

“ TRAGICAL-COMICAL-HISTORICAL-PASTORAL ”: ELIZABETHAN DRAMATIC NOMENCLATURE ¹

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OBVIOUSLY, the subject which I propose to discuss takes its cue from Polonius' famous catalogue when he introduces “ the best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral ”. It is equally obvious that this catalogue of plays is intended to be a joke, and it may well be thought that no profit possibly could derive from following the aged counsellor's meandering track and from seriously considering the names given to Elizabethan dramas.

Such a judgement of the choice of theme unquestionably appears to have validity, and as a consequence my first task must be to offer a defence of the topic in itself ; and, if the defence is to have any weight, it must be prefaced by some general considerations.

Among literary forms, the drama is peculiar in its nomenclature. For the most part, poems are presented to us without any distinguishing generic labels, and many novels—which are, of course, the nearest relatives of plays—are published merely with their own specific titles. Throughout the whole history of the theatre, on the other hand, there has been a steady trend towards the indication of dramatic categories, and this trend, even now when newer forms have been substituted for the old, has by no means lost its force ; tragedy, comedy, farce still retain their time-honoured significance. Apart from this salient fact, there is another. Within the realm of non-dramatic poetry, if and when generic descriptions are employed, these tend to refer rather to the external shape of the verse than to the attitude of the

¹ A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

poet towards his subject-matter. No doubt we can speak of an "epic" approach or spirit; no doubt a "dirge" can be nothing save a song of lament; but most of these terms, such as "sonnet", are concerned with the outward lineaments rather than with the inner qualities. A sonnet is a poem of fourteen decasyllabic lines riming in one of half-a-dozen established ways; any particular sonnet may be light or monumental, serious or gay, a song of praise or a song of grief. We recognize a sonnet by its structural shape, not by its particular tone.

Something else reveals itself when we turn to prose fiction. Here the generic terms generally apply to the nature of the subject-matter rather than to the manner in which this subject-matter is dealt with. We speak familiarly of an historical, a domestic, a detective novel, indicating that the first deals with life in a past age, the second with ordinary situations and characters, the third with crime and its exposure. No attempt is made here to suggest the attitudes of the authors towards their themes; the terms employed remain bound and restricted by the nature of the contents of the works themselves.

Most of the terms applied to drama are of a completely different kind. True, we find in the Elizabethan period such a description as "history", which does not in any respect point to the approach which has been taken towards the historical material itself; and in the modern period "detective play" parallels the "detective story" of prose fiction. Usually, however, the theatrical terminology possesses an import of its own. From ancient Athens down to the present day, "tragedy" and "comedy" enshrine meanings which have little or nothing to do either with the outward forms of the works included in these categories or with the nature of their subject-matter. During the Renaissance, numerous critics, following the lines laid down by earlier grammarians, sought to define these two terms by insisting that tragedy dealt with royal courts and comedy with humbler characters, that the one group of plays was concerned with a movement from confusion to happy solution and the other from good fortune to dismal disaster. We, however, recognize that such an interpretation is false. No doubt the greater tragedies have introduced princes as their heroes and the comedies most

familiar to us have delighted in characters of less exalted position. Certainly comedy leads to a happy ending and tragedy closes with death. But essentially the quality of a tragedy rests in its author's metaphysical attitude towards the universe, and comedy expresses a mood less exalted and more social, under which its characters and situations are viewed. There are comedies with princely persons and tragedies of humble life.

All of this is, of course, so well-known as to require no elaboration. What assumes importance here is the fact that terms of these kinds should seem so appropriate to the theatre. It is not merely that ancient classical terms have been carried on traditionally through the ages; even when generic names unthought of by the Greeks find their way onto the stage they are generally either expressive of an attitude or, if originally they sprang from another source, are modified in time so that they come to express an attitude. One example will serve. When the word "melodrama" crept into the English theatre about the beginning of the nineteenth century, it meant simply a play with music, and in particular it designated a play in three acts, with some kind of instrumental accompaniment and with a number of songs. In so far, the term was conditioned by external form alone. Soon, however, it assumed another significance established upon an utterly different foundation. When we speak of "melodrama" today there is absolutely no thought of musical accompaniment in our minds or of any external shape. A melodramatic speech, character or situation is one in which the author or the actor has taken a special attitude towards the subject-matter of his choice—and thus the designation has come to have an inner meaning of the same sort as those associated with "comedy" and "tragedy".

