

ON DIVIDING SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

When hearing and seeing or reading a play of Shakespeare, it is useful to know the kind of play it is. For Shakespeare wrote many kinds of plays. And one should not approach them in the same way or seek the same pleasure from each, but that which fits each kind.

One should not seek more precision or certitude in dividing than the matter admits. Each play of Shakespeare is to some extent unique and there is a mixture of many elements in many plays so that complete certitude or precision should not be expected in a division of his plays.

Longinus said that literary judgment is the last fruit of a long experience. One must immerse oneself in the plays before one can begin to see the different kinds of plays he wrote. What I have to say here is the fruit of a long experience of reading and re-reading the plays of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare wrote about thirty seven plays. I say *about* because in the usual complete editions of his plays, this is their number. But there is some controversy about some of them, whether they are entirely by the bard. And there are some other plays besides them in which he may have had a hand. I shall not enter into these learned controversies, but consider the division of the thirty seven plays customarily attributed to him.

In the original complete edition of Shakespeare's plays, the Folio of 1623,¹ the plays were divided into tragedies, comedies and histories. This division has been followed in many subsequent complete editions. This division is defective for a number of reasons.

The main defect is that the word *comedy* is equivocal and includes comedy in the strict sense, which is a likeness of the laughable and the contrary of tragedy, and other kinds of play which, although ending happily, are serious and not chiefly a likeness of the laughable.² These serious plays which end happily are in the

¹The Folio of 1623 contained 36 plays. *Pericles* was added in a subsequent addition.

²We see this same equivocation in the title of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. That work is not called a *comedy* because it is a likeness of the laughable, but

middle between tragedy and comedy in the strict sense. In recent complete editions of Shakespeare's plays, some of these middle plays are made a separate group of plays distinguished from both the tragedies and the comedies. And in that separate group, which is called the *Romances* (used in a different sense from what is popularly called a romance; more in the sense in which the Hellenistic novels are called *romances*), is included a play, *Cymbeline*, which the Folio of 1623 had put among the tragedies. And perhaps one could also distinguish another kind of play, found under the name *comedy* in the Folio which is between this middle kind of play and the comedies in the strict sense.

The other question mark about the division of the plays into tragedies, comedies and histories in the First Folio is that the same basis for division is not used throughout. What distinguishes tragedy from comedy in the strict sense also distinguishes most of the history plays from comedies in the strict sense.

One could say that the ten history plays are distinguished from tragedies and comedies by the greater interest we take in the particular in them. Although fiction is more about the universal than about the singular, some forms of fiction approach more to the singular. Thus, our interest in the historical novel is more particular than in some other forms. But this could be said of some of the Roman plays as well as the ten English history plays, although the former are placed with tragedies. Nevertheless, as we shall see, there is a problem of where to put some of the English history plays and it may be good to set them aside temporarily while we divide the remaining twenty seven plays. We can then consider where and to what extent the English history plays can be placed in that division.

Laying aside then for the time being the ten English history plays of Shakespeare, let us consider the distinction of kinds found in the remaining twenty seven plays.

Where there are contraries and something between those contraries, it is perhaps best to begin with those contraries and then proceed later to what is between those contraries. For contraries being the forms of a thing that are the furthest apart, their distinction will be most known and most clear. And since what comes between the contraries seems to be a mixture of the contraries, one can understand better this mixture after one has seen clearly the two pure forms.

because it goes from *Inferno*, the place of misery, to *Paradiso*, the place of happiness. But it is a likeness of serious things.

Further, one can order the intermediate forms by their likeness and distance from the contrary forms after one has considered the contrary forms.

