

On Not Being Reconciled to Bertram:
All's Well That Ends Well and the
 Conventions of Renaissance Comedy

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All's Well That Ends Well is a "problem play". It is said to contain a much greater concern with social and moral issues than most of Shakespeare's earlier and less "serious" comedies. Yet criticism is exercised by certain peculiarities of characterization and presentation which are so contrary to its elevated atmosphere. Consequently, the play's difficulty has often been stressed; it is frequently regarded as a fascinating failure, an essay in the treatment of pressing moral and sexual problems which had, somehow, gone wrong through Shakespeare's ill-advised attempt to pour this potent stuff into the old bottle of comedy.

The character of Bertram has been singled out as its major problem. He is regarded, almost without exception, as unpleasant, ungenerous, dastardly and immoral. Dr Johnson's celebrated account of his shortcomings still represents a widely accepted critical attitude:

I cannot reconcile my heart to *Bertram*; a man noble without generosity, and young without truth; who marries *Helen* as a coward, and leaves her as a profligate: when she is dead by his unkindness, sneaks home to a second marriage, is accused by a woman whom he has wronged, defends himself by falshood, and is dismissed to happiness.¹

Shakespeare's offence was, clearly, against the dictates of poetic justice. Bertram is unworthy of Helena's love; his repentance at the end is so perfunctory that it cannot be regarded as sufficient expiation for his crimes. The play is, therefore, of little worth, Johnson argues. The bed-trick had been used before, in *Measure for Measure*, and once, according to him, was sufficient. He considered the finale rushed and careless, as so often with the last moments of Shakespeare's plays. The comedy, in short, is as unedifying as the mouldy tale from which its plot is drawn.

Later critics have not accepted, on the whole, this almost complete dismissal of the play. But few have disagreed with Johnson's diagnosis of the difficulties connected with its "hero". Modern accounts still stress Bertram's moral faults; his rather meagre con-

1 S. Johnson, Notes to *All's Well That Ends Well*, in *Selected Works*, ed. Mona Wilson (1957), p. 553.

tribution to the opening scene is used as evidence of his dastardliness. Critics usually presume that the play's structure is based on the *a priori* assumption that he is unpleasant and lacking in generosity. Some go to considerable lengths to tease "proof" of this from the first scene. G. K. Hunter, in his Arden edition of the text, makes a very characteristic comment about Bertram's address to his mother, and Lafew's interjection:

Ber. Madam, I desire your holy wishes.

Laf. How understand we that?

(I.i.55-56)

Hunter's gloss on l. 56 is as follows:

The relevance of this remark is not obvious, and various rearrangements have been proposed . . . Lafew may be commenting on Bertram's rude interruption of the conversation about Helena, and drawing the audience's attention to this early symptom of his coltishness.²

When Bertram leaves the stage some twenty lines later, the curttness of his farewell to Helena prompts the same editor to remark: "Bertram nowhere in this scene shows any affability to Helena".³

These are but minor instances of a general attitude towards his character. It is usually presumed that throughout the play he offends against certain codes of conduct, and that he violates weighty moral requirements. But the denigration of Bertram in moral terms is difficult to sustain during the first half of the play. As far as the latter part of the structure is concerned, where he does demonstrate signs of caddishness and ungentlemanly behaviour, the critical distress at his being so promptly forgiven is curious. The end of the play represents the familiar concern with the reform of a rake. Many societies have readily accepted the proposition that the best thing to do with an unstable youth is to bind him over to the care of a sensible and loving wife. Why, then, does *All's Well That Ends Well* seem to have such a morally dubious finale, when critics and readers are prepared to accept implicitly similar events in a variety of literary works? The reason is to be found, I think, in a fundamental and quite deliberate aspect of the play: it contains an extraordinary and unsettling ambivalence of attitude towards a number of its characters, not merely Bertram. Shakespeare plays with possible ways of regarding characters and their actions, only to demonstrate that the

2 *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. G. K. Hunter (1962), p. 6. All quotations from the play are taken from the revised version of Hunter's Arden text.

3 *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. Hunter p. 7.

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contrary, at times, is being presented. *All's Well That Ends Well* is a more witty and far more formal comedy than most critics are willing to concede; its apparently elevated moral concerns are contained within a framework of constantly shifting perspectives.

Moral concerns are, probably, to be encountered in the latter half of the action; it begins, however, from a very different set of premisses, ones which have little to do with our moral faculties. If Bertram seems to be guilty of certain offences in the first half (and I think that we are meant to feel that he is), it is not against any objectively demonstrable moral code that he offends, but against the narrative modes of the type of drama Shakespeare seems to be writing. It is not until Act II scene iii, when Bertram flatly refuses to obey the King's command that he must marry Helena, that we are given any firm indication of his role in the latter part of the play. Up to that point, the doubts and uncertainties we entertain about his character and his motives emerge from the curious and sophisticated games Shakespeare plays with conventional narrative expectations.

There are a number of "signals" in the first scene suggesting that this play is to be concerned with the familiar material of Renaissance comedy: the tribulations of a pair of young people whose love is strenuously opposed by their elders. Critics have been quick to point out, it is true, that the commencement of the play does not strike an obviously comic note. The conversation with which it begins is sombre and subdued; it is concerned almost exclusively with death, disease and sorrow. The old Count of Rossillion and Gerard de Narbon are dead; the King suffers from an incurable fistula; the Countess is about to be parted from her son. No other comedy of Shakespeare's begins in such an elegiac manner; yet such a commencement is not inimical to the spirit of comedy. It is possible to regard this melancholy opening to the play as fulfilling the requirements of a well-known definition of comedy: an action which begins in adversity and culminates in prosperity. *All's Well That Ends Well* begins where its society and characters have reached their lowest ebb; there is decay and stagnation (even though a journey is discussed). If there is to be any movement, it can only take place upwards and outwards. Some such promise is inherent in the metaphor of the Countess's words which begin the play: "In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband".

