Classical Drama. Semester 6, G 1 & 2

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Shakespeare’s dramatic work is divided into comedies, tragedies and history plays. Each of these three categories addresses a variety of issues using specific techniques and theatrical traditions. In comedies, he dealt with everyday life and characters in a humorous manner (Love’s Labour’s lost, A Midsummer Night’s Dream). In tragedies, he tackled serious situations such as death, existential fear, destructive desire and ambition (Macbeth, Othello). In histories, he revisited history to evoke Kings, and historical events (Richard III, King John). In these three different genres, Shakespeare borrowed from long established theatrical traditions, such as the Greek drama, but also invented new forms and techniques that are qualified as Elizabethan or Shakespearean. What are then the main characteristics of these genres?

In his *Dictionary of Theatre*, David Pickering defines a tragedy in the following terms. “It is a form of drama characterized by its serious tone and unhappy ending. The theories of Aristotle established a number of basic ground rules, stipulating for instance that the central characters should come from the upper echelons of society and that their downfall, usually culminating in their death, should be essentially a consequence of the workings of fate”(p. 510). Tragedies should also induce fear and pathos/pity in the audience after watching the tragic fall of the tragic hero. This leads to catharsis or purification of the audience. One could also define a tragedy in the way it is structured. Tragedies start with order then go through disorder or anarchy before returning back to order. Order could be, for example, the established legitimate rule of a king. Disorder is when an individual disrupts and challenges such order deemed “divine” by the community. Order is re-established once the usurper or villain is punished by God. Seen from this perspective, tragedies are extremely conservative because they perceive change as blasphemous and unethical. On the contrary, comedy is “a form of drama distinguished by its humorous content and happy ending. Comedy has its roots in the ritual celebrations from which the lively satires of Aristophanes... it was traditionally written in simple language and identified with plays dealing with the lower classes and affairs of the day. During the Roman era comedy typically revolved around the obstacles faced by young lovers and was frequently boisterous and coarse in nature. Subsequently it was elevated by Shakespeare who drew his realistic characters from all levels of society and successfully married the form with highly elegant and sophisticated language capable of conveying significant comments upon human natures”(p. 113).

However, it would be too superficial to regard comedies simply as plays for laughter and entertainment. Comedies actually are more challenging than tragedies in the sense that they disrupt the rigid order of family, society and conventions. They also empower characters to create new possibilities and develop personal choices and thoughts. The happy ending or marriage comedies end up with point more to optimistic openings that lovers will experience after braking with the frustrating laws of tradition. In his book titled *Shakespeare’s Comedies (1991), Gary Waller argues that comedy “should not be thought of simply as light or trivial or less demanding than tragedy- as, say, merely pleasant entertainment designed to make us laugh, or help us escape the tensions of our lives, however important these characteristics may be in different experiences of comedy. Some of the greatest comedies may produce as much tears as laughter...The ‘joy’, in short, may be inextricably connected to, and even dependent upon, the ‘terror’ (p.3).*

W. Thomas MacCary in *Friends* *and Lovers: the Phenomenology of Desire In Shakespearean* *Comedy* (1985) claims that ‘Shakespeare’s comedies are not merely designed to evoke laughter, but to produce complex emotional and intellectual effects centred on an acceptance, even a celebration, of our at-one-ness with ourselves and our societies. Such harmony is frequently represented by the marriages and family reconciliations that usually occur, or are promised at the play’s ends” (p.6).