All's Well That Ends Well Study Guide

All's Well That Ends Well by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Scholars generally agree that *All's Well That Ends Well* was written between 1600 and 1605, although some belleve that the play is the lost Shakespearean drama tItled *Love's Labour Won,* which was written before 1598

Most critics believe that Shakespeare's primary Influence in constructing the main plot of the play was Wilham Painters English translation of Giovanni Boccaccio's story of Giletta of Narbonne in his *Decameron* (1353), titled *The Palace of Pleasures* (1575). Shakespeare added the characters of Parolles (and the subplot in which Parolles is the main character), the Countess of Rousillon, Lavache, Lafeu, and the second ring at the end of the play. Some commentators have remarked that the uneven nature of the play suggests that it was Written at two different times in Shakespeare's life.

All's Well That Ends Well has often been called one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" or "problem comedies," a category of his work that usually includes *Measure for Measure* and *Troilius and Cressida,* because these works often seem more similar in tone and theme to the tragedies Shakespeare was Writing during the same time period than they do to the romantic comedies he wrote in the 1590s. Most critics acknowledge the folktale elements in the play. Some critics condemn the play outright, considering it a comedic failure Others take into account how the play would have been received by Elizabethan audiences and find it successful, despite what might seem to be its oddities to twentieth-century readers. Rarely does a critic praise the play without reservation.

Early critics of the play focused on the incongruous plot elements and the thematic concerns of merit and rank, virtue and honor, and male versus female. More recent critics address these issues, but they focus more attention now on topics such as gender and desire. Helena's sexuality and the reversal of gender roles has generated much discussion, especially as they intertwine with other main conflicts in the play, such as social class, the bed-trick, and marriage. The ending of the play (whether the play does end well, as the title suggests it does) has historically been much-debated and continues to be so in recent Criticism.

The three main characters-Helena, Bertram, and Parolles-have generated a great deal of literary criticism and comment as well. Some critics brand Helena as conniving and obsessive in her love for Bertram, while others find her wholly virtuous and noble in general, critics are united in their displeasure with the character of Bertram, though some Judge him more harshly than others. Some critics find Bertram thoroughly unrepentant and unredeemable at the end of the play, making the ending implausible. Others are more sympathetic toward him, finding him merely immature at the beginning of the play and in need of life experience in order for him to "grow up." Parolles has generated less controversy in terms of the nature of his character (even Parolles himself recognizes his deficiencies and is not ashamed of them), and some critics find the subplot involving Patolles the only thing that saves the play from utter failure

Plot Summary

The Countess of Rousillon's son, Bertram, prepares to leave for the court of the King of France. The Countess and her friend Lafeu discuss the King's poor health, and the Countess laments the fact that the father of Helena, her ward, has died, as he was a great physician and would likely have been able to cure the King. After Bertram departs, the Countess learns that Helena is in love with her son and encourages her to follow him. Helena devises a plan to cure the King using a prescription of her father's and the Countess agrees to assist her in traveling to Paris to see the King.

Characters

Bertram (Bertram, Count of Rossillion):

Bertram is the hero of the play. Forced to marry Helena against his will, he flees from her, but is tricked into sleeping with her unknowingly, and in the last moments of the play accepts her as his wife. When the play opens, Bertram is off to join the king's court at Paris, where he will presumably put the finishing touches on his education as a courtly gentleman. Bertram is hardly an ideal gentleman: he is at best, as his mother says, "an unseason'd courtier" (I.i.71). The first indication of Bertram's character comes when we encounter the company he keeps: the lewd and parasitic courtier Parolles, who banters with Helena on the topic of her sexual experience (I.i.99). Then, soon after his arrival in France, Bertram grows petulant because the other lords are running of to the Italian war, while the king makes him stay home. Even before he enters the play's central action, then, Bertram emerges as something other than a decorous gentleman - in fact, according to Lafew, he is "an ass" (II.iii.100). Then, when Helena cures the king's illness and he rewards her by allowing her to choose a husband from among his lords, she chooses Bertram. Bertram rejects Helena because she is low-born - and because of the king's high-handedness in giving away his young lord. "My wife, my liege? I shall beseech your Highness, / In such a business, give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes.... / A poor physician's daughter my wife!" (II.iii.104- 15). Perhaps there is an element of fear in Bertram's protest, for his youth suggests sexual inexperience along with a will to be free of the control of his elders. But sympathetic responses to Bertram's cal low character are few and far between. His display of arrogance ignites the wrath of the king, and receives no support from the. other noble characters in the play, Lafew and, later, his mother the countess. In fact, when she learns that Bertram has fled from spending even one night with his new wife, the countess disowns him: "I do wash his name out of my blood" (III.ii.67).

Bertram's youthful arrogance and inexperience and the influence of his friend Parolles contribute to his rejection of Helena. He launches into an extend ed rebellion, leaving France, fighting in the Florentine wars, and seducing the daughter of a Florentine widow. He is apparently successful in war, thereby gaining a certain kind of honor as a knight. But the shame of his treatment of both Helena and Diana calls into question the value of such honor. Indeed, Bertram's character calls into question the very notion of noble birth itself.

When Bertram pleads with Diana to satisfy his "sick desires," (IV.ii.35) he shows himself to be not only arrogant but lustful as well. He woos her persistently, even though he clearly never intends to marry her - for he himself is already married, and besides, Diana is at least as low-born as Helena. But Diana, in turn, bargains with him: his ring for her chastity, his honor for hers. Since it is plain that Diana no more intends to sleep with him than he intends to marry her, Bertram's persistent pleadings come to seem trivial and ridiculous. Diana has control of his courtship, and his apparent success in winning her will later be his downfall. She exposes his honor as a sham.

When, in the last act, Bertram is finally trapped by the net of his own vows and attempts to escape those vows, it becomes clear that he has treated Diana in the way of many well-born men and low born women. He claims never to have been serious about loving her. As Parolles puts it, "He did love her, sir, as a gentleman loves a woman. . He loved her, sir, and loved her not" (V.iii.245-48). Bertram cannot disentangle all the strands of his experience - primarily because he does not realize, even after Helena's ring has been identified, that the woman he slept with in Florence was not Diana but Helena. This failure to distinguish between women is further evidence of Bertram's youthful blindness -- and, more specifically, of the fact that he has made no attempt to recognize Helena as an individual woman. At the very end, when the dead Helena returns and al is revealed, Bertram speaks only three lines - words of absolute acquiescence. For most audiences, the suddenness and brevity of his consent fail to outweigh his callow behavior through the course of the play.

Citizens of Florence:

These citizens appear in III.v, when Helena meets the widow and Diana on the street, as the soldiers go by in a procession. Helena mingles among the citizens, while Bertram parades past in a parade, accentuating their class difference.

Count of Rossillion:

See Bertram

Countess of Rossillion:

See Rossillion

Diana:

Diana is the Florentine woman who helps Helena fulfill the impossible tasks that Bertram sets for her. She first appears in Act III, as Helena herself arrives in Florence. Diana is a chaste young woman herself, and sympathetic to Helena's cause even before Helena reveals her. identity (III.v.63-65). When Bertram tries to seduce her, Diana uses language with enough double meanings so that she seems to encourage him, while at the same time she points out his immoral behavior. She says that his "oaths / Are words and poor conditions" (IV.ii.29- 30); she doesn't believe him even when he swears to love her. She is aware of the behavior typical of high-born men toward low-born women: she has no reason to trust that he would actually marry well below his station.

Nonetheless, when he gives her his ring, she makes arrangements to meet him that night. Diana and Helena have plotted together, so that it will actually be Helena who

sleeps with him. Diana thinks twice about lying at all, but concludes that "I think't no sin / To cozen him that would unjustly win" (IV.ii.75-76).

Diana then travels with her mother (the widow) and Helena to the court of Paris, and then to Rossillion, to help Helena win Bertram, but also in the hope that the king will reward her. In the final scene of the play, Diana confronts Bertram with the ring he gave to her and the promises he swore to her: she tells the assembled court that he vowed to marry her when his wife died. Helena is presumed dead at this point. When Bertram tries to escape his vow - along with the consequences of all his actions - Diana begins speaking in riddles. She makes so little sense that the king grows frustrated, and starts to send her to prison. Diana persists: "He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't; / I'll swear I am a maid, and he knows not" (V.iii.290-91). Finally, at the height of the drama created by her inexplicable riddling, Helena appears. She makes sense of Diana's doublespeak, and prompts Bertram to accept her at last.

The king's final act in the play is to offer Diana a husband of her choice from among his lords. The play thus closes with a repetition of the very action that began its central conflict: at the king's bidding, a woman strong enough to know her own desires chooses her husband regardless of the man's desires.

Duke of Florence:

See Florence

Florence (Duke of Florence):

The duke of Florence makes only brief appearances (III.i, III.iii) to welcome the aid of the French lords and of Bertram and Parolles.

France (King of France):

The king of France is the highest authority in the play. The scenes in which he presides are the most dramatic and ritualistic, as well. In his first appearance, he is ill, old, and fretful. But then Helena arrives with her promise of a cure. At first, the king seems almost to want to stay ill: he says he will not "prostitute" his malady to anyone, when there is no cure (II.i.121). But Helena, in a long, clever, and modest set of speeches, seduces him into trying her cure. Unexpectedly, the cure works, setting in motion the central conflict of the play. The king has welcomed Bertram to his court nostalgically, praising Bertram's dead father be cause "his tongue obey'd his hand" (I.ii.41) - that is, his words matched his deeds. The king's words should match his deeds as well, as it is his duty to uphold the truth and honor of his court. After his cure, the king upholds his promise to Helena to reward her for her cure: in a pageant-like scene, he allows her to choose a husband from among his lords. When she chooses the reluctant Bertram, the king insists on his own absolute authority. But there is a limit to that authority, of course. Even though Bertram has been sent to his court to become a polished courtier, the king

cannot make an ignoble man noble. When he threatens to "throw [Bertram] from my care forever" (II.iii.163), the count responds by accepting Helena in marriage, but only superficially. And Bertram soon throws himself free of the care of the king after all.

The limits of the king's authority are revealed in other ways as well. He is not involved in the Italian wars, and in fact he allows his lords to go off and fight for whichever side they want. The lack of political weight to these wars contributes to the play's larger theme of the emptiness of honor. But the king's reticence about the war makes his reign seem strangely divorced from the world of politics. More dramatically, when the king presides over the final scene, he struggles to play his proper role as judge and mediator among conflicting parties. He can forgive Bertram, until he suspects him of murdering Helena; he cannot make sense of Diana's riddling story; his impulse, once again, is to force the concerned parties to behave according to his will, to obey his absolute command - so he has both Bertram and Diana seized by his guards. When Helena finally appears, his tone changes tone of toleration. He asks to hear the whole story of Helena's travels, "To make the even truth in pleasure flow" (V.iii.326), as though the entire episode has been merely pleasurable. He speaks the epilogue as well, a point at which the players' masks and roles are taken off, and he simply asks for applause.

French Lords:

The two French lords become more active in the play as it progresses. They are two of the king's courtiers who join the Florentine army, and unlike the king they express a genuine support for Florence in the war (II.i). They act as witnesses to Bertram's departure, and later urge Bertram to test Parolles; they are therefore, in a small way, responsible for upholding the moral values of Helena, the countess, and Lafew. They are not named until the scapegoating of Parolles, when they refer to themselves as the Dumaines (IV.iii.248). In that scene, they are the principal interrogators of Parolles.

Gentleman:

A gentleman helps Helena by carrying a letter from her to the king (V.i, V.iii). It is worth noting that he is one of the many bourgeois, non-courtly people whose allegiance Helena wins in the course of the play.

Helena:

Helena is the main character in the play. The daughter of a recently deceased physician and therefore both low born and poor, she is under the protection of the countess of Rossillion. That is, as a member of the countess's court, she has her material needs taken care of and has probably received some courtly education. Helena's character thus draws much from the countess's courtly values. But Helena also contributes to the play a miraculous cure and demands a fairy-tale marriage as her reward. Moreover, she persists until she is accepted as Bertram's wife: as Helena says of herself from the beginning, "my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me" (I.i.229). This persistence has

sometimes been read as controlling and hard-headed. But Helena also represents a stubborn attachment to a set of ideals that no other character in the play exhibits. Helena makes most of the play's action happen.

After Bertram leaves in the first scene, she declares her love for him in a soliloquy (which is accidentally overheard by Rinaldo, the countess's steward), then holds her own when Parolles baits her about her virginity. She resolves to follow Bertram to the king's court to "show her merit" (I.i.227) by curing the king. When the countess discovers her intentions, Helena expresses proper embarrassment, and says she knows her birth is to lowly for her to expect Bertram for a husband. But though she is quick to be frank with the countess about her intention to go Paris, she does not reveal the larger plan: her own request to receive, as the reward for curing the king, her choice of his lords in marriage. The fact that Helena carries out this plot completely independent of any other influences, and regardless of anyone else's desires, makes her a highly unconventional comic or romantic heroine. Helena's character is not only defined by simple persistence, though. She carries out what she intends to do, and what she says she will do, throughout the play. She makes her words match her deeds. When she offers to cure the king, she employs a combination of modesty and insistence similar to that in her interaction with the countess. The king refuses her help almost immediately; she says she will go; but then she says, "What I can do can do no hurt to try..." (II.i.134). She swears on her own virginity ("my maiden's name" [II.i. 172]) and even her life that her cure will work. The king finally agrees, and agrees further to reward her with a husband.

Helena, of course, chooses Bertram. In the face of Bertram's refusal of her, Helena continues to make words and deeds match - this time, those of her husband. He writes to her that he will never accept her as his wife until she gets the ring off his finger that never will come off, and becomes pregnant with his child after he vows never to sleep with her. She takes his impossible task literally, setting out to get the ring and to sleep with him even though he refuses. She also continues to express a quite openly sexual desire for him. Here again, though, her humble and modest persona mask an ability to ask for - and ultimately, to receive - what she wants. As a bride, she is for the most part submissive, but she asks Bertram directly for a physical token of love, a kiss (II.v.86). And after they have actually made love, she remarks on the strangeness of being embraced as another woman (Diana, who Bertram thinks he's making love to), but also recalls Bertram's "sweet use" and "play" in bed (IV.iv.21- 25).

Helena's most elaborate plotting is required for the so-called "bed-trick." When Bertram vows never to return home as long as Helena is there, she decides to leave Rossillion - "I will be gone. / My being here it is that holds thee hence" (III.ii.122- 23). Helena goes on pilgrimage, and again the very humility of her pose allows her to take control of her situation. She meets a Florentine widow and her daughter, Diana, and without revealing her identity at first, encourages their sympathy for the plight of the young Bertram's wife, whom he has left behind.

Bertram then woos Diana, who gets his ring off his finger, and then arranges to meet him at night. Helena meets him instead. She then promulgates the rumor of her own

death, so that Bertram will think it safe to go home. The three women travel to Rossillion, where, in a climactic final scene, they reveal Bertram's broken vows, Diana's "cozening," and Helena's bed-trick. Helena's pretended death is yet another example of her ability to take control by suppressing or humbling herself. Her appearance in the final scene causes great drama. She calls herself "but the shadow of a wife" (V.iii.307), prompting Bertram's plea for her pardon and promise to love her ever dearly.

The character of Helena is at the center of the play. But it is unconventional to have a woman heroine who controls all the action, and Helena does so by contradictory means: she is at once quite deliberate and gentle-womanly and humble as well. Although she gets what she wants in the end, the rapidity with which Bertram has made and broken promises, especially in the last scene, call into question the value of his promises to her. The king barely retains control of the court scene, and Helena herself does not speak much after her appearance.

Moreover, the same action that began the central conflict is about to be repeated: the king offers Diana to choose a husband from among his lords as well.

King of France:

See France

Lafew:

Lafew is an old lord in the countess of Rossillion's court. Like the countess herself, Lafew supports Helena in her desire to marry Bertram, in spite of Helena's low birth. Lafew accompanies Bertram to the king's court, as his advisor. He acts as a moral guide, but his judgements go largely unheeded by the callow Bertram.

Lafew's role first comes to the fore when, at the king's court in Paris, he convinces the king to listen to Helena's offer of a cure. Lafew and the king seem to share a past, or at least a set of social conventions, that enable them to behave familiarly with each other: Lafew even teases the king a bit (II.i.64-65). Furthermore, the old lord's support for Helena becomes clear at this point in the play. He has thus been established as a character whose judgment and integrity can be trusted. He comments on the scene as Helena chooses her husband from among the king's lords (II.iii). The lords respond with apparent acceptance of her, but Lafew seems to think they disdain her, either because, critics explain, he is out of earshot or because the lords are responding ironically. But Lafew is on the side of Helena.

Lafew is also an index to the outrageousness of Parolles's behavior. When Lafew a n d Parolles discuss the king's recovery, Parolles says nothing of substance while Lafew fills in meaningful and gracious responses (II.iii. 1-37). After Bertram has been forced to marry Helena, Lafew refers to Bertram as Parolles's "master" (II.iii.186), to which the young lord takes offense. Parolles then insults Lafew, calling him "too old" (II.iii. 196). The two of them then engage in a direct and hostile confrontation, in which Lafew

exposes Parolles for what he is: a court hanger-on, a parasite, and a fake, one who claims to be better traveled than he is and more gentlemanly than he is, and who insults his superiors (II.iii.257). Lafew warns Bertram not to trust Parolles (II.v.44), indirectly setting in motion the trick by which Bertram tests Parolles later in the play. At the end, though, when Parolles has been exposed as a liar and begs Lafew for help, the old lord is characteristically generous: in spite of his lack of respect for the man, Lafew tells him, "Though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat" (V.ii.53-54).

After Bertram runs away from the French court, Lafew returns to Rossillion, where he is when the countess hears the false news of Helena's death. Lafew banters with the clown a bit, though without the relish that the countess has for this activity; he calls the clown "a shrewd knave and an unhappy" (IV.v.63), suggesting a certain unpleasantness. But his interchange with the countess, like that with the king, is based upon both intimacy and shared standards of polite and gracious behavior, so his criticism of the clown is quickly smoothed over ("'tis not amiss," he says [IV.v.68]). He then asks the countess to arrange for her son to marry his own daughter - even knowing Bertram's faults. There is a kind of idealism to this act, as though Lafew hopes in spite of everything that a marriage bond will cement the court community. Nevertheless, like the countess herself, Lafew acts with undue haste, and when Bertram's misbehavior begins to be fully revealed, Lafew retracts his offer: "Your reputation comes too short for my daughter" (V.iii.176). Still, the old lord retains his idealism at the end. When Bertram finally accepts Helena as his wife, Lafew starts to cry.

Lavatch:

Lavatch, the countess's clown, is a so-called "allowed fool": that is, he can get away with making jokes about al kinds of sensitive topics because he is always only joking. His main function in the play is to entertain and bear messages for the countess, but he also comments indirectly on much of the action - especially the conflicts about sexuality and class that the play struggles to come to terms with.

Lavatch first appears in I.iii, where he makes a mock request to marry one "Isbel." His main reason for marrying is that he is "driven on by the flesh" (I.iii.29). But soon after this request, he goes on to argue that the fear of being cuckolded, or betrayed, makes men reluctant to marry (I.iii.49- 51). In raising these issues, the clown highlights the concerns of both Helena and Bertram: desire to marry, and fear of marriage. The clown's image of marriage as sexual play makes Helena's fairy-tale image of marriage look idealistic and even innocent. Later in the play, Lavatch makes light of the values that define court behavior when he says to the countess, "Ask me if I am a courtier" (II.ii.36). When she does, he answers with complete evasion, parodying a courtier desperate not to offend his lord. The countess is so entertained that she doesn't notice time passing. But Lavatch has highlighted the class conflicts in the play - the degree to which the lower-born characters like Helena are depend ent upon the nobility, and also the potential that those protected by the nobility can become empty, parasitical creatures, like Parolles. In fact, he makes fun of Parolles directly: "To say nothing, to do nothing, to know nothing, and to have nothing, is to be a great part of your title" (II.iv.24-

27). Parolles gives no indication of being entertained by this, unlike the countess, whose social status makes her safer from mockery.

Lavatch's role as messenger makes him intimately involved in the affairs he comments on, but although he can be blunt he is not ruthless. He bears a letter from the countess to Helena shortly after Helena has married Bertram. When the clown returns to Rossillion, he bears the countess a letter from Bertram; even before she opens it, the clown seeks to warn her of its contents by telling her Bertram seemed "melancholy" (III.ii.4) and talking about his own supposed marriage to Isbel, which he now has lost the stomach for. When he hears that Bertram has run of to Italy, he seems reluctant to hear the bad news and exits (III.ii.44). Lavatch's final appearance is to announce Parolles to Lafew, when he makes fun of the humiliated courtier uncompromisingly, calling him a "poor, decay'd, ingenious, foolish, rascally knave" (V.ii.23- 24), but then says he pities him nevertheless. Lavatch is absent from the play's final scene, an occasion full of such disorder that his disorderly voice is not needed.

Lords:

See French Lords

Mariana:

Mariana is a neighbor of the widow in Florence. She appears only once (III.v).

Page:

A page interrupts Parolles's banter with Helena in the first scene to announce that Bertram is waiting for him.

Parolles:

Parolles is Bertram's friend and a hanger-on at court who insults Helena, offends Lafew, encourages the count to flee from his marriage, and is finally tricked into revealing his true colors when Bertram and two French lords capture him and pretend to be enemy soldiers. He is thus a kind of scapegoat, and suffers exclusion from the court, but only temporarily; by the end of the play Lafew has promised not to let him starve.

Even before his downfall, many of the other characters in the play recognize Parolles as a threat to the moral order of society. Helena says she speaks to Parolles only for the sake of Bertram, whose friend he is, and that he is "a notorious liar, / ... soly a coward" (Li. 100-01). The clown Lavatch calls him a fool (II.iv.35). The countess calls him "A very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness" (III.ii.87). One of the French lords tells Bertram, "he's a most notable coward, an infinite and endless liar, an hourly promise-breaker, the owner of no one good quality worthy your lordship's entertainment (III.vi.9-12). In fact,

many of the other characters call attention to the influence of Parolles on Bertram. The countess blames Parolles for Bertram's rejection of Helena (III.ii.88). Diana says that Parolles leads him astray - "Yond's that same knave / That leads him to these places" (III.v.82-83). And the French lords urge Bertram to plot against his friend in order to avert danger to himself: "It were fit you knew him, lest reposing too far in his virtue, which he hath not, he might at some great and trusty business in a main danger fail you" (III.vi. 13-16). That is, the lords warn Bertram not to put his own life in Parolles's hands during the Italian wars. Yet although Parolles certainly encourages Bertram's flight from his forced marriage, the play does not make clear that Parolles is really to blame for Bertram's actions. Indeed, the plot against Parolles diverts attention away from Bertram; Parolles thus acts as a scapegoat, receiving punishment while his friend goes unpunished.

Parolles does not end up reformed, but he is forced to admit his own folly: he says he is a braggart and an ass (IV.iii.336). In fact, the French lords trick him in the hope of reforming not the corrupt courtier but the count himself. They want Bertram to understand Parolles's corruption in order to see his own unethical conduct more clearly: 'I would gladly have him se his company anatomiz'd, that he might take a measure of his own judgments" (IV.iii.31-34), says one of the lords. Bertram does finally recognize Parolles's faults, but never says anything about his own.

Parolles's punishment is that he is blindfolded and questioned about his own fellow soldiers. His interrogators are the French lords and Bertram, who pretend to be enemy soldiers. They essentially force him to betray themselves - especially Bertram. Although Parolles's accounts of the two lords are insulting, his description of Bertram is all the more pointed because it has been shown to be true. The lords read aloud a letter Parolles wrote warning Diana of Bertram's less than trustworthy intentions: "the Count's a fool, I know it" (IV.iii.229), he has written. This letter reveals not only that Parolles betrayed the count even before he was "captured," but also that Parolles sees clearly the count's vices and has nonetheless encouraged them. Bertram responds angrily to hearing the letter read aloud, but gives no acknowledgment of his own vice. Although Parolles is looked down upon and condemned by almost everyone else in the play, he at least has the insight to warn Diana about the count. "Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live" (IV.iii.333-34), he says - that is, he will continue to survive by being a braggart and an ass. Parolles might not be a virtuous character, but he emerges as somewhat more self-aware than his friend the count. And because he undergoes such elaborate humiliation, it is also possible to treat him - as does Lafew - with a bit of sympathy.

Rinaldo:

Rinaldo is the countess's steward. He overhears Helena declaring her love for Bertram, and reports it to the countess (I.iii). Later, he delivers Helena's announcement of her departure on pilgrimage, but too late for the countess to be able to stop her (III.iv).

Rossillion (Count of Rossillion):

See Bertram

Rossillion (Countess of Rossillion):

The countess of Rossillion is the mother of Bertram, the count of Rossillion. The countess also protects Helena, the daughter of a physician who recently passed away. When Helena marries Bertram, the countess supports her against her son. But when Helena is rumored to be dead, the countess agrees quickly to marry off Bertram to someone else. The countess represents established courtly conventions and morals in the play; she is, like Lafew and the king, of the older, more powerful generation. Yet throughout the play, she watches as events unfold before her, without her control.

As the play opens, the countess bids goodbye to Bertram, who is on his way to the king of France's court. Here she praises her son, but calls him an "unseason'd courtier" (I.i.71). Later, the countess banters with the clown, Lavatch, who makes jokes about marriage and cuckoldry and sings her a song about the end of Troy. Then the countess's steward confirms her suspicion that Helena is in love with Bertram, and the countess confronts Helena with her knowledge. To Helena's surprise, the countess offers her blessing, in spite of the fact that Helena is low-born, and sends her on her way to the king of France's court. The countess's generosity and open-minded acceptance of Helena as her potential daugh ter- in-law flies in the face of comic conventions. Usually, in comedy, the older generation blocks the love of the younger generation, and the younger characters find ways to trick or play their ways into desirable marriages. The bond between the countess and Helena is also unusual in Shakespearean come dy: although bonds between women certainly occur elsewhere, they rarely take center stage.

Even after Helen has left, the countess sends her letters and looks after her as much as he can from afar. When Helena returns to Rossillion in the hope that Bertram will soon meet her there (II.ii), both the countess and Helena receive letters from the young count saying that he will never accept her as his wife. The two letters work together, like two halves of a whole, to indicate both his whereabouts and the impossible task he sets for Helena. The bond between the two women is cemented at this point, for the countess disowns her son: "I do wash his name out of my blood, / And thou art all my child" (III.ii.67-68). He may be off to the wars, but battleground heroics will, she says, never win him enough honor to make up for what he has done to Helena (III.ii.93-94). Helena herself, however, leaves Rossillion and the countess in the next scene. It rapidly becomes clear that the countess has not in fact disowned her son at all, but holds out hope for him. She bids her steward write to both Helena and Bertram, in the hopes both will come home, for she cannot tell "Which of them both / Is dearest to me" (III.iv.38-39).

When the countess next appears, she believes Helena to be dead, and she speaks of her "rooted love" for the young woman (IV.v.12). Yet she rapidly consents to arrange Bertram's marriage to another woman, the daughter of her lord Lafew. In the final scene,

when Bertram returns to Rossillion and the king arrives there as well, the countess begs the king to forgive her son. Yet as soon as Bertram's integrity comes under question again - because of his mysterious ring - the countess recalls having seen the ring on Helena's finger (V.iii.90). She is also ready to believe Diana. Throughout the play, the countess's love for her son is at war with her own set of values and morality. She can thus be read as a somewhat rash and inconstant, but well-meaning mother, or as a standard-bearer for the courtly values of gentility and generosity that characterize her generation.

Soldiers:

Soldiers aid in the humiliation of Parolles in IV.i and IV.iii.

Violenta:

Violenta is a neighbor of the widow in Florence. She appears only once (III.v).

Widow:

The widow is Diana's mother, and one of Helena's principal helpers in the plot to win Bertram's acceptance. She greets Helena (who is disguised as a pilgrim) with friendliness and gossiping, and with ready sympathy for the plight of Bertram's wife, even before she knows that Helena is his wife (III.v.66-68). Helena lodges with her in Florence, and later confides in her. The widow does not want to engage in any "staining act" (III.vii.7), but she willingly consents to help in the "deceit so lawful" (III.vii.38) that will bring Bertram to Helena's bed. The widow then travels with Diana and Helena, first to the king's court at Paris and then, when he is not there, to the court at Rossillion. She describes herself as "well born" (III.vii.4) and respectable even though she has little money and makes her living taking boarders. Therefore the prospect of a dowry and an aristocratic marriage for her daughter is appealing. But the widow is not purely selfish in her motives - she also helps uphold the virtue of Helena's desires.

Character Studies

Helena

Helena is usually considered the central figure in the play, and all of the topics discussed above (gender issues/ desire, bed-trick! marriage, social class, and endings; see these sections above and below for more extended commentary) have direct bearing on her character. As the heroine of *All's Well That Ends Well* Helena is often described by her admiring commentators as noble, virtuous, honorable, and regenerative, and by her detractors as obsessive, degraded, or narrow-minded. Her single-minded quest to wed Bertram and her actions thereafter inspire and inform these assessments of her. Most critics fall in between strict admiration or abhorrence of her, finding her a complex character.

Those commentators who unequivocally admire her find her guiltless in plotting to wed Bertram and in fulfilling the terms of his letter through the bed-trick One critic even refers to her as a "genius." Scholars who are decidedly critical of her character find her obsessed by sexual passion and an example of noble womanhood degraded, using her abilities as a "huntress" to realize her plans for a union with Bertram with no thought of their consequences to others (primarily Diana).

Most critics, however, see Helena as a many-sided character. Several critics have noted her regenerative and restorative powers. She is the key to restoring a kingdom whose noble elders are dying with no honorable replacements. Helena heals the king, restoring the kingdom at least for a time, and saves Bertram (and Diana) from making what would have been a mistake of lifelong regret. She is pregnant at the end of the play, symbolically the provider of a restorative new generation of nobility. Other critics have noted her embodiment of both "feminine" passivity and "masculine" activity. She is the desiring subject (the pursuer of Bertram), yet she longs to be the desired object (pursued by Bertram).

Bertram

Commentators are similarly divided regarding the character of Bertram as they are with Helena. Most agree that he is decidedly immature and full of shortcomings, but while some critics find him thoroughly sincere and repentant by the end of the play and thus worthy of the honorable Helena, others find this turnaround in his character implausible and false. (See "Endings" above and below.)

Critics who argue that Bertram has truly repented by the end of the play suggest that it is his immaturity and desire for "life experience" that cause him to reject Helena. Elizabethan audiences, they argue, would find his wanting to go to war and earn his honor on the battlefield entirely normal and, in fact, laudable. His inability to *see* through Parolles and recognize him for what he is until Parolles's true nature is shown to him is

thus attributed to Bertram's inexperience. Those scholars who find him entirely despicable and without merit conclude that his acceptance of Helena in the final scene of the play is one calculated to save his neck, as he finds himself backed into a comer with all the evidence (Helena, Diana, and Parolles all "testify" against him) stacked against him. A few critics abstain from roundly praising or condemning Bertram, offering other ways to interpret his character.

Parolles

Most Critics tend to roundly praise Shakespeare for his creation of Parolles, a character not included in Boccaccio's version of the tale, whether they like him or not. He appears in thirteen of the play's twenty-three scenes, and some critics consider the scene of his unmasking (the longest scene in the play) as the structural center of the play (since the critical scene of the bed-trick occurs offstage). Parolles is responsible for most of the laughter (albeit scant) in the play, and although he is generally regarded as a liar, a coward, crude, foppish, and lacking in honor and principle, he is essential to understanding the play. Critics agree that Parolles is aware of his baseness- he possesses self-knowledge, unlike Bertram- and never has any intention of changing, even after he is exposed as a liar and traitor. He is actually grateful for his exposure- he is released from his life of pretending.

Conclusion

There is no definitive answer as to whether *All's Well That Ends Well* truly does end well, and the question will likely continue to be debated as new interpretations of the characters of Helena and Bertram appear, as they are integral in any interpretation of the ending. The play ends "properly," as a comedy should, with the hero and heroine reunited, but most modem critics tend to view their future beyond this momentary reunion as uncertain. Central to this debate is whether the gender role reversal experienced by Helena and Bertram is ultimately resolved as Helena assumes her proper "feminine," passive role, and Bertram his "masculine" active one, and whether the desires of the two main characters will be realized in their union, which has been achieved through the deception of the bedtrick.

Themes

Gender Issues/Desire

Commentary on the issues of gender and desire necessarily centers on the character of Helena, although some mention of Bertram is warranted as he is directly involved in what some critics call the reversal of gender roles in the play. More recent critics focus less on whether Helena was justified in her actions- bartering with the King to gain Bertram as a husband, following Bertram to Italy, engaging Diana in the bed-trick to fulfill Bertram's otherwise impossible conditions and thus tricking him- and instead confront such issues as Helena as subject rather than object, as desiring rather than desired, as pursuer rather than pursued, and she embodies both activity and her passivity.

Several critics note the similarity between the masculine quest-romance or the theme of the knight-errant and the plot of *All's Well That Ends* Well, only in the latter the initiator of action, the savior, the hero, is a woman. Helena possesses the knowledge and skill to influence events and other characters and thus is able to secure Bertram as a husband. However, she cannot force him to love her, and his repudiation of her necessitates her pursuing an alternate plan of action. Some critics note that Helena's active role, her ability to go out and get what she wants (Bertram), is motivated only by physical, sexual desire. Others excuse her perhaps unorthodox means of fulfilling Bertram's conditions because they were created with the intent of being impossible to fulfill and because she had no other recourse after having been publicly humiliated by Bertram.

Some commentary takes note of the dual nature of Helena's character- she has elements of both the "traditional," passive female character and the more "masculine" active character. Helena, as desiring subject, sets out to gain Bertram for a husband by curing the King. Yet when it comes time for her to select a husband as payment for curing the King, she emphasizes her low social status and how unworthy she is. When Bertram rejects her and humiliates her in front of the entire court, she retracts her choice. When Bertram leaves her to go the wars in Italy, for a time she passively sits at home and then wanders off as a pilgrim so that Bertram can remain unfettered. Even when Bertram sends the letter with the conditions of his acceptance of her as his wife, conditions that he believes she could never fulfill, Helena is not angered but takes pity on him instead, noting how she "stole" rank by marrying him. Finally, once Helena has completed the tasks Bertram required of her and he takes her as his wife, she is satisfied with the role of wife and mother.

