CHAPTER 3

The Problem Plays

> Our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.
>
> —Sidney

BETWEEN THE romantic comedies and the romances proper stand the so-called problem plays—*Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*—and any attempt to trace the development of Shakespearean romance must come to terms with them. No group of Shakespeare's plays, with the possible exception of the romances themselves, has generated such divided response and diverse speculation, so much (in Guildenstern's phrase) "throwing about of brains." They have been grouped on the basis of a widely felt, though variously conceived, community of theme or mood or effect. Other plays have from time to time been added to their number, and their status as a discrete and coherent group has not gone unchallenged.[1] To those who doubt that they present any special or intrinsic problems and trace our uneasi-

[1] The term "problem plays" has been recently redefined by Ernest Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare* (New York, 1963), pp. 1-10, 187-91, for whom it properly applies only to *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. A more convincing case, to my mind, for the by now traditional application of the term to *Troilus*, *All's Well*, and *Measure for Measure* is made by A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns* (London, 1961), pp. 108-28.

ness with them to the Victorian spiritual biography of Shakespeare, the first attempts to classify *Troilus* should be cautionary.[2] The titlepage of its first quarto called it a "history"; the self-styled Never Writer of the euphuistic epistle prefixed to it was magisterially confident he was introducing a "comedy"; while Hemminge and Condell placed it among the tragedies in the first folio. I hope to show not only that these three plays share certain formal features which justify their being discussed together, but that these common denominators arise from the unique relation of these plays to romance convention.

That relation is fundamentally a new ambivalence toward the romance mode itself, particularly the naive romanticism that informs Shakespeare's early work, an ambivalence already adumbrated in the plays immediately preceding the problem comedies. In *Hamlet*, often discussed in conjunction with the problem plays, the will to woo and wed to which even the most reluctant lovers of the comedies are finally subject is seriously problematized. Hamlet's bitter interdictions to the girl he once loved and Gertrude hoped he would marry—"Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?"—at once divorces his world from that of the comedies and allies it

[2] Nor are the difficulties most of us feel with *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* of recent origin. Johnson's uneasiness with both plays and Coleridge's with *Measure for Measure* directly prefigure our own. See *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York, 1960), pp. 76 and 84; and Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (Everyman's Library, London, 1960), I, 102. Bernard Shaw repeatedly singled out these three plays from the rest of Shakespeare's comedies for praise, on the grounds that plays as unpleasant and unpopular as they are cannot be all bad. See *Shaw on Skakespeare*, ed. Edwin Wilson (New York, 1961), pp. 25 and 259.

with that of *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*. Honor fares little better than love. How "divine" is that ambition which moves Fortinbras (he recalls both Hotspur and Henry V) to risk twenty-thousand lives for "a fantasy and trick of fame"? The chivalric world of ritual single combats had already seemed slightly outmoded when Hotspur had appropriated its terms, and with the murder of the elder Hamlet, it has faded into a lost golden age. When Troilus champions a similar code of honor in a world even less hospitable to chivalric modes, he becomes not only a bit ridiculous, as Fortinbras had been, but finally pathetic.

Similarly, the noble Romans and Roman nobility of *Julius Caesar* are so seriously undercut, it is not surprising to find that play too recently classified and discussed as a problem play. No one has yet considered, to my knowledge, the *Henriad* as a problem tetralogy, but there is warrant for doing so, particularly in the case of its latter two plays. Like *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*, *Henry V* has a romance ending despite the fact that the strong counter-romantic forces which have been raised have not been altogether charmed to rest. The various public voices of that play (the Chorus, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Henry himself) use all the rhetoric at their command to erect the romantic myth of a sun-king purged of "the offending Adam," winning the angelic Katherine, and regaining "this best garden of the world, / Our fertile France." But the hard facts of the play jar against the myth and threaten to shatter it: the quibbling legal pretext on which Henry invades France in the first place, as well as his motives for doing so; his inability to rationalize away Williams' legitimate doubts on the eve of

battle; his habit of making deals with God before major encounters; and his cruel and gratuitous slaughter of French prisoners. Then too, the triumphant note of the final Chorus is muted by the reminder that Henry's achievements will prove short-lived. As for the common sort, we learn that Falstaff is dead and all but forgotten, that Doll Tearsheet "is dead i'th'spital / Of malady of France," that Bardolph and Nym have been hanged for stealing, and that Pistol means to turn pimp and thief and make for England. As at the end of the problem comedies, even though its unhealthy elements have been put down with a vengeance unprecedented in the earlier comedies—perhaps *because* they have been so ruthlessly put down—we may question whether all is any more "well" in Henry's England than it is in Vincentio's Vienna or in Helena's France. *Henry V* could well be regarded, as Polonius might say, as "problem-comedy history."[8]

