CHAPTER 5

# *Shakespeare, Johnson and Philosophy*

Romeo
Hang up philosophy!
Unless philosophy can make a Juliet,
Displant a town, reverse a prince's doom,
It helps not, it prevails not.
(Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III.iii.57–60)[1]

## Worlds Apart?

Exploring human nature is the grand theme both of philosophy and of Shakespeare, and for students of the plays, philosophy has proved impossible to "Hang up." The great eighteenth-century philosophers raise questions that Shakespeare might have answered; Shakespeare, for his part, poses questions about human nature which, by virtue of the fact that they are always questions, belong to eighteenth-century philosophy. But Shakespeare makes this entry into philosophical tradition in forms that neither the eighteenth-century philosophers, nor their historians, would always acknowledge as philosophical, and which include ends not defined by intellectual ambitions or disciplinary endorsement. The differences between the two worlds of Shakespeare and eighteenth-century philosophy are undoubtedly marked, and suggest dichotomous paradigms of the pre- and the post-scientific. Shakespeare – all that concerns the dark, the dislocated, the tragic, the rugged, the absurd, the irrationally superstitious and the powerful, the natural and the supernatural, the spontaneous and the capricious. The great European tradition of eighteenth-century

[1] *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., *The Complete Works*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 1125. Unless otherwise indicated, further quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition.

philosophers – all that embraces the relation of human analysis to scientific method and of mind to nature, the empirical, the enlightened, the comprehensive, the rational, the knowably known and the knowably unknown. Such a philosophical community will seem intuitively alien to the "wild dramas of Shakespeare" ("Life of Milton," in *Lives*, vol. 1, p. 280), and while studies of Shakespeare and philosophy have multiplied, the investigation of Shakespeare's relation to eighteenth-century philosophy is infrequent and oblique.[2] Yet on several grounds – the role of skepticism in eighteenth-century philosophy and its contribution to moral philosophy, a moral emphasis in the period's criticism of Shakespeare, and an aesthetic turn in critical thought – something essential in Shakespeare's relationship with eighteenth-century philosophy can be brought to light.

Recent studies of Shakespeare and philosophy by literary critics will support this claim. In *Shakespeare Thinking* Philip Davis suggests how far Shakespearean thought is bound up with his language. He writes that the thinking in question "is in no sense straightforward – is, rather, non-linear in its account of experience; untethered to the regular consequential spaces between propositions; traversing instead multiple space-times simultaneously."[3] Shakespeare's drama, argues Davis, generates a language "creatively anterior to, and more primary than, mere paraphrase." The intellectual affiliations of this thinking, according to Davis, correspond to a "process philosophy" developed in the early twentieth century by John Dewey and Henri Bergson, but also by William James, Samuel Alexander and A. N. Whitehead. Its broad subject, he adds, was "to reverse the tradition of epistemological separation (mind and body, cause and effect,

[2] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy* (London: Harper Collins, 2006); A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Philip Davis, *Shakespeare Thinking* (London: Continuum, 2007); Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). Cavell, who has most to say, and most that is probing, about the relations between Shakespeare and the eighteenth-century philosophers, writes suggestively about Othello's "knowing" in relation to Kant's concepts of knowledge and appearances (*Disowning Knowledge*, p. 9), and he brings Kant to bear on *King Lear* (pp. 81, 88–89, 94–95). He suggests also, with respect to a reading of the *Winter's Tale* as "painting the portrait of the sceptic as a fanatic," the pertinence of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (p. 206). Cavell is similarly helpful on Hume, though has nothing on Voltaire. McGinn makes good use of Hume, though he says nothing of Kant or Voltaire. Nuttall notes a correspondence on the topic of perception between Hume and Hippolyta (*Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 125), and suggests Shakespeare's advanced critique of Berkeleyan "idealism" (p. 327). He has one passing reference to Kant (p. 186), as does Zamir (*Double Vision*, p. 202), who has nothing on Hume or Voltaire. For reviews of Nuttall, McGinn and Zamir, see Martha C. Nussbaum, "Stages of Thought," *The New Republic*, vol. 238 (May 7, 2008), pp. 37–41.

[3] Davis, *Shakespeare Thinking*, p. 2.

one entity distinct from another) in the name of a more fluent and fluid whole universe."[4] This tradition of thought in language need not detract from the link between the eighteenth century's intellectual exploration of the limits of Reason and the drama of Shakespeare. The malevolent characters in Shakespeare's plays – Edmund in *King Lear* or Iago in *Othello* – speak many lines of seductive rationality. Others, like Bushy in *Richard II*, think in a confused way, not to be confused with those occasions where Shakespeare's own reason descends into the "unwieldy sentiment, which [Shakespeare] cannot well express, and will not reject" noted by Johnson in his 1765 *Preface to Shakespeare* (Works VII, p. 73).

