

**THE MORAL UNIVERSE OF
SHAKESPEARE'S
PROBLEM PLAYS**

VIVIAN THOMAS



ROUTLEDGE

THE MORAL UNIVERSE OF SHAKESPEARE'S PROBLEM PLAYS

VIVIAN THOMAS



London and New York

First published in 1987
by Croom Helm

Paperback edition first published in 1991
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

© 1987, 1991 Vivian Thomas

Typeset in Baskerville by
Pat and Anne Murphy, Highcliffe-on-Sea, Dorset
Printed in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham Ltd, Kent

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Thomas, Vivian

The moral universe of Shakespeare's problem plays.

1. English drama

I. Title

822.33

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Also available

ISBN 0-415-04226-7

Acknowledgements

My desire to write this book arose out of long, intense and often passionate discussions with my extramural students. The questions and debates to which these classes gave rise did much to stimulate my approach to the problem plays in general and *Troilus and Cressida* in particular. My second debt of gratitude is to four remarkable teachers: Bill Gregory, John Howells, Luigi Pasinetti and Tom Rees. Finally, I should like to thank Rachel Hodgkinson who typed part of the initial manuscript, and my wife, who completed the task and contributed greatly to clarifying expression and removing errors. The mistakes and blemishes that remain are my own.

A Note on the Text

All references are to the New Arden editions of Shakespeare's plays: *Troilus and Cressida* edited by Kenneth Palmer, *All's Well that Ends Well* edited by G. K. Hunter, and *Measure for Measure* edited by J. W. Lever. References to Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* are from Nevill Coghill's Penguin edition. All other quotations and references to Shakespeare's source materials are drawn from Geoffrey Bullough's invaluable *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, volumes II and VI. The bibliography has not been extended to include articles in order to keep it within reasonable bounds. A number of the most significant articles on the plays are to be found in the Macmillan Casebook series on *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*. Wells (ed.), *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides* and Ure, *Shakespeare: The Problem Plays* contain extensive bibliographies on the problem plays; Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* has a wide-ranging bibliography of relevant background literature.

Contents

Acknowledgements

A Note on the Text

1. Concepts and Perspectives: Why Problem Plays?	1
2. Shakespeare's Use of His Source Material	23
i. <i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	23
ii. <i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>	61
iii. <i>Measure for Measure</i>	67
3. The Fractured Universe: Wholeness and Division in <i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	81
4. Virtue and Honour in <i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>	140
5. Order and Authority in <i>Measure for Measure</i>	173
6. Conclusion	210
Bibliography	232
Index	235

1

Concepts and Perspectives: Why Problem Plays?

The purpose of this chapter is to convey a clear sense of the emergence and evolution of the term 'problem play' and the nature of the arguments surrounding the grouping of various plays under this heading. Having summarised the views of the most significant contributors to this debate an attempt will be made to isolate the key features of the genuine problem plays and to specify characteristics and themes which they share. By sifting through the ideas and approaches which have been most influential in shaping critical perceptions of these plays as a group, it will become clear why the categorisation and terminology attaching to them have proved both controversial and durable. Through careful analysis of the difficulties arising from the most seminal studies it should be possible to formulate a satisfactory definition of the term 'problem play' and to state precisely why, if the term is to be of value, the designation is applicable to only three of Shakespeare's plays.

Historically, the linking of these plays is both intriguing and illuminating. Dowden began the process in his book *Shakspeare: His Mind and Art* (1875), referring to them in the Preface to the third edition as 'serious, dark and ironical' comedies. He perceives a sharp cleavage between these plays and the romantic comedies:

Twelfth Night resumes all the admirable humorous characteristics of the group of comedies which it completes. Then the change comes; *All's Well that Ends Well* is grave and earnest; *Measure for Measure* is dark and bitter. In the first edition of this work I did not venture to attempt an interpretation of *Troilus and Cressida*. I now believe this strange and difficult play was a last attempt to continue comedy made

when Shakespeare had ceased to be able to smile genially, and when he must be either ironical, or else take a deep, passionate and tragical view of life.¹