The historical mode of *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet* allows wide scope for problematic elements without jeopardizing their generic status or upsetting our concomitant expectations. Of course romance and romantic comedy also deal in problems, or more precisely, in the overcoming of problems, and the best romances work to some degree against the genre by making their problematic forces as recalcitrant as possible to solution. Even in the early comedies, Shakespeare takes pains to ballast the buoyancy of a Duke Senior and an Orlando with the melancholy and skepticism of a Jaques and a Touchstone. When the lovers of the comedies cast about for romantic

[8] I owe the phrase to a letter from Northrop Frye. See also his *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 284.

prototypes, and come up with the example of Troilus and Cressida, it does not go unqualified. Troilus is "one of the patterns of love" for Rosalind, even if he "had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club." Lorenzo opens his catalogue of romantic exemplars in the moonlit garden of Belmont with Troilus, sighing "his soul toward the Grecian tents, / Where Cressid lay that night," though Jessica's replies point up the fact that each of those legends of love ends in disaster. There, in any case, is the equipoise between romantic and anti-romantic sentiment characteristic of Shakespearean comedy, the fulcrum of which is usually centered in his witty heroines. Their romantic genre is established, mildly threatened, and reestablished stronger for the testing.

Such is not the case with *Troilus* and the problem comedies. As the foregoing examples from the comedies suggest, the matter of Troy had been, along with Arthurian legend, the great repository of romantic and heroic materials in medieval and Tudor England, of "fierce warres and faithfull loves," as Spenser announces the subject-matter of his romantic epic. When Byron wittily misquoted, "Fierce loves and faithless wars," to describe the twin subject of his satiric epic, he might have been describing *Troilus*. "All the argument is a cuckold and a whore," barks Thersites, "and war and lechery confound all!" (II.iii.73-7). Heroic warriors and romantic lovers are reduced by the end of the play to "traitors and bawds" (v.x.38), a phrase spoken by Pandarus in what amounts to an epilogue. Someone has said that there is not a single characterization of the Greek "heroes" in *Troilus* that is not embryonic in Homer. The Thersites of the first book

of the *Iliad*, for example, who takes at face value Agamemnon's suggestion that they abandon the war and go home, is hardly more attractive than the scurrilous rogue of Shakespeare's play. But anti-heroic sentiments in Homer usually serve as safety-valves for the audience's own skepticism, are quickly squelched, and work ultimately to validate the heroic norms of the poem. In Shakespeare, however, Thersites' cynical rant threatens to drown out the voices of order and idealism altogether and to sum up the status of love and honor at the end. The apparent triumph of the ignoble would seem to suggest the poetics of satire or burlesque, where from *Don Quixote* through *Candide* and *Gulliver's Travels* to *Don Juan* and *Brave New World* a romantic myth is consistently invoked or implied in order to be systematically subverted. *Troilus* and the problem comedies have been discussed under this rubric, and there are no doubt moments when they do work on satiric principles. One thinks of Helena's invocation of Marlowe's mighty line on another Helen to underscore the indignity of her own situation in *All's Well*, or Aeneas's glorification in *Troilus* of "the high and mighty Agamemnon" (I.iii.232) and subsequent failure to recognize him in the flesh, or Achilles' sordid butchery of Hector against all the rules of chivalry and his own reputation. For not only do the heroes of antiquity fall short of their legendary status (even for Hamlet they are types of heroic action, the bywords of a humanist education) but they fail to live up to their own ideals of themselves within the play. In the problem plays generally, and *Troilus* in particular, the romantic imagination—be it Homer's, Chapman's,

Troilus's, or Shakespeare's own—is subjected on all sides to unprecedented stresses and strains.

