PART THREE

Problems and Ambiguities
CHAPTER EIGHT

The Real versus the Ideal: Taking a Skeptic View

UNUSUALLY TRUSTWORTHY EVIDENCE points to Shakespeare's having written *Henry V* and *Julius Caesar* in the same year, 1599. Yet the two plays have marked differences, which go beyond those that one expects between a history and a tragedy. *Henry V* is a translucent play that centers on the hero-king it celebrates; *Julius Caesar*, by contrast, is controversial in all its aspects: in its structure, its theme, its thought, and the quality of the major characters. But the relevance of the two plays to our time appears to be in an inverse ratio to their degree of clarity. *Henry V*, at least when presented as a national celebration of a heroic king, has seemed to many a twentieth-century critic peculiarly dated and has been strongly popular only in times of a consciously felt outward threat, such as existed in the forties, when patriotism and heroism were in men's hearts. *Julius Caesar* is quite a different case; its gripping account of power-play and its controversial major character are congenial to our problem-oriented age. And so is the group of plays Shakespeare wrote soon afterward, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. *Hamlet*, of course, has always been popular. But the three other so-called problem plays have come into their own only in recent years, when it has been proved that they can be effective on the stage in spite of their complexities, ambiguities, and vexations and when they have attracted critical interest for these very features. They appear to have a special modernity that transcends whatever artistic defects they may have, a modernity we do not quite experience in Shakespeare's earlier works.

I believe we do best to understand the plays of this group, the two tragedies and the three "problem comedies" (for simplicity's sake, *Troilus and Cressida* may here be called a comedy) as constituting
in Shakespeare's creative work a special phase, one in which he became highly sensitive to changing intellectual and cultural tendencies of an age that has a fascinating resemblance to our own age of accelerated change. The five plays are united by a common "style" in the art historians' sense of the word, that is, they share identifiable features that give them a certain likeness and that can be seen as responses to a particular mentality of an age. I would like to suggest that we label this style "mannerist" in order to distinguish it from the preceding, "Renaissance" period and the subsequent one, that of the "baroque." This is not to deny that some features I have isolated in the plays under discussion and called "mannerist" occur sporadically in earlier or later plays, that other characteristics I have considered "Renaissance" persist in the two later periods, and that some baroque traits appear occasionally before _Othello_, the first play that, I think, can be called "baroque." The point is that the respective features are conspicuous in the plays I have labeled accordingly.

All periodization of literature or art is the work of the classifying and categorizing human mind and, of necessity, involves a certain simplification. We are not bound to traditional groupings if they prove unsatisfactory or oversimplified, as, I think, has been the case with the use of "Renaissance" for that enormously long and diverse period from the fourteenth (or, in the north, sixteenth) century to the end of the seventeenth. The discussion on breaking up this period into more meaningful units is in process, but, unfortunately, it has not yet led to generally accepted results. Moreover, the division into Renaissance, mannerism, and baroque, though widely used by art historians, is still controversial among literary historians. Yet it appears to me a sensible one, for it allows one to think of "style" as an artist's total response to the dominant concerns of his age, a response that includes not only diction, but also structure, choice and treatment of subjects, preference of themes, and much more. Shakespeare's own style is then an expression of his individuality within the period style or styles. It is by no means an attempt to limit his genius if one declares a particular play to be "mannerist." The term is merely a shorthand symbol for certain identifiable features in which his artistic response resembled that of his contemporaries. I trust that my reader will not be impeded by my choice of labels, and, I hope, he will be helped if, for the sake of following my argument, he accepts them in the interpretation I shall give them. This interpretation has some currency among scholars,
particularly in continental Europe. We cannot enter here into this on-going discussion; ample, although sometimes quite divergent, treatments are available elsewhere.2

The meaning of baroque and its application in this study will be discussed at a later point. As to mannerism, the term appears to me advantageous in denoting, as it does in the analysis of most art historians, a reaction to the classical Renaissance and, as such, a transitional phase as well as an authentic style that makes itself felt in the form and the content of a work of art. Changes in form are not a primary concern of this study, but we may at least note the changes in structural patterns because they make more obvious the differences between the five plays under discussion and the preceding plays and because they also have a considerable influence on the patterns of self-knowledge. There is something opaque or even unsatisfactory about the structure of each of the five plays, a fact that contributes much to the difficulty of their interpretation, but, on the other hand, has also attracted modern readers and audiences, who find the well-made play artificial. The structural opaqueness is least apparent in Julius Caesar, which connects in many ways with the preceding “Renaissance” plays. But even it has a structural problem by suffering from what one could call a mannerist tension between the apparent theme and the content of the play. Although Caesar is in the center of its forces, he is not its protagonist or, in the conventional sense of the word, the tragic hero; these designations fit only Brutus.3 It could also be said, of course, that Prince Hal is the real hero of the Henry IV plays; but these are histories that dramatize the events of a reign and are therefore appropriately named. In the case of Julius Caesar, we ponder whether to attribute greater significance to the personal tragedy of Brutus, or to the dramatic struggle for power, or to the revenge tragedy of Caesar. As to Hamlet, Shakespeare’s audience must have expected it to be a revenge tragedy, as was its predecessor, the Ur-Hamlet; yet it erupts into a drama of character and thought. Brutus is as unusual a conspirator as Hamlet is an avenger; both speak highly reflective and analytical idioms that contrast with the turbulent climate of their plays. The question of dramatic form is even more vexing in the case of the three comedies. W. W. Lawrence called them “bastard brothers of tragedy,”4 and, in fact, “tragedy” has seemed to some a better term than “comedy” for Troilus and Cressida.5 These discrepancies between general form and major subject are very similar to those noted by art historians...
in mannerist paintings. The problematic structures of all five plays make applicable the concept of the "gestörten form" (disturbed form) that Gombrich coined for mannerist art.⁶

