

## Review

**Mark Alznauer (ed.), *Hegel on Tragedy and Comedy: New Essays*. New York: SUNY, 2021. ISBN 978-1-4384-8337-5 (hbk). ISBN 978-1-4384-8336-8 (pbk). Pp. 298.**

The new collection of essays on Hegel's understanding of tragedy and comedy, edited by Mark Alznauer, is remarkable. For the first time, Hegel's comments on comedy have systematically been placed on an equal footing with his far more famous discussions of tragedy. The volume rightly focuses not only on an aesthetic classification of the two genres in the systematic hierarchy of the arts, but also on the extensive role Hegel assigns to the two genres regarding history, their relation to religion, and to the constitution of the political. For Hegel, it was clear that tragedy and comedy are essential philosophical categories of political, religious and metaphysical self-understanding. In the book's introduction, Alznauer accordingly describes the dramatic genres as a substantial part of the 'human conversation about what we are and what our place in the world is and ought to be' (2). Despite this very convincing opening of a broad thematic field of possible applications of Hegel's concepts of tragedy and comedy, most of the contributions remain characterized by an implicit preliminary limitation. Since both genres are—according to the majority of Hegel's own examples—mainly understood and discussed in terms of the self-relation of individuals to the social world, the perspective of the subjective spirit is assumed throughout the volume, leaving open how Hegel's conceptualizations of tragedy and comedy might contribute to an understanding of objective spirit. Likewise, some aspects of the overall framing of the volume could be questioned, for example the claim that tragedy is more closely assigned to the political while comedy remains in the religious field (5)—a statement that is surprising in view of Hegel's vivid remarks on the correspondence of democracy and comedy in his Berlin *Lectures on Aesthetics*.

In the thirteen new essays the reader will find a broad and profound overview of the development of Hegel's understanding of drama from his early works on Theology to his later Philosophy of Fine Art. The strength of the book's division into three sections—two more philologically oriented discussions of tragedy and comedy and a third, more speculative part on history—lies in its concise dramaturgical framing of the highly diverse approaches to Hegel's poetics.

In the first two essays by Douglas Finn and Eric von der Luft a literary focus on the relationship of Hegel's poetics to Johann Wolfgang v. Goethe's writings is

provided, with Finn examining Goethe's reception on the part of the younger Hegel, while Luft traces Goethe's much later reaction to the theory of tragedy presented to him by Hegel's fellow student Hermann Friedrich Wilhelm Hinrichs in a historically detailed manner.

Of the essays on tragedy, Wes Furlotte's more philosophical approach is particularly noteworthy for its precise analysis of the metaphysical danger of aestheticizing the political following Hegel's account of tragedy in his *Natural Law* essay. Furlotte very convincingly lays out the extent to which Hegel uses Aeschylus's *The Eumenides* to compensate for his failure to rationalize the institution of private property by means of a metaphysical reconciliation: 'That is to say, [Hegel] seeks an atemporal-aesthetic justification for a historical social problem' (71). Furlotte goes on to trace the extent to which Hegel's failed attempt to conceptualize the social relations of his time through the 'tragedy in the ethical' nevertheless paved the way for an understanding of false totality in critical theory.

Antón Barba-Kay examines the sexual dimension of Hegel's famous reading of *Antigone*, in which the distinction between state and nature is represented in the sexual difference between Antigone and Creon. According to Barba-Kay, it is sexual difference that accounts for Hegel's fascination with *Antigone* because it was the medium through which the relation between nature and morality first became a philosophical problem. While the conceptual centrality of sexual difference, which Barba-Kay mainly grounds on the general topicality of sex in German idealism, seems somewhat questionable—especially against the background of Hegel's general lack of interest in sex as well as against his often ill-conceived and sometimes overtly sexist explanations of femininity—the author opens up some interesting new perspectives on what is often supposed to be an overinterpreted piece.

Allegra de Laurentiis offers an explanation on Hegel's interest in ancient tragedy as the blueprint of all tragedy, which is convincing in argumentation and as a concise summary but contributes little that is new to the general reception of Hegel's theory of drama. In contrast, Rachel Finkelstein's innovative reading draws on Shakespeare to develop an original, explicitly modern understanding of tragedy according to Hegel. Using *Hamlet* as an example, she demonstrates how Hegel's understanding of tragic subjectivity can be carried over into modernity.

