

ROGER
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From Goethe to Gundolf

ESSAYS ON
GERMAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE





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4. Laocoon, Dante, Shakespeare, August Wilhelm Schlegel and the Overcoming of Tragedy¹

A more precise title for this chapter would be simply 'Overcoming Tragedy Around 1800. A German View'. To a scholar of German, the idea of overcoming tragedy would have immediate associations. We think of discussions about what Aristotle really meant by pity and fear, and whether perhaps he was talking more about empathy, and certainly not about terror. We note the choice of dramatic subjects that kept tragic action in the background and concentrated more on the values of the human heart. One thinks of how Johann Wolfgang Goethe adapted Euripides' Iphigenia story to this very effect; or how Friedrich Schiller constructs a whole theory of tragedy around the notions of 'sublime soul' or 'beautiful soul' and seeks to illustrate this in the 1790s in his two tragedies *Wallenstein* and *Maria Stuart*; even how Schiller in 1800 produces a version of *Macbeth* with distinctly neoclassical overtones. And, finally, we recollect how August Wilhelm Schlegel, the great translator and critic — the main subject of my remarks here — in 1797 produced a reading of *Romeo and Juliet* that played down the stark connotations of the young Shakespeare's tragedy and instead read in it values of the human heart that mitigated 'never was a story of more woe'.

Since writing my book on Shakespeare's critical reception in Germany,² I have come to see Schlegel's essay of 1797 in a wider context: this context

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- 1 This chapter developed out of a paper, hitherto unpublished, given at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford on Avon in 2010.
 - 2 Roger Paulin, *The Critical Reception of Shakespeare in Germany 1682–1914. Native Literature and Foreign Genius*, Anglistische und Amerikanistische Texte und Studien 11 (Hildesheim, New York: Olms, 2003).

did not necessarily cast more light on his attitude to Shakespeare per se, but it made that reading of *Romeo and Juliet* more plausible. For within a year of his *Romeo and Juliet* essay, Schlegel had been translating parts of Dante and writing a commentary on him.³ He had been faced with the stark awfulness of the story of Ugolino della Gherardesca in Dante's *Inferno*.⁴ In grasping for words to express what was plainly there in the text but from which he instinctively recoiled, Schlegel mentioned the name of Laocoon (from Greek mythology). In the same year as his essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, Schlegel wrote a poem which states with brevity and succinctness the insights that the essay develops at greater length and with sometimes deliberate shifts of meaning. This is the background to my remarks. It is what enables images of Laocoon and Ugolino to cohabit with Shakespeare and how these can be incorporated into a wider discourse, even one where his name is not even mentioned.

Ultimately, however, my subject has to do with the reception of Shakespeare in Germany, and also with the wider issues raised by that particular debate. The primary question is: what is it that draws the Germans to Shakespeare and confers on them — or leads them to confer on themselves — a special relationship to Shakespeare, so that Schlegel in 1796 could speak of Shakespeare as 'ganz unser' ('entirely ours').⁵ I am not posing these questions in the abstract, because they impinge quite directly on my subject. What is it then that accords to the Germans that special relationship to Shakespeare?

One can safely state as a general principle that all non-English reception of Shakespeare is really a debate with existing national traditions and their preoccupations, especially in the eighteenth century.⁶ The French for instance spend more time on the question of Shakespeare and their own *drame classique* than on anything else. The Italians ask themselves whether some of the qualities being exhibited in Shakespeare do not relate to their own golden age (Dante) and whether

3 August Wilhelm Schlegel, 'Dante's Hölle', in *Die Horen eine Monatsschrift*, ed. by Friedrich Schiller (Tübingen: Cotta, 1795–97), 1. Jg. (1795), 3. Stück, 22–29, 4. Stück, 31–49, 8. Stück, 35–74.

4 "'Ugolino und Ruggieri'" Fortsetzung von Dante's Hölle', *ibid.*, Jg. 1795, 8. Stück, 35–74.

5 August Wilhelm Schlegel, 'Etwas über Hamlet bey Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters', *Die Horen*, 2. Jg. (1796), 4. Stück, 57–112, ref. 79.

6 See Roger Paulin, 'Ein deutsch-europäischer Shakespeare im 18. Jahrhundert?', in *Shakespeare im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Roger Paulin, Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert. Supplementa 3 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 7–35.

