



# SHAKESPEARE'S PROBLEM COMEDIES

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TO  
A. C. BRADLEY  
INTERPRETER OF ENGLISH POETRY  
AND OF SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

## PREFACE

This book is, to a considerable extent, the result of pre-occupation with the Middle Ages. For the past twenty-five years, I have been working in mediæval language and literature with graduate students in Columbia University, and for nearly the same length of time I have given a course in Shakespeare for undergraduates. Discussions in this course have often shown that perplexing questions connected with Shakespeare's art may be solved by a consideration of his inheritance from earlier times. By this I do not mean the usual "source study," but something much more comprehensive. His plays are, of course, not complete re-creations of older themes in the spirit of his own age, but a combination of Elizabethan conceptions and mediæval survivals. No Chinese wall separated him from the Middle Ages; the Renaissance, that much-abused and yet shadowy term, means not a new birth after death, but a new spirit in a living and developing body. Most of the mediæval elements in Shakespeare's work are not obscure or difficult to understand, though considerable study is required to make clear the subtler issues. Many problems which baffled the older critics, and which are still subjects of controversy, may by this general method of approach be much better understood, and often definitely settled.

My original intention was to write a book illustrating the general importance of a study of mediæval literature and life for an understanding of Shakespeare's plays. During the past quarter century, however, much highly significant research has been published, historical in method, rather than

appreciative or impressionistic or philosophical. At the present day there is assuredly no need of elaborate argument to prove that the man who would understand Shakespeare must have some knowledge of the centuries preceding. The dangers of taking a purely modern point of view have often been stressed with striking results, as in the criticism of *Hamlet*.

It happens, however, that the so-called gloomy comedies, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, which are singularly well adapted to this method of approach, have, with the exceptions of portions of *Troilus*, been very little so treated, and never, I think, as a group. They present very great difficulties, and critics are still far from agreement in regard to their proper interpretation. Their relation to Shakespeare's other plays, and to literary and social changes in his day, is still imperfectly understood. Both plot and characterization are greatly illuminated by study of mediæval analogues and customs. Such study carries us on, with *Cymbeline* and the *Winter's Tale*, into the era of the Dramatic Romances. Perhaps the attempt to solve the definite problems presented by this group of plays will have a concreteness and an interest which a more extended treatment of Shakespeare's work as a whole might lack.

The Notes have been reduced as much as possible. I see no need of repeating easily accessible information. The bibliography of Shakespeare is now so large that it is impossible to give credit for every borrowed idea, or indeed to be sure that ideas which one thinks original may not lurk somewhere in print. I have, of course, relegated to the Notes discussions of matters too specialized for the main text, but such discussions, which might be almost indefinitely extended, have been sternly subordinated. Portions of Chapters II

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and V have appeared already, in somewhat different form, in the *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*; and some passages in Chapter IV have been taken from an essay of mine in *Shaksperian Studies by Members of the Department of English and Comparative Literature in Columbia University*, New York, 1916. Detailed references will be found under the appropriate chapters, in the Notes. The Modern Language Association and the Columbia University Press have courteously accorded permission to reprint. Quotations from the plays in the present volume follow Neilson's text in the Cambridge Edition, Boston and New York, 1906.

My colleagues Professor Ashley H. Thorndike and Professor George C. D. Odell have given me assistance which I gratefully acknowledge. Professor William T. Brewster has had the great kindness to read the entire book in manuscript, and I recall with gratitude the friendly interest and counsel of the late Professor Brander Matthews. The obligations of the worker in Shakespearean drama to the published researches of others are too great to be stated in detail.

