

# **A Trajectory of the Debates on Generic Hybridization in Shakespeare: From Neo-Classicism to Deconstruction**

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## **Abstract**

This essay examines the critical receptions and stage adaptations of Shakespeare's plays from the perspective of genre, and investigates the hybridization of tragedy and comedy in relation to Neo-Classical and Deconstruction decrees. Shakespeare's mingling of genres satisfies the audience's need for variety and the integrated verisimilitude of human life and emotions. Yet, for Neo-Classicalists, comedy and tragedy constituted a dichotomy of binary alternatives, denying any intermixture of the pathetic and the hilarious. Subverting this Neo-Classical dramatic convention, the hybridism of Shakespeare's generic experimentation, while facilitating Shakespeare to broaden his theatrical horizon, has caused critical debates throughout the centuries. Most significantly, Samuel Johnson's commentaries on Shakespeare's generic exploitation shared with modern theories concerning genres as dynamic, interactive, and historically defined. This reception study argues that factors shaping the debates include the multifarious interrelation of genres, which make it impossible to offer a binary distinction between the comic and the tragic.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, genre, hybridization, Neo-Classicism, Deconstruction

## **I. Introduction**

Among the characteristics of Shakespeare's plays as opposed to those of the Neo-Classical period, his intermingling of comic and tragic scenes has instigated debates among scholars throughout the centuries. Through the mixture of different genres, Shakespeare illustrates human life as a plausible combination of features of comedy and tragedy. Yet, according to Neo-Classical creeds, which by definition abide by the tenets of Aristotle and Horace, tragedy and comedy are mutually exclusive genres whose features should never be commingled. While this genre taxonomy implies that the concepts of each genre will be stable, other critics have examined the interconnections of genres and identified the inconsistencies in such a system of categorization. This essay explores how commentators at different periods approached Shakespeare's exploitation of genres, and demonstrates genre as subject to constant change over time and across cultures. To examine critiques concerning Shakespeare's deviation from Neo-Classicism through his mixture of genres, this essay discusses generic hybridization such as tragicomedy and mixture of comic and tragic scenes, since generic blending, as defined by David Duff, is "[t]he process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work" (xiv). This reception study argues that factors shaping the debates over the interrelation of genres, as exemplified by Samuel Johnson and modern theorists, include the changing audience tastes over different periods of time. According to Johnson, different generic attributes may occur on the basis of different criteria the audiences adopt. Tragi-comedy is "not only common but perpetual in the World" and the stage should function as "the Mirrour of Life" (Vickers 3: 434). In Shakespeare's plays, as Johnson notes, "to produce or actuate the Affections needed not the slow Gradation of common Means but could fill the Heart with instantaneous Jollity or Sorrow (Vickers 3: 435). Johnson's Shakespearean commentaries reverberate through modern genre theorists, who highlight the volatility of genre taxonomy and call attention to its correlation with audience reactions.

## **II. Generic Mixture in Shakespeare and Classical Criticism**

Most of Shakespeare's plays include constituents of diverse genres and bring together socially distant classes. A possible reason for Shakespeare's mixing of genres is that he had to please all of his audience, a mixed bag of high- and low-brows and those in the middle. His comedies contain agonizing scenarios; his tragedies amusing ones. Hamlet has his clownish gravedigger, Lear his Fool, Macbeth his Porter. In

*Macbeth*, the Porter's bawdy jokes do not disrupt the tragic tension, but intensifies the scene of horror through his use of equivocation. According to Glynne Wickham, "on the medieval stage hell was represented as a castle" guarded by a janitor or porter, and therefore audiences familiar with medieval religious drama should recognize a correspondence between Inverness and hell (68). Immediately following the murder of Duncan, the Porter scene thus reinforces the integrity of the tragedy, instead of abruptly interpolating the play or serving merely as a comic relief. The scene suggests that opposites are interrelated, as paradoxical as the Witches' notion of "Fair is foul, foul is fair." The role of the gravedigger in *Hamlet* contrives similar dramatic functions, highlighting Hamlet's dilemma as in his "to be or not to be" soliloquy. Moreover, in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, the triviality of the lower class often parodies the solemn narrative concerning the king's court (Buchanan 45). Shakespeare's late plays, also called tragicomedies or romances, are the most heterogeneous forms among his works. Shakespeare's mingling of genres not only satisfies the audience's need for variety, but also portrays the verisimilitude of human life.

Yet, Neo-Classists perceived Shakespeare's mingling of plebeians with patricians to have violated Classical decrees of decorum, as allegedly defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. When commenting on the structure of tragedy, Aristotle focuses on a specific action or incident rather than the characters:

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. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. ... The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy:

Character holds the second place. (Part VI, 39)

Hence Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude [appropriate length]" (Part VII, 40). In the following section, Aristotle repeats his emphasis on the plot as concerning, not primarily the hero, but a single and complete action: "Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the Unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action" (Part VIII, 40).

Later reviewers tended to disregard the distinction between Aristotle's emphasis on action and Shakespeare's accentuation of character. Of course, action and character

may not be mutually exclusive, but Aristotle's theorization of the tragic hero is based on a single and complete action, whereas Shakespearean tragedy portrays various actions of major characters. A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, for instance, has interpreted Shakespeare's tragedies as tragedies of character.