a renaissance of their national literature is possible. The eighteenth century in Germany, when the reception of Shakespeare begins in earnest and at whose end we have that extraordinary proprietary claim, 'ganz unser', is — I am simplifying complex processes here — a time of self-definition. The question is being asked: do we have a national literature? And if we do not, how are we to go about acquiring one? Are we to follow foreign models — the French, the Greeks, the English, or elements of all three? Or are we to look to the resources of our own native tradition? The history of German literature in the eighteenth century involves all of these elements. For some writers and poets, Shakespeare is an irrelevance. For many however he is not. He is the way forward, in terms of self-definition, inspiration, attitudes to form and its models, and much else besides. They are remarking and absorbing a Shakespeare as known in the eighteenth century, Shakespeare as mediated by Voltaire, or Alexander Pope, or John Milton, or Edward Young, or Mark Akenside or Ossian. Shakespeare is made to relate to the issues that occupy each successive generation. The eighteenth century sees two important moments of self-definition in German literature, both of them conducive to the Germans finding their own voice and their own stylistic expression, one commencing in the 1740s, the other around 1770. The second of these is known as the *Sturm und Drang* ('Storm and Stress'), and it is, as the name suggests, explosive, urgent, concerned with issues of originality, nature, creative forces, the definition of the self, and the expression of all of this in poetry and prose. In this period the Germans first begin to say things about Shakespeare that are their own and not borrowed from others. It is also worth reminding ourselves in terms of European Shakespeare reception that 1770, using this as a rough date, is the time around which a major reaction takes place in European Shakespeare reception, a rejection of his alleged 'faults' and imperfections, a reaction against the 'misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire',⁷ as Elizabeth Montagu states in 1769, and an attempt to explore the nature of his genius.

An example from Germany in this very period is the dithyrambic essay *Das Hochburger Schloss/The Ruined Castle of Hochburg* of 1777 by

7 Elizabeth Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare Compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets. With Some Remarks Upon the Misrepresentations of Mons. de Voltaire* (London: Dilly, 1772), title page.

Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz (1751–92). It is a rejection of Voltaire and Pope, of anyone who dares, who presumes, to raise a voice of criticism against Shakespeare. Who, he says, can utter reservations about King Lear? Who is not shattered to the core by this spectacle? Who can even begin to speak of it, to find words to express it? ‘Doch wer darf über Laokoon reden? Und über Lear, wer darf das? —’⁸ For all its impulsive force, this is a rhetorical figure, a variation on the ‘words fail me’ trope (called *hyperoche*): Shakespeare will lead us into the realms of the unsayable, the inexpressible. But why Laocoon, and, one might venture to ask, who dares bracket him with Lear?

Laocoon is, of course, the Trojan priest who was punished by the goddess Athena for warning the Trojans about the wooden horse. The goddess sent venomous snakes out of the sea to bite and strangle him and his two sons. The Laocoon, a Hellenistic group of statuary discovered in Rome in 1506, becomes in eighteenth-century Germany a cipher for all kinds of aesthetic and moral debates and a criterion of taste. Depending on one’s views, it is an unsurpassed model of classical harmony in art, an exemplar of stoical suffering and moral greatness, or a martyr enduring the pain of death, offering defiance to the gods in the very act of punishment. The question of why Laocoon and his sons suffer in the way they do is not in the forefront of eighteenth-century debates. The contemplation of this group of statuary is concerned rather with drawing out of it qualities of human endeavour, inner capacities of mind and soul. Thus it is that everyone who matters in the eighteenth century has something to say about Laocoon: Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Gottfried Herder, Schiller, Goethe, and many others, a roll-call of the great names of eighteenth-century German criticism, thought and poetry.⁹ Such observations are not restricted to Germany; witness Sir Joshua Reynolds noting that the Laocoon can depict but the

8 ‘Who may venture to speak of Laocoon? Who of Lear, who dares it?’ Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, *Das Hochburger Schloß* (1777), in *Shakespeare-Rezeption. Die Diskussion um Shakespeare in Deutschland. I: Ausgewählte Texte von 1741 bis 1788*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Blinn (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1982), 148.

9 See the definitive account by Hugh Barr Nisbet, ‘Laocoon in Germany. The Reception of the Group since Winckelmann’, in *On the Literature and Thought of the German Classical Era* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 241–90, <http://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0180>

'general expression of pain'.¹⁰ And so Lenz's shorthand reference to Laocoon taps into current debates and aligns him with those who see in this statuary the depiction of tragic suffering. But Lenz goes further: he is saying that for him Laocoon represents, like Lear, the limits of the expressible, takes us out beyond analysis, outside of articulation, beyond critical debate, into spheres of the absolute. We do not concern ourselves with details, with motivations, with questions of guilt or innocence. Words do not suffice.

Let us now jump nearly twenty years, to 1795, to a figure better known in German Shakespeare reception, August Wilhelm Schlegel, the great translator and the author of the *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur/Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* that so influenced Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Except that in 1795 he is neither of these things. Although he has produced a draft version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,¹¹ he is for the moment occupied with other matters, notably with Dante. Whereas references to Dante and Shakespeare in eighteenth-century English Shakespearean discourse are so rare as hardly to count, the position in Germany is different. For them, the great figures of world literature represent a continuity of poetry, in different epochs, in cyclical progression. But poetry remains whole and undivided all the same. Schlegel's brother Friedrich expressed this in 1798 in the following terms:

Dante's prophetisches Gedicht ist das einzige System der transcendenten Poesie, immer noch das höchste seiner Art. Shakespeare's Universalität ist wie der Mittelpunkt der romantischen Kunst. Goethe's rein poetische Poesie ist die vollständige Poesie der Poesie. Das ist der große Dreyklang der modernen Poesie [...]¹²

10 *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by John Burnet (London: James Carpenter, 1842), 114.

