Cymbeline and the Question of Genre

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Most of us can visualize the table of contents from the First Folio, with its list of "Comedies, Histories and Tragedies." What is most obvious about it are the clearly demarcated groupings, with thick black-lined boxes separating each genre. What is not so quickly apparent is the number of times the folio stands in contrast with the various quarto titles:

The True Tragedy of Richard Duke of York and the Good King Henry the Sixth (*3 Henry VI*)
The Tragedy of Richard III
The Tragedy of Richard II
The Comical History of the Merchant of Venice, or Otherwise Called the Jew of Venice
The History of King Lear

Cymbeline appears as the last of the tragedies. *The Tempest* is listed as the first of the comedies, with *The Winter's Tale* the last. *Pyrocles*, the last of the plays now grouped as "Romances," is not included at all. Perhaps the most controversial play in regards to genre, *Troilus and Cressida*, illustrates the "problem of genre": it is called a "tragedy" in the First Folio (but not without adding to the problem by the editors seemingly leaving a place for it among the Tragedies, only to move it to a makeshift position between Histories and Tragedies); the play is called a "comedy" in the 1609 quarto, which adds a prefatory epistle applauding the play for being a model comedy. Adding to the confusion is the original quarto title: *The Historie of Troylus and Cresseida*, a title used again in the Folio. In the case of *Troilus and Cressida,* the conditions and context of the earliest performances of the play could serve to define the play's genre: as Walter Cohen notes in his introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare,* a "coterie performance implies satire" while a "public stage, tragedy."[1]

What I hope to make obvious with these examples is that some plays "become" either a tragedy or a comedy in the course of being "textualized," i.e., edited and cataloged, starting with the First

Folio, but a play's performance and its reception by its original audience was not bound by essentialistic notions of "genre": "kinds" of literature, to use Rosalie Colie's terms, were not so much fixed categories as broad descriptors with often overlapping intentions and aesthetic demands. As Colie notes, the concept of genre was continuously discussed and debated throughout the Early Modern period: Sidney's "Defence of Poesie" is exemplary in its concern for proper generic distinctions; equally so, however, are the new literary forms, such as the novel, which begin to arise from older literary traditions and forms.

There are other examples. A traveler in London who saw what was presumably Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in 1599, reported he saw "the tragedy of the first Emperor Julius with at least fifteen characters very well acted. At the end of the comedy they danced according to their custom."[2] This is not as strange as it might sound since "comedy" was sometimes used for any narrative. Like *Trolius and Cressida*, a play entitled *A Tragedy of Apius and Virgine* was registered under that title in 1567-68, and later published in 1575 as *A New Tragicall Comedie of Apius and Virginia*.[3] All of these examples suggest that, in the words of Lawrence Danson, "Shakespeare's contemporaries had a healthy ability to live comfortably with the unruliness of a theater where genre was not static but moving and mixing, always producing new possibilities."[4]

Despite Harold Bloom's recent assertion that the late Shakespeare plays are "beyond genre,"[5] *Cymbeline* and the late romances do have "genres" (if for no other reason than because, as Derrida states, "there is no genreless text"[6]). Why? Because for Renaissance writers, genres were always present, but as descriptive and creative paradigms, not as prescriptive, editorial categories. Bloom, for example, complains that it cannot be clear that *Cymbeline* "behaves like a play: the plot is a chaos, and Shakespeare never bothers to be probable."[7] Later, Bloom notes that Shakespeare "overloads us with plot" and that the end of the play, with its complex plot twists and resolutions, is likely a parody.[8] The reason Bloom comes to these conclusions is that no essentialistic definition of Shakespeare's genres allows for the kind of complex narrative structure which categorizes *Cymbeline*. For these reasons, *Cymbeline* has undergone more debate surrounding its generic classification than any play besides *Trolius and Cressida*, and ultimately, what this debate suggests is that the distinctions between genres is not as fixed as some critics might think.

Polonius reveals the multiplicity of theatrical genres when Shakespeare has him list them: "The best actors in the world, either

for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral. . ." (3.3. 396-399). What is not often acknowledged is that despite Polonius' characteristic verbosity, all of these "genres" did have precedent on the Early Modern stage. In fact, Polonius' comments are closer to the truth of Renaissance genre theory than the Folio's table of contents. Sir Philip Sidney in "The Defence of Poesy" points to the problem of genre mixing: "Now in his [the poet's] parts, kinds, or species . . . it is to be noted that some poesies have coupled together two or three kinds, as the tragical and comical, whereupon is risen the tragicomical."[9] Also, some have coupled prose and verse and heroical and pastoral.[10] Later he points to the "gross absurdities"of plays which are "neither right tragedies, nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns."[11] Since Sidney did just that in his own *Arcadia*, one must assume that he felt such mingling was inappropriate on stage, but not in prose. It should also be noted that Sidney is criticizing comic tragedies, not romances, which is the true genre of his *Arcadia*. The fact that such mixing is acceptable in a prose work suggests that Sidney had two aesthetic standards: one for drama and one for prose fictions. Such a distinction, I would argue, still marks dramatic and Shakespearian criticism.

