

ANGLO-ITALIAN RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Shakespeare's Poetics

Aristotle and Anglo-Italian
Renaissance Genres

Sarah Dewar-Watson



Shakespeare's Poetics

The startling central idea behind this study is that the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the sixteenth century ultimately had a profound impact on almost every aspect of Shakespeare's late plays, their sources, subject matter and thematic concerns. *Shakespeare's Poetics* reveals the generic complexity of Shakespeare's late plays to be informed by contemporary debates about the tonal and structural composition of tragicomedy. Author Sarah Dewar-Watson re-examines such plays as *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles* and *The Tempest* in light of the important work of reception which was undertaken in Italy by pioneering theorists such as Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio (1504–73) and Giambattista Guarini (1538–1612). The author demonstrates ways in which these theoretical developments filtered from their intellectual base in Italy to the playhouses of early modern England via the work of dramatists such as Jonson and Fletcher. Dewar-Watson argues that the effect of this widespread revaluation of genre not only extends as far as Shakespeare, but that he takes a leading role in developing its possibilities on the English stage. In the course of pursuing this topic, Dewar-Watson also engages with several areas of current scholarly debate: the nature of Shakespeare's authorship; recent interest in and work on Shakespeare's later plays; and new critical work on Italian language-learning in Renaissance England. Finally, *Shakespeare's Poetics* develops current critical thinking about the place of Greek literature in Renaissance England, particularly in relation to Shakespeare.

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Shakespeare's Poetics

Aristotle and Anglo-Italian Renaissance
Genres

Sarah Dewar-Watson



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For Martha, Tilly and William

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Introduction

This book argues that Shakespeare has an evolving aesthetic self-consciousness which culminates in the plays he writes – both as a sole author and collaboratively with Fletcher – after 1608. Noting that tragedy and comedy exist in a dynamic relationship in Shakespeare's plays, Susan Snyder argues that he uses tragedy and comedy 'first as polar opposites, later as two sides of the same coin, and finally as two elements in a single compound'.¹ While Snyder does not situate Shakespeare's evolving conception of genre in the context of his engagement with contemporary dramatic theory, I argue that Shakespeare's interest in generic experimentation in the final phase of his career is supported by new encounters with dramatic theory, chiefly through the work of the Italian critics Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio (1504–73) and Giambattista Guarini (1538–1612). Both Cinthio and Guarini were involved, in very different ways, in pioneering attempts to theorise tragicomedy in the light of the rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The *Poetics* engendered a new emphasis on the ideas of tragic pleasure and *catharsis* as the teleological goal of tragedy and together with Aristotle's discussion of happy-ending tragedy (*Poetics* 1453^a30–9), this radically disrupted the traditional view that tragedy entails a structural progression towards death and disaster.² Critics began to register a new sense that the relationship between tragedy and comedy involved much more ambiguity and overlap than had previously been supposed. Far from confirming an established orthodoxy, the *Poetics* opened up a new and wide-ranging theoretical discourse about dramatic genre, in particular, concerning the structure and tonal composition of tragicomedy. In this book, I argue that Shakespeare's late plays consciously explore and respond to the fractures that are emerging in traditional conceptions of genre, and I attempt to relocate the plays in relation to the theoretical culture of their time.

What does it mean to see Shakespeare as a 'theorist'? There has long been a latent resistance to the idea that Shakespeare's plays are informed by any kind of theoretical knowledge or sensibility. While we readily legitimise psychoanalytic, Marxist, new historicist or postcolonial readings of Shakespeare, for instance, it is regarded as rather fanciful to think about the kind of encounters with contemporary dramatic

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theory which the plays themselves might reveal. As Terry Eagleton has mischievously remarked, 'Though conclusive evidence is hard to come by, it is difficult to read Shakespeare without feeling that he was almost certainly familiar with the writings of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein and Derrida'.³ And here is the paradox. On the one hand, we are ready to explore these kind of intellectual transactions between Shakespeare and some of the great thinkers of modernity; but on the other, we are strangely reluctant to acknowledge any relationship between Shakespeare and the theorists who shaped the very culture in which he worked. One influential and highly-regarded collection of essays entitled *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* further exemplifies the fundamental premise: the conjunction of the title's key terms invites us to think in terms of our theory, not his.⁴

Similarly, the very title of David Scott Kastan's book, *Shakespeare After Theory*, quietly endorses the notion of a linear chronology in which theory – at least, the kind of theory that really matters – postdates Shakespeare by several centuries. Kastan characterises the transformation of theory in the 1960s, 'from a minor and arcane subspeciality into a compelling, if not completely coherent, subject in its own right' as a defining moment in its history.⁵ This is to imply that 'theory' is a recent arrival on the critical scene, the property of the modern era – as if it participated in that sudden cultural genesis, 'Between the end of the Chatterley ban/And the Beatles' first LP'.⁶ This is not to say that attention to Renaissance criticism should displace, supercede or otherwise devalue the work of modern theorists. But our focus on the fruits of twentieth-century theory has somehow obscured for us the fact that Shakespeare was writing in a theoretical Golden Age of his own. We need to relinquish the idea that theory is something which we retrospectively apply to the plays and instead consider what kind of theoretical ideas they embody and express.

