**More about Romance**

The genre of dramatic romance did not appear in the First Folio, which divided plays into comedies, histories, and tragedies. These notes are designed to answer the question as to why we call the last four comedies that Shakespeare wrote dramatic romances.

**First**, the characteristics of narrative romances that Shakespeare certainly or probably read:

The plots are episodic, multi-stranded, and disconnected. The characters are flat, static, and idealized. The settings are long-ago times and far-away places, as exotic as imaginable. They are likely to include supernatural or magical or divine intervention or knowledge or objects. And they end happily for the good but sadly for the bad. (The 1977 *Star Wars* is an excellent example of a romance in these ways.)

**Second**, how do these dramatic romances resemble Shakespeare’s previous romantic comedy?

According to E. C. Pettet in *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (1949), they are all derived from romance literature; filled with incident, vigor, and excitement; unhampered by verisimilitude – indeed, aiming at the far-fetched, the incredible, the astounding; and filled with all-deceptive disguises and mistaken identities. After the realism of the characters in Shakespeare’s tragedies, the characters in his romances revert to the types found in some comedies: superficially sketched, with weak and implausible motivations. Also, the women in the romances are idealized, and the settings are courtly or pastoral.

**Third**, why are these four Shakespeare plays not comedies?

According to Alfred Harbage in *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, “The affinity of the early romantic plays is with comedy, that of the late ones with tragedy. The forces of evil overcome in them are truly formidable, indeed identical with those appearing in the great tragedies; and whether or not deaths occur in them, the shadow of death lies on them.”

He also says that the happy endings are not the pleasant surprises of comedy but are instead joyous revelations, often with something resembling resurrection. The plays include mystical elements and have in common a theme of transgression → expiation → redemption. “In the comedies the perpetuation of life seems a merry business. In the romances it seems sacred.”

**Fourth**, how do these romances relate to the tragedies Shakespeare had been writing?

According to Robert W. Uphaus in *Beyond Tragedy* (1981), the romances provide “an exit from the seemingly irreversible movement of the tragic experience of time by continually presenting the characters, as well as the audience, with versions of a second chance or fresh start.” They do this “by adopting two different premises” from those found in the tragedies: first, that an individual human life is part of a cycle of life and death that is itself part of a larger process of life; second, that psychological experiences of the realistically depicted individual are reflective of archetypal patterns of behavior.

Uphaus says the plot structure of the romances is that of tragedy or a near approach to it, followed by developments that culminate in a providential experience. Where destiny in other Shakespeare plays can be equated with Fate or Fortune, in the romances destiny is identical with Providence.

As a result, according to Uphaus, they are openly defiant of probability, both dramatic and historical, because they dramatize a realm of experience beyond customary understanding of reality. Therefore, they are also beyond the grasp of a critical vocabulary based on the self-sufficiency of reason.