One reason for their structural imbalance is their heavy burden of thought. Except for King Lear, no earlier or later plays contain more theoretical statements on self-knowledge, or, for that matter, theories in general. Professor Tillyard considered this incumbrance with ideas a major reason for calling them problem plays (he did not include Julius Caesar, as he might have done). He said that they showed "an overriding concern with religious dogma or abstract speculation or both" and that these matters were "felt rather more for their own than for the drama's sake, as if, in this form at least, they were new and urgent to Shakespeare's mind, demanding at this point statement and articulation rather than solution and absorption into other materials." ⁷ Such preponderance of thought and theory in drama, which by conventional definition has its center in action and character, is comparable to the way certain elements, such as ornamentation and psychological content, which were thought secondary in Renaissance art, became primary during mannerism.

The best proof that change was in the air lies in the increased interest in the theme of change. In all five plays, Shakespeare, in varying degree, was concerned with the problem of innovation versus tradition. In Julius Caesar, Brutus's old-fashioned ideas of liberty are irreconcilable with the evolving new order, that of a dictatorship. In Troilus and Cressida, Ulysses appears to apotheosize a moribund social order based on priority and degree; but he himself violates it by stirring up against each other Ajax and Achilles, and he becomes a foremost champion of a new spirit of craft and force that is about to destroy the sentimental chivalric notions of the Trojans. In All's Well, Bertram rejects his dead father's old-fashioned virtues and turns to new habits and new vices until Helena regenerates him. A major issue of Measure for Measure is the question of what form of government is best in a state that has become corrupt as its duke has grown older.

But it is Hamlet, the play carrying the heaviest burden of thought, that concerns itself most explicitly with the theme of change. The prince cannot be categorized simply as a traditionalist or as an innovator; he is both. Young as he is, he is already rooted in the past, no longer at home in Denmark, before even the ghost's command
pits him against the new order. To the courtiers at Elsinore, Hamlet seems a dangerously wild spirit, and they are right in a sense that transcends their comprehension. The very voice of the past assigns him to a role that requires him to abandon conventions. The new Hamlet, as we shall note, examines the whole range of traditional microcosmic and macrocosmic knowledge for its relevance to himself, and finds little. It is of interest in the present context that he takes a direct interest in Shakespeare's own profession, acting, and that he proves to be a decided conservative in this field. The matter is worth considering for indications of Shakespeare's attitude toward the one aspect of change that concerned him most.

Hamlet's remarks on acting and the theater have a tinge of bitterness one cannot help associating with Shakespeare. It is true, the only overt expression of irritation is Hamlet's response to the children's companies that "are now the fashion, and so berattle the common stages—so they call them—that many wearing rapiers are afraid of goose quills and dare scarce come thither" (II.ii.336 ff.). Shakespeare was concerned about the welfare of the children: he blamed the exploiters who made the children "exclaim against their own succession," that is, caused them to satirize the profession they might later elect. But there is also a touch of professional dissatisfaction here, a not negligible one in a dramatist reticent about personal matters, as was Shakespeare, and it is underlined by Hamlet's application of the incident to the situation in Denmark; the children's popularity reminds him of the adulation afforded his odious uncle since he became king.

