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Introduction

SIMON BARKER

I

This collection of essays is aimed at students who are working on the three texts that have customarily been grouped together as Shakespeare’s ‘problem plays’. At first sight these plays appear to have only a little in common. *All’s Well That Ends Well*, written around 1602–4, was based on a section of the fourteenth-century Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio’s stories in the collected *Decameron*, and in terms of form is clearly a comedy. The action moves between a number of European cities, with all the intricacies and confusions of plot that the reader might associate with such plays as Shakespeare’s early comedy success, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595–6), or the popular *Twelfth Night*, which was written slightly before *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

The second play, *Measure for Measure* (1604–5), was based on George Whetstone’s *Promos and Cassandra* (1578), which was itself drawn from an older collection of stories. Whetstone’s play is of great interest in its own right, since despite its rather odd structure and difficult style, its representation of women and sexuality is so intriguing that modern readers of *Measure for Measure* might valuably go back to Whetstone’s work. Critics have sometimes described *Measure for Measure* as a ‘tragi-comedy’ in that, although there is a formal ‘happy ending’, the Vienna of Shakespeare’s imagination is a society beset with the kind of moral dilemmas and dangers that seem familiar from the tragic plays of the period such as *Hamlet*.

In a number of significant ways, *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–2) contrasts completely with the other two plays in the ‘problem play’ group. Drawing on sixteenth-century histories of the classical world, Shakespeare sets his love story in a rather claustrophobic society dominated by military and masculine values. Little positive seems to emerge from its retelling of the betrayal of Troilus by Cressida. James Ruoff has remarked that a major critical problem with *Troilus and
Cressida ‘has been to establish the unity of a play so evenly divided between the argument of Mars and the theme of Venus’, and this appears right: the play seems to set violence and love against each other in a bitter, non-comic action.3

The labelling of Shakespeare’s plays as, say, ‘tragedies’, ‘comedies’, ‘Roman plays’, ‘histories’, or, indeed, ‘problem plays’ provides a somewhat unsatisfactory shorthand, especially if such terms are taken at face value. Particularly in performance, it is hard to ignore the comedy that is woven into, say, Shakespeare’s great tragedy Hamlet, a play that at moments can stir audiences to uncontrollable laughter. The same is even more true of Richard III, the demonic anti-hero of which draws audience and action together like a kind of early stand-up comic, making the broad classification of the play as either a ‘history’, and/or a ‘tragedy’ and/or a ‘variation on a medieval morality play’, rather limited. The play seems capable of being read as any or all of these at once, so throwing such categories into doubt.

Given the uncertainties and pitfalls of classification with regard to Shakespeare’s plays, or any other work of literature for that matter, an introduction to a set of critical essays on these particular three plays needs, first then, to address the history and impact of the term ‘problem play’ itself. It is also important to establish a context for this collection of essays in terms of significant developments in contemporary criticism. It is hoped that the volume will appeal to readers who are seeking to read Shakespeare not in terms of a simple enquiry into character or plot (although these aspects of the play can never be entirely dismissed) but in terms of the priorities that have been set by recent theoretical approaches.

One shared assumption made by all the critics writing here, however, is that Shakespeare wrote in a period of probably unprecedented change within the institutions that shaped early modern society in the overlapping realms of politics, religion, the family, the law, and economics – as well as in the creative representation of how these institutions conditioned the very experience of what it meant to be human. Although it was common in Shakespeare’s time to emphasise, at least officially, the harmony and order of society, much of the writing of the day, and especially that produced for the stage, exposed the intense fragility of this vision. These signs of contradiction and discontinuity in the social order of Shakespeare’s time are to the fore in these three plays. Indeed, so unsettled are the plays that they have produced the unique shorthand term ‘problem play’ to
distinguish them from the relatively straightforward categories that serve the main body of Shakespeare’s work.

II

Several underlying factors have contributed to the categorisation of the three texts as ‘problem plays’. For many years they were variously described as ‘dark comedies’ or ‘problem comedies’ because they did not share a notion of hopefulness and resolution with the more traditional comedies in the Shakespeare canon. Contrasted with earlier plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, with its fantasy world of spirits and its final reconciliation of lover with lover, or the promises of marriage and contentment that close *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*, the ‘problem comedies’ were considered problematic because they featured strong elements of tragedy, an abrasive sense of realism, and often privileged sexual love (as against romantic love) in a way that set them apart from the more mainstream form of comedy. This may have been an oversimplification and sentimentalising of the earlier comedies since it is clear that, for example, the sheer cruelty of the baiting of Malvolio towards the end of *Twelfth Night*, the sinister nature of the forest in *As You Like It*, or even the threat that hangs over Egeus throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* show that potential tragedy haunts these comedies just as surely as humour threads through the tragedies. But no one has seriously suggested that *Twelfth Night* is a tragicomedy or that *Hamlet* is a comic tragedy: the plays do mix or conflate genres in that way. There is, however, clearly a quality in *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* that critics over the years have found hard to define.

