All's Well That Ends Well

Excerpts taken from:

http://www.enotes.com/topics/alls-well-that-ends-well/critical-essays/criticism

* Scholars generally believe that All's Well That Ends Well was written between 1600-1605, although some believe Shakespeare wrote it earlier. The source story for the play was an episode from Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (1349-50); a story based on a common folkloric theme of achieving what is thought to be an unobtainable goal. Early critics of All's Well That Ends Well focused on the incongruous plot elements and the thematic concerns of merit and rank, virtue and honor, and male versus female. Beginning in the nineteenth century, scholars found it necessary to justify Helena, especially her aggressiveness and her questionable use of the bed-trick. It was not until the twentieth century that critics began commenting on the balance of tone and structure, and the heretofore overlooked connections between the dark elements of Shakespeare's play and the source story.
* In All's Well That Ends Well, Helena, a physician's daughter, must first cure the King of France, and then consummate her marriage to Bertram, the unwilling object of her affections. Although there are several other characters and subplots in the play, the themes of virtue, honor, and redemption can be seen in these central characters. The conclusions of the play's subplots, and that of the primary conflict, are seen by many as unsatisfactory, and as leaving the audience with mixed feelings about the characters and the story. Although the play was written as a comedy, it is commonly referred to as a "problem play" because of the somber and tragic elements found in it, and because of the general lack of satisfaction at the ending. Critic James L. Calderwood (1963) calls All's Well "the most problematic of the so-called 'problem plays'," and Joseph G. Price (1968) finds that while the balance of the play is exceptional, All's Well lacks the "characteristic mood" by which Shakespeare's plays can be identified.
* The ending of the play has received much critical attention, with scholars divided on the issue of whether the play does, in fact, end well. Several critics call attention to the fact that due to the title of the play, expectations of the ending are heightened. Some believe that Shakespeare ended his play prematurely, in order to meet a production goal or for financial needs. Others debate the idea that the ending is not acceptable, and suggest viewing the play in terms of Elizabethan conventions. In 1977, Ian Donaldson argued that All's Well has not been studied as the complex play that it is. In what he calls Shakespeare's "play of endings," Donaldson contends that "the notion of the end dances elusively ahead, always just appearing. . . ." Thomas Cartelli (1983) suggests that the conclusion of All's Well was an experiment by Shakespeare, to keep the ending in rhythm with the "eccentric design" of the rest of the play. Maintaining that the ending of All's Well confronts the traditional romantic ending, Gerard J. Gross (1983) questions whether the ending of the play is happy, as a comedy is expected to be, in part because Helena's attraction for Bertram is not entirely believable, and also because the audience is never positive that Helena and Bertram will have a happy life together.
* The sexuality of the play is another controversial and much-debated theme. Critics point to the unlikelihood of Helena pursuing a husband who is not only clearly above her rank, but who is portrayed as a selfish, seemingly unlikable man. Early commentators on the play criticized Helena for pursuing a man at all. Recent critics, however, have been more favorable to Helena. E. A. J. Honigmann (1989) views All's Well as a play of female dominance, and one illustrating the contrast of male and female. Likewise, Marilyn L. Williamson (1986) contends that the bed-trick allows Helena to be more sexual than normally allowed in romantic comedies, without being lustful, because the sex is achieved for chaste motives. Carol Thomas Neely (1985) sees the separation of sexuality and marriage in the play as the foundation for other sources of corruption, and cites the bed-trick as death and rebirth, both sexually and psychologically, for Bertram and Helena.
* Modern criticism of the play also addresses Shakespeare's intention of commenting on the social role of women, the similarities between Helena's feelings for Bertram and Shakespeare's feelings for his lover in the sonnets, and whether or not stage productions should attempt to explain the holes in the plot through non-verbal cues. The primary debate continues, however, over whether All's Well illustrates Shakespeare's ability to fuse together drastically different characters and seemingly unrelated elements, or whether it exposes lack of unity and forethought on the playwright's part.
* Perhaps the most problematic of the so-called "problem plays," All's Well That Ends Well has been received, both in the theater and in the study, with nearly unanimous disfavor. The principal objection of its critics, that the play lacks unity, would appear to be well-founded, for the relatively few serious attempts to elicit some sort of order have been largely selective, extorting a partial and particular coherence at the expense of major considerations which would vitiate the critical performance. W. W. Lawrence has presented a valuable but somewhat limited study of the analogues of the plot material, indicating the combination of the two folktale plots, "the healing of the king" and "the fulfilment of the tasks," and concluding that the use of such material, freighted as it is with traditional meanings, requires from the audience a relatively uncritical response: Helena is to be seen as noble throughout, the "bedtrick" as entirely acceptable, and the final reconciliation as portending unmitigated happiness. 1 Such a view, unfortunately, imposes upon Shakespeare the function less of a transmuter than of a transmitter of his sources, and by emphasizing the idealized fairytale qualities of plot ignores the pointed qualifications made upon these qualities by tonal realism and structural ironies. Lawrence's findings are accepted by Mark Van Doren, but are enlisted for purposes of disparaging the play; Shakespeare's commitment to the fable plot, Van Doren feels, caused him to subordinate both poetry and characterization to the mechanical requirements of the story.2 On the other hand, E. M. W. Tillyard finds that the play is admirably constructed and its characters effectively delineated, but feels that Shakespeare's imagination operated rather fitfully, failing to invest the crucial moments of action with verse that rises above the merely conventional and sententious.3 And finally, G. Wilson Knight has sought a unifying principle in the play in the pervading opposition between "feminine love in virgin purity [and] male values of prowess linked to sexual laxity."4 Like Lawrence's argument from plot, Knight's argument from theme results in a whitewashing of Helena's character; indeed, Knight considers her scarcely less than a Saint Joan marching forth under the banner of her goddess Diana to encounter and defeat the forces of Mars led by the hapless Bertram. However, against this black-or-white, essentially melodramatic conception of character we can profitably set the lines of the First Lord (IV.iii.68-71):
* In reading a play whose title makes an assertion, we can scarcely avoid questioning the validity of that assertion, can scarcely avoid asking ourselves if all really ends well here or if the patent falseness of the title as a general proposition should alert us to following ironies. To what extent in this play is the end influenced by the means through which it is reached? And if all does end well, what is all? Certainly one of the critical irritants in All's Well has been the problem of deciding what, if anything, does end in the play, let alone whether it ends well or badly.
* If we turn to the opening line we discover that one kind of end, death, is being played off against one kind of beginning, birth: "In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband," the Countess says, and Bertram replies, "And I in going, madam, weep o'er my father's death anew." In fact, the entire first part of this scene is preoccupied with the theme of life and death. Lafew informs us that the king has abandoned himself to death, refusing any longer to delude himself with hopes that his sickness can be cured (11. 14-15). Helena's father, had his skill as a physician equalled his honesty as a man, "would have made nature immortal, and death should have play for lack of work" (11. 19-20); his life, were he living, would have been "the death of the king's disease" (1. 22). Bertram's father is dead; Helena's father is dead; and their contemporary the king is fast nearing death. Bertram's departure from Rossillion signals a new life for him but a form of death for Helena: "there is no living, none, / If Bertram be away" (11. 82-83). For one who loves, separation is death; yet, in the overworked Elizabethan pun, sexual union may also be death: "The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love" (1. 89). And so, to achieve the "little death" of love, Helena renounces death-from-separation and sets out to acquire married "life" with Bertram.
* Perhaps we should pause at this point and examine Helena's decision more closely. Her two soliloquies in I.i are separated by her dialogue with Parolles regarding virginity. Since this dialogue has often been regarded as dramatically irrelevant, it might be profitable to consider it in relation to Helena's attitudes before and after Parolles' appearance. In the first soliloquy (11. 77-103) we find Helena in despair. She has no thought of pursuing Bertram, of actively pressing her love, no more hope of success than if she "should love a bright particular star / And think to wed it," but, instead, is unhappily resigned to a form of private worship at a distance—"my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics." This style of love—passive, contemplative, worshipful—makes no claims upon its object, nor issues in any kind of action, except insofar as it seeks a mystical union with the beloved in the realm of mind. Innocence and purity are retained, guaranteed by passivity, but only at the price of sexual discontent, for the hind that must die for love aspires to a union that is not of the mind. But if Helena's position involves discontent—the frustration of sexual desire which strives against the apparently insuperable barrier between count's son and physician's daughter—yet she is resigned to it, and her lines just before Parolles' entrance are an endorsement of passivity.
* Parolles, however, serves as a catalyst, and the ensuing conversation both crystallizes the issues and provides an index to Helena's changing state of mind. Virginity, to Helena, is something one preserves by inaction, a passive honor acquired at birth; to Parolles, it is something one uses, a marketable commodity which can best be employed in the service of self-interest: "Off with't while 'tis vendible; answer the time of request" (11. 150-51). However, there is an ambiguity in Helena's thoughts about virginity which mirrors her dilemma about the innocence of passivity (love-as-worship) and the potential contamination of action (sexual desire consummated), for though she professes the values of virginity she nevertheless cannot refrain from asking, "How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?" Throughout their talk we see Helena trying obliquely to determine how virtuous virginity really is and how corruptive active love may be. Although she has committed herself to love-as-worship, in her dialogue with Parolles—himself the embodiment of material values, of rationalism, of calculation—the religiosity of Helena's earlier attitude is subjected to the test of secular pragmatism, spiritual love to the claims of concupiscence. She states the problem of mind and body clearly when she says it is a 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  
  Return us thanks.
* (I.i.177-82)
* In other words, the passive virtues inherent in loveas-worship ("wishing well") go, as they have gone from Bertram, unrecognized and unrewarded; acknowledgement of merit can be obtained, apparently, only if one demonstrates that merit by some kind of physical action. The line about the "baser stars" which shut the poorer born up in wishes—the fate which condemns love for one's social superior to hopeless worship—implies the philosophic basis for Helena's passivity: in a world of determinism personal initiative is futile. But of course determinism offers, as she is well aware, the consolation of innocence: men's lives, and lovers', are like "their birth[s]—wherein they are not guilty."
* If we sum up the conflicting attitudes and ideas in Helena, they consist on the one hand of determinism, passivity, innocence, and love-as-worship, and, on the other, of personal initiative, action, potential contamination, and sexual love "to her own liking"; on the one hand, the cold comforts of chastity, on the other, the hope of practical human fulfilment; on the one hand, honor without pleasure, on the other, pleasure without honor. Parolles' importance in Helena's changing position can be inferred from her observations about him as he enters and just before he leaves. She first observes that although he is wholly contaminated—a liar, fool, and coward—nevertheless "these fix'd evils sit so fit in him / That they take place when virtue's steely bones / Looks bleak i' th' cold wind." If evil is here contrasted with good to the latter's disadvantage, yet there is a clear conception of what is evil. At the end of their talk, however, Helena renders a different judgment of "fix'd evil": "the composition that your valour and fear makes in you is a virtue of a good wind, and I like the wear well." Evil has moved, at least rhetorically, into the camp of virtue. The change in terminology suggests a change in Helena's values, a movement toward Parolles; and the suggestion is reinforced by Helena's use of what is conspicuously a Parolles figure of speech: "and I like the wear well." The essentially religious attitude toward values has been modified by the secular one emphasizing appearances. Parolles, the man who can change values as easily as he changes clothes, and for the same reasons, has, without knowing it, induced Helena to tailor her own values in the light of newer and more utilitarian fashions.
* In her second soliloquy Helena rejects the views to which she was resigned in the first. Her acceptance of responsibility now requires a partial renunciation of her earlier determinism: the "sky" remains "fated," but within the territories mapped out by fate one has "free scope" for action (11. 213-14). Moreover, the greatest social distances established by fortune can be bridged by the natural human desire for union with the beloved (11. 218-19). And yet in implementing the desire for union one can remain honorable: "Impossible be strange attempts to those / Who weigh their pains in sense, and do suppose / What hath been cannot be." That is, difficult enterprises which seem impossible if contemplated rationally and which are likely to entail a loss of honor ("What hath been"), will be undertaken only if we allow the force of our desires to dominate all other considerations. So Helena sets out on the difficult enterprise of winning Bertram without compromising her innocence. And just as Bertram's departure from Rossillion was his birth into a new life, so Helena's decision is a rejection of death in favor of a new mode of life.