This sombre exposition isolates the two young people, Bertram and Helena, in a significant manner, by means of a device used

elsewhere by Shakespeare to great effect. The conversation focuses on these two, who remain, throughout, relatively silent. The first fifteen lines concentrate on Bertram, the death of his father, his imminent departure and the illness of the King. Next, the conversation between the Countess and Lafew turns to a discussion of the great healing powers which Helena's father, Gerard de Narbon, had possessed. By line 16 the emphasis is firmly on Helena herself. With assured stagecraft, Shakespeare isolates and compares these two young people in a predominantly aged world: both are relatively silent; each has lost a father; both seem reserved, even secretive, certainly formal in their demeanour. The effect is achieved largely because they do and say so little; they are enigmatic, and we are made to feel that there is a significance to this. Are they young lovers about to experience the bitterness of parting?

A passing comment of Helena's helps to support such an assumption. The Countess reprimands her for grieving too much for her father:

Coun. No more of this, Helena; go to, no more, lest it be rather thought you affect a sorrow than to have—

Hel. I do affect a sorrow, indeed, but I have it too. (I.i.47-50)

The reply is quibbling. The verb "to affect" had several possible meanings in Shakespeare's lifetime, besides the common meaning of false suggestion (in which sense it is used by the Countess in l. 49). It could mean to aim or to aspire towards a goal, or to like, love or cherish something. The drift of Helena's quibble is plain enough: it suggests that she prefers the Countess and the others to think that her dejection is the result of her father's death, but it implies that the real cause of her grief is to be found elsewhere. The sentiment is delivered in the enigmatic manner she has repeatedly in this scene, which has been noted by several critics. Thus much is commonly acknowledged. We must realize, though, that her reply contains, in addition, certain faintly indecent overtones which have little to do with her character as it is presented in the course of the play. "Sorrow" is an ancient periphrasis for childbearing, being derived, in all probability, from the prophecy of Eve's sufferings in Genesis iii. 16. Any suggestion that Helena is pregnant is impossible to maintain in the light of the play's subsequent development. But at this early stage of its exposition, all possibilities are open: one, among several, is that she cherishes the "sorrow" she bears. This deliberately vague intimation serves as a faint suggestion to the audience that it is

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attending a certain type of theatrical entertainment.

We, who know the play and its unusual material, are able to recognize in this comment the first hint of Helena's great predicament: the conflict between her unfulfilled love for Bertram and her lowly status, of which she is only too conscious. But if we "stand back" from this familiar play in order to observe its intrinsic design, rather than to peruse its individual features, Helena's quibbling remark assumes another significance. The play begins with a domestic situation couched in sober prose. The older generation laments the passing of a world. Two young people, who are largely silent throughout this episode, seem to share certain characteristics. We learn that they are about to be parted, since the youth is about to leave home. In the midst of this, the young woman makes a punning reference to sorrow which allows several interpretations, one being that she cherishes a secret and possibly shameful grief.

This suggests that the play is to deal with the usual material of love comedy. Many plays in the English Renaissance are based on situations derived from Roman New Comedy, though tempered and to some extent altered by the different social and emotional priorities of the Renaissance world. Such plays are often concerned with the conflict of youth and age. The love of the young people meets opposition from the girl's angry, intolerant and materialistic family; the comic structure is centred on the way in which these obstacles are overcome. Comedy after comedy imposes the frank, free and loving values of youth over the antiquated social and financial standards of the world of aged authority.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona is Shakespeare's most sustained attempt to incorporate these elements in a play. The narrative interest in the tribulations experienced by Silvia and Valentine, until the Duke of Milan's opposition to their marriage collapses (once Valentine has demonstrated his nobility and courage), places the comedy firmly within such a tradition, as does its poetic style and characterization. It is a copybook example of the love comedy of the English Renaissance. Though no other play of Shakespeare's incorporates these features so fully, there are two curious exceptions: *Romeo and Juliet* is a fascinating attempt at imposing a catastrophic ending on the conventions of love comedy; these conventions are transformed in *The Tempest* into Prospero's ceremonial mock-torment of Ferdinand. Elsewhere, it seems, Shakespeare avoided including such clichéd material in the main

concerns of his comedies; the well-trying formulas of love comedy were banished to the subplots and to the background interest, even though they are clearly discernible in that relatively inferior position. The Bianca subplot of *The Taming of the Shrew* is obviously derived from this tradition, being used in that play to provide an ironic contrast with the hectic mating of Petruchio and Katharina. Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the blustering *Senex* of Roman and Italian comedy when he threatens Hermia with the bloody rigour of Athenian law if she refuses to marry Demetrius. Page's opposition to the love of Ann and Fenton in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is another clear instance, characteristic in the way that it crumbles, in the last moment of the play, when he finds that he has been outwitted.

Shakespeare appears to have had greater interest in subjecting this material to formal variation (as in the case of *Romeo and Juliet*), though nowhere with such flamboyant wit as in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Two plays, written during the same period, reveal a similar though lesser concern with the potentialities inherent in this material. The melodramatic concerns of *The Merchant of Venice* are said to foreshadow the themes and effects of the "problem plays" or "dark comedies"; a minor, though notable, strand in it is Shylock's bitter racial and religious prejudice against any notion of Jessica's consorting with a Gentile. His bizarre outrage when she elopes with Lorenzo (if Solanio's account of it is meant to be credited) places him, fleetingly, in the familiar role of outraged paternal authority. The other instance is more compelling. The terrible threat of death hanging over Claudio in *Measure for Measure* originates in a predominantly comic opposition to his marriage with Juliet. He identifies the cause of his misfortune in an impassioned and memorable speech delivered shortly after his first appearance in the play:

Thus stands it with me: upon a true contract
I got possession of Julietta's bed.
You know the lady, she is fast my wife,
Save that we do the denunciation lack
Of outward order; this we came not to,
Only for propagation of a dow'r
Remaining in the coffer of her friends.
From whom we thought it meet to hide our love
Till time had made them for us.

