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## TRAGI-COMEDY OR TRAGICOMEDY?

## I

In his genuinely interesting article published in "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" Bohdan Dziemidok observes: "The antiquity created no single tragi-comedy and, as a matter of principle, was not familiar with the tragi-comic."<sup>1</sup>

If it is only a matter of course to agree with the second part of the statement, the former, i.e. referring to "no single tragi-comedy" may be objected to on serious factual grounds. The paradoxical intrinsic contradiction within this objection—for how is it possible to have tragi-comedy without the tragi-comic—is only apparent. It will be used in this essay as the starting point for certain inevitable differentiations within the genre, neglected by the author of the above mentioned article. The generally outlined differences will be exemplified with analyses of two specimens of English drama.

The word 'tragi-comedy' (*tragicomœdia*) was actually known to the antiquity. About 2200 years ago Plautus ordered Mercury to provide mankind with a new literary term:

MERCURY: What? Frowning because I said it was to be a tragedy? I am a god: I'll transform it. I'll convert this same play from tragedy to comedy, if you like it, and never change a line. [...] I shall mix things up: let it be a tragi-comedy. Of course, it would do for me to make comedy out and out, with kings and gods on the boards. How about it, then? Well, in view of the fact that there is a slave part in it, I shall do just as I said and make it tragi-comedy.<sup>2</sup>

From the point of view of the theory of drama the gift was premature. It was only with the coming of the Renaissance that the term began to be appreciated.<sup>3</sup> After a long period of oblivion the Plautine hybrid was seized upon by playwrights and used as a shield against the Ciceronian formula "in tragoedia comicum vitiosum est et in comoedia turpe tragicum," and as a convenient label for their dramas deviating from the accepted conventions of tragedy and comedy. As a result of the search

<sup>1</sup> B. Dziemidok, *The Comic and the Tragic: Certain Aspects of Mutual Relation*, „Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, 1966, vol. VIII, nr 2(15), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Plautus, *Amphitryon*, [in:] *Plays*, 1948, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> The first Renaissance play subtitled "tragi-comedy" was *Fernandus Servatus* (1493) by Carlo and Marcellino Verardus; cf. T. Herrick, *Tragicomedy*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1962, p. 4.



for a classical antecedent which might account for the irregularities in dramatic works and add dignity to all sorts of mixtures of both genres, *Amphitryon* came to perform the role of a venerable ancestor and was used alongside with Euripides' *Cyclops* as an argument in the dispute about the artistic legitimacy of tragi-comedy.<sup>4</sup>

The controversy, which also on a small scale concerned *Amphitryon*,<sup>5</sup> though interesting in itself, is not relevant here. It, however, calls our attention to the fact that the lexical compound in question might be a source of confusion. In the course of centuries the semantic capacity of the term expanded and its frequent usage with reference to the works of Tchekhov, Beckett, Pinter or Ionesco, when compared to the above quoted Plautine "definition", often results in misunderstanding.

The border-line which the authors of *Fernandus Servatus* and their sixteenth- and seventeenth-century followers wanted to wipe off ran through four points—four principal criteria of the division of literary genres: level of style, *dramatis personae*, the subject matter and ending. According to the rules of classical rhetoric, often used in the argument, the lofty and dignified style was assigned to tragedy, whereas the diction of everyday speech to comedy. This was inevitably connected with the "population" of both genres: gods, kings, knights, and all high-born characters entered the realm of tragedy, low-born persons belonged to comedy. As to the subject matter and ending, let us quote Martin Opitz (1597—1639) who has, half-cynically perhaps, but perspicuously, summed up the concern of tragedy:

[...] royal decisions, manslaughter, despair, infanticides and patricides, conflagrations, incest, wars and rebellions, lamenting, screaming, sighing and the like,

and of comedy:

[...] weddings, festivities, gambling, the cheating and roguishness of servants, vainglorious mercenaries, love affairs, the wantonness of youth, the avarice of old age, pandering and such things as happen daily among common people.<sup>6</sup>

According to the four principal criteria four model types of the hybrid genre could be differentiated:

1. mingling *dramatis personae* from all stations of life,
2. mixing the styles proper to tragedy and comedy,
3. jumbling together of serious and comic incidents,
4. a serious and potentially tragic play with a happy *dénouement*.