For this peculiar quality inherent in so many dramatic terms an explanation can readily be found. The drama, because of the conditions of its art, ideally demands a clarity, perhaps even a conventionality, of approach. In our own times, realism has descended drearily upon the playhouse, but realism is essentially alien to the true spirit of the stage. What we get from the greatest plays is not a photographic, phonographic record of ordinary life, but an image of ordinary life viewed, as it were, through some magical glass interposed by the playwright

between ourselves and the so-called real world—a glass which may be dark and sombre, or light-coloured and gay, relatively plain or so polished and curved as to contort what is seen through it. Thus all great plays, whatever variety may be introduced into their scenes, exhibit a vigorously controlled consistency. Within the extended scope of a long novel we do not necessarily demand consistency of quite the same kind ; but in the theatre's two hours' traffic, if a play is to make a deep imaginative appeal, consistency in approach becomes essential. *Twelfth Night* will always give joy to its audiences because the one magical glass remains steady between us and the characters from our first glimpse of them in the Duke's affectedly melancholic court on to the Clown's exquisite final song with its haunting refrain of " hey, ho, the wind and the rain ". *All's Well that Ends Well* will never appeal in the same way. It has some interesting characters ; its poetic melodies are often delicate, sometimes profound ; hardly any of Shakespeare's plays is more skilfully constructed : but it has the one basic fault—the approach lacks surety and we move from scene to scene, now with one glass colouring its persons, now with another. The stage-history of *Twelfth Night* is long and distinguished ; *All's Well* has never been a favourite and even the most fervent Shakespearians acknowledge its weakness.

Here, then, seems to be the explanation for the continued employment in the theatre of a limited number of generic terms, corresponding to a limited number of approaches. In effect, Shakespeare, who may never have known more of Sophocles than his mere name, has viewed his characters in *Hamlet* in the same light as that which illumined for his Athenian predecessor the characters in *Ædipus*. At the same time, when we survey the history of the stage, we realize that two almost contradictory forces here have ever been at work. From start to finish fundamental approaches such as " tragedy " and " comedy " have held sway ; but, quite understandably, both audiences and playwrights have been at times impelled by the desire for novelty, while changing social conditions and altering philosophies have imposed fresh demands. Thus, alongside what we may call the standard forms, new forms have taken shape. Some of these consist in no more than an attempt to discover formulas for

combining in single plays diverse elements characteristic of the standard forms. Of such combinations "tragicomedy" may be taken as a prime example. Plautus will take the heroic persons associated with tragedy and in *Amphitryon* present them comically; Shakespeare, more daringly, will seek to impose between audience and characters a glass of a new colour which may embrace and render delightful both laughter and death in *The Winter's Tale*. And, as these new forms develop, new generic names tend to be invented for them: tragicomedy clearly is but the earliest in a lengthy range, varying as age succeeded age. If we were to look simply at the designations used for dramas in the English theatre from the sixteenth century on to our own times, we should be able to form by no means an erroneous picture of the historical development of our stage, and, were we confronted by some such designations without having their dates attached, we should not go far astray if we were to attempt to assign them to their proper periods. The terms which flood in upon us—farce, ballad opera, burletta, comedietta, extravaganza, even "operatic, romantic, magical, semi-burlesque, terpsichorean burletta"—which beats Polonius hollow—all have intimate things to tell us concerning the playhouse of the past.

