

Towards a Definition of European Tragicomedy and Romantic Comedy of the Seventeenth Century: The Courtly Fashion in England and Spain

Luciano García García

University of Jaén

The elusive term tragicomedy can actually be thought of in two different ways. A wide one without further qualification pertaining to the domain of the theory of genres and that should be placed side by side with the contiguous terms of tragedy and comedy, and another one which encompasses its different historical or diachronic realisations and which may appear qualified by other terms such as pastoral, palatine, Fletcherian, *drame libre*, French neoclassical, romantic or whatever. More frequently, though, the historical realisations of tragicomedy bear labels which do not exhibit any formal mentioning of the actual words *tragic* or *comedy*, as is the case with medieval and Renaissance developments such as the miracles, moralities, interludes or humanist plays; or nineteenth century forms of melodrama and its aftermath in the twentieth century: melodrama, *drame* (Ibsen, Chekhov), epic theatre (Brecht), theatre of cruelty (Artaud) and theatre of the absurd (Ionesco) insofar as these form share and explore definite features of tragicomedy in an age of dissolution of established dramatic categories.¹

It is significant, however, that during the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth centuries the term *tragicomedy* clearly emerges and appears, with no matter which qualifications, both as part of the actual dramatic practice in need of complying with popular taste of the time, and as part of the critical debate started in Italy, but with continuation through all Western Europe, and which tried to reconcile received classical (mainly Aristotelian) theory on the dramatic genres and Christian and medieval tradition. The result is that, together with a considerable bulk of tragedy, tinged anyway with tragicomic elements, an immense and variously qualified corpus of plays all bearing in one form or another the label *tragicomedy* arises through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, France and Spain. The variations in the qualification of the term tragicomedy may sometimes, as it is the case with Spanish overgeneral term *comedia*, obey national development or to cosmopolitan, more elitist fashion, but, in any case, they are never entirely isolated developments, but rather the product of many subtle and generalised connections.

¹ "The term [tragicomedy] is now antiquated, for traditional labels have lost their importance, but most of the significant modern dramas still occupy a middle ground between tragedy and comedy" (Herrick 1955: 321). This work constitutes our main source of the exposition of the evolution of the genre given below.

Let us present first a brief outline of the apparition of the term along with the development of specific dramatic forms in early and full Renaissance Europe, and then focus our attention on the particular province of romantic comedy and courtly or rather *palatine* tragicomedy mainly in England and Spain.

The early European humanists of the Netherlands, Germany, England and France, deeply concerned with conciliating their staunch Christian and mainly Protestant worldview (and the popular medieval practice besides) with the classical theory and accepted traditional practice of Aristotle, Horace, Sophocles, Euripides, Plautus and Terence via Donatus and Diomedes, made a first attempt to conciliate both worlds through what is today customarily known as the *Christian Terence*: an immense corpus of varied plays mainly in Latin, so named after the collection of “sacred comedies”, “sacred tragicomedies” and domestic comedies or *fabulae ludicrae* began by the Dutch Cornelius Schonaeus towards 1570. In fact, although the term Christian Terence crystallises with Schonaeus it went as backwards in time as the tenth century nun of Gandersheim Hroswitha, whose sacred plays, in which she attempted to christianise or moralise the Terentian method infusing it with a clearly edifying Christian moral purpose, had been published in 1501 at Nuremberg. Long before 1570 (about 1530) the technique of the Christian Terence had been established. And it was going to keep its vogue during the whole of the sixteenth century, giving rise, besides several interesting developments in comedy, to various outgrowths (the prodigal-son play as the most conspicuous of them) which in more than one respect advance the cause of the tragicomedy in Europe. At all events, the authors of these academic plays, written mainly for the instruction of students, are noteworthy for the development of modern tragicomedy in several aspects: they often show an awareness of their departure from classical rules and try to legitimise their practice one way or another; the actual titular headings very often include the terms “tragic” and “comedy” combined;² and, finally, they represent an early attempt to mould the popular drama into the formal structure of classical drama and the easy but elegant style of Terence, although, and this is crucial, in so doing they more often than not broke certain traditional conventions (the normative historical plot for tragedy and fictitious plot for comedy, that the tragic characters should be well-known important personages while the comic ones should be unknown common folk, the classic economy of time and space) and, of course, carried out the normal medieval practice of inserting comic scenes in a serious plot and concluding with a happy ending, so that, as Herrick points out (1955:62): “the plays of the Christian Terence anticipated almost every characteristic, save the pastoral machinery, of the secular tragicomedy that flourished in western Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century”.