It is apparent that Dowden recognises a change of tone and mood from the romantic comedies: *All's Well* is 'grave and earnest'; *Measure for Measure* 'dark and bitter'; and *Troilus and Cressida*, which he assumes is chronologically the last of the three, is 'ironical'. If these plays can be called comedies, for Dowden they constitute a special kind of comedy. Moreover, within the grouping, *Troilus and Cressida* is the strangest and least amenable to being encompassed by any definition of comedy. Nevertheless, despite misgivings, Dowden believes *Troilus and Cressida* to be a comedy of sorts — a 'comedy of disillusion' — though he admits to being perplexed by Shakespeare's 'intention' and the 'spirit' in which he wrote the play.² Dowden avers that 'a mood of contemptuous depreciation of life may have come over Shakespeare, and spoilt him, at that time, for a writer of comedy'. Only the presence of Isabella submerges this mood in *Measure for Measure*, Dowden feels, but he insists on a close affinity between *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*: 'we must notice a striking resemblance in its spirit and structure to *Timon of Athens*'.³

No modern scholar would attempt the task which Dowden set himself: 'to connect the study of Shakespeare's works with an inquiry after the personality of the writer, and to observe, as far as is possible, in its several stages the growth of his intellect and character from youth to full maturity'.⁴ What, for Dowden, represents a change of mental state would, for modern scholars, constitute a movement in interest or style — an attempt to discern patterns and relationships within the drama — rather than in the mind of the dramatist. It is all the more interesting, therefore, that like Dowden, modern scholars have been struck by the strangeness of these plays; by their unwillingness to be placed or located with other conventionally accepted groups of plays; by certain affinities which they share with each other — and with other plays, namely *Hamlet* and *Timon of Athens*.

Dowden, the first critic to group these plays together, was inclined to refer to them as comedies. F. S. Boas, however, who brought *Hamlet* into the grouping, believed that they merited a distinct classification. Writing in 1896, he chose to adopt a term which had been applied to the plays of Ibsen and Shaw: 'problem plays'. It was neither an identity of approach or centre of interest

between Shakespeare and those modern playwrights which attracted him to this phrase, but rather a sense of aptness: they shared certain affinities but above all were difficult to classify, so why not problem plays? The term has survived, though with frequent misgivings on the part of scholars.

What, then, were the reasons adduced by Boas for linking these plays? He argues:

All these dramas introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilisation 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 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 Shakespeare's problem-plays.⁵

There is something imprecise, but nevertheless true, about Boas's suggestion that these societies are 'ripe unto rottenness'. Indeed, the decadence of Troy was at the centre of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1985-6 production, being portrayed by a set redolent of a decaying mansion still affording crystal brandy glasses and decanters. Vienna is so overripe that Angelo is called upon to provide a purgation, while in the Court of France there is a clear sense that the qualities associated with the older generation are not to be found in the young. Again, his observation that 'abnormal conditions of brain and emotion are generated', thereby producing 'cases of conscience' which 'demand a solution by unprecedented methods', is so vague as to be of questionable value. But Boas is surely right when he says that 'at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain'. These plays are puzzles which — even if we exclude *Hamlet* — cannot adequately be described as comedies.

Boas, then, distinguishes these plays from the rest of the Shakespearian canon in terms of the texture of the societies which they contain; the problematical nature of the questions which they pose; and the impossibility of achieving a totally satisfactory resolution. The audience is left perplexed — still pondering the problems even when reconciliation and harmony is nominally afforded them (as in *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*). What Boas fails to do is to convince the reader that *Hamlet* really falls into the group. His main point is that the atmosphere of obscurity which envelops these plays 'closes most thickly round *Hamlet*'.⁶ Not only is the play manifestly a tragedy, but it is a particular kind of tragedy — the most popular kind of tragedy to occupy the stages of Elizabethan and Jacobean England — a revenge tragedy. *Hamlet* has its share of problems but they are effectively contained within the mode of tragedy. The genuine problem plays evade any such adequate classification. *Hamlet* would have been recognised as forming part of the tradition so clearly established in the mind of the Elizabethan playgoer by Kyd's seminal play *The Spanish Tragedy*. In contrast to the immensely popular revenge tragedies, George Bernard Shaw makes the illuminating observation 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 twentieth century if only the seventeenth century would let him'.⁷

W. W. Lawrence, writing in 1930, gives careful consideration to the comments of his predecessors, removes *Hamlet* from the group and attempts greater precision in delineating their fundamental features:

The essential characteristic of a problem play . . . 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.⁸

Here the problems in the plays are seen as perplexing, and open to varying ethical interpretations. Moreover, the problems may be abstract but they are embodied in and acted out through tensions encountered by the characters who find themselves trapped in specific situations. One point omitted by Lawrence is that, in

order for the audience fully to engage the intellectual or moral problems, Shakespeare affords them a considerable degree of detachment. This is most obviously the case in the most complex of the three plays, *Troilus and Cressida*.