Hamlet's specific instructions on acting (III.ii.1 ff.) also breathe an air of discomfort with the times. The prince bases his precepts on the rules of conventional Renaissance rhetoric; he enjoins the players to use good "pronunciation," that is, appropriate oral delivery ("speak the speech . . . trippingly on the tongue") and fitting gestures ("suit the action to the word, the word to the action"); and he instructs them to acquire "in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion . . . a temperance that may give it smoothness." This is quite in the tradition of classical rhetoric, which demanded a temperance of πάθος by ἡθος, of the vehement emotions by the lighter ones. Hamlet censures those who do not practice moderation but tear the passions to tatters and strut and bellow so "that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well" (33). One should not
be misled by Hamlet's remark that these practitioners outdid Ter­
magant and out-heroded Herod; the actors Shakespeare had in mind
surely did not attempt to reintroduce the style of the old mystery
plays. Hamlet's annoyance points to Shakespeare's irritation with
a new-fangled way of acting, a more impassioned, presumably a
more naturalistic one than that in which he had been trained. The
word "journeyman" is indicative: Shakespeare himself had as an
apprentice or journeyman been taught to suit the action to the word
and the word to the action. When he had Hamlet imply that the new
style was against nature, he surely meant that it was against the
theoretical norms of human nature as humanistic-classical theory
had formulated them.

Because the change in the style of acting was accompanied by a
change in dramatic fashions, it is justifiable to read into Hamlet's
strictures a reluctance of Shakespeare to adjust himself to a new
style of drama in general. The plays of some of Shakespeare's
younger contemporaries, such as Marston and, later, Beaumont and
Fletcher, tended to satirical extravagances and to stronger, some­
times perverse emotions, for which the acting style censured by
Hamlet is quite appropriate. Perhaps under the impact of these inno­
vations, Shakespeare rethought some of the principles on which his
art was founded; Hamlet contains Shakespeare's one definition of
drama in the prince's advice to the actors that the end of playing,
"both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror
up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,
and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure"
(III.ii.22–26). It must be said that the statement is vague; it reiter­
ates a classical commonplace on the imitation of nature and com­
bines it with a moralistic definition of drama as the humanists
applied it generally to comedy; but in Hamlet's mouth, the remark
that the players should show the "very age and body of the time his
form and pressure" has a peculiar urgency. One recalls how the
prince himself holds constantly the mirror up to others; the re­
former of the stage also would like to be the reformer of his time. In
either role, Hamlet leaves something to be desired; he has not
finished his thoughts, and, presumably, neither had Shakespeare.
Hamlet's strictures on acting and drama are symptomatic of Shake­
speare's struggle with the problem of artistic change; they breathe a
nostalgic addiction to a fading tradition and an acute awareness of
a change. In practice, Shakespeare was already in the process of
adjusting himself to new fashions, particularly to the satiric mood. But he did not yet release the full power of passion in any of the characters he created. It is possible to pronounce the speeches of the tortured Hamlet in the mixture of passion and temperance he advocates; but it is impossible to utter those of the jealous Othello in the same fashion.

Hamlet's remarks on the theater point to a tension between theory and practice in Shakespeare, a tension characteristic of mannerist art, which sought to solve the problem of tradition versus innovation by rational means. There is here an attempt to cling to the balanced certainties of the Renaissance; but they fail to satisfy. The heroes of the two tragedies of this period, Hamlet and Brutus, are confronted with tasks for which their theoretical training does not equip them. For them, what knowledge teaches differs from what experience shows, and Hamlet, at least, is pained by the discrepancy. The theme of seeming and being, of deception and truth, which always interested Shakespeare, is more strident in these plays. Troilus, even more unequipped to deal with reality than Brutus and Hamlet, fragments his psychological substance in a fruitless attempt to identify the real Cressida with the woman he seeks to idealize. Bertram and Angelo are men of deceptive and even engaging outsides, but both are deeply corrupt underneath.

And what is true of the characters is also true of their milieu. Rome, Denmark, Troy, and Vienna are more insidiously and perplexingly vicious than the locations of Shakespeare's previous dramas. It is not merely that they are corrupt—so is the Venice of The Merchant of Venice and the court of As You Like It—but that the corruption is ingrained and unrelieved by convincing alternatives. There is no Belmont to balance Venice, no Forest of Arden in which to take refuge from Duke Frederick's court. And it is not merely that much significant action takes place at night—so it does in earlier and later plays—but that darkness becomes a cloak for dubious and deceptive actions. Troilus's and Cressida's tryst, taking place under the aegis of the leering Pandarus, is a deliberate and satirical variation of Romeo's and Juliet's wedding night. In All's Well and Measure for Measure, the happy solutions are achieved by acts of darkness and deceit, the bed-tricks by which Helena and Mariana claim their husbands. In Julius Caesar, the conspirators gather in stormy nights, and Caesar's ghost appears to Brutus in a dark tent at Sardis. In Hamlet, two nocturnal appearances of a
I38 PROBLEMS AND AMBIGUITIES

ghost open a play that is never perfectly lighted. A later tragedy, Macbeth, it is true, contains more night scenes than Hamlet, and they hold more terror, but they do not have the same atmosphere of uncertainty. There is in Hamlet and the plays of this period a fascination with night because it disguises the truth or makes it ambiguous.

