'manly' (or as a 'Montague', or a 'Capulet') cannot explain the necessity of the fight to the death here. And it is the fight to the death that we need to explain.

At stake, therefore, is something more elemental.

I risk my life in a battle to the death—say the men—not for prestige, nor as an act of tribal duty or animal aggression; but rather to show that the desire to stay alive (mere instinct) does not drive me absolutely. ('Draw if you be men' [1.1.59].)

I am more than my desire to live. My bodily vitality is not the highest value for me; biological life is not a higher 'good' by which my existence is measured. I take measure of my own life by risking it.

*If I cannot stake this claim, then no social standing or recognition of my manhood can be meaningful for me.*³⁹ (This is exactly how Hegel describes the motivation for the life-and-death struggle in the 'Lordship and Bondage' section of the chapter on 'Self-Consciousness'.)

So, at this point at least, Shakespeare seems to see the duel much as Hegel does—as a scene in which a longing for social recognition, while it may well follow the struggle, does not *motivate* the battle.⁴⁰ Recall, as further evidence, the exchange

³⁸ There is no use denying that a display of sexual prowess is also motivational for the men. ['I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his / maids to the wall' (1.1.15–17).] But 'sexual prowess' is not only a form of social prestige; it is also a struggle for self-realization.

³⁹ See Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 114, paragraph 187.

⁴⁰ For a longer discussion of this, see my 'Defying the Stars: Romantic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63.1 (2012).

between Benvolio and Mercutio at the opening of Act III, which explains that the socio-historical occasion for a fight—a hot day, a ‘Capel abroad,’ a drunken tavern—is not to be confused with the motive for fighting. A hot day, and two young desiring beings who stand ready to risk their lives to prove themselves, will suffice. Fighting is its own motive—the quarrel urges itself:

Thou wilt quarrel with a man that hath a hair more or a hair less in his beard than thou hast. Thou wilt quarrel with a man for cracking nuts, having no other reason but because thou hast hazel eyes. What eye but such an eye would spy out such a quarrel? Thy head is as full of quarrels as an egg of is full of meat, and yet thy head hath been beaten as an adle as an egg for quarreling. Thou hast quarreled with a man for coughing on the street, because he hath wakened thy dog that hath lain asleep in the sun. . . . (3.1.16–26)

Now, if Hegel and Shakespeare at least agree on the motivation of ‘quarrelling’ as the threshold of socio-historical life, then it is striking that Shakespeare nowhere organizes one of his dramas around the consequences of the ‘duel’ as depicted by either Hegel or Hobbes. After all, while *Romeo and Juliet* contains life-and-death struggles (Romeo slays Tybalt and then Paris) the play does not seem to be primarily *about* the consequences of those struggles.

Put simply, if Shakespeare agrees with Hegel and Hobbes about the *motive* for the duel—that it belongs to those actions in which the achievement of our humanity is on display—then it would seem that Shakespeare does *not* share the philosophers’ vision of the upshot of the duel. Nor, significantly, does Shakespeare think that duels, in all of their perverse specificity, *need not be shown theatrically*. Hamlet’s fight with Laertes, Macbeth and Macduff, Tybalt and Romeo—all these must lend themselves to re-representation. Let me now turn, then, to my discussion of the implications Shakespeare’s departure from Hegel and Hobbes on these two points.

First, on the upshot of the battle. Neither Hegel nor Hobbes is really interested in a struggle that leaves one (or both) of the combatants dead.⁴¹ As Hegel puts it, ‘death is the *natural* negation of consciousness. . . which thus remains without the required significance of recognition.’ Or, put less floridly, dead is dead is dead: end of story. Duelling generates historical life not through the destruction of one or both combatants but through a transformation effected when both survive and begin to interact in norm-governed ways, as in Hobbes’s ‘commonwealth’ and ‘pact,’ or Hegel’s ‘Lord and Bondsman.’