Italy led the way during the mid-sixteenth century in the progress towards secular tragicomedy as it possessed the cultural and social conditions for the existence of a courtly and more sophisticated audience allowing the emancipation of tragicomedy from the academic milieu of school and university proper to the Christian Terence. There are two fundamental Italian contributions to the development of tragicomedy in Europe: the tragedy with a happy ending with no comic episodes, originating in the dramatic output of Giraldi Cinthio during the middle of the century (*Altile*, *Selene*, *Arrenopia*, *Antivalomeni*, etc.) and the pastoral

² As in *comoedia tragica, sacra (et nova) tragicomoedia, tragocomoedia* or *tragicomoedia* (with the *Amphitryon* of Plautus in mind), *tragicall comedy* (in *The Glass of Government* by Gascoigne), *drama comicotragicum*, etc.

tragedy, a kind which reached its peak moment both in respect of critical definition and European repercussion in the great debate around Battista Guarini's *Il pastor fido* and *The Compendio della poesia tragicomica* (1598), in which this author made a defence of his dramatic practice against the attacks of the contemporary critic Jason Denores. Despite its precocity, Italian tragicomedy became exhausted by the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries in such a way that its tragicomic production is not comparable to the production of France, England and Spain during that time. This is due to the fact that, in its Cinthian form, Italian tragicomedy was soon superseded by the pastoral, whereas the pastoral or Guarinian form, in its turn, never became really popular, although it enriched and fertilised other kinds of tragicomedy, especially in the other countries; finally, in either of the two forms, Italian tragicomedy was too starchy, deprived of real on-stage technique (and perhaps of the political support of a unified state) to give rise to a strong national and popular theatre.

Anyway, the Italian practice (Cinthian or pastoral) of tragicomedy at that time bequeathed to the Spanish, English or French tragicomedies of the seventeenth century some of their most characteristic features: poetical justice, feigned plot, romantic love, regal characters, serious action, grave sentiments, elevated diction (these last three traits clearly a in conformity with classical tragedy), sense of intrigue, reversal of fortune, complicated action, and melodramatic situations and feelings. It also added some of the most characteristic themes and motifs of the new genre: the changelings, the sexual harassment of the honest heroine, the woman in boy's clothes, the reformation of the villain, and the final anagnorisis. Moreover, the Italian practice and theory of both Cinthio and Guarini reveal that, in its origin, the new tragicomedy is equally rooted in tragedy and comedy, for, broadly speaking, the Cinthian tragicomedy is conceived of as "tragedy utilizing some comic methods", whereas the Guarinian pastoral tragicomedy is conceived of as "comedy utilizing some tragic methods" (Herrick 1955: 136), and, what is more, romantic comedy, as can be seen early in the practice of Cinthio with his *Eudemoni* or a bit later in Giovanni Battista della Porta, shows romantic and pathetic arguments that made them close to tragicomedy, manifesting thus, something inherent to the ensuing tragicomedy: its blurred limits with the contiguous field of romantic tragicomedy.

During the first half of the seventeenth century the pastoral tragicomedy has a considerable development both in France, England and Spain, following the trail of Italy. However, in general, the pastoral form remained for the most part an aristocratic, artificial and elitist form of drama and its vitality was already spent by 1640. Notwithstanding, important practitioners of tragicomedy like Lope de Vega, Hardy, Mairet, Racan, Fletcher, and Shirley (and even an out-and-out classicist such as Ben Jonson with his incomplete *Sad Shepherd*) contributed important samples to the genus. The importance of the pastoral, however, remains largely in that it encouraged (as can be seen in *Il pastor fido* or its English counterpart the *Faithful Shepherdess*) the critical definition of the term tragicomedy³ and that many of its

³ Guarini is the first in stating that his tragicomedy differed from the tragedy of double issue in that it had a single comic issue, with no deaths or even severe punishment of the wicked characters" (Herrick 1955: 137), thus preceding Fletcher in the famous prologue to his *Faithful Shepherdess* in which he declares: "A tragi-comedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants death, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy, which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned; so that a god is as lawful in this as in tragedy, and mean people as in comedy".

elements leapt freely from pastoral to the other adjoining types becoming generalized there (as a brief comparison between *The Faithful Shepherdess* and *Philaster* will evince).