The above division is schematic and, with the exception of the fourth type, the so-called 'tragedia di lieto fin' or 'tragedia mista', there rarely occurred tragi-comedies following one pattern only. The Plautine term which originally referred only to a play with mixed *dramatis personae*, was now applied to all kinds of mixed drama. Simultaneously terms such as tragic comedy, comic tragedy, comi-tragic drama,

<sup>4</sup> Besides Plautus other authorities were quoted in the argument, e.g. Aristotle, Horace. A detailed discussion of the dispute is included by Herrick, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Giraldi Cinthio insisted that *Amphitryon* was a tragedy that had taken on comic qualities, whereas Joachim Camerarius considered it to be a comedy with tragic qualities.

<sup>6</sup> M. Opitz, *Buch von der deutschen Poeterey*, 1624, quoted after: K. S. Guthke, *Modern Tragicomedy*, Random House, New York 1966, p. 7.



tragi-comic drama were used. This variety of synonyms was due to a terminological confusion alien to no epoch. In course of time the majority of those terms were weeded out, unlike 'tragi-comedy' which proved to have the strongest roots in the language.

For an exemplary analysis we have selected a five-act play by Robert Greene, published in London in 1598—the well-known *James IV*.

The play begins with a prologue in which Oberon, surrounded by his fairies, converses with Bohan, a misanthrope, on vanity, treachery and pride, and thus introduces the public into the subject matter of the play. Consequently, the characters taking part in the prologue change into chorus to appear between acts. The chorus provides entertainment in pantomimes, and comments on the moral aspect of the action.

Act I is an exposition. In the first, pathetic scene, Dorothea, daughter of the king of England, newly married to James IV, the king of Scotland, bids farewell to her father just departing for England. After the ceremony, in Dorothea's absence, James reveals that he is in love with Ida, daughter of the Countess of Arran. The king's factotum, Autekin, undertakes to win Ida's charms and reciprocation for his master. The next scene, amusing due to the jocularity of its plebeian language, introduces Andrew, a comic servant, and the sons of Bohan: Slipper and Nano. The act ends with a conversation of the honest, wise Sir Bartram and Lord Eustace who is the leading suitor for the hand of Lady Ida, and thus James's rival.

The second act begins with Autekin's pandering visit at the home of the Countess of Arran and the dramatic refusal of the dishonourable offer by virtuous Ida. The scene between Ida and Autekin, maintained in a high and lofty tone, is interrupted by a comic episode: Slipper, who accompanies Autekin, manages to swindle a meal and a drink out of the Countess by means of rather coarse hints. In the meantime (Act II, sc. 2) Dorothea discusses state affairs with the nobles debarred from posts of authority by the king, and defends her husband against their charges—James's infatuation with Ida is now well-known. The conversation, interrupted by the entrance of the king, is full of lofty Senecan sentiments. Autekin breaks the news to James about Ida's unyielding virtue. The king, instigated by Autekin, gives his consent to murder Dorothea.

The impetus towards a tragic ending weakens temporarily in Act III. Comic episodes with Andrew and Slipper alternate with far-reaching events. Sir Bartram, having bribed Slipper, intercepts the king's warrant for Dorothea's death and shows it to her. The character of a professional killer Jacques introduced towards the end of the act, though he may be funny due to his Anglo-French-Italian jargon, accelerates the tempo of the play which in act IV almost borders upon tragedy. Dorothea is overtaken and attacked by Jacques as she flees away in male attire accompanied by her page Nano. On the first encounter she is wounded, falls to the ground with a cry: "I am slain" and is left there for dead. Ida, already betrothed to Lord Eustace, is now beyond the king's reach, and thus Dorothea's apparent death results in a certain amount of dramatic irony. This, however, is of short duration, for in the next scene it turns out that Dorothea, though desperately wounded, is still alive. Sir



Anderson, guided by Nano, rescues her, takes her to his castle and leaves there under his wife's care. King James, convinced of Dorothea's death and unaware of Ida's betrothal, sends Autekin to fetch the young lady. Andrew decides to inform the king of England about his daughter's tragic death.

