Throughout the history of Shakespearean criticism, but especially in the early eighteenth century, the critics most loyal to what Pope calls “the model of the Ancients”\(^1\) have lamented Shakespeare’s lack of taste in inserting comedy in his tragedies. They admire Shakespeare’s genius, they acknowledge that the comic passages “wou’d be good anywhere else,”\(^2\) and they are forced to admit that, in the words of Nicholas Rowe (1709), “the generality of our audiences seem to be better pleased with it [tragi-comedy] than with exact tragedy.” But, says Rowe, “the severer Critiques among us cannot bear it.”\(^3\) “Grief and Laughter,” wrote Charles Gildon (1710) “are so very incompatible that to join these two . . . wou’d be monstrous . . . And yet this Absurdity . . . is what our Shakespear himself has frequently been guilty of . . . for want of a thorough Knowledge of the Art of the Stage.”\(^4\) Lewis Theobald (1733) “would willingly impute it to the Vice of his [Shakespeare’s] Times . . . the then reigning Barbarism.”\(^5\) Dryden, indeed, had been ardent in Shakespeare’s defense, as Thomas Rhymer had been abusive; but few dared frankly approve until Dr. Johnson wrote, in 1765, “Mixing comick and tragick scenes . . . is a practice contrary to the rules of criticism . . . but there is always an appeal open from criticism to nature. . . . When Shakespeare’s plan is understood, most of the criticisms of Rhymer and Voltaire vanish away . . . The character of Polonius is seasonable and useful, and the Grave-diggers themselves may be heard with applause.”\(^6\) But

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\(^3\) Rowe: Some Account of the Life, etc., of Mr. William Shakespear (1709) in Smith, p. 10.


\(^5\) Theobald: Preface to Edition of Shakespeare (1733), in Smith, p. 73.

even in the early nineteenth century, the smoke of battle had not wholly passed. Coleridge7 and Hazlitt8 felt bound to justify
the Fool in "King Lear;" Schlegel, repeating the argument of
Dr. Johnson,9 thought it necessary to insist that violations of the
pseudo-classical rules, including "the contrast of sport and earn-
est, . . . are not mere licenses but true beauties of the
romantic drama;"10 and Ulrici in 1830 could still say, "Shakespeare
has always (and again quite recently) been reproached . . . for
having introduced scenes of low comedy into his overpower-
ing tragedies."11 Nothing, indeed, could show more clearly the
advance of critical opinion since Ulrici's day than the fact that
Professor A. C. Bradley, in his recent book "Shakespearian
Tragedy," can discuss Shakespeare's use of comic scenes12
without the slightest hint of controversy.

The long continuance of this dispute makes interesting a two-
fold inquiry:—

(1) If a modern critic, adopting for a moment the pseudo-clas-
sical rule,13 were to condemn all comedy in tragedy, in what
passages in Shakespeare would he find offense?

(2) Would he find no way to reconcile these passages with the
canon they are alleged to contravene?

The first difficulty is one of definition. Gildon, for example,
discusses under the head of "Tragedy" all the plays so catalogued in
the First Folio, together with "Troilus and Cressida" which
in that volume is left unclassified.14 Five of these, however, the
modern critic must reject. "Titus Andronicus," "Timon of

9 Schlegel: Dramatic Art (Bohn) pp. 370-71.
10 Ibid.: p. 344.
13 "There is no place in tragedy for anything but grave and serious ac-
14 See "A Catalogue of the Several Comedies, Histories and Tragedies
Contained in This Volume" in Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, His-
tories and Tragedies. Published according To The True Original Copys.
London. Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed Blount. 1623.
The comic passages occurring in these plays Gildon, of course, included among the “Errors” of our Poet; but we, having assumed the modern point of view, may confine our discussion to the eight plays admitted to be both tragic and Shakespearean, namely: “Romeo and Juliet,” “Julius Cæsar,” “Hamlet,” “Othello,” “King Lear,” “Macbeth,” “Antony and Cleopatra,” and “Coriolanus.”

