Shakespeare's Irrational Endings
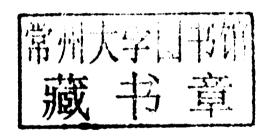
The Problem Plays

David Margolies

Shakespeare's Irrational Endings

The Problem Plays

David Margolies
Emeritus Professor of English, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

palgrave
macmillan

Preface and Acknowledgements

The Problem Plays, in my years of teaching Shakespeare to English and drama students, were always awkward. With the histories, the comedies and the tragedies, students knew where they were and they knew (or thought they knew) why the characters acted as they did. But the Problem Plays had actions, the endings in particular, where answers to questions about motive seemed unsatisfactory. This made the plays disturbing – not hugely disturbing on nightmare proportions but producing an uncertainty that lingered. Why did they end like that? In the other plays the playworlds appeared to contain the answers: we could look at the motives of the characters and we could judge the consequences of their behaviour. But the Problem Plays seemed to lack any stable connection between cause and effect; they had too many arbitrary elements. Arbitrariness is a result of the author's intentions, not those of the characters; Shakespeare must have intended the disturbance. Naturalistic understanding of the playworld could not explain the situation. I found myself crossing into territory everybody has been warned against: we cannot know Shakespeare's intentions – don't go there. Treating the plays as structures designed to produce emotional response in an audience I found to be a fruitful approach – the plays started to make sense. The Problem Plays are still awkward but I now admire their enormous skill and, not bound to naturalism, I enjoy them more than I had ever imagined. I hope this book can also make readers' experience of the plays more pleasurable.

I am grateful for the tolerance of all my family in putting up with my distraction from concerns of daily life over the last couple of years. I also wish to thank Cushla Brennan for her helpful comments on the *Measure for Measure* chapter and Leonard Goldstein for his criticism of the chapter on *The Merchant of Venice*. Most of all I thank Sandra Margolies for her continuing expert criticism and wise advice, and for her patience in having to live with someone else's deadlines. This book is dedicated to her.

David Margolies

Note on Texts

The editions of Shakespeare plays used in the different chapters are as follows:

All's Well That Ends Well (1994) ed. Susan Snyder (Oxford: Oxford World Classics)

Much Ado About Nothing (1981) ed. A. R. Humphreys (London: Arden)

Measure for Measure (1994) ed. N. W. Bawcutt (Oxford: Oxford World Classics)

The Merchant of Venice (1998) ed. Jay L. Halio (Oxford: Oxford World Classics)

Troilus and Cressida (1984) Kenneth Muir (Oxford: Oxford Shakespeare)

Othello (1968) ed. Kenneth Muir (Harmondsworth: Penguin)

Hamlet (1982) ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Arden)

King Lear (1972) ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Arden)

References to other Shakespeare plays are taken from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (2005) *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon)
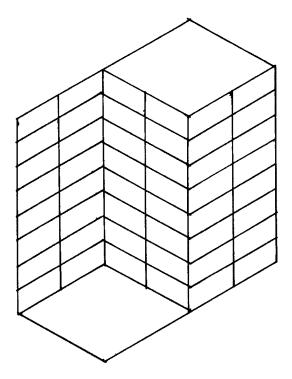
Contents

1
Introduction

A few of Shakespeare's plays – not quite tragedies, not quite comedies, neither histories nor romances – were quarantined in the late nineteenth century in the category of Problem Plays.[1] *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, the conventional group, were identified as Problem Comedies, but *Troilus and Cressida* certainly was not a comedy and the comic quality of the other two was constrained by their bitterness. They were not felt to have sufficient similarity to constitute their own positive category and were rather an 'any other' group. Changes in critical approaches that followed major changes in social attitudes in the last century revivified interest in the plays. New relevance and new meanings have been found in the texts. The conventional group of three has also been recognized as sharing significant characteristics with a number of other plays, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Much Ado About Nothing* in particular, and to them, as I will argue, *Othello* should also be added.[2] The environmental, economic and social problems that have reached crisis point in this century, and the political structures that seem inadequate to deal with them, the widespread corruption in high places and the deluge of political spin, have had their effect on the arts and given the Problem Plays a new attractiveness. Shakespeare does not preach, he does not confront; he is neither an Edward Bond nor a late Pinter, but he does pose contradictions. These contradictions have always been there in the plays, but now people's experience of the gap between official rhetoric and social reality makes them important. The attraction of these six plays does not lie in any answers Shakespeare provides; it is the excitement of seeing

in the theatre a relevant and witty response to the disintegration of society around us.