(I.ii.138-46)⁴

This passage clearly combines the mercenary opposition of Juliet's

4 Quotations from Shakespeare's plays (other than *All's Well That Ends Well*) are taken from *The Complete Works*, ed. P. Alexander (1951).

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family to the marriage with Angelo's insistence on the letter rather than the spirit of the law—Claudio and Juliet are legally married, in the light of the principle of *sponsalia per verba de praesenti*. The young people are victims, no longer in a playful manner, but with absolute gravity, of the hostile priorities of age and authority that the lovers of the earlier and more lighthearted comedies encounter.

The opening episode of *All's Well That Ends Well* bears some hints of this type of material, especially in Helena's reply to the Countess's reprimand. It is intrinsically a jest, and in this, momentarily, Helena assumes an important characteristic of many of the personages of love comedies. The predicament of the young lovers in such plays is, of course, sad for much of the action. Yet many of them retain a curious sprightliness, despite their troubles, which helps to sustain the essentially sportive atmosphere of comedy. This is often expressed in extended verbal sallies and in the decidedly athletic good humour, often the hallmark of these characters, which they retain even in the midst of their frustrations and disappointments. The faintly indecent spark in Helena's reply to the Countess may be an echo of such things; the episode with Parolles that follows shortly afterwards is a much more obvious instance.

But before that significant and in many ways disturbing passage, Helena has the first of her two great soliloquies in this opening scene. She expresses her dismay at being parted from Bertram; she speaks of the hopelessness of her love, given the social distance between them. Yet, contrary to the assertions of many commentators, there is nothing in this speech which states explicitly that Bertram did not return her love. The details in the soliloquy are deliberately vague: everything Helena says could be interpreted as her lament for a mutual, though frustrated love which must now suffer separation in addition to other obstacles. There are several misleading suggestions in this speech which imply, initially, the contrary of what Helena is, in fact, saying. She says that she has practically forgotten her father, and continues:

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.

(Li.80-96)

Favours were tokens of fidelity exchanged by lovers; we must attend to the text very carefully (more carefully, perhaps, than a theatrical audience is capable of doing) to realize that Helena carries Bertram's favour in her imagination, not on her person. To be undone commonly means to have been ruined through seduction or loss of virginity. Helena's claim that she is undone causes a momentary *frisson* (coming not long after the quibble on "sorrow") which is dispelled by the latter part of the statement. The astronomical conceit in "collateral light" is apt, but the adjective carries a genealogical sense which helps to confuse the issues for a moment. Later in the speech, Helena seems to suggest that her relationship with Bertram was intimate enough for her to sketch his features, until we learn that she is speaking metaphorically of the strong impression engraved on her heart. These obfuscations are quite deliberate. Helena is made to speak with intense feeling about a situation; what is lacking, though, is precise information about its circumstances. In such a case, the suggestion that the situation belongs to a commonly encountered tradition of stage narrative assumes considerable importance. All forms of narrative art operate by drawing on reserves of familiar material; an audience would, I think, presume that it is being treated to yet another tale of mutual but frustrated love.

Once more, such a suspicion would be strengthened by the punning interview with Parolles that follows the soliloquy. In this lengthy and frequently bawdy passage, which has caused a number of critical misgivings, Helena behaves in an uncharacteristic manner. She is relaxed, even good-humoured for much of this episode—a marked contrast to her sobriety and melancholy elsewhere in the play. In this respect, the episode displays some affinity with a frequently encountered feature of Renaissance love comedies: a disputation between a virgin and a person of sceptical, cynical or even corrupt attitudes. This spirited *agon* with the worldly and obscene Parolles resembles such passages, even though Parolles is far more outspoken and apparently much more corrupt than any

of the other antagonists—we must turn to Thersites in *Troilus and Cressida* if we wish to find a parallel. Yet his exchanges with Helena reveal a sportive, holiday mood which, in this play, is so contrary to the predominant tone and atmosphere.

This comical dispute on virginity is another of the "signals" suggesting that the play is to proceed along the familiar lines of conventional comedy. Helena's second soliloquy, which closes the scene, adds further support to the view, while providing the first hint of the variations that are to be played on this conventional material in later scenes. She announces her intention of attempting the King's cure (with her father's potions) and so gaining her desire. Her determination is stated in a series of high-minded, sententious couplets, in the course of which a philosophical and religious basis is established to justify her actions:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky
Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.
What power is it which mounts my love so high,
That makes me see, and cannot feed mine eye?
The mightiest space in fortune nature brings
To join like likes, and kiss like native things.
Impossible be strange attempts to those
That weigh their pains in sense, and do suppose
What hath been cannot be. Who ever strove
To show her merit that did miss her love?
The king's disease—my project may deceive me,
But my intents are fix'd, and will not leave me.