Further critical reactions to Shakespeare by Johnson suggest how far Shakespeare's literary interrogation of Reason is consonant with eighteenth-century philosophy, and to what extent these opposing worlds dissolve within Shakespeare's dramatic expression. As Johnson observed in the *Preface*, the plays are full of truths: "It was said of Euripides, that every verse was a precept, and it may be said of Shakespeare, that from his works may be collected a system of civil and oeconomical prudence." "It may be doubted," Johnson wrote in the same essay, "whether from all his successors more maxims of theoretical knowledge, or more rules of practical prudence, can be collected, than he alone has given to his country" (Works VII, pp. 62, 89).[5] But, as reflected in many editorial notes, Johnson recognized that Shakespeare's moral thought does not have to consist of moralizing dicta when conveying "theoretical knowledge," and he pointedly refused to elaborate his moral readings as valid contributions to a moral philosophy. For Johnson, Shakespeare's "real power is not shewn in the splendour of particular passages, but by the progress of the fable, and the tenour of the dialogue" (Works VII, p. 62).

For later critics, philosophy in Shakespeare is similarly anchored in enacted moral conditions and dilemmas. "If," observes the Shakespearean critic and classicist H. A. Mason, "[Shakespeare] had a philosophy, [the] retention of the particular is an essential part."[6] Writing criticism as a practicing poet and student of philosophy, T. S. Eliot in 1925 goes so far as to say that "what the poet looks for in his reading is not a philosophy – not a body of doctrine or even a consistent point of view which he endeavours to *understand* – but a point of departure ... The attitude of a *craftsman* like Shakespeare – whose

[4] Ibid., pp. 1, 21.

[5] For a collection of the Shakespearean passages that Johnson may have had in mind see P(hilip) J. Smallwood (ed.), *Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1985), pp. 86–87.

[6] H. A. Mason, *Shakespeare's Tragedies of Love: An Examination of the Possibility of Common Readings of* Romeo and Juliet, Othello, King Lear *and* Antony and Cleopatra (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 179.

business was to write plays and not to think – is very different from that of the philosopher or even the literary critic."[7] For A. D. Nuttall, in *Shakespeare the Thinker*, on the other hand, the problem is not that Shakespeare did not have thought as his "business," but that, given that his expressed thoughts (which are nobody else's thoughts) are dramatically presented, at arms' length, as it were, we have little knowledge of Shakespeare's thought content except via inference: "We know what Milton thought about many things . . . But we have no idea what Shakespeare thought, finally, about any major question."[8] And yet, of course, as Nuttall's title itself allows, Shakespeare appears all the time to tantalize us with the powers of a thinker.[9]

Johnson values Shakespearean "maxims of theoretical knowledge," and his editorial notes persistently address the logic of language and the rationality (or irrational improbability) of the plots; but he does not extrapolate these reactions to an aesthetics of tragedy, or a theory of genius, imagination, beauty or taste. Other eighteenth-century essayists regard Shakespeare's works from a perspective more selfconsciously philosophical than Johnson's. In his *Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (1774), William Richardson notes that "the poetic art, adorning the precepts of philosophy, renders them easy and agreeable."[10] Further discourses extend the eighteenth-century "philosophizing" response to Shakespeare,[11] and single-issue tracts from the middle years of the eighteenth century reflect a deepening engagement. In his *Essay on Taste* of 1759, the professor of philosophy Alexander Gerard could write that "A man should justly expose himself to a suspicion of bad taste who approved a faultless, uninteresting tragedy more than *Othello*, or *King Lear*."[12] In his 1762 *Elements of Criticism*, Henry Home, Lord Kames, adopted Shakespearean examples to illustrate literary beauties and

7 T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and Montaigne," quoted in Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare's Essays: Sampling Montaigne from* Hamlet *to* The Tempest (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 7. Eliot's remarks are from his review of George Coffin Taylor's *Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne*: "Shakespeare and Montaigne," *TLS* (December 24, 1925), p. 895.

8 Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 1.

9 The most sustained of such studies, Cavell's and Nuttall's aside, is probably that of McGinn. On philosophical origins, see Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources* (London: Continuum, 2004). Gillespie is particularly cautious of overstating Shakespeare's unsubstantiated affinities with Montaigne.

10 William Richardson, *Philosophical Analysis and lllustration of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (Edinburgh, 1774), p. 2.

11 R. S. Crane notes the eighteenth century's "widespread philosophizing of criticism." *The Idea of the Humanities*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), vol. II, p. 172.

