

the middle when genre is being negotiated, when it is in the process of being made.

Shakespeare's genres: dynamic, not static

In many of these mid-points, that is to say, what we see is a battle over the genre of the play: a tussle about how things are going to work out. Most introductions to genre begin with definitions from notable theorists from Aristotle onwards; most are subsequently discomfited by their apparent misfit with Shakespeare's own employment of those genres. (See 'Where next' for some early modern definitions of genre.) I'd prefer to emphasise the ways in which Shakespeare seems to use his plays to comment on, rather than merely to occupy, generic categories and generic expectations.

Thus, Mercutio is the comic hope for an alternative to the hatreds of *Romeo and Juliet*: it's symbolically significant, therefore, that he's killed by Romeo's clumsy attempt to intervene in the fight. Shylock, a minor character in *The Merchant of Venice* who appears in only five scenes, is, nevertheless, always threatening to take it over. When Portia arrives at the Venetian courtroom disguised as the lawyer Balthazar, she is fighting for the play as comedy; Shylock, whetting his knife on the sole of his shoe, is trying to wrest it from the comic. When, as in Jonathan Miller's stage production (available on video directed by John Sichel (1974): see chapter 2 for more discussion of Shakespeare in performance), the part of Shylock is taken by a tragic actor – Miller cast Laurence Olivier – this generic uncertainty is even more pronounced. Portia's got to get rid of Shylock by the end of Act 4 because Act 5 belongs to the tragic hero. She does so, but Act 5 of *The Merchant of Venice* is a curious and uncomfortable affair, with a distended charade about the rings, and Shylock's spendthrift daughter Jessica and her new husband Lorenzo ominously trading abused-wives-in-mythology stories, all overshadowed by Shylock's unmentioned fate. We could see, therefore, both *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, as negotiating potential generic conflict, personifying a literary-critical discussion into an encounter between different protagonists on the stage. The same might be true of history plays: take *1 Henry IV*, for example, Hotspur is a character from a chivalric chronicle history, Falstaff from a London comedy, Prince Hal from something approaching the modern *bildungsroman*, or narrative of maturation. Their encounters are thus points at which different generic possibilities rub up against each other as the play dramatises its own negotiation of generic markers.

Table 5.1. Aspects of comedy and tragedy

Comedy	Tragedy
Titles suggest a mood, a time, or something flippant	Titles focus on an individual – or, less often, two individuals
Movement is towards marriage and social cohesion	Movement is towards isolation and social breakdown
Ends in marriages	Ends in deaths
Suggests a future beyond the play in renewed social bonds	Little sense of a future beyond the end of the play
<u>Tendency to dialogue</u>	<u>Tendency to soliloquy</u>
<u>Female characters prominent and active</u>	<u>Male characters prominent and active</u>
Transfer to a different location is full of possibility for change	Transfer to a different location intensifies old problems
Puns tend towards fecundity and sexual innuendo	Puns tend towards nihilism and the impossibility of communication
Choices are maintained, events are less predestined (what Susan Snyder calls 'evitability')	Sense of inevitability or inescapability about the sequence of events

Tragedy and comedy

I have tried to suggest so far that genre is produced dynamically in Shakespeare's plays, and that it is a topic for negotiation rather than for slavish conformity. When Desdemona momentarily revives at the end of *Othello* there is a tiny window of generic opportunity: perhaps she is not dead, perhaps the tragedy can be averted (it can't). When a 'green and gilded snake' (4.3.103) and a 'lioness, with udders all drawn dry' (4.3.109) converge dangerously on a sleeping man in the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It*, there's a sudden sense that this wood may not be so hospitable and comically transformative as it had seemed (perhaps it's time to go home). That is to say, therefore, that all plays combine elements we might want to consider as 'tragic' or 'comic', and it is the effect and the style of these combinations that is important, rather than some external definition of Shakespearean genre.

Because comedy and tragedy have often been seen to be at opposite ends of the generic spectrum, it can be useful to identify how the plays negotiate our expectations of these definitive forms (we will return to history below). Table 5.1 gives a template for the ways in which comedy and tragedy have tended to be distinguished.

While it's interesting to set out these generic differences, it's also clear that all of Shakespeare's plays partake of elements from both columns. We could trace in *Measure for Measure*, for example, the shift between the comic dominance of a female character – Isabella – and that of a male character – the Duke, even as the play negotiates the marital conclusion of comedy and the threat of the tragic conclusion of death. We could identify moments of soliloquy in comedy – Viola's in *Twelfth Night* – or their absence in a tragedy such as *Timon of Athens*. From this list, we can see that tragedy and comedy tug on the same rope and make use of the same tropes, to different effect. The interplay between these elements and these expectations is what makes Shakespeare's plays work.

At the end of his career, Shakespeare works on a number of plays – including *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest* – tended to be seen by recent scholars as a group, sometimes dubbed 'late romances', in which comic and tragic elements are intermingled. Thus *The Winter's Tale* gives us a jealous husband, rather like Othello, who accuses his wife Hermione of infidelity with his best friend Polixenes, banishes his infant daughter, and repents of his rashness only on hearing his wife has died, at the end of Act 3. The next act is set after the passage of sixteen years: in a pastoral landscape the alienated princess is approaching marriage, and this comic coda to the tragedy brings about resolution and restitution at the end of the play. It is clear that this structure juxtaposes tragedy and comedy in an explicit way, but what should also be clear to us is that this is a typical technique throughout Shakespeare's works, rather than one confined to this later period.

Tragedy – expanding the genre

Let's return to tragedy to examine this characteristic juxtaposition of generic expectations. The Folio catalogue lists eleven plays in its category 'Tragedies': *Coriolanus*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Cymbeline*. *Troilus and Cressida*, which comes immediately before *Coriolanus* in the body of the book, may also have been intended as a tragedy, but it is not listed in the catalogue. Since at least A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, first published in 1904, however, critical discussion has tended to focus on *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*.