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THE ISSUE OF GENRE-NESS IN SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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The present paper re-examines Shakespearean genre-ness in its historical context. Accordingly, attention has been focused on the two storylines of Western dramatic theory and practice, classical and non-classical, which include various time periods. The main objective is to explain the concept of *genre-ness* in terms of its historical continuity and causality.

Key words: *Shakespeare, Aristotle, drama, genre-ness, comedy, tragedy, tragicomedy*

The history of Western dramatic theory and practice can be represented as a narrative that combines two storylines, Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian. The first brings us back to those who kept comedy and tragedy clearly separated, and the second revolves around those who acted the opposite way and sought greater freedom of maneuver. The problem is that the first has dominated the narrative most of the time, but, in fact, the two storylines have always run parallel to each other. Many playwrights were channeled into the Aristotelian comedy/tragedy dichotomy, others ventured into crossover genres, while still others changed sides. As tradition exerts a tangible influence on art-minded people, I will argue that Shakespearean *genre-ness* is not only a matter of personal choice but also a matter of historical continuity because it is a natural continuation of previous developments. I will, therefore, try to historize the concept by presenting it as a link in the chain of centuries-old theater experience.

The concept of genre-ness originated in ancient Greece (5th-4th century B.C.). As we learn from Plutarch's *Moralia*, drama was strictly divided into high and low modes (Plutarch 1972: 346f-348d). The foremost playwrights' reputations are clearly suggestive of a high degree of artistic specialization. Judging from the writings that have survived intact, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides excelled in tragedy, while Aristophanes surpassed anyone else in composing Old Comedy-style plays.

As for the comedy/tragedy dichotomy, Plato asserts the role of versatile dramaturgy. He ventures to say explicitly, which he does through

Socrates, that "authors should be able to write both comedy and tragedy: the skillful tragic dramatist should also be a comic poet" (1997: 223d). That this bifurcated ability poses a considerable challenge to all aspiring dramatic poets is as glaringly obvious as the effort to commend comedy by stressing its equality of status with tragedy. Aside from the dominance of one genre over another, the assertion strongly implies a division into spheres and competences.

In his discussion of Greek poetic forms, Aristotle bends his mind to rectify the "anomalous" forms of tragedy that appeal to popular taste. Whether or not his *Poetics* stresses the purity of literary genres, the fact remains that it does not even slightly suggest a *normative* interest in "mongrel" categories. The Stagirite argues that all branches of poetry – epic, tragic, comic, and dithyrambic – grow out of imitation, but they differ from one another in "the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation, being in each case distinct" (1992: I.3.1447a). Basically, he takes note of the essential differences between the main mimetic modes because he aims to lay down the principles of "the art itself" rather than study audience tastes (Ford 2015: 3). Therefore, he explains the dichotomy between ideal and real character types by attributing its polar opposites to the script strategies of Sophocles and Euripides, the former depicting his dramatis personae "as they ought to be," and the latter portraying them "as they were or are"[1] (Aristotle 1922: XXV.11.1460b).

By quickening his interest in everyday characters, a playwright is bound to at least partially lift the curtain on the integrity of life which, when vividly presented within a single play, tends to blur the boundaries between the comic and the tragic. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Euripides, who delves into the issues of religion, slavery and women, challenges the taste of his contemporaries and contravenes the notion of tragedy as he "transgresses generic boundaries" (Gregory 2000: 59) without shaking the mimetic-cathartic foundations of the genre. Greek tragedy did exhibit some degree of tolerance toward comedy as long as the latter did not threaten to distort the contours of tragic action beyond recognition. All the main tragedians had occasional recourse to comedy, but it was Euripides that "repeatedly aim[ed] at comic effects" (Seidensticker 2005: 52). It is hardly any wonder, then, that his *Orestes* effects "a dénouement that is rather comic" (Luschnig 2015: 239)" in the sense that it suggests some affinity with the medieval conception of comedy. In *Orestes*, this sudden change is effectuated by a twofold development: first, Apollo, acting as a *deus ex machina*, sends Orestes to the court of the Areopagus promising him an acquittal at his trial for matricide and, second, a double marriage is arranged between Orestes and Hermione and between Pylades and Electra. I would like to specify that, in spite of all this, Euripedean "comedy" never oversteps its bounds. As Seidensticker correctly argues, Euripides employs comic elements only as long as they can bring about a more acute perception of tragic situations (2005: 52).

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[1] His reality-driven method of representation might have offended the lofty mythopoeia of 5th-century Attic tragedy (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2002: 25).