The uncertainties, ambiguities, and unresolved problems that permeate these plays point to a shift in Shakespeare's world view away from the certainties of the Renaissance. The vision of reality that shaped his earlier dramas resembled that of a Renaissance painter who depicted persons and things as solid, tangible bodies, clearly bounded, proportioned, and situated in intelligible space. Now reality becomes fluid and problematic as it is in mannerist art: the lines twist and curve; proportion and spatial arrangements are freakish and vexing. Mannerist art, as Jacques Bousquet has noted, has sometimes a dreamlike quality: “In dreams, people and things are never exactly what they seem; they are either in contradiction with themselves, being one thing and its very opposite simultaneously; or, if they do achieve a moment of precise definition, it is only to change just as abruptly and become something else.”

Hamlet's world approaches this oneiric state; he could be a king of infinite space if he had not bad dreams.

But when mannerist vision is awake and conscious, as it is generally in Shakespeare, the contradictions and ambiguities of the world are due to an eminently skeptic look at it; there is no clear demarcation of shadow and light, of truth and falsehood; opposites merge imperceptibly into each other and become indistinguishable. From being a comprehensive, structured frame, the world becomes a shifting semblance. As Justus Lipsius, a neo-Stoic touched by skepticism, said, acting prudently in this world was a very “diffused thing, confused, and obscure” because this world itself was very “diffused.”

And Montaigne in “An Apology of Raymond Sebond” —although he purported to defend the Theologia Naturalis, an elaborate fifteenth-century defense of a rational universe—granted a little condescendingly to Sebond that it was likely “that this vast world's frame must bear the impression of some marks therein imprinted by the hand of this great, wondrous architect, and that even in all things therein created there must be some image somewhat resembling and having coherency with the workman that wrought and framed them.” Montaigne went on to say that “our imbecility” is the cause that we cannot read or discover the marks imprinted
by God in the visible world. To a diffused world like that of Lipsius or an unreadable one like that of Montaigne, it is difficult to apply the existing standards. The nature of both macrocosm and microcosm, as well as their relation, are uncertain. When there are no longer definite answers to the question of what is true and false, right and wrong, it follows that there is no static system of values and that one must suspend judgment. Skepticism and mannerism come from the same world view and are interrelated. Montaigne has been called "the unofficial philosophic voice of mannerism" when he asked: "What do I know?"

In all the plays of Shakespeare's mannerist period, there is a similar concern with questioning and even with rejecting the ability of the mind to see the truth. It was not a totally new interest for Shakespeare; it appeared, for instance, in Richard II, a play that anticipates some of the mannerist patterns. But now the heroes are not only ignorant of themselves and uncertain of the world in which they live; they also are placed in situations that make self-knowledge peculiarly difficult if not impossible. This begins with Julius Caesar, where already the story, as Shakespeare found it in Plutarch, turned on the irony that men make decisions whose moral significance they cannot foresee. Brutus is a man most studious of virtue; he ponders deeply whether to join the conspiracy or not; when he decides that he must do so if he is to remain himself, he, the selfless idealist, enters the world of political intrigue and assassination in alliance with the self-seeking Cassius, and, while he remains addicted to his high ideals, his actions become dubious and criminal. Hamlet's problem of determining the truth of the things he believes he knows is even more acute: first his mother's hasty and incestuous marriage, then the revelation of the ghost make him a stranger to the world and to himself. He loses his way more thoroughly than Brutus and can much less keep from doing so; he is astray in a universe of disintegrating and illusionary values, where an "uncle-father" murders his own brother, marries the latter's widow, and yet smiles; where school friends are enemy spies; and where it is impossible to say whether it is better to act or not to act, to be or not to be. And he finds it difficult to say clearly whether anything is good or bad—thinking makes it so. Troilus believes he knows Cressida, but finds out differently; his idealism and chivalric code make him incapable of understanding the real nature of his beloved. Nor does he judge his own nature better; some weakness, difficult to diagnose but con-
connected with an endemic relativism and with a Trojan obsession with honor, prevents him from asking the question whether he is not himself responsible for his delusion. In Measure for Measure, Vincentio undertakes a governmental and human experiment that is to determine the best way to govern and to test the moral nature of Angelo; but the dangerous situation of his state obliges him to take the direction of events in his own hands to prevent misfortune. In the process, Angelo falls and asks the question "What dost thou and what art thou Angelo?" in a spirit of incomprehension about himself and human nature in general. Angelo appears indeed to achieve self-knowledge through repentance, but many of the ethical and political questions posed by the duke's experiment remain unanswered.

Clearly, Shakespeare during this period was particularly concerned with the problematic nature of knowledge and inclined to some sort of skeptical position. Of course, this is not, as such, proof of his interest in philosophic skepticism. Skepticism is an attitude as well as a philosophy, and one can be a skeptic without being a philosopher. In a sense, every dramatist must be something of a skeptic: he must be able to see more than one side of a question; he must take an experimental attitude toward the reality he wishes to dramatize; he must devise situations that make his characters react at variance and create different characters that react variously to one and the same situation. The growth of a relativistic and skeptic spirit in Shakespeare was surely related to his development into a mature artist.