(I.i.212-25)

This speech can be seen as a solemn version of those episodes in which the amorous maidens of comedy—Julia, Rosalind, Imogen—set out on their travels (often in male disguise) to rejoin or to seek their separated lovers. Yet Helena is subtly different from those women. This speech is strong, determined, almost masculine; there is none of the pathos that frequently attends such departures—instead of the vaguely-placed adventurousness with which other maidens set out for the great unknown, Helena has a very clear-sighted recognition of her goal and of the means of achieving it. There is an insinuation here that, instead of adopting the outward covering of male attire, Helena is assuming a fundamentally male purposefulness in her quest for satisfaction.

These are merely recondite implications, though, at this stage of the play's development: the dominant note is still that of familiar Renaissance love comedy. The third scene of the first act, which contains the major confrontation between Helena and the

Countess, serves to confirm such an assumption, while incorporating the first major instance of the transformation of conventional comic devices. Its initial suggestion is to reinforce the feeling that Bertram and Helena had plighted their troth. In the course of the scene, the Countess learns from her Steward the circumstances in which Helena's love for Bertram and her plan to travel to Paris became known. The words she addresses to her informant recall very strongly similar episodes in other comedies.

You have discharg'd this honestly; keep it to yourself. Many likelihoods inform'd me of this before, which hung so tott'ring in the balance that I could neither believe nor misdoubt. Pray you leave me; stall this in your bosom; and I thank you for your honest care. I will speak with you further anon. (Iiii.117-22)

The Duke of Milan's speech in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Proteus makes known to him Silvia and Valentine's plot to elope, affords an apt comparison. The tone of outrage, the dark hints that the liaison had already been suspected, the insistence that only caution prevented the speaker from acting, the veiled promises of reward are all closely linked in the two passages:

Proteus, I thank thee for thine honest care,
Which to requite, command me while I live.
This love of theirs myself have often seen,
Haply when they have judg'd me fast asleep,
And oftentimes have purpos'd to forbid
Sir Valentine her company and my court;
But, fearing lest my jealous aim might err
And so, unworthily, disgrace the man,
A rashness that I ever yet have shunn'd,
I gave him gentle looks, thereby to find
That which thyself hast now disclos'd to me. (III.i.22-32)

Despite the familiar contents of the Countess's speech, though, a perceptive member of Shakespeare's first audience might have been struck by a curious reversal: these apparently outraged tones of conventional authority are not usually adopted by women in the comedies of the period, they are the prerogative of angry fathers. A traditional ingredient of love comedy is here given a faintly bizarre twist.

After this point the witty varying of traditional devices multiplies rapidly. There is a painful interview in the final section of the scene between Helena and the Countess in which the conventional confrontation between the young lover and his mistress's angry father is transformed into a conflict between two women. It is notable, furthermore, that it is in the course of this impassioned scene that we are given the first substantial hint that the play's

story is based on the tale of Giletta of Narbona.⁵

In the opening stages of the episode, the Countess displays the anger and outrage which are implied in her earlier words to the Steward. She torments Helena by insisting that she should be addressed as "mother". Her barbed comments finally elicit a veiled confession of love, whereupon she attacks her victim with a show of violence:

Yes, Helen, you might be my daughter-in-law.
 God shield you mean it not! daughter and mother
 So strive upon your pulse. What! pale again?
 My fear hath catch'd your fondness; now I see
 The myst'ry of your loneliness, and find
 Your salt tears' head. Now to all sense 'tis gross:
 You love my son. Invention is asham'd
 Against the proclamation of your passion
 To say thou dost not. Therefore tell me true;
 But tell me then, 'tis so; for, look, thy cheeks
 Confess it t'one to th'other, and thine eyes
 See it so grossly shown in thy behaviours
 That in their kind they speak it; only sin
 And hellish obstinacy tie thy tongue,
 That truth should be suspected. Speak, is't so?
 If it be so, you have wound a goodly clew;
 If it be not, forswear't; howe'er, I charge thee,
 As heaven shall work in me for thine avail,
 To tell me truly.

(I.iii.162-80)

The last of Helena's defences are overcome by this *tour-de-force* of mock indignation. She confesses her love and her intention of travelling to Paris. Thereupon Shakespeare pulls off a spectacular *coup-de-théâtre*: the Countess gives her blessing to the project and dismisses her with words of soothing comfort:

Why, Helen, thou shalt have my leave and love,
 Means and attendants, and my loving greetings
 To those of mine in court. I'll stay at home
 And pray God's blessing into thy attempt.
 Be gone tomorrow; and be sure of this,
 What I can help thee to, thou shalt not miss.

(I.iii.246-51)

"Be gone tomorrow" are the words with which young men are usually banished from the sight of their grieving mistresses; in this play, a young woman is peremptorily banished into happiness.

5 The link is, of course, established in I.i. (esp. line 25). But we must remember that we are dealing with a play; in such circumstances, the reference to Gerard de Narbon is hardly striking enough to establish a connection between the play and its source-story, no matter how familiar the latter might have been.

Far from objecting to the love of the young people, the older generation encourages it and aids its pursuit. At the end of its first act, *All's Well That Ends Well* stands the traditional world of Renaissance love comedy on its head.

The first act ends, thus, on a note of reversal, a flamboyant upsetting of established expectations. The theatrical effect is carefully engineered. Shakespeare leads us from an opening which, though unusual, seems firmly placed within the normal concerns of love comedy, to a showy peripeteia of the sort that commonly occurs at the end of a comedy. One avenue of conventional narrative development is, thus, firmly blocked; the question that remains is about the direction the play will subsequently take.

The opening of Act II may toy with the idea that the King will fulfil the traditional opposition to the young people's love; but this possibility, even if it is entertained, is not sustained for long. Instead, having witnessed the bargain between Helena and the King, and having been told of the miraculous cure, we come swiftly to the major incident in the first half of the play, the point of closest contact with the source-story, Bertram's rejection of Helena. Shakespeare is careful to keep Bertram's feelings largely hidden from the audience until the crucial moment when Helena chooses him as her reward. His reaction is brusque and uncompromising:

My wife, my liege! I shall beseech your highness,
In such a business give me leave to use
The help of mine own eyes.

