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The genres of Shakespeare's plays

PRESENTING the dramatic works of Shakespeare in the Folio of 1623, John Heminges and Henry Condell categorized them in the table of contents under 'Comedies', 'Histories', and 'Tragedies'. What may strike us now as a conventional grouping was not so at the time: in the most obvious precedent for such a collection, the 1616 *Works* of Ben Jonson, the plays were arranged chronologically. The organizational principle they chose, which is featured as well in the title of the collection – *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* – invites readers of Shakespeare's plays to read in the light of genre, apprehending family resemblances within each group as well as individual distinctions.

For that matter, the individual nature of any work of art is hard to grasp without some sense of the genre to which it belongs – its 'kind', in the language of Shakespeare's day. The genres or kinds can be seen, in Rosalie Colie's words, 'as tiny subcultures with their own habits, habitats, and structures of ideas as well as their own forms'.¹ In recognizing such habits as clowns and wordplay for comedy, and such habitats as royal courts and battlefields for histories and tragedy, we construct a notion of a play's *modus operandi* that in turn conditions our reactions as dialogue and action unfold. A sense of the norms of genre guides us through that unfolding: prompting sympathy or detachment, highlighting the significance of what we witness, and raising expectations about what is to come. The author may also at times invoke generic codes in order to play against them, refusing to fulfil the expectations he has aroused and thus pointing us in a marked new direction. This contra-use of genre may be overt, as when Shakespeare at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost* denies, or at least postpones, the traditional comic ending of multiple marriages and has one of the thwarted bridegrooms complain, 'Our wooing doth not end like an old play' (*L.L.L.* 5.2.851). It may be more subtle and pervasive, as when *The Tempest* reshapes the makings of revenge tragedy into reconciliation² or *Romeo and Juliet* abruptly derails promises of a comedic conclusion with the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt and destroys young lovers and all in the subsequent wreck.

Of the three Folio genres, two – comedy and tragedy – were part of traditions stretching back to classical times, traditions which in England encompassed native elements as well. The history play, though its place alongside the other two was established by the early seventeenth century, had come forth much more

recently, in the English popular theatre of the late 1580s and 1590s. One effect of the three-genre grouping chosen by Heminges and Condell for their late colleague's plays was perhaps to remind readers of the central role played by Shakespeare himself in developing, or even originating, the Elizabethan history play.

However long familiar, the genres of comedy and tragedy were usually theorized during this period in a reductive, schematic way. While Aristotle's thoughts on tragedy received extensive Renaissance commentary, especially on the Continent, the dominant influences on dramatic genre theory were not the *Poetics* but certain later codifications of generic difference: 'De tragoedia et comoedia', made up of two late fourth-century essays by the grammarians Donatus and Evanthius and widely circulated in editions of the plays of Terence used in Renaissance schools and universities, and a similar treatise by another early grammarian, Diomedes. Conflating their several pronouncements produces a series of rudimentary oppositions between the comic and the tragic. Comedies take their plots from fiction, tragedies from history. Comedy involves men of middling estate; its perils are small-scale, its outcomes peaceful. In tragedy, 'omnia contra', the persons and issues are exalted and they end unhappily. Comedy, beginning in turmoil but ending in harmony, celebrates life; but tragedy's course from prosperity to calamity expresses rejection of life.³ English Renaissance writers when addressing dramatic genre repeat these schematic oppositions again and again without doing much to advance or refine them. The notion of drama, particularly comedy, as ethical instructor was especially useful to writers trying to defend the English stage against the persistent attacks of moralists (for example Thomas Lodge in his *Reply to Gosson* and Thomas Heywood in *An Apology for Actors*), and to Sir Philip Sidney defending imaginative literature in general in *An Apology for Poetry*.

Sidney advances in support of comedy the definition then ascribed to Cicero: by imitating 'the common errors of our life' and inviting reactions of scorn and ridicule, comedy teaches us what not to do.⁴ In fact, this works better as a debating point than as a gloss on actual comedies of the 1580s when Sidney was writing, or on those Shakespeare wrote in the following two decades. Indeed, by deploring the recalcitrance of 'naughty play-makers and stage-keepers' even while praising comedy's proper social aim, Sidney himself tacitly recognizes a large gap between theory and practice. Farces and romantic fantasies hardly mirrored everyday life, and the driving impulse of most comedies was not to punish error but to entertain. Nor is there any evidence supporting Sidney's parallel didactic claim for tragedy, that watching the downfall of unjust rulers made kings fear to be tyrants. Other aspects of the grammarians' generic paradigms, however, can in spite of their limitations be more usefully pursued in the actual dramatic practice of those Elizabethan plays that have survived (many were never printed, or no copy now exists), which in turn may fill out those laconic formulas and uncover their implications.