Moreover, both Hobbes and Hegel focus on the fear of death in which the battle results, when it does not end up destroying one or both combatants. ‘This consciousness,’ writes Hegel of the combatant who become the bondsman, ‘has been

⁴¹ So, Hegel’s interest is quite different from that of, say, Elias Canetti—for whom the survival of the victor is the crucial point of political-ethical interest. See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 72 and *passim*.

fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord.⁴² If this fear only expressed a species-imperative or a survival instinct, then the ‘natural’ response of the fearful combatant would be to take flight—to run away from the enemy and avoid his company. But remember that what Hegel and Hobbes envision are not battle scenes in which one side simply turns tail and runs—evading all further interaction with the enemy. Instead, they want to explain *why* the fear of death that arises in the duel leads, somewhat counter-intuitively, to a *relationship* between the combatants—indeed, to an enduring, institutionalized, norm-governed, ‘human’ relationship.⁴³ For Hobbes, this fear produces the ‘pact’ whereby the combatants agree to submit to the terrifying authority of a sovereign power; for Hegel, the Bondsman does the Lord’s bidding inasmuch as he labours in submission to the fear of death.

For both philosophers, in other words, the fear of death is the impetus to norm-governed, historical interactions—and registers far more than just an instinctive response to this or that frightful thing in the world (*this* enemy or *that* mortal danger). Leaving aside the many differences between them, each sees the fear of death as distinguishing human life from mere natural instinct inasmuch as this fear transforms one’s relation to life and living *tout court*. Unlike the flight of a deer from a predator, or the flinch of a hand from a hot stove, the institutionalized submission of one human being to another is urged not simply by the unthinking preservation of life and limb but—more deeply—by an reflective estimation of one’s life and limb as *worth preserving*. Rather than an innate instinctual reflex to stay alive—what Robert Pippin calls a ‘species imperative’—there emerges an individual who reflects upon *her attachment to her own life* and comes to see her life as valuable.⁴⁴ This is not a natural (species) imperative, in other words, because her life is now individually *hers*—valuable *to her*. For both Hobbes and Hegel, this reflexive movement through which *life becomes worthwhile* to the one(s) living—and not just a species imperative—is a threshold or passage from something like sheer natural consciousness to self-conscious, historical existence. Why? Because now the former combatants must and do *interact* with one another in norm-based, rather than merely biologically driven, ways: they *take up* a life together. In Hobbes, for instance, this

⁴² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 117, paragraph 197. Hegel’s fear of the ‘absolute Lord’ [Death] has a parallel in Hobbes’s suggestion that the ‘Gods were at first created by human feare’—a ‘perpetuall feare, always accompanying mankind’. See, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 169–70. This is captured, as well, by Carl Schmitt in his description of the relevant moment in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: ‘The state of nature drives anguished individuals to come together; their fear rises to an extreme; a spark of reason (*ratio*) flashes, and suddenly there stands in front of them a new God.’ Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 31.

⁴³ This also explains why they focus on a fear of death occasioned by violent conflict with another—rather than some generic fear of dying, or of what Hamlet called ‘the undiscovered country’.

⁴⁴ Robert Pippin, *Hegel on Self-Consciousness*, 79 and *passim*.

means that the former combatants ‘obey’ the sovereign; in Hegel, it means at a minimum the ritual acts by which the Bondman demonstrates his submission to the Lord.

‘Social-historical interaction’ thus turns out to be co-extensive with the self-conscious estimation of life as *worthwhile*—and furthermore with an estimation of *ourselves* (rather than Nature, or God or biology) as the final arbiter of that worth. Hence, this self-arbitration is more than an intellectual exercise or pious belief. Self-conscious reflection upon one’s life as worth living must amount to the *doing* of certain routine, norm-based actions—such as wearing the required uniform, bowing deeply, or saying ‘yes, sir’. Historical forms of life—with all of their ritual practices, customary modes of interaction, and divisions of labour—turn out to be, at bottom, practical reflections of the value of our lives, estimations of our lives as worth living.

There would, of course, be much more to say about all of this. At this point, however, I would like to characterize the perspective of Hegelian or Hobbesian ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ as the search for paradigmatic acts that allow human life to distinguish itself from mere living or from nature. And in this way, ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ also suggests that socio-historical forms of life are invariably practical estimations of the worth of our ‘natural’ lives. Certain actions—such as duelling, at least for Hobbes and Hegel—might even constitute zero-degree dramas through which a mere life might begin to appear worth living, worth preserving, worth something as ‘human’.

