

**The revolt of autonomous reason
and the self-authorization of lawlessness in Schiller's *The Robbers* (1781)**

Synopsis

Modern tragedy stages the antinomies of autonomy as a tragic *agon*, the tragedy of revolutionary *arche* as beginning and governance, stasis and state. It dramatizes extreme dilemmas/irreconcilable contradictions of legitimacy as contestation intrinsic to revolt.

Its protagonist is involved in two major projects:

Subjectivity (doubled or divided) and Rebellion (freedom against necessity).

Three major issues in this chapter:

1. Is the hero two opposed characters or one self-divided character?

The question of the heroic subjectivity: is it double or torn?

The subjectivity of the protagonists is a dramatization of the antinomy of heroic autonomy.

2. The hero claims agency as an autonomous subject by rebelling against a declining ruling order and seeking the self-authorizing legitimacy of absolute freedom.

Self-definition and revolt become mutually authenticating:

in order to make their own law and history,

autonomous individuals turn into criminal rebels.

3. At a time of crisis, revolution rises to challenge the legitimacy of sovereignty and pursues justice by legitimizing lawlessness.

I focus on the inherent contradictions of the revolutionary exception and self-authorization.

Introduction

Freedom vs. fate is the fundamental problem of modern philosophy in both the philosophical sense of freedom (vs. necessity) and the political one (vs. tyranny): To what extent and under what conditions is freedom possible?

[Kant defined freedom as autonomy](#), that is, free will obeying its moral law, thus resisting heteronomy, the natural necessity of subjection to objective causality. Kant's autonomy invited a tragic understanding due to [the antinomy between freedom and causality](#) (Lehmann 2016: 308), threatening to turn into arbitrariness (freedom without law) or heteronomy (law without freedom). Here is the paradox of the Kantian autonomy:

“If we understand autonomy on the basis of the scene of self-legislation, a subject giving itself the law, we find ourselves in a situation where we oscillate between two accounts that both seem to undermine the very idea of autonomy. First, self-legislation seems to require that in giving itself the law the subject cannot be bound by anything other than itself. This seems to suggest that the first act of self-legislation has to be a lawless act of arbitrary positing. But if that were true, it is unclear what should prevent the subject from untying itself from this law in the next moment. This suggests that we should try to conceive of the act of lawgiving differently, such that there are reasons to give ourselves this law. And yet if that is true, then there was already something obligating us independently of the law we are about to give to ourselves. It thus seems that autonomy is either grounded on arbitrary positing or on heteronomy, either based on lawless freedom or a pre-given law, where both of these answers threaten the very idea of autonomy” (Thomas Khurana: “Freedom's Tendency to Get Ahead of Itself and Fall Short etc.” Interview by Richard Marshall, 3:16, 2018).

Kant's antinomy of the inherently heteronomous autonomy (the unresolved tension b/w freedom and obedience) became Schelling's tragedy of freedom.

When Schelling rejected Kant's compromise between freedom and obedience, the antinomy of autonomous reason turned tragic:

Mortals commit an inevitable crime as they fight against the necessity of fate; they are punished for this crime, but their freedom is proved and recognized.

However, long before Schelling's notion of tragic freedom, the antinomy of autonomy was explored in Schiller's *Robbers*.

When individuals refuse to submit their self-legislative will to its own law because they find obeying their own law contradictory,

and they resist policing themselves,

they may make an arbitrary positing and turn to the self-authorization of disobedience and revolt.

If Kant's autonomy (a technique of private government) is seen as a mode of subjection,

it may ignite a revolt of reason against obligation, of free will against moral law.

A self-legislative will cannot be bound by a law it has given to itself.

But if self-authorization knows no limits,

autonomy turns from moral self-legislation (Kant) to lawless self-determination (and, in politics, from the rule of government to the quest for revolution).

Let us examine the revolt of autonomous reason and the self-authorization of lawlessness in Schiller's play.

The Robbers (1781) is a great *Doppeltragödie*, a tragedy that draws on the dramatic tradition of doubleness to reflect on conflicting principles of identity and legitimacy that guided the transition from the despotic feudal absolutism to the enlightened constitutional monarchy. More specifically, it draws on the fraternal dramas of the *Sturm und Drang* that depict the fall of a noble house during the eighteenth-century transition from a patriarchal community of primogeniture to a rational state. "Not only was drama a favourite genre of the time, but the 'Bruderzwist' seems to have been one of the most popular dramatic subjects" (Kirby 1983: 348). As such, it has been a foundational play of modern theater.