What is implied by the most basic distinction of all, that comedy ends happily and tragedy unhappily? Since all plots involve threats and dangers, the assumption is that while in tragedies these threats are fulfilled, in comedies they may be evaded. Evanthius characterizes the dangers of comedy as small in scale compared to those of tragedy, but Shakespeare's comic protagonists regularly face alienation, abandonment, and death. What makes the difference is not less serious perils but the operation of a kind of 'evitability' principle whereby shifts and stratagems and sheer good luck break the chain of causality that seemed headed for certain catastrophe. Portia finds a hole in Venetian law through which Antonio may escape without paying his pound of flesh (*The Merchant of Venice*); Dogberry's watchmen accidentally uncover the villainy of Don John and deliver Hero from disgrace and death (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Reality itself, seemingly fixed, turns out in the comic world to be both mutable and malleable. In *As You Like It* a chance meeting with a hermit results in the sudden conversion of the tyrant Duke Frederick, who then easily gives back the throne he usurped from his brother; Oberon's magic redirects Demetrius' love from Hermia to Helena so that the lovers of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may be tidily paired. In tragedy, on the other hand, the causal chain unwinds inexorably towards destruction, cutting off alternative possibilities of escape or potential new beginnings. In *King Lear* the army led by Cordelia that seemed to promise deliverance is defeated; and in a final shocking blow even the refounded relationship of father and daughter is cut off by Cordelia's murder. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony is cornered in Egypt, loses his last battle, and can find himself again only by dying.

Even though Shakespeare occasionally drew a tragic plot from fiction, the premise that tragedies are based on the givens of history or established legend and comedies on fictional events the writer can mould as he wishes has its own internal logic. The chain of cause and consequence is more usual in lived experience than magical transformation. Actual lives, no matter how rich in power and achievement, always end in the final defeat of death, and tragedies, whether they end in death or not (Shakespeare's always do), have the same fated quality of what has already happened and cannot be changed or evaded. In its unerring movement towards that inevitable conclusion, tragedy enacts the cadential rhythm of every human existence, even while it protests against that inevitable end in its countermovement of expanding heroic self-realization.

The insistence of tragic formulas on events of great magnitude and persons of exalted estate accords with life thus felt from the inside, the unique self and its never-to-be-repeated life. (Shakespeare's Othello, Antony, and Titus Andronicus are indispensable military commanders, Julius Caesar and the men who kill him are central to the leadership of Rome; even Romeo and Juliet are the focal points of a social division that threatens to destroy a whole city.) But life may also be apprehended, by different minds or by the same minds in different circumstances, in a more social way: as something common and ongoing, the community weathering upheavals and vicissitudes by finding new ways to adapt

and regroup. The clever devices that untie comic knots enact this real sense of continuity and new opportunity even while they remould hard facts into the image of our wish. Comedy's more ordinary characters, who evade death and disgrace and move on to marry and procreate, assert against the personal orientation of tragedy a sense of life as an endless stream in which we participate but are not the whole story.

From an intertextual perspective, Elizabethan tragedy grows, like any other form, out of roots in earlier literature. Classical drama provided one source, although the work of the great Greek tragedians in Shakespeare's time was known, if at all, mainly to the learned in the occasional Latin translation. Euripides was more admired than Aeschylus or Sophocles, and also more available in Latin versions; individual plays of his have been claimed as models for the rhythm of *Titus Andronicus*, 'suffering to an intolerable pitch, followed by the relief of aggressive action' and for the pervasive disillusionment of *Troilus and Cressida* with its self-divided characters and unstable values.⁵ Better known and more revered than any Greek was the Roman tragedian Seneca. The models his plays provided for high passionate rhetoric, structured by repetition and opposition, probably assisted Renaissance writers, including Shakespeare, on their way to mature tragic verse. On the other hand, Seneca may have been credited with too much influence in other areas: the comic dramatist Terence is the more likely model for five-act structure, and the complaining ghost was already omnipresent in the narrative tragedies generally labelled *de casibus* after Boccaccio's archetypal collection detailing the falls of the mighty, *De casibus virorum illustrium*. Boccaccio's work was translated at one remove by Lydgate in his fifteenth-century *Falls of Princes* and later imitated in a popular compilation, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, which was first issued in 1574 and republished several times, with substantial additions, through 1610. In the *Mirror*, figures from English and Roman history narrate in the first person their greatness and fall, providing numerous models for individual tragedies – Richard II, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, Locrine, Julius Caesar, and so on – and cumulatively a sense of the instability of worldly greatness. That sense also pervades Seneca's dramas and, from a different perspective, the equally well-known narratives of mutability in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Another cumulative effect of the *Mirror* narratives has potential relevance for the sense of blurred responsibility in most of Shakespeare's tragedies, where personal failings and external circumstances operate in a mysterious conjunction to bring down the hero. The *Mirror* collection as a whole creates a similar ambiguity, with some figures attributing their falls to personal flaws and crimes while others blame fortune, the instability of this fallen world.