Contradiction is fundamental to the nature of drama, and all Shakespeare's plays could be said to deal with it. 'Drama, by definition, is dialogical, it is the meeting point of often conflicting attitudes to a chosen subject', Alexander Shurbanov and Boika Sokolova point out. In the Problem Plays these contradictions are created in such a way that they cannot be resolved. In the words again of Shurbanov and Sokolova, 'most dramas, like most artistic products in general, strive to transcend this dialogical status and attain a conclusive synthesis of attitude and meaning. Shakespeare's drama is rather exceptional in that it does not seem to strive towards any such final transcendence, a peculiarity defined by the tradition of liberal humanism as the poet's proverbial elusiveness' (Shurbanov and Sokolova, 2001, p. 17).[3] The major Soviet Shakespeare critic Alexander Anikst said, 'Shakespeare's plays are nearly always problem plays, and not just the ones which we normally call the "problem plays" ' (Anikst, 1989, p. 179). All the plays necessarily have some conflict or there would be no plot but the plays I include in the category under discussion have contradictions that are more than simple conflicts. They go beyond oppositions of subject matter; they are contradictions between the form and the content and they are therefore impossible to resolve. They are most obvious in the endings of plays where the form has led to audience expectations which are fulfilled at a formal level but, in terms of the content, are frustrated. Shakespeare's comedies commonly end in marriages, by definition a happy form, but the marriages of the Problem Plays are for the most part not at all happy. Thus the happy form is filled with a dubious content; form and content are in contradiction. The endings produce emotional responses that are positive and negative at the same time, not the one and then the other. Part of the effectiveness of Shakespeare's construction is that these contradictions cannot be reasoned away or balanced out as a mediocre relationship. They arise from the same event but are attached to different aspects (the form and the content) and thus exist effectively in different dimensions. The nearest parallel for me is optical illusions – for example, the drawing of two stacks where one's perception of the visual keeps changing, as in the Figure opposite.

The contradictions of the Problem Plays are like the visual contradictions in the graphic work of M. C. Escher – his 'Waterfall', for example, where the conventions of linear perspective are organized so as to make a credible image of an impossible relationship. Audience responses to the play's form are logical, their responses to the content are logical, but together the two are in contradiction; together, they are no longer logical. They are irrational – and it is from that situation that I take the title of the book.

An audience that is responsive to a Problem Play must experience some uneasiness from this contradiction. It is not then surprising that the Problem Plays usually fail to produce the pleasure audiences expect from comedies like *As You Like It* or the cathartic sadness they expect from tragedies like *Hamlet* (although directors seem now to favour treating *Much Ado* as a happy play, emphasizing the sub-plot at the expense of the main one). But in an age of growing cynicism and where authority is subjected to unprecedented questioning, the

plays fit the spirit of the time and can indeed provide a satisfying experience, even though the pleasure is usually qualitatively different from that produced by the major comedies.

The problem of the Problem Plays

Most of the obstacles that mislead understanding of Shakespeare's plays generally are a particular nuisance in making sense of the Problem Plays. The most common problem is the assumption that the plays are naturalistic. Television has ingrained naturalism as the default mode; audiences and readers tend to assume that plays mirror external reality and too often apply that expectation to Shakespeare's plays. Even when the playworld contains supernatural elements such as the witches in *Macbeth*, naturalism can accommodate them if the belief in witches is attributed, not to present-day audiences, but to the audience of Shakespeare's day. The difficulty for the understanding of the plays is that the chief concern of the dramatist is considered to be the imitation of reality, rendering in detail what people do, rather than the production of significance by the way that material is used; hence, the audience focuses on the evidence rather than the argument. This is not stupidity or naivety; it is cultural habit. A highly intelligent lecturer in English of my acquaintance, after seeing the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1969 gold-lamé-jockstrap production of *Troilus and Cressida* at the Aldwych, lavished praise on the play for what it had taught him about the Greeks.

A corollary of naturalism is that the play is reflecting part of a continuous narrative, with the expectation that there are no gaps in time or space. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* sends up this kind of thinking – Stoppard provides continuity of the narrative of the eponymous heroes where Shakespeare has them not on stage. The attitude can also be seen as a misapplication of novelistic thinking, a criticism Alistair Fowler levels at current directors: 'Nowadays, novelistically minded directors tend to iron out Shakespeare's interwoven structures into a single, rationalized sequence, with at most a "main plot" and "sub plot" ' (Fowler, 2003, p. 100). Pauline Kiernan also raises objection to continuing the simplistic approach of Bradley, treating the play as if it were a novel: 'commentators still discuss Shakespeare's drama as mimetic illusion' without considering 'what *kind* of illusion he sought to create' (Kiernan, 1996, p. 95).

