

# Tragedy and Comedy in Shakespeare

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[Podcasts.ox.ac.uk](http://Podcasts.ox.ac.uk)

*This Is Shakespeare* (Penguin, 2020)

@OldFortunatus



# Tragedy

(1) 'The high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon what weak foundations gilden roofs are builded.' Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* (c. 1581)

(2) Classical tragedy shows 'the disastrous miseries of man's life and so out of that melancholic vision, stir horror, or murmur, against Divine Providence'; contemporary tragedies show 'God's revenging aspect upon every particular sin, to the despair, or confusion, of mortality.' Fulke Greville, *The Life of Sir Philip Sidney* (c. 1611)

(3) 'If we present a tragedy, we include the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggravated and acted with all the art that may be, to terrify men from the like abhorred practices.' Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors* (1612)

# Comedy

(1) . . . persons, such as Comedy would choose,  
When she would show an image of the times  
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.  
Except, we make 'em such by loving still  
Our popular errors, when we know th'are ill.  
I mean such errors, as you'll all confess  
By laughing at them, they deserve no less.

Ben Jonson, Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* (1600)

(2) 'the moving of laughter is a fault in comedy, a kind of turpitude, that depraves some part of man's nature, without a disease. As a wry face without pain moves laughter, or a deformed vizard, or a rude clown dressed in a ladies habit and using her actions, we dislike and scorn such representations which made the ancient Philosophers ever think laughter unfitting in a wise man.' Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries* (1640)

(3) comedy serves 'to recreate such as of themselves are wholly devoted to melancholy, which corrupts the blood; or to refresh such weary spirits as are tired with labour, or study to moderate the cares and heaviness of the mind, that they may return to their trades and faculties with more zeal and earnestness, after some small soft and pleasant retirement'  
Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (1612)



In tragedies, tranquilla prima, turbulenta ultima, Comedies  
begin in trouble, and end in peace; tragedies begin in calms,  
and end in tempest.

Thomas Heywood (1612)

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                   |
| Tendency to dialogue  | Tendency to soliloquy   |
| Female characters prominent and active  | Male characters prominent and active                                  |
| 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 |

From  
Emma Smith,  
*The Cambridge  
Introduction to  
Shakespeare*  
(2007)



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## *Hamlet*

- Ophelia
- Soliloquy
- Puns
- Sense of future

# Macbeth



- Lady Macbeth
- Puns
- Inevitability
- Sense of future

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# Othello

- Cyprus
- Social breakdown
- Desdemona

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# Romeo and Juliet

- Chorus
- Mercutio
- Dialogue
- Inevitability?
- Marriage?