12 Alexander Gerard D.D., *An Essay on Taste* (1759; 2nd ed. Edinburgh, 1764), p. 145. Gerard (1728–95) was a professor of philosophy and divinity.

faults.[13] Most celebrated is Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757).[14] Assisted by the enthusiasms of Joseph Warton, whose *Adventurer* essays on *The Tempest* and *King Lear* appeared in 1753, Shakespeare, in company with Milton, was to become in the later eighteenth century the archetype of sublime genius. Burke's *Inquiry* in turn encouraged the great philosophical claims for Shakespeare's preeminence advanced by the Romantic critics in both Germany and England.[15]

The systematic investigation of seminal concepts in such works belongs to a strengthening philosophical ambition. To this, Johnson's critical achievement is distinctive as a counterweight and as a caution. But Johnson nonetheless conforms with the major eighteenth-century editors of Shakespeare in regularly composing notes on "Adversity's sweet milk" (*Romeo and Juliet*, v.iii.55); by this means the editors had explained Shakespearean allusions to philosophical utterances in the plays, observed Shakespeare's playful representations of philosophy's parlor games or his expatiations on the term "philosophy" itself. In a spirited exchange from *As You Like It*, Shakespeare mocks the exalted pretensions of philosophy by reducing causation theory to aphorism and gossip:

> Touch[stone]
> Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?
> Cor[in]
> No more but that I know the more one
> sickens the worse at ease he is . . . That
> he that hath learn'd no wit by nature, nor art, may
> complain of good breeding, or comes of a very dull
> kindred.
> touch[stone]
> Such a one is a natural philosopher.
> Wast ever in court, shepherd?
>
> (iii.ii.21–33)[16]

[13] Henry Home, Lord Kames, *The Elements of Criticism*, 2 vols. (1762; 6th ed. Edinburgh, 1785), vol. ii, pp. 414–17.

[14] The *Inquiry* was translated into German in 1773, and was cited by Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 130–31.

[15] On the sublime and Shakespeare, see also William Smith, *Dionysius Longinus, "On the Sublime": Translated from the Greek, with Notes and Observations* (London, 1739). Shakespeare's reputation in Germany was assisted by the prose translations of Christoph Martin Wieland (1762–66); for Kant on the sublime, see *Critique of Judgement*, pp. 90–203.

[16] For Johnson's different scene numbering here see Samuel Johnson (ed.), *The Plays of William Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London, 1765), vol. ii, p. 49.

In his note to this somewhat unedifying banter, reprinted in Johnson's edition with reference to Act III, scene iii, Shakespeare's eighteenth-century editor William Warburton restores a sense of philosophical solemnity:

> The shepherd had said all the Philosophy he knew was the property of things, that *rain wetted*, *fire burnt*, &c. And the *Clown*'s reply, in a satire on *Physicks* or *Natural Philosophy*, though introduced with a quibble, is extremely just. For the Natural Philosopher is indeed as ignorant (notwithstanding all his parade of knowledge) of the *efficient* cause of things as the Rustic.[17]

The effect of the clowning is, however, to portray the transactions of philosophy as elevated beyond everyday reach. In the opening of *Love's Labour's Lost* the preposterous Dumaine laments that "To love, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die, | With all these living in philosophy" (I. i.31–32).[18] Here philosophy prompts satirical treatment by commonsensical persons. Warburton appeals to Shakespeare's contexts and sources when he notes "the peculiar defect of the Peripatetic Philosophy then in vogue": "These philosophers, the poet, with the highest humour and good sense, calls the *Godfathers of Nature*, who could only give things a *name*, but had no manner of acquaintance with their essences."[19] Shakespeare's "philosophical" skepticism includes a skeptical approach to philosophy itself, and his satirical comedy seems to bind him more closely to eighteenth-century satires on the pretensions of philosophers than to philosophers themselves. "No sooner has one identified a philosophical "position," writes Nuttall, "than one is forced, by the succeeding play, to modify or extend one's account."[20] For "the succeeding play," however, one could reasonably substitute the succeeding speech.

## The Eighteenth-Century Philosophers

It remains to look more closely at the philosophers. The divide between Shakespeare and eighteenth-century philosophy is significantly blurred by the latter's *literary* texture, by philosophy's "aesthetic" orientations and by

[17] Ibid., p. 49.
[18] Ibid., p. 112. Johnson's editorial note on this passage reads: "The stile of the rhyming scenes in this play is often entangled and obscure. I know not certainly to what *all these* is to be referred; I suppose he means that he finds *love*, *pomp*, and *wealth* in *philosophy*" (Works VII, p. 266).
[19] Johnson (ed.), *Plays*, vol. II, p. 114.
[20] Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 24.

the relations between aesthetics and the history of criticism.[21] Hume and Voltaire conceived of philosophy as a branch of literature and are ironists both, while in this guise we might place them in closer proximity to the satirical skepticism of eighteenth-century literary figures. Joseph Warton called Hume "a writer of taste and penetration,"[22] and the overlaps of eighteenth-century philosophical writings with the writing of history (Voltaire and Hume), with criticism or aesthetics (Voltaire and Kant) and with theological speculation (Kant) suggest the generic indeterminacy of "philosophy."