The 'novelistic' attitude can also be seen in narrowing the range of the explanations for characters' actions in the play to their personal motives. When Hamlet, for example, calls Polonius a fishmonger (2.2.176), the motive can be attributed to his character and recent experience – his rebellious nature and his personal dislike of Polonius, intensified by Polonius's thwarting his courting of Ophelia; but it is also part of a larger dramatic construction – the way Hamlet addresses Polonius highlights the corruption of the court by emphasizing Polonius's 'procurer' role, his eagerness to offer up his daughter for someone else's purposes. The appropriate question in regard to the passage would ask what is Shakespeare's, not Hamlet's, purpose *in having Hamlet address Polonius in that way. The naturalistic view* is of course strengthened by seeing the play: live actors playing the parts foster the illusion of the playworld's reality, transferring the reality of the actors to the playworld. (The presence of puppets in a play, increasingly used in modern theatre, can be a good corrective to this illusion.) Carol Rutter makes the useful point that 'Elizabethan spectators, understanding actors as professionals whose business was role play, read the role played, not the player beneath the role', adding 'I read Cordelia as "she", not "he" ' (Rutter, 2001, p. xiv).

A problem of particular prominence in discussion of the Problem Plays, what could be called the Second Fallacy of Interpreting Shakespeare, is the habitual assumption of the primacy of words. In the novel meaning is necessarily carried by words – with a few exceptions, such authors as Laurence Sterne and Alasdair Gray with a taste for typographic games or their own illustrative material – because there are no other signalling devices, whereas plays (except those never intended for performance) have a great many ways of making meaning. Aristotle, in his six elements of tragedy, has two that have no verbal component. Just the fact of using actors gives the play the possibility of a multiplicity of meanings at the same time. Keir Elam argues that it is often assumed that writing, because it occurs before performance, has priority, but the possibility of performance of the dramatic text 'constrains the dramatic text in its very articulation'; the written text 'is determined by its very need for stage contextualization' (Elam, 1980, pp. 208–9). Declan Donellen, addressing the International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford in August 2002, caused much consternation when he said, 'Shakespeare knows that words don't work' (Donellen, 2002). In Shakespeare's

plays the meaning of the words spoken is not conveyed completely by the words themselves and may in fact be quite different from the literal sense; they are embodied in a context of action that determines which of their potential meanings are the active and important ones. Paradoxically, having only the words of plays from Shakespeare's day, it is from the words that we must understand what the action is, even though it is the action that determines their meaning. The play objectifies, not in the sense of removing the subjective element, feeling, but in making an 'object' for interpretation, a situation or set of actions. It embodies positions and issues and becomes, as it were, an object. The organization of the narrative, says Fowler, is not continuous action but 'discontinuous moral stages or aspects' (Fowler, 2003, p. 20). The 'object' goes through various steps of argument that can recontextualize it and alter its significance by techniques such as changes of register. Bakhtin was mistaken to insist that the novel was more dialogic than the theatre, if for no other reason than that the theatre can involve senses not available to the novel to make meaning.

Related to the 'fallacy of the primacy of the word', because it minimizes the complexity of the dramatic interaction, is the 'fallacy of the play of ideas'. There is a tendency, fortunately in decline, to regard Shakespeare primarily as an important purveyor of ideas. This approach abstracts from the play relationships or philosophical positions, as if Shakespeare wrote essays rather than plays. From this comes Boas's use of the term 'Problem Play', by analogy with Ibsen's analyses of social problems. Tillyard, in his *Elizabethan World Picture*, makes Odysseus' speech on order central to *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure* has until recently been presented as a play about justice and mercy. The presence of these topics in the play is clear; but the discussion offered is by no means straightforward and changing the context in which they occur certainly transforms their significance. The transformation is not of abstract principles but a feeling judgement; the intellectualization of the 'play of ideas' approach neglects the emotional aspects of the plays. Emotion is not a low-grade substitute for thought or for principle; it is a judgement that can have moral and aesthetic components.