* Let us pursue this life-and-death opposition a little further. Like Helena in her first soliloquy, the king has abandoned himself to death. However, Helena, risking her life on the success of her cure, restores the king to life and thereby furthers her own plan of achieving life in marriage. Bertram, forced against his will to marry Helena, willingly risks his life also, not for love, but for military honor. In reaction to his flight and continuing danger, Helena again accepts death in order to save life in another (III.iv.16-17). Diana is willing to die for Helena, provided she retains her virginity ("honesty"): "Let death and honesty / Go with your impositions, I am yours" (IV.iv.29-30). And finally, Parolles can be made to reveal the true nature of his life only under the apparent threat of death (IV.iii).
* While instructive in itself, this life-and-death opposition is perhaps more important as it bears on other themes. For example, if we know what it is that characters are willing to die for, we have an excellent indication of the values they endorse, and hence we can begin to understand the motives which urge them to particular kinds of action. Helena is willing to die for love and Bertram; and Diana and Bertram are willing to die for honor. Parolles, however, is unwilling to die for anything: "Let me live, sir, in a dungeon, i' th' stocks, or anywhere, so I may live" (IV.iii.235-36). Indeed, if others are willing to sacrifice life for honor, Parolles is willing to sacrifice honor for life:
* First Lord. If your life be saved will you  
  undertake to betray the Florentine?  
  Parolles. Ay, and the captain of his horse,  
  Count Rossillion.
* (IV.iii.283-85)
* This leads us into the themes of love and honor. Under the general head of honor the play makes several distinctions, especially in the king's lengthy remonstrance to Bertram in II.iii (11. 117-44). The king's speech is meant to distinguish between inherited honor ("name," "additions," "title") and merited honor ("virtue"), between the appearance and the reality of honor: "Good alone / Is good, without a name; vileness is so: / The property by what it is should go, / Not by the title." In its context, the distinction thus made calls attention to Bertram's lack of both honor and moral insight in failing to acknowledge the superiority of Helena's "virtue"—particularly in saving the king's life—to the passive honor of "name." In addition to these, however, there are two other kinds of honor emphasized in the play—virginity and military prowess. In III.v Maria says that "the honour of a maid is her name, and no legacy is so rich as honesty" (11. 12-13). Thus, just as Bertram's "name" is his legacy, so Helena's and Diana's virginity is their legacy; and just as Helena's "virtue" is a merited honor, earned by action, so Bertram's military prowess is a merited honor, earned in battle.
* If we consider the play in these terms it is apparent that the king is the fountainhead of honor, containing in himself all of its forms. At the opposite extreme is Parolles, who lacks all forms of honor, but who, because he can counterfeit them effectively, retains Bertram's approval and gets along well enough in the world of the court. Between the two extremes are Bertram and Helena, and it is here, in the thematic middleground of the play, that honor will be tested dramatically in its different forms.
* Before examining this theme in any detail we might observe how it contributes to the structure of All's Well. As Lawrence has noted, the first part of the play deals with the "dealing of the king"; that is, it deals with Helena's attempt to convert passive honor into active honor, virginity into virtue. In the latter part of the play, notably Acts III and IV, the Florentine-Senoy war and Bertram's role in that war are dominant; that is, this part focuses upon Bertram's attempt to convert passive honor into active honor, "name" into military prowess. The end of each movement is marked by a kind of peripeteia that we might call the failure of apparent success. Thus Helena's saving of the king successfully leads to the wedding she had hoped for, but the marriage itself becomes an immediate failure. Thus Bertram goes to war to escape Helena and to win honor, apparently succeeds in both, yet surrenders his honor unwittingly to Helena in the "bed-trick." Although less important, Parolles' actions mirror those of Bertram as he makes a pretense, which becomes a parody, of seeking active honor by recapturing the drum—"this instrument of honour," Bertram labels it (III.vi.61-62)—and, instead, is brought to disaster by his fellow soldiers.
* The failure of apparent success characterizing each movement clearly directs our attention to the motives underlying these sustained actions and to the goals desired. Self-deception becomes an issue. In assuming that to win Bertram's love she has only to save the king's life and make her choice, Helena is, as the play demonstrates, radically deceived. Principally, she fails to realize the extent to which Bertram is devoted to the purity of his "name." But she is also partly deceived about her own motives. The credo which she stated in I.i—"The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love" (11. 89-90)—is, as mentioned earlier, significantly ambiguous, at the literal level implying the courtly ideal of entirely selfless devotion to the beloved, and, in the punning sense, emphasizing the altogether wordly instigations of the flesh. In setting out to marry Bertram, Helena attempts, as we have seen, to engage herself in the world of action while retaining the innocence inherent in passivity. At the opening of I.iii, however, we find the purity of her intentions undercut by the comic parody of the clown Lavatch. He too seeks marriage, but he is perfectly conscious of his motives: "My poor body, madam, requires it; I am driven on by the flesh, and he must needs go that the devil drives" (11. 25-28). Like Helena, however, he has "other holy reasons, such as they are" (1. 30); that is, Lavatch, though undeceived about the sexual basis of his urge to marry, is aware that to be politic one must have "other holy reasons," even "such as they are." Accused of being a "foul-mouth'd and calumnious knave" by the Countess, he claims to be "A prophet I, madam; and I speak the truth the next way" (1. 54 ff). In his little ballad Lavatch speaks "the truth the next way":
* For I the ballad will repeat  
  Which men full true shall find:  
  Your marriage comes by destiny,  
  Your cuckoo sings by kind.
* The last two lines are reminiscent of Helena's earlier dilemma: destiny that separates; sexual desire that joins. Kind refers here, of course, to "nature," and, in this context, to sexual nature, which is pitted against "destiny" as being a more fundamental force. So the flesh was the more fundamental force urging Lavatch to marry, although he could produce "other holy reasons." What the parody suggests, then, is that although Helena professes the courtly ideal of selfless devotion—the willingness to die literally for the beloved—she is, without fully realizing it, more basically motivated by the urge to die sexually with the beloved. The parody thus reinforces the implications apparent in Helena's dialogue with Parolles—that in exploring the uses to which virginity might be put she was particularly wondering, as she said, "How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?"
* This undercurrent of sexual desire, together with the same themes which have been considered thus far, emerges again in the curing of the king episode. In essentially the same position that Helena was in following Bertram's departure, the king has abandoned life and hope, has passively given in to his apparently fated death. His answer to Lafew's question—"will you be cur'd / Of your infirmity?"—is a flat and unqualified "No" (II.i.67 ff.). When Helena proposes her cure, he rejects it partly from despair, partly from fear that his reputation will suffer ("to dissever so / Our great self and our credit"—(11. 121-22). Helena's problem now is to persuade the king, as she had earlier persuaded herself, from passivity to action, from despair to hope; and her arguments suggest that she is not unaware of the parallels between them: "Oft expectation fails . . . / and oft it hits / Where hope is coldest, and despair most fits" (11. 141-43). In venturing the cure, the king stands to lose both life and reputation; and in return, Helena hazards her life and her "maiden's name." It might be observed that she makes her hazard in terms that are excessively disproportionate to the nature of the situation:
* Tax of impudence,  
  A strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame,  
  Traduc'd by odious ballads; my maiden's name  
  Sear'd otherwise. . . .
* (II.i.169-72)
* Now although there is some evidence that Helena's virginity is associated with magical powers, as G. K. Hunter notes,6 still her virginity cannot be dissociated from its primary sexual significance. In other words, Helena is engaging in an action that, by her own definition, may result in a metaphoric loss of virginity. Her verbiage about hypothetical sin—"strumpet's boldness," "divulged shame," "odious ballads," "Sear'd"—helps further to define the situation as one tainted, at least in her mind, by overtones of sexual promiscuity.
* These overtones are still present when Helena chooses among the young nobles. In rejecting one of them, she says, "Blessing upon your vows, and in your bed / Find fairer fortune if you ever wed" (II.iii.91-92); and to another: "You are too young, too happy, and too good /To make yourself a son out of my blood" (96-97). Blood here is capable of referring either to Helena's social rank or to her "passion"; thus in both passages she seems partly conscious of violating "destiny" and chastity. This sequence of imagery culminates in another significant ambiguity when Helena, choosing Bertram, says: "I give me and my service, ever whilst I live, / Into your guiding power. This is the man." As in the earlier line, "The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love," here we have on **the one hand the courtly ideal of service as devotion, and, on the other, the sexual pun upon service as fornication**.7
* This is not to suggest that Shakespeare regards sexual desire in itself as being impure, that he is applying the moral standards of Malvolio; but that Helena's sexual desire is "impure" in terms of the ideal of courtly love which she has been professing to follow. The two codes of love, courtly and naturalistic, are brought together with a clash when Helena offers Bertram her "service." In the naturalistic sense of the pun, "service" implies the element of love which receives fuller definition in Sonnet 129:
* Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame  
  Is lust in action.
* "Lust in action," of course, by no means characterizes Helena; but even so, ever since her encounter with Parolles in Act I, there has been an undercurrent of sensuality in her motives running counter to the mainstream of courtly love. Neither code, however, is being dramatically sanctioned. If the naturalistic view of love seems a descent from the courtly ideal of love-as worship, its insistent presence nevertheless exposes the essential sterility of the courtly ideal—its impracticality, even impossibility, in view of the fundamental force of the sexual nature to which Lavatch's ballad called attention. Ultimately, both views of love are inadequate, and later in the play we shall find Helena moving beyond them to a position which is best described in the first seventeen sonnets and in which the element of lust in the sexual act is subordinated to a desire for procreation in marriage:
* So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,  
  Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.
* (Sonnet 7)
* A discussion of that development in Helena must be deferred until later. For the moment I am only suggesting that Helena's motives are complex—that their web is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together—and cannot be accounted for merely by reference to the folktale plot. We should not forget, for instance, that although her healing of the king is intrinsically virtuous, it is, after all, virtue with a design and not simply altruism. As Helena told the Countess in I.iii.227-30:
* My lord your son made me to think of this;  
  Else Paris and the medicine and the king  
  Had from the conversation of my thoughts  
  Haply been absent then.
* For the king, of course, all's well that ends well; the fact that the restoration of his life is only the means to another end is unimportant. For Helena, however, all does not end well at this point, but very badly indeed; and the reader seeking explanations is forced to examine means and motives more closely than the king. To a large extent, then, the measure of Helena's actions in saving the king and choosing Bertram lies in their paradoxical outcome. What she receives is the letter, not the spirit, of her desires. If her success confirms the "virtue" of her action in saving the king, the failure of her success confirms the self-deception, the underlying faultiness of motive, which has been suggested in the imagery up to this point.
* **The initial failure of the marriage** is augmented by Bertram's abandonment of Helena and by his ultimatum stating the unlikely conditions under which he will accept her. In III.ii, Helena starts on her pilgrimage with a sense of contamination which is illustrated in the letter that she leaves for the Countess (III.iv.4-17):
* Ambitious love hath so in me offended  
  That barefoot plod I the cold ground upon,  
  With sainted vow my faults to have amended.
* .....
* Bless him at home in peace, whilst I from far  
  His name with zealous fervour sanctify.
* With these last two lines we should compare the conclusion of her first soliloquy in the play:
* But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy  
  Must sanctify his relics.
* (I.i.95-96)
* She has clearly forsaken the mode of action and returned to her original attitude of love-as-worship. In her realization that Bertram's flight from her may cause his death—"And though I kill him not, I am the cause / His death was so effected" (III.ii.115-16)—she has had a type of tragic anagnorisis, which has led to her present penitence, her desire "With sainted vow [her] faults to have amended." Thus if Helena's motives in healing the king were in accord with the sexual interpretation of her credo—"The hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love"—her motives in leaving France now accord with the credo as a statement of the courtly ideal of pure selflessness in love. The "little death" in union succumbs to death-by-separation: "He is too good and fair for death and me; / Whom I myself embrace to set him free" (III.iv.16-17). And so at this point Helena has come full circle in her movement from passivity to action and back to passivity. She is not, of course, literally back at the beginning, for she has moved also from innocence to contamination, and her recognition of guilt, her penitence, her desire to amend her faults signal her progress from self-deception to an enlarged consciousness both of herself and of the world of action. The product of this enlarged consciousness will be found in the so-called "bed-trick," where she finally discovers the way in which innocence can be made to attend action.