Lawrence returns to Dowden's emphasis on problem 'comedies' and justifies his position in a way which is both logical and practical:

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.⁹

But Lawrence does not rest his case there: he insists that 'the "problem" mood must not only be prominent in the action; it must dominate it'.¹⁰ Thus the serious or dark strains in the romantic comedies do not make them problem plays. 'Still less', says Lawrence, 'do the tragic elements in a tragicomedy make of it a problem play.' In contrasting the essentially 'theatrical' qualities of the tragicomedy with the 'analytical' nature of the problem play Lawrence quotes Professor Ristine's view 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 emphasises novelty, sensation, surprise, startling effect.' Thus, for Lawrence, 'the controlling spirit in a problem play must obviously be realism'.¹¹ This, however, does not preclude the presence of non-realistic elements in the drama. Lawrence, like Dowden before him, sees these plays as constituting a 'radical departure' in Shakespeare's art; they present the 'serious and realistic treatment of a distressing complication in human life, but without a tragic outcome'.¹²

After providing perceptive comments about the nature of the problem plays, Lawrence states unequivocally that 'They are of course greatly inferior to the better known dramas written by Shakespeare in the opening years of the new century'.¹³ This view is now highly questionable and it is significant that the popularity of these plays has continued to increase since Lawrence expressed his negative view with such confidence. Not only is the modern world catching up with Shakespeare, but it is now arguable that

Troilus and Cressida is Shakespeare's most remarkable work and perhaps his greatest achievement. The Achilles' heel of Lawrence's analysis is his claim that the conflicting ethical interpretations affect only a modern audience. Shakespeare's audience, Lawrence claims, would have possessed a familiarity with the conventions and assumptions embodied in the plays and therefore would not have experienced the conflicting judgements to which a modern audience is subject. Thus Lawrence unintentionally devalues the ethical dilemmas to which these plays give rise: all is explained by simply acquiring the perspective of Shakespeare's (assumed) audience.

E. M. W. Tillyard's study, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, published in 1950, pays generous tribute to the work of Lawrence, but substitutes 'plays' for comedies in his title, and reinstates *Hamlet* to the group. Tillyard is not enamoured of the term yet sees it as the most useful available. However, he makes a distinction between *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* on the one hand and *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* on the other. Indeed, the distinction is such that Tillyard's forewarning that he uses the term problem plays 'vaguely and equivocally' is no exaggeration. He begins with an analogy to express the essential division within the group:

There are at least two kinds of problem child: first the genuinely abnormal child, whom no efforts will ever bring back to normality; and second the child who is interesting and complex rather than abnormal: apt indeed to be a problem for parents and teachers but destined to fulfilment in the larger scope of adult life. Now *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* are like the first problem child: there is something radically schizophrenic about them. *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are like the second problem child, full of interest and complexity but divided within themselves only in the eyes of those who have misjudged them. To put the difference in another way, *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* are problem plays because they deal with and display interesting problems; *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* because they *are* problems.¹⁴

Despite providing a definition of the problem plays which separates them into two distinct groups, Tillyard does partially rescue the situation by asserting that they share a sombreness of mood arising out of their interest in speculative thought and a psychological exploration that results in an intense sense of

realism. Like other writers on the subject before him, Tillyard makes some perceptive points about the nature of the plays but fails to establish a meaningful framework for analysing them as a group.

Almost a decade later, A. P. Rossiter took up the question of the problem plays in lectures which were later published under the title, *Angel with Horns* (1961). He begins by commenting that these plays were written during the period of Shakespeare's greatest versatility: twelve varied plays written between 1597-8 and 1604. Rossiter suggests, therefore, that they do not form a triumvirate, but share a pattern of interests and methods which spill over into other plays. Nevertheless, he does propose a particular strength in the bonds which hold together three of the plays (he excludes *Hamlet*) — even though he thinks of them as 'tragi-comedies', perceiving the essence of this mode as 'an art of inversion, deflation and paradox', which has as its subject 'tragi-comic man'. Thus 'genuine tragi-comedy is marked by telling generalisations about the subject, *man*, of a seriousness which is unexpected in comedy and may seem incongruous with it'.¹⁵