A likeness or comparison will make more clear this way of going forward. Contraries are sometimes compared to the end points of a straight line. As those points are the points furthest apart on that line, so too, contraries are the forms furthest apart in some general kind of thing. Hence, although there can be many points on a line the same distance apart, but only *two* points the furthest apart, so too there can be only *two* contraries in any one kind of thing. And just as the end points are the points most clearly distinguished on the line, and we would say where the other points are by their distance from the end points, so also the contraries are the forms of a thing most clearly distinguished and we would arrange the forms in-between by their distance from the contraries. Thus, in colors, we could begin with the contraries black and white. These are most clear in their distinction. Hence, we say proverbially when something is very clear, that it is *black and white*; and when it is not clear that it is not black and white, but *gray*. And we would arrange the colors in-between black and white by their distance or proximity to black and white. Thus, for example, blue is closer to black than is yellow; and vice-versa, yellow is closer to white than is blue. So we would order them as white, yellow, blue, black.

Tragedy and comedy (in the strict sense) are contraries. This can be seen in their plots, characters and language. Everyone knows that the plot of a tragedy goes from some form of happiness to misery while comedy goes in the contrary direction. And this is why they move us to contrary emotions or feelings. Tragedy moves us to pity and fear and comedy to mirth and hope. And the characters of tragedy are above us in station and abilities while those of comedy tend to be below us. And the language of tragedy is more beautiful and elevated in its images while that of comedy is lowly and representing the laughable which is a form of the ugly. When Juliet is found apparently dead on her wedding day, we have the beautiful simile:

Death lies on her like an untimely frost
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field.³

But Falstaff, Shakespeare's greatest comic character, is described by Mrs. Ford, one of the merry wives of Windsor, in this image:

³*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Sc. 5

What tempest, I trow, threw this whale, with so many tuns of oil in his belly, ashore at Windsor? How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease.⁴

And Prince Hal describes Falstaff huffing and puffing along the road in these words:

.....Falstaff sweats to death
And lards the lean earth as he walks along.
Were't not for laughing, I should pity him.⁵

The last words quoted of Prince Hal, "Were't not for laughing, I should pity him", indicate again the contrariety of tragedy and comedy, the pitiful and the laughable, since one excludes the other. Hence, Gorgias gave the advice in rhetoric to kill your opponent's seriousness with jesting and his jesting with seriousness. This is a sign of the opposition or contrariety of the serious represented in tragedy and the jest or laughable represented in comedy. For opposites eliminate or exclude each other.

Let us then consider first Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies in the strict sense (that is, the plays which are a likeness of a course of action that is laughable); and then second, distinguish the kinds of plays in-between these contraries. And after that, we can consider how the ten English history plays do, or do not, fit into these divisions.

Of the twenty seven plays of Shakespeare other than his English history plays, ten can be considered tragedies and five of them, comedies. The remaining twelve can be considered to belong to two other kinds of plays in-between these contrary kinds of plays.

The ten tragedies can most easily be first distinguished by the place and time in which their plots are situated. Three of them are set in the mediaeval North: *King Lear* in England, *Macbeth* in Scotland, and *Hamlet* in Denmark. Two of them are set in Renaissance Italy or later: *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona and *Othello* in Venice and Cyprus. The remaining five tragedies are set mainly in ancient Rome or its empire and one of them in Greece. *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*,

⁴*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Act II, Sc. 1

⁵*King Henry IV, Part I*, Act II, Sc. 2

Coriolanus, and *Titus Andronicus* are the Roman plays and *Timon of Athens*, the Greek play.

But there is another way of dividing the tragedies which is more profound and which yet corresponds *somewhat* to the division by the place and time of their plots. Some of the tragedies bring out more than others the role of nature in human life, the distinction between the natural and the unnatural in human action, and how nature is the measure of what is good and bad in human acts and dispositions. But other tragedies bring out more than others the role of fortune in human life. Nature and fortune are causes found in all plays, but some bring out or emphasize nature more than others, and some bring out or emphasize fortune more than others. And this distinction corresponds *somewhat* to the distinction of the tragedies by the place and time of their plots. For the three Northern tragedies, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are wonderful in the way they bring out the role of nature in human life, the distinction between the natural and the unnatural in human action, and that nature is the measure of what is good and bad in human acts and dispositions. In *Hamlet* we see this order touched upon by Hamlet in his advice to the players:

o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so
overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end,
both at the first and now, was and is,

to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature:

to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,

and the very age and body of the time his form and
pressure.⁶

The order here is significant for nature is the measure of what is virtue and what is vice and the age is judged by the virtues or vices predominate in it. Shakespeare stays close to the origin of the word *nature* which is from birth. Hence, plays like *Hamlet* and *Lear* revolve around the representation of what is natural and unnatural in father to son or daughter and son or daughter to father and brother to brother.

