THE OXFORD SHAKESPEARE

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

All's Well that Ends Well

Edited by
SUSAN SNYDER

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PREFACE

I AM fortunate to have first encountered *All's Well that Ends Well* not as a 'problem' text to be puzzled over in a classroom, but as compelling stage drama. Noël Willman's 1955 production, which I saw twice as a student in Stratford, involved me thoroughly as an enactment of clashing human desires. This initial impression has remained the primary context for my later more scholarly explorations into this play, and I am grateful for the illumination provided by that production and later those of John Houseman (1959) and Elijah Moshinsky (1980). Most recently, the Royal Shakespeare Company's nuanced, haunting *All's Well* directed by Trevor Nunn (1981–2) was for me a magical theatrical event in both London and New York. For my understanding of the play's stage fortunes beyond my own experience, I owe a great deal to the studies of Joseph Price and J. L. Styan.

My debt to previous editors is equally important in a different way. I have been guided and enlightened in my own work by many predecessors, especially G. K. Hunter. His learned and elegantly sensible edition of *All's Well* in the new Arden series (1959) is a hard act to follow.

I did most of the work for this edition at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, and the Furness Shakespeare Library at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I am grateful to both institutions, and to individuals in them who provided thoughtful assistance at every turn: at the Folger Nati Krivatsy, Betsy Walsh, and the Reading Room staff, and at the Furness curator Georgianna Ziegler, who is a staff all by herself. For my term appointment as Eugene M. Lang Research Professor, which facilitated research at a crucial period, I am happy to record my gratitude to Swarthmore College, which awarded the chair, and to its donor Gene Lang.

Friends and colleagues at the Folger, Swarthmore, and Penn, as well as others buttonholed at meetings of the North American and International Shakespeare associations, have been generous with encouragement and advice on everything

from fistulas to speech prefixes. In particular, I appreciate Gary Taylor's sharing with me his own reasonings in the process of editing *All's Well* for the Oxford 1986 *Complete Works*. In their separate capacities, general editor Stanley Wells and copy editor Christine Buckley have been models of judgement and tact. If Heminge, Condell, Jaggard, and those alphabetical compositors had had such assistance, Shakespeare editors would long since have had to look elsewhere for employment. Christine also scouted illustrations from the Nunn production, which I hope was more fun for her than copy-editing.

Lastly, I thank Leighton Whitaker for helping me through the times when all was cheerless, dark, and deadly.

<div style="text-align: right;">SUSAN SNYDER</div>

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INTRODUCTION

From Boccaccio to Shakespeare

SCHOLARS generally agree that Shakespeare's ultimate source for the situation and plot of *All's Well that Ends Well* was the ninth story of the Third Day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. He probably knew it through the translation of William Painter, which appeared in *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566, 1569, 1575) as the thirty-eighth novel.[1]

Painter summarizes the story as follows:

> Giletta, a physician's daughter of Narbonne, healed the French king of a fistula, for reward whereof she demanded Beltramo, Count of Roussillon, to husband. The Count, being married against his will, for despite fled to Florence, and loved another. Giletta, his wife, by policy found means to lie with her husband in place of his lover, and was begotten with child of two sons; which known to her husband, he received her again, and afterwards he lived in great honour and felicity.[2]

The tale proceeds in similarly brisk and straightforward fashion. Howard C. Cole has discerned a satiric subtext in Boccaccio's Third Day, based on characters in several tales who use religious practice as a means of achieving their sexual desires and present their clever contrivances as acts of

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[1] H. G. Wright ('How Did Shakespeare Come to Know the "Decameron"?' *MLR*, 50 (1955), 45–8) argues that Shakespeare may have used a French translation by Antoine le Maçon (Paris, 1545, with seventeen subsequent printings). His term 'Senoys' for the Sienese (Boccaccio's *Sanesi*) points to a French intermediary, as perhaps do his forms 'Bertram' and 'Gerard de Narbon'. On the other hand, Painter also has 'Senois', and while he gives the Italian forms 'Beltramo' for the hero and 'Gerardo of Narbona' for Helen's father, Shakespeare might easily have Frenchified the names himself. Wright's case is not strong enough to hold against the probability that Shakespeare would use a popular English version rather than a less widely available one in French. As G. K. Hunter observes, he may have used both. Since Wright has also shown ('The Indebtedness of Painter's Translations from Boccaccio in *The Palace of Pleasure* to the French Version of Le Maçon', *MLR*, 46 (1951), 431–5) that Painter used le Maçon's *Decameron* when making his version, and since no one has advanced any detailed influence of one or the other text on *All's Well*, the question is not central.