Bed-trick/Marriage

The issue of the bed-trick in *All's Well That Ends Well* pervades much of the commentary on the play and necessarily intersects with any discussion of marriage. Commentators tend to focus on whether Helena's use of the bed-trick is justified and

lawful and whether it provides a means for a satisfactory ending to the play. Critics who believe Helena's switching places with Diana is justified and warranted argue that as Bertram's wife, Helena had every right to take Diana's place and consummate their marriage, thus saving both Diana and Bertram from dishonor. Helena saves a virgin maiden from what would have been a grave mistake, and she keeps Bertram from committing what would have been an unlawful act of adultery. By thus "saving" Bertram, and, as a result, securing his ring and carrying his child, Helena is an agent in restoring the dying kingdom. Those who find Helena's actions unlawful note that Helena is in actuality encouraging Bertram to engage in an act of adultery (even though Helena knows that what she is doing is technically lawful). They note that although Helena satisfactorily fulfills Bertram's requirements in his letter, this does not necessarily dictate a happy ending, since their sexual union was based on deception.

Social Class

Commentators on the element of social class in *All's Well That Ends Well* generally remark on this issue within the context of the relationship between Helena and Bertram. Helena, we are told early on in the play, possesses "true" nobility and honor, which cannot be obtained by birth. Bertram, though born with wealth and status, has no nobility or honor to speak of. The noble and honorable "older generation," represented by the King, the Countess, and Lafeu, recognize Helena's virtues and Bertram's lack of them. Thus the King orders Bertram to marry Helena when he initially refuses to do so.

A few commentators have noted that wealth and rank actually mean little to either Helena or Bertram. Helena wants Bertram, not his money, and Bertram wants his freedom, not a marriage to a woman everyone considers noble and virtuous, the daughter of an esteemed physician. If Bertram were truly in pursuit of great rank, he would have accepted Helena, whom the King has endowed with wealth to make her Bertram's equal (although a few critics note that this is actually unnecessary, for Helena's fine qualities erase the social gap between her and Bertram). Bertram also would not engage in a friendship with Parolles, a man of notably low birth and, worse, base and vile qualities.

Endings

Commentary regarding the ending of *All's Well That Ends Well* usually centers on whether all really does "end well." Most modem critics conclude that the ending is unsatisfactory and unconvincing, even though it provides the required comedic resolution whereby the hero and heroine are joined at last. Early commentators, however, tended to have less trouble accepting the abrupt ending and argued that Elizabethan audiences would not have found the ending lacking.

Of those critics who find the ending poorly done, one has argued that Shakespeare's interest in the character of Helena waned when she had succeeded in securing Bertram, and he proceeded to a hasty closing scene. Several critics find it difficult to

believe that only happiness lies ahead for Helena and Bertram, especially when there is no apparent change of heart or character in Bertram and his acknowledgment of her as his wife takes place in half a line.

Modern Connections

All's Well That Ends Well focuses on what makes a marriage work. Helena is in love with Bertram from the very beginning of the play, and although she recognizes that her class status makes her an inappropriate match, she seeks to marry him anyway. In modern day America, marriage across classes is a common enough affair, so that Helena's low-born status may seem a superficial reason for Bertram's refusal of her. Certainly, the play makes Bertram himself into a superficial, vain, and arrogant young nobleman. But the class difference between the two is significant to Bertram, Helena, and the society in which they live. What other barriers, in addition to class distinction, exist in our own society?

When Helena wins Bertram in marriage, it is as though the play reaches a fairy-tale ending to soon. She has her Prince Charming, but he is not charming at all: "A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (II.iii.l 15- 16). What follows is an exploration of the meaning and value of their marriage. Bertram's challenge to her is to get a ring from his finger and bear his child, as though he believes that these are the elements that constitute the true marriage bond. Helena, on the other hand, begs a kiss from him (II.v.86), and later talks about how pleasurable their experience was in bed (IV.iv.21). Physical desire is a vital element of the bond for her. But she also behaves submissively when he tells her to return without him to Rossillion (II.v): to Helena, being a wife means fulfilling the duties of obedience and even servitude. By the end, she apparently wins Bertram's submission as well. When she comes back from the dead, his response is to beg her pardon, and promise to love her "dearly, ever ever dearly" (V.iii.316). Different ideas about the meaning of the marriage bond are evident even today. Although the traditional Christian ritual includes a promise to "honor and obey" each other, some couples prefer not to promise obedience. Marriage and family mean different things to different people. For instance the current argument about whether gay people can get married legally in America raises the question of how people define marriage. The issue is no simpler today than it was in Shakespeare's time.

All's Well That Ends Well has been called a "problem play" because it fails to fulfill conventions in a number of different ways. Even its title serves as an ironic comment on the play: all may seem to end well, but whether or not all is truly well in the end remains open to question. Although the play has the happy ending of a typical comedy, Bertram's humble acceptance occurs so abruptly and seems so out of character that the happy ending seems, at best, unrealistic. Other comic conventions a r e changed, reversed, or simply ignored. In comedy, marriages generally occur at the end, and marriages are generally based on mutual love. In *All's Well,* the marriage occurs near the beginning, and is even consummated in the course of the play, but it is never based on mutual love. In comedy, the older generation typically blocks the happiness of the younger generation by objecting to the younger characters' love affairs. In *All's Well,* the older generation supports Helena's love for Bertram, and it is the younger generation□Parolles and Bertram himself□who block the marriage. The younger generation holds onto the value of class difference much more tightly than the older

characters, who value Helena for her noble conduct and do not condemn her for her low-born status. Thus *All's Well That Ends Well* resembles a sitcom that doesn't even try to be funny, or a TV drama that refuses to be a tear-jerker. The genre or category of sitcom makes an audience expect certain conventional material like jokes; the genre of TV drama makes an audience expect conventional emotional appeals. When these conventions are not fulfilled, the audience's expectations are left hanging awkwardly.

A central element of the unconventional plot of *All's Well That Ends Well* is the female heroine. Seldom does a female character in Shakespeare's plays hold the stage as fully as does Helena; seldom does the will of a female character guide nearly al the action and seldom is that will fulfilled with such drama in the end. Helena behaves with an apparent meekness and propriety throughout the play. She keeps her love secret initially, and is embarrassed when the countess confronts her about it (I.iii). She does not force her cure on the king (II.i. 125-28). Once she has married Bertram, she behaves meekly. But Helena nevertheless insists on getting what she wants in the end.

Overviews

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7
- Critical Essay #8
- Critical Essay #9

Critical Essay #1

Source: "All's Well That Ends Well," in *The Riverside Shakespeare,* edited by J. J. M. Tobin, Herschel Baker, and G. Blakemore Evans, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997, pp. 499-503.

[In this brief essay Barton postulates that the plot if All's Well That Ends Well *was nothing out of the ordinary in its day- similar folk motifs and story elements could be found in the literature if other languages and in literature of the past. Barton demonstrates haw Shakespeare's All's Well That Ends Well was strongly influenced by an English translation of Boccaccio's story if Giletta if Narbona in his Decameron, noting the similarities and especially the differences between Helena and Giletta and Bertram and Beltramo. Barton also discusses the play's nostalgia for the past and the notion if honor as they pertain to the play's main characters.]*

The plot of *All's Well That Ends Well* is a tissue of traditional folk motifs. The story of the abandoned wife who performs a seemingly impossible series of tasks in order to regain her husband is at least as old as the myth of Eros and Psyche. It has analogues in many of the literatures of the world. The hero or heroine who achieves great good fortune by knowing how to cure the sickness of the king when everyone else has failed, the bed-trick, the exchange of rings, and the association of virginity with magical power are all story elements with reverberations originating far back in the past. In shaping them into a dramatic plot, Shakespeare was strongly influenced by the story of Giletta of Narbona, told as the ninth story of the third day in Boccaccio's *Decameron* It is possible that he read the Italian original, but his chief source was probably the English translation, in William Painter's collection *The Palace if Pleasure* (1566-67, 1575).

Giletta of Narbona is the daughter of a wealthy and celebrated physician. She falls in love with Beltramo, the only son of the noble count by whom her father is employed. The count dies and Beltramo goes to Paris as a ward of the French king, who is suffering from an apparently incurable disease. When Giletta's own father also dies, she follows Beltramo to Paris, heals the king with the help of a remedy she has inherited, and then claims Beltramo as her reward. Beltramo himself is horrified by the idea, and even the king is reluctant to agree to a marriage so unequal. He keeps his word to Giletta, however, and Beltramo is forced to yield. Immediately after the wedding, Beltramo flees to Italy and enters the service of the Florentines against the Sienese. Giletta, an unhappy virgin wife, remains for a time in Rossiglione, where she wins the love and respect of all her husband's subjects. Hearing, however, of Beltramo's bitter jest, that he would consent to live with his wife when she possessed herself of a ring from which he was never parted and came to him with their son in her arms, conditions impossible (as he thought) to fulfill, she disguises herself as a pilgrim and journeys to Florence. There, discovering that Beltramo is paying court to the daughter of an impoverished gentlewoman of the city, she persuades the two women to help her. The daughter exacts Beltramo's ring as the price of her surrender, and Giletta then, for some time, secretly supplies her place in Beltramo's bed. When she is sure she is pregnant, she puts an end to these nocturnal meetings, rewards the gentlewoman and her

daughter, and sends them out of Florence. Beltramo returns to Rossiglione where, some time later, Giletta suddenly appears to confront him with the ring and twin sons so like their father that Beltramo cannot help but recognize them as his own. All the courtiers and ladies of Rossiglione plead that Giletta should be accepted, and Beltramo, "perceiving her constant mind and good wit, and the two fair young boys," gladly agrees: he sets up a great feast and "from that time forth he loved and honored her as his dear spouse and wife."

As told by Boccaccio and Painter, this story has a simple shape and a clarity which are satisfying and wholly unproblematic. Everyone, even the king, is agreed at the beginning that Giletta, though wealthy, is too low- born to be Countess of Rossiglione. In her first attempt, made as the physician's daughter, she fails to win anything more than the outward appearance of rank. Subsequently, while administering Beltramo's estates, and then in Florence, she demonstrates an innate aristocracy of wit and enterprise so compelling that it annihilates the class barrier. She wins over Beltramo's household and subjects, then Beltramo himself, through sheer intellect and resourcefulness. No one in the story blames Beltramo for his initial repudiation. The king forced him into a demeaning marriage, and it rests entirely with Giletta to prove by her "diligence" that there might be something to recommend such a misalliance after all. It is true that the reader wants Giletta to succeed, but no blame attaches itself to Beltramo for being hard to persuade. Only through sheer intelligence, and by demonstrating that she can give her husband sons who inherit his face as well as his name, can Giletta make herself Beltramo's equal, his wife in fact and not in law only.

As usual, Shakespeare greatly compressed the timespan of Boccaccio's story, reducing it to a more manageably dramatic compass. He also made some significant changes in the situation and characters of the two protagonists. Helena, unlike Giletta, is poor as well as low-born, and she lacks the total self-sufficiency and some of the cunning of her prototype. Bertram, her reluctant husband, stands convicted of faults considerably more damning than Beltramo's aristocratic pride. He is callow and insensitive, a lecher, an oath-breaker, and a liar, who not only misprizes Helena but makes other serious mistakes of judgment as well. Shakespeare also added four major characters for whom there were no equivalents in his source; the old Countess of Rossillion, Lafew, Parolles, and the fool Lavatch. All four have one thing in common: they operate in their different ways, throughout the comedy, to raise Helena in our estimation and to degrade Bertram. The play that results has sacrificed the simplicity and clear emotional emphasis of the folk-tale from which it derives. Indeed it seems positively to stress the incompatibility between characters who are sophisticated and complex and a plot which is neither of these things. Like its successor *Measure far Measure, All's Well That Ends Well* often seems to be questioning its own story material and, particularly in the final scene, to look ironically at its own title and at the very nature of comedy.

It is virtually axiomatic in comedy since the time of Menander that when a young man or woman wishes to marry purely for love, overleaping disparities of birth, wealth, and position, the older generation represented by fathers, mothers, uncles, and guardians will strenuously oppose such an attempted infringement of the laws of established society. *All's Well That Ends Well,* with no help whatever from its source, insists upon

inverting this pattern. Boccaccio's king, though grateful for his cure, did not relish bestowing Beltramo upon a rich physician's daughter. Shakespeare's King, by contrast, is warmly approving of the match, even though Helena, unlike Giletta, is not only a commoner but poor. The old lord Lafew, the most eminent of the King's courtiers, also adopts the attitude that nothing can be too good for her. Most surprising of all, the old Countess of Rossillion, Bertram's mother, greets the news that her only son has been married to her waiting gentlewoman with unfeigned delight. In this play it is the old who are generous and flexible in their social attitudes while the young- Bertram, Parolles, and (according to one view) the young lords whose constraint and inner fear at the prospect of being chosen by Helena are mocked by Lafew- tend to be class-conscious snobs.

All's Well That Ends Well is a play filled with nostalgia for the past, concerned to evoke the remembrance of better times. Rossillion, where the action begins and ends, is an almost Chekhovian backwater, elegiac and autumnal, a world preserved in amber. It derives its character chiefly from the old Countess, from the shrewd and "unhappy" fool favored by her late husband, and from memories of the dead: Bertram's father, or that wonder-working physician Gerard de Narbon whose skill, ultimately, was not proof against his own An often overlooked marker of Helena's control is her curious post-coital detention of Bertram. "When you have conquer'd my yet maiden bed," Diana says on Helena's beha1f, "Remain there but an hour, nor speak to me" (4.2.57-58). What, one must ask, is the point of this detention? What takes place during that hour? Does the dilation of the trick create a space for the operations of a less propulsively phallic, consumptive sexuality? Does it summon the freer, more resourceful and expansive processes of female desire? Certainly it seems that Bertram is being set up for something- but that something is never explicitly revealed. This ellipsis per haps offers yet another register of unrepresentable female desire which a staged bed-trick could represent. The staged bed-trick could, for example, begin with Diana's placing a blindfold on Bertram and yielding her place to Helena. The blindfold would not only provide a realistic explanation for Bertram's inability to distinguish her from Diana but also visually link him with his double, Parolles, who is likewise blindfolded and tricked in the very next scene. The blindfold would both deprive Bertram of the gaze and signify his blindness to the threat of castration that originally drove him away from Helena.

The principal strategy in staging the bed-trick would be to present a kind of suspended foreplay, Helena deflecting Bertram's propulsive, lust-driven energies into more dilatory, sensual rhythms, with Helena positioned as gazing subject and Bertram as gazed-upon object. Helena's masculine gaze, initially frustrated by her feminine powerlessness, would here operate freely and powerfully.

The play provides other possibilities for reinforcing such a gaze. Just as Diana, her mother, and Mariana all positioned themselves as spectators to the triumphal procession of soldiers in 3.5, with Diana sending forth her eye over the glistening combatants, one could turn Bertram's attempted seduction of Diana into a spectacle by positioning Helena, the Widow, and Mariana as spectators, concretizing the female frame of reference that contains the scene. Within this play- within-a-play, Diana acts the part of sexual tease, defamiliarizing the role of "the-girl-who-says-no-but-means-

yes" by exposing it as performative, presenting herse1f instead as "the-girl-who-says-yes- but-means-no." The concealed female audience also marks Bertram's incipient masculinity as performative: "My mother told me just how he would woo," exclaims Diana, *"As* if she sate in 's heart. She says all men / Have the like oaths" (4.2.69-71). Like Helena in her hyper feminine mode, Bertram enacts a culturally inscribed script without knowing it, affirming his kinship with "all men" by venting unctuous oaths and fulsome endearments in order to arrange a one-night stand. Since the play's audience not only watches Bertram's performance but also watches women watching it, the scene parallels that of Parolles's capture, in which concealed pranksters also watch their victim walk into a trap.

Even if the voyeurism and fetishism of this gaze reverse rather than overturn masculine-feminine polarities, the powerful position of gazing subject afforded Helena by the staged bed-trick would not only empower her desire but perhaps also momentarily free her from a process of representation that enables her consumption as sexual object. There are at least two scenes, in particular, that position Helena, the desiring subject, as desired object: her early skirmish with Parolles and her interview with the King. Performance could make clear the extent to which Parolles not only jests with Helena but also cheekily flirts with her, launching, behind the cover of licentious badinage, an assault on her own virginity. In the latter scene, performance could also emphasize the erotic arousal enveloped by magical incantation and miraculous faith healing. Some productions have, in fact, attempted to bring the scene's erotic undercurrents to the surface. In John Batton's 1967 production Helena was "a tease of a girl," titillating the King by sitting on his bed and fluffing up his pillows, and in Elijah Moshinsky's BBC version she was a very proper young woman whose provocation of the King culminating in a lingering, erotic kiss- seemed utterly unintentional. Barry Kyle, in his 1989 RSC production, apparently attempted both to accent the scene's eroticism and to *preserve* its mysticism: his Helena "kick[ed] off her shoes to perform a circling, energetic, sexually assertive, slightly fey dance," exuding an aura of "white witchery."

In both scenes Helena claims the only kind of female *power* available in a phallocentric economy by activating and frustrating male desire, "blow[ing] up" both Parolles and the King, making them swell with desire (1.1.118-26, esp. 118-19). Helena's active sexuality is discernible throughout the play but, beyond the space of the bed-trick, is constricted not only by internalized notions of normative femininity but also by the external operations of an objectifying gaze.

As befits Helena's status as desiring subject, the ultimate goal of her bed-trick seems to be that of "taming difference." In the immediate aftermath of the trick, she recoils from male lust and affirms Bertram's strangeness ("0, strange men, / That can such sweet use make of what they hate"). In the play's final scene, however, she emphasizes his kindness, a word that connotes kindredness as well as gentleness or generosity: "0 my good lord, when I was like this maid, / I found you wondrous kind" (5.3.309-10). Helena needs to claim Bertram as one of her kind, needs to create him in her own image- the same image she has sought doggedly to impose despite all his obstinate assertions of alien-ness. In the final scene, Helena tries to confirm Bertram in kindness by"crush[ing]" him "with a plot."

Helena avenges her earlier humiliation at Bertram's hands by orchestrating his *utter* ruin: he is censured, disgraced, and threatened with execution. She enacts a version of the romance-novel retributive fantasy, bringing Bertram to his knees- a posture he has, in fact, assumed in more than one production- abusing him in order to please him, positioning him to savor the bondage he initially abhorred. It appears that Helena schemes to rescue Bertram from the calamity she has herself created in order to elicit feelings of indebtedness conducive to capitulation. She depends on his feeling like the rescued sinner of the medieval morality plays to ensure her reception as savior and wife. Her strategy, which recalls Duke Vincentio's determination to make Isabella "heavenly comforts of despair" *(Measure far Mea. sure,* 4.3.110), appears to work: in penitently promising love and accepting her as wife, Bertram accepts transformation from beast to Prince Charming, at long last consenting to actualize her fantasy (5.3.315-16 and 308).

The success of Helena's plot does not, however, guarantee a successful marriage with Bertram, for it validates neither the sincerity of his conversion nor the seemliness of their union. Critics have lamented the paltriness of Bertram's conversion speech, but the problems with the play's final scene run much deeper. Since Bertram has twice before falsely professed admiration for Helena (2.3.167-73, 5.3.52-58), no words of his, no matter how eloquently or torrentially penitential, could ever suffice to confirm his sincerity. Nor, for that matter, could his actions. Even the most extravagant self-abasing gestures may simply be symptoms of feverish gratitude rather than of genuine conversion. Helena may be able to work up feelings in Bertram that simulate and even enable love but do not actually generate it. And of course Bertram may simply cunningly simulate a penitential swoon. In either case, Helena manipulates Bertram into affecting a kindness that he may quickly discontinue upon assuming his male prerogatives in marriage. Perhaps Bertram functions here as a male Kate - a seemingly tamed lout who performs the submissive role his dominant spouse has taught him, but who may, after all, only be performing. Since, in the play's second half, Helena's aim seems to shift from wedding Bertram to eliciting his desire, it may be that, for the second time in the play, her goal eludes her even as she appears to achieve it.

Moreover, Helena's success seems mitigated by not only the dubiousness of Bertram's conversion but also the dubiousness of her own objectives, her willingness to deliver herself unequivocally to normative femininity. Her dominance of Bertram ultimately enables her to submit to him in marriage. Ever in thrall to Bertram, she wins him only by putting him temporarily in her thrall so that she may put herself permanently in his. Although Helena's narrative dominates Bertram's and allows her to construct him as the Other out of whom she creates herself, at the same time her fundamental, culturally prescribed desire is to become the object of his desire, the Other out of whom he creates himself:

The end of the little girl's journey, if successful, will bring her to the place where the boy will find her, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting him, Prince Channing. For the boy has been promised, by the social contract he has entered into at his Oedipal phase, that he will find woman waiting at the end of his journey. Indeed, while Bertram mayor may not gratify Helena's fantasy, Helena seems 'prepared to embrace Bertram's.

His "impossible conditions" essentially ask for assurance that Helena can conceive a child without sexually contaminating herself or surrendering maternal purity. Bertram's apparent acceptance of Helena's success in meeting his conditions subjects them to a final reinterpretation: "I'll be your husband if you can have sex with me without shaming or emasculating me." Through the bed-trick Helena allows Bertram to fulfill his forbidden desire for her involuntarily, assimilating for his sake the seemingly unassimilable roles of wife and lover, mother and "real girl."

The finale of *All's Well* could be said to dramatize the amelioration of castration anxiety. Helena steps forward as the eroticized mother-figure of Bertram's dreams. Her resurrection at the play's end represents the final mystification of her own sexuality, an unthreatening eroticizing of the saintly guise she assumed for the pilgrimage. She replaces her own degraded double, rescuing and retiring the wayward desiring self that the beleaguered Diana personifies. Her pregnancy - that is, her status as mother - purifies the sexuality it affirms. It also ratifies Bertram's manhood, signaling his conquest of her, his success in "blowing her up." Moreover, given the belief circulating in Shakespeare's day that a woman could conceive only if she experienced an orgasm, Helena's pregnancy serves as the proof not only of his potency but also of her pleasure, of her satisfaction by him. The bed-trick thus becomes Bertram's initiation into manhood, with Helena serving as his initiator. This fact may simply mean that, in this world of absent fathers, no viable model of manhood exists for Bertram. His father's masculinity, as Bertram confronts it in 1.2, may be no more authentic than that of Parolles, for it is also derived from a performance, from the King's dramatic, deathbed celebration of the Count. The King constructs an exceptional figure, a hero/ courtier of fabulous proportions who seems partly a product of the King's intense nostalgia for a lost youth. Bertram is thus left with a choice between two equally fantastical images of manhood: the inaccessibly legendary and the ins1diously fashionable. In marrying Helena, Bertram finds his manhood affirmed through a reassuring maternal presence and gets what he may have wanted all along: a wife/lover! mother who allows him to become a man by remaining a boy.

The play's refusal to dissipate its tensions or substantiate its tentative resolutions leaves its drama of sexual difference suspended, arrested in an unresolved but provocative, even poignant tension. Helena's attempt to tame difference meets with uncertain success, and Bertram seems to reaffirm difference in the play's final moments, confronting a female strangeness that mystifies rather than repels. When he declares, "if she, my liege, can make me know this clearly" (5.3.315), the "this" he wishes to know surely encompasses a good deal more than the details of Helena's fulfillment of his conditions: it must include the mystery of female otherness. The body Bertram used and discarded returns in the person of a would be wife, a once and future lover, to claim him like an avenging spirit. Helena brings him, however obscurely, new knowledge of female sexuality, offering tantalizing allusions to their time in bed and visible proof of their mutual gratification. Bertram may wish to know more, to see the unseen wonders to which he was previously blind. Bertram's "this" becomes homologous with Helena's "there," suggesting that the performance of sex has possibly solved his problem with sexuality. Yet this solution and the knowledge it assumes are simply intriguing

possibilities. As the play ends, Helena and her body remain unknown and perhaps unknowable to Bertram - objects of fascination, further knowledge, perhaps even desire.

Helena remains a mystery to be solved by the reader and spectator - and director and actor- as well. So too does Bertram. Both characters aim to ground themselves in genders that the play suggests are groundless- or at least unstable, fluid, performative. Neither manages to forge a stable identity or secure a clear destiny. Modern performance could underline Helena's and Bertram's status as subjects-in-process, active agents inextricably engaged with subjugating myths of gender. And a staged bed-trick, by fetishizing the male body and empowering a female gaze, could underline the instability of the genders that Helena and Bertram seek to stabilize, taking the play's provocative dramatization of difference to startling and invigorating lengths.

Critical Essay #2

Alice Shalvi and J. A. Bryant argue that since Helena is legally Bertram's wife, her use of the bed-trick is lawful. Bertram set before her impossible demands, and the bed-trick proves a useful and legal way of meeting those demands. Eileen Z. Cohen notes that the disguise of the bed-trick solidifies the marriage between Helena and Bertram, and Helena saves Bertram in the process. Shalvi adds Diana to the people whom Helena saves- she saves Diana's virtue as a virgin as well as Bertram from the shame of adultery.

Michael Shapiro, Maurice Charney, Julia Briggs, and Janet Adelman take a different approach toward the bed-trick, doubting its efficacy. Shapiro argues that although the bed-trick surely allows Helena to meet Bertram's demands, she is not convinced herself that her actions are entirely legal. Charney finds the substitution of one woman for another, as if all women are alike, unsavory. (According to Kenneth Muir, Helena is well aware of this.) Briggs argues that the "happy" ending 1S based on deception precipitated by the bed-trick, leaving the reader uncertain as to whether it is truly a "happy" one, although Helena's use of the bed-trick effects marriage by consummating it and allows Bertram to be redeemed. Adelman argues that, at its core, a bed-trick is a trick after all, and clearly Bertram is desirous of Diana not Helena. Thus Adelman concludes that the ending of the play is tenuous at best.

Margaret Loftus Ranald and Katharine Eisaman Maus provide commentary on the institution of marriage in Elizabethan England. Ranald notes that although the marriage between Helena and Bertram is consummated by the bed-trick, this ensures the marriage's solubility. Had the trick not occurred, Bertram would have had recourse to annul the marriage, since it had not been consummated. If it had been Diana and not Helena in that bed, under Elizabethan law Bertram would have been bound to Diana, not Helena, because of his promises to Diana and his sexual union with her. Maus comments on the institutions of wardship and the bawdy courts and their influence in regulating marriage. The King's ability to dictate to Bertram that he must marry Helena was entirely in keeping with Elizabethan practice, according to Ranald and Hazelton Spencer. Mary Free argues that what makes the marriage between Bertram and Helena unique among Shakespearean comedies is Bertram's wholehearted rejection of Helena, and the trickery involved in mending the "broken nuptial' creates an unsatisfying resolution to the play.

J. Dennis Huston finds an example of a verbal bedtrick early on in the play, in Helena's discussion of virginity with Parolles. Instead of dismissing Parolles, who is roundly despised by everyone except Bertram, Helena instead engages in banter and double-entendres with Parolles. In this way she can get "closer" to Bertram and enter his world. Later, instead of merely talking about virginity, she will use her own virginity in her own bed-trick

Source: "'Virtue Is Bold': The Bed-trick and Characterization in *All's well That Ends well* and *Measure for Measure,"* in *Philological Quarterly,* Vol. 65, No.2, Spring, 1986, pp. 171-86.

[In the following excerpt, Cohen examines haw Helena and Isabella in, respectively, All's Well That Ends Well *and* Measure for Measure, *use the bed-trick as a disguise, and in doing so, these characters "reverse traditional female behavior, invert stereotypes, and turn apparent lechery into the serve of marriage.* "]

Western literature abounds in characters who have arranged bed-tricks- from Lot's daughters to insult, and by the seventeenth century the bed-substitution was a commonplace convention of English drama. Yet it is Shakespeare's use of the device in *All's well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* that disturbs us, doubt less because of the women who perpetrate it, Helena, a virgin-bride, and Isabella, a would-be nun. We seem unwilling to accept that Shakespeare deliberately intends to disrupt our sensibilities. Scholars have told us that we must accommodate ourselves to conventions or fairy tale traditions that are outmoded, or they call these heroines sluts, or saints and tell us to forget about the bed substitutions.

Shakespeare, however, does none of these. Instead, he requires us to believe that virtuous maidens can initiate and participate in the bed-trick He insists that it saves lives and nurtures marriage, that it leads the duped men out of ignorance and toward understanding, and that the women who orchestrate it end with a clearer image of themselves. Thus, we have a simple theatrical device that effects complex response in the characters and in us, the audience. The convention "deconventionalizes" and makes the world of each play and the characters therein more real. Paradoxically, a device associated with lust abets love and marriage; it utilizes illusion and deception to bring perception and understanding. In so doing, it strips away stock responses to the women who design the deception. Shakespeare apparently does not associate virtue in women with blindness or passivity- or even predictability. He will not allow the audience to generalize about female virtue. Given popular sixteenth-century attitudes towards women, Helena and Isabella must have been as disturbing to their original audience as they have been to subsequent ones, and the bed-trick, because of its ultimate affirmation of the complexity of virtue, just as jarring.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the controversy concerning women was part of the literary and social experience of the middle and upper classes of society. It surfaced in the *1540s* and again at the beginning of James I's reign, with reprintings of various pieces throughout these decades. What emerges from the debate, whether the writer was a critic or a defender of women, is that he or she rarely considers women except in the most general ways. Devil or angel, she is a stereotype. A flurry of popular pamphlets was precipitated by the publication of *Schole House of Women,* which went through four editions between 1541-1570, and is alluded to in several other pamphlets. Here, women are "loud and sour" (Aiii), gossipy (Aiv), adulterous (Bii), frail, crooked, crabbed, lewd (Cii), and weak and feeble in body (Cii). A female's function, because she is made of man's rib, "in every nede / Shulde be helpe to the man, in word and dede"

(Biii). There is a remedy for each of man's afflictions, except gout and marriage ([London: John Kyng, 1560], Biii).

Responses to this attack abound. Readers were assured that woman was not created out of dog bones, but from man- the crown of creation. There have been many good women, a fact to which the Bible, the classics, and their very own Queen attest. Anthony Gibson, in addition to cataloguing great women, ebulliently lists their virtues: Women are beautiful and their voices are soft (20). Since they are by nature inclined to sadness, they are wiser than men (21), and more charitable (30). Philip Stubbes, too, had a good word to say for virtuous women- or rather, a virtuous woman, in a eulogy to his dead wife, *A Christal Glasse far Christian Women* (London: R Ihones, 1592). He describes her as a perfect pattern for virtue: modest, courteous, gentle, and zealous for truth. (A2). "If she saw her husband merry, then she was merry: if he were sad, she was sad: if he were heavy or passionate, she would endeavor to make him glad: if he were angry, she would quickly please him so wifely she demeaned herselfe towards him" (A3). In both Stubbes and Gibson, the burden of virtue is as heavy as that of vice.

Very few of the writers in this controversy approach women as other than very good or very bad. Perhaps the most aggressive of those who do blur the stereotypic perceptions of both men and women is the author of *Jane Anger Her Protection far Women* (London: Richard Jones, 1589). "She" is less rigid than most of her contemporaries with regard to male and female characteristics. "Jane Anger" lowers the barriers between the sexes in that she does not say that women are necessarily more or less virtuous than men. Rather, she equalizes the sexes by suggesting that women pay men in just coin. "Deceitful men with guile must be repaid. . ." (B2). Woman's greatest fault is that she is too credulous (B2). Though "Jane Anger" still deals in stereotypes, she perceives the weaknesses and strengths of men and women in different ways from most of her contemporaries. She condemns men for failing to see women in terms of these strengths, "We being wel formed, are by them fouly deformed" (B3).

Even though many of these pieces are satiric and were probably written because there was a ready market for them, rather than out of sincere beliefs, their popularity indicates an interest in the nature of women and an insistence that their virtues were different from those of men. From these pages and more, there emerges an ideal woman in whom the virtues were chastity, patience, piety, humility, obedience, constancy, temperance, kindness, and fortitude- all passive characteristics. Even her supporters urged her to suppress assertiveness. The ideal male virtues were justice, courtesy, liberality, and courage. For a man the ideal was self-expansion and realization of self; for a woman, self-abnegation and passivity. For a man chastity was unimportant; for a woman it was everything. Her honor and reputation were defined in terms of it. The educator Vives frankly states, "As for a woman [she] hath no charge to se to, but her honestie and chastitie."

Helena and Isabella offer a marked contrast to many of the prevailing presumptions about women that the popular literature manifests, and in some ways a sharp difference from the portrayals of Rosalind and Viola, both in earlier plays. If art does hold a mirror up to nature, then Shakespeare's drama reflects, refracts, and re-focuses the ideas of

his time. In *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It,* the remover of affectation from the other characters is a woman, who for much of the play is disguised as a man. Necessarily, disguise was inherent in the role even before the play began since the woman was played by a male actor. But now the deception is double because we have a male actor, dressed as a woman, disguised as a man, and in the case of Rosalind, sometimes pretending to be a woman. Disguise, instead of conveying ambiguity, gives the audience distance from the characters, whose dialogue is now ironic and conveys double meanings. Our response thus becomes intellectual rather than emotional, as perhaps it had been when we were faced with Rosalind's exile and Viola's grief- before they donned male clothing. In these comedies disguise thus clarifies and helps to confirm the point of view of the play.

However, in *All's well* and *Measure far Measure* Shakespeare alters this presentation of illusion. Rather than wearing male clothing, Helena and Isabella assume another form of disguise, the bed-trick. Isabella perpetuates the disguise because she believes in the legality of Marianna's plight-troth and Helena because she is a married woman. Among Shakespeare's most interesting and courageous characters, they reverse traditional female behavior, invert stereotypes, and turn apparent lechery into the service of marriage. The ultimate irony, or secret hidden behind illusion, is that resourceful, autonomous women shore up marriage. Helena and Isabella show why they force us to redefine virtue, rather than simply lowering our opinion of them. They encourage the audience to reevaluate virtue, chastity, honesty, and honor in the context of character development. Stock responses to these characters, merely to like or dislike them, will not do because their subtlety demands that the audience respond with subtlety as well.

The bed-trick can be thought of as a kind of disguise since the female lover is disguised by darkness and silence from the male lover. In that sense it is no more or less deceptive than disguise. Like Rosalind and Viola, Helena and Isabella know who they are- a wife and novice, respectively; the characters whom they trick do not see them as they see themselves. One might here use the defense of "Jane Anger" that deceitful men should be repaid in kind, that to men for whom all women are the same in the dark, deception is exactly what they deserve. The bed-trick is, however, far more significant and more "theatrical" than that. Disguise is obviously conventional, but the bed-trick is even more unrealistic if we concede that disguise- that is, role playing and putting on uncharacteristic clothing- is the reality of actors and plays. The bed-trick serves, in addition to its obvious plot function, as the inherent symbol of the play, comparable to Hermione's statue coming to life. Life, death, fertility, and renewal cannot easily be portrayed realistically on the stage. Bertram and Angelo do not get what they deserve. In fact, they get far better, and the bed-trick provides the opportunity to effect their union with feeling and harmony. Lust may have driven them to their ignorance of the women with them, but these women in their love both demand recognition.