It is also highly probable that personal experiences had something to do with Shakespeare's more skeptic look at the world from Julius Caesar on. When he wrote Henry V, he looked forward expectantly to the victorious return of the Earl of Essex, "bringing rebellion broached on his sword" (V.32). But soon after that, perhaps when Shakespeare was engaged in writing Julius Caesar, Essex's failure became apparent. In Henry V, Shakespeare had compared Essex to the victorious king, but his debacle must have given him a heightened feeling of the dubiousness of all political action, a feeling that pervades not only Julius Caesar but also Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida, and Measure for Measure.

Relativism and skepticism feed on the awareness of man's errors and contradictory actions, whether this awareness comes from life or theory. Plutarch's Lives, in which Shakespeare immersed himself
when writing *Julius Caesar*, must have sharpened his view of man's subjection to errors and of the baffling discrepancies between intention and execution. That Shakespeare took a more detached attitude toward Brutus and toward Caesar than he had taken toward the characters of his history plays, can surely at least in part be attributed to his having graduated from the Tudor chroniclers to a wiser guide, one more sensitive to the weaknesses of human nature. And the satire in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida* undoubtedly owes much to Shakespeare's seeing the relativistic and debunking plays of some of his contemporaries like Marston and Jonson. As Shakespeare became acquainted with attacks on, and alternatives to, orthodoxy, his sense of the relativity of values grew even without any specific knowledge of skeptic philosophy. Relativism is encouraged by the realization of contradictions between world views, by the canceling-out of one supposed certitude by another. Hamlet's "nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" does not, as such, prove that Shakespeare was reading skeptic philosophy; the remark is symptomatic of the age's increasing disillusionment with norms and occurs in some form quite frequently.

But it still appears to me likely that Shakespeare was reading skeptic philosophy at some time during this period, perhaps not yet when he was writing *Julius Caesar*, but at least when he came to *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*. *Hamlet* tests some of the most cherished humanistic assumptions on the nature of man in ways that owe something to skeptic ideas, and *Troilus and Cressida* is pervaded by these.

This latter play also contains evidence that Shakespeare had a technical knowledge of the distinction between the moderate, academic skepticism of Cicero and its difference from the radical, "Pyrrhonic" school of which Sextus Empiricus's *Hypotyposes* was the classical model. The former skepticism was embraced by many Christian humanists; the latter was gaining ground in Shakespeare's England, particularly after the translation of Montaigne's "Apology of Raymond Sebond." The proof of Shakespeare's knowledge of the two schools comes in the debate of the Trojans, when Hector assumes the moderate, and Troilus the radical, position. Hector, the mouthpiece of reason, proposes peace negotiations and the restoration of Helen to the Greeks because of the uncertainty the future holds; "modest doubt," he says, "is call'd / The beacon of the wise, the tent that searches / To th' bottom of the worst" (II.ii.15–17).
Hector thus sides with the wise man of Cicero's *Academica* who doubts to the degree of not giving too easy an assent to the phenomena. Troilus, however, will have none of such caution, and puts his argument for passion and war on the relativity of all values; the Trojans can make Helen into a symbol of reward for their struggle because "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" (52). Troilus here takes a Pyrrhonic view much like Montaigne's: "That our opinion endeareth and encreaseth the price of things... and we call that worth in them, not what they bring us, but what we bring to them. According as it weighteth and is of consequence, so it serveth."  

Hector objects to this argument that "value dwells not in particular will:/It holds his estimate and dignity/As well wherein 'tis precious of itself/As in the prizer" (53–56). This is quite the moderate humanistic position that things have value not only through the appraiser but also in their own right.

Although Montaigne's popularity in early seventeenth-century England undoubtedly was great, the *Essays* were not the only source of philosophical skepticism, and one should not make the mistake of equating the influence of skepticism on Shakespeare with that of Montaigne. Neither should one equate philosophic and religious skepticism, although it is true that on the edges of philosophic doubt agnosticism and atheism were spreading. Skepticism in its simplest form as doubt in the mind's ability to attain to the truth was a respectable Christian attitude. Christianity, as the Elizabethans inherited it, contained many anti-intellectual, pietistic, and mystical elements that were antipathetic to the rationalists' claim for the efficacy of human knowledge. The skeptic passages in Shakespeare's plays do not give any indication of religious doubt, and some emphasize that faith is superior to knowledge. Thus Hamlet reproaches Horatio, who takes a rationalistic attitude toward the ghost and will not let belief take hold on him:

> And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.  
> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
> Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.  
> (I.v. 165–67)

The remark echoes many Christian objections to rationalism, beginning with Paul's deprecation of "philosophy and vain deceit" (Col. 2:8) and his glorification of the mystery of God over human
wisdom (I Cor. 2:7). The Genevan side-note to the latter passage defines "mystery" as "that which men could not so much as dream of" and thus uses the same metaphor as does Hamlet and, for that matter, as did countless Renaissance theologians. Another, even more pronounced fideistic declaration is in All's Well when the king's old counselor, Lafeu, expresses his master's seemingly miraculous cure by Helena:

They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

(LII.iii.1 ff.)