[2] See Appendix E.

divine intervention.[1] But neither phenomenon is so wide-spread as to characterize the Third Day as a whole and thus to tarnish by association, as Cole wishes, Giletta's 'miraculous' cure of the King and her wearing of pilgrim's garb in pursuing Beltramo to Florence. One suspects that Cole would not have detected such a preponderance of religious hypocrisy in Boccaccio if he had not started by trying to resolve the tangles of Shakespeare's much more problematic text.

By decree of the day's queen, Neifile, the tales of the Third Day concern human initiative: they focus on people who through their own efforts obtained something they desired very much, or got back something they had lost. If there is a common theme in this section of the *Decameron* more specific than the announced one, it is the narrowing of 'efforts' to 'stratagems', the focus on how the protagonists win out *through their ingenuity* against their adversaries' stupidity, self-preoccupation, and conventional expectations. The ninth story is propelled by Giletta's clever devices in overcoming external obstacles to marriage with Beltramo. When the King awards him to her in recompense for his cure, Beltramo's vehement objection is conceived equally externally, based entirely on her inferior social position. Giletta thus sets out to prove herself worthy of him, first by efficiently running his estates and winning the affection of his subjects, and then by inventing a ruse to obtain his ancestral ring and become pregnant by him. When she returns with the ring, and with twin sons who look just like their father, the effect is of a second job interview in which the rejected applicant has come back with stronger credentials. Giletta has demonstrated her success in the chief functions of a countess, keeping the estates in order and bearing male heirs. Accepting her as his wife will please Beltramo's subjects as well as honour his promise. In addition, there is gratification for his ego in Giletta's persistent pursuit, as well as in the replication of himself in their two sons, chips off the old block. It follows naturally in such a context that when this excellent bargain is offered to him again he takes it up, impressed by his wife's

[1] Cole, *The 'All's Well' Story from Boccaccio to Shakespeare* (Urbana, Ill., 1981), ch. 2.

'constant mind and good wit' (Appendix E, p. 232). Boccaccio goes below the plot surface just enough to ground Beltramo's change of heart believably in egotism, political expedience, and appreciation of a clever helpmeet. In his treatment the story prompts no deeper questions.

But in Shakespeare's dramatization, the same actions are handled so as to break down Boccaccio's neat closure and at several points to generate uneasy questioning. The straightforward story of a clever woman who surmounts obstacles to get what she wants is complicated by admixtures of social realism, by disquieting inversions of the fairy-tale pattern, and by a more intimate view of the emotions and reactions of both Helen[1] as pursuing maiden and Bertram as reluctant bridegroom. Shakespeare added to the main action, the heroine's achieving of her husband, a sub-plot involving another character without rank, Paroles. The elaborate pretensions of this talkative poseur, observed with biting mockery by Lafeu, and the equally elaborate hoax by which he is finally shown up provide most of the play's comic appeal; on-stage they are genuinely funny, especially the comeuppance scene with its menacing nonsense-language. By introducing Paroles into the main action Shakespeare sets against Helen's efforts to win and hold Bertram a strong counter-force luring him toward male bonding and military adventure. But posing this fraudulent figure in structural parallel to the heroine, as another middle-class character aspiring to intimacy with the noble Bertram, may also open the way to interpretation of Helen as another kind of unscrupulous social climber.

Shakespeare inserted several older characters into the action whose principal function seems to be to dispose the audience in Helen's favour by their unanimous approval of her, and thus to defuse any negative reactions when she transgresses class and gender conventions. The Countess of Roussillon and Lafeu are his creations (as is the Clown, whose association with Bertram's father links him with the older generation); the King, and to a lesser degree the Widow of Florence, are expanded and particularized from their prototypes in

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[1] For the form of Helen's name, see general note to The Persons of the Play.

1. Two older characters added by Shakespeare to his source story: after sharing some foolery, the Countess (Peggy Ashcroft) in Trevor Nunn's 1981 production sends a message to Helen by the Clown (Geoffrey Hutchings).

