

«To call fools into a circle»: Benjamin's interpretation of As you like it and The Tempest

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Calderon and Shakespeare are the two main authors that lie behind Benjamin's examination of the German baroque drama. This paper addresses the importance of Shakespeare in his difference from the European counterpart, Calderon while attempting to answer the following questions: Why does Benjamin say here that the dramatic precedes the tragic? And what does this have to do with the two Shakespearian characters he refers to in a letter of the same year, Caliban and Ariel? Moreover, is the interpretation of The Tempest that this passage implies the same as the one that he suggested in his previous essay on As you like it (1918)?

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Calderon and Shakespeare are the two main authors that lie behind Benjamin's examination of the German baroque drama. This paper addresses the importance of Shakespeare in his difference from the other big European cousin, Calderon. This does not mean that, according to Benjamin, Shakespeare is more important than Calderon (his beautiful essay on Calderon of 1923 contradicts this point), but rather that the English author brings to light an element that in Calderon is in some way missing. This is what Benjamin in some critical texts from the period of the *Trauerpielbuch* calls the «dramatic».

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These questions will lead to a few passages of the *Trauerspielbuch* that were particularly difficult to translate (not only in the two Italian previous translations, but also in the first English version, by John Osborne) and that can shed light on some important aspects of the book itself. In this context, another Shakespearian character will come to the aid, the Jacques of *As you like it*, with his Greek invocation «to call fools into a circle».

Calderon and Shakespeare are the two main authors that lie behind Benjamin's examination of the German baroque drama¹. This paper is going to address the importance of Shakespeare in his difference from the other big European cousin, Calderon. This does not mean that Shakespeare is more important than Calderon according to Benjamin (his beautiful essay on Calderon of 1923 is an example against this)², but rather that the English author brings to light an element that in Calderon is in some way missing. This is what Benjamin in some critical texts from the period of the *Trauerpielbuch* calls the «dramatic».

The idea of the «dramatic» already arises in the different choices that were made to translate the title of Benjamin's book, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*: literally, "Origin of the German *Trauerspiel*". This is in fact the choice of the new English translation that came out a few months

¹ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, vol. I.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1928, pp. 203-409; also in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991, vol. I.1, pp. 203-430.

² See W. Benjamin, "Calderon's El mayor monstruo, los celos and Hebbel's Herodes und Mariamne. Comments on the Problem of Historical Drama", in Id., *Selected Writings*, eds. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma. 1996, vol. I, pp. 363-386; it. trans. In Id., *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, a cura di A. Barale, prefazione di F. Desideri, Carocci, Roma 2018, pp. 369-99. On Benjamin's interpretation of Calderon see B. Menke, *Das Trauerspiel-Buch: Der Souverän - das Trauerspiel - Konstellationen - Ruinen*, Transcript, Berlin 2010.

ago³. The problem has always been how to translate the term “*Trauerspiel*”, which literally translates to “mourning play.” In Italian, however, we don’t have this possibility: we don’t have a word that means both play and theatre representation. The word *Trauerspiel* is typical of German, it doesn’t exist in other languages. *Trauerspiel* is the name that German scholars gave to some particular dramas written during the baroque period, in certain regions of Germany (of course for Benjamin it means much more than that, as we are going to see). In the last Italian version of the book, “*Trauerspiel*” was translated, just like in the previous ones, as “dramma barocco” (although the term “origin” [*Ursprung*] had been cancelled in the previous versions and has now been reinserted). This choice could find a reason in something that can be discovered through the critical texts that were included inside the same volume⁴, that is, the importance of the «dramatic». What is the dramatic, for Benjamin?

1. Caliban and Ariel

The most important answer that can be found to this question is in a review that Benjamin writes on Hofmannsthal’s drama *Der Turm, The Tower*⁵. In this text Benjamin states that with this drama, *The Tower*, Hofmannsthal has reached a dimension that is very important not only for him, but for modern theatre in general, the dimension of the «dramatic». He then adds something else that can seem to be quite problematic at first sight. He states that this dimension of the dramatic *precedes* the tragic:

With this drama the author enters into a sphere that seems to be destined to be particularly important both for Hofmannsthal’s dramatic figures and for modern theatre in general. We could call it the «pre-tragic» sphere. Drama arose from ritual: the prototype of dramatic tension is the tension between word and action. The tension in the sphere of language (the tension of debate) is not dramatic [...] Only the tension of ritual, which arises from the space between acting and speaking, from their polarity, is dramatic. The tragic itself is already extraneous to this sphere of the dramatic. The tragic solves the tension between body and language in a purely linguistic sense.⁶

This proves to be quite problematic, because if we read *the Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, we tend to think that tragedy, according to Benjamin, has to do with ancient theatre, while *Trauerspiel* or drama has to do with modern theatre in general; starting from the Middle Ages to the Romantic Age and beyond. For Benjamin there is a romantic *Trauerspiel* and there are also some

³ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. by H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma. 2019.

⁴ W. Benjamin, *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, cit.

⁵ W. Benjamin, “Review of *Der Turm*”, *Die literarische Welt*, 2, 15, 1926 (now in: Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. III, pp. 29-33; It. transl. in Id. *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 435-9).

⁶ *Ibidem*; my transl.

contemporary attempts of *Trauerspiel*. That is why, in some cases, *Trauerspiel* is commonly translated only as “dramma”. How can the dramatic, then, precede the tragic?

Benjamin gives an explanation in this passage: he says that the dramatic precedes the tragic because it doesn't have to do with a tension *inside* language, but rather, a tension between «language and body», or «speaking and acting». What does that mean?

In order to find the answer, it is necessary to consider the subject of Benjamin's review, Hofmannsthal's drama *The Tower*, which is actually a remake of one of Calderon's most famous works, *Life is a dream*. The plot in the two works is the same: there is a King, the king Basilius, who receives a bad prophecy and decides for this reason to lock his newborn son, Sigismund, inside a tower. Sigismund grows up inside the tower, lives his entire life there and becomes very savage and dangerous.

There is a big difference though, according to Benjamin, in the way Sigismund's situation is treated in the two works. In Calderon's version, everything that happens to him is part of a bigger law, the «natural and statal law», which is a sort of «secularized providence» for Calderon. In comparison, Hofmannsthal's version no longer includes this element. The «injustice» of Sigismund's situation is «called by its name»⁷.

It is here, precisely, that the «dramatic» element becomes important, because Sigismund's fight, in Hofmannsthal's version, is first of all a «fight for language», according to Benjamin. Sigismund, in Hofmannsthal's work, is not really able to speak: his speech sounds strange very often, and very often breaks into laments or silence⁸. This is the tension between «language and body» then, the «dramatic» element quoted above.

It is in relation to this «dramatic» element that Shakespeare becomes particularly important. In a letter from the same period that was published inside the last Italian version of the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin states that Hofmannsthal's Sigismund can be compared only to a few Shakespearian figures: «Am I wrong if I see in him – he says – what in Shakespeare constitutes the colored fringe of the comic: Caliban or Ariel, the animal-man or the primal spirit of any kind?»⁹.

Caliban and Ariel are, as it is well-known, the two servants of the wizard Prospero in *The Tempest*. *The Tempest* is a very important work for Benjamin, not only in this period but also in the

⁷ W. Benjamin, “Review of *Der Turm*”, cit.

⁸ On this aspect of Hofmannsthal's drama see M. Cacciari, “Intransitabili utopie”, in H. von Hofmannsthal, *La torre*, trad. it. di S. Bortoli, Adelphi, Milano 1978. On Benjamin's interpretation of *Der Turm* see F. Desideri, *Walter Benjamin: il tempo e le forme*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1980, pp.172-4.

⁹ W. Benjamin, “Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal of 11 June 1925”, in G. Scholem. T. W. Adorno (eds.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 271 (It. transl. in W. Benjamin, *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 432).

past. In fact, in another letter to Hofmannsthal, Benjamin states that for many years he wanted to write a commentary on *The Tempest*¹⁰. It will be necessary to return to this.

It is useful to understand, first of all, the connection between Caliban, Ariel and Sigismund that Benjamin establishes in this passage. The two Shakespearian figures, Caliban and Ariel, are both bounded to nature, like Sigismund. Caliban is the only native inhabitant of the island Prospero lands on at the beginning of *The Tempest* and he is described, according to Benjamin, as «a half animal and half man»¹¹. Ariel is a spirit of wild nature of the island. Just like Sigismund, Caliban and Ariel are both trying to free themselves from the oppression of their master. The only difference that separates them from Sigismund is that they do so through a comic element.