Lady Macbeth's words before the killing of the king bring out her departure from nature:

The raven himself is hoarse

⁶*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
 Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
 And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
 Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
 That no compunctious visitings of nature
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
 Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
 And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
 Wherever in your sightless substances
 You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wound it make,
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
 To cry "hold, hold!"⁷

And Macbeth remarks how nature seems dead when wicked images come to him:

.....Now o'er the one half world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtain'd sleep.⁸

And after the unnatural deed, we have this conversation between Ross and an old man:

Ross: Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
 Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,
 And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp.
 Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
 That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
 When living light should kiss it?

Old man: 'Tis unnatural,
 Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,
 A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,
 Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

Ross: And Duncan's horses - a thing most strange and certain -
 Beauteous and swift; the minions of their race,
 Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out
 Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would
 Make war with mankind.

⁷*Macbeth*, Act I, Sc. 5

⁸*Macbeth*, Act II, Sc. 1

Old Man: 'Tis said they eat each other.

Ross: They did so, to th' amazement of mine eyes,
That look'd upon't.⁹

And later when Lady Macbeth can no longer sleep, we have these famous words about those who do the unnatural:

.....Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles.¹⁰

But the Italian tragedies, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello, the Moor of Venice* place greater emphasis than the Northern tragedies on the role of fortune in our lives. As Romeo says:

I am fortune's fool¹¹

And in Othello's last words

Who can control his fate? 'tis not so now...
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am, nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well.¹²

But in the Northern tragedies, we see the role of nature brought out again and again, and the distinction between the natural and the unnatural in human action, and how nature is the measure of what is good and bad in human acts and dispositions.

The Roman and Greek tragedies are mixed. *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* emphasize fortune, but *Coriolanus* especially and also *Timon of Athens*, nature. When Coriolanus relents from the destruction of his native city, Rome, at the pleading of his mother, wife and child, we have some of

⁹*Macbeth*, Act II, Sc. 4

¹⁰*Macbeth*, Act V, Sc. 1

¹¹*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Sc. 1

¹²*Othello*, Act V, Sc. 2

the most profound lines in Shakespeare's works about nature and what it entails upon us. Coriolanus wavers between following nature or his own pride and anger against his native city:

My wife comes foremost, then the honour'd mould
Wherein this trunk was fram'd, and in her hand
The grandchild to her blood. But out, affection!
All bond and privilege of nature, break!
What is that curtsy worth? or those doves' eyes,
Which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not
Of stronger earth than others. My mother bows,
As if Olympus to a molehill should
In supplication nod; and my young boy
Hath an aspect of intercession which
Great nature cries 'Deny not.' Let the Volsces
Plough Rome and harrow Italy; I'll never
Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand
As if a man were author of himself
And knew no other kin.¹³

Thus about five of the ten tragedies emphasize nature more than the other five and the latter five plays, more fortune.

In accordance with the order of learning, let us now turn to the other end of the spectrum which is the five comedies. Three of these are good-natured comedies and two are the lesser kind of comedy, the satire. Comedy should make us laugh and expel melancholy. But the good-natured comedy does this much better than the satire. The satire in fact can make us a bit melancholic if it is too savage and makes us have contempt or scorn for our fellow human beings in their defects and failings.

The three good natured comedies (which I prefer much to the satires) are *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Perhaps it could be said that fortune is emphasized more in *The Comedy of Errors* and nature more in the *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merry wives of Windsor*.