Despite the change of name (though he also refers to them as problem plays) certain aspects of these plays are once more delineated: 'inversion, deflation and paradox' and concern with the nature of man. Rossiter goes on to specify four major concerns which are embodied in each of these plays. First they 'share a common evaluation of conventionally accepted "nobilities" . . . All are deflated'. Secondly, 'ideal' figures are placed in the pattern in such a way that cynicism is checked. Thirdly, 'these plays involve us in discoveries, always of a bad reality beneath the fair appearances of things: revelations, painful in the extreme — and we are *made to feel the pain* — of the distressing, disintegrating possibilities of human meanness'. And fourthly, they are all 'profoundly concerned with seeming and being: and this can cover both sex and human worth'. Rossiter does add a further element which he sees as forming one of the overall qualities of the problem plays: 'shiftingness' by which he means that 'All the firm points of view . . . are felt to be fallible.' Ultimately, Rossiter suggests:

these plays throw opposed or contrary views into the mind: only to leave the resulting equations without any settled or soothing solutions. They are all about 'Xs' that do not work out. *Troilus and Cressida* gives us a 'tragedy-of-love' pattern that is not tragic (nor love?); *All's Well* a 'happy ending' that

makes us neither happy nor comfortable; *Measure for Measure* a 'final solution' that simply does not answer the questions raised.¹⁶

Once more a penetrating critic is left confronted by a sense of perplexity. Interestingly, although he perceives a need to range more widely in the pursuit of themes and interests which are embodied in these plays, it is precisely the problem plays which leave him with a peculiar sense of perplexity or open-endedness. They seem to provide puzzles that refuse to yield solutions. Unlike Tillyard, Rossiter makes no distinction between the nature of the problems associated with *Troilus and Cressida* on the one hand and *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* on the other. Moreover, he recognises that they belong to a genre which inevitably excludes *Hamlet*.

Peter Ure, writing in 1961, reverted to a quartet of plays by excluding *Hamlet* from the group but including *Timon of Athens*. He declined to provide a tight definition, embracing Tillyard's disclaimer that he intended to use the term 'vaguely and equivocally'. Nevertheless, Ure commences his discussion of these plays by identifying their shared characteristics:

the probing of character under the test of situations which raise conflicting ethical interpretations; the replacement of the strain of occasional melancholy which is found even in Shakespeare's most festive comedies by an urgently satirical and disfiguring temper; a willingness even in comedy to draw near to pain and death; a curious interweaving of romantic and even fantastic tales with realistic characterisation, which itself sometimes moves towards allegory and symbol; an art whose occasional apparent contempt and carelessness about what W. B. Yeats called the 'wheels and pulleys' of drama, the machinery for achieving consistency and smooth running, mediate the reach and pressure of a mind profoundly aware that energy and meaning in the theatre may spring from the attempt to embody in its forms the very resistance which life offers to being translated into expressive modes of art . . . [Finally] their language is often extremely hard to construe. It is tough and subtle, compounded of unexpected words, daring and resonant images, and strangely subterranean and occluded rhythms. For all readers this is the first and most vital 'problem'.¹⁷

This summary is of considerable value though some of the points require qualification. For instance, the reference to the intermingling of fantastic tales with realistic characters applies much more accurately to Shakespeare's romances and applies not at all to *Troilus and Cressida*. And Ure is no more convincing in his attempt to establish a close connection between *Timon of Athens* and the other three plays than Boas or Tillyard are in relating them to *Hamlet*. However, Ure's comment on language is particularly pertinent.

In setting out his case for recognition of the true or genuine problem plays, Ernest Schanzer, writing in 1963, rejects the idea that a meaningful distinction can be made on the basis of genre. He questions the validity of previous contributors as follows: Boas is denounced for claiming that *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* are problem plays on grounds of their moral problems and yet are, after close analysis, found to be devoid of moral 'perplexity'. The problem which Boas discerns in *Hamlet*, Schanzer maintains, is of an entirely different kind (the psychological inscrutability of the hero), while *Troilus and Cressida* presents the problem of interpreting the meaning of a complex play and discerning the connection between the war plot and love story. Thus, though Boas finds the chief primary connecting link in 'the atmosphere of obscurity that surrounds them', Schanzer denies the validity of attaching this label to plays which exhibit different kinds of problems. Likewise, although admiring the greater precision of Lawrence in approaching this question, he points out that having claimed their essential affinity is one arising from the 'different ethical interpretations' to which the plays give rise, Lawrence goes on to argue that there would have been no such diversity of response in an Elizabethan audience. Hence Schanzer says of Lawrence, 'His concept of the Problem Play and his view of the proper interpretation of the three plays he discusses under the label are irreconcilable, because they point in opposite directions.'¹⁸