Arguably, the Roman playwrights took over and continued the narrative of non-Aristotelian drama. In the prologue to Plautus' *Amphitryon*, Mercury terms his work "tragicomoedia":

> I shall mix things up: let it be tragi-comedy. Of course it would never do for me to make it comedy out and out, with kings and gods on the boards. How about it, then? Well, in view of the fact that there is a slave part in it, I shall do just as I said and make it tragi-comedy.
>
> (Plautus 1916: *Am.* 1. prol.)

Like his Greek predecessors, Plautus deals with a mythological subject as his play is an adaptation rather than an original work. Unlike them, however, he approaches this "unusual" dramatic mode from a comic perspective. Neither Greek nor Roman drama was walled off from subsequent times. Just as Euripides' *Bacchant Women* exercised enormous influence across Europe,[2] which reached Plautus – his play *Menaechmi* gave "a comic response to the metatragic possibilities he saw in the *Bacchae*" (Slater 2001: 201), – so Plautine comedy had an impact on Renaissance playwrights, including Shakespeare. It is well known that *The Comedy of Errors* is basically patterned on the *Menaechmi* and partially on the *Amphitryo*.

In contrast to Plautus, Roman critics subscribed to Greek literary theory. Consequently, they were less than enthusiastic over any form of unsanctioned interaction. In Horace's estimation, comic and tragic poetry run on independent tracks, which is why light-hearted subject matters and comic characters are ill-suited to tragedy.[3] Cicero, who conceives of literary genres as ideal types of poetic discourse – "tragic, comic, epic," etc. – also emphasizes the impropriety of mixing two distinct genres.

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[2] Many of them acknowledged their acquaintance with Euripides' play, from Plutarch and Callimachus through Lucian to Pacuvius, Catullus, Horace, Seneca, etc. (See more in: Perris 2015: 508-509).

[3] As he put it, "A theme for Comedy refuses to be set forth in verses of Tragedy […] Let each style keep the becoming place allotted it" (Horace 1942: 459).

Hence he goes on to say that "in tragedy anything comic is a defect, and in comedy anything tragic is out of place" (Cicero 1856: 527). Thus, in spite of the domestic significance of Plautine comedy, Horace and Cicero refused to give theoretical status to tragicomedy.

The Trecento, however, saw a sea of change because of the renewed interest in the culture of classical antiquity. Not only did some playwrights press ahead with tragicomedy, but they also did their best to defend its pragmatic plausibility, as demonstrated by Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio (1504-1573) who, although steeped in classical literature, clearly felt the need to bend the rules of classical drama in order to please popular taste.[4] As Cinthio was able to see both sides of the argument in Aristotle's disquisition on drama, he was determined to rehabilitate the "Odyssean" type of tragedy, which favors happy endings over disastrous ones (cf. Aristotle 1922: XIII.7.1453a). This marked a complete reversal of classical dramatic theory since, in his view, it was no longer reasonable to disapprove of any "tragedy [that] has a happy ending" (Cinthio and Javitch 2011: 215).

This revisionist agenda did not remain within the confines of Italy. There is convincing evidence that, at least to a certain extent, Shakespeare was influenced by some Italian luminaries. As E. M. Tillyard argues (1951: 129-30), the plot of *Measure for Measure* is borrowed from George Whetstone – from his play *The Historye of Promos and Cassandra* (1578) and from his eponymous prose tale "The Rare History of Promos and Cassandra" – who in turn was inspired by Cinthio's *Hecathomithi* (1566; *A Hundred Stories*).[5]

In one way or another, Cinthio's assumptions resonated with Italian dramatists, namely with Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612), the author of *Il Pastor Fido* (1590; *The Pastor Fido: A Pastoral Tragicomedy*). Having taken Aristotle's "double thread of plot" (1922: XIII.7.1453a) quite literally, he constructed two plotlines, which, soaked in fear of danger and death as behooves a tragedy, are interwoven into a fitting finale crowned with the double marriage between Mirtillo and Amarilli, and between Silvio and Dorinda.

Even before its publication in 1590, the play attracted the censorious attention of Lionardo Salviati (1540-1589), a Florentine scholar, who commented on the impropriety of its form and content. After its first fulllength performance, the clash of opposing views escalated further into literary warfare (Fenlon 1976: 90-91). In response to the keen philippics against his play, Guarini wrote a treatise, the *Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1601; *The Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry*), wherein he explained that, as regards the types of plots, his play "contains two forms, the tragic and the comic" and that "it has more than one subject, like almost all the plays of Terence" (1967: 507). Not only did this contestable concept of unified "irreconcilables" come to the fore, but also it did justice to all Greek crossovers and their audiences that attracted no sustained attention in the *Poetics*.

