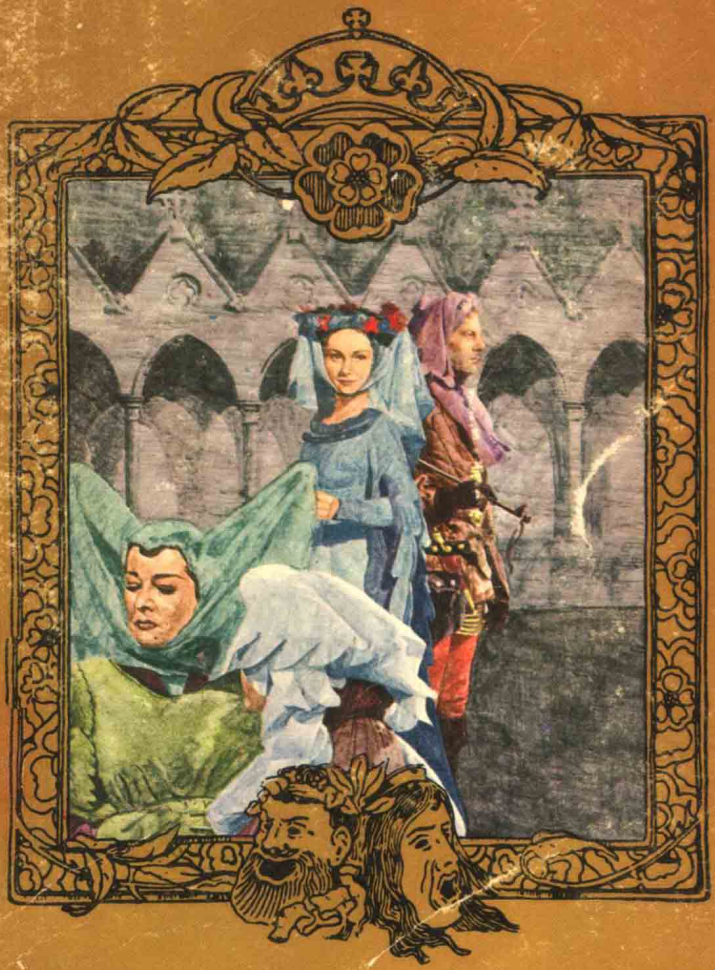
William Shakespeare

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL



Dr. Beryl Rowland, *Introduction* / Lucy M. Fitzpatrick, *Notes*

AIRMONT SHAKESPEARE CLASSICS SERIES

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

By

William Shakespeare

General Introduction by Dr David G Pitt

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare: His Life, Times, and Theatre

HIS LIFE

The world's greatest poet and playwright was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in the year 1564. An entry in the *Stratford Parish Register* gives his baptismal date as April 26. Since children were usually baptized two or three days after birth, it is reasonable to assume that he was born on or about April 23—an appropriate day, being the feast of St. George, the patron saint of England.

His father, John Shakespeare, was a glover and dealer in wool and farm products, who had moved to Stratford from Snitterfield, four miles distant, some time before 1552. During his early years in Stratford his business prospered, enabling him to acquire substantial property and to take his place among the more considerable citizens of the town. In 1557 he married Mary, daughter of Robert Arden, a wealthy landowner of Wilmcote, not far from Stratford. Two daughters were born to them before William's birth, but both died in infancy. William was thus their third child, though the eldest of those who survived infancy. After him were born Gilbert, Joan, Anne, Richard, and Edmund.

Very little is positively known about Shakespeare's boyhood and education. We know that for some years after William's birth his father's rise in Stratford society and municipal affairs continued. Many local offices came to him in rapid succession: ale-taster, burgess, assessor of fines, chamberlain, high bailiff, alderman, and chief alderman in 1571. As the son of a man of such eminence in Stratford, Shakespeare undoubtedly attended the local Grammar School. This he was entitled to do free of charge, his father being a town councilor. It is probable that he covered the usual Elizabethan curriculum: an "A B C book," the catechism in Latin and English, Latin grammar, the translation of Latin authors, and perhaps some Greek grammar and translation as well. But family circumstances appear to have curtailed his formal education before it was complete. About the year 1578, having gone heavily into debt, John Shakespeare lost two large farms inherited by his wife from her father. Thereafter, he was involved in a series of lawsuits, and lost his post on the Stratford town council. Matters got steadily worse for him, until finally, in 1586, he was declared a bankrupt.

