

# The Elizabethan Theatre

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## The Tragedy

- It can be defined as a play in which “the hero and his world begin in a condition of harmony which disintegrates, leaving him, by the end of the play, in a state of isolation”  
*(Scholes and Klaus)*
- *Tragic heroes and heroines are above ordinary people because of their social rank and strong personality. As a consequence, their suffering is also much greater than common people could bear.*

## The Tragedy

### • Structure

- exposition
- conflict
  - rise of the hero up to the critical point= crisis; usually in the middle of the tragedy= 3rd act.
  - decline of the hero.
- catastrophe

## The Tragedy

- 1- The HERO: is a man of high status endowed with moral stature and exceptional personality.
- - When the main subject of the tragedy is love, there is also a heroine.
- 2- The tragic action moves from the hero's initial error – often due also to a fatal defect in his character (Hamlet is indecisive, Macbeth is ambitious, Othello is jealous, King Lear is arrogant)
- 3- In the suffering deriving from his actions, the hero achieves recognition of himself and of the evil he has caused; he re-gains his initial charisma and becomes capable of facing his final destiny with courage.
- 4- Tragic action may be reinforced by such elements as
  - The supernatural ( The Ghost in Hamlet – The 3 Witches in Macbeth)
  - chance (Desdemona's dropping her handkerchief, in Othello; the pestilence in Mantua, in Romeo and Juliet)But it can be said that in the end the hero is free to choose his destiny of death.

## The Tragedy

- 5- The VILLAIN : the action may be originated also by the presence of an antagonist of the hero; he is determined to provoke the hero's destruction which often involves also that of the other positive characters. The villain is moved either by personal motivations or a generic impulse to evil. He lacks any moral sense and is determined to achieve his ends (Machiavellian)
- 6- Tragedy must arouse:
  - PITY for the hero's sufferings;
  - FEAR for the forces that are beyond our control;
  - a sense of WASTE at the amount of human potentialities destroyed by individual errors and by destiny.
- 7- Alternating of extremely tragic high-tension scenes and comical ones, whose purpose is to lighten the atmosphere (originated from Medieval Drama, rather than Classical Theatre).

## SOLILOQUY

- a) **Typical convention of Elizabethan Drama;**
- b) **it allows the audience to know the character's thoughts on a specific problem;**

- plans for the immediate future;
- feelings or emotional reactions;
- philosophical meditations on such issues as the ultimate meaning of life and death, etc.

The audience must accept the unusual behaviour of a person speaking to him/herself.



## *The Comedy*

- 1- **EARLY COMEDIES**: slightness of plot, little development of characters, effervescent spirit, simple fun, verbal wit.
- 2- **GREAT COMEDIES**: great development in S.'s ability to create plots, richer and more truly comic spirit, the heroines are more fully developed characters.
- 3- **"BITTER" COMEDIES**: (or "Problem Plays") – they reflect a cynical mood of Shakespeare, set in a realistic environment; they must be classed as comedies only because the outcome is a traditional "happy ending".

## *The Histories*

### **These plays explore the same problems:**

- How to equate personal morality with the demands of public office or position; how to rule justly; how to serve loyally; how the liberty of the subject may be honoured in the same moment that he is being governed for his own good and the public welfare.
- Man's desire for power is the recurring theme.

### **Shakespeare's concept of history:**

- For him, history turns full circle. Mainly Feudal History, which is like a great staircase on which there treads a constant procession of kings.

## *Romance Plays*

- They have something of a fairy-tale.
- Though the themes are serious, potentially tragic even, good finally conquers, love is rewarded, a happy ending is possible for all but the totally unredeemable.
- They are the product of S.'s more mature vision of the world.

## *"Bad Quartos" and "Folio"*

- S. didn't bother to publish his plays, which circulated in dubiously authorized copies, later called "bad quartos", put together from notes taken in the theatre or reconstructed from memory by one or more actors. In 1623, two former actors and friends of S. - Hemonge and Condell - decided to publish a "First Folio", the first collected edition of S.'s plays (36 in number), printed in three sections: Comedies, Histories and Tragedies.
- The plays were neither grouped chronologically nor dated; so, to assign a precise date to each play, the critics usually take three types of evidence into consideration: -internal references (to contemporary events); -external references (in works of other writer of the time); -literary evidence (style and characterization of the different plays).