In his celebrated book *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* the mid-twentieth-century critic E. M. W. Tillyard, although admitting that it was highly unsatisfactory, argued for the term ‘problem play’ because there were clearly some Shakespearean plays that did not conform to the recognisable norms of those that could be more easily categorised. However, he also insisted that the term should embrace *Hamlet* as well. In this broadening of the range of plays that might be labelled thus, Tillyard was influenced by the work of F. S. Boas who had also included *Hamlet* and had borrowed the idea of the ‘problem play’ from a term that was being used at the time for the work of George Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen.
Tillyard noted in 1950 that *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* were like one kind of ‘problem child whom no efforts will ever bring back to normality’, and that *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* were like a ‘second kind of problem child, full of interest and complexity’. He concluded that *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’. To this extent he expanded the term but also tried to draw differences between the plays.

Tillyard’s notion of the problem play as ‘problem child’ may seem outlandish to a modern reader, yet his more detailed analysis of what the plays had in common (in order to form a separate category) remains interesting. Although he acknowledged the spirit of gloom, disillusionment and morbidity in the plays (characteristics that earlier critics had suggested were due to some personal crisis in Shakespeare’s life), Tillyard’s more immediate concerns were with three elements or preoccupations in the four plays that he (and other critics) had grouped together. First, he noted a common concern with ‘religious dogma’ and abstract speculation revolving around the experiences of a young man who ‘gets a shock’ and has to develop quickly: Hamlet, Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, Bertram in *All’s Well That Ends Well* and Troilus. Secondly, Tillyard observed that this rapid progress towards maturity was transacted at night when ‘thought and the dark go together’. Thirdly, he placed great emphasis on the fact that all the plays were based upon a sense of the relationship and contrast between generations. It was not that these elements were unique to the plays he singled out as ‘problem plays’, but that there was a concentration of these elements in four plays that had been written within a few years of each other.

The idea of including *Hamlet* in the problem play grouping was controversial before Tillyard’s book and is now considered somewhat eccentric. In his introductory chapter to *The Moral Universe of Shakespeare’s Problem Plays*, an extract from which is included in the present volume, Vivian Thomas (essay 1) perceptively notes that not only is *Hamlet* ‘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’, and that the point of the three problem plays proper, so to speak, is that they ‘evade any such adequate classification’. This seems right, and yet Tillyard’s highlighting of certain features in *Hamlet* and the other plays is not without its point. And although other critics have seen *The Merchant of
Venice as a problem play but excluded *All’s Well That Ends Well* from the group (regarding it as a ‘late romance’ along with plays such as *The Tempest* and *The Winter’s Tale*), and although Peter Ure, writing in 1961, proposed the addition of *Timon of Athens* to the group, the three plays examined in this book were generally thought of as ‘the problem plays’ by the 1960s and the label has been fairly stable and widely used ever since.9

The work of a few major critics dominated the study of the problem plays in the 1960s and 1970s. An interesting and fairly typical example is A. P. Rossiter’s acclaimed book *Angel with Horns*, which dealt with the plays’ preoccupation with matters of paradox, inversion, and the discovery of unpleasant realities beneath superficial codes of nobility and human worth. Rossiter suggested that, above all, the plays demonstrate a lack of resolution that leaves the reader and the audience unsettled. While freely using the term ‘problem play’, Rossiter finally opts for the notion of ‘tragi-comedy’ to best serve this sense of the three plays’ open-ended nature, both with respect to the lack of resolution at the end of each and the clear sense of uncertainty generated during the course of the action. Profound questions over morality, appearance and reality, and the power of language to deceive are raised in all three of the plays. Although no effect in the theatre is ever guaranteed, these questions, for Rossiter, potentially invite a reader or an audience to share what seems to be a broad sense of cynicism, which, even if overcome by the good actions of certain characters, none the less seems to prevail in the dramatic atmosphere that has been created as each play reaches a conclusion:

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.10

To a large extent the pattern that emerged in criticism of the problem plays over the course of the 1960s and 1970s was one of refusal and displacement. Each new critic would refute an earlier rationale for the problem plays as a distinct group (even if the membership of the group was now fairly established) and replace it with a new set of criteria. There were exceptions, however, which showed that even at a relatively recent point in the history of criticism of these somewhat troublesome plays, the grouping itself was open to question. Ernest Schanzer, for example, was at pains to undermine the arguments of
Boas, Tillyard and others, but he did so in a manner that was fairly orthodox in post-war criticism. His emphasis was, as was fairly typical of the period, on problems of *morality* in Shakespeare’s plays – and, in a sentence that is often remarked upon by modern critics of the plays, he states that a 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.11

Schanzer goes on to dismantle the by now commonly acceptable problem play grouping and proposes in their place *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Measure for Measure*. What is interesting about his rather caustic attack on earlier critics (and the dismissal of their grouping of plays) is that his audacity, which Schanzer perhaps intended for effect, is overwritten by the pronounced conservatism of his viewpoint. Far from being a radical overthrow of perceived notions both of the rationale for the idea of ‘problem’, and thus the constitution of the group, the approach is one that comes close to patronising the plays’ readers and audiences. Schanzer’s comment begs a number of questions. Who are the ‘we’ spoken of with such confidence? Is this an obvious and homogeneous group? And what of ‘our’ morality – is it the same for ‘us’ as it was for an early-Stuart audience watching these plays in a public theatre in London? And was the morality of this popular audience the same as the morality of a courtly one, or of the increasingly confident political dissidents in parliament who took such a strong stand against the theatre itself on the basis of moral values?

Schanzer, then, in common with many earlier critics, assumes a sort of trans-historical audience for Shakespeare which shares a common perspective. The kind of criticism attached to the problem plays during the years from, say, 1950–70, leading up to what some observers have seen as a revolution in the business of cultural criticism – the emergence of modern literary theory – might be summarised along the following lines. First, there was the argument over which plays belong to the group. The ‘problem play’ label proved flexible and controversial and, possibly, in the end, rather unhelpful to the modern scholar except in as far as it signals disquiet in the history of criticism of certain kinds of play. What is more interesting however, in looking back at this criticism, and turning to the plays in the light of the more recent critical approaches (exemplified by the
essays in this book), is the reasoning behind the disquiet of these traditional critics.

Indeed, the second major element of their work was their obvious unease over what was perceived as a discontinuity in some of Shakespeare’s plays in terms of a coherent moral outcome. For these critics this flaw was inevitably bound up with a sense of generic non-conformity: where there is moral ambivalence there is also stylistic or compositional deviation. The established labels (‘comedy’, ‘tragedy’, ‘history’), with their comforting provenance derived from the First Folio, classical authorities, and a long tradition of critical scholarship, seemed insufficient faced with what appears to have been judged a departure in Shakespeare’s work from a steady course of moral certainty. In short, the ‘problem’ with the problem plays was their sheer pessimism of tone, which disrupts and challenges an orthodox view of Shakespeare’s ‘vision’ of humanity. As will be seen below, it is this very unsteadiness and discontinuity that excites modern critics – and to the same degree that it perplexed earlier ones.

It is worth noting that the many hesitations or uncertainties over the ‘problem’ of these plays inevitably led to a third current in much of the post-war traditional criticism of the twentieth century. Troubled by the difficult moral tone or generic eccentricity of the plays, some critics concluded that the plays were aesthetically inferior, although it is possible to sense here a slight embarrassment in their writing when they reached this conclusion.12 W. W. Lawrence, writing in 1930, had concluded that the plays ‘are, of course, greatly inferior to the better known drama written by Shakespeare in the opening years of the new century’. This opinion, although perhaps not quite always so boldly stated, suffused much of the criticism of the middle years of the last century, albeit sometimes with an apologetic air to it.13

The fortunes of the Shakespeare canon overall, however, have rarely been absolutely steady. For a long time the tragedies were given precedence over the comedies for their more serious tone and philosophical weight. The histories were occasionally written off as Tudor propaganda or too narrowly nationalist in their outlook. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the whole of Shakespeare’s drama was open to question to the extent that many of the plays were rewritten in order to fit the rationale of the times and the aesthetics of new audiences. Since the early 1980s, however, while scholarship and technology were denying or endorsing the authenticity of Shakespeare’s texts, and new ‘replica’ theatres were constructed in which to perform them, the whole realm of
Shakespeare criticism (and literary criticism in general) was subjected to a kind of revolution in method, objective and rationale.\textsuperscript{14}

This was the fundamental shake up in critical thinking heralded by structuralism in the 1970s that arrested traditional criticism and was to set the scene for a long battle over not only what constituted the canon of English Literature, but also what the practice of criticism should entail, and what contribution a new body of critical theory could make to the understanding of literature and criticism. A tiny corner of this battlefield was inevitably, and fruitfully, devoted to Shakespeare’s problem plays, and while none of the contributors to this book would necessarily endorse the totality of this revolution (their essays can speak for themselves in this respect), none was immune from the significant changes in the critical agenda that have emerged in the last twenty years of criticism. Their contributions have been chosen, in part, for their application of aspects of ‘theory’ in their critical readings of the plays, but also, given the stylistic difficulty that has characterised much modern critical writing, for their lucid approach to challenging critical questions.

