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All's Well That Ends Well

 [Subscribe to posts](#)**Analysis**posted Aug 6, 2013, 12:40 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 21, 2013, 9:18 AM**]

All's Well That Ends Well is often described as a "dark" or "problem" play, distinguished from the earlier, more cheerful comedies by unpleasant characters and a sophisticated bitterness toward human relations, all capped off with a "happy ending" that is nothing of the sort. In part, these criticisms are unfair. The characters in general are a pleasant group, distinguished either by the wisdom of experience (the King of France, Lafew, the Countess) or by basic decency and good intentions (Diana, the First Lord and Second Lord Dumaine). The only truly unsympathetic figure in the supporting cast is Parolles, who is less a villain than a comically value-free rogue. The ending, while unsatisfactory to our sensibilities, seems to please the characters, and the play is far from being a tragedy.

There are unpleasant themes percolating amid the comedy, however. Specifically, the gloom of decay and old age hangs heavily over the older characters, none of whom seem to have long to live. At the same time, for a play ostensibly concerned with romance, *All's Well* takes a harshly cynical view of sexual love. We expect coarse humor from characters like the Clown, who exist to provide smutty comic relief, and cynics like Parolles, but even the romantic heroine, Helena, indulges in sexual banter, and has a low opinion of male sexual behavior in general. This view is justified, the play suggests, since the successful central deception, the bedroom switch that enables Helena to become pregnant by her husband, Bertram, and thus force him to stay by her side, hinges on the fact that in the dark, all women are alike to men.

Just as significant in analyzing the unpleasant effect of the play on the reader/audience are the facts of the central "romance," if we can call it that. Shakespearean audiences have to accept

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great women picking men who are unworthy of them (Portia and the fortune-hunter Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*; Hero and the feckless Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and many others), but it is extremely difficult to reconcile oneself to a romantic lead as odious as Bertram, who abandons Helena, tries to seduce an innocent woman, and only turns repentant in the play's final scene. We may be meant to perceive him as salvageable in some way, and to expect that he will mature in marriage, but the play gives us only a few hints of this, preferring to focus on his obvious flaws.

The resourceful Helena, meanwhile, loved by everyone (save for Bertram), cuts a far more appealing figure. However, her relentless pursuit of a man who is obviously unworthy of her has the unfortunate effect of diminishing her appeal as the play goes on. Nothing stands in Helena's way as she determinedly pursues the man she loves, and while we may admire her, by the time she appears to triumphantly show Bertram how he has been tricked, we no longer like her as much as we did--and our opinion of her good taste, after so long watching her chase a cad, is all but gone. The final scene demands that we celebrate the triumph of love--but it seems less a fairy-tale ending than a cynically contrived close to a cynical comedy, in which true love takes a back seat to manipulation.

Characters

posted Aug 6, 2013, 12:38 PM by alaa hagag [**updated Aug 6, 2013, 12:38 PM**]

Helena

The play's heroine. The orphan daughter of a great doctor, she is the ward of the Countess of Rousillon, and hopelessly in love with the Countess' son, Bertram. Her good qualities are attested to by nearly every character in the play, and events prove her a resourceful and determined woman, who is not easily discouraged by setbacks.

Bertram

The Count of Rousillon since the death of his father, and the Countess' only son. A handsome, well-liked young man, he proves to be an excellent soldier, but a cad in his relationship with Helena, who he unwillingly marries and quickly abandons.

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RECENT SITE ACTIVITY**Countess**

The mother of Bertram, the mistress of Rousillon, and Helena's guardian, she is a wise, discerning old woman who perceives Helena's worth and rejoices when she marries Bertram. When Bertram treats Helena badly, the Countess is quick to condemn his behavior.

King of France

Bertram's liege lord. He is deathly ill when the play begins, and is miraculously cured by Helena, who uses one of her father's medicines. Like the Countess, he loves Helena, and is appalled by Bertram's behavior.

Lafew

An old French nobleman, who offers advice to the King and is friendly with the Countess. He is wise and discerning, perceiving both Helena's worth and Parolles' worthlessness.

Parolles

A companion of Bertram, he is a coward, a liar and a braggart, who pretends to be a great soldier when he is nothing of the sort. He is eventually exposed and disgraced.

First Lord

A genial French nobleman named Dumaine, he serves in the Florentine army and becomes friends with Bertram. Aware of Parolles' character, he and his brother, the Second Lord plot to expose him for what he is.

Second Lord

The First Lord Dumaine's brother, similar in character and also a friend to Bertram.

Diana

A young virgin in Florence, who Bertram attempts to seduce. She assists Helena in tricking him into sleeping with his lawful wife.

Widow

Diana's mother.

Mariana

A woman of Florence.

Duke of Florence

The ruler of Florence, many French lords (including Bertram, Parolles, and Dumaine) volunteer to fight for him.

Clown

An old servant of the Countess, who serves as a messenger and enjoys coarse, sexual humor.

Steward

Another servant of the Countess.

Summary

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Helena, the orphan daughter of a famous physician, is the ward of the Countess of Rousillon, and hopelessly in love with her son, Count Bertram, who has been sent to the court of the King of France. Despite her beauty and worth, Helena has no hope of attracting Bertram, since she is of low birth and he is a nobleman. However, when word comes that the King is ill, she goes to Paris and, using her father's arts, cures the illness. In return, she is given the hand of any man in the realm; she chooses Bertram. Her new husband is appalled at the match, however, and shortly after their marriage flees France, accompanied only by a scoundrel named Parolles, to fight in the army of the Duke of Florence.

Helena is sent home to the Countess, and receives a letter from Bertram informing her that he will never be her true spouse unless she can get his family ring from his finger, and become pregnant with his child--neither of which, he declares, will ever come to pass. The Countess, who loves Helena and approves of the match, tries to comfort her, but the distraught young woman departs Rousillon, planning to make a religious pilgrimage.

Meanwhile, in Florence, Bertram has become a general in the Duke's army. Helena comes to the city, and discovers that her husband is trying to seduce the virginal daughter of a kindly Widow. With the connivance of the daughter, named Diana, she contrives to trick Bertram: he gives Diana his ring as a token of his love, and when he comes to her room at night, Helena is in the bed, and they make love without him realizing that it is her. At the same time, two lords in the army expose Parolles as a coward and a villain, and he falls out of Bertram's favor. Meanwhile, false messengers have come to the camp bearing word that Helena is dead, and with the war drawing to a close, Bertram decides to return to France. Unknown to him, Helena follows, accompanied by Diana and the Widow.

In Rousillon, everyone is mourning Helena as dead. The King is visiting, and consents to Bertram marrying the daughter of an old, faithful lord, named Lafew. However, he notices a ring on Bertram's finger that formerly belonged to Helena--it was a gift from the King after she saved his life. (Helena gave the ring to Diana in Florence, and she in turn gave it to her would-be lover.) Bertram is at a loss to explain where it came from, but just then Diana and her mother appear to explain matters--followed by Helena, who informs her husband that both his conditions have been fulfilled. Chastened, Bertram consents to be a good husband to her, and there is general rejoicing.

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