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Klára Severinová

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***COMEDIC ELEMENTS IN SHAKESPERE'S TRAGEDIES***  
***KOMEDIÁLNÍ PRVKY V SHAKESPEAROVÝCH TRAGEDIÍCH***  
***DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE***

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):

Prof. PhDr. Martin Hilský, CSc.

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Zpracovala (author):

Klára Severinová

obor (subject): Anglistika

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

I declare that the following diploma thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

V Praze dne.....29.Srpna.....podpis.....

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům. I have no objections to the diploma thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

## ABSTRACT

The aim of the thesis is to discuss the comedic elements in Shakespeare's five tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. The Introduction presents the elements which I will try to cover in each of the play. Since the treatment of the elements is different play from play, its extent will differ accordingly. I would like to emphasize the existence of the comedy within the genre of tragedy and thus point out on the style which made Shakespeare a well read playwright for over centuries.

Cílem této práce je rozbor komických prvků v pěti Shakespearových tragediích, *Romeo a Julie*, *Hamletovi*, *Othellovi*, *Macbethovi* a *Králi Learovi*. Úvod seznamuje se všemi prvky, které se pokusím pokrýt v každé hře. Protože je každý z prvků zobrazen jinak v závislosti na hře, rozsah jejich rozboru se bude lišit. Ráda bych zdůraznila přítomnost komedie v rámci žánru tragédie a na základě tohoto zdůraznila Shakespearův styl, který z něj udělal nejčtenějšího dramatika několika století.

## CONTENTS

I.	<b>Introduction</b> .....	7-17
	General notions about Shakespeare's plays - Initial aims	
	General notions on the Genre	
	Comedy and tragedy elements	
II.	<b>Romeo and Juliet</b> .....	18-32
III.	<b>Hamlet</b> .....	33-43
IV.	<b>Othello</b> .....	44-57
V.	<b>Macbeth</b> .....	58-67
VI.	<b>King Lear</b> .....	68-79
VII.	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	80-82
VIII.	<b>Resumé</b> .....	83-84
IX.	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	85-89

## INTRODUCTION

*Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow [...]*<sup>1</sup>

### **General notions about Shakespeare's plays - Initial aims**

It could be argued that, for the contemporary playgoer, Shakespeare is noticed mostly as a master of tragedy. His name is associated primarily with this genre, despite the fact that prior to his first tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, which he wrote in 1593-94, Shakespeare was recognized as a playwright of histories and comedies. Robert Greene commented on his history plays in his pamphlet *Groatworth of Wit* (1592), and the evidence of the reputation of his comedies first appears in 1598 with Francis Meres's book *Palladis Tamia*. However, Meres praises the comedies written in or before 1594, such as *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost* or *The Comedy of Errors*. Perhaps because of his initial focus on comedy, he often seemed to find a way to incorporate certain comedic elements into the most intense plots. Nevertheless, although he was applauded for his ability to amuse people, his comedies always appear to be covered with the thinnest veil of tragedy. As a result, there has been a challenge among Shakespeare's critics to discuss the genre of his plays. Most of the plays are easy to define even though the intermingling of comedy and tragedy is present in all of them. Some of them, however, are very difficult to place into a certain category. Shakespeare, as a playwright, was much ahead of his time in many aspects. He not only disrupted the dramatic unities of action, place, and time, but he also mixed different genres. These unities were originated by Aristotle and although Shakespeare has brought the mixing of genre into perfection, the tradition of 'tragi-comedy' is very typical for English Renaissance drama and was often discussed in opposition to French drama which was more rigid in keeping the style of the play. An example of such a discussion could be Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie*. Because of his declension from the traditional understanding of drama as set by the Ancients, Shakespeare was criticised by his contemporaries. Sir Phillip

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," Samuel Johnson: Selected Writings, ed. Patrick Cruttwell (England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1986) 266.

Sidney did not live to witness Shakespeare's plays, however we may assume that he would have objected against his drama. In his *Defence of the Poesy* pronounced discontent on the fact that Shakespeare uses comedy elements in tragedy and tragedy elements in comedy:

But besides these gross absurdities, how all their plays be 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, which neither decency nor discretion, so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained.<sup>2</sup>

Does this mean that it is impossible to distinguish between tragedy and comedy in Shakespeare's plays? It is certain that Shakespeare does not go that far. The fact that some comedy elements are inserted in tragedies and some tragedy ones in comedies has its own important function. The comic scenes in tragedy work as a comic relief from the heavy plot. On the other hand, tragedy elements in comedies help the plot to appear more real and true to life. These qualities of Shakespearean drama were applauded by critics and other playwrights, and their opinion stands in complete opposition to that of Sir Phillip Sidney. As an example we may look at John Dryden and Samuel Johnson. Dryden's *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* deals with the differences between French and English drama and it discusses these two 'dramatic schools' in connection with the drama of Ancient Greece and Rome. He praises Shakespeare for being able to imitate nature and defends his development of tragi-comedy:

A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes, as we bait upon a journey, that we may go on with greater ease. A Scene of mirth mix'd with Tragedy has the same effect upon us which our musick has betwixt the Acts [...]<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Johnson was looking at Shakespeare's drama with admiration and praised him above all other playwrights. In his preface to the edition of Shakespeare's plays from 1765, Johnson discusses the reasons for such admiration but at the same time he does not forget that there are certain flaws in the structure and plotlines of the plays. His initial statement is that

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<sup>2</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry* ed. R.W. Maslen (Manchester: Manchester Univeristy Press, 2002) 112.

<sup>3</sup>John Dryden, "Essay on Poesy", *The Online Books Page*, 1999, 12 March 2008 <<http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/display/displayprose.cfm?prosenum=14>>.



Shakespeare's plays are "a faithful mirror of manners and of life"<sup>4</sup>. The fact that the plays seem to be true to life is later proved by showing various ways in which Shakespeare breaks the rules of the dramatic writing as set by the Ancient Greece. What is most interesting for us, however, is his opinion on the mingling of the two genres of comedy and tragedy. According to Johnson:

Shakespeare's plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state o sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveler is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity o one is sometimes defeated by the frolic of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.<sup>5</sup>

And, moreover, he says:

Shakespeare has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. Almost all his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and, in the successive evolution of he design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.<sup>6</sup>

From these two extracts we can see the reasons behind Johnson's opinion on the 'greatness' of Shakespeare. The mixture of pleasure and pain, laughter and weeping, in Shakespeare's comingling of the genres is, in Johnson's view, an accurate reflection of the mixture of real life. His shift in the understanding of the dramatic genre moved the English drama forward and allowed other playwrights to experiment. Although we cannot say that Shakespeare completely disregarded the rules of dramatic writing, it is more inspiring to follow his variations rather than those aspects which remain the same.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson 263.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson 266.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson 266.

One way of looking at the discrepancy of a certain genre is to point out the ‘odd elements’. In other words, we can discuss the tragic aspects of comedies or comedic elements in tragedies. The latter will be the case of my study. As has been mentioned, the problem of genre has been the topic of many literary studies and out of those I would like to draw attention towards a critical study of Susan Snyder; more specifically to her book called *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*. Snyder explores the comedy within the four famous tragedies: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. Her initial premise is to look at ‘the world of romantic comedy, as a point of reference and departure in developing tragic forms’.<sup>7</sup> Her critical approach is to perceive the plays as ‘dramatic wholes’.<sup>8</sup> In contrast I would like to explore those elements in tragedies which we would expect to find in comedies. Clearly, one cannot reduce the comic aspects simply to several elements, nor would it serve any purpose of critical discussion to do so. However, I believe that elucidation of the particular comedy present in each play will help us to uncover the structure of Shakespeare’s writing and perhaps enable us to see the tragedies from a different perspective. Moreover, I would like to have a look at the development of those elements throughout the tragedies I am about to explore. It would be interesting to find out whether Shakespeare elaborated on the comedy or whether he tried to tone it down as he was progressing in writing tragedies. I will comment on the elements that will be covered in a more detailed manner later on. With certain plays I will try to comment on the actual performances and how the comedy within tragedy is being used, or indeed whether there is any significance for the performance.

If we look at Shakespeare’s tragedies, we find that they could be divided into two groups: those dealing with the world of Antiquity and those which are set in Europe. Going further in our discussion of the comedic elements in the tragedies we may speculate that the comedy in Roman plays would be different from the comedy in the plays which represent the life of the people in the time closer to the period Shakespeare lived in. It would be interesting to see whether such distinction could be made; however that would be beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I have decided to explore Shakespeare’s ‘European Tragedies’. These also happen to be his most famous plays and the so called ‘great-tragedies’. In consequence, we may be able to trace a connection between life in the Renaissance period and the actual plays.

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979)

6.

<sup>8</sup> Snyder 6.

## General notions on the Genre

From the creation of drama in Antiquity, the playwrights and literary critics distinguished between two main genres – the comedy and the tragedy. These were very clearly defined and the authors attempted to adhere to the given norm. Nevertheless, even in the time of the birth of drama, we may find slight overlapping between the genres which later on became a very common practice. As an example of this discrepancy Marjorie Boulton cites *Antigone* by Sophocles which, although it is a classical tragedy, contains a character of a soldier who could be read as a comic character.<sup>9</sup> Definitions of genres were an important part of study for literary and dramatic critics from the very early stage of the existence of drama. Perhaps the most important piece of critical writing on the subject in Antiquity was Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle defined the difference between the comedy and the tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.<sup>10</sup>

The main difference between tragedy and comedy is in the characters and in what each genre represents. Generally he thought that tragedy concentrates on the characters of higher rank, while comedy was grounded around the lower characters. Overall tragedy has traditionally been understood as a higher literary form while comedy was aimed at the masses. This established notion, however, changes in Renaissance with Shakespeare, since there is evidence that his tragedies were aimed at the 'common people' of London and a lot of his comedy corresponds with the life of the lower classes. What we should note in Aristotle is his insistence that tragedy as a genre is based on the imitation of action: "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality."<sup>11</sup> In consequence, tragedy remains a tragedy even with comic characters if the sequence of events leads to a tragedy. A.C. Bradley also finds the grounds of Shakespeare's tragedy in the action:

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<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of Drama* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1968 ).

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, "Poetics," *Aristotle's Poetics, Demetrius on Style, Longinus on the Sublime*, ed. John Warrington (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1969 ) 12.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle

A Shakespearean Tragedy as so far considered may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate. [...] The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men.<sup>12</sup>

This leads us to the nature of the characters, although they are the force behind the tragic action, they may not necessarily be the tragic characters. As a result, we may find that a number of great comic characters play an important part in the tragic plot. The comic characters are just one of the comedic elements we shall discuss. As has been already mentioned, Aristotle considered comedy to represent the worse deeds of the characters of the lower men. Sidney was a great follower of Aristotelian dogma and in his *Apology on Poetry* he commented on the notion of Comedy:

Comedy is an imitation of the common errors of our life, which he representeth in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be, so as it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one.<sup>13</sup>

Shakespeare's comedies may sometimes be considered 'fantasies'<sup>14</sup>, since the plot usually possesses either a fortunate turn in plot or presence of supernatural characters. The appearance of supernatural phenomena, however, is also true for some of his great tragedies; namely *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Moreover, we may find that fate also plays an important role in some of the tragedies. The best example of the importance of Fortune for the plot is *Romeo and Juliet*. Their disastrous ending is predicted by the chorus who refers to them as 'star-crossed lovers' and thus we may assume that it was work of cosmic or supernatural force.

### **Comedy and tragedy elements**

In order to fully understand each genre it is necessary to establish the elements which distinguish tragedy and comedy. It is not possible to fully enumerate all the tragic and comic elements, nor would it serve our purposes. However, we find that certain elements are indispensable for our perception of the given genre. What I am most interested in, in relevance to the topic, are the comic elements and their projection into the tragic plot. I would

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<sup>12</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1985) 28.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney 98.

<sup>14</sup> Gary Waller, "Introduction," *Shakespeare's comedies*, ed. Gary Waller (London: Longman, 1993) 2.

like to explore how comedy works within tragedy and whether the function of the same elements is different because of the genre. Larry S. Champion found it necessary for the reader and subsequently the playgoer to understand the nature of the comedy. According to him, the reader can only appreciate comedy if he or she understands what it represents:

Regardless of the level of comic characterization, the reader must, of course, possess sufficient information to appreciate the comic confusion. If it is situation comedy, he must understand the situation to enjoy its incongruities; if it is comedy of identity, he must perceive the gap between appearance and reality to which, at least for a time, the character is impervious; if it is comedy of transformation, he must understand the nature of the evil or the adversity which purges the character and be assured that its power is only temporary.<sup>15</sup>

He looks at different types of comedy which appear in the text and similarly we may look at the actual ways of representing these varieties.

Looking at tragedy and comedy as a whole, we may suggest that the significant indicator of the genre is the ending. If we over simplify the matter we may say that the tragedy ends with the death of one or more main characters and the comedy usually ends by marriage of the central couple. However, we shall not forget that this simplification may not be valid for all of the plays. To persuade us otherwise, Shakespeare has chosen a less joyful ending of *Love's Labours Lost*; this was also observed by Susan Snyder in her essay *The Genres of Shakespeare's Plays*. There is no doubt that Shakespeare has written a comedy, however: the main characters are separated by circumstances beyond their power and even though they promise to meet in one year, the spectator does not get a 'satisfaction' in the scene of marriage. Linda Bamber has debated the difference between the ending of a comedy and the ending of a tragedy:

If the ending of a Shakespearean tragedy is like a prolonged symphonic finale, a Shakespearean comedy ends like a piano prelude that tosses off the expected final

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<sup>15</sup> Larry S. Champion, *Evolution of Shakespeare's Comedy: A Study in Dramatic Perspective*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970) 21.

chord at the moment it stops developing its themes. The endings are too unassertive to end the dialectic.<sup>16</sup>

The ending is significant and in the case of tragedies, we cannot find any comedy element which would release the tension of the tragic action. However we cannot say the same about comedies, where the presence of a dark motif in the final reconciliation occurs regularly. As an example we can think of the arrest of Don Jon at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the angry words of Shylock when he leaves the court of Venice in *The Merchant of Venice* or indeed deeply hurt Malvolio, who swears revenge upon everyone in the final scene of *Twelfth Night*.

If ending is an indicator of the genre of the play, we cannot say the same about the beginning. For, while the greatest tragedies seem to start in the comic mode and end in bloodshed, some of Shakespeare's best comedies are gradually moving from the tragedy of circumstances to the final reconciliation in happiness. Samuel Johnson commented on this fact in his writings:

The play of *Hamlet* is opened without impropriety, by two sentinels; Iago bellows at Brabantio's window, without injury to the scheme of the play, though in terms which a modern audience would not easily endure; the character of Polonius is seasonable and useful; and the grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause.<sup>17</sup>

While the plot of the tragedy seems to move from a stable situation to a distressful end, the comedy often begins with a tragedy which needs to be fixed. Nevertheless, one has to beware of too much of a generalization. The beginnings of the tragedies we are to discuss are often hard to grasp because none of them gives us any clue as to how the story will develop. *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* surprise us with the festive imagery and portrait of ideal love; both of which are shattered later on in the play. The stories of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* open with supernatural figures and characters with supernatural power, but, unlike in the case of the previous tragedies, the ambience is dark and cold. *King Lear* begins as a domestic play, but what starts as a rift in a family is turned into bloodshed and civil war.

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic men : A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982) 126.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson 268.

One of the chief features of either genre is the characters. The characters are easy to determine. Clearly we would expect that the leading characters will be those who determine the genre of the whole play; however, sometimes, we are witnesses to a different practice. In tragedies, the comic characters are mostly the supporting one; nevertheless, we may see Iago as an exception to the rule. He is the main agent of the tragic action and yet he bravely balances on the edge between comedy and tragedy. Out of the 'comic characters' we shall look at, he is probably the most interesting precisely because he has most space and is neither purely tragic nor comic but falls in between. To some extent we could say the same thing about Mercutio, who clearly is a comic character, but in the crucial moment turns into a tragic one. A special case of a comic character is the Clown. Clowns were very popular in Renaissance theatre and although it is a part belonging to a genre of comedy, none of Shakespeare's 'high tragedies' appears to be without him.