Cymbeline could be given any of Polonius' labels. Frank Kermode, in *Shakespeare's Language*, notes that the Folio of 1623 labels the play as a tragedy, but it is for him "really a tragicomic romance."[12] As he rightly notes, the roots of tragicomedy are Italian and were also closely associated with pastoral; in Polonius's words, the play would be for Kermode a tragic-comic-romantic pastoral. However, the only real "rule" of tragicomedy which he cites as relevant to the play is that Shakespeare brings characters "near to death but [does] not kill them." However, Shakespeare does kill Cloten, which Kermode admits problematizes a strict tragic- comic-romance distinction. To solve this dilemma, Kermode notes that for Shakespeare, a romance was "a history play with a romance plot mixed in."[13] Perhaps Polonius' "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral" is ultimately the most accurate.

Most often the play is labeled simply as a "tragic-comedy," a genre which Kermode rightly acknowledges has a long and distinguished tradition. I do not have the space to go into a comparison with other plays from the Renaissance which are also labeled "tragic comedies," but I would suggest that a comparison with, for example, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *The Changeling* will strongly suggest that simply labeling the play tragic-comic does

not do justice to it or the genre; *Cymbeline* lacks the self-conscious attempts at borrowing from the two genres which the genre demands. Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling*, for example, deliberately contrasts scenes of tragic tone with those of comic tone, maneuvering toward the final tragic conclusion. Likewise, Shakespeare and Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen* manipulates viewers and readers by refusing to settle into either a comic or tragic mode until the very end of the play.

According to James M. Nosworthy, the play is a "pseudo-historical" example of romance;[14] for Irving Ribner, it qualifies as an "historical romance," a kind of play for him "devoid of real historical concern" and responsible for the demise of the "legitimate" history play.[15] Robert Uphaus states that *Cymbeline* "wavers between tentative romance and pure parody."[16] The full title, *Cymbeline King of Britain*, clearly suggests a historical subject, but this title belongs to the 1623 Folio, the earliest published version of the play. Dr. Simon Forman, one of the play's most famous critics, refers to "the storri of Cymbalin king of England" after having attended a performance in 1610 or early 1611.[17]

Many of the problems which we face in understanding the genre of *Cymbeline* are a result of a common assumption that romance and tragic-comedy are the same thing. Even one of the play's best critics, J. M. Nosworthy, in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play, makes this mistake, noting that tragic-comedy must achieve a balance between tragedy and comedy by making certain that the tragedy is only a "potentiality" and that the end is sufficiently "optimistic." He further notes that *Cymbeline* "comes near to breaking down on both counts."[18] He also notes that at certain times the play breaks from a "Romantic norm," as it does with Posthumus' tirade against womanhood in Act 2, Scene 4. The play presents a dramatist "somewhat at odds with himself," as Granville-Barker notes of the play,[19] a conclusion Nosworthy comes to as well because he likewise assumes Shakespeare was trying to combine tragedy and comedy. It is true, as Nosworthy and Granville-Barker show, that Shakespeare has not achieved a proper balance between these two genres, but that is because he was not trying to do so. But as I suggest, romance is a distinct genre with its own "rules" and its own aesthetic demands, and that many of the faults which these and other critics find with the play are in fact vestiges of the romantic tradition.

It should first be noted that the label "romance" does not appear in Polonius' infamous, but I would add, nearly exhaustive list. The term "romance" was first used to describe a drama by the

Irish critic Edward Dowden over a century ago.[20] He used the term "romance" to characterize the "serenity" of Shakespeare's late plays over the tragedies which preceded them: "The dissonances are resolved into harmony; the spirit of the plays in one of large benignity; they tell of the blessedness of the forgiveness of injuries; they show how the broken bonds between heart and heart may be repaired and reunited; each play closes with a victory of love."[21] These idealized characteristics are not necessarily the same ones we use today when we think of the romances as a subtype of comedy. Today most critics are more inclined to think of the four plays as sharing certain thematic characteristics, such as "shipwreck, lost children, disguises, pastoral interludes, apparent death, and final reunion."[22] Also, all of the romances, with the exception of *The Tempest*, spread their stories over vast amounts of time, and even *The Tempest* expends an enormous amount of dramatic energy with exposition allowing it to play out in one twenty-four hour period. However, despite these characteristics of *Cymbeline*, *Pyrocles*, *Winter's Tale* and the *Tempest* (and, by some accounts, *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*), all of these themes are found throughout the comedies (and some tragedies), so we cannot rely solely on thematic characteristics.