This clearly leads us back to Polonius' catalogue. My own first interest in this catalogue originated from a desire to determine whether here—as in the related passage concerning the boy players—Shakespeare was being strictly topical. Was he actually referring to terms already used by his fellow-playwrights, or was he, for the sake of a jest, permitting his imagination to range? If this was the start of the enquiry, however, I soon realized that to explore this topic thoroughly demanded the putting of many other questions, one so leading into another that what seemed at first a query capable of almost immediate answer became so complex that it would truly demand the scope of a whole book were it to be dealt with adequately. On this occasion, I can do no more than select a few matters of interest, designed to illustrate the varied kinds of enquiries involved in the investigation of the theme as a whole.

The original simple question can in part be easily answered, even though the answer itself must assume a more complicated form than the query from which it springs. First, it may be said with assurance that for one term at least, the lengthy "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral", there is no known basis in actuality. At the same time, we must remember both that of the thousands of plays presented between 1500 and 1640 only a sorry remnant has come down to us, and that, if Shakespeare invented this combination, he did so on a fairly sure foundation. A second observation is that Polonius did not make use of all he might have included: "play" is not here, or "moral", or "interlude", or "chronicle": there is no mention of "tragicomic". Thirdly, a strange fact emerges: in a list which clearly has ironic implication, it is, ironically, somewhat surprising to discover that one of Polonius' terms, "tragical-historical", was apparently introduced for the first time to describe the very drama in which this character plays his part. *Hamlet* was printed both in 1603 and in 1604 as *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*, and no earlier dramatic work known to us had used that appellation.

Was Shakespeare responsible? True, the play of *Hamlet* had been entered before publication in the Stationers' Register as "The Revenge of Hamlet", and it might be thought that this was the drama's original designation. Yet it is difficult to believe that the publisher of the bad quarto of 1603 invented the heading of "tragical history", which, in any case, was retained in the good quarto of 1604. More probably, the employment of "tragical history" had been taken over into the printed title-page from the description given to the play by the actors themselves, and, if so, we may indeed have reason for supposing that it was inspired by the author. We must, certainly, take into account that a few months later Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* was printed as *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus*, but it seems most probable that this form of wording resulted merely from a copying of that used for the recently popular *Hamlet*. While, of course, we have always to bear in mind that much of the evidence relating to Elizabethan drama has been lost, we have good reason to presume that the same hand and mind invented "tragical history" as a generic term and jokingly introduced "tragical-historical" into Polonius' catalogue.

A whole series of related queries thus emerge ; and, whatever our conclusion concerning the persons—authors or printers—responsible for the descriptive terms, obviously an examination of these terms will serve to cast light on the way contemporaries regarded the works in question by revealing what they felt to be implied in the employment both of such ancient basic designations as “tragedy” and “comedy” and of such more recently coined descriptions as “tragical history”. Furthermore, we begin to realize that a scrutiny of title-pages, which provide the basic material for the enquiry, will bring us other material of interest ranging considerably beyond the original object of our search.

First of all, a brief glance may be cast on one or two relevant matters concerned with pre-Shakespearian drama. What was the earliest play to be published in London we cannot tell, but at least we can be assured that *Everyman* and *Fulgens and Lucrece*, printed about 1515, were among the very first. Each of these calls attention to interesting aspects of the general question.

Everyman appears as a “moral play”. Although nowadays we speak familiarly of the morals and moralities we must remember that in the whole run of drama up to 1642 only one other piece, *The pleasant and stately morall of the Three Lordes and Three Ladies of London* (1590), utilizes this term. Our common employment of the word “morality” finds practically no reflection in contemporary sources and seems to have crept into critical parlance only during the eighteenth century. Occasionally we encounter the term “moral” outside of printed texts, as in Dekker’s “the old Moralls at Maningtree”, but so infrequently as to convince us that it did not form part of current stage speech.

