

THOMAS JEFFERSON

AND THE MORAL POWER OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE*

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“Immortal man! not only of thine own
The best and greatest, but of every age;
Thou whose meridian strength was prompt to wage
For liberty the war against a throne!
When thy gigantic mind had plac’d thee lone
And high, thou didst controul the wildest rage
Of rival factions—scorning to assuage;
To thee all nature’s mysteries are known:
Oh! how shall we of less ethereal mould
Address our souls to thine? thy greatness weigh’d
Our love were too familiar and too bold;
Thy goodness, admiration were too cold;
But both united in men’s hearts have made
A monument whose glory shall not fade.”¹

This poem, composed in the classic Petrarchan sonnet form, was written by a certain Dabney C. Terrell in 1822, and the “immortal man”, whom it was addressed to was Thomas Jefferson, seventy-nine now, approaching the end of a long and eventful life. The “Sage of Monticello” must have been pleased with its content: Having dedicated a significant portion of his life to public service, Terrell’s laudation for him as an American politician fully devoted to the service of his nation seems to have been equally relevant, appropriate, and justified.

Yet, beyond the scope of reverence and admiration, Terrell’s lines also expressed ideas that were strongly related to Jefferson’s general views concerning morality, the relationship between the individual self and the community. Such was the question that Jefferson himself was strongly concerned about throughout his life and addressed as part of his

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¹ Thomas Jefferson, *Jefferson’s Literary Commonplace Book*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 217.

moral philosophy. In this effort he was inspired by others with William Shakespeare among them, and although not a major one, he became an integral part of Jefferson's moral vision, chiefly as far as moral conduct and education as well as their relationship is concerned.

In this paper I wish to address questions about Jefferson's reception of Shakespeare's moral vision and see the extent to which Jefferson shared the moral concerns that Shakespeare articulated and as they were received in a contemporary critical context. In other words, I will examine what features of Shakespeare's moral world Jefferson found worth considering for adopting and for what purposes? As part of my effort to account for Jefferson's interest in the Bard's works I will argue that in Jefferson's vision of morality Shakespeare's tragic gestures had a significant role to play and more particularly in his conception of the moral sense and its development in the individual self. Sporadic and thin as they were in Jefferson, these references functioned ultimately to sustain his educational model for securing a republic of independent, self-governing citizens. In exploring such themes I hope to move beyond the general treatment of formal links between Jefferson and Shakespeare without considering the broader intellectual context.²

My approach here will be irredeemably conventional, very much like in the sense as identified by György Endre Szőnyi, who, in connection with iconographic research into Shakespeare's work, once claimed, at the same time acknowledging the legitimacy of more recent paradigms based on otherness and difference, how more conventional methods, with their emphasis on "coherence", "analogies" or recurring patterns within a given cultural context can still be productive in understanding the Bard's work.³ Relying on intellectual history I will thus examine patterns of thought tapping into reverberations within the context of eighteenth-century moral philosophy in relation to Shakespeare and Jefferson.

Jefferson's interest in the moral side of Shakespeare's plays was generated by his public roles and his concern over its cultural traits. A public figure since colonial times, before his retirement as third president of the United States, he had served in the colonial assembly of Virginia, in the Continental Congress on the eve of the War of Independence,

² Cf. Ernst J. Schlochauer, "Shakespeare and America's Revolutionary Leaders," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1961): 158–16; Kevin J. Hayes, *Shakespeare and the Making of America* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2020), chap. 10.

³ György Endre Szőnyi, "Vizuális elemek Shakespeare művészetében (A 'kép vadászattól' az ikonológiáig)" (Visual Elements in Shakespeare's Art [From 'Image Hunting' through Iconology]), in *A reneszánsz szimbolizmus* (Renaissance Symbolism), ser. Ikonológia és műértelmezés (Iconology and Interpretation), vol. 2 (Tibor Fabiny, József Pál, and György Endre Szőnyi, eds.. Szeged: JATE Press, 1998), 85.

then to be elected its governor following independence, and representing his country as a minister to France until the start of the French revolution.⁴

An active participant in the grand project of the Enlightenment, Jefferson had distinct views of the individual and society holding that institutions were to be based on principles derived from reason serving as a blueprint when formulating his political ideals. Believing in the ability of humans to govern themselves, he developed a political vision for America promoting the active participation of citizens in republican governance designed to preserve their liberties.⁵