When, however, allusions to Shakespeare's plays are sought in the works of "Enlightenment" thinkers of the stature of Hume, Kant or Voltaire, Shakespeare is not normally acknowledged as a source of philosophical inspiration. Voltaire, after his early campaign to introduce Shakespeare to audiences in France, famously concluded that the plays lacked dramatic and philosophical value, and his attention falls especially on *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Julius Caesar*, while his detailed attack is contained in his "Appel à toutes les nations de l'Europe" ("An Appeal to All the Nations of Europe," 1764).[23] Writing out of the manifold consciousness that distinguishes him from Kant and from Hume – that of a critic, a practicing dramatist, a translator of Shakespeare (the first three acts of *Julius Caesar*) and a philosopher – Voltaire had here challenged the critics of Europe apropos Shakespeare by pointedly invoking an admired English dramatic text for comparison: "comment on a pu élever son ame," he asks, "jusqu'à ces Pieces avec transport, & comment elles sont encore suivies dans un siecle qui a produit le Caton d'Addison?" ("How can the soul be lifted and transported by these plays and how is it they are still current in a century which has produced the *Cato* of Addison?")[24]

[21] Michael B. Prince writes of the indistinctness of philosophy and literature in "A Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy and Literature," in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 391–422. On the evolution of aesthetics out of, and in detachment from, criticism see Philip Smallwood, "Literary and Aesthetic Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Thought*, ed. Frans De Bruyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 205–26.

[22] Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writings* [*Writings and Genius*] *of Pope*, 2 vols. (London, 1756 and 1782), vol. i, p. 251n. Vol. i appeared in 1756.

[23] On their relationship, see Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Shakespeare and Voltaire* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902). See also, more recently, Haydn Mason, "Voltaire versus Shakespeare: The Lettre à l'Académie française (1776)," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1995), pp. 173–85, and John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).

[24] "Appel à toutes les nations de l'Europe des jugements d'un écrivain anglais ou manifeste au sujet des honneurs du pavillon entre les théatres de Londres et de Paris," in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1843–85), vol. xxiv, *Mélanges*, iii (1879), p. 201.

Hume, writing from inside the world of British philosophical and literary culture, concedes that Shakespeare possessed "A great and fertile genius," but he is equally confident in dismissing Shakespeare's achievement in his *History of England*:

> A striking peculiarity of sentiment, adapted to a singular character, he frequently hits, as it were by inspiration; but a reasonable propriety of thought he cannot for any time uphold. Nervous and picturesque expressions, as well as descriptions, abound in him; but it is in vain we look either for purity or simplicity of diction. His total ignorance of all theatrical art and conduct, however material a defect; yet as it affects the spectator rather than the reader, we can more easily excuse, than that want of taste which often prevails in his productions, and which gives way only by intervals to the irradiations of genius.[25]

The historian's reservations about Shakespeare were founded on an "enlightened" superiority to Jacobean values. Hume blamed Shakespeare for the poor esteem in which English drama had since come to be held: "The English theatre has ever since taken a strong tincture of Shakespeare's spirit and character; and thence it has proceeded, that the nation has undergone from all its neighbours, the reproach of barbarism, from which its many valuable productions in some other parts of learning would otherwise have exempted it."[26] But Hume's philosophic engagements with taste, morality and human sensibility are not isolated from the moral and human issues that are raised by the plays, and that make them explicit.[27] As the forms of the novel began to inflect how Shakespeare was experienced by the growing audience for fiction and drama, the depth and universality of Shakespearean character-drawing became of increasing importance to such philosophizing critics as William Richardson and Maurice Morgann (who expounded the character of Falstaff).[28] For Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, however, the rest of mankind are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which . . . are in a perpetual flux," a formulation that

[25] David Hume, *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688 . . . a New Edition*, 8 vols. (1754; Edinburgh, 1792), vol. VI, p. 192.

[26] Ibid., pp. 192–93. Other comments by Hume on Shakespeare include his references to *Othello* in an essay on tragedy. See *Four Dissertations . . . III. Of Tragedy* (London, 1757), p. 194.

[27] Later philosophers have pointed this out. McGinn suggests that "set against the teleological view, we have the conception generally associated with the eighteenth-century sceptical philosopher . . . [such as Hume], that causation is simply brute temporal sequence, with nothing underwriting it at all." With a philosopher's willingness to enter into dialogue with the intellectual past as if with contemporaries, McGinn observes that Shakespeare's plays "involve themselves in this debate over the nature of causation, particularly *King Lear*." McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, p. 14.

[28] See Maurice Morgann, *On the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (London, 1777).

will bring to mind the critically controversial character of Shakespeare's Hamlet and the theatricality of his self-presented façades. When Hume writes philosophically upon the human nature investigated by Shakespeare, there is no fixed and stable unity: "The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations."[29] The history of eighteenth-century philosophy brings together thinkers as often in collision as in collusion, and as the great names of eighteenth-century philosophy built upon, or departed from, each other's thought in a critical spirit, their relationship to a future critical accounting of Shakespeare is neither irrelevant nor straightforward.

