The Problem Play: Some Aesthetic Considerations

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Comedy and tragedy differ from the problem play in a number of significant ways. Comedy treats man as a ridiculous social animal. In placing man in society, comedy calls upon all those weaknesses of man in his role as homo ridiculo-ludens - the ludicrous animal at play, man at the game of living and prat-falling by rules of his own making, man the creature caught in his own ridiculous traps. In this sense, comedy and tragedy are two sides of the same coin: the traps that catch man in tragedy call on the best in him - his virtue, his endurance, his need to overreach himself - for they are cosmic traps; in comedy the traps are laid by his faults - his affectations, his greed, his earth-bound delusions of self, his gainful game-playing. Even the social satires of Ben Jonson and William Wycherley perceive man as the ridiculous creature in society - posing, scheming, strutting about like the absurd, straggletailed peacock that he is, winning or losing his small battles for happiness. The disorder of man in society is the disorder that emerges from the self that confronts other such selves. The condition of man, as depicted in social concert, results in a portrait of the ridiculous; in tragedy, a portrait of inevitable yet awesome disaster.

The problem, if it can be so called, explored in tragedy is the problem of man in the universe - a problem that must ultimately end in mystery; the problem in comedy is man, the natural creature, pursuing happiness among his fellow creatures in a variety of misguided ways and finally ending in a necessary delusion of his own making - the achievement of a state of temporary happiness, itself fraught with delusion. Therefore, despite its concern with man as a social animal, the tone, focus and concerns of comedy are quite different from those of the problem play. Perhaps the work of one modern writer of comedy, a contemporary of the transitional dramatists, comes closer to the problem play than any other - the work of Chekhov. Chekhov's comic portraits are a synthesis of the comic and the tragic view; he combines the sufferer of tragedy and the ludicrous creature of comedy and thus creates that strange hybrid - the ridiculous sufferer.

Chekhov's plays explore man in society in a manner suggestive of the problem play. The Cherry Orchard, for instance, involves the confrontation of a woman of the aristocracy, Mme. Ranevskaya, with the fact of the decline of her class and the rise of a new merchant class. If this were the principal focus of the play (as some critics would have it), it would indeed be a problem play. But it becomes quite clear, as the play progresses, that Mme. Ranevskaya is involved in a more profoundly human dilemma - a dilemma more typical of comedy than of the problem play. The dilemma concerns the delusions of self in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles. These obstacles first assume a socio-
political aspect - the downfall of a once rich and powerful class, unable to survive social change; but they soon resolve themselves into the more basic human difficulty. That dilemma might be stated thus: Given a life of suffering and the inability of the sufferer to overcome, master or reconcile the circumstances that bring about the suffering, what recourse has the sufferer? The tragic answer might be to endure with the full knowledge of the situation and its consequences or to commit suicide. But Chekhov gives us a comic answer to that situation and, given the character of Mme. Ranevskaya, it is the only one possible - the reconciliation between the sufferer and insurmountable circumstances becomes possible through a form of delusion - to love that which creates the suffering: "He's a stone around my neck, but I love that stone" is Mme. Ranevskaya's response to her miserable situation and one of its principal sources, her lover in Paris. There is little exploration of the social problem as such: Lopahin, a successful member of the rising merchant class, demonstrates a vigor and resourcefulness that are bringing him and his class to power; the aristocrats manifest all of the ennui, the apathy, the intellectual and moral sloth of the decadent aristocracy. To the extent that these are dramatized and are part of the dramatic reality, The Cherry Orchard is a problem play. One point of view has Lopahin as the hero, and the play can thus be viewed as the triumph of the vigorous, rising classes taking over from the sterile, decadent aristocracy. Through Trofimov, the student, Chekhov expresses some interesting social and political ideas. But the whole play is bathed in a tragic-comic atmosphere; everybody, including Lopahin and Trofimov, manifests himself in moments of ludicrous and pathetic posturing. Chekhov seems more concerned, finally, with the exploration of the human problem - the suffering that necessarily follows from the delusions and illusions of human creatures. The problem play stands, then, as a genre separate from comedy and tragedy, though it bears some resemblances to both.