(II.iii.106-8)

The attitude is not unreasonable; far from being an instance of his caddishness, Bertram's objection is in basic accord with the priorities of Renaissance love comedy. That genre declared its total opposition to the conveniently arranged marriage. It proposes the attractive (though, for the period, socially unacceptable) creed that marriages should be based on love. Because so much of the play's narrative and emotional capital is invested in the desirability of the union of Bertram and Helena, his refusal strikes us as ungenerous and even, perhaps, immoral. The effect is quite intentional: it is designed to mislead, as it misled critics like Johnson. Yet, although we do not applaud Bertram's action, we should recognize that he is adopting the conventional and quite proper attitudes of a young lover in reverse, as it were. He does not love this comedy's heroine, and at this stage at least, he argues implicitly for the primacy of love.

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Lest we miss this essential point (as some of the play's critics have, indeed, done) Bertram is made to state the same proposition again, in a different form, a few lines later. The King reminds him of Helena's great service, and he replies:

But follows it, my lord, to bring me down
Must answer for your raising? I know her well:
She had her breeding at my father's charge—
A poor physician's daughter my wife! Disdain
Rather corrupt me ever!

(II.iii.112-16)

Yet even in this, the play's characteristically multiple perspectives are seen to be operating. Bertram's plea that he should not be used to pay another's debts is striking enough, but it is combined here with snobbery and with a coarseness of expression—the speech contains an obvious pun on erection, and a possible *double-entendre* in "She had her breeding at my father's charge".

These curious reversals of comic roles and expectations, as well as the frequent presence of odd ambiguities in speeches where such ambiguities do not seem entirely appropriate, bring the play close to possessing a particular type of wit. Such wit—without basic "significance", philosophical or moral reference, existing, it seems, for itself and for the delight of its own fantastic convolutions—is not normally considered to be a facet of Shakespeare's art. Yet, increasingly, the middle episodes of *All's Well That Ends Well* assume the characteristics of such virtuoso, bravura drama, possibly trivial and flippant, but revelling in the possibilities of abstract linguistic and theatrical games.

One of the most notable instances of such concern in the play follows Bertram's point-blank refusal to marry Helena. In a long, sonorous passage, the King exercises his political and moral authority over Bertram—as sovereign and as guardian—to persuade the youth to obey the royal command. The first part of his argument states that virtue is independent of wealth or social rank:

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's young, wise, fair;
In these to nature she's immediate heir . . .

(II.iii.125-32)

Bertram's reply to these possibly startling sentiments from a figure

of authority in a comedy is "I cannot love her, nor will strive to do't" (l. 145); thereupon the King invokes his political authority to command obedience: the aphoristic couplets of the previous speech are replaced by direct blank-verse:

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.

(II.iii.158-66)

The traditional antagonists of Renaissance comedy have changed sides in this scene. Bertram appeals to the social and fiscal mores of parents and old people; the King uses the authoritative rhetoric of angry fathers and tyrannical dukes for directly opposite ends. We may profitably compare his speeches in this scene with the words with which the Duke of Milan banishes the hapless Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

Why, Phatheon—for thou art Merops' son—
Wilt thou aspire to guide the heavenly car,
And with thy daring folly burn the world?
Wilt thou reach stars because they shine on thee?
Go, base intruder, over-weening slave,
Bestow thy fawning smiles on equal mates;
And think my patience, more than thy desert,
Is privilege for thy departure hence.
Thank me for this more than for all the favours
Which, all too much, I have bestow'd on thee.
But if thou linger in my territories
Longer than swiftest expedition
Will give thee time to leave our royal court,
By heaven! my wrath shall far exceed the love
I ever bore my daughter or thyself.
Be gone; I will not hear thy vain excuse,
But, as thou lov'st thy life, make speed from hence.

(III.i.153-69)

The King of France employs, thus, the rhetoric of power; Bertram adopts the social and moral priorities, in part, of stock figures such as the Duke of Milan; yet he also uses the time-honoured pleas of young lovers in his insistence on the absoluteness of love. And just as the unfortunate lovers in comedy have no option but to obey the edict exiling them, so Bertram's opposition crumbles. With heavy sarcasm (which Johnson took to be cowardice) he accepts Helena:

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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 thought most base, is now
The praised of the king, who, so ennobled,
Is as 'twere born so.

(II.iii.167-73)

His next action, later in the scene, is to plot how to rid himself of his unwanted wife. He is assisted by Parolles, who now assumes a function similar to the witty servant that aids his master's marital ambitions. But, as in other instances, it is the reverse-image of the tradition that these two enact.

The climactic scene of Act II in which Bertram refuses Helena contains the major instances of the reversal and the inversion of traditional ingredients. The later scenes of the play are concerned with the unravelling of the situation, and consequently the spotlight comes to fall more on its narrative aspects. It is in this section of the play—but not, in effect, until this section—that Bertram acts in a wholly dishonourable and reprehensible manner. Until this point, his rather strange role in the play—an eminently reasonable refuser of an unwanted love who, nevertheless, uses certain social and financial criteria inappropriate to his youth—makes him into a curiously ambivalent character. He appears to be unsympathetic because he stands so much in the way of the play's basic drive, the success of Helena's endeavours. He sets himself up against powerful and eloquent authority which, in this play, represents the goal towards which the narrative aspires. And yet all this is merely one perspective in a play of multiple perspectives and of shifting focuses. Although critical tradition has singled out Bertram as representing a special difficulty, other characters, as well, strike surprising poses, even where their social status, age, authority, and above all, the rhetoric of their speeches identify them with certain traditional roles in comedy—the opposites, in fact, of the roles they play in this drama. Bertram is symptomatic of the play as a whole: it is a network of contradictory suggestions, strange *voltes-faces*, odd reversals of attitudes and expectations.