The native medieval drama offered no direct model for tragedy, but certain features of it point towards the tragic: especially the Passion of Christ in the mystery plays, a single life and death freighted with significance; and in the morality plays the deployment of personified virtues and vices to explore internal conflict. After

the Reformation, a new theological emphasis on reprobation made tragic shaping a possibility in Protestant moralities such as *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1560s) and *The Conflict of Conscience* (1570s). At the same time a few early attempts at tragedy began appearing. Some were classical in orientation, such as Sackville and Norton's *Gorboduc* (1562) and Gascoigne's *Jocaste* (1566), performed at the universities and Inns of Court, and some more popular, such as *Horestes* (1567) and *Cambises* (1569/70), which mingled high and low estates and leavened the tragic events with a large dose of comedy. These plays, although variously wooden, flat, and incoherent, nevertheless gesture towards a serious secular drama. Norman Rabkin has found promise of the more golden future in the very confusions that make *Gorboduc* and *Cambises* individually unsatisfactory as works of art: the ambivalences that cloud any clear moral message in them thus open the way to tragic complexities as some neat causality inside a single moral system could not.⁶

In any case, the golden future was not long in coming. The 1580s saw the beginnings of true tragic shape and style in two successful dramas of the commercial stage: *The Spanish Tragedy* (?1587) and *Tamburlaine* (1587–8). In the first, by Thomas Kyd, the central premise of revenge is complicated by questions about the relation of such individual justice to social and divine law. *The Spanish Tragedy* also keeps blurring the line between theatricality and life, so that events presented as plays become all too real, and courses of action apparently individually willed are shown to be a fated script. The second, by Christopher Marlowe, opened up new horizons with its soaring verse and grand heroic vision. Both plays eschew the reductive moralizing that had short-circuited any tragic effect in earlier proto-tragic poems and dramas, *Tamburlaine* instead celebrating heroic virtù and *The Spanish Tragedy* underlining its ironies of concept and perspective. The next notable developer of tragic possibility was Shakespeare himself, in the 1590s and the early 1600s.

No single formula informs Shakespeare's tragedies. The decisive tragic act may be variously placed, as early as the first scene in the case of *King Lear*, which then traces out in the rest of the action the ramifications of Lear's giving up power and dividing the kingdom, or as late as the last scene in the case of *Othello*, where the emphasis is rather on the complicated internal and external forces that push the Moor to murder the wife he loves. In the tragedies of the 1590s Shakespeare's focus shifts from heroic suffering in *Titus Andronicus* to social and generational tension in *Romeo and Juliet* to the clash between personal integrity and political imperative in *Julius Caesar*. When he later returns to some of these areas of tragic conflict – the dialectic of personal and political in *Coriolanus*, generational dynamics and monumental suffering in *King Lear* – the result in each case is a different tragic vision. If they are linked by any distinctive feature, it is the structuring of events to mark the limits of the hero's power by moving him from his sphere of established mastery into a situation demanding another, perhaps diametrically opposed, kind of effectiveness. Othello and Coriolanus

must leave the straightforward hostilities of war for the covert rivalries of peacetime society; Brutus and Hamlet, the amplitude of uncommitted speculation for a realm of action that calls for decisive deeds. More voluntarily, Macbeth goes from an honourable subordination to a royal power he cannot wield righteously, and Lear in the other direction, from supreme authority to dependence.