11 See Frank Jolles, *A. W. Schlegels Sommernachtstraum in der ersten Fassung vom Jahre 1789 nach den Handschriften herausgegeben*, Palaestra 244 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

12 'Dante's prophetic poem is a system of transcendental poetry in one, and still the highest of its kind. Shakespeare's universality is like the midpoint of Romantic art. Goethe's pure poetic poetry is poetry of poetry at its most perfect. This is the great threefold chord of modern poetry [...]. *Athenaeum. Eine Zeitschrift von August Wilhelm Schlegel und Friedrich Schlegel*, 3 vols (Berlin: Vieweg, 1798; Unger, 1799–1800), I, 244.

You will see from this quotation that poetry does not stand still. It is progressive and extends into the modern period as well (Goethe). The Romantics, August Wilhelm Schlegel among them, never hesitated to name Dante and Shakespeare as the highest 'archpoets', and so in a sense what he says about Dante can by analogy be applied to Shakespeare. I am going to take what he says in 1795 about Dante and apply it by analogy to his attitude to Shakespeare, especially Shakespearean tragedy, around 1800.

And so first of all to Dante. Schlegel is translating selected parts of the *Divine Comedy*, hitherto never rendered in the original verse form, and in 1795 he is translating the first part, the *Inferno*. (We should not forget that Schlegel did translations from Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Sanskrit, as well as of Shakespeare.) The Dante essay and translation appears in Schiller's periodical *Die Horen/The Horae*, a journal concerned with bringing together all men of good will in a common purpose. Schlegel was in good company, for it is here that Schiller published his *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen/Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* and *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung/On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, Goethe his *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten/Conversations of German Refugees* and *Römische Elegien/Roman Elegies*, and it was in this same journal that Schlegel also published his first important statements on Shakespeare. Schlegel, in translating the Ugolino episode, then commenting on it, was not plucking his example out of the air. He knew that the subject had a pre-history.¹³ Precociously knowledgeable as he was, he must have been aware that, as far back as 1741, the Swiss critic Johann Jacob Bodmer had drawn attention to this passage and had even translated a part of it.¹⁴ (Over his later drama *Der Hunger-Thurn in Pisa*, based on the same episode in Dante, a veil is best drawn.)¹⁵ Bodmer is also one of the founding figures of German

13 On the Ugolino episode and its various mutations, see the old positivist study, still useful, by Montague Jacobs, *Gerstenbergs Ugolino. Ein Vorläufer des Geniedramas*, Berliner Beiträge zur germanischen und romanischen Philologie 14 (Berlin: Ebering, 1898); and more recently, Frances Yates, 'Transformations of Dante's Ugolino', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), 92–117; Yvonne-Patricia Ahlefeld, "'Der Simplizität der Griechen am nächsten kommen'. Entfesselte Animalität in Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenbergs Ugolino', *Herder Jahrbuch*, 6 (2002), 63–82.

14 Jacobs, *Gerstenbergs Ugolino*, 16f.

15 Johann Jacob Bodmer, *Der Hunger-Thurn in Pisa. Ein Trauerspiel* (Chur und Lindau: Typographische Gesellschaft, 1769).

Shakespeare reception. The juxtaposition of these two 'archpoets' was therefore not the Romantics' invention. It was, however, not in Schlegel's interests, writing as he was in *Die Horen*, a journal at the cutting edge of criticism and philosophical reflexion, to allude to a figure so unmodern and dated. He may not have known that Schiller himself, from early on, had taken a lively interest in the most notable manifestation in Germany of Dante's Ugolino episode, Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg's tragedy *Ugolino* (1768).¹⁶ Not only that: Gerstenberg is an important voice in the Shakespearean reception of the *Sturm und Drang*, and for him Shakespeare and Dante are commensurate figures. Do you expect smoothness in the works of genius, his *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur/Letters on Curiosities of Literature* (1766–67) asks ('denn großen Genies sind Auswüchse wesentlich: erinnern Sie sich des *Dante* und *Shakespear* [sic]?').¹⁷ Thus it is that Schlegel can find admiring words for Gerstenberg while nevertheless admitting that the subject is hardly suitable for dramatic adaptation, at least not in the form chosen.¹⁸

Lessing, too, had alluded to Ugolino in a passage in his *Laokoon* (1766) referring to repellent subjects in poetry.¹⁹ It was however not he who was to review Gerstenberg's play, but Herder, in 1770.²⁰ Herder was generally laudatory, but with some reservations. The chief of these is that Gerstenberg, Shakespeareanizing in typically *Sturm und Drang* fashion, had overlooked the essential difference between Ugolino and Shakespeare's subjects. While horror is penetratingly present in Shakespeare, it is never the main point; it never forms, as here, the whole substance of the dramatic plot. Similar points are to be found later in Schiller, himself never averse to the spectacle of cruelty in dramatic subjects.²¹

16 Jacobs, *Gerstenbergs Ugolino*, 125f.

17 'For irregularities are an essential part of genius: do you remember Dante and Shakespeare?' Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, *Briefe über Merkwürdigkeiten der Literatur*. Vollständige Neuausgabe mit einer Biographie des Dichters, hg. von Karl-Maria Guth, Sammlung Hofenberg (Berlin: Contumax, 2013), 2. Sammlung, 12. Brief, 70.