Ironically, as the disguise device that is embodied in the bed-trick becomes more theatrical, the plays in which the bed-trick appears are more realistic than the earlier comedies in which the disguise is of a more conventional nature. Here, we have sickbeds, barracks, courtrooms, and cities instead of pastoral forests and imaginary seacoasts. The heroines, themselves, are less mannered and winy; instead they have

the drive and zeal of conviction. Perhaps Shakespeare is suggesting in these later comedies that the male protagonists, who are also not typical and indeed are very unlikely heroes, make obvious disguise impossible. Their corruption ought to be confronted directly. Male disguise establishes Viola and Rosalind as the friends of Orsino and Orlando, and it momentarily submerges their feminine identity. Bertram and Angelo cannot be treated in the same way. For Isabella and Helena to put on male clothing is to create a visual similarity between them and their antagonists. Such disguise would imply amicable relationships. Perhaps, too, Shakespeare is suggesting that in ethical confrontations such as these, one cannot stare down ruthlessness in someone else's clothes. One must take a stand in one's own person. Isabella and Helena must simultaneously be themselves and more daringly theatrical in order to reinforce the differences between them and the men they confront. The bed-trick affirms the feminine sexuality of these women and, in pan, their identities. Helena must be recognized as wife and consummate her marriage, and Isabella must be recognized as virgin and not consummate the relationship with Angelo. They will also ensure that the men will honor their vows as a result.

With this peculiar merging of the realistic and the theatrical, Shakespeare redefines societal expectations of female virtues. Role playing, identity, and integrity of self are examined through the characters involved in this obviously sexual disguise, in plays that are about life and death, marriage, fertility, and renewal- all of which are tied together by the image of the bed.

Both Helena and Isabella are associated with and ultimately effect recovery and generosity in their respective plays. The outcome of their machination is marriage. Thus the stereotypic female roles- nurturing and insuring generation- are at the heart of the plays. However, the rare, unstereotypic personalities of these women and the use of the bed-trick - a seemingly adulterous theatrical device, establishes them as unconventional. The bed-trick, with its secrecy, silence, and deceit, is the device that strips away illusion and ignorance, and confirms truth and understanding. It uses carnal knowledge to effect compassion and knowledge of the spirit. Thus, the use of the bed-trick to beget marriage and the miracle of loving confirms what is unique in these women.

Both the stereotype of nurturer and the more complex and realistic portrait of a passionate-virtuous woman are established very early in *AI1's Well* A litany of family designations begins this plays as the Countess says, "delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband" (1.1.1-2), thus initiating the rhythm of family, generation and death- in short, all of life. In the ensuing exchange between her and Lefew, family designations recur, *father, child, husband,* as they will in act 1, scene 2, when the King greets Bertram, and again in act 1, scene 3, when the Countess and Helena have their exchange between *mother* and *daughter.* Also in act 1, scene 1, Helena and Parolles discuss virginity. Though chaste, Helena does indicate that virgins do fall in love and do passionately feel desire.

The stereotyping and unstereotyping of Helena is further established in her two "miracles." She takes her legacy from her father to the court to heal the King and her

love to Bertram's bed to give him the blessings of life. She does not perform a miracle in either case unless the human capacities to cure and to love are miracles. If the healing and loving are wondrous, then the bed-trick is a misnomer and is the *bed-miracle,* instead, just as the King's recovery apparently is. Miracle or not, loving sets people apart from the rest of the natural world, and both the King and Bertram benefit from Helena's precipitation of event. Indeed, Helena anticipates the similarities between her two *miracles,* both occurring in bed as they do. She acknowledges her daring in her venture to heal the King and tells him that should she fail she will feel the "Tax of impudence, / A strumpet's boldness, a devulged shame, / Traduc'd by odious ballads; my maiden's name / Sear'd otherwise" (2.1.169-172). In short, her reputation will be destroyed. Like her discussion about virginity with Parolles and her asking for a husband in payment for curing the King, this speech reveals Helena's many facets, not the least of them being her vulnerabilty. She acknowledges the sexuality of love and marriage; indeed, she welcomes it. She also acknowledges that there are risks of failure, suffering, and public disgrace in acts of daring. There are hazards in shaping destiny.

Helena later decides to make her pilgrimage to save her husband from the dangers of war by encouraging him with her absence to come home. This decision, made from love, will lead to resolution of events by the bed-trick Helena's motive for leaving Rousillion is quite different from Giletta's in *The Palace of Pleasure,* where the latter planned to seek and bed her husband from the outset of her journey. In *All's Well,* as in the variation from the source in *Measure far Measure,* Shakespeare gives greater complexity to his character. Indeed, fate seems to approve of Helena's love and generosity for it introduces her to the Widow and Diana, the means to love Bertram. Had ambition been her motive for marriage, she would not have denied herself the comforts of her new station in life. At Rousillion she has the name of wife without the excess baggage of a petulant boy- hus band.

However, she cares about Bertram's well-being and off she goes. She ruefully describes herself to Diana and the Widow as being "too mean / To have her name repeated; all her deserving / Is a reserved honesty, and that / I have not heard examin'd" (3.5.60-63). As with Parolles in act 1, scene 1, her virginity is the topic of discussion, but now the stakes are quite different. Then the question was how a modest maid might pursue the man she loved; now Virginity should no longer be the normal condition of her life. As before when she declined modesty in favor of Bertram, she is aware of the ambiguities of what she is about to do. She acknowledges that her plan may be misunderstood and must be defended, "which, if it speed, / Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed, / And lawful meaning in a lawful act / Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact" (3.7.44-47).

With it all, she will save Bertram from adultery and give him love. . . .

The men whom Helena and Isabella confront expect stereotypic replies from them; Bertram and Angelo judge by appearances and are taken in by the bed-trick while it asserts complexity and reality over superficiality and mere appearances. George Bernard Shaw described Bertram as a very ordinary young man with "unimaginative prejudices and selfish conventionality."_ Bertram certainly seems to embody some of

the attitudes toward women that the sixteenth century expressed. He expects that Helena will passively accept the role of virgin-wife which he assigns to her and that his superior intelligence will defeat her. For him women are wives to be rejected, or wenches to be seduced. When Diana defends her honor and equates her chastity with his aristocratic legacy, he is so enmeshed in his lust that he gives away the symbol of that legacy. Want of feeling marks his behavior throughout, culminating in his description of his night's work. He has "buried a wife, mourn'd for her, writ to my lady mother I am returning, entertain'd my convoy, and between these main parcels of dispatch effected many nicer needs; the last was the greatest, but that I have not ended yet" (4.3.8589). The last is the liaison with Diana-Helena.

Bertram will not accept his good fortune, either in marrying Helena or in the contingent good will of the king. He *sees* her not as herself, but as his "father's charge / A poor physician's daughter" (2.3.114-115). The King, recognizing her virtues, in gratitude defines honor in terms of deeds, not heritage. "Honours thrive / When rather from our acts we them derive / Than our foregoers" (2.3.135-37). He makes a distinction that the myopic Bertram cannot see, "Virtue and she / Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me" (2.3.143-44). Bertram rejects her and goes off to be a soldier, to be brave, and to wench. Thus, he even makes a stereotype of himself. Parolles delivers his lord's message in conventional courtly love language serious business has called Bertram away from his "rite of love" (2.4.39). Bertram later smugly declares, "I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the 'not' eternal" (3.2.20-1). He is too arrogant to realize that his decision may not be Helena's, and he anticipates that she will do as she is told. Lavatch had sung, "marriage comes by destiny" (1.3.60). Surely the action of this play denies that platitude. It comes to Helena in name and in actuality through her own actions. Bertram will not bed her; so she will bed him.

As the bed-trick 15 being planned, so is the drum-trick. Both Parolles and Bertram will be in the dark, literally and metaphorically. Neither will know that his "friends" are beside him. One will speak and hear nothing and the other will be blindfolded and hear foreign sounds. By agreeing to the strictures of darkness and silence, Bertram acknowledges his lust. Love seeks and knows the differences between people; lust makes them all the same. Ultimately, each will reveal his worst when caught. It is Parolles who says, "Yet who would have suspected an ambush where I was taken?" (4.3.291-92). Bertram could as well have said the same thing.

When Bertram makes his assignation with Diana, his language is once again that of the highly conventional, literary, courtly tradition. He will do "all rights of service" (4,2.17); Diana is "holy-cruel" (4.2.33); and he suffers from "sick desires" which only her acquiescence will cure (4.2.35-36) He vows "for ever" (4.2.16). The darkness then disguises Helena from Bertram, but he also does not know himself, so caught up is he in the roles of lover and warrior. The bed-trick will open him up to feeling and an understanding of his own vulnerability.

Helena, through her active assertion of first, her role as physician, and then her role as wife, acts as restorative for Bertram and will perhaps enable him to cultivate the kinds of feelings that do heal and comfort, that do express humanity and the complexity of the

human experience, "a mingled yarn, good and ill together" (4.3.68). Helena brings intelligence, compassion, and fertility to the world of Bertram and Parolles. Theirs is the world of battle and of superficial friendship based on flattery and self-seeking. . . .

Like the bed-trick, the endings of *All's Well* and *Measure far Measure* are at once conventional and unconventional. They both end with marriage, but "happily ever after" may not rule the day. Equally, the heroines who have effected these endings and revealed the subtleties of a world in which the illusions of the characters who have expected stereotypic behavior have been removed elude arbitrary classifications.

In *All's Well,* when morning comes, after the bed-trick, Helena anticipates better times, "When briars shall have leaves as sweet as thorns / And be as sweet as sharp" (4.4.32-33). Thus she expresses hope but is also mindful of the "mingled yams of life" (4.3.74). Even in the final scene when it is full daylight and many voices of propriety and family are heard, the bed-trick seems re-enacted as it had been anticipated by the King's illness, with the exchange of rings, the substituted women, the oaths, the lies all until the light comes and the truth is revealed. Once more the ambiguities of life are defined. In an ideal world, all would be well. Here all is well only *if* Helena can make the riddle clear to Bertram (5.3.310). *If she* cannot, divorce will follow (5.3.311). The play is a success *if* the suit for applause is won (epilogue, 1-2). Of course, she will prove the consummation, there will be no divorce, and we will applaud when the player asks us to. With the introduction of the *ifs,* however, comes the confirmation that people behave in individual ways. There are mitigating circumstances, and not to recognize them condemns us to a life based on appearances and assumptions. Bertram thought he got an evening's fling; what he got instead was blessing and love. The *ifs* tell us that life can go sour; it can also rise and bake sweet.

Women like Helena are more risky to love than passive, conformable women. They ask for more- that their husbands be as chaste as they for one thing and give more. They are reckless and dare to assert themselves with the means available in order to give their gifts. The convention of the bed-trick confirms and enriches their specialness. Further, it ties together the p ast and present, dying and fertility, role playing an disguise, all of it, to deny the ordinary and unimaginative.

The final discovery in *Measure far Measure,* like that in *All's Well,* exposes a man who has misjudged the subtleties and complexities of the personality of the woman who confronts him. Isabella, to expose Angelo's misuse of power, allows her good name and reputation to be tarnished. She publicly denounces him but must say that he has seduced her in order to do so. For her, reputation of chastity is not the same as chastity itself. And virtue means much more than chastity as she risks public disgrace to expose evil. Throughout, however, Angelo remains alienated. He is given love and marriage, neither of which he wants. Because he cannot tolerate public shame, he requests death, which is denied him. Finally, Isabella makes her grandest assertion for life, and once more her sincerity and directness surface. Angelo's death will not revive Claudio; therefore she pleads for his life. Asshe had participated in the bed-trick to save her brother's life, so she now pleads for Angelo's out of compassion for Marianna.

Asin *All's Well* the ending of *Measure far Measure is* precarious. None of the marriages seems ideal. We do not believe that distress is over and happiness necessarily follows. Instead, there is sense of a beginning, of new opportunities and second chances, rather like life. We have arrived at this realization in part by having had our sensibilities shocked. Chastity typically demands reticence and passivity, but Shakespeare says *no* in these plays. The bed-trick is unseemly to the unimaginative, indecorous to the conventional and undemanding. These plays ask of their heroines that they be virtuous and assertive, chaste and outspoken; that they search for the harmonies of life. These characters and their participation in the bed-trick shock, disorient and ultimately extend a reality- that part of virtue which actively reaches for the elusive commitment to life. In creating plays in which the stereotypes are distorted, Shakespeare via an old and much used convention seeks to define honor, chastity, virtue- not as abstractions but as realities.

Critical Essay #3

Source: "Bed Tricks: On Marriage as the End of Comedy in *All's Well That Ends well* and *Measure for Measure,"* in *Shakespeare's Personality,* edited by Norman N. Holland, Sidney Homan, and Bernard J. Paris, University of California Press, 1989, pp. 151-74.

[In the following excerpt, Adelman explores the male desire to sexually contaminate a pure woman (as played out in the characters if Bertram in All's Well That Ends Well and Angelo in Measure for Measure, and haw this is integral to the bed trick and the unsustainability if marriage based on trickery. She also examines the "incestuous potential if sexuality" and haw these two male characters are drawn to sexual relations outside the context of marriage (and, for Bertram, outside the context if "family," as he regards Helena almost as a Sister).]

In the midst of Hamlet's attack on deceptive female sexuality, he cries out to Ophelia, "I say we will have no moe marriage" (3.1.147). *Hamlet* begins with the disrupted marriage of Hamlet's mother and father; by the end of the play both the potential marriage of Hamlet and Ophelia and the actual marriage of Claudius and Gertrude have been destroyed. This disruption of marriage is enacted again in the tragedies that follow immediately after *Hamlet;* the author of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Othello* seems to proclaim with Hamlet, "we will have no more marriage." But the comedies written during this *period-All's well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure-* end conventionally in marriage; in them Shakespeare was, I think, experimenting to discover by what means he might make marriage possible again.

Marriage rests on the legitimization of sexual desire within society; insofar as sexuality is felt to be illicit, marriage itself will be equivocal at best. As Hamlet proclaims the abolition of marriage, he repeatedly orders Ophelia to a nunnery (3.1.120-49). Here the double sense of nunnery as religious institution and bawdy house explicates perfectly the sexual alternatives left when marriage is abolished; or rather, it explicates the sexual alternatives- absolute chastity or absolute sexual degradation- that make the middle ground of marriage impossible. These are the sexual alternatives for the male protagonists of both problem comedies, where the middle is absent and sexual desire is felt only for the illicit. Bertram and Angelo are both presented as psychological virgins about to undergo their first sexual experience. In the course of their plays, we find that both can desire only when they imagine their sexuality as an illegitimate contamination of a pure woman, the conversion in effect of one kind of nun into the other. Both plays exploit this fantasy of contamination. The drama of the last scene in each play depends heavily on the sexual shaming of the supposedly violated virgins. The public naming of Diana as a "common gamester to the camp" *(All's Well That Ends well,* 5.3.188); Lucio's comment that Mariana, who is "neither maid, widow, nor wife," may be a p unk *(Measure for Measure,* 5.1.17980) and his extende joke about who has handled, or could handle, Isabella privately (5.1.72-77); even Escalus's claim that he will "go darkly to work" with Isabella, a claim that Lucio promptly and predictably sexualizes (5.1.278-80)- all assume the instantaneous transformation of the virgin into the whore, the transformation implicit in Hamlet's double use of "nunnery." Though the contamination is

apparently undone in these scenes insofar as the continuing status of Diana and Isabella as virgins is eventually revealed, these revelations do not undo the deeper fantasies of sexual contamination on which the plots rest; at the end, as at the beginning, male sexual desire is understood as desire for the illicit, desire to contaminate.

Since the impediment to the conventional festive ending in marriage in both comedies is thus the construction of male sexual desire Itself, the ending turns on the attempt to legitimize sexual desire in marriage- an attempt epitomized in both plays by the bed trick, in which the illicit desires of men are coercively directed back toward their socially sanctioned mates. (See Neely 1985, Kirsch 1981, and Wheeler 1981 for very similar accounts of the problem and the solution in both plays; of these, Neely and Kirsch tend to be more sanguine than I am about the effectiveness of the cure.) In the bed tricks in both plays the act imagined to have been deeply illicit is magically revealed as having been licit all along- but only at the expense of the male protagonists' sexual autonomy. Through a kind of homeopathic cure both Bertram and Angelo are allowed to enact fantasies of the sexual soiling of a virgin and are appropriately shamed for these fantasies, only to find out that their sexual acts have in fact been legitimate and that the soiling has taken place only in fantasy. Bertram and Angelo are thus saved from their own imaginations; presented with legitimate sexuality as a fait accompli, they can- or so we might hope- go on to accept the possibility that they have been tricked into: the possibility of sexuality within marriage. But given the status of the bed tricks as tricks and the characters' failure to provide much evidence that they have been transformed by them, our hope seems frail indeed and the marriages at the end of both plays remain equivocal. Moreover, because they so clearly betray the desires of the male protagonists, the bed tricks in both plays tend to become, not a vehicle for the working out of sexual impediments, but a forced and conspicuous metaphor for what needs working out.

Comparison with Shakespeare's source for *All's Well* there is no bed trick in the sources for *Measure for Measure*- can help us to gauge the tonality of the bed trick in both plays. In *The Palace of Pleasure,* William Painter's translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* (day 3, story 9), the bed trick is a rather well-mannered and genial affair, repeated often and with affection. We are specifically told that the count (equivalent to Bertram) "at his uprising in the morning. . . used many courteous and amiable words and gave divers fair and precious jewels" (Bullough 1958, 2:395). In both *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure* the bed tricks are portrayed as one-night stands that the male protagonists have no desire to repeat- and not only, I think, for reasons of dramatic economy and credibility. Both Bertram and Angelo lose desire for their virgins as soon as they have ravished them; for both, apparently, the imagined act of spoiling virginity is the only source of sexual desire. In both plays the prohibition against speaking *(A* WW, 4.2.58; *MM,* 3.1.247) and the male recoil from the object of desire utterly transform the encounter reported in Painter, so that it becomes the epitome not only of the dark waywardness of desire but also of its depersonalization, the interchangeability of the bodies with which lust plays *(A* WW, 4.4.24-25). The potentially curative affectionate mutuality of the source is utterly absinthes bed tricks demonstrate the extent to which

sexuality is a matter of deception on the one side and hit-and-run contamination on the other. They do not bode well as cures.

Insofar as the bed tricks represent sexuality in these plays, it is portrayed as deeply incompatible with the continuing relationship of marriage; the very trick that imports sexuality back into marriage reveals the incompatibility. In "Upon Some Verses of Virgil," an essay that some have found a source both for *Othello* and for *A It's Well,* Montaigne registers a similar sense of incompatibility. (See Cavell 1979, 474, for *Othello* and Kirsch 1981, 122-27, for *All's Well;* I am particularly indebted to Kirsch's account.) Montaigne says, "Nor is it other then a kinde of incest, in this reverent alliance and sacred bond, to employ the effects and extravagant humor of an amorous licentiousness" (1928, 72). Here Montaigne seems to me to come very close to the psychological core of the "problem" that I find definitive of the problem comedies. When Montaigne registers his sense of the incompatibility between the sexual and the sacred by calling that incompatibility incest, he associates the soiling potentiality of sexuality with the prohibitions surrounding the male child's first fantasies of soiling a sacred space; insofar as marriage is felt as sacred, sexuality within it will replay those ancient fantasies and their attendant anxieties. Angelo's anguished self-questioning upon the discovery of his own desire reiterates powerfully the core of Montaigne's concern: "Having waste ground enough, / Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary / And pitch our evils there?" *(MM,* 2.2.169-71). For the male sexual imagination represented in both Bertram and Angelo, sexuality within marriage is, I think, an ultimately incestuous pollution of a sanctuary; they can desire only when they can imagine themselves safely enacting this pollution outside the familial context of marriage. In both plays, however, the very fact of sexuality binds one incestuously to family, so that all sexuality is ultimately felt as incestuous. I want to look at this incestuous potential within both plays and then to suggest the ways in which they finally seem to me to undercut the accommodations to sexuality apparently achieved by their bed tricks.

The recoil from a sexuality felt as the soiling of a sacred space is split in two in *All's Well* and analyzed in two separate movements. Bertram's flight from, and slander 0, Diana analyze his recoil from the woman felt as whore once his own sexuality has soiled her; even at the end of the play the deep shaming that Diana undergoes makes her the repository for his sense of taint. But the flight from Diana curiously echoes Bertram's earlier flight from helena. This initial flight analyzes his aversion toward sexual union with a woman who is terrifying to him partly insofar as she is identified with a maternal figure and thus with the incestuous potential of sexuality. In the end, I shall argue, the splitting of the sexual object into the legitimate but' abhorred Helena and the illegitimate but desired Diana will be undone as Helena and Diana begin to fuse; their fusion will serve the deepest of the play's sexual paradoxes. But before the end Diana seems the solution to the problem created by Helena: the problem of sexuality within a familial context.

Bertram's initial flight from Helena is phrased in terms that suggest a flight from this familial context. Here, too, Shakespeare's management of his source emphasizes issues central to the play: the figure of the Countess and the crucial association of her with Helena are his additions to Boccaccio/Painter. *All's Well* begins with the image of a

son separating from his mother, seeking a new father (1.1.5-7) and new possibilities for manhood elsewhere. The formation 0 a new sexual relationship in marriage is ideally the emblem of this separation from the family of origin and hence of independent manhood. But marriage with Helena cannot serve this function, both because of the association of her with Bertram's mother- an association so close that Bertram's only words to her before their enforced marriage are a parenthesis within his farewell to his mother ("Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, / And make much of her" [1.1.77-78])- and because she becomes the choice of his surrogate father. Marriage to her would thus be a sign of his bondage to the older generation rather than of his growing independence. In Richard Wheeler's brilliant account of the play- an account to which this discussion is much indebted- Bertram's flight from Helena and his attraction to a woman decidedly outside the family structure become intelligible as attempts to escape the dominion of the infantile family (Wheeler 1981, especially 40-45; see also Kirsch 1981, 141, and Neely 1985, 70-71).

Bertram's exchange with the king suggests the extent to which marriage with Helena threatens to obliterate necessary distinctions between father and son, mother and wife:

KING: Thou know'st she has rais'd me
from my sickly bed.
BERTRAM: But follows it, my lord, to
bring me down
Must anSWer for your raising? I know her
well;
She had her breeding at my father's. charge A poor physician's daughter my wife!
Disdain Rather corrupt me ever!
(2.3.111-16)

Bred by his father, Helena is virtually his sister. Moreover, she becomes in the king's words virtually a surrogate mother. Lafew's reference to himself as a pander ("I am Cressid's uncle, / That dare leave tWO together" [2.1.97-98]) and the earlier sexualization of "araise" (2.1.76) combine to make the sexualization of the king's "she has raised me from my sickly bed" almost inevitable here (see Wheeler 1981, 75-76, and Kirsch 1981, 135). Bertram imagines himself sexually brought down by the woman who has raised up his surrogate father (see Neely 1985, 70). Beneath his social snobbery, 1 think we can hear a hint of the ruin threatened should Bertram become sexually allied with his surrogate father's imagined sexual partner. The escape from the parents' choice thus becomes in part an escape from the incestuous potential involved in marriage to a woman who is allied to his mother not only by their loving association but also by her position as fantasied sexual partner of his surrogate father. Bertram's response to the king suggests his terror at losing the social and familial distinctions that guarantee identity, distinctions protected by the incest taboo. His terror is unlikely to be assuaged when the king answers him by denying the distinction between Helena's blood and his: "Strange is it that our bloods, / Of color, weight, and heat, pour'd all together, / Would quite confound distinction" (2.3.118-20). Bertram's fear is, 1 think, exactly that the mingling of bloods (see *The Winter's Tale,* 1.2.109) in his sexual union with Helena would confound distinction.

Bertram faces an impossible dilemma: he must leave his family to become a man, and yet he can take his full place as a man in this society only insofar as he can be reconciled with his mother and the king, hence with the woman they have chosen for him. Moreover, the play insists on the full impossibility of the task facing Bertram by emphasizing at once the distance between him and his father and the social expectation that he will turn out to be like his father. From the first, Bertram's manhood is the subject of anxious speculation on the part of his mother and the king, speculation expressed in the desire that he be like *his* father in moral parts as well as in shape (1.1.61-62; 1.2.21-22). For them- hence for the ruling society of the playmanhood is defined as living up to one's father, in effect becoming him. Bertram himself unwittingly plays into this definition: he will accept the validity of the marriage only when Helena can show him "a child begotten of thy body that 1 am father to" (3.2.58-59). This stipulation in effect makes *his* own achievement of paternity the condition of his resumption of adult status in France: he can become a man only by becoming his father, and he becomes his father only by assuming his role *as father*- by becoming a father himself. But if paternity is imagined as becoming one's own father, then one's sexual partner again takes on the resonance of one's mother. The social world of the play and his own fantasy of himself as father finally allow Bertram his place as a man only insofar as he can form a sexual alliance with the woman he and the play identify with his mother. The route toward manhood takes Bertram simultaneously away from the mother and toward her; hence the incestuous double bind in which Bertram finds himself.

Given Bertram's association of Helena both with his mother and with his surrogate father's sexuality, we can begin to make sense of both the impossible conditions Bertram sets for Helena: the act by which Helena simultaneously makes Bertram a father and gets his father's ring is, 1 think, a fantasized replication of the act of parental intercourse by which Bertram himself was bred. Hence the complex logic governing the exchange of rings in the dark: Bertram's father's ring is given unawares to Helena, the mother's choice, and the ring taken from Helena turns out to have been the father king's. Even here, when poor Bertram thinks that he has escaped his family, the exchange of rings is in effect between father and mother; in the last scene the ring play turns out to have been a symbolic sexual exchange between surrogate parental figures. (On the sexualization of the rings see Adams 1961, 268-69.) In attempting to define his manhood by locating it elsewhere, Bertram thus finds himself returned to his mother's choice; flee as he might, there is no escaping Helena. Indeed, in its portrayal of Helena the play seems to me to embody a deep ambivalence of response toward the mother who simultaneously looks after us and threatens our independence. Astonishing both for her willfulness and her self-abnegation, simultaneously far below Bertram's sphere and far above it, apparently all-powerful in her weakness, present even when Bertram thinks most that he has escaped her, triumphantly proclaiming her maternity at the end, Helena becomes the epitome of the invisible maternal power that binds the child, especially the male child, who here discovers that she is always the woman in his bed.

Insofar as *AII's Well* splits the sexually desired woman from the maternally taboo one, the project it sets for itself in reinstituting marriage is to legitimize desire, to import it back into the sacred family bonds. The bed trick is, as I have suggested, an attempt at such importation. But the bed trick as Shakespeare presents it here fails to detoxify or

legitimize sexuality, instead it tends to make even legitimate sexuality illicit in fantasy, a "wicked meaning in a lawful deed" (3.7.45-47). Despite Shakespeare's apparent attempt to rescue sexuality here, he seems incapable in this play of imagining any sexual consummation - legitimate or illegitimate - that is not mutually defiling. Musing on the bed trick that technically legitimizes sexuality, Helena makes this sense of mutual defilement nearly explicit:

But, 0, strange men,
That can such sweet use make of what they
hate, When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts Defiles the pitchy night.
(4.4.21-24)

It's very hard to say just what is defiling what here. The sexual interchange itself is replaced in Helena's words by a defiling interchange between "saucy trusting" and "pitchy night," in which "saucy trusting" seems to stand in for Bertram's part and "pitchy night" for Helena's. We might imagine that the defilement here is the consequence of Bertram's belief that he is committing an illicit act; but in fact Helena suggests that the very trusting to deception that legitimizes the sexual act is the agent of defilement. The defilement thus seems to be the consequence of the act itself, not of its status as legitimate or illegitimate. Moreover, in her odd condensation of night, the bed, and her own apparently defiled body, Helena seems to assume the mutual defilement attendant on this act. In the interchange, Bertram/trust defiles Helena/night. But the night itself is "pitchy"; and as Shakespeare's frequent use reminds us, pitch defiles (see, for example, *Much Ado About Nothing,* 3.3.57, *Love's Labor's Lost,* 4.3.3, and *I Henry IV,* 2.4.413). Bertram thus defiles that which is already defiled and that which defiles him in turn; that is, in the process of trying to sort out legitimacy and defilement, the play here reveals its sense of the marriage bed as both defiled and defiling. The bed trick thus works against itself by locating the toxic ingredient in sexuality and then replicating rather than removing its toxicity.

It is, moreover, revealing that both the sexual act and the bed tend to disappear in Helena's account, the one replaced by the mental process of trusting to deception, the other by the pitchy night. The sexual act at the center of *A II's Well* is absent; its place in our imagination is taken by the process of working out the deception. One consequence of this exchange is the suggestion that mistrust and deception are at the very root of the sexual act, as though the man is always tricked, defiled, and shamed there, as though to engage in sexual union is always to put oneself into the manipulative power of women. At the same time, the disappearance of the sexual act in Helena's musing on the bed trick points toward the larger disappearance of the sexual act enabled by the bed trick Ultimately, that is, the bed trick in *All's Well* seems to me as much a part of a deep fantasy of escape from sexuality as it is an attempt to bring the married couple together; as its consequences are unraveled in the last scene, it allows for a renewed fantasy of the flight from sexuality even while it seems to be a means of enabling and legitimizing sexual union.

Just before Helena appears in the last scene, Diana says, "He knows himself my bed he hath defil'd, / And at that time he got his wife with child" (5.3.300-301). In effect she

separates the mental from the physical components of the sexual act, Bertram's intentions from his actual deed, ascribing the shame and soil to herself and the pregnancy to Helena. This split in part explains the insistence on Diana's shame in the last scene; her words here identify her role as substitute strumpet, the figure onto whom Bertram and the play can displace the sense of sexuality as defilement, thus protecting Helena from taint. The structure of the last scene is calculated to replicate the magical legitimization of sexuality in the bed trick insofar as it substitutes the pure Helena for the shamed Diana in our imaginations; we are put through the process of imagining a defiling sexual contact with Diana and then released from that image by the magical reappearance of Helena. (Hence, I think, the lengthy insistence on the mutual shame of Diana and Bertram, which is not strictly necessary for the plot.) But in the process of repudiating the taint attaching to sexuality, the last scene enables a fantasy repudiating sexuality itself. AsDiana begins the process of repudiating her shame, the sexual act is done and then undone in our imaginations as the ring- emblematic of the sexual encounter-is given ("this was it I gave him, being a-bed" [5.3.228]) and ungiven ("I never gave it him" [5.3.276]). The business of the ring makes this portion of the last scene into a ritual of doing and undoing, from which the soiled Diana emerges purified, not a "strumpet" but a "maid" (5.3.290-93). Diana's last words- the riddle to which the appearance of Helena is the solution- again hint at this ritual of doing and undoing: in substituting the pregnant wife for the defiled bed- "he knows himself my bed he hath defil'd, / And at that time he got his wife with child" - Diana comes close to making the bed itself disappear, as though the act of impregnating did not take place in that bed at all. Her words suggest the almost magical quality of the act by which Bertram impregnates Helena: defiling one woman, he impregnates another. The pregnancy is thus presented as the result of Bertram's copulation with Diana, as though the child were Helena's by a magical transference through which Diana gets the taint and Helena gets the child.

Diana's riddle reinterprets the bed trick in effect as an act split into a defiling contact and a miraculous conception. As the defiled bed disappears, the sexual act itself seems to vanish, to become as imaginary as Bertram's knowledge of defilement. The stress throughout the scene has been on the undoing of the sexual act rather than on conception. In the logic of fantasy here, I think that the sexual act has not happened at all, not with Diana and not with Helena. The prestidigitation expressed in Diana's riddle brings the promised birth of Helena's child as close to a virgin birth as the facts of the case will allow. The sense of miracle that greets Helena's return is not wholly a consequence of her apparent return from the dead; it also derives partly from the apparently miraculous conception that Diana's riddle points toward. At the end Helena can thus assume her new status as wife and mother without giving up her status as miraculous virgin; she can simultaneously cure through her sexuality and remain absolutely pure. This simultaneity should seem familiar to us: it in fact rules the presentation of Helena's cure of the king, where her miraculous power depends equally on her status as heavenly maid and on the sexuality that could "araise King Pippen" (2.1.76). (See Neely's fine discussion of Helena's various roles, 1985, especially 65-70.) The play asks us nearly from the beginning to see Helena both as a miraculous Virgin and as a deeply sexual woman seeking her will: thus the early dialogue with Parolles, in which we see her meditating both on how to defend her virginity and on how to lose It to

her liking (1.1.110-51). Helena's two roles are ultimately the reflection of the impossible desire for a woman who can have the powers simultaneously of Venus and of Diana-who can in effect be both Venus and Diana, both generative sexual partner and sacred virgin. (Adams [1961, 262-64] finds the desire possible insofar as procreation legitimizes sexuality.) This is the fantasy articulated in Helena's re-creation of the Countess's youth, when "your Dian / Was both herself and Love" (1.3.212-13). The role of the character Diana should ultimately be understood in this context. As Helena chooses Bertram at court, she imagines herself shifting allegiance from Diana to Venus (2.3.74-76). The emergence of the character Diana shortly after Helena renounces her allegiance to the goddess Diana suggests the complexity of the role that Diana plays: if Bertram can vest his sense of sexuality as soiling in her, Helena can also vest her virginity in her. Both as the repository of soil and as the preserver of virginity, she functions as a split-off portion of Helena herself: hence, I think, the ease with which her status as both maid and no maid transfers to Helena in the end. Both in the bed trick and in the larger psychic structures that it serves, Helena can thus become Venus and reincorporate Diana into herself.

The buried fantasy of Helena as Venus/Diana, as secular virgin mother, is the play's pyrrhic solution to the problem of legitimizing sexuality, relocating it within a sacred familial context. The solution is pyrrhic insofar as it legitimizes sexuality partly by wishing it away; it enables the creation of familial bonds without the fully imagined experience of sexuality. But this is exactly what Bertram has told us he wants. The impossible condition that Helena must meet stipulates that she can be his wife only when she can prove herself a virgin mother, that is, prove that she is with child by him without his participation in the sexual act. This condition suggests that she can be safely his only when she can remove sexuality from the establishment of the family and hence sanctify and purify the family itself. The slippery riddle of the bed trick satisfies this condition both for Bertram and for the audience: he knows he has not had sexual relations with Helena; and we have watched the sexual act be defined out of existence in the last scene. Here sexuality can be allowed back into the family only through a fantasy that enables its denial: the potentially incestuous contact with Helena is muted not by denying her association with his mother but by denying the sexual nature of the contact. The fantasy of Helena as virgin mother thus allows Bertram to return to his mother and surrogate father; he can now accept his mother's choice and achieve paternity safely, in effect becoming his father without having had to be husband to his wife/mother.

In the multiple fantasies of *All's Well* the marriage can be consummated only insofar as Bertram can imagine himself as defiling a virgin or insofar as the act itself is nearly defined out of existence, so that It becomes a fact without act as it becomes a sin without sin, a "wicked meaning in a lawful deed, / And lawful meaning in a lawful act, / Where both not sin and yet a sinful fact" (3.7.45-47). Despite the overt attempt to make sexuality curative, suspicion of sexuality remains the dominant emotional fact of the play. Even here, where Shakespeare attempts Pandarus-like to bring two together, we are left with a sense of failure about the sexual act itself and with a final queasiness about the getting of children. . . .