In 1598, Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* noted the pre-eminence 'among the Latins' of Plautus for comedy and Seneca for tragedy, and praised Shakespeare as 'among the English the most excellent in both kinds'. That Meres lists along with *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* as examples of Shakespeare's tragedies four plays later classed in the Folio as histories – not only the tragically shaped *Richard II* and *Richard III* but *King John* and *Henry IV* as well – suggests the instability of generic labelling at the time and the fluid mingling of kinds. Meres may also have had some difficulty in getting his total of Shakespearian tragedies up to six in order to balance the six comedies he has just listed: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and the problematic *Love's Labour's Won*, which refers either to a lost play or to one now known under another name. While Shakespeare's great tragic period, the decade from 1599 to 1607 or 1608, was still to come, Meres had no trouble finding successful comedies to list. Indeed, if modern chronologies are correct, he could have added others: *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*. After something like ten years writing for the public stage, Shakespeare's credentials in comedy were well established.

The tradition of comedy that Shakespeare inherited and developed was as mixed as that of tragedy but considerably richer in examples. The classical models were Plautus, as Meres notes, and Terence, whose influence on structure and character in Elizabethan comedies is more observable than that of Seneca in the early tragedies. The plots of Plautus and Terence work out of tight spots through deceptions and mistakings to a gratifying conclusion in recovery of lost children, exposure of impostors, and removal of impediments to youthful male desire. But English comedy also had deep roots in popular festivals, characterized variously by song and dance, disguising, ritual abuse, and the mocking or up-ending of authority under the chaotic rule of temporary kings or queens. Tied as they were to the round of the agricultural year, the festivals celebrated fertility through individual sexual coupling as well as communal rites. In both their elaborate pretences involving disguise and their usual conclusion in the mating of the young, festive practices merged easily with the classical comedy plot. The clowning spirit infiltrated serious medieval drama, to enliven the Flood story with Noah's shrewish wife and even the Nativity with the chicanery of Mak the sheep-stealer, and to leaven the moralities' action of fateful moral choice with the antics of the Vice. Like tragedy, comedy was fed from non-dramatic sources as well, ballads and romance narratives such as *Amadis de Gaule* and Heliodorus' *Aethiopian History*, that presented strenuous quests and much-tried loves in a climate of wonders.

Romance, classical structure, and festive elements had already begun to come together in drama when Shakespeare began writing, in such school and university plays as *Ralph Roister Doister* (1552) and *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1553) and later in John Lyly's fantasies written for the boys' companies and comedies of the adult popular theatre by George Peele and Robert Greene (1580s and 1590s). While the school plays feature clowning, romance elements come into their own with such comedies as *The Old Wife's Tale* (Peele) and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (Greene).

Courtship is the staple activity in the comic drama of Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries, driving the main plot or, less often, a subplot (as when Antipholus of Syracuse woos Luciana around the edges of a welter of mistaken identities in *The Comedy of Errors*). While these plays pursue love wholeheartedly, they are equally energetic in negating death. Like their carnivalesque antecedents marked by burlesque funerals and resurrections, they invoke the end of life only to avoid it, undo it, distance it, laugh it off. Only the most minor characters in them actually die. Quite a few, like Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, are believed to be dead, only to reappear in due course among the living in a triumph of 'evitability' and wish-fulfilment. The same bent to reshape reality can be seen in the many controller-figures who haunt these comedies, working their transformations through magic, like Friar Bacon (*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, *John of Bordeaux*) and Oberon (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), or through their own ingenuity like Petruccio (*The Taming of A Shrew/The Shrew*). The frequent disguisers and deceivers belong with this group in that they manipulate others through their superior knowledge. Their stratagems, indispensable for the dramatic structure, generate both complications and resolutions. While such manipulators are typically male, like the hero of *Mucedorus* and the suitors in *Fair Em*, Shakespeare fostered his own tradition of women who control events in their plays – sometimes aided by disguise in the manner of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Rosalind in *As You Like It*, sometimes relying on sheer force of wit and wisdom, as do the ladies in *Love's Labour's Lost* and the wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Not all his comedies work this way, and in a few, such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Twelfth Night*, male disguise confers on the heroine only knowledge, without the power to alter events. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's 'women on top' speciality has its own relevance to the comic mode, which rejoices, like the seasonal festivals that animate it, in temporarily placing servants over masters and women over men, dislocating the hierarchies sanctioned by its society only to reassert them at the play's end.