All's Well That Ends Well is, therefore, a series of variations on the traditions and conventions of a popular form of Renaissance comedy. This flamboyant, sophisticated facet of the play is further indicated by the unlikely overtones that centre upon the heroine's name. Helena's counterpart in the source-story is called Giletta; this is the only instance where a precedent given in the source is

not followed by Shakespeare.⁶ The reason for the change is not readily apparent: Helena as a name may be slightly more euphonic than Giletta, and it allows abbreviation into the more homely Helen, with obvious metrical advantages. Yet, whatever the reason for the change, Shakespeare obviously plays with the fact that his heroine bears the same name as the legendary adulteress, the cause of immense suffering and woe, Helen of Troy. This is clearly implied in the snatch of song (apparently taken from a popular, though otherwise unknown, ballad) sung by the Clown in I.iii., just as the Countess is ordering him to summon Helena into her presence:

Was this fair face the cause, quoth she,
 Why the Grecians sacked Troy?
 Fond done, done fond,
 Was this King Priam's joy?
 With that she sighed as she stood,
 With that she sighed as she stood,
 And gave this sentence then:
 Among nine bad if one be good,
 Among nine bad if one be good,
 There's yet one good in ten.

(I.iii.67-76)

The point of this ditty is somewhat obscure; it establishes, though, a seemingly irrelevant comparison between Helena and her mythological counterpart. The Countess claims that the Clown has "perverted" the ballad; it seems, therefore, that the comparison is a pointed one, yet we cannot pursue it far, since there is little affinity between Helena and Paris's paramour. This may, indeed, be the whole point, but if that is so, the insistence on the analogy may well seem excessive. Twice in the course of the confrontation between Helena and the Countess at the end of the scene, specific use is made by the Countess of the name of the French capital city, while she is worming out of Helena a confession of her love for Bertram.

Had you not lately an intent—speak truly—
 To go to Paris?

.....
 This was your motive
 For Paris was it? Speak.

(I.iii.213-14; 225-26)

6 There is some uncertainty about the version of Boccaccio's story actually used by Shakespeare. In all versions, though, the names of characters and of locations are substantially the same. Painter's version in *The Palace of Pleasure* is reprinted in G. Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, II (1958), 375-96 (the text of the first edition of Painter's compilation), and in an Appendix to Hunter's Arden text of the play (the text of the third edition).

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Helena's reply to the latter is:

My lord your son made me think of this;
Else Paris and the medicine and the king
Had from the conversation of my thoughts
Haply been absent then.

(Liii.227-30)

The references to Paris—city and Trojan prince—form a cluster in this climactic scene of Act I. Their point is, once more, not entirely clear; they may or may not be deliberate, yet the three references to Paris, the impassioned nature of the confrontation between Helena and the Countess, as well as the startling peripeteia with which the act concludes, all add a curious overtone to the concerns of this scene. A riddling link is established between Helena and her namesake which is not entirely logical or conducive to thematic or literal explication. No specific significance is pointed out; no character is made to comment on the oddly appropriate way in which Helena must travel to Paris to gain her heart's desire. Yet, in a strangely punning and off-handed way, these suggestions are implanted within this last scene of Act I.

There may well be some connection between this facet of the play and certain aspects of Helena's character and role. Her seemingly indecent statements in I.i. and the exchange with Parolles in that scene belong to the same order of dramatic reference and suggestion: a faint sense of impropriety very often centres on this virtuous heroine. Lafew, for instance, bringing her into the royal presence, says, not entirely aptly:

I am Cressid's uncle
That dare leave two together.

(II.i.96-97)

Helena, when attempting to persuade the King to undergo her cure, invokes the following penalties should she fail:

Tax of impudence,
A strumpet's boldness, a divulged shame,
Traduc'd by odious ballads; my maiden's name
Sear'd otherwise; ne worst of worst, extended
With vildest torture, let my life be ended.

(II.i.169-73)

Finally, we may note that Helena, the exemplar of chaste dedication, has to indulge in the shoddy bed-trick to regain her conjugal rights—she must come to Bertram in the dark and in silence, disguised, morally at least, as a woman of light virtue. When she hatches the plot at the end of Act III to capture Bertram, her sprightly confidence highlights, in an interesting way, her recognition of the potential immorality of the deed:

Why then tonight

Let us assay our plot, which, if it speed,
 Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
 And lawful meaning in a lawful act,
 Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact.
 But let's about it.⁷

(III.vii.43-48)

Criticism enters dangerous waters when dealing with such matters. There is no way of being certain whether or to what extent this apparently flippant series of comparisons between the sober and solemn young woman and her lewd mythological namesake represents anything intentional, functional or meaningful within the play. A similar difficulty surrounds the various suggestions that Helena's character is not, in fact, what it so obviously is. There is no denying, though, that such suggestions are present in the play, and that, far from being scattered in a random manner, they are concentrated in those parts of the structure where the heroine, her predicament and her fortunes receive especial emphasis. These suggestions are striking, even if it is not possible to ascribe specific significance to them.