¹³*Coriolanus*, Act V. Sc. 3

One of the two satires, I call the *white* satire and the other, the *black* satire. The white satire is *Love's Labour's Lost* and the black satire is *Troilus and Cressida*.

Perhaps both of the satires were written for more private audiences, more sophisticated and cynical, than the popular or general audience that would be found in the public theaters such as the Globe. *Love's Labour's Lost* may have had a court audience and *Troilus and Cressida*, an audience of lawyers. One distinguished critic has written about *Troilus and Cressida*:

Troilus and Cressida stands in modern criticism...with the comical satires that are supposed to mark the transition from the times of Elizabeth to the more cynical and disillusioned attitude of the Jacobeans...To regard this as the very height of comedy the Jacobean critic must have recalled the occasion when it was all very much in keeping and the audience would sense in such literary heresy a kind of dexterity they could enjoy. To find such an audience in 1602 except at one or the other of the Inns of Court seems impossible, and the interpretation of Shakespeare's play, unless the observations of a well-informed contemporary are to go for nothing, should allow for the unusual occasion and the dexterity with which Shakespeare plays the physician to a group with their own peculiar kind of humour.¹⁴

Nevertheless, *Troilus and Cressida*, among its other excellences, contains the finest critique of fashion and its danger that I have ever seen.

Thus at the comic end of the spectrum of Shakespeare's twenty-seven plays (other than the ten English history plays), we find five plays, the three good natured comedies and the two satires. The remaining twelve plays belong in-between the ten tragedies and the five comedies.

Perhaps six of these plays could be put almost exactly in the middle between the tragedies and the comedies. I call these plays the mercy or forgiveness plays.

They are like the tragedies insofar as they are a likeness of a course of action that is serious rather than laughable. But they are like the comedies in that they end happily for the main characters (albeit after much suffering or repentance) while tragedy ends in misery and death for the main characters.

¹⁴Peter Alexander, *The Easton Press Shakespeare, Tragedies*, Introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*, The Easton Press, Norwalk Connecticut, 1980, pp. 5-6

The emotional effect of this middle kind of play is also between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy and comedy divide between them the four chief passions or emotions. The four chief emotions are joy, sadness, hope and fear.¹⁵ Shakespeare touches upon these four in *Henry VI, Part Three*, when King Henry says in his change of fortune:

Master lieutenant, now that God and friends
Have shaken Edward from the regal seat,
And turn'd my captive state to liberty,
My fear to hope, my sorrows unto joys,
At our enlargement what are thy due fees?¹⁶

Tragedy moves us to pity, a form of sadness, and to fear. Hence, Shakespeare, in the Prologue to his tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, touches upon these two emotions in preparing us for the play:

Two households, both alike in dignity
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife

The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,

¹⁵Thomas explains how the other emotions are reduced in some way to these in *Scriptum Super Lib. III Sent.*, Dist XXVI, Q. I, Art. IV, Ad 5: "omnes praedictae passiones ad has principales passiones reducuntur vel sicut species ad genus, sicut admiratio ad timorem; vel sicut imperfectum ad perfectum, sicut concupiscentia ad gaudium; vel sicut effectus ad causam et participans ad participatum, sicut audacia et ira ad spem, quia spes tendit in arduum bonum quod de se est tale ut in illud debeat tendi, audacia autem et ira tendunt in arduum nocivum repellendum, quod quidem non est tale ut in ipsum tendi debeat, sed magis ut fugiatur; tendunt tamen in ipsum in quantum participat aliquid de ratione boni quod est victoria ipsius; et ideo spes participatur quodammodo in audacia et ira, sicut quod est per se, in eo quod est per accidens."

¹⁶*Henry VI, Part Three*, Act IV, Sc. 6

Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffick of our stage.

The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

But comedy moves us to mirth, a form of joy, and hope. The middle kind of play, the mercy or forgiveness play, moves us to mercy and hope. Mercy is the same as, or like, pity which is proper to tragedy while hope is one of the two key emotions in comedy.