During the Renaissance, the term "romance" carried a very precise and restricted meaning. Popular romances included Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Sidney's *Arcadia*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Also, since the middle ages, Arthurian romances remained very influential; perhaps the most popular was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The height of fashion for prose romances seems to have been 1589-90, the year Sidney's *Arcadia*, Greene's *Menaphon*, and Lodge's *Rosalynde*, were all published. The source of *As You like It* was also Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, yet few critics call the play a romance; despite that, *As You Like It* is worthy of discussion as a romance since it shares virtually all of the characteristics of prose "romances": love is the central subject, but the real motivating agent is that the love leads to hazardous quests and the love is put to abnormally strenuous tests. Also, all of these romances make use of coincidence and mistaken identity, both of which add to the complex narrative.[23] Ultimately, the problems are resolved and the complicated situations are concluded in a flurry of justice and conventional happy endings. Along the way there are often journeys, journeys which lead to even more exotic locations than the original setting. It should be added that all of these conventions can be found in the long romance tradition which leads back to the ancient Greeks.[24]

J. M. Nosworthy's contention that the play is an experiment, and ultimately a flawed one, is based upon a valuable observation: "Romance conventions and stage conventions did not go hand in hand, and dramatic representation of the impossible adventures of unreal people in promiscuous surroundings was a heavy undertaking."[25] Nosworthy goes on, however, to equate certain failures to Shakespeare, not the least of which is plot/story selection and the use of long soliloquies to forward the action. This complaint sounds a lot like Samuel Johnson's remark that *Trolius and Cressida* "subverts the rules which the practice of foregoing authors had established."[26] *Cymbeline*'s uniqueness is based on the fact that it was, to some extent, an experiment: prior to Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and Fletcher's *Philaster* (I will not attempt to argue which came first and therefore influenced the other; it is enough to note that they were close contemporaries of each other), romance was predominately a prose genre, with Spenser's *Faerie Queen* the exception which proves the rule. In writing dramatic romances, Shakespeare had to find a way to make the narrative complexities of the genre adaptable to the stage. In this sense, history plays serve as a good analogy; by the time Shakespeare began writing histories, they were a relatively new theatrical genre, yet, like romances, they were based largely upon prose sources. Also, like romances, history plays challenged Shakespeare to find new ways of dramatizing actions and characters which were not themselves inherently prone to dramatization. In so doing, Shakespeare often relied upon tragic conventions as well as comic.

Cymbeline is a perfect example of how these impulses influence and shape the drama of the first decade of the seventeenth century and why we don't really know what it is, generically speaking. In trying to define *Cymbeline* as a romantic play in the strictest sense of the word, we must focus not on the play's themes or seeming shortcomings, but on the narrative structure of the play. Doing so allows us to turn what for some are problems with the plays into virtues. For example, when Granville-Barker complains about the number of "frankly informative" soliloquies (which Nosworthy also finds "objectionable"), he is ignoring the narrative demands of the romantic genre. For a critic who sees the only purpose of soliloquies to be the "vehicle for the intimate thoughts and emotions of chief characters,"[27] certainly speeches such as Belarius' at 3.3.79-107, where he outlines the complex story about how he came to steal the two boys and raise them as his own, do seem problematic. Likewise, the final scene of the play, which seems to many as overly laborious, arises from the conventional necessity

of harmonizing labyrinthine plot complications; as Patricia Parker notes of romances, the question is not "What will happen?" or "Who done it?" but "When will they do it?"[28]

Deepening complication and resolution is the paradigmatic pattern of romances, and the pattern is essentially narrative. "*Cymbeline* weaves together three separate stories, drawn from separate sources, and creates a plot of such dizzying complexity that a concluding scene of 484 lines is devoted to resolving" ten different plot complications.[29] Shakespeare weaves together plots taken from such diverse sources as Boccaccio's *Decameron* (the narrative of Jachimo's trickery of Postumus, which constitutes the opening two acts), and *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* and *Clyomon and Clamydes*, two romances from the 1580's, which provide elements of both the stories of Imogen/Fidele and the discovery of Cloten's headless body.[30]