It is on this aspect that it is necessary to focus. Benjamin states, in the quoted passage, that Caliban and Ariel are the «coloured fringe of the comic»¹². This brings to mind the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, in which writes that the comic element emerges from mourning like the «lining» from a dress¹³. Yet «coloured fringe» also has a very literal meaning here, because clowns, at that time, were actually dressed with multicolored clothes.

2. The «motley fool»

This brings to mind another Shakespearian work that is closely connected to *The Tempest*, *As you like it*. In *As you like it* the clown, Touchstone, is called a «motley fool» by another character, «the melancholic Jacques», who is very envious of the multicolored clothes of Touchstone¹⁴. It is interesting to notice that Touchstone and Jacques are the only two characters that Shakespeare invented in this work, because the rest of the story is taken from *Rosalynde*, a very popular drama by Thomas Lodge¹⁵.

The connection between these two Shakespearian works, *The Tempest* and *As you like it*, can help to understand a very difficult passage of the *Trauerspielbuch* that has to be considered here, and also the question of the «dramatic», from which this investigation has started. In fact in 1918

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, «Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal of 28 December 1925», in G. Scholem, T. W. Adorno (eds.), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, cit., p. 286 (It. transl. in W. Benjamin, *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 448).

¹¹ W. Benjamin, «Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal of 11 June 1925», cit., p. 271; It. trans. cit., p. 439.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, cit., p. 123.

¹⁴ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, Norton Critical Editions, London 2001, I, 7.

¹⁵ Cfr. the section «Sources and contexts» in W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, cit.

Benjamin writes a paper on *As you like it*, in which he states that this Shakespearian comedy has to be considered as a «prologue (*Vorwort*)» to *The Tempest*¹⁶. Why?

To find a key, it is useful to start from the similarities between the two Shakespearian works that scholars already noticed. Just like *The Tempest*, *As you like it* starts with a history of injustice between two brothers. There is a duke who is usurped by his brother and sent into exile in a forest, the forest of Arden. In a similar way, Prospero was usurped by his brother and was left in the middle of the sea, getting to the island in this way.

The Tempest and *As you like it* have in common, then, the theme of the exile, an exile that constitutes nevertheless a chance of redemption. It is one of the most beautiful moments of *As you like it* when the two girl protagonists – the daughter of the exiled duke and her cousin – decide to escape from the court into the forest, and they bring with them the clown Touchstone: «now go we in content to liberty, and not to banishment»¹⁷.

In fact, the forest in *As you like it* is the opposite of the court. The court is one of the most important themes in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, as it is a terrible place of lies and intrigues. The alternative between forest and court, however, doesn't provide a real solution, because the forest – and also the island in *The Tempest* – are places where it is not possible to remain. At the end of the story, the protagonists will have to leave these places.

It is necessary, however, to return to the clown and his name, “Touchstone” (in Italian it has been translated with “paragone”, comparison). This name brings to mind a very important passage of a letter that was included inside the Italian edition of the *Trauerspielbuch*, in which Benjamin tries to define the different use of images in Shakespeare and Calderon. Writing to Hofmannsthal in 1927, he says that in Calderon «image is an intensification of speech», while in Shakespeare, «image is similitude and figure [*Gleichnis und Figur*] of action and man»¹⁸. «Similitude and figure»: this expression reminds us of the clown's name, «Touchstone».

It is important to notice first of all that «figure», in this passage, is considered something that is not completely inside the language. In relation to this, it is necessary to examine a very difficult passage of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, which was very often translated incorrectly¹⁹.

In this passage Benjamin is investigating the romantic theory of allegory (in particular through the writings of a romantic physicist, J.W. Ritter) and he states that an important and difficult task

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, “Shakespeare: Wie es euch gefällt”, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. II.2, pp. 610-11.

¹⁷ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, cit., I.3.

¹⁸ W. Benjamin, “Letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal of 28 December 1925”, cit., p. 286; It. transl. cit. p. 448.

¹⁹ Not only in the previous Italian versions, but also in the first English translation by John Osborne. A correct Italian translation was published for the first time in T. Tagliacozzo, *Walter Benjamin e la musica*, Il Glifo, Roma 2013, p. 36.

for scholars would be to «bring oral and written language together», but only as «thesis and synthesis»; and to «secure to music [...] the central place of antithesis»²⁰.