Mercy or pity and hope are perhaps the two emotions most like a virtue.

Thomas teaches that mercy (*miser cordia*) and shame have some likeness to virtue in *Scriptum Super Lib. III Sententiarum*:

aliquae passiones, quamvis proprie loquendo, non sint virtutes,
tamen in quantum sunt laudabiles, habent aliquid de ratione virtutis;
sicut misericordia et verecundia; et praecipue secundum quod est
ibi electio.¹⁷

But mercy is godlike while shame is not. Only man has something to be ashamed of, but mercy seems godlike. Thus in the famous lines in *The Merchant of Venice*, spoken by Portia:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the heart of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.¹⁸

¹⁷*Scriptum Super Lib. III Sententiarum*, Dist. XXXVIII, Q. III, Art. IV, Sol. IV, Ad 3

¹⁸*The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Sc. 1, lines 184-197,

And in *Scriptum Super Lib. III Sent.*, Thomas explains about hope:

spes, secundum quod est passio, non est virtus, sed secundum quod est in appetitu intellectivae partis. Nec aliarum passionum nomina ita convenienter ad virtutes transumi possunt sicut nomen spei. quia spes dicitur in ordine ad bonum; et propter hoc importat motum appetitus in bonum tendentis, et sic habet quamdam similitudinem cum electione et intentione boni quae requiruntur in omni virtute.

Timor autem dicatur in ordine ad malum. Recedere autem a malo, quamvis ad virtutem pertineat, non tamen in hoc consistit perfectio virtutis, sed in electione boni.

Gaudium autem et tristitia magis dicunt impressionem boni et mali in appetitum quam motum appetitus in ea; unde non habent similitudinem cum electione virtutis.¹⁹

There is something profoundly Christian about this kind of play. And Shakespeare touches upon this when he used this kind of play for his farewell to the stage. Listen to the Epilogue to the *Tempest* spoken by Prospero

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,
 And what strength I have's mine own,
 Which is most faint. Now 'tis true,
 I must be here confin'd by you,
 Or sent to Naples. Let me not,
 Since I have my dukedom got,
 And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
 In this bare island by your spell;
 But release me from my bands
 With the help of your good hands.
 Gentle breath of yours my sails
 Must fill, or else my project fails,
 Which was to please. Now I want
 Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
 And my ending is despair
 Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
 Which pierces so that it assaults
 Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
 As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
 Let your indulgence set me free.

¹⁹*Scriptum Super Lib. III Sent.*, Dist. XXVI, Q. II, Art. I, Ad 1

Four of these six mercy or forgiveness plays are often put together in complete editions of Shakespeare's plays today in a separate category from the tragedies and the comedies. And the name given to this category is the *Romances*. This is not romantic in the sense of romantic love, but in the sense that there is a descent of this kind of play in some ways from the Hellenistic romances or novels. These four plays are *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and the *Tempest*. In the original Folios, some of these plays (*Pericles* and *Cymbeline*) were put with the tragedies and some (*The Winter's Tale* and the *Tempest*) with the comedies. This is a sign of their mixed character. But to these four last plays of Shakespeare (I say *last*, except for *Henry VIII* for which he seemed to have come out of retirement and on which he perhaps collaborated with another playwright), I add *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends well*. These plays, although somewhat different from the last four, agree with them in their serious theme of forgiveness or mercy. The title of the latter fits well with a serious play in which, after much suffering and forgiveness, there is a happy ending.

The remaining six plays belong to a fourth kind of play which is between the romances or mercy plays and the comedies. They have some origin in the *mediaeval romance* ²⁰ (rather than the Greek or Hellenistic romance) and could be called romances also. To avoid confusion in the word *romance*, one could call the former six, the mercy or forgiveness romances and these could be called the love, or the love & friendship, romances. In these romances, romantic love is very important, but they also emphasize friendship.