The real question to ask is, "Is *Cymbeline* a good romance, and if so, what does that mean?" But, as I have already noted, asking if a play is a good comedy or succeeds as a tragedy is putting the cart before the horse, since genres exist as "sets of loose similarities among artworks widely separated in their historical and cultural assumptions," not as unchanging essences.[31] As Alastair Fowler notes, we see the difficulty of hard and fast genre distinctions when we look closely at plays which are normally grouped together: for example, compare *Hamlet* to *Oedipus at Colonus*. They have few shared elements, yet each is commonly called a "tragedy."[32] Genre is, in Lawrence Danson's words, a "system in which each new member changes the system,"[33] creating new forms always changing and "reforming" themselves. A clear example of this would be the fact that at one time in literary history, the "novel" was itself a genre; now, there are epistolary, fantasy, science fiction, romance, and Oprah book club novels, to name just a few. As academics we should be aware of how new genres are created: for example, we are often fond of labeling certain plays "problem plays"—but we are (or should be aware) that is an academic and editorial nomination. As critics we outline and debate the "problem" plays, knowing perfectly well that whatever Shakespeare's motivations might have been in writing the plays, he did not set out to write a "problem" play any more than he set out to write a "minor play" or an "early" play, or any other editorial or critical nomination we may apply to his plays. I would argue that these terms represent critical constraints. As Tzvetan Todorov notes in *Genres in Discourse*, genres beget genres, and each new genre changes as new members are added to it.[34] Such is the case with those plays we label as

"romances": the old prose genres, which themselves coalesced around certain generic attributes, gave rise to dramatic romances, and Shakespeare was either the "creator" of the genre or an early popularizer of it.

Given this abundance of genres today, it is often hard for modern readers to appreciate the early modern anxiety and importance put upon questions of genre. This modern naivete is humourously illustrated in the way in which James Cameron described *Titanic*: it is "an epic romance set against an historical tragedy . . . My first goal is to create an overwhelming cathartic emotional experience for the audience . . . It's a true love story."[35] Despite the absurdity of the remark, Cameron does seem to conceptualize genre as something which provides rules or paradigms by which to create entertainment. As Alistair Fowler reminds us, after Polonius, "there are in a sense as many of them [genres] as we care to count; they are types, rather than fixed categories with border."[36] Tell that to the publishers of Shakespeare's Folio. What we need to remember is that genres "are institutional and mutable"[37]—not fixed. Inevitably, generic classifications are a by-product of textualization and editing. What is at work are competing literary standards and suppositions as to genre and decorum. These editorial decisions mirror the modern critical attempt at defining all early modern drama according to genre and using stereotypical notions of audience expectation to do so. However, in the Renaissance, genre theory both governed aesthetic choices and served to motivate writers to experimentation. *Cymbeline* is a fine example of this mutability: it contains not only comic-tragic elements (yet is not a tragic comedy), but also mixes in a bit of history as well, all against the backdrop of conventions inherited from the prose romances. What we see with *Cymbeline* is that the play was motivated by a variety of genres, one of which was the popular prose romance. What is worthy of further examination is the way in which Shakespeare's dramatic interests and the necessities of theater affected his use of this tradition.

Cymbeline is a romance, but not for the reasons we may think it is. This feat of rhetorical trickery is deliberate: the proper, early modern conception of "romance" is not so much a thematic definition as a structural one. The plays we have grown accustomed to seeing as generically similar are, in fact, as similar as *The Comedy of Errors* is to *All's Well that Ends Well*, or *Titus Andronicus* is to *Antony and Cleopatra*: the transparent genre similarities are broad, unstable, and ultimately an incentive, not restriction, to Shakespeare's dramatic intentions.

Notes

1. Walter Cohen, "Introduction to *Troilus and Cressida*," *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York: Norton, 1997), 1825.
2. Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10.
3. Danson, 10.
4. Danson, 11.
5. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 616.
6. Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 65.
7. Bloom, 616.
8. Bloom, 626.
9. Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defense of Poesy," in *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983).
10. Sidney, 127.
11. Sidney, 150.
12. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2000), 262.
13. Kermode, 262.
14. J. M. Nosworthy, "Introduction," in William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. J. M. Nosworthy (London: Routledge, 1969), xix.
15. Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 253.
16. Robert W. Uphaus, *Beyond Tragedy: Structure and Experience in Shakespeare's Romances* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1981), 50.
17. J. Clinton Crumley, "Questioning History in *Cymbeline*," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 41:2 (2001): 297-315.
18. Nosworthy, xxxi.
19. Quoted in Michael O'Connell, "The Experiment of Romance," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearian Comedy*, ed. Alexander Leggatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 215.
20. O'Connell, 215.
21. Quoted in O'Connell, 216.
22. Nosworthy, xlvii.
23. Nosworthy, xlvii.
24. Nosworthy, xlix.
25. Nosworthy, xlix.
26. Quoted in Danson, 7.
27. Nosworthy, xxxii.
28. Patricia Parker, "Romance," in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 611.
29. O'Connell, 222.
30. O'Connell, 223.
31. Danson, 4.
32. Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 39.
33. Danson, 5.
34. Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
35. Danson, 8.
36. Fowler, 249.
37. Fowler, 249.