The very common mistake that was made by translators was that «oral and written language» were «brought together» as «thesis and antithesis», instead of «thesis and synthesis», so that writing became «antithesis» instead of «synthesis».

In this passage, though, just like in the review of *The Tower* considered above, the *Trauerspiel* for Benjamin has to do with the problem of language. The *Trauer* (mourning) is the mourning that comes from language when it becomes something from which we feel alienated (like in Sigismund's experience). Mourning comes from language when it becomes something rigid, as Benjamin says in two essays that are very important for the *Origin of the German Truaerspiel, Trauerspiel and Tragedy* and *The meaning of Language in Tragedy and Trauerspiel*²¹.

This is the reason why, according to Benjamin, music is always present in baroque dramas and it doesn't have a mere functional or additional role: «Nevertheless, music – not by virtue of the authors' liking but in its very essence – is intimately allied to the allegoric drama»²². Music is so important for baroque dramas because it has the function of liberating language from its stillness and rigidity. This is the role of the organ in *The Tower*, which sounds like a lament, and this is also the role of the happy songs of *As you like it*, to which it will be necessary to return.

It is possible to understand, then, why music can be considered the antithesis of verbal language. Yet why should writing be the synthesis? It is in relation to this point that most translations of the *Trauerspielbuch* had problems, and this is indeed the most difficult passage to understand.

A first step in finding an answer can be to observe that writing, in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, is a kind of figure. In fact one of Benjamin's most important goals in this book is to show that language doesn't only have a sound – a temporal dimension – but also a figure – a spatial dimension. From here derives the theme of hieroglyphs and the difficult word “Schriftbild” (lit. “scriptural image”)²³, which is the image of figure. How can writing or figure, then, arise as a synthesis from the opposition between language and sound?

To find a key, it is necessary to return to *As you like it* and consider the second new character that Shakespeare introduces in this drama, Jacques.

²⁰ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, cit., p. 232.

²¹ W. Benjamin, “Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. II.1, pp. 133-7; It. transl. in Id., *Origine del drama barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 349-53. W. Benjamin, “Die Bedeutung der Sprache in Trauerspiel und Tragödie”, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., vol. II.1, pp. 137-40; It. transl. in Id., *Origine del drama barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 349-53.

²² W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, cit., p. 230.

²³ Cfr. *ibidem*.

3. «A melancholy of mine own»

Jacques or «the melancholic Jacques» is a very mysterious figure in *As you like it*, firstly due to the fact that it is unclear what he is doing in the forest. In fact he is not one of the King's noblemen. He is a traveler, this is what the readers know. He got there some way, and he stays there, disturbing the perfect pastoral life of the exiled court.

In fact the nobles in the forest spend their day hunting and singing happy songs and Jacques wants to sing too, but he is not very musical and he invents very strange songs with no meaning:

Thus it goes:--
If it do come to pass
That any man turn ass,
Leaving his wealth and ease,
A stubborn will to please,
Ducdame, ducdame, ducdame:
Here shall he see
Gross fools as he,
An if he will come to me.²⁴

Scholars went mad trying to understand what “ducdame” means. Of course there is no answer: Ducdame, Jacques says, is a «Greek invocation», «to call fools into a circle». The Greek character is barely invented here, it has no meaning. This passage, however, is important in this context because this topic of the circle, as something that characterizes the ritual and magical dimension, is also present in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. In particular, in the section on tragedy, Benjamin interprets tragedy as something that breaks the circle of destiny:

Für athenisches Recht ist das Wichtige und Charakteristische der dionysische Durchschlag, daß nämlich das trunkene, ekstatische Wort die reguläre Verzirkelung des Agon durchbrechen durfte.²⁵

This passage is an example of how the translation of the *Trauerspielbuch* and the interpretation of the critical texts of the period are two intertwined tasks. In fact, to translate this part of the book it is necessary to consider the discussion that Benjamin had with his friend Florens Christian Rang. «Verzirkelung» (circle) is intended here as something real. According to Rang, the ancient temples had a circular form because they imitated the cycle of the stars. Tragedy arises as something that

²⁴ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, cit., II, 5.

