

Is Shakespeare Unethical?: A Critical Review of Shakespearean Ethics

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Abstract William Shakespeare's popularity as a poet and a playwright deserves scrutiny when we come to the question of his morality and justice represented in his works. His popularity is often considered as the effect of his condescension to the crude taste of his audience wanting some raw and bloody sensationalism. The purpose of this paper is to critically review some of the major ethical criticism of Shakespeare from Samuel Johnson to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and to suggest an alternative idea of imaginative ethics in Shakespeare as a man of imagination. Jonson, Tolstoy, and Wittgenstein, in their respective differences, all together find fault with Shakespeare's lack of morality and high seriousness. However, as Wilson Knight's defense of Shakespeare as a visionary poet demonstrates well, Shakespeare's moral judgments are placed in his poetry which demands a detached observation on various human dispositions. The Shakespearean principle of 'poetic' justice is more than the Johnsonian poetic justice in that the former puts a moral judgment in the design of artistic threads: Shakespeare's "mingled yarn" is more than a melodramatic and bipolar black and white. Shakespeare's music of forgiveness is touched by his creative mercy beyond the earthly idea of morality. Shakespearean living ethics is the ethics of sympathetic imagination and tolerance oriented towards the realization of transcendental co-presence and musical harmony, as is represented in his final plays of romantic reconciliation and forgiveness.

Key words Shakespeare; poetic justice; Tolstoy; religiosity; Wittgenstein; Johnson; morality

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Structure (2012).

William Shakespeare was, from the very beginning of his career as a playwright and poet, both applauded and denounced as a popular writer. His popularity with his audience was his honour and liability at once. When Robert Green found fault with Shakespeare as an “up-start crow, shaking scenes,” he was pointing a finger at Shakespeare’s so-called job ethics. Shakespeare’s sudden success on the London stage allegedly went, in his contemporary university wits’ view, in tandem with his uncompromising ambition of success and appeal to the audience’s taste and indulgence in pleasure and entertainment. The notorious Jonsonian epithet of “small Latin, and less Greek” with his tongue in his sleeve, was to rather denounce Shakespeare for his lack of self-consciousness as a writer and his sense of morality than his lack of classical education proper. The purpose of this paper is to critically review major Shakespearean ethical criticism from Samuel Johnson to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and to suggest an alternative living principle of ethics in Shakespeare in terms of sympathy and imagination.

This tendency to characterize Shakespeare in terms of morality and moral or poetic justice was epitomized in Samuel Johnson. Johnson held consistently that enduring popularity was the final test of greatness of a literary work, and the public was the final arbiter of it. He always paid great homage to the 18th century bourgeois aesthetic and appreciation. In this vein, he went so far as to assure that “the popular preference, exhibited over a long period, for the happy ending to *King Lear* established the superiority of that ending” (Krutch 250). Johnson supposed that the death of Cordelia at the end of the tragedy went against the grain of general human nature, finding a cathartic satisfaction and happiness in the working of poetic justice of a melodrama. Cordelia’s undeserved tragic death and innocent suffering was shocking and terrible to his sense of morality and justice: “I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia’s death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor” (Raleigh 161-62). It is evident from this quotation that Johnson was reading “Shakespeare as a poet rather than a writer for the stage.” Johnson represented his contemporary common readers’ desire of pleasure, and in the case of Cordelia’s undeserved death, that desire was not satisfied. Sudden wonders, Johnson assures, can bring out small and short delights; however, the stability of truth and just representation of general nature can repose the audience in long-enduring pleasures. In Johnson this pleasure is irretrievably interwoven with his sense of moral justice. Delight is much enhanced by instruction, and intellectual delight is greater than sensual

delight. Johnson's general complaint on and dissatisfaction with Shakespeare rather foreground the function of pleasure as the final arbiter of literary value and greatness:

He [Shakespeare] sacrifices virtue to convenience, is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This is a fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place. (Raleigh 20-21)