Lafeu here opposes the "atheistic" position, as it was held for instance by Cicero in De Divinatione (II.60) that all natural events have natural causes. Except for taking the opposite viewpoint, Lafeu's words come close to Cicero's.

Like Montaigne, Shakespeare was open-minded and undogmatic when it came to natural occurrences. But we must not press this and other affinities of thought even if they are occasionally combined with verbal resemblances; the arguments about truth developed often on classical and theological commonplaces that were all cultured men's property. It would be equally hazardous to assert on the basis of Hamlet's and Lafeu's words that Shakespeare had a sudden upsurge of faith or to claim him as being radically relativistic on the basis of the rampant skepticism in Troilus and Cressida. Positions taken in these plays are generally subjected to questioning through ironies, ambiguities, and paradoxes. Thus Lafeu's espousal of fideism occurs in a bantering conversation with Parolles, who echoes, apes, and contradicts the old counselor. We are left in doubt where Shakespeare stands because whatever seriousness Lafeu's words lose by the travesty, they regain in part by the fact that Parolles is an example of the "seeming knowledge" that the old counselor castigates.

Shakespeare generally did not let his philosophic interests damage his dramatic designs; yet these very designs breathe a conception of life as a hazardous venture. More noteworthy than the skeptic attitudes taken by Hamlet and Lafeu are the ways in which their statements highlight the dramatic uncertainties from which the actions of the two plays arise. The speeches, spoken in awe about most
unusual occurrences, draw attention to the difficulty and dubiousness of the tasks that are central to both plays. In *Hamlet*, the ghost demands a course of action from the prince for which the latter has no map or plan; he must act on the command of a questionable agent, who may be his father's spirit or the devil. In *All's Well*, the healing of the king is the achievement on which Helena has staked her hope of winning and regenerating Bertram, a hazardous enterprise, considering the young count's nature.

The fideistic position with its low opinion about the mind's ability to decipher microcosm and macrocosm often entailed, as it does in Hamlet's and Lafeu's words, an attack on man's pride in his reason. The main thrust was aimed at such idealistic or rationalistic metaphysics as that of Plato and Aquinas, but fideism-skepticism also contradicted the more moderate Christian-humanist position as exemplified by Erasmus and Hooker. Not that either Aquinas or the Christian humanists neglected to list pride as a sin detrimental to self-knowledge—Erasmus castigated pride strongly in *Enchiridion*—but they did not direct their castigations at man's attempts to come to some rational conclusions about his role in the universe. Montaigne's sarcasm about such presumption was uninhibited:

Is it possible to imagine anything so ridiculous as this miserable and wretched creature, which is not so much as master of himself, exposed and subject to offenses of all things; and yet dareth call himself master and emperor of this universe in whose power it is not to know the least part of it, much less to command the same? And the privilege, which he so fondly challengeth, to be the only absolute creature in this huge world's frame perfectly able to know the absolute beauty and several parts thereof, and that he is only of power to yield the great architect thereof due thanks for it, and keep account both of the receipts and layings-out of the world! Who hath sealed him this patent? Let him show us his letters of privilege for so noble and so great a charge.  

Montaigne, however, did not push this position to the logical conclusion that man could say nothing about the universe and his relationship to it. He was not averse to accepting the idea of a universe shrinking and degenerating like man when it could be made to show up man's absurd pride, the pride of an animal living on a shrinking planet "farthest from heaven's cope."  

For the mannerist-fideist, self-knowledge implied a realization of the absurdity of man's proud claim to rationally know himself and
The Real versus the Ideal: Taking a Skeptic View

God. This fideistic article is reflected iconographically in an early seventeenth-century emblem, mannerist in its paradoxical subtlety. Entitled *Nosce Teipsum*, it shows a peacock—symbolizing man—rearing a pearl-studded tail—symbolic of reason—proudly toward the sky; but the bird turns its crest toward its ugly feet—meditation, as the punning motto explained, bows man (*homo*) to the earth (*humus*).24

The exposure of man’s pride in his reason was not a subject new to Shakespeare in his mannerist period—we may recall *Richard III*—but it becomes now more explicitly associated with the patterns of self-knowledge, as, for instance, in Brutus’s persuasion by Cassius (I.ii.51 ff.) and in Ulysses’s appeal to Achilles to rejoin the battle (III.iii.95 ff.). This exposure appears also in a much subtler form than in *Richard III* as the hard-to-discern defect of an essentially fine and sympathetic mind like that of Brutus. And, I think, there is a similar dram of pride in Duke Vincentio and Isabella; as I shall argue, it is, by implication, acknowledged by them in the end. And Hamlet, metaphysically, although not psychologically, the humblest of men, deflates the intellectual certitude of the Danish court, as when, most amusingly, he exposes Polonius’s presumption in conceiving of himself as sane and of Hamlet as mad.