But the real flourishing of the most effective and distinguished theatrical form of tragicomedy was going to take place in Spain, France and England during the first half of the seventeenth century. It is a great shame that, as far as I know, the scholars who have devoted themselves to the study of tragicomedy have systematically neglected the largest corpus of tragicomedy of the first country,⁴ for the Spanish *comedia* constitutes what Walter Cohen, when complaining about the aforesaid neglect, aptly qualifies as “the most important corpus of tragicomedy in the Renaissance” (Cohen 1987:158). The problem, however, is that most foreign scholars are content with echoing the general received term of *comedia* or *comedia de capa y espada* (or *cloak and sword drama*) and no one has taken pains in unearthing in the light of the latest critical development in Spanish drama the different kinds which rest concealed under the general denomination of *comedia*. For though, assuredly, the Spanish *comedia* is for the most part tragicomic or comic in character, it happens that just within the kind of tragicomedy, in a somewhat parallel way to what can be seen in England and France, several modalities can be ascertained, some of them characteristically national (the peasant play or *drama campesino*, the *auto sacramental* and the religious drama in general), but some others clearly share common features with similar types in French and English tragicomedy of this period. A tentative and more rigorous classification of Spanish drama in line with recent critical views would yield the following results:⁵

1. Tragedy in the Spanish fashion to label those plays which approach more or less the current standards of this genre in France, Italy and England. It is doubtful and part of the critical debate on the *comedia* whether these plays approach or fulfil the classical standard in the other countries owing to the need of accounting for Christian elements and typical Spanish values such as honour (*honra*) and stratum (*estamento*). This group would include such plays as *El castigo sin venganza*, *La estrella de Sevilla* and, of course the Calderonian drama of jealousy such as *El médico de su honra* or *El pintor de su deshonra*.

2. Tragicomedy:

- 2.1. Historical or chronicle plays: plays of national exaltation, populist or, according to Cohen (1985:282, 315), peasant drama (*Peribáñez y el comendador de Ocaña*, *El mejor Alcalde*, *el rey*, *Fuenteovejuna*, *El alcalde de Zalamea*), etc.

- 2.2. Religious

- 2.3. Mythological.

- 2.4. Pastoral.

- 2.5. Palatine.

⁴ See, for instance, Ristine 1910, Herrick 1955, Hirst 1984, Doran 1954; ch. 8, who, anyway, make a brief mention of Fernando de Rojas and Lope de Vega, or Lancaster 1907, who only perfunctorily and occasionally refer to Spanish tragicomedy.

⁵ For a detailed exposition see García García 1998: 358-80.

3. Comedy:

3.1. *Entremeses*.

3.2. Palatine comedies (roughly corresponding to what Wardropper (1978:195) calls comedias "fantásticas" o "románticas").

3.3. Cloak and sword comedies, with such varieties as *costumbristas* (local customs), urban, of character, of entanglement (*de enredo*), *de figurón* (poseur), etc.

At this point we must take into account that, although the general development and consolidation of the Spanish *comedia*, diverge greatly from those of France and England, due to the powerful influence of Lope de Vega (after the reforms of Juan de la Cueva) and the early nationalisation and popularisation of the Spanish tragicomedy, it still shares the Italian influence, especially in those kinds germane to contemporary forms in France and England. Unfortunately, I have no time here to discuss in detail the Italian influence on Spanish drama, not even the same issue concerning France or England, and we must be content with pointing out one specific form of tragicomedy equitable with conspicuous forms in these two countries.

This form is, of course, the palatine tragicomedy or *tragicomedia palatina*, a kind which in its usual practice by Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina or Guillén de Castro, among many others, could be successfully compared with the tragicomedies of the most representative practitioners of the genre in England (Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, Shirley, even Shakespeare in a restricted number of plays) and France (Hardy, Schelandre, Du Ryer, and Rotrou). We face here three tasks: first to break through the disparity among the different terminology employed in Spain, France and England; second, to supply a suitable definition of this kind of tragicomedy, with a mind to the problem of the overlapping into the domain of either comedy or tragedy, to extract a set of similarities from that corpus, and, finally, to define a corpus of at least a number of the tragicomedies by these authors that could support our definition.

