Shakespeare and Generic Dichotomy

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Abstract. Among the characteristics of plays of Shakespeare as opposed to those of the Neo-Classical period, his intermingling of comic and tragic scenes has instigated debates among scholars throughout the centuries. According to Neo-Classical creeds, which by definition show allegiance to the tenets of Aristotle and Horace, tragedy and comedy are mutually exclusive genres whose features should not be commingled. While this genre taxonomy implies that the concepts of each genre will be stable, other critics have examined the interconnections of genres and identified the inconsistencies in such a system of categorization. Exploring how commentators of different periods approached Shakespeare's exploitation of genres, this essay argues that the ambiguity in genre classification relates to changes in performance cultures and audience tastes.

Keywords: Genre Taxonomy, Shakespeare, Neo-Classicism, Samuel Johnson, Deconstructionism, Audience Reaction.

1. Criticism of Generic Mixture

Most of Shakespeare's plays include elements of diverse genres and bring together socially distant classes. His comedies contain agonizing scenarios; his tragedies amusing ones. Hamlet has his buffoonish gravedigger, Lear his Fool, Macbeth his Porter. Shakespeare's late plays, which are also called tragicomedies or romances, are the most hybrid forms among his works. A possible reason for Shakespeare's mixing of genres is that he had to please all of his audience, a mixed bag of high- and low-brows and those in the middle. Yet, Shakespeare's mingling of plebeians with patricians in his plays is perceived to have violated Classical decorum of character, and the hybridism of his generic experimentation subverts Neo-Classical dramatic convention.

The Aristotelian tragedy differs from most of Shakespeare's tragedies because for Aristotle, most significantly, tragedy is an imitation of an action, not a portrayal of character. Thus, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle, in commenting on the structure of tragedy, focuses on the incidents rather than the characters (Part VI, 39). Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude [appropriate length]" (Part VII, 40). In the following section, Aristotle repeats his emphasis on the plot as concerning, not primarily the hero, but a single and complete action: "Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the Unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action" (Part VIII, 40).

Earlier, Aristotle distinguished tragedy from comedy through their depictions of different kinds of men: "Comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life" (Part II, 35). Since these two genres depict different kinds of persons, Aristotle believes that they will involve themselves in different types of actions. Aristotle defines comedy as an imitation of "characters of a lower type, not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the Ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly," because comedy consists in some "defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive" (Part V, 37). While tragedy is an imitation of the actions of characters of a higher type, Aristotle regards the proper function of tragedy as the purgation [or catharsis] of fear and pity in the audience at the sight of an important character's downfall due to *hamartia*, tragic flaw or error in judgment. The tragic hero must be a man whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is "highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families" (Part XIII, 44). Hence, for Aristotle a well-constructed plot in a tragedy should be unified or "single in its issue." He observes that, like

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the *Odyssey*, tragedy of the second rank has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad (Part XIII, 45). As Aristotle highlights the single plot of a complete action in tragedy, he indicates that the intermixture of the comic and tragic elements may violate the unity of action and disrupt "the true tragic pleasure."

From the Renaissance period onward, when criticizing Shakespeare's departure from the Classical decorum, reviewers tended to disregard the distinction between Aristotle's emphasis on plot and Shakespeare's accentuation of character. Italian critics of the 16th century, such as Lodovico Castelvetro, and 17th century French critics, were proponents of the Neo-Classical movement. They expanded Aristotle's descriptions and turned them into rigid prescriptions for playwriting. Important French dramatists such as Molière (1622-1673), Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), and Jean-Baptiste Racine (1639-1699) generally followed these strictures. By the late 17th century, English critics, under the influence of French criticism, began to review plays according to Neo-Classical criteria for the three unities of drama and against the blending of tragedy and comedy. For them, a tragedy should be written in a high style about high-ranking characters, whereas a comedy should treat humble characters in a low style. Accordingly, the Neo-Classical principle of decorum required characters from different social groups to be kept separate, and prohibited the contrasting of incongruent elements, the ludicrous and the serious. Leaning on Aristotle's authority, these scholars presupposed discrete genre systems according to Aristotle's mimesis theory as they understood it. They emphasized that Aristotle referred to effective tragedy as the imitation through action, of a noble man's fortunes, with a miserable conclusion, and expressed in serious language and tone. As such, social hierarchy of the *dramatis personae* was essential to genre: gods and kings should not appear in a comedy, and the speech patterns of comedy would not be appropriate for tragedy.