* The failure of Helena's marriage cannot, of course, be attributed entirely to failures of motive on her part; the major cause is Bertram. With respect to **Bertram** we again find Shakespeare employing the passivity-action pattern and linking it both to the honor and to the self-deception themes. Like Helena, Bertram has his legacy of honor in the "name" he has inherited, and, again like Helena's, his honor is of the passive type, a mere birthright. In this sense, then, his "name" is equivalent to her virginity; and certainly he protects his "name" with all the assiduity of one who believes a virgin status is about to be violated: "A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain / Rather corrupt me ever!" (II.iii.115-16). Bearing his father's face, as the king observed in I.ii, Bertram has not, however, inherited his father's "moral parts," as the king had hoped. Throughout the play Bertram's rejection of Helena is clearly intended to contrast with the king's description of his father, whose primary virtue was his humble disregard for social distinctions: "Who were below him / He us'd as creatures of another place" (I.ii.41-42). Thus, in his long remonstrance about honor in II.iii, the king pointedly suggests Bertram's failure to conduct himself as his father would have: "that is honour's scorn / Which challenges itself as honour's born / And is not like the sire" (11. 133-35). In his strenuous defense of his own honor of "name," Bertram ironically proves himself deficient in honor, by failing both to accede to the king and to recognize genuine honor ("virtue") in Helena. Like Hotspur and like Faulconbridge early in King John, Bertram regards honor less as the inherence of ethical values than as a transferable award which one can receive through inheritance or merit through physical exploit. For him, as Parolles says, "He wears his honour in a box unseen / That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home" instead of rushing off to war (II.iii.275-76). Hence, just as Helena attempted to convert her passive honor of virginity into the active honor of "virtue," so now Bertram sets out to convert his passive honor of "name" into the active honor of military prowess.
* There is still another parallel between his and her actions here, in that the war, which hardly becomes at any point a dramatic reality, is linked with the life-and-death opposition discussed earlier. In I.ii the Second Lord said of the war: "It may well serve / A nursery to our gentry, who are sick / For breathing and exploit" (11. 15-17). And in III.i the First Lord says to the Duke of Florence: "But I am sure the younger of our nature / That surfeit on their ease will day by day / Come here for physic" (11. 17-19). The implications are clear enough: the war is a symbolic one, and we are to regard it in the same light as Helena's healing of the king. As she cured his sickness and proved her "virtue," so the war cures the sickness of an idle nation whose young men are absorbed in vanities of dress and superficialities of thought. Like Helena, then, Bertram also risks his life, and he proves himself "virtuous" in the masculine arts.
* Unfortunately, Bertram is not content to restrict his prowess to the battlefield but insists upon assailing the maid Diana's chastity as well. At this point the honor theme receives its strongest emphasis in the exchange of the rings. Bertram refers to the ring which Diana demands as being
* an honour 'longing to our house,  
  Bequeathed down from many ancestors,  
  Which were the greatest obloquy i' th' world  
  In me to lose.
* (IV.ii.42-45)
* And Diana replies:
* Mine honour's such a ring;  
  My chastity's the jewel of our house,  
  Bequeathed down from many ancestors,  
  Which were the greatest obloquy Γ th' world  
  In me to lose.
* Thus the "bed-trick" involves the exchange of Bertram's passive honor of "name" and Helena's passive honor of virginity.
* The "bed-trick" has produced a good deal of critical displeasure; and it is no doubt true that this sort of sexual shell-game, even though it is an integral part of the source material, is rather out of taste. However, there is much to be said for it in terms of theme and character. What happens to Bertram is, of course, wholly consistent with our knowledge of his character. His inability to distinguish one body from another not only emphasizes the superficial values upon which his lust is based, but also confirms his general lack of discernment. From the first he has been deceived in his opinion of Helena, has lacked the maturity of judgment to perceive her genuine virtues, has been blinded by his own selfish concern for "name," which is itself a superficial value. Unable to "see" Helena's spiritual qualities—ironically, in refusing her, he begged the king to give him "leave to use / The help of [his] own eyes" in the choice of a fitting wife (II.iii.107-108)—he is now unable even to recognize her physical self. Moreover, when he imposed the conditions under which he would accept Helena—the "tasks"—Bertram voluntarily and foolishly put himself into the position of one who could be defeated only by an act of deception. The "bed-trick," then, is a fitting culmination to a series of self-deceptions under which he has labored throughout the play.
* The "bed-trick" is also important structurally, for it displays the relationship between Bertram's behavior in the latter part of the play and Helena's behavior in the earlier part. I have already suggested that Helena's essentially virtuous action in saving the king was compromised by the undercurrent of sexual desire in her choice of Bertram, and that the climax of this sexual imagery was reached at the moment of choice when Helena offered Bertram her "service." In Bertram's wooing of Diana now, his sole motive is sexual desire, sheer lust, although he professes (as Lavatch could profess) "other holy reasons"—his oaths of pure love and eternal fidelity. The parallel is made exact when Bertram tells Diana that he loves her "By love's own sweet constraint, and will for ever / Do thee all rights of service" (IV.ii.16-17). We have seen, however, that Helena came to a recognition of her faults and, by implication, a greater understanding of the relationship between action and contamination. In the "bedtrick," lust is entirely absent from her motives; sexual pleasure for its own sake—"How might one do, sir, to lose [virginity] to her own liking"—is wholly subordinated to the necessity of meeting Bertram's conditions, to the getting of the ring and the begetting of the child. In other words, as Adams has pointed out,8 lust is impure because it turns sex to selfish and idle purposes; honorable sex consists in having procreation as its object. Thus Helena's much-criticized deception is not only lawful, as she herself insists (III.vii.45-48), but chaste as well. She has found the one irreproachable use for virginity and, at the same time, the way in which innocence can accompany action.
* Although the "bed-trick" has an important bearing on Bertram's behavior in the final scene of the play, let us now consider Bertram in terms of another character in whom he has been deceived—Parolles. In IV.iii the plan to expose Parolles is carried out. Early in the scene Bertram's fortunes are apparently at their zenith, and in a gush of hubris he says:
* I have tonight dispatch'd sixteen businesses a month's length apiece. By an abstract of success: I have congied with the duke, done my adieu with his nearest, 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.
* He does not know, of course, that this last, "nicer" piece of business with Diana has turned out otherwise than he anticipated, nor that his estimate of Parolles is about to turn out differently from what he expects. Just as Helena has deceived him in order ultimately to undeceive him as to her own merits, so the lords deceive Parolles in order to undeceive Bertram as to Parolles' merits as friend, soldier, and adviser. In both deceptions, symbols of honor are central—the ring and the drum.
* The interrogation of Parolles does as much to expose Bertram as it does to expose Parolles, and the two men are in some respects equated. For example, Parolles says about the validity of one of his answers, "I'll take the sacrament on't" (1. 133), but sacraments have no binding effect on such a word-changer as he, nor has the sacrament of marriage had any binding effect upon Bertram. Naturally enough, Parolles is excessively concerned about truth: "a truth's a truth," he declares, and "I will tell true" (11. 152, 157). In this he is trading a form of honor to gain his ends, just as Bertram traded his family honor to gain his ends with Diana. Both plead their cases and maintain that they are the soul of honor at the very moment that their conduct gives them the lie. And finally, Parolles' desperate lying in this scene has its parallel in Bertram's equally desperate lying in the final scene of the play.
* It is in this final scene that critics have found Bertram's conduct—and hence the play itself—inexplicable. Throughout the play an undiscerning adherent of superficial values, Bertram now becomes almost despicable in his Parolles-like squirmings to avoid exposure. He lies about Helena's ring, lies about having bedded Diana, and, when forced to admit the latter, tries to pass her off as a whore. In short, he is utterly without honor. And yet when Helena enters and gives her explanations, Shakespeare apparently means for us to accept Bertram as a reformed man and the conclusion as a happy ending. The strain upon the reader's credulity is excessive indeed.
* This conclusion is perhaps no less difficult to accept, but somewhat easier to understand, if we observe that Bertram's conduct here is consistent with the symbolism of the "bed-trick" episode. In giving his family ring to Diana, Bertram relinquished his honor symbolically, and in (supposedly) bedding Diana out of pure lust he relinquished his honor in fact. However, thanks to Helena's substitution of herself for Diana, Bertram's honor passed into her keeping both symbolically and actually: the discarded ring now remains in the family, and the act of lust now becomes an act of lawful procreation. In the final scene, then, Shakespeare maintains this merger of actual and symbolic by presenting us with a Bertram entirely devoid of honor. In other words, so long as his ring (family honor) is in Helena's possession and so long as he is ignorant of the child within Helena (which exonerates the act of lust), Bertram is literally incapable of honorable behavior. As soon as she restores the ring and informs him of her pregnancy, his honor is redeemed, and he is able to say:
* If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly  
  I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly.
* Thus, as she had miraculously healed the king, so Helena also heals Bertram. We may well feel that if Bertram is actually cured it is a more impressive miracle than that which cured the king; but there is little doubt that Shakespeare is asking us to grant the success of the cure. As the king says in conclusion:
* All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,  
  The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet.
* Although it is typically categorized among Shakespeare's comedies, most scholars consider *All's Well That Ends Well* a “problem play” or “dark comedy” because of its somber and tragic elements. The play, based on Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353), relates the tale of a young woman's pursuit of a reluctant lover. The principal figures of Helena and Bertram have often been viewed negatively, while the overall tone of the work—despite its ostensibly happy conclusion—has been considered bleak and marred by unresolved issues. Critics have frequently discerned problems of sexuality and gender conflict in *All's Well That Ends Well.* In particular, the work's concentration on a strong, somewhat unconventional, and passionate heroine has prompted feminist critics of the late twentieth century to see in the drama a variety of themes related to sexual roles and feminine disruptions of social order. Overall, while numerous topics in the drama have drawn modern critics to the play, the subjects of gender, Helena's character, and the work's problematic status as a comedy continue to provide the focus of much recent scholarly commentary on *All's Well That Ends Well.*
* Feminist analysis, and its consequent concerns with the themes of gender and sexuality, has provided the dominant model of contemporary critical interest in *All's Well That Ends Well.* The thematic implications of Helena's pursuit of Bertram and her bold use of the so-called “bed-trick,” in which she disguises herself in order to win Bertram as her lover, have long been recognized as central to the play. Peter Erickson (1991) examines the gender dynamics of *All's Well That Ends Well* and their relation to politics and society, commenting on how Helena's sexualized actions toward Bertram upset the dominant patriarchal order. David McCandless (1994) studies Helena's infamous “bed-trick” and the tensions it raises concerning conventional distinctions between masculine and feminine roles. Jonathan Hall (1995) takes a somewhat different approach, seeing Helena's active sexual pursuit of Bertram as posing a symbolic threat to patriarchy that—in her later renunciation of “ambitious love”—ultimately serves to reestablish traditional social hierarchies. Irene G. Dash (1997) offers a thorough feminist critique of *All's Well That Ends Well,* which finds a demarcation of the limits of feminine sexual choice within the patriarchal confines of the play.
* A perennial critical interest in Shakespeare's representation of women has resulted in a number of analyses of Helena, who has elicited widely differing opinions. Richard A. Levin (1980) has a cynical view of the play's heroine. Acknowledging a dilemma between her virtue and ambition, Levin argues that Helena uses guile and dissimulation throughout the drama, seeing her as a master of intrigue who carefully orchestrates Bertram's acquiescence to her passions. David McCandless (1990) takes an opposing point of view. Interpreting *All's Well That Ends Well* as essentially a romance, rather than a “defective festive comedy,” McCandless perceives Helena's chastity as an indication of the play's romantic theme of redemption. Robert Ornstein (1986) considers the play's protagonist as a complex character, largely devoid of romantic idealism. For Ornstein, Helena is not only virtuous and noble (despite the fact that most other characters in the play generally fail to perceive this), but also single-minded and manipulative in achieving her goals.
* In addition to questions of character, the status of *All's Well That Ends Well* as a comedy figures prominently in many recent critical assessments of the play. Comparing the drama with several of Shakespeare's earlier works, Richard P. Wheeler (1981) comments on the unprecedented shift in the play's comic form, due in part to its treatment of issues generally reserved for tragedy. David Scott Kastan (1985) has a similar view of the play, observing that while *All's Well That Ends Well* does provide a happy ending, its failure to resolve its own internal tensions points to Shakespeare's commentary on the palliative nature of comedy. Considering comic sources, Robert S. Miola (1993) places *All's Well That Ends Well* within the tradition of Latin New Comedy—inaugurated by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence. Mary Free (1994) acknowledges the play's comic form, but characterizes *All's Well That Ends Well* as a “noncomic comedy” due to its strong emphasis on dramatic and linguistic expressions of power.