[...] the clown or Vice, when Shakespeare started to write, was a recognized anarchist who made aberration obvious by carrying release to absurd extremes. The cult of fools and folly, half social and half literary, embodied a similar polarization of experience.<sup>18</sup>

The clowns in Shakespeare's hands matured and developed and in consequence we may distinguish different 'forms' of this character through out the plays. The differences between Clown in Othello and Fool in King Lear are vast and deserve closer examination. All of these are just certain examples of the comic characters we can find in the mentioned tragedies. The majority of the comic characters in tragedies are present in order to release the tension and let the spectator 'breathe' in between the heavy scenes. However, they have another function which should not be forgotten. Because of their nature, they can cast a mirror on the seriousness of the situation and thus enable the other characters to realize their own actions.

The characters seem to be fractional elements in the whole structure of the play; however they are very significant for our purposes. The same can be said about the use of language. The language defines the characters and, as such, it shall be discussed as another source of comedy. What we need to bear in mind is the fact that the comic language is not solely an attribute of the comic characters but, more interestingly, the tragic characters have the ability

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<sup>18</sup> C.L. Barber, Shakespeare's Festive Comedy : A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom, (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1959) 5.

to lighten the situation by the way they speak. Shakespeare's wordplay is an important source of comedy across the genres of his drama. Susan Snyder develops the notion on the 'wordplay' in comedy and in tragedy as follows:

[...] one can draw a broad distinction between tragic wordplay, where the crucial element is the *word*, and comic wordplay, where it is the *play*. That is, in tragic speech (as opposed to comic speech in a tragedy, like Mercutio's Queen Mab speech in *Romeo and Juliet* ), the primary function of the pun is to illuminate by its conjunction of meanings some aspect of the tragic action.<sup>19</sup>

Although the comic speech in tragedy is more important for our purposes, we should not forget that punning and wordplay is not an attribute only for a comedy, but it can also be found in the most serious and tragic speeches.

The comic aspects of the play can be found in much broader elements than those that we have just talked about. The plot seems to be an absolute give away in determination of the genre, and yet some plays could work as both comedy and tragedy because there are grounds of both in the plot itself. The plot is just the framework for the final outcome of the play and it is the way the playwright treats the events which turns the action to one or the other side. As an example we may think of the double handling of the theme of jealousy. This theme can easily be used in both genres as Shakespeare himself justifies by writing comedy and tragedy using jealousy as the main driving force of the story; *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*. If the plot be the framework, the setting and the scenes are the actual core of the story. The setting of the play is important for the whole mood of the drama; however, Shakespeare proves that even if the initial setting seems to be ideal for comic plot, the tragedy can develop even from there. Comic scenes are probably the most direct sources of comedy in the tragic plot. These are scenes which are purely comic, and function mostly as a comic relief or as a foregrounding of the heavier and more serious ones. A.C. Bradley gives us several examples of these scenes and their function:

Sometimes, again, in this section of a tragedy we find humorous or semi-humorous passages. On the whole such passages occur most frequently in the early or middle

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<sup>19</sup> Snyder 33.



part of the play, which naturally grows more somber as it nears the close; but their occasional introduction in the Fourth Act and even later, affords variety and relief and also heightens by contrast the tragic feelings. For example, there is a touch of comedy in the conversation of Lady Macduff with her little boy. [...] A little before the catastrophe in *Hamlet* comes the grave-digger passage, a passage ever welcome, but of a length which could hardly be defended on purely dramatic grounds; and still later, occupying some hundred and twenty lines of the very last scene, we have the chatter of Osric with Hamlet's mockery of it.<sup>20</sup>

The occurrence of the comic scenes is subject to the interpretation of the director and performers of the actual performance. Often, those are the scenes which are being cut for various reasons. From the dramaturgical perspective the director may decide to suppress them completely, or do the complete opposite and bring out even the tiniest bit of comedy. All the elements which I have briefly discussed above, will be subject to study in each of the play. Clearly some of the plays are more 'comedic' than the others and the use of the humor differs. Although each play will form a separate chapter, I would like to make a connection across all of the plays discussed.

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<sup>20</sup> A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 69.

## ROMEO AND JULIET

[...] there is a constant stress on the nearness and oppositeness of comedy and tragedy, of triviality and seriousness, laughter and tears, minuteness and vastness, youth and age, and, of course, love and death.<sup>21</sup>

*Romeo and Juliet* is the second Shakespeare's tragedy and the first one we are to discuss. Perhaps more than in his later work, there is an obvious return to the world of festivity and carnival. There is no doubt that festivity played an important role in Renaissance society, and the lives of the people turned around the holidays throughout the year. Festivity was more linked to the life in the countryside where people were dependent on the production of crops and thus they would celebrate a successful harvest. Apart from the celebrations connected with harvesting the two most common festivals were the May games and the Lord of Misrule.<sup>22</sup> The May festivals were often described as a celebration of the relationship between man and nature.<sup>23</sup> To understand the term Lord of Misrule we may consult Barber's work *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*:

The formal Lord of Misrule presided over the eating and drinking within-doors in the cold season. But the title was also applied to the captain of summer Sunday drinking and dancing by the young men of a parish, a leader whose role was not necessarily distinct from the Robin or King of the Maying.<sup>24</sup>

All of these traditions and festivities were part of the entertainment affordable for all the people regardless of their social position. Since the plays were to represent the life of the people, it is understandable that 'festive world' was one of the sources when it came to the turns in the plot. Nonetheless, we associate these types of celebrations mainly with the genre of comedy, purely because comedy was to represent the more pleasant deeds of life. A classical example of festive comedy is *Midsummer Nights Dream* which composes the supernatural elements of the magical midsummer's night, together with the traditional celebration holiday.

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<sup>21</sup> Stopford A. Brooke, *On Ten Plays of Shakespeare* (New York: AMS Press, 1971) 87.

<sup>22</sup> Barber 18.

<sup>23</sup> Barber 19.

<sup>24</sup> Barber 24.

The elucidation of the festive traditions is necessary for our discussion of the time period in which *Romeo and Juliet* is set. Particularly, the first part of the tragedy relies on the knowledge of the traditions, and the fact that the play is set in July puts the audience into a certain mood. There are two reasons to believe that the story is set in summer; one is from the text itself and the other one is from the source of the play – Brooke’s poem. In the introduction to the Arden edition of the play edited by Brian Gibbons et al., we are acquainted with the closeness of the poem and the play in this particular matter:

[...] the impression of Italian summer weather, hot days, warm nights, sudden thunderstorms, is absorbed by Shakespeare from Brooke, and much enlivened in the process.<sup>25</sup>

The summer weather is an attribute of the festive comedies and it is also a period connected with love and wooing. Nonetheless, the theme of love is present in all the plays we are to discuss. Unlike in comedies, love in tragedies seems to be distorted and imperfect. *Romeo and Juliet* is, however, a tragedy where love has the same value for the characters as it has for the characters in comedies. Similarly, we shall discuss the same theme in *Othello* since love, although infected by jealousy, plays an important part in the dramatic plot. In contrast to these two tragedies we may see the treatment of love in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

The textual reference for the period of time the story is set in comes from the characters themselves who talk of hot days on several occasions.

**Ben.**            [...] The day is hot, the Capels are abroad,  
                    And if we meet we shall not ‘scape a brawl,  
                    For now these hot days is the mad blood stirring.<sup>26</sup>

From Benvolio’s talk we shall see that the weather has a direct effect on the action. The heat stirs up the characters’ blood and they do not know what they are doing. We may safely assume that this was not unknown to the people of London as Brian Gibbons points out in his

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<sup>25</sup> Brian Gibbons, “Introduction” *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006) 38.

<sup>26</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* III, i, 2-4.

introduction to the play<sup>27</sup>. Another reference comes from the mentioning of the festival of Lammas Tide which is the time when Juliet was born.

**Nurse**                                   [... ] How long is it now  
  To Lammas-tide?  
**Lady Cap.**                               A fortnight and odd days.  
**Nurse**                                   Even or off, of all days in the year,  
  Come Lammas Eve at night shall she be fourteen.<sup>28</sup>

We know that Lammas Eve was a harvest festival on the first of August<sup>29</sup> and therefore the present time of the play is set in the middle of July. The festival of Lammas was discussed by Ronald Knowles who was looking at the festival and ‘carnavalesque’ elements in *Romeo and Juliet*:

This, again, aligns the religious with the natural; Lammas, or loaf-mass day, with old age and birth. Lammas day is the first of August, a harvest festival at which loaves of bread made from the first ripe corn were consecrated. Harvest is often found as a metaphor or analogy for death [...] but here death is transformed into life in the provision of sustaining food. Ominously, Juliet is to be cut down by death before Lammas eve, pre-empting the natural harvest of her body in the fructification of marriage.<sup>30</sup>

From this extract, we may see that the mentioning of Lammas Tide by nurse was not just a means to determine the time space of the play but, more importantly, it gave the audience something they could relate to. As we have already mentioned, the plays were intended for the broad public, and thus the authors always tried to ‘please’ the people by showing, to a greater or lesser extent, particular parts of day to day life.

Apart from the minor portrayal of English festive tradition, Shakespeare has decided to make the most of the reputation of Venice as a town of Carnival and masks. Carnivals and balls are also often associated with the comedies. As examples we may think of Shakespeare’s own

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<sup>27</sup> Gibbons 61.

<sup>28</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* I, iii, 13-17.

<sup>29</sup> “Lammas Eve.” Def. *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol VIII. (Oxford: Clarendon Press) 609.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Knowles, *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1998) 38.

plays. In *Love's Labours Lost* the play with masks is a key part of the wooing of the ladies by the king and his men; similarly in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice talks about Benedick in a very insulting manner while dancing with him masked. Both of these two masked balls serve the purpose of getting the lovers together in much the same way as the masked ball in *Romeo and Juliet* does. Nevertheless, there is one important difference in the treatment of a ball in comedy and tragedy. In comedy, one person from the couple always knows who the other is and the mask is only a way to trick them. In *Romeo and Juliet*, however, the couple falls in love with not one of them knowing who the other is because such information would prevent any possibility of further acquaintance.

For the majority of critics, *Romeo and Juliet* has always been a play on the edge of both tragedy and comedy. While the beginning seems to resemble a festive romantic comedy, there is no place for even a slight hint of a comedy towards the end. The two opposing genres are in perfect proportion to one another and thus the flow of the play is not disturbed. Brian Gibbons remarks on this fact:

The two modes of tragedy and comedy are opposed, so generating the central dynamic of the action, but there are subterranean connections between them which make an antithetical complex like a living organism.<sup>31</sup>

The comedy, more than in *Othello* as we shall see, functions as a starting point for the tragedy. The possibility of the tragic circumstances hangs over the characters from the very beginning and they are constantly warned to alter their behaviour or there will be cause for regret. In this way, the tragedy is implied even within the comedy. Nonetheless such an implication is very subtle and easily forgotten. What makes the mingling of the genre particular interesting in this play is the fact that we may almost 'divide' the play according to the two genres. Moreover, unlike in other plays the decisive moment occurs almost in the middle of the play<sup>32</sup> and thus the distinction is even more apparent.

The key moment of the plot is, obviously, the death of Mercutio. Mercutio is the clown of the tragedy and one of the most influential comedic characters in all Shakespeare's tragedies. According to many, his death results in the death of initial comedy:

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<sup>31</sup> Gibbons 63.

<sup>32</sup> Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Introduction* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986) 21.

In Mercutio's sudden, violent end, Shakespeare makes the birth of tragedy coincide exactly with the symbolic death of comedy.<sup>33</sup>

It is true that with the death of Mercutio the action is speeding towards tragedy much quicker, however, in a way his death is just the tip of the iceberg and we could place the end of comedy a little bit earlier by drawing a parallel between tragedy and comedy. As we have discussed in the introduction, traditionally, the plot of the comedy revolves around wooing of a lady which successfully ends in wedding. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo wins Juliet in the course of two acts and after that there can be no linear way to another climax within the genre of a comedy. As a result, the play can only go in the opposite direction – towards tragedy. There are, however, other parallels which I shall draw upon when discussing the comedy elements themselves and perhaps we may see that we should not try to 'divide' the play but see the break between the two genres as necessary part of the action. After all, the audience is still led to believe that there may be yet another turning point which would set the unfortunate lovers onto the right path.

The mood of the play is set by the Prologue, who summarizes the story of the play and prepares the audience to see blood and tragic action which will eventually lead towards the death of the main characters. Nevertheless, the serious tone is quickly removed by the first scene and we are transferred into 'fair Verona' where the young gallantry spend their time challenging each other by uttering words of mockery in the faces of their enemies. Although we do not know much about the city, we have certain assumption as the readers/audience. Verona is an Italian town and the Prologue uses the adjective 'fair' to describe it. Italy seemed to be an ideal place for comedies and a lot of Italian Comedy del'arte is seen in Shakespeare's plays, as we shall discuss later on in connection with Othello. Shakespeare himself used the same setting for one of his comedies, *Two Gentlemen in Verona*, which was written roughly around the same time as *Romeo and Juliet*. Verona is represented by the people of both higher and lower rank. The background of the characters is one of the key elements for either genre and it shapes the nature of their personality. In case of this tragedy all of the characters seem to have certain 'comedic disposition'. The main characters are a young generation of Aristocracy and their everyday life is nothing but sporting or, in case of

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press) 62.

Romeo, dreaming about love. As the antithesis of these ‘rebels without a cause’ we have their servants. Servants were traditionally understood as comedic characters since Greek drama, and Shakespeare has decided to give quite a large space to the character of Nurse. She seems to be the perfect follower of the Greek tradition of servants who move the wheels of action by their folly and lack of common sense.

The character of Nurse is on the borderline between comedy and farce and yet we may see her as a devoted servant to her mistress who would do anything to make her happy. In her first scene she completely overshadows Juliet’s mother who wants to talk to her daughter about the possibility of marrying. We see a woman who seems to talk before she thinks and all her contributions into the conversation are just cascades of memories which have only one common point – Juliet. This part of Nurse’s personality reminds us of farce and according to Gibbons:

The role of the Nurse seems at first designed to temper Juliet’s cool, tentative air with earthy vigour and indulgently humorous acceptance of sexual desire and enjoyment, while the Nurse’s lower social position enables her to give practical help in advancing the cause of love.<sup>34</sup>

However, throughout her several other appearances we realize that her character is more complex and her personality is not one sided. Her wit opens very widely in the scene when she comes to Juliet with a message from Romeo. Here, the Nurse is well aware of the eagerness from her mistress and deliberately prolongs the time till she says the message. In contrast to the first scene we saw her in, she is very thoughtful in what she is saying. We no longer witness uncontrollable babbling, but we see how the nurse takes delight in teasing her young lady by deliberate turns from the ‘main topic’ of the conversation:

**Juliet**            I’faith I am sorry that thou art not well.  
Sweet, sweet, sweet Nurse, tell me, what says my  
Love?

**Nurse**            Your love says like an honest gentleman,  
And a courteous, and a kind, and a handsome,

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<sup>34</sup> Gibbons 66.

And I warrant a virtuous – Where is your mother?<sup>35</sup>

From the very first scene Nurse's affection towards Juliet is unmistakable and she herself stresses her love and intention to see her well married. Nevertheless, the audience, as well as Juliet herself is caught by surprise, when she suggests bigamy in order to please the Capulets.

**Nurse**            [...] Then, since the case so stands as now it doth,  
I think it best you married with the County.  
[...] I think you are happy in this second match,  
For it excels your firs; or, if it did not,  
Your first is dead, or 'twere as good he were  
As living here and you no use of him.<sup>36</sup>

It seems that the loving Nurse, full of energy and funny disposition, disappeared with the 'death of comedy' in the play. There is no doubt that she has her mistress' happiness in mind but, nevertheless, she appears just as calculating as the parents. Thus we shall see her character as indispensable for the first part of the play because she represents the ultimate comedy and farce; however, as the play progresses, her comic characteristics are toned down and she remains just a devoted servant to her mistress. In the second half of the tragedy there is no place for the comic side of her character and what is stressed more is her sense of practicality. Juliet's mind is overshadowed by the mixture of feelings of love and desperation and Nurse feels that she has to bring her down to earth. In a similar way, Mercutio felt the need to keep his friend on the ground when he was blinded by his 'love' for Rosalind.

Although Nurse gets most of the space in the story, she is not the only servant character who happens to twist a plot. The first half of the play is filled with simple minded servants whose function is to either move the action in a certain direction or just to create funny scenes. Because of their connection with particular scenes, we shall discuss these characters in the complexity of comic scenes.

If Nurse is the slightly farcical character of the play then Mercutio is the ultimate opposite. He is, without a doubt, a comic character; however his comedy has more intellectual grounds

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<sup>35</sup> Romeo and Juliet II, v, 53.

