

From Gottsched to Goethe: An Evolution of the Concepts of 'Autonomy' and 'Freedom' in 18th-Century German Literature

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I. Introduction

One of the main elements of the infamous Gottsched/Lessing debate on the merits of Shakespeare's influence on the German drama was the controversy surrounding the bard's disregard for the Aristotelian unities, i.e. the combination of the tragic with the comic, his inclusion of what can be described as the darker side of life in his work, and his apparent refusal to adhere to such fundamental dramatic rules as the unity of time and place. Much has been written on the subject, especially by those German writers who, following in Lessing's footsteps, used the Englishman's work as the basis for their own creations. One of the elements that has been disregarded and needs further research are the aspects of freedom and autonomy as they manifest themselves in the role of the tragic hero within the drama before and after the emergence of Shakespeare on the German scene. This omission will be rectified in part here: due to the limited scope of this paper, an exhaustive study of this point is not possible. Instead, this essay will serve as an introductory examination of the area by focusing on a combination of tragedies which can be divided as follows: the first two plays are pre-Shakespearean¹ while the second pair to be examined are *Shakespearean* -- one written by the bard himself, the other written after his emergence upon the German literary scene. Through analysis of the concept of freedom within the plays, a pattern will emerge that includes a shift from a largely deterministic universe to one in which 'free will' plays a much more significant role. Still, as we shall see, this pattern is not quite as obvious as one might expect it to be: whereas the demarcation line concerning the shift from the Aristotelian rules are readily recognizable, the same lines are somewhat less obvious (though very much present) when looking at the degree of determinism in the plays at hand. Further elaboration of this point will take place in connection with the individual examination of the various works and conclusions will be forthcoming in the last section of this paper. To begin, the concept of freedom, which serves as the basis of the comparisons to be made, must be discussed in greater detail.

I. The Evolution of *Autonomy* in German Drama

¹ Technically, Gottsched's play is not pre-Shakespearean (it was written in 1732); however, it predates the Shakespearean renaissance in German literature.

1) A short definition of *freedom* and *autonomy*

The semantic range of terms such as determinism, freedom, and autonomy crosses numerous academic fields, i.e. philosophy, sociology, and political science just to name a few. Given that the roots of these concepts are of such an intricate nature and surface in a variety of scholastic debates, it is important to find an adequate summary of the concepts, one that is broad enough to serve the literary purposes of this essay. It should be noted, then, that the concept of freedom, as it will be discussed here, may not include certain particulars which are relevant to an exhaustive discussion of freedom proper.

Any discussion of freedom must include some mention of the fundamental dialectic concepts of determinism and indeterminism. As summarized by William James in his lecture "Man is Free" determinism "professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decide what the other parts shall be" (Gould, 80). Indeterminists, on the other hand, state that no such plan exists. Instead, the universe is comprised of elements which interact with one another in an undetermined (where being determined implies some kind of Supreme Will) fashion, or as James states it: "Indeterminism...says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be" (Gould, 81). As we shall see, these metaphysical positions are important to the consideration of the concepts under discussion here, i.e. autonomy and freedom.

Simply stated, autonomy is "self-governance--the ability or right to determine one's own actions and beliefs" (Martin, 8). To fully understand the concept, however, it is necessary to connect it with the concept of freedom. In the interest of space, freedom will be discussed here in terms of positive and negative freedoms. Negative freedom, then, is a concept which:
... refers primarily to a condition characterized by the absence of coercion or constraint imposed by another person; a man is said to be free to the extent that he can choose his own goals or course of conduct, can choose between alternatives available to him, and is not compelled to act as he would not himself choose to act or prevented from acting as he would otherwise choose to act by the will of another man"(Edwards, 222)

It is important to realize that 'person' or 'man' here can be taken in a broader context to refer to societies and elements of them as well. Further, although some may argue that this is included in the aforementioned, theological forms of coercion should also be seen as infringements upon negative freedoms (although this inclusion leads us back to the concept of determinism): as will be demonstrated, in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the realm of the gods does play a role in determining the negative freedoms of individuals.

Of lesser importance to our discussion, yet not completely irrelevant, is the concept of positive freedom. While negative freedom refers to the "absence of obstruction, interference, coercion, or indirect control"(Edwards,222), positive freedom involves "the processes of choosing and acting on one's initiative, and more concretely ... to the general types of human interests or forms of activity for the expression and exercise of which liberty is claimed"(Edwards,224) In other words, positive freedom involves the ability to choose. Choice has to already exist or, in some cases, be made available by society, i.e. education, for positive freedoms to exist.