Thus, although Shakespeare was involved in London theatre for a period which spanned two decades – as actor, playwright, shareholder and audience member – we are to believe that the controversies which so exercised his friends and rivals, bypassed him altogether.⁷ The yardstick so often used here – either explicitly or implicitly – is Ben Jonson (1572–1637) whose theoretical pronouncements are ubiquitous, and whose critical stance is confidently projected throughout the whole body of his work. Jonson's commendatory poem, *To the Memory of my Beloved, The Author*, is, in many ways, an object lesson in condescension.⁸ It is here that Jonson so influentially characterises Shakespeare's mode of writing as free, unlaborious, and untrammelled by the constraints of classical erudition: 'Yet must I not give Nature all; thy art,/My gentle Shakespeare, must enjoy a part' (55–6). From this poem, Jonson bequeaths to us an antithesis between himself and Shakespeare that is as powerful as it is faulty. By the time that Milton writes *L'Allegro*

(c. 1631), the dichotomy between Jonson as a learned, rule-bound writer, and Shakespeare as an intuitive, free-thinking dramatist, is becoming canonically enshrined:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
 If Jonson's learned sock be on,
 Or sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child
 Warble his native wood-notes wild.

(131–4)⁹

It is significant that it is in Shakespeare's First Folio that Jonson should attempt to cement this antithesis. Jonson had led the way in publishing his own Folio in 1616, a bold and pioneering event in the history of printed drama. With the publication of his Folio coinciding with the year of Shakespeare's death, Jonson may well have felt that his emulous, anxious relationship with Shakespeare had finally reached some kind of resolution. The publication of Shakespeare's First Folio may have threatened to renew an old rivalry that had been dormant for the last seven years. But with that, Shakespeare's Folio presented Jonson with another chance to speak to posterity about his own achievements.

It is not just an exaggerated sense of antithesis between Jonson and Shakespeare that Jonson's poem sets up. From Jonson's claims about art and nature, we have extrapolated a false dichotomy between theory and practice. Such a dichotomy is, above all, anachronistic. There is a bedrock of assumption that theory belongs in the hands of intellectuals and scholars, and this has traditionally excluded Shakespeare from the field of enquiry. But this is to misunderstand the way in which dramatic theory operated in the early modern period. For Cinthio and Guarini, theory and practice went hand in hand: their plays attempted – often quite explicitly – to put theoretical questions to the test. The prefaces to the published editions of Cinthio's plays, such as the *Apologia in Didone* (1543), became vehicles for his exposition of dramatic theory.¹⁰ Importantly, this kind of exposition was not confined to the printed texts of the plays but was included in the stage versions too. In the Prologue to the *Altile* (1543), for example, Cinthio explicitly addresses questions about the play's genre.¹¹ These questions are not simply the concern of a scholarly readership: they matter to audiences in the playhouses too. While Cinthio's theoretical ideas are dispersed across a whole range of texts, Guarini incorporates his into a single magisterial work, *Il Compendio della poesia tragicomica*, which he began writing in response to criticisms of his pastoral tragicomedy, *Il Pastor fido* (1585).

This symbiotic relationship between theory and practice is not unique to early modern Italy. While what we know of Jonson's poetics is amplified in texts such as his *Conversations with William Drummond*,

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it is the plays themselves which most eloquently express their author's stance. Unlike Jonson, Shakespeare appears to say very little on the subject of poetics and this apparent reticence has been long been read as an indication of apathy or even ignorance:

He refused, so far as we can tell, to participate wholeheartedly in the imbrolio known as the War of the Theaters, and he mostly eschewed prologues, inductions, and theoretical asseverations. By remaining aloof from public controversy, Shakespeare allowed future generations to imagine him as the private, diligent artist, untainted by the personal and literary squabbles of the time.¹²

