

Marta Gibińska

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1655-8802>
Józef Tischner European University, Krakow
gibinska@wp.pl
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Shakespeare's Mixed Genres

ABSTRACT

The problem of generic transformations to which Shakespeare's plays bear witness is discussed against the ancient and early renaissance definitions and discussions of dramatic genres, from Aristotle through Plautus, Cintho, Castelvetro, Guarini to Sidney. The point of interest is located in the fuzziness in which comedy melts with tragedy (or the other way round) and yields in effect a new creation – tragicomedy. The wide range of Shakespearean comedy, tragedy, histories and Roman plays is briefly discussed in order to illustrate Shakespeare's generic transformations, proving that traditional construction of dramatic genres, i.e., of tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy, was too narrow and too constraining for the early modern understanding of the condition of man.

KEYWORDS: tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, Aristotle, Italian renaissance models, Shakespeare

STRESZCZENIE

Transformacje gatunkowe w dramatach Szekspira

Problem transformacji gatunkowych w dramatach Szekspira jest omawiany na podstawie tradycji teoretycznych od Arystotelesa, poprzez pisma Plauta, Cinthia, Castelvetra, Guariniego i Sidneya. Główny problem skupiony jest na mieszanii wątków komediowych i tragicznych prowadzących do mody na tragicomedie. Szekspirowskie komedie, tragedie, sztuki historyczne i tragedie rzymskie są pokrótce omówione dla zilustrowania szekspirowskich transformacji, które dowodzą, że tradycyjny, wyraźny podział na tragedie, komedie i tragicomedie był zbyt wąski i zbyt ograniczający rozumienie kondycji człowieka w okresie wczesnonowożytnym.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: tragedia, komedia, tragicomedia, Arystoteles, włoskie modele wczesnorenansowe, Szekspir

Introductory Remarks

The first printed volume of Shakespeare's collected plays appeared in 1623. Before, single plays had appeared sporadically, some in two or three, others just in one version of small size known as Quarto. The collected plays appeared in a large size, hence the name of the volume – the First Folio. The folio size carried its own special sense of marking out the eminence of the author. The two gatherers of the plays and editors of the Folio, Shakespeare's colleagues John Heminge and Henry Condell, titled the volume *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* and treated it as a tribute to their great friend. For four hundred years their generic decisions functioned as a popular indication of what to expect in the theatre or in one's own private reading, not to mention the educational routine in schools. However, the four hundred years have also been marked by critical problems connected with their labels. On the occasion of the four hundred's anniversary of the appearance of this much coveted book, I would like to take a closer look at the problem of generic transformations to which Shakespeare's plays bear witness.

Tragedy

In an excellent essay "The Genres of Shakespeare's Plays" Susan Snyder (2001) offers a broad discussion of the problems concerning the specific 'fuzziness' of Shakespearean tragedy in the context of the ancient models and native practice, of the plays of other playwrights of roughly Shakespeare's time, as well as of the problematic classification of the editorial practice of the time. Her conclusive statement (and at the same time the basis for further discussion) is simple, obvious, and openly accepting the generic 'fuzziness': "No single formula informs Shakespeare's tragedies" (2001, p. 87).

Yet, from the perspective of a literary historian, Snyder duly notes the fact of the varied strands of traditional inspiration and sources which offered a broad range of the ways in which the tragic was understood; also, the literary, dramatic and theatrical novelty of the genre in Elizabethan England was responsible for the vagueness – and therefore lack of precision – in the understanding what tragedy was. To a certain extent it was paradoxical that the Aristotelian definition which functioned in the opposition to the definition of comedy was broadly accepted as the definition: events of great magnitude and persons of exalted state must develop and face an inexorable destruction and death. Aristotle's definition referred to tragedies that existed in his time, so this ready-made template was

inevitably variously applied in Renaissance; hence a rich variety of plays could be labelled with the same category. Thus, we can accept without hesitation the fact that no single formula informs Shakespeare's tragedies.

Tragicomedy

The point of interest in this paper is located in the fuzziness in which comedy melts with tragedy (or the other way round) and yields in effect a new creation – tragicomedy. This mongrel of a genre was at the forefront of Renaissance discussions. Research in the reception of classical literature in the Renaissance offers a good starting point for the discussion of dramatic genres in Shakespeare's time. The famous contempt of Sidney (1595) directed against "the mongrel tragic-comedy" is an important signal of generic fuzziness in the practice of Elizabethan playwrights.

Another signal is the distribution of plays within the three genres of comedy, tragedy and history in the First Folio as well as the editorial practices of the time concerning titles: it is clear that no division was clear-cut for Shakespeare's contemporaries as proven also by variously formulated titles in the quarto editions of his plays.

Elizabethan playwrights and the Elizabethan theatre looked to varied sources. The poets and playwrights were inspired by ancient drama and Aristotelian-cum-post-Aristotelian discussion of dramatic genres, while the theatrical practitioners in England were conversant with the traditions of medieval miracles, moralities and interludes which did not cultivate the time-honoured division into comedy and tragedy. The perusal of titles from mid-sixteenth century to Jacobean plays shows without doubt that neither the playwrights nor the actors worried much about holding strictly to the ancient models of tragedy and comedy, and the mixed genre of tragicomedy seemed a popular solution for a successful play. Sidney's worry proves that tragicomedy was popular, while his contempt represents a radical conservative position of an elitist poet.