In 1852, in the midst of his father's legal and financial crises—Shakespeare married Anne, daughter of Richard Hathaway (recently deceased) of the village of Shottery near Stratford. The *Episcopal Register* for the Diocese of Worcester contains their marriage record, dated November 28, 1582; he was then in his eighteenth year, his wife in her twenty-sixth. On May 26 of the following year the

Stratford Parish Register recorded the baptism of their first child, Susanna; and on February 2, 1585, the baptism of a twin son and daughter named Hamnet and Judith.

How Shakespeare supported his family, how long he continued to live in Stratford, we do not know for certain.

But however he may have occupied himself in the interim, we know that by 1592 he was already a budding actor and playwright in London. In that year Robert Greene in his autobiographical pamphlet *A Groatsworth of Wit*, referring to the young actors and menders of old plays who were, it seemed to him, gaining undeserved glory from the labours of their betters (both by acting their plays and by rewriting them), wrote as follows:

> Yes trust them not: for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers heart, wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute *Johannes factotum*, is in his owne conceit the onely Shakescene in a countrey.

"Shakescene" is clearly Shakespeare. The phrase "upstart Crow" probably refers to his country origins and his lack of university education. "Beautified with our feathers" probably means that he uses the older playwrights' words for his own aggrandisement either in plays in which he acts or in those he writes himself. "Tygers heart wrapt in a Players hyde" is a parody of a line in III *Henry VI*, one of the earliest plays ascribed to Shakespeare. And the Latin phrase *Johannes factotum*, meaning Jack-of-all-trades, suggests that he was at this time engaged in all sorts of theatrical jobs: actor, poet, playwright, and perhaps manager as well.

Greene died shortly after making this scurrilous attack on the young upstart from Stratford, and so escaped the resentment of those he had insulted. But Henry Chettle, himself a minor dramatist, who had prepared Greene's manuscript for the printer, in his *Kind-Harts Dreame* (1592), apologized to Shakespeare for his share in the offence:

> I am as sory as if the originall fault had beene my fault, because my selfe have seene his demeanor no lesse civill, than he excelent in the qualitie he professes: Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approoves his Art.

Thus, in a very indirect manner and because of an attack upon him by an irascible dying man, we learn that Shakespeare at this time was in fact held in high regard by "divers of worship," that is, by many of high birth, as an upright, honest young man of pleasant manners and manifest skill as actor, poet, and playwright.

Although Shakespeare by 1593 had written, or written parts of, some five or six plays, it was as a non-dramatic poet that he first appeared in print. *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, long narrative poems, both bearing Shakespeare's name, were published in 1593 and 1594 respectively. But thereafter for the next twenty years he wrote almost nothing but drama. Long before his death in 1616,

his name held such magic for the public that merely to print it on the title page of any play assured its popular acclaim. The "upstart Crow" had come a long way since 1592.

He had come a long way, too, from the economic straits that may well have driven him to London many years before. We know, for example, from the records of tax assessments that by 1596 Shakespeare was already fairly well-to-do. But his life during this time was not quite unclouded. His only son, Hamnet, died in 1596 at the age of eleven years, his father in 1601, and his mother in 1608. All three were buried in Stratford. More happily he saw, in 1607, the marriage of his daughter Susanna to Dr. John Hall, an eminent physician of Stratford, and, in the following year, the baptism of his granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall.

Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford appears to have been gradual, but by 1613, if not earlier, he seems to have settled there, though he still went up to London occasionally. On March 25, apparently already ill, Shakespeare revised and signed his will, among other bequests leaving to his wife his "second best bed with the furniture." A month later he was dead, dying on his fifty-second birthday, April 23, 1616. He was buried in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford, on April 26.