But the mechanisms for judging Shakespeare's engagement with theoretical controversy have traditionally been very flawed, and we have long mistaken non-conformism with neutrality. A prime example of this is in Shakespeare's treatment of dramatic unity, which is discussed further in Chapter 6. It is worth noting that the three 'Aristotelian' Unities of Time, Place and Action are not in the strictest sense Aristotelian at all. Aristotle does mention the Unities but these occur in separate passages in the *Poetics*: he does not theorise the Unities in the form of a complementary triad of ideas, as we now habitually do.¹³ As such, the Unities were first formulated in the terms that are now familiar to us by the Italian critic, Lodovico Castelvetro (c.1505–71); an important bridge between classical Greek and early modern thinking on the subject of Unity was, of course, Horace's injunction 'simplex dumtaxat et unum' ('let it be simple and unified', *Ars Poetica* 23).¹⁴

Unlike Jonson, whose plays resolutely conform to the Unities, the majority of Shakespeare's do not. However, his career is framed by two important exceptions. There is an early experiment with dramatic unity in *The Comedy of Errors* (c. 1592) which Shakespeare abandons and then revisits in *The Tempest* (1612). And in the intervening years, his work is punctuated with references to the doctrine.

In *Henry V* (1599), the action of the play jumps about, from London to Southampton and then to France (something that Jonson would never do): 'Linger your patience on,' says the Chorus, 'and well digest/Th'abuse of distance, and we'll force our play' (*Henry V*, 2. 0. 31–2).¹⁵ This early reference to the Unities is significant because we can see Shakespeare articulating his position long before Jonson intervenes in this theoretical debate: it is nearly twenty years later that Jonson satirises the device of the Chorus in the Prologue to *Every Man in His Humour*.¹⁶ In other words, Jonson offers only a retrospective comment on something which Shakespeare has already done. Viewed in this way, Jonson, the self-proclaimed theorist, starts to seem a more reactive figure in the dialogue with Shakespeare.

In *The Winter's Tale* (1611), Shakespeare extends his earlier critique of dramatic unity, again, introducing a choric figure – here, personified as Time – as a commentator on the broken-backed structure of the play:

Impute it not a crime
To me, or my swift passage, that I slide
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried
Of that wide gap...

(4.1.4–7)¹⁷

In both *Henry V* and *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare refers to his breaches of convention in self-reproving terms, playfully exploiting an image of naivety. There is a touch of hyperbole in the diction ('crime', 'abuse'), which transfigures what is ostensibly apologetic into a parody of the forelock-tugging which Shakespeare's contemporaries expect from him. Though outwardly self-deprecating, Shakespeare confidently asserts an independent and non-compliant stance. The plays are themselves, in some sense, theoretical texts. As John Pitcher observes,

It shouldn't really surprise us that Shakespeare might care just as much as Jonson and the classical critics about what drama ought and ought not to do, even if he chose to say what he thought, not in prologues and notebooks, as Jonson did, but through his plays themselves.¹⁸

It is in the late plays, rather than the tragedies, I argue, that Shakespeare is at his most richly 'Aristotelian'. For Renaissance critics and dramatists, the *Poetics* did not provide a theoretical template for tragedy; conversely, it served to problematise existing conceptions of dramatic genre. And, as we will see, the *Poetics* did not just define the critical agenda of the Renaissance: it shaped the form and content of the drama too. Aristotelian theory did not simply remain at the margins of the drama, in explanatory prologues and prefaces. It had a profound impact on almost every aspect of the plays – their sources, subject matter and thematic concerns.

In the following chapters, we will consider some of the main conduits through which Aristotelian theory was available to Shakespeare and we will explore ways in which Aristotle's *Poetics* was shaping contemporary attitudes to dramatic genre. We begin with a look at the questions of generic classification which Shakespeare's late plays pose. Chapter 1 discusses the catalogue of plays in Shakespeare's First Folio, from which the category of tragicomedy is notably absent. This has been considered as a casual contingency of Heminges and Condell's lack of scholarly expertise in the matters of genre. I suggest that the omission of tragicomedy

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may reflect a sensitivity to the controversial status of mixed genre in the period and that the questions of genre which the Folio attempts to negotiate are integral to the plays themselves. Here I consider evidence that audiences in the period enjoyed what Henke describes as ‘dramatic competence’, i.e. that their engagement with drama was informed by familiarity with generic conventions. Throughout this book, I explore these generic conventions in terms of the classical legacies which are being rediscovered and rewritten in the early modern period. Towards this end, I devote part of Chapter 1 to a discussion of the (often vexed) question of Shakespeare and the classics. Drawing in particular on the recent work of Colin Burrow, I set out my own sense of the scope of Shakespeare’s classical knowledge and revisit some of the historical objections to the claim that Shakespeare’s engagement with Greek was of scarcely any significance. In the light of recent developments in the field of classical reception, I suggest that the old orthodoxy now looks rather rigid and moreover, inaccurate. We need to give fresh space in our thinking to Shakespeare’s use of oral sources and his knowledge of Latin and vernacular translation, to name just two examples, in order to develop a fuller picture.