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

Generic mixture, however, can be traced back to Classical models. Ancient performances of tragic trilogies were often followed by the satyr play, and both Sophocles and Euripides wrote tragedies as well as satyr plays. In particular, comedy plays a significant role in plays by Euripides (Dunn 158). While Euripides's *Alcestis* and *Ion* are tragedies with happy endings, Terence's plays integrate hazard in comic plots. Also, at the end of Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates tells Agathon and Aristophanes that a poet should master both comedy and tragedy, and that the true tragic poet is also a comic poet. Socrates might mean that playwrights should be versatile enough to work in both genres, but he could also be accentuating the connections between these two genres. Plautus further coins the term *tragicomoedia* in the prologue to his comedy *Amphitryon*, in which Mercury redefines the genre of the play because of its inclusion of kings, gods, and a slave: "I will make it a mixture: let it be a tragicomedy. I don't think it would be appropriate to make it consistently a comedy, when there are kings and gods in it. What do you think? Since a slave also has a part in the play, I'll make it a tragicomedy" (qtd. in Mukherji and Lyne 9). This statement demonstrates Plautus's notion of generic deconstruction, that ancient tragedy and comedy are not pure genres that do not overlap.

Moreover, if we go back to where discussion of dramatic genres began, even for Aristotle genres are not mutually exclusive categories. Whereas Aristotle distinguishes four types of Classical genres: tragedy (superior-dramatic dialogue), epic (superior-mixed narrative), comedy (inferior-dramatic dialogue), and parody (inferior-mixed narrative), he recognizes that the *Iliad* is a tragedy as well as an epic. Also, the Aristotelian tragedy may include characters of different social classes. Aristotle appears to distinguish between tragedy and comedy by differentiating between the natures of characters of high and low levels: tragedy treats of serious and important people, while comedy treats of laughable people who are less dignified. Many scholars understood this to mean that tragic characters must always be kings or princes, while comedy concerns working classes. Yet, for Aristotle, character is determined more by moral choice than by birth: tragic characters are those who take life seriously and seek meaningful goals, while comic characters waste their lives in trivial pursuits (Else 77).

Furthermore, Aristotle's distinction between comedy and tragedy does not rule out other genres that have bearing on both of them. Much as his *Physics* identifies the empirical world as made up of constantly changing elements, he defines tragedy as the imitation of an action revolving around a change from ignorance to knowledge, precipitating recognition and reversal. Perceiving tragedy to be as he finds it in Sophocles and Euripides, Aristotle appreciates characters that are true to life and consistent, or "consistently inconsistent." In effect, Aristotle has broadened the scope of tragedy when he suggests that Homer's epic, the *Odyssey*, offers a paradigm of comedy, and therefore provides a model for a tragedy with a double thread of plot, though Aristotle regards it as a tragedy of the second rank (Part XIII, 45). With its inclusion of characters of different status, the *Odyssey* exhibits features ascribable to tragicomedy. An alternative to the rigid Neo-Classical theory, the *Odyssey* is a Classical precedent for mixed genre, a manifestation of tragicomedy as one of the oldest literary genres (Dewar-Watson 16).

As a result, Aristotle's theory of tragedy should not be used to prescribe forms for all tragedies. Unfortunately, Aristotle's famous descriptions of Greek tragedy in the *Poetics* have often been given an absoluteness they never claimed (Bal 171). In addition to the genre classification, Aristotle's notion of the Unity, for instance, focuses principally on the unity of action, but was misinterpreted into the three strict unities of Neo-Classicism.

### **III. Renaissance Commentaries on Generic Taxonomy**

Renaissance genres, including those in Shakespeare, were influenced both by the

Classical and the Christian conventions. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Erich Auerbach criticizes Homer for observing the doctrine of “styles” (what today we would call *genre*) for corresponding subjects: the low style for the lower classes, and the elevated style for the classes of rank. On the other hand, as Auerbach notes, the Bible portrays the encounter between common people and the divine through the “antithetical fusion” of the humble and sublime styles (153). Conditioned by the medieval Biblical mixture of styles and engagement of everyday experience, the development of the "mixed style" under the influence of Shakespeare, Auerbach believes, contributed to "modern realism" (Auerbach 443). Also, medieval narrative may have influenced Renaissance tragicomedy, as medieval comedy in St. Isidore's definition "begins with sorrowful material, namely Hell, and ends with gladness, namely with Paradise and the divine being" (Jack 1-10).

The revival of ancient genres and the invention of new ones in the Renaissance, and the Renaissance taste for generic hybridization, arose from changed social circumstances, including the development of a print culture (Fowler, “The Formation of Genres” 185). Although Shakespeare’s stage plays should be appreciated within the context of theatrical culture, the organization of the plays in the First Folio contributed to the print culture and subsequent reception of Shakespeare generically. Edited by John Hemmings and Henry Condell, the 1623 Folio divided Shakespeare’s plays into comedies, histories and tragedies. Some of the plays, however, epitomize more than one of these categories, because they combine features attributable to different genres. For instance, in *Measure for Measure*, often called a “problem” play, its grim plot and tragic tone make it problematical to classify as a comedy, even though it ends with a multiple marriage and the Jacobean considered it a comedy.