All's Well That Ends Well

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* [In the following excerpt, Price analyzes the structure and exposition of All's Well That Ends Well, and argues that the play is excellently balanced.]
* What is the nature of All's Well that Ends Well? Does that nature, justify the coexistence of these various literary modes? We have three pieces of evidence: the text of the play, its source, and a general knowledge of Shakespeare's artistic methods as dramatist and poet.2 Presumably, the text provides the final version of a play prepared for performance on stage. Variations between the text and its source provide clues to the intention of the playwright; deliberate changes suggest specific effects. Shakespeare's general method as a dramatist provides the foundation for particular judgements in this play. His methods as a poet have significance in that his artistry in imagery and symbol, in irony and vision, may surpass the immediate comprehension of a theatrical audience. I propose, then, to examine the nature of All's Well on the basis of this evidence.
* The first scene of All's Well is excellent exposition. Mood, plot, character, and theme are deftly sketched in lines which, characteristic of Shakespeare's economy, serve several functions. The Countess's mourning for her late husband and her melancholy at the departure of her son, the regretful recollections of Gerard de Narbon and his medical skill, the despairing talk of the King's disease, and the tears of Helena establish a sombre mood. The deaths of the two fathers set up a parallel between hero and heroine which is extended throughout the play as the structural basis for the plot. Bertram and Helena are both wards: Bertram, we are told, will find in the King a second father; Helena has already been bequeathed to the Countess's overlooking. As the plot develops, both, ironically, object to their wardships. Because of her love for Bertram and her fear of acknowledging him as brother, Helena protests against the Countess's use of the title 'mother'. Because of his contempt for Helena, Bertram protests against the father-king's arrangement of his marriage. The marriage forces Bertram to flee from King and Court as a soldier; his desertion forces Helena to flee from Countess and home as a pilgrim. Only in the final scene are the young people reconciled to an acceptable relationship: Helena's 'O my dear mother' (v. iii. 313) is uttered not to her mother-guardian, but to her mother-in-law. In addition to the structural function in the plot, references to the deceased fathers characterize the children. The Countess describes Helena in terms of inherited and acquired virtues:
* I have those hopes of her good that her education promises her dispositions she inherits—which make fair gifts fairer; for where an unclean mind carries virtuous qualities, there commendations go with pity; they are virtues and traitors too. In her they are the better for their simpleness; she derives her honesty and achieves her goodness.
* (I. i. 36-42)4
* Helena is praised for perfecting those natural qualities which she has derived from her father. This characterization, moreover, elicits from the Countess a theme of the play: inherited qualities must be nurtured before goodness is achieved. If they are ruled by an 'unclean mind', they become traitors to our characters. The dramatic elaboration of this theme is the basis for the characterization of Bertram, who fails to cultivate his inherited nobility. Thus the Countess's praise of Helena is restated as dispraise of Bertram in Act IV. In a thematic judgement upon mankind generally and Bertram specifically, the Second Lord defines us as 'merely our own traitors . . . so he [Bertram] that in this action contrives against his own nobility, in his proper stream o'erflows himself (IV. iii. 20-24). At this early moment in the play, however, we have only to realize that Bertram has yet to develop inherited qualities, that he has yet to achieve that goodness which is Helena's. The terms of his conflict are made explicit in the hopeful farewell of his mother:
* Be thou bless'd, Bertram, and succeed thy father  
  In manners as in shape! Thy blood and virtue  
  Contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness  
  Share with thy birthright.
* (I. i. 57-60)
* The talk of death and departure characterize the elders as well. In 'the most beautiful old woman's part ever written', a widow's grief and a mother's anxiety are mollified by the dignity of the Countess, a 'breeding' which, as another instance of the thematic nurturing of inherited qualities, prefigures the potential maturity of Bertram. Lafeu's concerned responses to her demonstrate his warm amiability. His role as court councillor is implicit in his description of the King's virtue and of the disease which plagues the King. The description not only introduces the King but also prepares the audience for the first major action. For, the Countess's reply, 'Would for the king's sake, he [Gerard de Narbon] were living! I think it would be the death of king's disease' (I. i. 20-22), serves the plot in two ways. It suggests to the thoughtful Helena a means of fulfilling her love; as an exclamation of faith, it makes the consequent cure of the King more plausible to the audience.
* The lines of the hero and heroine in the first part of the scene do little to extend the characterizations beyond the delineations of the Countess. In her only line, Helena hints at a motive of grief which is comprehensible only in her first soliloquy. Bertram's lines have been interpreted as indications of a vicious temperament, but this premature view of his personality destroys the dramatic effect of Helena's revelation of her love. His 'Madam, I desire your holy wishes' (I. i. 55) may be a brash interruption in the discussion of grief, but, even as such, it is no worse than might be expected from an 'unseason'd courtier' (I. i. 67). In itself, the line is indifferent; the suggestion of a faulty text, the insertion of stage business, or merely the intonation of the voice obscures Shakespeare's intention. Indifferent too are his parting words to Helena, 'Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her' (I. i. 73-74). But surely in this case, their indifference is the very point of the lines. There is neither warmth nor scorn. From Bertram's view, the departing son bids the household dependant to assist his mother. An indifferent Bertram intensifies the effect of Helena's soliloquy.
* In a brief seventy-six lines, the exposition has prepared the audience for the play's primary interest, the seemingly futile love of Helena:
* O, were that all! I think not on my father,  
  And these great tears grace his remembrance more  
  Than those I shed for him. What was he like?  
  I have forgot him; my imagination  
  Carries no favour 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 his 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 lion  
  Must die for love. 'Twas pretty, though a plague,  
  To see him every hour; to sit and draw  
  His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,  
  In our heart's table—heart too capable  
  Of every line and trick of his sweet favour.  
  But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy  
  Must sanctify his relics.
* (I. i. 77-96)
* In the revelation of her love, Helena sketches such an attractive portrait of Bertram that the attention of the audience is redirected to the hero. The rather indifferent young man who has just left the stage now assumes a romantic image.5 Shakespeare makes use of this device throughout All's Well. More typical of Shakespeare's dramatic technique is the introduction of a major character, through the speech of another, before he appears on stage. In All's Well, however, Helena constantly follows Bertram on stage to interpret his conduct through her love. The reason for the device is clear: the reaction of the audience is not to be fixed by his conduct; rather, the conduct is to be reconsidered in the light of her love. This device, of course, does not prevent Shakespeare from foreshadowing the actions of Bertram. Bertram's later objection to Helena because of class distinction gains some legitimacy in this speech by Helena's admission that the difference in social rank constitutes an apparently insuperable obstacle to her love. This kind of foreshadowing makes more acceptable the subsequent reconsideration demanded of the audience.
* The entire first scene shows a gradual shift in mood from darkness to light. The soliloquy is pivotal in that shift. (Helena's soliloquy initiates a change in mood which brightens as the scene progresses.) The sombre response to death is not to be extended into the play, and Helena's dismissal of it, 'O, were that all! . . .' leads us into the world of comedy. With Helena, we are not to be involved in death, in the potentially tragic circumstances of the opening lines, but in life and love. The romantic exaggeration of her loss—the departure of Bertram outweighs death—lightens the tone. Even a serious concern for the futility of her love is undermined by the sentimental picture which Helena draws of herself sketching Bertram's features in her heart. In the same spirit of young love is her worshipful 'my idolatrous fancy / Must sanctify his relics'. Both imagery and diction reinforce the shift in mood. Images of death and darkness yield to 'bright particular star' and 'Bright radiance and collateral light'. The Countess's 'I bury a second husband' is now vitalized in Helena's:
* The hind that would be mated by the lion  
  Must die for love.
* As a striking instance of Shakespearian compression, the sentence not only contributes to the mood, not only defines the distinctive quality of the love and Helena's awareness of it, but also foreshadows the plot on two levels. On the denotative level of 'die', Helena is mated to Bertram, then feigns death, and finally wins him; on the sexually connotative level of 'die', Helena is mated to Bertram, but wins him only after the 'death' of sexual union.
* The soliloquy is interrupted by the entrance of Parolles, and the comic mood shines more brightly. For Parolles is colourful and alluring:
* Who comes here?  
  One that goes with him; I love him for his sake,  
  And yet I know him a notorious liar,  
  Think him a great way fool, solely a coward;  
  Yet these fix'd evils sit so fit in him  
  That they take place when virtue's steely bones  
  Looks bleak Γ th' cold wind; withal, full oft we see  
  Cold wisdom waiting on superfluous folly.
* (I. i. 97-103)
* In a choral role, Helena, who has just delineated Bertram for the audience, now indicates the intended response to Parolles. Although he has serious faults, we are not to consider them seriously. In fact, in the world of comedy, these faults 'sit so fit' in him that the absurdity of the character dismisses any moral judgement. Other evidence supports his attractiveness. Parolles mixes freely with the other young lords at court and appears to deceive them temporarily (II. i); the First Lord attributes a seductive charm to him (III. ii. 90-91); and, even Lafeu admits the disgraced braggart into his household (V. ii. 49-51). Helena's assessment of Parolles establishes a basis for the justification of Bertram. The structural link between Bertram and Parolles is made later, but Helena's acceptance of the vices of the braggart anticipates her willingness to accept the faults of her beloved. Although Helena's motivation is love, the contributing congeniality of Parolles must surely be matched or surpassed by the external charm of Bertram. Until his defiance of the King, there is nothing in the text to support a disagreeable Bertram. He is escorted to Court by the King's chief adviser, welcomed affectionately by the King, and is adopted as a comrade by the other lords. After his defiance, he is still received warmly wherever he goes. He is commissioned general of the troop by the Duke of Florence, praised by the Widow and her neighbour, and is attractive to Diana. He is readily forgiven by the Countess, the King, and Lafeu; Lafeu's daughter is willing to marry him. Most important, his appeal is essential to Helena's love. In this speech, Shakespeare paints the broad stripes of Parolles's personality as a hint of the finer lines in Bertram.
* There is little need to justify the humour of the virginity repartee which follows. It has a comic appeal for the modern audience as well as the Elizabethan, if not for the Victorian. What has been obscured in the argument over propriety, however, is the structural function of the duologue.7 Just prior to it in her first soliloquy, Helena has expressed the futility of her love; just after it in her second soliloquy, she resolves to fulfill her love. What happens between these two speeches must account for the difference in attitude. In the interim, Parolles has engaged Helena in a typically Elizabethan wordplay upon the term virginity. How does Helena react? At first, she falls in with his banter. To his question, 'Are you meditating on virginity?' she poses a question which will feed the exchange, 'Man is enemy to virginity; how may we barricado it against him?' The question and her next few replies serve the comedy, but we note that there is little interchange thereafter. Parolles dominates the stage, delights the audience with his argument against virginity. Meanwhile, the topic has dropped Helena into a reverie which links her two soliloquies. Parolles's first exclamation, 'Away with't!' intrudes upon her thoughts and her answer reflects the first soliloquy, 'I will stand for't a little, though therefore I die a virgin.' After another exhortation, his second exclamation, 'Away with't!' intrudes again, but this revealing reply foreshadows her second soliloquy, 'How might one do, sir, to lose it to her own liking?' The singular, personal form of both lines contrasts with Helena's general applications to virgins at the beginning of the duologue.
* There are several ironies in the exchange between Parolles and Helena. The couching of the discussion in military terms is natural to the braggart-soldier, but the assault of man and the barricade of woman are reversed in Bertram and Helena. It is Bertram who flees before the offer of Helena; moreover, he prefers war to a conquest of her virginity. It is ironic that Parolles prompts the plan that leads to his young master's flight. So too, his urging, 'Out with't! Within the year it will make itself two' is actualized in an 'increase' which brings Bertram to accept his wife. There is irony in that Parolles assists Helena in the loss of her virginity, for he acts as pander between Bertram and Diana. The duologue, although many critics have insisted to the contrary, is demonstrably not an interpolation.
* Editors have generally agreed that the speech of Helena's which follows shows signs of textual corruption because of its abrupt shifts, the ambiguity in its second line, and its obscure dramatic function:
* Not my virginity; yet . . .  
  There shall your master have a thousand loves,  
  A mother, and a mistress, and a friend,  
  A phoenix, captain, and an enemy,  
  A guide, a goddess, and a sovereign,
* A counsellor, a traitress, and a dear;  
  His humble ambition, proud humility,  
  His jarring-concord, and his discord-dulcet,  
  His faith, his sweet disaster; with a world  
  Of pretty, fond, adoptious Christendoms  
  That blinking Cupid gossips. Now shall he—  
  I know not what he shall. God send him well!  
  The court's a learning-place, and he is one—
* (I. i. 161-73)
* Mr. Hunter is hesitant to concede a textual corruption and annotates the lines to suggest a pattern of continuity. Helena is 'fooling the time'; she uses abrupt transitions to conceal her deeper meanings from Parolles. The annotation, however, raises a problem for the actress who must convey these deeper meanings to the audience while she conceals them from Parolles. I believe that a restoration of the first line as it appears in the First Folio may make the speech intelligible and prompt a solution to the actress. The Folio reads, 'Not my virginity yet:'. Literally, the line is a satisfactory answer to Parolles's question, 'Will you anything with it?' If the line is delivered in the same distracted manner as I have suggested for the duologue, with a slight stress upon 'yet', it likewise reveals to the audience what has absorbed Helena—the formulation of a plan which involves an action precedent to the loss of virginity, a plan which is made explicit in the second soliloquy, the cure of the king as a remedy for her love. The vocalization of her thought before Parolles startles Helena, however, and she quickly redirects the conversation. The redirection is marked stylistically by a shift from prose to verse. With a gesture that indicates the Court, or at least the departure of Parolles and Bertram (Parolles might very well have set down baggage to which Helena points), Helena engages Parolles in courtly, fashionable talk of love and its conceits. Eager for a new line of wordplay, Parolles, amused, waits to reply. When Helena places Bertram in this love cult, however, her own feelings break over this witty patter and she cannot continue, 'Now shall he—I know not what he shall.' Her awareness that 'The court's a learning-place, and he is one—' frightens her. The recital of love titles which were meant to conceal the hint of the first line has instead built up an anxiety which strengthens her reason for action. Her anxiety is apparent even to Parolles, who responds not with banter, not with a bawdy analysis of love at court, but with unaffected questions that seek an explanation. Helena's reply is a riddle to Parolles but it conveys to the audience her desire that her love might manifest itself tangibly to Bertram. The entrance of the Page cuts off further questions and the scene falls back into prose.
* The exchange adds credibility to the love of Helena and to the later developments of the plot. Helena recognizes traits in Bertram which make him easy prey for courtly fashions and courtly love. Despite these traits and the anxiety which they arouse in her, she determines to win him. Her insight and her acceptance prepare the audience for Bertram's conduct and weaken any condemnation of him.
* The interruption by the Page marks a return to the bantering style at the beginning of the virginity duologue. Her quick retorts illustrate the wit and zest by which Helena easily overcomes Parolles, as she did not do when distracted by her own thoughts. Her jests underscore the braggart's cowardice which will be exposed later. As Helena knows Bertram, so she knows Parolles. In fact, it is she, not Lafeu as so many critics argue, who is the first to see through him.
* The scene ends with Helena's second soliloquy in which she reveals her resolution to win Bertram and hints at the King's disease as the means. Her thoughts and images link this soliloquy closely to the first. If earlier she had sighed, 'I am undone', she now decides, 'Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie.' If she had regretted the distance which made Bertram a 'bright particular star', she now decides, 'the fated sky / Gives us free scope'. If she had blamed the ambition in her love 'which thus plagues itself, she now asks, 'What power is it that mounts my love so high?' and suggests nature as the answer. If she had decided earlier that 'the hind that would be mated by the lion / Must die for love', she now sees that only those 'who weigh their pain in sense' refuse the attempt. The hind and lion have now become 'like likes'. Is Helena now the aggressive female condemned by so many critics?
* I do not think so. What has Shakespeare done, what can the actress do, to protect Helena during this transformation? First, Shakespeare has tied these soliloquies together so that the second recalls the first, and the actress can reinforce this by posture and gesture. The Helena of the second soliloquy recalls the loving maiden of whom we all approved in the first soliloquy. Second, Shakespeare has made Parolles the unwitting source of the idea; through his bawdiness, as a scapegoat, he carries away any reproach which decorum might dictate. Third, Helena's introductory association of Parolles with Bertram gives a psychological validity to her absorption in Bertram while Parolles jests about virginity. Fourth, because of that absorption, Shakespeare preserves her indecorous participation in ribaldry. While Parolles roguishly delights the audience with his wordplay, Helena indifferently serves as a foil to his wit and ponders the problem of her love. Finally, Shakespeare softens her resolution in the soliloquy by couching it in a general romantic 'truth':
* Who ever strove  
  To show her merit that did miss her love?
* (I. i. 222-3)
* The structure of All's Well displays superb craftsmanship; as so often in the plays of Shakespeare, balance is the principle of construction. The second scene creates the background for the hero's interest—military honours and the adventures of war; the third scene promotes Helena's interest—her love for Bertram. The interview at Court gains credit for Bertram through the King's eulogy of the deceased Count Rousillon. The commendation of the Countess and the tenderness of the scene at Rousillon gather sympathy for Helena. The King concludes his scene by expressing his regard for Bertram, 'My son's no dearer' (I. ii. 76); the Countess ends the third scene with full approval of her ward:
* and be sure of this,  
  What I can help thee to, thou shalt not miss.
* (I. iii. 250-1)
* Shakespeare has begun both scenes along lines which quite similarly introduce the sub-plots. The second scene opens with a sketchy discussion of the Florentine war. Some critics have seen in the vagueness of the reports a cynical attitude on the part of the dramatist to the war, and consequently to masculine poses of honour. Rather, the...