HIS TIMES

Shakespeare lived during the English Renaissance, that age of transition that links the Mediaeval and the Modern world. Inheriting the rich traditions of the Middle Ages in art, learning, religion, and politics, rediscovering the great legacies of classical culture, the men of the Renaissance went on to new and magnificent achievements in every phase of human endeavour. No other period in history saw such varied and prolific development and expansion. And the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), Shakespeare's age, was the High Renaissance in England.

During the Middle Ages theology had dominated education, but now the language, literature, and philosophy of the ancient world, the practical arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and training in morals, manners, and gymnastics assumed the major roles in both school and university—in other words, an education that fitted one for life in the world here and now replaced one that looked rather to the life hereafter. Not that the spiritual culture of man was neglected. Indeed, it took on a new significance, for as life in this world acquired new meaning and value, religion assumed new functions, and new vitality to perform them, as the bond between the Creator and a new kind of creation.

It was, of course, the old creation—man and nature—but it was undergoing great changes. The Mediaeval view of man was generally not an exalted one. It saw him as more or less depraved, fallen from Grace as a result of Adam's sin; and the things of this world, which was also "fallen," as of little value in terms of his salvation. Natural life was thought of mainly as a preparation for man's entry into Eternity. But Renaissance thought soon began to rehabilitate man, nature, and the things of this life. Without denying man's need

for Grace and the value of the means of salvation provided by the Church, men came gradually to accept the idea that there were "goods," values, "innocent delights" to be had in the world here and now, and that God had given them for man to enjoy.

HIS THEATRE

There were many playhouses in Shakespeare's London. The first was built in 1576 by James Burbage and was called the *Theatre*. It was built like an arena, with a movable platform at one end, and had no seats in the pit, but had benches in the galleries that surrounded it. It was built of wood, and cost about £200. Other famous playhouses of Shakespeare's time included the Curtain, the Bull, the Rose, the Swan, the Fortune, and, most famous of them all, the Globe. It was built in 1599 by the sons of James Burbage, and it was here that most of Shakespeare's plays were performed. Since more is known about the Globe than most of the others, I shall use it as the basis of the brief account that follows of the Elizabethan playhouse.

Open to the sky, somewhat like a modern football or baseball stadium, though much smaller, it had three tiers of galleries surrounding the central "yard" or pit, and a narrow roof over the top gallery. But most interesting from our viewpoint was the stage—or rather *stages*—which was very different from that of most modern theatres. These have the familiar "picture-frame" stage: a raised platform at one end of the auditorium, framed by curtains and footlights, and viewed only from the front like a picture. Shakespeare's stage was very different.

The main stage, or *apron* as it was called, jutted well out into the pit, and did not extend all the way across from side to side. There was an area on either side for patrons to sit or stand in, so that actors performing on the apron could be viewed from three sides instead of one. In addition, there was an inner stage, a narrow rectangular recess let into the wall behind the main stage. When not in use it could be closed by a curtain drawn across in front; when open it could be used for interior scenes, arbor scenes, tomb and anteroom scenes and the like. On either side of this inner stage were doors through which the main stage was entered. Besides the inner and outer stages, there were no fewer than four other areas where the action of the play, or parts of it, might be performed. Immediately above the inner stage, and corresponding to it in size and shape, was another room with its front exposed. This was used for upstairs scenes, or for storage when not otherwise in use. In front of this was a narrow railed gallery, which could be used for balcony scenes, or ones requiring the walls of a castle or the ramparts of a fortress. On either side of it and on the same level was a window-stage, so-called because it consisted of a small balcony enclosed by windows that opened on hinges. This permitted actors to stand inside and speak from the open windows to others on the main stage below.

Very little in the way of scenery and backdrops was used. The dramatist's words and the imagination of the audience supplied the lack of scenery. Usually a few standard stage props were on hand: trestles and boards to form a table, benches and chairs, flagons, an

altar, artificial trees, weapons, a man's severed head, and a few other items. Costumes were usually elaborate, though no attempt was made to reproduce the dress of the time and place portrayed in the play.