If we take the bed tricks of *All's Well* and *Measure fur Measure* as diagnostic of the two plays, then the shift in their management can point to the ways in which *Measure fur Measure* is an undoing of *All's Well* (Both Neely 1985, 92-95, and Wheeler 1981, 12-13, 116, compare these bed tricks in terms very similar to mine.) In *All's Well* marriage is a cure, even if an enforced cure; in *Measure fur Measure* it is a punishment. Despite its final muted fantasy of Helena as virgin mother, *All's Well* had seemed to promise that legitimate sexuality could be redemptive; in *Measure fur Measure* the relationship between legitimate and illegitimate sexuality itself becomes vexed and all sexuality seems corrupting. Characteristically, then, the bed trick in *All's Well* functions dramatically to enforce marriage, while the bed trick in *Measure far Measure* functions to protect virginity. The direction *of* these differences is summarized in the shift in the agent through whom the bed tricks are realized. The bed trick in *All's Well* is under the management of Helena, a powerfully sexual woman. But exactly this management seems to be the central image that calls forth male fears in the play- fears of being drained or spent (see, for example, 2.3.281 and 3.2.41-42), ultimately fears of being absorbed into a female figure imagined as larger and more powerful than oneself, fears that Lavatch localizes in his "That man should be at woman's command, and yet no hurt done!" (1.3.92-93). *Measure fur Measure* responds to the fears released in *All's Well* by redoing the bed trick so that it is under the management of a powerful and asexual man, in whose hands the women are merely cooperative pawns (see Riefer's discussion of the diminution of Isabella's power, 1984). That is, the play takes power back from the hands of the women and consolidates it in the Duke; and it allows him special power insofar as it represents him as a ghostly father, divorced from the bonds of natural family. In effect, then, *Measure fur Measure* redoes the sexual act under the aegis of the protectively asexual father rather than of the sexually intrusive mother; in the end it is the pure father rather than the sexual mother who proves to have been everywhere unseen. That the doing and undoing in this pair of plays so closely anticipates that of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* suggests the centrality of these issues in Shakespeare's imagination.

Critical Essay #4

Source: *"All's Well That Ends Well* as Noncomic Comedy," in *Acting Funny: Comic Theory and Practice in Shakespeare's Plays,* edited by Frances Teague, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994, pp. 41-45.

[In this brief excerpt, Free examines haw All's Well That Ends Well, *unlike Shakespeare's other comedies through its central coupling (marriage) of Helena and Bertram The play has only this one pairing whereas Shakespeare's other comedies hare many couples. Helena and Bertram share only fire scenes together, during which they did not always engage each other in dialogue. There is no battle of wit and will between them Helena's role "outside" her social sphere further increases the comic distance, and there is scant "lightness" or "playfulness" in the play.]*

. .. Marriage is a central element in the construct of Renaissance comedy. In the Shakespearean canon, a number of the comedies include marriages, placing them (or implying that they impend) close to or at the plays' ends as a reaffirmation, restoration and promise for the continuation of society. Other comedies deal with married women as in *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor;* or they move the marriage forward, thus fore grounding it and making it precipitate further action in the main plot as in *The Taming* 0/ *the Shrew* and *Much Ado about Nothing,* What makes *All's Well That Ends Well's* foregrounded marriage unique is the undeniable fact that Bertram does not want Helena regardless of how much she wants him or how much the members of the nobility- most notably the King, the Countess, and Lafew- want him to want her. Further, in its institution, its mixing of high personages with low, and the alliances between social groups, the foregrounded marriage in *All's Well That Ends Well* subverts the comic by creating discomfiting inversions in the play's social spheres. While the concept of marriage as regenerative force via Helena's pregnancy obtains in principle at the end, when the "broken nuptial" comes together, no wonder we, along with the King in the epilogue, feel little if any delight: things but "seem" well; we have no guarantees. We cannot be certain even there that Bertram truly wants her.

A distinction that contributes to my thesis is that *All's Well That Ends Well* stands apart from the Shakespearean comedic mainstream in that Helena and Bertram, however estranged their relationship, remain the single couple in the play. Elsewhere Shakespeare provides us with sets of couples: twins who marry and woo in *The Comedy of Errors* and *Twelfth Night,* two men in pursuit of one woman in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A M mid summer Night's Dream,* two married women who plot to outwit one man and teach another a lesson in *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* Rosalind and Celia with their loves in *As You Like It,* and a triad of lovers in *The Merchant of Venice.* Even *Measure far Measure,* the play most often closely linked to *All's Well That Ends Well,* provides us pairings. *All's Well That Ends Well* gives us two windows, a virgin, and a wife in name only. While all these pairings deal with power in relationships, they do not constitute the exact marked hierarchies of power that *All's Well That Ends Well* presents to us.

The foregrounded marriage in *All's Well That Ends Well* differs from those in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado about Nothing* in origination and ordination. While Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* has no more *choice* than does Bertram about whom each marries (Baptista and Petruchio merely strike a bargain as do the King and Helena), Petruchio and Kate as a pair remain this play's focal point. We observe the battle of wit and will between them, and the entire fourth act centers on them. Whether we grant or disallow the concept of mutuality of consent, whether the production relies on Zefferellian horseplay or a more restrained production concept, *The Taming of the Shrew* provokes laughter- the *sine qua non* of the *comic*- because of the physical and verbal interaction between the principal characters. The same holds true for *Much Ado about Nothing.* Like Kate and Petruchio, Beatrice and Benedick command our attention, their wit and wordplay amuse and distract us, and they are more interesting to us than the play's other couple Claudio and Hero. Even in that relationship, the comedy of *Much Ado about Nothing* remains more *comic* than does *All's Well That Ends Well.* Claudio and Hero agree to marry, an important distinction between their relationship and that of Helena and Bertram. The distasteful circumstances of the broken nuptial notwithstanding, the separation between Claudio and Hero fails to disrupt wholly the play's overall *comic* spirit for two reasons: first, we know Dogberry and the Watch hold the key to reconciliation; second, as well as more *important*, the *comic* Beatrice and Benedick remain our primary focal point.

Helena and Bertram appear on stage together in but five scenes. Their exchanges generally indicate the dynamic of power in their relationship as Helena oozes subservience to her lord and master, while Bertram, until the final scene, plays his superiority, both of class and gender, for all Its worth. In three scenes where they appear together, they speak to or about one another but engage in no dialogue. In 1.1 Bertram in one and a half lines commands that Helena, "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, / And make much of her" (76-77). In 2.3 she subserviently offers herself to him in two and a half lines:

I dare not say I take you, but I give
Me and my service, ever whilst I Jive,
Into your guiding power
(2.3.102-104)

The remainder of this scene has them each talking to the King, but not to one another. In a third scene (3.5), Helena merely views Bertram from a distance as the army passes and asks about him. Only two scenes have them exchanging dialogue. In 2.5, comprising thirty-five lines, Bertram, without having consummated the marriage and refusing Helena's modest request for a departing kiss, *dismisses* his bride by sending her back to Rossillion. His language is primarily in the command form, hers acquiescent. She comes "as [she] was commanded from *[him]"* (2.5.54). She declares herself Bertram's "most obedient servant" in a scene that allows for no possible irony (2.5.72). Even when she musters the courage to hint at a parting kiss, she hesitates and stumbles as a young woman very much in love and unsure of herself. In 5.3, the reconciliation, they exchange two lines each, and arguably Bertram's "If she, my liege,

can make me know this clearly / I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" is addressed more to the King than to Helena. These two encounters comprise but thirty-nine lines all told.

All's Well That Ends Well remains a comedy in structure, yet Helena's agency in the enforced marriage, as well as the subsequent separation and ploys, distances us from the *comic.* Other elements distance us as well. When the Countess learns that Helena loves Bertram, we have the perfect occasion for a traditional blocking figure, but no. The Countess not only enjoys, but also encourages Helena in her aspirations. No witty bantering about sex, love, fidelity in wedlock- that which might create the *comic* within the matrix of comedy- takes place between Helena and Bertram, the play's only couple. Certainly some comic playfulness occurs within the play. No one will deny its presence in the virginity dialogue between Helena and Parolles, nor in the choosing scene as Helena walks from budding youth to budding youth before "giving" herself to Bertram, nor in Parolles's humiliation. Nevertheless, what lightness exists remains apart from the focal couple. Of added significance is how little of the playfulness associated with earlier comedies takes place among the women. Beyond the Countess' hope for Helena's love, her brief acknowledgment of her own past, and her teasing in the "I say I am your mother" dialogue (1.3), women's dialogue as they assess man's fecklessness has a more brittle edge than do similar assessments given in the earlier comedies.

Helena's actions set her apart from her Shakespearean sisters. Other independently-acting heroines- Viola, Rosalind, Portia- play at their love-games and are, in some cases, willing to leave *Time* to fadge things out. They also employ masculine disguise to effect the amount of control or empowerment they enjoy. Helena does what she does without disguise. In some respects Helena and Portia are the most closely akin. Portia is willing to comply with her father's will; Helena is willing to submit herself to Bertram's. Both work purposefully to achieve their goals. However close that kinship, differences obtain. *Allies* from the play's outset, Portia and Nerissa plot to test true love's faith; Helena, who must create her allies, has yet to gain mere acceptance as wife. To achieve her goals, she acts with what Western culture sees as male prerogatives. AsA. P. Riemer has said, she acts with a "male purposefulness" (Riemer 1975-76, 54). In order for her to succeed undisguised, she must perform these actions in a way that the empowering male structure (i.e., the King and Lafew as members of the ancient regime fails to recognize as violating sex or class differences.

In *All's Well That Ends Well* Helena follows Bertram to Paris. There she originates the marriage by striking a bargain with the King and curing him. Unlike the other pairings and marriages in the comedies, however, no tacit nor overt mutuality exists between this nuptial pair. Here the King must ordain an enforced marriage of his ward Bertram to comply with the terms of the bargain. Such ordination violates the usual circumstances that we find in the festive comedies. In those comedies, ordination, directed against a woman, may initiate the flight from authority into the satumalian world of comic license.

Bertram's response to the King's command is like that of Silvia or Hermia: forced into marriage ordained against his will, a marriage that is originated by a spouse who is not loved, he runs away, as do the heroines. Bertram's running away to Florence offers a different kind of escape from that of the heroines. Not only is his escape to a city but to

one associated with sexual licentiousness. The King himself warns his courtiers against "Those girls of Italy." When Helena discovers Bertram in Florence, she entraps him by means of the bed trick, which inverts predicated male-female sex roles just as "girl gets boy" inverts what we would recognize as the cliched phrasing. Her action substitutes the legal for the licentious. Helena entraps Bertram a second time as well in 5.3 by her further employment of Diana before the King. Even the King becomes confused as Helena employs her skills. What allows everyone to escape prison is Helena's ability to use the language of empowerment without disturbing the status quo. . . .

Critical Essay #5

Robert Ornstein and John M. Love have provided the most comprehensive commentary on the barrier of social class in *All's Well That Ends Well* Ornstein argues that Bertram would likely have opposed any marriage forced on him at that particular stage in his life. What makes it worse for him is that Helena is a dependent in his household. Although the differences in their social station is his voiced objection to the union, he cares little about rank and wealth at this point in his life. If they were concerns, he would have likely embraced a union with a royal favorite whom the King has promised to grace with honor and wealth to make up for the disparity in their rank. Love calls the barrier of social class the play's "source of darkness" and its "alien, ineradicable element." He argues that social rank determines the fate of the three main characters- Helena, Bertram, and Parolles- despite their virtues and vices.

W. W. Lawrence notes that by the time Shakespeare wrote this play, social conventions had changed and there would not have been a huge difference in rank between Helena and Bertram. By bestowing Helena with so much honor and virtue, Shakespeare constructs Bertram's rejection of her as one precipitated by his own arrogance and inability to see Helena's superior qualities. Katharine Eisaman Maus notes that Helena's marriage to Bertram would help shore up a "lapse in the proper social order," with her excellence making up for his lack of it.

Alice Shalvi and Kenneth Muir both argue that in the play Shakespeare provides a running commentary on nobility and gentility- true versus false nobility and whether gentility is inherited by birth, based on wealth, or attained through one's virtue.

Source: "Dark Comedy and Social Class in *All's Well*" in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* Vol. XVIII, No.4, Winter, 1977, pp. 520-26.

[In this excerpt, Love examines haw social rank "debases" Helena and Bertram and determines their fate as well as that of Parolles. He argues that the issue of social rank is pervasive throughout all of the action of the play. Love also points out the differences between All's Well That Ends Well *and Boccaccio's story of Giletta of Narbonne, particularly in term of the difference between Helena's and Giletta's stations and haw this is directly related to their actions.]*

. . . The alien, ineradicable element of *All's Well that Ends Well* and the source of its darkness is the barrier of class. Class debases the characters of Bertram and Helena throughout the play, and in the final scene it determines their fates and that of Parolles, despite the measure of virtue and vice each character possesses. At that point Helena, "a maid too virtuous / For the contempt of empire" (II.ii.30-31), must plead with a pampered husband, Bertram's fellow-prodigal Parolles appears beaten into due submission, and Bertram is, in Johnson's words, "dismissed to happiness." The difference between *All's Well* and the comedies that preceded it lies in its greater darkness, for class pervades the action and influences all the main characters.

Shakespeare's Helena hardly resembles the heroine of William Painter's tale of "Giletta of Narbona," the likeliest source of the play. In the first place, she has been deprived of the wealth and independence that made Giletta her spouse's equal in all respects save those of blood. Giletta, "diligently loked unto by her kinsfolke (because she was riche and fatherlesse)," clearly managed her own affairs. Having "refused manye husbandes, with whom her kinsfolke would have matched her," she journeyed to Paris alone and unaided, and there sealed her bargain with the King. Once married, she "went to Rossiglione, where she was received of all his subjects for their Lady. And perceyving that through the Countes absence, all things were spO1led and out of order: she like a sage Ladye, with greate diligence and care, disposed his thinges in order againe, whereof the subjects rejoysed very much, bearing to her their harty love & affection." By contrast, from the moment the Countess presents Helena to Lafew as Gerard de Narbon's "sole child. . . bequeath'd to my overlooking" (I.i.35-36), Helena's dependence upon her mistress and adopted mother is apparent. As much "unseason'd" as Bertram, she presumes to travel to Paris only with the Countess's knowledge and approval, "my leave and love, / Means and attendants, and my loving greetings / To those of mine at court" (I.iii.246-48). There, with the aid of Lafew, Helena gains a timid entrance to the King. But she does not in any sense come into her own upon her return to Rossillion as the wife of Bertram.

In those scenes which Painter's narrative suggested, Helena's application to the King in act 2 and her encounters with Diana and the Widow, Helena displays a heroic confidence in the heavenly source of her healing power and in her eventual success. Elsewhere in the play, in keeping with the dependent status that Shakespeare bestowed upon her, she remains mistrustful of others, fearful of earning their contempt by her slightest gesture of self-assertion, and self-effacing before her wayward husband.

Fearfulness leads her first of all to deceive the Countess, ironically her staunchest ally. After the soliloquy she utters upon Bertram's farewell, Parolles's meditation on virginity, and ills farewell, "Get thee a good husband, and use him as he uses thee" (I.i.210-11), the soliloquy with which Helena concludes the first scene clearly outlines a plan to win Bertram by means of the king's disease:

Our remedies oft in ourselves doe he, Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. The king's disease- my project may deceive me, But my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me.
(I.i.212- 25)

Under persistent questioning by the Countess, Helena admits her love, but equivocates, and finally denies any intention of pursuing Bertram, notwithstanding the audience's knowledge to the contrary:

. . . I follow him
not
By any token of presumptuous suit,
Nor would I have him till I do deserve him; Yet never know how that desert should

be. ..
. . . O, then give pity To her whose state is such that cannot
choose
But lend and give where she is sure to lose; That seeks not to find that her search implies But riddle- like lives sweetly where she dies!
(I.iii.192-212)

Helena admits only that Bertram's journey reminded her of the king's illness, and when in the scene immediately following her interview with the Countess she demands of the King, "What husband in thy power I will command" (II.i.93), the deception becomes unmistakable. Helena's guardedness in the first scene and her frequent reiteration of courtesy titles and deferential gestures in the presence of the Countess suggest the acute consciousness of an inferior place that might lie behind this unwarranted secrecy.

Helena remains uneasy even after her miraculous cure of the King. In act 2, scene 3, she balks at the mere prospect of choosing a husband from among the assembled courtiers, anticipating a rebuke even though the King has expressly forbidden one:

Please it your majesty, I have done already.
The blushes on my cheeks thus whisper me:
"We blush that thou should'st choose, but,
be refused,
Let the white death sit on thy cheek for ever,
We'll ne'er come there again."_
(II.iii.68-72)

The terms of her address to individual lords indicate that Helena fears contempt for her class, not her person or unmaidenly forwardness:

The honour, sir, that flames in your fair eyes
Before I speak, too threat'ningly replies.
Love make your fortune twenty times above
Her that so wishes, and her humble love!
Be not afraid that I your hand should take;
I'll never do you wrong, for your own sake.
You are too young, too happy, and too good,
To make yourself a son out of my blood.
(II.iii.80- 97)

Like the unswerving support of the Countess, the young lords' protestations at being passed over underscore the extent of Helena's misapprehension.

Thereafter, the most poignant moments of the play grow out of Helena's self-effacement in the presence of her renegade husband: her choosing of him, "I dare not say I take you, but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live" (II.iii.l02-03); their farewell, in which Bertram denies her the courtesy of the kiss that she can barely bring herself to ask; her self-accusing letter to the Countess; her bittersweet recollection of the

rendezvous with Bertram, "But, 0, strange men! / That can such sweet use make of what they hate" (IV.iv.2122); and finally, her dramatic reappearance at Rossillion:

King Is there no
exorcist
Beguiles the truer offIce of mine eyes?
Is't real that I see?
He!. No, my good
lord;
'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see; The name and not the thing.
(V.iii.298-302)

Though Shakespeare gave Helena a far greater advantage over Bertram than Giletta held over Beltramo, Painter's heroine confronted her husband far more conscious of her power: "knowing that they were all assembled. . .. shee passed through the people, without chaunge of apparell, with her twoo sonnes in her arms. . .. 'My Lorde, . . . I nowe beseche thee, for the honoure of God, that thou wilt observe the conditions, which the twoo (knightes that I sent unto thee) did commaunde me to doe: for beholde, here in myne armes, not onelyone sonne begotten by thee, but twayne, and 1ikewyse thy Ryng. It is nowe time then (if thou kepe promise) that I should be received as thy wyfe.'"

Unlike her mistrust, Helena's humility is a virtue, yet the circumstances under which it appears make her at least potentially a pathetic heroine. Her nature and her circumstances ally her more nearly to the heroines of the later romances than to her predecessors in the festive comedies, but the pathos she evokes finds its closest counterpart in Desdemona. Even though it leads to a reconciliation with Bertram, her manner during the final scene cannot but recall her character and status throughout, as well as the somber emotions she has frequently stirred.

That the unworthy husband presumes upon the class barrier that works against his virtuous Wife is one of the pervasive ironies of *All's Well,* and in that sense Bertram's nobility of blood corrupts him by licensing his misdeeds. But Shakespeare's juxtaposition of each stage of Bertram's career and its counterpart in Parolles's creates a second irony, for the two finally emerge as wayward youths, possessed of the same degree and kind of vice, but distinguished by class and thus by fate.

The parallel courses that Bertram and Parolles run begin with their farewells to Helena in the opening scene. The Count, characteristically attentive to the niceties of rank, departs with the charge, "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her" (I.i.73-74). The farewell between Helena and Parolles that follows parodies Bertram's patronizing air, from the opening gambit:

Par. Save you, fair queen'
He!. And you, monarch!
Par. No.
Hel. And no.
(I.i.104-07)

to the valedictory:

Par. Little Helen, farewell. If I can remember
thee, I will think of thee at court.
Hel. Monsieur Parolles, you were born under
a charitable star.
(I.i.184-87)

That in the presence of the despised Parolles Helena relaxes the guard she had earlier maintained, and that his absurd meditation on virginity proves more fruitful advice than the elders' precepts, only increases the apparent distance between Helena and the nobles, a distance that her earlier silence and tears had suggested.

Parolles's fall from grace likewise mirrors Bertram's. In the same scene in which Bertram's presumption earns the King's rebuke, the Captain runs afoul of Lafew for forgetting his proper place:

Laf. Your lord and master dId well to make
ills recantation
Par Recantation! My lord! My master!
Laf. Ay. Is it not a language I speak?
Par. A most harsh one, and not to be understood without bloody succeeding. My master!
Laf. Are you companion to the Count Rossillion? *Par.* To any Count, to all Counts; to what is
man.
Laf. To what is Count's man.
(II.iii.186-94)

Lafew objects less to Parolles's outlandish garb and manner than to the pretensions to equality with his social superiors which the manner and garb signify: "Why dost thou garter up thy arms a' this fashion? Dost make hose of thy sleeves? Do other servants so? . . . You are more saucy with lords and honourable personages than the commission of your birth gives you heraldry" (II.iii.245-58). In this sauciness Parolles copies Bertram, yet reverses the attitude of his fellow-commoner, Helena. In his own humiliation Parolles seconds Bertram's resolve to flee "to those Italian fields / Where noble fellows strike" (II.iii.28687), strengthening the parallel.

Throughout the third and fourth acts, each step of the French lord's plot against Parolles immediately precedes the corresponding step in Helena's winning of Bertram. In the final two scenes of act 3, the lords unfold their scheme to Bertram and enlist his aid, and Helena does the same with Diana and the Widow. Act 4 begins with the ambush of Parolles, and his vow to reveal "all the secrets of their camp" (IV.i.84), a promise that seals his fate as surely as Bertram's gift 0 his family ring and promise of a rendezvous seals his in the scene following. In act 4, scene 3, the parallel lines converge. Not only does Bertram report his nocturnal meeting, which the audience knows to be the last stage of Helena's plan, but Parolles's exposure becomes the exposure of both wayward

youths. Although they would have Bertram believe that they aim at Parolles only "for the love of laughter" (III.ii.32), among themselves the French lords "would gladly see his company anatomiz'd, that he might take the measure of his own judgements" (IV.iii.30-32). Their disapproval of Bertram's conduct with Helena and Diana, his concern over the Captain's confession, "Nothing of me, has a'?" (IV.iii.109), the pointed warning that "If your lordship be in't, as I believe you are, you must have the patience to hear it" (IV.iii.11l-l2), the aptness of Parolles's slanderous portrait of the Count as "a foolish idle boy, but for all that very ruttish" (IV.iii.207), and the contrast between Bertram's rage and his companions' amusement at the slanders, all serve to unite the two youths in folly.

Once the time comes for Parolles and Bertram to answer for these equivalent offenses, the parallel abruptly breaks off. In the soliloquy that follows his exposure, Parolles seems beyond chastisement:

Yet am I thankful. If my heart were great
'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more,
But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft
As captain shall. Simply the thing I am
Shall make me live. Who knows himself a
braggart,
Let him fear this; for it shall come to pass
That every braggart shall be found an ass.
Rust, sword; cool, blushes; and Parelles live
Safest in shame; being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive. There's place and means for every man alive.
I'll after them.
(IV.iii.319-29)

Nevertheless, his offenses earn him the lowest place and the poorest means. When he reappears in the fifth act, he shows respect even to the Clown, whom he had earlier patronized: "Good Master Lavatch, give my Lord Lafew this letter; I have ere now, sir, been better known to you, when I have held familiarity with fresher clothes; but I am now, sir, muddied in Fortune's mood, and smell somewhat strong of her strong displeasure" (V.ii.lS). In the same scene, he abjectly confesses to Lafew,

;0, my good Lord, you were the first that found me"
(V.ii.41).

He acknowledges Bertram as his master in the trial scene, and that Lafew will see to it that atonement follows conviction of sin and repentance is apparent from the charge he gives his newest servant as they observe the lovers reunited: "Good Tom Drum, lend me a handkercher. So, I thank thee. Wait on me at home, I will make sport with thee. Let thy curtsies alone, they are scurvy ones" (V.iii.31S-18).

Bertram sins more than this and suffers less. He arrives at Rossillion unmuddied, spared the "exceeding posting day and night" (V.i.l) that Helena endured, needing no letter to the King, and in the height of fashionable attire. In the trial scene, Parolles

suffers the contempt of Diana, Lafew, the King, and even Bertram, while Bertram lies, contemns, slanders, but finally embraces Helena. In the absence of Parolles, one might call the treatment that Bertram receives mercy; the Captain's presence makes it something less attractive than that. . . .

Critical Essay #6

Robert Grams Hunter, W. W. Lawrence, Hazelton Spencer, and Robert H. Hethmon concur that the ending of the play is perfectly acceptable. Hunter, Lawrence, and Spencer argue that Shakespeare's audience would have been satisfied with the ending. Hethmon argues that Bertram endures enough suffering to effect a change in his character and thus makes his union with Helena at the end plausible. Michael Shapiro argues that although Helena has succeeded in fulfilling the terms of Bertram's letter, she has failed to secure his love after all until he forgives her and they serve as each other's mutual redeemer. Gerard J. Gross argues that the ending is plausible, but the future happiness of Helena and Bertram will likely be a more subdued one than usually dictated by a romantic comedy. Susan Snyder, Kenneth Muir, and Katharine Eisaman Maus disagree. Snyder and Muir find the lack of a significant speech of endorsement by Bertram of Helena one of the main elements contributing to the unsatisfactory ending. Maus finds the ending of the play considerably arbitrary and without resolution. Throughout the play, Maus argues, our narrative expectations are consistently dashed, and just when a promised ending seems to emerge, especially for Helena, she must regroup and expend more energy and effort to get the desired result. Gerard J. Gross argues that just when we are ready to accept a changed and redeemed Bertram at the end of the play (the King has forgiven him, he has agreed to marry Lafeu's daughter), Diana enters and we see once again the more base nature of his character.

Although Muir and Roben Hapgood agree that the ending, as it was written by Shakespeare, is lacking, a good performance on stage might help remedy that deficiency. Gross notes that the casting of Bertram is central to how the audience reacts to the ending of the play.

Source: "The Conclusion to *All's Well That Ends Well,"* in *Studies in English Literature,* Vol 23, No.2, Spring, 1983, pp. 257-76.

[In this essay, Gross traces the events if the play leading up to its conclusion, especially emphasizing haw we must have Some sense if progress in the love between Helma and Bertram if we are to understand the end if the play. He argues that there is indeed evidence that Bertram has come to love Helena, nuking the ending *more plausible despite its brevity and continued lack of physical expression if despite it between the two He also examines the subplot if Paroles in its effect on the ending if the play, arguing that it injects some much needed optimism]*

The web of our life is a mingled yam, good and ill together: Our virtues would be proud if our faults
whipt them not, and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherish'd by our virtues
First Lord

The title of *All's Well That Ends Well,* a title which epitomizes comic or romantic endings, invites us to pay special attention to the ending of this play, to examine it against the norm of comic ending. Some critics take the sense of the title at face value,

and believe with Hazelton Spencer that all does indeed end well, that "the play's title clinches the argument against its detractors." Others would see the meaning as wholly ironic, or would agree with the reviewer of a 1959 Tyrone Guthrie production that the play "raises a dozen issues, only to drop them all with a cynical, indifferent 'all's well that ends well'." The intent of this study will be to examine not simply whether all ends well, for our reactions at the end of any play are often complex, but rather what factors in the play and its ending contribute to our total response to the ending. I hope in my analysis to emphasize effects which were intended by Shakespeare, and to be comprehensive enough to avoid the criticism Richard Levin raises against an ironic approach which "operates at such a high level of abstraction that it can easily pass over such concrete details as the dramatic rhythm and its emotional effect." I will be very much concerned with dramatic" aspects of the play, not only with what is said, but with how it is said, with action, with characterization, and with rhythm or pacing in the ending.

Previous studies of the ending of *All's Well* have concen trated on some limited aspect of the ending . Roger Warren's anal is in 1969 emphasized the. Which the sonnets shed on the characteristic of Helena's love and Bertram's reaction to it. More recently, Ian Donaldson has found throughout the play a concentration on endings and beginnings, on ends and the means to those ends. His article, though intimately concerned with the problem of "ending well," does not devote extensive detail to the final scene itself. I would look on my attempt to analyze the entire context of the ending of *All's Well* as a means of complementing and extending these previous analyses.

A close look at the title can help identify two separate, though related, aspects of comic ending which will play an important role in the discussion to follow, for the cliché, "all's well that ends well," can be taken in two distinct senses. First, comedies and romances usually entail a great many complications, reversals, and perils before a resolution and happy conclusion are reached. Where the pure spirit of comedy reigns, the ending generates a feeling that all that went before can be reckoned at naught as long as the story has ended happily. The trials and tribulations are worth it. It is the end that counts- the sense of Helena's statement mid way through the play:

All's well that ends well! still the fine's the
crown;
What e'er the course, the end is the renown.
(IV.iv.35-36)

An emphasis on the "all" of "all's well that ends well" yields a second sense of the phrase, one close to the notion "they all lived happily ever after." In romances and fairy tales, and in comedies derived from these types, audiences are invited to believe that the marriage or re *union* at the end is the panacea to all problems raised in the story, and that thereby future happiness is assured. Because the story ends well- in marriage or betrothal all *will be* well. Beyond the end of the story lies a prospect of nothing but bliss. These two aspects of the tide are related: the stronger the feeling that the final happiness has conquered any sadness or *anxiety* encountered during the story, the stronger will be our conviction that the happiness will endure. Conversely, if we are somehow led to suspect that the goal for which the hero or heroine has travailed so

arduously has not been worth the effort- as E. K. Chambers reacts to Helena's conquest, "but after all it is a poor prize for which she has trailed her honour in the dust" - we would also be inclined to have some doubts about the future happiness of that hero or heroine.

A question that may legitimately be raised is whether we are ever justified in speculating on the future happiness of the hero and heroine in a story such as *All's Well* Thomas Marc Parrott voices a stricture against peering beyond the end of the play:

We may be fairly sure that Shakespeare's audience accepted the performance as an entertaining example of the old saying: 'all's well that ends well'. To ask whether the marriage of such an ill-matched pair was likely to be a happy one is to confuse drama with contemporary *life,* much in the fashion of a small boy at a performance of *Hamlet* who asked his father why Mr. Evans didn't marry Ophelia..
Yet, though it is undoubtedly over-naive to confuse drama and real life, it would also seem overly simplistic to rule out from drama or fiction any concern whatever for what happens beyond the end of a story. The writer of romance is generally not concerned about the psychological plausibility of events or of their consequences. If he tells us that the villain was suddenly converted, we believe him. And if he tells us that the couple lived happily ever after, we have no reason to doubt his word. But in a story where psychological plausibility has a legitimate place, where the motivation of characters is a clear concern of the author, and where the characters themselves examine or question their beliefs, feelings, or reasons for action, we have every reason to question the plausibility of the ending. This is not to say that we should speculate about some *specific* action of a character well beyond the conclusion of the plot. But *if* an author tries to tell us, "The marriage was a happy one," while the characters themselves, by their behavior or by what they tell us of themselves, preclude the possibility of that ever being so, we can well question the artistic integrity of the ending. As Barbara Smith points out in her study of poetic closure, marriage may not be an effective theme of closure when all that follows after marriage is not felt by the reader to be predictable.

These distinctions suggest that our response to the ending of *All's Well* depends to a large extent on what kind of play it is. For the most part, critics who see no real problems with the ending are those who are satisfied with a limited interpretation of the play, usually with an emphasis on romantic fable, or those who would emphasize the difference between the expectations of Elizabethan audiences and of modem audiences.

Thus, for Hazelton Spencer, "it was in a later age, when the old romances were no longer human nature's daily food, that *it* occurred to anyone to question whether the ending is really a happy one." There is a danger, however, of underestimating both the sophistication of Elizabethan audiences and of Shakespeare's intentions in the drama. Joseph Price, in his thorough review of critical reaction to *All's Well,* has identified six categories of interpretations of the play: "farcical comedy, sentimental romance, romantic fable, serious drama, cynical satire, and a thematic dramatization." After

presenting capsule summaries of the play as it might be acted with each of the six major interpretations dominant, Price concludes as follows:

Such constricted interpretations of *All's Well* have achieved at times a unity of form, but only at the expense of Shakespeare's intention, only by distortion of his play. For, the very recurrence of six major approaches throughout its history suggests a complexity which cannot legitimately be reduced to a single focus.

. . . Criticism generally has insisted that these elements jar, that only by the elimination of several can an artistic unity be imposed. But the very essence of Shakespearean comedy is variety; a blending of seemingly jarring worlds.

I would agree, with Price, on the valid existence in *All's Well* of all the elements identified here. There may even be a certain *unity* or artistic coherence in the very juxtaposition of romance and realism in the play, in the tension between these aspects. G. B. Harrison has stated of *All's Well* that Shakespeare "has asked himself the question: *if* this story had really happened, what sort of people would these characters have been?" As I hope to show, not only in character portrayal, but in other aspects of romance, particularly that of the typical happy ending, Shakespeare seems to be holding the conventions up to the scrutiny of realism.

In examining the aspects of romance and realism, it is particularly important to recognize the difference between the play itself and the romance narrative from which the plot is drawn. If we look specifically at the ending of *All's Well,* in terms of simple plot line we recognize the conclusion of a traditional "fulfillment of the tasks" episode, of which Boccaccio's tale of "Giletta of Narbona" is the nearest source. A nobleman, forced to many a woman beneath him in rank, imposes on her what he thinks are impossible conditions before he will accept her love. The woman cleverly and resource. fully fulfills the conditions, and the nobleman, faced with her presentation of the *fait accompli,* is moved to a change of heart, agrees to love her, and they live happily ever after. At the level of Boccaccio's tale we are not inclined to inquire about the motivation of either person in loving or not loving, about the worthiness or unworthiness of either person for the other's love, or about whether we have a right to suppose that they really did live happily ever after. If the ending of the story, including the hero's change of heart, occurs abruptly, our attention is not attracted to it in the fable because of the pace of the entire fable. But if we attend with some degree of sensitivity to the play *All's Well,* I would maintain that on all the accounts mentioned above we have, at least potentially, some cause to pause and wonder. Because the characters have come alive for us, have involved us in their motivations throughout the play, and because the play seriously addresses such themes as the problem of birth versus merit, the role of the woman as pursuer, and the differing male and female perspectives on honor, we find ourselves, with justification, concerned at the end of the play with how believable Bertram's conversion is, how believable Helena's and Bertram's love for each other is, and whether we are meant to feel that their lives *Wit* be happy ever after. And if events seem to conclude abruptly, we are warranted in asking why, or to what effect, since the rest of the play has been developed at a comparatively sophisticated level of psychological and motivational detail.