Schanzer's conclusion on previous writing on the problem plays is that critics have employed definitions that are either too vague or equivocal (such as Boas and Tillyard respectively) or have produced interpretations of the plays which are at variance with their precise definitions (Lawrence, for example). Thus he sets out to provide a definition which is unambiguous and genuinely applies to three plays: *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Measure for Measure*. His definition of the problem play, therefore, has nothing to do with genre (he sees *Measure for Measure* as a comedy).

Rather the problem play is:

A play in which we find a concern with a moral problem which is central to it, presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible or even probable.¹⁹

Schanzer argues that neither *All's Well* nor *Troilus and Cressida* exhibit a moral problem (for the latter play he suggests that the central issue is a metaphysical one: what is value?); and likewise he invokes A. C. Bradley in dismissing the suggestion that Hamlet's delay is 'prompted by moral scruples'.²⁰ Thus Schanzer not only discards the previous definitions of the term but creates an entirely new grouping which has nothing to do with earlier perceptions.

Whatever arguments can be adduced in favour of the establishment of this new triumvirate, the grouping has not secured a place in critical writing if for no other reason than that there are fascinating interrelationships which are shared by the three Roman plays, not least being their common source material, which results in their being treated as a group. Moreover, the Roman plays have powerful connections with the English history plays, especially the consideration of morality and ambition in the political sphere. Schanzer's comments on individual plays are valuable, but for the present discussion his book is most notable for constituting a direct challenge to the peculiar association of *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Schanzer is unique in wishing to discard all previous definitions and groupings for the plays while preserving the term problem play and attaching it to an unusual triumvirate.

The most recent extended contribution to this question is Northrop Frye's *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (1983). Frye's book is devoted to a consideration of Shakespearian comedy, but he is interested in establishing a connection between *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* and the Romances (see esp. pp. 8 and 32-3). Frye dismisses such issues as the 'realistic' nature of the problem plays and their concern with 'serious' social issues as a 'pseudo problem'. His view is that 'while *Troilus and Cressida* is admittedly an experimental play in a special category, the other two are simply romantic comedies where the chief magical device used is the bed trick instead of enchanted forests or identical twins'.²¹ For Frye, then, the

question of genre is a matter of structure. In his summary he sets out the characteristic structure and purpose of Shakespearian comedy and portrays *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* as romantic comedies with *Troilus and Cressida* set apart as representing something unique in the Shakespearian canon. It is worth quoting Frye's summary paragraph almost in full as it sums up his argument with singular clarity and comprehensiveness:

Two of Shakespeare's problem plays, then, are fairly typical comedies in which redemptive forces are set to work that bring about the characteristic festive conclusion, the birth of a new society, that gives to the audience the feeling that 'everything's going to be all right after all.' Such plays illustrate what we have been calling the myth of deliverance, a sense of energies released by forgiveness and reconciliation, where Eros triumphs over Nomos or law, by evading what is frustrating or absurd in law and fulfilling what is essential for social survival. But comedy is a mixture of the festive and the ironic, of a drive toward a renewed society along with a strong emphasis on the arbitrary whims and absurdities that block its emergence. There is a much larger infusion of irony in *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well* than in, say *As You Like It* or *Twelfth Night*, and of course there are many comedies, especially in modern times, where the ironic emphasis is too strong for the drive toward deliverance, and where the play ends in frustration and blocked movement. In Shakespeare's canon the play that comes nearest to this is *Troilus and Cressida*, a play that, whatever else it may do, does not illustrate the myth of deliverance in comedy.²²

What Frye states is quite acceptable but for one crucial point: many critics and vast numbers of theatregoers choke on the very consummation which they readily accept in Shakespeare's romantic comedies. They don't believe in the happy endings of *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. They feel that there is something wrong and are driven back to a reconsideration of all that has gone before. As a consequence the perspective of these plays seems radically different from that of the romantic comedies. Frye perceives that these plays raise questions about the relation between drama and life, of illusion to reality, an affinity they share with the romances — plays which explore this matter with singular insistence. Nevertheless, he does not take sufficient account of the