18 Schlegel, "'Ugolino und Ruggieri'", 65–67.

19 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke*, ed. by Franz Muncker, 12 vols (Stuttgart: Göschen, 1890), VII, 360.

20 Herder's review is most accessible in Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg, *Ugolino. Eine Tragödie in fünf Aufzügen*. Mit einem Anhang und einer Auswahl aus den theoretischen und kritischen Schriften, hg. von Christoph Siegrist, Reclams Universal-Bibliothek 141 (2) (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977), 74–86.

21 See Karl S. Guthke, 'Schiller, Shakespeare und das Theater der Grausamkeit', *Shakespeare im 18. Jahrhundert*, 181–94.

This pre-history — which can only be sketched here — is doubtless the reason why Schlegel chooses this particular passage for translation and comment. Not his very first public statement on Dante, it has nevertheless a milestone quality in that it contains the first version of the rhyme-scheme *terza rima* in German (Schlegel refers nowhere by name to the previous prose translation by Johann Nicolaus Meinhard, only disdainfully to ‘mattere Umschreibungen’).²² Foretaste samples of the first blank-verse translations of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest* and *Julius Caesar*, also by Schlegel, were to be published in *Die Horen*, followed by his two great essays on Shakespeare. Echoing Herder, Schlegel, too, considers what Shakespeare might have made of such a subject as Ugolino.²³ Of course such an idea was never in Shakespeare’s mind. Schlegel must nevertheless come to terms with tragic horror in all its starkness, whether in Dante or in Shakespeare; whether in Dante’s account of Ugolino and his sons’ death by starvation or the action in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the number of corpses even exceeds Dante’s. But first, Ugolino.

As a translator, Schlegel is confronted with the passage in Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno* that for him and many other readers besides represents the scene of the most appalling horror: the story of Ugolino. For what was seen as an act of treachery, Ugolino, his sons and grandsons were incarcerated and left to die of hunger. Dante, with his guide and mentor, Virgil, meets Ugolino in Hell and hears his story. Schlegel the translator makes two points: he is inadequate to express the full force of Dante’s original, but must nevertheless do justice to what Dante has written.²⁴ For the text hints at even worse: how Ugolino was tempted to commit two desperate acts, to feed on his dead sons, and also to put an end to his own life, but did neither, as Dante puts it, ‘Until hunger did what anguish could not do’.²⁵

Despite this, Ugolino is punished eternally in Hell, for betraying the trust that was placed in him. But Schlegel sees deeper processes at work in Dante’s depiction. He says that Dante, by using Ugolino’s own words as he describes his own torture and death, appeals to our hearts,

22 ‘Fairly dull transcriptions’. Schlegel, “‘Ugolino und Ruggieri’”, 58. Meinhard’s translation in Gerstenberg, *Ugolino*, 72–74.

23 Schlegel, “‘Ugolino und Ruggieri’”, 67.

24 *Ibid.*, 58f.

25 In Schlegel’s version: ‘Dann that der Hunger, was dem Schmerz mislang’. *Ibid.*, 57.

to our sympathies: 'no-one could pass by and not be affected', is how Schlegel puts it.²⁶ Over this whole account, says Schlegel, are written in an invisible hand the words 'To Humankind'.²⁷ Through the atrocities he is forced to recount, there shines Dante's own sense of humanity, his own natural innocence and his sense of natural recompense. There must, Schlegel avers, be here a belief in a divine justice higher than the events depicted. Otherwise, our hearts and souls would revolt at the sights and sounds evoked in the poetry and we would wish them veiled from our sight; the punishment would be out of all proportion to our sense of justice. In all, we sense virtues, heroism and self-sacrifice; after horror, we are filled with admiration and pity; as an equilibrium is restored in our hearts, we are healed and reconciled.²⁸ You will note that here Schlegel is using the well-tried vocabulary of catharsis, the pseudo-Aristotelian theory of inner purification through the spectacle of pity and fear at others' sufferings. Is Schlegel attempting to accommodate Ugolino to Schiller's notion of tragic art that is essentially concerned with inner moral values? If so, Schiller does not seem to have minded having the extreme example of Dante's translated text published in his journal. Even then, Schlegel seems to wish to mitigate: Ugolino is not Dante's invention, but history's;²⁹ he merely reports what he has learned through other sources (which overlooks Ugolino's punishment in Hell). This argument is somewhat specious, for Dante did after all choose his subject. Or: Dante is only recording history; he is not its inventor, suffused as he is by a natural sense of justice. But we might just as easily say that Shakespeare did not invent the child murders in *King Henry VI*, *King John* and *King Richard III*, but he chose nevertheless to display them to dramatic effect. Schlegel is seeking factors that might compensate and balance the 'Ekel und Abscheu' ('disgust and abhorrence'), what he calls 'Entschädigung'.³⁰ Our natural sense of pity at the deaths of children is invoked, rather than our distress at the sight of the cannibalism to which Ugolino is condemned eternally, inflicted on his earthly adversary, Ruggieri.