The six love romances can be divided into the three earlier ones, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The last two are connected with the same two Italian cities as the Italian tragedies. The later and perhaps more mature love romances are *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Twelfth Night*.

The love romances are more serious than the good natured comedies, but not as serious or heavy as the mercy romances. Also, unlike the mercy romances, they have a good dose of the laughable in them.

The forest in *As You Like It* is symbolic of the goodness of nature. In the words of the Duke in exile in the forest:

And this our life exempt from public haunt

²⁰This connection can be studied in C. S. Lewis' *The Allegory of Love*

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in every thing²¹

Hence, it is significant that the two pairs of discordant brothers in this play are reconciled in the forest.

But on the whole, in the remaining five love romances, we can say that fortune is more predominant. And this is in accord with the passion of love. For those subject to strong passion are also more the slaves of fortune. Hamlet notes this by its opposite when he says why he chose Horatio as his close friend:

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself; for thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks; and bless'd are those
Whose blood and judgment are so well co-mingled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.²²

We have divided the twenty-seven plays of Shakespeare other than his ten English history plays. But before we turn to those ten history plays, we can consider the universality of Shakespeare's genius as seen in these four kinds of plays. Tragedy and comedy, as their names indicate, go back to the Greeks who are at the origin of Western fiction. The mercy romances are connected with the later Hellenistic novels and the love romances run back in their origin to the mediaeval world. Shakespeare's tree has roots in almost all the main poetic and fictional traditions of the Western world.

Turning now to the ten English history plays, they seem closest to the Northern tragedies as one would expect from their setting. However, there are some important reasons for not placing all of them with the Northern tragedies.

²¹*As You Like It*, Act II, Sc. 1

²²*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2

Richard II foolishly loses his throne while Lear foolishly relinquishes it. And both suffer in different ways the results of their foolish actions. Hence, we could place *Richard II* next to *Lear* among the Northern tragedies, even though no one would think of *Richard II* as approaching the greatness of the tragedy of *King Lear*.

Richard III could be placed near *Macbeth* in that it represents a man who chooses to murder others so as to become a king or tyrant. (Of course, *Macbeth* is considered a much greater play.) These two plays would seem to move our pity much less than *Othello* or *Lear* because pity is sadness or sorrow over the *undeserved* misfortune or misery of another.

King John is something like *Richard III* and *Macbeth* in that he is willing to some extent to murder to keep his throne and things unravel for him because of this. But this play does not have the unity or order of *Macbeth* or even that of *Richard III*.

Henry VIII may not be entirely by Shakespeare. The scenes of Wolsley's downfall and the scenes of Catharine's suffering in the pretended annulment of their marriage by Henry VIII arouse our pity, but the play moves towards the birth of Elizabeth which is presented as a joyful event in prophetic anticipation of her reign.

The three *Henry the VI* plays are again like the Northern tragedies, but are somewhat episodic, there being so many turns of fortune in them. They emphasize nature. The playwright, in bringing out what is natural and unnatural in human affairs, must stay close to the original meaning of nature which is birth. Hence, Shakespeare will emphasize what is natural or unnatural in parent towards child and in child towards parent. Father and son are especially emphasized in the history plays of Shakespeare because the son will succeed to the father. Hence, in the *Henry VI, Part I*, we have the noble scene where the son of Talbot refuses to leave his surrounded father who urges him to flee. Finally Talbot seeing his son's determination to stay and, undoubtedly, die fighting with him against the surrounding French, says:

Then here I take my leave of thee, fair son,
Born to eclipse thy life this afternoon.
Come, side by side together live and die;

And soul with soul from France to heaven fly.²³

And in *Henry the VI. Part III*, when Henry the VI basely disinherits his son in a vain attempt to save his life and throne, he notes in reply to Warwick that his action is unnatural:

Warwick: Why should you sigh, my lord?