Crucial in this regard is Immanuel Kant, who according to Isaiah Berlin "was the first great philosopher to realize that the principal questions of philosophy are neither those for which there is a clear method of solution by empirical investigation . . . nor those to be answered by deduction from self-evident or a priori axioms."[30] The problem of "art" – in senses including the dramatic – is a focus for the period's philosophical achievement: A conception of the judgment of artistic taste emerges from Kant on aesthetics. Quoting Kant's ambition not to "allow my judgement to be determined by *a priori* proofs," David Womersley has concluded that "English literary criticism of the period 1660–1750 was everything Kant thought criticism should not be."[31] But for Alexander Pope, who stresses the capacity of Shakespearean drama to induce surprise or shock, and remarks the impossibility of appraising Shakespeare against standards fixed in advance of the pleasurable and terrible experience of the plays, there could be "no preparation." In the Preface to his 1725 edition of the plays, Pope wrote of Shakespeare's "*Power* over our *Passions*" as:

> never possess'd in a more eminent degree, or display'd in so different instances. Yet all along, there is seen no labour, no pains to raise them; no preparation to guide our guess to the effect, or to be perceiv'd to lead toward it: We are surpriz'd, the moment we weep; and yet upon reflection find the passion so just, that we shou'd be surpriz'd if we had not wept, and wept at that very moment.[32]

[29] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature . . . Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, 3 vols. (London, 1739–40), vol. I, p. 439.

[30] Isaiah Berlin, *The Age of Enlightenment: The 18th Century Philosophers* (New York: Mentor Books, 1956), p. 24.

[31] David Womersley (ed.), *Augustan Critical Writing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. xii.

[32] *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. Rosemary Cowler, 2 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), vol. II: *The Major Works, 1725–1744*, p. 14.

Shakespeare has the capacity to deliver in the immediacy of the moment an experience that no thought or theory could seem to precede, explain or predict, but that once experienced, appears natural and universal. Precisely how this effect is produced becomes, then, the work of philosophical enquiry. For Kant, writing in "Book I: Analytic of the Beautiful. Second Moment" of the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), from where Womersley takes his quotation, the judgment said to arise is not predictable conceptually but is a product of the specific "aesthetic" occasion: "In their logical quantity all judgements of taste are *singular* judgements. For, since I must present the object immediately to my feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and that, too, without the aid of concepts, such judgements cannot have the quantity of judgements with objective general validity." Kant explains that "There can be no rule according to which any one is compelled to recognize anything as beautiful" and that "nothing is postulated in the judgement of taste but such a *universal voice* in respect of delight that is not mediated by concepts." The judgement of taste, in that it "*imputes* … agreement to every one," "looks for confirmation, not from concepts, but from the concurrence of others."[33]

Johnson avoids the aesthetic philosopher's vocabulary of "taste" and of "beauty" (as too remote, perhaps, from immediate experience or too precious); but in the opening pages of his *Preface to Shakespeare* he had also distinguished rigorously between what can be measured and what must be judged. Of objectively nonmeasurable phenomena such as Shakespeare's plays, he claimed that "Works tentative and experimental … must be estimated by their proportion to the general and collective ability of man" (Works VII, p. 60).[34] And he observes the preconceptual conditions of authorship as part of the historical situation which assisted Shakespeare's universal appeal – his power to please many and please long. When Shakespeare composed his plays:

> The contest about the original benevolence or malignity of man had not yet commenced. Speculation had not yet attempted to analyse the mind, to trace the passions to their sources, to unfold the seminal principles of vice and virtue, or sound the depths of the heart for the motives of action. All those enquiries, which from the time that human nature became the fashionable study, have been made sometimes with nice discernment, but often with idle subtilty, were yet unattempted. (Works VII, p. 88)

[33] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, pp. 55–56, §8.

[34] "Tentative and experimental," as against "scientifick," are terms Johnson uses to describe the literary criticism of Joseph Addison (*Lives*, vol. III, p. 36).

Johnson's distinction here between "nice discernment" and "idle subtilty," and his designation of contemporary enquiries into human nature as a "fashionable study," intimate both interest in philosophic achievement and skepticism about it. But according to Berlin they also look ahead to the shift in philosophic attitudes that is later produced by Kant, who expressed appreciation of Shakespearean genius in the debate he conducted with Johann Gottfried Herder, an enthusiast for the Promethean grandeur of Shakespeare.[35] Kant accused Herder of philosophizing in an excessively Shakespearean, impetuous, and exuberant, manner to the detriment of his own philosophy.[36] But in terms of their presiding criterion of judgment, the English critics of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century – in the major figures of Pope and Johnson – were *exactly* "what Kant thought criticism should be."

## Philosophical Value: Editors, Critics and Aestheticians

Voltaire's remarks on Shakespeare's moral and dramatic crudity in a century which has seen the *Cato* of Addison were taken up in Johnson's comparison in the *Preface to Shakespeare* between *Othello* and *Cato*, and in a passage which seems designed specifically to refute the estimate of the French *philosophe*:

> Voltaire expresses his wonder, that our authour's extravagances are endured by a nation, which has seen the tragedy of *Cato*. Let him be answered, that Addison speaks the language of poets, and Shakespeare, of men. We find in *Cato* innumerable beauties which enamour us of its authour, but we see nothing that acquaints us with human sentiments or human actions. (Works vii, p. 84)

It is, as we have seen, the want of a dramatic appeal to the heart that marks the inferiority of *Cato* to the Shakespearean tragedy. Johnson's response to Voltaire's "Appel" with his own "appeal open from criticism to nature" (Works vii, p. 67) comes at a moment of crisis in Shakespeare's reception within a rational culture which leans upon a science of ethics. "He who

35 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Von deutsche Art und Kunst* (1773), trans. as *Shakespeare* by Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). "Herder's *Shakespeare*," writes Moore, "represents a defiant rejection of Enlightenment poetics, neoclassicism, and the dominance of French taste. It pioneers a new historicist, proto-Romantic approach to cultures and their products, one that favors the local over the universal, the authentic over the ersatz, the primitive over the modern" (p. vii).