Play production in Shakespeare's time was clearly very different from that of ours, but we need have no doubts about the audience's response to what they saw and heard on stage. They came, they saw, and the dramatist conquered, for they kept coming back for more and more. And despite the opposition that the theatre encountered from Puritans and others, who thought it the instrument of Satan, the theatre in Shakespeare's time flourished as one of the supreme glories of a glorious age.

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INTRODUCTION
All's Well That Ends Well

DATE AND SOURCE OF THE PLAY

All's Well That Ends Well is about a clever girl who, as a reward for healing the King of an apparently incurable disease, gets herself married to an unwilling and profligate young nobleman. Her new husband refuses to sleep with her until she has conceived a child by him, and his impossible condition is fulfilled when, without his knowledge, she substitutes herself for a young woman whom he intends to seduce.

This improbable tale has its origins in both folktale and myth,—in the story of the Clever Peasant Girl who, after she has passed all the tests at the royal court, marries the man of her choice, and in the ancient motif of the Dying King whose restoration can only be achieved by miraculous means. Its more immediate source was in a collection of tales printed in 1566, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, where the following synopsis introduces the *novella* proper:

> Giletta a Phisitions daughter of Narbon, healed the French King of a Fistula, for reward whereof she demaunded Beltramo Counte of Rossiglione to husband. The Counte being maried against his will, for despite fled to Florence, and loved another. Giletta his wife, by pollicie founde means to lye with her husbande, in place of his lover, and was begotten with childe of two sonnes: which knowen to her husband, he received her againe, and afterwards he lived in great honour and felicitie.

Shakespeare may also have known a French version by Antoine le Maçon, and both Painter and le Maçon followed fairly closely the tale as it appeared in the *Decameron*.

The date of the play is uncertain. Francis Meres in 1598 referred

to a play by Shakespeare entitled *Love's Labours Wonne* and the idea that this was an early working of *All's Well* persisted until this century without any firm evidence to support it. Attempts to date the play on internal historical allusions, borrowings from contemporary works, similarities in mood, theme, action or treatment of characters between it and other plays by Shakespeare, or on the basis of language and metrical patterns have proved inconclusive. The style of *All's Well* is uneven; the tone hovers uneasily between romance and realism. But these variations may be the result of mood and of irreconcilable interests, and are not necessarily occasioned by various dates of composition. In the latest Arden edition, G. K. Hunter gives a tentative dating of *All's Well* as being 1603–4, largely because of the play's affinities with *Measure for Measure*. The latter is, however, dramatically and stylistically, a far richer and more sophisticated drama. There is no record of a contemporary performance.

THEME, STRUCTURE AND CHARACTERS

In Boccaccio's *Decameron* this tale was one of the stories of the third day, intended to illustrate a set theme: the pursuit of a desired object and its recovery when lost. Translated into drama, it has obvious limitations. The hero's reluctance to be forced into marriage even to such a beautiful girl as Helena might be understandable, but both the condition which the young man imposes on his wife and the means whereby it is fulfilled seem unpalatable.

The problems of moral alignment are enhanced rather than minimized by Shakespeare's alterations. In the source, the man whom the heroine chooses is socially so much her superior that even the King is reluctant to approve. In Shakespeare's version, the King minimizes the importance of any social discrepancy; Bertram's subsequent dishonesty, his callous rejection of the woman whom he thinks he has seduced are new; Bertram's *affaire* seems more reprehensible in that the ring which he barters for his pleasure is not simply an item of value but the very symbol of the honor of his ancient family. Shakespeare also compresses the time of the action, establishes a political relationship between France and Florence to provide motivation for events, and adds several new characters—the countess, her clown Lavache, Lafeu and Parolles.

In the opening scene Shakespeare quickly establishes the basic situation and shows us that the play is concerned with regeneration and love. He tells of a dying king and presents a young girl filled with love-longing. Good, as represented by the healing art and romantic actions of Helena, and by the honor and piety of the countess, Lafeu, the King, and the widow and Diana, is to be opposed to the pride and unscrupulousness of Bertram and the trickery of Parolles.