Here Johnson argues that satisfaction of moral justice is the very source of an everlasting pleasure, and that Shakespeare fails in this, if not always. As Joseph Wood Krutch rightly says, with Johnson, "pleasure which runs counter to morality was obviously vicious, and even pleasure which was no more than innocent seemed too trivial an end to justify the feeling that poetry is, next to virtue, the noblest achievement of man" (Krutch 280). Again, if among Shakespeare's defects is found the failure to enforce moral lessons and thereby to achieve our sense of just pleasure, this Johnsonian complaint of Shakespeare for his lack of moral justice is contradictory to his acclaim of Shakespeare as a poet of nature. This nature is the common human nature, as it is not the Aristotelian *physis* proceeding toward a *telos* of what it ought to be. Johnson highly praises Shakespeare as the poet in whom the real world of life and experience is faithfully and truly represented, as in a mirror held up to nature.

Shakespeare is the touchstone to test the truth of our own experiences, and in his mirror of life are reflected all human sentiments in human language, all the transactions of the world, and in fine, just representations of our general human nature. For Johnson, Shakespeare is the acknowledged legislator and painter of the world. However, his acclaim of Shakespeare's works as the mirror of life is extenuated in order to put more emphasis on the desired end of writings, which is to instruct by pleasing. In his general remarks on *King Lear* he admits of a possible conflict between a just representation of the common events of human life and our

sense of moral justice:

A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtless be good, because it is a just representation of the common events of human life; but since all reasonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot easily be persuaded, that the observation of justice makes a play worse; or that, if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always rise better pleased from the final triumph of persecuted virtue. (Raleigh 161)

Here Johnson reveals his self-consciousness over the conflict between his aesthetic value judgment of a literary work and his sense of justice as a moralist. However, he resolves this conflict again in yielding the priority to pleasure over verisimilitude. Poetic Justice is defended by him not because it is instructive but rather because it meets our more fundamental and essential sense of pleasure: “[T]he irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight awhile, with that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth” (Raleigh 11). Johnson’s high estimation of Shakespeare as the poet of nature is given place to his sense of nature as it ought to be.

Johnson the moralist gets over Johnson the aesthetic critic, and Shakespeare’s power to hold a mirror up to life as it is, gets sacrificed in order to satisfy his artificial sense of moral justice as it should be. The Johnsonian sense of pleasure as the final judge was based on the common sense and reason of his reading public and gives no just place to creative imagination as a faculty of human mind in judiciously selecting and combining various elements and events of life in order to achieve dramatic effects on the stage. Hence the supernatural and mysterious are passionately denigrated as absurd and incredible. Though Johnson contributed a lot in making Shakespeare as a national poet and a modern classic, his criticism on Shakespeare was limited by his sense of moral purposes in literature. Shakespeare was criticized as immoral and purposeless, even at the cost of his true and just representation of life which is the great source of eternal pleasure, since the satisfaction of Poetic Justice is supposed by Johnson to be the source of more lasting pleasure of man.

Samuel Johnson’s estimation of Shakespeare as immoral was done as a reader in his private study, blind to the stage effects as a whole. His position was faithfully followed by the Russian Johnsonian, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy’s hatred of Shakespeare was life-long, mingled with his passionate envy of Beethoven and Raphael. Later

in his life Tolstoy assumed it his evangelical duty to save the poor bardolaters from the illusion that Shakespeare was a great writer. In his diary of October 28, 1900, Tolstoy wrote thus: "I reflected that if I am to serve people by writing, then the one thing which I have the right to do, which I must do, is to unmark the truth of the rich and to reveal to the poor the deception in which the rich are keeping them" (Gibian 22). For Tolstoy, Shakespeare is the aristocratic writer looking down on the clowns and the poor. This prejudice against Shakespeare as the enemy of the people is quite in contrast to the Johnsonian establishment and estimation of a people's Shakespeare.