All's Well That Ends Well, which features a young woman's pursuit of a reluctant lover of higher social standing, was inspired by the story of Giletta of Narbonne, from Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (c. 1353). Shakespeare's play retains some of the traditional folktale elements found in its source material, such as the healing of the king and the fulfillment of impossible tasks. It is generally considered a problem play due to its unresolved issues, ambiguous ending, and unsympathetic characters. All's Well resists categorization because it features elements of the comic, tragic, and romantic; indeed, the play has been variously regarded as a dark comedy, tragicomedy, and romantic comedy. In addition to considering issues of genre, modern critics focus on the heroine Helena's role in the play, and often examine her attraction to the snobbish Bertram. Critics are also interested in Bertram's unscrupulous friend, Parolles, who has been compared to other Shakespearean comic villains, such as Shylock and Malvolio. Despite the play's problems, All's Well exhibits an interrelatedness of structure, language, and theme that modern scholars find both complex and compelling.

In order to account for what he perceives as the play's failure, Jay Halio (1964) analyzes the sources, dramatic structure, and characters of All's Well That Ends Well. The critic contends that in spite of its shortcomings, the play is both fascinating and complex. Halio focuses on Bertram as the connection between the old, noble social order of France and the new social order, mainly centered in Florence and embodied by the young bourgeois characters. Through Bertram, Halio demonstrates, the revitalization that integrates the best of both of these social orders will occur. In addition, Halio assesses the characters of Helena and Parolles, studying in particular the opposition between these two characters and Helena's ultimate victory in the struggle for Bertram's favor. Like Halio, J. Dennis Huston (1970) is concerned with the relationship between Helena and Parolles. Huston maintains that while both Helena and Parolles are full of youthful energy, Parolles's energy generates darkness and deception; Helena, on the other hand, puts her energy to constructive use in the regeneration of society. Jeremy Richard (1986) traces Shakespeare's transition from comedies of plot to tragedies of character through an examination of Parolles's character. Like Shylock and Malvolio, Richard argues, Parolles is depicted with psychological depth and emotional complexity. Concentrating on Helena's character, Dorothy Cook (1990) demonstrates the ways in which Shakespeare depicted the heroine in a realistic manner. Cook finds that Helena is a major force in All's Well; her character establishes the play's value system and generates and resolves the majority of the play's action.

Although All's Well That Ends Well has traditionally been one of the least performed of Shakespeare's plays, its reputation has improved since the 1950s. One of the most noteworthy recent productions is Peter Hall's staging of the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992. Martin Dodsworth (1992) describes the production as “intense and powerful,” and contends that Hall successfully blended the realism and folktale elements of the play. Robert Brustein (1993) and Jeremy Gerard (1993) both review the production of All's Well directed by Richard Jones for the New York Shakespeare Festival. Brustein observes the production's particularly dark tone, which reflects Jones's tragicomic approach to the play, and offers high praise for Miriam Healy-Louie's portrayal of Helena. Gerard also singles out Miriam Healy-Louie's Helena as particularly praiseworthy and notes that the production emphasized the play's troubling and ambiguous nature while retaining the play's comic features. Grevel Lindop (1996) is less than enthusiastic in his comments on Matthew Lloyd's production for the Royal Exchange Theatre, which he finds lacking in emotional warmth. Lindop also notes that Trevyn McDowell's Helena was ineffective in conveying the psychological depth of her character. In a review of Irina Brook's production of All's Well, Robert Smallwood (1998) applauds the performances of Rachel Pickup's Helena and Emil Marwa's Bertram, but contends that the director failed in her attempt to create a setting in which the play's folklore elements could be explored.

Many modern critics have noted that All's Well That Ends Well, while ostensibly a comedy, contains tragic and romantic elements. Josephine Waters Bennett (1967) contends that the play is more a comedy than a romance, and that it should not to be viewed simply as a romantic comedy gone awry. Concerns regarding the play's genre are intimately linked with issues related to the play's structure and themes. J. M. Silverman (1973) examines the dual nature of the play's structure, demonstrating the way the comedic action of the play moves from simple and naïve to a more complex and insidious form. Vivian Thomas (see Further Reading) argues that Shakespeare used the structure of romantic comedy in order to highlight the moral and social values the play depicts, and to explore the dramatic mode in which those values are presented. David M. Bergeron (1972) maintains that through the course of the play, structure and theme become unified. Bergeron focuses on the theme of healing and outlines the structural movement of the healing process as it occurs in the play. In this process, Bergeron explains, Shakespeare moved from Helena's literal, physical healing of the King to the metaphorical healing of Bertram and Parolles. As individuals in the play are cured, Bergeron contends, the larger world of the play is renewed. Patricia Parker (1992) suggests linkages between characters, scenes, and themes in All's Well, arguing that the sexual terms “increase” and “dilation” have economic, verbal, hermeneutic, and familial implications. Maurice Hunt (1987) discusses the disintegration of the relationship between language and action in the play. Hunt notes that “[t]hrough his portrayal of the King of France, alternately preferring words and deeds, Shakespeare indicates that any actual wedding of word and deed in the play will be difficult.”

SOURCE: Halio, Jay. “All's Well That Ends Well.” Shakespeare Quarterly 15, no. 1 (winter 1964): 33-43.

[In the following essay, Halio examines the sources, dramatic structure, and characters of All's Well That Ends Well, and contends that although fascinating and complex, the play is a failure.]