HELENA

The theme is not developed in a conventional way. Helena quickly establishes her forceful personality, her ability to cope with all kinds of situations and to dissemble. In the first scene in the play we find her tolerating the rogue Parolles and entering into a bawdy conver-

sation on virginity simply because he is a follower of Bertram, and at the conclusion of the first act we learn that her intention to go to court is prompted not by her concern for the sick King, but by her desire to further her marital ambitions. Her affection for Bertram is such that she has even forgotten her father who died but six months previously. With her skill in rhetoric she is able to overcome the reluctance of the King to submit himself to her cure and she is very specific about the bargain which she proposes. In the ensuing argument between the King and Bertram she is silent except to interject too late—when feelings have become enflamed and the King feels that his honor is at stake—that she will not insist on her bargain: "That you are well restor'd, my lord, I'm glad./ Let the rest go."

We begin to feel sympathy for Helena when she acknowledges that she has driven Bertram into the army and when she resolves to steal away herself like a thief in the dark so that he can return. Poignant, too, is the letter which she sends her mother-in-law announcing her intended pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Jacques and implying that she is seeking death.

> I am Saint Jaques' pilgrim, thither gone.
> Ambitious love hath so in me offended
> That barefoot plod I the cold ground upon,
> With sainted vow my faults to have amended.
> Write, write, that from the bloody course of war
> My dearest master, your dear son, may hie.
> Bless him at home in peace, whilst I from far
> His name with zealous fervour sanctify.
> His taken labours bid him me forgive;
> I, his despiteful Juno, sent him forth
> From courtly friends, with camping foes to live
> Where death and danger dogs the heels of worth.
> He is too good and fair for death and me;
> Whom I myself embrace to set him free.

But, as Samuel Johnson observed, the most famous shrine of Saint Jacques was at Compostella and Florence was "somewhat out of the road." Nevertheless it is at Florence, where her husband is stationed, that Helena next appears, posing as a pilgrim. Here she loses no time in shrewdly quizzing an elderly widow and her attractive daughter, Diana, about Bertram. She displays an extraordinary readiness to suspect her husband of making dishonorable advances:

> Maybe the amorous count solicits her
> In the unlawful purpose?

With customary adroitness she elicits sympathy for Bertram's wronged wife, and the way in which she asks her new companions to identify Bertram and Parolles for her as they pass by shows considerable zest for dissimulation. Her offering of money to the widow and the promise of more to come is in keeping with her knowledgeable handling of affairs. Widow Capilet has already shown herself to be warm-hearted and honest, but Helena still feels that the

quickest way to get cooperation is to buy it. Her role as manipulator of events achieves its climax when she dramatically reappears at court in the final scene. Not only do the King, the countess and Lafeu believe her dead, but they suspect that Bertram has murdered her. Bertram's ready acceptance of her ensures the conventional happy conclusion, but we are reminded of the origins of the plot in that the ending is also a folktale, one in which two riddles are solved: the immediate one posed by Diana: "One that's dead is quick" (referring to Helena who is believed dead but is now with child), and the action-riddle posed earlier by Bertram.

BERTRAM

Samuel Johnson remarked: "I cannot reconcile my heart to Bertram. A man noble without generosity and young without truth; who marries Helena 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 he has wronged, defends himself by falsehood, and is dismissed to happiness." But it must be noted that until his encounter with Helena at court, Bertram seems to be an admirable if immature young man. He inspires the affection of others, speaks with propriety and is commendably anxious to involve himself in the excitement of war. When he protests at being chosen as Helena's husband, his initial remonstrance is reasonable.

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

He is justifiably reluctant to marry a woman out of gratitude for her saving the life of his King. His disdain of her breeding, his unawareness of her physical attractions and his reluctant agreement when threatened with royal "revenge and hate" put him in an unfavorable light, certainly, but he is confronted with an abnormal situation, engineered entirely by the persistence and daring of Helena.