In these eight plays, the comic passages may, for our purpose, be best classified according to their effect upon the modern reader or audience:

(I) Comic passages that in effect are comic;
(II) Comic passages that, through contrast with their tragic setting, are, in effect, tragic or pathetic; and
(III) Comic passages that, by relieving the tension, contribute to the tragic effect of the passages that follow.

The classification of any particular passage will vary somewhat with the mood and temperament of the reader; and in many instances, moreover, a single passage will fall under more than one class. But the Cobbler in the opening scene of “Julius Cæsar” affords a fairly clear example of the comedy that, in effect, is merely comic (Class I); Mercutio’s dying jest in “Romeo and Juliet” (III, 1) and the fooling in the Mad Scene in “King Lear” (III, 6) illustrate the comedy that, through contrast with its tragic setting, itself becomes tragic in effect (Class II); and finally, the comedy of Osric’s part in “Hamlet”—without which the audience, already over-wrought by the tragedy of Ophelia’s burial, would be less sensitive to the full tragic import of the catastrophe that follows—strengthens the tragic effect indirectly by contributing relief (Class III).

Let us now examine these eight tragedies in order. In “Romeo and Juliet,” the first half of the play consists of a few passionate love-scenes in a setting of gayety. The “scenes of low

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tension” (to borrow Professor Bradley’s phrase16) are largely comic, with the Nurse and Peter and Mercutio in leading parts. All this must be accounted mirth for mirth’s sake (Class I); for not until the scene of the duels does the play become tragic. From that point, however, the comic element ceases — with two exceptions. The first of these is an example of the mirth that, by contrast, heightens the tragic effect (Class II) — Mercutio’s jests before the duel and his dying breath.

Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man . . .
A plague o’ both your Houses!

The second, however, belongs distinctly to Class I; it is comedy that is comic in effect, and, as such, most unseasonable. At the end of Act IV, just after the discovery of the supposed death of Juliet, Peter the Clown has a long jesting conversation with the musicians. This may be an attempt at a “scene of low tension.” Such relief is needed at this point after the excitement of the fourth act; and, even in a tragic setting, comedy is one method of obtaining this relief. But if this was the purpose, the result is inartistic. The jesting does not relieve; it merely jars. It seems to exist solely to meet the demands of the Elizabethan audience, or of the Clown himself, for more fooling. Perhaps, in Shakespeare’s mind, it was not a part of the play but rather an independent interlude. It is, however, the only instance, in these eight plays, where comedy that does not aid the tragic effect intrudes after the tragedy is under way.

The next play, “Julius Cæsar,” is relatively barren of comedy. It has, indeed, “scenes of low tension;” but these for the most part, as Cæsar’s greeting to “Antony, that revels long o’ nights” or the kindness of Brutus to his sleeping page, are light rather than comic. Perhaps blunt Casca contains comic possibilities; so, perhaps, does the scene in which Cinna the Poet is mobbed for his bad verses. But to me the only inevitably comic passage is the quibbling between the Cobbler and the Tribunes. This, like the jesting of Samson and Gregory in “Romeo and

Juliet," serves to catch the attention of the audience in the opening scene. Both passages belong to Class I: comedy of comic effect.

In "Hamlet," however, the use of comedy is more conspicuous. Polonius, to whom "brevity is the soul of wit," often causes a sad smile himself or occasions some quick thrust from Hamlet. These comic passages contribute to the tragic effect—sometimes only as comic relief (Class III), but more often as themselves of tragic effect (Class II). Such for example, are the lines in Act II, Scene 2:—

Polonius: My honorable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you.

Hamlet: You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal;—except my life, except my life, except my life.

And there is decided grimness in the mad jest of Hamlet to the King (IV, 3):—

Where is Polonius?
At supper . . . a certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him.