As defined by Shaw, the problem play involves the conflict of human institutions with human feeling. He goes on to say that all drama involves the conflict of human emotion with circumstance, but that the social drama necessarily involves social institutions as an essential part of the human conflict. In his preface to a collection of plays by Brieux, he further defines the focus of the problem play by suggesting that dramatists like Molière and Shakespeare are concerned with human nature and whatever fault they find with man is to be ascribed to the creature as created and thus "their quarrel is really with God for not making men better." But writers of problem plays, like Brieux, are concerned with human fault as it is responsible for suffering created by social and political institutions. Brieux thus aims his blows at "human noses for the good of human souls." In his preface to a collection of seven plays, the German expressionist Ernst Toller makes a similar distinction which is helpful to us in clarifying the area of concern for the problem play. Toller speaks of "necessary" and "unnecessary suffering." Necessary suffering stems from man's identity as man - his weaknesses, his limitations, his aspira-
tions, his knocking his head against the rock of his puzzling and agonizing existence. His quarrel, then, as Shaw would say, is with God. Unnecessary suffering stems from his agonies as a social animal - from the operation of bad or faulty institutions, from the built-in mechanisms of the social schemata, from what man himself has made and made badly and which can be undone or improved because it comes from the hand and brain of man. The problem play, then, concerns itself with the conflict of human emotions and values, with social institutions, with that suffering that arises from the relentless and unceasing war between the individual and his society, between man and the man-made machinery of order and accommodation in society.

In its concern for man, the social animal, caught in a conflict of moralities, of values between individual and class, individual and social institutions, individual and the social heritage, the problem play has evolved simultaneously with the development of the realistic style. Since the concerns of the genre are the day-by-day, basic and unavoidable concerns of all men in society at a given time, then the realistic style itself is most suitable for the problem play. All of the problem playwrights of the turn of the century are "realistic" in the general sense of that term - that is, concern themselves with the depiction of basic and prevalent social problems, with the settings and decor to be found in actual life in society, with speech that is, with some variations, an imitation of common speech and finally with characters - husbands, sons, fathers, business and professional men - who are to be found in the conventional social milieu. Typical of these problem plays and their realistic concerns are T. W. Robertson's Caste, A. W. Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, Ibsen's A Doll's House, Shaw's Mrs. Warren's Profession, Galsworthy's The Silver Box. That is not to say that all of these dramatists treat their dramatic material with the same tone and on an equal level of aesthetic skill and verbal insight in the handling of character and conflict. Some of these playwrights, Pinero being the most typical, fall into the trap always present in the realistic mode. That trap is the tendency to treat the ordinary - that is to say, common and prevalent - problems and situations in an ordinary way, with no extraordinary insight into either. Shaw makes this observation about Pinero's Mrs. Tanqueray. He says that at a crucial moment in the play - a moment which calls upon the perception and artistic insight of the dramatist - Pinero fails because he is "simply an adroit describer of people as the ordinary man sees and judges them." What was extraordinary, perhaps, for Pinero's day is the dramatist's daring in putting on the stage for public view the situation in which a lady with a scandalous sexual past, Paula, attempts to make a successful marriage with a man of high social station, Aubrey. Such a situation is not so extraordinary for our time because we have seen, on and off stage, so much that is so much more daring and new that Pinero's seems hardly a difficult problem for us; nevertheless, we can accept the notion that such a presentation of the problem was for the contemporary stage an extraordinary one just as Ibsen's were extraordinary for the public stage of that genera-
tion. But what is ordinary and conventional for us as well as for Pinero's day is his insight into character and into the problem. Pinero's denouement would seem to corroborate the conventional contemporary attitudes toward such a marriage: it would never work; it was a case of bad judgment all around. Such women could never remain happily and peacefully married to respectable men of high social station. Unlike Ibsen, who challenged social conventions and morality, Pinero seems to corroborate their "truths." Ibsen does not fall into the trap because Ibsen's artistic insight into the dramatic situation is extraordinary; he is not limited by the realistic style and the subject-matter. Ibsen, like Shaw after him, explores the dramatic situation and thus the social problem from the total vantage point of the dramatist who perceives all and articulates all; Pinero explores the dramatic situation and thus the social problem from the far more limited perspective of a particular set of social conventions and a prejudiced social morality. Shaw makes this point when he says that Pinero's characters "... are projections of Mr. Pinero's own personal amiabilities and beliefs and conventions."  