The first task is really the easier one. I propose that the denomination "palatine tragicomedy" should be extended to what in England is customarily known as Fletcherian tragicomedy, and in France to the subclass of *la tragicomédie de palais* at least (although it might be extensive to the so-called *d'aventures* and *d'amour contrariées*).⁶

The second task is much more complex. From the times of the Christian Terence we have a lot of definitions and lists of defining features around the general term of tragicomedy. Cinthio and Guarini, especially the latter, give very pertinent clues of application to the seventeenth century tragicomedy. Fletcher, Lope de Vega and several French playwrights and critics, especially in the critical debate around the classical bent, which was becoming more and more compelling around 1639, bear witness to the different attempts to define the genre.⁷ Not even the recent critics agree

⁶ See Guichemerre 1981: 49-55. This critic recognizes, however, that these distinctions are quite artificial (1981: 55-56).

⁷ For Fletcher's definition of tragicomedy, see note 2. Guarini, laying the stress on the quality of blending or alloy of the tragicomedy against a conception of mere juxtaposition of tragedy and comedy, says the following: "[It] takes from the one [tragedy] the great persons and not the actions, the fable verisimilar but

completely on a definition of tragicomedy of the seventeenth century. Madeleine Doran (1954) although acknowledging “the Beaumont-and-Fletcher sort of things” (p. 186) draws our attention to the close relationship between tragicomedy and romantic drama (p. 188). However, she analyses critically a definite set of tragicomic features: mixture of social classes, averted catastrophe, the satyr play and the formal theory of Guarini (pp. 193-209). Guichemerre (1981:15) dares give a straightforward definition for the French tragicomedy:

Une action dramatique souvent complexe, volontiers spectaculaire, parfois détendue par des intermèdes plaisants, où des personnages de rang princier ou nobiliaire voient leur amour ou leur raison de vivre en péril par des obstacles qui disparaîtront heureusement au dénouement.

Even allowing for further disagreement on details, anyone who has read a score of plays bearing the mark "tragicomedy" by Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, Shirley, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Hardy, Du Ryer or Rotrou will easily recognize the above definition in the actual plays. In fact, most of them would conform rather well to the following characteristics:

- Remote and palatine location.
- Idealising worldview, which manifests itself in incredible actions and events, characters subordinated to fixed stereotypes of virtue and nobility, and, as a counterpart, other characters who are stereotypes of villainy.
- Lofty and exalted diction (this is not so conspicuous in Spanish tragicomedies).
- Careful social tact which does not preclude violent or unjust actions (though never put on directly on scene): illegitimate births, sexual persecution as result of violent love, death penalties not usually carried out, attempted murders, imprisonment, etc.
- Stereotyped characters.
- Rich action: it is episodic and loaded with complication, double plots, peripety, suspense, fortunate and surprising discovery, and dramatic reversal.
- Epic atmosphere: battles and wars abound, although they are seldom presented on-stage. They are always due to romantic motivations such as love, honour or regal aspiration.
- Happy ending based in the restoration of the lost order.
- Indulgent poetical justice: even if the villains are really wicked they

not true, the affections moved but blunted, the delight but not the melancholy, the danger but not the death; from the other [comedy], the laughter that is not too relaxing, the modest amusements, the feigned complications, the happy reversal, and above all the comic order.... These component, corrected in this way, can stand together in a single fable, especially when they are handled with decorum and quality of manners that are fitting to them" (Quoted by Doran 1954: 207).

are leniently punished or even pardoned.

- As main motifs we are presented with the struggle for political power in conflicting situations, dichotomy love vs. duty/honour, the sexual persecution of a maid or married woman and her honest resistance, the neglect of the conjugal duties or other offence against a royal or aristocratic wife by her husband, the virtuous resignation of the former, the woman disguised as a boy, the frustrated love of two lovers, etc.
- Honour and knightly punctilio are a reference for the noble characters in their behaviour. Honour is usually social and of birth and class. And in the Spanish tragicomedy this kind of honour supersedes the individual honour or awareness of one's own worthiness or *honra*.
- A comic subplot is possible, but not compulsory.