<sup>36</sup> Romeo and Juliet III, v, 216.



and in the story he supplements the character of a 'wise fool'. Susan Snyder sees him as the source for verbal comedy:

Mercutio is the clown of romantic comedy, recast in more elegant mold but equally ready to take off from the plot in verbal play and to challenge idealistic love with his own brand of comic earthiness.<sup>37</sup>

His comedy lies in his language. He steals every scene he is in by finding puns on other characters' sentences and thus he may seem to the audience as the ultimate joker without any real problems or sorrows. However, like every joker, he carries a soul full of emotion which he dares not to open. Unlike Romeo he never talks about his feelings and he does not sink into melancholy; he hides his real personality behind a cascade of jokes and analogies. Nonetheless, an observant audience is able to reach behind the facade painted by crude jokes and there find the thoughtful and perhaps melancholy personality of Mercutio. The difference between Romeo and Mercutio seems to be in the way they deal with their own sorrows. While Romeo keeps to himself, Mercutio exposes one part of his personality in order to take away the attention from the other part. His wit, however, does not only serve the purpose of humour but by stressing out thoughts and words of others he tries to bring out more important matters. As Brooke remarks:

He has wit. Whatever he touches he finds ten remote analogies for it; his wayward thinking plays with every unimportant matter, as a cat with a mouse, till the matter seem important.<sup>38</sup>

His wit is an educated one and from his analogies it is clear that he is a literary man despite the fact that he may seem as an opposite of a scholar due to his lack of dignity.

**Mer.** [...] Now is he for the  
numbers that Petrarch flowed in. Laura, to his lady,  
was a kitchen wench – marry, she had a better love  
to berhyme her – Dido a dowdy, Cleopatra a  
gypsy, Helen and Hero hildings and harlots, Thisbe  
a grey eye or so, but not to the purpose. Signor

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<sup>37</sup> Snyder 61.

<sup>38</sup> Brooke 42.

Romeo, bonjour. There's a French salutation to  
your French slop. [...] <sup>39</sup>

Mercutio and Nurse are the main comic characters in this tragedy. Although they seem to serve the same purpose, their comedy could not be more different. According to Thomas Marc Parrot, they are counterparts of each other:

He is the conscious wit; she the unconscious humorist. And since Shakespeare was by nature more the humorist than the wit, we may well believe that he knew the Nurse better and was able to reveal her more fully in speech and action. <sup>40</sup>

They serve as counterparts to their more serious masters. As has already been suggested, Romeo and Mercutio could not be more different and yet they seem to hold similar characteristics with which each of them deals in a different way. Mercutio's humour helps Romeo to open up and lifts him out of his melancholy. His function at the beginning of the play is not only to provide humour but also to serve as Romeo's companion and to bring him back to reality. Before Romeo meets Juliet he is madly in love with Rosalind, who we do not meet but only hear of through his sighs. Mercutio knows that Romeo's feelings are based on the idea of love rather than on real love for another human being. His death comes at a time when he is no longer needed as Romeo's cynical conscience. Romeo has found his love and, perhaps for the first time in his life, he does not need any guidance. Though Mercutio is a jester till the end of his life, on the verge of death he is able to stop and speak his mind when he tells Romeo that it was in fact his fault he was hurt: "[...] why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm." He then continues his words of hatred towards the enemy families.

**Mer.**           A plague o'both your houses,  
                  They have made worm's meat of me.  
                  I have it, and soundly too. Your houses! <sup>41</sup>

He knows that the quarrelling between the families has no purpose, and, just like the Prince's words, his death reminds us of that.

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<sup>39</sup> Romeo and Juliet I, iv, 39.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Marc Parrott, Shakespearean Comedy (New York : Russell and Russell, 1949) 202.

<sup>41</sup> Romeo and Juliet III, I, 108.

The plot of the play is a story of a young couple who fall in love despite the wishes of their family. This is a traditional plotline for a Renaissance festive comedy; lovers who have to overcome certain obstacles in order to live happily ever after. However, in comedy the obstacle serves only to strengthen the relationship and leads the couple to marriage. Often the lovers flee from their town and find refuge where they could stay till their families approve of their marriage. In *Romeo and Juliet* such a place could be Mantua where Romeo is banished after killing Tybalt. However, it is only Romeo who goes away and leaves Juliet to face her relatives and deal with grief on her own. The key twist in the plot of the play is of comedic nature as well. Friar Lawrence persuades Juliet to pretend her death in front of the family so that she can be with the man she loves; however, the wheel of Fortune is not merciful to the young lovers and Romeo himself falsely believes that his love is dead. Faking death or indeed belief in one's death can be found in other Shakespeare's comedies and Romances. In *Much Ado About Nothing* the supposedly dead Hero brings Claudio to the realization that she was innocent; Viola is led by her grief for her 'dead' brother to change her identity and thus she meets her future husband; and in *Pericles* the newly found Thaisa contributes to the family reunion. Dieter Mehl comments on this 'comedic element' in *Romeo and Juliet*:

Simulating death is a favourite trick in Elizabethan comedy; in *Romeo and Juliet*, it helps to create a scene that hovers precariously and provocatively between comedy and tragedy.<sup>42</sup>

We have already pointed out that the first half of the play seems to be pure comedy and we should elaborate more on what makes the first scenes 'classifiable' as comic. Interestingly, Brook mentions a performance in the Theatre at Weimar directed by Goethe who decided to cut the whole of the first act and, according to Brook, these first scenes are crucial in understanding Shakespeare's intentions<sup>43</sup> It is certain that the 'comic part' of the tragedy gives us important information about the characters and the place they live in. The tragic action is a result of unhappy circumstances and we are witnesses to those situations. The comic beginning resulting in tragic ending gives us the idea that life is not black and white and we are subjects to fate and fortune. Because of that, *Romeo and Juliet* is often dubbed 'tragedy of fate'. Brian Gibbons, for instance, points out the relationship between the speed of action and the given fate:

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<sup>42</sup> Mehl 24.

<sup>43</sup> Brooke 35.

*Romeo and Juliet* is a drama in which speed is the medium of fate, though at first it appears that fate is only a function of speed.<sup>44</sup>

The fate is always present in the play and, moreover, the Prologue introduces us to the inevitable end at the very beginning. In consequence, when the fate becomes irreversible, the tragedy 'speeds up' and we know there is no turning back; although we are still held in hope. The play opens with a playful quarrel between the servants and men of the house of Capulet and the servants and men of the house of Montague. The comic aspect is given by the language and moreover through their conversation. The banter among them tells us that they quarrel just for the sake of it. The whole scene gives the impression that this is the way they spend their time. Susan Snyder points out that 'the feud itself seems more a matter of mechanical reflex than of deeply felt hatred' and, moreover, she considers the feud to have the same function as 'legal restraints in Shakespearean comedy'.<sup>45</sup> The progress of the first scene is, interestingly enough, a parallel to the fight during which Mercutio dies. Nonetheless, the climax of both scenes is very different and leads us to different genres. The mode of the first scene is changed by the interruption of Prince Escalus who represents the law of Verona. He comes to remind the characters that their behaviour may cause a tragedy: 'Once more, on pain of death, all men depart.'<sup>46</sup> Prince's warning is later fulfilled in III.i when Mercutio is killed. The quarrels in both scenes, I.i and III.i, are similar, however the attitude of some of the characters is different. In the latter scene, Benvolio senses that they should not be there and his tone is slightly mournful from the very beginning. Romeo is another character who does not approve of the 'banter' between the two houses because he is suddenly part of both. Both of these scenes start as a meaningless quarrel however the second one ends in the tragic event of Mercutio's death. Romeo is trapped between the two families without anyone knowing it and, paradoxically, his inability to choose sides leads to the rising of the hatred of one house towards the other. Thus, the different endings of two fairly similar scenes show us the possibility of development of one scene in two different genres. The first scene of *Romeo*, I.i, is again closer to comedy than we would expect. Mehl comments on this:

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<sup>44</sup> Gibbons 76.

<sup>45</sup> Snyder 59.

<sup>46</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* I,i, 101.

Romeo himself, when he first appears on the scene, seems to be the kin fog romantic lover we know from Shakespeare's early comedies and have learned to view with a certain amount of amused detachment.<sup>47</sup>

Romeo is full of melancholy and, in contrast to Mercutio, his feelings seem to be pathetic. His sighs in the name of love may remind us of Orlando in *As You Like it*, where he was mocked by Rosalind; here it is Mercutio who has to fill this role as we have already discussed.

One of the comedic themes is the 'bartering of the bride'. Capulet discusses with Paris his marriage to Juliet, and it is clear that he is not yet willing to part with his girl but, at the same time, he encourages Paris to make Juliet fall in love with him. This scene of marriage arrangements is a parallel to the final marriage arrangements of Juliet and Paris. In a similar way we discussed the two fights we may discuss these two scenes. As has been pointed out, in the first scene, Capulet feels that Juliet is not ready for marriage:

**Cap.** [...] Let two more summers wither in their pride  
Ere we may think her ripe to be a bride.  
**Paris.** Younger than she are happy mothers made.  
**Cap.** And too soon marr'd are those so early made.  
[...] My will to her consent is but a part,  
And she agreed, within her scope of choice<sup>48</sup>

This scene is written in a very comedic mode. The father jokes about the male view of the women who become miserable after their marriage.

In contrast to this scene, there is Act II.iv, when Capulet suddenly changes his opinion and, without Juliet knowing, decides when the wedding will be:

**Cap.** [...] A Thursday let it be, a Thursday, tell her,  
She shall be married to this noble earl.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Mehl 23.

<sup>48</sup> Romeo and Juliet, I, ii, 10-18.

<sup>49</sup> Romeo and Juliet, III, iv, 20-21.

He is very hasty in his decision to marry his daughter. Everything is arranged without any sense of feeling, and Juliet's father is being very formal, almost like a businessman finalising his agreement. With the change of the genre, there must also be a change in the attitude of the characters. Capulet, as a father, has the right to impose his will on his daughter and he takes it. In the world of tragedy there is no space for romantic love or long wooing; everything must be done in haste since, as Capulet says, 'we were born to die'.<sup>50</sup>

There are few scenes which seem to serve only the purpose of comic relief; these are the scenes involving only servants. To some extent it may remind us of the scenes with Clown in *Othello*. There are no "professional" clowns in *Romeo and Juliet*, but their position is taken by the servants. As an example we may look at the short soliloquy by one of them:

**Ser.** Find them out whose names are written here. It is  
Written that the shoemaker should meddle with his  
yard, and the tailor with his last, the fisher with his  
pencil, and the painter with his nets, but I am sent  
to find those persons whose names the writing person hath  
here writ. I must to the learned. In good time.<sup>51</sup>

This is followed by a scene when the servant tells Romeo and his friends about the ball. As we can see, the servants and characters of the lower rank seem to be in charge of the movement of the plot. In comedy, their lack of mind leads to various misunderstandings which form the twist in the plot. In *Romeo and Juliet* the servant, without any intention, causes the meeting of the couple. However, when we move into the genre of tragedy, the servants are no longer those who stir the story, but the gentry and 'fate' take their position in influencing the plot.

The last scene of the play seems to create an interesting paradox. According to Mehl, the layout of this scene is the same as in the comedy where all the characters are present on the stage to be part of the wedding of the happy couple. In the case of tragedy, however, we are not overlooking a wedding but a funeral:

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<sup>50</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, III, iv, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, I, ii, 38.

It is, in many ways, a classical comedy scene, a mock tragedy whose essentially comic character is underlined by the entrance of the clownish musicians and by the trite lamentations of the Nurse.<sup>52</sup>

The final scene thus points out to the whole discussion of *Romeo and Juliet* as a play in between two genres. Although the style of the setting is taken from the comedy, the fact that the young generation is dead points to the cruelty of a tragedy.

The comedy in language is very important not only in Shakespeare's tragedies but also in his comedies. In case of *Romeo and Juliet* it is even more apparent and according to some critics it is the most punning play. Mahood comments on the importance of the wordplay in this tragedy:

It holds together the play's imagery in a rich pattern and gives an outlet to the tumultuous feelings of the central characters. By its proleptic second and third meanings it serves to sharpen the play's dramatic irony. Above all, it clarifies the conflict of incompatible truths and helps to establish their final equipoise.<sup>53</sup>

Often, in comic scenes, the characters use the means of repetition or multiple synonyms to add the gradation to the comic situation:

**First Ser.** You are looked for and called for, asked for and sought for, in the great chamber.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that a servant is giving information by using different synonyms is bizarre given the fact that he is a character without any education. On the other hand, the whole sentence seems very playful and suggests that he is not interested in the fact that someone is being called but rather tries to choose the right words; and being an illiterate man, he uses all the ways of saying he knows.

We have already discussed the possibility of dividing the play into the comic part and the tragic part. With respect to the language, this division is perhaps even more applicable. The first half of the play, especially the first scene, includes purely comic language which

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<sup>52</sup> Mehl 24.

<sup>53</sup> M.M.Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957) 56.

<sup>54</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, I,v, 12-13

diminishes with the progression of the tragedy. The comedy lies in the ability of the characters to quickly react to one another and use the versatility of the English language as a main method in creating jokes and puns. These comic scenes are very quick; one utterance follows another and the speed only amplifies the comedy behind the language. To some extent it may remind us of contemporary drama, especially work of American dramatist David Mamet whose clipped dialogues and rhythm affect keep the audience on their toes just as Shakespeare's dialogues did.



## HAMLET

*Humour is a determinant of Hamlet's nature and a key to the tonal quality of the play as a whole.*<sup>55</sup>

Hamlet is a very complex tragedy which encompasses different themes and philosophies. One cannot doubt the comedic elements present in the play, however the comedy is very subtle and it seldom fulfils only the function of comic relief. More significantly, it seems to reflect the tragic action and highlight the serious tone of the play. Shakespeare does insert comic characters, themes, or even comic scenes; nonetheless he does not allow them to develop in the course of the comic genre but instead works with them as if they were elements suited for tragedy. In consequence, the comedy in *Hamlet* is, to a greater extent, subject to interpretation, unlike the comedy in *Romeo and Juliet* or indeed *Othello*. With the exception of the 'Gravediggers' scene', the comedic elements seem to possess the ability to be treated both in a comic and a tragic way, and it is up to the particular production to make that decision. Unlike in *Romeo and Juliet*, the tone of the play is set by the very first scene. We enter the Danish castle in the night and we are encountered with the ghost of the dead king. The tone of the whole scene is very grim and grey. Moreover, throughout the first act it is apparent that the main theme of the play is revenge. Nonetheless, there is comedy introduced on other levels of the play. Certain minor themes which are indispensable for the course of the tragedy seem to be 'borrowed' from the comedy. Clearly, Shakespeare works with them in a different way and uses them to strengthen the tragic themes.

The theme of Love can be equally used in Comedy as in Tragedy. In *Hamlet*, Love is not the key theme or motif of the tragedy, rather it is pushed aside from the main plot. Hamlet is driven by a strong feeling of revenge for his father's death and, in consequence, he has no 'space' for his love of Ophelia. In fact, it may seem that he has never cared for her if we take into account the way he treats her. However, there are a few remarks which suggest that, had the circumstances been different, he would have pursued the relationship with Ophelia. When Hamlet sees Ophelia in Act III.i he remembers his love:

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Davidson, "The Comedy of 'Hamlet'," *Hamlet*, ed. Martin Coyle (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1992) 45.

[...] Soft you now,  
The fair Ophelia! Nymph in thy orisons  
Be all my sins remembered.<sup>56</sup>

And later on, throughout his very unforgiving conversation with Ophelia, he suddenly says: 'I did love you once.'<sup>57</sup> This is perhaps the only kind word Hamlet has towards Ophelia since in all other conversations he remains very critical towards her, and his true feelings are revealed only to the audience through the mentioned 'aside' and when he watches her funeral. Comedies often deal with lovers and obstacles in their love, however, the central couple always stands together against all odds and thus the story leads towards a happy ending. In *Hamlet*, nonetheless, the relationship is broken by one of the leading characters and therefore this 'comedic' motif cannot be further developed. Dieter Mehl, comments on the nature of love:

The conventional love-comedy motifs are soon perverted by the course of events as well as by the realities of the Danish court. Polonius only uses the conventions of courtly love to show his loyalty to the new King. Similarly, as Hamlet soon realizes, the friendship of his former associates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is cunningly exploited to pry into his secret.<sup>58</sup>

If we look at the concept of love-relationship in the tragedy of *Hamlet* we realize that there is 'something rotten' in all the relationships, and love, though present, seems to be either suppressed or affected. Shakespeare is not only exploring love between partners but also love in the family, but even relationships between children and parents are not ideal. We watch two different households; the royal family and the family of a servant at the court. Both families are not complete, even though Claudio has taken the role of the father in the family of Hamlet. The distortion is not as explicit as we shall see in *King Lear* nonetheless, even here, we see children manipulating their parents or vice versa. Hamlet is a stronger character and therefore his mother is submissive to his bursts of madness and anger. On the other hand, Ophelia is manipulated by the men around her; her father, brother and by Hamlet. We shall have a closer look on the relationships between Polonius and his children since it is necessary to discuss it in relation to his character.