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May, 1930.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

IN the Chorus preceding the Fifth Act of *Henry V*, Shakespeare, departing from his usual though not invariable custom, introduced the familiar contemporary allusion to the expedition of the Earl of Essex to Ireland, which dates the passage, and inferentially the completion of the play, in the year 1599. Other evidence confirms the conclusion that this was the last of his chronicle plays dealing with English history and written in the closing years of the sixteenth century. He was at that time approaching the height of his creative power; he had gained a solid reputation as a dramatist and a man of letters, and he had become a shareholder in a theatrical company whose prosperity was in part dependent upon his pen. Some ten years of great productivity lay behind him. He had written two tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, but his greatest achievement had been in comedy. The range and variety of his work in this field are remarkable; the dates of the comedies are uncertain, but we know from Meres that he must by 1598 have written *Love's Labor's Lost*, the *Comedy of Errors*, the *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the *Merchant of Venice*. To these, by the turn of the century, must in all probability be added the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, the *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. What piece may be concealed under Meres's allusion to *Love's Labor's Won* is still a matter for speculation.

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The playwright, least of all craftsmen, can pursue his art along fixed and unvarying lines. He must be alert to perceive changes in the public taste, he must be conscious of the value of novelty, he must study the successes and the failures of his fellows. As he grows in maturity and insight, he must put the best of his ripened powers into his work. If he fails to do these things, he will soon find himself falling behind, and becoming, not the entertainer of the present, but the memory of a bygone generation. Shakespeare made no such mistake. He was singularly quick to perceive changes in theatrical fashions, to provide his public with new varieties of amusement, and to pour out the best which he had to give for their deeper reflection. This was characteristic of him down to the very end of his active career in the theatre. In the *Tempest*, perhaps the last play wholly from his pen, he adapted effective elements from the Court masques and from current tales of adventure in the New World, which were then stirring the imagination of Englishmen, with no hint of the fatigue or the indifference of the magician about to break his staff and drown his book.

Especially noteworthy are the new paths into which he set his feet midway in his career. He did not neglect types of drama which had already proved successful, and in 1600 and 1601, to set conjectural dates, he produced *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, the most delightful of joyous comedies. But more serious themes were engaging his attention. He turned, probably first as early as 1599, in *Julius Caesar*, to tragedy based upon classical themes, following this later with *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and the collaborated *Timon of Athens*. Beginning with *Hamlet*, he was occupied with the four great tragedies in the first five or six years of the century. So prodigal an outpouring of

masterpieces of the first rank in so brief a space of time hardly finds a parallel in literary history. This appears still more remarkable when we add *All's Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*.

These three comedies mark one of the most striking developments of Shakespeare's genius. They were probably written between 1599 and 1605, though the dating of no one of them is certain, and all of them show evidences of revision.<sup>1</sup> While they were composed, no doubt, in alternation with other work, they resemble each other closely in style and temper, and may be conveniently studied together. The settings and the plots are still those of romance, but the treatment is in the main serious and realistic. They are concerned, not with the pleasant and fantastic aspects of life, but with painful experiences and with the darker complexities of human nature. Instead of gay pictures of cheerful scenes, to be accepted with a smile and a jest, we are frequently offered unpleasant and sometimes even repulsive episodes, and characters whose conduct gives rise to sustained questioning of action and motive. These pieces, in short, reveal to us a new phase of Shakespeare's mind, and a new type of comedy. The term "problem plays" has been proposed for them by F. S. Boas, who would also include *Hamlet* in the group. "All these dramas," he says, "introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness. Amidst such media abnormal conditions of brain and of emotion are generated, and intricate cases of conscience demand a solution by unprecedented methods. Thus throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome, even when, as in *All's Well* and *Measure for*

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*Measure*, the complications are outwardly adjusted in the fifth act. In *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* no such partial settlement of difficulties takes place, and we are left to interpret their enigmas as best we may. Dramas so singular in theme and temper cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies. We may therefore borrow a convenient phrase from the theatre of today and class them together as Shakspeare's problem-plays." <sup>a</sup>||