More important, however, are the comic scenes which Garrick eliminated when he produced the play in 1772—they contain the Grave-diggers and Osric. The latter character, entering between the funeral of Ophelia and the final slaughter, relieves the nervous tension of the audience and so makes possible a deeper consciousness of the tragedy of the closing scene (Class III). The Grave-diggers, however, not only give similar relief between the drowning of Ophelia and her burial (Class III), but also, by their mirth at such a time and place, contribute the last needed touch of pathos (Class II). "The Grave-diggers' scene," says Lowell, "always impresses me as one of the most pathetic in the whole tragedy. . . . All we remember of Ophelia reacts upon us with tenfold force, and we recoil from our amusement at the ghastly drollery of the two delvers with a shock of horror. That the unconscious Hamlet should stumble on this grave of all others, that it should be here that he should

17 Lounsbury: *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*: p. 166.
pause to muse humorously on death and decay—all this prepares us for the revulsion of passion in the next scene, and for the frantic confession,

'I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum' \(^{18}\)

In "Othello," for the first time since "Romeo and Juliet," we find in the first half of the play several comic passages in a setting not necessarily tragic. Iago's jesting with Desdemona on her arrival at Cyprus (II, 1), the humorous aspect—if there be one—of Cassio's drunkenness (II 3), and the jesting of the clown as he dismisses the musicians at the opening of the third act—all these come before the tragedy proper has begun, and will seem comic or pathetic according to the reader's consciousness of the impending tragedy. In the second half of the play, unless one can smile at the unconscious irony of Emilia (IV, 2), the only comic scene is the jesting between Desdemona and the Clown (III, 4). This dialogue comes immediately between the passage in which Iago has roused the fury of Othello and that in which the Moor demands his handkerchief of Desdemona. It may be classed, therefore, with the Osric scene in "Hamlet," as existing to relieve the nervous tension of the audience (Class III); but its more important purpose is to heighten the pathos by contrasting the innocent happiness of Desdemona with the jealous passion of her lord (Class II). The last two acts contain nothing that is broadly comic. In "King Lear" and in "Macbeth" the use of comedy is similar to that in "Hamlet," already fully discussed. In each, the tragic struggle begins early in the play; and in each the comedy exists, not for its own sake, but to relieve, and more often to heighten, the tragic effect (Classes III and II). In "King Lear," Edgar and the Fool and Kent may have seemed laughable to an Elizabethan audience; but to a modern reader or auditor the effect is tragic or pathetic. In "Macbeth" the comedy is confined practically to two passages.

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One, the Porter-scene, which falls just between the "knocking at the gate" and the discovery of Duncan's murder, heightens the horror (Class II) far more than it relieves. The other, the playful dialogue between Lady Macduff and her child, may give momentary relief from the tension of the cauldron scene (Class III); but to the reader, who knows that the murderers are at the door, this charming prattle is, in effect, most piteous. Even more than the scene between Desdemona and the Clown, it must be accounted tragic in effect (Class II). In "Macbeth," as in "King Lear," there is no comedy that is comic.

"Antony and Cleopatra," however, is a return to the type of "Othello" and "Romeo and Juliet:" the type, namely, in which the tragic issue of the struggle is not inevitable until the middle of the play. In its first half, therefore, we find the teasing witcheries of Cleopatra, the merriment of her women, and the jesting of Enobarbus; but this mere mirth for mirth's sake (Class I) occurs before Antony, in his infatuation for his "serpent of old Nile," has thrown defiance to Octavius. From the moment that Antony abandons Cæsar's sister, reconciliation is impossible. The death-struggle follows, and Antony's love for Cleopatra works his destruction. The tragedy, evident from the moment of the flight at Actium, is uninterrupted. Not until the final scene does comedy reappear, and then with tragic effect: the passage, namely, in which the Clown brings to the captive queen an asp, a "worm"—and wishes her "joy."

One comic passage in this play demands separate consideration, namely, the carousal of the triumvirs upon Pompey's galley (II, 7). Here the mirth is of the maddest; but what rivets our attention is the possibility that Menas will cut the cable, murder the triumvirs, and make young Pompey master of the world. In such a setting, the effect of the comedy is far from comic, yet it is not exactly tragic. It does not even relieve the tension of the audience. On the contrary, it increases the tension. Perhaps for this passage we must invent a fourth class: comedy that heightens, not the tragedy, but the nervous excitement of the scene.

