

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28371-7 - Aspects of Shakespeare's 'Problem Plays': Articles Reprinted from Shakespeare Survey

Edited by Kenneth Muir and Stanley Wells

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# ASPECTS OF SHAKESPEARE'S 'PROBLEM PLAYS'

ARTICLES REPRINTED FROM *SHAKESPEARE SURVEY*

EDITED BY

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All the illustrations are from productions at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Grateful thanks are due to the Governors of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, for permission to reproduce plates nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20; to Thomas Holte for nos. 3, 7, 11, 18.

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## PREFACE

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Until the present century the plays discussed in this volume were regarded with some embarrassment. During the nineteenth century they were scarcely performed, and those critics who paid them any attention found them so distasteful that they supposed that Shakespeare must have written them after some grave crisis in his own life and that in them he gave expression to his temporary disgust with sex – ‘sex nausea’ is their favourite diagnosis. The change of attitude to the plays came after the First World War when returned veterans found that their own feelings seemed to be reflected in *Troilus and Cressida*, and when the sexual frankness of all three plays appealed to that generation, as well as to our more permissive society.

A performance of *Troilus and Cressida* by the Marlowe Society at Cambridge in 1922 and a production of *Measure for Measure* at Sadler’s Wells in 1933 (with Charles Laughton and Flora Robson) revealed that the plays worked on the stage, while G. Wilson Knight and R. W. Chambers began their critical rehabilitation. Their later fortunes are discussed in Michael Jamieson’s article. Since he wrote it there have been two more books on *Measure for Measure*, by Rosalind Miles (*The Problem of ‘Measure for Measure’: A Historical Investigation*, 1976) and Darryl J. Gless (*‘Measure for Measure’, the Law and the Convent*, 1979).

In the present collection we have tried to illustrate the fortunes of the three plays in the theatre by photographs of productions, by reviews, and by the interview with John Barton who has directed them all. The articles, written over the past thirty years, are part of the continuing debate on the problem plays. Happily no one now regards them as evidence of the author’s breakdown, whether psychological or artistic.

With *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the least successful of the three, the debate centres on the question of tone; and R. L. Smallwood, Nicholas Brooke and Roger Warren seek to establish what Shakespeare was trying to do, and how successful he was in the attempt. With *Troilus and Cressida* the central question is one of genre. Is it a comical satire (as Oscar J. Campbell supposed) or is it rather a tragical satire? Kenneth Muir and R. A. Yoder in their different ways take the latter view. With *Measure for Measure* the controversy has sometimes been acrimonious between those who regard it as Shakespeare’s most Christian play and those who think it cynical. The difficulty here has been that each article on the play published in *Shakespeare Survey* has been followed by an indignant rejoinder. The opening pages of a number of recent articles have been devoted to a summary of the damnable errors they seek to confute. Elizabeth Pope and James Black in their different ways support a ‘Christian’ interpretation, while Harriett Hawkins wittily demonstrates that the play is not without ironies and ambiguities. Indeed, the impression we get from the essays on all three plays is that more than one interpretation can be based squarely on the text, not because of a failure of communication, nor because they are flawed masterpieces, but rather because their

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ambiguity is a sign that Shakespeare's mind, in Keats's phrase, was 'a thoroughfare for all thoughts, not a select party'.

K.M.

S.W.W.