**More about Tragedy**

**First**, at the risk of repeating much of what I’ve said about comedy, contrasts between it and tragedy:

Comedy – Tragedy –

begins with threat to order from conflicts begins with threat to order from conflicts between

between society and character(s) and/or within character(s)

proceeds by adjusting both the society and proceeds by breaking both the social order and the

the character(s) character(s)

ends by including characters (marriages, ends by excluding characters (mostly by death) and

reconciliations, conversions of wicked) destroying the old order; often leaves a new order

and re-establishing the old order established or on the verge of being established

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is usually set in the present is usually set in the past

is usually based on fiction is usually based on history

has conflicts due to external circumstances has conflicts that result from internal qualities

has contrived actions due to “chance” or has inevitable actions, the consequences of earlier

to manipulation by some character(s) actions and of the characters’ internal qualities

has stock types for most characters has unique characters

features several roughly equal characters features a protagonist and antagonist, plus supporters

tends, in Shakespeare’s case, to have women tends not to have women in either of the major roles

as well as men in major roles

often includes song, dance, jokes, etc. tends to be relieved only by “black humor”

often includes masking, cross-dressing, and often includes deception, such as feigned identities, in

other disguises, for fun or self-protection order to harm others

celebrates social succession and the survival mourns individual losses and the death of the body

of the species

surprises the audience by how it gets to its uses foreshadowing to deprive the audience of hope

happy ending

**Second**, some affinities between tragicomedies and tragedies (a collection of quotations):

In 1896, in *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, F. S. Boas says that not only *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* are problematic, but so are *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet*: they take place in “highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness . . . . at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome.”

In 1931, in *Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies*, W. W. Lawrence groups *Troilus and Cressida* with the two tragicomedies as “those productions which clearly do not fall into the category of tragedy, and yet are too serious and analytic to fit the commonly accepted conception of comedy.”

In 1951, in *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays*, E. M. W. Tillyard says, “*Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are problem plays because they deal with and display interesting problems; *All’s Well* and *Measure for Measure* because they are problems.”

In 1963, in *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare: A Study of Julius Caesar, Measure for Measure, Antony and Cleopatra*, Ernest Schanzer gives a definition of “problem play” which he feels fits the three plays of his subtitle: “A play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible or even probable.”

**Third**, some observations on which plays include a character who is evil / wicked / villainous:

Among the 12 comedies/tragicomedies, there are villains in at least 4 – *The Merchant of Venice, Much Ado about Nothing, As You Like It,* and *Measure for Measure.* They are, respectively, converted by force, awaiting punishment, converted voluntarily, and converted by being exposed and then repenting.

Among the 10 tragedies, there are villains in at least 5 – the antagonists in *Titus Andronicus, Hamlet, Othello,* and *King Lear*, plus the protagonist in *Macbeth.* (There is more than one antagonist in *Titus* and in *Lear*.) All but two of the villains are dead at the end of their plays; Aaron in *Titus* and Iago in *Othello* are awaiting punishment that is likely to culminate in their deaths. They are unrepentant.

Among the 4 dramatic romances, there are no villains, but characters may act badly on account of folly, madness, revenge, etc., rather than on account of their being evil.

**Fourth**, a brief look at classical versus Early Modern tragedy:

Greek tragedy consisted of a prologue, the entrance of the chorus (originally 50 persons, decreasing to as few as 12), episodes separated by choral odes, and the departure of the chorus. Generally, the tragic protagonist was a noble character with a fatal flaw; usually, the protagonist’s downfall was caused by his or her over-reaching, in the kind of pride the Greeks called *hubris*. The effect on the audience was supposed to be emotional catharsis, a purging of pity and horror by feeling both to their utmost.

Roman tragedy is not continuous with Greek tragedy. We have ten plays attributed to Seneca, who was the classical tragedian known to the western Europe in the Early Modern period; of these, scholars believe Seneca actually wrote eight. All ten were available in English translation by 1581, and the subsequent English “revenge tragedy” is derived directly from Seneca’s examples.

**Fifth**, a listing of sources and settings for Shakespeare’s ten tragedies:

*Titus Andronicus*, based on Roman history, set in Italy in the 4th century CE

*Romeo and Juliet*, based on recent Italian fiction, set in contemporary Italy

*Julius Caesar*, based on Roman history, set in Rome and Greece in the 1st century BCE

*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, based on Danish history, set in Denmark, perhaps in the 12th century CE

*Othello, the Moor of Venice*, based on recent Italian fiction, set in contemporary Venice and Cyprus

*King Lear*, based on British history, set in Britain before the Roman invasions began (i.e., BCE)

*Macbeth*, based on Scottish history, set in Scotland in the 11th century CE

*Antony and Cleopatra*, based on Roman history, set primarily in Egypt in the 1st century BCE

*Coriolanus*, based on Roman history, set in Italy in the 5th century BCE

*Timon of Athens*, based on Greek history, set in Athens in the 5th century BCE

Two comments on this list:

The fact that Shakespeare used a source he thought was a history does not imply that a modern historian would admit even the protagonist, much less the plot, to be historical.

Plays set BCE are remarkably free from Christian influence; for example, Shakespeare permits any pre-Christian character to commit suicide as an honorable rather than a damnable act.