However, Johnson and Tolstoy agree with each other in that, in their views, Shakespeare is immoral, sacrificing virtue to convenience. According to La Zurskii, a diarist and professor of world literature at the University of Odessa who recorded his interviews and conversations with Count Tolstoy, "Tolstoy complained that everything that happened, good or bad, moral or immoral, concerned Shakespeare only insofar as it made an interesting picture, fitted into a good spectacle" (Gibian 20). Here Zurskii points out Tolstoy's dissatisfaction with Shakespeare, especially with the latter's engrossment in the pursuit of entertainment at the cost of morality. However, Tolstoy's disapproval of Shakespeare was more fundamental in the light of his view of literature. To Tolstoy, literature is religious in its essence. Here he uses the word "religious" in its etymological meaning of "to bind, to combine together," and in that sense of infected combination with another's feelings lies the very essence of true art. Tolstoy's ideal art form is the folk songs, ballads, and heroic songs that enhance the sense of community and alleviate the pains of labor in primitive society. In this sense, Shakespeare's tragedies, Tolstoy thinks, have no moral basis, which thereby uncovers Shakespeare's fatalism.

Tolstoy's life-long hatred of Shakespeare was crystallized in his essay, "Shakespeare and the Drama," which was intended as the preface to Ernest Crosby's essay, "Shakespeare's Attitude to the Working Class." The Tolstoy essay was written in October, 1903-January, 1904, and was published in 1906. In this essay, "with the full-blown exaggeration of a polemicist" (Gibian 31), Tolstoy debunks Shakespeare's popularity as a deception, item by item. Of course his attack on Shakespeare is mainly focused on a perceived want of religious essence in the plays and thereof mutual affection in and by moral sense and affinity. Tolstoy strongly puts in question Shakespeare's sincerity as a writer over all, not only as a popular entertainer. I think nobody could better sum up Tolstoy's wholesale diatribe against Shakespeare than George Orwell, who regards the essay as "one of the greatest pieces of moral, non-aesthetic criticism, — *anti* — aesthetic criticism"

(Orwell 127).

Tolstoy's main contention is that Shakespeare is a trivial, shallow writer, with no coherent philosophy, no thoughts or ideas worth bothering about, no interest in social or religious problems, no grasp of character or probability, and, in so far as he could be said to have a definable attitude at all, with a cynical, immoral, worldly outlook on life. He accuses him of patching his plays together without caring twopence for credibility, of dealing in fantastic fables and impossible situations, of making all his characters talk in an artificial flowery language completely unlike that of real life. He also accuses him of thrusting anything and everything into his plays — soliloquies, scraps of ballads, discussions, vulgar jokes and so forth — without stopping to think whether they had anything to do with the plot, and also of taking for granted the immoral power politics and unjust social distinctions of the times he lived in. Briefly, he accuses him of being a hasty, slovenly writer, a man of doubtful morals, and, above all, of not being a thinker. (Orwell 128)

Orwell considers what Tolstoy says is true on the whole and that he is “unanswerable” to Tolstoy, though he admits that Shakespeare’s moral code might be different from Tolstoy’s. Orwell agrees without any hesitation with Tolstoy in that Shakespeare is not a thinker. Orwell easily acquiesces in the Tolstoy criticism on the condition that “Tolstoy criticizes Shakespeare not as a poet, but as a thinker and a teacher” (Orwell 130). Orwell’s “unanswerability” seems to miss the bull’s eye of the Tolstoy criticism in emphasizing Shakespeare’s immaturity and confusion as a thinker.

The pillar of the Tolstoy essay is built upon Shakespeare’s immorality, justifying his worldly outlook of “the end justifies the means.” The beams of criticism are laid on unnatural characterization, pompous and embellished language, incredibility and improbability of characterization and plot, and lack of clarity, simplicity, and explicitness. Admittedly these defects are, Orwell thinks, all the offshoots of his immorality. In Tolstoy’s view of art, aesthetic architecture and characterization of a work must be considered given the writer’s morality and world-view. His criticism of Shakespeare’s characterization demands our deeper probing into Tolstoy’s definition of what a drama is.