26 'Wer hier untheilnehmend vorüberginge, müßte seine Natur verläugnen oder vergessen'; 'An die Menschheit'. *Ibid.*, 59.

27 *Ibid.*, 57.

28 *Ibid.*, 60.

29 *Ibid.*, 59.

30 *Ibid.*, 61.

Even that, says Schlegel, cannot suffice. We may be able to bear the spectacle of others' physical sufferings — as with Philoctetes (the Greek hero of the Trojan war who endured a wound for ten years) or Laocoon³¹ — but there is something infinitely more terrible in the thought of Ugolino being part of a chain of sin and retribution ('I shudder even to imagine this idea', says Schlegel).³² Was he reminded of the doctrine of eternal punishment in which his own father, a Lutheran pastor, had still believed? The real crime that Ugolino committed stands in no proportion to the sufferings he underwent. But Dante's sense of truth and justice is inerrant, almost inhumanly so. We admire, but do not wish to enter into these regions ourselves.

The brief, passing reference to Laocoon is interesting, not as an explanation of the Ugolino story but as an analogy. It would suggest that Schlegel subscribes to the view of Laocoon as eliciting our admiration and our empathy through the spectacle of his suffering and that of his sons. It is a reference that takes us out of literature proper and into the fine arts, away from the story as such and into its depiction in this group of statuary. Without referring to it by name, Schlegel turns to the subject of Lessing's *Laokoon* of 1766: the distinction between the art forms, the visual arts and poetry. Can a painting or sculpture elicit our empathy in the way that Dante's text has done? I find it interesting that Schlegel near the end of his essay refers briefly to the painting of Ugolino and his sons by Sir Joshua Reynolds.³³

It seems to me that this painting has some affinities with Laocoon: not so much with the bodies writhing in their last agonies, but with the pyramidal structure of the Laocoon group, a feature that many eighteenth-century observers note.³⁴ Reynolds's Ugolino sits stoically, heedless of his imploring sons and grandsons, who alone represent an unruly element in the painting. I see similar analogies with contemporary paintings of Shakespearean scenes, notably those in the Boydell Gallery, James Northcote's or Josiah Boydell's depiction of the father and son dying on the battlefield in *3 Henry VI*, for instance, or James Barry's of Lear and Cordelia, even perhaps John Opie's of Romeo and Juliet. I

31 Ibid.

32 'Ich schaudre mich weiter in diese Vorstellungen zu vertiefen'. Ibid., 61f.

33 Ibid., 73.

34 See Nisbet, 'Laocoon in Germany', 251.



Fig. 5 Joshua Reynolds, *Count Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon* (1770–73), National Trust Collection.

do not wish to pursue these iconographical links any further,³⁵ at least not here. At most, they all point to some reconciliation beyond tragedy, some resolution: Laocoon's nobility (as many saw it), Ugolino's stoicism (not the pangs of starvation), an artistically harmonious solution in the Shakespearean paintings through the juxtaposition and ensemble of bodies live and dead, as indeed the theory of history painting at the time demanded.

With this, we leave Laocoon, but not Ugolino. In 1799, Schlegel writes an enthusiastic review of the outline engravings of scenes from Dante done by John Flaxman, the great neoclassical illustrator and sculptor.³⁶ Flaxman cannot rightly omit Ugolino, nor indeed does he disappoint us. Flaxman is not Reynolds. Reynolds's Ugolino could, Schlegel says, be 'any old man starving',³⁷ not Dante's character. Not so Flaxman. He makes two scenes out of Dante's story, and thus shows a 'much higher

35 See *The Boydell Shakespeare Gallery*, ed. by Walter Pape and Frederick Burwick in collaboration with the German Shakespeare Society (Bottrop: Pomp, 1996), 261, 262, 281, 283.

36 'Ueber Zeichnungen zu Gedichten und John Flaxman's Umriss', *Athenaeum*, II, ii, 193–246.

37 *Ibid.*, 212.

perception'.³⁸ For the first sheet shows the arrest of Ugolino and his family, how they are jostled and bound by rough soldiery, the man Ugolino, unbroken and unshaken in their midst forming the central character around which everything else in the engraving is resolved. His accusers skulk in the background, aware of the enormity of what they are about to perpetrate. (He does not say it, but one thinks by analogy of the arrest of Christ.) The second sheet shows Ugolino surrounded by his dying and dead sons and grandsons. Schlegel quotes two lines of Dante, without commentary, and restricts himself to a short technical note on how Flaxman centres the figure of Ugolino.³⁹ Nothing more. There are no words now on the inexpressibility of horror and judgment. In fact, it seems that Schlegel in this essay is only too happy to escape from the pressing repugnances of *Inferno* to the etherealities of *Paradiso*, in other words, to avoid the pressing reality of sheer tragedy.