In their varied ways, all of Shakespeare’s plays of this period demonstrate man’s inability to discern rationally who he is and where he belongs. The plays take problematic attitudes toward the self, toward man in general, and toward society and the universe. The various frames of existence are shown to have fissures, and the possibility of harmonious relationships between them is drawn into question. Brutus, essentially harmonious man that he is, becomes disharmonious in a Rome that is changing from republic to dictatorship. Hamlet’s agonized spirit cannot break through the prison bars of his Denmark even though he sees a light beyond. Troilus’s debilitated idealism is deflated by the brutal sexual and military realities of Troy and Greece. Duke Vincentio never finds the answer to what it takes to be an ideal ruler in the corrupted currents of Vienna. As the characters’ world becomes problematic, they turn inward to find other insoluble contradictions: Hamlet comes to a point where he questions the very possibility of self-knowledge, and Troilus thinks of himself in the end as being just as contradictory and fragmented as Cressida and the Trojan war appear to him.

When conventional ideas associated with self-knowledge are in-
voked, their relevance becomes sometimes ambiguous or disappears. The old humanistic conviction is lacking when Hamlet asks himself the question what man is if the chief goods and markets of his time are but to sleep and feed. And when, as in Troilus and Cressida, ethical norms are proclaimed, their application to the present situation is questionable, as is instanced by Ulysses's advocacy of degree that he conspicuously fails to translate into action. The old commonplace becomes a euphemism for power politics and for shoddy intrigue. There is here and elsewhere a cleavage between what was once and what is now as well as a contradiction between what there should be and what there is. Theory and practice, ideal and reality have a problematic relationship to each other.

The discrepancy between the humanistic theory and the reality of the self is expressed in Shakespeare's ambiguous attitude toward the "pattern of perfection," the ideal man he had embodied in his ideal king, Henry V. There is no character in Shakespeare's plays of this period who can be said to know himself in the manner of Henry. Brutus is indeed a man of virtue, but he falls prey to an appeal to his awareness of himself as a virtuous Roman; his errors and failures prove that it is not enough in this world to be a well-balanced man. Hamlet admires Horatio as a kind of pattern of perfection, a just man, who is neither the slave of fortune nor of passion; but Hamlet's attraction to the ideal appears an aesthetic and nostalgic aspiration that is drawn in question by the paleness of Horatio's actual character as it appears in the play. In this respect, Hamlet's attitude resembles that of Montaigne, who still was fond of patterns of perfection and flirted with the idea that they could be found among the poor. (Hamlet, too, notes Horatio's poverty when he commends him.) Montaigne also admitted that he was pleased when others said of him, "Lo, there a pattern of true fortitude; lo, there a mirror of matchless patience." But the pinch of his kidney stone kept him from keeping up the pose, and he admitted that "there is nothing I so hardly believe to be in man as constancy and nothing so easy to be found in him as inconstancy."

Inconstancy and inconsistency are characteristic of the heroes of four of the five plays under discussion. Brutus is the one exception; but his republican constancy is a corollary to his lacking sensitivity to the moral ambiguity of his action. Hamlet, whatever else he may be, is the spirit of inconsistency; the shallower Troilus, although he chants absolutes, is corroded by a pervasive relativism. Bertram has
not enough psychic substance for us to expect constancy from him; that of Angelo, thought spectacular, proves an illusion. Even Duke Vincentio, the stablest of the major characters, has troubles in deciding what his actions should be. He has let the law lapse for many years, then experiments with restoring it through the agency of a deputy stricter than himself; but finally he takes the reins in his hands again. Although he is the most exemplary of Shakespeare's rulers after Henry V, he is far from being a signal pattern of perfection; but then, he also has to contend with more difficult psychological problems.

With the problematic moral orientation of the major characters is connected a disorientation of the minor ones. In Shakespeare's earlier plays, the heroes put themselves in a context of either morality or immorality and take the others with them in the one or the other direction. Henry V is a perfect king, and his follower Fluellen an admirable man and soldier; Richard III is a villain, and his friend and supporter Buckingham a traitor. Henry and his adherents opt for a moral world, Richard and his for an immoral one; but both sets act according to the choices offered to them in a world that they understand. For Brutus and Hamlet, there are no clear moral options; the world is an uncertain and hazardous place.