It demands that the persons represented in the play should be, in consequence of actions proper to their characters, and owing to a natural course of events,

placed in positions requiring them to struggle with the surrounding world to which they find themselves in opposition, and in this struggle should display their inherent qualities. (Gibian 35)

In this definition of drama Tolstoy opposes the self to the world, and this is truer of Greek drama of a Sophoclean type than of Shakespearean tragedy, completely disregarding a Shakespearean tragic hero's mental agony undergoing double or split consciousness. However, against this definition Tolstoy severely accuses Lear of his sudden and whimsical division of the kingdom at the very beginning of the play without any preparatory explanations of his motives, and he also charges Cordelia for her ungentle language unlike that of an obedient daughter, whom she is assumed to be throughout the whole play.

To Tolstoy's eyes all the kings of Shakespeare's plays are the same, characterless characters speaking the same undifferentiated bombastic language. Tolstoy also found fault with the vulgarity of Gloucester's language at the opening scene of the play, and this demonstrates that Tolstoy was under the shadow of the neo-classical idea of decorum, both literary and ethical. Beyond his understanding and appreciation were the Fool's jests in *King Lear* and the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*: they are digressions and indecorous distractions introduced to amuse Shakespeare's audience regardless of the plot development. In his calculating reason and cool rationalism, Tolstoy was unperceptive of metaphoric languages and puns, the supernatural wonders and silence, all contributing to the invention of dramatic effects. In his over seventy marginal notes in his text of *Hamlet* [volume six of the Tauchnitz (Leipzig) seven volume edition, with the Collier text] Tolstoy put the question mark on the first entrance of the ghost. As Gibian argues, "the very presence of the ghost of course offended Tolstoy's exaggeratedly rationalistic views" (Gibian 43). Tolstoy wrote in an unpublished draft passage of his essay on Shakespeare that "coarse embellishments mark the tragic quality of Shakespeare: the trumpets before a king enters, the storm in *Lear*, the grass he puts on his head, the disguise of Edgar as a knight, Desdemona's songs, ghosts in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*" (Gibian 43). Tolstoy was quite ignorant of the conventions of a poetic drama and he seemed to read Shakespeare's plays as a kind of realistic novel of the cause-and-effect development. He preferred simple and lucid prose language to the poetic one of nuances, ambiguities, suggestions, metaphors and hyperboles. The linguistic medium conveying infective feelings must be a prose of simplicity, modesty and plainness.

Against this simplified language of feelings, Ludwig Wittgenstein points out

that the problem lies rather elsewhere than in language itself.

Tolstoy: the meaning of something lies in its being something everyone can understand. That is both true and false. What makes the object hard to understand — if it is significant, important, is not that you have to be instructed in abstruse matters in order to understand it, but the antithesis between understanding the object and what most people *want* to see. Because of this precisely what is most obvious may be what is most difficult to understand. It is not a difficulty for the intellect but one for the will that has to be overcome. (Wittgenstein 25e)

Here Wittgenstein makes it clear that what makes understanding and communication difficult and even impossible is the intentional blindness to what is obvious. He, on the whole, denies Tolstoy's argument that a simple language guarantees lucid understanding. In addition, Wittgenstein categorically disregards Tolstoy's criticism that Shakespeare was not concerned about his characters and events, insincerely fitting them into a picture. Wittgenstein admits of an inevitable gap between a poet's feeling and a reader's feeling of it:

There is *much* that can be learned from Tolstoy's false theorizing that the work of art conveys 'a feeling.' ...but what he (the author) may have felt in writing it (a poem), that doesn't concern me *at all*. (Wittgenstein 67e)

If Tolstoy accused Shakespeare of his insincerity as an author, Wittgenstein defends Shakespeare against Tolstoy as a reader. Wittgenstein's criticism of Tolstoy in terms of language and feeling is evidently done while keeping in mind his understanding of Shakespeare's poetic language:

Shakespeare, one might say, displays the dance of human passions. For this reason he has to be objective, otherwise he would not so much display the dance of human passions — as perhaps talk about it. But he shows us them in a dance, not naturalistically. (Wittgenstein 42e)