Similarly, verse in the plays is recognized as important but not necessarily in terms of making significance. 'If there is one thing

certain about poetry it is that it is not addressed to the mere intelligence,' wrote Lawrence Binyon; 'You cannot make an abstraction of the pattern or the rhythm', both of which are expressive (Binyon, 1913, pp. 41, 47).[4] The verse in the plays is not just an aesthetic extra but can create an emotional judgement important to the meaning of the play. In *Macbeth*, for example, Shakespeare makes doggerel of old Siward's closing words in the last scene (5.11.14–18), which undercuts his authority for the audience. This is in no sense an intellectual judgement: it is emotional; but it is a judgement nonetheless, and one that can have a qualifying effect on the total message of the play. Similarly, Macbeth himself is given some of Shakespeare's richest lines (3.3.47–56; 5.3.22–30, for example) which necessarily produce a more complex attitude towards the hero-villain.[5]

A further difficulty of the play-of-ideas fallacy is that it assumes the meanings of the plays must be obvious and the reality depicted consistent. It follows that anything that is not clear is likely to have been the result either of inattention on the part of the compositor or a mistake on Shakespeare's part. *Othello* has suffered particularly from critics' assuming that unclear passages may be his errors. Valerie Wayne has clearly shown in regard to Iago's 'praise' of women in *Othello* (2.1) that critical doubts about the lines arise from imposing on the play an unarticulated misogynist ideological framework, in which the lines lose their significance (and hence are often cut). By connecting them to other misogynist attitudes that run through the play, Wayne makes them meaningful. Her argument depends not simply on the imposition of a different ideology but on consideration of the attitudinal value of the speeches, who is making them and the emotional judgements suggested to the audience (Wayne, 1991, pp. 163–4). From a different angle, Fowler argues that criticism of *Othello*'s double time-scheme misunderstands sixteenth-century notions of spatial and temporal representation. Discontinuous visual perspective, multiple perspectives in one work instead of a unified overall perspective, was common in painting. 'This seemingly piecemeal composition closely resembles the discontinuous structuring of literary narratives.' In regard to *Othello*, he says, 'Perhaps, given "fluid time", Shakespeare may have had no thought of tricks, but simply tried for the maximum dramatic effect' (Fowler, 2003, pp. 8, 39).

Shakespeare and intention

Despite a Shakespeare industry that thrives on ever more speculation about Shakespeare's life, we have very little factual information about him. This is used to justify the dictum that we cannot know what Shakespeare thought or what he intended. If biographers and historians rely on letters to know what other figures of the past thought, then surely with a collection of 37 plays, a volume of sonnets and a couple of long narrative poems we ought to be able to make some judgements about what Shakespeare had on his mind and what he liked or disliked. This is quite different from picking out speeches in the plays and presenting them as Shakespeare's real views on politics or women or law. Attempts to identify individual characters as speaking for Shakespeare are similarly invalid – not because we recognize that the plays are collaborative creations or because of potential errors in choosing which characters are his true representatives but because the meanings of the plays come from the interactions of characters with each other and from speeches that are modified by context. Because the parts of the play take their meaning from the whole, it is the whole play that must be the basis of judgement. The larger context – other plays in the canon and other contemporary works – is also important because Shakespeare has patterns and types that run through several of his plays, and because he uses other works as source material and sometimes what he writes is in response to them. But to say of a man that we are unable to tell what he thought, when his career was based on making meaning, suggests that either he was a failure or we are quite misguided.

Part of the problem relates to the play-of-ideas fallacy, a response distorted by the assumption that Shakespeare's thinking was largely concerned with logical propositions about serious subjects. Shakespeare's job was as a commercial dramatist; he made his money from successful plays – partly from writing them and partly from owning a share in the theatre that staged them. Success required that he please the public, but that could be done in different ways. Clearly a static play in the *Gorboduc* mould would not hold audiences at the Globe – its formality dried up the potential vigour and emotion of its conflicts (mother killing son has a lot of potential)

and it was too occupied with intellectual arguments more suited to its original venue, the Inns of Court. The Elizabethans relished emotional intensity, characters of heroic vision who were larger than life and spoke a language that gave colour to its subject, not 'jigging veins of rhyming mother-wits'[6] or legal argument. Ben Jonson's complaint that the perennial favourites of the public were *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus* indicated an enduring taste for exciting plots and soaring rhetoric, action and verbal energy that ordinary lives outside the theatre lacked.[7] This 'big' drama did more than massage the emotions; the perennial favourites, despite their heroic scale, had a relevance to ordinary life: their heroes rose to avenge injury or humiliation and asserted their individual worth in a social context that denied it. As the alternative to the Church in presenting some coherence in the view of reality, the theatre was a purveyor of attitudes and opinions. From the second history cycle until the late romances, Shakespeare's plays resonate with issues of his own day, even though the subject matter only rarely has explicit topicality. The effect was that the audience was presented with a complex situation organized in the play to produce an emotional response – this was Shakespeare's job as dramatist. There is something perverse about the wilful undervaluing of emotional response, attaching Shakespeare's importance to abstract intellectual concerns. His theatre was not a seminar; even now, if you don't feel any emotional response there is little point in going to the theatre. Thus the approach to the plays that would seem to make most sense is to look at them in terms of the response they generate, and how Shakespeare engineers that response.

