THE NEW PENGUIN

Shakespeare

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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EDITED BY
BARBARA EVERETT

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

All's Well That Ends Well is not one of the more popular of Shakespeare's plays. This is regrettable, since it is a distinguished work: mature, subtle, and haunting. But certainly, there are real difficulties in the way of appreciation. One of the most difficult problems concerns its tone – the level and kind of seriousness with which the writer is presenting his materials. *All's Well That Ends Well* is usually thought of as a 'dark comedy' or 'problem play'. It is clearly a serious comedy, in that it is full of issues which can tax and vex the mind; moreover, the issues are explicit – the characters argue, think, debate, and doubt. It is characteristic that the first climax of the action, the rejection of Helena by Bertram on the grounds of her inferior social class, is marked by the King's passionate yet fully rational argument for the superiority of Merit over Birth. The play is a serious one, moreover, in a rather different sense from this. It contains no crimes and its only death is illusory – the very absurdity of Bertram's being arrested on a charge of wife-murder in the last scene serves to define the milieu here as one where 'such things do not happen' – yet it shows things grave enough: the sadness, defeat, and decline of the old, and the natural egoism of the young. In its appeal to the mind, then, and in the gravity of its vision, *All's Well That Ends Well* is a sober work, elegiac rather than saturnalian. And yet it is also, and truly, a romantic comedy. Coleridge spoke of it as 'not an agreeable story, but still full of love', and his emphasis on the quality of feeling in the play is just. The main

action in it is a love story; and though happiness is not one of the things this play directly concerns itself with (there are other goods, even for comedy) nevertheless the love story ends as happily as it can. Now, the combination of all these – a romantic love story, an astringent intellectuality of presentation, and a grey vision of things – does not promise, at first sight, an easy and harmonious literary experience. Certainly this particular blend of materials is unique in Shakespeare, and the elusive and suggestive style which it produces is so original as to be frequently missed or under-rated.

For such diverse materials to fall into relationship with each other, and communicate what they have to communicate, demands an especially receptive and flexible sympathy in the reader. But here another problem arises. The play seems to rebut the sympathy it needs by the very nature of the story it tells. Shakespeare has found an edgy and affronting tale, and has left it more difficult than when he found it. He must have been looking for a story that was romantic, that told of a happy and fulfilled love, and yet that did so in a striking and startling way: such that the 'romance' could work on freshened perceptions and a livelier sense of fact. He found in Boccaccio (or his translator) a story whose pursuant heroine loved – so its first paragraph tells us – 'more than was meet for a maiden of her age', and Shakespeare perhaps saw here the element of the extreme, the surprising, the intensely individual, that he wanted for his heroine and for his comedy. Nothing in the rest of Boccaccio's story matches this hinted-at extremity, least of all the 'sage lady' who is his heroine. Boccaccio's narrative has a suavity, a grace, and a control that almost entirely conceal the fierce and archaic lineaments of the older stories within it. For within *his* story there are others. Boccaccio's tale of a young woman, a

doctor's daughter, who manages at last to win, by the bed-trick, the man who has rejected her because of her inferior birth – this is in fact his deft interweaving of two very old folk tales, a tale of the Curing of the King and a tale of a Clever Wench. Except for the extraordinariness of the incident (mainly, in fact, the bed-trick) we should scarcely guess at these sources in Boccaccio. But we can hardly fail to guess at them in Shakespeare: who has, most interestingly, revived the buried folk-tale elements and brought them into bold and disturbing prominence. Helena enters the Court of France like a saviour-knight in the Waste Land of the Fisher King; the beginning of her cure is an archaic ritual, announced in stumbling and 'primitive' verse. But this account is, of course, partial; if Shakespeare had only made the story *more* like folk tale, the play would present fewer difficulties. He has in fact made the story more up-to-date as well as more archaic – given it a striking modernity as well as barbarous depths. If France in this play is sometimes reminiscent of a feudal Waste Land, its *genius loci* (so to speak) is the great creator of an intensely modern sceptical self-consciousness, Shakespeare's contemporary Montaigne. Treated in this way, an already slightly uncomfortable story becomes twice as uncomfortable, and infinitely more strange.