The story takes place in Germany in the mid-eighteenth century, some thirty years before the work was written. It presents the rivalry between the two sons of Count Maximilian von Moor. After six years of dissolute life away at a university,

Karl, the older son, is a wanted man, and his arrest may be imminent. Repenting for his behavior, he has written to his father, begging for his forgiveness, and seeking to return home and to the arms of his beloved Amelia.

In Scene 1 on the basis of this letter of apology, Franz, the younger brother, reports to his father, the Count, some actual instances of Karl's wasteful living but exaggerates his faults in order to win his inheritance, together with Amelia. The scene concludes with a monologue that draws on Shakesperean figures of evil (especially Edmund, Iago, and Richard II) to portray another deformed villain who resents nature for robbing him of his "rights." Franz rejects honorable reputation, conscience, and love of one's kin as "conventions men have made" in order "to keep fools respectful and to hold down the mob" (Schiller 1979: 33). Since kindness cannot get him what he deserves, he is determined to pursue power: "Might is right, and the limits of our strength our only law" (33).

When we first see the reckless Karl von Moor at the opening of Scene 2, he is at a tavern deep in reading. When he puts the book aside, he expresses a sentiment that, from the time of the premiere and for at least a century reverberated in Western theater, and literature in general: "I hate this age of scribblers, when I can pick up my Plutarch and read of great men" (35). Modern writers are inkblotters and cannot compare to the ancients. Karl is steeped in the classical tradition: he reads the lives of Alexander and Caesar, sings Roman songs, and is called "Hector" by his beloved. He complains that the drama of history as recorded by Livy and Seneca has been reduced to French tragedy. "The bright spark of Promethean fire" has been replaced by a flash of "stage lightning" (35). Clerics and professors control understanding: "An age of eunuchs, fit for nothing but chewing over the deeds of bygone days, mutilating the heroes of old with their learned interpretations and mocking them with their tragedies" (36).

This monologue introduces us to the play's impressive intertextual scope that ranges from the Hebrew Bible to medical writings, not to mention much of the dramatic tradition between Shakespeare and Goethe. The play "operates through a network of allusions to the heroic rebels and outsiders of literature – Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Brutus, and (implicitly) the two figures with whom the young Goethe

... had made a European reputation within the last decade: Karl Moor combines the fighting prowess of Goethe's medieval knight Götz von Berlichingen and the reflective sensitivities of his Werther. Just as compellingly in the creation of antipathy, the cynical and misshapen Franz calls to mind Iago and Richard III" (Reed 1991: 23). What is most impressive is the play's awareness of its range. The main characters are aware of several rhetorical registers (poetical, novelistic, theatrical, scientific, religious etc.) and seem to adopt or criticize them quite consciously. For example, while listening to Karl at the tavern, his friend dismisses his exhortations with sarcastic comments like "You go on in the grand style" (Schiller 35) or "Bah, you're not going to play the prodigal son, are you?" (37)

In addition to the gap between classical and modern writing, Karl is bitter about the gap between reading and action, grammar school and battlefield, idleness, and passion. He complains that people live in a world of "ridiculous conventions" which nobody dares challenge, and he contrasts law, which puts a strait jacket on human will, to freedom, which breeds eagles and giants. His initial concern is not the state of society but the condition of the age. At the end of this outburst, he invokes the spirit of chief Arminius (whom Tacitus called "the liberator of Germany") and cries: "Give me an army of fellows like me to command, and I'll turn Germany into a republic that will make Rome and Sparta look like nunneries" (37).

Soon, Karl will have the opportunity to begin formulating his own interpretation of history by putting his fiery readings into action. By the end of the scene he will receive a forged letter from his brother which informs him falsely that their old father has disinherited him. At the spur of dejection, he will join his libertine comrades at the tavern to go into the Bohemian forests and become their captain: "My spirit thirsts for deeds, my lungs for freedom – murderers, robbers! at that word I trampled the law beneath my feet – men showed me no humanity, when to humanity appealed; so let me forget sympathy and human feeling" (49). As an idealistic leader, instead of turning Germany into a republic, he will raise a band of robbers, fulfilling his brother's prophecy in the previous scene that he will become "the commander of an army, ensconced in the stillness of the forests, ready to ease the weary wanderer's journey by taking half his burden from him" (28).

