CHAPTER - FOUR

THE PROBLEM PLAYS
At the thematic centre of the Problem plays is the experience of pain and death. Unlike in Tragedies and Roman Plays, death migless with degeneration and degradation. Time and Oblivion drain the sap of romance and wither the flower of love. Corruption in life permeates the Problem Plays and Mortality is viewed with cynicism. It is here that we see many masks of death lacking in reverence for life.

'Troilus and Cressida' is a tragedy of something worse than death. The betrayal of Troilus by Cressida and the terrible murder of Hector are the climax of the play. The tragedy of Troilus is that he has to continue to live in such a despicable world.

In 'All's Well that Ends Well' the milieu at Roussillan is charged with gloom, darkness decay, disease and death. What is disturbing is moral and spiritual sterility that pervades the fantastic tale.

'Measure for Measure' is a sustained probe into the reality of death. It dramatises a society bereft of all spiritual values, presenting the vogue of moral and spiritual death. Against that social background are presented several attitudes toward death. Death is inescapable. Isabella considers death as no threat where honour is concerned. The Duke presents death as a welcome liberation from humiliations of life. Claudio is trapped between two forces - his youth pulls him...
towards life but he is called upon to face death. The fear of death is made intense by the mystery of the unknown. The life of Saramaka in its animality degrades even death. Isabella moves from chastity to charity through the many masks of death, which she encounters. The Duke is masked Providence. He shows death as a destroyer only of appearance and externals of life.
The Problem Plays are plays of pain. They bear the impress of cynicism. Their theme is hate born of disgust of the body physical and revulsion of life through awareness of its limitations. They suggest horrors beyond the grave. Modern criticism has established that in the Problem Plays "there is intertwining with the far-fetched plots of comedy a Christian or near Christian pattern of Providence and redemption."  

The Problem Plays - Troilus and Cressida, All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure are also known as Dark Comedies or Bitter Comedies, for they are comedies from which all laughter has evaporated. In the Problem Plays, we are in a metaphysical universe. Both in the matter of love and death, the thinking in the Problem Plays is essentially a time thinking, more so in Troilus and Cressida.

In Troilus and Cressida the lover analyses the metaphysical implications of his love. Troilus is throughout a metaphysical lover, thwarted inwardly by the fine knowledge of human limitations. Shakespeare in Troilus and Cressida suggests that time and oblivion
are the nihilistic forces most to be feared. Agamemnon declares:

"What's past and what's to come is strew'd with husks and formless ruin of oblivion."

(XV, v, 165-166)

Later Hector, too, refers to the omnipotence of Time.

"...the end crowns all,
And that old common arbitrator time,
Will one day end it."

(iv, v, 223-225)

Time which belongs to the world of the flesh, and which can negate the values of the spirit, lies on the side of the Greeks. As Ulysses cynically comments:

"Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back,
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-sis'd monster of ingratiations."

(iii, iii, 145-147)

Thus Ulysses warns Achilles that Time and Oblivion are ultimately supreme over all values. As Troilus and Cressida is killed by the arch-enemy time. As Troilus utters:

"Injurious time now with a robber's haste
Drams his rich thievery up, he knows not how:"

(iv, iv, 42-43)
The thought that Time is a destroyer, permeates the play and "leaves the romantic flower drained of its sap and withered to the root".  

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare shows that the end of both, military and sexual fury is self-annihilation. Troilus aspires to the infinite but he is embarrassed when he faces actuality. Of all the plays which Shakespeare devoted to this theme of love, made tragic by the jolting of the world, this is the only one in which the lovers are left alive at the end. "Theirs is the inward death of disintegration and despair". Troilus cannot conceive of any further fall than the one he suffered by Cressida's betrayal. Troilus has discovered her falsehood. "... this is, and is not, Cressid" (V,ii, 143). His mind becomes a battleground like Troy. He seeks death in battle but does not find it. He realises the meaninglessness of world and pointlessness of war, yet a pointless war has to be won. 

In the great tragedies like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* the heroes suffer, but in their great suffering they are sustained by the fidelity of others. But here, the hero is all alone in a despicable world. In the case of Troilus, we have a tragedy worse than death - the tragedy of continued existence after every cherished value has been destroyed.
There are two climaxes of the action — the murder of Hector and the betrayal of Troilus. The war ends in chaos and anarchy. The Trojans, like the Greeks, are doomed to disintegration. His devotion is now a chaos. He is in metaphysical anguish, in emotional torture. He neither dies nor does he kill faithless Casside. There is no catharsis.

