

# Illegitimacy in shakespeare's problem plays

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



To be legitimate is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, to “[conform] to the laws or rules; to be able to be defended with logic or justification; [to be] valid.” [1] Thus to be legitimate is to be legal, lawful, licensed, and valid; to be true. On the other hand, to be illegitimate is to be defined as “ not authorized by the law; not in accordance with accepted standards or rules,” or rather, to be illegal, illicit, criminal, unsanctioned; to be false. [2]

Questions of legitimacy are particularly consequential when examining problematic texts, such as the ‘ problem plays’ of William Shakespeare. The following analysis will discuss the ways in which these plays, Troilus and Cressida, All’s Well That Ends Well, and Measure for Measure engage, both directly and indirectly, with ideas about and the concept of legitimacy.

Looking at their identities, character, and relationships, this assessment will attempt to explore what effects notions of legitimacy or illegitimacy have on the various dramatis personae of these works, as well as the influence exerted on the genre and definition of problem plays overall. Whether a character’s identity is legitimate, or even legitimately their own and how these things are decided is an issue that must be addressed first and foremost. The idea of anything or anyone being legitimate is a complex one, for the reason that “ what is illegitimate cannot define itself or exist of itself, since it is defined by and in relation to what is legitimate.” [3] As Peter Hyland puts it: “ bastards do not make themselves.” [4] Thersites, of Troilus and Cressida, embodies one of the purer conceptions of the ‘ illegitimate’, perhaps more so than nearly any other character that will be discussed in this study, in that Thersites is, by birth, a bastard. Because of this both his existence and his identity are, in effect, defined as being intrinsically and

inescapably false. He is the “perverted product” of infidelity, diseased by his representation of “disease within the system.” [5]

To be a bastard was, in 17th century England, to be an outsider, a form of the “other” deprived of a socially, and in some cases legally (such as those regarding property rights), authorized identity. They are an “incarnation of the disruptive anti-social energies associated with [their] begetting,” defined by their status as a “symbolic denizen of that realm of unredeemed nature.”

[6] Thersites confesses to his bastardy amidst a confrontation with

Margareton, the only other bastard in the play. To him Thersites defines himself as “bastard begot, bastard instructed, bastard in mind, bastard in valour, in everything illegitimate,” and, whether due to cowardice or some form of logical reasoning, submits that, as “one bear will not bite another, [...] wherefore should one bastard?” [7] This brief scene makes little sense given that other than a mention of him by Agamemnon, this is the only physical appearance of the “bastard Margareton,” and it looks as though his sole purpose in the play is merely to give Thersites an opening for his own revelation of his illegitimate origins. [8] In *Measure for Measure*, the legitimacy of certain characters’ identities hinge on who they are meant to be and who they actually are. This is especially true in the case of the Duke, who spends much of the play pretending to be a friar. Through his taking on the illegitimate identity of Friar Lodowick, the Duke is able to, “from behind the scenes, manipulate other characters much as a dramatist would,” furthering both his private and public motivations. [9]

As the Friar, the Duke takes on powers that are not his own, just as Angelo does by acting in his stead, but these powers are, again, in themselves fraudulent. There is no such thing as a “ substitute priest,” and therefore not only is his identity illegitimate, but so too are any absolutions or spiritual counsel he gives. [10] From the opposite standpoint, Angelo, one of the Duke’s two deputies, through the latter’s appointment of him as his surrogate, Angelo himself takes on a sort of illegitimate identity. When appointing Angelo as his substitute over Escalus, the Duke instructs Angelo thus: “ In our remove, be thou at full ourself.” [11] Where the Duke became a false friar, Angelo becomes a false Duke. This identity, this role, it could be argued, is also somewhat counterfeit given the fact that it was not Angelo’s originally, it has been given or transposed to him by another. A similar ‘ illegitimacy by proxy’ situation exists within *All’s Well That Ends Well*, found in the bed-trick exchange of Helena for Diana, wherein Helena temporarily takes on Diana’s identity to mislead her reluctant and unwitting husband. This taking on of a new role or identity is crucial for Helena to accomplish the impossible tasks Bertram has set for her. To win her husband, she must become other than she is: “ the devoted would-be wife must refashion herself as sexual object.” [12] Just as well, Diana effectively takes on a slice of Helena’s person, in that she serves as the woman’s “ sexualized double.” [13] Under her instructions, Diana becomes her agent and sets up the deception in which Helena would in a way assume her identity in what would have been Diana’s act of prostitution, in this way tricking Bertram’s lust into “[playing] with what it loathes for that which is away.” [14] Yet another form of illegitimacy in Shakespeare’s problem plays is found within the character