The potential problems with the ending, then, cluster around the two distinct, yet closely related aspects of the conclusion: the effect of the actions of both Bertram and Helena near the end on their relationship with one another, and the brevity or abruptness of the conclusion, especially the thirty lines after Helena's final en. try. Since Bertram, but not Helena, is on stage in the last scene before the final thirty lines, it is natural to start with his part in the scene.

Bertram has been castigated by numerous critics, beginning with Samuel Johnson, and has been defended by others as an acceptable romantic hero, even as "almost a model youth." One way of getting close to Shakespeare's intentions in establishing Bertram as a romantic hero is by comparing his treatment of Bertram with that of Beltramo in the source story by Boccaccio, retold by William Painter. The final episode of "Giletta of Narbona" is the aspect of the tale most modified by Shakespeare. In the original tale, after Giletta has obtained the ring and conceived twin sons, Beltramo hears that she has left Rossiglione, and he returns there, taking his place as rightful lord, and presumably ruling in prosperity for several years. Giletta, after having borne twin sons, returns to Rossiglione, arriving at an All Saints Day feast, at which are present many ladies and knights. Falling prostrate at the count's feet, Giletta begs to be received as his wife, and tells the whole story of how she fulfilled the conditions. ('Though her dialogue is not repeated in the tale, we can imagine this retelling taking a long time, and the count gradually responding with greater and greater admiration.) Beltramo reacts in a way that in no way diminishes his stature, but rather raises him in our esteem at the end:

For which cause the Counte knowing the thinges she had spoken, to be true (and perceiving her constant minde, and good witte, and the twoo faIre young boyes to kepe his promise made, and to please his subjectes, & the Ladies that made sute unto him, to accept her from that tyme foorth, as his lawefull wife, and to honour her) abjected his obstinate rigour: causing her to rise up, and imbraced and kissed her, acknowledging her againe for his lawefull wyfe. And after he had apparelled her, according to her estate, to the great pleasure and contentation of those that were there, & of al his other frendes not onely that daye, but many others, he kept great chere, and from that time forth, hee loved and honoured her, as his dere spouse and wyfe.

Shakespeare, however, instead of allowing Helena simply to appear before Bertram and beg to be received by him, as in the original tale, devises the entire episode where Diana confronts Bertram with the evidence of their supposed affair. By so doing, Shakespeare, instead of heightening Bertram's stature as "romantic hero," permits him to sink lower and lower in our estimation and in that of the characters of the play who are present. Even more significant, Bertram's exposure occurs just at that point in the play where he is *beginning* to rise in esteem. At the opening of Act V, the King is ready to allow Bertram a new start:

My honor'd lady,
I have forgiven and forgotten all,
Though my revenges were high bent upon
him,

And watch'd the time to shoot.
(V.iii.8.11)

The Countess and Lafew argue that Bertram's deeds were "done i' th' blade of youth" (V.iii.6) and are ready to give him the chance to prove himself wiser and more virtuous. We are at that stage in the plot where a typical romance might show the hero reformed, reconciled to the heroine, and where we would, with reason, expect him from that time forth to love and honor her as his dear spouse and wife. If Helena entered at this moment, we would have a typical happy ending with little to complain about other than its being somewhat expected and lacking in suspense.

But Shakespeare consciously (since It required considerable change from the original plot) chose *not* to end the play at this point. First Lafew, then the King, then the Countess notice that Bertram has Helena's ring, and Bertram tells a half-truth to explain his way out. Then Diana enters, and Bertram lies, then lies again in futile attempts to defend himself. His stature diminishes perilously from the promise shown at the beginning of the scene. It is obvious that Bertram has lost his composure and is thoroughly rattled: *"Countess.* He blushes, and 'tis hit" (V.iii.195). *"King,* You boggle shrewdly, every feather starts you" (V.iii.232). What sort of candidate is this lying, shaken creature for the "happily ever after" romantic ending? Bertram bears little resemblance to Beltramo, and seems to have gone far beyond the "few mistakes before he straightens out and settles down" posited for the romantic hero by Spencer.

We might sense in Bertram's degradation a degree of burlesque of romantic heroes and plots, a deliberate inversion of the expected progress of a romantic hero. Viewed against the ideal image of a romantic hero, Bertram's actions have a comic cast. One can imagine a performance in which the actor, taking a cue from the King's "You boggle shrewdly," stutters and overplays his responses in an obvious, desperate attempt to fabricate a story. Yet the comic aspect can be carried too far. The more we laugh at Bertram, the less believable he is as a beloved of Helena. A totally comic, over-acted Bertram would destroy any sense of romantic reconciliation between Helena and Bertram in their final reunion.

The question of how Bertram can be what he is, and still be attractive to Helena is, indeed, one of the knottiest in the play, and it is a problem demanding the utmost sense of balance in the actor playing the part of Bertram. Bertram has so many faults that it would be easy to play him at the opposite extreme, not as a comic figure, but as a totally unsympathetic character- an arrogant, conceited, headstrong, lecherous, deceitful, shallow cad. Such a characterization would likewise make Helena's love for Bertram look absurd. There are, however, clear indications in the text that Bertram possesses attractive qualities. A key scene is Helena's arrival in Florence. We learn immediately from Diana that Bertram has indeed shown the bravery, won the "honor," which he had dreamed of. Perhaps most significant is Diana's spontaneous exclamation at Bertram's appearance as the French soldiers match by (even though she has been warned of his dishonest solicitations):

'tis a most gallant
fellow.
I would he lov'd his wife. If he were
honester
He were much goodlier. Is't not a handsome
gentleman?
(III.v.78-80)

This is in one sense a variation upon the statement of the First Lord, "The web of our life is of a mingled yam, good and ill together" (IV.iii.71-72). But its principal effect is to emphasize the credibility of Bertram as an object of Helena's love. Throughout the play, despite Bertram's dishonorable acts, there must be that flair, that presence- and it must show through in the acting of the part- that elicits the response, "'tis a most gallant fellow."

If Bertram is, at least to some degree, credible as a person whom Helena might love, what can be said of the course of that love throughout the play? It is crucial for an understanding of the conclusion of the play to have some sense of the progress of the love between Bertram and Helena. I would like to turn, therefore, to a closer look at Helena, first at her love for Bertram, and then at her as a possible object of Bertram's love.

In Helena's meditation on Bertram in the first scene she appears the typical young romantic heroine, perhaps slightly self-consciously *so,* and concerned perhaps too much with appearance:

'Twas pretty, though a plague To see him every hour, to Sit and draw
His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls.
(I.i.92-94)

She is at once idealistic and adolescent in her adoration, and also aware of her excesses. If Bertram is unseasoned, Helena is also, in matters of love. Both will mature; their romantic ideals will be tempered in the course of the play.

AfterBertram's shameful treatment of Helena following the marriage, we may have difficulty understanding her unswerving adulation for him, expressed immediately after reading his disdainful letter to her at Rossilion:

Poor Lord, is't I
That chase thee from thy country, and expose Those tender limbs of thine to the event
Of the none-sparing war?
(III.ii.102-105)

Helena here lapses into romantic sentiment similar to that expressed in the first scene, and we may find that the dichotomy between what we know of Bertram and how Helena responds to him makes this one of the most difficult moments of the play. However, this soliloquy again reinforces the feeling that Bertram possesses some quality which inspires such devotion.

In the bed-trick episode, Bertram reaches a low in honor, which contrasts with his "honorable service" on the battlefield, when he parts with the family ring in exchange for an expected night with Diana. We do not, of course, witness the bed scene with Helena, but we are allowed as close an approach as possible to the event, one which pushes Elizabethan decorum to the limit, in Helena's reflections after lying with Bertram. Her comments in IV.iv are significant in two ways. They serve to emphasize the distance of this play from pure romantic fable, a story told for story's sake. The play is at this point perhaps farthest removed in spirit from its source tale. Can we imagine any heroine in a romance reflecting and expressing her thoughts in terms such as these?

But 0, strange men,
That can such sweet use make of what they
hate,
When saucy trusting of the cozen'd thoughts Defiles the pitchy night; so lust doth play
With what it loathes for that which is away But more of this hereafter.
(IV.iv.21-26)

Here Helena, aware that Bertram's sexual advances were made to one he thought to be Diana, most vividly reveals herself capable of feelings, reflections, and changes of mood. It is this change of mood that is the second important aspect of this speech. There is present an unmistakable sense of disillusion which contrasts sharply with Helena's earlier idolatry of Bertram. She has heard talk, from the women of Florence, of Bertram's lust; now she has experienced it herself. What a contrast this first union of Helena and Bertram is to the typical romantic meeting of lovers, and what a contrast to the union she would have idealized in her daydreams at Rossilion. It has been a union from which their child will be born, but on Bertram's part there has been no love in it, only lust. Helena, it is true, takes up the pursuit with her customary zeal- "All's well that ends well yet" (V.i.25)- but I would claim that from this point on some doubt has been cast, in Helena's mind, on whether the prize will, in fine, be worth the effort of the chase.

The words "prize" and "chase" underscore the fact that in this play it is definitely the woman who takes the initiative in seeking a mate. This active role of Helena has, however, been overplayed by some analysts. One strain of criticism sees her as relentlessly pursuing Bertram by a plan carefully thought out and consciously executed at every point in the play. Thus, for E. K. Chambers, Shakespeare has turned "man's tender helpmate, like Mr. Bernard Shaw's Anne Whitefield, into the keen and unswerving huntress of man." Bertrand Evans has espoused this view of Helena (though her pursuit is seen as ultimately for the good of Bertram), and a recent article by Richard A Levin carries the interpretation of Helena as deceptive schemer to even greater extremes. Such an interpretation, however, though supportable at certain points in the play, strains for credibility at other points, and even posits a kind of perversion of theatrical conventions. Moreover, this view of Helena as huntress does little to make her a plausible object of Bertram's love at the end of the play.

Granted that Helena is the initiator of the "romance"

With Bertram, her dominant qualities appear to be vitality (we have seen the like ill Bertram), shown both in her actions and her speech, and a remarkable resourcefulness- an ability to spot and take advantage of circumstances to further her ends. *All* important example of this is the scene of Helena's first arrival in Florence. *After* some discussion of a countryman of Helena's, it is the widow, and not Helena, who first suggests the possibility of Diana's aiding Bertram's wife to regain her husband: "This young maid might do her / A shrewd turn, if she pleas'd" (III.v.67-68). The story of what unfolds after Helena's meeting with the women of Florence is much more plausible, as well as more fascinating and appealing, if seen as an instance of Helena's exceptional ability to seize the occasion and respond to opportunities as they arise, rather than as a plot preplanned in every detail. Up to at least this point in the play the evidence suggests that Shakespeare intended Helena as an engaging, sympathetic character, whose love includes a strong concern for the good and happiness of Bertram.

With the information from the widow that Bertram is soliciting Diana's favors, Helena's ready wit conceives the plan of having Diana agree to a meeting, and then substituting herself for Diana in the dark. At this point there is no doubt that the sudden prospect of fulfilling Bertram's seemingly impossible conditions is a strong motive for Helena. The conditions were stated as a cruel, cynical jest by Bertram; but since they were set down in writing, she will hold him to them, if she can. Yet even here, motives of Bertram's better welfare are not entirely absent. Bertram is, after all, bent on committing adultery. Conveniently, Helena can save Bertram from sin in deed, if not in intent, while at the same time fulfilling his conditions. By this time she is clearly bent on helping herself to win a husband. However, the progress of her pursuit has not manifested the stealthy, predatory quality that many commentators find so unlikeable.

The final scene of the play, when Bertram is confronted with his misdeeds, contains the instance where Helena's scheming is the most deliberate and calculating. We can ask, now, what effect the actions of this final scene have on Helena's character and on the possibility of Bertram's loving her. Whatever her motivation, Helena has placed Bertram in an extremely tight spot in the moments before the conclusion of the play. It has been observed that Helena's absence from the stage till the final moments, with Diana managing the exposure of Bertram (after the careful instructions of Helena, of course), keeps our sympathies from being turned too strongly from Helena. This piece of plotting is theatrically effective in keeping our attention from Helena; yet she is the person directly responsible for planning Bertram's confrontation with his own misdeeds.

Helena's actions are explained by some critics on the basis that Bertram must reach some extreme limit of psychological or moral shock before he can be "converted" by the virtuous or providential Helena. Her motives are mainly a redemption of Bertram. As Harold Wilson says,

Helena in *All's Well* is not seeking justice of the King but Bertram's love. In Boccaccio's tale, the heroine's fulfillment of the tasks is enough to win her happy union with the hero. In Shakespeare, Helena's efforts would go for nothing did not Bertram experience a change of heart. In the climax, everything is directed toward this end; and this is the

abundant psychological justification of the means used, for Bertram is still far from penitent as we see him ill the opening of the last scene.

Yet there is evidence that Bertram has come to love Helena, evidence that occurs well before Bertram is faced with :Helena's reappearance. At the beginning of the last scene, when Bertram first meets the King, under no prompting or pressure, in the course of explaining a previous affection for Lafew's daughter, he refers to Helena:

Thence it came
That she whom all men prais'd, and whom
myself,
Since I have lost, have lov'd.
(V.ili.52-54)

Though the reference is made obliquely, Shakespeare seems to have intended the audience to advert to it, for he has the King repeat the reference to Bertram's love for Helena, and so reinforce the impression:

Well excus'd.
That thou didst love her, strikes some scores
away
From the great compt.
(V.iii.55-57)

Shakespeare, then, seems to have fashioned the latter part of the playas it relates to Bertram's love for Helena with the following effects. The audience is told that Bertram has finally come to love Helena- and this in conditions in which they would have no strong reasons to suspect the statement. Then Bertram undergoes the unexpected reversals, some schemed by Helena, that lead up to her sudden appearance. At this point, Bertram has lied himself into a position from which he cannot escape without help. He is, independent of what Helena's intentions are, trapped. There is nothing *in what immediately preceded,* or in what Helena has contrived, to motivate Bertram's love or to support our belief that he means his later claim to love her "ever dearly." Yet we know from his previous statement that he did profess to love her. He is at one and the same time in a state of having previously inclined towards love of :Helena, yet forced to submit by actions which have not served to reinforce that love, but if anything, to undermine it. Bertram could not be blamed if he went back on his statement at the beginning of this scene and turned a cold heart towards Helena.

Furthermore, Bertram has lied so much that he is in danger of being in the position where no one will believe *anything* he says thereafter, much like the shepherd in the fable who cried "Wolf! Wolf!" On :Helena's part, though Bertram had shown qualities that made her love for him believable, most recently he has behaved so despicably that we are entitled to serious doubts about how :Helena or anyone could now accept and cherish such a creature. She has already expressed signs of disillusionment after her midnight tryst with Bertram. The possibility of a "happily ever after" ending may still be within reach, but considerable dialogue and action would seem to be needed to present

such a happy ending convincingly to an audience. Yet, as presented by Shakespeare, what do we have? Thirty lines of compressed dialogue, much of it stated in negative or conditional language. A close analysis of the final section of the dialogue will help identify some of the effects it produces.

First, I have noted an apparent change in Helena's attitude towards Bertram with her earlier words, "But O, strange men." I would maintain that this same bitter-sweet mood, tinged with melancholy, is manifested in the final scene. Helena's entry is not triumphant, jubilant. Her opening words, spoken to the King, are

No, my good lord,
'Tis but the shadow of a wife you *see,*
The name, and not the thing.
(V.iii.306-308)

Though the sense refers directly to the fact that her marriage (in Bertram's and the world's eyes) was never consummated, is there not some connotation that she will never now quite attain "the thing" of wife-hood, the ideal of love she had sought so earnestly? The words imply that her love is now but a shadow of what it once was. Her words to Bertram,

O my good lord, when I was like this maid, I found you wondrous kind,
(V.iii.309-10)

do not overtly claim that he is *not* "wondrous kind" now, but the implication is there. Helena has fulfilled the conditions, reached her goal

There is your ring,
And look you, here's your letter. This it says: "When from my finger you can get this ring,
And are by me with child, etc." This is done.
(V.iii.310- 13)

But missing is the sense of victory we may have earlier been led to expect from her words, "the fine's the crown. . . the end is the renown." One senses a hint of weariness at so long and arduous a chase after an object of ever diminishing brightness and value.

As for Bertram, we might ask what effects in his final words lend credibility to his professions of repentance and love. One way in which a character caught in falsehood might convince his hearers that what he now says should be believed is by lengthy explanations, giving reasons for his past conduct and emphatic assurance of reform in the future. But the very opposite strikes us in the concluding lines of the play. The extreme brevity of both Bertram's and Helena's speeches contrasts with the duration of dialogue we might expect, given the seriousness of the complications to be resolved. Some critics have seen this brevity as a defect on Shakespeare's part. For example, Kenneth Muir would have preferred more explanation by Bertram-"If the clown were given better jokes and Bertram a better speech at the end, the play would leave us with feelings of greater satisfaction." On the positive side, it must be conceded that seeing and hearing the actor express repentance can make the scene more effective on the

stage than in reading. Also on the side of believability for Bertram, his speech patterns, despite the brevity, have a ring of sincerity. The repetitions- "Both, both. O, pardon!" and "I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" - seem intended by Shakespeare as an earnest mode of speech. A similar example might be Cordelia's "No cause, no cause" *(Lear,* IV.vii.74).

Yet, in spite of these positive aspects, there is still a sense of something missing from Bertram's protestations. They lack weight: three lines in all to accomplish repentance, reconciliation, and assurance of love. Also countering the earnestness given the lines by the repetition of words is the curious fact that Bertram's expression of love is stated as a condition:

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly. (V.iii.315- 16)

Even more curious, these words are spoken not to Helena, the one he is professing to love, but to the King. Bertram's *only* statement directly to Helena is the brief "Both, both. O, pardon!" Despite the desirability of not allowing the audience to dwell too much on Bertrarn's faults, it would have been easy for Shakespeare, if he had wanted, to have given Bertram more words, if not of explanation, at least of positive profession of his love.

If Bertram's dialogue is brief, Helena's is somewhat fuller. There exists, however, the same shortage of direct address to Bertram, and the same conditional tone. Her first words, on entering, are addressed not to Bertram, but to the King, which may be natural enough, since the King raises the question, "Is't real that I see?" (V.iii.306). But then, in response to Bertram's conditional statement of love, her reply is phrased not only as a condition, but also in strongly negative words:

If it appear not plain and prove untrue, Deadly divorce step between me and you! (V.iii.317-18)

The conditional phrasing may be meant, in part, with the rhyming couplets, to balance Bertram's statement. But if the balance and repetition have any effect of emphasis, what they call attention to is the very conditional nature of the statements. Then, after Helena's statement, "Deadly divorce step between me and you," almost in the same breath it would seem, Helena turns to the Countess and exclaims, "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" (V.iii.319). The Countess's love for Helena must, of course, be acknowledged; but the quickness with which Helena turns from Bertram to the Countess says little for the capability of Bertram to hold her attention.

Finally, Helena's attention to the Countess raises the interesting question of when, if at all, Helena and Bertram might be expected to embrace. If the words of the conclusion are abrupt, but the playwright intended a fully genuine feeling that all is well, we could expect this to be shown by a kiss and embrace between Bertram and Helena. But if one reads the final lines beginning from Helena's "No, my good lord, / 'Tis but the shadow of a wife you see," to the end, and tries to imagine plausible stage action, there is no

moment when Helena and Bertram might reasonably embrace without doing violence to the dialogue or interrupting it awkwardly with stage action. Bertram might fall on his knees with "Both, both. O, pardon!" but it is difficult to imagine them kissing at this point. The last plausible moment when they might embrace is at Helena's final words to Bertram, "Deadly divorce step between me and you!" Fine words on which to hug and kiss. We can imagine Helena falling on the Countess's neck at the words, "O my dear mother, do I see you living?," but not upon Bertram's neck.

The inescapable impression from the final thirty lines is one of a deliberate holding back of effects which could easily have produced a much more convincing, resounding ring of all being well than we now have in the play. One feels that Shakespeare has taken the standard romantic happy ending, and if not stood it on its head, has at least abbreviated it and diluted its impact so much that we are forced to question whether the simple fact that hero and heroine are united at the end is any guarantee of their achievement of happiness. If such is the effect of the ending, is it to be seen as entirely skeptical on Shakespeare's part? An example of Northrop Frye's category of irony; a cynical demonstration of the impossibility of all ending well? Thus far in this analysis I have discussed solely the main plot, and have said nothing of the subplot of Parolles. I believe, however, that this subplot has an important role in the play, not only thematically, but also in determining how the ending works.

Though Parolles is undoubtedly a secondary character, he is in some ways the most memorable in *All's Well* Whatever else may be said of Parolles, he is not lacking in faults. He is boastful, vain, ostentatious, untruthful, lecherous, and under all that, cowardly. Do we like him? Well, yes. Our sympathies turn more towards him after his exposure; but even at his worst he has a quality that attracts us to him. As Helena remarks early in the play,

Yet these fix'd evils sit so fit in him
That they take place when virtue's steely
bones
Looks bleak i' th' cold wind.
(I.i.l02-104)

But what primarily maintains our liking for Parolles is his vitality of spirit. Parolles is enthusiastic; he lives. He may be eager about the wrong things- the latest clothes; the latest words; the esteem of the court; the esteem of his fellow soldiers- but he is constantly eager. His vitality virtually bursts its bonds when he senses the chance of accompanying Bertram to the Tuscan wars: "To th' wars, my boy, to th' wars!" (II.iii.278). Perhaps Parolles's vitality shows forth most prominently in his language. Though he is an aspirer after the status of courtier, and though being fashionable is of highest concern, he is no Witwoud, no *mere* imitator of the fashionable wit of others. Even when being held blindfolded at the hands of his supposed captors, the inventiveness of his language is irrepressible. Descriptions such as his claim of the first Captain Dumaine's corruptibility- "Sir, for a cardecue he will sell the fee-simple of his salvation, the inheritance of it, and cut th' entail from all remainders, and a perpetual succession for it perpetually" (IV.iii.27881)- elicit the admiration of his captors: "He hath outvillain'd

villainy so far, that the rarity redeems him' (IV.iii.273-74). Finally, and most important, when Parolles has been beaten as low as anyone can be, it is his supreme vitality that sparks his recovery.

Up to the beginning of Act IV we had seen much of Parolles the braggart. Now, in the first scene of Act IV, with Parolles on his solitary foray at night near enemy lines, we are allowed to peer a little into his soul. We find out that Parolles *realIZes* he is a braggart and a coward: "I find my tongue is too foolhardy, but my heart hath the fear of Mars before it, and of his creatures, not daring the reports of my tongue. . .. What the devil should move me to undertake the recovery of this drum, being not ignorant of the impossibility, and knowing I had no such purpose?" (IV.i.28-36). With his overhearers we respond in amazement, "Is it possible he should know what he is, and be that he *is?"* (IV.i.4445), and we may begin to have some compassion for Parolles.

The double-talk scenes are some of the funniest in Shakespeare, not only because of Parolles's wit in his responses, but because of the ironies and the asides of his captors. But when Parolles shows his abject cowardice, and when his blindfold is removed and he is completely humiliated by the revelation that his captors are his friends, the humor changes. We have an instance, common in Shakespeare, of a baiting where the edge is allowed to become too sharp. The departure first of Bertram and the Lords, and then of the Interpreter and Soldiers, becomes cruel. Parolles, left alone on stage to face his humiliation, is a pathetic sight. It would not be surprising if he were to remain crushed, completely undone. But there are still remnants of his irrepressible *esprit.* In his touching speech of self- knowledge and acceptance, he resolves to make the best of what he has:

Yet am I thankful. If my heart were great,
'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more.
But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft
As captain shall. Simply the thing I am
Shall make me live.
Rust sword, cool blushes, and, Parolles, live
Safest in shame! Being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive! There's place and means for every man alive.
I'll after them.
(IV.iii 330-40)

Parolles not only achieves self-acceptance; he is also accepted by Lafew, previously his sharpest critic. Though Lafew still teases Parolles, he concludes their meeting after Parolles's return affectionately and encouragingly. "Sirrah, inquire further after me. I had talk of you last night; though you are a fool and a knave you shall eat. Go to; follow" (V.ii.52-54). As E. M. Blistein observes of Parolles, "from artificial captain he has become a nobleman's genuine fool, and he does not mind. He is, in fact, grateful. The audience has laughed at him for pretending to be something he was not. Lafew hence forth will laugh with him for being what he is."

The parallel between Parolles's exposure and humiliation at the hands of his comrades and Bertram's later exposure at the hands of Diana has often been commented upon. Both are liars, and both are confronted directly with the evidence of their lies. There is stark irony in Bertram's disavowal of Parolles's testimony at the very moment when Bertram is speaking lies of much more serious consequences:

He's quoted for a most perfidious slave, With all the spots a' th' world tax'd and debosh'd.
Whose nature sickens but to speak a truth. Am I that or this for what he'll utter, That will speak any thing?
(V.iii.205-209)

The fact that Bertram has been blind enough to be "misled with a snipt-taffeta fellow" (IV.v.1-2) may lessen his stature in our eyes; yet it contributes to making his blindness to Helena's worth more believable. One might expect that being made aware of the possibility of deception by Parolles might open Bertram's eyes to his lack of perception elsewhere, specifically to the meanness of his behavior towards Helena. In fact, the failure of Bertram to profit from the lesson of Parolles has been seen by some critics as a flaw in the play. G. K. Hunter, for example, states that Parolles, as well as Helena, the Countess, the King, and Diana, all have to face an "acceptance of death leading to fuller life,"_ a point of reconciliation "reached only by self-sacrifice, by an acceptance of oneself as outcast and despised." Hunter concludes, "that the pattern is not fully achieved by Bertram is the major thematic failure of the play." Shakespeare, however, chose not to complete the parallel in such a neat fashion as this.

Though a relationship between the lesson learned by Parolles in the sub-plot and the concluding action of the main plot is not made explicit by Shakespeare, the episode 0 Parolles is intended to affect the way the ending works for us. What the unmasking of Parolles and his conversion to foolery adds is a badly needed note of optimism. We have seen that Bertram and Helena have achieved, at the conclusion of the play, a state of outward, but not entirely convincing, reconciliation. The conclusion lacks the weight and positiveness required to assure us that all indeed will be well, given the obstacles that seem to exist to a happy union between Bertram and Helena. But this uncertainty is relieved by Parolles- by his presence and by the memory of his previous scenes.

Parolles does not have a part in the dialogue at the very conclusion of the play, the last thirty lines. Yet he is not only present, but definitely a part of the concluding action of the play. Shakespeare's technique here, though used with less emphasis, is reminiscent of his ending *Much Ado* with the conclusion of the Benedick-Beatrice story. He turns the audience's attention from potential problems to a more satisfying emotional resolution. Parolles, accepting himself as he is, had earlier been received into the graces of Lafew. Now our attention is again directed toward this part of the plot, though it is a sub- plot.

Lafew's final speech aids the conclusion in several ways. His emotional reaction, "Mine eyes smell onions, I shall weep anon" (V.iii.320), though comic, convinces us, as neither Bertrams's nor Helena's words have, that there is something genuine in this reunion. His request of a handkerchief from Parolles (rather than from someone else) is not

without purpose: "Good Tom Drum, lend me a handkerchief. So, I thank thee; wait on me home, I'll make sport with thee. Let thy curtsies alone, they are scurvy ones" (V.iii.321-24). The reference to "Good Tom Drum" is a brief reminder of the scenes where Parolles was humiliated because he offered to recapture his drum. The sight of Parolles dressed in smelly, muddy clothes is an additional reminder of his disgrace, and also of his self-acceptance. In the simple gesture of asking for a handkerchief, Lafew indicates his complete acceptance of Parolles. His scorn at the end is entirely good-humored, and his invitation to "make sport" is an invitation to laugh with him and not at him.

Parolles's "conversion" has helped establish the spirit of this comedy, and his presence in the last scene, a symbol of self-knowledge and self-acceptance, cannot but help influencing the audience's reaction to the scene. Even though Helena and Bertram do not make explicit application of Parolles's dictum, "There's place and means for every man alive," the audience should be in such a frame of mind. Bertram may have proved that Parolles's earlier description of him, "a foolish idle boy; but for all that very ruttish" (IV.iii.215-16), was all too true, and he may now, in Helena's eyes, be far from the romantic hero she had doted on. Helena, for all the fine qualities the Countess had admired in her, may have become too persistent in her pursuit in the end. "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together." But, if there's place and means for such as Parolles, there can well be place and means for such as Bertram and Helena to find happiness, in spite of their shortcomings.

In the ending of *All's Well,* Shakespeare seems to have directly confronted the traditional romantic ending, where the marriage or reunion of hero and heroine is assumed to guarantee that all problems are resolved and that bliss will ensue for ever after. The ending of *All's Well* is constructed so that we cannot possibly project for Bertram and Helena the ecstatic happiness of the traditional romance- the happiness that was perhaps naively expected by Helena at the start of the play. But neither is the play entirely cynical about any possibility of happiness. Helena has matured, and Bertram may at least be at the threshold of maturity. We may expect happiness, but a much more subdued happiness than posited by romance- neither mate will be a perfect person. The happiness foreshadowed for Bertram and Helena may be similar to that expected by Parolles. He has not now the esteem he'd had; his goals and expectations are greatly reduced. But he has also not the constant pressure to *seem* a courtier nor the fear of being found out. He can live at peace with himself. "Though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat."_ So with Bertram and Helena, their goals and expectations may be modified. But within these limitations, why not expect that they will be happy? All may be well at the end of the play, but on very different terms from what was projected earlier in the play and from what romantic convention would tell us.

Critical Essay #7

W. W. Lawrence and Robert Hapgood evaluate Helena in glowing terms; everything she says and does is noble, heroic, and fully justified. They find her ability to fulfill the terms of Bertram's letter clever and courageous. E. K. Chambers and Clifford Leech conclude otherwise. Chambers describes her as a woman driven by sex alone and a degraded example of womanhood. Leech finds her devious in her ambition and the planning of her ultimate victory- her final union with Bertram- unsavory.

Other critics argue that her character is more multidimensional than the critics above suggest. Robert Grams Hunter and Sharon R. Yang, for example, find in her regenerative qualities, whereby she restores the kingdom and redeems Bertram. Michael Shapiro argues that Helena and Bertram are mutual redeemers, whereby each character "regains through submission and humility what has been lost through self-assertion."'

Susan Snyder describes the odd mix in Helena of initiative and passivity, a combination that is unusual for Shakespeare's heroines. All of Shakespeare's heroines (except, oddly enough, Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream)* wait to be courted; Helena overtly chases the man she wants. Robert Ornstein also finds Helena to be a complex character. She is single-minded in her determination to form a romantic attachment with Bertram, yet her temperament is decidedly unromantic. He notes that she is calculated (not calculating) and intelligent in her planning and pursuit of Bertram.

Source: *"All's Well That Ends Well,"* in *Shakespeare's* Comedies: *From Roman Farce to Romantic Mystery,* University of Delaware Press, 1986, pp. 173-94.

[In the following excerpt, Ornstein examines the characters of Helena and Bertram throughout the play, focusing primarily on Helena. He finds her more complex than Bertram, though she, like he, is somewhat self-absorbed in her own desires (hers is to become Bertrams wife). Ornstein also notes that the play is lacking in romantic idealism because of the characterizations of Helena and Bertram]

It is not easy to say why Shakespeare wanted to write a play about characters as limited and uninspiring as Helena and Bertram. A relatively straightforward dramatization of Boccaccio's tale of Giletta and Beltramo, *All's Well* is the only comedy that centers on a single love- or rather, a single love-hate- relationship. No Hero, Nerissa, or Celia stands by Helena's side; for most of the play she is a solitary figure who keeps her own counsel and pursues her ends without confiding them to any other person. For a time Bertram has Parolles as a companion, but he is nearly incapable of intimacy or emotional attachment. The minor characters of *All's Well* are, by and large, more attractive than its romantic protagonists, but none are as fully realized or as important to the plot as Leonato is in *Much A* do. Nevertheless the warm-heartedness of the Countess, Lafew, the King, and Bertram's fellow officers is important to the emotional resolution of the play precisely because it is a quality somewhat lacking in Helena and completely absent in Bertram.

Compared to the comedies I have discussed already, *All's Well* seems gray 1£ not bleak, not because its viewpoint is jaded or disillusioned but because its chief characters do not delight us by their verve or humor or expansiveness of thought. Bertram is the least philosophical and perhaps the least intelligent of the heroes of the comedies. He does not reflect on his experiences, much less on life, and he seems incapable of introspection and self-knowledge. He never wrestles with alternatives even though he finds himself repeatedly in difficult predicaments. Although his conduct appalls those who love him, he is never burdened by shame or guilt, and he can be dishonest as well as callous. Because his inner life (if he has one) is hidden from an audience, **it** knows and judges him by his acts, which are thoroughly unlovely. Helena is a more complex character who is revealed as much through soliloquy as through dialogue. Unlike Bertram she is thoughtful and reflective by nature, yet her speeches lack choric amplitude and range because she is as self-absorbed as he 15, forever occupied with her quest to become his wife. More than any other heroine, Helena is single-minded in her romantic dedication, and yet she is the least romantic in temperament of any Shakespearean heroine. As serious as her namesake, Helena of *A Dream,* she is incapable of light-heartedness or gaiety. Love does not inspire her to flights of whimsical or ecstatic poetry, and she seems nearly incapable of spontaneity. Thus while Helena will dare all for love, the Countess's remembrance of her youthful passion is the most poignant expression of romantic yearning in the play; and the only love scene, ironically enough, is the one in which Bertram attempts to seduce Diana. The hero and heroine are alone together only once and that is when Bertram takes his leave, never expecting to see Helena again. He seems almost incapable of tenderness, and she is almost indifferent to what he desires in her determination to become his wife.

The absence of romantic idealism in *All's Well* is not an inevitable result of Shakespeare's choice of the Boccaccian tale, which ends with the loving embrace of husband and wife. Even as Petruchio is less attractive than his counterpart Ferando in *A Shreu;* Bertram is less attractive than Boccaccio's Beltramo, although he is not coarsely contemptuous of women, as Petruchio is. Immature and inexperienced, he is quite incapable of seeing through Parolles' preposterous affectations, which he takes for courtly graces. He is also incapable of seeing beyond his immediate desires, but his faults would seem pardonable enough if Helena's determined pursuit of him did not bring out the' worst in his character. He wants what most young gentlemen want- to win honor on the field of battle and to sow a few wild oats *before* he settles down to marriage and adult obligations. His youthful male instinct for freedom and adventure is opposed by Helena's desire to turn the would-be hero into a husband and father. Having just escaped his mother's watchful eye, Bertram yearns to prove himself a man among men. The disclosure in act 5 of his earlier attraction to Lafew's daughter seems almost an afterthought by Shakespeare because one cannot imagine Bertram in love or desiring to share his life with a woman. He does not love Diana or seek to win her love; he wants only the spoil of her maidenhead, which is no less a trophy than the capture of an enemy's drum. After he has proved his gallantry, won the esteem of his fellow officers, and possessed the prize of Diana's virginity, he is ready to marry Maudlin, especially when it will redeem him in the eyes of the King, his mother, and Lafew.