2. A captive Paroles (Douglas Campbell) and his interrogators (Eric House, Peter Mews, Robert Goodier), in World War II gear: production directed by Tyrone Guthrie, Stratford, Ontario, 1953.

Boccaccio's story; even the dead fathers, the old Count of Roussillon and the fabled physician Gérard de Narbonne, are present by frequent recollection in Shakespeare's play as they are not in the source. The sanction of the Countess and the King is especially important in promoting Helen's worthiness in the eyes of the audience; yet when the elder authority-figures who appear in the play vote for merit over rank and support rather than thwart the young heroine's wishes in marriage, they subvert the familiar fairy-tale formula that is the backbone of the play, by failing to play their traditional roles as blocking parents. More than that, their prominence in the script makes for more complexity in general, as they meditate on their own youth and on the difficulties of ageing, of 'holding on and letting go'.[1] However focused they are on the doings of the young, they nevertheless go considerably beyond functional demands to project a composite sense of a whole generation in passage: their backward orientation to long-ago love, achievement, and status, in counterpoint with the impatient forward thrust of the young, informs the strains of intergenerational relations in the play.

Shakespeare also added to Boccaccio's archetypal story-line elements that, in Bullough's fastidious formulation, 'bring the whole thing into close contact with the seamier side of Tudor life':[2] among characters, not only Paroles the posturing pseudo-courtier but the 'foul-mouthed and calumnious' Clown (1.3.56–7). Bertram is portrayed more harshly than his prototype Beltramo: as a callow snob with Helen, as an eager but crass seducer with Diana, as a dupe lacking even ordinary discernment with the tinsel Paroles whom everyone else quickly sees through. There is no counterpart in Boccaccio for Bertram's repellent lies and cowardly evasions in the play's last scene.

In the larger milieu, unromantic social realities of Early Modern Europe jostle against the fairy-tale elements: a

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[1] Ruth Nevo, 'Motive and Meaning in *All's Well that Ends Well*', in *'Fanned and Winnowed Opinions': Shakespearean Essays Presented to Harold Jenkins*, ed. John W. Mahon and Thomas A. Pendleton (London and New York, 1987), 26–51; p. 30.

[2] Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. ii (London and New York, 1958), p. 380.

remarkably unheroic petty war, an ugly exposure of class prejudice in marriage, a side glance at the abuses of royal wardship, even unexpected invocations of an exchange system based not on moral absolutes—inner worth or the pledged word commanding loyalty—but on money. Paroles advises Helen to make the most of her virginity while it is still 'vendible' (1.1.157) and tells Diana to insist on payment in advance for her sexual favours; Helen herself when engineering the bed-substitution wins the Widow's necessary co-operation not through the power of virtue alone but with gold.[1]

In dramatizing the tale of the clever wench, then, Shakespeare also deconstructs it. He brings to the surface its latent tensions by getting inside awkward moments rather than simply gliding over them (how would a nobleman react when handed over in marriage to a commoner woman? how would it feel to receive the lovemaking your husband means for another woman?), and also by subjecting some of the plot-mechanisms to scrutiny (wouldn't a large bribe make it more probable that the Widow would help a strange woman in a sexual deception?). In his hands Boccaccio's more or less homogeneous story-line thus becomes a weave of disparate threads. Like the 'web of our life' in a line from the text which critics delight in applying to the play as a whole, it is 'a mingled yarn' (4.3.71). But before we turn away from the question of source material to examine those threads more closely, two other probable influences on *All's Well that Ends Well* deserve mention. One is the unhappy experience of inequalities in love, apparently Shakespeare's own, set forth in the Sonnets. I discuss this theory and its implications in a separate section below. The other is Erasmus' colloquy titled 'Proci et puellae', a lively dialogue between a girl and her suitor. As the *Colloquia* was a standard school text, the Latin original may well have been familiar to Shakespeare, but it was also available in the English translation of Nicholas Leigh

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[1] The offer of payment for the Florentine gentlewoman's help occurs in Painter's story of Giletta, but it is de-emphasized there by stress on her 'noble heart' and by her later assertion that she gave her assistance 'not for hope of reward but because it appertained to her by well doing so to do' (Appendix E, pp. 230, 231). Shakespeare omits these ennobling details.

(*A Modest Mean to Marriage*, 1568), of which excerpts appear in this volume as Appendix F.