of the persons in each work; their nature, their disposition. In Troilus and Cressida, Cressida's character, throughout the course of the play, one of, if not her most defining features. Whether Cressida is truthful or false in this sense dictates whether she herself is deemed legitimate or illegitimate. When making her vows which bind her Troilus, Cressida at once swears herself to be true to him, declaring the consequence of her failure, and sets herself up for her inevitable failure:

Cressida: Prophet may you be!

If I be false, or swerve a hair from truth,

When time is old and hath forgot itself,

When waterdrops have worn the stones of Troy,

And blind oblivion swallowed cities up,

And mighty states characterless are grated

To dusty nothing, yet let memory,

Upbraid my falsehood! When they've said ' As false

As air, as water, wind, or sandy earth,

As fox to lamb, or wolf to heifer's calf,

Pard to the hind, or stepdame to her son',

Yea, let them say, to stick the heart of falsehood,

' As false as Cressid'. [15]

When Cressida is seen to betray Troilus with Diomedes, she is split in two: Troilus's Cressida and " Diomed's Cressida." [16] Not only that, but she has also confirmed her initial evaluation of her own character; that within her their resided two " selves" divided. The one a " kind of self" which resided with Troilus. The other an " unkind" self which, when the " error of [her] eye directs [her] mind," she gives over to Diomedes.[17] Consequently, the question is raised as to which version or versions of Cressida are illegitimated by this, this upset in a system in which there exists an insistence on absolute nature and truth. Illegitimacy as derived from the splitting of character occurs as well with Cressida's own father, Calchas. Calchas is, or was, a Trojan priest who has defected from his home and its people and left to side with the enemy Greeks; he has, due to his prophetic visions regarding the fall of Troy, " abandoned Troy, left [his] possessions," and " incurred a traitor's name." [18] In this light, he goes from being simply a Trojan turncoat, "[becoming] as new into the world" an illegitimate Greek, a status for which he is willing to bargain away his daughter in exchange for the warrior Antenor, so to please the leaders of the Greeks. Additionally, the character of Angelo from Measure for Measure might also be seen as illegitimate in some sense with regards to his public propriety and private corruption, and the intermingling of the two. Angelo, who has been louted as being a " man of stricture and firm abstinence," one who " stands at a guard with envy; scarce confesses that his blood flows, or that his appetite is more to bread than stone." [19] He is made out to be

incredibly pious and strictly adherent to both moral and legal codes. However, this changes following his condemnation of Claudio, when the man's sister approaches him to plea for her brother's life. At this time his eye and mind are turned, affected by Isabella's modesty and her virtue more so than he believes he could ever be by any woman's lightness, "vigour, art, and nature." [20] He who supposedly never felt "the wanton stings and motions of the sense" is now victim to the most dangerous of temptations, being that which "doth goad [one] on to sin in loving virtue." [21] Still he, for the most part, maintains his own piety despite the circumstances which have called it into question and now in effect illegitimize it in favour of the more immoral inclinations and desires he now exhibits. Thus the saintly in Angelo is replaced by the sinful. A third form of the illegitimate in Shakespeare's problem plays comes with the relationships of the characters in each of the works, many of which fail to meet all of the standard requirements for what would by either moral or legal statutes constitute a genuine union. This is evident, first of all, in *Troilus and Cressida*, in the relationship between the title characters. There is no courting or any such flirtations involved in the affair between Troilus and Cressida until just before they are married, though both have beforehand either in discussion or in private admitted their attraction to and affections for one another. It is then in a seemingly secret ceremony known to only a select few, primarily the couple in question and Pandarus, their go-between and the one who brings the pair together and oversees their union, that Troilus and Cressida are brought together. Immediately after they are united, the news is delivered that Cressida is to be taken to the Greek camp, and Troilus himself is to