Fig. 6 John Flaxman, illustration of Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 33 (Rome?, 1802), showing Ugolino and his sons. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

38 'Viel höhere Ansicht', *ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*



Fig. 7 John Flaxman, illustration of Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 33 (Rome?, 1802), showing Ugolino and his sons. Courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

I have spent some time on Laocoon and Ugolino because I think that they provide for us important analogies for Schlegel's attitude to Shakespeare and tragedy. He never obliges us, like Lenz, by mentioning Lear and Laocoon in one breath, or indeed Ugolino and Lear. But he does show how you can, as it were, 'face up' to what is staring you starkly in the face by seeing inner structures, by referring to higher orders of cause and effect, by seeing those words that are not there in the text: 'To Humankind'.

But first of all, some facts and some chronology. Schlegel's remarks on Ugolino were, as we saw, published in 1795. In 1796, Schlegel published his programmatic essay on translating Shakespeare, in 1797, his great essay on *Romeo and Juliet*, and in the same year, 1797, he begins issuing his translation of Shakespeare. The play that ushers in the translation, with the first volume, is *Romeo and Juliet*. Not only that: in the same year again, he publishes a seven-stanza poem in *ottava rima*, a dedication to *Romeo and Juliet*. *Hamlet*, a far greater test for the translator, has to wait until 1798.

It is worth noting which plays Schlegel did translate and which he did not, in the creative burst of translation activity between 1797 and 1802: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Tempest*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and all of the Histories except *Henry VIII*. He then puts down his pen until 1810, to issue *Richard III*, then nothing more. There are clearly some notable absentees: no *Macbeth*, no *Lear*, no *Othello*, no 'problem plays'. In a sense, he is translating those plays that appeal to the taste of his own age, or which, like *Hamlet*, have been the subject of prolonged discussion and debate. Goethe and Schiller, however, wanted the big tragedies for performance on the Weimar stage. Schiller had to do a version of *Macbeth* himself in order to meet that need. Schlegel seemed to have other priorities. (And, incidentally, Schiller's version has a special interest, in that it is one great dramatist translating another.)

Of course, the Histories are not short of tragic themes or moments of pity and terror — those deaths of children in *King John*, *3 Henry VI* or *Richard III* — but the Histories have a special agenda of their own in Schlegel's thinking, one that transcends these dark points in the dramatic narrative. Schlegel is not concerned with linking the deaths of innocents in the Histories with their equivalents in the so-called Big Tragedies. When in the *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1808) he comes to talk about the Histories, he places them very much in a political context that has resonances for his own day.

Given that *Hamlet* is the subject of several essays in German during the 1790s and indeed is a determining factor in the first part of Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister* in 1795–96, it is noteworthy that Schlegel's essay of 1796 has relatively little to say about the play itself or about its central character. It is, under the disguise of its title 'Some Remarks on Hamlet Occasioned by Wilhelm Meister', really Schlegel setting out his stall as a critic, and it is a statement of Schlegel's translation principles. By emphasizing how one puts Shakespeare into German, he is in effect saying: read my text, a line-by-line version, and explore that text for yourselves. The text is to be read for itself, not to be explicated.⁴⁰ Thus the evidence points to *Romeo and Juliet*, not *Hamlet*, as being for Schlegel

40 See the distinction drawn in this respect between Coleridge and Shakespeare by Reginald Foulkes, 'Samuel Taylor Coleridge', in *Voltaire, Goethe, Schlegel, Coleridge*, ed. by Roger Paulin, *Great Shakespearians* 3 (London, New York: continuum, 2010), 128–72 (146), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472555557.ch-004>

the paradigmatic text with which to introduce Shakespeare to a wider audience, the reading public, but also the spectators in the theatre. It had, like *Hamlet*, been part of the repertoire in adapted form since the 1760s; it is the first tragedy that Schlegel translates, and it becomes, as said, the subject of an essay and a long poem.