\textbf{III}

The theory that has recast criticism of Shakespeare’s plays since the 1970s is a striking but complex phenomenon that cannot fully be explained in an introduction such as this. An examination of some of its key components, however, will help to provide a context for the essays that follow. Three general points can be made about the kind of approach that has overturned many of the assumptions found in the earlier criticism of the problem plays described above. The first is to do with the established literary canon, the body of ‘accepted’ great works that privileged certain writers above others. This has been viewed for the last twenty-five years or so as an ascendancy of male, western authors that necessarily led to the exclusion or neglect of writers whose works did not fit an exacting but nonetheless partial, or even prejudiced, set of criteria. Thus, in the realm of Renaissance drama, Shakespeare ruled supreme, to the detriment of the dozens of writers classified as his ‘contemporaries’. If Shakespeare could be said, rightly or wrongly, to have occupied the upper levels of such a hierarchy in terms of his value, achievement and appeal, then a book of essays about three of Shakespeare’s plays might be viewed as reinforcing that structure. After all, many of the themes and issues that
the problem plays address are present in the plays of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, including the work of such ‘rediscovered’ women dramatists of the period as Elizabeth Cary.\textsuperscript{15}

Value judgements, however, have always been applied across the range of Shakespeare’s work (as has been demonstrated above), leaving the problem plays marginalised as ‘problem children’. Consequently the very fact that these three plays have been treated to the kind of critical approach characterised by the essays in this volume is evidence of a new way of approaching Shakespeare’s plays overall. Plays traditionally seen as a ‘problem’ in their own right might yield new and exciting conclusions about their own status, and they might, under close examination, encourage readers to reflect upon the rest of Shakespeare’s work in a new light. It is also the case that some of the readings found here are themselves a product of critics productively exploring a juxtaposition between Shakespeare and his traditionally less-favoured contemporaries.

A second major theme of modern theory has been the sense of its own politics, and the politics of its predecessors. Traditional criticism, modern theorists would claim, was based on a covert sense of the apparent innocence of its assumptions and practices. Where it was seemingly harmless, in, say, claiming an educational and even moral purpose in ‘close reading’, or learning extracts of Shakespeare by heart, or in recognising ‘timeless values’ in the literature of the past, there was none the less, theorists argue, a political significance in the assumptions made about what constituted those timeless values and their role in reinforcement of the accepted social order. Thus, if a great work like \textit{Hamlet} was read in order to show the timelessly tragic nature of the ‘human condition’ and the ‘flaw’ at the heart of even the noblest of men, then this tended to ‘fix’ human nature as unchanging and unchangeable. Accordingly, modern readers and theatre audiences enjoy the play not for its sense of historical distance from their own experiences, but in terms of identification with an historical continuum: history means nothing because nothing has really changed in the core of human experience since the period when Shakespeare was alive. Implied in this kind of traditional approach, if never clearly announced, was that the desire for societal change found at the heart of radical political criticism, such as Marxism or feminism, was pointless, but was simultaneously (and paradoxically) a danger to the status quo.

Equating critical practice with politics in the first place may seem to some absurd. Yet modern theory has been thoroughly committed
to exploring the ‘ideological’ nature of this traditional vision of the relationship between humanity and culture, exposing the politics of the old criticism by contrast with its own, explicitly stated, agenda for change. One objective of this book is to include a variety of approaches to Shakespeare’s problem plays, but none of the essays can be read in isolation from the critical upheavals of recent years, and some are extremely explicit in their politicising of criticism. Much modern criticism has been linked to political movements at work beyond academic circles and this is recognisable in the terms that have been used to describe various subsections or varieties of modern critical thought, including feminism, postcolonialism, and Marxism. And although Marxist criticism is rarely to the fore in the realm of the most recent criticism, its influence was an important factor in the re-examination of the theory and practice of criticism in the 1980s. This was partly due to its insistence upon the decentring of the individual as an agent in the creation and transformation of social formations and its emphasis upon structures (classes, groups, and economic systems) and the collective ‘consciousness’ of people subject to those systems.