We can be somewhat more certain about these matters if we take them in conjunction with another curious feature of the play's nomenclature. In none of the surviving accounts of the story is there a name given to the young woman Bertram attempts to seduce in Florence. In Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* she is described merely as "a gentlewoman, very poore and of small substance, nevertheless of right honest life & good report".⁸ Shakespeare chose to call this character Diana, giving her, thus, the name of the goddess of chastity, the patroness of the moon, and therefore of childbirth, and also of the plebeian classes. The name is, in many ways, appropriate: she is chaste and honourable, she heeds the warnings about Bertram's intentions and safeguards her virtue. She is the patroness, as it were, of Helena's pregnancy, since the bed-trick depends on her co-operation. She is certainly *déclassée*, if not actually plebeian. Yet certain improper suggestions are made

7 Though there is no editorial tradition to support it, it seems likely that this speech is corrupt and in need of emendation. Lines 45-46 should probably read:

Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed,
 And lawful meaning in a wicked act.

This reading, apart from clarifying the sense, brings out the riddling, gnomic nature of these lines. The error is a commonly encountered compositorial misreading.

8 *All's Well That Ends Well*, ed. Hunter, p. 149.

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to hover around her. There is probably not much significance to Bertram's attempting to seduce her; the role she plays in the final scene of the comedy, during Bertram's unmasking and humiliation, makes her subject, however, to abuse and vilification quite contrary to her moral stature or to the name of the deity she bears. She comes to the King with her riddling tale of having been ravished by Bertram, yet remaining still a virgin; claiming that Bertram believes himself guilty of betraying her, yet being innocent of the deed. She has, she says, his ring, even though she has not bought, stolen or borrowed it. Understandably, in the light of all this confusion, Lafew comments:

This woman's an easy glove, my lord; she goes off
and on at pleasure.

(V.iii.271-72)

The King remarks insultingly:

I think thee now some common customer.

(V.iii.280)

He orders her to prison. Matters are, naturally, sorted out, and Diana's honour is vouchsafed by Helena's "resurrection". This curious humiliation is, indeed, part of the ceremonial set of gestures that heralds the approach of the *cognitio*, the great event of Helena's return. Nevertheless, again in a way that seems not entirely connected with the play's central concerns, Diana is made to appear other than she is or than her name implies. There is, in other words, a playfulness in these odd suggestions which appear to be somewhat detached from the main dramatic and narrative interest. This is not the only instance where Diana is surrounded by such overtones or innuendoes. In the Florentine scenes, there is a minimal aura of disreputability about her, even though her virtue is never in doubt. We feel, fleetingly, that this innkeeper's daughter might play Doll Tearsheet to her mother's Mistress Quickly.

All's Well That Ends Well contains, therefore, odd jesting with the names of its two leading women characters. Their names suggest absolute contrast; yet they are in many ways quite similar. Both are virtuous and chaste; both are poor and of lowly status. They are resourceful and courageous. This affinity between them is further emphasized by the play's off-beat conclusion, when the King addresses Diana:

If thou beest yet a fresh uncropped flower
Choose thou thy husband and I'll pay thy dower;
For I can guess that by thy honest aid
Thou kept'st a wife herself, thyself a maid.

(V.iii.321-24)

Their function in the play, however, is sharply contrasted: one

seeks Bertram, the other strives to avoid him; Helena is pious, grave and solemn (in many ways the contrary of a comic heroine); Diana exhibits much more of the usual comic vitality. Through these similarities and contrasts, the two characters are interwoven in the play's complex fabric.

Diana's name surrounds Helena's at several crucial moments in the early part of the play, before Diana herself has entered the action. In I.iii. the Steward reports to the Countess how he overheard Helena's complaint:

Her matter was, she loved your son.
 Fortune, she said, was no goddess, that put such difference betwixt
 their two estates; Love no god, that would not extend his might only
 where qualities were level; [Diana no]⁹ queen of virgins, that would
 suffer her poor knight surpris'd without rescue in the first assault
 or ransom afterward. (I.iii.106-12)

Later in the scene, just before the Countess extracts from her a confession of love, Helena invokes the goddess's name (and unwittingly, that of her potential rival) in the course of an impassioned speech:

My dearest madam,
 Let not your hate encounter with my love,
 For loving where you do; but if yourself,
 Whose aged honour cites a virtuous youth,
 Did ever, in so true a flame of liking,
 Wish chastely and love dearly, that your Dian
 Was both herself and love—O then, give pity
 To her whose state is such that cannot choose
 But lend and give where she is sure to lose;
 That seeks not to find that her search implies,
 But riddle-like lives sweetly where she dies. (I.iii.202-12)

This passage contains a strange see-sawing of meaning and suggestion. Diana's name is first linked with the Countess, but by implication it is linked with Helena as well. For Diana to be the goddess of love and of chastity simultaneously is of course paradoxical in one sense, just as Helena's asseverations about her own self-effacement and resignation to being frustrated in her love curiously turn on themselves to suggest the opposite. Line 112 is usually glossed to read that Helena will be content to live in obscurity in Rossillion, attached to the Countess's household in a menial capacity, with all hopes of love frustrated. But we know, of course, that she cannot mean this, since we have heard, two scenes ago, of her

9 Theobald's conjectural emendation has been generally accepted. See Hunter's gloss in the Arden text.

strong determination to travel to Paris. Her words, in effect, echo this determination: "to die" is a famous pun which is clearly invoked here—it is through dying with Bertram in orgasm that she will be able to live sweetly, just as it is through giving and lending her virginity that she will suffer a loss which is the greatest of gains.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in II.iii., when embarking on her stately review of potential husbands, Helena should exclaim with greater than customary vivacity:

Now Dian, from thy altar do I fly,
And to imperial Love, that god most high
Do my sighs stream.

(II.iii.74-76)

Yet, ironically, it is to "Dian's altar" that she must fly to find "imperial Love"—for her destiny is to find fulfilment of her desires in a Florentine hostelry, in Diana's bed.