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[4] His explanatory letter to Guilio Ponzio Ponzoni, entitled *Discorso [...] intorno al comporre delle comedie e delle tragedie* (1543, 1554; see Charlton 1946: lxxiii), and his poem "Ercole" (1557) were aimed at correcting the injustice inflicted upon the art of drama by Aristotle's *Poetics*.

[5] See also Sarah Dewar-Watson's "Aristotle and Tragicomedy" (2007: 23).

As has been correctly noted, it is hard to know whether Shakespeare familiarized himself with Guarini's view, but, given the strong typological resemblance between their works, it is not even necessary to look for any further evidence since the transfer of humanist ideas and values, e.g. the commedia dell'arte and pastoral tragicomedy (Henke 2007: 43; see also Maguire 1987: 85), from Italy to England provides an international perspective – European, Western, continental, etc., – from which to view all dualities that undermined the classical model. Shakespeare's non-conventional attitude to dramatic composition is all the more evident when one considers *Cymbeline* since it reflects all of Guarini's assumptions about stage pastoral (Kirkpatrick 1995: 293).

The men of letters of the early Tudor period were still far from attaining enough clarity of vision to set direction. There were wide fluctuations depending on the source of influence. One line of development was domestic. It came from medieval drama inasmuch as moralities and interludes were performed well into the sixteenth century. But there was another one, too. Having originated on the Continent, it fostered academic drama, which was performed at the universities of Oxford (Christ Church and St. John's College) and Cambridge (St. John's College), first in Latin and then in the vernacular. It was Roman drama that gave rise to Tudor comedy as represented by plays such as *Jack Juggler* (1553-58), Nicholas Udall's *Raplh Roister Doister* (1551-53), and *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (c. 1553).[6] As for Tudor tragedy, e.g. *Gorboduc* (1562) by Norton and Sackville, it was patterned after classical sources (Sophocles, Euripides, Seneca the Younger, etc.) and the morality play. Given this enthusiastic but tentative fumbling for new forms, it seems unlikely that even the most experienced man of the theater would have developed a commonly accepted orderly system of dramatic conventions. Instead, there was a genuine difference of opinion even among scholarly oriented professionals.

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[6] Its purely insular spirit was unaffected by either Plautine or Terentian comedy.

In his “Dedicatory Epistle”[7] to Gilbert Smith, Archdeacon of Peterborough, Nicholas Grimald aired his own views and sought authoritative support from his teacher, John Aerius, by quoting the advice he had received from him in order to shield the genre of tragicomedy from any unwarranted attacks. Looking back into previous centuries, he reverted to an old formula and created an intermediate sort of spectacle notable for its tensile unity of time, which he explicated as follows:

> I have united in one and the same action a story covering several days, and different periods of time, or because such a pleasing close is given to such a mournful and lamentable beginning, he ought to understand that I follow Plautus, whose play, the *Captivi* […] is represented as *taking place during an interval of several days*, and *passes from a sad beginning to a happy ending*.
>
> (Merrill 1925: 109-11; emphasis added. Cf. ibid. 59).

No doubt Grimald maintained continuity with the past by drawing support from Roman rather than Greek playwrights, which explains why he tended to view drama from a non-mainstream perspective.

Written in response to Stephen Gosson’s *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), Sidney’s pioneering treatise, *An Apology for Poetrie* (1595), affiliated England’s budding literary criticism with Western theory of literature. Like Aristotle, he believed that the art of verse making comes through *mimesis* (1952: 114), that poetry has higher status than history (1952: 121), that “[c]omedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life” (1952: 127), and that tragedy should accentuate “the affects of admiration and commiseration” (1952: 128), which is a loose restatement of Aristotle’s concept of *catharsis*. So is his view of the necessity of a clear boundary between comedy and tragedy. Contrary to Grimald’s crowd-pleasing, middle-of-the-road view, Sidney deplored all contemporary plays like Plautus’ *Amphitryon*, since they are

> neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders, to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained.
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> (Sidney 1952: 142; also see Leach 2008: 51)

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[7] It is appended to his tragicomedy *Christus Redivivus* (Merrill 1925: 92-112).

In Sydneian terms, the effect of boundary erasure is adverse because it entails ill-assorted pairs such as “kings and clowns” and “hornpipes and funerals.” As sixteenth-century English playwrights were full of unchanneled creative energy and failed to meet the standards of neoclassical taste, his criticism was aimed at putting contemporary drama back on the “right” track.