Thirdly, and most challenging, has been the influence upon modern criticism of various schools of critical theory. These have often repudiated the strictures and simplicity of Marxism. Yet they often shared with it (explicitly or otherwise) a strong sense that human beings are products of systems of language, culture, and identity, which actually generated the concept of the ‘individual’, promoting it as the source rather than the effect of those systems. The radicalism of the many strands of theory that have influenced critical approaches in the last quarter of a century has been in their understanding that meaning is not fixed or stable, but plural and contingent. Texts as diverse as a Shakespeare play, a political speech or even the signs that direct us from place to place in our everyday lives, render not a set of transparent truths, but a range of sites where there are contests for meaning. We may not be unduly troubled by what might simply be seen as ambiguities in signage in public places, such as arrows apparently directing us the wrong way. But it becomes clear that, for example, the meanings of phrases such as ‘a just war’ or the idea ‘love and marriage’ are altogether more problematic and unstable when seen in terms of twenty-first-century international relations and gender politics, just as they can said to have been in Shakespeare’s problem plays.
The theoretical approaches that have informed approaches to Shakespeare’s plays over the last quarter of a century are, then, diverse and complex. The terms that have emerged, such as ‘structuralism’, ‘poststructuralism’ and ‘psychoanalysis’, are perhaps better understood by readers when they are applied in practice to literary texts, although Marxism and feminism are more easily apprehended because of their clear political provenance. However, there is common ground in the different areas of theory that is particularly significant in terms of Shakespeare’s plays.

The philosophical and linguistic approaches that draw to a large degree on the work of the French structuralist Roland Barthes and the poststructuralist Jacques Derrida (who modified the earlier ‘structuralism’, of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure) have been particularly influential with respect to texts written for theatrical performance. In proposing that meaning is not fixed, either by the intentions of the author, or by the text itself, Bathes and Derrida unsettled the emphasis that more traditional criticism had placed on the author. An author produces a text, but cannot control the meanings that flow from it into the communal systems and cross-currents of language; and meanings are not his or her private realm, but operate in a public way – in what might collectively be termed ‘culture’. In many respects this idea is especially true of the dramatic text – written perhaps by a single hand, but manifestly opened up in terms of the plurality of its meanings by the collaborative nature of production. Were this not the case, the impulse individuals have to see many different ‘interpretations’ of the same play would become meaningless. The theatre might be said to be a complex system for the production of meaning that inherently reinforces the idea of ‘plurality’ of meaning that theorists have ascribed to any kind of written text. The theatre is a system of signification in which meaning circulates through a range of agents, such as actors, directors, stage managers, and by means of its own mechanics – set, scenery, lighting and costume. Faced with this proliferation of devices for the production of meaning, audiences are invited to experience systems that reveal the way that meaning is ‘produced’ in a very practical way. The objective may be to create an illusion of reality, but the mechanics of that illusion are very apparent, and the raw material of any production, the text, is necessarily but one component in the overall process.
The process through which meaning is produced seems especially ‘open’ in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries where there is an extremely close correspondence between the texts and the theatre environments for which they were written in terms of an awareness of the conditions of production. Although this openness also has much to do with contemporary attitudes towards language and meaning in a world before literacy was common and before the widespread use of the printing press, the dramatists of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries seemed particularly aware of the instability and plurality of meaning. The plays are full of double-meanings, slips of the tongue and puns. In a period that valued rhetoric as an expression of scholarship, the plays constantly reflect upon the power of speech itself and its potential for deception as well as truth: language seems less a transparent medium for ‘truth’ and more a complex of variations and uncertainties of meaning. When this phenomenon is considered in the context of the way that the plays were staged, the self-reflexivity of Renaissance drama is even more apparent. The stage was itself a system of signs, simple in its construction but complex in terms of its signification. If, as it is widely thought, the canopy in public theatres such as the Globe represented Heaven, and a trapdoor in the stage could mean Hell, then the meanings of those terms could be unfixed by being used in other pieces of stage business, or simply by being seen as part of the theatre. Meanwhile, the stage could be a platform or a forest, a castle or a field, but certainly a space where meaning could be played with and played out.

Such a complex system of signification might be said to reinforce and, indeed, amplify ideas about language and meaning that have underpinned recent critical approaches to Shakespeare’s problem plays. Instead of searching for universal truths and timeless continuities such as ‘human nature’ or the ‘human condition’, the emphasis of recent critical thinking has shifted to the way that the theatre represents a contest between competing sets of ideas. Far from providing a smooth hierarchy of meaning, with the ‘truth’ of any dramatic situation as inevitable and easily accessed, the theatre tends towards inviting its audience to ponder a range of contrasting positions and viewpoints over which it has to make a judgement.