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<sup>56</sup> *Hamlet* III, i, 87.

<sup>57</sup> *Hamlet* III, i, 114.

<sup>58</sup> Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Introduction* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986) 41.

In discussing the characters of the play, we shall find out that there is more comedy in *Hamlet* than we would expect in this type of genre. There is a number of supporting characters who would fit comedy as well as they fit tragedy. What is necessary to distinguish are the purely comedic characters and the characters who have comedy only as one part of their, otherwise very complex, personality. Special attention should be paid to the character of Hamlet. Although he is the key figure of the tragedy, if we look closely at his characteristics we find that there is more to his romantic-tragic personality. The humour that Hamlet possesses is not the type of humour we expect from clowns, but his is rather sarcastic and bitter due to the circumstances of the plot. His sarcasm reflects the grim situation in the kingdom of Denmark. He is not a comic character, however it is necessary to discuss his comedy in order to have a full understanding of the importance of comedy for this play. Peter Davidson writes about the nature of Hamlet's humour in his book *The Comedy of 'Hamlet'*:

Hamlet's humour is properly to be termed wit, and that word 'wit' should be considered not solely as a word for a kind of comedy but as retaining something of its original Anglo-Saxon meaning: 'intelligence', from the verb, *witan*, 'to know'.<sup>59</sup>

Hamlet's strength is in his 'words' and wit, both of which he uses against those who are less quick minded than he is. A prime example could be his conversation with Polonius in Act II.ii. Hamlet is very sarcastic and reacts on the literal meaning of Polonius' words in the same way we will later see in scene with the gravediggers.

<b>Polonius</b>	[...] – What do you read, my lord?
<b>Hamlet</b>	Words, words, words.
<b>Polonius</b>	What is the matter, my lord?
<b>Hamlet</b>	Between who?
<b>Polonius</b>	I mean the matter that you read, my lord. <sup>60</sup>

Hamlet is quick with his responses and he is well aware of the nature of Polonius' questions. We may assume that he knows that Polonius is trying to spy on him and find out the reason behind his strange behaviour in order to report it to the king. The audience knows that Hamlet was only acting in front of Polonius from his last remark after Polonius leaves: "These

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<sup>59</sup> Davidson 44.

<sup>60</sup> *Hamlet*, II, ii, 188.

tedious old fools.”<sup>61</sup> Hamlet’s humour is, however, not only in using puns and wordplay. Some of the joking is very crude and on the edge of comedy and cruelty. As an example of this style of joking we may use an extract from Act IV.iii after Hamlet kills Polonius and is questioned by the King:

<b>King</b>	Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?
<b>Hamlet</b>	At supper.
<b>King</b>	At supper! Where?
<b>Hamlet</b>	Not where he eats but where ‘a is eaten. [...]
<b>[...]</b>	
<b>King</b>	Where is Polonius?
<b>Hamlet</b>	In heaven. Send thither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’th’ other place yourself. [...] <sup>62</sup>

Hamlet avoids giving Claudius the answer by using set of puns and leading the king towards the dreadful realisation of Polonius’ death. This black humour is developed in Shakespeare’s later tragedy, *Macbeth*. There, the crude jesting forms the main body of the comedy.

Polonius is another character who possesses a certain comedic nature. His comic nature is developed on two levels; private, and that of a member of the court. The private side of his character is seen in the relationship with his children. Although Polonius seems to be a little bit harsh with his children and we do not see any affection, he ceases his strict behaviour when Laertes leaves for France in order to give him some advice on how he should behave and what he should and should not do. In his guidance he uses the means of oppositions:

<b>Polonius</b>	[...] Give every man thy ear but few thy voice; Take each man’s censure but reserve thy judgement. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy But not expressed in fancy – rich, not gaudy; [...] <sup>63</sup>
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<sup>61</sup> Hamlet, II, ii, 214.

<sup>62</sup> Hamlet IV, iii, 16.

<sup>63</sup> Hamlet I, iii, 67-70.

His advice is that of a parent who seems to be more worried about the opinion of others than the good of his son. The fact that he chooses to give Laertes limits rather than straight advice, points more towards the comedy in this scene. At the court, he is very zealous and he would do anything to please the king. In consequence he acts like a fool without realizing his own foolishness. He is just a figure in King's play and his intentions are to some extent 'honest' since he believes in the right of his doing. Susan Snyder sees his behaviour as a prototype of an 'obstructive father' in comedy:

From the beginning right up to his death, Polonius behaves as if he were in a comedy. Suspicious of his children, spying on Laertes and interfering in Ophelia's love affair, he casts himself first as the traditional obstructive father.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, his function within the play is to interfere in matters which are not his own and to serve Claudius as his right arm. However, since we are not in a comedy, he has to pay the highest prize for his foolishness. His death, just as the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, reminds us that there is no place for those without wit. All of them die in vain without knowing the truth.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are peculiar characters in the play. They have often been discussed by the critics and, moreover, inspired Tom Stoppard to create a play in which they are the main characters: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*. It is hard to determine their position in the play since they don't have much of a space. Indeed, it is difficult to put them into the category of 'comic characters' when we know that they are victims of the whole conspiracy. Nevertheless, perhaps their inability to deal with the situation and their ignorance can be the key factors in classifying these characters as comedic. Their insignificance is shown in the first scene they appear in:

<b>King</b>	Thanks, Rosencrantz, and gentle Guildenstern.
<b>Queen</b>	Thanks, Guildenstern, and gentle Rosencrantz. <sup>65</sup>

From the fact that the Queen seem to correct the King about the identity of Hamlet's friends we may assume that they are not important enough for the King to remember who is who.

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<sup>64</sup> Snyder 108.

<sup>65</sup> Hamlet II, ii, 33.

Nonetheless, according to some critics, it may signify the Queen's effort to give each of them the privilege to be addressed first. Thus, although they are two characters, the audience perceives them as one since they are always addressed together and respond to questions together. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, similarly to Polonius, seem to hold strongly the loyalty to the crown and the king. They are very polite in addressing the King and Queen as well as Hamlet himself:

<b>Guildenstern</b>	My honoured lord.
<b>Rosencrantz</b>	My most dear lord.
<b>Hamlet</b>	My excellent good friends. <sup>66</sup>

Although they are friends of Hamlet's they seem to exaggerate their language when meeting Hamlet for the first time. Their loyalty, however, proves to be the way to death.

An even 'less important' character who gives the play a touch of comedy is Osric. Victor Kiernan wrote talks about his function in the play: "He adds a touch of sour amusement to Shakespeare's picture of the decadence of an old order, and Hamlet's disgust with it and its pretentious silliness."<sup>67</sup> Osric is in a way a 'replacement' of Polonius since he is also very loyal towards the crown and thus lacks his own mind. In fact his verbal exchange with Hamlet is reminiscent of the conversation between Polonius and Hamlet in Act III.ii:

<b>Hamlet</b>	Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
<b>Polonius</b>	By th' mass and 'tis like a camel indeed.
<b>Hamlet</b>	Methinks it is like a weasel
<b>Polonius</b>	It is backed like a weasel.
<b>Hamlet</b>	Or like a whale?
<b>Polonius</b>	Very like a whale. <sup>68</sup>

<b>Hamlet</b>	[...] Your bonnet to his right use: 'tis for the head.
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<sup>66</sup> Hamlet II, ii, 217.

<sup>67</sup> V.G. Kiernan, Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare (London : Verso, 1996)77.

<sup>68</sup> Hamlet III, ii, 367.

**Osric** I thank your lordship, it is very hot.

**Hamlet** No, believe me, 'tis very cold; the wind is northerly.

**Osric** It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

**Hamlet** But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot, or my complexion –

**Osric** Exceedingly, my lord, it is very sultry, [...] <sup>69</sup>

Both Polonius and Osric purposely agree with everything Hamlet says so as not to make him angry. However, they do not realize that Hamlet is well aware of their pretence and they keep on 'acting', persuaded of their own cleverness. The fact that Osric comes in the play only after Polonius' death shows Shakespeare's tendency throughout his tragedies. In most of the plays we are to discuss, comic characters are replaced half way through the play. In *Romeo and Juliet* Mercutio is replaced by the Nurse. Although they appear in the play from the beginning, after the death of Mercutio, the Nurse takes over his function as we have already discussed. Similarly in *King Lear*, when the Fool disappears, Shakespeare brings on the stage Poor Tom who becomes Lear's attendant instead.

In *Hamlet*, there are two purely comedic characters and these are the gravediggers who are referred to as clowns in the stage direction. The fact that they are called 'clowns' directly refers to a comedy. The gravedigger and his man joke about death and later on are joined by Hamlet who is curious as to who is to be buried in the grave. Harley Granville-Barker in his prefaces comments on the function of the clowns:

It is not merely or mainly by being funny that the clown captures and holds his audience, but by personal appeal, the intimacy set up, the persuading them that what he has to say is his own concern – and theirs. It is with the comic and semi-comic characters – from Angelica and Shylock to Falstaff – that we are first brought into this fellowship; and whatever conventions Shakespeare may discard, it will not be the revealing soliloquy and aside. <sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Hamlet* V, ii, 79-86.

<sup>70</sup> Harley Granville- Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* vol.1 (USA: Princeton University Press, 1964) 25-26.

The gravedigger talks to Hamlet in a very similar manner to that which Hamlet himself uses towards other people; that is he takes everything said literary and thus twists every word the prince says. Although the clowns seem to be present only to fulfil the comic relief of the heavy action, one can see another, more serious, meaning in their seemingly mindless talk. Their questioning of death and their ‘philosophy’ on the matter of suicide raise the questions of the meaning of life and death in a similar way that Hamlet’s famous soliloquy does. Moreover, in confrontation with the gravediggers Hamlet casts away his pretending madness and once again thinks about the meaning of life. In the words of Phyllis Gorfain: “They demonstrate the comic likeness between seeking salvation and damnation, and the mock the slim distinction between choice and passivity in suicide.”<sup>71</sup>

The scenes are closely connected to the characters present; to put it simply, we cannot find a scene which would have a comedic nature unless there is a ‘comic character’ or unless the comedy is implied by the language, and the Gravedigger’s scene is perhaps the most important comic scene in the whole play. Charlotte Spivack comments on the combination of laughter and death in this scene:

The comic treatment of the *memento mori* tradition again combines with the mockery of sensuality in the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*. Wise fools that the gravediggers are, they comment philosophically about death as they go about their grim work of digging a new grave. They engage in amusing quibbles over the technicalities of suicide, questioning whether the corpse they are about to bury was drowned “wittingly” or “unwittingly”. Then they undertake a series of humorous riddles, all with answers involving death, thus investing their morbid occupation with comic detachment.<sup>72</sup>

The clowns mock death and debate about suicide using puns and wordplay and, moreover, sing songs while digging the grave. It may show their lack of respect for the dead as Hamlet himself feels, but at the same time it tells us that death is an inevitable part of one’s life and as such it should be taken. The gravediggers do not pretend any kind of compassion towards the dead Ophelia and their only concern is whether she should or should not have Christian

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<sup>71</sup>Phyllis Gorfain, *Towards the Theory of Play and the Carnavalesque in Hamlet*, Ronald Knowles, ed., *Shakespeare and Carnival; After Bakhtin*, (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998) 152-177.

<sup>72</sup>Charlotte Spivack, *The Comedy of Evil on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1978) 158.



burial since she committed suicide. Thus, although we perceive the puns and the acting of the clowns as humorous, we have to stop and think beyond the actual words spoken.

During this scene, there is one more clown apart from the gravediggers. It is Yorick, king Hamlet's fool who died some years ago. He is present as a skull and a memory. The fact that he is mentioned and discussed by Hamlet and the gravediggers is significant for the whole scene, since he himself contains the relation between death and laughter.

The language is one of the most important features distinguishing comedy from tragedy. Lynne Magnusson has been interested in the relation between comedy and its language: "Language has many uses in Shakespeare's comedies, but important among them is the least utilitarian – to surprise with pleasure, to trigger laughter."<sup>73</sup> The use of Laughter in tragedy must be obviously different, however we may recall that one of the purposes of having amusing scenes in between difficult ones is to lighten up a little the heavy plot. In case of *Hamlet*, the language mostly remains the serious tone; however we may distinguish the character of Hamlet from the other personages by looking at his use of irony. He plays with the language that is with the meaning of words and thus strikes the characters with bitter remarks. His utterances, however funny they may be, serve other purposes than comedy. They reveal the reality of what is going on the stage. Hamlet attempts to behave like a 'mad man' in the eyes of the king and the others, however the audience is aware of his honesty in what he says. Although it may seem that he does not answer any of the questions he is asked, and that a conversation with him does not proceed sensibly from the beginning to the end, everything he says is precisely and clearly commenting on the situation around. Thus his irony has two uses. On one hand it is meant to create an impression in the characters that he is mad, and, on the other hand, by pointing out things which others do not know, he raises the feeling in the audience that it is him who knows everything that is going on. His use of irony can be well shown in the dialogue of Hamlet and Polonius in Act II.2. Hamlet 'puts on' the mask of madness and creates it by means of language. His replies to questions seem to have no sense, nevertheless, from what he says it is clear that the madness is only pretended:

**Hamlet**

Well, God-a-mercy.

**Polonius**

Do you know me, my lord?

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<sup>73</sup> Lynne Magnusson, "Language and Comedy," *Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 164.



There is one more linguistic device directly pointing towards the comedy. It has been also uncovered by Magnusson: “The habit of word repetition and inversion slides seamlessly into the pervasive comic strategy.”<sup>77</sup> The repetition is a very interesting dramatic device. On the one hand it emphasizes the urge and need, whilst on the other it may evoke laughter if it is overdone:

<b>Polonius</b>	Madam, I swear I use no art at all. That he’s mad, ‘tis true, ‘tis true ‘tis pity, And pity ‘tis ‘tis true: a foolish figure! But farewell it, for I will use no art. <sup>78</sup>
<b>Queen</b>	Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
<b>Hamlet</b>	Mother, you have m father much offended.
<b>Queen</b>	Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
<b>Hamlet</b>	Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. <sup>79</sup>

The short excerpt from *Hamlet* shows Hamlet’s ability to twist the words around in order to get the other characters in position he wants them to be. In a way he manipulates the others because he knows what the reaction to his utterances is going to be. Often, too much creates a suspicion in the mind of others as to what extent the claim is true.

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<sup>77</sup> Magnusson 158.

<sup>78</sup> *Hamlet*, II,ii, 96.

<sup>79</sup> *Hamlet*, III.iv, 8-11.

## OTHELLO

*The tragic ending of this play is a trick of chance and intrigue rather than the effect of fate and necessity: the final disaster is brought about by a perversion of motifs and situations that would normally belong to the world of comedy.*<sup>80</sup>

Othello is one of the best known of Shakespeare's tragedies. And it is a great one. The tragedy of the characters is inevitable; and yet even here we may find scenes as if taken out from a comedy. The similarity of the plot in *Othello* and *Much Ado about Nothing* is one of the sources we might use when trying to see the thin line between comedy and tragedy. It is not our aim to "disregard" *Othello* as one of the greatest tragedies but rather to focus on the 'minor' aspects of the play; on the parts of the plot evoking comedy. *Othello* is a play of contrasts and oppositions. The themes symbolising the evil are balanced by the themes representing the good. Thus the opposition of comedy and tragedy perfectly fits the whole nature of the play. In this tragedy, more than in any other we are to discuss, the two genres are present throughout the whole play and each of them seems to outweigh the other at certain points. In consequence, the audience is kept in constant strain over the final ending of the story. Unlike in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is not possible to draw a line between comedy and tragedy because they are so intertwined that only in the last act we are able to see the irreversibility of the action. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Shakespeare used comedy in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* in a fairly similar way and therefore some critics such as Susan Snyder take the opportunity to discuss the plays together. The key resemblance is in the treatment of the beginning and the ending. As Susan Snyder points out, both plays start as comedies but there is no comic relief towards the end:

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* use the world of romantic comedy as a point of departure, though in different ways. In the early play a well-developed comic movement is diverted into tragedy by mischance.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> François LaRoque, "Othello and the festive traditions," *Shakespeare's Festive World*, (Cambridge, 1993) 282.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979) 56.