Certainly W. W. Lawrence's complaint about the criticism of Shakespeare's problem comedies—or the lack of it1—has steadily been remedied. Not only do we have Lawrence's own extensive research, but the plays have elsewhere won treatment, notably in E. M. W. Tillyard's book2 and many times in articles and whole chapters of works on Shakespeare. This new interest parallels a rather considerable revision in our critical approach to Shakespeare and to literature in general, and one might speculate with good cause on how much this new approach is, in fact, responsible for the attention the problem comedies have recently attracted. But such speculation is not here intended. Despite the new interest, some questions of interpretation remain still unanswered, or inadequately answered. This paper will deal with the questions concerning the least of the group, All's Well That Ends Well. No apology for choosing this play is necessary, for we must agree with Tillyard that though All's Well is a failure, it is a most “interesting” and “complicated” failure, if unfortunately not a “heroic” one.3

The kinds of questions which still demand attention in All's Well fall roughly into four groups: the relationship of the relevant source material (including questions of rhetoric, atmosphere, and dramatic emphasis); the function of the minor characters; the role of Bertram; and the underlying unity (if any) between the two main divisions of the dramatic structure. These questions, let it be remarked at once, should not be dealt with separately, for herein is the root of much mischief; they must be treated as complementary and mingled parts of the basic critical problem. For example, most critics and scholars have noted Shakespeare's addition of the Countess and Lafew, and several of them have distinguished a little between the King in Painter's translation of Boccaccio and the one in All's Well.4 But the reason usually mentioned to explain these additions or changes seems strangely literal-minded: they are introduced simply to build up audience sympathy for Helena.5 Consistently overlooked is Shakespeare's effort to give these characters some existence of their own, if not individually, then at least as a special group important for the play's thematic development. They are all old and all uncommonly given to dwelling upon their age, their decline, and (pre-eminently in the example of the King), their approaching death. This emphasis cannot be pointless. It does not derive fundamentally from Boccaccio (who may have suggested it), and, except to accentuate her youth, it has little to do with our feelings about Helena. Again, critics have often noted the two-part structure of this play; but they have either considered one part without the other6 or, when they tried to establish some interrelationship between the parts, have in most cases stuck with Lawrence and his discussion of the Clever Wench legends.7 But a more basic thematic link between these parts is suggested which so far has gone largely unnoticed and which makes the play, as a dramatic poem, much more intelligible. If it does not save All's Well, it at least helps us better to account for the play's failure.

To understand the play more completely, then, we must analyze in detail its structure, themes, and language, keeping in view the source-relationships of these aspects as well. The opening lines at once introduce the theme of disease, death, and decay—the recent death of the old Count of Rossillion, the King's fistula, the passing of Helena's father six months ‘previously, the young lords’ need for “breathing and exploit”. This theme is stressed throughout the first two acts, which constitute the first part of the play and deal mainly with the healing of the King. Shakespeare may have found a suggestion for this emphasis at the beginning of Boccaccio's tale of Giletta of Narbona in Painter's Palace of Pleasure:

In Fraunce there was a gentleman called Isnardo, the counte of Rossillione, who because he was sickely and diseased, kept always in his house a phisition, named maister Gerardo of Narbona.

(Novel 38)

Shakespeare begins shortly after the death of “Isnardo” and, unlike his source, gives no explicit reason for the fact that Helena grew up with Bertram. But the idea of constant illness (hardly developed by Boccaccio except for the King's fistula) may have stirred his imagination and may in part explain the creation of the old Countess and Lafew. To accent the idea of decay, Shakespeare places the death of Helena's father earlier than Boccaccio does; the opening dialogue thus becomes a veritable dirge, lamenting not only the death of the old Count and the King's disease, but Gerardo's death, too (I.i.19-26). The keynote is struck in the first line; there is something both morbid and unnatural in the Countess' speech: “In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband.”

Only Helena seems unaffected by the idea of death: her preoccupation with her passion for Bertram—Lafew has to remind her to think on her father (I.i.88)—appears at first merely a malady of a different sort, but emerges at the end of the long scene as the only healthy thing in it. The contrast is significant: in this way Shakespeare prepares us for Helena's role as the “providence of the play”, to use Dowden's term,8 or as the dominant restorative force amidst all the sickness. Restorative, but also regenerative. For closely associated with the theme of individual death and disease is another theme, the passing of generations, introduced and more fully developed by the King in the second scene, as we shall see presently. Hence another reason for creating the Countess and Lafew and for more carefully portraying the King: the universe of All's Well contrasts two worlds—the old order represented by the aged nobility and centered in France; the new order represented by the aspiring young bourgeois (Helena and Parolles) and centered mainly in Florence. Bertram is the link between the two worlds: it is through him that regeneration will occur when he synthesizes the best of both.9 But before he can effect this synthesis, he must be able to perceive the “best” and embrace it, and unfortunately Bertram is himself diseased. His ailment is more serious than that of the other young nobles who, stifled in France, need only the Tuscan wars for physic (I.ii.15-17; III.i.17-19). Bertram's sickness (in a larger, metaphorical sense) colors his judgment and affects his actions, and thus requires a more searching remedy.

According to this pattern, then, Bertram is to be the central character of the play; but he does not assume this importance dramatically until after his marriage to Helena, when the action shifts to Florence.10 Shakespeare first defines the true instrument of regeneration and the difficulties it must encounter and overcome. He does this directly by opposing Helena and Parolles (another new character): their wit combat on virginity (I.i.121-179) prefigures the more serious struggle in which they will soon engage, and Helena's victory prefigures, too, her ultimate success. The dialogue occurs in the middle of the first scene where—despite a light-hearted tone—their respective views on procreation are made clear.11 The quibbling sequence near the end of this dialogue takes on added significance when viewed with regard to the conflict between the regenerative and degenerative forces in the play: Helena claims Parolles must have been born under a retrograde Mars—he goes “so much backward” when he fights (I.i.204-214). But not only in the wars is Parolles “retrograde”; in his emphasis on clothes, manners, and mere words he exemplifies the degenerate influence at work among the younger members of French society.12 When Bertram first appears at Court, the King almost immediately launches upon an extended eulogy of the older generation, represented by Bertram's father, to the discredit of the younger set. He speaks of the dead Count before Bertram, Lafew, and Parolles (who is silent throughout):

It much repairs me

To talk of your good father. In his youth

He had the wit which I can well observe

To-day in our young lords; but they may jest

Till their own scorn return to them unnoted

Ere they can hide their levity in honour

So like a courtier. Contempt nor bitterness

Were in his pride or sharpness. If they were,

His equal had awak'd them; and his honour,

Clock to itself, knew the true minute when

Exception bid him speak, and at this time

His tongue obey'd his hand. Who were below him

He us'd as creatures of another place;

And bow'd his eminent top to their low ranks,

Making them proud of his humility,

In their poor praise he humbled. Such a man

Might be a copy to these younger times,

Which followed well, would demonstrate them now

But goers backward.

(I.ii.30-48)

The clock metaphor, really a conceit, boldly if obliquely insists upon the purport of the entire passage: a noble era is passing, yielding to a less noble, more “reactionary” time (note goers backward), a time which the King describes more fully in his speech on virtue in Act II (II.iii.124-151). The inference is clear: Parolles, for all his fashionable clothes and language, represents those “whose judgments are Mere fathers of their garments” (I.ii.61-62). To this extent only is he capable of regeneration. Yet it is he whom Bertram retains as his guide throughout most of the play.13

If Parolles is “kept under” by the stars that govern him (I.i.209), Helena is determined not to be. After earlier but momentary resignation to her position of shining in Bertram's “collateral” light but not in his sphere (I.i.96), she recognizes the true relationship of human will and heavenly restraint:

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.

(I.i.231-234)

Here begins what has sometimes been called the “morality” pattern in All's Well: the struggle between Helena and Parolles for Bertram's favor.14 Parolles is patently an ass, detected by all save Bertram; but Helena must prove herself to her idol, to the other characters in the play, and to us. Hence she devises her plan to heal the King. Upon reaching Paris, she overcomes the King's doubts and is recognized as a minister of Providence even before she succeeds in curing him (II.i.178 f.). To be sure, Helena herself understands her ministry as something more than human (I.iii.248-249; II.i.139ff.), and at least one critic has explained the peculiar incantatory verse in this scene as therefore appropriate.15 But we need not repeat Tillyard's version of the theme of Bertram, natural man, redeemed by Helena, the agent of grace (pp. 118-122). We may simply note that at this point Helena proves her ability to heal in a literal sense, and the cure seems miraculous to all. Even Bertram and Parolles admit the wonder of it when Lafew shrewdly comments on the nature of event (II.iii.1-9).

By healing the King, Helena merits her bounty, as stipulated in the terms of the venture she chose to undertake: she may select her husband from among the King's wards. This precipitates the first major crisis in the play—a crisis no less severe for critics trying to understand Shakespeare than it is for Bertram. Many have found Helena's conduct blamable,16 and still more have condemned either (or both) Bertram and the King.17 Several have tried valiantly, if unconvincingly, to defend Bertram, notably A. H. Carter in a recent article.18 But no one, it seems, has adequately followed Dowden's hint to place the action subsequent to the healing of the King in its proper relationship to the first action in the play:

A motto for the play may be found in the words uttered with pious astonishment by the clown, when his mistress bids him to begone, “That man should be at woman's command, and yet no harm done”. Helena is the providence of the play; and there is “no hurt done,” but rather healing—healing of the body of the French king, healing of the spirit of the man she loves.19

Bertram's refusal to accept Helena as his wife and his later renegade conduct must be understood in the context of what has preceded; and Helena's influence upon him must be seen as following closely the pre-set pattern of her healing of the King—the initial refusal to believe in and accept her, the eventual success after what seems a “miracle”.

This early, repeated reference to the miraculous nature of the King's cure may also explain the “blackening” of Bertram's character, a problem pondered by all who have compared Bertram with Boccaccio's Beltramo.20 Bertram is blind to the real virtues of Helena—and in this sense ill, for no one else (except Parolles) fails to recognize her worth. His judgment is corrupted and his idea of nobility, as the King says, diseased:

Where great additions swell us, and virtue none,

It is a dropsied honor.

(II.iii.134 f.)

Earlier, at the suggestion of Parolles and two young lords (II.i.25-36), he falsely believes he will gain honor by disobeying the King and stealing from the court to fight in Florence, and after his marriage he actually does run off. His debauchery in Italy and especially his treatment of Diana seriously detract from his service on the battlefield and argue further this sense of “dropsied honor” (see III.v.3-87). Helena follows her husband to Florence, as the requirements of the traditional story demand; but she follows also to “cure” his affliction.

For Helena's effect upon Bertram, like her effect upon the King, is restorative. It is a long-standing error, as noted above,21 to regard Bertram as utterly without principle or virtue apart from his martial prowess—a man upon...

All's Well That Ends Well

Likely composed and first performed between 1602 and 1605, All's Well That Ends Well has long been considered a problem play. The drama has resisted categorization because it features elements of the comic, tragic, and romantic; indeed, the play has been variously regarded as a dark comedy, tragicomedy, and romantic comedy. The play centers on Helena, who becomes the ward of the Countess of Roussillon after the death of her father, a famous physician. Helena falls in love with the Countess's son, the pompous Bertram, who regards her as socially inferior. After she heals the King, Helena requests as her reward Bertram's hand in marriage. Unhappy at being coerced to marry a woman he does not love, Bertram sets a series of impossible tasks that Helena must accomplish if she wants him to accept her as his wife—she must become pregnant with his child and take the ring from his finger. By conspiring with Diana, a woman Bertram is trying to seduce, and taking her place in Bertram's bed, Helena accomplishes her tasks and Bertram is forced to accept her as his wife. All's Well was inspired by a story from Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron (c. 1353). Scholars have noted that the drama retains some of the traditional folktale motifs of its source, including the healing of the king and the fulfillment of impossible tasks. Although traditionally viewed by critics as one of Shakespeare's least successful dramas due to its numerous unresolved issues, ambiguous ending, and largely unsympathetic characters, All's Well That Ends Well has risen in esteem among contemporary scholars. In an attempt to overturn the play's designation as a flawed work, many modern critics have endeavored to reevaluate All's Well's dramatic structure, genre, themes, and characters.

As in many of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, the central figure of All's Well That Ends Well is a determined young woman. Unlike such esteemed Shakespearean heroines as Rosalind or Viola, All's Well's Helena has frequently perplexed or disappointed commentators. Surveying past critical perceptions of Helena, Susan Snyder (1993) describes her as an unorthodox female protagonist, and remarks on the traditional critical apprehension of her sexual aggressiveness in pursuing an unwilling, and perhaps undeserving, Bertram. Snyder also considers Helena's role in challenging patriarchal gender conventions that expect passivity and submissiveness from women. David Haley (1993) stresses the significance of Bertram as the main focus of All's Well That Ends Well. According to Haley, Bertram's personal maturation from a “proud, scornful boy” to a young nobleman possessed of at least a degree of self-knowledge and a sense of personal responsibility forms the thematic arc of All's Well. Michael D. Friedman (1995) focuses on the tension between Bertram's individualized sexual desires and the social necessity of legitimate procreation. Principal among the minor characters in All's Well That Ends Well is Bertram's dubious companion Parolles. Robert Hapgood (1965) associates Parolles with a life of shame, viewing him as a debauched liar in the tradition of Falstaff, but bearing none of the redeeming features of Shakespeare's exuberant tavern knight. For Hapgood, the ignoble rogue Parolles quite simply sacrifices honor in favor of unrestrained living. R. J. Schork (1997) claims that Parolles is a clever adaptation of several stock types from Roman New Comedy: the cowardly braggart soldier, the crafty servant, and the archetypal pimp.