At the same time, his political ideals were intimately linked with his moral philosophy, informing almost every aspect of his thought. At its center lay the concept of the moral sense, which he took from Scottish moral philosophy. For him, it was the force that connected individual and community enabling the former to distinguish between right and wrong and also feeling love for others. Jefferson deemed the moral sense essential for the appropriate functioning of society, facilitating the coexistence of individuals as social beings. Its lack or defect was an impediment to social cohesion because there would be no balancing of man's selfish disposition. He also thought that the moral sense could be improved through education and exercise.⁶

It is important for the purpose of my analysis that since it was the moral sense that, according to Jefferson, made man a social being, its presence in humans was ubiquitous. Hence the individual's capacity to differentiate between right and wrong, he thought, was implanted in everyone. Nonetheless, he admitted that in certain individuals it could be deficient, but even in such persons, it would be ameliorated or compensated for by the rational faculty.⁷

⁴ For Jefferson's political career see, for instance, Merrill D Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987); Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948[–1981.]); Joyce Appleby, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Times Books, 2003).

⁵ Ari Helo, "Jefferson's Conception of Republican Government," in Frank Shuffelton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 36; Joyce Appleby, "What is Still American in the Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1982): 287–309.

⁶ Jefferson to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, in Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 1335–39; Jean M. Yarbrough, *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 27–8; Ari Helo, *Thomas Jefferson's Ethics and the Politics of Human Progress: The Morality of a Slaveholder* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 16; Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville / London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 50–1.

⁷ Jefferson to Thomas Law, June 13, 1814, in Jefferson, *Writings*, 1337–38.

Jefferson's concept of the moral sense was derived from Scottish moral philosophy of the eighteenth century, whose representatives such as Francis Hutcheson, Lord Kames (Henry Home), David Hume or Adam Smith developed a strong interest in a complex study of moral sentiments. Hutcheson, for one, argued that human individuals were not completely driven by selfish interests but were willing to act to the benefit of others. Moreover, both Hutcheson and Hume emphasized the immediacy or instinctual nature of the moral sense in guiding the individual to judge about the right or wrong nature of any action. Hutcheson also set a sharp contrast between self-interested action and the moral sense: one without the moral instinct cannot do good to others. According to him, the moral sense is also independent of the interests of the individual, enabling him/her to make unbiased moral judgements about culturally different situations.⁸

Jefferson's ideas on education, at the same time, were largely inspired by John Locke, especially his notion that sense impressions are vital to the individual's acquiring knowledge about the world and the mind experiencing the world through the senses.⁹ The aim of education, according to Jefferson, was also to develop the moral sense of the individual to prepare him to become a true citizen of the republic, promoting the good of the whole.¹⁰ Without proper education, therefore, no nation could preserve liberty, he argued. For him, education also had an immense role to play in the development of the young in shifting their affection for parents to that of their country as *amor patriae*.¹¹

Jefferson had a profound knowledge of Shakespeare and his *oeuvre*. It was based on his education, reading experience and even his personal exposure to the cult of Swan of Avon. He took record of his reading the great man's works, collecting quotes from his plays and poetry in his *Literary Commonplace Book* (Jefferson 1989, *passim*). Finally, he even found the opportunity to visit the shrine in Stratford in April 1786, and according

⁸ Luigi Turco, "Moral Sense and the Foundations of Morals," in Alexander Broadie, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 137, 138, 144, 140, 138.

⁹ Charles A. Miller, *Jefferson and Nature: An Interpretation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 27.

¹⁰ Harold Hellenbrand, *The Unfinished Revolution: Education and Politics in the Thought of Thomas Jefferson* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 4; Jennings L. Wagoner, Jr., "That Knowledge Most Useful to Us: Thomas Jefferson's Concept of Utility in the Education of Republican Citizens," in James Gilreath, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Education of a Citizen* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1999) 121.

¹¹ Wagoner, "That Knowledge Most Useful to Us," 120; Hellenbrand, *Unfinished Revolution*, 84–5.

to anecdotal evidence, he carved a chip of the chair used by Shakespeare for a relic to cherish upon his return to his native Virginia.¹²

Hardly a surprise, then, that Jefferson developed a deep reverence for the English playwright, which, however, mainly became manifest through his own interest in the moral aspects of the republican order. However far in time and space, Shakespeare's world proved to be, Jefferson claimed to find those values universal and thus applicable to his own world. Nonetheless, he did so within an eighteenth-century context, which undoubtedly influenced his relationship to the Bard.