But for all its ironic moments, *Troilus and Cressida* is not finally a satire of the vanity of honor and the folly of love, nor its relation to the romantic legend of Troy simply parodic. The play is ambivalent toward romance, not scornful of it. At times its romantic ideals are allowed to shine forth in so pure a form that their after image persists in the mind's eye, whatever their fate within the play. This persistence of vision beyond its apparent demise is suggested by the fact that the best-remembered utterances in the play are Ulysses' monologue on order and degree and Troilus's impassioned advocacy of assigned over intrinsic value, of faith over expediency. Neither ideal is set up solely to be knocked down, as they would be in a purely ironic work. Ulysses' exhortation is not invalidated because Achilles and Ajax fail to follow it; if anything, it is negatively borne out. Troilus's insistence that "the life of our design" consists in "glory" rather than "the performance of our heaving spleens," though it is betrayed by the brutality of Achilles and Ajax, by his brother Paris's dalliance, and by his own eventual rage for revenge, is nonetheless upheld by Hector, in action if not in principle. Ulysses is no Pangloss, and Troilus, though he is related to the *naïf* of satire, is no Candide. In everything but his end Troilus has more in common with Don Quixote, who also tries to impose the "high designs" of romance on a world too late, and who also has the power of temporarily drawing others into his vision of grace and nobility.

For Troilus, like Quixote, has been reading too many

chivalric romances and repeatedly tries to cast his experience of war and love into that mold. He insists on seeing Helen as the conventional exalted lady of quest romance, with whose metaphors he invests her:

> Why, she is a pearl,
> Whose price hath launch'd above a thousand ships,
> And turn'd crown'd kings to merchants.
> (II.ii.82-4)

> A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
> Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
> And fame in time to come canonize us.
> (II.ii.199-201)

That Helen seems closer to the "flashy bauble" described by Yeats than the "pearl" described by Troilus may not disturb him—"What is aught but as 'tis valued?"—but it bodes ill for his love affair with Cressida, whom he invests with the same imagery:

> I cannot come to Cressid but by Pandar;
> And he's as tetchy to be wooed to woo
> As she is stubborn, chase, against all suit.
> Tell me Apollo, for thy Daphne's love,
> What Cressid is, what Pandar, and what we.
> Her bed is India; there she lies, a pearl.
> Between our Ilium and where she resides
> Let it be called the wild and wand'ring flood,
> Ourself the merchant, and this sailing Pandar
> Our doubtful hope, our convoy, and our bark.
> (I.i.99-108)

Troilus romanticizes his situation into a risky and arduous quest for a rare object guided by an expert merchant-adventurer, in the course of which the best in everyone will be brought out. But the speech, like so many of Troilus's utterances, is bedeviled by a curious *double entendre* of which he himself is unaware. He superimposes the exotic image of a pearl lying in India upon the erotic image of a flesh-and-blood woman lying in bed. When he later complains to Cressida of "the monstruosity in love . . . that the will is infinite and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit" (III.ii.82-5), we again recognize two possible constructions. Though Troilus speaks out of his adopted role of the servant of love faced with the impositions of a cruel but ennobling mistress, Cressida takes his references to "will," "execution," and "act" in their unabashed sexual sense, the sense that informs her frequent exchanges of puns with Pandarus. Troilus's speeches are chronically and unwittingly subverted from below, and the action proceeds to fulfill, not the high designs and roles they project, but their low undertones. Pandarus is revealed, not as a highminded merchant-adventurer, but as a prurient "broker" and "trader." And Cressida, far from "stubborn, chaste, against all suit," proves in the end to be only too pliable to the nearest male will.

There is, however, another romantic model and matrix embedded in *Troilus* besides that of chivalric romance, one which seems for a time adequate to contain the experience of the principals, and that is the morality play. During the scene of their union, Cressida falls back on its terms out

of her uneasiness with the high romantic role in which Troilus has cast her: "I have a kind of self resides with you; / But an unkind self, that itself will leave / To be another's fool." (III.ii.149-51) Cressida, that is, recasts herself in the role of the morality protagonist wavering between the best and worst in her nature and her world, a role better suited to what we see of her than that of exalted mistress. For it is a mistake to view Cressida simply as a slut, as many interpretations and productions have. To do so is to play Thersites' game (Troilus's in reverse) and coarsen the play's special quality of anti-romance. Shakespeare's Cressida fluctuates throughout between the dignity of Chaucer's heroine on the one hand and the indignity and degradation of Boccaccio's and Henryson's on the other. During their love scenes, Cressida reveals a heart warm enough to make romantic protestations and a head cool enough to realize she protests too much. In her combination of romantic and anti-romantic attitudes, her ability to speak the language of both Troilus and Pandarus, she recalls the witty heroines of the early comedies. But whereas Rosalind or Portia have no difficulty reconciling contrary attitudes, Cressida is divided by them; hence her recourse to the imagery of the moralities. In the scene of their separation, Troilus adopts her terms:

Troilus. But I can tell that in each grace of these [Greeks]
There lurks a still and dumb-discoursive devil
That tempts most cunningly. But be not tempted.
Cressida. Do you think I will?
Troilus. No!
But something may be done that we will not;

> And sometimes we are devils to ourselves
> When we will tempt the frailty of our powers,
> Presuming on their changeful potency.
>
> (IV.iv.89-97)

When the temptation scene he imagines is realized outside Calchas's tent, Cressida proves to be neither the personification of faith-in-love Troilus would have her nor the personification of lechery he believes he beholds, but the fallible figure in between. In the world of the morality play proper, Cressida's infidelity and Troilus's desperation would eventually be repaired. But in the world of this play, the model of morality-romance, like that of chivalric-romance, turns out to be misapplied.

The ability to see "Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt" is in Shakespeare's early comedies always harmless and usually vindicated. The lovers of those plays may exert their romantic imaginations on the wrong object, as Orsino does on Olivia and Romeo does on Rosalind, but sooner or later their worlds yield up the right one. The dual setting characteristic of Shakespearean comedy insures an objective correlative for the imagination's highest flights, a local habitation where the greeting of the spirit with its object can take place. However muddled Bottom's description of his dream, its content was real and the passage in St. Paul on which it is based not ill-chosen. But the not-impossible-she Troilus describes is in fact impossible within the world of his play, unseconded as it is by any superior reality:

> O that I thought it could be in a woman—
> As, if it can, I will presume in you—

> To feed for aye her lamp and flames of love;
> To keep her constancy in plight and youth,
> Outliving beauty's outward, with a mind
> That doth renew swifter than blood decays.
> (III.ii.159-64)

Attainable as this ideal will again become in Cleopatra's Egypt, it is doomed to destruction, along with everything else, in Cressida's Troy. It is a critical, if often overlooked, feature of *Troilus* and the problem comedies that they contain no fully realized second world where the romantic imagination has room to maneuver, is free to create constructs that rival and rehabilitate the first.

Shakespearean comedy and romance typically moves from a world in which no one is really or fully himself (dukes are usurpers, brothers are unkind, lovers are in love with love or with the wrong person, fathers are not fatherly) to a world in which everyone, or almost everyone, regains his lost integrity and society its pristine structure. In Renaissance Christian terms, this movement is often portrayed as an emergence from a lower or fallen order of nature, human and external, into a higher order of nature and is often accomplished through the exertions of a figure both powerful and virtuous. Prospero is the best example, but most of the comedies and romances contain a "stage-manager" or *architectus* figure.[4] Troilus projected just

[4] Northrop Frye coins the term *architectus* (with some help from Plautus) and discusses his role in the action of comedy in *Anatomy of Criticism*, pp. 173-74. In the less naturalized and well-built action of romance, usually resolved by marvellous means, a term such as *magus* might be more appropriate. The chief Virtue performs such a role in morality-romance.

such a movement at the outset of his play and entrusted its management to Pandarus. It is hard to imagine a less promising piece of casting, a more "doubtful hope," than Pandarus, who lacks all the virtue and authority the role demands. (Ulysses, the would-be *architectus* of the war-plot, is similarly ineffective.) The dramatic movement of *Troilus* diverges from that of a romance like *The Tempest*, where the stage-manager Prospero can transmute flesh and blood into "something rich and strange," where Ferdinand can say convincingly that "the strong'st suggestion / Our worser genius can, shall never melt / Mine honour into lust," and Gonzalo can claim that "all of us [found] ourselves / When no man was his own" and not be far wrong. But Prospero's island lies a long way from Troy, where men and women prove devils to themselves, love collapses into lust, honor into "spleen," and in the portentous words of Ulysses, "will into appetite."