In *Everyman*, however, “moral” is combined with “play”, and here we encounter a series of facts of undoubted interest. “Play” of course, is one of the oldest English names for a theatrical performance or a dramatic composition and it has so continued on to modern times. In view of this, it is somewhat surprising to discover that, during the period with which we are at the moment concerned, 1500 to the eighties of the century, its use on title-pages is excessively rare. Apart from a “newe playe for to be played in Maye games” which is attached to *A mery geste of Robyn Hoode* (1560), it appears on the title-pages of

only five printed dramas—*A mery play betwene Johan Johan the husbande Tyb his wyfe & syr Jhān the preest* (?1533), *A mery playe betwene the pardoner and the frere* (1533), *The play of the wether* (1533), *A play of loue* (1534) and *The playe called the foure PP* (?1544). The first four of these were printed by William Rastell, and of course it is possible that he was responsible for the run in the use of the word “play”; but if, as seems probable, he also published *Nature* (c. 1530-4), he described that work by the much commoner term “interlude”, and, unless the 1544 edition was a reprinting from a now lost original, it was another printer, William Middleton, from whom came the use of “play” for *The Four PP*. All five dramas are stylistically alike, and one may well conjecture that the choice of the descriptive word points to common authorship. In a sense, we have here, in the use of the descriptive term “play”, still another pointer towards the assumption that one dramatist, John Heywood, was responsible for all of them. And, if so, there is the suggestion that perhaps for some Elizabethan dramas at least the generic terms emanated not from the printing-house but from the dramatist’s study.

In view of the unique application of the word “play” to these five dramas, it is rather ironic that Collier should have tried to apply to them specifically the term “interlude”, and that ever since Collier’s time this quintet has been commonly called “Heywood’s interludes”.

The word “interlude” itself was employed in the second among the earliest plays printed in England—*Fulgens and Lucrece*, which appeared as “a godely interlude”—to be interpreted as “goodly” rather than as “godly”. Thus is introduced to the library a theatrical definition of more than common interest, one which deserves some attention. Whence it came we cannot tell. Towards the beginning of the fourteenth century we have an *Interludium de clerico et puella*, a reference to “enterludez” in the poem *Sir Gawayn* and an allusion to “entyrludes”, associated with “somer games” in a treatise by Robert Manning of Brunne; but a puzzling fact is that, despite the fact that in form it suggests a French source, it remained, both then and later, a word known only in England. Despite unquestioned

associations between the French drama and the English during these years, not a trace of it can be found on the other side of the Channel.

Obviously it is made up from a combination of *ludus*, "a play", and *inter*, "between", but exactly what this combination signified remains still a matter of debate. Into the debate itself we have no time to enter now, although one or two comments may be made.

Unfortunately, the excellent *Oxford English Dictionary* here lets us down badly when it rather strangely defines the word as "a dramatic or mimic representation, usually of a light or humorous character, such as was commonly introduced between the acts of the long mystery-plays or moralities". Even although this explanation has been discredited, the general authority of the *Dictionary* is so great as to demand a declaration that for such interpretation there exists hardly any real evidence. The solitary record of anything approaching any practice of this kind in the medieval drama is the appearance in the midst of a French miracle-play, *La vie monseigneur saint Fiacre*, of a stage-direction, "Cy est interposé une Farse", followed by a comic knock-about dramatic sketch running to 278 verses. It might, of course, be argued (i) that the French word "farce" is regularly used to describe plays which in England are called "interludes", (ii) that this French word bears the primal sense of something added to a main dish, and (iii) that this example proves that short dramatic pieces could be added to, or incorporated into, longer theatrical works. But it indeed seems hazardous to base any general conclusions on a single instance and positively dangerous to imply English practice from this one French example. The only other slight pointer in the same direction is the fact that, when George Bannatyne made a transcript of *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis* in 1552, he selected only the "Interludis": "I omittit", he says, the "principall Mater and writtin only Sertane mirry Interludis thair of".