On the other hand, Italian critics of the 16th century, especially Lodovico Castelvetro, and 17th century French critics played important roles in the development of Neo-Classicism by turning Aristotle's descriptions into rigid prescriptions for playwriting. Important French dramatists such as Molière (1622-1673), Pierre Corneille (1606-1684), and Jean-Baptiste Racine (1639-1699) generally followed these strictures. By the late 17th century, English critics began to review plays according to Neo-Classical criteria for the three unities of drama and against the blending of tragedy and comedy. Leaning on Aristotle's authority, they presupposed genre systems according to Aristotle’s mimesis theory as they understood it: A tragedy should be written in a high style about high-ranking characters, whereas a comedy should treat humble characters in a low style. Accordingly, the Neo-Classical principle of decorum required characters from different social groups to be kept separate, and prohibited the contrasting of incongruent elements. For the Neo-Classical proponents, then, social hierarchy of the characters was crucial to genre:

gods and kings should not appear in a comedy, and only solemn language and tone were appropriate for tragedy.

Similarly, Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson required that the bounds of tragedy and comedy never be contravened. In *An Apology for Poetry, or the Defence of Poesy* (1595), Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) disapproves of Shakespeare's "mongrel tragi-comedy," and points toward its failure to observe the rules of decorum. Sidney reinterprets Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica*, and discerns the didactic aim of dramatic poetry as being achieved "by just proportion according to the dignity of the subject" (124). According to Sidney, comedy is a scornful representation of the "common errors of our life," whereas tragedy "makes kings fear to be tyrants" and "teaches the uncertainty of this world" (134). Complaining that the English dramatists of his age failed to observe generic rules, Sidney attacks mixed genre for "mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carries it," and he finds objectionable those plays in which "neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragi-comedy obtained" (147). Like Sidney who denounces the mingling of distinct social roles, George Whetstone (1544-1587), dramatist and author, condemns English tragicomedy and proclaims in his dedication to *Promos and Cassandra* (1578): "Manye tymes (to make myrthe) they make a Clowne companion with a Kinge; in their graue Counsels they allow the aduise of fooles; yea, they vse one order of speech for all persons: a grose *Indecorum*" (60).

Although Sidney recognizes that "the ancients have one or two examples of tragicomedies, as Plautus hath *Amphitryo*" (147), his protestation dwells upon the inappropriate amalgamation of different classes of "kings and clowns." Despite his negative reaction to generic mixture, Sidney makes contradictory statements about hybrid modes in his *Defence of Poesy*, when he qualifies generic hybridization with the condition that the parts must be good for the whole to be good.

... some poesies have coupled together two or three kinds: as the tragical and comical, whereupon is risen the tragi-comical. Some, in the manner, have mingled prose and verse, as Sannazaro and Boethius. Some have mingled matters heroical and pastoral. But that cometh all to one in this question, for if severed they be good, the conjunction cannot be hurtful. (133)

Whereas Sidney attacks contemporary English tragicomedies on the stage for blending genres and characters of different social classes, his tragicomic admixture in *New Arcadia* seems to sanction mixed genres (Bearden 29). Thus Sidney is actually ambivalent in his stance toward the mixed generic model of tragicomedy.

Although the "Neo-Classical period" commonly refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, or the Age of Enlightenment, it is a scholarly commonplace that Ben Jonson (1572-1637) is

in many respects a forerunner of the Neo-Classical movement in English literature (Hunt 273). William K. Wimsatt, Jr. observes that Jonson is "the first English man of letters to exhibit a nearly complete and consistent neo-classicism. His historical importance is that he throws out a vigorous announcement of the rule from which in the next generation Dryden is to be engaged in polite rationalized recessions" (qtd. in Bloom 21). Jonson's translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, published in 1640, captures Horace's emphasis on characters acting in conformity with their levels of society:

If something strange that never yet was had  
Unto the scene thou bring'st, and dar'st create  
A mere new person, look he keep his state  
Unto the last, as when he first went forth,  
Still to be like himself, and hold his worth. (175)

These statements reflect Jonson's convictions that dramatic speech should correspond with the character's social status. While Jonson attempted to advocate Classical decorum and orderly craftsmanship, he admired Shakespeare's "excellent Phantasie," even though he felt "that sometimes it was necessary he should be stop'd":

... the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing (whatsoever he penn'd) hee never blotted a line. My answer hath beene, would he had blotted a thousand. ... And to justifie mine owne candor (for I lov'd the man, and doe honour to his memory on this side idolatry) as much as any. . . , Hee was (indeed) honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent Phantasie, brave notions, and gentle notions, and gentle expressions. Wherein hee flowed with that facility, that sometimes it was necessary he should be stop'd. . . . But hee redeemed his vices, with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be prayed than to be pardoned. (7: 91)

Although Neo-Classicalists criticized Shakespeare's liberal innovations, generic distinctions were not always observed in Renaissance drama. According to Madeleine Doran, Elizabethan dramatists "never were slaves of decorum" (246). Lawrence Danson also remarks, "The apparently perverse refusal of English playwrights, Shakespeare included, to keep the kinds decently separate from one another was a commonplace of Elizabethan criticism" (18-19). Although Sidney regarded tragicomedy as the "mongrel" genre, in Renaissance England it was popular, ranging from pastoral romance to satires. In the prologue to *The Faithful Shepherdess*, a 1608 adaptation of *Il Pastor Fido* (1590), John Fletcher's definition of tragicomedy focuses on the lack of deaths:

A tragie-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet



brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie: . . . a God is as lawfull in this as in a tragedie, and meane people as in a comedie. (3: 497)

The hybrid nature of Shakespeare's plays, especially his tragicomedy, seems akin to the new Italian modes of pastoral tragicomedy. The Italian dramatist and theorist Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612) challenged the Classical rules by introducing generic innovation into his pastoral tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido*, whose characters include shepherds, nymphs, and gods. He created the form of the pastoral drama by imitating "a feigned and mixed action comprising all the tragic and comic parts that plausibly and decorously may stand together, corrected to a single dramatic form, in order to purge with delight the sadness of the spectators" (qtd. in Marrapodi 3). In his *Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1601), Giovanni Battista Guarini states:

Does not Aristotle say that tragedy is made up of persons of high rank and comedy of men of the people? Let us give an example of men of rank and men of the people. The republic is such a thing. . . . Yet they join in a single mixed form. . . . Why cannot poetry make the mixture if politics can do it? (511)

By appealing to the contemporary factual situation, Guarini defended the hybridity of tragicomedy against accusations of departure from Classical decorum. Arguing for a generic flexibility, he insisted that genre should be responsive to changing contexts (McMullan 117). Similarly, the Italian dramatist Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinthio (1504-1573) mixed high- and low-born characters through diverse scenarios, and created the *tragedia de lieto fin* (tragedy-with-comic-ending). Cinthio saw tragicomedy as a genre in the Classical tradition, and he may have also influenced Shakespeare's tragicomedy, since Shakespeare used Cinthio's works as sources for *Othello* and *Measure for Measure*.

Whereas a number of critics have attributed Shakespeare's mingling comic matter with tragic features to his ignorance of Classical rules, Shakespeare may have intentionally challenged these decrees. In *Hamlet*, Polonius introduces a group of players as

. . .the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited. Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light. For the law of writ, and the liberty, these are the only men. (2.2.392-98)

Polonius's assortment of genres pointed toward Shakespeare's awareness of contemporary Italian innovation, distinguishing scripted five-act drama, following the neo-Aristotelian rules ("the law of writ"), from improvised scenarios ("the liberty"),

inspired by the *comici* of the *Commedia dell'arte* (Clubb 15-26). This passage is often cited as an example of Shakespeare's contempt for classical norms (Guneratne 4). Andrew Gurr mentions a few hints of resistance to generic labeling, especially the omnivorous name of "comedians": By the 1590s, these "comedians" were playing as many tragedies and histories as comedies (73). According to Gurr, Polonius's list of compound names, and the "very tragical mirth" of Pyramus and Thisbe (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 5.1.57), might be comments on this "linguistic confusion" (Gurr 73). Of course, it was the practice in the eighteenth century to play Polonius, in the words of Thomas Davies, "to excite laughter and be an object of ridicule" (41), and this passage may be intended to satirize Polonius's clownish pretence of theatrical expertise. Polonius's declamation, however, alludes to the emergence of tragicomedy and Shakespeare's liberation of himself from the fixity of Classical tenets. This reference to the variety of genres also demonstrates Shakespeare's awareness of the phenomenon of genre hybridism that discloses the intrinsic volatility of genre categories, as later manifested by Jacques Derrida in "The Law of Genre." Meanwhile, Shakespeare acknowledges the problems of mixing genres in Hamlet's instruction to the players:

And let those that play  
your clowns speak no more than is set down for them;  
for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to  
set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh  
too; though, in the mean time, some necessary  
question of the play be then to be considered:  
that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition  
in the fool that uses it. (*Hamlet* 3.2.38-45)

Hamlet warns the clowns not to *ad-lib* or improvise, as it may distract spectators so as to overlook an important issue the play attempts to address. This remark sheds light on Shakespeare's awareness of the possible impropriety of generic confusion. Despite all these hazards, Shakespeare challenged Neo-Classical generic decorum in many of his plays. It was highly likely that Shakespeare was experimenting with generic blending, for instance, when he modeled Polonius on the *commedia dell'arte* figures of Pantalone the meddler, but fatally reversed the *commedia* scene with his death (Barasch 105-17). Furthermore, Shakespeare employs the "slippery genre" (Foster 10) of tragicomedy for his late romance, by incorporating the pleurably tragic and the painfully comic, paradoxically unifying the seemingly conflicting constituents. In these plays, Shakespeare might be utilizing the dichotomous perspectives of tragicomedy, since the power of the genre to facilitate cultural infiltration makes it "a natural tool for politicizing" (Maguire 7).