The movement from a lower to a higher nature, achieved in *The Tempest* and abortive in *Troilus*, is even more clearly presented in the allegories of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Milton's *Comus*. Comus bases his appeal, like the Renaissance lyrists of seduction who lie behind him, on nature as a fallen order, while the Lady rebuts from nature as a "superior power." His version of humanity would most naturally express itself in sensual and sensuous abandonment; hers through spiritual discipline, so that what seems negation to him—"the lean and sallow Abstinence"—is affirmation to her—"the Sun-clad power of Chastity." Like its chief models, *The Faerie Queene* and *The Tempest*, *Comus* proceeds by pitting images of higher nature against their degraded counterparts: the barbarous

dissonance of Comus's drunken crew gives way before the "Divine enchanting ravishment" of the Lady's and Sabrina's songs; the charms of Comus's black magic yield to the charms of "divine philosophy" and the white magic of the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina. When Sir Guyon, in the second book of *The Faerie Queene* breaks the staff of the bad Genius in the Bower of Bliss, and the Palmer (who serves as Guyon's good Genius throughout) waves his more potent staff, the men Acrasia has transformed into beasts regain their proper shapes. All are pleased to be human again except for one Grille, who "Repined greatly, and did him miscall, / That had from hoggish forme him brought to naturall." (*FQ*,II.xii.86) Grille corresponds to those characters in Shakespeare's comedies and romances who resist change when the logic of romance demands it and who remain outside the magic circle of raised humanity at the end—Shylock, Malvolio, Antonio, among others. For humanist romance is not so naive as to presume everyone redeemable or even educable: "Let Grille be Grille and have his hoggish minde," as Spenser puts it. If we imagine somewhat different versions of Spenser's allegory of temperance and Milton's masque, versions in which several Grilles resent and resist the reformation imposed on them and the protagonist himself is more like Grille, or the charms of the Palmer and Sabrina fail to work, we would have the Spenserian and Miltonic equivalents of Shakespeare's problem comedies.

All's Well and *Measure for Measure* open onto degenerate worlds, societies fallen on evil days. When Duke Vincentio looks around his Vienna after years of loose law

enforcement, he finds "that there is so great a fever on goodness that the dissolution of it must cure it." (III.ii.217) To legislate lechery out of existence now it would be necessary, according to no less an authority than Pompey, "to geld and splay all the youth of the city" (II.i.227), and Lucio corroborates that "it is well allied . . . and impossible to extirp . . . till eating and drinking be put down." (III.ii.97-9) In the delinquent duchy of Vienna, lust is the great leveller; it afflicts low and high, libertine and puritan alike. When the "precise" and repressive Angelo discovers he is no different from the Claudio he condemns, he too must give his "sensual race the rein" and resort to the argument of Comus:

> Be that you are,
> That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none.
> If you be one—as you are well express'd
> By all external warrants—show it now.
> (II.iv.133-5)

It is precisely because Isabella knows of the "natural guiltiness" Angelo has just discovered that she asks for an even "more strict restraint" on the already restrictive sisterhood of nuns she is about to enter. Although the claims of lower nature are more peremptory in *Measure for Measure* than *All's Well*, the status of sexual desire is in the worlds of both plays the index of moral and social degradation.

When Parolles expostulates with Helena in the opening scene, it is almost as if the palace of Rossillion were Ludlow castle and we were listening to a prosy and down-at-heels Comus:

> It is not politic in the commonwealth of nature to preserve virginity. Loss of virginity is rational increase, and there was never virgin got till virginity was first lost. . . . 'Tis against the rule of nature.
>
> (I.i.123-34)

Were it only Parolles, "a very tainted fellow," who expressed and followed this program, all would indeed be well once he is discredited; but Bertram arrives at Comus's position independently:

> In your fine frame hath love no quality?
> If the quick fire of youth light not your mind
> You are no maiden, but a monument. . . .
> Stand no more off,
> But give thyself unto my sick desires,
> Who then recover. (IV.ii.4-36)

Throughout his attempted seduction of Diana, Bertram casts himself in the role of courtly lover pining away for love, much as Troilus had done before him. But Bertram's terms, even more than Troilus's, conspire against him to betray desires not romantic but diseased. The arrogant Bertram and the braggart Parolles are poor replacements for an older aristocracy of honor and virtue, whose passing is lamented by the ailing King of France. The "commonwealth of nature," in both *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well*, has deteriorated beyond the power of law or medicine to rehabilitate.