In another problem play All's Well That Ends Well the heights are much less elevated than in Troilus and Cressida. This Dark Comedy opens on a note of bereavement. The theme of love is enveloped in thoughts of death which suggest the dark tragedies which were to follow. The hero Bertram has lost his father; the heroine Helena has lost her father. The father of the land, the King of France lives under the threat of incurable mortal disease. Bertram’s father is dead, and with him has died the spirit of the place.

Bertram lives at Roussillon, a place of darkness, old age, disease, sadness and death. It is a place of superannuated people holding on to the chilled edges of their life. Bertram feels himself crushed under the weight of death at Roussillon. He gladly escapes to the freer air of the Royal Court. His absence is another form of death for his mother and for Helena who loves him. She follows him and offers to save the King. She has to counter the King’s scepticism by offering to lay down her life. It is then that the King says:
"Sweet practiser, thy physic I will try,
That ministers thine own death if I die."

(II.i, 188-189)

It is an ironic equation of death with death. The healing of the King is intended to foreshadow the spiritual healing of Bertram. In both cures—of King and of Bertram, Helena perceives a grace of grace, a Heaven-sent Mission. It is her sacrificial ardour, her readiness to stake life itself which finally solves the problem of the play.

In All's Well That Ends Well as in Measure for Measure, Shakespeare offers an artificial society as a background for human problems. Here the problems have priority over the setting. The solution of the problem in these plays is not rational but miraculous. About the cure of the King's disease, Helena asserts: "Heaven hath through me restor'd the King to Health" (II.iii, 70).

The death atmosphere of the play gradually changes into an atmosphere of birth and marriage at the end; what was lost, is regained. This aspect of the play is formulated as a riddle on the lips of Diana.

"So there's my riddle: one that's dead is quick; and now behold the meaning."

(V.iii, 307-308)

Helena was given up as dead but remained constant in
A mere unschooled girl through God's Grace keeps death at bay and rises from the reported death to resurrect the dead heart of the man she loved. She voices a Shakespearean insight when she says:

"But with the word the time will bring on summer when briers shall have leaves as well as thorns, and be as sweet as sharp."

(IV, iv, 31-33)

In Parolles, we find a contrast to Helena. He seems to be a coward who would live ignominiously rather than meet death. Says he: "Let me live, Sir, in a dungeon, i' the stocks, or anywhere, so I may live" (IV, iii, 275-276).

Shakespeare articulates his comment on life through the following statement of the first Lord.

"The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together: our virtues would be proud if our faults whipped them not; and our crimes would despair if they were not cherished by our virtues."

(IV, iii, 83-87)

Bertram and Helena both illustrate this truth, and Shakespeare was soon to pursue further this problem of the relation of virtue and vice in Measure for Measure.

Measure for Measure offers a series of divers
attitudes to death. Here Shakespeare dwells on death and the fear of death. Death is at the core of this play. He presents various aspects of death. It first appears in Isabella's talk with Angelo. To her death is nothing in comparison with honour.

"Better it were a brother died at once, Than that a sister, by redeeming him, Should die for ever."

(II, iv, 107-109)

Then the Duke urges Claudio to be content with death as life is something that only fools would keep.

"Death is visualized as a Mortality Play figure, the more man tries to shun it and keep it at arm's length, the more dangerously he runs into it, and the fear of it is instinctive and hair-raising." 4

Isabella assumes that Claudio would prefer to embrace death rather than accept the condition of his sister stooping to shame. But human nature is so incalculable that her confidence about Claudio's preference is misplaced. She looks upon death with contemptuous detachment; whereas Claudio visualizes a sensuous image of death.

"If I must die, I will encounter darkness as a bride, And hug it in mine arms."

(III, i, 81-83)
Isabella understands that the apprehension of death is more to be feared than its actuality. "The sense of death is most in apprehension." (iii, i, 76) But the primitive horror of death assumes a visible shape for Claudio, beckoning him towards total annihilation. The time processes of bodily disintegration are hateful to Claudio. He is prepared to accept death if death were all. But he is unnerved by the fear of the unknown.

"Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;"

(iii, i, ll6-ll7)

what he fears is the perilous leap in the dark. It may be compared with Hamlet's dread of something after death.

"The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns."

Hamlet(iii, i, 79-80)

This famous outburst upon death lifts fear of the unknown into pure poetry.