There is little evidence to suggest that he is under the evil influence of Parolles, although his friends wish to think so. His attitude towards him at times approaches that of master to clown. It is Bertram's decision to be off to the wars, and in his farewell to Helena he is courteous if firm. He is justifiably unimpressed by her humility; he is patient when confronted with her importuning and is polite enough to show anger only when she is out of earshot. He softens the harshness of his complete rejection of her by sending her a letter instead of expressing his resolution to her directly, and it must be remembered that the terms that he gives are not inspired by any intention on his part to promote an unpalatable stratagem—the "bed-trick": what Bertram is trying to get through to Helena is that he will never live with her. That we are supposed to consider his behavior reprehensible is suggested by the attitude of his mother and of the French lords. We discover, however, in Act V, scene iii, that there were stronger grounds for Bertram's reluctance to marry Helena than those previously given: he was in love with Lafeu's daughter. It is in this same final scene that Bertram reveals

what lust and war have done to him: when he is accused of having Helena's ring, he invents a wretched and palpable lie in a desperate attempt to maintain the proprieties. Thereafter we witness Bertram perjuring himself more and more opprobriously in an effort to extricate himself from a situation which, contrived by his wife, now brings about his complete degradation. Clearly, when he declares Diana to be a tramp, we can have no sympathy for him and his abject acknowledgment of Helena is the relieved reaction of a man who has, in truth, just escaped a death sentence.

Our opinion of Bertram is not enhanced by the company he keeps. Parolles tends to serve as an indication of Bertram's corruption. Robert Grams Hunter in *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* (1965) remarks that he has elements of the abstract personification, Vice, and of the evil counsellor in his makeup. But he is not an active tempter: his major involvement serves to point up the contrast between Bertram and himself. When he is the victim of a trick, Parolles reveals that he is willing to betray honor itself. He is, however, aware of his true nature even before the unmasking and the tolerance which Lafeu shows finally towards him is a feeling which we ultimately can share. Bertram's treachery is more flagrant and of his reactions we know less. Penitence is too late and too briefly expressed to be dramatically satisfying.

OTHER CHARACTERS

The King, the countess and the court give depth, background and a sense of propriety to the action. The King has vitality and dignity and we are meant to approve of the exercise of his royal prerogative in Act II, scene iii.

The countess is more solidly drawn. In her conversations with her clown, Lavache, her steward, Reynolds, and with Lafeu, she emerges as the gracious lady in charge of a noble household. Her warmth towards Helena encourages our appreciation of the younger woman. She bears the news of Bertram's defection with fortitude, but at the same time she tries to put some of the blame on Parolles:

> A very tainted fellow, and full of wickedness;
> My son corrupts a well-derived nature
> With his inducement.

But while she can speak severely of her son to the two French lords, she is more revealing of the distress which she feels when she talks to her own steward:

> Which of them both
> Is dearest to me I have no skill in sense
> To make distinction. Provide this messenger.
> My heart is heavy and mine age is weak;
> Grief would have tears and sorrow bids me speak.

Understandably, when she believes Helena is dead, she promotes the proposed new match for her son with Lafeu's daughter, and asks the King to view Bertram's unsatisfactory conduct as "natural rebellion done i' th' blade of youth." At the same time she does not

allow her affection to blind her. When Bertram denies that the ring which he now possesses belonged to Helena, she remarks with naturalness and devastating honesty: "Son, on my life,/ I have seen her wear it." She is the first to detect his guilt when Diana accuses him—"He blushes and 'tis hit," and makes this her last speech. During the reversal at the end of the play Helena remarks: "O my dear mother, do I see you living?" but we have no reply.

Equally plausible and lively is the character of Lafeu whom we first encounter addressing the King familiarly and somewhat wittily, using the fable of the fox and the grapes to suggest that the King is foolish to decry the idea of recovery just because he believes that recovery is out of reach. He is appreciative of Helena and he is not long in summing up Parolles' character. We are not surprised to learn from Bertram that "common speech/ Gives him a worthy pass." He tries to comfort the countess and like her is disposed to lay the blame for Bertram's behavior on Parolles. His speech is characteristically rigorous:

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

He is also tolerant. Lavache addresses him with rude familiarity but he does not hold it against him, and he is ultimately generous towards Parolles. Consistent with his open integrity, is the outburst which the revelation of Bertram's dishonesty provokes from him. He publicly rejects the young man as a prospective son-in-law:

> I will buy me a son-in-law in a fair, and toll for this.