36 Andrew Cutrofello, "Kant's Debate with Herder about the Philosophical Significance of the Genius of Shakespeare," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2008), pp. 66–82.

thinks reasonably must think morally," wrote Johnson in the *Preface*, where Shakespeare is "the poet of nature" who thinks reasonably about life (Works VII, p. 71). But Shakespeare permits access to Nature beyond what Reason affords, and Johnson follows Pope in seeing Reason in critical dialogue with Nature and in acknowledging the cruel incomprehensibility of Nature in such locations as the very unreasonable end of *King Lear*.

Both Johnson and Pope wrote philosophically – Pope most famously in his poetical exercise in philosophical optimism that is his *Essay on Man*; Johnson in such contexts as his papers for the *Rambler*, and in his "Review of Soame Jenyns' *Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil*" (1757; Works XVII, pp. 387–432), where Johnson systematically dismantles the moral and logical foundations of Pope's *Essay*, the precedent on which Jenyns had built the fabric of his *Enquiry*.[37] As an editor, Pope is probably more inclined than Johnson to accord philosophical awareness to Shakespeare: "Nothing is more evident," claims Pope of Shakespeare, "than that he had a taste of natural Philosophy, Mechanicks, ancient and modern History, Poetical learning and Mythology . . . When he treats of Ethic or Politic, we may constantly observe a wonderful justness of distinction, as well as extent of comprehension."[38] Theobald notes of Pope's edition that "Some Remarks are spent in explaining Passages, where the Wit or Satire depends on an obscure Point of History: Others, where Allusions are to Divinity, Philosophy, or other Branches of Science."[39] In the notes to *Julius Caesar* Theobald complains that Pope was wrongly convinced of Brutus's "mild and philosophical character" so far as to remove a speech from him and accord it to another character.[40] Pope saw Shakespeare as a storehouse of moral thought in ways that echo his personal ambitions as a moral artist, a didactic poet and a satirist.

Johnson's own moralist's instincts mean that he can appreciate Shakespeare's "system of civil and oeconomical prudence" (Works VII, p. 62). But Johnson's sense of the moral functioning of Shakespeare's plays as a "system" goes far beyond their exploitation of propositional thought. Christopher Ricks has latterly seen Johnson as an adversary of philosophy, whose greatness as a critic

[37] Fred Parker suggests the difficulty of allocating Johnson to any particular philosophical school in his "'We are perpetually moralists': Johnson and Moral Philosophy," in *Samuel Johnson after 300 Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 15–32.

[38] "Mr. Pope's Preface," in Johnson (ed.), *Plays*, vol. I, p. lxxxiii.

[39] "Mr. Theobald's Preface," in Johnson (ed.), *Plays*, vol. I, p. cxv.

[40] Johnson (ed.), *Plays*, vol. VII, p. 50.

> is not distinct from his sustained and rational opposition to philosophy and to theory. "The task of criticism" was, for Johnson, to "establish principles" (*Rambler*, No. 92), and he everywhere made clear that his refusal to elaborate and concatenate the needed concepts beyond a certain point (a point reached early) was not a refusal to continue to think, but a decision to think thereafter about the application of the principles and not to elaborate principle into theory.[41]

Here the preempting of theory offers the experience of truth by a procedure superior to philosophy's "idle subtilty," and Johnson's elevating of critical principle above theory liberates appreciation of Shakespeare's dramatic verities. As Charles Martindale has argued in his essay on "Shakespeare Philosophus," Shakespeare "knows that ideas, even or especially good ideas, do not necessarily, or even often, carry the day."[42] Shakespeare's characters, as Johnson recognized, make speeches which may issue "warm from the heart" and are, in effect, spoken prior to thought, or in its absence.[43]

This does not mean that no thought entered into their making. Nor, in celebrating the power of Nature over human utterance, does Johnson's own philosophical practice dilute his appreciation. In *Rasselas* Johnson effects a creative rapprochement between philosophical thought and literary expression in a hybrid text of wide-ranging popularity. *Rasselas* is sometimes appositely described as a "philosophical fiction,"[44] and was composed at the time of Johnson's most intensive work on the text of Shakespeare's plays for his edition. The work relates a "process philosophy" to the mental life of individuals at critical moments: "Our minds, like our bodies," Imlac observes, "are in continual flux; something is hourly lost, and something acquired. To lose much at once is inconvenient to either, but while the vital powers remain uninjured, nature will find the means of reparation" (Works XVI, p. 127).