The degraded worlds of the problem comedies, whatever they may say about Shakespeare's state of mind or the spirit of the age, are primarily a function of their ro-

mantic form, which traditionally begins in adversity. Adversity so extreme and deep-seated, however, does make the task facing the *architecti* of these plays an unusually formidable one. Yet the art Helena employs to cure the King of France seems equal to the challenge—"There's something in't / More than my father's skill" (I.iii.237-8)—and its success is described in the language of Christian miracle:

Lafew. A showing of a heavenly effect in an earthly actor. . . . [The] very hand of heaven.
Parolles. Ay; so I say.
Lafew. In a most weak—
Parolles. And debile minister; great power, great transcendence. (II.iii.18-36)

In the medieval religious drama such an act would indeed have been the very hand of heaven, for it would have been performed on stage by Mary or Christ, something of whose nature and function are resurrected here in Helena.[5] But Helena is preeminently human, and the choric commentary that surrounds her miraculous act stresses her human frailty as much as her superhuman power, her womanly appeal—in bringing her to the King, Lafew likens himself, after a series of bawdy puns, to Pandarus—as much as the sun-

[5] See R. G. Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (New York, 1965), pp. 106-31, 204-26, for excellent readings of *All's Well* and *Measure* against the background of the morality play. My treatment of these plays owes much to his, but he generally ignores the deliberate irony with which Shakespeare employs his medieval models in them. The problem comedies, in my view, are not so much about forgiveness as about the inadequacy of forgiveness.

clad power of chastity that she, like the Lady of *Comus*, embodies. By staging a scene right out of the miracle play, Helena (and the audience as well) expects her design to end like that of the miracle play, that is, in the eternal bliss of union with her lord, or at least happily ever after. But even though she brings off her miracle, cures the King, and secures Bertram for her husband, her plan fails of its intent. For human nature being what it is in this play, Bertram may see the better—the "blessed spirit" that "doth speak / His powerful sound within an organ weak" (II.i.174-5)—but he follows the worse and wants no part of the wife he should by all rights embrace.

Similarly in *Measure for Measure*, Isabella is entreated to plead for her brother's life, for as Lucio puts it, "All hope is gone / Unless you have the grace by your fair prayer / To soften Angelo" (I.iv.68-70). She proceeds to do so, using all the "prosperous art" (I.ii.174) at her command (just as Helena employs her "inspired merit" to recover the King), and her arguments mount to this climax:

> Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
> And He that might the vantage best have took
> Found out the remedy. How would you be
> If He, which is the top of judgement, should
> But judge you as you are? O, think on that,
> And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
> Like man new made. (II.ii.73-9)

Now it is Isabella who takes on a recognizably medieval role, that of Mercy, who pleads to save the figure of Hu-

manum Genus in the morality play, after Justice has argued for his eternal damnation—a role the Countess of Rossillion also assigns to Helena:

> He [Bertram] cannot thrive,
> Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear
> And loves to grant, reprieve him from the wrath
> Of greatest justice. (III.iv.26-9)

In *Measure for Measure*, Escalus further reminds us of this dimension of the play when he says "I have found [Angelo] so severe, that he hath forced me to tell him he is indeed Justice." (III.ii.246-8) Mercy wins her case in the moralities by appealing, like Isabella, to the compelling precedent of Christ's atonement. But Isabella, unlike her predecessor, succeeds in "softening" Angelo by her "fair prayer" only in the sense of arousing his lust, his "sensual race" and not in the expected sense of awakening his mercy. Shakespeare recreates these scenes from the drama of Christian redemption only to have them misfire within *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure.*

To the extent that these scenes conjure up an older (one is tempted to say, simpler and more innocent) dramatic world, they hold no solutions for the more problematic worlds in which they now occur. By virtue of their roles at this point in their plays, both heroines cannot help but appear what Lucio terms "a thing enskied and sainted" (I.iv.34) occupying a pedestal far above common humanity—the last place either really wants to be. Lafew expressly disclaims such a role when Parolles attempts to cast him into it:

Parolles. It lies in you, my lord, to bring me in some grace, for you did bring me out.

Lafew. Out upon thee, knave! dost thou put upon me at once both the office of God and the devil? One brings thee in Grace and the others brings thee out.