#### IV. Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Receptions

The Fool in *King Lear* had been cut from all productions since the Restoration, as this character was regarded as too buffoonish to belong in a tragedy. Also, Shakespeare's mixture of genres met with censure from literary critics such as Joseph Addison, who observes neoclassical rules and asserts that drama should maintain a unity of action and avoid any subplots that may dilute the tragic effect. In *The Spectator*, Addison decried tragicomedy as an outrageous genre:

The tragi-comedy, which is the product of the English theatre, is one of the most monstrous inventions that ever entered into a poet's thoughts. An author might as well think of weaving the adventures of Aeneas and Hudibras into one poem, as of writing such a motley piece of mirth and sorrow. But the absurdity of these performances is so very visible, that I shall not insist upon it. (158)

Yet, during the Restoration period, new dramatic genres developed and intermixed, and the audiences adored the mixing of comedy and tragedy despite some critics' condemnation of the incongruity. In the "Epistle Dedicatory to the *Spanish Friar*" (1681), John Dryden declares that few tragedies in that age would succeed, unless "lightened with a course of mirth":

...the audience are grown weary of continued melancholy scenes; and I dare venture to prophecy, that few tragedies, except those in verse, shall succeed in this age, if they are not lightened with a course of mirth; for the feast is too dull and solemn without the fiddles. (qtd. in Lounsbury 159)

Influenced by Dryden, Nahum Tate (1652-1715) introduced comedy into his 1681 adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, in order "to help off the heaviness of the tale." According to Tate's preface to his version of *Richard II*,

I took care from the Beginning to adorn my Prince with such heroick Vertues, as afterwards made his distrest Scenes of force to draw Tears from the Spectators.... The additional Comedy I judg'd necessary to help off the heaviness of the Tale, which Design, Sir, you will not only Pardon, but Approve. I have heard you commend this Method in Stage-writing, though less agreeable to stricktness of Rule; and I find your Choice confirm'd by our Laureat's last Piece [Dryden's "Epistle Dedicatory to the *Spanish Friar*"], who confesses himself to have broken a Rule for the Pleasure of Variety. (Vickers 1: 325)

Shakespeare's mixture of comic scenes with the tragic was again a matter for

debate in the eighteenth century, even though the era witnessed the bardolatry of Shakespeare. In addition to the publication of the various critical editions of his works by Nicholas Rowe (1709), Alexander Pope (1725), Lewis Theobald (1733), Thomas Hanmer (1744), William Warburton (1747), Samuel Johnson (1765), Edward Capell (1768), George Steevens (1773), and Edmond Malone (1790), the erection of his statue in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey in 1741, and David Garrick's Stratford Jubilee of 1769 all contributed to promote Shakespeare as Britain's national poet. Nevertheless, several critics mocked the mixture of social ranks in Shakespeare's plays as offences against decorum, and viewed the confusion of tragedy and comedy as destroying the unity of action. They agreed with the French writer Voltaire, who, for one thing, attacked the opening scene in *Julius Caesar*, in which the lowest class of the populace exchanges speeches with the tribunes. In his Preface to Thomas Corneille's *Earl of Essex*, Voltaire remarks that "this mixture of buffoonery and solemnity is intolerable" (Walpole 30). Voltaire's deprecation of Shakespeare's plays may have resulted from his Neo-Classical judgment as well as his jingoistic stance affected by eighteenth-century French nationalism (Ou 12-30).

Throughout the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's mingling of kings and clowns, in Prince Hal and Falstaff, Lear and his fool, Hamlet and the gravedigger, was often assumed to be a breach of art as well as nature. Nahum Tate's adaptation, *History of King Lear* (1681), performed Shakespeare's *King Lear* without the Fool. Shakespeare's court jester, albeit licensed to comment on human life, was accounted to have violated Classical artistic model for conversing with the king. Thomas Davies, Garrick's biographer, recorded how Garrick had wished to restore the Fool in *Lear*, the role to be performed by Henry Woodward (pantomimist, 1717-1777), "who promised to be very chaste in his colouring, and not to counteract the agonies of Lear; but the manager would not hazard so bold an attempt" (266-67). Also, the anonymous author of "Observations on the Tragedy of Hamlet" (1762) denounced the grave-digger's scene in *Hamlet* for violating propriety, remarking that Shakespeare had "blended humour and clumsy jests with dignity and solemnity," and that the "low comedy," though full of humor, debased Shakespeare's "sublime compositions with wretched farce, commonplace jokes, and unmeaning quibbles" (Vickers 4: 46). Similarly, in *The History of English Poetry* (1774-1781), Thomas Warton, Poet Laureate from 1785 to 1790, critiques Shakespeare's "abrupt transitions" between high and low social levels:

In the same scene he descends from his meridian of the noblest tragic sublimity to puns and quibbles, to the meanest merriments of a plebeian farce.... He seems not to have seen any impropriety in the most abrupt transitions, from dukes to buffoons ... and from kings to

clowns. (4: 331)

In a comment on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Henry James Pye (1745-1813), Poet Laureate from 1790 to 1813, further asserts that "the mixing of the serious and the comic, in one piece, tends to destroy the efficacy of both, and is therefore a fault" (127).