Although never a favorite with audiences, All's Well That Ends Well's popularity on the stage has increased since the second half of the twentieth century. The drama is a challenge to directors, who must create psychological coherence and dramatic resolution out of the play's incongruous elements, such as its ambiguous ending and unsympathetic characters. Eric Grode (see Further Reading) reviews the minimalist staging of director Andrew Grosso's 2000 production of the play at the HERE Theater in New York. Grode praises the director's incisive rendering of the drama's darker themes, but laments the loss of the its much-needed comedic elements. In another unfavorable review, Peter Marks (2003) critiques director Richard Clifford's 2003 staging at the Folger Theatre in Washington, D.C. Although the critic acknowledges the inherent difficulties of successfully staging All's Well That Ends Well, Marks contends that Clifford's production was a conventional, drab, and lifeless effort that failed to elicit audience sympathy. Unlike these two relatively disappointing presentations, Gregory Doran's 2003 Royal Shakespeare Company production at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, which featured an outstanding Judi Dench in the supporting role of the Countess of Roussillon, received the highest praise of reviewers Matt Wolf (2003) and Patrick Carnegy (2003). In addition to offering accolades to Dench for making emotional sense of the play through her compelling performance, Wolf commends workable interpretations of both Helena and Bertram, and an innovatively comic Guy Henry as the garrulous Parolles. Carnegy lauds Doran's brilliant ability to effectively lead audiences through this notoriously obscure stage drama, and notes that “Doran keeps you on the edge of your seat, wondering why the play's making better sense than you might have imagined.”

Critics of All's Well That Ends Well are interested in the play's treatment of love, redemption, and honor as well as its evocation of the destructive forces of old age, decay, and death. Carl Dennis (1971) illuminates a religious theme in All's Well associated with the Christian conceptualization of agape, or divine love. Dennis discusses the play's dramatization of an unsympathetic and seemingly unredeemable Bertram saved by the saintly grace of Helena's boundless love for him. Michael Shapiro (1972) presents a variation on this theme, arguing that redemption in All's Well begins with self-knowledge, but is only achieved through mutuality. In this reading, Helena saves Bertram with her love and intelligence, and Bertram returns the favor to Helena by offering her his own redemptive forgiveness. David M. Bergeron (1973) focuses on the play's allusions to the tumultuous affair of the classical gods of love and war, Venus and Mars. Associating these figures respectively with Helena and Bertram, Bergeron declares that the play offers a final triumph of love over discord and conflict. Vivian Thomas (1987) stresses Shakespeare's deeply ambiguous treatment of honor and virtue in All's Well That Ends Well, claiming that the play features a clash of personal and public moral perspectives that remain largely unresolved at its conclusion. Finally, Lynn M. Simpson (1994) concentrates on the psychological dynamics of All's Well and its themes of separation, identity, and memory. Simpson contends that Helena's character, caught between romance and reality, illustrates a repressed failure to adequately mourn for her dead father. According to the critic, Helena insulates herself against her grief by denying it, and outwardly compensates with bold self-assertion in a reckless sexual pursuit of the reluctant, but ultimately willing Bertram.

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SOURCE: Thomas, Vivian. “Virtue and Honour in All's Well That Ends Well.” In The Moral Universe of Shakespeare's Problems Plays, pp. 140-72. London: Croom Helm, 1987.

[In the following essay, Thomas stresses Shakespeare's deeply ambiguous treatment of honor and virtue in All's Well That Ends Well and claims that the play features a clash of personal and public moral perspectives that remain largely unresolved at its conclusion.]

A striking feature of All's Well is the way in which the play opens by specifying relationships and engaging the theme of virtue as an intrinsic quality which may be complementary to or in conflict with nominal status. In the opening line of the play the Countess expresses sorrow at the imminent departure of Bertram, but does so by emphasising the fundamental nature of family bonds: ‘In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband’. Bertram acknowledges his debt of affection to his dead father but counterbalances it with his duty to the King and his ‘subjection’ (line 5). However, this statement of Bertram's is to sound like a hollow formula in the light of his later disregard of the King's authority. No sooner has Bertram expressed himself formally than Lafew speaks of the King as a ‘husband’ to the Countess and ‘father’ to Bertram: formal bonds are to be affective ties. Lafew's confident reassurance to the Countess is based on knowledge of the King's virtue and her desert: ‘He that so generally is at all times good must of necessity hold his virtue to you, whose worthiness would stir it up where it wanted, rather than lack it where there is such abundance’ (I.i. 7-10).

The pattern is continued a few lines later with the first reference to Helena. She too has lost a father and has become the adoptive daughter of the Countess. Before extolling her virtues the Countess makes a remarkable statement about Helena's gifted father. Although, as Lafew comments, ‘he was skilful enough to have liv'd still, if knowledge could be set up against mortality’ (I.i. 28-9) the Countess describes him as one ‘whose skill was almost as great as his honesty’ (I.i. 17-18). Immediately there is a weighing and balancing of admirable qualities: if this man was famous as a physician he must have been a man of total integrity for his honesty to surpass his skill. The implication is that honesty is valued even above life-saving skills. Characteristic of the problem plays is the way in which we plunge into a consideration of values.

The relationship between inherited qualities and education is developed by the Countess in her praise of Helena: ‘I have those hopes of her good that her education promises her dispositions she inherits—which makes fair gifts fairer’ (I.i. 36-8). Where skills and talents are cultivated but are at the disposal of an ‘unclean mind’ they are not to be admired. Rather, ‘they are virtues and traitors too’ (I.i. 40). The suggestion that talent and honesty do not always go together is followed by an awareness that integrity is not necessarily inherited. The Countess' farewell to Bertram expresses hope rather than certainty that he will prove worthy of his breeding:

Be thou bless'd, Bertram, and succeed thy father

In manners as in shape! Thy blood and virtue

Contend for empire in thee, and thy goodness

Share with thy birthright!

(I.i. 57-60)

The Countess is aware that Bertram is on the brink of being tested for the first time in his life. His inexperience is revealed in her plea to Lafew:

'Tis an unseason'd courtier; good my lord,

Advise him.

(I.i. 67-8)

If the hope but uncertainty of inherited qualities is suggested by the Countess' speech, along with an awareness of the need for education and experience to bring intrinsic qualities to fruition, the idea of the child as preserver of the parent's reputation is brought out by Lafew's farewell to Helena: ‘Farewell, pretty lady; you must hold the credit of your father’ (line 75). It is ironic that Helena's tears are not for her famous father because she has already forgotten him. Indeed, the impression made by Bertram on her imagination is so powerful that it has erased all other images. Helena's soliloquy, in which she gives vent to her adoration of Bertram, possesses an ease and fluency which contrasts with the compacted speeches that precede it: analysis of concepts and values gives way to free flowing verse which is expressive of Helena's idealised love of Bertram:

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 his 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 lion

Must die for love. 'Twas pretty, though a plague,

To see him every hour; to sit and draw

His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls,

In out heart's table—heart too capable

Of every line and trick of his sweet favour.

But now he's gone, and my idolatrous fancy

Must sanctify his relics.

(I.i. 82-96)

The immediate effect of this speech is to create a sense of surprise or incongruity. Helena's ‘idolatrous fancy’ seems strikingly at odds with Bertram's cold and detached comment to her ‘Be comfortable to my mother, your mistress, and make much of her’ (I.i. 73-4). Not only are they separated by a social gulf, but Bertram seems unaware of her as a young woman. Moreover, there is nothing in the early exchanges to suggest why Bertram should attract such admiration—other than the fact that he is a handsome young man. That Helena is not just a silly young girl is made clear by her shrewd assessment of Parolles: she recognises that he is a ‘liar’, ‘fool’ and ‘coward’, but rather than feeling contemptuous towards him she implies that these qualities don't create an altogether unattractive character. Helena quickly routs Parolles in a battle of wits which reveals an ease of manner that enables her to cope admirably with his bawdy talk and self-importance. It is her resilience and strength of character which are manifested in the closing speech of the scene:

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.

.....The mightiest space in fortune nature brings

To join like likes, and kiss like native things.

(I.i. 212-19)

Here Helena expounds a philosophy to underpin her action. Leaving everything to heaven often serves as a pretext for inaction; and frequently seemingly disparate things are brought together and conjoined. If the audience feels any scepticism at this stage it is not about her determination to be active but rather about the worth of Bertram. Has this young woman so idealised the object of her love that he will not prove worth the effort? Significantly, her enthusiastic description of him is confined to physical characteristics: the comments of the Countess have been sufficient to create an awareness of the possibility of a discrepancy between intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. Moments later the King directs the attention of the audience back to this duality with its potential for conflict:

Youth, thou bear'st thy father's face;

Frank nature, rather curious than in haste,

Hath well compos'd thee. Thy father's moral parts

Mayest thou inherit too!

(I.ii. 19-22)

The King hopes rather than assumes that Bertram will inherit his father's qualities.

When the King recalls Bertram's father he conveys a genuine sense of loss: there is no feeling of respectful sentiment being the due of the dead, but rather a picture is created of a man remarkable for humour, tact and humanity. And when the King reaches the climax of his praise it comes as something of a surprise: his greatest virtue was an ability to communicate so easily with men of all social levels that they felt comfortable with him, indeed as if they were dealing with their social equal:

Who were below him

He us'd as creatures of another place,

And bow'd his eminent top to their low ranks,

Making them proud of his humility

In their poor praise he humbled. Such a man

Might be a copy to these younger times;

Which, followed well, would demonstrate them now

But goers backward.

(I.ii. 41-8)

The quality for which Bertram's father is most praised will be found most markedly absent in Bertram. But the King's speech suggests that Bertram should find it easier to shine as a consequence of the falling away in the present generation. The King undoubtedly creates a sense of two distinct eras, with the present being inferior to the former. While this could easily appear to be part of the traditional expression that things are no longer what they were, there is a feeling that the King is not merely responding as an ageing man idealising the past. One of the minor links between the problem plays is criticism of the obsession with the new-fangled: Ulysses makes the point in Troilus and Cressida (III.iii. 175-6); and so too does the disguised Duke in Measure for Measure (III.ii. 217-20). Here the King attributes the view to Bertram's father:

‘Let me not live,’ quoth he,

‘After my flame lacks oil, to be the snuff

Of younger spirits, whose apprehensive senses

All but new things disdain; whose judgements are

Mere fathers of their garments; whose constancies

Expire before their fashions.’

(I.ii. 58-63)

Just as in the opening scene the fathers of Bertram and Helena are linked, the King turns to ask how long it has been since the death of the physician who was ‘much fam'd’ (I.ii. 71). The King's welcome to Bertram is concluded in a manner which expresses the emotional bond which binds them through the father-friend:

Welcome, count;

My son's no dearer.

(I.ii. 75-6)

So it is that both scenes focus sharply on human qualities through recollections of Bertram's father and the father of Helena.

While the question of Bertram's worth remains open, Helena's virtue is placed beyond question. On hearing of Helena's love of Bertram the Countess makes clear her estimation of her adopted daughter.

Her father bequeath'd her to me, and she herself, without other advantage, may lawfully make title to as much love as she finds; there is more owing her than is paid, and more shall be paid her than she'll demand.

(I.iii. 97-101)

Moreover, the Countess insists that her feelings towards her adopted daughter are as great as those for her natural son. In expressing this feeling Shakespeare has the Countess employ his favourite source of imagery: horticulture (also used at a critical moment in Measure for Measure but virtually absent from Troilus and Cressida):

I say I am your mother,

And put you in the catalogue of those

That were enwombed mine. 'Tis often seen

Adoption strives with nature, and choice breeds

A native slip to us from foreign seeds.