(v.ii.43-7)

When the recovered King begins to play God to Bertram's Humanum Genus one cannot help but feel, with Helena herself, some sympathy for Bertram, for who wants to be morally pressured into marrying someone, particularly a saint? Ironically, the medieval roles performed by Helena and Isabella work to widen rather than heal the divisions between body and spirit, nature and grace that make the worlds of these plays so unhealthy. Isabella's speeches to Angelo, her *ars rhetorica*, serve to polarize humanity into saints and sinners, sheep and goats—a tendency inherent in the medieval religious drama. The *contemptus mundi* she so passionately expounds, while appropriate to the morality play, is inappropriate to the secular drama she appears in now:

> No ceremony that to great ones longs,
> Not the king's crown nor the deputed sword,
> The marshal's truncheon, nor the judge's robe,
> Become them with one half so good a grace
> As mercy does. (II.ii.59-63)

> Hark, how I'll bribe you . . . .
> Not with fond sickles of the tested gold,
> Or stones, whose rate are either rich or poor
> As fancy values them: but with true prayers,

> That shall be up at heaven and enter there
> Ere sunrise: Prayers from preserved souls,
> From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicate
> To nothing temporal. (II.ii.150-56)

Her prosperous art, with its otherworldly tenor, is decidedly not what is needed in the ailing world of the play. The art which is needed in both *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* is this-worldly and human rather than otherworldly and divine, an art that works to reconcile the merely natural with the properly supernatural in human nature, not to lock up the former and cloister away the latter. The ideal toward which these plays move is not chastity, the personal ideal of Isabella, and of Diana in *All's Well*, but "married chastity,"[6] the personal and social ideal later embodied by Imogen in *Cymbeline*, whose bedchamber is adorned with images of Cleopatra and "Chaste Dian" emblematic of the two sides of her nature, of the moral oxymoron of married chastity itself.

If Isabella advocates the absolute divorce of the orders of nature and grace in human life, Helena and the Duke seek a closer communion between them, and the art they finally employ is directed to that end. Rather than ministering to the sick human will from without or from above (as the King, Isabella, and Angelo try variously and unsuccessfully to do) Helena and the Duke set about curing it from within. Though their end is different from that of Hamlet—reform rather than revenge—the means they adopt is very similar: to hold a mirror up to degraded

[6] The concept of "married chastity" is of course central to the third and fourth books of *The Faerie Queene*, where its chief exemplar is Amoret, but the term itself comes from "The Phoenix and the Turtle."

human nature, show it its own sinfulness, and thereby precipitate a kind of self-discovery. Like "The Mousetrap" in *Hamlet*, the bed trick is staged in these plays as a form of shock treatment. (We might recall that after the play-within-a-play Claudius reveals in soliloquy his detestation of his own crimes almost to the point of repenting them—not at all what Hamlet had intended.) It may seem perverse to talk of the bed trick in the same breath with "The Mousetrap" as an endeavor of art, but that is how its practitioners think of it:

> Why then tonight
> Let us assay our plot; which, if it speed,
> Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
> And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
> Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact.
> (*All's Well*, III.vii.43-7)

> He [Angelo] is your husband on a pre-contract:
> To bring you thus together 'tis no sin,
> Sith that the justice of your title to him
> Doth flourish the deceit.
> (*M. for M.*, IV.i.72-5)

The Duke stresses not only the legal justification of the bed trick but its poetic justice. Both Angelo, who insists throughout on a merciless legalism, and Bertram, who lays down seemingly impossible conditions for accepting Helena as his wife, are outwitted on their own terms. When Helena returns from supposed death wearing her husband's ring and carrying his child, she has in effect performed another miracle, the secular equivalent of her

earlier recovery of the King. Not only is Angelo guilty of violating, like Claudio, the letter of the law by consummating his own "pre-contract" but the spirit as well, unlike Claudio, by committing adultery in his heart—a concept, we might recall, that evokes the same Scriptural context as the title of the play. The incredible fact that a man can mistake in bed the woman he detests for the woman he desires is not the difficulty but the point of the bed trick, a commentary on the reductiveness of lust in action which not even characters as self-deluded as Bertram and Angelo can misread. The bed trick is employed in these plays not as Shakespeare's way out of the dramatic dilemma he has gotten himself into, but as Helena's and the Duke's way of making Bertram and Angelo confront the moral dilemma they have gotten themselves into.