Characteristically even here he uses figurative language with an element of wit. Appropriate to the subject of the marriage market, he employs words having to do with trade: goods at a fair were often stolen ones but nevertheless Lafeu would prefer them to the present purchase; he would register Bertram in the "toll-book" as being once more for sale. We are again reminded of his honest nature when, on Helena's dramatic reappearance, he remarks that he is near tears. True to form he uses another figure, this time a domestic one, humorously unsuited to the present occasion—"Mine eyes smell onions." His final speech (the last in the play except for the King's) is addressed to Parolles, and shows that for all the latter's inadequacies he finds him entertaining. It also brings together the two worlds, the courtly idealistic world in which Lafeu lives and the sordid world of reality which Parolles represents.

PROBLEMS OF THE PLAY

It is small wonder that critics have been uneasy and at variance with one another over this play. Some have seen the drama as a struggle between Helena and Parolles, the good and the bad angel, for possession of the soul of Bertram. But this interpretation, while not impossible to justify in the case of Helena whose virtues impress

all but Bertram and his boon companion, falls short in the case of Parolles who is worthless and foolish rather than wicked. Bertram's caddish behavior is his own. Other symbolic interpretations have been suggested: the King's fistula is indicative of a diseased world; Helena restores that world to health and fertility even though she has to trick Bertram into performing his necessary function—"the physical regeneration of the dying world of Rousillon." To an Elizabethan audience, believing in the reality of the descent of grace upon a sinning human, the play is concerned with Christian forgiveness. As such, it is structurally and thematically related to *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*: the sin is the failure to trust in love. The rejected woman appears to die; the dénouement of forgiveness comes when she is found to be alive and the man who has wronged her acknowledges his error.

It seems possible that the thematic statement is in the text itself. In Act IV, scene iii, one of the minor characters, the first French lord, makes a philosophic statement which is often quoted:

> The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together; our virtues would be proud if our faults whipp'd them not, and our crimes would despair if they were not cherish'd by our virtues.

Helena's virtues are qualities which Shakespeare holds up for our esteem. She impresses all those who are competent to judge her. To the countess she is as dear as a daughter. To Lafeu, who seems most competent to assess her, she is:

> One that in her sex, her years, her profession,
> Wisdom and constancy, hath amazed me more
> Than I dare blame my weakness.

To the King, as soon as he has talked with her, it seems that

> All that life can rate
> Worth name of life, in thee hath estimate,
> Youth, beauty, wisdom, courage,—all
> That happiness and prime can happy call.

Such qualities must be tested or their owner will become proud. Posed against them are the faults and crimes of Bertram. Both protagonists undergo an ordeal before happiness can be achieved. Helena leaves home and friends, allows herself to be used by Bertram as his mistress and to be thought of as dead. Bertram, too, becomes totally alienated from all sources of power and affection. In Act IV, scene iii, we hear of his mother's angry letter, his estrangement from the King, the death of his wife. His brother officers disapprove of him and his friend Parolles betrays him. These blows to his morale are the external representations of the nadir to which he has sunk. In the last scene he shows the interior psychological corruption which is coexistent. The dénouement illustrates the thesis of the first French lord: Helena, her virtues whipped by Bertram's faults, achieves humility through tribulation; Bertram, confronted by his own evil, is saved from despair through virtuous love.

STYLE

Dramatically, however, we are not satisfied: both characters and conflict offer a less than consistent interpretation. The imbalance is reflected in the language itself. The style of *All's Well* is often labored and contorted; complex ideas refuse to be compressed within the limits of normal syntax and versification; passages of stately rhetoric seem artificial. Such factors support the conclusion that the play was experimental. For a resolution of the problems of structure, theme and technique posed here, we have to look to the last plays.