A primary force in Shakespeare criticism of the eighteenth century was William Richardson, who explored the *oeuvre* from the viewpoint of characters, very much influenced by contemporary English and Scottish moral philosophy and more particularly Smith's ideas. Representatives of this line concerned themselves about the mysterious nature of feelings, especially passions of harmful nature and hoped to turn literary criticism "philosophical" in hoping to provide a tool for not only knowing about the self but also to explore the workings of such sentiments, educating people about practice and most importantly performing such work through literary criticism.¹³ In other words, mirroring the passions at work in real life characters would have practical use in that analyzing them would also facilitate exploring their nature in the latter, too. Epistemological inquiry would thus precede partial application. Richardson attempted to explore these issues through his studies of Shakespeare's characters, concentrating on the moral philosophical aspect of their conduct,¹⁴ which was largely influenced by his former university professor, Adam Smith.

A major element in the moral philosophy of Smith (as well as Hume) is sympathy relating to the relationship between the observer and the agent of sympathy. They both point out the distance between them and the impossibility for the former to reproduce the sentiments of the latter. For Hume, it is the difference between the situation of the two persons that creates the distance, while for Smith, simply the difference in identity. Therefore, in both reasonings, the feelings of the subject are attempted to understand through the imagination of the observer.¹⁵ Smith develops this operation further in his

¹² "John Adams diary 44, 27 March – 21 July 1786," in *Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive*, accessed September 2, 2021, <http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=D44>.

¹³ Veronika Ruttikay, *The Rhetoric of Feeling: S. T. Coleridge's Lectures on Shakespeare and the Discourse of "Philosophical criticism"*, PhD-diss. (Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2006), 144–45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵ Turco, "Moral Sense and the Foundations of Morals," 147.

concept of “the impartial spectator”, whose duty is to connect the isolated self from the observed other through the imaginative work of sympathetic participation.

For Smith, the impartial spectator or “the man within”, has the function to determine appropriate conduct for the agent so that s/he wins the moral approval of the observer. This operation, however, requires calculation of what others may think of the conduct of the agent, instructing him to rise above natural propensity to self-love. It is also there to show how the individual self is no one above the others. In Smith’s words, “It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it [...]”¹⁶

At the same time, the application of the impartial spectator also marks the indelible isolation between self and the other for Smith, and such a mechanism of sympathy also results in a more general feature of human society based on sympathy, more particularly, “the theatricality” of “social relations”, in the sense that creating sympathy in the observer becomes a question of representation and appeal to the imagination.¹⁷

Smith’s concept of the impartial spectator informed Richardson’s analysis of morality in Shakespeare’s characters. Relying on the “man within”, the self is capable of assessing the moral conduct of others, too – in this case that of Shakespeare’s characters existing in a fictitious world. At the same time, this operation is largely based on the imagination between the reader and the characters,¹⁸ not unlike in the case of the observer and the agent in Smith’s theory of moral sentiments.

How does, then, Shakespeare seem to have influenced Jefferson in promoting his moral ideals? And to what extent did his reading of moral issues in the Bard’s *oeuvre* match with the Richardsonian paradigm?

It was through the impact of literature on the imagination that, on the one hand, he found Shakespeare relevant in the first place. As he explained in a letter to Nathaniel Burwell in 1818, most of it has no connection with reason and reality and hence is useless, the reason being that most novels tend to instill a false sense of judgement in the mind of the reader thus being “poison” that “infects the mind.” There are exceptions, though, he claimed, such as “poetry”, which is suitable for influencing “style” and “taste.” “Shak-

¹⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford University Press, 1976; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 137.

¹⁷ Daniel Wickberg, “The Sympathetic Self in American Culture, 1750–1920,” in Wilfred M. McClay, ed., *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past* (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 147.