The problem play lent itself easily to techniques of the contemporary theatre in which it grew up. These include the technical innovations of the realistic style and of the well-made play. The techniques of the realistic drama were developed simultaneously with the problem play. Since the problem play dealt with real problems, real conflicts in real settings - real toads in real gardens - then it was only logical that writers of the problem play should use the techniques of the emerging realistic theatre and thereby contribute to the development of that theatre. The inherent advantages and difficulties of the realistic style were many; for one thing, the realistic style places the people and conflicts in situations familiar to the theatre-goer. What the theatre-goers had hitherto considered matters of a personal and private nature - the real status of wives and women, money problems within and between families, the consequences of certain socially taboo illnesses, professions and practices, the real motives behind the actions of fathers, husbands and employers, the policies and practices of the police court, etc. - these were given an added force in being placed in familiar surroundings and being spoken of in the familiar phrases of the home and the street. But along with these advantages, came difficulties. For one thing, the realistic technique often limited the perspective of the dramatist; fidelity to the surface details of life - the details of speech, dress and decor - often narrowed the vision of the dramatist to the surface. The real is seen as the ordinary and the ordinary as real. 

Another limitation is that, in focussing on a contemporary social problem, the dramatist often ran the risk of dating his work within a short time; today's social problems might easily find their solutions in tomorrow's actions. Such drama, therefore, will not survive the solution of the problem it is concerned with. Shaw himself recognized this, though he also saw an important function of social drama: "A Doll's House will be
as flat as ditchwater when A Midsummer Night’s Dream will still be fresh as paint; but it will have done more work in the world . . . " However, as Shaw himself proves through his own drama, such need not be the case with all social drama. The aesthetic concerns of any given social drama - the structure, the language, the drawing of character and scene - may be more than enough to ensure its survival despite the solution of any given social question that may be part of its concern. Suffice it to suggest here that most of Ibsen’s social drama and of Shaw’s offer ample proof of such survival.

The continued survival or the obsolescence of any given social problem play depends on a number of essential factors: the focus of the dramatist; the principal concerns and skills of the dramatist as craftsman and artist; the basic strategy of the play itself - that is, does it subordinate all dramatic features to the functional demands of the social message or does the exploration of the social problem become itself part of a larger, artistic aim? Another mode of strategy might be the dominance of a third concern in the construction of the play - the treatment of the social material - material that often is controversial and likely to offend or alienate the complacent members of the large middle-class audience - in such a manner as to avoid offense and to invite approval. The three strategies mentioned above may be illustrated by three different problem plays: the first by Galsworthy’s The Silver Box, or for that matter, any of Galsworthy’s plays; the second by Shaw’s Major Barbara or Man and Superman in which Shaw’s skill with language, his indulgence in lively wit and his penchant for drawing paradoxical character seem to overwhelm the social problems in the play; the last by Pinero’s Mrs. Tanqueray, whose structure, point of view and treatment of character finally resolve themselves in an inoffensive treatment of what, for some members of the respectable middle class, might be considered a controversial and troublesome problem. Not only does the play itself attest to these qualities but its continuing commercial success as well.

The techniques of the well-made play also offered these dramatists certain advantages and difficulties. What we call the well-made play is, finally, a manufactured piece of theatre. The implications of this definition are that the components of drama - character, plot, scene and language - are carefully crafted with one end in view - to make the play an evening of easy, comfortable, unruffled and enjoyable entertainment, to avoid the exploration of ideas that are truly controversial and serious, to machine all the components for a smooth-running show. As a result, character and language become technical constructs - that is, they are honed, geared, and oiled, like well-machined parts, to fit the demands of plot.