For Schlegel, criticism is part of the creative process; it is related, as he says in the *Hamlet* essay of 1796, to the 'divine power, ability, to create for oneself'.⁴¹ There is criticism which is merely carping and atomizing, for example Samuel Johnson's, and there is 'real criticism'⁴² that enters into these workings of the spirit. Not only that: there is 'philological criticism' and there is criticism that makes connections and links and is able to see the essentials in related phenomena, what he later calls 'vermittelnde Kritik' ('criticism that crosses borders').⁴³ And so, as we approach the *Romeo and Juliet* essay, we may expect to see elements of the 'set piece' work of criticism. Now, there were views on *Romeo and Juliet* circulating in the group that in this same decade was to call itself 'Romantic', that Schlegel certainly knew.⁴⁴ His own brother Friedrich had stressed the antithetical nature of the play; how these antitheses are never resolved; they remind us, amid the insouciance of youth, of the general pointlessness of life itself, the emptiness of all existence. Using other images, it is a 'thunderstorm amid the full blossoms of a spring day', a 'rose, with a thorn that goes to the very core'. Schlegel's wife Caroline, who copied out the manuscript of the play for the printer, saw in it occasional 'harshness and lack of beauty'. Ludwig Tieck had noted privately that 'melancholy' and 'Schwärmerei' (a difficult word to translate, but its connotations are enthusiasm, fanciful visionary aberrations of the mind), in other words a failure to connect with reality is at the base of the play. In fact what we note is that Schlegel took a number of these images, the ones from his brother and his wife, and incorporated them into his essay, but with a different emphasis, with the sharp edges blunted, the blossoms divested of their thorns. It is therefore interesting to note what Schlegel does not say about *Romeo and Juliet*, let alone about *Hamlet*, for that matter: that the stage is littered with corpses

41 Schlegel, 'Etwas über Hamlet bey Gelegenheit Wilhelm Meisters', 60.

42 Ibid., 59.

43 Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur, Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, IV, i, ed. by Stefan Knödler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2018), 282.

44 See Paulin, *The Critical Reception of Shakespeare in Germany*, 288–94.

at the end, as befits the 'tale of woe'. True, Schlegel had said in 1795 in connection with Dante, that Shakespeare would never have chosen a subject like Ugolino, with its never-ending suffering. Instead, he sought resolution, essentially Herder's point of 1773. Shakespeare nevertheless confronts us with horror, with death on the stage. But Schlegel will have none of this, sharing as he does the late eighteenth century's reluctance towards such displays (Schiller, for instance, in his version of *Macbeth*, leaves out the killing of the children, and he has Macbeth's armour and crown, but not his head, borne in triumph at the end).

Schlegel⁴⁵ takes the play away from any historical context it may have (such as being an early work of Shakespeare's) and transposes it into a realm of its own, a kind of capsule, an 'inner unity' whose secrets we are to fathom, to sound (the verb he actually uses, 'ergründen', means more than that; it is related to its stem-word 'Grund', which in German has religious and mystical connotations of depth, the fathomless love of God). Into these 'inner depths', as he calls them, the critic is called to descend, not to be content with surface analysis and 'conventional explanations'.⁴⁶ True, the play rests on a conflict, an antithesis, the feud between the two houses, but Schlegel is concerned to mitigate the effects of this dissonance: words like lyrical, tender, sacred, true, mild, determine his discourse, despite the necessary acknowledgment of reality and the sense of a fate that is intent on frustrating this tender, spring-like love. And so Schlegel has the lovers inhabiting a sphere where nothing matters but love, a place inaccessible to reason, where their actions, their language, the very mannerisms of love, their sense of being wrapped up in themselves are everything; not the pressing realities of life 'out there', not the malevolence of some higher agencies. He can exonerate the lovers, as living in a capsule of their own, speaking language that only they understand and which even in its extravagances was for them natural and appropriate. It was, one might say, a Petrarchan reading that removed the negative connotations of the word 'conceit', that made this poetic language 'right'; it was not evidence that the lovers had lost all sense of dimension and proportion. Of course, Schlegel cannot deny the tragic outcome: but the play, he emphasizes, despite everything, ends in reconciliation; it does not end abruptly, but on a note of circularity,

45 'Ueber Shakespeare's Romeo und Julia', *Die Horen*, 3. Jg. (1797), 6. Stück, 18–48.

46 *Ibid.*, 24.

in that the asperities with which it began are now overcome and the 'course of things' may begin again.

Schlegel's poem of the same year, 'Zueignung des Trauerspiels Romeo und Julia'/'Dedication of the Tragedy Romeo and Juliet',⁴⁷ is less well-known. Free of the element of critical commentary, it concentrates even more than the essay on the good and positive things that *Romeo and Juliet* stand for, their loss of self in love, their heedlessness of the outside world, their triumph over adversity, the inventiveness of their love, their union of body and soul. Their language, not governed by real constraints, seeks extreme and extravagantly polar expression. Their love, though fleeting, is nevertheless fulfilled; they are to be admired, not merely pitied, because they found the joy that is given to the gods ('Götterwonne'). It is fleeting and brief, but not evanescent, in that the lovers still stand for the fulfilment of the moment; it is not all inconstancy and frailty: as lovers, they enter 'heaven's gate'.

And yet they die. Forces are marshalled against them that frustrate even the purest and most fulfilled of loves. Shakespeare, as we know, has a whole range of expressions for this: calamity, happy, misfortune, hanging in the stars, and the like. Schlegel the translator does not have this array at his disposal, and so the words in German that he chooses have a monosyllabic finality about them: 'Glück', 'Noth', balancing the 'Lieb' and 'Leiden'.⁴⁸ Despite this linguistic insistence on the lexis of fate and death, we are told that Romeo's and Juliet's love did last in the face of fate or fortune. They did know that state where, as the poem declares, 'Love drowns in bliss inside its very chalice',⁴⁹ but even that love must in the end be extinguished.