Recalling the theoretical work of Emile Benveniste, Catherine Belsey has described the plays of the Renaissance as ‘interrogative’, distinguishing them from the ‘declarative’ texts of classic realism.
The Renaissance play, or ‘interrogative’ text, she argues, invites an answer or answers to the questions it poses. Further, if the interrogative text is illusionist it also tends to employ devices to undermine the illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality. The reader is distanced, at least from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated into a fictional world. Above all, the interrogative text differs from the class realism text in the absence of a single privileged discourse which contains and places all the others.\(^{18}\)

The scholars whose work has been reproduced in this volume do not necessarily subscribe in full to the implications of the theoretical debate that has informed critical approaches to Shakespeare’s problem plays in recent years. Indeed, they have been selected for the diversity of their approaches and concerns. Yet the originality of their positions indicates a departure from the orthodoxy that informed the earlier work that struggled to classify these extraordinary plays in terms that were often negative or grudging. However complex its source, the term ‘problem play’ retained a sense of negativity. Whatever their relations to the theoretic developments that have characterised literary criticism of late, the critics who have contributed to this volume have clearly reversed this negativity. They demonstrate that this small portion of the Shakespeare canon is not only worth engaging with in its own terms, but may well raise important questions for our understanding of Shakespeare’s canon in its entirety.

V

In ‘Shakespeare’s Problem Plays: Concepts and Perspectives’ (essay 1) Vivian Thomas approaches the question of what distinguishes the ‘problem play’ from the rest of the Shakespearean canon by looking at a list of features, themes and concepts. The essay is particularly useful and important because Thomas implies a settling, in his mind at least, of the debate over which plays should be included in the ‘problem play’ classification. The list of distinguishing features is firm, authoritative and shows a keen grasp of the kind of issues that are to come under closer scrutiny in the succeeding essays in this volume. Thomas is also sensitive to the fact, sometimes overlooked by literary critics, that what makes these plays challenging (and difficult to pigeonhole) is their effect, notably a sense of ‘incongruity’, upon an audience in the theatre rather than simply the reader of
a text. The book from which the essay for this volume is extracted shows Thomas exploring in detail the kinds of concerns he raises here and is thus recommended as further reading. As an essay in itself, it can be seen as a preface to the varied work on the three plays that this volume includes. It is worth noting that Thomas seems to predict many of the central issues dealt with by later critics, and this gives his own piece a special resonance in terms of critical approaches to the plays over the last twenty years.

Leah Scragg’s ‘All’s Well That Ends Well and the Tale of the Chivalric Quest’ (essay 2) is the first of three very compelling but contrasting essays on the play. Scragg invites her reader to re-examine the sources of All’s Well That Ends Well in considerable detail and her conclusions are the result of painstaking and original research. Starting with a quotation from an early seventeenth-century story of the chivalric quest by George Wilkins, Scragg reminds us that this kind of story had a long and widespread pedigree in Western European literature. Making links between the Wilkins story, Shakespeare’s source in Boccaccio’s Decameron, and a range of other examples from the tradition, she explains the unique appeal of All’s Well as both belonging to and modifying this tradition. Of particular interest in this essay is Scragg’s analysis of the way that women are given an unusually prominent voice. This is a play that includes many reversals of ‘gender expectations’ and invites us to consider quite fundamental issues of gender and identity which were of concern to its audiences at the time of first production and clearly have a resonance for twenty-first-century readers and theatregoers. Above all, Scragg demonstrates that Shakespeare’s play, however original it might have been in its framing of a traditional story, none the less had a relationship with its sources and contemporary narratives, a knowledge of which enriches our reading of Shakespeare’s version.

Peter Erickson’s ‘The Political Effects of Gender and Class in All’s Well That Ends Well’ (essay 3), as its title implies, is a distinctly political reading of the play. The essay is of value both for its originality and as a good example of the kind of criticism characteristic of the last decade of the twentieth century. Erickson examines the layers of authority in the play and unpicks the rhetoric that promotes certain values associated with hierarchical relationships. A surprisingly involved and textured linguistic system is revealed that supports but sometimes undermines concepts of masculinity, kingship, love and social class. Erickson concludes by comparing All’s Well with Hamlet because of their mutual sense of ‘restiveness’ – a good word for the
atmosphere that concludes both plays. While Erickson is not returning to the old school of critics that would have included *Hamlet* as a fourth ‘problem play’, his thesis reminds us that one of the more thought-provoking approaches to the three plays examined is that their ‘restiveness’ illuminates the unsettled nature of much of the whole Shakespearean canon, even those plays more easily pinned down by the seemingly straightforward generic groupings such as ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’. It is almost as if the three problem plays are a kind of laboratory for the other plays, testing and teasing their audiences with new ideas and a distinctive lack of philosophical certainty.