(I.iii. 137-41)

This reference to ‘foreign seeds’ is critical, because for Bertram there can be no question of social equality between people of unequal descent. Whereas the Countess enthusiastically accepts Helena as her own, and eagerly embraces the prospect of her marriage to Bertram, and the King praises Bertram's father for his natural humility which enabled men of inferior birth to feel that they were being treated as equals, Bertram appears to have total contempt for such values. He exhibits a powerful sense of social superiority. However, before revealing his attitude in this important sphere Bertram expresses an enthusiasm for the value of military honour. He fears that he will be forced to stay at court ‘Till honour be bought up’ (II.i. 32).

When he is chosen by Helena he is not only vigorous in expressing his dislike of the proposal, but is positively insolent in responding to the King's question:

Know'st thou not, Bertram,

What she has done for me?

Yes, my good lord,

But never hope to know why I should marry her.

(II.iii. 108-10)

Here is a clear breach of decorum which Bertram reiterates before going on to make the basis of his defiance clear:

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. 113-16)

A great deal of special pleading has been made on Bertram's behalf—he is immature, too shocked to respond more cautiously, bitterly disappointed at being deprived of the excitement of being a young man at court and going off to the wars, etc.—but Shakespeare could hardly have made this character's feelings more explicit and unambiguous. To marry someone of Helena's social standing would be to suffer dishonour regardless of her personal qualities. Clearly for Bertram, unlike the King and his mother and father, status is everything; personal qualities are irrelevant. The King's reply constitutes a philosophical generalisation but is also a gentle attempt to persuade Bertram that he is mistaken:

'Tis only title thou disdain'st in her, the which

I can build up. Strange is it that our bloods,

Of colour, weight, and heat, pour'd all together,

Would quite confound distinction, yet stands off

In differences so mighty. If she be

All that is virtuous, save what thou dislik'st—

A poor physician's daughter—thou dislik'st

Of virtue for the name. But do not so.

From lowest place when virtuous things proceed,

The place is dignified by th'doer's deed.

Where great additions swell's and virtue none,

It is a dropsied honour. Good alone

Is good, without a name; vileness is so:

The property by what it is should go,

Not by the title. She is young, wise, fair;

In these to nature she's immediate heir,

And these breed honour; that is honour's scorn

Which challenges itself as honour's born

And is not like the sire. Honours thrive

When rather from our acts we them derive

Than our foregoers. The mere word's a slave,

Debosh'd on every tomb, on every grave

A lying trophy, and as oft is dumb,

Where dust and damn'd oblivion is the tomb

Of honour'd bones indeed. What should be said?

If thou canst like this creature as a maid,

I can create the rest. Virtue and she

Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me.

(II.iii. 117-44)

The King's response to Bertram is astonishing for its powerful insistence that assessment of human worth must be made in terms of character and action (‘is’, ‘deed’, ‘breed’, ‘acts’, all operate to generate a sense of action) rather than by means of social status or breeding. Starting at the fundamental physiological level the King makes a statement of fact that blood cannot be distinguished in terms of social status. Hence when the term ‘blood’ is being used as a means of making social distinctions it is operating as a metaphor not as a description of physiological reality. The King argues that the comparison must be between actions regardless of the status of the actors. He then goes one step further: high social standing cannot transform a bad action into a good deed. Finally, he insists that Helena has derived outstanding qualities from nature, which she may transmit to the next generation and so produce genuine honour, as opposed to the honour of title unsupported by virtuous character.

It is difficult to think of another speech in the whole of Shakespeare which sets forth this ‘democratic’ argument with such force and clarity. It is all the more remarkable coming from the King: a man who owes his position to inheritance of title. The argument does not necessarily undermine the principle of inheritance, the existence of an aristocracy or a hierarchical society, but it does imply that title and high status require virtuous behaviour—honour goes with actions not title—and that there should be no barrier to upward social mobility: not every virtuous and beautiful young woman can become a countess, but when she is chosen by a nobleman or is endowed with wealth (as Helena is by the King) there is no possible justification of citing humble birth as a means of casting doubt on the acceptability of such a marriage. The King in Shakespeare's source material does have momentary qualms about the marriage on social grounds; Shakespeare's King is unequivocal in his dismissal of the values enunciated by Bertram.

Bertram's answer to the King's speech is surprising. When he insists, ‘I cannot love her nor will strive to do't’ (II.iii. 145), not only is he rejecting the social ethos advanced by the King, but he is also denying a vital social principle in his society: his duty to his monarch. The King reminds Bertram of this but not before Helena has attempted to relinquish her reward and the King has insisted that fulfilling his side of the bargain is a matter of honour:

My honour's at the stake, which to defeat,

I must produce my power. Here, take her hand,

Proud, scornful boy, unworthy this good gift,

That dost in vile misprision shackle up

My love and her desert; that canst not dream

We, poising us in her defective scale,

Shall weigh thee to the beam; that wilt not know

It is in us to plant thine honour where

We please to have it grow. 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 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. Speak. Thine answer.

(II.iii. 149-66)

Only after Bertram has been warned that he will have no significant place in the court life of his society does he submit to the King's demand. What in the source material was a private transaction behind closed doors is in Shakespeare's play a public occasion which is embarrassing and humiliating to all three participants. Bertram's retreat is anything but dignified and stems quite clearly from a recognition of his own dependence on the King's favour:

Pardon, my gracious lord; for I submit

My fancy to your eyes. When I consider

What great creation and what dole of honour

Flies where you bid it, I find that she, which late

Was in my nobler thoughts most base, is now

The praised of the king; who, so ennobled,

Is as 'twere born so.

(II.iii. 167-73)

Having reiterated his pledge to provide Helena with a handsome dowry (one that will make her more than Bertram's equal in terms of wealth) the King warns Bertram that his fortunes are inextricably tied to Helena:

As thou lov'st her

Thy love's to me religious; else, does err.

(II.iii. 182-3)

Clearly the King has less than total confidence in Bertram's willingness to be a ‘good’ husband without a strong incentive.

Thus, like the debate scene in Troilus and Cressida which begins with Priam setting out the costs of the war and the Greeks' offer of peace, and ends with Hector's astonishing turn about, this public occasion conveys a feeling of the perversity of human nature. As Hector sets forth an irrefutable case for ending the war before joining ranks with Troilus in the pursuit of ‘honour’, so too in this scene is there a feeling that Bertram has bowed to necessity but remains unconvinced of the validity of the social principles enunciated by the King. And what of Helena? The problem for the audience is to comprehend how she will be able to retain her feeling of love for Bertram after the treatment she has received in this scene. Can she still idolise him?

When Helena next appears it is to be informed by Parolles that she has to forgo the consummation of her marriage because Bertram has urgent business elsewhere. Helena's response is one of simple acceptance: ‘In everything I wait upon his will’ (II.iv. 52). Before Helena receives the remainder of her instructions from Bertram—to return to Rossillion where he will join her in two days—the audience has had the opportunity of seeing Parolles thoroughly exposed by Lafew, while being accepted as a worthy confidant by Bertram. Even after Lafew has insisted that ‘the soul of this man is his clothes’ (II.v. 43-4), Bertram remains convinced that Parolles ‘is very great in knowledge, and accordingly valiant’ (II.v. 7-8). Bertram, then, is singularly undiscerning: he lacks the ability to see through even such a transparent character as Parolles.

Bertram's attitude to Helena is one of contempt: as she advances to receive her instructions from him his terse comment is ‘Here comes my clog’ (II.v. 53). He then proceeds to lie to her and in response to her tentative plea for a kiss he dismisses her coldly. After making all possible allowances for Bertram's disappointment it is difficult to feel any sympathy for him. His behaviour towards Helena is callous. However, even after receiving the next blow—the riddling letter informing her that Bertram will never accept her as his wife until she has his ring and a child fathered by him—Helena expresses no antagonism towards Bertram. Rather she suffers great anxiety on his part and a sense of guilt that she has caused him to court danger in the wars:

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?

.....Whoever shoots at him, I set him there;

Whoever charges on his forward breast,

I am the caitiff that do hold him to't;

And though I kill him not, I am the cause

His death was so effected.

(III.ii. 102-16)

The contrast between the reactions of Helena and the Countess is striking. The Countess is direct in her chastisement of her son:

Nothing in France until he have no wife!

There's nothing here that is too good for him

But only she, and she deserves a lord

That twenty such rude boys might tend upon

And call her, hourly, mistress.

(III.ii. 78-82)

Moreover, she claims that honour is not interchangeable: the sum of honour cannot be augmented if it is lost in one sphere and gained in another: ‘tell him that his sword can never win / The honour that he loses’ (III.ii. 93-4). Ironically, when Bertram does return from the war the honour he has gained in battle does serve him well in gaining quittance for his treatment of Helena.

It is not merely Helena's tender care for Bertram which is so marked but the whole speech is delivered in a highly romanticised vein; she is still in love with what sounds like an ideal or idealised young man rather than the insensitive character who has treated her with contempt. There seems nothing selfish in Helena's love; her own bruises she can bear with equanimity; it is the prospect of Bertram suffering that she cannot endure. And yet, though her ostensible reason for leaving home is to encourage Bertram to return, Helena is soon in Florence on Bertram's doorstep planning yet again to win him. Although Helena's chief goal is to see Bertram safe and comfortable she is unable to quell her longing for him. Shakespeare has headed off any antagonism towards her by the Countess' comment that:

What angel shall

Bless this unworthy husband? He cannot thrive,

Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear

And loves to grant, reprieve him from the wrath

Of greatest justice.

(III.iv. 25-9)

This attitude is reinforced by the ladies of Florence who are full of admiration for Bertram's appearance but dislike his treatment of his wife and the attempt to seduce Diana. It is the young virgin herself who insists on placing moral considerations in the final estimation of a man: ‘if he were honester / He were much goodlier’ (III.v. 79-80). Likewise, Mariana in cautioning Diana against Bertram states: ‘the honour of a maid is her name, and no legacy is so rich as honesty’ (III.v. 12-13). Bertram, in contrast, sees honesty as Diana's only failing: ‘That's all the fault’ he replies in answer to the comment ‘But you say she's honest’ (III.vi. 107-8). Here is the topsy-turvy world of the dashing young nobleman: he gives his all on the battlefield to heap up honour, but in order to satisfy his lust is prepared to ruin a poor young virgin. In a play overflowing with references to worth and honour Shakespeare has created an awareness of the incongruities between scales of values. When Helena puts her proposal of the bed-trick before the widow she has to persuade her that there can be no question of improper behaviour. Despite her poverty the widow is proud of her ancestry claiming ‘And would not put my reputation now / In any staining act’ (III.vii. 6-7). In contrast to the reticence of the widow Helena has no doubt that Bertram will surrender his family ring in payment for Diana's virginity:

Now his important blood will naught deny

That she'll demand; a ring the country wears

That downward hath succeeded in his house

From son to son some four or five descents

Since the first father wore it. This ring he holds

In most rich choice; yet, in his idle fire,

To buy his will it would not seem too dear,

Howe'er repented after.

(III.vii. 21-8)

It is ironic that a man who stood first against marriage on the principle of high birth should be willing to part with a symbol of his family's honour for an hour of sexual gratification with a woman whom he disdains as a human being. The ring is of far greater symbolic significance than the drum ostensibly sought by Parolles. But the drum is merely a pretext for action that will win esteem; Parolles' difficulty is to acquire the symbol without risking his life. Unlike Bertram who possesses physical courage in abundance, Parolles is a natural coward. As he ruminates on his dilemma, one of the eavesdropping lords asks the question, ‘Is it possible he should know what he is, and be that he is?’ (IV.i. 44-5) Rather than promoting a contempt for Parolles' brazenness, this comment rather creates an awareness of his self-knowledge. At no point in the play does Bertram ever display such a sense of insight into his own character: from first to last he appears to think of himself as an admirable fellow. Moreover, Parolles' exposure is highly comic as he unwittingly participates in a dialogue with his fellows. His vice is revealed in an atmosphere of amusement, whereas Bertram's exposure takes place in a formal situation which is untouched by comic elements. When Parolles is ‘captured’ his outburst is poignant as well as comic:

O, let me live,

And all the secrets of our camp I'll show,

(IV.i. 83-4)

Parolles' disgrace, as a soldier, is total. But when set beside Bertram's calculated wooing of Diana his response is understandably human. In the light of his later denunciation of Diana, Bertram's courtship is cynical in the extreme. Dismissing the ties of his enforced marriage he pledges undying love to the woman whom he intends to use:

I was compell'd to her, but I love thee

By love's own sweet constraint, and will for ever