While Tolstoy did not like a play written in verse, blind to the beautiful poetry of Shakespeare's pun and world-play, Wittgenstein was more perceptive of his metaphoric, dance-like language. However, his understanding of an author's 'feeling' cannot be said to be just and fair to Tolstoy. When Tolstoy criticized

Shakespeare for his insincere feelings, he blamed his superficial characterization and improper impersonation. When Hamlet speaks of social and legal injustice, Tolstoy thinks that Shakespeare himself speaks in Hamlet's mouth, and that is the significance of his 'feeling.' In fact Hamlet is in the play too much talkative and verbose and when he stops talking, literally "the rest is silence" (*Hamlet*, 5.2.363). T.S. Eliot is right to some extent in arguing that Shakespeare fails in finding out an objective correlative that can impersonalize Hamlet's overflowing subjective emotions. As Samuel Johnson pointed out earlier, formal and rhetorical embellishment of language and technical quibbles were a fatal attraction for Shakespeare, enough to make him lose his world of plot and unity of a drama: "In narration he[Shakespeare] affects a disproportionate pomp of diction" (Krutch 278). Tolstoy is not alone in his denunciation of Shakespeare's language and feeling: he stands in between Johnson and Eliot.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny Tolstoy's simplistic partiality and prejudice in his understanding of Shakespeare, especially of his poetic language and atmosphere. As Gibian puts it properly, Tolstoy wanted drama to be simple, plain, morally hortatory, logically consistent, and rationally lucid: "its atmosphere as well as linguistic medium was to be prose" (Gibian 44). The influence of Tolstoy is expressed in Wittgenstein's preference of Beethoven to Shakespeare, since Wittgenstein's propensity was toward the classical unity and lucidity. However, as Peter Lewis points out, "Wittgenstein goes over Tolstoy into the minds of men who are impressed by Shakespeare when he emphasizes the importance of a cultural code in understanding a poet" (Lewis 7). Though he doesn't personally like it, Wittgenstein acknowledges, unlike Tolstoy's denunciation of self-deception, some genuine response to Shakespeare.

Wittgenstein's defense of Shakespeare in terms of his poetic language and feelings was preceded by Wilson Knight in his English Association address, "Shakespeare and Tolstoy" (April 1934). In his reply to the Tolstoy essay, Knight finds out an astonishing similarity between Tolstoy and Robert Bridges in their responses to Shakespeare. Like Tolstoy, Bridges says in his essay, "The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Drama" (1907) that "he[Shakespeare] was making concession to the most vulgar stratum of his audience, and had acquired a habit of so doing" (Bridges 2). In such scenes of "sheer brutality" as the murder of Macduff's child and the blinding of Gloucester, Shakespeare, Bridges continues, sacrificed his artistic ideals for the sake of gratifying his audience (15). This is very alike to Tolstoy's argument that Shakespeare's popularity was mainly due to mass suggestion and hypnotism of the audience.

In Knight's words, both Tolstoy and Bridges "bring forward precisely the objections: poor characterization, impossible events, exaggeration, vulgarity" (8). However, there is no clear evidence that "two great minds have directed their hostility" (Knight 3). The main tenet of Knight's counter-attack on Tolstoy is that the latter misread Shakespeare as a novelist, not as a poet, committing "indeed a devastating neglect of Shakespeare's poetic symbolism" (4). The "unnaturalness" Tolstoy found as a fault in *King Lear* is, Knight argues, rather "essential to the Shakespearean vision" (9). Knight repeats on and again that Shakespeare is a visionary poet, not a great novelist: "Tolstoy and Bridges suffered from clear thinking" (11). In order to understand Shakespeare as a poet, it is crucial to "grasp the vitalizing idea behind the phenomena of the plays" (11). Knight answers to Shakespeare's "unnatural" characterization mainly attacked by both Tolstoy and Bridges, saying that "art always discloses the inner flame of reality" (17). Against Tolstoy's Hamlet, who is a characterless character, Knight's Hamlet is universal: "In him we recognize ourselves, not our acquaintances. Possessing all characters, he possesses none" (19). Knight finds in Hamlet a typical Renaissance man and the prototype of a modern man. Here Knight's response highlights Shakespeare the poet at the cost of his novelistic naturalism.