²⁵ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, cit., p. 292.

permits to escape from this circle, which was also the circle in which sacrifices were accomplished²⁶.

The question of tragedy as an overcoming of the ritual is present also in another difficult passage of the *Trauerspielbuch* that brings us back to the question of the «dramatic». In the second chapter, Benjamin is talking about the war that the Greek philosopher Plato declared to tragedy and he states that this war was won indeed, but through a kind of victory that «affected the challenger more than the challenged object»:

Den Kampf aber, den dessen Rationalismus der tragischen Kunst angesagt hatte, entscheidet Platons Werk mit einer Überlegenheit, die zuletzt den Herausforderer entscheidender traf als die Geforderte, gegen die Tragödie.²⁷

The reason of this statement, which could seem quite strange at first sight, is that the form of the dialogue which Plato chose let something «appear» [auftreten], and that something was «the pure dramatic language»²⁸. This «purely dramatic element» restored «the Mystery», «which had become gradually secularized in the forms of the Greek drama»²⁹. «Its language», the language of this purely dramatic dimension, Benjamin continues, «is the language of the new drama and, consequently, the language of Trauerspiel»³⁰.

The drama, then, brings back something of the ritual or magical dimension that tragedy already secularised. This point is also present in the passage on the dramatic that was previously examined, in which Benjamin stated that «drama arose from ritual».

If we go back to *As you like it*, it is exactly this «ritual» dimension that Jacques teases, when he invents his Greek magic spell to call fools into a circle. There is also another moment in which he does that. At the end of the story, the exiled duke tells everybody to start dancing to celebrate the marriages that took place and the new life that will start. Jacques, however, doesn't want to dance and says goodbye to everybody. He refuses to join the circle³¹.

In his essay on *As you like it*, Benjamin stated that the great merit of Shakespeare in this comedy is his ability to let things go, not trying to hold them back or hold them in any longer. Everything that happens in *As you like it* is like clouds on a beautiful summer day. At the end, everything

²⁶ Cfr. W. Benjamin, *Origine del dramma barocco tedesco*, cit., pp. 401-15; cfr. also F. C. Rang, *Psicologia storica del Carnevale*, a cura di F. Desideri, commento di M. Cacciari, Boringhieri, Torino 2008.

²⁷ W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, cit., p. 294.

²⁸ W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, cit., p. 114.

²⁹ Ivi, pp. 114-15.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 115.

³¹ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, V, 4.

«concludes in loneliness»³². Jacques seems to represent exactly this moment, in which things separate from each other and remain on their own. Even the way he describes his melancholy shows us this impossibility of things to get together:

I have neither the scholar's melancholy, which is emulation, nor the musician's, which is fantastical, nor the courtier's, which is proud, nor the soldier's, which is ambitious, nor the lawyer's, which is politic, nor the lady's, which is nice, nor the lover's, which is all these: but it is a *melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects*, and indeed the sundry's contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humorous sadness.³³

The Tempest in Benjamin's essay on *As you like it* represents precisely this dissolution [Auflösung] of things. It is in this sense that *The Tempest* can be considered to be the conclusion of *As you like it*: «Prospero breaks his magical wand and things don't blow as we like it any more»³⁴.

In the passage on *The Tempest* from the letter to Hofmannsthal, however, there is also something else. Here Benjamin states that everything in *The Tempest* and in Shakespeare's dramas in general is «similitude and figure of action and man». It is a new beginning, then (because figure is «synthesis», if we remember the passage of the *Trauerspielbuch* that was examined above), which can happen through the «tension between language and body»³⁵.

It is this second element, which is as necessary as «the tension between language and silence»³⁶, that can be found in Jacques and in the ancient tragic heroes. It is a moment that brings back something of ritual and something of the uncontrollable nature of Caliban or Ariel, but with a limit to its violence, because tragedy was not in vain and Jacques is always there, spying on us from his cave when we call «fools into a circle»³⁷.

³² W. Benjamin, «Shakespeare: *Wie es euch gefällt*», cit., p. 611.

³³ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, cit., IV, 1.

³⁴ W. Benjamin, «Shakespeare: *Wie es euch gefällt*», cit., p. 611.

³⁵ W. Benjamin, «Review of *Der Turm*», cit.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ W. Shakespeare, *As you like it*, cit., II, 5.