On the other hand, Arthur Murphy (1727-1805), the barrister, journalist, and playwright who edited the works of Fielding (1762) and wrote biographies of Johnson (1792) and Garrick (1801), defends Shakespeare against Voltaire's attack in his *Gray's Inn Journal*, and supports Shakespeare's transgression of Classical rules: "for every Transgression he [Shakespeare] recompences his Auditors with Beauties, which no Art will ever equal" (No. 12, 15 Dec. 1753: 70). Yet, Murphy deplored Shakespeare's mixture of tragic and comic impersonation and objected to the practice of comic epilogues to ease the pain of tragedy: "We storm upon the stage th'impassioned breast, / Then, come, and turn all sympathy to jest" (qtd. in Spector 51). Murphy's ambivalent attitude results from his inner conflict between his adherence to the Classical decrees and his admiration for Shakespeare as a national poet. Although Murphy's *Desert Island* (1760) is a tragicomedy taken from Metastasio's *L'Isola Disabitata* (1750) and Collet's *L'Isle Diserte* (1758), in the epilogue to his tragedy *Alzuma* (1773) Murphy interrogates the incongruity caused by the tragic and comic blending:

By FASHION's law, whene'er the TRAGIC MUSE  
With sympathetic tears each eye bedews;  
When some BRIGHT VIRTUE at her call appears,  
Wak'd from the dead repose of rolling years,  
When SACRED WORTHIES she bids breathe anew,  
That men may be,—what she displays to view;  
By FASHION'S LAW, with light fantastic mien  
The COMIC SISTER trips it o'er the scene;  
Arm'd at all points with wit and wanton wiles,  
Plays off her airs, and calls forth all her smiles;  
Till each fine feeling of the heart be o'er,  
And the gay wonder how they wept before.  
Say, do you wish, ye bright, ye virtuous train,  
That ev'ry tear that fell, should fall in vain? (71)

In his tragedy *The Grecian Daughter* (1772), Murphy also criticizes the unnatural fusion of tragedy with hilarity:

THE GRECIAN DAUGHTER'S compliments to all;  
Begs that for [comic] Epilogue you will not call;  
For leering, giggling would be out of season,

And hopes by me you'll hear a little reason. (6)

As such, Murphy differentiates a proper tragicomedy from the introduction of the comic into a tragedy. Although he considers the genre of tragicomedy acceptable, he does not find justifiable the inclusion of the hilarious in a serious tragedy.

Whereas Shakespeare's mingling of genres offended eighteenth-century Neo-Classicists, in the second half of the eighteenth century an increasing number of critics defended Shakespeare by praising his fidelity to "Nature," or factuality in life. In 1751 Samuel Johnson supported tragicomedy in Number 156 of *The Rambler* by claiming, "That it [mixing tragedy and comedy] is a practice contrary to the rules of criticism will be readily allowed; but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature" (Vickers 3: 434). In this article Johnson remarks,

I know not whether he that professes to regard no other Laws than those of Nature will not be inclined to receive Tragi-comedy to his Protection. The Connexion of important with trivial Incidents, since it is not only common but perpetual in the World, may surely be allowed upon the Stage, which pretends only to be the Mirrour of Life. (434)

Johnson affirms that the grave-digger's scene in *Hamlet* "may be heard with applause," because the "tragic and comic Affections have been moved alternately with equal Force. No Plays have oftener filled the Eye with Tears and the Breast with Palpitation than those which are variegated with Interludes of Mirth" (435). Admiring Shakespeare's manipulation of emotional responses in the audience, Johnson also pays tribute to Shakespeare's "transcendent and unbounded Genius that could preside over the Passions in Sport," since Shakespeare, "to produce or actuate the Affections needed not the slow Gradation of common Means but could fill the Heart with instantaneous Jollity or Sorrow, and vary our Disposition as he changed his Scenes" (435).

In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1765), Johnson again argues for Shakespeare's combination of seriousness and merriment by eulogizing his contribution to nature. According to Johnson, Shakespeare's powers of exciting laughter and sorrow are the reasons for which his plays exhibit "the real state of 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" (Vickers 5: 61). Echoing Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Johnson maintains that the mixture of sorrow and joy may instruct by pleasing and is more faithful to life: "That the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy or comedy cannot be denied, because it includes both in its alteration of exhibition and approaches nearer than either to the appearance of life" (64). As regards the view that the "change of scenes," provoking abrupt shifts

in emotional reactions, causes the “passions” to be “interrupted in their progression,” Johnson argues that the “interchanges of mingled scenes seldom fail to produce the intended vicissitudes of passion. Fiction cannot move so much, but that the attention may be easily transferred” (64). For this reason, Johnson justifies Shakespeare’s representation of the partially hilarious character of Polonius in the tragedy of *Hamlet*.

Other contemporary critics also consented to Shakespeare’s violation of the Neo-Classical rules because Shakespeare presented the sublime through various aesthetic modes while holding a mirror up to nature. In “Observations on the plays altered from Shakespeare” (1779), George Steevens (1736-1800), a Shakespearean editor, argues that Shakespeare’s mingling of genres succeeds in the integrated verisimilitude of his portrayal of life:

His Comedy and Tragedy are by no means forced into Union, but are engrafted on each other, and so engrafted that they appear alternately as the natural Produce of one ample and luxuriant Story.... The comick Efforts of Shakespeare cannot be said to counteract his Tragick Effusions; for it should be remembered that in every Piece which he has called a Tragedy the Sensations resulting from the Calamities of Love, the Punishment of Guilt, or the Fall of Ambition, are always forcibly impressed on the Audience in his concluding Scenes. (Vickers 6: 206)