The view of the play which emerges from these considerations is rather different from its usual reputation. Instead of a gloomy, agonized examination of vice and chastity, love and selfishness, the play is a curiously "abstract" and formal structure which rings sophisticated changes on the usual ingredients of Renaissance love comedies. Bertram, who should be the ardent lover, willing to risk all for his mistress, insisting upon the primacy of love above all considerations of caste or property, adopts the point of view usually held by antagonistic old age. The elderly people in the play, and its figures of authority, encourage and aid the penniless girl (turned adventuress) in her pursuit of the unwilling male. She herself is surrounded by unlikely implications of unchastity and indecency; her rival, who appears, in the first instance, to be named as inappropriately as she is, proves to live up to the moral requirements of the goddess whose name she bears. The seemingly moral disapproval we have of the "hero" and his actions in the first half of the play prove, on examination, not to be based on morality at all. It is a play, in short, which constantly turns its own material and *a priori* assumptions inside out. The play is, therefore, a highly *literary* work; its basic impulse and much of its effect seems to depend not merely on extrapolated meanings, views of life, schemes of morality—the usual topics, in short, of literary exegesis—but on essentially "meaningless" patterns, suggestions, situations and events. In common with many examples of such art, it is concerned with the witty and unexpected treatment of commonplace or even trite material.

Boccaccio's story of Giletta of Narbona belongs to the type of

anecdote which celebrates the ingenuity of those young women who get their mates more through resourcefulness than by virtuous striving or dedication. His heroine is a highly practical person. Her use of her father's medical skill has none of the mysteriousness and other-worldliness that surround Helena's practices. Once she gains Beltramo in marriage, she hurries back to Rossiglione to attend to the county's chaotic economy. When her husband defects, she sets out in pursuit of him well provided with means and attendants; Helena embarks on a self-effacing pilgrimage, avoiding her home and her husband to ensure his happiness. In short, Helena and Giletta are completely antithetical in all but narrative function. Helena is modest and pious (though in a way courageous and even aggressive); her love for Bertram is so great that she is willing to sacrifice herself for his well-being once she learns the extent of his disdain. She attempts to regain her rights only when she stumbles upon him—seemingly with the aid of Providence—in Florence. Moreover, her social and financial inferiority to Bertram is stressed in the early scenes of the play. Giletta, by contrast, is a wealthy young woman who was "nourished and brought up" with Beltramo more or less as an equal.

It would seem that Shakespeare was attracted to this rather commonplace tale because it afforded opportunities for a spectacular virtuoso display of dramatic and theatrical cunning. Pains are taken to tease out every possibility of philosophical or even religious significance from these seemingly trivial ingredients. There is a flirtation with all kinds of arcane and exotic suggestions: Helena's great speeches in Act II (when she pleads with the King to undergo her cure) are cast in the heightened and idealized terms of the magical medicine of Renaissance Platonism. The basic paradox of her fortunes—that she should meet only frustration when actively seeking her desires, and that she should succeed precisely where she has become passive and "contemplative"—suggest strong religious and philosophical overtones. Bertram's rescue from vice has itself been seen as incorporating transcendental Christian mysteries. Yet all these possibilities—which seem to strain at the limits of comedy—are surrounded by the sense of the play as a witty exercise: how to tell the well-known tale of the pugnacious maiden and the randy youth in such a way that the most inappropriate complexities and intellectual overtones are implicit in the telling.

All's Well That Ends Well is not merely or purely such an exercise; its stance is not completely reductive; it does more than

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mock the solemnities which contemporary criticism has been so ready to discover in it. It is not, in short, a *jeu d'esprit* entirely devoid of meaning or "seriousness". But it is not the anti-comedy, moral tract, or instance of Shakespeare's dissatisfaction with comic possibilities that criticism has often insisted on. In the manner of much comic art, this is a strikingly multi-faceted, complex play. It contains a heterogeneous mixture of interests which are difficult to comprehend within a conventional critical "reading". The sublime and the trivial rub shoulders in such works. As in other Shakespearian comedies, the moments of greatest seriousness exist side by side with clowning, jesting and levity. The two facets of the world are, obviously, complementary, yet it is difficult, if not impossible, to state precisely how they complement each other. The comic effect, and indeed, the particular status and power of comedy depend on this rich and satisfying simultaneity of the dewy-eyed and the foolish. The profound pressures towards mysticism evident in some of the later plays are throughout accompanied by seemingly inappropriate sports: the comic impulse is towards inclusiveness, the acknowledgement of all facets of life, even of things of darkness, in the ceremonial, stylized finale of a play.

All's Well That Ends Well is a particularly striking and in many ways quite daring instance of this aspect of comic drama. It is perhaps more extreme than other plays because its mixture of heterogeneous material emerges so much from conventional dramatic ingredients. It is, possibly, as much of an "in-joke" as *Love's Labour's Lost*. As in that earlier play, but in a more brittle manner, the characteristic concerns, expressions and events of comic theatre become actual terms within the structure of the particular play: the work of art seems to make statements of greater or lesser profundity or import; the play, simultaneously, insists that it is all merely a play, an entertainment.

It is possible to argue that *All's Well That Ends Well* does not combine its multifaceted material into a satisfying, coherent whole. Perhaps it is too "tricksy" for its own good. But it represents, together with *Measure for Measure* (another notoriously "difficult" play), an extraordinary broadening of the effects and ingredients that a comedy can sustain. These virtuoso pieces of stunning sleight-of-hand prepare the way for the equally complex, multi-faceted but infinitely more harmonious and less flamboyant world of *The Winter's Tale*, the crown of all comedies.