In approaching the term, perhaps we will do best to distinguish between an original significance and the significance which later came to be attached to it. So far as the first is concerned, E. K. Chambers may be right in assuming that its first sense was

of a play between characters ; if so, Heywood's *Play between the Pardoner and the Friar* would give an exact translation of the word. On the other hand, all the evidence seems to point to the conclusion that in the sixteenth century the word was applied, specifically, to plays given by the then small bands of professional entertainers, in the midst of banquets and entertainments, particularly those of Christmas-tide. Thus, "interludes" formed just such a mixed bag of scripts as those carried round by the actors who are introduced into the play of *Sir Thomas More* and are invited by More himself to present a brief playlet in the midst of a banquet. There is no time now to enter into the available evidence as a whole, but attention may be drawn to the peculiar significance of an early sixteenth-century lawsuit involving John Rastell and his stage costumes. The significant fact in this lawsuit is that for the loan of these costumes for "stage-plays" in summer the receipts were "sumtyme x^ld., sometyme ij^s.", while for the loan of the same costumes for "interludes" in winter the receipts were eightpence "every tyme". The variation in the amounts received at the former and the fixed sum at the latter clearly is best explained by presuming (1) that the costumes were paid for by a proportion of the actors' total takings, and (2) that stage plays were those given before a general public (hence with varying total receipts) while interludes were those presented by command at noble mansions (and hence with an established fixed fee). At this period, the actors would have been most unlikely to have had two completely different repertoires ; hence "stage-plays" and "interludes" may be equated, and the latter may thus be defined as "dramatic pieces suited for professional performance at festivities in noble-men's mansions".

It may, of course, be freely admitted that at times "interlude", like the word "ludus" itself, might bear merely the significance of "game" or "sport". It may also be admitted that at other times it was applied in a general sense to any kind of dramatic entertainment. Other theatrical terms follow such a pattern ; "comedy" is something specific, but in several continental countries it still may legitimately be used to refer even to a tragedy ; when we speak of a "drama" we may mean simply

a play or we may be thinking of a special kind of play. Thus, any general use of "interlude" is by no means exceptional, nor does it take away from the special professional connotation.

Interpreting the term in this way, we understand why, when the learned John Bale sought by dramatic means to popularize his religious and moral concepts, although he called his *Chief Promises of God* by the academic term "tragedye", he was careful to add to this the familiar professional word "interlude", and similarly he associated "interlude" with "comedy" in his *Temptation of Our Lord and Father Jesus Christ*.¹

Now, we may turn to something which I at least find fascinating and perhaps rather startling. This we may approach by observing that out of some sixty-four plays printed up to 1576 well over half bear the designation "interlude". When we proceed beyond 1576 we find that not a single play was so described by its publisher. The fact is there, firm, incontrovertible, and an explanation is demanded. For myself, I cannot believe that this fact is not related to another—the establishment of the first permanent English playhouse, "The Theatre", in 1576. In surveying the history of the stage in general it has always seemed to me that close connections can be found between upward surges of dramatic productivity and new theatre forms; and, if the conjecture here is justified, we have in 1576 perhaps the most notable example of such a development. Suddenly, by 1576, the actors find that no longer have they to rely upon occasional performances in noblemen's mansions as the most important source of their incomes; no longer are the companies restricted to three men and a boy; the stage's orientation is turned to a growing general public; new forms of plays are introduced—and the term "interlude" vanishes from the technical vocabulary. The clerk of the Stationers' Company for some years sporadically continues to use the word in the sense of "dramatic piece", but this, it appears, is due merely to established habit and ancient custom; the actors and dramatists retain its use only to describe crude, short pieces in a style outworn, things associated with coarse and exaggerated methods of

¹ It may, however, be noted that when Bale's *Three Laws* was printed about 1547 it was described simply as a "comedy"; when the play was reprinted in 1562, it appeared as a "comedy or interlude."

interpretation. The "Pyramus and Thisbe" playlet is thus properly an "interlude", both because it was intended for presentation in the midst of wedding festivities and because the amateur actors were absurdly aping the crude style of an earlier generation of professionals. And when in *King Lear* Goneril ejaculates "An interlude!" she clearly means that what has just been said is like a "stagey" speech from an out-of-fashion play.