Similarly, in “An Essay on Genius” (1774) Alexander Gerard praised Shakespeare’s artistic creation for its “exuberance of imagination” (Vickers 6: 113-14). In “Cursory Remarks on Tragedy” (1774), Edward Taylor initially exemplifies Shakespeare’s mingling the sublime and the bathos through the gravedigger’s scene in *Hamlet* (Vickers 6: 126), and indicates that Shakespeare’s characters of higher social standing are guilty of vulgarity. While blaming Shakespeare for hurrying the audience “from heroes and philosophers into a crew of plebeians, grave-diggers, and buffoons,” Taylor nevertheless acknowledged Shakespeare’s versatility and faithfulness to life:

...Shakespeare abounds in the true sublime; but it must be allowed that he abounds likewise in the low and vulgar. And who is there, that after soaring on eagle wings to unknown regions and empyreal heights, is not most sensibly mortified to be compelled the next moment to grovel in dirt and ordure? (Vickers 6: 130)

In addition to the verisimilitude of human life and emotions, Shakespeare’s use of comic scenes in tragedy was often defended by eighteenth-century critics in the interest of the audience’s need for variety and comic relief. Performances of tragedies were often followed by dances, comic songs, plays of wit, even clowning, since these practices catered to the contemporary audience taste for variety and mitigated the

tragic catastrophe. In a 180 degree turn from the previous century's critiques, eighteenth-century writers increasingly believed that the classifications of tragedy and comedy were not adequate to a drama of such variation as the Elizabethan: *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, is a tragedy in folio, but the quarto declares it as witty "as the best comedy in Terence or Plautus" (Orgel 109-11).

## V. Audience Reactions to Genres

Among the debates over Shakespeare's generic treatment, comments based on the complexity of audience reactions significantly provide insight into the diverse divisions between genres. Samuel Johnson's perception, that "No Plays have oftener filled the Eye with Tears and the Breast with Palpitation than those which are variegated with Interludes of Mirth" (Vickers 3: 435), resembles that of Dryden concerning the fact that few tragedies would succeed unless "lightened with a course of mirth" (qtd. in Lounsbury 159). In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare, Johnson further declares that the mingled drama may convey all the instruction of tragedy and comedy, because "the high and the low co-operate in the general system by unavoidable concatenation" (Vickers 5: 61). Johnson points out the complexity of staged affective impacts on different spectators: "the disturbance of one man may be the relief of another; that different auditors have different habitudes; and that, upon the whole, all pleasure consists in variety" (62). Most noteworthy is Johnson's comment on the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, published in 1623 by John Heminges and Henry Condell:

The players [Heminges and Condell], who in their edition divided our authour's works into comedies, tragedy, histories, seem not to have distinguished the three kinds by any very exact or definite ideas. An action which ended happily to the principal persons, however serious or distressful through its intermediate incidents, in their opinion constituted a comedy. (62)

Different from Aristotle's focus on the single and complete action of drama, Johnson suggests the possibility for plays to contain an array of emotions: "Plays by changing the catastrophe, were tragedies to-day and comedies to-morrow.... Tragedy in those times required only a calamitous conclusion, whatever lighter pleasure it afforded in its progress" (62). As such, Johnson argues that the multiple facets of human nature and perspectives legitimize the generic contrast in a play.

Fascinatingly, Johnson's perceptions concerning genre instability and the intricacy of audience responses correspond to the evolution of genre theories in the



late twentieth century. Modern genre critics have declared that generic categories are not mutually exclusive, and that the changing tastes of theater-goers and theatre artists may shape the interrelation of genres. According to Peter Stockwell, genres can be defined “socially, historically, functionally, authorially, politically, stylistically, arbitrarily, idiosyncratically, or by a combination of any of these” (28). Playwrights may utilize characteristics of genres to guide audience response, but it is difficult for any genre to remain stabilized. Since audiences interpret a performance according to their cultural background and sense of generic conventions, genres respond to recurrent cultural situations (Devitt 24). As genres persist through the “constant renovation of their conventions” (Fishelov 85-117), the variation in genre cannot be limited by any classification system. Reacting to the shifting milieu in which they were created, works of art may fit into different genres.

As such, several Shakespearean scholars justify Shakespeare's generic hybridization by emphasizing audience taste for variety instead of unity. Alexander Leggatt notes that a tragedy needs comic relief while a comedy needs variety: “When a joke runs too long, its potential cruelty comes too much to the surface” (139). Also, Stephen Orgel observes that comedy and tragedy are complementary, as they comprise two aspects of human life. Comedy is necessary to tragedy for the proper effects of drama to be achieved in the audience. The “tragic purgation of the spirit and the reassertion of norms” lead us to the world of comedy, much as the Renaissance liked to conclude its tragedies with jigs (Orgel 118-20). Shakespeare’s predisposition for hybrid forms indicates his belief in genres as “sets of possibilities” with shared assumptions; hence the deprived Lear in the scene with the Fool may touch the hearts of modern audiences, and so may Caliban in *The Tempest* (Orgel 123).