Another decided preference is for the plural. Plotting is typically multiple, including frames and inductions as well as subsidiary actions, and tone often varies accordingly. Refined love-longings are set off by the more physical preoccupations of servants and clowns, intent like the slaves of Roman comedy on getting dinner and avoiding danger. The resulting suggestion of alternative realities was most fully developed by Shakespeare in his repeated comic device of

contrasting worlds: court and forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, Venice and Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*. The point is not to choose fluidity and anarchy over strict social and hierarchical codes, or the law of love over the law of property, but to include both, adjusting one to the other in a new, productive balance. Comic inclusiveness thus reinforces 'evitability', achieving a broader view that sees around the impasse. In encouraging alternative meanings, it also underlies the verbal play for which comedy always has room. Fools and lovers alike bandy words with delight, derailing or ignoring the forward thrust of the action for the local pleasures of pun and clever insult. In such verbal acrobatics, and in larger complications of action, the principle of 'dilation' expounded by Patricia Parker finds its place in comic structure – to a great degree *generates* that structure. Its devices, derived from rhetoric, of repetition, doubling, preposterous reversal, amplification, and multiplication of words and errors structure comedy's dramatic time from beginning to conclusion, indeed function largely to defer that conclusion.⁷

From a different point of view, Alexander Leggatt also sees comic inclusiveness as antithetical to closure, pointing out that since comedy regularly contradicts itself by incorporating opposite perspectives – for example mocking marriage while working to bring marriages about – it naturally mocks itself as well, undermining its own practices.⁸ 'Our wooing doth not end like an old play' is part of the very convention it flouts.

The history play lacks such clear generic markers. The 1623 Folio lists Shakespeare's histories between the comedies and the tragedies, ordered by historical chronology: *King John*, *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* come before the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, which were written earlier, with *Henry VIII* coming last. Even in Shakespeare's time, it was easier to recognize the history play than to define it. In the anonymous play *A Warning for Fair Women*, which brings on stage all three genres personified, tragedy is associated with high passion and violent deaths and comedy with wit and the lesser passions of lovers, but the only clue to history's nature is her drum and ensign, suggesting war. Some years later, in his defence of the theatre, Heywood proposes that the deeds of worthies constitute the core of the history play, held up for emulation and, in the case of the English histories, patriotic pride.⁹ These pointers are relevant as far as they go, implying concentration on public affairs as characteristic of the history play, battle as a central action, and a nationalist flavour to the proceedings.

The dramatic practice of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights suggests a more specific focus in the dynastic politics of recent English history, the later Plantagenets and, after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the Tudors. Shakespeare's Plantagenet plays and his later *Henry VIII* were accompanied by others in the same areas such as the anonymous *Troublesome Reign of King John* and *Woodstock*, Marlowe's *Edward II*, Heywood's 1 and 2 *Edward IV*, the anonymous *True*

Tragedy of Richard III, and the later *Sir Thomas Wyatt* by Dekker and Webster and *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody*, by Heywood. If a basis in recent national events was felt to define the genre, we can understand why Heminges and Condell would exclude from their middle category Shakespeare's plays based on Britain's remote/legendary past (*King Lear*, *Cymbeline*), as well as those based on Roman history. Plays in the latter group, such as *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, have in common with the English histories a pervasive concern with tensions between public and private values, a preoccupation with power and its conflicted passage from one ruler to another, and (except for *Antony*) a marginalizing of the sexual relations so central to some tragedies and almost all comedies. What they lack is Englishness, and in making that definitive for their history category, Heminges and Condell imply a particular relationship between these plays and their English readers.

That relationship, the special meaning of the English past for the English present, was both general and specific. The history play arose at a time when the sense of nationhood was crystallizing in England as in other European states, part of a heightened interest in earlier times that took in chronicles, ballads, and pamphlets as well. Elizabethans looked to events and figures from those times – not only kings and their battles but country squires, folk heroes, and common soldiers with their different activities and perspectives – to anchor the corporate English identity they were newly defining. In a more focused way, playwrights might dramatize through the Plantagenets current political forces both conservative and radical. Certainly some issues of the history plays were current concerns as well: religious factionalism threatened Elizabethan society as well as that of the Wars of the Roses, powerful nobles still challenged central monarchic rule, and conflicts over the succession to the throne had particular resonance in a land ruled by an aging childless queen.

Conceived and valued in these terms, the history play was tied more closely than the other two genres to what actually happened, or was understood to have happened, and accepted artificial structuring less readily than the more openly fictive comedy and tragedy.¹⁰ Formally it inclines towards the episodic, and its endings, though frequently signalled by the death of the eponymous king, nevertheless offer more provisional closure than the other genres, with a new ruler succeeding and the life of the nation continuing. Perhaps because of this open-ended, *in medias res* quality, critics of the histories have sought a larger framework in which to comprehend them. Such formulations of an overarching structure owe something to the 'Tudor myth' perceived by E. M. W. Tillyard in Plantagenet history: innocence lost with the deposition of Richard II, rebellion and unrest culminating in military losses abroad and increasingly savage fighting at home until Richard III gathers all wickedness into himself and is cast out by the redemptive figure of Henry Tudor. The lost ideal order is usually located in the reign of Edward III; or, looking only at Shakespeare's histories and bearing