Shakespeare, whether or not he knew Sidney’s treatise, composed two works, *The Comedy of Errors* (1594-95) and *The Tempest* (1610-11), which show familiarity with those standards, particularly the unity of time. So even if the bulk of his work is far less disciplined than would have been needed to please an Aristotelian-minded humanist, it seems to be a matter of deliberate principle, not ignorance. Shakespeare never expressed his views openly. To look into the legacy that he and his associates or contemporaries left is the only way for us to get as close as possible to his own understanding of dramatic genres. The plays in the First Folio (1623) are grouped into just three major classes: comedies, tragedies, and histories. It is true that he did not supervise the printing process, but John Heminges and Henry Condell, compilers and fellow actors who must have been fully aware of their friend’s views, left no room for “tragicomedy.” Save for the “histories,” which were an outgrowth of domestic drama,[8] the rest of them were labeled in Aristotelian fashion.

On the other hand, The Royal Patent of 19th May, 1603, which is also a reliable source, gave Shakespeare’s troupe, now renamed the King’s Men, the right “to use and exercise the Art and Facultie of playing Comedies, Tragedies, Histories, Enterludes, Morals, Pastoralls, Stage Plaies and such others” (Stopes 1913: 97). Surely this extended range of non-classical genres was not an idle fancy, but rather it was an accurate reflection of early seventeenth-century dramaturgical practice.

Shakespeare’s own view of such subdivisions, though presented under the veil of fiction, is clearly evident in Polonius’s words (Shakespeare 1998):

> They are the best actors in the world, either for
> tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-
> comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical,
> tragical-comical-historical, scene indi-
> vidable, or poem unlimited: Seneca cannot be
> too heavy, not Plautus too light.

(*Ham.* 2.2.424-29)

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[8] Many of the history plays were based on the chronicles of Polydore Vergil (1534) Edward Hall (1543), and Raphael Holinshed (1577), etc.

The comprehensiveness and jocularity of this list of genres and their recombinations imply at least three things: first, by the end of the sixteenth century, English drama had developed an extensive taxonomic range; second, this range was completely within the grasp Shakespeare's Polonius; third, both author and character showed readiness to tackle any type of play-within-the-play, regardless of the surrounding context.

If the style of his "straightforward" comedies and tragedies is not entirely unalloyed, this applies with double force to the troublesome complexity of his problematic plays, tragicomedies, and romances. Certainly it is not by mere chance that even his collaborations with other dramatists confirm his preference for unrecognized dualities. In *Pericles*, wherein George Wilkins's hand is traceable, comic and tragic threads are interwoven into the fabric of romance, the latter tending to redress potentially deadly situations by providing relief: Pericles, because of Antiochus' riddle, is under pain of death but is eventually brought back to his family.

The plays he co-authored with Thomas Middleton are likewise problematic in terms of Aristotelian genre-ness. With the development of Shakespeare criticism, they were extracted from the traditional poles of comedy and tragedy and began to move toward the intermediary aesthetic realm of the "problem play": *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*, which were listed in the First Folio as comedies, are now often considered "problem plays," and *Timon of Athens*, which was among the tragedies in the First Folio, is sometimes reckoned a "problem play."

Shakespeare's collaborations with Fletcher are also notable for their half-serious, half-comic storylines. An entry in the Stationers' Register, dated September 9, 1653, informs us of a now lost play, namely that: "Master Mosely Entred also . . . the severall playes following . . xx^{s} vj^{d} […] *The history of Cardenio*, by M^{r} Fletcher & Shakespeare" (Arber, ed. 1913: 428). As far as we can judge from its possible source, i.e. an episode from Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the play has the usual requisites of tragicomedy: a heroine in distress – Luscinda who is on the verge of attempting her own life with a hidden knife – and thwarted relationships that are eventually brought back to normal through the nuptial reunions of Cardenio and Luscinda and of Don Fernando and Dorotea. Another collaboration with Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, is attested to by a note in the Stationers' Register (dated April 6, 1634), which tells us that it was "Entred […] Aspley warden a TragiComedy called the two noble kinsman by JOHN FLETCHER and WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE . . vjd. IV.316" (Arber, ed. 1877: 290). Inspired by a late medieval romance, Chaucer's "Knight's Tale," it features the imprisonment of two knights, Arcite and Palamon, who fall in love with the same girl, Emilia, the ensuing tournament between them, as well as Arcite's accidental death and Palamon's lucky break, allowing him to marry Emilia. The incompatibility between fourteenth-century narrative poetry and seventeenth-century drama aside, the change over time in popular taste as regards plot development and the purity of aesthetic experience cannot have been substantial since this Jacobean remake, poised midway between tragedy and comedy, defies the classical rules of dramatic composition.