Act V, attenuated by the comic underplot of Lady Anderson's love towards Dorothea mistaken by her for a young squire, brings bad news for the protagonist: the English king, in revenge for the murder committed on his daughter, has attacked Scotland and is triumphant in the campaign; Ida has married Lord Eustace.

The final scene undergoes metamorphosis from pathetically sinister and potentially tragic into a serene scene of reconciliation. The king of England challenges James to a single combat. They are about to engage in a duel when Dorothea, accompanied by Sir Cuthbert and Lady Anderson, intervenes. The father's joy is infinite. James seriously repents. Dorothea is magnanimously forgiving. James promises to punish Autekin and other court flatterers. The kings are reconciled and the nobility restored to favours.

The isolation of «tragic» and «comic» elements (in the sense of features belonging conventionally to the respective literary genres) presents no difficulty:

1. King James who acquires the dimensions of a tragic character, particularly in act V, appears side by side with and is dependent on the actual *spiritus movens* of the play—the comic parasite Autekin, modelled upon Terentian Gnatho<sup>7</sup> (he is even referred to as Gnatho in Act II sc. 2 and in stage directions). The characters of the plebeian group (Slipper, Nano, Andrew) perform roles by no means less important than the court group (Dorothea, the king of England, Sir Bartram, Sir Cuthbert Anderson, Lord Eustace, Ida), and what is more, representatives of both groups appear not only in comic and lofty scenes respectively, but also together as functionally equal partners.

2. The obvious result is the variety of style oscillating between refined blank verse and coarse, though funny, prose.

3. James's intrigue, the murder design and unhappy love as content factors belong, according to classical definitions, to tragedy, whereas underplots (e.g., Lady Anderson's love towards Dorothea), the happy ending and chorus are comic elements.

## 2

So far, when using the terms 'tragic' and 'comic' we referred to certain conventionally fixed elements of tragedy and comedy, since a combination of such elements is the basis of the hybrid genre. On the other hand, it is only too obvious that we use other premises to categorize as tragicomedy a play by Ionesco or Pinter. Similarly, B. Dziemidok uses the term in a sense different from the formerly discussed, though he sometimes seems to overlook the vital dichotomy: tragedy, comedy—the tragic, the comic. In order to continue intrinsic consideration of tragi-comedy, or rather, to distinguish between its two different types, one has to refer to the essence of tra-

<sup>7</sup> Gnatho — the name of the parasite in Terence's *Eunuch*.



gedy and comedy (for these genres are still implied by the term), i.e. to what Ingarden calls 'metaphysical qualities'. We mean, of course, the tragic and the comic, respectively.

Ontological speculations about these qualities, the question whether they are the concern of "heart" or of intellect, or whether the tragic, as it is sometimes claimed, is a property inherent in life and hence objective, whereas the comic a matter of subjective perception, or whether both of them are of the same nature—these questions are not relevant from our point of view, since in the course of perception of a theatrical performance both qualities become intersubjective. Although this kind of intersubjectivity permits individual deviations (e.g. laughter in "wrong places") and cultural variations (e.g. differences between the notions of the tragic in Chinese and European drama), yet it may be assumed that the reaction of the public to the stimuli operating from the stage will be alike within reasonable limits.

The goal of the author and/or the director of a comedy or a tragedy is to shape the stage reality in such a manner that the respective metaphysical qualities carried by the work are the comic or the tragic. It, however, occurs more and more often in contemporary drama that the playwright's vision is twofold and so embodied in his work. Hence, the represented reality offers both qualities in question simultaneously, and acts upon the spectator to the effect that he "cries with one eye and smiles with the other." The terseness and brilliancy of Schlegel's aphorism must be appreciated, though it does not render the gist of the process, but only emphasizes its temporal identity. Crying with one eye and laughing with the other would still imply two separate qualities, whereas it must be realized that a new quality springs up—the quality based on the tragic and the comic without, however, being their simple sum, but rather a compound enriched with a peculiar kind of bitter irony. The tragic and the comic not only appear simultaneously but, being interdependent, they are also inseparable. This has been accurately observed by G. W. Knight:

The comic and the tragic rest both on the idea of incompatibilities, and are also, themselves, mutually exclusive: therefore to mingle them is to add to the meaning of each; the result is but a new sublime incongruity.<sup>8</sup>

The interdependence and mutual contribution of the tragic and the comic, which in their compound actually cease to be two separate qualities, is the essence of the "modern" type of tragi-comedy.<sup>9</sup> The ways to achieve the tragi-comic effects are numerous. To supply an example we have chosen Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*.