Bertram does not pose any problems of interpretation; apart from his gallantry in war, he is incurably ordinary and lacking in scruple. Helena is less easily explained. As the play opens, her situation at Rossillion is comparable to Viola's situation in Orsino's household; both adore a great nobleman who is far above their station in life and who knows nothing of their love. Where Viola is resigned to her unhappy circumstances, Helena is determined to wed Bertram, and her single-minded quest of that goal inspires continuing critical debate. No critics have said of Olivia what distinguished Shakespeareans have said of Helena, that she is enthralled and degraded by sexual passion, even though Olivia's desire for Cesario is more obsessive and reckless than Helena's desire for Bertram. But then Olivia responds to what is beautiful in Viola's character while Helena's attraction to the callow Bertram must necessarily be merely physical, just as her pursuit of him must be calculated and covert. Like Olivia, Helena will accept any humiliation for the sake of love, but she is never impulsive or reckless in seeking Bertram, and she does not, like Olivia, openly declare her love and beg to be loved in return. She has adored Bertram for some time, it seems, without once speaking or even hinting of her feeling for him and without trying to draw his attention to her. When she confesses her love in soliloquy, she does not speak rapturously of Bertram the way Olivia does of Cesario or Juliet does of Romeo. She does not dream of embraces and kisses; she dwells on, even fantasizes, the hopelessness of her love in lines that seem to belie any immediate physical longing:

I have forgot him [her dead father]. My
imagination
Carries no favor in't but Bertram's.
I am undone, there is no living, none,
If Bertram be away. 'Twere all one
That I should love a bright particular star And think to wed it, he is so above me.
In ills bright radiance and collateral light Must I be comforted, not in hIs sphere.
Th' ambition in my love thus plagues itself: The hind that would be mated by the hon
Must die for love.

(1.1. 82-92)

The verse is clumsy in movement and the statements curiously flat and lacking in emotional intensity. Whenever Helena speaks of her desire she feels compelled to abstract it from anything resembling sensual longing. Asa result, her poetic figures are stilted and even grotesque in their incongruities: She is a hind that would be mated by a lion, a violent consummation indeed.

It is conventional for poets to speak of a loved one as a star; so Astrophil speaks of Stella in Sidney's sonnets. But Sidney does not, like Helena, at once imagine Stella as a point of light in a distant heaven and speak of wedding this star as if he could yearn for physical union with a galactic sphere. The peculiarity of Helena's lines cannot be ascribed to a failure of Shakespeare's poetic imagination because he knows how to make the traditional conceit of "love's star" a vehicle for romantic ardor. Compare, for

example, Helena's soliloquy with Juliet's soliloquy as she awaits her wedding night with Romeo:

Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd
night,
Give me my Romeo, and, when I shall die,
Take him and cut rum out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no attention to the garish sun.
(3.2. 20-25)

Helena's statement that she cannot live without Bertram does not express a comparable immediacy of longing bur rather a determination to be his wife. Even when she is alone her responses are guarded; instead of a spontaneous rush of feeling there is cautious appraisal of possibilities and practicalities. If her passion for Bertram were not all-consuming, it would seem jejune because she dwells on his features as an adolescent might linger over the publicity photo of a movie star. What she describes she reduces to conventional epithets, thereby robbing Bertram of any distinctiveness of face or form:

'Twas pretty, though a plague,
To see him every hour, to sit and draw
His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,
In our hean's table- hean too capable
Of every line and trick of his sweet favor.
(1.1. 92-96)

Since she will not allow herself to imagine kissing, embracing, and joining bodies with Bertram, Helena's deepest longing for him is expressed not in soliloquy bur in her teasing, riddling conversation with Parolles about losing her virginity to her liking. The more directly she thinks of sexual union with Bertram, the more blurred her lines become, until she recovers her self-control and remarks of the pity that "wishing well had not a body in't,"

Which might be felt, that we, the poorer
born, Whose baser stars do shut us up in wishes, Might with effects of them follow our friends,
And show what we alone must think, which
never
Returns us thanks.
(1.1. 181-86)

She knows what Parolles is bur can appreciate the flair with which he pretends to valor and courtesy. She gives him scope for his scurrilous argument against virginity and pretends to fear the loss of her maidenhead when in fact she is thinking of making love to Bertram; that is, wishing him well with a body that might be felt. She also manages with smiling, gentle mockery to suggest that Parolles is an absolute coward without

seeming to insult him. When she is alone again, she represses all sensual longing and coolly assesses in soliloquy the difficulty of the task that lies before her:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. What power is it which mounts my love so high, That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye? The mightiest space in fortune nature brings To join like likes, and kiss like native things. (1.1. 216-23)

This kind of rhyming sententiousness is more customary in a choric speech than in a personal meditation, but the very stiltedness of Helena's images is an intimation of the emotional turmoil that lies beneath her seemingly measured and generalized statements. Since she can look up to her high love and feed her eye with Bertram's sight, the unsatisfied appetite that she is determined to "feed" is not for his sight but for his body, an appetite that is half acknowledged in the murky lines about joining "like likes to kiss like native things."

Helena's incapacity to express her sensual longing for Bertram is analogous to Angelo's recoil from his sexual desire for Isabella in *Measure for Measure.* Convinced of his superiority to the common sensual herd of men, Angelo is shattered by his longing for a virginal novitiate, and yet an audience realizes that his desire, unlike

Helena's, is not immediately physical in origin. He responds to the beauty of Isabella's spirit, her religious ardor and anger at his complacency, even as Olivia responds to Viola's liveliness of mind and depth of feeling. For though Isabella is fair, her physical beauty is in large part hidden by her novice's habit. Only a woman like Isabella, Angelo says, could have aroused his de sire, and we believe him, for any calculated or sophisticated sensual appeal would have aroused his contempt and disgust. He hungers to possess Isabella's purity, and since that desire horrifies him, he must hate her for inspiring it. If he could freely accept his passion, he could ennoble it by his genuine admiration for her and turn desire to love. Unable to accept his passion, he is like Helena incapable of appealing for the love he desires. Just as Helena never hints to Bertram of her love, Angelo does not woo Isabella with tender vows or seductive praise. Revolted by his longings, he cannot voice them and would have Isabella catch the drift of his veiled suggestions and submit to his lust without his having to make it explicit. Her ignorance of his desire infuriates him because it forces him to speak frankly; and when he finally does it is with a desire to drag her innocence down into the mire of his lust, to prove that she is like him despite her show of purity. Like Bertram with Diana, he would have Isabella stop playing the modest virgin and put on the destined livery of all women-the soiled garment of a whore.

Like Helena's soliloquies, Angelo's soliloquies have a detached quality, even when he immediately confronts his passion, because he must seek to maintain control or lose his sense of self. His lawyerly assessment of his case is, like Helena's stilted conceits, an attempt to distance himself from sexual desire. When that attempt fails, he necessarily has to satisfy: that desire in a way that degrades Isabella and himself. Because Helena can turn sexual longing into a quest to prove her worthiness, she can channel it into a

goal that engages the best of her intelligence and daring. And because she can separate that goal from Bertram's nature, she can endure insult and humiliation from him without feeling degraded. We cannot speak then of Helena's love as demeaning her when it expresses what is essential in her nature. Apart from that love, she does not exist for us in the way that Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind, and Viola do. She lacks their warmth and imagination, their pleasure in others and responsiveness to their worlds. Except for the comedy of the denouement, which she invents and stage manages, and apart from her brief sparring match with Parolles, Helena is without humor. Of course, she is more burdened by circumstances than other heroines but one doubts that she would be playful even if her situation allowed it because she is too earnest and practical by nature.

In fairy tales Cinderellas live happily ever after with their princes because love and fairy godmothers annihilate barriers of money and class. In *All's Well,* as in Boccaccio's tale, these barriers are not easily waved away with a magic wand. Although Giletta is a wealthy heiress in Painter's version of Boccaccio's tale, she is not of noble blood. The King, therefore, "was very loath" to grant Beltramo to her and would not have allowed it had he not pledged to do so earlier. Beltramo is shocked by the command to marry Giletta and protests that she is not of "a stock convenable to his nobility." Shakespeare increases the disparity of rank between Helena and Bertram by turning Boccaccio's rich heiress into a ward in the Rossillion household whose only dowry is the medical cures left to her by her father. Yet the difference of rank matters only to Bertram in *All's Well* The King does not hesitate at Helena's choice of Bertram as a husband, and he immediately condemns Bertram's snobbery in refusing Helena. Praising Helena's virtues, he promises to make her honor and estate at least as great as Bertram's. Lafew, who watches while Helena chooses a husband, thinks her worthy of the best in France, and the Countess, learning that Helena loves her son, welcomes her as a daughter. Only Bertram finds Helena too mean to be his wife, and his objection is prompted less by aristocratic hauteur than by distaste for a woman who was no better than a dependent in his household-"a poor physician's daughter," from whom he parted ill scene 1 with the command one gives to a servant, "Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress."

Bertram's contemptuous attitude toward Helena is not supported by the choric commentary in the play on aristocratic values. The King's complaints of the decline of courtesy and chivalry invoke a standard of gentility that is the opposite of Bertram's disdain, one of gracious respect for inferiors. Indeed, the King's praise of Bertram's father in 1.2 measures Bertram's failing as a courtier, not Helena's lack of nobility. To be sure, Bertram is not by nature rude or arrogant; he does not demand a cringing obedience from servants and retainers. If he were infatuated with the idea of great rank, he would not reject Helena but rather rejoice in having a wife who is a royal favorite and will bring him great wealth and esteem. One suspects that Bertram would have turned as angrily on any marriage that was going to be forced upon him.

If Shakespeare wanted an audience to recognize Helena as a social climber he had only to give her some of Malvolio's hunger for money and status or allow her to lord it over others when she becomes the Countess of Rossillion. Nothing in her words or

manner intimates that wealth and title mean much to her. She wants Bertram, not his estates; the goal she aggressively pursues is to submit to Bertram, to surrender her virginity- her body- to him and be accepted as his wife. Parolles, not Helena, is the upstart of the play, the dependent who affects aristocratic airs. Indeed, it is doubly ironic that Bertram, unable to appreciate Helena's virtues, despises her baseness but accepts Parolles, who is all sham and bluster, as his mentor in chivalry. It is doubtful, moreover, that Shakespeare's audiences were scandalized by Helena's desire to wed Bertram, for the vitality of their society depended on its relative openness, on the opportunity It offered men of talent and energy to rise above their birth and enter the ranks of a nobility that had not grown moribund. The New Men whom Elizabethans and Jacobeans despised and feared were the unworthy royal minions who gained power and wealth through a monarch's thoughtless largesse or granting of monopolies.

I have suggested elsewhere that if Hamlet did not keep accusing himself of failing to revenge his father, no reader would think that he hesitates or delays taking revenge against Claudius. Similarly, no reader would be inclined to label Helena a social climber if she did not persist in accusing herself of ambitious and overreaching love. It is she who keeps harping on her humble origin and on Bertram's great height above her and who feels a continuing need to apologize for her presumptuous desire when no one impugns her motives. Proclaiming that she is unworthy of Bertram, she stalks him relentlessly, without seeming to be hypocritical, and she resorts to a bed trick without seeming to degrade herself. If she were conniving by nature, she would rely on the King to make Bertram accept her as wife after their marriage. But she turns neither to him nor to the Countess and Lafew, who would willingly aid her if she asked. She never desires something for nothing; she offers good value to the King for the reward she seeks, and she is scrupulous in fulfilling the letter of the terms Bertram sets for accepting her as his wife. She would not have him, she says, without deserving him. Since he is a radiant star she will shine forth with her own glowing achievement. She will be a fairy tale heroine who wins her love by daring and skill as so many fairy tale heroes win a king's daughter. To succeed she must use guile and deception because his terms leave her no other alternative; or rather the only other choice she has is to be revolted by his mistreatment of her.

It never seems to occur to Helena that success in winning Bertram might depend on his feeling for her; assuming that she is nothing to him, she never attempts to gain his affection. Because she says nothing to him of her love before she publicly chooses him as her royal reward, he is utterly unprepared for and dumb founded by her choice. Because she conceals her love from everyone it is only by accident that it is discovered and brought to the attention of the Countess; even then she will not readily admit it. Boccaccio's heroine is not, like Helena, a loner by nature as well as circumstance. She is surrounded by relatives before she marries and wins the love and loyalty of all her people after the Count rejects her and departs. From the beginning Shakespeare makes Helena a solitary figure, one who grew up alone on the periphery of a great household in which she had no assured place or station. Accustomed to this aloneness, she does not reach out to anyone except when an alliance with the King or with Diana and her mother will further her goal of obtaining Bertram. Her joyful greeting of the Countess in the final scene is the single occasion when she openly returns the affection of those

who love her. At other times she hoards her emotion as if she must channel it all toward Bertram and the task of achieving him.

As soon as she learns of Helena's love for her son, the Countess makes clear her approval by inviting Helena's confidences. When she asks Helena to think of her as a mother, the response is that the Countess is her "honorable mistress." The Countess persists in speaking of her as her daughter, and Helena persists in denying the possibility of such a relationship. Although she has already concluded that she can deserve to become Bertram's wife, she speaks here as if she would never dare link her name with the Rossillions:

The Count Rossillion cannot be my brother: I am from humble, he from honored name;
No note upon my parents, his all noble.
My master, my dear lord he is, and I
His servant live, and will his vassal die.
He must not be my brother.
(1.3.155-160)

Helena's equivocations are transparent to the audience; she cannot allow Bertram to be her brother because she would be his wife, and she hints more directly at her yearning for him when she says that she wishes the Countess were her mother, "so that my lord, your son, were not my brother. . . So I were not his sister." The Countess, having offered her sympathy and love is annoyed by this evasiveness. She declares that Helena's looks, sighs, and tears express her love of Bertram, and "only sin / And hellish obstinacy tie thy tongue, / That truth should be suspected." Although the Countess charges her to speak truly, Helena continues her zigzag course, begging. for pardon, refusing to say she ,loves Bertram until finally she slips to her knees and confesses" :

Here on my knee, before high heaven and you,
That before you, and next until high heaven,
I love your son.
My friends were poor, but honest, so's my
love
Be not offended, for It hurts not him
That he is lov'd of me, I follow him not
By any token of presumptuous suit,
Nor would I have him till I do deserve him;
Yet never know how that desert should be.
(1.3.192-200)

Since she cannot believe by this point that the Countess will be offended by her love of Bertram, Helena's evasiveness must be prompted by her own emotional needs rather than a fear of rebuke. Her humility is genuine and yet equivocal because she kneels only to declare her intention to pursue Bertram- but not in "any token of presumptuous Suit." That is, she will not "have him" till she deserves him. This is the humbleness of one who will not claim great merit as yet, but who is absolutely certain that one day she

will deserve a place among the best. This kind of self-effacement is slyly glossed by Lavatch just before Helena enters:

Though honesty be no puritan, yet it will do no hurt; it will wear the surplice of humility over the black gown of a big heart.
(1.3.93-94)

Ordinarily humility and simplicity go hand in hand, but there are times when plainness becomes ostentatious and a sign of self-righteous superiority. Repelled by the rich panoply of Anglican worship, the puritan minister wears a simple black gown beneath the showier surplice church law required, thus making his disdain for episcopal finery a gesture of spiritual pride. To say there is a like pride in Helena's humbleness is not to accuse her of hypocritical earnestness, for she must be certain of what she can achieve to dare what she does, and she must also believe in her inferiority to Bertram to bow before his abuse and rejection. If she did not keep telling herself that she is unworthy of him, she could not accept the contemptuous conditions he sets for accepting her as his wife. At the same time, once she has proved her worthiness to be his wife, she is determined to enjoy the prize she has won. Sometimes Helena plays the poor little waif for herself and others, but she invariably slips from this self-image to that of a female knight-errant who will accomplish impossible tasks to win her curled darling.

Helena's proud humility and kneeling pride are vividly expressed in her audience with the King, who must be convinced that he can be cured when his learned doctors have given him up as lost. First she is all humbleness, ready to accept his denials; then she refuses to be denied because she is heaven's emissary, an agent of providence, an instrument of miracles as great as the parting of the Red Sea. Finally she is a high priestess of mysterious powers and incantatory prophesies who promises a cure in less than forty-eight hours. She will wager all on belief in her father's cure, aware, no doubt, that the melodramatic punishments she names as her forfeit would not be imposed should she fail When she asks what reward she will obtain if she succeeds, she specifies nothing until the King has pledged his scepter and hopes of heaven on his good faith. Then she avoids any hint of guilty presumption by declaring that she would not think of joining her "low and humble name" to the royal blood of France but seeks as husband only a vassal whom the King is free to bestow.

The public ceremony in which Helena pretends to pick and choose among the young noblemen at court before settling on Bertram is not in Boccaccio. It is invented by Shakespeare- or, rather, it is invented by Helena as an ostentatious show of humility in her choice of a husband, and as such it wins the hearts of all save Bertram, who is ignorant of his role in the charade. It also allows him no time to digest the stunning news and no way to protest his fate without open defiance of the King. Since she cannot be sure of Bertram's response, her timidity may be real. She acts as if she were so fearful of rejection that she prefers not to choose, yet she knows that she cannot be refused by any of the lords because the King informs them that Helena has power to choose any and they "none to forsake." When Helena hesitates, the King insists that she make a choice and turns a threatening eye on the assembly: "Make choice and see, / Who shuns thy love shuns all his love in me." So reluctantly, blushingly, shamefacedly,

Helena is "forced" to do what she has set her mind on doing. She could choose Bertram outright, but that would be too obvious; she will settle on him only after considering various other young noblemen. One lord, she says, deserves a wife twenty times above herself. Another she would not wrong, for he deserves a fairer fortune in bed. A third she says is "too young, too happy, and too good" to be the father of her son. Only after these lords have protested their willingness to be her husband does she humbly turn to Bertram:

I dare not say I take you, but I give
Me and my service, ever whilst I live,
Into your guiding power.- This is the man.
(2.3.102-4)

What she says is heartfelt but it does not alter the fact that that though she dares not "take" Bertram, she does take him.

Bertram's outcry is understandable. Just before he was deprived of an opportunity to fight in the war by the King, who said he was too young. Now he is being deprived of his right to choose his own wife; although not old enough to be a soldier, he is old enough to be given away in marriage as a royal reward. This is especially bitter to one who complained to Parolles that he must remain at court in the service of women as "the forehorse to a smock" Bertram is probably the only lord foolish and heedless enough to refuse Helena, but his refusal is frank and prompted by the fact that he does not love her. Shall he be denied the right to choose his own wife because Helena is a worthy choice? Or can he not rebel against an enforced marriage with the same justification that Silvia, Hermia, and Juliet rebel? The abuse of wardships through enforced marriages was a scandal in Shakespeare's time, and the misery of enforced marriage was poignantly depicted by contemporary playwrights. The moral issue does not change because a man rather than a woman is thrust into a loveless marriage by a guardian's prerogative.

When Bertram asks leave "in such a business. . . to use / The help of mine own eyes," he is a sympathetic figure. When he speaks scornfully of Helena as one who would bring him down, his snobbery is nasty because he speaks of her as if she were a horse or a dog who "had her breeding at my father's charge." This arrogance merits the King's angry reply about the superiority of Helena's active virtue to a dropsied inherited honor. Nevertheless, *honor* and *dishonor* become slippery terms when they depend merely on the King's favor or disdain. Helena says she is glad of the King's cure and would let the rest go. That is not possible, however, because his honor is engaged on her behalf and he cannot allow himself to be publicly humiliated. "Obey our will," he commands Bertram,

Or I will throw thee from my care for ever Into the staggers and the careless lapse
Of youth and ignorance; both my revenge
and hate
Loosing upon thee, in the name of Justice, Without all terms of pity.
(2.3. 162-66)

Threatened in this fashion, Bertram asks pardon, and with just a bit of insouciance declares that Helena, who just before seemed most base to him, is now with the King's praise as noble as if born so. It would be sensible for Bertram to marry Helena and learn to cherish her qualities, but it would also be sensible for Hermia to marry Demetrius rather than risk death by eloping with Lysander. It is not shameful of Bertram to state his feelings openly; what is shameful is the cowardly revenge he takes on Helena afterward.

Furious at Bertram's response to being chosen by Helena, Lafew takes out his rage on Parolles as if Parolles were responsible for Bertram's callowness. An audience knows, however, that Parolles' influence on Bertram is limited. When he sneers at Lafew as an idle lord, Bertram bluntly disagrees: "I think not so." His decision never to sleep with Helena or live with her is made without Parolles' assistance, and he shows his contempt for his wife by having Parolles inform her that there will be no wedding night before she returns to Rossillion. Enjoying his role as messenger, Parolles mockingly addresses Helena as "fortunate lady," and assures her that he prayed for her success. He probably also embroiders Bertram's message with a few rhetorical flourishes of his own, promising that the postponed pleasures of the wedding night will be sweeter still when enjoyed later. Helena shows immense composure in the face of Bertram's rejection of her. Wanting Parolles' good will she does not tease him, nor does she protest the fact that she learns her fate from him, not her husband. The quiet with which she accepts Bertram's will suggests a resilience and perhaps a heart already prepared for the blow. Her responses are simple and matter-of-fact: "What's his will else? . . . What more commands he? . . . In everything I wait upon his will." It is as if she continues to regard herself as Bertram's vassal even after she has become his wife. Her parting from Bertram is equally restrained; she shows no self-pity and makes no appeal. Bertram seems, if anything, more uncomfortable than she, and makes his lame excuses in lines that are sinuous, stilted, and patently insincere:

You must not marvel, Helen, at my course, Which holds not color with the time, nor does
The ministration and required office
On my particular. Prepar'd I was not
For such a business; therefore am I found So much unsettled.
(2.5. 58-63)

Here, as later in the play, Bertram proves to be a bad liar- one of the more hopeful signs of his nature. He is unable to be brutal to Helena face to face, and he is unable to withstand her long-suffering patient humility. When she replies to his threadbare excuses, "Sir, I can nothing say / But that I am your most obedient servant," he says, "Come, come; no more of that." But she has much more to offer; she swears that she shall ever,

With true observance seek to eke out that Wherein toward me my homely stars have fail'd
To equal my great fortune,
(2.5 74-76)

a statement that inspires in Bertram an overwhelming desire to cut short the interview.

Once again Helena's humility seems sanctimonious and manipulative, a denial of self calculated to make Bertram squirm. Yet the acceptance of her situation is real; she timidly begs for a parting kiss as if she recognizes that affection cannot be earned or "achieved," it can only be given or begged for. The Countess's response to the letter in which Bertram swears never to have Helena as his wife 15 unequivocal. She is angry and also fearful for this "rash and unbridled boy" who risks the King's wrath by "misprising of a maid too virtuous / For the contempt of empire." When Helena reads aloud her "passport" from Bertram, the Countess is ready to disown him: "He was my son." Helena will not permit herself any outcry; the most she will say is that Bertram's decision is a dreadful sentence and "bitter." Even when she rereads the letter alone on stage she cannot acknowledge its brutality. She must pity Bertram rather than pity herself; indeed, she must accuse herself of being the -reason he fled his home and country for the Italian wars or else face the reality of his contempt. Her pity is like the pity Julia feels for Proteus when she discovers his faithlessness to her. Julia, however, can admit the ugliness of Proteus's behavior, whereas Helena must heap abuse upon herself so that she can blot out the callousness of Bertram's actions. Melodramatizing her guiltiness, she declares that it will be her fault if he dies in battle. For his sake she will renounce all claim to him and steal away like a "dark, poor thief" so that he can return to Rossillion; yet like the Countess she speaks of him as if he were a defiant child who has run away from home because she was too harsh, one whose "tender limbs" are being exposed "to the event / Of the none-sparing war." It would be more appropriate, she thinks, if she met a ravenous lion than he be a mark for smoky muskets. Helena's self-accusations become more unctuous still in the letter she leaves for the Countess when she departs Rossillion. Once again she speaks of the offense of her ambitious love that only a barefooted pilgrimage can expiate. Ignoring Bertram's mistreatment of her, she promises to sanctify his name "with zealous fervor," begs forgiveness for driving him to the war, and declares that she will go away because "he is too good and fair for death and me." Can Helena believe that such a letter will soften the Countess's anger at Bertram and bring him home from the war? The Countess notes the "sharp stings. . . in Helena's mildest words" and sends a letter to Bertram that is full of praise of his saintly wife.

No letter from the Countess will reform Bertram, who is now openly defiant of his wife and the King. If he is to be redeemed, it will have to be by Helena, who is willing to meet his mocking demands and win him twice. Her pretense of a holy pilgrimage is no more devious than Portia's pretense that she intends a religious retreat when she sets off with Nerissa for Venice. Her attitude of self-sacrifice is very different, however, from Portia's refusal to praise herself or be praised for her effort to rescue Antonio. But then one could not be like Portia and accept the humiliations that Bertram heaps on Helena. To undertake and accomplish Helena's venture, one must have immense self-confidence but not much pride, for one must believe that this "god" has the right to set whatever terms he pleases for his wife.

More alone in Florence than at the start of the play, Helena confides in no one. She will not admit to the Widow that she knows Bertram, much less that she is his wife. When

she hears that Parolles has spoken coarsely of her, she agrees that Bertram's wife "is too mean / To have her name repeated." Boccaccio's heroine is more open and direct in managing the bed trick, but Shakespeare does not emphasize Helena's craftiness so much as he does the viciousness of Bertram's attempted seduction. Mariana warns Diana of the deceitfulness of men like Bertram, whose oaths and promises are merely "engines of lust" and who leave the maids they have despoiled to the misery of a ruined reputation. Her appraisal of Bertram's motives is painfully accurate because he is callous as well as unskilled at seduction. First he attempts some conventional Petrarchan flatteries and a bit of Parollesian casuistry about the value of losing one's virginity. When these fail, he swears that he will be her servant, and when she ridicules these vows, he discards the pose of courtly lover and bluntly demands her surrender:

Stand no more off, But give thyself unto my sick desires,
Who then recovers. Say thou art mine, and
ever
My love, as It begins, shall so persever.
(4.2. 34-37)

Later Bertram will boast of this night's work to his comrades, but it is he- not Diana- who surrenders. Instructed by Helena, she insists on having his ancestral ring- his honor- in exchange for her maidenhead- her honor. He holds out for only a moment and then barters for one night's lust the ring that was "bequeathed down from many ancestors"; such is the regard for name and lineage of one who disdained a poor physician's daughter. The mention of vows and holy oaths and the exchange of rings turn the supposed seduction into a mock nuptial in which Diana acts as Helena's proxy even as Helena will serve as Diana's substitute in bed with Bertram.

The ironies and moral ambiguities that surround the bed trick in *Measure for Measure* are absent in *All's Well.* There is no surrender to unlawful coercion, no bribery of justice, no soliciting of a woman for a stealthy assignation by a mock friar. The Widow and Diana will be rewarded by Helena for their part in the duping of Bertram, but they do not agree merely for the sake of reward. The Widow would not put her reputation "in any staining act" and must first be convinced that Helena's purpose is legitimate and will not harm her daughter. Then she and Diana join with Helena as women, as natural allies, against predatory men like Bertram. *After* listening to Bertram's lying protestations, Diana decides that it is "no sin / To cozen him that would unjustly win." More candid with herself and others than Duke Vincentio is about the bed trick, Helena does not attempt to invest it with high moral purpose. It is lawful, she says, and yet it involves on Bertram's part a "wicked meaning" (that is, vicious intention); she and Bertram will not sin in making love because they are married, and yet the act she knows is "a sinful fact." Diana risks very little and because of Helena's generosity will no longer be dowerless and prey to the enticements of men like Bertram; Helena will lose her virginity to her liking and gain Bertram in the bargain. She has no illusions anymore about her bright star; she knows him well enough now to wager that he will give his ancestral ring "to buy his will," but she does not recoil from that knowledge. Perhaps it is comforting to know the full extent of his shabbiness, because the shabbiness justifies the means she *uses* to gain him....

Most of the comedy of the final scene derives from Helena's artful choreographing of Diana's accusations against Bertram and her provocative riddling about Helena's ring. Shakespeare aids Helena's cause by al lowing Diana to enter just as a bewildered Bertram, suspected of wicked deeds, is being led away under guard. But Helena does not need much help from Shakespeare because she is able to contrive her own masterly version of the discovery scenes that close *Errors* and *Twelfth Night,* one in which the clamor of false accusations mounts until the entrance of a single character-Antipholus S. or Sebastian or Helena- resolves all difficulties. Except for Bertram's mistaken assumption that he made love to Diana, none of the supposes *in* this discovery scene is the result of mistaken identities. Moreover, the crucial *issue is* not the discovery that Helena is alive but the unmasking of Bertram's moral nature, which resembles the exposure of Parolles down to the extravagant lies each one tells when caught *in* the trap. Where Parolles rises to heights of *comic* calumny, Bertram descends to depths of falsehood and *vicious* slander, but the *comic confusion* that surrounds his *possession* of Helena's ring and Diana's saucy manner keep the revelation from becoming so nasty that a happy ending *is impossible.* The tone is as artfully balanced as *in* the analogous ring episode *in The Merchant,* although the dramatic circumstance and moral *issue* are far more serious.

Things go wrong from Bertram as soon as his love token for Maudlin is recognized by the King as a ring he gave Helena. Although the Countess and Lafew confirm the identity of the ring, Bertram is convinced that they are mistaken, because he knows that he got it from his Florentine dish. Too tactful to brag of his sexual conquests, he invents the facile lie that the ring was thrown to him from a window by a woman who desired him. *Since* Helena told the King she would not part with the ring except to her husband *in* bed, he is incensed by Bertram's falsehood and begins to have dark *suspicions* about how Bertram obtained the ring. After Diana enters to accuse Bertram of seducing her with false promises of marriage, the King wonders why Bertram wishes to marry Maudlin when he has apparently fled from two other "wives," and Lafew decides to "buy me a son-in-law *in* a fair." Bertram admits that he knows Diana but will not admit he attempted her seduction. Even granting his shock and panic, his lines suggest that his view of women has not changed:

My lord, this is a fond and desp'rate creature, Whom sometime I have laugh'd with. Let your Highness
Lay a more noble thought upon mine honor Than for to think that I would sink it here. (5.3 178-81)

Sinking lower, Bertram describes Diana as "a common gamester to the camp," but she shows his ancestral ring, and that is enough to convince the Countess that Diana is his wife. Bertram reaches his nadir with the lie that Diana obtained his ring by angling for him, madding his desire with "infinite cunning" until he gave it for that "which any inferior might / At market-price have bought." *Since* Parolles, who is called to testify, can expose this falsehood, Bertram must also vilify his former companion as

a most perfidious slave,
With all the spots a' th' world tax'd and

debosh'd,
Whose nature sickens but to speak a truth.
(5.8. 205-7)

Bertram seems all the more shabby when Parolles proves reluctant to condemn him and charitable *in* his assessment of Bertram's character: "My master hath been an honorable gentleman. Tricks he hath had *in* him, which gentlemen have." According to Parolles Bertram loved Diana "as a gentleman loves a woman. . . He lov'd her sir, and lov'd her not." This explanation is less equivocal than the King supposes, for Parolles implies that gentlemen marry ladies but make love to women of no birth without loving them and have no intention of marrying those who surrender to them. If Bertram had been more sophisticated he would not have pursued a virgin; he would have made love to a woman who had already lost her maidenhead and honor and who could not be further degraded by a gentleman.

Parolles' statement, like those which Diana, Helena, and Mariana make about men, make the battle of the sexes *in All's Well* more *explicit* than it *is in* earlier comedies, for here the aggressiveness and callousness of male appetite is opposed to the woman's need to lose her virginity to her liking or husband it as a priceless commodity. Like the cynical Lavatch, the ruttish Bertram travesties romantic ideals by reducing the "ser *vice"* of love to that which a bull offers a cow. Portraits like Bertram and Lucio of *Measure far Measure* do not imply, however, that Shakespeare has lost faith *in* the romantic ideal that informs his earlier comedies; they simply confirm that the ideal of love depends on an ability to cherish others and a capacity for generosity that Bertram does not possess.

Since too much emphasis on Bertram's failings will make a shambles of the denouement, Shakespeare focuses attention on the mystery of Helena's ring after Parolles has spoken. Coached by Helena, Diana, who has already given false testimony about Bertram, responds to the King's questions with such riddling equivocations that Lafew and the King believe she *is,* as Bertram claimed, "some common customer," "an easy glove" that goes off and on at pleasure. Threatened with death, Diana grows more impudent; she is cheekily familiar with the King, and hinting that she is still a virgin, she suggests also that Bertram is "guilty and he is not guilty." Her impudence is a welcome note given Helena's willingness to abase herself before Bertram *in* earlier scenes, for at last the women *in* the play do not bow before the will of men. At the last moment Diana plays her trump card: she produces a Helena whose pregnant state is the simple truth hinted at by her equivocations: "one that's dead is quick."

No one is more overjoyed at Helena's appearance than Bertram, for she alone can rescue him from ignominious disgrace. Like Hero in the last scene of *Much Ado,* Helena does not dwell on the wrongs that were done her. When the King asks, "Is'r real that I see?" she answers:

No, my good lord,
Tis but the shadow of a wife you see,
The name, and not the tlUng.
(5.3. 306-8)

To which Bertram cries our, "Both, both. O, pardon!" Reminding Bertram that she found him "wondrous kind" when he thought he was making love to Diana, she also reads aloud the conditions he set down for accepting her as his wife and asks, "Will you be mine now you are doubly won?" This is not the Helena of earlier scenes who bowed before Bertram's scorn; instead of timidly begging for affection, she asks Bertram to acknowledge publicly that she deserves him. In a last attempt at masculine pride Bertram makes his answer not to her but to the King:

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly.