Application to the Elizabethan age of a term usually confined to the present day has obvious dangers, but its use appears allowable if its meaning is made perfectly clear. We may note the modernity of the work of Shakespeare in the pieces now under consideration; Bernard Shaw has observed that "in such unpopular plays as *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*, we find him ready and willing to start at the nineteenth century if the seventeenth would only let him." <sup>a</sup> But we cannot escape the necessity of making a working definition. <sup>4</sup>|| The essential characteristic of a problem play, I take it, is that a perplexing and distressing complication in human life is presented in a spirit of high seriousness. This special treatment distinguishes such a play from other kinds of drama, in that the theme is handled so as to arouse not merely interest or excitement, or pity or amusement, but to probe the complicated interrelations of character and action, in a situation admitting of different ethical interpretations. <sup>||</sup> The "problem" is not like one in mathematics, to which there is a single true solution, but is one of conduct, as to which there are no fixed and immutable laws. Often it cannot be reduced to any formula, any one question, since human life is too complex to be so neatly simplified. Familiar illustrations may be found in the prose dramas of Ibsen. For instance, various problems are implied in *An Enemy of the People*—

the duty of the citizen to the community, the right of a husband and father to sacrifice family comfort to his conception of such a duty, the value of compromise as against outspoken opposition to social abuses, and so forth. The outcome proposed by the dramatist is not the only possible way out of the difficulties; several playwrights, working with the same characters in the same situations, might well reach different conclusions. Sometimes the personages are left at the end in the midst of their troubles; in the play just named, nothing is really settled at the end. Usually, however, some resolution of the complications of the plot is suggested. In consequence of the painful nature of the events characteristic of this type of play, the issue will often be tragedy, as in *Hedda Gabler* or *Rosmersholm*. Or the problem may be resolved in a way that is not tragic, as in *A Doll's House*. Whether we shall, in this latter case, call the play a comedy or not is a matter of definition and agreement; most readers feel that this particular piece is too serious in mood and theme for comedy.

The term "problem play," then, is particularly useful to apply to those productions which clearly do not fall into the category of tragedy, and yet are too serious and analytic to fit the commonly accepted conception of comedy. Indeed, when the problem play becomes tragedy, it is, I think, best considered under that rubric; at all events, there is no difficulty in so classifying it. Moreover, it is often very hard to determine whether a tragedy may also be called a problem play, or may be better so named. For these reasons, I prefer to exclude *Hamlet* from the group of Shakespearean problem plays proposed by Boas. On the other hand, there is little ambiguity in classifying the Shakespearean problem comedies, which stand sharply apart from the comedies of a lighter sort. I am therefore limiting the

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present study to *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and the wager-plot in *Cymbeline*, which affords a conspicuous illustration of the method in the Dramatic Romances.

Some further cautions and explanations are desirable. In the first place, the "problem" mood must not only be prominent in the action; it must dominate it. Painful and even tragic complications may occur in comedy, they may even be used for a deeper purpose than merely as contrast to more cheerful matters, but they will not make a problem play unless they constitute the controlling interest. Thus in the *Merchant of Venice*, the clash between Jew and Gentile is set forth in a spirit of high seriousness, and is most significant for the play as a whole. Shakespeare was obviously greatly interested in it; he balanced its conflicting issues in his own mind, and gave compelling eloquence to Shylock's recital of Jewish wrongs. Nevertheless, he made it only a part of a complicated action, with separate plots, which taken as a whole must clearly be classified as romantic comedy. Probably we give to the Jewish problem greater stress on the stage today, and regard Shylock's misfortunes more seriously than did the Elizabethans, who took their amusements naïvely, and who retained much of the mediæval religious hatred of the Jews. The case is similar in *Twelfth Night*, with the sufferings of Malvolio, a good and honest, but dull person, with no sense of humor, who finds his darling ambition shattered amid the ridicule of those whom he knows to be at once happier and less virtuous than himself. Here Shakespeare, with his marvellous insight, gave to comedy a subtlety which we rarely find in his fellow dramatists. But there seems little doubt that the tragic element was greatly subordinated in Elizabethan performances of this merry piece, and it may be rightly so. Nowa-

days we stress it unduly. Stage versions of the play are arranged to give prominence to the part of Malvolio, and many actors, among whom Irving was conspicuous, have darkened the bright sunshine of Illyria with Malvolio's misfortunes.