¹⁸ Ruttkay, *The Rhetoric of Feeling*, 136–37, 156–57, 160.

spare" belonged to this group of writers, he maintained, because like other such poets, he "may be read with pleasure and improvement."¹⁹

In other words, Shakespeare's art, as this reference shows, was useful for Jefferson on account of its didactic function, being instrumental in developing the moral sense of the reading individual. Furthermore, he also believed that by being exposed to Shakespeare, people could get better – very simply put. More accurately, as he elaborated on the problem in a letter to Robert Skipwith in 1771, by reading about morally uplifting pieces of literature, because of the aesthetic appeal of acts of benevolence, people will feel the urge to perform similar acts, while the repulsive nature of morally unacceptable scenes in fiction tend to deter people from committing similar acts.²⁰ Shakespeare was his main example here. "I appeal to every reader of feeling and sentiment", he declared, "whether the fictious murder [sic] of Duncan by Macbeth in Shakespeare does not excite in him as great horror of villainy as the real one in Henry IV by Ravailac as related by Davila."²¹ Such a reading of Macbeth's character from a moral perspective is also tied with Richardson's analysis.

Richardson's reading of Shakespeare's characters seems to have been based on a pathological understanding of their minds, his concern being with how they deteriorate resulting in medical cases as it were, as far as tragic actions are concerned.²² Becoming such, the deterioration of moral conduct, as in the case of Macbeth is triggered by the erroneous workings of the imagination. The imagination is thus also something to be controlled according to Richardson, in order for the individual to avoid a moral transition for the worse.²³

Such an interpretation by Richardson, at the same time, was fully in line with the general moral vision of Shakespeare. As Neema Parvini has shown, such a stance was part of a larger, more general moral pattern, i.e. "sanctity" as a moral foundation which is crucial to understanding Shakespeare's concept of the evil. Sanctity implies the moral transaction in breaking a taboo having the consequential act of generating evil. Through this concept, "dirtiness, disease or contagion" become connected with evil.²⁴ The violation of the principle of sanctity as a moral foundation principle results in "pollution", "activating moral revulsion and disgust."²⁵ Jefferson obviously shared this understanding of effect in connection with Macbeth's evil deed as represented by Shakespeare.

¹⁹ March 14, 1818, in Jefferson, *Writings*, 1411, 1412, quotations.

²⁰ August 3, 1771, in *Ibid.*, 741.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ruttkay, *The Rhetoric of Feeling*, 152.

²³ *Ibid.*, 167, 169.

²⁴ Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's Moral Compass* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 262.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

Parvini also maintains that like other characters in Shakespeare's plays, Macbeth has no fixed traits. Hence, in relation to morality, he also exhibits qualities that keep changing. Most importantly, he is not evil by nature but "becomes" a figure committing ethically unacceptable deeds. He turns from a morally neutral person into one that responds to changing circumstances, and in doing so, he becomes evil. Also, as Macbeth's example shows, Shakespeare's characters have the freedom to choose between evil and its alternative.²⁶

Jefferson, like Richardson, seems to have understood that the imagination had a crucial role to play in the interaction between the morality of the characters and the reader as observer. Furthermore, he seems to have agreed with the idea that moral evil is supposed to generate repulsion in the reader possessing the moral sense.

The system of moral theory that Richardson adopted from Smith, however, is not absolutely compatible with the one employed by Jefferson in general and in his understanding of Shakespeare in particular.

In the first place, he showed no interest in the process of their becoming villains developing into a pathological state of evil.

Furthermore, while Smith (and Richardson) emphasized the need for control over human conduct through the concept of the impartial spectator, Jefferson was rather a follower of the earlier version of Scottish moral philosophy, believing in the complete separation of the mind and the moral sense. Smith claimed that, "It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct."²⁷ In Jefferson's view, however, the moral sense is instinctual therefore receiving no guidance from pre-consideration of the moral situation from the "intellect." His approach to sympathy therefore is "sentimentalist" rather than "cognitive" which is characteristic of Smith.²⁸ It is not the instinctive unconscious operation of the moral sense, then, that triggers moral conduct for Jefferson.

Jefferson's concept of the moral sense and its consequential treatment thus differed significantly from that of Smith (and Richardson) in that while the Scottish philosopher connected it with premeditation and calculation expressed through the concept of the impartial spectator, the former deemed it independent of such supervision and thought it instinctive. In other words, it expressed the decision of the self on a moral question based on immediate moral decision. Evil in Shakespeare, then, in Jefferson's reading at least, is something that is not the matter of calculation or the internal supervision of the impartial spectator, but rather the deficiency of the moral sense.

²⁶ Ibid., 22, quoted phrase; 185.

²⁷ Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 137.