"......the icy coldness of death with the sure process of ultimate decay......is at the heart of the passage. The spirit set free from the bondage of the body - its traversing through dark misty and frozen regions or abysses of space is terrifying to contemplate. Claudio's speech offers us a crystallization of the deepest anguish by which the human psyche is invaded."
In the dialogue between Isabella and Claudio, two souls meet in a dreadful reality - the love of life and the fear of death. Though he feels it is the fear that repels him from the idea of death, it is also the fresh youth in him that calls on him to live.

To Barnadine, death means nothing at all. He has no care for the past, the present or the future. He makes his roaring joke in the presence of instant death. For him, death is robbed off both the elements - fear and mystery. He is just indifferent to it.

"As an objective fact of existence, death does not fit into Barnadine's pattern of animal living." 6

Barnadine is neither overwhelmed by its gruesomeness nor intrigued by its subtle and impenetrable mystery but drags on his existence in his own empty universe. Death itself becomes degraded when it is confronted with a man of Barnadine's temper.

"How would death look when juxtaposed with an unregenerate life-force like Barnadine?" 7

In his delineation of Angelo, Shakespeare shows what a man feels about death when he is thrown into an abyss of shame from the summit of reputation. Angelo's agony first expresses itself in an appeal for mercy and then modulates
itself into a death wish. He recognizes death as the only proper punishment for his evil doings. He passes through the inferno of misery but that pain has brought him a new perception and a new wisdom. He accepts the punishment, he rather expects it when he says:

"I am sorry that such sorrow I procure;
And so deep sticks it in my penitent heart
That I crave death more willingly than mercy.
'Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it."

(V, 1,475-478)

Thus Measure for Measure means Angelo for Claudio, death for death.

The longest exposition on death is found in the Duke's famous advice to Claudio. His thoughts on death are devoid of any explicit belief in immortality, though his ethical attitude is corresponding to that of Jesus. His words at first appear agnostic. The Duke comforts Claudio by concentrating not on death, but on life. However much one runs from death, one runs towards it. Sleep is man's 'best rest' yet he fears death. Man is tortured by disease and old age. Death unloads him of all cares and worries. He condemns life in order to make death acceptable. Life is not happy, nor certain, nor kindly. To the Duke, life is a sequence of unrealities. Everything life can offer, is, in turn, killed; thus it is a delusion, a living death.
"The Duke has concentrated especially on the temporal aspect of life's appearances, regarding only the shell of life and neglecting the inner vital principle of joy and hope."

it is only the temporal aspect of decayed appearances, which death ends. As Claudio fears the time succession, the Duke proves it of no importance. The death of such a life is not death but rather a kind of life.

"To sue to live, I find I seek to die,
And, seeking death, find life:"

(III,1,42-43)

As Prof. Asloob Ansari rightly points out:

"Here the classical and Christian motifs and overtones are fused together for creating a composite picture of death.... making Claudio feel repelled by the prospect of living so that he may persuade himself to accept the death-sentence as the less inadequate of the two alternatives."

Claudio's gloomy meditations on death sound like an echo from Hamlet's soliloquies. The Duke symbolizes masked providence. The play shows Isabella's progress from sanctity to humanity. Her chastity leads her to charity. In the words of G. Wilson Knight:

"In the Shakespearean mode of progressive thought, it is essential to feel death's reality strongly as the ender of what we call 'life'. Only then do we begin to feel the tremendous pressure of an immortality not known in terms of time. We begin to attach a
different meaning to the words 'life' and 'death'. The thought of this scene thus wavers between the old and the new death-prophecies. "10

This wealth of philosophic thought concerning the deepest issues of life here and beyond the grave gives the play a massive weight. Death is viewed from a variety of angles. We feel that

"neither Claudio's nihilistic horror nor Angelo's death-wish nor Barnadine's impercipline constitutes the whole of truth. All these masks of death are, however, relatively inconsequential, for as Karl Jaspers puts it beautifully: 'what death destroys, is phenomenal; it is not Being itself'. "11

Death in Measure for Measure, as pointed out by Prof. Asloob Ansari, has indeed many masks. But the wasteland of Verona, where moral values have decayed and nearly died, stinks worse than a rotten carcass.

All throughout the Dark Comedies, Shakespeare's approach to death is moral rather than physical. It is the moral death that is unreaded more than physical death.
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The Problem Plays

References


5. Ibid P. 242

6. Ibid P. 245

7. Ibid P. 244