Shakespeare’s difference

In a sense, of course, dramatic poets have always asked us to reflect upon whether our lives are worthwhile or desirable. They invite us to regard our lives not only in terms of species-level requirements for living but also in light of social practices that—when laid bare—show themselves to be occasions for weighing the value of particular lives, opportunities for their *self-evaluation*. This is as true of Shakespearean drama as it was, for instance, of Sophoclean or Aeschylean drama.⁴⁵

Consider, as one striking instance of both points, Shylock’s agreement to convert to Christianity at the end of the *Merchant of Venice*. Here the ‘dramatic’ predicament is inseparable from a self-consciously *theatrical staging* of it—namely, both Shylock’s appearance before all of Venice, and the appearance of this scene before an audience (us). This self-conscious presentation—a ‘courtroom drama’ with both an internal audience (the Duke and those gathered) and an external audience

⁴⁵ For more on this comparison, see the close of my ‘Introduction’ in *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*.

(us)—seems designed in part to *test*, as in Greek tragedy, whether the action is as meaningful to us as it is to the protagonists. And, if it is, then it must be in large measure because we have achieved, by watching the enactment, some sense of what this conversion must mean to Shylock as a Jew or as a Venetian, or because we somehow ‘identify’ with his predicament. We squirm, that is, because we have seen (through the enactment of the drama) that circumstances have forced Shylock to reflect upon the value of his own life—in light of the occasion furnished by his attachment to his Judaism, to his money, to his community. The stakes of that reflection are not separable, I think, from our sense of how the other onlookers—in ‘Venice’ and in the audience—gauge their importance. All of this parallels Aristotle’s view of how our affective response to a classical tragic drama is an expression of its social stakes.⁴⁶

This also allows us to hear Shylock’s ‘first-person’ experience of the threat of being reduced to abject poverty—to hear, that is, Shylock offer an evaluation not only of what owning property means in Venice generally but also, above all, a declaration of what owning property in Venice means to *him*:

Nay, take *my* life and all; pardon not that:
 You take *my* house when you do take the prop
 That doth sustain *my* house; you take *my* life
 When you do take the means whereby *I* live. (4.1.372–5) (emphasis mine)

The moment is riveting, I want to suggest, because we sense what hangs in the balance is not only the fate of Venice, of *that* historical world or way of life, nor simply the fate of Shylock’s or Antonio’s standing, nor even the future of Shylock’s biological life. We are mesmerized, rather, because we see that Shylock is in the process of discovering *for himself* whether his life is worth preserving. We watch him ask himself if his own life matters to him at all—whether there are conditions under which it might no longer appear worth living. Shylock’s consent to the conversion—like his seemingly relentless pursuit of the pound of flesh at the scene’s opening—grip us, then, because they are moments at which we see someone *discover* that which, for him, is worth living or dying for. After all, we do not simply watch Shylock act on what he has already *decided* is most important to him—his biological life, his money, or his social standing as a Jew. Instead, we see him forced by circumstance into actively evaluating his own life’s worth *to him*. In doing so, we ask ourselves the very questions that also signal our investment in the drama: how far will Shylock go? Is he willing to die in order to see Antonio die? Will he be pushed over the edge, to the point of devaluing his life utterly? Or, does he love his life enough to go on living bereft of property? Does he love life enough to renounce Judaism and to live as a Christian?

⁴⁶ See my ‘Avoiding Tragedy in *The Merchant of Venice*’, *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 8.3 (Fall 2007), 53–65.

Now, we may or may not feel that how Shylock answers these questions bears on the worth of *our own* life—collectively or individually—as well. We may or may not see Shylock as one of us. But we do not *need* Shylock's self-evaluation to bear immediately upon our own lives in order to perceive the stakes of his predicament for *him*. We look on as Shylock weighs his attachment to his own life as such. And we perceive, further, that only in light of this reflective evaluation will his place in Venice—will the social meaning of his actions—be decided. Thus, his acceptance of his new social standing as a Christian is the outcome, not the origin, of this self-evaluation. Indeed, there is nothing about being a Jew or a Christian—nothing about belonging to an historical community—that can fully decide whether it is worth clinging to one's life by means of that belonging.⁴⁷ Shylock's practical commitment to a community, finally, must be the upshot—and not the full means—of his evaluation of his own life as worth living or not. As Shakespeare knows, the particularities of the Venetian world—the conflict between Jews and Christians, the realities of a mercantile economy and so on—merely occasion a self-evaluation that Shylock alone must undergo.

