

Shakespeare's plays by genre

- In the First Folio (1623), Shakespeare's plays were divided into Comedies, Histories and Tragedies.
- Classifying Shakespeare's plays by genre has been a subject for debate over the years.
- Romance was later added as another category.
- There are plays that combine elements characteristics of other genre(s) and therefore do not neatly fit into any of the aforementioned categories.

Comedies

- F1 (First Folio) lists 14 of Shakespeare's plays as Comedies.
- *The Tempest* was included under Comedies in F1 whereas nowadays it is referred to as a Romance.
- Some examples of Shakespeare's Comedies:
 - *The Comedy of Errors*
 - *The Taming of the Shrew*
 - *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
 - *As You Like It*
- Some conventions:
 - Disguise (often involves cross-dressing).
 - Frustrated love.
 - Mistaken identity.
 - Romantic misunderstanding.
 - They end in marriage.

Histories

- F1 lists 10 of Shakespeare's plays under Histories. They are English history plays (about English history).
- These include the first tetralogy (*Henry VI Part I*, *Henry VI Part II*, *Henry VI Part III*, *Richard III*), the second tetralogy (*Richard II*, *Henry IV Part I*, *Henry IV Part II*, *Henry V*), and two more plays: *King John* and *Henry VIII (All Is True)*.
- Some conventions of Shakespeare's Histories include:
 - A large number of characters
 - Conspiracy
 - Fighting
 - Subplots
 - Decisive on-stage battle.

Tragedies

- Fl distinguishes 11 plays as Tragedies.
- *Cymbeline* was listed under Tragedies in Fl, but later grouped with Comedies and even with Romances.
- Some examples of Tragedies:
 - *Hamlet*
 - *Othello*
 - *King Lear*
 - *Macbeth*
 - *Coriolanus*
- Some conventions:
 - A heroic main character (protagonist).
 - Some dreadful dilemma / wrong decision.
 - Conspiracy.
 - Madness (often).
 - Many deaths at the end.

Romances

- The term is used to refer to Shakespeare's last four tragicomedies (a hybrid of the comic and tragic). The motifs found in these plays are common in romance literature (separation, wanderings, reunion, reconciliation and forgiveness).
- Examples:
 - *Pericles*
 - *The Winter's Tale*
 - *The Tempest*
- Some conventions:
 - Natural disasters.
 - Remarkable adventures.
 - Unlikely coincidences.
 - Conflict within families and between generations.
 - Unforeseen conclusion / forgiveness and reconciliation are achieved against odds.

Problem Plays

- This category is used to refer to mixed-genre plays (genre-defying plays). These plays use conventions from different genres.
- *Measure for Measure* is an example. The play employs some conventions of comedy (disguise + ends with multiple marriages), but the mood is dark and the plot is grim which makes it difficult to be classified as a comedy.
- *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida* are also considered as Problem Plays.

Shakespeare and Tragedy

- Shakespeare's career coincided with the revival of interest in the classics and renewed fascination with tragedy.
- Aristotle theorized the genre (around the 4th century B.C.) by examining the Greek plays of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus.
- The Romans wrote tragic dramas in partial imitation of the Greeks, and those written by Seneca were frequently read and translated in England in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Aristotle and Tragedy

According to Aristotle:

- Tragic action must have a beginning, middle and end.
- Tragic action must be of a certain magnitude.
- Tragic action evoke pity and fear and by arousing emotions, purge them (catharsis).
- Tragic hero is an exceptional person.
- Hero cannot avoid fate.
- Suffering of the tragic hero is rendered significant by the special insight it allows him/her to achieve.
- Conflicts are resolved by the hero's downfall and often the destruction of others.

Shakespeare's Tragedies

- Shakespeare's most compelling tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*) were written between 1600 and 1608.

Shakespeare's Tragedies

- *Titus Andronicus*
- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Julius Caesar*
- *Hamlet*
- *Othello*
- *Timon of Athens*
- *King Lear*
- *Macbeth*
- *Antony and Cleopatra*
- *Coriolanus*

Revenge Tragedy

- Revenge tragedy was quite popular in Shakespeare's time.
- Shakespeare and his contemporaries modeled their work upon the Roman plays of Seneca whose works provided the inspiration for such tragedies like *Gorboduc* (1561) by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton and *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) by Thomas Kyd.
- Revenge plays were called tragedies of blood because they usually ended in the violent death of most of the main characters.

Revenge Tragedy

Some conventions:

- A melancholy hero/avenger.
- A hesitating avenger.
- A villain to be killed in the revenge.
- Complex plotting.
- Murders and other physical horrors.
- A play-within-a-play.
- A ghost that calls for revenge.
- Real or feigned madness.
- Death of the avenger.

Elizabethan Revenge Tragedies

Some examples:

- *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd.
- *Antonio's Revenge* by John Marston.
- *Atheist's Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur.
- *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Thomas Middleton.
- *Titus Andronicus* and *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare.