



All's Well That Ends Well: The Female Appropriation of Comic Inevitability

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Abstract

*The genre of Shakespearean comedy is often characterized by gendered conventions, including a thwarted obstruction of the lovers' union by the heroine's father, an ending that satiates the male lead's desire via freely chosen marriage, and a patriarch who orchestrates the dramatic action to facilitate this conclusion. The prevalence of these tropes makes William Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* highly unorthodox, as the play's culminating marriage is forced upon Bertram by both the authority of multiple parental figures and the trickery of Helen, who takes on an unusual role as a female director of the plot. Though the progression of *All's Well* fails to resemble a standard comedy, the play nevertheless constantly calls attention to the idea that, as long as it resolves in a harmonious ending, the path that the action took to reach that ending is justified. This paper argues that *All's Well That Ends Well* deliberately probes the question of how much gendered subversion can be legitimized by a well-staged comic conclusion that presents a narrative in which female will is the driving triumphant force. The play's notoriously ambivalent resolution is a symptom of the difficulty of divorcing patriarchal power structures from the comic form.*

When John Heminges and Henry Condell compiled William Shakespeare's plays into the First Folio in 1623, they divided them into three genres: comedies, histories, and tragedies (Shaughnessy 81). Though Shakespeare likely did not write with such discrete categories in mind, they have become key, in the intervening four hundred years, to how scholars and audiences understand his works. One common way to view comedy is as a descriptive term applied to plays that fit certain conventions. Shakespearean comedy typically includes two young people getting married against the will of the heroine's elderly father (the senex), who must be outwitted by the hero to enable the lovers' eventual marriage (Miola 30). This thwarting of the patriarch is often part of a broader conflict between the desires of the young and the old, which results in the outmoded and repressive law of the father being reformed to let the young people pursue love where they so choose (Mardock 451).

Arguably, the most essential of these distinguishing features is the fact that comedies nearly always end in a marriage, and I look to Hilary Handelsman's and Patricia Anne Corrigan's scholarship to examine what these marital endings typically entail. Handelsman observes that comedies tend to follow a young man who desires a woman and faces obstacles to pursuing his love but ultimately succeeds in his quest to marry her (8). The man's desire is thus sated, and the woman's desire is confined within the patriarchal institution of marriage, making it less of a potentially subversive force. This pattern, Handelsman argues, goes uninterrogated because it is so ubiquitous: "The genre's dependence upon the satisfaction of male desire is disguised by the notion of the 'festive' ending, which has traditionally been treated as a neutral, purely 'aesthetic' feature of comic form" (Abstract). Corrigan's work likewise highlights the triumph of desire as a defining feature of comedy. Her focus is on the conflict between freely chosen love resulting from a character's unimpeded perception and from efforts by other characters to impose vision upon them, making them "[adopt] the imposer's perceptions, see with the imposer's eyes, speak with the imposer's voice, and comply with the imposer's will" (13). Corrigan terms this latter force a "potentially tragic imposition," because when a character successfully co-opts another's desire or perception (as, for example, Iago does in *Othello*), it tends to bring about tragedy (7). However, in comedies, attempts at this sort of imposition (such as Theseus' insistence that "[Hermia's] eyes must with [Egeus'] judgement look" (I.i.57) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) must be defeated for the desired marital ending to take place. Taken together, these observations reveal that marriages in comedies typically satisfy the romantic will of the young lovers, particularly the young man, and that this will arises from their own perceptions, often in spite of efforts by other characters to impose alternate desires from the outside.

Of course, these conventions are by no means universal, but they are prevalent enough to merit analysis. Some variation of the blocking-father plotline appears in seven of the fourteen plays listed as comedies in the First

Folio: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest*. This last is a particularly revealing example: Prospero feigns disapproval of Miranda's love for Ferdinand in order to spur on her affections, as if believing that invoking this comic trope will make the love story he is directing more convincing. In other comedies, characters quote and twist proverbs to draw explicit attention to the standard comic structure and whether or not it is coming to fruition. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck, as he disenchanting Lysander and arranges the sleeping lovers to facilitate their forthcoming marriages, proclaims, "Jack shall have Jill, / Nought shall go ill; / The man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well" (III.ii.461–63). Conversely, *Love's Labour's Lost* ends with Berowne lamenting "Our wooing doth not end like an old play: / Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy / Might well have made our sport a comedy" (V.ii.862–64). These self-consciously metatheatrical references demonstrate Shakespeare's acute awareness of specific genre conventions, as well as the fact that his comedies by turns reproduce them and subvert them with a purpose. These patterns are also consistent enough that both Early Modern and contemporary audiences can look at a play that fits most or all of these criteria and meaningfully identify it as a comedy, as long as it resolves in a happy ending.

Because comic endings typically involve reestablishing a stable status quo, specifically through the fulfilment of male will and the confinement of female will in marriage, many critics view the genre as fundamentally conservative (Creaser 97). While the comic rebirth may see the scapegoating of individual bad actors and the granting of free choice of marriage for certain lovers, the conclusion rarely radically transforms dominant power structures, and figures at the top of the social ladder often avoid consequences for the same actions for which they punish others (Creaser 91). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, Demetrius' efforts to use state power to coerce Hermia into marrying him against her will are punished when his love for her is overridden by the fairies' enchantments and he is forced into a marriage he did not initially desire. Simultaneously, the coerced unions that Theseus and Oberon impose upon Hippolyta and Titania are allowed to stand, and these couples join Hermia and Lysander, the ingenues who had to fight for the right to pursue their freely chosen love, in celebrating the festive conclusion. Even when individual men are punished for their vices and individual women are free to pursue their desires, the conclusion accords with the will of patriarchal authority.

I wish, however, to investigate a comedy that troubles this pattern. *All's Well That Ends Well* is a play in which the conclusion relies on the thwarting of male will, at least if we take Bertram's five acts of insistence that he does not want to marry Helen¹ as stronger evidence than his last-minute change of

¹ Though the protagonist of *All's Well That Ends Well* is most often referred to as "Helena," she is also called "Helen" at multiple points in the play (I.iii.65), (I.iii.95), (II.ii.60). In this paper, I refer to her as "Helen" to differentiate her from Shakespeare's more famous "Helena" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, whom I also discuss.

heart. Moreover, the resolution is brought about by the triumph of female will, as the dramatic action is driven by Helen plotting to orchestrate her marriage to Bertram and, ultimately, through a combination of skill, trickery, and the support of essentially every authority figure she encounters, getting exactly what she wants. The plot utterly defies the typical comic tropes laid out by Handelsman and Corrigan. The marriage that occurs is not a fulfilment of the male lover's will but the exact opposite, and Bertram is the victim of imposed desire that goes uncorrected. Helen's female will is enforced through both her bed trick and the decree of the King of France, who is (unusually, for a patriarchal authority figure) aligned with a lower-class young woman's pursuit of her desires. The play's action barely resembles an archetypal description of a comedy. Yet in its title and the dialogue of multiple characters, *All's Well* constantly calls attention to the idea that, indeed, all's well that ends well; as long as the play ends harmoniously, as a comedy would, then the thorny path we took to reach that conclusion is of little concern.

We might, then, propose an alternate definition of comedy—one that is not descriptive but prescriptive. Within this framework, labelling a play a comedy creates a foregone conclusion. A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is not a comedy because we observe that, like other comedies, it ends in marriage; rather, the fact that it is a comedy is the starting point, and, because it is a comedy, it must end that way, no matter what it takes. Northrop Frye notes that comic conclusions are often brought about by improbable or impossible devices that are symptoms of the need to fit the genre's conventions: "Plays like this have to end like this, whatever the outrage to reality" (8). Frye also argues that the central drive of comedy is toward deliverance for the characters, and "comedy has the same narrative shape as many of the programmes in religion that lead toward goals of salvation" (14). We might, therefore, think of the central aim of comedy not as satisfying the characters' desires or reforming or maintaining the status quo but, in essence, as creating a credible theatrical illusion that fulfils specific genre conventions and leaves the audience satisfied with having watched the sort of play they paid to see. Catherine Bates argues that it is precisely the moments when comedy strains the audience's moral acceptance that slick playwrighting sweeps in to smooth over the rough patches. Bates writes:

Formal perfection seems directly related to moral vacuum or collapse. The more morally ambiguous or contingent a situation, the more dazzling the display of wit or the more perfectly crafted the scene. It is as if an inverse relation exists between society's ordering of human behavior and the artist's ordering of his material. Where one fails, the other steps in to take its place. (108)

It may be unsurprising, then, that in a medium where miraculous resolution has supremacy over earthly logic, sometimes the comic conclusion is aided

or enabled by divine intervention (Silverman 30–31). Shakespeare makes use of a few literal *dei ex machina*² in his plays, but, more often, he incorporates characters who are part of the cast but orchestrate the comic action like directors (Silverman 30–31). These characters can be thought of as taking on a pseudo-divine role, as they are the means by which the comic providence, the inevitable conclusion in harmony and redemption, is achieved. These figures are also typically male; Prospero in *The Tempest*, Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the Duke in *Measure for Measure* are key examples of this archetype (all of whom, notably, are imbued with supernatural powers or holy authority, yet all of them also appear somewhat morally fallible). In these plays, the alignment of the comic conclusion with male will is even more explicit, as a specific patriarch is bringing about the conclusion.

But what, we must ask, would be the outcome of a comedy where a woman, not a man, drives the plot forward? We can see one answer in *All's Well That Ends Well*. In this play, I argue, the comic action is effectively directed by a woman, and the patriarch is a hollow figurehead who functions primarily to lend institutional authorization to expressions of female will. I propose to analyze *All's Well* through this framework, examining how the suppression and satisfaction of male and female will in the play result from a philosophy that a harmonious and dramatically satisfying ending justifies, whatever double standards and unsavory devices were necessary to achieve it. This tendency often serves to make comedy a conservative genre that punishes individual male abuses while upholding corrupt patriarchal authority, and Handelsman argues that this inclination is baked into the form: “there is a direct connection between the satisfaction of male desire . . . and the eradication of death” (40). But is this, we must wonder, inevitable due to the nature of the genre, or is it possible to use the power of comedy to legitimize whatever brings about a mutually agreeable social order as a means to challenge institutional power? In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Shakespeare pushes the limits of how much social subversion can be justified by using a well-staged comic ending: he lets a woman direct the action, aligning state power with female will, and posing unruly young men's desires as the primary obstacle to harmony. The play's title foregrounds its ambivalent resolution and forces the audience to interrogate whether Helen has directed a comedy good enough that its ends justify her means.

All's Well That Ends Well is a notoriously unorthodox comedy, and it fails to fit the standard criteria neatly for either comic journey or comic destination. While the play's abrupt and ambivalent ending has received extensive critical attention, it is also worth examining its unusual beginning, which averts nearly all of the avenues for conflict that typically set a comedy in motion. The start of a comedy typically introduces one or more external obstacles to the union of the

2 Latin for “god from the machine,” *deus ex machina* is a plot device in which a god abruptly appears at the end of a play and resolves the plot via divine intervention; for example, the appearance of Hymen in *As You Like It*. The term can also be used to refer to any unanticipated intervention that sets right a story's apparently unsolvable conflict.

lovers; these obstacles often take the form of gendered generational strife. The most conventional manifestation of this trope is the senex, the disapproving father figure who stands in the way of his daughter marrying the man she loves. In plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the central conflict is between female desire and institutional power, and these forces must be at least tenuously reconciled in order to facilitate a mutually agreeable ending, even if the patriarchal structures do not fundamentally change. The initial arrangement of the characters suggests that *All's Well* might proceed as a gender-swapped version of this stock conflict. Instead of a heroine, her disapproving father, and a hero who is of lower status or otherwise unacceptable to the father as his daughter's husband, we get a high-born hero, his mother, and a lower-born heroine in Helen. It would be easy, then, to imagine the play proceeding accordingly, with Helen being loved by Bertram all along but needing to thwart or change the mind of the Countess (or another holder of institutional power, like the King of France) for their marriage to occur. In actuality, however, the older authority figures in *All's Well* display very little gendered or generational prejudice and are notably sympathetic to young people's desires, which leaves the play lacking much of the conflict that typically structures this sort of comedy.

Rather than callously exercising their power over young people in order to prevent their pursuit of love and stand in the way of the comic resolution, the King of France and the Countess are both supportive of youthful desires and, as Paul Gleed notes, act as "catalysts for romance" (92). At the start of the play, the King believes himself to be dying, but rather than resenting his own mortality, he recognizes the necessity of passing the torch to the next generation. In one of his earliest speeches, he recalls and concurs with Bertram's father's desire to "not live . . . after [his] flame lacks oil, to be the snuff / Of younger spirits" (I.ii.55–57). Depending on the performance, his tone here may be more self-pitying or irritated than light-hearted, as he clearly misses the "corporal soundness" that he enjoyed as a younger man (I.ii.24). However, he does not respond to this by trying to cling uselessly to his fading youth and health, or else taking on the role of the typical senex and trying to constrain these young people's behavior. Both efforts would pose him as ineffectual, even foolish—time and disease thwart all men eventually, and the senex is a fool by structural necessity, who is always defeated or at least reformed by the time a comedy ends. Instead, the King holds onto what power and love he can by embracing comedy and orchestrating romance. His role recalls Oberon in *Midsummer* and Duke Vincentio in *Measure*, both of whom are patriarchs who find themselves unable to exercise their power in the way that they want to at the start of their plays. Both end up reclaiming their potency by allying with young lovers (especially young women) and taking on the role of the director of the comic action, so that they can then shape the comic ending to directly suit their interests. We can see a similar tendency in the King's championing of Helen's chosen marriage, as well as his permissive attitude toward his lords' sexual liberality. As his lords

leave for war, he playfully tells them, “Those girls of Italy, take heed of them” (II.i.19). He is well aware that they are off to enjoy sexual freedom as well as military glory and is willing to advise them in matters of both love and war. We might wonder if he speaks from experience with these women, given his reminiscence about when he and Bertram’s father “first tried our soldiership” (I.ii.26). He remembers his youth fondly and wants his lords to participate in the same coming-of-age rituals he once enjoyed. The Countess is similarly in tune with her memories of her younger self, which causes her to sympathize with Helen. When she first learns of Helen’s love for Bertram, she says, “Even so it was with me when I was young” (I.iii.125), then echoes the King’s sentiments as she declares “It is the show and seal of nature’s truth, / Where love’s strong passion is impress’d in youth” (I.iii.129–30). In her view, love, even unwise love, is natural and therefore ought to be celebrated. One of the most ubiquitous comic conflicts—that between unruly ingenues and unsympathetic elders—is not a factor standing in the way of the comic resolution.

Also, in stark contrast to comedies like *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Midsummer, All’s Well* does not feature much of a conflict between institutional power and female will. The role of the Countess marks France as a zone of female authority unlike almost any in Shakespeare’s other plays. Although Bertram has inherited his father’s title, it is his mother who exercises political power in a meaningful way. The scenes with the clown Lavatch show the Countess flexing her political authority, specifically over a male subject. Lavatch must “beg [her] good will” before he can marry his lover, Isbel—unlike in most plays, a woman must sign off on a man’s marriage, not the other way around (I.iii.18). The Countess is thus set up as one of the most powerful figures in the play, but rather than using her authority to prevent mutually agreeable marriages like a typical senex, she facilitates them. She agrees to Lavatch’s marriage, and when she discovers Helen’s affection for Bertram, she does not renege on her statement that Helen, “may lawfully / make title to as much love as she finds” (I.iii.100–01). She helps Helen strategize about how to convince the King to try her treatment and offers her “Means and attendants and my loving greetings / To those of mine in court,” affording her both material resources and social capital she could not acquire on her own (I.iii.249–50). The favor she shows her adopted daughter goes far beyond obligation, and she emphasizes that she loves Helen by choice: “I say I am your mother / And put you in the catalogue of those / That were enwombèd mine” (I.i.139–41). Her role as mother is not merely the result of her “mother’s groan” and biological capacity to give birth (I.iii.144), but an expression of her will to prioritize this bond—“choice breeds” as well as intercourse does (I.iii.142). The Countess deems Helen her daughter and uses her authority to help Helen to social advancement so that her love can thrive.

The Countess’ uniquely influential role is also enabled by the fact that multiple characters’ fathers have died directly prior to the play’s action, leaving space for a matriarch to fill the void. While many of Shakespeare’s comedies

are notably devoid of mothers, *All's Well* opens with two dead fathers, and with the theme of motherhood placed front and center (Creaser 86). Not counting the first witch in *Macbeth*, the Countess is the only female character in the canon to speak the opening line of a play. The line—"In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband" (I.i.1)—is about two male characters, but the use of "delivering" also evokes childbirth, gesturing at the fact that, as Michelle Osherow observes, "Helena will both anticipate the delivery of her own child, and facilitate the delivery of [Bertram] home to Rossillion" (158). It is also notable that the Countess is the subject of both clauses of this sentence, while the men to which she refers are the objects over which she has control. She is the one delivering and burying. She gets to initiate Bertram's wardship, a role which might have otherwise gone to her husband. The Countess' strong bond with Helen is likewise reliant upon the death of a man; Helen's father "bequeathed [Helen] to [her] overlooking," and if he were still living, the Countess presumably would be unable to take on Helen as, effectively, an adopted daughter and help her to advance so high (I.i.36–37). The deaths of the fathers in this play pave the way for the women they leave behind to exercise more power in their stead.

In the actual timeline of the play, France in *All's Well* is also inhabited by male rulers who are supportive of women. Lafeu promotes Helen's medical abilities to the King even when he has given up on all other treatment, praising her remarkability "in her sex, her years, profession, / Wisdom and constancy," noting her sex as just one unusual factor of her prowess (II.i.81–82). The King likewise only doubts her chances of success since his "most learned doctors" have failed, placing Helen no lower than the male professionals upon whom he has given up (II.i.114). Of course, Helen is only there to cure the King because her father cannot be, and the King seems to like her as soon as she reveals she is Gerard de Narbon's daughter, demonstrating another instance of a man's death clearing the way for a woman's agency. After Helen has cured the King, his lords seem even more inclined toward her, speaking as one to "thank heaven for [her]" (II.iii.65). None of the men she approaches have any objection to marrying her, and when Lafeu thinks they are objecting, he declares he would "send [his sons] to the / Turk, to make eunuchs of" if they did such a thing (III.ii.87–88). His support of Helen supersedes his loyalty to his male offspring, and he feels that anyone who would not deign to marry her would not deserve to be a man. Although the world of *All's Well* is not free of sexism, the figures at the top of the social pyramid exhibit very little, and present almost no obstacles to Helen's pursuit of her desires.

In the absence of generational strife or patriarchal abuses, therefore, *All's Well* presents very few stumbling blocks on the path to Helen's achievement of the happy marital ending she desires. Only her class is a major impediment to her union with Bertram, but once she cures the King, he "can build that up" and make her an unobjectionable wife for a lord (II.iii.218). On one hand, this setup clears the way for the comic conclusion to be achieved more easily, but in

terms of the play's ability to fit a descriptive definition of comedy, it is almost too easy. Without the harsh inequalities upon which stock comic conflicts are based, there is not enough plot to carry us through five acts of a satisfying play. What, then, keeps the audience rooting for a harmonious conclusion? It can only be an investment in the characters, particularly in Helen, who serves as the chief entry point into the world of *All's Well* and regularly grants the audience access to her thought process and inner life. Although the play she inhabits is unorthodox, she is compelling enough as a comic heroine that much of the audience likely wants her to succeed.

Act 1, Scene 1 of *All's Well* sets Helen up as a sympathetic figure. We first learn that she is visibly distraught, that she has recently lost her father, and that Bertram treats her rather callously, and we likely pity her as a result. When her first soliloquy begins, however, Helen subverts the audience's expectations by revealing that her grief, though real, does not stem from the expected source: "I think not on my father; / And these great tears grace his remembrance more / Than those I shed for him" (I.i.79–81). These lines reveal Helen's social savviness, as well as her tendency to dissemble, a tendency perhaps exacerbated by her lowly position and the repressive expectations of her superiors like Bertram. She is aware that she ought properly to grieve more for her father and is allowing everyone around her to think that that is the true cause of her sorrow, hiding her subversive desire that "[her] imagination / Carries no favour in't but Bertram's" (I.i.82–83). Her first line—"I do affect a sorrow indeed, but I have it too"—is proven accurate; her misery is genuine, but she is also concealing the nature of it by omission of the truth (II.i.52). This, I think, is what makes Helen so riveting. She is sympathetic enough that we hope she will succeed in getting what she wants, and so clever that it is captivating to watch her try. She is engaging because she is, to some extent, a deceiver. Her second soliloquy, in which she proclaims, "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven," anticipates Edmund in *King Lear*, another scheming social climber (I.i.212–13). But Helen is hardly as callous as Edmund; she grieves deeply and seems sincere in her feeling that "there is no living, none, / If Bertram be away" (I.i.85). The audience cannot define her solely as a helpless young lover or a conniving tactician, but must engage with her as a complex actor who uses sincere emotions to construct a narrative of her plight that is simultaneously affected and true.

James Kuzner contends that Helen's affections echo the masochistic narratives of Petrarchan sonnets,³ as she loves partly for the sake of dwelling in her own lovesickness and uses it to produce a sort of art (226), "manifesting it in the world as she orchestrates scenes that keep her beloved close yet not too close" (221). We can see this tendency in her longing "To see [Bertram] every hour; to sit and draw / His arched brows, his hawking eye, his curls, / In [her] heart's

3 A type of sonnet popularized by the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca. Petrarchan sonnets typically chronicle a male poet's masochistic obsession with his unrequited love for a cruelly indifferent mistress.

table” (I.i.93–95). Her inventory of his features resembles a blazon;⁴ she is not simply gazing but drawing, arguably objectifying, and there is an artistry to her unrequited desire of the sort typically reserved for male poets. Helen, however, not only evokes unrequited love poetry but also more triumphant stories. “Who ever strove / So show her merit, that did miss her love?” she asks, and this thought propels her to win the King’s favor so Bertram can be hers (I.i.222–23). She creates a narrative of her suffering, but she also favors a narrative wherein her love is fulfilled.

We can see the messiness of *All’s Well’s* genre when we attempt to map Bertram’s and Helen’s roles onto those of the lovers in a more standard comedy. Helen’s artfully masochistic pining brings to mind Orlando and Orsino, but she also has a kinship with her namesake Helena in *Midsummer*, as she has likewise been spurned by, and yet remains hopelessly devoted to, a callous and apparently undeserving man. But unlike her *Midsummer* counterpart, the Helen of *All’s Well* is allied with state power, as she collaborates with the King to secure a marriage that suits both of their ends. Although she approaches the King with the veneer of humility, she ultimately negotiates with him almost as an equal, responding to his telling her “Make thy demand” (II.i.189) with “But will you make it even?” (II.i.189). Helen is able to “demand” something of a monarch and expects, and is granted, fair payment for her service. Her payment, of course, is Bertram, a human who is reduced to a commodity as he becomes a pawn in Helen and the King’s exchange. When Helen asks to marry “such a one, thy vassal, whom I know / Is free for me to ask, thee to bestow,” she sounds not like Hermia or Helena, but like Egeus (II.i.97–98). Her deal, like that between a father and his daughter’s suitor, passes custody of a person from one owner to another, without regard for what the person themselves want. Through this negotiation, Helen aligns herself with royal power, and arguably goes even further than that as she comes to embody the King’s authority herself. Kathryn Schwarz argues that because Helen’s deal with the King makes their fates interchangeable, she takes on the power of his command: “*All’s Well* makes the borders between subjects as porous as those of the medicalized body itself. If the King dies, Helena does not affirm command over his body, but dies as well; if he lives, she is reinscribed as his subject but gains the authority of his word” (118). The King is allowed to live only on Helen’s terms; her curing of his illness is contingent upon his agreement to grant her a husband of her choosing. If he had denied her demand, she could have rescinded her offer, and he might only have resisted Helen’s will by entirely giving up his own and accepting an impotent death. Helen may be relying on a patriarch’s authority to legitimize her marriage, but the patriarch equally relies on her, and she can thus shape his authority to suit her ends.

Bertram is by no means a straightforward victim of the power structures of the world he inhabits. He undeniably tries to coerce Diana into giving him her virginity, and because of the gendered double standards around sex, his success

4 A popular mode in Early Modern love poetry, in which the (usually male) poet presents a catalog of his (usually female) beloved’s beautiful physical features.

would have meant Diana's reputation being ruined while his remained relatively unscathed. He willingly exploits patriarchal norms for the sake of pleasure. When his supposed affair is exposed, he insists that Diana's resistance to his advances was only an attempt to spur on his desire, telling the King that "all impediments in fancy's course / Are motives of more fancy" (V.iii.214–15). His logic resembles that of Demetrius, who likewise refuses to take no for an answer from the woman he relentlessly pursues. His attitude toward women is posed as rather repulsive, and he is punished by failing with Diana even when he thinks he has succeeded; but in his relationship with Helen, she is the relentless pursuer, and he is in flight.

Bertram also bears the brunt of the King's blunt exercise of power; to the extent that older dominant patriarchal will is still a significant force in this play, Bertram is the one whose relationship with institutionalized authority makes him seem more like a comic heroine forced into an unwanted marriage. The King explicitly tells Helen "Thou hast power to choose, and [the lords] none to forsake," giving Bertram and the other lords no agency and utterly refusing to factor their desires into the equation (II.iii.57). The extent of the coercion in this scene might not be immediately apparent, as the King appears to abdicate his power by giving it to Helen. Helen, for her part, claims to give up her agency to Bertram in choosing him, telling him, "I dare not say I take you; but I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live, / Into your guiding power" (II.iii.102–04). When Bertram resists this prescribed marriage, however, it becomes clear how little power he has. The King, enjoying his renewed vigor, is quick to defend the slight to his pride: "My honour's at the stake; which to defeat, / I must produce my power" (II.iii.149–50). The parallel between the King's and Helen's actions in this scene is revealing. The King only pretends to deputize his authority in order to exercise it, perhaps making himself seem doubly dominant over his lords by flexing his power to marry them off to anyone he chooses. We can think of Helen as doing the same thing with her show of submission to Bertram; though she claims to give herself to his will, she orchestrated the King's mandate of her marriage, and barely objects to his enforcement of it.

When the King reprimands Bertram, "Thou wrong'st thyself, if thou shouldst strive to choose," he sounds much like Egeus reprimanding his wayward daughter, and Bertram seems more a Hermia than a Demetrius (II.iii.146). Though he is not threatened with death, he faces disownment by the King at an age when he is still young enough to be a ward, and he understandably loses his nerve to resist in the face of royal authority. When he says "I submit / My fancy to your eyes," he is claiming to do what Theseus and Egeus demanded of Hermia, becoming the subject of what Corrigan terms tragic imposition by allowing someone else to impose vision and desire on him rather than looking for himself (II.iii.167–68). Bertram's dialogue with Diana, slippery though his motives may be, makes his awareness of this dynamic explicit, as he tells her: "I was compelled to [Helen], but I love thee / By love's own sweet constraint"

(IV.ii.15–16). In *Midsummer*, the wayward youth who flees compelled marriage in favor of freely chosen desire gets rewarded, but here, Bertram's attempts to pursue his uncompelled affections must be thwarted to bring about the comic conclusion.

The characters of *All's Well*, evidently, cannot fit straightforwardly into the conventions of a comedy that concludes when the external obstacles to the lovers' marriage vanish. J. M. Silverman points out that it is easy to imagine a version of *All's Well* that ends with the events of Act 2, Scene 3, as soon as Helen proves herself worthy and the last external obstacle to her union with Bertram is dissolved (26). "Instead," Silverman writes, "the conventional romantic elements prove stubbornly resistant to ceremonious merger and must be hand-sewn together," because the impediment to the comic conclusion comes not from outside the lovers but from Bertram's lack of appropriate desire (26). What he wants is at odds with the demands of the genre—"Comedy's most triumphant celebration of renewal and the healing of division becomes his cry of desolation: 'O my Parolles, they have married me!' (II.iii.289)" (Silverman 29). On a structural level, this reaction may be somewhat unsurprising. The set-up has provided only enough conflict for an act and a half of plot, and the play desperately needs more resistance to keep the drama moving. Bertram's pushback against what otherwise might have been a satisfying conclusion therefore becomes the driving conflict for the second half of the play. Helen has her marriage contract, but she has failed to secure a comic ending, and her project must evolve from winning the King over to pushing the genre back on track. Her love story did not start as a standard comedy, but she still has a chance of getting it to end like one.

The conflict that defines the latter half of *All's Well* is strikingly different from the conventions of comedy laid out by Handelsman and Corrigan. The fulfilment of male desire is not the culmination of the comic conclusion but an obstacle to it, and instead of a struggle between the lovers' freely chosen desires and external forces that seek to separate them, we get male desire and female desire set at odds. Helen's first conversation with Parolles, in which they discuss how women can protect their virginity from men, sets up male and female sexuality as enemies at war. Parolles poses male desire as the inevitable victor—the only way for women to "blow up men" is to have sex with them (I.i.122), but this strategy is self-defeating, because, he tells Helen, "with the breach yourselves made you lose your city" (I.i.125–26). Sex might have the power to undermine men, but any power women might gain from it necessitates the sacrifice of their virginity. However, Helen's desire is not to maintain her virginity but to "lose it to her own liking" (I.i.149–50). If she achieves wanted sex within the marriage bed, she can defeat the male impulse for sexual conquest without losing anything she cared to keep. The conflict is not simply between sexuality and virginity but between male sexual aggression and female sexual agency. Accordingly, the latter half of the dramatic action is defined by the

contention between Helen's and Bertram's desires and a series of dichotomies that reflect them: love and war, femininity and masculinity, marriage and sexual conquest, and comedy and tragedy.

This dichotomy is also embodied by the play's two central locales, with France as the more comic sphere where female will dominates, and Italy as a zone of male will as expressed by military and sexual conquest. As previously discussed, France is a domain where female power thrives and marriage is encouraged by authority figures. This tendency, however, comes at the expense not only of male dominance but also of male dignity. We can see the emasculating effect of the French court in the clown Lavatch, whose sexual desires are tamed by his marriage and his journey to court, as he goes from being "driven on by the flesh" (I.iii.28–29) to loving "with no stomach" (III.ii.16). Handelsman notes that dominant discourses in Shakespeare's England posited that male desire died when it was satisfied, and therefore "romantic comedy concludes with the death of male desire" (36). For Lavatch, this is the case; he is granted full license to pursue his desire but quickly loses interest in the woman he so passionately sought. Lavatch's emasculation is also related to his embrace of female sexual autonomy even when it makes him a cuckold (Briggs 303). After a series of clownish leaps in logic, he declares that "he that kisses my wife is my friend" (I.iii.49–50) and that "[i]f men could be contented to be what they are [cuckolds], there were no fear in marriage" (I.iii.50–51). In his view, female infidelity and male indignity are inevitable, and the key to happiness is to accept this as a fact of life. His embrace of marriage, regardless of the folly perhaps inherent in the role of husband, aligns him with the ends of comedy. The "ballad . . . which men full true shall find" (I.iii.60–61), which he sings, likewise marks him as a representative of the comic mode: "Your marriage comes by destiny; / Your cuckoo sings by kind" (I.iii.62–63). In Lavatch's France, as well as within the confines of comedy, men are fated for marriage and for their unruly desire to be cooled by a comfortable life within the status quo. Clownish though he is, Lavatch's embrace of love and domesticity at the cost of traditional models of manhood seems to be, for him, a happy ending.

On the other side of this conflict, however, are young men like Bertram and Parolles, who flee what they view as a feminized France for Italy, a more masculine sphere where they can win honor through military conquest and take honor from the vulnerable women around them through sexual conquest. Mariana warns Diana that "many a maid hath been seduced by" the French soldiers (III.v.20–21), which causes the women they have slept with "misery . . . that so terrible shows in the wrack of maidenhood" (III.v.21–22) but does not deter more women from being "lured" and caught by the soldiers' traps (III.v.23). These men's expressions of their desires are framed as predatory and destructive, as they seek not to engage in mutually pleasurable relationships but to win women like prizes. Reporting on Bertram's apparently successful seduction of Diana, one lord says that he "fleshes his will in the spoil of her honour," showing that,

in this framework, spoils of war and spoils of flesh are both treated as markers of male dominance (IV.iii.15). Through both military combat and seduction, men win honor by taking it from others—either the soldiers on the losing side or the women who lose their virginity and have their reputations tainted as a result. Reto Winckler argues that “Bertram tries to escape to the wars because he feels that the entire French court has been made effeminate through Helen’s mighty presence there, a place of stifling domesticity where there is “no sword worn / But one to dance with” (2.1.32–33)” (386). He is spurred on in this way of thinking by Parolles, who calls France “a dog-hole” (II.iii.271) and “a stable” (II.iii.282) and argues that a man “wears his honour in a box unseen, / That hugs his kinky-wicky here at home, / Spending his manly marrow in her arms” when he ought to be winning honor in war (II.iii.277–79). If Lavatch shows what a comic ending entails for male sexuality, Bertram’s flight from marriage to war can be seen as an attempt to flee the comic mode altogether. Wartime settings in Shakespeare plays tend to be reserved for tragedies and histories, and the only comedies to feature wars prominently are *Much Ado* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*, which open as the war is closing; the fighting is over, so the loving can begin. In *All’s Well*, however, war intrudes in the middle of the play to separate the lovers and introduce the specter of death. Helen’s faked death is a ploy, but it stems from her anxiety that Bertram will die in battle and she will be “the cause / His death was so effected” (III.ii.116–17). Bertram, however, seems to fear death less than he fears marriage. Upon arriving in Italy, he declares: “Great Mars, I put myself into thy file. / Make me but like my thoughts, and I shall prove / A lover of thy drum, hater of love” (III.iii.8–11). War offers him the chance to escape the romance he has been forced into in France, for an alternate gender dynamic and perhaps even an alternate genre, even if it means risking his life.

Ultimately, however, Bertram’s attempts to run from the comic conclusion are thwarted by Helen, as she comes to embody royal authority, divine authority, and eventually dramatic authority, directing the play’s action in order to bring about her will. As previously noted, Helen benefits from state power and arguably comes to exercise it indirectly through her influence of the King. Though the deal she makes in Act 2 only outlines a one-time exchange between her and the King—a cure for a husband—we learn by the end of the play that he is seemingly forever at Helen’s beck and call. In the final scene, he reveals that he even gave her his ring, which may literally be a royal seal, and “bade her if her fortunes ever stood / Necessitied to help, that by this token / [he] would relieve her” (V.iii.84–86). Helen can thus bring royal authority to her aid without even having to ask directly. David M. Bergeron also notes that, after Act 2, Scene 3, “the play will not refer to Helena’s father again nor to Bertram’s either; and the King of France disappears from the play until the concluding scene” (177). The play’s pronounced absence of patriarchal authority becomes yet more prominent. The King remains for a while, but he has always been something of a vacant figurehead—he self-admittedly “fill[ed] a place” and

mostly functioned to legitimize Helen's desires and reign in Bertram's (I.ii.69). Once he has disappeared from the action, Helen, bearing his ring and his stamp of approval, fills that place instead.

In appropriating the King's power, Helen effectively becomes the director of her own play, a role that sets her apart from many of Shakespeare's comic heroines. *Midsummer* and *Measure*, for instance, both also feature plots in which a man's problematic desires are forcibly overridden to orchestrate his union with the woman who wants to marry him. In both cases, however, it is not the woman who directs the action but an older male authority figure. Helena has no say in Oberon's machinations, and, while Isabella signs off on some of Duke Vincentio's stratagems, she ultimately must trust him to make sure all goes according to plan. At first glance, the King of France conforms to this pattern; he is a patriarch who disregards Bertram's desires in order to oversee his marriage to Helen, partially, it seems, to affirm his own political power. But while the King is the legitimating instrument of Helen's marriage, he is hardly its architect, and, in the second half of the play, he has almost no impact on the romantic plot. Helen herself orchestrates her own bed trick and the exchange of rings, then stages Bertram's shame and her own miraculous resurrection such that Bertram will be all but forced to return to her. She works with the Widow to "direct [Diana] how 'tis best to bear" Bertram's advances, making sure Diana follows her instructions precisely to pull off the switch (III.vii.20). She also correctly guesses that, though Bertram values his ring highly, "To buy his will it would not seem too dear, / Howe'er repented after," and thereby gets him, unwilling though he is, to follow her plot too (III.viii.27–28). She uses her letters to support the otherwise shaky narrative of her death in Italy; as a lord reports, "The stronger part of it [is justified] by her own letters, which makes her story true even to the point of her death" (IV.iii.53–54). Helen is actively writing her own story to make it as convincing as possible, maximizing the impact of the twist ending she will stage.

Helen, like the male director figures in *Midsummer*, *Measure*, and *Tempest*, is associated with divine authority and providence. She frames herself as an agent of God, telling the King, "Of heaven, not me, make an experiment" (II.i.152). In agreeing to this, he implicitly affirms that if she cures him, it will be God's will. Since he also agrees to reward her with a husband of her choice for the cure, however, the sense of holy legitimacy may be extended to her marriage too. As the play goes on, Helen becomes even more of a figure of miracle, achieving a resurrection and a pseudo-virgin conception. Her association with the divine further emphasizes the appearance of her ends as virtuous, even when her means are questionable. Silverman argues that the second half of *All's Well* is a different sort of comedy than the first, as Helen must resort to trickery because Bertram has rejected his first chance at a happy marital ending (31). If she cannot change Bertram's desires, she must weaponize them to create a second chance for the union upon which the comic conclusion relies. Through the bed trick,

Arthur Kirsch argues, Bertram “is able to conquer and know Helena as a woman, a conquest that provides the basis for a marriage in which there may actually be both desire and affection” (81). Helen’s deceit is thus justified within both a religious framework and a comic framework, as she saves Bertram from his own sinful nature and pushes him toward the marital culmination.