The comedy in the beginning is mostly given by the setting and the scene of waking up Desdemona's father; both of which we shall closely discuss.

The plot and the themes seem to have a certain potential for both tragedy and comedy. Jealousy, which is the most important theme in the tragedy, works here as an initiating impulse leading towards tragic action. Nonetheless, the same theme in *Much Ado* sets up a comedy. The similarity of the plot between these two plays is more than striking and it shows how fine the boundary between comedy and tragedy may be in Shakespeare. Both plays are the stories of love, revenge, jealousy; they are the stories of oppositions, but in comedy it is love which helps to settle the whole situation, while in tragedy love comes too late in realization and hatred wins. In discussion of the comedic elements in *Othello* we should look closer at the plot in relation with the already mentioned comedy, *Much Ado About Nothing*. Together with jealousy and hatred, the main topics of *Othello* are love and marriage. The latter two are also traditional topics for comedy. Love especially, is an essential theme in the 'comic world'. The characters have to prevail over obstacles so that their love is purified and may end up in happy marriage. Snyder observes the theme of love as essential for Shakespeare comedy:

The *value* of love and of its proper fruition, marriage, is a basic premise of all Shakespeare's comedies, which invariably present as all or part of their initial situation individuals in a single and unsatisfied state and direct them through plot complications toward appropriate pairings-off at the end.<sup>82</sup>

In *Othello*, however, love develops in the opposite direction than in comedies. Othello and Desdemona are in love from the very beginning and their marriage happens in the first act, therefore the catharsis cannot be found in the fulfilment of their mutual feeling but in its slow deterioration. Love slowly changes into jealousy, misunderstanding and death, all of which are attributes belonging to tragedy. Although the couple resists the first obstacle of their relationship – the disapproval of their marriage from Desdemona's father – their love is not strong enough to endure the malignity of the outer world. According to Snyder, love becomes a weakness rather than strength:

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<sup>82</sup> Snyder 71.

The love that in comedies was a strength in *Othello* is vulnerable to attacks of reason, arguments from nature. More than that: vulnerability is its very essence.<sup>83</sup>

Nonetheless, Shakespeare does not limit the theme of love in *Othello* to only one couple, but rather presents us with three types of relationships between man and woman. Although all of the relationships are distorted in one way or another, the fact that the story includes several 'transformations' of love only points us more in a direction of a festive comedy. In *Much Ado About Nothing* it is the dual relationship between Hero/Claudio and Beatrice/Benedick; *Love's Labours Lost* ends in pairing the King of Navarre and his Lords with the Princess of France and her ladies; multiple marriages fill the end of *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. If we compare the relationships in tragedies to those in comedies we realize that while in tragedy we are witnessing couples in unequal partnership while in comedies there is a social equality between the lovers.

Othello and Desdemona are at the beginning a loving couple who violate the established norms to fulfil their love. They might easily remind us of Romeo and Juliet in this sense. Each character in the couple has a different social status and their being together is unthinkable for the others. In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare kept the pure love from the first act to the last, and its strength could not be weakened by the opinion of others. In Othello, the problem of the disparity in the social position is solved at the beginning, however it is not enough since their love starts to break into pieces because of Iago's manipulation. Desdemona is more mature than Juliet was and more radical in her thought and opinions; her love is of the purest kind and cannot be stained even by the beastly behaviour of Iago. Although Desdemona seems to be the weaker one in the couple, her love is the strongest and she is not afraid to proclaim it in front of everyone:

<b>Desdemona</b>	That I did love the Moor to live with him My downright violence and scorn of fortunes May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued Even to the very quality of my lord [...] <sup>84</sup>
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<sup>83</sup> Snyder, 81

<sup>84</sup> *Othello*, I,iii, 249-252.



personality. They are both deceived because they believe what they see or better what they want to see without deeper thought or any kind of hesitation. Their blindness is a starting point for the whole plot. Despite these similarities, these two pairs of characters are developed in different ways. To be more precise, there is a disparity in the degree of refinement of the two pairs of characters. Othello and Iago are the key figures for the tragedy. Their personalities change throughout the play. Iago is a master of manipulation and he causes much of the play's tension. He is not satisfied until his revenge is done to perfection. He creates a whole conspiracy net to persuade Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Iago is a very complex character who is able to change the outward appearance of his personality as quickly as he needs to in order to reach his goal. A.C. Bradley comments on his ability to accustom to every situation in this manner:

One must constantly remember not to believe a syllable that Iago utters on any subject, including himself, until one has tested his statement by comparing it with known facts and with other statements of his own or other people, and by considering whether he had in particular circumstances any reason for telling a lie or the truth.<sup>87</sup>

Iago himself summarizes his nature in words: "I am not what I am"<sup>88</sup> This is said at the very beginning and it does not only describe the character of Iago but the whole mode of the tragedy for nothing is what it seems to be. Iago is the type of clever villain who carefully thinks out every next move of his plan. In this way, he is the complete opposite of Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The difference between these two characters is not just the fact that one appears in the comedy and the other in the tragedy. The most conspicuous differences are the reasons which brought them into the present state of hatred. In the case of Iago, it is not so simple to identify these causes; there are several. The first and most important is his thwarted ambition. He hoped to gain the position of lieutenant-general but Cassio was promoted instead of him. This promotion was initiated by Othello and thus Iago must enact his revenge not only on Cassio but also on the Moorish general himself. However, from his behaviour we can detect other motifs such as racism or desire for Desdemona. Don John, on the other hand, is much simpler in his motifs. He hates his half brother and his retribution is not so carefully pre-mediated. He is a villain without deep personality. All the audience know about him is that he is a villain and that he treats his brother unkindly. Don

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<sup>87</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 181.

<sup>88</sup> *Othello*, I,I, 66.



John's decision to hurt his brother is only coincidental. When he overhears that the closest friend of Don Pedro is to be married to Hero he thinks up a plan to destroy the happiness of the young couple. His malicious intentions to harm have no deeper reason than to satisfy his wounded ego. Therefore, his personality does not have to be developed further because it would not bring any major turn into the plot. Iago, on the other hand, harms for more specific reasons and not only that. He hopes to get something from his conspiracy. As we can see, the difference between the villain in comedy and tragedy is the fact that in tragedy he is more developed and to some extent becomes the main character whereas there is no such need, nor desire in comedy. Villain in a comedy merely functions as an incentive of the action as he restrains the fruition of the relationship of the main characters. Othello and Claudio are the other halves of the 'key pair' of tragedy. They are both persuaded of the infidelity of their wife/bride because of their suspicious nature. Claudio is very easily persuaded because Don John gives him the conclusive proof of Hero's falsehood by showing him his beloved in the arms of another man. In this scene we might find one of the common themes the plays have in common – nothing is what it seems. Claudio believes what he sees despite being assured of Hero's qualities. The word of Don John is enough for him to think that he really sees Hero and her lover. He is much more easily convinced than Othello because he is given the ocular proof. Othello himself also "longs" to witness Desdemona in the arms of Cassio so he can be absolutely certain of her falseness. Therefore Iago needs to be inventive in order to fulfil his act of vengeance. Jealousy does not heave immediately in Othello but creeps rather slowly into his mind until it reaches the proverbial brim of the cup. Bradley talks about the rising jealousy in Othello:

But up to this point, where Iago is dismissed, Othello, I must maintain, does not show jealousy. His confidence is shaken, he is confused and deeply troubled, he feels even horror; but he is not yet jealous in the proper sense of the word.<sup>89</sup>

Othello is being slowly eaten up by his jealousy and this gradation is shown in his behaviour. At the beginning we see a true hero; an honest, trustful man to whom men look up to and whom women admire. This is also revealed in his rhetoric, which is noble and glorious. However as the "disease" spreads through his veins he changes into "bloodthirsty beast" only

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<sup>89</sup> Bradley 166.

to end as “a nobly tragic figure”<sup>90</sup> as G. Wilson Knight puts it. As we can see there are as many similarities between *Othello* and *Much Ado about Nothing* as there are differences. Still, one important dissimilarity has not been mentioned yet. Although jealousy is a main theme in both *Othello* and *Much Ado*, the characters in the comedy being influenced by it are not the leading personages in the two plays. In *Much Ado* the two major characters are not Hero and Claudio but Benedick and Beatrice who represent the other couple in the play. Thus, the theme of distrust, disrespect and hatred are pushed back to create only a small dark cloud in the blue sky of Messina.

The comparing and contrasting of the characters from two plays of different genres brings us closer to the recognition of the comedy potential of the personages in *Othello*. Othello is at the beginning a prototype of a romantic hero. He is a cultural outsider in Venice but he has a respect as a skilful soldier. Also his bombastic language may invoke a smile. Othello is a victim and thus the audience tend to sympathize with him despite his obvious wrong-doing. On the other hand, Iago’s complex and villainous personality is more typical for tragedy, yet he is often funny in conversation with others and especially with Roderigo. Iago is very cynical and he shows off his ability to convince weaker characters. Thus, he is able to ridicule the others by simply pointing out things as they are. To certain extent we may see him as the main ‘clown’ in the tragedy as Susan Snyder points out:

Iago is a clown without good humor and (what underlines that lack) without self-sufficiency, who must therefore prove his theories on other people.<sup>91</sup>

It is true that he has a great ability to create a whole comic scene, however Iago is an equivocal character and he should be performed as such. A perfect example can be found in the 2007 production of *Othello* in Globe, London. Iago, played by Tim McInnerny, was both maliciously calculating and incredibly funny. His comedy came mainly from the ‘asides’ in which he talked to the audience about his plans and also from the scenes with Roderigo. In contrast to Iago, Roderigo may seem as a ‘pseudo-romantic’ comic character who is totally dependent on Iago. Their first scene together is also the first scene of the play and as W.H. Auden points out they remind us of a pair of swindlers:

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<sup>90</sup> G. Wilson Knight, *The wheels of Fire* ( Meridian Books Inc, 1962 )118.

<sup>91</sup> Snyder, 80.

When we first see Iago and Roderigo together, the situation is like that in a Ben Jonson comedy – a clever rascal is gulling a rich fool who deserves to be gulled because his desire is no more moral than that of the more intelligent avowed rogue who cheats him out of his money.<sup>92</sup>

Desdemona, Emilia, and, to some extent, even Bianca are the female characters having the comic potential, though Bianca does not have much space to prove it. Desdemona, despite being innocent and pure, is also a woman who eloped from her father to marry a man out of her ‘class’. She shows her strength, especially at the beginning when she stands in front of the court and defends her love to Othello. Moreover her ‘comic potential’ is displayed in her jesting with Iago before Othello’s arrival to Cyprus. If we follow the definition of a ‘comic heroine’ by Linda Bamber, we may find that all of the three female characters perfectly fit the premise:

The comic heroine does not actively resist the social and political hegemony of the men, but as an irresistible version of the Other she successfully competes for our favor with the (masculine) representatives of the social Self.<sup>93</sup>

Desdemona is strong at the beginning, and, as we have already pointed out, she voices her feeling. Although she seems to be in charge when she tries to manipulate her husband in order to get better position for Cassio, she remains a puppet in Iago’s intrigues. Emilia, on the other hand is a submissive figure throughout the play. Her comic quality is again discussed by Bamber:

Emilia shares with the comic heroines a clarity of emotion that guides her to the truth. But the play does not balance on the emotional clarity of its women, as the romantic comedies do.<sup>94</sup>

Bianca seems to be the least tragic character. She is reconciled with her position and dominates the scenes with Cassio by her quick-witted responses. Moreover, they seem to set up a mirror to the relationship of Othello and Desdemona, particularly in ‘their’ scene of

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<sup>92</sup> W.H.Auden, “The Joker in the Pack,” *Shakespeare Othello*, ed. A.E.Dyson, (London: Palgrave, 1994) 204.

<sup>93</sup> Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (California: Stanford University Press, 1982) 30.

<sup>94</sup> Bamber, 13.

jealousy. In Act III.iv, Bianca accuses Cassio of being unfaithful to her nonetheless the whole tone of the scene is very light and rather comical.

The purely comic character is the Clown who only appears in two acts to relieve the plot from the tension. According to Susan Snyder, he does not have much to do:

His feeble essays at bawdry and wordplay have nothing conceptual to adhere to, and after a second brief appearance in Act II he departs unmourned.<sup>95</sup>

This may well be the reason why directors often disregard this character and choose to cut his two scenes, nonetheless his appearance fits into this type of play perfectly. The two scenes, however small, are significant for the ‘play of oppositions’. The Clown as a character may be underdeveloped, nonetheless he is still an important part of the play and a source of comedic elements in the tragedy. He keeps the other characters on toes and we may suspect that he had the same function towards the audience. We shall discuss the particular scenes later on.

The setting of the play seems to be an ideal setting for a comedy. Moreover, the plot of *Othello* begins in the city-state of Venice. This might be significant for our search of comedy elements in *Othello*. Venice was used in comedies for its reputation of a city of loose manners and morals. Gunnar Sorelius says on this matter:

In spite of the example of Romeo and Juliet whose setting is similar to that of Othello, it is more natural to conceive of Venice as the appropriate background for the kind of romantic comedy that *The Merchant of Venice* represents or for classical comedy of the type of *Volpone* than for a tragedy like *Othello*.<sup>96</sup>

The interesting fact about Venice is its duality. On the one hand it was a city of sin and on the other it was also a place of rule and justice as well as place of prejudice. If Venice is a setting for comedy, Shakespeare went even further when he decided to move the couple to Cyprus. What we find in most romantic/festive comedies is the presence of a “magic place” where the lovers escape to find happiness: in *Twelfth Night* it is the island of Ilyria where the unhappy lives of the characters are resolved; a forest of Arden becomes a place of wooing for Rosalind

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<sup>95</sup> Snyder 80.

<sup>96</sup> Gunnar Sorelius, *Comic and Tragic Metamorphosis* (Milano, 1985)

and Orlando in *As You Like It*, and we should not forget about the magic woods in *Midsummer Nights Dream*. Here, it is the island of Cyprus which seems to be the “beneficent green world”<sup>97</sup> defending love; however, it fails to fulfil its cathartic function. The lovers move to Cyprus where Othello is due to succeed to an office and it may seem as if they were moving away from the prejudice of Venice into the world where neither race or age difference is a problem. Nevertheless, Othello and Desdemona are surrounded by the people from Venice and thus they remain in the biased society. Moreover, Cyprus is at war and thus the characters are moving from the city of stability to the place of instability. In consequence, Cyprus cannot be the place of liberation and happy ending.

The two settings of the play complete the set of binary oppositions appearing in *Othello*. Peter Washington in his *Notes on Shakespeare* comments on the opposing qualities of the places which we have already hinted at:

Venice represents stability, order, authority, the conventional respectable world. Cyprus is the scene of war, intrigue, where Iago can hatch his plots and Othello’s ascendancy be shown up for what it is: precarious and vulnerable.<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, he believes that: “The two places become symbolic of order and disorder, stability and passion, continuing life and disaster.”<sup>99</sup> Thus we can see that the type of setting does not provide us with an exact knowledge of the genre. The important criteria are the consequences of action and the dramatic twist which leads us towards the final catharsis.

Although the play starts with slightly rough conversation between Roderico and Iago, the following actions of the first act might serve well also in a comedy. LaRoque sees in the first act a presence of “charivari”; a tradition of waking someone up in the middle of the night.<sup>100</sup> This device comes from commedia dell’arte and in this respect the tragedy begins as a farce. Also, the reason for waking Desdemona’s father could be found even in a comedy. He is warned that his daughter has eloped with her lover/ husband. The dialogues also point to the character of comedy:

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<sup>97</sup> LaRoque

<sup>98</sup> Peter Washington, *Brodie’s Notes on William Shakespeare* (London: Pan Books, 1990) 70.

<sup>99</sup> Washington, 70.

<sup>100</sup> LaRoque

**Brabantio** What profane wretch art thou?

**Iago** I am one, sir, that comes to tell you, your daughter  
and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.

