HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL (1602-04)

William Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

There is a narrow line between the problem play and the comedy, in Shakespeare's work. *The Comedy of Errors, The Taming of the Shrew*, or *As you like it* may serve as exemplary comedies, bringing together disguised identities and seemingly unrelated fates and topping them with a forward looking finale—the model for which was often the hilariously packaged Plautine drama of early Rome. The problem play—we have instanced *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*—is kin to the comedy, but far less wrapped, closer to raising questions than to providing answers. *All's Well that Ends well* is in that sense very much a problem play, bringing about a startling and tricky resolution, which poses itself as a particular question: is this resolution proof of the conversion, of a hopeless narcissist, or is it proof that cynical realism can prevail in even the most adverse circumstances?

CHARACTERS

King of France
Duke of Florence
Bertram, Count of Roussillon
Countess of Roussillon, mother of Bertram
Lavatch, a Clown in her household
Helena, a gentlewoman
Lafew, an old Lord
Parolles, a follower of Bertram
An old widow of Florence, named Capillet
Diana, daughter of the Widow
Steward of the Countess of Roussillon
Violenta (ghost character) and Mariana
Neighbours and friends of the Widow
A page
Soldiers, servants, gentlemen

STORY

Illness. The tale opens on the mystery of regal illness, the passing of generations, and the search for a magical cure. The victim of a fatal illness is the King of France, who has just suffered a major administrative blow, the loss to death of his personal advisor, and thus of the man best placed to suggest a cure for the King's fatal illness. The wife of Count Bertram—the advisor to the King-- proposes that her son, the Count de Roussilon, heir to his father's savvy, should take over the curative role hitherto occupied (ineffectively) by his dad. The King is in agreement with this plan, and takes on Bertram, Count of Roussillon, as his personal attendant.

Helena. At the same time, in the Roussilon household which includes a gentlewoman, Helena, sub-themes are developing which will have a sharp impact on the ultimate point of the play, that *all's well that ends well*. Helena, a beautiful, witty, Rosalind kind of Shakespearian chick, is, as she explains it to the Countess de Roussilon, deeply in love with the lady's son, Bertram. This must have been love at first sight, we muse, for we have seen no reason—other than the presentable male in the hunting season—why any young lady should concentrate on this guy.

Herbals. As it is, though, Helena puts her case strongly to the Countess' hearing, and, receiving an interested response—for the Countess knows from the start what would be good for her son—the thought arises that Helena might herself be a curative for the King. We learn, at this point, that Helena's father has been a distinguished professor of herbal healings, and that from him, on his deathbed, Helena has inherited some herbal knowledge appropriate for the problem—a fistula—which is threatening the King's life. Inquiries are made at court, and a modest expression of interest tendered to Helena from the royal side.

Court. In that fashion it happens, consequently, that both Bertram, in service to the King, and Helena, who begs for an audience with the King, and is cautiously granted one, coincide at the royal court. Bertram is quickly tagged for what he is, a pretty boy aiming for a well-heeled officer's career, and Helena is allowed to make her case, which is strongly buttressed by the reputation of her father. The King accepts the offer of Helena, to attempt a cure of him, but he attaches riders to the offer:

Riders. if Helena succeeds In the cure, she can choose any young man at the court for her husband, the King guaranteeing that that lucky gentleman will be her husband. If, however, she fails in her cure, she will be condemned to death. She succeeds in her cure, the fistula disappears, and in lineup review of the court bachelors, she chooses Bertram. Without much choice in the matter,,Bertram makes it evident that all he wants is to get active on his military career. After the obligatory marriage, Bertram heads for the front, failing, to Helena's huge disappointment, even to kiss her on his way out the door. So matters stood, in spite of the King's backing of the marriage.

Sequence. Obviously the marriage of Bertram and Helena will only advance if Helena can find some way to jumpstart it. The opportunity presents itself courtesy of Bertram's continual womanizing, which he indulges to the full at his various military postings. By coincidence, Helena grows acquainted with a lovely young lady who is desperate to draw her handsome boyfriend into marriage. Bethinking herself of an early in marriage statement by Bertram, that he will only marry Helen if she wears his ring and bears his child, Helen moves boldly into a plan by which her new girlfriend can help both of them.

Plan. The new friend makes a date to meet Bertram for an hour of love in the middle of the night: he goes for it, of course, his suspicions unaroused even by the attached conditions, that he gets only an hour, must make love in complete silence, and must, for a love token, leave his ring with his one hour lover. In the subsequent fall out, when Helena gives birth to his baby, and produces his ring, Bertram is left to conjecture what happened during the famous night with 'Helen's friend.' Bertram is by this time, anyway, thoroughly chastened by his own mother's actions: mom abandons her son, adopting Helena instead, as a virtuous and effective wife, while the King, who after all stands guarantee for the marriage, berates Bertram for his bad judgement and unreliability.