in mind the composition of the Henry VI–Richard III group before the historically earlier Richard II–Henry V group, one may with Phyllis Rackin see Henry V himself as the ‘lost heroic presence that the entire historical project is designed to recover’ – gone and mourned in the first tetralogy, not even fully present in much of the second, often absent or play-acting, and even in his own play ambiguously presented.¹¹ In any case, behind the various versions of mythic loss and renewal is the ur-myth that structured human history on the medieval stage, the fall and redemption of man. Even this perspective, however, cannot completely enclose history’s open-endedness in full recovery, for history still goes on: the loss of Eden is an accomplished fact, but final redemption, on the individual level at least, is only a hope for the future.

If elements in the history play kept it from full adherence to the conventional organizations of either tragedy or comedy, it nevertheless drew freely on both genres for devices large and small. The common pattern tracing the reign of a king, who rises to and wields great power and then loses all in defeat and death, accommodated easily to tragic shaping, all the more so since so many of the major figures of the history plays had already undergone such treatment in the *Mirror* narratives. Single-figure trajectories determine structure in such Shakespearian histories as *Richard II* and *Richard III*, and strongly condition it in others, such as *Henry VI*. In these *Henry VI* plays, however, the falls of Talbot, Humphrey of Gloucester, and Richard of York are single elements in more various designs, which include also the bizarre career of Joan of Arc, the Duchess of Gloucester’s dabbling in sorcery, the love affair of Margaret and Suffolk, and the waxing and waning fortunes of the pathetic Henry. Already sharing with comedy its concern with a whole society, the history play in such instances borrows comic practices as well, the multiplying of actions and even in some cases the actions themselves – the duchess’s spirit-raising, Suffolk’s winning Margaret for himself instead of his master, the king going incognito among common folk, as Henry V later does on the eve of Agincourt – all were familiar from the comic drama, especially what Anne Barton has called the ‘comical history’, which deploys historical personages such as James IV and William the Conqueror in romance actions.¹² The *Henry IV* plays are perhaps structurally closest to comedy, with plots based in different social and ideological worlds commenting on one another by contrast and ironic analogy rather than feeding into one line of action. If there is a structure peculiar to the political play, not shared by tragedy or comedy, it may be that described by Geoffrey Bullough in the *Henry VI* plays, which also characterizes the political tragedy *Julius Caesar*: ‘a wavelike motion’ as figures become significant power-players, then are challenged and downed by others who in turn are overthrown.¹³

The sense of ongoing motion implicit in successive waves suggests how the histories also differ from the comedies and tragedies in their apprehension of time and their mode of closure. Tragic time is relentlessly linear, irreversible, all

too short. Death is the end towards which Renaissance tragedies move, an end rendered all the more final for the individual when the Reformation swept away the doctrine of purgatory and the practice of intercession for the dead. The real impending defeat facing the hero in secular drama, however, is not damnation but what Michael Neill has called 'the horror of indistinction', which is paradoxically 'the supreme occasion for exhibitions of individual distinction', the stance that we recognize as heroic.¹⁴ Comic time is elastic, even reversible. The right person arrives on the scene just in time to ward off catastrophe: Valentine to rescue Sylvia in *Two Gentlemen*, the missing twins in both *Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night* to save Egeon and Viola. Death itself is not final. In their conclusions comedies invoke a new phase of life rather than the absolute end, but the solution of the comic dilemma, accompanied by comeuppances for the obstructive figures and multiple pairings-off for the marriageable, gives a sense of closure nevertheless. Projections beyond the immediate comic stasis are rare. The histories, however, habitually look before and after. *1 Henry VI*, for example, begins by mourning for the dead Henry V and celebrating his deeds, and ends with the projected marriage of Henry VI to Margaret not yet achieved and her adulterous affair with Suffolk already prepared for. Even the hero-king's triumphs in *Henry V* are dimmed by the epilogue's forward look to Henry's early death and the contested rule of his successor that would lead to loss of territories in France and civil war in England. Whether the provisional closure is ominous like this one, or problematic, as at the end of *Richard II* when the new Henry IV vows to lead a crusade to the Holy Land and to do penance for his part in the murder of his predecessor, or hopeful, as in *Henry VIII* when Cranmer prophesies over the infant Elizabeth the greatness of her future reign, the history play moves not towards completion but into ongoing time.