Much more might be said concerning the employment of this word, but at the moment all that may be done is to underline the fact that the simple enquiry originated by a consideration of Polonius' lines has led us to see the erection of "The Theatre" in 1576 not merely as just one other milestone in the progress of the English stage, but as a mighty landmark. Possibly no more surprising example than this can be found of the influence of the playhouse upon dramatic forms.

Discussion of "interlude" had thus demonstrated one aspect of interest and value in the exploration of the generic descriptions attached to plays during the Elizabethan period. "Tragical history" suggested another aspect, while the use of "play" in connection with Heywood's writings propounded a third.

Within the sixty-odd years from 1515 to 1576 divers other terms slowly developed, and much can be learned from tracing the employment of such words as, for instance, "comedy" and "tragedy" and in noting their variations in meaning, until towards the close of the century they become established as part of the theatre's technical vocabulary. Both "tragedy" and "comedy" start, quite naturally, out of a classical environment; they belong to the ancient world of Seneca and Terence. Then the word "comedy", with memories of its medieval sense, is extended to describe works in which the stories are brought to fortunate conclusions, or else is drawn into the circle of "interlude" and so used to mean simply "any piece of writing suitable for theatrical performance". Only gradually does it come to designate a play designed to arouse merriment and laughter. Indeed such a sense was not formally attached to it until the seventies of the century when some publishers demonstrated

in their title-pages that they could count on a new awareness of its meaning among the reading public. *The Tide Tarrieth No Man* can be announced as "a moste pleasant and merry commody, right pythie and full of delight"; *Common Conditions* as "an excellent and pleasant comedie", *Gammer Gurton's Needle* as "a ryght pithy, pleasaunt and merie comedie". For readers and spectators of the sixties and seventies "pleasant, merry, pithy, full of delight" were the qualities associated with the newly revived dramatic term. Within a few years, however, after the establishment of "The Theatre" in 1576, we can see the term "comedy" taking on fresh connotations. While it still continues to be employed at times simply in the sense of "a dramatic work", its specific application to a special category of drama becomes more formalized, and an emphasis begins to be laid, not upon mere merriment, but, as *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1589) expresses it, upon the "manye fine Conceites with great delight" introduced into its action and dialogue. Perhaps note ought to be taken here of a new descriptive epithet which comes into fashion at this time, the word "excellent". In its use we receive the impression that in men's minds there was an association between it and the presence of "conceits"; and, although the evidence is not sufficient to warrant a definite conclusion, we may sense an awareness of a connection between these new adjectives and a new style in drama. If we may judge from the running titles, "excellent" was added to the title-page of *Alexander, Campaspe and Diogenes*; at first *The Three Ladies of London*, printed in 1584 as "right excellent", was merely "pithie and pleasaunt"; while "excellently discoursed" and "fine conceited" were added to the title-page of *Fedele and Fortunio*.

"Tragedy" was rather slower in reaching a similar established position. Only eleven examples of its use are to be traced in title-pages before 1576, and of these, seven appear in translations of Seneca's dramas. Nor are any defining epithets attached to the word with the single exception, in 1569, of "lamentable" in the title-page of *Cambyses*—which is, however, "a lamentable tragedy mixed ful of pleasant mirth", reminding us that we are on the threshold of that "tragical comedy" which brings us well

within the sphere of Polonius' compound categories. After 1576 the word "tragedy" begins to be employed more frequently and the "lamentable" of *Cambyses* tends most commonly to be associated with the adjective "true". In combination, tragedy "lamentable and true" assumes a definite meaning both for audiences and for authors, the stress being laid on dismal events, generally but by no means always affecting prominent individuals, which had or were thought to have a basis in reality. What appears to possess even greater significance is the fact that for men at the close of the sixteenth century this word "tragedy" was firmly and almost exclusively connected with death by murder. A recent study attempts to argue that the core of Elizabethan tragedy lies in the theme of ambition, leading to dramatic essays in the concept of power, but this theme seems to be rather incidental than central for the playwrights and their audiences. Another recent study comes nearer to the truth. Analysing Shakespeare's usage of the words "tragedy" and "tragical", J. V. Cunningham asserts that

The tragic fact is death. Even the most natural death has in it a radical violence, for it is a transition from this life to something by definition quite otherwise; and, however much it may be expected, it is in its moment of incidence sudden, for it comes as a thief in the night, you know not the day nor the hour. Hence the characteristics of suddenness and violence which are attached to death in tragedy may be viewed as only artistic heightenings of the essential character of death.