In Chapter 2, I show how the publication of Aldine *editio princeps* of Aristotle’s *Poetics* reinvigorated the theoretical culture of Italy and beyond.¹⁹ Although the text more often provided critics with a point of departure rather than an exact theoretical model, it was nonetheless a central stimulus to critical thinking. Although the *Poetics* is ostensibly concerned with tragedy, this first phase of its reception sparked a wave of new ideas about the form of tragicomedy.

It is against this critical background that Cinthio pioneered and theorised a form of drama which he termed *tragedia di lieto fin* (‘happy-ending tragedy’) or *tragedia mista* (‘mixed tragedy’). Cinthio is an important point of contact between Shakespeare and continental theory, since we know that Shakespeare had a first-hand reading knowledge of Cinthio: he used sections of the *Hecatommithi* as the basis for *Othello* (c. 1602) and *Measure for Measure* (1604), for which he also read Cinthio’s *Epizia* (1547). While Cinthio emphasises the sharp division of tragic and comic elements in tragicomedy, Guarini argues that there should be a careful synthesis. This chapter considers the dissemination of Guarinian theory in England by Daniel, Marston and most importantly, Fletcher. In examining Shakespeare’s collaborations with Fletcher, this chapter explores the two key ideas of verisimilitude and pastoral which are integral to the conceptual framework of Guarinian tragicomedy.

Chapter 3 examines the status of the Donatus-Evanthius tradition in the early modern period, a tradition which characterises the relationship between tragedy and comedy as symmetrical and antithetical. This idea was already coming under considerable pressure from theorists who were responding to Aristotle’s comments on happy-ending tragedy and

tragic pleasure (ὑπὸ τραγωδίας ἡδονὴ ...οἰκεία, *Poetics* 1453^a30–9).²⁰ These commentators identified a conflict between the structural goal of tragedy – the unhappy ending – and its teleological goal, identified by Aristotle as pleasure. If the function of tragedy was to generate pleasure and delight, all tragedy could be seen, to some degree, as inherently tragicomic. The chapter argues that the so-called ‘two-part structure’ of *The Winter’s Tale* can be seen as an intervention in the contemporary debate about the shape of tragicomedy. In constructing the play in an overtly dichotomous fashion, Shakespeare challenges the idea that the relationship between tragedy and comedy is neatly symmetrical. Thus the play as a critique of tragicomedy offers a self-reflexive commentary on its own structure and form. The final part of the chapter analyses correspondences between the statue scene in *The Winter’s Tale* (5.3) and the ending of Euripides’ *Alcestis* (1006–1158). Developing the work of Douglas B. Wilson, I argue that George Buchanan’s Latin translation of the play (1539) provides a clear model for the statue device in Shakespeare.²¹ This reference to the *Alcestis* suggests that Shakespeare was alert to the play’s reputation as one of the most significant classical prototypes for Renaissance tragicomedy.

Chapter 4 looks at wonder and empathy. In his central definition of tragedy (*Poetics*, 1452^a1–7), Aristotle posits a close relationship between the marvellous and pity and fear. These concepts acquire an even stronger mutual attachment in the early modern period, when wonder is frequently characterised as a distinctively empathic phenomenon. Meanwhile, there was a continuing emphasis (deriving from the Horatian tradition) on the didactic function of drama. Cinthio is among those to argue that, for a work of literature to succeed didactically, it must have some degree of personal application to its audience: the spectator needs to feel what the protagonist feels. This interest in the possibilities of empathy gave impetus to an evolving theorisation of audience response. Beginning with a discussion of *Othello* and *The Tempest*, Chapter 4 considers how the ideas of pity and wonder are closely interlinked in Shakespeare. From this, I move on to a discussion of *The Winter’s Tale* (5.3) in which wonder is characterised as a reciprocal process between protagonist and audience.

In Chapter 5, I discuss *catharsis*, which Aristotle briefly discusses at 1449^b27–8. Commentary work on *catharsis* gave rise to a body of writing which was concerned with the therapeutic possibilities of theatre as an instrument of moral, spiritual and humoral purgation. Aristotle himself employs the term *catharsis* in a physiological context (*Politics* 1342^a11–12) and so, from its origins, the concept is a highly transferable one. Both Minturno and Guarini, for example, extend the quasi-medical implications of the term in developing their theories of dramatic purgation.

Audiences were very familiar with purgation in the context of medical practice, and so far from being a highly specialised literary term,