The treatment of the bed-trick, an aspect of the play it is hard to ignore, affords one of the best examples of the richly affronting strangeness Shakespeare achieves in his conversion of the original story. The bed-trick (a fictional convention for the most part, although there seem to have been a few occurrences of it in real life) was an unavoidable part of the story Shakespeare had chosen. His heroine achieves nominal marriage with the man she loves by curing his guardian, the King; but Bertram angrily imposes apparently impossible conditions – that he will

consummate the marriage only *after* she has conceived a child by him. This riddling impossibility is soluble, like many ancient riddles, by a small intellectual adjustment: Bertram must be tricked into making love with Helena in ignorance of her identity, Helena must 'become' someone else, the mistress Bertram desires. This situation Boccaccio passes over with a calm speed, motivated, one presumes, not so much by the indelicacy of the arrangement as by its unlikelihood. Shakespeare brings it well to the fore in the second half of his play, coolly exploring its possibilities. What makes this remarkable is that in the earlier part of the play Shakespeare has managed to create the sense of living in precisely that 'modern' world to which this archaic convention is most offensive. He has created, mainly through his heroine, the sense of a world which counts sexual experience as vital: vital in that it may be a focus of that fusion of sensations and experiences which makes up the consciousness of a person. It is Helena's love that makes her a person, and she longs to express her love. This longing takes her unerringly, in the course of the action, to the bed-trick – that expression of the impersonal in sexuality, only acceptable in some archaic folk-tale world that regards persons as *things*, and bodies as chattels of the spirit. It is the collocation of these two opposed aspects of sexuality that is disturbing, and not the mere use of the bed-trick in itself. That Helena's deep and inward consciousness should resolve itself in the frank device of the bed-trick; that the subtle and ambitious exploration of the first part of the play should descend to a mere unravelling of plot in the second movement – this tends to cause a shock to the mind, as when Hamlet says with a comparable achievement of the outrageous: 'The King is a *thing*'.

There are many such contrasts and collocations in *All's*

Well That Ends Well. And the play does not always resolve its paradoxes very explicitly. Unlike a good deal of the satirical and realistic writing with which it has affinities, this is a work which does not give us much clear direction as to how we should judge and what we should think; it makes its 'points', diverse and sometimes contradictory as they are, and leaves us alone with them. It has a quality, in short, summed up by the figure of Diana, whom we see perplexing and irritating the King in the play's last scene, as she enumerates all the riddles and impossibilities of the action; and many readers may well feel like echoing the King's exasperated response:

Take her away, I do not like her now. V.3.279

Diana resolves her riddles only by pointing to the loving Helena, now visibly pregnant, who remains as enigmatic but in one sense as simple as she has always been. It may equally be said that the play's paradoxes as a whole serve simply to turn a more intensive and questioning attention to familiar things, which we see more clearly than usual because from strange and various angles. Though 'romantic', the play is strikingly unfantastic: when we move from France to Italy, we move merely from Court to Camp, and find them much what they always were. The strangeness lies, not (as in true romance) in new places, but in new light thrown on familiar ground.

The play's verbal style works to the same end. At first it can seem both difficult and puzzlingly diverse; but on better acquaintance it may be more justly found lucid and expressive. The diversity of style is so marked indeed that it has been used as evidence for dating the play within almost every period of Shakespeare's career, from the early 1590s to 'after 1608'. But a single play will often contain passages written in very various modes. Here the stylistic

variations are far from random; they are dictated by literary purpose. They communicate mood, tone, and character. Helena's primitive and oracular couplets, for instance, at her meeting with the King –

> *He that of greatest works is finisher*
> *Oft does them by the weakest minister –*
> II.1.136–7

are merely a way of conveying, but with critical detachment, her ambiguous innocence and its impact on the court (for the King uses the same mode of speech). Similarly expressive, though different in kind, are the couplets of the King's long speech on Honour:

> *Good alone*
> *Is good, without a name: vileness is so;*
> *The property by what it is should go,*
> *Not by the title. . . .* II.3.127–30

These impressive though fine-drawn aphorisms prove, ironically, far less persuasive than the royal blast of rage which follows them. Or, for a last example, there is Bertram's smoothly diplomatic apologia, spoken before he is exposed:

> *At first*
> *I stuck my choice upon her, ere my heart*
> *Durst make too bold a herald of my tongue;*
> *Where, the impression of mine eye infixing,*
> *Contempt his scornful perspective did lend me. . . .*
> V.3.44–8

There is something self-betraying in his easy and conventional abstractions.

In the light of its dramatic functions, the play's stylistic