Still less do the tragic elements in a tragicomedy make of it a problem play. Tragicomedy is hard to define exactly, but it clearly lacks the seriousness essential if this term is to be used. It is not analytical but theatrical. As Professor Ristine puts the matter, "The essential lack of the integrating qualities that make for lasting drama is the besetting fault of tragicomedy. It presents no transcript from life; it neglects portrayal of character and psychological analysis for plot and theatricality; it substitutes dramatic falsity for dramatic truth; it emphasizes novelty, sensation, surprise, startling effect." <sup>5</sup> The controlling spirit in a problem play must obviously be realism. No serious analysis of the difficult issues of life is possible unless the dramatist comes to grips with things as they actually exist. The theme itself may have grown out of popular story, and may still retain the irrationalities of such story, but it must be taken as a real human problem, and discussed as such. For example, the conditions imposed upon Helena by Bertram, or upon Isabella by Angelo, seem fantastic, and the means taken to fulfil them almost equally so, but we are made to feel the reality of the sufferings of these unhappy ladies, the grim necessity which drives them to remedies so desperate. The "problems" which confront them are taken by Shakespeare seriously and realistically, not with the easy geniality of romance. Contrast the romantic sufferings of Rosalind or Viola, which are as unconvincing as the serpent and lioness in the forest of Arden, or the shipwreck on the shores of Orsino's dominions.

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It must be noted immediately, however, that realistic treatment is by no means maintained throughout Shakespeare's problem comedies. He was obviously far more interested in the complications of the action than in its resolution. He treats the development of the intrigue seriously and analytically, but he is impatient of reaching a solution by the same method. In *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* he closes his play with the stock theatrical devices of romantic comedy. In *Troilus and Cressida* he stops the action abruptly; nothing is concluded. In *Cymbeline*, which begins in the full manner of the problem plays, he relaxes his grip on realities after the ending of the Second Act, throwing coherence to the winds, and pouring out his whole bag of stage tricks in a complicated and superficially effective close. We shall examine all this in detail later. It is characteristic of his general procedure in comedy. As Neilson says, "the philosophical significance [of the comedies] stops short, as a rule, in the fifth act. The marrying off, at the close, of all eligible youths and maidens is more a concession to the convention of the happy ending demanded by the particular type of drama than the logical outcome of the characters or their deeds."<sup>6</sup> Clearly, too, realism is much hampered by the demands of a pre-existing plot. This point hardly needs to be elaborated; we are all familiar with its importance in the consideration of *Lear* or *Hamlet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. While Shakespeare exercised freedom in the alteration and manipulation of the plot-material which he had borrowed, he was also to a great extent controlled by it. His task was not so much the logical and realistic working out of a given situation as the psychological rationalization of a pre-existing story. In this regard his procedure was far removed from that of Ibsen or Sudermann or Pinero, and close to that of Chaucer in



*Troilus and Criseyde*, or of Wolfram in *Parzival*, or of Wagner in *Tristan und Isolde*.

If the foregoing definitions and cautions are kept in mind, it appears legitimate to call these three Shakespearean comedies "problem plays." They represent a radical departure in his art: the serious and realistic treatment of a distressing complication in human life, but without a tragic outcome. Some phrase to designate them is highly convenient, and I know of none better than this, nor of any other as good, and I adopt it the more readily since it is not my own, but is borrowed from the distinguished English critic who was, I think, the first to give it this application.

There is a special reason for discussing these comedies afresh, which I have already suggested in the Preface—the distressing lack of critical agreement as to their interpretation. Oddly enough, they seem never to have been studied minutely and dispassionately as a group, and their complexities probed in the light of modern knowledge. The "best authorities" are often directly contradictory, one praising a character for conduct which another regards as reprehensible; one perceiving a faithful transcript of life, and the beauty of heroism triumphing over great obstacles, where another can find only a gibe and a sneer. I have reviewed some of these disagreements in the chapters which follow. We shall see that Andrew Lang and Masfield have maintained as positively that Helena is despicable as Hazlitt and Coleridge did that she is admirable; that Dr. Johnson thought that *All's Well* contains no moral, while Gerwinus believed it is all moralizing; that Isabella, who is to most critics lovely and virtuous, seems to Quiller-Couch "a bare procuress," and that the Duke, who is generally censured for being shifty and untruthful and for violating law and religious observance, emerges, from one of the