However, Tolstoy does not deny the inner vision of art. When he says that a tragic hero reveals his inherent qualities in his struggles against the surrounding opposing world, he underlined a tragic character's logical and consistent development and individuation thereof. He is actually antipathetic to the "given" characters of dramatic conventions. Sometimes in his overwhelming passion of patriotic defense, Knight ignores Shakespeare's singularity and puts him in the air of generalization and abstraction: "But Shakespeare's persons make utterance from a height where all men speak alike: the height of universal experience, refracted often in human terms, voiceless save by poetry" (19). Do they? Is Ulysses wrong when he says that the upper-rung people kick back the following climbers? While Tolstoy emphasized the religious essence of drama in mutual infection in real life, Knight seems to say that Shakespeare's drama realizes religiosity in the height of universality. Can the groundlings reach that height, or otherwise does the height emanate its holy light on the earthly common people? Knight denies the "aristocratic" Shakespeare by his universality and myriad-mindedness. The general humanity is revealed in a type of religious vision, relating man to the Absolute. Knight argues that "Shakespeare presents us very definitely with just such a variable religion-philosophy compound as Tolstoy seems to require" (25). He characterizes Shakespeare's religious vision as "his imaginative qualities" and

intense symbolism: “the ‘disorder’ philosophy of the Histories, the death-force in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* embattled against life, the Christian ethic of *Measure for Measure*, the purgatorial vision of *Lear*, the accomplished paradise of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. ...the Birth and Resurrection dramas of Final Play” (26). Here we come back to the starting point of Knight’s address saying that Shakespeare is a poet and a visionary. Beyond Tolstoy’s cold reason and realism was Shakespeare’s poetic vision of intense symbolism and universal and highly serious religious concerns. Knight’s argument was corroborated by Wittgenstein’s retort to Tolstoy that lucid simplicity is not all that matters in understanding a language. Meanwhile, Knight’s definition of Shakespeare as a religious and philosophical poet in the mode of Tolstoy is brusquely denied by George Orwell when the latter says that “Shakespeare is not a thinker, and the critics who claimed that he was one of the great philosophers of the world were talking nonsense” (Orwell 128). For Orwell, Knight is one of the nonsense-talking critics, sliding into misty and abstract generalizations. Now we return to Ludwig Wittgenstein. We saw that he stood on Knight’s side in opposition to Tolstoy, concerning Shakespeare’s poetic language. However, Wittgenstein goes over to Tolstoy when he says that the admiration for Shakespeare is a matter of convention:

It is remarkable how hard we find it to believe something the truth of which we do not see for ourselves. If e.g. I hear expressions of admiration for Shakespeare made by the distinguished men of several centuries, I can never rid myself of a suspicion that praising him has been a matter of convention, even though I have to tell myself that this is not the case. I need the authority of a Milton to be really convinced. In his case I take it for granted that he was incorruptible. — But of course I don’t mean to deny by this that an enormous amount of praise has been and still is lavished on Shakespeare without understanding and for specious reasons by a thousand professors of literature. (Wittgenstein 55e)

In these passages we are likely to have a hallucination that we are reading Tolstoy, not Wittgenstein. Why do we experience this kind of continuity of dissent? What is remarkable here about Wittgenstein’s observation on Shakespeare is his suggestion of deceptiveness within the Shakespeare cult, similar to Tolstoy’s in its wording. Interestingly, in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton states that the classical plays of the antique tragedians are still “unequalled yet by any” (qtd. in Stein 3). Milton assists Wittgenstein in his non-commitment in the Shakespeare admiration.