As perfected by Scribe and Sardou, the well-made play achieved a kind of perfection - the perfection of the well-wrought mannequin. The theatre of the turn of the century was, as Shaw often reminds us, a theatre dominated by the technique of the well-made play, which he labeled Sardoodledom. Typical is
Shaw's comment in comparing Jones with Grundy and Sardou:
"Mr. Grundy or Sardou, at their respective worsts, perform such feats of carpentry in constructing show-cases for some trumpery little situation, that the critics exhaust all their space in raptures over the mechanical skill displayed."6 And further on he elaborates on the metaphor: "If you invent a mechanical rabbit, wind it up, and set it running round the room for me, I shall be hugely entertained, no matter how monstrous-ly unsuccessful it may be as a representation of nature. . . ."7 It was inevitable, then, that the technique of this popular form should find its way into the work of serious dramatists - even those dramatists who, like Shaw, criticized the successful products of the technique. In the theatre, nothing succeeds like successful gimmicks, and nothing grows stale so fast. These technical innovations proved useful to the writers of the problem play. For one thing, like do-it-yourself kits, they made craftsmanship easy. The technical formulas could readily be adapted to the treatment of serious social problems. The best as well as the least of the problem playwrights of the transition period adapted these techniques to their own uses - Pinero, Shaw, Galsworthy, Barrie and, of course, their mentor, Ibsen. These dramatists differed, however, in the subordinate or dominant role to which they assigned these techniques; also in the individual, aesthetic uses to which they put them. In those dramas in which the well-made play techniques dominate, we can discern a number of faults: the deliberate distortion of character to fit the ultimate design of the plot; the contrivance of scene to effect a startling or emotional ending; the neat intrusion of coincidence or parallel to effect a turn of events or to score a dramatic point; the minimal employment of language for aesthetic effect, language being used only to advance plot and scene; the paring down of scene to meet the minimal demands of plot structure. What we miss is a sense of the fullness of life, delight in the beauty and subtlety of language, the surprise of recognition at the discovery of paradox in character, the energy and vigor generated by the exchange of wit and idea, and, finally, the total sense of theatre, generated when all comes alive - character, language, scene and idea.

The techniques available to the writers of the problem play - the technical innovations of the realistic style and the well-known and well-used craftsmanship of the well-made play - did not, in themselves, make or break the plays. They must be seen, mostly, as useful know-how for writers who were concerned with the materials of the social world in which they lived - concerns greater than those of the technical know-how they made use of.

All in all, the aesthetics of the problem play, as it came to be developed in the transitional period, involve the use of well-made play techniques; the employment of the realistic style; the development of character and of human emotion in conflict with social values, mores and institutions; the presentation of controversial or socially taboo questions for dramatic exploration; the attempt at an objective or at least open-minded
treatment of the social problem; the attempt to see the individual in his relation to the total society or a stratum of that society; the attempt, if not to offer a solution to the problem, at least to so clarify the problem as to point to a solution, or to effect a greater awareness of the problem and its consequences. In summary, the problem playwright's aim was to write a good play and through that play to bring to vivid dramatic life one of the prevailing social problems of his time.

The aesthetics of the problem play do not, I believe, necessarily relegate the genre to the level of the second rate, as some would have it - the second rate implying that drama which goes stale before it has outlived a generation or two. Shaw himself believed that such would be the fate of the problem play, but he himself offered the most decisive refutations of that position. However, there are such things as second rate genres, the melodrama being the most apparent, but the problem play is not among them. That is not to say that there are no second rate problem plays; there are, but their limitations are not those inherent in the form but those imposed by the limited skill of the dramatist himself.

The aesthetics of dramatic form must allow for the free play of the artist's energy, vision and insight; that form which necessarily binds the vision, cripples the energy and obstructs the insight is, perforce, second-rate; the restraints become, not a challenge to the imagination, but shackles. For instance, the well-made play, per se, and melodrama are such dramatic forms because they involve the shackling of the dramatic material by fixed formulae - the well-made play requires the mechanical gearing and subordination of all the components of the drama to the preconceived demands of the plotted dramatic narrative. In the well-made play we come very close to drama without meaning - meaning is simply the plot, a pattern of action, and that pattern evokes no meaning, no significance above and beyond itself or meaning which becomes cliché. The melodrama, too, involves the subordinating of all components of the drama to fixed preconceptions, except that the preconceptions are a simplified and rigid set of moral attitudes, attitudes which are imposed, as by a prejudiced god, on the entire dramatic material. Compared to the melodrama, the morality play, which also assumes a kind of preconceived morality, allows, structurally, for a free play of the dramatist's vision whereas the rigidity of the melodrama applies to the shaping of all the features of the drama - situation, character, structure, language and denouement.