In Pinter's play the differentiation between elements discussed in case of *James IV* is unfeasible. With the typical disrespect to characters' past and motivation he places his protagonist in a seaside boarding-house (or at least a house which once used to be a boarding-house) owned by a couple of old people. Stanley, a man about forty,

<sup>8</sup> G.W. Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, Mathuen, London 1949, p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> The adjective 'modern' is used in the sense qualitative rather than temporal, to include, for instance, certain aspects of Shakespeare's and Cervantes' work as well. Cf. also J.L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, Cambridge 1962.



is their only guest. His relations with the couple are friendly and familiar, particularly with 60 year old Meg who shows both motherly and erotic interest in him.

The house, in which Stanley evidently seeks refuge from an unknown danger (he apparently used to be a pianist, but nothing definite is known about his past) is visited by two gentlemen: Mr Goldberg and Mr McCann. Soon it turns out that they are tentacles of some mysterious organization. Conversations, harmless at first, change into psychical torturing and brain-washing. Goldberg and McCann arrange a birthday party for Stanley, despite his resistance and declarations that in fact the day is not his birthday at all. During the party Stanley, who is on the verge of psychical collapse, attempts to strangle Meg and rape Lulu—a girl from neighbourhood. The next day Stanley appears downstairs accompanied by Goldberg and McCann. He is now a puppet dressed in a dark suit, white collar and a bowler hat, incapable of uttering a comprehensible phrase. The only sound he emits is a kind of gibber: "... eeehhh-gug." The three men leave the boarding-house in a car.

*The Birthday Party* has been interpreted from various angles: sociologically, politically, psychoanalytically etc. Whatever point of view we choose the structural pattern of the play remains unaltered: a man in search of a refuge—destructing force—man's destruction. Simultaneously with the dynamic scheme of Stanley's annihilation the scheme of Meg's failure is carried out: desire to love—annihilation of the object to love—impossibility of fulfilment. Both Stanley and Meg fall down from the elevation of everyday happiness: one into the abyss of non-existence, the other—of loneliness. The message of the play is tragic: annihilation of a human being on the one hand and the void of hopeless existence on the other.

The qualification of *The Birthday Party* as a metaphor of a basic existential situation would be incomplete without sufficient emphasis put on the constant activity of comic stimuli which are decisive of the ultimate shape of this metaphor. The situation itself, if considered on the action level, is absurdly comic: two strange guys arrive; they persuade the third one that the day is his birthday; after the party they leave accompanied by the gibbering celebrator. Similarly, in the pivotal moments of the play the grotesquely-comic tone prevails, e.g. the blind man's buff play, Stanley's efforts to rape Lulu, Stanley playing a tune on the drum and later on dragging the drum on his foot.

The grotesquely-comic situations and gestures are only preparatory tortures: the real instrument of destruction in *The Birthday Party* is language. Goldberg and McCann destroy Stanley's personality by throwing at him a cascade of nonsensical and contradictory statements. Let us quote the final stage of the execution:

GOLDBERG: We'll make a man of you.

McCANN: And a woman.

GOLDBERG: You'll be re-orientated.

McCANN: You'll be rich.

GOLDBERG: You'll be adjusted.

McCANN: You'll be our pride and joy.

GOLDBERG: You'll be a mensch.

McCANN: You'll be a success.

GOLDBERG: You'll be integrated.



McCANN: You'll give orders.

GOLDBERG: You'll make decisions.

McCANN: You'll be a magnate.

GOLDBERG: A statesman.

McCANN: You'll own yachts.

GOLDBERG: Animals.

McCANN: Animals.

*Goldberg looks at McCann.*

GOLDBERG: I said animals. *He turns back to Stanley.* You'll be able to make or break, Stan. By my life. *Silence. Stanley is still.*

Well? What do you say?

