

TRUTH AND READINESS

Karl Jaspers' reading of Shakespeare

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■ Abstract

This article presents Karl Jaspers' reading of Shakespeare. In the first part (I.) I will briefly introduce Jaspers' *On Truth* by sketching the main points of his philosophical work as far as these are relevant for his interpretation of Shakespeare. In the second part (II.) I will give an overview of his interpretation of Shakespeare by singling out the main point of interests; finally, in the third part (III.) I will focus on one single aspect of Jaspers' interpretation in order to highlight the way in which Hamlet's tragedy illustrates Jaspers' concept of truth and its connection to action. Via a discussion of other interpretations of *Hamlet*, according to which the main character is incapable of making decisions and to act at the proper time, Jaspers sees in Hamlet a positive hero striving for truth but knowing the limits of his own ignorance: the struggle between ignorance and truth is a form of "inner action", and therefore, for Hamlet, "readiness is all."

Keywords: Karl Jaspers, Shakespeare, Hamlet, truth, inner action.

One could easily argue without exaggeration that, among English playwrights, William Shakespeare is not only the most important, but also the most philosophical one. Indeed, the capacity to quote one or more lines of his plays in journal articles, conference presentations and the like seems to be an almost essential instrument of the philosopher – or at least, it can help in sounding profound and literate. But notwith-

standing the ubiquity of Shakespeare in philosophy as well as in the popular culture, in the 20th century it is not easy to find serious and elaborate readings of Shakespeare by major philosophers that go beyond the mere quotation of a couple of lines to dwell extensively and in detail upon the philosophical dimension of these writings. There are, for sure, notable exceptions to this: particularly noteworthy is the collection

presented ten years ago by Paul A. Kottman in his valuable volume *Philosophers on Shakespeare*.¹ Kottman puts together an interesting (and very varied) collection of philosophers, from Goethe and Hegel (whose interpretation of Shakespeare is probably well-known) up to Benjamin, Marx, Schmitt, Lukács, Derrida and Cavell.

It is not surprising that Kottman, in his otherwise excellent work, seems to have ignored an author who nowadays is almost forgotten, but whose philosophy was absolutely central in the Germany of the first two decades after the Second World War: Karl Jaspers. Jaspers devoted a considerable part of his mammoth work *Von der Wahrheit* (*On Truth*) to a discussion of the philosophical meaning of tragedy. He does this mostly in reference to questions related to the theory of knowledge, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (as well as more sporadic quotations from *King Lear* and *Othello*) are crucial reference points for him, albeit among others (such as Sophocles, mostly his *Antigone*, and Dostoevsky, mostly his *Brothers Karamazov*).

This absence comes as no surprise not only because Jaspers is considered today a secondary figure in the history of 20th-century philosophy, but also because the translation of his work into English has been scarce and, in some cases, of questionable

quality.² The present article aims to fill this gap (as far as this is possible in a short essay) by presenting Karl Jaspers' reading of Shakespeare, discussing the main issues at stake, and trying to show where the strength of his reading lies – both for the reader of Shakespeare interested to know about his reception among philosophers, and for the philosopher interested in Jaspers as well as in Shakespeare. In order to make this article also accessible to readers who are not acquainted with the usual philosophical jargon, I will keep the use of technicalities at a minimum. Moreover, I will try to explain the – sometimes somewhat cryptic – style of Jaspers' writing. In order to achieve this, I intend to take the following steps: in the first part (I.), I will briefly introduce Jaspers' *On Truth*, sketching the main points of his philosophical work as far as these are relevant for his interpretation of Shakespeare or, at least, as far as they could help shed light on this. In the second part (II.) I will give an overview of his interpretation of Shakespeare by identifying the main point of interests. In the third part (III.) I will focus on a single aspect of Jaspers' interpretation – which is complex and multilayered – in order to bring out its genuinely philosophical content, and to show why Jaspers' interpretation of Shakespeare deserves the atten-

¹P.A. Kottman, *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). Whereas Kottman takes a historical path into philosophers that dealt explicitly with Shakespeare, the *Routledge Companion to Shakespeare and Philosophy* (ed. by C. Bourne and E.C. Bourne, New York: Routledge, 2018) considers mostly systematic topics.

²Already in the 80s a debate between C.F. Waltraff and A. Lichtigfeld brought to the fore the necessity for an English translation of *On Truth*: “until [...] a really first-rate translation of *Von der Wahrheit* appears, Jaspers as viewed from the English-speaking countries, will remain largely incommunicado”. Cf. A. Lichtigfeld, *Jaspers in English. A Failure Not of Communication but Rather of Interpretation*, (in: “Philosophy and Phenomenological Research”, 41, 1/2, 1980, p. 216-222, here p. 216). The situation hasn't changed yet.