This certainly comes nearer to the truth, yet it is not the whole truth for the Elizabethans. No doubt the dramatists of this time, when they turned to tragedy, were intent on the contrast between life and death, and no doubt all death, as has been said, bears within it "a radical violence". At the same time, an examination of the employment of these words "tragedy" and "tragical" demonstrates without a shadow of doubt that men thought of them almost exclusively in terms of murder. In *Jack Drum's Entertainment* Pasquil uses "tragedy" for the murder he is about to commit; "Arden's Tragedy" in *Arden of Feversham* means his death by a criminal hand; "Thy tragedie" in *The Spanish Tragedy* signifies "thy death by violence". In the induction to *A Warning for Fair Women*, Tragedy is "Murthers Beadle". The prologue to *The Devil's Charter* (1607) sums it all up:

Our subject is of bloud and Tragedie,
Murther, foule Incest, and Hypocrisie.

Dozens of examples could be adduced to show that it was the manner of death and not simply death itself which occupied men's minds when they thought of this term ; and the more murders there were in a play the more intense a tragedy it became. In the first part of Thomas Heywood's *The Iron Age* a stage-direction informs us that

They are all slaine at once,

whereupon one of the survivors comments—

Why, so, so, this was stately tragicall.

Amid all of this, one play stands out alone, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Neither of the two principal characters is slain by another, and in the course of the action murder does not play even a subsidiary role. Mercutio is killed in fight with Tybalt, and Tybalt in fight with Romeo. This fact immediately assumes particular significance when we find that the description on the title-page is unique. *Romeo and Juliet* is not a lamentable and true tragedy : it is " An Excellent conceited Tragedie "—and the second of these adjectives had by that time become specifically part of comedy's sphere. Apparently either Shakespeare or his publisher felt that an attempt was being made in this play to do something different from what others had done. In penning his " excellent " and " conceited " play, therefore, Shakespeare can be seen engaged in trying a double experiment—basing his tragedy on romance material instead of on historical events, and avoiding the familiar use of murder—thus breaking away from his companions to explore hitherto untried ground. And the title-page indicates that he or his companions, probably both, fully realized the innovating quality of his experiment.

The reference to historical events naturally leads to a consideration of the new generic term, " history "—a term under which a third of Shakespeare's plays were printed in the First Folio, but which crept with very tentative steps into the theatrical world. In 1567 appeared *Horestes*, " a newe Enterlude of Vice Conteyninge, the Historye of Horestes ": the following year *Jacob and Esau* was printed as " a newe mery and wittie Comedie