While the plays overall confirm the generic divisions laid out by the Folio table of contents, it is clear even from my brief review that there was considerable commerce between those subcultures of comedy, history, and tragedy. For one thing, the stories audiences liked, romances in particular, did not necessarily accord neatly with tragic or comic paradigms.¹⁵ For another, viewers liked variety in their theatrical entertainment. The mixture of kings and clowns, hornpipes and funerals, that Sidney deplored in his *Apology* went back to the medieval drama and would continue long after Sidney's death. Several of the Folio designations are problematic. May we not consider *Richard II* and *Richard III* as tragedies, labelled as such in their quarto publications and the latter even in its Folio heading, praised as such by Meres, and certainly akin to the other tragedies in their single-figure, rise-and-fall structure? Do the Roman plays, especially *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, not have as much in common with the histories' preoccupation with struggles for power and issues of state as with the tragedies' more personal emphasis? Source material seems to have determined placement in both these instances, English as opposed to Roman history. Does source material also

account for a more notable anomaly, *Cymbeline* listed among the tragedies? Comedic in structure and concluding in happy reconciliation rather than death, *Cymbeline* is nevertheless based on the same body of legendary British history that lies behind Fletcher's *Tragedy of Bonduca* and Shakespeare's own *King Lear*. *Troilus and Cressida*, which Heminges and Condell placed with the tragedies but earlier was promoted as a comedy in the printer's advertisement to the 1609 quarto, presents another generic puzzle, compounded for readers of the Folio because the copy was apparently cleared for publication so late in the printing process that the play is placed ambiguously between the histories and tragedies, with a separate set of signatures unconnected to either sequence, and is omitted entirely from the table of contents. Should we see it as a tragedy (so designated in its Folio heading and running titles) because, like *Cymbeline*, it is based on legendary history? And indeed, unlike *Cymbeline*, has a heroic war as its framework and ends with the death of a major warrior? Or should we accept the 1609 label of comedy because the play systematically deflates those towering figures and debunks their idealized causes? The question is still with us three centuries later: in the first two generations after World War II, editions of Shakespeare's complete works that organize the plays generically usually place *Troilus* with the tragedies, but recently it appears more often among the comedies.

Both *Troilus* and *Cymbeline* are best seen as generic experiments, in the context of changes in theatrical fashion as the seventeenth century began. The history play in its later manifestations (*Edward IV*, *Jane Shore*) was veering into romance and folk comedy. In comedy, the new prominence of the boys' companies fostered a taste for modes that made use of the child actors' wit and quickness but made fewer demands on them in the way of emotional depth: the satiric comedy in which Jonson and Marston led the way and the city comedy exemplified by Middleton – its scene bourgeois, competitive, money-driven London, its staple action trickery. Shakespeare did not pursue the citizen comedy line – *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has an English setting and middle-class characters who perpetrate various deceptions but money is hardly central and the play is too genially romantic to foreshadow the harsher tone of Middleton and the 'Ho' plays. *Troilus*, however, in its pervasive spirit of detached parody, is somewhat akin to the 'comical satires' written for the boy actors.

More recent critics, whether viewing *Troilus* as ironic tragedy or as satiric comedy, have largely followed the lead of the late nineteenth-century critic F. S. Boas in grouping it with two other Shakespeare plays of the early 1600s, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well*.¹⁶ These 'problem plays' (Boas's label gestured at social-issue drama in the manner of Ibsen while reformulating the problems in ethical terms) share a grittiness not apparent in Shakespeare's earlier comedy, addressing deep-rooted perversions in both individuals and societies resistant to the magico-metamorphic strategies that heretofore had produced satisfying comic conclusions. The harsh imperatives of class division and rampant sexual appetite invoked by these experimental plays push uneasily

against the fairy-tale devices that move their plots forward and supposedly resolve them.