If we examine the work of some of the best practitioners of the problem play, we find that, in different ways and with varying success, they adapt the formula of the well-made play to the treatment of serious social conflicts. The devices of the well-made play assume a more dominant and decisive role in the work of Pinero, for instance, than in Barrie or Galsworthy; more dominant in Barrie and Galsworthy than in Shaw and Ibsen; more dominant in Ibsen than in Shaw Pinero, in such plays as The Second Mrs. Tanqueray and Thunderbolt, two of his best, employs the
intrusion of the hidden device - the letter or will or charac-
ter - that will effect the necessary turn of events toward the
denouement; the meaning and the outcome of these plays hinge
upon the revelation of the secret - one of the mainstays of
the well-made play. The effect, of course, is to undercut the
sense of the inevitability of events and therefore of the den-
ouement; this undercutting reduces the meaning and the force
of the play as a social problem play because the conflict and
its attendant outcome must be inevitable for us to take the
social problem seriously; if a catastrophe can be avoided ex-
cept for a lost letter or will or forgotten stranger out of the
past, then it is simply a case of bad luck and not a case of
unavoidable conflict and disaster in the confrontation of indi-
vidual and social institutions. Shaw also uses the convenient
coincidence - Cusins discovered to be an orphan in Major Bar-
bara, Mendoza to have been in love with Straker's sister in
Man and Superman, the Reverend Gardner, Mrs. Warren's former
lover, discovered to be the father of Frank in Mrs. Warren's
Profession. But these discoveries are made playfully, out-
rageously by Shaw; they do not, for a moment, affect the unavoi-
dable confrontation of individual and social institutions, indi-
vidual morality against social morality in all of Shaw's plays;
the texture, the wit and the various confrontations in his
plays are always part of the fabric of that conflict. Thus the
well-made coincidences are amusing, more than likely Shaw
playing his monkey-tricks in the midst of serious business,
than necessary to the meaning and total life of the play.

In Galsworthy, the well-made devices are more seriously in-
volved in the fabric of the plays. The Silver Box, for instance,
contains several necessary to the meaning and structure: the
coincidence of a neat parallel of thefts, Jones' and Jack's;
the convenient and coincidental entrance of the policeman in
time to see the silver box on the bed; the coincidence of Mrs.
Jones being in the employ of the family whose silver box has
been stolen by her husband. However, these, while useful to
Galsworthy and convenient in the laying out of the plot, never-
theless, as in Ibsen, serve a larger and more important function
- the presentation and exploration of a social problem - the
unequal dispensation of justice to rich and poor. As in Ibsen,
the devices often obtrude, but the essential materials of dra-
matic conflict are there in abundance; the exploration of the
problem does throw light on the operation of social institutions
in their management of individuals within the society. Aesthet-
ically, the limitations of the play are partly the result of the
employment of these devices and of the economy with which Gals-
worthy handles his materials. The play does not, as in Ibsen,
for instance, stand as a kind of metaphorical presentation of
social theme, but more as a dramatised sociological report or
case history. The social message in Galsworthy becomes para-
mount. For the most part, Galsworthy's handling of dramatic
irony is skillful. The more she narrates to the Bartwicks the
miserable conditions of her poverty-stricken family, the more
Mrs. Jones appears to convict herself of the theft. Some of the
irony is a little heavy-handed, such as scene 2, Act II when
Jack, who had come home drunk the night before, is drinking much port while the policeman and Mr. Bartwik condemn Mr. Jones for being a drunkard.

In Barrie we find more wit and amusement than is to be found in either Galsworthy or Pinero. Barrie introduces his own adaptation of the well-made formula, the convenient desert island, that allows for the isolation of his characters to put his problem - the natural equality or inequality of man - to the test. Like Shaw, Barrie also adapts the manner, language and decor of the drawing room comedy to his uses. Also, somewhat like Shaw in Man and Superman, he introduces a kind of fantasy in the middle of the play to further his exploration - the fanciful notion that his characters had suddenly been transported to a distant desert island. Whereas Shaw and Barrie allow for some free play of the imagination, Pinero and Galsworthy remain within the confines of the realistic mode.