deliver her, and with no true resistance shown by either party, the exchange of Cressida for Antenor is carried out and no one is given any clue as to the romantic connections existing between the two lovers. It is this secrecy that brings into question the legitimacy of their apparent marriage. Troilus and Cressida is a play frequently interrupted by bouts of “disruptive envy,” such as those which involve characters like Ajax or Achilles, but moreover, in the context of this review, they are also seen within the scope of the formation of the love triangle existing between Troilus, Cressida, and, now, Diomedes. [22] We have already discussed in part the nature of Troilus and Cressida’s legitimate-illegitimate relationship, and now must address the affair between Cressida and Diomedes. Where the former pair, by all appearances, seem to have married (though in secret) and consummated their union, the same cannot fully confidently be said of the latter. The progression of the relationship between Diomedes and Cressida appears to have occurred rapidly, where with the capturing of a sleeve is seen to cement this transference of Cressida’s affections:

Diomedes: Nay, do not snatch it from me.

Cressida: He that takes that doth take my heart withal.

Diomedes: I had your heart before. This follows it.

Troilus: [aside] I did swear patience.

Cressida: You shall not have it, Diomed, faith, you shall not.

I’ll give you something else.



Diomedes: I will have this. Whose was it?

Cressida: It is no matter.

Diomedes: Come, tell me whose it was.

Cressida: 'Twas one's that loved me better than you will.

But now you have it, take it. [...]

Cressida: Good night. I prithee, come. –

Troilus, farewell! One eye yet looks on thee,

But with my heart the other eye doth see.

Ah, poor our sex! This fault in us I find:

The error of our eye directs our mind.

What error leads must err. O, then conclude:

Minds swayed by eyes are full of turpitude. [23]

Regarding both of Cressida's romantic entanglements, there exist in each aspects of both legitimacy and illegitimacy, as well as questions as to which is more lawful and true: the marriage done in secret but already consummated or the public tryst but for which consummation is at the end of the play not completely clear. Another case in which the legitimacy of a marriage is brought into question due to issues with its private and public existences and statuses is that of Claudio and Juliet from Measure for

Measure. Prior to the start of the play, it appears the pair were married, though without a religious ceremony or other customary rites and observances. Following this, on accusation of unchastity and fornication, both were arrested and taken to prison to await trial and possible execution at the hands of the Duke's deputy, Angelo. However, it seems that at least Claudio holds to the notion that the marriage was genuine:

Claudio: Thus stands it with me.

Upon a true contract

I got possession of Julietta's bed -

You know the lady, she is fast my wife,

Save that we do the denunciation lack

Of outward order. This we came not to

Only for propagation of a dower

Remaining in the coffer of her friends,

From whom we thought it meet to hide our love

Till time had made them for us. But it chances

The stealth of our most mutual entertainment

With character too gross is writ on Juliet. [24]

For lack of public announcement, dowry, and church service, Claudio and Juliet's marriage is deemed illegitimate and unlawful, and the child with which Juliet is pregnant, out of wedlock as far as the law is concerned, the bastard product of sinful fornication. However, if by the most basic rights and standards the two are married, is their marriage truly illegitimate? Are there truly any laws being broken? Lastly, some amount of special attention must be paid to the debate regarding the legitimacy and logistics of the marriage between Helena and Bertram of *All's Well That Ends Well*.

This is a marriage in which the lines between legitimate and illegitimate have been blurred, and what might work in its favour in one respect could severely damage it in another. Outwardly, the marriage between Helena and Bertram appears more or less genuine, if forced on Bertram's part. Already one runs into a roadblock. Is a forced marriage really a marriage? Moving past that, it is still a union blessed and in large part orchestrated by their king. However, until the bed-trick occurs, it is a marriage that is not consummated. And in the 17th century, the consummation of a marriage was one of the cornerstones by which it was validated, for without it, the union could be annulled. So when Bertram swears "Although before the solemn priest I have sworn, I will not bed her," he is in effect saying that, in a situation which stands as a polar opposite to that of the previously discussed Claudio and Juliet, where they were married in flesh but not in soul, Bertram, though married now to Helen in the eyes of the Church, will not 'marry' her by way of copulation. [25]