This is not to say that the characters in the earlier dramas are merely static. Prince Hal, for instance, is placed on a middle ground between evil and good and grows morally in each of the two parts of Henry IV. He is at first attracted to the fun-loving but duty-eschewing Falstaff and cold toward the political world of his father to which one day he must belong fully. But Hal's position does not have the baffling uncertainties of the call to political action Brutus receives or the soul-harrowing terror of the demand to avenge his father that comes to Hamlet. It is indeed clear from the beginning in which direction Hal will go; he will become England's hero-king rather than end in a tavern brawl in Eastcheap. Hal's attitude to others, to his father, to Falstaff, and to Hotspur, is at any time known to us even if not always to them. Hamlet's oddities and antics, as much as they fascinate us and as much as we accept them as part of his character, sometimes bewilder us as much as the characters on whom he practices them. He and some of the other heroes of this period seem to need a psychological disguise in a world which, like that portrayed by mannerist painters, is one of doubt and secret anxiety, which therefore requires an armor instead of a body; a mask instead
of a face.\textsuperscript{27} Brutus wears the armor; Hamlet and Duke Vincentio wear masks, the one a psychological one, the other an outward one; Troilus tries both the mask and the armor but is successful with neither.

In Shakespeare's mannerist plays, the feeling of uncertainty created by the characters' lack of direction carries through the dramatic designs from the beginning to the end. It is true that the hope of Romeo and Juliet to find themselves is as precarious after the death of Tybalt as is Hamlet's endeavor to restore his own and Denmark's health after the killing of Polonius; but the two lovers' certainty about themselves lessens our feeling that it is so. Also, they are placed in a symmetrical design between the hostile Montagues and Capulets, a design that allocates the tragic responsibility to fate and the hostile parties. They never lose themselves as inextricably as does Hamlet in the labyrinthine worlds of his soul and the universe. Although Romeo and Juliet die, they win a victory for Verona and humanity: this is a better world for their having lived and loved. It is not so in Denmark or in Rome: Hamlet's wounded name may be healed, but Denmark will be in the hands of the unknown Fortinbras, and the ideal of liberty is certainly not advanced by the death of Brutus. The endings of \textit{Troilus and Cressida} and the two comedies are so dubious as to have made some critics attribute them to Shakespeare's artistic uncertainty. Nothing is really concluded in \textit{Troilus and Cressida} except Troilus's love for Cressida. And there is something conditional about the happiness of the characters at the end of \textit{All's Well} and \textit{Measure for Measure}: we must trust in the sustained efficacy of the astonishing conversions, and more than one critic has found such trust difficult.

The complexities and ambiguities of these plays go deep, deeper than this and the following brief discussions can indicate. For instance, one may read the endings of some of the plays more positively than I have done. Hamlet's decision to abandon his attempts to analyze himself, his situation, Denmark, and the world is accompanied by his declaration that, from now on, he will trust in the providence that is present even in the fall of a sparrow. Similarly, the ending of \textit{Measure for Measure} can be read as an apotheosis of faith.\textsuperscript{28} Certainly, an appreciation of these endings requires more than the customary acceptance of improbable accidents at the end of conventional comedies; it does require faith. faith in the miraculous moral regeneration of a scoundrel like Bertram and a hypocrite like
Angelo. And \textit{Measure for Measure} does make the point of the Sermon on the Mount that one should not mete out to others what one does not mete out to oneself. Admittedly, fideistic elements are present in these plays although, contrary to some theologically oriented critics, I believe that Shakespeare used them tentatively, hesitantly, and with some mental reservations, not yet, as for instance in \textit{The Winter's Tale} and in \textit{The Tempest}, with force and artistic assurance. Yet, the quality and role of fideism and, for that matter, many other problems of form and thought in these plays are difficult to evaluate. One may arrive at divergent, at times even opposite, conclusions if one chooses a perspective different from the one I have adopted in making the issue of man's knowledge of himself the focal point.

Shakespeare's mannerist plays are vexing and disturbing, and they make self-knowledge a more puzzling and hazardous quest than do any of his other works, but they also speak to us in a particularly provocative voice. We feel a keen and probing mind at work in an age that resembles so much our own. These tragedies and comedies point to a conflict in Shakespeare's mind and art between humanist and counter-humanist ideas; they are the product of an age that felt tentative, torn, and self-conscious in exploring man and the universe independently. The plays reflect Shakespeare's struggle with the ideas of the world in which he was brought up. At times they affirm them, at other times they reject them; but more often they probe and question them. Whatever blemishes some of the plays may have, they all render fascinating insights into extraordinary human predicaments. They have a quality of improvisation, of attempting statements that are not definite but demand revision and perhaps total restatement. Agitated by the winds of a cultural crisis, they strike a sympathetic chord in us, makers and victims of another cultural crisis.