The functionalism of the realistic style and of the well-made play are often self-defeating in the construction of the magnitude and wholeness of the drama. They do not allow for the free play of wit or scene or character which are essential to the fabric of the drama. Ben Jonson recognized this when, in Discoveries, he comments on what is necessary to the wholeness of the drama: "... that there be place left for digression, and Art. For the Episodes, and digressions in a Fable, are the same that household stuffe, and other furniture are in a house."8 Of all writers of the problem play in the transition period, only Shaw can be said to have constructed his drama on this Jonsonian principle. Shaw does allow himself, as does Shakespeare, the privilege of "digression and art" in the handling of language, scene and character. Thus we enjoy a fullness and a variety in Shaw that we miss in the other dramatists; thus Shaw's drama survives with greater vigor and freshness than that of any of the others, though Shaw is no less didactic, no less committed, no less concerned with contemporary social problems than any of the other social dramatists.

Viewed as a functional piece of theatre, as a weapon or a document committed to the presentation of a contemporary social evil, the problem play becomes, in Shaw's phrase, as flat as ditchwater soon after the problem has found some amelioration in social action or as soon as the ideas involved have, in effect, become cliches. The aesthetic life of the drama is then bound up with the newness of the perception of the problem and of the attendant ideas: in other words, the drama's aesthetic life is parasitically attached to a particular historical moment in the evolving society and its social concerns. When that moment passes in the social memory, when those problems no longer excite controversy or concern, then the drama becomes lifeless; it has no aesthetic energy of its own. Such is the case, not only with social problem plays, but with other kinds of drama, attached to the energizing emotionalism of a particular generation or a given cultural phenomenon. Such is likely to be the fate of most contemporary civil rights drama. But, as Shaw says, it will have done its work in the world.
The transitional dramatists, Shaw and Galsworthy in particular, were interested in sending their audiences back to their homes, their jobs, their clubs - their social milieu - with a keener sense of what was wrong in their world, with a greater awareness of the causes and vested interests of poverty, injustice, war, and the general victimization of man by man in society and finally with the urge to do something about it. Galsworthy's efforts are supposed to have been responsible for some concrete reforms; Shaw can claim no comparable credit. But Shaw's drama still entertains millions of theatre and movie-goers and Galsworthy's, at best, an occasional college or university audience.

Those who believe first of all in the drama as a weapon of reform, as a means to a larger end, the improvement of society, say to hell with art, let's change the world first; those who believe that the life of the drama is paramount, that entertainment is as important as the commitment of the play, say art first, social message second. It is no coincidence that the greatest writers of social problem plays, of committed drama, also are the greatest entertainers as well as the most profound explorers of the social drama - these might include Ibsen, Shaw and, more recently, Bertolt Brecht. All side with the individual against society, with man as victim against all forms of social injustice - poverty, war, and the oppressive establishment. Besides their skill with language, character and construction, what they share, finally, is the ability to make of their work a kind of metaphor; their drama overreaches itself in that it presents an image of man that survives the immediate social crises which are its concern: So Ibsen gives us individual man, having to learn over and over again, that social conformity has its dangers, its delusions, its deceptive and destructive safeness; that image will survive as long as there are societies and individuals in conflict with them. Shaw gives us man, that lively comic animal, in pursuit of himself, passionately intent on improving himself - interesting but funny, serious but deluded, iconoclastic but idealistic, and, like Falstaff, both witty and the object of wit. Brecht gives us man against himself, man pursuing his profit but wreaking his own destruction at the same time; man caught in the insoluble dilemma of wanting what will destroy him. All of these images are vivid, profound representations of modern man. All of them will survive as long as man survives as the creature he is today. Thus we come to a conclusion about the greatest problem plays - that in their profound exploration of man in conflict with his society, we begin to perceive an image of man in a new tragic mode - not a creature knocking his poor soft head against a cosmic enigma, but a blockhead knocking himself against bricks of his own making. We get a picture of man the self-destructive animal, and that is, indeed, a very contemporary picture.
NOTES


3 G.B. Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties (London: Constable, 1954), I, 47.

4 Ibid.

5 Shaw on Theatre, p. 63.

6 Our Theatres in the Nineties, II, 14.

7 Ibid., 14-15.