Even when the marriage is finally consummated, it does not easily and resolutely stand as genuine wedlock, for it came in the form of what can almost be called an act of prostitution, or even of a type of rape, in that it occurred in a bed-trick, with Bertram believing himself to be bedding Diana, and not his wife whom he had no desire to have sex with. [26] To finish, it might be pertinent to examine the legitimacy or otherwise of the problem play genre itself. First, what exactly defines a problem play? Given that there are so many widely varying interpretations, is it possible to single out one or even a small number to compile and claim that they are legitimate and all of the rest are false? If these problem plays are problematic in part for their dissatisfactory endings, could it be that their categorization is just as unsatisfying? Discussions of genre, especially when concerning these plays, tends to be somewhat uneasy, for while other genre titles (comedy, history, tragedy, and so on) state fairly clearly and understandably the kinds of pieces they encompass, the term 'problem plays' as well as the accompanying criteria for categorization of works is often at best unclear and at worst incomprehensibly vague. In his article "Legitimacy in Interpretation: The Bastard Voice in Troilus and Cressida," Peter Hyland predicates that "Illegitimacy is defined by authority and is, furthermore, a category which authority needs to legitimate itself;" the two cannot be separated as the one cannot exist without the other. [27] For something to be legitimate, there must be something else that stands in contrast and thus helps to authorize its definition as authentic or genuine. Examples of this, and of the various parameters by which the legitimacy or otherwise of the characters of William Shakespeare's problem plays, Measure for Measure,

All's Well That Ends Well, and Troilus and Cressida, their identities, their temperaments and dispositions, and their relationships are determined. Similar notions can also be applied to the questions surrounding the validity of the 'problem play' genre itself and what it constitutes.

## References

1. Oxford English Dictionary [online], ' Legitimate', [accessed 29 December 2017]
2. OED, ' Illegitimate', [accessed 29 December 2017]
3. Peter Hyland, " Legitimacy in Interpretation: The Bastard Voice in ' Troilus and Cressida,' Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 26, no. 1 (1993): pp. 1-13, p. 4 [accessed 30 December 2017]
4. Hyland, p. 4
5. Hyland, p. 7
6. Michael Neill, "' In Everything Illegitimate': Imagining the Bastard in Renaissance Drama," The Yearbook of English Studies 23 (1993): pp. 270-92, p. 270 [accessed 30 December 2017]
7. William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, ed. by David Bevington (London; New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), V. viii. 9-12
8. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, V. v. 7
9. Normand N. Holland, " Measure for Measure: The Duke and the Prince," Comparative Literature 11, no. 1 (1959): pp. 16-20, p. 16 [accessed 2 January 2018]

10. Alexander Leggatt, " Substitution in ' Measure for Measure,'" Shakespeare Quarterly 39, no. 3 (1988): pp. 342-59, p. 357 [accessed 2 January 2018]
11. William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, ed. by Brian Gibbons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) I. i. 43
12. David McCandless, " Helena's Bed-Trick: Gender and Performance in All's Well That Ends Well," Shakespeare Quarterly 45, no. 1 (1994): pp. 449-68, p. 456 [accessed 2 January 2018]
13. McCandless, p. 450
14. William Shakespeare, All's Well That Ends Well, ed. by Susan Snyder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) IV. iv. 24-25
15. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, III. ii. 178-191
16. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, V. ii. 144
17. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, V. ii. 116
18. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, III. iii. 5-6
19. Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, I. iii. 13 ; I. iii. 52-54
20. William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, II. ii. 188
21. William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, I. iv. 59 ; II. ii. 186-187
22. Hyland, p. 9
23. Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, V. ii. 87-97 ; V. ii. 112-118
24. Shakespeare, Measure for Measure, I. ii. 126-136
25. Shakespeare, All's Well That Ends Well, II. iii. 271-272
26. McCandless, p. 450
27. Hyland, p. 6

- Hyland, p. 6