Only one play now remains to be considered: "Coriolanus."
This differs from the other tragedies in that the struggle that makes it tragic—the spiritual conflict between the hero's pride and his duty to country, mother, and wife—does not become openly inevitable until the final act. The conflict between Coriolanus and the rabble is not tragic. Even when threatened with exile, he retorts undaunted,

You common cry of curs! . . I banish you . . .
There is a world elsewhere;

and he departs only to reappear victorious. Nor is the conflict between him and the Volscian general tragic. Aufidius, although at last his murderer, is at no time large enough to be party to a tragic struggle. These two minor conflicts are but a disguise for four acts that might almost be called expositional, acts that serve primarily to make clear the hero's character and to create the conditions of the major conflict. This, the real tragic struggle, is first brought home to the hero when, in Act V, scene 2, he replies sadly to Menenius:

Wife, mother, child, I know not . . .
. . . Therefore, be gone.

Willingly he would evade the issue; but at the sight of Virgilia and Volumnia (V. 3) his contending passions clinch. From that instant, either alternative must be

. . . . most mortal to him.

This, then, is the struggle that makes "Coriolanus" a tragedy; and its postponement to the final act permits, in the scenes of low tension, a larger amount of mirth for mirth's sake (Class I) than we would otherwise expect. These passages occur in the speeches of the citizens and of Menenius in the first two acts, and in the conversation of Coriolanus himself and of the servants, in Act IV, scene 5. The latter passage, in view of its position in the play (compare the Grave-diggers in "Hamlet") would fall usually under Classes II and III. But in "Coriolanus" the scenes that immediately follow and precede contain no tragedy; and there is no need, therefore, either to heighten or to relieve.
Both in purpose and in effect, the passage is merely comic (Class I). In the fifth act, however, the tone is changed. The discomfiture of old Menenius by the sentries is decidedly pathetic (Class II); and although "in the very middle of the supreme scene between the hero, Volumnia, and Virgilia, little Marcus," to quote from Professor Bradley, "makes us burst out laughing," yet our laughter is so akin to tears that the passage must be classed as tragic in effect (Class II).

The foregoing discussion, while pointing out the more evident instances in which Shakespeare, by using comedy in tragedy, violated the pseudo-classical canon, has also, I hope, suggested a ground of reconciliation. In several of these tragedies, a fatal termination is not at first inevitable: many comic passages, therefore, stand in a setting no more tragic than do the comic passages of a romantic comedy — for example, "Twelfth Night." On the other hand, many passages that would be merely amusing if separated from their context, are in effect tragic, if examined in relation to their setting. If, then, we re-interpret the pseudo-classical canon; if we limit the word "comedy" to that which is comic in effect as well as in itself, and exclude from "tragedy" those early scenes or acts before the tragic ending has become inevitable: if in this sense we take the phrase "comedy in tragedy," then, in all these eight tragedies, Shakespeare has used comedy in tragedy but once. Even this instance, the interlude after the supposed death of Juliet, is not necessarily an exception; for, since this play is not only the earliest of Shakespeare's tragedies but also among the earliest of Shakespeare's plays, we may, if we prefer, call this passage an amateurish attempt to heighten tragedy by comic relief. But, with this possible exception, every comic passage either comes early in the play where it is not "in tragedy" — for example, Mercutio's mockery of the Nurse (II, 4) — or else — like the Grave-diggers in "Hamlet," the Porter and Lady Macduff's child in "Macbeth," the Fool in "King Lear," and the passage in which the simple country-man wishes Cleopatra "all joy of the worm" — the comic passage is tragic or pathetic in effect, and consequently, by our definition, is no longer "comedy." In the real
Shakespearean tragedies, therefore—as distinguished from "Titus Andronicus," "Timon," "Pericles," "Cymbeline," and "Troilus and Cressida"—only once at most does Shakespeare really violate the pseudo-classical canon that forbids comedy in tragedy. If this be so, let no one wonder that the old quarrel between romanticist and pseudo-classicist is dead. Their quarrel was one of names, not of realities.

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