**Brabantio** Thou art a villain.

**Iago** You are a Senator<sup>101</sup>

Here the comedic language has a political nature since Iago likens Senators to villains. This was one of the remarks which would be popular with the audience since it criticizes the ruling class. Later on, Othello is awakened in the same manner to be informed about the unfaithfulness of Desdemona. According to the critics, this resemblance of the two scenes shows the assimilation of the father figure and Othello. Othello and Desdemona are not the young light hearted couple which we saw in *Romeo and Juliet*. As we have already pointed out, the marriage of Othello and Desdemona was an outcome of admiration one for another rather than love. Although Desdemona declares her love for the Moor, she always looks up to him as her superior.

In addition to the apparent nature of the comedic plot and setting, Shakespeare has decided to create whole scenes which seem as if they were taken from one of his comedies. We have already discussed the direct link to commedia dell'arte in the scene of awaking Brabantio and now we shall discuss yet another connection with the world of comedy: two short interludes with a clown. He appears briefly at the beginning of the third act and then later on, in act 3 scene 4. It is not the major part of the play, yet it is an interesting one concerning the genre. It has been mentioned above that the latter part of the tragedy is very tense and thus the 'clown bit' enables the audience to relax a little and breathe in before the final tragedy. In the first appearance, the Clown is sent down by Othello to chase out the musicians who came to play under his windows. The comic aspect of this passage is the language. Clown plays with words exactly in Shakespeare's typical style. This scene is described in Monarch notes: "The musicians identify their noise-makers as 'wind-instruments', which incites the Clown to several ribald puns on 'wind', 'tale', and 'tail'."<sup>102</sup>

**Cassio** Dost thou hear, mine honest friend?

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<sup>101</sup> *Othello* I,i, 115-119.

<sup>102</sup> *Shakespeare's Othello, Monarch Notes* (Cole Publishing Company, 1991) 45.

**Clown** No, I hear not your honest friend: I hear you.<sup>103</sup>

While the first part of the scene, Clown and the musicians, is built on the pun without any other than humorous meaning, the short exchange of words with Cassio may signify more important matters. The Clown is called “honest friend” by Cassio but he does not listen to it. Instead he turns Cassio’s utterance upside-down. This might mirror the type of conversation between Othello and Iago where Iago is the one to compliment Othello who willingly accepts Iago’s flattery. Moreover, Othello keeps addressing Iago as his honest friend which is paradoxical given the fact that Iago is anything but honest with Othello. The Clown, on the other hand, uses his honesty as a tool to create comedic effect.

The other appearance of Clown brings another playful pun on the word ‘lie’. When Desdemona and Emilia came to seek Cassio, they are encountered by Clown who at first refuses to tell them the place of Cassio’s lodging.

**Desdemona** Go to! Where lodges he?

**Clown** To tell you where he lodges is to tell you where I  
Lie.

**Desdemona** Can anything be made of this?

**Clown** I know not where he lodges, and for me to devise a lodging, and say he lies here, or he lies there, were to lie in mine own throat.<sup>104</sup>

The Clown’s function is even clearer here. He is the one to use his wit based on linguistic puns and thus to provide a comic relief. Moreover, in both scenes with the clown we can see that he is the only one to suspect the dangerous situation among the characters. The playful pun on the word “lie” is an appropriate one considering the fact that, throughout the play, the characters lie either deliberately or unintentionally. The whole dramatic situation would not be possible without a series of lies, white lies and half-truths. We should not forget the second meaning of this word – lie as in to rest in bed. Iago gives Othello very vivid images of Desdemona lying with Cassio and this talk expands Othello’s jealousy. In comparing the two scenes with the Clown, the latter one already foreshadows the coming tragedy as the topic of his jesting is more serious than in his first appearance. Also, Clown’s speech might again

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<sup>103</sup> Othello III,i, 23-42.

<sup>104</sup> Othello III, iv, 1-12.

remind us of Iago and his ability to avoid answering direct questions. Still, it is difficult to say whether there is an important significance of this character or whether he is there only to relieve the tension.

Shakespeare has created an excellent comic scene in Act II where Iago sets up a trap for Cassio and gets him drunk. Iago, himself, is pretending to be drunk by singing songs and discussing the drinking habits of different nations. In the already mentioned production in the Globe, this scene particularly was created as a pure comedy. McInnerny as Iago seemed to have left the seriousness of his character completely behind and performed a skilful theatrical etude of a drunkard. Nick Barber playing Cassio put the emphasis on the sentence “[...] You must not think then that I am drunk.”<sup>105</sup> And the whole fight between Cassio and Roderigo resembled parody. Nonetheless, the comic scene ends with the appearance of Othello. In the theatre the change from comedy to tragedy was amplified by the sound of the bell.

The language of the opening scenes is very relaxed and the dialogues are quick; it is the complete opposite of the tense interlocation of the final part. Yet, Brabantio’s language is very distressed when he learns that his daughter fled with a man of different colour and this contributes to the comicality of this scene. His utterances are rather short exclamations in which he resemble *Shylock* in a similar scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Further on, Brabantio accuses Othello of using witchcraft to enchant his daughter. The introduction of magic powers refers to comedy more than to tragedy; although one of the other greatest Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Macbeth*, is full of charms. Despite the fact that the first act resembles comedy in most of the aspects, the seed of dubiety in Othello is already laid. After the court where Desdemona admits to being attracted to her husband from the very beginning, Brabantio is forced to accept the marriage. However, he does not waste the opportunity to warn Othello of his daughter: “Look to her, Moor, if though hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee” (Othello I.3, 289-290).

Although this utterance may evoke laughter, it also has certain darker undertones. Brabantio might appear as a comic figure in his despair and anger, yet, his fate is tragic and can be seen as foreshadowing Othello’s end.

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<sup>105</sup> *Othello* II,iii, 114.



The comedy in language is determined by the character. While the Clown bases his language on puns and 'cheap jokes', Desdemona and Iago are very subtle and their conversation resembles meaningless banter. Particularly their scene of awaiting Othello shows Desdemona as a quick witted lady who is not afraid to voice her opinion. In consequence we perceive her as a worthy opponent to Iago. Iago is the main bearer of the linguistic comedy, however his jokes are often on the edge with cruelty: cruelty against his wife, and everyone who is in his way to power. As an example we may take his remark to Cassio about Emilia:

**Iago**                    Sir, would she give you so much of her lips  
                              As of her tongue she often bestows on me  
                              You'd have enough.<sup>106</sup>

He is very sarcastic and shouts down Emilia by complaining publicly about her scolding him. Iago's cruelty is often hidden in the double meaning of the language. Thus he appears to possess two faced personality; one of which is the 'honest Iago' and second one which is a sarcastic rascal.

The treatment of comedy in *Othello* is very much similar to the treatment of comedy in *Romeo and Juliet*. Nevertheless, we may see a certain development in Shakespeare's style. We are no longer tempted to completely divide the play into comedy and tragedy although there maybe a certain climax point after the arrival to Cyprus. Instead, we are witnesses of a proportionate 'intermingling' of the two genres.

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<sup>106</sup> Othello II.i, 100-102.

## MACBETH

*There is nothing in Macbeth, however, to compare with the interwoven comedy of character and action that runs through the tragic tissue of Hamlet and King Lear.*<sup>107</sup>

Out of the five plays in which we are discussing comedy, *Macbeth* is the most serious one, without any larger attempt for comic relief. The topic, the characters and the setting all fit into the dark tragedy and the plot thickens from act to act. And yet, despite the very ‘murky’ mood of the play, we may still find at least one comedic scene and a few hints of comedy to relieve the heavy plot. Unlike in the other plays, there is no comic set up or common theme for the writing of the comedy. Already, the first scene defines the genre of the play or at least the shadowy tone of the drama. The audience is encountered by three witches who in ‘thunder and lightning’ introduce us to their plan of meeting with Macbeth. The presence of magic and supernatural element seems to occur in the later tragedies; until then it was a device mainly common in comedies. Their unearthly beings within the play possess a certain ability to lighten the story from reality and thus remind the audience that what we are watching is just a play. Seemingly, there is more space for comedy in such characters as they do not answer for the verity of the drama. The fact that *Macbeth* starts with the appearance of three witches creates for the audience an atmosphere of the unreal and mysterious only to be broken down by the horrific actions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Dieter Mehl comments on the function and nature of the witches:

The spectator finds himself transported into a world where human beings are closely observed by supernatural spirits eager to create confusion and to take advantage of man’s infirmities. The witches are a rather more sinister version of the elves and fairies in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* who make fun of the mortals and are amused by their folly.<sup>108</sup>

His opinion both points out to my earlier comment about the role of witches and goes even further. Their function is not only to create a distance between reality and the play but,

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<sup>107</sup> Parrot 316.

<sup>108</sup> Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: An Introduction* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986) 108.

moreover, according to Mehl, they seem to influence the characters' doings and thus the audience may find a way to pardon Macbeth and his wife. Nonetheless, despite their undeniable gift of prophesy, one cannot free the main characters of their sins entirely since their acts of violence were conducted only to fulfil the divination, and thus the prophecy became an excuse for everything they had done.

The other function of the witches which was briefly mentioned is a certain possession of comical aspects in their personality. The audience might tend to see them as less serious figures because of the fact that they are super natural creatures and moreover their riddle-like speaking may encourage the spectator's laughter. Nonetheless, all these 'possible flaws' are subject to interpretation and if we take the scenes as a whole, they seem to hold together fairly well. Charles Lamb commented on the un-believability of the characters of witches on the stage:

[...] When we read the incantations of those terrible beings the Witches in *Macbeth*, though some of the ingredients of their hellish composition savour of the grotesque, yet is the effect upon us other than the most serious and appalling that can be imagined? Do we not feel spell-bound as Macbeth was? Can any mirth accompany a sense of their presence? We might as well laugh under a consciousness of the principle of Evil himself being truly and really present with us. But attempt to bring these beings on to a stage, and you turn them instantly into so many old women, that men and children are to laugh at. Contrary to the old saying, that 'seeing is believing', the sight actually destroys the faith [...]<sup>109</sup>

Lamb believed in the power of Shakespeare's language, however, he felt that the language could only work on page. The studies of the difference between 'page' and 'stage' in Shakespeare's plays are increasing in their importance and with the possibilities of the contemporary theatre, the companies have different means to make each scene as believable as they can. Moreover, the Renaissance theatre was well equipped with props which enabled the actors to create storm, thunder or lightning. Thus, the assumption that witches on stage would seem comical just by their appearance seems to be unreal. Their comical aspects lie in the heart of their existence; in the way Shakespeare created them.

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<sup>109</sup> Charles Lamb, "On Shakespeare," *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. D.F. Bratchell (London: Routledge, 1990) 38.

The seriousness of the witches always disappears when they are on stage on their own, without other characters and talk one to another. At that moment, there aren't any other characters they would like to impress or tell them their prophecy. Instead they talk about their personal lives:

**1 Witch**                      Where hast thou been, Sister?  
**2 Witch**                      Killing swine.  
**3 Witch**                      Sister, where thou?  
**1 Witch**                      A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,  
   And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd: 'Give  
   Me,' wuoth I : -  
   'Aroyant thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries. [...]<sup>110</sup>

The 'Weird sisters', as they are called, present themselves as vindictive old women who use their power to revenge on those who were unkind to them. This scene shows their ability to manipulate ordinary humans and, in a way, it justifies our earlier proposition that Macbeth's behaviour could be blamed on the witches and their dark powers. We learn that they are going to drown the sailor's ship because his wife was unkind to them. Therefore, why would they not have the ability to lead Macbeth towards a murder? During the period the play was written, the playgoers would certainly blame the witches for all the wrong doing since their belief in supernatural was much more than that of the contemporary audience.

The last scene concerning the comic ability of witches we shall discuss is Act IV.i. The witches are boiling a potion while 'talking us through' the things they are mixing in. Their rhyming reminds us of a fairy tale and in a way it could be seen as a relief from the tension of the main plot. It is not a purely comedic scene like the one with the Porter, which we shall discuss later on, however its function within the play is the same; to relieve the tension.

Although the witches have a certain comic potential, mainly because of their supernatural character, the sole comic character is the Porter who appears briefly in Act II.iii. Coleridge did not consider the scene to be written by Shakespeare but rather as an invention of the actors. Moreover, he did not find any comedic elements or puns in the play:

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<sup>110</sup> Macbeth I,iii,1-7.

Hence the movement throughout is the most rapid of all Shakespeare's plays; and hence also, with the exception of the disgusting passage of the Porter (II, iii), which I dare pledge myself to demonstrate to be an interpolation of the actors, there is not, to the best of my remembrance, a single pun or play on words in the whole drama.<sup>111</sup>

Together with Pope, Coleridge is the only one of the opinion that this scene was inserted by the actors, but for most of the critics, the Porter is a significant character for the play. What has always been a part of the debate is the function of the scene. While it clearly works as a comic relief since the plot is very tense and there is not much space for the audience to breathe in before the final catharsis, there is one more practical aspect of the scene. The practicality proceeds from the timing within the play. The Porter appears just after the murder of Duncan and delays the entrance of Macduff and Lennox. This is discussed in the introduction to the Arden edition of the play:

The scene is theatrically necessary, if only because the actor who plays Macbeth has to wash his hands and change his clothes, and, as Capell suggested it was necessary 'to give a rational space for the discharge of these actions'.<sup>112</sup>

Thus we may say that the timing of the scene resolves the theatrical problem of the actor's changing while the nature of the whole scene remains comic.

The character himself is reminiscent of other comic characters in tragedies; such as the gravediggers in *Hamlet* or the Clown who brings the worm to Cleopatra. Parrot sees him as 'a visitor from the common kindly world into the realm of tragic circumstance.'<sup>113</sup> It is true that he does seem like a 'visitor' since he is out of the range of the characters we meet during the play. Moreover, although cutting his scene would not change the whole outcome of the play, it would rob the audience of a very theatrically attractive intermezzo. Although the comicality of the Porter seems indisputable, A.C. Bradley found it hard to perceive the scene as humorous. The timing of the scene prevented him from seeing the Porter as a comic character. The surrounding action is too terrific and we are all aware of what has just happened. In consequence he comments on the scene in this way:

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<sup>111</sup> Samuel T. Coleridge, "Lectures on Shakespeare" *Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. D.F. Bratchell (London: Routledge, 1990) 138.

<sup>112</sup> Kenneth Muir, "Introduction" *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2005)

<sup>113</sup> Parrott 315.

He is grotesque; no doubt the contrast he affords is humorous as well as ghastly; I dare say the groundlings roared with laughter at his coarsest remarks. But they are not comic enough to allow one to forget for a moment what has preceded and what must follow.<sup>114</sup>

Although, his argument seems very plausible and the terrific turn in the course of events is indeed hanging over the comic scene, there is no doubt that the Porter is a pure comic character and should be acted as one. His dimensionality rests on two aspects; the fact that he is drunk, and his language. Both of these characteristics point towards the bawdy comic characters of Sir Toby Belch from *Twelfth Night* or even Falstaff. Stephen Regan comments on the use of language by the Porter:

The Porter's speech is full of sexual innuendoes and bawdy puns, and these fasten our attention, once again, on the play's preoccupation with manhood.<sup>115</sup>

His language slightly changes with the entrance of Macduff and Lennox. He starts to talk more in puns containing 'sexual innuendoes' when talking about the effects of drinking. In his soliloquy, before he opens the gate, he refers to the Hell Gate which may suggest the nature of the gate he is a guardian of. Thus the topic of his talk throughout the scenes changes from Christian to secular.

There is no doubt, that the main function of this scene is a comic relief, however, Honigman suggests that there might be other functions which tend to be overlooked:

Comic relief fails to indicate the Porter's other functions. He is introduced to transform the mood and pace of the play. His humour helps, but his very brief scene leaves an indelible impression because he brings to it so much more – a pagan tolerance and comfortableness, expansiveness, a glimpse of a man who remains immovably himself.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 350.

<sup>115</sup> Stephen Regan, *Macbeth, Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Kiernan Ryan (Bath: The Bath Press, 2000) 106.

<sup>116</sup> E.A.J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare, Seven Tragedies: The Dramatist's Manipulation of Response* (London: Macmillan, 1976) 148.