Though Helen’s approaches range from virtuous to deceitful, they are united by her constant intent—to marry Bertram—and the fact that her intent aligns with the goals of comedy—she seeks to bring about the marriage that the genre demands. Helen’s repeated declaration that “All’s well that ends well” shows she is motivated by her belief that the correct ending will set right all that came before it, regardless of the twisting path she had to take (IV.iv.35). She wins Bertram, Silverman writes, through both “miracle and guile” (32). But in a comedy, where the inevitable endpoint is not the fulfilment of God’s will but the happy marriage of the lovers, we must ask, is there really a meaningful difference between the two? Even if Helen’s actions would not be deemed holy in a Christian context, if she succeeds in directing a satisfying comic conclusion she is, on some level, an instrument of providence, nonetheless. Helen is, however, invested in the narrative of her own holiness, though the play does not definitively indicate whether she is indeed the recipient of divine aid. Her miraculous cure of the King, which she says has “something in’t, / More than [her] father’s skill,” and her conception of a child after one night with Bertram are both improbable accomplishments that might indicate that God is on her side (I.iii.239–40). However, at least at the start of the play, Helen is openly skeptical of divine solutions for problems that might be solved by human ingenuity: “Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie / Which we ascribe to heaven” (I.i.212–13). She continually affects helplessness to win over authority figures, so her assumption of piety may follow the same trend. Therefore, it is also possible to read Helen’s miracles as the result not of divine intervention but of her cleverness and sexual promiscuity. Many critics suggest that her cure of the King is symbolically or literally sexual, and if Helen wanted to maximize her chances of getting pregnant, having intercourse with multiple men would be the obvious way to increase her odds (Handelsman 224). In these moments, Helen is at both her most potentially miraculous and her most potentially sexually threatening. Certainly, Helen is quick to bolster the former reading; she continually stresses her virginity, even telling the Florentine women that “all her deserving / Is a reserved honesty” (III.v.60–61). They can think poorly of her, but she does not want them to question her chastity. The question of Helen’s virtue, then, like the broader question of whether her means are justified, comes down to how convincing we find her story.

Helen’s ending entails a journey away from Italy and back to France and, concurrently, a defeat of Bertram and Parolles’ brand of exploitative male will in favor of a comic conclusion. In Act 4, the war comes to an end suddenly, to the surprise of the lords who did not expect “a peace concluded” so soon

(IV.iii.38). This abrupt, harmonious resolution foreshadows the outcome of the broader conflict between the comic and tragic modes. Parolles' fate likewise anticipates Bertram's, as he too is the target of deception and has his faults publicly bared, arguably for his benefit. Winckler argues that, once his machismo is exposed as a facade, Parolles "come[s] over to the women's side—a side to which, in his heart of hearts, he has always belonged" (389). He gives evidence of this in his account of Bertram's dishonesty to Diana, as well as his report of Bertram's seduction of Diana to the King, which plays a key role in Helen's finale (Winckler 389). Parolles also mirrors Lavatch by embracing his role as a fool, proclaiming that "every braggart shall be found an ass" (IV.iii.327) but foolery provides "place and means for every man alive" (IV.iii.330). Lavatch has been made a fool through emasculating marriage, but Parolles has become just as much of one through his assumption of manly bravado, and he concludes that embracing shame is a much more agreeable and sustainable form of folly. *All's Well's* comic arc takes us not only from deadly war to marriage but from young upstart masculinity to the incorporation of men into a more stable status quo wherein female will prevails.

Helen's ending is a triumph of female will as much as it is an indictment of this kind of masculinity, because her conclusion is shaped predominantly by her own desires, as well as the interests of her female allies. Hee-Won Lee Hong posits that the bed trick facilitates female friendship through male objectification as "Bertram symbolically assume[s] the role of Isbel, an object to be exchanged between the female friends, a shared medium of their desires" (36). Indeed, both Helen's sexual desire and Diana's wish to remain chaste are validated by the trick; both women preserve their bodily autonomy and free will. Helen also rewards the Widow, whose "estate [is] fall'n" (III.vii.4), with money, and offers to "be [her] daughter's dower," though this proves unnecessary, as the King later offers to pay her dowry too (IV.iv.19). Diana's potential engagement is somewhat problematic, as Emily Gerstell notes that Diana expresses no desire to marry and clearly declares her wish to stay a virgin (201). She feels that the Widow and Helen conspire for their own profit at the expense of Diana's desire to remain chaste. Gerstell writes: "the Widow and Helena are the agents of the transaction, and Diana their object" (196). Both Helen and the Widow, she notes, "have experienced a change in fortune due to marriage," and their actions may therefore be read as promoting female social mobility as the Countess did for Helen, providing Diana the means to marry up in the world (201). Another factor may be the demands of the comedy—perhaps the more marriages the better in the scene Helen is trying to stage. In any case, she favors a resolution that advances multiple women, not just herself.

Within the world of the play, Helen succeeds in bringing about her ideal conclusion, as she fulfils the conditions of Bertram's letter and the two are reunited as husband and wife. But Helen seems to desire not just to win back her love but to stage an ending that is dramatically fulfilling enough to justify her unconventional path to social harmony. Waller notes that the final

scene “is a deliberately staged, self-consciously theatrical moment” in which Helen deftly moves the pieces in the scene into place to take the watchers (both onstage and in the theatre) on an emotional journey that culminates in wonder and joy (50). Helen deliberately constructs a logistically unnecessary dramatic arc, which includes an “all is lost” moment for both Bertram and Diana. The King’s accusation that Bertram may have killed Helen because “[he did] hate her deadly” (V.iii.117) shows that he has played right into the narrative Helen has created: “She is dead, which nothing but to close / Her eyes myself could win me to believe / More than to see this ring” (V.iii.118–20). Instead of simply revealing that she has fulfilled Bertram’s conditions, she again places him at the mercy of royal authority. Only once the King has laid out that Helen’s appearance alone can redeem her lover does she resurrect herself and sweep in to save the day. Kent R. Lehnhof argues that Helen’s control over the staging of this scene evokes anxieties around female players in Renaissance theatre, as some male actors feared that women could upstage them (121). Helen does just this to Bertram. As Lehnhof suggests: “Performing as a theatrical actor (one who creates dramatic illusion), [Helen] becomes a social actor (one who takes action in the world), and consequently exemplifies the dangers of female theatricality” (121). Her ability to perform (and get others to perform for her) is tied to her ability to exercise her will. Bertram, by contrast, has no control of the narrative, constantly changing his story and floundering until Helen rescues him from his own lies. Helen, Lehnhof argues, “exploits her superior theatrical skill to shape his identity as well as his destiny” (121).

Yet as dazzling as Helen’s conclusion is, it is also notoriously ambivalent. The play finishes extremely abruptly; Bertram gets only one couplet with which to affirm his love for Helen, less than a minute before the play ends: “If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly, / I’ll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly” (V.iii.313–14). These lines are dwarfed by the multiple acts he has spent professing that he would rather do anything than marry Helen, leading to a common sentiment among critics that this is far too little too late to convince us that he has had a genuine change of heart. His consent is also somewhat coerced; having so recently been faced with royal disapproval and potential legal consequences, he has every reason to submit to the person who can clear his name. Ellen Belton notes that “the fact that both Bertram’s and Helena’s final speeches begin with “if”? and that the promises made in these speeches are conditional . . . epitomizes and reinforces the ambiguities” of the ending (136). Helen’s final lines to Bertram are equally troubling: “If it appear not plain and prove untrue, / Deadly divorce step between me and you” (V.iii.315–16). Several commentators point out that, because one of the pillars of comedy is that it concludes without death, the introduction of “deadly divorce” into the scene troubles the extent to which the ending can be considered comic (Gleed 85). The prospect of Helen’s literal death has been dispelled, but there is something equally deadly, equally non-comic, about the suggestion that this marriage might not last.