Shakespeare was not alone in holding a non-orthodox view of dramatic genres. As *The Tragedy of Hamlet* suggests, his opinion is very similar to Thomas Heywood's. The latter's account of the major types of spectacle in *An Apology for Actors* (1612) – "[t]ragedy, [c]omedy, [h]istory, [m]orall or [p]astorrall" (1612: Bk. III.F3) – basically echoes Polonius's understanding of the matter and also includes the pastoral. This form provides a good medium for intergeneric discourses. However, it is not Shakespeare's invention, for it had already had a long history before it appeared in England. Since the Greek satyr play had already blazed the trail, it was much easier for Italian Renaissance playwrights to develop pastoral tragicomedy into a full-fledged art form represented by a number of works, from Poliziano's *Orfeo* (1480) to Tasso's *Aminta* (1573), Guarini's *Il pastor fido* (1590), etc. Through his *Endymion, The Man in the Moon* (1579), John Lyly introduced the genre into English literature.[9] While the treatment of his characters is not tragicomic, his work shows little faithfulness to comedy proper either, which hinders the survival of classically orthodox genre-ness.

As for the conceptual grounding of the pastoral, Sidney briefly focused attention on the kinds of verse poets employ when imitating things (1952: 115) and on the dualities arising from the integrated use of different poetic styles – "tragical and comical," forms of language – "prose and verse," and subjects – "heroical and pastoral" (1952: 126). If the reader is left with the impression that Sidney pardoned poets for adopting this approach, it is mainly due to two reasons: first, the matter at hand was not *dramatic* poetry and, second, he acted as a "spokesperson" for authoritative figures such as Virgil who was greatly indebted to Greek authors, Jacopo Sannazzaro (1456-1530) who wrote the first pastoral romance, *Arcadia* (1504), and Boethius who was instrumental in reviving the ideas of Aristotle and Cicero. Sidney's untimely death in 1586 predates the start of

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[9] Peter Saccio has rightly observed that, because of this, "one might call the play […] more a contemplation than a comedy" (1969: 186).

Shakespeare's career, which was first documented by Robert Greene's caustic remark of 1592.[10] Thus, of central importance here is the possibility of Shakespeare's supposed acquaintance with Sidney's treatise. As recent scholarship has shown, *Love's Labour's Lost* triggered a muted response to the limitations of Sidney's purist critique (Woudhuysen 2000: 6) and indicated at once Shakespeare's familiarity and disagreement with the assumptions of neoclassical criticism. There are enough clues to the existence and recognizability of the pastoral, but, in spite of Grimald's efforts, it still lacked a solid theoretical foundation. This was a possible reason why this genre appeared "under disguise" and was not granted proper status in the First Folio. Yet the streak of the idyllic countryside – as in *As You Like It*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* – was "constant and pervasive" (Greenlaw 1916: 154) and tended to erode mainstream genre-ness. Also, by providing a middle ground, the pastoral receives input from both comic and tragic poets. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that critical appraisals can vary widely over time. For instance, *The Winter's Tale*, which was considered a comedy in the First Folio, is presently classified as a problem play or one of the late romances. Conversely, *Cymbeline*, which was placed among the tragedies in the First Folio, is now deemed to be a romance and, at times, even a comedy. Each of the two plays is the tail end of a really big set of stories by authors from various time periods. *The Winter's Tale* is based on *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* (1588) by Robert Greene who may have been inspired by *The Clerk's Tale* (Group F, Fragment IV) by Chaucer who, in turn, may have drawn on the last chapter of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; and, in like manner, *Cymbeline* is based on Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which hinges on the story of Cunobeline (reigned c. 10 AD-c. AD 40) described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1136). None of the borrowed material remained unchanged. Yet, alongside with Shakespeare's inventiveness, there was obvious continuity that maintained the unity of the non-Aristotelian narrative of Western drama.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's genre-ness is both a causal and a self-contained phenomenon. His creative worldview, influenced by multiple historical contexts, cannot be expressed through any static definitions. As a result, each of his play types is a complex, multicomponent construct, which can be best explained in retrospect. His strategies create a heteroglossic atmosphere through a wide diversity of characters, speech styles, and world-views. Instead of sticking to the Aristotelian genre-system, he prefers to create generic dualities, thereby building a more complex relationship between author and hero that relates to changes in the novelistic discourse of subsequent times.

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[10] In *A Groat's-worth of Wit*, Greene's narrator warns Marlowe, Nashe and Peele not to trust ungrateful people, „for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers" who "is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you; and […] is in his own conceit the only *Shake*-scene in a country" (Greene 2009: 19; emphasis added).

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