Shakespeare's introduction of comic scenes into tragedy was again a matter for debate in the eighteenth century, even though the era witnessed the bardolatry of Shakespeare. His mingling of kings and clowns, in Prince Hal and Falstaff, Lear and his fool, Hamlet and the gravedigger, was often assumed to be a breach of art as well as nature. Although Shakespeare's mingling of genres offended eighteenth-century Neo-Classicists, in the second half of the eighteenth century an increasing number of critics, by assuming the voice of nationalism and patriotism, defended Shakespeare. Praised for his fidelity to nature, the Bard was allowed to violate the Neo-Classical rules. For these commentators, Shakespeare was able to represent the sublime through various aesthetic modes, while holding a mirror up to nature.

2. In Defense of Shakespeare

As early as 1751, Samuel Johnson defended tragicomedy in Number 156 of *The Rambler* by claiming, "That it [mixing tragedy and comedy] is a practice contrary to the rules of criticism will be readily allowed; but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature" (Vickers 3: 434). In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1765), Johnson again defended Shakespeare's interchange of seriousness and merriment by eulogizing his contribution to nature. As Johnson observes, "the disturbance of one man may be the relief of another; that different auditors have different habitudes; and that, upon the whole, all pleasure consists in variety" (Vickers 5: 62). Different from Aristotle in his focus on the action of drama, Johnson emphasizes the diversity of audience perceptions: "Plays by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies to-day and comedies to-morrow.… Tragedy in those times required only a calamitous conclusion, whatever lighter pleasure it afforded in its progress" (62).

The evolution of genre in the late twentieth century was influenced by the deconstructionist concept of relativity, which interestingly confirms Johnson's views of gender instability and the diversity of audience responses to Shakespeare's generic mixture. In "The Law of Genre" (1980), Jacques Derrida concludes that "genre" implies a presence that is absent. Since the characteristic that signifies genre defies classification, taxonomy is subjective, and may change with the place and time the taxonomical act takes place. Responding to Derrida, Ralph Cohen, in his "History and Genre" (1986), argues that genre concepts "arise, change, and decline for historical reasons," because each genre is composed of texts that accrue, and the grouping is a process, not a determinate category. Although the process by which genres are established involves the human need for distinction and interrelation, the purposes of critics vary, and therefore the same texts can belong to different groupings of genres and serve different generic purposes (Cohen 204). Interestingly, both Cohen's and Samuel Johnson's analyses of genre shed light on the relationship between genre taxonomy and audience response. Many other modern critics shared this concept. Since an audience is never a monolithic entity, spectator response to performances may be influenced by gender, race, class, education, mood, etc. (Bennett 101). A spectator may experience satisfaction from an unhappy ending

simply because of, for instance, his appreciation of the play's sincere and authentic portrayal of harsh realities. Or, as Lounsbury rightly remarks, the humorous may relieve the strain from the prolonged grief of a series of scenes, but the contrast may also amplify the effect of the grief (154).

As a result, writers may draw on preexisting genres with similar circumstances to guide audience response, but total stabilization in a specific genre would be impossible, not to mention unwanted. As audiences will interpret a performance according to their cultural background and sense of generic conventions, genre coexists with and is embedded in culture (Devitt 24). Created by their cultural environments, genres respond to recurrent cultural situations, and serve to enhance the organization of ideas in both authors and audiences, but are problematic due to their dynamic interactivity. While David Fishelov views generic conventions as an inescapably "vital part of the literary communicative situation," linking present and past writers to each other as well as to readers and viewers, he also perceives that genres are not static, but persist through the constant renovation of their conventions (85-117). As Neo-Classical classification concepts led to different responses to those Shakespeare's plays that exhibit features of multiple genres or modify genres, genres as discursive institutions create "constraints that may make a text that combines or mixes genres appear to be a cultural monstrosity" (LaCapra 220), but since the predestined variation in genre prevents it from being straitjacketed by any classification system, later critics gradually accepted the potentially seminal interrelationship between comic and tragic scenes in Shakespeare's drama.

3. Conclusion

Modern approaches to Shakespeare's plays gradually unveiled the intrinsic volatility of genre categories. Whereas the Jacobeans regarded *Measure for Measure* as a comedy, modern critics prefer to call it a problem play because of its tragic tone. Shakespeare's predisposition for hybrid forms indicates that he thought of genres as "sets of possibilities" with shared assumptions (Orgel 123). In *King Lear*, the deprived king touches the hearts of modern audiences in the scene with the Fool. For modern audience, Caliban in *The Tempest* can convey his sorrow with no less dignity than the courtiers. As such, in terms of genre taxonomy, performance cultures and audience taste should be taken into consideration, since plot is "not necessarily the determinant for value in the experience of theater" (Holland 13).

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