If Schlegel's choice among Shakespeare's tragedies falls on one that in his terms can demonstrate a reconciliation beyond tragedy, this is also the case when he comes in 1802–03 to speak of the tragedy of the Greeks. He is now lecturing to an audience in Berlin on the history of poetry. He must face up to the terrible realities of Greek tragedy, just as he had confronted Dante's. This he indeed does: he must explicate the mythology that informs Greek tragedy, in conflict with human striving,

47 August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Sämmtliche Werke*, 12 vols (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1846–47), I, 35–37.

48 'Bliss', 'oppression', 'love', 'suffering'. *Ibid.*, 36, 38 ('Glück'), 36 ('Noth'), 35, 37 ('Lieb', 'Leiden').

49 'Ertränkt sich Lieb' im Becher eigener Wonnen', *ibid.*, 36.

and he must allude to its darkly orgiastic beginnings. Significantly, his preference falls on Sophocles, and on the Oedipus trilogy, not so much on the *Oedipus Rex*, with its story of murder, incest, suicide and blinding, but on the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the sequel as it were, for Schlegel the resolution, the harmonization of dissonances that were so strident in the earlier part of the play. He does not see only starkness and bleakness; instead, we have the 'mildness of humanity', as the Furies lead the hero away from the horror into a blissful grove, where the tragic effect is diminished — or so he would have us believe.⁵⁰

The same applies to Schlegel's so-called Vienna *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 1808 (published 1809–11) where he discusses the full range of Shakespeare's plays. When Schlegel comes to treat *Romeo and Juliet* in this framework, he does little more than rehearse what he had had so say in 1797, but more succinctly: reunion beyond the grave, purity of heart, gentleness of spirit, an idealistic canvas, triumph over the forces that separate them, a 'sigh that never ends'.⁵¹ This is romantic vocabulary (with a small r). In 1797, as we saw, there was no question of relating this play to its tragic neighbours. In his Lectures, Schlegel must now do this, and we sense that he does it only because he must. After the section on *Romeo and Juliet* comes that on *Othello*. The red skies of dawn that in *Romeo and Juliet* announce the storm of a sultry spring day, give way to the dark and sombre colours of *Othello*. Desdemona's love, while noble and innocent, cannot match Juliet's. Othello's defiance of Venice he does liken to the feud of the Montagues and Capulets, but whereas language is adequate to describe the exemplary love of Romeo and Juliet, 'no rhetoric is capable of expressing the destructive force of the catastrophe in *Othello*', 'which in one moment plumbs the abysses of eternity'.⁵² *Hamlet* leaves Schlegel with a distinctly uneasy feeling about the character of the hero, and the fate of humans caught up in this tragic conflict is likened to an enormous sphinx, ready to tear into the abyss all those who cannot solve her riddles.⁵³ Both tragedies are about

50 August Wilhelm Schlegel, *Kritische Ausgabe der Vorlesungen*, ed. by Ernst Behler et al., 4 vols (Paderborn, etc.: Schöningh, 1989-), I [Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I 1798–1803], 745.

51 'Unendlicher Seufzer'. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Litteratur*, 330.

52 *Ibid.*, 331.

53 *Ibid.*, 335.

inexpressibility, about forces that consign humans to the nether regions, mysterious, uncontrollable.

What of *Macbeth*?⁵⁴ Schiller, Schlegel says, was wrong to make the witches into Greek Furies, thus mitigating what is by nature obscene and magical and inexplicable. Yet Schlegel is prepared to alleviate the starkness. He is not above comparing the workings of fate in *Macbeth* with those of the ancient dramatists. The natural heroism of Macbeth's character is not extinguished by his crimes. In the same way as Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote their tragedies to their greater glory of the Greek state of Athens, so the story of *Macbeth* has national connotations.⁵⁵ With *King Lear*, hardly finding adequate words to express his revulsion at the horrors piled one on top of the other, Schlegel nevertheless sees a moment of light in the chaos and darkness and points to Cordelia, who shares the same beauty of soul ('Seelenschönheit') as Sophocles' Antigone.⁵⁶

Schlegel needs desperately to be able to save something of common humanity out of a world of moral and political disorder. Hence his recourse to Greek tragedy in the case of *Macbeth* and *Lear*. For *Romeo and Juliet*, however, the qualities are innate to the play itself; the characters have their own sets of values with their own validity and congruences. We may — by analogy — read moral greatness and obliviousness to fate into the writhings of Laocoon; we may see a banner with 'To Humanity' as Ugolino and his sons and grandsons starve to death. In the same way, though fate seems to ordain otherwise, we may read into *Romeo and Juliet* a reconciliation and a love that has its own validity in the face of adversity.

54 Ibid., 336–39.

55 Ibid., 339.

56 Ibid., 341.