An accumulation of echoes and common contexts in *All's Well,* especially its first act, suggests that this dialogue was fresh in Shakespeare's mind when he was writing his play. G. K. Hunter, glossing the first scene in the Arden edition, notes that the opening exchange between Paroles and Helen— 'Save you, fair queen. | And you, monarch' (1.1.108–9)— may recall 'I shall be to you a king, and you shall be to me a queen' (Appendix F, p. 236), and that Paroles (1.1.128 ff.) and Erasmus' Pamphilus (p. 235) use the same argument, that virginity must be lost to produce virgins. Peggy M. Simonds[1] adds more parallels. The 'withered pear' featured in Paroles' case against virginity (1.1.163–5) seems to draw on 'old wrinkled maid' in the parallel passage from Erasmus (p. 235), which also occurs in a context of lost fruit. His paradox that virgins like men who do not like virginity (1.1.154–5) recalls the remark of Erasmus' Maria that 'Virginity would seem always to be taken with violence—yea, though sometime we love the party most earnestly' (p. 238).[2] In its play with the idea that Maria can raise Pamphilus from the dead (p. 233), by means medicinal ('the herb *Panaces*') or sexual ('a light thing'), the dialogue anticipates Shakespeare's treatment of Helen's cure of the King of France, which gathers in both notions. Maria's reminder to Pamphilus that his suit is in its early days—'Your harvest is as yet but in the green blade' (p. 239)—also finds an echo in *All's Well,* when the Countess tries to excuse Bertram's sins on grounds of his youth: 'I beseech your majesty to make it | Natural rebellion done i'th' blade of youth' (5.3.5–6).

Given the connection thus strongly indicated by close parallels, I think it likely that other features of the dialogue were suggestive for Shakespeare as well. It invokes Mars in the early exchanges, and later Venus, presenting the goddess as herself a powerful warrior. Shakespeare structures Bertram's

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[1] 'Sacred and Sexual Motifs in *All's Well that Ends Well*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 42 (1989), 33–59.

[2] Hunter perhaps has this passage in mind when in glossing Paroles' paradox he refers to a parallel in Erasmus, though he quotes the less relevant '*violanda virginitas, ut discatur*'.

choice, to run away from the marriage bed and fight in the wars, in terms of the traditional opposition between Mars and Venus.[1] His Helen, following the less familiar paradox also sketched by Erasmus, invokes the powerful warrior-Venus when she complains of being suddenly taken captive by love, 'surprised without rescue in the first assault or ransom afterward' (1.3.115–16). The elements of her grievance against Cupid, who seems to observe class distinctions by wounding her but not her high-born beloved (1.3.113–14), are also anticipated in the same Erasmus passage, when Pamphilus warns Maria that a rebuffed Cupid may make her fall in love with someone beneath her and then fail to make the loved one reciprocate (p. 234). Later in the same scene of *All's Well*, when Helen describes her ever-hopeless, ever-desiring state in terms of a sieve perpetually taking in water and losing it, her image calls up the contrasting figure of the Vestal Virgin Tuccia, who proved her chastity when it was challenged by carrying water in a sieve; this allusion too was perhaps suggested by the Erasmian dialogue, especially if Shakespeare was remembering the Latin original in which Maria refers to a vestal virgin in the context of forbidden love.[2]

The Mingled Yarn

Whether prompted by Erasmus or not, the archetypes of myth and legend provide further dimensions to *All's Well*, already an unstable collocation of different discourses. Perhaps the most dramatic clash between romantic wish-fulfilment and brutal social fact comes in Act 2 Scene 3, when the King rewards Helen for curing his near-fatal illness by allowing her to choose a husband from among his wards, and Bertram angrily rejects both the low-born bride and the high-handed gesture of giving him away. He violently disrupts the whole familiar scenario in which humble merit wins its heart's desire.

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[1] See 2.3.280–4, 3.2.36–42, and especially 3.3.8–11. I explore this opposition in my article 'Naming Names in *All's Well that Ends Well*', *SQ*, 43 (1992), 265–79.

[2] 'Quid si iuvenis amet inconcessam, hoc est, uxorem alienam aut virginem Vestalem?', *Opera omnia* (Amsterdam, 1972), i. 3. 280; the *Modest Mean* translates '*virginem Vestalem*' as 'a virgin which hath professed continual chastity'.