Having briefly examined the concepts of negative and positive freedoms which will serve as a guideline to the subsequent discussion, let us move on to the works themselves.

2) Autonomy and Freedom in Pre-Shakespearean and Shakespearean Tragedy

The choice of plays to be discussed was, naturally, influenced by the desire to examine the evolution of personal freedom in literature. Thus, by using two plays which can be seen as symbolic of the Shakespearean debate that took place in eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany, namely, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the change in how freedom was viewed will be highlighted. The subsequent juxtaposition of Gottsched's *Sterbender Cato* and Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen* will serve as a more German-oriented version of the same subject matter; Gottsched's play will be used here as the pre-Shakespearean example, while Goethe's work will serve to demonstrate the post-Lessing metamorphosis of German drama. The contrast in the second set of plays will not be as sharp as the one evident

in the first pairing: given the temporal differences that divides the Sophocles/Shakespeare pair, this should not be surprising. (What will become evident is that, given the chasm that divided the Gottschedians and Shakespearean factions on most issues, the divide in connection to the concept of freedom might, in comparison, seem somewhat smaller.) To begin with, let us examine the two prototypes of the debate before moving on to their German counterparts.

a) Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

In the universe that Sophocles places his protagonist Oedipus, autonomy, as previously defined, cannot exist. The nature of the human/god relationship postulates a clearly deterministic view of the world in which the concept of fate dominates any rational decision making process. For Oedipus, life, from beginning to end, has been carefully mapped out, as is shown by the predictions of the oracle which come up numerous times during the play. Although some freedom to act does exist, it is never the less, curtailed greatly by predestination: Oedipus seems to be in a position where every action he decides to take has no bearing upon his greater destiny. How this destiny makes itself known, can readily be shown by taking a look at the play itself.

One of the first themes that emerges is the important role that the gods play in the destiny of man. Thus, early on, when Oedipus tries to find the answer to the misery of Thebes he promises to its citizens that devine advice is being sought:

.....
one thing I have already done-
The only thing that promised hope. My kinsman
Creon, the son of Menoeceus , has been sent
To the Pythian house of Apollo, to learn what act
Or word of mine could help you.

...
Whatever the god requires, upon my honour
It shall be done (Sophocles, 27)

Having recognized his fate, which at one point he seems to attribute to a
"monstrous god of evil"(ibid,48), Oedipus, as part of his self-punishment, blinds

himself. When asked what "evil power" (ibid, 62) has done this to him, he replies, "Apollo, friends, Apollo has laid this agony on me"(ibid,62).

Interestingly, he weakens the statement somewhat by specifying afterwards, "Not by his hand; I did it"(ibid,p.62). Unlike in Homer, Sophocles does not let the gods interfere directly; instead it is the oracle and the blind prophet Teiresias who become mouth pieces of the divine thereby leaving, it seems, some room for some form of self-determinism. This is deceiving, however, for any apparent form of freedom to act is over- shadowed by the high degree of determinism which permeates Sophocles' world-view: in one of Oedipus' last statements, for example, he declares that his own death is in the hands of the gods:
Not age, nor sickness, nor any common accident
Can end my life; I was not snatched from death
That once, unless to be preserved
For some awful destiny. Be it so. (ibid, 66)

To summarize, heteronomy, not autonomy, seems to prevail in Sophocles' play. The predetermined fate of Oedipus, leaves him little if no room in which he can benefit from any variation of the previously discussed forms of freedom. Although there appears to be some form of choice present, it vanishes once the development of the entire play is taken into consideration.

b) Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*

At first glance, Shakespeare's work is diametrically opposed to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* when the concepts of determinism, autonomy, and freedom are used as comparative tools. As we shall see, however, Shakespeare's world is not completely free from the idea of fate which is so prominent in Sophocles' play: although the degree of autonomy within the portrayal of the two protagonists, Caesar and Brutus, by far exceeds the one found in Oedipus, we never the less still encounter some of the fatalism that prevailed in the ancient tragedies. To illustrate this apparent inconsistency between fatalism and indeterminism we have to look closely at the play itself.

It seems clear from the outset that most of the coercion or restriction imposed upon the actors emerges from human interaction, not superhuman interference. Talking to Brutus, Cassius, for example, claims that the answer to Caesar's tyranny lies in their own hands :

Why, man, he [Caesar] doth bestride the narrow world

Like a Colossus, and we petty men

Walk under his huge legs and peep out

...