As I will go on to examine in the following chapter, both Shakespeare and Johnson maintain relations at the level of analogy with Montaigne,

41 Christopher Ricks, "Literary Principles as against Theory," in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 322–23.

42 Charles Martindale, "Shakespeare Philosophus," in *Thinking with Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. William Poole and Richard Scholar (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007), pp. 33–51, at 47.

43 Among Shakespeare's "effusions of passion," Johnson notes the speech by Postumus from *Cymbeline* I.i beginning "Yea, bloody cloth . . .": "This is a soliloquy of nature, uttered when the effervescence of a mind agitated and perturbed spontaneously and inadvertently discharges itself in words." Works VIII, pp. 901–02.

44 For an examination of the work in the light of this term see Ian White, "On Rasselas," *CQ*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1972), pp. 6–31.

and in their different kinds of writing are similarly vested in a philosophy of change and time itself sustained by Ovidian and Lucretian perspectives. Both Shakespeare and Johnson respond to "l'homme *ondoyant et divers*" ("the flexibly minded and many-sided man") of Montaigne while Shakespeare's worldview, according to Johnson, arises from plays that are "not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind" (Works VII, p. 66). Neither optimism nor pessimism likewise prevails in the fictional universe of the Johnsonian narrative. The travellers in *Rasselas* discover truths about the possibility of happiness; not that human wishes are vain.

## Issues in Philosophy

Post-Enlightenment categories of philosophy – Romanticism, relativism, existentialism, Marxism, postmodernism or even nihilism in its twentieth-century modes – have often found analogues in Shakespeare. The eighteenth-century philosophers, for whom Shakespeare remained an issue, express in their turn a remarkable confidence that has few equals in cultural history. All are inheritors of the *loci communes* of classical philosophy, of Plato and Aristotle, and of the medieval and humanist intellectual landscape of logic, rhetoric and metaphysics. But eighteenth-century philosophical thinkers do not interrogate Shakespeare in developing their ideas to the extent of later periods, and the monumental *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* can find room for a total of only three passing references to Shakespeare over two weighty volumes and in excess of one thousand pages.[45] The philosophical consequence of Shakespeare (compared with his inspiration for eighteenth-century critics, poets, dramatists or novelists) seems reserved for a time when Shakespearean "wildness" appears more comfortably accommodated. Coleridge lectured both on philosophy and on Shakespeare.[46] Hazlitt claimed that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare handled arguments for and against aristocracy and democracy "with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher."[47]

[45] Knud Haakonssen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[46] R. A. Foakes (ed.), *Coleridge on Shakespeare: The Text of the Lectures of 1811–12* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

[47] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817), in *The Selected Writings of William* Hazlitt, ed. Duncan Wu, 9 vols. (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), vol. I, pp. 85–261, at 125.

Such conjunctions suggest that we should suspend unwavering commitment to two independent canons of writing and see them as in any period expressing the same problems of life in different forms – just as F. R. Leavis, writing of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, could admire the poet's ability to "keep his abstractions so fully charged with the concrete experience and his thinking so unquestionably faithful to it."[48] Kant's analysis of the relation between taste and its aspiration to "the concurrence of others" has its analogue in the eighteenth-century criticism of Shakespeare, while understandings within the plays reflect eighteenth-century philosophy. The link between the two worlds can be comprehended in the role Kant accorded to the *judgment* of the aesthetic. For all their reservations, the eighteenth-century philosophers open avenues for the cultural penetration of Shakespeare beyond theatrical popularity and unrivalled stage success to the intellectual centers of the succeeding generation. When therefore in these late days we find human life described in *Macbeth* as a "tale, | Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, | Signifying nothing" (v.v.26–28), we hear this philosophically.

In the twentieth century, the philosopher R. G. Collingwood could see *Hamlet* as a working through of the question-and-answer complex deduced from methods originating in the seventeenth century, and especially derived from the procedures of Francis Bacon:

> It belongs to the ... class ... of plays in which certain persons react in certain ways to certain situations. Hamlet is a young, warlike, and intelligent prince whose uncle has usurped his late father's throne and married his mother. The play is an attempt to answer the question "what does Hamlet do?" The situation changes in various ways, and every time it changes the same question is asked. Finally Hamlet dies, and the series of questions is at an end.[49]

Stanley Cavell has suggested that philosophy's skeptical engagements call to mind the bleak uncertainty of the Shakespearean tragic universe with an emptiness at its core. And Colin McGinn has explained how major dramas by Shakespeare tackle problems central to departments of philosophical thought. Shakespearean ponderables proposed by such modern philosophers include benevolence, sexual and familial love, social duty, Liberty and Necessity, and the political analysis of kingship. A sense of selfhood is

[48] F. R. Leavis, "Thought and Emotional Quality," in F. R. Leavis (ed.), *A Selection from "Scrutiny,"* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 211–31, at 231.