²⁸ Wickberg, *Sympathetic Self*, 152–53.

Another difference between the moral system as promoted by Richardson on the basis of Smith and that of Jefferson is related to the fact that the former deemed Shakespeare capable of designing characters whose sentiments and moral conduct he represented in a judicious way. However, Richardson was less convinced of the power that they could exert on the spectators/readers of such characters, designed to educate them in appropriate moral behavior. The reason was the lack of rational control over sentiments as suggested in Shakespeare's works. As he explained in his *Essays on Some of Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters*,

Taste is perfect, when sensibility, discernment, and knowledge are united. Yet, they are not indispensably united in the man of poetic invention. He must possess sensibility; but he may want knowledge and discernment. He will thus be liable to error. Guided solely by feeling, his judgment will be unsteady; he will, at periods of languor, become the Slave of authority, or be seduced by unexamined maxims. Shakespeare was in this situation.²⁹

Such unity, however, was not a requirement for Jefferson, as we have seen. He found the moral sense as a singularly appropriate guide in generating moral conduct – without the aid of the mind.

Alongside the problem of evil in Shakespeare, the moral sense for Jefferson also involved love and affection, and he was ready to find inspiration from the English playwright on such matters – however limited the scope of his interest was. In spite of the theme of the overwhelming presence of evil and moral degeneration in Shakespeare, his works also contain the element of “compassion” and “care.” – another moral foundation. Thus, “mercy, empathy and the ethics of care” can be found in his moral world.³⁰ Despite the selfishness of his major characters depicted as villainous, “fellow-feeling” never disappears totally, and the destruction of social order never becomes complete; moreover, he always provides the possibility of “rebirth”, the making of a new order.³¹

The moral sense, whose function it was for Jefferson to distinguish between right and wrong, as seen above, could be improved through reading Shakespeare and similar authors as an “exercise.” As Jefferson explains in the same letter to Skipwith, such works can also serve to improve the ability of affection in the reader – another important func-

²⁹ William Richardson, *Essays on Some of Shakespeare's Dramatic Characters: To Which is Added an Essay on the Faults of Shakespeare* (London, 1798; facsimile edition: London: Forgotten Books, 2018), 390.

³⁰ Parvini, *Shakespeare's Moral Compass*, 289, 290.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 290, 291.

tion of the moral sense. Moral rules, including love for parents, as they exist in real life are best taught through fiction. Jefferson's example here is *King Lear* because it proves that "[...] a lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written."³² This drama, then, was there to instruct the young, providing them with the appropriate sense impressions aimed at developing their moral sense and in a pleasurable way, too. Jefferson thus found Shakespeare instructive not simply in teaching the observer to feel repulsion at evil imagined through reading but also to grasp the significance of love for parents expressed through "filial duty."

To conclude, Jefferson's understanding of Shakespeare's art and its appropriation was in part a derivation of contemporary Scottish moral philosophy as well as the Richardsonian concern over the dramatic characters in the Bard's works. Imagination also proved necessary for Jefferson to make sense of the link between the reader/observer and the character/agent – very much in the manner of an Adam Smith-based method. Nonetheless, he failed to discuss character development (deterioration) in terms of morality – otherwise a concern for Richardson. His instinctual conception of the moral sense, totally separated from the intellect, also made his use of Shakespeare different from the mainstream. Likewise, he was more convinced of the power of the Bard to shape the moral sense of readers thus he proves to have been more consistent and faithful to his own original conception of the moral sense as well as education in hoping to make use of the tragic characters.

For Jefferson, the use of Shakespeare, in addition to providing pleasure for the devoted reader, thus had a more profound aim: alongside other meritorious authors, his art had the ultimate significance of edifying the moral sense of the citizens for the republic. Whether an unequivocal identification of the evil or promotion of virtue and filial affection, his works proved excellent in Jefferson's eyes in improving the moral sense of the individuals, especially the young, guiding them through the intricacies of modern life which they were compelled to grasp by relying on their own reason and moral sense as citizens of the American republic. He thus seems to have been more optimistic about utilizing Shakespeare than does Richardson. In this ideal vision, Shakespeare, fit very well, becoming another immortal man himself, providing moral inspiration for a fledgling republic otherwise very different and distant as it was both in space and time.

³² Jefferson to Robert Skipwith, August 3, 1771, in Jefferson, *Writings*, 742.