Keeping her emotional distance from Bertram, Helena embraces the Countess, whom she can at last acknowledge as her "dear mother." Diana's future seems assured, for the King promises to provide a dowry when she marries. Wiser than before, he does not propose to en force her choice of husband with his prerogative, and still wary of her glibness he makes his promise as conditional as Bertram's to Helena: if Diana is still a virgin, he will see that she marries well. Too ready before to jump to erroneous conclusions, now he is cautious about assessing the outcome of events:

All yet seems well, and if it end so meet, The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.
If all is well it is not because Bertram is more mature or more sensitive in the last scene than in the first, but because, after his narrow escapes, he is no doubt ready for a quiet life at Rossillion. He promises that he will love Helena dearly, and no doubt he will, insofar as "loving dearly" can be a matter of deliberate choice. Helena's progress is more certain and significant. She knows more about Bertram than any wife should know about a husband and yet she loves him still. She is not revolted by his desire for Diana because she knows how circumstance affects sexual longing and pleasure. He rejected her out of anger and spite but enjoyed her body in Florence, thinking she was a prize that had been won with difficulty. She can acknowledge the lure of stealthy illicit sex without feeling the need to justify Bertram's lust. Once too ready to proclaim her unworthiness, she now is fully assured of her self-worth. At the beginning, she imagined the attaining of Bertram as an achieving of the impossible, a striving for a star. *After* the bed trick, she no longer speaks of what she can achieve by a determined will. In a speech to Diana and the Widow, she puts her faith in the passing of time that brings life again to barren twigs and that will confirm the new life that exists in her womb:
. . . the tune will bring on summer,
When briers shall have leaves as well as
thorns,
And be as sweet as sharp. We must away: Our waggon is prepar'd, and tune revives us. All's well that ends well! still the fine's the
crown;
Whate'er the course, the end is the renown.
(4.4. 31-36)

Helena's alliance with Diana and the Widow is important to the denouement of *All's Well* because she is no longer apart from others, absorbed in her determination to have Bertram. When she embraces the Countess, the familial drama of the play reaches its happy conclusion: an orphaned child raised as a ward in a great household has found a

mother as well as a husband at Rossillion. Despite the earlier melancholy sense of lost values, there is hope of better days to come. Bertram is in good hands and Helena carries the child that will assure the future of the noble lineage he very nearly compromised. . . .

Critical Essay #8

E. M. W. Tillyard, W. W. Lawrence, Hazelton Spencer, and Michael Shapiro all find Bertram a thoroughly reformed character at the end of the play. Tillyard and Lawrence find it completely plausible that Bertram has grown from an immature, inexperienced man at the beginning of the play into a sincere hero. Spencer argues that the "play's title clinches the argument against the play's detractors." Shapiro concludes that Bertram's reluctance to marry Helena is entirely credible. The King orders him to marry Helena when the last thing he wants is to be tied down in marriage. What he desires is the "masculine" form of honor earned on a battlefield.

Larry S. Champion's assessment of Bertram is generally a positive one. If Helena finds him worth pursuing, Champion argues, there must be something worthy in his character. (Gerard J. Gross agrees.) His association with Parolles, his treatment of Helena and Diana, and his disobedience of the King taint his character, but in the end, he is "apparently purged" and repents. Katharine Eisaman Maus similarly finds him capable of reform, not merely through the efforts of Helena but through the actions of his mother and the King as well. His dismissal of Parolles also reflects well on him, indicating that he can indeed discern the difference between honorable and dishonorable behavior. Richard P. Wheeler, acknowledging the discontent critics express in assessing Bertram's character, refrains from making an overall judgment of Bertram's character (though he is somewhat sympathetic toward him). He argues that it is useful instead to examine how the events of the play as experienced by Bertram define his role in the play and shape the play as a whole.

Robert Ornstein and Robert Hapgood are more dubious about Bertram's transformation. Ornstein finds him a simple, unintelligent character, one with an inability to reflect on his actions or consider their consequences and incapable of guilt or shame. Hapgood finds Bertram's quick repentance at the end of the play unconvincing and argues that his acceptance of Helena is merely his settling for her instead of Lafeu's daughter.

Source: "Imperial Love and the Dark House: *All's Well That Ends Well,"* in *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter- Turn,* University of California Press, 1981, pp. 34-35.

[In this excerpt, Wheeler argues that examining the character of Bertram can "help identify unresolved tensions" in the play. Wheeler acknowledges the critical discontent regarding the success

of All's Well That Ends Well and suggests that analyzing Bertram's role can be useful in the context of these disagreements mere the efficacy of the play. Wheeler argues that Bertram finds his situation at court intolerable and has to escape, especially When forced into a marriage by the King a father-figure, with the approval of his mother (in essence, his parents are forcing him to do something against his will). Bertram wants to experience the worlds, physically and sexually. Through Bertram's actions, Shakespeare orchestrates his ultimate retrieval.]

Shakespeare's decision to base a comedy on Boccaccio's story about a young man who flees rather than pursues his eventual wife, despises rather than adores her, creates for *All's Well That Ends Well* an altered set of comic conflicts. Instead of accommodating the marital aspirations of a Bassanio or an Orlando, the play's action must bring Bertram to accept Helena as his wife. Before this action is completed, the young count is identified at various moments as a nobleman of great promise, an object of adoration, a complete fool, a snob, an ungrateful son and subject, a whimpering adolescent, a warrior of heroic stature, a degenerate rake, a liar, a moral coward, a suspected murderer, and, perhaps, a regenerate husband. Few characters in Shakespeare's comedies are called upon to fit so many different images, certainly none of Bertram's more compliant comic predecessors. Partly because he has often been seen through responses he generates in other characters, who repudiate him as son, subject, and comrade, Bertram has long held a reputation among critics as a "thoroughly disagreeable, peevish and vicious person." Recent attempts to brighten Bertram's character have often accompanied attempts to salvage the play from a long tradition of critical discontent, to demonstrate "that *All's Well* is a good play," that in fact, "All does end well." I think instead that a close look at *All's Well* as it is experienced by Bertram can help identify unresolved tensions that not only define ills position in the action but that shape the play as a whole and indicate the place it occupies in Shakespearean comedy.

Bertram, Marriage, and Manhood
KING Youth, thou bear'st thy father's
face.
Frank nature, rather curious than in haste,
Hath well composed thee. Thy father's moral
parts
Mayst thou inherit too!
(1.ii.19- 22)

Dr. Johnson's indictment of the young count can speak for many:

I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram; a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries Helen as a coward, and leaves her as a profligate: when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness.

Johnson's denunciation seems to be exactly the response to Bertram that the moral context of the play demands. But Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch remarked, introducing his edition of *All's Well,* that Bertram "has something to say for himself against the moralizers":

There is nothing in him, until we come to the final scene, that we cannot find it in our hearts to forgive, if only he will give us the right excuse. . . .

For, consciously or not, we have felt Helena's love pleading his cause with us all the while. The follies of youth- "lusty Juventus" - come of nature and mettle, and arrogance

of birth may be a fault well on this side of sm. There *must* be some attractiveness in Bertram to Justify such devotion, and tills will surely reveal itself, to satisfy us or nearly, before the curtain falls. But the final scene destroys our hope.

The contrast between Quiller-Couch's tolerant view of Bertram and Dr. Johnson's severe indictment is present in the play, without seeming to come under the control of dramatic irony. The tension between these two perspectives, and between each of them and Helena's adoration of the youthful count, can be used to clarify the problem that Bertram poses, not only for *All's Well,* but for the development of Shakespearean comedy.

The first scene reveals little of Bertram directly beyond the impatience of an "unseasoned courtier" (I.i.66) anxious to realize the promise of manhood in the service of aristocratic ideals. The initial image of Bertram is focused chiefly through Helena's extravagant praise as she celebrates the "bright particular star" (I.i.82) of her imagination. Again at the French court, there is a strong trend to assimilate Bertram to identities that others impose upon him. In his first encounter with the king, Bertram plays an entirely passive role as the king weaves into rambling speeches wistful recollections of the old Count Rossillion, sober thoughts on his own approaching death, and impatient reflections on his youthful courtiers. As the king moves toward a nostalgic identification with the dead count, Bertram, by his mere presence, comes to be invested with a double, partially contradictory role. Bertram becomes, in the eyes of the king, a son ("Welcome, count; / My son's no dearer" [1.ii.75-76]) who represents both the promise of vicarious fulfillment through Identification with his youthful promise and the threat posed by a younger generation unworthy of the tradition it inherits. Both of these projected identities become actively important in Bertram's subsequent meetings with the king.

Bertram begins to appear defined by his own presentation of self through action and sentiment in Act II Scene i The young count watches the king issue an official farewell to the lords bound for the wars in Italy, which "may well serve / A nursery to our gentry, who are sick / For breathing and exploit" (1.ii.15-17). The king's speech is rich in the idealized rhetoric of ennobling war:

Farewell, young lords. Whether I live or die, be you the sons Of worthy Frenchmen Let Higher Italy (Those bated that inherit but the fall Of the last monarch_ *see* that you come Not to woo honor, but to wed it, when The bravest questant shrinks: find what you seek,
That fame may cry you loud.
(II.i.10-17)

The king pronounces an ideal of honorable combat that promises self-fulfillment, liberation, and fame. These young lords may prove themselves worthy sons, brave men, and esteemed comrades. Opposed to the warlike courtship of honor are the snares of Italian women:

Those girls of Italy, take heed of them. They say our French lack language to deny If they demand; beware of being captives Before you serve.
(II.i.19- 22)

The king presents his lords with a world of masculine activity familiar to our culture and our poetry. War offers sexualized aggressive release, idealization through the commitment to honor, and affectionate communion among men; heterosexual activity brings the threat of emasculation and is to be shunned or carefully subordinated to the masculine ideal. "Our hearts receive your warnings" (II.i.23), the lords reply, while Bertram eagerly looks on.

But Bertram must remain at court: "I am commanded here and kept a coil with / 'Too young,' and 'The next year,' and "Tis too early'" (II.i.27 - 28). Denied access to heroic masculine endeavor by the king who has just exalted it, Bertram's forced stay at court takes its shape from his frustration:

I shall stay here the forehorse to a smock, Oeaking my shoes on the plam masonry, Till honor be bought up, and no sword worn But one to dance with. By heaven, I'll steal away!
(II.i.30-33)

Encouraged by Parolles and the other lords, who join for a moment in the masculine camaraderie from which Bertram is about to be severed, Bertram bristles with resentment toward the court life he now regards as effeminate. Bertram, who went to court to realize himself as a man, as a seasoned courtier, is treated as a boy, a condition Parolles uses to put salt into his barbed advice: "An thy mind stand to't, boy, steal away bravely" (II.i.29). Confined to the court he perceives as womanly, where the sword, the virile means to honor, merely adorns ballroom apparel, Bertram makes his first, precocious, gesture toward rebellion.

Bertram's implicit son relationship to the king- who tells him how to be a man and tells him also that he cannot be one yet- and his festering resentment at being "kept a coil" at court furnish essential background for the conflict shortly to develop when, after the king's mysterious cure, Bertram is appointed husband to Helena. His confrontation with the king in II.iii toughens and deepens the presentation of a Bertram just beginning to emerge as a character whose youthful ambitions seem destined for frustration. The scene appears to be heading for a triumphant culmination in Helena's selection of Bertram as husband. Helena's almost coquettishly ritualistic rejection of the other prospects lends comic momentum to her final decision. "This is the man," Helena announces, and the king sanctions the choice: "Why then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife" (II.iii.104-5). Because Bertram is caught off guard, and because he in turn catches the king off guard, the intensity now injected into the scene has a special emotional authority. Bertram's immediate response is astonishment: "My wife, my liege?" But he is quickly able to channel the logic of his position into a plea for freedom of choice: "I shall beseech your highness, / In such a business give me leave to use / The help of mine own eyes." The king seems a bit bewildered, but counters with a question that implicitly develops the authoritarian logic of his own position: "Knows't

thou not, Bertram, / What she has done for me?" Bertram in turn challenges this argument: "Yes, my good lord, / But never hope to know why I should marry her" (II.iii.105-9).

As this exchange becomes increasingly heated, Bertram fights for his autonomy and the king insists on his own absolute power in a struggle that pits demanding father against rebellious son. The king identifies phallic mastery with honor and power: "My honor's at the stake, which to defeat, / I must produce my power" (II.iii. 148-49). Either Bertram bends before the all-powerful father or the king's restored virility is invalidated. Lafew has already comically injected the castration theme into the scene when, standing apart from the ritual elimination of all suitors but Bertram, he thinks that the courtiers Helena passes over have instead refused her: "Do all they deny her? An they were sons of mine, I'd have them whipped, or I would send them to th' Turk to make eunuchs of" (II.iii.85-87). But in the struggle of wills between Bertram and his king, this anxiety is developed into irreconcilable conflict. When Helena suggests that the marriage be waived, the king erupts in rage at the threat reluctant Bertram poses to his own restored manhood:

Here, take her hand,
Proud scornful boy, unworthy this good
gift, .. .
Check thy contempt. Obey our will, which travails in thy good. Believe not thy disdain, but presently
Do thine own fortunes that obedient right Which both thy duty owes and our power claims;
Or I will throw thee from my care forever, Into the staggers and the careless lapse
Of youth and ignorance, both my revenge
and hate Loosing upon thee, in the name of justice, Without all terms of pity. Speak! thine answer!
(II.iii.149-50; 156-65)

Under the shaming force of the king's violent anger, Bertram relents: "Pardon my gracious lord; for I submit / My fancy to your eyes" (II.ii.166-67). Bertram not only is the *submissive* son viewed from the lofty position of a towering king: he literally sees, for the moment of surrender, the situation through the king's eyes. He becomes, through a radical, forced suspension of self ("Believe not thy disdain"), an extension of the king's person. The validity of his own experience is define by the king's imperative: *"As* thou lov'st her, / Thy love's to me religious; else, does err" (II.iii.18182).

This submissive attitude toward the king must be abandoned, however, largely because the pressures that force Bertram to succumb to him are further complicated by conflict aroused by Helena herself. On the surface, Helena exacerbates Bertram's already expressed resentment at being confined to the effeminizing court. But this, too, builds on deeper dangers that Bertram has no means of understanding or adequately expressing:

KING Thou know'st she has raised me
from my sickly bed.
BERTRAM But follows it, my lord, to bring
me down
Must answer for your raising? I know her
well;
She had her breeding at my father's charge.
A poor physician's daughter my wife? Disdain
Rather corrupt me ever!
(II.iii.110-15)

Bertram interprets his abhorrence of Helena in social terms, but his snobbery covers deeper fears. Helena has raised the king from his sickbed, cured him, and, symbolically, restored his virility, made him erect. But, asks Bertram, must this woman therefore "bring me down" to the marriage bed?

The forced marriage to Helena deflects him from his quest for a masculine identity and toward a sexuality he fears. "Undone, and forfeited to cares forever!" (II.ii.263), he whines, sounding like a little boy because he has been made a little boy through *submission* to the king. He can reopen future potentialities of manhood only by fleeing the sexual union forced upon him: "Although before the solemn priest I have sworn, / I will not bed her" (II.iii.26566). Parolles' defensive rhetoric in counseling flight brings to the surface the unsavoty resonance of debasing sexual anxiety, and opposes to *it* the ideal of war. "France is a dog-hole,"_ advises Parolles, speaking not only to Bertram but for him,

To th' wars, my boy, to th' wars! He wears his honor in a box unseen
That hugs his kicky- wicky here at home, Spending his manly marrow in her arms,
Which should sustain the bound and high curvet

Of Mars's fiery steed. To other regions! France is a stable; we that dwell in't jades.
Therefore to th' war!
(II.iii.268; 272-79)

Marriage, from such a view, means dishonor and emasculation, a symbolic mode of castration ("A young man married is a man that's marred" [II.iii.292]); *it* drains off "manly marrow" better expended in the field of war than in "the dark house and the detested wife" (II.iii.286). Bertram's horror of marital sexuality, his fear of having his precarious masculinity overwhelmed by his wife, drives him to "those Italian fields / Where noble fellows strike" (II.iii.284- 85).

The tensions provoked by this marriage are realized dramatically in Bertram's painfully dishonest parting from Helena, a scene brought to an anxious climax when his "clog" desires a farewell kiss. This is only the second *time* Bertram has spoken to Helena in the play, and the second time he says farewell; he is unable to speak to her at all in the scene in which the marriage is arranged. As he repeatedly *bids* a persistent Helena to

go home without further ado, a squirming Bertram resorts for the first time to the lying that will characterize his behavior in relations to women henceforth.

But within the lie he tells Helena, Bertram obliquely expresses a deeper truth about his situation:

Prepared I was not
For such a business; therefore am I found
So much unsettled. This drives me to entreat
you
That presently you take your way for home,
And rather muse than ask why I entreat you;
For my respects are better than they seem,
And my appointments have in them a need
Greater than shows itself at the first view
To you that know them not.
(II.v.60-68)

Bertram's options are to lie to Helena or lie with her, and the latter is unacceptable to him for reasons he is powerless either to alter or to articulate fully, to Helena or to himself.

All's Well That Ends Well, through those relationships centered subjectively in Bertram, deals with a young man's inevitable problem of freeing mature sexuality from threats that originate in the mutual development of family *ties* and infantile sexuality. Bertram's exchanges with Parolles and Helena as he prepares to flee France demonstrate how far he falls short of having won that freedom midway through the play. The "need / Greater than shows itself at the first view" that makes the prospect of marital sexuality intolerable is the unconscious dimension of his association of Helena, who "had her breeding at my father's charge," with his own family.

In I.iii, just after Bertram has gone to the French court, Shakespeare suggests the incestuous context of this relationship when the countess teases Helena into acknowledging her love for Bertram: "You know, Helen, / I am a mother to you" (I.iii.130-31). For the two women, Helena's pained protest in this prolonged exchange gives way to a simple resolution:

HELENA You are my mother, madam.
Would you were
So that my lord your son were not my
brother
Indeed my mother! or were you both our
mothers,
I care no more for than I do for heaven,
So I were not his sister. Can't no other,
But I your daughter, he must be my brother)

COUNTESS Yes, Helen, you might be my daughter-in-law.
(I iii.154-60)

But the countess jests with the very association of Helena with the Rossillion family Bertram fears, and which he cannot so easily resolve.

Bertram mentions his mother nearly every time he talks to or about Helena, casually at first (I.i.71-72), but more compulsively in the press of emotionally intense occasions later on (II.iii.272; II.v.69: IV.iii.85-86). A son's affection for a mother is directed by Bertram toward the countess; a son's fears of female domination and of his own oedipal wishes are aroused in Bertram by Helena. The situation builds on but complicates childhood circumstances in which an incestuous object-choice must be abandoned, for Bertram is forced to accept a woman unconsciously associated with the object of repressed incestuous impulses. Instead -of allowing Bertram to find a sexual love removed from infantile conflict, the forced marriage reopens and concentrates the hazards of an oedipal relationship that has undergone repression. The marriage to Helena means for Bertram accepting a sexual bond made repugnant by its incestuous associations and abandoning the possibility of achieving a masculine identity independent of infantile conflict. In the typical oedipal situation, the son protects his own developing autonomy by relinquishing, through repression, the incestuous object to the father; in Bertram's situation, the father's power both transgresses the son's effort to achieve manly autonomy ("It is in us to plant thine honor where / We please to have it grow" [II.iii.155-56]) and compels the son to act out incestuous impulses made intolerable by repression ("I cannot love her, nor will strive to do't" [II.iii.145]).

In the Italian war Bertram finds release from the paralyzing force of this situation:
This very day,
Great Mars, I put myself into thy file.
Make me but like my thoughts, and I shall
prove
A lover of thy drum, hater of love.
(III.111.8-11)

He serves heroically, realizing in action the masculine ideal held up earlier by the French king to his restless courtiers. In place of the overpowering king, Bertram finds in the duke of Florence a family romance father whom he serves and saves, and who rewards him for conduct the king of France has forbidden. The comic exposure and renunciation of Parolles as a "counterfeit module" indicate further Bertram's escape from con£hcts that beset him in France, for Parolles, however obviously bogus to others in the play, has been a necessary ally in bolstering the young count's courage at court. No longer in need of Parolles' assistance, Bertram can afford to recognize his duplicity. Among men and the affairs of war, Bertram in Italy becomes "the general of our horse," a "most gallant fellow" who has "done most honorable service," "taken their great'st commander," and who "with his own hand. . . slew the duke's brother" (III.v.).

In affairs of women and sexuality, Bertram also finds a strategy for evading conflict in Italy. Once he has located matters of honor, loyalty, and affection in a context

independent of heterosexuality, he attempts to establish a sexual relationship with Diana that is independent of honor, loyalty, affection, and the conflicted impulses that have driven him away from Helena. Bertram attempts to escape infantile undercurrents of sexual inhibition by letting them rise to consciousness in a depersonalized context. He appeals to Diana: "And now you should be as your mother was / When your sweet self was got" (IV.ii.9-10). Here the maternal association emerges, not as a hidden inner block against marital sexuality, but as Diana's mother, a woman doing the universal, necessary- and therefore justified- act for begetting children. In Florence, Bertram can perform the act he has fled in disgust because he has or, rather, he thinks he has- removed himself from conditions responsible for his fearful loathing. In his attempted seduction of Diana, however, Bertram is forced to use a symbol that binds his sexuality to his place in a family tradition, a ring that, as Helena explains to Diana, "downward hath succeeded in his house / From son to son some four or five descents / Since the first father wore it" (II.vii.23-25). Bertram relates to Diana his full awareness of the ring's significance, but he soon hands it over: "Here, take my ring! / My house, mine honor, yea, my life be thine, / And I'll be bid by thee" (IV.ii.51-53). In this impulsive gesture, Bertram completes the logic of his rebellion; he repudi ates in an instant the inheritance leading back to "the *first* father" who wore this very ring. Bertram can win a measure of sexual freedom only by symbolically forfeiting his place among those familial bonds that have complicated his relation to Helena.

In Bertram Shakespeare invests in embryonic form the essential components of a romantic rebel who can only thrive by rejecting the society that has shaped him. Bertram has written this note to his mother on leaving France:

I have sent you a daughter-in-law. She hath recovered the king, and undone me. I have wedded her, not bedded her, and sworn to make the 'not' eternal. You shall hear I am run away; know it before the report come. If there be breadth enough ill the world, I will hold a long distance. My duty to you.
Your unfortunate son,
Bertram
(III.ii.19-26)

Geographical distance here corresponds to the psychological distance Bertram must put between action and inner conflict if he is to pursue a desired identity. To preserve the purity of his deepest loyalty, that to his mother, Bertram must escape the marital claim of her surrogate Helena. He must find a new father, seek action in a land far removed from France, win a woman he can isolate from an unconscious dread of incest. Bertram's disillusionment at court; his flight from France and an unwanted marriage; his success among men at war in a foreign country; his cavalier attempt to seduce Diana; his symbolic repudiation of patriarchal loyalties in giving up the ring- these are gestures belonging to the Don Juan story, which Bertram brings into a comic art deeply committed to the family.

The problem Bertram puts to Shakespeare resides in the nature of the solution Bertram finds for his own intolerable situation at court. Bertram must be reinstated, for he threatens precisely those social and domestic values celebrated in the festive

comedies. Although Shakespeare sketches out the logic of romantic flight in Bertram, the young count is released, ultimately, in order to be retrieved. Every step Bertram takes toward seducing Diana is a step toward the bed, and finally the household, of Helena, Shakespeare's chief agent for reclaiming him. But the effort to reassimilate Bertram further intensifies the pressures on comic form in this play. The nature of these pressures becomes clearer if *All's Well* is understood as a development out of earlier comedies.

Critical Essay #9

J. Dennis Huston calls Parolles "a curious mixture of the corrupt and the commendable." He acknowledges that Parolles is foolish and corrupt, but he also points out that Parolles injects a good deal of energy into the play. Gerard J. Gross finds his enthusiasm similarly engaging. When Parolles meets up with Helena as she is despairing, their discussion of sex and virginity cause Helena to be energized and desirous of taking action to fulfill her goals. Robert Hapgood draws a similar conclusion, arguing that Parolles's exuberance, even in his betrayal of Bertram and his fellow soldiers, is "disarming" in its "zest." Parolles also draws off criticism from Helena, Katharine Eisaman Maus argues, as they are both social climbers, but Parolles's character and actions seem much more reprehensible in the light of Helena's virtue and honor.

Harold C. Goddard praises Shakespeare for his "masterpiece" in Parolles. Goddard argues that Shakespeare poured all of his venom toward the" gentleman" in this one character and thus made him utterly vile and deserving of universal scorn from everyone except Bertram. Robert Grams Hunter absolves Parolles of any responsibility for Bertram's behavior, arguing that Parolles is a symptom of Bertram's misbehavior, not the cause of it. David Ellis agrees that although Parolles may be a tempter, he generally does not initiate wrongdoing but merely encourages it in Bertram. George Philip Krapp concludes that there must be something redeemable in Parolles's character if Helena endures his conversation.

Maurice Charney and Michael Shapiro find that Parolles shows a definite resiliency, even after he has been exposed. He is not surprised, nor ashamed, and finds himself able to "play the fool without hypocrisy or deceit" and is accepted back into the community at court.

Source: "Finding a Part for Parolles," in *Essays in*

Criticism, Vol. XXXIX, No.4, October, 1989, pp. 289303.

[In the following essay, Ellis argues that Parolles is not a "corrupter if youth" and that Bertram is not under his spell Parolles supports and encourages Bertram's misbehavior but is not the cause of it. Ellis also discusses how Lavache and Parolles both contain elements if the fool and the knave]

Shakespeare's plays often include characters ready to save us the bother of seeing for ourselves. Generally speaking, the higher their social status, the more chance they have of being listened to. Maria's character-sketch of Malvolio in Act II, Scene iii of *Twelfth Night* would not have enjoyed so much success if her mistress hand't already pronounced him 'sick of self-love'. When in Act III, Scene ii of *All's Well That Ends Well* the two French lords deliver Bertram's unpleasant letters to Rossillion, the Countess asks who is with him in Florence and, on hearing that it is Parolles, complains, 'A very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness;/My son corrupts a well-derived nature/With his

inducement'. This interpretation receives some support from the Florentine ladies watching the soldiers go by in Act III, Scene v. Diana remarks that it is a pity such a good looking young man as Bertram is not honest and adds, 'Yound's that same knave/That leads him to these places. Were I his lady/I would poison that vile rascal'. The context makes clear that she is shifting to Parolles some of the blame for Bertram's 'dishonesty' in paying court to her when he is already married. But much weightier confirmation of the Countess's belief that Bertram has been led astray comes from Lafew. With the war in Tuscany over and Helena supposed dead, Act IV, Scene v opens in Rossillion as Lafew is saying,

No, no, no, your son was misled with a snipp'd taffeta fellow there, whose villainous saffron would have made all the unbak'd and doughy youth of a nation in his colour. Your daughter-in-law had been alive at tills hour, and your son here at home, more advanc'd by the king than by that red-tail'd bumblebee I speak of.

The notion of Parolles as a successful corrupter of youth has received wide critical approval despite the obvious vested interest of those figures in *All's Well* who propound it (Bertram's mother, a young girl physically attracted to him and an old friend of the family). One reason is that critics, unlike ordinary playgoers, have recognised in Parolles vestiges of the medieval Vice. A similar recognition, allied to a similar inclination to trust 'the quality', leads several of them to believe those at Henry IV's court who say that Hal has been corrupted by Falstaff. The interpretation is no more satisfactory in one case than it is in the other, but for different reasons. There is never a moment in the Henry IV plays when an audience feels that Hal is in any genuine danger from Falstaff. *All's Well* begins with a few half-hearted indications that we shall be shown a well- bred young man tempted from the straight and narrow by a flashy companion; but it quickly becomes the tale of a headstrong youth with all the natural gifts for going to the bad on his own.

Joseph Price claims that Parolles 'prompts the plan that leads to his young master's flight' and the editor of the Arden edition goes further when he says that Parolles 'ships (Bertram) off to the war'. They can only refer to the one occasion in the play on which Parolles appears to initiate rather than merely encourage wrong-doing. This is in Act II, Scene i when Bertram is complaining of the King's refusal to allow him to go to the Tuscan wars and Parolles says, 'And thy mind stand to't, boy, steal away bravely'. Urging a fiery young man to defy authority is perhaps wrong but it is hardly criminal, and any discredit which attaches to the gesture is lessened by the support Parolles receives from the twoo French Lords. After Bertram has decided that 'he will indeed steal away, the first of the Lords says, 'There's honour in the theft'; and when Parolles interjects, 'Commit it, count', the second adds, 'I am your accessory'. If Parolles is a wicked corrupter, so too are they.

When the two Lords have left the stage, Parolles makes an absurdly affected speech in which he tells Bertram that he ought to have used 'a more spacious ceremony to the noble lords' and urges him to go after them to 'take a more dilated farewell' (II.i. 49-56). Bertram's 'And I will do *so'* is the last serious indication we have of his being under Parolles's influence. There is no suspicion that he is acting on any but his own

headstrong authority when in Act II, Scene iii he responds with indignant, snobbish dismay to the idea of marrying Helena ('A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain/Rather corrupt me ever!'); and after the King has forced him to accept her, he takes no-one's advice before flatly announcing his intentions, 'I'll to the Tuscan wars and never bed her'. Parolles is enthusiastic in Bertram's support and clearly not averse to being the young Count's instrument in fobbing Helena off; but he is a means of bad behaviour not its cause. This remains true for the rest of the play and, as R L. Smallwood has pointed out, that 'Parolles is not the wicked angel responsible for leading Bertram astray is vividly shown in the final scene where, long after he has been made to *see* his companion for what he is, Bertram goes on to show himself independently capable of his most objectionable behaviour, in that long demonstration of weakness, cowardice, and lying'. The demonstration Smallwood refers to also militates against efforts to represent the exposure of Parolles as a necessary stage in Bertram's moral regeneration. 'The two scenes which conclude Act III', writes Joseph Price, 'prepare for the expulsion of Parolles's influence and the cure of Bertram' and he goes on to claim that, 'when Bertram realizes the folly of his model he will begin to understand his own faults'. It is true that in Act IV, Scene iii the two French Lords succeed in convincing Bertram that Parolles is not the courageous captain he pretends to be; but the young Count is shown as far less disturbed by this discovery than by the realization (via the letter to Diana discovered in Parolles's pocket) that his messenger in his own double-dealings with women can't be trusted. His indignation reaches its height when he learns that Parolles has not only made a feeble effort to seduce Diana on his own behalf ('Men are to mell with, boys are not to kiss'), but also had the audacity to tell her that a man like Bertram tells lies and doesn't keep his promises.

The failure of Shakespeare's text to support the readings which the Countess, Diana and Lafew try to impose upon it has clearly led to strange goings-on in the theatre, some of which must be reflected in J. L. Styan's relatively recent commentary on Act II, Scene iv of *All's Well* in the 'Shakespeare in Performance' series. This is the scene in which Parolles comes to tell Helena that Bertram will be leaving Paris before consummating his marriage. According to Styan, Parolles 'takes his time before he breaks the news that Bertram is leaving (Helena), for us an intolerable delay'; he 'relishes his secret', 'teases Helena with the unaccustomed colourfulness of his notion that this obstacle in the way of her wedded love will make fulfillment all the sweeter when it comes', and ends the scene 'beside himself with triumph'. Although they purport to be a statement of the theme on which variations could be played, these comments on Act II, Scene iv sound much more like the description of a specific performance. But if Parolles does not immediately deliver his message to Helena it is because he makes the mistake on his entrance of acknowledging the Clown, who happens to be present, 'Oh, my knave! How does my old lady?' Lavatch is never complimentary to anyone, but he is particularly scathing with Parolles, calling him a nothing, a knave and a fool in rapid succession. Of the 150 or so words in their exchange, Parolles only has 27. He is too patently the unwilling recipient of a stream of witty insults to be relishing any secret, and would clearly be only too glad to say what he has to say to Helena, if he could only get rid of the Clown. When he is able to speak to her, his language is colourful; but it is difficult to make much of that in a figure who is continually shown priding himself on elaborate speech. There is no convincing evidence in the text that Parolles takes any

special pleasure in doing dirty work which, as the following scene shows, Bertram is in any case always prepared to do for himself. Parolles has told Helena that her new husband wants her to take 'instant leave a' th' king' and in Act II, Scene v she comes to Bertram to report that she has done *so.* He assures her that his reasons for going away and not consummating the marriage are better than they seem, when they are in fact much worse (ll. 58-69); and after a series of painful exchanges meanly denies her a parting kiss. In productions from the 1950s which Styan describes, Parolles was made responsible for preventing a kiss which would otherwise have come about. It is in the spirit of these productions, or of others like them, that Styan writes his commentary on Act II, Scene iv. To present Parolles as more enterprisingly and, above all, effectively wicked than any lines he is given suggest he should be, makes it easier to turn him into a scapegoat; and if directors often share the same interest as the Countess, Diana and Lafew in achieving that result it is because it lessens the unattractiveness of a Bertram to whom, as Dr. Johnson memorably complained, it is difficult to reconcile one's heart.

Giving Parolles behaviour which exaggerates his effectiveness also has the advantages of making him seem more coherent. 'Character criticism' may be long out of fashion among academics but, in the theatre, actors and directors are still inclined to look for some centre around which they can organise the various manifestations of a Shakespearian role. To see Parolles as the corrupter of youth helps to impose order on what, in the first half of *All's Well* is an unusually loose assemblage of comic types. As an addition to the faint indications of the corrupting Vice which he offers, Parolles is also- with varying but never complete conviction on his creator's part- the traditional boasting soldier, the parasite, the foppish would-be courtier, the traveler and, in the feature of his many-sidedness which arbitrarily determines his name, the man of many words. In other circumstances, this variety of constituents might have been a sign of satisfying complexity; but in *All's Well* it leaves an audience wondering what or who Parolles is supposed to be. Their puzzlement is only likely to be increased by the fact that no-one in *All's Well,* apart of course from Bertram, believes in any specific part he attempts to play. (So strikingly is this so that Bertram's failure to see through his companion comes to seem more and more of an obvious dramatic convenience.) Parolles moves forward via a series of mortifying encounters as first Helena, then Lavatch and Lafew successfully call his bluff and oblige him to fall back on lame expostulation or excuse. The ineffectuality of his efforts to impose upon the world, and his lack of success in trying to hold his own in any company other than Bertram's, make it impossible to credit him with the force to corrupt anybody, least of all a young nobleman capable of replying to his king as impudently as Bertram does in Act II, Scene iii (111 - 3).

Parolles has too many features for Helena's accusation of cowardice in Act I, Scene i (186-202) to fix him in the mind as the *miles glorious us* and Lavatch's refusal to take him seriously as a gentleman (II.iv. 17-36) doesn't determine how he should be taken. In remarks which excite Parolles to unwise and untypical self-defence, Lafew casually assumes that Bertram must be his 'master' (II.iii. 84-230), but servant is too broad a category to be usefully defining. These bruising encounters are effective in demonstrating that Parolles is not what he pretends to be but they fail to make clear what he is. The illusion of what a Shakespearian character 'is' most frequently

establishes itself through monologue or soliloquy. The various parts which Iago plays in *Othello,* for example, are put into perspective by the explanation of his intentions which he offers in private to the audience. It is not until Act IV, Scene i of *All's Well* that Parolles is found communing with himself and on that occasion the consequence is not the tardy discovery of some 'key' to his character but engaging confirmation of an audience's feeling that- *qua* Captain, in this instance- he is not much of an actor. 'They begin to smoke me, and disgraces have of late knock'd too often at my door' (27-8). With the First Lord and his associates listening in, Parolles curses his habit of talking himself into situations which he has no means of handling. Since Bertram's enterprise and his own general ineffectuality up to this point prevent Parolles from being perceived as a serious threat, It is hard not to feel some stirrings of sympathy for him in his dilemma: 'I must give myself some hurts, and say I got them in exploit; yet slight ones will not carry it. They will say, "Came you off with so little?" And great ones I dare not give' (37-40). This sympathy is important because of the fine balance Shakespeare achieves during the great scene (IV. iii) in which the blindfolded Parolles is interrogated in the presence of Bertram and the two Lords.