Men at some time are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,

But in ourselves, that we are underlings. (Shakespeare, 7)

Caesar himself even goes a step further when he discusses the threat to his own life:

..... danger knows full well

That Caesar is more dangerous than he:

We are two lions litter'd in one day,

And I the elder and more terrible:

.... (ibid, 30)

'Danger' here could be interpreted as a personified version of the general idea of fate. By bluntly affirming that he, himself, is more of a threat than the 'idea of threat', Caesar is not only negating the concept of determinism as such, but further, he is accentuating his role as an independent and even superior influencing power in what is fundamentally an indeterministic universe. This particular point is reemphasized when, just before his death, he makes the following speech in which he attributes to himself almost super-human abilities:

...

So in the world; 't is furnish'd well with men,

And men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive:

Yet in the number I do know but one

That unassailable holds on his rank,

Unshaken of motion: and that I am he

... (ibid, 37)

Apparently it is this pride that is at the heart of Caesar's downfall. Yet punishment for this 'crime' is meted out not by the gods but by the conspirators, the most notable of whom is Brutus.

It is in the character of Brutus that the concept of freedom is to be found in all its complexity. For here is a person who cannot, in the truest sense, be called autonomous, for reasons that will shortly be given. Yet, it is through him that Shakespeare personifies that force in humans which is necessary for autonomy to exist, namely the drive to be free from coercion. Brutus, the reluctant conspirator, is driven by forces that are of a histo-political nature. To illustrate, at one point he questions, "did not a great Julius bleed for justice sake?"(ibid,57). The paradox within the character of Brutus becomes clearer as the play progresses: while he is fighting for the freedom needed for a fundamental form of autonomy to exist, he, himself, has become a slave to this ideology, negating his potential for being truly free; coercion in this case is not applied by any outside force, but rather comes from a propensity towards a philosophical ideal which was adopted from an historical movement, namely, the ideals of the Roman republic. Were it not for his final act of suicide, one could be tempted to conclude, that *fate* rather than *will*, was shaping Brutus' destiny. Still, "in his death, Brutus overcame himself"(ibid,78), once again reinforcing the general indeterministic nature of the play.

Before moving on, the contradiction mentioned in the opening paragraph of this section, must briefly be discussed. Although, as postulated, the general tone of the play is one of indeterminism, there are some inconsistencies that must be mentioned for the sake of completeness. Thus, for example, the famous warning of the soothsayer to Caesar to "beware of the Ides of March" (ibid,4) coupled with the mysterious storm and Caesar's subsequent death are at odds with the general concept of indeterminism. Similarly, Brutus' visions of Caesar's ghosts before the battle of Phillipi are also a part of the same pattern of inconsistency. These irrational aspects initially were part of the broader attack on Shakespeare's work when it first appeared on the Continent. Much as his initial defenders did, this aberration will be dismissed here, for the inclusions of these supernatural elements could easily be interpreted as being of theatrical importance rather than having any ideological significance. It can also be hypothesized that Shakespeare was somewhat uneasy with the idea of a totally indeterministic universe; hence, the inclusion of some supernatural elements. Although this must remain a point of contention, it should not distract from the general observations made concerning

indeterminism and free will in the work.

c) Gottsched's *Cato*

Although to some the comparison between the work of Shakespeare and that of Gottsched might be considered a travesty, given the great qualitative chasm that divides the plays, it never the less fulfills a function as part of the analysis of the evolution of autonomy within German literature.

Written 116 years after the death of Shakespeare, Gottsched's work can be considered as taking a step backward when it comes to the treatment of the concepts of *fate* and *freedom* in European literature. While the bard more or less recognized the inherent indeterministic nature of human existence, Gottsched regresses into a universe in which fate -- the will of the gods -- plays a major role. This, in turn, accentuates the anachronistic aura that has surrounded the works of Gottsched. Yet, as will be seen, it would be a mistake to state that Gottsched regresses all the way back to a Sophoclean view of the universe: the character of Cato, although seemingly dominated by unearthly forces, never the less shows certain tendencies which indicate that he, unlike Oedipus, for example, does possess some degree of choice in determining his fate.

To begin, let us examine the extent to which Gottsched reverts back to a more deterministic state of affairs, examples of which are found throughout the text. Most notable of these is Artabanus' story of how Cato's daughter Portia, believed dead, was rescued by a Parthian prince, renamed Arsene after the ruler's dead daughter, and was made heir to his throne (Gottsched,27). This subplot resembles the fate of a number of ancient fictional and mythical heroes including that of Oedipus himself. From the beginning of his play, then, Gottsched uses the concept of fate to push his plot along . Furthermore, the will of the gods is also emphasized throughout the play. Thus, Phacas at one point argues that Cato's daughter has a right to be a monarch, since the gods had willed it to be so:

Sitzt Portia denn nicht mit recht auf ihrem Throne?
Die Götter fehlen nie, die schenken ihr die Krone!
Bedünkt uns ungerecht? Ach! Unser Augenschein

Kann hier von ihrem Tun kein rechter Richter sein;
Man unterwerfe sich nur dem, was sie befehlen;
... (ibid, 29)

Later on, while Caesar is trying to convince Cato of his right to rule,
he invokes the gods as a form of justification:

...
Warum habt Ihr Euch stets den Göttern widersetzt?
Es hat sich ihre Gunst vorlängst für mich erklärt;
Sie haben mir bisher noch stets den Sieg gewähret
.... (ibid, 54)

These are just two examples chosen from a multitude of similar passages. Yet the picture of godly interference would be distorted if these examples were left to stand on their own. Closer examination of the text reveals that although the gods seem to be ever present, their role in earthly matters is of a passive nature. Whereas in Sophocles' work the mouthpieces of the gods directly influence the action, similar 'orders' cannot be found in this work. Instead, the universe is dichotomized between heaven and earth, representing a more Christian model of divine rule. To illustrate let us look at Domitius' speech in act II, scene 3 where he, trying to explain Caesar's successes, reasons:

...
Ihr seht ja, daß sogar die Götter ihm hiernieden
Ihr halbes Regiment, die halbe macht beschieden.
Der Himmel bleibt ihr Sitz, da herrschen sie allein,
Der Erdkreis soll hinfort nur Cäsarn dienstbar sein. (ibid,40)

Further, when Pharnaces plans to abduct Portia, his servant Felix perceives the act in very much the same dualistic fashion:

...
Der Himmel , wie mich dünkt verspricht ihm selbst den Segen.
Es scheint das Schicksal ist auf euren Wink bereit,
... (ibid, 64)

Though fate as a concept does exist, it seems to need human action and will in order to function. This point will be illustrated more clearly when we examine the character of Cato.

In contrast to the other characters that appear in the play, the figure of Cato is somewhat

more difficult to interpret. Much like Brutus in Shakespeare's play, he seems driven by a philosophical ideal which includes a strong belief in freedom and a strong dislike of tyrannical rule. Thus, at one point he blatantly exclaims, "Mein Schicksal heißt: Sei frei !"(ibid,55). Contained in this sentence is a paradox (one that is inherent to the character), for fate and freedom are fundamentally incompatible concepts. This somewhat strange combination which could be labeled as an 'indeterministic determinism' or vice versa, reappears in a number of Cato's speeches. In act I for example, Cato ,infuriated by Phocas' suggestion to let a sacrifice to the gods decide whether his daughter should continue to rule, rants :

Wer? Ich sollt allerest in toten Opfertieren
Des Gottes, der mich treibt, Befehl und Willen spüren?
Der mir doch damals schon, eh ich das Licht erblickt,
Den Trieb zur Billigkeit in Herz und Sinn gedrückt.
Der lenkt ohn Unterlass mein Tichten und Trachten
Und treibt mich, lebenslang die Tugend zu achten,
Dem Laster feind zu sein, so mächtig es auch ist;
Gesetzt, daß ich dabei zugrunde gehen müßt!
... (ibid, 30)

The essence of who Cato is, his character, seem to have been created by the gods: hence, any choice that he possesses was given to him not *willed* by him.

This, in itself, does not justify a label of heteronomy since the Christian belief system, for example, entails a similar dualism. However, towards the end of the play, the fatalistic aspect of Cato's existence reemerges. Thus, having learned of his daughter's love for his enemy Caesar, he exclaims:

.....Was für Plagen,
Soll Meine Tugend noch ertragen?
Das Glück versucht an mir fast alles was es kann,
Weil ihm mein Widerstand vielleicht zu weh getan.
.... (ibid, 63)

Direct punishment by higher entities presupposes a fundamental lack of freedom of action and choice; for where gods directly interfere in moralistic judgments they must be viewed as a coercive force which in turn negates the possibility of negative freedom and *this* severely curtails the possibility of autonomy. Cato, though portrayed somewhat inconsistently, in the final analysis reemphasizes the

deterministic world view that dominates Gottsched's work

d) Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*

The post-Shakespearean evolution of German drama manifested itself in a variety of ways, most notably in its break with the Aristotelian unities. Yet, not only did this metamorphosis affect the structure of works, it also penetrated their thematic and philosophic development as will be seen in the following examination of autonomy and freedom in Goethe's work. While Cato was a character whose fate, to one degree or another, was heavily intertwined with the will of the gods, Götz's destiny is no longer bound by similar shackles. In this work, Goethe revives the indeterministic state of being, taking the concept a step further than Shakespeare himself, for here no form of the supernatural appears at all. In Götz's world, it is humans alone who determine the course of history. To state, however, that Goethe's creation is absolutely free would be erroneous, as will be shown through an analysis of the text.