[49] R. G. Collingwood, "Hieronimo and Hamlet," Bodleian Library, Dep. Collingwood 17, fol. 14, University of Oxford.

explored dramatically in the magic and transformations of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. The eighteenth-century understandings of Hume may similarly arise in the mutations of *Hamlet* and a central personality of extraordinary symbolic mobility and unboundedness. But the Shakespearean analysis is in all such cases nonfinalist, and when plays terminate in chaos or *katharsis*, original questions are not exhausted. Shakespeare offers the experience of principles, but propounds no theory unqualified by dramatic occasion. No later theory can therefore supersede him.

Both the comedy and the tragedy of Shakespeare underline the relation of the history of philosophy to literary history and the history of criticism. Thus the affinity with Montaigne anticipates the skepticism of Hume. But historical explanations are not needed to see that Iago's gulling of the tragic hero in *Othello* raises the knowing of other minds as a problem of inference. The play highlights the distinction between real and illusory causes, as in Othello's crazed lamentation over his imagined betrayal by Desdemona, and the twisted logic of his mad rationalization of her brutal and premeditated murder:

> Othello
> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul;
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,
> It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
> Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
> And smooth as monumental alabaster.
> Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
> (v.ii.1–6)

The problem of causation is again entertained with savage directness in the remorseless action of *Lear*, with its terrible denouement. Such an ending produces effects of Aristotelian pity and fear that seem unavailable to a rational accounting by knowable causes (as we have seen Johnson registers movingly in his final note to this play). *Lear* plays out through the connectedness of its action the logical concatenation whereby "crimes lead to crimes and at last terminate in ruin" (Works viii, p. 704). Elsewhere, we may leave the Shakespearean play at its close, bereft of all answers or explanations; sometimes the moral question is in effect simply dropped, as at the conclusion to *Measure for Measure*.

Shakespeare's ability to speak directly to the moral, immoral and amoral condition of human experience is brought out by the criticism of Johnson, who in taking a view of all the plays, praised Shakespeare as the poet who conformed himself to, and was a conduit for, "general nature." But the overlap between the literary-critical and the philosophical also occurs at the detailed level of the dramatic texts, as in Johnson's explanatory note first drafted in 1745 on the famous speech, given by Shakespeare to Macbeth, on Time:

> MACBETH
> She should have died hereafter;
> There would have been a time for such a word.
> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death.
>
> (v.v.17–23)

Having paraphrased the speech, Johnson is prompted to a peroration on the human condition that anticipates his own philosophical fiction at the point where the party of moral tourists visits the catacombs of Egypt and is admonished by Imlac concerning the treacherous evanescence of temporal presence. Here is *Rasselas*: "Those that lie here stretched before us, the wise and the powerful of antient times, warn us to remember the shortness of our present state: they were, perhaps, snatched away while they were busy, like us, in the choice of life" (Works XVI, p. 174). Here is Johnson on Shakespeare:

> Such is the *world* – such is the condition of human life, that we always think *tomorrow* will be happier than to-day, but tomorrow and to-morrow steals over us unenjoyed and unregarded, and we still linger in the same expectation to the moment appointed for our end. All these days, which have thus passed away, have sent multitudes of fools to the grave, who were engrossed by the same dream of future felicity, and, when life was departing from them, were like me reckoning on to-morrow. ("Observations on Macbeth, Note XLIV, Scene V," Works VII, pp. 41–42)

This confluence of the thought of the Shakespearean editor and his edited text suggests an openness to the philosophic to which modern critics and philosophers have responded. Thought, in the eighteenth century, was perhaps a stronger expectation of imaginative literature than it has since become. At the same time Johnson's elucidation of Shakespeare's temporal transcendence as a poet of "general nature" is critically complementary to Kant's account of the judgment of taste on grounds that are not a priori, and Shakespeare advances questions that eighteenth-century thinkers have continued to pose. Was "Dr. Johnson," at moments like these, a "philosopher"?[50] His friends might think so, but philosophers usually have not, and the Shakespearean criticism of Johnson makes no claim to occupy the disciplinary terrain of philosophy in the same sense as the intellectual watershed of Kant's *Critique*.

The great eighteenth-century philosophers pursue *critiques* of Reason and of each other, while the pages of editorial notes to Shakespeare are replete with analyses of cause and effect and explore the logic of language and of human situation. In the dramas of Shakespeare words precede thought, and even silence speaks, while the eighteenth-century recognition of Shakespeare by Johnson does not take its most important philosophical turn by dissolving "criticism" into "aesthetics." The tension between criticism and philosophy in the writings of Johnson offers rather a critical "anti-philosophy" in a sense defended by F. R. Leavis.[51] And if the great philosophers of the eighteenth century write equivocally about Shakespeare, the critics of the period compensate by claiming attention for the fact that Shakespeare thinks. No generic divide could be more open to deconstruction in one sense or closed off to examination by the conventions of the history of philosophy in another.

[50] See Johnson's conversation with Oliver Edwards: "'You are a philosopher Dr. Johnson. I have tried in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in.'" Boswell, vol. III, p. 305.

[51] F. R. Leavis, *The Critic as Anti-Philosopher*, ed. G. Singh (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982).