As for *Cymbeline*, though this crowded play incorporates some tragic features, it has deeper affinities with two other late plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, and with another not included in the First Folio but usually ascribed at least in part to Shakespeare, *Pericles*. The plays in this mode were responding in some degree to recent developments on the theatre scene, the popularity of masques at court and the availability of a new indoor acting space at Blackfriars, more intimate than the Globe. Often designated as romances – another nineteenth-century category, this one devised by Edward Dowden¹⁷ – they may be thought of either as a subset of comedy in that they achieve a final harmony, or as a merger of tragedy and comedy in that this reconciliatory phase comes only after prolonged evil and suffering. If they are part of the same generic adventure that produced *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare now finds a way of holding in solution the diversity of tone and action whose clash made those earlier Jacobean comedies problematic, returning to the romantic narratives he had drawn on in some earlier comedies but with additional emphasis on the peculiar features of the romance mode. His plots in these late plays are episodic in structure and vastly extended in time and space. The larger view that results generates a perception of time different from that in earlier comedy as well as that in the histories and the tragedies: whether or not actually personified as in *The Winter's Tale*, time is shown as shaped and patterned, its past disorder made meaningful by present retributions or fulfilments. This evolving larger vision creates a certain distance between audience and stage action which is increased by the conscious fictionality of that action, its improbabilities and miraculous turns of event, including manifestations of the divine, and by the recurrent narrator figures like Gower in *Pericles* and Time in *The Winter's Tale* who 'tell' the drama at key points.¹⁸ In terms of Marianne Moore's celebrated definition of poetry,¹⁹ Shakespeare in the romances accentuates the imaginary quality of his gardens in order to contain very real toads. It is in that realness, that grounding of extreme emotions and actions in a comprehensible internal psychology, that Shakespeare's last plays diverge most markedly from the contemporary tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher which they resemble in surface characteristics.

Generic traditions in Shakespeare's time, often blending and always evolving, nevertheless served as guides: to playwrights in developing their material, to audiences and readers in understanding the plays they produced. In addition to the internal genre indicators discussed in this chapter, spectators at the theatres were directed in their reactions by the look of the stage itself, hung with black for a tragedy and perhaps with some other colour for non-tragic drama.²⁰ In Shakespeare's hands, genre conventions provided shape rather than limitation, in musical terms a kind of ground on which – and sometimes against which – he played the individual descant of each play.

Notes

1. Rosalie L. Colie, *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 116.
2. Michael Neill, 'Remembrance and Revenge: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*', in *Jonson and Shakespeare*, ed. Ian Donaldson (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 45–9.
3. Donatus, Evanthius, and Diomedes are summarized in Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954), pp. 105–9, and Marvin T. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 56–7; a translation and analysis of the Donatus–Evanthius treatise by S. Georgia Nugent appears in *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Maurice Charney (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), pp. 259–80.
4. Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry; or, The Defence of Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1965), p. 117. Subsequent references are also to this page.
5. On *Titus*, see Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) p. 98 (discussion, pp. 85–107); on *Troilus*, see Margaret J. Arnold, "'Monsters in Love's Train': Euripides and Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*", *Comparative Drama* 18 (1984), 38–53.
6. Norman Rabkin, 'Stumbling toward Tragedy', in *Shakespeare's 'Rough Magic': Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), pp. 28–49.
7. Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), chs. 2 and 5.
8. Alexander Leggatt, *English Stage Comedy 1490–1990: Five Centuries of a Genre* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), ch. 7, esp. pp. 146–9.
9. *A Warning for Fair Women*, Tudor Facsimile Texts (New York: AMS Press, 1970), Induction, A2–A3; Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (1612), B3–B4.
10. G. K. Hunter, 'Truth and Art in History Plays', *Shakespeare Survey* 42 (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 15–24.
11. Phyllis Rackin, *Stages of History: Shakespeare's English Chronicles* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 29–30.
12. Anne Barton, 'The King Disguised: Shakespeare's *Henry V* and the Comical History', in *The Triple Bond: Plays, Mainly Shakespearean, in Performance*, ed. Joseph G. Price (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1975), pp. 92–117.
13. Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. III (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 168.
14. Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 33–4, 51–88.
15. G. K. Hunter, *English Drama 1586–1642: The Age of Shakespeare*, *Oxford History of English Literature*, vol. VI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 93.
16. F. S. Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors* (London: J. Murray, 1896), ch. 13. Boas's inclusion of *Hamlet* in this category was not adopted by most later critics.
17. *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art* (New York and London: Harper and Bros, 1899), pp. x–xi.
18. On distancing, fictionality, and narrativity in the last plays, see Barbara A. Mowat, *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), chs. 2 and 3.
19. Moore's 'Poetry' in its first version (1935) calls poets to present 'imaginary gardens

- with real toads in them', in *Selected Poems*, with an introduction by T. S. Eliot (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935).
20. For black hangings marking tragedy, see the opening line of *1 Henry VI* and *A Warning for Fair Women*, Induction, A3. The New Cambridge Shakespeare editor Michael Hattaway speculates that another colour may have indicated comedy: *The First Part of King Henry the Sixth* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 24.

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