Furthermore, modern theorists who believe in the Deconstruction concepts of relativity accentuate the fact that ideas of distinctness and compatibility structure conceptions of literary hybridity, even though the distinctness of the literary classes serves as a precondition for the formation of hybrids (Allen 4). Jacques Derrida’s view of “mixing” genres, as unveiled in “The Law of Genre” (1980), engages in the main currents in contemporary genre theory. Based on the Deconstruction theory of literary criticism, Derrida argues for conceptual blending in genres by denying the existence of pure discursive forms, portraying divergence and mixture as regulation rather than exception. Derrida’s essay begins with the premise: “Genres are not to be mixed” (55). Although this idea of genre is one of “law,” he nevertheless claims that, as soon as we attach law to writing, norms and interdictions will establish the limit (56). Whereas genre classifies text into categories through its common traits, mixing genres happens, and therefore Derrida believes that in the heart of the law itself is “a principle of contamination” (57). By scrutinizing Maurice Blanchot’s story “La Folie

du jour” [The Madness of the Day], Derrida demonstrates how this work defies classification into any genre, and how the mixing of genre is always already working within the word “genre.” In consequence, the participation of a text in a genre does not mean that it belongs solely to that genre. Observing that art participates in genre but also transcends and mixes genres, Derrida concludes that “genre” implies a presence that is absent.

Other critics who shared these Deconstruction notions of genre also paid attention to reader/audience tastes. In “The Origin of Genres,” Tzvetan Todorov asserts that genres delimit by functioning as “horizons of expectation” for readers and as “models of writing” for authors (163). In his *Genres in Discourse*, however, Todorov identifies genre as “a system in constant transformation” due to its fluid boundaries:

A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several... Today’s ‘text’ (which is also a genre, in one of its senses) owes as much to nineteenth-century ‘poetry’ as to the ‘novel’, just as ‘la comedie larmoyante’ [weeping comedy] combined features of the comedy and the tragedy of the previous century. There has never been a literature without genres; it is a system in constant transformation.  
(15)

Arguing that new genres arise out of combinations of old genres, Todorov suggests that the order formed among genres should be regarded as a historically changing system, rather than as a “logical order” (Frow 71). While genre facilitates communication between the writings/productions and the reader/audience, it nevertheless challenges categorization because genre taxonomy may change with the historical and cultural contexts in different eras and arenas.

Similarly, Ralph Cohen argues in his "History and Genre" (1986) that genre concepts “arise, change, and decline for historical reasons,” because each genre is composed of texts that accrue, and the grouping is a process, not a determinate category (204). Although the formation of genres results from the human need for distinction and interrelation, the purposes of critics vary and therefore the same texts can belong to different groupings of genres and serve different generic purposes (204). Thus, Cohen’s analyses of genre highlight the correlation between genre taxonomy and critic/audience responses. Peter Holland also claims that theatre cultures and audience tastes should be taken into consideration, especially when plot is “not necessarily the determinant for value in the experience of theater” (13). Since an audience is never a monolithic entity, spectator response to performances may also be influenced by gender, race, class, education, mood, etc. (Bennett 101). A spectator might be delighted by a miserable ending because of its truthful portrayal of harsh

realities. Or, as Thomas R. Lounsbury rightly remarks, the humorous may relieve the strain from the prolonged grief of a series of scenes, but the contrast may also amplify the effect of the grief (154). These observations demonstrate that the complexity of audience responses to theatrical performances results in the absence of the essential distinctions between genres.

## VI. Conclusion

Neo-Classicist genre critiques stimulated different responses to the multiple genres or modified genres in Shakespeare's plays. As misunderstandings dominated their views of Aristotle's genre theory, Neo-Classicists promoted genre decorum that dichotomized between comic and serious actions in proportion to the social status of the *dramatis personae*. Purporting that tragedy should exclude characters of the baser sort, these decrees create constraints that may make mixed genres appear to be a "cultural monstrosity" (LaCapra 220). Whereas Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson criticized Shakespeare's combining components of tragedy and comedy as a breach of Neo-Classical decorum, an increasing number of scholars acknowledge that Shakespeare's drama "privileges the living human body, the organic matter on which it is created" (Kiernan 11). Samuel Johnson believe that Shakespeare indulge his natural temperament by attending to the capricious world of nature, because the complexity of human society makes it impossible to offer a binary distinction between the comic and the tragic. Subsequently, eighteenth-century critics gradually appreciated the connections between comic and tragic scenes in Shakespeare's drama. Shakespeare's mingling of genres enabled him to present the integrated verisimilitude of human life and emotions, and satisfied the audience's need for variety. In the nineteenth century Samuel Taylor Coleridge also indicated that Shakespeare never introduced the comic except when it may react on the tragedy by harmonious contrast (247), and in the twentieth century Kenneth Muir states that Shakespeare did not create tragic tension only to dissipate them in laughter (p. xxvi). These justifications of Shakespeare's generic exploitation shared with modern theories concerning genres as dynamic, interactive, and historically defined. When Jacques Derrida deconstructed predetermined groupings of genre, he claims that it is impossible not to mix genres, due to the transgressive text's ambiguous condition of participation in "the generic norm" (Collins 57). Indeed, eighteenth-century audiences wept over sentimental comedies, while nineteenth-century melodrama, a tragedy with a happy ending, evoked tears and laughter. Alastair Fowler rightly observes that, as tastes changed over time, literary genres exist in different states at different times (*Kinds of Literature* 41-42).

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