The Porter seems to break the flow of the horrific events and slow down the pace in which the story is told. His humour, to a greater extent, relies on the performance and the actor's ability to portray drunkenness. However, the fact that he is not in any way involved in the doings of his master puts him aside of any action. He is just a Porter who has a single duty; to open the gate. He seems to be only an interlude and although his comical etude withdraws some of the bloody action, we can never fully forget that somewhere in the castle his master is washing his hands of blood. Rosenberg sees the Porter as a transition from one moment of a tragedy to another:

The Porter bridges us from one moment of tragedy to another, never letting us escape the implications of a murderous world he inhabits, yet dressing them in the rough, humorous language and action of inspired earthy foolery.<sup>117</sup>

His humour seems to be coarser than that of the gravediggers, even though they are using death as a starting point of their riddles.

The language of *Macbeth* is in tune with the tone of the whole play; there is not too much space for punning and jokes. However on scarce occasions we may find certain traces of comedic language. Most of the comedy in language comes from the characters we have discussed; the Porter and the witches. While the purpose of the Porter is to be funny and amusing, the witches have different functions in the play and thus their language is not fully comedic. If we compare the character of Porter with the Weird Sisters, we realize that the humour they all carry comes from different sources. The Porter is a follower of the tradition of clowns, and as such he inserts puns and riddles in his talk as well as vulgar vocabulary. The witches, on the other hand, are supernatural characters who should create a feeling of fear in the audience, and their comedy comes as a side effect of the language they use. Looking at the language of the play in general, Shakespeare uses means of mockery, irony or sarcasm, and all of these only stress the brutal nature of the events. According to M.M. Mahood we should not dismiss the existence of the wordplay completely:

The wordplay of *Macbeth*, less obvious than that of other plays, is some of the most subtle Shakespeare has given us. It welds the themes of the play together into the

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<sup>117</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, The Masks of 'Macbeth' (London: University of California Press, 1978) 353.

imaginative unity of a great dramatic poem. At the same time it preserves the play's theatrical vigour by contributing to the interplay of characters as fully realised as any in the major group of Shakespeare's tragedies.<sup>118</sup>

We have already discussed the scene with the Porter and it may seem that there are no more comic scenes. It is true, that we would not find any more comedy to the same extent as in Act II.iii. Nonetheless, there are couple places in which the 'comic tone' underlines the cruelty of the main characters and coarseness of the situation. As an example we may have a look at Act V.iii where we are witnesses of a master-servant exchange of words:

**Macb.** [...] The devil damn thee black, thou cream-fac'd loon!  
Where gott'st thou that goose look?

**Serv.** There is ten thousand-

**Macb.** Geese, villain?

**Serv.** Soldiers, Sir.<sup>119</sup>

What might strike us at first is that it seems as if the master and the servant have exchanged their roles. In comedies, the servants usually play on the words spoken and thus may seem dumb to the audience. Here, however, Macbeth uses the play on words in order to mock his servant. By interrupting the servant's line, he emphasizes the fact that he despises the servants and, moreover, in enhances his cruel personality.

Another example of cruel but comic remark can be found in Banquo's reaction to the witches when he meets them for the first time:

**Banquo** How far is't call'd to Forres? – What are these,  
So whither'd and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth,  
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,

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<sup>118</sup> M.Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957) 145.

<sup>119</sup> *Macbeth* V,iii, 11-15.



And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.<sup>120</sup>

In this extract, however, the mockery is interwoven with the fear he feels towards them. In the case of Banquo we perhaps cannot talk of mockery since he is a very pure character and does not treat others in the same way Macbeth does. Nonetheless, we may assume that the groundlings would at least smile on his description of the witches.

We have already touched upon the fact that the presence of the supernatural was more of a comedic device, and we should discuss the function of the magical element in tragedy in more detail. Similarly to *Romeo and Juliet*, the plot is hanging on fate. However, while the earlier tragedy uses indirect reference to the presence of fate – like referring to Romeo and Juliet as ‘star-crossed lovers’<sup>121</sup> – in *Macbeth*, fate and prophecy are the key factors for the changing of the course of the story. The attribute of fate was already discussed in relation to the witches. Perhaps we may stress here that there might be two ways of looking at the function of the destiny. If we take the prophecy seriously, we may assume that the characters are lead by Fortune and there is nothing in their power to reverse the course of events. In this respect we are reminded of Greek Tragedy, where fate and fortune played an important and crucial role in turning of the events. The other way of looking at the prophecy is to dismiss its validity and see it as a babbling of three senile women. Taking this stand, we would not be able to forgive the action of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, as we have discussed earlier. Thus, they would be taking the prophecy as their guideline rather than being lead by the fortune. Macbeth’s desire for power is apparent straight after he hears the prophecy. Until then, he is content with his position and would not dream of being anything more. However on the prospect of climbing up the ladder he already starts to form his desires:

**Macb.**            [Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! – That is a step  
                         On Which I must fall down, or else o’verleap,  
                         For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!  
                         Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
                         The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,

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<sup>120</sup> *Macbeth* I, iii, 39-47.

<sup>121</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* Prologue, 6.

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.<sup>122</sup>

His confession of having ‘black and deep desires’ leads the audience to the conclusion that Macbeth is not fully lead by the ‘wheels of fortune’ since he himself is very ambitious to get everything the witches have predicted for him.

What is connected with these elements is the element of Nature. In comedies, Nature comes as a saviour for the main characters who are rejected by other people. In *Macbeth*, however, Nature rises against the main characters and leads them to destruction as Russ MacDonald comments:

Nature seems to conspire against humans rather than cooperate with them – the benevolent sprites of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the unnamed providential forces that assist the characters in *The Comedy of Errors* or *Much Ado About Nothing* become the witches who tempt Macbeth or the distant and inscrutable gods of *King Lear*.<sup>123</sup>

The nature surrounding the castle is as gruesome as the murders which take place there. The woods surrounding the home of Macbeth are the complete opposite of the magical forest from *Midsummer Night’s Dream* or the idyllic forest of Arden in *As You Like It*.

In addition to the elements of Fate and Nature, Shakespeare was not afraid to insert supernatural elements requiring more complex staging. Like in his Romances, the audience was a witness to the vanishing of witches, sounds of thunder or apparitions created by the Weird Sisters. These effects seem to occur later in Shakespeare’s work and the only other tragedies with the presence of supernatural elements we are to discuss are *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. It is important to say that in both of them it is the appearance of a ghost which creates a transcendental touch in the play.

The comedy of *Macbeth* is hard to grasp and indeed it may seem to be an illogical attempt trying to find any lightness in one of the bloodiest tragedies Shakespeare has ever written.

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<sup>122</sup> *Macbeth* I,iv, 49.

<sup>123</sup> Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare : An Introduction with Documents* (Boston, Mass. : Bedford, 2001) 86.

Nonetheless, the traces of comedy we have discussed only understate the complexity of the plays. The lack of more significant comedic elements has been part of critical studies for years. Parrot suggested that it may be due to the fact that the play was intended specifically for the court:

Of all Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth* alone was written for a special performance at Court. Perhaps this explains why there is so little of comedy in the original version; Shakespeare may have felt that there was plenty of mere entertainment, some of it notably transgressing the bounds of propriety and even decency, in other Court performances at that time. Nor was there any need for him at Court to appeal, as he was bound to do to the groundlings of the Globe, by the antics of a clown.<sup>124</sup>

His argument seems to be plausible since the expectation of the court would have been different to the taste of the people of the city. Moreover, it is possible that Shakespeare felt the need to produce a 'neat' play according to the rules of the Ancient drama, and the court performance gave him the opportunity. Either way, we have no evidence to rely on but the text of the play and therefore any speculations would be based on a very unsound ground.

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<sup>124</sup> Parrott 316.

## KING LEAR

*Shakespeare's great coup in King Lear, the black joke which he plays on the audience, is that the happy ending which the recognition scene seems to promise never materializes.*<sup>125</sup>

*King Lear* is the last of the tragedies we are to discuss. Similarly to *Macbeth*, and even *Hamlet*, the comedy is not obvious and the comedic elements work in a completely different way. It may seem that we shall be in a less conformable position than when we were discussing *Macbeth*. In other words, one may struggle to find comedy in one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. Nonetheless, there is a major difference in the perception of comedy in these two plays. While in *Macbeth* we witnessed one almost farcical scene despite the fact that the comedic elements were scarce, in *King Lear* we have more themes and motifs to discuss. However, there is not one scene which would be comparable to the entrance of the Porter or Clowns in *Hamlet*. The Comedy in *King Lear* is more subtle, which makes the play more interesting and subsequently gives space for further debate on the existence of comedy in this tragedy. There is no doubt that there are elements present in this play which could well work in comedy as they do in tragedy. However, the way they are being dealt with is very unlike any comedy we are familiar with. Shakespeare uses means of irony and sarcasm just as we have witnessed in his previous tragedy. Unlike his later plays, he does not rely on magic and supernatural elements but rather explores the earthly problems of family and power. The subject matter of the plot reminds us of Shakespeare's early romantic comedies like *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*. While the first one contains both, the complicated relationship between family members and wish for power, the latter one covers motifs and themes of madness, folly and grief. By finding allusions between tragedy and comedy we may easily justify the existence of comedy in *King Lear*. Susan Snyder was concerned with the presence of comedy in the play and gives a very thorough list of comedic elements she found in the tragedy:

*King Lear* is full of the structures, motifs, and devices of comedy. It has a double plot and a developed Fool; it is concerned, like many comedies with the passing of power from old to young; two of its characters are disguised through most of the play, one of them in a series of *personae* that allow him to manipulate other characters; the protagonists are forced out from society into educative confrontations in a natural

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<sup>125</sup> Michael Mangan, *A Preface to Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Harlow: Longman, 1991) 184.

setting and then return to society again; and this process is accompanied by the traditional disorder of comedy – social hierarchies turned upside down, logic and even sanity violated.<sup>126</sup>

As we proceed in our discussion, we shall see that the majority of the points Snyder considered important are justifiable.

The setting seems to be *neutral* in terms of deciding on the genre of the play. We appear at the court in the daylight and there is no evidence of the forces of nature as we witnessed in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. In fact, the very beginning of *King Lear* could well be a beginning of a comedy. Shakespeare is thus going back to tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet* or *Othello* where the proportion between comedy and tragedy was less decisive and, moreover, where the start of the play referred to comedy rather than tragedy. The first characters we meet are Kent and Gloucester who discuss the conception of Gloucester's illegitimate child – Edmund. The topic of illegitimacy is developed in a more serious way and it creates the main force behind the tragic consequences in the subplot. Here, however, Gloucester talks freely about his time with Edmund's mother and the language they use is full of sexual banter:

**Kent**            Is not this your son, my lord?  
**Gloucester**    His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge.  
                      I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now  
                      I am brazed to it.  
**Kent**            I cannot conceive you.  
**Gloucester**    Sir, this young fellow's mother could;  
                      Whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had in-  
                      deed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband  
                      for her bed. Do you smell a fault?<sup>127</sup>

Gloucester is not shaken or stirred by the existence of his illegitimate son and does not resent him. On the other hand, he admits to him but at the same time does not forget to point out the fact that Edmund is a 'bastard'. His banter may seem funny to the characters around him and indeed to the audience, however, we may assume that this is the seed of hatred planted in

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<sup>126</sup> Snyder 140.

<sup>127</sup> *King Lear* I, i, 9- 17.

Edmund's mind. He is constantly reminded of the fact that he is not the same as his brother Edgar and as a result he seeks revenge against his father who ridicules his existence. Edmund's hatred reminds us of another of Shakespeare's bastards – Don John from *Much Ado About Nothing*. Both of them share malicious intentions towards their brothers for a single reason: feelings of humiliation because of their origin. Don John says: "I cannot hide what I am"<sup>128</sup>; but Edmund has more space to express his true feelings. His speech in I.ii may remind us of Shylock's famous speech 'Hath not a Jew eyes, [...]'.<sup>129</sup> Both of these speeches deal with different measures for people based on the social prejudice:

**Edmund**                      [...] Wherefore should I  
    Stand in the plague of custom and permit  
    The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
    [...] Why bastard? Wherefore base?  
    When my dimensions are as well-compact,  
    My mind as generous, and my shape as true  
    As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us  
    With 'base'? with 'baseness'? 'bastardy'? 'base, base'?<sup>130</sup>

This overlapping of a certain topic from comedy to tragedy gives us idea on how Shakespeare composed his plays. His genius lies in the ability to treat one issue in several different ways and thus allowing the audience to look at the problems of the society from several different angles.

We shall now return to the first act of the play and continue our discussion on comedy in *King Lear*. This rather comic scene is interrupted by the sound of a trumpet introducing the entrance of the king and his court. Nonetheless, we are still left in slightly idyllic world of a comedy or a fairy tale when the king decides to divide his kingdom according to the way each of his daughters expresses her love to him. Lear's way of distributing the power of his country seems very childish and almost senile. His delight upon hearing the praises from his daughters is soon stained by the inability of the youngest to lie. The tragedy in this play starts

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<sup>128</sup> *Much Ado about Nothing* I.iii, 12-13.

<sup>129</sup> *Merchant of Venice* II, iii, 55.

<sup>130</sup> *King Lear* I, ii, 2.



Vaunt-curriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world,  
Crack Nature's moulds, all germens spill at once  
That makes ingrateful man!<sup>133</sup>

The nature by which Lear is surrounded is not beneficial and it almost reflects Lear's own rage and madness. In that moment all the evil of the past scenes seem to materialize in Lear's speech and subsequently in the outburst of the storm. In *As You Like It*, Amiens sings a song about wind in a completely different tone:

**Amiens**                      Blow, blow, thou winter wind,  
   Thou art not so unkind  
   As man's ingratitude;  
   Thou tooth is not so keen,  
   Because thou art not seen.  
   Although thy breath be rude. [...] <sup>134</sup>

The wind in comedy is very light and playful. While in *King Lear* we can see the merge of Lear's speech and the weather, Amiens points out the difference between humans and nature. No matter how rough the nature is, it would never be as ungrateful as man.

As we progressed from Shakespeare's earlier tragedies towards his later ones, we may have realized an important development. The ratio of comic characters and comic scenes changed and it is harder to come across a comic scene which would have purely comic nature without any side meaning. Thomas Marc Parrott comments on the presence of comic characters and scenes in *King Lear*:

[...] there is no scene of incidental comedy like that of the drunken watchmen. There is, in fact, nothing in *Lear* that can be described as comic action. What there is of

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<sup>133</sup> *King Lear* III, ii, 3- 10.

<sup>134</sup> *As You Like It* II, vii, 181-186.



comedy is embodied in two characters, both of them Shakespeare's addition to the story, the Fool and Edgar.<sup>135</sup>

It is true that the comedic characters are more important for our discussion; however, it would be wrong to dismiss comedy in certain scenes entirely. The scenes are usually linked very tightly with the characters and therefore a closer look at the comedic elements in characters should help us later on when we discuss extracts involving comedy.

The most important comedic character is the Fool. His function at the court is to amuse the king and to lighten his mood. However, he has another role both in the play and for the audience which is perhaps more important. He is there as an 'alter ego' to Lear; he helps him to understand the world and he opens his eyes. Lear is blinded by his power and self-love and therefore he needs someone with a clear mind to lead him. Paradoxically, this person is his own jester. The Fool is one of the 'wise fools' we recognize across the genre of Shakespeare's plays. As an example we may cite Feste from *Twelfth Night* or perhaps Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Both of these 'motleys' represent wit disguised in foolishness. They bring the comedy on stage, yet attentive audience recognizes the wisdom beneath their jesting. The Fool in *King Lear* is probably the most complex one. S.T. Coleridge wrote on the nature of this character:

The Fool is no comic buffoon to make the groundlings laugh, no forced condescension of Shakespeare's genius to the taste of his audiences. [...] The Fool is as wonderful a creation as the Caliban – an inspired idiot.<sup>136</sup>

His character has an important quality; he is able to judge the situation and act accordingly. He knows when to make almost grotesque jokes or pantomimes and at the same time he knows when he is needed for his consoling methods. We may find an example of this in the fifth scene of the first act:

**Fool**                    If a man's brains were in's heels, were't not in danger of kibes?

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<sup>135</sup> Parrott 297.