In ‘Subjectivity, Desire and Female Friendship in *All’s Well That Ends Well*’ (essay 4) Caroline Asp begins with her interpretation of what has given the play the ‘problem’ label but renews the term by offering a psychoanalytical reading. Some criticism of this kind can be difficult for the new reader, depending as it does on knowledge of the kind of psychoanalytical theory derived from the work of Jacques Lacan, whom Asp acknowledges in her essay. Asp’s essay, however, has the virtue of explaining many of its terms as it goes along, and while it is a thorough and demanding piece, there is also a commendable lucidity and sense of engagement with the reader. Asp is concerned that the play can be read in the context of Renaissance theories of male superiority and the gender relations that result from the policing, or otherwise, of sexual desire. She makes a case for the singularity of *All’s Well That Ends Well* in these terms, but in her conclusion invites her readers to look again at the representation of female figures in other Shakespeare plays. Like other essays in this volume, Asp gives a detailed analysis of the play itself and argues for its importance as a distinctive work, but also asserts that a ‘problem play’ is also of value for the comparisons and contrasts that can be made with other plays in the canon.

VI

The three essays in this volume on *Measure for Measure* have been chosen for their individual merit as original and compelling pieces of interpretation. They are all representative of the kind of critical energy that has been applied to the play in recent years and will hopefully inspire readers to look at the longer works from which
they come, at the other works of criticism to which they refer, and at Shakespeare’s play with new insight.

Jonathan Dollimore’s ‘Transgression and Surveillance in Measure for Measure’ (essay 5) with Peter Erickson’s essay, is another overtly political reading of the Shakespeare derived not only from historical research and the application of critical theory, but from the context in which the essay itself was written. Dollimore is at pains both to open up a text from history to the available relationships that can be forged between the text and historical circumstances that conditioned its production, and also to suggest its absolute relevance to modern readers. His reading of Measure for Measure is thus informed by his reading of his own times – in this case the political dissensus of the mid-1980s which found many of the issues addressed in Shakespeare’s play very much to the fore in the modern world that was forged from developments in the early-modern world of the English Renaissance. It is certainly not outlandish to suppose that Dollimore wrote with one eye on the extreme political context of Shakespeare’s England and another on the unfolding narrative of Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. If Shakespeare’s world was a dangerous one for dissenters and the marginalised, then it may have reminded Dollimore of the contests that were taking place in a divided Britain in terms of political power and human rights. Whatever the case, Dollimore’s essay has a sense of urgency and authority that remains fresh and compelling, perhaps suggesting that the issues raised in this essay and in Political Shakespeare in general, the book (co-produced with Alan Sinfield in 1985) from which it comes, have not gone away.

In ‘London in Measure for Measure’ (essay 6), Leah Marcus takes us on a tour of the legal systems that operated in Shakespeare’s London and are addressed in the imagined Vienna of Measure for Measure. The approach is historical and necessarily ‘political’ in that to the fore in this essay are concerns with the way that the law regulated (or attempted to regulate) sexual behaviour and the institutions of marriage and the family. What emerges from Marcus’s analysis, apart from the admirable breadth of her knowledge of early-modern legal systems, is a compelling argument that determines the ‘problem’ of Measure for Measure as a virtue – for what it reveals about the relationship between power and law in the emerging Jacobean state.

Richard Hillman’s ‘Love’s Tyranny Inside-out in the Problem Plays: Yours, Mine, and Counter-mine’ (essay 7) concludes the section on Measure for Measure with a memorable argument about the subversive possibilities of Shakespeare’s plays. We usefully return to
the theme of the problem plays in general, but are specifically invited to consider the instability of the idea of the ‘state’ in Measure for Measure and its implications for our understanding of the political context in which it was written. Much of Hillman’s work (see the further reading section for his book on the problem plays in general) is underpinned by his understanding of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin who explored the political potential of carnival, trickery, and the inversion of order in his own analysis of Rabelais. Hillman’s work on the problem plays is well known and influential; this essay is a good example of his approach to Measure for Measure, but usefully concludes with an analysis of Troilus and Cressida, the subject of the final three essays in this volume.