Tanya Pollard (2015) has surveyed the history of tragicomedy and traced it back to Aristotle himself. Together with Bruce Smith (1988) she reads the reception of the ancient ideas as an active, creative process by which Renaissance authors did not so much followed as re-worked and re-wrote creatively what they found in Aristotle. Thus, what was understood as classical genres was really constructed individually by poets and playwrights on top of the ancient models, and in that sense tragicomedy was a classical genre as much as tragedy and comedy. Pollard goes as far as to say that "tragicomedy was – paradoxically – the quintessential classical genre" (2015, p. 2).

Aristotle offered models for the genre by classifying plays as ending either unhappily, happily, or with a double ending (happy for some and unhappy for others). His preference was for tragedy; however, his discussion identified the possibility of tragedy with a happy or mixed ending as a legitimate dramatic form (*Poetics*, Section 2, Part XIII):

In the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first. Like the *Odyssey*, it has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. It is accounted the best because of the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to Comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies- like Orestes and Aegisthus- quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain.

So much for Sidney's contempt. Pollard rightly stresses the fact that the old master offered best weapon for the defence of the mixed genre: "Homeric authority and audience mandate" (2015, p. 3).

To give more proof of the classical position of the tragicomedy one should remember Euripides, praised by Aristotle as the most tragic of the tragic writers. However, many of his plays have mixed and happy endings (e.g., *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Alcestis*) and these were particularly popular with Renaissance translators, audiences and readers showing the wishes of the audience and the evident weakness of the spectators, to repeat Aristotle. As Pollard notes, "For Aristotle's Renaissance readers, the idea that tragedy's telos involved conjuring intense emotion through structural devices formed the centerpiece of the genre theory they constructed in his name (2015, p. 4; cf. Reiss, 1999, p. 242).

Titus Maccius Plautus whose plays were inspiration for Renaissance comedy offers another (and to Renaissance poets well known) passage in which the Aristotelian possibility of pleasing the audience with a mixed genre is reworked into a prologue to *Amphitruon* ([www. Gutenberg.org](http://www.Gutenberg.org)):

Mercury:

Now first as to the favour I have come to ask, and then you shall hear the argument of our tragedy. What? frowning because I said this was to be a tragedy? I am a god: I'll transform it. I'll convert this same play from tragedy to comedy, if you like, and never change a line. Do you wish me to do it. or not? But there! how stupid of me! As if I didn't know that you do wish it, when I'm a deity. I understand your feelings in the matter perfectly. I shall mix things up: let it be tragic-comedy.

The sixteenth-century debates on dramatic genres combined voices arguing for the superiority of tragedy over tragicomedy with those who defended the idea of the mixed genre. Lodovico Castelvetro was the authority of the former and his treatise *Poetica d'Aristotele vulgarizzata e sposta* (1570) was indeed a well-known and famous commentary on Aristotle's views. Giraldi Cinthio represented the latter: not only he enjoyed success of his own mixed plays, but also argued in *Discourse or Letter on the Composition of Comedies and Tragedies* (1543) that in employing happy endings he made a concession to the spectators' pleasure which was, of course, an argument first voiced by Aristotle.

Plautus' plays *Menaechmi*, *Aulularia*, *Miles Gloriosus* and *Amphitruon* were the most popular ones in documented postclassical performances before 1600 (Pollard, 2015, p. 5); *Amphitruon* on account of its unorthodox structure became ultimately the model for Renaissance tragicomedy of Giovanni Batista Guarini who was also an important and influential theorist of tragicomedy: for him it was made marvellous because it employed danger, but not death, and on this account offered better catharsis than tragedy. Guarini was a thorough student of Aristotle; he developed the latter's ideas of a mixed ending to argue that tragicomedy was the perfect realisation of Aristotle's ideal of dramatic poetry in his treatise *Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1601).

The pastoral dramas of Torquato Tasso's *Aminta* (1580) and Giovanni Batista Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* (first published 1590) similarly sparked conversations, controversies, translations, and imitations. But the main direction they took was towards the pastoral tragicomedy and it is the pastoral tragicomedy that takes most space in criticism and discussion of scholars nowadays. In this context Shakespeare's late comedies or romances, particularly *The Winter's Tale*, have become the most frequently targeted texts. Yet, as concerns mixed genres, pastoral tragicomedy, or tragicomedy as defined by the Aristotelian tradition, is only part of the problem. Enough to look at the wide range of Shakespearean comedy: what is traditionally labelled 'dark comedy' hardly fits the idea of a tragicomedy. More, we may still ask if 'happy comedies' are all that happy?