<sup>136</sup> S.T. Coleridge, "Lear" *Shakespeare:King :Lear* ed. By Frank Kernode (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd, 1975)

**Lear** Ay, boy.

**Fool** Then I prithee be merry. Thy wit shall not go slipshod.

**Lear** Ha, ha, ha!

**Fool** Shalt see thy other daughter will use thee kingly;  
For though she's as like this as a crab's like an apple,  
Yet I can tell what I can tell.<sup>137</sup>

The fool softens when he sees Lear distressed because of the unkind behaviour of his daughters and tries to persuade him that his other daughter will be nicer to him. Nonetheless, when Lear seems to recover a little bit, the Fool continues his education:

**Fool** [...] But I can tell why a snail has a house.

**Lear** Why?

**Fool** Why, to put's head in; not to give away to his daughters, and leave his horns without a case.<sup>138</sup>

As we have seen, there are many layers to the character of the Fool. Though he seems to have no wit and often responds in singing, he makes the audience laugh by simple utterances targeted mostly at his master.

**Lear** Dost thou call me fool, boy?

**Fool** All thy other titles thou hast given away; that thou wast born with.<sup>139</sup>

This is a prime example of his comedy. He calls Lear fool and admits to it, since as king's jester he is permitted to say anything because no one would take him seriously. However, he does not only educate, but also amuses the audience and helps to loosen the tense string of action. The proportions of him being a clown and also a wise attendant to a slightly senile king make him an exceptional character. At one point, he attacks Lear by saying that he is less than himself:

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<sup>137</sup> King Lear I, v, 8- 16.

<sup>138</sup> King Lear I, v, 27-30.

<sup>139</sup> King Lear I, iv, 145-147.

**Fool** [...] Now thou art an 0  
without a figure. I am better than thou art now; I am  
a fool; thou art nothing.<sup>140</sup>

Indeed at this point Lear is nothing. He has given away his kingdom and lives on mercy of his cruel daughters. But only when Lear is stripped of his dignity is he able to realize his own mistakes, and then the Fool is no longer needed. In consequence, his character disappears almost in the middle of the play and his function is over taken by Poor Tom who becomes the attendant to Lear while in the woods.

The aspect of Poor Tom's character which points towards comedy is the fact that he comes on the stage disguised and pretends to be someone else. In fact, he is Gloucester's son Edgar who has to hide from malicious plotting of his half brother Edmund. The disguise often helps the characters to do things they would not be able to do otherwise. Edgar as Poor Tom brings Lear hope. Even though he was betrayed by his half brother and was forcibly stripped of all he had, he remains very spirited, and believes in the turn of things for the better; as A.C. Bradley comments:

His own thoughts are more than patient, they are 'free, even joyous, in spite of the tender sympathies which strive in vain to overwhelm him. This ability to feel and offer great sympathy with distress, without losing through the sympathy any elasticity or strength, is a noble quality, sometimes found in souls like Edgar's naturally buoyant and also religious.<sup>141</sup>

His natural goodness and cheerful disposition cannot be shaken by the unfortunate events and thus he remains the same characters throughout the play. According to his philosophy, those who get to the bottom can only rise again since they cannot fall any further.

Edgar is not the only one who has to choose disguise in order to remain in the society. Kent is another character who shows certain elements of comedy. Although he is not a comic character *per se*, his disguise as Caius Kent allows himself to joke in order to win Lear's

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<sup>140</sup> King Lear I, iv, 185-187.

<sup>141</sup> A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1992) 255.

favour. According to Susan Snyder his 'mask' differs from the disguise we are used to see in comedies:

Unlike Julia, or Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who do new things in their disguises, Kent becomes Caius in order to go on doing what he has been doing before. His servant role represents no radical change of outlook, and its freeing powers are correspondingly limited. As he watches and weeps for Lear, we easily forget the fact of his disguise. Certainly it permits no sustained escape or detached overview.<sup>142</sup>

Indeed, Kent is a faithful servant to his master who does not want to leave him despite how badly he was treated. He is a man of good character and his disguise enables him to be a clown even if it is just in a few scenes. As an example of his comedy we can have a look at I.iv:

**Kent** I do profess to be no less than I seem: to serve him  
Truly that will put me in trust, to love him that is honest,  
to converse with him that is wise and says little, to  
fear judgement, to fight when I cannot choose, and to  
eat no fish.

**Lear** What art thou?

**Kent** A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the  
King.<sup>143</sup>

In his speech, Kent answers Lear's question on the nature of his profession by saying that he is a simple man going through life by being honest serving with his whole heart. He is trying to get to the King's favour not by praising himself, but by emphasizing his honesty. As Caius, Kent becomes in a way another fool. He joins Lear at his side and using his wit he tries to help Lear open his eyes and see the reality. The Fool concedes the new role of Kent and at one occasion he even calls him fool:

**Kent** Where learned you this, Fool?

**Fool** Not i'the stocks, fool.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Snyder 150.

<sup>143</sup> *King Lear* I, iv, 13-19.

<sup>144</sup> *King Lear* II, iv, 92-93.

If Poor Tom/Edgar and Caius/Kent have certain characteristics of a 'clown/fool', we may find similar trait in Lear's nature. We have already touched upon the reasons for the sudden disappearance of the Fool. He is no longer needed because he is replaced by Poor Tom and also because Lear does not need him. We could even say that the Fool, in a way, becomes part of Lear himself. The Fool earlier on pronounces his opinion that Lear would make a good fool.<sup>145</sup> Lear is not a clown, he is not deliberately funny but he is a fool. He is fool at the beginning for thinking himself to be mighty and loved without reason; he is fool to divide his kingdom according to the false pretences of his daughters, and, finally, he becomes mad out of his own folly. Nevertheless, by becoming mad he also becomes wise; suddenly he is able to see through his blinded eyes and the newly found truth puts him even deeper into his madness and melancholy. Moreover, we could even distinguish several stages of his folly. At the beginning he seems to be rather a clown than a wise fool. Certainly, for his Court and daughters, he is perhaps more amusing than the Fool himself. Victor Kiernan talks about the 'first stage' of Lear:

Lear's own behaviour is as undignified as can be, whether he is bawling for dinner, laughing over a clown's scurrility, or pettishly running in again after launching his terrific malediction against Goneril.<sup>146</sup>

To put it simply, he is not a stately ruler nor just a gentle father but a rather self-absorbed, aging man.

As the play progresses, it is harder to determine any comic scenes. The action becomes more and more tense and all the characters are preoccupied with thoughts on more serious subjects. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that we may find certain comic scenes in the first half of the play. The comic scenes in *King Lear* are not as obvious and grotesque as some of the scenes discussed in the previous plays. The comic nature of these scenes is based on the characters and word play. We have already discussed the comic beginning, now we shall have a look at some extracts which seem to deviate from the genre of the play. One of the first comic scenes after the banishment of Kent and expulsion of Cordelia is the reappearance of Kent as Caius. His presentation in front of the King is not short of comic language and parody. We have

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<sup>145</sup> *King Lear* I, v,

<sup>146</sup> V.G. Kiernan, *Eight Tragedies of Shakespeare* (London:Verso, 1996) 114.



the loins, and men by the legs. When a man's over-lusty at legs, then he wears wooden nether-stocks.<sup>148</sup>

As we can see, the scene itself is not comic; it shows a man in pain. But at the same time the Fool is can see something else and laugh at it. The comedy does not come from the scene but from the language used by the character of a Fool.

Last but not least, we should discuss the traces of comedy in more formal aspects of the play; the language and the fact that *King Lear*, more than any other tragedy, includes a great number of songs. In Shakespeare's comedies, songs were important means of expression for the fools and clowns. In fact, songs play important part of all his plays regardless of genre but they are more excessive in comedies. In this tragedy, all the songs are sung by the Fool. In this respect he reminds us of Feste in *Twelfth Night*. Both of them use songs to express the truth towards the society. The songs are to some extent a disguised truth the characters want to express. They can be regarded simply as music without any deepest meaning and yet most of Fool's wisdom comes from his songs. By singing he cannot offend the less witty ones since they would not listen to the words he is singing but at the same time he knows he can affect those who listen.

The comedic language was partly discussed together with the characters we have mentioned earlier. The jokes are mostly based on the ability to disguise the true meaning into less offensive language environment. Kent and the Fool both use their language to tell Lear the truth. In case of the Fool we may find several ways he uses to tell Lear that he is fool himself, in neither occasion does he say the word, he merely implies it and waits for Lear to pick up on it. Unlike in *Macbeth*, we cannot doubt the existence of puns and it is the language which loosens the tight noose of tragedy. As we have seen, the comedic language of Fool takes the eye of the horrific situations in the plot.

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<sup>148</sup> *King Lear* II, iv, 5- 11.

## CONCLUSION

*Humour is an evanescent thing, even more difficult of analysis and intellectual location than tragedy.*<sup>149</sup>

The aim of this work was to closely examine the five of Shakespeare's tragedies in order to find out more about the playwright's use of two opposite genres within one play. Although all of the discussed plays are significant tragedies full of tension, there are themes which suit the effect of comedy. I have tried to cover certain comedic aspects through out the plays and thus attempted to compare the different treatment of the same element from play to play. Perhaps the first thing we notice is the treatment of the opening scenes in tragedies. Apart from *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the tragedies seem to resemble a comedy. The tragic action appears only after longer or shorter 'comic prelude' and in consequence the unfortunate events are even more striking. Extensive comic beginnings are the case of mainly *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, however even *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare's supreme tragedies, opens with a comic scene.

Themes and topics of the tragedies form a significant addition to our discussion. By means of comparing the tragedies and certain comedies, we have stressed the initial premise of the existence of comedy within tragedy. Moreover, it illuminated our understanding of Shakespeare's writing. There is no doubt that different people view things differently and thus one theme can be a core for the plot of a play of either genre. G. Wilson Knight commented on the dual perspective of one event:

To the coarse mind lacking sympathy an incident may seem comic which to the richer understanding is pitiful and tragic. So, too, one series of facts can be treated by the artist as either comic or tragic, lending itself equivalently to both.<sup>150</sup>

The plays were intended for people and therefore, the playwrights tried to satisfy the masses by enabling them to see things from different perspectives.

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<sup>149</sup> G. Wilson Knight, "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque," *Shakespeare: King Lear*, Ed. Frank Kernode, ( London: Macmillan, 1991) 107.

<sup>150</sup> Knight 107.



The observation of the characters brought us yet another step towards comedy. Shakespeare was not afraid of inserting purely comic characters, such as clowns, or to give some comic characteristics even to the main characters. The diverse characteristics of the personages made them more believable and helped the audience to identify with them. Mehl commented on the presence of comic characters in tragedies:

More relevant is the observation that these comic characters and techniques help to create a fictional world in which tragedy is, at first, only one element among others, a possibility that only becomes real and inevitable fairly late in the play.<sup>151</sup>

Perhaps one of the most interesting comedic elements is the appearance of the clown in every single tragedy we have discussed. The clowns may differ in their personality and jesting, nonetheless, the fact that Shakespeare has found a place in each tragedy for this type of character suggest its popularity among the Renaissance audience. It is known, that in every theatrical company there was an actor who would ‘specialize’ in the acting of clowns, and the spectators would wait for any kind of intermezzo which would amuse them even though it was in the middle of a heavy plot. The actual role of a Clown or Fool appears only in two or if you like in three of the play we have covered. In *Othello*, there are two short scenes involving the Clown and although these scenes are often cut in the performance, they complete the over-all outcome of the play. The Fool in *King Lear* is a wholly different type of a jester. He is one of the main characters and his role is not only to amuse the audience but also to lead the senile king and educate him. The third appearance of the character of a clown could be found in *Hamlet*. Although Yorick is dead and we encounter him only as a skull, he fills the scene by his omnipotent presence. In other tragedies, and also in those we have just mentioned, Shakespeare gave the attribute of the clowns to ordinary characters. Thus we have discussed the comic aspects of the Nurse, Mercutio, Gravediggers, Porter and a few more.

The setting of the plays proved that genre cannot be judged according to the location of the events, since even in the beautiful island of Cyprus or the romantic town of Verona there can be wrong-doings, feelings of despair and death.

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<sup>151</sup> Mehl, 23

Although the actual performances of the plays formed very marginal fraction in the whole of our discussion, we should not forget that the dramaturgy of the plays explains the text to the audience what is written down. Therefore, the audience's view of either comic or tragic scenes depends on the production and its director. Peter Davidson comments on this:

Nowhere is the distinction greater between text and performance than in the matter of comedy. It is not simply that what makes one person laugh leaves another unmoved, but rather the difficulties of recognising as comedy what on the printed page seems uncomic; secondly, imagining the stage business that makes lines comic; and thirdly, not finding comedy where none exists.<sup>152</sup>

The performance highlights certain things we would not be realized by just reading the play and the actors uncover hidden layers of the character. A typical example which we have seen was Globe's production of *Othello* and especially the character of Iago. Iago may, for many of the readership, seem as an unscrupulous villain; however he has many opportunities to show off comic aspect of his characteristic and that can be proven by the actual performance.

To conclude, all the five tragedies we have discussed are remarkable because of the way they deal with two opposite genres. The intermingling of comedy and tragedy makes the plays more believable and thus more interesting for the audience. By comparing the tragedies and comedies I was trying to prove my initial premise that the tragedies are often tragic only by a very fine twist in the plot. Moreover, after such discussion it is hard to decide whether there is something as a tragic and comic plot, since comedy can be point of departure for tragedy. As we have seen, the comedic elements do not fulfil their comedic function; they only contribute towards the inevitable tragedy. Although we are sometimes held in hope that the wheels of Fortune will turn in favour of the characters, somewhere at the back of our mind we know that the catharsis of the play will be reached through the total destruction of all the characters.

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<sup>152</sup> Peter Davidson, "The Comedy of 'Hamlet'," *Hamlet*, ed. Martin Coyle (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, 1992) 37-47. 37.

## RESUMÉ

Ve své diplomové práci se zabývám komediálními prvky v pěti Shakespearových tragediích. Klíčem výběru oněch pěti her – *Romeo a Julie*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* a *Král Lear* – bylo rozdělení tragedií na antické a ne-antické. Ne-antické tragedie jsou zároveň těmi nejvíce známými, to však nemá vliv na konečný rozbor našeho problému. V Antice, tedy době vzniku dramatu, bylo jasné rozdělení žánru tragédie a komedie, nicméně velmi brzy začalo docházet k jejich prolínání a později se to stalo běžným způsobem psaní. V době renesance nastal návrat k antickému umění a po určité období přetrvával názor, že divadelní hry by měly dodržovat dramatické jednoty dané Aristotelem. Shakespeare byl tím, kdo zdokonalil tradici „tragikomedie“ v anglickém dramatu. Kvůli jeho trvalému prolínání žánru komedie a tragédie si získal řadu kritiků, ale i obdivovatelů. Jeho vkládání komických prvků do děje tragédie není nahodilé, ale má určité funkce, nepostradatelné pro divákovo vnímání celé hry. Právě funkcemi těchto prvků se zabývá velká část této práce.

V úvodu mé práce se zmiňuji o všeobecném povědomí o dramatických žánrech, jejich historickému vzniku a vývoji v období renesance. Dále nastiňuji komické prvky, které jsou středem rozboru jednotlivých her. Metoda, kterou jsem zvolila je právě analýza tragédií na základě těchto komických prvků. V rozboru jsem se rozhodla postupovat od obecnějších prvků komedie jako je zápletka, místo zasazení děje nebo témata děje k těm blíže určujícím jako jsou postavy, jednotlivé scény a jazyk.

Pro lepší znázornění funkce těchto prvků, jsem se snažila o srovnání jednotlivých tragédií s komediemi, ve kterých se objevovaly rozebírané komické prvky. Téma žárlivosti se objevuje jak u *Othella*, tak u komedie *Mnoho Povyku pro Nic*. Stejně tak postavu klauna můžeme najít nejen v komediálně laděných hrách, ale také ve všech tragediích, které jsem rozebírala. Velmi zajímavé srovnání navrhla Jeanette Dillon, která se zabývala funkcí přírody v *Králi Learovi* a *Jak se Vám Líbí*.

Cílem, bylo především upozornit na existenci komedie v rámci Shakespearovy tragédie a tímto způsobem poukázat na jeho styl. Při bližším rozboru her se ukázalo, že i hry, které působí na první pohled, jako čistě tragické obsahují určité elementy komiky. Neznamená to

však, že by se Shakespeare snažil vkládat komiku do vážných situací za každou cenu. Pouze, využívá prvků, které se osvědčily u jeho komedií a přetváří je tak aby fungovaly i v jeho tragédiích. Čistě komické scény a postavy potom tvoří jakési odlehčení složitého a často napjatého děje.

Celkově lze říci, že tragikomedie dodává Shakespearovým hrám trojrozměrnost a umožňuje divákovi ztotožnit se s téměř lidsky složitými postavami, jejich problémy a zápletkami.

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