Everything I just said sounds, I think, consistent with the questions motivating Hegel's philosophical dramaturgy, or, for that matter, with many aspects of Aristotle's reflections on ancient tragedy. So what is Shakespeare's difference?

First, if for Hegel (and Aristotle) the particularities of the structural predicament do not need to be tested through the concrete enactment or re-enactment of *this* particular protagonist—then, in Shakespeare, the theatrical enactment seems crucial. Indeed, in light of our earlier discussion of the philosophers, the conspicuous specificity of Shylock's predicament cannot but strike us here. Whereas Hobbes and Hegel perceived a general, indeterminate 'battle to the death' as the elemental scene in the self-evaluation of human life, Shakespeare offers the singular predicament of deeds of *this* man, Shylock the Jewish moneylender of Venice—a person whose historical 'baggage' is as particular and personal as it is historically determined.

Shylock is a well-known instance, but in every play he wrote, Shakespeare offered predicaments of such vivid and particular detail that they defy all paradigmatic or generic descriptions (including paradigmatic descriptions such as 'Duel'). At the same time, Shakespeare supersedes classical tragedy by offering no final guidelines—theatrical, ritual, psychological, physical, or other—for *how* Shylock is, finally, to be played or *mise-en-scène*. In this sense, the nearly infinite *enactability* or stageability of Shakespearean drama is expressive of, and essential to, its presentation of our historicity. Because the very conditions for human activity are historically transformable—and must therefore be seen as transformable still—our

⁴⁷ This is not at all to say that the particularities of the Venetian world—or the differences between Judaism and Christianity—do not matter to Shakespeare. They matter absolutely to the full presentation of the predicament in the drama; I mean to say, here, that these cannot *decide* the matter for Shylock himself. And that this, too, is essential to the drama's presentation.

presentation of these activities must be manifold, transforming and transformable: replayable, re-enactable, rethinkable. This radical mutability, I think, explains both our need for Shakespeare's drama in its multiplicity—for *all* the plays—as well as for the sheer variety of critical responses (theatrical, cinematic, and other) that Shakespeare's work has occasioned in universities and playhouses since the eighteenth century. J. G. Herder praised Shakespeare for just this quality: 'Is there anyone in the world who is indifferent to the time and place of even trivial events in his life?' writes Herder:

Is it not place and time and the fullness of external circumstances which endow the whole story with its direction, duration, and existence? . . . From out of all the scenes and conjunctures in the world, Shakespeare chose, as though by some law of fatality, just those which are the most powerful, the most appropriate to the feeling of the action; in which the strangest, boldest circumstances best support the illusion of truth; in which the changes of time and place over which the poet rules, proclaim most loudly: 'This is not a poet, but a creator! Here is the history of the world!'⁴⁸

In *The Merchant of Venice* alone, we see a 'strange' suit for a pound of flesh, a Venetian merchant whose fortune has been ruined by three shipwrecks, the inimitable legalisms of Portia, the utterly contingent motivations of love and friendship that lie just beneath her words—to say nothing of the convergence of Jewish and Christian interests in Venice, or of the weight of flesh and gold in that world, or of Shylock's own motivations. The particularities of these scenes stem not only from Shakespeare's peerless skill as a dramatic poet, from his imaginative energy. They also reveal, I am suggesting, a crucial difference between Shakespeare's dramaturgy—which *must* pass through the theatre—and the philosophical dramaturgy of Hegel and Hobbes.

Unlike Hobbes and Hegel, Shakespeare does not think that the actions by which our humanity is achieved—by which we *evaluate* our attachment to our individual lives, and to our lives together—unfold at the emergence of socio-historical life, out of what Hobbes calls the 'state of nature' or what Hegel calls 'the sphere of life'. Shakespeare, that is, does not derive his dramatic energy from the cusp of culture's denaturalization of life, or at the moment at which animal desire is transformed into human longing. Shakespeare nowhere looks for those actions that supposedly raise us out of nature, thereby making us human. Shakespeare never depicts, imagines, or stages wholly pre-institutional desires or strivings. In Shakespeare's theatrical dramaturgy, there is no 'state of nature' or 'sphere of life'—there is, instead, always an enactable *scene*.