At first glance, the character of Götz seems to epitomize the concept of autonomy, for there seems to be little coercion put upon him from outside forces. Thus, for example, in act I, Götz questions his prisoner and former friend Weislingen as to why he has rejected the path that was open to him, and instead joined forces with the Bishop:

..... Bist du nicht ebenso frei, so edel geboren als einer in Deutschland,
unabhängig, nur dem Kaiser untertan, und schmiegst dich unter
Vasallen?...Verkennst den Wert eines freien Rittermanns, der nur abhängt von
Gott, seinem Kaiser und sich selbst!.... (Goethe, 22)

Götz, here, assumes, given Weislingen's circumstances -- which fundamentally resemble his own -- that his prisoner has the same potential for freedom that he himself enjoys. What he fails to realize is that Weislingen, though in theory as free as Götz himself, never the less does not have his strength of character.

Further, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Weislingen has become swept up in the new political/sociological movement of the times which demands the sacrifice of the type of autonomy that marked the now dying order of the independent knight. That Götz himself refuses to become swept up in this new

order is shown by his defiance against the establishment whose main representative is the bishop of Banberg. This defiance is epitomized in the following speech by the protagonist in which he describes his reaction to being given an order by the 'Pfalsgrafen':
.....da legt' er mir einen Zettel aus der Kanzlei vor, wie ich reiten und mich halten sollt; da warf ich den Räten das Papier wieder dar und sagt: ich wüßt nicht darnach zu handeln..... (ibid, 59)

The "er" and the "Räte" are representatives of the new order discussed previously. Independence and autonomy are, then, part of the main characteristics of Götz's character; for him, these two concepts seem to be synonymous with life itself: as they prepare to go into battle, Götz asks his compatriots, "... was soll unser letztes Wort sein"(ibid,75), to which the same answer resonates three times:

Georg: Es lebe die Freiheit!
Götz: Es lebe die Freiheit!
Alle: Es lebe die Freiheit!

The nature of this essay does not allow for an extensive coverage of this major theme. The examples given, however, should be sufficient to demonstrate that the freedom to act independently has become an integral part of the post-Shakespearean protagonist in German drama. As stated previously, it would be a mistake to assume that Götz is free from all coercive forces, for he, much like Brutus in Shakespeare's play, has internalized a code of conduct that is deeply rooted in European history. What the concept of the republic was for Brutus, the concept of Ritterpflicht is for Götz: both forces have a similar effect, that is, both regulate and dictate the behaviour of the individual under their influence. Note, for example the following dialogue between Götz and Weislingen:

Weislinger: das ist deine Ritterpflicht.
Götz: Und ihr wißt, daß die mir heilig ist. (ibid, 18)

The 'Ritterpflicht' is a complex code of conduct which, among other duties, demands loyalty to the emperor. The tragedy within the play thus emerges when this concept of duty clashes with Götz's sense of justice and responsibility. Hence, when these two forces collide, within the subplot of the peasant rebellion, the demise of Goethe's protagonist becomes a necessity. Simultaneously, the usurpation of the ideal of absolute autonomy as it is portrayed in Götz, by societal change that cannot coexist with this ideal, becomes apparent. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these new forces are part of a deterministic universe: since they are made up of and by humans, there is no one necessary direction in which they will be expanding, or as Lerse, one of Götz's followers states:

So geht's in der Welt, weiß kein Mensch,
was aus den Dingen werden kann. (ibid,73)

III. Conclusion

The pattern which shows the development of the concepts of autonomy and freedom as they relate to the Shakespearean influence on German drama should now be clear, that is, Gottsched's philosophical connection to the Ancient Greek drama is mirrored in Goethe's relation to Shakespeare and his work. Though there exists a clear determinism/indeterminism dichotomy that separates these two sides, the chasm is not as apparent once one examines the degree of freedom found within each of the characters. Although the coercive forces on each of the protagonists tend to be of a different nature, they each restrict the degree of autonomy in a similar way. Still, the variation in quality and quantity of these coercive forces is significant enough to warrant the following conclusion: while the protagonist of pre-Shakespearean German drama, much like his ancient role model, is greatly inhibited in his expression of self by forces based, at least partially in the religious concept of fate, the post-Shakespearean hero's

autonomy is regulated only by forces within himself, e.g. by Götz's 'Ritterpflicht', or by broader socio-political movements. Whether or not this thesis will stand when confronted with a broader spectrum of works remains to be seen.

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