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STUDY QUESTIONS

ACT I

1. In the first scene what details are presented which are essential to an understanding of the action of the play?
2. What is the function of the exchange between Parolles and Helena?
3. What is the effect of the frequent emphasis on Bertram's youth and inexperience?
4. How does the kind of imagery which Lafeu uses reveal his character?
5. In what way does Lavache's discussion with the countess parody Helena's subsequent request to the countess, in addition to picking up the previous discussion between Helena and Parolles?
6. Shaw termed the role of the Countess of Rousillon "the most beautiful old woman's part ever written." What evidence do you find in this act to support his contention?
7. What elements in the King's speech indicate that one of the problems with which this play is concerned is with youth and age, old respected values and new untested ones?

ACT II

1. In the opening scene Bertram and Parolles bid farewell to various young nobles going off to the Florentine war. What further indications are given of Bertram's character?
2. What are the arguments which Helena uses in order to persuade the King to let her try her skill?
3. To what extent does the imagery suggest that Helena's healing power is miraculous and God-given?

4. How does the way in which Helena phrases her bargain with the King forestall the very objection which Bertram is to make when she chooses him as her husband?
5. How does Lafeu's opening speech in scene iii illustrate one of the distinctions made in the play? Who are those who embrace the new science and with whom does Lafeu align himself?
6. What ritualistic folk elements do you see in the court scenes in which Helena is involved?
7. The King claims that Bertram should marry Helena because the royal honor is at stake. Is the audience expected to view the matter in the same light?
8. In the exchange between Parolles and Bertram after the match what impressions do we get of both men?
9. What attitude does Parolles consistently adopt towards Helena, and how does his greeting to her in scene iv, "Bless you, my fortunate lady," illustrate that attitude?
10. What indication do we have of Lafeu's reaction to Bertram's and Parolles' conduct?

ACT III

1. What is the effect of Lavache's revelations of his change of taste since he has been to court? How does he imply criticism of the superficialities of courtly behavior?
2. To what extent does the riddling nature of Bertram's letter soften the harshness of its meaning?
3. How are we supposed to interpret both Helena's decision and her letter to the countess?
4. What emphasis is put on the unpleasantness of Parolles by Mariana and Diana, and what appears to be the dramatist's intention here?
5. How are the characters of the widow and Diana readily presented?
6. In the same scene Parolles reveals that he has lost the drum. Since Bertram in Act III, scene iii, swore to follow the drum in exclusion of love, what is the symbolic implication? How does it point to Bertram's transactions with Diana?
7. What is the intention of the sub-plot and what is the meaning of Bertram's function in it?
8. Do Helena's manipulations in the final scene do anything to make the stratagem more palatable?

ACT IV

1. In the first two scenes realism and romance are juxtaposed. In what way are they presented and what light do they throw on the characters of Parolles and Bertram?
2. In the second scene Bertram departs confidently asserting to Diana whom he hopes to seduce: "A heaven on earth I have won by wooing thee." What series of events reviewed by the two French lords point up the irony of his statement?

3. How do the opinions of the two French lords enhance the impression of deterioration in Bertram's character?
4. In the continuation of the sub-plot, Bertram discovers Parolles' true nature and expresses his contempt. What evaluation do we make of Bertram as a result?
5. How harshly are we supposed to judge Parolles? Is he primarily a comic character, a hanger-on, conscious of his own inadequacy, or is he an evil tempter who corrupts Bertram?
6. In the fourth scene Helena refers to the title of the play. What is her interpretation of its meaning?
7. What are the implications of the images which Lafeu uses to describe Parolles to the countess?
8. What is the dramatic function of the exchange between the clown, the countess and Lafeu?

ACT V

1. How does the first scene enhance the suspense and also look forward to the dénouement?
2. How do the actions in the second scene provide an ironic counterpart to the first?
3. How is the audience expected to view the quiet opening of the final scene, with Bertram's acceptance of the King's pardon and the arrangements for a second marriage?
4. How do the reactions of the King, the countess and Lafeu to the discovery of Helena's ring in the possession of Bertram give credibility to the contrived situation?
5. What is the dramatic intention behind the further denigration of Bertram? Does his baseness make Helena's love all the more admirable?
6. To what extent does Shakespeare succeed in giving the play a happy ending?