Rather than proceed, as do Hobbes and Hegel, from 'nature to culture'—Shakespeare remains firmly within the particular contingencies of the social, which seem

⁴⁸ Herder, 'Shakespeare', in Paul A. Kottman, ed., *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 31.

to require something like their enactability. Shakespeare, that is, *begins* with the facts of historical existence, the nitty-gritty of social interactions and communal practices. Even where Shakespeare seems to depict a kind of pre-institutional setting—such as the cave in *Cymbeline*, or Prospero’s island, or the forest of Arden, or the heath and cliffs of Dover in *King Lear*, or the world of Oberon and Titania—he never lets us forget that these settings are historical predicaments through and through. Savageness, deprivation, raging desires, fear, deep despair, the ‘churlish chiding of the winter’s wind’—for Shakespeare, these are not the origins but rather the direct fallouts and expressions of specific human interactions, histories, relationships.

And the ‘proof’ of this theatrical dramaturgy is the enactability of these scenes before an audience. To say it all at once: for Shakespeare, that which cannot be re-enacted as a scene before an audience cannot be understood as historical, as human, as implicating *us*. Our dramatic practices are, in this sense, a test of our historical self-understanding—its limits and possibilities. This is how Shakespeare differs from the ‘philosophical dramaturgy’ exemplified by the Hegelian and Hobbesian ‘duel’. Rather than imagine that there is an elemental dramatic ‘structure’—a fight to the death that transforms animal desire into a human relationship, that takes us from biological life to institutional-human-historical life—Shakespeare shows how we invariably begin to act, in some here-and-now setting, from within a specific human-historical setting, with all its attendant baggage and precise conundrums. The lustre of our humanity shines brightest when this baggage weighs most concretely, here and now (as in a tense theatrical or cinematic moment), when the specificity of our socio-historical existence crushes us most. And because it is *as a specifically weighty circumstance*—which, I think, is Shakespeare’s sense of what any performance self-consciously displays—that historical life becomes drama, there can be no single ‘human’ scene through which others are encompassed and explained. If dramas—loss, joy, fulfilment, desperation—are to be found in all our words and deeds, at different moments and in disparate ways, then dramatic performances afford a historically self-aware human *practice* through which to better grasp the implications of this knowledge.

Shakespeare thinks, too, that we can never really see the ‘origins’ of our historical baggage or social quandaries; to *really* inhabit a human predicament means accepting this blindness as an insight. Agnes Heller has it right when she says that, in Shakespeare, ‘truth is revealed about history’ because Shakespeare shows us ‘what happens and ‘how’ it happened without bothering to show us ‘why’.⁴⁹ In Shakespeare we grasp *what* happens when we stop asking *why* it happens. For Shakespeare, we see our sociality most clearly when we cease looking for its *deep*

⁴⁹ Agnes Heller, from *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* in Kottman, ed. *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, 188.

motivation and attend, rather, to its possible expressions as theatrical performance. *That* Capulet and Montague quarrel matters more than why; *that* Duke Senior has been banished to Arden matters more than why; *that* Jews live in the ghetto in Venice matters more than why; *that* Fortinbras marches matters more than why. *That* we fight and have fought matters more than why. Let us admit this, says Shakespeare, and strive to show how the inevitable historicity of our practices—the unavoidable *baggage* that comes with being born into a historical world—shoves our face in the mud of self-evaluation, whether we like it or not. There needs no murderous enemy on the desert plain come to force us to reflect on the worth of our lives. Anyway, there is no such desert plain. We encounter one another in the world, not on the moon. What murderous enemies there are live in our midst; they speak our language; we can know their names.⁵⁰

If Shakespearean dramaturgy dovetails with, but differs from, that of Hobbes and Hegel, then it is because Shakespeare sees the manifold, concrete specificity of our communal rituals, re-enactments, social practices, and values as *the* only occasions—and *only* the occasions—for ongoing, reflective evaluations of our lives' worth.

FURTHER READING

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⁵⁰ At any rate, quarrelling Capulet boys are probably the least of our worries. We should be so lucky that all our relationships are forged from out-and-out duels! But, alas, murderousness does not always present itself immediately as such—as Othello, Banquo, Edgar, Claudio and company find out. Enmity can also arise as a betrayal of trust, in the wrecking of a world that we have no choice but to share. The experiences of such betrayals, too, make us who we are—introduce us to our humanity, such as it may be.