Helena and the Duke manage to avoid the sexual betrayal of *Troilus* through a *coup de théâtre* designed to restore the social integrity of their world and the personal identity of its inhabitants. But because the "bed trickery" they employ reflects—and reflects upon—the moral ambivalence at the very core of these plays, it is no mere *coup de théâtre* in the way the Friar's benign deception in *Much Ado* (employed to bring round another Claudio) is. Yet the art of Helena and the Duke seems less than wholly "prosperous," itself slightly tainted and imperfectly effective, compared to the "prosperous and artificial feat" (*Per.*, v.i.72) of Marina, Paulina, and especially Prospero in the romances to come. Part of the triumph of Prospero's art consists in his express recognition of its limits, in his acknowledgment of the resistance life offers to being transmuted into art at all, and especially into romance. A sim-

ilar resistance, expressed not only through Bertram and Angelo but through Parolles, Lucio, and most of the low-life characters as well, makes itself felt in these plays (particularly in their long and painful recognition scenes) but it goes curiously unacknowledged by the stage managers themselves. Helena and especially the Duke seem blithely unaware that the self-discoveries they have precipitated represent only half the struggle toward self-recovery. "Is it possible he should know what he is," comments one of the captains present during Parolles' exposure, "and be that he is?" (IV.i.44-5). The answer, as the play goes on to show, is that it is only too possible, and we may wonder whether the same is not true for the principals as well. Bertram and Angelo doubtless come to discover of themselves, as a result of the humanist endeavors of Helena and the Duke, what others already know: "As we are ourselves, what things we are . . . ! Merely our own traitors." (*All's Well*, IV.iii.18-19) But that they are ripe for the self-recovery celebrated at the end of *The Tempest* is something that we, like Mariana, can only take on faith:

> They say best men are moulded out of faults,
> And, for the most, become much more the better
> For being a little bad. (V.i.437-9)

Her tentativeness suggests there is good reason to doubt. For the problem comedies, unlike the romances, give little time on stage to the "heart sorrow" that alone signals the reform of the heart. Even Duke Vincentio, though described as "One that, above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself" (III.ii.226-7), is never shown, as Prospero is shown, engaged in the strife for self-knowl-

edge he demands of Angelo. Nor is the Duke aware, as Prospero is aware, of the limits of his role. In his zeal for poetic justice and romance endings, he marries off everyone, including himself, and by coupling the incorrigible Lucio with "a punk," makes a mockery of the institution. (Similarly in *All's Well*, the King is bent on doing the same for Diana at the end as he did for Helena at the beginning —we can only hope with happier results.) Sick desire is sacramentalized at the end of these plays, for better or worse, but hardly cured. Therein the patient must minister to himself.

These are disquieting conclusions to be sure, but our disquietude arises, I submit, not from the design *of* the plays but from the designs *within* the plays. One of the common errors in interpretation of the problem comedies has been to blur this distinction: "None of the plays is wholly satisfactory from a formal point of view . . . because of the working out of a serious moral problem in an action built of improbable device and lucky coincidence. The result is . . . to make the solutions seem trivial or forced."[7] The bed trick raises as many problems as it solves; the cure partakes too much of the disease; in sum, the designs of Helena and the King, of Isabella and the Duke, are unsatisfactory. The design of Shakespeare reveals that they are so. The playwright is no more identical with his stage managers, however sympathetic, than the play is equal to the sum of its plots. We are used to distinguishing in prose fiction between the novelist and the narrator whose judgment is not always to be accepted at face value. The dramatic equivalent of the unreliable nar-

[7] Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art* (Madison, 1954), pp. 366-67.

rator is the fallible *architectus*, the figure we encounter in each of the problem plays and even to a lesser degree in *The Tempest*. The human capacity for projecting high designs and the equally human incapacity to realize them are combined in the same figure. The problem facing Helena, radically formulated near the beginning of her play, "That labouring art can never ransom nature / From her inaidable estate" (II.i.116-18) is the problem facing all romancers. Helena and Vincentio gloss over that fundamental recalcitrance of life to the designs of art, and in so doing become bad romancers. For the first time in his career as a romancer Shakespeare faces that recalcitrance head on, and we catch him in the act of realizing that when romance comes too easily or overlooks too much, it is not worth having. The problem plays stand midway between the romantic comedies and the romances in more than a chronological sense. The resistance they offer to the wishes of the romantic imagination is greater than anything in the early comedies and comparable to much in the final romances; to increase it further is to enter the world of tragedy. At the same time they lack figures of vision and resourcefulness adequate to overcome that resistance; to provide them is to enter the world of the last plays.