King Henry: Not for my self, Lord Warwick, but my son,
Whom I unnaturally shall disinherit.²⁴

And the Queen more in anger denounces his unnatural act:

Who can be patient in such extremes?
Ah, wretched man! Would I had died a maid,
And never seen thee, never borne thee son,
Seeing thou hast prov'd so unnatural a father!
Hath he deserv'd to lose his birthright thus?
Hadst thou but lov'd him half so well as I,
Or felt that pain which I did for him once,
Or nourish'd him as I did with my blood,
Thou wouldst have left thy dearest heart-blood there
Rather than have made that savage duke thine heir,
And disinherited thine only son.²⁵

But the Queen herself is unnatural in her savage revenge on the Duke of York when she gives him the napkin dipped in the blood of York's son to wipe his eyes in the tormenting of him before his death. York upbraids her thus:

O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide!
How couldst thou drain the life-blood of the child,
To bid the father wipe his eyes withal,
And yet be seen to bear a woman's face?
Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible:
Thou stern, obdurate, flinty, rough, remorseless.²⁶

²³*Henry VI, Part I, Act IV, Sc. 5*

²⁴*Henry VI, Part III, Act I, Sc. 1*

²⁵*Henry VI, Part III, Act I, Sc. 1*

²⁶*Henry VI, Part III, Act I, Sc. 4*

There is a question whether the three *Henry VI* plays should be considered one work of art or three. One follows to some extent through the three plays the fortunes of the house of York in which the Duke rises, loses his life, and is revenged in the success of his three sons, one of whom becomes the King of England.

It is difficult or impossible to place the two *Henry IV* plays and their sequel *Henry V* in the division. The two *Henry IV* plays contain some of Shakespeare's most famous comic scenes revolving around Falstaff. And yet there are noble scenes in them arousing our pity and emphasizing nature - for father to son and son to father are very prominent in King Henry IV and his son Prince Hal, the future Henry V. The conversations in which the King upbraids his son for his apparent conduct and the son justifies, or states how we will justify himself, are exquisite. Here is one example in the words of Prince Hal in reply to his father's rebuke of his life in comparison to Percy or Hotspur, the young leader of the rebellion against Henry:

Do not think so; you shall not find it so;
And God forgive them that so much have sway'd
Your majesty's good thoughts away from me!
I will redeem all this on Percy's head,
And in the closing of some glorious day
Be bold to tell you that I am your son²⁷

If one places the two *Henry IV* plays in the middle between tragedy and comedy because of their alternation of tragic and comic scenes, they should not be confused with the mercy romances. For the mercy romances are in the middle between tragedy and comedy, not by an alternation of tragic and comic scenes, but by a plot which represents the serious with a happy ending and moves us to mercy and hope. But the comic scenes in the *Henry the IV* plays move us to mirth or merriment.

One might in the abstract expect this kind of play with its alternation of comic and serious, or even tragic, scenes to be uncertain in its dramatic effect. But literary judgment is the last fruit of a long experience. These plays were very successful in Shakespeare's days and also in ours. Samuel Johnson, speaking of the two *Henry IV* plays, said that "perhaps no author has ever, in two plays, afforded

²⁷King Henry IV, Part I, Act III, Sc. 2

so much delight."²⁸ And in the introduction to *Henry IV, Part II* in the *New Hudson edition*, it is said that "The drama of *King Henry the Fourth*, taking the two parts as artistically one, is deservedly ranked among the very highest of Shakespeare's achievements."²⁹

The way in which the character of Prince Hal, who becomes Henry V, ties together the two *Henry the IV* plays and *Henry V* is like the way in which David Copperfield ties together Dickens' greatest novel. We see someone rise in life to success through many vicissitudes. But it is not the kind of unity that a plot with a beginning, middle and end has. However, one can read each of the three plays somewhat by itself where there may be more a unity of beginning, middle and end.

Duane H. Berquist

²⁸Quoted in the Introduction to the *New Hudson* edition of *Henry IV, Part I*, p. liv

²⁹*King Henry IV, Part I*, The New Hudson Edition, Ginn and Company, 1924, p. liii