Why, then, is this ending so ambivalent, only swerving from the appearance of tragedy to comedy at the last minute and then abruptly veering back to suggest that tragedy might not be vanquished after all? Handelsman argues that “the gendering of the plot configuration in *All’s Well* is largely responsible for the nature of the play’s conclusion, which lacks a satisfying resolution,” and I am inclined to agree (210). On one hand, by replacing the senex role with the Countess and presenting the King as so sympathetic to women, Shakespeare seems to argue that a world less dominated by patriarchal authority might be more conducive to marital harmony and a stable social order—the key building blocks of a comic ending. But while this setup easily leads to harmonious marriage for characters like Lavatch, it also almost entirely obliterates the structures necessary for a standard comic plot. Just as one can rarely have a comedy without a marriage at the end of it, it is even more unthinkable to have a comedy without conflict preventing the lovers’ union. The characters whose desires impede social harmony must be overruled for the tragedy to be averted, but they must always be present, too, for the drama to occur. The gender configuration, and specifically the absence of domineering patriarchal authority in France, means that *All’s Well* fails to meet a descriptive definition of comedy.

If *All’s Well* is to be deemed a comedy, therefore, it must be according to a prescriptive definition—one that treats a happy ending as a foregone conclusion and views any twists and turns the plot took to arrive there as necessary and desirable. This, of course, requires an ending that is recognizably happy, but it is not impossible to imagine Shakespeare providing one, despite the lack of satisfaction of the male lead’s desires. The ending of *Midsummer*, for instance, relies on Demetrius having desire for Helena imposed upon him, yet Act 5 of that play is festive in tone. Still, *Midsummer* does not end with the thwarting of male desire and the fulfilment of female desire on a systemic level. Hermia and Helena get the husbands of their choosing, but Hippolyta and Titania are coerced into their bonds with Theseus and Oberon. The patriarchal authority figures still get what they want, and Oberon gets to set the terms of the drama to suit his goals. *All’s Well* is notably different, and from an Elizabethan perspective, more threatening. This comic resolution has been brought about by the triumph of female will over male will at virtually every turn. Moreover, Helen has participated in and directed the action as if it were a play, in a world where female actors are not allowed a place onstage, confirming our sense of her metatheatrical agency; her manipulations are what generate the comedy that audiences witness in the theatre. This makes Helen’s triumph, at least to an Early Modern audience, potentially difficult for both the spectators and the characters to condone. Stanton, cited in *All’s Well, That Ends Well: New Critical Essays*, similarly posits that “if ‘all’ fails to be ‘well,’” it will be by “male refusal to accept the rejuvenation of the society through feminine leadership” (Waller 49). If the comic ends always justify the means, then to see this as a comic ending, one that rejuvenates a mutually agreeable social order, is to affirm the unruly female will that got us there.

Through the ending of *All's Well*, Shakespeare seems to be deliberately questioning whether this is possible. The text repeatedly points to an anxiety about whether the conclusion counts as an effective comic resolution. Helen's use of "appear" in her last line is notable. It almost does not matter if what she has told Bertram is true; it needs, first and foremost, to look true, to make for a convincing story, for her marriage to succeed. The King's final speech is similarly ambivalent: "all yet seems well," he says, drawing the spectators' attention to this dilemma (V.iii.330). All yet seems well, but is it? We never get a concrete answer, at least within the world of the play. If there is one, it might be found rather in the epilogue, which begins with the same actor deliberately stepping out of his kingly role: "The king's a beggar, now the play is done" (Epilogue line 1). This statement plays on the actor begging for applause, but it also highlights his class, and the fact that the kingly stature he spent the last few hours assuming was only an illusion. There is no real monarch there to legitimate Helen's actions. The theatre allows for a temporary inversion of order, in which players can become kings and boys can become women and those women can successfully shape the narrative around their desires, but the show must always come to an end. Still, that does not mean an Early Modern audience would have taken nothing from a play like *All's Well*. Rather, it is left to them to form their own opinion of the drama they have witnessed. Having first shed the mask of royal authority, the actor goes on to declare that "all is well ended" if the audience applauds, thereby declaring the comedy a success (Epilogue line 2). It is up to the watching crowd to decide if an ending that relies on such a radical assertion of female power at the expense of problematic male autonomy can be considered a sufficiently harmonious and desirable conclusion. The play does not straightforwardly endorse Helen's approach, but it provocatively poses the question of whether the triumph of female will can be an alternate path to social harmony.

It is common for Shakespearean comedies to play with inversions of hierarchy, but it is much rarer that these inversions persist past the comic conclusion. Often, the characters enter a green world or a carnivalesque state of affairs where the usual rules are reversed, but by the end of the drama, they emerge, ready to take their places in a stable status quo. *All's Well That Ends Well* is an unusual comedy not just because it affords a woman unprecedented control over the dramatic action but because the play's conclusion is the moment when it is at its most subversive and unstable. This troubled resolution is perhaps inevitable, given Shakespeare's historical moment. For contemporary theatrical censors, a play wherein a lower-class young woman—especially one who is unapologetic in her sexuality and skeptical of providence—deceives her way to the fulfilment of her desire, and this is presented as an unambiguous good, may have been a step too far. As a result, the ending of *All's Well* defies comfort, not only in the context of Early Modern gender relations but for audiences today. Modern productions often smooth over some of these issues by using acting

choices to diverge from what is denoted in the text—the 2011 production at Shakespeare’s Globe, for instance, presents a Bertram who has clearly been pining for Helen all along. With this staging, the ending can be seen as the fusion of male and female desire rather than a triumph of the latter over the former and is easier to swallow. This and similar choices indicate a view that *All’s Well* needs to be corrected to seem truly comic, even in a more progressive world. The play does not depict a triumph of gender equality; it is directed by female will exerted to an extent that male autonomy is violated, and it is hard not to be troubled by Bertram’s fate. But it is notable, I think, that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which likewise infringes upon the free will of one of its male lovers in order to facilitate the comic conclusion, is so widely celebrated by general audiences, while *All’s Well* is relegated to a much smaller and more uncomfortable niche. Even four-hundred years later, *All’s Well* remains genuinely challenging, because it poses a provocative question to the audience and refuses to provide a concrete answer: whether, as Lavatch proposes, “man should be at woman’s command, and yet no hurt done” (1.3.91–92).

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