It is important to note that the first characteristic (namely, that this kind of tragicomedy takes place in a remote and palatine location) is to be taken broadly in the sense that they favour the remote scenery as a way to create a neutral place out of current time and space which enhances the distance from normal life and provides the main characters, who usually belong to the nobility, with a suitable heroic status. In this way the distinction of this kind of drama from the more realistic varieties of comedy is more apparent.

A corpus of plays which neatly or almost neatly could realize the above distinctive traits of the palatine tragicomedy could be composed of the following Spanish, English and French plays: *A King and No King*, *The Loyal Subject*, *The Island Princess*, *The Mad Lover*, *A Wife for a Month*, *The Humorous Lieutenant*, *The Queen of Corinth*, *The Knight of Malta* and *The Laws of Candy* by Beaumont-Fletcher; *The Renegado*, *The Picture*, *The Emperor of the East*, *A Very Woman*, *The Bondman*, *The Maid of Honour*, *The Great Duke of Florence* by Massinger; *The Young Admiral*, *The Coronation*, *The Duke's Mistress*, *The Royal Master*, *The Gentleman of Venice*, *The Imposture*, *The Doubtful Heir* and *The Court Secret* by James Shirley; *La ocasión perdida*, *Don Lope de Cardona*, *El amor desatinado*, *La corona merecida*, *Laura perseguida*, *El príncipe melancólico*, *Ursón y Valentín*, *La infanta desesperada*, *El mayorazgo dudoso*, *Los pleitos de Ingalaterra*, *El amigo por fuerza* by Lope de Vega; *La república al revés*, *Siempre ayuda la verdad*, *Quien da luego, da dos veces* and *Amar por razón de estado* by Tirso de Molina; *Elmire ou l'hereuse bigamie*, by Alexander Hardy, *Chryselide et Arimand* by Jean de Mairet; *Tyr et Sidon* by Jean de Schelandre; *Cléomedon* by Pierre du Ryer; *Laure Persecutée*, *Venceslas*, and *Don Lope de Cardona* by Jean de Rotrou.

When we analyse the foregoing corpus we realise that there is a certain closeness in treatment and in general conception that leaps over the national frontiers and individual methods. Still, we must admit that the border between romantic comedy and tragicomedy is rather fuzzy, since we can find in the former almost all the components of palatine tragicomedy such as is seen paradigmatically, for instance, in *Philaster*. This is what happens, with *The Great Duke of Florence* by Massinger, which is less central to a definition of tragicomedy on the side of romantic comedy than *The Maid of Honour*, for instance. As it is seen by Ristine (1910:85) this seems

to be a question of quantity or degree:

Both forms employ the same materials and turn on the same situations; their difference are in degree and not in kind. When the element of impending disaster, the invariable accompaniment of stories of romantic love, is turned to the darker purposes of tragedy, then romantic comedy may be said to stiffen into the cast of its stauncher sister.

A question of degree it must be, for, to be sure, we face the same problem but in respect of tragedy when considering other plays, like *The Politician* by Shirley, which verges on tragedy through the neighbouring domain of the tragedy of the double issue. The same happens with some of the Spanish or French plays of the corpus. As we have already seen, even in the formative period of this kind of tragicomedy it was equally rooted in tragedy and comedy. Clear-cut separations do not easily occur in living forms either biological or artistic, for they are in continuous interrelation. It does not invalidate our classification but, on the contrary, shows the mutual dependence of the genres and how they leap over national boundaries. Still, a further study of a corpus more or less similar to the one provided here is needed. It would allow the European tragicomedy to be seen with more completeness and would point to the permanence of a tradition shaped in a common architect or group of plays sharing basically the same features and problems. It would also help us to understand better the ways in which several borrowings or hypertextual relationships known to us (*Don Lope de Cardona* by Lope de Vega with *Don Lope de Cardona* by Rotrou and *The Young Admiral* by Shirley, *Laura perseguida* and *Laura persecutée* and, in general, arguments from the domain of comedy, cloak and sword comedy, romantic novel) have been effected.

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