In these two opening scenes of the play, both brothers reject hypocritical social conventions and the constraining rule of law, and instead propose their own principles of legitimacy. While Franz argues that might is right, and Karl believes that liberty is right, they both pursue legitimacy through lawlessness, the first seeking raw power and the second trying to make the world a better place through terror. They seek to serve a higher justice by pursuing power which one calls mastery, the other grandeur.

In a non-providential world, both Moors announce that man makes his own destiny. Franz insists that nature gave him nothing, and what he can make of himself is his affair (33). Karl announces: "Externals are but the varnish upon a man – I am my heaven and my hell" (131). But what values can guide this self-fashioning? How can individual autonomy find a rightful place in social order? Franz displays the power of reason, Karl that of fantasy. The one has the cunning to correct nature's injustices, the other has the inventiveness to people the silent emptiness with his imagination (131). Each tries to plot his own destiny, with destructive results.

Their sharp opposition has generated a discussion among directors, actors, and critics regarding the identity of the two heroes. Two brothers (who never appear on the stage together) are defined by one another. Do they represent one or two subjectivities? The dualistic pattern that permeates the play brings to life the self-defeating principle of division. Most critics agree with Ilse Graham who sees two opposed characters with a reciprocal dependence (Appelbaum-Graham 1960: 123): "On the one hand, we see an elemental drive suppressed within the protagonist; on the other we see the same drive embodied in his antagonist. And as the protagonist imprisons the elemental force deep within himself, so also does he imprison the person of his antagonist, body and spirit" (122). The development of one drive at the expense of the other represents the guilt of each hero in his "onesidedness" (R. Petsch, quoted in Graham 1974: 357).

However, a large number of commentators sees only one character. It is not an accident that, "once *The Robbers* had taken a secure place in the German theatrical canon, the parts of Karl and Franz were often played by a single actor"

(Sosulski 2007: 144). E. L. Stahl sees a single hero in all the plays: “The essential conflict in Schiller’s tragedies is the struggle within the hero which the hero’s battle against the world elicits and intensifies but never supplants” (Stahl 1954: 12). Peter B. Waldeck argues that “Karl and Franz represent two halves of a split self” (Sosulski 2007: 155). Jeffrey Champlin believes that Karl “has always been constitutively split, sending off the part that would then be drawn back to unify his psyche” (Champlin 2015: 91). Michael Hofmann “also reads the two brothers as opposed manifestations of the modern subject” (Sosulski 2007: 157). Peter Michelsen “conceives of the Karl/Franz duality as separate halves of a human spirit, flowing from an Enlightenment-era dichotomy of heart and reason” (158). Jürgen Bolten argues that the brothers Moor “represent a single individual divided between head and heart, and Karl is himself divided, in typical fashion for this generation, between passion and melancholy; he is Prometheus and Ganymed (of Goethe’s celebrated poems) at once” (121). Michael Sosulski agrees: “Rather than viewing Franz and Karl as two distinct characters opposed to one another, I believe a more productive psychological reading of the play will view them as complementary aspects of the modern subject who together enact a drama of identity formation through a game of mirrors, reflections, and identifications” (143). Most of these critics believe that the essential conflict in Schiller’s tragedies is the struggle within the hero which his struggle with the world intensifies but never supplants.

Whether the two brothers represent two characters or one, they foreground the question of personal self-determination. Like Kant’s first Critique, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which was also published in 1781, *The Robbers* posited the question of autonomy, asking under what circumstances and to what extent autonomous agents may make their own law and history. The play launched “Schiller’s life-long preoccupation with individual autonomy and the exercise of freedom” (Sharpe 1991: 6). In it, we find that “those characters who have learnt to think and feel for themselves can only do so at the cost of a break-away from established traditions and conventions. They thus find themselves alienated from society, no longer able to fit into accepted patterns, cast out from the security of the known world” (Ives 1966: 35).

Schiller “shows that this new sense of history – the idea of man’s struggle to make his own history that was explored by a line of thinkers from Vico to Marx – provides a field for both heroic action and tragic destruction. [] Tragedy can arise within history for it provides a ground for a struggle between freedom and necessity. [] History invites a heroic expression of man’s freedom, but it also embodies the tragic limits upon that freedom” (Cox 1987: 67). Individuals may rebel but they cannot shape their own history. Schiller introduced the radical notion of revolt, a dimension that Kant ignored before the French Revolution and downplayed after it. At the end of *The Robbers*, lawlessness is punished, and providence reaffirmed. Yet the play rehearses the drama of revolt in many of its manifestations with a marked sense of inescapability. It dramatizes the tragic antinomies of individual autonomy (the self-authorizing reason of subjectivity) and collective autonomy (the self-legitimizing claim of revolt).