Turnaround. Hoist by his own petard, Bertram gives in to the inevitability of the marriage. 'Gives in' puts it too listlessly, and here lies more of the mystery that dangles from the end of this play. For quite suddenly, faced with the fallout of his fruitful night of deception, Bertram discovers in himself a wholesome and hearty love for Helena. Helena of course is delighted, for she loved him at first sight and has never lost faith. The mystery is with Bertram: what happened to his indifference to Helena? How did he become a marital team partner, instead of a seducer around town? A certain magic realism settles on the end of the play, which makes it question itself: does Bertram change abruptly or does he yield to the force majeure of social pressure, in a move of cyniclal realism? After all he has seriously jeopardized his ftuture position .at court, by his indifference to the bond he has established with the King.

THEMES

Selfishness Bertram is a paragon of selfishness, attractive, a lady's man, and interested only in himself. He is drawn to the military career because, as an officer, he will be a dashing young charmer, and get all the girls he wants. In the end he becomes the victim—or does he?—of his own desire for the magic of an hour of intercourse.

Fidelity. If Bertram is selfish, Helena is kind, concerned with others, and generous. It is not at all that Helena is bland, for in her wit she leads the pack, making a smart aleck like Parolles look tinny. It is that Helena truly sees into other people, and treats them according to what they are.

Healing. Helena's personal charms belong together with her magical charm as a healer, who uses herbal recipes taught to her by her father, a renowned healer. These herbs seem like a byproduct of her own benign personality.

Military. For the officer class, the mlitary provided, in the world of Bertram, an opportunity for little actual conflict, fine uniforms and high style social life. These conditions perfectly suited the tastes of Bertram, who employed his time making out and dressing up. One thinks of Vronsky, in *Anna Karenina*.

Trickery Helena, as said earlier, was of a lovely character, but at the same time she was a wit and sassy enough to hold her own in any company. It was her idea to build the trick that trapped Bertram, or, if you prefer, gave him both pleasure and a chance for stability.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Helena

Character Helena is the main character. It is her passionate (and inexplicable) passion for Bertram that generates the plot of the play. It is her tenacious pursuit of him, to Paris, that gives her the chance to bind him with a marriage contract, and it is her ingenious bed and ring trick that finally gives her power over Bertram. Her goal, from the start, has been to catch Bertram, and what she has finally caught is a mystery. A true lover or a playboy trapped in a net?

Parallels Love at first sight, through female eyes, shines through the ancient Greek lyric poet, Sappho. In one of her most ardent poems she envisions her beloved under the eyes of another, who carries in watching all the passion of adoration that Sappho herself feels. Helena was equally struck blind, by Bertram, as was Cinderella, in the fairy tale, who was blown away by the sight of the Prince. M. Bennett's daughters, in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, live in an upper class culture world devoted to advantageous, and pleasurable, marriages, and have their eyes essentially on that one outcome, as did Helena. Estella and Miss Haversham, in Dickens' *Great Expectations,* manipulate, while playing with, Pip, Estella herself as dangerously erotic as Helena. Finally, for the television buff, there is the fascinating series of the *Bachelorette,* which makes the audience draw in its breath, while awaiting the Lady's awed gasp of fascination, with her choice of the handsomest guy in the pack.

Illustrative moments

1
'You know, my Father left me some prescriptions…'

Helena tells her friends that she will be in a position to cure the King of France.

2
'What I can do, can do no hurt to try.' Helena to the King,

She wants him to trade her his health for a binding arrangement to Bertram as a marriage partner.

3
'But such as one thy vassall, whom I know,
Is free for me to ask, thee to bestow.'

Helen lets the King know that Bertram will be her only marriage choice.

4

‘Strangers and foes do sunder and not kiss.’

Helena’s bitter words to Bertram, as he leaves her shortly after their marriage, to return to the war. He has just urged her to return home—no kiss.

5
‘Let us assay our plan, which if it speed,
Is wicked meaning, in a lawful deed.’

Helena speaks with the widow, who is prepared to trick Bertram by acquiring his ring and setting up an hour of night for Helena to enjoy her husband.

Discussion Questions

Does the present play ‘end well’? Does Bertram discover, after the trick has been played on him, that Helena is the one for him? Has he listened to the attitude of his mother, who adopted Helena in his place, considering Bertram himself an unworthy son?

Are you satisfied with calling the present play a problem play? It is not a play that can be solved by the disclosure of hidden relationships or histories—like *The Comedy of Errors* or *As you like It*—but one in which you are invited, as in *Troilus and Cressida*, to consider the nature of love and war, or, as in *Coriolanus*, the nature of perverse nobility. Is a problem play, then, sharply different from a tragedy, in which, for example, we are invited (*Othello*) to think about the nature of an emotion like jealousy?

Does Shakespeare ‘take sides’ in the present play, and write it, say, from the angle of one particular character? George Bernard Shaw is said to have considered the Countess—a well of objectivity and good sense—the outstanding figure in the play. Would it be feasible to choose Bertram as central, on the grounds that, in the end, it is he who comes to a sudden realization of what his true values are?