VII

In “Tricks We Play on the Dead”: Making History in Troilus and Cressida (essay 8) Heather James shows how Shakespeare’s interpretation of the legend of Troy intersects with a more general inscription of classical legend in the official ideologies of the Tudor and early-Stuart governments. Classical images shaped an ideal of the nation and its leaders through a variety of media – including fine art, costume and architecture – and legends from the past were appropriated as models of national identity, heroism and military masculinity. However, as James shows, the use of the classical legend was neither stable nor seamless – and in the special environment of the public theatre the relationship between classical legend and contemporary politics was revealed to audiences in an open and interrogative way, which contrasted with the imperatives of government myth-making. A fascinating aspect of the essay is the way that James shows that classical figures and events were available to a wide range of people through a variety of non-official and popular media, such as ballads. She argues that early-modern English culture was seemingly saturated with classical images made to work in different ways for a variety of ideological causes. A ‘problem play’, such as Troilus and Cressida, with its complex treatment of the classics, invites a reading that suggests its audiences might discover discontinuities in the treatment of classical legend, and therein a critique of the purposes to which legend was put in the world beyond the theatre.

Valerie Traub’s ‘Invading Bodies/Bawdy Exchanges: Disease, Desire, and Representation’ (essay 9) begins with a reminder to its
reader that sexually transmitted disease has throughout history been blamed on a scapegoat in the shape of certain minorities or races. She cites the example of AIDS, but traces the formulation back to the period that produced *Troilus and Cressida*. This essay is disturbing because of its relevance, once again showing that broadly historicist readings of Shakespeare can show how the early-modern era gave rise to the values, institutions and prejudices of the modern. Traub notes that ‘diseases’ is the final word of a play that uses images of disease to address a range of issues and relationships, including a central one in Traub’s thesis, the relationship between disease, desire and warfare. The essay concludes with an appeal to the reader to see how studying *Troilus and Cressida* can, at the very least, defamiliarise our own concepts of sexuality and disease.

The last essay in the volume, Matthew Greenfield’s ‘Fragments of Nationalism in *Troilus and Cressida*’ (essay 10), reflects on *Troilus and Cressida* in relation to the ideas it presents about nation and community. Given the importance of classical legend in the presentation of early-modern notions of ‘nation’, Greenfield argues that, whilst Shakespeare’s history plays, often with some difficulty, seek to promote continuity in terms of nation or the genealogies of royal leaders, *Troilus and Cressida*, from the outset, does the opposite. Greenfield reminds us of the fragmented nature of nation in the play and the attacks it contains on the notions of genealogy. For an audience as sensitive to the use of classical legend as Heather James (in essay 8) claims it would have been, these aspects of *Troilus and Cressida* make it a potentially subversive play, and Greenfield’s essay is a learned and readable account of these issues.

As the most recent essay in this collection Greenfield’s contribution also shows how a ‘problem play’ is provoking original criticism for a new and inquisitive readership. The essays in this collection together show that despite the troubled response among earlier critics to *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and indeed other plays gathered into the problem play grouping, these are plays that have excited and inspired recent critics. For some of the earlier generations of critics, the problem plays seemed somehow unfinished or crude – in short, somehow un-Shakespearean. It is hoped that the essays in this volume show that Shakespeare may be at his most provocative when he is being least predictable, or at least at his most difficult to categorise.
Notes

1. George Whetstone based his two-part play on Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio’s *Hecatomithi* (1565) and his posthumous drama *Epithia* (1583).

2. Shakespeare’s main sources for *Troilus and Cressida* were William Caxton’s *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* (1475), John Lydgate’s *The Troy Book* (c. 1412–20) and Robert Henryson’s *Testament of Cressid* (1532), although he would have known Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and Homer’s *Iliad*.


4. It is generally accepted that the critic Edward Dowden originated the ‘problem’ label for the plays in his *Shakspere: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, 3rd edn (London, 1877).


7. Perhaps the clearest rebuttal of Boas’s inclusion of *Hamlet* is in W. W. Lawrence’s *Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies* (New York, 1931).


12. I was reminded here of William Makepeace Thackeray’s embarrassed verdict on Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*. He returned from a performance attended with friends and wrote in his diary that ‘we all found the play a bore; […] it is almost a blasphemy to say that a play of Shakespeare’s is bad, but I can’t help it if I think so.’ See Thackerary’s *Letters*, Vol. II (Oxford, 1945), p. 292.


14. The restored Globe Theatre at Southwark, in London, provoked fierce and occasionally humorous debates over whether or not its productions were ‘authentic’, with purist critics and theatre historians lined up against its sponsors, developers and practitioners.


16. For a clear and engaging account of these aspects of meaning see Terry Eagleton, An Introduction to Literary Theory, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1996).


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Note: The following abbreviations are used: AWTEW (All’s Well That Ends Well); MFM (Measure for Measure); TAC (Troilus and Cressida)

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