Of course a problem of historical distance immediately arises – we do not know how the audience of the day responded, but that does not justify restricting the discussion to abstract ideas. There is enough similarity of life situations between Elizabethan society and our own to make interpretation from our own responses a good starting point, but then we must test them against other aspects of the play and the Elizabethan world outside the play. How does this affect interpretation of the Problem Plays? The discomfort Shakespeare creates for the audience in the Problem Plays is not a heuristic device; it reflects irritation with corruption, hypocrisy, injustice and other evils of his society but it is not a casual effect – it is intentional. And the

negativity of the plays that forms part of the discomfort must be seen as Shakespeare's own.

The order of discussion

A chronological ordering of discussion of any group of plays seems natural and, had I intended essays on the separate plays, I probably would have ordered the chapters that way. But when my description of the defining characteristics of the Problem Plays met with rather more resistance from friends and colleagues than I had anticipated, I had to find a different way round: I had to establish clearly what was the problem of the Problem Plays before trying to trace the way it is embodied in the six plays. I started with the simplest and most obvious Problem Play, *All's Well That Ends Well*; because there was already a good deal of shared attitude towards *All's Well*, discussion of that play was likely to be less contentious than discussion of the others and I could probably gain agreement on a number of points that would figure in the later analyses.

All's Well, Much Ado and *Measure for Measure* have thematic similarities: they are all built round a progress to marriages (or reunion) at the end. *Much Ado*, the earliest of these three, moves in the same direction as *All's Well* but seems like a prototype for it: the organization is considerably less clear and what it is that Shakespeare wants to do is also uncertain. Looking at it in the light of *All's Well*, the direction of its tentative moves can be interpreted with more confidence.

Measure, on the other hand, the latest of the three, has the most complex structure, very clever but difficult to grasp immediately because the tensions of the play switch from one issue to another.[8] Consideration of the earlier plays can make *Measure* comprehensible more quickly and can make it easier to appreciate Shakespeare's outstanding dramaturgy. The skill of Shakespeare's organization of the parts can be better appreciated when one has grasped the direction of the two earlier plays.

Many of the characteristics of the Problem Plays have been attributed to *Merchant*, the earliest of the six plays. It is the first one of the group to experiment with a contradiction between form and content. John Drakakis points to this quality, in the introduction to his Arden edition of the play, saying that the formally harmonious

ending is in conflict with tensions that cannot be contained in the play (Drakakis, 2010, pp. 111–12). It has a rather chaotic quality with several narrative strands that lead in different directions, some of them away from the central contradiction. The play's most famous strand, Shylock and the flesh-bond, does indeed produce frustration of expectation but it does not occur at the end. The ending follows the comedy convention of marriages but the marriages have a pantomimic quality which succeeds in frustrating the convention but only insofar as they mock it. To see *Merchant* in the light of the first three discussions should make the 'type' of the prototype more recognizable. Although most discussion of the play has been drawn to the question of whether or not it is anti-Semitic, that discussion often says more about matters outside the play than about the play itself. I shall touch on it only briefly.

Troilus and Cressida has always been difficult to pigeonhole; even to classify it as a Problem Play needs the criteria to be loosened somewhat. Like the others, it combines positive and negative responses in a manner that makes them inseparable but it does this with different elements and in a different manner. It is the earliest play included in the conventional group, and Shakespeare has not yet worked out the dramaturgy; like *Merchant*, it is a confused proliferation of concerns. The play is extremely negative, even hostile: Shakespeare rubbishes two embodiments of positive value – the Trojan War and Chaucer's elegant romance of *Troilus and Criseyde* – and attacks the audience in the epilogue. It has a strength of emotion that has not yet found its proper form, but it is more understandable when seen in relation to the other Problem Plays.

Finally, *Othello*, one of Bradley's four great tragedies, has been seen to have elements that make for audience discomfort and would characterize it as a Problem Play but it has not been considered part of that group. This is perhaps because 'Problem Comedies' is an alternative designation of the conventional group, but also because the similarity of the discomfort of the ending to those of the other Problem Plays is less easy to recognize. Relying on generic expectations of tragedy rather than comedy, Shakespeare constructs a plot that frustrates expectations in a way that has the most enduring power to disturb of the six plays. Like anti-Semitism in regard to *Merchant*, racism has been a major issue in discussion of *Othello*. The play includes Iago's racism but does not support racist attitudes, and since it is largely