The following section on comedy is dominated by three different interpretations of its role in the transition to the revelation of religion in Christianity. While Peter Wake and Paul T. Wilford both emphasize the emptiness and despair created in Hegel's account of a comic questioning of life, they differ regarding the question of whether comedy ought to be understood as a sort of secular transcendence or rather as a concept that is only fully realized when it is transformed into 'Christianity's Divine Comedy' (167). While Wake, in following Bergson, stresses

that comedy's 'triumph' over tragedy ought to be conceived as a *corrective* which must eventually result in an unhappy consciousness, Wilford emphasizes the subsequent reconciliatory possibility of a sublation of comedy's despair in Christianity, whose dialectical journey, however, always runs the risk of slipping back into disenchantment.

Unlike the first two essays, Martin Donougho tries to rehabilitate the concept of comedy by stressing Hegel's attempts at an ethical appropriation of the *Lustspiel*. In his equally elegant and compelling 'speculative attempts' (198) Donougho strengthens the concept of comedy vis-à-vis the transition to religion by emphasizing the role of the ordinary for Hegel's philosophy of spirit. According to Donougho's reading of Hegel, comedy is of central importance because it demonstrates that 'the Ideal *lives in* the ordinary, as (we might say) caviar for the general' (199).

In contrast to these lucid observations, Jeffrey Church's *zeitdiagnostic* proposal to apply Hegel's concept of comedy to the creation of political consensus in the wake of fake news clearly falls short of contemporary philosophical research committed to a Hegelian understanding of democratic ethical life. His suggestion to take comedy as a blueprint for the reconciliation of contemporary, 'idiosyncratic' (220) political conflicts fails to understand the contradictory composition of the bourgeois society responsible for the eruption of such conflicts—what was, after all, first described by Hegel himself in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights*. Church furthermore takes up the most problematic part of Hegel's theory of comedy: Hegel's claim that comedy ought not question the ethical substance of a given community. Church thereby dangerously depoliticizes the question of how to distinguish between supposedly reasonable and merely idiosyncratic opinions.

Fiacha D. Heneghan, in her essay, examines the tragic elements in Hegel's philosophy of world history. Drawing on Hegel's various metaphorical turns of the connection, she argues that the experience of the one-sidedness of tragic subjectivity can be found in history, as can the conflicts between two equally entitled disputants. Although her approach softens the teleological features of Hegel's philosophy of history to a certain extent, Heneghan maintains that 'the tremendous human costs' of a historical learning process based on Hegel's understanding of tragedy are nevertheless too high. Consequently, she rejects attempts to rehabilitate his philosophy of history. Convincing as Heneghan's remarks on the tragic logic of history are, it would have been interesting to learn how she would inscribe the less obviously historical concept of comedy into Hegel's understanding of history.

Jason M. Yonover is interested in the precarious righteousness of the world-historical individual and her revolutionary action. In his analytically rigorous, yet floridly written essay, he approaches the question of right and

wrong, guilt and innocence by means of a retrospective theory of ethical action. Although his reading tends toward a very progressive and optimistic interpretation of Hegel's understanding of revolution and social change, the methodologically original recourse to Hegel's own concept of historical retrospectivity is compelling, as are the concluding remarks, which reinforce Hegel's groundbreaking role for critical social theory. Again, it would have been intriguing to learn how Yonover would determine the role of comic reconciliation for revolutionary action.

Even though not all the essays are equally convincing in their take on the relevance of Hegel's theory of drama, the collection remains impressive, not only in terms of the breadth of the disciplines and approaches represented, but also with regard to the many highly innovative perspectives on the systematic status of the comedy and tragedy within Hegel's philosophy. I would like to recommend the volume specifically to all those who have long been interested in taking a closer look at the concept of comedy, which, according to Hegel, not only stands on equal footing with tragedy but, interestingly enough and despite all the reception tragedy has received, ranks superior to it.

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