Comedies

Happy comedies are filled with unhappiness which touches on a truly tragic experience. As an example may serve here *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Egeus – a figure filled with arrogance of pride, authority and anger, if not wrath – is resolved to send his daughter to death if she chooses Lysander rather than Demetrius, the young man of his choice. The happy

end is guaranteed, he will bless Hermia's marriage against his early threats. But the happy end is automatically guaranteed – we are told that we are in a comic world. However, if we refuse easy fun, then the comic world is taken in brackets: to what extent can we believe in reconciliation with the irascible, proud and authoritative father? A similarly irascible, proud and arrogant father – King Lear – must first become the unaccommodated man before he becomes free of his sins. There is no such ordeal for Egeus. The comic *deus ex machina* arranges the happy end without any warrant for its truth and duration. While the lovers – victims to sexual desire which comes and goes and comes again – do not seem to be destined for the happiness ever after. If we agree to accept the happy end as a happy end which guarantees reconciliation and moral renovation, we stay locked within the comic vision which is not entirely Shakespeare's and take divorce with our own experience of the real world.

Dark comedies are plays in which the comic world is radically deconstructed, so the traditional 'happy end' becomes a highly ironic notion: in *Measure for Measure* Isabella's silence at the very end when the Duke comes forth with his proposition of marriage (i.e., of a happy end) is a master stroke of the playwright which opens a truly tragic vision. That tragic vision is at the early stages inscribed in Angelo's hypocrisy and ruthlessness of a true villain. Again, there is no room for a convincing proof that his reform at the end is true. Not only the play does not fit in any way the definition of comedy, it does not fit the concept of a tragicomedy: if the end is good for some and bad for others (to keep close to Aristotle), the question for whom it is good looms heavily over the closing lines. And yet, there is no death, though there is much fear of death...

Tragedy again

As for tragedies, take *Hamlet*: the best-known Shakespearean tragedy which seriously questions the character of the tragic hero: is he a noble sweet prince, or a hysterical and paranoid aristocrat; or perhaps a ruthless killer? or a sardonic joker? Moreover, the restoration of order and harmony under Fortinbras hardly helps us to believe in the cleansing power of the tragedy. The early brutal *Titus Andronicus* introduces farcical (if not bordering on absurd) moments which are mixed with the crudest cruelty; the world which cannot be saved by the suffering of a true tragic hero, because there is none there. In *Othello* the fascination with Jago's creative manipulation, with his vulgarity mixed with a specific sense of humour and superb command of linguistic manipulation erases much of the tragic quality of *Othello's* fate and introduces the comic dimension of *Vice* which, surely,

must have been recognized by Shakespeare's audiences. In a similar way Richard III, the play which stands in history with one leg and in tragedy with the other, opens up the comic perspective with Richard's skills at manipulation, thus further multiplying the generic facets of the play.

Histories and Roman plays introduce still more questions. The chronicles bear evident traces of Holinshed's and Hall's Chronicles mixed with the dramatic inventory of tragedy. All three plays Henry VI are structured as a string of tragic incidents connected by the historical background; the catastrophe and catharsis comes with the victory of the Tudors, i.e. with the historical narrative which, like in a tragedy, promises a new beginning.

In Henry IV two plays historical narrative concerns the struggle for power and the problem of a good monarch, both connected to the political dimension of historical facts, but the show is stolen by the comedy of Falstaff.

Roman plays combine the historical narrative of Plutarch's Lives (Thomas North's 1579 English translation), the moral dimension of the Illustrious Men (the Italian renaissance tradition of the *De Viris Illustribus*), the struggle for power, the romance (Antony and Cleopatra) and tragic heroes (Coriolanus being a good example). Each Roman play has a different character, and yet, they are all (with the exception of Coriolanus) listed under tragedies in the First Folio.

Conclusion

Clearly the traditional construction of dramatic genres, i.e., of tragedy, comedy and tragicomedy, was too narrow and too constraining for the early modern sensibility and consciousness, for the early modern understanding of the condition of man. Elsewhere I have tried to argue that Shakespeare's tragic hero was in fact a deconstruction of the traditional idea of the hero or of the dignified human being:

the discursive method of character presentation allowed Shakespeare to question all aspects of the 'ideal' and yet also to offer a persuasive vision of a human being, a long shot from Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, and yet not less capable to be truly great: neither the beauty of the world nor the quintessence of dust (Gibińska, 2020, p. 129).

Between the beauty of the world and the quintessence of dust the range of possibilities is endless and could not be encapsulated in strictly defined genres. Shakespeare was not, of course, the inventor of mixed genres, but followed the fashion (for the lack of a better word) in the most

sophisticated and artistically most mature way. This, I would like to suggest, stands behind his great progress through theatres all over the world until today. His plays are for all time exactly because they encompass so much and therefore lend themselves to sensibilities, and consciousness of people living in realities so very different from Shakespeare's.

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Marta Gibińska – Professor Emeritus of English literature, Jagiellonian University, Krakow; specialist in Shakespeare's drama and poetry. Currently teaching at Jozef Tischner European University, Krakow. Her scholarly interests and publications cover Shakespeare's language, interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, reception of Shakespeare in Poland, Shakespearean appropriations in Polish culture; also poetry translation and translation theory. Member of Polish Shakespeare Association, Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft, European Shakespeare Research Association, and International Shakespeare Association.