Just as Tolstoy criticizes Shakespeare of his embellished and rhetorical verbal pictures that induce the poor to easy hypnotism, so Wittgenstein implicitly accuses Shakespeare of his magical and spectacular skills of language generating only a phenomenal significance:

It is not as though Shakespeare portrayed human types well and were in that respect *true to life*. He is not true to life. But he has such a supple hand and such individual *brush strokes* that each one of his characters looks *significant*, worth looking at. (Wittgenstein 96e)

Shakespeare's technical skills as a language painter seem to Wittgenstein's eyes, to intimate some kind of unrecognizable and unknown visual deception. And that great picture of Shakespeare's is worth just looking at, as at natural scenery. And this picture is not a mimetic representation of real life. His whole works are akin to a dream only complete and significant in itself. When Wittgenstein characterizes Shakespeare's plays as a dream-like corpus autonomous and significant in its own possible world, he distances Shakespeare from ethical and philosophical depth: "So he is completely unrealistic" (89e). As George Steiner astutely points out, "[T]he very nonchalance of Shakespeare's pictorial, histrionic means induces in both Tolstoy and Wittgenstein the intimation of a confidence trick" (10). Wittgenstein cannot favor the creator of language, nor even a poet, because he thinks the latter only paints a picture of an apparently significant phenomenon like a splendid piece of scenery: "I do not think Shakespeare could have reflected on the 'lot of the poet.'" Neither could he regard himself as a prophet or teacher of humanity" (96e). Here Wittgenstein uses the word "poet" (Dichter) in its German sense as one who knows ethically, whose knowledge is organized by ethical perception. (Steiner 11) Wittgenstein makes this sense clear when he says: "The reason I cannot understand Shakespeare is that I want to find symmetry in all this asymmetry" (98e). Wittgenstein is following the Platonic tradition of epistemology as moral action. Maybe he is imposing too heavy a burden of moral responsibility as a teacher of life upon the shoulders of Shakespeare the playwright. However, when Shakespeare is acclaimed as a visionary poet par excellence, can we disregard Wittgenstein's observations as the misunderstanding of a strict logician and epistemologist?

The question of whether Shakespeare is ethical or immoral is still unresolved. Perhaps it stands somewhere between Tolstoy and Knight. Nowadays the question has deviated into sense, or more properly, nonsense of whether Shakespeare is authentic or a fake, borrowing from somebody else's feathers and plumes. Perhaps

the question was put in the wrong direction from the very beginning when we applied the term “ethics” to Shakespeare’s works, since Shakespeare puts in question the whole being and experiences of man. As Wittgenstein said before, Shakespeare’s works compose a dream-like corpus of its own autonomy with its own living principles. That means that we have to apply the ethics of imagination to his works, not to Shakespeare the man. The corpus of his own has its rule of consistency and contradictions, and in itself it is not the actual living life and world as we experience in everyday life, though it has a strong relevance to it. If it is for the real life, we do not go to the theater and want some relaxation and entertainment therein. Shakespeare’s play is a configuration of a possible world, similar to life but not the same to it, to which we have to apply its own logic and ethical measures. That is the ethics of imagination and sympathy. If the sense of ethics still has the etymological significance of “ethos” meaning subjective value judgment of a character, ethics is the effect of a character. And a literary character has a meaning only when he is ‘placed’ in relation with his surrounding characters and circumstances. Literary characters play and act in a network, sometimes enmeshed in it cast by an Iago. Shakespeare’s plays convey the feeling of being inter-related and in the presence of the supernatural and the mysterious, and the marvelous that cannot be understood in a Horatio’s competent reason or aplomb. That Shakespearean imagination casts all the people in his plays in tempest and music. No man is an island in Shakespeare’s imagination and imaginative understanding. Shakespearean tragedies enact the failure of that sympathetic imagination, while his comedies and romances play out the trial and restoration of it. It is time that we must apply the rule of imagination to life, not vice versa. Only then can Shakespeare be set free from the bondage of applause or scold of his critical audiences. As Hamlet tells Horatio, our reason, there are more things in life than can be understood in our philosophy, and we need imagination to explore that mysterious region, which reveals intermittently to the eyes of sympathetic imagination and forgiveness.¹

Note

1. This paper was supported by the HUFS research grant.

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