*Stanley's head lifts very slowly and turns in Goldberg's direction.*

What do you think? Eh, boy?

*Stanley begins to clench and unclench his eyes.*

McCANN: What's your opinion, sir? Of this prospect, sir?

GOLDBERG: Prospect. Sure. Sure it's a prospect.

*Stanley's hands clutching his glasses begin to tremble.*

What's your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

*Stanley concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.*

STANLEY: Uh-gug... uh-gug... eeehhh-gag... *On the breath* Caahh...caahh...<sup>10</sup>

Language, being the means of annihilation, is at the same time the most direct source of the comic resulting both from non-sequitur statements and typical Pinteresque puns. It performs, therefore, a grotesquely double function and thus epitomizes the whole play.

The play itself is a mixture of reality and nightmare—deformed, comic and gloomy. The message is tragic. The spirit that controls it is the spirit of the grotesque. In isolation the tragic idea communicated by the play loses its poignancy, and the “formal” grotesqueness may seem purposeless. Only when appreciated together: the tragic communicated in a grotesque way, they unite in the tragi-comic.

### 3

The above drawn comparison of two types of drama filed under the label of tragi-comedy will, hopefully, make the contradistinction between them clearer. In the first case “tragi-comedy” means a *mixture* of certain *conventionally fixed elements* typical of two literary genres; in the other it is a *fusion* of two “metaphysical” *qualities*, resulting in a new substance. Their relation to one another might be compared to the relation of a physical combination of two elements, which remain fairly feasible, to their chemical compound, i.e., a homogeneous unity.

One may consider now J. Thurber's suggestion<sup>11</sup> to spell tragi-comedy without a hyphen as “tragicomedy”, which would perhaps render the kernel of the “modern” type and minimize the possibility of misunderstanding. Whichever spelling we use, and one may encounter both referred interchangeably to either type, the difference between those types remains essential.

<sup>10</sup> H. Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, Methuen, London 1968, p. 83–84.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Guthke, *op. cit.*, p. 148.



## TRAGI-KOMEDIA CZY TRAGIKOMEDIA?

## STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na istotną różnicę między dwoma typami dramatu objętymi wspólnym mianem tragikomedii.

W jednym z omawianych przypadków tragi-komedią jest sztuka, w której do czynienia mamy z wymieszaniem konwencjonalnie ustalonych strukturalno-treściowych elementów tragedii i komedii, takich jak rodzaj stylu, *dramatis personae*, tematyka czy zakończenie. Przykładem jest tutaj szesnastowieczny utwór Roberta Greene'a *Jakub IV*, w którym obok protagonisty króla występuje funkcjonalnie co najmniej równorzędny partner — komiczny (w sensie „komediowy”) pasożyt Autekin, wzorowany na Gnathonie Terencjusza. Analogicznie rzecz się ma z grupą dworską i plebejską; sceny patetyczne przeplatają się z komicznymi; język oscyluje między wyrafinowanym białym wierszem a prostą prozą. Sztuka zmierza kilkakrotnie w kierunku tragedii (np. pozorna śmierć Doroty, konflikt zbrojny między Jakubem a jej ojcem), zakończona jest jednak komediowym *dénouement*.

Zupełnie inną odmianą dramatu, również nazywaną tragi-komedią, jest utwór, w którym dwie jakości metafizyczne — tragizm i komizm — objawiają się jednocześnie, stapiając się w jakość nową, na tragizmie i komizmie zbudowaną, nie będącą jednak ich prostą sumą, ale związkiem wzbo-gaconym o szczególny rodzaj gorzkiej ironii. Ta „współczesna” odmiana tragi-komedii egzemplifikowana jest w artykule przez *Urodziny Stanleya Harolda Pintera*, utwór, w którym język jest jednocześnie narzędziem zbrodni i źródłem bodźców komicznych, a tragiczne unicestwienie protagonisty ubrano w formę groteski.

Relacja między obydwoma typami tragi-komedii jest analogiczna do relacji mieszaniny chemicznej, stosunkowo łatwo rozdzielnej, i związku chemicznego dwu pierwiastków, czyli nowej, homogenicznej całości.

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