Regarding the former, it explores how reason may guide conduct so that free will may be exercised under moral law. Both Schiller and Kant propose free obedience: The self-legislative will of the free subject should obey its own law. But this rule triggers the antinomy between freedom and obedience, a heteronomy inhering in moral autonomy, and the revolt of free will against moral law. Hegel noted in his *Aesthetics* that, because he lacks the ancient collective context for his actions, the modern tragic hero appears as a mere criminal. Yet he saw in this criminal identity a higher purpose since modern tragedy deals with the emergence of subjectivity in its rebellion against traditional structures of legitimacy. “Hegel has noted a tendency for the modern tragic hero, who lacks the ancient transcendental and collective contexts for his action, to appear as a mere criminal. [] But this criminal tendency in modern tragedy, although in one sense a flaw, has in Hegel’s view a higher philosophical necessity. As he has stated, such tragedy, behind all its new multiplicity, deals with the emergence of the modern subjectivity in its rebellion against the old collective structures of meaning: ‘More profound yet is the criminal wrongdoing that the subjective character, in order to reach the goal he has set himself, does not shirk, even though he has not made criminal wrongdoing his purpose’” (Pugh 2000: 36). Autonomous individuality as subjectivity is presented

as modern hubris. The individual quest for self-definition and self-determination leads to rebellion against tradition (Cox 1987: 60-2) and tragic conflict between subjectivity and social order (Lehmann 2016: 308). Schiller mobilizes “the sublime criminal” (Hart 2005: 60) “to explore the kinds of great deeds that challenge order and define great men” (64).

The same applies to the dramatization of collective revolt. The major theatrical challenge here is the representation of the robbers. In various productions, the robbers have been associated with proletarians (Erwin Piscator in 1926), Western films (Peter Zadek in 1966), student demonstrators (Karge and Langhoff in 1971), political extremists (Andras Fricstay in 1989), social cynicism (Frank Castorf in 1990), militant patriotism (Alexander Lang in 1990), and gangsters (Gabriele Lavia in 2012). By the time it is denounced in the last few moments of the play, revolt has exposed the dominant forces so forcefully that it is hard to continue supporting them. By showing the excesses of despotism and anarchy as two sides of the same threat (the imminent new order), the play deals with rebellion as the tragedy of autonomy whose ethical dilemmas stem from the pursuit of justice through lawlessness, and of freedom through power. *The Robbers* “might make a fair claim to being the first in world theatre to deal with the subject of terrorism” (Patterson 1990: 84). It shows the tragedy of a political order that suffers the excesses of justice, “the consequences of unbridled excess” (Schiller), when the pursuit of freedom slips into insolence, the defiance of authority violates limits, and the pursuit of retribution becomes vengeance. Both personal and collective autonomy result in hubris.

As the self-instituting activity of a community, civic autonomy works when society recognizes itself as the sole source of its norms. It is the manifestation of the search for intrinsic justification and legitimation of a self-questioning polity. However, since it lacks marked boundaries and ultimate guarantees, it lives with the problem of self-limitation, and runs a historical risk of canceling itself. Schiller’s plays argue that autonomy is a tragic regime, always subject to hubris and self-destruction.

Note: The play, which preoccupied the young Schiller for two years, exists in four versions:

1. *Die Räuber: Ein Schauspiel* (1781), published anonymously at the author's expense.
2. 2nd "revised" edition, preliminary to the acting version (1782), dedicated "*in Tyrannos*" [= against the tyrants].
3. stage text of the premiere (1782).
4. *Die Räuber: Ein Trauerspiel* (1782), a version based on the acting version.

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A selection of video clips

[Friedrich Schiller - Die Räuber / 1. Akt: Szene 1](#)

[Friedrich Schiller - Die Räuber / 1. Akt: Szene 2](#)

[Die Räuber | Friedrich Schiller - Spiegelberg Monolog](#)

[CyberRäuber - Monolog Franz](#)

[Die Räuber - Monolog Karl / Vierter Akt, fünfte Szene](#)

[Die Räuber, Theater Münster 2013 \(Trailer\)](#)

[Les brigands](#)

[Les Brigands de Friedrich von Schiller](#)

[Aus dem Musical schiller *rockt: die räuber* - street fighting man \(rolling stones\)](#)

[Introduction to *I Masnadieri*](#)

[I Masnadieri - chorus](#)

[I Masnadieri – Final scene](#)