The comedy in Act IV, scene iii depends not only on the irrepressible fatuity of Parolles in a 'life-threatening' situation but also on the way the balance of power shifts towards him as the conditions of the joke oblige Bertram and the two Lords to stand by helpless whilst he insults them. As the scene progresses, a vital difference emerges, which is not mere comic, between the first Lord's amused tolerance 0 the outrageous *lies* Parolles tells about him and Bertram's anger at characterizations ('lascivious boy' etc.) which are broadly accurate. Like the great Boar's Head Tavern scene (II.iv) in 1 *Henry IV,* Act IV, Scene iii of *All's Well* gets even better after the reader or spectator is persuaded It has reached its climax. The play is a long way from being Shakespeare's most successful work, but there are few *more* effective moments in his drama than when Parolles is 'unmuffled'. With a laughing audience on one side and the social superiors he has just been betraying and abusing on the other, no-one's situation could be more humiliating. His first reaction is to protest with some justice that anyone can be crushed with a plot. But after the officers have bid him their ironic farewells, and the interpreter has left him alone on the stage with the ominous, 'Fare ye well, sir. I am for France too; we shall speak of you there', what every reader or spectator of *All's Well* remembers is the first half of Parolles's full response to his plight,

Yet am I thankful. If my heart were great 'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more, But I will eat and drink and sleep as soft As captain shall. Simply the tiling I am Shall make me live.
(IV iii. 319-323)

Every critic of the play refers to these famous lines, but there is considerable confusion and disagreement over what to make of them. This is partly because the most striking of them- 'Simply the thing I am/Shall make me live'- depend for their full effect on everything that has gone before. But a further difficulty for many has been that the lines have to be reconciled with the strong moral disapproval of Parolles which has become part of the orthodox interpretation of this play, and which is usually sustained by adding to a sense of his egregious shortcomings much of the blame for Bertram's. How the

reconciliation is effected can be traced back at least as far as H B. Charlton who, in the tone of a superior officer criticising a disgraced subaltern for failing to blow his brains out, described Parolles's response to his final discomfiture as 'his ignominious acceptance of mere existence'. The critical climate which this remark suggests was evident in Michael Hordern's Parolles at the Old Vic in 1953, or at least in Richard David's account of that performance.

When Parolles is finally unblindfolded, and discovers his captors to be his own comrades, Hordem managed an immediate and breathtaking transition from farce to deadly earnest. At the discovery he closed his eyes and fell straight backward into the arms of his attendants; then, as with taunts they prepare to leave him, he slithered to the ground, becoming wizened and sly on the instant, and with 'simply the thing I am shall make me live' revealed an essential meanness not only in Parolles but in human nature as a whole.

David's whole description is vivid enough for its essentials to have found their way into Robert Hapgood's 'The Life of Shame: Parolles and *All's Well',* a short piece, published in these pages in 1965, which usefully reminded its readers that Charlton had called Parolles, 'that shapeless lump of cloacine excrement'. (At the height of his anger in Act IV, Scene iii, even Bertram could only manage, 'I could endure anything before but a cat, but now he's a cat to me').

At the beginning of Act IV, Scene iii the first Lord shakes his head over Bertram's conduct and complains, 'As we are ourselves, what things we are!'. His 'things' here are human beings who are spiritually degraded because they ignore the teachings of religion. It is unlikely that Parolles ever paid much attention to these teachings either, but it is hard to *see* why so many commentators have found his celebration of being a 'thing' memorable if the intended sense is the same as the first Lord's. Harder still to understand is how a good proportion of these commentators could find something exhilarating in the celebration if all It revealed was, 'an essential meanness not only in Parolles but in *human nature as a whole'.* Robert Hapgood was justified in refusing to believe that 'Shakespeare intended an effect simply of revulsion'. He attributes the positive way in which many people respond to Parolles's soliloquy to the character's 'comic vitality, describing as 'his most redeeming trait "a love of life so strong that it can make him welcome (all too easily, it's true) even the prospect of living safest in shame'. Like Falstaff, Parolles turns his back on the precept 'Death rather than dishonour' and celebrates not the meanness of human nature but its resilience and powerful instinct for survival- its 'all-surviving tensile-strength', as Hapgood puts it.

His remarks are helpful but insufficiently specific after all, many other comic figures, apart from Parolles, have a jack-in-the-box resistance to misfortune- and they don't do enough to counter Charlton's charge that Parolles's thankful acceptance of life, after being deprived of any respectable social identity, is 'ignominious'. The memorability of Parolles's soliloquy, and its exhilarating effect on some, cannot only be dependent on his delighted relief that all his desperate efforts to stay alive- 'Let me live, sir, in a dungeon, i'th' stocks, or anywhere, so I may live' (IV.iii. 235 - 6)- have been successful. What they depend on more is implied in his witty recognition that escaping death would

not have done him much good had he in fact been the greathearted captain the joke was designed to prove he wasn't. 'If my heart were great/'Twould burst at this'. One certainly responds to the instinct for survival in his words, but even more to the feeling of relief in having to throw off a social role which had become a burden. Being a captain was especially burdensome to Parolles because, as the audience recognized and he himself acknowledged in his first soliloquy, he was such a poor performer in the part; but the oppressiveness of a defined social position is something which everyone occasionally feels from captains to authors with bad reviews ('Author I'll be no more,/But I will eat and drink . . . etc.'). Shakespeare has already instructed us in these matters earlier in *All's Well* The King of France has consulted all the best doctors as only Kings can and is so convinced he is dying that his first instinct is to refuse Helena's offer of a cure.

I say we must not
So stain our judgement or corrupt our hope, To prostitute our past-cure malady
To empirics, or to dissever so
Our great self and our credit, to esteem
A senseless help, when help past sense we deem.
(II.i. 118-123)

These lines are good enough to bring to mind the intolerable dilemma of someone in the last stages of a fatal illness who is trapped between 'What harm could it do?' on the one hand and 'Have I not the courage to face up to the truth?' on the other. The King believes that he owes it to himself as a rational creature to reject what would constitute-and what in fact turns out to be-'a miracle cure'. Impossible to disentangle in his lines (especially as they move from the first person singular to the first person plural) is what he expects from himself as the individual who happens to be King, and his awareness of the general responsibilities of his position; but his sense of the latter is plain enough in his reference to the dangers of separating his 'great self' from his 'credit', or reputation. What he might think of himself if he welcomed Helena's offer is inextricably bound up with his sense of what other people would think of a King who accepted 'A senseless help'. In his case, the oppressiveness of a defined social position comes near to having fatal effects and it is evident that, if he could have followed the example Parolles is later to give and said, 'King I'll be no more', his resistance to his good fortune would have disappeared more speedily.

Parolles offers a momentary glimpse of a world where people have to play, not Jaques's 'many parts', but no part at all. In the best Falstaffian tradition, he turns the tables on his recent captors, emerging triumphantly from his ordeal like a Brer Rabbit thrown into the briar patch of non-identity by those who failed to realise how far his previous experiences would incline him to welcome it as his natural habitat. He makes of necessity an exhilarating virtue as does also, one might reasonably say, the Shakespeare who, up until this point 'in *All's Well,* has given Parolles a number of different personae none of which has proved wholly satisfactory. Now he both explains and excuses the relative failure of Parolles as a 'character' by allowing the audience to share in a utopian escape from the necessity of having any character at all: 'Simply the thing I am/Shall make me live'. In general, Shakespeare is always inclined to be more

interested in immediate dramatic effect than larger questions of consistency or coherence. It is as if he wrote his parts in the foreknowledge that there would one day be a Coleridge to lay the foundations of a method for filling in all gaps and explaining away all discrepancies. Here he can be taken as using Parolles to entertain very briefly the notion of a 'thingness' which would absolve the dramatist from the duty of giving his figures adequate social definition. There can of course be no such absolution just as, when 'dropping out' is always as firmly defining as social conformity, Parolles can have no realistic hope of living both off and free from society. Shakespeare is obliged to draw back from having a 'thing' on the stage and Parolles will have to re-integrate himself into social life. The two processes are simultaneous and have already begun in the second and less memorable half of Parolles's soliloquy.

Who knows himself a braggart, Let him fear this; for it will come to pass That every braggart shall be found an ass.
Rust, sword; cool, blushes; and Parolles live Safest in shame; being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive. There's place and means for every man alive. I'll after them.
(IV.iii. 323 - 9)

The move here into a different and, for modem ears, more conventional idiom exemplifies the struggle between two different kinds of drama which goes on throughout *All's Well.* The conflict is easiest to locate in Helena and has given rise to much dispute as to whether the emphasis should fall on revelations of a delicately sensitive inner life (as in III.ii. 99 - 129, for example), or on the actions to which she is committed by Shakespeare's sources and which, when the point of view remains psychological, mark her out as a predatory schemer. In Parolles's soliloquy the change of manner is evident in the appearance of couplets, but also in his reminder of one of the several stock types ('braggart') with which he has been loosely associated. Now all of these are no longer serviceable, either for himself or Shakespeare, there is a hint of what will replace them ('being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive'), but as yet no clear or obvious indication. His decision to follow his recent tormentors into France ('1'11 after them') is nevertheless a plain enough sign that the release from association of any kind, which he has just been celebrating, is imaginary.

'Simply the thing I am/Shall make me live' may be a defiant assertion of freedom from social definition, but by the end of his soliloquy Parolles is already referring to the 'place' which exists for every man alive. It is significant that in his quest for a new 'place', and in Shakespeare's final efforts to place or characterize him, the first person Parolles should meet is Lavatch. In a play in which many figures are problematic, Lavatch is not the least puzzling. This is not because, like Parolles, the impression he initially makes is indeterminate. On the contrary, the dominant features of his composition are immediately apparent on his first entrance and only become more so with each subsequent appearance. The difficulty lies rather in trying to follow the by now well established custom of thinking of him along with the other domestic fools Robert Armin is assumed to have played; Touchstone, Feste and the Fool in *King Lear.* When the Countess excuses Lavatch to Lafew by saying, 'My lord that's gone made himself much sport out of him' (IV.v. 61 - 2), she is paying a very considerable tribute to the sturdiness of her late husband's sense of humour. To an even greater extent than the other three

Fools, Lavatch has his order's earthy cynicism, especially on sexual matters; and his Fool status is confirmed by the memories and threats of whipping in Act II, Scene ii. Several important similarities between the four figures can be established, but Lavatch is unlike the others in that at no point in *A Il's Well* does he offer the slightest hint of mental unbalance. Touchstone and Feste can lay claim to being the cleverest people in their respective plays: they are much more clearly than the Faa in *King Lear* 'artificial'. But neither of them abandons completely a protective colouring of madness without which their manner of talking to social superiors would become unacceptable. Lavatch is different in that he never appears to feel he needs folly as a stalking horse, and one consequence is that Lafew's question in Act IV, Scene v- 'Whether dost thou profess thyself- a knave or a fool?'- becomes a highly pertinent enquiry. The knave/boy collocation found in *King Lear* is obviously irrelevant and the dialogue which follows Lafew's question- the one in which Lavatch expounds the bawdy implications of his claim to be a fool at a woman's service and a knave at a man's makes it clear that the issue is not whether Lavatch is a domestic fool or an ordinary servant or menial. 'So you were a knave at (a man's) service indeed', says Lafew, after Lavatch has explained that he would give the man's wife his bauble 'to do her service'; and he has then to admit, 'I will subscribe for thee; thou an both knave and fool'.

In the official designations of *All's Well,* Lavatch is more Fool than knave and Parolles the opposite. Their second encounter (V.ii) temporarily justifies the old adage that fools and knaves divide the world. Lavatch is even more scathing to the ragged and disheveled Parolles than he had been on their first meeting and Parolles is only saved from his scorn by the entry of Lafew. After first of all failing to recognize the former dandy, Lafew offers Parolles a symbolic handshake. Earlier in the play, he had asked Parolles to acknowledge that he had been detected as a fraud by shaking hands: 'So, my good window of lattice, fare thee well; thy casement I need not open, for I look through thee. Give me thy hand' (II.iii. 212 - 14). The offer had been indignantly rejected. There is now no reason for Parolles not to acknowledge openly that all his disguises have been stripped away, but despite Lafew's 'though you are a fool and knave you shall eat', what if anything they will be replaced by is not yet clear. The process of clarification is interrupted by the entry of the King and the final scene of reconciliation between Bertram and Helena. Parolles's minor role in this includes humbly accepting the King's reference to Bertram as his 'master', and then talking himself of the tricks 'which gentlemen have' in a way which makes it obvious that he no longer aspires to be one of them (V.iii. 233 - 9). But it is only after Helena and Benram have been finally brought together that his own fate is decided. 'Mine eyes smell onions; I shall weep anon,' says Lafew, and then to Parolles, 'Good Tom Drum, lend me a handkercher. So, I thank thee. Wait on me home, I'll make span with thee. Let thy curtsies alone, they are scurvy ones' (314 - 318). That the Countess's husband enjoyed making span with Lavatch strengthens the impression that Parolles is here being adopted as Lafew's household fool and confirms the appropriateness of his advice to himself in his great soliloquy: 'being faal'd, by fool'ry thrive'. Looking back over *All's Well* in the light of this conclusion, it becomes evident that Parolles has already shown several attributes of the Fool or Clown, the most easily identifiable being his opening discussion with Helena on virginity (I.i. 104 160). When this dialogue is compared with the one in Act **I,** Scene iii in which the Countess plays the straight-man for Lavatch and

when the topic is also sexual (7 - 93), it is hard not to feel that, in comparison with the Countess, Lafew has arranged for himself the better or at least more comfortable deal. Now that there are two Fools, it is also hard not to conclude that the official account of who is more knave than fool will have to be reversed.

From experimenting with various roles- none of which, either singly or in combination, he is much good at Parolles moves to an exhilarating shedding of all social categorization, and is then finally accounted for as a domestic fool Like the recovery of Bertram, his reintegration into society is a sign of that 'tolerance' so often stressed in thematic accounts of *All's Well'* 'There's place and means for every man alive'. Yet the ending to his career is no more unambiguously happy than the one which in the final scene unites the two protagonists. The lesson it provides as to what it means to be social- the stress on our inevitable dependence on the social groups sobering. Interiorized social norms are always more likely to govern our behaviour than the promptings of some putative essential self.

The progress of Parolles is also illustrative of a problem of casting which Shakespeare appears to be struggling with, or at least working on, throughout *All's Well* In the first pan of the play the figure is too unfixed and ineffectual to be capable of the serious knavery of corrupting Bertram, a task for which Shakespeare does not give him the necessary character. As he moves from one humiliating encounter to another, his efforts to find himself a place in a world of gentlemen are too unsuccessful to be seriously threatening. The decisive contribution to the problem of how Parolles should be regarded is probably made in Act IV, Scene iii by the First Lord. When the blindfolded Parolles first begins to talk about the First Lord and suggests he was whipped from Paris 'for getting the shrieve's fool with child, a dumb innocent that could not say him nay' (181 - 2), Bertram has to restrain his fellow officer from violent retaliation. But after Parolles has slipped into his comically abusive stride and made a long speech on the First Lord's 'honesty', the latter's response is, 'I begin to love him for this' (253). A few lines later the First Lord says of Parolles, 'He hath out-villain'd villainy so far that the ranty redeems him' but the truth is rather than his insults are so outrageously and ineptly wide of the mark that they are laughable. It is this ability to provoke laughter which, after Shakespeare's brief euphoric toying with a drama of 'things', marks Parolles out as a Fool or down.

In *As You Like It,* Jaques is 'ambitious for a motley coat' (II.vii. 43) and in *Twelfth Night* Malvolio is reduced to the status of a 'poor *fool'* (V.i. 368); but only at the end of *All's Well* is there a genuine doubling of the number of Fools. In the traditional method for distinguishing one kind of fool from another, 'natural' refers to those who are mentally deranged and 'artificial' to those who only pretend to be. The distinction can also be extended to refer to Fools whose humour is either inadvertent or deliberate. Lavatch is very clearly 'artificial' in that he tells jokes and exercises full control over the comedy of the situations in which he is involved. Parolles has some control in his opening dialogue with Helena but, in general, he might well have said of his rival Lavatch's fooling what Sir Andrew Aguecheek says of Sir Toby's, 'Ay, he does well enough, if he be disposed, . . . but I do it more natural' (II.iii. 82-4). Perhaps the disapproves of Parolles, and latter-day Johnsonians anxious for Shakespeare to demonstrate more clearly his

antipathy to vice, can be comforted with the thought that his likely role in Lafew's household would be less to make his new master laugh than to be laughed at by him.

Adaptations

All's Well That Ends Well. BBC Time/Life Series, 1981.

Television production starring Ian Charleson, Angela Down and Celia Johnson. Distributed by Ambrose Video. 141 minutes.

Further Study

Literary Commentary

Briggs, Julia. "Shakespeare's Bed-Tricks." In *Essays in Criticism XLIV* , No.4 (October 1994): 293-314.

Discusses the influences on Shakespeare in his use of the bed-trick and how Shakespeare used the bed-trick in his own work Briggs focuses *on Arcadia* , a work preceding Shakespeare's plays, and Shakespeare's own *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well.*

Brown, John Russell. "Love's Ordeal and the Judgements of *All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure,* and *Troilus and Cressida."* In *Shakespeare and His Comedies,* pp. 183-200. Lon don: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1957.

Argues that these three *comedies-All's Well That Ends Well, Measure far Measure,* and *Troilus and Cressida-* are, like their Shakespearean predecessors, "informed by Shakespeare's ideals of love's wealth, love's truth, and love's order," even though they are often classified as "problem plays" and set apart from Shakespeare's other comedies. Brown argues that the three plays "refine and extend Shakespeare's comic vision" and that understanding them enhances one's appreciation of the earlier comedies.

Bryant, J. A, Jr. *"All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure."* In *Shakespeare and the Uses of Comedy,* pp. 203-20. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986.

Examines how the two plays, although "traditional" comedies, veer from the usual paths of such tales, arriving "at the prescribed destination with marks of the passage still showing."

Chambers, E. K. *"All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Discussions of Shakespeare's Problem Comedies,* edited by Robert Ornstein, pp. 38-41. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961.

Briefly explores the" degradation" of Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*

Champion, Larry S. "The Problem Comedies." In *The Evolution of Shakespeare's Comedy A Study in Dramatic Perspective* pp.96-128 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970. Examines how *All's Well That Ends Well* centers on the character of Bertram and how Parolles, Lavache, Lafeu, and Helena contribute to the comic perspective of the play.

Charney, Maurice. *"All's Well That Ends Well."* In *ALL of Shakespeare,* pp. 95-103. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Provides an overview of *All's Well That Ends Well* in tended for classroom use or for the general reader.

Dowden, Edward. "The Role of Helena." In *Discussions of Shakespeare's Problem Comedies,* edited by Robert Ornstein, pp. 35-37. Boston' D. C. Heath and Company, 1961.

Briefly explores the character of Helena in *All's Well That*

Ends Well, finding her noble, active, and courageous.

Fraser, Russell, ed. Introduction to *All's Well That Ends Well,* pp. 1-37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Provides an overview of *All's Well That Ends Well,* including its genesis; how Shakespeare drew on historical figures and tales for his creation of characters (acknowledging Boccaccio's *Decameron;*) the uniqueness of Bertram as a Shakespearean hero; and various other much-discussed elements of the play, such as its ending, the characters' sexuality, and the importance of Parolles. Fraser also puts this play in context with some of Shakespeare's other plays and provides a brief stage history. This introduction is followed by the actual text of the play.

Friedman, Michael D. "Male Bonds and Marriage in *All's Well* and *Much Ado."* In *Studies in English Literature* 35, No. 2 (Spring 1995)' 231-49.

Discusses male bonding in *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Much Ado about Nothing,* primarily the relationship between Bertram and Parolles, and Claudio and Benedick, and how it pertains to marriage in the plays.

Goddard, Harold C. "All's Well That Ends Well." In *The Meaning of Shakespeare,* pp. 424-35. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Explores the possibility of examining *All's Well That Ends Well* in two different ways- as a folktale and as a "less clandestinely ironical" *Two Gentlemen of Verona.* In the folktale interpretation, Helena is the "good angel" who rescues Bertram from Parolles, the "bad angel." If this was Shakespeare's intent, Goddard argues, he did a poor Job of it, as Bertram's character is simply too "blackened" for the reader to think the ending plausible. In the second interpretation, Parolles and Bertram are the two "gentlemen," and Parolles, especially, takes center stage as a universally scorned and abhorred character.

Haley, David. "Bertram at Court." In *Shakespeare's Courtly Mirror: Reflexivity and Prudence In* All's Well That Ends Well, pp. 17-51 Newark: University of Delware Press, 1993.

Examines *All's Well That Ends Well* as a courtly play (and Shakespeare's approach to the courtier in general), with specific emphasis on Bertram as a courtier.

- - -. "Helena's Love." In *Shakespeare's Courtly Mirror: Reflexivity and Prudence in* All's Well That Ends Well, pp. 87122. Newark: University of Delware Press, 1993.

Examines Helena's character, including her love melancholy, her "prophetic virtue" and "providential mission," and her" erotic motive" to be united with Bertram after he has rejected her (thus abandoning "providence for Eros").

Hapgood, Robert. "The Life of Shame: Parolles *and All's Well."* In *Essay; in Criticism XV,* No.3 *(July* 1965): 269-78.

Discusses Parolles's Vitality, how the King, Helena, Diana, Bertram, and Parolles are faced with an ordeal in which death is areal possibility, and the issue of telling the truth.

Hethmon, Robert H "The Case for *All's Well'* What Is Wrong with the King?" In *Drama Critique* VII, No.1 (Winter 1964): 26-31.

Provides a very brief overview of the main characters and scenes in *All's Well That Ends Well,* with some discussion of how certain scenes should be performed, especially the ending of the play.

Hodgdon, Barbara. "The Making of Virgins and Mothers: Sexual Signs, Substitute Scenes and Doubled Presences in *All's Well That Ends Well."* In *Philological Quarterly* 66, No. 1 (Winter 1987): 47-71.

Approaches a reading of *All's Well That Ends Well* from Helena's point of view, examining in particular how Shakespeare based his play on Boccaccio's play and what he did differently; how" sexual signs are articulated in character and event"; and how substitute scenes are used, particularly the bed- trick.

Hunt, Maurice. "Words and Deeds in *All's Well That Ends Well."* In *Modem Language Quarterly* 48, No.4 (December 1987): 320-38.

Examines the "competition" between words and deeds in *All's Well That Ends Well* primarily through the King of France, who vacillates between valuing word and deed and thus the two cannot be brought into harmony; Helena, through whom Shakespeare implies that "not only that deeds can on occasion speak but also that they can prompt an eventual honesty in words"; and Bertram, who merges word and deed in the final scenes of the play when he embraces Helena.

Hunter, Robert Grams. *"All's Well That Ends Well."* In *Shakespeare and the Comedy if Forgiveness,* pp. 106-31. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.

Highlights the main scenes and dialogue in *All's Well That Ends Well.* Hunter describes how the play has a special significance in its oddities and in how our expectations are continually disappointed. He emphasizes the theme of a "dying world in need of regeneration,"_ and classifies the playas a "comedy of forgiveness."

Huston, J. Dennis. "'Some Stain of Soldier': The Functions of Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare Quarterly* XXI, No.4 (Autumn 1970): 431-38.

Argues that Parolles is not an entirely unworthy figure in *All's Well That Ends Well.* He does provide some energy amid the backdrop of solemnity and death at the opening of the play, and he does infuse Helena with energy when she is despairing over her love for Bertram. However, Huston also argues that Parolles represents the very worst of the younger generation, whose failings are facilitating social decay and "darkness,'" which the older generation, especially the King, laments.

Jardine, Lisa. "Cultural Confusion and Shakespeare's Learned Heroines. 'These Are Old Paradoxes." In *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38, No.1 (Spring 1987): 1-18.

Discusses how Helena and Portia, in, respectively, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *The Merchant if Venice,* possessed knowledge traditionally associated with the "male sphere." Helena, in particular possessed knowledge as a healer (the community's "wise woman"), in her upbringing (her "education"), and as the "woman who knows" in her deception of Bertram. Jardine discusses the tension between possessing knowledge as a part of female virtue and possessing It in the "male sphere."

Kastan, David Scott. *"All's Well That Ends Well* and the Limits of Comedy." In *ELH* 52, No.3 (Autumn 1985): 57589.

Argues that although *All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's other "problem plays" are classified as comedies and not tragedies because "fictive aspirations have been gratified,'" the reader is not entirely satisfied with these" aspirations" and indeed has been" made suspicious of them,'" thus making the plays "generic mixtures" or "mutations."

Krapp, George Philip. "Parolles." In *Shakespearian Studies,* edited by Brander Matthews and Ashley Horace Thorndike, pp. 291-302. New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962.

Argues that it is erroneous to connect Parolles with the creation of the character of Falstaff, or to equate him with the "braggart soldier" of Renaissance comedy. Rather, the character of Parolles parallels that of the Elizabethan "young wits" of the last part of the sixteenth century he was "a transcript from Elizabethan life."

Lawrence, William Witherle. *"All's Well That Ends WelL"* In *Shakespeare's Problem Comedies,* pp. 32-77. New York: Macmillan, 1931.

Focuses on the characters of Helena and Bertram using two well-known themes of popular story- The Fulfillment of the Tasks and The Healing of the King- and by looking at Parolles and Lavache. In general Lawrence concludes that Helena is wholly deserving of admiration, not scorn; the ending is unreservedly a happy one; and that the play must be examined in an Elizabethan context to interpret it properly.

Leech, Clifford. "The Theme of Ambition in *All's Well That Ends Well."* In *ELH* 21, No.1 (March 1954): 17-29.

Touches on the possible folktale elements in *All's Well That Ends Well;* the juxtaposition of older and younger characters; the unsatisfactory ending; and how the element of ambition is intertwined with Helena's love for Bertram. Leech paints a fairly negative portrait of Helena, finding her devious even in her modest language.

Leggatt, Alexander. *"All's Well That Ends Well:* The Testing of Romance." In *Modem Language Quarterly* 32, No.1 (March 1971): 21-41.

Suggests that instead of praising or condemning *A II's Well That Ends Well,* it is much more instructive to investigate how this controversy arose. Leggatt attempts to do tills by focusing on the characters as "creations springing from, and inextricably wedded to, the peculiar dramatic mode of the play," concentrating in particular on the concepts of romance and realism

Magee, William H. "Helena, A Female Hamlet." In *E English Miscellany* 22 (1971): 31-46.

Explores the" similarities amid many differences" between Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Hamlet. For example, they are similar in their capacity for affection and love, both are attractive characters, they face comparable difficulties and they have an essential dignity and a "passion for friendship and love together with an awareness of love's nasty side." Spiritually, however, they are quite different. :Hamlet is philosophical, a scholar, and muses on abstract Ideas; Helena lives in the here and now, in the physical world, relying on divine providence. According to Magee, we can "observe in the comparison of Helena and Hamlet how Shakespeare's *unique* absorption with his unusually vapid young hero type can be related to his continual interest in the young heroines."

Makaryk, Irene Rima. "The Problem Plays." In her dissertation, *Comic Justice* in *Shakespeare's Comedies,* 1979.

Discusses *All's Well That Ends Well* within the context of the two other "problem plays" with which It is usually aligned-Measure *for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida.*

Maus, Katharine Eisaman. *"All's Well That Ends Well."* In *The Norton Shakespeare,* edited by Stephen Greenblatt, pp 2175-81. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997.

Provides an overview of *All's Well That Ends Well,* touching on such topics as the reversal of gender roles, the lack of "endings" in the play, desire, honor, and social class.

Muir, Kenneth. *"All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare's Comic Sequence,* pp. 124-32. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1979.

Provides a brief overview of *All's Well That Ends Well,* focusing on the actions and motivations of Helena and Bertram.

Ranald, Margaret Loftus. "The Betrothals of *All's Well That Ends Well."*_ In *The Huntington Library Quarterly* XXVI, No. 2 (February1963): 179-92.

Examines the laws of marriage in Elizabethan England and how they can be used to analyze the marriage contracts between Helena and Bertram, and Diana and Bertram.

Richard, Jeremy. "'The Thing I am': Parolles, the Comedic Villain, and Tragic Consciousness."_ In *Shakespeare Studies,* Vol. XVIII, pp. 145-59. Burt Franklin & *Co.,* Inc., 1986.

Demonstrates how the character of Parolles fits into Shakespeare's development of the metamorphosis of the comedic villain in his work: "Parolles and the manner in which he suggests that all is not well that ends well creates a new Shakespearean drama of the pitfalls of the mental world rather than the pratfalls of the physical."

Roark, Christopher. "Lavatch and Service in *All's Well That Ends Well.'"* In *Studies* in *English Literature, 1500-1900* 28, No.2 (Spring 1988): 241-258.

Argues that examining the role of Lavatch, the clown, can add an important dimension to understanding the play, especially its more problematic elements, such as the unsatisfying ending.

Shalvi, Alice. "The Pursuit of Honor in *All's Well That Ends Well.'"* In *Studies* in *English Language and L literature,* Vol. XVII, pp. 9-34. Jerusalem: Magnus Press, Hebrew University, 1966.

Examines how Shakespeare represented various types of and attitudes toward honor through different characters and groups of characters in *All's Well That Ends Well* The "older generation" of nobility, represented primarily by the King of France, the Countess of Rousillon, and Lafeu, values honor and virtue, regardless of social rank or birth. The "younger generation," represented primarily by Bertram (and excluding Parolles and Helena), "have inherited none of their elders' virtue and Wisdom; they are noble in title, not character."

Shapiro, Michael. "The Web of Our Life': Human Frailty and Mutual Redemption in *All's Well That Ends Well.'"* In *JEPG* LXXI, No.4 (October 1972): 514-26.

Argues that Helena and Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well* can be seen as symmetrical, parallel characters. At the beginning of the play, both characters need to prove themselves and attain distinction through achievement

Bertram goes off to war and Helena cures the King. However, both experience failure in the process- Bertram gains glory in battle but loses his honor with Diana, and Helena gains Bertram's hand but not his heart. In the end, these two characters redeem each

other. It is often noted that Helena redeems Bertram, but he is also an agent of her redemption through his forgiveness of her deception and acceptance of her as his Wife.

Simpson, Lynne M. "The Failure to Mourn in *All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare Studies* XXII (1994): 172-88. Examines the Oedipal anxieties in Helena and Bertram as they pertain to the failure of each to mourn the death of her/his father. Helena substitutes Bertram for her dead father, and Bertram substitutes the King of France for his. Simpson takes a psychoanalytic approach with regard to the concepts of guilt, death, forgetting, memory, and forgiveness in the play.

Snyder, Susan. *"All's Well That Ends Well* and Shakespeare's Helens: Text and Subtext, Subject and Object.'" In *English Literary Renaissance* 18, No.1 (Winter 1988): 66-77.

Examines two aspects of *All's Well That Ends Well* as they relate to Helena. The first concerns the" gaps, disjunctions, and silences" in the play, "where we lack an expected connection or explanation in the speeches or actions" of Helena, primarily as they concern her character's mixture of initiative and passivity. In the second part of the essay, Snyder compares the Helena of *All's Well* with the Helena of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and with Helen of Troy, demonstrating how *All's Well's* Helena, even at the end of the play, stands in marked contrast to the other two similarly named heroines as undesired subject rather than desired object.

Spencer, Hazelton. *"All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Discussions if Shakespeare's Problem Comedies,* edited by Robert Ornstein, pp. 42-44. Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1961.

Argues that one must "accept the romantic plot" of *All's Well That Ends Well* as is if one is to enjoy the play and find it worthwhile. Spencer especially notes that the bed-trick should not be considered unnatural or unusual, "since the condition was imposed on Helena by her husband," and that the plot of the play necessitated the stupidity and viciousness of the character of Bertram, "if we are to be wholeheartedly for Helena."

Styan, J. L. *"All's Well That Ends WelL" Shakespeare in Performance Series.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. Describes how *All's Well That Ends Well* has been performed primarily on stage but also on television in the twentieth century. The first part addresses issues of performance; the second part takes the play scene by scene; and the appendix contains listings of twentieth-century productions, major productions, and principal casts.

Tillyard, E. M. W. *"All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare's Problem Plays,* pp. 94-123. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949.

Finds *All's Well That Ends Well* an overall failure due to its lack of execution, its lack of "steady warmth pervading the whole creation," and a "defective poetical style." However, he does find some merit in the plot and in Shakespeare's three main characters, Helena, Bertram, and Parolles.

Ure, Peter. "The *Problem Plays"* and *"All's Well That Ends Well."* In *The Problem Plays,* pp. 7-18. London: Longmans Green & Co., 1961.

Provides a brief overview of the problematic nature of *All's Well That Ends Well,* focusing primarily on the ending of the play as it relates to the character development- or lack thereof- of Helena and Bertram. Ure finds that in the end, Bertram's character remains unchanged despite his tutelage from the King regarding honor, his "education" in the military, and his witnessing of Parolles's destruction. Bertram's inability to "grow up" and Helena's unflagging goodness provide an unsatisfactory reconciliation of the two in the final act of the play, and thus an unsatisfactory ending (albeit a "proper" comedic one).

Vaughn, Jack A *"All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare's Comedies,* pp. 153-59. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1980.

Provides a very brief overview of *All's Well That Ends Well,* touching on the difficulty critics face in assessing the motives and actions of Helena, Bertram, and Parolles. Also provides a brief stage history.

Warren, Roger. "Why Does It End Well? Helena, Bertram, and the Sonnets." In *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey if Shakespearean Study & Production,* edited by Kenneth Muir, pp. 79-92. London: Cambridge University Press, 1969..

Finds that Shakespeare's sonnets provide "illuminating commentary" to discussions of *All's Well That Ends WelL* Warren interweaves sonnets and excerpts from the play to explore Helena's "passionate love and the power of its expression," the" curiously unsympathetic portrait" of Bertram; the social gulf between Helena and Bertram; and the unlikely ending to the play.

Wells, Stanley. "Plays of Troy, Vienna, and Roussillon: *Troilus and Cressida, Measure far Measure,* and *All's Well That Ends Well"* In *Shakespeare: A Life in Drama,* pp. 234-244. New York: W. W. *Norton,* 1995.

Follows the relationship of Helena and Bertram in *A II's Well That Ends Well* to illuminate the play's "moral self-consciousness."

Yang, Sharon R "Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well"* In *The Explicator* 50, No.4 (Summer 1992): 199-203.

Briefly explores the parallels between the characters of Lavache and Bertram, particularly how Lavache's "words and experiences expose the absurdity of Bertram's perspective."

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

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The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

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The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

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The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members educational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

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