or Enterlude . . . treating upon the Historie of Jacob and Esau "; *Common Conditions* came in 1576 as a comedy " drawne out of the most famous historie of Galiarbus Duke of Arabia ". In none of these is " history " used as a generic theatrical term, and we might think that for all three the word was being employed to suggest, not the manner of treatment, but the truth of the actions displayed on the stage. Elizabethans might well take Orestes as an historical figure ; the truth of the Biblical narratives was unquestioned ; and the events of *Common Conditions* were taken from a " famous history ". At the same time, we receive another impression, that there is here a kind of vague groping after some word which would convey the idea of " tale " or " narrative " ; and that this impression has validity seems indicated by a further development in the employment of the term during the nineties. The first play to have " history " attached to it on the title-page was *The Taming of a Shrew* in 1594, where it was described as " pleasant conceited " ; during the same year *Friar Bacon* was issued as an " Honorable Historie " and " history " was the word used to designate *Orlando Furioso*. Certainly none of these could be taken to be anything save tales or narratives ; " history " here means simply " story ". So, too, *Clyomon and Clamydes* and *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* were both " histories " in 1599, while it is noticeable that *James IV*, described as a " Scottish Historie " in the quarto of 1598, was entered four years earlier in 1594 as " the Scottishe story " and that *Alphonsus*, full of slaughters, was called a " Comicall Historie ", evidently in the sense of " a story told, theatrically, in the form of a play ". Precisely the same compound term, " comicall Historie ", was employed the following year for *The Merchant of Venice*. The descriptive words on the title-page : " With the extreame crueltie of Shylocke the Iewe towards the sayd Merchant, in cutting a iust pound of his flesh : and the obtayning of Portia by the choyse of three chests "—are designed to stress the romantic nature of the theme, and we must suppose, once again, that the term " comicall Historie " is to be interpreted in the sense of " dramatic narrative ", with, perhaps, faint overtones suggestive of a fortunate conclusion. At any rate, Greene, who seems to have been the innovator in

the employment of the compound term, refers in his novel *Perymedes* to "comicall historie" as a story with a happy ending.

Much more important, however, was a further development in the use of the word "history", a development which came just about the same time. In 1598 *Henry IV* was issued as a "History" and it is essential to observe that no other history-play published up to this time had been given such a title. Dramas which dealt with the careers of earlier English monarchs had been styled tragedies, troublesome reigns and lives and deaths. In so far as published plays are concerned, Shakespeare was definitely the innovator here, and it was he who in 1600 first established the term "chronicle history" for *Henry V*, combining Peele's "chronicle" with his own new use of "history". Since *Henry IV* inaugurated the employment of "history" as a theatrical designation and since the play of *Sir John Oldcastle* was confessedly written in opposition to it, for the purpose of presenting a more favourable portrait of Oldcastle-Falstaff, we need feel no surprise at finding Shakespeare's innovation caught up and ironically emphasized in this drama's generic description as a "true and honorable historie". Nor need surprise be felt when, in *Thomas Lord Cromwell*, the new and the old are combined in one comprehensive *True Chronicle Historie of the whole life and death of Thomas Lord Cromwell*.

After the term "history" had thus been given a specifically theatrical connotation, the use of the word in the more general sense of "story" naturally declined, and perhaps a sign of this is shown, in 1602, when Marston's *Antonio and Mellida* was printed. On the title-page appears *The History of Antonio and Mellida*, but the half-title styles it "The Play called Antonio and Mellida"—and that reminds us of the fact that, since the run on the designation "play" in Heywood's five works published three-quarters of a century earlier, this word had not been used for any dramatic writing save the unprofessional *Robin Hood* of 1560. We receive the impression here that Marston, after describing his drama as a "history" in the wider sense, has turned to the word "play" in an endeavour to suggest "a dramatic narrative of a kind for which there exists no narrowly

defining term ". If so, he is pointing the way forwards to the prologue of Fletcher's *The Woman-hater*: "I dare not call it Comedy, or Tragedy", declares the author, "'tis perfectly neither: A Play it is".

Whether Marston had this in mind or not, certainly "history" and "chronicle history" became established by Shakespeare's example as strictly theatrical terms. *Captain Thomas Stukeley* and *Sir Thomas Wyatt* are "famous histories"; *When you see me, you know me*, dealing with Henry VIII, *King Leir and his Three Daughters*, *Nobody and Somebody*, dealing with the ancient Elidure, and Shakespeare's own *King Lear* are all "chronicle histories".

What, then, is our conclusion? Shakespeare clearly put the catalogue of plays into Polonius' mouth as a joke; yet often we may suspect that Shakespeare's jokes were directed at least partly towards himself. He, it seems, was responsible for establishing "history" as a generic term, and it looks as though Polonius' "tragical-historical" was indeed first used for the world's most famous play—*The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet*.